

George Bowering / DESERT ELM

I.

I woke, & woke again, to see her smiling
at me, & turned to find soft sleep in the
green pillow.

Later in the day she said what were you
dreaming, you were smiling in your sleep,
but again it was my sleep, though I have
never said that.

Later I felt the pain three times inside
my left arm, driving the red car, & I re-
membered, I had dreamt that I too had had
my heart attack.

Attack, I didnt mean that when I told her,
sitting now on my lap, it was simply all
I could remember of my dream & thinking,
of course, but I am nearly thirty years
younger than him.

He finally had his on the green grass of
the golf course, how mundane, how it
filled my mother's voice with unwonted
fear, to be telling this to *me*.

I thought of a rock, not quite round, to-
night, reading H.D. on the old age of the
professor, a rock, not quite round, be-
ginning to crack, it will crumble, will
I know this earth.

II.

The earth he made me on, we dug into
side by side, has not long been there,
has been carried there by the glacier,
all rocks & all round rocks, all stones
rolled together.

We toiled among the stones, that rattling
sound is my earth, where I grew up look-
ing like him. There was some light fal-
ling always into the valley, always blue,
the blue that hovers over heat, a blue
I saw cooling the Adriatic shore.

It is the blue fading in his eyes, they
are not startling blue, it is the family
color I never got, they are not bright
blue but fading to a transparency you
will notice only if you are watching
closely, I mean within a few feet.

They found a desert & made it bloom, made
it green, but even the fairways seen from
across the valley are under a blue haze,
the smoke of space it seemed on high sum-
mer days, not a cloud in the sky, no mote
in that eye.

The earth is not brown but gray, gray of
stones, the flat stones round to the eye
looking straight down.

III.

I never saw him attack anything but a baseball, a golf ball, his own records, to be beaten despite his getting older, to compete satisfactorily with himself. That is why he never rebuked her, he is more pure than I.

He said hold the hammer at the handle's end, for leverage, not because he was a science teacher, because he knew how to do it, full out, not thinking or rather thinking wide open, down the lines of energy.

He had those muscles you can see under the skin, the large vein down the middle of his bicep I never had, I didnt get the blue eyes or that, & not the straight nose, I would perhaps never have broken it then.

He is associated with no color, no color clothes or car or house, he would as soon eat a peach as an apple. I think of the apple splitting in half as some can make it between their hands, & he could likely do that, & it is white.

In the last two years his hair is thin & one may see between them, & they are white. His slacks were white below the purple blazer, & worn twice a month.

IV.

Rounding the bases his neck became red as
a turkey's but it was a home run, every
one like me has to see his father do that
once, fearing his father is like him, not
as good.

Red as a turkey neck, his eyes bulging,
his heart already something to frighten
the young boy, was it something she said
as this other says now to me playing my
guerrilla ball, I dont want you collapsing
& dying on the field. It is a playing field,
I say, I can feel my blood running red
under the skin.

I tell him about it whenever I can, my
average, joking as if I am my team & he is
his, & sometime we must come together,
clasp & both of us, win. He was his mother's
first child, I was my mother's first child,
& after us came just all the rest, the
bases cleared already.

But he didnt get it done till a quarter
century later, he lay they say on the fresh
cut grass, all the red gone from under the
skin of his face, pale, these pale blue
eyes looking for her?

In my dream I thought of course, I too,
what will I take up when too old to round
the bases, what crimson driver.

V.

I thought of a rock, not quite round,
sticking half out of the earth where I
would put the ladder's foot. In a hurry,
without patience to place it safely, to
be up that tree & working.

& working. Never half as fast as he could
do it, but in some ways inheriting his
quiet efficiency & turning it to grace.
He said he could never play second base
& I found it the easiest position, bending
over occasionally to pick stones off the
ground.

Even this summer, a month before his fall,
he pickt twenty pounds while I pickt
eleven, just more than half & I am more
than half at last, thirty-seven, moving
around to the other-half of the tree,
but someone guesst, that is under the
ground, the root system.

A tree, growing downward as I dreamed I
would or desperately hoped I would, to
become this child again, never having the
nerve or wit, age four, to follow that to
its home, from one hundred back to the
seed, & then what. A new lease on life?
For him?

The earthly tree grows downward, we do it
after all, bypassing the womb, back where
we came from, down the rabbit hole on the
golf course, above the shade of the old
cherry tree.

VI.

General knowledges are those knowledges that idiots possess. What words would you use to characterize your relationship with your parents. Scratchy tweed pants they provided for sunday school. I remember because of my legs. They look now like his legs, shorts he wears at the golf course, no embarrassment, he has come this far, what are they to him?

Prophecy is finally simple & simply more interesting than characterization. We are not characters, we devise characters. I sat as still as possible, the backs of my knees held forward from the hard curved wood. Those pants were never worn out, though they belonged unused to some uncle first.

His white slacks hung for two weeks in the closet we'd built some years earlier, he took them out two Tuesdays each month. A lifetime uses few such garments. Who wears the pants in this family is no sociological question. Prophecy is no answer. If you need an answer go make up a question & leave me alone without it.

He has those muscles you can see under the skin, the calf muscle like mine tending toward the other, inside the line of shin bone. I see his lines every morning in the mirror.

VII.

I woke & again I woke, to find her smiling
at me, & turned to return to soft sleep
in the green pillow. A tree, growing down-
ward as I dreamed we all would or hoped
we would, against my god or what they
gave me as my god, their god, given them
against their will, we punish the gener-
ation that succeeds us.

Did I mean to say he did that. No, he
never tried to bend my life, never stood
between me & the sun, this tree grew where
the seed fell. A new lease on life? For
him? In the thick dark forest the trees
grow tall before they extend wings. Tall
green pillow.

They found a desert & made it bloom, made
it green, but even the trees feel blue
smoke curling among their branches, the
smoke that holds away the frost, the early
message that fills our hearts with ice,
lovely to taste fresh from the branch,
but it doesnt travel well. All stones
rolled together, long enough & they will
all be dust, hanging in the air over our
blue lakes.

Prophecy is finally simple, & simply a
pair of eyes thru which the blue of the
sky travels, an observation thru a lens.

VIII.

Staring straight into his eyes for the first time, I see the blue, a sky with some puffy white clouds many miles away. Step into the nearby field, over the sill, into footprints that disappear as I step into them, into the blue sky that is not above but straight in front of me. Straight eyes, in all the photographs, & in one old brown kodak print of the family assembled I look into his oval eyes & see inside them a man walking backward, out of his footsteps.

My eyes are brown, walking inside them would be moving over burned grass on low hills. They found a desert & made it bloom. I move closer, zooming into his eyes & find the first aperture completely filled with one petal of a blue flower, a close-up of a star weeping in surrender to the earth, a tear, Aurora weeping helplessly on the edge of the Blue Nile.

He's no sun of mine, I never stood between him & the brightness, the mistakes I make will live as long as these ovals stay open. I walkt into his open eye, over the sill & saw two enormous black holes in the sky. A voice came thru a nose & reduced them to personality. I had never said the word poetry without a funny accent.

IX.

"Men who love wisdom should acquaint themselves with a great many particulars."

Cutting the crisp apple with a French knife
I saw that the worm had lived in the core
& chewed his way out, something I've seen
a thousand times & never understood & while
I'm looking he's on the other side of the
green tree picking. One two one two, the
wisdom of the tree filling his picking bag,
its weight strapped over his shoulders. He
showed me, you cross the straps like this
& keep it high. Get above the apples & look
down at them.

& I still do it wrong, reaching up, picking
with sore arms, strain rather than wisdom
filling me not the bag. He said the
safest step on the ladder is the top, he
was trying to get me up, & always right,
this one I have learned & Saturday I was
on the top step picking apples, wanting
someone to advise. That is how one becomes
acquainted, working to gather.

It could be a woman but is it a woman. Is
it a woman you can work together with, is
it a woman you know doesn't feel the
particulars as you do, they are apples, not the
picking of them, the filling. She has been
without a man for years, she offers ladders,
tools, bags for the apples. You want some-
one to advise to be him, but do it silently
knowing your expertise is somehow, known.

X.

I did not see him lying on the grass, I
may as well have been under the ground,
perhaps entangled in the tree growing down-
ward, an earth. His earth, our particular
earth, as it sifts back & forth, composing
like dust on a piano. The piano is black
but where it has been rubbed it is brown.
He never sat at a piano, only an old black
typewriter with round keys, making faint
words.

So faint they barely heard him. It was Aug-
ust & the grass dry, the thin words rose
like a tree into the air, lightly, as blue
as the thin smoke hanging over the green
fairway. It has nothing to do with justice.
He spent thousands of hours in those trees
picking pennies for me, this day he was
knocking them into a hole, I'm glad to hear
that.

In the ocean light of the ward window his
eyes are barely blue & deep in his head
like my daughter's. He woke again to see
me smiling at him, his head straight in
the pillow, a rock nearly round. In the
desert the rocks simply lie upon each other
on the ground, a tree is overturned out
of the ground, its shallow widespread roots
coiled around small rocks. By these fruits
we measure our weight & days.

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