

New Poetry from Nidhi Agarwal: “The Goddess Incarnates;” “Cow Dust Hour;” and “Emancipation”

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New Poetry from Ben Weakley: “Beatitudes I,” “Beatitudes II,” “Beatitudes III,” “Beatitudes IV”



THE BROKEN SKIN / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Beatitudes I.

The Lord blessed us with knowledge. Twin curses, good and evil.

Why else plant the luscious tree there, where we were bound to find the fruit? The purple and shivering flesh never lacks in spirit. The ache and growl of our naked bellies are the price

for the moment's delight. So, we gorge and the juice drips

sticky down our chins. Let angels have the eternal heaviness of paradise; ours is the moment. The act, willful and with intent.

Advised of the penalties. Done poorly. Knowing this kingdom cannot last. Looking beyond the gardens for a more convincing view of heaven.

Beatitudes II.

Are we not also blessed, we who praise
the clear night and its silence?

Betrayed by the absence of stars, we mourn
a billion-years' light no longer burning.

We whimper at the withered grass burning,
the breathing forest burning, the one
great and living ocean boiling and burning.

You who created time, who is before all things, who will remain after the ruin,
will you be waiting for us in the cool garden?

Will we lie down with you in the dew-damp grass?
Will we be comforted?

Beatitudes III.

Are the meek blessed tonight in their bundled and stinking shelters
beneath frozen bridges? Are they blessed with patience in their waiting
for the Lord of compassion? For the Lord that *suffers with*?

They suffer together. Their children will inherit the suffering

of generations,
the split lip of submission, the broken skin of the earth.

Beatitudes IV.

Blessed. From a word that meant *blood*.

Latin for *praise*. Blood and praise to the hungry; they are weak.

Blood and praise for the thirsty. For those who bathe in fetid water.

What are words

to those who hunger in a gluttonous world?

To those who thirst beside the brackish rivers,
choking on garbage? We say, wait for righteousness
to come from above. But they have starved
in their flesh so that our spirits could be filled.

New Fiction from Ulf Pike: Son of God

I. Esses

The warmth of his voice makes us wary of his intentions. He bears our sin of greenness like a precious burden, our softness like a direct order from God to transform us in his image.

A helmet fits his skull like the mold from which it was cast. When he removes it his bare head glistens in the sun. We pretend not to look, as though he were a woman undressing, feeling almost queasy

waiting for him to put it back on. His skin is fair and something childish in his face does not relieve it of an old mortality, which is what one feels when caught in his stare. Under the kevlar brim crouches some secret in eyes, level as a landless horizon. He takes in the world as if in the path of some vast, righteous burning.

“Without death,” he tells us, “there could be no beauty.” Behind us in all directions, warping heat weaves the sky and earth together like two banners in a low wind. He continues, “They had to consume death to know how to live.”

Had we not been standing around the smoldering carnage of a recent Apache gunship engagement, talk might have remained speculative. The target was a small truck, now a skeletal remnant riddled with 30mm holes. We all lean on it and peer in. Of the reported three enemy kills, the charred remains of one are scattered in the bed. The way the body has come to rest, it looks as if his hand is trying to prevent more of his brains from spilling out. Esses fixes his eyes there while he removes one glove and probes gently around. He pulls at the partially coiled pink and black matter.

Standing at the tailgate he considers what he holds between his fingers like a sacrament.

He looks up, holds each of us in his gaze, searching our eyes as if for the words he wants to say.

He speaks warmly: “Even the light of a dead star can guide us.” He smiles, pleased by his own insight. He says, “The past is always present but never as it was.” Then extending his hand: “Memory comes back in pieces, some of them not our own.”

II. Chrysalis

Upstream, an elk lowers his velvet crown to drink. A sudden gust tears a flurry of leaves from their branches and they

flutter to the current like butterflies. He remembers being told as a child that before they could fly, they were caterpillars, and they ate milkweed because they knew it was poisonous to their predators. Some predators were too hungry to care and ate them anyway. Only one-in-a-hundred caterpillars would get to fly. But they ate milkweed anyway until they were fat, then they curled up in a sleeping bag called a chrysalis and hung from the branches of trees to wait for their second birth.



Abraham Begeyn, "Still Life with Thistle,"
circa 1650s.

A storm rumbles off across the valley and sunlight breaks through in its wake. The dirt road is scattered with shining

blue and silver portals. He remembers walking with his mother, holding her hand, imagining being pulled through them into that underworld and drifting weightlessly. He remembers her voice, excited to show him something beautiful. How she motioned ahead: "Oh, sweetie, look!"

Wing-to-wing, hundreds of Monarchs covered the surface of a puddle like a burnt-orange blanket, undulating lethargically in afternoon warmth. He remembers crouching down and his hand recoiling to the sharp change in her voice, "No, no! Don't touch! You can't touch them, honey. They are very, very delicate."

He remembers curling up on the couch early in the mornings and twirling her hair between his fingers while she leafed through the thin pages of her old King James Bible. She says it was the most obsessive thing he did. If he was crying in church it was likely because she wouldn't let him claw his way into her long, brown, carefully styled hair. In the event of an outburst he would be escorted to the nursery and left with all the other criers. He learned to twirl his own hair and draw on the back of donation envelopes and prayer request cards, whatever it took to endure an hour of liturgy without causing a scene. According to the pastor there was an invisible war being waged inside of him and his soul was in the balance. According to his mother, his actions and even his thoughts could tip the scales.

When he walked through the sliding glass door, blood streaming from his scalp, holding a fistful of his own hair in one hand and scissors in the other, her terror was quickly suppressed by rage. Following the swift and blunt force of her hand he was marched to the barber shop where for the first time he felt the cool, metallic pleasure of clippers vibrating over his skull and the feeling of wind moving over his exposed mind as they walked back home. They stopped on the sidewalk to speak with her friend who insisted on running her open palm over his new bristle. She cooed to

the sensation and a mysterious pleasure fused him to that moment, to her touch, like a corridor of heated light.

He remembers hiking to Fallen Leaf Lake in northwest Montana and his father giving him

what was in his metal-frame rucksack so his weary youngest sister could fit inside. The extra weight made his shoulders chafe and bleed, made him proud. It rained a warm summer rain and when they arrived they were all soaked through their clothes, except for his sister who emerged from under the top flap of the rucksack dry as a bone. They had a small fire and he remembers feeling almost magical as he unrolled his sleeping bag and sealed himself inside.