

2011

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Recommended Citation

Crofut-Brittingham, Robin, "Faces and Myth" (2011). *Senior Projects Spring 2011*. Paper 135.
http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2011/135

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Faces and Myth

Poetry and Paintings by Robin Crofut-Brittingham

When I began conceiving of what kind of a poetry project I would like to undertake I was spending a great deal of time thinking about Greek and Roman classics. I have always been fascinated by myths and their ability to create a world in which to imagine- to escape. Last year, however, for the first time I began to reconsider the illustrious and fantastical place I had assigned the world of myth in my mind. In one of my classes I began to read Lucretius' tome of a poem *On the Nature of Things*. I had been learning things about poetry and philosophy for my entire time at Bard, trying to make sense of ideas as singular objects. These were ideas to be one at a time dissected, examined and then perhaps discarded. But when I began reading Lucretius everything seemed to culminate in my mind. He seemed to be describing the same basic ebb and flow of life: the vacillating tides of thought and self that wind and encircle themselves about the eaves of time. However, suddenly, perhaps because it was poetry I felt so connected to the text. How could something written thousands of years ago hit me over the head with relevance to the present I began to wonder how something so antiquated, so ornate and old could strike me with so much power and wonder. This led me to wonder about everything in time is connected and how I might come to understand it for myself. Obviously this is something that has been done to death, philosophers, painters, scientists, thinkers of any sort imaginable have tried to answer this question and perhaps some of them found a satisfactory answer for themselves. That is what I have tried to do here. I am not looking for an answer, an end or even a beginning.

Robert once suggested that these poems were like individual observations. Some of them as though I were looking at a wound on my body and describing the way the blood pooled and dried in the open wound. I think that may be the best way I can explain them. They are observations about time and flesh. I want to explore the way time manipulates things. I want to explore how faces stretch and sink to reveal new characters, how things burn to the ground in the hissing spark of an evening only to have plants grow from their ashes. Most importantly I wanted to know how words braid themselves into the currents of time. In his essay *The Poet* Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "we have far from exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can come to use them yet with a terrible simplicity. It does not need that a poem should be long. Every word was once a poem." I am trying to see what I might make of the discarded poems and words that have been scattered about us and how I might make them into my own thoughts.

The paintings that accompany the poems explore the same themes. While I was writing I was simultaneously creating watercolor paintings that helped me to better understand some of the things I was working on in my poetry. I am fascinated by faces and by the myths that can surround a single face. At first I chose faces that struck me for their ability to suggest a singular emotion or theme in the folds of their skin. The early portraits are meant to portray larger ideas about human nature like sadness, grief, power, or loneliness. As I continued to work on this series I realized that I could connect these faces to ancient archetypes for these singular emotions. So I began to choose pictures of contemporary faces that I felt could serve as a representation, perhaps even a kind of reincarnation of an ancient character or archetype. The paintings will be displayed in a small gallery in Sandisfield, Massachusetts throughout the month of May.

I owe a great deal to those wonderful minds at Bard and elsewhere that have inspired and encouraged me throughout my time there. Robert Kelly, my advisor was one of the first teachers at Bard that I worked with and he continues to be one of the people who inspires and challenges me the most. I would also like to thank Thomas Bartscherer and Benjamin Stevens for showing me just how fresh and exhilarating the classics can be,

even now, Michael Ives for helping me to break out of my comfort zone and write poetry in forms I was afraid of.

I.

sky is spilled out

soft bruised pools of cadmium

veins of tress stretched into light
divergent capillaries of darkness

cold has left wounds in the air where the fruit should be
wet leaves dangle in their place

storms come

grass shrieks

tumbling thunder turns

fills the valley with a low hush

sky boils

decoction of stars

warm erosions of ochre spread like ink
dilute the fleshy cadmium black

thoughts

silted into memory and striations of time
fall back into the ground

they rest below the earth
fertilized by the evening rain
when lightning strikes the tree at the root

etches the topography of its voice in a crooked line of blackness that paints the night alive

thoughts are pushed out of memory
back into time

by the storm

lightning breaks the stillness

strikes and shakes the veins of the tree

knots at the top

vessels filled with warm sap tangled in air where they drain and pull
fill with smoked sky

the fruits

organs of the tree

drop back to the earth like gods pushed from empyrean

limp mortals chained to the dirt
soon to become flesh of the ground
rotted into the pulp of history
where they will rest until fertilized again

watch the crows
black slick of feathers crinkling silver in the sunlight

they pierce the flesh with their beaks and it will grow back

flesh

left picked of its fertility
fades back into the moss

stretched across the skin of rocks
poured out between the mountains by the gods who sketched us here among the trees

the gods rest dormant

coiled obliquely somewhere in the brain

they perform their rituals in the chest cavity
carving cave drawings into the fiber

but the body heals them over
intent on its own wisdom
those gods can never grow back

II.

the mist of the clouds settles on the skirts of night

a meek effulgence of air

groaning through spirals in the heat of the dunes
cold encircling the shuddering breast of the ground
sparks jumping in the fog
transient rays of self entangling

color imprisons the canyons

nocturnes of falling sound

half of the world is sand
the other half has eroded away

water would be the ash of air if we could burn air like we used to

humans are breathing animals
birds mollusks insects trees voices men
seraphs of smoke
moonlight pinned to the parapets
folded into the tiles
mucilage of the day
fade into darkness

children drink in voices

pulse of the present

sheath them in gloves of acrid smoke
pathogens pistons poisons
numb neutered nebulae

we know that shapes are lies

that only the circles of oxygen mouths exists
birds suckling for silence

masticated time digests in the void

the anguish of the sad fossil world

III.

Thin is an absence from the torso and upper extremities that renders it woman
found only when caught between the light that strains through leguminous plants

man is the amount of soft left in the absence of hard remaining only after stomach egrets
have picked the bones from the caverns and retreated back to the intestine caves

gods are made from a tincture infused with the stamen of winter flowers and the paste of ancient roots

humans apply this once a day

to imitate themselves

this is how we learn mimesis

this is how we learn to consume ourselves

lovers are composed with the amount of lust congruent with attraction resulting in an equation that can only be solved in childbirth

when recording mating rituals the empiricist may observe woman calling out in birdsong and man mistakenly watching as bats rustle the leaves of fruit trees

thinking them sparrows

man watches

woman becomes night

pleasure is found with the amount of infusion required to heal over the thick wound in the sky so that man may recognize plumage in the dark

sex is the correct amount of bodies required to unlock a door

causing a thick rash on the eyes it can only be healed with a neutering tincture requested from empyrean

empty vessels

render woman

that which is becoming man

a feminine atavism seen only in sunlight

man is woman

shaken up by briny light

pulled from the teat of the day
an imperceptible shade

that reminds them to count to enough

Locust trees grow at the edges of things
wombs swelling on the limbs
lines of branches gnarled between the wind
atoms caught in spaces
waiting for the lights of the liver to indicate the dawn

hepatic candles of the earth

lit by the swing of the evening's pendulum

fire blinks in the dark

crawls across the earth

an oriborus of light spinning through the reeds

pestilence of fire unfurls
branches dance in the heat wavering
mirages of night

pod's dried and split
seeds spit to the ground

the tree crumbles

splinters of age break in the fresh inferno of sky
the last branches sink to the ground

blackened by the blaze

smoke fades

sputters

the ground rests on the salt of the earth

berries grow up through the embers

blossoming green and then cloudy nacreous blue

IV.

the weather is mild in the land of the dead
the rivers churn for angry miles

evening fades

draws back the hunger curtains of the night

bulbs of dusk ascend up rungs of gold into the twilight

night roars in with kicks and whinnies

bucks and shouts

sommersalting stars in the open belly of sky

trees hackled in the rising fog

dead are burned on boats at the shore
esculent mushrooms rising in the night
juices blistering in drops on the earth's tongue
accents of breath dissolving
skeletons prepare for the air
petals of skull and ash that fail to enrich the bitter soil
upturned mummies of the clay

the rivers churn for angry miles

throaty spasms of night
sticks and crayfish bubbling in the swollen estuaries
corpses rolling bruised among the rocks
lolling arms and bleeding eyes
tangled in the turning waves

A discolored man bathes in the sea

squeezing the stems of aquatic flowers
soothsayer of the silent shoots
isthmus of the phosphorescent spores

the sky drinks in the vinous beads of color

footprints
plumage of plants
punctured sunlight
yolk of pain

bebido de sangre, bebido de salud, bebido de soledad

imagine the dead who rest in the gardens of Tangier
glass and organs tied between the hustle of bushes
dandelions growing up through their armpits
flowers buzzing in the open sockets of eyes

the women will not let their children see these brothers
will not pick the flowers of the dead
they gather herbs around them
and slaughter fowl in the streets

Cloisters of silence rise in the mist
Saturated with fog and rain
They drift over the graves
Kites falling on the night

bodies are wrapped for burial in the evening
flies resting in empty eyes
buzzing in savage green valleys

night comes sputtering in
lamps of day turned over in rain
hiding those wretched thinking pieces of clay
death lapping at puddles of rain
skeletons sitting drunk in their graves
freshly buried blue mouths filled with sky

there is a ruby colored rope that creaks in the body
pulls wrinkled shadows out from their corners
sugared holes punctured by sad acid
blind ivy that grows in the lungs
without the smiling light of sun

adders hiss in the diaphragm
curl themselves through naked rooms
dark techtonics of night

supine shells of man
return to the women at dusk
mouths splayed up
bacteria surging in the gut
pollinating the compost of their folded eyes

burn them at dusk
when breath clings to the crepuscular cusp of day
voices lapping at the red tide
pulling them back into the basaltic womb

death heals the decay of things
salamanders curl among the tufted weeds
stars mark the arch of bodies in the sky
dulcet cavers of voice echo in the light
obdurate buds peak through the lazy snow

V.

shadow waits

plaited among the pieces

geometric patches of measured darkness

edges of the afternoon

parts catch the beads of light and drip down
gelatinous puddles of something astrological
signs that refract the reflection of words
gesticulating arbitrary meanings on the pericardium of sky

undulating tides of memory
twisted among solar ephemera
drizzles of moonlight
darkness well suited for devotion

words wobble up in tangerine spirals to meet the sunset

lightning strikes again at the root

catalyzes corpulent strings of self
synaptic flashes
iridescent streams

fresh basilisk blood yelping with hissing hums that rise up as shaped shrieks in the silver
sliver of sky

a night to conjure

mephitic human vapor rises
dilutes the atmosphere and pervades
moisture clotting in the raw air
fractures in the ether that surrounds the world

troglodytic holes of human carved out by time
tangled with capillary vines and rain

the womb of the brain fills up

gestates poisoned flowers
blossoming ripe with ethereal petals
maturing with symbols at the stamen
curling into coruscating filigree

diegetic anatomy spills out

to be read

the silk of the spider is entwined about the architecture

strings braid themselves up from the ground
pull fiber from the earth and air

the body runs naked

born of the breed of soil
spawned by the day
whelped by earth

fragile homunculus moss

watching the sky shake the red trees

laced windows

manacles of imagination

limbs carry them up to the mountains

steam of sylph
crazed of mind
sick with spirit

self digests

cannibalizes

vapor sucked back into porous holes

transformed

dropped as stone

breaking the glinting surface of viridian pools

lightning born seeds of man

opalescent tide pools

vestigial signifiers of progeny
of what had happened in the future

the crinkling walls grow

they jabber

whisper chatter argue
echo

it's the light that makes them jabber

shout and then jabber

it's the light that gives them sound

the body decomposes

running out through the fabric it sewed itself into

men hits the burlap with ringing thwaps
leaving the imprint of their flying forms

shadows sewn into the light