

Poetry Collection

Zain Shahid

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was still a thing, then. To have timed your arrow
a perfectly meant watching the air for a moment
seem stitched throughout with a kind of
timelessness. To have straddled at last, correctly,
the storm of falling in love (and staying there) meant
the smell of apples, victory, tangerines, and smoke
all mixed together on the breath

of a stranger, half asleep still, just beginning to remember a bit,
as he stirs beside you. I dreamed we were young again,
he's mumbling, as if to someone whose name he's known
long enough to have called it out more than once in anger
and sex and fear equally. Somewhere happiness too,

right? All those hours spent trying to outstare the distance
of what the days must come to,

and pretending a choice to it: now the shadow-script
that willows and hazel trees mark the barn's western
face with; now the wind-rippled field, like a lesser version—tamer,
tameable—of the sea, for movement (same infinite
pattern, and variation; randomness and intention; release;
restraint—that kind of movement) ...

Dear saddle
of gentleness. Dear moss, sweet moss that only
the dark and wet and patience make possible. To sing a song
of water, and not drown in it. And some calling that
a good trick. And some calling it

mastery. That last flickering before nightfall. From beneath
the low branches. I dreamed we were new again. Stars. Just a little
past dusk.

They planted flowers because the house had many rooms
and because they'd imagined a life in which
cut flowers punctuate each room, as if each were a sentence

not just to be decorated but to be given some discipline,
what the most memorable sentences—like people—always
slightly resist... Spit of land; rags

of cloud-rack. Meanwhile,
hawk's-nest, winter-nest, stamina as a form of faith, little
cove that a life equals, what they meant, I think, by

what they called the soul, twilight taking hold
deep in the marshweed, in the pachysandra, where the wind
can't reach.

Then the war.
Then the field, and the mounted police
parading their proud-looking horses across it.

Then the next morning's fog, the groundsmen barely visible
inside it, shadow-like, shade-like,
grooming the field back to immaculateness.

Then the curtains billowing out from the lightless room
toward the sea.
Then the one without hair

stroked the one who had some. They closed their eyes.
If gently, hard to say how gently.
Then the war was nothing that still bewildered them, if it ever had.

What's meant to be wind emerges from what's
presumably a god's mouth, as if people
thought that way, once, as I have read they did,
though I have never believed it. Yes,
the stag inexplicably there, on a raft
at sea, how the light catches in the runneled
fur of a dog's underpaws as he steers
across dream; yes, the gods and their
signs, if you want, everywhere –

but the wind is the wind. the map makes
the world seem like a human body
when it's been stripped and you can finally
see it for the world it is: plunderable –

almost, in places, as if asking for it –

who wouldn't want to lay waste to it
the map suggests, suggest the hands
that made the map, with the kind of
grace that proves grace can
be a sturdiness, too.

–

But the world is *not* like a human body
Or the dark that, just past twilight,
overtakes a canyon.

Or the shiver of sleigh bells on the collar
of an invisible donkey, scratching itself
in the dark,
in the cold of it –

donkey bells...

Above me, the branches toss toward and away
from each other
the way privacy does with what ends up
showing, despite ourselves, of
who we are, inside.

Then they're branches again
– hickory, I think.

– It's not too late then.

The Uncle Poem || *Jackson Holbert*

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avuncular
trees
or was it avuncular skyscrapers?
yea it was the skyscrapers but
I don't know man
I remember it was tuesday
the cars were doing their
normal car shit some asshole
was blasting Puccini
out of his BMW and some other
asshole was singing
an opera as he walked
down Main Street
what else
I saw my grandmother
this wasn't anything crazy tho
she's still alive and all that
she lives in town she was
driving her convertible
very slow I waved at her but
I'm not sure she recognized me
no other family interactions to report
something about the day unsettled me tho
in the worst way possible
I knew I would be going home soon

home to the hills where
hill things happen
but I had thrown that terror into the future
like a baseball or a bag of trash
and of course it is the future now but I'm
not
in the hills not yet
so why were the skyscrapers
avuncular to me
me who had many uncles none
of whom were skyscrapers
I think I have a few less uncles
now but it's hard to keep track
big family and you know what
they say uncles are like crab apples they
wither
maybe it was that it
smelled like crab apples
while I walked down Main Street
I don't know where
that quote comes from probably
someone famous but I remember my uncle
saying it and it seems like a quote
about your uncles dying but that uncle
wasn't dying not yet he was

very much alive and very much
addicted to oxycodone
but the consequences would be
far in the future but I guess
the future is now which means
the consequences have already happened
which makes perfect sense
because that uncle died
tho not of overdosing exactly he died
of a heart attack induced by fireworks
on the fourth of July one of three
citizens to do so in the county that day I
do not know what made hearts
so angry on that particular fourth it was
warm
but when wasn't it
warm in the valley I wasn't
there when my uncle died I
had picked up overtime
at the call center because
I needed money to buy
some oxycodone
for myself
I was planning to buy it
off of him tho obviously that

would be impossible because he is dead and
altho it doesn't mean his pills are gone
it does mean it would be super uncool to
break into his trailer
and steal them I have
determined that he is the uncle I am
referring to when I said
the skyscrapers were avuncular
tho referring isn't the right word
I didn't intend to call them avuncular
I felt it and it wouldn't go away
like a dog bite
but what made the skyscrapers
so avuncular my uncle had never been
to the city and possibly had never been
to any city he was country from his hair to
the tip

of each toe he was so country that his
countryness stretched
out from his body and into his car
maybe it's because he never
saw these skyscrapers that I
think of him tho that
is bullshit and I know it so why the fuck
could I not push the avuncular
skyscrapers out of my decidedly
non-avuncular brain
was it the windows? the
black paneling?
maybe it isn't the building at all
maybe it's the idea of the building
and tho I don't believe in ideas
I do believe in uncles
maybe it is that the building

is so high it would take minutes to elevator
up
and maybe an hour to climb
which means by the top you would be in
the future the real future the future minutes
away not seconds a future farther than
a word is from another word and maybe
because I look
at the skyscraper from the top down
I think of those elevators in reverse
which means I think of the future in reverse
and if those elevators go enough
the future will reverse enough to be the past
like the real past
like a few months ago when my
uncle was breathing and taking
pills and feeling the high
come on like television static
turning into tv or like tv
turning into television static