

Still in Soil

A Collection of New Poems

by

Kyle Torke

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INTRODUCTION

A Mechanism of Engagement
by Dale Ritterbusch

Our time is, perhaps, an age of poetry, yet with so much poetry written and published there are relatively few surprises, few distinctive voices that command the reader's attention. So it is particularly pleasing to find Kyle Torke's work which contradicts the usual experience; there are poems here that are firmly grounded in the living of everyday life and others that are imaginative forays into the realm of philosophical and cosmological questioning, all designed to reflect on what we have come to call the human condition. And there is certainly a celebration of the human capacity to employ language as a mechanism of engagement and understanding, a means of learning about ourselves and the roles we play as we "travel together/ to the ocean at time's end": and along the way on this journey we find, for example, a wonderfully insightful metaphor that Torke has crafted in his poem *Ride* where a father flies model airplanes with his sons and the plane "dipped/ below the roofs and toward the streets and vanished" in the same way those sons will grow and some day similarly vanish into their own adult lives.

Another poem, *Beating My Father at Scrabble*, conveys the sense of developed understanding created by raising one's own sons and then confronting the relationship a man has with his father. Torke skillfully uses the letters placed on a Scrabble board to explain with the few simple words formed by these letters the profound recognition of what binds a man to his son, a son to his father. And there are curious poems that resonate on various levels, poems like *Placket* where the story of the Garden of Eden is used to explain the profitability and loss of knowledge and belief.

Still in Soil is a wonderful collection by a poet who demonstrates both skill and imagination. Whereas so many poems one encounters are disposable, Kyle Torke has written a number of poems that are worth coming back to, poems that will endure.

University of Milwaukee – Whitewater

Dander

First the galaxies, expanding like shotgun pellets,
and then each solar system: beneath the stars,
the earth with blue stains like melting ice.
The continent, the mountain, a valley, a village,
one house, three people, their cat, its mouse,
the fleas, the drop of blood they stole, its platelets,
their molecules, chromosomes, genes overwhelming
the atoms like lightning striking the ocean. Planets
swarm the sun, neutrons and electrons dance,
the family gathers to hear the fiddler, and the cat
watches the floorboards. Across the universe,
the wagon-train of light hasn't reached the outpost
where a darkness will raise a hand and turn
them away. The deep sea angler jigs its own worm
and waits, a bit of light strung above the teeth,
like an idea: Light? Here? The sign above
the bar, the sun above the trees, the lantern bobbing
in front of the oxen—the candle in the window
that sets the curtains on fire: all the world
is on fire. A sun's glow is a dying glare. Soon
the turning tide will swallow all: the great swathes
of black in the universe will coalesce into a giant ball
of light: the volcanoes, fiddle sticks, and mouse tails.
One corpuscle will breathe and breed, algae will bloom,
a fish will grow lungs, feet, a brain and populate
villages, the villagers will build on the far side
of the mountain, the mountains will seed clouds,
lightning will ignite the atmosphere, the world
will flower into the galaxy, a giant dandelion
whose children will whistle along trails planets leave
until they meet the planets and travel together
to the ocean at time's end where, with the oxen,
they will charter an ark and sail on and out and away.

Wordsworth Calls

I imagine William Wordsworth sitting at his square desk, square hands on the side of his square head, fingers pushing finally through his hair: "Dorothy!" Without a response (she is out wandering the meadow, swishing her long legs in long grasses), he says, "I need more mist on the mountains! I need more children playing in the lake, or by a wall!" The chair feels suddenly rough, and he stands, admires the window and the glass so soft the green looks like trees. "More goddamned butterflies, Dorothy! Bring me more butterflies!" He wants to slam his fist on the wall, but instead repositions in the chair, feels his hair, and imagines Dorothy coming to him across the meadow, coming to him from the lake, arriving finally: an opening door and the promise of answers.

Travelers

Our ghosts arrive from vacation,
having brought bags with stickers
from Montana, Sudan, up the street.
I wish we could invite them to tea,
talk about their travels: the chairs
they sat in, glasses of wine swooshed
through their teeth, the comfort
they took from each other and others,
but the ghosts whistle through us
like trains whose only stop arrived
years before, and instead they interrupt
us in bed, smile as if out a train's passing
window, quickly, and wave. They
are willing to wait for the next station.
They have stories they can half tell,
photographs they shuffle before us
like cards from a street hustler: the one
we pick is never the one that has them
dining together, kissing on the porch,
saying "I love you." They are willing
to wait for us to grow cold while
they speak of palm trees and sweat, and
candlelight that saw through them, and
sweat, and the heartache of losing their bodies
and the joy of finding us, flesh, and seeing us
apart.

Camping

When I woke at two to take a piss
and the tent flaps crackled with frost
as I passed through them, a stranger
leaving a comfortable town, the stars
set upon me like grains of sand
thrown into the sky by my sons
who slept warm with their dog, still
and breathing the tent's darkness.
I covered my eyes.

No moon sealed
a corner of the sky from the invasion
of stars, a paint splatter of lights,
a disconnected puzzle, a mystery
whose questions had yet to be asked.
An elk bugled from across the stream,
the wind tussled pine needles
and the last few leaves on the elms.
I thought I should wake them, my sons,
so they could see.

But they were safe,
cocooned in sleeping bags, sentient as bears
who would rouse the next morning to frost
and leave the tent hungry to play on rocks,
unaware of the stars, their weight, the sadness
of great distance, and cold, and the press
of one's bladder that calls us from sleep
into the wakefulness of human loneliness.
Stars could wait. I would dream with my sons.

The Market

The man at the supermarket weighed the avocado in his hand like a grenade and set it off to the side. The woman pushed two kids in a tank-shaped shopping cart near him, put her hand on the man's arm. Thank you, she said, God Bless America. The man looked at her hand. "It's my responsibility," he said. He saluted the children playfully. The crisp camouflage of his pant-legs brushed together. He placed his hands on his own mundane cart and waded into the tangerines, the lemons, the coconuts as if crossing a tremendous plain then disappeared near the steaks, blending at last into the cold bunker of the meat aisle.

Cannibal Freed

Peter Green's torso reposed
in the closet. In the can
out back, his legs tried to run,
but only the bones emerged
from the feet, still in shoes.
Simmering in the crock pot
on the counter, near the basil
and gardenias, potato, carrot,
and strips of Peter Green
mingled, and the smell of stew
made the house a home. He's
with god now, she said, stirring
the psychiatrist to write. Carolyn
Blanton kept the trunk wrapped
in cheese cloth, like a crocodile
buries its kill, as a store for the longer
months ahead when the conversation,
now quiet, would not be enough
to fill her.

Borrowings

Snow falls on the graves, dug fresh
with popsicle sticks, neat as bridges
from science class whose glue unglues
under slight pressure, nestled
within the sapling's roots, shallow
and waiting for summer to descend,
two mice, a study in living things,
for two boys who appear and disappear
like the mice in their dens, with plans:
I will name mine Mousy, one says,
and the younger adds: mine Memousy.

Eden blossomed in the small cage
for two days. The two mice grew—
the life of mice, furtive burrowing
and the occasional small hand of god
to scoot them about the grounds—
until they stopped, and the garden
felt its first flush of winter grimness,
having tasted some poison seed.

The two boys consider the graves.
I will miss my mouse, one signs
with a snuffle, and the other grabs
my hand: in summer, they are grass.

Salt

The dog sleeps in a spot of sun on the floor, a biscuit rising in the oven, her legs splayed as if the bullet knocked her to the carpet. The front paw flexes, and her whiskers twitch. She is far away, on a boat, listening to the Captain prattle about salted pork and the one remaining orange, even now going flat. They have eaten fish for months, and not good fish, either. The rind of a coconut bobs in the dolors, the sails won't luff, the salt wears the hull, each sailor looks at the other and wonders how blood will taste. If only the sharks didn't look so hungry, we could swim for it, says one. If only you weren't so fast, says another, we could pitch you over and see which shark is hungriest. And just then, as the men finish their laugh, the light snuffs out, and the gunwales and the crow's nest and salt disappear in the creak of a door and the master's whistle.

Cave

I dreamed the grasshoppers conspired
in Spanish (I was the grass) while car
tires scooped ice cream from vats
of copperhead snakes themselves
singing Hallelujah! Hallelujah! louder
than a Mormon boys' choir Christmas
morning when I felt you nudge me
with your toes, pricks of ice ringing
the edge of my cave, and I tried to see
the light of your presence (but
the snakes are copper and glitter) and hear
the in and out of your breath (but
the grasshoppers call to each other
with song) and noticed the sky
was light at the entrance and the sun
would swarm the grass and the snakes
could find rocks and the tires
should drive on other roads and you and I
will wake and hear new songs
in our own tongue and own flesh.

Breeze

The common house gecko hangs upside-down
from the silk plant, his eyes bicycle tires
with only four spokes, his feet five Frisbees
each ready to take flight. His tail, detachable
as a Popsicle from a stick, curls into a question mark
and invites speculation: If the universe will soon contract,
should I move on the cricket now or after I am warm?
The cricket, small and bony as a bucket of chicken, sings
as if Autumn will follow the heat-lamp's summer
and knows the number of singers in his choir diminishes
each day. His song speaks of the breezes, crisp
as marbles on a tile floor, that cracked in his world
years earlier, breezes he hopes will return. The leaves
rustle, the song pauses, and the cricket looks
toward the false sun, hoping the movement of green
is the grass bending for spring.

Different Hands

I know how quickly we forget
the small offices of love, daily
offerings of cut fruit, clean
dishes, I love you mouthed
through windows. We forget
all in the presence of strength,
a truck heavy with steel,
the wind bending a maple,
lightning: a great something
different from us together,
a reminder that outside us,
a fence, lurks an animal
who can come in only
if we open the gate. We
forget we are two kites
riding the same wind, strings
held by different hands. We
should remember our own garden
blooms and the fruit tastes sweet
and the shade comforts.

Raining in the Mountains

In the distance, lightning flashes. Thunder staggers across the mountains like tanks. In three days, the bombs and planes, in two the helicopters and machine guns and mortars, in one the bayonets. Boots mark the sand like patters of rain, and windows explode toward the street like handfuls of confetti. The parade pushes past the center of town, toward the statue and the fountain, and each soldier throws a gift to the water, makes a wish: please, great clouds, cover the sun, but do not move the sand—we are only palm trees looking to each other for shade. For now, the lightning scatters sheep on the mountainside, and the rivers carry dust. Tomorrow, we will need umbrellas. Tomorrow will see rain.

Placket

Emily Hu, having
taken her Christian
name, walked
the garden to collect
twigs on Tuesday
night. She left
her three daughters
behind in the hut
because the small
lantern is not enough
to rid the dusk
of evil. In the first
garden, The Snake
tempted Eve to eat
the apple and seemed,
as far as snakes go,
not especially fearsome,
but the boa Emily
Hu startled hissed
no sweet sentiments
to charm her intellect.
He coiled rather
his muscle around
first her ankles
and hips and then
her shoulders, and
when the breathing
finally, finally
stopped, he disjointed
his jaw and swallowed
only half, leaving half
for the morning
and the other
Christians.

Swimming at Night

I like the time at night best
when the water in the hotel pool,
illuminated from below, glows
as if molten, undisturbed
and solid, and the other travelers
are asleep, the last coils
of the beds motionless and taught,
the whistle of the trucks
like bats cutting the darkness
and the real bats dipping
to the surface of the water
the only sounds. Then the rumbles
from the day slip
out of their trunks, unpacked
and unseen, and lower
into the pool, like skinny dippers,
seeking, finally, the dark spaces
around the lights,
the warmest spots
that look like caves
in the long, smooth expanse of the walls,
and try to leave.

A Garden

Older now, tattooed with thorns, the blood
irrigates a garden across her shoulders,
a patch of soil first for the boy in kindergarten
who kissed her lips and wild bracken
running along her shoulder for the husband
and second lover in college who taught her
to smoke pot and tend issues outside
the classroom, nearer her heart, and a fence
and high vines on posts to shroud the woman
flowering beneath the apple tree, the woman
who parted her lips and slid her tongue
like a small snake between her teeth, marked
her forever as a field recovered from the flood,
a field more fertile for all the dreck deposited
when the rains receded and the sun lit
the side of her face once reserved
for the bloom of shame and the husks
of lovers who had kissed and closed gates
that should have opened out and in.

Prayer

Bring me mica and quartz,
water drops and spittle, all
elements that gather light
and send it forward changed,
not new but something else,
stones in a bridge and steel
firmed as a gate: bring me
ponds and rain, husk and oaks,
the inevitable metamorphosis and
cycles swift as teeth and cog
and seeds under the wheel: bring
me leavening, bring me heat—
water, flour, yeast, tin.

Fetch

Me the dog
you the arm
and the stick
to throw
and me to flee
through the flowers
through the field
half way
to the willow
before I see
the stick still
in your hand.

Attention

The General left his four stars on the bench beside his trousers and marched to the shower, towel pressed neatly against him like a flag draped across the coffin. The others already installed wanted to salute, to raise soapy hands and snap to attention, but the General turned his back to them and reached his towel to the hook, nearly too high, and swiveled toward the farthest spigot, chrome and solid and solitary. Each man completed his mission, did not smile, passed without looking. Finished, the General reached for his towel as if hung among the stars, grabbed a small piece of heaven, and cinched the clouds tightly around his waist.

Panic

Gazelles don't panic
once the lion has them
in its teeth. Limp as satin,
a sudden calmness
like the ease of sleep
overcomes the soldier
whose legs are lost
to the mine and who sees
before him an expanse
of blood like a desert.
And you and me underwater
float like jellyfish, our limbs
soft as tissue paper, our
last breaths foreign as darkness
without stars, a pillow
without a cover, the head
lost, clamped between the
waves and the ocean's floor,
blue extending beyond
the light murky as a match
half in flame.

Ride

I took my sons to the soccer fields to fly airplanes, tethered to us with radio signals, and early I felt how like the planes were my sons: as capable of flight as broken wings. The field seemed large enough, and if the wind felt strong, we felt stronger. We failed at first flight, but the second, a red bird with yellow markings, warbled and wafted and took wing. She circled for a moment, as if examining us, such paltry creatures in a nest clearly outgrown, and headed away, over the houses, over the trees, grateful for the push, but even more grateful for the current of wind and the sudden rush of blue sky that separated us, who ran after and yelled “Come back!” as the plane nodded adieu and dipped below the roofs and toward the streets and vanished.

Sex of Rain

Sexless as cottonwood with full lapse of seed,
spilling out of the fibrous bud like sea foam,
the sex of rain softens the earth indeterminate
of male or female, pounds the earth, penetrates
the landscape like asteroids scattering moon dust
around craters: a rain drop like parenthesis
looking for a word to fill them (see?) or an
idea to gestate, something inside each gathered
molecule to molecule, umbilical to the clouds,
mother earth's water broke (listen) and then
drops of breast milk to feed the tiny shoots whose
noses turn up to the clouds like birds in a nest
(o chalice, o little embryos) and discover throbbing
leaves glistening with god's lightning, god's semen
scattered recklessly to plant and bring life anywhere
and everywhere (o) a shameless scattering
like coal miners deep in the shaft whose picks
drill holes from which gems seep like afterthoughts
and whose carts on rails like buckets left brimming
drip stones like words that line the way out (out)
and always something falling, moving inside,
working sexless, as a bomb that rips itself open
and leaves, as all things, (leave).

Old Woman

The ancient battle axe of a woman held her breasts
like watermelons she toted toward a scale, one
under each arm. Not watermelons, exactly, but children
without opportunity of escape, headed for the bath.
I could still take you, her posture said, just allow me
to tie these behind my back. The dress hung like armor,
the earrings scars, her hair-dye the blue blood of past
conquests. She fixed me with her one good eye,
the other drifting toward the light of the exit door,
heading away from her, and we both stepped aside.

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