

Four Poems by Deven Philbrick

Matter and the Birth of the Other

The fact of the matter
 is its happening.
I didn't think
 it mattered if we
made our beds in the morning light or
persisted in our slimy dreams
and slept like the sloths we were.
What's the matter
 this time, first breath's arterial clang
sang to me in my somnambulatory state,
sated my desires with wine
 sweet as pine pitch.

Somewhere burns an alchemical fire.
Matter sprays as smoke. Whitehead
said "there are no brute, self-contained matters
 of fact capable of being understood
 apart from interpretation
as an element in a system." My
 systems have declared
their operations bunk, have slunk down
dusty stairwells and delivered bread
to the unconscious. The dead
matter more
than the living, from a certain point
of view. It's *you* who sees it, who smells the decay,
 the rot at the heart
 of the matter.

Tattered and torn, bruised and broken, the subject
bores its way through earth as a worm.
 Reading Whitehead again: "The Adventure of the Universe
starts with the dream
and reaps tragic Beauty."
The worm is the final adjudicator
of what matters, master of the sphere
we've named reality.

It is a physical sphere, made
of what happens. I have imagined
this moment for infinite eternities, slept
on the dirty, broken floorboards of

dualism. I have

skin in the game, it matters
to me

what happens, whether
alchemical fire persists as ever
in leaping exaltation of primordial balance, that
the dual nature of creation, abstract
essence and concrete
actuality, two natures, primordial and consequent
respectively, finds its form
in our flourishing.

To sniff adventure is to create as a god.
To love is to listen.
Hastening, our footsteps match the pace
of the universal rumbling undergirding all
sense, intensity's flare and flavor, the cosmos's
elemental tint.

None of it matters—
except the lint in my pants' pocket, the
dust in my dresser drawer. Sweeping the floor, the broom
moves particles like
souls. Suppose

all the world was a poem.
Would it still matter
if we turned over every stone, found
all the facts and arranged them? The ink
on the page bleeds margin
to margin and, still supposing, the poet
hangs himself with a shadow-noose. An altogether different poet
gives birth
in an inverted posture. Galaxies contained
in a single droplet of her sweat. Planets
the rocks tumbling from her skin, becoming dust before
our eyes, that woman of ethereal stone,
magma madonna, holy earth mother. Birth
of the other, strained
by liminality's drunk
material.

It's a matter of
life and death, this business
of saying and meaning.
She said what she meant until
personal

matters

lured her far away, into that
threaded iridescence, the glimmering shadow's
central sacred dark space. Every involved body,
chasm. Finally: "the distinction between matter
and radiant energy has now vanished."

The body washes its hands in acrid water.

Tucked in smoke beds, the body
enervates the sun
and grows rigid in the morning light.

Abandoned bed.

Dead bed.

All those things thought and said
never mattered

more than they matter now.

We are here.

Gone as smoke.

Curtailing the void.

Making sense.

Making matter.

Making difference.

Surveilling even ourselves,
we suppose we flung those doors open
fast enough.

Dream doors matter

like real ones. For the space they leave empty, clear
for passage.

Eulogy in Blue

The dream is blue as stone.

Gathered and arranged here, carried
great distances, painted the natural
blue of
certain unfamiliar fruits. The stones
are the foundation.

Its emanations are trans-
versal, its residue
everywhere. It's in the skin,
the eyes, the hereditarily thinning hair,
in aching bones
built from blue stones—the mother
of us all.

I can only carry so many, two
in each hand, one
in each pocket, and a seventh
tucked under my
tongue. Time's tether takes
collapsing lungs and
failing heart (tumors like tennis
balls, big and throbbing)
along for that ride
toward eventual respite
and intrinsic enigma.

I watched him carry those stones
for her, up the sinister slope of that
malevolent mountain. Carried them
so far his heart gave out. They built a cathedral
up there, and put a brothel in the basement,
a mortuary
under that.

The stones are only meaningful if in their proper place.
The dream foretells its mystery by
coexistence of past, present
and future. I am beside myself *with grief*, I
is beside me, eyes. Seeing
death on someone's face—hearing, over the telephone,
that the stones were thrown too far.
No injuries to the head or neck.

Little blue stones in his shoes.

I am a child in blue, strange
 scripture there before me, tore me
open, tore me up.
 The pages on the table
turn as if moved by an unseen force, by,
 perhaps, memory's mystic vagaries or
dream's dramaturgical withdrawal.

Words are blue stones, language
 an inverted cathedral, invented
 society's dodecahedral foundation,
blueprints scrawled like sacred scrolls, instructions
 given to me
 without my knowing.

The books they've written will be read
 only by the blind.
The stones they've assembled
 on thin, thin paper, ink
blue as
 the sea at midnight, that heavenly
stitch, where the differences between
 stars and stones
are a matter of mere perspective.

Geologic architecture.
Linguistic tectonics.
Plates shifting, rifts made from
 the rumbling of earth's
ragged edges, stones
 designed
to be used
 just like this, in making, in
artifice's artificial auspiciousness, in losing it
 at the edge of the poem.

I've thrown these stones for you, O
 mystic blue
 note of forgiveness
written on a thread of memory,
midnight's iridescent whisper longing for
 lungs to breathe with and
 feet to walk with and
 a complex organic system
 greater than the sum of its

parts

 like the sea parts
 and red becomes blue
 like they told me
blood did, but in reverse—turning blue
 upon contact
 with the air
 we breathe.

The need for sensemaking, like
 biting off a finger with
 the ease of biting thru
a carrot, is only in
 the saying it, saying
stones are blue
 makes them so, and saying
they were placed here, one by
 burdensome one, stones
boulders in another life, pebbles
 in another, planets
after that. The moon, a built
rock, like the stones
 we sat on, or the blues
he built with,
 a body
given up on
 like sea stars
 in a blue dream.

Huge rocks, casting great grey shadows on the seashell beach,
 awash in seaspray, salt—*the sailboat, the sailboat*
 it's a visual fact in
blue, built not from boards but from
 you guessed it
 stones. I've written poems
 on these for years, having
long forgotten
 that book and its
 arrangement of the facts. It's *all*
arrangements of the facts, I've learned
 all of it. The politics
eschewed or confronted, the same, a matter of
 opposing views, viewed and verified
by the angles
 of its appearance, I've seen it
 riding that blue, blue
sailboat, that sky, so dark and so

stone!

The memory is *stone!* Blue as *stone!*
It is made of the thing
you are. Map of
stone. Book of
stone. A life composed of nothing but
stone, and significant thus—that is
by its gesture toward eternity
despite its inevitable inertia,
it's movement toward the neverpoint
where even god
is made of stone
and the water,
blue and cold, tastes
of that mineral sweetness
we know.
Moon stone.
Sun stone.
Dream stone.
Death stone.

They've carried them in enormous wheelbarrows,
thousands of miles on tired, tore up
feet. Carried them to the highest peaks
of my mind. It is a made
place, made of images and stone. An
architect
did work here, raising up mountains
from flesh and from bone, blue earth
birthing everything there is.

The stones do not contain but
encircle. It is easier to
change than to rebuild, easier
to remember than
to dream, easier
to turn over every stone
and see the blue, blue
life
that flourishes underneath, easier
than returning home after a long journey
and discovering that what you thought was there
has turned to ash, everything burned
but the stones. It is easier

if the stones, gathered, harnessed, thrown
over great ponds, skittering on the water's surface, blue
but only
from the sky,
are accounted for, the totals
scrupulously squared.

Pebbles painted by trembling hands, dead
hands, dancing, turning blue from
oxygen deprivation and varicose veins, it's
plain to see that the blood
will be blue
in the afterlife, imagined
or otherwise.

It is a labor to carry stones, to hold them,
to pass them as in
birth or shit, that goddess
who knows their proximity
the matron of stones.

Stone box, filled with ashes. One
bird shaped, one square. Both
so heavy, it would take an army to carry them
up that same mountain of
malcontent. Dreaming, I ascend, with my
eyes on the peak, straining
for the weight of the stones
I've been charged with,
turning to see a waterfall of mystic blue nestled
among the slopes and, rather
than make my way
all the way
up to that peak, I'll stop here and drink
from the water, blue
as crystal.

It is a painful taste.
A death taste.
And the rings he wore had blue stones
and her false teeth made her smile
a stone-blue smile. And I, crying blue tears,
plink Picasso's blue guitar
behind the waterfall
and fall
into the depths
where the merwomen go, when they've left the rocks they lay on, when

the sailors they've lured away from
grieving wives have left. Down there, still plinking
a blues we used to listen to, I help them
 detangle their hair. Blue hair with a blue comb.
She rises in her sadness and relieves me
 of the stones, and I pass along that waterway
as the blue that surrounds me deepens, darkens, and everything
 gets cold. I'll only drown if I close my eyes.
 My eyes are made of stone.

Fly by Night

Dreaming. Barefoot. Ashamed.

I have perched myself
 on this ledge
of experience, remembering with
 naked accuracy
the summoning and its consequences.

Uncovered. Sweatsoaked. Limp.

With what wings
 nocturnal experience
takes flight, lifting off
 the branch the talons
clung to. Rooted tree.
 Suspended sky.

A dream of feet
 and talons, love's language
lost in the bird-body, soul's
 remittance paid to man
asleep. The body remembers, in
 its fibers,
 the feathers
she wore in her
 dangling hair.

Entanglement of soul
 and stone, of hollow bones
and vacant voice,
 part whisper, part
screech.

Wingbeat. Nightmare. Balm.

Memory makes
 soul speak, spoke of
duende, spoke of
 undigested fur,
speech a sad substitute
 for song. All night long we
wait for her, whose memory
 burns bright in the mind's
closed eyes, and the will to find
 a way to fly

presents itself, unbidden.

Moonlight. Dead wood. Fear.

The hands become fists, become
fast. Gliding
across the night, the tree behind
love's lurch getting smaller,
blurring at its sudden edge, even
the moon
is made of feathers
now. I remember
the body
the dream
the sordid ceremony
of inaugural naming.
I have become what was there.

Silent prayer. Frantic flutter. Edgewise.

Sacrilege is also a body.
The night claims kin
those who whisper.

Feathered hair. Mournful eyes. Dead words.

Breathing the night, the bird
roosts only temporarily. Singular
stalker. Silently soars.

There is only moonlight between us.

Deadly ledge. Erratic ascent. Heavenly
feather. Bright
as the moon whose
derivative light
burns in the body
and the mind.

The memory is physical. Like wind beneath
imagined wings.

Bare feet protrude from
short blankets and she, appearing, sings.

It is a star I seek. For you, for night, and

*for the tree I'll never land
on again.*

Sunset Masque

Black robed sundown,
it is night, but notwithstanding,
gesture's effervescent loom, day's inevitable
break, takes its toll—we know the sound it makes
but, hearing, find ourselves often
mistaken. Find the sound again,
make listening
tantamount to being, seeing tertiary
to the relationships that beget it, *don't sweat it* some-
body
said.

It is the sound of a thing's internal motion
that gives it its edges.

The sun, in its robes of darkness,
demonstrates its drunkenness
by way of what it illuminates.

The ground is there.
A universe of pure gesture.
Tongues tethered to aching spines,
a younger man attempts the impossible:
create an exactly representative
text, visual exactitude perception's
impossibility, imagination mind's
defective measuring stick, the same problem
set in extremes. Sunset wears black robes
in a dream and I wait for it, the shadow
that appears only then.
Mallarmé's boat tilts
in the mimetic sky, sent adrift on that
moon-drawn tide, it's high time we set things
straight. The boat is not a metaphor.
It is a real boat, built from imagined boards,
boards broken by real waves. The sky is a real
sea, seen by the real eyes
of Time's terrible countenance. An awkward color,
but beautiful.

We saw two people drown, once. Drown in what
we thought was sky, and elsewhere,
a woman in a sunset dress
carried crumpled orange leaves

in a basket woven of mystic wicker
through the grass and through the weeds
to her ancestral home, real
and imagined
all at once. There is a twisting
in it, her step, taken under
the same sun, black
robed and setting nonetheless. Boats
can no longer cross tumultuous seas, not least
in France, their point of sinister origin,
diseased and angry, sailors slither on deck and, rocking
as in
a cradle, the boat, built of the same boards, transports
more than bodies and minds. In its wake,
the universe's primary creative force
wills its way through the water
in that space of presence's tender touch
of absence, of absence's serene surrender.
We have heard it, the echo of the original sound.
We will hear it again and again.
Who are we? I ask the black
robed sun.
Shining,
the sky recedes,
low
from the tugging moon.