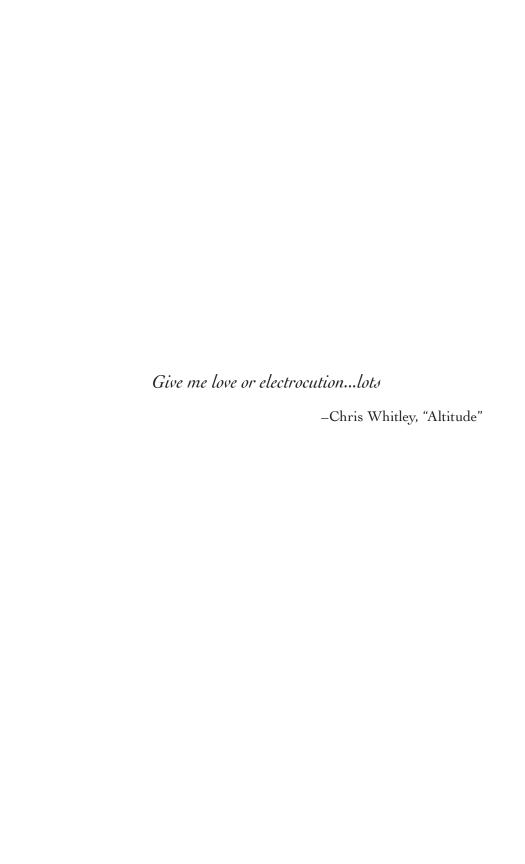
Skin Music

Dennis Hinrichsen

Co-winner of the 2014 Michael Waters Poetry Prize



Published by the University of Southern Indiana Evansville, Indiana



ICE: PRELUDES TO A MEMORY OF HEAVEN

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls...

Matthew 13:45

In the dream, bitter cold. Two men sawing

at ice until large chunks can be lifted,

carried to a flatbed truck, laid on straw.

Again and again down the incline,

their breath white against the snow.

Then up again, building

a kind of house.

It takes hours to do this. Their hands are bare. Snow not deep,

but slick, so they step carefully.

The dream-shot has me as bird or tree, so I cannot see

the meat of their faces.

but they seem — since this is my waking reference —

to be penniless.

The lake is a kingdom and so they harvest,

until the bed is full and

they climb in, drive away.

†

Second dream—same lake—

different men.

There's a pickup backed to the ice, and they are tugging,

positioning the weight of an animal at the lip

of the gate until they can haul it

twenty feet out.

It hangs between them like something drowned, or sleeping.

And then they drop it -

a doe hunted down or roadkill, the dream won't say.

And then they are gone.

The body steams a little in the cold.

The men park on a hill overlooking the surface,

watch eagles one by one

unlock themselves from the hammered sky, flutter

in, tear and feed.

†

I know the structure cannot hold

but as long as it does it is sheened.

The straw soaked through—a drowned man's hair.

The impossible gem melting down —

striations that for awhile resemble knives,

bleeding pearls.

As for the deer, it is scraped to bone.

Emptiness where the eyes were set.

Ribs still holding their curve.

Skeleton—target of fur and blood gone feathery at the edges,

until it is dragged away in pieces,

or drops, unhinged,

through water returned to water.

MY BUCEPHALUS,

my cloud shape, my incidental, somewhere there is a child standing in dirt,

shitting its ankles, but you are running again in that Canadian field, tight

along the fence rail, so that your speed matches mine

and it is not the speed of an old woman swatting flies from an open

cut, or the move (since I am well-fed)
from wound
to blossom

to wound and I am birthed again in sunlight, freed from my shadow.

Your pinto high-step whispers, your proud pounding

for no good reason. The bold tower of losses that on earth

conveys our misery just one more silo of grain in an Ontario field.

And still you run. Over the fence rail, around the curve, and back

again where you bed down and whinny,

roll

on your back. I have seen you there, pointing belly at sky,

all that shining muscular roundness.

I have seen
the crisp,

rudimentary hooves.

Where was I going that was so important

that I could not stop and place a hand on your broad,

flat skull, consider your huge eyes not all broken glass,

pieces of cloud, but jeweled, encompassed, as if packed with stone.

Somewhere a man imagines
his wife's
cancer as small islands forever

leaving her body. While elsewhere bullets fragment, go

butt-headed, twin-pronged, rip flesh. And still you run, so far

to the edge of the field,
it is memory,
horizon,

and I am walking to the fence, my body the consistency

of balsa and myth,

the angle of my leaning like a lure

to heaven. I wonder: When I finally see the god face, will it be you, a horse?

EVERY CORAL BRANCH SUPPORTS THE MOON

(answer to a Zen koan / for my mother)

There was a river in her head that kept flowing and so she

sang at a piano built

from air.

hands frail and spotted with match heads.

Strange singer she was,

mask forcing pressure

into a failing heart so the external lung that kept pumping

was nearly opera

in the room, grand, scaled— La Scala—

and the chambers of her dying

its box and voice.

But no sound came. Plank on plank

she kept building,

reaching out, leaning,

bridging some lumber in her head

with deeper wood. I thought fear

would take her like some Jesus bucket

tearing

at the bottom of a well when the preacher

gripped her skull

and uttered last harsh words, but it was she

who came to drink, not some savior

in the shape

of a man's palm. And so I too sucked breath

in hospital light,

brought her dripping from the sea.

Gave her a *cup of winter*, language

having clotted in a sheath of thought-

a particle of ice—

it was all she could whisper,

dying, to get a glass of cooling tea...

Reader, it was morphine.

I let them wand her heart

to disconnect it, and then we pumped the slurry in.

Nobody winced

because it was beautiful and smooth, a fat.

controllable lightning, cured

with honey.

How it serenely sleeved the wires of her brain, the nerves,

the cheekbones I saw yellowed

with jaundice, that Taj Mahal of heresy and belief

we call the self come crashing down,

zone

by zone, reduced, relaxed, surrendered

to one thin hand caressing a cold dead leg.

FRAGMENT: WINTER JOURNAL

...then seizure again, that blue clot, level

of the larynx, can't breathe, can't

speak, don't want to, heron long gone

(where?), no longer perfecting its one

slant move: stillness stabbing at shadow,

its throat (no cry) muscle of fin

and writhing, all I dream

is blue weather, blue snow

on a blue roof, Rilke's zombie angels

fixed in this world for now, sharp,

angular ice, halfway down the river

the trees are dirty with them, as bent as

fishhooks, sundown: last red wash of emptiness,

last seizure, ice cracking, then seizure again...

MINOTAUR

The first time I ever reeled from my family's stink I was in the basement of the Paramount Theater, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, taking a piss. My uncle, nineteen,

retar∂e∂—
that's what we called it then—was next
to me.

We had just seen a John Wayne film and were heading home. I was working hard, nine years old, to drill the urinal but could only manage a pale yellow rope

that splayed

and went feathery at the end.

Uncle, for his part, was all bull.

Something powerful and amber coming out of the pizzle he held with both hands.

Eyes glazed, mind elsewhere. At peace with it-

reek of armpit and groin like the air

around a farm.

I could smell in it the drench of decaying skin cell, money, failure, honeyed ear wax, the genetic rubs that contained my mother (but not my father).

And so I quailed, zippered up:

boy child, idiot uncle. Minotaur, blue baby...

Why

did they give him up?

Ward of the state at three or four, I can't recall, he took his ruined crown into the world, bone that would not unstitch, and howled himself to sleep.

Did not die at age six, as he was promised.

But lashed out. Survived.

Learned to steal.

I visited him once in that orphan bedlam. I was thirteen and could barely make him out from all the other smells,

the long rooms, high windows, shades pulled so tight

they smacked like canvas.

And then I caught that burning Jesus scent, devil in the whiskers of bristled scalp.

Bad breath hovering beneath coagulant cream.

He grinned hard and hugged me as if I were a friend, and we two perfect creatures in a world of flashy men, gorgeous women, and this moment, the touch

> that would tag me his, though I was already his

> > †

(how could I know that then?): my own stink coming back in rusted jackknife and cut-up bird, crawdad, creek mud,

wedge of sneaker hanging over the culvert

I sometimes crawled through the length of a childhood, the tunnel not holding,

until I re-entered this shining world all snot

and dripping phlegm, a scabbed child turning

†

blue: "hue of illness and nobility, the rarest color in nature."

Why did they give him up?

(it's easy now— Nazis, Pearl Harbor, there was metal to save, sugar to ration, he was the fourth child/ flesh issued damaged from the mother's genius womb):

†

cell for cell our own body...

Now age seventy, they have him tethered down, they think he's crazy, they have the feeding tube sutured in.

His eyes, my mother's eyes, flash white above palsied

vocal chords.

He blinks to remember: the ten or so cars we owned, where we lived, who was oldest, who kept him in chocolate, how his pa died and his

ma went crazy, half her head shaved off because she fell down the stairs, then forgot everything, even his name.

And those mean dogs that bit us and

ran away.

Miami Drive, 2019 D Avenue.

The house on Bonita...man-child stumbling in the labyrinths of our play.

That ring of silence I held my breath in when I was a kid so I could be as dumb as him

just one more useless dodge to what they always

told me:

how when I was born they put my crooked body in his open arms

and he cooed my name.