Segue 7: Fall 08

© 2008 Segue online literary journal
ISSN 1939-263X

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Issue 7 Fall 2008

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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between August 1 and April 30 (closed May through July), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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We Leave the Land of Our Fathers

They made me leader,
(and I was the fittest leader)
because I stayed up nights worrying
we’d eat bark all winter.

Close to the summit,
witnessing
the campfires of others
in that passive, bewildered manner
of the early-old, the imbecile.

I would say, You’re
a cigarette extinguished
in my arm.

You would say,
*A hundred years seems sensible.*
So we went on fighting
for what felt like it.
(Or longer?)

A purple rash rushed
from nettles. Ahead or back
like an oxen in heat.

They made me leader.
Then I was captured by enemies

and what a relief that was,
needing only to carry
out the small acts of life.

*It’s out of my hands,* I would say.
*The river meanders,* I would
and it would,
and it makes its way;
little hills in the air as it goes.
Humming to Myself in a Voice I’d Never Heard

You have to cease believing
the world will end tomorrow.
On the cabinet’s ligneous surface,
the parking tickets marshal,
letters not-so-subtly hostile—
movies you refuse to return.
Morbid thoughts catch
in your whirlpool of unemployment:
Into the ballroom of the west you came waltzing
and into the strip mine of death—
you race this banner through
your cerebrum enough and, bam,
all the ducks dead from arsenic.
Evidently some company named Anaconda,
and for weeks representatives arrive
in the neighborhood like a smell of rotten eggs.
Each one wears a hardhat hung too low
and enacts for you
how the arsenic found its way
into Plummer’s Pond.
It’s perfectly safe now
they say. But no one really lets it go.
They look on dubiously,
hands on hips.
And you don’t know what to think.
You’re killing your mother.
The Little Number Attests

And when the world ended, we cast
lots for each other’s clothes. We hated
each other’s silence. We sat before your desert home,
counting the shadows of lean-tos.

How far, Little Number,
how sorry our pronouncements carried!

Always I thought of your skeleton,
muscles flared like hot gems,
knotting the troubled sails of your ship. We dreamed it,
together, with our eyes transfixed on the late eruption

of stars. But no testament existed to our lives. The knives
wailed and dissolved into thick solvents of dust.

And in the summer we ate moths for luck.
We cut our ears like women.
Venus Clothed by Distance

Originally arising from sash—fashion—or a fondness for softness typically associated with women.

During the era of Italian city states, rural debtors described the princely passions of dress as sashioni, only in the occlusion of their campfires. This, like most derisions was later adopted affirmatively by the rising families of Apulia and inner-Rome.

As the word migrated to the western estates of Kiev, plague traveled at its side, twining with the proto-Russian, falluck: to depart or to turn a jar till all contents, typically gypsum, reach a single end.

The connection between the two terms bore: one which dies each season and rises with alms, the current understanding of Russian fashion.

Then mighty Europe lapsed into its sleep of war. Such it was during the era of Industry and on.

Nowadays, we know (or believe we know) what perpetuates even after upheaval—famine, flu epidemics.

Fashion became a means to reorder death and life as baptism had been hundreds of years before: beauty in its time then the slow plod toward subsequent existence.

American have challenged such notions of the recursive as the cornerstone of fashion, arguing in favor of saffion, from the Portuguese, a sometimes troubled clothing of the eternal, as the true root.
The term’s lineage traces to some uses during the Roman Empire
to delineate the life of a soldier
from the immortal being of the emperor.

This is why American models are asked to refuse tattoo,
why fashion is so often associated with the search
for dark matter
which would evidence an ever-expanding universe,
though no evidence seems to suggest such.

Because the young hold such sway
in American fashion,
the fetish of the perpetual I surfaces.

They insist upon it like a mantra. A people un-phased
even faced with the inevitable,
though their land is stubborn and ill-suited
for the uninterrupted.

Such is the state of things in America.
About the Work

Kyle McCord is an MFA student studying under Peter Gizzi and James Tate at UMass-Amherst. His manuscript, A Nesting Doll, was selected as a finalist for the 2008 Orphic Prize. He has work forthcoming or published from Columbia: a Journal of Art and Literature, Fourteen Hills, Diagram, William and Mary Review, The Portland Review, The American Poetry Journal, and elsewhere.

About the Work

It’s difficult to establish really distinct links between all the pieces here, but certainly one common thread is the speaker’s relationship to the poem, the “we,” the “I,” the all too dangerous, “they.” I spent a good bit of time studying Durkheim’s theories on the construction of enemy identities, the “them” and “us” reflex; how the human mind uses division, differentiation to affirm identity. It’s why the cartographers have to buy so many different shades of ink to draw even the most localized maps. I think Moses is one of the first victims of this human trope. If he’s not defending the Israelites from Jehovah, the Israelites are trying to stone him or causing him to break tablets up on a mountain. Not only is there the “they” of the enemy, there’s the “they” of the leader distanced by responsibility, hierarchy. That’s one string I was playing with in “We Leave the Land of Our Fathers.” The wearying liability of actually being in charge.

History is full of these great stories just waiting to be couched in the personal. A few years ago the Black Maria’s featured a short pseudo-documentary, pseudo-propaganda piece about the International Workers of the World in Butte, Montana. Part of the story was that Anaconda, a copper mining company who badly misused the Butte population, had contaminated the water in the area to such a point that a flock of birds mysteriously died after drinking the water. I wanted to take that story, with fictional liberties of course, and couch it in this strange domestic, depressive mode of the speaker. I was studying under James Galvin at the time and was thinking about drastic tone shifts manifest through narrative. Jim Tate always talked about the most successful poem being one where you can make the reader laugh then cry. That’s not to say I expected either particular emotion from a reader of “Humming to Myself…”, but instead to say I consciously tried to develop a poem where, like life, exterior circumstances interfere with an otherwise interior monologue in a way that produces unexpected and not wholly determinable outcomes.

In my preoccupation with religious narrative, I became equally interested in narratives or devotional works of the occult. Berryman was obsessed with surprise. With novelty. Not on an “Anxiety of Influence” macrocosmic level. I can’t speak for that. No, a line-level pleasure for the reader arising from invention, from unprecedented juxtaposition. Berrymen’s writings were/are a big influence on me. With those two things in mind, I decided about a year ago I wanted to write a set of devotional poems to the Mark of the Beast. Not in a way that elevated, in a dishonest way, the character of the Mark were it a material being, but that elaborated like Psalms the character of the subject. Obviously, it was a weird set of ideas to hold in my head all at once and my effort is always to normalize the line-level clarity when I’m dealing with strange enough subjects. So the poems came out a little flat on first run. I got rid of the third piece and trimmed the other two
down to what you see now, “The Little Number Attests” here and the other which was featured on Diagram a couple months ago.

As far as what’s central in poetry, besides novelty, I think a lot about balance. Eliot in “Verse Libre” talks about how no poem is a-metric or a-assonant. I’m always thinking “ok, the effect of this line is x so I’m going to either maintain or counter-act that tone with the subsequent line.” Only I’m thinking not just about balance of tone but balance of material and ideographic images, deceptions and altruisms, filtered emotion and unfiltered emotion, differing dictions, etc. Not always on such a short time line either. A good poem should make you its Dante, guiding you, letting you feel the real dangers, but never losing you altogether. Part of the seed of the last poem was a desire to abuse the reader-ly deferent— where the reader is asked merely to absorb the reportage as fact. History has some elements of fact, but it’s also a particular arrangement of events to derive an outcome. The scope of the events selected and the conclusions drawn from them are largely subjective and can, in a careless historian, lead to some very strange or hilarious conclusions.

Kyle McCord on the Web

dailypalette.uiowa.edu/index.php?artwork=898

thedigram.com/7_5/mccord.html

cratemfajournal.wordpress.com/category/kyle-mccord/