

ABSTRACT

TITLE OF THESIS: Summon Up the Blood

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Summon Up the Blood is a collection of poems divided into two sections. The first, entitled “Country” deals with the relationship between the individual and the natural world, and with the tendency for one to reflect the other; the second, entitled “City” is primarily concerned with the inner life of the individual amid the stresses of society and culture, and with the difficulties of preserving a sense of self in the modern world. Both sections share the overarching goal of extensively inspecting the necessity of being an honest observer of both the interior and exterior worlds. Influences include Robinson Jeffers, Ezra Pound, Tomas Tranströmer and Robert Frost.

SUMMON UP THE BLOOD

by

Evan Matthew Stephens, 2007

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Country

On The Mountain

Imagine the surprise of Dr Weathers,
waking on that assaulted winter ridge,
fresh from a dream, frostbitten and snowblind,
yet stumbling, as if pushed, forward,

not knowing if he's aimed at camp
or off the mountain-face; strange – no feeling
in the feet, not even cruel numbness;
stranger still, hands that belong to someone else –

he can't feel that they've gone solid
in the night, the blood crystalline in the veins.
Awakened, he moves, shuffling feet hard as skis
ploughing through the flood of powder.

Did he dream that he was deep undersea,
on the black floor of the ocean, desperately
pressing through watery miles, every move
slowed by half? The sun above

invisible, hidden beyond a cone
of wind that is impossibly conscious,
the way it carefully, scrupulously
finds each tear in coat and boot and beard.

And yet, the mountain rejuvenates –
did he realize he was growing steadily younger?
First the adolescent dismay of being abandoned mid-path
to be cut loose too soon, when a hand is most needed,

betrayed by the guides. And then younger still –
his steps awkward as a toddler's, his ability to speak

lost as his lips froze, his thoughts mirroring his needs.
Imagine what the guides saw as he arrived,

his face grotesquely shining in the light,
from the mask of frost on his frozen flesh.
Now, imagine his last infantile thoughts
as they cover him in warm water, glad to be awake.

Eight Litre Bentley

We're back in the auto museum again,
you're bored and breathing your little
goddammit out into the polished air.

It's too late - I've slipped into the plaque,
the bronzed history of the sleek, monumental
Bentley, once the favorite thing of a rich man,

who, drowsy with brandy and estate narrowed
to a copse and a pond, idled it slowly
and deliberately to the pond's black edge

to keep it from the inexhaustable cuts
of paper scythes. But he wouldn't
ruin what he loved.

Back in your apartment, I can't explain
the restraint which held him back because
I can't find any in you. Instead, you spill out

everywhere - cold evening floats in your eyes, where once
I thought I saw grains of coal glowing. You turn off
like a machine as night's dark sleigh wedges between us.

Arizona Song

Gardens of cactus mount out of the dust,
and cast a deep shadow over the rented car.
Radiator's blown, and not overly surprised
the local shop begins to call around for parts.
An old lady sits across from me at the bar,
the only other person there at opening. We nod
in mutual understanding as tall beers are poured.
Car gets repaired, but still threatens to combust
as Weaver's Needle looms. I've come far
enough to know that the heat gauge lies.
I learn to travel only by night, propping charts
against the dashboard, to spare the car –
the new radiator's almost worse than the old –
and sleep by day in motels, under the A/C's roar.

Clays

I'm making tunnels in the air,
with the shotgun at my shoulder:
it's an informal shoot, three friends

in a hundred-acre cornfield, just reaped
in late cool September. The clays fly
into light above shorn stalks,

hover a moment before the shots
scatter them to dust in the field,
bright orange fingernails scraping at dusk.

We try not to be like they are:
impossibly fragile,
crushed with one hand;

we too rise and rise, while on the edge
of sight a gun is brought to shoulder,
sighted with the safety off...

It's oddly easy when we gather and shoot here
to imagine we're creating, as in the Old Testament –
the clays like golems, filled with breath,

sent out in a sudden curious gesture,
recalling them in an impulsive display of will.
And in the moment the clay is flung free,

I suddenly understand how many years ago,
at a winter dance, adolescent feelings disappeared
into the air, undecipherable as white noise.

All we have now are our shields – shooting glasses'

lenses yellowing earth and sky, earpieces muffling
muzzles so that a death-roar becomes a cough.

Before A Deer Hunt

I'm two counties away in the deeper hollows,
snow slowly settling as I hear the same story
told to all of us each year at the bend
in the frozen Monocacy by the ruined rail-bridge.

How each year by the river bottom, they find footprints
coming from nowhere and going nowhere, only lasting
a hundred yards. And always after a sharp frost
has exploded into the air. We make nests into the cold,

and talk over the prints. "It's ghosts of Civil War soldiers,
stationed at Furnace Branch, after Antietam," intones
the oldest man, and our blank faces flash in the weak light
that bunches through the thick, ice-packed drifts
in the crooks of trees, bringing dawn at a crawl.

Quarry

The mind is a constant quarry,
where the ferrous ore of thought
is collected and gathered to the maw
of the smelting furnace, the essence bled out.
Above the siphoned stone, birds wheel and flurry
and drop the seeds of ash trees, brought
to rubble to flourish. But, dead rock and raw,
bad teeth in the pit's open mouth,
this unwanted dross tells its story –
how for every bar of artful iron wrought,
an equal amount is made grossly flawed
and as such discarded, the earth's wracking gout –
for each cathedral built, for every Gilgamesh,
there's slag enough to grow a leafing ash.

Gasoline

The roads are crusted with salt, parched
dry until the scent of salt pervades, bleached
dull white as cars rumble over, scorched
by glowing undercarriages until they split.
Tank's empty, and as soon as the battery gives
it's a forced march to the sloping eaves
of the farm where ancient Duvall lives.
And all the way one foot on the highway,
the other in fields strewn with loose hay –
hunting in the dim, brittle dusk for gasoline.

Birthday

Laying under an elm tree
the day before your birthday,
the trees bend and whistle all afternoon,
as grasses bend toward Sugarloaf Mountain;
I notice a giant shadow roaming in the field.

Tomorrow's birthday floods the air,
cutting like the sharp acid scent of unripe plums.
I imagine you languishing in Houston,
in a clear tunnel of heat outside of a bar
where everything sticks to everything else,
while here I feel that things are sliding away from me,
and the beginnings of forgetfulness
tarnish my memories one by one.
Your face, once bright, has dimmed;
More and more often, I turn to photos
to refresh what little of you I can recall;
It's dishonest, but it's all I have.

Baba Yaga

You puncture the heart with your name –
now you've got my full attention.

With irises black and sleek
as limousines, the river Lethe,
you pass the soul's guardhouse
and enter the grounds unannounced.

You're like the witch Baba Yaga:
Wanton, wild girl, so good with words,
you're a threat, living in that gnarled house,
turned inward like a fist,
keyhole filled with teeth,
and all of it moving on hen's legs.

Aerie

Curled like smoke
by the warm wet pane,
my old cat dreams
of a cold rustle in the grass.
At the desk a pint is drained,
goose-neck hunched over
an open, worn yearbook –
I also look back...

Outside Frank steals a toke
bending the cheap siding as he leans
huddled against driving rain,
waiting for it to pass
so he can go out fly-fishing again
down on the Monocacy river.
He catches me stealing a look,
takes another drag...

Behind the exploded heads of trees
ribbons of condos appear in the hills,
though you can still trade an oil change for beer –
a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon will do.
Old friends like Frank give lease
to the lie: the bend at Michael's Mill
still yields bluegill every year,
while the kitchen table offers only bills come due...

The Lake-Light

Something strange happened at Seneca Lake –
a light was seen shining deep below the ice,
as if a diver was sending a beam to the surface,
in some kind of cautious greeting or resigned farewell.
Illegally night-fishing, the first spotter didn't dare break
through the translucent crust. Instead, checking twice,
he placed some calls. Soon, people came to the place
from their homes in the ribbons of outlying hills.
Pictures were taken while children took to skipping
stones across the frost. But, too soon, it faded out and then
vanished completely; slowly, the crowd thinned,
disappointed by the lost radiance in the ice-chamber,
making guesses: a rusalka wanting company, the camber
of the ice reflecting the moon, or a lost, luminous fish.

On the Way to Sarah's Wedding

On the way to Sarah's wedding,
I stay the night in Pottsville,
in the shadow of the great brewery.
Well, beer's cheap here at least,
even if the town slightly reeks
of gasoline and dry cleaning.
A light snow has children sledding,
down collapsed, hunchbacked coal-hills
that make you glad to be passing through.
In the morning I have my hair cut;
the locals keep their mouths shut
and the barber stares until I'm out.

The Lawn

If you look out across the street,
you'll see the old man and his wife
tending the possessions they barter slowly
in the yard sale they've kept going
since Nineteen Seventy-Five.

They'll still pay five dollars
if you'll mow their lawn; a small parcel
of land that used to belong to a larger field
meant for grazing, belonging to the old Watkins twins.
It lies fallow, and draws the envy of realtors.

The lawn is still corrugated, the grass
rolling in bristling waves, making it difficult
to cross with anything but the old rail mower
they lend you for the job. It's an antique,
motorless, with three scythes that rotate in a barrel.

After you mow the lawn and sheepishly collect
your fee, you can feel their old eyes on your back.
As you cross the two-lane highway back to your own yard,
you know there's truth in what they think, but won't say –

That your house is as temporary as the woodpile
you've stacked carelessly next to the basketball pole.
That you, too, will soon vanish, as dreamy and fleet
as a stray stalk of wheat in a sudden August gale.

The Jay

In the yard is an old rough jay,
with whom I've earned some small trust.
Over the years I've seen him fight tabbies
to a draw, and conquer birds who strove
against his nest in my favorite juniper tree.
He's put in his effort to stay –
so in the siege months I'd toss a seed or crust
high into the ice. Coat gone shabby,
and at least as old as my own,
I felt pity when his mate left in scant weeks.

One June, keeping a respectful distance from him,
I passed slow hours sanding a weathered deck railing,
uselessly prodding his silence with words,
as he studied me, head cocked in mock debate.
His only reply came the next morning, in a hymn:
“Jay, jay, jay” – his mantra cawed as he took wing.
I began to scribble notes for this poem, about a bird
who's sure of a world that bends under his small weight.

Potomac Sonnet

Small boat on the river,
tillerman guiding from a lawn chair
as dead leaves gather to choke
the Potomac, garbling the sway.
Watch from the patchy cover
of buttressed elms, newly bare
in dim October, as the boat
carefully divides in the lazy array
of the ripples, until it's plural.
So many days like this day,
indistinguishable. The shoal's face
marked by tracks, chaotic mural.
Embedded in this quiet world,
the subtlest sensations are crushing.

Reenactment at Gettysburg

Too far away to distinguish
any one among the rest
above the waving mirage of wheat,
the muzzles bark into the heat.

All sound is lost but breath,
suddenly rough and quick,
as across the lonely mile,
smoke rolls from the hill

I've come to Gettysburg this year
to try my hand at this –
the uniform is tight and hot,
the musket's hard to load,

and water's scarce all along the line.
Someone's smuggled beer,
and in their envy, many turn
and register complaint.

And then, a horn –
the battle starts, we fire blanks
across the shadowless field
towards gray slivers that sometimes show.

They march to take this crest,
but are foredoomed, and know it –
the Union keeps the ground,
as it always does.

Then I receive a shock like a slap –
A firm voice tells me I'm dead,
and I'm confused

before I hear it repeated, farther away.

“Strange, I don’t feel dead!”

yells another dead man.

I laugh, am unnerved,

and do as I’m told:

I press hard against the field

as if fastened to it,

below the scattered press of blank fire,

above the unnatural coolness of the earth.

Range Day

The breeze cuts across the dale,
and though no one else is here,
I swear – my voice brought to branches
where it's punctured, emptied.
Ten shots from an SKS manufactured
during our bicentennial year,
and my fingers already are numb,
fumbling with the bag, done already.

If this was a self-test, I failed –
the blood blanched from every inch
of skin that showed beyond a sleeve,
the air penetrated simply everywhere.
No one can take cold like this for long,
I tell myself; but it's still unsettling:
how quickly I found myself desperate,
yearning fervently for my quilt.

Mathew Brady Speaks to the Field at Antietam

September leaves, falling softly and slowly as snow,
lay down gently onto the choir of eyes,
and find repose as soft coins that pay the fare across the river.

Diaries and letters home, lying smeared and bared,
exposed to an exploded world: bear the wracking
coughs that send you to your posts.

Trampled grain, become both bed and grave,
and curl your stalks around hands to comfort those
who are reclaimed under the rude thunderheads.

Mechanical eye, survey this field a final time,
the sunken road, the Dunker church and lower bridge,
and be glad that you have no memories.

City

Tone Poem

Let me warn you, this poem says nothing.
A half inch of snow fell on my yard,
and I'm compelled to record it here,
for reasons unknown even to myself.
The clouds are dark and frothing,
but that's nothing new. Skies are hard
to find new lines about. Poets fear
the cliché, try to enjamb around it – won't help.

What are these rough cumulus lips mouthing
in the upper distance? Coagulating like lard,
the snow meets salt, goes gray. Look up, peer
into that distance as the snow-hills melt,
discolor into the hue of bruise or welt,
as if even the earth self-flagellates, regards
this day with self-loathing. I'll change gears:
this poem, turned skyward like a telescope,
still says nothing.

Hierarchy

The old men crowd the locker room like crows,
each spreading a little news in the slow steam,
after a deliberate lazy hour on the treadmills.
They're much resented by the varsity studs,
the yoga throng. Their sweating brows,
craggy as basalt and unregenerate, scheme
to maintain this primacy. A frail thrill,
perhaps, but good business for the blood.

Luthier

I can't be trusted,
shaping this guitar.

There is spotted birdseye
set aside for the neck,

firm, slim spruce for the braces,
rosewood's hourglass shapes the back.

But my hands already tremble slightly,
At twenty-five, too early –

At each hesitation,
my patience thins.

It's too much like making a body -
a misjudgement that strains the wood

will snap it, splinter it
like bone across the weak plane,

Press too hard, the sander cuts
into the firm blonde flesh of the thing,

opening a view into the hollow,
where the heart is braced.

If I must rely on unfaithful hands
to hold the body steady as the neck slots in,

to lay the frets down
among the long-grained abalone,

always worried
that my maker's mark will be a flaw,

then I'll quit this unfinished hull,
leave it unfinished but unmarred,

because imperfect things
perform imperfectly.

Fantasia on a Theme

It's an untidy room, but I reserve a little optimism,
from the way the mums are lumped in the crystal,

the way breezes comes in when both windows are open.
And out past those windows, somewhere, is you -

In the yard or the square or the park beyond it.
I'm not sure how far or fast you can walk...

The screams are always unbearable in a new way,
someone tries to be honest, someone can't stand it,

and one of us is out in the yard, the square, the park.
And by nightfall we're back and the television's glow

and hum seems to cancel everything away, rescind it all.
It's at that point that the gear notches, something clicks,

and everything rotates once more. I'd die for a spiral,
a circle turning inward or outward, turning away from itself,

but that's not the way things work. Things have a way
of grinding together, eroding each other.

Is it worth it, for those moments that it goes the other way,
when a heavy breeze washes the room thoroughly,

scrubbing chrysanthemums, brushing past a take-out meal,
fluttering the white truce-flag at half-mast for the evening?

Cartographer

You say there's no forgiveness for the crime
of mapping out the wilderness I found
so firmly nestled far inside of you,
each thistled wall against me traced with care
until by knowing where the thorns were thin
I pushed until I'd broken through to you.

But this, you couldn't bear. You pushed against
each forward move I made, until I stopped.
And then you rallied and erased each chart
that even vaguely pointed to the gates
that led me to the places I could hurt.
That's fair enough, and I do understand.

But I feel that next to later loves,
those safe and sterile ghosts you've kept at bay,
just moments held no longer than a breath,
who never even knew you locked them out,
mere shadows reeling in a rocky field,
I'm almost happy to be unforgiven.

Hear Me

There was an old man at the bar who repeated himself.
“Hear me, hear me, I have something to say.”
He never changed his plea, as he inspected
his beer bottle for hours, talking as countless seers
or prophets did whose warnings also went unheeded.
The rest of us at the bar wondered at his chant –
both threat and prayer – and in a cruel moment
we wore lying smiles and agreed with him, urging him on,
as if to really understand. He sensed it, we could tell –
but he just droned on, broken and looping.

And so we at the bar learned that ignoring someone
was a skill honed through practice, and became deaf to him.
When buying a round, he was passed over, not even given
the most basic attentions. But soon we noticed
we were very good also at ignoring each other:
our deafness grew worse and we went home that way at night,
not caring to listen to the insect buzzes of other voices.
And then we noticed that we were masters at ignoring ourselves,
that we now were sitting at the bar inspecting our bottles,
repeating “Hear me, hear me, I have something to say,”
though no one could listen anymore.

Tattoo

after Yazid Mu'awiya's "And Pearls Rained Down"

You knew I had wanted you for years
when you bared your back, your side, the edges of your breasts,
lying face down in the tattoo parlor,
preparing to receive the shrieking needle.

Is it wrong I wanted to be the needle and the ink?
Enter your skin and deposit myself there
as beautiful blue streaks arching across your shoulders,
four parallel curved lines like a lion's paw
across the back of a rushing gazelle?

In fact, the lines were the motion marks of a shooting star,
and I felt as empty as a phantom. Small red pearls of blood
beaded on your skin, wiped away as you looked in the mirror.
Your bandage resembled a wounded angel's lone wing.

Spring

Release your grip –
I'm arched between us,
thin as gold leaf,
every inch awake,
drowning in open air.

Rescind me, turn me loose,
a stone skipped across the water,
stamped with your hand's indifference.

You're locked away
in the narrow monochrome chamber
behind a closed eye,
and I'm sinking as lust branches through me
nerve by nerve,
my every atom adding yours as well –
until I'm plural.

Thoughts At A Wedding Reception

From penthouse height the scraping wind's assault
leaves beaches dark with tar, as salt-like sand
is peppered toward the glass. All my friends
half-drunk on gin, to my chagrin I've called
you once again, awoke from restless sleep
in deep Chicago's restless drives. Polite,
though curt, you let me know it's not the night
to reconnect the nervous histories dreamed
between us in that single nervous twitch...
Belts of stars swing out above the sea,
the gin is free, and soon I'm drunk out here
against the rail. It hurts, but here it is –
imperfect people love imperfectly,
we started marred, and are scarred each year.

Ocean City

Fat, disinterested gulls half-heartedly
squeal for bread thrown from the balcony
early in the morning. The whole episode
cements the feeling we've been getting
over the entire off-season weekend:
lazy moments by a calm sea
punctuated only by thoughtless cruising
down the lone empty highway
as the strings of green lights collapse
into each other, the same color
as the margaritas served at the bar
that tries too hard to be decadent.
At checkout on Sunday morning,
the lobby is as vacant as when we arrived;
Sign the check, go through the motions.

Larkin at the Bar

I've been drinking four hours now,
the gift-book of Larkin folded
on the table behind me as I draw
the cue for a last break. Lines from "Sad Steps"
reverberate through the alcohol and smoke:
The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness.
Well, not tonight. The clouds crawl
on their big bellies to hide a bleeding moon.

*The drink gone dead, without showing how
To meet tomorrow – "Love Again," words molded
perfectly to us who are blind-drunk, thawing
by breezy open windows, getting prepped
for our rides home after going for broke
in alcohol's blitzkrieg salvation, losing all finesse
early into the binge but kindly corralled
by patient friends that are deaf to last call's croon.*

The Days

Watching from their porch,
nodding at us if we catch their eye,
a mummified Pontiac roosts in their drive.
More than a quarter-century in this house,
but always the outsider when I speak with Mr Day,
voice soft and low and quick as a mouse.
Same topic each time: how the lot where my home sits
was just scrap-land used for barley or straw.
And then came “the war years” – he came home
and the houses “came up,” like some other crop.

Research sheds little light: he’s farmed all his life,
and Mrs Day worked at the bank for years,
yet they but rent that ancient house,
and what they own would barely fill a single truck.
Married over fifty years, most in the same rented
farm cottage – locusts appearing like sparks
between branches of maples, the church up the hill shining
with paint every other summer, the road winter-salted
and repaved, fields fallow and then sown
in checkerboard routine – that was their life in full.
At least, it was what could be observed.

Both of us knew the life couldn’t be mine –
to live in the dusty limit carved into the grass,
never push out beyond the town that’s two miles north,
or the hamlet two miles south.
They accept that the world changes, and are satisfied
that it has nothing to do with them. Indifferent and bored
with the counter-wilderness of cities, they muse
through their garden gently, growing vegetables.

San Diego

You want “your voice brushes the air thick with honey” –
but that's not honest. Instead: you speak
with a slight lisp and breathe a little too heavily.
Love isn't perfect; you wish I would say
things like “Your blue eyes glitter, museum gems,
beacons on a velvet pillow, blinklessly waiting
for a thief like me to bypass all alarms,”
or “Your hair is dark as mahogany,
like that used on the Star of India,
last of the wooden frigates, as it slips
its moorings, drifting into a widening sheen.”
But I don't. Romance falters in the face of truth –
you rarely look people in the eye,
and you tend to squint when you tell a lie.
Your hair is rich and dark, but it's a mess,
a bird's nest never combed, maybe a little oily.
But, as you secretly affirm to yourself,
the erotic core inside you doesn't need poetry,
or even beauty. You fail to object
when I throw your small pamphlet of Sappho
to the floor on my way to your body.

October

Ten years ago, we went down the lane
to the wheat field even though it was freezing,
and only bent, broken stalks remained after harvest;
teenagers descending to the field to fumble,
we must have seemed both amusing and threatening
to the neighbors we noticed watching
from kitchen windows. A reminder of their own
courtships, and what awaited their children.
Let them watch, you said, as you kissed me.

Drunken Sonnet

Drunk in the Hirschorn garden,
it seems that the sculptures rise
and take to air, bronze against bronze.
Swear as sweat falls in the cocked corner
of the eye, squint against the mounting glint
of the polished windows that gaze
so blankly over the glossy green estate.
Drunk again at noon, and hardened
by hurt against the friend who surprises
with criticism: must realize it spawns
first inside the soul – the first mourner
at the living funeral. O Jennie, swimming
through the garden with your cotton grace,
tolerate my dazed smile today, amid the statuary.