

Poems by Corey Marks from *Renunciation* (University of Illinois Press, 2000)

Portrait of a Child

When I'm ready to think of something else, finally,
I think of wind that runs like a river along a river,,
and trees bending into themselves with a will for breaking,,
a will to break from the soil and leave the lap of the horsefield
where death has laid its head,,its fire-red curls.

.
I think of the young painter who finds the body of a child,
drowned in the river and cast on stones that rattle
in the white hands of the water.

At first, the painter thinks all the right things.
He thinks of his own infant son.

. .
But then he notices the child's beautiful blue lips
like the blue rim of a bowl, and the wine of its blood
spilled on a stone, and the dark loaves of its closed eyes
resting on the table of its face,

like the meal Christ rises over, sweeping his hands apart
while around the table the Apostles all lean against each other,
whispering, waiting, posing, even, for the thousands of painters
not yet born,

all but Judas, who looks away,
who has already broken the heavy bread and chews the grain,
not thinking of betrayal, of kissing sour wine from Christ's lips,

but of walking in a narrow street and hearing the song
of one bird that flew a hundred miles to rest in a tree
and pull its meal from a tent of worms.

The painter begins a portrait of the boy.
For a long time he stands beside the river, the brushes in a jar
near his hand, the sun turning lower in the sky,

and after a while he doesn't look at the child on the stones
but only at the boy lying in the soft bed of paint,
the dead boy at the end of his brush.

Then the boy by the water wakes
and climbs from the stones to the riverbank.

He walks to the painter and asks him, What are you painting?
You, the painter says, But you're dead.

No, the boy says, That boy is dead,
and he points to the painting.

The Butcher's Son

I would watch the butcher from behind a slatted fence
those mornings in the city where I first lived alone.
He'd pause in his yard to speak at his only child
before walking to his shop to crack open the day's carcasses,

before severing the simple lexicon of sinew and tendon
and bone, muttering the body's names while he worked
as though he wedged his knife between word
and thing, and split them, glistening, meaty,

to prove they were absolute. Each morning,
while his swollen-faced son turned endless circles
on a tricycle, the butcher would reach a finger
to trace the child's cheek wheeling by

and another circle would snap shut. The son,
who could not speak, or even listen,
spun the perimeter of his own wordlessness
through the days and evenings and into my sleepless dawns

when I would lean against the fence to see
something—anything—of the world not mine.
But then the butcher would step through the gate
—it's here I lose my place—and into the other city,

the wrong city, into the street outside the club
where J. Mascis twisted over his guitar
as though it had slammed into his chest, the hulking amps
pounding molecules of air into the crowd

so the sound opened in me with its furious touch,
like hands impatient and unsatisfied with what they found,
the hands that cut my mother and lifted me,
never born, into the world. The hands

that scrubbed me dry of her blood and smacked me
so I coughed a wail and split my ears to the tumult
of voices speaking everything I didn't know.
She said I was beautiful because of it, unbruised,

undistorted, and maybe I learned that word,
beautiful, because she knocked it against my skull
so long it finally jimmied its way in.
But as I wandered from the emptying club,

turning down a street where men pushed racks
of stripped and split cattle swaying like garments
that grazed one another's emptiness,
I finally wrested that word from her.

It's what I called the hush in my ears,
that stunning city the music had raised and abandoned,
vacant now but for the swirl of my blood
and my own steps tamping distantly,

as though someone turned away at the far corner
to leave me to myself. And now I can't help
but imagine the butcher behind me, after his gate
clacks shut against his son's muteness

and the tricycle's scrape. He turns from me
to a rack of meat, tilts a carcass towards
the narrow light. *Beautiful*, he says
to the dumb, dead flesh, and understands its silence,

the clearest thing that takes us from each other.

Soup

i

I begin in the particular: this thin fan of steam
whisking the air as it rises from a bowl of soup,
today's *Almuerzo*—an orange broth so flecked with beans

hinged to their own dissolution it mimics the walls
of this place, flaking into their past. And in the middle
of the bowl, nudged by the spoon's curve,

a piece of gristle clings to a bone fragment,
still not yielding its final semblance of the body.
Begin here, as good a place as any, my head

bowing to meet the spoon's graze against
my pale lips, my image, reversed, blooming
across the nicks and scratches in the burnished metal.

My back is turned to the open door
and the city in celebration, the whirl of voices
shouting from the street in another language,

the alternating horn blasts, traces of music—
the voicings of a city that neither wants me
nor needs me to go on with its reveling.

Here I seem more distinct than anywhere else
because here I begin unraveling, not with pain
but with a numbness that drifts from where my spine

first gives way, even as I fade into invisibility:
the waitress brings a plate of rice and beans
and *platanos*, and setting it on the table

she looks through me, her eyes incising a line
to the open door and the multiplying crowd,
the city's dense and discordant image of her life.

ii

When I went to look for this country's beginnings
in the Monasterio de las Conceptas de Cuenca
I found a colonial carving of Christ, life-sized,

peering from the wall of a small room
with beaten, blued eyes that could own at best
only pinpricks of vision, blood trapped in paralytic flow

from grooves rent in the body, thick washes of red
cracked and curling away from the pocked forehead's
yellow skin, from each thorn's bite,

blood flaking from the spike driven into one hand,
so that there, in the impossible resolve of knuckles,
I could see woodgrain and a splintering worm track

that submitted again to the paint's gloss
but was the twitch of its undoing. On the wall
a plaque proclaimed this *El Jesús del Gran Poder*,

and withheld its maker's name, denying the history
of hands that shaped Christ's body, that claimed a piece
of the New World and rived it away, into the Old.

iii

But this city sustains itself, beyond the door
of the *restaurant*, sustains constant discord, the wheel
of voices in flux but always spinning,

roiling the celebrants into itself: the street musician calling
"Cante, cante," to a woman who laughs and begins to sing
in the midst of the ongoing song; the thief

who grunts to himself as he slashes the straps of a bag
with his small razor and strips possessions
from one of an undifferentiated line of backs

as though trimming fat from a piece of meat;
the young men shouting from a balcony as they toss
water-gorged balloons into the milling crowds

with the same smooth gesture as the cook's,
casting chunks of muscle and bone into the broth
through the fanning steam's erasure in air.

iv

Months after I leave this table, this city,
a doctor will stick a needle into my arm,
and I'll count my way into blankness, into surface,

until I too am muscle, bone, and gristle
husking a dreamlessness. Then she'll split
the skin of my back—*this* blood drawn by tubes—

spread and pin my muscles into a yawn
and pick away the shattered spinal disc,
coaxing the pieces from my body's wiring

the way a monastery curator pulls
worms, fattened on Christ's diminishment,
from the wooden body . . . Until I cease being

an operation. *It was a soup in there,*
she'll say—she couldn't find every shard.
And worms still fret the carving with absence,

thinning it inside so I could crack its arm
open with the rap of my knuckle. But for now
I work meat from the bone and ignore the waitress

trailing her fingers along the peeled doorframe,
and the cook's small sounds clamoring from the kitchen,
even the reveler, paused at the window, who grins,

not at me but at himself, at his hair
he's painted red, at rivulets of sweat
streaking his face with dye, at the violin

perched on his shoulder, two strings frayed
into silence. I chew the meat, gnash my teeth
through the gristle that marries its unmaking

to what *sustains*. I am becoming myself.