

Young Writers Awards - 2005 winner

Nom de guerre by Christopher Boulton

All the bones I carry around now were born in this city.

Later there was also my wife's native skeleton, and my son who, though actually born elsewhere was quickly brought back from the coastline to root in these familiar pavements and basketball driveways, the nervous system fanning out, his shadow cutting on pedestrian crossings were mine had cut. His blood would surely have remembered these things, would have known the city harmonics, the chemical genes of the air. In this way a city will enter the bloodstream like nicotine, and what I realised, years later, was that we must, in time, walk outside our homes to the gutter, as though with butcher's buckets, and pour it back.

At that time I lived with my family in the East wing of the city, amongst the body-shops and high powerlines, dogs behind wire fences. Peeled chassis ranked on the corner, lopped and wounded, like massive cattleskulls that I used to weave through on my way to the bus station. On Sunday mornings we used to walk in the sun to the bakery or the laundromat for bread and chocolate and a newspaper, a box of matches. Each holding a hand we would lift my son over smashed glass on the concrete and watch the traffic as we waited out a spin cycle, which we could know was complete by the sound, for we are people who are attuned to such things.

The morning after the wedding of old friends I walked out to the kitchen and found him lotus-style on the carpet, a little buddha watching the news. On the screen was some kind of aircraft, milk-white at high altitude with tapering wingspan, an undeniably phallic head, and no windows.

He said, "Drone aircraft," without looking at me.

"I don't know what that means," I said.

"No pilot, only a computer. For Intel. No windows, see?"

"Intel," I said, "Of course," and took a cup of coffee back to the bedroom for my wife, watching her come up from the bed like a lion to receive it.

When you are young some girls are like bones that will pull soft out of the body, the way teeth come loose when we are children. But for a long time my wife was like my skeleton full.

In a photograph of her taken years ago in the hall at her mother's house wallpaper vine crawls changing colour onto floral clothes, so that she is a singular design, marine on red. Seated on a chair she looks like a musical instrument, a hybrid of brass and woodwind, a chimera. Mellotron, I want to say. The hem of her skirt stretched taut as harpstring, and I imagine other transparent lines running from the lip to the wrist, calf to earlobe, from the eyelid to the back of the knee, clitoris to metatarsus. I imagine the sound that was made when I hit you that time was like the sound of a drum. In the picture the viewer cannot notice the scar at your wrist that is my own notation, written with a cigarette when I was barely twenty.

As she was dressing for the wedding my wife knelt on the bed, touching her breasts tenderly with her fingertips, checking for signs of cancer. Things once erotic are no longer. Somewhere nearby across the hivescape of domestic fences someone dived into a pool. She sat on the corner of the bed beside her sister the reflection and conversations between us were held in the mirror. We do not look at the true body, but speak to copies, or versions. Later at the wedding I sat with her on collapseable chairs and pointed out the faces of people she would be introduced to, telling her their names, my connection to them. We were on a wooden deck, overlooking a manmade canal, a few small, moored boats rocking on the water like dolls. We had ourselves been married for three years.

Half the wedding guests were Chinese, on the bride's side, so that parts of the ceremony were undertaken in two languages, which I thought seemed appropriately arcane. But there was something missing.

What had I expected exactly? I had wanted them to meditate, to paint their faces, to show some sign. What of worship and chant? What of the exchange of secret names, blessings of the flesh? What of true ritual? Jewellery and symbols.

Nevertheless, I understood everything better, then. At my own wedding we could just as easily have cut our hands, the way kids used to before AIDS. There were yet other possible rituals. My ceremony of leaving.

We held hands and were silent in the sun.

Afterwards the newlyweds were extracted to have their photographs taken and our contingent of old friends walked around to a separate deck and ordered beer and wine from the bar, and tried to light cigarettes in the wind. This was the weekend the trains were detonated in Newcastle, and despite the occasion this was what we talked about. We had all at some point come into the shared knowledge of explosives used in recent terror attacks. "Plastic, they are saying."

"They used to call it 'plastique,' if I'm not mistaken," I said. "For some reason you used to have to say it French, but you don't seem to hear that anymore."

"No, we use our own language now," someone said. "Plastic, we say."

"C4," I told them.

"Or C4, exactly"

"Disappointing, really," I said. "I liked that word. I used to think it sounded like a woman's name."

We were watching some early dancers through a picture window as we spoke, the bridesmaids at the periphery, the way young women dance with small babies in their arms at weddings, the upper body swivelling easy as though the hips were oiled, the two bodies compact in motion. Of course it might have been my wife a half-decade ago.

Someone asks us about our son.

"I don't know what to say, exactly. He's a force, this kid. He lives and breathes, he plays the piano. This is the defining element at the moment. Also modern warfare."

My wife says, "So we're saving now for a piano. My husband calls him Salieri, which I think is probably counter-productive when you think about it."

"He is six, we should mention."

"He plays 'Moonlight Sonata.'"

She shaved her legs sitting on the tiles under the heavy showerflow, and we held conversations through the white noise.

She was a woman who would become the room she rested in. How the spin of a ceiling fan became like a movement of her own on the bed, how sun through wire mesh painted a grid like warpaint on the skin. You were always the rooms of this house; I became corners.

I kissed her eyelid, and she took off a silver necklace and draped it in a lazy line across her stomach, like a royal worm.

I kissed her forehead, her foot.

In the afternoon I drove my son, hungover, to the home of his piano teacher, and she and I had the obligatory dialogue about his progress in the doorway. We had believed he was gifted for a while, prodigal, and started sending him here, one of only two students to a former concert pianist who gave a lesson a week to supplement her income. She was Russian and lovely and, when I was around, subject to the usual subcurrent lusts, the way some parts of the psyche will operate independently of others; sex drive and the moral centre, for example. I asked her once how she came to be a piano teacher and she said she didn't know, and I understood that, that people did not often understand why they did the things they did. She asked after my wife and I say, "We live and breathe. We threaten to take slow walks in the afternoon. Worse, she threatens fast walks in the morning." She threw a couple of telephone books onto the piano stool, and I watched him take his place at the instrument, noticing that his small hands were almost the same colour as the keys, the arms relaxed and slightly spread, the piano huge and black around him. He looked like a little eagle that had swept down to lift away a limousine. I remember that he had been a wren once. At home he used to say things like, "What does I.C.B.M. mean?"

"Ask your mother."

"Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile, Honey."

"I knew it."

But at the piano he was stripped down to a symbol, a letter; little calligraphy. A more perfect version of myself, a refined copy. His fingers resting easy on the teeth.

I was standing in the half-dark doorway with the Russian. This is the last time I will see my son. I made no effort to mark the moment with a word or gesture. Had to go out smooth as glass.

We must have a separate name for every person that we know intimately. I want to give you all the names of birds or flowers. For each of you a secret name. Perhaps the names of constellations that my son used to read me from his book of star-charts, which I had thought were some of the more beautiful terms in any language I had ever heard. Horologium, Vulpecula. You are Vindemiatrix, he is Triangulum. Auriga, 'the Charioteer.' The way God in some cultures has a thousand names. Serpens Cauda. For in the manner of stars so may you people, my populace, be classified in terms of 'brightness,' magnitude, mass. The Blue Dwarf that is my son, and The Red Giant you had been. Myself you may call 'The Lyre.'

In the same way the human body will reject a transplanted organ, so I felt motley against my family, my wife and son. A pig-heart.

What terror. That a family could produce a rogue element, a renegade, and that of all of us it would be me. Splinter-Cell.

I felt that my blood had turned sour, or perhaps that I no longer owned any. We stopped regularly sleeping together when the buildings came down.

Look at me, I have it in my palm, I sift us down to a handful, like sand; I strip us back to a few pages.

I remember how you had fallen coming down the stairs when pregnant, breaking your tailbone, the coccyx. Certain items of clothing I hold in my memory like parts of your body, as integral as scars and eyelashes and bruises out of nowhere. A kind of material you could pour from a glass, a green liquor one could drink, the absinthe camisole that you slept in through Summer. How all these things I had loved could turn sour as old stacked newspaper. How you could go sepiatone.

The ribs defined beneath your skin are like struts of bamboo, shadow liquid in the groove. There is the black riff of hair between your legs, the breast that I have named 'Olympus Mons', which I tell you is the name of a mountain on Mars. I secretly break the rest of you into the territories of that planet, which I have learned from a book I bought for our son. I want to write the names on your skin while you sleep - Tharsis, Amazonis, Valles Marineris - so you will wake described and mapped like this. The greatest intimacy is sleep. How I used to move into an embrace easy as loops of elastic.

I remember the time you were bent over crying after a fight and I moved my mouth into your ear as though to whisper something, but spat in it instead, and left.

Two a.m. on a neighbour's windowsill, when we were in love, there used to be this cat that would watch us come drunk onto the stairs, about which you used to say, the Ghost of Someone's Mother.

In her doorway once I had flirted with the Russian whilst my son began his scales. "I used to believe perfect love was possible," I said. "But now I think it could be perfect only if time rolled backwards, so a relationship that ended badly would begin in bitterness, then toll into the first sweet domestic years, then earlier days of tenderness and sex, and finally a last meeting; flirtation as the couple leave each other, on the last day giving the parting gifts of their names." And she said, "You practice that in your head, don't you? You practice that the way your Salieri practices his sonata."

"Go back to Russia," I said.

The day waned and I cornered one of the more beautiful Chinese bridesmaids at the bar and said, "Do you ever believe that somehow you are the cause of disasters you see on the news? That one's mindset can influence these things?"

"No."

"Because in that way I believed once that terrorist attacks both here and abroad were symptomatic of my what? Bad moods, depression."

"It's never occurred to me, honestly. More likely it's the other way around, isn't it? That your depression is symptomatic of terror attacks."

"Honestly, it's never occurred to me."

Later a small group went back to a friend's house and sat around a bar drinking deep into the morning. I took a polaroid of my wife playing pool. Afterwards we walked home very drunk through the dark streets and someone back at the house sent up a signal flare that briefly cast the asphalt and houses under a violet daylight. My wife carried her shoes in her right hand the way women do when it is past midnight, the streetlights turning the low night sweet and hot, making the renewed dark seem almost Oriental. The next morning before I leave she asks me what I remember and I want to say, I remember You.

I left the piano teacher's apartment under strains of 'Moonlight Sonata' and drove back to the house. My wife was back in bed, recovering, asleep, a leg and arm uncovered by the drift of her blanket so that she appeared like a statue, an ancient Shiva, slowly coming unburied out of sand.

I walked out quiet into the afternoon for cigarettes. The pavement cracked like hot mudflats. And what was this thing I felt I was now? A criminal. A weapon. Terrorist.

I bought cigarettes only to make the myth complete. In the distance I could see the building where I used to work. I lit the first cigarette on the pavement outside the store, cupping the matchflame until it steadied to a neat burn.

Father, husband. Black hole. Pig-heart.

I looked back towards the house, where my wife slept, in the West, hearing a news report from a radio in a back room somewhere.

Plastic, they were saying. Plastique. But I knew now that wasn't true.

For our hearts are the weapons.

East.