

The Essence of
Bees Among Flies

by
Keith Pertusio

2014

Summary: A collection of poems seeking meaning in the stories of the past, the powerful emotions of the present, the humor and hope of the future, and the life both inside and outside the prison walls.

Introduction

The road through prison is one of sorting through, of stripping off, of allowing, if willing, the true self lost to brush against you again. It is a confronting of the worst and also the best within you. Both need to be discovered in order to be truly free.

These are my first baby steps toward that freedom as I learn to see others, myself, and the world around us all through clearer eyes. My hope is my journey through words may help others even as the words of others have helped me. There is light found when we all travel together.

If you would like to provide feedback, ask questions, or feel my writing is worthy of your advocacy, feel free to contact me. Thank you for reading.

Current Prison Address:

**Keith Pertusio - KE-9535
SCI-Banner
301 Institution Drive
Beliefonte, PA 16823**

Permanent Address:

**Keith Pertusio
15 Plum Street
Annville, PA 17003**

Summoning

Keith Pertusio 1

What is this pipeline
connecting my mind
to some well within me
buried and inaccessible
reached only after great effort
like searching for paintings
lyrical
instinctual
prehistoric
deep in the resonant recesses
of a cave?

Poetry is subterranean
and once gushed
out of me
to the surface
so pen could barely keep up.
Now it is only accessible
after a priming of the pump
because channels have run dry
hollow tubes rusted
or perhaps I have
forgotten the way.

It used to be
sentences flowed from my hand
unbidden
almost an annoyance
like a runny nose
a reminder of life
and breathing.

But now
a literary amputation
somewhere
and it's not the same
the exterior sterility
breeding internal impotence.

It is only natural.
Trees bend the wind
rocks bend the water
I must
bend words
but that takes
life
emotion
respiration.
Here I am encased
in cement

only the memories
of the words of others
to help.

I am starving
There is nothing around
no tinder
to start a fire.

So this poem is written
a word at a time
each one
snatched from a corner
discovered under a bed
wedged in a book
hidden in a photograph
each one a leftover from
something seen
something heard
something said
each word drawing strength
each one inhaling inspiration
from the word before.
Starting with the first word
brick by brick
one by one
a poem of beginnings
is created
a new wall
from which all poems
in this desert
of sand
are born.

Riddle

From lions' carcass
honey.
Scooped out
from dissicatatated
flesh and bone
touch fingers to tongue
and find it
sweet.

From this broken body
poetry
the essence of bees
among flies
sweetness
despite its source.

In decay
a hive.
In dissolution
words.

In both
a riddle.

Perpetuality

Of all the words
ever written
how few have been kept.

Each word
a flame
as brain synapses connected.

Each word
sparkled
as it was pulled from the ether.

Each word
created
implanted
like the clack of typewriter key.

Each born
here in the darkness
invisible
until hand moves
fingers lever against one another
and it is written.

Its voice is now
a giggle
a groan
a sigh
a cry.

It is alive
fresh on the page.

But we cannot
keep them all
these jottings
these notations
of the activity of our minds.

They must be
crumpled into trash cans
burned in fires
decayed in earth.

I imagine
for the sake of my own
guilty conscience
that as all material around them
decomposes
incinerates
rots
words instead
grew opaque
turn into vapor
and rise out of the earth
out of the smoke
to be absorbed

back into the invisible darkness
of their first
and perpetual
birth.

There
bonds disintegrate
all relax
into their sounds
into their inflections
into their silence.

There
they wait patiently
in the swirling mosaic
of individual
colorful letters
for the blinding lighting
of thought
to seize them
join them
and bring them
again
to dancing
satisfying
life.

Let

Let others sort it out
what is right or wrong
fair or unfair
deserved or undeserved
too much or too little
let others figure out
the punishments or rewards
the fame or obscurity
the hope or despair
the smile or the frown
Let others invoke in the name
of God or nothing
of patriotism or rebellion
of justice or compassion
of progress or tradition
let others decide
Let others judge
Let others look at your life
pick through the pieces
and put them in boxes labeled
Good
Bad
Masculine
Feminine
Success
Failure
Let others put them on their scales
Let others throw their laurels or darts
Let them fling labels
Let them give
Let them take away
Let them whirl around you
picking
patting
Let them
Let them

But you
awake this morning
feel the tug of purpose
of Spirit's direction
the irresistible calling
compelling you
to move
to do
to plunge into delicious action
because it makes
your heart skip
your breath quicken

your eyes open wide
your smile open wider
Be satisfied
be anchored in the inhale
be rooted in the exhale
work with fingers intertwined
with the you
who skips inside
who runs through the meadow
with arms wide open
pretending
for the simple pleasure
of pretending
to fly

That meadow is empty
and it is simply
you
and the
persistent pulse
of the
morning sun

Unseen

You are a shaman
and you have your feather
hanging off your hair
your fingers.

You have your drum
and it has a living voice
rawhide speaks through
your mallet
your fingers.

You fling your potent offerings
milk or blood
pollen or vodka
spinning around you.

Surrounded by your animal bones
your rattles and fierce masks
worn ribbons and pungent herbs

You sit on your rug
singing
chanting

until
like the flick of a switch
your eyes close
hands twitch
body trembles
as the spirit enters with
whispers
shrieks
and murmurs
bringing oracles and guidance
to creative life.

One moment you are here
the next moment
the ethereal world
riding a horse or
dancing with the ancestors
consumed by the intersection
of earth and
immaterial realms

Your friends held you down
or up
until you collapse to the ground
exhausted
spent.

I sit here
in the darkness
night after night
and pray
feeling nothing.

I am told to press on
that all this makes
a difference.

I believe it.

But oh
to be a shaman
so obvious
so clear
that something is

happening

that something in this world
is altered
when my lips
so desperately
move.

Epiphany

Keith Pertusio 10

The column of air
for once
is anchored on something solid
each molecule
each shaft of light
aligned above
perfectly resting on
your shoulders.

There is no weight
only a soft pressure
as something descends
something steps down
and lays across your weariness.

Relax in the straight
the balanced
the orderly.
This pillar
touches a distant point in space
passes outstretched stars
terminates at its beginning
that eternal something
and sometimes
that something
comes down
and all other words
fall away
until
tears streaming
there remains for you
the one word
over
and over
just saying
just repeating
knees weak
eyes closed
just that endless word
time irrelevant.

Until
when the time has ended
when everything for that moment
has been fulfilled
that something
rises again
past known edges
past knowing itself
and you are
alone

sitting
trembling
listening
to people talking
doors slamming
phones ringing

but still whispering
the great wheel turning
now with its own
momentum
still murmuring
that one
beautiful
word.

From Now On

From now on, everyone will be free to
make their own mistakes and not learn from them
burn their own bridges
allow once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to slip through their
fingers
ignore sound advice
take advantage of the generosity of others
squander second and third chances
be a conceited egotist or a spineless martyr
pursue dead ends, unattainable dreams, and self-delusions
blew a fortune on pleasures that last a minute
create long lists of people hurt, relationships severed, and
believers betrayed
never speak to loved ones and never go home
fall into addictions ruinous to all
chase empty happiness in empty things
fornicate blindly, eat excessively, heard compulsively, drink
endlessly
walk the same destructive path so many, across time, have
walked and achieve the same results

From now on, everyone will be free to
ruin their own lives
cry their own tears
swim in their own regrets
create their own mistakes
live their own pain

From now on, everyone is free to
be human
not because these things are best
but because we must own
we must possess
our lives
which are soaked
in beauty
in ugliness

From now on, everyone will be free to
live their own imperfect lives
so in all the mess
and in all the garbage
we can cling to one another
hold each other's tears
so
when lives are in ruins
we can look
eye to eye
and truthfully say to one another
I
understand.

Empty

Keith Portusio 13

I am so hollow
when all I have inside
melts away.

I am an old
empty gasoline can
a few pebbles rattle inside
as a gust blows me across
dry fields.

I have enough stones now
to weigh me down
so I cannot move.

My ribs curve around
like fingers sipping air
after a life of filling up
with nothing.

They are dry branches
rubbing against one another
in this lonely wind
and I feel how hollow I am
with an emptiness
as wide as the
soundless
airless
expanse of space.

I fall into it
that hollowness
that empty space
that cage between
spine and sternum.

Until I talk to you
and I am stuffed with
endless snow days
glitter-covered cats
elusive becks to crave
and a middle school concert
with glorious costume changes
and tunes from Phantom

And I am so full
I strain to hold it all in
and when I breathe
I hurt with happiness.

Some People

Some words
writhe and squirm
press against the walls
beg to be expressed.

Some thoughts
ensnared and knotted in a ball
hiss and rattle
wave their threads
beg to be pulled and untangled

Some fears
shimmer in a black waxy capsule
drip ooze and salt
beg to be held and kissed.

Some memories
sink as molten weights
bulge lining of stomachs
pour hot acid into throats
beg to be relieved.

Some people
prick us until we dissolve
into rainbow puddles
unravel us into strings
hold us until we
find constellations
in the chaos of the stars

begging us to only
ask.

Then we beg
with all the other beggars

and we are restored.

Cemetery

In this colonial cemetery
head stones toppled
rubbed bare
even fallen and buried
beneath inches of soil
A third of the graves
hold children
whose parents clasped
their little hands
as they weakened
and then slipped away
Erased by some disease
that with modern medicine
would have been so simple
so easy
To fix.

In my graveyard
there are children too -
a third gone and buried
a third slipping away
a third still standing.
Yet all have been weakened
by something

By someone
that with today's insight
would have been so simple
so easy
To fix.

Deserving

They asked me for my clothes
my ring
my watch
but they did not ask me for
my poetry.
I wonder if I should have
turned it in.

It's a question of having
of deserving
lines and words
arranged into
radiant beauty
brittle ugliness
of taking such delicate things
and knitting them together
with hands
these hands which are
covered in soot
in grime
guilty hands
bloody hands.

It's a debate of the right to
form in the same mind -
which somehow made evil
justified
within it constructing such
horror
beyond anything I thought myself
capable of bringing
to life
to form in This mind
poems
and flowers
and starry skies
and love
and humor.
Have I not lost the right
to it all?

Yet
somehow
here it all is
unbidden.

My mind
now healing
now realizing
pours it out and I write
doubting the whole time

whether I can say
these are mine
that I
this monster
could create them.

For those who feel
they are not mine to claim
be assured
my poems
are suffering
cause suffering.
Rejoice that I
suffering greatly.

I could numb
before screen
within music
behind book pages
but instead I
must feel
must feel
must feel.

In poetry there is great
feeling
so that in the tense release
of words
of ideas
there rises up within
more of me
more realization of others
than I ever let through
before
and I am
for once

Real.

Then in this realness comes
pain
deep pain
even in the beauty
in the horror
as I think of
them.

I deserve suffering
but do I deserve poetry?

These poems
come with suffering
so perhaps
poetry

Keith Portusio 18

is exactly
what I deserve
what I need
here.

For Too Long

- I must be despised.
For too long
I have survived
off the approval
of others
- I must be useless.
For too long
I have measured my worth
on the strength of my
usefulness.
- I must be helpless.
For too long
I have prided myself
on my self-made
competency.
- I must be alone.
For too long
I have used others
to avoid
myself.
- I must be neurotic.
For too long
I have worn the mask
of having life
all together
- I must be flawed.
For too long
I have hid behind
a wall of morality
and platitudes.
- I must be lost.
For too long
I have arrogantly
blindly
led.
- I must be afraid.
For too long
I have numbed fears
gnawing
with mindless stupor.
- I must be broken.
For too long
the fake glue of pride
has held me deceptively
together.
- I must be imprisoned.
For too long
freedom to choose
has held me in
chains.

But here
on this refuse pile
beneath darkness
and weight
beyond the sound of
voices
I am stripped
melted away
until all I will have
one day
is
you
me.

It is a gift.

For too long
a root has waited
for such darkness
in which to
grow.

Line

Stand in line
if I have hurt you
in big ways
or small.
It is a long line
and some of you
should move to the front.

Stand in line
for it is a long line
created from birth.
I feel each one of you
your pull
the crackle of your energy.
I slump beneath
the weight of the
buckets you carry.

Stand in line
for it is a long line
and at some point
in my mind
I have visited
each one of you
and have felt
your pinch
your twist
the overwhelming cloud
of my responsibility.
Some I visited daily.

It is a long line
and I put you here
against your will
and there is nowhere
I can walk
where I do not stumble
from the heaviness.

It works to keep me
quiet
and humble
and thoughtful.

It is a long line
where some of you
have extended to me
silence
hostility
ambiguity
and others

undeserved grace.
I accept it
all.

Sense
sensing my struggle
point over their
own shoulders
to the line
trailing behind them
and we mourn
together
the different types
of humanness
within us
all wishing
to go back
and choose
differently.

Stand in line
if I have hurt you.
It is a long line
and I know
each one of you
and regret
the hurt goes on
for us both.

All I have is what I can say.
All I have
is what I can do.
Even with your weight
you propel me
and you are in
every step I take.

The line is long
it is attached to my soul
but that is what
compels me to
try harder
and harder
and harder.

Forward

Did I move
just one inch farther?
I don't need much.
I just need to know
there is a space
however small
between the back of my heels
today
and where they were
yesterday.

Am I closer to God
is the divide a little narrower?
Am I more kind?
Do I hold my head
a little taller?

Have I climbed
a millimeter higher
over this wall
once insurmountable?

Am I mindful
even one second longer?

Did I laugh
just one more laugh
than yesterday?

Have I paid
one cent more
on all I owe?

I don't need miles
though miles would be nice.
I just need an inch
because stretched over
all my days
I will have
a foot
a yard
a mile
a horizon
until the final step over
and inches won't matter.

But may I still know
each one
has made me
ready?

Here

It is these times
the ordinary times
the day-to-day times
the put on your pants and shirt
tie your shoelaces and walk out the door times
the sunrise then sunset
five-day forecast times
the coffee in the morning
TV remote at night times
that slowly kill.

You are heroic
you swing your battle ax
sparks explode off your shield
into the smoke of burning thatch roofs
as you parry the blow of an iron mace
and step over the cooling horse carcass.
This land is yours to conquer
these fjords, these cliff top meadows
these stone walls, this grazing field
these will all be yours.
Roar through your blackened teeth
above the tempest of sounds
crashing flames, eely shrieks
staccatos of clanging weapons.

You are the hero
created to stomp through oily bogs
cross the ocean to Iceland
or scale the Alps to conquer Rome.
These are your genetics
your destiny.

But you look out this sliver of window
only a postcard view of the mountains.
This is all
they say
you are good for.

The Himalayas, the Carpathians
the Pacific, the Sargasso
the Sahara, the Amazon
the stratosphere, the surface of Mars
they pulse through your veins.
When they are given life
they will explode in you
and you become the sun
and you can do
so much good.
When they are held
repressed and contained
they eat through

your heart's lining.

To die ordinarily
never knowing one is
a hero
is a tragedy.

But to live ordinarily
knowing you have
heroic finger prints
the weight of history
behind you
is living death.

Do you feel it
within you?
It is exhaling
life
or death
now.

Encapsulated

Concrete buildings

fashioned from gray and fog
 unsmiling and dour statues
 squat on abrasive macadam
 heavy and ponderous.

They raise their megalithic heads
 as we try to catch
 the orange of a sunset
 the cotton green of far off trees
 the syrupy blue beneath the clouds parade.

Like playground bullies

they arch to block our line of sight
 as they defiantly, provokingly
 maneuver their cement torsos between us
 and the living, lightweight colors
 in order to smother

the spark of life and hope
 which smells like freedom.

The fences, too, dance around us
 skipping in an endless circle
 laughing and jeering at us
 rattling their razor wire
 in sadistic glee
 encouraging the buildings on
 goading us to

"Do something about it"
 sneering at our helplessness.

They've snatched our view from our hands
 and toss it back and forth
 between them
 daring us, taunting us
 while we
 foolishly
 try to catch it.

And we know what's happening
 how we look, the humiliation
 but we still try to snatch the view
 anytime it comes near.

We can only see in front of us
 we are taught
 to limit and strangle
 our gaze
 our vision
 until all we can see
 is our feet darting out
 in front of us
 first one, then the other
 shuffling across the concrete.

Eyes to the ground
 we ride the conveyer belt

to chow
to yard
to pill line
Our world
reduced to
salivating over a brownie
a little bigger
than the rest
or a full bag
of commissary items
Hoping that
something good
is on TV.

I have looked too many times
to the sodden tears of the past
to the scratching fears of the future
and have missed
the sweetness of today
this minute
this second.

Put a fence around today
hem it in, enclose it fast
imprison this moment in
your impenetrable arms.
Put a fence around it all
blind to all else
block off the sky
until you are forced to find
The sacred in
the compassionate
the good
the God
the humanity
the expansive vision
encapsulated
in this breathtaking
sparkling
goods
called
Right Now.

Rare

Part I

Touch here is rare
I am startled by it
Pat me on the back and I will jump
Brush my arm and I will cringe
I flinch from the electric shock
of flesh connecting
establishing a circuit
with me.

Touch here is rare
taboo in its nuances and insinuations
It raises questions and curiosity.
A hand's touch on my shoulder
ripples through me
nerves rolling like waves
to a pool that needs it
pleads for human contact
but that harbors dark islands
of wondering
of suspicions.

Touch here is rare
because it is hard
to interpret
so I fear occasional
exposure to it -
walking away
thinking
wondering
What did it mean?
Even if touch is filled
with all the innocence and friendship
the world could hold
It is a struggle to appreciate
and relax into.
It is only
cautiously affirming

Part II

Long sweeps of contact
whisk across my scalp
to the buzz of the clippers.
Fingertips touch and press
guiding and commanding
into my soft temples
leaving their fingerprints.
The tiny teeth chatter

nibble up and back
a minuscule massage.
My ears are pressed down
folded
to trim behind them.

The buzzing of blades
lull me
sing to me
and I sink into
their melody
their movement
and the way they
jostle every nerve.

The pool is filled
until next month.

Wishing

In the morning
the rattling heating unit
echoes off macadam
vibrates past concrete faces
rubs against coiled razor-wire.

It is the only sound
awake this early.

Sometimes
I think it is
the chorus of
crickets.

Tumbleweeds

Why do I want
to stuff this car
with tumbleweeds?
What is it about this
rusted
crumbling frame
that makes me yearn
to push them
one after another
into its decaying interior?

Why do I love
the sound of those
brittle tangles of
awful sticks and spines
scratching up against
cracked windows
those biting
fanged scales
falling with the patter
of dropping beetles
to the rotting carpet
as I push
as I push again
each one bending
compressing
cracking
enmeshed with one another
but wanting so badly
to burst out
to be round
and rolling again?

Why do I want to
slam that hollow door
tumbleweeds
staring at me
pressing
spines claving
through windshield
through windows
as I walk away?

Perhaps

I want them
to hear the wind blow
outside
and know they too
are stuck
are strangled
are imprisoned.

De'cor

It is best to let
your color palette
revolve around neutrals.
They are timeless
earthy
and provide a balanced aesthetic.

Next
add a bold
punch of color
a splash of interest.
It provides a dramatic
vibe of contrast
that pops against
the natural backdrop.

In little natural light
tan walls
beige cabinets
white sheets
gray blankets

I leave a bright round
orange
on my cabinet.

Belief

As a child
I doubted.

Was it even possible
for a flannel beard
with its flat
sloppy
flannel characters
to contain
on its fussy horizon
all the currents
all the wind - whipped vander
of a story?

Yet I hoped.

But how her slow hands
failed me
rearranged characters
adding flannel elements
so slowly
slow lips intoning
losing the story
too busy focusing on what
the slow hands were doing
fumbling fingers
moving those lifeless figures
How her hands
unwound the strands
of legend
even as her lips tried
to weave them.

I believed

the power of words
the energy of story
could animate these
lifeless
flannel people
and make them
leap
love
stumble
and get back up again.

I mourned

She was human
but still
I begged her only to sway

with the rise and fall of it all
like a snake charmer's flute
until flannel people danced
mesmerized by
the intoxicating river
of story
until only her voice was needed
the drama on this board
now living
moving
so her slow fingers
could fall to her side.

It must have been possible

for how those words
filled me
made me
a boy so shy
a boy so reserved
dance inside.

Festival

Let us unfurl this sheet
this tablecloth
this sari
reds and oranges
so much red
checkerboards and flowers
patterns
on outstretched arms
high above our heads
bracelets sliding to our elbows.

Let us form a quilt
squares of upturned fabric
rectangles of texture
you must have two of you
to hold your piece so high.

Let us open
blue umbrellas
tops in our palms
bright blossoms
their handles like stamens
reaching for the sun.

Let us move
and wave until we are
one ocean
our movements crashing
against one another.

Let us smile
beneath this surface
touching shoulders
with one another
we are colorful here too.

Let us laugh
through our happy screams
as rice sprinkles down
from the sky
onto our swaying
dancing
sea of cloth
and faces
hitting with the patter
of rain upon
rolling water.

Four Dresses

Four little dresses

dry on a long clothesline.

The summer sun filters through
the gauze and lace
and they are illuminated
opaque like glasses of
pink and yellow
lemonade.

They inhale the breeze
their frilly folds swaying
the tall wall of green grasses
behind them
swaying
haze rising up like fog
and they are all mysterious
as they dry in the sunlight.

The ground is mud beneath them
a black volcanic mud
and all that holds
these colorful, perfect dresses
above the strains of
such rich mud

are the plastic pinched fingers
of orange clothespins
so much relying on their
welded sticks and
rusted tiny springs.

Yet the dresses dance precariously
with youthful indifference
their long ribbons twisting
teasing above the mud
as if some of the
twirls and spins
leaps and hops
of the little girls
still cling to them.

They dance with uninhibited joy
the sun exciting
the lingering happiness that
despite washing
has saturated the fibers
until they bounce playfully
heedless of the mud below
but only feeling the sun above
warming their ruffled
shoulders.

Mountains

The mountains stand over us
hanging above our heads
whispering so only we can hear
crush
crush
and we expect them
to disassemble into boulders
rumbling
rolling
cascading down in some avalanche
to crush us beneath
their jagged edges
their ancient weight
and then to reassemble
somewhere else
to stand royally
as new mountains
over someone else.

When they don't
When they hold themselves back
standing silently instead
we call them benevolent
we feel their strength
add stone to our insides.

We call them majestic
for it is in their
restraint
We recognize their
power.
It is in their
beauty
we allow their
threat
to form in us
the first breath
of satisfied
security.

Autumn Pursuit

Coated in the evidence
of a summer spent drinking
the orange liquid of the sun
the autumn leaves lie thick
upon the cooling ground
like footprints of a great army
in sand
overlapping
edging over one another
each a monument telling how
three seasons marched
between those dark trees.

The sun
low on the horizon
smooths these flakes of gold
which somehow
had fallen from
the soldiers' backpacks
covering the dying grass
and sticks felled by some
summer storm.

The leaves spread
so far and wide.

Stand in one place
and orange paths radiate
like a thousand pointing fingers
in all directions
leading pursuers on false trails
beneath every tree
and between every bush.

The warm seasons
have marched through
and no one knows
where they have gone.

Trembling

A breeze begins to
 hum
 now damp
 now sweet scented with mist
A herald
of the rain to follow.

Dark clouds
tower in the west
this wind
then
 their voice
touching earth.

Pushing through our hair
it tells the future
and we are
 lifted.

The marigolds tremble.

Is it
 the wind
weaving through them
or could it be
 joyous
 anticipation?

Restoration

Only fifty pages
of words
folded double
in his pocket
slowed the .38 bullet
enough
so when it punctured
his cavernous chest
it simply rattled around
and made its permanent
home by one of his ribs.

He touched his shaking
fingers to his lips
waiting for the rivulets of blood
to seep between his ivory teeth
out his keyboard mouth
and dribble down
crimson puddles on his
white, starched shirt.
He drew his hand away
dry
so he reached into
his jacket pocket
and pulled out
these death - defying
words.

He lovingly spoke
each word
even the fallen ones
each syllable
even those missing
until they all
lived again
floating with such
significance
into the crowd
like red
red balloons.

As he spoke
weaker
more determined
he dropped
those sheets
one by one
into the crowd
and they saw
each one punctured
together telling how

they had pushed that bullet
away from his heart
so he could always
speak them into existence.

He had always honored
words
acknowledged their power
to shape people
so now
the words had done their work
sacrificed themselves
threw themselves into the
bullet's path
huddled voluntarily to be
vaporized by its velocity.
They had done so
for they knew
he loved them
and would bring them
to life again.

There are bullets biting outside
but I
as I read
as I write
words
delicious words
do not feel them.
This is the work words do
for one who loves them:
wrapping
shielding
cushioning
protecting
even while bullets buzz
unheard
transforming
within this bubble
until there is strength for
another adventure
another safari
another Panama Canal
and another charge
up San Juan Hill.

First

Everything monumental
starts at some
infinitesimal point
 a slip
 a shift
 a conversion
microscopic change
bringing down
 homes
 cities
 continents
 and lives
erupting from
a fraction
of a fraction
of a fraction of something

A single filament of earth
 slides
San Francisco is shaken flat.

A trigger for a millimeter
 moves
Kent State sprouts red puddles.

A gray grain of powder
 sparks
Sarajevo births death trenches.

One atom's nucleus
 jumps
Hiroshima disappears.

Grinding plates of incalculable tonnage
Colliding forces of change and status quo
Immense momentum of dueling empires
Old and new eras of human carnage

All pressed and taut
on their infinite fault lines
until that one pinpoint
 moves
and then things rumble
vanish
nothing after recognizable.

Only afterwards
all we have is history
the knowledge in hindsight
given all the factors involved
of all its tragic inevitability.

So we fear that tiny point
waiting unseen in our future
never knowing what
gesture
oversight
or slip
will cause everything
to unravel.

Then we look -
one more photon of light
is reflected on a cloud
flipping the switch
from the tyranny of
overwhelming night
to the bright optimism
of glorious day.

Part One: Labor
(A poem by Frank Conroy)

I paid
old Mrs. Schreiner
\$2.00 for 59 bundles
of corn fodder on March 31st,
so that I still have
35 bundles to get.
Sell the tobacco,
Mary,
for what it will fetch
and bury me
and keep the rest.
Sell my guns
and all you do not need
and keep the money.
Get Abe Carpenter's boys
to finish stripping
the tobacco.
I am tired of this life,
Mary,
and I am about
my last.
Your Papa,
Frank Conroy

P.S.
Good Bye
Mary.
I took the fatal dose
April 2
at 4 past 3
in the afternoon.

Part Two: Harvest

I picked up
the corn fodder
Mrs. Schreiner owed you
like you asked.
She gave me
your \$2.00 back.
Abe Carpenter's boys
came and stripped the tobacco
while I was gone
before I even had a chance
to ask them.
I sold the tobacco
and they gave me
more than it was worth.
They said it was

real good tobacco.
I took the money
and I buried you,
Papa,
beside Mama
near the garden
where you and I
used to grow sweet pea
on trellises you made me
with hands I used to hold.
I kept your guns
because they remind me
you never wanted
to leave a mess
for anyone else.
I took Mama's quilt
you kept on your bed
and Mama's china plates,
your tools worn smooth,
the photo you kept
from my graduation
and in the end
I just kept everything.
I am tired of this life too,
Papa,
but I understand
and I know your tired.

P.S.

Good bye
Papa.
I came home
April 17
just in time
to watch the sun set
behind your empty
expectant fields.
The Carpenter boys
said they'd
help me plant.

Note: Part one is a verbatim suicide note from 1884. Mr. Conroy
poisoned himself with laudanaum at home where he lived alone after
the death of his wife. On his grounds, his neighbors found three
head of cattle, one horse, and one dog.
Source: Lititz Record. Reprinted April 10, 2014.

Denied

His request had been denied
but the word had not yet arrived
so he, still hoping
stepped forward into a new life
gathering the pieces around him
and slipping them into his suitcase
to ride the Greyhound bus
to his open door.

He packed his assumption
and tucked it behind
thoughts of anticipation
and the nerves of the new
trusting they would say yes
that all he had been through
would count for something
that sympathy for pain
would spark behind
their eyes
so they would embrace decency
resolving past
as he steps into his future.

But they, far away
in their clicking machine
cut off from the sound of human voices
by the opening of file folders
by gossip giggled across phones
by the pounding of rubber stamps
and the clicking of forms being filled

But they, far away
in their own lives drained of hope
devoid of story
sickened by cynicism

Denied his request
muttering about policy
must protect the policy
must worship the policy
they name their pet "policy"
and hide behind its purr

So they don't have to hear the sounds
of humming tires
the rattle of hope
and healing
in a young man
as he rides with growing confidence
toward his glowing future
not knowing
how they would flippantly crush him.

Importance

He carried the dry packet
of photos in his
top right-hand pocket
to which his badge was pinned.
I have photos, he thought
and knew
he was the only one
with such photos
the only one in the world.
They weighed heavy
on his chest
heavier even
than the silver metal badge.

He knew those were important.
Inside their 3 by 5 walls
were colors
were images
was a person
and sagebrush
sand
and small brown rocks
fused together
in a way that was
So important

He was important
with those heavy photos.
But that importance
was lost unless
unless someone knew
but no one did
unless he reached
above that badge
and pulled that paper husk
slipped out those photos
so glossy they appeared wet
and passed them around.

A German tourist
teetered on the lip
of the deep canyon
before a gust of wind
caught him.

He flew for those long seconds
with the swallows
with the black crows.
Did he stretch out his arms
to soar
above the cottenwood

the sagebrush
the sand with its
small brown rocks?

His eight-hundred foot
descent ended in that
hot brown earth
the earth of the ancients.

He was so far from home
when they reached him.
Had his spirit flown
across the ocean to home
or had he joined the spirits
already whispering through
the red sandstone canyon
with its dark streaks
of varnish
and its abandoned
haunted
houses in the cliffs?

The photos were passed around
and they made faces of disgust
tongues sticking out
curious of this twisted thing
lying among the sagebrush
the yellow rabbitbrush
and sand.
They laughed nervously
while passing photos
to those who respectfully
reverently
closed their eyes
and passed them on
not looking.

But it did not matter
whether they looked
or not.
The photos were his
and he smiled
and felt
important.

So Close

Keith Pertusio 49

We huddle.
We stand so close.
The sides of the road
are wide open
enough for the white trucks
to park.
There are many of us
and we are scattered.

But we stand
in groups of three
of five
our shadows merging
on the dusty
sandy ground.
We stand with
brothers
sisters
strangers
little ones holding onto
bigger ones
backpacks on our backs
our own
or someone else's
who was too tired
too tiny
to carry it any further
our whole life
there inside pink
across our sloped shoulders
inside gray
against our weary back.

There is soft light
there is comforting energy
off of each one of us.
We stand in each other's
glow
trembling.
We have this wide
wide open spaces.
There is nothing from here
to the horizon
only dirt
and patches of dry grass
but
we huddle.
We stand so close.
We touch
and it helps us
breathe

while those in uniforms
stand behind
open truck doors
together
while we all
beneath a sky
threatening rain
can only
wait.

Keith Pertusio 50

Cloths

This is the most important,
isn't it?

Clouds move like billowing sheets
layers of white and gray
across open spaces
the chemicals tear throats
biting smoke of cannon and rifle
or singeing steam of spitting gas
they are the sensations of war
of conflict
of protest.

There are always cloths
scattered all over the ground.
Why so much cloth every time
and where does it come from?

Cloths dropped
or torn from bodies
as they charge
or flee.
cloths soaked in blood
or saturated by water cannon
mounds sprawled on pavement
blocking reflections of hazy streetlights
or decaying on hot grassy meadows
strangling green life beneath.

In violence
the cloths drop first
and then the bodies.
As they run
there is softness beneath their feet.

But one cloth
who will hold it up
a flag
a defiant message
in rumble of cannons
in thump of targes canisters?

Every conflict has one.

There is always a believer
to hold the flag
a bandage
a gas mask
a scarf around their head.

Before the flames

before the spotlights
before the sparking of weaponry
Before the screaming
or silent
herdes

They stand
astride things burning
among people writhing
upon ideas compelling
a solid silhouette
always waving that flag
which is so different
from the flag of their enemies
but often
more often
the same.

Amidst the clouds
amidst the cloths
amidst the chaos
this is the most important,
isn't it?

Confession

If only those who beat him
and extracted a false confession
from his agony
had been North Korean.

With bizarre syntax
stilted phrasing
odd colloquialisms
read from a sheet of paper
over the TV
everyone would have laughed
at such a confession
so obviously coerced
and so tragically
comical.

Instead
he suffered in prison
thirty years
for a crime he
never committed.

His confession -
flawless.

Munching

She was supposed
to watch the cows
as they grazed
in the grasses and wild flowers
beside the long country lane.
But the sun
was so warm
and the cows
moved so slowly
she lay down in the
dry, crisp grass
and fell asleep.

She woke to the sound
of munching
all around her head.
She kept her eyes closed
just listening
knowing
the cows stood tall
above her
their shade waking her
their shadows encircling her
as they moved
like slow ships.

She had forgotten much
but she still remembered
the sound of
that funny
that comforting
munching all around her
ninety years later.

Epitaph

I was startled by your name
wedged so eerily
in an index
comprising the last few pages
of a book about
the Spanish Inquisition.

I found myself wondering
what you had done
to get yourself there.

A virtual machine to enhance
the childrens' pretending.
Then
the lines roared.

Yet there you were
Bible
bigamy
blasphemy
Bosch, Hieronymous
stacked upon your head.

Douglas only needed to visit
the time machine.
Then
the resurrection of the Civil War.

You stood quietly
brothels
Buenos Aires
burning at the stake
a list of burning places
beneath your feet.

A string encircling him
beneath his bat wings.
Then
flight and his childrens' laughter.

I suspect in your death
this is exactly how you
a lover of sweet simile
of delicate metaphor
would choose to spend
your eternity.

Two words
impaled by a comma
among such weighty
such dreadful
such wonderful

words.

Keith Pertusio 56

Waiting silently
across the years
anticipating
a victim like me
to wander by
so you could leap out
and hear their
shriek.

Yes, that would be like you
and to think I nearly
stumbled past
your tombstone
here
on this page
inscribed simply

Bradbury, Ray

Rockets rumble
one by one.
Then
in the silence of Mars
a giggle
of delight.

Footprint

I think the next time a broken oil pipe
belches its crude onto the ground
contaminating plants, streams, and lush trees
with its smothering, stinking saliva
the first thing that should be done
is to erect large, three-story bird feeders
bursting with birdseed and peanut butter suet
throughout the shiny, bubbling pool.

I'm sure the birds flying over
would not be off put by the viscous ooze
and would instead flutter unharmed to those feeders
to stuff their beaked faces with quality seed
made possible by Exxon
BP
or who ever's turn it is to pour pollution
into the natural landscape.

I think other birds might stand on one side
cock their little heads to the left and then the right
and balance risk and reward
Risk - acrid fumes rising off sun-baked blackness
Reward - an endless supply of seed to stuff
in their bloated bird bellies.

They can make their own decisions.

So many bird feeders
(definitely make them colorful and festive)
would attract huge flocks of migrating fowl
and probably some exotic ones with
fascinating and scintillating plumage.
Tourists would park their cars on the road
beside the massive, stinking spill
get out their sunglasses and binoculars
and watch excitedly for birds to cross off
their lists.

The community could recoup some money
that way
so once all the oil leaches into their groundwater
they have a little nest egg of cash
an untouched reservoir
to help them start again
somewhere else.

I think once the tourism of bird watching
really gets established
people wouldn't be in such a big hurry
to clean up that huge swath of oil.

Oil Company: "Hey, do you want us to take care ^{Keith Pertusio 38}
of that gigantic oil slick there?"
Community: "Oh no. We're good. Take care of it
when you can.
Oh, thanks for all the bird feeders."

Of course, they would have to clean it up
eventually.
It is toxic, after all.

But all those fancy bird feeders
all those spectacular birds
would soften the blow

and then maybe people
wouldn't be
so quick
to judge.

I.

It is the long
graceful necks of deer
that contributes to the urge
for some hunters
to blow him or her away
to munch on his or her haunches
and then mount that head
with its long
graceful neck
on a wood plaque on the wall.

That neck seems
tailor-made for
connecting that majestic head
with its pensive glass eyes
to the wood.

Imagine the implications
if the deer did not have
that long
graceful neck.
Would anyone want to
mount that head
flat on the plaque
flush with its surface
looking like the deer
had fallen through the ice
and just its head
pecked frantically
desperately
at the world before
slipping under
deep into the frigid water?

II.

A man sees
that no-necked head
flat on the wall.
He grips his own neck
and suddenly feels
that tight necktie
choking him
that starched collar
squeezing him.
He tears away
the tie.
He rips away
the buttons.

He shreds
his shirt and
bare chested
snatches that mounted deer
breaks away the
strangling wood
and runs screaming
primally
into the woods with it
wild
and free.

III.

Would natural selection
favor
the no-necked deer?
If so,
it might behoove the regular deer
still tramping through the forest
to not hold up
their long
graceful
heads
so high.

Drone Snapshots

I.

If everything goes south
drones won't matter.
So I guess I shouldn't get
too excited.
Its just a shame
no one would be around
to appreciate them
because,
as they flit around
capriciously
evoking the playful spirit
of a child,
that seems to be
what
they live for.

II.

I did not see in the fine print
anything saying
I could not own
a drone.
I guess you didn't
think of that.

III.

If I climbed to the top
of Mt. Everest
and brought
a drone
could I fly it
higher than my head
without cheapening
my accomplishment?
It seems at the peak
of Mt. Everest
nothing should be higher
than me.

IV.

In the divorce settlement
I get to keep
the drone.
That's okay.
You refused to learn
how to fly it.

V.

The glee written
on the dog's face
as he watched
the drone
faded to dismay
as he realized
he was no longer
needed.

VI.

Put a mixed martial arts
fighter
and a drone operator
in a cage.
I'd put my money
on the one
with the best
choke hold.

VII.

Ansel Adams
in his darkroom
shakes the pen
and lifts out
a photo of
El Capitan.

But there
to the right of the falls

a drone.

Adams is pissed.

VIII.

I suppose someday
like all technology
seems to go
we will only talk
to each other
through our drones.
There
three hundred feet up
we'll talk
via dips and wiggles
and somehow
we'll understand.

Denial

You read me your poetry
over the phone
and it so moved me
I rushed back
and attempted to express
all I was feeling
in some lines of poetry.
I only wrote a few lines
before I stopped
and wondered if writing
a poem
about the experience
somehow cheapens
the whole thing
if perhaps
a poem
about your poetry
would drain the energy
from your creations.

Then I thought
Gee must I write a poem
about every profound experience
I have?

Can't I just enjoy the moment
without running for pen and paper?
Must every moment be some
opportunistic chance
to jot something down?
Must I find
the poetic significance
in everything?
So instead
I simply remembered
your poems
and how I felt
as you read them.
 (proud
 full of awe
 connected)
I was going to write
a poem
about the whole thing.

Good thing
I didn't.