

Barefoot

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Barefoot



p o e m s

KEVIN HART

BAREFOOT

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for

TONY KELLY

*Después,
Hay que seguir descalzo.*

—Roberto Juarroz

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1

NIGHTS

Dark One, I walk the streets for half the night
And see my father slide toward the grave:
Look left, and death will enter from the right

Or jump on you from some tremendous height
No matter if you run or act all brave.
Dark One, I walk the streets for half the night,

Not looking flash, not looking for a fight.
A car screams through a light: a nasty shave.
Look left, and death will enter from the right,

And if he passes it's no oversight.
He whispers, "Go, get all that you must crave."
Dark One, I walk the streets for half the night,

Not looking for the very things I might,
Not looking for the years that you once gave.
Look left, and death will enter from the right.

My father's crawling upward to your light,
I tell myself, while counting years to save.
Dark One, I walk the streets for half the night.
Look left, and death will enter from the right.

LITTLE BOOK OF MOURNING

in memoriam JHH

Winter

Dark freeze in Charlottesville;
The drinking water bites my lip.

Bare room: I write till dusk
In dusty radiator heat.

Clocks graze on me all day;
I hear the silence of two crows

Then look down at my arm:
Not even your shadow's there to touch.

Inside

I only speak old words:
They keep in with the dead,
They leave their doors ajar.

Some words are corridors
That lead us to the dead
And we can trust their dark;

We pass a hammer, sure,
We pass an anvil too,
We pass a stirrup last;

And then we find the dead
Curled up, inside, asleep,
Our names upon their tongues.

On the Mantelpiece

My father doesn't know
That he died years ago:
He looks out for a while

From '65 or so
And I look back, although
It chills away my smile

To see him with a glow
At dinner, in the snow,
In full-on sixties style

Not knowing then the blow
That was to knock him low,
That scrapes me like a file.

Parachuting

They dropped you into France when young,
A town up north (I went there once);

Your squad was braced behind a wall
And you could see the man in front

Go left and his big head go right,
And saw yourself from up above,

And lived the moment in a vise
And stayed there almost fifty years.

You showed me medals only once
And a weird wound just once as well,

A mucky hole that sucked in flesh
On each side of an upper thigh.

Now you've gone down again at night:
No river and no fields beneath.

Downstairs

I walk down there
Because I must
And feel each step
Is less than just

And blank a thought
But can't ignore
A shadow's sigh
The furnace roar

This is the place
Where darkness grows
This is the place
My father goes

BAREFOOT

Still of our world, dear father, in your grave
Or at my winter window, looking hard
Into a life you never knew in life:

This house of books, this fire that cracks a whip
At cats and shadows when they cross the room,
Vast silences that swallow days alive.

Dear father, know another life, your own,
Not of this world, seen faintly through past love
As though it were a frosted windowpane,

Know you can go there, to that other world,
By walking barefoot in the dark tonight,
As happened all the time at home in time

With just a fraying God to keep you warm
On winter nights, in Brisbane, in the nights
You couldn't sleep for memories of war,

Know in that other world you are your life,
Complete, intact, and brimming high with love;
Know nothing comes undone there, not a thing.

Faint shadows gather in the afternoon
Around a house, around a fighting fire;
Look past them all, look through the icy rain,

A night not of this world yet drawing close,
Come from a time that's hollowed of all time.
Don't sleep tonight, dear father, darkness eats

Shadows and men alive, just walk barefoot
Into that other world: no darkness there,
All warm, in silences and words, all warm.

FATHER

My father's only still a child in death.
So can he speak that quiet language now?
And can he walk the ways they slowly teach?

And does he smell thin summer here below?
So questions flicker through a hot dry day
When summer leans too hard upon the land,

When days seem cornered by a violent sun,
When days weigh more than two or three a time,
When rain is no more than the faintest myth

And all you do is sit inside and read
And live in words made soft and stretched by heat,
And squeeze the day for any minutes left.

I think my father makes his way in death,
Avoiding trouble, somehow getting by;
I think he's learned enough to say, well, "Love,"

And say it with a steady even voice,
And hover in it, like a bird of prey,
And look down here, where summer scolds us all,

Creatures of mud, as he well knows by now,
All cut with cracks, as he once was back then
When he would walk the earth in heavy sun.

But days go bad; thick light falls hard and long;
And questions rot before an answer comes.
This summer's worse than any I have known:

The sun grows vaster with each fallow day.
My father ages fiercely in his death.
No breath of rain to blur the cracks in mud.

GRIEF

Grief wipes away wild days that burned
Like matches struck on windy streets
And time goes blank.

Grief scrapes dry grit across your bread
And has you swallow mother's pins
Lost years ago.

Grief slumps upon your sagging heart:
It has all channels play white noise
And voids the mind.

In grief the world pulls up its roots;
Life bleeds from fattened days ahead
And hours clot.

In grief brute hills seem fragile things
And light lies dead on dusty blinds
And voices hurt.

In grief the son walks through his town,
Through narrow angles of his mind,
And sees no one.

Grief sidles up to you at night
And sits with you and sleeps with you
While others fade.

In grief you thickly stay in bed
Or walk in circles, lost, although
The road goes straight.

OLD CROW

Hey ho, old crow,
Where do you go?
I watch you fly
Wherever I go,
Old crow,
But can't keep up,
You fly too high:
Perhaps you know,
Old crow,

Where father is,
He's in your eye
Because you travel so,
He's gone from me
Old crow,
I can't keep up, I know,
Tell me
Where father is, old crow,
Show me your eye,

Show him so I can see,
See him, old crow,
In your black eye —
Show only this
So I can know,
And keep me up, old crow,
Then fly,
Fly high in thick black sky,
Old crow.

ECLIPSE

All night I hear rain puckering the lake.
Where are you, father, in these ragged hours?
Your death eclipses God: I see a flare —
Then darkness slowly walking on the water.

AGAIN

My father weeps. He looks at me, in me,
And wants it all again: the buckthorn job,
A marriage flaring every now and then,
Outlandish birds that squeal of hope and loss,
Dry winds that whip through bones, mosquito gangs
Falsettoing in hot, dark rooms at night.

I'm heading south on a wild train that snorts
And thunders through a slit in Illinois;
The darkness parts for me. He follows hard,
Outside in rain whenever I peer out.
He tells me, Look: you are your father's son.
He's right; I'm worn. I want it all again.

DOWNSTAIRS

There was a room downstairs where father went,
Where darkness smelled of coal and paraffin,
Where Christmas pudding brooded in a box.

It's where the lost things go, my father said,
When putting on his clips one graveyard shift,
I'll take you there one evening, boy, not now.

But he forgot: I'd see his shadow flare
Across the wall when stealing down at night,
When I was meant to be slum deep in dream.

How could so many lost things fit in there?
It's like the TARDIS! But all crammed with shelves
That stretch as far as Ford's, and they're all filled

With crazy stuff: Grandfather's drippy pipe
Left somewhere on the tube at Stepney Green,
Umbrellas, keys, old Tom's tobacco cards,

A sheriff badge beside a Milkybar,
My uncle's Jolly Golly in mid-swing,
Torn copies of *The Beano* dropped in parks . . .

Then I forgot; and slowly climbed my years
Like stairs that rise toward a single bulb
That's likely on the blink more times than not.

One day I'll travel back and see that house
And stand outside awhile and take it in
And maybe ask if I can go inside.

One day I'll get the key I never found.
One day I'll open up that door and look.
One day I'll find my father in that room.