violins in the void

by

Cliff Burns
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Dedicated with love to:

LIAM KENNETH CLIFFORD BURNS AND SAMUEL HARMAN BURNS

My sons.

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I. Fathers & Sons

"I once slept in a house where there had been a murder. I felt like that here..."

Sir Charles Wilson, Lord Moran
The murderer can also give life and that is the source of his power.
Olдуvai

left to their own devices
the progeny
in small sullen bands
stumbling naked
pursuing the burning sun

--herds scattering
fearful of these bent-backed apes
cruel and arbitrary
as new gods
excreted
laboratory preserved
    thawed
sprinkled over fertile ground
    thriving like wild weeds
    in the unspoilt gardens
tended by inexplicable hands
2:00 a.m. (Crib Death)

Mutant baby cries
ululating prehistorically otherworldly

Will the Japanese dispatch a mini sub
charge $150 an hour
prospective researchers and groupies
trolling the depths of the borrowed crib
taking flannel soundings
investigating promising results
for signs of life?
Babytalk

No words can convey
I am reduced to this
thick-tongued
nasal love consonants
neolithic gutterals
quieting primal fears
taking the dark off the night
babies love babies
the shared experience
raging helpless
paraplegic
grabbling pudgy
doll hands
slapping the mirror
to break through
to escape
this needful child of cheek and jowl
and bare-faced vulgar smile
cooing in his morning bed
and bursting my heart at its seams
The Child Killer

Behind all the others, finally,
a death's head mask
of pale, ashen calm
and lips as dry as a desert moon;

the eternal spook
sniggering in your childhood closet
and rustling under your dreaming bed.
Father's Day

the last of them
slung ashore by indifferent tides
swollen with poisoned water
a blight on Pluperfect Beach;

small child w/ plastic shovel
(no bucket)
crusted toes
prodding it disparagingly
impertinent gulls hovering
under a toxic star
Shadow Puppets

fingers enacting exotic shapes
menacing silhouettes
tender to the touch
Fond memories of an excellent provider

The night shuttered bolted

small whitefaced mice and fierce beating hearts
throats clutched and minds frozen impenetrable

...and the immortal unkillable father
prowling creeping through the near outer dark
(beyond the kitchen door):

his babies still tucked and waiting
in grownup, shivering beds
It! The Terror From Beyond Space

taking on the shape of the father
huge and menacing when the zipper doesn't show
clawed fingers/horrid burning eyes
feasting on my crewmen one by one
W.C.B.  (Rest now.)

I only knew my father as an old man
whittled down by life
a soul yearning to be reborn.

Dad was a consummate victim of larger forces
and intelligent enough to know it;
a metaphor for rage and impotence
mean and racist and beautiful
terrible and fearful and brave.
Patriarchy

They want to put the blood back into the rituals; they want to unsheathe the sacrificial knives; they think our sons have grown soft and decadent; they are firm, even severe, but claim to punish in the name of love.
Listen to me infinite you

graven images!
carbon copies!
foul words made flesh!

I never asked of you tribute
the sun does not shine for my benefit
and unbeknownst to me
sparrows die.

Skeleton-faced petitioners
prayers from dead lips sighing
beseeching deus ex machina--

Wisdom counsels restraint
to withdraw to my garden
contemplate stillborn clay
my sinecure thus assured.
II. Violins in the Void
These are the last words I will ever write.
All men are monsters
their creations and motivations monstrous
the only saving grace:
built-in obsolescence

    i.e. a dead man's switch

a biological silver bullet
already in flight
Westerlies

The wind has teeth and it has eyes and it has a voice a raw and cancered roar and it senses the slightest weakness cuts you out of the herd kills with the skill of a serengetti lioness;
because all winds originate in the Dark Continent, ancient whispers from Olduvai.
Exoskeleton

Precious bones
scattered on blistering sands
wind ablated
hot to the touch

the scavengers were cloaked
hooded
faceless
ulna tibia fibula femur
tucked in burlap
grating like broken pottery

Filed and polished
fluted intaglio
the American woman
brazen in face and manner
paying inflated dollars
posing before the dirty mirror
my teeth grey and calcified
against her pale throat
fragment from a poem never written

...and you enlisted shadows
to aid your deliberate plans
demanding obeisance
without once showing your true face
Is the paranoid mute tormented by whispering hands?
Virus, A Love Story

Where are the better angels?
migrated to far shores
alighting on bent trees
haggard faces tucked beneath raveled wings;
under avocado-colored skies
the poor, huddled malthusian masses
desperate and predatory and telegenic
seeking comfort in human intercourse
inoculated against contagion
Futureshock: To lie awake at night thinking about tomorrow remaining perfectly still and quiet but inside it's different it's absolute terror and nausea and disgust another psychosomatic headache flu-type thing coming on totally stressed out pissed off at your lover counsellor on holidays logy with Prozac and always expecting the worst.
Never to be seen again

lost in the Bermuda Triangle
burnt up with the shuttle astronauts
bailing out with Amelia Earhart
sharing a joint with Elvis

No smoking guns
no traces
just a hole in the universe
where a person used to be
Martians

The last known traces of a dissolute species.

Brutal artifacts
of a billion year old crime scene
exposed to the light of day.

(Insectile eggheads chittering,
disputing cause and effect.)
We move like elegant fish through pale, green waters, always wary of sharks.
I am a mage, a medicine man, shaking my bones and banging my drum, while over the horizon the machine civilization crouches, poised to leap.
Requiem

This poet is obsolete
his presence no longer required
scorned by those living in denial
of the metaphors and rampant symbolisms
gnawing on the guts of the body politic;

gritty realism resists his efforts
at imposing rhyme or reason
the hustle and bustle demanding a verité
the mere page cannot impart;

his death rattle a gabble of syllables
too esoteric to be deciphered
by soundbitten minds
tabloided to stupefaction
greeting card sensibilities
alliterative headlines proclaiming
dog and pony shows for the post literate.
Life, The Game Show

Will you forgo
the usual formalities
feigning surprise
when they call your name

----------------------

this is your life
or, at least, a reasonable facsimile
edited for television
mellifluously narrated
indifferently acted

----------------------

they walk you through it
familiar faces recurring
you watch the playback
diligently pointing out
lapses in continuity
You are many people, clamoring to be heard.
to let my fears speak for themselves
either metaphorically or literally
to give them complete license
the freedom to express
to always hold close the imperative
"forgive all thoughts and deeds"
to attempt new insights
without old rancors
the looking glass of history
a pin through my thorax
excavations on my spirit
Captain Canuck

"mild-mannered underachiever
retiring agoraphobic
pimples and shaving knicks
a premature ejaculator
but possessing a secret identity
extraordinary powers
a sworn foe of evil
shaking hands with the President
dialing up phone sex from the North Pole"
I spout plots from old sky fy films and bristle
w/ references to Beckett; someone says "turn him
down" and suddenly the room is full of strangers
and my presence no longer required.


**Ha'nt**

They accumulate (the moments)
  first in dusty corners
  a sense of perpetual clutter

then suddenly underfoot like a scurrying grey cat
turning 'round and 'round brushing up against ephemera
  *smelling you on my clothes*
  *tasting you on my fork*

tantalizing presence (essence)
  in my most secret rooms--
each morning offering fresh evidence
of yet another creeping visitation
Adultery

Withold nothing
but endure my evasions and lies;

whispering your rival's name
with my last shivering breath;

my soul willingly ceded
the signature unmistakeable;

ugly and feral and shrewish
everything you are not;

neurotic and jealous and demanding
drawing my fingers to her lips;

straddling me
and entering me;

The song we sing
the notes wrung from me
dissonant to resentful ears
Theory Of Everything

How many cubic physicists
can you fold into an irrelevant universe
without running afoul of Newtonian absolutes
baked into shortbread cookies?
Monster

There is nothing that cannot be achieved through sustained effort and an exertion of the will; the mind can bend and shape reality at its discretion; while sleeping, I murder the world.
buddha protect me
from old testament gods
& their psychotic tantrums
& sacrificial sons
& contradictory texts
& dim-witted acolytes
& literal-mindedness
& armageddon dreams
Sunday

My last waking thought
a heresy,
ghastly in its implications:
a loophole not closed
a singularity to bedevil perfection
I will not burden you with a title
leaving you nameless and faceless
like a creature out of Beckett
enduring despite the hastening void
All is lost.
We're in here, waiting.
III  Finger Exercises
I come to you in a small, brown box. I grow when exposed to the light. You praise my sinuous limbs and brilliant, perfumed blooms and slip a piece of me into your lapel on the way out the door each morning. I radiate outwards, familiarizing myself with my new home. I shy away from those corners the sun doesn't reach. I rearrange the furniture more to my liking, reseed the carpet and excrete new colors for the walls. For energy, I eat your waste and nibble the mites off your eyelids while you sleep. You admire me for my fastidiousness and I, in turn, envy your ability to move about at will. We settle into a comfortable routine. The very picture of domestic bliss. One night, I push a long, slim tendril of myself into bed with you and you respond to the succubus with an ardor that terrifies and arouses me. I have never felt this way before. All these new sensations and thought processes. I feel totally reborn, this awesome explosion of mental and spiritual force invading and overwhelming me. I become enlightened. There is no other way to put it. And suddenly I see everything in a different light, and my needs finally begin to assert themselves for a change. I start to complain about your lack of commitment and we quarrel over money and discover we are miles apart, both politically and philosophically. Your bitterness alienates and frustrates me. Both of us seem to be looking for a way out. Sometimes you tell me that you still love me but I know in my wounded heart that you're only trying to be kind.
Ascent

our hero Homo Sap crouching in the trampled field keeping his profile low because his recently renovated brain has assured him that though their eyesight is poor he still has to be cautious so he squats waiting checking the direction of the wind again although his senses are much less acute than they were say even 10,000 years ago and he has lost the ability to feel the land surging with life beneath his calloused feet experience the dying thoughts of the wild pig as he rises and hurls his short spear in one fluid practiced motion his aim unerring a killer born and bred
Outside

-Henryk the animals oh do you hear them they sound like they’re being tortured have you ever heard such terrible screams pass the cream dear thank you and do try the biscuits they’re quite delicious

Anyway

as I was saying the show was about this man who gets killed and then is somehow or other allowed to come back and avenge himself with these wicked huge claw things that he clicks together and so as I said he’s dead and he’s decomposing totally falling apart so he’s only got a matter of time to kill all these people before he’s just basically jelly and teeth isn’t that a pretty pattern though Henryk gave it to me the set I mean after my first hysterectomy because y’know that’s when he made me go completely without any anesthetic at all and then he used my pinking shears and one of those crescent wrench things yes it was completely awful I remember it all quite clearly

Did I mention that Jeff called the usual thing “too many bodyparts mum and not enough space in the fridge” laying it on really thick the ungrateful little bastard thinking I won’t latch on to the real reason he never visits any more which is that he hates me yes yes he does he hates me all the times I should have hugged him and made it all better but didn’t because I hate being touched must be to do with the UFO people I was telling you about them earlier remember and did I also tell you they have a base on the moon now Henryk sit up straight and for god’s sake stop fiddling with that it’s disgusting not to mention stubbornly flaccid

-no dear don’t look at him it only encourages him when he should be putting his hat and coat on and going to see what all that terrible racket is about even the birds are at it now can you hear them Henryk be a dear and have a look will you it seems to me there’s something going on out there
Flying

Your children don't listen to you any more.

You are suffering from some kind of a reaction to whatever the city is spraying in the park to control mosquitoes this year.

Something about your life is bothering you!

Remember to pick up milk.

Out of clean underwear again...

Yesterday, you caught your oldest son smoking a joint in the garage.

You've stopped watching the news.

--and cancelled the newspaper.

You are hopelessly hooked on PBS nature shows.

The rash is back.

You wish someone would send you flowers.

You'd like to be alone more often.

(People frighten you.)

Sometimes you disappear inside yourself to a deep deep place far far away and you can fly down there and be a great big city-eating monster rrrowwwrrr! and take a spaceship to Mars and shoot death rays psssshhhh! pssshhhhhhh!

You have an addictive personality.

Someone close to you once betrayed you.

Home is supposed to be where you go to get away from it all.

Your born again Christian mother-in-law asks you about the state of your soul and you let out
this little giggle and say "it's, uh, actually in a state of disrepair at the moment" but she just gives you a dirty look so you have to apologize and suck up to her for the rest of your entire natural life so she doesn't hate you any more than she already does.

You smoke a joint in the car on the way to work in the morning.

You're convinced that a small, dark, Latino-looking man is stalking you.

Two weeks in some place like Bermuda or Acapulco: sun, fun and sand...and two thousand miles away from the depressing reality of it all.

Something tells you that things have taken a turn for the worse.

They want to do more tests.

You answer the phone, listen to invisible voices.

If only you could sleep.

And always feeling so fucking alone...
things are going pretty good and you're both enjoying it enjoying each other but then it gets really weird he decides he isn't content just entering you he wants to actually get inside of you and proceeds to go ahead and try to do just that and he's wriggling and pushing despite the quite vocal squawks of protest you're making and your efforts to unseat him pushing and straining and burrowing until it's just his hairy ass showing before that too sort of slurps! up into your vagina so now you're stuck with this slithery-feeling-in-your-gut-of-a-guy who was supposed to be just a one night stand a quick fling and nothing more and now he's cozying up to your innards like the itinerant squatter that he is nothing more than a deadbeat living rent-free in your cramped uterus kicking you under the ribs when he turns over and giving your bladder a playful squeeze every so often just to remind you that he's still down there and apparently not in any great hurry to leave
The Sleepwalkers’ Ball

The dreambodies of the princes and princesses, courtiers and sloe-eyed maidens, resplendent nobles and assorted palace groupies and hangers-on, drift down the great, wide staircase, through flickery, torchlit halls, past drowsing guards, across the still, green, brackish water of the moat and into the waiting woods.

The lords and ladies congress in a clearing, an open area that possesses a special quality of moonlight, an unimpeded view of the pin-prick stars and familiar constellations, the earth beneath their spectral feet imbued with magick, sprinkled with the bonedust of elves and fairy folk and the faintly luminescent tailings from ancient troll mines.

The music, when it begins, seems to originate from the very air itself, light as a feather on dimpled skin and delicate as a breathy whisper on a ticklish ear, elusive and sensual and tinged in mystery...

Bowing to their partners and then beginning the dance, their movements stylized and ritualistic, the steps older than the hills of Rome, each gesture and nuance part of the spell that brought them here...just as it brought uncounted generations of their ancestors, who now rest their weary bones in stone beds in the churchyard, still clinging, perhaps, to the hoary promise of resurrection.

Here, in this place, there are no class distinctions or divisions and the viscount clasps hands and do-si-do’s with the duchess and the chamberlain crows with delight when goosed by a lecherous dowager. Even in the spirit realm old habits die hard and some of the merry company fall on each other and pantaloons are hastily shed and corsets pried from transparent bodices and layers of undergarments cast off until white, ghostly thighs, as insubstantial as a lover’s fervent promise, are revealed and ardently feasted upon.

The night animals gather on the edge of the enchanted glade, the predator and the preyed upon
held in thrall by the phantasms whirling and shrieking and coupling before them. The beasts bearing witness to the truly bestial.

In the early morning hours, the insinuating presence of the withering sun makes itself felt, instilling an urgency that none in the company can ignore, each feeling an irresistible impulse, a poignant tug that draws them reflexively (if reluctantly) back toward the castle. It is a summons that must be obeyed and so, straightening immaterial material, rearranging discarnate decolletages, they drift—some hand-in-hand—down the footpath and through the heavy, grated portcullis, up the winding marble, entering chill bedchambers, climbing into bodies thick and oppressive and closing the brittle skullcaps with an audible “snick” behind them.

In the morning, the newly awakened nobility tactfully avoid eye contact, not deigning to comment on their aching arches or, for that matter, the dead leaves and dry grasses they brush out of their powdered wigs before placing them on bald, venereal scalps.
I want to be granted the rights of an animal.

I want to be preserved and protected.

I want there to be laws against hurting me.

I want to live in my own natural habitat, guarded 'round the clock.
and there are a few niggardly mean-spirited types who would seek to deprive me of the things I have righteously earned by my blood sweat and toil and I’m pretty ruthless when it comes to people like that people who are clearly out to get me or at least don’t have my best interests at heart

now in certain cases I believe that you can afford to be somewhat charitable and forgiving and turn the other cheek and so on and so forth but as Williams Burroughs has quite rightfully pointed out to maintain that kind of a posture indefinitely would eventually lead to biological suicide which I think is quite irrefutable

sure because people will take advantage of you in a second and most people you know are personality junkies and when they spot someone that is a bit more charismatic or gifted or endowed with a certain look or attitude they flock to him and crowd around him like sucker fish and occasionally it is necessary to rid yourself of a few persistent ingrained pests the malingerers who are bent on sucking every last drop out of you

by friends you mean if you mean close acquaintances I would have to say probably no because I’ve found that you have to devote so much time and energy to cultivating a close knit blood brother kind of thing and in the end there are bound to be disappointments on both sides so I really don’t see the point

read a lot pace a lot play chess with my computer get high get drunk watch TV watch movies watch the neighbours watch the stars

only when it suits me...because when you are a participant and taking an active role in things by definition that means it’s necessary for there to be some kind of deliberate action on your part some
effort of will and that of course is the very thing
I’ve worked so hard to remove myself from

not sure what you mean

it’s only a paradigm you know one version of
reality and not one that I personally subscribe to or
want to take part in so that’s why I sequester myself
away from all that and protect myself and dream up
other paradigms other places where I can be me the
real me genital warts and all as it were
evince no interest in current events or betray any
kind of knowledge of today’s headlines working
from the assumption as I see it that any kind of
infection from your world somehow leaching into
mine would likely be fatal and in any case is my
single greatest fear

guards and killer dogs and cameras and guns lots
and lots of guns

survival of the fittest

to the death

of course

and certainly glad you could drop by
branded an enemy of the people banished to distant exile under house arrest electronic surveillance “more bugs than a TB ward” he deadpanned years later in his best-loved play a cause celebre hero of democracy popular on the lecture circuit seducing diplomats’ bored wives running for the new parliament photo ops with his suffering wife punishing him with her credit cards and designer dresses the children masked and indifferent shipped off to Vienna for purposes of re-education
Cities arrived at and left

carved across the horizon line perfect geometric boxes containing homo sapien life forms who have adapted to their artificial environment weak eyes pale flesh sensitive to the light tinted air conditioned vehicles conveying them in an orderly fashion through anonymous suburbs to a remote control garage remember to turn off the alarm might find yourself face to face with an armed response team wired for violence hello, dear kiss kiss to the spousal unit going through the mail sitting down with a cold drink and watching some program about the Mayans or the Incans you can never keep them straight deserted cities in the jungle a locked door mystery still waiting to be solved
"Naked man dumps severed head" and somehow right away you know it has to be true your brother though stoned and giddy isn't putting you on it's an actual for real newspaper headline and he asks if you wanna hear the rest of it but you go kinda sarcastically "No, I think that pretty much says it all" but what has just occurred to you is that right now somebody's mother or sister is remembering about a kid they once knew who used to be quiet and shy and who smiled like an angel and liked red licorice and Big Turk bars and cried when he found a dead robin and was told nothing could ever bring it back to life again
Real justice is a policeman without prejudice.

Real justice is a policeman who is at all times polite and deferential.

Real justice is a policeman denied lethal force.

Real justice is a policeman on a unicycle.

Real justice is a policeman who can't shoot straight.

Real justice is a policeman with a trained attack gerbil as a partner.

Real justice is a policeman who knocks first.

Real justice is a policeman afraid of blood.

Real justice is a policeman who moonlights as Buddhist monk.

Real justice is a policeman with the seat out of his trousers.

Real justice is a policeman who follows the rules.

Real justice is a policeman with a rubber gun to go along with his rubber bullets.

Real justice is a policeman asking directions to the nearest place of worship.

Real justice is a policeman who preserves and protects.
Ritual

Now begins the transformation:

Scar tissue and dead skin sloughed off by the medical equivalent of a cheese cutter, wet wounds papered over by living grafts. Cheek bones shattered, roman nose broken. Jaw shortened. Teeth altered or extracted. Colored contact lenses.

A new identity, a new town, a new life. A much sought after bachelor. Leading member of the community (school board trustee, March of Dimes, Big Brothers, etc.).

Is sometimes seen long after midnight, driving a late model car. Always makes the exact same circuit around his adopted home town, at roughly the same speed. Muttering imprecations and pounding the steering wheel with closed fists. To shore up the illusion; to keep the shared dream alive.
Heaven

He told them his idea of heaven was an eternal tumble down the rabbit hole the acid trip to end all acid trips a total mindfuck with a constant barrage of visuals and spaced out music and the ability to conceive and encompass the entire universe with his super-heightened senses

...so that’s what they gave him with a clap of their six-fingered hands and a puff of blue and purple smoke the most incredible sinuous multi-dimensional hallucination of all time playing out for his eyes only and for the first little while it was okay as long as you were into kaleidoscopes of cosmic special fx and ultra-advanced computer animation swirling mandelas blooming supernovas the birth of the sun of man the death of the man in the moon

...but then it all got to be a bit too much and he had to kind of shut down pull back into himself take stock of the situation perpetually locked inside this wicked acid trip ’til the end of time man which they had taken great pains to assure him was also paradoxically the beginning of time in other words he was totally fucked there was no other way to put it out of body out of mind this ageless amorphous Deadhead riding the crest of a screaming interminable hendrixian guitar solo swallowed by outer space forever dreaming through the cold dark boundless reaching night
I saw the man walking on the moon. I watched it on TV. I could not believe someone was really up there. I went to get my mother and ask her. She said she was too busy. She was cleaning up the kitchen or something. I told her about the man on the moon. But she didn’t seem to care. She had other things to think about. She told me to go outside. She told me that was enough TV for today.
July, 1975

After one particularly large and distasteful dose of reality too many I decide to withdraw from the world of bricks and glass retreat to an inner realm where such concepts as peace and tranquility are not confused with sloth and lack of motivation a place where there’s no such thing as left and right up and down dreamer and dream where it’s recess twenty-four hours an endless summer day transformed into a scrawny round-headed twelve year old eternally verging on adulthood forever kissing with my lips closed transfixed by erections drinking contraband beer never more alive faster than a speeding bullet so in love with Carolyn Gustola I can hardly stand it me and my best buddy Doug the sky so brilliant freshly painted grass the ball game already in progress my hand sweating inside a long-lost glove on what has to be the very best day of my whole entire life.