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Epileptic’s Song: poems by Bob Zordani

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Epileptic’s Song

I have come here
to dance. Lurch
into action like

an old motor – sputtering,
hacking, when *click*,
switches kick on.

Call me Clacking Jaw.
Call me the dazzled boy
who licks sockets.

Call me Headknock.
Broken Nose. Come
see me dance without

music. Come. See me
shake out the rhythm
no one can drum.

Watch me hum.

My Strongest Man

Kenny cannot read the warning
on the floor jack, does not know
what truck might one day crush
his legs or upper body.
But Kenny is my strongest man, able easily to spin off even the tightest rust-laden lug from the dirtiest rim in town as if he himself is king of every tire buster here.

Kenny says it is some chore to be stupid but that even a man with smarts like his has lapses, like last week when he didn't tighten the lugs on the rear wheels of my best customer's new Caddy.

And Kenny says he'll never forget how he remembered his mistake as the car eased into traffic, the things that man said when he walked back.

Still shaken, Kenny stares hard into the spin balancer, as if any small weight he is pounding onto that rim will balance out his life, make him roll true.

Song for an Ex-Wife
Whatever love I felt for you is gone
is what I’d like to say, but that’s a lie
I cannot even make myself believe.
You float across my dreams, angelic face
that darkens like a summer cloud at dusk
when I approach. Sometimes a storm blows in,
your voice the crack of thunder through the rain.
I hide my head until the storm is gone
and bats are feeding in the angry dusk,
inhaling insects off the breeze like lies
just sweet enough to twist a woman’s face
into the only thing a man believes.

When morning hits, I knot my tie and leave
the house for work. I drive past Happy’s Inn
and up Route 1 through Kankakee to face
my students in their tidy rows. I’m gone
by three, elated that the asphalt lies
beneath my wheels, and ready for the dusk
to spread its blanket over me. By dusk
I’m nearly home. Fall’s almost here. The leaves
look ripe enough to drop in this red light,
love, their simple lives all but crashing in.
On Saturdays, you’ll find me blowing one
mean harp outside of Martinton, my face
jammed up against the tiny holes, my face
the bloody color of the coming dusk.
Our drummer keeps good time, says, We be gone
without a steady beat. You best believe
it, too, big man, because you don’t you in
a world of shit. It ain’t no fuckin’ lie.

I nod and smile. It ain’t no fuckin’ lie,
I say, and count off time. He grimaces,
then flies into a roll. The band kicks in,
our music pulsing high across the dusk,
the song some simple treatise on belief,
on heading down the road until we’re gone.

We’re in a groove far smoother than the lies
we might believe, the lies we have to face
long after dusk when all the light has gone.

Pond Management

When I’d filled a five gallon bucket
with bream too small to eat, I lugged it
to the spillway. My son trailed behind,
asking to count the fish before I dumped them.
I listened to the numbers he called out,
watched the fish sail from his hands
as he threw them into the gully.
By number thirty-five he got bored,
so we emptied the near full bucket.
Fifty pounds of fish slid down the hill
to mix with the leaves and the rot.
The live ones flopped and rustled on the way.
My son asked why we had to kill them.
The pond is all choked up with bream, I said.
But he’d picked up a stray fish
and wasn’t listening. He studied it,
said it was the prettiest one he’d ever seen.
Then he reared back and sent it flying
over the gully and out of sight.

**A Few Long Feathers**

Just yesterday I watched a red-tailed hawk
circle the house and land in the red oak

next to the vacant chicken coop. He’d plucked
my last hen off one afternoon last week

and left a few long feathers in the pen,
hard evidence that couldn’t be undone.

I thought of pulling out my Winchester
and downing him for good, right then and there.

He kept staring into my empty yard
as if my every chicken were not dead

and there were plenty still for him to eat.
It would have been, no doubt, an easy shot.

I would have done it, too, without remorse,
without a head shake or a single curse,

but I admired his perching on that branch,
scanning the idle barnyard for a catch,
unaware that I held him in my sights,
clicked the safety, and had to make a choice.

This once, I let him sweep across the field,
swing north, and slice straight through the cutting wind.

Lament

You asked me not to put you in a poem,
to leave your voice and body out of it.
You asked me this one night not far from home
in the old oak grove where we used to come
to settle back and stretch our legs a bit.
You asked me not to put you in a poem,

and when I winced, you sat straight up to comb
your hair and let the moon shine into it.
You asked me this one night not far from home.

A poem is nothing but a lie that some
believe is truth, you said, not made up shit,
then asked me not to put you in a poem,

your voice as steady as a metronome,
as steady, love, as it was explicit.
You asked me this one night not far from home,

and truthfully, I found it troublesome
A Conversation With Bob Zordani

1. Why do you write poetry?
I write poetry (as opposed to short stories and novels) simply because poetry is the genre I love most. For me, there is nothing better than making a tiny, pristine object. Think of Yeats’s great poem “Sailing to Byzantium.” The best poems are highly crafted baubles meant to sit on the shelves of the kings and queens of Byzantium.

2. What is your poetry about?
This is a difficult question because I cover a lot of themes. One thing that interests me greatly is the power struggle in male/female relationships. A lot of my work examines this tenuous balance (or imbalance, as the case may be). Some of my poems discuss familial relationships, and my struggle to deal with epilepsy underlies much of what I write.

3. Who are your influences?
Since I write narrative poetry almost exclusively, my influences tend to be poets who have significant bodies of narrative work. For instance, I love the narratives of Tennyson and Robert Browning, but I could not care less about their lyric poetry. Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” is a huge influence on me. I love Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. Pope and Dryden really float my boat. Wordsworth and Coleridge’s The Lyrical Ballads is awesome. Who
could forget Donne and Herbert? Those are old school influences, but I like newer stuff, too.

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve gained a lot of respect for Frost’s best poems, and all of Yeats sends me, especially his love poems from the first decade of the twentieth century. James Wright’s work, especially the pre-Bly stuff, has been huge, and so has that of Richard Hugo. I like Gary Soto’s poetry even though he’s mostly a free verse guy. The same goes for Thomas Lux. Andrew Hudgins is an absolute god. Lately, I’ve been reading Rodney Jones, Dorianne Laux, Kim Addonizio, Robert Wrigley, Tony Hoagland, Beth Ann Fennelly, and Bob Hicok, to name a few.

Many of our faculty members and former faculty members have had lasting influences on my work: Bruce Guernsey, David Radavich, Jay Prefontaine, Sally McCluskey, John Guzlowski, Michael Loudon, Beth Kalikoff, Dave Miller, Mary Maddox, Graham Lewis, John Kilgore, Dan Tessitore, and John Martone. In graduate school, I studied under James Whitehead, Heather Ross Miller, Sidney Burris, and Michael Heffernan, and all of them helped me a great deal. Perhaps my most important influence, though, comes from Dominic Belmonte, my high school English teacher. After all, it was he who slid me a copy of Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* under the table and got the ball rolling.

4. **What is this particular book about and what inspired it?**

I struggled with the title of this book for years before – on the advice of poet Beth Ann Fennelly – settling on *Epileptic’s Song*. Although only four of the poems in the collection deal directly with epilepsy, this is the thematic glue that holds the book together. Some people may eventually take me to task for capitalizing on my disability, but I will always brush aside this shallow sort of criticism. Disability is something that is often left undiscussed. The grim truth of the matter is that many “normal” people simply consider those of us with disabilities as freaks and are uncomfortable in our presence. For me, the title of this collection is, for better or worse, an unflinching affirmation of selfhood. It should also be apparent that, although epilepsy is a cornerstone of my life, it is merely a component of my being, a fraction of what I am.
5. What are you working on now?
I’m working on some poems for a new manuscript tentatively entitled The Naturalist. In the summer, I hope to begin coauthoring a book on edible wild mushrooms with our own Drs. Michael Kuo and John David Moore.

6. Why Water Press and Media?
Thank you for asking this question. Patrick Peters, the publisher of Water Press and Media, has been my friend for twenty years. In the old days, we wrote poetry together, fished together, got drunk together, chased women together. I stood up in Patrick’s wedding, and he stood up in mine. There are not many people in the world whom I respect and trust more than Patrick Peters.

When Patrick called me up out of the blue to talk about Water Press and Media and to ask to have a look at my manuscript, I was elated. I had been sending out different versions of the book for a decade and had come close to getting it published a dozen times by very prominent poetry presses, including The Yale Series of Younger Poets. My poetry had been published in a wide variety of journals, and I’d won a few awards for my work as well. In truth, I was pretty disheartened with the whole book thing. Ten years of manuscript rejection is a hard pill to swallow for anyone. That phone call was my lucky break. It was like hitting the lottery.

I liked what Patrick had to say about Water Press and Media. He noted that most of the respected small poetry presses (Copper Canyon and Graywolf, for instance) are really no longer small presses. He also asserted that many small presses had been bought out by large publishing houses and that many university presses had cut back on their poetry titles or had stopped publishing poetry altogether. In other words, Patrick believed there was a need for a new high quality small press and that Water Press and Media could help fill this niche. I had to agree.

Patrick also guaranteed me that we would work on the book together from start to finish. We would be able to discuss editorial issues and come up with fair solutions to any problems that might arise. Patrick’s editorial suggestions have been outstanding. He changed the ordering of the book sections so that the book flows much more coherently, and he suggested I discard one poem that seemed much weaker than the rest of them. I hated the idea of
cutting that poem because of sentimental reasons. However, Patrick was dead right, and I gave in, no matter how much it pained me to do so. Patrick also suggested that I include a very early poem I’d written as an undergraduate. This freaked me out because I hadn’t even looked at the poem in fifteen years and considered it juvenilia and hoped no one would ever find it. Grumbling, I promised Patrick I’d have a look at the poem and see if I could do anything with it. It took me all afternoon to find the thing in an old, yellowed journal from the mid-80’s. To my surprise, the poem was pretty good and just needed some sprucing up. I cut a few words, changed a couple others, fixed some bad punctuation, relined the poem into long unrhymed couplets, and fit it into the manuscript. Lately, we’ve been quibbling over the book’s cover design. We’re still not completely eye to eye on this issue, but I know the final product will be of excellent quality and both of us will be satisfied with the outcome.

Finally, Patrick Peters is a very astute businessman who understands marketing and publicity. He has been involved in a number of successful businesses and knows what it takes to make a venture work. He understands deadlines and budgets, and he knows how to deal with people. In addition, Patrick loves literature and is a fine poet in his own right. I would be a moron not to let Water Press and Media publish *Epileptic’s Song.*