

Rishma Dunlop

Copper Moon

Erratum Note:

In Arm Journal Vol.3:1, an error was made in the reference to the name of Mathew Shepard's mother, Judy Shepard. A corrected version of the poem is reprinted in this issue.

*For Matthew Shepard (1976-1998)
and for his mother and father, Judy and Dennis Shepard*

i

Child

of our time, our times have robbed your cradle.

Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken.

Eavan Boland, "*Child of Our Time*"

In the wake of a thousand years,
your body a scarecrow
battered silhouette against the starlight
of a grave sky
death arrives in a pick-up truck
steals your shoes and \$20 for coke and cigarettes
wraps your wallet in a dirty diaper
in a garbage pail
for this and for love
you are lashed to your crucifix
your blood a bitter stain
on the place that cradled you

your face
a scarlet mask
but for the clean white tracks
of your tears

and the air around us is a knife
and the taste of death is like rust
in our mouths
and a hundred years closes
a savage end to your journey

What hope for a new century
unless your brief shining will be
an ecclesiastes
unless in this broken place
some aurora of promise is born
unless your tears cleanse
the skin of the earth
unless our children,
born of this time and the next
learn from your severed wings
and fly
follow you out of this geography
this darkest heart

I imagine you there
in the primal glow
of a copper moon
the earth curving its shadow
across the lunar surface

There will be a season for you
when the trees and air and sky are singing
and light will begin in the roses opening,
in the apples falling from trees

and there will be a time for you
when the crows will disappear
mourning doves will vanish,
when faith will rise up
with the songbirds of dawn

May your breath be resurrected
by the human cantos of mercy.
May you dance beyond these years,
your heart breaking loose
in cathedrals of winds.

May this new century
hold you,
tender as a fontanel.

ii

You, Mr. McKinney, with your friend Mr. Henderson, killed my son....
You left him out there by himself, but he wasn't alone... he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time—one more cool, wonderful day in Wyoming. His last day in Wyoming. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time.

Dennis Shepard's statements to the court, November 4, 1999

In the wake of a thousand years
I drift back on the bent neck of time
to the infant clasp of my firstborn
nursing her on an autumn night
her eyes reflecting
the milky net of stars

the earth curves its shadow
across the lunar surface
a copper moon glows over the foothills

and in this primal light
I give her to the tidal pulls of sleep and dreams,
my hand cupped beneath her heart

I remember her flight
through my cave of bones
her life spreading open
the beginning of music and light
an aperture of hope

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in the folds of clean white linen
my child so new
all around her lightens and rises
claims me
the distillation of her breath
a universe,
an infinite refrain that enters me

iii

Baby boy

If anything stood out, it was the fragileness of Shepard
Fireside Lounge employees cited by Prosecutor Cal Rerucha

Outside your funeral at the Redemption Chapel
Reverend Phelps marches
with his cronies from Kansas
their signs God Hates Fags
a full-color image of you says
Matthew in Hell

and it is a time to mourn
and a time to weep
a time to remember your father
teaching you songs of childhood
Frère Jacques,
Row, Row, Row Your Boat
Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star
how I wonder what you are
up above the world so high
like a diamond in the sky

the hatemongers at the temple
are surrounded
a parade of people dressed as “Angels of Peace”
white angels for you
seven feet high with eight foot wingspans
and the crowd cheers them on

I remember
that October night

at the Fireside Lounge,
how death courted you
beer bottle and pool cue in hand
discussing your politics
wrapping the syllables
of a serpent's coil
around your open heart
your smile shining
like your patent leather shoes

iv

this was someone's child
Melissa Ethridge, "Scarecrow"

and I remember
another mother's voice
in a Laramie, Wyoming courtroom
claiming mercy for the murderers of her firstborn
Matthew stood for something
mercy for those who could not show mercy
and a father speaks to his son's killers:
I give you life in the memory
of one who no longer lives.
May you have a long life,
and may you thank Matthew
every day for it.
and I want the sanctity of scriptures
to conjure spells upon my tongue
to pray that this season too shall pass
as if the words might chant
a new scene into being

perhaps those farm fields
filled with wildflowers
the choirs of weeping
hushed in the opiate of poppies

but I see your pistol-whipped body
blood seeping into a nation
I remember the officer who cut you free
speaking of the braces on your teeth,

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your school ID in the dust
she whispers to you in the ambulance
words of comfort, Baby boy
and the sound of mothers and fathers
through endless years
is a wailing of sirens in my ear

and I wonder, as I touch
the memory of my sleeping child
her tender fontanel,
as I watch her now
running fleet-footed
through corridors of time,
my anthem, my bloodline calling,
I wonder, if I could cast away stones,
if I could be so merciful
to those who would crush her

I wonder, if this new century
will hold her,
will her mother's faith in
memory's insistence,
be enough
for a millennium of mercy