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The Tragedy of Nigel Rain

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The Tragedy of Nigel Rain

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B.A., English, Truman State University, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri – St. Louis in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

December 2009.

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THE TRAGEDY OF NIGEL RAIN

Jason W. Dockery

Abstract

This work is a two-part collection of poems examining creative loss and gain and human dysfunction. The first part details the struggles of Nigel Rain, a persona born through an artist's pen who finds himself abandoned by his creator. Nigel believes himself saved through the perpetuation of desire, and these poems show Nigel's attempts at redefining his purpose in life by projecting his fortunes upon a woman he believes to be an embodiment of the Tarot card of helpful fortunes, the Star. Nigel's tragedy is his failure to realize and ultimately survive the fragility of human connections. Language proves as frail as emotion. The second part of the collection spreads dysfunction beyond Nigel's world and into other arenas of human interaction, from politics and war to encounters at the grocery store and failed swimming lessons. The stability of experience is always in question.

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THE BLACK INK IN EACH OF US

The Star

The finger in the sand
reads Braille in the sediment
 having to learn beautiful all over again-
Her last lament for a love story
 a sensual textual.
A map in the dark, the water, the wood
Where before the earth was a goblet,
 a drink of continental thrift,
Her lips touch only a bone-man,
 a skull without demands,
 the path of least insistence.
When she found her broken one,
he accepted her spoils as golden hair, answers to moments unasked.
We crush into the puddles
 the disasters
 of fools believing in what they're doing
accepting all visions when reflections collide.

The Tragedy of Nigel Rain

Ten years ago he was born
by some scribe
but then the pages stopped.

Teased by the pen star out there somewhere,
writing the new pornography,
a sudden end of sentence.

A lack of paragraphs in his lungs,
he looked for breaths in other's mouths,
trying whatever he could to contract

a syntactically transmitted disease, or
purge the participles dangling in his throat,
cutting off air.

Broken inkwells provided nothing to drink.
He believed he found answers without needing questions.
He wrote *Nothing is missed since I don't exist*.

Then – a star shining over each page,
illuminating words in the margins, the peripherals,
the black kingdom of abandonment.

She would burn him more sentences after all,
and he would bask in their light
until she found out how to just bend his spine

into indelible wrinkles.
Typographical horrors across his skin,
the marks and all of him deleted again.

I Can't, Unfortunately, Stop Looking

She was never more dazzling,
disbelief in my throat
as her eyes scan between the margins
of my face,
she is stylizing, conjugating, punctuating
every pore, my lips the line break
I lick raw.

It never takes long here.
snow turns from pale, flawless skin
to gray tumors piled about,
looking like some afterlife place for
Hitler, the ripper, the candlestick breaker.

The tie's the problem, wrinkled and necessary,
not strong enough to form a noose
in meetings.
Organization ist alles – so say the Germans
with their dames who look like porcelain dreams.

Hands Raised But Not in Surrender

And that was the last time she was unknown,
shifting uncomfortably between one foot
and the other in a crowded basement mistaken
for a coke snob discotheque,

she mouthed the most beautiful things,
but I couldn't read lips or chose instead to stay
the broken second hand.

One more bridge burned so simply,
as if paper, small flaming particles twisting,
lighted parachutes in the darkness.

I tried to repair or retrace
the broken meridian of jewelry stores,
coffee shops.

I am this close to being hurt by the simplest of things:
the messy nest of the back of her hair,
my jealousy of objects soaked by her eyes.

If *truth* were spelled some other way,
or the rain ran through the bark in a different pattern,
the snow fell slightly to the left,
those white, almost invisible hairs were rearranged on her cheek,
the moment wouldn't be a thousand ringlets
reaching out to touch
and find me illicit in this world.

oh yeah go go

then her mouth closes and
something else opens up and I do too
duped like a tulip in warm February

dust on the end of her eyelashes so close
stroking my nervous
why do you have to talk can't you just be occupied
by what you occupy
her body replies in place of her lips

and another thing I'm not ready for confessions or dreams
so let those feelings swim in the droplets rolling down my back
across the complicated geometry of the moment
and maybe just maybe I'll collect them from the sheets and make a decision from there

Morning

V.

And that was yesterday
when it really sort of fell together
and that buzzing streetlight finally knocked it off.
That's when I caught her.

IV.

When did my life become these deposit slips
splayed like a bad hand dealt on the kitchen counter?
Her idea of a good time was a quick smoke away from my eyes
with His and Hers DNA blowing up her stomach.

III.

Who told me to pick myself up when I fall?
It was that one guidance counselor back in ninety-three,
he looked like someone who would use a cane
as instrument or excuse.

II.

Bipolar disorder was better
when Robert Johnson called it the blues.
At least the worst allergies in the world
hide every tear on the pillow.

I.

High school sweetheart - the girl who hated rhyming poems
as an accomplished Freshman English student.
That was when she caught me: the day *forever ago* starting
dressing as *right now*, not an eyelash out of place.

Entropy on Carter Avenue

When she found, that last day, the pencils rubbed down
By draft after draft of *there's no easy way to say this*.

Could have been, though, the time the candles went hungry
crying over a cold dinner, and melted into disappointment.

Or, after having taken her name, rearranging the letters for comfort,
and crawling into the soft nape of another's lexicon.

The finality of it all fell in a box of photos at my feet,
curled remembrances worn at the edges, creases forcing into skin.

Pollutant

Father is a dishonest
collection of phonemes
scrawled in flaking chalk
in a public place,
the meaning carried away on shoes
scrutinized later between blackened finger
and dried-up thumb.

Stop crying over the aching pendulum
cracking and stabbing at fretful air
or the empty bell falling from the tower,
shattering in the garden
that needed the sound.

Small and in your arms
is a part of your catalogue
that is unmovable by tectonics,
unwashable by floods,
a time capsule not trying to be a snitch
or a womb for fires
where whispered letters will burn in incinerators,
fingerprints reduced to ash.

In unused darkrooms are embraces that do not count,
waves of hands that break on nothing,
and it is still better for you to miss questions parading by
in death masks unrecognized.

Saturday Night's All Right for Spontaneous Combustion

These days I'm just not sure whether I am indecisive
or a fine wine in a box that gets better with age –
more likely I'm that bag of Cool Ranch Doritos
wrapped like a Velvet-Elvis blue, corn-slicked tourniquet
around that impossibly high branch
at the train station.

Then there's you, you, you,
as delicate and careful around things
as the corner preacher waving his cardboard signs
that, yes, as you correctly point out,
are typically misspelled,
or being held backwards,
as if we, the working dead,
aren't the only ones who need convincing.

So here we are discussing transplants
And whether or not another thousand paper-cuts
or so will suffice as incisions.
Go ahead, call my bluff, pry off another layer
of whatever it is I have on the outside
with those blue contact lenses.
We're not going to get sensible tonight,
and I've got a lot of matches left.

Scalpels Over Guns Any Day of the Week

Give me a blade,
I have to go find the music in here.
Our answers came through misuse
of the flames and the failures.

Yes, baby boys are good, precious metals,
as dry as their razor mothers have been,
the knifelings will get here soon enough
and we'll talk about the slivers passing forth.

What you mistook for thunder
was only construction on a face.

Ink on my fingertips
leave a trace of sky
soft of your cheek,
of the cracking of crystal happenings.

Here to devastate with words,
to make sure they all fall through unseen streams,
I keep dancing on the tail of this arrow,
oblivious to the pierce.

Market on the Edge of the Astral Plane

If there is no chance of black wells
or those soft belly dancers having their way with us
in space, then at least as I fall I get the
moment I need for diabolical musings,
tattered rag shortcomings,
and afterthoughts knitted by the
Bosnian refugee, her featureless face
a smooth bowl with one dark bead
rolling weary in the socket.
As I fall I attempt acrobatics,
self pneumatics, advanced quadratics,
and hypochondriatics,
because after I work out all the physics of
you and me, how can I not worry
about the rocks down there?

No Place in Particular Can Still Punish You

Of the last experience in a car fourteen miles
outside Quincy, Illinois, I notice a fist of birds
pushing ramrod through power lines,
the digits closing around the danger,
but not one of them exploding into dying fireworks
the six year old in the backseat is dreaming about.

The foam on his lips captures the small blinks of
that burning sore just over the line of trees.
Slowing over gravel, the soundtrack needs retuning,
the tires knobs I stop to reset my head.
Dust rises around me as the earth
tries to escape one piece at a time.
I look up knowing I might fall upward with
the dust, and drown blue.

To a Farm Unable to Die

The house gazes across broken cornstalks,
two dirty eyes glassed by lids sewed by a long gone hand.
A dozen cats are performing an opera tonight,
each note tuned across forks whose handles
have long rotted away, metal fingers
mucked in the rancor of worms' deep heaven.
For years hard men's tractors have rusted
and old wives spin no tales.
Out of season is the season here,
termite the artisan at work.
The clock has broken away from the dusk
of fireflies arguing across acres,
and the nights the scarecrows danced arm in arm.

Pears on a Windowsill

Their placement might be deliberate
A throwaway, a discard, a disappointment
The palate disagreed when the eyes deceived
There was no chance from conception
Not a prayer since the dispersed seed

Or accidental
Never meant for the flies to bore
Toward the sweetness
Or the disease to erode neuron after neuron
Allowing the distraction of voices or outdoor vices
To fail against this hungered, dying light.

Murdered on Vacation at Pinsocoli Hotel

But under your nails
they found pieces of broken moth
that must have slipped through the paper towel
despite your careful, tender wipes.

Like beads of sweat on my burning forehead.

I couldn't return the favor.
The way your head poured out,
spread like pancake batter –
even ridiculous that I made that connection –
but trapped in my head, and ruining the moment,
and breakfast, for the detective.

He noted your lipstick on my cheek.

It came from the hotel phone.
Which later spewed out clichés,
apologizes and arrangements
I took like swallowed glass.
Opening drawers, a necessary distraction,
I noticed the pages of this yellowed Bible were curling,
as if you sucked the air out of everything
before you went.

His Nights

The jeweler sees the dead man
just on the other side of the fence.
The gate speaks and then hushes, his footsteps choking stillness.
His eyes do not miss the glint of money through the fog
curling around his legs.

His hand reaches for the diamond in the corpse's laugh.
The thing, as it turns out, is very cold.
He mutters that he did not expect it to be cold,
and something – a tree, a gust, a lucid nightmare -
answers behind him. He does not hear it properly.
It is, like last night, in crooked tongue.
His eardrums are not in a position to interpret or re-imagine
the linguistics of the deepest moments of night.

Again at this last smile – he wonders if there's just something
about showing off the goods
one final time. Perhaps, though, the other side
is not bright or glorious,
devout or pristine,
but a charlatan's paradise,
a holy rupture
a jest, like the rest, continued.

Degradation

The skeleton is laughing at you
not me
don't fill up jars with eyes
that are not yours
without telling me the names
of the brick buildings
where men and women wipe away tears that you bottle
sell on the street corners
where mortal men wait for immortal boys
shivering in the deep part of the night
where no one goes and only needles
touch the hands of the girls

Enough, According to the Body

the searching breathless murder
twofold shreds of paper she left across my lips
one read "diamonds in the dead mouth"

the other "cancer watching, nothing waiting"
my smile a zipper, a suture, a railroad hack
changing colors of the leaves in the table

while sleeping on a mattress stuffed with love letters
a million pains of sand in these shoes
sundown flaming sulfur liars

across town traffic light of my life
the dinnertime conversation of astrology
raising a shard of glass

to repose a toast
as this calliope spews one last time
then shuts up

I Will Always Feel This Woman's Searing

N

This is about the name I was given before she rewrote it as *Sufferer*.
 Harder by the minute if all I'm thinking about is wheels as
 cohesion has left the outer roads.
Say nothing, Nigel, she said and I obliged,
 crooked from liturgy splattering
 between my teeth, red sun apostrophes turning
 their curvatures necessary and into my nostrils.
 She forgot about these rusting moments and
 the weeds that strangle them into frames of metal,
 brown drippings of negligence finding permanence as scrap
 out behind the shed where we made
 a union of gumballs in our hair and grass stains
 in the stretch marks of her hips. When she washed she washed
 me out too, from her clothes and from her brain. The folds
 came out clean.

I

Someone like a train car barreling down the spaces behind my eyes.
 Star, the rest of this transmission goes out to you,
 though I suspect the dial finds nothing
 but the radio static in your throat.
 I see your credentials crashing against the rocks,
 leaving a deep crimson paint slipping away like ghosts
 to find me again in common soil.
 Legs before yours I flipped like the last pages
 of this cruel story, then shut the whore behind me.
 The little doors curl on this used advent calendar,
 my days up yet suspended by the air
 through which telephone conversations bore like drills.
 There is nothing next to next.

G

Portend the wrath of these minutes,
 each second the jilt of some rusted typewriter
 machine gunning my thoughts.
 What it means to see new rose bushes
 on fire, I can't say with this tongue
 that's really a scabbard.
 This chair should be glad there's going to be someone
 new to look at it. Give it a love the burning kitchen
 on the news used to know.

The tricks we use to keep electricity in our minds.
The world is a bone I will find a way to break.
The worst winter storms encircle and shatter their victims,
the fragments tumbling in my joints,
probing cartilage and dermis for a means of escape.

E

Probably I'll die with some glinting rock in my mouth.
It should be collected then and placed in your heart cavity
as reparations for the ragged paths of my tooth marks. Then
your tears will begin to bleed through, and the rest of them will feel it –
countries and their slowing, broken clocks of men coming home
from war or the maker's other hazards.
When I stopped hating him,
I needed you only as I needed to become your ashes,
the spread between us gorgeous.

L

The soul is leaking through cuticles. I can see you, Star, through it all,
my eyes painted onto the world's last stones.
You were an amazing consequence of whatever I fate last night.
The searing you know like the leaks of consciousness
from a skull cupped in your hands,
a face blasted of its layers, crow's feet and old kisses
flaking off long ago like asbestos.

BLEEDTHROUGHS AND OTHER HAZARDS

Properly Raising a Bomb

The mother takes the old, soft rag,
soaks it in muddled water for her hands only,
then twists the linen until the taint of time
and death bubbles out and drips down
like rusted rain into the basin.

Unfolding a clean cloth, she nuzzles
the wick with the tip of her nose.
Her face looks like a funhouse trick in the body's shine.
The black casing, scratched by the safety pin
again, fits the crane of her arm as she
wraps the diaper.

She pricks her finger with the pin,
the blood mixing with the salve she streaks
across the curves. She sings something low, a whisper,
as she sets the bomb on a nest of newspaper,
from the inside, its first words,
a faint rattle of shrapnel coos.

When The Big Numero Uno Gets A Bad Rap

-An America Poem

wet musings and you move
toward the flesh that counts

welcome to foreign
as original as stenciled declarations
reviving transitions between the sentient

and the impatient, plugging in
our boots to climb a mountain of emails
made of LaserJet soil

let's ask the fireflies that are really helicopters
this is when we stop and stare at you
start unfurling banners and hope

for the best recessions to be the folds
in our brains, the caverns
that find chloroform speeches
much more unbearable

The Cut-Up Machine as a Weapon of Mass Destruction

weapon, nothing for you
war swelling anywhere
but for Fanaticism to understand this
mirrors disease itself.
of windows broken
the go brain processes blood
mistakes it for liberty.
soldiers' lost limbs as trophies
for senators in show and tell.
babies kissed.
wives learning of Sullivan Ballou
the history lesson to read from flag
on his wooden coffin propped.

Bartending

The old man's hands –
I never figured out just how he did it.
Sandpaper fingertips scrape the rim of his drink,
a wagon-rutted palm comforts an unshaven face.
A few knuckles I mistook for volcanoes;
a wild prairie above the torn cuff of his sleeve,
the left hand has the elegance of the face of the moon.
He taps with that yellow nail,
never the brown one I thought was an old penny,
I pour right on cue.
Old tattered gold on yesterday's fingers -
I saw it last Tuesday,
Tonight not so lucky.

At The End of the Street

His house plays orphanage
to every weed imaginable.
Pack of Lucky's oh four thousand or so
touches up the film-noir haze on his windows.
His siding, twisted and hunched, needs cleaning.
The dust collects, settles, and nestles in joints.
His ex-wife's skin was always scratched by

A rusted nail.
Teeth are worn keys.
His eyes sizzling streetlights.
No repairman can reach his ducts.
A surgeon, maybe.
He thinks about lawyers but one tumor is enough.
For one drag he is in dialogue with the devastated -
he coughs metal into a breeze through the porch,
the wind carrying a bone melody creak
but the door never moves.

One-Eyed Man on a One Lane Road

How the road twists narrowly here
A tight scar across this forest belly
is just like the deep groove
where my beard won't grow
Once pink now white reminder
of going to the wrong fucking place

The red everywhere came out warm
got sticky in the fortune telling marks in my hand
died cold
I asked the question not soon after
Is everything I've seen bleeding out now
gushed through a retina and rusty blade

The war stories now
like all those whispers and lies
to the beautiful ones
The smoke halo faces I dreamed about
lost in this partial death in my fingers
now forever in the half shadow

Under

Before the train carrying the white queen
blasted into this jerkwater town
crushing tumbleweeds and skunk skulls
into the carbon dust that bore them
I was beginning to map out the rest of my days
in drops of sweet cherry blood
each cell transporting flecks of rust
from the chasms between each knuckle
to the bees dancing for my sticky red honey.
Should the gaze below Her Majesty's crown
befall those muscles of devotion,
whose fingers are old keys unlocking the pitted earth
the last of us wouldn't be screaming
and we could stop waving our sun-sapped kerchiefs
at the bitter end of the world.

Election Sonnet

They'd rather not fuss or just remain lame
Than vote for the one who brought blood
Or shoved a million homeless into the mud
A safe kind of practice, a democratic shame.
They could care less if bombshells are the ticket to fame,
"American Idol's on, it's not like I'm not voting!"
They cry as the fabric of mankind is eroding,
While they pockets are eaten away just the same.
But at least I'll get my shot at the line,
As the rest of them are home in their chains.
Walking right into the booth is just fine
So I can stop those big-wig capital gains.
Since I've done my part nobody else gets to whine,
If we all drown again in Republican rains.

The Last Haiku

Atomic rising
Everything must hurt now
Tears and screams leave dust

Swim

Fool me once, shame on two parts hydrogen
bonded with one part oxygen,
its covalency inspiring nothing but suspicions

from this six year old flagging about
in the YMCA pool after walking too close
to the deep end,
his father swimming over to rescue
him but forgetting to throw in any pointers
over the next decade or so,

or this sixteen year old on the first flight
of his life – to Germany, no less,
two thousand miles of ocean
five miles down churning and waiting
for the event of a water landing,

or the twenty six year old
desperately paddling into a tree
on the Current River,
where the only water he trusts
is about to fall out of the cooler
and vanish into the twisted brown and green
swarm of branch and rock,

or the married man,
clinging to his wife
in the allegedly safe shallow end of the stuff,
his arms unable to unlock from her cool,
teaching embrace without the use
of a fireball fusia noodle
he wrestled away from first graders.

Aisle 7

I see the lady
through a fingerprint on the right lens
staring either at me
or the box in my arms
with the picture
of the world's happiest cat,
the woman's frown a million
miles of messy blood
hastily applied
for the social rituals of
browsing through the frozen pizzas

Neighborhood Block Party

*So you want me to stick an air conditioner
into that hot dog?*

Jon pauses, beer breath
leaks through crooked slats.

*But I guess
the guys in the Wienermobile
have to stay cool, right?*

I nod silently without a meat product vehicle
story of my own,
Jon's mesh 1986 Legion 1A Softball League cap
also bobbing
up and down in the corner of my eye.

Another of Connie's kids
comes out of the house with her husband,
I can't believe
there are more of them I haven't met yet.

Terry informs my wife
he plans on making wine with the berries
growing in my back yard.

I'm picturing the purple droplets clinging
to his immaculate 70s porno mustache.

I glance back at the house,
wondering why the benefits of wine-making
were never mentioned
as a selling point when we bought this first home.

It's time for a bathroom break.

My television
flashes the violent red of the Cardinals' game
through my living room.

sis

torment I poured
through oil thick words
and shredded pink flesh

a rust barbed tongue
lashes moss covered brain
chain-link mantra:

as when you drew blood
your mind expelled across the room
and when my tongue did as it did

before the drugs did what they do now
your body a vial of everything
the pharmacy could throw at it

a toxic river dissolving teenage cares
your eyes so faded in photographs-
sis I can only think about you for so long

Eleven Days

The poem I threw away over the weekend,
something about surprise measured by stick,
aftershocks and taking stock:
my eyes and your lips,
my hair, your nose,
or some kaleidoscope of practicality
and verse.

When you called, it ended in drips
that might as well have been asteroids
hurdling toward a new burn.
New you and transformed me
redacted after eleven days.
I balled up all possible combinations
and scanned the office for the wastebasket.

Work Related

Low pay, state holidays at civil court,
then here, the big time, criminals in a dying metropolis's last gaps.

Staring into stapler nicks and pen slices harshening
this oak bench's surface, I take my seat in the courtroom
and remember how I got here.

As for Number 227 on the docket,
he turned a little girl into a doll
with one perfect hole measured out
from passenger seat to front porch,
allegedly.

The orange shirt and pants match my tie,
his cuffs as tight as my watch.

I worry more about others, though,
like that sour-looking man in the front bench
who scowled when asked to remove his hat,
his thoughts almost legible as his eyes burn
into that lollipop of a handle
waving back and forth under the bailiff's armpit.

At lunch I walk through a cloud of smokers,
one or two of them asking me through a puff here or a cough there
if I can call their lawyer or if they can go home.
I remind them that the last person in the world they want legal advice from is me,
then walk away to lunch while try to tuck my badge
(first middle initial last)
behind my tie.

I am asleep when they follow me.

When my eyes close they rise as fire from the seats,
and I, sitting to the judge's left, watch them come,
ants rushing to find the inside of my skull.

I can run but then they have seen
my badge, my name, my house number, my blood type, my wedding pictures, who I wanted
to kiss in the fifth grade, my wife's office, what her legs look like in a bathing suit, and they
know it and throw it, all of it coming, breaking, smashing against my bones and the steel
panel behind this bench, with no way to keep the next one from rushing
the long dark tunnel of the bailiff's gun.