Classic Poetry Series

Brooks Haxton

- poems -

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Brooks Haxton (1950-)

Brooks Haxton, born in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1950, is the son of the novelist Ellen Douglas and the composer Kenneth Haxton. The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Guggenheim Foundation, Haxton teaches in the writing programs at Syracuse University and Warren Wilson College. He lives in Syracuse with his wife and three children.

Eserleri:

Nakedness, Death, and the Number Zero, The Lay of Eleanor and Irene (Backcountry, 1985)

Dominion (Knopf, 1986)

Traveling Company (Knopf, 1989)

Dead Reckoning (Story Line Press, 1989)

The Sun at Night (Knopf, 1997)

1985

The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth
the vengeance; he shall wash his feet in
the blood of the wicked. Psalm 58

It was the fortieth year since Buchenwald: two thousand
Jewish refugees in Sudan starved while Reagan visited
the graves of Nazis. CBS paid off Westmoreland
for their rude disclosure of his lies and crimes:
he had killed thirty of the enemy, let’s not forget,
for every one lost us: he was owed something.
That year, though, no terrorist could touch God’s work
in Mexico and north of Bogota: an earthquake here,
volcano there, and numbers do not signify the dead,
each corpse incomprehensible as to the widow Klinghoffer
her Leon, shot, dumped overboard as if to make a point.
Westmoreland said, the Viet Cong could be indentified
from the attacking aircraft as all personnel in uniform
below. Their uniform, he told us, was the native dress.

Brooks Haxton

Deaf

Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy
waterspouts. Psalm 42

The waterfall in sunlight is God
talking to herself. Her voice
poured into the trees asks
nothing, to prove nothing,
and her way of asking
says by overflowing what
may not be said. The stream
unbroken at the rock's
edge bursts with downflung
beads where daylight bursts
and drops. Though deaf, I listen
through my shoesoles, through
the stone ledge, into the water,
thrumming, into the spray and light.

Brooks Haxton

Every Death Is Magic from the Enemy to Be Avenged

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
Psalm 22

When fever burned the last light out of my daughter's eyes,
I swore to find and kill the ones to blame. Men
must mount the long boat in the dark with spears.
At dawn, where the flowering spicebush hid my scent,
I crouched. A young wife, newborn slung across her chest,
came first for springwater. She stooped. My god,
for vengeance, spoke her secret name inside my ear. Her god
stepped back with no scream, his right hand at his mouth,
the knuckles clenched between the pointed teeth.

Brooks Haxton

Monster Minded

The wine of astonishment
is house wine at my house.
The whiskey of it is a sauce
we savor. The cocaine
of thy judgment also
is rock crystal, blow
to blow the mitral valve.
Truly is the heroin
of thine excellency said
to be deep brown, shit
pure enough to stop the heart.

Brooks Haxton

Rotgut

The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor
the moon by night. Psalm 121

On a hillside scattered with temples broken
under the dogday sun, my friend and I drank
local wine at nightfall and ate grapeleaves
in goat-yogurt glaze. The living grape vines
bore fruit overhead. Beyond our balcony,
beyond the Turkish rooftops, an old moon
touched Venus at one tip. This vintage,
he said, would melt pig iron. But I wondered,
were we drunk enough, and he said no. I took him,
staggering and laughing, in my arms, and soon,
with snow at nightfall easing off,
another old moon slid into the hill
behind my dead friend’s house. He loved
that smear of light cast back on it from earth.

Brooks Haxton

Sackcloth

I made sackcloth my garment once, by cutting
arm and neck holes into a burlap bag.
A croker sack they called it. Sackdragger
they called the man who dragged a croker sack
between the cotton rows to pick. He dragged
a gunnysack behind him in the ditch
collecting empties. Him they chose
the Likeliest to Sack Seed in the feed store,
or to suck seed. He was your daddy. He sacked
groceries part-time, and they jeered:
you sorry sack of shit. Sackcloth,
which Job sewed upon his skin, was goat hair.
God who clothed the heavens with such blackness
said, I make sackcloth their covering.
Isaiah understood. God had him speak a word
in season to the weary. Speak, Isaiah, now, to me.
Before the stars like green figs in a windstorm
drop, the sun is black as sackcloth, and the moon
becomes as blood. My soul is weary. Speak,
Isaiah. Sing. I was a scholar as a boy:
I cut the neck and arm holes into the burlap,
pulled it on, and cinched it with a hank of rope:
what I have done from then till now is itch.

Brooks Haxton

Salesmanship, With Half A Dram Of Tears

Gripping the lectern, rocking it, searching
the faces for the souls, for signs of heartfelt
mindfulness at work, I thought, as I recited
words I wrote in tears: instead of tears,
if I had understood my father's business,
I could be selling men's clothes. I could be
kneeling, complimenting someone at the bay
of mirrors, mumblingly, with pinpoints pressed
between my lips. That was the life I held
in scorn while young, because I thought to live
without distraction, using words. Yet, looking
now into the room of strangers' eyes, I wanted
them to feel what I said touch, as palpably
as when a men in double worsted felt
the cuff drop to his wrist. There was a rush
in the applause of gratitude and mercy:
they could go. A teenager, embarrassed
for himself and me, lefthandedly
squeezed my fingers, and said thanks.

Anonymous submission.

Brooks Haxton

Storm

Cattle egrets in the dry grass waded
like white clerics at the hooves
of brood cows, heifers, and new calves.

Forked lightning. Calm.
The darkness in the cattle tank welled up
and flooded the reflection of the trees.

Turkey vultures wheeled, and wheeled away.
No swifts, no swallows, children gone indoors.
Rain seethed into the willowtops,

sky flashing, while the black bull
under the water locust glowed
with an inward surge of darkness

Brooks Haxton

Submersible

Why art thou cast down, O my soul? Psalm 42

Down from twilight into dark at noon,
through darker, down until the black
could not be more devoid of star
or sunlight, o my soul, near freezing
in sub-photic stillness past
the fragile strands of glowing jelly
radiant with tentacles to sting,
and bioluminescent lures of anglers,
down where water beading on the cold hatch
overhead has sheathed in dewdrops
the titanium, past dragonfish
with nightlights set into their heads
and flanks, past unlit cruisers,
blackcod, owl fish, eelpout, skate,
where spider crabs, arms long as mine,
on creamy prongs drift floodlit
over the pillow lava, here,
our craft has taken us where no one
could have come till now but corpses.

Brooks Haxton

Thy Name

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
I will declare thy name unto my brethren.… Psalm 102

OK. Let's not call what ditched us God:
ghu, the root in Sanskrit, means not God,
but only the calling thereupon. Let's call God
Fun. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word
was Fun. Fun created man in his own image.
The fool hath said in his heart, There is no Fun.
Let's call the House of God the Funhouse. Fun
derives, according to Dr. Onions (may he
with his Johnson rest in peace), from fond,
or foolish. God, in this prime sense, is fond
of us, and we, if all goes well, of him. Let's
call God luck. There is no luck in scripture.
Chance gets mentioned several times, my favorite
being, Time and chance happeneth to them all;
but luck is the unspoken name. King David
to the harp and sackbut sings, in paraphrase, My luck?
Gimme a fucking break! With my luck, how do I know?

Brooks Haxton

Unclean

I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am
like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am
as a sparrow alone upon the housetop.
Psalm 102

The pelican in scripture is unclean. It pukes dead fish
onto the hatchlings, and it roosts alone, like Satan
on the Tree of Life. Nobody told me. I liked pelicans.
I liked owls, too. I used to lie awake and listen,
wanting to become an owl, to fly, to see through darkness,
turn my head, and look straight back behind me. I was
happy, as kids go, but I did not belong in human form.
Sparrows peck grain from fresh dung. In this world rich
means filthy. Leopardi, in his high Romantic musings
on the sparrow, does not say the poet is a shitbird, just
that, singing by himself, he acts like one, and wishes
he could feel more like one, unashamed to do so. Here,
the preacher (burning in his bones with fever, puking
half-digested fish, and hooting, sleepless in the ruins
like the baleful dead) cries: O Lord, take me not away.

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