

Classic Poetry Series

David Berman
- poems -

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David Berman(4 January 1967)

David Berman is an American poet, cartoonist, and singer-songwriter best known for his work with indie-rock band the Silver Jews.

Biography

David Berman was born January 4, 1967 in Williamsburg, Virginia. He attended high school at Greenhill School in Addison, Texas, before matriculating at the University of Virginia. While in Charlottesville, Virginia, Berman began writing and performing songs (often left on friends' voice message machines) with his loose band, Ectoslavia, primarily composed of UVA classmates Stephen Malkmus and Bob Nastanovich.

Upon graduation from the University of Virginia, the trio moved to Hoboken, New Jersey, where they shared an apartment and adopted the moniker Silver Jews.

Before moving to Hoboken, Malkmus had also founded another band, Pavement, with his childhood friend Scott Kannberg. As Pavement's acclaim and visibility grew, the notion arose that the Silver Jews were a "Pavement side-project," despite the fact that Berman's writing, singing, and guitar playing led the band's music, and, of course, the Silver Jews preceded Pavement. On the band's early recordings, Berman even tried to protect the Jews' individuality by listing Malkmus and Nastanovich under aliases, but it backfired when people learned who "Hazel Figurine" and "Bobby N." really were.

Not long after the success of Pavement's debut album, *Slanted and Enchanted* (which was named after a cartoon Berman had created), Dan Koretsky, founder of the Chicago-based indie label Drag City, met Berman at a Pavement show. When he heard of the Jews' tapes, Koretsky offered to release them. On their first single and EP for the label, 1992's "Dime Map of the Reef" and 1993's *The Arizona Record*, respectively, the band held to their ultra lo-fi aesthetic and recorded the majority of both on a Walkman.

After the release of the EPs, Berman entered a graduate-level writing program at the University of Massachusetts and met like-minded members of local bands—the indie-rock/alt-country hybrid Scud Mountain Boys and New Radiant Storm King. Writing at the university left Berman time for songwriting; soon, he had enough material for an album, which became 1994's *Starlite Walker*. The album reunited Berman with Malkmus and Nastanovich (this time listed by their real names in the credits) in the 24-track Easley Recording studios for a more

focused, polished take on the Silver Jews' literate, lyrical, country and noise-inspired rock.

1996-2008

Along with writing and working with other performers like the War Comet, Berman recorded the Jews' second album, *The Natural Bridge*, in the summer of 1996 with members of New Radiant Storm King and Drag City artist/producer Rian Murphy. Originally, Berman planned to record this album with Malkmus, Nastanovich, and the Scud Mountain Boys, but both sessions were scrapped after a few days. *The Natural Bridge* continued to streamline the Silver Jews' sound and let Berman's rich, abstract lyrics and reflective vocals take center stage. Malkmus returned for 1998's *American Water*, and his guitar and vocal interplay with Berman places it among the Silver Jews' strongest efforts.

In 1999, Berman's first collection of poetry, *Actual Air*, was published by Open City Books. The Silver Jews returned in 2001 with *Bright Flight* and the EP *Tennessee*, which also features Berman's wife Cassie on a few tracks.

In early 2003, The Houston, Tx.-based theater group Infernal Bridegroom Productions staged a theatrical interpretation of *Actual Air*, which featured selected poems from Berman's book, as well as three live covers of Silver Jews songs, with Berman's blessing.

Following the release of *Tennessee*, Berman struggled through an intense period of depression and substance abuse. In 2003, he attempted suicide by using crack-cocaine, alcohol, and the prescription drug Xanax. Berman would later credit this time as "an incredible blessing", because he became more deeply involved with Judaism.

In 2005, Berman reunited the Silver Jews—with a lineup including his wife, Malkmus, Nastanovich, Will Oldham, and Azita Youseffi among many others—for a new album. Recorded in Nashville, *Tanglewood Numbers* narrowly avoided being destroyed in the electrical fire that engulfed Memphis' historic Easley-McCain studio, where it was supposed to be mastered. Drag City released the album that fall.

Berman surprised fans in 2005 by announcing the group's first ever tour.

Though he is a reluctant live performer as a musician, Berman occasionally does readings of his short stories and poems in both the US and the UK. His accomplished and trademark sardonic lyrics have been compared by some to Bob

Dylan, and his poetry is known to examine overlooked aspects of everyday life as well as chance and often hilarious juxtapositions.

Lookout Mountain, Lookout Sea, the Silver Jews sixth studio album, was released 17 June 2008. It was recorded at Marble Valley of Lexington, Virginia and Lake Fever Productions of Nashville, Tennessee. It was followed by an American tour.

Berman currently resides in Nashville, Tennessee with his wife Cassie.

Retirement from Music

On January 22, 2009, Berman announced via the official Drag City message board that he would be retiring from making music (along with the Silver Jews moniker), and would play a final show at Cumberland Caverns in McMinnville, Tennessee on January 31, 2009. The caverns are located 333 feet underground, and only 300 general admission tickets were made available. The concert aired on Nashville's famed WSM AM radio station, and was also available via a streaming format on their website. Berman stated that he would play his 15 favorite Silver Jews songs. He also wrote that his intentions are to move to "screenwriting or muckraking." He closed the entry by saying, "I always said we would stop before we got bad. If I continue to record I might accidentally write the answer song to 'Shiny Happy People'."

On the same day, he made another post on the message board revealing that he is the son of lobbyist Richard Berman. The two have been estranged since about 2006, when David demanded that his father halt his work supporting guns, alcohol, union-busting and other industries of the like, or else he would sever their relationship. Richard refused, and the two have not spoken since. In the message board entry, he called his father "evil," a "human molestor," an "exploiter," a "scoundrel," and "a world historical motherfucking son of a bitch." Berman ended his post by saying, "I am the son of a demon come to make good the damage."

In January 2011, Berman launched his blog "Menthol Mountains."

And The Others

Some find The Light in literature;
Others in fine art,
And some persist in being sure
The Light shines in the heart.

Some find The Light in alcohol;
Some, in the sexual spark;
Some never find The Light at all
And make do with the dark,

And one might guess that these would be
A gloomy lot indeed,
But, no, The Light they never see
They think they do not need.

David Berman

Catallus Cx - A Translation

Alfie, honest mistresses are lauded;
The presents they receive they earn, but you,
Who lead me on with lies, leave me defrauded.
My anti-mistress, brazen what you do;
You keep my gifts but, suddenly demure,
Renege on my reward. Either be chaste
Before accepting fees or be the whore
That you pretend, your total body placed
Where just your mouth is. Greed and 'virtue' make
Strange bedfellows, each sure the other's fake.

David Berman

Coincidence

For Mildred Nash

Coincidence. Perhaps coincidence
Explains it all. Why look far out, in deep
For mystical solutions to make sense
Of how a dream disturbed more than my sleep—
A dream in which you sat bolt upright on
A Windsor chair and wore a long blue dress
(Ornamented with a white chiffon)
And on your visage bore a dark distress
And said your dog was dead? When I awoke,
I thought the dream an impetus to phone,
And when I did, the first words that you spoke,
Through sobs, were that your cat had died. Your tone
Was as it had been in my dream, which plain
Coincidence tries too hard to explain.

David Berman

End Of The Cruise

Ready to disembark,
We're mostly puff and grey.
Who else can sail this ark?
Who else afford such play?

Our bags are overpacked
Protruding like our flesh,
The proof of nothing lacked
That money can enmesh.

Before we booked, we viewed
Pictures in which the young
And svelte declared the moods
We hoped to move among.

We fidget, wait to be
Called back to land once more,
Selves dragged from the sea
We meant to leave on shore.

David Berman

Governors On Sominex

It had been four days of no weather
as if nature had conceded its genius to the indoors.

They'd closed down the Bureau of Sad Endings
and my wife sat on the couch and read the paper out loud.

The evening edition carried the magic death of a child
backlit by a construction site sunrise on its front page.

I kept my back to her and fingered the items on the mantle.

Souvenirs only reminded you of buying them.

* * *

The moon hung solid over the boarded-up Hobby Shop.

P.K. was in the precinct house, using his one phone call
to dedicate a song to Tammy, for she was the light
by which he traveled into this and that

And out in the city, out in the wide readership,
his younger brother was kicking an ice bucket
in the woods behind the Marriott,

his younger brother who was missing that part of the brain
that allows you to make out with your pillow.

Poor kid.

It was the light in things that made them last.

* * *

Tammy called her caseworker from a closed gas station
to relay ideas unaligned with the world we loved.

The tall grass bent in the wind like tachometer needles
and he told her to hang in there, slowly repeating

the number of the Job Info Line.

She hung up and glared at the Killbuck Sweet Shoppe.
The words that had been running through her head,
"employees must wash hands before returning to work,"
kept repeating and the sky looked dead.

* * *

Hedges formed the long limousine a Tampa sky could die behind.
A sailor stood on the wharf with a clipper ship
reflected on the skin of the bell pepper he held.

He'd had mouthwash at the inn and could still feel
the ice blue carbon pinwheels spinning in his mouth.

There were no new ways to understand the world,
only new days to set our understandings against.

Through the lanes came virgins in tennis shoes,
their hair shining like videotape,

singing us into a kind of sleep we hadn't tried yet.

Each page was a new chance to understand the last.

And somehow the sea was always there to make you feel stupid.

Submitted by sallack

David Berman

Grace

As one who, reading late into the night,
When overcome by sleep, turns off the light
And yields whatever he can sense by sight

To what the gates of ivory or of horn
Will send him, sightless as a child unborn,
To goad, amuse, remind, reveal or warn,

So may I turn a light off and embrace
With resignation, better still with grace,
The dreamless sleep that all awake must face.

David Berman

Imagining Defeat

She woke me up at dawn,
her suitcase like a little brown dog at her heels.

I sat up and looked out the window
at the snow falling in the stand of blackjack trees.

A bus ticket in her hand.

Then she brought something black up to her mouth,
a plum I thought, but it was an asthma inhaler.

I reached under the bed for my menthols
and she asked if I ever thought of cancer.

Yes, I said, but always as a tree way up ahead
in the distance where it doesn't matter

And I suppose a dead soul must look back at that tree,
so far behind his wagon where it also doesn't matter.

except as a memory of rest or water.

Though to believe any of that, I thought,
you have to accept the premise

that she woke me up at all.

David Berman

Oh Where

Where did you go, my dear, my day;
Where, oh where, did you go?
To market, to maker of market, to say
Too much of the little I know.

Where did you go, my dear, my year;
Why did you flee from me?
I went from here to there to here
Loitering breathlessly.

Where did you go, my life, my own,
Decades gone in a wink?
Some things are better left unknown
Some thoughts too thick to think.

David Berman

Self-Portrait At 28

I know it's a bad title
but I'm giving it to myself as a gift
on a day nearly canceled by sunlight
when the entire hill is approaching
the ideal of Virginia
brochured with goldenrod and loblolly
and I think "at least I have not woken up
with a bloody knife in my hand"
by then having absently wandered
one hundred yards from the house
while still seated in this chair
with my eyes closed.

It is a certain hill
the one I imagine when I hear the word "hill"
and if the apocalypse turns out
to be a world-wide nervous breakdown
if our five billion minds collapse at once
well I'd call that a surprise ending
and this hill would still be beautiful
a place I wouldn't mind dying
alone or with you.

I am trying to get at something
and I want to talk very plainly to you
so that we are both comforted by the honesty.
You see there is a window by my desk
I stare out when I am stuck
though the outdoors has rarely inspired me to write
and I don't know why I keep staring at it.

My childhood hasn't made good material either
mostly being a mulch of white minutes
with a few stand out moments,
popping tar bubbles on the driveway in the summer
a certain amount of pride at school
everytime they called it "our sun"
and playing football when the only play
was "go out long" are what stand out now.

If squeezed for more information
I can remember old clock radios
with flipping metal numbers
and an entree called Surf and Turf.

As a way of getting in touch with my origins
every night I set the alarm clock
for the time I was born so that waking up
becomes a historical reenactment and the first thing I do
is take a reading of the day and try to flow with it like
when you're riding a mechanical bull and you strain to learn
the pattern quickly so you don't inadvertently resist it.

II two

I can't remember being born
and no one else can remember it either
even the doctor who I met years later
at a cocktail party.
It's one of the little disappointments
that makes you think about getting away
going to Holly Springs or Coral Gables
and taking a room on the square
with a landlady whose hands are scored
by disinfectant, telling the people you meet
that you are from Alaska, and listen
to what they have to say about Alaska
until you have learned much more about Alaska
than you ever will about Holly Springs or Coral Gables.

Sometimes I am buying a newspaper
in a strange city and think
"I am about to learn what it's like to live here."
Oftentimes there is a news item
about the complaints of homeowners
who live beside the airport
and I realize that I read an article
on this subject nearly once a year
and always receive the same image.

I am in bed late at night
in my house near the airport
listening to the jets fly overhead
a strange wife sleeping beside me.
In my mind, the bedroom is an amalgamation
of various cold medicine commercial sets
(there is always a box of tissue on the nightstand).

I know these recurring news articles are clues,
flaws in the design though I haven't figured out
how to string them together yet,
but I've begun to notice that the same people
are dying over and over again,
for instance Minnie Pearl
who died this year
for the fourth time in four years.

III three

Today is the first day of Lent
and once again I'm not really sure what it is.
How many more years will I let pass
before I take the trouble to ask someone?

It reminds of this morning
when you were getting ready for work.
I was sitting by the space heater
numbly watching you dress
and when you asked why I never wear a robe
I had so many good reasons
I didn't know where to begin.

If you were cool in high school
you didn't ask too many questions.
You could tell who'd been to last night's
big metal concert by the new t-shirts in the hallway.
You didn't have to ask
and that's what cool was:
the ability to deduct
to know without asking.

And the pressure to simulate coolness
means not asking when you don't know,
which is why kids grow ever more stupid.

A yearbook's endpages, filled with promises
to stay in touch, stand as proof of the uselessness
of a teenager's promise. Not like I'm dying
for a letter from the class stoner
ten years on but...

Do you remember the way the girls
would call out "love you!"
conveniently leaving out the "I"
as if they didn't want to commit
to their own declarations.

I agree that the "I" is a pretty heavy concept
and hope you won't get uncomfortable
if I should go into some deeper stuff here.

IV four

There are things I've given up on
like recording funny answering machine messages.
It's part of growing older
and the human race as a group
has matured along the same lines.
It seems our comedy dates the quickest.
If you laugh out loud at Shakespeare's jokes
I hope you won't be insulted
if I say you're trying too hard.
Even sketches from the original Saturday Night Live
seem slow-witted and obvious now.

It's just that our advances are irrepressible.
Nowadays little kids can't even set up lemonade stands.
It makes people too self-conscious about the past,
though try explaining that to a kid.

I'm not saying it should be this way.

All this new technology
will eventually give us new feelings
that will never completely displace the old ones
leaving everyone feeling quite nervous
and split in two.

We will travel to Mars
even as folks on Earth
are still ripping open potato chip
bags with their teeth.

Why? I don't have the time or intelligence
to make all the connections
like my friend Gordon
(this is a true story)
who grew up in Braintree Massachusetts
and had never pictured a brain snagged in a tree
until I brought it up.
He'd never broken the name down to its parts.
By then it was too late.
He had moved to Coral Gables.

V five

The hill out my window is still looking beautiful
suffused in a kind of gold national park light
and it seems to say,
I'm sorry the world could not possibly
use another poem about Orpheus
but I'm available if you're not working
on a self-portrait or anything.

I'm watching my dog have nightmares,
twitching and whining on the office floor
and I try to imagine what beast
has cornered him in the meadow
where his dreams are set.

I'm just letting the day be what it is:
a place for a large number of things
to gather and interact --
not even a place but an occasion

a reality for real things.

Friends warned me not to get too psychedelic
or religious with this piece:

"They won't accept it if it's too psychedelic
or religious," but these are valid topics
and I'm the one with the dog twitching on the floor
possibly dreaming of me
that part of me that would beat a dog
for no good reason
no reason that a dog could see.

I am trying to get at something so simple
that I have to talk plainly
so the words don't disfigure it
and if it turns out that what I say is untrue
then at least let it be harmless
like a leaky boat in the reeds
that is bothering no one.

VI six

I can't trust the accuracy of my own memories,
many of them having blended with sentimental
telephone and margarine commercials
plainly ruined by Madison Avenue
though no one seems to call the advertising world
"Madison Avenue" anymore. Have they moved?
Let's get an update on this.

But first I have some business to take care of.

I walked out to the hill behind our house
which looks positively Alaskan today
and it would be easier to explain this
if I had a picture to show you
but I was with our young dog
and he was running through the tall grass
like running through the tall grass
is all of life together
until a bird calls or he finds a beer can

and that thing fills all the space in his head.

You see,
his mind can only hold one thought at a time
and when he finally hears me call his name
he looks up and cocks his head
and for a single moment
my voice is everything:

Self-portrait at 28.

Anonymous submission.

David Berman

Snow

Walking through a field with my little brother Seth

I pointed to a place where kids had made angels in the snow.
For some reason, I told him that a troop of angels
had been shot and dissolved when they hit the ground.

He asked who had shot them and I said a farmer.

Then we were on the roof of the lake.
The ice looked like a photograph of water.

Why he asked. Why did he shoot them.

I didn't know where I was going with this.

They were on his property, I said.

When it's snowing, the outdoors seem like a room.

Today I traded hellos with my neighbor.
Our voices hung close in the new acoustics.
A room with the walls blasted to shreds and falling.

We returned to our shoveling, working side by side in silence.

But why were they on his property, he asked.

David Berman

The Broken Mirror

My life is almost over; that's a fact
Statistically derived but simply true;
I look into the mirror, but it's cracked

And so reflects two, three, or more, that lack
Cohesion. Which one's goal shall I pursue—
My life is almost over; that's a fact—

In time remaining? Luggage largely packed,
Past boxed and crated, little left to do,
I look into the mirror, but it's cracked

And won't be fixed and always did refract
The one before it into at least two.
My life is almost over; that's a fact,

But life cannot be lived in the abstract
And begs for certainties that it once knew:
I look into the mirror, but it's cracked;

I look away in search of the exact;
Nights melt the shadow shrinking from my view;
I look into the mirror, but it's cracked.
My life is almost over; that's my fact.

David Berman

The Charm Of 5:30

It's too nice a day to read a novel set in England.

We're within inches of the perfect distance from the sun,
the sky is blueberries and cream,
and the wind is as warm as air from a tire.
Even the headstones in the graveyard
 Seem to stand up and say "Hello! My name is..."

It's enough to be sitting here on my porch,
thinking about Kermit Roosevelt,
following the course of an ant,
or walking out into the yard with a cordless phone
 to find out she is going to be there tonight

On a day like today, what looks like bad news in the distance
turns out to be something on my contact, carports and white
courtesy phones are spontaneously reappreciated
 and random "okay"s ring through the backyards.

This morning I discovered the red tints in cola
 when I held a glass of it up to the light
and found an expensive flashlight in the pocket of a winter coat
 I was packing away for summer.

It all reminds me of that moment when you take off your sunglasses
after a long drive and realize it's earlier
and lighter out than you had accounted for.

You know what I'm talking about,

and that's the kind of fellowship that's taking place in town, out in
the public spaces. You won't overhear anyone using the words
"dramaturgy" or "state inspection today. We're too busy getting along.

It occurs to me that the laws are in the regions and the regions are
in the laws, and it feels good to say this, something that I'm almost
sure is true, outside under the sun.

Then to say it again, around friends, in the resonant voice of a

nineteenth-century senator, just for a lark.

There's a shy looking fellow on the courthouse steps, holding up a placard that says "But, I kinda liked Reagan." His head turns slowly as a beautiful girl walks by, holding a refrigerated bottle up against her flushed cheek.

She smiles at me and I allow myself to imagine her walking into town to buy lotion at a brick pharmacy.

When she gets home she'll apply it with great lingering care before moving into her parlor to play 78 records and drink gin-and-tonics beside her homemade altar to James Madison.

In a town of this size, it's certainly possible that I'll be invited over one night.

In fact I'll bet you something.

Somewhere in the future I am remembering today. I'll bet you I'm remembering how I walked into the park at five thirty, my favorite time of day, and how I found two cold pitchers of just poured beer, sitting there on the bench.

I am remembering how my friend Chip showed up with a catcher's mask hanging from his belt and how I said

great to see you, sit down, have a beer, how are you, and how he turned to me with the sunset reflecting off his contacts and said, wonderful, how are you.

Submitted by sallack

David Berman

The Moon

A web of sewer, pipe, and wire connects each house to the others.

In 206 a dog sleeps by the stove where a small gas leak causes him to have visions; visions that are rooted in nothing but gas.

Next door, a man who has decided to buy a car part by part excitedly unpacks a wheel and an ashtray.

He arranges them every which way. It's really beginning to take shape.

Out the garage window he sees a group of ugly children enter the forest. Their mouths look like coin slots.

A neighbor plays keyboards in a local cover band.
Preparing for an engagement at the high school prom,
they pack their equipment in silence.

Last night they played the Police Academy Ball and
all the officers slow-danced with target range silhouettes.

This year the theme for the prom is the Tetragrammaton.

A yellow Corsair sails through the disco parking lot
and swaying palms presage the lot of young libertines.

Inside the car a young lady wears a corsage of bullet-sized rodents.
Her date, the handsome cornerback, stretches his talons over the
molded steering wheel.

They park and walk into the lush starlit gardens behind the disco
just as the band is striking up.

Their keen eyes and ears twitch. The other couples

look beautiful tonight. They stroll around listening
to the brilliant conversation. The passionate speeches.

Clouds drift across the silverware. There is red larkspur,
blue gum, and ivy. A boy kneels before his date.

And the moon, I forgot to mention the moon.

David Berman

The Ultimate

When dreams have turned to dust and dust to slime;
When all you ever were or hoped to be
Appears as no more than a jest of time,
A foolish jest, a tasteless parody

On some unlikely fiction; when not just
Your dear pretensions but your best ideals
Have been ground down into an acrid dust
That you are forced to eat for all your meals;

When—oh, but what can metaphor provide
Sufficient in its scope to comprehend
The fury never to be satisfied
Of one betrayed by a once-trusted friend?

David Berman