

John F. Buckley

Frustration

And now that you mention it again, this
is indeed the easiest poem in the world
to write, its lines extrusions from the glue
gun of a glib prodigy, a sleek sensation.

This piece — let us call it a construct —
is about nothing. It builds scaffolding
within which hangs empty space, hot
pregnant air, the loom on which to weave
a blank, blue, beautiful tapestry, seamless.

I read the book by the man who split his
chest to bare his soul amidst rainstorms
and eggshell eyes, and I feel perturbations
in my heart, dim concerns. I want to express
my own anguish and resilience, wrest hostile
memories from the quartermaster and set them
like claymores in the minds and bowels of readers.

But all that issues forth is birdsong from
blithe sparrows wearing straw boaters,
chirping away in the play of phonemes
and pipedreams, happy horseshit.

Cartesian dualism: life kicks me in the groin
and the mind reacts with a tinny aria.

Cloud Map Ceiling

The spare-bedroom ceiling shifted. It trembled incessantly
— Nothing seismic, it started to move, forming letters

and shapes in the stucco patterns — As if possessed by
a stenographer poltergeist taking notes on whatever

informal court proceedings may take place in this room.
I lay on the bed, trying to decipher the messages — I read

them just fine but the sense of the plot and the illustrations
escaped me — until I looked out the window and saw

similar yet more diffuse shapes in the sky. The clouds!
The ceiling had become a map of the clouds, one written

in American vernacular with comic-book pictures. This
cloud was an homage to *NCIS*, with clear portraits of

Mark Harmon and Cote de Pablo and episode guides
of their exploits as Navy police. This bank of cumulonimbus

was a dark, complex, celestial puzzle, a three-dimensional
combined chessboard and crossword with esoteric hints

sprouting across, down, and rearwards and with twelve
distinct pieces: one seemed to have to solve the clue to move

a pawn or a rook or a hooked executioner, And pieces did shift,
but how? Who was doing the puzzle and playing the game?

Was it put to a vote, each viewer below helping to shape
the answer? Whose ceilings were also decoding the sky?

Or was there something else majestic or hinky at work?
And why was it all depicted in English? Were other ceilings

elsewhere around the globe translating the clouds, perhaps
into Italian with Renaissance-inspired or inspiring artwork?

Did Muslim clouds without illustrations float over Baghdad,
Tashkent, and Jakarta? I couldn't watch once the questions

accumulated like thunderheads, keeping me awake at night,
invading the smooth glassy pond of semiconsciousness

I cultivate when watching television, which is very often.
I hung a heavy, opaque curtain over the stucco and closed

the blinds. Now when I go outside, less and less, I stare only
at the ground. Have I learned or avoided a lesson here?

Acceptance Speech

When I think of all the other, much more experienced candidates in the bars, cafes, and cubicles across this great nation of ours, it amazes me, warms my peach-pit heart, that you would single me out today to celebrate the awesomeness of my self-pity.

There were times, so many times, when I felt my poisonous envy, of those who were younger yet more talented or accomplished than I, had been overlooked by this selection committee. I know now that you were just granting me the space for me to be *me*, to demonstrate what I was capable of, to prove just why I deserved this award.

I know I'm not the easiest man to love. Truth be told, I'm surprised anyone even *likes* me... Thank you, thank you, that was a little bit of improv...can't keep a bad man up, am I right?

I've had some stiff competition. You, constantly worrying about aging without an entourage of attractive female devotees to show for it. You, fretting about getting fat but your feet hurt too much to exercise and you can't afford a podiatrist. And you, complaining about the children you never wanted, about the baby daddy who suggested you remain childless and who doesn't pay enough child support, about a professional world maliciously conspiring against your quickly-shifting whims of what you want to be when you grow up and have to go to work. Don't get me wrong: you are *all* enormous babies. I can't take that away from you. But I guess this was just my year to get lucky.

I'd like to thank my parents, who each modeled, throughout my childhood and the first part of my continuing adolescence, what it truly meant to be ridiculously sorry for oneself. If they both hadn't already crushed my heart by dying, robbing me of what could have someday evolved into a nurturing home environment, I would dedicate this award to them. But what's the use, now? They're dead and I'm all alone. Yes, thank you, thank you. More improv.

I'd like to thank all five of my ex-wives, whose emotional withholding kept me lean and hungry, helping me maintain the eye of the tiger, the spleen of the elephant, the broken spirit of a true competitor.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of you. Thank you for allowing your words of encouragement to fall on deaf ears. Thank you for letting your praise seem like thinly veiled sarcasm. Thank you for enabling me to close my eyes to your pictures of a better, more optimistic and hopeful world. Thank you. And good night.