

PAUL L. THOMAS

CODA: ART IN CONVERSATION WITH ART

Another One of “Murakami’s Children” I

The moment some 35 years later is quite vivid, and that moment was the day I sat in my second-floor dorm room—the same dorm where my father had attended college—and wrote what would be my first *real* poem. And that moment of realization—that I am a *writer*, that I am a *poet*—came directly from a speech course with Steve Brannon, where we had (inexplicably) read e.e. cummings’s “in Just-.”

Since that day, I have continued to live the life of a poet, and a tremendous amount of my creative work is a conversation with the art I love—poetry, popular music, novels, visual art, film. As a result, I am a habitual synthesizer, what I have deemed “quilting”¹—part of which is the urge to offer snippets of that art that informs my poetry through opening quotes. I suppose my scholarly self seeks always to cite, to confess the shoulders of the giants upon which I humbly stand.

When I suggested to the co-editor of this volume, Matthew, the possibility of sharing my poet’s life connected to the writing of Haruki Murakami, he was gracious enough to defer and suggested it represented what Tomoki Wakatsuki poses in his chapter about the legion of “Murakami’s children.” And I agree.

Below, then, I offer a few poems that reflect my poet’s conversation with Murakami—one that represents both how I had been investigating similar images and themes to Murakami before I began reading him, and then how our common artistic explorations of the human condition began to merge in my poems—I, for example, do not believe I would have come to the image of the well without Murakami.

Further as a teaching volume, I share the poetry as ways to enter the work of Murakami as well as a possible avenue for inviting students to begin their own conversations with Murakami through the artistic medium or media of their liking.

And thus, my poetry:

dark chocolate

“Alienation and loneliness became a cable that stretched hundreds of miles long,
pulled to the breaking point by a gigantic winch”

Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage, Haruki Murakami

i am standing at the counter
of a Starbucks
in a Barnes & Noble

P. L. THOMAS

i came here to buy
the new colorless Murakami
my small acts of happiness

there i see no dark chocolate bars
i used to buy for you at another Starbucks
that absence like the hole

resting in my chest
where you used to be
like a new book or square of dark chocolate

diligence (skeleton key)

Perhaps an even more distressing prospect for Habara than the
cessation of sexual activity,
however, was the loss of the moments of shared intimacy.
“Scheherazade,” Haruki Murakami

I’m having trouble inside my skin
I tried to keep my skeletons in
“Slipped,” The National

gradually and with reluctance
i have whittled away at my own resolve
to fulfill your wishes when you left

and then as i am walking to my morning class
a student in front of me tells another goodbye
saying *your name* rattling in my chest like a can

these hauntings erode my diligence to your requests
to live as if we never were and never will be again
i stand on the precipice of this my toes curled at the edge

i am reading a new Murkami short story
and it is toward the end when i realize
he is writing about the thing eroding me

and fueling my constant melancholy
because i cannot share this story with you
the thing that matters most about all that matters

everything is reduced in magnitude without you
dimmed dulled and nearly erased except what could be
and there is the limit of my diligence hidden in bone

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when they dismember me
the skeleton key will be
the thing they come to see

the thing that can set me free
opening the door with a skeleton key
that allows me to be and to see

*i hear your name and i recall your hands
making me the happiest and saddest i can be*

meet me at the bottom of the well (our seasons out of kilter)

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Emily Dickinson

Forgive me/they were delicious
"This Is Just To Say," William Carlos Williams

So now I had a well if I needed one.
The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, Haruki Murakami

meet me at the bottom of the well
there i will kiss your fingertips

tiny brief and fading gestures of my bones
telling you in the darkness hiding us

*if this is what you want
if this is truly what you can bear*

i am offering all i have to share
small and inadequate as kissing fingertips

as i invite you here to the bottom of this well
my sincerity will engulf you like a tidal wave

because this *all* that is small and *less than*
lies here as my *only remaining thing* for just you

time has driven us underground our seasons out of kilter
forever shrouded and muted if we dare embrace

if this is what you want and truly can bear
if this *my inadequate* can ever be enough

P. L. THOMAS

*meet me at the bottom of the well
not of time or place but always like a sigh
there i will kiss your fingertips
spooning i will press my feet against your soles
i ask this without asking and the promise of small gestures
waiting in the emptiness of the dark well i dug*

then&now (rocket ship)

“Many dreams, many sorrows, many promise.
Yet in the end nothing remains.”
Pinball, 1973, Haruki Murakami

“If dreams are like movies then memories are films about ghosts”
“Mrs. Potter’s Lullaby,” Counting Crows

[then]

*i did not ask for this
but what i asked for
fell on deaf ears*

he told her these words
so carefully and coolly
that he seemed entirely rational

although he was anything except
rational cool or even careful
beyond his skill at shaping such words

*one time the moon appeared
so large and orange in the sky
i lost my balance looking up*

she had laughed when he told her
his favorite Beatles’s song
“I Want to Hold Your Hand”

and that was the first time of many
his heart felt suddenly hollow and cold
like two blue moons in a Murakami novel

*my greatest fear is the last time for this
which keeps me from noticing anything
except that i am always always afraid*

he did not tell her any of this of course

because it was only after the last time
that he was able to put all his fear into words

he noticed gray hairs across the back of his hand
and his wrist along with wrinkles around his eyes
all that she would never ever see or tell him about

*when i woke i had to look at my hand
to be sure i wasn't still holding yours
but i knew without a mirror that i was smiling*

he pretended that they had somehow saved things
living together and growing older hand in hand
so he sometimes quoted aloud something special

“Staring at the chair where no one sat,
I felt like a tiny child in a De Chirico painting,
left behind all alone in a foreign country.”

[now]

torrential rain thunder and lightning
filled his dreams night after night

but he woke to relentless drought
plastic black balls covering reservoirs

his night fantasies and days science fiction
he longed instead for the confines of a theater

where they could sit side by side in darkness
holding hands as if the room were a rocket ship

this other world will be our world he whispered
as he slipped his hand to the curve of her knee

the proximity of entrances and exits (the only teenager i ever knew how to be)

“If you think of someone enough, you’re sure to meet them again,”
she said in parting.

“Samsa in Love,” Haruki Murakami

“I won’t need any help to be lonely when you leave me/It’ll be easy to cover”
“Slipped,” The National

it is the day after Halloween as i leave for work
the black lab is sitting up anxiously in the dark garage
the chocolate lab lies just outside blocking the door and gate

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he has always been drawn to the proximity of entrances and exits

the morning is unseasonably warm and wind chimes sing
in the breeze that is up well before the sun has risen
but there is enough light to see the blanket of clouds
covering the dawn as the promise of rain approaches

i am carrying a bag of comic books i bought the day before
a middle-aged man visiting a comic book store
like the only teenager i ever knew how to be
i pause before stepping into my car to listen to the chimes

i am six minutes later than usual for leaving
and my broken smallest toe throbs in the boots i wear
the interstate i know will be packed like a swarm of beetles
so i resign myself to a creeping trip alone in the car

*i will turn on The National to sing along as i drive
i will change my mind from beetles to an infinite centipede
with thousands of red glowing dots on the segments
and then my mind will turn to you as it always does*

foolishly as a teenager i thought i was as lonely as a human could be
gathering comic books to surround myself with the Marvel Universe
i could collect into neat plastic-bag rows and count on each month

and then each night alone in bed i would imagine you there
thinking of you over two decades before i would meet you
trapped then in the only teenager i ever knew how to be

*what did i know of you what could i know of you i realize now
what did i know of being lonely what could i know of being lonely
it is a foolish and brave thing to imagine the one you love*

it is Halloween when i feel compelled to buy comic books again
there is always long pauses of this adolescent compulsion
but *The Sandman Overture* series is published and my bones just know

i start reading a new Murakami short story before visiting the store
it is a story of Gregor Samsa falling in love in the wake of being a bug
his being human again for the first time and listening to the surge of his heart

i finish the story at home after buying several comic books and browsing
and it is there in the story that my mind turns to you as it always does
i am thinking of you as the woman Samsa loves talks of thinking of someone

she is assuring Samsa and then me who she does not know and cannot know
that people can and will meet again if the *thinking of* is true and warm
as i begin to imagine seeing you again for the first time as if that is possible

*i will introduce the me who is not me but of course is the only me i can be
and i will hear wind chimes and think about my anxious black lab in darkness
while a warm day after Halloween blankets us with clouds and offers dreams*

the moon is nothing

“There must be something in him, something fundamental,
that disenchanting people.

‘Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki,’ he said aloud. I basically have nothing
to offer to others.

If you think about it, I don’t even have anything to offer myself.”

Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage, Haruki Murakami

there is something about the moon and all its phases
the moon is nothing like the sun except in the reflecting
the sun is fixed and necessary larger than our minds can imagine

but the moon the moon it waxes and wanes
although sun and moon share one flame of light

and loom above us marking the inevitable passing of time
the moon nonetheless remains a tambourine soundless when shaken

like a lover abandoning you without word nod or hand waved
the moon the moon the moon is nothing like the glorious sun

full or blue or crescent or new the moon is just a lifeless rock
trapped in the purgatory of orbit earth-bound and the magnificent sun

and thus:

alone deserted while i lie beneath cold moon or warm sun
that becomes another story and all the same in the end

midnight (these rituals of recreation)

i. midnight

i walk into the bedroom just before midnight
watching the digital clock shift from 11:59 to 12:00

after a hard bicycle ride into fading daylight
followed by dinner and beer among those friends

P. L. THOMAS

and then i notice the familiar shape of you in my bed
although we haven't seen each other in over a year
although you belong now completely to someone else
you stir awake and smile at me through a stretch-yawn
don't shower you purr still yawning *slide in with me*
it's been so long since we've held each other you know

ii. dreaming

[as i dream i begin to wonder if i am dreaming]

i lie on the couch alone
watching my DVD of David Lynch's *Lost Highways*
i am also re-reading Haruki Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*
this time it is the hardback first edition i bought for you
between the film and the novel
coursing through dreaming and contemplating if this is a dream
i think about the possibility of worm holes
and children sliding through giant tubes at the playground

iii. morning

i wake to the smell of coffee brewing
but no one has started the coffee maker
and then i am standing outside in cool spring sunshine
the dew-covered grass almost too green to bear
you were no longer in the bed beside me (of course)
i cannot be sure if we were really intertwined last night
although your voice rests in the hollow of my ears
and then i suddenly drop into an imagined scene

*i return to the bedroom for your clothes in the hamper
i wash and then dry them before separating each piece*

*i smooth your t-shirts carefully straightening the hems
before stacking them over the back of the recliner*

*thinking of your cat bringing mice to your doormat
gestures of love and devotion offered on padded feet*

creature of habit in these rituals of recreation
i start the coffee and inhale the you of entered rooms

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NOTE

- ¹ See “quilting,” *English Journal*, 100(4), 65, and my blog “DISCOURSE as quilting” (<https://discourseasquilting.wordpress.com/>)