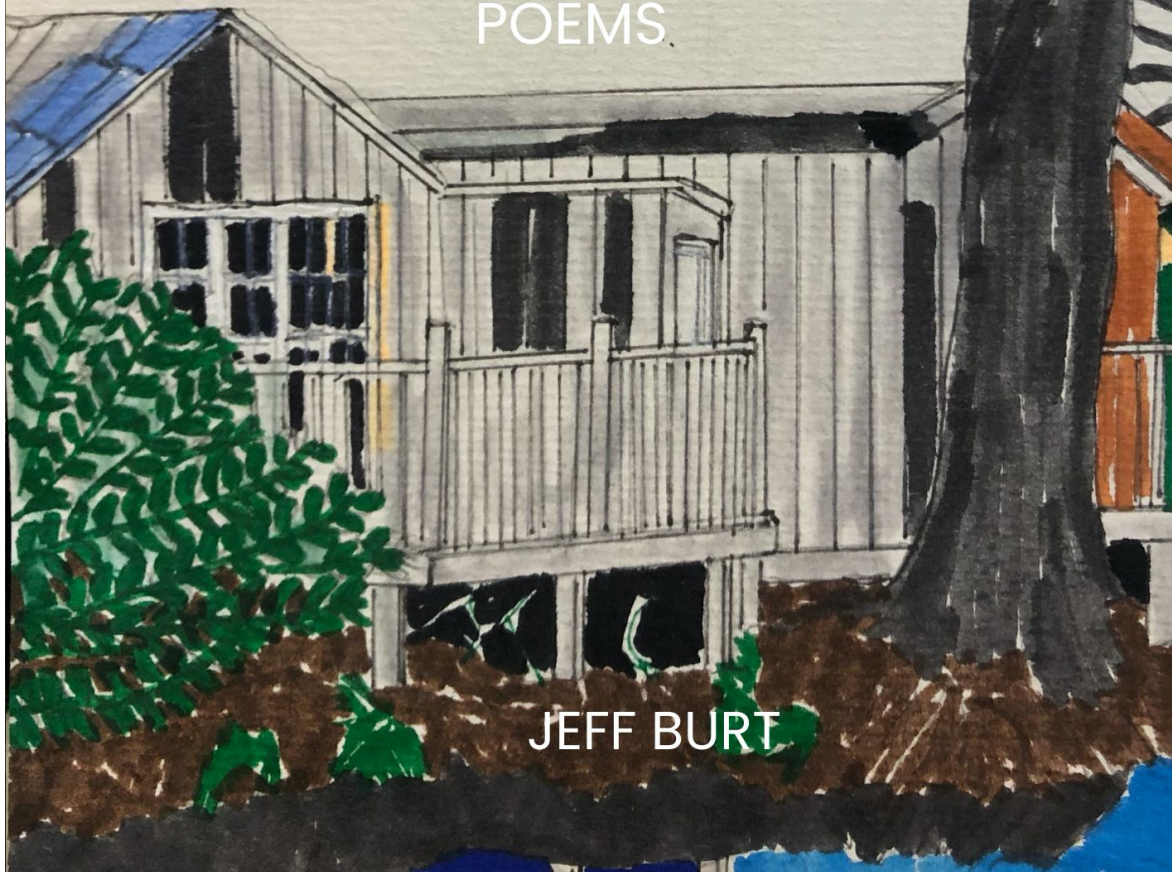


RED WOLF EDITIONS

LITTLE
POPPLE
RIVER

AND OTHER
POEMS



JEFF BURT

LITTLE POPPLE RIVER

and Other Poems

Jeff Burt



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Little Popple River

One road led to the cabin on Little Popple River
and ahead it looked like an old man, wrinkled, buckled, sunken.
I drove at times with clenched teeth and hands,
at other times loose, as if my bones
had slid from my body and were seated
on the passenger's side, a few times
with a hollow gut turned childish
when the ride made the low swales
of asphalt vanish or the high rises pitched
the truck such that I could see sky
and nothing else. That made me think of Tubman,
who at night said all she could see was the Drinking Gourd,
the prescient Dipper in the northern sky--
the rhythm of walking in the forested dark
not unlike the passage at sea,
one step a sudden swallowing in the furrow
and the next riding the tower of a wave
launched into nowhere.
At the speed the road forced me to travel
I knew I would not make the cabin
and the comforts of friendship that night.

That day I had visited a safe house
on the Underground Railway, a humble
almost claustrophobic home with a secret passage
where I had to bow at doorways to fit
and the steps were shorter than my shoes.
I had imagined the house would be large,
enlarging, a place where a freed person could relax
and stretch and feel the full length of freedom,
not have to tuck, shrink, and curl again.

I stayed in my car overnight. The seat
not long enough for my frame, I tried to sleep
sitting aslant, but Tubman's pull kept me awake,
and quietly rose, hushed the closing of the door
and stood out in the woods with the pines sighing
and the stars vivid without a moon.
The Dipper poured. I drank.
I drank an unbound freedom and cried
and laughed and felt the wounds of misery
if not healed then dulled. When done, I shrank,
I hung my shoulders and drew them forward
and with head bowed returned to the car
with my watch ticking and feet cold.
Salvation occurs often and triumphantly alone,

but between people it is seldom.
That historic stretch that Tubman made,
that far travel on foot, that long reach
of her dream, that recapturing of the soul's expansion,
it has seldom ended. For many,
the doors remain a smaller size.
Even with freedom they must stay hunched to enter in.

When I reached the cabin in the morning
at Little Popple River my friend apologized
for the road, but no, I told him, no,
but I had no way to tell him then
I had encountered a fleeting joy
bound by a continuing sorrow,
and, returning late that night, would again.

Trace by Compression

I am removing nails to let the rain through the roof
so the drops slip through shingles and slats
and I can make a pond where drought-winnowed migrating herds gather
to show how arresting one note is like water on your lips.

I am looking for ways to keep the propagation of sound continuing,
an eternal sine wave that captures all your words
into an echoing tone that continually wakens my anvil and stirrup,
like the ring a sculptor makes pounding with her hammer to shape
one metal against another, or the frequency of a bell rung to welcome
prodigals home, to show how one vowel from your lips
perpetually resounds off the folds and creases of my brain.

I am looking for ways to capture the atmospheric storm
of horses on your tongue that gather and stampede with satchels full of letters,
ponies I want to corral with thunderous hoofs sending
wild and captivating Morse code I would read the rest of my life
to show how exhilarating phrases charge forth from your mouth.

I am telling you why when you recite the atlas and cache of your heart
I must close my eyes and place my lips against your lips
to trace by compression what I cannot understand by sound.

I Walk with Nietzsche on Saddle Mountain

We climbed in a light dark enough to die in.
I felt the bark of the oak branch buzz with the electric
scraping random granite.
The mountains formed a dull terrain,
the purple majesty faded to gray.
Child-fancy thrust off
like an undersized jacket,
wonder and worship
ruined and ravaged
by the ramming and rutting of intellect,
no day remained love in itself:
horses ridden to lather and tremors,
lilac-scented air gathered in draughts,
yet still the sun set quickly.

Nietzsche said that night was not truth:
the wind blew, oaks swayed,
but despair could not fathom
and search one's depths, failing to ring
and thrill like a familiar parental kiss.
I strode up the gravel grade
in the dark the embodiment
of my rending purity and peace.
I had found nothing worse
than the erosion of purpose
by the intrusion of nonsense.
What was left but to pluck a black banjo,
moan bucolic ditties, move cups
about the checkered table like bishops
on a chessboard, polish spots
on the floor with old socks?
Even language was nothing more
than a lengthening fish between
the stubby fingers of a man.
At best the transfer of thought
from one to another was crude
and imperfect, of emotion exiguous.
To speak meant to fail.

Each orator uttering words
into the gutter of the world
was chained like Sisyphus to failure.
But early in my life I had given up
incoherence to take up language.
If later language with cyclonic twists
had taken me to the heights

of a cosmopolitan disorder,
I could not desert the city
for laconic pastorals.
The sparks of stars had started flames
of song, and sound had never failed me.

We sat at last on the top of the mountain
watching lightning pinpointing ships
out at sea, and up the coast
a lighthouse sweeping.
I knew, then, the event
of my being. Across the valleys
of my incoherence I spoke
from the summit, and though misunderstood
the word had a form and a sound,
and the sound was the flash of a mirror,
the signal to send the runner
to speak of the flash, to utter
the signal, for I knew I had entered
the world as sound and had turned it
into physicality, following
language, living its cadence.
So I spoke and kept on speaking
frenzied words about the sea,
for if I had no meaning
it was because the meaning
lacked my experience.

Belonging

I cannot abdicate
 what I've never
rested on,
 position, laurels,
honor, faith.

I rise in the dark
 and search for a hard chair,
tiptoe on the route
 so as not to disturb another

in the cabin made into a home
 at times a labyrinth
at times a cell without a bead
 of bread to trace

to a door that leads
 to another door
that leads to a place
 where I can sit.

Your breathing's buoyant,
 weightless, woven
to my own in a way
 my body understands

but my thoughts cannot wrap
 around as if they were a piece
of saran cut off too short
 to cover the bowl.

Winter lengthens and summer
 I could forget
it ever happened.
 Squirrels go to the exact place

they buried an acorn
 but act surprised
when they find it
 happy

and when I retire
 and find you in bed
I feel the same.
 So too in meditation

to find the otherness
by not searching
and that unnamable presence
comes and bliss reigns.

As much as poor people wish
there is royalty
in blood, an ancestor
to pull them out

of biological insignificance,
of the faceless throng
the mob, the unnoted mass
left out of the ink

of history where their winter
begins and lasts
forever if they dwell on it.
They long for a chair

they could rise from
and say they do not want it
anymore, they want to say
in a royal way

they are above such royalty,
that they've made their mark
and that history will record them
and that is enough,

no need to reign
to be further noted
perhaps worshipped
adored.

Isn't that the whole movement
of God loves you
just for what you are,
you are an heir, that trifling stab

at royalty? That in your blood
tinted by otherness
would be enough to earn
a special chair

in a special room
in a special house
in a special town
in a special time?

I sometimes forget to lock
the door to my home
wish that once some thief
might find an interest

in something I own,
give me an entry
on the blotter of the sheriff
and an inch in the local paper

but no one comes.

I get it.

I am faceless in time
except to her

whose toes reach
to touch my calf for warmth
and knee bends out
to touch my thigh.

I hear a sigh
of great relaxation
and first think it's her breath
but notice the full sagging

of my lungs and smile
because it is my own
breath finally, at length,
exhaled into time.

I am no one
but her no one.
And suddenly I hear robins,
winter has collapsed

and otherness enters,
mindless bliss,
I am in the company of the faceless
and I belong. I am happy.

Cinders

They had to make something out of the coal cinders
so chose the alleys to cover like cinnamon crumbs
over rising dough, a poor man's asphalt,
creating opportunities for the malformed nuggets
to imbed in knees and elbows when I fell from a bike.

Under snow the cinders gave traction, friction,
how one thing rubs up against another
to move on, or in the case of my brother and I,
how needs created fiction to tell our mother
of what we had done or not done
to keep on playing outside.

One wet snowfall a snowball
Jimmy Powell packed in the alley
opened the crease of my hairline
wide enough for stitches,
and everyone in our pack laughed.
It stung I told the doctor,
kept to myself the mockery I felt,
as he plied my hair with eyes closed
and muttered he'd found three cinders
below the scalp, but tweezers searched
and found only two, dismissed talk
of infection, that the apprehension
of not finding the missing cinder would pass.

In summer, as I soaked my head
in the tub, I imagined broken bits of cinder
floating to the surface with bubbles of soap,
and in morning I might sweep
one from my hair, squeezed
out of its hiding place.

Things like that embed from childhood.
Decades later I check baseballs I throw
with my kids for any fleck that mars
the stretched leather,
replay words I have spoken
to sense if any rises to speech
that could have inflected
a slap in the face, a dis or dig
that might stay hidden in their hearts.
I wake in the middle of the night
to an itch in the croft of my knee,
search the sheets for the missing cinder.

Horses and Water

I dream of horses on the High Plains plateaus
gathering to run in wild magnetic orchestrated swirls,
floodwaters propelling in dismembered droplets
to form a rivulet, a stream, unfordable creek,
though water lacks magnetism,
has only that thin meniscus for bond
rather than the electric pulse of flank
that pulls it back together
or bridges of ions like iron that bind
like the bristles of the mane one side to another.

I think how often I fear horses,
as a child bucked into space and kicked
in the sternum, left with a bruised imprint,
how ferocious the water I traversed
in the thunderstorm limping home,
how the creek water seemed to uphold me,
just as it holds me, stuck here
on a cliff of the Pacific coast
watching horses on one hillside
and the squall of rainwater on another,
birds a-cliff, one lone otter bobbing in waves,
riptides buckling shoreline, sucking sand under,
intimidation mixed with rapture all these years.

Somewhere, Anywhere

It's natural to think the thread of a spider that wafts
from a dying oak branch toward a blueberry bush
is cast like an anchor from one ship to a floor,

but the filament is spun as it drifts, the spider is not in safety
on deck but riding the forefront whiffed by the breeze
eyes set on nowhere in particular or a vague set of greenery

where chances of prey are plentiful, being prey are few.
They are the perpetual first astronauts launched
in a cone on the top of a rocket screaming into space,

Not a void as in nothing in it, but void as in empty of experience.
My ancestors from Sweden took trips in the dark night
and ill holds of transports with all the other poor farmers

for a vague territory on a map of the western Great Lakes,
not attached to a tow line that could snap them back to Sweden,
but riding the deck, splashed with spray, to an unseen port,

like yearling whales on ancient and epic excursions
ribbing sea's mountains and shoals following the same
genetic geographic destiny without a clue of a resting place.

Even today at the 7th Avenue stoplight
I think of being taught detachment from desire
will enable us, but to what when we do not desire?

We feed on want and wish like fire eats oxygen
and bound carbon until the flame poofs out.
Bound carbon—that is what we are anyway,

waiting to be unleashed, our DNA demanding
the chains be sparked into explosion,
to do, to act, to have something other than.

Other than—to be other than what we are.
Some of us are not meant to stay on the dying oak
or strung on a taut string in comfort.

Some of us are not meant to farm the old land.
Some of us are meant to launch into the air
screaming as we head to who knows where.

The red light changes. I walk. I dream
I have somewhere, anywhere, to go.

Trestle

We had gone as far as the trestle that led to the pond
with its rickety boards and missing wood
 that left holes to look down into the creek
and wondered if we had enough daylight left

to walk across and watch the sunset
sparkle the water, the few geese swim
 without wake, the duckweed once brilliant
turn to a lesser shade of neon.

The dog wanted to run across, frightened
of the tremor of loose footings.
 naked bolts and crossbars,
but head up, seemingly aware of each paw-trap,

never slipped, not in gracefulness,
but in awkward strides, in the manner a tether
 of a boat in a storm pulls taut, relaxes,
pulls taut, and the boat lurches, survives the storm.

Emerson's divine animal came to mind,
the body, but our mind and eyes
 looking into the near future
were too far from ground to be trusted.

Perhaps the republic has traveled
just so, ignoring the missing architecture,
 the gaps in justice and equality,
a trestle made for the train of commerce

but not the evened path for others.
Perhaps we have wanted not bliss
 but ignorance, pretending not to look,
to keep our heads trained and vision up.

My mother told me often as I wiped dishes
to only see the good in people
 because the bad will be evident
whether you try to see it or not,

and perhaps that is like crossing
an old trestle, a blithe unawareness
 until your sole fails to find firmament
and your ankle scrapes against a ragged board.

The dog feels tremors, and moves.

If we avoid seeing, we plunge.

We choose to cross. For the others
who traipse this trestle, I count the missing

and damaged planks that float without anchor,

the planks with wooden spirit worn

and split, make a date to return,
a list of lumber and coated common nails.

Ramps

The coon froze on the fence as if sculpted,
a taxidermist's art, not a flinch or tic of muscle,
not a wandering eye of inspection or fear.
I was no enemy, so moved, but fixed the coon remained,
and I saw two wet waifs on the bottom of the other side
of the fence waiting for cues to cross from their mother.
They could not stay still for long, their cells animate,
climbed, slipped, and climbed again,
never drawing a turn of neck nor hiss of disapproval.
I spoke, said time to get along in a low assured voice,
and the mother broke, the two young slow to master
the top of the fence, tripping, going backwards.
How exhausted she appeared, clean but haggard,
not frightened or anxious. One young fell,
could no longer climb, so the mother took the strong one
toward a trail behind my neighbor's house,
looking back as if to orphan the weaker one.
I took a wide board saved for repairs
and made a ramp to the fence top and poked
the little one with the handle of a rake
until it used the ramp to make the top of the fence
and slip off to the other side to join mother and sib.
The mother turned at the corner of the house
and looked back at me and I wish to say
I saw acknowledgment, perhaps an animal thanks,
but it was weariness I saw. She was beat.

I remember this today as I disengage from work
serving a mother with children who escaped Syria
on a boat to a camp in Italy where she said she played
the part of shepherd for her kids, herding them here
and there, protecting them from human wolves,
entire days spent at times in lines for food
or haggling for a transport to where her uncle lived,
and I saw those eyes again, not thankful for my assistance,
but weary, fixed on a place in a landscape I could not envision,
a stare into nothingness, a blank.
Today my ramp was words, direction,
of assistance, grants, aid for her children,
a slow elevation of her vision to find
the point of escape, of rescue,
in the worn and faded future she beheld.

I remember my daughter eight months pregnant with Covid
walking the hills of Vermont for ramps,
wild allium, leeks, so her husband could make a pesto

that cannot be purchased, home-made,
and thus avoid human contact.
She converses internally with her child
at all hours, tired, ready to birth, yet
not, the fear of the virus, the apprehension,
the ignorance of not having a predictable outcome.
Her voice on video is monotone except for when she speaks
to her child in utero, when like music
it falls and rises, rises higher to an almost clarinet's squeak,
or when she speaks of finding clusters of ramps,
fistfuls, the pearls of the soil taken from the clam of wet dirt.
so I study allium, study pesto, pull a few wild leek
from the corner of the yard by the same fence
the raccoon had almost lost her young,
and my daughter and I talk of harvesting ramps
for ten minutes, and this is all I can provide,
not absolve the fear of separation, of illness,
but a slight elevating lever from her distress to the joy
that the world could provide for her and her baby,
a bridge for all of the internal discussions she has
to take root again in the external world,
to which she will, as I have done, yield.

Honoring Harry Chapin

It wouldn't keep, this impulse.
I had to make the long transit
in the oak forest, moonlight
choked by a rare cloud
eleven miles to walk, car
broken down on County N,
moon swung in my face like an amulet,
the frosted ground like lit glass,
lugging a pack full of pamphlets
to distribute by six A.M.
in October darkness on my college campus,
calling for cans of food
for the first World Hunger Day,
for starving Biafrans,
malnourished seniors in Milwaukee,
to give from our excess
not confined by jurisdiction of town,
as much to feed as to honor
Harry Chapin, his songs on replay
in my head, his melodies making the hairs
on my arms bristle, I so alive,
and yes people were hungry,
I was hungry, impoverished.
I had so much to give.

Sources: When I was in college I played his music (on vinyl!) often, and found his devotion to people and charities enthralling. I organized a World Hunger Day on campus, the first, and wept when he died a few years later.

Hull

All this travel, all these strokes
of invisible oars to reach you.

The day turns gray, the water
against me. I have bound my hands

to the wood so when they weary
I will not let go.

~

A house with few windows
windows with few views

the day begins in shadows
and ends in shadows

correspondence frequent
but conversation absent

when the leaves fall
I wait for light to enter

~

The snow like water
its other state

curls over
and holds shape

that sand can wish
it could do

joy and sadness
have similar arcs

build a little lip
that extends

the force that built it
weathering time's

erosion, a trajectory
against the pull of gravity

a conversation
with you mother

that continues
with a suspended decrescendo

after the quiet
of your death.

~

I lie in the hull
cradled and curled

snow falling on my face
it is not easy to let go

hard to be free
when the ice encroaches

when life withdraws
when cold advances

hard to believe
that I will walk away from this water

this boat, that my arms will tire
that I will put down the oars

that I will rise from the hull
like a seed, take root elsewhere

I Am Old and It's November

I burn the leftover triangles of fir
from making stairs to a deck
and the few, lean outcast branches
of oak that beetles and disease lopped off.
The fir growls and spits out sap like a wild cur
while the oak barely musters a flicker.
I poke a branch with a stick,
hoping to provoke it into joining
but it stays reluctant,
like the new kid at school
on the outside of a happy ring.

I squint through smoke, strike
the silver tomahawk into a rotting stump.
It hits a knot and kicks back
just missing my right ear,
sings like a tuning fork,
forearm like a pulsating circuit
for the wood's last electric moment.

Again, old oak, without asking,
you have taught me.
Let me go out singing.
Before ash, let me ring.

Blessing No One

We are at war
with ourselves
since we cannot be at war
with others

claim a peace
beyond borders
but an occupation
within

all created =
striving to become ≠
by stabbing a knife
between two ribs of otherness

one's dollars do not stack up
to another's dollars
the larger stack
repeatedly takes from the smaller

if not wealth to distribute
the poor ask about income
displaying their poverty
of thinking as well

we build cheap houses
by freeways
so the cost of living
enslaves

we gather cheap fruits
per-fumigated
hallucinatory
if you don't inhale

whites fear
a lost society
blacks
have never found

whites fear
a loss of advantage
browns
have never gained

whites fear

a moral degradation
they were never inclined
to keep

a person in a tent
is no nomad
but mad, stripped
of sex, a no-man

counted on
but not relied upon
fed
but not nourished

one's overpass
is another's underpass
unless the other
cannot pass over

course the verb
of blood running
coarse the hand
that makes the bleed

we bless everyone
and thus no one
words evaporate
before hitting ground

About the Author

Jeff Burt grew up in rural and small-town Wisconsin, with a boyhood dominated by fields and water, Lake Superior, Lake Mason, the Fox River and its tributaries, Long Lake, and the Mississippi. The variety and plenitude of botanical and biological forms tintured his life. After stints in Texas and Nebraska, he has lived in Northern California for most of his adult life, sculpted by redwood and hardwood forests, droughts, floods, fires, and the Monterey Bay. He and his wife live in Santa Cruz County, California, where his three children grew and were released into the wilds of other places.

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