

The Crown Ain't Worth Much

Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib

Button Poetry / Exploding Pinecone Press
Minneapolis, Minnesota
2016

AT MY FIRST PUNK SHOW EVER, 1998

me & tyler jump into the pit head first even though four older boys got patches that say *NO BLACKS* & *NO QUEERS* & I flinch & cover my head when the drum kicks too sharp & I don't know what could be more black than that & tyler don't know it but in an alley last month I saw him build a church in the mouth of a boy from 'cross town who don't talk to nobody & don't come 'round the hood unless he thirsty for a tithe but we up in the pit anyway 'cuz it ain't the 70s anymore what I mean is there ain't a war always on television what I mean is we came here to see blood like all boys who sneak past their sleeping fathers & crawl out of windows before running into the night with ripped jeans & ain't all blood the same when bodies get hurled like they in a cheap amusement park ride & some blond girl from bexley gets slick & tries to sneak into the rampage but not before tyler & some other boy grab her by the collar & toss her smooth out & then they high five & through the guitar bending over our heads like an umbrella I hear tyler whisper *some things are just unacceptable* & then he puts his head in his hands & his whole body begins to shake & I tell myself it can only be laughter

IN DEFENSE OF "MOIST"

Sprawling river / peeling off the chest / a wet slap / endless summer / not quite drenched to the bone / yet still a burden / how it sits heavy on the tongue / after being spoken / leaving the mouth / a humid storm / becoming the definition of itself / inside you / heaviness in the prison of your chest / I am trying to pull my shirt over my head / after a full court game / in June / and I am thinking of how everyone I love / was once taken from the inside of another person / *moist* with what carried them / into the world / isn't that worth the smallest praise / I am closing my eyes / as the shirt's cotton clings to my back / and I am thinking that all wetness must have teeth / especially the wetness that grows from within / and spills out / or / chews its way through the skin / and falls onto another's skin / the night Michael Jackson died / everyone black / in Ohio / danced in a basement / until the walls were *moist* / until it rained indoors / and we saw our heroes / resurrected in the reflection / of our own drowning / I say *moist* / and do not first think about two naked bodies / the sound their skin might make / when they awkwardly press into each other / underneath a hungry sun / in an apartment with a broken air conditioner / I say *moist* / and first think of / the eager and swallowing mud / the bullet that burrowed into Sean's chest / on Livingston Ave / the country of dark red / that grew across his white tee / while his mother held / his paling face / I say *moist* / as in / *my homie's blood left the corner of my block moist* / or / *his mama had her hands moist with what once kept her baby alive* / or / *my eyes were moist when I heard the o.g. say / "niggas gonna die every day"* / and then he wiped blood off of his shoe / and it felt like summer for ten years

WHEN WE WERE 13, JEFF'S FATHER LEFT THE NEEDLE DOWN ON A JOURNEY RECORD BEFORE LEAVING THE HOUSE ONE MORNING AND NEVER COMING BACK

and this is why none of us sing along to “Don’t Stop Believin’” when we are being driven by Jeff’s mom, four boys packed in the backseat tight like the tobacco in them cigarettes Jeff’s mom got riding

shotgun with us around I-270 in a powder blue Ford Taurus where four years later Jeff will lose his virginity to a girl behind the East High School football field then later that night his keys and pants in the school pool so that he has to run

home crying to his mother with an oversized shirt and no pants, like a cartoon bear, and the next day when I hear this story, I will think about what it means for someone to become naked two times in one night to rush into the warmth of two

women, once becoming a man and once becoming a boy all over again but right now it is just us in this car with Jeff’s mother, that cigarette smoke dancing from her lips until it catches the breeze

from the cracked front window and glides back towards us a vagabond, searching for a throat to move into and cripple while Neal Schon’s guitar rides out the speakers and I don’t know how many open windows a man has to climb out of in the middle of the night in order to have hands that can make anything scream like that.

nothing knows the sound of abandonment like a highway does, not even God.

in the 1980s, everyone wrote songs about someone leaving except for this one cuz it's about how the morning explodes over two people in one bed who didn't know each other the night before when alone

was the only other option and their homes had too many mirrors for all that shit and so it is possible that this is the only song written in the 1980s about how fear turns into promise
I think I know this because there is so much piano spilling

all over our laps that we can't help but to smile since we still black and know nothing can ransack sorrow like a piano.

Jeff's mother's hand trembles and still wears a wedding ring so she pulls over to the side of the highway and turns the volume up so loud after the second guitar solo when the keys kick in again that we can barely hear the cocktail

of laughter and crying consuming the front seat until the song fades away and the radio is low again and the ring once on Jeff's mother's hand is on the side of the highway beneath us, a sacrifice

and so maybe this is why grandma said a piano can coax even the most vicious of ghosts out of a body.

and so maybe this is why my father would stare at the empty spaces my mother once occupied, sit me down at a baby grand and whisper *play me something, child.*