

# AFTER LOVE

⋮  
*poems*



JOHN A. GRIFFIN



## View of a Pig

I heard the dull blade slap against  
the strop and my fear quickened  
like its stroke, growing sharper,  
and shaving the day down to the bone.

The steel of will flashed cold,  
and clove the rough edges off doubt,  
it purged the mind as water  
washes wounds or absolves a stain:

blots of tissue would soon dab the spots  
where the wounds bloomed into view –  
I eyed the razor as it cleared lanes  
through foam to shear my neck –

I once saw a slaughtered sow hanging  
by a hook and draining into a trough –  
my pulse was syncopated to her busy silence,  
and harrowed there, as dead bristles

broke through the edge of mortification –  
the carcass was silhouetted in the window,  
dead eyes wept onto snout, trotters joined  
as if in prayer and the flash and thud

of a cleaver hit the butcher's block,  
then the high-pitched whine of the saw  
screamed through flesh and bone –  
The flesh was pink and raw and new.

'Hurry now,' you said, 'the table's set  
and we are late.' We passed a victualler's  
on our way: the sow was fully opened,  
her ribs showed, chest cavity was vacant

and the heart sat in a dish with the offal,  
the head was in the scales. You retched, aghast  
that such slaughter should surround us,  
and that such a sight should sate us.

## Nereids

The nymphs pass time  
through their gills  
and exhale memory:

they were spawned  
where innocence  
crossed consciousness,

and where they pool  
we dive naked

in the sun,  
hoping to catch  
something of their pulse  
through the water –  
tantalizingly attuned  
but chastened,  
we net nothing  
but the chill  
of recall, and the lures  
that lust after lost time.

## Tunnels

I  
What lives in the tunnels of the trees  
Orders and anchors the day –  
Shadows warp and deliquesce there  
And umber weaves are mottled with decay,  
The birds tie the fronds into knots  
The fairies flit among and racemes  
Of laburnum fall from their foraging:  
Crushed wings and broken shells and spilt yolks  
Lie strewn across pillaged nests,  
And fungi stink and clot the humid air,

And frogs plop through whips of bull kelp,  
And the seeds the wind aborted are lost  
Among the green blades and the poison ivy,  
And the meretricious blossoms are all wilting –  
Something's missing here, something has fallen through  
The spaces of the children's dreams  
And in the long summer days and nights they can't be filled  
With longing or with longing's memories,  
Or whatever imagines itself dead and mourned.

II

The distant hills wear the passing clouds  
And all afternoon their nacreous arabesques  
Cast shadows down across the fields –  
Rings and loops of light and slabs and stripes of colour,  
And hay-dust billowed and buffeted like a golden mist,  
And sounds and songs and beats and rhythms,  
And the anger of tethered beasts stamping the ground,  
And the leaves listening in at the windows,  
And the eyes of the birds shining in sylvan tunnels,  
And the shadows tumbling like windfalls,  
And the stubble on the stalks catching tears of dew,  
And the caterpillar circled into a green cog  
And cranking the daylight into night,  
And the snails retreating and hauling away their grey shells,  
And the water running over dead fish,

And someone humming a tune,  
And bloodied hands pulling out entrails,  
And the mind conjuring sculpted stones  
That cast their mythic shadows across altars of water.

III

In an arbour, an old man stoops through azaleas,  
His withered hands stoke the dirt,  
An autumn chill creeps over him  
And he starts and falters and scans the sky –  
A hawk is hovering, his shears blades glint  
Before they cleave into the heart of the dying day.  
Apples fill themselves and drop from the trees.  
You can see them from the bedroom window  
Hanging in rows that withering or in bloom,  
Autumn or winter, with leaves or snow on the ground,  
Order the unmelodious, insistent disorder of things,  
Like colours shading into focus at the moment  
Of surcease or a grief that has nowhere to turn  
But inward: golden crabs decorate the trees  
With regrets and grudges, like baubles they mirror  
The world upside down and in reverse,  
The passing year is marked by butterfly powder,  
Web silk and bees wax and the wind-chime is made  
Of shells threaded through with the sinews of an eel.

IV

Arethusa met her omega in the baths of Alpheus,  
Salt entered her veins and muddied their flow:  
Was that love to be morphed from a passion  
Into purulence with venom pendent on the lips  
And lids and dancing naked in some chthonic rite  
Where assegais of whalebone were flung  
Into the sea and the sea bled silver light?  
You reach your terminus by increments alone  
All the measured motions and slow processions  
Of bones amid wastes of wind and water  
And the sonorous percussions of the flesh  
Seem but seasonal and pendulous and ponderous  
Till you awaken in the desert where no birds sing —  
A sphinx casts her riddles across the sands  
As you lie mummified and entombed  
Inside your labyrinth of corridors and chambers  
Seated high up in some hidden tabernacle  
Where the honing energies of the pyramid whittle  
Your bones to razor reeds the winds chill into chime.

V

You've fogged yourself and sapphire clouds numb  
Your temples raw, ice cracks and the river groans.  
There's a turn on a path you cannot pass.  
Go there and the shadows will follow,

A curse of leaves will mock your feet,  
Hexed daws will flutter about you there and flee,  
Even the waters will strum their flows and undertows.  
You're addicted to sublime things, music,  
Strokes of the brush, the pen's cursives  
And those dark moments when slow air enters drones.  
You fructify, you grow torpid, sick and empty,  
You yawn, you feel yourself catatonic and you fall –  
Falling's what you do best, after guilt and despair.  
If only you could die easily without your knowledge,  
But you drown instead in a slaughterhouse of blood  
Near damp walls where shapes shift and blur  
And the green deeps are flecked with hideous forms,  
Insensate fury, the muffled arias of endless pain  
And the rambling ruminations of old water.

VI

A life going is a thread tugged into absence –  
Follow to where the chord is snapped by darkness,  
Pull the line where it gives and comes undone,  
But play it out and it grows taut and twangs  
With mystery's note or it becomes a Cambria skein  
Woven into webbing to catch your dreams:  
Such are the tiger-leaps of recognition –  
An old man in room by an oleograph of Ariadne  
And Bacchus guzzling hock from a pannikin –



A black swan opening her wings to die,  
Or an elephant shot through the eye,  
Here Quaggas and dodos and the great auk  
Are housed in an edifice of glass, a palace of crystal  
With its frosted domes and spinning chimney cowl,  
Its turrets of quartz and its prismatic minarets,  
Its towers of marble and its diamond dungeons,  
Its glass stones climbing into stairs only absence ascends –  
You mount them nonetheless, clasping those igneous banisters  
That lead you into dazzling landings of light.

## Unrescued

Building absence one day at a word  
till foundations are set in sound –  
cutting off the edges, planing the stops,  
screwing conjunctions into place,  
and then burying the voice-box  
deep in silence.

Building death  
one word at a day till life resounds  
from the deeps and then surfaces –  
Where? Somewhere in the vicinity  
of the circumference of its passing,  
but does it really matter?

All sound should be  
anonymous: if you can disappear  
between silences but still speak,  
if you can sink a grave in water,  
but do not own the hemmed cries  
between here and the white ...

Building breath  
one absence at a remembrance.  
There is a way, but instead you die,  
and nobody knows to designate  
the punctuating pulse or pauses  
by your name.

It is too late now  
for pretence – drive is spring  
waking into a slow autumn.  
It's too late to find the voice  
you used to bury the voice  
one essay at an Absence.

And who  
will name the unheard echo?  
None gives the exiled word  
a home in sound. What passed  
did not pass if it went unknown –  
The unrescued goes in obscurity.

Wait on the shore,

and build one sea-going craft,  
and when the tides return the waves  
will carry it away, but you've lost  
faith in the rhythms of water,  
and you've built one too many vessels.

## Ready, Fire, Aim.

My trigger has a prosthesis and it's me –  
What's loaded in the chamber  
with the safety on is locked there,  
but like a premonition burrows  
through the tunnel of the barrel  
to count and collect spent casings –  
The scope sees what the sight can't see.  
I adjust the lens but the prey I see is me.

## Midwife

Loss was our first midwife  
and death our first born,  
and we never after healed  
the umbilicus of that first breach.

I knelt beside you on the floor  
and held you through the contractions.

Three hours it took to pass  
his portal into this world.

Then I washed away the evidence  
as if it were a crime scene,  
investing more in the absence  
than I ever had in his presence.

## Disappearing Art

I

War is the crack-up of light,  
the breaking of the vessel,  
art's atrocity on the canvas of day,  
in the instant it takes to trace white

*From white to art then black again  
from fade to black then back again*

II

*We must put out the excess rather than the fire*

Heraclitus

There's a gallery in the heart  
where all the oils ignite  
to burn it down.

No point in regulating  
such fits of fire  
pain-t can't be quenched.

Not long ago a blue haze  
hung in the frozen air  
with a deafening absence.

*Where plenty is, less is more.*

*Where want is, more is more.*

*Less wants more, more or less.*

III

Your hypnotic gaze  
is not the mirror  
where I see myself.

Your heartbeat doesn't  
measure time  
or syncopate mine.

Love in the heart of love  
is always other  
but somehow never you.

And when your fire burns  
you do not repay  
flame with flame.

IV

[Tuol Sleng - Phnom Penh]

*“Impiety of Art”*

Christian Boltanski

Here is where they came and sat,  
in this room,  
on this very chair,  
for the penultimate shot –  
Then they were taken next door  
for the final one.  
One bullet to the head.  
The killers rued such a waste of ammunition .  
They needed to cast their minds  
beyond the faces they finished.  
The photographic records remain  
to prove everyone did their bit.

But what was mass-produced back there  
besides that certain unlook in the eye?  
Murder modeled and dressed down  
to its barest grimmest frown.  
Vacant stares sell history’s horror  
except the future isn’t buying.  
Death’s a seller’s market  
and the market always knows best.

We see in them only what  
awaited them in the next room.

v

*Inertia is a raw form of despair*  
Saint Exupéry

Slow now, slow it down to stop,  
and slower still so a moral  
can't hitch itself to expediency  
or ride impiety home.

What flies is amoral.  
What lags is the law.  
Inertia's the word that speed makes flesh,  
and flesh has no conscience.

Death on the move,  
it's only business, brother, duty,  
so suspend all commotion  
and put commandments into motion.

Keep going then past  
pensive piety  
into philo-folly  
where faceless faces stare  
from bodies long gone.

VI

This one's about nothing at all,  
just a square strung up in air,  
suspended where it frames the view  
the world looks through.

vii

My gallery is a window  
into absence,  
when I draw the blinds  
nothing unfolds beautifully.

There's no point in going on  
hoping to find what's not there to find,  
a scream within a frame,  
though eyes are framed by screams.

*Speed them up and everyone  
comes undone*

Movies accelerate  
conscience into art  
where it disappears  
the very moment  
the scenes depart.

*Fade to white*



# The Flowers

## *Burren Flowers*

Across miles of rocky waste  
light gathers up light  
and pulls reflection  
off the sea.

A riot of colour limns  
the incongruities of stone,  
and now all the flowers  
that don't belong there bloom.

## *The Remembrance Flower*

In that place where he had been,  
beside the wall near the garden,  
and close to where the fence met  
the road and the plot ended,  
a clump of flowers grew  
out of a crack in the pavement.  
They first emerged the first Spring  
after he was gone, all iodine-hued,  
with blood-red spots spiralling  
towards their pallid centers.  
They bloomed in April  
and survived till June,

and then they vanished altogether,  
as though the concrete he laid  
had reclaimed its hold  
over the stubborn clay.

*The Miracle Flower*

Imagine a flying flower  
that pollinates the birds,  
and instead of chicks  
hatches blossoms  
that can sing scent  
into rhapsodies of light.  
Can you picture its petals,  
all powdery purple, velvety  
and smooth as they launch  
into warm cross-currents  
with wings of musk?  
They mate mid-air  
when the sun's eclipsed  
by swarming bees,  
then silver flakes fall  
to tantalize the greens,  
and instantly sunflowers  
blink awake and sway  
as goldfinches come to lay

gold orchids in the gloaming,  
crepuscular fronds fan  
the new flocks of flowers  
that lift into illusion's air,  
and hang there, lithe as air,  
and then disappear.

## Imaginary Geographies

*After Jean-Dominique Bauby*

I

A butterfly falls through space –  
outstretched wings  
flutter into mind  
and settle like  
thought.

II

What melted on the tongue  
was a cream so whipped  
full of air and sugar  
it silked down  
the dark.

III

At the depth of dozing,

awareness pulls closed  
its veil of sighs –  
sleep comes  
like a dream  
of dreaming.

IV

Rising out of silence  
and condensing on absence,  
as if forming itself into a tear,  
a word falls and grows  
round sound.

v

A stillness settles like  
a guilty conscience –  
unease knocks  
and time's threshold  
no longer cuts sin  
from absolution.

vi

When did the last breath end?  
Where did the last air go?  
Where is the final thought  
thinking itself?

## Motto

A war is on and the days are dark.  
Fires burn on every front  
but not to light the way.

Men blunder into glory,  
but lose more than they find  
serving their Mecca of the mind.

## The Wasps

They come on wings of plunder and din and they agitate  
the dead days back into dying – a foul wind rises  
off their barbed wombs and they beget throbbing stings  
that thwart the thorns and tackle the ripened berries.

My dream's Minotaur rots beneath the helicoptered ash  
in the shade where sirens sound – an open wound  
policed by flies and wild bees is the battleground  
for worms or honey or the wasps' grubbed progeny.

So they come on spears of fear, they swarm and swoon  
into the maelstrom or poised now on fangs they hang  
on threads of venomous gold to prey on the preyed  
and to breed and feed on the carrion feeders.

The stench is stanchèd, warring needles stitch up  
the parasitic purse and the Apocryphal text  
of their *Communia Maledicta* is sewn shut again,  
till with a pulse the pods tear into membranes of flight.

## Our Lost Sun

Remember the day we found the sun  
at the end of a long, cold winter,  
through months of ice and snow,  
through thaws and endless sludge,  
and after that rains and floods,  
weeks of wind without birdsong,  
then mornings quiet with dull greys  
when everything that lived died,  
and we like mourners following  
the cortege of those dark days around,  
looking to the night sky for any star –  
remember when we found the sun  
and we laughed at break of day,  
because it seemed then our love  
might have filled those same days  
with the light of one another?

## Wildire

Across the deep plains curtains of fire close  
and a silver ash snows the sky grey –  
There is a waste in these final fields  
that the last light of evening will deflower.  
Still, come spring pines will sprout from new grass,  
wolves will return to howl their hunger  
across the valleys, and the swallows will source  
new places to nest.

A red shawl blows  
through your dreams searching for its ghost,  
but there is none, only strands of brittle wicker  
the pine needles cannot stitch together –  
rusted butterflies flutter like treeless leaves  
and the earth heals – a pollen fog gathers and sows  
a new season. The seeds will bride their time.

It is the way of things –  
Even empty hands and stomachs fill again,  
and the wolf-whelp in the heart returns  
to sire the demons of your dreams:  
only sorrow can shrive the curse, douse the blackness,  
and supplant the ash with its clockwork blood –  
If you can hear a hopeful tale in your delirium,

or can muster spirit from flame, you may also find  
a way back into time to exit it aright,  
like a train sounding into sleep and emerging  
derailed or a hermit resuming his hermitage.

## Oulipo

What constrained absence  
dulls the wordblade and cleaves  
a lipogram from what is said?

Shadows hole the wounded air  
from objects that aren't there  
and they clot the blood with care.

The same heart does not break twice  
and the vowel's dominion vanishes  
with the snow that is not water.

## Ephemeris

The sundial's shadowed to the moon  
where it does not belong —

I can hear a ticking in the dark  
like a metronome —



A snow owl perched on the eaves  
kills first with her eyes –

The stricken heart is hung out  
to die on a talon hook –

I was born for a very long day  
when no shadow falls.

## After Love

I would have these tears be the living lens  
you view me through, and the world too,  
that my refracted light might absolve you  
and be the arc of your vision without division,

but the moons of your eyes have eclipsed  
my sun's true inclination, and their dark  
are pools where all that swims soon sinks  
and drowns and then floats vacantly ashore.

Will you take up this last entreaty then  
before my breath condenses on the pane  
between us: that you see my love but not  
as some mirage wept into longing after love

LOVE AFTER LOVE ARISES LIKE A SURGE,  
AND SIGHS, AND PASSES IN THE SIGH AWAY.

EVELYN DOUGLAS, SONNET L.

.....  
WILL YOU TAKE UP THIS LAST ENTREATY THEN  
BEFORE MY BREATH CONDENSES ON THE PANE  
BETWEEN US: THAT YOU SEE MY LOVE BUT NOT  
AS SOME MIRAGE WEPT INTO LONGING AFTER LOVE

“AFTER LOVE”

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