Contents

Acknowledgments ix

I

Litost: A Style Manual 3
The One 7
Homecoming 9
The Lost Conquistador 11
Photograph of Religious Sacrifice, Tarahumara, Mexico, 1984 15
Santa Cruz 16
Stark Room 18
Dust 19
Uganda, 1997 24
Mistakes 25
The Beach 27
Offering 29

Buy the book
II
San Fernando, Trinidad, 1954  33
Blind Woman of Gondan  35
Shaving my grandfather
in his hospital bed (1)  37
The Market  38
My People  40
Shaving my grandfather
in his hospital bed (2)  44
Stop  45

III
To a Curl of Water  51
I remember reading somewhere of a Czech word, *litost*, that means too much to be translated properly—a wild mixture of sorrow, regret, empathy—an inexhaustible longing.

At one time I would have said it sounded like all the things we might take from this life distilled to the smallest salt crystal on a blade of grass. Or the worst possible sadness.

I wonder about that now how something can be possible yet infinite and all I can think of are the countless cracks in the pad of a dog’s paw raised in mid-stride, body rigid with instinct. Perhaps in this way instinct is a precursor to form so that it is not darkness but instinct that hems in the tree’s silhouette on a ragged grass patch in Washington Square park in the strange light of late afternoon . . .

And sadness?
Sometimes those old days seem so far away,  
with their despair and other stories.

One night a friend called  
said he’d just gotten back from an all night drive  
to try to save his marriage.

The previous evening  
walking past the Budget Car Rental Office  
on Douglas Street  
he’d stopped in mid-stride,  
wheeled and gone in.
Minutes later he came out driving  
what was left on the lot:  
   a bright red cargo van  
for the twelve hours north on mountain roads.

It didn’t matter that when he showed up at his old door  
his wife would be leaving for work  
a strange look on her face,  
the question, What are you doing here?  
ringing out across the driveway  
in the clean morning air.

All I could do was smile and point at the van,  
he told me, voice cracking,  
say, Look honey, it’s red.

The past is a loan shark. It lends to anyone.  
And you can never pay it back.
That word litost can also mean too little
to be translated correctly —
a thumbprint as singular as the shade of green
on a grass blade

        a meaning as precise as the tools used by carvers
who make the delicate figurines
I once saw in an African Art shop window:

        slender, dark wood,
teardrop shaped heads,
        bodies long to the ground
        without legs.

Holes had been carved through the heads.
An index card labeled them “Shadows,”
a name which —
        perhaps because I associate shadows
in some vital way with the soul
and imagine the soul living somewhere
above the shoulders

        — made no sense to me.

In parts of the world
        when a loved one dies
they eat the brain
        to stop the soul from returning.

Or is it to keep it close?
Another friend had a different solution—
he locked himself in his apartment,
cigarettes, a case of gin.
When finally he opened the door there was nothing left:
mirror, arm chair, bicycle,
plates, stereo, potted plant,
sacred heart painting—
all smashed in the alley below his window.
He’d shaved a strip of hair
down the middle of his chest
was sitting on a carpet of glass
talking on the phone.
A hand covered in cigarette burns
 shielded the receiver as he looked up at us.
 It was four a.m.
 *Keep it down guys*, he said, *I’m talking with mother.*

I don’t know what to call those wooden figures,
the name for what’s left behind
 after body, soul, after it all.
And I don’t want to.

Something about the past
makes me want to lathe it down to perfection,
 to nothing,
 the finest wood dust . . .
The One

The enormous head and huge bulbed knees, elongated hands and feet, don’t fit with the filed down chest, limbs of kindling, yet this is one whole boy, suspended in a cloth harness hooked to what looks like a clock stuck at three fifteen. Closer, you can see it is not a clock but a scale, the kind you find in any North American grocery, but of course this is not North America, this is the Sahel famine, this is Mali in 1985, where a boy waiting for his rations to be adjusted must be weighed. At once his face relays one and many things: he could be crying out, he could be grinning, he could be frightened or tired, he could believe he is suspended in unending dream. What starvation started gravity refines as the boy
reclines, the hunger having
crumpled his neck, his face
staring up at the ceiling
of sticks which like most ceilings
anywhere in this world is blank.
Homecoming

Beside me a woman moves her lips and I wonder if she’s praying.
With his stunted machine gun the checkpoint soldier waves us down, stilling the drum and creak of the tro-tro bus. In front of me tightly strapped to a woman in bright aqua homecoming cloth, a baby stops gurgling, lays his head down on her brown back, closes his eyes. We file out into a heat and red dust field.
A guardhouse, thin and shaky like the soldiers, crumbling mud walls, tin roof half ripped open like a can of smoked oysters.
From somewhere, more guards appear, more guns with taped-on crescent-shaped magazines.
The one who waved us in walks down the line, stopping at a watch, shirt collar, face, as though inspecting troops in the Independence Day parade. Reeking of palm wine, he sways and his dented gun sways. Beside me a woman moves her lips and I wonder if she’s praying. Someone’s got enough of what the soldiers want
and what is it. From her cloth bag
I smell pepper-smoke, dried fish.
The noon sun hits. Who among us
won’t get back on the bus?
Peering at a child’s sandals, the soldier
leans over too far, hitting
the red dirt hard. We don’t say
anything. Another soldier shouts
and points at the fallen man
and the soldiers all laugh.
The one on the ground curses,
leans heavily on his gun
like a field hockey player getting
back on his feet. But he’s
not a hockey player.
And that’s when it starts.