

Other Dancers



Justin Spring

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JUSTIN SPRING

A SOULSPEAK E-BOOK

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In this electronic version, I have edited some of the poems and changed their order.

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FOREWORD BY ROBERT BIXBY, MARCH STREET PRESS

I was impressed first of all by the humanity of Justin Spring's work, his common touch and his involvement with the world of his poetry. His work not only tells the remarkable stories of unremarkable people, but it also tells the story of a poetic consciousness brought into ordinary circumstances. His stories take place in bars and country churches populated by the people of the neighborhood, full-fleshed and passionate.

His work is exemplary in its clarity and powerful in its implications, but if there is one superlative that best describes Mr. Spring and his work, it is extreme ease and friendliness. He writes poems that lure you in and surround you with people you suddenly realize you have known all your life, but whom you have never seen in this light before.

Robert Bixby

BOGIE

I've been meaning to tell you this story
I heard about Bogie, or maybe I read it somewhere,
how he was sailing with Flynn, tacking back and forth
between a fleet of tankers steaming back
to the Naval Yard, and he turns to Flynn,
no, wait a minute, it couldn't have been Flynn,
he would have laughed, he was that crazy,
and besides, Flynn knew how to sail,
no, it must have been somebody else,
maybe one of Bogie's buddies out of Yale Drama School,
one of those blonde, faceless types who play
CPAs or laboratory assistants, that kind of thing,
I remember him now, he was on one of those talk shows
saying, *Bogie was drinking, but no more than usual and
Oh how he loved that boat, even with the cancer,*
and then he's going on about Bogie
suddenly handing him the tiller and dropping
below, mumbling he was tired or wanted
a drink, or maybe Bogie didn't say anything,
all he remembers is screaming down at Bogie
to stop kidding around he had never sailed before
and then looking up at something so huge
he still remembers the rivets, the little orange
aureoles of rust, how he closed his eyes
until he felt something pass over him, or through him,
and then he looked up, saw the tanker's huge, bulbous stern
pulling away like a giant question mark and Bogie
climbing back on deck with that little shitty
embarrassed grin of his, like he wanted to say
he was sorry but he knew it wouldn't cut it,
and then how Bogie stood there, looking at
the disappearing tanker like it was a
tracking shot in a movie
he was making, except it wasn't
a movie. And Bogie wasn't making it.
Not this time.

CAROL GILLESPIE

I'm travelling through the ranches in Myakka,
and the dust and the heat and the sagging clumps
of humped-back brahmas are beginning to get to me,
so I pull off at some windowless,
cement-block bar, but no one's there
except the bartender, and a young girl
on a stage in the corner, singing country-western, blues.
Her name's Carol she says, she's a music major
at FSU, in Tallahassee, making some extra money
for herself, for her little baby girl Cheryl,
and I know this sounds like I'm making it up,
but when I tell her my name, she looks at me
like my hair's on fire, says she's read my poems,
Well, some of them. Not bad, she says,
especially the one with the small boy,
and I'm wondering whether she's putting me on
or she's crazy, and then she tells me she even
wrote a song on it, that she'd seen it in a magazine
from out West, where she wishes she were now,
instead of here, at Lamar's, and I laugh,
tell her at least she's getting paid, and not
just in copies, and she gives me this look like
What do we have here? So I say to her,
Why don't we stay in touch, send each other
some stuff from time to time,
but of course neither of us does, and then
four years later I get a call from her,
she's in town she says, playing at the Hyatt,
she'd like to see me, her little boy Randy
is with her, *He's six now, Remember Randy?*
and I tell her, *Sure,* but all the time I'm thinking,
What little boy? It was a girl, but the next thing I know
I'm at the Hyatt and she's on stage in this black silk dress
that keeps crinkling like anthracite, and when she sees me,
she winks, nods down to her left, and I see him
sitting next to the bandstand, the little boy,
or whatever he is, and he's looking up at her
and laughing and clapping and he has this little,

checkered sports-coat on and a black bow tie
and these tiny black shoes, Like a ventriloquist's dummy,
I keep saying to myself, and she says to the boy, *Randy,*
this is Justin, you remember Justin don't you, the man
mommy met at Lamar's who wrote the poem
about the boy that mommy wrote the song about?
and he's just sitting there, beaming, looking up at us
like he's in heaven or church or somewhere
only he can imagine, and then she tells me
she's sorry she never wrote or anything but life
has been hectic, and I look at the boy
who keeps changing and then
back at her like I'll bet it has,
but she doesn't miss a beat, she's
right on to me, telling me her song about
the little boy is the best one on her album, *Everyone*
says so, even Randy, and all the time she's grinning at me like
Can you believe this? And then I feel someone
push the boat away from the dock and I'm
drifting around in circles, looking up at her,
thinking, God, how I love this woman.

SUNDOME

I'm watching MTV, reading this little strip
running across the bottom saying,
MC HAMMER... SUNDOME...MC HAMMER...
but before it can come around again
I'm hustling through the door of the *Sundome*
and then I'm staring down at
four young black singers
slowly exploding out of their bodies,
Troop, the black girl next to me says to me
by way of explanation, and I'm remembering
the concerts I went to as a kid, how dazzling
the black groups were, how I'd never seen anything
like them, the voices, and those spare, beautiful moves
that made my vertebrae float, how I wanted to reach out,
become them, but this is different, this is black on black,
the kind of communion that makes everything
stop, swell to one breath, like it's doing now,
and then *Troop* is suddenly gone
and the house lights come on and then
they go off again and there's this beautiful roar,
After Seven, the same black girl says,
as if she were naming another bend in a river
she knows like no other, because this is
the beautiful river, this is the one you steal for,
get beaten for, called Nigger for,
this is the river you die for.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

I'm looking at a picture of myself and my sons
standing outside a tuxedo shop in Pennsylvania
where I've just been fitted for my son Art's wedding.
Everyone looks a little silly, or stupid, maybe because
we're still hung over from the party last night and it's early
in the morning, *Too early*, Art keeps saying,
exasperated, angry with me
for having missed the first fitting,
but I've never seen myself like this, I'm kind of
grinning off into the distance but I have this hard,
Don't shit me look on my face, like I'm a second away
from hitting him, and I suddenly realize
I'm my father, the one my wife sees,
there's that quick fist, that disgust.

WRITERS CONFERENCE

Suddenly, somebody in the back of the station wagon
is yelling, *Stop the car, there's a raccoon*
back there, it's hurt, bleeding,
and I look up, see a small, dark shape
hurtling along the ditch, and then we're all
piling out of the car running down the hill, trying
to catch it, and then everyone's standing around
out of breath, watching it lurch and shiver in the underbrush
until someone, a voice says, *We'll have to kill it, it's too far gone,*
and we're picking up stones, hefting them for weight,
and I'm remembering the morning I helped
my mother die, how she shriveled up like paper,
and then I'm dragging myself back up the hill,
not wanting to think about how I hit it and hit it
until the little hands pulled into the body
and the lips and teeth and tongue
that fought me all my life
shriveled to a small dark hole.

FIGHTERS

I'm lying on my back, tracing two lines of fuzzy chalk
across the sky and then I see them, high up,
like grains of rice, *Fighters*, I'm thinking,
and then I'm back in high school, squatting
next to Kevin Adley in the Boys Room
and he's going on and on about
he's going to be a pilot, *Fly Sabres*,
while I'm grunting, *Sure Sure*, back through the stall,
but the next thing I know he's over Korea
shooting down MIGs.

Kevin

was like that: no wasted motion . But it didn't
bother the girls. They were always beautiful, smart,
the kind who'd talk to you after English because
they felt sorry for you but not enough to go out.
Like Valerie Kueling. I knew she and Kevin
were getting it on, I mean, Jesus, she couldn't
stop talking about it but Kevin
always told me, *Uh, unh, no way*,
but he wasn't keeping it quiet for Valerie's sake,
he just couldn't resist drawing that line
between you and him
whenever he could.

Like

at Valerie's second wedding,
we're all in the kitchen and she's going on
about high school, how great it was,
and he leans over, tells me
the two of them were doing ninety one night
when all of a sudden she reaches over and unzips him and
straddles him, all in one motion,

Continued

FIGHTERS, *Continued*

like she was practicing a dance step,
that he tried holding back but he
lost it, began dividing into light...

but I didn't

have the heart to tell him
Valerie had already filled me in
about the light back in high school,
but he must have figured it out pretty quick
because two seconds later he's over Korea
strafing gunships and something
goes wrong, his engine quits,
and all of a sudden the harbor's
coming up like a runaway train but
all he can think about is his mother, how as a kid
he got up one night, saw her sitting in the kitchen
throwing up on the table cloth, and then he's going down the
displays and buttons and switches like his fingers
are leaving his hands, hearing himself or
someone sounding like him, saying *Easy now,*
no fuck-ups, lay it down, and then
all he could see was the water
streaming past his eyes like the hissing
of millions of veins and then
something inside him snapped
and all of a sudden he's high up
on the ceiling of his mother's kitchen,
naked, arms outstretched, trying
to tell her he's OK, but she keeps
fiddling with the tablecloth and then
she looks up at the ceiling like maybe
she heard something, but he could tell
by her eyes she kept looking right through him
like he wasn't really there.

.

UNREQUITED LOVE

I'm sitting on a street bench, wasting my life,
watching a couple of black kids
with haircuts like shrubbery, squatting
and pumping, practicing hip-hop,
and everything's getting vivid,
Maybe it's a poem about the two of them,
I'm saying to myself and then I look up
and there's this other kid
hanging over me like a black moon,
telling me he needs some money, that his car's
out of gas, it's around the corner at the station, his brother
is there, they need a dollar to get home, Just a
dollar man, and I'm thinking, *God how I hate this,*
he must have seen me talking to myself,
moving my hands, and I start to say,
No, but I'm thinking, *Jesus, it's only a buck, maybe*
he's telling the truth, he looks honest enough, like a farm hand
or a soldier,, and besides, he's big, he could take it all
if he wanted, and I'm reaching around
for my wallet when I hear him say,
Two dollars, real slow, like he's
explaining something to me,
and suddenly everything's slowing down so fast
he's already halfway down the block, yelling
to his brother, and I'm still sitting there, staring
at his palm, counting out the dollars.

FIRST KISSES

I don't know why Marina Fegelman and I
began kissing each other in the back of the laundromat,
maybe it was the hot, steamy bloom of desire
pressing up from her boney body
like a whispered, Yes, because
expectation was everywhere that summer.
I'd sit on the stoop all morning, waiting
for something to happen, and when it didn't,
I'd go to the movies with Flavian and Michael Monaco.
We'd sit in the balcony, put our feet up,
smoke cigarettes like big-shots.

Then, one day,
whatever was supposed to happen, happened.
Her name was Ruth, she said,
and she put her hands on her hips, told me
Flavian and Michael took turns
kissing and feeling her, that maybe
I could too, but I just stood there, not knowing
what to say until Flavian said,
Don't worry, you can too,
and as soon as he did,
Ruth looked lost, like she didn't know
where she was anymore, but it just made me
want to touch her, slip my hands
under her blouse, feel her breasts.

But every time
I did, she'd always look at me
like I should know better, but then again
she never said no. I liked that about Ruth:
she may have had my number, but she never
beat me with it. Anyway, Ruth wasn't that tough.
Not really. She just had opinions about everything.
And when she wasn't thinking about Flavian,
which was most of the time, she could be
really funny. Wicked is more like it.

Anyway,

that's how I spent that summer: kissing and
feeling Ruth, then passing her to Flavian, because
that was the order: first me, then Flavian, then
Michael, except she'd sometimes
stand up, tell Flavian
she wanted to go home,
and for a moment, he'd look
surprised, or maybe angry, it was always
hard to tell with him, but he'd never
say anything, just get up,
take her home.

Then

just before high school, Flavian told me
Ruth wouldn't be coming anymore,
but I never asked him why
because I knew they were playing
with razors and then his father sent him
to military school and then to his uncle in *Abruzzi*
so we lost touch for I don't know how many years
and then he calls me up out of the blue
and invites me to his son's confirmation party,
and who's there when I walk in, but Ruth,
talking to his wife, and when she sees me,
she smiles at me like she's asking a question
and saying Hello at the same time
and I'm thinking, *Jesus, maybe they're still lovers,*
but there was something about her
that said she was living a different life,
so I kept hoping the balcony
wouldn't come up, but it was hard
avoiding it after she asked me if I still went
to the movies, because there was something
very funny about the way she said it,
so I told her, *Yes, but I sat*
a little closer to the screen now,
so I could see the dots, sometimes
between them, and we both laughed,
but not for the same reasons I think.

THE POET VISITS ALACHUA BAPTIST HIGH

God knows what I was thinking about
when I decided to read it, but I'm barely
thirty lines into the poem and I know
I'm in trouble, I can see *unfuckable*
looming up in front of me like a *Pet erbilt* ,
but I somehow keep cadence,
change it to *unmakeable*
like I'm slicking putty on a crack, but I'm
not fooling Ms. Strickland, she's up like a fox, sniffing
the air, and then I'm barreling through the scene
where Dixon goes down on his girl friend
and then the lines are rolling past my eyes
like a subpoena and Ms. Strickland's up
like a shot, racing around the room
like she's putting out a brush fire: *This
particular poem shows how drugs and sex
can ruin the lives of those people
unfortunate enough to be
obsessed by them*, and I'm thinking,
What do you mean, *those people*, it's me,
I'm the one who's obsessed,
but she didn't put out all the fires,
we both saw kids here who were still smoldering,
who'd seen that poems were more
than words, that something hidden
could suddenly reach out, pull you in,
kiss you hard enough to make you cry.

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