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THE FIDDLER



TIM HUNT

2022 PAMPHLET SERIES

TIM HUNT

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POSTCARD PALIMPSEST: THE NAPA VALLEY

The vines, seen from the road
as it switchbacks down the last of the mountain,
march the valley's floor as if it's a parade ground—
rank and file, with here and there
a winery chateau built to look old yet new—

not as if it's been there for what seems ever,
but as if beyond time:
life as style,
and the air so clear
the sun is pausing for its picture.

*

The world you knew as a boy is gone,
scraped away and overwritten by the rows of grapes:
Those places outside of town where you'd go for eggs
or berries and the small ranches and farms,
the dairy, these are gone, and the slaughterhouse, too—

holes in your memory
as if your memory were that map
in the encyclopedia with tooled leather covers
someone gave you when you were a boy—
the one that had different names for the places you knew
and the dots with names for the places
that even then had worn away

from when the mule wagons made their way,
sepia-toned, from the foot of the mountain

where the railroad ran out of track—
the axles creaking as the iron-hooped wheels
climbed the toll road to the even smaller towns,
and then on to the mines beyond them.

*

In this world, this now, there are no locals
rocking on some cabin porch,
and the aficionados who come to taste and sip
are not lost
because there's really no *where* to be,

and the workers bending to the vines
are not lost,
because they do not matter,

and the fiddle player who once drove his mule team
up the mountain carrying in his fingers
the reels and jigs from Kentucky
that someone had carried from the Carolinas
and before that some Ulster or Borders farmstead—

he is not lost because that was then,
and his world makes no sense in this one,
if it made sense then.

And the people before that?
Their world
never existed.

They never existed.

THE FIDDLE

1.

In the fiddle case,
unopened for fifty years
and retrieved from the closet's top shelf:

a loop of twine and brittle chewing gum
hold the top and back to the curved sides—
the bow a splay of separated hairs.

2.

As a boy you were told the story of how the fiddle
was passed by someone to someone
who gave it in turn to your great grandfather
when he was a boy.

And how, as the wagon train crossed the plains
and desert and mountains, he would play
when the wagons circled at night.

And you believed this, as boys believe the stories their
fathers tell,
and so, when you are handed the scuffed case,
you receive it like a relic,

and carry it in the crook of your arm on the plane flight
home,
and take it to a man in the city as if he is a priest
who will reveal its mysteries.

And he does:

Made, he tells you, in the 1920s,
a factory in Germany, mass produced and sold
by mail order catalog.

So, this is the story I tell:

At night when the wagons circle into another camp,
someone's grandfather takes his fiddle from under the
wagon's seat,
unwraps it and runs the lump of rosin along the bow.

The people making camp, the routine of chores,
do not stop to listen but know the tune.
They hear it as if it is a place they've left,

and the place they're going,
in this wherever they may be.

And the boy, having scavenged the firewood for cooking
and carried the buckets of water, stops
and listens, watching the fingers double stop the strings

into the perfect fifths that are like breathing in,
and letting go, and how the wrist arcs
as the bent arm draws back and up—

the bow like the prairie wind calming past dusk
as it drops to that imperceptible sigh
and he hears again the cook fire calling to dinner.

And there is something in the way the boy listens,
night after night, until someone's grandfather nods
and offers the fiddle and bow,

then guides the boy's hands.

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And each night when the wagons circle,
after the firewood for cooking and the buckets of water,
someone's grandfather pauses

and hands the boy the fiddle until his fingers, too,
become the tunes from back there,
though not back then, because they are from always,

and the cloth covered wagons moves on, each day
a few more miles west, until *here*
and *there* becomes *here* and back *there*

and *when* divides into *now* and back *then*.

3.

In the story your father tells, he is (you imagine)
seven or eight as he watches his grandfather
filing down the arch of a violin bridge—
just enough so the fiddle's bow can drive
an open string against the double stops.

And eighty years later what he remembers
is the patience: the file's careful strokes,
almost delicate, then a few more,
for what seemed hours until it was right.

This story is true:

in the fiddle case,
a partly filed maple bridge—
ordered you imagine from Montgomery Ward
and brought by bus
up the mountain in a sack of mail.

A moment in time. Or out of it.

HILL COUNTRY (LAKE COUNTY, CA)

1.

In these hills, *lost*
is not the opposite of *found*—
as if something to be

recovered, forgotten then
remembered

like that word on the tip of your tongue,
or something covered over
by the drifting litter on your desk—

beach sand, the day darkening
as you gather your things to leave
and that pretty shell

retrieved from the tideline
belongs again to the shore.

2.

In this world, the opposite of *lost*
is *belong*:

A storefront of folding chairs,
the small table opposite the door
where the neighbor who preaches

dreams of TV millions, and the woman
sitting at the electric keyboard on a stand
waits to begin the hymn.

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In the world beyond this one
there is temptation and sin. Here,
redemption.

Here the sheep are in the fold
and the shepherd faces the dark
as if the dark were out there—

in that place

where the people who have gone away
have lost their way, and so are different.

But that isn't quite it,
because *here* and *there* are places,
and this is somehow *now* and *then*,

and if *now* is *there* and *here* is *then*,
then *here's* a kind of *nowhere*,
a *nowhen*. Oh, brethren. Repent.

Let us pray. Our Lord, who art
somewhere,
make our world ours again.

3

In this world *lost* is here,
even though *here*
is where you are from,

and where you are,

as if there is no other
place you could be,
because *here* is now,

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not *then*, and this *now*
is somewhere
else you don't quite belong,

or matter, and so
this is where
it feels as if you are not.

SAYING GRACE

In the past as you were taught to know it,
it is always the 1930s: The Depression.
The time of getting by:
when saying grace as the day finished turning dark
wasn't a form,

because food on the table was a blessing
to be counted.

But this past was their past—
and in it, hardship an Eden
carried on into this world
where necessity
is no longer the order of things.

And so, in your past theirs is a kind of fable
that you want to mean something,
because then there would be an order to things

and you, too, could sit at the table
saying grace as if food were a blessing,

and the place that was
would be this place.

GRANGE HALL DANCE (MIDDLETOWN, CA, 1935)

In the Grange Hall, the fiddle's drone string
keens its forever
against the bow's rosined punctuations
as the dancers step and the squares
of four form and reform to the caller's commands.

And always:

the motion within the patterns
until the return,
after the seeming freedom
of the fiddle's repeated figures—

the last note fading

and the dancers are again
where they began—
stepping back into themselves:

the men talking about the things
they talk about, the women
talking what they talk about,

and a few strolling outside
as if for a breath of air or to admire the stars,

and these men, too, talking about the things
they talk about, as they pass a flask
and light their cigarettes,
resting a foot on a running board

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or a hip against a dusty fender.

It is easy to imagine this time as timeless—like fall
to winter and winter to spring,
or the Saturday dance and Sunday sermon
and the days between.

And so it is easy to imagine, to believe,
in this order of things
as you have learned to believe
that your name matters in that litany of begettings
that map these interwoven families,

placing you here, this place and moment,
so that the hills do not erase you
and the Saturday dance and Sunday sermon
and the days between can seem
more real than the hills—

or at least as real.

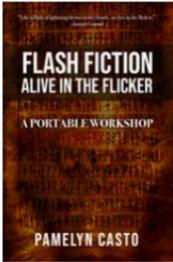
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ABOUT THE WRITER:

Tim Hunt's collections include *Voice to Voice in the Dark* (Broadstone Books), *Ticket Stubs & Liner Notes* (winner of the 2018 Main Street Rag Poetry Book Award), *The Tao of Twang* and *Poem's Poems & Other Poems* (both CW Books), and *Fault Lines* (The Backwaters Press). Recognitions include The Chester H. Jones National Poetry Prize. Originally from the hill country of northern California, he was educated at Cornell University. His final teaching post was Illinois State University where he was University Professor. He and his wife Susan live in Normal, Illinois, which is not hill country.

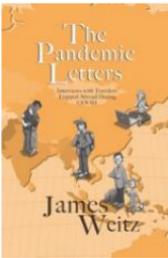
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