



BRUCE HOLBERT

Pastoral #9

I don't write love poems or cut roses from my grandmother's garden
and deliver them to you in ribbon, then press the doorbell and hide behind the old birch
like I did for my mother back when I was still vessel enough to haul her hopes in.

My grandmother is lost to heart failure and her garden planted grass. My mother drinks
and worries over her pension. She has harvested the trees for timber and paid the neigh-
bor man to grind the stumps that pock the yard.

My boy heart rolled, though, when she lifted the flowers, and set them on the porch to
sun. She closed her eyes like breathing was some fine taste she'd just come upon. It was
when she knew everything, All I'd consider and discard.

Would you read your poem in this same way?
Or would it offer only pulp and ink and the scent of one more man?

Pastoral #5

I have tracked you
through pastures and meadows
pressing my ear
to creases in the grass
to hear the splash
of you passing.

Once I tried the trick
on train rail the coolies
beat into this county.
The frozen metal
pulled my ear fast.
A truck stopped
Mister, are you all there?
the driver asked.
I reckon not, I told him.

epic

**Sinkalip is the Salish language's phonetic word for coyote*

I prologue

You stand beneath my office window
the moon's liquid shimmer
bathes your haunches.
solstice is a week away,
but cold has outlegged the seasons.
five deer browse the garden dregs;
they do not fear you, sinkalip.
winter you're a story
and must starve until you are told.

II sinkalip

only if the moon is new,
and far from cities garish light,
in a the sky that does not teem
with the state's exhalations
or farmers chaff
complicating the dry bluster
can astronomers detect
story's ashen hue.

HOLBERT

narrated in an arid, plasma language
by a tongue that cannot speak
to earth's beasts
cannot articulate light's willowy thread,
filtered through a thousand years
of ambiguity and contradiction,
good for nothing practical,
just wonder and doubt.

III
sinkalip is born

the earth was once a human being.
The notion inhabits the
Spinster's chalky shapes
on green boards,
that teach children
they don't understand
words they've heard since birth.
The earth mother is the sound beneath the marks.
but you are deaf, sinkalip
because you forget that birdsong and the wolf's bay
are bones of your mother.
You construct stone huts
to conceal your self-abuse

HOLBERT

and hear nothing.

old one rolled your mother's skin
into balls of mud and clay.
he spat to bind them together.
disgusted by his need for you.

IV
sinkalip dies

You find the sun a burden.
a cloud bruises the horizon.
deer bed in thickets
rain feeds the beaver pond
where you cool your feet.
on a gambler's roll,
you lift your face
more, you say.

are you not swept
in a storm without air?
are you not drowning in your wishes?
do you not gasp and vomit
silver drool upon the river's bank?
do the buzzards not poke your eyes from your head?

HOLBERT

V

sinkalip is born

your memory does not
reach to your penis
or beyond regret or grudge
your copulation
is birth and death,
it bleaches memory
like the prairie's bones.
you exist between,
where you can induce dust storms
to hide your sins
then die
of asthma and return
to ejaculate clouds over your enemies
and wipe your penis
across your grandchildren's eyes
after enjoying their mother,
and mornings the white paste
of our own desires
matts our lashes
and we blink our sins
into unfinished wishes
of weak and muted creatures.

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Sinkalip, you are the first porn star.

VI

sinkalip in love

When you see five mallard duck girls,
Sinkalip, it is akin to christ
who donned a thorny crown,
and lugged his cross to calvary.
And when the romans
drove open his feet
and the dogwood planks
parted for the spike like a casual lover –
he cried out a bloody orgasm--
body broken for thee--
draping the timbers, a sail
in the horse latitudes
then mary magdeline or judas,
steps over his body three times
and he becomes a sinkalip.
Yes, we know what you will do
and you will do it for us

sinkalip in love (again)

HOLBERT

one woman among stinking men
winds her legs beneath her stool
in her eyes is nothing warm nor cold.
she is a cave no one occupies
the bartender twists a knob on the tv.
another senator
seduces an assistant
and executes perfect contrition.
do they scream like children,
sinkalip?
while their clothes
dutifully bent across chairbacks,
sustain their tailored creases?

VII

sinkalip, the hero

you step about tossing your head
to appreciate its reflection.
where sisters tend a rock trap
and feast upon salmon as long as their arms.
when each delivers the bones to the river

HOLBERT

the current returns flesh to the bones
until the fish stirs and swims,
each rib a thready prayer.
it's devotion is past obedience
and nothing you recognize.
you unpile stones and the sisters
turn tearful kingfishers.
salmon leap from the water
into your arms.
villages offer you maidens.
A falls the salmon will not climb
Bisects the river
where one refuses.

VIII

sinakalip, the savior

your wife dies
you walk many miles
“sit here,” your shadow says.
you see only open prairie.
but the sky darkens,
and many fires burn
your wife sits next to you
in a great lodge,

HOLBERT

there are no monsters
here you can love one wife,
the shadow says,
“your wife will be with you.
when you have descended the fifth mountain,
On your return home
you may touch her once more.”

But lust seizes you
the last night.
Your wife cries as if in
love’s thrashings
before she vanishes.

at your village.
no one greets you.
they have abandoned their homes
for the mountains
to be away from you.

IX
sinkalip dies

never again will your sisters counsel you.
your mind will grow loud

HOLBERT

until you hear only the din.
fox and the birds weary of
your reincarnation dance.
it is simple as that.
When you return
you shall bring the spirits
from the other side camp.
nothing will make sense.
Then we will be free.