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Possible Ways that Pulitzer Prize Winning Poet, Michael Regime, Fell in Love with Language.

Abstract

How, suddenly, near the age of nine, almost all noise begins to sound like a heartbeat: the footsteps of his mother on the kitchen linoleum, moving in a beating circle around the boiling pasta; a pack of cigarettes smacking his father's palm; the sound of slapped fat as a flock of house sparrows take to air in the lawn; any hammer, anywhere; his brother punching the dirt to keep from crying after losing some senseless, pick-up basketball game; applause.

Keywords

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Possible Ways that Pulitzer Prize Winning Poet, Michael Regime, Fell in Love with Language.

by Travis Vick

1.

How, suddenly, near the age of nine, almost all noise begins to sound like a heartbeat: the footsteps of his mother on the kitchen linoleum, moving in a beating circle around the boiling pasta; a pack of cigarettes smacking his father's palm; the sound of slapped fat as a flock of house sparrows take to air in the lawn; any hammer, anywhere; his brother punching the dirt to keep from crying after losing some senseless, pick-up basketball game; applause.

2.

The dark imaginings—as Michael lay in a pew, resting his head in his mother's lap—of Jesus descending to the dead. The anxiety he felt not being able to explain to himself in words the way he visualized the dead walking lost and ashamed through yellowed fields. The combating sensation he felt, years later, while watching Borges find the words for him:

“...others were headless and walked with hesitant, fearful steps, as though groping through the dark.”

How he imagined that the sound of Jesus's voice, in every language at once, struck the ground like rain—each droplet a river, each river an ocean—the overwhelming scale of Grace so immeasurable that those there to witness it might have said it felt like nothing.

3.

The blind bird he kept in his bedroom as a teenager. The unattached sound of vowels ringing from its beak into a darkness that it, at all times, knew. The bird's singing resurrecting images that Michael felt but couldn't remember: his father driving drunk in the back pasture with the headlights cut; his friend, Shawn, dropping a baseball from the Rock Falls Bridge into the Red River.

Sleeping all day beneath the birdcage, dreamless.

The bird, near death, dropping its feathers, flying into the bars of its cage, shutting up—for nothing.

4.

The death rattle of no sound at all. A darkness moving in. Silence finding Michael, as a child, hiding beneath the bed.

5.

God, the silence.

6.

The sound of knuckles crashing into his nose during a fist-fight. How it felt better, to Michael, to lose. How it felt like living near the ocean, like living a life past his life, to hear that night the sound of his nose still bleeding in the shower: that *Tat Tat Tat* of blood and water slapping fiberglass, mixing into one, slipping down the groan of the drain. Gone from him forever.

7.

Two botched suicides in his early twenties. The soggy flop of stringless shoes in the hospital. The soft-sided words spoken by his family doctor—rest, strength, health—those words, once physically detached from their meaning by Michael's weakened

mind, becoming the slap and jerk sound of language's inner self, telling Michael, that of course it knew he hadn't tried hard enough.

8.

"What do you want be?" Michael used to ask himself.

"The sound of the soundless," Michael would answer, drunk in bed. "The sound of the color teal, of the sun rising in Oklahoma. The sound of AIDS, of ashes, of a room filled wall to wall with broken chairs. The sound of air, once breathed by Rilke, deep in a dark lake, falling further into water."

9.

His intermediate poetry professor, one Wednesday, discussing the use of the words 'penis' and 'vagina' in his poem.

"Penis is too small," he said, "too puny, as if it wears glasses and lives with its mother."

"And vagina just sounds like an evil sister from King Lear."

10.

The mumbling friction of his fingers tracing the line of a woman's back.

11.

Here, it's best to remember the heart again, to remember its beat again—since, during the whole of our investigative process, it hasn't ceased to forget us, or its pattern to keep to us.

This moment of Michael's happens beneath the water.

It happens during a certain summer as an undergraduate, when Michael spent his evenings swimming the length of a small lake, after reading, all morning, the works of the recent Masters: Auden, Roethke, Hecht; and laboring the rest of the day at the library, working on his own poems.

But back to the lake: back to the clap of Michael's arms interrupting the water that swallowed his body, back to the rudder-thud of his feet, back to the wet clicks of Roethke's tongue still ringing in Michael's mind—*All the rings and the relics encrusted with sin / And the taint in a blood that was running too thin*—back to the accumulative moment of physical exhaustion and creative desperation that built in Michael when, for a moment, he quit and dipped under.

What happened beneath the water? The thumping ring.

The thumping ring of Michael's heart pulsing in his ears. The necessary silence, available in deep water, that brought forth to him the inevitable connection between his heart and mind—Michael having, for the first time, the conscious knowledge that at every moment he was only hearing his own heart, either directly or in reflection.

The new poet that then rose from the water.

12.

Billions of competing narratives happening, right now, at once.

13.

Michael experiencing a believed breakthrough on vacation in Frankfurt, where he spent most his time reading Georg Trakl on a veranda that overlooked the Main, and working, feverishly, on his own poems at night, then sending a packet of these poems to his friend, and lesser poet, Travis Vick, only to receive in return this letter:

Dear Michael,

I can't say, with any affirmation, that I understand a word of your poems. It seems that you're writing in tongues, like a Pentecostal. Is this the theme? Regardless, I can say that your words—*Blue, Ruined, & Drooling*—have not left my mind once this week since reading them. I see myself this way. Do you see yourself this way too? I hope you come home soon.

Your friend,
Travis

14.

A man in Houston tossing his laundry to the street from a third floor window, shouting, “If we want to go back to Nature, for God’s sake, we can’t go in these.”

His underwear raining onto a small spruce tree, then, for days, hanging there—limp—like fruit, or words.

15.

The ocean, at different distances, all around him, building then breaking, like breath.

16.

The possibility that Michael never fell in love with language at all: a life spent too long in the headwaters / memories of running the length of the lawn in March far better than any poem he could write / the thoughtless thoughts, the dreamless dreams, evenings—in the woods—not caring to listen to the wind as it whispered through the feet of *everything* / years spent reading: Pound (the failed experiment,) Stevens (asleep beneath his desk,) Ashbery (the unconvictable gimmick,) all proving to be, in the end, only the carving of a cave / a cave, where Michael has found a preferable dark, and—just as in deep water—can hear the thumping ring of his heart clearly in his ears / a cave, where Michael tosses *Leaves of Grass* through the black into the cave’s walls, knowing that this, and Whitman, is the end of the road / a cave, where Michael, blind, lets loose an unattached voice, and—having grown old, with his hair dropping from his head in clumps—decides that in solution to creative impotence he will shut up / for nothing.

17.

The unbreakable babble of a river at rest.

Then, during heavy rain, how the same river will awake, screaming.

“Even if you can’t understand it,” Michael’s father told him, standing on the bank of the Red, “you should still listen for a while. Just shut up and listen.”

Travis Vick studied poetry beneath B.H. Fairchild & Bruce Bond. He currently works in a diaper factory, and tells himself he lives alone in Paris, Texas.