

Waiting for the Dead to Speak

A Collection of Poems

Brian Fanelli

NY
Q Books™

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
New York, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
P. O. Box 2015
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10113

www.nyq.org

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First Edition

Set in New Baskerville

Layout by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover Design by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover Art by Mikayla Lewis

Author Photo by Daryl Szynter

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016931047

ISBN: 978-1-63045-025-0

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For Jimmy, Who Bruised My Ribs and Busted My Nose

In our neighborhood, Fat Jimmy descended the mountain,
his chest heaving like a bull,
ready to maul a matador.

He cracked his scarred knuckles, hunted scrawny prey,
curb stomped our basketballs
like heads he wanted to bash,

or ghost rode our bikes
down the garbage trail dump,
until one day I gripped my handlebars

like a soldier clinging to a rifle,
refusing defeat as Jimmy knocked me to my back,
clocked me in the chin.

Numbed, I laughed as he pounded and pounded,
until my nose gushed, my ribs throbbed,
my skin swelled faster than his heated cheeks.

This poem is for the bully who never cried,
who hid belt lashes from us, who ran from the sound
of his father's battered Ford tracking him down,

the son whose hands tightened to fists like his father's,
who uncurled his fingers to study my blood,
and then extended a hand to lift me up.

What I Imagine My Parents Did After Dinner

In our house, nobody ever danced,
even though my father played Elvis
or Johnny Cash from the silver
CD player that rested on the nook,
separating the kitchen from the dining room.
He could have used the wooden pasta spoon
like a mic and lip-synched along to the King
or the man-in-black, but he just labored
over the stove, his white apron hiding the same
Packers shirt he wore each Sunday,
while the football game blared in the living room,
his mood dependent upon who was winning.

My mother, too, followed routines,
her task to knead the dough,
until flour powdered her hands
and streaked her cheeks,
after she spent hours leaning over the table,
rolling macaroni through the machine.

I like to think that after we ate
two servings of pasta and meatballs,
a salad on the side,
after I helped them scrub pots and pans,
after they untied and washed the aprons,
and I closed my bedroom door to study
or practice guitar scales,
they put on the King or Johnny Cash again
and passed the pasta spoon back and forth
like a karaoke mic and danced around the kitchen,
while moonlight sliced through foliage
and spilled into the kitchen.

Immigrant Names

At ten, when I tanned in summer,
neighborhood boys said I looked Mexican,
my hair dark and shaggy,
my skin brown like dirt they spit upon.

I took no offence, but laughed
when their freckled Irish skin
burned on the baseball mound,
or they had to wear shirts while swimming.

When they rubbed globs of Aloe on redness,
I whispered private thank yous to my grandparents—
Italian immigrants who passed on
their genes and complexions to me.

I didn't know then what it meant
to be othered, the darker friend.
Now I imagine those guys grown, graying,
and wonder if their lips upturn in a sneer

over immigration reform, that same sneer they flashed
when I struck out and they hollered, *Nice play, greaseball,*
forgetting that their great grandparents were called micks
and black and blued because of their freckles and foreign accents.

Looking back I wish I had kicked my cleats on that baseball mound,
clenched my bat, refused to retreat to bleachers,
until I was given a second chance at bat, opportunity to knock the ball
over the fence and slide into home, like any other American boy.

Learning to Garden

You think of her these first days of spring
and the tulips you planted behind the house,
orange and red, bright for a few weeks,
until they shrink to slender stems and their color
is given away to the wind.

The relationship was like that, never finite,
fragile enough to tear from one more gust,
one more outburst, one more argument,
and it too blazed at moments,
from the squeeze of her hand in the movie theater,

or the spark of a kiss during those art walk dates.
You think of her these first warm days
and wonder if she's pausing beneath the weeping willow
along the river walk. You remember she said its leaves
looked like a firework unfolding into night.

She taught you to call flowers by their right names,
and now you kneel in dirt because you learned
what it means to garden and when to lay the tarp
so what blooms can withstand
rare frost and sudden bursts of wind.