

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 7

June 2008

Tour of the Drowned Neighborhood

Blake Butler

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Recommended Citation

Butler, Blake (2008) "Tour of the Drowned Neighborhood," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol8/iss1/7>

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Butler: Tour of the Drowned Neighborhood

TOUR OF THE DROWNED NEIGHBORHOOD

Blake Butler

This is the yard where the dogs would sit by the half-wrecked shed and sweat. Dad often tied them so tight they couldn't crane their necks. Their backs flea-bit and wrecked with mange and xylophonic ribs. Moxie, Skipper, Moonbeam. Remember their howling in the hot nights when the ambulances screamed by. Remember the scummy flex of their brown backs, the lather of their sweat like suds. The year I snuck them each a sliver of my birthday cake, age 13—fudge batter, banana frosting. You should have seen those dumb dogs' eyes.

This is the driveway, cracked with gravel from the groaning of the earth. These are my initials scraped into the wet cement for which my father blacked my eye. His Corvette sat for years there dripping, no amount of wrench or sweat bringing it back to life, until finally one day the wind lifted it straight off into the air. Remember how on brown August days mom would come out and spread a towel and tan in her underwear where all could see. Her name carved in a stall of the middle school's boy's bathroom—another box now undersea.

Imagine these houses taking on water. The cold flutter of family lungs.

This is an electric chain-link fence.

This is a picture window with no picture.

This is my parents' bedroom where, when they slept, he'd lock the knob. The drywall damp between us not thick enough to keep a quiet. How dad would shower her in shouting. How mom would cough as if she'd rip. Remember emphysema. Remember how quick the disease spread. Remember the nights I woke with

nightmare and went to crawl in bed between them, finding only a door that wouldn't budge, a cold metal bauble in my hand.

Here's my room with the bunk beds I've slept in since I was seven, long after my feet hung off the end. Here's a picture of my first girlfriend, who I never got a chance to kiss or nuzzle. This is my videotape collection. This is a butterfly knife. A conch. This is the toenail I lost after kicking the side of the house in anger. This is a 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle rookie card in near-mint condition.

This is a drawing of me on the top of a mountain waving hello or goodbye.

Imagine my innards flush with water. Imagine endless rain.

This is the chimney, where once a year we'd catch a bird. You could hear it singing through the whole house, in the attic, in my sleep. *Chirrup chirrup*. Dad would get so mad he'd stand in the hearth with a broom. He'd shriek and curse and stir up dust. If he couldn't scare the bird free, he'd start a fire. The smoke curling up its beak lines. Within an hour, the chirrup ceased. I guess the bodies stayed stuck up there somewhere, lost in charcoal smudge.

Imagine how when the water rose high enough to cover the whole house. How you could see the tip of the chimney on the lip—*an eye*.

This is the cul-de-sac where I once socked my neighbor for saying my parents were going to die. Bobby had a sty over his right eye from not sleeping—bright yellow, oozing, swollen so big he couldn't blink. He said he'd read the Bible and there was still time for absolution.

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BLAKE BUTLER

Remember how his was the first body I saw floating bloated on the rain, a school of malformed fan fish nipping at his back.

Remember how you never know it's coming until it's there and then it's there.

Imagine how they swam until their arms ached, their lungs heavy in their chest.

This is a ruined veranda.

This is where I sometimes liked to hide.

This is the mouth of the sewer. Vortex of lost balls. Remember how on hot days you could see the heat rise in wavy lines. How, on that first day, after six hours of torrential downpour, the manhole overflowed and bubbled, and the water spread out from around it, washing sludge and shit into the street.

This is a makeshift graveyard where we all buried our pets. No one could say who'd started, but you could count a hundred markers: cats, dogs, ferrets, snakes, hamsters, goldfish, lizards. The dirt was soft and loamy, fat with earthworms, ripe, alive. In April the flowers grew here first. Remember when Moxie died—followed by both Moonbeam and Skipper within hours, as if one lived off the other, as if connected in the pulse—my father carried them one over each shoulder. He made me watch while he struck ground, heaving. The emphysema had him too. My mother began to recite a benediction, and he told her to shut her mouth.

This is blacktop concrete, great for skinning knees.

This is a children's playground.

Imagine secondary drowning where inhaled saltwater foams up in the lungs and makes it hard to breathe.

This is a spacious 4-bed, 2.5 bath colonial with formal dining area, fireplace, walkout basement, in-ground sprinklers, and a kidney-bean-shaped pool.

This is the Andertons', the Banks', the Barretts', the Butlers', the Carlyles', the Canters', the Crumps', the Davidsons', the Dumbletons', the Fultons', the Grants', the Griggs', the Guzmans', the Kranzs', the Lotts', the Peaveys', the Peerys', the Pendletons', the Rays', the Rutledges', the Smiths', the Stutzmans', the Weidingers', the Woods', the Worths'.

Imagine shallow water blackout, heart attack, thermal shock, and stroke. The skies alive with color. No light, no sting, no sound.

This is street number 713, which sat abandoned since I was eight. Murmur of murder. Phantom life. The paint was green and chipping. The grass had grown up around the hedges, the trees leafless year-round. Sometimes in the evenings you'd see a light come on upstairs. Remember the summer some kid's cousin went in during night. How he didn't come back out for hours, and later they found he'd fallen through the stairwell and snapped his back. Remember the way I sat up evenings as a preteen already balding, staring through my bedroom window at the house with one eye and then the other.

This is the last square of the sidewalk.

This is telephone wire.

This is mud.

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ROSE BUTLER

This is a rowboat, long abandoned, rotten, mired in stagnant water.

This is the steeple, still uncovered—the high mark of the flood's thread. Remember the copper swallow of communion, the tab pressed against the tongue. Remember trying to imagine how my father could stand the burn of every evening; how his throat must have been mottled from all he'd poured through there, I imagined. How he'd seen me come home through the front door in my Sunday suit and spat.

Imagine the ocean approaching overhead. Imagine waking up under dripping ceiling. The puddle plodding on the carpet, the water already having filled mostly up the stairs. My parents' bedroom on the first floor. The coughing covered, calm. Remember my mother's wet head in the bedroom, a hundred thousand thin, blonde fiber fingers spreading out as I swam down to kiss her face.

This is a quiet evening.

This—I'm not quite sure.

Imagine nowhere. Imagine nothing. A world all swollen and asleep.

These are the tips of tallest trees—the funny firs up to their wrecked necks, spreading out distended undersea. Notice the new nests brimmed with egg. The mothers' wings weak, flown for hours after food over the flat, shimmering face of endless water.