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A TREATISE ON VIOLENCE

Kerry James Evans

Mad cow, the nurse said, *ravaged Europe from 1980 to 1992.*
For ten months of 1988, I lived in England with my family.

I cannot give plasma.
At five years old, I ate cannibalized beef.
My brain might be eating itself.

I cannot give plasma at the plasma center
where, in a raffle drawing of people
who have donated twice this month,
one person will win a plasma television
worth 450 dollars.

I asked the nurse how the British
owning the plasma center
had anything to do with my brain eating itself.

You can never give plasma or blood.
And when will my body become meat for my mind?



Tangoed in the living room beneath the ceiling fan
with my wife and six beers and polka music
and two helpings of dinner—walked outside,
looked off the deck at the sun casting shadows

of a tree on a garage door, pack of children
howling at a playground—Saturday
a football day, helmet to helmet, an upset;
Colorado beat Oklahoma, Auburn beat Florida.

This, the day men watch bodies that were their own.
But I have this dance waiting after this cigarette;
I have a shadow and voicemail from my father:
he counts gravestones at Gettysburg.



We were stationed in England—my family.
The playground was installed
at the end of the cul-de-sac
of our neighborhood three weeks
before we moved to the Azores,
the next stop on my father's route
to satellite command headquarters—
Pentagon, Washington, D.C.,
contractors, revolving door.

But I am talking about a playground
and skinned knees, riding my BMX
into a European-looking van—
I was flat-nosed and weak,
like my younger brother,
the high school football-stud-graduate
working part-time toward an electrician's degree.

There are wires in the machine
—*Neutral is white, but white,*
he says, *is not always neutral.*



I'd like to give a retirement plan
to each member of my family,
tell them to live their lives, invest
in nothing—the poor do not belong.

I am poor. I play golf on Mondays
with used clubs, drive a used car
to a public course and hit a used ball
to a hole after striking the ground

with the club head more times
than my father choke-slammed
me to the wall, more times
than my father choke-slammed

my brother to the wall. No promotion
and I strike at an already scarred
and filthy ball. My father is honest.
What apology does a father owe his son?



I hate golf, but the walk is nice—bull-shitting with the guys
about nothing, football glory extended play-by-play—
we drop out of the pond without counting the stroke.

I am not angry at my father;

I am not angry at my brother.

The crazies in the plasma center are not angry
at their condition, their fucked eyes
swirling in a room

of free coffee, peanut butter crackers,

a movie about football—volume turned low enough to sack
the waiting room, the nurse calling loudly the names
of high school dropouts,

marriages that began at eighteen

at a courthouse with two witnesses—



I do not belong here.



Tube-drawn from a long needle, my wife's arm
drains, her plasma the muddy yellow of urine.

She collects her twenty dollars.



If I am mad, where, but in the shadow of a tree
that has lost the leaves of its crown and buried
roots in winter, a tree crossing a power line

and shucking its bark, this sycamore standing
in my yard? And now, I will dance the mad dance
with my wife, bow before her curtsy, archaic

and chauvinistic—what she appreciates when she
takes my hand, asks me to lead. I cannot be angry
at my wife, and yet I toss her across the room,

our limbs shadows breaking from the walls,
the bass picking up hard, and her hair: red,
opening like fist. A fist covered with blood.