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Ceiling of Sticks

Shane Book

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Set in Bulmer by Bob Reitz.

Designed by Nathan Putens.

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For my mother, my father, and my sister

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Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*

I

Litost: A Style Manual 3

The One 7

Homecoming 9

The Lost Conquistador 11

Photograph of Religious Sacrifice,
Tarahumara, Mexico, 1984 15

Santa Cruz 16

Stark Room 18

Dust 19

Uganda, 1997 24

Mistakes 25

The Beach 27

Offering 29

II

San Fernando, Trinidad, 1954 33

Blind Woman of Gondan 35

Shaving my grandfather
in his hospital bed (1) 37

The Market 38

My People 40

Shaving my grandfather
in his hospital bed (2) 44

Stop 45

III

To a Curl of Water 51

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Litost: A Style Manual

I remember reading somewhere
of a Czech word, *litost*,
that means too much
to be translated properly —
a wild mixture of sorrow, regret, empathy
an inexhaustible longing.

At one time I would have said
it sounded like all the things
we might take from this life
distilled to the smallest salt crystal
on a blade of grass.

Or the worst possible sadness.

I wonder about that now
how something can be possible
yet infinite
and all I can think of are the countless cracks
in the pad of a dog's paw
raised in mid-stride,
body rigid with instinct.
Perhaps in this way instinct is a precursor to form
so that it is not darkness
but instinct that hems in
the tree's silhouette
on a ragged grass patch in Washington Square park
in the strange light of late afternoon . . .

And sadness?

.....

Sometimes those old days seem so far away,
with their despair and other stories.

One night a friend called
said he'd just gotten back from an all night drive
to try to save his marriage.

The previous evening
walking past the Budget Car Rental Office
on Douglas Street
he'd stopped in mid-stride,
wheeled and gone in.
Minutes later he came out driving
what was left on the lot:
a bright red cargo van
for the twelve hours north on mountain roads.

It didn't matter that when he showed up at his old door
his wife would be leaving for work
a strange look on her face,
the question, *What are you doing here?*
ringing out across the driveway
in the clean morning air.

All I could do was smile and point at the van,
he told me, voice cracking,
say, Look honey, it's red.

The past is a loan shark. It lends to anyone.
And you can never pay it back.

.....
That word *litost* can also mean too little
to be translated correctly —
a thumbprint as singular as the shade of green
on a grass blade

 a meaning as precise as the tools used by carvers
who make the delicate figurines
I once saw in an African Art shop window:
 slender, dark wood,
teardrop shaped heads,
 bodies long to the ground
 without legs.

Holes had been carved through the heads.
An index card labeled them “Shadows,”
a name which —
 perhaps because I associate shadows
 in some vital way with the soul
 and imagine the soul living somewhere
 above the shoulders
 — made no sense to me.

In parts of the world
 when a loved one dies
they eat the brain
 to stop the soul from returning.

Or is it to keep it close?

.....

Another friend had a different solution —
he locked himself in his apartment,
cigarettes, a case of gin.
When finally he opened the door there was nothing left:
mirror, arm chair, bicycle,
plates, stereo, potted plant,
sacred heart painting —
all smashed in the alley below his window.
He'd shaved a strip of hair
down the middle of his chest
was sitting on a carpet of glass
talking on the phone.
A hand covered in cigarette burns
shielded the receiver as he looked up at us.
It was four a.m.
Keep it down guys, he said, I'm talking with mother.

.....

I don't know what to call those wooden figures,
the name for what's left behind
after body, soul, after it all.

And I don't want to.

Something about the past
makes me want to lathe it down to perfection,
to nothing,
the finest wood dust . . .