

Ready, Aim, Whisper | *D. Doug Mains*

*curse words, like tobacco,
tucked under the lips
that kiss your cheek
and whisper
“i love you.”*

My dad and my brother talk about their right to bear arms. They talk over one another, and neither one cares. I hear their voices tangle like barking dogs in the middle of a birthday party or some family holiday, and I wonder if their shared worldview can be explained away as a simple gene I didn't get. Mom talks about the Mains men, and we all know who she means (and who she doesn't). They grin in the rumble of loud cars and arm wrestle without needing to put their elbows on a table. Their Jesus is white, and he marches to the tune of "I'm In The Lord's Army" with a sword in his mouth, swinging to save all of the unborn children and to damn the democrats back to Mexico and maybe even to make America great again. *What did I miss?* How did I end up with such a different version of the same flannelgraph Jesus? What deficiency could I have possibly acquired that has me hoping the sword in Jesus' mouth will not be one of blades but of breath—a poem, perhaps—a whisper in a screaming world.

Storm the Capitol!
Scale its walls!
Plow through police barricades!
Spray'em with chemicals—
Kicks to the testicles—
Chase'em with guns and grenades!

Employ your right!
(that is, if you are white...
not to say others should not—
although rights aren't decree;
they're what you can flee,
and others would surely be shot.)

on the return to classes after the MSU shooting

i see every person now,
fragile and foreboding,
how nearly
it could have been them;
i can see their pictures — smiles, framed
— clutched by mother,
dad, broken
saying “no parent should have to bury
their child.”

our statue
made a headstone;
a wave of chrysanthemums
clap against the shingles
and shake our very bones,
our home;
our floors groan
with new meaning —
a final resting, stained,
fresh hell to fear —
my desk is now a barricade,
a weapon, if it must — and
my chair has lost all luxury
as i seem to sit
more on my toes;

memory
does not relent;

it crouches in the corners
of our eyes,
in the cavities
of our ears,
in the pulsing
of our nerves, and
i will always leave an eye
on the door —
i will always leave an ear
on the cinder block,
listening for the tolls
of gunfire — waiting
for my day,

my time
to die.

Feigning Superman

There is a picture of me when I was four—maybe five—and I had draped a string of plastic coral beads around my neck. Purple clip-ons dangled from each ear, and slender gloves made my arms look as if they'd been dipped like Pirouettes in white chocolate. Mom smiled in the clicking of her film camera, and my sister looked on, proud of her recommendations. Dad bought me Superman pajamas that Christmas, the kind with a red cape velcroed to the back. He urged me to puff out my chest for the photo, but my body wouldn't or couldn't comply. I sucked my stomach to my spine and tried desperately to pose, feigning some bestial instinct, but my father's voice thundered in frustration as he stuffed the camera back in its case.

Re: "Bad guys with guns are the reason we need good guys with guns"

Where are the good guys
you always talk about—
the guys with cross and cape,
noble hearts and AR-15s;
who do much more
than make iron imprints in their crotch?

Where are the good guys
you always talk about—
ready to swoop in like Superman
at the sound of children's screams
when guys with guns like them
ring echoes in the hall?

Where are the good guys
you always talk about—
who slice the open air
and grab the hands of terror;
who might save us from the bullets
you so ardently fought to save?

A Bullet Is A Period At The End Of A Long And Run-On Sentence

A bullet is the period a person blasts at the end of a long and run-on sentence in which their felt need to bellow breath against the wind is born of a deep fear and has grown so immensely unbearable they go places they shouldn't go; they claim that question marks are of the devil, semicolons are for pussies, and school children need to die so that full grown men might cement a place in Times New Roman; and they no longer desire, if they ever did, to maintain a conversation, to seek dignity in their neighbor, or to wonder at their own brittle moments how strength could possibly show itself in unexpected ways like, for example, in a child who gets out of bed and goes to school after news breaks of another futile shooting, or also in a man who allows himself to cry while watching something so trivial as America's Got Talent because he finds it so goddamn beautiful that a person might blossom out of themselves only to be baptized in a wave of applause and, maybe if they're lucky, be lifted upon the avid praise of a golden buzzer—*that golden buzzer*—but even when they aren't washed in the confetti shower or sprayed with the sparkle balloons, they become a little more convinced—a little more confident—that they are *someone*—someone with *something*—something *special*—but mostly just someone—and that's the beautiful part—*they're someone*—someone who may or may not have a soul but certainly has a body—a body so filled with commendable bravery that they step into their power before a world that too often shouts and tweets and roars and fails to listen, and then they are heard—*they are actually heard*—even while they offer little more than a panged whisper in a vast universe—for they have learned, somewhere along the way, that they can neither pry an ear nor split the sea, but that art is meaningful—more powerful than a period and louder than gunfire—and so they refuse, they refuse, they refuse to shoot a pistol into thunder just as I will conclude with—no, not a period—but a comma,

i could make a paper sign,
fray the edges with my number;

“have you seen this
young life
bleeding on the floor?”

a staple gun to lumber—
hope too small to matter—
where oh god is the fucker
that stole the time?

Am I the enemy?

So, he went to church. I heard it from my sister's husband who heard it from his sister's coworker. He was as quiet and as disturbed as you'd imagine, a muffled ticking in the corner pew. And, at some point, perhaps even just before loading his handguns and traipsing them onto campus, he changed his Facebook header to quote the holy book. Luke 10:19: "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you."

Trigger Warning

This poem may contain inappropriate language and sensitive material; mentions of guns, gun violence, rape, genocide, historical and strategic racism, biblical patriarchy (God, save our guns); xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, authoritarianism, complimentarianism, abusive fathers with umbrella diagrams and the braver women who remain silent; priests in closets, priests in corsets (in closets), priests who touch boys in private parts in private parts of the sanctuary (like closets); altar boys (and the little girls disallowed) whipping themselves, cursing themselves, killing themselves for sins done unto them and the sins they've committed — major giant fucking sins like masturbation and an “oh my god” when they should have said “oh golly gee gosh,” or when they failed to bend to a god-appointed authority with a holy switch in his hand; also, forms of self-discovery, means of exploration, creative freedom; *Pokémon*, *Harry Potter*, Glenn Beck's massive hernia; a horny fixation on bacon — *fucking bacon at the pulpit!* — and assholes, assholes who sit at pancake breakfasts eating bacon and circle jerking to Jesus eating fucking bacon; purity culture, youth groups, christian schools with segregationalist histories; smoke machines, porn jars, teen moms tucked away (as if mother Mary wasn't one); beer, IPAs, beer and coffee shops, coffee shops run by love-the-sinner-hate-the-sin types with *Live Laugh Love* etched in republican cursive on snow-white walls; christian nationalists, militant evangelicals, fragile men with stepstools as family; thick fists, dick sticks, red-blooded American beef dowsing mustached boys, bunkered, trembling, *my guns my guns my guns my guns my guns*; Joshua Harris, John Wayne, John Piper, John 3:16, Mark Driscoll (the swearing pastor who, I believe, coined the word *pussified*), pussified men and adult boys who use the word *pussified* (at pancake breakfasts, perhaps); flannel-graphs and puppet shows, altar calls with every eye closed (every eye closed, every head bowed, every mouth shut); there's a pastor in your pockets, your pockets, your pockets (turn out your pockets!), boys being boys and daughters to the slaughter — soft-skinned long-skirted butter-churning Proverbs 31 women, submissive women, rape-able women, stupid women, “Yes sir please and thank you sir” women; division, religion, suppression, depression, repression, (de)conversion, liberation, gays taking over a holy nation (and who is it more guilty of indoctrination?), bacon; bullshit — I lost your point. Did you have a point? Was there a point?

Do they talk about heaven at a shooter's funeral?

do they talk about heaven
at a shooter's funeral?
say things like,
oh, he's in a better place —
we'll hope to see him again someday.
do they hug his mother,
rubbing circles on her back
and telling her what a nice boy he was?
and how, upon entry,
he may just bump into the souls of his victims
— *those darling children* —
and find it in his fresh skin to testify
of the sovereignty of god
and the mystery of predestination
and how, at the end of his spree,
with his last breath
he muttered that final prayer —
snuck that foot in the god-blessed door
with *a hey, hold up, right behind ya!*
and that sweet-jesus-
golden-ticket stamped, hallelujah!

praise! praise! praise!
he would sing.

Whisper in a Frat House

Words first found me as a singer-songwriter, and I recall playing a house show in Ann Arbor around 2013. It wasn't a frat house, but it partied like one, and, certainly, no one was there to kee stand to the indie folk band plucking in the corner. We were mic'd and the knobs were cranked—a whole PA system shaking the house—but no one—I don't think anyone—could hear us. There are few things worse than the feeling of dumping yourself out for an indifferent audience. And so, before the final two songs, out of either spite or frustration, I suggested a thing that seemed weak and counterproductive at the time. We should unplug. Then, in the chaos of that night, against the shrieking cackles of college kids swimming in cheap beer and hanging from rafters and stretching the confines of rented drywall, we played a song called *Rain In December* that begins in a whisper-sing of sorts and my fingers just barely threatening the strings. I will not soon forget how still the house became when I breathed into the open air my confessional. And if there was ever a moment—a first time—that I realized the power of a whisper, it was then: when we ditched the microphone for a conversation; conquered the noise with a song.

dad what's a lockdown

a place shuts down to keep everyone safe

we had one at school

i know

we hid in the closet

how did you feel

i wanted to know why

someone made a threat—you weren't in danger—it was only a threat

what do you mean

someone said they were coming to the school—said they'd do something bad—they didn't do it

they did it at your school

yeah bud—they did

how did you feel