

The Lame God: Review by Brad Crenshaw

[The original article can be found here: <http://bradcrenshaw.me/tag/m-b-mclatchey/>]

The End of the World

A dear friend of mine from Holland has a son who, during his latency years, unexpectedly developed a seizure disorder. One evening years ago, after riding yet again in the ambulance to the hospital emergency room, his dazed son in his arms, he blurted out a Dutch proverb: “You’re only as happy as your unhappiest child.” The context added particular weight to the emotional vision. I had come along afterward bringing extra clothing, mainly pajamas and underwear for the hospital stay, and at the moment it seemed possible to me that, given the proverb, no one in that family would be happy ever again.

It was a sobering thought, and it put me on alert. I had children too, younger than my friend’s, but they had their vulnerabilities as well—they had desires, and the frustrations to desire. So I hunted around for things to do, clearing a path, smoothing the way toward their futures. My daughter discovered early on that she wanted to play the piano—not a violin, not a keyboard, but a *piano*. So, well, okay, that was easy enough: we found her a piano.

I mean, seriously, I couldn’t even get the instrument out of the truck before she was all over it.

My son, for his part, basically needed *room*, an exit from the strictures of developed social play into the boundlessness of an unconstructed world.

From the beginning he has pulled me outdoors, enticed me out from behind my desk and onto frozen dog sleds, into kayaks floating among whales in the Pacific Ocean, on treks in arid Southwestern mountains photographing petroglyphs—and then he has gone to places where I could not follow, so that his safety did not depend on *me*, but on another father—this one Kenyan, who sat outside his cloth tent at night with a wooden club to whack any marauding hyena that came too close. The lions, apparently, were no problem.

I have wanted to risk all this personal detail here in order to bring each of us, in our minds, personally, onto a certain pathway that leads in the end to M.B. McLatchey’s new book, ***The Lame God***. It’s a book that pretty much requires a personal response from us, because the core of its themes centers around a person: 16-year-old Molly Bish. It is possible that some of you may have heard of her, insofar as her plight unfolded for months in the national news. In fact, it is entirely possible that a few of you may actually have known *her*, the real Molly Bish—maybe as a high school student, maybe as a neighbor— before in June, 2000, she was abducted from her lifeguard tower at Comins Pond in Warren, MA, and subsequently raped, tortured and then murdered.

Whether McLatchey herself knew Molly is unclear: she does not disclose what, exactly, her relationship to Molly Bish and her family has been. But she does reveal that she has, at a minimum, spoken with the mother, Maggie Bish, to obtain permission to write explicitly about Molly, and about the attending horrors that ensued after she was found to be missing. McLatchey writes in her

Introduction “This book is offered in memory of Molly Bish and in homage to her mother, Maggie Bish, who encouraged me to ‘keep talking about this; keep writing.’” McLatchey adds that “The story that this book tells is true. No names have been changed to protect the innocent—the innocent have already seen the face of evil, smelled its breath, learned its customs.”

This is a unique introduction to the poetry. We as readers are explicitly denied the usual aesthetic distances from the events depicted in the stories because the events are not fictionalized. McLatchey’s artistry here is working with brute facts—among which is the troubling recognition that the perpetrator, whoever he is, has not been apprehended. The man is still at large out there. Accordingly, there is no sense of justice in the book, no comfort derived from cosmic symmetries, no vengeance exacted, no eye taken for an eye, no recourse. Just horror.

THE RAPE OF CHRYSIPUS

“She came home bone by bone. First her shin bone, then her skull. In the end, 26 of Molly’s bones came home to us.” –Mother of 16-year-old Molly Bish

For the rape of Chryssipus, King Laius suffered.

The gods saw what he took –
a young boy’s chance

to play in the Nemean Games, to make his offerings
to Zeus, to win his wreath
of wild celery leaves, advance

the Greek way: piety, honor, and strength. He raided
their heaven, not just a small boy’s frame.
Their justice

was what Laius came to dread: a son that would take
his mother to bed,
a champion of the gods, an *Oedipus*.

We called on the same gods on your behalf, asked
for their twisted best:
disease like a Chimera to eat

your Laius piece by piece; a Harpie, who might wrap
her tongue around his neck
and play his game of breathing

and not-breathing that he made you play.
Medusa’s curse in stone – and a Golden Ram
to put you back together bone by bone.

The quotation alone is hair-raising—though with that said, I am struck by the poet’s lack of overt drama in the poetry that follows. On the one hand we have the sensational, flat enumeration of the number of bones that were, over time, returned one-by one to the grieving mother—and with the manner of that return left unstated. How would you do it? Did they come in a box? Labeled with an

evidence tag? Did a policeman ring the doorbell, and hand over her skull? What kind of protocol could even be possible here?

However, before we step out into that emotional darkness, we hear the poet's measured voice avoiding hysteria by invoking a classical myth, and with it organizing a parallel narrative of divine retribution to help her metabolize her raw feeling. Because contemporary explanations just feel petty, just lame excuses offering a simplistic cause-and-effect model to rationalize the behavior—something like 'bad parenting creates bad boys', or these days maybe it is a defective neuron causing the problem. Bullshit. It takes the scale of mythology to begin to convey the goliath male evil that descended upon Molly.

The poet's task is, essentially, to figure out how to express the full weight of the violation without screaming. It is a delicate matter. Often in the book McLatchey combines classical figures with traditional poetic forms to allow us perspective with which to view the scope of violence, and the depth of the insult to Molly and her family. In *Little Fits*, for instance, the poet composes a sequence of Petrarchan sonnets to organize her thoughts and feelings, and to secure a mental space in which to arrive at insight, emotional clarity, and decision. The formal restraints allow the emotional matter to be pitched very high, but without ever sounding bathetic. And look at the graceful formal movement in this sonnet:

CATHARSIS

A portly man on TV says he's eating jelly donuts
since his doctor recommended more fruit. My head
tucked beneath your chin, I feel you grin. A welcome joke—
what Aristotle called *catharsis*: the comedy channel in bed.

A piecemeal purging meant to clear our minds, a chance
to graft, like patchwork, the wreckage of our lives
onto a campy figure, cheer for him; love him for dancing
when the gods single him out, pile on the twisted trials.

As if—for a few moments—we are watching someone else's
life unfold. Pizza and beer, you my armchair, tucked in our sheets.
As if—for a few moments—we have climbed up from some well
to lounge on sun-baked stone, take in the Dionysian Mysteries:

lore of the vine—seasons, grapes, wine. Nothing ever truly dying.
And us, tender initiates, laughing so hard we're crying.

Fortunately for the book—possibly for the poet herself—McLatchey moves from her contemplation of the brutish facts of murder, and toward a reprieve, toward a respite that acknowledges other continuities besides those of abiding anguish. Here we find an intimate pair *coupled*, which is to say, linked in their common association that, for the moment, includes humor and catharsis. Here we are offered an image of mutual purpose, and shared pleasures, as well as their doubled purgation expelling together the poisonous, unacceptable affects.

The purgation signals an emotional transition out of trauma and into sorrow, and to a generalized sense of both vulnerability and promise. The transition is an essential point of the poet's vision. She discloses that she, too, has children—two sons, we are told—and she has to wonder what she has let herself in for. Having children is a sort of biological vote for continuities, a tacit endorsement of future, continued participation in the social morass. Like it or not, she as a parent is compelled to be party to a world that has its disgusting matters, its truly fearful possibilities, against which she tries to civilize brute desires, and ward off threats to naked innocence. But there is only so much she can do.

Always in the distance
burnt brown combines sweeping up
spools of wheat. My sons sleep
in the back seat—the younger one
bowed over; the other up straight
like a sun-drenched sheaf.

Up ahead, one sheer pool after another
that the heat lays down. *Day stars*
(the older one calls them) spring up
from the pools and usher us on,
then flicker and steam.
A Dakota we've never seen...

I reach back to wake the older one:
solicitude, or a favoritism
that I had thought might pass.
Or a reckoning of our lives
that comes when the light slants
like this, as if we are looking through

more than window glass. I pat
his leg to comfort, or to bless him,
or to brush some divination off.
But he is already looking out....

from *Joseph Dreams Two Dreams*

There is only so much any of us can do, and who knows if it is ever enough?

POSTSCRIPT: It occurs to me that an interesting mirror image to McLatchey's book—or at least to the events composing the detonating first cause of the book—is a poem found in Frank Bidart's first poetry collection, **Golden State**. I'm thinking of *Herbert White*, which is the first of Bidart's poetic attempts to inhabit the psyche of various historical persons—Vaslav Nijinsky, for example, the anorectic Ellen West—and convey through them his own matching torments. Herbert White is, or was, a convicted murderer, child molester, and necrophiliac. Bidart's poem, with its monstrosity, can be read as a companion piece to McLatchey's traumatic abhorrence. I have written about *Herbert White* elsewhere: <http://www.bradcrenschaw.com/sin-body-frank-bidarts-human-bondage>

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