



## YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

Philip Raisor. *That Naked Country*. Fabius, NY: Standing Stone Books, 2019.

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Philip Raisor takes the title of his sixth volume of poetry from a somewhat convoluted epigraph, a comment by Charles II about William Berkeley, governor of colonial Virginia. A century before the American Revolutionary War, Berkeley led a rampage of revenge against the defeated insurgents of Bacon's Rebellion; Charles II purportedly called Berkeley a "fool" who "has put to death more people in that naked country"—Virginia—"than I did here for the murder of my father." Comparisons of body counts aside, the quote supplies Raisor with both a theme and a setting: the inevitable consequences of violent revolution, and the battle-scarred terrain of Virginia, a landscape with which the poet, professor emeritus at Old Dominion and a Virginia resident for the past 50 years, is intimately familiar.

Though the ostensible subjects of the poems in *That Naked Country* range widely, the theme of revolution dominates the book. References to historical revolutions abound: the aforementioned Bacon's Rebellion, the American War for Independence, Hong Xiuquan's Rebellion, Nat Turner's Rebellion, The American Civil War, Paris in 1789, Guanajuato in 1910, Cuba in 1956, and many others; Raisor name-checks revolutionary figures like Fidel, Che, Black Elk, Emiliano Zapata, Mother Jones, James Baldwin, etc. The book is divided into five sections, each with its own epigraph, and the epigraphs focus Raisor's theme even more sharply. For example, Part Three opens with a quote from Octavio Paz: "Revolution, that magical word, the word that is going to change everything, that is going to bring us immense delight and a quick death," while the epigraph for Part Four comes from Victor Serge's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*: "...Never give up the defense of man against systems whose plans crush the individual" (which brought to my mind Hayden Carruth's great lines from "Emergency Haying": "woe to you, watch out / you sons of bitches who would drive men and women / to the fields where they can only die.")

One subtle arc of the book feels semi-autobiographical. It begins in Raisor's teenage years with a first-person poem about James Dean and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), then continues on to 1970's shootings at Kent State, where Raisor was a graduate student, though that poem is narrated in a more distant third person. "The Weary Professor Writes His Un-Manifesto" portrays the professoriate not as participants, but rather as detached observers: "That's // what professors do. They understand the causes / of rise and fall, similarities between the Catalan Revolt / and the first

Serbian Uprising against Ottoman rule.” But for all the professor’s scholarly expertise, “the student insurgency at Kent State // shocked him.”

From his office, he saw buildings burn,  
knees bend in prayer, rocks and bullets flail the air,  
a non-violent hand collapse, and a thin girl fall into  
wounded bodies like a secret orgy in a graveyard.  
You did not mention the irony, Dr. King, but O,

There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution.

From Kent State, jump forward 47 years and two states over to Charlottesville, site of the infamous Unite the Right rally (“very fine people, on both sides”). Just by chance, the speaker of “On Instructing a Nazi How to Walk” is passing through town on that August day in 2017; he witnesses “mob violence,” “a modern storm trooper,” “a bearded man with ... a swastika on his forehead,” and “placards and words hot enough to melt Kevlar. / I see a man rope-whip an old woman. I see a gray car // plummet into a crowd, then back up into inertia.” In the poem’s denouement, swastika-man is righteously chastised by a queenly African American woman who calls him out (in italics, no less) as a “pale scribe of evil,” a “hooked-cross blank,” a “forged sacrilege.” She tells him to “be a man ... walk like you know where you come from.”

Like “On Instructing a Nazi,” the strongest poems in *That Naked Country* speak directly to our current place and time, but in a mode more communal than personal, and they are a sobering critique of where and who we are now, and of the cultural amnesia that seems all too common in our American zeitgeist. The loss of historical awareness, of national memory, comes up again and again. “The past is a ricochet of memory,” Raisor says in “Yesterday”:

So where does it go, all burned up and soggy  
with tears? Albums, computer chips, revisionist

textbooks, forums on how the present is doing,  
a half-filled well sucking down debris we leave

behind. I wonder why buckets we drop  
into our past come back so empty?

It almost goes without saying that reading *That Naked Country* now, in late September of 2020, is a sobering experience: it’s impossible even to skim Raisor’s lines without thinking of the ongoing revolt in our cities and towns as we grapple with centuries of injustice and brutality against people of color, and of the upcoming national election almost certain to be disputed, with the horrifying specter of armed partisans running riot in the streets. (A few weeks’ time may prove me wrong on this; I fervently hope so, but won’t hold my breath.) This collection was published six months before the murder of George Floyd, but of course police killings are hardly new to 2020. “Through

the Morning Glass, Darkly,” begins with an epigraph from the late John L. Lewis: “Let their crystallized voice proclaim their injustices and demand their privileges.” The poem’s speaker, walking through a battered neighborhood in Norfolk, sees “a body under a sheet, police tape, / a small crowd, red lights thumping store windows,” and wonders, “Drug bust? Another cop shooting?” Safely back home, listening out his window, he hears the chants:

We want Truth! Justice! Present voices, dead young  
men, marching for respect. A mother angrily hoists  
love like Boston tea for the masses. A violent beauty  
from the past is born is born is born.

“The Broken Nights of Glass,” with its evocation of Kristallnacht, is structured around a painful refrain: “what do we do?” What do we do when “nightmares make sense,” when “governance is ungovernable,” when “Canada is an option again”? When “the air you breathe is a lie,” when “the economy improves after books burn,” when “a neighbor aims a pointed gun from her mouth” (are you seeing the same TV images I am?), when “crossing streets requires passports”? When all these and more 61 happen, when this is the world you inhabit, what do you do? In an italicized apocalyptic coda, Raison answers,

I can tell you what the past has told me: get ready  
for a casting out, a sublime madness, defiance, clarity,  
exultation, truth, get ready to confront ourselves  
in the corridors of horror and hope. The rest is new.  
You will have seen it before.

For my money the most powerful poem in the book is “Independence Day,” which begins with a quotation from Chris Hedges’s *The Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt*. “Independence Day” is a call to arms, reminding us that when it’s our time, the dead will be watching: “They want action, don’t they? If our response is timid / we fail centuries of slaves and miners ground down / to their graves in an unfettered industrial age.” Is it even useful, Raison wonders, in the era of cyberwar and drone strikes, to “sit at desks, coordinate / warnings of deportations, unlawful seizures, corporate / takeovers of our lives?” The only true choice is rebellion, insurgency, deposing the oppressors, and this revolution, the poem predicts, will not

collapse like Icarus, sun-blistered and doomed,  
no, we will fall, in the modern way, freely, without

wingsuits, eyes like drones, toward targets thought  
invincible, the labyrinths of self-proclaimed gods.

I’ll close with a short poem, almost an aphorism, that needs no commentary. This is “Perceptible,” quoted in full:

The eye  
does not see itself  
seeing  
if the mirror is set  
in another  
century  
if we stare  
straight ahead  
blindly  
when what we need  
to see  
is behind.

In its poetic examination of our American past and our dysfunctional present, Philip Raison's *That Naked Country* looks forward with clear eyes into uncertainty. – Luke Whisnant