

DAYE PHILLIPPO

Thunderhead

POEMS



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S L A N T



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Slant

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-7252-6251-5

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-7252-6250-8

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-7252-6252-2

Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Names: Phillippo, Daye.

Title: Thunderhead : poems / Daye Phillippo.

Description: Eugene, OR: Slant, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-7252-6251-5 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-7252-6250-8 (paperback) | ISBN 978-1-7252-6252-2 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Poetry. | American poetry -- 21st century. | Country life -- Indiana -- Poetry.

Classification: PS3566.I6 T48 2020 (print) | PS3566.I6 (ebook)

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

JUNE 26, 2020

In memory of my parents, John and Ola Barkley



*With special thanks to Clark Dinwiddie,
dear friend and neighbor who welcomed our family to farm country*

Just ask the animals, and they will teach you.
Ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you.
Speak to the earth, and it will instruct you.

—Job 12: 7–8a

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CURRENT

The man who installed our submersible well pump,
lowering it a hundred twenty feet down, said,
“I hear current down there, strong current,”
so I have reason to believe
this water we’re drinking is from the Teays,
ancient river, forced underground
when glaciers scrubbed and gritted
their thick Arctic tonnage across this land.
Ponce de Leon searched too far south.
Our ninety-two-year-old neighbor, Clark,
has been coming in thirsty from these fields
for most of his life, splashing his hands and neck,
then slugging down great gulps, wiping his mouth
with the back of his broad, calloused hand,
then kissing his love, his wife, Celena,
sitting down in the kitchen to supper—
fried chicken, buttered potatoes, tomato slices,
green beans from the garden.
For a treat, she’d pop the top
on a jar of zucchini pickles,
his favorite, her specialty. His big hands,
tender on her in her final illness. . . .
Tonight he draws a tall glass of well water.
It stands clear, cold, pure beside his solitary plate
while night comes on, while the Teays
rushes and throbs, while stars appear
in the purpling sky, one by quiet one.

THUNDERHEAD

Last week, at the supper table I was daydreaming
after the meal, looking and not looking
through the dining room's wavy glass,
glass as old as its farmhouse, which is to say
almost a century older than me.
As I'd been doing all afternoon,
I was mulling the word "radiance,"
how to use its Latinate voluptuousness
in a poem in a way that wouldn't seem cheap,
when my husband said, *Your face. It's glowing,*
and I said, *Well, maybe I'll just sit here in this light forever,*
and he said, *No, it's not that.*

I noticed it earlier, in the kitchen, too.

At my age, I knew it couldn't be youth, so maybe
the word itself was incandescing? I mean, what if,
in choosing words to ponder we choose
our countenance, too, the simple way
switching out a blackened bulb for new
relights the shade, the room, in which case,
You have another think coming,
as my mother was fond of saying, could actually mean
something to look forward to.

The way those thunderheads rolled in
yesterday evening between rains
—white, gray, old lavender rimmed in gold—
cumulus, piled so high they made the sky
into a great Midwestern sea, and thunder
into a great whale sounding its depths,
sights and sounds one might expect
when being born into the next.

The setting sun diffusing gold through
the humid air, light pouring over
beanfield and barn, pasture, cat, every tree

and me, summer robe and flipflops, out
in that light, stepping through wet grass
and the aroma of wet grass, searching,
camera in hand, trying to find a way
to capture it all. Giving up, just standing there,
letting Radiance thunder through my head.

COYOTE CHAMBER

October's chill dusk and the western horizon
is a persimmon rim, darkening
behind trees. Frost tonight. In dusky light
the woman at the clothesline is pulling cold laundry
from the line, folding the stiff cloth
as much by touch as by sight into a basket.
The dog and cat are with her, too.
Then, coyotes, far off, west. Yips that drift
into something like laughter,
laughter into howl-at-the-rising-moon.
Notes threading through trees like bonfire smoke
through spikes of goldenrod, curling
above the garden's limp-black leavings,
over the mown grass to the clothesline—
five-lined musical staff, post as repeat,
repeat, wooden pin notes.
The cat and dog move close as her cold fingers
fumble-fly at the pins. Yet, when the howls
begin again, she hears more ancient rite
than threat, thinks
chambered cave, flickering firelight,
mineral pigment, no brush. Coyotes singing,
loping the undulating stone.
Chamber of Horses, woman as chamber,
wild notes echoing in her chest.

TO THE ANGEL IN MY LIVING ROOM

Angel above the closet door, prone
in flight among stars, trumpet to lip,
long white gown and chestnut hair flowing,
ribbon of old rose trailing beneath you
so as not to become entangled in wings.
Framed in half-opened eye, framed
in plastered transom, you sail motionless
(though suggestive of motion) above history,
the door's creaky hinge, closet beneath
the stairs, space reducing back like years,
items stored in there changing over time, now
my vacuum sweeper, cans of paint,
old Super 8 movie projector and reels,
our children still babies just being born,
just learning to walk. But in 1865, back
when this house was built? Broomcorn
broom, black metal dustpan? Curling scraps
of leftover flowered wallpaper, shellac
for woodwork and floors, a tintype or two?
Angel who guards the door, musician
of music I cannot hear, musician who appears
to be looking away, what do you think
of our comings and goings, our various notes
and dramas? Or perhaps it's not for you to say.
Your clarion call to mystery, not terrifying
like visitations by biblical counterparts.
I don't tremble or faint in your presence,
in fact, most often I forget you're up there
as any dustcloth would show. Perhaps your
lyric goes something like this: Forgetting

is a layer of dust, a half-opened eye,
a plastered transom in which to be suspended
at the door of dark space going back
years, while memory is a mote, an anthem,
old rose that may entangle if one forgets
to drape it out of the way of wings.

GREAT LAKES

for Caleb

At fifteen, he stands blond and lanky,
gazing out the louvered hospital window
onto a Lake Michigan
as green and chopped as slag glass,
fracture lines curving each wave.
With his parents, he traveled north
to meet their newest grandson,
the boy's nephew. The baby,
early in utero a twin, but born alone.
Never is its own weeping.

On the drive up, the call.
Their ninety-six-year-old neighbor, Clark,
the boy's best friend,
the boy's "ninety-six-year-old teenager,"
the boy's "I wanted him to be my best man," born
into the next life.

In the room's dim light, a grief as green
as the winter lake settles over the boy.
If only the waves could draw it
like the wreckage of six thousand ships,
out into the lake's great heart.