

SEAN KILPATRICK

## *Thank You, Steel China: My Panic Is Your Panic Too*

### **Thank You in the City of Steel China**

My mother aborted me on someone's doorstep.  
I dreamed of coat hangers. I cried at thrift stores.  
The people who raised me worked in oil.  
We ate vats of it for dessert.  
We were accused of minstrel antics.  
We were accused of playing violins.  
They cut us a little bit and promised more.

At the hospital, the doctor showed me slides.  
"These are slides of what you would look like if you were better."  
They were slides of road kill, slides of pregnant women killed  
by fire.

"Everything drips if you hate it long enough."  
"I want to go," I said.  
"You big tease," the doctor said, "Please cough for me."

The window showed buildings without spines.  
In a bomb space, children cornered their dinner.  
Dinner was shaking and drawing them a treasure map.

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Children in Steel China are not tickled into believing.  
Dinner lost its hind legs first.

I used mine to walk home (what was left of home)  
and worshipped random objects.

I thought I was funny.

Someone saw me in the backyard  
and threw a large rock at my lap.

I dreamed of a girl who had a bruise between her legs  
where something else was meant to be.

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**Dear Inventor of the Triple Tree, Steel China,  
Surgeon's Hall,**

"Imma boo hoo up and down the street for those that hang,  
dress my tears in little suits and call them you and you and  
you . . ."

—from "Fight for Steel China"

Your landmines watch us sleep, doctor.  
The sky crossed with bombs. We love you  
here. We're your biggest fans.

Economy was your thing back then.  
Your dreams were made of whispers. (We keep them numbered.)  
I know, I know — Commission from the mayor,  
oil knives for feet, make the prison shine.  
But have you seen three people dropping into the noose hold  
hands?  
It fills your heart with good silverware.

We send you letters from the stove.

In Surgeon's Hall it is cold and bombs announce their arrival.  
We give them what little of us we can spare.  
Our meat is so valuable. Our meat  
is so valuable because we wear it.  
Even our mirrors are shaped like dollar signs.  
But don't worry, everyone's paycheck involves  
disembowelment, castration, bad music.

But we are poor here and tremble  
in closets. We bite our arms and swallow  
all day. We go to your statue  
and cry, come home, starve some more.

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But Thank You is teaching self-defense to the cows.  
And just the other day Mr. Ostrich robbed a convenience store.  
He was bored.  
And look, even this girl's suicide note reads:  
learn to sing.

Yours quite literally,  
The animals of Steel China

## **My Name Is Thank You**

Heavy tax fees were no longer fashionable in Steel China.  
Instead, the citizens were allowed to plan which five years  
of their lives they wanted to spend in prison.  
This was economical. This was fair. This worked.  
I chose puberty. I filled in the box.  
They came to the house and escorted me out with batons.

They said, "These handcuffs are gold, all yours.  
In them, you would be even more beautiful as a skeleton.  
We might feed you today or in three months.  
The chair has caught fire and you must sit down.  
Water might drip into your eyes for a long time."

I killed a man for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.  
I killed a man to eat and stay alive  
and for every man I killed  
they gave me another death sentence.  
They walked by the cell  
(there was only one cell)  
jiggling nooses, electric chairs, dogs, family portraits.  
They walked by the cell with steak and shaved labia.  
They walked by the cell spraying mace  
and I tried desperately to eat the clouds,  
tongue stuck past the bars.  
"Thank You," they said, "please die."  
They were polite about how  
they killed us  
and always  
knew my name.

## I'm Sorry

Most abortions in Steel China were performed through  
interpretive dance.

The high school debate team always turned into a masturbation  
contest.

At my probation hearing, I showed them my talent for throwing  
knives.

I was released immediately and given a free house  
filled with taxidermy heads and bombs that had stopped ticking.  
Everyday I watered the landmines, went back in, and stared at a  
different head.

Small country presidents, former popes, animals  
—but those were too beautiful to watch stuffed.  
They looked like they were going somewhere.  
"Would you like a sandwich?" I asked them.  
"I only eat sandwiches now and sit down when I want."

Black jaws in the living room showed me outside.  
A girl was running through my landmines.  
She had big red fist prints from punching herself.  
She was naked except for a yellow blanket around her waist.  
"Stop," I said. "There are bombs where your feet want to be."  
"I know," she replied. "This is how Steel China girls pick suicide."  
"But my lawn . . ." I said.  
"I can already tell we're in love," she replied. "So, instead, I'll come  
in."  
"Let me draw you a map of the landmines."  
"If they love me, they love me," she said. "You should let them  
have me,  
if they want me that bad, and stop whining."  
I winced every time her bare foot touched the ground.  
Since this was love, and we were to be married,  
I knew a tragedy would come soon and be great.  
The first tragedy was that her toes were painted black.

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"Dear, what have they done to you?" I asked.

"There is almost nothing left," she sighed. "And I'm sure you'll want the rest."

"I have to write you a love poem now," I said.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Is that your name?"

But she had already stopped talking to other humans.

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## **My Panic Is Your Panic Too**

We sleep inside a phonograph  
that sings our dreams.

You say we are moving. There is a house.  
You close ten fingers and it is night.

Our music grows perfect  
only when you are made of fists.

I found my panic  
when you extended your hand.

Send love bulletins  
every minute, every day.

We can only forget Steel China  
when music plays in our dreams.

The phonograph gives cute  
death rattles when we conceive.

## A Boring Place

I'm Sorry drew a cartoon of me with that poem floating up from  
my ass in a bubble.

She re-titled it: "Meaningless," "Too Cynical," and "Cliché Love  
Crap."

She only talked to the taxidermy heads of animals.

They sunk down the wall, carrying her problems and advice.

I had to hire a psychiatrist for the animals.

He paced back and forth with big pills cupped in his hand.

They gobbled them and looked at me and laughed.

They told me that I'm Sorry cries before and after orgasm.

They threatened to run outside and jump on the landmines.

"You don't have the guts, quite literally," I said, being cute.

They showed their teeth and said: "My guts are in your pocket."

The psychiatrist had told them to distract me so he could go hump

I'm Sorry.

My birth musician called on the phone and told me  
to jump back in the womb at seventeen o'clock.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

"You're acting like a child," said the psychiatrist, changing  
positions.

I grabbed a head by its whiskers. We tongue-kissed  
till it vomited the pills down my throat.

"I will disappear into a boring place called Hate  
where nothing ever dies and sit there like a big plant,  
watering myself with gibberish," I said.

"It is sad because everyone goes there," the head replied.

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**I'm Sorry's Dear John Letter (originally published in  
*The Paris Review* and that's how I found out she was  
gone),**

Your heart is something nosed around by dogs.

Do you think this knife looks good?

I fooled you. It's just my hair.

Don't you think your heart bores my pets?

Put my hair in your chest instead.

Cross your toes.

It will improve you

if I say

it will improve you.

Love,

I'm Sorry.

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**There was also a Dear John painting by I'm Sorry on display in the Louvre. The real title, before they shortened it:**

'Up-skirt Library Shareholders  
Feeling Violent, Yet Strangely Blanketed  
by Congregating Hours of the Advancing Day  
and Cascading into Existential Lust  
with Thoughts Like:  
Here Is the Plain with Kicking Infant.  
Here Are the Towns, Parading Murder.  
The Short Judge Who Raps.  
Candles Shaped Like Vertebrae.  
A Venereal Disease Xylophone.  
Bullhorns Filled with Plastic Dog Shit.  
A Neck Bloated Loose and Wind  
Singing Through the Hole, Singing This . . .'

## Goodbye Steel China

I felt like my own bacteria were tired of my voice.  
Or they were listening, but they were listening with headphones on.  
I laid money on my chest and told them to take it.  
I pretended there was a catalogue from which I could order  
tiny microphones. I watched through a microscope.  
They were constantly eating. "Chew me faster," I said.  
"You're so petite."

So,  
the girl was answering Steel China's prayers.

So,  
the girl was out there parting her smile around another cock.

So,  
I donned a blindfold and tangoed alone.

So,  
all over the front lawn I went with my indignant shoes.

So,  
I dreamed people had guillotines instead of torsos.

So,  
no one had any hands left to pray.

So,  
things got better.

So,  
I condemned myself to sitting and grew a beard.  
The rent was cheap inside my beard.  
Still, everyone refused to live like that.