



BADGER, APOCRYPHA

ADAM DAY

Selected and Introduced by

JAMES TATE

The Poetry Society of America

NEW AMERICAN POETS • CHAPBOOK SERIES

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F I R S T E D I T I O N

F O R A L I S T A I R

The house seen from everywhere ...
-*Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

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Biographical Note

Adam Day is a master of disguises. His primary disguise is, of course, the badger, but this badger is no ordinary badger. He morphs into a man, then morphs right back into a badger. But most of the time he straddles the duality of being both, sometimes living in a house, sometimes underground, but with a pain that encompasses both man and beast.

There are times through a whole poem when we are unsure of which creature we are reading about. He lives in an ordinary human house. He does human things. He wears clothes. And, yet, we are sure this is a badger. Why? Because the poet says he is.

These are brutal, often savage poems, tearing organ from organ. It is in these acts of brutality that tenderness is found, not through sentimentality but true compassion, one suffering leading toward another. Such as when it comes to old age.

However, in the early poems of this chapbook, such as “A Small Family History,” there is no tenderness or redemption. There is only brute animal history. Disease and natural disasters decimate populations. There is little hope of survival. And yet our narrator does survive some seventy-odd years, not glorious years but years of marital betrayal, sickness, addiction.

In “Badger’s Mistress” it is said:

*He never minded the gray bladders
beneath her eyes that lay
like roadkill raccoon pups. Didn't*

*mind the arroyo of dark veins
and tough hair at her back, her breath
like the moss-bogged bottom

of a cistern, the bread crumbs
in her pockets, her small-teeth.*

This is particularly original and cruel description, right down to the small teeth detail. What kind of animal would betray his mate for this creature?

From his ghastly birth through his long and sadly grotesque life we follow this animal with compassionate interest. There is nothing noble about him, and yet we root for him. It is in the writing that subtle glimpses of light shine through and make us want him to succeed, to overcome the downward pull of his character. Does he make it? You'll have to judge for yourself.

—JAMES TATE

BADGER, APOCRYPHA

**THE GODS DESCRIBE BUILDING BODIES,
LIKE BADGER'S**

We pour the eyes in with a ladle
like postholes half-filled with mud-
water, tap them in if we have to. Sprinkle
hair onto bald, moist limbs and faces,
like boiled potatoes—sometimes
we confuse female
for male and she is left looking like
a pubescent billy goat. We take
the liver and kidneys squatting
like frogs from the brown dresser drawer—
the flaps of skin pinned open
with a system of strings.
The pliers are for pulling ears
from two white-rasped
skull-craters. We shake the body
hard by the arms—penis
and more pop out—teeth fill
the mouth gap, and finally, the green
leakage of ordure falls from that button
of twisted flesh.

BADGER BORN AMID TROUBLE

After a breeze through a screen door
scattered the eyebrows
from a man's face, a door slammed
and hate was born. After the salamanders
slumped in their holes, and cowbells
without cows rang
in pasture fog. After houses
were chimneyed, and machetes
freed men of hands, after
the blast, after a stockinged
leg was lodged like a lamp in a storefront
window, badger was vomited forth
by his mother—a gutter pipe
birthing a head
of leaf mush.

BADGER SPEAKS FOR HIMSELF

My parents blessed my birth
with celibacy. An ordinary
and anxious child, I have
never been comfortable
underground. Though I was a member
of the Communist Party for a time,
initially to meet women
as liberal with their bodies
as with their politics. Eventually,
I embraced Marxism, which is to say
I had lingering doubts
about my masculinity. Ordinariness
has become something
to pursue. In future years
I will be kept from falling
from high places by a sense of responsibility
to loved ones that will fade
into routine. I will become obese
and a dedicated philanderer—my excess
hiding, like god, the tool of my degradation.

BADGER'S BROTHERS

a performance of loving
sons and brothers-in-arms
*which he pays anew
as if not paid before.*

linked like orangutans
from the ship's ropeworks
*for the besieged vessel is, of course,
a metaphor for the human
condition, in general.*

sat and ate and drank
coffee in the bakery,
until dawn *and thrashed him
with a cane so furiously
that it shattered, and blinded
by his own blood and trying
to rise, he ripped the bolted table
from the floor.*

with eyes shining like polished
steel. *Brothers, I thank you for
your kind intentions toward
my future happiness,
and for your interesting
if somewhat dogmatic behavior.*

A SMALL FAMILY HISTORY

Everything we built turned
against us. Our growing, prosperous
populations starved, war erupted;
we suffered storms, floods, earth-
quakes, which forced rats
from their holes and into our
more secure tunnels. It was flu.
Then the black pussing lumps
at our pink groins and joints. We spat
blood. Some fled. Some found
scapegoats. My clan climbed
from their dens over the frost, past
the pits and rivers of dead,
and opened cold human neighbors,
crawled in for warmth, saying
*I leave this record in case anyone
should still be alive in the future.*

THE REVOLUTION

The signal was a little girl's raised gloved hand to her red hair. So, it spread along the rye fields, through the alfalfa and dusty roads to our homes like birds barking in the hollow of the hills. We were rebels or, when generals were killed, the generals. Sometimes the military were better rebels. We were the products of our own ideas; being rough is a game. Unseen loudspeakers drowned protest in canned laughter and waltzes. Men patched wounded women; like pregnancy it was an unfair competition. Captured or capturing, condemnation followed upon execution. What's lovely about war is its devotion to thoroughness and order. It keeps count. At the end we got down and tasted the forest floor, holding the place where someone was before, stood in dead shoes, understanding the mathematics of it, the finite sets of odd cardinality, below the pirated nest of a titmouse and eight pink-white eggs.

ON LOCATION

But I haven't told you what the thing is about yet. The characters wander freely in and out of frame as they talk. Here everything is imported—arrives in crates by steamship or train—*I'm not a dandy; I merely watch myself go by*. It is a fortunate country... or it is not. Glasses in hand, Badger would leap into its sea but it would not have him. What does it care? He closes a book, tightens his tie. Backstage, the milk's off. The cords won't reach.

BADGER MARRIED

She sleeps alone
in the burrow beneath a tangle
of roots. A septum divides her uterus.
At the seventh month she stepped
on a grave and our girl was born
clubfooted. When I fall
asleep her little fingers creep up
and undo my necktie. Trust
is an ugly deity. She cannot
finish a cigarette without
eating it. Brother, we clean
our dead. It's a good
we can't imagine deserving.

THE CHARACTERS SPEAK UP

There are balconies overflowing with red
geraniums. Badger sells apricots, asparagus,
eggs, acceptance of the end. A kingfisher
recites the Nicene Creed and in a pool
of broken sunlight, Badger's wife: a piano
teacher with knobbly knuckles. One
grows dizzy looking down. A prick, she once
told Badger, is still a prick though it bends
slightly to the left. —*A woman who sings Strauss
as marvelously as I do couldn't possibly mean
that. —It's only a poem, Mrs. —But why us,
Love? —Think of it as a history, if
it helps. It certainly isn't personal.* Midday
is in their apartment, the furnaces roar
in the ears, hell revolves, and in poor lighting
the elastic eye holds the blackberry
scratch at her pale thick thigh. A neighbor
knocks. —*I had the distinct feeling someone
was about to knock. I suspect there's really nothing
to us—he hasn't given us anything resembling
a truth against which to measure, at night—*

BADGER'S SON

He is the first shit of the fourth reich, in yellow galoshes. Gelding a horse called Palestrina, has the expression of an intelligent dog. Unreliable witness to his own existence—he moves like a mistake; his buttock celebrating itself. He slit his right wrist like drawing a watch from a pocket. Like coughing. Above the shadow of the valley of the kitchen sink, singing, *I'm afeared if I don't have a piglet, lamb, or little calf I'll chop my humanness in half*, like twisting a doorknob in a night-quiet room where two sleep furred, and sleep, and are unaware.

WINTER NIGHTS

Walking from the sett into a field of snow, the moon eases from its blue blouse, half-blinded by the hills. Eider shadows skate past the pond boat overturned on shore. There is the fatty scent of pine, like the smell of marrow. Things are blooming that shouldn't yet. Badger reaches up to his black and white face to touch something real but imagined, like some invented criminal pleasure, like making a virtue of a flaw.

O H, M R S.

One midnight Badger left
the toilet seat up and his wife
fell in—so, Mrs. led him
sleep-dazed to a cold closet
and locked him up, telling him
he would be better trained

in isolation. Outside,
an explosion of starlings
from a burning barn—
he wished them harm. Years later,

on his paint-stained workbench
beside the red rubber mallet
a tooth that just howls, and no
wife to be found.

BADGER'S DISCOVERY

Squint-eyed and portly behind
sweater-vest and fogged
glasses, he turned the corner
to his apartment and was clotheslined
blind by a man in a black
jacket. Scared stumbling
he swung his bag, exploding yogurt
over the man's face—the stark white
coagulating—a bullet
of blood running his nose.
Walking numbly away, feet
like sinking mud, Badger could
be heard to say, *I found my hands.*
And from there life changed.

BADGER'S MISTRESS

He never minded the gray bladders
beneath her eyes that lay
like roadkill raccoon pups. Didn't

mind the arroyo of dark veins
and tough hair at her back, her breath
like the moss-bogged bottom

of a cistern, the bread crumbs
in her pockets, her small teeth.
Didn't mind the nickname

she gave him: gravy-leg—
after an incident on the school
soccer field that left a trail of stool

like three slugs, nosing down his thigh.
She had a green thumb—when
she held his piece she held it like

a trowel—a digging implement.
In summer he put his congested
furry cheeks against the cool

of her plump arms, as when a child
he mistook the pillowy flab
of another mother for his

mother's—because the soft of fat
is universal—and the woman could not
have been more amused or flattered.

M R S. S P E A K S

She stands before a window speaking
with a friend, she shifts like compost collapsing
beneath a dress in summer heat. On her nose
a wreck of warts that glisten in light like elvers.
She's remembering out loud: "When the workers
marched Badger came home to find Henry
had my skirt up past my garters, and a leg
of lamb hot on the table. And I told him?
Eat up before it gets cold." In the half-light,
the way the shadows played his face, he looked
like a bearded woman. But, Badger was a bullock.
He took me hard by the arm, on a night walk,
watched an owl snatch a cat from the road, Badger
mewling and hooting beneath stuttering streetlights,
watching with the subtle giddy smile of a retarded child.

B A D G E R U N D E R C O V E R

There are letters steamed
open. There are bugs behind
wallpaper. There is a mechanical
relief found between outsized
mutton thighs. There is a word
that forms *reality* into *poetry*,
then *fiction*— an empty room
lit by a bare bulb—there is
a bland cruelty—music
echoing from a flood-control
chamber. Net curtains around
blacked-out windows. Plastic-wood
cabinets withholding a good man.
Here are his Prussian gray polyester
pants, his cheap mailman's boots
that march.

R U N N I N G O F F A T T H E M O U T H

There are no Siamese twins in this
town, no albinos; only soccer

matches, bourbon, steaming horses
and the slick skirts of afterbirth hanging

from hind ends. I don't care how
depressed you are, I'm not coming

to your party. Champagne
and sodomy are overrated—in that

order. Smoking in the shower, with a bacon
sandwich and a boy named Daniel waiting

on the sink, on the other hand, is
supremely underrated. I admit,

I'm an unnecessarily handsome
knockabout, nightly drunk to no apparent

effect. But, it's nice to be worried about.
It's almost like being cared about.

T R A P P E D B A D G E R

I lifted the wire. Back and forth.

There were men with beards
like black anemones
playing horseshoes. Jobless
farmers. One with a broad streak
of cow's blood down his shirt,
and a daisy chain
around his thick, sun-flecked
neck. His wife died
of stomach cancer in April.

I folded the notch, working it.

*You are a fool, Badger. Damn
you, putting the paw
that was not mine anymore
into my mouth like a lump
of dried chewing gum,
softening it with saliva,
a withered nipple—wearing
the flesh away.*

I looked off. It was a step.

Smell of a butcher's drain.
The live white pulse
of lice. Horseshoes thwacked
the dry dust. *Eat, stumpy, you silly
sunuvabitch . . . and you'll get a Coke.*

AFTER THE TRAP

I was here before man's wings
folded into the body and became
spongy lungs. I am the Christ
of automotive exhaust systems.

There are white nodules of stink
hung at the back of my throat.
I have an uncle made so stupid
by the fireless fury of working-

class life that he rubs WD-40
into sore joints before bed.
His wife gave birth to a cocaine baby
that turned to cloud dust

in her chapped hands. You see, I died
a bit. I shipped my oars and laid
flat on my back in the bottom
of my rowboat. They found me

plum-blue and tangled beneath
the surface in the long white roots
of water lilies, an algaed plat of scalp
floating from my skull like a leaf of cabbage.

BADGER'S NEIGHBOR

His face shaven, kittenish.
Bachelor's eyes. His wife, Mary-
the-bristled-lip's body could be
mistaken for that of a man. Outside,
fish stringers rusted from frozen
shore to pond bottom. Neighbor
craves danger, rough living,
the companionship of young
men. He cut slices out of
a living horse (to eat) without
the animal turning, because
the unbelievable cold, the blue
snow. Mary found love notes
scribbled to a stonemason. *I should
have slept with half a dozen
of them and gotten it out of my
system*, he tells her, curled up
in the den with the dog, hiding
the blackened heels of his hands
like a coin collection in a dark corner.

BADGER TELLS OF NEWS

Neighbors brought news
of a rape. They stapled her hair
to the headboard. We wondered
if they had hands; tongues
were found—a kind
of penance, we thought. More
than one. There were hoofprints
in the morning mud.
The umbrella was still
in its stand. It was bored
with itself—it will not talk. Which,
of course, may be very kind,
considering.

IN MOURNING

My father was inconsiderate enough
to die. A barrister, he loved
his wig: *The criminals like it too. No one wants
to be sent to prison by someone wearing
a T-shirt.* They cut his carotid in autopsy
and asked if we had a scarf he might wear
for the funeral. So he lies in state
like Liberace. The rings won't fit
the swollen fingers. On his sixtieth
he planted his face in the cake. When
the undertaker isn't around I run him through
the range of motions—the pulleys
and cranes of his knees still creak. I've never
seen god in the face of a sleeping girl
or anywhere else. The old lovely bastard.

OLD AGE

Seventy, I'm up at eight, bathe
and trifle about until lunch. After,
I have a cup of champagne—

it makes my mind race—I'm seeking
help. Do I get breathless
when I take exercise? I wouldn't know.

I procrastinate by answering
letters. My neighbors judge me now
entirely on the cut of my coat;

but we're all equally poor here, so the verdict
is softly given. Beside my bed
the radio plays; I read *Bleak*

House. My favorite room is the kitchen,
though I've given up on eating—
I've gotten to an age when I don't like

to have food in my mouth and heaven
is the moment after constipation. You'll be
happy to know, even now

my sex life could fill more than
one wet holiday weekend. Still,
passive as a toilet, I want my God back.

ELEGY FROM HIS CHILDREN

The worst was his naked feet, his buttons
of bone, his ape's gait. Corseted hydrophobe.
Politic and pawed dog's body. Bought, sober
cabbage stump. Feast of nail parings. Busted
lobster pot. Rheum-eyed hogget. Retired professor
of androgyny. Premature evacuation. Made cats
laugh. Fought walls. Red-bearded hyena's ghost.
Skytree of stars. The growling icebergs; the braying
oarlocks at the wastewood coffin. Inside, warm-gloved
softer skin of night, ear-to-ear, smiling or slit.

NOTES

“Badger’s Brothers” draws on Shakespeare’s 30th Sonnet, and Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Paradise to be Regained,” in which Thoreau speaks of the attack on Senator Sumner.

“The Revolution” briefly paraphrases Walter Benjamin’s essay “Central Park,” one of his many writings on Baudelaire.

“The Characters Speak Up” quotes text from Laura Riding’s poem “Death as Death.”

The italicized portion of “Badger’s Son” is taken from Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy’s song “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness.”

“Winter Nights” reconfigures a phrase from Knut Hamsun’s novel *Pan*.

“Badger Undercover” utilizes text from Timothy Garton Ash’s review of the film *The Lives of Others*, entitled “The Stasi on Our Minds,” in *The New York Review of Books*.

“Old Age” quotes briefly from an interview with Sir John Mortimer in the *New York Times Magazine*, and from Elfriede Jelinek’s novel *Lust*.

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Salmagundi: “Badger’s Mistress”

Forklift: Ohio: “Trapped Badger” “Old Age”

Catch Up: Louisville: “Winter Nights”

The Journal: “Running Off at the Mouth”

Hotel Amerika: “The Characters Speak Up”

Salamander: “Badger’s Brothers” “On Location”

The Lumberyard: “Badger’s Discovery”

“Oh, Mrs.” (Published as “Badger Married”)

Tusculum Review: “Badger Born amid Trouble” “Badger’s Neighbor”

“A Small Family History”

Portland Review: “After the Trap” (Published as “Badger on Pain Killers”)

“Badger Married” (Published as “Letter to His Brother”)

B I O G R A P H I C A L N O T E

Adam Day’s work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Guernica*, *AGNI*, *The Kenyon Review*, *FIELD*, *Verse Daily*, *The Iowa Review*, *BOMB*, and elsewhere, and has been nominated for 2008 and 2009 Pushcart Prizes and included in Best New Poets 2008. He is the recipient of a Kentucky Arts Council grant. He coordinates The Baltic Writing Residency in Latvia, and is a contributing editor to the online literary journal *Memorious*.

