

“Of the Land” by Baxter Black

We are of the land. The land that everybody’s trying to save.
We are of the earth. Of the earth from the glimmer to the grave.
We’re the plankton in the ocean, we’re the grass upon the plain,
We’re the lichen on the tundra, we’re the clevis in the chain.

You will find us on the outskirts
Coaxing bounty from the ground
With our watchful eyes cast skyward,
Well beyond the lights of town.
Dust to dust we are committed to the earth in which we stand,
We are farmers by our birthright, we’re the stewards of the land.

There are those who sit in towers
Who pretend to know what’s best,
They pontificate and dabble. They bray loudly. They protest
That a peasant can’t be trusted with the land to which he’s bred
And they rail with the courage of a person who’s well-fed.

We have labored through the ages for these power hungry kings.
We have fueled the wars of nations
With their arrows and their slings,
We have fed the teeming masses
Without fish and loaves of bread
So the poor would sit and listen to the words the prophet said.

Mother Earth can be forgiving when, in ignorance, we err.
But, she can die of good intentions.
She needs someone who will care.
Not with platitudes of poets touting blood and seat and toil,
But with daily care of someone with his hand upon the soil.

Though the bullets become ballots
And the rulers change their names,
They will still march on their bellies,
So our job remains the same.
For the bureaucrats and battleships,
The Einsteins and the choirs
Would spend their life behind the plow, if no one fed their fires.

Used with author permission from his book, "Poems Worth Saving" (2013)

Coyote Cowboy Company
P.O. Box 2190
Benson, AZ 85602
(800) 654-2550
www.baxterblack.com

Annotation by Londyn Lorenz

One of the images that is prominent throughout Baxter Black's poem "Of The Land" is that of death. He makes reference in the first stanza to the "grave", in the second stanza "dust to dust", in the fourth stanza "wars", and in the fifth stanza to the possibility of Mother Earth's death. This motif of death serves two purposes, one is that it reinforces the fact that people, and farmers in particular, are connected to the land even after death. The reference to the grave reminds people that within the grave people become a part of the earth and dust is a part of soil, thus people are a literal part of the land. The abuses he speaks of are largely those done by political figures in ivory towers who believe they know how to best use the land. These political figures are likely attempting to use it in a capitalistic mindset that does not take into consideration the farmers extensive knowledge on how to do what's best for the land. This is one of the reasons that Mississippi Valley Conservancy is so important. They are also trying to protect farmers' lands from big interest companies and politicians who would see their land used in a way that they know is wrong.

The theme of death also serves as a warning against those who would misuse and abuse the land. While the first four stanzas initially may give the reader the idea that Black views the land as nothing more than something to be used, it is the fifth stanza that changes the focus of the whole poem. In it Black talks about Mother Earth, reinforcing that the earth as something that needs to be taken care of and respected as one would their mother. By portraying the land as a mother Black implies that the land provides and nurtures us, her children. She provides food, work, materials, our homes and to abuse these gifts by abusing her is something Black advocates against.

He also talks about how we can make mistakes and while we can be forgiven, if we do not learn from those mistakes, she can "die of good intentions". He warns that while Mother Nature can recover from someone occasionally misusing it in ignorance, unless something changes in systemic abuse, the land can die. This thought that we have the power to destroy the land is a powerful one, it puts the responsibility of preserving the land on us. Destroy seems like a strong word; however when one thinks of destruction as more of a slow violence it makes more sense. Slow violence is a term used by Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, where he defines a type of violence that is "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). Essentially this means that this disaster, this destruction is not something that is instantaneous and easy to see, but is much more sinister in its incremental negative changes that happen over time. This power also highlights the fact that the land can only take so much abuse, it is not a resource that can be used carelessly without real consequences, consequences that can include our own death due to our reliance on the land to survive.