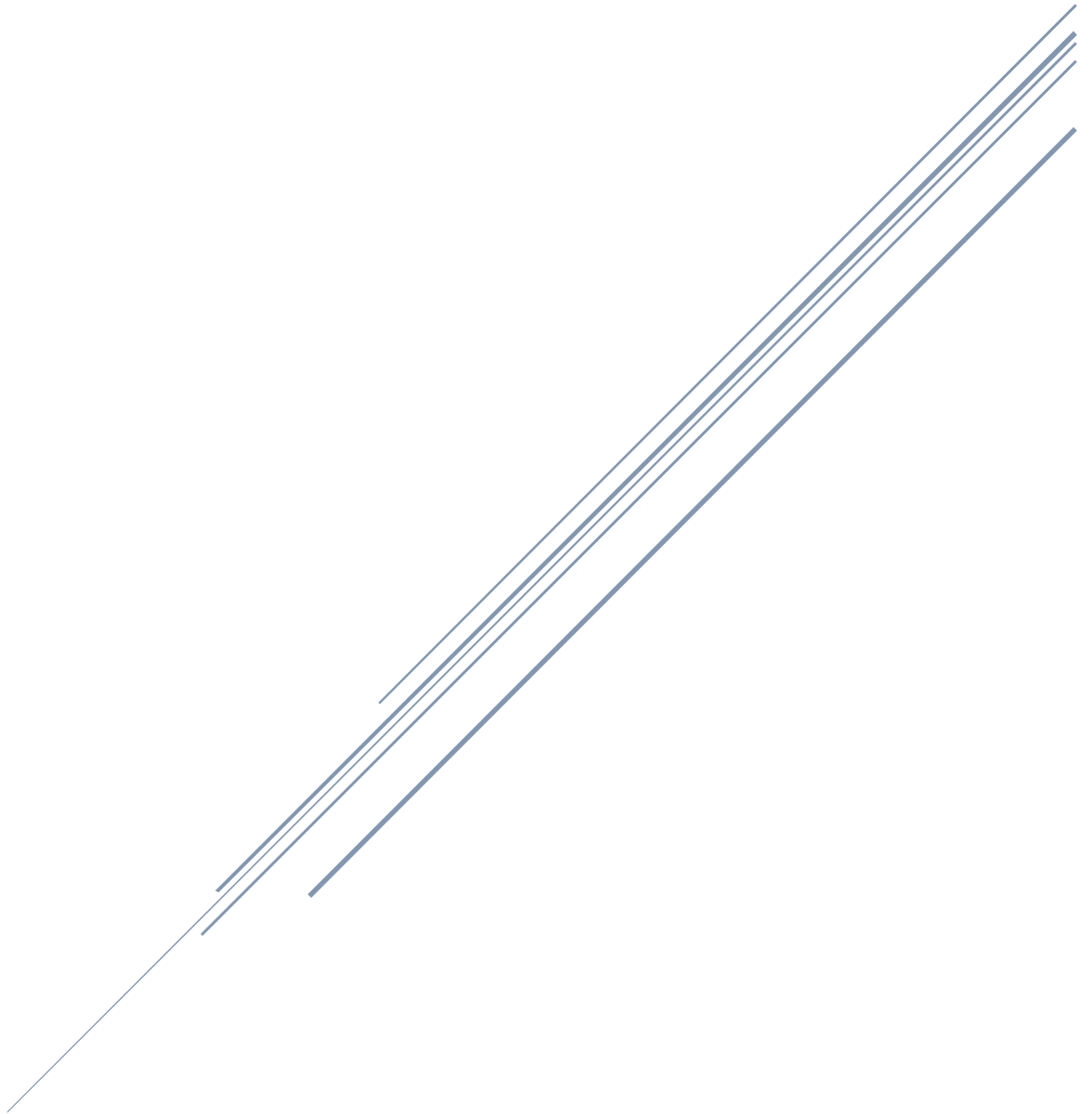


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2016 – 2020



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Self-Immolation: Fire at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris

“The breaking of so great a thing should make a greater crack.” - Shakespeare

The power of fire is not that it burns
but that it distracts:
We save what burns because it burns.

What goes up in flames comes down in ash,
and ash is cremation:
We do not want to die.

There is no suffering in wood, stone, glass,
no Resurrection in their rebuilding:
Only flesh, blood, and bone feel pain.

Never has a candle saved a life,
and though the thirteen-ton bell rings clear
and the stained-glass awes,

injustice has neither ears nor eyes:
The centuries grow heavy with war, revolution, poverty,
buttressed by our sanguine belief in tomorrow.

When the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris was ablaze
I did not cry—I was already sad, already felt the decay
of great things breaking all around me.

I just wanted to ask the firefighters:
Could you have as quickly, desperately,
brought clean water to the poor?

To ask the billionaires:
Did you sell your yachts, your cars?
How did you spare so much money so fast?

And to ask the leaders of the world,
the priests, the mourners, the press,
the Parisians, the tourists, the public:

In lighting myself on fire,
might you be similarly moved?
And what if Notre Dame,

old, venerable, and angry,
had intended to burn to the ground
as you watched with awe-struck eyes?

In Polite Society

In polite society we hold doors open,
say thanks and please, wear crisp
suits when we drop bombs.

In polite society we always greet
Black and Latino and Native peoples,
smile as we strip them of their rights.

In polite society we wear bright jewels
mined by slaves, decry slavery,
tip generously.

In polite society we destroy the Earth
to make us rich, create jobs
that pay the poor to be poor.

And in polite society
we are never rude, never mean—
we murder democratically.

Waiting in Line to Donate Blood After Another Mass Shooting

This is where we come together,
not before but after:
The blood already drained, we refill it.
We never lack for blood to give.

It is hot and volunteers bring water,
or cold and they bring coats.
Amnesiacs improvise memorials,
and even arid soils sprout flowers
held in vases of denuded blood—
we are generous in our way.

Where else but here and in the armed forces
does nothing matter—
not race, not gender, not religion—
save one's ability to proffer blood?

Like a hundred-million others, I wait,
sleeves rolled up bearing veins
plump like unpicked fruit:
How does so much bounty go to rot
time after time after time?

The dead and the dying do not care.
Their blood indicts me,
they demand repentance or conviction
as they slip six feet under a stolen, boundless land
whose rulers couldn't even spare
40 acres and a mule...

I go to bed woozy, haunted again
by that old abolitionist saying:

"Peace if possible,
justice at any cost."

Mourners

“Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne...” – [James Russel Lowell](#)

We are all mourners now, our clothes
funeral shrouds we tear off our backs
when the time comes (and it will come);
in one pocket we carry brushes for tidying
the memorials we stumble on in [schools](#), [churches](#),
[nightclubs](#), [concerts](#), [grocery stores](#), [streetcorners](#),
and in the other plastic flowers to brighten them up;
our bodies are grown stiff with kneeling in prayer;
we watch life bleed away all around us, screaming
Out, damned spot! at no one in particular; we dream
of Heaven and fear that Hell is murky, though in truth
we believe in neither; we work so hard to build
an estate which, at last, our children refuse.

In a world where attention wanders without end
we still pause, rapt, for a tearful moment, when
the last rites are read, the dirges played;
and lacking willpower, or time, or imagination
to stop the killing, we become expert at lining up
—so orderly, so civilized! —to pay our respects
to the dead.

On Reading That Some Physicists Posit We Are Living in a Computer Simulation

An analysis shows there is a 50% chance that we are living in a synthetic reality – [Scientific American](#)

If life is a lucid dream or some near-perfect
computer simulation, do I risk waking up

to a world in which I can't embrace you?
I was so young when I came to feel that

death is as simple to understand as the eons
before our birth: we are not, and then we are,

and then we are not again. I'm a mystic. I
love the weight of the cosmos, how it feels

in the palm of my hand. I reach for your
hand in order to hold on to all that I wish

were eternal but stand to lose. I can't dwell
on loss, least of all when thinking of you;

and if none of this is real, if there are
truths stranger than our brief mortality,

all the more reason to lie down together and
demand that the earth reveal what it knows—

to discover who we are when stripped of fear,
our bodies trembling at the edge of reason.

The Gardener

We have pitched an innocent man against the
thousand blades of grass.
Once a week the battle is waged;
each green sword glints with dew.

But our man is well armed: we have given
him motors, gasoline, blades faster
than the wind, and so he goes trampling
because our yard needs taming:
He leaves the lawn strewn with
wilting corpses—their rot attracts
a pair of curious bluebirds.

For the moment victory smells like sprinklers
and empty fields.
For the moment our house is in order.

Then a rainstorm soaks the earth
like an oil-well run amok,
wreaks havoc on gutters and sewers,
floods the streets, knocks down trees,
holes us up in our homes,
where through windows we observe
hope erase carnage.

A week passes and the proud grass
again waves beneath the wind.
The grass has a human spirit that
grows endlessly, sprouts from the soil,
and wonders why we bother to hire
mercenaries to fight a war
that must never come to an end.

A Bipolar Spring

It must be Spring.
The begonias are vomiting diesel
Again,
Leaf blowers are whining like scapegoats
Condemned to die
Again
In a swirl
Of garbage and leaves,
And I don't feel like being alive today.

Why must I
Again
Salute the pilfered flag
That just yesterday I glibly waved?

Somewhere a monstrous, moody moon
Lingers like a flashlight in an alley,
Plunges her sequined syringe
Into my unwitting, smoggy veins.

Somewhere bird watchers
And gardeners
And beekeepers
Swoon like submissive violins.

It must be Spring
Again.
I am choking on the dew.
I am lost in a maze of barbed-wire-wool,
Still cold, lacerated, hemmed in
Again
Like a fiery torment of acid tears
Spilling into a perverse pool
Of my own making,
And I don't feel like being alive today.

Who are you
To assure me
That life is regenerative?

Somewhere I know that you are right,
But I don't care. Not now.
I am an oil derrick
Wheezing night and day;

My demise is bound up in my riches,
And I don't feel like being alive today.

Somewhere it is Fall
And somewhere it is Summer
And somewhere it is Winter
And maybe here it isn't even Spring:
How quickly, how often the seasons change!

I am sober. I've never done a drug.
But the begonias are vomiting diesel
Again
And I don't feel like being alive today.

Renewal: A Haiku

hail flattens the grass
not all bruises blister blood
each blade asks why me

After Running Errands, I Think of the World I Want Us to Live In: A Villanelle

What is left after the groceries are put away?
Dishes on the drying rack, nothing to clean:
all is as it should be, or so they say.

My darling, tomorrow is recycling day!
Let us do our part. There's much I mean
to do after the groceries are put away!

Even death comes with chores: one day
we'll buy for the other what flowers remain,
which is as it should be, or so they say.

My darling, don't be sad. Hold this bouquet
to your breast. There's much to grieve; I'm keen
to make love after the groceries are put away!

You would be so warm to touch. It is with dismay
I admit I can't have you, the gap between dream
and nightmare—which is as it should be, or so they say.

With what little time remains, we must disobey
the voices of reason, the calls to action, which scream
that we find peace in putting the groceries away:
nothing is as it should be, no matter what they say.

Perfection

I had thought I lacked for time
and spent my days frantic,
as though life were a web
and death a looming spider, his
approach inexorable, his mouth
large enough to swallow whole
my ambitions.

I had thought I lacked for time
and arose each dawn to make up
for yesterday's failure,
to promise that today I would be perfect;
I bribed the gatekeepers of perfection
with my promises—
“O, let me through!” I begged.
And at night I'd rub my forehead
where the iron had held me back,
the currency of my promises
still glistening like anxious sweat in my hand.

For years I pressed my nose to glass
and watched sun, wind, rain, snow
as they whirled past my stationary self
like a riderless bicycle balanced
by something, someone, I couldn't see.

I had thought I lacked for time
and raced to outrun the bell
whose ring might rouse me from my dream,
only to at last find I was awake and tired
and still holding coins no deity, no therapist, no poet
would accept—a pauper with a home, a job, a six-figure net worth,
wanting for nothing, suddenly with time to spare,
Unable to afford even a moment of calm self-reflection.

Keep Your Wits

For Mom and Dad

A terrible student, I was predisposed
to chasing phantoms into alleys, to seeing
carnations bloom in oil slicks: I once spent
a math lecture lost in a dream
where I planted a tulip garden in a landfill.

Having failed Algebra twice—I said it was
on purpose, and, in a way, it was—Dad
began to help me study. How easily the proofs
came to him, the solutions! Before each exam
he would say, Son, keep your wits about you.

Mom and Dad worried I would fail
and spend my days serenading beached whales
or beseeching Eagles to sheath their talons;
I feared subjects with clear answers, even if
uneasily arrived at. With so many means
to drown oneself, I did not know
how to survive a world stripped of wonder
by what is expected of us.

Still too busy to rake the yard,
I've buried the moon in leaves.
Amidst all this ardor,
I study how a leaf shrivels absent the tree
it fell from, why a cockatoo
refuses to comb its crest.

Somehow, I forge an authentic life.

I Don't Know What Poetry Is...

...but I want to change the world

I don't know what poetry is.
At 33, I've read very little,
and written even less.
At school, on the other shore
of the salty void
that separates the child from the adult,
poetry was obligation, beauty
hanging in frames,
words as real as cubes of ice
that hurt to chew, and left me thirsty.

I don't know what poetry is.
At work, poetry is an acid,
in it, the walls are stripped bare,
clothes are stripped bare,
teeth rot,
no suits, no smiles, no awards
for running a small nonprofit.

At 33, I am married. My wife is pregnant.
We love each other, our son, our Beagle.
Have a home, a mortgage, a yard.
Don't worry about money.
Are happy.

But if I knew what poetry was, I'd say:
The diapers I wore and now change;
the homework I refused to do
because I was a Romantic
and Romantics don't do as told;
my two years wearing all white
because I wanted to be pure
and knew no other way;
the implausible ambition that
these words outlive me like a mineral,
that my work overcome injustice
the way barnacles scuttle ships;
and the pool of blood in which
all human longing swims, alone,
wrestling currents...

Still I seek that other shore
where I can meet myself
at last
and unload the cargo of my potential
before all goes dark and nothing matters anymore.

The Machinery of the State

A relentless South Texas wind poses impossible questions,
flaps the smirking flags until they are upturned,
mists the mown grass with evil's sputum,
ripples the lone unarmed security guard's shirt
as he waves concentration camp employees
in and out of the unremarkable office park parking lot.

Outside the *Casa El Presidente* tender-age detention facility
where children as young as one-month live in cages,
I wonder: How durable is the machinery of the state?
How many of us would it take
to brush past the guard in blue short sleeves
and blue shorts set against a darkening blue sky,
and set free the children?
One? Ten? One hundred?

Does America's strength reside in this man's
minimum-wage-routine, his indifferent pacing?
Do they that hired him have children, believe in love?
How does he feel standing there as darkness falls
and he becomes an inhuman shape silhouetted
against an inhuman panorama of wind-tossed stars
and a low-slung office building where little children
sleep the sleep of those who have lost everything?

I came here to bear witness.
I came to take a sabbatical from business-as-usual.
What I've found is the unimaginable-turned-banal,
like a nuclear detonation mentioned in passing
before CNN cuts for a commercial break.

The sun disappears. No one bothers to reach for a flashlight:
Nothing to see; the office curtains are drawn.
The night-shift staff arrives to relieve the day-shift
like nameless mechanics just doing their job,
for in America we all have jobs, we do them well
and without complaint,
and we quiet our minds with the faith
that hard work can set us free.

The Frantic Invisible Night

They've separated 2,000 children.
No, they've discarded them
like cans of Coca-Cola,
2,000 children who reached our shore
like sea foam, salty, crying salt,
a column of families marching for asylum,
tangled in the seaweed of fear,
2,000 children taken away
because the border is where,
like a maternity ward,
ideology meets blood.

They care for fetuses but not brown babies
dead of dehydration
or hysterical, crying *Mama, Papa*,
they destroy the water jugs
scattered like leaking life rafts
in the desert ocean
that stretches from Tijuana
to the District of Columbia,
and the brown children's faces
briefly light up in the light
of the Cities on the Hill
before they disappear
into a frantic invisible night.

On Ellis Island they changed names
to make it easier to pronounce them—
mine was Pozniaski, now it's Posner,
yes, much easier, much neater—
at least we pronounced them,
what are the names of these children?
No child is nameless, no child illegal!

They've stolen the honey of children
to manufacture their diabetic propaganda:
The soda-can-American-Dream!

See, America is the land that without irony
sells cigarettes and Nicotine gum
and diet pills and Coca-Cola
side-by-side at the checkout counter:
What becomes of a people immune to irony?

Ah, but they don't mind
the children when they grow up,
gardeners, nannies, cooks, field hands, factory workers,
nor do they mind 2,000 children
locked in cages, barcoded,
scanned like soda
sold for a profit at Walmart.

I mind.
My grandfather was
sent to the Gulag
for being Jewish,
others gassed to death:
How is this not the start
of a Star-Spangled Holocaust?

Listen, listen, listen.
Lady Liberty's torch, once doused,
will not with ease re-ignite.
Already she vomits,
her dress is covered in vomit,
her arm grows weary,
the waters creep up her torso
like a rising tide of vipers,
but still the light burns,
still the light lights up
the frantic invisible night.

Somewhere 2,000 children
cower in desolation,
mothers and fathers
sob like exploding stars
Wailing comet-tears for all to see
(if only they would look).

And I too wail, I too am frantic
Because in the night things happen
that neither history
nor our children
will or can or should
forgive.

In Whose Custody the Flags?

The flags are at full staff
though Jakeline is dead
of dehydration
and the Guatemalan boy whose name
has not been released
is dead
of the flu—

They died in our custody.

The flags remain at full staff,
their stars going dim with grief
as refugees beg
for a glass of water
or a dose of Ibuprofen and Amoxicillin
on the kitchen counter,
next to the bills and Church flier—

They died in our custody.

Just after Jakeline died
but before the Guatemalan boy
whose name has not been released,
my son Richard was born
at a world-class hospital:
8 pounds 6 ounces. Apgar score of 7—

They died in our custody.

In whose custody are these flags?
In whose name are they raised and lowered,
repaired or replaced, honored or disgraced?

I ask because
Jakeline is dead
of dehydration,
the Guatemalan boy whose name
has not been released
is dead
of the flu—

And they died in America.

--

Jakelin Ameí Rosmery Caal Maquin died in US Customs and Border Patrol custody at the age of seven on December 8, 2018. ([The Daily Beast](#))

My son was born on Saturday, December 22, 2018

The Guatemalan boy died in US Customs and Border Patrol custody on Christmas Eve, 2018, at the age of eight. He was later identified as Felipe Alonzo-Gomez. ([CNN](#))

Written Wednesday, December 25, 2018

Regret

“The only difference between a flower and a weed is judgement.” - Wayne Dyer

I have put pen to much that I ought not have written, including, perhaps, these very words.

I have mistaken Ragweed for Goldenrod, alleyways for gardens, watched them torn out,

make way for something better. I have asked what better is, been taught the benefits of

a healthy tan, a good diet, three square meals and an hour of exercise a day.

Once, a coyote chastised me for drinking espresso before bedtime. All night I watched him watch me,

both of us tense, locked in stalemate, until dawn sent us scurrying off, hungry and tired, for no dreams

came true that night. I have been party to dreams deferred, and, occasionally, realized, have brought

wine and cheese to the celebration, have sipped and snacked, alone, in the corner, then slinked home

without saying goodbye to my hosts, have wished for more, for less, been satisfied with what I have,

have cursed the mirror, loved the mirror, cursed and loved every being that has ever lived.

My Green Foxtail, my Deer Tongue, my Smooth Brome, my Bull Thistle, my Slender Rush, my Spotted Knapweed,

What am I to do with this secret desire for your sweet unwanted pollen?

Earth Day 2019: A Love Poem

“Researchers find that over 1,000 metric tons of microplastic fall on 11 protected areas in the US annually, equivalent to over 120 million plastic water bottles.” - [Wired](#)

Every poem is a love poem, even one about plastic rain.
Why else bother to save anything—rainforests, whales,
ourselves—if not because the world is sensuous?

Rocks hum, seashells murmur, jungles throb
with life, life, life sprouting from every inch,
impossible, overwhelming: it takes a kind of lust
to tear down trees, to eat the flesh of once-living things.
I destroy as little as I can, yet I consume all the same.

If I tattoo my poetry to your thighs, will I have left
too strong a mark on the world? Haven't we all?
There is plastic in the rain!

An alien poet could pen an elegy to what we've killed off..
Yet were she to set foot on Earth, she might come upon us on the
shore, hand-in-hand, collecting what the waves can't wash away.

Allegory for an Unreasonable Age

“It was in Spain that men learned one can be right and still be beaten, that force can vanquish spirit, that there are times when courage is not its own reward.” [1] – Albert Camus

December 19, 2019:

30 people are protesting
and it's so cold
we can't feel our limbs. [2]

We're in need of warmer gloves
and de-icing salt
and things money can't buy.

How long do I shiver like this?
Can motorists read the signs?
My chants disappear in steam.

So little makes sense these days.
I've seen cars go off cliffs
with no ice around to indict:

The wreckage flames,
then is towed away
like a bad dream,

and only the dreamers
understand who's at fault.
I occupy this sidewalk,

Snowplows be damned.
I author the history
my son will read about.

Tomorrow there will be debate:
No, I will not yield my time;
When the gavel cracks wood

I will not come to order:
Let the parliamentarian observe
his antebellum rules.

One may well ask what good standing here.
How does reason answer to madness?
A hot shower can erase the cold but not

the shiver. Is it not better to fast than go hungry?
Our headlights struggle against the sleet:
Green, yellow, red blur together. Chaos beckons.

There is no guarantee we'll make it home.
Yet the hour's grown late, the streets are empty, and
there's nothing left to do but get some rest.

[1] London, Maryann Bird. "The Pain In Spain." *Time*, Time Inc., 25 Jan. 2002,
<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2056137,00.html>.

[2] Collins, Sean. *Pro-Impeachment Protests Swelled in Cities across the Country - but There's Still No Real Impeachment Movement*. Vox, 18 Dec. 2019, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/12/18/21028069/impeachment-protests-house-vote-senate-trial>.

Reichstag

It doesn't matter who lit the flame
that burned the Reichstag down,
only that it burned and so few
considered what cremation means
to those who long for proper burial.

Were there citizens to witness
the arsonist at work?
Could they have his intentions doused?

No matter. The economy was bad
and it felt good to scream
“Reichstag! Reichstag! Reichstag!”

For days the embers lingered
like a bee in nectar drowned.
For days the ashes flowed
like the violent undertow of waves
of people marching the streets,
where it was a relief to chant
“Reichstag! Reichstag! Reichstag!”

Soon they would find employment
In factories for tanks, planes, bombs,
like so many ceramists shaping bleak urns
at minimum wage—

But it did not matter
because the economy was bad
and there was cruel solidarity in singing
“Reichstag!” long into the torchlit night.

Helium

[His Momma died 18 months ago](#). For Mother's Day, he bought one of those shiny Mylar helium balloons and some Carnations. It wasn't easy to do, between shifts at work and wearing a mask to the store—it's dangerous for a Black man to protect himself against a virus—but he wanted to honor the woman who, in spite of the odds, had kept him alive.

He tied the balloon to a vase on the kitchen table where they used to listen to music and cook dinner. When the store clerk was filling it, he stifled a laugh-turned-cry, remembering that birthday when she got him 20 balloons and one-by-one they inhaled the noble gas, nearly dying of laughter at their squeaky voices.

Leaving for the final time, he caught his reflection in the Mylar. Hours later, dying beneath a cop's knee, he called out for Momma. The last thing he saw was the joy in her eyes.

Back home the flowers have wilted and the balloon, twisting slowly in the now-stale air, sinks lower and lower to the ground.

in memory of George Floyd

Manumission

“Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

- [Václav Havel](#)

1

I long to be optimistic and airy, to write of our generous spirit, to wax poetic about moon landings and beach landings, entrepreneurship, sliced bread,

the assembly line, the World Wide Web. It feels un-American to discover an Antebellum shackle and not see its value at auction, not imagine the great stories of triumph and

tragedy it can tell. An unarmed Black man was—again—[murdered by police this week](#); they crushed his windpipe with a knee. Shall we steal that leg, extract the knee like a

tooth, shine it like a fine pair of shoes worn at a meeting of the Fraternal Order of Police, donate it to the National Museum of African American History?

Mr. Floyd was shackled and dead when the ambulance arrived. What will become of those cuffs when they are no longer needed as evidence?

2

If the little Black girl at her lemonade-stand can become president, if the little Black Boy Scout selling cookies can launch an empire, what more do we owe the past? We’ve gotten ahead by looking ahead: history

recedes until nothing remains but glorious myth. Our most dangerous belief is in the Grand Gesture, the faith that all wrongs can be righted. If in 1860 the South had manumitted its 3,953,762 slaves, would George Floyd’s windpipe still be whole?

3

America on the brink. America always on the brink. Land of the larger-than-life. Land of slavery and freedom. Land of monumental dreams,

it’s not optimism I need, but hope, “the ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.”

An American didn’t say that: We are strivers, doers, achievers, no time to waste. When I was a teenager opposed to one of the many

wars we like to launch for one reason or another—we thought it was oil, this one, but maybe it was geopolitics, or messianic Christianity,

or, most likely, someone stood to profit from the bombs bursting in air—
my teachers told me it was naïve to oppose war, that I would grow out of

idealism, as though there were honor in accepting the unacceptable
and shame in questioning it. They were wrong. I did not outgrow it, still

I am ashamed of myself, ashamed of my country. The shame
grows hot like iron forming into manacles, and I fear every one of us

will soon be chained, face to the pavement, knee to the neck,
unable to free ourselves of this ferrous burden.

It's Complicated

A friend texted to say it's irresponsible to protest during a pandemic. All those people crowded together become [vectors for the virus](#), which doesn't care about race. I hadn't thought of Covid-19 as post-racial, the enlightened bug. My friend fears a second wave of infections. Like millions, he's been quarantined at home. Like me, he's a Jew; our family histories include Gulag and Ghetto. I muse, what if protestors wear masks to protect against infection, and tear gas, [and surveillance](#); practice social distancing, [even in jail](#); cover their mouths when they cough, even if at that moment they have their hands in the air—*relax, officer, relax?* He says that's impossible, and he may be right.

As Jews we lament the complicity of the German people, the silence of Vichy France. This is America, and this is a public health crisis, my friend replies. He means I'm overdoing the Nazi analogy. He means it's reasonable to decry police brutality and also expect its victims to observe stay-at-home orders. I'm tempted to ask what if George Floyd were Jewish. There is nothing more American than not understanding what doesn't directly affect us. And yet, many will get sick; some will die. I can see them buried amidst a continent of gravestones—slaveowners and slaves and the descendants of both, war heroes, war criminals, victims and perpetrators, bystanders and protestors: America. And I strain to hear their eulogies over the awful din of the unaffected, who murmur in unison *It's complicated...It's complicated...*

What One Gives Up

My heart has grown docile, less inclined
to thrash about and strain at the leash.
Maybe that's the way it goes: we come
into the world like lava, we burn and blaze
and flow, then cool into something solid—
an identity? No, I don't believe that,
my friend. Too many adults tried to sell me
a story about who I would become, and how.
But life is hard, a shadow passing through
the briefest light, a pulsing in the body
we'd have to destroy to touch. To grow
into myself, I've had to refuse to exchange
purpose for joy—what kind of goal is felicity
amidst such suffering? And yet, here you are,
my love: a presence, a mind, a body I hold
close and still without need to sacrifice a thing.

Insanity: A Sonnet

I'm insane, or at least not well, my brain
a flooded grave, the coffin cracked by roots
from a forest overgrown...she has slain
the dead once again, and from me no fruits
shall flower again; alas, I'm now dust
that once was flesh and bone, long since decayed,
crushed, missing and lost in Earth's silent crust—
a flute gone stale or a lover betrayed
by time. O, am I really out of time?
May I not wash my face and clear my head
and try again, again, again?—To climb
from ruin and rubble to glory instead?
I'm not well, true, and well may never be,
but the sane cannot see what I have seen!

The Beauty of Bipolar Depression

Too musically disinclined to rap or sing the blues,
too bound up in striving to retire
to the vase of my bed like an ersatz flower
(not even 300mg of Seroquel
can reduce me to mere ornamentation),
I instead write this poem,
which few will read.

You may wonder if it matters
that you read this, but
I'm not one to lavish much on myself:
For whom else would I obsess
over this comma, that
enjambment?
To survive this world's lush, radiant, burlesque
suffering,
It's best that you understand
why I will never self-immolate, never
give what's broken in me or the world
the satisfaction of my surrender.

Peel back my eyes
and touch the still-healing wound
oozing cerebral fluid from the Big Bang.
It's in this blind space of raw pain
I often dwell. Here everything is reduced
to elements, genes, math, poetry. Here
my life to date plays on an endless loop like
propaganda. And here originate the florid
manifestations of myself: the video gamer
and the coder, the lucid dreamer
and the psychoanalyst.

If you could join me here,
you would understand how I've endured.

You would find immortality in anguish.

What of the Future?

I've been hearing *Save the Rainforest*
since I was small enough to sleep
in the safety of my parent's bed
or snuggled with stuffed animals—
pandas, giraffes, monkeys, frogs;
Since I lived for lullabies and storytime;
Since the world was as small as a crib
and as big as my imagination;
Since a nightlight could douse fears
and a drop of Tylenol could erase all pain;
Since adults could assure me
that all was well and would always be well.

Now I hear that 20% of the Amazon is lost,
that the remainder is on fire,
that a tipping point may soon be passed—
all life in peril.¹

Now I have a beloved wife, toddler, dog—
great plans for our lives.
Now my parents are older, frailer.
Now, at thirty-four, I have traveled enough of life
to know that adults have always betrayed their children,
that absent drastic change I, too, will betray my child,
and that without a future for him
there can be no real joy or pleasure in the present.

¹ Fisher, Max. Aug 30, 2019. NY Times. '*It's Really Close*': How the Amazon Rainforest Could Self-Destruct
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/world/americas/amazon-rainforest-fires-climate.html>>

Elephant

Out of the blue our three-year-old
declares he doesn't like the elephant.

For days he repeats—unbidden, as if recalling
a nightmare—that he doesn't like the elephant.

It is funny, at first, then confusing, concerning
even. We plumb the meaning of elephant

like Freud or Jung might, consider every angle,
scour the house as though for elephant dung

but all we find is a small plastic figurine
he ignores when we call it to his attention.

When at last we ask what elephant he doesn't like,
he says, matter-of-factly, *the one outside my window.*

That night the Santa Ana winds rush past our house
like a herd of flaming horses stampeding for relief

in the cold Pacific, or a rusty brakeless train, and we hear it:
the sharp scrape of branches on roof keeps us up all night.

The tree-trimmers are here now, sawing away. Is this how
it begins, then—the culling of the mind so we sleep soundly?

The Spirit of Christmas

It's all too much, the floor strewn with gifts
we couldn't possibly deserve. But our son
is happy, going from toy to toy, and so
are we, smiling along with him as he plays
with the train, the trucks, the scooter.

Tonight our son will sleep fitfully, dreaming
what gifts tomorrow will bring. Exhausted,
we'll gather up the trash, question what
can be recycled and what cannot, wonder
how long until these toys too turn to trash,
until we run out of things to make us happy.

What Can a Poet Do in Times of War?

“No feats of scholarship console us for bloodshed.”- Robert Vansittart, 1st Baron Vansittart

There are epochal battles blazing around the world, [1]
blinding to those who look, shrapnel of noon-day sun
in the concerned citizen’s eye.

In my grandfather’s day I might’ve enlisted
physical courage, learned to parade and to kill, given
my life or spent a lifetime writing of valor and victory.

Each generation has had its wars, but never such as these:
Conquered lands rising up in flame, conquered seas in foam
and man, in charge of everything, losing all control.

Now there are those who camouflage themselves in disgust,
holed up in their living rooms, shouting at the evening news;
and others who grab for a machine gun to fire at an inferno.

(Once soldiers sought immortality in verse, believing
that civilization would last, if not forever, for long enough.
But we know too much of history, and ecology, and physics.)

*Does poetry not make anything happen?
Does it not survive?
Is it not a way of happening, a mouth?* [2]

I’ll tell you what poets can do in war: Open our mouths
like uncultured beasts whose roar and spit douses
the flamethrower, makes him stop dead and sob.

-

[1] Lustgarten, Abrahm. “A Taste of the Climate Apocalypse to Come.” *ProPublica*, 22 Oct. 2019,

<https://www.propublica.org/article/taste-of-the-climate-apocalypse-to-come>

[2] Auden, W.H. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." Poets.org, Academy of American Poets,

<https://poets.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats>

The Savage Harvest

Dogs know how to live and die with grace.
I don't.
In my hands are wet grapes fit to burst
and beyond my reach
a glass of wine
I'll never swallow,
like a sticky creek
that catches in the Earth's muddy maw.

When nighttime chews up
dusk with starry teeth
I become ravenous,
I stalk my domesticity
with savage ennui,
like a hawk that can neither
fly nor chew with its mouth closed.

I love this wolf asleep in my lap,
his fur as soft as fresh lawn clippings,
his gentle flicked-tongue kisses
and his incessant wagging tail.
Does he recall or resent
what time and man
have changed in him? Do I?
Of what stuff am I made—
carpet or coal?
Wind or windmill?

We dig trenches for war,
trenches for bones.
We sometimes obey ourselves,
Sometimes obey others.
Our quiet yard looks
out upon train tracks,
and beyond them woods
and roads and trails and forests
and hikers and hawks.

I press my ear upon the seashell
of the universe
and hear the hiss-howl
ff raw iron tamed into the scythe,
and wonder how to harvest myself
before the season changes

and wild weeds
flourish in the plowed grave
where great men and women
die cacophonous deaths.

What Happens When You Forget to Close Your Bedroom Window

I left my window open. Moonlight knocked over
the dresser, flung socks and secrets like a thief
scared away mid-theft. A fly rummaged my body. I survived
bombs meant for I know not who, mistook my beating heart
for unexploded ordnance. Whose war am I fighting?

My throat burns with lightning. A rainstorm sloshes
in my stomach. I smell strongly of ozone, wet grass, bird
feathers. Someone made off with my tears, sold them
to a cloud for pennies on the dollar. At breakfast,
I find the cupboards bare, the fridge ransacked.
I make coffee with a bean I scrounge off the floor,
next to a blueberry and breadcrumb I eat greedily.

I have lived so long, unawares of this black market,
slept with my mouth shut to keep out the spiders
I learn [don't actually climb into mouths](#) at night.
I guzzle water from the faucet; remove a thousand
stingers from my face, neck, chest, thighs;
watch a spider eat a bee and a lion eat a bear.

Tonight I'll dream that a colony of ants has dragged
me out to sea, where I discover my belongings and I
have become so much flotsam and jetsam. Bobbing
in the water, I barter what's left of me for a pinch of
salt to season my last meal and bribe a pigeon to tell
my wife to close the window--that I'm happy here.

The Future of Channel Islands Beach, California

One can almost forget the future [1]
in a Pacific sunset's wake,
forget how quickly placid waves turn brutal,
that waters are stubborn as facts, immune to prayer.

Whom do I ask to explain the difference between
desire and hunger? I came here to find solace
in whale-song, but the whales are starving;
science gives me reasons but not answers. [2]

We've built a condo empire in the shade of dunes:
What good to bequeath our children a rising sea?

We've measured ourselves against the Nasdaq
and Whitman, made a killing off the sale of tides
as a tonic for what ails us, lost sleep over
our poverty and our ignorance.

One can almost forget the future...

Darkness alights slowly here,
flapping its wings with unhurried confidence.
I can make out oil derricks wheezing like lungs
that won't die, and hear a foghorn blow
like a shipwreck's parting words:

"Lost souls pray for salvation as they drown
themselves. Or they don't.

Life will feast on the ruins regardless.

Go home, dear poet.
There's time yet to hold back the ocean..."

--

[1] The Pacific Institute estimates that, given a 4.6-foot rise in sea level, 16,000 people in Ventura County would be vulnerable to the impacts of a 100-year-flood event, a 120% increase over today:

Herberger, Matthew, et al. *The Impacts of Sea-Level Rise on the California Coast*. California Climate Change Center, May 2009, <https://pacinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/sea-level-rise.pdf>, p. 42

[2] Ferreira, Gabby. *Gray Whales Are Dying along the West Coast, and Scientists Are Trying to Figure out Why*. San Luis Obispo Tribune, 25 Apr. 2019,
<https://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/california/article229646274.html>.

April 22, 2020: 50 Years of Earth Day

This morning I rose so early that not a living thing was awake. Smokestacks, lungs, crows, bulldozers—all were silent and still.

I asked the Earth for forgiveness, but she was silent. She could not fathom what I'd done to her or for her; what does she know of my carbon footprint?

I don't deserve pandemics, dictators, drought. She was silent and still; what can she say of my guilt and aspirations?

Life began to stir. Blood circulated, tree rings grew, chainsaws cawed like starving crows. I made my perennial promise—nothing will be the same.

Nothing is ever the same, of course: Look away long enough and Earth becomes unrecognizable, and then it's nighttime and our lungs fill with hope again.

Will We Stand for This?

“Rising Arctic temps cause sea ice to melt at alarming level, threatening habitats and cultures.”²

I want to rest on the shore
until the urchins break skin
and the salt seeps in.

Salt that seals my nostrils.
Salt that makes pain edible.
Salt of injustice boiled over.

The seas are rising.
The cold tides will drown me
in their froth and churn.

Why stand? The bleak horizon
holds no promise of light;
the mighty waves erase

all human endeavor.
What wayward ship will find its way
by the pale blue dot of my eyes?

What slender hope
keeps me here, caught between
the depths and the shallows?

Night begins to draw its curtain on me.
The audience has gone home.
For whom do I empty myself?

There is a spark in me that leads
to the place our dreams belong;
what good to guess at the future?

These questions are wet matches
I strike at over and over.
How many to change the world?

² Rice, Doyle. *Rising Arctic Temps Cause Sea Ice to Melt at Alarming Level, Threatening Habitats and Cultures*. USA Today, 11 Dec. 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/12/10/arctic-report-card-temperatures-rise-sea-ice-melts-exceptionally-low-level/4385182002/>.

In Praise of the Two Jehovah's Witnesses at the Camarillo Train Station

I am no less a propagandist than you. I understand the impulse to spend hours at a sleepy train station for the chance to spread your

gospel to a handful of indifferent passers-by. I too have good news and bad news to share. I too think myself wiser than, more enlightened than.

I too seek to bend the world to my will. Where we differ, I fear, is that you don't know this work does more for us than for others: perhaps

that is why you don't laugh at my jokes, why you are dressed not as one who knows the secrets of God—riotously joyful, I would imagine—

but as one who wants humanity to *believe* you know the secrets of God. My friends, have you ever wondered what would happen if all were to

convert to our cause? I, atheist poet saving the climate, you, believers saving souls: how bored we would soon grow! Not far from this station,

the Pacific's waters gleam, beautifully, miraculously indifferent to our exhortations. As we chat, wars rage on, the saved and unsaved alike die

as they always have, always will. Let us be careful with our powers, my friends. This is a serious business we are in. So very serious.

How to Survive an Apocalypse

I refuse to die in a bunker, even if
it's with you, my dear. I want the
slow death of struggling for light,

hand in hand, through the tremors
and the flames. Do you recall when
we thought things were okay? I am

thankful to live in a time of terror.
The bomb can go off any moment:
There are so many triggers, we've

lost track of who or what can pull them.
What do we gain from inner peace?
Humanity risks extinction because

we love the wrong things too much.
I am under no illusions. To love you is
to resist oblivion, to laugh at craters.

I Remain Marvelously Alive

*"One life is not enough.
I'd like to live twice on this sad planet,
In lonely cities, in starved villages..."* – Czesław Miłosz*

In the creak and give of floorboards,
hollow of trees felled by storms,
fists of despots, palms of departing lovers,
click of deadbolts, swing of doors;

In the purr and pant of aging pets,
hush and sweep of forgotten tombs,
sway of ships at night,
darkening of sunset in quiet waters;

In the sweet-smelling rot of discarded apples,
shimmer of heat rising from denuded lands,
diesel roar of trains disappearing in distance,
tremor of aftershocks, of cello strings;

In the splatter of blood, of ink, of midnight rains,
buzz and throb of wasps, of poked-at hives,
opening of veins, rip and tear of mail,
lick and seal of unsent letters, locked away;

In the reading of wills, of eulogies, of elegies,
caw and cry of wild, dangerous birds-of-prey,
tantrums of children, sadness of hospice
strange warp and bend of space-time—

in all this, what foreboding and thrill!

There are myriad ways to die
yet I remain—marvelously—alive.

The Busy Muse

A rock skips across the sky,
leaves concentric circles of cloud
to wonder at.

You flung it long ago, before we met,
when your mouth was wet
with unformed words
no language could yet convey, and
your eyes shined
like incantations of light,
shapeless, erasing voids.

There are no names
for the shapes that pass me by.
They are whiffs of coffee
teasing blood with caffeine,
dreams I forget the moment
they begin to make sense.

I cannot say how long
I stay rooted here:
Moons have formed,
inspired poetry,
crumbled into dust
occluding suns, and I grow sad
the way I imagine
redwoods do—
asking why all the rush.

Now a wet wind clears the stratosphere,
pours cold air down the back of my neck.
You crest in a heave of foam
and effervesce on shores beyond my reach—
I grow seasick tossing in your wake,
leaning over rails and wondering
why you only come when hard things
skip across the sky and I have
so much to take care of.

The Fog of Anger

"...acquitted on all charges in the August 2020 shootings of three men, including two who were killed." - [CBS](#)

At what time the fog took over, I do not know:
I was, if not sleeping, attempting to, tossing
and turning like a Heron's wing, lost in fog.

Fog clings to the hillsides like grime, like rust,
like coffee dregs, like piss on porcelain, like anger
on the heart: Who will scrub the world clean?

The fog is so thick, my son cannot see the soccer field,
grows angry, cries, demands to go home. We go home
and learn to count time: How long until the sun comes out?

I am not as angry as I should be, or content. It is neither
dark nor light, a purgatory of waiting. A young man fires
bullets at the fog: Who will atone for the Heron's demise?

I can give my son a jacket, take a bullet, confront the fog
so he doesn't have to. But how to shield him from this anger?
When the fog lifts, everyone, right or wrong, will take credit.

The day grows hotter. Flies sweat, as do trigger-fingers.
One misstep these days can kill you. Surely there is more
to aspire to than martyrdom? Look at the circling birds!

They eye us warily, with curiosity. They have had to adapt
to our anger, to learn to live with it better than we do.
Tomorrow I'll have them explain their system of justice.

Earthbound, how do I escape the algorithms that stoke, reward
anger? We are commodities, eyeballs, data points. To still my
nerves, I swat at the fog, blame it for this and that injustice.

The fog is more than metaphor. Cars crash, ships run aground,
friends mistake friends for enemies. Then the fog lifts and
we face ourselves, guns drawn, hands shaking with fear.

If I Had My Way

In time this pebble, gathered from that beach
which cuddles the curves of your body, would

have dissolved to sand. But I have gathered it,
made of it an obelisk to my need for permanence,

the way I take things I love and tattoo them to
my body: on my right shoulder, Lady Liberty

cradling a refugee; on my left, solar panels
in front of a sunset we might watch, together,

drain from red to pink to black. I wonder: if
we could pluck a star from the sky, place it

on our nightstand, would it be freed from
a star's fate? I finger the pebble's curves,

touch its surface to my tongue. If I had my
way, I suppose there would be no shorelines,

no dying light sinking into bruised-blue lakes, no
dead poets, no Libraries of Alexandria. But when

I kiss these waters, an electric charge enters me
like an eel and I don't mind that I'm drowning.

People

Falling in love is like swallowing grains of sand
to recover the pebble you skipped across the pond

by your childhood home, the ripples setting in
motion every marvel, every horror of your life;

except the grain touches your tongue, you close
your eyes, and the world becomes one ripple

with neither pebble nor shore in sight; and your
throat fills, not with sand but the sweetest tea;

and you find that you don't have eyes or mouth
or body: that you *are* eyes and mouth and body;

and though you are old enough to know that
people are cruel, and selfish, and hypocritical,

and, only every so often, marvelous, you lift
every stone you encounter, pull back each

curtain, page the back-issues of magazines
and newspapers: you search for love in every

dark, flickering, uncaring atom of the cosmos
because you are dark, flickering, uncaring; and

because you are matter, you matter; and because
you are time, you have all the time to attempt to

recover that improbable spark which, nigh-on
fourteen-billion-years hence, still has you saying

I love you, dearest one. May I have this dance?

Confessions of a Private Grief

In the yard of my childhood home
there was a mature Jasmine shrub
beneath my window. On many mornings
I would arise from my private grief
with a deep yawn and breathe in
a sweet gulp of air that would rush
like rum down my throat and into
the center of me. This is love,
atoms discovering atoms.

I recall my first experience of infirmity.
It was like a dream, all vague shapes
and things that make no sense in retrospect.
An old man hobbled toward a casket.
There was silence but for the click of his cane.
He paid his respects, then turned. A solitary diamond
dripped from his eye and shattered in the grass,
so hard and so fragile. This is death,
atoms splitting into atoms.

I have lived as free as a fragrance on the wind,
as shackled to the earth as the vine that produced it.
May I confess in a poem what is forbidden us in prose?
I want the atoms you exhale, the cells of your skin,
the platelets in your blood. To open a door and find you
as alone as we are in dying. To touch my grief to yours.
To be a single gust of sweetness howling in the dark.

Love Sonnet Written on the Occasion of the Death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg

I won't accept death delivered in prose.
Darkness fell twice tonight; can we still know
what's real? Give me your hand and we'll compose
ourselves. Do you recall, not long ago,
when one could mourn but not despair? When pain
made sense? I'm tired. Let us not be bound
by Time, least of all these times, when again
we stand upon the brink. I hear the sound
of mourners keeping vigil in the night:
we're but tiny flames clinging to the wick.
I want to touch what aches in us, the light
we guard to stay alive. My dear, come quick.
I hear a knock; I'm afraid. Is it you?
I dare to open and let hope come through.

Love Sonnet Written on the Occasion of the President Being Hospitalized

What a fine day for schadenfreude, my dear!
I've no intent to offer thoughts or prayers:
for we, the heathens, lovers of Earth, fear
no god—aspire not to sainthood. May
we live long in love, and the nation heal—
and if the wicked suffer, what's it to me?
Why must we their empty conscience appeal
for kindness, or give an ounce of ours? We
have a future to fight for! They won't steal
another thought from us. I think of you,
of post-pandemic strolls, how it will feel
to be relieved of this hate. O, we knew
these would be awful years; at least we laugh,
say *I love you*, watch for flags at half-staff.

--

On October 2nd, 2020, then-President Donald Trump was hospitalized with COVID-19

Opening Line

Last night I dreamt of the perfect opening line
to a poem that would, I had no doubt, piece

back together the crumbling world. It was a line
that drew you in, breathless, that made you drop

everything—coffee, that online shopping cart
one click from arriving at your door—and pay

attention, the way, when I was little and living
in a rainless place, I would long for the clink

of rain on roof. Yesterday was my son's fourth
birthday. We had a bouncy house, petting zoo,

piñata, stood around in a light drizzle and watched
the kids play, unaware of the crumbling world.

What if they are not ignorant but right? What stops
us from dropping our sorrow, the weight of concern

for the present, the future: the weight of regret?
After the presents had been opened, after my son

was dreaming his child-dreams—of rain? of playtime? —
after we put away the toys he'll soon grow tired of, threw

away pounds of garbage, I thought of the children who
have no toys, who go to sleep hungry, or afraid of bombs

or beatings, children for whom a bedtime story is enough.
For my birthday this year, my parents asked what I wanted

and for weeks I thought of nothing but my wants. What I
chose doesn't matter; by the time I got it I wanted something

else. But my dream-poem's closing line was about pinecones
nestled in the rain-soaked earth, and the title was *Happiness*.

Regarding a Corpse

Regarding a corpse
at the bottom of a ravine,
I wonder if it's mine.

I wonder if as it tumbled,
sinews tearing like tissue
soaked in another's tears,

it felt my pain. I wonder
if there is relief in not-
feeling, not-being: absence.

I see no headstones, nothing
to mark a life, to reveal who
the corpse belonged to.

Was it held hostage,
a bouquet torn from the branch
bleeding into its vase?

Did it find what it sought
at the bottom of a ravine,
or did it recall, too late,

the dog-eared novel, the unread
poems by the bed—how a body
can leap without falling?

Damnatio Memoriae

To resist through nonviolence, yes—
I'll do what the data says is wise.³
But to love is another matter:
I may wave the flag, but I am no patriot;
is it not better to burn what they betray?

If the House is rotten, I leave it to others
to destroy or Reconstruct. I am fine with either.
Sure, nothing grows without rot—
no rich soil, no history to study and to learn—
but the illiterate draw their own lessons, wield
their own weapons.
I have run out of words of outrage.

One day there will be monuments
to tell of this dangerous time:
What structures will the architects design?
What wild rantings will the walls inscribe?

I am no thief. All that is mine is mine.
Shall I first confiscate this epoch,
make it mine to censure or delete?^{4 5}
What of the graffiti I may not find?
The encrypted hard drive I can't erase?
The yard signs yet to decay...?

No, it would take millions to do the job.
We, redeemers of what—an idea?
Nearly half the population?

At Appomattox no treaty was signed,
for there was no truce to be had:
Democracy always teeters between deliverance
and decay...

My greatest pleasure in overcoming
would be to never have reason to relive the trial.

³ Robson, David. *The '3,5% rule': How a small minority can change the world*. May 14, 2019. BBC.
<<http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world>>

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Is There Freedom in Forgetting or Being Forgotten?

“*A breathless Death is not so cold as a Death that breathes.*” – Emily Dickinson

I’m no Dante, lost though I may be,
nor you my Beatrice, just as lost to me.

Yet the passions ring, silent to your ear—
O brooding lyric, lead on! Lo these many years:

In warm ink we poets write
excuses for the darkness of the night.

-

I dreamt your room I once belonged,
where we in solitude thronged,

two confined, chained soul-to-soul:
In me you sought, and found, parole,

though living, dying, always chains—mind
the key I held, fumbling, blind!

Will you let me in? I dare not ask.
Sobriety drinks that bitter flask.

-

Outside, in rain, in heat, in snow,
life passes, tipsy, slow,

and in me rivers, laden, flow—
carry dreams the tombs outgrow.

Don't Let the Fascists Win

To write is to argue without evidence that beauty pervades: the rainforest and the killing field, sunsets and floods of acid rain on I-95.

Every morning I brush my teeth, wash my hair, check my clothes in the mirror before work. Is it vain or naïve to read poetry these days?

I've travelled millennia across lands of brute illiteracy and great odds to arrive here, on a couch in the suburbs of a fragile Democracy:

Isn't it nice to rest a while, put our feet up, drink of the marvels of a global economy?—my coffee is from Perú, my coffeemaker made in China!

The TV blares, though I'm not watching; every so often I hear a commercial for car insurance. I forgot to turn off the upstairs-light; my empty bed

is bathed in unobserved miracles. Passing comets must marvel that so much abundance can go to waste. In 2020 America, it is normal to mock the idealist,

and yet we've built a union worth perfecting. On Monday mornings, I cringe at myself in the mirror, then hurry along I-95...

so much work to do today.

The Business of Life and Death

It seems inconceivable,
reading on a couch on a Sunday afternoon,
that one day I'll die
and my decades of warmth will release
back into the sky's body
and my footprints will wear away
like a pillow forgetting the shape
of a face.

Suppose I grant you the premise of your question.

Should I gather up my limbs at once
and build something immortal with them?

What could I construct to outlast
the drowsy calm of this moment?

I have seen too much destruction already. Limbs
torn down to make way for greed, or, worse,
the illusion of grandeur; lakes drained
and whole towns gathered at the shore, aching
for how the waters used to feed winter's light;
moss ripped up lest someone trip and fall.

No, it's safer here. Come, rest your cheek
on my chest. Touch your bruises to mine.
Let others dig graves, pick flowers, chisel
monuments, draft wills, prepare eulogies.
So long as we embrace, passing warmth
between us like breath or fresh bread,
what reason do we have to worry
about the business of life and death?

The Planet Jeff Bezos Returned to

Jeff Bezos did not leave the planet any better than he found it, though he is rich enough to [leave it and return, alive](#). As I watch the skies, greedy mosquitos stalk me like a herd of tiny buffalo. Swatting them away, I order cortisone cream on Amazon. Triumphant, Jeff [thanks his employees and customers](#)—“You paid for this,” he says. You’re welcome, Mr. Bezos. He does not reply, but the mosquitoes are feeling generous: they tip me for the speed with which I feed them. I should go in now; there’s an Air Quality Advisory, smoke from fires across the country. Fire stalks me. There is not enough water in the seas to douse the fear of flames or soothe my skin. I scratch until I bleed. Isn’t death for other people? Seneca wrote, *Things that were hard to bear are sweet to remember*. Perhaps the Internet erased the need for memory: I remember nothing. There is little sweetness now. Let’s observe a moment of silence for the climate we’ve driven to the brink, like the 30 million buffalo we [culled to a few thousand](#). But so long as there is sperm, and eggs, and energy to procreate, all is not lost; we’ve yet to agree upon a [Kármán line](#) to mark the boundary between hope and despair. I have so many plans. I could sit on the bloody grass all night, scheming beneath a hazy moon—
If only the mosquitos would leave me to think.

On Doing Good in America

“If you are born poor it’s not your mistake, but if you die poor it’s your mistake.”- [Bill Gates](#)

We admire the philanthropist for "giving back" and ignore what they first had to take away.

It is a sin to need help and a blessing to offer it; there is profit in not asking too many questions:

“How does one with no boots pull himself up by his bootstraps?”

“Why teach someone to fish then deny them access to the lake?”

We are only 4.25% of global population, and yet we own [28% of Covid-19 fatalities](#). But don't worry,

our billionaires, dying to [restart their factories](#), [donate to food banks](#) so the underpaid don't starve.

But we do not weep for the hungry—this is America! We are each one sixty-hour workweek away

from striking it rich. We refuse to quarantine our dreams; If 200,000 perish, that's the price of freedom.

Someday we'll erect an immaculate monument to those who died for the good of the economy.

Funeral Procession

“Billionaires have added about \$1 trillion to their total net worth since the pandemic began.” –
[Washington Post](#)

On a drizzly morning walk I stopped to let a hearse go by,
its pitch-black paint sweating polish, and as I waited

for the procession I thought about who profits from tragedy,
the business of loss, and who profits no matter what,

who, having reserved the choicest funeral plot, knows its value
will rise, even in death, whose children inherit the belief that

the soil is for sale—and if the soil, then why not the air,
why not the sun, why not the universe itself?—who is driven

home from the womb and back to the dirt on leather-wrapped
seats, who leads a leather-wrapped life, who is [first to be treated](#)

and [first to be vaccinated](#), who, [early to learn of a pandemic](#),
buys up all the coffins, whose guile makes the markets swoon,

who understands what love will drive people to do, what they’ll
pay for a final hug, squeeze of the hand, nap inside the deep, deep earth.

Reading Poems Written Half a Lifetime Ago

Mom has been cleaning the house I grew up in;
she's mailed me a stack of old poems I wrote

by hand, back when I wrote by hand and carried pen and
paper at all times—just in case. The poems are no good,

just a few decent similes I can't think what to do with,
like coins from a long-forgotten empire only I value.

Maybe they'll inspire you, Mom says. I promise to give
the collection a title such as *Winter Snaps the Trees*.

I read while my son naps. A car passes; its tires crunch
on de-icing salt; I am inspired. Expanses of snow-laden

fields radiate light, which catches in my mind's eye
and stuns me. I remember when, learning of Buddha,

I became convinced I was enlightened, and paced the yard
the way I imagined a Saint would pace: deliberately, hands

clasped behind my back. Now I set aside the old pages and
walk, stiffly, to the window. They say one never steps into

the same river twice. But is this not the same world I stared
at years ago, when I could close my eyes and will away war

and hunger—all those horrors I had the power to stop?
The glass is cold, the way glass is almost always cold.

I press my forehead to it as though to cure a fever. A bird
I cannot name—Hawk? Robin?—streaks past, squawking.

Somewhere a branch snaps off an ancient tree. Somewhere
a teenager wanders his yard, full of unreasonable dreams,

ideals he has yet to disappoint. In my book, the boy meets his
adult self. They discuss what the other knows and doesn't know.

By the time my son stirs, then cries, I too am crying,
I too find joy in every object, turning it in my hands.

The Bottom Line

“Would you break the law then pay a fine if it helped the bottom line?”

“Yes,” says the CEO, “this job is mine so long as I grow the bottom line.”

“And how do your values align with this growing bottom line?”

“The free market is a thing divine; we all grow rich when I grow the bottom line”

“But nature, she is in decline while you pursue the bottom line...”

“We donate to restore the coastline with profits from our bottom line.”

“You have children working in the mines, to a life of slavery confined...”

“That work to others is assigned; slavery is their problem, not mine.”

“One last thing: is there a line you wouldn't cross in service of the bottom line?”

“Ask my lawyers and my Board; I have time only to serve the bottom line.”

The Self-Made Man

I was raised by wolves who gave me just enough to survive.
I am the uber autodidact:
I built the school where I taught myself
economics, built a factory—and the roads
leading to the factory—where I alone
made my fortune. I am a self-made man.

When my factory caught fire, I put it out myself.
I hire the police that protect my home from the hordes
that would tax me: I need nothing from the State, and so
give nothing to the State.

After I die, my employees, and the countless
recipients of my charity,
will bemoan that they aren't also self-made;
they will accept their poverty and continue to work for
and admire my son,
whom I have raised like a wolf to be a self-made man,
to carry on my legacy.

Daydreaming on a Saturday Afternoon in May During a Pandemic

It's Saturday afternoon about two months into social distancing and quarantine and I find it hard to daydream. I can cite the numbers—70,000+ dead, 30 million+ jobs lost—but we have all become statisticians of the macabre. Let's talk about something else. In the morning there were snow flurries and now an imitation sun is making false promises:

- those branches are not swaying in cold
- you don't need a sweater to keep warm
- it is snowing in May and everything is perfectly fine
- the train that rumbled by was full of healthy people doing weekend things

It's Saturday afternoon. I just read that the [virus is mutating](#), anti-vaxxers are joining other unsavory elements to [protest public health measures](#), the president doesn't see the need for mass testing but [is now getting tested daily](#)—we all know the news isn't good. Let's talk about something else. Last night I had a dream. A poet wearing PPE stood in a park crowded with unmasked people; no one heard him over their laughing and their coughing. Elsewhere, [nurses stood up](#) to gun-toting, flag-bearing protestors. In the ensuing melee, a mom and dad were shot dead; their son watched the funeral by video chat. Okay, let's talk about what kind of country that boy will grow up in...

How to Prepare for a Coup in a Pandemic

My stockpile is such that
when I open a closet I brace
for an avalanche of toilet paper.

In the kitchen are enough cans of beans
to last a months-long struggle, for my son
to pass the hours building steel pyramids.

I've strewn fat books of poetry around the house
like a Beagle hiding bones to find delight
in the mundane and comfort when there's nothing else to do.

Sometimes, taking a break from the news and work,
I'll spot the collected works of this or that poet
and, for a moment, have context for despair.

I'm talking to my son now. I want you to know
that I wore a mask, that I quarantined, and protested,
and wrote things that failed to stop the death and

suffering of this horrible age, that if we manage to
survive, a time will come when my poems,
gathering dust, just might keep you alive.

Be Wary of Sadness in Dark Times

I notice my parents' aging as I do my own:
Not at all, then in a photo, all at once.

I blink and seasons, eons have passed.
Now Winter speaks to me, her voice
a groan of boilers straining against cold—

Don't be sad. Doesn't the frost remind
of home? Of baking Piroshki with Grandma?

On sluggish mornings such as this, when
the sun sweats to warm the chilly earth,
I wonder what my napping son is dreaming,
what he will ask when he grows old—

Remember that photo of Grandma and Grandpa?
They are smiling and, though it's getting dark, I smile back.
What was it you wrote about America and hope?

(So much happens when we're asleep;
One morning I awoke to an altered Earth.)

You've begun to stir. I hear your happy babbling.
This darkness is heavy; I won't let it crush you too.

During a Nor'easter I Seek Shelter from the Tumult: A Haiku

In this white-capped wind
a kite can fly a lifetime
never touching earth

Strolling Great Hollow Beach, Cape Cod 50 Days Before the Election

Is this how the enlightened or unaffected live,
strolling Idyllic beaches, at peace? What do these
happy tourists know that I don't? Strolling and striving
for peace, I can't help but picture the world in ruins
even as my little son is playing on the dunes.

Here at night a poet can step out and see actual stars
—not as metaphor, but proof that one is more
than one's dread. And this vastness reminds
that though in time the world will be in ruins,
right now my little son is playing on the dunes.

Soon great things will be decided. If I stay here much
longer, what horrors will happen that didn't have to?
And if I leave, what will I miss? After four years,
it has come to this: I fear that all I love will go to ruins,
and my little son is playing on the dunes.

Election Day

“Power is not what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.” – Saul Alinsky

Elections have consequences.
So say the victors to justify
their ends and means.

Perhaps the American Dream
is to live without consequence:
no mistakes, only cheapness

we are free to later discard.
Why deliberate honestly?
Abundance is our temptation,

prosperity the lie we tell to
expiate our original sin.
Elections have consequences.

Had Lincoln lost, how many
would we still count as slaves?

Who voted for mass incarceration,
child detention, soaring inequality?

In America anything is possible.
A Black president. Rags-to-riches.
Our poets, scientists, entrepreneurs

have proven their greatness—
the full flower of individualism—
yet something blights the soil.

We are good people but not a
Good People. We welcome the Iraqi
refugee, ignore the crime that made him one.

Who voted for the War on Terror?
Who paid for the lies that launched it?

How much is too much to spend on
defense? On political ads?

Alinsky argued that what matters
is a *particular* means for a *particular*

end. Democracy not in the abstract

but in the flesh, the messy world
of action and reaction. I'm ready to commit
murder at the ballot box. I hope it's not

too late to stop the carnage. America
forgives itself so easily, as though
we weren't forgiving but forgetting.

If we knew the difference between
poll numbers and corpses, budgets
and starvation, we might have avoided

this moment. A pandemic. A fraud.
I cast my vote uncertain it will count.
That is, be counted. That is, matter.

When my blood is on the ballot,
there is only one outcome I can accept.
Elections have consequences.

Life After Dodging a Bullet

I try on a suit to look handsome for the moon,
ask the mirror what I've gained and what I've lost.

I mourn the death of those yet to die,
seek an urn to hold the ashes of what might have been.

I rake leaves as though they fell naturally,
say the quiet part out loud and feel no shame, only sadness.

I sip an evening breeze and admire a robin's body,
dance to birdsong no one else can hear.

I shake my head to dislodge the ringing in my ear,
dream of Chekhov's Gun—flinch at the evening news.

A More Perfect Union

"And I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice. I don't want any greatness for it, particularly a greatness born of blood and falsehood. I want to keep it alive by keeping justice alive." - Albert Camus

When children by gunfire die,
when the dreamer and the warden clash,

when statues betray the sculptor, we proclaim
this is not who we are.

Who are we?

I take my chisel to Plymouth Rock
but the rock gives no blood;

our history is like that stone,
heavier than its weight...

Standing at a dank underpass, I rattle
a tin cup, wave a sign that reads

this is not who we are—

I can grow rich here, devote my life
to the pursuit of happiness...

It is said that upon his murder, Lincoln belonged
to the ages: Why do we wait for blood?

We've planted great forests of headstones.
I wander their lush paths, the sanguine streams,

and amidst this grandeur, this horror,
I glimpse both what is and what could be.

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