


Spring 2020

Love is a country

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LOVE IS A COUNTRY

A Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Gregory Ethan Scheiber

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Elksong

Moan, elk—
 Call out your songs of the dead—
 Tell me of the calves who were—
 Your old, your sick—the ones you love lost to wolves
 Or bears or winter or hunter.

Whether we decay or become ash,
 Whether we are eaten or stuffed in a chimney
 Or trunk of a car—
 The earth comes for us.
 There is no preservation—

We can't stop volcanoes or tsunamis
 or the orbit or the expanding sun
 But snow in June or falling ash in June is all the same—
 an arbitrary moment
 in a world of gods.

Everything we see—even beginnings—
 are always endings—
 The calf nuzzling its mother, the calf decapitating blades of grass,
 the empty bugle—

Listen—
 the yip of coyote and howl of wolf
 Are also mournful—even the killer will moulder—
 bones picked clean,
 Bones bleached in sun or eaten by mud—pecked by ravens once friends.

I.

Love is a country
to which we return and return
but in which we cannot live.

—Chase Twichell, “Reno” from *Northern Spy*

The world was all before them

The dying leaves:

your hair—

the spaces between

the baring twigs twining on trees:

your eyes.

The bark—

Well—

I'd name my bark after you—

cross the ocean

in the thought of your orange dress

in the touch of your grey UConn sweatshirt;

arms around you like serpent coils

surrounding the trunk of the Tree

Summarily cast down—

cast out.

Evening comes on.

I never noticed

the sunset so early up north.

(I've lived in this latitude all my life.)

Do you notice the darkness?

What's the east like now?

What do you labor for?

I can barely feed myself.

Shylock of the Lamar Valley

You see the cinnamon wolf tear a hunk of flesh
 From the killed calf.
 It had been lying out all day
 But now, in the evening,
 The mother had given up
 On it ever rising again—
 Perhaps she found someplace quiet
 To lay down and die too—
 Somewhere shaded and out of sight
 Like a bleeding deer who knows its time has come
 To consign itself into other life.
 You see the wolf come away from the carcass
 And pass by the small still water reflecting whatever walks upon its banks
 Or sits atop its surface—earlier it was a white water bird—you couldn't tell what kind.
 People with binoculars or scopes or naked eyes
 Ask what part of the calf it has.
 Someone says *the head*, another says *the leg*,
 I say *it has a hock* but in my Connecticut-tinged voice it sounds like *hawk*
 And someone questions my intelligence.
 You see that unlike Shylock, the scavenger has claimed its flesh—
 Though it is too far away to see blood,
 Perhaps the wolf managed to fulfill the contract
 Just like you worry about fulfilling contracts you signed
 On student loans and suspect
 That one day some agency will hold its knife to your chest
 And carve out a fair piece
 From whichever part it pleaseth them—
 Unlike Shylock, they will have done their homework
 And with knife in hand, will collect
 On your blood, on your death,
 Never nervous about a court of *deus ex machina*
 While the wolf takes home the head or the haunch
 To feed its hungry pups,
 Never worrying if what it did was just
 While what remains of the dead calf is consumed
 By three species and innumerable insects
 and finally—
 like everything else—
 The earth.

Unelegy

--for C.G.

I went to the memorial your mother held at her house—
 I hadn't been there in years
 But it looked the same
 And felt the same—
 A blood-orange posterboard was on display by the door
 Like it was a school project
 Covered in photos of you
 as a child—as an adult—with friends—with family—
 drawings you made from animes you watched—
 a chronicle of Bolivia and Connecticut and Massachusetts—
 your smile still like the air in the house
 like the graphite mouth of the figure you
 drew

And your mother
 Sat on the steps that led to her now
 One-bodied bedroom in her now one-bodied house
 And told me—an hour before the rabbi arrived—
 About how you wanted to live—to be a father—
 (I could see you—
 soccer-coaching our sons and daughters—)
 About how you took care of your fragiling self—
 Changed what you ate,
 How you lived—

She told me about the liver you were born with,
 That life in the states was at least longer than life in Bolivia
 had you never been adopted

And she told me how the hospital you died in
 Couldn't stanch the internal bleeding
 The night you woke with it flooding your mouth.

I've been wanting
 To write you an elegy for years
 But I find my powers
 Lack the ability to give you life.

Chris—
 I'm sorry you're dead and the only thing I could do was listen to your mother's
 words.
 I don't know how you can now be a rock in another state,
 plotted among relatives.
 Maybe if I had seen your body or your coffin I would know.

I want to talk about when we ran laps around the soccer field
Or your birthday parties or the half of the bar mitzvah I attended.
I want to talk to you in context
But all I can think about
are the last words
I couldn't say
in what I hoped
Would not be our final conversation
When I let you know
that your mother told me you would likely not
get that transplant
And the world seemed silent as I waited for you to type
And you said you were taking it day by day
And what you needed most was conversation
As we caught up after years
And when you went to rest from your most recent liver failure
And I said that I was sorry I hadn't kept up with you better
And you said *we are only human*
And I discovered
That I did not know
How to speak

Aeneas Comes Upon Dido in the Plain of Mourning

*Tragic queen, I beg you not to turn away—
 When I saw you last
 There was yet life in your limbs—
 Why do I find you down
 amongst the ruined?
 What fastens you to this empty plain?*

I watched you
 sail on,
 Son of Troy—

Your sleek ships
 cutting the dark water
 from Carthage—
 I saw grief go with you—
 your refugeed crew caught it in their sails—

And you left me to myself—

I could barely look my sister in the face

For beholding her
 was like looking
 at myself,
 tearless—

I see no peace
 between my walls
 and your ragged fleet
 and I could not live
 with the thought of violence between us—

Do not think to say
 more to me now—

Your left-behind sword
 is what I drove on down to the
 Underworld—

Aeneas—love—
 all I need to say
 is that I watched you sail away.

Displaced Memory

It wasn't until I turned down the aisle,
Looking for liners to bring home to you
That I remembered when I was seventeen,
And told her that I wanted
To be with her forever.
She said that meant
Going to the store late at night
For tampons and Midol—
And standing in Rosauer's,
At 10 pm, I was fulfilling
This AIM prophecy
As if two separate timelines
Were converging. As if I could walk
Out of the grocery store
And if I believed hard enough,
Would be in a new place and time
Where she would be
On the couch in our apartment
Waiting to receive this pledge of love
In the form of small black box.
Our happiness became of another time
And I couldn't quite
Place myself outside my adolescent
Designs for the future
Until I opened the door
And saw you awake.

II.

I am dreaming
I am in the dark
And it is raining
And she is the rain.

—Primus St. John, “Dreamer”

You Too Are Water

Rain comes down.

It shatters on the sidewalk.

Think of water as a body.

Its blood is everywhere—
even in your blood.

You too are water—

Liquid. Mobile—unchanging—unsettling.

Creeping in under doors, little wet fingers licking t-bars—

Little wet fingers grasping stone—grasping mortar.

I'd fight it if I could. But currently—I've got nothing—

Just myself—just this counter upon which I write—just this mess of words.

Tell me water—air—blood—Greg—

What do you believe in?

I am sure I believe in the trees and their transient colors—

I believe in the holy fire they lay upon the earth like quilts—

I love their rustle when I stick my feet into the warm and rotting center—

I love the way the dampness sneaks into my shoes.

You give me no end to pleasure.

You give me no end.

Waking Up to Our Picture

I had set you on the dresser last night so that I would—
I cupped my arm

 Around a space too small to be anyone

 And I whispered

you are

this emptiness

 Though I knew

 That even the void

 couldn't be you.

 I imagined foreign hands on your exposed arm—

 Their fingerprints and sweat marks staining you

 But that isn't any of my business now—

 Nor has it ever been—

I checked my phone—laconically—

 To see if my psychic voice

 Came to you in the morning

 But you are beyond responding.

 I have yet to mature.

Summer Nights on Venta Drive

Summer nights in bed with the top half
 Of the window open, Venetian blinds drawn,
 And the sawing sound of cicadas through the window.
 I could see the dark blue of the late sky
 And the thin magma of the streetlamp on the corner of our yard
 Creeping through the plastic slats.

The sound of the occasional car sailing through the neighborhood—
 rubber tires rolling across asphalt
 and headlights highlighting the dust and black mold on the window
 before turning either parallel
 or perpendicular at the fork of our yard
 and cruising on.

Before going to bed,
 Gramps would drop the cover of the ceiling exhaust fan
 And turn it on to suck the day's heat from the house:
 air vacuumed from the hallway and bedrooms
 through spinning blades—
 heat pulled into the attic and left to rise.

Everyone else I knew had air conditioning—
 Windows shut just as tight in heat as in cold—
 A hard delineation between the outside and the indoor.

I grew up understanding the importance of a cross-breeze
 And what blinds you close across the life of a day
 to keep the sun from further heating the house
 or from fading the vegetable-dye carpets.
 How you don't park the car in the garage after it's been running
 and instead under the fifty-year-old maple near the road
 except for the one summer plagued by a rash of car break-ins

Or since that May when the furious Spring winds
 ripped the tree down on our power lines,
 plunging the house into darkness for days.
 At night we sat around the dining room table
 swapping card games by the light of a D-battery lantern
 until our eyes tired and we walked with flashlights down the silent hall,
 the house devoid of life except for our four bodies roving in the dark,
 turning in bed,
 after we had spent our evenings in the same room
 with the same experience.

Amtrak Trilogy: New Haven to Raleigh

1. New England Forests

I can see why the Puritans were frightened of witches here—
 The empty trees in winter
 and the too-full trees in summer
 Are home to more than deer or skunks or bobcats
 or the supposedly extinct Eastern mountain lion—
 They are not home to the druidic wisps of Celtic isles
 or to madmen or merry men living off the bounty of the land
 But to rougher, more primordial beings:
 The dark dog of luck and loss in the Hanging Hills near Meriden,
 The vacant ghosts haunting New Haven theatres and colleges—
 The hill of the demigod asleep under trees in Hamden,
 The stream in East Haddam where the devil or a devil blasted
 in frustration
 beautiful smooth holes in the riverrock
 where brewers would later store hops—
 The centuries-old whispers under Moodus—
 named by native sachems as “place of the bad noises”—
 Hobbomock rattling bones and war
 and later, Satan rattling his chains—
 Or the unexplained insanities of abandoned and off-limits Dudleytown—
 Ruined foundations surrounded by dark entry forest,
 untalked-about by Cornwall residents—
 Antediluvian entities hiding behind thin naked trees and under fallen leaves,
 crouched in groves of rhododendron—
 Old magick at work
 despite the modern desire to take—
 to enlighten instead of enchant and raze to raise—

I used to be an adventurer like you—then I took an arrow to
the knee

I had a sword once—

A bright blade I sharpened often—

Eventually I set it in an anvil

Or wrapped it in rags to bury its gleaming surface

In the bottom of a trunk with all that I left in boyhood.

I became man and that meant not muscles nor freedom nor brave deeds
but mundane ones

full of earthy necessity.

You can't be anointed on High Hrothgar

And speak in commanding tones if you've already given up yourself in favor of her
who lodged this arrowhead in my joint.

I suppose that's why

The Greybeards never called me dragonborn—

Tied to this land and building (and smithy or desk or shop or hall or
tannery)—

Tied to this woman I share these hardships with—bear hers in addition to
my own as she bears hers in addition to mine—

Maybe you'll stop to purchase—or at least pause

To open my store's stock

Before continuing on your way to another village,

Miles and roads distant—

Resolving some earth-rending decision that affects me not

For my world is so shrunken

That the pawing of wares

Means little beyond this clustered village—

I'd like to shake your hand, dragonborn

And join your quest across this hard and frigid land—

I would like to camp cold beneath the high iced peaks

And bear my old sword (rotten now with rust)

And die with the free breath of the wild in my mouth.

But now with my gut and kempt beard and craftsman's tunic

I will offer you my single line as you pass by,

armor rattling your presence—

smelling of ash

and pine

and blood—

Summer Solstice

June snow:
The mountains are white.

Tiny globes drift down:
Clings to needles

Coats cars coats leaves melts on soil
Melts on road.

The ram topping the totem pole
Across the street looks down

And sullen—a small pile of thick wet snow
Crowns his crown and he clearly
Thought we were through with this.

Coloring Eggs on Bailey Road

We have spread
 The newspaper over her kitchen table
 And lined up
 An assortment of mugs
 Scrounged from the depths of the cabinets,
 Each one filled with vinegar,
 The sour smell bursting up
 With the bubbling dissolution
 Of each tiny chalk tablet
 That resembled a pill or a spree
 Frothing from a resting place
 On each cup's floor.

When the dye had spread itself
 Between molecules of vinegar,
 Darkening the clear liquid to blue,
 Red orange, green, violet, and yellow,
 We took a tray of hard-boiled eggs and plopped one into each mug,
 Allowing the colors to attach
 To the fragile shellskins,
 Changing the bleached white
 Into every shade of rainbow.
 Settled upon the twenty-year old table
 (as old as her parents' marriage),
 We ladled into each mug with soup spoon
 Or the wimpy wire bracket
 That came from the kit box.

I bent it into an "L"
 And scraped the ceramic surface,
 Catching one of the molting ellipses
 And raising it out
 To marvel at where
 She had drawn on it with the white wax crayon
 Creating whimsical designs—
 Curlicues and spirals cutting through the colors.

The liquid clinging to each egg
 Sopped onto the cardboard holder,
 Destroying the disposable piece—

Each of these stillborn eggs
 Were tinted into single or double colors
 And the last one

Which visited each mug,
Our Ugly Duckling,
The crack running down from its forehead,
The scrambled mash of wannabe salad
Poking between fissures of shell
Sat on the collapsing cardboard
And stared—boredly—
Out at us—
The newspaper folded in my hands and crumpled between hers
Cast into the garbage
Behind the giggles which rippled
In the pool of vibration.

Listening to Garbage's "#1 Crush" While Driving Through Fog on the Merritt Parkway

Here, everything has melted into blindness—
The roads full with fog and dark sedans appearing out of it, speeding
This stretch of old road between New York and New Haven

And I could say there's nothing more Connecticut than this—
 Roads thick with limitless cars,
 Windy days blowing us out of February
With the mourning tinge of morning—
Wet woods and rocks and the river widening
Toward its mouth with long coastal bridges
Spanning watered chasms.

My rental car straddles the imaginary line in water
Between Stratford and Milford
And the lights of Sikorsky on the Housatonic
Shine dimly through the noon grey—
Murky evaporation of slush and shallow water—
Murky as the 90s alt-rock sounds on the radio.

The upright and empty-branched trees of Fairfield County
Hide the parkway from the small wealthy towns
And divide the east and westbound lanes
With wooden guardrails, wet
And the obscuring air, wet
And eyes wet at tomorrow's funeral
In the yellow and blue Saint Ladislaus church
Where the Norwalk parish has turned its immigrant population
From founding Hungarian to Hispanic,
The Magyar memories long dispersing
And long in dispersing
 As they assimilate
 and circulate— and dissolve

And I feel
 as if I
 could never assimilate
 anywhere else.

This brief trip up the shoreline towards home,
 Passes under the Merritt's low old bridges,
 paint and concrete flaking—
 And the familiar signs from Darien to North Haven
 are each an exit into reverie

Where all my #1 crushes
and all the girls I've asked to church
are now shrouded in snowmelt muddy mist.

For once
I am not here for any of this.

The weight of this state
Feels good God I never imagined
I could miss this leaden place.

North Branford at the Convergence of Routes 22 and 80

The town is a hunchback—

The humped spine of the Totoket Mountain Ridge

Where the traprock quarry feeds

Rises from the meal of its southern terminus

And peels north into Durham,

dividing the town from the village.

The water company-owned slopes

Covered with maple, oak, tulip, beech, and birch—

The skin of the forest floor covered by

A thick rug of brown leaves

And branches broken in storms and trunks tumbled down in wind

And legal and illegal pathways through the deciduous

And the occasional sign of whose firewood permit

This wedge of treed land belongs to.

On top of the town's scoliosis ridge

Lies Lake Gaillard—

A flooded valley we drink and shower from.

Here and there near the edge of the water

Are houses that were vacated on order from 1920s authorities,

Their wood siding fading to earth tones

And their interiors dark like a glut on the land—like the vast vacuous water company

We thought of as an enigmatic evil empire

When we played in the woods as children as teens as adults.

We heard tales that the tops of farmhouses could be seen

When the water level is low

And I have never seen them myself

But I believe in that mythic existence:

No need to waste time to deconstruct

When collecting

a reservoir

Behind a small cement dam

That the water splashes over when it is too high or when the wind
whips down

Over the canopy and across the clearing of the lake

And sometimes I worry about the traprock quarry

Delving too greedily and too deep on the mountain's southern slope,

Awakening a balrog of shadow and water instead of flame,

Crushing through rocky passageways

And washing out the towering metal slides and carriages and railroad above Route 80

That seems to me (both now and past and future) as an industrial amusement park,

The rock slides (at least what I assume are rock slides)

Resembling roller coasters with their beige tracks

pointing toward the earth at acute angles from corrugated towers—

And then—if the quarry were to wash out
There would no longer be
The sound of its lunch whistle heard in the classrooms across the street
Nor the high school's rumble and shake
 Of new drilling
 Of new blasting—
The marsh foundation of the school seeming strong enough
 To withstand the incessant vibration of machinery in the earth—
 But the bubbling gym floor
 Or the basement locker room, declared off-limits
 Like a Venetian first level
 Are caused by the bog's reclamation.

And the foundations which provided fifty years of people
With foundations are these foundations—
 Are these brick bones
In marshland unrelenting.

This Swirling Mess

There is nothing like fingers—
 Human fingers which tie shoes and pluck strings and grasp pens and
 people and knives and drinks
 Aren't they incredible?

Wash this page in orange light—
 Wash it clean of sentiment or wash me in sentimental waves of grass—
 Wash me in orange—
 Set me back—
 Into an artifact picture beneath a mural of artifact pictures
 perched on the white wall—

Perhaps I should concentrate on the cobalt couch—
 Blue has always been my favorite color—
 Green and red my brothers—
 Blue is—like cornflower—like eggplant—no—that's purple
 That's Kate's color—
 Royal—
 Roman—
 Expensively dyed.

Is purple the color of God? It is of Advent.
 Did the devil wear His cloak
 And the hem grabbed by Michael's hand thrust down?
 And down and down to the bottom
 (Smoke 'em if you got 'em)
 (My mom said my dad had that song on vinyl back in the '70s.
 I got his Steve Millers—
 The rest are gone now.)

But purple—that cape is like the cape of kings ascending their daises
 And kings cast down
 Descending to flagstones where their heads were dashed upon the
 metamorphosing earth hewn out of quarries and placed somewhere else—
 like Stonehenge, ancient fingers rising from the earth.

Dash me against Stonehenge—
 Would I die for that ancient lore?
 I would die—maybe.
 But it must be God's color—
 The hue of Advent
 The color of coming, of preparation—

What were people wearing
 When I arrived on this earth,
 Cast down to mortal plane or formed on mortal plane
 And I hate planes.

I pray to God and venerate to Mary for the propellers to stay aloft—
 Ascents are always evened with a fall
 And those cast down do not return to rise—
 It is a choice to Fall—

But if a propeller failed
 Or a fuel tank ran down
 Or we minced a flock of Canada geese
 The only choice there
 Is the arrogance that says we can rise
 And that is no good—
 Plummeting
 To the bottom of everything—enveloped in a fluttering inferno turning to ash—
 (it's your birthday. Happy birthday)

As I clutch whatever the last possible dearest thing is in all the remaining
 world—
 Digging my digits deep enough
 That even Death cannot unlodge
 My form from my fingers—

I remember a passage from *All Quiet on the Western Front*
 When Paul sees the torso of a man blown in to a leafless tree
 Amongst the shattered midst of no-man's-land
 And—

The shells are coming
 They always come—
 Firing through the sky—
 Glowing orange and purple
 And that last moment of combustion
 Separates our arms from our fingers.

Elpenor Speaks from Limbo

I know I was young and unknown
and drunk.

I didn't place the ladder—only climbed it
to see what island views
a second story could afford
in this wayward pigsty place—

Why did we stay?

Was it for desperation of bedding and drinking
after a decade of war
that we lingered?

Are you sure she had not modified you as well—

You who had the most beautiful and steadfast woman on Ithaca as wife—
(Though I suppose she must expect
that great and pious men obey the desires of goddesses.)

But—we were not hubristic heroes—

We were not of name or position to turn an Olympian's eye—
Merely followers rallying to banners knit under oath,
The cause (we believed) just and the accord pure.
We trusted to your cunning at Troy
and your captaincy on the wine-dark sea.

Our deaths, past and future are on your mastery, bright-eyed king.
Those who are left no longer desire plunder
or wit-numbing drink—
they only desire for home—a comfort I shall never reach.

Great Strategos—

I ask that when you turn your sail once more for Swine Isle,
erect a pyre for my body on the warm sand of Circe's beach
so that the smoke and ash of my flesh
might blow in the right wind toward Ithaca.

Say the prayers and pour the libations
to fill my voided future.

Build me a mound—affix my mighty oar in the dune—
Lend me this small mercy
so that if the dead ever rise
my body can rejoin this broken crusade—

That someplace beyond Styx
there may be a substitute for the wool-flecked rises of home.

Amtrak Trilogy: New Haven to Raleigh

2. Landscape Parallel to Rail

You—naked northeast trees—empty fingers searching for God,
Scratching the fog—

Grey winter trunks and absent foliage

Give molting texture to the sleeping giant—

A stand of straight twigs pressed into the brown
leaf-covered floor,

the forest clear like opened venetian blinds.

You are everywhere like eyes on the world like roots through my skull.

O Chesapeake watershed—

I hope we have not claimed you entirely.

I think—I fear—I have lost the words for you

That arrive in my hand unasked-for like untapped oil thrumming to Pennsylvania
surface.

This train is too hot to think and there is so much America and so little me

That I cannot find where to begin—

But that's false

or at least I have to believe it.

I have to believe in this rear-end of America seen from the train—

Small houses with backs turned

beside graystone downtown churches built long before the high tracks were
installed, their stern stained glass only half-visible above the railbridge

and bricked apartment buildings with canvas shades pulled down,

silhouettes of people undressing and unknowing

and broken bottles and crushed cans and metal orange in weather and discarded

paper and plastic wrappers and bags littered on the edges of the trackbed

and on the edges of towns and cities and forests and swamps where the

tracks have ditched through and tunneled through and raised through

and the blind windows of tall downtown buildings constructed since urban

renewal with their brutalist concrete and glass whispering the names of the
city in which they reside

as I read the name of the city in which they reside from the green or white sign on

the platform of Stamford of Wilmington of Baltimore of Trenton of every

stop along this route except New York and Philly where the trains are

shuttered off into the underground and under buildings where the wide

windows transform to mirrors and ask you to focus your eyes and look

into your own face like a forced Narcissus or to look beyond the image

and out into pre-creation void—

The wheels rattle against the track—the cars rattle on their links—the cool pane
rattles

my leaning forehead—

What a wild place this is.

A Petrified Tree in Yellowstone

The ancient redwood permineralized fifty million years ago—
 And here it stands—improbably—most of the trunk buried deep
 In the earth like Easter Island heads
 Or Saint Josephs interred in back or front yards.

(Who remembers which?)

Some fifteen years ago, my dad said he buried a Saint Joseph
 When they were trying to move to Lakeville—the prayers went unanswered
 or at least the gesture of veneration
 went unheard.

He still lives in the house my parents built
 Though the walls have changed and the basement has changed and
 the bathroom has changed and the kitchen has changed and
 the deck has changed
 And simply—it had to.
 I can't imagine the memories caught in a 1995 carpet and
 what it means
 to walk on those same scenes each day,
 Touch rekindling every moment an object (or person) has lived.

One's own mind is bad enough—
 I wonder if I touched that tree—
 reached over the dark metal spikes of the fence—
 Would I feel
 Its moment of metamorphosis?—the organism holding too much soot in its cells
 From the unmatched cataclysm—blanket of black smoke and brimstone
 Turning breathing tree
 to rock.

The Inland Northwest as Compared to the Air I Breathe

Backsides of brothels seen from the interstate,—
 Endless slopes of lodgepoles and larch waiting to be cut
 And among them tiny poisoned towns
 Below panhandle mountains—mines and sins and roads hidden by trees—
 Waiting to be burned—
 Everything so impermanently permanent here,
 Living and dying and returning to soil
 then washed away by blessed water—
 blessed with silver and lead and (I wouldn't fish in it—
 (Don't drink the water—
 There's mineral in the water—)

Earlier, in Butte, a great stone virgin
 Stood watch over the city
 And the giant pit and great scraped-clean mound of dirt
 Ever present, unavoidable, omnipotent—
 Even seen walking out of something as common
 As a DQ—
 So unlike the one where we used to get
 Dilly bars and cherry-dipped cones
 After summer soccer games
 With dried ice cream souped and stained on the plank and cast iron
 benches—on the spread of pavement before the bar—
 All the spots like the designated times
 Of all the teens who worked there—
 One who I endlessly loved
 And one who I endlessly love
 Fired amidst the frozen machines
 And I don't think of things without thinking of them—
 I associate everything
 With everything—
 These poisoned Idaho waters that may contain mutant fish
 Reminds me of the Farm River
 For no other reason than that they are both moving waters I am near—one
 physically and one forever
 And my father's boat in the Mississippi River, great artery of America
 And crossing it over bridges in La Crosse—in Stillwater—in Saint Paul—in Red
 Wing—
 Is as impressive as crossing the Connecticut in East Haddam or the Missouri in Pierre
 Where I watched the waves from the back
 Of the black Suburban my dad had termed The Beast
 And vowed would eat up every Prius it saw that time he drove it east for my
 graduation.

He had driven east previously for my first Communion
 And my grandfather said he didn't want Phil galivanting around his house
 And with no other choice in hospitality my mother offered him cake in the
 driveway
 And yesterday I stood on Yellowstone banks, sulfur smell
 Curling and lodging around every tree and limb
 And I know
 I could boat all the way to Bill's Bay
 If I wanted to—
 When, like a homebound Lewis and Clark I trek back east
 Without the corps, without the firearms or food or uncertainty
 Or danger
 —The only mimicry in miles.

Still twenty from Coeur d'Alene
 All this is so unreal earth—
 Unreal despite a year of living here—

Yesterday I turned my back on the bits of mud volcano
 And saw a hill that despite its uniform quilt of pines
 Reminded me of home—
 I told Sierra that as she headed up a boardwalked hill toward more burbling mud
 And she said it was beautiful—
 Two low mountains rolled over with thick trees
 Like a landscape seen perched atop Bluff Head in North Guilford
 While devouring a slightly spiritual sandwich—
 Legs in the air—flesh on stone and breathing the exhale of the forest,
 Feet landed instead on western wooden slats
 And I turned to face the bubbling mud of the Black Dragon's Cauldron—
 Steam rising all around like hell of the woods
 And—you know—everything is living—even I—even the soil—even the rocks.

Interlude.

Near Pompeii, at the foot of Mount Vesuvius,
lies Herculaneum, the small village, now museum,
once buried in lava. A man and wife were found
embraced, caught in the soft stone.

As though love were the fossil of desire.

—Mark Irwin, “Point Nine”

Holy Week 2019

I.

Lay down.
 Lay down your cloak.
 Lay it on the ground—
 Lay your palm on the road
 for the unbroken colt.
 Lay down your shirt
 from off your back,
 Let it muddy be—
 Let it filthy be—
 Be present.

Here is Jerusalem—
 Here is the Skull above all.
 Dress in red—
 Ready for blood—

Be a carpet.
 Let hooves push you down
 in mud—
 Let you reborn be,
 Reconciled
 In the cathedral's final pews—
 Reconciled
 at least for today.
 —See if it lasts the week.

II.

Kate grimaces during the walk—
 We follow the raised high gold cross
 Around the cathedral block—
 Ascend and descend the stairs—stand-kneel-sit with the rhythms of Mass—
 She's not feeling well enough
 To be here—she hasn't eaten yet today.
 She feels faint and says so
 So I give her the car keys
 Which she chooses not to use—
 Peter who holds the keys
 Denies three times.
 Of course he would.

as Kate squeezed my arm
 as she tried to remain standing through the Gospel.
 At that moment I thought I too might be a Christ or a mystic
 But really—

I was just Greg.
 The same person

I've always been
 Who knows not what he is
 Or where he is going—

III.

I heard about the caught-fire spire,
 How the roof of ancient beams
 collapsed.

It was the Monday following Palm Sunday
 When Matthew told us the veil of the temple
 tore at noon on the first Good Friday

And on this same Monday—in Jerusalem—an ancient mosque
 Suffered in flame.

This is how ruins happen—
 Things fall apart
 and collapse

And whether the destruction is from inferno
 or time
 or Visigothic raids
 or bankruptcy—

Everything ceases—leaves behind broken stones
 and ash—

these cracked bones of Rome—
 of ancient Israel
 of Ayyubid and Ottoman
 and Byzantine-Grecian grandeur

Shining out like shook foil

And I realized

That my vision
 Of skull hill suffering
 Was not to equate me with God
 Or God with Man

But told me

That all
 are on the Cross—
 nailed to beams

stuck in our own eyes
 Like so many Roman splinters
 Sticking from the ground
 outside Jerusalem—

wood and metal touched to blood touched to flesh

(pencils sticking out of a mug
 or pins pushed into plush tomatoes
 or quills in the flesh of tomatoes
 Touched to fruit
 Touched to flesh.)

Golden crosses will not melt
 Under such heat
 Though I think the pressure
 Could turn my soul to diamonds
 And as diamond—unreadable.
 Save my selfish spires. Save
 My self-abused self—
 Unworthy of divine flesh—
 Of transfiguration and Old Testament prophets
 And psalms—
 (you lovely little predictions—)

I have been thinking
 About plucking my beard
 Though counting my bones is too much work
 When, hung by wrists, I look down—

And see every rib
 as gravity
 tears me earthward
 in public suffocation
 like a defeated slave.

IV.

Man—
 I wish I was watching
 Ben-hur today.

V.

I've been listening to Titus Andronicus
 With all its throaty pain

And cracked and myriad
 Girlfriends caught in the Jersey rain
 And this east coast frustration
 finds its little root in the west—
 This little import of Steve K stuff
 Stuffed in drawers of library CDs
 That I've been slowly consuming
 As I should be consuming poetry
 Here in snowy Spokane, dry except for this early April wetness—
 still a stranger—
 With this swirling mess in me—
 in my desk—
 as strange as Connecticut is to the Pacific Ocean—
 Only ever touched through assumption of Royal Charter
 issued
 by a restored monarch across the Atlantic.
 It is the single claim my state can make
 To these western tracts—
 I suppose
 No one expected this New World to be so large and varied
 And the same.
 Maybe I should find more to murder
 Maybe I should murder myself—
 Self-martyr and sanctify—
 Can up, pickle, and preserve.
 Bound here a little while yet,
 I will return home and wash my feet
 And prepare for the last fast
 For my essence to finally eat—
 So much lost and it has always been my fault...
 I have always been my own summoned demon.

VI.

The setting sun blazes through Cana
 At the Holy Thursday Mass—
 The wedding and wine on fire,
 Gilded in light,
 Gilded in grace—
 Bleed through the last rays—
 the ultimate rays—the final ones the sun will ever give—
 Glory diminishing itself into the lightless catacombs,
 The Host in monsternace
 Held aloft by the bishop in clothed hands,
 Descending the stair—
 The mass following in darkness,

adoring.

VII.

I do not hope
 to rise again—
 I see the dead faces and
 Soon-to-be dead faces
 And how hooded nihilism
 Has come to swallow with its immense mouth—
 Add us to its collections
 To be sorted—
 Inevitably.
 To be ended—
 To find ending—

I don't think that shall happen to me

But I am young yet and afraid

and without control.

VIII.

Kate says she doesn't understand flagellation—
 That Christianity reacts against Roman cruelty
 So torturing of the self seems hypocritical.
 But I guess I can understand it—
 Just a little—
 How shame can make you want to dig out your soul
 with a gardening rake—
 How your past mistakes and stupid memories
 Are never erased and you want to mark them as scars in your flesh—

You want to mark yourself
 So others come not near—
 So they—without words—know
 Who you are
 What you are
 That you write stupid poems
 You hope someone else will understand
 As you cast your fingers
 Through the ancient yellowed pages
 To reach forward and strangle the reader—
 Shake them awake.
 Tell them to fear.
 Fear yourself

And what you may do.
Fear what comes around
 And pushes you into
 And pushes into you.

III.

And God said
Prophesy to the wind, to the wind only for only
The wind will listen.

—T.S. Eliot, “Ash-Wednesday”

The Sibyl Receives a Visitor

Slaughter seven bulls first—

Then perhaps I will speak your fortune.

Do you hope for luck in battle?

For the grace of the Muses?

How about a way to reclaim that gold you've squandered?

Or a way into the heart of some preening maiden
you dared to love?

Or better yet—

How do I wash this conscience clean?

How do I avoid the Underworld?

How do I become a god?

I, the Sibyl, may answer your queries but first—

Sacrifice. To me. To my long ages.

Not to your household gods.

Clairvoyancy

is innate—gifted by Apollo—

Not gained by daily training in a prince's court

Or by flattering Olympus with spilt wine.

To me—you are no different than your man on the oar

Or your soldier whose body lies on the beach—

lapped by salt foam and tide.

Go on—what wishes have you?

I will oraculate a future—

And one far better than just the sign of a bird.

Any fool can say what it means when a murder of crows
land on a hill

overlooking a river.

Destiny can be truth, yes—

And Divine Will occurs—sure.

But I am the conduit to which you have come.

I am the astrolabe and sextant.

So:

Slaughter those bulls in my name. And the same in yearling sheep.

Spill their blood at my feet

And tell me what you came to Cumae for.

No God is here

who will cast out this legion
yet.

I told her I loved her

After she vomited over the side of the hammock from smoking a cigar—
 After she washed her mouth in the upstairs bathroom and descended the
 stair,
 The unintended words rising in the unlit house
 toward her hand-covered face—

I touched her hands with mine
 And kissed her mouth
 And she invited me to lay beside her
 Despite her father somewhere in the house
 And her friend with her own boyfriend elsewhere in the
 house
 And I could have stayed on her sheets and among her collected Buddhas
 Until the night cascaded into obscurity

If I knew at that moment how to be someone who loved—
 I wish I knew now.

I wish that (like everyone else) you became a landscape—
 Became, to me, the entire town of Madison—
 Or the stretch of Hammonasset
 footsteps from your parents' house—
 Or the humid and deciduous neighborhood roads
 where you would run at midnight.

It's a shame, really—
 What I remember best is your mouth—
 I can see your hair and your nose and your breasts and brown eyes
 But the mouth surfaces—
 I remember it like I remember badly singing the lyrics to "I'm Yours"
 Together over the evening phone
 Because you loved a happy thing.

These days I'm most sad when I'm happy—
 Well...I guess I've always been happiest when I'm sad—

I never want to throw anything away,
 Least of all the first and last times we touched in a hammock—
 Least of all the pungent dark of shoreline summer nights
 Least of all the syllables I spoke to you—
 Least of all the pies you baked for my birthday and the cookies you sent me at college
 Least of all asking Colleen for your number at tennis
 Least of all your shirts which my mother said were always falling off your shoulders
 Least of all the dark stairs in your parents' house in Madison
 Least of all

Your mouth.
Your indescribable mouth.

Sacred Trees

I.

I hear the Connecticut in *Pinkerton*:
 The empty spaces surrounding Storrs—
 The wooded and farmed hills, the darkness of Windham and Tolland—
 The foundations of Gay City along the Black Ledge, long grown over and crumbled.
 I've walked there in winter
 And stood on the solitary bridge as the unfrozen river ran under.
 I've walked between the boulders and ruins
 With dead leaves caught in the corners of mortared cellars.
 I took my girlfriend there on that winter afternoon
 When I was not at work
 And we saw the faerie homes—
 Stumps ready as seats for forest gods
 Who likely live nearby with their green hair and mossy beards—
 Sticks woven in like wreaths.

II.

Later that year,
 At a near-surprise marriage
 On an abandoned Christmas tree farm in Little Compton,
 The few witnesses and I followed the groom
 As he hiked back into a grove,
 Refrigerator-cool on a July Friday.
 The men in black dress shoes
 And the women in flats and heels
 Stood atop an inches-thick carpet
 Of years' accumulation, needles
 Lapping at trunks like tides.
 The pines in rows on either side
 Extended forever into the sky—
 The trees as mystic as coniferous mallorns—
 The moment held in here like Masses under domes.

The bride and groom read their individual vows
 Off slips of paper that he had folded in his jacket pocket
 And they held hands and slipped rings
 At the command and invitation
 Of a Hawaiian-shirt-clad justice
 Whose girlfriend-photographer
 Moved among us and the trees,
 Snapping photos through long lens,
 Catching the shade and the sun
 And seeds of what was growing.

Observing a Young Couple in the Bartlett

(Spokane, Washington)

This is the country for young men—
 The young in one another's arms—
 The tightness
 Of limbs around backs or limbs clasped around fronts
 Or the site of I-love-you kisses speaking themselves so sweetly
 In the near dark
 off to the edge of raffle and reading.
 A touch seems to say so much
 Like—I am glad you are here with me—even though the venue is full and hot—
 even though I don't have hands to hold my drink—
 even though all we can do is stand and listen.
 I wouldn't trade our moments—even among a crowd—for anything else—
 There is still much for us to do—
 Let's not yet grow old together on the couch
 But stay young with kisses—hikes—winnings—losings—
 and even if this ten-dollar raffle ticket proved
 useless,
 It wouldn't matter—
 There would be no need for half-hearted apology
 Or attempt at consolation
 For anything necessary would be in these limbs—

 Do you flutter like we are at the trailhead of a grand hike?
 Good—I flutter too—

Peaceful Valley

Today—I walked into the low floodplain
 of Peaceful Valley—
 Descending the wooden stairs
 at the edge of Browne’s Addition.
 It was cooler—down in the valley—
 I walked to the edge of the river
 And read the signs about the final camp
 Of the Spokane Tribe
 And how barely ten years later this tract was undercity housing
 For European immigrants and black tradespeople
 involved with the construction and reconstruction of Spokane(nee Falls)
 And those houses—narrow and long with mere inches between—
 Back right to the river
 And back right up to large stone walls
 at the cliff’s base—
 The low rumble of the bridge far above the roofs—far above my head—
 Was not noisy as expected but comforting with a low hum—
 A hum that lulls one to sleep—
 The same hum that murmurs at the center of a fire,
 a consistent burn whispering unhuman words
 And the smell of the small stove fire by the basketball courts,
 The homeless sheltering under the small pavilion
 On this wet day,
 The fog at this level of the city
 Stuck in the bare tree branches, unlifting.
 I shuffled my sneakers through wet unraked leaves
 And longed to touch the darkly damp and darkly mossed rocks—
 Holding the chill from low crevices of river-banked earth.

The evening set on earlier down there
 And, level by level, I rose
 Until I stood on the uppercity of Spokane,
 Looking evenly across to the clean architecture and well-lit windows of Kendall
 Yards
 And not up to it
 As I would an unassailable citadel
 And slunked the sidewalks back to Browne’s.

Graves of the Poets

I've seen their writ-on-water names
 Etched in stone in Rome,
 On Massachusetts or Pennsylvania hill.
 Unsure of what to say (as usual)
 I look down and try to read every word
 That weather has worn away.

I've seen the marble body cast down
 And I've seen the scribblings
 And single portraits that have been recopied
 On the backs of all the books.

I've seen the cats amidst the crumbling walls—
 Tender ruins beneath shady Mediterranean trees
 Laid down like lovers on the grass—
 Lacerated and buried by green blades.

Ice threatened to wash me back down
 The broken blacktop trails
 Winding among ancient trees
 Like any classic New England scene.
 I was a fool to come in winter

With freezing rain perpetually falling
 And mixtures of slush and snow piling in the gutters.
 The trudge to the plot bucked us back down the hill,
 With murmurs from behind breaking
 In the silent space.

These knee-high hip-high pieces of rock
 Are pilgrim monuments settling in the soil
 As my feet refuse to settle in the grass or on the concrete.
 Bands of words keel to my body like chains
 And pull me to sink in poem-prayer
 Before the solid homes of transient lives
 Of those who could only
 Be contained by earth.

The Branches Write Themselves

Touch the sycamore and
Whisper your stories to it and listen—
It will tell its own back.
The bark itself is a tapestry
With its mottled pieces,
Flaking bits,
Peeling scabs of wood.

Let the tree do the talking—
It's blown in more winds
And had more breaths
Than even you
can count.

My Losses are Nothing Compared to the Classics

Well—I've done it again—
 I've lost my poems—
 All I can think about are the series of edits
 from thirteen months
 gone.
 All the saving,
 the swapped sayings and reworked syntax.
 I have no desire to touch a pen or keyboard—
 Only the desire to lay on the couch
 under blankets and read *The Odyssey*.

If Sappho were here, she'd probably punch me
 And say that for all nine volumes which defined her
 There remains a single complete poem.
 And she'd be right
 if she were alive to care.
 Losing a year isn't as terrible
 as losing an entire lifetime.

But Sappho aside
 It still depresses that my lost words will not recover
 Until some future archaeologist looks in the least likely place
 And plugs in the missing Bart Simpson flash drive.
 At that point, of course,
 Sappho's fragments will still be read
 and I still
 will be the one lost.

Amtrak Trilogy: New Haven to Raleigh

3. How Horror Films Begin

Train stopped on the tracks somewhere between Petersburg and Rocky Mount—
 Engine trouble the muffled loudspeaker says—
 Will have to send another locomotive.

It will come from DC.

Only darkness out the window—

The occasional headlights

 of a vehicle passing on the parallel road

Otherwise

 still

Except for the subtle noises inside the car—

 The yelp of a dog—

 Sound of TV shows or music enjoyed without ear buds—

 The passive aggression of families

 Rationing battery power—

 Waiting until the engine powers on and powers the outlets—

Waiting until the wheels roll on the rusty tracks again.

The train is a long house crammed with people—

 A perfect target for a mythological predator

 to be born out of the Virginia soil

 And rage through the steel Amtrak bullet.

Its fury and frenzy

 Would light the silver star itself.

Sitting in a Coffee Shop, Looking like a Poet

The height of the Davenport Grand rises over downtown Spokane
 With its giant white GH at the top like a baseball hat logo
 And I imagine that inside the Grand Hotel
 Is a black-and-white blonde woman
 Declaring her desire to be alone.

(The Head and the Heart on the speakers in Atticus)

And I too—undeclared like a college freshman
 here alone without words,
 Attempt to generate new life despite my lack of Godly powers—
 But at least I can go all these places—

Leave the valley

In its blasted loneliness—

What state is this?

Washington? Plasma?

Gas?

I suppose I am solid—

For I have no

Hamletian desire to melt, thaw, and resolve into
 a dew.

With a warm mug of chocolate on the table,
 Healthy cold and fog lingers outside—

And billows into the building with each push/pull of the door—

The sense of the Grand

Invades not here

and I appreciate this simple moment—

And I thought this poem was going

Somewhere—but here I am—

Another stereotypical writer in a stereotypical coffee shop

With drink prepared by a poet and dishes and table cleaned by a poet,

Trying to make connections between my moment and some obscure quote of the past—

Hashing and rehashing the same subjects of loneliness and guilt

That anyone else can conjure and write—

Questioning my state of being—

Questioning myself

and how all this fits into the
 greater corpus of work

And

I did donate ten dollars

This morning,

To Morgan's fundraiser

for a children's hospital

in Connecticut
And I know it's personal
Because pancreatic cancer
Tried to kill him
When he was a pre-teen.
And I love him
And I love that he's alive
And that we've been friends
For fifteen years
 So I squeezed ten dollars
 From my debit card
 As a way of saying
 I appreciate you
 And I miss you
 And I'm glad you're alive
And I don't know
If I feel better
 But I sure hope a child I will never know does.

Erlkönig

My grandfather wept when he recounted the story of the *Erlkönig* to me—
 And I was shocked that the thought
 of a few stanzas of Goethe
 Could carry this effect two hundred years later—
 That the long-dead can reach through centuries
 and release emotion like opening a fist,
 catharsis puling in hand.
 But then—I'm not being fair.

Step back:

Imagine an apartment
 in New York City—
 in Washington Heights.
 Imagine the 1930s—
 Lionel train and track on the floor—
 Imagine spare German décor.
 Imagine a man.
 He could be any man coming home from work
 But he's not.
 He's this man.
 Imagine he's worked in the bakery all night and morning—
 he's come home to finally sleep—
 Imagine flour clapping off his hands
 Imagine him rinsing them clean—
 Imagine his son—a motherless teen,
 Out somewhere in the city.
 Imagine his wife
 Working the bakery counter during the day—
 Selling breads and pies and cakes and cookies
 baked in the dark morning.
 Imagine she arrived in America—
 She arrived at the New York Port Authority with her best friend's
 son
 to marry her best friend's widower.

Now.

Imagine another son—a child—
 born in Astoria—in Queens. Not Germany.

Imagine

 He is in the apartment.

 Imagine he's running the train.

The man lays on the carpet beside his child. The train rolls around the circuit of track,
 the car lights blink, a hand adjusts the speed—

It stops.

The man decides to tell his child a story.

There's a hardcover book of Goethe's poetry on the shelf
 almost the size of the child,
 illustrated with wood block carvings pressed in ink

And

Of course—it's in German, brought over from Berlin or the Rhineland
 But the man doesn't touch it—he doesn't need to.

He merely speaks—softly—in German—

He says

Stelle

There's a father who loves his son—
 He loves him very much
 But the son is ill—
 They live in the country and the doctor lives in town.

Now imagine

That as he's saddling the horse
 He sees a specter in the field
 coming toward the cottage—
 He sees a shining crown on the brow
 and a train of followers—
 The specter's hand
 Stretches toward the cottage window—
 The window through which the son lies,
 Pale.

Imagine the father mounts the horse.

The son in the saddle,
 the father's hands tight on the reins.
 The bearded figure approaches.
 The father digs his heel into the horse's flank.
 The horse whinnies and quickens.
 The spectral fingers stretch.
 The sound of hooves in the forest

Imagine the fear

 of the father

Imagine the frailty of the boy

Imagine the moon—yellow—dire—

Imagine the voice of the crowned ghost—

Dear child—come with me—join my daughters' games and dance—

There's no swell of music—

 no timpani booming a rhythm of tension.

Imagine the son says, pointing to the pursuer,

Vati—der Erlkönig —jetzt faßt erm ich an—

The horse stops. The father weeps.

Imagine there's a man who works—

 who sits in a chair with his young son,

Telling the story of the man

in the saddle with his young son—

Imagine just this scene.

Just this moment.

Imagine light through the window—imagine the dust caught in the light.

Remember the train.

Remember the language.

Now let it fall away—

Let the apartment go—

Let the bakery go—

Let the flour dust floating in the air
settle.

Move the Germans out of Washington Heights.

Let a second war happen—

Let Germany be consumed

Let the father go—

Let the mother go—

Let the older son go—

Keep the trains—the book—

Replace the tongue.

The story doesn't change.

Goethe—in dust or in ecstasy—doesn't change.

The Erbkönig reaches for the boy—

His daughters dance behind him.

He says they are beautiful. They are.

He invites you to dance. His hand is out—luminous.

He smiles—

He gestures—

Remember the tears—

Remember the taste—the irreplaceable taste—of stöllen and plum küchen—

The softly-spoken language—

The floured hand reaching

For a rolling pin.

For a hand.

VITA

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