

Carnage. Cataclysm. Catastrophe.

Not for us and not by the gods is the world made

De Rerum Natura, Book Five

At recess, I used to force myself to imagine the curtains
at home catching fire. Or I'd see my father's car
drifting off a bridge, and no matter
where I was, lining up for lunch or waiting my turn at spelling,
I'd let out a yelp so loud
that, even though miles away,
my father could not help but swerve,
my mother would glance up and notice the mischief
that fire had done when she wasn't looking.
How could I explain to the recess monitor
or my fifth-grade teacher
that I'd just saved my father from certain death,
kept my house from burning
again? If fate's mission was to catch us
by surprise, mine was to keep a step ahead
of it in all its disguises:
mudslide and tornado, lightning and flood,
one more hurricane throwing its weight around.
I colored the sky so dark
there'd be no space left in it
for my brother to plummet
from his tree fort again. I kept my eye on every breeze
so it couldn't smuggle into the house
the same germs that my mother said had killed
her baby sister. On my wrists I scratched tiny blue numbers,
so when I played ball or lined up my soldiers
I could see in permanent ink
what I'd not been able to prevent. *Holocaust.*
Apocalypse. Doom.
The way the *o* seems to gloat
over a sorrow, or the *r*, doubling itself, reveals

in *terror* and *horror*, a conspiracy
of language, a cadre of vowels,
small coterie of consonants, all
zealots, all committed to disaster.

Freedom Train

Because my mother, in her nightgown,
started wandering into neighbors' houses and explaining
how easy it'd be to drown a child,
and because my father loved diesel engines,
he thought a train trip might be good for us all.
That year, the Bill of Rights and Mayflower Compact
were riding in glass cabinets

from city to city. We caught up with the Constitution
in Wilmington, Delaware. My father had timed it
exactly so we'd step off the midnight special
and onto the Freedom Train
the morning before it pulled out and headed for its next
stop. There'd been a war and now
there wasn't a war, and the original manuscript
of Monroe's Manifest Destiny
was right in front of me and people were pressing
against me, and my father was saying, *Look! Look!*

and I knew that in the cramped, hot air inside the Pullman car
he expected me to explode
into so many syllables of delight
they'd make the whole trip worthwhile,
but I couldn't do anything but stare.
It was what I'd learned to do

while my mother, weeping, rubbed salve
into the scratches she'd made on my cheek and my arm:
I paid attention to dust on a sill,
the frayed ends of rope,
a raindrop not quite ready to commit itself
to plunging down a window.

Here was Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence
and the Treaty of Paris
and the Emancipation Proclamation
and the best I could do
was to tighten and open my fists inside my pockets.
What was my father to do with a boy like me?

Army Hearings

One day my father brought home a large box of polished wood
with glass in front and rooms inside
that had sea serpents, witches, and cowboys
and a man who played the ukulele
and women who cried when crowns were laid on their teased hair,
and to go into each room you didn't open a door
but turned a knob. Each day after school
Beany and Cecil and Kukla, Fran, and Ollie and Buffalo Bob
would talk to my brothers and me.
Then one afternoon there was only a head
so large I grew afraid
that it would burst the sides of the television.
It talked the way I imagined a rock would
if it dressed up in blue serge and sat
in front of a microphone and pointed its finger
at professors and lawyers and generals
till they shrank
inside their shirts. How did they get so small
and the man so big? I'd come home
from school and adjust the rabbit ears
and think, okay, he's got to be gone by now,
but on every channel he'd bellow
the way I thought only fathers did
when they got too tired
to love you anymore, or teachers
when they tried to make you ashamed for not knowing
as much as they did. So this is what words could do:
get people to squirm, sweat, loosen their ties, look down
at their hands. So this is what happened
when you got older. I watched
the way you might a snake about to strike.
What was the point of moving?
It would be like shutting the closet door and hoping to
hide in a house full of flames.
Eventually the fire would get around to me.

One More Victory for the Children of Light,
One More Defeat for the Children of Darkness

A dozen Arabs cost \$3.95 a box
so I had to slaughter the same men
over and over. Day after day
they disregarded common sense and charged the line of fire,
pure zeal once more trying to
overcome howitzers and turn away bullets aimed
for their hearts. Their flowing capes
gave their horses wings
and the horses' manes gave the riders the courage
to fly over any rampart. They rose
with the muscular assurance of birds of prey
and headed straight for the same weak spot
in Her Majesty's Royal Soldiers, a kid
so slender he could be mistaken for a girl,
his hands soldered to his drum
so he had to keep up the call to arms
even after spears were driven
into him, steel plunged again
and again into the hole I'd made in his chest
with my father's screwdriver. If it took ten minutes
to kill him, it took much longer
to mourn him, a pink-cheeked lad
so beloved by every man in his regiment, so martyred
there could be no hope
for peace now, the whole murderously beautiful Nation of Islam
must pay for the death
of this one boy wrapped in a linen handkerchief
I'd stolen from my mother and offered up
to the earth, a grave so deep
I wasn't sure I could find him
the next day. I had no idea what was going on
in Egypt or the Sudan or Palestine,
but in my playroom's shadows good never triumphed
without cost.