

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.