

Last Song

I choose the other way,
with heels dug in.
I vote for screaming

yearningly. For heading to the afterlife
against the grain of this one. For a slowing down
to the pace of a person too absorbed
in the glory and grit
to work up any hurry for departing it.
I choose greedily looking backward
at each freestone peach and grubby radiator cap,
each watermelon seed and hypodermic needle,
jonquil, castanet, railroad spike. And even so,
by now—I'm seventy-three—I've seen enough

to know that there are ample reasons
of psychology and circumstance for a quiet,
accepting, meltaway transition
from this plane of muscle and capillary
and Shakespeare's plays and Afro-plaited hair.
I choose the other way,

remembering the adamant drag
of Rembrandt's burin over the resistant surface,
bringing out a crown of light
over Jesus's head, as well as the granary shadows
rats make more rats in.
He was true to these: precise, and with integrity.
With ardor.
I want to snag in the folds like a burr.
I want to remora
onto the bellyflesh of creation.
Every anther. Every pollen grain, that under

magnification resembles the Taj Mahal.
And the Taj Mahal. The grouting—not much different
from yours or mine—that’s necessary even in
the Taj Mahal. If I must go, I want my teethmarks

on the inner velvet nap of nearby tree bark, saying
I went, but in a frenzy of refusal. Let me be a squatter
standing with a shotgun in the doorway labeled Breath.
I want to be a cult—if only a cult of only me—
that won’t vacate the compound. I choose to be stubborn,
I want to be full-on jackass stubborn over Einstein’s
spidery scrimmage of equations, over the gelid mass
of a fresh lung in the transplant tray, I choose to be a miser
of jewels and breasts, of sewage treatment plants.
An inch cube of beryllium. A scimitar hilt.
An alligator pear.
The *no* of Rosa Parks, on loan to me.
I want to be witnessed

floating above the hospital bed, still tethered
by the paying-out tube of a catheter

the way the astronaut’s corded
to the mother ship on a space walk.
I want to be witnessed,
witnessed rising to the ceiling
still attached by that stem.
I want to be unwilling.

Praxilla (fifth century B. C.)

His love of simple things was not always understood. For example, he
“mentioned cucumbers along with the sun and the moon.”

—Richard Lattimore

The news tonight: a car on fire,
so frighteningly ugly-bright
against the lightless street,
its orange daggerflower flames
might be a test from the minions of Hell itself
to see if a fuller invasion
of the surface world is feasible. Given the rest
of the news, the answer is yes. The powers
of legitimate unrest and the powers of brute
and mindless violence have become
—without either side seeking this out—the two
flanks of a single nightmare army on the move.
There will be more of cars
as makeshift bombs, and more of people
behind the wheel as fuses.
Is it wrong, right now, to want to write a poem

in which the sunlight slices through the blinds
of the bedroom window, muted
by the trees to a shade of apricot, and
burnishes my wife’s already coppery hair
as she sleeps? Is it wrong to remember
we went to the zoo this week, and when
she took my hand between the rhino
and the ocelot, my palm
was the calmest, maybe the happiest,
patch of animal life for a mile around?
The deaths from COVID . . .
and the deaths in the streets . . .

is it wrong to say I don't want to die
as much as anybody has ever not wanted to die

in a world of garden leaves
that follow the arc of the sun in the sky
like an audience that follows a celebrity
across the stage; and books that I treasure;
and friends that I treasure;
and carmelizing onions; and those bags
of mini-cucumbers I buy at Trader Joe's
that have come from Canada
to lay their benediction on my tongue.

*Summer, 2020
Wichita, Kansas*

Duet

in memoriam, Michael Cissell

The Russian experiment—from the 1950s—
in which the baby rabbits aboard a submarine
were killed—their necks were snapped—
and in a cage in a lab in Leningrad,
that same second, the mother rabbit shrieked.

How subtle, how ethereally silken, we've learned
to make that experiment. Chinese scientists
have split apart pairs of photons,
one of them “teleported up to a satellite
orbiting 300 miles overhead,” and yet “remaining
entangled with its partner on Earth.”
I don't know how they recognize “entanglement”
on that level—it isn't lovers' legs
in bed, after all—but I trust their wacko-physics expertise.

The twin who died of a heart attack
in Oakland, California, as his sister
awoke in a chilly slip of sweat
in Haven, Connecticut.

The infant who wakes with a hungry cry
and, out in the car in the driveway, the mother
—although she can't hear him, not literally—
can feel the pearlescent petals begin
to blossom out of her nipples.

If we could beam a consciousness
to Mars, would it scream

from a nightmare in the subconscious
we kept back on Earth?

Would the brain still thrill in pleasure,
in a nutrient solution rocketing out of the solar system,
when the body of its entanglement
was sexually aroused in Dayton, Ohio?

My friend Michael loves to play
acoustic guitar (his son's named Guthrie
after Woody). He does a soulful
"Saint James Infirmary." But he also has
some electric whooziewhatsis machine

that records him, then replays it in a loop,
so he can accompany himself,
can be two Michaels, a duet—but
from a single egg.
If I weren't here in his living room watching,
making him self-conscious, I think
he'd be rocking out ecstatically.

"Ecstasy"—that is, "out of one's own body,"
"to be beside one's self."

Reshelving

What is it, with these novels?
People are always dying. Even
—often especially—the people
I’ve come to like. The unwed mother,
shamed by her own family for that single
consequential act of careless love, who
(over chapters of complicated narrative engine-rev:
the opioids; the asthma; her job defined by wiping
withered-up Assisted Living asses) rises
into the echelons of heroism: but dies
three-fourths of the way to the final page.
The Buddhist warrior: the same. His nights
excruciating over ideas of justice
in an unjust world, parsing “duty,”
parsing the weights of “necessity” versus “decency”
that he sets down in the moonlight
on the balance-pans of his conscience—this
won’t save him when the plot requires his being
offered up. And some novels are *nowhere* near
that chintzy; their dead get scattered throughout
prodigiously, as if some great piñata of mortality
were struck, and cracked, and its contents
unloosed: gang war, gulag, killing field,
the Biblical Flood, the podcast on Ebola.
It’s a simple question flippered like a pinball
through my head tonight—simplistic,
even—but still worth sharing,
knowing as I do that TL’s cousin OD’d
yesterday (it was heroin); and the cancer
claimed another unit in W’s
condominium of a spine, and soon will own it
in entirety; and hovering over these two,
from a month ago: P’s suicide, P’s (she was

a physician) self-prescribed and pill-by-pill
renunciation of the world.
And Michael—when his wallet was lifted
out of his unlocked car, within an hour “he”
was spreeing through the nearest WalMart, loading up
from every aisle; one year later real-Michael
suffered a cardiac arrest and never recovered;
maybe it’s small of me, but he was my friend,
and my wish is that fake-Michael became
so quantumly entangled with the original, he
fell over, in the same sick sweat, the same time.
With this roll call out of “real life,” who needs,
as a mnemonic, some skeletal tug at the sleeve,
these books wherein the cadavers are being positioned
onto their stone slabs in an ancient Egyptian mortuary,
and—the 1950s—a body is lifted out of its minimalist
chalk outline as a conveyance the cops
so charmingly call “the meat wagon” roars to the curb.
Some nights my easy question haunts me, haunts me
equally under the mystery text
the stars code into the sky, *or* driving diminished
beside the eerily lit-up dynamos of the power company
talking to each other with inhuman bolts of charge.
These novels. . . Why do we call them “fiction”?
They’re “biography” told through identity theft.

Atlanta, 1899

After Sam Hose, a black farmer, was lynched, he was dismembered, and barbequed, and his body parts were sold as souvenirs. W. E. B. Du Bois saw his knuckles displayed in a store window.

—as reported in Jill Lepore’s *These Truths*

If I were stronger right now I’d research
more. What he did; what he was said
to have done; the pants
he wore (that he shit, as the animal
hiding in his eyes took over and “terror”
wasn’t merely a word but a stink in the air,
a slobber that predates language); and also
what animals the crowd became as his skin
began to bubble and crisp, and their lust for this
was better than sex and was consummated.
I’m not, however, that strong. I close
the door on all that, I have to, forgive me,
my weakness unerringly knows
how lovely the wafer of full moon is tonight
that the sky will take eight hours
to dissolve, as if extending its pleasure
in so much golden light as long as possible;
and how my wife, who’s already asleep, is somewhere
as far as Atlantis, rehearsing the songs
and performing the rituals of that otherearthly realm,
but will return to me at the appointed hour;
and how the poems in the books in my study
are part of a physics in which they hold
more space in them than they physically take up.
All this. And yet I know that there will come
a knocking at the door. A knocking, increasingly

more insistent, demanding entrance.
A knocking that won't give up.
A fist that won't retreat.
Its knuckles are bloodied but it won't retreat.

Plasterville / Occasions When Light Doesn't Function for Us

This must be how “invisibility shields”
work: you stare at something, stare at it
directly, but the light refuses
to be reflected, it skids off
(into seeming nonexistence)
on some subatomic quantum physics
banana peel—so, ocularly,
nothing’s there. The future too:

its light won’t travel retrograde through time.
All we can do, in our unknowing,
is confect some symbol of “maybeness”
and attempt to invest it with certainty:
the zombie apocalypse shamble-and-slaughter,
species extinction,
we-become-the-tools-of-cyborg-overlords scenario,
but also the great galactic spree of (either
disembodied or rocket-ship) travel
out to wonder-worlds like scattered pearls
against the inky deepness. . . . These
are stunt doubles standing in for what’s “really”
invisibly there in tomorrow. The same

with our deaths: we *can’t* see
(we don’t *want* to see and so can’t see)
the stopped-clock rot and oblivion
that wears our names like a pageant ribbon.
Instead (and still unbearably, but *acceptably*
unbearably) we mourn (and here
you can fill in the blank from your own increasing
obituary list) stunt doubles
taking our place in a realm where light
to see by can’t escape. At Peg’s memorial

I mourned for Peg, at Fran's for Fran,
at Boogie's for Boogie (the planet now
bereft of his unfailing affability),
and yet all of that time I floated *blink-blink* in and
blink-blink out of them,
these dear, sufficient substitutes.
Through them, I could pre-mourn myself.
And the past? Nobody can see the past.
"History," yes, but that's different.
Archeologists

bring us glazed ceramic bloodletting bowls
and arrowheads and crumbled baked-clay baby rattles
and theories about matrilineal inheritance—these are
canes we use
to feel out the B.C. actuality
we're blind to. In 2017, archeologists unearthed,
"from sand dunes 175 miles northwest of Los Angeles,
a five-ton sphinx of painted plaster, one of twenty
made in 1923 for the film *The Ten Commandments*."
Maybe now you too are fantasizing

a world of plaster Hebrew slaves
whip-lashed by plaster overseers as the blocks of plaster stone
are dragged across the sand to build the tomb
in which a plaster pharaoh in his coffin waits
to see if his lifelong guesses about the afterlife
hold true. Our eyes are limited to only
what the photons carry into them, and these images
have to imply the rest of the universe
that photons *don't* deliver
. . . the way that light-years, which are a measure of time,
imply light, which is timeless.

Persist

The way that Whitney Houston
could extend a final note, extend
the word inside that final note, like some
ethereal taffy being pulled out of her lungs
and up to the stars, or a wire extended
into invisibility and yet
its tensile strength would slice your heart in two . . .
that's how it is: we won't let go,
our overwhelming and formative passions
ask that we hold on to them still,
and still more, and still aftermath more,
they ache for the dig of our fingernails,
they want our tongue to fasten like a remora.
A bouquet still floats above
the long-gone shelf life date, and the contrail feathers
still embellish the sky when the jet has disappeared.
And Ishmael . . . ?
When the operatically epic voyage
ends, and the *Pequod* sinks, and all of its voices
drown, a final note still lingers,
clings like a barnacle to its rolling spar
—a persistence that carries a novel inside.
