

Morning, Berlin

The best part of the day.

The woman with the *Kleiderladen*

is hanging the latest styles
on a rack by the sidewalk.

In this summer's dresses, women
look like fields of star jasmine. Galaxies.

The pretty waitress at the café—she's from
some dusty nightmare, some desert, but

got herself over here, Merkel let her in—she's
putting flowers on the tables.

The man at the wine shop is having a tasting.
He's putting out glasses on lacquered trays.

The mothers look great, they're walking by
with their kids, holding hands, they do

realize, they do, that this enchantment
will pass, something dark awaits us,

an empty room, a TV set waiting, but . . .

The waitress, young, skin like butterscotch, asks

what are you writing? In her bad German.

I am exploring the mystery of the human condition,

I say, I always say, in my worse German. It is our ritual.

At a distance of roughly two thousand miles

(ten light years) from Kabul
she laughs.

Polar Bear

A father died heroically in some Alaskan park
trying to save his kids from a polar bear.

Long ago, when his mother gave birth
one afternoon in Barstow, California,
could anyone have prophesied,
as in an old myth, that the baby crying
at her breast would one day be killed
and partially eaten by a polar bear?

Has *anyone* from Barstow, California, been killed
and partially eaten by a polar bear? Yet her son
was. He looked up from making camp,
pitching the tent or lighting his Coleman stove,
and there it was, white and immense. His fate.

And he died heroically and was partially eaten.

Of course, the bear had to be killed. The rangers
shot it, which makes sense. You can't have polar bears
running around in the wilderness!

The wilderness is a place for dads and kids
and Coleman stoves. Polar bears just . . .
they just kind of ruin the whole thing.

As for the bear, it didn't die heroically.
It just got shot and fell over
and was sent to a lab for testing.

Anna Karenina

My mother was long dead before
I was old enough to ask her
who she was. But I'm reading
Anna Karenina, which I recall
her burning through late nights
after a double shift, after
the insertion of suppositories
and the emptying of bedpans, after
she fried us up some pork chops
and opened a can of applesauce
and a can of hominy, and a can
of fruit cocktail. She'd sit down
with her cigarettes and red wine
and read these big novels
that took her away from thinking
all day about money and into
whatever Emma Bovary or
Elinor Dashwood was dealing with.
She disappeared into French
winters, she walked down
London streets or sat quietly
with Anna in her parlor.
I look around in the novel
for her cigarettes tonight,
her glass of wine. Anything
she might have left behind.

No Problem

I sit here aging at the street side café,
giving off the sickly yellow smoke of decay
while people walk by pretending
not to notice, glancing away
into the distance or down at their phones,
doing their best out of politeness or shock
to ignore me sitting here aging,
and I don't blame them, it's hard to watch.

And now the waitress in her burning beauty,
her lustrous incandescent womanhood,
walks up to me in a radiant cloud of youth
and asks if I want another iced latte macchiato.

But I'm aging so fast, I'm racing so quickly
through time I can barely hear her, and furthermore
I know what she really wants to say is,
your aging is kind of gross, kind of a turn off,
maybe you could go do it somewhere else
where it doesn't frighten the customers, and besides,
it's not like there's anything I can do about it.

And as I sit here with my skin peeling off
and crumpling up like toilet paper
and my hair falling out on the table
and my teeth rotting and my bones
turning to glass and all my organs drowning
in the sludge of age I croak to her
as she floats in the cool creamy oasis
of her youthful lustrousness, I do manage to croak, yeah,
another iced latte macchiato would be great.

And from the far side of the universe,
from the beautiful bountiful burning galaxy
of her late teens she says to the fast-decaying,
maybe starting to smell bad, just about to be
covered with flies old leathery carcass I'm becoming,
No problem.

Except that there is, actually,
a problem.

Chernobyl

I wish I were in Chernobyl today.
The streets are peaceful there.
No cars or bicycles rush by, no one
is late for work. No children
are crying on the playground
or getting into trouble.

The file cabinets
in the police department are full
of mice, and the outcome
of the important vote
at the General Assembly
doesn't matter.

There are plenty of vacancies
in the brand-new state prison,
and for once, no one
is talking in the library.
Not even a dog is out today,
pursuing mysterious errands.

Life in my city is tiring.
Deadlines and unread books.
Making love, or dinner.
So many people to disappoint,
so much to buy in the supermarket.
Almost unbearable, this city.

But today in Chernobyl
the clocks have given up.
No one is tapping the phones,

and every night the movie theater
shows the same old silent film.

Does anyone have a question?
No.

The houses of Chernobyl
tend their silences
and on the dinner table
two gray sandwiches are waiting
with such quiet patience.
Like an old married couple.