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Crisis Across the Dog-Starred Verse: Tales of Heroism, Horror, and Apocalypse

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Crisis Across the Dog-Starred Verse: Tales of Heroism,
Horror, and Apocalypse

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY


David A. Arroyo

2016

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 1, 2016

We hereby recommend that the thesis of David A. Arroyo entitled *Crisis Across The Dog-Starred Verse: Tales of Heroism, Horror, and Apocalypse* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Crisis Across the Dog-Starred Verse: Tales of Heroism, Horror, and Apocalypse is a collection of formal and free-verse poems. Although a few pieces are confessional in nature, many of the poems borrow from the genres of speculative fiction: horror and science fiction specifically. The thesis is not divided into sections, rather it alternates visions of a confessional real world and fantasy space. Many poems cover the death of my dog and our adventures in the multiverse, while others like “Together We Are Monsters” are meditations on monsters and pornography. Two longer pieces, however, “Campus of the 21st Century,” and “The Yellow House” push away from the contemporary short form model and towards long, narrative poetry in the mode of short stories.

DEDICATION

For Radar. I made this for you.

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Preface

I'm eighteen. I'm an institutionalized Catholic, who's been in the parochial school system for fourteen years. I take copious notes on everything I read in class, but I'm horrible with the opposite sex. My friends see me as distant, walled-off. I'm amazed I even have friends. I go to Heroes & Dragons, the local comic book store, once a week. I go to Blockbuster just as often, hunting down anime, western sci-fi, and horror films. In short, I'm the classic high school nerd.

And the classic high school nerd develops a crush on the classic popular overachiever, so I write a poem and give it to her. I'm rejected. This doesn't stop me from writing poetry. I write through college, but I am unable to get into an MFA program, instead earning an MA in literature. I keep writing. Finally, I publish several pieces. I keep writing. I am accepted to Stonecoast. I'm thirty-eight.

I think of this as the origin of a super-hero poet. Like Oliver Queen, I had to wander in the desert for years. Like Peter Parker, I endured phases of intense awkwardness and rejection, and like Bruce Wayne, I've had to practice, practice, practice, prepare, prepare, prepare.

In this time of preparation I've been converted to the power of writing and poetry as a life habit as much as artistic endeavor. I've met quite a few writers over the years who are attracted to poetry because they can use it to tell the truth. Me? I use it to lie, and use those lies to tell truths, but truths reflected through a hall of mirrors. I use poetry like a super power.

But what sort of poet uses verse in this way? This sounds like the work of a supervillain, not a superhero. There's a little bit of the rapper, MF Doom, within me. A persona within a persona. An MC skilled at daisy chaining rhymes into deep soundscapes where entire lines of verse will rhyme with each other rather than a few end rhymes. He is mush-mouthed and alliterative. Admittedly, I just don't have his chops when it comes to rhyming word by word, few do, but I do have his appreciation for pop culture, that nerdery is play. This, I've learned, is a dangerous death ray indeed.

In my first residency at Stonecoast, I learned that pop culture is highly combustible; either the reader will be alienated and annoyed or feel like they're taking part in a secret. Poet Adrian Mitchell said it best, "Most people ignore poetry because most poetry ignores most people." Ignoring people was never my intent. I wasn't pursuing an elitist ethos, but this doesn't make Mitchell any less right (qtd in Bradley 36).

Effect trumps intent, but what does this say about audience? On one hand, unexamined elitism is just laziness, but on the other, a poem that tries to be all things will fail to be anything. I faced that conundrum with almost every poem in this collection. In my case, elitism is represented as a pop culture aesthetic filled with comic books and horror films. The solution changes from poem to poem. Sometimes it really *is* just a matter of restraint, avoiding allusions and homages unless absolutely necessary, but a skilled poet will learn to create back doors into the work for the uninitiated. Truly, each poem must teach the reader how to read (and teach the writer how to write). MF Doom does this through soundplay and humor. Although I love to play with superhero fantasy

in my work, I am cognizant that overloading a piece with obscure Marvel references doesn't compensate for a bad line or lazily constructed stanza.

I have more to say on technique and aesthetics and how specific poets have influenced me, but before that, I need to talk about one poem in particular as it crystallizes where I am right now as an artist, "An Open Letter to Grant Morrison." My dog, Radar, died from cancer on Valentine's Day of this year. The grief I experienced in the wake of his death was crippling. When the vet took his body, I made a cry, a howl, honestly, I don't know how else to describe it. It was a sound I have never made before, and it came straight from my center. I was fetal. I couldn't stand. I could only make that sound. There are nine poems in this collection about Radar. Some of them play with genre tropes, and a few are firmly grounded in reality, an uncharacteristic lack of MF-ness on my part. Of all of them, of all the poems in this thesis, "Letter" has proven the greatest challenge in terms of both technique and content. Since I started this MFA program my father had a heart attack and my sister was briefly committed, but Radar's death is what shakes me to the core.

In my imagination, Grant Morrison, a comic book writer whose run on *Animal Man* was inspired by his cat's death, understands what I'm feeling, so I wrote an epistolary poem. Problem: I hated every version of this poem. It never sounded right. The lines were overloaded. Too much was obscure. Too much was bland, generic in that "workshop poem" sense. Which takes me back to the quote and the issue of audience. There are three audiences at work here: one is me, the author; two is the reader; and three, Grant Morrison.

This poem is about grieving the loss of a pet and does so in a comic book context, yet it confounds me because no draft feels like it properly addresses all three audiences. It needs sound and discipline, while craving mythology. With each draft I ask the question, “Would I give this to Grant Morrison?” The answer has always been no. I think I am closer now though, mixing in the rhetorical structure of the sonnet with long lines just shy of prose.

In the process I’ve figured out the poem is also central, not just to the cycle of Radar poems, but to this collection. It is an invocation, a call to balance the rigor of the line and demands of the stanza against my imagination. More importantly, I feel a sense of responsibility with this poem that doesn’t usually extend to my other work. THIS is the poem that bothers me when I teach. THIS is the poem that brings me to tears over Radar when my roommates are asleep. THIS is the one that articulates Radar’s loss to someone I greatly respect and admire, and if I haven’t written something that he would appreciate then I have failed to articulate what Radar means to me, not just to Morrison and to my general audience, but to me, the first audience.

“This is illusory, David, you can’t find validation in the opinion of others,” one might say, and I agree, but what I’m looking for is recognition not validation; without recognition there is no audience. There is gibberish, so perhaps it is really that first audience, myself, where the conflict lies. According to the *Hagakure*, a Samurai text, the only opponent is the ego, and this poem is, for reasons not entirely clear to me, a direct confrontation with my own ego (Yamamoto 13). I am reticent to say much more about

the piece as, by the time this thesis is published, who knows how many more revisions I'll have made?

Thankfully, not all the poems here have been this difficult to write. Most of them, while challenging for me, have been fun, even the ones that touch on raw nerves. "Meanwhile, on Earth-616" is another piece about my dog, but one that plays as it grieves. In my first workshop with Jeanne Marie Beaumont, she remarked how few of us were willing to come off the left hand margin. What did this mean? When you did come off the margin, what was the effect? For me, coming off the margin took on a double meaning, as many aesthetic decisions do. One, it represented an opportunity to create that backdoor, construct winding breath-like lines that call attention to their own internal and end rhymes. Two, it represents a peeling away from reality. Earth-616 and many other pieces are inspired by Richard Siken's "Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out" as much as MF Doom:

"For a while I thought I was the dragon.
I guess I can tell you that now. And, for a while, I thought I was
the princess,
cotton candy pink, sitting there in my room, in the tower of the castle,
young and beautiful and in love and waiting for you with
confidence
but the princess looks into her mirror and only sees the princess,
while I'm out here, slogging through the mud, breathing fire,

and, getting stabbed to death.

Okay, so I'm the dragon. Big deal. (11-12)

“MF Siken” claims the role of the dragon to keep the reader off kilter, an idea forwarded by his jagged, shifting lines. MF Doom would appreciate this as well as Siken’s ability to sneak assonance by you like a terrorist, “sees” and “breathing” and “deal” for example, camouflaged by the varying line lengths and whitespace.

As much as the poems in this thesis are a struggle with a loss I don’t completely understand, they rush forward to meet one of the great superhero tropes, the multiverse, a series of interlocking alternate universes. Some pieces may be said to be Earth-1 or Earth Prime, meaning they happen on this world and are a direct confrontation with loss, but pieces such as “Meanwhile on Earth-616” allow me entry into a fantasy space that celebrates the connection between human and animal. The multiverse convention inspired formal experimentation, the opportunity to vary line and stanza shape of each piece in accordance with content and specific to that content, even when poems happen on this earth. Overall, I’ve paid more attention to line and stanza in the last two years than in any of my previous seventeen years of writing. I couldn’t have written these pieces without the closer consideration of craft I’ve developed at Stonecoast.

In my first residency Stephen Motika pushed me to consider the significance of versification and prosody. He suggested I read *Rhyme’s Reason* by John Hollander. Using a given form to explain said form — explaining sonnets by writing in sonnets — *Rhyme’s*

Reason provided a way to reconsider the function of line breaks, rhetorical conventions, and pure syllabic verse, the last of which figured heavily into several of my verse stories.

It has been remarked that the only real difference between superheroes and supervillians is how they respond to trauma. I don't want to dive into trauma theory, but the former work through their suffering, while the latter act out. I'm not a huge fan of binaries, but I think this one has some merit, and yes, they can do a little bit of both in a myriad of ratios. For me, this tug and pull of acting out and working through is prevalent less so in poetry about superheroics and more so in poetry influenced by the horror genre. Horror is a genre of fear and trauma. I'm almost embarrassed — okay, I am embarrassed — to admit I need it. Why? Because these poems tend to deal with pornography and women, and the horror genre, especially when these two subjects are involved, is difficult to formulate without succumbing to a misogynistic social conservatism. Stephen King called horror a Republican in a suit and tie for good reason. For me, horror is a place to explore desire and the internal/external force we call the male gaze, but how to do that without getting trapped by that gaze? How do you explore the nature of pornography without creating *some kind* of pornography?

Of course, providing answers requires an agreed upon definition for pornography. In her essay “No Matter How Unreasonable,” Susanne Kappeler offers one I find fascinating but inchoate, “silence has significantly surrounded women's experience of male violence throughout history, while men have produced their own discourse on

sexual aggression, violence and domination for public consumption...Feminists call this discourse pornography” (177).

I agree with Kappeler insofar as men have clearly dominated the discourse surrounding women’s bodies. The male gaze as a hegemonic construct couldn’t exist otherwise. It codifies porn as an inherently oppressive patriarchal force. It is not stated but implied that this male perspective is evil. This is not without veracity, but it does assume the sum total of the male experience, with respect to gender representation, is oppressive. Aren’t there really two male violences? That of the abuser and that of the fantasy of domination in which some women share? The two types are interrelated, yes, but the latter can be healthy. Her definition of porn appears to deny a space for the healthy fetishization or expression of sexual acts; moreover, if I accept this definition then I — the cisgendered heterosexual man — can’t participate in any rehabilitative project. I can only reproduce sexual violence, without any guide for what constitutes a healthy, or at least, alternative, representation to what Kappeler thinks of as pornography.

What I mean to say is I am suspicious of Kappeler’s definition because I find it too narrow, and it ignores the machinery of sexual desire in favor of a definition that views pornography strictly through the lens of power. It ignores the significance of fantasy and fetish in the role of human sexuality. In addition, Kappeler doesn’t offer a feminist alternative to pornography, which I think is critical to disrupting the male gaze. What we are left with is a definition of pornography that does not delineate, rather one that itself risks becoming all consuming and oppressive. Thus, I am left to my own devices, but mindful of my ability to perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

In “Campus of the 21st Century” my tension with the male gaze is clear and present, and honestly, I don’t know if I stay on the side of the angels on this one. “Campus,” represents my alienation and frustration with the machinery of higher education, with the students, the institution, and even myself, the teacher. It is a piece that longs for revolution and transformative apocalypse, not merely a deletion of the human race. It is also about broken promises. As our grandparents were promised flying cars in the fifties, we’re stilling waiting on that super-speed internet, and an enlightened society, the, *ahem*, obvious result of a civilization with access to all the data ever created or will be created; academia is not excepted from this narrative. The old promise of that always impending social revolution collides with the digital one, neither giving us quite what we expected.

But back to those angels. “Campus” is also an exploration of desire and pornography. Sex is conflated with power and revolution, even as it is used to oppress, so which is it in “Campus?” My intent is that the speaker, who has a revolution fetish, confronts the sheer impotence of a hyper-sexualized body; it has no power in and of itself. He is slowly disabused of his assumptions of the female body, among others preconceptions. Do the visuals hijack the intent? I don’t know. Revolution, as a concept, always promises utopia but terminates in uncertainty.

But why am I interested in porn? That itself, would require a separate preface. The short answer is fourteen years of Catholic school. It’s an institution completely unaware of its tendency for fetish and to instill fetish as it creates strict, harmful gender roles, while managing to espouse worthy ideals for both social justice and education. I

suppose I see education and pornography as intimately tied together! So even if “Campus” falters in its politics, it is an angle I have to explore.

If this is not a satisfactory answer, once again, I turn to Kappeler, who describes the phenomenon of academic pornography. It is best described as the uncritical absorption of art that contains scenes of sexual violence/sexual fantasy without regard or discussion about said violence. It does not consider the subjectivity of the victims (women). It may, in fact, romanticize such violence. Academic pornography includes not just the art itself but also the role of academics in characterizing such violence as benign, wistful, celebratory, or simply ignoring the problematic nature of the work (178).

In his essay “Gangsta Rap’s Heroic Substrata...” John Paul Hampstead bolsters Kappeler’s assertion. Hampstead identifies misogyny as a common thread running in both Gangsta Rap and Heroic Poetry, while noting there is a double standard afoot. Gangsta Rap is consistently taken to task for its misogyny, while academics consistently ignore the misogyny present in several thousand years worth of heroic poetry.

I believe this establishes a trickle down culture in education that establishes acceptable forms of pornography. A pornography that, as Kappeler has indicated, is preoccupied with sexual violence and objectification. As someone who spent his formative years in Catholic school, I think a peculiar form of academic pornography is present, one in which an uncritical view of religious myth and tradition is substituted for heroic poetry in higher education.

Again, I am not saying that Catholic and higher education systems are without merit, but I will not list their virtues here. I think for those of us involved in education,

such virtues don't need repeating in this preface. But as an artist, as a heterosexual guy, I feel strangely — I hesitate to say controlled, though I've had my moments — saturated by it. I have an obsessive streak, and if I'm being honest, again, more so than I'd like to be, I'm fascinated by both women's minds and bodies. This can lend itself to the creation of pornography, which can distract from theme. I want to subvert pornography, and horror as a genre lends itself to subversion; however, as deft as horror is at subverting the subject, it is equally deft at subverting the goals of the author.

In the 1960s, the “revolution” promised massive social change, but it ended with some individuals granted more social change than others. We are living in a technological revolution in which many of the same promises are made, and, again, some benefit more than others. “Campus” belongs to this discourse, but in order to affect real change, we have to acknowledge the failings of past revolutions, rather than uncritically romanticize them. Our notions of sex and gender roles are still germane to the conversation.

I don't mean to say, however, that all porn is misogynistic or vice versa. I am as suspicious of this conflation as I am that all sexual depictions are benign. The speaker of “Campus” is entrenched in this discourse. On one hand, he recognizes the power of human sexuality as a revolutionary force. On the other, he's guilty of what I think of as “fourteen-year-old boy feminism.” In other words, he equates sexual displays with strength and power, if not empowerment outright.

“The Yellow House” is similar to “Campus,” as it is also a horror story told in pure syllabic verse; in fact, both pieces use a fusion of the sonnet corona, but with

sonnets of thirteen lines of thirteen syllables each. It seems appropriate to me as thirteen is a supernatural number that is, depending on whom you're asking, a sign of good luck or immense evil.

Also, I think "Yellow House" is concerned with gender in its own way. In my mind, the characters Cotton and Willow are women, even though one is a dog and the other is a god-creature; nevertheless, gender roles take a back seat in "Yellow House." In their place, I turn the volume up on race, ethnicity, religion, southern culture, food, and music — Rap especially.

In the world of this story, racism is its own religion, and given that high ranking officers in the KKK are sometimes referred to as Grand Wizards, this seemed a tiny intuitive leap to me. In the South (and arguably everywhere), racism is pervasive (like the male gaze). We don't always notice it; however, in the South it is entrenched in our food. In fact, barbecue occupies an important role in the story because this food exists at the nexus of competing ideologies: racist "Lost Cause Southerners" and aspirational Black optimists. This might be an oversimplification, but the latter is usually aligned with the Civil Rights movement, Black Christianity, Black power, etc. How fascinating that they share a common cuisine!

How do you combat racism when it is a kind of supernatural force that can appropriate food for evil? We aren't dealing with old-style demonic possession anymore, so Catholic exorcism no longer makes sense. What does? Rap. Because Rap speaks truth to power. Rap is an art that developed under the boot heel of police violence, economic injustice, and institutional racism. It's the perfect foil for Southern racism.

One problem: I can't rap. Not that I really considered it though, as from the beginning I wanted to use pre-existing texts (Rap songs) so that it would feel like I was fighting one tradition with another. Rap is a young language, but I think sampling the work of these artists implies a spiritual cannon in the annals of hip-hop culture.

Several different songs are used, but the most important is "Get It Together" by Q-Tip and The Beastie Boys. It fits the collaborative spirit of the story. Three beings of different genders and species working as one...getting it together, so to speak. In addition, the song appeals to me because it's a collaboration across ethnic lines. I call forth other artists in the story, Dr. Dre, LL Cool J, Nas, and even an allusion to the poet John Hollander.

Although not mentioned in either sonnet corona, the Australian writer Dorothy Porter is a major influence. Years ago, I heard a lecture by Jean Valentine. She said that writers are students of writing, but there is a tendency towards a broad base of knowledge. This isn't to say poets aren't familiar with poetry, or memoirists aren't familiar with memoirs; however, Valentine said every writer should take the time to subliminate himself to another writer, to read all their books and critical works; moreover, we too should write at least one critical essay on that author.

After reading *The Monkey's Mask* in my first semester, I knew Dorothy Porter was the author I wanted to study. She hasn't written a lick of horror, and that was okay; I've already studied horror. Having written an MA thesis on David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, I consider my understanding of horror tropes, conventions, and politics

already replete; it's above average to say the least. What I needed was an author interested in telling stories in verse who was herself devoted to that process. Porter wrote five verse novels, multiple collections of poetry, and even a YA novel. She seemed ideal to me. She was interested in the application of poetic craft to storytelling, but didn't forsake the former to meet the needs of the latter.

I made studying her verse novels, along with Kevin Young's *Black Maria*, part of my third semester project. As evidenced in *The Monkey's Mask*, Porter knows how to tell a tale while harnessing the soundscape of verse:

“You know” Diana says
her mouth moving on my
collarbone
“I only love you for your stories.
You're my dyke Othello.”

I don't know
what she's on about (72).

As a storyteller Porter understands that dialogue is not merely an exchange of text. Dialogue is the pretext for physical interaction and subtext. As a poet she is able to fill the subtext of dialogue with sound. The stanzas are filled with a variety of “o” sounds: the repetition of “know,” various combinations of “ou,” “collarbone,” “don't,”

and “Othello.” And that’s still an incomplete list. These sounds, coupled with the alliteration of “mouth moving on my” add to the sexual tension of the scene. This is magnified by her attention to lineation, which she uses to draw attention to “collarbone” and “Othello.” Yet, the passage moves fluidly. It’s easy to forget she’s writing poetry, but she’s able to maintain this attention to detail while harmonizing narrative and verse for entire books.

There are other reasons I chose Porter. I enjoyed the idea of sublimating myself to an author who is quite different than me. I’m a half-Puerto Rican cisgendered guy living in the States. She’s an Australian lesbian. As a genre, I’ve already mentioned that horror has a way of inverting the politics of its author, but this is not a certainty. Through Porter I live life differently, and I experience power and hegemony differently. It’s not a guaranteed vaccination, but I see studying her work as a meditation on gender dynamics, and that perpetuates a kind of mindfulness when I’m revising genre driven poetry.

Jeanne remarked she’s seen Porter’s influence in “Yellow House,” but Porter is just one of many women writers influencing that piece. There’s a little Octavia Butler and Shirley Jackson in there too, which was a kind of happy accident. I started listening to their audiobooks, and found I was absorbing Jackson’s cadences in the composition process. Meanwhile Butler’s work gave me a space to consider collaboration and the differences between symbiotic relationships and parasitic relationships, major themes in her work germane to the politics and culture of the South.

In conclusion, this preface is intended to familiarize the reader with my preoccupations as a writer. What I really mean to say is this preface is about my obsessions. I tend to obsess. I tend to obsess. I tend to obsess. I don't always know why I obsess over particular topics, simply that I do. What poetry offers me is the opportunity to find insight into these obsessions, to articulate *how* they affect me if not why. If I knew why, I guess I wouldn't need to write about them in the first place.

In other words, there is a meta-obsession at play here. How many obsessive tendencies can someone have before they are obsessed with obsession, with the nature of desire writ large? I am frustrated because, while I can identify when my conscious elevates a thing to obsession, I struggle with the why, which makes me obsess just a little bit more. We're engaged in a conversation, me and the poem, but I only understand every third word. Perhaps if I could just put the poems in the right order....

My life as a professional writer has barely begun. I have a few decades left to figure things out, although I'm sure some will remain a mystery. I'm okay with that because I've learned how to challenge myself as a writer, how to embrace writing in different forms, to periodically alter my writing practice with different exercises. I've even developed an appreciation for books on writing craft, which I used to despise. I've learned a good writer reads constantly, reads constantly, reads constantly.

Letter to Grant Morrison

Do you remember when the Anti-Monitor destroyed the multiverse?

Grief is that. Beyond small words like “supervillian.”

Grief is antimatter, shrinks David to “david,”

— no caps—

and david feels less than without Radar — his dog — my dog —

i

— no caps —

am less than without him.

No, that sentiment is like “supervillian.” It is too small.

You know what it means to be “grant”

— no caps —

to lose your cat and stand in the shadow of the Anti-Monitor:

you are diminished.

Soon to be a small “g” and only that

as you face the gathering antimatter storm of White Space.

Grief is that: the Anti-Monitor. Bleaches my thought bubbles with White Space,

casts a third eye over my heart, but this blind eye cries a clorox eclipse.

It does not transcend; it nullifies.

Grant, why does the fabled moral arc of the universe, which I’ve been promised bends,
noose around my throat, crackle like a death ray?

Electron sparks singe skin,

singing the triumph

of small words like “supervillain.”

I keep waiting for the cliché monologue moment when the Anti-Monitor reveals all.

It doesn’t.

Radar’s death is a moral loss.

Why?

This is unfair. Grief is that, definitely that, definitely unfair, but unfair to you.

These questions, you cannot answer them for me;

they’re not the Why of this letter.

Grant, I want to be a SUPERHERO

— all caps —

I want to answer these questions.

No, my ambition goes beyond that: a new multiverse.

Founded on the principle there is always David;
there is always Radar.

Always together.

Only way to fight the Anti-Monitor and sift through this spectrum called the moral arc of
the

universe

is to imagine.

In this universe, imagination is a sickly nerd in dire need of a radioactive spider.

In this universe, I am a sickly nerd,
cried when mom said “best friend”
and hated those sapphire tears, but I fear....
Grief has enough avatars in this dimension.

Grant, I dig at myself ‘til breathless,
looking for this geyser of white, striving,
I fumble,
sending communiques in Klingon to readers as I cling
on their shoulders, shaking their necks floppy,
but they don’t understand my spit,
slimy graffiti on their blank faces. The readers must dig,
scratch furiously at their beliefs like we have. Dig dig dig.
Dig desperately at the white, digging for a bone in the backyard,
but they don’t find a bone — dig dig dig dig dig dig.
Fevered, readers dig, dig, in the night
against the backdrop of a full moon rippled,
dog-starred with grief and in grief forget why they are digging.

When they hit paydirt,

it isn’t a bone but a geyser of blood

— POW! —

Punched by a cartoon rabbit,

they’re hurled from one end of the funny book to the other.

But halfway they collide with a Nietzsche quote.

They think they’ve found some clue to the meaning of the violence.

It’s a red herring, Grant, that maxim maxed out its credit limit on
reason.

You and Nietzsche should find that hilarious.

Ha! I find it hilarious, Grant.

I dig in the dirt and find the blood
because I've broken all the walls,
but the white still looms; it is a cartoon rabbit,
and it is absolutely terrifying.

Grant. I think the Anti-Monitor is this rabbit.
It's a fantastic avatar for a cosmic being,
nonthreatening, indestructible,
casually spreading white space with its zany footprints.

Grant, I am called to fight
this nasty, little christ.
I'm a poet who needs to be a Poet
— Capital P —
superhero of words and sounds,
Captain Marvel of a multiverse of verse.
Billy Batson says one word, "SHAZAM!"
— All Caps—
BOOM. He is transformed by the lightning:
Big. Red. Smile.
I want to do this, flex my smile.

Poets invoke, Grant. This letter is an invocation. This is *Why* I'm writing.
This letter is me, genuflecting, chin down, before you, asking, be my wizard.
Rev a single word with magic so that RADAR
— ALL CAPS —
is the lightning. Palindromes make for fierce incantations.
RADAR. Load it like a belly laugh.
RADAR. Give it GPS.
RADAR. Give it Scotland. Give it plaid. Give it stout legs and terrier 'tude.
Grant, living corporations will fall at my feet. I'll grow gardens on the darkside of the moon.

Build heaven for the cats and dogs,
the parrots and the hamsters,
even the goldfish will swim happy.

Grant Morrison, writer-god of the imagination,
I will fight the Anti-Monitor and remake the multiverse —

my best friend still matters. I will absorb the anti-matter and make matter,
and in making matters matter, make sense.

Wizard.

Send down RADAR in a jagged hail of SHAZAMs.

Step. Back. And watch me work.

I am yellow. I am red. I am blue. I am black.

I am the ludicrous Holy Spirit, flexing my smile.

One Week Before His Death

But Radar won't eat
food, his food, his food,
his pills, his pills
won't fill an empty
stomach.

Radar needs pills the hard
way, the finger down
the throat way or no
way he keeps
his food down.

A vet will tell
you to weigh
your options,
"A Scottie has teeth
comparable
to a German Shepherd"
Shepherd your digits,
dangerous to play
those calcium keys
but Radar won't eat
and he
has a platoon
of pills to take.

I hate it here I hate it here I hate it I hate it

I pant, granted,
we are out of
out of options.

Anxiety stuck to
my face like whey
protein tears: powdery,
lumpy rouge.

Give him an appetite
stimulant to stimulate
a taste for taste
so he'll crave
the taste of meat.

Can smuggle the meds

if he has a taste,
I can smuggle the meds
these meds are murdered
bits of rejected hotdog
don't reject, don't reject,
don't reject this
pill, wasted
if he can't
keep it down.
I wait I wait I wait

Anxiety

So I dive
with a nausea pill,
dive into that boneyard
pierce my thumb
on his tooth. Scream,
I scream and burst into a bad
case of the turtles. Turtle
all the way down
to the carpet, shelled by
my own howl—
he doesn't mean it.
It's an accident, an accident.
Accented by a thin red slash.
My howl a duet. I screamed
in pain — the melody— but
the harmony? — anger.
Concern in his eyes:
soft whey tears. I
never scream
in his presence.

We were close.

Ars Poetica Ex Nerdastica

When I was 18, I wrote a love poem for Mary Mahoney,
 blonde hair with the pop of sunflowers, the tangy shine of lemon Jolly Ranchers,
 but her favorite candy bar was a Payday because she was allergic
to chocolate.

Wait. Stop. This was before I gained access to the Power Cosmic;
 I lacked the Silver Surfer's slick full body fondant, but I had his
loneliness.

 His craving for penance.

This was when I was mortal. When the Catholic machine
 convinced me I would go to hell for masturbating, and I went to hell every night,
but —

but I wrote a love poem for Mary Mahoney, not the cheerleader,
 the captain of the volleyball team, in the honors program, succeeded
 at everything she touched.

And she touched me — no — it was a psychic slap.
 I doubled over with Gamma Rays: condition terminal.
 And I coughed up that hulk, my poem,

my first poem. And it did not work. It was a failure.
 It did not make her love me.

This was before I had access to the Speed Force,
 but the Catholic Church took the words “social justice”
 and gave them the weight of a 53 lbs. kettlebell.

Mary Mahoney. I wrote a poem for her. It didn't work.
 She was puzzled at first, but gracious; she's a pediatric oncologist now.

 Wait. Stop. Stop. Stop.

This was before I joined the Green Lantern Corp.
 before I learned how to turn willpower
 and imagination into physical constructs.

This was issue 1, when the Catholic machine controlled my fate.

I wore leather under my school uniform, a cenobite,
a loathsome angel from a Clive Barker story, convinced
I was, in fact, a loathsome angel.

Mary said to me “David, you treat me like a queen, but honestly,
sometimes talking to you is like talking to a brick wall.”

Boom. Crack. I just got decked by Captain America.

This is when I made the choice, that conscious Jedi or Sith choice.

I gathered my clothes, my notes, my broken teenage heart,
and I climbed the mountain. I found the wizard, Shazam,
and like Captain Marvel, he taught me to say the word, “POETRY!”

and I said it over and over until I knew what it meant,
until I filled in the acronym with my own meaning.

You're a Good Phone

The glow of the screen is bad for me.

The glow of the screen emits
low dose insomnia.

But I run my thumb back and forth over
the screen to keep the iPhone
from fading to the pass key,
then fading out entirely.

Radar is my screen saver. It's a great picture—
wish I took it. No, Debra did that, she has
a great eye. Captured him on the top
of her tall steps before he
descended down
like a thudding slinky.

It's a rare moment when he isn't looking serious. Has
that dog grin that isn't a grin
just humans projecting, but if we're going
by his eyes, yeah, I'd say he's genuinely
Happy. Dogs and humans have a few shared skills.
Smiling with the eyes is one of them.

He's been dead for months now. The poems keep coming,
and I know they will keep coming for years. Dogs are
projections of our own ego, and here is my ego
projected back at me as visual poetry.

The ego I had to kill
because he had stopped eating, and anorexia
is as bad for the spirit as the body.
Back and forth, back and forth, I swipe my thumb,
sliding never unlocking,
rubbing the iPhone as if it had a soft belly,
as if it could look at me, expectantly,
as if in its short display of his image,
it's doing me a favor.

The Earth, The Bad, and The Ugly

The Saloon is parched. Miss Mack's Ladies are lyin' low
as I walk down the gravel main street with a Morricone
whistle at my shoulder, the chorus rolls by my holster,
stride bolstered by the chimes in time with my spurs.

My face is dirt caked. Mud pies the street signs.

Termites dine on wood. The sun doesn't burn
land. It chars it like a rabbit steak.

John Wayne waits 100 paces away. I say,

"One good film, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance."

He just stands there, filling up the screen with that larger than life
privilege that had all the boomer kids in a tizzy.

He doesn't know Radar is in the upper left window of the brothel.

Six shooter locked on his smug face.

Something this Italian needs meatballs not dustballs
rolling through the mis-en-scene.

Together, We Are Monsters

My film is not a dream. It is a giallo birthed from a Hammer film. British cleavage
blood-drenched in Italian fantasy. Dubbed English heightens the unreality
of me, former Puerto Rican altar boy, looming behind you, white girl.

You. Turn. Out of lips synced too precisely to my
libido you purr, "I never try anything. I just do it." A quiet bang spreads across
my mind in thick viscera. I do not know who the monster is. There is a
rusty gleam, smearing
over this flick like a money shot,
gratuitous, just shy of pornographic. Unless, a person can feel pornography. My deepest
rape fantasies intertwining with my sticky heart strings in a tangled, messy
scream for you.

There are many questions posed in my scream, a bouquet:

venus fly traps, triffids, flowers that inhale moonlight. Why can't I love
with sobriety? How do I work through embracing

my nightmares doggystyle? Why can't I convince you I'm a risk
worth taking? Did the first two questions answer the third?

"I want to carry you off to my Black Lagoon."

What would you do with this truth?

Compress the questions down my throat like coal. The result:

not a diamond for an Adam's apple but a puzzlebox. The solution
is speech, but these hallelujahs are for The Scarlet Gospels according
to Clive Barker; it is his angels, leather-strapped Cenobites
I'll call forth. They have such sights to show us, and they would make
deals with me. Finally, I'd bend you to my will, and throwing my
soul to Leviathan is small price, but the questions would still be questions
stalking my cobwebbed halls in a porn-shaped zombie of you,
hardly the love poem I had in mind, so I forsake the best
of all possible hells for intellectual torture porn. Pinhead
is disappointed. Writhing coffins for two cannot compete

with my need to be a student of you. I'd rather be caught staring into your
cleavage,

possessed by a male gaze, riding the sight line to the sin line in hopes of
finding

something less human housing a moment of honesty with whatever
Transylvania lurks

under your full moon flesh--

But hell is full of rebels and compulsive explorers. Pinhead turns my gaze to the souls raised and struck down, raised and struck down in Styxxxian pools: flaming liars, cheats, the insatiable kindred spirits. I see black sabbath tears and black tears congeal into a viscera that never lies or cheats. The triple x pools sated as the bottom of a lake full of the dead. Questions sink like concrete boots, and the dead hate the living.

The answers rise when the visceral bodies popsicle into a black monolith on water's skin:

Together, we are monsters.

Bride of Frankenstein, blonde hair like a bishop's mitre streaked
with wild cotton, it is not you I fear, it is me, my weakness,
my inability to make you feel this heart, hung
from the tallest gallows by The Puritans and love it.

Ohm/Ow

I cannot tell when Radar is in pain,
 only guess at the meaning
 of the barks and whines
 laced with chastisement.

“You should know better, idiot, traitor.” All I can do is
 look at him blankly, like I’m a Crash Test Dummy
 with just enough gray matter to intuit
 the oncoming sixteen wheeler,
but not enough to grab the steering wheel and make a hard right
 into the Corvette in the other lane. I’ll say this for humanity,
 language grants us the power to say “Ow,” which
teeters so close to “Ohm” it feels like Cancer paid off Poetic Justice
 just for shits and giggles. When Radar spends ten
 minutes going around the apartment barking
 at the window, his crate, the door, me,
the window, the door, me, me, me, with the sharpened force
 of accusation, I try to say “Ohm” but it feels like “Ow”
and wow, the pain is breathtaking. This zen stuff is full of shit.

 Where’s Saint Francis when you need him? Then he barks
 at the window, his crate, the door, me, the window,
 the door, me, me, me. I want to strangle
the dying. We are both in suspense here. Ohm echoes the mind
 as ow. Bow Wow, ow, ow, ow, idiot, traitor. This is ego
 fucking with me. Projection of my own failings
 on the ow-bow-wow bark in his throat.

I follow him to the window, his crate, the door, but all he wants
 is me, me, me, so I give him me, me, me, and hope
 that the day I put him down silences the ohming
 ow in both of us.

Earth-1942

We're gum shoes.
I'm a trench coat; he's monocled and
kilted. With soft drama, we walk
in and out of foggy nights, followed
by the wispy notes of saxophones.
Saxophones and pianos are the only instruments
on Earth-1942.

Together, we average a case a month, manage
to keep our licenses, and we're up to our suspenders in dames.
Lots of dames on this earth: ingenues, femme fatales,
the occasional mother, and Golden Hearts, hooking
the specific wisdom of red sheets
bluesy in the wrinkles.
Radar always finds the femmes,
I end up with the hookers —
they have the best one liners.

Hard lit by a loose lamp overhead,
we booth in the back of Backstabber's, living off whiskey on the rocks, coffee,
meatloaf, but no mashed potatoes, we don't need mashed potatoes; that's
what the bad guys are for, we mash their potatoes.

Radar's lookin' through the window.
I'm lookin' at him. He sees through the fog
and the bad razzmatazz jazz, can sort out trouble. Hear
clicks of its red heels a mile away. This is the best life,
not because of the dames or the meatloaf, and
truth be told I hate whisky, but
it's him and me through thick and thin,
and I realize there's no such thing
as cancer, and I realize
we might be dead,
that fog looks
textured like
angel food,
heavenly.

I'm okay with that.
Radar is okay with that.

“Huh,” I say to him, “always thought
our heaven held superpowers
or a couch or a superpowered couch or —” he interrupts
never taking his monocled eye away from the window — “David
I love you, but sometimes you gotta keep your eye

on

the ball.”

I sip my coffee, smile. Talking dog equals afterlife.
It’s the only explanation. Another case solved. Cue the sax.
Here comes the piano. Fade. See you next week
folks, feel free to let the smile linger before you leave.

I Can't Break Up with a Mermaid

You want something torrid,
 a swan dive into jagged rocks and just enough
sea foam to make the blood look
 pretty in the moonlight.
I do not want to look pretty in the moonlight,
 to stumble back to the surf with
salt in my wounds, feeling like
 a poorly cured chunk of ham.
Ship. Number. Three. You aren't supposed to take
 those poems of siren songs and shipwrecks
literally. They aren't a substitute for a sex life. I'm tired
 of having only half the parts for you, the strife
of you as just before we break all laws of man and god
 you shout "I'm a sea cow!" and I say "you're ten
kinds of wow" "oh you mean bow wow" Damn it I cry
 foul. There's no meeting you halfway, so
no. Not a sexy no. Not a sexy sea cucumber of a negative
 hiding a delirious yes, a Sex Ed. no. A no means
no. But you wanna take the poems literally, like they're gospel.
 So here I am, surf sounding "I told you so"
as the foam makes for a dirty shampoo of man-o-war
 stings and flotsam — crates of soap! —
My toes sinking in sand as you sand
 the softer parts of me
as I wonder if I have the sand to say
 so long, goodbye,
save these sins for someone a little
 more...original.

Campus of the Twenty-first Century

1

David Cronenberg, whisper dark signals in my eyes,
teach me to think in genital transfigurations:
penis guns, vaginal tears across the chest. Pull my
hair until it is long, black seaweed. My terse verse must
traverse technologies in alliterations skipping
across stagnating disruptions. I must be The
Ring Virus, a mix of holy scripture rendered digital vid
And the liar's meme — the fabricated quote slapped on
Morgan Freeman's fatherly face. This sonnet sings for
the broken heart of Higher Ed: adjuncts on food stamps.
It sings for students stunned by the mad science rants of
their instructors. It sings for Apocalypse. Bring
it down. Bring the Ivory Tower down on our heads.

2

Their heads tilted down, blue light on ivory skin. I
stood in the center of the room. Mouth on auto, "Me
Talk Pretty One Day achieves characterization
through dialogue," they aren't listening, "how?" I could not
compete, stared out the window large as a cathedral
door. I was backlit by the chromatic flicker of
a flat screen the size of a billboard. Outside, winter
sun splashed sterile on spotless concrete. Square pools of lawn,
manicured by migrant workers, stood untrampled and
untouched. So many short cuts but no one took them. "How
about confusion?" I craved a dirty black summer,
filth and revolution, "the students are never sure
what their teacher is saying, they're intimidated. Why?"

3

My students weren't intimidated. They did not care.
They did not do the reading, again. I didn't think they
had done a single reading. I fumed a tired, slow boil.
No energy for rebukes. "Class dismissed. Fuck this. Do

the reading. Why are you here?” Why was I there? “I won’t do this for you.” Blue light on black skin. No one looked up. Their cells were my cell. I was done. “I’m marking you all absent.” I grabbed my bag and stormed out the room. My stomach rumbled curds of steam. Fumes verged on tears. The I teach college and I’m on food stamps tears. The I teach in Higher Ed. and the students don’t care tears. The I teach college-Quick-Trip-pays-more-with-benefits-tears. Yeah, I was upset to say the least. I could not inspire them.

4

I inspired nothing, neither upset or inquiry. Spent twenty minutes lost in the beige corridors of Building A. Walls clean. No flyers. Serious as a Hospice. Ceilings a little too high. I passed by stiff corporate boardrooms of long desks in rows: lines of snug isolation. Never circles. Slicked eyes. Heads never moved. Did anything move them? By accident I arrived at the fast food hub. I sat and thought. Stared slack eyed out a window. Woe weighed on my jaw. Where was the revolution? That’s why I loved horror. It promised murder and monsters, the collapse of the status quo in an epic close-up of gore and screams. My tummy rumbled. Students ate carefree. Stuffing faces with hot

5

Chik-fil-A. Carefree, students stuffed eyes with Facebook. I was stuffed on carefree, which was just empty calories. I sat for hours, watching students come and go, watching the sun sink behind a library shaped like a gray hotel: a Monopoly reject. George Romero, can’t you wipe the board clean? Across from me, a light brown girl with molded waves of hair chewed on waffle fries as she watched cat antics on YouTube, stolid, starched poster behind her. White font against green background. CAMPUS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. “Hooray. Go future,” I muttered. The smell of spicy chicken sandwich tumbled down my throat. Seven. Time to go. Stood up — Crack—

Flick — — Air singed gray — — Clouds coiled, then
flatlined.

FLASH

Streaked sea green.

6

A comet streaked across the gray sky in a flash fried
lavender eyelash. The moon broke open like an egg,
sticky as clouds dissipated into sifted flour.
Its yolk ready to emulsify space-time. Joy like
cake batter filled my gut. Hunger quieted at the
awe. The glass vibrated, cracked: veined, varicose. Tangled
lines spun out until the room itself was heavy with
age. The floor shook like a mechanical bull at a
honky tonk — I was thrilled, smiled in ecstasy! I fell
backwards — landing hard on my head. Blackout. No dreams. I
woke up bloodless but covered in ketchup, mustard, Coke
Zero. I stood up slow and giddy, big helium
smile buried under condiments and sticky napkins.

7

Stood up with a sticky smile. Napkins like a lion's
mane on my cheeks. I didn't remove them. Turned around. The
students were still in their seats, staring at screens lit sea
green--couldn't see the image--but their eyes were locked: green screens
of death. They were waiting for a hard reboot; they were
always waiting for a hard reboot. Then, the reboot
happened. The latina changed. Her breasts shook and grew and
she pornified into an hourglass with red marker
hair offsetting blue eyes like barely frozen lakes. Her
cleavage punched through a yellow shirt. The tear followed by
a blossom of vertical lips between her tits. Lips
relaxed into a whisper--razored teeth peeked through. Her
jeans tightened, a thick bulge appeared. Finger nails and ears

8

lengthened and stretched, canines bulged, points appeared. Her hair hissed.
Long red locks moved of their own accord — I didn't step back —
I gazed with hard amazement. She didn't move. I heard gold
coins and Super Mario, turned left, a pudgy white

nerd nursed on the HD dazzle of his Gameboy. He
wore a slave Leia t-shirt. “Hey!” — before I finished
Leia went 3-D. She peeled off his stomach, slithered
around his neck. Took a moment to peek at his score,
nodded with approval, rose up, drove her fingers deep
into his skull, and pulled it apart like a stubborn
oyster; she plunged face first into the brain, her skin
calcifying, metallic bone, slave parts pushed through. They
fused, horrific gibberish: privilege and revenge.

9

I was privileged. My horror fused with schadenfreude,
and Freud himself would’ve had a few jolly cigar
puffs, but these were not hallucinations; these monsters
had an antiseptic smell, cold clorox slime on the
skin. The nose knows, and my nose knew the smell:
a hospice. I was bearing witness to radical
transformation. Yes, I was privileged; this was the
ground floor of the revolution. The student horde would
eat the anodyne bureaucracy. Smash the classrooms.
Devour overpaid administrators. Campus of
the 21st century? No, the century was
a decade. Here comes the *thirty-first* century, and
its got purple tentacles and dangerous boobies.

10

Students purpled and pulsed. Smoke tentacled around the
corner from Chik-fil-A. Sandwiches burned. I waited
for screams, for howls, for chaos, for bloody amputees,
for the fury of fast food workers, deep fried — nuggets
for eyes — deep fried, in peanut oil, ready to digest
the terrified masses. So, where were they? I waited,
but the monsters didn’t move. Nerdboy with the Gameboy still
stared at the screen, and The Bride Of Pornhub just slumped in
her chair. Cat antics. Still watching cat antics. *I can’t*
even dripped from her vertical mouth. I felt no lust
or longing. No tug and pull of desire and terror.
Hard reboot followed by a system error? I walked
down the hallway and peered in the silent, beige classrooms.

11

Silently, I peered into beige thoughts in classrooms stiff
with rows of tables and chairs like corporate boardrooms,
entombed, bodies scribbled over with latex effects
direct from Savini's workroom, discarded nightmares
of 'Nam and Mei Lei. "Windows is updating" declared
the HD monolith, and so was I. This wasn't right.
"Buffering." Minorities don't last long in horror.
We bleed, sweat, and pay the price for the white hero. Scent
of peanut oil followed me, smoking cloudy twists. Each
classroom the same story: ugliness and apathy.
Ran back to the Chick-fil-a. All the monsters stared at
Screens. Jumped behind the counter. Looked for a knife. Found
thick billows of smoke, but I found a true blade. I left

12

Building A, smoked by hot oil, bladed by billowing
truths. I clutched the knife and surveilled the campus. A few
faces, here and there, stumbled and screamed in terror. Did
they run because of the mutants or did these mouths of
madness see the truth? Rod Serling, that laughing Christ, was
the last philosophy standing. This was a *Twilight*
Zone Catastrophe. I laughed manic tears; my panic,
not born of fear: it's hysterical disappointment
at the Main Event! (And I smelled like burnt chicken). Sky,
broken moon and all, was filled with such promise. Serling,
this madness is a white man's burden--or at least a
white girl, final girl in a slasher film! "Tentacles!"
shouted a thin plaid dot running through a wide green lawn.

13

Shouted back in a thin, plaid scream, "I'm not a white girl!"
Should have known. Horror has never favored a brown guy.
Horror has always been a white guy's revolution.
This one? Standing still in a bottle of Adderall,
pills, just pills. Armageddon was the victory of
yesterday. My teeth hurt at the irony. I hate

irony. To my left, a football field away, lay the administration building. The campus of the twenty-first century began there. I walked towards that beige tower with a casual stride, gripping the knife firmly, “black kids have guns for teeth!” a voice cried out. I did not care; they’re shooting blanks. I will start my own bold future: a good healthcare plan and buckets of blood.

Horror Nerds Be Like...

After much deliberation I'd rather be a monster:

a cyborg with a killer arm, fuelled

on a mix of cocaine, satanic curses

and social resentment. I'd rather be a werewolf or

a swarm of killer bees but not a sparkling

vampire. I'm not Mormon. I'd

rather sit down, dine with Hannibal Lecter or drink

a mysterious potion thick as lotion.

I'd rather be blood on a knife that cut your face,

be a thing that leaves scars but shines.

It's better than branding. Leave my mark without having

to stay for dessert and chit-chat and god I hate small talk.

It just makes everyone feel small. Sign me up

for that bull-in-the-china-shop course. Go in, do my thing,

let everyone else discuss the impoliteness of

my horns, my muscle, my magnificent

clumsiness.

Earth-1 Million B.C.

Radar Find Beast.
David Kill Dino-Devil.
Hands Red.
Club Red.
Read Palm.
Red Future.
Ground Cool, Green.
Ground Is Present.
Radar Present,
Stand In Breeze.
Radar All Chest.
Sky Lizards Cry.
They Don't Dive.
Sky Lizards Respect
David And Radar.
Know Their Song.
Sky Lizards Hate
Dino-Devil.
Red Spill On Green.
Radar Silent.
Sniffing Whispers
From Raining Woods.
David Tie Dino.
Radar Quiet
World Talks.
David Quiet
World Say Nothing.
David Turn Back
Look At Woods.
Big Woods.
Big Leaves.
Big Palms,
Slapping Steaks,
Green with Red Stars.
How We Get Here?

David Strongest One There Is.
But.
David No Get Home Without Radar.

The Yellow House

1

I invoke the fissures of Trauma, plunge my bare hands
into its grief-filled lakes. Will make a tiny cross on
my forehead with white grease. Travel parched through the desert
channeling prophecy and feeding on brown locusts.
I invoke Shirley Jackson. Teach me to build a house
and make it old. To give it a plantation's cracked soul,
wood painted sour yellow, thick with familial tragedy.
Grant me your gift for deep architecture. Need a new
demonic harmonic for this sonnet corona
of lost dogs and lost masters. Let me find prosody
in their quest. In questing, let them find the truth I can't.
Find that which longs to render us invisible men.
Invade us. Erase us. It begins with a hard heat.

2

Summer in South Carolina is a hard heat: one
hundred degrees and thick as a wool comforter wrapped
around your face. In July, the wool was electric
with a heat wave. Sweat stuck to my skin, melting under
hard light. Heavy with humidity the rough blanket
rashed raw my thighs. "Cotton!" I called, screamed until hoarse.
She bolted. Terrier brain. Scottish soul. Saw a squirrel.
That was that. I chased her through creeks and bramble, my mouth
covered in that thick summer wool. My calves striped red with
the lust of thorns. Followed her through the underworld of
suburbia: swamps, sewers, manholes, and powerlines.
I didn't see her. Worried she would die in the heat.
I could die in the heat, but I saw only green and wood.

3

In green woods slowly dying, the sky overcasted--
heat lightning--but the hard heat wouldn't break. FLASH. After
first flash I saw a house in the distance. Flash. I saw
Cotton walking towards it. Flash. The sky, color of coal.
Flash. Front porch — tall columns like teeth. Flash — teeth mossed, decayed.
Flash. Drizzle. Cotton stood on a mound. Nose to the air.

Flash. Rumble. Even the water is hot. White steam rose clawed from the ground. Rumble. Drops on my glasses: tiny spider eggs. Flash. Bang. White bolt crash landed like a space shuttle in the front yard. Cotton bolted. Flash-Rumble. I bolt after her, shouting “Cotton!” Flash. Flash-Rumble. Flash-Bang behind me. Don’t look back. Drizzle quickens. Flash. Rain stiffens. I reached the mound. She went left. I followed.

4

Each rain drop like a boxer’s stiff jab. Leery of a flash knockout, I looked for her, frantic. Looked for cover, frantic. Flash-Flash. Flash. Flash-Rumble. The wool blanket of summer was saturated with water. It stifled. I stepped into the garage. Dried motor oil pooled in the middle of the floor. No cars, but a crusty John Deere lawn mower, covered in thick grey dust, more cobwebs than metal. Trail of watery paw prints cut the room in half, pointing to a yellow door. “Cotton?” I said with strained patience. If she suspected rage, she’d never answer. Flash. Flash-Bark. Bark? “Cotton! Honey, I’m coming,” entered the yellow door. No hesitation. “Hello?” My question greeted — Flash-Bang — with scent of old urine.

5

Stepped back, banged the door. “Hello?” I ventured. Urine scent. Moved forward with slow, deliberate intent. Each step on the wood floor a cautious knock. “Saw my dog enter your...place.” Was I talking to dead air? To absence or the click-click, flash-boom of a shotgun? Stepped in sticky yellow goo. Clung to my shoe like lemon bubblegum: piss perfumed as the weird sauce stretched with my stilted stride. Flash. Pause. Flicker-Flash. “Please don’t be an angry white guy,” I muttered. Click-click, Flash-freeze. I froze. Flash. Rumble. Still. Perfect. Still. My clothes were soaking wet. I drip-dropped on the floor. Drops hit the wood with pecks. Flash. My head turned towards the door. Shut. Locked. Turned my head around, taking a slow step forward. Flash. But no clicks. Sauce still stuck with my steps.

6

Sauce stuck like old sin. Flash. No click. Rumble. Boom. Step. Cabinets shivered. There was a red smear on a blond counter--kitchen counter. The smear was surrounded by freckles of dried powder, also red. Sniff. Sniff. Kool-Aid. Could have used one billion Kool-Aid points right about then. Summon the Kool-Aid Man, knock down walls, find my dog, get the Mountain Berry Blast out of there. Rumble. One glass bottle of yellow barbecue sauce on the counter: Maurice's. In South Carolina, mustard sauce has two secret ingredients: black gospel music or racism. Maurice used the latter. Flash. Some black folks and white liberals preferred Maurice's. Flash. Slow, stiff, starched step. Flash. No clicks. I giggled at the stress, the sauce.

7

Slow stressed step. Flash. Giggle stuffed. Kool-Aid Man, where art thou? Slow, gum scraped, turn left, wide window on far side of room. Rain tumbled. I saw a weeping willow hunched over like a grunge rocker playing filthy chords. "Know Dirty Black Summer?" I whispered. "Too bluesy?" Rumble. The yard, otherwise, a desolate mess of dead grass. Massive, the willow magnified by the wide glass cinema. With my trembling throat I gave speaking a final try. "Ah come in peace. Jus' wan' my dawg." Flash-flash. I needed to speak slow and southern. Hear me as part of the tribe before they saw my skin, "She's the only kin ah gawt," letting my vowels dip into thongs. Flash. Silence. No bark. No sound. She was not a quiet dog. No reply.

8

No sound. The quiet crescendoed in jags of dead bark. I walked to a kitchen table by the window. Oak. The surface was carved and cut with the weirdest plastic surgery: Saint Andrew's cross. Stars. Not star spangled. Stars and Bars. Confederate scars. Ran my hand across the wood. The stars were scar tissue, lifted skin, like the brands of black frats. There was yellow plasm in the far right corner of the table. Tabled my fear, peered hard at

an inscription on the cross, english but the letters
were latinate design. Getting darker. Harder to
read. I strained to make the first word, “heritage.” I thought
the last word was “hate.” Couldn’t make out the middle word.
The table smelled like vinegar. Pricked my finger — Flash —

9

“Ow” I ground out through clenched teeth. The table owned a — Flash —
drop of blood. Flash. Bang. Outside the willow tilted with
a gathering wind. Flash. Looked like it’s rockin’ out to
Soundgarden. “Untuning of the sky,” my eyes moved from
tree to finger to table. The blood was gone. A strand
of steam peeled off my shirt. I’d stopped dripping on the floor.
A second strand sliced slick from my forearm. Dizzy. Hot.
Hard Heat held me. Flash. Click-click. Sour sound: a loaded
shotgun. Not fun. Not good. But I saw no one. Heard the
bark of the willow weeping. I wanted to weep, to
hear Cotton bark. No clicks. No crazy. No way I left
without her. I dropped the diphthong, “You can’t kidnap my
dog, can’t fuck with me and mine. If you want me gone, just

10

let her go. That simple. Dog plus David equals gone.”
Strand of steam rose rank, upward through my field of vision.
I looked down. The strand rolled off my red scratched calf. I felt
a laughing gas lightness curl up through my sinuses.
Felt like a House of Leaves, brittle, not quite stable. Flash.
Click. Not a gun. It was the windows, the doors, sealed shut.
“My family is dead. I’m the last one walking the earth.
She is the only child I will ever have.” Creek.
Stepped through the kitchen into an empty den with a
sliding glass door. The willow was widescreened by the door’s
lengthy scope. I turned from the mouth to the wide throat of
the room. In dreams, dogs are extensions of our egos.
There were three dead egos here. Wet fur, swirling in the

11

spectre of a quiet swamp rot. Wet fur swirling in
a tangle of leashes, streaked with an eggy stench. No,

one dog lived. I knew this black poodle, Freddie, friend to the neighborhood. Blood was massaged into his fur like shampoo. I saw no cuts or gashes. Paraplegic, he was frothing like a cappuccino. I broke his neck. Courage dissipated with locks of steam. Stared at his dead body, their dead bodies. Looked around the room. Was unfurnished but stuffy. I heard the cold, ghosting roar of a far off train. Was it midnight? It couldn't be midnight. New fright set in. Light, still saw light outside. Checked my cell. Midnight surprise despite the light's disguise. The midnight train never lied, but the sky shined: red wine.

12

There is no midnight sun in South Carolina. Flash. The cell glowed. Ninety percent power. Bars? Bar none. I put the phone away. I had never killed before, and the willow knew it. It rocked in the wind. Weeping? More like smug laughter. Flash. Light bounced off crimson viscera and canine corpses. My eyes stung with tears. My eyes stung with fear. Steam began to peel away my eyebrows. Flash Bang. There was a banging in my chest, an urge to run, then a flash of guilt, then gush of love and loyalty. She was kin and kind if not species but me? Diseased. Skin pale paste. "Please," won't leave. Legs buckled. My soul sieved. "Cotton run!" I cried, I fried, grieving slow in the steam. Burning tears flashed fast, creamed. Didn't feel the fall, the hard thud.

13

*I run so fast I run so fast after hard flash falls
after the squirrel after the Freddie I smell Freddie
like a teddy we wrestle best I hear him distress
Freddie friend Freddie Find Freddie Friend Freddie Find / FLASH /
Push through the heat the heat is hard "Cotton!" David says
No time No time Very busy dog "Cotton!" No time
No time Smell thunder in the air Find a puddle Lick
Find Freddie Freddie find Find Friend Freddie's Funk Sniff-Sniff
Found the funk I want the funk! / FLASH / Find Freddie Drop Drop
Rain drops On grass On fur On house Big house -Yellow House
Hesitate Big house Yellow House Big Evil Big Teeth*

*this house Sniff Foul funk this house Flash Rumble this house / FLASH /
Bang Bolt Run I run Find Freddie Find a cave-way / FLASH /*

14

*No way the cave safe Run Freddie run Bolt Whimper I
hear Freddie No No No This is bad Big evil here
Fear stiff Fur stiff Ears up Go go Go through yellow door
Go through the yellow death Kitchen stinks Walk smart Whimper
Deep Growl Yelps Walk fast Stop Freddie is a dead teddy
Alive but gone Shakes on floor White shadow Freddie-blood
on Its mouth White shadow! White death! Comes at me Dodge left
Spin right Snap at gloved hand Stick and move Stick and move Stick
and go Blocked Can't go the cave-way got to change the way
There's a hallway that's the new way Go! Turn and burn
New way dark way long way long hall Hide Must hide Must hide
Long way long hall New room Break right Sniff Sniff Foul funk weak
Safe to sneak here Hide here Rest here Bed here Go under*

15

*bed Sneak a peek here Safe See picture of tree Big sniff
I rest my head Floor cool Hear steps Feel steps Crawl slow Hide
in shadow Slow breath Hold breath Step Step Stop I see white
robe I do not like it here I hate it here I hate
it here It stays in doorway Does not enter I smell
mustard smell yellow It kneels It sees me with mustard
eyes "Bark!" I will bite you White I will bite you Yellow.
"Hello?" says distant David David? No No No The
eyes rise They turn They step I crawl careful A hard heat
in my heart Panting Panting Hot here Standing free New
smell Strange smell Cornbread? "Hello." Turn startled Show sharp teeth
Show my teeth "Do You Want To Help Your Friend?" Scar around
her neck like collared teeth Blue eyes Holds out hand Big smile*

16

*Missing two front teeth Sniff her slim hand Dress blue-collared
I sit Listen "I Can Help, But I'm Not Your Butler.
This Is Quid Pro Quo." Favor for favor How'd I know
that? "Right Now, I'm Giving You A Taste, An IQ Boost
So You Can Make An Informed Decision." She smells of*

ancient wood I hear music I hear mad beats in her speech
"I'll Make You Smarter, Full Time. And I'll Show You The Path
Of Escape, But You Have To Open The Sliding Door."
"Quid Pro Quo. Favor For Favor, Favor For Flavor.
I Savor Life, Slow Cooked And Tender, But I Am Trapped
Between Bad Choices, Vicious Vinegar And Mustard
Malevolence. BBQ Is The Common Tongue Of
Southern Magics, Thick Molasses Rubbing Black Lives And

17

Bigots In Thick Black Secrets And Dry Rubs And Here's The
Rub," *the rub-a-dub-dub rub?* "The Three Men In A Tub Rub,"
she laughs "It Hates With Hard Heat That Cooks. What It Hates Is
Consumed Or Erased," *suddenly straight faced suddenly*
straight laced she shows me the movie David dead David
is death David is white death David is Big Death Whine
worry worry becomes fury I shit on the floor
I rage-quit the floor piss-quit the floor I'm floored "Bark! Bark!"
"Quit The Barking." *Growl Grunt Growl Mad beats in my brain Mad*
speech in my brain It killed Freddie It won't get David
The collared teeth glow — neon glow — green strange life Smells like
blood and hickory and chicory Coffee clear my
bright thoughts Quid pro quo should I stay or go? "Shitting Will

18

Not Help" *She frowns* "Don't Clown," *Quid pro quo Stay or go? No*
"Snort," I sit "We Can Beat It Together." Defeat It?
Beat It? Whip Its white candy ass together? "Put It
Down Together Hulk-Smash Metal Souled Doom Together."
And then we seal the deal? "The Quid Pro Quo." Favor for
favor favor of flavor? "Favor Of Serious
Flavor" her blue eyes shimmer "Remember This True, Do
As I Ask, And I Will Bring Fierce Gospel To The Fight."
She sits like a lotus "David's Mind Will Break From The
Stress Unless You Tell Him 'Gotta Do It Like This Like
Chachi And Joanie." Okay Big Brain Chachi Got it
Sliding Door Deal "David Owes Me Too." Let's quid pro quo
Go go go She strokes my ears "Little Bit Magic, Touch

19

Of Wi-Fi, Stroke Big Thoughts Through These Giant Ears...Now Go.”
Go go go Flash bolt from the the room the wood floor gets hot
I feel it a skillet a skillet I run I run
the hallway gets longer I run I run run my mind
expands the way expands I must be the way I am
the way Yellow plasm seeps like sap through cracks Jump Dodge.
Don't touch mess Floor inclines and curls I run I run through
questions--what is subaltern theory? Who are the New
Age Outlaws? Floor bends into loop go-Go go-Go Am
I subaltern? Is She? Upside down I am looking
down at stars It is illusion It is mindkiller
“Cotton! Run!” I run I run on the hard hot skillet
Only way out is in I am the way See doorway

20

I am through the doorway Brakes! Slide across floor David
lies on floor He is passed out He is passed out Hard hot
heat Hard hot floor White steam rises off his skin in ghosts,
in ghosts I do not see White Evil It should be here
I do not smell Big Evil I heel to David Sniff
sniff his hand Skin pale bumpy lick the palm lick the palm,
no avail Finger nails melt away No tan He looks
like clam chowder Dig at his chest “Bark!” Flash Rumble “Bark!”
I lick his face I lick his face He does not respon —
I smell mustard Big Evil fades in like a glaring
sunrise White hood Yellow eyes It eats the steam “Bark! Bark!
/Flash/ The words the words No duh the words Bark them in his
ear: Gotta do it like this like Chachi and Joanie

21

I am riding in a car with Chachi and Joanie.
Happy Days theme playing on radio. They are in
the front. Flash. I'm in back. Flash. Joanie and Chachi turn
into Mom and Papi arguing. “Look at the road!”
I say. The radio plays, “Gotta do it like this,
like Chachi and Joanie.” And they don't see the flaming
crosses behind mailboxes or the Bad Gandalf, grand
wizard in white casting star spangled missiles our way.

I see him in the rearview. “Gotta do it like this.”
Flash-bang go the tires. We spin spin spin. We crash crash boom
Big Gandalf laughs Adluh flour in dragon puffs. Mom and
Papi on fire--burning biscuits. Flash. “Gotta-Gotta-
do it like this, like Chachi and Joanie, cuz she’s the

22

cheese and I’m the macaroni....” Chachi and Joanie!
Gotta be cheese and macaroni. Revelation
stops the nightmare. Wikileaks style info dump in my dreamscape.
Hip Hop crazy is my dreamscape. I’m seein’ deejays
in black hoodies scratchin’ turntables in the streets. Trees
tilt, branches bob. The grand wizard trembles. His ears bleed.
He bursts into a mustard blizzard. And the trees spit
hard, “One-two, one-two keep it on listen to this shit
because we kick it ‘til dawn. Listen to The Abstract,
got it goin’ on.” This whole thing is abstract, but I — I’m—
I’m downloading the codes and stories and meanwhiles: the
quid pro quo. Favor for Favor. Sliding Door. Wake Up.
“Bark! Bark!” Fade out of dream. “Bark!” Flash. Rumble. Boom. Rumble.

23

Flash Rumble. Flash Rumble Crack Boom. Boom Bark. Sloppy tongue.
Cotton on my chest, the bright eyes that called me father
whimpered in desperation. Groggy smile on my face.
“Is it time to poop? Morning already?” Scratched behind
her ear, but the fear is rigid. Stiff mustard perfume
above me. I sat up like a slow, flimsy Michael
Meyers. Looked at my hand. My color boiled, then drifted
upward and over, across the room, above wood and
yellow spots like a pox. The Big White inhaled me through
its nose-placed slits. Flash Rumble. Its eyes were yellow pools
of sauce, dotted with black pin pricks. My throat constricted
to a plastic straw. The Menace mawed. Mouth round. Can’t tell —
was that a pillowy mask or a true face? Cotton

24

growled with her true face. She masked nothing. Intelligence
bristled across the sandstorm streak of fur down her back.

Flash Rumble. Flash Boom. I stood. Glanced at the pile of dead dogs to my left. Glanced at Cotton on right. Sliding Door behind me. Looked to the Big White eating my color. The floor quaked in syncopated rhythms. THUD. THUD. THUD. THUD. A voice like falling anvils broke the air. "ONE TWO ONE TWO KEEP IT ON LISTEN TO THIS SHIT BECAUSE WE KICK IT TILL DAWN. LISTEN TO THE ABSTRACT, GOT IT GOIN' ON." THUD. Flash. Without turning we knew what was behind us: The Weeping Willow, waiting on the other side of the door. The Big White sneered--touch of fear. Flash Rumble. "Cotton!" She was teeth and claws. "Cheese and Macaroni!"

25

I am teeth and claws teeth and claws go go go! Oh you didn't know Big White? Your ass better call somebody! I charge him hard I charge him fast David goes for the door. I bore through Its legs It pivots and turns pivots turns. David is weak Big White still eats Can't open the door. Flash We're in deep shit Willow The Abstract spits "LET ME GET DOWN TO THE RHYTHM. YES I GET FUNKY AND I'M SHOOTING ALL MY JISM!" That is gross how does that help us? I dodge flurry of claws David doesn't quit David keeps pulling He absorbs the word magic but he needs more help needs more help White steps to me White spins to flee No! White spins to David breaks to David White flight reaches screeches White fright! It chokes him smokes him "PHONE IS RINGIN,'

26

OH MY GOD." He's fright faced white faced I bite White in the midnight light I bite White with thunder I bite White / Flash-Bang / on Its back door Sink my teeth in — David released — we spin around the room and off the walls Ha! White's got a new tail Flail flail Stops Drops Rolls Crash Crunch Under Me. Over Me Can't Breathe Under me Breathe "LISTEN TO THE SHIT 'CAUSE BOTH OF THEM IS BONY." Gotta do it like this like Chachi and Joanie "Cause she's the cheese and I'm the Macaroni" Over me Can't breathe Tumble of Bruises — floor — rumble of slaps Ribs sore not cracked Under me I release / Flash-flash / But It's down snap snap Its face —

*Elbowed — Flash of stars Eyes water roll Rolls in green
sea See spots Don't run Step back It stands Hold ground Rolls out*

27

*the green sea See hard heat fingers Talk trash: So why all
the fight and why all the fuss? "Cuz I ain't got no dust!"
David grips the door He pulls It won't give Talk Trash: Yeah
you know I'm gettin' silly "Got a Grandma Hazel,
and a Grandma Tilly," he shouts Willow bobs I bob
and pant-pant-pant Big White is big work Flash flash goes the
sky Buy more time David fades He fades Big Evil is silent,
violent ready I'm steady Freddie Won't forget
Freddie Smell his messy death Ingest teddy's last scent.
Fill with sad beats mad beats will beat you White Flash-Rumble.
Growl "Bark! Bark!" I run to David fast-flash fast bounce bounce
off door Charge Big White Make It turn to the hallway the
new way Leap at Its chest We tumble down the hallway.*

28

*Tumble down the new way the hard way chest first Jaws first.
Become cartwheels Headbutt Its chin — Crash — bruising wood floors.
Land on my head See bright stars Shake it off Snap at air.
Snap at claws Claws draw my blood "Yelp!" I will smite you White!
Leap at its face I wrestle best I wrestle fierce Flash.
Nip Its nostrils thin yellow blood gushes Steam feast stops
Barked at Its brain I'm gonna knock you out mama said
knock you out It steps back Ha ha! I hurt you Freddie,
my Teddy the next bite is for — Big White swells rises
like a fresh biscuit sweats steam — steam dream — steam becomes
new arms four arms Its breath hot hard heat vinegar smells
of vinegar of sick vinegar and molasses.
Wants to eat me Suck me dry like Freddie Oh yeah? come*

29

*and get me Try to eat me I charge with hard heat dry
rage in my teeth "Yipe!" White times a kick a hard kick a
very hard kick to my ribs — CRACK — rocket through the air
past the stars and looping floor Slide slick across the wood.
Slide slick across the doorway threshold into wall Flash*

*Rumble Hard to breathe hard to breathe Get up Get up up.
Go Go Stumble Fall See David on floor I'm blurry
blurry Hear a train howl Did it lose its Freddie too?
Hear slow steps against the howls Hear slow steps against the
rumble of thunder See David shaped blur on floor Smell
vinegar smell molasses Smell salt Smell mustard smell
smug smell thirst Smell claws on tail Up side down See mouth-maw
blows in to rows of needles See green strings tap-tap*

30

Its shoulder. Wet strings needled through crack in Sliding Door. Lances, they stabbed Big White in the eyes, fishhooked Its mouth. Cotton fell to the floor, limp. "YOU FUCK WITH ME NOW IT'S A MUST THAT I FUCK WITH YOU." The Abstract ragdolled Big White with pointed rage. Smashing It against the floor, the walls. Branches flooded the house, dashed into the kitchen, dragged the starred table into the den. The Willow had gone gangsta. Branches scrubbed the house, carpeting the floors in writhing leaves, followed by storm-cooked fresh air; it washed out the vinegar, the mustard, my stale sweat but not my fear, my awe, my boiled skin. Willow raided the house in a drive-by rush. Big White was bum-rushed, blitzed, bound at the ankles, rooted, silent with yellow-eyed rage.

31

Silent I crawled, rooting for Cotton, swallowed by green inferno. Couldn't stand if I wanted. More leaves dogpiled the den, but I heard her shallow whine near the wall to my right. More vines like verdant pulled pork. The train howled hard, a cry, a fading rockstar. Spotted Cotton's white ears in the green jumble. "YOU THOUGHT I WAS A MARK CUZ I USED TO HANG WITH E Z." Its bonds sang like tight leather. Flash-flash. I crawled to Cotton. She was dreamy and bruised, zebra striped with blood. The Willow bound Big Evil to the table like a virgin sacrifice as she wrapped It like a mummy. She pulled the vines from Its eyes. Flash. Rumble. Crack. Boom. Thin yellow streaks spray from the sockets like samurai blood in an action film. *Don't call it*

32

a comeback, Cotton sighed, blood stained, pocket samurai.
We would faint, but the vinegar and mustard bouquet
dousing the room made for strong smelling salts. It rained hot
inside. It rained soft outside. Needed to get outside,
needed to go home. Take hot baths. Move downtown. Flash. Flash.
The rain outside stopped. The rain inside stopped. The thunder
was mute. The branches, table, Big White, took a slow fade
out, dissolving into green steam, then, nothing. The ghost
train howled a final time, replaced by the vibrating
staccato of cicadas. I looked back at the door,
open: The Weeping Willow in its original
spot. But She stands against the empty space, deep blue eyes
against black sky, skin a few shades lighter than midnight.

33

Lightly, She shaded across the midnight threshold. Sky
and house tuned as she stepped on the floor in brown sandals.
My handle on reality waxed and waned. I'm
pale as stale white bread. Cotton breathed steady but shallow.
Cicadas sang. Willow walked toward our sad heap of
dirty laundry, sad and soiled and stained. "So. Quid. Pro. Quo,"
I exhaled. "Favor Time Indeed" she smiled through her blue
eyes. I interrupted, "If this involves immortal
souls can I take Cotton to the vet first?" Laughing, she
helped me stand. "Sure." I carried Cotton through the sliding
door. Cicadas serenaded. "You're Shamans Now, Have
Travelled Through A Psychic Wound," Willow licked her chapped lips.
She said, "Bar-b-q. The Good Kind. The Black Gospel Kind."

34

"Don't mean to blaspheme kindness in bleak times, but that's it?"
I asked, Cotton heavy in my arms. She responded,
choired by cicadas, "Would You Rather Slay One Hundred
Cows? Spend A Fortune On Rum And Cigars? You'll Feed Me
For Fifty Years, Shamans — Coming Back? — Price And Reward;
Loyalty Showed To You, Is Loyalty Showed To Me.
We Rushed And Rushed And Attacked. Big White Tried To Rebuke —"
So we had to smack... Cotton. Talkin' trash in her sleep.

We walked past the tree and garage. Mist rose like fresh bread.
“Keep Your Cell On,” Willow vanished in charcoaled grays.
Soggy smoke swallowed the house. Kudzu, starlit by dew,
broadcast normalcy with a neon sign. My muscles
moved gingerly — and would for weeks. My steps slow and sore.

35

I moved weakly; wooden steps across weeded outskirts,
my shirt filthy, sticky. Inhaled. Smelled fresh peach cobbler.
Cotton twitched. She smelled it too. It would guide us through
this sloppy maze back to civilization. I kissed
her brow. Nas said, “Life is parallel to hell, but I
must maintain” but we had brushed that dirt off our shoulders.
Hell is here. In the Yellow House, the picket fences.
But so is cobbler and rhyme. Hell is here? Well. We are
the exorcists, insisting our spit matters. She snored.
I thought of sleep, the cousin of death, but the cobbler
kept me going. Mist receded. Constellations shrugged.
My left arm tingled from holding Cotton, far closer
to death than she. Damn it, she was really heavy. Buzz.

36

My cell buzzes, nowhere near dead, suddenly heavy.
I’m on airplane mode, riffing on peach cobbler wi-fi.
Needed the distraction. Hurt to breathe. Bruises hugged my
abdomen like a fierce wrestler. Buzz. Answered my iPhone.
One new text message from an Unknown number: Congrats
on the new addition, abuelito :). Stopped. Confused.
We wrestle best...Freddie, my teddy.... Her grief. It clicked.
Started walking again. Homes were lit. Families laughed.
We emerged from suburban bush, a mile still ahead.
“Radar is a good name for a Scottie, don’t you think?”
She just slumbered, and I kept walking. Two suburban
shamans back from the threshold, metered steps on blacktop.
As the lights flickered, so did a worn smile on my face.

1 cc of Feldene

Radar: I watch him often,
mulling over the secret life
of a canine
who finds satisfaction staring out the window
at cars and wasps, gold plated nasties
looking for an excuse to rumble.
He has never taken the bait. Better to admonish
me for not paying proper attention
even as I pay attention.
The practice is paramount, too important
for distractions. Distractions
from his meditation,
surveillance. It is exhausting work. When not
on the clock he daydreams in thoughtful
repose, a knighted rook, stout.
His ears tall caves. His snout a musical wheeze.
Tea Kettle Radar, that's
what I call him.

His brindle fur is teflon. Rain
cannot penetrate his black kilt and
sunlight bounces off his silver
streaks. My friends say he and I are alike,
not physically, spiritually. Intense
stare lit with a caveman's
secret fire, daydreaming
a meditative state with every step, too alert
for our own good. Okay, they don't say
that. I wish they did. What they mean is
we can both be sullen brick walls. "The graffiti is there,"
I tell them. It's not our fault you can't
read the writing, don't look
through the naked cracks veining our psyches,
our secrets.

This is no secret. He is eleven.
He will not see twelve.

Cancer sings quietly, but it sings. I
hear it in the tea kettle wheeze.

It longs to metastasize:
neoplasm acapella.
Even for animals, cancer spares
no expense,
no indignity.

After I've prepared 1 cc of Feldene
with ¼ cup dry, ¼ cup wet
and a tablespoon
of pumpkin, I wonder if it's okay
to feel this intensely for a dog,
but we are alike as my friends say.

These thoughts subside, replaced with a greater concern,
as when plants recycle air. He will be dead,
and it will fall to me to surveil the window
To stand vigilant. I will learn to ignore the wasps,
to defy them with stillness, concentration
like the bloody tip of a rapier.

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