



Oblivion, More

Brad Liening

for Lani

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Pony Up

Bats rattle the windowpane.
Wait, what was the question again?
I can already tell this won't end well,
struggling in the belly of the whale
or the giant eagle's beak
or what's behind door number three.
I couldn't even work up the courage
to ask for my one DVD back.
Hey there, Platonic ideal.
Tropical idyll on the coffee mug,
a heart traced in dust.
Hey there, dead plant.
Hey, empty flowerpot.
Differences are only ever
hammered out, never smoothed
and often not even then.
Crash of the frying pan
through the sheetrock.
Laughter falls from
the attic into the canyon.
Echo, echo. I used to think
these magnetic forces would hold
us together forever forever.
The parking lot runs right into
the ocean, the ocean right out of sight.
I used to think that, given a bit
of birdsong, I could chew through
even your baddest apocalypse.

Five Facts About Your Life After the Apocalypse

Seahorses drink blood now.
Other than that it's all
pretty much the same
except no one remembers you
and the sky looks like
burning phosphorous
and plants smell weird
because they drink blood now too.

O Positive

How much blood is cause for concern
depends upon context, though generally
a little goes a long way toward ruining
the elegant brunch, an unsurprising reduction
to tears. For Lady Macbeth,
one spot proved to be enough.

For the rest of us it may take more,
a mason jar full to sloshing, or none at all,
depending upon our priors and levels
of involvement. But don't be mistaken:
everyone's implicated, and in this
there is no choice. God's probably
off somewhere counting up his cartridges,
as if it takes the ineffable to reduce
some dude to a pile of cinders.

A spring-loaded bird pops out: time to go.
The numina do not effervesce so much
as simply disappear, unnoticed save
for select moments, like when you squint
into the sun while attempting a left-hand
turn into heavy traffic and get distracted
by the dead cells drifting across your eyeball.
The ambulance idles, letting the line of ducks cross.
A cloud shaped like the reification of what
you damn well don't want to consider
drifts across the sun, but the operating table
shines like its got all the answers.

Never mind your redacted case history,
your assorted awards and accolades.
When the golden pinwheel becomes
unglued, the wind won't bring it back,
and neither will the child's small-lunged
puffing. Please. So much cheap,
wrecked beauty, it's enough to achieve
a brand new bathetic nadir every day.
But it can hardly be helped. It's like how
I was sure I could be composed solely

of sumptuous grace if only I were artfully
draped in some rich, demure fabric,
cast in marble, and then had my arms removed.
It's like how I thought a meal could be made
out of all that was left over, but turns out
it was just some trick of the light.

Poem

By osmosis does your unhappiness
become mine, our sighs
billowing into the blue sky.
Everything floats away
from you eventually.
The heart creaks.
The soul takes a step
toward the celestial banana peel.
For a moment, Death
stands on its hind legs.
Here's a spider that preys
on small mammals.
Here's a week's worth
of nightmares crammed
into a mayonnaise jar.
The electronic clock
blinks once then no
more glowing numbers,
another unremarkable exit.
What were you going to say?
The reporter is lashed to a tree.
The robot turns its face to the sun.

Poultice

Little drizzle of heart-shaped glitter
along the floor, the party's
passed this way before
but when to come again?
Fortissimo turned sullen bus rumble,
a piece of green string
cut too short, fading
warble of what was once
the roaring of some ocean
unseen but we knew it was there.
We will be held accountable
but cannot say for what
or when. No wonder then
about the mixed-up feeling
I get when entering and
exiting the planetarium
and while inside besides.
It's only my doubts and concerns
that never grow old.
One emerges in pink static,
another pauses halfway
over the rocking rope bridge.
But I've come back
as promised, arms full to breaking
with marigolds and photos
from the mock-execution,
hardly able to believe your dress
is much more than ash.

Oblivion, More

Outside the window
is the world and
everything in it.
The blue and white
layers of the sky
reddening at the edges,
beakers of acid
in orderly rows,
a dumb dog
and its long pink tongue.
Once I got a phone call,
it lasted about six minutes
then I was drunk
and sad for a week.
Many times during the day
I am afraid
but pretend not to be.
Sometimes this feels brave
but more often
it doesn't.
I think other people
probably understand
what I mean
but I don't know
if this means
I don't understand
what it means
to be brave or
if there's a bigger bravery
we have yet to tap into.

Flash Point

When something burns, does it burn up
or down? It isn't just a question of usage,
ash in your hair and grit in your teeth.
Something inside of me springs into
a fizz and all the clocks go back an hour.
It's the time of year when everything spongy
in the world recedes and we make do
tracing the calcified edges. Being so
easily squished, the hermit crab finds
itself a bigger home. A good move
for the crab but I dread getting the mail
which must be done no matter how many
times I move. It's the havoc in miniature
that gets me, garbles me up in twaddle
court reports and nonsensical forensics,
my shopping list consisting entirely
of canned beans so who needs a list?
Radiance sprung from sudden secret
belief snuffed by the pet store window,
can't afford the skinny calico kitten
trembling in a chewed-up cardboard box.
Mist on the dog track, clothes askew
in the persimmons. Lingering tingle
of lips on your cheek, an intricate pastiche
of stains on my nice interview shirt
indicating all the past campaigns that have

ultimately led me to these granite steps,
these frilly pillows, feeling like I missed

the first few minutes of a movie in which
vital plot points are given, thus relegating

the dramatic eleventh-hour revelation less
to the province of a subtle articulation

of individual ennui with a gesture to shared
human despair, and more to the domain

of just what the fuck was all that about?
There go ten bucks. There go the avocados,

moldering the moment you turn your back.
If we follow this string long enough

does it lead back to your rotten tooth?
Must the medieval tapestry be undone

by the loose thread of a dragon's tongue?
Let's let morning unstitch the dark, and

when that stops working how 'bout a beer?
For an entire year I was late for every morning

meeting since I was always buying coffee
from a machine in the opposite wing,

always hating the chalky taste and never once
not thinking I was holding a thin cup

of hot robot pee. You know what I mean,
 x amount of y requires no less than z .

Otherwise the whole thing is doomed.
Gashed earth matched by gashed sky.

There's no way all this blood is mine.
Fire dashes from one point to the next,

caring not for our proofs or theorems,
our flammable darlings and funny bumps,

consistency or perfection, just as fog
simply slides from the pond or small clouds

drift in and out of the sore spot in your chest.
Within the green field is a brown/black

field getting bigger, within the red field
no one knows for sure. The photoelectric

solution fans out and spreads its webs.
Your purple popsicle dribbles into your fist,

and suddenly I feel like a flaming hoop
through which a tiger lazily hops.

The Soul's Smithies

They weep for you even as they plot your doom.
They think they're Spanish conquistadors
one second, the next
they're made of hummingbird bones,
twin sparklers among the oil drums.
They watch too many videos on YouTube.
They are unassailable in their despair,
which is also your despair,
which runs not like a river
but like water-logged monkey carcasses
down a river. Probably a river of blood, even.

Poem

How wonderful and terrible the to-do list of humans.
Keep the past from slipping away,
okay, but how?
Your dad pushing you on a swing
forever and then not,
not a playground around for hours,
all this weak, shitty coffee.
The clouds huddle up,
get some big ideas.
Burgeoning umbra
gathering in the burgeoning shadows
in the berserk zinnias.
The thing about shadows
is they're always burgeoning
even when you're not looking.
It gets late and
then it's very late
and you're not even
out of your pjs –
this is maybe not the worst thing to happen.
Fizzy martini lunch date
with those you cannot stand.
How to remember to fix
the chain on your bike
when the planets are moving
at such high speeds?
Turns out your fortress isn't much,
your adopted city has a problem with you.
If you were a child, it would step
out of the dark while you slept
to savage terribly
whatever wasn't covered by the blanket.

For Real

You thought your heart was a moat
but it was a small crystal duck
in another's moat.

A common mistake.

Here comes the riptide.

Here comes the hacked-off arm
looking for vengeance.

Maybe a hug.

Fuck this shit:

bad attitude or enlightened
view of the infinite

all tricked out in spangled ruckus?

Miles away, the hacked-off branch
is planted in dark soil,

a carillon passes through
the keyhole and into the storm.

I've come this way before,

I think, but the thought

is gone before I can
even register its color.

Gloop and swirl
of lava and sky.

How quickly we bleed out.

Good thing my blood is full of stars,
my mind a clutch of bees,

you can pass your hand
straight through but it comes

out the worse for wear,
which makes it like most things

we pass through and most
everything that passes through us.

Photons.

Sadness but also joy.
How quick is my love for you
but also good at staying quietly
in one place.
A branch become a tree
full of rubber snakes and lightning.
One hundred umbrellas.
Birds opening their throats
then colors no one has names for.

Good Luck

Must an awful kerfuffle envelop
even our most pedestrian terrestrial

exigencies? Yes but no but yes.
Okay, one more cup of coffee

but this can't be good. There's either
something wrong with my inner ear

or it's a cosmic cog gone awry,
microcosm, macrocosm, neither

thought comforting on a Sunday
evening when no can be cajoled

into grabbing a beer, not even
that one friend everyone has

who's always ready to reaffirm
the buggy elemental ruction.

In those moments it's as if my soul
accepted a job at the Pentagon,

far different from when I lost
my trusty wristwatch late one night

climbing a tree so packed with
pink blossoms it appeared

forever stuck in floral eruption.
You can't stay in such a moment

for long, no more doable than
never needing to pee, so insight

falters and scatters into the weeds
as quick as the time between

mosquito bite and reflexive slap.
Of course it's a bad idea to scratch

but who hasn't not learned at least
one valuable lesson from some

fuck-up or another? It's nigh
impossible not to light the fuse

as an explosion forever imminent
will drive anyone to lose their shit,

go prone in the corner or thrash
their savings to bits, to lurch

from a bar and into the street
choked with charred garlands

only to wind up in a big pink tree.
It seems we're pretty well stuck

one way or another, so here's
a pie with a file baked inside,

a big plastic bag in which your
brand new goldfish turns and turns.

Powdered Milk

Is it because I'd never see you again
that I do not want to die?

There are other reasons too,
like the time at the beach
I ate too much watermelon
then it rained and rained,
playing Dead Kennedys
at the highest possible volume
until the neighbors complained,
likewise mistakes I keep
making, smoking, calling
you from a bivouacked citadel
to ask after your cat.

Now that that's out of the way:
I'm pissed about our sad
allotment of plywood and nails,
the assurances requiring decoding,
what is this, another needle,
another blood test?

I know that we are partially
to blame, thoughts skitter
like spiders through the mist.
You can't be serious.

I ran out of excuses years ago
but new ones keep popping up
like presidential candidates.
Surely these are some
badly fucked-up individuals,
they make the rest of us
look positively stable even as
we bash ourselves against the shore,
our brains like bird skeletons
perfumed then set aflame.

But something's coming fast
through this weird green light,
better tell the guy eating
an ice cream sandwich and
crying in the gas station parking lot.
Tiny mouse mouth, wolf-sized heart.
I may not know just what
we're made of, but I've got a hunch.
O audacious foal, you haven't got a clue
what we do to horses round here.

Several Interrelated Observations Probably Pertaining to the Human Something or Other

1

Ahab stalks the deck,
grimly surveying the horizon.

2

There may be a moment when a person
will have the distinct feeling

of being watched, and he or she will
wheel about, disrupting the flow

of pedestrian traffic on the sidewalks,
throwing dog-walkers off their stride,

sending the dogs back a few steps
with a high yip, stalling many cars

in the middle of a busy intersection,
so that she or he, in wheeling about,

might locate the point of origin
of the sensation, which may be dubious.

3

Shortly before falling into a fit
of hysteria, the waiter says, "Gee."

4

The pack of nuns roams the city after dark.
They have been compared

by various persons to wolves.
There is some validity to such a comparison.

5

That weird lobster, crab, whatever,
who cares, snaps its claws in a way
that can only be described as horrifying.
Why is it doing that is the question
which we are desperately engaged
in answering, which search has led us
to several realizations, chief among them
being that we know jack shit regarding
the subphylum arthropods, and,
thinking that perhaps our lack
of knowledge (read: total ignorance)
of the subject has in part fed this fear
(which may be pupating into hysteria
(brown paper bags are on hand)),
we have undertaken to learn as much
as we can, a strategy also implemented
to varying degrees of (non)success
regarding terminal cessation of
an organism's automated bodily functions,
which is all together awfully impossible
to wheel back into the subconscious
once it's out all over the damn place
and does not bode particularly well
for the work now ahead of us.

6

Ahab lights his pipe,
claps his hands together briskly.

Poem

You're not going to amount to much
I'm afraid, though
I'm not actually afraid.
In fact, it may be relief I'm feeling
knowing this fire too will abate,
the sea will swell
and carry your sadness away.
By your sadness, I mean mine.
Your sadness requires its own sea,
its own glacier.
I hope you feel at home
on the ice floes,
slippery, dwindling,
a little white blip
moving through the bigger blips
whirling in the dark.
Your home was never
much to begin with,
a few wooden matchsticks
and a notion not yet grown
into sturdy dream
weaned on histrionics and tequila.
You thought you'd never get
to the worm then you did.
How little mystery.
Here comes an old lover
grown old though
you're older still.
You really fucked up.
I mean I really fucked up.
No one remembers the television
shows you loved as a kid.
No one remembers
the night you fell off the pier
or how you ripped
your pants getting over the fence.

You weren't supposed to be there
but the moon was so big
and for a second
it was like all those fish
were just waiting there to say hey.

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Why are the best romantic gestures always
the doomed the hopelessly moronic part of me

doesn't believe that at all but the other part
is unplugging the phone starting the dishwasher

just to hear the wet chug and believe it leads
to cleanliness if not purity probably never that

that's an ideal we snatch after like Tantalus
maybe or better an infant after a mobile

dangling above the bassinet mobiles are
supposed to aid in development so the failure

to obtain is ingrained in us from the get go
and in this way pushing us to our better selves

a nice idea but then to walk outside into
three feet of snow can't start the car

the bottom of the bag rips open and where'd
the suspension bridge go this is terrible

an awful thing to happen to a suspension bridge
never again to see its cables shake tautly just

a bit or listen to the river rush swirl around
the pilings driven who knows how deep

and no explanation not even a note scrawled
on the back of a receipt for soup plums

paper towels so what are we supposed to do
now what are we to thunder across in our

brokenhearted attempt to regain what we
know we can't what are we to hurl ourselves

from our desperate hopes and loves clanging
like railroad spikes cloud-covered moons like

miles of metal shavings our dreams
like soap rubbed in our eyes kittens

crowbars and even then oh only half formed.

Featherweight Champ

Just because I do not want to barf
into the sousaphone doesn't mean
that I won't,
one draft of the thesis reading
control comma lack of.
The key busts off in the lock.
You thought you were lost
then you knew you were lost.
Death, but duh.
Ladies, put your hands in the air.
The kitchen floor floods
while the pork chops char,
no detergent strong enough
to lift the stain from the dress
that barely bothers to conceal your breasts
to say nothing of your heart,
pumpkin-big,
as unapproachable as a burning car.
Now the fellas.
Laughter strung drunkenly about
one room while in the next
barely stifled sobbing,
many labyrinthine years pass
until mistake and bitter regret
blossom into something auspicious.
Love of my life!
Tarantulas in the bananas!
In walks a man with
I'm so sorry I don't know how to say this
seared so clearly across his face
it's already been said a thousand times
but behind him hops a yellow bird.

A flower as big as a tire
sprouting from the hole in the skull,
red as your heart.
A good dental plan always a plus.
Scary-looking bat
atop familiar-looking cactus,
another omen nigh impossible to interpret
but often we flock to only
the dumbest endeavors.
Turns out that fortune cookie was right.
If you want your answer to count,
make your mark heavy and dark.

Sonnet

You didn't always traffic
in the totally obvious –
looking into the septuagenarian's
seamed face and feeling
the telltale prickling
of tears in your nose,
or the upturned face
of the sunflower in summer,
by fall bent low
to the dirt in anticipation
of your shared future. Listen,
your bones are singing.
They sound like ice.
Right there. Listen. There.

Goner

It's only the vaguest of notions
that bind the comings and goings.
Icy draft, phone beep,
for sale signs blowing through empty streets,
wolves passing quietly through green leaves.
Part of my heart is gleaming spaceship,
part intergalactic kangaroo,
part slow and doleful dinosaur
only ever guessed at,
only a few millennia removed
from time-lapsing and condensing
into a skylark in flight.
You make me sick says one,
I hope you're happy says another,
Yes yes yes says a third.
The grass gleams like
a well oiled death machine,
which is part of my head.
Slowly does the wind undo your hair.
Beauty makes a big deal out of it.
Your beauty is a slick dark well.
Full of balloons.
Patrolled by tigers.
I'm trying to explain now how I love you
but it's like trying to solve
a math problem during the accordion solo,
like keeping my train of thought
while you undress beside me.
Turn around and it's nothing
but fancy dinner and crystal.
Then dust.

Then the smell of iron.
Then broken elbow and lost ring,
beautiful face beginning to smile
on the last train fast speeding by.
Is this a rip in the fabric of space or time?
Not that it matters much.
Orange juice, silly hat,
a letter left taped to a door for days.
Somewhere behind us the big fiery roar.

Resurrection A G-Go

What matters now are your sea-legs,
your ability to like walk around and stuff
not shitting your pants.
Your beloved turtle speeds into the sweep
and turning curlicues
with barely a rattle.
Snow settles into the cattails.
It's amazing what you can get used to
if you must, knowing
if is just a nice way to say when.
Wrong cell phone plan.
Somehow the argument has gotten confused.
This was never supposed to happen.
Diamonds are unbreakable.
Dogs love you unconditionally.
Birds supposedly aren't capable
of disdain but clearly
this macaw thinks you fucking suck.
It calls you dicknose,
claws at your palm.
It's all coming back to you now.
No, it's not.
The after-effects of the dream
are its legacy, e.g.
feeling pretty weird and guilty
even just looking at a lamp, a mailbox.
Blood flows through
the channels of chalky grouting
before pooling over the tile.
In the dream, still.
The phone rings.

Soft-serve ice cream,
human beings made mostly of water,
desperate to join their elemental kin.
The ineffable blows a chill
through the keyhole
like a jet stream of pot smoke,
even the grape jelly freighted with secret code.
Melodrama makes us feel bad
about our already bad feelings,
despairing over a peanut.
O sad little peanut, what will become of us?
Tangle of crows.
Junked in the weeds, sucker MC.

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