

Norman Mailer Prize
POETRY

Amelia Urry
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Entropia

The universe is dying, as they say.

It wants to go from one state to another,
the way the glass wants to be broken,
because it is easier to be many things
than it is to be one thing.

Standing by the gate, the man in the dream
asks you where you have come from.
You presume you have come from somewhere.

You are holding a book. If you were to open it,
the page would glow in the little light of dusk.
You do not know the words inside but you know
the sound the book would make as you opened it.

You know you have come from somewhere else,
because you are standing at the gate waiting to go through.
The next step presumes the previous steps. That is all you get,
in the dream: a glimpse of the grinning man, a sense
of something before, and something after.

Fog

At sea, the fog is rolling in, swamping the ships out there
as small as barnacles, heaved to the flat grey surface.
When they are gone, the moan of the foghorn
is the only reminder of anything past the edge
of our land, where the field slopes to meet the lipping edge of water.

I take the boat out. It is that time of month
when I become tender and solitary, seeking comfort
in the placement of words around their objects: great blue heron,
grey heron, cormorant, common egret, the crustose lichen frilling
the granite rocks which stick and tilt above the water line, the things
that grow and metastasize in the border zone, carrageen moss,
sea grape, limp scraps of sea lettuce, and that green
aquarium smell of the water that offers and retracts
as the rippled window of it approaches and retracts.

Though it is quiet here, at the glassy surface reflecting fog,
the water underneath moves invisibly, clear and dark
with a color that is not blue and not grey, bending the long strands of eelgrass.

Museum

At the Ho Chi Minh Museum, a few bowls
with a chipped blue glaze are set on a dirt floor
behind the swoop of rope that says *Do Not Touch*.
These are labeled: *the Predicament of the people*
Under the Oppression of the French colonial government.
Or, in French, *la misère de peuple*—
the translation of symbol is always inexact.

Nearby, the hurricane lamp used by Ho Chi Minh himself,
when he was *a light to his people*— though rather dim, flickering
when the oil ran low— in a dark place.

On the train that pulls out of Hanoi in the rain,
the man who watches his own reflection flash on and off
in the windows is *Loneliness Obscuring Contemplation*.

In the morning, the rice paddies with their ghost banners
of plastic bags staked over the haze of new rice.
These form the image, *the Inability of the Past To be Forgotten*.

The kite-tailed hawk flapping once, twice over the fields
as though seeking to fix himself like a cipher in the sky,
while a kid on a bicycle urges a muddy buffalo along,
this is: *Nature's Insensitivity to Human Suffering, or Joy*.

The creation of inevitability from causality, from one-thing-led
to one-thing-occurred, and one thing only.
The mountain falling into the field is *Stubbornness Buried*,
and the image of the river rainbowed with blood and diesel
is *A Poem on War and Industry* while the tree filled
with long black hair, *A Boy's Memory of his Family*.

Myth

The river is waning.
It threads the vast banks like a bright seam of metal.
In the morning you cannot look at it.

The girls walk along the river with their baskets,
clay jugs for water, bracelets shimmering.
They are straight and dark against the light.

The edge of the water moves in and out
like the side of a man sleeping, shallow
trickle of dreams among pebbles.

Small, brown birds at the edge of the water,
in the mud their feet scratch out old languages,
and pick at snails, and wait for a better season.

Regret comes up with the rising day
like the first wave over the first stone.
It follows the path of the river, which is a circle.

The girls are distinct and untouchable as shadows on a white wall.
They walk along the river, against the light
beating between sky and earth, and behind them the children come.

Brief Erotic Scene

In the dream there is a flight,
followed by a separating of the flight vehicle
into its auxiliary and essential parts,
and the long coasting down into a forest,
the wind in my hair like a summer day
driving north into farmland.

They lead us to a theatre where I've been
before, though they've remodeled since then,
added an orchestra pit. The brief erotic scene
bursts in here and there as a relief
to the plot, cut to and away
as the dream sees fit. Elsewhere,

in a flooded hallway a giant squid
floats in its own luminescence,
a cloud of tentacles like hair, or live wires
netting around the big, soft body.
When I try to swim, my body doesn't move.
Bodies in the dream are a curse, forget them.

Neobulé

O to touch Neobulé's hand!
O to touch! O hand!

To touch Neobulé's hand,
to take one in the other, a marriage
as easily as a meeting, but still—
not to touch Neobulé herself.

To touch. To be in touch with.
To say the name and mean: new.
To say the words and mean: *renewal*.

To touch the hand
backwards and forwards,
sensation unfolding like an image
passed between two mirrors. To
touch the hand of Neobulé with one
fingertip and come away
with a swirl of tint against the skin.

To touch the hand of Neobulé and take
its curses and its blessings, the one
unfolding within the other always:
the touch inside the hand inside the words,
Neobulé herself like a forgotten kingdom
whose wealth was that she had always been
forgotten, a memory unfolding other memories,
hanging them like sheets in the dry air,
naming desires by their objects, naming them
“hand” and “touch” but meaning neither
the word “hand” nor the word “touch.”

As if the thing were not the thing—
O blank touch and blank hand,
to blank the hand with a touch—
but the gate through which fate enters
and becomes the word, necessity.

Soden

Kitty loved Varenka—
that is a part of the story.
Spring in the mountains:
the small violets blooming

at the edge of the brook,
the lambs in the meadows
crushing new grass underfoot.
Kitty whose heart was so

broken, Varenka with her calm smile,
bringing glasses of water,
singing in the parlor after tea
as though it gave her joy.

Such acts seemed like generosity,
nothing kept over for the self.

The parasol opened and closed,
until the spring snapped, the silk luffed.
Kitty loved Varenka the way men love
women who do not know they are beautiful.

In the spring, the new wheat, the clover
growing in curls along dark furrows,
Varenka whispering in the coat closet,
not knowing what else to say.
Many things are important, many things.

Guide to Birdwatching

1.

The goal of birdwatching
is to populate your mind
with memories.
Though what isn't.

2.

The cataloguing of personal
experiences of the sword:
billed hummingbird, the green
broadbill, the syrinx, the feathers,
the fossils.

3.

Birds are attractive to themselves,
which helps when making social
decisions, like: where do you break
the line?

Experience is subjective; we expect
a different set of criteria, but end up
with the same old
different new.

4.

How does preference evolve, someone asks.
I do not ask this question because I do not
believe in the terms of the inquiry. Better:
How does the male superb bird of paradise
choose his courtship log?

The preference and the preferred come into being
in the same instant. Beauty, someone else responds,
is just stuff happening.

5.

Beauty can be, though it is not
always, decadent. Like the word
"strigulated," which no one needs.

6.

Irrational, exuberant,
unreasonable, legitimate.

Hair

My friend brushes his hair
once a week, coiling the
long rope down his back,
picking curls apart with
his fingers, arranging the strands
into a cloud around his face.
His mode is growth: the beard
on his face has eclipsed
his face. And yet he writes
such short poems, short and
stark as paraphrased escape plans:
get out.

He brushes his hair on his bed,
in his cloud of light, each stroke
standing the filaments up like grass eels, silent,
swaying, watching over the ocean floor.

North Atlantic

The larval stage of the moray eel
moves over the reef like a wisp of smoke,
a glass ribbon folding and unfolding in the current.

What is down there has no windows
and no outcome that is not foretold.
The selves which move there are singular,
inscrutable as the color which moves within blackness,
no thing or part which assumes
itself to be indispensable.

I want my symbol and the symbol
of this world to coincide, to be both
the smallness of the self
and the labyrinth of the world outside.

It goes like this:
First, you want something.
Then you want something else.
Then you want nothing.

Volto Santo

Last year a music student
killed himself leaning
from the third floor window.
He fell like a ripe fruit into the lot where my mother's car was parked.

I wrote a poem last year. This year
my friend is losing his mind.
On the pressed image of his brain darkness
blooms like dry violets but I will not write a poem about it, not even this one.

The way the island came to be does not change
the way it will go when the swill washes in,
the tides of the North Atlantic slamming ice
and old broken things into our bay, damming the channel with a bridge.

This year I did not go up north and do not
know how far the sandbar stretches now. Soon I will
walk from the house to the island for the first time, and the deer
will leave, and the rabbits, and the small grey foxes, and the sea will not come in anymore.

These things are in three parts: sea, island, a third connecting—
they mean that you cannot go back. The poem last year was for
the men working in the parking lot in white suits afterward,
they scrub the asphalt like an apology, scraping and scrubbing the silhouette.

Metaphor

The vision in one eye
goes before the vision
in the other, the last image
of the world a lopsided
slipping away of particulars:
the mind listing at the edge of the waves.

When it comes for the other
half of your face, you
are already living there
and it is not so much
to lose the interface with what
is left of the world.

The wire-and-stake fences
at the beach, leaning
among the salt grass,
are the preliminary signs
of the forces that accrue.

The dunes behind
and before them, sloping
away into waves over there,
on the other side the long stretch
of scrub, beach rose and juniper,
and way at the back:
a pavilion in a muddy field.

If what we call the body
and what we call the mind must both
perish, does it matter what goes
first, and what dissolves
somewhere between first and last.
Something still carries you
across one moment to the next,
even if it cannot be named.

You ask, how to explain.
You drop an almond in my teacup.

A Little Light

A sense of loss, a question,
an answer imagined and discarded,
a woman turning into stone, though she thinks
she is turning into air. In any case,
a stillness.

A house whose rooms eclipse
a sense of the personal, as though they make up
a part of that iconic labyrinth,
empty space organized into a riddle.

A film of dust along the new revival molding,
a crust of bread, postcards, other leftovers.
A cat mewling, the voice of someone asking to be
relieved of an unknown burden.
A denial of request.

A room.
Another room.
A window, at which snow beckons thinly.

A light snow,
a view,
a little light falling upon it.