



Image from American Literature

Christopher Bernard

Five Poems

The Great God Pan

“He lives! The Great God Pan – he lives!”  
echoes through the city woodlands  
(the city a kind of forest now  
after a wildfire has crossed it,  
the black trunks stripped of boughs,  
falcons nesting on the towers’ cliff edge,  
with creek beds hard as cement).  
Shock-haired New York stares, empty,  
past the Statue out to sea.

The echoes, rough as goat pelt,  
stalk the uplifts, the veins  
of river, the skin of salt flats, the itchy  
flannel of Rocky and Sierra,  
cross the Golden Gate National Recreation Area  
between the horns of the Bay,  
cross the gull-shrieking Farallones.  
The city, paralyzed like Sleeping Beauty,  
lies in lumpy shadows,  
towers like surprised fingers  
in shock beneath a setting and a rising sun.  
Blankets of clouds pinkly lap Twin Peaks.  
The spirits creep like coyotes from the urban brush.  
The coyotes themselves are howling  
at Greenwich and Powell;  
if you listen closely, you can hear them.  
They are no strangers to strange gods,  
nymphs, satyrs, goddesses,  
the theophanies of Europe.  
He lives – the Great God Pan, he lives!  
And covers the world with his goat-like hoof.

## Social Distancing

Yet you have been practicing this all your life.  
Always you have kept a small place  
as far as you could from the human race,  
preferred your own company by far,  
with cat, book, music, a little mood light,  
and pleasure in the dusk and night;  
only felt lonely in a crowd,  
such as one finds in that torture chamber of the spirit,  
a bar,  
or that slightly less menacing social institution  
(not to be obnoxiously arty!),  
a party.  
You are just one of those who rarely feel lonely alone.

And now the world, in its viral distress,  
is joining you in your solitariness.  
A paradox! But it mocks  
neither of you, I must confess.

When you walk out to the city streets  
now, it's like being inside your own room,  
if with expanding walls, ceiling, floor,  
enormous windows, thrown open door.

The city is quiet and empty and free,  
filled with a monumental tranquility.  
In a certain sense beautiful and true,  
like walking about in an empty museum  
peopled alone with magnificent work,  
the city seems to belong to you.

The richest man is the one who owns  
nothing, it has been said, and wisely too:  
the world is his wilderness,  
his home. (Another paradox! They come  
like flies, they are so unorthodox.)

Your soul expands to meet a place  
that knows no boundary in space,  
city, country, sky, room.  
You grasp your peace like a held stone  
that rides your pocket like a charm.  
In the empty, still, and gleaming town,  
you feel the fleeting peace of a universe.

## Spiritus

When you see it, you will know.  
The shaky camera, the kneeling  
men in midnight blue:  
they look at first as though  
they are praying, pious  
as three altar boys,  
caught in an innocuous crime, perhaps  
stealing holy wafers or consecrated wine.  
But they are not.

The shaking camera stops,  
and you hold in your breath,  
like clutching at a hand,  
not quite believing that you see  
what it is you think you see.

Underneath their knees,  
in the brutal sun,  
a dark form. And a voice from the feed:  
“I can't breathe, I can't  
breathe! I can't breathe! I  
can't breathe!” For eight minutes and  
forty-six seconds,  
as the altar boys pray  
in the shouting glare.  
Then it stops. The video  
stops. The voice stops. The praying  
stops. The breathing  
stops. And you breathe,  
too late. But you seethe, you seethe.

### A Year of the Comets

“In the spring and summer of 2020, two  
comets flew close enough to the earth to be visible  
in the night sky.”—Report from AP

Remote visitors burled with ice  
and filaments of life, and tails  
like hair windblown with light, in vast  
cycles flung  
across the roads the planets run,  
original angels  
foretelling catastrophe: you have come  
to visit from afar our sun  
this year of disasters we cannot sum.

But senseless to speak as though a trace  
of life to come lived. Less than a week  
within our circled cage of light  
had passed before the first one broke  
disintegrating into smoke  
and snow. The second spells our sleep,  
our coldly staring summer sky,  
like a scratch on a blackened window pane,  
and a mocking name: “Neowise,”  
above the foolish of our earth  
as off you go on your return  
seven thousand years long, for you're still young.  
Too late for warning, too soon for sign

of triumph's dance, you come, you go,  
a shrug among the stars. Design  
or chance? The finger writes, and goes.

### A Year of Burning

The fireworks of midnight ceased. The smoke  
Dispersed with the echoes of the booms.  
We turned from the windows back into our rooms.  
Hope lingered in the air until it broke.  
A winter without rain. A word from the east  
Went viral faster than irony winked an eye.  
Countries closed like butterflies. A friend would die  
Before worlds shook the greatest to the least.  
The smallest crumb of life took hold of the earth  
On its crown's tines. Your soft and generous heart  
Grown thick nearly killed each of us. The city's silence  
Invaded the house. A black man died in violence  
And cities rioted in flame. Dry storms that start  
In fire terrify a state laboring to give birth  
    To a future we can't, yet must, face.  
Another friend died. The country burns  
Under wildfires, hurricanes, politics' lies.  
The months ahead darken toward our own winter.  
A child holds its breath: will we survive?  
Will you survive? Will any of our world survive?  
The song breaks. The words freeze in my mouth.  
Hold fast. Be strong. Have courage. Love. And live.

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