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Steven Hill

Where the Gods Reside

(for Jeffrey, too soon)

The mountains
assuage our sorrow
for not being one of them,
we climb their eternity and perspire,

and grind our efforts into them, and
they are so vast, they can hold it.

The craggy peaks crouch,
ancient souls birthed in the sea,
a distant ship fading over the horizon,
sometimes you
were a mountain to me.

Sometime, just before the euphoria of Spring,
all things growing
must spend time on their knees.
At this time the mountains thunder,
the road begins to climb toward a scraping fury,
the bruised sky flashes in lightning-crossed patterns,
like my life before my eyes,
like my aching alone,
the late fall of snow buries
your name on your gravestone.

Yet a glimmer of starlight still arrives,
ancient beam from a time
before our time,
reminder of our place in this
galaxy of infinity,
at this time I lick stones we had saved
– why shouldn't I – ?
for, not comprehending stone,
how can I apprehend the heights?

From the peaks I espy,
the valley below in fog,
where a silent God resides, a
lone steeple poking above the prologue.
One day soon I will cross over the divide,
holding my breath to glimpse the Other Side,
hoping you'll be there,
through End's dream door, awaiting.

Beautiful Interregnum: The Sin of Forgetfulness

This Wannsee lake grows deep and dark,
a ribbon of history cutting through the present,
rippled only by streaks of the sun's setting,
watchful vigil, the shore lights wink on.
Sparkles of first stars remind me of you,
and the light you lent me to face this dark,

when the human condition is perplexing, like
 an ungovernable algorithm,
rattling my glass heart, yearning for our native soil.
Across the lake is the growing shadow of the Haus¹
whose name must never be forgotten,
where unspeakable things were decided
and factored into the price,
 “too many bullets wasted, we need more efficiency,
 the latest gas technology, what percent Jew”
over schnitzel, schnapps and ice.

Past or future? I wish you were here, my love,
 to help me locate the proper response
to this reminder of the failure of democratic deliverance;
triumph of technocracy, rulers and the ruled,
my courage hesitates before this ancient genuflect,
 before authoritarians capturing the overwhelming questions,
dangling promises of the previous resurrection
 a perfect that by definition never arrives.
So we default to bloodline gurgling in our veins,
yield to the wild, chasing us in our dreams,
amidst animal psychology, survival, battle,
the lure of the borderline defends the tribe,
another hominid line dead end,
civilization offers no answer, or excuse,
for a populist architecture outrun by its fears,
grown tangled and inbred with its use.

In the last light I hear, whispers from the dark lake,
 voices from the deep past gone:

*“This is where human hands have been
 This is where human paths have led
What was violated, what held sacred;
Where the irreversible decision
When the wrong turn to our fate
Which the lie that tricked our humanity
 How blind the line between ‘reap’ and ‘rape.’”*

Suddenly a butterfly alights on the barbed wire fence,
proof that in the stillness you watch over me still,
my heart beats inside, without need of a guide,

¹ The Wannsee Konferenz Haus is an elegant villa in the lakeside neighborhood of Wannsee in southwestern Berlin, where in January 1942 a meeting was held among senior Nazi and SS leaders to decide the so-called “final solution” to the Jewish Question: most Jews of German-occupied Europe were to be deported to Poland, and murdered in death camps.

History's arrow still aims for the sun.
Wannsee Haus fades into the falling dusk,
its shadow-hulk silent, a black hole of memory,
Past, future, try to suture the moment
inspired hands bury the footprints of fear.

For even if we are not perfect,
 or at least not as perfect as we need to be,
even if Paradise remains Lost, with no hint of the telling,
even if the lights in the distance
 are the coals of the enemy campfire,
still we journey to this crossroads place,
to this promised lands place,
 awaiting sunrise to illuminate,
 inhaling the spread of atoms,
 watching the boat lights, bouncing on the lake water
standing on this foreign shore, thinking of you.

In these moments, my love, I am certain in my bones,
I am glad I shared this life with you.

Passing out of the world's memory
no one will survive who remembers us.
We are sentenced to exit the ring,
and then to be forgotten, amidst forgetfulness.

The Long and Mischievous Life of Love, Hatred and Fear

(dedicated to the memory of George Floyd)

*"Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made."
— Immanuel Kant*

Now the streets are quiet again, peaceably quiet,
but it is the pause of the reloading,
the stillness of a graveyard;

 it is the morning after
for those without a future,
viewing the hulk of strip malls charred to steel frame,
shuffling through the shattered glass
 of the fragile consensus,
and the melted smell of tear gas, weeping over broken dreams.
It is the same twisted today that looks like the yesterday of a
 hundred or thousand years ago,

for those without a language whose hopes were turned to ash, and
swept by the aproned shopkeep into the ceaseless star-stream.
The damage is done when the prospect of progress vanishes
with the dust re-settling,
when we cease plumbing the depths of the human soul to
find that broad territory in common.
And as the clash of flesh exhausts its insanities,
as the Us vs Them smashes together like dialectic atoms,
the frantic synthesis arrives in time for the new tumult,
the pieces pick themselves up and recompose,
sneak past the debris to find a way forward again,
arresting the black hole collapse to the backward,
leading the escape of runaways in search of
a refuge from this most un-civil war.

But the silenced ones know, oh yes don't they,
that the interregnum always ends
and the relentless assault on meaning begins again,
leading once more to another round of tweeted reprisals;
across the broken landscape, the tectonic plates crack and separate
kin from kin,
ethnic from ethnic,
accord from conversation,
we watch helplessly as words tap the algorithm and
sentences juice the emotion,
foreboding the passage of night swallowing the day.
History the bloody obituary written by
the last of the last survivors,
language a vehicle for unconditional surrender,
signed at the Court House adjacent to the ghastly battlefield,
bearded General to bearded General, victorious to vanquished,
chainreacting all over the weaponized volksgeist,
there are no winners here, only those who lose less.

But what if we re-launched the invention of the feeling?
What if we sought where the tenderness may lie?
What if we weren't beset by something so sad that it paralyzed?
Or if we listened harder to those who
had to bite their own tongues until they bled,
to those who ended with the short end of the loaf of bread,
those buried beneath the missing tombstones of the mass graves.
What if the pure decision of the Good Samaritan
replaced the pursuit of the Master Race deal,
or if our human desires were not entwined,
like a crown of thorns,
inside the political economy of our times?

Here, at the apogee of our history,
the latest Great Leap Forward turns out to be²
a backward fall into more backwardness.
The return to MAGA plantation greatness is exposed
as another fake story of
white bwanas sipping lemonade on the porch,
attended by obedient Dark Continent subservience,³
such a human thing to do, to love fantasies that never were,
as they disappear in the rearview mirror.

But the past survivals never stay buried, do they?
They ooze from the muck of the weeping mass graves,
the Rosewood's and Tulsa's and Thibodaux's and 1919 arise⁴
from the cruel crypt of Hate's harsh oblivion,
white-world memory tries to delete from the hard drive
the silenced evidence of ethno-cide, and
the un-banality of evil and the sin of looking away,
every soul guilty of all the good you did not do,
leaving us still groping toward a recognition of our real lives,
our real history,
the stipulated record of who really built this country,
planted its fields, erected its towns and schools and cities,
and laid the rail tracks to the future,
as the Four Horsemen⁵ howled their overwhelming questions:

Are we here?
Is this real?
Are we sure?
Am I real?
Does here connect to anywhere?

If $E = mc^2$, then how am I still here? ⁶
How do I find a reason to put one foot in front of the other?
When will I uncover the words, consonants and vowels needed

² The Great Leap Forward of Chinese leader Mao Zedong was a disastrous economic policy from 1958 to 1962 to reconstruct China's agrarian and industrial economies thru forced collectivization that led to mass starvation for tens of millions of Chinese.

³ A 19th century colonial and racist term for the continent of Africa. Sigmund Freud also compared adult women's sexual life to a "dark continent."

⁴ Racial massacres: in Rosewood, Florida, New Year's Day, 1923, a white mob of 300 men murdered dozens of black men, women and children, and completely torched the town into oblivion, wiping it forever off the map; in Tulsa in June 1921, whites burned to the ground the prosperous black neighborhood of Greenwood, murdering hundreds and burying them in forgotten mass graves; and in Thibodaux, Louisiana, November 1887, white plantation owners, politicians and their paramilitaries murdered hundreds of black sugar cane workers and their families for going on strike, the most violent labor dispute in US history; in 1919, white massacres and lynchings of blacks took place in more than three dozen US cities, including Chicago, Washington DC, Baltimore and Omaha, after black military veterans returning from World War I asserted their labor rights, resulting in the murder of hundreds of black Americans.

⁵ The four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Death, Famine, War, and Conquest, that arrive in the biblical Book of Revelations as harbingers of the Last Judgment and the end of the world.

⁶ Albert Einstein's equation of special relativity. Energy (E) produced equals the mass (m) of a body destroyed times the speed of light (c) squared. That means mass and energy are the same physical entity, and can be changed into each other.

to arrive at the source of Something true,
instead of circling the lonely perimeter with longing,
for what I cannot have,
for what I cannot taste and cannot kiss,
and cannot see except in fleeting glimpses of Beauty,
that elusive Something that vanishes into Nothing.
Yes, I see it in your eyes, my love,
all the disappeared lives that mattered,
reflected a thousand by thousand times,
the ones who looked after the system, previous and present,
blown like dead pollen across the centuries;
I see it in my eyes, reflected in your eyes, my love,
the present is everything and nothing,
utterly reusable in the Grand Mortar and Pestle,
nothing lives forever, nothing ever will,
not even you and I, my love,
pawing through the leftovers to hoard what we can,
to return and return as the dust of the double helix,
amidst the un-raveling of the un-civilization and—

You don't believe me, you say?
You don't believe this is slithering thru our DNA?
Then why, in the realization that we are everywhere and nowhere,
why have all roads led from the many pasts to here?
Why, for each History's moment, does the crossroad
fork yet again, to anywhere but here?
How do we find it within ourselves to arise from the breakfast cereal
into the urgency of each tangled day?
And why then do we fall down, we millions and billions,
hearts beating fast like the Ninth in D minor,⁷
contesting the birthright of where we were born,
as the Fear and Confusion plant their jeering flags
amidst a fireworks of scorn?

No, the streets are calm now, passably calm,
it's dead quiet out there, beneath the noise;
despite the rumblings of marchings from those who demand a future,
despite the huddled masses barred at the border by the rusted Iron Lady,⁸
despite the divided "e pluribus unum" of this violent mammal trajectory,
we thought if we plugged our ears it would leave,
we thought if we clutched our bellies without malice,
we thought if we arranged the words and paragraphs just so
that we could pacify our death-fear locked inside.

⁷ Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125, popularly known as the 9th Symphony, or "Ode to Joy."

⁸ The Statue of Liberty is the figure of Libertas, robed Roman goddess of liberty, inscribed with the words "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

But what if the most feared thing is that which we refuse to confess:
that Love is the strangest notion of Civilization,
proven to regularly run amok,
kneeling at the altar of heartless entropy,
until one day we run out of luck;
Yet Love is also the molecular force that can bind,
and what's bound gives the World its arrow-direction,
in broken search for that more perfect Union,⁹
you and I, a chance for resurrection,
for in the end, in the very very end,
we are here,
within the limits of our language,
within the space between our opposable thumbs,
stumbling toward governance within the parliament of hysterics,
straining toward common ground,
resisting the Hate that tries to overrun all representation,
standing in defiance of the Trumped up charge and
the profanity of evil exposed.

And then, as the streets re-explode in their un-poetry of un-justice,
as we gasp over our brutal re-acquaintance
with the imperfection of it all,
we discover that something still lives above
that purple bruise behind the stars,
and below the crooked tree limbs, swinging heavy with that strangest of fruit,¹⁰
our prayers re-locate the ACTG helix,¹¹
replicating with mercy and haloed in pearls,
until finally, we remember, just before we extinguish:

“Our kiss is for the whole world.”

Nightstill

Bruised moon, imperfect crystal
I am tied to the land where I am,
and the land maws like a pit bull's jaw
sucks from me through my feet.
I am no plant
converting sunlight effortlessly,

⁹ "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union...", first words of the U.S. Constitution.

¹⁰ Singer Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit*. "Southern trees bear a strange fruit, Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees."

¹¹ ACGT is an acronym for the four fundamental units of the genetic code found in a DNA double-helix molecule: adenine (A), cytosine (C), guanine (G), and thymine (T). They comprise the molecular foundation for all organic life.

I break the dirt with a hoe
and want to own my own
square piece,
as any plant sprouting leaves.
It is not perfect, my situation, or perhaps it is
my expectation, or my explanations,
my imperfections, or
my description of the world,
not Buddhist, not billionaire, not America First
but mine.

And now there is time
for refinement and deep breaths,
and what of that?
Now I shall breathe shallow and always come up short, and
what of that?

And that, and that?

Forced labor in China coal mines,
that is that and hard to deny,
and lethal to take deep breaths for
the fine black soot petrifies
bronchial tubes;
the air is thick
in Ferguson ghettos,
in Rohingya temples and Berlin bordellos,
among Emanuel AME Bible study death prayers,¹²
and there
the short quick breath is life,
the walls have ears,
and that is that.

The short, quick breath is love,
is resuscitation,
for who in love has time for long, deep inhales?
There is so much to love, so much that requires constant spark.
Fragile life withers and the plant needs water,
the roof begs repair, the faucet leaks,
the dull rock of entropy evaporates
by what divine rule shall I choose?
My child cries in the purple of the night,
and off I go
to comfort her:

¹² On June 17, 2015, white supremacist Dylann Roof murdered nine African Americans in the middle of an evening Bible study at the 200 year-old Emanuel AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

and when the child is once again asleep,
bald head reflecting moonlight

back to bed I crawl
to the sound of my partner's hairy snores.
At the edge of the bed and rapid-eye dreams
on my knees I pause
and claim all my voices—

none are silenced under the bruised moon,
rising up as crystal dew through the straws of my legs

voices dialogue back and forth,
they find common ground for armistice and conditions--

"Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright..."

and for a few deep breaths I love this terrible land,
like the bombings in my body
of Mariupol.

Time appears as an imperfect crystal,
a jagged silhouette rising in the nightstill¹³ sky.
Moonlights, bouncing on the water,
silhouette branches that drip like black fingers,
that grip a hammer or a sickle,
or a galaxy balanced sideways,
for humans to comprehend.

Steven Hill, with this issue, joins Caveat Lector as a principal and contributing writer. He is a political journalist whose essays, articles and media interviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Die Zeit*, NPR, PBS, BBC, C-SPAN, Democracy Now, and elsewhere. He has published short fiction and poems in a number of publications, including the *Columbia Journal*, *Minnesota Review*, *San Fernando Poetry Journal*, *Struggle*, *Prophetic Voices*, and the anthologies *Sparkle and Blink*, *Grasp the Rainbow*, and *Poets for a Livable Planet*. His plays have been produced in New York (Off-Off Broadway), Washington, DC, and San Francisco. Steve's website can be found at www.Steven-Hill.com.

¹³ The German language often smashes together two or more words to form a longer word that becomes a concept, such as *freundschaftsbeziehung*, which means "bonds of friendship." *Nightstill* is that quiet time in the middle of a sleepless night, when suddenly you feel content and whole in the knowledge of all things and your place in it. Yet you cannot corral that knowledge, and by the morning you remember almost nothing.

