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Leaving Myself Behind

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Leaving Myself Behind

by

Shea S. Montgomery

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

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LEAVING MYSELF BEHIND

Shea Stuart Montgomery, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2014

Advisor: Grace Bauer

This work presents poems detailing different events of my life in an almost chronological order, while at the same time juxtaposing them against the backdrop of a life changing car accident I suffered through when I was 21. The events detailed within the poems reflect moments in my life that occurred either before or after this car accident, and I have arranged them in such a way that I hope will show my own struggles with masculinity while growing up, while at the same time realizing my own mortality by the end.

The poems contained within this work detail my attempts to grow up in a world where the absence of a father marked you as an outsider, and the further struggles of discovering what it means to be male in the absence of a role-model to guide me along that path. The resulting journey leads down many roads, including a frightening and violent stage of hyper-masculinity where I not only come to terms with my own capacity for violence, but seek to make amends for it through my work as a poet.

By the end of the work, I hope a reader has been brought full circle through the physical and spiritual journey that has been my life to this point, and I hope a feeling of resolution and new beginning can be reached by anyone willing enough to follow the poems through to the end.

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Putting Down the Burden

I spent a lifetime
learning, yearning
to hurt—everything;
I hurt so much it killed me.

I walked through it—
mangled steel, bloody knuckles,
the field where I died
to become my true self.
It all led me here, now.
I can't walk away from that.

The hardest part of carrying a burden
is learning when to put it down—
and to hold a hand instead,
to press it to you, let it touch you,
and be thankful for the road
that leads the living together.

She holds me now—
whole, laughing, aware
I'd do it all again,
to be here now.

What I Left Behind (1)

*I was born tomorrow
Today I live
Yesterday killed me
-Parviz Owsia*

*I saw my world through the .45 caliber holes I shot into it.
My anger, hatred, armored me against a world that I hoped to one day see undone.
My last wish, on the day of my death, would have been to drag everything to hell, with
me.
I was a monster, true and specific. I wanted to become an incarnation of loss, liable to
none. When my car crashed, I flew for an instant, and the earth rose up like a hammer
against me.*

From boy to man
as a snake sheds its skin,
I am different, yet the same.
I was once a font
of laughter, until I slithered
from the barrel of a gun,
ravaging with desire
to escape myself.
I grew fast, and hard,
I grew tall.

They Were Laughing

When they chased him down
next to me.
Threw him down
next to me.
Then sentenced him to death
by Pop-Rocks.

They were laughing
as they fell upon him,
filled him with their candy
and washed it down with soda.

They were laughing
while the butt of a palm
against his chin,
fingers splayed up
into his eyes,
held streamers, tinged purple
with fear and soda
within him—just for a second.

They were laughing
when their eyes fell upon me,
their words, breath,
heavy against me.
“Do the snake, pussy.”
“Hssssssssssss.”

They were laughing
as they trailed away then,
through time and recess,
and he asked me
to leave him there—
crying.

Alone

Andre the Giant once drank 127 beers
and then passed out, alone,
in a hotel lobby.

Andre Rene Roussimoff's life dream
was to find a giant woman
and lead a giant's life—
to have happy giant children,
and never be alone again.

He was so heavy
that the staff left him in that lobby
until he awoke, alone again,
in a hotel with large honeymoon suites.

The Lobsters of Linoma Beach, Nebraska

I remember the ride there,
mother and father, silent, together.
His knuckles, white on the wheel,
cold headlights on her face,
my leg twitching,
nervous.

The night, smothered in snow,
a red checkered tablecloth
garnished in lemons,
paper napkins
and a neon glow
that made us whole.

My excitement at their red shells
was drowned in amber waves
of butter that clarified—
made me see, clearly,
his present to me
was the illusion
of a family—together.

At the Dump with My Grandfather

He told me to stay in the truck, as he got out,
began to toss bags over the edge of the rift,
a stinking canyon carved into the prairie,
studded with gulls fighting for donuts,
the plastic from six-packs wrapped around their feet.
Tears fell from my face, like bags into the pit,
as I clutched the seatbelt he'd laid across my lap.
The rough mask of his face looked at me,
half smiling, half snarling—the hard gravel of his voice
grated when he asked me what was wrong—
and I didn't know what to say,
I could only tremble at the rim of the world,
afraid we'd roll over the edge—into nothing,
while the sky swept over those who fed at its edges.
And then, silently, he drove us back home,
to everything that had been before.

Hit Them in the Hands

I was ten, and my Grandfather
wanted to make me stand up, alone,
after I'd been knocked down.

He wanted to teach me
how to break hands with a rifle stock—
how to get them out of the way,
to clear a path for a blade.

I was ten, and he smiled at me
through the hide of his face.

He taught me how to pin a man
by the neck to the ground
with a bayonet and a scream.

I learned that day
I could never, ever, hold his hand—
until years later, when he lay dead,
and the doctors made me let go.

Post-Secondary Biology Lesson

Anthrax is aerobic, non-motile
it has existed, is known, believed
to be one of the seven plagues of Egypt.
Its death rate in dermal infection
averages at 20%,
90% in pulmonary,
100% intestinal.

One unique aspect of its lethality
is that blood oxygen levels fall
to 1% in the host—
in all other diseases,
as well as drowning,
and asphyxiation,
this level remains at 5%.

The spores can survive indefinitely
in the presence of amino acids.
This is useful in designing,
rapidly germinating,
inhalation dust weapons—
only a small number are needed
to be infective by inhalation.

When producing dermal based weapons,
mail delivered ordnance,
contact weapons,
an irritant, like itching powder,
is recommended—
so the host will aid the spread,
by scratching.

With entry through a cut or abrasion,
a small blister will develop,
become filled with dark fluid,
and its rupture will reveal a black core
with a prominent ring of reaction around it;
this is called the malignant pustule—
death will usually occur in three days.

At the Food-court with Mr. Park

I once worked in a mall food-court,
with an old Korean man who was noted
for hating white people—
but seemed to make an exception for me.

On his breaks, he would sit and write
in Korean, on any paper he could find,
and I asked him one day, if he would tell me
what he was writing—

after a long stare, he told me
he was rewriting the bible, as a poem—
that he couldn't understand it
unless it was in his own language.

Every day he wrote,
a cigarette hanging from his face,
forming a smoky halo about him
as he brought meter to Cain's death
at Abel's hands, and poetry to Christ's passion.

His knotted fingers would hover
over the paper in front of him,
the pen slicing down at it
as his lips pursed, and his eyes
widened at his work.

He would smile and tell me he knew all the stories
by heart, and that the only law of Christ
was to love thy neighbor,
as the spidery runes he wrote in
stacked up before him on the food-court table.

The Killers

There are three types
of killers in the world—
The young, the striving, and the old.

Young killers are born in blood
are introduced to it as children,
and there are more young killers than old.

The young killer sees
his worth in
the blood that surrounds him.

Striving killers have lived,
see killing as a means
to become valuable while alive.

Striving killers never wanted
to be killers at all—
but they'll take the job.

The striving killer sees
his worth in
the faces of others.

Old killers wanted importance
to the life they led,
and now get it by killing.

The old killer sees
his worth in
what is remembered of him.

The Woodpecker

BB guns were smooth
killing machines in my hands,
and the commercials
to each individual bird I killed
were G.I. Joe figures—
always presented in forms
of surrender, so it was easier
to shoot their arms off.

I remember a Woodpecker,
perched on a tree,
hammering out the seconds
that remained in his life
as I aimed, fired, and it fell
to the base of the tree, wounded.
At 12 years old,
I had only ever killed,
never injured.

It bobbed on the ground,
tried to hide from me
behind the tree
and blood poured from its mouth
like a crimson song—
it was the brightest
darkest song
I'd ever heard—
and then I silenced it forever.

The Samaritan

I crawled towards him
along a red carpet of my own blood—
my eyes rolled back like a shark's
as I died, but I still saw him
with a frightening hunger—
I rose up like a red nightmare
and he told me he hoped I didn't die,
as I pulled my knife on him.

He told me he was the pizza man.
As we stood alone in a field
I thought was my living room,
a wrecked car my coffee table—
I collapsed on my red carpet then,
at home in my fractured skull,
as I tried to pay him.

I left red smudges on his face
as I reached for it,
and he couldn't tell if I was grateful
or trying to strangle him,
but he prayed I didn't die nonetheless.

What I Left Behind (2)

Leave me alone, I'm dying.

Is this hospital my tomb?

White walls of semiprivate pain.

We died...Both of us.

Why?

I don't want you anymore.

Why are we here?

A smile like shattered glass.

A thin rivulet of pain
runs down my mangled nose—
collides with my pillow
and leaves a red stain like me.
I'm crying blood.

Why did you do this to me?

Glass tinkling

You're not dead.

The voice is like an anvil.

It sings to me at night.

They brought us back.

**Because we need each other like oil—
and water.**

I know. You need me.

Because I hate you.

Because I hate you.

The Things I Carried

They carried all that they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.

-Tim O'Brien, "The Things They Carried"

30 round stripper clips
 So many knives
 Serrated and automatic
 The suicide note a girl left me once
 As a smoker, it was my fault
 15 round magazines
 A .22 pistol
 Right past the cops
 Twelve-packs of beer
 Boxes of ammunition
 And the coordinates to where I buried more
 Brass knuckles
 They were a birthday present
 A 9mm pistol—to a job interview
 And I got the job
 The arc of a beer bottle through the air—
 When I threw it into a man's head
 How I laughed when both shattered
 Chemical Mace
 An AR-15 assault rifle
 And why I named it "Mother Painless"
 A rolled-up target of a man
 His face and heart shot out
 The looks on the faces that watched me do it
 They stared at the floor when I stared at them
 My friends bloody hand-prints shuffling
 Across his mattress, toward the phone
 On the night he killed himself
 Books on how to make napalm
 As well as anthrax
 A shotgun loaded with carpet tacks
 The sight of steel cables snapping—
 Waving in the sky like serpents
 As they tore a man I worked with apart
 The fact that I don't remember his name
 And the sound of the hoses they used—
 To wash him away

The weight of the concrete which crushed another

That had just eaten lunch with me

I don't remember his name either

Rope and a shovel

Because you never know when you'll need them

A knee-jerk reaction to being touched

That ended with my fist

An emptiness

Creatures of Winter

The wind whispered as it sliced through the tall trees
and bushes, while a cold sun shown down on me
and the small creatures that crawl on un-skinned knees.
The winter gusts brought a certain certainty
that though it was cold, it would get still colder,
and the last warm light left would soon cease to be.
For food, the sparrows and starlings bickered
as squirrels rambled through the grass—wary of me
as they buried their food stores for the winter.
I shivered as I watched them, knowing surely
my cold was their cold, magnified by wet nests
of leaves knitted together like thin ivy.
I was stunned by the fearlessness and protests
of the smallest squirrel in the group who I spied
as he approached in his seasonal inquests.
Squatting pensively—close enough to confide—
he chewed on mouthfuls of ice from a snow bank,
his eyes on me always, chuffing in pride,
as he let me know that he meant to survive.

I Didn't See

I didn't see his pain,
I didn't know he needed help.

I heard his quiet conversations though,
with himself,
and I turned to him in the times
he would laugh—
only to see him realize I was there
as he turned away.

On Easter night, when his brother called me
we went to his apartment,
but he wouldn't answer—
I felt him through the door, watching,
he leaned against it, towards us,
but he didn't let us in.

The next day he was dead—
he had shot himself, alone in his room
and I had to hold his brother up
when he told me.
I had to request permission for a school absence
so I could bury my friend.

I touched his coffin, before the burial—
I still remember how it felt
like snakeskin beneath my hand.
I remember crying, having to turn away,
stumbling blindly, and tripping over a tombstone.
I needed help to stand.

I saw his apartment later,
the holes in the walls left by knives—
some, I think, by his fists
I saw the red on the sheets of his bed—
how it moved across it, to the floor.

I saw his pain, then.
I saw he needed help.

Percocet Girl

I wake at her touch,
and grasp at her hands
with my blind fingers.
A sapphire ring is her only clothing,
and her nail polish glitters in the dark
when I open my eyes—
her bracelet becomes a halo
as I pull her to me, weakly,
and kiss the lips of her fingernails.

The pill hidden in the love line of her palm
passes into me, ensures my slumber,
my freedom from the pain
of being broken.

Her face, her name, is lost to me,
but I know every inch of her
through the soft details of those perfect hands.

What I Left Behind (3)

Indomitable is
another word for
unrealized anguish at
the limits of one's body;
its flaws.

*In this hospital bed,
tubes growing from me like weeds.*

Here I am at my most indomitable.

I said you need me, its winter without you.

I said, I don't want you anymore.

The Clean Up Crew

I heard the strands snap that day—
the steel cables popping
like the strings of a guitar
I looked up and saw them strumming the sky—
It was as if they were waving goodbye.

I was 17, and new to the job
so I was selected, with two other boys
to clean up the site,
to make sure no cables remained
to whip at the air around them—
they told me I could die.

We found pieces of him
scattered on the job site,
a porridge of red
painted on the white canvas of the machine shop—
a loop of intestine hung like barbed wire
from steel cables that lay slack in their moorings.

We stumbled back to the foreman
could only point back to where we had come from—
one of us had brought back a leg,
fumbled with it confusedly as we
tried to make sense
of what we had seen.

They washed him away in the afternoon
with fire hoses—
and I saw a man pick up his hand—
as if to shake it,
and put it into a bag.

Pieces of Fort Pulaski (Georgia, 2011)

From a distant hill,
the curve of the fort's wall
smiles at those who come
to remember with a careless, pitted grin.
The long road leading in gives time
to wonder what made it so important.

Land that men marched upon
is now a parking lot.
Cigarette butts drift like practice shots
in the moist sigh of a breeze,
while a family in folding chairs adds
boiled peanut shells to the din.

Boys beg their mother, at a soda machine,
for one last can of Coke.
Their father flicks a cigarette
where men practiced how to die.
Cheers resound in concrete echoes
when change is found for the children.

I cross a drawbridge
where chain links as big as my hand
reach across the green scarf of a moat.
Here, hinges ward in hand-wrought perfection,
while sandal soles have softened the scars
the boots of men once made.

In the barracks, where men drank
coffee and played cards,
the wood floors surrounding
fireplaces tell of different times
when men didn't worry about
careless embers while bacon cooked.

In the inner walls, where soldiers leaned
to shoot out with rifle and cannon from rooms
where they laughed and prayed,
I can still smell cordite.
They had to breathe through holes
that let the smoke out.

The yard is filled with cannons and picnics,
where one boy hits another with a stick,
reenacting the civility of war.
He fell where walls crumbled
like lips parted in shock
as men died in broken shade.

Across the yard is the smithy,
where horseshoes were made.
Cannon balls were heated here
so they would catch ships
on fire, while dancing
across the waves.

The walls are crowned with cannons
resting in the grass, but guarding the sea,
while their black skin burns in the sun.
Their dead eyes have stared
at where they killed
far longer than I will live.

I enter the gift shop
as Boy Scouts plunder its sweets.
The Scout Masters watch, fan themselves,
but the woman at the register has eyes
wise enough to smile,
even though she has a headache.

A mug sat on a shelf there,
the curve of its lip smiling up at me
with a grin that will last as long as those hinges.
It burns my hands when filled with my black tea,
until it is as empty as the lone eyed gaze
of those cannons, staring out to sea.

Blood of the North

*A son is better
though late begotten
of an old and ailing father.
Only your kin
will proudly carve
a memorial at the main gate.
- The Hávamál*

My forefathers came
from cold northern climes,
and sought silvery new lives.
They arrived in a river
of blonde beards,
determined to dominate and survive.

The ministrations of Midwest
winters warmed them—
resembled the sultry snows of home.
Time traipsed along,
waiting for their words—
for the blood, and a boy.

The hair of their heir
may not match,
but my spirit stirred to awaken.
They came to me in chaos,
as dreams, fierce and dire—
Viking men beating spears and swords.

They chewed churlishly
on sanguine shields,
swilling mead, and screaming—
"Skald! Skál!"
Their spirits smiling
with fearsome happiness in their heritage.

Warily I would
wake though, wondering
why they screamed "Scald."
Sometimes I smelled
the thick thought
of their being blooming in evening incense.

Nightly they nagged me,
plundering my sleeps pillow
in their fierce-faced crafts,
their hands and hails
pointing to northern places—
beyond the bounds of consciousness.

"Skald," they screamed—
finally I followed,
hearkening to the Hávamál, the Eddas prose
and poignant poetics, while
The Wild Hunt wanders,
and my runes sing like rain.

Living and Dying

Once more into the fray I would go,
filled with all the things that left me
feeling as empty as the idea
of an abandoned ship.

The parking lots of Nebraska are filled
with trash, and people fucking in their cars,
aware of the violence around them—
they both hope she won't get pregnant.

I lived and died those nights,
searching for recognition on the faces
of people I had just knocked down—
both of us as empty as two hollow ships
meeting at sea, the waves between them
their only greeting.

The Book of Pazuzu

Pazuzu: A Mesopotamian demon, and king of the evil wind demons; patron demon of the southwest wind which brings disease.

This chapter will describe to you:

How to grow

How to make, culture, separate

How to mass produce desired species

Each potential weapon

will be described—in detail

How each can be located, collected

How its toxins can be purified

How those materials can be incorporated—
made effective

How the easiest way to see

this process at work

is to set out a wet piece of white bread in the wind

How spores will settle on the bread

that can kill human beings—
in tiny amounts

How you will name and identify

the children of Pazuzu:

Bacillus Anthracis

Yersinia Pestis

Tetanus Bacillus

Staphylococcus

How to describe them,
mass-produce them

How to convert them to your will

What I Left Behind (4)

Fragments of thought shoot through me like bone slivers that were once whole. I roll in my death bed and I'm swimming in blood. A silver sump crawls from my back and spews my life out beneath me. I hover within it, hurting. My fingers leave red streaks on the pillow of lilies beneath my head, and I try to scream, but can't—I'm broken. Don't let them let you die, don't lose your grip. You've bled all the bad out; now make them take it away. It's cold as death; its exit is a window, left open in the cold.

Does it hurt?

The voice is warm—living, a doctor's.

Of course.

My world is pain; I've seen what I can do.

Do you remember anything?

Why?

I'm glad I don't. I wanted to do this to others. My god.

You died, twice. Anything at all?

Just darkness.

Glass shattering like my skull.

You pulled a knife on the man who found you.

One last act of malice aimed at man.

I was leaving myself behind.

Cutting myself free.

Sharp Whispers

The spears and swords of this room
are storytellers hanging from the walls.
In the near silence between visits,
these patient and silent guards
whisper tales of glory in voices
soft as the filtered air that keeps their
sharp tongues from corruption.

Cuchillo

Spanish for “knife,”
and much as the sharp blade
hides behind the blunt end
of the word that names it,
the “I,” and double “L,”
hide behind the why
of their pronunciation.

I have made knives,
pieces of steel I wrapped
in beautiful bone handles.
I only sold one.
I gave the rest away.
They are out there, somewhere,
trying not to be noticed—
hiding behind their names.

The \$50 Shot

I once sighted a hawk floating over a field,
the day's thermals lifting up its fingers
as it scanned for prey in the noon of the day.
We were both predators—hunting that day,
separated by barbed wire fences.

I bet a friend fifty bucks that I could shoot it,
as it circled lazily against the clouds.
I aimed, led the bird through the sky,
drew a straight line between us,
with a bullet, then waited, for the kill

Far out, the hawk dipped in the sky,
and plunged into a stubble field
with a faint, lispig whistle,
never to be seen again by man, or the sun—
and I was so terribly, terribly happy.

When I was a Monster

At the bottom of a box
dug from the back of my closet,
meticulously buried
amongst my other memories,
I found a photo, purposely forgotten—
of me, but not of me, by me
and of something that was me, once.

In this photo, I'm beardless, with black hair
running down my back—
my lip is curling up, one-sided,
in a smile that I know now
shows that I was so angry,
I had to hold back—from laughing
at it all.

I'm walking through a doorway
from a darker room,
while the black sigils of that era
in my life cling to me—
claw at the light paint
hanging from the walls—
trying to whiten the room
in my presence.
My shoulders tilt suggestively
in a scale of violence and play.
And I was so, so thin—then.

As I look back into those slim, dead eyes
hungering up at me from the past,
I can understand their anger—appetite;
that they can never look through mine, now,
and I gladly rebury them, in the box
I forgot them in.

Last Visit with My Father

I heard his voice before I saw him. I remember
having to remember that it was his,
one of those sounds or smells you know you know,
but can't quite place, regardless.

I was shocked, more than anything, that he was there
as I rolled myself over in the hospital bed—
Who had told him I was there? How had he found me?
He didn't even know how old I was.

The colors of his face merged over his collar,
like the nervous smiles I'd seen him wear—
the times he was actually around.
Sick with pain, painkillers, heartbreak—

I remember him, as he sat by my bed,
how the only greeting I could muster
was to roll back over, close my eyes, and try to sleep—
I think I muttered, "Shit."

As I drifted off, I could still hear him talking—
of all the things that had happened since I'd seen him,
of the places he'd been, wanted to go,
how he'd sold the movie theater—

all of it so matter of fact, like the weather.
There was no mention of absence, remorse,
missed birthdays or car rides. I don't think he even asked
if I was in pain.

His voice wafted up at me like the stink
of the spinal fluid that leaked onto my pillow.
It was like drowning in garbage laced with that bleach aroma
only hospitals seem to get right.

I realize I'm not special, more or even less
has been committed to other sons.
But, damn him, it was the last time I saw him.
He didn't even know how old I was.

The Monumental Fiddle Competition (Nebraska, 2013)

The slab-like backs of farmers in coveralls
were suspended on folding chairs
in a dim tent, tins of Skoal in pocket.
The grass beneath their boots
kept time to the beat of their heels
as an old man with a hearing aid
half hidden beneath his hat
heard Irish folk tunes for his last time.

He held his grown son's shoulder
and told him all the tales of Vietnam
he had probably told him before—
how Agent Orange didn't wear a badge,
how it wasn't even orange, either,
how he had to leave his fiddle at home,
with his father, to fight—
for what, he didn't know.

They watched as new players took the stage
acknowledged how some played, while others just played—
and as the music lifted from their instruments,
floated through the dust and shade,
the old man's words rode their melody
as his hand highlighted each note with a slight squeeze,
and I like to believe that he thought
all he had done in life had been worth it.

The Spider

I watched a spider weave its web
in the doorframe of a bar—
the fat body gliding from strand to strand,
plucking at each like an instrument
of something other than its own hunger.

It would weave and catch,
dispatch prey, knit for it
the last blanket it would ever need;
and then set about the repairs,
anticipating the next arrival.

I watched a man, drunk,
allow himself to be caught
in its web, by his fist.
His rough finger struck,
and the spider flew, was gone.

The web still hangs there, vacant,
the bodies of winged visitors suspended
on unfinished strands, forgotten,
cold in the night, with no one to sew for them—
awaiting the strumming of fingers.

The spider is dead, or hungering elsewhere—
I want to put it back to its work,
show it fingers that appreciate art.
I look for its eight eyes at night,
shining patiently in the dark.

Over Dinner, That First Night

She sat sideways in the booth
and rested her chin on her knees
to tell me stories about Mammoths,
which she accentuated with a fork.

She said she loves whiskey,
looked me in the eyes
and promised to kill me if I stole her muse—
tines tilted in my direction.

She smiled then, red in the soft neon,
and I smiled too—because I knew
she'd have to touch me, once,
to kill me with a fork.

Accidents Happen

It was funny how we laughed as we sat there—
thoughts of cars crashing, the past
so far away from us.
She'd never been in an accident before.

Turning through the light,
we had a second
to see the other driver
before he hit us.

I had a second,
to remember a time
when I didn't matter to myself,
to realize I cared—for her

She was pushed into me then
from across the seat—smashed
into my body, my experience—
accidentally brought closer.

When I look at her now,
reach out to touch her hair,
there's something hard within her—
forged from the same fire as myself.

The Talkative Sun

I saw on NOVA that the sun would make noise
if we could hear it—

Did it chuckle at the sight of the first men to master fire?
Or to melt steel in flames hotter than flesh had ever known?

Did it laugh when we discovered that an atom
can be made warmer by cutting it in two?

Was there a whimper when it first saw
the way we treat starving children?

Do its cosmic grunts tell us
that all we can dream will never eclipse it?

What entertainment we must provide, at the noon of its day,
as it sits center to the sky, braiding magnetism and fire with noble gasses,
mumbling quietly to itself, as we build cities, empires,
and then expire quietly, in its own quantum measurement of time—
hoping that someone will someday say something kind about us.