

Something Borrowed

It weighs me down, this debt coming due
– this lease that one day won't be renewed.
All sorts of signs remind me
that these elements aren't mine for keeps,
that there's more of those in them than these,
more scatter and drift,
more of moment than of ownership.

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This morning I was up at five,
flushing out sleep with news and music
and coffee in my rocking chair.
The radio played Bach, and the moon
was a cork of light that plugged the summer sky.
I slipped the science section from the paper's fold
and read about myself: how I am mostly
a hydrogen stew, heavily seasoned
with dashes of potassium, iodine, zinc,
down to a lone cobalt molecule –
like a single teardrop adding flavor
in a huge cast-iron pot.

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That moon-plug was slowly pulled out
and light began leaking in
while I sifted through the paper's other parts.
A global conference had commenced in Bonn;
a bomb had killed four people on a bus;
and the Sox had won it in the ninth.
I got up and stretched, distracted now
by this peculiar matter of mine.
Science says I am a short-term deposit
in the billennial bank.
Science says I am an atomic baggage check.
Science says I am a snapshot of Union Station

at eight a.m., every moving object
on its way to somewhere else.
I am a table with a dusting of self
and the housekeeper is knocking at the door.

The daily broadsheet lay at my feet
(the Sox had scored on a wild pitch)
like slabs of discarded slate.

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All people are taught from an early age
that borrowed goods must be returned,
an axiom that includes those items only on loan
from the void, formed when the earth was without form.
Sunlight poured into my living room.
It warmed that little global forum
in human shape (it means the world to me)
which time and the wind will disperse
about the planet and beyond.
It illuminated those past and future
bits of atmosphere and rock
which have assembled for an instant
in between, convening just long enough
for my tiny allotment of oxygen
to be put into the service of song.

Fragment found in the ruins of the (future) ancient city of Chicago

Here am I, a man alive, emph
An inhabitant of now
I ride a bicycle and have red hair.
Come summer I grow plum
Yesterday you said, "Tomorrow
ever, and so remember
!", and today, I testify,
art is fragile and unique.

At the Museum of Artifacts

Stand at that handaxe on display.
Imagine the clever hominid
who fashioned that cutting-edge technique,
but also call to mind a kinder biped
on the savanna, an early-feeling female
who saw the stone device but could not see the point.

The story of the spearhead in that case
should not omit the tender savage teen
who shied away from sharpened ends.

Where are the artifacts that show
the dissent of man? When the dig is done
and the items cleaned and catalogued,
only the ghost of an intuition
will hint at some resistance
to a tool for which the age is named.
Shall we insist such unease was in vain?

In ancient Lydia there was an old priest
who held in his palm that very coin;
who stared at the hard, brilliant token
of the first gold standard in the world,
and despaired at the way it devalued
the fragile currency of love.