

Painting of a Car Crash

it's the most detailed painting you've ever seen
hanging on the looming beige museum wall
so large the cars are almost life-sized
you nearly trip over a bench
backing up to take it all in.

you never knew a Nissan Sentra
with a Honda Odyssey slamming through its driver side
crumpling it like a egg squeezed tight
could be rendered with such loving precision.
the bright red traffic light
and the flames from the engine
coloring the white and silver cars in shades of passion
backlighting the fusing, floating metal beasts, with perfect drama
Under purple twilight Jersey sky.

I wonder how many reference photographs of gore the artist looked at
to be able to render such a meticulous image
Of my face, bursting through the passenger side window
blood stained glass bubbling outwards like a swimmer
emerging from underwater
The surface tension not quite broken.

The look in the other driver's eyes is a sight to behold
And if you stand close enough, you can see the whole scene
Perfectly mirrored in her irises.

How lucky I was that
an aspiring painter
driving past on the other side of the road
took an image in his head of my death
and spent the next four years creating it in his basement
after his shifts at Footlocker using
paint he stole from Michael's.

If I had been able to see it
I would have said it was remarkably accurate.

I would have laughed that this is the way that I will be remembered.
not the things I made or the people I loved
those will be gone in a couple years.
But this painting of a car crash
On Route 23, in front of Foodtown
Under purple twilight Jersey sky
On looming beige museum wall
Will stay.

Wake

The night air is full of the smell of the dark
and all the dogs have stopped barking
the air is perfectly still in the streets
the trees silent.

All the stars speed away
shrinking into space
by 9 pm the sky is an oily black
that sucks up the streetlights and fills the cracks in the pavement.

Every person in town is in bed, but awake
staring at the wall across their room
or into the grey-black of their dormant TV's,
forgetting to breathe for as long as they can.
throughout the town no atoms move
aside from slowly blinking eyes
of 7,800 barely breathing people
Scattered throughout the hills in their little houses.

nothing special is happening to cause all this
Except in the center of town, a duck is drowning in the cold, black pond,
due to an old injury that went untreated.
there are very few doctors for small town ducks
and so the drowning
on this lightless December night.

sometimes the earth chooses to mourn strange things
and it holds its breath
all at once, all of it, all of us
to wait for a duck, or some other small thing
to drift to the bottom of the lake
or disappear under the tire
and we all bear the burden in an unspoken way,
together.
the next day you wake up a little colder
and hold everyone a little closer
although only the earth knows about the duck
or the squirrel
or whatever it's chosen to collectively mourn
through the stars and the dogs
and the people
and the wind.

Of course, this is rare.
most of the time
it doesn't mourn at all.

Bad Lullabies Sung By Very Tired People, to Themselves, In Strange and Horrible Places

Yes I'm behind enemy lines
but i'm hidden in the grass
the dew is warm the stars are bright
and i'm layin' on my ass

i'm behind enemy lines
and i could die at any time
but if i do not get some sleep
i'll go insane tonight

Russell Jensen [1920-1941]

I'm here inside a submarine
alone and wide awake
afraid a giant fucking squid
will smash all our air tanks

or maybe all the pressure
will break through the porthole
and dark waters will bring me sleep
i hope, i hope, i hope.

Christina Tomlin [1968-]

I'm not sure how I got here
Deep inside this hole
I've screamt and screamt until I'm spent
And haven't heard a soul

I'm glad the floor is softish dirt
I'm glad that I can't see
I'll pray that someone comes for me
til then I'll be asleep.

Tiffany Johns [1998-]

I Am a Mouse Who Works at The Airport

They've never formally given me a job
But I take what I do very seriously
And my mouse wife
And my seven mouse children
Respect me,
I think.

I realized when i was very small
curled in a nest in a hole in the the luggage carousel
The thumping of falling suitcases like a heartbeat above
that the airport is designed to forget everything and everyone
that moves through it.
A giant funnel of memory and time
With nonstick shining metal sides--and yet
in my three-month youth I saw so much!
So many strange and vivid scenes forgotten
by all but a mouse in the luggage carousel.

I looked at the records the plane companies kept--
Pathetic.
Numbers and names devoid of love or drama
so i pledged to write, with stolen Delta-branded pen,
on dark inside of every wall
everything i saw, from my perspective,
Under feet and in the shadows
until i saw no more.

Years-awaited kisses, and very near flight-misses
And every type of fearful face a human's ever worn
Both departing and arriving.
Piling endless little sleights
to employees and passengers and animals alike
My "Wall of Small Cruelties" is the fullest of all.

Goodbyes, goodbyes.
So many goodbyes I have seen
Some tearful, some cold, none too long
None enough.

I've seen elderly fliers with heart troubles
Loaded into ambulances in the back lots
And plastic coffins, pulled from cargo holds
Arriving back home for funerals.
but inside of my neat little writing, on my many walls
everyone lives forever
Locked in the few frantic, bored
hours that they breathed in my airport
But alive all the same.

one day when they tear this place down
and peel it apart
they'll find its real history inside of every wall.
Then they'll know that it once lived
and know that i did, too.

Fivewalls

there is a town with a wall over top
(it's not a ceiling—i asked)
and four surrounding walls, each 'bout five miles long
all made of some sort of black glass

there's no doors in the walls, no windows, no holes
but the population grows inside
all those thousand's desire
in their five-walled home
is to make sure
there will not
ever
be light.

their houses are normal and pretty
they look just like you and i's
but after the town was sealed away
no light's ever reached that town's eyes.

once when i was a younger man
met a girl from Fivewalls in a bar
(her eyes were off-white,
her pupils odd-sized)
who said that she had been outcast--
I guess that she'd broken some law.

she said that she had been exiled for years
that it'd taken her months to adjust
to our cold ugly world
where the light tells, shouts all
and our eyes became all we could trust

she said that Fivewalls was near
she said it was sitting in the most massive field.
she said she knew a way in under the ground
she said that she'd bring me to see.

we left the bar, walked down the road
till street gave way to sky
while she told me childhood stories
of her youth untouched by light.

she made it sound perfectly wondrous
as field-grass started brushing our hips
to be young and alive in eternity's night
laughing, not seeing--still kids

i could tell that we were approaching
though Fivewalls' glass blends perfect with night
the girl bent down and reached into the grass
i could see that her eyes were shut, tight.

I looked to the sky and could just barely view
by tracing where stars were not
the shell of Fivewalls, the town of the dark
that mile high, seamless black cube.

no one could tell me why it was so tall
why the fifth wall was kissing the stars
how was this not in the history books
how could someplace like this be unmarred?

the scraping of metal cut quick through my thoughts
the girl had pulled up a hatch
with hardly a sound she slid into the ground
through the metal door hidden in grass.

i followed her quickly and closed it
the darkness was full and complete
but the girl whirled around, again, with no sound
and she quite deftly blindfolded me.

i tried to speak and she shushed me
no words were exchanged from that point.

she led me through some type of tunnel
but the walls weren't stone or brick
they were coated with leaves and they smelled like the trees
and the wind was so pleasantly thick.

finally we stepped into somewhere quite open
and she told me that we had arrived
i could feel the space yawning out from me
I could sense that this place was alive.

she told me we stood on the top of a hill
on the very edge of the town
and we couldn't move or make any noise
but she'd let me look around.

I asked her, "won't I just see darkness?"
She told me that wasn't her problem. She was delivering her end of the bargain. I stopped arguing.
i being young and foolish and brave
had a flashlight inside of my jacket
and when the blindfold came off
and i stood in Fivewalls

i took it out, and i flashed it.

From the breezy hill where we stood my beam of light cut the darkness in a way that felt physically painful to it, as if it was an eight-foot long head of hair or a sequoia--it had grown for so long untouched, compounding its own beauty, grown soft from several lifetimes of absolute safety. It wasn't prepared for light. I think that for this reason, the tiny flashlight I had secreted in my pocket illuminated almost the entire five mile by five mile by one mile cube in shades of yellow and white that were so violent that I felt I had firebombed the entire town with my little light. I could hear the dark screaming as it vanished.

But I couldn't turn the flashlight off.

I couldn't not stare at what rose up in front of me.

Below, a beautiful little American small town, just like any other, just without any lights--

Above, a towering canopy of the most beautiful, lush, alien trees and plants I had ever seen, filling every crevice of the jet-black cube that housed them, writhing and rejoicing with life and color. Every inch of the cube was teeming with vivacity, worshipping the dark. In that brief moment where I could see everything I saw giant flowers beyond description, vines weaving in and out of each other to create even more intricate, gorgeous vines, and animal life that surely lived nowhere else on earth, living, playing, growing. I could feel the joy and the life coursing through me. Waterfalls ran down the sides of the cube and birds somehow flew in closed patterns that did not suggest in any way that they felt trapped. I could not comprehend that this much beauty existed in one place, and that no one ever saw any of it, not even the Fivewallers below. I couldn't comprehend that maybe all this beauty existed *because* no one could ever see it--only feel it.

Seconds after that, of course, everything set aflame, all at once. The flashlight was too much--the dark couldn't handle it. Nothing in that wonderful place could.

I looked to the base of the hill and I saw the people of Fivewalls, strong and powerful and very, very pale, with odd-shaped pupils and milky-white eyes, leaving their quaint little homes and charging at me up the hill, their efforts futile, their immolation begun. They collapsed in flames like all the rest.

I flicked off my flashlight eight seconds after I had turned it on. I could still see everything, perfectly. The fire illuminated everything for me now. I took one last glance at that most beautiful and perfect of places, that I had somehow completely destroyed with one small act of curiosity. I saw the girl who had brought me run away from me, down the hill, to the people who had exiled her--maybe her family--I don't know--and touch them. She let their flame run up her arms and consume her.

I turned and ran backwards the way I came.

I turned the flashlight back on.

I figured the damage was done--if I didn't have it on some Fivewaller would surely catch up and kill me.

The lush, verdant tunnel I had come through went up in flames as I ran, every plant wailing as it disappeared into dust.

I reached the hatch, climbed out into the grass, and closed it.

I laid there for a long, long time, weeping.

I looked up at that towering black cube, blotting out so many of the stars. It looked as if nothing had changed. I don't think anyone would ever know it had, except for me.

So I waited for days upon days upon days
looking at the black and towering glass
until i was sure that all Fivewalls was gone
and its staggering beauty was all in the past.

then i shut my eyes tight and i reached in the grass
and i pulled, back open, that hatch
and i slid underground without hardly a sound
and i walked myself all the way back

to that breezy, black hill on the edge of the town
the paradise that i had burned
and i set up a camp, without any lamp
to wait for the darkness, and plants,
and Fivewalls
to return.