

Prayer of the K-12

Lord, let me start with one pull,
my bar shuddering in your calloused hand
as you ratchet my disc
to the scream that melts cast iron.
I pass through it, a ghost through rebar.
Chatter teeth, set on the floor and released.
On a house of cards, a tidal wave.
So much you have engineered, Lord.
I beg you let loose my chain
so with my carbide teeth
I can chew through the paper of this world.
My god! let me do what you made me to do,
and growl beneath your trigger finger.
Let me tear this place in two.

DuPont Paint Factory

Two officers have located the victim in the abandoned building where the copper-thief says his friend is on fire.

He said they scaled the barbed wire fence topless,
one at a time, t-shirts wound around their hands for the spikes.
He said he doesn't remember trying to wrench his friend loose,
how he got the hole blasted in his hand,
or the twenty minutes it took him to limp two miles
to Saint Joe's Hospital.

We cut the sirens, leave the lights warbling
across the cracked red brick when we hiss to a stop.

Use bolt-cutters on the chained gate,
park Engine 11 at the rear of the building,
use the K-12 to slice the hinges of the heavy steel door
I help Jack slide from its jamb, and lay flat on the ground.

The officers are already inside,
have heaved themselves through the thieves' entrance,
the busted window. The cherry of Tate's cigarette
appears before he does in the dark doorway,
nodding in the direction where Bearden--
Samantha, a friend I call Sam-- waits with the victim,
crooning to him *it's gonna be alright, champ,*
help is coming, help is here.

Entering the cavernous room,
I can smell it for the first time the way I always will
(here on out forever and forever amen)
the first few moments of each time the tones drop
in the middle of the night--
rancid meat, bone's charred powder,
fear in a bundle of thick-wristed copper wires.

I'm close enough to count
how many breaths Jack takes in a minute,
close enough that if I reached out
I would brush the thick material of his turnouts,
but not nearly close enough to say aloud
that sometimes it is good to fear what isn't seen,
or good to fear what isn't understood.

Shattered windows crunch beneath our boots

as we move slowly forward, slicing the tight beams
of our LED flashlights
through thin layers of smoke and the voltaic dark
where first human-- then robot-- arms once stamped
lids onto one-gallon cans streaming by
on black conveyor belts.

Sweat is a cold layer of rubber coating my body.
I hear a whine like the yipping of a trapped coyote
and think an animal has made this place its home.
But then I realize in the center of the room, a substation,
inside it, whoever is stuck, still alive. Crying.

Sam, talking softly where she points her flashlight,
then turns to us. *Thirty minutes*, she says.
Thirty minutes electricity has been churning through him,
leaving a blackened trail like wildfire behind it.

Sam tells us do something, please...
then goes outside and props herself by one arm against a light pole,
pukes in the rain as Tate wicks another cigarette
into his lungs and pats her back, chuckling,
then goes over the digital pictures he took for evidence.

The substation is boxed in sheetmetal
and an insulated column rises from it like a chimney to the ceiling.
I can see the panel which has been removed
at chest height and placed on the concrete floor.
The neon warning, stencilled on it in blue spray-paint:

DO NOT TOUCH!
ENERGIZED, MARCH 2010

Jack says relax, it's too late, his insides are blasted,
there's nothing we can do. Jack says go ahead and look,
go ahead, I've seen it all before.

Jack says...

But I don't feel whatever it is
that mutes the urgency in his blood so he can lean back
against a wall, one boot crossed over the other
waiting for the lucky guy who's next
on the power company's OT list to arrive
and shut it off at the transformer,
then go home and back to bed.

Inching up to the opening,
I see the back of his head and the silver chain
which has blackened and sunk into his neck's flesh.
I can tell he is still alive by his moans
and by the hum of voltage and by the way smoke dances
above his body, naked and fetal.
His clothes have burnt away to only his collar and a thin strip
of denim around his waist.

As he climbed inside
he must have brushed the copper cable thick as my wrist
elbowing down from the shutoff switch,
that, without any room to get away, must have held him down
against the concrete floor, against the sheetmetal walls,
making him and the substation both part of the circuit
as it passed current through his body.

It's a blessing he's stopped moving.
Thank God, it's a blessing we're here to help.
It's a voiceover.
An act-out of a joke we don't laugh at,
and if we do it comes out bitter and mean
because I know we have done all that can be done
for a body that has been wracked by electricity--

how it enters and branches through
what is sixty percent water, cooking the blood and muscle
and bone as it arcs from cell to cell
until it blossoms out like a hollow-point round.

And what could we have done?
Not climb inside and pry him from the cable
with our fiberglass pike poles.
Not remove another panel because if he's leaning against one,
he's leaning against them all.

I feel burned out and hollow but can't look away.
It has been twenty minutes since he has moved,
at least fifty since being electrified.

There is not one, but two, exit holes.
Smoke ribbons from a hole in his stomach
and the blasted joint where his elbow should be.
His eyes drip from their pinched lids like egg white
and belly fat has melted and run in stringy

yellow-brown columns to the floor.

Then I see his shoulders rise and fall.
Hear a low-throated moan that sounds like rip-starting a chainsaw
and know it can only be a death rattle.
And though I don't know how he is still alive,
Jack and I give him what we can.
We say *we're right here buddy*
 we're doing everything we can buddy
 what's your name
 we're gonna get you out of here real soon
can you say anything buddy?

Hard to accept that even when what you say is true
what they hear is the lie your heart hides behind.
Hard to accept when his breathing finally stops
and the end looks like a second chance,
that this is how some of us go--
naked, and black with boiled blood
while those supposed to save us only stand by,
always waiting for someone else.

What else can I do but look at the place
where the leather of my left glove has come unravelled
from hefting the axe too many times this year.
What can I do but fix my eyes on the unravelling seam
I swear to god I'll fix tomorrow,
though whether it will actually hold I can't say.
A lyric from a song ruins its way
through my head and I take my place next to Jack,
help him hold the wall up.
I ask him if he's heard the one about the methhead
who breaks into an abandoned paint factory.
He says yeah, but tell it to me again.

Prayer of the Maul

Let me sweep aside a factory wall, Lord,
cinder-blocks preventing passage
to an engine room scrolled in flame.
I am the grunt before thought.
My load is greater than your stamina,
and though I am your simplest machine
if you let yourself love too much
what is inside the mountain
I am sure to burst your colossal heart.
Even in my dreams
I am a juggernaut ready to destroy all things.
I pray only that you heft me
from that place between your shoulders.
Let me be the one chosen.

Shock

He turns off his cell, stays home Saturday night.
Sits on his living room floor,
 arranging empty bottles of Stag between his legs
as he watches John Goodman play a shell-shocked Vietnam veteran
who pulls a gun on his friend in a bowling alley.

There may be a full moon outside.
A vague notion he is supposed to meet a blonde downtown.
 If someone knocks he doesn't notice.

When he clips the jag on his fingernail
that pierced the latex glove he used in the paint factory last night,
the sound of the movie is replaced by the wet paint sound
 of the body as it peeled from concrete.

His ellipse of cuticle
is the brown skin and marbled strip of fat left behind,
fused to the galvanized steel grating like burnt meat on the grill rack
and now the paramedic is telling him again
to grab the legs and help him lift the body into the bag,
and he no more than clasps the charred calves
 when the meat slips off the bone,
exposing the tibia's pink and purple ball.

That moment, frozen--
 as it slides like a greased marble along his bare wrist
between his cuff and the glove.

He smells it under the piss and ink odor of beer.
Lifting the spot where burnt flesh touched his wrist--
the smell of cooked meat is imprinted there
like the throbbing pain left long after a limb has been lost.

And just like the game of mouse trap
 where the marble has already been put in motion,
he can do nothing to stop the thoughts' tumble toward climax,

that the boy's body smelled like the pork shoulder
he and his partner from the station barbecued at the Fire Department picnic
on Labor Day for their families as they gathered at Riverside park.

That like the symbolic body of Christ
taken beneath the tongue in Mass, dissolving to a paste
so his body can better become yours

their wives and children ate the body
and they gave scraps to the yellow labrador
that Captain Tripp's daughter stumbled over
as she played badminton and they clinked bottles together
while the blues band played,
eating until a pain filled their bellies.

He can do nothing to stop the slipping
rack and pinion of his mind,
how it was nothing so unpleasant as the rancid char of those
he has found crumpled at a door or window,
dead from smoke inhalation but only a few feet from air.

How he's starving, but cannot eat
not because of what persists on his hands or the fabric
of his turnouts
but what he can't wash from his mind.

This is the job that chose him.
The one where no mask seals tightly enough
against the face so that you will never have to taste
what circles a worn track
deeper in the mind,
a memory that is named *Danger*
that sniffs and gouges its snout where it will sleep in its ruin,
turning no cure to the light.

Therapy

The woman I'm seeing off and on, two years on depression meds, without work.
My neighbor, fifty and bald from chemo I sit with mornings,
drinking coffee as she pets my dog.

I think *This time I will be there.*
This time she will live.

The therapist leans forward, eyes cresting the silver rims of his glasses.
You can't really save anyone, you know.

Shame like water rushes into me, fills me like cotton-jacketed hose.

Nothing to say, I look at the book on the coffee table
for what must be the appropriate amount of time.
Then the gold clock, its ticking encased in glass on the desk,
three spheres spinning on its mirrored base.

Good, the therapist says, leaning back. *Good.*

Why can't I tell my Father about the electrocuted boy?

Try. Talk to him now, pretend he's in that chair.

My Father, a spreading wingspan of a man
named after a Ford and a character in Shakespeare
who herniated a disc and the meniscus in both knees
working doubles for UPS so we could go to the beach each year.

Sleeping beside him for a week of nights
in the shallow dent my Mother's body left,
each time our backs touched his breath threatened to not return.

A story. It comes to me from a life ago. Bible School. Of Ham,
who, finding Noah drunk and asleep, covered his nakedness,
and how when Noah awoke, he woke ashamed
and cursed his son for seeing him in his human weakness.

Tell me how can I come to him for comfort

*when it wasn't the electrocuted boy I saw there but myself,
helpless to his own singing grasp
and clutching the copper cable like the third rail of life?
Tell me how I can be anyone other than I am,
please-- how when not the least part of me
leaks beyond my Father's pooled shadow
that I can now go to him with my smallest of pains?*

*With this crumb a stronger man could pinch in two.
This infinite fleck of nothing, this small worry.*