

Brown bear

Three summers my grandfather spent
suffering Lima, Ohio, his hometown.
He was fit for it, the fanatical nature
of the disease. He'd brag he could
walk for days, and he, unaccompanied, would,
which made him hard to find, at first.
He was always current, always meandering
over what he thought important. Thought-
His one true privacy made him a standout.

He liked to dig his hands into the soft earth
under the Ottawa river, scrounge around
for the ideas that had been ideal
to him, because they had been his.
He dug with fingers no longer than they had been,
for what was no longer a possibility.
Still, he made off with a new ferocity,
with hands with perfectly breakable, incapable
fingernails he imagined would pierce the lip of any fish,
he'd go about his eddies midstream.
At the care facility he'd forgotten to trim them.
The nails kept everyone away from him,
now, they made him clumsy.
He'd no longer be able to handle anything gently.

Or he'd forage for the ideas like they were berries:
blue and raspy and full of the old juice.
In the flash-bulb bright, brand spanking new
supermarket he was unwise, outright.
He drew straws out of their clear plastic baskets,
gnashing handfuls, whole mouthfuls mid-aisle,
between rows of ever-fresh, ever-ready evergreens.
He'd shuffle out, usually escorted by someone
who thought him harmless, hand held.
He wore no shoes; still they let him go.
His hands, and his soft, outgoing pads
spilling a trail to track,
a seeded stream of sweet red mash.

Earlier that year he'd disappeared
into the bizarre untouched wilderness
of his mind, tramping through a dense corridor
of forest, coming to rest in the darkest
corner of the Bitterroot Range, digging himself
into the slope just under a ponderosa pine,
glancing up, for the last time, at a corral of sky
flush with stars, fighting off that sleep
with everything yet longing for it, feeling the roots
come around about him like iron bars,
and then pulling them warm over him.
The doctors hadn't seen anyone that far away before.

Three hours he fought them off in Faurot park.
Park goers talked up fear and how he'd lost it.
Grandfather flashbulbing teeth he imagined
were marvelously long, extraordinary and sharp.
But those teeth were just long winded, full of
mumbo-jumbo; the park people roared when he put
them in, took them out, still he stood up for himself,
by now a shirtless, skinny, worn out old man.
A whole bridge full of people watched
as he took on the Ottawa on all fours,
watched him swallow some and then fall for it.
The police put down their tranquilizer guns.
When they pulled him out he was the same:
slippery and grizzled and out of it.

Then I was there, or I imagined I was,
asking him about where he'd been.
He was stumped by my presence, still
half hidden, brushing off pine needles.
I was questionable, yet he could tell
I was of him. He somehow knew my smell.
He asked if I was my father, his son. I nodded
and forgot. We talked, three minutes, maybe,
a few incredible, useless shoots of sunlight falling
into that strict corral of sky behind his eyes.
We smiled coming out of that moment,
knowing we'd never be that all-knowing again,
on our way to becoming questionable again.

Babyzilla

Our precious one-year-old

She walks like an old timer,
an old time movie monster,
with awkward, almost seizing, legs,
feet put down like sledgehammers.
The floored potted plants shake and beg.
She's a stiff, strong armed creature
the two of us stitched together.
She smiles a helpless, know-it-all,
Two-bottom-teeth-only smile
while manhandling the Hot Wheels cars.
Drool pools on her lip, falls while
she's stomping all over the Little People.
We want her to flow, to know her
muscles and mind will someday keep
time; for now she creeps. We set free
mini biplanes, white doves on strings
which she crushes, her hands going ape.
If anything, we can offer her protection,
anything to keep her occupied,
anything that keeps her searching the skies
upright, moving in our direction.

Survivor

“the only person certified by the Japanese government as having been in both cities.”
-Obit

In Hiroshima on business,
Mr. Yamaguchi,
badly burned by that great light,
took the overnight train home
to the safety, and lush greenery
of Nagasaki.

Died today, of stomach cancer.
No wonder.
Through the horror, the half life, a half
death twice
to become a teacher,
a wonder.

His double exposure official, a public
record.
But there were others
identified.

He could remember them all
because there are no half lives.

-Tsutomu Yamaguchi, 93.

Coreopsis

Go away
And the Santa Monica
Mountains will give you giant
Roadside bouquets,

Man sized
Green stalks with wild yellow
Blooms along the narrow coast range,
Farthest west.

Go away
To Chumash *Humaliwu*, to
A Malibu in the mind
Of May Rindge.

She behind
Armed horsemen on the beach,
Fighting that snake the government
And its eminent domain.

Go away
She cried in court, fighting for her dead
Husband, for “Zuma land” creeks and chapparal.
All hers

Until they
Snaked that four lane “Roosevelt Highway”
Through her imagination, wonderland,
Now

Go away.
Now all ours: Holy Landish, Edenemic,
Paradaisical, without forgiveness we
Trespass

Against those
Who have trespassed against us,
A kind of Roman triumph, a biblical
Turn around.

Go away
With the giant coreopsis bouquet
Sticking out your car window,
Go away

When
You've taken what you feel is yours.
A barbed wire topping will be erected
In your honor

Say residents
Already parceled, dismayed in chain link,
Armed guards with a heightened sense of *not*
In my backyard.

Back
To the Chumash, who had no notion
Of private property, no words for
Go away.

Angels Flight

one ups, one down

I hear it is somewhere near downtown
on an imposing, unbearable hill.
Not needed, it goes nearly nowhere,
a train of two connected cars
that can't stand each other,
opposing forces moving until still
and farthest apart and finally, content.

Needing no help up and so only let down,
the angels see people living perpendicular.
The angels ride alongside the people,
making astral faces as the cars pass,
their flighty fog faces disdain the glass.
The angels, I hear, are a serious lot,
but here they have their funicular.