

Confessional

Friends, I'm having one of those days.
Everything's bad and getting worse.

It's obvious by now that for all the valiant
and selfless striving, most of us won't

change fast enough for it to matter.
The trash, the cars, the meat, the water:

do your part or don't, trust science
or that guy on YouTube, it's the same. Friends,

as a poet I shouldn't be writing this, but
my mood's in no mood to worry about

how it makes me sound. Well, challenge accepted.
Ask yourselves this: what were you expecting

when you breezed in here past a title
like the one above? Something squalid and personal,

all binges, breakdowns, and performative trauma?
Sorry to disappoint, but in my disclosure

the catastrophe on display is you, not me.
Fact is, friends, I'm ashamed for our species,

and for most of us as individuals too.
I wish it wasn't like that, but it is. Boom.

So you can understand why I'm always
coming back here, this bright noplac

where I'm never too proud to remember
kindnesses shown me when I was poor,

or lonely, or foolish, by someone with nothing
to gain. Because here, the rinsed light of morning

never quite fades from the view out over
green quiltworked fields, orchards, a river

sweeping grandly off toward the sea beyond.
And today you came, which makes me glad

because why shouldn't it? It does. It will.
Here I wish you, I wish us all, well.

Skútustaðahreppur, a Volcanic Lake in Iceland

for A.

Charcoal uplands, barren and crumpled.
Lunar distances, a serrated horizon,
low murky skies. Rain this morning.
Rain again soon.

A puddled uphill path, slimy
with trodden ochre mud, skirting
the pipes and outbuildings of a hydrothermal plant,
sleek and toylike and alien
against this jagged umber sea
of scabbed-over lava.

At the top of the rise, more mud
slickening the approach to the unfenced rim
of a fissured escarpment.
Down where the crater
plunges like a puncture,
our first glimpse of what we came for:
a blown-glass pool, improbably blue,
aglow like a sapphire ember,
stoked by breaths from a sun
slathers of cloud keep hidden.

We look and look,
but discover nothing
of that unlikely color
for these waters to mirror.

And so,
almost dissuaded from fancying ourselves
as likewise bedded, jewel-bright,
amid broken tracts of circumstance
but not quite,

we turn away as one
into the weather coming swiftly on.

White Lies

Close the book
and shake your head:
makes you think,
what those men did.
Well, days like that are done.
[number one]

We arrive to find
no one around.
Once the wars
make it all ours,
we save a lucky few.
[number two]

They sail here in chains
but we set them free
[which makes three],
so we're not to blame
for what happens way before
we're born. *[and four]*

Soldiers we send
to far-off lands
bring freedom's gift.
[that's a fifth]
It can't be an empire if
it's us. *[and sixth]*

This country's built
for men who can sprint
ahead of all others,
not for losers
whining how the lanes aren't even.
[and now seven]

One faith to shape
this nation *[eight]*,
one god to guide
its progress *[nine]*,
one book spelling out when
it ends. *[and ten]*

Another CNN-Induced Lyric Outburst

“—Bad news first thing
this morning, the whole day’s ruined,
it’s over, but hold on now, let’s show
some initiative here, why settle *again*
for being a defeated observer of the spectacle
when I am, after all, a creator, in fact
a poet, and so it falls to such as me to align
the channels of language with the floods of feeling,
such as they are, let loose by these times,
such as *they* are, yet not through a poem
about the bad news, because
it’s not *about* the bad news (it’s about
what we *do* about the bad news, right?), no,
but instead with a poem—which, to review,
is a verbal artifact widely considered
forbiddingly esoteric but actually,
if done right, a source of unique
and lasting pleasure—a poem that betrays
a love of its world (which of course includes
the bad news), and seems to know much more
than it has room to say, and seduces us by design
into almost remembering it, a poem that knows better
than merely to distract from the bad news,
or enact a generic outrage over it, or brandish
whatever gestures are popular right now, or even,
as I think does happen, aestheticize the bad news
and thereby collude in it, so *no*, not
a poem like that, but one that does for the reader
what the Earth does for its forests, what
the forests do for our air, what the dead
end up doing for the living, what the living do
or should do for each other, what each of us is doing
(whether we know it or not) for the future,
what the future, or what used to be the future
(and not that one the bad news just brought closer),
what the future, if we weren’t afraid to remember it,
is supposed to do, and might still do, for us all.”

Terminus

There were never many trains for us to take
and most are long gone by now.
The big arrivals board is blank. Or broken.
The help desk went dark hours ago.

That scruffy local crosses the decrepit hall
for another quick one at the bar.
He seems amused to find us still here, still spiked
on our droll illusion, departure.

Phone-faced children sprawl like flotsam. Another family
is escorted off: when you ask why, a uniform shrugs.
The woman feeding the trash pyramided over its bin
pivots away as it gently avalanches.

On the newschannel, floodscapes, char, a cataract
of protest. Heart attack orange splatters
map after map. Arrows knit cartel hierarchies
or evacuation routes. Red carpets fritter.

They're garbling the announcements now, unless I've lost my ear
for the beige idioms of official disregard.
Adscreens on endless loop splash an ice-blue glow
that eases our passage from outraged to bored.

Your turn to luggage-sit, mine to scavenge a concourse
of forlorn boutiques. For some change, the soldier
with no legs offers the eye-contact I instantly regret.
If it's too late, fuck it, his placard reads.