

At his Bedside/Pier Jump

At the end of the lifeguard pub crawl
we gave in to the evening,
to the pier stretching like an exclamation
point under us, dark water
everywhere, hard as concrete when we hit it.

And we would hit it, and it would give in,
but it would hurt. We told
lifeguard war stories those nights, of work
on the sand, hysterical bee
stings slightly soothed, and lost kids

forgotten much of the afternoon, whom
we would sing surf songs with,
in tall, saggy chairs at the top of the ramp,
and when their parents got there,
they were scared straight, no wandering stories.

He was asleep so I didn't say anything
at first. He was pitch white:
his hair, his face, his slim arms, the sheets.
His breathing labored, like he
was going under waves, wave after wave

of old age washing over him, with shits
underneath, crooked ribs
from the fall at first. His frail legs had failed,
full of sea water, hardening
into concrete, still, and toppled by stories.

On lifeguard pub crawls, mediocre rescuers
told tales of heroic saves,
of strong riptides and three-story-tall waves,
while the good ones smirked,
it was about *prevention*, making little moves,

(At his Bedside cont'd. Pg. 2, new stanza)

using precise words, herding swimmers
away from danger, lifeguards
as shepherds, as good lords of boredom,
smiling nice polite smiles
at the end of monotonous, lonely days

smiling at each and every sunset, every
green flash, each beachgoer,
like you knew them, like they were something.
He told war stories that were
work stories, about low level work in a B-25

over Burma, China, strafing, gunning for evil,
mopping up messes like a janitor.
The diving, the disappearing into darkness,
started just after midnight:
some leapt with arms eagle wide, some found

the curl of swans off the top, the can-do
of pelicans striking like lightning
through a crack in the concrete. I stood
watching him open mouthed
like an emptied oyster; he was the pearl.

I was about to pencil jump, my arms tucked
in, my shoes still on to stifle
the fall; he didn't have to leap, just fall asleep.
It would be a hard peace
as the looming white sheets covered him.

His breathing went as I went after a good talking down.
After a good talking down, he crawled in.

Valley Boy

-*"Gag me with a spoon."* -Moon Unit Zappa

There are no more porn stars, it doesn't pay.
No more whores on the horizon, no one plays
outside. Monogamy a more affordable, affable grid.
Square on square on square of lower class middles.
We won't get tangled up in cul-de-sacs, or the hills
where blind curves and long bare sexy stretches
unwind like rattlesnakes, slip off like horseshoes.

We know our mini-malls malignant, but spreading
is another thing, they're contained at every intersection.
Sure they malign the horizon, but where are we
supposed to get a hair cut, a donut, our dog washed?
We store our liquor at every corner, like fleeing
to the bow of a ship, when we need air, an airy feeling.
I was inside a Seven-Eleven during Nine-Eleven

slurping, coughing up syrup, soft-serving ice cream
when those grand towers fell, like when the world
went to hell in 94, quaking, shaking, apartments
coming undone, falling into apartments below,
crushing those, crashing into carports, crushing cars.
Shattered glass and cigarette smoke everywhere.
The university parking structure concrete curled

soft like play-doh. "*Doh*" Homer would say, missing,
then taking the punchline, the gut punch, missing home.
I was born with a silver surfboard under my arm,
a mild grey marine layer stalled over me, cold feet.
I came to straight edges, heat and concrete late,
need a suburban cityscape to push up and through
to stand like a salty weed, a seedy purple wildflower.

Venice Beach Pastoral

I'm at the height of my power. I'm guarding
the Avenues and the riptides are strong pulling.
We're in and out of the water, towing in, moving
swimmers, doing our best *Baywatch* sprints
and dramatic dive-ins when I get a call that hints
of punishment: clean the headquarter bathrooms.

I'm swimming in *Comet* and bleach, the fumes
pulling me under and the red wall phones
are ringing like hell, like boxing bells. The rips
are strong pulling and they need me saving
the pudgy kids, the sloppy Joes not shaving
yet, whose big, bold smiles are misbehaving,

as their sound round faces stand over the sand
and they can't let go of my red rescue can,
when the Captain storms in, the Captain
pulls me across the floor to the open door,
the water near the mop a dirty grey, not azure,
into a blue sky like nothing I've worked in before.

Balboa Park

Like a parked car, it sat stagnant,
smelling like treated water.
The storm drain hadn't stormed yet,
the river unwilling to run,
a strange foam following the small waterfall.

Rush hour began and still it sat still,
but on paths amid bleached
grass and pieces of trash, people
walked and children played,
lovers talked and it was meaningful.

Like a car stuck in traffic but still on,
the park had our hearts.
Its only high-rises the sycamore trees,
its skyscrapers were geese,
coming in for belly landings on the lake.

Like a parked car, with engine running.
Our open space, closer
to clouds, the stop-and-go that
went all the way around.
Lovers kissed and it wasn't a mistake.

Rain came and the park got moving,
swiped clean, green grass
growing all winter, not sprung in spring.
Rain came and the park sat
desolate as people partied in their cars.

Rain gone and the park went wild
mustard over dust brown hills,
Indian paintbrush splattering pavement,
fresh mint alongside asphalt
and people in their cars studying stars.

Lifeguard Elegy

There is no undertow.
No thin string of water that wraps around your toe
and pulls you under.

There is no underworld.
The light oozes and melts away the farther down you go
into darkness if deep enough.

There is a riptide.
A flow of surface water that moves you out past the waves
into a flowing circle,

where the mourners gather
on surfboards, throwing leis and tears at the gathering
water, look into the offing,

what Heaney called the ocean
*visible, at a distance from the shore, the emptier it
stood, the more compelled*

the eye that scanned it.
You would have been out there on a stand-up paddle board
or on a sailboat beset

by the wind, you would have been
out there, never bored, for the ocean is never the same
as before, it is never

yesterday. We are in
the riptide, it is pulling us in your direction, it is pulling us
out to sea, ripping apart

the past from the present,
rushing us into hopelessness but still in sunlight it does not
pull under or push darkness.

(Lifeguard Elegy cont'd. Pg. 2. New stanza)

To get out of a riptide,
you swim parallel to shore until released, and then in; we might
swim parallel to shore

the rest of our lives,
even as our mothers call us in for dinner, even as the light leaves
or we might swim in,

into the might of the riptide,
for we are strong swimmers, right into the fastest flow, toward
the glow of a still warm beach.

Yes, we just might
do what you did, come in with the wind, come in with someone
who couldn't swim.

-For Ben Carlson. 1982-2014.