

AT THE STATION

Red balloon tied around my wrist
bounces against the present. One day
I will catch up with where
I am not now. Had I left on time to meet you

I might hold this balloon
without knotting it around a soft spot
between lunate and radius. So many knots

to love: anchor hitch, constrictor,
classic figure eight. Balloon is for your son,
the first nephew born here in the summer
of lost balloons. This balloon

can toggle
below the ceiling
of his nursery. He can fixate
on shadows and contemplate being alive again. I'm talking

Tibetan here: in pictures
he looks so much like Uncle Jack
it's hard to think he's not our uncle
who swallowed a knot and tried

to drink it out of his body
until he had no body. Or else

your boy
is Uncle Chili who bit a dog who was
one life away from human. Don't blame your son

if he buries his teeth in the backend
of a stray he's acting out

a link of karma
thicker than the halyard hitch,
more consistent than the soft shackle knot. Earlier

I stopped at a Mennonite fruit stand
to buy bruised fruit
from their still life with bruised fruit bins and fall in love
with their faith
in wool vests and bonnets.
My last birth

(continue, next page)

(At the Station, stanza break)

played back to me in the heat: ninth pup
in a litter, my thirsty mouth.

Almost at the station now, half-way
over the rise—I have a story

to tell your son from when you and I
were boys: how once, asleep in the kitchen

I woke and didn't know
who or where I was

but found you
curled around a chair
like a comma and knew the bones
of my face
in the bones of yours.

LAST CALL

On the sidewalk we wing-flap
angels into snowbanks
then rise to high-step Ben Franklin Parkway

where open signs receive us, the glow of late
happy hours, bar lights blink,
almost Christmas, the cold a kiss-a-stranger-whose-hair-
reminds-you-of-the-weather
type of night.

Snow in the streetlamps
is positively George Bailey—I'll take a bridge

neat with a back of Clarence, a river
to receive us in the dark, an order
of Pennsylvania's favorite son long-faced

at the long bar's far end—I see him
chasing a shot of wish-I'd-never-been-born
with a pint of please-let-me-live.

Among specimens and oddities

we shine
evangelical-like: someone, quick:
draw our picture on a napkin for a dollar,
watch me bury myself

to the nose in your sub-
conscious—you only dream of faces
you've seen
wrapped in ice I freeze the evening

hippocampus-like for you. Tonight we
hijack the Mütter Museum

for a round of temporal lobes, Grover Cleveland's
jaw tumor, Ben Franklin's breath

in a jar at the front of the Mummer's Parade
where Ben himself stands black-faced and naked. We are going

backward in time, if you don't know,
standing by traditions

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(Last Call, no break)

like God's lower gorillas
knotted to trees.

Send a round of Einstein's brain
down to the prep-schoolers in the corner
in their holiday Holden Caulfield hats, red-brimmed,
red-eyed,

then bring three shots of innocent bystanders
in the spirit of Dr. Hyrtl's human skull collection.

When the driver comes for us
please let no one
jump the guardrails

unless each of our ships rock
among the ships in the shipyards

waiting for
last call's hammer-on-triangle
to ring us out

to high-step back the tracks we made
and meet our angels
open-armed.

TOMORROW WE LEAVE FOR MARS

Goodbye
to our last night
standing on the balcony

under the fresh uranium glow.
The air is positively
fabric softener, the sky

a slide of cheek sells
held under a microscope.

Add one drop
of methylene stain,

bacteria
bang wildly
like every interaction
is a new world
blooming. Once we settle

on Mars

we'll need to tank spring water
to our split-level
biodome if your flatbread

is going to
turn out
the way your grandmother's did.

My sweet *gwiazdy*—for Mars

be sure to pack
your Kundalini
breathing practice;

I will pack
my favorite belief: that dog
is the last link on the wheel
before human again. Combined

on Mars

our faith is a foaming mouth. To be

(continue, next page)

(Tomorrow We Leave, no break)

on Mars,
 I mean

really on Mars, we'll need
 some nook of night

with drinks and quiet
 and no comparable word in English,

a sushi bar
 filled with graceful kanjis
where a stranger
 picks up the tab. Leave the stranger at the table,

say you'll be back. On Mars
 we might go days, weeks without
seeing outside, might

 forget the sky and taste of water, the way

sidewalks from home were always uneven.
 On Mars

 there's a first layer most people say
is far enough, they say
 stay there, that after the first

the second layer is too far away. We have to find it

 no matter how long we look
without a plan for what we're seeing,

without a name of the red around us, just
 some idea a newer red
 will welcome our approach.

 People
turn in early on Mars. Let them sleep.

 We'll mix
our spit in the clay,
 replot the family tree.

HALFMOON ISLAND

Far side of lighthouse, coffee urn
plied with trinkets to farewell you
not knowing where the Mohawk ends.

Nowhere runs forever.

My homemade skiff

will go so far then sink. I'm sorry. It was
all I could do with scrap.

No tack or sail. The wind

might land you

on Halfmoon Island. You'll rest among
wild ferns that grow between rocks.

Next life

you'll be wellborn, well-bred.

What is being well

on the far end of a get-well note? I'm no longer

well-adjusted.

You deserve a three-masted vessel

for the Greek of your bone ash.

Such ancient dust

inside us all, our ziggurats

framed stage by stage, staircase to shrine.

I thought holding flame to this mastless sloop
would let me watch what's left of you
consumed by wave and fire, to see something
between the two but what? Spirit? Soul?

The ancients of your line
said every bone has a brain, the body a singsong
of stacking minds. Which mind knew first
you were gone? Did the mind of your heart

whisper stop

the night the moon was halved? Small minds of hands
fold over, your fingers twist into prayer—each word
a misnomer. If fish had gods

they'd be fish. Jesus walked this river once,
is out there now. He spies your raft

beyond the bend

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(Halfmoon Island, no break)

after Kosciusko Bridge. Dead minds lock in a bow.
We dressed you in your one good shirt,
placed a coin beneath your tongue
so downriver you will not beg.

DINER STILL LIFE WITH PRESENTISM

Everyone I know, sit with me at once, you're
always here in my diner with me as these thumbs
turn in my lap when my mother reaches
across the table with a clutch of napkins
the moment before I spill my drink—brothers will you
spill out of your sides of the booth
laughing at the side of scrapple I lose half-way
to the men's room years before we are men
but always somehow the same?
Stained carpet on the exact morning
all these years later, my diner always happens,
we are here discussing dues and the will-not-do's
of our lives in the summer when the book of presentism
falls open on the table for us to read from the middle
forwards and backwards at once
feeling pre and post-nostalgic then nothing.
Our mistakes make nooks in the wall; this diner
burns to the studs then rises as the first drip of coffee
makes itself real. There is no end to the five-gallon vat
of the Valley's best waffles this side of the river;
you can hardly squeeze out of the booth
without pointing to the model train that runs
the length of dining room below the ceiling,
toy whistle piping just before it disappears through the wall
into the kitchen then back on a loop that runs
like a Carrick Bend. So many knots to love, so many lights
popping out, the same bulbs unmaking then
making themselves again. We put our menus down. We
order and reorder the past, we order what we always order
into the hour when your cells have begun to turn on you.
It's Mother's Day. I sit with every woman in my family.
We drink mimosas once a year all day. I study
the high red of each pair of cheeks that push
into each pair of eyes as each woman smiles. My diner
is known for its high long bar where my favorite waitress
shows her tattoo of the Reaper
playing fiddle in a field of posies. Her song
comes to everyone just now stirring creamers
into coffees with spoons spotted like my mother's mother's
hands which forever tear open a packet of Concord jam,
shaking to get at something in the corner, easing a blunted knife
to roll grape evenly over toasted rye. The payphone
outside my diner always costs a quarter. We cradle receiver
between shoulder and jaw. We repeat goodbyes.