

Waiting in Line at the Liquor Store

That look we exchange in the liquor store —
it's all right there: shame, defiance, oblivion,
the love we've been denied. Let's ignore
the voice of the village scold, let's not give

ourselves up to the perp walk, flashing red lights
in the rearview, the deputy's soft knock
in the middle of the night, screaming fights,
the drunken uncle whose wine-crazy talk

ruins everything. I guess I agree: booze
leads to madness, sometimes in those who drink
and always in those who don't — those who choose
to scorn the devil's alchemy. But think

of it: money turned to spirits, America's
hardest-fought dollar in exchange
for song, friends, poetry, moments without care —
the loving cup, the lifted chalice, strangeness.

Don't I know you from somewhere? Wasn't I
that apeman in the cave of magic berries —
and you that apewoman wandering by,
she who grunted, Fancy meeting you here?

Centralia

*They wanted the coal. They knew they could sell
the coal because everyone needs fire, so
they built the town nearby, and all was well*

*until fire crept into the seam beneath
their feet, rising like the hand of hell
to take back everything they'd made. A wreath*

*of smoke arose, just wisps at first, encircling
their homes, their schools. The fire was something seething
and obscene in the earth's belly, lurking,*

*unseen. There was nothing they could do.
For years it smoldered, relentlessly working
its way — sappers beneath their walls. Few*

*families were spared the sickness, the failure
of human will to stop what is too
big to stop, can never be stopped. Centralia's*

people, places, everything —

*She turns away,
takes the remote, hits MUTE as he inhales,
then she returns her gaze to the cold gray*

*fire of the TV. God, everything's so —
she whispers through tears. Exhaling, he says
Let's see what else is on. I hate this show.*

Grief

Not: I'm so sad, but: I forgot my keys
again. Not: I know I'll always miss you,
but: this food has no flavor. Not: oh please,
God, bring her back, but: I wore the wrong shoes.
And people continue to speak, they say
it's a beautiful day, quite unaware
that beauty's been revoked, mindless that May's
the same as December, that nothing's fair
and nothing matters, that jokes might as well
be Chinese. Their laughter is dust, their pain
is dust, everything's dust. Forecast for hell:
rain. Whatever. Forecast for heaven: rain.

St. David's Head

In my defense, as I would later tell
myself, I was weary, footsore, alone.
I had no map — but no matter. The Welsh
moors, the Irish Sea beating on the stones
a hundred feet below — who needs maps? I
would take no rest, I told myself, until
I reached St. David's Head, and then I'd lie
on the grass beside the path, have my fill
of the wine I'd brought to help me admire
myself for arriving — the end of the world.
I conjured ghosts of murmuring druids, choirs
of angels as luminous as schoolgirls
to greet me, sing my song. But every time
I reached the farthest headland, there would be
another, still farther ahead; the fine
spring day reproached me, mocked me. After three
such defeats I finally lost heart and let
myself collapse beside the path and chew
my onion vanities, watch the sun set
into the sea, drown in sour wine. In due
time I stood and stretched and watched a gull
hop effortlessly into the headwind,
hovering there in flightless flight, the pull
of gravity poised against the relentless
push of wind. And then I saw the trick —
the path bore right. The rocks I'd seen ahead —
an island. But here was where banshees shriek
at fools who've been here all along — St. David's Head.

Jubilee Blues

*Anguish and grief, like darkness and rain,
may be depicted; but gladness and joy,
like the rainbow, defy the skill of pen or pencil.*

— FREDERICK DOUGLASS

The books were all about November — dying
light; brown, withered leaves; black ink on white
paper; words to call the colors. And I
was sure I understood. By candlelight
I read about despair, and understood.
I read about freedom, too, and of love
and the words for its colors, and I could
recite those words. What did I know? Above
the wharf, above the masts, above the smoke
and stink and roaring might of New York, I
saw the sky for the first time, and the docks
were alive with free men in blue; the sky
was blue beyond my words, beyond my books —
I laughed with the men, and began to cry.