

Terror

Our hatred for fanatics is really lust.
Salaaming to news, we shoot salutes through
the television to our commander-in-chief,
who in a powdery blast of press lights
damns the latest security breach
while stewing in a vat of presidential envy.
Whose power is greater? The diplomat
who diddles a tinfoil fuse of interviews
from Jakarta to stony Oslo? Or the Somali
gang bangers who bob like rifle-barbed
viruses in the Gulf of Aden, waiting
to hook a Maersk freighter and pump
red pandemonium into the dried figs
of our hearts? We laud the official whose
lathe of rhetoric whittles the world
to a green marble in his fist. But our most
secret awe laurels the Yemeni teen
who hatches a grenade with enough punch
to unwrap a jetliner and sprinkle
the confetti souls of Dutch tourists
over Detroit. How long before we are called up?
When will we be worthy to rocket
the indigo blots of our butterfly souls
through the windshield of sky? Disasters don't
bloom in an instant. Real fear bristles
like a miracle crop in the sunlight
on board room floors. It booby-traps
lunchboxes with damp dynamite, sews
newspaper straitjackets on subway commuters.
It is the ten thousandth time we rush
to worship loneliness. When a raggedy
pilgrim brave enough to light his fuel-soaked
god complex flips the switch, we rally
with the worldwide cult of hostages,
faces ablaze with twenty-four hour reports,
hands raised heavenward at the orgy
of bombed bystanders and bloody wrecks,
hysterical with hope that we might be chosen next.

American Anthem

Outside Biaggi's, teens in gowns and tuxes
glide through panhandlers in the blind parade.
Dusk stains sidewalks pink. Busses lurch.
Stretched limos promenade. A glum vet,
slim as a blade of candlelight, sinks bills
in his sneaker, claws a scrawny ankle.
At the traffic light, Elvis Costello's scuzzy double
begs means to perch bedside for a dying aunt
in Canada. Should we wonder that
the world is a street corner? Everywhere
you wait, the desire of the day
scrawls a menu of myths on a cardboard sign.
Plush voices crack, ordering a fantasy,
and the man pours the wine. This is
your country. Land of the Guarded Stare.
Hunger scuffs the floor in a dim gymnasium
of sappy ballads and snags the last
slow dance in a diner of overturned chairs.
In the same half hour, you can meet two women,
both in their eighties, one asking about
the Wills boy's suicide, the other with a snapshot
on her avocado fridge—her only son,
absent ten years, dead for all she knows.
Evenings, shove your toes in combat boots,
don a grungy skirt and loose lemon blouse,
slouch against a streetlight, boyfriend in your lap,
while he cadges smokes from Jazz fans.
You can watch mobs of starlings stab rinds
of sunlight in the gutter, wear on your
exposed breast a corsage of grime.
Your standing reservation can be the newest way
to seem, to find a corner to sit and never
get over the day someone handed you a dream.

Qaddafi's Granddaughter

Not long after bombs stop plunging
from the sky over Tripoli, I invade
the "Mommy and Me Class" at the local pool.
A storm broods. Lightning slithers
through murky clouds. The chance that steered
the wayward bird of artillery that killed
the general's four-month old granddaughter
threatens to march us into the break room
for a politically correct safety video
in which Longfellow, a cartoon whale
in Florence Nightingale bonnet, tells the tale
of the only black kid in a gang of four white kids
to get sunburned. For now, our group
floats in a cheerless hub: Sleek teenage teacher.
Eight tubby moms hugging eight girlies
in pig and peppermint suits. My son and I,
the only males, keep the far-off dreams
of deposed kings behind the forged passports
of our smiles. Chilly hypocrites, the adults sing,
"If You're Happy and You Know It,"
paddling the hands and feet of rebel kids.
Each turn of the matriarchal wheel sends
an overcast look of ethnic cleansing
in my direction. Who can splash off the stain
of not belonging? What dark weather
decreed us too heavy for this year's styles?
What tyranny snares me in the whirlpool
of fatherhood? My son, pure Viking, hair as white
as Arctic light, eyes of fierce democratic blue,
senses the shift in regimes as we slip
single-file into The Lazy River. Under guard
of a goofy fiberglass moose, I learn I must
dunk him three times, which I do, loving him more
each time he comes up screaming curses
at this world in which every small life matters
as long as we, the newest circle of leaders,
obey the command to drown our hearts
and immerse our young in the lessons of death.

The Year I Was Born

Mrs. Nixon dogeared The Book of Isaiah
on Capitol Hill. Her husband autographed
the moon. Rock bands roared
like dinosaurs. Movies became porn.
On Yasgur's dairy farm, Jimi Hendrix played
out of tune. It was the era of The Takeover,
The Be In, The Mystical Mind Warp.
Whole communes had sex with the cosmos
and braided a new age in their Aquarian hair.
Every lover's cry uncorked a storm
of psychedelic sparrows, and Norman Rockwell
melted from *The Saturday Evening Post*
like a chalk drawing in a downpour.
Elvis crooned tunes of rocket fuel. *The Times*
said sorry to Robert Goddard's muse.
As Soviets parachuted to Venus, goat-bearded
dropouts got nude on stage and honed
the soul to an arrow of sunflowers.
Remorseless mobs torched American flags
Boy Scouts handed out at parades.
Vietnam, the seamy charade, stained the map
of Pinkville with M-16 magazines
of baby dreams. Who could stay the chaos,
promise school boards things would be okay?
Not rabid Black Panthers. Not the Sac and Fox
dogpaddling to Alcatraz. Not Charlie,
composing for The Beach Boys, or his family,
fingerpainting furies of opulent blood
on mansion walls in the amber lamplight
of their mescaline eyes. Not me, five days old
in San Francisco, crying with the silent majority
in the loins of the nation's lovequake.
Maybe The Mets, who over and over flared
like a hatch of shabby phoenixes. Maybe Ginsberg
chanting on the stand for The Chicago Seven.
Maybe those who overdosed on the acid
of the outdoors, as a Kennedy returned
one of Eve's daughters to the sea
and The New Left boomed like the Fourth of July.
Every dawn greased the wheel of apocalypse.
Every Saturday, a satyr play of the seventh seal.
Impossibly, The Mississippi flowed north
while Hurricane Camille ground her thumbprint
of rain in the face of Gulfport,
and The Cuyahoga River blossomed
in fascicles of flame when God showed himself
on a street corner and the world added my name.