

Night Makers

Imagine the assembly of nights.
A zodiac conveyor belt tightens all their bolts
and tosses them across Mayan squares.
Everything must be exactly in place, precise
every nose, beaded bracelet, pair of gray
vans, limit. All ambition hardens in drizzle,
Thursdays left out to dry in the sun
stretched side by side with loose teeth and used condoms,
peace of all the body's cells, streetlight circles
lining the way home, the desire to break,
and other things that will vanish by morning.

This night isn't done, they may frown
before adding a walk alone
through rain prickles that fall only
between one and two AM, a stanza.
The finished nights must come out golden
brown, perfect pies with swollen bellies
and crusts puffed just right, the perfect resistance--

although I will never know,
not being a maker myself.
I consume nights passed to me
one after another, as they are dropped
into my round and hungry palms.

Titling

This is how you get a woman to tear her body apart,
not by crooning or cookies, but by the time to title.
Give her unlined. Mean it.

It isn't the carrying she'll do it for or even the lifetime
of doorways opening and closing with curfews and college,
white paint peeling a little but holding.

It isn't for the memorizing or finishing or slimming,
the coolness of a hand or season, not for the shower,
green park benches nor the railings penning
them in from the East river, not for being strung
or doing the stringing, hopes, fears, and meals
softening in a wide milk bowl placed on a weekday wooden table.

It isn't even for the release of something heavy.

This is the kind of pain that is worth it.
This is for the setting down, observing
footsteps down a long carpeted hallway, for learning
and fattening and heat, basketball courts and cobblestones
and wildness that hangs just above bicycle handles
and December dew. This is for the bath,
the cleaning, decades lined up like bowling pins
and brimming with the mystery of the place behind them,
somewhere only strikes and gutterballs know,
a place to push toward where speed is good.

This is for the naming,
the grace hung on the lips of a life
as it puts another into words.

Red Telephone

I think the green bananas are a kind of street
sign, and that the wind behind
the lens is misleading.
Polka dots are classy, in a way
only salt crystals could understand, and
this striped world could learn by not hanging up
the phone - the world could learn
a lot by pronouncing the 'tele'- and twisting
its coiled cord like the 80's, or the curls of a girl
before straight was the style.

Seventeen failed
relationships darken my mind
tonight, and so does one successful marriage.
So does the right choice, and so do
the peppered canyons between the seconds
before my very first

kiss. I hope the words don't learn
about caution. I hope they'll tumble forever,
without searching for another time. I hope
you're awake right now to share
the night with me, because someone,
somewhere, is tasting for the very first time
champagne, crayons, red canyons,
saltshakers, the bravest sand dunes,
and the bladed bananas
in all their terrestrial tartness.

Solving

Here is the problem. An unbalanced equation
is your banner, your alphabet. Today
is shiny floors and backpacked crowds;
you don't know your schedule.
Your shoes give you blisters, a growth
spurt is on its way, the bus pulls up.
Faces and pencils sharpen.
This is the stage of questioning.
Now is learning forms, names.

Here is the during. You are stumped.
Something won't balance, or the plugging was flawed.
Word stacks are crooked. Draft four takes hours.
This is when the boy doesn't like you back
and lab goggles begin to print red
on the bridge of your nose. There is no sleep.
This is combustion. The bus is on the Deegan,
you have fallen in love. Boyle's law
makes sense of pressure. Things heat up.
Nick Carraway has turned thirty.
We use machines to see through flesh.
People put themselves into tubes and call it flight.
The SAT is next Saturday. You move to a new city
and spend afternoons alone. Your brother leaves home.
The dog begins to forget old faces.
This is the Experiment. You'd give anything for more.
Objects are in motion; forces are unbalanced.

Here is the conclusion. You factored
correctly. Carvings around your eyes run deep.
Goggles are back in the lab cabinet, finals
are over, sneakers have molded to your feet. Bus
doors swing open, it is May. Now is for printing,
sending away, recycling. The good guys win.
Romeo and Juliet have separate funerals.
We have named the elements. Prom
is dancing to a song you know all the words to,
and your ears ring in darkness remembering.
He will be in a different time zone. You are over.
Forces have acted. The system is at equilibrium.
This is at rest.

55 Minutes in America Today

--Thomas Hart Benton

I. City Activities with Dance Hall

My head lay in your lap in a feed-me playground
when I realized I would never leave this planet.
It starts on the right foot, ten cents a whirl
between trapeze artists and cigarettes over sidewalks,
the only place where concrete steps
back, stilettos of mica
and chewed gum boots. Yellow dresses
are not my style, my grip was a strength
you wanted. We hadn't made landmarks.
Our ground was ordinary. My mind
had nowhere to go
other than here. Before reasons,
there were "why-nots." Because we wanted
to live, we called this instinct.

II. City Building

This is the part where I fall
and you mock everything I believe in,
then face it beside me and bear upon your back
the blueprints, paintings, pavements,
the making of nights and cities.
These were conversations that you needed
to be excused from. Our fingers scabbled
through broken glass for an earring
in the dark. The art of losing
excited you and the shards
we left behind. The people who built this spine
knew power, or at least got lucky.
Here where they dug the tunnels
we can only imagine how it felt to lay the tracks,
the makers of Sin City and electric lights
scraping the sky, escaping into the bowels
of the earth because this is their beginning,
they've been here since ours, and in the darkness
before traffic there could have been
only ambition and a mind to move.

III. Steel

Silver pushes us forward.

Instruments of Power

This is what we hold between stops, our rails
and our tracks and our turns, your shells,
my speed, something we both rode
and wrote. You think of steel's dense breath,
I hold mine high, this night
like the time we danced on the platform
coming home from Mulberry Street or the Oculus,
and this is what I think of when I see a rat.
I discovered your back, an alien swan
rippling with April inhales and chords, solid
as a moon pebble heading home.
Nobody had constructed this spine I wanted.
We pass our thundering words
from palm to palm, triumphant in our roar.

IV. Coal

This is what we've avoided, the dust
that clings to curved bones
where something straight once stood.
Your letters on a sheet scream
that you were here and thinking,
maybe of your pidgeon fear
or the caverns between their coos.
Tell me about Basquiat, his scribbled skins.
Faces eat each other in neon red
and green, your colors. Mine are missing.
All I can rely on are green bananas,
the ones I explained to me years ago
standing in front of a painting in a white
walled room that taught me everything I know
about love and slipping. You were in the background,
busy with musicians whose figures didn't fit
together, just the way you like bodies.
Ripeness was off with yesterday's dusk. We were green
and peeled before our prime.

V. Instruments of Power:

We have so many: plastic combs, fearlessness,
promenade walks, goldfish, the sputtering
of one La Croix to another, stamina of self,
our own. We have pages, fish that spin on the scarlet
ceiling, and the blessings of Mother, Father, and Pa
who will be coming home just as soon as the panes

Instruments of Power

are there or not at all, our outlets sideways
and the rugs have all become carpets.
This floating sinks to skinning, the small loves
shifting into all our nights in warm socks, sunset,
cucumbers discs sprinkled with salt,
your pupils pooling into puddles of iris
with a tight black yolk at the center, 100 Barclay Street,
our freedom and lips of the buildings
speckle sky against the cold
even though you aren't here tonight.
Yesterday we inhaled those minutes,
standing in the shower in pajamas and clarity
under scalding water cradling our ankles,
the ink river that takes you home every time.
I must be cracking your eyes against the rim
of my metal bowl or your collarbone,
this smooth countertop and the tracks of my ribs,
and under the lamplight your breaking
looks more like magic, the kind that turns this
into something worth saving for last.

VI. Changing West

Do I know your handwriting?

VII. Midwest

Saint Louis in the sun of the continent, starry
eyes blinking like hideous eggs
into orbits of day. Tell me
how it feels to recognize the smell of storm
before it comes. Show me your precipice.
What was it like when you named this "rain"?

VIII. Deep South

A place we're happy to be out of,
just imagine all the dove to be tasted
and all the feathers that will interfere.

IX. City Activities with Subway

At first, I held my breath and plunged,
gorging myself on the grime, battering
again and again. The shame
scraped deeper than I'd like to admit.
The city doubled and I crusaded alone,

Instruments of Power

certain of speed. I am on my own,
for my own, the ownership
of occupancy. The man across from me
has a square face--has he been here, have I
had this since the beginning? It's been here.
I wouldn't call it love. It was triumph
without anyone to pull me back
from the yellow line that replaces the white.
The track splits road and we meet
in the middle, shifting our weight
from foot to foot, street into sight
into home that never needs balancing.

X. Outreaching Hands:

Finally, the palms it always comes back to, the palms
that cup the seconds between our doors and our lips.
Certain that this is prayer, all the mornings
will be like this: 83rd and York the harbor
of our goodnight, the back of your neck bobbing
home, my anchor.
Our first and only, summits and telephones
make sense of our Picasso conversations,
our masterpieces framed in color and light,
shapes that come together.