

LINNAEUS' PRAYER

by

Michael Lavers

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

The University of Utah

August 2015

ProQuest Number: 10000295

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10000295

Published by ProQuest LLC (2016). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Copyright © Michael Lavers 2015

All Rights Reserved

The University of Utah Graduate School

STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The dissertation of Michael Lavers
has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

<u>Jacqueline Osherow</u>	, Chair	<u>04/13/15</u> Date Approved
<u>Barry Weller</u>	, Member	<u>04/13/15</u> Date Approved
<u>Matthew Potolsky</u>	, Member	<u>04/13/15</u> Date Approved
<u>Vincent Cheng</u>	, Member	<u>04/13/15</u> Date Approved
<u>Kimberly Johnson</u>	, Member	<u>04/13/15</u> Date Approved

and by Barry Weller, Chair/Dean of
the Department/College/School of English

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

Linnaeus' Prayer is marked throughout by a desire to name and to record. The collection begins with a sonnet sequence, titled "The Theory of Everything," which records, in part, the struggle of naming the divine as a way of calling it into existence. The long poem "Works and Days," which concludes the volume, looks back to Hesiod not only through reimagining the farmers and shepherds of my own ancestry, but also through more general meditations on the role of human labor and that labor's effect on the land. By shifting between the past and the present, and combining catalogues of the natural world with lines and phrases from several canonical works, this poem strives for what Eliot calls "an easy commerce of the old and new."

As the volume progresses, the poems' gaze gradually falls earthward, moving from God and heaven, to ancient shepherds and upturned earth. Poems in "A Golden Age" insist on the presence of the mythical or miraculous in the things of this world, whereas poems in "After Earth" struggle with depicting an imagined afterlife in terms that are not explicitly earthly. Broadly speaking, this collection engages and interrogates a variety of traditional poetic forms by renovating them with a recognizably twenty-first century idiom and urgency. Dickinson writes, "you cannot solder an Abyss / with Air," and each of my poems, no matter what its subject, strives to weave its language into a material whose textures might defy entropy, as if to replace, as far as this is possible, what has been lost.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
Linnaeus' Prayer.....	1
THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING.....	2
0.....	3
1. t.....	4
2. m.....	5
3. c.....	6
4. =.....	7
5. Negative.....	8
6. Credo.....	9
7. Multiverse.....	10
8. Codicil.....	11
9. Field Guide.....	12
An Afterword: DNA.....	14
A GOLDEN AGE.....	15
I	
Christmas Eve in Frankfurt.....	17
Öland.....	19
Arkhangelsk.....	20
A Prophet.....	22
Three Horses.....	23
Cryptozoologist.....	26
Elegy.....	27
II	
Andromache's Lullaby.....	29
A Golden Age: Invocation.....	30
Book I: Bough City.....	31
Book II.....	32
Book III: The Gold Man's Wife.....	33
Book IV: "Ave verum corpus...".....	34

Book V.....	35
Book VI.....	36
Book VII.....	37
Book VIII: Execution of J. Hock, Cattle Rustler.....	38
Coda.....	39
 AFTER EARTH.....	 40
The Rustle of Hemlock.....	41
Granted.....	42
Underground Psalm.....	43
After Earth.....	44
Patmos Revisited.....	45
Cosmography.....	46
Letter from Deep Space.....	47
Light Years.....	48
 WORKS AND DAYS.....	 49

Linnaeus' Prayer

thank you Lord for creations so numerous
we have something to do
with all this ink

and forgive me
for pressing flowers in books
instead of boiling them down

to make medicine
for lingering at streams
for bowing to bones

and I'll forgive you for being
superfluous

if earth is your echo
it does not need us to express
ourselves

even the stars are empty
and in love with decay—like you

I was lonely I bred
new roses
and named them

Hieroglyph

Abracadabra

Stare at the Sun and then Close Your Eyes

THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING

0.

Before the rest, there was one word,
and nobody to speak it. Then some change occurred:
Lord Naught, Lord Spark, Lord Boom: we, too, delight
in figures that can equal day and night,
in knowing how from that hot loam of nothing
something bloomed; that gap our grieving
planet filled; the endless fall and span
of atoms you spat out when we began
to spume dark matter like your pseudonym,
signing this print: the fallow earth they chose
that fall to till and where they now, still, pose:
he making a face, her blush of laughter,
the date and details hazy, colors dim;
a word, a flash, an everything, an after.

1. t

I say the word now and a piece of the future breaks
off, a ruin of memory. Where else is there?
Does the horizon lean, or does my balcony,
this fourteen-story babel filling air?
These little minutes could return, and clocks quiver
their arrows. These little minutes could return
the fingertips that frost stole from the fern,
the blueberries that made the blackbirds stay,
before the silt of moments settles into century,
or the galaxy's white hem begins to fray.
One second turns one and a half. Then two.

This does not sound like grief, because it ends,
and what we now call now begins,
on spinning ground, to swell until it bends askew.
Only the sun's still sweep can keep Earth true,
a brief bubble of atmosphere inside time's level.

2. m

What is that sound, that minute rockem sockem
punching holes through Zeno, proving Occam
wrong? A faint mass chorusing a *Kyrie*,
Gloria, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei* into a theory
of everything, the latest name for Logos,
Blue Lotus, White Raven, all that hocus pocus
mumbling supernovas in its sleep,
the hatchling protons playing chicken under
the skin of things? We carry being in us like a thunder.
So much appears that we should keep
and then is gone, some inarticulate
conversion to a dark- or anti- state,
even our atoms crave communion, some mathematics
that replaces you with *Y*, a crucifix with *X*.

3. c

it's not dark yet so quickly tell me you
and I inversely proportional I'm standing still

in case someone's listening like you
like the stars like the sun you are like

only more so some nights only fog some a slant
of horizon some nothing at all but we live

beyond nights in the hour where where
fades what names are there for it say one

then presto the moon and these words
if they cannot reach you tell me what can

they do castaway from the window
outside space beyond that speed

where mass miscarries number dies
as it is Oh god I hope in paradise

4. =

The storm cloud's pent-up clamor over matter
prattles on, but won't amount to much,
so ants resume dismantling a peach, like math
slowed down. Vocabularies screech
like rookeries: Lord, make me a letter
clogged with light, some constant that can carry
over upturned plots toward the flat skyline,
and whisper like a shibboleth
past sight into a better, if there is one,
state. No jot or tittle lost. Run it again:
slim gray foals in spring become
mayflies floating upstream; bodies combine
with time and turn to air, and air
combines with breath and turns to song.

5. Negative

this space stays blank an undeveloped impression of absence
 a shell with no
 sea to echo
 off no- thing to
 no one the sound
 of dark noise
 nothing dare
 utter in order to
 save its own silence:
hush. the word incarnated to silence itself the word looked at but
 not seen anti-re-
 flection al-
 most belief
 if nothing is no-
 thing there must be
 something not unlike
 the space that snapped when in the beginning it named itself *god*

6. Credo

But how can we say silence smokes us out
into the pointless pandemonium
of verb and tense, when your music is everywhere?:
the well-fed fly, a fire eating air,
a swish of thistle, and the vultures' scrum,
a groaning whetstone, and the sighs
of earth taking a spade, the griefs that teethe
inside our bones and which, taking for praise,
you multiplied, the granite sky my echoes
thrash into an unrequited dust.
I ache for Sabbath, Lord, some rest
from you, a word to catch your garish breath,
or else, if I'm your mime, to burn our tongue of dross
until we both say of that silence *it was good*.

7. Multiverse

Let constellations shrink to form our figures;
one nesting doll stand for a universe,
the whole set, counterfeits, or funhouse mirrors,
foreign faces pressed like flowers
ramifying on the inverse
of a single skull, as hers—
inside the casket, in the hearse—
was stained with soot from years of seizures.

Sometimes this world's thin boundary blurs.
Sometimes we look and see strange stars.
A fish rises and doesn't. One breath stirs
to frost whose dizzy fractal alters
infinite, unfurling futures,
some with softer earth. They too are ours.

8. Codicil

What if there's only earth? What if I made
a phantom praise? The church bells
bite their tongues. These stained-glass leaves
might crown a never-ending, other-worldly green,
but can't unravel light or rival shade.
A steam comes off the common asphodels,
and these poor prayers quiver in the pause
before a hawk, quitting the belfry, dives.

That silence taught me to fear fall.
But minds can make the most beautiful
ruins. And light obeys strange laws.
Say amen. That's the birth of a universe:
nothing, then the word for nothing, the sound
of night, a fir tree ticking in the wind.

9. Field Guide

Come little wind, come sad chinook, and catch
me like a weed, some strain of yellow vetch,
pluck nothing but the uncut rusty strings
of purple sedge and mouse-ear, strum these rows
of barberry and spread the milfoil's disease,
unsift the sleeping houndtongue and the toadflax,
drain the sour backwaters of my brain
to sow a line of henbane, tansy, ragwort,
brome, the greater groundsel then the lesser,
choke my ears with burs if you are there,
just speak as plainly as you can: say something,
true or not, like beargrass, not a grass,
which bears don't eat, no matter what it's called:
elk grass, turkey beard, quip quip, firelily.

An Afterword: DNA

"Is all good structure in a winding stair?"
—GEORGE HERBERT

The radio weaves night
 around an aria, bright scales
 wringing the air. One note,

then more, until the high C wails.
 How fleeting, breakable, weary we are.
 A monologue of snails

and lilies in rain: more
 proof than we deserve. And then some
 nighthawk swerving after

self, a soul, the magpie tone
 blood mutters as it gargles
 in earth's throat. Gone

our belief that perfected angles
 tamed fire, framed space;
 articulate angels

on ladders to nowhere. Leather or lace,
 the body was all;
 all we said, said for us;

costume, congenital;
 thin
 wall; a glass in fall

light; a book writing its reader; a town
 I inherit to keep futile
 watch. Where sorrow has been,

singing. Measure it. The level
 strains. Turn, and we're gone.
 Every solo will

end, but the chorus will start up again.

A GOLDEN AGE

Christmas Eve in Frankfurt

*"How is the most fine gold changed!
the stones of the sanctuary are poured out
in the top of every street."*

—LAMENTATIONS 4:1

"Saget, Steine, mir an..."

—GOETHE

As if oblivious to rousing winds
or the nightmares of the monuments,
snow settles its burial cloth
over the bombed-out Roman bath,
brimming a beggar's eyes, balming his hands,

downing boughs where drowsy pawns chase
kings across the park. Another mass
dissolves in pools of wax and candle smoke
uncoiling like the staves of Bach,
framing a stranger's stained-glass face.

How rich had life together been. How silly.
How wise to shadow stars through Germany,
with, between us, one piece of luggage,
one prodigal speaker of the language—
one last fling before responsibility?

How efficient, like a watch's gears, the wound syntax
of names, dates, the few surviving facts
with which occasional gold cobblestones are stamped.
One where we queued at the *finanzamt*,
still two, to give our names, be taxed;

but everywhere. Everywhere
we cavalierly kiss, not unaware
that as river weaves its tapestries of ice,
Earth hardens to paradise,
and prayers unravel into air.

But we rejoice. Adore the word-pierced nave,
the dark the flames announce, believe
in tempera and the devotion
to a stroke that froze a brief ocean
of folds into eternal robes; believe

Hades is fed, and heaven's in the barn,
that we beget no happiness alone,
that we'll forever crown the hills
whose trembling, soft-cheeked Neanderthals
sowed their lineage into garlands of stone;

that it was this that made the oxen bow:
the black earth's whispering tenantry, an undertow
where fallen leaves still loom and seethe
and ferns recoil in springs of sleep beneath
the merciful, indifferent snow.

Öland

Limestone alvar, anvil of sea, hammer
 of air, and ö, the word for island here,
 a closing eye, contracts infinity.
 Gettlinge and Borgholm stand on grave,
 bone-glutted ground, where kings
 and wrights that wrought their strand

into your bloodline, daughter, drowned.
 Islet, seed-husk, idle hour's asterisk
 now swimming in your mother's ken,
 we're broaching names again, as if brute force
 could sound your minute pulse: *Magda Solveig*,
Ingrid Rose—each fair, each false.

Piled like clothes where the river bends,
 May ends. *Praise me* says the rockrose,
marvel at my industry the bee where
 marguerites dress, nakedly. To labour,
 to betroth our tongues to teeth, or stone
 to stone, and see the unrelenting

toil of the sea scour and unhoard the soil,
 pruning the mind of stashed airs, stale songs—
nothing will stay, will stay—and still believe
 the beautiful enough, or work sufficiently
 an end. So much christening. None of it true.
 Swan Bay—because there once were swans—

should do. Little flint, light hoard, vague
 circumference shored by sea-tongue into being,
 take from us desire to hold; from earth,
 a throne by its heirs overthrown, some grief;
 and from this swelling sea whatever name
 contains a perfect thing. And everything.

Arkhangelsk

From the height of a glacier I beheld half a world...
—JOSEPH BRODSKY

1

The train ride up Russia's
north coast makes him nauseous.
Snow falls, in a hurry
to mimic the mercury,

and flapping seagulls'
Cyrillic squiggles
mark, in mute air,
where the mackerel are.

If the formula of the state
is to scribble its *stet*
on each corpus, dictate
its subjects' brief predicate,

demand they pronounce
only plural pronouns,
then what scares the tyrant
is that poems, read

from the right distance,
resemble fingerprints,
that the Hermitage
of one's language,

no matter how abstract,
can't be ransacked.
But what use were metaphors
now, if he froze?

2

He'll chop a wide plot
through that dark wood
the first autumn, follow
his own bright shadow,

until his waves crash
like an accent on our English

shores, making us sound
far from home.

The moon will recycle,
one day, its sickle
into a ruble
he'll pick from the rubble

of stars, and vanish,
with Charon, past Venice.
Not yet. The train comes
to the end of its sentence.

Full stop. He looks over
the cold samovar
of the evening sea.
What breakers say

to the stones isn't much,
but they are no match,
being mere matter,
for the water's rough meter.

A Prophet
from Pushkin

Drinking the dregs of my despair,
I dragged across a wilderness
and met a six-winged seraph where
two roads converted to a cross.
Lightly as sleep, he touched my eyes,
glutting them on prophecies
until, insatiable, they looked
up like a fledgling eagle's, spooked.
Without speaking he filled my ears
with the shudderings of spheres,
and sullen mumblings of heaven,
the bursting of each bud and vine,
the sudden thump of brooding wings,
invisible reptilian seethings
underwater. Then he seized
my tongue, still writhing and diseased
with guile, and with a blood-
stained hand he severed it and sewed
a snake's slick fork onto the root.
He split open my chest, cut out
my heart, then stooped to cauterize
the black wound with live coal. God's voice
called me as I woke on the sand,
strewn like a corpse: *Stand
up Prophet; speak, and I will fill
your mouth with my unbending will:
hold my Word's torch to every town,
to every heart, and burn them down.*

Three Horses

from Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*

1:11

“Those stars there?: they’re called *The Rider*,
and those ones, reined-in, spurred, and saddled: that’s his ride.”
“Or so it seems, at least, from way down here:
behold, from out of the earth rose children of pride... ”

“That’s life, life’s very flesh and blood.
We’re scarcely born before we’re bound and broken.” “...*the trail
of the Lord is straight.*” “But then an order’s understood
before it’s spoke and we become one six-legged animal.”

“Do you really? It’s true you only leave
one set of tracks. But you’ve never chewed a mouthful of
his hay, or sat him at your table—

a constellation’s not reliable
for truth.” “Well, I’ll believe
it anyway, if it makes me happy. It’s true enough.”

1:20

“Then tell me: what praise could I utter
to a God who has no ears?”
“Remember that spring gelding those steers?
One night we saw the Russian trotter—”

“The young grey?” “—cantering in from town,
hobble peg still dragging from his heel
because they’d left him out that night in the alfalfa field.
His mane bobbed up and down

against his thick neck in the cocksure rhythm
of what desperately wanted to be a gallop.
A four-legged fountain of blood,

a field made flesh, song and silence both, space itself within him.
All the legends of the frontier were summed up
for me then, in his image.” “That’s good, Father. That’s good.”

2:4

“They loved it, though they’d never seen that kind of animal,
its gait, its port, such towering withers,
such bright black oceans behind a creature’s gaze.”
“That’s because that kind of creature isn’t real.”

“Of course it isn’t real. But it became
real for them to love it. They had a little space,
a cleared and unfenced plot for it to show its face,
if it wanted. But such a being didn’t need to be corralled. It just came.”

“Sure it did. And was fed on their best oats, I bet.”
“They fed it only on their hope that it would be there
when they looked. Their longing for it gave the creature

such strength, a horn shot straight out of its forehead.
Some say if you stare hard at a virgin’s image in a mirror
you’ll see it, all white now, staring back, instead of her.”

Cryptozoologist

It snorted, coyly, close, if that's the word,
defunct by its own breathing, mortified,
I think, by me, but condescending to be
seen the way one sees a silhouette,
like when leaves fall onto a lake and drape
the sand below in leopard-prints of shade.
No bigger than itself, with height and width,
and moths that haloed it like purple steam.
Eyes, but not exactly. Ears, if I'd addressed them.
Not brash, not timid, almost like a dying
to exist, a hope I loathed for letting
me conceive it; it was not what it was,
an angry consonant I'd hurled to break
like crockery against the canyon wall.
Or else the humming of the Byrd *Te Deum*
heard through vestry marble. But more than that
I couldn't say. I thought that I should praise it
for some reason, but it wandered off,
brushing out its footprints as it went,
and leaving nothing but a thing-shaped hole
behind it in the air, as if pushed off the edge
of being, but neither to fly or fall.

Elegy

While that sheep staggered
up the gravel road, stooped low,
unsheathing seablush from the dirt,
and through a skin of August snow,

or after, when a whisper
warmed the horsetail and the heal-all,
wooing the cows, panning an empire
of reeds for one last pastoral?

While wind plucked everlasting,
miles away, in shoaling light,
your last words, like a harp string,
snapped: *don't be afraid*, you said, and died.

Of course you did. But why
should I try stitching wounded air
with breath where yours should ramify
the bloodroot, foxglove, toad's prayer?

Shepherds plaiting phlox and lily,
filigreeing with their sighs
your vacancy, cannot buck gravity,
or unclot ice, or cauterize

the wind. They loiter and award
prizes for mourning, string a fence
of syllables around their herd
as if to claiming the place grief ends,

language begins; they sing all night.
And so, as when a yearling, spooked,
believes its mother might
be there, I turned and looked.

You weren't. Upstream,
the bees spit out another hive,
and twins the she-goat dropped steam,
inconceivably alive.

Andromache's Lullaby

Son, no helmet or horse
can rearrange the stars
once Venus shifts her course
to better flirt with Mars.

When wind that storms the tower
pauses, you might hear
some godly homesick warrior
sharpening a spear,

and squeals as buzzards feed.
Even the sun goes down.
Even hawks retreat.
So take off your tired toy crown

and sleep, and if you grow
up tall enough to wield
your father's sword, I'll sew
silk armbands for a shield.

If not, the gods know best,
and taper your lamp's flame;
there are worse beds than dust,
and better fates than fame.

For what good is a hero,
what evil can spears destroy,
when every ground is zero,
and every heart a Troy?

A Golden Age

Invocation

A tone, or tense, or feeling, or the sound
of sunlight, then its shockwaves of debris,
a frisson in the leaves, some broken ground,
a warm wind shaken from us, gradually,
leaving behind only the sense that something
had been lost behind a sheen of frost.

But moon,
just be the moon, unmoved by all this howling.
Piano, hauled down from an old Yukon saloon,
unclench a sweaty augury of rain,
and seep our sleep in your gold-rush tobacco
smells—chicory, butterscotch, aniseed, jasmine,
the first B minor chord of *Iris*es in Snow.

Book I: Bough City

First abandoned was the telegraph.
(The railway had found a straighter course).
The silos emptied. The bank foreclosed itself.
The last live bullet soothed the last lame horse.
The saloon snuck out, and then its drunk,
followed by his shadow constable
who faded like his red serge into fable.
Even the cemetery, somehow, shrunk.
No one noticed the cartographer
erase them from the map. One day
the magpies found another place to perch.
Time followed the geese, and flew away,
and the town's two founders left together
as they'd come: the whorehouse and the church.

Book II

No dress. Instead, a whitish falcon, flushed
above lucerne so low its underwings
flashed pink. A white pine was a witness, and rings
spread from a rising trout. For weeks the summer blushed,
so when the first frost of September knocked,
it was too late: granaries, half-built, rose
no further. What wheat cropped fell under the blows
of its own gold until the fumes made
even mayflies dizzy. We were the only yield
that year, the ears a honeymoon's hexameter
conceived, hearing our unborn empire totter,
whole citadels their pleasures exiled
into myth. But whom would temperance leave to please,
or clothes flung into willows spook but prudish, scribbling bees?

Book III: The Gold Man's Wife

So old I hardly knew him, home from Yellowknife
and staring in my eyes as if he saw something he wanted
to pan out. All fingers as he hoisted from his breeches
three small pouches bound onto his belt
by cords to ask if I'd inspect them:
pinches, flakes. Not twelve troy ounces total.
"Next, the big vein," he said, "train's in two days,"
and tenderly retied the fraying draws,
holding his breath to not arouse his precious dust.
"Now I'll go bathe, if you have any soap."
I killed the hen and roasted it with butter
and two small yellow onions I was saving.
I think I thought that we could now afford it
and that a celebration was in order.

Book IV: “Ave verum corpus...”

This, in the grand scheme of things, and compared
to the fates of his penpals from seminary
(Lalande’s gangrene flared
to the hip after wading Whitehorse frost; McCarry
lay sickled by famine back home
with his “da” to manure next year’s crop;
and poor Thibault, whose feet they boiled,
renounced, and fell just short of martyrdom)
was nothing. His chapel’s spire had ruled limp
wheat before his spooked flock chose to chop
the church down and drag it to the city. The field
froze without its sundial. Time was what he missed.
An emptiness now itched over the old foundation stump,
a phantom limb on the bruised body of Christ.

Book V

No preach queerer than the quack touch Doctor's
in the silk tent he pitched past *The World's End*,
a tavern apply named, as hearing it to swell
with Blackfeet, fur traders, and Catholics, the Catholics
by far the fearsomer to me for never seeing one,
I never went beyond it till my fifteenth year,
the year when Doctor came. His subject mostly Babylon,
such curiosities as never counted in our church:
the resting place of Noah's ark, the names of all the priests
of Baal. He gave us from the same cup wine
with honey and who knows, then drawled *a legion*
something as they rushed the creek howling like sows.
So so did I, stomping all fours, not so ashamed
by such a showing as I was to not say *I believe*.

Book VI

Someone wasn't buried fast enough. Someone
was kissed. Or someone cleared their throat,
and then the sewers of some vermin's veins,
finer than Rome's, invaded ours until
even the hawkweed shivered in aftershock.
Miles of silver birch unraveled atmospheres
of gauze but couldn't staunch the rheumy, rife,
and restless air. Distance, that old god,
was dead. The horizon's quarantine retreated
when we ran to it; but this is what it means to be
on Earth, a little shoreless bog where crows
and coyotes steered clear of the corpses.
Nowhere else to go, and no drought long enough
to purge the soil one sexton called "unfit to burry a dog."

Book VII

Drought had preened his daughters to a dross,
prayer had drained him like a leech, so when the well's
dark gullet coughed he felt the fossil
of some eons-brooding bird force-feeding them
its own fermented blood, wet fire,
sunlight caught and curdled in the mantle's heat.
Anointed with it and amnesiac
as Lethe, no more so jealous he would stab
at air for fondling his bride, he'd now repent his lack
and ransack lakes of oil beneath the lap
of stone as if their cache could never hollow.
He'd let rats sponge the slime out of the river's veins.
And who could blame him? Thirst had made him blind.
Some wounds heal. Some gods can't be refined.

Book VIII: Execution of J. Hock, Cattle Rustler

*A pity I had not waited until after the sun went down,
since the mountains that evening were so beautiful.*

—FROM THE JOURNAL OF LT. S.W. SHREVE

Shreve read him something from the Bible. A mule deer
cocked her ears, and shot through rows of bellflower
and a whispering sedge. The unstaked hemisphere
of clay had kilned into a callous floor,
and so they stacked a cairn where the horizon's only tree
offered one bough, thin shade, and buzzard song.
He stood, and Hock, eyes suddenly greedy,
sat on the horse. Shreve clicked his tongue.

It would take minutes. He would suffer.
But Shreve trusted the tautness of a rope
over his rookie's grip on the revolver.
The tree would never blossom into knowledge,
the prairie hadn't learned to pardon or to hope,
and mountains, though beautiful, can't judge.

Coda

From the garden rose the sound of bees
that lurched and wobbled through the peonies.
We ate eggs and toast with milk that warmed
in minutes in the sun while fat drones swarmed
and looped like bullets, misfired from the fields.
It was the sound the mind makes when it yields
to gluttony. I didn't understand,
until one smelled the syrup on your hand,
and in a gold-encrusted, drunken strut,
smeared pollen from its mandibles and gut
along your wrist. That morning you had tied
your hair, and as you rose and ran inside,
it gently bounced, and loosed, and then unfurled.
If the next is better, I'll still miss this world.

AFTER EARTH

The Rustle of Hemlock

I don't know what I'm supposed to want, without you,
from the world. But I can't stand it anymore,
this stagnant sea of days, these endless hours
I must part with breath and breath and breath...
or else be silent in, and drown; these nights,
when lost thoughts rise as flotsam to the surface
of the mind and scrape my skull like waves
slowly devouring a stubborn cliff;
the shifting boundaries of day and night,
when light meanders like a pointless dream,
and this dead earth, our little plot, seems
prologue to some sorrow yet to come:
snow falling on snow, a boy leading
a tame bear on a leash along a ditch,
an empty silo on a distant hill,
the cracked, off-key sonata of the moon
whose cadences could make one fall in love
with doubt and dust and madness and despair,
the soil tinged pink from wars somewhere upstream,
a river on whose currents, as if from my arms,
the last few leaves slip silently away.

Granted

The snow fell steadily all night. I woke
before dawn, smothered in the silver light
of silent fields. The clock tower began,
but not for me, and stray winds bit the plain
until the blushing sky of morning stirred.
Waiting for some signal to get up,
some reason to be here, but nothing came.
Instead, a space between two clouds appeared
to grow with something in it, censuring:
“You’ll lay up naught but frost-bit weeds, stretch
over silence flat facades, painted abundance,
brief shows of energy against unlasting if you
think your common loss into the world;
the briefest specks, an egg with three yolks,
a man waving a white flag at the sky,
outweigh unsettled stars. Confusion, yes.
But even waning moonlight overruns
the little dish of Earth.” When I woke up
again the hills had lost their edge, and a pure
light shone there, just shy of oblivion.

Underground Psalm

And then

my eyes flickered like moths against a window
when the lamp's turned off: first frantically,
as if the friction might wring out more light.
Then not at all. Then from beyond the sun,
smelling of space, a breeze, proemial,
I thought, and warm, until it pushed me past
the barn, outside the claustrophobic orbit
of your futile grooming, stuffed my mouth
with wheat and planted me under deep snow.
And though I knew my absence could not make
something more permanent appear, some bread,
or some immenser sound that ordained nothing
but in which traces of everything
that happened next were present, it began—
in shivers from your throat throughout the night,
apostrophes to long-dead stars sparking
the taste of smoke that seemed to chorus me,
well-dressed, into thick air, out of the still
small earth of the ineffable, a smashed
abstraction that grew louder when the wheat
began to bloom and geese returned again,
shaking out their heavy wings, shedding
the purple sands of Tijuana on our hills.

After Earth

As if a smooth loam shines here, and faces shine,
and shadows, where instead of a moon
a steady moan of sharp wings
wings from us a thick harvest of praise,
a sound like flies drowning in honey.
Perfection stiff as cold mud under snow,
but snow and mud, this crude prelude of days,
dissolved to allegory. Words winnowed
from thoughts like chaff. A thing past bliss.
I knew that once they put the hymnals down,
corralled their vowels inside consonants,
fenced in their griefs, and sank back into blood
that I was finally free, that I'd survived
outside their songs and after earth, beyond
the burnt-sap smell of March, the frogspawn
of November, the haymaking of June.

Patmos Revisited

No green clouds hang like a divine disease,
no hot breath haunts the back of the neck,
no claws clink their dictation across shale.
Oyster-shell sand still scatters the light, but songs
the sea here murmurs seem scum-fringed, colloquial,
its rhythms private and indifferent
to us; no tides of purple crabs rising
through town, bearing the dead back down to sea.
And dreams, when they happen now, are dreams:
we bore each other with them over breakfast.
No sun's blunt fist, no bruise of earth; instead,
leaf-colored leaves, and cow-faced cows,
and nameless toads that spook us while we sleep;
a perfect darkness making shadows disappear,
nights punctuated by someone downshore,
braining an octopus against a stone.

Cosmography

In one, a cesspool stirred to lamentation.
In one, a vacant palace and a throne
deposed by air that would step down
if it could be mere breath again. In one,
all hours coalesce, like insects hatching
on a standing pond, while in another,
they make a single-file break for it
over the barbed-wire hills. No stars in one,
or else no moon, or else no sun, or else
two suns, stabbing their spurs into the earth;
a fabulous unease; an antic pomp.
Some just like ours was, but for wind, and rain.
And some where those who leave always return,
or don't, or hover, halfway, like a dream.
One where you die all over again, and one
where silver moths will cover you like cloth
to stop your shivering, then fly, blushing,
away. One with a fountain. One with a cloud.

Letter from Deep Space

The view's not much.
Sometimes faint constellations
sweep like crows.
But mostly shadows,
almost the color of lily pads
deep under water.

No sound; not even
wavelengths of white noise
writhing like eels
in a satellite's net.

I miss the dead flies
that littered the sills
of windows on Earth.

The distance to nothingness
used to be infinite:
dusk and a stray dog
chasing down stars.
Can you hear me? I'm shooting
at houseflies with cannons—
words fall back to Earth:

There were so many trees there
that a squirrel could cross two thousand miles
—from Tyumen to Irkutsk—
without touching the ground.

Light Years

Mostly the desire to feed themselves,
and the rusty lineage of tools invented
to that end. Everything else was waiting,
discussions about weather interrupted
only by the need to bury their dead.
They tried their hardest to kill time, to fill
the gaps left open by survival. Wars helped.
And so did painting, from what we can tell.
At thirty two feet per second per second, children
fell into the dirt, were cleaned, and given names.
Birds that left in fall came back in spring.
Churches were interred in coats of moss,
and doctors washed their hands, and viruses
made promises to blood that nobody
could break. They cried out hoping
someone heard; they spoke in darkness,
but the darkness grew. They called it *life*,
but we don't know what it was for. We only
know that they were brief, and somewhere
over there, beyond those stars, light years ago.

WORKS AND DAYS

Light, so heavy Earth groaned like a boat,
 saturated landscapes, thick commotion
 forcing colours from the universal
 shade; the horsemint, milkweed, sorrel, vetch,
 red gorse and pink marsh vapours that dissolve
 coarse clouds and without losing breath bloody
 the moon; a yellow house, a flock of goats
 who feed on ruin and wail and will not spook;
 the silver grass around the lake, and angels,
 falling just to feel fall's cadences:

I want to say whatever's missing,
 here it is, full as the wind that's culled
 from centuries until at last it reached
 the single cypress bough outside your window,
 waking you. That's all it was. I'm here
 now, and will stay a while, and then morning
 will come. We'll try *The Earth is like unto*
a parable: for those with ears to hear;
 and, *Nature's not a shambles;* and, as your mother
 put it once, while whipping cream: *Life*
will be appreciated, or else; my prodigal
 accountings of chronologies which now
 belong to me, too soon unsponsored, and to you,
 too soon their little heirs, ungarnished
 from their long beginning by a purpose
 other than to save you, if not all,
 then, something. First things. Patch work. Before the rains
 begin:

In the beginning, silver grass
 around the lake where she, who made all this
 built up a house, and multiplied her flock,
 He pointed up at her and she said *moving water;*
 then to himself: she said *Mooncalf.* He grew,
 and made small horses do big things, and planted
 when the stars, he thought, so clearly said
plant now. But knapweed.

Hawkweed.

Medusahead.

Thistle, marsh.

Thistle, plumeless.

Loostrife, goatgrass, buckthorn, dyer's woad
 are not the consequences of some ancient curse:
 they're things, and things are always growing
 harder to explain. Man comes and tills the field
 and lies beneath. Sometimes fantastic
 effort simply fails. Sometimes we think

there was a day before this sour air that stews
 the holy water into broth, a time when they say
 angels hovered, thick as cowbirds on an ox.
 But Earth was never better than it is right now.
 And what use would wings be if you eat lice?
 Each winter juncos bend their song to dearth,
 Earth's, one thinks, best rhyme.
 Then lynx tracks annotate the trail behind you
 where, just now, blank snow. And a box
 of oranges begins to shed its fumes.
 Sixty four species of birch?
 What is Olympus if it can vanish in a cloud,
 or Eden if its fences are so small?



Remember autumn was here first;
 the yellow leaves do not need your approval.
 You're not obliged to sorrow, or to joy,
 but in seasons of joy, be absolute;
 in sorrow, weep, and be not comforted.
 Be fluid, but exact; be here, but hopeful;
 hesitant, not silent; still, not idle.
 Some proof demand of heaven, but not much.
 Demand nothing of hell except your dead.
 The acres where Seth was conceived,
 and where, feeling he had a special claim,
 he jawboned William to the ground. And Mary,
 five years old, who screamed from unknown pain,
 for seven days, until she died. The Earth is full
 of evil things; the sky, full of the vultures'
 too-patient panache. And so they dug a hole
 and buried her and went to bed. And then
 got up again. For what? Coffee and milk
 and a nice quince jam? What is the best thing?
 An apple? Fresh saskatoons? There's nothing
 better. That's how easily we are seduced:
 a six-month winter, but the first loose scab
 of ice, the first card-table dragged outside
 for brunch, stippled in honey, convinces us
 the world's always like this: flaunting
 gaudy maples like new money.
 Lynx tracks on the trail right behind you,
 and light, nothing and everything

at once, a shade like the imagined
 moment where greenfinches end
 and goldfinches begin. "While earth remaineth,
 seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat,
 and summer and winter, and day and night
 shall not cease." That was the promise.
 "Do not the chaste lines of this ark
 deny the dominion of space?" And yet we drift,
 though not for lack of ballast or direction,
 nor can we blame it on the wind,
 which is good, but cannot turn
 the torn rags of our bodies into sails.
 "Too many things and not enough forms."
 The milkpail of the galaxy is spilled.
 Horizons bend. The willows bend and break
 and drape their heavy clothes onto the stones.
 Days bend and shed their sunlight like a skin,
 while into pitiless darkness frays the moon.



And Seth gathered anew. And the Lord filled
 all his granaries, and cattle well-stricken
 in age were multiplied, that there was no room
 in the land for him, so great was his substance.
 How can we think of thinking to explain?
 "The world is that which happens
 to be the case." Is that it?
 Better a love of shaping soil, upturned
 rows well-tamped, before time stops
 to catch its breath, set down its spade, and scrape
 its boots of you; small order, finish, straightness
 realized; harvests of sweat and sound
 perfection, absolute
 control over a practiced hand that can exactly
 hover like an osprey in a sunspot's sliver,
 stilled inside the faddish current
 of hot air by vast fine-tunings
 of its feathers' flickering, or fold,
 and fall, gutting the salmon-coloured air,
 a limitless dominion
 over small but salvageable fields.
 The bees grow louder right before a frost.
 Better a botched opus than a perfect silence.
 Better decades worth of creaking floors

and carpet she capitulated to
 only to cover bloodstains and the smell
 of afterbirth the hardwood would exhale
 in hot sun; better, even, the goat
 army that sacked it, breeding on the beds,
 eating the wallpaper, the glue,
 the curtains, Shreeve's dress uniform,
 the roses, and ten inches of topsoil,
 than blank fields. Better the lurid steaming
 of the windfall plums, the hatchling tensure
 when the foaming mooneye bites,
 the blood's curt countercoil and—Stop: fewer
 adjectives, more nouns. *Serein*: a fine rain falling
 after sunset from a sky in which no clouds are visible.
Serac: a ridge of ice crowning
 the surface of a glacier. Ants queueing
 to higher ground, the prairie sounding charlock,
 rapeseed, Job's tears, milkweed, sorrel—
 faster, before everything goes, let's put them
 in our little book, the fireweed, the wood lily.



I'd yield everything and live well on a line or two
 of winter sedge, the mare's saltlick, a muddy spring
 where some slim muse would say "fatten your sheep,
 and then be silent!" but that your birthright
 will not be abridged: abundance, too,
 fell under our stewardship. And joy.
 Remember all the silver grass around the lake?
 All kinds of things exist. Why shouldn't we
 be happier? "...a world which though wicked
 enough in all conscience is *perhaps* as good
 as worlds unknown" is tempting, I agree,
 but no. Salvation from our smoking detritus
 in clichés of "a better world,"
 unsatisfactory. The end must be
 to cultivate perpetual astonishment
 right now, and watch light bail
 darkness from the flooding sky.
 Earth's earth. The rest is silence,
 and I've had enough of that already.
 Gods, and Mooncalf naming grasses
 by the sound they made in wind, then Shreve,

Mary, five Wills in a row, then Beulah,
 Lord Al, of nothing that we knew, and all
nomina dubia the night will swallow
 in its senseless sea. Then Afton, mom, me, you,
 the little center of this crumbling chiasmus:
 you, me, mom, and Afton, who filled
 fifteen black folios with clippings:
 brown blue-ribbon calves, the nurses' strike,
 fat birth announcements, lean obituaries,
 Sarajevo, Munich, D-Day; each photograph
 a little grave of light. One day I turned
 and saw the moon looked small.
 It wasn't. Earth had grown. There must
 be reasons why we love it here, something
 more to say in tragedies since "We must choose
 our happiness" does not go far enough.



When the moon threatens to jump if you don't heed it,
 keep your head down, hoe your acre, think
this is the row I will consider now. This one
and no other. Mooncalf lay with Beulah. Elizabeth
 bore twins so early they were kept in breadpans
 in the oven for a week. Yes, that happened.
 Not another of my indolent exaggerations.
 In the season of blue damselflies, when all
 the violet saxifrage was still in bloom,
 and huge swaths of wapiti browsed the mustard fields
 and diamond willows courted, coiffed
 in crows. (We've had those; fine, in thrushes then.)
 Now wreaths of fescue, summer snows,
 blood moons, and all the nameless species
 of sensation that exist only in us,
 but that would not, if we could name them,
 be ours, like the burnt-out stars
 we constellate ourselves, in vain, against,
 and which had something to do with soothing you
 when dreams call daylight's bluff. Let's turn
 the wind into the wind again before it tears
 more genera out of the tree of life, or blurs
 the willows into brush strokes of some hidden
 scheme that though almost invisible, inflects
 and shades the texture of our conscious thoughts

might not be. Let's turn and look;
 life happens here, and nowhere else.
 The cows will soon be up, staining their
 jabots in green drool. The violet
 saxifrage will bloom, and dawn will come.



And dawn will come, carrying its dish of milk
 with both hands over the hills. That is
 enough. I will get up again. I will make
 eggs. How can I justify despair at this,
 when bats illumine air by whispering,
 and she-wolves polish their blind cubs
 until they shine? Let's not wrong Earth
 a second time by bungling the elegy.
 Dogwood, soapweed, bergamot, cinquefoil,
 August hay still steaming under January snow,
 red gorse, green vetch, blue damselfly,
 a box of oranges shedding their fumes,
 Afton's commonplace, the goat army's
 mad pica, and, since no decent
 plowhorse bucks its lineage, the boot-eaters,
 polygamists and prophets, unversed,
 unwashed wagon-draggers, hauling bickering inbred
 gods from out-of-county, shattering
 the snowpack, pausing here to bury
 frost-bit grain like loot until new generations
 grafted with the city's stock; all so-called
 "baser matter," together with your quiet
 wonder, each time, at the quiet moon,
 I'll sing. A miniscule calamity of words
 to wrap around us at the very end.
 Two deer were eating millet near the lake;
 I pointed and said "Isaak, look..." But you
 weren't even there.

Man comes
 and tills the field
 and lies beneath.
 In the beginning, silver grass around the lake.
 I'm here now, and will stay a while,
 and then morning will come.

Rest,
 crow. Rest, dove. Rest, rest.

And she wept,
and knelt down, kissing the earth,
saying "here is a good land: a little
clover, a little sedge; here I will
build a great house and multiply my goats,"
carving the future plot
in creeksand with her foot. And this is all
that's left. It's all I know.