Other Hurt

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Contents

To Lorine Niedecker | 2

Three Ways of Looking | 4
Some Nights, I Dream | 6
Notes on Seroconversion | 7
México Through the Phone Line | 8
A Self-Portrait | 9
Over 2,000 Miles from the Border & No Concordance | 10
Notes on Seroconversion | 12
Lingua Franca | 13

While You Are Out Roaming Zanzibar | 15
Notes on Seroconversion | 16
Notes on Seroconversion | 18
México at Ten Removes | 19
In a Different Country | 21
Fast | 22
I Was A Stranger in Your Strange Land | 23
Tenderness | 24

The Lovers, 1928 | 27
Fluid Mechanics | 30
Notes on Seroconversion | 31
On Being | 34
Lingua Franca | 35
Notes on Seroconversion | 37
Feedback | 38
Report | 40

Brief History of an End | 43
A Self Portrait | 44
Notes on Seroconversion | 45
Everything Coming Up Roses | 47
Everything Gin & Tonic | 48
Everything Said & Done | 50
So the Dream Goes | 52
Notes on Seroconversion | 53
Illness is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship.
—Susan Sontag

to be ashamed is to be American
—C.D. Wright
TO LORINE NIEDECKER

Tell me, how
does one do
it, that trick,
condenser?

Careful cuts
on the tongue
after reading
suggest surgical precision. Perhaps pres-
sure. Like slipping

a hand
between
fat mattress,

rough box spring.
Only dark
-er. Deeper.

What did Blackhawk Island teach you?

If I could go there
would I see you
kneeling on the shore,

dipping your tea cup
into the lake?

Would you let me take
a sip?
THREE WAYS OF LOOKING | AT THE ELIZABETH, NJ I.C.E. DETENTION CENTER

1.

On the news, through an interview:
"In terms of our facility, it looks like a jail. It's a detention center but it has a lot higher detention standards. There's a lot of recreation, visitation, they're not being held for punitive reasons," a rep said.

Until now, television crews weren’t allowed to tour or record inside. Until now the chances of my arrest seemed—not slim, just distant. I thought denial would render me immune, somehow. But I resembled every face in lockdown.

2.

In an overview report conducted by an advocacy group, wherein nearly all detainees interviewed had claimed requests for help were either ridiculed or left unmet. Nearly all knew well the staff’s contempt. One nurse: “If you want to be in this country, you have to learn to speak English.”

One guard: “You are immigrants. You don’t belong. I'll be glad when _____ deports you all.” Nearly all detainees mentioned suicidal thoughts.

Nearly all reported whisperings: “criminals,” “animals,” “dogs.”
Online, scrolling through reviews 
purportedly penned by personnel, 
both current & ex: 
“Detainees are nicer to you 
than your actual co workers. 
They will deny you breaks 
even to use the bathroom 
even when there is nothing going on. 
Detention officers have physically fought 
in the parking lot after shifts 
to settle disput[e]s.” The pros are 
the hours. The cons, the attitudes.

And what allows those walls to exist? Who, 
I ask you. I ask you. I insist.
SOME NIGHTS, I DREAM

I am born with teeth
 too wide
 for my jaw, nostrils too
 narrow to breathe.

~

Favorite color? Blue. Favorite word?
    Distant.
 Though sometimes I'll lie, say
 its green.

For no reason, really,
    I just say it.
 A pure
 palatal pleasure,
    to say it.
 Green.

~

I am in love with a married man,
 a fact
 as strange, as familiar
 as rain.

~

In a sauna, the last man I blew says

    In water, our hands prune
 to help us grip
 all sorts of things:
 tapering things, hirsute things.
 We are born
 for catastrophe,
    it seems.

~

Some nights I laugh
 in my sleep.
 Some nights
 just the thought of water
 makes me sick.
NOTES ON SEROCONVERSION

The problem isn’t sick, it’s guilt, springing forth
With a body, a voice, full grown. It speaks:

Because it’s not 1986 anymore, not as rough
As it could be, used to be, I have the right to be
Grateful. All the bodies that did not succumb
Serve as evidence against me should I, selfishly,
Refute this. I have the right to mourn
Behind closed doors. If I cannot learn to do so,
Insisting instead on explanations (there are none)
I shall be deemed
Inscrutable. I don’t understand
These rights as they are handed down. I don’t
Understand how lucky I am
Just to be alive?
Difficult to hear loved ones die from afar: the calls detailing grandpa’s greying, his being waist deep in his golden years; his bayonet long oxidized, his mind flashing the early signs of dementia. To know: most midnights, he likes discussing the specifics of the failed revolution, likes to face towards the grandfather clock to talk of the iron heel, of zero sum games, of tobacco by the pound. Talk of: in those days, everything felt

indentented. It was a city of millions but one still felt lonely. Everything seemed to reverberate as if along a fault line, everyone’s knuckles white with effort, Everything hauled brick by brick. The men thinking themselves orarians, the women just as muscular. Everything felt ancient: the hotel, the armory, the cobbled plaza. Everything felt heavy with dread: the sex, the tripe, the husk of night. The century was industrious: everyone washed their dishes at the sink, even as tectonic plates shuffled off the coast.
A SELF-PORTRAIT

Here, neither one of us endures alone. A summer spent in the cedar's shadow, noting how the lumber resembled men: proud, budding.

And I listen, try to scribe the syncopated lapping of the lake against the splintered dock, the open maws of the mussel shells.

To the nebulous, I became familiar: the shapes the swarms of gnats made around the milkweed, the feeding habits of the praying mantis. How, at dusk, when dusk-light struck the mud banks slant, sometimes their wings would catch it, cleanly. So that if you were to squint, they would resemble a host of straight razors flashing in the reeds.
Dad recalls the afternoon
somebody called to say
the fee for my crossing
had raised. Then to dispel
the idea of guarantees.
Then remind him all
polleros worked like that:
nothing personal, just business.
I was four. It was 1997.
Business was good.
In those days, he says,
the fare to ride the train
below the river was paid
in tokens. Beneath
the elevated rails, pockmarked boys
hocked phony Socials.
And at street carts, men
would wolf cordero down
so fast, sometimes
they’d swallow tin foil.
It was 1997. Dad describes
unfamiliar faces: albañiles
from Chiapas; electricians
from Guerrero; an arthritic
Oaxaqueño who peddled
miniature baseballs,
neon screwdrivers.
And there were always rumors,
dad says, in those days,
of silverfish infestations,
of extramarital affairs;
a woman from India who paid
cien pesos al mes to sleep
on a kitchen table. It was 1997.
Business was good
in New York. One dawn,
in July, in the summer,
before I arrived,
the cops discovered
62 indentured Mexicans,
al deaf-mutes, shoehorned
into a 4-bedroom apartment.
On the news, detectives remarked
the ten children they found were
in good condition,
quite charming.
The Red Cross brought provisions. That day, no arrests were made. It was 1997. Brought in for questioning the day of the raid, all 62 of them slept at the precinct that night. They were given blankets. They signed their names. It was 1997. I was elsewhere. I was four.
NOTES ON SEROCONVERSION

Am the ghostly confidant.

The once flush cheek gone dull, gone gaunt.

Am stricken within.

A stitch of strife, a life measurable in pills,

in the sudden fell of lymphocytes.

Am the acronym, the fever dream.

Was elegant, was sharp, sheathed as the Spanish olive pit.

Was the wanton limb, the sleight

of hand, the cheapest trick. No more.

Am omitted. Hear:

the swollen tongue is wrung to speech.
LINGUA FRANCA

I assure you, 
your Honor, 
I crossed that border

but once, wet
behind the ear, nestled
in the pseudo

utero of a hollow
stereo speaker.
In those years,

in that rage, 
I learned to be
dispossessed, to dress

in red,
white, & blue.
I understood

to live, to trek
in the shadows
of your steeples,

I was to step soft
as the shorn ewe
does, let

my snout rest
in your palms
as the razor’s edge

scoured my hide
ad nauseam.
It’s here, if you listen

still:
a bleating. Ringing
through this.
Still.
WHILE YOU ARE OUT ROAMING ZANZIBAR

with whatever shirts you packed,
whichever shoes you took,
I buy two more pillows for the bed,
I take the time to poach an egg
even if it makes me late.

Lunchtime, I light a cigarette
beneath the scaffolding lining the street,
let the smoke loose through my nose
as an out-of-place preacher
screams through his teeth.

When the ember runs dim
I chuck the butt in a sewer;
a little dread fills my head.
Emails go unanswered. Phone calls, too.
Most nights, I stay home.

Wide awake past midnight,
I listen to cars whir by outside,
make a game to see if I can tell
which socks make up which mound of clothes
scattered on the floor.

Sometimes I stay out, I drink
until every man feels like you,
my windows & blinds left wide
open overnight.

When I miss you too much,
I imagine you grinning
as you cross an old courtyard,
tour a bastioned fort,
your boots, the hem of your shirt,
burdened with dirt.
If you return & I’m not home
(I’ll be worse for wear, plump
in new places) don’t come looking.
“Some kinds of sadness hurt less,”

that’s what you said.
NOTES ON SEROCONVERSION

please look inside
look deep doctor
beneath this glacial

blue room
where I lie
shirtless flat

on your examination
table. across a length
of translucent

butcher paper. doctor
please: explain.
how virulence goes

felt. but unseen.
this beneath.
each sinew, each
nerve end

& nail bed wrought
flush, the self
swollen with

look, can you name
what buds inside,
name the source

of my fever & night.
sweats & dreams
of towering

birch trees on fire,
their very being
susceptive to fire & I

am always at the edge
of some forest, watching
tense, holding

a pitcher of water,
knowing not one is saved
from the fire—
Yes, but when did you start losing weight, hair? When did you notice under your throat (right there) two swollen nodes like stone fruit, could you be specific, would you be specific in your hurt? A detailed record of your turbid sight & tongue must be made, it must be specific, it must detail the instant you gripped the & took it with teeth, when you bit the open but not discard its seed, no there is no room for artifice inside, be specific: when was it, where was it, who was it that came & trussed you with the language?
NOTES ON SEROCONVERSION

If its immune system is stressed
doesn’t that justify the body’s third
cigarette? The fourth? The fifth

of Jack, slapped back
straight because it lacks a faith

in prayer & Percocet?

Nowadays the body lives as a dung beetle
does, night after night, its strange

ocular stalk
fixed on the Milky Way, hoping to shape meaning
from the scat.

Granted, it was not always this way.

Once, the body had dreams: to be

steel—stainless, taut
something one could whet

a beat on

night after night.

Once, the body had dreams:

if not the sharpest, certainly
the most clean.
MÉXICO AT TEN REMOVES

contains some
excitement some
usage like

the series of turns
one might expect
to encounter
on a southern sojourn

a turn
on the road
in the waist
of the knuckle
that dark
rendezvous

is supple
as sweat
on the vendor’s
narrow brow

bright
as condensed
dew on the roadside
begonias
in a town
where the men wear
their sadness like

a second-hand shirt
a row of potbellies
hanging
just below the hem

is a switchblade
lobbed

over a draw-
bridge railing
    the handle worn down
by touch

    as to suggest
a waxen moon
a set of lustrous
    veneers

    is ultimately
free
of appraisal
    of margins
of sequence

    I assure you
your Honor
I was never beautiful
I have always been
    myself
IN A DIFFERENT COUNTRY

I was allowed to forget
how there is no loneliness
like ours.

I did not search for signs
I might take back, no
directions to move me
into feeling.

I was not envious of the trees,
the certainty with which they know
to be trees.
It was almost spring.

I laid in bed & ran
one hand down my chest,
then between my legs.
I did not think of you.

In the distance,
a pair of brown cows
lowed & chewed
their cud together.

I did not think of us.
It was almost spring.

I read “a happy bee
will fly a thousand miles,
will tap a million flowers,
to make a single pound of honey.”

I did not think of me.
asleep, he dreams he is
speaking or being spoken to
in disagreeable tones,
his fists & vocal cords clenched
in pre-emptive defense
as a film of cold sweat
develops on his chest
shimmering like a stretch
of cellophane
forgotten on the street.
No fisticuffs but
the details of his indiscretions
so well-known,
his face aches just the same.
There is the sensation
of a window flung open
& he can discern
one stray calico’s yowl
as another mounts & clamps
its canines down.
At some point a vase is flung
towards a green wall,
petals dot the linoleum,
& a hand is brought down
against the barren kitchen table,
the latter sound so familiar
it wakes him, where he lies
bleary-eyed, outstretched & alone
in bed; a hushed erection waiting
just below the hem.
I WAS A STRANGER IN YOUR STRANGE LAND

It was bliss. Your propaganda claimed
I lived as a mouse would: invading
your spectacular kitchen,
smuggling my pliable body
through dime-sized cracks
in the walls. I made a nest
of forgotten cotton balls.
I chewed your damp napkins & rot,
got around the sticky black
booby-traps. Even the winter of steel
wool & peppermint oil,
I ran amok, gnawing hard
to clear each blocked hole
even as it burned my eyes raw.
And the stalemate: long,
so long I had no second thought
siphoning sustenance, cheese,
unaware you watched
with a vacuum in hand.
Before the black bag,
the last I saw: was you, wielding
the longest nozzle.
TENDERNESS

After about 400 days, the mother births a single young.

Mother & father raise the babe together, eating & sleeping alongside one another. When they forage, they hiccup & grunt, touch noses, chew softly, their ears cupped like rolled mulberry leaves.

They whistle to communicate. If lost, the young knows to sniff the air in search of a maternal scent & then meander after it. Sleep comes night or day, it doesn’t really matter where. Sloshing in the river’s cold mud, they lower their knees to rest, let the water engulf them as they set their heads on the bank. Upon hearing a crash—sharp bird cry or some other ruckus—they freeze. It’s their best defense.

Today, we saw one of these, a tapir, approached by a tiny coati. We saw the latter gently place its paw on the former’s hind leg. Slowly the tapir turned, eventually lowering its knees to rest.

Sniffing, preening, the coati began to scavenge ticks off the babe,
as we watched, as we noted from a distance.

Everything told us these two, tenderly, would not interact

but did so today. Were you glad for it? Was I?
THE LOVERS, 1928

-René Magritte

So everything has changed.
So history has cut a wide swath
in your mind. Has made

the insides of the frame,
the distant pear trees, the off-white
sky, heavy with implication.

So you can't look at it again
without thinking how
its significance

has to do with the artist who,
as a child, was brought to a river & told
his mother had drowned.

Has to do with him,
a witness to the instant
her body is fished out of the dark—

by pulley, by counterweight,
working together like some grim wrist
to raise her, carefully,

by the waist, her off-white
night-gown soaked, clinging
to her face.

Has to do with mother
as handkerchief being lifted,
as exposed bone.

Mother, a question mark
at the center of his life,
usurped by other questions like

“Weren't there signs, something
unusual, something
you should've seen coming,

son, you should've warned someone.”

The first time I understood
the uselessness of language, I was ten.
My mother led me by the hand, locked
me in the bathroom, hoping
  I wouldn't hear the blows,
dad swearing, the subsequent

  shattering. All said & done (there
were welts, broken skin) she thought
to run. We were there,

standing in front of our screen door
  with a small black duffle bag
stuffed with clothes, waiting

  for the storm to stop. Waiting
for what
  felt like hours. We were there:

her eyes, swollen but not
  watering, not breaking,
just looking

  as she took one step
beyond the awning
  to let the rain come,

to let it wash her face.
  And me, reaching for her
wrist, asking

  Do we go back in?

So is that what it is,
  what he's trying to answer,
sifting the bottom of the palette,

  the frame, kicking up river
rocks & algae & pear trees
  & history—

searching for meaning
  as if meaning could be
wrung out?

  But of what?
The nightgown? The pear trees? Their bodies
  peering out at us as if being
photographed? As if seeing
their reflections on the surface of a river
before stepping in?

And what was he thinking
(here, right here)
when he raised his wrist to drape

the whites, the greys,
to hide the now
phantom face?

What was she thinking?
Was there hesitation?
Was there a moment

he imagined removing it,
raising it,
finding gold coins

over the voids
where her mouth & eyes
would be?
**Fluid Mechanics**

Much to his surprise the train left
On time, at five minutes to five, he rode
The front-most car, slicing December
Air at a rate just shy of thirty-three
MPH, barreling below the churn
Of rivers & weeds & perpendicular
Trees stripped to their waists of green—
Those trunks, he thought, soon to be
Encased in ice, after recalling how,
Earlier today, rain came down
In sheets, it seemed, & he stood
Beneath an awning, watching droplets do
What he still can’t do: traverse the world
Under the influence of gravity alone
NOTES ON SEROCONVERSION

And what could I feel, but calm
when you prop my arm against the desk,
when you slip the needle in?

Years in, I’ve come to ignore
the beaker, collecting its keep;
to consider instead

how the ballasts inside
the fluorescent light bulbs above us
click, hiss—an insectile sound—

a sound almost alive,
desperate, as if something
sad had hatched there, boasting

wings but no means of escape.
And I wonder if it, too, is struck
dumb by the beauty of you,

doctor, your practice
which always leaves me feeling like
an iron ore, mined.

And it’s hard not to think of colonial pasts.
To imagine the site of first contact
of the new world: a fleet

of invading ships, at daybreak
prowling in, their sails open
or opening—clean.

To imagine the vessels drifting
in, oar-less, carried by the wind;
their holds swollen with
root bulbs, rice, small bands
of wild horses—to imagine the cold
of the low morning still clung

to their tufts. To imagine the sight
of men charging on horseback,
to imagine the end of life as one knew it—

now the dirt: warmer;
now the air: warmer;
now the sea: warmer too,

you can feel it: the smallest cell
altered by invasion; the future self
sentenced to sift for answers—

what could it mean, to be given wings
but no means of escape?
Go ahead. Ask me anything.

I swear, I’m trying to be clear here
for my sake & yours,
for the sake of life

in the aftermath of this
internal disaster, this
acronym, such an acrid synonym for

loneliness. Tell me, am I
destined now to be sharp,
temporary—some hard candy, loved

simply for how easy it is
to ground down? Doctor,
are you particular at all?

Tell me: what truth would end
the shame I feel when I sit here
with you? I know I’ll never know
the name, or name the time or place.
Infection is a variable, an × so small
I don’t think neither you nor I could ever solve

for it—and that feels like a joke
neither one of us could tell
all on our own.

That’s how I feel today.
If you must know, if I must show
the shadow work I’ve done
to keep me here.
(It has been quiet,
like the first shoots of the season cropping up
to gather light, pushing up
into becoming.) Years in,
I believe I’m ready to admit:

I like the needle’s pinch.
It proves I’m not
a counterfeit.
I can’t tell but it’s probable my doctor could.
That’s plain. In truth, I’m selfish, I’m afraid
I never sought to make things clear,
I sought a nail on which to hang
my guilt. It’s heavy, still.
That’s how I’ve come to speak of it,
my sex—smoke, an epigraph, a threat,
a form which also pantomimes
the men, their matchbook flash
of flesh. But that’s expected, yes?
The state of the acquired pain,
that’s what you meant to ask:
do I recognize the luck I have.
Does it bifurcate the body, still?

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I can’t tell but it’s probable my doctor could.
LINGUA FRANCA

“You don’t get the right to a hearing.”
- Bryan Cox, I.C.E. Spokesperson, 2017

Your Honor,

the field in the form stands blank
because it’s true:

alien, being of ordinary abilities,

I have no wisdom to peddle,
no arcanum to speak of.

Every day, my Spanish grows grungy, unkempt.

I was a good-for-nothing brat,
anyone would attest to that.

I submit:

In 20 plus years of living here
I never took to pie,

apple or otherwise;

never pocketed a single bill
from any till.

When the towers fell, I saw

the smoke plumes (tall)
from the kitchen window;

the hair on my nape raised.

When dad’s ingrown turned septic,
when ma’s wrist was sprained,
when Lola’s one good eye was cast
to darkness, cash
is how we paid.

Because I know your enterprise is not
to mince words, to gather wool,
can only end in my ejection,

Hermano, here’s what I admit:

Unlike the man who dug JFK’s grave on his day off
to the tune of $3 an hour,

I will continue to live nondescript, to love
even in the fellest fault.

I do not consider myself abandoned.

I do not consider our talk an honor.
NOTES ON SEROCONVERSION

& hereafter, I say
to myself: Self, keep going,
even though not doing so seems easiest.
No, I say, keep going

even if your joints ache,
even if your nose leaks,
even as you track
how follicles extinguish,
how body fat slogs off,
even if your gums recede,
even if the suture breaks,
even if it takes all day,
even when the fever-dreams say No,
the bed sheets soaked with
a watery sum of you,
everything alive is wet,
even if misunderstood,
even if the brain is on the verge,
even when the hour hand treads slow
in its pilgrimage
round the clock’s expressionless face,
even when you’re sure
this dirge, its ungainly pitch, is liable
to ramble on forever,
even if you don’t,
even as that hope
takes you by the hand,
is finally, lovingly, introduced,
even then you know
a beat in this will go unheard
Feedback (for my border poems)

We can feel
so much rage
in this
voice
but show
don’t tell

This line
where your four
year old speaker leaves
his abuelita
behind
reminds me of
&
check them out

Pollero
is a good word
(is Spanish?)
(italics?)

We like the four-by-four
its trunk
we like the desert & your use of
snuck

Is it true
are people really smuggled through
like this

We just don’t buy
that a toddler could really fit
inside

It’s cluttered
unclear
pls show

Suggestions for revision
MORE
abuelita more
flor
y fauna
more
VOICE

less rage

If possible pls show
  show why
  they run
  towards what
why would anyone be
  trust

We can tell
so much is left
  behind
  unsaid

We can feel
  your searching
your homesick
  for your
  end
REPORT

(or, for childhood arrivals, THE ACTION DEFERRED)

Near the turn
of the century
I was born.
A foreigner.
On a wednesday
In a hospital.
I was somebody’s
baby once, then not
anymore.
Home was there then.
Not anymore.
I could only listen
as my grandmother died
from the other side.
That’s the border.
That’s a refrain.
I plan in days
nowadays, not weeks.
That’s a sign
of age.
I grind my teeth.
I bite my nails.
As of this morning
I’ve accrued
at thirteen hundred
american weeks.
I don’t drink
for pleasure,
not anymore.
That’s a refrain.
I’ve hurt other hurt
beings.
That’s a sign
of the age.
I was somebody’s
asset once, then not
anymore. How
values diminishes
over time.
Twenty.
Nineteen.
That’s the first age
my dying made sense.
That’s suicidal.
That’s rage.
I'm asked to refrain.
I drink.
I'm compromised
therefore they know
I'm easy to pity credit,
easy to use.
That's delinquent.
That’s debt abuse.
The american way.
I don’t watch the news
nowadays.
For today is today, I say.
No one's come to collect.
For now, I say I'm not dead.
Not anymore.
Not yet.
Look, you say, this is not the love
I imagined: useless,

a single oar in

our skiff, our skiff, now ship
-wrecked in a desert.

Agreed. Still,

Look how well
we make-do. Doesn’t

practice make perfect?

The variables terrify.
Also titillate. Also teach.

For instance,

the first man to chew
a fistful of raw

bitter almonds in the dark

and die
nameless. Thankless.

Bless him.

One day, I will look back at this
with such nostalgia. I will say

Thank you, I think.

Thank you.
When I hear this pair of dragonflies
whirring by, bumping up
against one
another, I think of
their love (or what I’ve dubbed
their love) as matter-
of-fact: their indirect
insemination, their multifaceted eyes.
I think of Dickinson’s
“success in circuit lies.”

When I face the moon, I ponder
the stillness of its face (or what we’ve dubbed
its face) which beckons the lake,
which whelms the mud bank
every night.

When I think of my life, I see
its equation, feel its soft largo
in my ear—a measure
awkward, undecipherable,
it feels.

When I feel my self
alive, I recognize the lies I told
to coax it here, the self
wrought forth
as if a thread, emerged
as through
a needle’s eye.
NOTES ON SEROCONVERSION

Since then, every day I’ve sought a new sense of being.

I do not worry about being a man,
that is,
I do not worry about being my father.

I’ve kept track of the days with particular interest in the jicama’s tuberous root.

Whatever fear was was distilled to a single sensation,
like a ring-finger tracing the eminent spine of a book.

I have chewed clover in the presence of guests, made sure to shake the sediment off my boots.

Like the salvia I have spoken in a placid voice, a deep pleasure like lake-water obscuring these words.

I came to a conclusion: shame is a construct, a sorry pocket in which any pittance seems frivolous.

At some point, I matriculated as a magpie, full-time.

I have been happy to report all traces of forlornness have dispersed.
And the body, humble & pliant,
finds the utmost joy
telling tall tales ad libitum
while holding
a hairy rope.
EVERYTHING COMING UP ROSES

Most weekends I suppose
my drinking might just be
a symptom of that
common variety
of modern sadness
not a calling just
a habit
I might kick later
in life

I’m saying when I drink
I really feel like that
irreparably arctic whale
which has
since 1986
been singing below the ice
so low it goes
unheard

And what do you make of that
I ask
I insist
of the wino me
catching a glimpse
of him
in the warped
mirror behind the bar

Finished?
We’re just beginning
EVERYTHING GIN & TONIC

for the lives
the virus didn't snuff
the poet
the lawyer
the bald-faced liar
the plumber whom everyone remarked resembled a mollusk down to the sucker-bearing arms the soft-sac-like body the horticultural one always in cahoots with the corn-fed one the pungent one the peppy one who seemed to sweat vermouth & crept like a yew bush the other one with his god-awful habit of cracking his knuckles while chatting the cadre composed of the pretty one the sorta virgin one the hung one the great-kisser-but-stricken-with-halitosis-its-tragic one stepping softly alongside the lonely one the irreconcilably quiet one who'd shed
his silence & stand
resplendent as a quetzal
only after he’d slunk by &
having slapped our backsides
cackled
having once again proven these to be
indisputably
jelly
‘cause jam don’t shake
EVERYTHING SAID & DONE

Then & only then was it made clear
   I was no different than the rest
   stepping out to toke
   menthols at the curb,
standing tall & slack-jawed as we spoke
   of so-&-so’s stagnant
   credit score; this fresh
   stretch mark; that odd crash course
   (“did you know there was more
   than one way to snake a drain?
   to sump a pump? to earn
   one’s crust?”) eventually snuffing
our butts to reenter the space
   with an edged finesse, as seen
   in certain sub-sects of eels, looking just
   as lithe & cosmopolitan beneath
   the stroboscopic
   lights, fueled by
   syrup & ice & salt on the rim & in
   that drunken second
   I was convinced
   we could be evermore
   bright-eyed & bushy-tailed,
   not a single one subject to bad
   trips or high rent or low T
   cell counts or tear gas or
   squalor, each of us convinced,
   utterly convinced
   our lives might always feel
   like this
   like cupping rain water
   like whetting an old knife
   like the spoor of petrichor
   like a swig of olive oil
   like a mid-afternoon
stroll barefoot atop

a lake bed drained

in a distant colonial age

the invasive feather grass

itchy & thigh-high & here

our soles are so

bewitched

by the mud

upon which

the tombstones cling
**SO THE DREAM GOES**

with our words
we make enough space in the world
to finally believe
somebody loves us all

and we are free
to breaststroke in a bay
or slumber
in a sculpture garden

like the unbranded maverick
we can choose to gallop
towards or away
the shade beneath the trees

or we are astronauts
in orbit
stunned by how blue
the curve is

and upon our return
from wherever it is we go
we would know there to be
enough firewood at home
our laughter & flatware
bright & loud enough to hold
the prowling lynx at bay

(and though I’ve lied to you before
[I apologize, I was afraid, I was led astray]
believe me when I say
Reader, the plot
is different now)

we do not want for solace
or pragmatism anymore

we strip the locks
from every door

and every word is an effort
to bring back

the exiled selves we once
cast forth
A jukebox at the back of the bar, drinks & music stronger than expected once, he said, if this were then

*if I could turn back time*, I think I would’ve taken you home, he said things haven’t changed all that much, right? sex is still sex, you still put it on one leg at a time, he said, I don’t know why I did the things I did, couldn’t tell you how many lines went dead, how fast it spread, it was like one minute you were kissing them, the next the dread, I don’t know how we did it, he said, despite all that dead, he said, y’know, I had someone, once. thirty-two. he looked a lot like you.