

A sampler of poems from

ETCH AND BLUR

by

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Towing Water to Australia

You can want whatever you want
and still another tenth of the iceberg
gives itself back to the ocean;
you can say things are perfect, right now,
exactly imperfect as they are—
the trees one rain away from busting
their seams—but then the daylight always
hammering itself into the next
cold-engine morning, clouds gathering
on a horizon that even the quiet
can't keep quiet—and you can't
be blamed for asking things to remain
familiar as the last word and new
as the next one, just like our words
can't be blamed for meaning both
where have the last five years gone?
and *there is one thing I want and we're it.*
You want to walk so slowly
under that canopy of singular leaves—
those days in a single day—so intent
on not disturbing the dust in the sunlight,
that everything filters down
bit by visible bit. You want
to quick cut down anything that comes
between you and the possible horizon.
What you want is a trail of freshwater
stretching nearly back to the South Pole.
So what if they can fashion a life
in an incubator? Give it some time.
Give it a driver's license. Put it in traffic.

Schubertiad in a Minor Key

Didn't it all feel easier when you were younger,
the longer evenings, diluted summer
endings, no need to know
you could reassemble memory
later?—fold it into some other summer,
just a few of the right creases
and paper becomes
lotus blossom becomes pterodactyl
becomes a fortune-teller, each season
another halved sheet of loose leaf.
There's no real need to know all that,
but now you know
a little somehow about having
more than you need.
Need. It's necessary.
Even those who claim they don't, do.
Never mind all that circular reasoning
within your definition. Reconcile
with the fact of growing up
in the dugouts of Softball City,
around aging men who smoked grass
and played drunk to feel like boys again,
no thoughts aimed toward a future
and what it might present.
Maybe if you had picked up a guitar
before seventeen, maybe reading all of Auden
in your twenties, maybe some goals, focus,
though a second guess
is still just stabbing blind
as the possibilities dance and weave.
Acquisition of new territory;
the past has a mind of its own. Those days
it took a whole summer to finally forget
everything from the last year
and a whole year to learn to believe
in it returning again.
The family Dodge had 80,000 miles on it
that summer it finally sold, and who knows
now where all those miles came from,
all that so-called time?

A tire can either be a swing or a spare
depending on who you ask and when.
You could keep time to the answers.
You could spend years in therapy
locating your inner child's stubbed toe.
You can only embrace time in the past tense,
after the hill flattens out—if it does.
Too smart for his own good—
quadratic equations that look like arithmetic,
memorization of the Vicksburg phonebook,
an Oscar by eight?—What if
the kid isn't one for long enough?
Misunderstanding from adults and children both.
Things never happen fast enough,
and when they do the throttle breaks,
breaks off in the hand, and *zoom*.
Schubert composed string quartets,
symphonies, and a three-act opera
in his teens—and they call that
“an extraordinary childhood aptitude
for music.” That's one way of describing it.
Unfuckingbelievable is another way.
You can almost forgive Salieri his insanity,
forgive the notes their perfect pitch,
forgive the pupils for being geniuses.

Atmospheres

1. *Clouds Passing Over Farmland in Ohio*

There's a running all the time; I'm aware
of an approach and a passage looping,
all etch and blur, like a moment of sky
then another then another—flatland
stoned by lengths of shadow, lengths of sun,
sweeping motion—one more day, one more turn—
almost no breeze against the shelterbelts
sectioning the fields; it's almost as if
the clouds are moving and the rest isn't,
like trees don't, like the minutes don't seem to—
it could be anytime and it would still
feel 1980, halfway to Dayton,
the father calmly under the steaming hood,
the kid so anxious to get where he's headed.

2. *Detroit Morning in March*

How sudden it comes, how crisp and sudden,
the first idea of daylight in a
neutral corner of sky, night exiting
stage-west, then more slowly, deliberate,
the actuality of the thing: sun
through empty maples in the near distance—
the earth is heating up—someone walking
north on Hall Road, someone in Detroit
mourning, someone's body laid out today
in a dated chapel, all this meaning
meaning less each time a story's told, like
shadows filled with snow-melt; I was a child,
then, when I learned to put on a suit and tie,
carry a box to the ground and deposit.

3. *Lake Michigan Winter With Stars*

The sky so clear, so vaporless that night,
like the stratosphere never existed
before right then, the very name for it
new on our tongues—our twenties, new to us;
we were trying them out like a learned word
pushed past the lips and into a sentence
it doesn't quite belong—we dosed half-hits
of *Blue Rose*, waited for “hell-if-we-knew,”
the visible air, a ceiling of stars;
we were in the thick of it, on the head
of a pin poked into the Milky Way,
and we talked like it—we had ideas,
we were clueless, we were on the verge near the
edge at the brink of some big bright emptiness.

4. *Hancock Building Observation Deck*

Chicago's dissolving in a flurry
of clashing weather; in this thick instant
the fog appears dense as cement, concrete
enough to stand on—of course it's not, just
like the lives we move through that move through us
simultaneously—my fear of heights,
of depths really, no different than that
of at least a third of the strangers in
this crowded space, and yet it's mine and mine
alone, this feeling that glass allows for
sight but can't hold the weight—everything has
pros, cons—nothing close to perfectly made;
somewhere out there the lake is down again, and
cars pile up behind the untimed traffic lights.

5. *Dawn, Daleville Marathon Station, Near Muncie*

Something about the light—yellow and pale
green—transforming the darkness into sight,
the man across the pump filling his truck
says, “it’s going to be beautiful
today,” and I nod, blowing a warm breath
into my fist, and return to watching
the numbers spin—I realize this is
Muncie, realize that farmland is some-
thing to pass *through*—the highway’s an arrow
shot from somewhere to somewhere else, and we’re
all on it *pronto*, dormant fields falling
away on both sides, the clouds breaking like
snow in front of the plow, and in this new light
cars in driveways warming up: sputtering facts.

6. *Boats on Grand Traverse Bay, Middle of Night*

Wind from the north means cold again—tonight
more of the same—clouds like frosted glass blown
over the sky, this pure dark of no city lights,
nothing by which to navigate; boats bob
like stars on the lake, and I watch them float
while picking stones from the shore—my thumb drawn
across their sand-etched surfaces, impulses
sent up the arm, blind, toward memory,
a horizon that everything travels—
beacons in the choppy surf, erosion
by the present wind—and these tiny boat-
lights setting out on black waters have not yet
drawn so far away as to be lost from sight.

Youth Longs to Live

which is a kind of dying, the same way a match
is a kind of darkness. Sometimes words
end up in the stickiest situations, as in the phrase
Your chocolate is in my peanut butter.
Sometimes the agreement is to disagree;
“mass” is used just as often in church and lab.
And just when I think that we aren’t ultimately
adding up to what MBA’s call “redundant overhead,”
not just one massive, decaying proton,
some 40-something in an orange Stingray
swipes the parking spot that should’ve been mine.
The supermarket far, far away, half the planet there
to pick up milk or eggs or bread, comparison shopping
for just the right brand of bottled agua.
Call it luck or a lack thereof, but someone out there
thinks water from the Swiss Alps
is decidedly better than its Canadian counterpart,
thinks the best milk is furthest back on the shelf,
a later expiration—“we’ll see who cheats who,”
says Orange Stingray to the grocery store.
Only they don’t put the milk out
before they have to, opting instead to keep it
on ice, a mass of shivering subatomic dairy particles,
in the cooler, in crates, upon which sits
an oily 18-year-old staring out through the skim
at the expanse of his *stock-boydom*.
He’s killing time, wondering how
the gods must’ve felt after stocking the shelves,
fronting the product, sweeping up the storeroom.
Life, to him, is a case of warm beer
smuggled out the back with the night’s trash—
and if he’s not eating a ham sandwich,
surely he must at least be thinking of one.