

An Orange in Flight

brian m. carlson

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Part I. Elemental Dreams

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In Your Fire Dream

You sit around a large campfire. You have a few too many. The campfire forms lips and kisses you. You drop your beer bottle, spilling it on your shoes and find that you are in front of your house. It is burning. You unzip and start peeing on the fire. When the fire department arrives, they join you. The fire goes out and the house is unharmed. Your wife arrives from the store and asks why you have lipstick on.

In Your Water Dream

You walk up to a large bathtub full of soapy water. It contains three nude, attractive young men in it. You join them. One of them introduces himself as Dustin. He is by far the most attractive. The bathtub starts rolling down the railroad tracks. You do not notice that the ground has fallen away. The tracks end abruptly in mid-air. You and the bathtub drop down into a unlined rectangular pool about six feet deep. The young men have disappeared. The water is cool, blue-hued, and translucent. You breathe normally under the water.

Part II.

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The Wonderer

The cold wind blows across the top of the hill
and dead brown grasses crunch beneath footsteps
as he walks down to the bayou.

The bayou that always has too much or not enough
as it wends its way through forbidding concrete walls,
walls that have been painted in pale blues and stark whites
by people claiming ownership of this place.

As he walks to the edge, he sees the water darting over stones,
the light glancing off them in speckled splendor.
He dips his hand in and feels the coolness of water in wintertime,
stones worn smooth by years of droplets dancing over them,
a reprieve from the warmth of the sun.

Pulling off his beat-up Converse, he walks in bare feet
downstream, to where some artful engineer discovered
how to make a bayou babble as it rushes in and out of divots.

Unimpressed, he sits on the bank, and washes his feet in the bliss
of the water, drops rushing up to kiss the cuffs of his jeans,
listening to the endless chatter, wondering.

Noose

A boy hangs from a jungle gym
with a noose around his throat,
choking slowly.

A child's chair lies, tipped over, below flailing feet,
in a bright, eye-catching yellow,
a reminder of carefree days that are no more.

Still, his little boy's haircut,
long in the back, bangs in the front,
flows around the slipknot.

His hands reach for the thick folds of rope
as he instinctively but futilely
tries to prevent his impending death.

Hating himself for trying to live,
he views his life in glimpses and images;
the times that ruined his existence
flow before him, keeping him company
until he stops moving.

One Night

Anxiety is blue; failure, gray.
—Judith Guest, *Ordinary People*

The sun sets,
reaching out with last tendrils
of pleasant-yellow warmth,
buttery and rich.

Still, as it moves toward slumber,
the goldenrod and cornflower
give way to cobalt, ultramarine, navy

and I sit under my desk,
mood gone with the sun,
tears tasting salty as they run down
my cheeks.

I do something—anything—
and don my hoodie, blending in with the night sky.
As I walk, I pass under streetlights trying, failing,
to emulate the sun,
but only providing discontinuity
of the slate-colored sidewalks.

I lie down next to the fountain,
letting its gurgling wash away my fears,
as the controlled randomness of the water
splashes together in happy laughter,
the granite cool against my cheek,
and wonder if I can sleep here, just tonight.

Closed Stacks

I walk in, the brass
door slams behind me,
resounding in this concrete tomb.

The hum of the fluorescence is angry,
a Mac boot chime threatening and discordant.

The room is sterile;
I wish for even the drip of water on this cold floor:
the lines hint where the concrete was smoothed:
imperfect, original, untouched.

A lamp protrudes from the wall, illuminates
the staircase sinking further into depths unknown.
The handrail—simple, metal, black—
is the only nod to the needs of humanity.

Downstairs, neatly organized, parchment sits row
by row on metal shelves. The gentle swirls of ink lean
down from pages peeking over, seeing how far it is
to the pool of grey concrete.

Quickly, I pick it up, carry it upstairs,
read it: prevent its escape.

Transit

Sitting in the back of the bus,
the roar of the air conditioner
and angry revved diesel
is deafening, swallowing, whole.

It consumes all thoughts, ideas, words.
Only gestures communicate:
 raised eyebrows, finger pointed at seat:
 Can I sit there?
 shoulder tap, pointing finger:
 Excuse me, you forgot your bag.

It is calming, soothing, equalizing.
There is neither dialect nor accent,
only raw suggestions, queries, aspirations.

The bus winds down streets, stops, corners;
the flow of people in and out of seats, leaning
against poles, is movement by bus
and person from Enid to Fuqua,
from *what's for dinner?* to *I can't wait
to see the kids*, from business section
to sports page.

Brief words remain in motion.

Trestle

Long ago

trains traveled here
down long, arcing rails
over crossed beams
and past innumerable ties,
chasing hopes and dreams.

Following the wind

they claimed a true right
to be free and passionate,
to love streaking down tracks
screeching brakes
and the rough-and-tumble collision of couplers.

Alive,

they grabbed tall grasses underfoot,
trampled like elephants,
marched across overflowing waters
and beyond the Roman armies.

But now, they clank and clatter

no more
and the once-common chatter
of steel-on-steel
has given way to
the creaks and moans of dereliction
and arsoned smells of wood.

Blue Line

At the station the train moves in slowly,
the wheels hidden but giving themselves away

with their slow hissing, like a cat and snake
at a stand-off. Its horn is unapologetically digital

-ly false. I walk in from dark platform to unnatural,
painful fluorescent lights. I sit down, slouch, relieved

of obligation, listen to wheels and rails
combined beating like drums, relax

into the grey building-shapes dotted with pinpricks of light,
read the Poetry in Motion signs in English and Spanish.

I'm not going anywhere: I'll ride around this city
until the darkness sucks the train into some depot:

I'll walk home, past all-night pizza parlors, steaming
drains, basketball courts, dumpsters smelling at once

of beer and stale piss. I'll ignore people stealing
the Christmas lights off City Hall, keep

my footsteps in rhythm with that *ka-clack* of train
wheels down those thin rails as I make my way home, up

the barred freight elevator, and through the loft's battered wooden door,
to the beat of my Converse squeaking on the kitchen floor.

Friendship

You pause, think of Vodka
and Reb, the ties of sick addiction to other
and self, wanting peace from footballs chucked
at heads, from being locked in small metal cages,
from constant poundings.

You breathe, blink, ask yourself about your best
friend, the one you drink beer and talk away
the afternoon with.

You are jealous that he is not your anchor,
the one you go to with your problems, the
one you destroy (yourself) with. You miss
him: he sucks the life from you to feed you both; you need
him: he has no regrets; you drive
him: from word into action, from thought into deed.

You crave the thick redness as it
washes over your tongue, let music flow
through your eyeballs as they burn hot
and cold together, sip irritation steeped
into anger. It wants you to intoxicate
yourself, never apologizing.

You breathe, steel yourself for another day
you must somehow survive. You wonder
what you will do tomorrow.

Part III.

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A Recounting of an Art Performance

We were having dinner, pizza in fact. His half was Hawaiian; mine, just cheese and pineapple.

“Do I look Jewish?” he queried.

“I can’t answer that,” I replied.

“Why not?” he asked.

“It’d be like you asked me, ‘Do I look gay?’” I answered.

“You think I look gay?” he said incredulously. “Because of the pink. Pink is my favorite color.”

“No,” I said, “because your shirt is ribbed. It’s something a gay man would wear.”

“But I’m not gay,” he objected.

“Exactly,” I said.

She and the Goat

As she deftly maneuvered across the endlessness, she realized that she had to do something: if she did not, existence itself would be lost. She decided to sacrifice her mother; after all, her mother was a rather terrifying being.

The goat, however, was not impressed with this analysis, and told her as much.

"She's your mother," the goat said to her. "You can't harm her, even if life itself is at stake."

"Not just life," she said, "but existence. This planet won't even exist as a cold, barren chunk of rock if we don't do something. I am quite certain you don't want that."

"Well, no," said the goat, "but isn't there some way we can preserve existence without doing your mother in?"

"Not without doing you in," she said.

"I withdraw my objections," said the goat.

Monotone

Jeremy turned off the light and laid back in bed. He put his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling, as he did every night. He closed his eyes and let the light show project onto his eyelids, showing him thick blades of grass against a pale sky, wildfire flames leaping forth in excitement, the stripes of a wolf cub.

His mind seethed in restlessness, boiling and bubbling like a cauldron. This was the way it was every night, and had been for a year. For a year, Jeremy's head screamed in activity, never shutting off. It had been that long since he had gotten a decent night's sleep.

And, like every night, he mumbled a prayer: "God, let this suffering end. May I not have to live through another day of this." Then, he summoned all his strength, forced the light show down to a dull, quiescent grey and his brain to a mere simmer, and eventually drifted off to sleep.

Jeremy awoke at noon, only somewhat less tired than when he went to sleep. After stumbling back from the bathroom, he went to his closet, and started to pick out another day's clothes. He went through black shirt after black shirt, and passing up his sole grey shirt, he chose one bearing an Alice in Chains logo. Noticing that his jeans from the previous day were unsoiled, he put them on, too, and went downstairs.

It happened that it was a teacher in-service day, and since Jeremy's parents both worked, he had the house to himself. He went into the kitchen, and discovering that his mother had put a vase of flowers on the counter, found the box of Froot Loops. Pouring himself a bowlful and a glass of milk, Jeremy sat on one of the kitchen barstools and crunched his way through several hundred cereal rings in slightly different shades of grey. As he did so, Lucky, his black cat, came and rubbed up against his legs. He reached down to pet her; she purred.

Finished, Jeremy put his bowl in the sink and filled it with water, then went back upstairs. He got his sketchbook, turned on his boombox, and sat down to look out of his window at downtown. His hand deftly drew short strokes on the paper, catching every angle and dimension of the skyscrapers, as he listened to the mournful sounds floating from his stereo.

Suddenly, Jeremy heard the crash of glass shattering from downstairs. "Damn it," he thought. "That damn cat broke my mother's vase."

He trudged downstairs and into the kitchen. It was then that he noticed the vase was still there. "Weird," he thought. "It must have been something else she broke." He turned around and bumped into someone, knocking them both to the ground. As they fell, there was a loud gunshot, and Jeremy felt a sharp pain in his abdomen.

The stranger quickly extracted himself from under Jeremy, and ran out the back door. As Jeremy heard the sound of an older car starting and zooming away, he looked down and dipped his finger into the blood rushing from the bullet hole. For the first time in his life, he saw the vibrant redness of the life-giving fluid as it poured out of him.

Jeremy felt very sleepy, and as he closed his eyes, he spoke: "Thank you."

Appendix A. About the Author

brian m. carlson has performed with Turned Up Volume, the Houston Boychoir, and several other groups, including Revels Houston. He has also written other pieces, although mostly of a technical nature.

brian is a jack-of-all-trades and master-of-few whose tastes in most things are just as eclectic. When he's in a good mood, brian enjoys computer programming for Unix and Linux machines, singing second tenor, reading banned books, volunteering in his community, and waxing philosophically with his friends. He lives in Houston, Texas.

Colophon

These works were written in DocBook XML, version 5.0. They were originally written in reStructuredText, from which they were converted into DocBook XML version 4.4, partially automatically, but mostly by hand. After numerous modifications, they were then autoconverted into DocBook 5 by the included upgrading stylesheet and by small manual modifications. They have since been hand edited.

Some works may have been written as **troff -mx** input and then autoconverted to DocBook XML version 5.0 using **thwack**.

PDF output was created by converting the XML source into XSL Formatting Objects (XSL-FO) for letter-style paper using libxml2 and libxslt. The DocBook XSL stylesheets, with a customization layer written by the author, were used for this conversion. The XSL-FO output was then processed into PDF using Apache FOP.

These works were typed and set on lakeview, a Debian GNU/Linux amd64/sid system, with 100% Free Software.