

Four Prose Poems

Benjamin Paloff

Of Names

If a visitor from another planet is going to ruin the last walk of the night with my ingenious dog on any night of the year, it's tonight, the Perseids, strolling again through the runoff of their own indecisive storms, their shots fired, their yada burning up in the yada yada. Stars aren't shaped like stars, but the tin that is hammered into a sheriff's star was forged in one, born in brightness. Whereas our street is so dark I can't remember the names of the cross streets. O magnificent hound, I had looked up from the bill for my father's headstone to see ye in lazy majesty, proud to have never held a real job, and I tell ye that nature's contract is camouflage. What the fashion industry did to the birds' business, the rays have done to me, pulling the rug out from under, as if that were a thing that ever actually happened on land. Suspended above the divot in the shallow reef, a darker gray amidst the gray and brown of dead coral erupting in life, I would adore the juvenile trunk fish like a magus. Like magi, if I'm being honest about myself, seeking a breath of the authentic in trivia as in an obituary. The names are interchangeable, our biases terrestrial. Mere mention of another season in certain climes would kill everything: starfish, sea bat, animal flower, devil ray. A star can fail, too. A devil may care. Years later, nobody cares who shot the deputy, though I know in my heart: 'twas I.

Tomorrow Is a New Day

It's never not after ten in this part of the house, and after a year these walls feel like the bottle around the message: if they could talk, they'd say, "Dude, being a wall sucks." We have to get out, if only into winter, where the potted basil by the garage is pregnant with hope and disappointment, where even as the seraphs and cherubs and other arcane inventions are polluting the sky our monotonous speech has a modest shot at going symphony. One can be pleasantly surprised. I know that what we are feeling cannot be sympathy. I know what knowledge feels like, what it feels like to know that this is happening to everyone we have ever loved and to everyone who's ever loved us back. There used to be travel, there was a dinner party where I was the only one to notice the cat catching fire, which, more than the inside jokes or gossip, made me aware of my foreignness. I can only wonder at the decisions the ever-elsewhere hummingbird is weighing mid-air, but its suspension in all-at-onceness makes perfect sense in this "rarely" so rare as to mingle with never-forever. Taking the corner wide to skirt the black ice, there's no need to keep looking for the island. Better to keep an eye out for what comes in where the basil had been, if only to avoid being the ones who hum along. Let's be the ones who know the words.

It Is What It Is, and I'm Not Here to Make Friends

Late September, last spring's squirrels know it's the warm weather's last day, a little later, a little warmer year on year, and across the park they're dropping walnut pods onto car roofs like they've never heard of insurance. They're driving the dog nuts, and he's right, it's captivating, hard tennis balls dropping out of nowhere onto lawns we've given up on, one or two hitting the pavement and rolling slowly, anonymously toward us, malevolent horror-movie messages, not to extort action or money, really, nothing Jersey about it, just a taunt: You're going to die. Around the corner, the goldfinches are all over the head of the dead sunflower like beetles on flesh, and as we're walking up the driveway there's a mourning dove standing there alone, doing nothing, so we just go into the house, where the central air is slowly fucking the earth, and the refrigerator sometimes makes a noise like something is trying to get out. It's no longer enough to listen. Now you have to tune yourself incrementally to catch the thump of walnuts in the neighbor's backyard, ever closer. It's a goddamn conspiracy.

Freedom of Conscience

Before ourselves, before our husbands and wives, before our children and mothers and fathers, before the thick sea glass I picked up far from the sea and cast across the water because I could not find a stone, before the skipping and its unnecessary disturbance, before the peace I comfort myself to imagine as the default, before the insidious love of comfort, before my “false warmth” and the stone I did not find, before the nettles and tall grass and the path through them that I was too late to realize had not been a path at all but may be now, before the invisible insects and their becoming more invisible, before the local birds rolling their eyes before the manners of the migratory birds, before our ancestors and progeny, before our allies more than our enemies, before our illustrated catalogues of plants and animals as they are shunted from list to list according to their invisibility, before the invisible counters of invisible things, before our taxes and bans, before variations in the salinity and acidity of seawater, before our definitions of what is natural or unnatural and the degree to which we are or are not accounted for in same, before our uses for phosphates in agriculture and laundry, before migratory birds and insects that seem to have stopped migrating, before milkweed planted when the damage is already done, before the comfort of planting as “doing something,” before the time it takes to domesticate the animal and the time it takes for the animal to forget, before the stillness of our atmosphere in a barometric column and the total energy of what used to be called a hothouse hurricane, before our superstorms and supercells, before alliteration, before our heroes and myths, before our God and gods, before the last ripple to reach the shore, we have joyfully abdicated our responsibility.

