

THE PABLO NERUDA PRIZE FOR POETRY
SECOND PRIZE

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The Adorned Fathomless Dark Creation

That a woman calculated light could be drawn
from collected radio frequencies
so that this world could see the shadow, the sink,
the portal out of our observable universe,
that this was all over the headlines the day
we would wake the man that had been
husband, father, grandfather to two children,
that tiny bees were found in some other woman's eye,
feeding off her tears after she'd been plucking
weeds from graves during Qingming,
that, before today, black holes existed only as gaps
in data, as engines that turned existence
around their absence, that before today his absence
was never a presence and none of us knew
about the sweat bees that nest near graves, inside
fallen trees, subsisting on pollen and nectar
but, also, on our salt, so that as our children kneel
beside his casket, maybe it's not the loss,
not the gut-empty sick that only death can give,
not the singularity that swallows all,
everything, even light, maybe there's no weeping,
maybe it's only some bees blurring their sight

Getting Out

So seeing morning so the drunks the morning
so seeing drunks lined up seeing morning lined up
along a rainbow so seeing drunks lined up at the Rainbow
Lounge seeing the theater the triple X's so seeing
XXX so seeing those men in ragged coats
so ragged coats so ragged men ragged faces
like laughing leather so seeing September seeing her son 16
so seeing the river driving over the river so the river
rushing over truck tires her tires rumbling the bridge
so her son 16 the boarded-up mills the half-skulled
factories so her son 16 she wept so she left him
to this town so this is college this so far away
from their two-family house Pittsfield gone so the river
so she wept so that is all we heard of her so my father
told us his goals after college to turn thirty so serious
so business and to get out of this town so easy so much time
left so way past thirty when he showed us the scrub
so near the water near the bridge rumbled above
where he puked his first screwdriver so his last so what

we didn't know what a screwdriver was so much yet
in what we didn't yet so many rides home from soccer
games so many Saturdays his stories on the road
that rivers road that rivers by the river so the river
near a closed theater near a lounge near a college so near
the hospital so we sat by him that Sunday so gone the Sundays
lying next to him watching westerns so a house also gone
so work trips to Seoul so Tokyo so Dallas and Pennsburg
a million frequent flyer miles so 63 so much time so sick
the hospital the hospital he watched us being born where we
watched him die so close the pop and groan so close
the groan the breath of ice floes gun gray the slush
along the road so the river so the road so close the water
the close water his mother so the water
so the water his mother wept to let him go so let him go

Boys Beyond June

My brother and I played Little League
with Marcus and oh shit that kid could hit
and just lights out at short I mean
he balled and ran as mad as winter
rivers so when ten years later
he walks into the packy where
we're buying bourbon and a sleeve
of dip and see the staples holding
together his cornrowed skull we ask
him and he laughs saying the dude
of this girl that he was banging whacked
him from behind with a machete
when he was walking out of a house
party and from the way he tells
us Marcus seems to feel that this
was the worst part like a move like that
was rude or something like to jump
out from the bushes behind porch steps
*was straight up punk and now the part
in my hair is forever fucked* he says
and then he pays for his case of Beast
then we all bullshit our see-you-soons
and my brother and I walk out the door
onto the busted concrete lot
across from the autobody shop
and see the lights leaking out
from miniblinds of multi-family
homes lining Concord Street
and we shake our heads and try to laugh
the way that Marcus always laughed
staring down Brad Pacheco pitching
him chin music with bases jacked
and all the dust the sudden dusk
and all this summer ahead of us

Legend

*You know, man, when I was a young man in high school /
You believe it or not, that I wanted to play football for the coach?
—Lou Reed, “Coney Island Baby”*

Recall the frayed red corduroy robe
and him, my grandfather,
in wide armed wooden chair, in Lowell,
the kitchen where my mother

grew up, the Highlands, Wilder Street,
around us. Now he’s laughing,
watching me dance for him, a foot
shod in black leather tapping

out a memory or just some story
given to me by my mother.
My uncle said Gramp called me Zonka
because my thick toddler

thighs were like that Dolphins back.
And Gramp was sick by then
so all I knew of him was a robe
below a nose broken

seven times between high school
and Green Bay. On my wall,
a photo of him in his Packers gear
sitting with Curly Lambeau,

(posing as if to recapture
something that was candid
a second ago) before the war,
two daughters, before he quit

the NFL to coach, to become Coach,
before state champs, coaching
his son, before working Sundays
at the florist, before telling

my father *No*, before the cancer
and the July day at a rented
house in Seabrook when he said,
Take care of my wife, to my dad

just days before he died. And this
was a life, spun out from frames
of photos and fuzzy anecdotes,
like him playing semipro games

under a pseudonym to send
money home during the Depression
while on a full ride at Fordham,
or sitting on the can

in Lambeau's locker room he heard
his coach come in and say,
We need to sign this Riddick kid,
and held out till they paid

him five hundred more a year,
or that meet in high school
when he figured the angle of descent
from the hole in the wall

how far he'd thrown the shot.
And all of this gets spun
though jennies of local history
myths carried out by sons,

carried into legends looming
around us, measuring us
against our most impossible ghosts.
I can't even recall his voice.

Uncle Ray, who must have sounded
like him, is gone now too,
and the way the men in my family
die young in beige cold rooms

of antiseptic light warps
like whispers woven through
a sick-lipped joke. And these deaths
dissolve our boyhood, weigh

us down as men, as much of that
as we can bend to and still
not break. So as men we learn
to doubt the folklore trill

of our fathers' lives, that no spotlight
fixed on them as either hero
or villain, that neither they nor we
stand protagonist in this play.

For there were mothers and aunts,
cousins, too, drifting through,
all slipping offstage to die in a letter
becoming, *Oh, no, did you*

bear who just passed? at some Sunday brunch
with your uninterested kids.
On the wall of the high school fieldhouse
his name, Raymond E. Riddick,

remains. I recall the dedication,
that building as new and Gram
alive, my mom so proud, the town
honoring their sinewy legend

and I was only seven then.
But I recall ten years
later Chris Lyman laughing, *Must suck*
to have that kind of pressure,

the fucking gym named after him,
like you even had a choice
about being any good?
growled in his wise-ass voice.

I don't know how I felt that weight
but loved that he, the best
athlete in school, empathized,
saw me, even if just

more headlines to be whittled away
by sports page stats that can't,
that don't, ever know the story
between trick play and punt.

And where slipped Coach from all of this?
Ephemeral in my life
as in these lines, the man loses
out to the myth each time

I try to conjure something truer than
some story of him with Jack
Kerouac or pissing next
to John Wayne, the Duke,

truer than the hurt of his daughters
still missing their dad, truer
than the stiff-hipped old men who stop
me (yet, less each year)

to say they loved him, how he made
them men. So, whatever
else he may have been, this
seems where it wants to end, where

rough-hewn nuances of life fade.
I guess it's best to just
print the legend. They'll build a new
high school, that fieldhouse

bulldozed along with his name. We who
are left will forget and thus
we are what is forgotten, highlight reels
lost to dust. All of us.