

Capt. Robert Falcon Scott
At The North Pole
Thinking Of His Wife

I have no doubt of the gifts
of the wide earth:
this bright woman under
this tinder roof,
the sky a pair of summer curtains
pulled aside.

Sleep Race

Closing your eyes sends sight
deeper inside the body: unplugged,
your mouth's socket still glows with speech.

You think that blood must get heavier
and hot with sleep, as if it multiplies
to stretch out the walls of the skin. Your brain rests

heavy, pulling away from its ceiling of bone.
A muscle slides down the base
of your skull. There is a pocket

around your heart, the only piece
still muttering in the cold. You think
that the body must be a boat

and buoyant. The body melts
and rakes itself into a neat pile.
Can a body be refilled by light,

by gyrating waves of light? Resting,
you rattle the bone cage of your face,
break against your forehead like a fever.

The Plenty Vacuum

A white-haired woman just off the Florida interstate
gently putting a 6-pack of Mike's Hard
Lemonade in her backseat.

A Haitian man up to his knees in cholera
and mud, shaking
his dripping hands at an Iowa pig.

The pig's stomach full of *vibrio cholerae*:
it had drunk from the dark groundwater
and swelled up like a raspberry.

Baby's blue Audi going
to the garage for an oil change.
Can anywhere be a farm

if elsewhere there is a famine?
Us walking, if backward,
on a bridge between drought and dearth.

Us, on the bridge, desperate
to believe there is no bridge.
Water to travel underneath,

and above, a little broken sky.
How do you take the land and turn it
into food? A hundred good housewives

all at the same time soaping
and unsoaping dishes by a bright window, practicing
the Great American Right to stay in doors.

After The Shrimp Farms

As quickly as the “shrimp boom” began in provinces such as Samut Prakarn and Samut Sakhon, production crashed as a result of viral disease pathogens, self-pollution and general environmental degradation.

– Brian W. Szuster, Ph.D.

For some time – how long?
years, maybe days –
we stay on the damp land, salted
beyond the thirsty water's limit.
We came here on the lip of a
cocktail glass,
knee-deep in cheap rice, praising
how far the tide swam up the river.
Now the only thing to do is lie
on our bellies and count
the stars like missing grains of corn.

Everything we asked of the land
she answered. The sky swallowed
the diesel we burnt and returned it
as sulphur, settling back down
in streams we can't stop
with our hands. We dig
our fingers to the knuckles
in soil, curl our eyes up and imagine
just waiting for the rain to come back.
The ocean has a limit

to what it can wash away.
We weren't welcome in the ground
or her kitchens, our silence ringing
like a guest on the doorstep with a bottle
of wine. The land beneath us
coughs with our weight.
Each time the sun rises
is a chance to unlearn something:
we still have found nothing to eat
that doesn't cause something else to die.

Electricity

“Think of the NMI effect as a light switch – it’s either completely on or completely off. During the 30-second cycle, the sensory and motor function signals are confused, which inhibits muscular control and causes incapacitation.”

– Taser International Inc website

For days, the white points where the electricity entered
will stay white on my fingers. I am trying to be

in order to avoid erasure, to find a way to multiply the world's furniture
in my image. To have the heat in my blood

be translatable. Can we learn the architecture of the soul
by breaking the body down? When I ask,

the man in charge nods and closes the electric door.
I search for a shell into which to stuff myself,

bawl, curl and uncurl at the edge of a fleeting ocean.
My tongue, thick as clover honey, trails from my mouth.

I take a mouthful of water and try to hold it. I slip like a skirt out
from under a belt: I try and try to put

out a fist. We asked him to rewrite our muscles as if
our bodies were not also in the room, listening.

Lead Poisoning

“Lead entering the respiratory and digestive systems is released to the blood and distributed throughout the body. More than 90% of the total body burden of lead is accumulated in the bones, where it is stored. Lead in bones may be released into the blood, re-exposing organ systems long after the original exposure.”

– NYS Department of Health

At a time much removed from the window
when he got easily drunk
and celebrated easily, his wife

in a thin bikini, laughing, putting her tongue
into the ice of her drink, near
the skirts of the highway that drink in the exhaust,

a few small lights flickered on and off in his bones.
Old age lifted the calcium lid from his skeleton,
cutting tiny slices out of the middle of the question.

Silently the doctors stained the cross-
sections and bent them over the knee
of a grim-faced x-ray expert, broke them like paper

under scissors. Victories have thousands
of fathers, but age and decay are orphans.
Sleeping lead pops its cramped shoulders

in the deep pools of his tibia:
the half-life collects in the bone pores.
That bitter element floods back

into his bloodstream, rewriting his worn mind's
old electric channels. Plenty of the possible geographies
in the brain are incompatible with life.

I Met a Woman That Did a Wonderful Thing

and thought *can I be your boyfriend*

can I know how it feels
to be next to your body at night

can I catch the glimmers of your hair
like drops into a bucket

when your eyes close, the things
I will scribble quickly on your eyelids!

the traces of your hair quietly retreating
from its battle across the earth of your neck

can I write your name
again and again across the sky
in letters thousands of years high

invent a language no one can speak
to explain your tortoiseshell eyes

the sounds your body makes
in the morning click as if

all your pieces are moving wrongly each against another

every woman wants a bridle
to buck against, wants to be the wild one
I want to lie down next to

one day I'll catch onto your shadow and reel you in
by the postmarks, the red ink geographies

a man once said his woman's waist
was the river delta, a fist
of salt water balled and loosed

yours is the skirts of a heavy flower
pressed open by wind, or
a heavy skein of water about to fall

you try to love me without any poetry
I ask you where you've been

late in the night there are horses
sprinting past in the desert nearby
I sleep on but the dream of you

stays awake, light spooling back into your eyes
as you wait for the first thick medallion of dawn

In The Time Of The Petrol Wars

Between the slow pockets of the roundabouts
laid out from Main Street past the college,
a small blue openback truck is posted
on the edge of the pavement,
caught like a deposit against the skin of an artery.

A man and his dog are asleep in the back,
laying out their bodies in July's static air.
The dog puts his tongue out
into the heavy sunshine. They are a closed circuit

like a lightbulb and battery:
he can sit in the front seat of the truck and be golden;
he and his dog can feast
on the same quick food wherever they land.
They are a mirage
of self-reliance, as if motion can be called
into a bottle like fluid.

But how long it takes
to get the machinery going!
Some mechanism inside ticks off the unseen miles
that circulate the idling pipes.

War used to be a shout
against the dark, a distant shell
above the bacteria of a distant enemy.
Then home to count the holes in the soaring body.
Will we grow old, and oily,
and be marked as those who have lived

through war? Without noticing, maybe
we have become converts
to smaller and smaller spits of soul.
I approximate over and over the volume
of me, calculate
how many fractions of myself will suffice.

If we could stomach the sour taste
of this world, could we see
whether we build a house out of the present
for more ancient fears?
Our bodies must be engines,
replaceable part by part and complete.
We are startled when
the muscles clamp for whatever reason down.

The road is a thin sheen laid out
over the old drag-racing scars, the roundabouts
blunt jewels like lifesavers.
Later, further in the city, the man stands
on the tall cab of his pickup, one foot
on a gospel boombox, yelling a kind
of salvation at the trawling bloodline of Main Street.

Trapeze

We slip across the river in a cup
under a small sail, water

running its fingers under our keel.
The shore runs in and out

of the river like a key's teeth. Sing Sing
passes by on the left,

the water shaking the island like
a marble in the palm of its hand.

The river doesn't hold well a saddle, rising as
the wind slaps its hard hand over the surface.

We sing out on one hull,
a thin wire run around my waist

to hold my weight to the top
of the mast – I put my body

down as ballast against the weather.
My eyes turn wide at the horizon:

I've never before seen the wind clenched
into such a careless fist, never the sky

look away so coldly when we went down.
The sheet sail closed over my head,

swollen with salt. I split
into as many parts as I could handle

and let the wind take each away
in one of its stray crushing hands.

The Canal Outside Saverne

The sky bites its bruised lips
and rain silvers the canal water.
Is this my body shivering
in a boat? The lock swells
when water is let in,
slapping its wake across the table
of the canal. I thought
the lock gates opened – too soon, the throat
of the world quick and caught on us.
The road above ticked along with bicycles.

Two boats meet head-on in a lock:
one cannot rise while the other wants
to fall. The canal raises its hips up the bank,
rain quiets the surface.
The lock exhales in thin clouds.
Slowly we let ourselves
by the ropes down. Those low clouds
rise to the sun, split the closest mountain
in two, trick the eyes into a valley.
I drift in place, keep my eyes

on the stone road ahead. It feels like
falling into the earth. The waters build
and are swallowed again in stone.
This land briskly changed hands
like a watch during the war.
Above us the road continues across
the top of the gate, and on the canal bridge,
lock-watchers stand. They want
and at the same time don't want luck
to come to the end of its rope.