

Still Life



By

Matthew James Friday

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Still Life

In my 40's, trying to like olives and opera
 as entropy outweighs denial: grey hair,
 odd aches and slowly healing scars,
 that sad acceleration of weeks witness
 with wine. And I finally understand
 Still Life art.

For years I wondered what the fuss was:
 tumbling bouquets of flowers in vases,
 bulbous fruit and plump vegetables on plates,
 dead fish and game flopped over furniture,
 draping cloth, sunlight glasses and porcelain,
 the occasional skull -
 therein was the clue.

I never questioned the skill involved:
 mastering form, perspective and colour;
 the bringing to life of something that is still
 movement out of light, shape out of solidness,
 the poetry of creating art out of emptiness.
 But why do people care

when they can fawn over epic landscapes,
 romantic impressions, life-like portraits,
 get mad about modern art. Then, I stare
 at the victory against the hyperactive decay
 of life: *Still Life With Flowers in a Vase*
 by Jan Davidszoon de Heem -

Monet's *The Peach Glass* hinted in orange
 glassiness that some deeper sense compelled

the artist to freeze in a frame the mundane,
the momentary, preventing it's fading, its betrayal.
Beloved Vincent with his beloved sunflowers
holding onto the light, yellowing our minds as

his darkens. Stillness before the flowers drop,
the fruit rots, the light of the day lost
and the shining surface of that house-hold
object goes back to being dull and forgotten.
The dead on platters, the staring skulls, all
ways of stating

the coming stillness.

The final lesson is in intonation. No,
the skill is not in stillness, not in what is held,
but in movement, in what is given. I need
to say the phrase differently when framing
myself within the living, breathing art.
Despite the entropy,

there's *still* life.

Light Makes Us All Ghosts

Even light takes time to travel.
Millions of years to milliseconds;
so everything we see is in the past,
every moment of experience,
so pressing and present, is past,
every person a shade of ghost.

We are just flickers of molecules
hanging on a moment of light,
a miracle of suspended seconds
believing its bulb to be bigger,
always a few milliseconds ahead
of the universe until the final day
the light catches up
and goes out.

Cow Bells at Kandersteg

They are still ringing
as night falls in sedimentary folds,
enclosing the fossilised sky.

In the questionable gloom
the blinded cows keep grazing -
the clanging rhythm continues,

the discordant music of ownership,
of Mankind's mastery over
beasts, the rich fields, even

the mountains - the bells
ring in valleys, in high pastures,
under the melting eye of time.

The mountains will play the final
note: long after I leave Kandersteg,
and the last cow is led to slaughter

and the bells themselves become
archaeological questions, fusing
with the bones we all belong to.

The Crow and the Douglas Fir

Crow born in the Douglas fir,
croaking, voice like cracking bark,
a black hole happening

in moments the tree cannot measure,
its ringed heart beats in decades.
Now flying between bare trees,

a black photon appearing when
observed, voice like creaking time,
disappearing back into potential.

Something Better to Do in Olomouc, Czech Republic

Late Saturday afternoon in Horní náměstí, the Upper Square in Olomouc. A few drifting tourists. A moody, immature storm spitting threats. Swifts diving for cover, pigeons hurrying to roost. A wind trying to conduct something dramatic, long promised.

Without announcement or applause an orchestra appears from out of the Town Hall, as if bubbling out of the astronomical Clock, the one the Soviets rebuilt with a procession of proletariats. There used to be Saints but they were martyred in 1942 by the Nazis, not satisfied with suffocating the sounds of the city's Jews.

The orchestra unpacks their cases around one of the baroque fountains, Hercules with his mace ready to strike, trampling the hydra, many mouths gushing water. Twelve violinists and three cellists, all of them teenagers of varying heights and ages. Organised in a semi-circle, they tune up without a fuss, confirm the first song and flash-mob into music.

Amazement leaps from bow to brow. The storm holds off. A crowd gathers in minutes, smartphones out, toddlers wriggling with joy. We, the middle-aged, witness the impossible: young people with something better to do. For us. Playing as well as any professional adults. Julius Caesar, the legendary founder, would halt his ambitions watching these teenagers play. A white bird crowns Holy Trinity Column where Apostles, surviving Saints and even Mary nod along. The youngest – a boy with a mare's mop of hair – shows his mature skills, skittering bow over strings, fellow musicians lined up behind, patiently gifting him this moment.

Now applause, applause for each piece, for each teenager's moment of glory even when two bulging men, prowling for beer, walk through the orchestra, guts twitching. Nothing can deter the teenage spirits except time, which runs out, clock striking.

They pack up and are gone in seconds, leaving everyone looking around, wondering the same questions, music ringing.

Still Life with Red Cabbages and Onions by Vincent Van Gogh

If there is beauty in basic vegetables,
earth bulbed sustenance,
with their finger-printed lines
and licks of bloody light arcing
through dull, every day colour,
then there can be poetry too;
a few fraught words for the feast.

In Cafe Brasileira, Lisbon

He studies the newspaper, neatly folded, slowly circling words, phrases, pinpointing paragraphs sometimes with a surgical pen, the eyes flicker to witness someone sit near him, squeezed on tiny hexagonal tables. His white, precise hair-line receding, the pages decreasing, more circling, small shots of coffee, knuckle pastry, a tiny nod when someone leaves; just enough to acknowledge they existed next to him – tourists mostly, like me, looking for Fernando Pessoa, as he looks out of every pair of eyes.

Hurry Away

In the *Kaiser and Kuche* cafe in Seefeld
an old man slides in from the snow and sits
quietly by the door, orders *café und kuchen*
as perhaps he does every afternoon,
tradition. Clothed in shades of grey,
his bald head an Alpine mountain rising
out of snow-lined trees. Polished black shoes
- an effort should always be made.

My wife says I eat like he does: tongue
rummaging my mouth, licking my lips,
nodding my head to the timely tastes.
She likes him. *That will be you in years to come.*
But where are you? I don't want to be
alone, paying the bill while still drinking,
wiping my face with a handkerchief,
crumbs stuck in the same corners
no one left to tell me, so I hurry away.

The Many Faces of Mount Hood, Oregon

After a long time away, I see Him again in Portland when crossing the Marquam Bridge (built 1966). There's that same gasp of disbelief: surely He's painted on the background, the backdrop of a geological magician's prop, a copy of Mount Fuji's perfect point. He's dressed in a year long white silk kimono dangling over a hairy belly of vascular gorges, time-knuckled hill, firs, fast flowing water.

Seen again from a street in White Salmon, Washington (est. 1852) He's now a bent-back Iguanodon's thumb poking time, hitchhiking half a million years. From the back deck of *Everybody's Brewing* in the High Street He's the tooth of a frosted megalodon biting heaven's breast – four times since the Ice Age he's torn at the darkening flesh. Now He's still-jaw and mumbling about the next cataclysmic meal.

Long before my white-faced arrival, the Multnomah tribe molded basalt into their myth. Now He's Wy'east, son of Great Spirit Sahale. He threatens with thunder and strikes lightning spears at Pahto, His rival mountain brave. For the love of La-wa-la-clough, He and the Pahto burn forests and villages, and their feud ends with the sundering of The Bridge of the Gods. Enraged at destruction and disgrace, The Great Spirit decides to teach all three mischievous children a lesson. La-wa-la-clough's not given any chance to protest, she's just struck dumb. Pahto strikes all three children into unforgiving stone, leaving behind the mountains as memorials.

For millennia, Wy'East stares north at his old enemy, now known as Mount Adams; dreaming of his old love, now called Mount St Helens. Her Hellenic face has fractured and fallen, still frail.

We choose Him to be in the background of our wedding, to be the natural wonder of our single day that is not even measured in stone or dormant magma. But measured by us with Him as a sharp, ancient, always active point of reference. Then I am back in Portland, five years since I started this observation; a few tides of snow and bird lifespans. He fills the view from the plane window: frighteningly close and massive in his tectonic contours and tone of long-time.

A Hotel Near Paddington

You are alone, you are alone, you are alone,
the chant of the District Line tube train outside
my window and below, close to the surface,
a metal snake, its belly full of students going home.

I sit on my bed, thin white sheets like flattened
prawn crackers; the TV on for company, the alarm
set early, the passing of happy voices in the corridor,
slurred by drink and thin walls. My room is small,

a box filled with old furniture, the cream walls hung
with four pictures: still life flowers in sour seasons:
spring, summer, autumn, winter; all year long
You are alone, you are alone, you are alone.

There Be Whales!

At the Sea Lion Caves we watch
a rookery of basking, bickering
sea lions, some rolling in muscular

waves. Further off a grey shadow
near the cliff. Probably rocks.
So many darkening hues here,
countless white waves razoring

the water. Suddenly the grey rises,
slashes open the wave, gushes
white relief and arches a crinkled
spine several times before bobbing

back down, hardly moving, waiting
for a smaller shadow to approach,
shed the same grey mantle, tear
silken blue for breath then sew

together in a gulping sink. We watch
in wonder, experts now at telling
whales and white waves apart.
We walk backwards to the Gift Shop,

Ahab reluctant to give back to the sea.
We share with couples, families, children
with excited pointing. Look! There!

Blue Curacao

For Glynn

'Go on boy! Go on!' cries the butcher
waiting nervously at the winning post,
punching the air as his greyhound,
Blue Curacao, streaks along the arterial
track. 'Go on! For me, boy, for me.'

All week he's up to his elbows in joints,
loins, portions, quick cuts, friendly manner;
as tender to customers as he is to meat.
The betting slip in his bony hands drips
with sweat. 'Come on! For your old man!'

Suddenly the crowd cries. 'Come on boy!'
The butcher's heart thumps hard.
Here come the hounds. 'Come on boy!'
Voice hoarse, lungs straining for air.
Here they are. Blue Curacao's in the lead!

Like a flash of steel, the sliver of meat
and hard muscle pumps past Glyn.
'Come on boy! For your old man! For me!'
Blue Curacao slices through the finish line.
The butcher chops the air triumphantly.

The Prague Hare

It sits wrapped up in tangled undergrowth
on a tiered bank of the *Letesnke Sady* park,
towering ears tuning into wavelengths
deaf to passing walkers, sniffing dogs,
hammering dance music from a party boat,
the cries of the future baby just implanted.

The hare is more a spectacle than the setting
sun blushing the clouds as they strip
over St Vitus' cathedral; angels atop columns
with outstretched hands. The new night
fertilising spires and roofs of the Old Town.

Rainbow beside the TV Tower penetrating
a sky aching with bruising rain clouds. We
watch the hare eating, looking up our way,
sniffing our hopes, alerted but not alarmed.
Passing students, busy with cameras, ignore
us as we stare into our secret.

Dot, Dot, Dot.

This is how you spell *hope* and *fear*
with three quick kisses.

The great tease of grammar,
turning finality into possibility,
completion into continuation,
an answer into a question.

Three tickling finger tips
pattering the skin of a sentence,
quivering it to giving just a little more.
A cliffhanger... if you want. The ellipses

prefers to think about the view,
something that can wait a little
until you are ready to see
what
comes
next.

How Semicolons Work

That eager puppy of grammar,
stopping a clause and wagging
its tail at another; so keen to play.

The two of us tugged by dating fate
from either side of the Thames;
lonely clauses drawn together.

One of the first things you told me
was how semicolons really work;
how they are playful and poetic.

I never thought of grammar like that,
but then I'd never met you before;
never brought those two facts together.

For three hours we talked earnestly,
happily about stories and politics,
how to pee as a form of protest,

fat cricketers who bowl over bellies,
how to hold china tea cups properly.
We took turns on your Brompton bike.

I ate my first falafel from a Portobello
road street stall; felt a fool when the sauce
dripped down my jeans, even worse

when I athletically returned a straying
football only to slice it further away.
Sarcastic applause from the children.

You thought it stupidly adorable.
I thought about us meeting again;
the semicolons' gift of continuation.

Coyote

You shock me, slipping stealthily
out of native stories, yellow fields,
the hissing August heat. You stand
on the side of the road, on a hill
high above Mosier, panting in incessant
heat, ragged in your grey mantle,
the exhausting expectation of tricks.
You stare at me as I ride pass slowly,
looking back. You sniff the shade
of the empty road, tasting Columbia's
waters nearby, fear of fires, charcoaled
trees from clumsy summers gone,
the fizzling heat over the fields. I ride
on and you slide back into hunger.

In Rooms, Therefore We Are

The rooms we build define us, shape us, create and consume us.

To function as a modern human is to be in a room: offices, classrooms, waiting rooms, shops, bedrooms, gardens, cafés, libraries, trains, airplanes, theatres, cinemas and stadiums.

Alone or confessing, on holiday, marrying, working or transgressing. Watching or waiting, dancing, defecating or contemplating.

Our own heads are a skeletal room we stare out of; thoughts, ideas and words bouncing around the bony walls. Billions pray to be safely ushered into the everlasting room beyond these rooms, to be reunited with those who were once in our rooms.

The number of rooms make all the difference between a slum resident and a billionaire, freedom and imprisonment; rooms that can be built from waste material or secreted into yachts; rooms that only the most valiant warriors can ascend to while others descend to the deepest unreachable rooms.

To feel free, we leap over the walls to the open, roomless countryside, though we return to rooms at night or make them using tents. We stare deeply and longingly into the blinking night sky, wondering if there are rooms on other planets like our planet, which is one giant, spinning room, moving through an ever-expanding room.

Even the atom itself is a kind of theoretical room, built mainly of nothing, of potentially something through which hums the moments of energy that we use to build up all the matter around us.

Perhaps we love rooms because that is where we began, in our mother's warm interior room; safe from everything outside

and other. Perhaps it is the safety of this dark, nourishing room that is the shadow between every room thereafter.

As children we build pretend rooms, hide in them from the monsters that sneak into our rooms, that lurk in their own dark spaces in the corners.

As adults we spend days rushing in and out rooms. Now, confined to our rooms in fear of that which knows no walls, we are more thankful than ever for the walls. We stare at each other from balconies and buildings, all afraid in our rooms and wondering when the doors will open again.

Balance

From the balcony I watch a cat
watching a squirrel leaping
from one tree to another, change
its mind, return and scuttle
up and down branches, a slither
of fast fur perfectly balanced,
death either side of sure claws.
The squatting cat tilts its head
as the squirrel becomes branch,
then pads off to draw its own line.

Glynn

Already insulting,
leukaemia slapped
one half of his face,
making it melt like a lolly
on a hot day. A palsy,
they called it. His speech
slurring like treacle.
Thick grey hair gone
in a day.

He was not easily defeated.
Humour was his shield.
The difficulties now jokes:
needing help to go the toilet,
the way his eye bulged -
horror movie face - dribbling
when he was eating, his limp
left hand once strong enough
to chop cow carcasses.

This man,
just a few months ago,
a butcher, beloved
for his juicy banter
and A+ attitude

now a lump of meat;
tenderly handled by nurses,
and a puppy-loyal best friend.
No wife or lover.

So we all loved him.
In public, he was our hero.
In private we cried for him.

The Porpoise

Fattened with plastic and viruses,
the porpoise splashed on the Christmas
Eve Pacific City sand flapping a fin
at distressed walkers, dogs hungry with
confusion. The flukes digging the sand -
a message mistaken for a desire to return.
Volunteers waded up to their waist,
pushing the porpoise back out, but she
turned back, rolled in by a corrupted
instinct and waves washing over and
over her, slapping her higher up on
the sand where the white lip of foam
was stained with corpuscles of plastic.
There she lolled, waving us away.

Kites Dancing in Switzerland

Above Ladir, a loving pair rise up
from yellow meadows, tottering cows,
bells ringing. They gladden the thermals,
wings outstretched in effortless prayer
to invisible forces, the unseen spheres
that turn under and around. Upwards
in circles of affection they wind, orbiting
around and around each other, tipsy wing
tips just about touching. They dip
into each other's elliptical space, swerve
aside and fall back into smiling circles.

Only jealous crows
interrupt the heavenly dance, forcing
emergency maneuvers, ugly ducking,
diving to avoid disruptive black holes,

but easily out-swooped and away
to dance in a higher atmosphere, above
the deepening V's of the Glogn valley
forested forearms, the rising mountains
still singing with the white aria of winter,
conducted by music written in eons.
The kites dance in and out of their solar
system while above swifts silently
watch in their effortless ballet play of air
and geometry, graciously sharing the floor.
The knowing moon softly bears witness.

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Jesus and His Animal Disciples

Herzlich willkommen auf der Wildmoos Alm brauhaus, 1338m.

It's two days after Valentine's Day, and my wife and I sit in the main reception room of the *Wildmoos Alm* brauhaus, wondering where exactly in the world we are. We had traipsed up the mountainside from Seefeld, the Austrian Winter Olympic town, snow crunching underfoot, the sky a hungry blue, our breath silky ice.

Now we're jammed elbow to elbow with hikers, skiers and snow-tourists while Elvis, Abba, John Denver and Austrian folk music play. A jocular waiter weaves through tight tables with beer, trays of schnapps, bowls of strudels, meat dumplings, saying, "Hello, Johnny" to other English tourists. Not us. We are invisible, for the time being.

Above is the crowning glory of Evangelical Alpine hunters: Jesus on the cross and stuffed outcasts from Noah's Tirol travels. Under Our Lord's wounded feet, two shocked grouse; to His right, a devilish looking ram's skull and horns; to His left, a defunct cuckoo clock and the grinning head of a boar with a bell below his neck and a scarf made of dry viper's skin. Under His holy nailed feet half a brown bear rearing out of the wall, mouth aghast in silent roar, claws scraping the air, as surprised as we are to be hanging out here.

Nearby, clamouring for a space next to the Saviour, is a strange assembly of regional Germanic acolytes: antlers, foxes on their hind legs, stoats in glass dioramas, framed paintings of falcons and deer, photographs of Bayern Munich FC and a random assortment of past wedding guests. Around Purgatory there's an even stranger retinue: a huge straw-filled Tirol bear, corn cobs drying from a rafter, witches flying from the eaves and locked in glass cabinets topped with a marmot, a goose, a wooden Tyrollean farmer; an indoor conifer tree hanging with fairies,

flowers, children's tokens; bundles of mistletoe above a corner table.

I don't remember when we left or if we ever did. We are still sitting in the main reception room of the *Wildmoos Alm* brauhaus, wondering where exactly in the world we are. Jesus looks down at us and sighs with divine disappointment.

The Birds in These Strange Times

A pair of kites have come for the lake
now the airport is closed, buoyed by empty
skies, rustling wooded hills, lacy waters.

My wife shows me trees on the lake's
whispering edge where cormorants gather,
roosting in the trees like paused pterodactyls.

An adult swallow giddy with its suddenness,
rolling in the early April air, the very first
migrant recoiled by a changed climate.

The Robin's Last Moments

A sudden sloppy
thud.

Feathery bundle tumbles past
and fluffs on the floor.

A robin, quivering.

It arches its wings over its body
shuddering in a tomb of its own making.

Then stillness.

A high school boy stares down
in disbelief,
points downwards.

Rumspringa in Southern Oregon

At a Motel 6 at Gold Beach.
 an Amish family packs their car with early
 morning urgency. The teenage boy
 with his fuzzy chin, his sister swanning
 a dress of pale water and a white headpiece,
 a shield from the world. As they leave,
 I think they're beautiful but can't explain why.

Heading south on Highway 10.
 We jump an invisible line in reason.
 The car radio rants about the falsehood
 of evolution, callers with pontificated proof:
 in Texas dinosaur fossils with human footprints.
 Megalodons might still be alive, ya know.
 No one knows what the appendix is for.
 The Flood wasn't really all that long ago.

Morning in a coffee shop in Gold Beach.
 An animated old man holds court with a jury
 of reverential peers, all entranced. "Nearer
 we get to death, the more church is our waiting
 room, the Bible our instruction manual."
 He describes a local woman as short, unattractive.
 Snuffled giggles from his complicit disciples.
 Sigh from a young woman at a table nearby.
 He nods her an apology. The cafe owner sits down
 and confesses her mother's many heart problems,
 depression, other ailments. Good days and bad.
 She sighs, heavy shoulders. "They fixed her heart.
 Old ma be haunting us for a few years yet."

Queuing for the power boat tour of Rogue River.
 A man talks about his first wife being Catholic.
 "But we had a bun in the oven under six months,

so got married. What ya gonna do?" His second wife is Jewish and he's grown to really appreciate Judaism as he's always been interested in Israel. We hop aboard the boat and surge up the Rogue, into God's own country, hoping to see bears.

The Toaster

My wife laughs at me this morning,
that kind of strained-amusement laugh.
She tells me about my morning routine:
shouting at the toaster, waving a burnt hand,
toast clattering on the plate, swearing.
Nothing much learned. Same drama
played out every morning, same small burn
that disappears with the toast, leaving
my wife shaking her head but laughing.

The Hallstatt Skeleton

Two Korean boys agape,
pointing at the bleached bones
of the Neolithic Salt miner
laid out in reverential order, small

Adams reaching to a gaping god.
The Peter Pans look up at parents,
needing confirmation that horror
on proud display is a real thing,

not a model, surrounded by fake
grave goods, examples of hundreds
found in Hallstatt's Neolithic burials,
the world's first ever salt mine,

now a theme park on the Salzberg
peering down at the Hallstatt lake
cupped in an Alpine pelvis, mobbed
by tourists sweetening life before

they become bones. Having summited
40, I am tottering between boyhood
and being buried, looking down
at the bones of those whom I love.

The Jigsaw

Only in my early middle-age years did I piece together the mystery of the jigsaw puzzle. As a child I never understood the attraction of spending hours slotting together pieces of a randomly divided picture to end up with a complete image that would then be broken up again. Why would mesmerized adults click away their precious hours? The older the adult, the more they liked puzzling.

Now I'm middle aged, the counter-intuitive has slowly revealed its secrets. Here is an activity that defies a crisis, that slows time, that delivers a slow-cooked triumph unlike few other activities. Here is a process that mirrors life itself except here you can be the true master, the divine force of creation and control, defining order from chaos.

The chaos begins with the bang of opening the plastic bag and the spilling of all those elemental pieces that swirl around, discordant and disconnected. Then bring in energy and patience to sort out the particles: a pile for the edges and the rest can wait. Now the defining of the space, connecting corners so that the space takes shape and the real investment of time begins.

Hours become days and weeks as you slowly sift the primeval soup and draw together crooked atoms to form elements, shapes, a sense of something grander. That triumph of a joining enough pieces to make a swirling ball of sense. Slowly bring order to chaos with the organization of pieces. Gravity of the edges creates a defined structure and space. You play at being a Biblical god forming something meaningful from darkness and clay. Each successful click is a step in the evolution of this matter towards complexity, something orderly emerging from the disorder: the life of the picture you are animating.

So it unfolds, this puzzle of your life. So you devote time and concentration, and you build and create, you realize and revitalize. The truth: the puzzle is everything you have ever wanted to achieve, including the sense of completion and knowledge that complexity can withstand the chaos. You are the master. You are the maker. Now it is your choice how long to preserve and when to destroy.

Back to Blue

Imprisoned in caution,
the cases rising, fear abundant,
school closed, classes cancelled.
All online now. I watch
a documentary about Miles Davis.

I have always struggled with Jazz,
berated the lack of melody,
felt lost amongst the jostling notes.
But following his story, the craft
from the chaos, the passion in tone

I choose to try again. Back to Blue
starts, and notes sound as alarming
as the online coverage but the jingling
chords, the blasts of trumpet suddenly
sounds peace while the world tears.

Riding Along the Columbia River with My Father-in-Law

He rides ahead, always ahead, calves
of lined marble, seventy-four year old
model man, while I struggle on behind,
gasping even with electronic assistance.

We ride the Columbia Scenic Highway,
east above the wind-peddled river,
parallel with sedimentary inclines, lines
spoked by giant tectonic artists, framed

in fields of lava and summer orange hills.
I have none of the proper clothing, just
a borrowed helmet and water bottle. Jim's
just pleased I want to share the journey.

The path sneaks alongside tumbling cliffs
with balding, scruffy woods of oak and fir,
incessant hiss of crickets, bald eagle nests
palmed in lightning punched trees, a red tail

hawk fledgling mewling from abandoned
branches. Welcome shade. Jim's far ahead,
full head of hair. Then the knuckled hills
covered with yellow grass. Screes of spilt

stone, dark overhangs, gullies of calloused
basalt. I day dream of overlooking cougars
excited by my panting and slow progress.
Jim stops, looks back, points out potholes,

waits in Mosier for me to catch up. Checks
I'm OK to push on to Rowenna outlook.
We climb to views of the river cutting a V

decision into ancient magma. Vultures

wobble as they hunt on hungry thermals.
The groan of the heaving highway, the sigh
of a mile long freight train. We turn and cruise
back a different route. The fearless grand

father guides me on how to be safe downhill:
tease the brakes, take corners at 20mph, enjoy
the screaming wind in the corners of my life.
But I am the nervous boy, unwilling to release.

We return to the State Park carpark safely.
Why did I think any differently? No doubt
from Jim, smiles, assurances of enjoyment.
plans for the next adventure into manhood.

Shooting Star

New year and nearly time to leave La Ventana.
My father-in-law and I are on the patio roof
looking up at the breaking Baja night sky,
that harsh honesty of physics dressed
in white light and hidden day-dreams
when an orange fiery eye blinks in the north,
blushes for half a second and burns out.
We are both awed and scuttle downstairs
to boast the shared fortune to the family.

A few weeks later on the phone.
My father-in-law - retired anesthesiologist -
has bad news. Another retired professional
on the beach and regular lecturer on star gazing
insisted the star was the International Space Station,
third brightest object in the night sky.
Questions for this disappointing diagnosis:
burning orange then bleeding away?
Apparently, yes. That is a normal sighting.

I have never accepted this outcome.
The poet prefers the truth of fiction, after all.
No matter what we saw, we know what we felt,
we know we both made wishes, both
hoped for them to prevail, both.

When I had poems published in [The Peacock Journal](#), I was asked to add short definitions of 'beauty' to accompany the poems. Here are the three definitions.

Beauty 1 - Still

On a hill above Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic. Winter's leafy waste still carpeting the empty woods. Snowy patches still on the elbows of the Ore Mountains, fending off East Germany. Still colourful the grand Victorian spa hotels in the narrow valley below where mineral-drenched spring waters quench tourists. Above, private jets ferrying rich Russians, beautified, molded bodies. Still luminous moss on the grave stones in *Hrbitovni* cemetery where three still figures squat, hidden in hoods.

Under a leaning yellow willow tree, a Czech woman in a red coat sits still, staring into her Sixties, long black hair like the fine, forlorn branches tickled by cold March fingers. Two boys walk past, just cubs testing strength, elbowing and flicking each other; never still with never-men giggles.

Beauty 2 - Refusing to Be Beaten

Refusing to be beaten: dwarfed by decades but dressed like a teen in a bright bikini, blonde hair, outrageously large sunglasses. She went up an elevator in a shopping mall while a young couple came down, looked down, noticed, sniggered, whispered about this youthful soul refusing to age appropriately.

The aged beauty saw the young couple, knew exactly what they said, what they thought, but carried on going up. She adjusted her glasses and cracked out a reddened smile.

Beauty 3 - Just Children

Beauty is a brilliantly blue November day that make the roots of winter wither into forgetfulness. The orange and yellow trees in the city park are so brightly colourful you forget the slow death that paints them. The continually falling leaves, filling the air with fluttering action. The leaves on the ground, fossilized in the frost. The sound of laughter: an adult snapping arms at falling trees, being a leaf-eating monster for his toddling son who giggles and runs, all limbs in waving steam-engine motion.

The fact that this is a German garden, the father and son are Chinese, and I am an English observer reveals how we are really all just children delighting in the passing world.

The Rhino

Pictured on Bahnstrasse in Zurich a life-size metal rhino, in honour of Albert Durer

who manipulated the armoured beast into Renaissance imagination.

Four hundred years later, there is two white rhinos female left

and a few thousand black rhinos, a few hundred Sumatran rhinos. Tourists poach pictures

of the metal rhino and saunter on through Durer's sigh. The rhino remains unmoved.

Displaying *Rejected*

This is progress. New
post office, no longer
huts. New building, new
technology: a metal

chute that slurps coins,
counting where humans
can't be trusted, only
this machine spits out

my coin, again, again,
again, ten times the time
it would take a human
to open a cash register,

exchange change, wish
for a nice day. Not today.
Rejected, the coin. Her
immoveable face, faint

sigh knowing some time
soon she won't be
needed, just machine
displaying: *rejected*.

Re-Connected

When you left me, I didn't panic. Not at first. There was disbelief and a refusal to accept the truth. I just calmly retried our connection. Something faulty but easily fixed. There are lulls in every relationship. After the tenth try, the worry whipped up inside. You had left me without warning or explanation.

What had I done? The silent emptiness gnawed at me. I could no longer check in on you, satisfy my addiction with fidgeting fingertips, use you at my favourite sites, deny that this was an obsession. The loneliness leered at me through buffeting windows, empty sites.

I called many times for help from people who have known you longer than me - your friends and mentors. I begged for help, explaining what little I knew of the cause of our break-up. There were a few words of consolation from your so-called-friends, empty promises by people who claim to be experts on how your workings and whereabouts. But they don't know you like I know you.

Too late, I was told, *try again tomorrow*. The tomorrows mounted up and the same empty promises that you'll return when you're ready. A monstrous thought stalked me- you'd never come back. What did you expect me to do? I had to find you somewhere, or someone like you. So yes, I admit, I scoured the neighbourhood and found a free partner elsewhere. We met over coffee. I was just temporary, I promise. Just a short taster to fill your gap. I would've paid anything to get you back. I offered money, I made deals with experts, appointments, everything I could to change to get you back and keep me away from my coffee dates and risk of infection.

Then on the third day I woke up and an idea slithered out: I could fix you myself and bring you back. It was as simple as changing the cable. Once. Twice. Fingers crossed, mumbled pairs, phone in my hand rubbed like rosary beads.

Then you returned in a flurry of lights. There was leaping, cheering. I kissed your plastic body and we were reunited over vacuous emails and fake news sites, full bars and sighing denial.

When in Piedmont, Late February

When the snow shrivels into myth, leaving just a pencil line of legend blinking views with white winks.

When trailing night mist threads the Langhe hill crests, and a teasing blue sky is bleached by wandering ghost-white tongues, all talking of the creeping season to come.

When trees in the hidden *ritani* valleys tremble with ecstatic songbirds, wood pigeons cooing from loveposts, woodpeckers testing out nesting spots.

When blossoming garden trees attract black carpenter bees as fat as thumbs, and resurrected lizards emerge to explore white walls, exposed brick.

When a mewing buzzard rises on the first thermal above a vine-dissected earth.

When the frowning arch of enamelled Alps gaup in winter-struck solidness.

When Piedmont vintners trim the Nebbiolo knuckles of arthritic, stunted inaction, the same tender toil as their grandfathers.

When small chokey tractors chug the steep contours of the Barolo hills that were once a prehistoric seabed heaved up with such tectonic effort.

When smoke from burning deadwood washes in grey exclamations around cemetery rows of white line posts.

When there are no signs that the vines are stirring deep under still-hard earth, awaiting the rejuvenation of rain and leaf.

Portuguese Grilled Chicken and Soup

We only worked the wards together once.
A night shift, perhaps.
No name, sorry.
But I remember that we swapped dreams.

I was self-medicated on poems and stories,
injecting hope
into a poorly body of work,
third eye bigger than the belly.

Your dream was a van with a kitchen
and healthy customers
so you could sell
Portuguese grilled chicken and soup.

We wished each other well.
Went different directions.
I wrote poems,
planned stories too complex to complete.

I hope you are in your van with a view
making people happy,
an expanded menu,
book of poetry waiting to be read.

Like Ants

Queuing up on the *autobahn* in Germany on our way back from a weekend in Erfurt. Autumn chilling the stunted fields, undressing the trees. Ahead, the blazing lights and sirens of an ambulance nudging through. We wait for minutes that leak into a frustrated hour. Bored drivers and passengers trudge up the verge for a peek, waving each other on to come and view the cause of their stalemate. Cars and lives going nowhere.

I jump the road barrier and bolt into a wood to relieve myself by a tree. Looking down I notice a vast line of ants, teaming back and forth in busy millions. I had drowned hundreds before I realised. A guilty god, I redirect my torrent of random deluge and ask the ants to forgive me. No individual loss for them, just replacement.

There's a sudden excitement beeping from my wife and I rush back, unaware I had hitchhikers on my shoe. My wife is waving at me, all smiles and tidal urgency. Her waving reminds me of every other time she waves at me from windows: her frantic arm pebbles me into worrying if this is the last time, if this parting pain is the most important current in the universe, reminding me to love her more than I can manage - when the water subsides.

The police wave us on, wanting to get traffic moving, the show over. We drive off slowly and skulk past the wreckage of an overturned removals van, the junk of life scattered on the road. No sign of the driver - perhaps already whisked away. No blood signs, just broken promises of delivery. We stay quiet, thinking of the times we have moved, the luck we've had.

Within seconds, impatient cars roar past. The lack of a speed limit a lesson already forgotten. Back in the woods, the ants ignore the damp soil, the fallen comrades, the inexplicable footprints of God, and keep on marching.

One ant appears in the car later on, antennae twitching with questions. Too late to return it to the colony, I let it wander off on a pointless search for meaning in the dark corners of the car.

The Wave

The curtain tugged into assistance. She appeared
in the window, five stories up
in the apartment block care home.

My wife and I watched
a story of departure:
family members
descending steps,
looking back, waving
at their mother/grandmother.

For a few moments they stood on the last steps,
looked up at the window
and waved,
and she waved back
at generations
with tidal hope
for a return.