

DEVOLUTION



POEMS AND FABLES

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Atlantis

In the lost city of Atlantis, we drift from god
to god. The animals on display
have slipped their feathered cages and
gilt chains. The Big Top sits empty
not even a flea in the matchbox seats.
It was tricky at first, a skid through marbles
on the curve. The swifts departed in ash plumes
rising from the lacerated
rim of our existence. They took the night
with them. We now know through inductive
reasoning and computer simulations
that the swifts were the night.
And with night comes sleep, and with sleep
dreams. You see where this narrative
of privation is leading.

Wait. There, behind the goat-shaped cloud—
I think I see another god.

Deception Pond

At Deception Pond small fish believe they are giants, titans of the deep. When raindrops pelt the surface the fish declare a state of emergency, round up all the caddis fly larvae and charge them with breaking the sky. They detain them in discarded beer cans without benefit of trial or legal representation. Meanwhile, the fish dispatch midges to repair the sky. The fish eat a few midges in front of the others to motivate a diligent work ethic. The midges do an excellent job (although really, the rain has simply stopped). The fish hold a parade in honour of the midges but accidentally devour them in their lust. A marching band of aquatic snails pounds out a beat on timpani of sodden candy bar wrappers. The rhythm triggers a seizure of group fornication. A darkness befalls the pond as the muddy bottom is flicked to the top. When the silt settles, the pond has turned anaerobic. The fish gasp, roll their eyes, heave red gills open and closed like a demon's bellows. They blame this sabotage on the caddis fly larvae, who must have escaped their beer cans. The sun is now bright upon the airless pond. The fish still believe they are titans but must seek cover to regroup. They school into shady water along the edge, unaware it is the shadow of a heron.

Staging

The opera had gone on far too long. The audience came and went as needed for sandwiches, hip replacements, jail sentences. But it was glorious. I composed it myself and was performing it with the koalas, high in the eucalyptus forest. The orchestra smashed metal plates with the ferocity of dueling moon rovers. My lyrics were inscrutable without the universal translator. Yet our harmonies were skeins of silver geese reaching all the way to Cassiopeia's left eye. The finale was perhaps too abrupt. (All the reviewers mentioned this.) When they slid me out of my oven casing on a steel rail, fully baked with golden puff pastry nicely crusted on my torso, I could still taste the sweet warmth of the koalas' eucalyptus breath.

The Old Woman and the Sea

Somewhere beyond silent streets and woodlands
beyond upheaved graveyards, empty schools
dry spillways, vacant
hibernaculums for little brown bats
beyond the last larval foodplant for the last
western tiger swallowtail
an old woman sits by the sea untangling
the nets of each life she can recall
from the Time Before. Her cabin above the tideline
is sparse as birdsong in a northwest
squall. She cooks over a burn barrel beside
her shack, stokes it with driftwood and whatever
tumbles ashore. Once an old door
made a landing, then a desk still intact.
She grills any scrap of flesh
the sea hacks up—bull kelp, moon jellies
three-eyed eels. Eats them with succulent stems
of glasswort growing in the sand.
When evening comes, she flings each newly
sorted net upon the ocean like a bedsheet
for each is a piece of the planetary
genome. She is waiting
for the nets to find one another, reconnect
end-to-end, spiral beneath the waves. Replicate.
But each net returns alone
an enfolded mass of knots, bone
chitinous exoskeletons, bloated elongate bodies
of the unknown.

Devolution

You were sitting on the stars. I didn't notice you at first. I was skipping the moons of Jupiter across eternity's black hiss. You sat very still and in the shadow of a large dog's last breath. Just smoking a cigarette and watching me skip moons. Each ripple was the raspy alarm call of a canyon wren trapped in the geologic grip of moons becoming stones becoming sand becoming beach glass becoming a coral reef becoming bleached muslin as the electrostatic waters recede exposing single-celled life to the face of complexity. I liked the grating sound of live wires unbraiding themselves until the moons ran out. That's when I turned and saw you saw the orange tip of your cigarette as you took a long drag. You flicked it aside and it became another star.

"Want to see something cherry-bent faraday?" you asked.

"What does that mean?" I said.

"No fun if I tell you. Follow me."

So I did. Past the Shrunken Nebula and the Palace of Historic Eyebrow Gestures and finally the Swale of Decomposing Art that no one understood. That's when you showed me the burial caves deep in your body. You led me on hands and knees. By the end we had to belly-crawl. When we reached the Wall of Bells we had become centipedes out of necessity. The bells were birdcages housing creatures we couldn't see—flash of feather a furry arm reaching out from underneath, curling over brass skirt, golden eyes blinking in dark cavities. The bells spoke, trying to convince us of something. Their tone was urgent but I could not grasp the meaning.

They all yammered at once and in a dead language. Their yearning was a hotplate beneath my hundred feet. Soon I had one hundred corn tortillas. I decided to open a taco truck. It was an unmet niche market in the burial caves gastronomy. You were watching me again and smoking another cigarette.

Curtain Call

When the full moon falls from the sky
and the world goes dark, we do not see
the heron built from car parts lift off
from its display by the hot dog wagon to impale
the bright moon on its crankshaft bill, causing
the moon to deflate as the light seeps out,
or the ship made of twigs that sets sail
and catches the dishrag moon in its loose-knit
bow, or the wooden crab the size of a
Guernsey cow that seizes the blackness to scabble
toward the crab dock and release the convicts
in the traps beneath, or the havoc this wreaks
for nearby condominiums, which quickly fill up
with crustaceans on the lam, or the consequences
this will have on world banking and interest rates
as the mortgage-paying population is increasingly
displaced onto the streets by arthropods who like
dry martinis and big screen TV. As we pull
our sleeping bags tighter in our sandy beds
beneath the highway next to the sewer outfall,
we will never suspect that public art
was the cause. We will simply, in our ignorance
and superstition and aching need to find
a larger organizing principle at work in the Universe,
tell ourselves the gods were against us, we had
a good run, it's time to kill the babies
and let the audience go home.