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Last Night in Americaland

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LAST NIGHT IN AMERICALAND

A Thesis Presented

by

TOM D. MCCAULEY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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ENGLISH

MFA Program for Poets and Writers

LAST NIGHT IN AMERICALAND

A Thesis Presented

by

TOM McCAULEY

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DEDICATION

For my mother, Laurie McCauley.

And wise dear friend Ralphus Aurelius Hunt.

EPIGRAPH

A long time ago the lightning was practicing
Something I thought was easy

I was young and the dead were in other
Ages

—W.S. Merwin

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ABSTRACT

LAST NIGHT IN AMERICALAND

SEPTEMBER 2018

TOM MCCAULEY, B.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Peter Gizzi

Last Night in Americaland is a collection of poems of life, death, terror, refusal, confusion, America, music, geography, place, love, friendship, hope, and the past.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
CHAPTER	
People Are Not Lights.....	1
The Tree May Die, Yet the Shadow Remains.....	5
The Cloudinator.....	6
First Date with the Moon.....	7
A Farm I Tell Everyone About.....	9
Liturgy of the Hours.....	12
Nothing Is the Force That Renovates the World.....	15
Blue Willow Pattern.....	17
To One in Kansas.....	18
Winter Camp.....	20
Gatekeeper's Last Words.....	21
Nothing Good Comes East.....	22
Bedroom Anthropologist.....	23
It's Best to Remain Outdoors.....	24
Follow Your Dreams, Alligators.....	25
Some People Want to Die on Mars.....	27
Snow.....	29
Self-Administered Vasectomy in C Minor.....	31
Traveler Running on Fear of Sleep.....	32
Govern Yourselves Accordingly.....	33
Watching It Rain on a Time Before You Were Born.....	34
The Paradox of Saint Ludicrous.....	35
Someone Cool Is Going to Walk into My Life.....	37
Color Photographs from the Great Depression.....	38
Prey.....	39
After Cleaning Dead Moths Out of a Meth House.....	40
Vacation Slightly Out of Tune.....	41
Practical Worldly Observations.....	42
Good Luck in Nebraska City.....	43
Table Mountain Ghost Frog.....	44
Life Is a Sailboat with Feathers.....	45

Corpses at Mount Everest.....	46
To the Active Galactic Nuclei.....	47
The Case Against Us.....	49
Surveying the Prominent & Illustrious Dead.....	51
People Are Lights.....	54
AFTERWORD.....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	57

People Are Not Lights

1.

Most days I take the ghost bus
up Route Nine

not tonight

there are no such ghosts

though my brain's gone clogged with birthdays of the dead

and living rooms I have known
and colorized versions of the moon

2.

One great thing about physics
is how good you get at shadows.
Yesterday some memories flashed
in their eyes snow. Everything was
real. Today out my window
came gunshot. I love
living in the city. Fear
sang that. My friend
when young and not homeless
went to the Fear show
feeling self-conscious
about his metal hair.
96 percent of the universe
is not anything we understand.

3.

Once, I used what
astrophysicists call “love”
to locate pleasure in another.

I was on a planet known as earth
having large amounts of surface water
and an iron-nickel core
70 percent as big as the moon.
That’s what I told people anyway.

4.

My old roommate broke his mind in 2014,
smashing his grandfather's spyglass
in our fireplace as I, laughing, read aloud
the part about sunlight from *Ulysses*.

It was weird that spring.
Before we called the hospital
Josh said our neighborhood harbored a secret
gang of Egyptian bodyguards
armed with chlamydia knives
funded by the Secretary of State
hellbent to stop the news
Elliott Smith had never died
but turned into a yellow bird.

Sometimes I worry what he thought
my role was in that scenario. How kind
of him to trust me anyway. One time
he cut his thumb on a cymbal
then tried to hand me his bloody t-shirt
in the rain because he saw that I was shivering.

The Tree May Die, Yet the Shadow Remains

Once highly prized among the pioneers of light,
the hours now lean heavily toward the ground.

The sky is brighter in old photographs
because the air was thicker—poor optics

from a ruined lens could account for this,
but the air was thicker, it could hold things

for a moment: grown men
strapped to pterodactyl wings,

the morning moon in its upturned face.
Long ago, cameras conquered dust

until a woman saw herself as others see her,
not in a mirror, but staring straight out into the world

like a lioness, queen of all Ohio.
Tonight her skeleton fosters a subterranean civilization:

microbes, complex worms, decay.
But the ambrotype in her descendant's attic

is poised as ever to ravage the industrial age.
In that room, it is always noon. Thank you, chemistry.

The Cloudinator

We were the family that invented tornadoes.
Everyone looked to us for piano lessons,
Kool-Aid, moral support, etc. Our trees
glowed better than anyone's. No radios
hanging on wires from upstairs windows,
no overturned laundry baskets
in the driveway, just a backyard
full of grass and holiday lights
all year. Time and weather moved us
to create a vortex from the sky
that would sincerely fuck the world.
It was a genetic affair, John drawing
blueprints adorned with equations
and photos of his ex-girlfriend
with her new Moroccan lover,
me trying to think of a name for our project
on which to launch a revolutionary ad campaign.
The Cloudinator? The dancing circus funnel?
Nothing stuck. We couldn't know
the destruction we would unleash
upon American roads. In retrospect,
how could we not? We were a family
blinded by our gratitude and respect
for one another and our place
in the neighborhood. We were slumped
over our dinner plates one night
when I thought up the name.

First Date with the Moon

In California I was made
to trace the moon
for sixth-grade science class.
The lunar phrases I repeated
under my breath as we
visited the ocean and Disneyland,
where a sour mood assailed me,
created a cloud of suspicion
around our tribe. "He's so...sullen,"
somebody's uncle told mine.
You must wait two hours
to ride the future cars.
They last ninety seconds.
Once part of earth, the moon
roars whitely in the night
vacuum, so angry
you can't make friends with it,
nothing like the soft piano tunes
you imagine on a first date (with the moon).
Soon, my notebook filled
with black scratches of crescents
and half-circles. I desired pancakes.
The moon parted the curtains
late one night to insult me.
"Fatty," it taunted. "Fatty fat."
I woke up weeping, remembering something
sand-flavored Grandma had said
on a drive through the mountains.
"What's Tom gonna do?" she waxed.
"Nothing. Nothing! He'll have to go out
and get a job, just like his mom."
Fifteen hundred earth miles
from the Trans-Mississippi
and International Exposition,
or home, as we called it in the hinterlands,
I made a great crying noise

like the teenagers from Colorado
who'd been shot that week
during Astronomy lab.

The next bed over, my aunt pretended not to notice. A travel agent,
she'd glimpsed the moon
from every time zone, even China,
and said it's nothing
to lose sleep over. It will always be there.

A Farm I Tell Everyone About

It was all over grey
in the Columbus Day
afternoon of unwallied slanting

room under the stairs
where I knew I'd never
planned anything

in my life: not you, not this
elegant music box carnival
fallen out of me early, like solace

through a dream luxury
of early ceilings and childhood water
shut-off notices

taped to our apartment door—
we lived thirty feet above
the grass & the grass's echo—

dark things coming at us fast
from a slaughterhouse parking lot
that in certain azure stillnesses

ring shrill pig screams
from dark wind There
to grassy bright unbridled Here,

where my best grandparents,
both dead,
stand in Hiawatha blue

against lone bike riding summers
on a farm I tell everyone about.
That's where my ghost was built.

Dreamy ghost, happily wallowed, once
as entranced by rainshades
and balustrades as the actual

stagehands—now that farm is gone.
If the flowers are bad, don't eat them.
If there is no shadow cabal

of the cosmos grading us, then there is lonely
you: brief skin, brief allotment
of curiosity, trademark sigh

in the night against someone's neck
as the stage explodes like a butterfly room
into twelve billion wings thrashing for sugar,

or summer bug systems clouding mountains
we blew apart years ago
to build the bloodtowns.

Maybe, with superior tectonics,
if we love harder, we could outlast
the same mountains.

And if the instant of sleep is equal
to its eternity, it follows that fates exist
lousier than fate, stars unbearable

as lime green plastic ones
bejeweled with flecks of plasma
on the ceiling of the suicide.

Yes it follows, but leaves no trace
of its sound, no hope, a ghostless ghost
eating cornsilk at the edge of the dead highway.

So let our voices go out
on no authority, whatever our names are,
having escaped

the windup infinity
extravaganza of music box,
huge as two equinox,

studded with honey & conundrum,
to give each other faces abandoned by
good news from the part of the universe

you can stagger up to:
last night the broken rides broke down
on the midway

where the happy Americans ran
stunned by sudden gunshot
and the child's screaming

that ruined the moon
that should not be there.

Liturgy of the Hours

Are there burglary classes
for aspiring burglars, like
at a trade school, or online?

Things haven't gone my way lately

and an exciting new career
anyone could start
from other people's homes

might change me deeply
like the sea

which is now more hostile to coral.

I could be more hostile to coral.

I could do a lot

if I don't quit
like the gulf stream
every three hundred years
releases
its most storied shipwrecks.

I could be a shipwreck.

Imagine the money wet dinner plates

and bottom-of-the-sea wine
would fetch in the dark

web, or deep web,
the darknet, whatever

it is where you can buy anything,
like at The World's Largest Truck Stop
in Wilton, Iowa, I-80 exit 284.
“Literally anything,”
my uncle swears on the drive
back from the hearseyard
where we planted my grandfather.

At the cloverleaf junction
we gravel to a crawl,
wait for the light to change.

“Seriously, anything you want.
From chrome mud flaps to a blow job.”

*

Everyone wants to be historic.

Well now you can do the next best thing
and buy some crap from the ocean.

And I will sell you that crap.

*

The treasures would be slight.

No gold doubloons or ancient Roman pickle jars.

Just old shoes

the sea couldn't eat.

Nothing Is the Force that Renovates the World

Help—I am on fire.
Everyone knows that.

If we must decide sunlight
is not boring, we cannot be

heavy bored
together like the dead

John Berryman said. His last leap
should not come so easily

to mind, yet many of us
keep questions like these

between our fingers, like this—
like that famous water,

was it old? What time exactly
did John learn the absolute

last name of the river?
Did he notice one more

dream song falling out of his face
high over the banks

of the icy Mississippi?
Who knows, Caitlin. Who can ever know.

Five million people live in Minnesota now.
Let's not joke about Minnesota.

In St. Paul, the coolest girls alive
play hockey and shake snow

from their hairy heads
even in summer: always

the worst time of year
to break somebody's nose.

Blue Willow Pattern

Next time you're at the lunar market
buying china fragments
a clown broke in a fit of eternity,

please ask for Wilsnap Size 2/0 Rust Proof Invisible Tape.
If they remember how to sell this,
go tell the dream cashier of the blue

willow pattern of Canada,
lull story fashioned out of gold
your mother puzzled whenever

dust brightened too much to sleep in.
Centuries ago, an heirloom plate exploded
because a girl's father did not want her

marrying the hilarious dispensing chemist
addicted to laudanum by the sea.
"And then what happened?" you'd ask.

"And then everybody
died. Shut up, go to bed. I love you."

To One in Kansas

This lake is so embarrassing
I had to be alone

There was this girl
along the shore studying

despite the earth
and its cracked windows

letting in
small green noise

This lake is so crooked
I couldn't leave

to leave would mean you accept
death like a bad gift

something blue and heavy
or worse

corn holders
shaped like little corn

So gauche, this lake
Noelle said it makes her want to fuck

the inside of her mouth
luckily earth

is not our job
not the pink trees

the sky cut last night
not the miles

I waded through puddles drunk on the names of famous trains

Winter Camp

There will be no seafaring
men allowed past the Valenka hour
according to this handbook
wedged between wall and radiator
in the dorm where spirits slip
in and out of air
on their way to wherever.
Down the lunette
of Peregrine House,
a million spider darkness
cascades the aisles
like a lost doctor
on a coral reef of dust
seen from the angels' point of view.
Plaster, in its dead way, echoes
those who nested here. Bad things
are supposed to happen
then get forgotten in time, sort of,
like hobo code. That is not now
the case nor ever will be.
We repeat ourselves incessantly.
Soon it will be January.
When that notorious blade departs
Valenka's legendary fingers,
the head of her suitor will fall
and warp an acre of lake
back to blood, while the other half, in cahoots
with the moon, cannot be so.

Gatekeeper's Last Words

As a child, I stuck my head
in bags of dusty toys
to smell the disassembled cities.

What dreams of nightmares
wakes to night milk
on the stairs, where belladonna tendrils

draw documents from my shoulders.
Echo, you were my Letter Horse
for an afternoon. We sang

delicately in a bottle of fireflies.
Do you think God will keep my gate
safe from elephants like me?

All day devouring conundrum pie
down dark furnaces of bronze & lye,
I'd make your grandma flip the Jesus

hologram toward the wall.
I couldn't stop screaming.
Please rewind the sunlight cassettes,

Mrs. Richardson, I want to leave
a garden in your knapsack.

Nothing Good Comes East

Nothing good comes east
and nothing east is good.
We are trying to learn that
we are stuck in a child's
dream of adulthood:
our own room
with elderly landlords
across the hall
who tell bright stories
of World War II.
During the day they
occupy the living room
and ride a loud chair
up and down the stairs.
After midnight, they go
to the hospital. Sometimes
they see us days later
as if nothing. Otherwise
there is something.
We have our own room,
pretend we are famous,
act like we're talking
to someone who loves us.
Like we already happened
and people want to know
what we thought of humankind.
See that's why we have no one.

Bedroom Anthropologist

An anthropologist found a tape recorder
inside a white tree in Jakarta:

hours upon hours of lost people
whispering secrets to the heart

of this plant. Across the night, the news
hit me in my room, where I have nothing

to tell a faraway person.
The tape picked up a language

we thought long extinct, a rain-dialect
encoded in the bamboo leaves

ancient man had fashioned
in ways Sony could never dream of.

I stay stunned for a month—ask
my ceiling. Soon I will need

to decant my emptiness
into the nearest clay jug

or World War II radio.
Failing that, allow me to mail myself to you

O sad and future human.

It's Best to Remain Outdoors

Sometimes I'm too tired to sleep
So I start to die

Her beauty challenged the fish
I do not know what her name was

Luckily rooms open forever
Dug out of make-believe people

I elaborate a letter to the mooncalf
Advise him not to wait all day

Nightly in the lightning orchard
My broken kayak sparkles

Against the advice of the sea
I firmly believe

If you build your life on nobody
You might survive

Follow Your Dreams, Alligators

Alligator wakes in the crawlspace,
stalks familiar blood
to the living room zone,
balances upright at the piano.
Neither proud, nor miserable,
nor mammalian at all,
alligator sits heaped on its coccyx
like a father typing
functions in the cells
of a digital spreadsheet.
The house is otherwise motionless.
Nobody swallows orange juice.
Nobody cries.
To prepare for a song,
alligator twiddles its claws
in cascades of keratin
and nerve—yes, it is still
a nervous system event
to rehearse in front of a mirror—
guided by classical inner storms
common to things that have lived
in a river. It always does this.
It cannot be persuaded not to.
As if to reveal honeycombs
or honey stones
or honey frequencies
or anything but this
long mouth of piano teeth
strung to a small coffin
you strike to invent music,
alligator slides back the lid
on 88 noise-making fangs,
all paused at the hammerpoint
of possible jazz. Yes, a fucking alligator
is a killer—this one
a terrible virtuoso as well.

Snatched from rain and hungry
subtropical darkness
of the great American songbook,
it plays a mid-tempo rag,
but poorly, poorly, all day.

Some People Want to Die on Mars

Summer 2003: NASA launched the Mars rover project
to search for evidence of past water
using solar-powered vehicles with arms.

A nine-year-old girl with dreams
named them Spirit and Opportunity
thanks to a national essay contest

which shows you what nine-year-olds care about.
Each rover had pieces of World Trade Center metal
made into shields to protect cables on the drills.

The planet Mars is composed largely of basalt,
though some parts are more like fused quartz,
both things I pretend to know about.

The surface has variable
albedo. Albedo
is the reflectivity of a surface. Therefore

Mars is like a person:
sometimes more reflective,
sometimes less.

Poor irradiated humanlike Mars
thirty-four million miles from us,
are you cold? Do you like water?

The journey takes six months.
I have never done anything
for six months.

The mission is so far successful.
We've learned all about rocks
and perhaps life.

Spirit died a long time ago
but Opportunity rolls on.

Snow

Please do not manhandle the terrariums
explains the cafe window sign
bursting out of late winter life

as around us the universe
with its statistical risk & galaxies
blazes on and will not stay

under the rules of spacetime
signed into law
13 billion years ago

outside the Greyhound station.
The journey ahead asks
did I steal my voice

from some bouquet of heroes
drinking coffee out loud
in summer rooms I've been alive in?

Or am I a continuous bloom
of "I am" statements
called the Tom McCauley proposals,

long refuted by our nation's
most luminous skulls?
Is there space enough

to remember the gnosis of Josh:
"I am the crow
on the philosopher's shoulder"

& "I have disconnected
the youthfulness of truth."
How would it feel to own a mind
so unable to say uninteresting things?

Difficult, probably, like driving a bus.

Self-Administered Vasectomy in C Minor

is the hardest opera
to perform

under the hot lights
of the Orpheum.

You, with your little
knife, cutting

at this dinner music,
say you knew a girl

whose voices swelled
against rooftops,

whose arias peeled
the green wallpaper.

After the encore, would you meet her
down a country road

where boys kill locusts
all summer and shove them

through the poor kid's mailbox?
Or would you take her home

to dance across ceilings,
to fix your gaze over a glass of rye

and say, "Elizabeth, what are you
doing here? I thought you were dead."

Traveler Running on Fear of Sleep

Soon we'll be able to say
we got through our lives.
Soon it will be here
o'clock, like always, like that one

dancer I can't remember—
Arabella?—who lives
at a pretty infinite address:
17th & sky

or the terrible
pink abandoned
lunchbox outside
the retirement castle

that says, "I want smiles!"
Thanks for being open, lunchbox.
This is what I know about life.
Some folks try to make each other laugh.

Some folks eat each other
when the weather's bad.

Govern Yourselves Accordingly

Everyone will live in a dense blue
nutrient cloud. No one
will starve or scrape
their eyelids
and when we go home
to our tiny closets
a row of infinitely white
shirts will greet us
once we pull the string
that forces light
to enter a dark room
you could get married in
as long as you are small
and enjoy the dust
of leather and silence.
They say detergents
mixed with souls
deceive our lightning brains.
I have no reason
not to believe them.
Soon you will understand
why everyone should forgive me
and why did I say this
was probably just flimflam
you heard on the radio
like you even listened to the radio.

Watching It Rain on a Time Before You Were Born

In the new landscape, I owe you a few grams
of non-equilibrium matter: seagulls, overdose,

road trips through the great known
of the grain elevator towns

it's not wrong to love someone in,
no matter how real we expect to

flourish in the music of flour.
That is the essence of time crystal,

the pattern that can't settle down.
Goodbye, Omaha. Goodbye, Mom.

The Paradox of Saint Ludicrous

Every idiot knows
the spirit finds

special pleasure
in lawless

irresponsibility.
Far from ending

where it begins,
the weird noises

have already been
noticed. Freakish

abnormalities
compose appropriate

accompaniment
of quite difficult kinds of pleasure.

I love ice cream.
Am I therefore sunlight?

There is no solution.
The sense of the ludicrous

is an abstraction
made up of

abstract elements
in fusion. Example:

the sadgirl
conspicuous for pigtails

is the one most likely
to have them pulled.

Someone Cool Is Going to Walk into My Life

I love the word amphetamine,
its spillway
of cause & sky—

like chlamydia,
it rustles too musically
for its essence.

Things happen, or they don't,
and elicit gradations
of value: from white sleep

to haunted auto store
in the piano district.
On this afternoon of Emily

I am suddenly stung
by orange survival
machines and their lovely

undiminished petals.
I grew up poor
and this means more to me than money:

you can eat these orchids
if you need to.

Color Photographs from the Great Depression

It's embarrassing to admit, I can't believe how human
everyone looks. A man hunches
westward on a crate, shirt taut, and drives two lucky horses

through the sunflowers. Behind him, peaches
bump around like days piled in boxes.
Maybe he's angling to kill whoever

drifts from the dogwoods into his lane, whatever day laborer
has spent a last quarter on moonlight and Sterno,
and who now, neurons abuzz,

plans to jack this driver and his dusty shoes.
It's raining in Georgia. Don't ignore it.
A blue boy whittles a boomerang

while his sister, deranged in maroon,
looks on.

Prey

When you are shot in the face,
you will be able to see
a barrage of days
down the grooved void
of the ballistic path.
You will notice this strange
hallway made of metal
but not the bullet
or the bang. The brain
encodes time at a lag
of nanoseconds. Guns
fire faster than that.
Therefore, a kitchen
in a flash of Indiana.
The letter blue.
All the willows you have known
and no light or noise
to say they're gone.

After Cleaning Dead Moths Out of a Meth House

I drag my blue bike

away to be one person
at a railroad bridge

past the unendurable flowers

Vacation Slightly Out of Tune

Go find the abandoned paper mill down by the river

Lead a separate existence of flowers

Saw the river back together

Put yourself on river mode

Memorize a list of Quercus species to impress a tree surgeon

Treat as urgent if you are still alive and not dead

Invent a new bibliography of tides

Pass the sleep

Water the sleep

Swim therein, little Charlie

Practical Worldly Observations

Most groups calling for ghosts
have settled for spectres

found in halo-like rings of a glory.
And so far the journey has been long

and unapproved in memory—
consider Germany. Dear Erin,

how are you not a figment
of the actual sea? Thank you

for being real. I want to
be real too. I want to have

my own life alive and together
like you, neotenous hedonist. Yesterday

got caught in a couple storms
up Stillwater to Albany.

My phone ate the pictures
you should have seen.

That's what phones do
before they die.

Good Luck in Nebraska City

At the Overland Theatre, I asked for the 10¢ orchestra.
They handed me the deed to the building.
Look, my life went that way, moon
seeking its planet

gets its own moon. Tell us what
brought you here, the doctor cooed.
A vague fear, I whispered as he fell
contagiously in love with me.

At the hospital they walloped my belly
with ultra-high frequency sound.
Nobody found any tumors, just a vial
of violet eternity, diaphanous with stars.

Has this always bothered you, a nurse asked.
I didn't know about it until now, I said.
They showered me with money.
Everything I'd ever bought

piled inexorably around us.
I couldn't move. I could carry nothing back.

Table Mountain Ghost Frog

Since you are Rose's ghost
with one phalanx of the fifth toe free of web
and no jaw at all

go play your nightly searching fugue
its maritime robot
trills of the forested gorge

that we may hear ourselves less
and be disheveled by this world

Life Is a Sailboat with Feathers

Thunder fires knives around
the drowned funeral town.

Night and they kept asking us back
to the station, to the train station.

If ever the cold waitress embodying sideways cello for bedsheets
comes to hang out awhile, someday after
the dishes have been cleaned and they shine,

even familiar factual phrases like I feel like a sick bird

transform: I am bird-sick

because something great will happen.

Corpses at Mount Everest

The way out of this harrowing
is a climb through darkness

past the twisted, frozen clothes
with limbs in them and faces

turned off slightly. Too costly
to bring down, their corpora serve

as landmarks: mile markers, stop signs,
planks on the eye of two continents.

Zipped in shadows and sun-vaporized,
fireless night in their mouths,

sometimes they transmit radio waves:
“Call star 286 for solace

when you are immersed in dirt
and lost to the black sky.

No need to carry that lantern,
your body will light up.”

To the Active Galactic Nuclei

Out of the falling
threads of water
at the Very Large Array
slides the town of Magdalena.

A building can be engineered
to carry the echo of
a button dropping equally
in all directions

or a telescope bloom
to balance the resonance
disturbed galaxies confess
over centimeter-wavelengths.

Our sky scatters the brightness
of cities, causing optical errors
called atmospheric blur.
Air motions make the light of a star

dance as it enters glass.
Therefore, astronomers
invented flexible mirrors
that correct glass failures

by dancing in opposition.
Even this falls short,
upsets the scientists.
So they superimpose waves

to extract information
from interference, a process known
as interferometry,
and in New Mexico space radio

dishes on train tracks

to attain the angular resolution
of a telescope 24 miles wide.
Now more light than ever

falls on Magdalena.
We can laugh
if we need help
seeing past dark matter

then accidentally become
luminous enough with our bodies
to glue those tallships of summer back together.

The Case Against Us

Tomorrow means apartment viewing
in that part of the city
where all the old days
are kept next to property maps

in an underground vault.
Tonight: fireworks sale
of blue-sky pills, unending
supercells of always

needing something to do.
Benzoyl peroxide summers
unguent in late teen choruses
drift toward us from a tintype

bent and rusted centuries ago.
Jobs we take in office mines
offgas hazelnut and static
in service of fluorescence

and devour our twenties.
We grow violent and quiet
in the capillaries,
go die at the movies,

never get inspired again
to avow the sea, as if ever
we knew about water,
or to write sweet postcards

for the heartbreak machines
that crush a delicate boy's
sternum—his willow basket
stacked with male pronouns

to wear like wildflowers

in his wild hair—so when
lilacs end, we'll touch
brief rooms full of hello

in torrential lightning snow.
This is not how the ritual goes.
We are strong and it shows.
We drop pistachios.

Surveying the Prominent & Illustrious Dead

To the farmer
belong the hills
of the Iowan frontier,
some aggraded
valley floors,
and the uneroded
remnants of drift plains.
To the latter
belong all other
reliefs.

In this region exists
various forms
of lifelessness:
the boulder-strewn plain,
its swags and swales
due to errors
in the ice-moulded
surface of the till.

The main ridge is crested
with dune
hummocks grassed

or forest-covered,
but with barren patches
here and there of

wind-blown sands.
Fed through storm
water, much of this ridgeback

falls on nearby hills.
Sloughs and shallow lakelets
eat the bones of millions of fish
and towns like Rockingham

are gone. Always

the streams are under control of the hills.

Always the paha

make bow-shaped knolls
or long, narrow ridges
with northwest-southwest
trend, composed
of lullabies: buzza buzza

erophorum
flatsedge nut grass
cut wind.

All these forms
so far belong
to the region
of the invasion
of the ice.

But they occur far to the south
of a once-level upland.

Say you were my friend / were born

where deep maps
provide a way out
of the gnarls

and a lost farmer
still haunts
the red remember house.

Say old photo atlases and county histories
are no substitute
for voices soaked into walls
never to leak back into rooms

lit by various electrons

enough to play piano
through faraway wars
you were invented in.

People Are Lights

I have been dishonest
with myself and the sea

When they find me
I will be covered in eyes

You know the old saying
a man in the night

who keeps on coming
you cannot break

Blindness crawls
the finite beach

where I comb thoughts
from water

water where I never met you
water I won't return to in this life

AFTERWORD

“...an image, of itself, ends or begins once more, accepting a succession of others, and, since, as ever, it does nothing, of regular sonorous lines or verse – rather prismatic subdivisions of the Idea, the instant they appear, and as long as they last, in some precise intellectual performance, that is in variable positions, nearer to or further from the implicit guiding thread...”

—Stéphane Mallarmé, *A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*, trans.
A.S. Kline

“If you ain't no place you can't go nowhere.”

—Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*

Last Night in Americaland is an elegiac reckoning with worlds real, ideal, and awful. While the book is more or less inspired (probably less) by such modern and contemporary American poets as Ana Božičević, Wallace Stevens, James Tate, Matthew Zapruder, Kenneth Koch, Richard Hugo, Marianne Moore, William Stafford, Paul Hanson Clark, Reg Saner, John Duvernoy—I’m going to stop before I accidentally list every poet that has ever made me want to write a poem—a less-obvious spiritual ancestor may be found in French Symbolist Stephané Mallarmé, namely his belief in an ideal world fractured from the sensual one. The preface to Mallarmé’s revolutionarily influential *A throw of the dice will never abolish chance* assays the poem’s form in a manner emblematic of the composition of this book: “Imagination flowers and vanishes, swiftly, following the flow of the writing, round the fragmentary stations...” Many poems in *Last Night in Americaland* work this way. Images and sentiments flourish and fade intuitively around “fragmentary stations”, or recurring words, themes, tones,

structures, and techniques. Words like moon, tree, sea, death, time, dust, sky, summer, human, universe, etc. Themes like wistfulness, terror, death, justice, refusal, rebellion, conundrum, confusion, alienation, abandonment, America, music, place, the past. Tones: sad, deadpan, surreal, puzzling, plaintive, accusatory, embittered, concerned, accepting, regretful, resolved, cockily self-deprecating. Structurally, couplets, tercets, and stichics mortar the book together while occasional blown-apart thoughtfields intersperse themselves alogically. And insofar as such impulses can be called techniques, the poems chase scattered thoughts, propose strange premises, build jeweled music boxes, run away from themselves, change their minds, and toss punchlines over their shoulders like salt to stave off dark luck. It's not necessarily a bad book.

Unlike Mallarmé, though, the wish to escape the real world is not indulged, but fought against. Underlying the poems' gem-encrusted skin are billions of poverty-class guilt microbes borne of fear of having only built a hodgepodge of self-dandifying glitter machines without enough reference to the world of dirt and bullets. To satisfy the urge to address the consensus-based world (or the longed-for ideal of one), place becomes a grounding mechanism, a tether to the balloon, a Ringo to the Beatles. In Americaland the arcanest of utterances must play on some kind of stage. The stage may be real—Iowa, farm, bus, operahouse—or simply implied by a voice disinclined to stray too far from familiar syntax, but there is a stage, the stagehands are drunk, the audience is restless, and the actors guilty.

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