

Black Hours

A Book of Days

Edwina Pendarvis

Morning

In the fifteenth and sixteenth century, miles from shore, sailors on board ships knew they were approaching America's shore before they came in sight of it because they could smell the exquisite fragrance of the abundant plant life:

And there came a smell off the shore like the smell of a garden/ the air smelt as sweet and strong/ richly scented with the fragrance of the pines/ the wind brought to us . . . the sweet fragrance of spruce, adorned and clothed with palms, laurels, cypresses, which, for a long distance, exhale the sweetest odors . . . Paul Metcalf, Apalachee

Errors accumulate with distance. Errors accumulate with distance.

Sunrise

Aztecs dance in angled mazes
inside circles
circling the sun.
Their streets are radiant
with shadowless children,
arms raised like flames,
spinning songs.
Music is slung out from the center
like seasons.

Snakes carve the surface
of calendar stones,
shadowing
the time.

The basket wind
weaves years past
with years future.
Golden
stalks of maize,
breathe obeisance to the sky.

Palm leaves dip
under the rain's tattoo.

Over the horizon,
ships like spears
fly toward the beach.

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

Sisterhood

Because some losses can never be recouped,
witches burn of their own flame.
They bind words like straws, red-tipped
and black with ash.

Some women waltz with the devil (one two three)
dip with his cleft-footed limp
and with all their pacts and promises
with all their midnight trysts,
their clothes are singed
before the torch is lit.

Bare-feet pointed down
eyes rolled back,
they brighten and burst into flame,
ecstatic with the answer
while the crowd surrounds them,
children hiding their faces
in their mothers' skirts,
husbands folding their arms.

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Essay on Liberty

On bright mornings in early spring
when Mozart's music argues convincingly
for free will—as if man could fly by example,
silhouetted against a white light, subdivided,
a preliminary figure
raises perfectly proportioned arms—
in a wheel electrified.

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

Revolutionary Waltz

His coonskin cap and leather leggings.
Her heart-shaped bodice of pink brocade.
His sun-burned face and shaggy hair.
Her white wig, piled high,
billowing wave on shining wave,
a sugary tsunami, sailing a delicate clipper-ship.
doll-sized teacups; and
somewhere inside those lovely strands
a tiny French citizen in a red hat.

“After the deluge, the democratic waltz.”

Once around the room, and it's time for a change.
Her upraised arm, her naked breast, and ragged gown,
His stove-pipe hat and striped pants,
His snowy beard and eagle eye.

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Cumberland

You can almost hear the corny music,
sad as a campfire at dawn.
Autumn's tent is folding,
and the moon,
thief of light,
has moved on.
Dry leaves rustle in a somber dance—
drifting and swirling like the edge
of a long, dark skirt.
A black wagon lurches as it rolls
through the mud,
over rough rocks
and into weedy by-ways. The melody fades
then builds again, and morning,
tawdry as ever, rubs against the mountains,
burnishing them like a copper pot,
like ruddy palms turned up to catch the sun.

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

Aerie

Under the mountains and fossil stars
icy currents plunge over cliffs
and through night's canyons.

Monoliths of water,
rivulets of stone,
the only light
the white
noise
of water-
falls.

Droplets of sound
splash the dark
walls.

Subterranean
birds reflect
the surface
of the
water

The angle
of the
rock.

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Catfish

Don't have scales
that catch the sun.
They card silt
and check the shifting current
slipping softly by.

Cast in sullen chambers,
they slowly circle just above the shoal.
Calipers shivering,
these pale clerks scud
through cold shallows
and catacombs of mud.

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

Vespers

The only mammal capable of true flight
Is almost a pair of hands.
Long-fingered wings rise and dip,
Skimming the evening winds.
The brown velvet ear
Hears above whispering rivers,
Tiny cries trying the depths
Like prayers to a tolling moon
Until some little pilgrim soul
Is caught and carried away
Through the darkened church of night.

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Between In Rem Suam and Insectmonger

The illustrative insect is laid out like a suit of clothes,
carefully, according to its parts:
italicized letters label its antennae, eyes, head,
anterior legs (spread like a handlebar),
prothorax, mesothorax, et cetera.
Dissected on the page, the grasshopper
looks latininate in its scrupulosity
and its potential disregard for syntax.
Insecta. More or less obviously segmented.
Here, more—

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

Phrenology

feel my head she said phrenetically
wishbone divining rod grey cauliflower, say.
begonia, a hyacinth raising yellow storms
blue suns, blazing branches of jelly wire
string cheese memory pods star wheels Feel my head
how it hums like steel rails like a wasp's vibrato
trace the bumps even the atavistic ears
trace its shape summer lightning behind the hills

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Armistice Day

A simple drawing of a black hole with arrows pointing one way outside another way in, shows how time gets captured at the rim of a dense abyss and flies backward—teetering as it falls into blindness—how fast—but soon finds a familiar path like the rhythm of a well-learned poem that sounds at once a sudden lull, the hiss of meteors' whipping rain, the marbled planets' awful roar.

Whatever flags
we raise, however far we fly—
from Tannenberg to the Western Front,
from cloud-swathed earth to dusty moon—
falling together, we always are
as we always were—outbound vessels
headed home.

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

Yellow Flower

Among my pitifully thatched eaves
a chrysanthemum –Issa

. . . but not on the rifle receivers
surrendered at the end of the war
after the war to end all wars—
those sixteen petals scratched away
loyally, in deference to the royal
descendant of the sun.

Now, I am become death. –Robert Oppenheimer

The test blast left a crater 2, 400
feet across and ten feet
deep. The intense heat fused
the sand in this crater into a
glass-like solid, the color of
green jade.

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Gasoline

Shakespearean Psalm 2.59

Let me not to the barrage of new fines
Admit impediments. Greed is not greed
Which alters when it altercation finds,
Or bends to give the needy what they need.
O no, it is an ever-hungry shark
That feeds on blood and is never slaken.
It is the bane of every suffering mark
whose credit's good, although his cash be taken.
Greed's not Love's fool, though pale and sunken cheeks
Within its oily station meekly come.
Greed pities none when it gross profit seeks,
but brings us all to contemplate our doom.
 If this be error and upon me proved,
 I never writ, nor engine ever moved.

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

Rhapsody

When trumpets untune the sky,
we'll all gush up like geysers,
tumbling over each other in our haste.
Mouths open, we'll gasp like fish
for the bread that will pull us to heaven.
We'll wait in line
with wafers like tickets on our tongues.

When serpent-tailed horses gallop,
pieces of people will fly back to their owners—
docking at first in the wrong spot: arm stumps
will sprout ears; fingers will roll their new eyes.
Orphan parts will panic, looking for a better fit.

But when at last the hills are level,
and the fires have sputtered and died down,
a light will rise from the forests;
from the oceans a strange singing will sound.
Our mouths will taste a new music,
and all of our senses will be one.
The universe will shine.
It will blaze forever
in one bright burning,
in one dazzling, deafening, chord.

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Rube Goldberg Device

There's no easy way
to manufacture the truth.
You have to hammer
and saw
and grab
whatever lies ready
to hand.

And it all has to be stuck together
somehow,
jerry-rigged,
a contraption to propel
your will
through time.

It takes at least two .
Or else
you have to hold the pins
in your mouth
to leave both
hands free
and hope
nobody asks any questions.

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

Augury

On the side of the barn—
right in broad daylight—
a luna moth
flattens its phosphorescent self
against a gray oak plank.
It shines—stopping a summer day
in mid-flight—
so bright
it makes me recall
not-so-far-away coal towns,

where moths evolve into colors
closer and closer

to the color of soot.

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Dead Reckoning

“And there came a smell off the shore like the smell of a garden”

In our century, if people off the coast smell anything, it’s unlikely to be pleasant.

Today, the head of a four-person household working full time at the federal minimum wage earns \$15.080 annually, about \$9,000 a year under the poverty level of \$24,250. Even two minimum-wage full time jobs in a family don’t provide a comfortable living. This desperate condition is an “object lesson.”

While fatigue from trying to eke out a living silences opposition to economic and environmental injustice, the lack of good jobs—and the health care linked to them—silences opposition, too.

At the same time that business interests keep wages as low as possible, they keep consumption as high as possible. These interests encourage selfishness. Consuming is called patriotic.

One Sunday morning, I stopped off at Target to do some “research”—I counted the different brands of shampoos, conditioners, and de-frizzers. On one aisle were at least 250 different hair products. Three aisles were full of these hair-care products. By my estimate, that particular Target store offered about 750 different bottles and jars of

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hair beautifiers—not counting hair color products, which took up three-fourths of yet another aisle. Add this small fraction of the store’s inventory to the hundreds of soaps and lotions; thousands of shoes, shirts, and pants; and the thousands of toys, DVD’s, and CD’s in that one store. This is how we pursue happiness.

The average cost of what people spent on a wedding last year was \$35,000.

Selfishness, greed, and vanity, created by corporate interests, have led us to become a nation where the freedom to choose among a myriad of cheap and not-so-cheap luxuries is valued more than making sure that every worker earns a living wage and that every adult and every child has uncontaminated water to drink, uncontaminated food to eat, and uncontaminated soil to work and play on. Mountains of trinkets are incompatible with meaningful liberty, including the liberty to enjoy the beauty of the mountains. We’re trading diversity of landscape and wildlife for diversity of consumer goods.

The outspoken eighteenth-century revolutionary, Tom Paine, told a story, in a note to chapter four of *The Rights of Man*, about “the bear of Berne.” The bear in the story is a metaphor for the French monarchy before and after the French revolution. However, this story is as applicable today as it was during the eighteenth century if we think of the bear as a metaphor for capitalism. The story, as Paine reports it, is that for centuries the people of Berne, Switzerland, kept a

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bear as a town mascot or totem. They kept this dangerous animal chained up in the town square, to its discomfort and their own inconvenience. They thought the bear's presence ensured good health, good weather, and good crops. Supposedly, if anything bad happened to the bear, disaster for Berne would follow. Accordingly, they took good care of the animal—though it ate a great deal and they risked getting attacked whenever they got close to it to feed it. Paine's tale has a happy ending for the townspeople, though not for the bear.

Capitalism is the bear of our day. In asking coal companies to spend money to mine responsibly, we're asking them to go against the major tenet of capitalism, which is to make enough of a profit not only to stay in business, but to expand. Clean-up of spills and other messes industry makes will not be undertaken by companies except under duress. Historically, most of the cost of clean-ups has not been paid by the companies. Rather the costs have been covered with tax monies. Like other businesses—most outrageously in recent years,, the banking industry—big coal companies privatize profits and “socialize” their losses.

If tight regulation means, as mine owners and executives claim, driving operation costs so high that profits are too low to keep investors happy, then coal mining will become a thing of the past. If other capitalistic endeavors, like the huge agribusiness industries cause enough problems to bring the public to insist on real regulation of them, they too may become a thing of the past. Capitalism itself is too costly to the planet. Its necessary wastefulness gives the term “laying waste” to something a new meaning.

Dead reckoning : deducing location of a destination from a fixed starting point.

For the past half century or so in this country there've been calls for people to stop trying to copy the lifestyles of the rich and famous and start copying the lifestyles of the poor and anonymous.

Given the reality that the world's resources are swiftly dwindling because of the wastefulness of affluent cultures, the poor everywhere who are content with living simply are best situated to offer a vision of hope to everyone, for the day will come when we will all have to live with less. —bell hooks

In other words, current economic and political circumstances make it all too clear that soon most people won't just be emulating the poor.

So what happened to the townspeople and the bear of Berne?

One day the bear died. For a long time, the villagers expected disaster, but they “discovered that the corn grew, and the vintage flourished, and the sun and moon continued to rise and set.”

Taking courage from these circumstances, they resolved not to keep any more bears; for, said they, “a bear is a very voracious, expensive animal, and we were obliged to pull out his claws, lest he should hurt the citizens.”

Capitalism has colonized our minds . . .
we refuse to understand the relationships
that underlie the commodities that we use
on a daily basis. *Angela Davis*

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