



RAIN LIKE VESUVIUS
A Few Poems

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to
Susan R. Norton
a poet
1949-2015

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IF BUILDINGS COULD TALK

If buildings could talk,
The Washington Monument would say
Sometimes an obelisk is just an obelisk.

If buildings could talk,
The Roman Coliseum would say
I am but a blink in time.

If buildings could talk,
The Great Wall of China would brag
I photobomb spy satellites,
And the pyramids in Egypt would lament
We weren't worth it.

If buildings could talk,
The Vatican would shout
Jesus Tap-Dancing Christ, the meek, the meek!
And the little blue chapel back home would say
Still here, would you believe it?

If buildings could talk,
The brown-shingle house where I was born would ask
What in the hell happened?
But the Central Valley shack where grandpa did his thing
wouldn't say anything, not after all these years.

If buildings could talk,
The New York Metropolitan Library
Would give all the TED Talks.

If buildings could talk,
Skyscrapers would tell us
On 9/11 we bowed our heads –
Maybe you noticed the shadows that afternoon.

If buildings could talk,
Scientology World Headquarters would whisper
For God's sake, someone call the police,
And the chapel at Westboro Baptist would plead
Burn me. Burn me to the ground.

If buildings could talk,
The Zeppelinfeld in Nuremberg would say
*Ten million tons of Allied bombs were nothing
compared to the darkness in a single human heart*
The torture rooms in Pyongyang would say
We know no other way
And the Hiroshima Peace Memorial would say
You showed me Hell, ask me nothing of peace.

If buildings could talk,
The White House would say
If they knew, it would be anarchy
The Capitol Building would sigh
It will never rain hard enough to cleanse me
And the Supreme Court marble would bellow
You realize they're completely fucking winging it in here, right?

If buildings could talk,
We'd lose our love for the Louvre,
Tianjin would plunge into the Bohai,
In Syria the ruins of Palmyra would say
We've seen enough, please let us go,
And the historians would have to find new work —

Because if buildings could talk,
We'd have a much harder time lying to ourselves.

EDITH, JANUARY 2025

As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city."

— Genesis 19:15

Driven no more, then.
Embers, there — the end.

Day shadows. Daily shadows. Dry shadows.
The Bank of Medici failed.
Embers, there — the end.

Rap on the doors, see the scraping.
Hear it.
We heard it. We fled.
We turned to stone. We turned to ash.
Like Lot's wife.
Ursúa watched from a safe distance.
He went unremarked.

Two canyons and four mountains.
Rapping on doors, the soldiers, the sheriffs —
We heard it, we fled.

Driven then, down the mountain,
A dry lake of acid —
Oil of vitriol
No warning.

Driven then, down the mountain,
Revisited, renowned, replaced —
Fools, the Medicis
Fools, all of them.

The Hydra killed Heracles

in the Los Angeles oil fields.
Bring us to the cut, bring us to the scullery,
Bring us to the edge of black water —
Flush it into the sea.

Aether, the grey stones,
Skull Rock —
too late.

The embers flew for miles,
We watched,
We snuffed them with our mouths.

We snuffed them in the scullery,
They waited,
They had time,
They had physics.
They learned their own darkness.

The darkness of the pyrocumuluous
Fire clouds —
The darkness taught us of ourselves.
It taught us through the cut in the hills.
Yes, there were bodies.

Death is a scalawag that arrives between heartbeats —
to die you have to give up.

CATAPEDAMANIA

Gravity plays tricks,
flickers quicker than consciousness.

Half Dome is half freedom —
chipped granite discovering infinity.
Denali is an igneous emancipation
staring down quicksilver lakes
from twenty thousand feet.

Tenzing Norgay ascended Sagarmāthā
to look gravity in the eye.
From the shattered cornice of Mount Saint Helens
you can divine the origins
of all that you believe.

On an Andalusian sandstone ridge
a pactolian shimmer echoed, *in inictu oculi*.
Receding ice caps shrink mountains —
the altitude of jetliners
becomes less relevant.

Even Monte Nido, humble b-movie protolith,
one clear moon night
revealed the cosmic runiform:

Cause of weightlessness.

EVICTION

for Brian D., somewhere on the street

after the eviction
 i resolved
 to take things more seriously
but it was a contrivance
mostly for the dogs' sake

it rained like vesuvius that night

for six days i ate green onions
one night in an alleyway
 between sixteenth and gower
 between feline copulations
 a voice muttered
 if we're good we come back like them
i thought it best not to question

on the seventh night a line of lights approached l.a.x.
a taco truck was reason enough to lie
 for a few nights thereafter then a girl
 she wouldn't remember

found a place at the end of the month
doesn't much bother me

it's got a perfect sunspot for the dogs

LOS ANGELES APPROACH

[*teardrop*: a standard aviation approach maneuver]

Catch the ILS on a teardrop through raindrops, altitude drop,
Warm GPS glow in the gloaming.

The first raindrops may have disembarked from comets —
Cosmic radiation makes for rough landing conditions.

In '83 I heard a Blackbird's sonic boom over L.A.
It traversed the continent in eighty-three minutes.

Upon landing the pilots were a nanosecond behind the world —
Unnoticed, not a noteworthy nanosecond.

Still — Will they get it back, at the end?
Blood pressure dropping toward darkness, an extra nanosecond?

And if they do catch up, what will it be like?
Experience suggests it will be a lot like riding a comet.

CALIFORNIA CITRUS

It took me a long time
to understand
lemons.

Even limes made
sense sooner:
tender 'pon the buds
soft citric acid —
in frozen form particularly,
almost plaintive.

Tangerines required little explanation:
summer's essence expressed
in sublime concentrated
fructose.

Grapefruits were adolescence:
enticing, ripe from afar —
up close, veritable minefields
of soursweet
uncertainty.

Oranges were so inoffensive
as to constitute peace offerings
to vanquished foes.

But lemons
even lemonade,
betrayer of ten million empty stomachs —

At some point you give up
you tried, it's you,
not them, nor it —

But wait — meringue!

Change of seasons
sweet surprise —
sacchariferous champagne
salacious citric acid —

Hope for adulthood yet!

A LACK OF STILLNESS AND SILENCE

“Someone had blundered.”

– *The Times of London*, December 2, 1854, describing the
charge of the Light Brigade against Russian forces at
Balaclava

Down there we saw what we saw
Saw silence, heard violence.
Battered and battered and —
 A feeling of descent.

Downtown is downtrodden
Legless mimes, trying times —
Tennysonian hexameters.

Egg battered ribeye
 Between echoes —
 Not to try.

Wayward wastrel,
A waif, neglected child —
 Lice and mosquitoes feasted.

Eliminate, evacuate,
 Leave behind the leavings —
 They stumble upon the fissures.

Ruinous, this city,
City aflame —
Into the gutters spilled lives by the thousands.

A sign, abandoned on Hope Street
 After fifty days:
 St. Julian's Crossing.

CRONKITE BEACH, EARLY EVENING

the breakers dancing prisms —
the sand beaten to dust, like life —
the bold and bearded granite faces —
the glint of sunlight on damp grassblades —
the vague chaos of drywash down a hillside —
the euphoric sprouting of poplars from hectic sage.

the cracked asphalt, warped by strong roots in natural motion.

the spindly, rustrotting telegraph poles succumbing to hungry lichens.

the tyrannical antennae of radio stations, oxidized by dew from adjoining trees.

the flights of sparrows casting transitory shadow masterpieces on pine needle basins.

the crumbling ghost barracks obscured and embraced by grass and gullies like downy wombs.

the ancient riparian hills where men once practiced killing each other, beneath the gaze of raptors.

A SENSE OF THINGS

That summer at Carmel Point
Razor orange sun every day
 everything alabaster
 and you, on a balcony, kimonoed.

That summer —
Spectral light —
 you were somnambulant.

Here's where they dug the first river in Los Angeles.
Here's where the bones of slaughtered grey wolves
 will outlive their killers.

Here's where love began.
Here's where it ended.
Here's where the consequences played out.

That summer in Highland Park
A free place to stay was all
 but a few miles nearer the East Coast
 synecdoche for things to come, intimated.

That summer —
That year —
 it never rained.

Here's where stood the house in which your father was born.
Here's where you can live and work all your life
 without ever touching the earth.

Here's where something happened that shouldn't have.
Here's where sins cleansed a sin.
Here's where she slept.

There was that one summer, in Baja
There was that summer —
 a summer of sea anemones
 and stingrays.

On the beach one day you said something about Cortez,
 about the conquistadors, and smallpox
 about how goddamned easy it all must have been —

A few days later summer was gone.

A BOAST

I was born in the third heaven
My wails were not echos
They were waves transitioning the cosmos
 Reflecting the albic light in the birthroom.

I went down between the rocks, at the shore
Reckoned with the gulls, and they with me
The gulls reckoned with me, and I with them.
 Their wails were not echos

The albic light thrashing the waves was real
Farther out, the ochre-tinted algae bloom was real
 Like the sea anemones dying in it.

Paul, you didn't know, you didn't know
You didn't know me — how could you?
God knows, you said
 I have my doubts.

The sea anemones were dying
The porpoises, the kelp, the krill
 The schooling fish.

I went down between the rocks
I fought the currents and the riptides
I fought the inevitable scourge of things
 I screamed to be caught up to Paradise.

I have the scar to this day
It's on my right thumb, at the trapezium
The albic light is the flash of impending stroke
 My wails are not echos, they are real.

COYOTE

The trickster is the best traveling companion —
he's the original ironist.

He knows traffic signals and more:
he knows whether the quail
will flush to the right or the left.

But sometimes he's frustrated by form —
sometimes in his eyes, watching cars:
I could do that.

The trickster is savvy in her canyon:
she senses inclement weather and intruders
she knows migration patterns.

She has learned roads and asphalt
but slumbers only in sweetsour chaparral
or among live oak roots.

The trickster is mindful of fence lines
but only so much —
ground squirrels and hares don't deserve such advantage.

The trickster with her pups restores all faith:
After lightening exploded her den
she dug a new one on the same hill —
three nights later she birthed her first litter
in the ashes of the thunderbolt.

MRS. MCGILlicuddy GOT A PEACOCK

Mrs. McGillicuddy got a peacock,
and the lane's been all a-twitter,
the peacockless have grown bitter,
For it struts and preens and fans its tail,
its most, utmost magnif'cent tail —
Ms. Teague swears she's seen it fetch mail.

Mrs. McGillicuddy got a peacock,
and she's the toast of Harper Lane
but the peacockless are quite profane,
They tut and tut and whisper in judgement,
their most, utmost self-righteous judgment —
Mr. Bream swears they're the embodiment.

Mrs. McGillicuddy got a peacock,
and now the *Times* has sent a man,
the *Picayune's* been scooped for the first time
Since that time it missed the stock market decline —
a most, utmost severe decline.

Mrs. McGillicuddy got a peacock,
now the humble lane's at all-out war,
sides and sides and sides foreswore
They strut and preen and fan their jacks,
their most, utmost resolute jacks —
eventually Mr. Stiches shot it in its tracks.

THE STRAY

Broken leg dog,
black and still
 lays 'neath a barroom
 paws coddling a beer bottle.

Limbs outstretched
hind legs at angles like oriental script,
Glassy eyes reflect the light
of the foreigners' street in Bangkok.

Alone,
Say we,
who walk like shadows
past dreams, past-lives, and whorehouses
with ruby windows.

We walk between the echoes.

A guitar seeps through the wet night,
like a creeping lizard:
penetrates the city's hum, a last invocation,
and still she lays.

A black-haired, almond-eyed dream
leaps over the ledge,
runs, legs flailing, disappears into the street,
and then there is no more motion in the air.

Her breath comes in a cadence, as though
she's listening to a heartbeat in the ground.

The bar grows quiet,
a cockroach scrapes across the floor,

She lays, still,
in the waking Bangkok morning.

PACIFIC SAGE

Broken by vistas, we watched ourselves grieve.
We watched ourselves in the aether,
 Which shouldn't have existed.
We tore our eyes away but the kaleidoscopes lingered —
 It shouldn't have existed, either.

A play of sunlight on skeletal trees
Returned something we'd lost
 The sunlight stole it again
 When the breeze shifted.
A play of sunlight on sandstone rocks
 Shouldn't have existed
 But it did.

Clear liquid made our heads light.
It played with the light on the trees and rocks.
 It tempted the aether.

A man stood at the crest of an arroyo
He spoke in tongues of the lost
 Then took his words back
 And descended into the canyon.
We never learned his name.

Marine layer fog doused the sunlight
The rains arrived too late
 Broken by vistas
 We awaited our fate.

THE SPIDER

In California autumn I reclined on a hillside,
And read from a volume of R. Jeffers.
A wind, lazy as I, whispered from the Pacific,
Foretelling the arrival of the first winter chill.

I paused, having come to the end of a line;
To give my eyes a rest I cast them down, upon a stone.

Mindlessly I retrieved it and, mind still brimming with Mr. Jeffers,
Turned it in my hand. Among the tatters of earth and weeds
Was a red spider, small as a grain of sand.
He shuddered in the sudden chill, then raced, lost,
'Cross the stone, to the shelter of a crack
(Or a mighty crevasse, so it must have seemed to him.)

I apologized profusely, retrieved my wayward book,
And placed the stone, face up, back in its place.

ORCAS ISLAND

From Orcas Island,
The orcas are distant islands.

On Orcas Island in the summer,
 fire sapphire sound —
We sat 'round the fire
 telling ghost stories.

The orcas know ghost stories —
Kenai fog holds secrets, and
 cetaceans are trustworthy
 to the death.

Phantom blue dorsal surfaces,
gulls cackle confused spirits, but
 not the owl nor osprey,
 having no such need.

On Orcas Island,
walk the promontory at Skeleton Point
'neath a blue fullclear moon:
 see the origins
 of ghost stories.

Sit upon the seakissed, barnacleclicking rock
and whisper the stories to
 ephemeral pods.

But beware, be diligent in your tales:
The orcas are not so easily fooled.

WHEN YOUR DESTINY ELUDES YOU

chained to a faraway roll of thunder, like a lunatic possessed i dreamt myself lost:

i was born to recline on rusted-out railroad tracks, to set and wonder when the next streamliner's due. fifty-seven years ago, by my watch.

once fell asleep almost for good at 23,000 feet on a mountaintop. distant from everything and everyone but for the rabelaisian doctors who knew just what to do, and so i didn't quite die that night.

once flew an airplane from here to le bourget and back, me and lindy. well, almost back. cylinder 5 gave out over lake superior, wheezing smoke death rattle. my elegy to it a petroglyph rendered in aviation fuel on an oil rag. what to do? left her in minneapolis and caught something faster home, a dc-9 that later crashed into the pacific with 167 souls on board but not me.

once i think it might have been iceland. god, they were blonde and brunette and beautiful, blue eyes to break your heart, but it was too dark six months of the year, and goddamn cold, too.

once followed her to marrakesh where we ate goat's head soup. i lay next to her three nights, dreaming of making love. instead, into the desert where the ancient french car broke down. a man with desolate skin offered five camels for her. i considered my options.

once set fire to a hilltop, because sometimes that's what boys do, and if it weren't for a bright yellow shirt they'd never have caught me. i thanked god for helicopters.

once for a week or two the chinese decided they hated us. bad time in tianjin. double line of troops did the trick, though we needed new windows afterward. also new underwear. somehow didn't die that time either. though, really, should've.

my blood's been spilled without reason on four continents. oughta suffice - no profit in bleeding in antarctica.

once rode a boxcar to lexington, massachusetts, where i waited forty days and forty nights for paul to gallop by and holler at me to get my musket and be ready at dawn.

because, you see, i was born to be a minuteman.

THE MAN ON THE BALUSTRADE

He scrapes outside
bu-bu-bu-beh-bu-beh-bu
He scrapes the pavement
Tooo-weet-tooo-weet-tooo-weet
He scrapes across the air
There is cracking
Next door we all breathe asbestos
He is a raccoon, he's a larcenist
He's an albatross around his own neck
He is in the dark
He's in his own dark
He's a rhapsody
He's setting up a tent
He is a trespasser
Who goes where he wants
While bu-bu-bu-beh-bu-beh-bu
Everyone just stares
He brings water to the wounded
The wounded he wounded
The wounded go tooo-weet-tooo-weet
He smiles as he walks past
He smiles at my window
I swear, it's like he knows something.

A VAGABOND'S LAST CREED

*My last words were whispered on shattered California asphalt:
I spoke once then fell silent –
Like a plugugly,
I'll give nothing to the world for what I took:*

I used to swashbuckle my way down the rails
when
steel tracks reflected California sunset mirages
in evaporating deserts:
Tendrils of Leland Stanford's empire,
dew-covered sinews of four men's pride
and ten thousand men's souls –
east to Promontory Point.

Lines and sidings sprouted from
the main line calamux,
urban seedlings upon their stems,
where were unloaded timber and steel,
so the state could be built
onto a blank granite canvas.

Then the main route,
North at last,
into Oregon mist,
into the Tacoma and Vancouver yards
where merged a hundred tracks
in that cathedral of caliginous solemnity:
The End of the Line.

I walked those tracks,
I rode next to men with tobacco beards and whiskey speech,
I took myself away from the world,
I became an American by freeing myself from America.

But now I've uttered my last breath, and will escape no more.

I discovered what I needed out of life
when I was nineteen –
But if I were to tell you what it is,
I'd give you the only possession
I've not gambled away.

I used to walk down railroad tracks that
lingered into California sunsets,
 before asphalt and concrete were laid upon them like
 tombstones,
 because General Motors had to prove a point.

In my last days, you know,
there weren't many open miles left at all –
Sometimes the trains had to stop at crossings
 to let the cars pass,
 and I knew my time was past.

I've uttered my last breath, and will escape no more.

I walked a few days down the line, for old times' sake:
 set out from San Jose, where
 the Union Station's a museum,
 made to San Rafael,
 nearly lost myself where the railroad bed
 faded into vague strips of dust
 and dessicated business plazas.

Between Francisco Boulevard and Third Street
 beneath the new freeway
 I came upon a man, huddled.
He breathed the slowness of sleep,
 rested his head upon an old tie.
I scraped the gravel of what was once the track bed;
He opened hazy eyes and stared,
 spewed out a greeting of
 who'n the hell are you?

Don't you know?

Just wondering, I said,
if you rode the highball that used to blaze through here
 twice a day,
 we called her the Soup Bone Express
 because Renee at the Grub Stake always had some for us.
I rode her, I said,
 and thought maybe we were friends.

He spat, and wretched once or twice
 before he answered hell no,

I got nowhere else to sleep.
This railroad tie is a pillow,
this road bed is my bed.

Have you escaped? I asked, persistently.

He laughed,
sure I escaped —
escaped a job when the company broke,
escaped a wife when she left me for a trucker in Sacto,
escaped three kids when DCS took them away.

Escaped, said he, and laughed again.
He pulled his jacket back up around his head,
lay his head down upon his pillow,
bid me on my way
with a wave.

And so I moved on, hoping to be gone,
until I lost the track altogether,
found myself in a field.
High voltage lines stretched above me,
they cut the air with a buzz.

Route 37 rolled over the hills towards Lodi and old California,
but there was no reason to go that far,
not anymore.
My bed was close by.

Trucks barreled past, hell bent for Motel 6
dragging hollow rattling trailers
where the trains once ran.

*So now I've laid myself down,
Hollow oat stalks round my head, in a glowing California sunset.*

I've left my last words out on the highway,
I've spoken my wisdom,
if you can call it that,
released myself from the yards,
And now I can rest.

Your future, not mine, rises with the sun.

I'll rust away, in a forgotten yard
 of discarded rails and ties,
Until my old bones redden with age
 and become no more,

But not too soon —
 for steel fades much faster than flesh.

