

The Victorious Ones

Chris Nealon

1

Then came fire

We drove out past the flooding to watch the birds

Long-lashed boys in hoodies looked up from the sidewalk to absorb the sky
Ancient women left the bedsides of their long-ago boys

And in the great transition no one could tell if we were doomed or free

2

Is there an original exile?

I think the Germans think we were driven from the forest

Sometimes like a distant station playing a tune you half-remember I can hear it—

Driven out into the terrifying open to savannah

That's not my myth

Or, I don't want it to be

3

I do like imagining high-value objects become nearly worthless
People just leaving their prized possessions lying around

It gives me a rest from that squirrel-y huddling near the outlets feeling
That well if a catastrophe hits at least my phone will be charged idea

So maybe just leave it on the toilet for the next guy
Maybe just delete all your contacts and go

4

My friends encourage me, take care of me

“You should totally become an anarchist! Just stay off the listserv.”

I was deep in the kaleidoscope,

Feeling it allowing me to sense all time, but I couldn't tell anyone about it—

Perhaps because I was dead

5

A daylight surface teeming with youth—it makes me feel like mine has been—not lost
so much as just...subducted

Abruptly it's the final day of spring—

Your pointillist relationship to calendar time
Tap that date / tap that date / tap it

Touchscreen indifferent to your bandaged thumb

And yes like other every other poet with a child I have dreamed of mine along some
empty road in camouflage and tatters, scrambling for potable water in 2046

But you know what? Fuck the zombie apocalypse

I'm going to imagine him with comrades

6

Oh man praying to the wrong gods again

Please flux keep me open just another poem

Woops no see you later

Thirteen weeks of winter salt across the Al-Jazeera banner

April lawns and trees Chaucerian and raggedy with hungry geese and mockingbirds

We were sold kenosis as a way to overcome discrepancies in scale

But everything hinged on the tone you did it in

7

There's a river running backward through this poem to the sources of literature

You'd think that would be a good thing

But I take seriously that beauty is the beginnings of terror, in a quarreling way

I do think beauty halfway staves off terror with forms, with dance, with symbols,

And I know we're never far from terror—

But here's the thing: even saying that sounds right-wing

And that's because the right has always practiced terror to insist that we can never get away from it

I say this as a homosexual

Terror—that's the meaning of male homophobia—

It's not a critique of buttfucking, please—it's the punishment of male insouciance, male lightness, a bodily comportment and a vocal inflection that gets heard as

everything is beautiful

everything is fine

Those hammer-blows administered to gay boys' skulls—they say NO—we are *not* free from violence—this is not Arcadia—how dare you flounce around—

So when my colleagues critique The Romantic Symbol, critique the Romantics, for peddling false consolation—

When the modernists champion objectivity, and unsymbolizable allegory,

Because we know better than to trust in pretty symbols but keep forgetting,
Because we need art to remind us that life is hard,

I wonder—

Who are we talking to? I mean three cheers for allegory

But there's a gossamer, a hollow way of symbols, isn't there

There's a way a beaten body looks in silk

I didn't become a professor so I could "demystify" my students

I didn't kiss that boy in 1987 because I'd forgotten terror

Maybe Rilke writing on the dime of the House of Thurn and Taxis knew this

Maybe he didn't just mean, whoa, those angels are *intense*

Either way when I say "beauty" I don't mean razzle-dazzle, and I don't mean
the crucifixion

When I say "terror" I don't mean the Titans

There's a river running backward through this poem to the sources of our struggle with
each other

8

Guilty as charged!

I do have something to peddle

But you know I can't help it—I came of age in the great mixtape swap meet of the
1980s—

Hey, you want to feel like this?

Hey, I have a crush on you, put this in your pocket

Later watching waters part around my friend as he took over the club—since gone on to glory—

As though the early 90s were an apical moment in the history of longing—

As though those vocals, Robyn S, had hit a plaintive note that was not to be repeated—

When in fact it was just another episode of black women teaching white boys how to ache for free

9

Later still—a Saturn return—

Me and Stephen on the Schäfergasse, chatting up the barback on a strangely silent Friday night

“Hey, where *are* the gay people in Frankfurt, anyway?”

“Oh, they are in the forest...”

10

So yeah the mythic method

“This place Hammertown I’m talking about, this imaginary place, actually has a very, very specific history... a history of genocide. And that’s something that the poetics I am proposing has absolutely no way of dealing with. There are a lot of reasons why I stopped but that’s certainly one of them... It’s just an aspect of that reality that I was never going to be able to deal with.”

11

Peter Culley I thought you should know—

The day after you died I took *Parkway* with me into the woods

Or, well... it was Rock Creek Park

I fell asleep contentedly beneath a tree, around the halfway point—

I wasn't dreaming quite—my sleep was not that deep—

But in the quiet I could hear you approach

I heard you telling me that you'd liked reading backwards, as a child—

I felt you were describing, in case I wanted to try it, how you'd learned to write those
lines like brushed-up nap on a trampled carpet, fresh again—

You know I'll never have your mad skills

But I'm taking you with me into the woods

12

Peter I bet you knew this let-down post-revolutionary feeling—

This lower-limit-private-perception feeling

This too-too solid flesh / hell is other people / Artaudian hell is my body feeling

Most days these days I've got nothing but my tepid intellectual watchfulness

But sometimes in distraction I get tugged at from behind—tugged at from within this
chidakasha backdoor in the mind

I usually ignore it but every now and then I turn the handle and it's like BAM—
a Narnia of forms!

Insubstantial forms—

Peter this is better

It's as though the ache in me to find substantiality subsides—

The ache to find it in boy's bodies—to find it in the firmest earth on which to take
a stand

That firm ground would never be enough against the weapon they have stashed in
readiness against us—shame—

Those hammer blows—

Those anonymous who-do-you-think-you-are letters from the FBI encouraging
revolutionaries to consider suicide—

But we're unjustified

It's like the sword thrust into us would just find... nothing
Like we know our poetry's as nothing to the waves of sound

13

So yeah I watched a lot of space epics as a kid

Look at me, all Obi-Wan

But fantasies aren't just implanted in us—they tap into something, right?

Trembling in-existent

Poets—sometimes I am proud of us—

How a stanza is a woofer pulsing—

How wood to us is beautiful but also an impedance

14

Your private perceptions—

Clarity—November like a wrung sponge—

Your eye hops over from the dissipated contrail to the crisp one and then tracks
southward to the actual plane

Mental recapitulation of the sensuous world—like I had an ice-hand that could freeze
the tip of every branch—

Ice world, white forest—

Held in some salinity—some meter—

15

Courage like cool water

We sat on a bank and read from the always-only deuterocanonical books we loved

We made a dossier of terrifying descriptions of the sky and bound the sheafs together
with red thread

And we came back to that scene in *The Salt Eaters* where the Sisters of The Yam are
headed to a demonstration, traveling dirt roads in rural Georgia on a rickety old
bus, when they look up, all twelve of them, and something in the pivot of a flock
of birds makes them realize that the roof of time has been torn off

“Tendon, feather, bone and flesh were riding against a backdrop of eight-
minute-ago blue, of fifty-years-ago blue, rode the curvature of the seam...”

How I pray for access to that feeling!

Toni Cade Bambara you are missed

16

So look I know I won't see the end of capital

But you, child—I wonder—

Surely it won't be pretty

Yes I know protective gear awkward alternative currencies

But maybe also how it might be said of you / that you were the ones who saw it through

The destruction from below of all the fucked-up supply chains by those giant worms
from *Dune*

The dropping like a fly of every drone

I've seen you by the window with your beautiful wide eyes as storms rolled in

I've tried to teach you the words

I've imagined you remembered at the end of a long life, circled by friends beneath an empty sky,

Your friends who wrote the poems of the 22nd century,
The poems of storms and drones,

And hoped that when they reached the line about you it would read,

He who loved lightning watched them fall

17

Then came fire

It wasn't yet a new world, or the end of the old one

But water, money, feeling overspilled their banks

There was finally something real to be afraid of

There was finally no reason to fear

Even animals approached us as they hadn't in ten thousand years

Buildings were either shelter or they weren't

Music got quiet

And poetry—

Poetry began to ask the question it had hidden in the forest

Poetry returned to lists, enumeration, inventory

It chose sides

This was not the same as prophecy

Look around you now and ask yourself

Which of these—

The innovators, profit-makers, the ones behind high walls,

The ones who are planning for the great catastrophes—

Or the ones with no ability to plan,

Who live from hour to hour, year to year,

In whom terror waits to be uncurdled,

Who live in the great wide world—

Which of these will be the victorious ones?

Nobody knows.