



Canid Elegy

Nathaniel Youmans

Canid Elegy

Nathaniel Youmans

You awaken to the rust of summer blood in the fields above the clouds.
 You are searching for your lost kin, your Children of the Sun,
 though like me, Coyote, you howl only to the Moon.
 When the Spider People of the Moonforest lowered you back down
 to the earth on silken songlines, your stomach full of moth blood,
 did you see the way the cloven cradle of night dilates like owlsong
 over these ninety thousand cubic miles of basalt, the mafic tallow
 of the gods so dense it sinks the bedrock? How even at night the brick
 color of thirst returns at summer's end to these scabbed steppes? Did you
 see our baptisms in sagebrush fires, the iridescence of magpie tailfeathers, the red
 eyes of telecommunication towers blinking on the horizon like torches
 of the tribes of the dead, the color of the killing
 of color: wheat stubble bristling against nervous ankles
 of the witch sisters you left keening in the afterglow—

Naked in the city that invented Father's Day
 you wander about in search of your lost skin.
 You slipped out of it to first take the form of

a teenage girl, absorbed in the kinetic capillary fringe
of a great long dream wherein she paints the sky
like the eyes of a dragonfly any world but here then wakes
and sees only a flat flax blue peeking through the plywood
nailed over windows above the porch, above
the rosebush that never blooms, and soon blooms
in the girl's bruised and woken skull a storming halo of
mother's methamphetamines, father's fatherlessness, the crows
barking above. How their talons itch the powerlines.
Such innovative injuries gather like tumbleweeds
in the corners of the rooms of lower South Hill homes.
The sparrow-flights of childhood adjourn
in one sweeping raptureless abatement.
We know where it is our dead have been taken to.

Then, Coyote, I saw you take the shape of a homeless man somehow
asleep in an alley deafened by a passing freight train. I couldn't stop
watching how peaceful the slow heave of your rest seemed
under a winnowing camouflage jacket and rectangles of cardboard. Moments
ago, another carnal ritual: two drunken creatures fight over nobody's
woman; one shoves the other over the sidewalk's lip, who, floating,
suspended in the timeless vertigo of liquor, tips backward like a felled stupid tree,
and then it was so simple: the protrusion at the back of his head burst
like a perfect tomato when it hit the street. Cranial shards and fractals
of grey matter and cigarette butts in the gutter. Yes, Coyote, those of us
born among the Scablands know that to be torn apart is to be built.
New swollen riverbanks of skin to seethe behind. They, we, are tattooed gifts
grown from wounded earth, from ink—one word—flooding over all this raw terrain.
Froth and smoke and erosion are all that separate the lithified and us.

Child of a vast theatre, I see you as you sniff out marmots on the bluff
of arrowleaf balsamroot, thistle stalks, and ponderosa pines above Latah Creek
where Colonel George Wright, like a boy playing with the taste of hate, sucking on it
like a lucky black rabbit's foot, hanged Qualchan and sixteen other native men.
Shot a thousand horses and dumped their bodies in the creek. *You will
attack all the hostile Indians you may meet, he was ordered, with vigor;
make their punishment severe and persevere until the submission of all is
complete.* Under these gallow limbs, these trees selected for the purpose
still creaking in the skin shroud of the wind, you stop suddenly.
You turn toward the deepening west like a heliotrope,
wistful and not without curiosity. Still abiding some promise of events,
some cardinal force gathering at the world's eyelid as the fat bodies
of marmots crawl out from beneath pages of concrete and twisting rebar
half-buried on the slope, fading to further detrital hues of half-life.
This is the way things have been, Coyote, even before the steam plant was built
downtown in 1916 and those twin smokestacks, our 225' Geminis,
brought the tallest symmetries to Spokane for sixty-six years and defined a skyline:
lonely, perpendicular against this eroding plateau and its scarred songs
of ancient floodwaters and volcanoes and palimpsests
purified by the violence of their geometries. I wish I could say to you
what the smokestacks have said to each other for precisely one century:
That we are the only two relative bodies looking down upon this salted earth.
That if you can see beauty it is always infinite always cruel.

I know why they call you The Trickster—what it means to be a thing
who moves alone in this world, this tenebrous expanse, but is not of it.
It is not a thing to tell but the marrow memory of the Scablands. It is the dust
of mothwings shaken in transverse flightcurves above the ringing fields;
it is the frenetic sweetness of iron in blood and how we stalk
these sprawling industries of distance. We could be Castor and Pollux,
you and I, we could be the smokestacks of Spokane, but no, Coyote,

you are trespassing in the Land of the Dead, and I am one of those
moth-colored men, and though I love you I will never
give you back your skin. If I see you again I will push
my fingers down your throat to feel if your howl is the same
as my howl, a wing-eyed panic moonward, for you
know that to the Moon I too have always sung, but though
it is sympathetic the Moon always has the same reply every night:
All life is the same, it will say as it falls away behind wayfaring tongues
of iridescent clouds to go about its business freeing shadows.
There is always an equal chance to take beyond hunger any given face
to ensile in idioms of basalt and brick the rage of mind and dust.
All dust is just sand. All sand is just glass waiting to become all mirrors.

Nathaniel Thrainn Youmans is a MFA candidate in the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. He has been a poet-in-residence and a lava cave guide in Iceland, and has performed environmental research in Antarctica, Argentina, and Ireland. Youmans's work often explores the intersection of psychology and the earth sciences: the formation, erosion, and violent processes of landscapes both real and imagined. Now he lives in Spokane, Washington at the eastern edge of the Channeled Scablands.



