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The Players, the Rules, and the World

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The Players, the Rules, and the World

by Michael Mingo

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State of the Union

Walk. Run.

Noses run. Fevers run.

Bulls run. Cattle walk.

Rivers run down riverwalks.

Pitchers walk. Batters walk.

Time runs out. Players walk away.

Juniors run. Seniors walk.

Pedestrians walk. Joggers eventually walk.

Moviegoers run. Ushers run, too.

Officeholders can walk. Officeseekers must run.

Accountants walk. Burglars run.

Briefcase carriers run down moving walks.

Security says don't run down moving walks.

Bono says, "Walk away."

Lou Reed says, "Run, run, run."

after Kiki Petrosino

I
The Players

Clio

A muse with no concept
of comedy. Crack a joke,
she'll make it so: Norman Lear
brought Reagan to the White House.
Mark Twain invaded Cuba.
Off-hand, never-in-
a-million-years asides
are transcribed and blindly
submitted to her desk
for approval. Though we stand
in awe of such prophetic
wisecrackers, they merely
are the victims of Zeus's
literal-minded offspring.
So much for the power of ridicule.
Our daily breaks to chuckle
at clueless politicians
and imperialist bravado
are the whispered invocations
of satire's greatest artist.

To a Prohibitionist

In America, ballots are bayonets.

—Frances Willard

You believed elections had the power
to skewer caseloads of whiskey,
to shatter the mirrors and shutter the windows
of every Midwest saloon. One day

in your fever dreams, your militia
would invade Congress and rectify
the Constitution. The voting booth
was your consecrated ground. The ballot

that I hold a hundred years later
is an attic antique, a piece of lead
bent, unpolished, incapable
of keeping state houses in line.

In my day, Frances, guess how many
of your bayonets lie dust-covered
in forgotten storage units? Votes,
we have learned, are like

baseball cards and comic books: worthless
in a crowded market. You might
even wonder, once the fever has broken,
if whiskey is not more potent.

Joan of Arc

Her campaign stops at Orléans and seizes
the moment, the momentum. Her base, a model
of grassroots organization, frenzies
in her youthful glow. Her message radiates

from the Channel to Marseilles: *C'est le matin
en France*. Her commoner credentials
are secure: a shepherdess from Domrémy,
loves Jesus like her father. "*Une nation*,"

she preaches, "*une langue*." She needs
no witchcraft to stun her foes and foreign heads.
Her words alone could set fire to the fields.

Gertrude

How I want to make amends, but only the wine
is talking now, stinging like the single note
of chalice striking slate. Only after the wine
enters the bloodstream do I hear: silence moaning
with your father's gravel, curtains rustling. The note
I sent you is laughing like mad. Now I'm the wine
splattered, gathering across the floor. I could drown
every island in this kingdom, but the moaning
would float like rue on the river. My love, take note:
only your name stains my lips, your name and the wine.

The Bull Moose

Run. Your father
was a coward, so run.
Run away to Cuba, charge
up San Juan Hill,
get bruised with shrapnel,
miss flown-blown bullets,
beat your father's shame
into the mud. Run
from the memory
of someone who bought
his way out of a fight.
War is splendid
for saving face
decades late.

The Pundit

a cento

At four in the morning when he can't sleep,
he rehearses the stale phrase to himself
with eye, hand, breath, and will,
opening his old throat, blowing out his lips:
“Let me tell you in a very frank manner...”

Bored by repetition, or afraid,
in later years he spoke feelingly of
the voice in his voice—
Steer clear of oratory, poetry and belles lettres.
Study fits a mercenary drudge.

The Modern Marcus Aurelius

The lot assigned to every man is suited to him, and suits him to itself.

—*Meditations*

When you wake up on the couch,
goal horn blaring through
your bleary eyes. A dirge
for the Rangers' Stanley Cup
delusions. Alec Martinez
dancing on the grave with the weapon
still in hand. It's over.

Rub out the sleep, and laugh.
Why not? When Jimmy Fallon
shakes you from this same position
with some bad pun in his monologue,
you go down quietly.

What is different but the image
shining through early morning?

Twenty years ago – you know
it's true – some Canucks fan
raged at the sight of your
happiness, the white
sweaters waving. He wept,
drank, pounded the wall.

What has changed but the pattern
stitched in polyester?

Nothing.

When you find that fate
is neutral, a fan of neither.
Just fall asleep. Let
the talking headsets rend
their tweed suits in mourning.

Listening to “Atlantic City”

Springsteen calls
his dolled-up gal,
saying, *Meet me
tonight
in Atlantic City.*
He’s got nothing
but bus tickets
and favors
for the mob.

Does he see
the rising
casino landscape,
the future built
on rigged odds
and protection

money? Down here,
in the land of winners
and losers, he warns
his dolled-up gal
(so drunk he says
to put the makeup
in her hair), *Don’t
get caught
on the wrong side
of that line.* That line,

drawn in the sand
beneath the boardwalk,
is erased, pulled
back with the tides,
and only
one side remains.

Every day,
or so I hear
from the papers,
one more
roulette wheel
has stopped
on double zero.

Just how thin
is the skin
of the gambling
commissioner's teeth?

*Maybe
everything
that dies,
he says,
trailing off
for the harmonica,
someday
comes back.*

The Fall of Eric Cantor

On June 10, 2014, Eric Cantor (R-VA), the House Majority Leader and heir apparent to the position of Speaker of the House, unexpectedly lost in his district's primary election. No House majority leader had lost a primary election in over one hundred years.

Cameramen keeping
vigil at the crime scene.

Pocket change spilt
on the Capitol floor.

The victim's identity
passed along
through hallway murmurs:

bright future
so youngish
boss hated him
had it coming

Condolences offered
through coughing fits.

The body cushioned
on a growing stack
of business cards.

Upon Finishing Tacitus

The *Annals* do not end, they stop mid-
paragraph, in transition.
Another trial's mock defendant hangs

in limbo two thousand years,
his sentence forever delayed.
The prose, so clear

and direct, creeps to the edge
of the page like a ship's crew
to the horizon; it refuses

to go further. What becomes
of all our missing chronicles?
Pages get converted to fuel,

devoured by bookworms, misplaced
in monastery libraries.
The gaps invite treasure-hunters

and idle speculation. We
can translate, gloss, guess
and trawl archives, but no

new ink will ever seep through.
Nero, once and always emperor.
Tacitus, time-captured chronicler.

History neither stops.

Lady Jane

after The Execution of Lady Jane Grey : Paul Delaroche : Oil on Canvas : 1833

Lady Jane Grey, let your hand fall.
The chopping block is before you.
Don't let the cushion that cradles

your knees—green velvet, not that you
can see—deceive you. The blindfold
holds your hair back for a reason.

No grace from the crown forthcoming,
no mercy from the eldest heir,
daughter of Spain, the Catholic queen.

Here is your fate: Mary Tudor's
first and youngest victim, martyr
for the Reformation, you reign

more symbolic than historic.
Now is when it ends. Do not hope
for anything. You are subject,

Lady Jane, to a painter's whims.
Paul Delaroche, born in the dust
of the French Revolution,

temporally closer to me
than to you, now determines
your final moments. He has draped

your walking ghost in white satin
folding over, falling to the floor,
and I think, "Lady Jane, you are

the image of justice defeated."
I cannot speak for Delaroche,
cannot know what impulse, what will,

fashioned you like so. The intent
is lost. This scanned picture, posted
on Wikipedia: I have

nothing else to work with. Could I
speculate on the politics

of Delaroche in the context

of the July Monarchy, whatever
that refers to? Certainly,
but speculation without fact

never knowledge becomes. And what
did he, this Paul Delaroche,
know of Tudor England, or you

of Plato's Greece? And yet we still,
we must, interpret the past
in the now. Originalism

is a fraudulent philosophy,
promising what can never be
delivered. I want you to be

the image of justice betrayed,
and so you are cast. If this role
offends you, I apologize.

Blame your cousin, Lady Jane,
the former king Edward, lying
in bed, dying, hacking your name

with coughs full of bile, yellow
and black. A pleasant end. Edward
never learned firsthand how fatal

the throne may be. It's a deathtrap,
Lady Jane, a torture chair.
It straps your legs in iron cuffs,

pries your eyelids open, and then,
holding a mace, your maker bows
and begs your pardon. All monarchs

hear rumors of the snap. A few
escape unscathed, but as many
become chapters in the story:

Henry VI, Richard III,
and now you, Lady Jane. As if
to prove the Universe does not

even human affairs, Mary,
your adversary, will escape
retribution and merely die

of influenza. No solace
in your condition. Only know
you are not the last.

Do not wince, Lady Jane.
There's the executioner,
impatient. See how he leans

on the handle, palm driving
the blade into the floor. You move
far too slowly for his liking.

When one manages executions
to keep family fed, the tension
turns limp, the ceremony

reduced to muscle memory.
Delaroche has placed your maker
on the edge of the frame, where he

and only he can think in peace:
"Get down, my lady, so we
can leave." This man would have gone

unnoticed entirely, if not
for his costume: scarlet pantaloons,
too-tight vest and foppish cap,

more foolish than fearful. Just what
was Delaroche thinking? (Again
with that damned question.)

I suppose that, contrary
to what Bob Dylan later wrote,
the executioner's face

can be found in plain sight. I know,
Lady Jane, that Bob Dylan's name
is unfamiliar to you, but

one might say he introduced us.
Bob Dylan wrote a song for you,

or to you or about you,

called "Queen Jane Approximately,"
in reference to your nine-days-reign.
Dylan, like Delaroche, was not

faithful to the record: you
had no children to resent you,
no clowns died fighting your battles,

and chemists had not invented
the plastics your advisors
allegedly threw at your feet.

(Dylan later claimed to be friends
with Queen Mary, so I dispute
his neutrality as well as his facts.)

A false portrait, but impressions
cannot be forgotten, cannot
be washed and left to dry, and so

for years, Lady Jane, I assumed
you were, shall we say, standoffish,
unpleasant, vain, and prone to fits

of violent self-imposed silence.
A tyrant teenage drama queen,
in contemporary parlance.

But now, if you want somebody
you don't have to speak to, no one
will chastise you, call you weak.

Divine will wants you dead, but you
will die on your own terms: quietly.
Quietly. Your so-called friends,

your ladies in waiting, will not
stop wailing, Lady Jane. How
undignified their grief: one stands,

hands raised in feeble prayer,
back turned; the other slouches
against a column, gazing

at the ceiling like a peasant
too drunk to beg alms. Neither is
of any help, unless you consider

pre-death mourning consolation.
Lady Jane, it's a wonder
you can understand one word

the Tower guard whispers. Does he
have advice, admonishments,
or mere morbid pleasantries?

Is his fur robe any comfort,
or have your arms become numb,
incapable of feeling? Do not

answer, Lady Jane, do not
reach through time, through canvas.
Do nothing, Lady Jane. Only now,

do I see your mouth ajar,
the bottoms of your eyes
just barely visible,

and I think—I realize—
that you are crying.

II

The Rules

Political Philosophy Monologue

Dandelions helpless
under April winds

Translucent tufts
landing on lawns

sprouting weeds
between lilac buds

Chemical spray
and rotating blades

undo the damage
Every spring

is unruly
What can be done?

Fellow lawnkeepers
fight alone

hands rubbed sore
pulling together

choking the stems
Dirt falls loose

from the roots

Three Criteria for Deliberative Democracy

I. Reciprocity

Whispers echo
in the dark.
I will open
the blinds, if you
stay quiet.

II. Publicity

Even fully-
shaded lamps
shed more light
than your or I
would care for.

III. Accountability

I say ignore
the question
of just who
smashed the bulb.
Go to sleep.

How to Break the News

Explaining the latest crisis,
foreign or domestic, becomes
an exercise in tone: calming
but professional. It sounds
like your doctor, clipboard
in both hands, both eyes
fixed on your racing heart.
“It’s serious,” she says.
“Problems lie ahead.
Stay calm, stay calm, exercise
good caution.” The words
as hard and soothing
as a post-needle sucker.

The smile and scheduled
next appointment, and life
goes on. Her words grow
faint, quiet, as weeks decay
into months. The nature
of the problem (muscular
or vascular, foreign
or domestic) is a matter
of details. How often
are such details important?
Just stay calm, stay calm.

The Numbers Game

The ghost of
J.P. Morgan

plays with reams
of cost-benefit
analysis,

flipbooks filled

with illusory
movement.

Statheads dissect
predictions,

endless

pundit prattle.
Calculator plastic
rattles beneath
pencil erasers,

held
like our hopes
by friction

to the desk.
Sixty votes
for cloture,

two hundred and seventy
for the White House:

a series
of significant digits.

Ask Why, Asshole

You got the results of the test back. Your child is Not-Yet-Proficient. The diagnosis is necessary but insufficient; the school board ATM reads *invalid PIN*. New year,

same bullshit. Take another ticket, memorize another number. Your baby falls through the cracks like dust through a punch-card. I'm sorry but we called your number two weeks ago.

When you turn off the news, the world pulls the crust from under you and drags you down a fault. Call it the misanthropic principle. Call it day-to-day. Do not call back.

JChinan

Ctrl+F *Japan*, replace
with *China*: instant

credibility. Your word
is gospel, prophecy

repeated ad nauseum
on *Face the Nation*.

It's common knowledge
that their children

are masters trained
in the time-honored art

of the No. 2 pencil. Their
technology harnesses

exotic magic. One Asian country
is, economically speaking,

a perfect substitute
for another: yesterday's

Toyota is today's
Alibaba. The future

is theirs, will always
be theirs, and we

will replay this panic
once more and again.

Domino Theory

Americans take justified pride in their own country...yet are genuinely startled when other people are proud and possessive of theirs.

—Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*

Fingers steady, we
 line up dominoes
 painted as flags—
 solid fields, stars
and crescents, script
 we don't comprehend—
 and push. We
 have designed
a certain collapse:
 tiles striping
 red, white, red,
 white. A mosaic
in our image.
 Instead, the colors
 change, patterns

 break, and new
 shapes, new forms,
 unpredictable,
 arise.

Sloganeering

The cars we make make us.

We are the cars we make.

We make the cars we make.

We make the cars that make you.

We make the cars that make you turn your pockets empty.

We make the cars that are just what you needed.

We are the cars.

We are combustion, and we make the cars.

We burn the fuel and drive the roads and rock in the free world while we're at it.

We are Henry Ford, we are the carmaker.

The carmaker can because he mixes it with gas and makes the air taste.

We can make you buy the sheepskin seat-covers.

We can make you beg for the sheepskin seat-covers.

We can make you beg.

We can make you lick asphalt.

You will drive this car away.

We can make you drive this car.

Transactions

Spending large sums of money in connection with elections, but not in connection with an effort to control the exercise of an officeholder's official duties, does not give rise to such quid pro quo corruption.

— from the majority opinion in *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission*

A jazzy piano line, played beneath
1920s chorus girls. Bells and bars
and cherries spinning to Rat Pack crooners.
The sound of money, money

in the abstract. All smiling faces,
harmless fun. No one
gets hurt. No one gets addicted
to twenty-dollar gifts
from little-old-ladies,
so why not up the dosage?

Do you want to hear
the siren song? Find two dimes
in a vending machine and rub them
beside your ear: radio static

so sharp you can't bear it. They beg
to get tossed with the cap,
if only you could hear your own thoughts.
The voice of metal fighting friction
is less Daisy Buchanan,

more Lina Lamont: harsh,
unrefined, but always in control.
It's a voice that gets what it wants,
because what speech is louder

than buying a politician
a brand-new seat?

Emergency Alert

Attention. Attention. The following (severe weather event) announcement applies to (locations). At (a time in the recent past), meteorologists/astronomers/passersby observed (ominous radar/cosmic convulsions). (Government agency) has declared/created a (specified level of alert). Residents are ~~ordered~~ advised to take shelter/avoid standing water/lock the door ~~and melt the key~~ and refrain from opening ~~your home to strangers~~ any windows. Attention. If you [*ed. note: emphasize*] plan on performing/enjoying (examples of routine human activities) indoors/outdoors, you [*ed. note: see previous ed. note*] ~~deserve what's coming~~ run the risk of death/serious injury/spatial disorientation/melting ~~and no one shall mourn you~~. To repeat. Attention. To repeat. The ~~end~~ storm is fast approaching.

Happy Hour

*This is the advice I'd give to the Athenians—
See our ambassadors are always drunk*

—Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

When sober and sharp-suited,
a politician enjoys
just one refreshment: homebrewed
constituent vitriol.
What can cloud the mind
in commerce committee hearings
more than sheer boredom? Sheer
potency imbibed from letter-writers

high on adrenaline
and talk radio rodeo clowns.
So drunk, so prone
to ranting, repeating
rehearsed talking points memos.
They chase the buzz
of guaranteed primary votes
and collapse.

Let's install in the rotunda
a barrel filled to the brim
with rotgut. Let them stumble
across the aisle, share stories
of the lunatics back home.
They'll smile on each other
and break into yet another
maudlin round: *Smile
on your brother,
everybody get together.*

Ballot Questions

Are you a legal U.S. resident?	Yes	No
Should that status be extended to your upstairs neighbors?	Yes	No
Should we subsidize a shopping mall if the state will seize the slums?	Yes	No
Should <i>12 Years a Slave</i> have won Best Picture?	Yes	No
If a tree were to fall in the woods, would you alert the Sierra Club?	Yes	No
Would you recognize the sound of such a tree's demise?	Yes	No
Are you familiar with the terms of the Public Affairs Act of 1975?	Yes	No
Does the sound implore you to throttle your upstairs neighbors?	Yes	No
Do you support public radio or the Communist Party?	Yes	No
Do you have the nerve to present your views to the public?	Yes	No
Would you recommend the sound to your local police?	Yes	No
Has your supervisor approved your vote in advance?	Yes	No
Do you hear his throaty, suggestive whisper?	Yes	No
Do you enjoy hurting others?	Yes	No
Do you certify that all answers provided are honest and correct?	Yes	No

Ex Falso Quodlibet

I will never take up serpents, but my liver
could handle the poison. Electricity flows
through conductors and insulators. Every morning

the sun rises, but refuses to move. Cities
are neither points nor planes. The map spread on my desk
is a carefully crafted fiction. Every vote

matters most when the election's been decided.
For all x , x is false, or there exists some y
such that not- x is true. You failed the final

and passed statistics. You aced psychology
but forgot to register. The property line
is marked with porous walls of solid rock. A waning moon

will soon be new. Jersey is a smokestack skyline
with no major cities. The mayor's been nabbed
for corrupting his campaign pledge. A or not- A

if and only if not A and not- A . A test
is not a drill. Take necessary precautions
against the invasion of the poverty line. Cities crumbled

when you left the world undisturbed. It's your fault
God left me here with you. It's not your fault I'm here.

Post-Election Day Survival Kit

- maps, color-coded for inconvenience
- wastebasket filled with bumper stickers, pins
- Wi-Fi connection for the airing of grievances
- half-empty Folgers and full-empty gin
- shredded copies of the *Washington Post*
- television off, blues music on
- fresh gin and coffee, bacon and toast
- a for-sale sign to decorate the lawn
- draft-dodger anthems from the Vietnam War
- passport, suitcase, accent tapes, keys
- AAA map to Lake Erie's shore
- plaster to puncture, stress-ball to squeeze
- head on a pillow, ice on the brow
- a calendar turned to four years from now

after Ander Monson

III

The World

Will It Play in Peoria?

The red carpet's been rolled out
from storage, the marquee
polished, announcing
the premiere of *King Lear*:
The 4-D Extravaganza.
The Ford commercials
and coming attractions
finally stop, the lights dim
and Shakespeare takes the screen.

The seats recline for Act I
as Lear takes his throne.
That's you, dear viewer,
reigning over England,
sitting on polish gold. But then
the daughters dress-down
their father and throw him
to the heath. You're beside him
wandering through the storm,
water streaming down your head,
over your eyes, past your lips,
through your windpipe.

Then: total blackout,
the gouging of Gloucester's eyes.
The shrieking chorus
behind you is not
a sound effect. The seats
dip forward, then push you
to the tile. As you
pick popcorn kernels
from your teeth, Tom O'Bedlam
convinces you
that Dover's cliffs
are not so deadly.

July 17

Georges Lemaître, physicist
and priest, proposed
that everything began

with an explosion. The present
is mere expansion, entropy
increasing across the cosmos,

bodies drifting further apart.
Our world was born of destruction.
Today, he was born

in 1894; he's faded since.
Now, MH17 falls
like glitter down the sky. If we

were on the ground,
witnessing, I would ask
if his chalkboard calculations

considered this bang, if
his eschatology foresaw
this falling from the air.

When we see the end
or the beginning from a distance,
we must decide, it seems,

if our conclusion is history
or projection.

A New Understanding of Arson

Insurance fraud, revenge, boredom
are active and intentional.
They leave tell-tale signs

any expert can read. The plans
are scorched into the surface. Our
modern, oblique age needs

a new arson, one that knows
the flame is the mind's reflection.
I threw a napkin, without

double-checking, to Uncle Bobby
(who, Jesus God, does not understand
democracy or the pass-rush) across

the table over the candle that held
our green paper-tablecloth
to the earth. Tell me

that the fire department, official
sponsors of American independence,
does not envision the tree-line

blending with bottle rockets,
a chance to save the country
from another conflagration. The hand,

clueless, follows a guilty mind,
an impulse of electricity.

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

We're winding through the narrow streets
of Boston, the trolley conductor shouting

every famous landmark like an auctioneer:
Governor Winthrop's grave, Thomas Yawkey's ballpark,

every piece of precious metal traced to Paul Revere.
Everybody unloads on Beacon Street

for *Cheers* (the original!), hoping against reason
that Cliff or Norm will welcome us strangers

into their fold beneath the street. We're still
humming the theme song when we pass a building

bearing Tip O'Neill's name against his will.
The guide, between complaints about the traffic, mentions

how one year the city, searching for a pretext
for a land seizure, held up garbage collection

and kicked twenty-thousand people to the curb –
even, get this, Leonard Nimoy.

Cash Payment

Whenever we see someone in front of us at an airline ticket counter who is paying with cash, we make the immediate assumption that here is someone who is poor.

—David Halbertstam, *The Next Century*

The ticket agent glares
at the creases
of my wallet. I pull,

bill by bill, the money
for my ticket.
She pecks at her keyboard,

impatient, wondering
why this asshole
isn't using plastic.

Transactions pass faster
than flight numbers
on a departures board

when abstracted. If I
could gain access
to this new, efficient

economy, I would.
My fingers stained
with green ink, my pockets

loaded with nickels, shout
“Here is someone
who is poor.” It carries

down the concourse, passing
the sushi bar
and the iPhone vendor,

a public announcement
to all flyers:
This could happen to you.

The Palace

after Tomas Tranströmer

Post-revolution, the palace sits
darkened, like a museum post-closing
where nothing and no one is enlightened.
The statues wait for rescue. The tapestries
shake in the draft, the history they tell
unraveling. Vandals spray-paint shutters,
windows, door-frames, but the doors themselves
stay padlocked. No one enters, afraid
that something else, something dark,
will leave its mark on all usurpers.

Radio Astronomy

So tempting, so righteous
at some local highway diner
to sink the aimless,
contrary chatter in the well
of a coffee mug. It's too early
for this nonsense, these people
who claim to understand the world,
this noise fit to fade away.

This must be the plight
of radio astronomers. What
does it take – bravado?
boredom? – to set aside
the telescopes and turn,
grant a hearing, to endless
cosmic static hiss?

Do they suppose
that even noise,
chaotic and incoherent,
hides a universe?

How far, how expansive –
the universe of Galileo and Herschel
has been shattered, stretched
beyond recognition. Think
of the galaxies and quasars,
the dark matter once
ignored, now accessible
to those who listen.

Neocolonialism

This land, these streets, tell me
what there is: emptiness, silence
save the thud of footballs striking
asphalt, shingles torn from shacks.
Call it *opportunity*.

These people, these children dressed
in yellow shirts, blue shorts,
christened "Ronaldo,"
"Neymar," "Fred,"
their traditional costume.
Call them *natives*.

Clear everything away. Make
room. Make room for hotels
and condos and beer stands
and cathedrals for our mission
and monuments inscribed
in English and French.
Call it *development*.

Make it a promise:
flakes of pyrite
resting in a sieve.
Call it *stimulus*.

Manifestation.
Call it *uprising*.

Cloud the posters
pitched at foreign cameras
in concessions, in tear gas.
Call it *pacification*.

Garden State

Gated communities litter
the state highway sprawl
with names befitting bottled water:

Deer Run, Cedar Grove.
Nature's bounty filtered
through corporate branding.

Somewhere, layers beneath
the asphalt and cement
and the painted lines

of parking lots, beneath
the flagpole and state seal,
wild roots strain through.

Hell No, We Won't Glow

In 1983, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) discovered unsafe concentrations of radioactive dirt in several homes in Montclair, sparking fear. In 1986, DEP announced plans to move the radioactive dirt from Montclair to Vernon, sparking protests.

I. Montclair, 1983

We have dignity,
distinctly human dignity.
Maybe it's buried
beneath pages and pages
of your executive summaries,
footnotes and appendices
explaining the toxicity
of radon decay. Shred them
and see our faces. We're not
a red tack on your map.
We're not storage space.
We're neighbors
having a barbecue
with kids and their cousins
playing with the hose.
This is our backyard.
Show some human decency.
Find somewhere unpeopled.

II. Vernon, 1986

We have dignity,
distinctly human dignity...

Pennsylvucky

The word of God, revealed
to radio evangelists, relayed
via translator stations

through every green valley
in coal country. The message
of hellfire, boldfaced, branded

on billboards that dwarf
my car as it passes
blast-out tunnels. This feeling

of soulless tedium: I'm lost
in the Alleghenies, alone
with my thoughts

and undisturbed creation.
I believe that, born-again
or born-once, we all

will wind up here, burnt
to the bone, identical
to coal dust.

When We Play with Model Trains

When we put together model trains, we reconstruct the past. Vivien Leigh lies enchanted, seduced, in Clark Gable's arms on posters plastered across the station and dry goods store. When model citizens watch, eyes frozen, the Technicolor scene, the burning of Atlanta, they construct the present: Europe once again gone mad, asking for more American boys.

When put the model trains away, we put away the past. What cannot be seen can be ignored, neglected. No one wants to watch china figurines pretend to be content. We know they're not content, we know we're not content, we're just waiting for the breaks, for the wheels to lock in place.

Final Frame

Beneath the hollow rattle of a 7-10 split
we grumble over warm Bud Light. It'll be dark soon,

the arcade lights and neon novelty signs
unplugged. The writing is on the door.

The bank has got a wrecking ball
and a surveyor from Brooklyn who couldn't

buy a strike but can haggle twenty lanes
for the words "economic redevelopment."

We'll slam down our pocket change
for one last Thursday night special,

zip our favorite balls up tight, and donate
our shoes to the Sally Ann. The wall paint peels,

the cinders are coming. For now, we save
our stoic mourning for the gutterballs

and 299s, and observe unspoken etiquette:
sit your ass down on your neighbor's turn to throw,

and when your fourteen-pounder clears the rack,
a simple high-five will suffice.

Washington Metro

No one, I'm surprised to see,
reads the *Post* on the Metro.
I'm alone, a tourist, hands
growing ink-stained. No senator
or Smithsonian tour guide
scans the minutes of last night's
budget showdown. Their one hand
on the overhead rail, the other
wrapped on coffee cardboard.

The magnetic tape malfunctions
at the Dupont Circle exit.
The turnstile sits rigid, cold
as an aluminum bat
across my waist. Some hipster
high on paint fumes or acid,
takes pity, seeing some tourist
stuck between daylight and the cave.
"Are you lost?" he asks. "Parlez-vous
French?" Ignore him, hoping
he'll hallucinate someone else.

No attendant materializes
to free me. If the locals
can steal from the margins, then
why can't I jump the turnstile?
I swing past the bars and climb
a stairwell of undefined slope,
shoulder-checking all the way,
seventy stairs at least. I step
into the low buzz of traffic
that heralds my escape. A taxi
cuts off two cars just short
of the light, and I think,
"More power to him."