

Slow Poetry in America

Dale Smith

BOMB

In a dream I am old, walking through a small co-op grocery store before its makeover into an upscale food boutique. I see a young woman pushing a cart with two children. I approach and say their names, anticipating smiles. And then I look again. This is not my family, just an image projected from long ago. I am old, my children grown, my wife old, too. The grocery store erodes under broken glass—the drag of time marks it with decay. The sun whitens the surface of the parking lot.

When I wake up I'm in bed with my family on a spring morning. The children run naked, playing monsters. They dress in shorts and t-shirts to play outside. By the window I see how they pass through patches of shade in sinewy release. Their bodies move between the possum haw and plumbago, arms winding in circles above their heads. The world will end, or it ended, or it won't. There will be loss and acquisition. A narrative of world-endings violates my sense of the every day, the ordinary. We grow old, lose ourselves, discovering new capacities in our lives: the child, the spouse, the parent. What do they mean, those many names? What am I in a sequence of events, rearranged by the ongoing drift of memory and narrative, the daily utterances of experience? Are there politics of self-inquiry where I stand apart to judge myself in myriad arrays of self-location?

My old man future self looks back at me down a long corridor. At the other end, Slow Poetry in America watches me play in a yard near my mother's garden. The phone rings. The children run. A persistent memory shaped and reshaped in the play of the present streams images from far away. The boy loafs under a ligustrum hedge, the afternoon sun bright on green leaves. He's alone, listening for the music of a snow cone truck.

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Many times I pretend I'm someone I'm not—a cowboy, a superhero. I run off across the yard into a narrow street, arms reaching forward as if to fly. The location of my neighborhood exerts itself through forms of playful dallying, say, in the hot summer. Like many of my generation, thought races to catch up with enthusiasm; emotional awareness glimpsed in crises unfolding.

Once, Donny Green frightened me when he told me the world would end in a firestorm. Bombs on missiles were aimed at us from Russia. The world was rigged for destruction. The memory remains distant. It's difficult to see Donny's eyes, his blond hair and lanky form. His German mother survived the Second War by marrying a US soldier. Her English came to my ears with extraordinary weight, entering my body with dense shapes that dislodged in me a more familiar exchange of words. I was shy to speak with this jolly woman, her cigarettes releasing thin trails of smoke into the air around me. I glimpsed her belly when she reclined on the sofa in her living room.

Back in the driveway, the sun burned through branches of a plum tree above a chain-link fence. The world could evaporate. The world could dissolve under the heat and pressure of vast bombs. I imagined the falling flames, but could not comprehend the totality of such devastation. By contrast to the Flood, there was no covenant between humankind and God to forestall the world inferno. The boy's fright perhaps played in fantastic apprehensions of what death brings, for it was an individual consumption of information, and nothing more, to carry out his haunting.

Donny's mom's German voice carried across the street.

He said men had hair on their penis.

On their penis, I said, incredulous.

On, he said.

Perhaps he got the preposition wrong because of his German mother's English. I thought he must have meant "around."

I hoped Donny was wrong about nuclear bombs and infernos and the end of the world. He ran home, his feet hitting smooth pavement. Sycamore pods lay in the grass and on the concrete drive. I crushed one with my sneakers, stooped to lift it, pulling apart the tiny seedlings, and watched as they sailed off into the wind. I took bark from the tree and crunched the brittle roughness in my hands while waiting to chase the music of the snow cone truck.

My mother carried clothes to the line. I went to her. I asked if bombs would blow up the world.

She said, no. But, I said, there are bombs. Yes, she said, nuclear bombs.

I don't remember what else she said. Or what I felt or said or did. How do you reconcile certain facts? The impact provided a blinding moment of violence, but the ashy fallout promised an afterlife of pain.

When that boy looks forward through time to me now, I think of nothing to say to him. He goes back to the sycamore by himself. He's not looking for his mother. Not listening for the snow-cone truck. Donny Green's mother's voice fills a street called Slow Poetry in America.

KOLKATA

My grandfather, Martin Luther, leaned against his El Camino, testing the carburetor. The flat surfaces of the outskirt loam received horizontal pale pressures of sunlight. He played thirties-era jazz: Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway. I admired his blue jump suit and Justin boots.

Slow Poetry in America arrived as cold relief, bottled like Coca-Cola, sweet and icy on my throat. Slow Poetry in America, I think of you so often, and how it was then in that great stretch of western banality. Some might call it suburban and bourgeois, but you could see through every instance, every gesture, how each muscle and nerve had grown out of the humid soil and green density of time. Fort Worth, less so than Dallas, adhered above the plains and river basins as a shiny abstraction. It had a zoo and art museums, strip malls, and taverns. Each year a parade led to the city's stockyards in a gesture of fealty toward the past. Cowboys and cattle drives figured large in my imagination, even as I absorbed urban conveniences of air conditioning and automobiles. The past was manufactured to sustain my ease, to put out of reach any special knowledge that might temporarily and self-consciously halt the modernization of the plains. But to stop that progress would have meant to fade into insubstantiality as the rest of the nation binged on Texas crude.





In the evening, my grandfather often played his recordings of jazz. He stretched out on a Lay-Z-Boy recliner to read *National Geographic*. Once in a small tin box I found photos he had taken while stationed in India during The War. The years of his service occupied family lore, and even as a child I understood that he had flown planes from what is now Bangladesh over some of the highest mountains in the world. I knew he did not like the test, and that it was dangerous, but he carried cargo over the Himalayas throughout most of the war. More than 4,000 pilots, many smashing into darkness at extraordinary altitudes, were stationed there. But what I recall that day—I must have been seven, perhaps eight—was the discovery of the textures of his experience. Even then I felt that the images I found meant more to me than to him. With a kind of embarrassment, he observed how I was perhaps too young to be looking at such things. He explained how the funerary pyres occupied space on city blocks and that the flames in the photos were of the deceased.



My eyes wandered through the images, in awe of something I could not quite pin down. Human frailty sounds so cliché, and yet here were bodies laid out on the side of streets for final rituals. I think of my own people—the brevity of our lives and the rituals of preservation and burial. A few generations exchange their values and brief possessions even as, in an instant, centuries seem to pass. Who are those people on a street in Kolkata, their trials long absorbed into vast anonymity? I didn't care as a child who they were, actually. I found interesting *what* they were, however, and tried reading into the significance of their figurative placement for me in the tin box my grandfather had brought home from a world far away. Certain textures of experience seize the imagination.

It must have been around this time that Donny Green tested my stamina by announcing the apocalypse of nuclear war. I wonder if I had the capacity then to reflect on what it meant? Certainly, at some level, I understood how life had been seized in advance by regimes of power that included nothing of my experience. I wonder now what possessed my grandfather to take those images from the pitiful figures who gripped the asphalt and dust as the features of their loved ones disappeared from them forever. What were these instances to him and how did they organize meaning in his submission to a foreign culture—or to his own? The sudden and matter-of-fact manifestation of the dead body, perhaps, seized his attention as it claimed mine, years later. I'm quite sure, in fact, that he must have provided money in exchange for the pictures of these dead. I gazed at the corpse of an infant. Because I was at an impressionable age, and because I am also an impressionable person, my grandfather's encounter, however mediated, fused in me with something I still hesitate to name. I see

Donny Green under the mulberry trees in our yard. We ride our bikes through the shaded portion of the driveway on a summer day in the nineteen seventies. Locusts scream across the yard. Sycamore branches form a canopy. We race around.

A sense of horror often accompanies moments of ease. Even now, motivated by these black and white pictures, I pursue some knowledge that refuses delivery. I don't possess an easy sense of things. The edges creep in. I see the naked child in the doorway. In the shadows, he appears to be about my mother's age at the time, a toddler. Perhaps my grandfather took this picture because of some homesick sense of relation between the child and his daughter. I wonder about that young pilot still, and his movement from the fields into the air, across an ocean and into a war that compelled him by naïve relation. An organization of character in ratio to vast ideological drives haunts the familial lore—the old force of the Bible and bumpkin pastures replaced with some new but equally forceful drive. I continued for many years to seek out that tin box. When I would visit, I traced through the images to try and see myself through them, and imagine things about the world.



ALBATROSS

In Chris Jordan's photographs baby albatross bellies are filled with plastic trash. Cameras document their distorted figures—making signatures of a moment in duress. How might we “process” such figurative associations of cheap industrial detritus bound within the organic tissue of expired creatures? They feed on bright doodads and shards, colorful pieces of discarded parts: clear syringe; worn balloon fragments; shampoo and detergent bottle tops; blue packing straw; medicine dropper; green, red, and yellow, translucent Bic lighters; aqua-colored Styrofoam pieces; buttons; a little bear; soda tops; engine oil container lids. A detached sacrum rises out of decayed feathers and the patterns of modernity accumulate in the rot on black pebbles, a thin albatross bill extending eyeless gaze toward the photographer's foot. These entrails make weird auguries: the refuse of industrial and post-industrial forms spiral outward toward a still too-slow-to-learn wilderness of exposed beings. Witness the accumulated residues of life-as-usual, unconscious, earnest in its need; examine the foreclosed judgments determined by arrangements of parti-colored fragments that choke the host. The optimistic urge to embrace modernity collapses in the far, unseen reaches of a world unused to such forward-looking endeavors. The decayed feathers and rotted portions of flesh reveal nothing but a mortality belonging to us, too.

Friends arrive. We drink wine. I wonder about us in a merriment that skims the surface of some deeper experience. The faces in the scrapbooks of my family—what will they hope to find to redeem the albatross exhaustion? The moments when we learn that our habits produce suffering pass rapidly. And yet, it's like discovering nuclear bombs: the knowledge integrates into associations we make with the world. Our experience bloats with the random accumulations of particles we are fed. Icebergs melt; islands shrink; tsunamis suck bodies into the deep. We know this. And move on. And store the knowledge. And forget. And are reminded. And upon our deaths, when our torsos are exposed, the auguries of this knowledge present what we knew, and what the birds told us, on the pebbles, decaying with their firm particles next to the lumbar bones and skull fragments. No one in the 1930s would have considered this, not until Catastrophe hit. Hopefulness made a strict ideology of discipline, attention, and mindless drive to move outward in a world where there was an out. What do the albatross think? Their ancient patterns continue without thought to the accumulating plastic in their bellies. In Jordan's photos there are maps of a future and a present. I hear Donny Green's voice and his taunting about dick hair. I hear my grandfather's worried voice as I view the pictures of bodies in India. I look and I watch with great wonder. We are so small next to things erupting around us. I stare into these dead things, and dream of the life still there.

