

Attractions



prose poems by

John Allman

Attractions

for Jay Meek and Peter Johnson

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Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the magazines in which some of these poems were first published, though the poems may have been cast in a different format.

2River: “Grackles,” “Spare Parts,” “Spraying the Chickens”

The Innisfree Poetry Journal: “Attractions,” “Black Crows, Mints, Gum, Lucky Strikes,” “Crows,” “Mud,” “The Golden Fleece”

The Long Island Review: “Pebbles”

Pivot: “Evergreens”

Poetry Northwest: “The Flow”

Sentence: “Bones,” “Stars”

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Attractions

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You've got to include mosses and ferns. The green dampness. The star anise. The child gathering an armful of black-eyed susans like suns unpeeling themselves. Think of teen-agers taking Ecstasy in the club on 46th ST, how the excluded girl's make-up streaks her face outside in the rain. Times also get tough (*time* is easy) for the amoeba, there's famine, no bacteria to eat. One amoeba protrudes to snag another. They ripple into each other. Even Einstein was confused in love. He wanted both his cousin—the mother—and her daughter (such lace around the throat!). Just think of him in Zurich, in a first-class compartment, holding a pungent, skinned orange in his hand, his reflection in the window of a train on the next track pulling away from the station. He doesn't know who is standing still, who is moving. Who first woke to the scent of the other.

Black Crows, Mints, Gum, Lucky Strikes

On the Northway

I expect towns like Famine and Burnt Hills just before Saratoga; the cruise control jerking the Buick forward, pacing the roofing truck blowing a dirty snow of asphalt bits, old tiles piled in back. I flinch when grains strike the windshield, my attention still thin in the gravities of North, the poems read at Clarkson U. Words swirling into the eye like soot. Like boyhood. The more I rub, the worse it gets. Streaked vision. A haggard grin. My father clutching the paper bag filled with Black Crows, mints, gum, Lucky Strikes. In his Memorial Hospital in the middle of Welfare Island, he tilts, and tankers leak past on the East River, the Queensboro Bridge sags a dowager's black lace. Words seep outward from a mildewed wall. His cane grabs an inch of floor and I follow in his wake, and he sways, as if still behind the wheel of his cement truck: redi-mix of broken youth, too much grit—like that 19th-Century stuff dug up on the far end of the island; old City Hospital a tumble of gray stones where he was first bedded, doves flown from his vacant mouth: his right hand forever asleep within mine; the driver of the roofing truck all smiles, waving me past.

Bones

Zagreb, Croatia

This square with its banks of flowers and underground passage to the urine tunnels of pan-handlers and dope-needlers, this *trg* that overflowed with well-dressed patrons in 1927, when a king ruled, this is the place we walk through, nodding at the slit-eyed policeman not yet aware what he will do if elections are nullified next month, his truncheon raised in the street. We amble past old men on benches along a park. They lean against each other, squabbling about Belgrade, this minute being rubble by NATO. They are unaware that 30 miles north in the caves of Krapina, Neanderthal bones show evidence of benign tumors, the surgical amputation of a hand, some bones bent by osteoarthritis, a people who arose stiff in the dawn. One skull showing a fracture in the occipital bone where a blunt instrument struck it in the cave where no one could buy an ice cream from a stand and lick his way through the temporary sweetness of the evening, chocolate smear on his lips.

Crows

Today, she said, *the crows look like Hasidim*, and I saw them in the maple, wearing black hats, their long curls like scrolls of text coming loose from their heads. One of them flew to a topmost branch and swayed on the tips of his feet. Another tilted his head and made a chuckling noise in the voice of a robin. She looked out and said, *There's no sense in misery, when juncos share this bounty with cardinals*—the feeder atop its long pole wobbling above the husks of seeds, a mild spongy earth. I saw laborers pushing wheelbarrows, dark bandanas around their necks, sweat trickling down their forearms. A Bishop blessed them from his balcony and red buds fell upon his garments. I saw a hawk grooming himself under his wing in the leafless catalpa tree, the sun gleaming on his beak, his nostril-hole a permanent wound. Then everyone flew off at once. *That's the way it is*, she said later, her nightgown open, breasts full in the moonlight. I saw a man with chapped lips at her nipples and I burned, oh, I burned.

Drums

Uptown, across the river, police are gathering for the black youth march. Uptown: barricade pens, cattle chutes, the shimmer of helmets. Uptown, there is too much debt. But in Brooklyn, dreadlocked and tall, he bends over a shimmering steel skin doing Joo-VAY and the pings of Trinidad shimmer down Nostrand Avenue. Corn soup, roti, sorrel-scented beer, lost jobs, lost wives, pursuit and odor of a perfect pitch. Take this to a village on the Black Sea, take this to Golcuk's earthquake, take this to the anchovy casserole lying in the rubble, take this to the ferry from Istanbul arriving to take families away, take this to the open fissures of a land. Take tamboo bamboo, biscuit tins, bottles, scrap-iron-struck triangles vibrating prayer from Brooklyn and be joy.

Evergreens

Whoever planted these Douglas firs must have known that sixty feet of darkness standing upright under a full moon would gather into itself more than reflection or paleness of age; that so many branches would never splinter to the weight of chickadees, nuthatches, cardinals. And must have known these flung arms would silhouette the space of Orion, unspeakable distances traveled by light would open in our blood like a fever, and I'd stand here in the hollow of a single moment running my finger along the smooth edge of being.

Grackles

Autumn in the biome. Our yard busy with grackles landing around the feeder, their iridescent hoods a stylish variation that clerics strive for, eyes bright, insane, their *crawk* a throat made raw with singing notes too high. They're stabbing yellow zoysia grass, hopping mad, glaring at chipmunks who have scampered under the drooping leaves of hosta lilies. A cardinal in the umbra of dried hydrangea blossoms, his redness the tongue naked to the air, loosened from its proper place in the heat of the mouth. A wet fear works its way among chickadees, titmice and nuthatches, the speckled lone woodpecker clinging to the edge of the feeder. They rise in a black cloud, the grackles, they're done, they break up like flak, bit by bit and all around they fill the dusk with thin lament, and squirrels rush for cover.

Grain Dust

North Dakota

Adjusting Jay's binoculars: blotched sugar beets bouncing out of trucks, squashed like squirrels back home; robins lacking an orange vest, stripped to basic black, piercing a stingy grass, veering among the reeds in Kelly's Slough, half-risen grebes dragging lobate toes. Flatness. Escape. A row of shelterbelt trees fingering the wind. We pass huge fields of sunflowers, their faces drained of oil; road dust rising from phantom bison, air dry as the syllables of taciturn men in coffee shops, towns with one barber shop, a Bible reading-room. Jay steers his dented Dodge and waves at half-boarded buildings last year's stranded motorists tried to reach, leaving their ice-clogged cars, their lips blue. We enter a grain elevator, high walls a combustible dust once slid down from a farmer's chute. Blown. Bankrupt. This land like a Lakota shield spilling light, the Red River swollen each spring; the gnarled branches swinging around, tumbling home.

Ice

In this frozen dawn, the garage door iced shut, electric switches stuttering above the rafters like a boy just risen from the cold sea. When the gray ice calved off our gables, we staggered from a dream the ceiling fell. What is so near, so unbroken as the clouds of grayness in our speech? Our friend in White Plains said while dying, *It's too bad*. Ah, the brown spots on his arms, the shanks of his thighs that I stroked like firewood. I thought he said, *It's stupid*. And now I can hold my hand against the sun, look at the x-ray bones of my fingers, dream of wolves racing on the tundra, and days later crunch the cindery edge of bleeding ice. A dampness creeping upwards into my knees, a slow porous philosophy taking privilege and lightness from my step. I'm slipping on three long weeks of ice! Feet kicked out from under me, mid-air, hovering shyly on my side like a bulky angel clapping extended legs, mimicking Nureyev, Nijinsky in this split second aloft for as long as it takes my dog to believe I'm flying!

Le Chant d'Amour

After the painting by Edward Burne-Jones

It's the sheep meadow in Central Park. She's at a little portable organ and her blind daughter is squeezing a toy concertina. The boy friend, lying on his side in stocking feet, cyclist's spandex tights, looks bored, but that's nothing new. *It's sadness*, he says. *You always mistake it for lack of interest.* She sings, ignoring him, the battery-driven tones humming above the noise of traffic, her hair loose in the acrid zephyr of the breeze, hazel eyes empty, narcotized. Something too painful to surface. She's almost not here at all. The child, who last year had been seeing colors, laughs now at her squeeze box, the wreath of flowers slipping off her head, and she gropes toward her mother's playing. Passers-by walk around them, give them a wide berth, where they seem homeless on their blanket, a Styrofoam container empty of fries, the mother's singing making the silence between her and the lover obvious.

Each spring he awakens at her side. She fingers the text of her music, plays with one hand—her child lounging in the sun, wearing dark glasses, as if she'd seen the Grail. But he's got the grayness of cheek, the blistered touch of the forbidden. He's sad because longing repeats itself in her monotonous music, her nasal singing, and no matter how often he comes back from cities or describes the unexpected verdure of mountains, or at a shore, the murals in a beach chateau, her eyes are the empty glass of drained goblets and her child asks to feel the curve of his face, the healed ridge of his broken nose. As if each time he is at first unrecognized, then disappointing when he is.

Mud

Kurdish Camp

Howling in the mud of Uludere, six years old, eyes squeezed shut, woolen coat spattered, its one toggle twisted like a piece of bone. Her undergarment shows beneath, its floral patterns unfurling toward the ground, where the wind swirls and grabs like a demented aunt. Stains on her coat splashed by treads of armored vehicles, a shoe visible only as a buckle, a footprint filled with rain. All this whiteness behind her. Sunlight glancing off lakes, a Presidential smile imperfectly faxed. Her left arm withdraws into a sleeve so invaded by wetness its fibers clump and squinge as they never do on sheep or goats. My fingers comb through short tangles in her hair. Her head pulled this way and that. Chin dimpled by the weight of a lower lip, the licorice darkness above. She screams. And screams.

Pebbles

The transparent vase has fallen, shattered its neck and flower-etched sides, flung out our pebbles from Itasca, from icy water scooped where the Mississippi begins, where Schoolcraft made his name, Minnesota's roundness feeding into turbulence. A brittle something has split open, its white nougat center a small nebula swelling toward outer darkness. Thinking of Vicksburg, I heft blue-gray embedded with marble or bone, clash in my hand a glacial debris, tiny mineral souls that wash into wild rice marshes. The little etched vase's shivered lengths of milky flowers so thin they cut like syllables of low-down Biloxi singers with braided hair, knocking against barges, plunking holes in oil slick.

Spare Parts

They must be good for something, like Homer's ready-cut hexameters, his ox-eyes and winey tide. There were scabs on Achilles' knee that you never heard about, Hamlet's stutter, Ophelia's infected toe. What if when Emma Bovary died, her jaw slack, what oozed out was *servitude*, *sash*, *succor*? All the wrong words you'd ever hear at the post office in Rouen. And the poet thinking of the tyrant's cockroach mustache, what if he picked a flea from Natalia's pudendum and said, *grifter*, *gasp*, *Garibaldi*? Always somewhere a crunch of tank treads. Why not *strato-cumulus*? Ambling across the *noir* screen, a *boulevardier* suddenly modern: *Bite me!* Try *child's rictus*, *a joy pineal*, the foot that Karloff dragged in *The Tower of London*.

Species

Across the bay off Mount Desert Island, or at Cross Island, or in Blue Hill Bay, anywhere at all beyond dehydration, beyond cholera, beyond mountains, oxygen thinning, slipping through the gills of caged salmon. Song flat as up-staring flounder. Grouper, snapper, tuna, shark, swordfish, penaeid shrimp, stone crab, blue crab, golden crab, oyster, calico scallop, clam. There's WhaleNet and the size of tilapia. Indian carp and milk fish. The oldest men at Cedar Key sitting on a sea-log bench, that twinkle in their eyes. Listen to their breathing. Shout your name.

Spraying the Chickens

It wasn't necessary back when the hen kept her chicks close and they pecked at her fecal droppings and they swallowed just the right kind of mother love, a touch of illness, a taste of their own blood, and they trembled in sleep. Those days you could eat them without a care. Maybe even find a dark spot near the pimply shoulder, a piece of quill, the memory of a certain kind of flapping. The farmer's wife wiped her hands on her apron after she put the naked thing in the oven and she wiped the dirt off potatoes and she cut the bread, and you were so happy and hungry you wanted to kiss her hands that kept layer upon layer of so much world intact. And if something of that got into your mouth, it was proof against the evil to come, the corruption of bodies. The cold touch of strangers.

Stars

Rijeka, Croatia, Yugoslavia

We feel foreign and poor, tiny bars of soap, hose shower, a handle coming off the bathroom door, soft gray outline of Krk, your father's island, humped beyond the shipping's smokestacks, masts, aerials, the Jadrolinija ferry's big red star. From the window I'm snapping photos of municipal buildings, arranging shadows in façades, smog swirling from Fiats made in Poland. It's a regular city, people rushing to work, shops opening at 8 a.m., on the wall of a building the same scarlet *fuck you* from the walls of the D train in the Bronx, on every wall from Berlin to Belgrade. At breakfast, there's a family curve in the bridge of the nose of the girl pouring sludgy *kafa*, this girl who resembles our daughter. I think of the woman in black approaching us at Rijeka Station, renting rooms, her face lined with the broken lace of doilies, antimacassars. Her voice a darkened parlor. Outside, I snap the entryways of apartment houses, street signs, moving uphill toward the Austro-Hungarian governor's palace, its open-armed rooftop crucifix since 1948 a star. We're stopped by a young soldier, arms crossed, scowling. I say good morning, *dobro jutro*, and we move off. He follows. Now he's saluting men with stars on their caps. A breeze blowing up the coast from Dubrovnik the soot of war. We wait to be arrested. Don't know what we're doing wrong.

The Bridge of Sighs

Venice

He sent them this way, the Doge, cupping his chin, waving them toward this darkness already a prison; where shackles hung, an outlined empty space voluble as the one covered by black cloth among portraits of the Doges: *This is the place of Marin Faliero, beheaded for his crimes.* This bridge so baroque seen from Ponte della Paglia, we imagined the interior of cake. The Moor swinging his hammer into rust on the bell of the Clock Tower, all that sound outside, the Campanile's golden angel severe in such resonance he moved the Adriatic back. Prisoners traipsed up dank stairs from below the water line.

You back against the steel-braced door, unable to breathe. You know them, the spirits sidling along the broken mortar, hunched and chained in Quonset stone cylinders, dragged here from Dalmatia, who fought to save their trees bundled under water to raise this city. Your people led down the gangway onto the Riva degli Schiavoni; someone who threw rocks from the cliffs of Omišalj, the moles on his back identical to your father's, the blue of your eyes a blueness along his cold lips, your lungs burning with claustrophobic fire, cords straining in your neck. From these stone walls the odor and exhalations of a people, their children hundreds of years later Thomas Mann said wore a flutter of rags.

The Flow

1992

There are days he has no stomach for it: a dry wind from Sarajevo, odors of torched hospitals, niter that pungency of vowels wafting across the river. His time nothing but these furrows. The caved-in cistern, the collapse of light, the lifted stones that were once a home. It can't be stopped. Islands scattered along its length, between its banks, added to by its motion. Somewhere cottonwoods blow tufted seeds toward the mainland, ospreys nest in a tangle of uprooted trees. Down there, where the field ends, an embankment, a flood carrying silt up over the verge, bringing richness from the depth.

He thinks a lack of hardness in the ivy listening up a wall. Peepers singing in wet woods.

The Fountain

It could be that its metal once dissolved in the flow from the hills, from the foundries, the glass blowers, the harness makers. A hundred years later, hippies in the woods threw things in the stream that became part of it. An attitude. Or it was the lightning that struck the molded iron framework the water leaps within (in the beach town, people are getting shocks in outdoor showers). One drink and it drives fever and chills out of two boys with malaria.

An old woman lawyer with leftist sympathies fills an eye-dropper and drips it on the DNA sample from her client already 17 years in prison for rape. He's still guilty, but he stops smoking and the missing lobe of his left lung reappears, pink and spongy.

Someone brings a beaker of it to Newark and pours it into the sidewalk cracks among the brick buildings of public housing. The Secretary of HUD develops a swollen prostate and can't pee. The mayor is found weeping tears of vinegar on the porch of his abandoned home.

The Golden Fleece

Pula, Croatia

A triumphal arch, an ancient church, but long before that, Medea prayed all night here, thinking the sunset a fleece. Her brother's blood smeared across the sky. His men in pursuit. These meat patties we're eating at a sidewalk café taste of remorse. Betrayed polis. But no one is chasing us, no one afraid to turn back, a crane swinging out over the blue harbor to hook onto a cargo of refrigerators from Slovenia. Opposite us the clerk in the Wechsel window yelling at an Asian man who stumbles through English like a thicket. That's what happened to Medea's pursuers—turning on strangers, where they were strangers themselves. The vengeful twitch Dante felt in his cheek when he walked through here—expelled from his city—now only the last reverberation of a water truck sprinkling cobbled streets.

The Singer

He's dancing in the street, chanting his poems, waving a claw hammer, the towel wrapped around him like a prayer shawl. The police are on their way. All the neighbors think about is how many bags of marijuana are in his basement room, how he studied the ancient secrets in Safad, while the great tenors sang in Berlin for taxes. His poems sound like a flute above the traffic, causing injuries to passers-by in heart, lungs, liver, intestines. An opinion falls out of a sergeant's brain. The police are almost here. Young Netyana sits on a stoop and weeps for him, her beloved, the stone beneath her thighs ancient as Pangaea, the origin of the world. In his poems, volcanic heat, water, ice. His blunt hammer flattens the air and the city is deformed. The police are dizzy and have lost their way. Inside the car driving past is a tether holding a child in place. Inside the tether is the fiber from which he weaves the poem. Inside the fiber are the 2,000 memories of the first dawn.

Tomatoes

As if there weren't some little piece of unradiated something still floating around just behind the esophagus that keeps swallowing tasteless vegetables from an aluminum tray. His friend the other side of a plastic curtain, speaking through the flap, his nicotine breath carrying fire. The blinking red eye in the hallway signaling someone else going down. Something in the air—if you can call it air—like the Caribbean, a bluish-green he looks through. It's here, seems to be here. The face mask he spat on to prevent fogging now clear as he looks at intricacies like coral that injure a swimmer, looking into himself at the slow gulping jaws of someone so long under he might just as well scrape deeper into a sandy bottom and hide there. Lungs hissing beneath tons of sunlight. He's only checking it out. He's going to pop up gasping, his daughters there in the shade under the sea-grapes, sting of water in his eyes. Sudden noise of an outboard motor and lens of blazing sun all the evidence he needs that he's in the resort bay, a cold current beneath him, the rattling of tubes and wires a fisherman's net slapping against the boat. He can wade out of this and buy t-shirts in the equipment store, the ones with an embossed map showing just where he is, sheltered from the path of cruise ships, the mountains behind him terraced into small farms. A man up there gathering early tomatoes. A wife in hospital whites patting his face dry.

White Ruff Collars

The *Santa Maria* taking froth along her wormy bow, her swaying fore and aft castles, a pennant streaming like Isabella's sleeves, the tufts of hair above his ears, his swollen eyelids curved and shadowy as the small breasts of Indian women. I mean Cuba not Cipangu or Cathay. *This western half of the world is like the half of a very round pear, having a raised projection for a stalk, or like a... nipple on a round ball.* Because it comes down to the beauty of white ruff collars the six Spaniards (delete the Genoan and make it five) wear like bleached starfish, their lacy points true admonitions to bone arrowheads. I mean bows, satin bows in Renaissance hats, turned-up brims, the peeled look of men's legs between garters and boots, their utter blankness, the little white *Inri* pinned to the vertical beam of a processional crucifix carried by the monk at the rear, sailors tinkling falcons' bells.

Open sewage, cracked syntax, cholera, the Orinoco thrashing like Charybdis, lice implicit in shades of purple beneath a parrot's wing. *There are great indications of this being the terrestrial paradise.* I mean myself, waking in Katonah to the odor of blood, the dogwood bright with dirty linen bloom. Vines hung from mangrove trees like elongated tears, bald Arawaks pearl-fishing off Margarita, and the shackles on his scuffed ankles, his red-rimmed eyes, Bobadilla bringing him home in chains. I mean thin brown arms of girls bought like farms for a hundred castellanos. The cacique Guacanagari with his men in ceremonial approach, their arms lifted like sleepwalkers. La Navidad's fort rising in the moonlight as quickly as a tin shed from Sears.

End Matter

John Allman has recently completed his seventh poetry collection, *Lowcountry*, part of which is currently featured as an electronic chapbook in Mudlark. The entire *Lowcountry* collection will be published by New Directions in the fall of 2007. His other books of poetry include *Loew's Triboro* (2004), *Curve Away from Stillness* (1989), *Scenarios for a Mixed Landscape* (1986), and *Clio's Children* (1985), all from New Directions; *Inhabited World: New & Selected Poems 1970-1995* (The Wallace Stevens Society Press, 1995); and *Walking Four Ways in the Wind* (Princeton, 1979).

Christina Carroll holds a B.A. in Studio Art/Design and Art History from Connecticut College, where she was introduced to monotype printmaking at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Museum School in Boston. Carroll's upbringing in California's rustic canyons invited her to look closely at nature's behavior and rhythms. In a sometimes chaotic world, logic and peace might be found by looking closely and openly at things. Carroll's creative expression in response to nature closely presented itself in both image and words, strengthening an intuition that art, and looking closely, was her intense interest. The monotype process triggered a delightful synthesis of the Carroll's intrinsic qualities and temperament.

Since 1996, **2River** has been a site of poetry, art, and theory, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the *2River Chapbook Series*, and, more recently, podcasting from Muddy Bank, the *2River Blog*. All publications appear first online and afterwards in print. Interested contributors can read the submission guidelines at www.2River.org/office/submit.

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