

# WHERE WE SAW THEM LAST

POEMS BY CHARLES FREELAND



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## Coda

Someone told me the stars are drunk,  
The distance between them so pointless  
As to make them behave erratically.  
But this is a mistake, an idea  
That assumes empty space is empty.

Once, I was on a boat, and the ocean  
Was an ocean of noise,  
A place where one yearns for the bottle.  
The squid and the albatross eyed me.  
Their patience turned day into night.

I have some books. Paperbacks mostly.  
They try to teach me lessons.  
Sometimes I catch from them a silence  
Too stubborn to overcome.  
Sometimes I get depressed and drink too much.

Tonight, the wine is made of light  
And a seed without taste or purpose.  
A seed with nothing in it. The wine  
Has a name that I forget, though I know  
It means starvation in another language.

There is no label, just the bottle  
And a cork the color of a pleasant evening.  
I pour the wine into a bowl made of clay,  
A bowl I found when looking for bowls.  
The wine has no color and so is colored

By the clay. It tastes like the things  
I say concerning happenstance and love.  
Soon my mouth knows every detail





In a liquid neither sweet nor unpleasant.  
And I grow tired of admitting guilt,

Of repeating myself shamelessly,  
But the wine gives me a kind of language  
I know I shouldn't waste. Words  
For the way an empty bottle falls asleep.  
Words that mean we need more words.





# Aubade

*for Carly*

1.

Our first night together  
You were afraid of morning.  
That's only natural.  
Light changes everything.  
We went to the pool hall  
And spoke about the past.  
Yours was like a book,  
Full of surprise endings.  
Look at the moon, you said,  
Outside where we shivered.  
The moon changed colors.  
It followed us around.

2.

This morning, you dress  
For work and I think you  
Magnificent, as is my habit.  
Tristan and Isolt sang an aubade  
Because morning did not  
Belong to them. We're rich.  
The moon is ours to keep,  
Even when half-carved, dim,  
Besieged by morning light.  
This song fears nothing.  
We own both moon and sun.





# Concerning Life on the Island

It is time again for the crustaceans. The crabs in particular  
Who rise from the ocean as if they were invited.  
The religion of the crabs is Presbyterian, their motives  
Unknown, their methods crude. A woman scolds her child  
For naming the crabs, for accepting them into the family.  
The child imagines a world where the sun tastes  
Something like fish. The woman thinks the crabs' pincers  
Are decoys, their bodies an exercise in obscenity.  
The poetry of the crabs is the heroic couplet. A man  
Invents local history. He imagines linguists, fishermen, and kings.  
The crabs help themselves to the meat in his freezer.  
They make themselves beautiful. The eyes of the crabs  
Are historical monuments, their philosophy a denial of light.





# Argentina

A woman gets perfume in her eyes and is blinded  
Momentarily, a victim of her own enchantment.  
She strokes the leaves of the hibiscus on the table beside her,

Waits for the darkness to fall apart like physics.  
The radio warns of tainted meat, gives the details  
Of a flood, and suddenly she remembers a snake

She saw once in the cane-brake, raspberry-striped  
And famished, too old for rejuvenation.  
She killed it with a shovel, hung the heavy flesh

Above the door. That night a man stopped by.  
He was fierce, haunted by the carcass  
And anxious to start over. They drove to the trestle

And watched the children risk their lives.  
The man took a picture of the salt moon and bit her finger.  
He said when you forget me, this will go away.





# Concerning Auto-Erotic Asphyxiation

A woman works for an insurance firm  
That no longer covers it,  
No longer pays claims  
For enhancing what little pleasure we have  
With a rope.  
Part of her job is to explain the term  
To anyone who calls in.  
But there are certain words  
She is not allowed to use:  
Masturbation. Strangle. Self.  
The boss doesn't like them,  
Says you went to college,  
Make something up.  
So she tells people to imagine  
The colors in broken glass,  
The way entire lives move  
Within a breath or two.  
She makes them dizzy  
With equivocation,  
With bird sounds that go on and on.  
Says see? They don't.  
They try to pin her down  
Over the phone,  
But she wanders off.  
She looks for certain words  
Of her own.  
Breath and Love.  
Static.





# The Flood

The flood was an occasion for coarse language.  
The boy knew to drown was to lie among  
Onions and mud, to endure the lamentations  
Of the fence post. Grown men passed ecstatic,  
Refusing to sink. The radio tower was the last to fall,  
Brought down by people with nothing to say.  
Eyes shone like stars in the deepest water.  
Debates raged concerning the ownership of horses.  
The renewal of fortunes.





# The Prophet

You are minding your own business.  
The movies, a wedding, a class  
In economics. It doesn't matter.  
You are sober and satisfied.  
Suddenly, you want to stand up  
And say fuck fifteen times.  
The impulse is as pointless and real  
As any vision. You are the prophet  
With live coals on his lips.  
You manage to stay in your chair,  
Let the movie out, the wedding be,  
But you know your life is over.  
You feel the urge to tell your wife  
The babysitter looks damned attractive.  
You almost shoot the neighbor's dog.  
There is no place to go, no big fish  
To hide in. God, in His infinite sense  
Of humor, has singled you out.  
How close control is to something else.  
You want to steal a bowling ball.  
No one would get the point.  
The prophet's biggest problem is  
God can be a little cryptic.  
Throw food in a restaurant,  
Call your boss an ugly drunk  
And you are only crazy, no use at all.  
So you stand around in silence.  
People pass you on the street  
And smile. You want to make bird noises.  
You want to sit down in traffic,  
Warn them how thin the line  
Between living and lost control.  
Between normal days and captivity.





# The Radio

My days are like familiar songs.  
The mean things I say to friends.  
The stoplight that makes me wait.  
I know every word by heart.

I know there are no words.  
I will have the special for lunch.  
A woman will look at me twice.  
A radio plays too low to hear

Over the noise of sitting still,  
The sound of breathing.  
I've heard these songs before, though.  
They celebrate the dead.





# Song

I don't mind the obvious.  
The steps made of broken wood.

The long, wet patches of sand.  
Who knows how many times

I followed water when I was lost.  
The other day I watched the sky

And a cypress tree stand still.  
Some of my enemies were there.

I couldn't miss the opportunity.  
The steps don't lead up or down,

But the last time I looked,  
The sand seemed dry as if

I invented the whole thing.  
Tomorrow, I unearth the flowers.





# The Method

You leave the house, walk streets  
That seem designed now in their absence  
Of design. Maybe you've had a fight  
With someone you thought you knew better.

Maybe your bathtub has grown too familiar.  
The dust in the air, the fact  
Of pine trees in the morning light,  
Your own hands taking up space

On either side of your body. These things  
Make you want to know something  
You hadn't known before.  
How the sidewalk stays straight.

Why store windows don't just fall out.  
The sun grows fat and high, the traffic  
Flies by as if you were less than the idea  
Of someone walking down the street.

This, of course, makes you uncomfortable.  
So you find a place with good blueberry pie  
And you imagine yourself the subject  
Of some vast and remarkable experiment.

The kind that determines what isn't there  
Based on what is.  
The scientists are all people you know.  
An uncle. The first person you slept with.

The last. The neighbor whose dog  
Whines itself to sleep. Your children.  
They ask you questions in a language  
You can't figure out, but their voices





Make you see. A childhood raising chickens.  
The tattoo you got for Christmas.  
Your life as a diver at the bottom of the sea.  
Visions so vivid as to make them real.

This is science. You understand everything.  
Suffering and death, the nature and limits  
Of space, perfection and greed,  
The meaning behind the mole on your cheek.

All is simple and obvious. Then it is gone.  
The scientists take off their coats  
And disappear. The traffic continues.  
You pay the waitress and head back home.

You take a route that seems familiar now.  
The broken windows and the bait store.  
The people in their yards.  
The streets named after trees.





## Where We Saw Them Last

I'm sorry I haven't written but the days seem  
More like accidents than anything we might have agreed to.  
I talked to the woman with the scars above her eyes.  
She told me you moved to Rhode Island to sing.  
I never knew you wanted to be famous.  
God, that woman is ugly. The scars float above her eyes  
Like pelicans. I don't even know where Rhode Island is.  
Last year I was in a lot of trouble. I saw my father  
On the neighbor's roof and he was speaking to me directly.  
His words were so real, they weren't words at all,  
But a bunch of scrawny crows.





## Fragment, With Dice

The gambler dreams of onions  
Painted gray and sitting on a shelf  
By the window. When opened,  
Instead of layers, they reveal a core  
Of nothing. He avoids the tables  
For a week or two until he breaks  
A lamp and then it's usual business.  
On the train, people tell him stories.  
A woman with elaborately-trussed hair  
Claims she dives with manta rays.  
The animals rise and touch her skin.  
An old man says his leg is made  
Mostly of plastic. He has twenty  
Grandkids and a mistress in Detroit.  
These people are going home.  
They speak as though life has been  
An unmitigated delight and for this  
He almost loves them.





## About the Author

Charles Freeland is Associate Professor of English at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, where he teaches composition and creative writing. His poetry has appeared in such national publications as *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, and many others. In 2005, The Skillet Press published two of his chapbooks, *The Idea of Two* and *Salon Noir*.

He is the father of two girls, Isabel and Olivia, and he and his wife Carly have a third -- Ryley -- on the way.



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