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:
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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