

THREE POEMS BY CHRIS BARTON

our free trial lives

I can explain. A sad pastry. A hymn of wet shoes
in a crowded supermarket. Negative capability
like a tree encaged in a median, where love is a cloud
passing slowly over the intersection of Death and My Peak.
The walk home and the mumbling rain coolly
asks, are we reborn too much in this world
or not enough? How expensive to think *I want this*—
another leaf, another plastic bottlecap—after all
my suspect decisions and the articles I've skimmed.
This charming deceit of individual moments
cascading into the ripe obscurity of a constant,
entangled now. I mean, what is a lie when it's all there is,
a lie and then some? You arrive, toenails intact,
another poet said. A line I pruned to navigate out
from the blue-green gist of the earth. Our inherited,
expiring, free trial lives. Here is a word for self that
means forget. Here is a word for pain that means
steal. Here is a word for end that means seed.
I can explain. September and people and the
absence of utopia. How we tilt our heads away
from the wind
like we are all rehearsing
our greatest belief that something comes next.

last supper

Drive slow under fog dusted traffic lights
and eat the Wendy's hamburger
alone in the car in the soft, grey dress
rehearsal of afternoon. Have you heard?
You cannot go on living *unless you*
cling with all your life to love is what
the comedic Japanese author said,
before his head filled with broken fish.
The roads are wet and, often, they
seem to lead us nowhere. The last
time I spoke to my father, he was
unhoused near the Georgia border,
digging croissants out of a Starbucks
dumpster. The swingsets at the YWCA
I played astronauts on are probably stale now, too,
or replaced by condos. I drive until
I remember how the bleak in me scattered,
the night you rolled over in the dark
just to sing Shania Twain before
we faded into sleep. No point
in looking at the sagging mattress
of the sky, yet I always do it. What
a blessing to not only crave what is
inherited, but also a taste of my possible
life. Here I am in the free trial of mine,
wadding another wrapper
into a tiny, tinfoil planet in my hands,
predestined for landfill. Throwing
the more enduring parts of me,
my poems,
out the window.

the bafflement

How long will the nights be low-budget and plotless?
We stay awake dancing *Strictly Ballrooms* steps
poorly across your hardwood rental.

And you tell me about the future
cliffside cottage where you want to grow food.

Somewhere that's still above seawater—
Canada, maybe.

And you teach me the history of Brecht
and Mack the Knife:

*"Oh the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear /
And he shows them pearly white..."*

After, I talk on the cold porch about Kafka.
The story of a father who stays awake all night
hungry, his two kids by his side,
because he can't cut a loaf of bread with a good knife.

With the window coated in the juice of the sun, he says,
*"Why act surprised, children?
It is more human to fail than to succeed at anything."*

I see the bafflement as two strong dreams
colliding in the same sleep:

When the moment of choice arrives,
fall as quickly as possible
onto the sharpest objects in life.

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We must learn when to put down
the tools we have been given
to work with.

“our free trial lives,” “last supper,” and “the bafflement” are from Chris Barton’s chapbook *a finely calibrated apocalypse*. They appear here with permission from the author.