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# From A NIGHT-BLUE STUMBLE OF GASLIGHT

M. Reed Corey

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## GRAB YOUR COAT AND HAT, THERE WILL SOON BE NOTHING LEFT HERE

*Keeping An Eye on L. M. Fish as He Surveys Eureka, California, 1947*

Cliffside, a lumberjack in apprentice suspenders, Lieber  
Fish struggles to judge the distance between the tip  
of his nose and a gull suspended in mid-air,  
its head held against the sea-breeze: California

holds the bird back—as a great aunt might—overruling its flight-path,  
the soil passed and passing to the sea, alluvial  
granite moseying westward along a wet  
avenue. And, look, he is a prince of the morning:

Goodman Fish loiters just outside the gallery of old-growth  
oaks and Redwoods that lean out toward the trudging  
distant seagull—how far he is from Back East. The West,  
the frontier, its horizon a whip-stitched halo

of atmosphere: nitrogen, oxygen. This diocese of noble  
gases reaches for the *grande dame* Pacific and east  
a-ways, across Piedmont, into his native  
Georgia; how far Fish seems—the prongs of his logrolling

*caulks* dug into Her spine like riding-boots, as if she could buck.  
Materfamilias up and down the knackered seaboard,  
these outskirts of Columbia, America  
fallen and falling in: there are, perhaps, eighteen

or twenty feet between him and the gull—which sweeps through the gust  
as a pendulum, as the shade of a sundial—less  
if counting the soil eroded, the lost ground, tokens  
of the New World run away deep into the Old.

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## SEVEN STANZAS WITH THE WEIGHT OF WATER IN MIND

*In Oregon, Mr. Fish Reclaims Land from the Sea, 1948*

The snowmelt is now pooling so keenly  
around the mouth of the Coquille River  
that, at a coastal pumping station,

I bear most of my goatish frame down upon  
this stock-still lever—Watch for my profile,  
cast against the delta basin, a day laborer

knuckling into the pumphouse waterworks,  
just as a misarranged alphabet of Dusky Grouse  
is typeset into the late winter sky.

I bring to mind the frigid meltwater from upriver  
and it turns in my temples, turns open  
the spotted cockleshells at river's edge,

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turns the paddlewheel of a seagoing steamship  
on its axle—Look for my signal, for the sternwheeler  
Astoria to pass safely by, and see it dock

at the hazelnut cannery across the way. Look  
for me, from the lantern room of the distant listless  
lighthouse, and I promise to throw my silhouette

so that even in the sleep-laden night snow, the flywheel  
will catch and you will see we are high-and-dry,  
the pinewood fishingboats upturned on the shore.

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### TAKE CARE, I WANT YOU TO TAKE CARE

*1953: Mr. Fish at Sheepshead Bay*

Into pebble-paved alleyways  
and out from the underpasses,  
I come in my coat-tails  
to stride alongside you,  
seeking what *you* are seeking:

lower Brooklyn—in goldtone,  
at first light—by the waterfront  
trolley line. From a high  
summer footbridge, you give  
audience to the harbor, the tidewater.

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### LINES WRITTEN ON THE BRINK OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE

*L. M. Fish at the Edge of a Thunderstorm, 1960*

Gone is the cascading light of day  
that echoed hours ago  
from windowpane to windowpane

in the long downtown afternoon,  
displaced by the thunderhead angling

overhead—with its broad beclouded  
crown—sidling over those of us  
who lean from our brownstone

flats to meet 14th Street in honest  
leisure. I think to tap my meerschaum

pipe over the sidewalk below,  
the street clock nodding off at half-past  
five—then there is an arc of light

in the distant clarity at the storm's edge,  
perhaps two hundred feet as the crow flies,

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no more—I ought to photograph  
the skyscrapers in these final moments  
of June daylight, catching the farthest

edge of the fleeting sunshower  
in sepia tone. I am forever free

to stand at the window—as I please,  
with arms folded inward—the cityscape  
small and isolated at the brink

of rainfall: knowable, personal.  
At the first mumbling of thunder,

I throw a leg over my window ledge  
and edge slowly closer—far below, the City  
darkens—at street-level, only an abyss

strolls past, in dusky habit, as thunderstuck  
Manhattan bristles at my cheekbones.

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#### POEM LIKE AN INSTAMATIC CAMERA

*Mr. Fish, 42nd Street & Lexington Avenue, 1965*

He has never photographed himself outside their brownstone, but how about now,  
winding the spring of his pocket-camera  
while curbside, sidling

the lunchtime clamor  
at The Chrysler Building:

What about here,  
in all of this uncertainty?

How about, instead, walking the boulevards of the far-flung boroughs for a picture  
with the clocktower of Ozone Park, Queens, or Staten  
Island's convincing

little roadside  
Revolutionary

War monuments?  
No, he clicks Shutter Release.

*This is for Janine*, he mumbles into the lens snapping above him. That will  
be a reminder without their mistakes. He smirks  
up toward the glassy

plane of The Chrysler  
Building, and up into  
the refracted light  
from his flashbulb, into his lens

and he poses in the city: Here is his face with the sunken eyes and here  
are his overcoat and loose jawbone, and his lips  
read *Hold the mayonnaise*.

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Here, Fish looks into  
    the rangefinder, exposes  
the film again  
    to midday, and he was there.

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**TO PERSEVERE IS TO DRAW BREATH AFTER BREATH AFTER BREATH**

*L. M. Fish Frets for Three Blocks, Thompson Street, NYC*

Within the cavity of my chest is a little pith,  
    a cystic bundle woven airtight and tucked

under the base of my windpipe, nestling amid two  
    lobes of lung—  
it seems to be a knot, a gradual aggregation

of worry and bother: the burl teased from a bolt of tweed,  
    its weft and warp disarranged. This is my

most lovable valuable, this coarse self-made  
    curio—  
a lump, a deep-sewn attaché that I will always carry

on my stroll from the free-lunch counters of Bleecker Street up  
    to Washington Square Park, just as I do

now. I take to my feet, which swing to measure my tempo against  
    the city—  
two metronomes sounding my internal Standard Time to all

of Greenwich Village and to its galleries of watchmakers  
    and clock-masters. From here, I can nearly see

the Village Gate and its understratum of busted-up  
    double reeds—  
under its floorboards, I would imagine, there is stored

a tone of such intimate length and depth, almost like a bass  
    trombone, or like hearing your mother cough

from one end of the house to the other. I no longer have  
    the patience—  
there is, between she and I, a little cluster of tissue

that in the long mid-day hours has swelled to a medallion  
    of fat. There is a knot caught in her throat,

and as she pauses, I feel for the underside of my fatigued  
    diaphragm—  
she holds my hand, and I hold my chest and we suffer.

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MY WIFE AS ONE OF MANY MAMMALS

*A Sketch of Missus Fish, 1966*

*Hush*—the play of lights, of common  
daylight and early evening  
owl-light, is pitched onto  
her knees,

against the palm of the Empire  
sofa—our windows thrown open  
to Stanton Street, bamboo shades  
half-drawn

to dim the avenue and dull  
its hustle-bustle—*hush*. Soundless,  
Janine slumbers, her child snoozing  
inside.

They should be fashioned in marble,  
here: her stock-still chin cordially  
stippled from stone, a keen bright  
chisel

tunneling for unborn promise.  
O! what a scene to study upon  
waking every day, for months—but  
*hush—hush*.

It seems too much: the quietness  
demanded by pregnancy, waiting  
for soft entrance—the twilight now  
a dark

gown—mother-and-child at rest,  
iced over, unmoving, breathing  
like two petite beasts—one within  
one more.

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TWENTY-EIGHTH STREET, KINDLY ALLOW ME TO FISH GOD & THE VIRGIN FROM YOUR DEPTHS

*from a line in "The Work" by Dana Levin*

*You can feel it, the city, constant around you: my cufflinks*  
skittery from more than a half-block of jackhammering. It must be  
said, *I* must say that *my* initials are not immediately  
apparent—oh, 28th Street is crumbling—on these fine  
monogrammed cufflinks, and I have been solicited to join the Order

of Carmelites on fine linen writing-paper. My fawn-gentle fingers  
seize upon the vibrating envelope in my pocket, guilty—like being  
the one left holding a pistol after a fist-fight—guilty for half-a-mile's  
walk from the bus to Our Lady of the Scapular. *You can feel it*, the Holy  
and Apostolic See, *constant around you*; and yet, it seems preoccupied.

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Even in Midtown, they sometimes bow in prayer—Gloria Patri—my own  
finger-bones half a tick behind the springs of a street clock beside  
the Congregation Adereth El. Someone should mention, in whispers,  
to the Reverend Father that I am at least half-Judaic—*You can  
feel it*, they might say after showing me out—and that is what I mean

by guilt: never knowing. Never being able to know enough to help,  
though kindness need be everywhere: *the city, constant around you*—Hear,  
O Israel, and Glory be—in this parish of chantry-chapels.  
The breath of a young lily settles near the church-door: Our Lady  
travels in a circuit from rooftop to rooftop, in oscillation,

an alternating current distributed to the very poor—*You can  
feel it*, I imagine the dispossessed would insist, but not like our city.  
The especially hungry should, instead, say that they do not know the Blessed  
Virgin and the God of Israel as others do: for they can know God without  
knowing the acquaintance of His grace. I can imagine it would be like smelling

perfume—Shalimar, let's say, or black pepper with tomato—while waiting  
alone at mid-day in a bus shelter. But I cannot know for certain. I'm left standing  
at the church door, my envelope folded in-two, a pocket in my pocket:  
I commit to memory the shape of my embossed name and the grain of the letterhead,  
propping their invitation against the doorstep, never giving them the chance.

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#### LIPPING CHOCOLATE CIGARETTES, THE MATHEMATICIAN SHAKES A FIST

Waking to a thunderclap un-tethered over the Ionian  
Sea, I button my snoring trousers, windstorms raising a caterwaul  
from the east—I am navigating the Earth's equatorial

cummerbund. Inside, my porthole depicts an ocean awash  
in Cinecolor: its greens dampened by the hurry-scurry of rainfall—and I,  
elephantine in my cabin, imagine myself seaside

with Archimedes at Syracuse—Archimedes and I laying  
in the surf, gowned and noshing Walnettos, malted milk balls  
and licorice pipes—we weigh upon the Sicilian

coast like a pair of elderly Monk seals: he, drawing a triangle  
in the sand, and around that a curving parabola, an arch—and I,  
tracing within his, a scalene triangle of my

own, and then he within mine, until sand and reeds seem  
no longer delicate enough—inadequate for inscribing even one  
granule with further figures and arcs; he, confounded

by the divisibility of sand into atoms—and further,  
farther—Archimedes as a host for molecules, quarks, antiquarks  
and nucleons: he gives me the eye—more-or-less John

Wayne at the corners of his mouth, snarling, the mathema-  
gician divides an envelope of Sen-Sen breath powder in two  
and into fourths, and onward: his palm a boundless quarry,

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each finger a jointed crane—I watch his sleight-of-hand  
with care, Archimedes crafting dozens of hand-cradled piles  
from the confection—breaking each mint fleck into smidgens

and smidgens into specks, specks into trifling jots  
of sweet starch—his hand thrown into routine as though sliding  
the beads of a school's abacus, east to west—only

a fine dust remains, an indivisible hodge-podge: chuffed,  
Archimedes turns and strolls the beach to dry his gown,  
and that is the precise distance between ancient  
and modern—O!, rocket-ships, O!, vulcanized rubber.

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### NAVIGATING BY ECHOCARDIOGRAM, 1968

*In which He is Plunged into the Sea*

L. M. Fish lies anaesthetized,  
the skin of the chest peeled  
back as to permit entry  
to the crestfallen monarchy  
of his cardiac organs—stretched

across an operating table, as stiff  
as a saint's finger-bone—*grand*  
*mal* bedeviled by the assembly  
of surgeons that carve from his fractured  
ribs a seascape of curling, red-tipped

whitecaps—this fleshy tide rises  
and falls with each kick  
of his mule-legged heart—outer  
walls swabbed sinless, continents of fat  
bathed in antiseptic; the muscular

Sergeant-at-Arms laid out, guileless,  
simple, a waxing gibbous  
moon—roundabout, the operating  
theater unable to contain Mister Fish  
in his most holy of holy forms:

gentleman caller to the Lunar  
Mansion, that colossal magnet—Fish  
falls away from Her, hovering  
fixed above the Pacific Basin,  
its ground swells soaking

the machine-sewn hem of his surgical  
drape, the sea a mimeographed portrait  
of Magellan: blustery—L. M.  
is ensnared by the algal bloom  
of the circumnavigator's whiskers,

and lowered, lowered until the value  
of Her coin-like face passes

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into an illegible hodgepodge of glowing.  
The patient's chest cavity fills  
with brine and, immersed, floating mildly

toward Manila; farther westward  
    and into the path of the Tet  
Offensive—tumbling along the peaks  
of seamounts—She, unable  
to hesitate, draws a tidal current over him,

a submarine river that presses  
    his displacement—obliged by Her  
magnetic thrust—soon, his heart  
will be restarted, and, the sutures  
will keep him whole, and, Fish is sewn

from east to west—Oriental  
    to Occidental—lungs aerated,  
blood siphoned-in to satiate  
the aorta, rambling through  
the four chambers, rambling when called.

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### BIRDCALL, I FIRST HEAR BIRDCALL FROM THE FRAGRANT MAGNOLIAS

*Janine L. Fish Waits for Dawn in West Florida, 1979*

I can't forget that once I crossed myself alone  
    at the sign of first-light: I prayed  
as the hard freeze withdrew inland, as two columns  
    of daytime ran parallel to the hallway

floorboards, the paper-backed vanity mirror  
    holding me upright, I waited in goosebumps.  
Before sun-up, I prayed a prayer to hear  
    birdsong, to hear what the aimless

kingfisher had to say as he sashayed  
    to wake his mate nesting in the sea grass.  
What else can the faithless do? I settle now  
    for the clacking yelp of the herring gull

that pitterpats her clawed toes along the frosted  
    gutter pipe and, my hair dressed and tangle-free,  
I think of dabbing the scar tissue atop Leiber's  
    breastbone with lanolin, and the new morning

carries the aroma of open magnolia blooms  
    and a winnowing of Bluebirds' wings.  
I do believe that I once crossed myself  
    alone and at the sign of first-light;

this is saying that I tried to take care of him,  
    this says I could only ever do so much.  
For seven weeks, I have left the screen door unhinged,  
    our sleeping-porch cold, anxious, open.

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### MADSONG CONCERTO FOR STRING DUET

Eyelids touching, well-met,  
    I am dead-tired of marching  
inward only to overlook  
myself. Of late,  
    at sixty-two, I'm starved

for song: *My dear, forget.*

Janine, let me pass for jest,  
    as meshuggeneh,  
your idling bridegroom.  
In my crooked  
    waistcoat, maddened

to sing: *My dear, forget.*

Put me aside. In repose,  
    I hum to fill the margins  
of your prayerbook  
with boughs of oak,  
    to take my place, singing:

*My dear, dear, forget me.*

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### HOW LOQUACIOUS THE QUIET CAN BE, HOW ENDLESS

*1981: Sitting With His Daughter Clementine, Lieber Fish Thinks of Something to Say*

*Each year is endured*

*at such a loss*, is what I could respond,  
but don't—you were telling me how most people  
would like for the Cold War to be over,  
but—I don't know. We've suffered a loss,  
too, you and me.

The kitchen faucet  
    snarls while you wait for me to speak.  
Under the sunshade of noiselessness that we've  
hung here—among the mid-day gibberish—our teatime  
is interrupted in mid-sentence, at this table,  
in mid-air.

I watch your jawbone  
    come to rest, the oatmeal cloth curtains part  
with the breeze and we think of what people  
will say in days to come, about the nearly  
silent day we spent together—though I  
don't think long.

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ARS POETICA IN BOTTLE GLASS AND SEAWATER

*L. M. Fish at Carrabelle, in the Panhandle of Florida, 1984*

Stretching his bird-thin limbs,  
Fish thinks it a shame  
that the pleasure of sleeping  
is an unconscious joy:  
    a dip of the eyebrows

beneath the nightlong sea-foam  
or like a prolonged moment of losing  
one's words, what to call this  
or that. He has propped each  
    window open to receive

the westbound doldrums of autumn  
that sweep over the cinderblock homes  
at Carrabelle, and thinks of the heavens  
above the Earth as a star-burnt  
    cavity, of the abandoned

Mojave Desert, that in dreaming  
he could attend to the airy unstudied  
spaces around his thoughts. Fish  
recalls, tightening his eyelids,  
    the peach-toned sea glass

shards that filled a jar on a piano lid,  
remembers them in his great-aunt's  
sun parlor, thinks of lamp light falling  
across the raised letters that spell  
    *Amb-erg-ris* or *In-dian*

*Ink* or *Tinct-ure*, their marks  
of manufacture. He must know  
that every serif of those four  
lost words was smoothed in time  
    by a groundswell pressing

upon the seafloor, and that the dreamful  
heavens hung overtop the Earth draw  
the tide: whispering the hours, one  
comes to depend on the other,  
    ink-stained and wave-worn.

M. Reed Corey is a Ph.D. student in the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he also teaches courses in poetry and nonfiction composition. A native of Neptune Beach, Florida, Corey is a winner of the 2007 AWP Intro Journals Project Award and serves as Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Packingtown Review*.