

ATOMIC CLOCK

Kerri Webster

I don't know why some people are shaped to a place, back to a ditch, thighs to a stand of pines. Blame boy-prophets. I mean bodily, absolutely. I want rest, a little house, a thin dog, happy to shrink scale and vanish back into the treeline. At the dog show, the announcer: "This is why I have my cardiologist in the good seats, in the front row:" because it's so exciting. On another channel, this lady swears *If they come inside my house again I'll shoot them dead*, saints among the azaleas commanding *Stay here but arm thyself*. I've heard air leak from a girl's throat, seen a man's body trembling in the dark. When I taste fear I take a pill, or call my friend, or recite something in my head, *carpenter, carpenter*, the world bucks and shifts, *tattered coat upon a stick*, the nor-adrenaline kicks in. No bullet can do this thing you wish.

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She loveth best who loveth the strange birds trapped in Concourse B, flora day-glo and oversized, endless water, no slaughter *per se*, though, in a shop in one of the bleaker suburbs, a knife inlaid with meteorite, a knife inlaid with jet, a sapphire knife. Insects pinch my nerve ends. We fail and fail and grow desirous of believing we're all vehicle, every wet atom of us. You be the consort, says the man in the bar, I'll be your most faithful pet.

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This city of red brick suggests *the subtle alienation from the sources of our strength*. There's enough rapture for sharing, pure metalwork of a damage-season, cicadas on my kitchen counter battered with a shoe. Hello foreign land with stoplights out where I rent square footage and glacial boulders squat in the yard, each with the world's tilt trapped inside, twitchy spin that bothers the inner ear. *Sea*, says the ear. The ear says *shipwreck* and we're all of us flung. Some boulders have spirals carved onto their surfaces, antelope, lines of dots that mean *string of beads* or the *planet that leaves comes back*. No wonder I grab the railing. No wonder I solder myself to another.

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We have eaten the world and mean to keep swallowing. How *fall* attaches to *asleep*, how the boot slips on talused slopes—I'm done with meantime. I'm into ordinary time. No time like the river road, ice shoved up on ice. Stranger, as we speak. The air psalmic, which is to say charged. The air palmic, which is to say touched. So help me. But what if the world's not ending? Let's see.

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Neither you nor I a shepherdess.

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Not believing something doesn't make it less so. I could not believe in wolves but there'd still be one inside your pet. What a woman will do for thirst. What a throat will. My edges softened but something else was knapped, a pure obsidian. If hush was the first prayer and rose like a silo, what sort of silo. Tell me that, boy prophet. In the cold war, my father sat in the desert and drafted parts for missile silos. And so it came to pass that a woman looked me in the eye and said *I don't believe in ghosts but I saw one once*. This in the hallway of a building outfitted with plaster cherubim. I don't know why some people are shaped to a meridian, spine to a county, breasts to one man's hands. I mean bodily, absolutely. I want respite, a little room, a night sky, spillways. The boy prophet's looking at a seeing-stone inside his hat, and from that saying when the horsemen are due back.

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Isn't the park fantastic, corners pinned, its objects a floating hey boathouse. The desert fathers and the desert mothers wonder what I'm doing here. A park's a dog-and-pony show, the husbands cannot stop jogging, always the unfaithful man walking his big white dog. I am a pioneer of time, pockets heavy with ticking, see the invasive come greenly o'er the pond. As the husbands scratch their heads. As the desert waits another age to take these acres down.

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What a weird tenor this world is, how it lends the appearance of appearing like something else. And so there appeared in the appointed place at the appointed time a plaster angel. And the angel said I don't believe in girls but I saw one once. And the angel said I have never been a cormorant, never fell anywhere, let alone headlong. And the trees caught fire, wicking up and up. And thus did the rivers confluence: this one brown, this green, and unto that place a Forest Parkway, with Goodwill near the intersection of Arsenal and Kingshighway.

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A creature scene in the dark. A water feature made on a lark. A theater: a park: a stage. A man-made lake. Which is not a lake. As bare is kin to not-there, the ragged dog on Waterman, fur falling out in great clumps, *Do you want to turn around and go back* and I said no, and now I carry him inside me like a clot of stopped time and no co-pay can buy me sleep. Sing to me, somebody.

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Not thaw, not freeze, I wake in the air between, air thick with dimwitted pollen, spent chances. The old sirens sound closer but they're not; pre-melt, pre-runoff, air catches sound like a bell's tongue, wags it. What's unseen unanswering, the dog gone where, or hit by a car, or where. As bare cozies up to not-there, makes its pretty bed. And who's to say's what's more like a temple, peeling signage or obese azaleas? Through the lattice partitioning self from sleep, through wandering sleep, I listen and imagine the partition meant to keep the angel clean while on level earth.

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Who's to say what's more like a temple, windshield glass or full-throated ease? *The beak that grips us*. Listen: a river cut the continent in half. The wilderness rose as incense. The spire lit up. The sky cracked open. I held my spirit in my hand; I put it back in; I heard it click.

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I came to find what my body was shaped for, what prayer my shoulders pressed into, what *And so it was made so* was made so. And this is how I made away: by night, ironworks nothing but a poor dream; from air a wet cloth on my forehead; into ceaseless draught, the desert mothers and the desert fathers saying Leave your good things in the alley, leave your fine goods by the wayside, leave your costliest whatnots on the saint's wide avenue. If it's matter, it's rubbish; if it's tin, it's tinny to the ear, dear girl. And I folded back into mountains where beetles dig legs into hardwood and wait. Allegory of the Flammable Paradise: one by one the steeplejacks grew old.

Kerri Webster's first book, *We Do Not Eat Our Hearts Alone*, was published by Georgia in 2005. Her poems are forthcoming in the *Boston Review* and *High Chair*.