

# THE GHOST SHIP

A POEM

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TABLA 6



LA LUNA



EL COTORRO



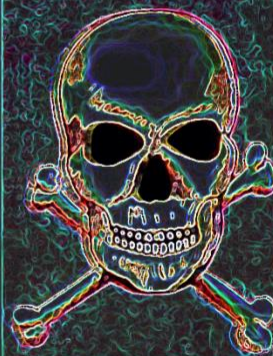
EL MUSICO



LA ARANA



ROSA



LA CALAVERA



DO



LA PALMA



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*It's not for you to know, but for you to weep and wonder  
When the death of your civilization precedes you...*

*—Neko Case, “Fox Confessor Brings the Flood”*

Then she said, "A coffin has no pockets."  
So funny, so true: you can't take it with  
you, or without you; even deep within  
you, you can't take you anywhere these days.  
Everyone is now an open grave filled  
with light. Inside is outside; outside, out.  
There is nowhere that something not alive  
does not see you. It only wants to not  
be alive, except in you. It just wants  
to thrive, at not being alive, in you.  
It doesn't care what you want (can you guess  
just what it is? You're both right; you're both wrong).  
A coffin is a sail no wind will lift,  
an empty lifeboat aboard a drifting ship.

An empty lifeboat aboard a drifting ship  
is neither a beginning nor ending,  
but a purgatory of silences:  
someday, somehow, by tow or by current,  
the ship comes into port, or to the rocks,  
a Flying Dutchman or a Demeter,  
filled with boxes of Transylvanian soil,  
roiling with hungry rats. Is that too much?  
Too gothic, too Masque of the Red Death?  
What do you think those castles were made from?  
Pestilence, once as common as old rags,  
always at hand to wipe away the world,  
this filthy purgatory, existence  
(heaven disguised as hell; hell, unmasked).

Heaven disguised as hell; hell, unmasked,  
like the ghost at the end of an episode  
of *Scooby-Doo*. Freddy pulls off the hood  
with a flourish, revealing another  
bitter, greedy old man. *It would have worked,  
too, if not for you meddling kids.*  
Everyone laughs. No one pulls the old man's  
head off. They suppose he'll rot in jail.  
He won't. His sentence catches such daylight,  
the spin of brass on a revolving door.  
He's declared bankruptcy often. He knows  
the score. He retreats to his condo  
in the Ninth Circle's air-cooled suburbs,  
a house unhaunted by even his soul.

A house unhaunted by even one soul,  
white as bone, & so read with so much blood  
no obsessive regimen of washing  
will ever turn their pink hands white again;  
a whiteness so pure it's darkest crimson.  
These are our representatives, doubles  
from the far side of the mirror where faces  
turn back on themselves, mirrors upon  
mirrors: an infinity of selfish  
selves. They never seem to run out, never.  
We put them there, but who is this we, now?  
The air itself is here to kill us all.  
How can they be we, we they? Who's dying,  
now? Who, if not all of us, cannot breathe?

Now: who, if not all of us, cannot breathe—  
call it a cover, “Ventilator Blues.”  
Trapped, circled, no second chances, no chance  
but time, time become an island nation,  
population one (to keep it from none).  
Home is where the panic attack is,  
the scrubbing, twenty seconds over,  
over, over again. Buried alive  
to save others, while all those walking dread  
show up for work, deliver the package,  
press a gloved hand to the fevered forehead  
of someone’s grandfather, husband, old friend.  
At twilight, they walk home to applause:  
the terrible encore that will not end.

The terrible encore that will not end,  
legion of Hollywood armageddons,  
all the post-apocalyptic fantasies,  
endlessly ending the same revelation:  
nothing revealed but time (still the only  
revelator). Watching Vincent Price drive  
through the Italian countryside, *Last Man  
on Earth*, a landscape made desolate  
by Allied bombs, postwar construction graft.  
Shall we watch *The Omega Man* next?  
Which version of *The Stand* do you prefer?  
Some say the world will end in zombies,  
some in vampires. Some say not with a  
bang, but a cough, echoing down empty streets.

Bang! A cough, echoing down empty streets,  
more terrifying than a gunshot, now.  
Looking forward, looking back, measuring  
each distance, the number of steps needed  
to avoid another human being.  
Today, that's the way that the world goes round;  
I can hear John Prine singing it, just now,  
as I read his obituary.  
Terrible thought: it's the wrong people  
who die... which implies that there are right ones.  
There are, but how dreadful, how poisonous  
to entertain it, even as the list  
grows ever longer in my mind: roll call  
of dishonor, of delusion, of death.

Of dishonor, of delusion, of death,  
the daily headlines toll like cracked church bells,  
summoning the faithless & faithful both.  
We are all in this together, & yet  
we're not. Disasters widen the chasms  
we paper over with paper bridges,  
the ones we walk holding lit lighters high,  
a whiff of gasoline burning our eyes.  
To the left, a coyote, pedaling  
the air, furiously; to the right,  
a private helicopter, hovering,  
pale faces pressed to the windows, their eyes  
gleaming with delight. Feverish, even.  
Coyote falls; the temperature rises.

Coyote falls as temperatures rise,  
the trickster attempting his constant trick:  
staying alive. It's not enough to just  
avoid infection—there's now a werewolf  
at the door, the specter of starvation,  
eviction, madness. When the moon is full  
& fat as a cat, the howling begins.  
The billionaires in their millions, waiting,  
It takes a nation of billionaires  
to hold you back—or just a notion  
of billionaires, the sick sucker bet called  
the American Dream. Dreaming is free,  
all others pay cash (or else). History:  
first tragedy, then farce... then tragedy.

First tragedy, then farce, then tragedy:  
that goes for the revolution as well.  
But options (like sand in a half-hour  
glass) are running out. The devolution  
began long before anyone noticed  
(are we not men? We are, alas). Tonight,  
I could almost turn to violence, almost.  
Tonight, if I had one wish, it would be  
to become the super-villain within.  
The only justice is poetic, now,  
& it seems it needs the littlest push.  
When we asked for nemesis to punish  
hubris, we didn't expect to become  
collateral damage (no one ever does).



Collateral damage. No one ever does  
know the people who die—until they do.  
Is this madness, this callousness, simply  
the insanity of the still untouched?  
Why is nothing ever real to people  
who believe in the false god of fake news?  
Why is the human heart a prisoner  
who thinks it has the freedom of the town?  
Freedom's just another word for what  
someone else will have to lose. Losers, all.  
The gambling ship can always pull its anchor;  
there's always another port, another  
patch of open sea, where anyone can  
go overboard, with a whisper, a scream.

Go overboard: a whisper, a scream,  
silence... long hours of looking out  
the window, discovering the mirror,  
dissolving into screens. The veil is lifted,  
if not the mask. Through a glass, brightly,  
never again face to face, unless  
in rows, grids, the busy beehive of Zoom.  
We should get a drink sometime, we should  
have a video chat. Improve yourself,  
or grieve beneath the covers at high noon.  
Take a nap. Take two. Do yoga, bake bread,  
try not to think of those who just can't even.  
Make a list of who is sick, recovered,  
slowly or quickly becoming unhinged.

Slowly or quickly becoming unhinged,  
madness, like time, is elastic. But rage,  
stifling, helpless anger—that grows harder.  
*Despair is the one unforgivable*  
*sin, & it's always reaching for us.*  
Yes, but *Anger cannot win; it can't*  
*even think straight.* Betwixt, between, bemoan.  
Jimmy Baldwin's two opposing thoughts  
come home to roost, a nest of quarantines.  
To accept without bitterness, & then  
never, ever accept. A commonplace,  
uncommon. A commune of being born,  
busy dying. Fragments of consensus,  
a desperate communion, receding.

A desperate communion, receding:  
I remember California before  
it became a nation-state. I recall  
a delusional republic before  
it became deranged. The dreams that sustained  
us are the dreams that will kill us, again  
& again, until we're all the ghosts  
we've pretended to be: *don't be it,*  
*dream it.* The dream is all most will ever  
be, the walking dead, the waking sleep.  
At the edges of the continent, we  
manifest the destiny of all stars:  
collapse into something so dense no light  
escapes. On the horizon, time stands still.

Escapes. On the horizon, time stands still,  
all the adventures disassembled, now.  
Remember that one art, places you meant  
to travel, lost to this land of the lost  
you now inhabit, land of contagion  
& conspiracy. From 5G towers  
to Made in China labs, the poison seeps,  
like toxic chemicals in groundwater.  
Up top, so many drunk on the Kool-Aid  
it's a wonder there's any Kool-Aid left.  
Is it any wonder? You, too, grew up  
here, in this dreamland where everyone's  
their own king of the infinite space of  
a nutshell. Bad dreams. False sounds of liberty.

In a nutshell: bad dreams, & the false sounds  
that greed disguised as the common good makes.  
The soothing cackle, the dog whistle of  
that sharp intake of breath before they say,  
"I'm not racist, but..." I'm not inhuman,  
but. I'm not inhuman, not yet, not yet,  
but can I feel myself slipping into  
the violence of thought that corrupts the heart.  
*Nothing is true; everything is permitted.*  
Everything is true; nothing is permitted  
but suffering to watch the death of all  
in all. What does a republic without  
souls represent? Dead souls, names on a list.  
No one's real until a name on a list.

No one's real until a name on a list,  
& often, not even then. The numbers  
begin to level off, the woods still dark.  
Slowly, a friend of a friend of a friend  
becomes one degree of separation.  
Can we even describe separation  
by degrees, now? Isn't isolation  
measureless? Out on the street, dodge & weave  
others as if in a video game,  
the awkward ballet of caution & care,  
stranger danger taken to the limit,  
not one step beyond compassion than  
necessary. Better safe than sorry,  
we are safe & sorry, grateful, afraid.

We are safe & sorry, grateful, afraid,  
walking along hope's razor blade, never  
looking down. *Always look up, never look  
down, all you'll ever see are the pennies  
people drop.* People are dropping, all right;  
pennies on their eyes, never from heaven  
but still they rain, down, down, from a great height.  
A pittance, pitiless, without even  
enough copper to kill a virus.  
Worse, the promise of a pretty penny  
that never drops. When, how long, will it drop,  
the other shoe of salvation, the light  
at the end of our tunnel vision?  
For want of a light, the light itself was lost.

For want of a light, the light itself was lost.  
For want of money, a test was lost.  
For want of a test, a city was lost.  
For want of a city, a country, lost.  
For want of a country, all countries, lost.  
For want of a world, whole worlds, lost.  
For want of a mask, someone's face, lost.  
The losses mount in every direction.  
You don't know what you've got until it's gone,  
except for all the voices telling you,  
over & over, just how much you had  
to lose. For want of a mind, a soul, lost.  
For want of a soul... ah, but where is it?  
How much does it weigh? How much does it cost?

How much does it weight, how much does it cost,  
to try to keep your spirits up, to lift  
& lift the falling night, to roll the stone  
to the top of this life & watch it roll  
back to the bottom of a bottomless  
dream... is it possible to touch bottom  
when you raise a gloved hand to a setting  
sun, brilliant & clear in smogless skies,  
or is the future simply too deep, too  
much of muchness? But it's nothingness  
that fills the mind, despair's last little pivot,  
the nothing matters that natters, chatters  
like teeth in a cave of ice. The sun's out,  
still. It's warmth is somewhere hidden, outside.



Still, warmth is somewhere hidden, outside,  
inside: society is not the same  
as the social fabric, the urge against  
selfishness, the hands held out in help,  
even if gloved. A paper bag inscribed  
FREE FOOD PLEASE TAKE left in the hall quickly  
disappears. A neighbor knocks to ask if  
anyone needs anything; they're going  
to the store. Distant friends order gift cards  
to the cafe next door. Each small blessing  
blooms a thousand-fold in the weary heart.  
Applause at dusk for the frontline workers--  
hazard pay would be better, but they'll take it.  
At day's end, it appears, battered: resolve.

At day's end, it appears: battered resolve,  
battering against stupidity, fear.  
There's always another virus besides  
this one, visible to some, if not all.  
The church of the spectacle, ever full,  
the sermon on the miasma audible  
to willing & unwilling congregants.  
To unplug is a wing & a prayer:  
who knows what might land, where the crash will come.  
If we are ghosts, we still drag our bodies  
behind us, carry our heads in open arms.  
We stare at our screens as if they were sails,  
slack in the doldrums, dreaming up new winds,  
while these dark depths start to die below us.

While these dark depths start to die below us  
(the greater crisis the covid occludes);  
while the economy that kills us slowly  
unravels to kill us faster; while we  
shelter, out of place in this old new world  
where plague & pestilence were once common;  
while we stare in disbelief at leaders,  
dissolving into superheated air,  
the world keeps turning with only a shrug.  
Nature abhors a vacuum, so the beasts  
return to the humanless streets, emptied  
now of our invasive species. Empty,  
filling up, tentative explorers, all.  
Nothing but blue skies, for who knows how long.

Nothing but blues skies, for who knows how long--  
the Industrial Revolution, gone  
home, going, going, gone, but not. Will we  
forget what we saw with this strange, calm eye?  
Before the eyewall arrives, stronger than  
ever? Will we, ever. The storm is not  
passing, not this time: it is exactly  
what it appears to be, the end of  
the something we take everything to be.  
Another world, nesting inside this one,  
a Russian doll of possibility  
beyond even the reach of Russian trolls.  
A bridge no troll could ever live under.  
A bridge to a different century.

A bridge to a different century,  
with its domed cities, jet packs, Mars bars packed  
with colonists & astronauts & hope.  
Bradbury was right: we are the Martians,  
but not the ones he envisioned, human,  
lost but found in the stars. Now, we're more like  
the things inside Wells' tripod war machines,  
dying like them from coronavirus,  
but whose salvation will that spell? The goats  
wander the silent streets, waiting. Hoping?  
Do animals without opposable  
all thumbs have a concept of hope? Is hope  
a function of time or eternity?  
A thing with feathers: dinosaur, fossil.

A thing with feathers: dinosaur fossil,  
dreaming of Jurassic Park. Keep dreaming.  
Not even a ghost ship can turn on a dime.  
Science usually damns us & saves us  
at the same time; we can only deliver  
ourselves from evil, if we can ever  
give up the convenience of delivery.  
It seems unlikely. Every standard  
is allowed to go lower & lower  
except one. Extinction rebellion is  
no match for instinct manipulated.  
Everyone talks of late capitalism,  
as if it's passed away. An asteroid  
passes close by. No one knows to look up.

Passing close by, too close, no one looks up.  
The sidewalk does not exist that's wide enough.  
We walk in bike lanes, we walk in the street.  
We are resolved to embrace rituals,  
new ceremonies to save our old skin,  
the one we can't quite shed, but know we will.  
We nod & smile if we can, still hiding,  
still in the plain sight of reason & risk.  
This is not life during wartime, not yet.  
Notebooks are everything. We're taking notes.  
We are paying attention to the fight  
to shape the shape of things to come. We will  
fight, beyond the gestures, the memes, the vote...  
Just now, we heard the fighter jets above.

Just now, we heard the fighter jets above  
our heads: that muted roar that swallows  
itself. Silence, now, huddled inside  
our apartments, the silence of a city  
unable to breathe; the quietude of  
quarantine disturbed for a moment by  
blue angels that bring no balm, no comfort;  
thunderbirds that bring only ruptured air.  
A weary nurse lifts her head; it's supposed  
to be in her honor. Her eyes blue, dull,  
above her mask. For an instant, something  
shifts. Then the next patient is brought in,  
gasping for an air not so rarefied—  
for an air brought down, just this once, to earth.

For an air brought down, just this once, to earth,  
a song to sing without falling for it,  
the raised voice that lowers as it rises.  
No matter how we said, You're not special,  
in our hearts the mirror gave us a wink.  
Fingers crossed became wires crossed, & then  
became crossed-out names. No more exceptions.  
No more it can't happen here; it's happened.  
No more luxuriating in The End;  
The End is now the title of this film,  
from Hollywoodland to Woodlawn, The Bronx:  
the cemetery, the end of the line.,  
where Miles Davis & Melville, unrestful,  
sleep within the last, greatest betrayal.

Sleep. Within the last, greatest betrayal  
of the last & greatest of human dreams,  
what dreams may come; must come; may haps, might come.  
Wake. Of the people, by the people, for  
the people. Not the corporate corpse,  
the rotting body politic, but these:  
people, human beings, one by one by  
two by two, two if by land, by sea, bye  
bye, farewell, fare *well*, stay safe, stay home, please.  
On the jetty at Bush Terminal Park,  
hand in hand, we gaze toward the colossus,  
a faded green shoot in a fallow field.  
I ask, "Is that all there is to a fire?"  
She smizes. "A coffin has no pockets."

*April 1<sup>st</sup> ~ April 30<sup>th</sup> 2020*