



Lew Watts
Tick-Tock



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Tick-Tock

Sweet Mercy

This time, I don't turn on the light. I search under the sheet for the notepad and pencil. The dream is still fresh, vivid. I try not to breathe. But as I press lead to paper, the memory fades and leaves without a word. It's always like this. It's always been like this, ever since I can remember. My therapist calls it suppression.

childhood stream
the hook at the end
of a candy cane

Agent Provocateur

Today is the day you replace your lingerie—H&M for “comfortables,” and that small, special shop for those most precious things.

I always arrange to be in our closet when you return—this year, it’s ordering my tie rack. After watching you throw the white and flesh-colored underwear onto a shelf, I hold my breath as you open the black-bowed bag. You have chosen red.

This is what I live for—the gentle way you twist each bra, cup-to-cup, how tenderly you fold the silk panties into tiny, soft samosas. As you open the bottom drawer, a waft of potpourri reminds me of last year’s purples, and even of the pinks, blacks, and pastel blues of earlier years.

Two soft pats, a faint smile, and you close the drawer with a sigh. There they will lie in scented silence, never to be seen alive again in this world.

sultry night
the glow of her iPad
on my tighthywhities

Lost in Time

I am on a ledge near the top of a cliff. These rocks date from the late Devonian period, some 360 million years ago, but the section in front of me represents only 624 years. I know because the layers are varves, thin bands of sand and shale, deposited in the winter and summer months in an ancient glacial lake—a varve represents one year, and I have counted them.

I am looking for a dropstone within the varves, a pebble or boulder released by melting ice that once floated on the Devonian lake. But the layers are perfect, undisturbed, and I follow them north until the ledge narrows and disappears.

so many years . . .

I still search for you
in traffic

Fanny Pack

I learn it is worn around the waist, perched on the buttocks. In other words it's a *bum bag*, something for carrying small things, like fags. I have an urge to tell her that where I come from the word fanny is slang for vagina, but I remain silent—some things are better left unsaid.

oysters the taste of the sea in her hair

Lament for the Lost Boy

I was working overseas. This was the reason I gave myself—that it had to happen, that it was for the best. But in the Headmaster's tea party for new boarders and their parents, doubts were creeping in with each bite of a bitter scone. We had been briefed on how to say goodbye, of course, but even then it was difficult to simply shake such a small hand before walking away without looking back.

So after all this time, this is why I hug you, why I wait those extra seconds before letting you go. It could be late at night, on a street corner in London before I return to my hotel. Or like today, when it is you who are leaving to fly back to your home. Tonight, as you walk away through Security, I am on my toes, peering over heads for one last sight of you, waiting for the turn and raise of a hand, for some sign of forgiveness.

new tattoo—
five blue quavers
on a staff of scars

Idols

“Why’s the land so expensive?” I was operations manager and chairing the meeting.

It was because a juju was there, a religious shrine. We could either agree to the price, or shift to another location to drill—we decided on the latter.

A month later, we review a report from the new location. The land is even more expensive. “What the hell’s going on?” I ask.

The surveyor replies, “It’s because of a juju.”

“But there was one at the old location,” I complain.

“Yes sir, it’s the same juju. The village has it on wheels.”

African dawn
the splash of nets
on an oily creek

Half Mast

The helicopter crashed catastrophically—no survivors are expected.

The remains of seven men have been recovered, one little more than a jawbone in the gear works of the engine. A diver sighted the remaining body this morning, some ten miles off Galveston, and the search boat has just arrived back at the dock.

“Worst thing I ever saw,” the diver whispers. “Found him at fifty feet. Not a mark on him, but you know what? He was standing up like a sentry, just drifting with the current.”

guard of honour
the ancient dignity
of pelicans

Lost in Translation

The files are easy: impersonal notes, the occasional reprimand from a boss. But saying goodbye to incomprehensible textbooks is hard.

crenulated cleavage

I remember some geology
with age

As I throw the last book onto the fire, a sheet of paper flutters to the floor. It's an operational telex from a drilling rig, a Nigerian well I recall as an oil discovery—the “yellow cut” gives it away.

12 hour report from Saipem II
location Aki-I, six hundred.
Twist-off fish recovered. Drilled
three stands down to top-Lammar.
Tagged top seal at 9620,
took a kick and closed in well.
Increased mud to 1.72.
Pressure stabilized and drilled
on to 9656. Steadily
increasing sand with yellow cut,
C3/C4 indications,
strong fluorescence, shows on shakers.
Resistivity on MWD,

with good separation on long over short.
Continued down to 9730.
Pulling out. Preparing to log.
Hostages reported well.

I read it several times, the last aloud. The text is equally impenetrable, but there is a poetic beat and rhythm I must have missed at the time. Hard to believe wellsite engineer Precious Nwosu had it in him.

new Serb neighbors
grandma says they speak
in acrylics

Blowout

Drilled into a shallow gas pocket. STOP. Lost control. STOP.
One dead, seventeen missing. STOP. Body unidentifiable.
STOP.

art therapy always the same blood moon

STOP.

When You Don't Smell It Anymore Is When You Should Be Worried

Sour gas contains hydrogen sulfide. It resembles rotten eggs, but at concentrations above fifty parts per million (50 ppm) we lose our sense of smell within fifteen minutes. Above 200 ppm, we risk developing “irreversible pulmonary oedema”—our lungs fill with fluid—and at higher levels death is certain.

insecure mask—
the hiss of vaseline
from my beard

We are driving north and have just passed Artesia, in New Mexico. The last hour has been one of peace. Car windows down, we have savored the heady smell of gas, leaked from the many wellheads adjacent to the road. But we are about to leave the Permian Basin, and already the air is strangely sweet.

Roswell gas stop sign:
illegal aliens
phone home

Out of the Mouths of Babes and Sucklings

The mines are long gone. It is late October, and last night's frost still lingers in the shade of saplings.

My son and I pitch our tent next to a stream and fan out in search of firewood. Suddenly, there's a shout, and I find him at the base of a cone-shaped hill holding a black slab of rock. He laughs as he shows me the charcoaled fronds of an ancient fern.

Now, with the moon rising, our coal fire smokes and wheezes with wetness. As I blow into the core, it begins to glow yellow then orange, and I tell my son about the old times—the sooted wallpaper above the fireplace, the blistered varnish on the fireside chairs, the constant sting in the eyes.

“Did you ever feel guilty?” he asks, quietly. “You know, night after night, burning fossil sunshine?”

calving ice
a seal pup wails
before the roar

That Wicked Right Eye

My best friend died last year. After being diagnosed with ALS, it took a mere 6 months before he had transformed from a handsome, strapping man into a something resembling a preying mantis; this, I would add, was his own self-mocking description. Today, I received an email from him, untitled but containing a link to a page promising a photograph. The temptation to open it is enormous, but I know it is not from him—not unless he has stopped signing off with *fuck you*.

open casket—
the glint of glue
on his lashes

Granite

“I personally like pink,” she said, browsing through the sample slabs for our new kitchen, “or perhaps, green . . .” Even the salesman nodded, which brings me to this:

Green volcanic rocks are basic, undersaturated, devoid of silica, packed with pyroxenes, hornblende and iridescent olivine. When cooled rapidly as lava, basalts can be almost black, but at plutonic depths the crystals take their time to form, growing into gorgeous gabbros, not granites . . . which are acidic, saturated with quartz and flecks of mica within which float the feldspars that give the color—orthoclase is gray, perfect for headstones, while plagioclase is pink to cherry red like many granite moors . . . where I used to run my fingers over those weathered tors, closing my eyes to read their cracked and nobbled skin. I could tell a pink granite blindfold, hands down—cooler at dawn, hotter at dusk.

Of course, I didn't say this, just “stick with the pink,” though by the time it is fitted even the smallest imperfection will be polished out of sight.

after dinner
soothing her psoriasis
strawberries and cream

4th of July

is a day for indulgence, even though we lost. Today, I am at home in my military finery drinking tea, having spent the morning luxuriating in repeatedly pronouncing correctly the word “aluminium.” For the last hour, as part of my build up, I have tried to enter my birth date on several online sites. Each responded with the fateful, hateful message, “ERROR. There is no month 15.” And so now, suitably vexed and primed, I can remove my wig, sit quietly at my desk, and pen letters and write checks, dating each with the day preceding the month—as it should be, not just today, but every day.

Bighorn Sheep
rumor is they evolved
from the British

Birefringence

I am in the archives of the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, staring at each tray as it slides out, at the pots of tiny pebbles, the polished bones and, as one larger drawer opens, a folded smock with its heady smell of musk. Set to the side is the lid of an old shoe box lined with cotton wool, and I ask if I can hold the largest of the stones nestled there, a single crystal of calcite—rhombic, coffin-shaped, perfect. Holding it up to the window, I imagine the day you found it in a cave or limestone cleft far from Abiquiú, the tender way you held two points by thumb and finger, captured by its light and the sight of two suns setting.

distant hills—

I squeeze more white
onto the palette

We are Vessels Filled by a 3-Dimensional Fractal of Vesicles

That is Geoff West summarizing one conclusion from his mathematical paper on why animals show a consistent scaling phenomenon. I nod uncertainly over my coffee, but decide to ask him for a simpler insight that I can share with some of my non-scientific friends.

“Tell them this,” he says, “that sometimes you need a key, a way to unlock two seemingly unrelated observations. For example, large animals have slow heartbeats, yet small animals have fast heartbeats—why? Then again, small animals live for a short time whereas large animals can live for many years—why? When all is said and done, it’s because our vascular systems age. You see, all animals live for around one and a half billion heartbeats.”

Tick-tock . . .

final days . . .

driving through aspens dad asks
are we there yet

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