



**How to make yourself
a small target**

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A series of dark days, India, 1998

The train stopped in New Delhi
but we'd lost track of the days,
the bodies that littered the cabins.
A goat opened a gash on your arm.
Its owner sat with a snake
wrapped around his fist
like a scale turban. It didn't bite
his neck. You prayed. It still didn't bite.

Silk scarves, silk maidens,
temples where they paint your face
with a red blotch. There was a spirit here
we'd paid good rupies to hold
in our foreign palms.
I rolled my sleeve. A henna artist,
a little girl, had traced a universe.
One of the stars was shaped like a ruby.

You got a tattoo of an elephant
along your ivory knuckles. The tusks
dug into the temples of a pickpocket
in a bathroom where I washed the sun
and the stars. The light was blinding.
Celestial bodies trickled down my skin.
For seconds, the wash basin was coated
with alien platinum, but then each galaxy,
like all the old religions, slipped out of sight.

Emergency patient transfer to birthing ward

This is bone and it is old.
Remember, once your atoms were spread
thin over the land. You are now achieving
density, your mother fabricating each molecule
until you cohere. Forgive that her mind
was sterilized by risperidone. You are what she wrought
in the midst of epilepsy; her brain firing impulses
like the last moments of a fireworks show.
Her muscles shook while a nurse
held a thin hand over your eyes.

Later, a bottle rocket shot past your bedroom window
and you had your first seizure. You barely recall
there was a chorus of light and sound that night
as your limbs shot out at angles, an abstract sculpture
of entropy. For years, you slept in bed with your parents
on the fourth of July. You always said it was an emergency.

Sandman stumbles on a shifting diode timer

You had fought with a bomb
at an abortion clinic. You knew nothing
of abortion, but you had seen the movies
with all the colorful wires. A rich girl
with a swollen abdomen sneered off into space
and distracted you. A poor girl prayed
with salty water. Across the street,
a pro-life group was scanning envelopes
for anthrax and lighting up cigars.
You had a dream just then, the final vision
induced by stress. Your hands were a blur
of motion, clipping wires and tying them into bows.
In your dream, a fat man parachuted onto modern Japan
and exploded. The paper said you saved twenty lives,
but you are not sure if it was more or less.

Mi padre, I too have known hate

In the cold desert night, you sent crows
to pin me with their stares, vultures
to sip at my liver, its precious proteins.
I am one trumpet call from the grave
thinking heaven might be a soda fountain
chocolate malts and my hands slipping down
an angel's feathery wings.

It was then the sun rose and I was on a mirage
highway. My cousins whose names
I'd long since given up remembering
were hanging onto the bottom of a train,
every word from their lips blaming me
for becoming a gringo, a forbidden metamorphosis.

I had long envied the life cycle of a butterfly
gluttony rewarded with painted wings
and the jazzy sounds of brass
theme music to carry me to the fields
when I am again a Chicano pulling watermelons.

In my nightmarish dreams, I am no longer a doctor,
my patients having died from the cheap cigars
I had put out on their sutures, the little miracles
I had stitched into their skin.

Awake, I am traversing a blizzard,
but the snow is all black, smelling
of poppies. This is the opium den
where I became a man, where the moon
slipped down my throat and I had visions
of being chased by my father, his anger
at me leaving mother to her needles
and turnicate fluorescing until it became palpable,
manifest as the hoe he taught me to wield
when I was young and he said labor
was all I'd ever be, all I'd ever know.

A soldier remembers basic chemistry

In class, we talked about protons,
how the business end of an acid will donate
them to melt your face. The process smells of napalm.

This morning, I patrol a desert market
and learn about the business end of a car bomb,
an industry of skeletons placed
in my limp fingers
like blunt instruments of war.

On a minor miracle I barely remember

My brother asked how many gunshots
it would take to kill a god.
I said one good bullet
made of silver, wrapped in garlic,
cased in pure wood.

Feuerbach shot the divine up
with so much heresy,
wondered how it survived.
He thought god was the mind
sitting on a throne in the stars.
But in a day when wolverines
with business degrees spar
in suits for every dollar,
heaven looks like fake silver,
the kind in a cheap earring
you give to a girl you like but don't love.

Yesterday, a high school student was beaten
for not showering, for revolting,
for not wanting to be cleaner
than the man you left in the streets
sucking on a paper bag,
an oversized pacifier.

When an ocean can take away the coastland,
make tomorrow disappear like a firefly
under a little boy's boot,
my brother and I drop to our knees,
pray for an old woman
who turned to a needle for god,
for a little girl who let us kiss her once
without asking anything in return.

How to make yourself a small target

Never build a gun from scratch.
Better yet, pretend not to know
the ontology of a gun, claim ignorance,
fail to mention you watched your dad
put thousands of bullets through the head
of some paper man at a shooting range.

Avoid a pocket protector, never wear
a suit, make your life seem pointless.
The more worthless, the better the illusion.
If necessary, hole up in your mother's basement
as long as she has no mafia ties
and hasn't sold anything to Russia.
Especially jars of salt. Anything can hide
in a jar of salt.

Recall your uncle, the bone piercing his heart,
how when your family rushed to help,
you stood very still and watched the calamity unfold.

Remember there are parallels to dodgeball.
If it helps, pretend you are in gym class
and there are rubber grenades all around.
Analyze your surroundings, sort
pedestrians by strength and importance.
Bring someone else into your little war.
Hope that when their rib cage disassembles,
you are not struck by any bio-shrapnel.

In a last ditch effort, emulate
the Cirque du Soleil. Make your body
emaciated, eat nothing,
do cartwheels and flips at all times,
twist yourself into knots.
If they still fire a missile,
dump cold water all over
and pray like a Buddhist
pouring napalm over every inch of skin.

Virginia, it began with snowball wars

Bullets leave an open mouth. Heart valves harden like seashells. Limbs descend, weight in an empty nest. Parents are thinking about unanswered cell phones. His body dances like a molecule of carbon burning. He is a thin layer of smoke adhering to your every thought, occluding every safe haven in your hippocampus.

Today, existence is a few circular waves rushing to a final violence, a hurricane that left burn marks in its wake.

Notes on destiny and flight

*There we all are and there
we'll all be. Except you, Allen.
You're going to fly.
~John Updike*

Your mother is spouting philosophy,
every word ever said about flight,
how even now you are levitating
inside her womb, a penguin with feathery dreams.

Steps to take when confronted by frivolous birthday candles

Say a comforting phrase. Contort your mouth
in a wan smile. It will be forced,
but no one will notice. Breathe the candles' smoke
deep into your lungs. If you are lucky,
it will kill you. Even still, it should interrupt
the pixels of the face you put on this morning,
aware of cameras intending to imprint
every second as a memory you will never relive.

Say a prayer. Or pretend to.
Stall early and often. These parties always end
if you pretend to be a mime,
forget how to talk, how to do anything
but blow out each candle individually,
all of you focused on the miniature smokestacks
like when you were sixteen and mother's car stalled
and you realized that waving for a motorist
might render you as dead as the industrial park
that lay in the distance, in ruins.

Circadian rhythm while bound by Islamic extremists

Remember, you were going to be a chemist.
Gunfire in Iraq plucked you like a set of steel tongs.
Boot camp synthesized testosterone, siphoned it.
Admit it, the night before you dropped your first bomb,
you thought of thermodynamics, how many kilocalories
the town would elapse.

Soldier, fear precipitates and coalesces on skin.
Sometimes you marvel at sulfur, how the smell clings
like napalm. You think of last week,
a boy with sapphires for eyes.
You showered him with shrapnel, with fire.

What terrifies you is that you do nothing, think nothing:
one small revenge you learned in high school
when Descartes slid a bayonet
between the ribs of every angel, every devil.

Following a treasure map on a bar napkin

I weave through a stand of pinon trees,
tread the roots of past, the dust of Arizona.
Red rock juts; gods and totems gather
in a nameless refuge. Outside, silver cities tarnish
while a populace dreams of a golden universe.

This place is its own galaxy, a fire in the alcove
and me revolving about the singed wood.
Tinged with smoke, the mountain air is a stale dream.

When I give birth to a son, steel behemoths
will circle in space; my lungs will be smog
and I will die knowing he'll never sit
on solid ground and pull his hands through soil,
the thick red clay of home.

You forgot you wanted anything except air

for Chris Potter

I.

How many Hawaiian queens can dance
on the cushions of a Chintz couch?
You asked your class when they stared
at essays on Romeo and Juliet.
You never told them they suicide every year
on cue, that they've done it sixteen times,
that you could set your watch to it.

II.

The last year of school, the air thickened, the discarded garments
of a ghost. You checked a red transistor radio
for nuclear war, but it played the Ride of the Valkyries.
The kids asked why radio waves were invisible
like a whisper from God. You said the medium required translation,
like a church bell is silent until rung
by your hands. The sound of artificial thunder
resonated, the tunes of the school jazz band
trumpeting through empty halls that tunnel.

III.

When you were ten, you buried the cannons
from a toy pirate ship beneath your bed.
Did you dream of lighting the wicks
for a salute at Joyce's funeral?
You always said Dubliners is about getting stuck
or dead, the sun rising regardless. Before sleep,
you wrote poems about a naked doll
someone orphaned on your neighbors' lawn.

IV.

At the funeral in your husband's mind,
lilacs shoved purple fists into the sunlit fog.
They flowered in neat rows. His lips:
the sound of silence at the end of a story.
You wished to be water so you could row yourself home.
But the night was dense as carbon paper

and he was looking for truth in cut grass
stern as grapefruit juice.

The sound of a pipe organ's endless breath
played in your ear and you swore the face of a student
wheeled across the sky. His speech was pale and visible
in the holy gloom.

In the morning, ruby glass and smoked sand
that caught the day's light and burned. On the ride home,
your husband sang and the two of you spoke with Beethoven
using only the shapes of skin and bone. The afternoon
proceeded quite well without you, never alone.

About the Author

Jeff Calhoun recently began a Ph.D. program in biomedical science at the University of Michigan.

His writing credits include *Mimesis*, *Lily*, *Poetry Midwest*, *Stirring*, *Ghoti*, *Mannequin Envy* and *Triplopia*.

When he is not paying attention to his family's prima donna Tonkinese or farming bacteria for plasmid DNA, he can be found playing bass guitar with his identical twin brother, Greg, listening to Ben Folds, asking his laptop to tell him the secrets of genetics, or eating banana pancakes.



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