ANOTHER REASON

CARL DENNIS

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

PENGUIN POETS

ALSO BY CARL DENNIS

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For Emily

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I

HABITAT

It’s a lost cause, the effort to make heaven and hell
Eternal, undone by the very creatures
The two establishments are meant to house,
Whose natural habitat is the stream of time.
Yes, it’s a comfort to hope that the good
Who are luckless here are lucky elsewhere,
That their enemies, here triumphant,
Later lose out. Let the violent suffer
A heat more fiery than the rage within them.
Let the betrayers of trust endure a chill
Even more icy than their arctic hearts.
Still, sooner or later, their victims—
The pillaged and trampled and rolled to the wall—
Safe at last in the balmy realm of the blessed,
Will grow uneasy with the thought of their oppressors
In endless torment. Sooner or later they’ll decide
That the sentence already served is long enough.
No one should be surprised when Abel
Finally throws down a rope to Cain, when Jesus
Stoops to take Judas by the hand.
So hell, as imagination construes it, is doomed
To dwindle away, and then heaven as well,
As the saints return to earth to help the sinners
Learn what damage they can undo
If they give themselves to the effort,
And what damage they’ll have to leave as is.

Night Sky

It’s good news for the stay-at-homes like us,
The new consensus among astronomers
That the night sky appears roughly the same
From any spot in the universe,
With roughly the same number of visible stars
At similar distances, in similar congregations.
Those who’ve labeled the view from Earth provincial
Turn out to be mired in provincial thinking.
Look at the star map, we’ll tell them. Note
How the stars have to make do without a capital,
Without a center where all roads lead, a sun
Whose pull proves irresistible to the ambitious.
And if the stars we discern above our roof
Don’t seem as numerous as we’ve supposed them,
We’ll remind ourselves of the many more
That will show themselves when the gauzy curtain
Is drawn back, the veil of dust and ash that now
Obscures their shining. Let the day draw near
When the Milky Way, visible once again
To the naked eye, inspires a silence
Appropriate to a revelation.
Nightfall then will be all that’s longed for.
The morning and afternoon of a cloudless day
Will seem to pass so slowly we’ll wonder
If the stars we think we remember
Are only fancies, the dust of dreams.
But no, look up. Here they are again.

At Home in the Cosmos

My friend writes with the news that the moon
Was full on the night last week when his daughter
Entered the world, a fact he might read as significant
And auspicious, he guesses, if he believed in astrology
And the universe were smaller, the Milky Way
Only a hundred stars across, not a hundred billion,
Each with a claim of influence on a birth chart.

In a smaller universe, I'll assure him,
He'd still feel inadequate to the thought
That he and Louise are responsible for the new arrival
In the borrowed cradle at the foot of their bed.
Yes, they were present at her conception,
But neither at that moment conceived of her,
And neither now has a strategy
For making her future bountiful.

In a smaller universe they would still
Give her the name of Esther in the hope
She'd prove in time to possess a few
Of dear Aunt Esther's many virtues,
As opposed to favoring poor Aunt Minerva.

A smaller universe wouldn't make it easier
For them to find the stories she needs
For inspiration, enough to outweigh
The sad examples she might be exposed to
In the yards of neighbors
Or on the buses to school or in the halls.

In my letter I'll mention my hope she becomes
The kind of girl who walks home on Fridays
From telescope night at the science museum
Entranced by the thought that the universe is too vast
To be weighed and measured, that only imagination

Can hope to embrace it, if not contain it.

And if sometimes it seems too empty for comfort,
So may her route at night from the museum.
Still, she’ll have to walk it. If she’s lonely,
Maybe she’ll find some company in the moon
As it rises slowly above the roofs,
Alone on its sail across the sky.

Silent Manners

In the book of manners that I rely on,
One chapter is devoted to keeping silent,
The one that reminds me now, as I pull off
On the shoulder of a country road to ask directions,
Not to ask the elderly man in overalls,
Who crosses the field to greet me,
Why he isn't wearing a hat on a day so sunny.
If the sun has deepened the ruts in his face,
It's too late now to stop it, the chapter reasons,
And why remind him how much he's aged?

As for the blood-vessel cobwebs beneath his eyes—
For me a sign of drinking over many years—
The same chapter warns me not to suggest,
However gently, that help is available
If he wants to stop. Who knows what escape
I might have tried if I'd had his worries:
The flooding and drought and heavy mortgage,
The money he owes the hospital, though the treatment
Failed to buy his wife an extra day.

Already I owe him something for the reticence
That keeps him from probing when I inform him
I'm on my way to visit an old friend.
He doesn't ask why I've come so seldom
That I can't recall if I'm anywhere near the turnoff.
"You can't miss it," he simply says,
"Three miles straight ahead at the stand of sweet gum."
And when my doubtful look suggests
I may find a sweet gum and never know it,
He fishes a pencil out of his bib pocket
And sketches its shape so deftly
That I'm certain I'd know it anywhere,

So deftly I need to resist the urge to ask

If he ever considered a career in art.
If he didn’t, it’s too late now to begin. If he did
But then decided against it, why finger that wound?

Then, before I’m tempted to ask about
The beautiful sunsets he must be able to witness
Above the hills to the west, it’s time to thank him
And drive off. Why take the risk,
I hear the chapter asking, of reminding him
Of sunsets he used to watch with a companion?
Let him think of those scenes just when he chooses,
When he’s in the mood for recalling
The words they used when they needed words
And the silence they liked to share.

My Noah

I can say here what I won’t say openly
To you, neighbor I share a fence with:
That I’d like you to suffer a little,
Though you sign for my packages when I’m away,
To suffer for the pain I feel when arriving home
On autumn evenings to find your lawn
Bristling with signs boosting the candidates
Who proclaim all will be well when the government
Is too small to intrude on the enterprise of the busy.

To make you suffer not so much as a punishment
But as a useful lesson that intrudes for a while
On your joys as a dutiful family man, out late
Watching a night game with your two sons
Or up early to pick your wife a bouquet from the garden,
You who’ve proven quick, when your mother
Couldn’t fend for herself in her own apartment,
To bring her home with a live-in nurse so the family
Can keep together, safe on its private ark.

I don’t want your ark to spring a leak
And go down with its crew. How could I,
When I believe you’d haul me aboard
If you glimpsed me signaling from a leaky rowboat,
Me or a stranger in similar peril?
I’m thinking more of a mast-shattering storm,
One that will force you and your kin
To crowd a lifeboat in a churning sea
So you learn firsthand what it feels like
To depend on individual acts of charity.
Or maybe a lesson a little less costly
Will prove enough, a close scrape in a fog
With a floating wreck that leaves you shaken,
Spared for no reason that you can think of,
Resolved from now on to be more considerate.

Then, when your ark ran low on provisions,
I'd arrange for you to spy, near the horizon,
Poking above the flood, a hilltop
That proves to be settled by other survivors.
No docking fee required, no need for permission
To attend a meeting about the meager harvest.
Feel free to participate if someone argues
The last to find refuge here should be the first
Required to look for another settlement.
Spell out an option just as practical
In which "first" and "last" prove irrelevant,
Along with the duo of "us" and "them."

More Reason

Though you may be a scribe in ancient Egypt
Or a breeder of horses among the Persians,
While I'm a dry-goods merchant in Peoria, Illinois,
I'd like to believe we can sit and reason together.

Though you attended, with the flower of Athens,
The first performance of the plays of Sophocles,
While I observed one last month in modern dress
At Peoria's regional theater,
We can learn something from sharing our perspectives.

No doubt you believe in the myths that to me
Are only stories, but if I make the effort
Reason requires, I may grasp what's implied
When the hero, in serving one god, runs afoul
Of another just as imposing. Their names may be strange,
But the principles they embody may be familiar,
Two living truths locked in contention.

And if you insist that you hear a voice from above
Conversing with you in private at least once a day,
As do many of my fellow Peorians, while I hear nothing,
We can still sit down and discuss what I
Must do to live in peace with myself
And what you must do so the voice you host
Has an easier time enjoying your company.

Is your list of virtues different from mine?
That's a question we can reason about together
Over a meal we share at a kitchen table
Set anywhere between here and Persia.
You won't be offended if sincerity
Keeps me from praising the camel brisket.
I won't be offended if you fail to ask
For a second helping of rhubarb pie.

Animal Husbandry

Isn’t it time to mention the millions
Of animal innocents allowed to drown
In the story of Noah, the millions sacrificed
As collateral damage when Yahweh decides
To drown mankind? Can so gross an act of injustice
Be allowed to pass without an apology?
The next edition should at least contain a chapter
On what it felt like for Noah and family
To enter, when the flood receded, a world
Of empty fields and forests, of empty sky.
And then a longer chapter on the remnant pairs
Returning to habitats devoid of their kin,
The strain of two bees trying to be a hive,
Two prairie dogs toiling to be a colony.
And consider the loneliness of the dove
Sent from the ark to scout for land
As it waited in the reeds for the ark to open.
Then imagine it darting off with its mate,
Quick to put as much distance as possible
Between them and Noah’s family.
Who knows when the god of humans
Might strike out blindly again in all directions,
As if the world were to blame for his failure
To plan, on the sixth day of creation,
The last two creatures as carefully
As he planned the others. And then his failure
To observe them at least a year in the Garden
Before he urged them to fill the world.

PUNCH BOWL

The friendly way to explain the missing punch bowl
Is to assume I loaned it to someone
On a day I've forgotten, someone who,
By the time he thought of returning it,
Had lost his job and moved to another city
And loaned it to the hostess of a charity ball
Who later couldn't recall the lender's name.
As for his intention to fetch it back,
It may have been shoved aside by more pressing issues:
A sickness, say, that wouldn't ease up,
And the thought of having to face his end
With many projects left unfinished.
So the bowl sits in a bin in the charity basement,
Still waiting to be reclaimed, just like the plate
Somebody brought to a party of mine
And never retrieved. Beautiful cut glass
I've kept safe in a drawer, unused.
It would be a friendly gesture now
To lift it out of the dark, into the open.
Friendly for me to urge any guest who casts
An appreciative glance in its direction:
If it looks familiar, take it home.

Letters Not Written

The letters I haven’t written should be included
In any fair assessment of my accomplishments,
Like the letter telling my friend I doubt that his efforts
To enroll new voters in forgotten precincts
Will make much difference, given the money
Invested by profiteers in the status quo.
Not written and sent because doubt
Is available by the truckload, while belief
Is scarce enough to be measured in ounces
Here in a world prone to fatigue and inertia,
To whatever keeps me from bestirring myself
In causes that I admire. At least I’m ready
To honor those more active than I am.
At least I don’t choose to protect myself
From painful comparisons by converting my friend
To my preference for watching from the balcony.

Or consider the letter I haven’t written my niece
To inform her I think she’s foolish
For spending her summer down on the Gulf,
Postponing her choice of career so she can help
In clearing a beach of tar balls from a blown well.
Not a word from me predicting the sand
Will soon be filthy again, given the sway
Of oil interests in Washington. Instead,
I’m trying to think of her as my representative,
Fulfilling our family’s quota of work
For the common good so I can stay home
And write a few lines of commendation.
Here’s a young woman who seems to regard
Her sacrifice as an adventure.
For her the thrill of washing an egret by hand.
For her the thrill of watching
As it stretches its wings to the wind and flies off.

ACHIEVEMENT

Though he’s finished his summer job, painting houses,
Without making it clear to his companions
He won’t be returning next summer as expected,
He’s told his father he won’t be studying medicine,
That he needs to give himself to the banjo.

As for his father, who’s led a five-year study
On what appeared a breakthrough treatment for tumors,
He’s willing now to admit that his final results,
However promising, are inconclusive.

And don’t forget his daughter, who didn’t join
Her friends when they steered their kayaks through rapids,
Who chose to sit in camp all afternoon
In the shade of poplars, eyes closed,
Listening to the rustle of leaves and grass.

And consider her mother, who’s dug up the greenest lawn
In the neighborhood for a vegetable garden
From porch to curb to explore the notion
That food comes from the earth, not from the market,
Who’s answered the neighbors’ complaints with baskets
Of squash, tomatoes, and corn.

Also a neighbor’s decision to pull up stakes,
After talking about it for years,
And begin again farther west, leaving behind
The clutter of her possessions, resolved to believe
Her new home will provide whatever she needs,
Including a rosebush under her bedroom window.

Likewise her former neighbor’s resolve
To make time every evening, however busy he is,
To sit alone for an interval
Of communing with friends far off

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