

Poems for A Brief Chat, recorded 16 April 2020

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Poem Beginning with a Line from Harlan Ellison

*I have no mouth &  
I must scream,  
says the wind.*

*My tongue knows its  
own taste: the half-  
frozen stream.*

You draw me & I'll  
draw you, I tell  
my childhood self.

We lean like ladders  
against the clouds.  
With one listening foot I feel  
for the next rung down.

The History of Animation

Twelve hundred kids packed the auditorium  
for a high school assembly: a road show  
on the history of animation, brought to us  
by Pepsi. The punishment for skipping  
such mandatory fun was an extra hour  
of school. But some wise-ass  
Spoiled It For Everybody with  
a little  
laughing box.  
In the middle of the presenter's  
introductory talk, a sudden  
outburst of demented giggles  
followed by rapid-fire hos & haws,  
squeals & peals, belly laughs  
going off like depth charges.

The thing about  
a laughing box is, once  
you get one started, you can't  
shut it up. Propelled  
by apprehensive kicks,  
it ricocheted from row  
to row beneath the seats,  
its laugh track whipping around  
like a sperm cell's flagellum  
in a Sex Ed film. As the shock  
wore off we watched the three  
or four minor führers on stage  
shrinking into their scowls.  
Finally it flew  
out – a bright blue  
plastic cube – struck the baseboard  
with considerable force & died  
in mid-guffaw.  
A long moment of silence.  
Then the clapping started, spreading  
throughout the hall. Cheers,  
whistles. The assistant principal  
on his feet, waving his arms  
as the applause went on & on.

## Signs

She set her empty bottle down against mine without looking so they would rock together, ringing—  
whether with a peal or a toll I couldn't tell. So that even before the words of welcome & the first  
fumbling for the right place, well in advance of the mingled cries and blessings, I would feel my skin  
turn to sky & my bones to living water.

Because her eyes held that exact and painful blue one only encounters over country churches—I mean  
those clapboard firetraps whose belfries offer sanctuary to the long-limbed owls, pale as Puritan angels,  
that go about their business at odd hours rarely observed in the modern liturgy. Except when some  
bored child, slipping under the pews, picks up a white wing feather missed by the custodian's broom.

Let's watch him as he waves it over his head, running up to the pulpit to show the startled minister.  
Whose flock shifts uneasily, the old pews creaking, Adam's apples trembling on scented necks.

## How Glass Breaks: Four Theories

1.  
Brittleness  
on the macroscopic scale  
can be deceiving. Measured  
in microns, the fracture surface

resembles the long-lost, infinitesimal  
twin of a rent in metal —  
that famously elastic break.  
So too, then, with glass:  
cavities as narrow as a few nanometers  
open ahead of the crack,  
not-glass  
flowing together  
in the last fraction of a second before  
the wineglass shatters under  
the bridegroom's shoe.

2.  
Atom separates from  
individual atom  
in rapid sequence  
wherever the amorphous  
solid — glass —  
encounters stress.  
The blind cane of an atomic  
force microscope can tap  
all along the edge of a crack  
& find no sign of deformation,  
no pits or pockmarks.  
Glass must therefore be  
as we'd always thought:  
immaculately brittle.

3.  
Atoms under pressure slip  
& slide across each other;  
nothing is simple. Friction  
leads to atom-sized cracks  
& the cracks widen into  
the necessary cavities, yes.  
But all along the fracture zone,  
the same pressure  
responsible for the break  
makes the gaps snap shut  
immediately thereafter.  
Let's call them *nanovoids*,  
these model wounds,  
healing as perfectly as if  
they had never been.

4.  
Approaching the fracture origin,  
the surface of a crack appears  
increasingly smooth. But under

an electron microscope, each region  
shows the same kinds of features  
at a finer & finer scale — a fractal  
self-affinity. Beginning at ground  
zero, we name these regions  
*mirror, mist, hackle,*  
*macroscopic crack branching:*  
energy magnified in chaotic order.  
Given an opening, given vibration,  
atoms in the amorphous silica will  
change partners — a choreography  
of rings that first contract, then  
join together, encircling ever  
larger volumes until the last  
bonds fail & the atoms  
dance irrevocably  
apart.

#### Blast Area

The blast was larger  
than anticipated: beds  
of limestone can dip  
in odd directions.  
The ground shook with release.

In the yellow house  
next to the quarry,  
the crash of a plate rolling  
off a plate rail  
& onto the tile floor  
was followed by a couple  
seconds of silence,  
then the trucks  
yelping into reverse.

The windows were all open.  
Raindrops began to blow  
against the curtains.  
An index finger  
resumed its pilgrimage,  
dipping into  
the hollow at  
the base of a throat  
too frozen with joy & terror  
to make a sound.

## The Sycamore

The young veteran — a double amputee — is still learning how to pilot a wheelchair. He stops a few feet from the concrete lip of the pond, gazing across at a sycamore shining in the sun. His eyes travel down the trunk and into the water where the shadow goes one way and the reflection another. A carp slides under the flesh-toned bark. Meanwhile, his flannel shirt has turned into a movie screen for reflected sunlight, dazzling the mallards crowding around his chair. He glances down at the dancing ghosts on his chest, then reaches behind for a bag of breadcrumbs which he sets there where a lap used to be, in that abyss.

## Advice for Prospective Troglodytes

Living under a rock, you learn to listen.  
It's not all thuds & rustles & the odd shriek.  
Things grind, other things grow,  
& the difference can be subtler than you imagine.  
A slow wheel can sound a lot like a snake.  
You learn to tell a clock from a bomb,  
if only for analog.

Living under a rock, you won't have heard  
anything from the digital revolution.  
But voices sound so much better  
for traveling down through the body  
& coming out the delicate bones in the feet.  
Words sound like the thoughts that bore them,  
grave & resonant.

Living under a rock, the news may seem  
one-sided, with an over-emphasis on body counts,  
but the ground can only catch whatever falls.  
You hear little from the affairs of distant stars,  
& from the wind's public whipping of the trees,  
you pick up nothing but the applause.

But at least with the proper sort of rock,  
rolling will never be an issue.  
The neighbors won't complain.  
Moss gathers  
like a second, softer head.