

The Backwards Year

Poems

Joe Weil

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Reversal

December 2017

The river, too full of itself,
Engorged with a 40-day rain
Runs in reverse, flees from the sea,
The sea which might have absolved it,
The ocean checks its watch and
Noting the river has stood it up,
retreats a mile, even ten miles out,
Leaving detritus of horse shoe crabs
mollusks, drift wood, penny loafers,
condoms, needles from that Hospital
by the bay, doll's heads, the half rotten
corpses of gulls, a man in a brown suit,
bloated, yet still clutching a pin wheel.
I take the pin wheel from his swollen
Fingers. The wind makes it spin.
The man rises and tells me he is
Joe and works for the government.
Only he has forgotten which one.
I show him a map of the world
Which I keep at hand, just in case.
And he says: *There it is! Estonia!*
When he walks, the sea in his shoes
Makes a squishing noise.
The pin wheel is for his daughter
Sophia, which means wisdom.
He begins to cry. Perhaps she's dead.
Perhaps he lost her to whatever
Lack of vision made him walk across
Thousands of miles of sea
I say *call to the river. Listen*
And the dead will rise. There is a Shofar
for all grief. All of us soaked in losses
And the spirit blows its horn.
He shouts Sophia as the river runs back

Down through the vast hills and onto the
Plains. The sea runs even faster to embrace it.
Everything is prodigal. All that I love
Has welled up and reversed its flow.

Poem to Myself

When the stuff you have on the wall
is just stuff you have on the wall
which you hardly look at at all and
when you're phone is 9 thousand indie
bands on shuffle, and you're in debt
and your job is like some old Harold Lloyd
Film, with Harold dangling off a skyscraper
and you realize you're too smart for the
fake smart people who don't even
know who Harold Lloyd is, and too dumb
for the truly smart people who know, but who
manage to handle knowledge like
something to which they'd flip the bird,
well then—maybe you can stare at a grey
cat and say: *I wish I were dead. I really want
to die right now. I want to cut my wrists
and screw everyone*, but you don't because
you're too old not to know emotions only
last for a long time if you're clinically depressed,
and there's drugs for that. Six hours from now
someone might say something that
makes you laugh. It's not enough, but, for now
it'll do. Harold Lloyd's ghost is alive and well
thanks to the Smithsonian. There are people
who care and care deeply about shit
that doesn't just hang or repeat itself every
200 songs. You would like to meet one of
those people. Once you stared at a painting
for seven hours. You weren't high or drunk
and the painter wasn't even famous.
You didn't need to buy it. It stayed in your
memory. If you close your eyes now
it will reappear. Ignore the tears that are massing
like some evil horde at the borders of your retinas.
You are the person you want to meet. and

everyone has been a cock block, an impediment
It is hard to meet yourself. You believe all the
rumors spread about you. You have fallen into
the wrong kind of faith—one where no one
'worships.' Get up, fuck face, gird your loins
You are someone who stared at a painting for
seven hours. They can take away your job, your
children, your house, everything they think makes
you sort of worthwhile. But you know the young
boy who stared. he isn't going anywhere. Put your
hands on his shoulders, touch him, feel his body shake
because he is so afraid, stare with him, cry with
him. He's the one who will save you.

What We Need to Live

I still get junk mail for my Ma
from the Maryknoll fathers,
41 years after her death.

I always include them in the change
of address. After all no one
who gets junk mail

is ever *really dead*. I have
my book bag from 4th grade,
filled with wrinkled homework

and the first story I ever wrote
told by a narrator who
admits at the end that he always

lies when he's drunk (and he's drunk).
If I am ever cremated, I want
my ashes in that book bag, and

fuck the church who says
sacred ground, which really means
give us ten thousand bucks.

The book bag is puce green
I used to belly flop on it
on the ice of the Acme parking lot.

I fended off six older kids
who thought I might
have money by swinging

it wildly, eyes clenched.
So much has been lost in my life—
to homelessness, to my own

innate disarray. What I have managed
to keep, if only as a story told
sober, told with the full

weight and knowledge of my being
is what keeps me alive,
keeps me praying with my

daughter Clare when she
can't sleep, and Hail Mary
full of grace becomes her lullaby.

I want to show her
Her grandmother's name on
the junk mail, the smiling

Maryknolls—fathers who
haven't gotten a dime out of me
in 41 years: Clare, Clare

Clare on the envelope, Clare in her
bed., Clare which means light
but reminds me of Clay

and means earth to me, the ground
where I take off my sandals;
Ground set apart. Arc of my life.

From Clare to Clare, from
light to earth I'll go. No one
knows what sacred ground is

until they have stumbled on it.
Grace for me has always been
a kind of stumbling.

What do I know of walking straight
except into walls? I am still swinging
that book bag with all my might,
eyes clenched—my body a gathering wind.

At a Bus Stop in El Mora, 1980

When someone tells you not to worry
and doesn't offer eternal life
or at least a good sandwich
know they are just
trying to get rid of you

in a nice way, of course, No doubt,
perhaps even with an arm squeeze
but most of the cheap forms of comfort
in this life are paper napkins close
to a raging fire.

Poof and up they go!
over the roofs of the happier neighbors.

Confronted with a brain tumor
a divorce, the death of three children
an unsightly wart—someone will
always say:

“it'll all work out” (translation: Go away)
or “God never gives us more than we can bear,”
(which means quit complaining)
or I'm so sorry (which means it's on Facebook).

If a person shows up juggling enchiladas
and fire balls for your sake,
or cleans your drain gutters and windows
or stays up all night with you as if on watch,
then it's probably not someone you expected.

The apostles fled.
The family has better things to do.
The best friend was getting laid.
Someone you hardly thought of or perhaps

didn't even like much came like Raphael
to walk the long journey with you.

Forgive your friends.
Remember family is limited (thank God)
Apostles are supposed to betray us.

Once, when I'd lost a bad job
but needed any kind of job, and was
sitting at a bus stop waiting for
the number 57 to Kenilworth, New jersey.

feeling lower than whale shit,
(and we all know where that is),
an old woman sat down beside me
and asked me why I looked so sad
and when I told her, she said: "Life crushes

us a hundred times and we are not pressed
into wine. Don't believe those idiots.
We are crushed." And she showed me the mark
of the camp, not to compete, but to let me
know there was something
behind her words,
and I said: "Forgive me. My troubles
are so small compared to yours."

And she said: "oh no. The world
makes contests. The soul does not
measure." And she kissed me on my forehead
and gave me a chicklet.

There is no moral to this story.
She was kind, like a broom sweeping
leaves in a fierce wind. She was

kind in the face of futility.
She was one who had put God
on trial for war crimes, had found God guilty
and then celebrated Shabbat.

She did not try to comfort me
or say my pain was insignificant
or promise there would be another job.
She sat with me until her bus arrived

and swallowed her whole.
And there was only the sound of traffic and my
sobbing, and I no longer knew
why I sobbed, or whether it was grief
or shame, or joy. I was rocking
like a man at the wailing wall

For all I know I was praying—
if that's what you want to call it.
It was prayer, but at the place
where praise and lamentation are both
beside the point
My heart burned like a paper plate
and it ascended. It was winter, a dirty
bus stop, and when the bus arrived
I put the change in slowly, carefully,
and stumbled to my seat.