

Impact Events

Open with found footage of Tunguska,
that thing we forgot, and then,
the slow dissolve, Primorye, into beach
another Great Dying, but calm,
dark Chelyabinsk splintering the sea.

This is the outer edge of things, and this,
Kamchatka, disembodied and unfolding,
telling us to fall in love, make babies.

A first mistake, like Whitehorse and the rest:
legacy waste, pandemic, arctic thaw.

And the bees, Oumuamua, are involved somehow
with Starlink, the ISS and space debris,
seeding the gone exosphere like Chicxulub.

The Lawns

We were driving through the winding roads of Northcliff
having taken our dogs for a walk in Valerie Avenue Park,
and I was looking out my passenger seat window,
hypnotised by the clean, well-paved roads and high walls,
not really thinking about anything except, maybe,
that the entire suburb had been designed by an architect
or an artist rather than a city planner.
Or, maybe, that city planners back then were artists
or architects preoccupied with things like space,
volume and dromology. It felt as if you weren't driving the car,
that the road simply gathered us into its intention,
ushering us through a series of smooth gradients
and inclines, into traffic circles, circle upon circle,
an ever-widening series of arcs, slowing us down
or speeding us up according to its qi.
There was a point where the car trundled along ...
We had time to marvel at the late day light
oozing through the car windows, lingering there,
inside the glass; to study the filoplumes of a red bishop
flying in time alongside the wing mirror,

dipping and swerving to the road's inclination;
and to hear the summery echo of a lonesome game of tennis
unfolding on a personal tennis court somewhere above us,
behind the sheer perfection of those high walls.
It's tempting, isn't it, you said, to call it out
for what everyone already knows it is.
The dogs were curled asleep in the back seat,
their bright black noses twitching at scents beyond human measure,
their shut eyes darting after something dreamed.

The Rowers

Sunlight on water. The rowers, ghostlike
and distant in the dawn mists, scull their oars.
Their backs are turned away from the headland,
away from whatever, like Klee's *Angelus Novus*,
cockeyed yellow rooster of our catastrophe.
From the pebbled shoreline, looking on,
arranging and rearranging my own feathers,
I marvel at what the oarsmen cannot see –
the far sector – lights and paved roads where the trash cans
constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage.
I would like to stay. Awaken the dead. Make.
But a storm is blowing in from Paradise.

Tipping Points

It seemed like just another day in the city, but I was wrong.
I'm always wrong about such things, so I called a friend
I'd never called before. You're not wrong, he said,
I can feel it. An axial tilt throwing everything off kilter.
A shifting of the poles. Butterflies in the stomach of the world.
We arranged to meet. We met. We discussed the matter
over coffee, busking through the epileptic city. Watch out,
I said, as birds dive-bombed slantwise about his head.
Close call. Sparrowhawks, he said, The best birds. Two birds in one,
body and name fused in feather and fluted bone, raptor
and songbird fused, as the name suggests. We walked on
at an angle to the world's breakfast: Amasi, Iwisa,
the broken necks of amber empties skunking the pavement,
light-struck. Sand grains shimmered just a little, trembled
just a little off the usual axis. Above us, hijacked buildings
ducked for cover, scattering across the plaza like a crowd.
What is happening!? I cried. And my friend said,
What isn't happening? That's my real concern.

Parked at the Shell Select Between Newcastle and Howick

Until the pumps run dry, just keep on driving,
past the burnt-out facades of what-once-were houses,
spaza shops, petrol stations – those amazing relics
of the auto-industrial age. Someone once said
that there was nothing more sublime
than a petrol station lighting up the long dark road
between somewhere and somewhere else:
the bright shell, symbol of Venus, our new beauty
floating, demure and mindful, in a night sky
crowded with private jets, drones and Starlink satellites,
sheltering our buried lakes of oil.
Stop. Turn off the ignition, stretch your legs
on the beige lawn shadowing the parking lot, and look
out across the landscape, a landscape of land
untitled, untitled, vast with the occasional animal.
Use the restroom. Eat an unsatisfying pastry.
Think about mileage, bars of pressure, your precious cargo:
half your home packed into the boot and back seat,
along with dogs, storm-lights, the parrot, spare batteries,
lawn chairs, a potjie, and food for holiday living.
Blink. Smoke a cigarette.
Ready yourself for the long hours of road ahead,
the roadside sights just beyond the hem of the city's skirts:
the settlement, jerrybuilt and unplanned, loaded with spare tyres
to keep the roofs and DSTV dishes from blowing away,
the roofless farmhouse, long abandoned and squatting
vacantly amid dungheaps, the caged bridge,
the lost walkers who somehow find their way
to these margins, these cambered medians,
vaulting guardrails, crossing the exalted speedway,
walking into the oncoming traffic. Soon, the first turnpike,
the tithe for Hermes Trismegistus, god of tar.

Otther

Another year in the city of pitmines and tar.
The pickers drag their mountains of plastic
up the hill, past the Gasworks, to the dump.
This city's eye still gleams, only less brashly.
Birds have nested in its hair of stripped wire
and inoperable communities gather and disperse
in its hollowed-out guts. It doesn't really care.
Parents still name their children 'Politician'
in memory of something called the future.
It's winter in spring now, summer in autumn.
I miss the sudden thundershowers of late afternoon.
Now, the sky wrings out a dishcloth's worth of rain.
Even so, the Christmas beetles still arrive
like clockwork, to die inside the house.

An otter has been spotted in the dam
at the botanical gardens where we walk the dogs.
It remains hopeful, I think, instinctually coded
to believe that it is still part of a species.
I watched a young gymnogene burying its claws
in its own feathers and crying for mother in the trees.
What can one do but stand a while looking up,
waiting to see the thing that voiced that cry
mattering through the branches, and, having seen,
to stand and watch and listen and feel ugly.

Cloud Profile

Let the sky aspire to what it wants,
accruing interest in its way, the way of a sky
hoarding its bank of birds (prinia, siskin, turaco)
or cloud (cirrus, lenticular) ... lenticular:
the cloud I've yet to meet in person,
yet to greet, cordially, before making the gesture
for Please, sit, the gesture for Would you like ...?
Before unfolding my dossier of assets
and casting grim looks over my profile.
You say, I say, that you spend only rain?
And lightning, yes, and hail and sometimes frogs.
It's a mug's game. Only the carbon draws interest.
Pondering Everything held in cloud
(pin codes, pictures, personals) life's fog
drones on inside some undocumented server.

Compulsively Working Up Variations

~ for Hedley Twidle

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of J. M. Coetzee.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three J. M. Coetzees.

III
J. M. Coetzee whirled in the autumn winds.
He was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.

A man and a woman and J. M. Coetzee
Are one.

V
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
J. M. Coetzee whistling
Or just after.

VI
Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of J. M. Coetzee
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII
O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden novelists?
Do you not see how J. M. Coetzee
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That J. M. Coetzee is involved
In what I know.

IX
When J. M. Coetzee emigrated to Australia,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X
At the sight of J. M. Coetzee
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI
He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For J. M. Coetzee.

XII

The river is moving.
J. M. Coetzee must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
J. M. Coetzee sat
In the cedar-limbs.

Abandoned Stations

Arriving in Lewes, I find myself, briefly
at a loss for words, and deepened,
I think, like a coastal shelf, remembering.
Then, I blink and listen for the birds,
but they are far away, it seems, regathering
in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.
And I am of the crowd now, and forever,
having passed through space by road
and air and rail and road again. Unblinking,
I find that everyone has gone missing,
leaving the concourse empty, me, with time
to look again at Lewes, domed and arched,
like a cathedral sheltering The Runaway.
It seems as if the station hoped to keep
a memory of the traveller as pilgrim,
moving only by and for the grace of god.
... I read somewhere, that the headhouse facade
was made to look just like a Swiss hotel,
though one, I think, now filled with holes,
Sussex pigeons, people, Brighton gulls.
Regathering myself, I take the turnstile down
the rainswept ramp in search of my late train.

Kali Yuga

What's the time? Noon, I say, and then he says, What year?
A concrete recess, hole in wall, off-street.
I've stopped to talk. His name, he says, is —.
He is all blankets, a swaddled man, lost to Valkenberg, here.
The question skitters out across the lot
where parked cars shimmer in noonday heat,
waiting for work. The library is closed. This much is certain.
Seagulls unpick the tarmac bit by bit. Then I look down.
— has resumed his game of gazing through me,
muttering something to someone I can't see.

This is the Kali Yuga, Age of Iron.
Except it's not. There's not enough disorder to displace
philosophers and their poor from their pavilions.
Let's call it violence. The system, the city without walls,
without an outside. We know why we enjoy its art of ruin:
the asteroid arriving like a sentence, Kaiju, the hole in the sky.
Expressions of our desire for the miracle
of another world's intrusion into this one.

Sky and Silo

... a bleakness and anonymity that registered in the mind as a ghostly longing for something that was beyond retrieval.
– Don DeLillo, White Noise

Back in sky-and-silo country again.
Fences bordering fields of god knows what,
landscape gathered to farmscape and escarpment
meandering off the shoulder of Colenso.
Listen for the birdsong that's gone missing
as you sit behind the wheel of your SUV,
outside a Midlands town where pylon signs
hawk apricot preserves and genocide.
Coal refineries process the clouds, our air,
and the radio cuts to static. No signal. Nix.
Nothing but the bakkie dusting out of a mirage
with its unchanged cargo of labour.

Thoughts and Prayers

Let me drive you to the hospital. You need help.
I almost said this once, but then I didn't.
Instead, I watched the sanderlings and turnstones
rearrange the remnants of a shore.
Sometimes I think I'd like to find out more
about this place that we're forced to live down.
Each day sequesters carbon less and less.
My thoughts and prayers are always with the future
nobody, apparently, saw coming.
When I'm back here, sometimes, I think of visiting.
Sometimes and always. And I always almost do.

Uncollectables

Winter again, just like that, somehow.
Eyeblick Summer, Autumn sneeze,
no Spring. And now, the captured sky
lodges in for the long haul. Listen.
The House is settling.
Maybe we got slightly carried away.
You can't argue with a Boeing 747

skying in low over a packed stadium.
I didn't understand what was happening.
This is my disorder: a deficit of joy.
Outside, stray winds picker through garbage
gathering impeached cables
from the deadbeat streetlights.
Cell base towers are the new trees.
Birdsong, our recorded calls.
Sentiments for the fire-drum.
Give it news, best practice, uncollectables.
The words of Butternut and Cupcake.
Just burn everything.
This is the only way that we'll keep warm.

Orpheus, Miner

I forced the marble // into its delicate mouth
– Cheswayo Mphanza, 'Pastoral'

I stepped through a torn corner of the world
and stopped, lost again, near an unkept enclosure
bracketing the same unlettered lane.
Listening for the lilac-breasted roller,
I watched the wet sheep gathered there to crop
the withered churchyard's grass to weathered stone.
But the bird had a marble in its throat
and could not call. Someone had left a spade
behind in silt, beside a half-dug hole,
while on the ridge a figure cracked in soil
limped nakedly, and turned, and waved a hand,
as if to signal some emergency.

Zero Summer

A windowsill waits for your arrival.
You'll be there,
holding a piece of coffee, holding space
but only later, leaning into it,
forehead pressed against glass braided with raindrops
agitating slantwise across your translucent reflection.
And within this,
the pentimento of another foreign, familiar skyline,
another city with its distant smokestacks,
still pillars of smoke braided through with hair.
The imperceptible declension of an aeroplane
furrows your brow,
belated ventriloquy of sound grasping at braids of contrail,
a bridge linking cheekbone to cheekbone,
freckles of traffic, unblinking sea-glitter,
the vitreous rainshine of an eye.

The freighted bay is still as a postcard,
ships dead on arrival,
harbour cranes mounting the smog-line to pin
horizons of high-rises to their billboards.
There are dead zones there, too,
concrete islands, encampments, colour-faded tents and tepees
far below your neighbour's yellow window
crosshatched with the circuitry of illicit connections
and yesterday's disembodied laundry.
A fly-over ends abruptly, carved in space,
hovers there, just like home.
All this reeks of the wild's extinction, and ours.
Mumbai's urban leopards
sunning themselves on solar cells,
the chacma lurking amid satellites,
kamikaze crows dive-bombing the windfarm.