

5 Poems from
ALREADY IT IS DUSK

by

Joe Fletcher

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ALREADY IT IS DUSK

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Article: “Elemeno”

Hollins Critic: “Already It Is Dusk”

Octopus: “Antenna”

Slope: “Ben Nez the Winged,” “The Wounded Americans”

ANTENNA

Let us return to the discipline.
Let the melons be halved and set
to drink the sky's cool milk.
A leaf is born.
Brigades advance, bearing in their flesh
the recipes for unborn cities.
Let the first word speak, shatter
the glinting spyglass of the one
on the far hill, sheltering in larch.

Is he traveling? Is he resting,
like a sloth? Is that a skin of ice
on the lake, or are winds gathered
elsewhere, rattling the sign of a pawnshop,
or streaking skies with turbulence?
Philosophies unhinged from life
snap in migratory winds like worn
streamers on a flagpole in the desert.
Listen. Watch for what comes out
of cracks in the tundra, out of
the sink in the demolished villa, out of
you, who want so badly for things
to be stirred, for breath
to rise to your brow and to break
in the salt-spray of an idea.

Is the politician alive?
His name is branded on the small of his back.
In his final hours he cried out
to passing bandits. Should we
dig him up and kill him again?
Sharp-winged landfill birds careen.
A sniper practices on a frog.
Let us enter the mud. Let us wait
for the furtive prophecy blown
from southern swamps, where
a theater presents *The Worm in the Goblet*.
Does the day's lust end?
Rains rub the land. Truth slips.
Let us touch, in awe, the stem of thunder,
the stone wheel rolling through meadows.

ALREADY IT IS DUSK

Today I forever lost my yesterday
to wind-seared weeds and
brackish channels, to the throat
of the osprey and the smooth white
bone of the castle. Is it possible—
so many souls condensed to twitch
in my cup of coffee, which reflects
a piece of my forehead?

There they go, to cities of gutted
industry, where swords clatter deep
in museums, where lindens
absorb the murderer's laugh.

I don't want it back.
It had already chiseled me
into a new behavior and made sad
every road that plunders green
hectares of forests. Men can stop
holding the walls up because today
is a javelin whistling through mist,
a pumpkin shattered on a pier while
final boats wink over the lip of world.
Don't go too near yourself.
You're not who you say you are.
You never were.

ELEMENO

His two legs draw strength
from the earth's deep veins.
Something rattles with each inhale.
In the gray scalloped sky of late autumn,
when lakes smell like crumbled leaves,
you can hear him. But no one gets
a good look. He keeps it that way.
He is the chimera that slips between
eyes and things. He rinses, weary
from the hunt, at the gurgling grotto,
in all his fairbooth shabbiness,
behind his patch of color.
His two hands never touch.
He is alive because the world is.
He is fuming westward.
He is the breaking wave.
The gray flower.

His hair is the color of sawdust.
Immense the muscles coiled
dormant in his skinsack.
He feeds on the air.
What is nightmare
but to know he is near,
to hear the cracking of twigs

and to feel him brush
the flailing tubers of sense?

He left a book. It changes.
There is a hole in it.
No one has read it,
though we act as if we have.
It's draining. We're rusting.

If he leans into you, if he cuts
from you a piece of sleep—don't squeal.
You have to eat a roasted crow's wing
or lick the pungent armpit of a sorceress.
You have to find in the sedge a bitter nut
to hold beneath your tongue. For balance.
You might be alone for a long time.

He obliterates your ideas.

BEN NEZ THE WINGED

told me to be calm and I tried.
Told me to burn my shirt, stained
with salt rings and stale sweat.
Told me to burn the straw inside
the violin case protecting the glass cube
within which was a cocoon plucked from
a verdant sprig abloom on an Asian hill.
Before the valley was smote by passage.
Before the placentas of the women emerged
gray and splotched. He told me.
He touched my neck, which trembled
like a pipe carrying smoke under a mountain.
I threw a handful of gravel at the mirage,
which stayed. I wanted to be protected.
He told me nothing could be. He himself
was naked and large, a pale
mushroom from some barren zone.
He looked like he didn't have any bones.
He told me his roots grew inward.
He wore a makeshift crown of shingles
ripped from the plunder of the previous village,
bound by a vine dangling withered leaves.
He wore it over his bald and peeling scalp.
I pointed to his crown: *that's protection*.
He told me it was an offering, that every-

thing was federated in a general sacrifice.
He was sweating and drawing up tufts
of parched grass and stuffing them in his sack.
The sun was very very hot and we hung in that land
like game skewered above the makeshift pyres
of splintered carts. I brooded and backed away.
To avoid a quarrel? Because I wearied of what
he told me? I didn't know. I slid away on my rail,
he on his, each to his own traversings, each
with his own idea flickering in the great dark.
But he called to me over the cooling dunes,
a strip of sunset on the rimrock.
He told me to be prepared and I wasn't.
He told me he'd come to suck in my last exhale.
Now I drag my boots to smear my tracks.

THE WOUNDED AMERICANS

They were bleeding on the sacks.
We handled them roughly
and they seemed to deserve it—
there in the square beneath
the scrawled obelisk and its idiot thrust
toward a drained sky. Its shadow
fell into them like a clock hand,
swiping chunks of time from their hides.
One lurched on tiptoe,
his blasted heel swaddled in gauze.
All of the air hung still and stung the lungs.
A trash cart squeaked by behind its burro,
up from Baja through stinking chaparral dust.
Their kids scrambled toward it,
eyes roving for anything shiny, lips puckered
for dugs, heads dented by a doctor's tongs.
They were the next American hatch.
The elders watched for those that might make it.

They began to tell their story.
It was one story and seemed to fit them all.
They tilted toward the speaker, who changed
as the story shifted from mouth to mouth.
It was a long story. I drifted in and out of it,
like a cormorant skimming a harbor.
They told of hot rain that fell
on the boy who entered the murmuring

forest, prairies flecked with zinnia,
the spangled estuary rushing inland
to mill towns; they told of a priest who
with a jagged bottle-half severed the tendons
of his member, which swung sapless as a polyp;
they told of the spires that became visible
come August and pollen clouds
blown from scotch pine, and the flock
they pulled behind them in a wheeled cage.

There they were, staining the shale,
waiting for any gust of strength.
I saw the artery that linked them.
Some were kneeling. One fed
millet to a macaw, which flapped
and croaked. They leaned against
each other as if it were the last
thing to do. Were they out of work?
Out of meat? Their story continued
sporadic as starswirl floated through night.
I saw one combing another's head.
What did they want? What did we
want from them? All our want
got ragged, broke and drifted
like a scrim above our gathering.
Where was our next dwelling?
We sunk sleepward.

Joe Fletcher is the author of the chapbook, *Sleigh Ride*, published by Factory Hollow Press. Other work of his can be found at *jubilat*, *Octopus*, *Slope*, *Hoboeye*, *Poetry International*, *Hollins Critic*, *MoonLit*, and elsewhere. He lives in Carrboro, NC.