

Survival Tips for a Parallel Universe

Tim Lockridge



Mid-American Review Featured Poet Chapbook Number Eight

Some Notes on “Parallel Universe”

I can't remember my dreams. I'm not sure when the inability began—I do recall several recurring dreams from my youth, but it's been more than a decade since my last recollection. This makes my mornings especially odd: As I rise from bed, the physical remnants of dreaming remain. It's like something tiring happened in the space of sleep, and my only proof is a waning fatigue. The groggy walk from my bed to the coffeemaker often involves an interrogation of this feeling, some attempt to siphon a narrative from muscle memory. It never works.

As such, the following poems are an attempt to reclaim the spaces I've conceded to the absence of dreams—which isn't to say they're concerned with surreality or the odd products of dreaming. Instead, in the act of writing, I've tried to meld routine motion with imagination, tried to build some amalgam of the day-to-day and an alternate, but still familiar, reality. I'm not a scientist, but I find science's most far-fetched theories fascinating, and I want to write from that place—from some other landscape where everything seems knowable but isn't. This, I imagine, is the actual stuff of dreams, the odd engine that fuels too many manic, long-winded retellings. But it's also the stuff of writing and of poetry, that desire to wade through the fire of synapse and the thrum of adrenaline (or, in my case, caffeine). This is what I miss most. This is where I write from.

—*Tim Lockridge*

Something Unfolds in the Distance

Some days you say the word meadow
and the meadow is not actually
a meadow but the memory of someone
you haven't heard from in years and now

her voice unwinds in your answering
machine. And her voice is a nest
of poppy seeds and her words are pollen
and you realize this when the sun splits

the window and you only want to fold
your hands and let doves loose in the snow.
And your hands are a sidewalk that misses
the kiss of her skirt-hem each morning

and you imagine some city block, a daily
walk: cafe, newsstand, parking meter.
And there's a lull in her speech, a pause
in her plea and here you build a new

rendition of the past: untilled fields
and buildings unbuckling. You consider
confession, maybe admit your heart
is a plastic bag and your desire a streetlight.

Or is your desire the autobahn? No
matter. You erase the message and spin
dials on the stove, bring water to boil.
Your mind is clover-covered, your thoughts

are worn fence posts—your desire:
long mornings that sink into noon.

Prologue

I've lived another life in crop circles,
bent the stalks and found a center

in something expansive. This is how
we pass years in nowhere. Sunup,

sundown, our eyes framed in echoes.
Focus lost in motion, the scraps

spilling into road. A new harvest
in headlights, our cars parked

at the edge of a field at night and so
many hands consumed in a search

for precision. Do you remember
when we found that dinner table

between those blades of corn? Candle,
candle, combine. I watched dust

collect behind you, some haze
hanging just beyond. On the right

nights they say you see forever, so I've
lingered in the ditch and built a home.

Survival Tips for a Parallel Universe, Part One

You wake in a field and you know
the feel of this field, the soft glance
of grass against your cheek

like a wineglass or sweater saying
yes, we've met, remember, it was
years ago and there were arms

and arms not yours and in them you
slept and woke to an empty blue
where the moon was and the smell

of apples hung between the blades.
And above you a single crow lights
the morning and you wonder: Is that

my soul? Is that the wind-struck
part of me? But then you see
your hands are not hands, just

gears and pulleys bound in some
intricate mess of metal. And you
lift your new arms and say, "This

is not my century, this is not the sky
I slept to.” But there is nothing near,
save the air humming wild through

the long grass and the field quiet,
just the earth waiting for a whir,
a tiny gasp that means nothing at all.

The Inertia of Failure

The first time you touched
another face you knew
the movement meant
something, the same way
canvas breathes morning
after the first blue stroke.
Soon evening and parting
and how to handle half.
Hands fall back to sides
and years pass, yet every day
a new doorway but the same
walk home. Now you think
words are just the loosing
before the real business
of hands to breast or back
or bedpost or afterthought.
But how to say what arms
can't? You once left someone
at a Midwest rest-stop,
rolled down the windows
and let hours of argument
fall against the plains.
Now the space between
Atlantic and Pacific
seems like a pause,

a hitch in the breath
before the pulse quickens.
Still you imagine ocean
crested the coast
and meeting midcountry,
the weight of the waves
bringing you toward and away
from a disappearing shore.

Survival Tips for a Parallel Universe, Part Two

The town has emptied, the streets silent,
the tents since bundled and rolled.
An aluminum can tumbles between

passing lanes and you again consider
the metal parts of you. How long
before maintenance, before some small

piece snaps and you have no idea
where to go: Doctor? Mechanic?
Soon a soft rain falls and you worry

about rust. Before there was little
concern for the future but now
there are only questions. A single light

burns in a window above and you think
maybe this is my sign, maybe this
is where they've hidden the answers.

But when you climb the fire escape
a loose rail rips some tiny plastic
tube winding from elbow to wrist.

You hear an awful hiss and your vision
blurs. Still two stories from the light,
you sit on the steps and rest your head

against the damp metal. The clouds part.
The stars kiss your wet cheeks. You hear
a train, giant pistons pushing into tomorrow.

Over a Plate of Pasta, You Are Presented With a Difficult Question

And in the moment you manage
to muster something, but say
only, "I was born with talons

in my chest." She signals
the server and will never
know the broken blossom

of desire: your limbs losing
leaves, some cold snap
tethered with retreating

sun. You stutter, cover,
"I've lived too long
in the language

of hands," but her chair
has returned to the table
empty. An old couple stares

past their shared spaghetti.
The man shakes his head.
Light breaks the window

and you almost offer
some surrender but remember
the horizon's heavy hang,

the stirring of something
clawlike in your lungs.

A Scene From the Epilogue

We spend weeks folding origami birds.
Through twilight we watch wind lift the brittle
wings into a long back yard and tomorrow.
They flutter in the red haze of evening, hang
on the invisible, ride into some vanishing point.
We imagine the yards between them, shards
of daylight mapping minutes of flight. Around us,
screen doors stutter and slam. Our hands grow
paper heavy and worn. When the horizon empties,
her eyes say: I am tired of flight. I speak
of plans that will populate the blank space
between this gesture and the next. But too
often what we want is really what we want
divided or divisible. I crease another corner,
fold another bird into something smaller. It flickers
in the suggestion of wind, falls to one side, trembles.

A Break in the Branches

I was lost in the woods for weeks
without almanac or divining stick.
You wouldn't believe the number
of bears. The trees sang my name
but only in verse, never a chorus
or memorable melody. You might
say it was the usual business
of forestry: the occasional brush
fire, frequent frustrations with civil
twilight—too much whittling
and wishing to etch initials
in tree trunks. You never showed
up with basket and blanket,
so I built a small shrine and lined
it with berries and polaroids.
I considered smoke signals
but also log cabins; these days
it's a debate between desires:
To be lost or found? What waits
in the distance? Wood huts,
steel girders, I dream of burning
both: some scar in the sunset, a gray
haze that hopes you're still waiting.