

Clay Matthews

Elegy for a Light Going Out

And just like that a big star fell out of the sky
and went streaking down the outer globe
of the visible world. A giant ball of gas
can only be understood as a giant ball of gas.

I put the nozzle into my car and stand
with my hands in my pockets and wait
for all the other people to notice me
because I am, because people I need love
and I need you all to recognize that I am
standing here pumping fuel just like you
and that last night the sky changed forever
and didn't even make a sound.

But there is the sound not heard
because there is speed and light and echo
and distance to travel and miles to go
before I sleep and miles to go and it has
to make you feel amazing and ancient
to see a star die, because stars live
forever in human years, and in dogs years
even longer than that. Witness
and wonder. Wonder and wander. I move across

the earth by foot and with various sorts of wheels
and have lived to see the death of something

older than the seed that spawned my family
tree. Come hither and for this we will drink together.

Even this land is older than any accurate conception
of it. Because a million years is a million years

it makes absolutely no sense. Take that to mean
what you will. Take that and run with it.

And run high and run far and run hard but friend
there is no out-running the run. We're here

to be beautiful and then to die. And to die
beautifully is the best thing of all.

Like we would put on a show for all the little creatures
that crawl across the world, for one member

of a generation of spiders or ants or flies
that we hadn't wiped off the face of the earth

with the stroke of a hand. We are dew and we are
new. We are bold and old and told

of one-thousand things in the world we should not
touch. But we represent the we in our reaching,

in our touch. We represent the current moment of being
in a long, long history of beings.

And so a light goes out and another story begins.
And I take my hands out of my pockets as if

pulling something fresh from the ground.
And shake the dirt off, and clap them together,

and begin a song about everything I love to sing.

Linger

From across America tonight and I hold
you tight. The days go on, whatever I have
to say about them. And past Wichita the trees
leave and the grass goes green and fields
of cattle and hills upon hills, water
and beauty and truth and a good classic
rock station coming out of the city. It follows
me as I go along, first north, then south,
then eighty miles per hour. Every year
I get older and Supertramp gets better,
more accurate, as I learn again the lyrics.
18th and Vine in KC, MO, and I proceed
through life with the accompaniment of light
jazz. And history, and all the homeless
just a few blocks away, lined up for soup,
some sugar for a sweet tooth and a bed
and a pillow to hide that tooth away.
Away, away. Far and away. Maps, and the real
wears through. And it wears boots, and buckles,
and feeds its horses one at a time, in the trailer,
at a gas station just outside Topeka. Coming
or going, I wonder watching them eat,
and also the point of destination or departure.
A rodeo, no doubt, somewhere in America.
And Kansas City a part of America, too. And I-35,
campers, cattle, and road kill, or calling out a name
into the divide of air and land: America, America,
America. This is not a poem on themes
but the theme itself. I hold a cup and drink
my coffee while it's warm. I hold and I hold everything
against the wind that threatens to take it, or hands,
or memory, or slow progression of time
from one note to the next, the first
being held to the point of frustration,
as it keeps going on, and on, and on.

Hounds Begin to Howl

A fried chicken joint and the buffet, steaming.
There is a narrative theory of making your plate,
but it depends on whether you let the potatoes
run into the green beans, the green beans into
the corn, or keep the food apart from smashing
against each other, from loving thy neighbor
and gravy and touch. I could say I have eaten here
before. I'll eat here again, etc. I make little promises
like this because it keeps the motor in gear, drives
me toward another day, another meal, another
vicious bite into hot, crispy breaded flesh. I should
not say flesh so much it sounds too metaphorical.
Like calling people meat. Meat, meat, meat.
It's a might, might, might and I don't know. Might
come the end. Might come a rain. Might come another
woman with a biscuit and baby on her arm.
Outside there is an enormous white chicken on wheels
for parades and general advertisement. Inside I am
the little red rooster, too lazy to crow for days.
I've got the blues, and we've got the blues. If you've
got the blues, then sing, child. A return to the line,
a return for one more, a little extra coleslaw, okra.
A return for the cobbler and ice cream and coffee.
The world, and a-one, and a-two, and a-three. Chords
and choruses, verses and refrains, meals and prayers
and cars filling the parking lot. Waiting patiently
as good cars do, for the next stop, or home, or highway.
Waiting as we all are waiting, and biting and chewing
and swallowing one mouthful at a time. Learning
moderation once as a child, learning the hell
with moderation again as an adult. Belts and silverware,
napkins and faces, everyone returns for another helping.
Through the blinds I see a man I know leaving,
and the sun, that strange ball of light in the sky,
shining down while he sticks a long arm out the window
and waves, to all of us still here, to what remains.

Clay Matthews' work is published (or will be) in Black Warrior Review, Gulf Coast, Court Green, LIT, Forklift, Ohio, No Tell Motel, H_NGM_N, and elsewhere. His chapbook, Muffler, is recently out from H_NGM_N B_ _KS.