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## A Crack of Light

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*Matt W. Miller*

## A Crack of Light

*“He buys the Indian’s moccasins and baskets, then buys  
his hunting-grounds, and at length forgets where he is  
buried and ploughs up his bones.”*

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

I.

Roosting in a December dusk,  
Fort Hill, Lowell, mimetic mill town

in the gloam, coveting some dark  
plain, snow falling, gently as factory

ash, my back to Shedd Park’s unlit swings  
and slides, ballfields, and a cemetery

drawered in an incised ice,  
I catch, on a ripped lip of roadsalt wind,

a downtown that sirens, serrates  
across the bony air. Through knuckled

trees and the arthritic angles  
of triple-deckers, down Rogers Street,

over the valley of millbrick condos  
and factory restaurants, of bridges

and churches, of section-eight row houses,  
I see, above a glaciaded canal

the Christmas-lit redbrick smokestack  
masted above the Wannalancit Mills.

Tented by 5,000 green bulbs hung hot  
on cables from the blacklipped

chimney mouth, the smokestack glows  
bright as any heathen holiday,

severe as some steampunk carnival,  
against the sudden evening closing in

around vinyl siding and sagging pines,  
all blurring into shadows, into profiles

where drag of cell tower and cable,  
where crack of cobblestone and blacktop

soften in the dust dimmed starlight  
of streetlamps and windows

all waking up now into a supertime cue  
of LCD blue.

And in centrifuge,

the festooned smokestack of a textile mill  
rechristened for Merrimack's last red

king to be exiled for god. The city flywheels  
around the smokestack as on a glittering

spoke, spinning under moon-creamed  
clouds back into a dream of a past

we won't get past, this we a town, this town  
a nation in miniature hanging blades

over every block. Incandesced by Farley White  
Company to be a communal Christmas tree

with twenty-foot star, the chimney is a searchlight  
of Bethlehem, sings the skyline,

cold lights the river in stark reflection,  
leading no wandering wise men to anything

but an old mill no longer a mill, a tree that is  
not a tree, a sachem unmanned,

sealed so no flue-gasses blow or bellow  
to rub yellow knuckles into the clock

tower back, all time cards now mud  
for barbeled carp. Tonight it glows

in a kind of hallelujah green, electric  
in its muddled cocktail,

its babel stalk of late industrial might,  
junky affirmation, and watchtower

delight of half-asleep children praying  
for a humpbacked sleigh to fall from heaven.

II.

But today is a day past the nativity  
and now that electric tower gussets all of us

into the New Year, like the last lit candle  
of Christmas night's sempiternal swindle,

corposant that lures me, my eyes  
tugged on its hook, its list of histories

I can't make out in the watery dark  
but which rewild me like a child whiskey-

eyed on the spitfire of a toy trolley.  
In a breath, a blink, I could be downtown,

leaning under the chimney, over a canal,  
cracks in the ice wide enough for me

to fall through and forever forget and be  
forgot. And why not? The feeds we fat on

howl our time on this spine of ablated ice  
are ticking down in lockdown drills, emptied vials

of Narcan, and the runoff legacy of textile dyes.  
Then ice will return, like an adagio creeping

and we will drumlin, turn glacial flour,  
be once more unmolded moraine,

unparadised from all dust and breath,  
beyond the scouring of this anthropic hour.

But digression doesn't diminish  
this, the so still and so beautiful of the hill,

of this winter pitch of old growth elm and birch,  
at the edge of the old millboss mansions,

in air so raw I could convince myself  
I'm clean again, in rebirth again, my blood

busting oxygen, endorphins, meaning just  
a Lucky rolled between index and thumb.

III.

Tomorrow, my son will turn ten.  
The boy of him is thinning from his chin.

His shoulders are widening, the earth  
under him is his to hold and yet his eyes—

oracular on some sadness still to come.  
What in all of this can I give him

but flat feet, football games, and the misspelt  
names of long-dead Indians?

What's his birthright but theft, desecration  
of this dirt and every flesh? To my daughter

I may, or must, bequeath fallen empires  
of cotton, gun powder gods, mass miracle

epidemics, the poisoned veins of engines,  
ploughed-under marshes, dirty canals

of aborted labor, and the last plague  
poured, finally, into our only river.

This the condition of mine and time.  
By God's word we planed this palm of soil

down to its tendons. And now, nine parts weep.  
And now grunts Cain's blue-eyed tribe

as we seek answers for the sins we sewed  
in the shadows of slumbering volcanos.

IV.

Dear God, was this your intent? Dear God  
of wine and breath, I waited for you

in the pussy willows when my answers  
got me kicked out of Sunday School.

But you didn't show. I played alone  
in kiss of catkins throwing stones to broach

casks in the Concord's April ice. You're no more  
than a strophe of flint across steel.

Your good news may have moved toward life  
but we became a book of Dis and Leviticus.

And now to say I'm sorry for our history  
becomes a too-convenient apology

for those bricks stacked on brown backs,  
and mortared by young girls' blood.

Look, here on this hill above Indian Ditch,  
the Great Bear's son, Wannalancit,

last sachem of the Pennacook, broke  
the Mohawk, preached his father's peace

when Metacomet scorched the colonial twilight.  
And still his land was stolen and his bones

at last he hauled from his Wickasee Island,  
where now Vesper Country Club looms.

Yet it is these bones that bring me  
to my own, to all the others entombed

in these towns, this time. Now is the hour  
for redress, to spin from the distaff

something more than the past's rough weave,  
more than the allotted bolt of Lowell,

and yet I'm pulled into my own small,  
it's all so much to rewind and try to untouch.

And so, to cut the belly and slip this mortal  
helix has a certain eventide allure

as I trudge up this frost-skulled hill  
to enter the cemetery.

Carved from marble,

just beyond the wrought iron gate  
of this necropolis, a pale lion perches

upon a plinth. I imagine him quickened,  
lit into life by this winter moon. Then maybe

he'll take me by the throat down this hill  
to the Pawtucket Falls and fling me

like a rose into the ice floes of the Concord  
where, like Thoreau, I will meet

the Merrimack. But then to float on, past  
Lawrence and Haverhill, past the violence

of a season violently failing, finally rattling,  
and slide north beyond Newbury and Deer Island

to be swallowed by upstreaming stripers,  
dagged by the beaks of returning blue

herons, a siege of them gutting me  
under Key Bridge, beyond Gangway Rock,

shat out past Plum Island, my annihilation  
tossed into the rim of the Atlantic at last

to become blur of sky and ocean,  
become equal parts krill and leviathan.



Yet again the river bends me back and now  
the night's cold has its cost. Ossification

in ears and mucus stalagmite, corneas  
of black ice collision. No, I can't stay lost,

tip out from this cradle yet, in this the minute  
of my movement. Already I'm not alone

in the dark. Lamplit windows silhouette  
the shapes of bentbacked survivors,

shadows standing over stoves and tables,  
struggling up the steep of stairs,

shadows in relief along the street holding  
open doors, waiting for busses,

banking on any gospel of possible,  
looking for a fix in the alley or the aisle,

saints as good as any others,  
miracles of laughter, tears, and of try,

who sometimes even blessedly see each  
other as they lean into flogging gusts,

booting over salted sidewalks to go home  
or head out or just find reason

to move forward against the gullet  
dark of scoliotic December.

V.

If now is a wound that will not heal  
and all of our fingers slick upon the pommel,

red on a shuttle thrown between this weft,  
this we woven through one warp of earth,

then all I can do is love you. All of you. And let you  
love me. Allow for a faith in the lightning strike

of synapses, that there is some truth  
laced through the bacterial rub of microbes.

Down the valley, the smokestack bulbs  
glow suddenly warmer now,

each a crack of light in the long night,  
one for every thousand garish, audacious,

useless, perfect life that receives  
few prophets, less prophecy, and still insists

against the ghost, though we know we'll fail,  
will fall to frost, to fire, to fade.

Then the hacking of an IROC engine  
crawling into the park as some kid slides

up to its window to buy a dime bag rips  
me from winding through this wool

to recall the touch, the taste, of kin  
and kindred who will hold out a while longer

in their soft-lit houses, in rusted trucks and rail  
cars, in late-met classrooms and early-hour

barrooms, in church basement meetings  
and in the tattered bedrolls under a weeping

willow, for me to fumble toward grace,  
toward the only home that we have left.