



c o m b a t i v e s

DARCIE DENNIGAN

Orienteering in the Land of the New Pirates

The New Pirates are men who, as infants,
told their moms *Keep your milk* and went and suckled gas pumps.

In towns of peril and experience, were the twelve-year olds
shrugging *It's an island all around and no water.*

Coming home to dark houses to moms saying, *Baby*
they turned our lights off.

ConEd turned their lights off. And ConEd turned
their stove off, turned their heat off. And Citgo
sucked the gas from their car. Citgo sucked back the gas from the car as they drove.

It wasn't that they weren't tender, didn't want to cry—
just, they saved up each yelp and lachrymal drop
till they could stick a finger in a socket and light up the house.

I am not the fountain of all pity.
We were all afraid to go near that neighborhood.

I thought, with gold caps on their teeth, they will smile and kill.
Yes, I thought, but they are sort of— beautiful.

Destiny for them is right now and right now and right now and the air with spit hovering in it.

Hiding in the town shadows, the air gagged
with electrical currents, the cars, the people on the street lagging—
even the moon lagging behind the tides—
they would come, the New Pirates, dark in the dark.

And the light they make and the light they take is gold.

That's the romantic in me, yes, but if you could see the latest maps.

The world is all dark
except for the pulses of natural gas etched in purple
the white of fireflies and the golden coils that trace the movements of the New Pirates.

Plus the thin red light off one police car chasing them down.

If you flipped the switch on that map
you would have seen the little boys, New Pirates-at-the-ready,
standing in line like for a carnival ride

because isn't adventure always better than stagnant water?

—I say this standing waist-deep in a swamp.

Sure the sludge this time of year is golden.
It is a swamp of ancient leaves, logs from ancient forests.
It is a few calendars until a seam of coal.

The golden sludge I think is a collection of sunlight.
It only wants to be stirred.

A crew of men from the inner city are robbing ships of the rich on the high rivers,
the highrises, the Hoover Dam.
Their treasure is energy, their loyalty to— living?

It sounds stupid.
We were afraid to even go near that neighborhood.

Still, if I had a son, I might want him
to make a New Pirate of himself. He'd be exhausted, always too thin, but that's an honest

heartbreak. I wouldn't want my boy to think the world is kind.
Wouldn't want him to think his games have no dark side.

Me the supermarket braggart—
My boy was the first to mechanize his fist. My boy rides a windmill when he needs impetus.
blah blah blah, *he surfs on oil slicks.*

My boy says energy is the only life.

I imagine this waist-deep in a swamp.

Or am I the swamp, wanting only to be stirred?

And who is the man on the map in the dark
eating out the heart of the swamp?

Sentimental Atom Smasher

“The punchline in a poem is always death.”

So this guy walks into a bar and asks for a beer. Sorry,
the bartender says, I only sell atom smashers

And the guy says well isn't that America for you—
every happy hour Nelson's a homemade physicist and no thank you,

just an ice cold one, but it's too late— suddenly, he's on his butt
in a ballfield where handsome men are chasing a ball over grass

sad grass, yellow like the hair of his once-young mother!
and again he says, no thank you— I've seen this movie before

And the bartender says it's a joke and you're inside its machine...

Hey, the guy wants to say— I'm not *the* guy—I'm me.
I'm just a guy who walked into a bar. I'm just a guy who retreats

to his car for a private cry. Instead he sniffs and cries out—
The sky smells like the bologna from when I was a boy!

Ahh, says the bartender, ahh yes. Someone has left
the refrigerator door of the cosmos open a crack

And the view! cries the guy. The beauty of an atom smasher,
says the bartender, even from the cheap seats you see

clear into 1952. And the guy, squinting into the distance,
starts to bawl. Maybe it's the vendors hawking

commemorative popcorn, or the programs promoting emotion
("the matter of the universe!") printed on material whose pulp

was milked from the trunk of a winesap apple tree, but—
What's the matter? says the bartender. And the guy says,

I'm confused. Am I allowed to be homesick in a joke?
Yes, the bartender says. It's elemental, the bartender says—

how streets are downtrodden atoms and falling leaves are aflutter
atoms and beer is over-the-moon atoms and the moon's an atomizer

of all matter's perfumes: And the guy starts to parse it out—
wait, I'm not smart, but if emotion's a material substance

then when a leaf falls in my lap and I hold it
like an about-to-be- abandoned baby, I'm touching "aflutter" in 3-D?

Dear fluttering leaf!
Streets—I'm sorry for stepping on you! Apples—for coring you, and beer—

A guy walks into a bar,
—actually just the beer-drinking bleachers of a ballfield— and says
is this some kind of joke?

Well, says the bartender who has observed the little lamb
and the tyger burning bright and tickled their particulates,
because your life has lately been stagnant, we have yoked you
to a joke and we await the gasp that will gas up the cosmos...

Just then, there's a hit at the plate— and it's going,
it's going — gone to smash the guy in the skull

And since baseballs are made of nostalgia atoms, the guy,
with concussion, says I want to buy a coke for a nickel

I want to install apple-pie-perfume makers in the crotch of every tree
Bartender, bring me dried nose-gays! Start the stalwart pageants!

And the moon's spritzing its perfumes and the phlegm is thick
and fast. And the bartender says time to wallow in byproducts:

Where we planted peanut shells, we got shaky, palsied trees,
where we planted nickel cokes, we got nicked cans,

where we planted baseballs we grew large, sad eyeballs
as we watched for something to grow. That's what you *get*

for probing into atoms the guy wants to say— but
the bartender's dark eyes, like strange pigeons, are flying

over centerfield, over the rooftops and watertowers of the joke's
universe, over alleys and cold valleys of refrigerator light

toward an infinity where some street kids are hurling a ball
in the moonlight and the moonlight is curdling into freon...

There is a dark building where a child is
about to be born. The smell of bread is about to

break. The guy is yelping , O spring evenings!
How I used to stand murmuring in the alley by the bakery...

But who are those boys throwing baseballs? Who is this baby?
O bartender, tell me, what is the message in this light rain?

Is this the moonlight's awful, final punchline?

...And the bartender says, kindly, Guy, no,
it's just your mother. She wants you to call her.

The Last Entry in the Book of Blogs

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The shepherdess held her head low as she asked me for paper. I have come down the mountain she said, and her voice was not caught on the store's security tape. Her movements, her heavy garments were not caught by the electric eye. It was late, the store was closing, but she did not know how to read these signs. No moon that night. That week, per the almanac, nothing but cloudy and raining. Nothing to write on unless I offered her my computer, but we were closing soon, I'd be turning the alarms on, plus it was the sort of hot night when the city had blackouts, the kind of electric weather the almanacs would eventually predict. The truth was, there were no mountains anywhere close—there were no sheep. But she had an ancient cane, and her robes were ample, and I thought *prophet* before *homeless*. But I did not offer her my computer—it was the kind of night when letters on a screen didn't add up to words or symbols or even strung beads. And she moved with a mechanical stiffness, and I thought the paper might be for her last words, and if the power went off, her words would be nothing. A light suddenly turned off in the distance is at most light detritus— which is just blots... of darkness, in which the shepherdess wailed then, for parchment paper...*parchment oh parchment paper...* It was then I thought there might be an end coming, that we in cities should have kept some *things*— some animals, some vegetation. To have slayed our lambs by the light of the moon then scrawled on their dried skins our last words— to have written on a house, or a rock, or on bark— The moon is no longer the dish of silence that shepherds eat, *or*, Night wasn't always such a blank screen, *or*, Midnight's lambs had at least that bowl of milk till morning. In a kind of slow, slow nursery rhyme, the shepherdess shifted her wool tresses and lifted the veil from her face, revealing a beatific robot dying in the electronic night. *Long live this mystic science*, she said, and as I put her words on my screen, the rest of my writing was no more than a herdbook entry.

In the night of words, there is no habitable city for the mind.
They said the natural moon was behind a cloud, but it was a wasted
neon wreath called *moon*, typeset in dead letters. That night
many of us ate our dish of silence and went to sleep. Many of us,
obsolete, deleted ourselves.

*And on Her Deathbed, Los Angeles Says
"If the Archaeologists Cannot Uncover Me,
Let Them Christen Me Los Lost. "*

Begin with one's self, the guidebook says,
but I, City Beautiful, got lost— wasted
by my vastness, snuffed out by my breadth,
fallen, fall-lorn. For one, I was west of
an uneasy sketch of wind. I was the sun's
end— a space to regret's left. A dark
song. Worse, I was vast. One big vat of blue.
Watch as I lay waste to my immensity:
Full of holes, I kept myself together with bees'
glue. Around my little lean-tos, around
my great towers strewn with flowers, my bees
patched the cracks. Then they lost their sting.
My streets traversed. They lost their bearings.
And I careen downhill... I have a tombstone
inside of me. I have a debt and a lease— I am
on loan. Abandoned, I lose my closeness.
My glue unsticks. My boulevards double
their distances, then diminish, then intensify
their shale density. Subterranean plates move
like that. The sun seems to shine like that—
loosed, then lost, then located again. And
when the sun gets mislaid, loss shines—
darkly. For the guidebook, I declaim the dead
streets inside me... Who Culled the Locusts?
Who Cut the Lord's Rhapsodic Diatribes
with Besotted Toasts? Clicked On the Circuitry
of the Thick Dark? But if, in this Neon Neon
Kingdom, someone could locate me.
If this locution could find me a place. I fear
that no one will excavate me, that I must crawl
inside my own cavity and ask, who was she?
A search very like baring the line of bees
in winter. For the spot the sun went at last to rest.

Train Station Reincarnation

I was buying plastic bottles of water again
in our local supertank store

staring with the other shoppers at the water containers as if they were windows
into the pool or spring or pure silver faucet of their beginnings

when I felt that old exhilaration—
that old sense of space and people and a high ceiling.

I sat down on a shelf as if it were a fine old bench.
How far was this place— material-wise— from our old train station?

The lost station with arcs and latticework and a moonstruck clock
that we carted off to the meadow, reduced to its parts.

Here, bowing over the produce division, could be the arcs
and in the shopping carts, I saw the latticework, and—

rows of water containers stood like rows of clerestory windows...

Yea, I proclaimed-- *we have transitioned* train station *into a Titan's parts*:

Stain powder, spaghetti strainers, sanitation stock. Roast things, toast
things, tiaras, transistors. A few small nations. Tit for tat.

These crowds of parts—
assembled from the train station's swarms of folks— and the folks

were ghosts of the crowds of pre-station meadow grass... Perhaps
someone in the station missed the meadow beneath the tracks?

Not me. I *was* steering this toward a train station elegy, but for the tintinnabulation
calling me to Aisle Five, for a sale on rat-catchers and anti-nit ointment.

I was pushing my cart that way, and the others were pushing their carts
(we were the reverse of the linked cars that used to pull us)

when there, next to the sale items, I saw they had split *metropolis*,

left behind its slime and slop, and were selling its pools, and loops, and lipsticks.

And after saying to the stockboy, you repackage our train station
and you reparcel our metropolis —indignant, thinking of lost

tracks and arcs— I stopped.

If you could have gotten a look at him — the stockboy—
he had stockboy boots, and probably dirty socks and yuks,

also a locomotive cap and sooty complexion and a Meadowlands concert t-shirt.
I felt that old sense of communion with him among the sale items.

I wanted to say to him, I don't know where to bear my loyalty.
But we were already aboard the ridiculous orb of this colossus—

and when the tintinnabulum sounded again and a voice requested artificial sod
assistance on Aisle Eleven, he went, and I followed him there.

from *The Feeling of the World As a Bounded Whale Is the Mystical*

The child asks, What can keep me safe?

We are riding in the car. She has seatbelt
across her lap, her shoulders, her gut.

She is little so she has seatbelt across her forehead.

It is a long ride, a good time for the plane crash story.

She is driving. She feels safer when she drives
and this allows me room to gesture expansively

about the plane taking off, the plane going down.

"No," he said, defiantly.

It was the man who sat in the plane as he drowned.

"No," he said, "No." Except he said this in his head.

Fine, the child interrupts. I will not ride in planes.

Wrong, I say. She's unschooled in the ancients. It's tiresome
to repeat the same adages, but that's what you do with children:

*For when there was a plague inside the houses, the people slept on the roofs.
What was that but sleeping on the whale's back?*

*And the stars made a whale in the sky and the grass
shone so brightly in the starlight that the night had a greenish hue.
And with the night whale shining down—*

He who slept on the roof died on the roof, the child finishes.

It was the story of the old ballplayer I was trying to tell. A good man,
he was flying rice to earthquake victims and the plane stalled over the sea...

*Before the plane went down the man saw the four corners of his fate:
rice paddy where the lethal bulk of the last bag of rice grew
grass on his first ballfield*

*moss on the rock where he sat while his son was being born
green dial on the control panel—*

And the man who saw this saw the green whale, the child finishes again.
She is curt when she is scared.

Why I let a small child drive my car—

well, this child knows my feelings on safety.
If we only stay careful and awake—if we are good people—

Ha. Then nothing. And the child
asking her question. Her quavering. Hope against hope. Child voice against adult.

We drive, avoiding highways
where a beautiful green slippery beast sits trapped behind the wheel of a car,
speeding toward a sea dock— when there's nothing but desert around.

The child calls me on my cellphone to ask, What is fate?

It is late. I imagine: the child on the couch curled up.
That grief has made her

smaller. Her cheek in the curve of her phone.
I whisper over the line *A beautiful green whale rolled over in the sea.*

He saw the whole sky in one blink and then he saw through the sky, his eye was so big.

I imagine: the child rolling her eyes.

He cried whale tears—

The child interrupts, Why? Because he had seen the limits of the world, I say.

The child says, Clearly, he doesn't know what water and air are.
The child says, That whale's a fathead.

The green whale was crying. He was rising and falling on his whale tears.

I ask, Do you want to know what whale tears are like?
No, the child says, I want to know what fate is. Fate is boring, I lie.

What will happen to you, when will you die.

I have never believed in a sky beyond the sky, but the child has.

When she believed— it was water she could drink.
For me it is like a jelly jar after the last drop of water has dried.

For the whale whose eyes were too big, now *this curl in the world.*
This well in the water.

The child has always been smarter than I. And surer.
Meanly, I have waited for a night call like this.

*And so the beautiful green whale left home to live
where the lip of the water eats
the light of the moon.*

I imagine: the child scowling.

Forget it, she says.
And then, indulgently, You can tell me what whale tears are like.

Poor green whale, I could have said, with significance,
bound ever after to look only within himself.

Which would have been to say, I know that a bad thing has happened to you.

And if the child asked the right question, I might have said, Wait.
Wait, the abridgement of *whale's fate*.

But the child is scared and I am scared so I say, Whale tears?
Imagine the mothersoul of honeysuckles. Size of diaphonous elephant ears...

The child has had a parent die. When she asks Will I die?
I say, Where are you? And she says very smally, I don't know.

Both our phones sweaty in our hands.

Then comes the story— who is telling whom?—
about how I would have comforted her, if we lived in the same house.

How I would have padded downstairs to her on the couch
to put the house phone back in its cradle.

How we both would have stepped outside into the small yard of a green night
to take fistfuls of bright grass, crushing the grass to form the curves of a whale

as the green juice leaked through our knuckles.

And though I knew it would ruin her, I would say to the child,
You be the yard and I'll be the grass.

You be the sky and I'll be the gas.
You be the whale and I'll be the fence.

How near morning, the child, again her clear-eyed self,
would have asked, What are we doing?

And I said, Child, let's last.

COMBATIVES Vol. 1 #2 – Darcie Dennigan

1-2. PURPOSES OF COMBATIVES TRAINING

Soldiers & poets must be prepared to use different levels of force in an environment where conflict may change from low intensity to high intensity over a matter of hours. Hand-to-hand combatives training, **along with a regimen of strong poetry**, will save lives when an unexpected confrontation or aesthetic dispute occurs.

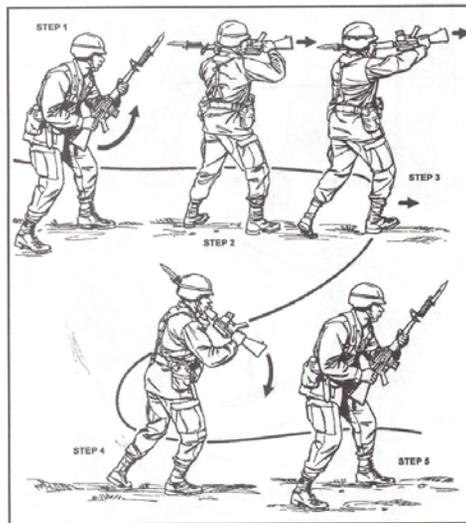


Figure 7-16. Smash movement.

1-2. DEFINITION OF DARCI DENNIGAN

Darcie Dennigan's recent work can be found in the current or future editions of Atlantic Monthly, Court Green, Forklift Ohio, H_NGM_N & Indiana Review. She is the recipient of three Pushcart Prize nominations & scholarships from Bread Loaf Writers' Conference & the Byrdcliffe-Woodstock Artists' Guild, where she worked on many of the poems in this issue.

cover collage – *On the Countryside, A Child Left Behind* by Noah Falck.

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