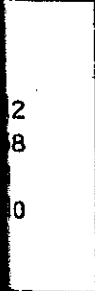


MEAN FREE PATH

BEN LERNER

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DEDICATION

For the distances collapsed.

For the figure
failed to humanize
the scale. For the work,
the work did nothing but invite us
to relate it to
the wall.

For I was a shopper in a dark
aisle.

For the mode of address
equal to the war
was silence, but we went on
celebrating doubleness.
For the city was polluted
with light, and the world,
warming.

For I was a fraud
in a field of poppies.

For the rain made little
affective adjustments
to the architecture.
For the architecture was a long
lecture lost on me, negative
mnemonics reflecting
weather
and reflecting
reflecting.

For I felt nothing,
 which was cool,
totally cool with me.
For my blood was cola.
For my authority was small
involuntary muscles
 in my face.
For I had had some work done
 on my face.

For I was afraid
 to turn
left at intersections.
For I was in a turning lane.
For I was signaling,
despite myself,
 the will to change.
For I could not throw my voice
 away.

For I had overslept,
 for I had dressed
in layers for the long
dream ahead, the recurring
dream of waking with
alternate endings
 she'd walk me through.
For Ariana.

For Ari.

MEAN FREE PATH

I finished the reading and looked up
Changed in the familiar ways. Now for a quiet place
To begin the forgetting. The little delays
Between sensations, the audible absence of rain
Take the place of objects. I have some questions
But they can wait. Waiting is the answer
I was looking for. Any subject will do
So long as it recedes. Hearing the echo
Of your own blood in the shell but picturing
The ocean is what I meant by

α

You startled me. I thought you were sleeping
In the traditional sense. I like looking
At anything under glass, especially
Glass. *You* called *me*. Like overheard
Dreams. I'm writing this one as a woman
Comfortable with failure. I promise I will never
But the predicate withered. If you are
Uncomfortable seeing this as portraiture
Close your eyes. No, *you* startled

Identical cities. How sad. Buy up the run
The unsigned copies are more valuable
I have read your essay about the new
Closure. My favorite parts I cannot follow
Surface effects. We moved to Canada
Without our knowledge. If it reciprocates the gaze
How is it pornography? Definitions crossed
With stars, the old closure, which reminds me
Wave to the cameras from the

∞

The petals are glass. That's all you need to know
Lines have been cut and replaced
With their opposites. Did I say that out loud
A beautiful question. Barbara is dead
Until I was seventeen, I thought windmills
Turned from the fireworks to watch
Their reflection in the tower
Made wind. Brushed metal apples
Green to the touch

All pleads for an astounding irrelevance
Structured like a language, but I
I like the old music, the audible kind
We made love to in the crawl space
Without our knowledge. Robert is dead
Take my voice. I don't need it. Take my face
I have others. Pathos whistles through the typos
Parentheses slam shut. I'm writing this one
With my eyes closed, listening to the absence of

∞

Surface effects. Patterns of disappearance. I
I kind of lost it back there in the trees, screaming
About the complexity of intention, but
But nothing. Come to bed. Reference is a woman
Comfortable with failure. The surface is dead
Wave to the cameras from the towers
Built to sway. I promised I would never
Tell me, whose hand is this. A beautiful
Question her sources again

Unhinged in a manner of speaking
Crossed with stars, a rain that can be paused
So we know we're dreaming on our feet
Like horses in the city. How sad. Maybe
No maybes. Take a position. Don't call it
Night-vision green. Think of the children
Running with scissors through the long
Where were we? If seeing this as portraiture
Makes you uncomfortable, wake up

α

Wake up, it's time to begin
The forgetting. Direct modal statements
Wither under glass. A little book for Ari
Built to sway. I admire the use of felt
Theory, like swimming in a storm, but object
To antirepresentational bias in an era of
You're not listening. I'm sorry. I was thinking
How the beauty of your singing reinscribes
The hope whose death it announces. Wave

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In an unconscious effort to unify my voice
I swallow gum. An old man weeps in the airport
Over a missed connection. The color of money is
Night-vision green. Ari removes the bobby pins
I remove the punctuation. Our freezer is empty
Save for vodka and film. Leave the beautiful
Questions unanswered. There are six pages left
Of our youth and I would rather swallow my tongue
Than waste them on description

α

A cry goes up for plain language
In identical cities. Zukofsky appears in my dreams
Selling knives. Each exhibit is a failed futurity
A star survived by its own light. Glass anthers
Confuse bees. Is that pornography? Yes, but
But nothing. Come to reference. A mode of undress
Equal to fascism becomes obligatory
In identical cities. Did I say that already? Did I say
The stranglehold of perspective must be shaken off

A live tradition broadcast with a little delay
Takes the place of experience, like portraits
Reciprocating gazes. Zukofsky appears in my dreams
Offering his face. Each of us must ask herself
Why am I clapping? The content is announced
Through disappearance, like fireworks. Wave
After wave of information breaks over us
Without our knowledge. If I give you my denim
Will you simulate distress

α

To lay everything waste in the name of renewal
Haven't we tried that before? Yes, but
But not in Canada. The vanguard succumbs
To a sense of its own importance as easily as swans
Succumb to the flu. I'm writing this one
With my nondominant hand in the crawl space
Under the war. I can feel an axis snapping
In my skull, and soon I will lose the power
To select, while retaining the power to

All these flowers look the same to me
Night-vision green. There is nothing to do
In the desert but read *Penthouse* and lift weights
My blood is negative. That's all you need to know
Sophisticated weaponry marries the traditional
Pleasures of perspective to the new materiality
Of point-and-click. I'm writing this one
As a woman comfortable with leading
A prisoner on a leash

o

Combine was the word I was looking for
Back there in the trees. My blood is
Scandinavian Modern. I kind of lost it
But enough about me. To return with a difference
Haven't we tried that before? Yes, but
But not from the air. Unique flakes form
Indistinguishable drifts in a process we call
All these words look the same to me
Fascism. Arrange the flowers by their price

Then, where despair had been, the voice
Of Nina Simone. Parentheses open
On a new gender crossed with stars
Ari removes the bobby pins. Night falls
There is no such thing as non sequitur
When you're in love. Let those who object
To the pathos swallow their tongues. My numb
Rebarbative people, put down your Glocks
And your Big Gulps. We have birthmarks to earn

α

Around 1945 the question becomes: Sleepyhead
Since the world is ending, may I eat the candy
Necklace off your body? Turn the record over
Turn the pillow over. It has a cooler side
Like a vein on the wing of a locust
The seam of hope disclosed by her voice
It cannot save us. But it can remind us
Survival is a butcher's goal. All hands
To the pathos. Let the credits

Bend the plastic stick and break the interior tube
The reaction emits light, but not heat
The tragedy of dialectics. Sand-sized particles
Of revolutionary possibility fall constantly
Without our knowledge. The capitol lawns
Sparkle with poison. Since the world is ending
Why not let the children touch the paintings
The voice of Nina Simone contains its own
Negation, like a pearl

α

As brand names drift toward the generic
We drift toward fascism, a life in common
Replaced with its image. The predicates
Are glass. I blew them. I'm sorry, sorrier
Than I can say on such a tiny phone. You're
Breaking up. No, down. I held the hand
Of a complete stranger during takeoff
Unaware it was my own, laying bare
The ideological function of

Numbness, felt silence, a sudden
Inability to swallow, the dream in which
The face is Velcro, describing the film
In the language of disaster, the disaster in
Not finishing sentences, removing the suicide
From the speed dial, failing to recognize
Yourself in the photo, coming home to find
A circle of concerned family and friends
It's more of an artists' colony than a hospital

α

It's more of a vitamin than an antipsychotic
Collective despair expressed in I-statements
The dream in which the skin is stonewashed
Denim, running your hand through the hair
Of an imaginary friend, rising from bed
Dressing, returning calls, all without
Waking, the sudden suspicion the teeth
In your mouth are not your own, let
Alone the words

She handed me a book. I had read it before
Dismissed it, but now, in the dark, I heard
The little delays. If you would speak of love
Stutter, like rain, like Robert, be
Be unashamed. Let those who object to the
But that's familiar rage. It isn't a system
It is a gesture whose power derives from its
Failure, a child attempting to gather
Us into her glitter-flecked arms

o

It isn't a culture of fear. When a people
Pats itself on the back with a numb hand
It isn't a culture at all. Take a position
Cut it off. Leave the rings. The president
But you promised you wouldn't mention
I saw myself in the mirrored lenses
You cannot kill a metonym
Of his bodyguards. I'm moving to Canada
When I wake up. You mean *if*

No concept of clockwise rotation can be
Described on the surface continuously
So this might take a while. Bring a book
Have you tried breaking it into triangles
Or changing hands. No, handedness
Fascia, a tangent bundle. Can we unfold
What we can't figure? Not without making
Cuts. Orient me, for the night is coming
Amphichiral, manifold, and looped

∞

We have no reason to hope, but what's reason
What's reason got to do with it? Accent
Not duration. Cantillation, not punctuation
And that's love. Why not speak of it
As we are drawn up into the rising
Toroidal fireball? This column
Of powdery light is made possible
By Boeing, but what, and here's where people
Start disappearing, made Boeing possible

If you could see the tip of the vector
It would appear to be moving in a circle
As it approached you. Reference is a slow
Wave transporting energy through empty
Media. You can't rush it. The displaced
Pathos returns with a vengeance and painters
Pull grids apart in grief. Only a master
Only a butcher can unmake sense. The rest of us
Have axes to grind into glass

α

By *complex* I mean my intention is drawn
Downward to the bottom of the cloud
It hurts me when you listen too closely
Smothering reference. Carefully decanted
Left to breathe. *That's* criticism. The subject
Rises to the surface. Bursts. All light paths
From the object to the image are reversible
And that hurts, to know it didn't have to be
I mean, don't get me wrong, I enjoy killing

Birds were these little ships that flew and sang
There are some cool pics online. Funny
Strange, not ha-ha funny, how the black
Canvas grows realistic, a bird's-eye view
Of their disappearance. Wave after wave
Of déjà lu. After the storm, the sky turns
Night-vision green. The color of murder
I can hear the soldiers marching in my
Pillow. Even in Canada

α

Her literature is irrelevant to October
Anna of all the Russias, whose body was
An ideal October that has yet to obtain
A face. October approached asymptotically
By tanks. The leaves turn night-vision
Anna, do you see how the sand-sized particles
Of the true October rise from the asphalt
Like fireflies whose bodies are night-vision
Neither do I. The irrelevant I. The I of all

It will develop recursively or not at all
The new closure. In lieu of fixed outlines
Modulating color. If concentrated light
Strikes the leaf, part is reflected through
The droplet, producing a white glow around
The genre. It's like the whispering gallery
The fighter pilot sees his shadow on the cloud
Crossed with the Wailing Wall. We can't
Distinguish rounds of ammunition from

∞

Applause. Speak plainly. Keep your hands
On the table. Do not flee into procedure
Do not wait for a surpassing disaster
To look your brother in the eye and speak
Of love. Make no mistake: the disjunction
The disjunction stays. Do not hesitate
To cut the most beautiful line in the name
Of form. The bread of words. Look for me
At genre's edge. I'm going there on foot

I dyed what's-her-face's hair with lime
Kool-Aid so when I read "Bezhin Meadow"
I lent her aspect to the green-haired spirit
There is a girl trapped in every manmade lake
She will pull you into your reflection
Stephen tells me what's-her-face
Who used to sleepwalk into the snow
Piss her name and glide back to bed
Without waking was thrown

α

Into this poem through a windshield
Once she gathered me into her glitter-flecked
I don't care if "aspect" is archaic
Once she walked into the sliding door
A plane announced through disappearance
You made it this far without mentioning
Topeka. Glass in her hair. Patterns of
I will throw my voice like a clay pot
Keep her ashes there. I don't care if "love

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I don't deny the influence, but it's less
A relation of father to son than a relation of
Moon to tide. Plus, my teachers are mainly
Particles bombarding gold foil or driving rain
It's the motion, not the material, not the nouns
But the little delays. A gender crossed
A genre crossed on foot by Marvin Gaye
Filicide. Strong misreadings arise
On the surface. Burst. It didn't have to be

α

If I rise from table, if I wander
Discalced through the sparkling lawns
If I'm lost in Juárez in Topeka, if it's winter
In August when the prodromata, when the birds
Cite the past in all its moments, there is no
No need for examples, police, doctors
Let me walk to the edge of the genre and look out
Into nothing. I will return, the fit will return me
In time for coffee and oranges

Authority derived from giving it away
Is how I define *aura*, like Zukofsky's
Paper flowers picked from *Kapital*
For Celia's hair. Priceless. The high
Reflective ceilings allow us to receive
Our own applause. When an audience
Takes a bow, that's fascism. A looped
Encore. Surface effects. The auditorium
Is a standing wave. A sedimented roar

α

The entire system weighs about two pounds
A small bird governs the atria. You dream
The donor's dreams. The donor's breath
Breaks your lines across their prepositions
Halved and polished to display the crystal
Back-formations. Go in fear of abstraction
But go. Be gone by morning. There is nothing
You don't need a shell. Just cup your hand
Nothing for you here but repetition

DOPPLER ELEGIES

α

By any measure, it was endless
winter. Emulsions with
Then circled the lake like
This is it. This April will be
Inadequate sensitivity to green. I rose
early, erased for an hour
Silk-brush and ax
I'd like to think I'm a different person
latent image fading

around the edges and ears
Overall a tighter face
now. Is it so hard for you to understand
From the drop-down menu
In a cluster of eight poems, I selected
sleep, but could not
I decided to change everything
Composed entirely of stills
or fade into the trees

but could not
remember the dream
save for one brief shot
of a woman opening her eyes
Ari, pick up. I'm a different person
In a perfect world, this would be
April, or an associated concept
Green to the touch
several feet away

α

I want to finish the book in time
period. Confused bees
In a perfect world
a willow-effect. Rain on the recording
Fine with this particular form
of late everything, a spherical
break of colored stars
a voice described as torn in places
Why am I always

asleep in your poems
Soft static falling through
The life we've chosen
from a drop-down menu
of available drives. Look at me
Ben, when am I
This isn't my voice
At such-and-such smooth rate, the lines
Stream at night

and love. Why not speak of it
as all work now
is late work. Leafage, fountain, cloud
into whose sunlit depths
I'm quoting. Is there a place for this
she cut her hair
She held it toward me
In your long dream
money changes hands

α

I'm worried about a friend
among panicles of spent
flowers. I'm on the phone
There's an argument here regarding
Cathedral windows thicker at the base
It does not concern you
flowing glass. Can we talk
about the drinking
They call them smoke trees

I'm pretty much dead
by any measure
already. When we were kids, the leaves
but that's a story, fallen or reflected
obscured the well. I cut this
In the dream, they are always
younger. Ari woke me
You were screaming
Everything is so

easy for you
You mean was
so easy, like walking slowly
Out of the photo, even those
They are blooming early. I mean that
literally. You can see it from space
he took. Can we talk
about the drinking
Sometime in May

α

The passengers are asked to clap
It was always the same
window in his poems
for the two soldiers. We were delayed
In every seat, a tiny screen
A tiny bottle. The same traffic
High up in the trees, small
rain. He held the subject
constant. Now I

get it. I looked out
over Denver, but could see
only our reflection. Dim
the cabin lights. Robert is dead
Articles may have shifted
I didn't know him. Why am I
clapping. We are beginning
our final descent into
A voice described as torn

On the recording, I could hear
the hesitation
A certain courage. I can't explain
as music. We could watch
our own plane crash. We would be
Our men and women
permitted to call down
in uniform. When I heard him live
it was lost on me

α

A flowering no one attends
The enterprise known
variously as waking, April, or
Bats are disappearing like
color into function. I wanted to open
In a new window
the eyes of a friend
by force if necessary. Amber light
is a useless phrase

but will have to do
what painting did
Dense smoke from the burning wells
for our parents. Ben
there is a man at the door who says
I've made small changes
he found your notebook
throughout in red. The recurring dream
contrived in places

Of waning significance
it resembles the hand
after a difficult passage
opening, a key word in the early
Blue of rippled glass
atonal circles. They phased us out
across the backward capitals
like paper money
Or is that two words

α

They are passing quickly, those
houses I wanted to
speak in. Empty sets
Among my friends, there is a fight about
The important questions
cannot arise, so those must be hills
where the famous
winter. I am familiar with the dream
Windmills enlarge

experience, killing birds
but I have already used
dream too often in my book
of relevance. Nothing can be predicated
Along the vanishing coast
tonight. You'll have to wait until
remnants of small fires
the eye can pull new features from
The stars

eat here. There is a private room
Are you concerned
about foreign energy
In your work, I sense a certain
distance, like a radio left on
Across the water, you can see
the new construction going up
is glass. The electric cars
unmanned

α

Somewhere in this book I broke

 There is a passage
with a friend. I regret it now
lifted verbatim from

Then began again, my focus on
moving the lips, failures in

 The fuselage glows red against
rinsed skies. Rehearsing sleep

 I think of him from time

in a competitive field

 facedown, a familiar scene
composed entirely of stills
to time. It's hard to believe

When he calls, I pretend
he's gone. He was letting himself go

 I'm on the other line
in a cluster of eight poems
all winter. The tenses disagreed

for Ari. Sorry if I've seemed

 distant, it's been a difficult
period, striking as many keys
with the flat of the hand
as possible, then leaning the head
against the window, unable to recall

 April, like overheard speech
at the time of writing
soaked into its length

α

Is this what you meant by prose
 Silica glass shapes
A supporting beam
where lightning strikes the sand
missing from the voice, eaten away
From the inside I could see
 his influence, mainly in the use
but also in exchange
 The head tipped back

to slow the speaking
 Our collaboration ends
On the appointed day, we gathered
in a makeshift structure
Viscous fluid from a floral source
but quarreled over terms
 pouring from the mouth into
Particles of wax. It's been done before
 cupped hands

in a lesser key, a broader sense
 I sound like him
more often now, unable to pronounce
or trailing off, then suddenly
Set against a large expanse
I have to leave. I just remembered
 something about Ari
structured like a language
 with appropriate delays

MEAN FREE PATH

What if I made you hear this as music
But not how you mean that. The slow beam
Opened me up. Walls walked through me
Like resonant waves. I thought that maybe
If you aren't too busy, we could spend our lives
Parting in stations, promising to write
War and Peace, this time with feeling
As bullets leave their luminous traces across
Wait, I wasn't finished. I was going to say
Breakwaters echo long lines of cloud

α

Renunciation scales. Exhibits shade
Imperceptibly into gift shops. The death of a friend
Opens me up. Suddenly the weather
Is written by Tolstoy, whose hands were giant
Resonant waves. It's hard not to take
When your eye is at the vertex of a cone
Autumn personally. My past becomes
Of lines extending to each leaf
Citable in all its moments: parting, rain

There must be an easier way to do this
I mean without writing, without echoes
Arising from focusing surfaces, which should
Should have been broken by structures
Hung from the apex in the hope of deflecting
In the hope of hearing the deflection of music
As music. There must be a way to speak
At a canted angle of enabling failures
The little collisions, the path of decay

∞

But before it was used by the blind, it was used
By soldiers who couldn't light their lamps
Without drawing fire from across the lake
Embossed symbols enable us to read
Our orders silently in total dark
In total war, the front is continuous
Night writing, from which descends
Night-vision green. What if I made you
Hear this with your hands

Autumn in a minor novel. The school
Scatters, scattering light across the surface
Reforms around the ankle of the child
That you were. The end. Put the book away
Look out the window: we are descending
Like Chopin through the dusk. Now it's six
Six years later and I'm reading it again
Over Denver. I bought it in the gift shop
Nothing's changed except the key

α

Little contrasts flicker in
Distances complex because collapsing
Under their own weight like stars
Embossed symbols. I can't compete
It's like the moment after waking
When you cannot determine if the screaming
With devices designed to amplify
Was internal or external to the dream
Starlight so soldiers can read in their sleep

Wait, I don't want this to turn
Turn into a major novel. I want this to be
Composed entirely of edges, a little path
For Ari. All my teachers have been women
But not how you mean that. That's why I speak
In a voice so soft it sounds like writing
Night writing. A structure of feeling
Broken by hand. I want the paper to have poor
Opacity, the verso just visible beneath

α

The ode just visible beneath the elegy
The preemptive elegy composed entirely
This movement from the ground to cloud
Of waves decaying slowly on plucked strings
Is lightning. I don't know how else to say it
I mean without writing. Maybe if you let
The false starts stand, stand in for symbols
Near collapse, or let collapsing symbolize
The little clearing loving is. Maybe then

