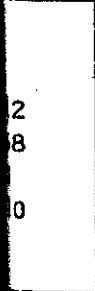


# MEAN FREE PATH

BEN LERNER

2  
8  
0



Dedication

3

Mean Free Path

7

Doppler Elegies

27

Mean Free Path

37

Doppler Elegies

57

*About the Author*

69

**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

