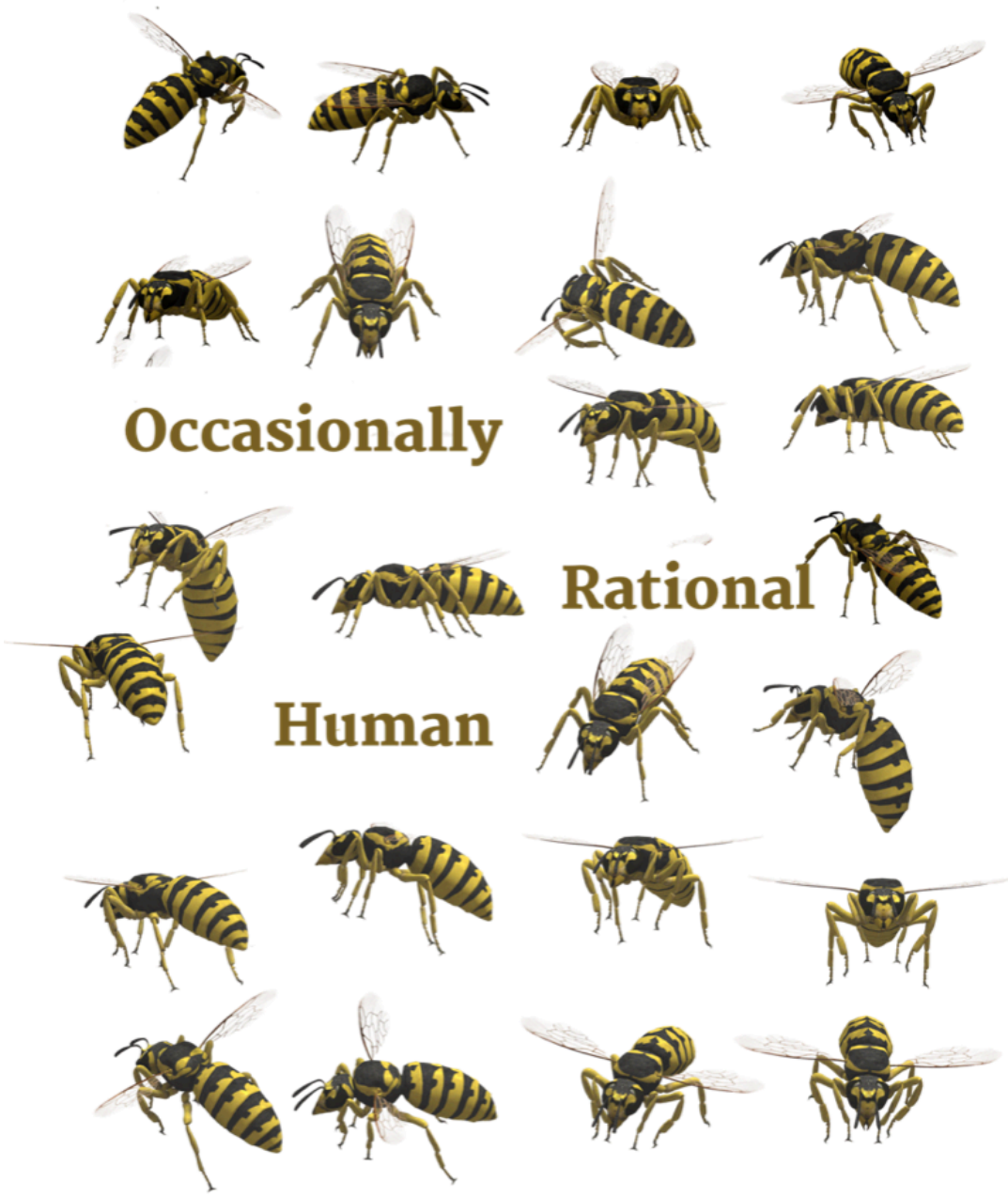

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Occasionally Rational Human

by Stephen Brockwell

dedicated to Danica

Mt Katahdin

We moose-dodged to Maine
climbed Katahdin's mile for a handful
of late summer snow.

We made a tent from fallen branches
of American oak — acorns green,
leaves gold-fringed.

I took a snapshot of you
in west ridge shade
throwing snow at the camera.

We were convinced the snow
would never melt completely.

Legends of Silence

1.
During the inquiry to the uprising, the inspector asked why the soldiers did not speak up when the slaughter of the civilians began. One soldier answered that he did not want the citizens to know that his tongue had not already been cut out.

2.
There was a kind of architectural mastery to the deployments. The plan for the violence inspired in the men the awe that their grandparents experienced in the nave of the cathedral.

3.
When they were not training, they were eating. When they were not eating, they were watching videos. When they were not watching videos, they were sleeping, not always during daylight hours. They slept well.

4.
Private Donald Samuels asked a question that began, “Why.” The drill sergeant ordered Samuels’ to present his rifle to demonstrate how to hold it securely. The sergeant bludgeoned Samuels to death with the butt of Samuels’ rifle.

5.
For every neighbour with a tongue cut out, there was a neighbour with a subsidized smart phone.

Rise up Youth

Young man, pick on someone
bloated far beyond your size!
Me. I am your oppressor.
Rather than topple Amar over
Sam who has snuck up
behind him, marshal Amar
and Sam to the defence
of small miracles I have made
impossible. I have extinguished
species you will never see.
Shame me into non-existence, lad.
Listen for the white-throated rail
whose song mimics the chatter
of children it has never heard
at the shore shaping sandcastles
from white sand on pristine beaches.
Ride your bicycles everywhere.
Key an SUV for me.

If You Want to Help, Listen

I walked by Phillipa's house on Springfield.
One of her paving stones was out of whack,
half on the declining path from her house,
half on the sidewalk with an inch of air
where the two angles met. Space to snap it
if a rambunctious teenager ran by
or a postman delivered a parcel.
I wandered back there and sheepishly nudged
the granite tile in place with my steel toe
against coarse gravel that pushed back. A black
squirrel threw an acorn down and I saw
firelight chrysanthemums in her garden,
a last rose clutching pink and coral hues
against the subzero pull of last night's frost.

Vitner in Springtime

This dirt and
a drop of dew
smear on my thumb,
a tear of mud
conspired with the Sun
and worms and beetles
under my feet,
to fill this clay cup
with the fermented
blood of a grape.
Filthy human hands
can make such beautiful things.

Treatise on Beauty

Here's a beautiful thing: a cuttlefish tattoos itself the
mottle sepia of the reef

Here's a beautiful thing: the tardigrade clambers up
a ladder of algae.

Here's a beautiful thing: a wasp heavy with nectar
harvests one last purple crocus.

Here's a beautiful thing: the invisible diatom's shell,
architectural glass assembled from dissolved silicon.

Here's a beautiful thing: a black squirrel puffs out its
grey winter undercoat.

Here's a beautiful thing: the gait of a cockroach
escaping an incandescent bulb.

Here's a beautiful thing: you! Look at your hands—
they are capable of so much, even nothing!

Here's a beautiful thing: the pangolin.

Here's a beautiful thing: the red wolf.

Here's a beautiful thing: the honeybee.

Here's a beautiful thing: you!

Showering After a Long Flight

The scent of sweat
entices you,
intimate partner.
I offer my opening
pores to you,
your abdomen
engorged, darkening.
A drop of water
ten times
your mass affixes
your wings
to travertine.
A thread of my blood
drains from you,
illegible
graffiti.

Saint Patrick

I'm walking toward the Rideau River
past the razor-wire-topped cinder block walls
around the nineteenth century monastery
Notre-Dame de Charité du Refuge
d'Ottawa that hosts the Chinese embassy.
Little known fact: the chapel spire was torn down;
in a photo from the sixties the tin-clad
fléche and the cross gleam in winter sunlight.
I wonder what happened to the chalice.

An unbearably patient Falun Gong
protester encamps on a tarp on the grass
across the street in Sukhasana pose,
a damp curling placard of disappeared
believers behind her. A driver honks.
My daughter studied photography here
at De Lasalle High School on the south side
at St. Patrick Street. Students chase after
a soccer balls that pings on the school fence.
I'm reading "Faces," a Stephen Dobyns
sonnet about his daughter and her almost
pathetically delicate flesh; he compares her
to a turtle on its back surrounded by crows.
Creepy and not untrue. As he puts it.
"How much is this a fiction I believe in?"

I hear the flying oil slick of a crow
land on a lamppost and caw! a living gargoyle
announcing apocalyptic days.
I'm tempted to caw back but there are clouds,
cars passing, children playing, a woman
meditating on her lost fellowship
with the disappeared. I take a photo
of the crow and the poem in my hand, holding
the page open with my thumb, four fingers
cradling cover and spine as I adjust
depth of field to capture both crow and page
in sharp focus enough to read the text.

Not My Dream

My dog yelps, asleep
on the hardwood floor.
Is it the pain of arthritic hips
or a dream of me
shaming him
for devouring sausages?
I waken him with a sniff,
a sympathetic bark
and a gentle nip
on the loose skin of his neck.

Epistemology

My dog has learned to
take off
winter booties.
He can't
put them on.

O Boethius,
from my wardrobe
of suits, long underwear,
threadbare socks
and self-delusions,

teach me to wear
the transparent
sweater my mother knit,
the one with
too many arms.

Teach me the trick
of putting on more
than airs. Feed me
a slice of liver.
Make me sit.

Good Morning

I had been sleeping.
Just before dawn, cats
fell from the ceiling
onto my abdomen.
Mopsy first. Then Tabitha.
Ganges. Phillipa next.
Goji after her.
They must have been
purring on the bookcase.
They leapt from the shelves
when I turned to kiss my wife,
spooling the blanket
near a bedside glass of water,
nearly empty. But that is all
forensic reconstruction.
The water was easily absorbed
with a hand towel.
But each cat leapt
on my abdomen
like a round.
No, no. Not the roundelay
of a feline chorus.
Like a munition
propelled at an overripe
watermelon on a fence.

You have all seen that video
in slo-mo. This will be
my last early morning
correspondence for some time.
What's gourd for the geese
and whatnot. You would not think
a bladder could burst
from such small wingless things
flying at you as if from no where.
Nurse Stapleton-Nasser tells me
the malignant memory
of one's own interminable shrieking
slows the pace of my own recovery.

Visitation from a Dead Cat

You see out of the corner of your eye
as you urinate at 6 a.m.
what might be temporal shadow
of your cat walking on the countertop,
spine curling, pulling hips and chest
together as if to say,
“I’m sorry about all that business
with your parents,
not their deaths so much but
their absences before passing.”
And though you’re an occasionally
rational human, an evidentiary
policy kind of guy,
you find yourself
sobbing naked in the bathtub
like a five-year-old
beaten for talking back.
Always with the sobbing
and the credulous
hair bristling, you SOB,
you ape.

Clock

A little
haired girl in
and a pink
her jeans
behind her
grandfather
walk home
up
Springfield
where the
installs
new water
and sewers.
is
a
catastrophe:
sidewalks,
gravel-
potholes,
dumpsters,
manholes,
pipes, plastic
steel covers,
concrete,
timber
walls—
the city is in
heart
Behind a
dumpster,
disappears.
She returns
dandelion
She plucks
and casts it
breeze.
One lands on
plant it in a

chestnut-
a white T
skirt over
dawdles

as they

Road,
city

mains
The road

sand for

covered

open
exposed
taps,

iron, and
retaining

open
surgery.

the girl

with a
clock.
each seed
to the

me. I
lawn.

The author of six poetry collections, most recently ***All of Us Reticent, Here, Together*** (Mansfield Press, 2016), Stephen Brockwell's poems have been described as incisive, ethical, biting, thoughtful, intelligent, playful, harrowing and funny. Add to those: raw, lyric, tender, and joyful,
and you have a glimpse of these poems, and of his next collection.

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