Night Errand
Eric Berlin

O, Great Northern Mall, you dwindling oracle
of upstate New York, your colossal lot

of frost-heaved spaces so vacant I could cut
straight through while blinking and keep my eyes

shut, I’ve come like the flies that give up the ghost
at the papered fronts of your defunct stores,

through the food court where napkins, unused
to touch, are packed too tight to be dispensed,

past the pimpled kid manning the register
who stares at the buttons and wipes his palms.

If I press my eyes until checkers rise
from the dark – that’s how the overheads glower

in home essentials as I roam through Sears,
seeking assistance. I know you’re here.

For this window crank I brought, you show me
a muted wall of TVs where Jeff Goldblum

picks his way through the splintered remains
of a dinosaur crate. There must be fifty

of him, hunching over mud to inspect
the three-toed prints. I almost didn’t

come in here at all, driving the opposite
of victory laps, and waiting as I hoped

for the red to leave my eyes, but my urgency
smacked of your nothingness. I did it again –

I screamed at the woman I love, and in front
of our one-year-old, who covered his ears.
Discussion ideas

- ‘O Great Northern Mall’ – who or what is being addressed in the poem? What are the personal characteristics of a shopping mall? What do the poet and the mall want of each other? What role does the pimpled kid play in this relationship?
- What’s Jeff Goldblum doing in the poem? Is a Jurassic Park reference one you automatically pick up? How does it affect your reading of the poem if you do or if you don’t?
- How many eyes in the poem, how many ears? What’s most important in the poem – what’s seen or what is heard?

About the poet

Eric Berlin is a freelance editor living near Syracuse, New York, where he teaches ‘Ear Training for Poets’ and ‘The Poetics of Prayer’ at the Downtown Writers’ Center. He received an MFA in Poetry from Syracuse University, an MFA in Sculpture from NY Academy of Art, and a BA in English from Harvard University. After a solo show at Spark Contemporary Art Space, he returned to poetry, winning The Ledge 2014 Poetry Prize and receiving a fellowship from Vermont Studio Center, where he began a book on the rhythm of language in stand-up. His poems can be found in Hunger Mountain, Tupelo Quarterly, and North American Review as well as Milkweed Editions’ Outsiders.

Judge’s comment

When it first turned up in the pile, ‘Night Errand’ was one of those poems that wouldn’t let you move on, but demanded a pause to dwell and recoup, followed by the compulsion to read it again. Its initial grip gave way to a sort of haunting. This is poetry that can somehow, magically, fill a cafeteria napkin dispenser with emotion, while subtly evoking the psychological need behind that displacement. Its syntax pays out like a wire, building to the final sting-in-the-tail: a realisation that deepens rather than diminishes what’s gone before. In that complex moment, the poem refuses to let itself off the hook. Through its artful control of sound and line, its powers of image and perception, ‘Night Errand’ dramatises a cry of pain at the damage we’re capable of doing to others. - Sarah Howe

Links

- www.ericberlin.net
- Retro shopping malls - bit.ly/RetroMalls
- Enter the National Poetry Competition: poetrysociety.org.uk/npc

More details of poetry reading, writing and discussion classes all round the country and online at poetryschool.com
Long Distance Relationship with a Mountain
David Hawkins

We got our hefting up here all right, 
the wind curling round us visibly, curing us, 
as if we were stones to be placed 
and lichen-dappled with glacial deliberation.

And now, thinking with these hills, 
a wandering sentence can be levelled 
between them, tested against the mean 
of wilful horizon and capricious sky.

Grey-brown green-black lutulent river 
drawn easily as a snagged thread 
pulling the best effects of the valley with it. 
Light hurdles swiftly into huge stands of pines

and hides there with great abandon 
intimate with the windage creaks and groans 
in the crowns of these self-shredding trees 
brashed and rusting beneath it.

Pulled back the thick curtain of moss 
and found wheel ruts slanting 
through the Ordovician, pulled back 
at the false summit and wandered towards

a trig point de-centred in the mist, 
spectral sheep splayed tarsally among 
the drop-skied moors, while someone else 
is summiting surely in their own home-made uplands.

A snipe whittles up from a cloak of rushes 
and I try to keep its ember alight with my eye 
until with perfect clearance it falls 
off the edge, or edges beyond seeing.

A particular breeze tugs its harmonic 
adjusted to our hearing, we are earmarked, 
as across the Irish sea a shadow range 
of mountains echoes unsayably.

Here the so-called Black Road 
on its endless ancient traverse over the ridge 
intersects the local corpse road 
that looks to another false summit

before the tireless sway of the Atlantic. 
The real inheritance: looking at ravens, 
waiting for their croak in the welcoming gloom. 
The names of all the rocks make their own ground.
**Discussion ideas**
- What do you know about the Ordovician period?
  What timescale/s is/are the poem working to?
- What is the line of argument that the poem follows? Is it linear, circular, accumulative or something else? What emotional or intellectual frisson does the last line leave you with? What would happen if you shuffled the stanza order of this poem?
- What relation does the poem have to something like this: bit.ly/FellsGuide. How specific is the mountain in the title? Is it a particular peak, or Everymountain? What is the quality of the ‘long distance relationship’ with the mountain?

**About the poet**
David Hawkins is a writer, journalist, editor and ecologist from Bristol. He grew up on the banks of the Severn Estuary, read English at New College, Oxford, then worked for several years in art history publishing, subsequently retraining as a botanist and habitat surveyor. Particular interests are the intersections of landscape and time and human activity. He has work in the forthcoming book from Dunlin Press, *The Migrant Waders*. David was a founding editor of the Likestarlings collaborative poetry project.

**Judge’s comment**
Do we write landscape poems or do they write themselves through us? ‘Long Distance Relationship with a Mountain’ is a poem of luminous mystery, not least in its human-natural interanimations, in John Donne’s word. This is poetry as field composition, assembling, mapping, ‘thinking with these hills’ to summon the wonders of place into being before the reader’s eyes. - *David Wheatley*

**Links**
- [www.likestarlings.com](http://www.likestarlings.com)
- Contrast and compare - bit.ly/Nature-esque
- Enter the National Poetry Competition: poetrysociety.org.uk/npc

More details of poetry reading, writing and discussion classes all round the country and online at [poetryschool.com](http://poetryschool.com)
Biracial
Carolyn Oxley

for my daughter

Some people stare,
searching for a Judas bone,
but all they can find
are the stems of your arms,
the sleek plunge of femur
into socket.

These are the usual things,
and why shouldn’t they be?
You were not a provision
of armistice or treaty.
You were not born to be
nation or diaspora.

The love that made you
was simple as the sounds
at breakfast: clink of pan
on stove, scraping-back of chair.
No slave ever rocked
inside the boat of your hips,
no explorer pried open
an African river.

They say the ancestors
reside in a sacred grove.
Your homeland is wherever
you stand. If the gaze lingers,
it’s on your spine, straighter
than the fence lines
at Gettysburg.

First published in the
Spring 2016 issue of
Discussion ideas

- What’s a Judas bone? Who are the ‘some people’ searching for it? How does it connect to the femur, the hips and spine?
- How much Gettysburg history do you know? How does the knowledge relate to your reading of the poem? Is this a globally relevant poem, or is it strictly American?
- How might a daughter addressed by such a poem answer back?

About the poet

Carolyn Elizabeth Oxley lives in Longmont, Colorado in view of the Rocky Mountain foothills. She is a freelance writer for the Boulder Weekly and meets regularly with local poets at a historic area restaurant. She studied literature at Georgetown University and counts herself lucky to have attended poetry workshops at Aspen Summer Words and Lighthouse Writers in Denver. Carolyn lives with her husband, daughter, three canine children, and a cat named Posy.

Judge’s comment

I’m glad we found space in our top three for the plain and poised speaking of Carolyn Oxley’s ‘Biracial’. It doesn’t strain for effect, building its argument through a series of statements and the deployment of a beautifully judged simile ("The love that made you/ was simple as the sounds/ at breakfast"). The poem is far from simple, its dignified assertion of the right of an individual to be an individual complicated by that final risk-taking image. This balance between personal and public histories is what most impressed and moved us, articulated in a form and language that mirrors the daughter’s straightness of spine.

- Esther Morgan

Links

- carolynoxley.com
- bit.ly/GettysburgWiki
- Enter the National Poetry Competition: poetrysociety.org.uknpc

More details of poetry reading, writing and discussion classes all round the country and online at poetryschool.com