

A CLEAN EDGE

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Jeremy Allan Hawkins



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Introduction

It's hard to listen to anyone anymore. We use too many words. We repeat ourselves to make our points, louder each time, without new information. We're suspicious of opinions and facts, discourse and reason. And we should be suspicious, because every system—even logic—has its limitations. But I think we've gotten sloppy and mucked it all up. I was originally drawn to poetry because it pushed against rational thought: its strategies full of swerve and surprise—the joy of the possible, and of the impossible—but recently something has happened to rational thought and the vehicle that carries it. Something has happened to rhetoric and pushing against it doesn't seem to work anymore.

Rhetoric: the art of persuasion. At best, it reasons. At worst, it manipulates. It arranges questions and declarations into argument. It's the language of science and law and the five-paragraph essay, as well as the language of politicians, hate groups, and comments-section trolls. With it, everything sounds like barking. Without it, everything becomes unmoored and unfollowable. The problem, I think, is that we've reduced our range of all possible communication to this one, limited, ubiquitous option. And I think we're using it in the service of winning, rather than in the service of being right.

So, in this cultural moment of aggression and propaganda, of self-imposed blindness and unfounded supposition, of unreasonableness—of *factlessness*—how is it that Jeremy Allan Hawkins can make such beautiful, important poems?

The first lines of the first poem in *A Clean Edge* put forth a rhetorical proposition:

the first step in seeking forgiveness
requires there be a wilderness

how wild it must be will depend
on how long you have spent in the air

—“To Ease Yourself”

But this isn't just rhetoric, it's the grand style—as used by Cicero, Milton, Augustine of Hippo—didactic in its moral instruction, categorical in its absolutes of *requires* and *it must be*. In other words: bossy, preachy, ham-fisted. But it isn't. It could have been, in lesser hands, but Hawkins has an exceptional understanding of balance. It will depend, he says (and here the word *depend* acts as the fulcrum of the balancing act) on “how long you spend in the air,” which is evocative, most likely figurative,

more image than pronouncement, sideways from the traditional, plodding logic we expect from heavy rhetoric, and, honestly, just plain lovely. The poem continues this balance of image and rhetoric (as does the whole collection) until the very end, where the last lines are:

before the second step of forgiveness
in which you must become a bear

—“To Ease Yourself”

In rhetoric, the propulsive words are usually transitions: *and*, *or*, *but*, *so*, *if*, *then*, *since*, *because*, *maybe*, *also*, *therefore*, *every*, *just*, *some*, *more*, *less*. These small latches reassure us, as an argument swings through its stations, that we aren't lost. In poetry, transitions like these are often tedious, relentlessly insisting only that one thing follows another. So how is a poet supposed to hinge and latch without becoming obvious or boring? Hawkins, strangely, brilliantly, uses punctuation instead of transition to achieve conjunction and disjunction, repurposing rhetoric in yet another way, and achieving yet another kind of balance. Here are three different moments, each with its own strategy:

this is my house about loneliness
the rooms open so you can see the reindeer

I haven't wished much in it
flowers keep growing in the doorframes

—“About the Coming Down”

to the ones who did all of this before & gave these same litanies,
words offered against summer storms & worse—

steer wide & clear, speak nothing of family to tempt the sea
no further, only dive when you can't be sure what you'll find,

—“The Salvagers”

When your hair has grown back.
When you have eaten all the ice.
When you have wept for three.
When you have slept.

—“The Prelude After”

In the first example, the uncapitalized, unpunctuated lines seem to float, independent from each other. As the poem moves forward, a friction is generated between these units of meaning as the ways in which they accumulate become more varied: narration, juxtaposition, associative leap, confession, proposition, self-interruption, and direct address. In the second example, dash and ampersand are employed to suggest stronger, even alternate visual and theoretical connections and disconnections than a line break or the word *and* would imply. In the third example, the repetitive, capitalized, end-stopped, punctuated lines begin to resonate with a historical, biblical gravity. Really, the periods should be commas, and only the first *When* should be capitalized, but written this way, each line rings out as a command. Not only are the strategies visually beautiful, symmetrical and consistent, they also put form in the service of intent, each style suited to needs of the poem in which it is employed.

There's one last aspect of Hawkins' use of rhetoric I want to address before I finish, and it concerns closure. The ultimate goal of rhetoric is to change a belief or incite an action. Poems can do this, have successfully done this, but they are not obligated to. And though Hawkins ends his poems in a variety of ways—sometimes declarative, sometimes suggestive or simply evocative—there's one ending I'm especially grateful for. The last four lines of

the last poem in *A Clean Edge*, are undeniably rhetorical. They are statements. They declare. They posit their conclusion as certainty. And yet, this argument seems more like an act of witness than an attempt at persuasion:

The cyclists reach the opposite bank.
A fountain throws up
its many joyful arms,
a park unrolls its lawns.

—“Selvage”

I believe here, in these lines, Hawkins’ argument, threaded everywhere throughout the entire collection, is most apparent. I believe he’s saying *It’s beautiful*.

—RICHARD SIKEN

for Barry & Lorraine

To Ease Yourself

the first step in seeking forgiveness
requires there be a wilderness

how wild it must be will depend
on how long you have spent in the air

when you circle down
you will have only yourself to tame

the whole thorny stretch of it
with a pair of rubber boots & a fishing knife

acre after acre brought low as if
it shared your shame & bowed to it

a list of brambles scored across your shins
your hands a muddy map of the work

the work itself a map of the work
you always knew needed to be done

the swamp to be drained & leveled
the brush to be beaten back

until what's left is a meadow
to which you are permitted to return

long enough to see it for what it is
the grass blowing dreamily to morning

a wilderness you have flattened to ease yourself
of its being without you & you wonder

should you have left it to waste
should you let it now grow back

before the second step of forgiveness
in which you must become a bear

About the Coming Down

this is my house about loneliness
the rooms open so you can see the reindeer

I haven't wished much in it
flowers keep growing in the doorframes

eat one & nothing happens
eat two & the wood begins to talk

you can see what it says from the hill
amoebas of smoke swim out from the windows

everyone is inside making happy
redundant as the grazing reindeer

& I am learning how to winnow
several neighbors have requested it

nothing is projected before Christmas
except a few deaths by icicle

that will separate seven of us
from the spreadsheets of likelihood

there were drugs once but they made us fat
which is good for winter

the bartender weeps
weddings remind him of his drunk

& cold as we are we don't care
to leave him any company

a van warming on a snowy driveway
is a deathtrap waiting to slip town

I am sculpting a hearth
to hold our collection of miniature boots

they are tramping all over us again
penguins crossing an ice floe

one of them goes off alone
then one of them goes off alone

The Crocus Thief

October, & I watched you
steal a crocus—
setting the sun behind
his lavender arms
& an ivory waist.
You let him bathe in light
while a black camera bloomed in your hand—
a chorus of dead leaves
dried themselves around
& you snapped him out of time.

But happy thief, have you been back
to the peak
to see where his purple paled?
His head hangs slack
& his stamen kink in on themselves—
you froze him
at the climax of his joy
& lie with a likeness
of all that has died back.

In its place, beneath the earth,
chills a corm
waiting out the snows
to rouse his shoot again,
waiting on a thaw
to give him reason to extend himself
again in the light of early mornings
& to suck the ground—

the woodpeckers share trees,
the onionskins are thick,
halos spring round every moon,
& I cut open a persimmon
to find seeds shaped like knives—
the wind will carve us
& ice will pierce us through—
what have you stolen?

A frozen image
won't satisfy my desire
for the thing in mind—
portrayed light
cannot thaw the ground

& you've even sacked me
as your stooge.

Should I wait for spring
to rut again?
The corm might wait,
but the bloom of a crocus
depends on you—

lie on his bed again & without pictures

he will come—

What Is True Is Seen from a Distance

In a different place a boy is throwing stones from the shore of a lake.
He cannot see us watching him. We are cities & countries

& years away. He does not know that you & I have put our books down
to learn love will not always spare us.

There are still frontiers.

He does not know the surface of the lake
is a frontier that survives
how his stones strike it, how two swans swim across.

Like a dowser wanders in search of water unmapped
& underground, I have made my crossings
to reach you. He doesn't know that

either. At one border, I was asked
if I had any family or friends that lived
in the country. At another,

the guards asked me if I had ever lied.

We stood on another shore & looked out
to see the ducks quarreling, to see

how the swans write an invisible script.
Our time is spare. We are a stone's arcing flight,

doubled a moment in the water,
disappearing below
just as we seem to meet.

The boy aims & finally strikes one of the swans, snapping
something in that willowy trunk.

It dies slowly, & he is made to watch.

Certainties in Texas

The plain & the cattle on the plain.

The cattle wearing their horns to excess.

The people who people the plain & the subdivisions
that skirt the cities.

The skies that would expand to flood the plain
& drown the subdivisions to make new,
airy skirts for city towers already risen into air.

The horizon line a girdle holding everything in place.

The chill of night & the heat of day.

The rivers ignoring it all to run through
to a distant gulf.

The gulfs between people traveling across the plain
to look on one another.

The differences between everything & the everything
that is California.

The laughter & the songs bursting out of people
to populate the gulfs.

The desire of a traveler, moving between cities
& the airy skirts of their towers.

His need for an architect to punctuate the plain
with her teeth.

The wonder of both.

& yet, the jagged boundaries which observe themselves.

The certainties in Texas, which surround us the same
as the skies & the plain & the cattle.

The dangers that rise in the gulf.

The Salvagers

When the sky is steel but the sea sits flat & dull as a skillet,
fishermen are likely to share secrets

while standing at the stern, looking for a black burl
on the horizon, because this is the time,

before the ship lists like a gull,
to recite devotions

to the ones who did all this before & gave them these same litanies,
words offered against summer storms & worse—

*steer wide & clear of any abandoned raft—
a tree found floating with its roots spells rain—*

they speak nothing of family, to tempt the sea
no further, & only dive unsure what they'll find,

because *any wreck that glitters should be left to lie*
along with other lures left glinting down below—

leave these to the salvers, who boat with cranes,
ready to haul up any hull fairly lost, & sell it

as something saved, who dive after any vague shimmering,
who swim among the dead,

for when they look at the carcass of a ship, iron torn like tissue,
they don't see a tithe but rather parts to strip, a gleam

in the scored dark trench, not the spirit of a young girl
thrown to the waves as offering for the fish that fattened a village—

the salvers, who think that no fortune is ever truly lost,
who dream that nothing can be sunk forever,

call to their women while the sky heaves & the sea is slate—
one more haul, they say, there's something left to take.

L'Avventura (1960)

everything here complains
of disappearances—

& everyone is set
to scour the island's face

colorless skies & funnel
clouds warn us away

but we still bore
search parties struggle

to remember—the land wraps
itself around them

now you have no face
a grey smear against a grey shoreline

it's said a city lies
lost beneath the rock here

maybe this is all we have—
a windy pantomime

perhaps there was a boat
perhaps it took you away

This Has Kept Me

I never learned
what chicory is
& this has kept me
from passing through
the gate. The gorge
offers no help,
just a stream
hurrying
through it, throughout
the constant day.

Small birds fall
on orange berries
& like me
have nothing to say
about the taste of chicory
or what people do with it
once they have passed
to the other side.
Is this the science
I was missing?

Two children
arrive in the gorge
& pass through
while holding hands
as the trees go on
growing taller.
They knew about chicory
at such a young age.
& yet I never believed
such stories could be true.

I would ask whoever
built the gate
but they are well
beyond my line of sight,
perhaps building more,
in other gorges, for people
to find & pass through
hand in hand.

I would ask the birds
about the orange berries—
if I could stomach them.
But they fly.

I find a rock
on which to sit & wait,
one of those abandoned
here long ago
by the whim & temper
of a passing glacier.
The rock has sat
in constant shadow
& it is cold.

A Long Season

if a dusting of snow was last night's gift to the valley
it snowed dust in this room last year

I was a rabbit sleeping through it now
I am the same grey stuff that buries my head

the dust fills my beard & I am a boy
I play an old man in a children's theatre

the tree sloth is more than his tenderness I say
but slow movements can't hold off the ache

the books are furry the bed is woolen
the floor is a floor or a floor

in the corner is a guitar made for impressions
it wears its own mute

in this year of our constant winter
with eight million breaths frosting the air

don't be clever about it
breathing can kill you in the wrong place

the snowpack holds in the right conditions
but it's easily upset & that never shows

the blanket is my mother & father seen from a distance
I pull them close to escape the chill

For Sorrow We Give Ourselves Names

I went shooting while you slept.
There were no bears to shoot.

They were hidden, like all
things hide when needed.

It is day here, night there.
I'll interrupt your day to ask

about your dreams. Your sleep
swells another country.

I like when it storms.
I like a storm that tears

your life into pieces,
& pieces it back again.

Another order, not of stars.
Stars squint in, out.

I lived & I've tried
other lives, lit other fires.

Nothing lights here
like what I hear from you.

I hunt bears with my camera,
my camera finds none. Around me,

the sky is hidden by the huge
apartment blocks that hide people

inside who know nothing
of me or what I know of you.

I can't picture them. In albums,
their pictures must show this place.

Portraits shot by the river. No
sense of who was shooting them.

Also Known as the Third Critique

Perfect emptiness is nothing
like a snowflake—
this is something
to accept.

Your face is perfect
silence & I agree—
a pond is not a pond
without serenity—
though it hasn't been said,
a brief swirl in the water
betrays you.

Your gaze stirs the saw
grass & the reedmace,
the silence now
only relatively perfect.

Your neck is a swan's,
unbroken but bent

where you burrow
in your own warmth.

Snow strikes the pond
& becomes the pond,
as I am unarmed
by looking.

I am your empty
contemplation,
reflected imperfectly
in the ice forming
on the water.

The ice grows slowly,
a heart slows buried
in the mud,
a toad waiting longer
than a White Narcissus,
a Star-of-Bethlehem,
or any strain of corm,
but nothing so perfect
as eternity.

Your lips are forever
closed,
your hair is a net
catching snow.

The trees have said nothing—
I accept,
like the pond in winter,
some things are to be
left untouched.

Salvage

I have not been able

to put the man & the woman
into the same room.

He is easy enough

to trail, moving from the office,
to the terrace, to the toilet,
but too busy with his drafts
& proofs to pause for long.

She waits in the bedroom, simplified

into the form of a finger tracing
the lines of accusation—
to find her whole

is to find her
in the past, or in the mind, or in a *négligée*
she wears for herself.

I want them to speak.

I want them to walk out of the house

together, into a small copse of trees,
then into a deeper wood, & settle
in a clearing to talk
& let the wood wind itself
around them.

The room can stand in silence
& await their return—candid yellow, adorned
with little more than a church pew.

These days you can buy old ones
salvaged from chapel renovations.
They are not cheap,
but offer a chance to bring
a bit of sanctuary into the house.

Not What Could Be

On a train from Freiburg you realize
the trees are not possible—
they are streaming
past the window.

The Schwarzwald crowds the horizon
where it hulks,
but it's not possible—
your love is buried in it,
performing experiments in his laboratory,
glass steel & formica nestled in a hill.

Love is not possible—
it is a thesis being tested
on the speed you are going
away—

you are rolling a cigarette
& when you step from the train car,
distance will be a fact accented
by burning.

Strasbourg is not that far—

it is not possible,
it's a knotted canal you walk along

while you think away the city,

you think what could be.

Beside the botanical gardens,

I hand you a coffee

in a paper cup.

We are not possible,

but nothing is,

everything is,

the world is a fact that you love.

If you forget

it is possible,

someone will love you for it—

a coin slotted into an idle coffee machine,
a stream in the forest that has not yet reached the canal.

You Must Become a Bear

to reveal your intelligence
you pull koi from the pond

in the village you crush clay pots
seeking tulip bulbs

& after dark you stalk
beyond the house lights

to show you know how
to feed on anything

adapt yourself to the climate
you will be either totem or omen

the spirit of their fears
or a sign of the gift

demanding by the wilderness
to honor its abundance

either one written in dark
splashes across the meadow

in the long summer
you will not feel sorrow

even into autumn's stately walk
feasting on gourd fields

& gorging on fallen apples
until you are dizzy

when the first chill blows
& you trudge out of the village

glazed early with frost
across the orchard grass

in search of the crevice
to which you are resigned

the next step must lead you
into the forgetfulness of sleep

your guilt there
the subject of a fearful dream

The Prelude After

When your hair has grown back.

When you have eaten all the ice.

When you have wept for three.

When you have slept.

When you have quit idling with razors.

When your hand has fought the temptation
to set fire to the house.

When you have made your altar in every room.

When you have let the trash pile & lean.

When you have given up
on the dullness of stone fruit.

Walk out with the door still yawning open.

Take any black car to any airport.

Park anywhere & ignore anyone who would stop you
from boarding a plane to Italy.

Sleep aboard or hum requiem.

When you arrive, do nothing
other than find the old quarter of town,

whatever town.

Sit in the piazza & wait for dusk.

Death remains death & the people will not care,
but they will soon walk for you.

Selvage

The outskirts here come trimmed in coal dust
where the city & its story arrive
at a ragged stop—this is what is left
waiting to be reclaimed by rave or erosion,
two different species of night.

A path cuts through it, splitting the factory
from the depot, the soot from the dirt,
the port cutting jagged
into the river.

Near the gate of a folded textile plant,
I watch bicycles hurtle past—
violet, turquoise, white & chrome—
a bridge waiting at the far end of the port
to carry them across & away.

I left you plucking
at the petals
of dried flowers,

to skulk around
machine looms, looking
for shreds of castoff linen
I can imagine quilting
into a charcoal coat.

Spring has been slow.
The thaw is hard
to measure in the shadow
of a smokestack—
it could still be mid-February,
I could still say goodbye
but there is no such thing
as a clean edge.

The cyclists reach the opposite bank.
A fountain throws up
its many joyful arms,
a park unrolls its lawns.

Jeremy Allan Hawkins was born in New York City and raised in the Hudson Valley. He has been the recipient of a grant from the US Fulbright Program and a teaching fellowship from the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project. His poems have appeared in *Tin House*, *Harvard Review*, and *Waxwing*, among other journals, and was selected for the *Best New Poets 2016* anthology. He is the author of *A Clean Edge*, selected by Richard Siken as the winner of the 2016 BOAAT Chapbook Prize. He lives in France.

