

THE MONONGAHELA BOOK OF HOURS

V. Penelope Pelizzon

A page to hold this place? Illuminations sharp
enough to catch the river's pitch, canoe's

clip around a rock, the redwing's dive above
stove-in banks of smoking trash, dark earth's plunge

to underworlds where men still crouch to free
the stone whose flesh is flame, whose bone

is time, whose ghostly ash the rains
wash down into the pool from which,

blue in the owl-annotated woods past town
at dawn, deer pick their way to drink?

≈

Spectral fog along a mountain interstate
someplace between the solid world we left and these
gauzed altitudes where we have come to live,

a convoy of trucks ahead so it's not until we nearly drive
right through them that we heel the brake and, swerving,
miss a mother goose walking her unfledged flock
across the median and straight into our lane.

We miss, but in the mirror watch the rigs behind
bear down and scatter them
easily as leaves, or feathers, into the oncoming lights.

≈

Dear O.,

Halfway between Pixburgh and Wheeling the historic college preens. Nearby, neon signs
outside the Eagle's Aery — a club we've since learned welcomes only whites — lend each earlier-

falling dusk a noirish tone we relish as a counterweight to the general I ♥ Jesus atmosphere.
Last week in class, a good student confidently remarked that men possess one fewer

rib than women. I was so flustered I didn't think of asking him to count. When a neighboring
college dean interviewed my husband and, halfway through, urged him to pray,

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Tony deflected by quoting Donne. He got the job anyway, but sneaks on and off campus, truant-like, afraid of invitations to kneel. The only imaginably gay man we've met is closeted,

or rather, chiffarobed. He runs the one cafe, mixing arsenic-and-old-lace décor with blasts of urban hip, his hyper-foamed, syrup-sweetened lattes oozing on the doilies on the counter.

We've rented an old tycoon's Victorian, built during the boom in glass. The walls are bird's eye maple. Even in winter we have to squint through a blind of trees to see the poorer streets.

≈

Small towns in mining country, everyone seems a little off somehow, the damage often clear but slight: missing fingers, a limp. In others, deeper harm emerges through a slack mouth or gaze trained on sights beyond. Christian fellowship is advertised, though churches outnumber visible occupants.

When we park and walk through,
the few stare like we came from the moon
and our own oddness quivers up
coldly magnetized, the way iron oxide
threaded through a rock will make a compass needle shake.

≈

Dog walk. Ahead the path grows over, lightly breeze-blown, margins illuminated by the trembling hand of a novice monk. Mining kills the water, yet horror vacui drives nature still, as it drove rows of cowled shoulders bent in the scriptorium to fill the vellum's flank with hatchings of azure and orpiment.

For Matins, paint the redwing blackbirds' epaulets ablaze in preened display, the marsh-side trees a loggia from which the flocking aristocracy drop alms of song onto your path.

≈

*First day of hunting season? Show a movie, advises my chair.
Half your kids won't be there.* Meanwhile, some ancient protein in Tony's DNA, long-couched, flares its nostrils at the cave's mouth and sniffs the air.

Borrowed, an uncle's camo jacket. Pants patterned in Leafy Oak Breakup, bought. For masking human scent, urine from an estrous doe, metallic, armpit-rich, almost a rasp on the back of the tongue,

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purchased under the brand name Still Steamin'. Topo maps. Tarp.
Binoculars. His father's bow, restrung, waiting in a case the same
size as his guitar. The arrow points he packs the night before

will burst on impact into five-bladed stars.

≈

Hiroshige, a minor bureaucrat in the shogun's retinue,
charged with delivering a gift horse to the emperor,
traveled the Tokaido road in 1832, sketching views
he later printed from woodblocks — simple images
of lumbermen guiding their logs along the river
or tax collectors, stopped at the Futagawa teahouse,
entertained by geishas. His prints translate the world
to floating dream with little fuss. Pilgrims ford streams
with the aid of loinclotted bearers, and women hold parasols
half-shut to shelter their horsehair wigs from snow.

≈

In early snow a hunter knelt by the carcass
of a whitetail buck and looked again into its barely
clouded eye. What he watched receding in the pupil

that had locked on his and held him still a full
three beats before he loosed the arrow, he would not tell.
Now the deer was a winter's meat.

When he came from cleaning it to warm his hands
and kissed me, I couldn't recognize his smell.
Like the bride in the folktale, I woke to find

I had married the forest, married the deer.

≈

And if there were a Hiroshige of the mill towns?
The visions closest to his clarity are the postcards one student
brings me from an antiques mall, printed when tourists came
frequently enough to warrant souvenirs of local sights. So I own
snapshots of Mingo Bridge and Monongahela
tinted in aqueous pastel. The block prints are timeless;
even if the artist never saw such scenes, his images
conjure an eternal world. But photographs are full of time.
Merciless smiling shadows of the lost, the last Mill Ball Team
before Pittsburgh fell to the flood of Japanese steel.

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Oxidized kiln skins. Quanta of junked glass.
How many autumns of sumac

rusting beside the tipple and the strip mall's parking lot
before this halflife, also, passes?

Mine shut. Residents gone. For thirty years
glance seams below the town have burned,

sulfur venting through rents in the tar,
roads buckling and sunk in this Flegrea

where steel-hooved industry breached the crust
dividing upper world from under.

≈

[Quecreek mine accident, 2002]

Could you die each day and descend to that black realm
borne under on the bier of the mantrip?
And there eat oily jewels of sunlight
trapped in trees that fossilized to coal?

These are the negatives of stars, for which
men give their breath.

Waiting in the air above
the flooded mine, imagination is an awful tool.

Rise Lazarus, rise Christus, rise
as in old myths the daughter returns and life
blooms from under the earth in a rush of water.

≈

After single-point perspective, I want omniscient sight.

Not just the news camera's flash outside a drowned shaft,
but the crush of the miner's pick breaching
the unmapped well, and water's vision winking out his light.

What a coal seam sees with its legion black eyes.

The merchants, matrons, dogs, and gladiators buried at Pompeii
left only their ash-filled shadows.

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But painted near them on a tufa wall
the goddess Flora turns, Flegrea

greening again below her heel

≈

[Photo, 1901]

White man in blackface
of coal. Among a blackface crew. A mile below surfaces where he

might elbow a *nigger* off
sidewalks. Or not? Too new yet to muscle into his stratum in the shifting

tectonics of *hunkies*, *dagoes*, *kikes*? Bodies
steeraged from cabbage-water towns where mustaches were the only

flourishing concern. No middle passage but slops, rats
eating the straps off the baby's shoes. All cats look the same in the dark

pit, the newcomer says in his
tongue that sounds to the shift crew like a cat being skinned.

≈

Artless demi-creature, at eighteen I'd sport with boys
then plump my pillows, smooth the shamefaced teddy bears.

Now when my students file in wearing tee-shirts printed with kittens
or Pooh clutching his honeypot,

cropped to bare their navel rings, they evoke
that last grab at girlhood, the threshold where

toothy blowjobs overlap homesick devotion to toys.
How old was Flora when the dark god tore her

from her meadow? The students chatter, flutter, settle, turning
their cell phones off and their pages to Ovid

≈

Long before it lent its name to the bacteria we're warned might be *weaponized*

Before Pittsburgh's reek made it *hell with the lid off* (though some locals liked

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joking that its artificial darkness spared them the sun's glare) When airborne,
rainborne sulfurs hadn't begun licking holes in the marble acanthus on public libraries
yet-to-be-endowed by Carnegie and Frick Earlier than the railways giving Londoners
the habit of carrying black umbrellas against its soot Before Star Chamber convened
to hear complaints against *the dregs of many counties, daillie drunkards* flooding
Newcastle to work the mines Or the narrow flues demanding chimney sweeps
no bigger than a child Before canaries Before pit ponies Before pits
When the Dance of Death had not yet kicked
high its heels through Restoration smog (the Dance's steps: *Piles, Planet,*
Rising of the lights, one ailment simply called *Mother*, all worsened by
smoaky air where babes reeled and spun and *perisht fast*) Earlier than
the London medico who wrote of buboes swelling hot until *like carbuncles*
of sea-coal they wept necrotic matter Even before the Venerable Bede
observed the smoke of fired *jet-stones* noxious and useful in routing snakes
Ovid's fellow citizens prized coal's scintilla when faceted and set with gems
as on this amulet of glance worn for fertile marriage by a girl no older
than you, my dears, whose eyes in her funeral portrait burn

≈

Some Adam, hopeful or huckstering or ironic,
seeing hills behind the tippie smoked in greenery
named this patch town *Muse*. Its economy
leans today on auto shops and taxidermy.

All, sayeth the Lord on the Baptist church marquee, *is vanity*.

If you see rainbows in your water glass, don't drink,
our neighbor warns. Your well's leaching gasoline.
On Sundays in service the faithful forsake
this place for Beulah Land, but love it, swallow its poison,
and won't willingly leave it for any place but heaven.

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To live where beauty batters your heart while poverties
bruise your mind, you must....what? From books I mined no answer.

So, to stop asking, I ran, hammering my bones each afternoon
against the hills. Caterpillars tented the sumacs

like silicotic lungs and my own breath burned from climbing
above pleated rows of houses aproned by church yards

sewn with the small gray pockets of graves.
We are all compacting into coal. I'd thought great weight

pressed coal to diamond. I was wrong. It was common
stone I was hardening into as the months bore down.

≈

[Henry Clay Frick, 1849]

Born in the springhouse footing his grandfather's land,
this measles wouldn't have survived a week
without nurse's mustard poultice on his belly
every time he screeched. Reaching boyhood, he thrived
on hot dreams of doubling the old man's wealth.

On cold cash borrowed against his father's farm
he bought his first coal field. Barely of age, he bartered
his health and nearly lost, but savored challenge,
made risk his meat. Learned not to take no for an answer.
Married. Built a manor. Buried his favorite daughter.

≈

[1862]

In my grandfather's house there are many mansions
and an ottoman with legs cut from a deer.

Down to cloven hooves the ankles spindle.
It crouches, a satyr's cushion, waiting to scamper,

when he whistles, to his heel.
On it I hunch reading Thucydides. *Of gods*

we believe and of men we know — the Athenian
boldness swells my throat — *their nature decrees*

wherever they can rule, they will. I rule grandfather.
Suppliant bellies offered, his dogs curl at my feet.

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≈

Figures are the two things he knows best,
drawings of the body and arithmetic.
He marries them on his money
where a gleaner woman and a miner with a pick
work above the legend

*H.C. FRICK & COMPANY
DUE BEARER ONE DOLLAR IN GOODS*

*AT OUR STORE
BROADFORD, 1874*

The scrip's green grays the bearer's hand.

≈

[Alexander Berkman, anarchist]

My tongue is thick, but like Caliban I've learned
the master's language well enough to curse.

Damned if we'll die servants of a king
bloated on a throne of smoke; damned if we'll mine
his empire, crouched below the earth to pluck
these sulfurous nuts he roasts at night.

He boasts of freeing sunlight, trapped inside each fossil tree
whose leaves drank in the day before it turned to stone.

Flame, he says, is that spirit's jubilation.

I'll kill him when we're alone.

≈

[July 6, 1892: The Homestead Strike]

The river at Pittsburgh seemed to Berkman
like a starved worker *stretching his arms toward monsters*
belching fire into the giant hive.

So Frick, the monster-king, must die.

But all Berkman's sense of justice — plus three bullets,
much stabbing, and a bomb clenched in his teeth — failed.

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While the weeping anarchist was led from the office
Frick dabbed his wounds and went on signing deeds.
Shoot to kill, Frick ordered strikebreakers. And thrived,
buying mines and European art the city's soot attacked.

≈

[Calendar page, Book of Hours, 15th c., Frick collection]

Illustrating March, two men have worked their arms stiff
swinging pruning hooks for six centuries in this
vineyard on a hill. They cannot read the book
where the painter has made them pastoral marginalia
for a parade of nobles entering the season,
page left. An ounce of the powdered lapis bluing
the constellations above them is rarer, nearly, than peace.
The painter, not knowing he has only a half-wheel of the zodiac
left before plague fells him, has spent hours picking out
the men's limbs in lampblack with a licked brush.

≈

[The Homestead Works, 1881-1986]

Rumor says, when a man fell into a ladle of molten steel
the foreman ordered that ingot set in a corner of the yard.
Later when they got busy again, he'd have it reheated,
rolled, and shipped. Homestead men annealed to beams. Beams
girded the country. From the Chrysler Building to the bridge at Oakland Bay,
how many hours to build the twentieth century?

Their tale-tall hero was a mule like them: Joe Magarac,
big as a smokestack, drank hot metal for soup and squeezed slab
into rail through his fingers. To save the failing works, he fired
himself to vapor tears in the Bessemer furnace.

≈

Sadness, a gently purgatorial Sunday sadness.
Is it because there's no mail to distract me
from my surroundings or myself? From meditating
whether our sweet neighbor's vision of how we'll pass
eternity at the picnic of evangelical afterlife
counts as penance when I'm obliged to listen?

Let the saved greet their own salvation.
The church-goers in church. The grass-goers

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chewing a blade as they lie on their backs,
so still a hawk circles, considering.

≈

Look, you haven't been exiled here, so don't get all sniffy,
Professor. Sure, Ovid's Rome seems more familiar,

his Tomis even, where the poet finally admits,
writing in their barbaric tongue, that he's grown fond

of his neighbors. But home is where your work is, and if it comes
graced by a plate of funnel cake, say *thank you*.

Get your nose out of the book awhile. You'll never quite fit,
but you can learn to paddle a canoe, spot deer in a stand of brush,

and when you turn venison into good red sauce, the locals
take seconds and see you're not a total loss.

≈

Grief in its local dress is piercing yet picturesque.
Here lies *Zarinda Fainter, Young Mother*,
and at her side five miniature blank slates. One by one
unhoused too soon, or all erased in a sole fell swoop?
A winged death's-head wipes clean her name.

Often the stones say so little that I am drawn
by silence to author their stories. In our second year
I learn to gather morels by the bed of my best tragedy,
the minister's brontophobic daughter who,
fleeing raindrops, fell down a well and drowned.

≈

Pumiced by dust, a miner's lungs are frailer
than the antique player piano roll I find
coffined in the Victorian parlor's pomp. Unscrolled,
The Monongahela Nocturne spreads its stigmata
of notes. Breaker boys dividing culm from coal
barehanded in the mills the year this house was built
suffered *red tips* when sulfur gnawed their fingers raw.
My fingers trace where the cylinder bit
each punched hole, translating, triggering the piano's
proper keys. So emptiness began this song.

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The first temple was a grove of trees
hung with sacrificial skulls. The gods praised there
were beautiful and wild, and often took the form of animals.

Our neighbor never spoke of this,
but a pair of mounted turkey cocks,
an elk's jaw, and a twelve-point whitetail rack
crammed the bedroom where he died.

Silent, he was welcomed back to the church.

After the funeral we built a fire in his sodden field
and sent his kills to honor him in smoke.

≈

[whispered into smoke]

Overhead the caravansaries of stars
light their revolving lamps to welcome you
as they greeted your teacher, Ptolemy.

The spring Crab scuttles the ecliptic west,
stretching a claw to the Water Serpent's head.
In its belly, the Beehive Cluster hums with young
stars seeded from hydrogen and dust.

You loved

insisting your DNA was engineered like that,
in space, and we knew the fields were just
your pied-à-terre, the air your truer habitat.

≈

Before the leaves flesh out in spring, a hunter follows
deer trails lacing the woods, pokes at scat, scratches
at scrapes, and daily leans a few more blowdown limbs
together for a blind.

Days lengthen.

Chlorophyll draws sunlight into stems.
New vines tendrils over, then blanket the blind.

At dusk on the meadow's edge a doe raises her head
from rampant green to watch a passing fox.

And the moon, white on long grass, makes the hunter
impatient for dawns of frost, the owl's call.

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≈

Monongahela, my river *where bluffs fall down to the water*,
though King Coal's steamed west and steel has folded,
you are still too freighted with commerce to canoe.

But you may school us yet in metamorphoses, for all
your northward-flowing length, where for years arterial
oxide waters flamed, your banks this summer blaze green.

Below the locks we paddle your tributary.

When a kingfisher dives, Tony masters his surprise, tucks us
neatly into an eddy turn to watch its plummeting refrain,
and as we hang mid-stream the redwings clamor on the bank.

≈

Lungs are frailer, too, than a Book of Hours' vellum page
given its tooth for ink six hundred years ago
with a pounce of ashes. *Vita brevis*,

the calf bawled in the yard. The birds in the bush
rustled till their limed feet burned, their bones
charred and ground to whiten the calf's singed hide.

The monks' calligraphy, Flora frescoed on the villa walls,
aquarelles of the river's span at night below
a multitude of stars. How sharply they shine, *ars longa, ars longa*,

painted fires lighting the painted water.

≈

Not of the diamond's water, this flame.
Not rich, not pure, not rare.

A common stone, burning, by which I've lived.
A sulfured smutch, a sputtering match.

Not diamond, but ancient
sunlight through a leaf

unsheathed from rock by the bare
fingers of a boy.

Truth is, these are his bones.

I've gnawed them to a skeleton of song.

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Far above our earthly woods, our earthly waters,
springs the river Eridanus from Achernar, star
of the first magnitude. Then heaven's flume of tears
trickles north to where I drink it, iced,
from my telescope's glass. In its shallows,
splashed by his hounds, Orion dabbles his hucklebones.
Orion the Hunter, the ancients named him. But here
winter dark is no game. It's a coal seam through rock.
So I call him *Orion the Miner*, pick and shovel in hand,
the three stars at his belt a hammer, a pail, a lamp.

≈

[Monongahela Nocturne]

Indian Summer burned two weeks before the weather
finally turned, and tonight acorns dropped, popping, in fog. Now the rain
moves over, making oaks rattle their leaves with slaking, bringing
water's course to the schoolyard and the narrow glen
bedded with whitetails, to the road, the track, the shotgun
shacks, to the pool of tailings dabbled by ducks,

and when it leaves us at midnight, it leaves rinsed stars
trembling like notes in the nocturne: *Diamond above me,*
diamond below, diamond at all four corners,
anthracite night, and carbon the body of miners.

≈

V. Penelope Pelizzon's *Nostos* (Ohio University Press, 2000) won the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award. She is also co-author of *Tabloid, Inc: Crimes, Newspapers, Narratives* (Ohio State University Press, 2010), a study of the relations among sensation journalism, photography, and film between 1927-1958. Her poems and essays have appeared widely.

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