



How Facism Comes to America

Steve Klepetar

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Locofo Chaps is dedicated to publishing politically-oriented poetry.

Chicago, USA, 2017

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How Fascism Comes to America

It comes down a golden staircase
with moving stairs while we are laughing
and telling jokes. It comes with a smile
and a sneer. It comes with marbles
and nails in its mouth.

It comes while the cameras are rolling.
Sometimes it comes dressed
as a clown. It sees demons everywhere,
and promises to build a wall. *Trust me,*
it says, *Believe me.*

It comes with documents to sign
and skywrites its name on everything.
It comes dragging a tin box,
and handsome children, who kiss its hands,
and a wife who stares into the flames.
It comes in tweets and sound bites
and speeches that jangle like bells,
or screech like tires and broken glass.
It comes with wide shoulders and big arms
and the open-mouthed snarl of an alpha male.

It comes waving flags and singing songs.
It rises from hills and towns;
pours from the sky in torrents of rain.
It hides in plain sight. I have seen it
on the riverbanks parading beneath willows
and pine. I have seen its bonfires everywhere.
Its gospel is written on tee-shirts. It runs
up our flagpoles, buries itself in our yards,
spreads like oil polluting our streets with sludge.

After the Election

I sail out in my boat and get lost
in the fog This may have been a good move,
I don't know, because sunset tinges
this fine mist pink and white.
I miss the sky's deep blue, but wind
always blows on the Swan River,
and if you could see them in this soup,
green banks are everywhere, and lights
shining from the yacht club
and from windows of expensive homes.
About politics, I don't know,
but it only takes one guy to sail this boat,
one hand on the tiller, one working the ropes.
It's a little bloody sometimes, with gulls
swooping and a bit of torn flesh,
but there are islands where you can rest awhile,
and watch turtles and their hatchlings
crawl slowly through shallow pools.
Snakes, all venomous here, slither away
before you see them.
Mostly I take care to stay on the paths.
When I said I sail out in my boat and get lost
in the fog, I didn't mean "sail" or "boat" or "lost"
or "fog." You get that, right? Hear the air quotes,
the way I say what I mean by saying something else?
Yes, I'm making some of this up
(but not the parts about turtles or snakes,
because those islands exist somewhere, rooted
to the bottom, miles before river tumbles to the sea).

November 2016

It's November 2016 and now I think
about my mother in Prague
after 1939, wearing a yellow star,
and walking a circuitous route
to avoid the streets forbidden to Jews.
Imagine a country where this
could happen, a powerful army who hates you,

your property stolen, your home
wrenched away and occupied.
At night you and your mother go out
to the garden to burn the communist
propaganda your sister left behind
when she fled, the smoke rising in thin,
gray wisps in a city you once called home.

Cup of Darkness

Fill your cup at the well of darkness.
That is all they offer us to drink

and we must taste those shadows
down to the iron dregs. Our tongues

thicken and ache in our mouths.
Bitter taste will linger as we shiver

in icy air. It may be that our houses
will dissipate into fog. No doubt

we will wander long through bracken
and swamp. We may lose our way,

but we can sing out in this long night,
even as the sound of moaning burns our ears.

The Spoilt Season

This is the spoilt season, the dying land.
Here are weeds and crows and graves.

Trucks growl up our street all night
and in the morning we pull our shades

against another day of rain and tears.
Here are angry men wading icy streams.

Here is their music of broken drums.
Here are drugs and beds with their sheets

torn up, and dust on the nightstand, dust
on the walls and floor. Someone lived

here once, in wind and fading light,
when the kitchen hummed, and the scent

of soup went everywhere. She lived
in a body, painted her image on glass

where it shone in the dark, another star
made of desire, kissing the brow of sky.

This Year

*the year of the well of darkness
overflowing with no
moon and no stars*

W. S. Merwin

And the sky has turned upside down.
We hang from its black rafters, each

of us trapped in a rage of sleep.
All night we sail through mournful

seas, past headlands where banshees
moan. Twisting in our hard beds, we

hear their song, that hungry noise
reeking of coal dust and oil. Fish

float in the grimy bay. We have heaved
our mirrors overboard. Broken into shards,

they will not shine. Morning tumbles
in a mirage of mist. We stumble to our

kitchens, on lines of darkness as we move,
hoping not to fall or be dragged away

into earthbound clouds. The morning
shot, and then a plunge into streetlights

and a rush of cars. Workday gears grind.
Artificial light smears across our eyes

as we doze on our feet or slump at our desks.
Coffee leaks into our veins. We are waiting

for the next war, which invades our dreams
with its red flares bursting in dark air. We are

waiting, each of us alone, for black rivers to
gather force, new floods to sweep us underground.

Stupidity

A student's mother asked me how long it takes to drive from L.A. to Australia. Don't laugh. Stupidity

is dangerous. There are vast "garbage patches" in the oceans, the largest in the North Pacific, between California

and Hawaii, mostly made of plastic particles a few millimeters long. When all the ice on Greenland

melts, sea levels will rise seven meters, and another five when the ice on Antarctica goes. Billionaires

think they'll be safe in their mansions on New Zealand, but that's an island too, a young one rent by earthquakes.

Islands will disappear and coastal cities swamped. There's a deluge coming, with no help needed

from an angry god. Imagine endless water stretching toward the horizons, and plastic slowly, slowly breaking

down. Maybe then the sky will fill with doves circling on white wings, waiting patiently for earth to heal.

The Deaf Planet

*Now the moment has gone it is dark
What is man that he should be infinite
The music of a deaf planet*

W. S. Merwin

On the planet of infinite resources,
we dig and dig for gold,
for copper, bauxite, iron, coal.

We pump oil from a million wells;
everything we take replenished
by some benevolent hand. Our smoke

rises and fills the sky until birds
disappear. Then a wind cleanses
everything. Birdsong leaks into lusty trees.

Everyone owns everything – a house,
two houses, cars, trucks, and boats.
Our convoys bear down to the shore, clot

the sea with sails until we are cheek
to jowl, each in our own little ocean square.
There is nothing to give away, nobody

needs a thing. To wish is to have and to
have and to have until all our desires
pile up into pyramids of shining things.

We type and tweet, smart new phones
gleaming in our hands. We offer
opinions to a world without want,

warm in winter, cool in summer's heat.
Our mouths hang open. See?
We are little birds waiting to be fed.

Disgust

Some toss it in the river and turn away,
some hang it on the wall.

Some bring it to the voting booth,
or kick it down the street like a battered can.

Others rub it in their skin until they shine with rage.
Some swallow it with gin or scotch or bourbon or rye,

masking its peculiar taste with bitters when night
becomes a black window or a torn shade drawn.

I know a man who molds his like a child in the snow.
He calls it Bud, and brings it with him on the bus.

Some wash their hands until they wrinkle and peel.
Some leave it on the doorstep of a lifelong friend,

or wear it as a shirt that won't come off,
that poisons flesh, mingling blood and smoke and air.

In the Camp

Sisters, brothers, we thought we knew you,
sat with you in the stadium and looked
into your hearts and faces on the TV screen,

but here we are behind this wire in the sun
where you have left us and gone to work,
your children digging the earth as we disappear.

Paper and Straw

What has gone wrong, that we should all seem to be made of paper and straw?

John Cheever, notebooks

Not long ago, we dove from slippery cliffs into a cool sea, our slick bodies lithe with each stroke, every breath and turn of the head. We swam into every new day, and in the sun salt dried on our arms and legs, our wild and ruined hair. Inland, by the river, we listened to the song of frogs. Once, far from any marked trail, we saw a python dangling from a branch, and watched in awe as its brown and olive body stiffened and moved along the trunk of a eucalyptus tree.

But today, our houses seem to bend toward drying grass, away from passionate starlings rustling among oak leaves, or green lizards of memory. When I reach for you, you turn toward another country in another time, before town halls stuffed with anxious bodies, before angry crowds and placards, fear radiating out into the night sky. Sirens in the distance, and many of our neighbors gone. We seem to be made of paper and straw, ready to ignite, burn, turn to ash in the summer wind.

Walking the Road

*“...Maybe hope
Was never anything but feet, and wherever
It heads for it must get there burning.”*

W. S. Merlin

But in back of the speeches I hear
feet marching, and sometimes, even
by the sea and in the warm air, fear
rises in me like a great, green lizard
with amber eyes and a darting tongue.
And I admit I am ashamed, healthy
as I am, and prosperous, while so
many have such reason to feel afraid.
We tread down the highway together,
though clearly this is not meant
to be a place to walk, and we all can
read comforting signs about places
to eat, to sleep, about parks named
for explorers, or more recently,
indigenous chiefs. We walk together,
not equally safe or welcome or at home.
We cross rivers, climb fences, or tear
through the border with its wire
and nails. We walk and our feet ache
from the length of the road, its hardness,
the mere fact of our suffering flesh –
blisters and corns, tendinitis, ankles
twisted as we go, sometimes marching,
sometimes limping, and always hope
burning above us like a second sun,
or a lamp held high in the ghostly air,

now vivid, now spectral, now drowned
by a terrible wave broken from rising seas.

In Praise of Soft Stars

So I look yearningly at the soft stars,
but they will do me no good.
I think of moral crises, but when

have I known the taste
of abstinence and self-discipline?

John Cheever, notebooks

I've known the press of crowds, heat
of summer sun, and velvet nights
with soft stars spreading in darkness

as winds blow cool from the western sea.
I've known the sharp taste of fruit

on my tongue, kiwi and mangoes
tart as little spears, burn of chilis, bright
jab of garlic sizzling in olive oil, and I've

been gladdened to walk alone through
parklands and city streets, and by the shore

as the tide rose and waves crashed, turning
white sand gray. But there are whispers
in my town, soft spoken men with many fears

wrapped around their arms like snakes
tangled in the boughs of trees.

And there are louder voices filled
with violence and hate. "Can we not
kill them all? I'm ready to take some people out."

And there are shouts and people running
in the street, and sirens, and mothers

huddling with weeping children
as they hurry to their homes. And where am I,
with my hunger appeased and my healthy

stride? Have I opened my door wide enough
to allow the strangers in? When shadows fall,

will I know the taste of abstinence, flinty
flavor of courage sipped from a tin cup
dipped in water so cold my teeth will ache?

Will I suppress my terror by decency and discipline,
and climb the burning rope to the core of my better self?

Refuge

If sky darkens on a day when you have roamed too far,
if wind picks up, trembling leaves on familiar trees,

if lightning carves its fiery veins above your head,
if thunder explodes, and a fury of rain drenches you,

if you stumble in this wet misery on a street
that all but disappears, I offer you an open door,

and at my table, an honored place. If power lines
lie sizzling and snaking on the wet ground, we will

find lanterns and candles, some crusty bread
and plenty of wine. Together we can ride it out,

this storm that rose so suddenly. Others have already
come, shaken and storm-cursed, but warm now, and dry

in this well-built house, where voices study the daunting
language of hope, and new songs braid and rise, until fear

is sealed away, and a new, quiet courage spreads around
us, a lake glimmering at sunset, or moonlight in the spring.

Acknowledgements

“The Deaf Planet” first appeared in *Ilya’s Honey*.

“How Fascism Comes to America” first appeared in *Verse-Virtual*.

“November 2016” first appeared in *Red River Review*.

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