

Accepting the Locust

by [Jeff Burt](#) (June 2025)



Locust And Grasshopper (Salvador Dalí, 1967)

Accepting the Locust

1

Locusts whirr, the stir of wings
as they swarm to a hot spot of vegetation,
vibrate, populate the day
with wing-whack, shirr, stridulation.
They do not sing like cicada
that ripple stomachs in song
reverberated against bark in the evenings.
They clack as a horde to rape the crops
farmers had meant to reap.
I know writers like the scissoring sound
of the circadian, a sexy seventeen-year metaphor,
but the prose of the moment is locust.
And yet from what high branch does the locust sing?
It strikes like a match in the grass below.

2

I read two writers who supposedly flipped
on the light on the flight of a beetle mating late
into October, when the male would have been dead
in June, the female by Halloween
months dead and her eggs
almost to pupae by the time a witch
and broom bond in the sky.
I know in a poetic sense these failures
mount towards success, like Keatsian callings
for the moon repeated in Merwin
and Olson chanted by lamp-struck odists.
Our mothers praised us in our errors
so much they became acclaim,
a type of emeritus faculty promoting
the form while ignoring the fill.

3

When we say it is the truth, of course,
we don't mean that it is fact.
It is the truth that I sat on the porch
and deer materialized out of dusk
behind the oaks and madrone,
but in fact, they were there all along,
I just didn't see them.
My spouse informs those who didn't ask
that I have problems remembering,
and that's a truth, though they think
I have a collapsed fold in my cerebellum
when the fact is I don't care to commit
to memory the details they think I should.
So when one writes that the ornamental cherry
bloomed in March I know it as truth,
that a tree has bloomed too early
and will be stricken by frost
and the blossoms will fall
when they were meant to linger,
but I know the fact—it's a plum,
not an imitation at all,
a fruitless plum, but who wants a fruitless plum
in a poem, when an ornamental cherry
at least provides the space to imagine
the fruit has died in frozen spring?
And yet from what high branch does the locust sing?
It strikes like a match in the grass below.

4

I have looked into still ponds
with blue reflecting sky above my head,
perched on hands and knees to see myself,
but one really needs to peer from a pier
and not be diverted as I am by a strider
wicking across the meniscus
or a floating piece of weed some coot

will pick and gobble, or debris
of last year's reeds and branches
floating one inch under the surface
of the skein that stretches a pond
into a metaphor for a mirror.
Frost wrote a solipsistic joke
of a mirrored pond broken by fingertip,
the glass of looking inward that nature
dashed with supposed need
to draw one out of the drowning well
of self-importance. Yet the truth and the fact
of what I know about myself
is no different than Frost—
I may have a deficit disorder
when plumbing the pond of me,
prefer to watch two minnows gulp
at the prod of my swirling fingertip
than spend a moment in self-contemplation,
but, in the end, I have caught myself looking.

5

Are all poems mirrors, darkling reflections,
not fact, but a truth?
How urgent the agencies of bad experience
exclaim and eager publics hear
that all songs must come with universal
middle fingers extended
not born from self-knowledge
but constructed for air?
From what high branch does the locust sing?
It strikes like a match in the grass below.

6

What do we make of this hyped equation
of truth, beauty, of earnestness,
of details yielding a metaphor
of analog or crosscurrent understanding?

Is it all just putting a dress on a pig?
Few read, less understand.
I read archeologists found flowers preserved
in the tomb of a Mongolian warrior
and among all the things he was buried with
I thought of these, not the symbols of courage
but the gifts of the most human sentimentality
thrown in by a wife or by daughters,
reaching stems, beauty extended.
I think that is the best of all the offerings
they could have given, a passing fragrance,
an innocent joy, a great gift out of the poverty
of grief, a simple way to mark a passing.
And so of poetry, and to forgiving the moon
for appearing in so many stanzas,
for the common locust turned into cicada,
for clutching to the fire that life can bring
wherever it is lodged.
From what high branch does the locust sing?
It strikes like a match in the grass below.

The Death of Newspapers

Hear Ye, Hear Ye, Ye scribes, Ye printers,
count up your pulp and paper

take up your heads from gilded words
your fingers etched from lead and acid

time to settle rents and accounts,
time to give the last newspapers to the poor

so that they may stuff their pillows
and insulate the framing of their shacks

scribble in the hardened scrabble
for soon you'll all be poor people

out of jobs in archaic fonts with papers
for windows when others own glass

and fact will die among fiction, faction,
truth like a dangling, fragile epiphyte

in a forest of monstrous trees
hidden by lies little and large

driven to hold the power of one
over another in place.

Justice

I like the blinding rag on the statue of justice,
but as any kid knows you can look down
and see your feet and know at least where you stand,
gain an idea of where you're going,
if on a teeter-totter, know with pressure
from one foot you can tilt the plank to a side.
Justice is not so blind as impaired.

I used to think when I was in sixth grade
the statue should have had eyes wide open,
even had vision of what was below the scales,
aware that all evidence rarely rises,
one side or the other trying to hide something.
During truth sessions my mother arranged
with my brother and I the whole truth
rarely came out, more sparks of truth
in fires of anger, resentment, and a few facts
saved from the fibbing conflagration to start

a new argument all over again.

It bothered me that the rag stayed.
It seemed a better invention that when the scales
tipped somehow the blinds would be removed,
or slipped over the nose toward the mouth,
so that the justice could be seen
instead of the statue being the only one
who could not see what justice wrought.
I thought perhaps that I spent so much time
on these scales that I was already on the wrong
side of the equation, though the scales
did not state an error or correction,
just left and right, and what was piled
on one saucer that outweighed the other
might not be truth or fact or right.
One side of the coin or the other,
my dad said, it's all about the money spent.

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