

## Four Poems by Deven Philbrick

### **Dungeness**

The memory is a dungeon. Crabs  
cross the mind, Dungeness, cross  
eelgrass in life, cross the stomach  
of hungry captors. Shell cracks echo

as bones broken by the sticks  
and stones they'd warned of, what seems  
to scream only steam escaping through  
the cracks. I am trapped here, like

*really* trapped, trapped as a crab  
in a net. They'll eat my flesh too,  
if the spirits I've convened cannot  
crack in or out or through. There is

power at play, in these unbidden  
visions of fleshly contact. Crabs  
are not so expensive, but what  
they signify is a deeper, more

pernicious kind of wealth. I might as  
well be dead, by now, eaten and  
excreted and returned to the earth.  
They eat crabs weekly, here. Mouths

full of meat, they speak their  
hatreds, instruct me to eat too  
and the spirits (here, at the moment  
looking back) are aghast. I have no

resources for telling what's  
what in this endless lookback, protracted  
experience of pain in the stomach or  
heart. I am both loved and hated

behind these fraying ropes of brain, this  
carapace a straightjacket for mind. Violence  
sidestepped, crablike, by assumed  
intentions, and memory's first grimace

awakening. Crushing crabs, she spoke  
in a masculine voice, said I'd eat it  
or she'd make me. Said crabs came  
for Christmas, said Christ himself

was a crab. Irreligious, she laughed  
and I (the spirits doubt me, here)  
was unphased, phase a phase gone  
thru only later. Sweet, she said more

than once. Like crabs, we are  
motivated principally by our  
sensations, reason mind's cleverest  
spell, value body's rising

to the seafoam surface, where  
fishermen hoist with mighty hands  
their precarious nets. Tattoos on  
the forearms, chum in the beard, it's

weird to see crabs like this, in their  
original state, before value. The shell  
is both body and home, the net both  
captor and capital, a dungeon of

sorts. In short, the crabs are crawling  
inside my brain, inside the hollows  
of my emptying body. If I grow extra  
legs (four more pairs, if anyone

cares) I'll still be still, trapped, a  
dungeon of rope and wire, hope and  
desire transfixed and transformed  
at once. The memory is a carapace,

an armored body, protective only  
as it seems. At its seams, chitin  
splinters under the weight of the falling  
mallet, between rough and callused

palms, eczema or psoriasis notwithstanding,  
bloody palms and sung psalms, in that  
dusty kitchen, wallpaper peeling  
from the fishy steam, scent of sea

and of death not so different. Meals  
eaten in the past undergo  
digestion at varying speeds, needs  
of the body met by another's body. Bodies

adrift in the mind's sea, the mind's  
sky, the mind's chitinous carapace,  
relate only by touching. Spirits see it  
differently, the spell what breaks bones, the spell

itself language, itself mind. We have gotten here  
by crawling, by journeys taken on our many  
limbs through hot sands. We have become  
the crabs of the distant past, eaten by

enemies long dead. We have become them or  
they have become us, become their very  
captors or, more accurate still, become  
artifacts of capturing minds. Kept captive

here, in the alchemical soup the memory  
sprung from, the crabs are stunned  
by speech. A quick death, she said, means  
they won't feel a thing.

The mind of a crab is a curious thing  
to consume. We have abandoned  
our exoskeletons.

## Scavenge

The moon was only a stone and we were  
there, where the vultures descended  
on the road. Exegetical egress. Demonstrative  
explosion. Shores worn down by erosion  
in the mind, mental  
shores—that which implores us: touch.

They have come for his body  
on this road of unending  
entropy, of imagination's unbelievable limit.  
It is late in the afternoon and  
the body, pink and glistening in the hot  
high sun,  
is starting to rot.

Three big birds, the sun and moon  
both shining at once, in a blue  
sky, limitless site of  
the vultures' searching flight—they are searching  
for life and death  
at once.

Food for the body, food for the mind,  
spiritual food given  
time after time in invisible forms, taken  
in the hungry, dripping mouth  
without acknowledgment. I've eaten  
my soup and vegetables, drunk my  
poisoned wine, drunk,  
my mind elides its place in time  
watching  
those three big birds descend  
on the carcass,  
tearing flesh from bone, the sun star and  
the moon  
stone given form in that  
mystic abyss the vultures  
seem to float thru  
we *all* seem to float thru  
changing color like  
flesh torn asunder, we walked on by  
like it was nothing.

I shouted that the birds were there, screamed

until my lungs rotted like the flesh  
the street played canvas to, painted street  
blood red, feeding hungry vultures like  
Eden. But the distance  
between our bodies bearing beating hearts  
pumping the same blood expands  
and I, immobilized, shout again, to nothing.

More vultures. Forming a circle  
if constellated, lines drawn between each. Who  
does the drawing  
but that body they're here  
to feast on, that flesh sustaining their own flesh.  
Innumerable feathers. Red head, featherless and  
cratered as the stone moon.

There are vultures here  
I screamed again  
To no avail  
As blood flows riverine  
on these unwalked streets.  
They cannot hurt us  
For we are not dead  
But nonetheless  
It cannot hurt  
To stop and stare for a while, at the feathers  
of their massive wings, at the flesh  
dangling from thieving beaks, at their  
seeking eyes, sites, inevitably  
of subjectivity.

Their work is to find what was already done.  
Their flight, ruddering  
in the co-light of  
the physical sun and moon. Vultures  
do not kill  
but terrify.

And the dogs bark again.  
You are gone.  
There are rivers of blood all over the place.  
On the road.  
In the mind.  
In the body of all bodies, the high sea of the  
sky and its  
terrible enclosure.

The vultures land on my shoulders and carry me away.  
Beyond the sun and moon, beyond the stones of other  
galaxies and times. They will feed me  
to their deity, supreme being of  
scavengers, but only once  
they deem me dead.

I am a shell of myself  
shouting in the streets  
amidst barking dogs and  
tired feet, waiting  
for the dead thing the vulture's picked at  
to reveal itself.

I am a body fit for vultures  
if I am anything at all. The sky hangs  
low, its objects available  
even to the hand  
of a dead man who reaches out for it, plucking  
the stone from the sky.  
The vultures will get him before too long.  
They'll get his dogs too.

## Spring

Ironic, that the sun darkens.

Ironic, in our flesh, we  
    dance as though made  
    in the darkening sun, flesh  
what makes us real, irony what makes us  
    see. Thought's embodiment  
the dream's diurnal reverie, inside  
    the darkening sun's inside's  
inside. Flesh encloses nothing  
    but its insides  
    and irony.

I've taken to taking my coffee  
    on the patio, where  
morning shadows make  
    the sun hard  
to feel. Real morning's imagined  
    heat, complete rejection  
    of night.

Don't you know that other lives are  
    being lived  
in the shadow of the same great rock  
we dance before? Yes, other lives  
    replete with everything, even  
the most revolting excretions. Ironic

that even selfishness, brazen and  
    unashamed, could get us here.

Where the sun, bright and darkening,  
    blazes.

Where the inside and outside part material  
    ways.

Where nights are mere darkened extensions of  
    material days  
    and the irony that makes  
    bodies breathe and bake  
    takes its material  
    toll.

Where it all happens.

Where the linguistic  
sausage is made.  
The sun darkens  
our flesh, poison and cure  
one. How, we, dancing, ask  
is it vitaminic and cancerous  
at the same time? It came time  
to hide inside  
and, ironically, we went for it.  
The whole art reveals itself  
in that cerebral unison of cross purposes,  
that simultaneous firing  
the sun lays claim to, the becoming  
set forth by the sun's  
material rays and their consequences.  
We've walked so long seeking shade.  
We've wept so long seeking sun.  
We've slept all wrong on countless  
nights, all around our  
dreams.

I dream of the sun  
rising in the mind alone, twice—once  
in the dream and  
once in the sky, identical  
in their falsity,  
ironic as it is.  
I dream of an earth  
encrusted in the skins  
we shed while sleeping,  
made of night's impregnable  
harvest. Sun darkened flesh  
leaves sweat stains on satin sheets—

sleeping outdoors, we wake  
from that nightmare  
in the sun's  
darkening  
embrace.

Ironic that it's  
come to this.  
Awakened.  
Darkening.



## The Road and the Things of This World

With what violence  
    the road stretches into the horizon.  
Corpse after rotting  
    corpse. With what callous  
indifference the drivers in their death  
    machines roll forward  
at speeds that daunt and baffle  
    the primordial mind.

Revery made rapid  
by monotony of white dashes and  
    bodies, aligned as if  
a constellation on pavement,  
I left the wicked machine I seemed bound to,  
    burdened by no limit  
but conscience. I left and found, amidst that  
    sea of metal, smoke and sound, the first body  
in what would become  
    a veritable lifetime  
    of bodies.

I came to the beast unburdened,  
torrential rain a mere plane of  
    alternative experience. Inspected  
its husk. In it  
    three scrolls appeared and I, turning  
to ensure I hadn't been followed, removed them  
    one by one. I read them there  
on that highway of  
    dust, pages wet with rain and  
entrails. Their hieroglyphs spoke  
as if the page were  
    film screen, telling of the poet who,  
armed with a katana and a handful of  
    rice, walked that other  
road, where all he saw but himself were  
    the footprints of the animals  
who'd quietly stalked these routes  
    in prehistory. One day, the animals  
who left these tracks will die, but  
    not here.

I imagine myself as the others, donning  
the animal's putrid skin. Inside

that bodily cavern, warm and  
bloody, womblike, life and death  
find their common ground.  
Wearing someone else's skin, I envision  
    myself at the precipice  
    of experience, becoming  
my own shadow. My imagination  
betrays me, fetid corpse the source  
of physical angst as much as  
    the onslaught of  
    terrifying tides. My mouth  
is full of maggots.  
    Wearing the same skin  
I wore in a childhood dream, I press  
    my fearful body against the wall  
that abuts the road.

In eternity, I envision  
    the silverback,  
whose rippling musculature eclipses  
even that of the strongest man. He has  
no use  
    for machines. All day long  
he sits in a palace of leaves, eats  
    his fill, sleeps  
as he wishes, and protects  
his palace and its amicable inhabitants.

In eternity, the roads  
    are mere footpaths  
and, lest I indulge pastoral naivete,  
    the ants still die  
    under gently stalking feet.  
The silverback is violent  
    when necessary.

Under the sign of the same blue moon  
    the automobiles  
grind to stopping. It is a sacred space we're  
    in, the skin sin's kin, we sin  
in it, sweating for its necrotic warmth.

The maggots have made a home here.  
The supremacy of the natural.  
Fallacy's everlasting grasp.  
Making sense of it all—the carnage.

This katana has cut down more foes than  
any novel highway, has  
eaten more rice  
than anyone on earth, birth  
of the silverback, mother gorilla on her  
back, spreadeagle, worth  
every cent spent on  
the scourge of industry.

Imaginal darkness enshrouds the fallen.  
Congenital weakness beckons the machines.  
Spaces between paving stones rendered obsolete.  
Space itself rendered obsolete.

A man and his dog, life among the corpses, stand  
panhandling with a cardboard sign.  
There are no dollar bills to give him  
from within my raccoon husk, so instead, I  
feed him maggots on the side  
of the road. In his eyes flashes  
rage at the engines' collective roar.

In another universe, he is  
a king, sacred sweetmeats brought  
as gifts by susurrant subjects, lifted  
to glistening lips by fat, greasy digits,  
digested and shat right there  
in the palace of leaves  
in the palace of concrete  
in the graveyard of  
universal belonging.

In yet another, a vehicle veers out  
of control, plows the man and his dog  
into the wall. A universe implodes  
with each revelatory rev.

The third scroll, previously unseen, tells  
of man's animal nature. Ire and desire  
fused at the site of sacred tires, worshipped  
by animals who know not  
their own weakness.

Feed the panhandler.  
Burn the automobiles.

Sleep beneath the easterly light, burning  
in the mind, hot and bright,  
our infernal orient, death's  
ultimate arrival  
made meaningful again.

They've followed me to this juncture.  
Laughed at my crown of leaves.  
Shedding my mechanical skin, my raccoon skin, my  
rubber-mask flesh I've been told  
is my body. A skeleton in a sea  
of sirens.

The bodies accumulate if we like it or not.  
The road is no adventure.

Honor killings rendered child's play.  
Billions of dead souls.

It is here that the silverback's teeth fall out.  
O Mother gorilla, take me from this  
no space, endless shortening  
of distances. O Mother of all mothers, take  
my blade in your hands, for you know  
not what it does. Slash the stalks of your  
foliate food, try not to slice your palms.  
Your child feasts upon maggots  
despite his nature.

Buckle up, buttercup! Child of glass  
thrown thru what shields him  
from his natural entropy—wind and rain  
and dust kicked up  
by the clattering of deer hooves.  
Roadrage and roadkill are separated  
by the vagaries of intention.  
An animal drinks her fill of wine and, drunk  
like a man, vomits  
on the asphalt of the universal highway.

Strapped to my seat, I weep  
but cannot say why.  
The radio announces foreign deaths  
like roadkill. Bombs dropped  
by engine machines.

There are two paths to walk.  
The silverback treads both  
at the same time.

Feasting on flesh at the riverine roadside,  
sticky tar encrusting feet.  
Angels descend on us.  
Civilization's ineluctable collapse.

We have sinned, O, we have sinned  
at the behest and expense of our natural kin, and  
    in the face of it,  
    we bathe our flesh in fresh  
    spilled blood.

The horizon is an unreachable point.  
But, walking on my knuckles, I'll will  
my way there.

The sun and moon coalesce, casting  
shadows on the asphalt.  
The panhandler refuses my rice.  
Each body evacuated of the thing that made it move.

The boundless myopia of the human.