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## Past Lives

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## Past Lives

One window bursting with light hangs in the town's wartime blackout.  
One orange cigarette dot during the new moon accompanies the rhythm  
of feet and leaves. One shiny corner of a lottery ticket hits the streetlight.  
One lonely wandering Titan spots it in the primordial refuse next to the  
curb. One drain almost washes it down, one hand takes it up. House and  
sky make one shade of murk. An upward look sees one homeless myth.  
One word bends itself into shape like a smile forming, a finger beckoning,  
a door mysteriously pushed ajar.

2

A pair of lovers wake inside each other. They can't remember the night  
before. One makes coffee for the other. They sit on the edge of the bed  
giving each other names and comparing genitals. They touch each other's  
cool hair the way rivers polish Petoskey stones. They read each other's  
minds and each thought gives the other a gift of raspberries. After two  
years, they open the window and climb onto the breezy ledge to see what  
else there is to do.

3

A trinity of sailors push past the beach of stones, almost immediately  
regretting it. Sea monsters twist their limbs clockwise, unscrewing the  
ship's cap, as the moon plummets like an orange into their mouths.  
The three wash up, dry off, and march across the horizon finding others.  
They trade songs for legends. They leap from one lover-crested  
mountaintop to another, dropping seeds into valleys below, which grow  
into cities. On a tundra further North than North, they sit around a fire  
passing whiskey between themselves and saying goodbye.

4

Four buildings yawn and a rooster crows. Four buildings think of themselves as important; they can't imagine anything bigger. They hold their children close to their breasts. They birth their children exponentially and secure themselves to this land and each other. There's more to worry about than nature now. They're shifty-eyed. There's a collection of valuables and cows in a field. Straight lines shoot across the Earth like a map, and a tool is looked at as a weapon. Just in case.

5

Whenever autumn comes, someone else harvests the crops. Five crows unstring nation-flags from their churches. A crow wraps itself in France. We string up flags of our own: flannel shirts with one black spot or nothing at all. *I'm telling my President on you*, she whispers, *he's gonna send you back to Ethiopia*. The pale marigold of warm autumn wind, the swaying top of the fraying pine. Single deaths frolic or pile into each other. Two hibernating aubades hover around the woodstove with winter supplies. That old man over there? He's never missed a day in his life. Some things tend to themselves just fine. But they must be revisited, to remind us.

6

In this life, bones hum for flesh and flesh for blood. Six men on horseback ride across the country remorseful of nothing and full of bricks. A face sets itself into stone and that stone sets itself in a library. Nicknames are given. Gates open and mounds of sugar are poured out of dump trucks. There is something going on about a fire and some girls huddling together against my cold in blankets made of injuries. I'm sorry, it's difficult, there are reasons we don't remember those times or choose not to conjure them.

Seven artists paint nudes in a circle in Paris. Sharks the size of sharks swim down New Jersey streets, thickening against the sides of cars, fanning muscles through the city. The artists like marble slabs trace curving thighs down to kneecaps and back up again. The market collapses. Hair of beard. Canvas toned as muscles, loud, tall as Parthenon. Hair of armpit, hair of pubic region. Someone gives an order and someone fires a projectile. Outside the artistry, a rumbling is felt, three hundred miles away is their best guess. Antigone drips from her pages and pools on the floor. She slithers under the door. A spider drops on its string a quarter of an inch, a penis takes an unexpected leap against the breeze, an artist sheds a tear and she doesn't know why.

A narrative weaves its way into the ears of the creek. There's a small spot there where the boy buried his treasure, under the tree with the knot like a face. He knows nothing of romance but claims to have had eight girlfriends by the time he got to high school, he swears it. His friends shoot squirrels with bb guns, bury their bodies in a little graveyard in the forest, each grave marked with a stone, each stone marked with a day that will outlast the future. He reverently visits it sometimes because it is sacred, the most sacred place on earth, and he hopes to find a girl who adores what he adores.

Nine Theravada monks set themselves on fire and one doesn't. It's his job to tell the story. Everyone's talking about peace. His journey takes him across the Himalayans to the city, where he discovers everyone's already heard about it. Everyone's talking about consciousness. They're setting fires in the streets. Everyone's talking about the end of the world. It's an exciting age to die. The ghost of Mother Earth is rising from her body and giving birth all at once. Everyone's holding their breath. Everyone's trying to peek around the corner.

Ten children stand at the bus stop. It is the first day of kindergarten. Their parents wait anxiously in the cold with them. In each backpack is a single red folder. In each hand is the future struggling like a trout. In each fear is a parent or a dream of parents. Exhaust the thickness of autumn pulls up. Teachers begin the process of undoing everything that's being done. In each child is a book. In each book is a chance. In each chance is a hope. In each hope a violence is being committed. Around each act of violence, each child begs forgiveness, or presses her ear to the door of her parents' bedroom, driven mad with the need to be known and be wild.

*John Withee*