

# THE LIGHTS

Poems



BEN LERNER

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*for Lucía, for Marcela*

## INDEX OF THEMES

Poems about night  
and related poems. Paintings  
about night,  
sleep, death, and  
the stars.

I know one poem from  
school under the stars, but  
belong to no school  
of poetry.

I forgot it by heart. I remember only  
it was set in the world and its theme  
parted.

Poems  
about stars and  
how they are erased by street  
lights,  
streets  
in a poem about force  
and the schools within it. We learned  
all about night in college,  
how it applies,  
night college under the stars where we  
made love  
a subject. I completed my study of form  
and forgot it.

Tonight,  
poems about summer  
and the stars are sorted by era  
over me.

Also poems about grief  
and dance. I thought I'd come to you  
with these themes

like my senses.

Do you remember me  
from the world?

I was set there and we spoke

on the green, likening something  
to prison, something  
to film.

Poems about dreams  
like moths about streetlights  
until the clichés

glow, soft

glow of the screen  
comes off on our hands,

blue prints on the windows.

How pretentious

to be alive now,

let alone again

like poetry and poems

indexed by

cadences falling about us while  
parting. It was important to part  
yesterday

in a serial work about lights  
so that distance could enter the voice  
and address you

tonight.

Poems about you, prose

poems.

## THE STONE

Imagine a song, she said, that gives voice to people's anger. These weren't her actual words. The anger precedes the song, she continued, but the song precedes the people, the people are back-formed from their singing, which socializes feeling, expands the domain of the feelable. The voice must be sung into existence, so song precedes speech, clears the ground for it. Then how are we speaking now, I asked, although not in those words. We aren't, she responded. Or we are, but only about whether one should take her cat to the vet in a pandemic, if I should form a pod with my neighbors, if mangoes are stone fruit. A people's voice isn't speaking through us. I pulled a handful of grass from the earth, which left the earth with almost no resistance. We're just talking, she continued, which isn't really speaking; talk precedes the song that makes speech possible. But we can talk about singing, we can describe the song and its conditions, sitting on our blankets in Fort Greene Park, the taped-off police cruiser still smoldering nearby, dragonflies mating aloft in the humid air above us. Can the song be talked into existence, I asked, I wanted to ask, just as I wanted the grass to resist more, to cling more passionately to the earth. The stems are hollow except at the nodes. They have evolved to withstand trampling and storms. I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, the poet wrote, which is neither speech nor singing, but a grassy area between them, cordoned off by cops. (Strange how "poet" and "cop" are anagrams.) Agitated starlings had gathered in the trees. Let's think up some new collective nouns, she didn't say. An agitation of starlings. A bevy, a herd, a game, a flight, a pod, a murder of people with stone voices, pinned to the ground of experience, the ethical ground. In that sense throwing stones is close to singing when you shatter glass, which is made by heating grass into a liquid, and the goal of song is to liquify things, the singer most of all. When she sings, she can't pull the song back out, and when she flees, she leaves behind parts of her digestive tract, muscles, nerves; you can hear that sorrowful foreknowledge in the song. Smoke masks pheromones so the keeper can access the hive (strange that "song" and



“smoke” are homophones), but even a dead singer can sing, even a singer a scrub jay has decapitated will sing if you step on it.

## AUTO-TUNE

1

The phase vocoder bends the pitch of my voice toward a norm.  
Our ability to correct sung pitches was the unintended result of an effort to  
extract hydrocarbons from the earth:  
the technology was first developed by an engineer at Exxon to interpret  
seismic data.

The first poet in English whose name is known learned the art of song in a  
dream.

Bede says: “By his verse the minds of many were often excited to despise the  
world.”

When you resynthesize the frequency domain of a voice, there is audible  
“phase smearing,” a kind of vibrato,  
but instead of signifying the grain of a particular performance, the smear  
signifies the recuperation of particularity by the normative.

I want to sing of the seismic activity deep in the earth and the destruction of  
the earth for profit  
in a voice whose particularity has been extracted by machine.  
I want the recuperation of my voice, a rescaling of its frequency domain, to  
be audible when I’m called upon to sing.

2

Caedmon didn't know any songs, so he withdrew from the others in embarrassment.

Then he had a dream in which he was approached, probably by a god, and asked to sing "the beginning of created things." His withdrawing, not the hymn that he composed in the dream, is the founding moment of English poetry.

Here my tone is bending toward an authority I don't claim ("founding moment"),

but the voice itself is a created thing, and corporate;

the larynx operates within socially determined parameters we learn to modulate.

You cannot withdraw and sing, at least not intelligibly.

You can only sing in a corporate voice of corporate things.

3

The voice, notable only for its interchangeability, describes the brightest object in the sky after the sun, claims love will be made beneath it, a voice leveled to the point that I can think of it as mine.

But because this voice does not modulate the boundaries of its intelligibility dynamically, it is meaningless.

I can think of it as mine, but I cannot use it to express anything.

The deskilling of the singer makes the song transpersonal at the expense of content.

In this sense the music is popular.

Most engineers aspire to conceal the corrective activity of the phase vocoder. If the process is not concealed, if it's overused, an unnatural warble in the voice results,

and correction passes into distortion: the voice no longer sounds human.

But the sound of a computer's voice is moving, as if our technology wanted to remind us of our power,

to sing "the beginning of created things." This is the sound of our collective alienation,

and in that sense is corporate. As if from emotion,

the phase smears as the voice describes the diffuse reflection of the sun at night.

4

In a voice without portamento, a voice in which the human  
is felt as a loss, I want to sing the permanent wars of profit.  
I don't know any songs, but won't withdraw. I am dreaming  
the pathetic dream of a pathos capable of redescription,  
so that corporate personhood becomes more than legal fiction.  
A dream in prose of poetry, a long dream of waking.

## THE LIGHTS

1

Slow-moving objects flying in groups  
Lights in the trees. Like those minutes before  
the storm when we stood at Kyle's wedding  
looking up. A decision has to be made  
about taking shelter. Too high to be birds  
too slow to be conventional aircraft  
her white dress stood out against the dark gray  
sudden drop in pressure. Lights  
in the trees. Slow-moving. The radar  
we shut the radar down and recalibrated to rule out ghost tracks

No notable exhaust from a known propulsion system in other words  
I want to know what it would do  
to the art if they are not Russian  
What I mean by "erratic" is  
unknown sources. A beautiful ceremony  
because the wall cloud visible behind them  
has to be made. I was in Paris once  
with Bobby who was mourning his mother  
and filming public sculptures. Every few hours he would  
in tears. And I would hold him. It is rare for me

to hold a male friend, but I was and looked up to see  
these lights. Now, my degree is not in physics  
so it is important I rise early and try to get it all down  
before my echo. Like walking to meet  
Mónica I must have got too much sun  
sat on the curb suddenly cold and looked up  
to the art. The video shows a source of heat  
Birds are out of the question. I have learned to hold

the back of the head when we embrace, it adds  
a sense and also slows it down like

if they do make contact and the dead missed it  
my mom missed it, he said, a break  
in all human understanding she wasn't here for and I  
was like: One, they might have ways  
of ministering to the dead and two  
and two, there are deep resources in the culture for trying to  
understand. The sightlines  
of the sculptures he was filming  
had these moths in them. No way a human pilot could  
unless the outer shell was a cavity filled with gas

2

At least the white poets might be trying to escape, using  
the interplanetary to scale  
down difference under the sign of encounter and  
late in a way of thinking, risk budgets  
the steal, the debates about face  
coverings, deepfakes, we would scan  
the heavens, discover what we've projected there  
among the drones, weather events, secret programs  
I'm no doubt doing some of that when  
I hold the back of his head and see  
unexplained lights over him  
that love makes, even if what I want in part  
is to be destroyed, all of us  
at once, and so the end of desire is caught in it

I think it is ok to want that, that wrong desire  
must have its place in your art, that the trails  
ice probably, and we are alone  
and we are not alone with being  
Out for the first time since the pandemic, we fought  
about the dog and who is allowed to use the word  
"Palestine," and then almost made up about how  
the insolubility, how every problem  
scales, and I made my joke  
which is not a joke, about the leaked footage  
our only hope. Is the work  
to get outside the logic of solution or to work  
as if there were one, ones

among us. I'm sure they are almost all military



but when the neighbor cut my hair  
she was masked, we were outside, she told me her  
cousin had been abducted and treated very gently  
that they have to make contact somehow  
they are waiting for us to evolve  
gray hair on the pavement among the cherry  
blossoms. And I said  
I want to be honest with you, yes, you do sound crazy  
I want to believe your story because there is love  
in it. Once I was in Paris and my  
friend's mom was in the trees  
he didn't see, I had to hold him and that knowledge

3

that they are here  
among us, that they love us  
that we invited them  
in without our knowledge  
into our knowledge, its cavities  
that we have asked to be destroyed  
that they are deliberating  
in us, that they are part of our sexual life  
that they are baffled by us, gentle  
to our cousins

that they take the form  
that forms can be taken up  
that the form is reflected in the Seine  
the rim of the glass at Kyle's wedding  
that they are patient  
to the point of nonexistence  
that they can withstand forces no human pilot  
that they have arts  
that they are known to our pets  
that if you put a pet down

they are beside it without judgment  
that they smell vaguely of burning paper  
that to meet them would be to remember meeting them  
as children, that they are  
children, that the work of children is  
in us, that they are part of our sexual life  
that they are reading this  
that they are baffled but can make out

the shape of a feeling to which they assign  
no number, gender

that they have sources  
of lift

## THE ROSE

At some point I realized the questions were the same questions. I'm studying implicit race bias in toddlers. I'm tracking the advent of the credit economy. The implications for folk music of the fact that stars don't twinkle—the apparent perturbation of stars is just a fluctuation in the medium—is something we want to understand. We want to understand the way it changes our memories of bedtime, for instance. A green flash. Twinkle twinkle. That's funny, a man in the atrium says, I'm studying the same question. In different terms. I'm living out that question as kindly as possible; in fact, that's why I'm here today volunteering. You have to admit, the staff is doing an excellent job. Then he sips his tea in a paper cup. Then he describes an experience of defibrillation. The other day I went to see the realignment of a permanent collection; abstraction had been demoted. I had complicated thoughts about it, which I carried into the winter sun, where I realized: That's the same question, pressing my face into her inner thigh. Calling a friend in agony. For folk music, the implications are profound. Rhythm shapes feeling. That way abstraction can rise again, rinsed of dominance, a blue rinse for the tradition, little star. Only then is it possible to pose the question, cup the question, blow on it gently. Is recumbency necessary to facilitate analytic revelry. Is your mom really capable of hearing you, given her level of anxiety. To use an example from my own life, I sleep with my head under the pillow. I think it's pretty common for men my age. But do we have a sufficient account of those rhythms of behavior as they spread out across a generation. Now a purpose for the arts comes into focus, leaving a bright halo around the body. The way psychoanalysis lacks an account of nut milks. How the term "labor" plays about the lips of humanists. I develop predictive technologies for complex scenarios. I slow down popular songs and play them over footage of sunflowers tracking east. That's funny, a man says. When I was a kid I thought all the skyscrapers were department stores, imagined the top floors were devoted to toys, and when the towers came down I kept imagining large stuffed animals in a panic, a few leaping to their