

CALL *and*
RESPONSE

Rob Carney



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I.

POETIC JUSTICE

This happened on November 9th
in Salt Lake City

on the corner of 500 North
and Morton Drive,

a spot that used to be in Mexico,
and before that

a tribal footpath, crossing from the mountains
to a million migratory birds.

•

Rewind from there and you'll see mastodons,
mastodons sensing

that the air has changed:
no spring on the way

with its snowmelt grasses,
or violets coming

like the Earth's best secret, violets
they've been waiting all winter to eat.

•

Walk it back more
and it's the home of crabs, sideways stepping

through tide pools,
the corner of 5th North and Morton

on the Inland Sea.
It helps to remember.

•

Anyway, after the ballots were counted,
a Somali girl, walking to school, fifth grade,

her head and hair covered as always,
was happy about her teacher,

or noticing the weather,
or thinking that burnt toast smelled too familiar...

like that Red Cross ambulance
hit by a mortar...

when the crossing guard, holding his sign out, said,
“Enjoy your free flight back to the jungle.”

•

I don't know what her backpack weighed,
but carrying that moment around all day—

and in her memory
forever—

probably felt like shouldering
a broken moon,

•

though that's not the end of the story

-

because a dire wolf
(long extinct, but not today)

turned that white man
into bloody screaming.

Throat gone first. Then his liver.
Then part of a thigh.

•

He resurrected.
He had no memory of being eaten.

He stood in the crosswalk, feeling accomplished,
like a star.

Then the ghost of Shakespeare appeared.
He was looking for a half-wit to cast as Polonius.

“Step behind this curtain,” he said.
“I need to see

if you’re stab-able.”
Turned out he was.

•

The crossing guard
came back from the dead,

this time facing a firing squad.
He'd insulted the daughter of a hacienda owner,

and a nun planting corn at the orphanage,
and women from Syria, Somalia,

from Bosnia, Cambodia,
from Poland and Ireland and fleeing

the Confederate South.
He'd insulted the trees who'd heard him.

And the future
for being in its history.

And even the ore taken out of a mountain,
then heated and shaped

into the shovel head
waiting nearby.

•

When he stood up, lit by the morning,
the bison stampeding him were beautiful,

as if the mountains had decided to run downhill
and out across the valley.

His dying thought while lying there—
a bird's nest

of compound fractures—
was *Where the hell did those buffalo come from?*

But that was wrong; buffalo are in Asia.
His face was in the dirt.

•

He sat up quickly and got to his feet.
His clothes weren't even dusty.

It was post-election Wednesday,
near Meadowlark Elementary,

and all the kids from the neighborhood
were headed his way.

He didn't much care for the black girl's *hijab*,
said, "Enjoy your free flight back to the jungle,"

but instead of sidewalks or African forests
there was water, an inland sea.

At the surface above him were silhouettes:
kids' windmill arms, and legs kicking.

It would've been nice to do that too,
but he couldn't swim.

•

He resurrects again,
unaware of drowning,

and a flock of ocean liners flies across the sky,
sounding impossible,

like Salvador Dalí painting with thunder,
a painting titled *Migratory Birds*.

Somehow the huge ships misjudge the distance,
drop anchor

and veer on their wings
two miles before the lake, skid down

atop the crossing guard: barnacled hulls,
and concrete, and him in between.

•

Something quiet flutters now
in the shadow

cast by one of them.
It's a red-and-white fabric sign on a stick.

It says, "STOP."