Roses for the Butcher

the screenheads are smoking laughter
in the glass tonight
because the disease can’t hurt them
during the red snows of Pluto
the disease melts like ice
it soaks its body in the ever-loving galaxian sea
and drips through the silver mattresses of Mercury

into the exact space
and much smaller
where the fourth sun
seen in the dimension
that always goes missing
rises like a dog from a nap
and licks its baleful whiskers

the screenheads are bored with their foremothers
and the slow diet of television
that ends in their palms
when they look out
across the empty football field
like deer studying a faintly mysterious sound on the wind

the screenheads have jobs in the labs of improv
and are feeding on the architectural corpse
of Wicker Park
the disease is in the cloud
that floats through their phones
it floats through their phones like vapor
feel it in your skin
everyone’s got it

above us, the sky,
where the grocery farmer covers us in bleach
and the virility of canceled Spartacus
and the dust from the bones
buried in the gods

the global virus of Italy and Indiana
has your attention
follow it closely
follow it into the morning mist
over the pond in Humboldt Park
it floats like a mosquito
with eggs and shimmering wings
and a beak of chlorine and metal

the screenheads are in their cloud tonight
smoking open windows
because the disease is self-contained
and largely vociferous
but has no home by which to rescue itself

and the earth is laughing gently
like a flower that trembles
when it’s brave
the disease drives a bus through the gaping tunnels
beneath cash registers
and movie theaters
the disease is on the countertop
and the window
and especially the filthy lucre
in the fist you make
that destroys everything
you love

and when someone says:
please make the disease someone that smiles,
please make the disease someone I can eat like cereal,
please make the disease a mostly regrettable instinct
to take my own picture so that I can laugh
at my perilous vanity

then the disease drives a corpse
across the countertops of Italy and Indiana

and the red snows of Pluto
turn into doves
with beaks of chlorine and metal

and the exact god in the exact dimension
that always goes missing
Mask

There were gulls
with coin-like eyes
and sea grief.

Color weaved beneath her hands.

She could see Kedzie Avenue
from the window in her studio.

She lit a cigarette.

The liquor store swelled
with patriarchal drug operations.

Ride by in a pair of shorts on a bicycle
and you would know
the vulnerability in power.

The sky was dyed pink
as in the pastoral novels
she’d read as a child.

Then silver,
like television-fueled windows
in houses she passed at night
as a young woman.
How everything flickered
like campfires then,

around which the posse dreamed.

As if they were eating miles of sleepless grass
or long blue insects,

until their eyelids quietly closed,

either in victory
or defeat.

As a shadow-thin vessel
floated down from the sky
and landed like fog
on the driveway.
my neighbor is carrying slow bags
of groceries from his car in the alley
into his apartment
he is preparing for the feast
of the damned
the cattle that died in the slaughterhouse galaxies
that exist all around us
the quarries of pig flesh
and tornadoes of crow
we all partake in
he is studying the trembling bacteria
at the end of the spoon in his eye
in his lab at the University of Chicago
he is studying it
even as he carries his groceries into his apartment
where the government he loves
is boiling potatoes
and sleeping with the rats
where the government he hates
is conjuring the black toad
and the mushroom
he has risen from the dead
from the mandatory division
in the spring
he walks slowly through the cloud
of mercury waiting on his doorstep
through the hemispheres
of palm-fed facts
and conspiracies of lead
the rising ghosts
of vegetation
and poultry
greet him like music
Pandemica

Pandemica

Pale it was in the vestibule of the virus where wandered the bus like a
limping bucket, its digital yellow breath seething in the blight. It was a
blurry half-rainy evening. I tightened my mask and crossed the street.

A clerk breathed me in at the door. There was a book in her lap and a
stopwatch in her hand. She sent me forth. We were burrowed inside
the Tank of Winds. Who knew what was being accomplished or why
we were here? We hadn’t been studied long enough yet but there was
plenty of time. In another life she might have been a friend. I could
imagine her laughter wasn’t easily provoked but once so it would last.

I moved through the underwater aisles. I swam like a fish through their
relentless unblinking. I pondered the hidden cameras in the glossy
potato chip bags and boxes of rice, and everywhere in the ceiling, the
endlessly recorded moment of myself, the virus cameras and their mist-
like flashing.

I studied the vegetables which had begun growing from the tile, blooming
asparagus and onion blossoms rising out of the unemployment dust,
bricks of evangelical milk melting in the aquarium light.

I thought of the local poets. How were they faring?

Dizzy? Old Red? The Diamond Twins?

I’m sure they were navigating similar terrain.

I began gathering: Frail, barely-realized eggs. Diced flanks of ham. Fist-
like cans of soup.
I moved into a quiet aisle with ease and optimum surveillance. I wanted to observe everything. But I didn’t want to linger. I hated these nervous innards of capitalism, this flowing anxiety. I’d never enjoyed it. The groceries always seemed much farther away than they really were. As if they were merely being suggested. The real grocery was much further within. Impossible to attain.

I appeared on the other side of an aisle. I had vanished for a few seconds... I walked right through a woman like I was air. She was there, and then I was on the other side of her. She almost noticed. Her mascara closed across her eyes like cage doors. The instant that I returned, I smelled her, a florid overpowering earthiness. A myth.

She suddenly appeared right next to me. But this time with a man. And she was different as well. She was larger and covered in a film of sweat. It felt like she was driving her eyes into the side of my head. The man moved off with their son. She spoke. A quiver in the web. I imagined the Spider felt it three city blocks away.

“Excuse me, aren’t you the bartender at The Wizard?”

“No, sorry,” I lied.

“Really?” she half-exclaimed from beneath her mask, “I could swear my husband and I got drinks from you there. You were bartending, you’re the bartender.”

She was right. Even in a mask, my clothes gave me away. I wore the same clothes everywhere. Work and life were exactly the same. I remembered
her and her husband. They were like all of them. They’d created themselves right in front of me. She kept asking about the cocktail list. She was flirting. Or she wasn’t. She was married so it didn’t matter. He seemed nonplussed. Trying to vanish into the monosyllabic. I imagined that he suffered from petulance and halitosis which were intensified by her otherworldly non-intuitiveness. He was a tech sales representative. He made good money and lived for fantasy athlete racing. She was a data interpreter for a company in development. And she loved it. Enough said.

And though the memory of her and her sudden transformation baffled me, it was so pointless to attempt to navigate or explore that I made a sudden move away from her. It felt like an entire atmosphere ripping. I could feel her voice hanging at my shoulder trying to say one more thing. It felt like “pandemic” but everyone was saying that.

Within a breath I leapt into an open checkout lane. The cameras flashed rabidly at that. The clerk eyed me. Who knew which side anyone was on? We understood: the membrane was dissolving. We didn’t really belong here anymore. That’s what the virus said.

Yes, it had spoken. And someone had discovered a way to record it. It would seem impossible. But there it was: a language murmuring at the molecular base. An uneasy burgeoning intelligence illuminated in a dimension previously unexplored and it had been recorded. The story was old news now. The first ones who heard it were called the creators. They said it sounded like gibberish but then a thought process and succession of formatting and sounds that moved and paused and questioned and asserted, became apparent. Philosophers and psychiatrists hypothesized. The language was found to be completely devoid of empathy. No trace at all. Not even the kind of trace a
psychopath might at least pretend to feel. And yet it was filled with esoteric rhythms and a fluid mathematical grace that was perilously seductive. The linguist who first attempted to translate it went insane. He proclaimed on social media that he’d fallen... in love.

The Spider had already tuned in. Hunched up like a swollen valve of shadow and blending into the brick, he studied his phone. He was a chemist at a university in the city. He wore alley-colored clothes and spoke no louder than a pencil moving across a page; quiet, gray, erasable. He was at the center of the web and he was my neighbor in the same shitty apartment complex. We shared a back stairwell overlooking the alley. He had a peculiar gift: he experienced every quiver the web made. If anyone in the building turned over in bed or went to the bath-room he was already there... in spirit. He detected the virus-speak between hands during an all-night online poker session. It took him a week to gain access. When he did, the virus approached him.

“Can we rely on you?”

He was frightened by the cryptic overtures of the remark but acquiesced quickly.

“You can,” he replied.

I saw him above the alley on the porch that night.

A rat shot out from under the dumpster. Like a boot with a tail.

The Spider was drinking a beer. I’d moved too suddenly. He was already outside even though I’d left minutes before him.
“There was a shooting at Seven-Eleven a couple nights ago,” he stated ominously, “Fullerton and Milwaukee. The shooter had a silencer.”

I liked the Spider. He was nervous and funny and possessor of a cryptic wit. The news he gave me was horrible, disturbing, all the things you could name. And yet, why even bring it up? That story was everywhere. I tried to make my thinking stop.

“It’s to be expected,” I finally said, “We’re in Logan Square. It’s Chicago, right?”

The Spider pretended I’d said something else. He pretended I’d asked for a drink of his beer. I had one of my own but he’d metaphysically eliminated it with a resolve that was hardly timid.

“It’s a Pils,” he said, enjoying the rare lift of his own voice. “FatScrew is selling it online with virtual Parquet Courts tickets.”

He was from Michigan and I trusted people from Michigan. I watched the glistening pink and green can extend in his hand. A small drop of spittle settled on the can’s lid.

I’d learned a trick. Whenever alone with the Spider I should imagine something off in the distance and concentrate on it. Perhaps a wound of melancholy or the kind of thing you might overhear a soldier saying to a buddy during a war.

“Thanks, man. This is good for me right now.”

I held up my PBR can and smiled dutifully.
The look on his face was pained. But I didn’t pity him. He didn’t want that. He wanted to explain something I didn’t want to hear.

He texted me within seconds of our parting: “I know what it wants...”

The words crept cryptically across the screen of my phone. It’s strange when you read words in a text saying something like that.

I didn’t reply. I let it go for weeks. But I thought about it.

What what wants?

I became friends with a young woman named Oklahoma. The lockdown was rough. We met in the front courtyard and talked now and then. She was the opposite of the Spider. Her voice was resounding and excited and definite. She had faith. I avoided the alley and the back-steps. I read a four part book on Euclidean comedy. I learned small phrases in German. I survived on packaged turkey and sleepy wheat bread. But it soon became exhausting. Within a few weeks the television had swallowed me. There were long chords of static and breathless attempts at birth by beings I could never have imagined. It was tough in there. The crackling of shells and leaking of yolk, the master vine bleeding into the great ill-begotten purge.

I’d tapped in by accident. It was December. There were protests around the statue. The boulevard whirled like a cold ribbon of fire with headlights flickering inside it. The Spider had lost it by then. He’d become pure Spider. He stalked the laundry room for a listener. He texted me a photograph of his electric bill. He made reckless suggestions to management - he wanted cotton balls to be included in the rent. It took him weeks to complete a load of laundry. The
walk, the thinking, the forgetting it was even there. I grew worried about him. The shadows beneath the steps filled with his murmuring. Quarters sang like broken teeth as they tumbled into the Humboldt Park swan plumbing. He stared resolutely into his palm.

The television was brutal. Information blurred into the Sitcom and the Sitcom blurred into static. A black and white nausea crept through tireless Bacall sightings. After months inside I began to detect the sound of the virus. It was the same thing the Spider had tuned into. It was louder than you might think. It was coming from somewhere inside the TV but also coming from the entire room. I knew now why he was always studying the alley. There were movements by the rats that only the virus was aware of.

These particular rats in these particular dumpsters. The patterns they made. A kind of \textit{wrestling}. The Spider believed even God had neglected these movements and their scurrying fluid calculus.

I started saving everything. The cowboy poetry I’d written on my six-chord guitar. The words \textit{immunoglobulin} and \textit{lysis} and \textit{cilia}. The last-call echoes when the speakers turned into bliss. I’d seen a lot so it wasn’t easy. I had to make split-second decisions and nothing was moving. That’s what made it even tougher. Time was happening all at once but my breathing was intact, at least for now.

It felt like I got on my bicycle and rode North, but I can’t be sure.

Near The Oakwood, I remembered the twins and the jukebox with its single glowing lung. The bar was closed down but everything was like it was before.
It was an autumn night. There were people going in and out. The moon was heavy and filled with smoke and drums and the voices of creatures who’d made it this far. The chill in the air felt like a high school football game. Cars passed slowly up and down Montrose Avenue. Coke dealers, gang bangers, cops. Bartenders and servers who’d just gotten off work rushed in and out of the door like flames. The women smelled like beer and weed and hope. The virus was telling the story. James passed me a one-hitter in the alley. I wasn’t there yet, but I was arriving. For a moment I wasn’t sure he was ever there. But then I realized he’d always been there. Ryan walked up laughing. It might have been the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.
Grocery Store

Oh earth, come down from your dry tower and speak.

My invocation tonight is poor and huddled.

Come down from your famine tower.

Come down from the bleach and medicine competitions.

Where the worms are spinning clouds and a falling pebble still hovers.

Remember us earth.

I am tired of criticizing your crawling shores and headache parties,

your inflamed digital landscape and violence.

We were never like that.

I am tired of myself in this room.
Today I rode my bicycle
to as many stores as possible,
and bathed my face in the fluorescent virus-light,
and spoke recklessly, but eloquently
to the clerk with brown eyes.

I remembered her from the great nights
of lust when we crossed the prairie
together, during the timeless grid
of lightning and flowers
we’d escaped from.

We followed each other for years
until the moon thawed.

Until trees bowed along the highway’s edge
like prayer husks
whispering over the corn.

There were storms and consequences.

The hotels we collapsed in
were like death stations,

where we were the last word
to each other.

But none of this mattered,
as the door to the store pushed
open and shut.
We were strangers again
and had never met,

except for this cruel exchange
in the lower regions
of commerce.
The Blessing War

what about the Covid Swallows
dying to be heard?
and the mosquito who injects
the flow of the sun?
what about the root rising
out of the bacillus pool
and its magnetic tree of pathogens?
what about the date you had
on Saturday night?
his colonial perfume
and exaggerated metal
what about the horn
in his pocket
and the attitude growing
from his spine?
bless the ground
for him and everyone
bless him, woman,
and the poison
that has done us wrong
bless the blood sirens
on Hallucination Avenue
bless the violent Amazon hearings
and their rage
turning into glass
on the candidate’s face
bless the candidate’s face
quivering in the hell of class
he is trying to make us
swallow
bless the steak he ate
and the wine he swilled
bless the insurance reptiles
in the slithering throats
of trucks
bless the glass-bellied
hillbillies drifting
in and out of consciousness
bless the rat dreaming opulence
and trash-blown alley
bless the alderman
and his media skins
bless the wanderer
in the snow-driven street
bless the wounded
in the pit of money
this is war
Soap

Moses used to work
in a factory
for two years he stood
in one place the width
of his arms
I don’t think anyone
would forget
two years like that
the grass alongside the building
has pooled with rainwater
the doors have been cleansed
the crucifix beneath the rainbow
has risen like a seed
on Sunday morning
it is his job
Moses feeds the key
into the ignition
and his motorcycle
opens
its glorious and oily throat
of crows
they create a color
when they burst
from their cages
that is part pneumonia
and part wheat,
a thrumming nation of virtuosic
and biological fury.