



THE ISLAND'S ONLY ESCAPE
POEMS BY MATTHEW PHILLIPS

The Island's Only Escape
By Matthew Phillips
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Contents

Letter From San Francisco

In Mafia Films

Another House

Chess

Driving Down

Flight of the Peacemaker

Fragments From Future Textbook

Idea of the Wailing Wall

Language

Letter From Sparta

Neighbors

New Year in the Desert

November 10th

Sabbatical Island

Said the Writer

Storm Season

The Caves of Lascaux

The Current Academic Climate

The Great Man to the Historian

The Latest Town

To the Budding Anthropologist

What is History

Last Days

Chat with a Professor

Daylight Savings

Coming to Larkin by Way of Auden

Letter From San Francisco

You were right—it is not China here.

I came to California and am getting California.

So what I'm not doing: learning Mandarin, eating dog.

But—I'll tell you—there are many hills,

And the other day, I passed a man struggling

Up one and was startled by how much he looked

Like me. There are no ancient wonders,

Only that golden bridge and a prison—

Imagine it! Suspended in the middle of water.

True, from a distance, it is almost comically small;

But to a prisoner there is blue in every direction

And to a child it must be halfway to China.

In Mafia Films

Generations have a seamlessness here unreflected
In our lives. The baby screaming at his baptism
Will, we know, one day shoot a man as his
Brain spills all over what was, seconds ago,
The best he had outside of that trip to Italy.
The Priest, holding his tiny head, has known his
Father since he was a boy in Sunday School.
Now, as an adult,
He seems to draw his own conclusion
About the Good Samaritan. No matter,
The Church isn't all for substitute teachers.
Plus who cares about worldly questions?
Most men, Mafia films say, either get parking tickets or they don't.
They adjust their ties and take all kinds of mockery,
Fantasizing about strip-clubs where you always meet
And a back room where the fuckin' guy who slighted you pays.

Another House

Maybe another house isn't a good idea.

After all, the low ceilings here have gotten

Us this far. The peeling paint, the paint's dull color,

Have made us—well, that's a bit of a stretch, but—

It has let us know where we are,

Which is not only some space we have passed through

But also, in the end, a kind of home.

There, on the other hand, the same things will be placed

In a new way, and I can't picture how that will look.

Though I know it's something desirable, is it possible

That we will get too much "natural light"?

Is there such a thing? Who really knows what will happen

then?

We can't know until we are living there.

Unwrap the silverware from the newspaper, return the boxes

To the liquor store. Tell our friend with the van to sleep in.

Leaving won't soon be considered again.

Chess

The young sergeant says, “War is like it”;

Generals nod gravely, in agreement.

The single woman says, “Dating is like it,”

Referencing male intentions, and their concealment.

The college counselor says, “Applications are like it,”

Meaning plan ahead, if you want to be collegiate.

All these people know chess? It’s hard to believe.

To the players it means the game itself.

When it’s over, they tend to get up and leave.

Driving Down

Mutual friends recommended the campsite.
It fulfilled what small promises were made so
They packed rented things into the car in order
To drive down. What they would do with the
Next long weekend was an unredeemed promise
And a lapse from ordinariness
That neither asked for. So much of it was in
The waiting that it wasn't worth considering;
So they drove away and back to themselves and
The much-joked-about "dwindling rations" gave way
To unpaid bills.

Flight of the Peacemaker

As an American, he was told to take
The telescope rather than the magnifying glass;
It's History's long view that matters here.
As a final gesture, one tribal leader spat at
The other and tore up papers between them.
Everything was going. He tried to make
The place fit his sense of it. In the end,
It was like a man who fears poverty so much
That he leads the most impoverished life.
The next day, his plane took off.
The press was nowhere; when the propellers
Lashed out, their immediate wind made no
Impression. The landscape was made of wind.
He saw, as he rose, three giraffes in the foreground.
It became clear, looking at their bodies
Long above ground, what it was to live openly
And in a place without interiors.

Fragments from Future Textbook

Their children listened almost perfectly; doctors made
Little use of talk-therapy and Ritalin.

They adapted their elderly to computers; libraries lent
Laptops to even arthritic senior citizens.

They mastered saving time, planning wars and the
Inevitable memorials simultaneously.

They loved their neighbors, mowed each other's lawns and
Built fences accordingly.

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