
JOEL PECKHAM

Astrocartography

1.

When I was ten, I won a contest with a friend for holding my breath underwater. It was a dare and I hated him for that, hated them, boys naked and shivering in the sun, pointing from the floating dock. Laughing. How they knew how much I feared the water and the dark. That pressure in the lungs and how the cold stung my eyes wide in the murk. After he exhaled, exploding

up and out, I stayed down there for another ten seconds, just to make them worry, just to make a point. Then swam up lazy, slow, drifting as globes of light spun and streamed from my mouth and nose. For the rest of the day I saw stars floating on the periphery

of my vision. Sometimes

I still do.

2.

Like most, I have survived things no one should. But here we are, aren't we? Miracle of miracles. With another surgical scar, another loss, another lesson that doesn't apply to any other situation and brains starved for oxygen. I am trying

to believe that pressure and loss can focus the mind or, like the saints in a fire, bring visions. Did they hold their breath as the smoke rose up? Or did they welcome the heat into their lungs hoping to see God? It is terrifying

to drown and terrifying to live and terrifying how quickly we adapt, pulling ourselves onto the dock as if nothing had happened, leaving a world behind only to realize much later that parts of us are changed or gone. And so

I can't let go, even as I stare down at my empty hands, swimming toward the bottom. I do not know what I hope to find. A single shoe unlaced, the skeletons of fish, a sippy cup, a teddy bear, a reason. Searching out what's missing? Diving into that tear

in the cosmos? Trying to re-create an ancient map of stars to guide us home.

Alien Technology

Sometimes I want to take it all down to the studs, the way a kid on my block once took apart his deadbeat father's motorcycle (he'd been gone two months), using a ratchet set and tools found in the garage, sure he could put it back together exactly right if he placed each bolt, each nut, frame and fork, in a line on a blanket in the order in which it was unscrewed, and then worked backward. *Reverse engineering*, he told us. *This is what they do with the saucers they capture*, and we watched him grunt and sweat, covering his T-shirt and his jeans with grease, before we left one by one, pedaling home before the early-summer sun had passed below the tree line. Yesterday I heard an explosion, saw a sunburst flash into the darkness and then the lights on all the houses on our street went out at once. Later we would learn how a semi too big for the back road along the highway had clipped an electrical wire and just kept going as everything stretched and popped, trailing and writhing behind in a shower of sparks. In memory I move

the scene back and forth, like a DJ in a dark club scratching a record in the middle of a song, the world astutter, askip. To find the moment there is no returning from and turn it like a dial, or at least to see it as it comes if it comes—to reproduce the solo as it was on the original recording, note for note. But we don't know by knowing. As if in making love we could retrace our steps and bring the body to climax again and again as if it were all one body and worked the same way every time. Where would be the darkness and the sparks? We go and keep on going. And even if we could get that engine to restart, where are all the flying saucers? Tell me that? They should be everywhere.