



# landscape with dekalb radio

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*Loneliness is solitude with a problem.*

—Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

There are no trees in the world. They have all been cut down and milled into boards and sheets of plywood with grain that ripples like rings in brown water. The missing trees leave room for the sky covered by a membrane of pale clouds. Beneath it, the grassy field has plenty of room for the contraptions and the bed. It is one of those indeterminate midwinter mornings where everyone feels flattened by queasy dreams, as if they have been dredging dark canals in their sleep.

Buddy Ash has, in fact, been trolling with a piece of thin, greasy string, effortlessly pulling up bent screens, urinals, plastic dolls with silver hair, cinder blocks, rusted refrigerators with their doors yawning open, car batteries, brightly colored tires like enormous rubber Fruit Loops, flapping carp mouthing O-O-O and rolling their cognizant yellow eyes up at him. As light as air, these things have come to the surface attached to the line he dipped again and again into the oily stream. Things angled past him, too, bobbing on the surface: coiled copper wire, secretive metal boxes cord-strapped shut, a set of straight-backed wooden chairs, a blue toy truck, a snow shovel, an umbrella, axles, and a flotilla of broken slate like decaying lily pads. Everything was buoyant, rising to the surface or skimming along with equal ease, but some things—the more desirable things—evaded him even as his cast line slapped wetly against a branch or a hubcap that only sank a little, swiveled, and rolled out of sight.

When Buddy wakes up, his fishing expedition has vanished like the one stone that won't float in the canal's dank waters, but he feels the familiar tickle of inadequacy in his belly and a sure sense that something got away. On a wooden stool beside the bed, the DeKalb Radio buzzes and pops. Fabricated of draped sheet lead, the radio has two protruding handles like T-bars on tap wrenches, handles that Buddy twirls to change the frequency and the volume. The frequency tuner is shaped like a bisected hot dog flying from a stubby pole; the volume control is an awkward claw that appears to be clutching a cigar. Around the radio's bulbous contours a frilled collar of sheared cursive lettering says, "Let's meet regularly."

Although the DeKalb Radio picks up only the most tenuous frequencies, it is a connecting point, receiving and transmitting messages, messages that never quite come through. It's like listening to a foreign language that Buddy is just beginning to learn, a liquid and confident cascade of sound, but obscure. Buddy listens through the radio's static with an intensity divided between the effort to pick up every third word and an absurd hopefulness.

Buddy had found it on a table at a flea market, nearly buried under a jumble of rusty second-hand hammers, pliers, and screwdrivers, broken



locks and chains, metal corner braces, and hand drills. A socket wrench set with missing sockets here and there grinned at him, a smile with missing teeth.

The man sitting beside the table rested his elbow on the table, his cheek against the back of his hand, watching Buddy with knowing, laughing eyes. A flip of brown hair curled over his high forehead. His beautiful beak of a nose pointed to an amused smile and Buddy had the feeling he knew something about Buddy that Buddy didn't even know himself. The man saw Buddy spot the radio and gave it to him for nothing, with a nod and an upward flap of his free hand that said, "take it, take it," as if the radio already belonged to Buddy and had been waiting for him.

When Buddy listens to the radio, there is another transmission underneath the broadcast, a simpler, truer relay. This is what he strains to hear, but he can't tell whether the sounds that come to him are the constructions of his own thinking or the voice of something talking to him, singing to him, telling him things he wants to know but shouldn't, like a siren. The radio seems privy to private things: desire, faithfulness, betrayal.

This morning it is full of love and garbage. It unleashes a burble of you and me and what we did. I thank you and I'll say I'm sorry now, at last, but how are you fixed for love, Mustang Sally? If not for you, fast and furious, the bird gets the worm. Still, let's stay together, at least another Saturday night. You can soothe me—I'm restless stuck in the middle with you. But you're so vain, you got me hummin'. It's a wonderful world, Venus de Milo, and ain't that the straight, no chaser truth.

Buddy turns on his side in bed. He is a young man, but he feels the old man inside, the one forming like an embryo who will gradually emerge and replace Buddy's body with the old man's thin, crepuscular skin, sagging little breasts, and tender belly striated by folds and horizontal wrinkles. He draws his knees toward his chest, crosses his arms to keep the old man in, to hold him back. His heart keeps stolid time with the radio's rhythmic patter.

Is Buddy lonely? He isn't sure. He prefers being alone. Other people make him nervous. He curls in the warmth of his bed, resisting the diffuse light filtering through the cloud cover that makes the floaters, the swirling worms, in his vision rotate on a gray field, wanting someone to share the cocoon. It's too warm, too soft to be alone with the dread of the day. Being alone calls up that feeling of stupidity, the sense that he annoys people. Stay in. Stay in bed. Don't think. What is it that got away? He's not missing anything. He doesn't have to jump up and make anyone coffee or have a conversation. He doesn't have to brush his teeth, if he doesn't want to, or do anything else, for that matter.

The faces of women he might like to forget flicker on the backs of his closed eyelids, a sexually synesthetic display. Margaret's hair is a lavender spiral; Paula's legs, a cinnamon orb. Angela's hands, with the slender fingers she curled into the hair at the nape of his neck, are blue tetrahedrons of different sizes and orientations; Betty's breasts, yellow dots; Wilma's knees, a curling silver ribbon. They had mostly been unhappy with him, accusing him of using his groin to forget them before they were gone. But drifting in and out of sleep, he enjoys watching the spectacle, even as the DeKalb Radio urges longing and regret.

The only way to beat the inertia, he decides, is to run without thinking. He has a sudden desire to leave home naked. It occurs to him that by running as fast as he can, he could run across the field to the mound and collect things, unnoticed. He has things that he's seeking; he just doesn't know what they are yet. He had better get going if he was going to go. No point in dressing. Nakedness is only conspicuous to those who want to draw attention to it, who are willing to stare at it, see it, say hello. Run, don't think, he says to himself. If he runs fast enough, both his nakedness and his fear will be invisible.

He throws off the covers, stands up, and takes off running like a cartoon character, arms and legs whirling. It's a wide, unvarying landscape. He can run a long way in it without feeling like he's gone anywhere. He cuts across the field toward the mound of debris that rises out of the plane like a diminutive mountain. If there were trees, it would rise above the treetops.

As Buddy picks up speed, his arms and legs spin like propellers. He wheels past Lucinda and June, who sit beside a stump spread with a flowered cloth, drinking coffee and talking. Grinning, he waves, flips his forearm back and forth in greeting, like a hinged yardstick.

"Now, where is he off to?" Lucinda asks June, staring after him.

"Who knows?" June answers, shaking her head.

The two are dressed in simple, patterned cotton. Their heads tilt toward each other. Though from a certain angle, they appear wooden, a little artificial and not pliable, they are pleased to gaze into each other's eyes and confess everything.

While they tell each other all, they watch Buddy getting a toe-hold on the mound, scaling it like a monkey with hands and feet, the thick pads of his soles and nearly prehensile toes curling around the detritus. He seems to be looking for something as he claws through the piles of discarded tires and scrap metal, aluminum copper radiators, rolls of insulated cable, bumpers, pipes, engine blocks, brass shells and turnings, compressors and die cast. Methodically, Buddy makes a pile of the things he picks out of the mound.

There are no trees in the world. They have been replaced by the carcasses of wooden and metal armatures dotting the landscape, by stiles leading nowhere except from one grassy patch to another, by networks of levers and pulleys moving in a rhythmic tango, in a reciprocal sway of stimulus and response.

Buddy sits on the edge of the bed, listening to the radio, looking into the distance where the team—a group of men in orange coveralls—is gathered. The team gathers in a circle beside a string of empty flatbed cars at the edge of the field. The bright orange jumpsuits conceal the fact that they are of different ages, shapes, and sizes, and the way they stand, intent on solving the problem of a broken switch, they are a single-celled organism. To Buddy, from a distance, they are a cluster of glowing orbs floating on the horizon.

Buddy is listening to a game on the radio, the pock-pock of the ball hitting the court, the squeak and thud of pounding shoes, the hustle up and down the floor, looking for the open man. The static sounds like breathing.

The radio cajoles Buddy, talks back. It's pushy, like an aggressive basketball coach. "Get out there, get your hands in the air," it says to Buddy. "You think there's nobody else can do this? You think that ball is gonna wait for you? It's not gonna wait for you. Nothing's gonna wait for you. Get out there. Get your hands in the air."

He has heard all this before, the pressure to keep up with everyone else, value measured by movement and by counting off the points. Up the court and make a basket, down the court and block the shot. Repetitions, the constantly shifting arrangements and rearrangements of the team are the units that demarcate time. You can put a hole in time, Buddy thinks. He imagines palming the ball, stopping the clock. When they stop the clock, the measuring stops, time stops. Motionlessness is not an interval and emptiness has no future.

Buddy doesn't want to put a hole in time. He desires work, the increments of construction, the building line of masonry, joists that support the roof of a structure, the aerial feats of the crane's jib. This is what he wants: the team, the play, the give and take, to know that what he brings is valuable.

He gathers the pile of scrap he has brought from the mound, cradles it, arranges it on a wheeled cart, and trundles it to the team, who clap him on the back. His nakedness is no cause for remark. The team is glad to have him, pleased with his addition to the pile of paraphernalia that might contribute to the repair of the switch. With him, the team is a whole.

This is the paradox of time: you can put wholes in it. When the ball goes through the net, you put a whole in it. When you can see the pattern, you put a whole in it. Whenever Buddy builds something, what is in it and what is outside of it, that's wholeness. And, more than the brief joining with a woman, being part of the team is wholeness.

There are no trees in the world. In the intermediate distance is a throng of massive wooden heads. Buddy wanders between them, as in a maze or on a chessboard, feeling the grass between his toes. Beside these sightless, generic figures, a sea of photographs of perplexed faces attached to bulky wooden armatures are turned to him like a field of satellite dishes, receptive yet vacant. Among them, Buddy feels abandoned and apprehensive, alone with his own memories, memories that are largely unavailable, as full of static as the broadcasts on the DeKalb Radio. The field is either a series of planes and portals, through which he wanders like a ghost, or it is crowded by throngs of icons, human yet impassive and unreadable.

The news on the radio is bad. The life forms in the waters surrounding the field face mass extinction. The currency is destabilized. There's a marsupial with a third eye due to radiation. A suicide bomber has destroyed a marketplace, killing forty-eight women and children. There is too much stuff everywhere; the field is crammed full of crapola. The world is devouring itself, an ouroboros, a snake eating its tail.

The news is bad, but the radio is philosophical about it. In the middle of the report, a second voice breaks through and takes over, "That's how the monkey flows," it says, as if it's shrugging.

*How the monkey flows?* Buddy wonders what that means. How does the monkey flow? *How the money flows?* Yes, that could be it since

it certainly is money that drives the flow. *That's how things go?*  
Sure, that, too.

The radio reverses and contradicts itself. Its voice is grief stricken one minute, caught up in the zeitgeist the next, indifferent or fatalistic a moment afterward. While he listens to the radio, Buddy goes about his job of tending to the monuments, clipping the grass from around their bases, cleaning them, setting them upright when they threaten to tip over. He lives among the dead, but it is the living mind, he thinks, that is entropic, disrupted by random errors in the transmission of signals, unavailable to do the work, longing for sanction that will not come, conjoining lies and autobiography.

The shadowy voices of the sea of faces and the crowd of heads hover just outside of consciousness. They remind Buddy that the unconsciousness of death is rich, too, a roster of loss. Death is the other ouroboros, the other snake eating its tail, containing everything it has swallowed, replete with the missing and the silenced, but ample and filled to bursting in that way.

There are no trees in the world. They have all been cut down and milled into boards and sheets of plywood with grain that ripples like rings in brown water. Buddy lies on the bed at the end of the day. The cataract of clouds that obscured the sky has drifted apart. The moon has traveled so close to the earth that it takes up half the sky. It isn't so much rising as sliding, like a molten manhole cover, between the ground and the darkening blue space beyond it. Buddy has the perspective of the lightning bugs and grasshoppers he dropped into jars as a child. He lies on his back and gazes at the pocked silver lid holding the inhabitants of the field in its reflected light that drips onto the grain elevators, the railroad tracks, the transmission towers, and mounds of debris, coating everything, as in an ice storm, in a sheer, glittering shell.

The DeKalb Radio has fallen silent, buzzing and crackling quietly. It appears to be listening intently. Buddy has lost the desire to run, to move from place to place, and to arrange things. He is tired of his autobiography, of his loneliness, of the inevitability of being naked. Buddy lies on his back and listens to the silence. Well, he thinks as he rolls on his side, we all lie, don't we?

There are no trees in the world, and the contraptions and the bed glisten in the overbearing moonlight. The radio resumes broadcasting, but this time the voice is Buddy's. It's the kind of evening where everyone feels a melancholy hopefulness. It's immaterial, the radio says, whether this is a paradise or not, whether you're lonely or not. The thing that got away will float by again. It's all a continuous flow trapped in a single temporal horizon. An ant could crawl all the way around it and never pass over an edge.

Buddy goes to sleep listening to his own voice, a little staticky, a little erratic, narrating the progress of the ant around the Möbius strip of time and place and desire. Tentative at first, its feelers out, gingerly exploring the edges before retreating from them, the ant gradually picks up speed as it progresses upward around a curve, the front legs generating forces equal

to its body weight to keep it moving. Its legs are designed for running. The locomotion of its alternating tripod gait—the front and back legs of one side and the middle leg of the other side move together during each step—helps the ant cling to the wide band as it comes over the hill and down the incline into the curve of another valley, passing from Buddy's sight as it traverses the inner rim. Buddy waits for it, knowing that it will appear sometime later, looping the loop, now visible, now hidden from sight, running around and around, its antennae perpetually moving back and forth, touching, tasting, and smelling everything within reach.

Buddy's eyes close and still the ant crawls forward and back, never stopping, and still his own voice describes its passage, while Buddy himself sleeps, voluptuously alone, under the silver ceiling of the sky.



*Notes from an Art Bigot, ca.1973*