

Awakenings, Recollected in 2008: Cannon's in Allentown, 1984

for W. P. D. and P. F. H.

“Karma...describes the continuity of occurrences that weaves the fabric of life. It is not linear.... In order for ignorance to happen, lots of other causes have already occurred.”

—Sakyong Mipham

[2008]

Even the wind is

laden with taint—

I know only that I know

little that can heal

such toxic loves—

I know only that I know

when poisons spread, but not how—

there is a scar

where a father was

absenteeed from happiness

for years,

his face abraded away like rust

while her disembodied sighs

corroding the air

with contagious fear

[1984]

“D’you hear that?”

The screams were so piercing

through the jukebox, the clamor,

I nudged Bill, alert amid the beer,

smoke and blaring.

He nodded, already rising—

we left the crowded tables

for the almost stifled street.

No cars running,

no drunks singing,

no pedestrians—

just the muffled roar of the bar.

But then across the street

and across the corner

we heard the scream again,

—terrorized in love—
cave in to continual red-black
bruises blossoming on skins
—hers and theirs—
auto glass bursting
into jewel-sized hail
bitting their kids as she flees—
there is a scar
where a father was
throwing stones at tail lights
gleaming, his family retreating—
there's a scar
where a mother was
ignored for ignoring
her own dysphoria—
her beauty caving in
to continual
red-black bruises blossoming
from a father's arms
the size of natural laws—

slamming doors,
boots clomping down stairs—
an exploding front door,
a slim figure fleeing.
She fell on her knees,
curled over herself
as if concrete could hide her.
He charged out shouting
“I’LL KILL YOU YOU BITCH!
I’M GONNA FUCKIN’ KILL YOU!”
—a repeating machine,
his fists above her rising—
I shouted, “HEY! LEAVE THAT
WOMAN ALONE!”
Turning, he lurched at us,
(*holy shit*, I thought).
Bill grabbed
and dragged me into his car,
revved and pulled it out and
aimed his headlights at them,

there's a scar
where a mother was
absenteeed from felicity,
contagious sorrow searing
all her pretty ones' skins
and the disembodied tangle
in her eyes—
I know only how
a slowly burning page turns
to ash you can read
where lunar mountains, seas
and craters bear the light,
but if you breathe too hard
or touch them, they'll crumble—
But I know how this story ends—never.
Suddenly, it dawns on me
that Bill has done this before
as the son of his parents'
beatings and fights—
and that Pam, inside,

blinding them.
The woman (*or girl?*)
squinted at us, crawling/fleeing.
He threatened her to go inside—
she shouted back she'd never.
He set to kick her hard.
Bill floored the gas—
the guy's eyes met mine—froze.
He was *just* bigger than her.
Then Bill apologized:
"I'm sorry I stopped you.
He could be armed,
but we're safe in here.
He can't see us very well,
but we can watch his every move.
And the motor's running..."
They argued in the headlights' glare;
the guy hesitated, retreated inside.
She stayed prone, shaking in sobs.
Then Bill parked again—

has lived this before
ad infinitum in the bar
that was her life—
and that I was in this story too, before,
myself with an ex enduring
another evening beyond repair
wondering, “How did I get here?” again,
and I had found myself
“Letting the days go by/
let the water hold me down”
like that “Once in a lifetime” song where
I was like water flowing underground
into the blues again
after the money’s gone....
Same as it ever
was... same as it
ever was...

we didn’t know what to do.
She looked over at us,
her eyes full, curious.
Quavering, too scared to move,
she was younger than I’d thought,
her face puffy from crying.
Then Pam opened the bar door,
phone in hand, urging,
“Get *in* here! I called
the cops already.”
She pulled me in by my shirt.
“Do you wanna get *killed*?”
Tearing myself away,
and going back in, then,
I realized the answer
must have been
Yes.