It’s not Armageddon

spreading amber fog from north to south
across the September sky. And no, that’s not
a metaphor for depression, or the slow death
of love. Not even with its signature reference
to the season of falling leaves. It’s just smoke
from a brush fire two hundred miles away,
staining sunlight the color of white sheets
soaked in a rusty bin. It’s just a minor fuckup—
a guy in his yard burning leaves, a spark
from a gas-powered mower, that Old Crow bottle
smashed in a dry field, finally finding its flame—
with a consequence writ large enough
for satellites to photograph from space. It’s just
ash dusting the parking lot, like dandruff
brushed from the shoulder of an itchy god.
Rush hour, leaving the last
downtown station, our train
descends under San Francisco Bay

and I imagine we are
Atlantis sinking, this populous
of stockbrokers snapping
evening papers, file clerks
lacing sneakers onto tired,
stocking feet. We’re all

going down together—
the brown-skinned girl
wearing fuchsia sweats,
thumbs working the buttons
of her video game, and the green
power suit who leans against

a closed door, flips out
her cell phone, dials home
to say she’s running late,
then mutters fuck, shit
when the train slows
to a crawl. See the girl

slouched in that corner
seat, notepad lying open
on her lap—she’s scribbling.
scribbling as if she could
keep us alive by recording
all our details right: the wingspan

of a boy stretching his yawn,
arched eyebrow penciled
on a sleeping woman’s face—as if,

fingernail by callus, ripped skirt
by sideburn, bottom lip by
butterfly tattoo, she could raise us

up from the depths, silver, glimmering.
Don’t Miss It

Turns out the tears
that Virgin statue
eked out from the corners
of her eyes were
insect secretions—
Mary has been
eaten by bugs
from the inside. Don’t
worry, pumpkin—
alternative miracles
arrive on the subway
platform in twenty-
minute intervals
every day. No lie—
in this lifetime
a descendant of
Confucius takes
the shape of an LA-
based rapper dropping
knowledge in English
and Cantonese. What
I’m saying is, keep
watch, sweet thing—
if the good books
pan out in that theory-
to-practice sort of way,

you could find Buddha

sitting beside you

on the L train. In

fact, you already have.
Knit cap rolled down to eyebrows, corduroys
slouched below hip bones, the boy leaned into
Good Life Grocery’s door, yelled to the butcher,
Yo—cops took us fishing. Look it here—
his fingers threaded the salmon’s gills, an arc of silver
lifted in the air. Sell it to ya, twenty bucks.
The butcher shook a grin onto his face, said,
Way to go, Jackpot, a name that stuck for life.
And they laughed like water, like last night’s
take of nickels falling in the slot machine’s mouth,
and Jackpot nudged out the doorway, strutting
up the street, his image flashing in storefront windows,
that fish swinging from his hand, like a comet
fallen to earth, a song of luck, of winning.
“A Soldier’s Home, Hughes, Arkansas, 1970”

after Eugene Richards

The rusted-out laundry wringer
sinking into the porch’s soft planks

makes the crisp pleats pressed
into the soldier’s khaki pants

mysterious. His house is loaded
on cinderblocks—corrugated tin roof,

siding split along the wood grain,
metal blinds slicing the only

window’s light. The soldier’s brass
buckle gleams against his cloth belt.

The bill of his private’s cap
shades a black anonymous bar

across his eyes. For the camera
he sets his jaw square, his arms

are sword blades pressed to his sides.
History melts in the baked dust

behind him—snapped bike chain,
crumpled sock, fifty-gallon drum

shot through with .22 holes.
On the stoop, a checker-shirted kid
hunches like memory, squinting
into Arkansas sun. Out front,

the soldier’s creased shoulders
wait to grow chevrons, inverted Vs

flying upward, out of this place.