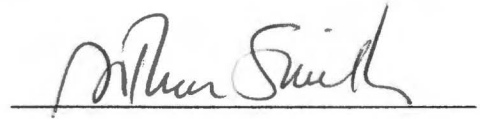


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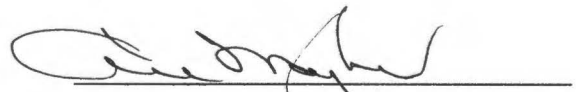
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of Graduate Studies

Thesis  
2003  
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Feathers from the Cusp:  
a Collection of Poems by Cameron Molchan

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Cameron Molchan  
August 2003

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Julie and Juneau who bring me handfuls of feathers everyday  
and to Arthur Smith who showed me how to craft them into wings.

## Abstract

The following is a collection of poems written by Cameron Molchan during his candidacy for a Master of Arts degree with a major in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Preceding the collection of poems is an introduction which discusses the author's influences and various stylistic approaches.

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## Introduction

I was raised in a house full of music. The child of two classical violinists, I learned to read music while learning to read words. I remember sitting through symphony rehearsals in empty concert halls making pencil sketches of the music on old programs; I remember falling asleep while my mother or father played the same four bars of a Mozart violin concerto over and over again. These are the places I find myself when I trace the influences of my poetry back to their beginnings. Poetry is, above all, the language of song. It is no coincidence, then, that in attempting to identify the texts that have had the greatest impact on my writing I begin with Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

I hardly need to restate Wordsworth's assertion here that poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [which] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (611). This "spontaneous overflow" of feelings is what accounts for the musical nature of poetry. It is as though the poem had no choice but to be expressed. It is why Coleridge likened the poet to the Eolian Harp. It is, however, only the beginning. What is, perhaps, most interesting about Wordsworth's Preface is the passage regarding a poem's "purpose" preceding the first mention of the "spontaneous overflow." After making it clear that he often does not begin a poem with a "purpose" in mind, Wordsworth explains:

My habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*. . . . Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a [hu]man, who . . . had also thought long and deeply. (598)

Good poems, then, are a result of this “meditation” that goes on in the background of a poet’s mind. It is the point of the writing process in which discoveries are made, the point at which the poet must forge out a new language equipped to express that which defies all other means of expression and is the direct consequence of the poet’s confrontation with the unknown.

For Wordsworth this “unknown” was the sublime. In Book I of *The Prelude*, after relating the story of his spotting a “huge Cliff” from his “elfin Pinnace,” Wordsworth recalls indulging in this state of meditation:

. . . and after I had seen  
That spectacle, for many days, my brain  
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense  
Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts  
There was a darkness, call it solitude,  
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes  
Of hourly objects, images of trees,  
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;  
But huge and mighty Forms that do not live  
Like living men moved slowly through my mind  
By day and were the trouble of my dreams. (417-427)

This encounter with the unknowable is present in every poem that has ever informed my own writing. Blake described this confrontation with the “unknowable” as a kind of mystical experience in which the “infinite” was seen in all things (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Plate 14). Whitman finds it in “a spear of summer grass” (“Song of Myself” 5),

Dickinson “gathers” it with the “spreading wide” of “narrow hands” (“I Dwell in Possibility” 11-12), and Neruda encounters it when he wakes in the night “caught” like a “fish trapped inside the wind” (“Enigmas” 29-30). Rimbaud and Byron find it in excess, Frost in moderation.

In his discussion of “Negative Capability,” Keats suggests that a poet must be “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Letter to George and Tom Keats, December 1817). Camus calls this unknowable the “absurd.” In “An Absurd Reasoning” he explains:

At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millenia. For a second we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. (14)

These encounters, however fleeting, are a kind of eviction from everything with which we are familiar. They speak to us in what I call in my poem “Reconciliation” the tacit language of the dispossessed. It is as though we have taken one step beyond what we can know and have returned with a souvenir; a souvenir which, in clumsy hands like mine, often disintegrates before it is preserved. It is the point upon which Whitman stands, like a spider, casting his web continually. Later in the same essay, Camus suggests that “the

world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (21). For a philosopher like Camus, this realization is the grounds for suicide. Keats, however, tells us that “what shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion poet” (Letter to Fanny Keats, October 26 1818). Poetry is, by necessity, bound to fail in its attempt to impose order and form upon a condition that by its very nature eludes such impositions; it is not beautiful *in spite* of that—but *because* of it. The poems that are the most beautiful are the ones that come closest to succeeding.

One of the most interesting points Camus makes in the passage quoted above is that regarding “habit.” The unknown is revealed when the curtain of habit is lifted. As far as it relates to early poetry, this effort to access and relate the unknown through the defiance of the habitual is seen most clearly in the metaphysical conceit. Although its shocking effect is somewhat lost when it becomes a controlling image, the metaphysical conceit is clearly an attempt to jolt the reader into the state of the absurd. What could be more absurd than a flea consuming two lovers and becoming their “marriage bed and marriage temple” (Donne, “The Flea” 13). Donne, however, reminds us that this flea is a miracle. It does contain the blood of two lovers and is, in and of itself, a wonder of the world. It is a miniature reminder of the absurdity of the mortal condition. Two hundred years later, Shelley writes “poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents” (*A Defence of Poetry* 487). The absence of familiarity in the face of this “hidden beauty” is created in poetry by novel and unanticipated associations and progressions that deliver

the reader to a place from which he/she can view the world from a perspective unlike any acquired before.

What I aim to do with my poetry, then, is to identify and relate those moments in time during which I am able to recognize both the infinite potential and the infinite futility of the human condition without at the same time recognizing any kind of logical inconsistency. In order to do this effectively, the form of the poetry as well as the language must, in some way, mimic the nature of the experience. Each instant must attempt to encompass an eternity, each word a story, each sound a song. Each writer finds his/her own way of doing this; Whitman, influenced by the expansive breadth and scope of the psalmic line, used free verse and long protracted lines which, quite literally, attempted to encompass everything by naming it. Dickinson, also influenced by ecclesiastic forms, used the short hymnal stanza and somehow sealed eternity into a box. Wordsworth coupled memory upon memory and accessed the ineffable through associations and reflection. Although I have experimented with all of the above in my own work, the method which fascinates me the most, and most recently, can be seen in the work of James Wright.

Wright has a way of breaking a line like a habit. At his most powerful moments, he can break a line at the exact point upon which the meaning hangs in the balance. That is to say that if the poem is read only up to a break in a particular line, the meaning is entirely different (sometimes completely the opposite) than if we continue reading beyond the break. In his poem "A Blessing" Wright relates an encounter he and a companion had with two horses in a field "Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota"

(1). He ends the poem with three lines that are carefully broken in such a way as to extend, one step at a time, the threshold of possibility:

Suddenly I realize

That if I stepped out of my body I would break

Into blossom. (22-24)

The poem makes perfect sense without the last line. The beauty of the world might destroy him if its essence were not diluted by his own limitations. When to this breaking, though, he adds “Into blossom,” Wright articulates something that many have felt and few have expressed. He defies the convention of habit, and, in both mind and form, he reaches out beyond what is familiar and returns with something that becomes, strangely enough, familiar. In the poem “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” Wright wades again into the absurd beauty of the world:

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly

Asleep on the black trunk,

Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.

Down the ravine behind the empty house,

The cowbells follow one another

Into the distances of the afternoon.

To my right,

In a field of sunlight between two pines,

The droppings of last year’s horses

Blaze up into golden stones.

I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.

A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.

I have wasted my life.

Again, each line is so unexpected that it shocks us into a vision of the world as close to Wright's own experience in the hammock as one can possibly get. Each line is unexpected and renders a familiar setting unfamiliar. This technique of breaking the line at the point at which the meaning hangs in the balance can also be seen in some of the poets whom Wright translated—most notably in the poems of the twentieth century Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo. Notice the opening stanza of "White Rose":

I feel all right. Now  
a stoical frost shines  
in me.  
It makes me laugh, this ruby-colored  
rope  
that creaks in my body. (1-6)

Each line is a complete surprise and adds a dimension to all that precedes it. The poem continues:

Endless rope,  
like a spiral  
descending  
from  
evil . . .  
rope, bloody and clumsy,  
shaped by

a thousand waiting daggers. (7-14)

In this stanza Vallejo whittles his line-breaking down to the very word. Each word shocks us into a deeper understanding of the significance of his own epiphany. We literally travel down with the speaker into a new understanding of himself. In his poem “I Am Freed,” whose scope includes sex, love, and confrontations with the absurdity of nothingness, Vallejo opens with the line “I am freed from the burdens of the sea / when the waters come toward me” (1-2). Here the second half of the sentence completely alters our understanding of the first. Not only does the second line render the statement conditional, but the condition of freedom demands that the speaker immerse himself in the very element that is the cause of his captivity. This is antithetical to any resolution the reader might have anticipated. “And if we banged / into the absurd,” Vallejo continues in the fourth stanza, “we shall cover ourselves with the gold of owning nothing” (11-13). This poem is fueled by the tension that exists between opposites, or, in Blakean language, “contraries.” This tension manifests itself in the deliberate, precise, expansive, and exploratory progression of lines each of which contributes to and alters the meaning of all that proceeds it. This technique can also be seen in the works of twentieth century Chilean poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda, particularly in his poems “Ode to Watermelon” and “Ode to Salt,” and in Wright’s own translations of Neruda’s work.

In my own work, this form began to manifest itself almost accidentally in my earlier poems like “Beginning” and “Practice.” As I became more conscious of what I was doing, I attempted to condense the technique. Poems like “Reconciliation” and “The Sleeper” are good examples of my attempts at doing this. Most recently, poems like “Perennials” and “Feathers from the Maize” have incorporated the technique without its

being so painfully obvious. These are only the most recent of my attempts to penetrate the barrier of familiarity.

The poems “She Led Me in a Dream” and “Antlers and Armchairs” are attempts to relate the significance of their respective moments through repetition and incantation. These poems were written while I was reading texts of origins and namings in *Technicians of the Sacred*, particularly a passage of “Aztec Definitions” in which the forest is described with a kind of repetition that gives way to the essence of experience:

It is a place of verdure, of fresh green, of wind—windy places, in wind, windy;  
a place of cold: it becomes cold; there is much frost; it is a place which freezes.  
It is a place from which misery comes, where it exists; a place of affliction, of  
lamentation, a place of affliction, of weeping; a place where there is sadness, a  
place of compassion, of sighing; a place which arouses sorrow, which spreads  
misery. (21)

Despite all of the references to desolation, sorrow, fear, and destruction, the description of the forest ends with a description of the “constant” and “continuing calm” (22). There is no contradiction or fallacy in describing a place of such disparate characteristics.

Whitman makes good use of this technique with sustained attempts at listing particulars in an effort to transcend them. Because he “contains multitudes,” contradictions are not logically inconsistent.

Kenneth Rexroth is among the most skillful users of this technique of repetition and incantation. His use of it is so subtle that we are at its mercy before we recognize its presence. A good example of his ability to do this is his poem “Hapax: The Same Poem Over and Over”:

A heron lifts from a pool  
As I come near, as it has done  
For forty years, and flies off  
Through the same gap in the trees.  
The same rush and lift of flapping wings,  
The same cry, how many  
Generations of herons?  
The same red tailed hawks court each other  
High on the same rising air  
Above a grassy steep. Squirrels leap  
In the same oaks. Back at my cabin  
In the twilight an owl on the same  
Limb moans in his ancient language. (32-45)

By continually reminding us that these are the “same” places and things he has been watching for forty years, and by listing over and over again various manifestations of the same beauty, Rexroth is able to transcend all particularities and participate in a kind of universal beauty. Perhaps his most astonishing use of this technique is in his poem “The Signature of All Things.” Rexroth creates images, not unlike paintings, which are the source of our expulsion from the everyday. Images of “huge trees rooted in graves” and of laurel leaves that “float / on the mirrored sky and forest / For a while” combine with a hypnotic rhythm to create a vision of the world in which all things are connected and alive. Perhaps Rexroth’s vision of interconnectedness as well as his gift for creating

compact, powerful descriptions of his surroundings stems from his fascination with Japanese and Chinese poetry.

Rexroth's own descriptions echo his translated works of the Japanese poet Marichiko who writes:

Early spring this year—

Pittosporum, plums, peaches,

Almonds, mimosa,

All bloom at once. Under the

Full moon, night smells like your body. (Poem III)

In five lines Marichiko is able to unify the disparate, access the infinite, and communicate the rapture and despair of a great love. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex body of work, Rexroth's poems communicate the ineffable by using sequences of images similar to Marichiko's. Although I am still experimenting with this style, I first began using it in poems like "Beginning," "Memorial Day," and "Escaping," the latter of which began as a series of haiku's that ended up fitting well into the form of a ghazal.

Perhaps most recently I have been influenced by a better understanding of what, in James Wright's poetry, is called the imagistic emotional equivalent. Like Rexroth, Wright has the ability to pull us immediately into a scene. Instead of mesmerizing us with image on image, Wright surprises us with an image of something outside of that scene that conjures up an equivalent emotional reaction. In his poem "A Summer Memory in the Crowded City," Wright tells us about being attacked by a barn swift one afternoon on a farm. The image of the "crowded city" is only implied through the sudden image of "a black woman" who is "somewhere . . . in absolute despair . . . cursing [the speaker]

blind” and “Gnashing jaw bone on shrunk / Gums” (35-39). Suddenly we become aware of the sense of eviction that comes to characterize the entire poem. In the poem “Inscription for the Tank” Wright begins by stating “My life was never so precious / to me as now” (1-2), and then comments:

If they loomed secret and dim  
On the wall of the drunk-tank,  
Scraped there by a raw fingernail  
In the trickling crusts of gray mold,  
  
Surely the plainest thug who read them  
Would cluck with the ancient pity. (5-10)

Wright’s imagistic emotional equivalent functions to relate to the reader the speaker’s vision of the world in all of its absurd beauty as well as his reaction to that vision. Wright makes an imaginative leap and provides the reader with an image that generates an equivalent emotional response to the ones generated by the primary scene. The imagistic equivalent also adds a dimension to the primary scene that would not otherwise have been achieved. The old toothless woman and the gray and moldy walls of the tank bring a sense of desperation and desolation into the poems that helps us to understand the significance of the speaker’s situation.

In my poem “The Sleeper” I attempt to do something similar to this. Instead of remaining inside the scene in which the speaker rises in the light of the moon to find it not only awe-inspiring and awkward but also convenient, I attempt to relate that experience through a sequence of other experiences that elicit equivalent responses. In

“Perennials” I take a number of separate images and “plant” them in a garden that becomes a kind of “wasteland” inspiring in the speaker an overwhelming sense of regret. It is my hope that these cold and desolate images take root and create a kind of warmth and beauty not unlike the speaker’s regards for the overwhelming sense of regret that, throughout the course of the poem, transforms itself into its opposite. A sense of affirmation and fulfillment, the rewards of a life lived to the fullest, usurp the conspicuous absence left in wake of a dissipating sense of regret.

Perhaps the most difficult job of the poet is that of remaining true to one’s self before a world stripped of its convenient explanations. This “honesty” is the hallmark of all good poetry and the pursuit of it is what Wordsworth calls in his *Preface* the “tracing” of the “primary laws of our nature” (597). Whether one rages in the face of our mortal condition like Thomas and Byron or senses in it the interconnectedness of all things like Rexroth or Whitman, one must be true to one’s voice. Although I have been influenced by the particular styles of particular poets, only some of whom have been mentioned above, I have learned one thing from good writers of all kinds: that in the face of certain death, life goes on with its living. And that without love and passion this would not be the case. The job of the poet, then, is to identify and articulate the innumerable and inexplicable loves that account for our ability to endure. In the language of metaphor, writing poetry is a waking from a somnambulant journey to one of deliberate steps. For this reason I have begun my collection of poems with the following work titled “Waking.”

## Part I

## Waking

By now the steam should be rising from the river,  
the frost slipping from the lawn,  
except in those dark corners  
that in the summer are the last to dry.  
In other yards and other times  
those corners were the reasons for my rising.  
I used to jump with the sun.  
In the shelter of their umbra  
I would steal and grub and worm  
until the blue-tailed afternoon slipped  
beneath a shredding stump.  
It never occurred to me, then,  
that I might find myself boned and burrowed  
beneath the blankets of a damp decay,  
waiting for some bright-eyed boy to strip the shades  
and chase me, blinded, into day.

## Feathers from the Maize

Everyday for a month,  
now, I've passed  
a fallen crow  
decomposing  
in a garden bed.  
I've watched  
the hollow bone,  
descending,  
like snow,  
down the mountain  
of its black reserve  
to winter at the  
weathered base,  
and seen its one  
visible eye,  
having never rested  
on its side,  
giving in  
to the skull  
with the careful rush of one

who once loved,  
and only once.

And today,  
among the frozen  
white light  
of morning,  
it reminds me of days  
between seasons  
when my father and I  
hunted crows  
from the cornfields  
near our house.

Through a bullhorn  
under the hood  
of our truck  
we played a tape  
of an owl being taken  
by a flock.

Almost instantly,  
a scout would come in high  
on the horizon

and, spotting the decoy  
posted in the field,  
would call the others in  
for the kill.

I never, before today,  
stopped to think  
what those cornfields  
must have looked like  
under the moonlight,  
in the wake of our shelling,  
on a night when breath would steam  
if breath were there.

Countless rounds of skeletons,  
white as lightning,  
emerging among the husks  
with the silent thunder  
of a great decay.

## Settling In

Today, coming in  
from a night away  
and slipping, through a drink,  
into a drift  
upon the couch,  
I found myself  
with something left  
undone,  
bobbing and rapping  
at the sides—  
some terrestrial obligation  
tugging at my sleeves  
and nudging from behind.

It was as though I had company—  
some stranger in the house of nod—  
who I must put to bed  
or chase away, as it happened,  
into the mirror,

where stood before me  
an aging, almost angry,  
adolescent who could count  
on his hands the times  
he'd worn a suit before.  
This was a man who  
put on the world  
much the way he  
put on that suit today—  
eagerly unsure,  
because it was a hand-me-down,  
whether anyone could tell  
it wasn't his.

## A Tomb with a Twelfth Story View

Outside my hotel window

Atlanta hides itself

in grid and grit—

always dying, never dead.

Galaxies behind the clouds

burn themselves unseen

in the only place where nothing

has a name and a face.

Shooting stars aren't

shooting stars at all—

fragments in the drift—

confined to the expanse.

Gutters hung against

the window, catching excess,

exceed themselves

and push a trench below.

I wish I could say I had  
the urge to throw myself  
into the grid and grit  
below, that I had

landed on something  
solid and profound,  
that I had spilled myself  
into the swelling trench below.

But I was content  
with my pacing and writing,  
so much so that I thought  
I might lock it in for good this time—

After all, I'm here  
anyway, pacing back  
and forth between  
the writing and the wall.

## The Sleeper

Finding my way  
by the wintered moon  
I see a new strength  
in an old friend—  
like a tree falling  
over a river.  
I might just as well have caught myself  
naked in a mirror  
facing a mirror.  
Or watched someone  
watching me  
sleep,  
the lift and lag of the swollen belly,  
rising breath moving air  
the way spilled water pushes  
dust across the floor.  
It's like catching the scent  
of a memory  
sprung from the musk  
of a widowed glove

and remembering your love was

always searching

with one cold

hand

for yours.

## Memorial Day

From the porch on the hill where we stood in silence  
we saw only the tips of our children's hands rise  
from shadows that tempted a redolent decay  
in coming forth, then stretched their arbored arms around  
the day that held our boys.

Everything insisted on standing still, but moved  
as slow and sure as birch. Even the fireflies  
just hung there, suspended, while the boys, armed with jars,  
reached their free hands above, caught them slowly, and pulled  
them down to seal them in.

Whatever was there that night would consume us all  
in our own consumption, but we were not concerned  
with what it was—busied as we were with our own  
blind reaching out, catching light in the shadows of  
a day that only was.

## Reconciliation

When I'm alone,  
outside, roving  
from star to star  
with pupils pooling  
like prayer,

nothing speaks to me  
but in the tacit language  
of the dispossessed.

Moonlight disputing  
with the wind above  
a shuddered blade  
of grass,

or a window condensing  
on the inside  
at dawn  
on a winter's solstice

are nothing  
if not instants  
of insignificance  
carrying eternity,  
like downed hope,  
home.

## Part II

## Perennials

This iron gate stands  
bound and brittled—  
black slag ivy caught  
curling back upon itself  
like the course of one  
who wandered long,  
but never wandered far.  
Across the littered path  
of broken glass  
a weathered stand of corrugated  
siding, settling in for the freeze,  
rattles rust against rock.  
I could live again a thousand times  
and a thousand times again  
find myself wondering,  
at this gate,  
what kind of regret  
swings open in the winter wind  
this way,  
inviting me in.  
Things work so slowly

toward their purpose  
it seems, sometimes,  
they never arrive—  
the way no one ever saw  
this sapling swallow the fence,  
here, while it grew.

## Beginning

Wedged between the rain and freeze,  
these early days of spring shuffle  
through the house like perfumed strangers  
passing on the street.

Curtains billow in their wake  
and their scent reminds me of a  
hyacinth, last year, that was  
larked into an early rise.

Not sure of what it was,  
I watched it burrow from the dirt.  
No sooner had its calyx, shot with color,  
cracked, when frost fell leaden on its bloom.

That hyacinth, caught between the first  
warm breath and the last hard rime,  
spent its everything on a place  
where others only briefly go,  
  
as strangers passing on the street

only briefly remind one another  
of one they loved, or couldn't,  
and never understood.

## Whatever Lasts

Last night I threw three sheets to the wind.

One was blank.

One was billed with time I never spent.

And one, the one that flew the farthest,

was a poem I can't recall.

It wasn't altogether unlike the dandelions

and the wishes

I used to blow to seed on summer afternoons.

How some would catch and pull, while others lingered

on the rise. I don't recall the wishes.

Nothing flies as long as nothing lasts.

And those seeds—

the ones that rose—might have landed root

somewhere and grown to blow to seed again.

Maybe it was the blank page that flew the farthest.

## Postlapsarian Reflections

I have not written into law the workings of the world,  
nor have I tripped, even once,  
upon a time and stumbled into song.

But I, too, have stood upon the shoulders of giants—  
Elm, birch, granite, steel—  
anything that held.

I have stood upon the rafters of the world and jumped,  
each time adding a limb, a link, a ledge,  
each time thinking that the fruit that never lands  
never rots into a law—that a simple act  
of defiance could be extended indefinitely.

I never stalled to look beyond, but unbound  
bound into the silence of a world past ripe.

## Practice

On nights like these, when sleep associates  
itself with all those things we want and need  
but cannot have, my body rises from the bed  
and trips into the kitchen for a drink.

I watch my fingers work,  
clutching, twisting, lifting, tipping—  
then switching the radio on.

They're not mine, these fingers, not tonight.  
With the smell of scotch, the sound of strings,  
the veins rising up over the knuckles,  
I want to lock them in the safe like guns,  
like knives, like everything else my father gave me.

Like my mind that cannot rest tonight,  
his fingers were commodities  
bent on boards of discipline.

I used to lie awake listening—  
fingers stretching octaves, scales rising  
sternly from the bow.

The whole house crescendoed  
toward a dissonance  
that pounced upon me

like broken pizzicatos.

The radio announcer tonight breathes

heavily through his nose between

phrases and makes me yawn.

He knows music.

## Giving Thanks

When I sit at this table and look into the yard in late November over the downed leaves that pool and stiffen—slow as memory—around the standing trees and listen to the racket of wind in the limbs I think of my grandfather, whom I never knew, pushing himself into a handstand from the armed chair at its head. This table holds upon its surface the history of the written word in our family. Every word that was etched upon the page was etched, too, upon the table's surface. A jumble of letters and penmanship. It's like listening to a room full of ancestors shout the family history above the ruckus and scrum of senility. The labored concert of chaos. No two memories are consistent with one another or even themselves, and none ever reaches its end but it's imposed upon and protracted by another's rendition. When my sister hushes the bunch with a linen cloth and secures their silence with the weight of another table's setting, I can almost hear the lost ones turning their good ears to the turf—as if the awkward silence we all struggled to overcome were some unequivocal truth, some ghastly confirmation.

### Part III

## Slipping Through

Whether that engine rolled in my approaching dream  
or railed into the waking night I never would have known,  
but a starling, whistled from its rest, awoke and  
rose a covey in its wake. Their consternation  
rioted and brimmed the night around the house.

I saw the starlings silhouette the night,  
moonlight purling on the wings.

And heard them, one by one,  
alight and preen themselves to sleep,  
the freight cars passed and lumbered  
into silence on distant ties.

The dream itself settled into a mist,  
slipping through screens and fences as it rose.

## She Led Me in a Dream

Last night I followed her across fields  
where she and slaves worked dirt,  
black as night, black as crescent moons  
under fingernails.

Black night turned—  
under the tips of the sliver moon—  
green.

Green as the lawn that swallowed the house  
across the fields—green as the sea that swallowed  
the fields surrounding the house  
where her father slept. Rising with the night,  
he came pitching steel like red swallows,  
his callused hand and crescent wrench  
crafting machines. A master-slave,  
the turned dirt, the steel, the cracked skin  
splitting over bone, bent blades  
whirling in dreams  
and dirt.

We worked through the night

riveted and burned while the chilled moon  
settled on the bent backs of metal machines.  
Spent slaves rising with the sun,  
cracked dawn, the swallows  
rising everywhere, the work  
everywhere swelling  
the swallowing sea.  
As far as I could see,  
the green eye  
swelling.

## Escaping

Gas in the gas tank—bust the round world wide open.

Why should we return? These roads—unfurled—wide open . . .

Without fresh flowers I return from the garden.

A thousand graves lay bare and gape, hurled wide open.

There are bats in the attic of this hollow house.

I dream its slow burn with red eyes curled wide open.

Heads filled with nonsense, we meet for laughs and cocktails.

Your necklace breaks my stare, shucked and pearled, wide open.

How many times before have I locked this door shut?

Dirty sheets consume what romance fled wide open.

## The Sculptor to the Nun Said

Rest yourself upon the altar, sister,  
I never force myself on anyone.  
Pluck the bobbies from your hair, untwist your  
papist inhibitions from your bun.  
And those habits, you must quit them now—  
for me, for you, forever—for they hide  
the artful hand of Him to whom you bow.  
Is not the work of censors jealous pride?  
Reveal that live mosaic! Cupids face  
of hubris crafted. Sacrilegious? No!  
Red nipple eyes and brunette chin (or lace?)  
and navel nose—Wait! This before you go—  
It's not success so much we seek as pardon  
when we strive in vain to shade the Garden.

## Hunger Stew

When we picked this produce from the shelf

we rolled

our cart of appetites like bouldered hope.

We shoved,

we shouldered past the shoppers ripe with heat.

We touched

tomatoes stacked and stuffed like glutton's guts.

We smelled

sun dusking on the husks of corn. We took.

We took.

I don't remember what you wore or swore

today

while I chopped the wilted odds and ends,

finished

bunches of stems, hulls, and cowered vines,

and, afterwards,

consumed what might otherwise have

wilted on.

## Evening Nap

It must have been a gust of wind, like that,  
that taught me how to listen.

With muted whispers in the limbs  
it swept and swaggered in silhouette

and might just as well have passed—  
unseen, unheard, unfelt, unfound—

lipping in a wisp of broken grass.

But that you caught it in cotton sheets

and, dreaming, threw it back slowly,  
with warm breaths, across my chest.

Pause

I'm late again, again you sit.

Dress draped over pale thighs,

hair ringing, like windless chime,

the softly scented sound of pantomime.

Say a word enough times and it makes no sense.

We must have said love that many times.

## Bonfire on Meesa's Mesa

Another time around the sun,  
another ring around the tree,  
another instant slowly spun  
into my ceaseless symmetry.

Another fall has fallen amber,  
resin-scented from the bough,  
and finds me raking into embers  
scattered remnants of a *now*.

But there are *nows* upon the boughs  
that will not fall into the *then*,  
though smoking fragments spark their vows  
they cling to clamor with the *when*.

The wound-up winds have time to spare,  
and so they spare it willingly  
by blowing instants from their bare  
and brittle limbs most chillingly.

Past and back, their swaggered fall

soon settles into flame.

And as they burn I hear them call

me, rising, by my name.

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## Vita

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