Collateral: Poems

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Joshua Jon Robbins

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Abstract

In the lyric tradition of Gerard Manley Hopkins' Terrible Sonnets and James Wright's odes to the Midwest, the poems in *Collateral* interrogate the complexities of faith and doubt in middle-class America and present a witness compelled to translate suburbia's landscapes and evangelical banalities into a testimony of hard truths. These poems explore the emotional exhaustion that accompanies language's broken connection to ideal meaning and how both are unable to fully correspond to our lives. The manuscript is also an exploration of my own corresponding lyric struggle to reconcile *what is* and *what should be*, the personal and the political as well as the personal and the theological, what poet Carl Phillips calls, "the sensibility of struggle—between private feeling and public expectation, mortality and divinity, the human impulse toward order and the disordered experience of being human."

In *Collateral*, I seek to present a collection of poems that raises up the banner of what Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz calls, "a passionate pursuit of the Real." The poems in this manuscript also attempt to bear witness to a culture that institutionalizes the purgation of the devalued from the public sphere's imagination. They are also an argument for a lyric poetry that is aware of poetic representation's ethical import, one that exemplifies a process working toward social change, a process that, for me, has deep roots in Christian theology.

The collection's critical introduction examines how, as a consequence of American poetry's contemporary fragmentation, the lyric has lost the political and social heft necessary to address its audience. I present two responses to the crisis in the lyric. The first reexamines the role of faith and doubt in lyric poetry. The second suggests a new framework for thinking about lyric's social role in response to *agon*: the lyric as theodicy.

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***Collateral*: A Critical Introduction**

In the introduction to her 1993 anthology *Against Forgetting: 20th Century Poetry of Witness*, Carolyn Forché confronts contemporary American poetry's notion that poetic witness of historical, political, and social extremities such as "exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination" (29) are too controversial and inappropriate to be proper subject matter for American poetry, a notion that, at its core, assumes the realms of the personal and the political are necessarily mutually exclusive for poetry in our country.

Compared to the West Bank or South Africa or El Salvador or Eastern Europe or any war-ravaged country in which poets face censorship, exile, and worse when confronting political strife, war, and atrocities, American poets have been quite fortunate. Stating it plainly, Forché writes, "wars for [American poets] (provided we are not combatants) are fought elsewhere, in other countries. The cities bombed are other people's cities. The houses destroyed are other people's houses. We are also fortunate in that we do not live under martial law; there are nominal restrictions on state censorship; our citizens are not sent into exile" (31). American poets are privileged. We have it rather easy in that there is not much to "witness" along the lines Forché defines and, as a consequence of its relatively privileged benign cultural status and its safe position ensconced in universities, contemporary American poetry too easily ignores the pain and discord that does exist in our country and the world. American poetry's witness gets divided into a clean, trouble-free binary: poetry of the "personal" and poetry of the "political." This binary establishes a false choice for younger poets who must choose either the personal or the political and, in recent decades, the result is new poetry's

response to the world has become more and more limited in its scope and the lyric fragmented.

The sharp distinction drawn between the personal and the political poem is an unnatural and artificial one that forces poetry to impose a kind of unnecessary equal airtime requirement between the two when really the personal and political should be seen as being one in the same. Since the origin of the lyric poem, the personal and political have actually arisen from the very same impulse. Through the vehicle of her anthology, Forché seeks to expose how the contemporary binary of personal and political limits poetry's power to adequately witness and respond to injustice, suffering, and the human experience. In order to refocus American poetry's gaze, Forché carved out a new category which I have found particularly useful: poetry of "the social." In her advocacy for a newly refocused witness Forché writes, "In fact, the [social] poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence" (31). Social poetry avoids one-dimensional binaries and poetic thinking that presents itself as a wholly realized and accurate description or response to a situation or to the truth of an experience.

The poems in *Collateral* seek to communicate the social traces of a personal crisis of religious faith and doubt. The manuscript is also an exploration of my own corresponding lyric struggle to reconcile *what is* and *what should be*, the personal and the political as well as the personal and the theological, what Carl Phillips calls, "the sensibility of struggle—between private feeling and public expectation, mortality and divinity, the human impulse toward order and the disordered experience of being human" (89). The poems in this dissertation manuscript also attempt to bear witness to a culture that institutionalizes the purgation of the devalued from the public sphere's imagination. They are also an

argument for a lyric poetry that is aware of poetic representation's ethical import, one that exemplifies a process working toward social change, a process that, for me, has deep roots in Christian theology. Unfortunately, the American lyric poem as a "social" force has been swallowed and fragmented by the very culture it struggled to bear witness to in the 1990s.

In a 2011 interview for *Poetry* Magazine's podcast series, Carolyn Forché examines the legacy of the term "poetry of witness" and argues the term is less applicable to writing than it is to "reading poetry marked indelibly and legibly by the extremity endured by the writer. I was resisting this idea of imagining it as a way to write or as an identity to become, or to inhabit, or to take upon oneself." For a term that comes out of philosophical and theological deliberations over the past decades in the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II, it is lamentable that the term's absorption into American poetry's identity politics since the mid-1990s has made it just another genre label or fashion among the many prescriptive options for one's identity as a poet, that one might be a "poet of witness" in the same way one might be a working-class poet or a New Formalist or a Language poet or any variety of *au courant* lyric styling.

The critic Stephen Burt's late-1990s description of yet another lyric fashion, "Elliptical Poetry," as believing "provisionally in identities…but [suspecting] the *I*s they invoke" could equally be a description of the divided state of the American lyric poem. It too often seems as if contemporary poets' base-level definition of the lyric today must incorporate and "admire disjunction and confrontation, [and that lyric poets must] seek the authority of the rebellious [in order to] challenge their readers, violate decorum, surprise or explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem, or what matters in life" (46-47). While I do not disagree with the notion that poetry should challenge readers and

what matters in life, the need for witness amongst the fragmentation is essential if lyric poetry is to maintain its social relevance.

Poetry is dying because the use of lyric has gotten out of touch with readers' lives. William Carlos Williams' oft-quoted adage from "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" has never been more true. It is not, however, only people that "die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found" in poetry. Poetry itself dies miserably when there is nothing to be found within it. Poetry is best when it gives an account of how people live, and offers readers opportunities to discover the larger implications of their lives.

In his essay "Barbaric Yawps: Life in the Life of Poetry," Dave Smith succinctly summarizes the definition of the lyric as being "typically brief, its language is imagistic, its nature is deliberately symbolic, and its speaker is an individual" (10). Smith also defines the lyric by juxtaposing lyric poetry's movement away from realism with prose's movement toward it. While each of these ideas is quite useful and true, there is an essential element missing from this definition. In order for a lyric poem to make a leap away from the experiences of the everyday and take its readers beyond the cumulative fragments that comprise the mosaic of our daily lives' struggles, those struggles must first be laid bare.

The tradition of struggle, or *agon*, goes as far back as Ancient Greek and Roman poets like Archilochus, Sappho, and Horace, whose concerns were the permeability between the public and private spheres, earthly transience and divinity, order and disorder. These ancient concerns remain the concerns of many contemporary poets writing today, poets like Jorie Graham, Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, and Adam Zagaweski, among others, who have been instrumental in guiding my thinking about the role of lyric poetry in social spaces.

As Carl Phillips explains in his seminal essay "The Ode," the struggle that makes up the lyric can be "physical, emotional, psychological," but what connects the reader to the poet's lyric expression is the fact that "the agon is the point of commonality" between the two (89). Phillips succinctly defines agon as, "What is, versus what should be" (95). The lyric poem, regardless of the time period in which it was composed, thus expresses and organically emerges from the struggle of human experience. That the lyric is a product of struggle is not, however, to argue for a return to Sidney's adage that poetry ought to delight and instruct as a means to diminishing the struggle, nor am I taking the position that poetry must necessarily be cathartic. My contention is that today's lyric poems, like those of the Ancient Greeks, possess the potential to reshape the world we live in and they can effect change in our lives, but in order for these changes to occur, poets need to make themselves vulnerable to that potential and to a process that makes change possible.

Far too often, discussions of competing lyric fashions' aesthetic and poetic differences are rooted less in a desire to locate common ground or to advance the cause of poetry in the public sphere than they are found opportunities for aesthetic discourse to degenerate into academic aggrandizement and polarized disputes of aesthetic opposition which invariably conclude with invective-laden denouncements and rage-blind screeds. The goal of this introduction and dissertation manuscript is to avoid prescriptive and partisan arguments about one particular style of lyric or another and, instead, to sincerely advocate in good faith for an additional way forward for the fractured American lyric poem.

In his essay "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," Tony Hoagland defines poetic fashion for our contemporary era and addresses the hazardous implications of thoughtlessly following after it. He writes,

> Fashion is not in itself a negative force, but rather a perennial part of the vitality of culture. Fashion is the way that taste changes and then spreads, in a kind of swell or wave of admiration. *The Waste Land* was fashionable, and sideburns and Hemingway and war bonds and Sylvia Plath, and existentialism, and bell-bottoms. The danger in fashion is its lack of perspective, that it doesn't always recognize the deep structure of whatever manners it is adopting. (Hoagland 519)

Writing poetry can be a dreadfully isolating endeavor and so knowing that one's poems fit in with the fashionable milieu can be some solace; however, privileging the fashion over the work of the poems themselves is not to participate in a poetic movement as much as it is a way to locate a modicum of artistic and social sphere identification.

In *Collateral*, I seek to present a collection of poems that raises up the banner of what Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz in *The Witness of Poetry* calls, "a passionate pursuit of the Real" (25). Although I do not fully subscribe to Milosz's argument that being "faithful to real things" necessarily requires hierarchical arrangement in poetic thinking, I wholly agree with his point that if one attempts to write about the world without method and without intent, without an awareness of the human condition and the human capacity to inflict and experience pain, when one searches for poetry "one finds a 'heap of broken images, where the sun beats,' fragments enjoying perfect equality and hinting at the reluctance of the poet to make a choice" (71). If it is true that the master narratives of poetic progress have been exposed as authoritarian and oppressive, without lyric poets

striving to make poetry relevant to the real lives of real people, all that will remain of the lyric poem in the future will be the tattered dusty husk of poetic fashion.

Milosz's quotation from *The Wasteland* has been especially instructive to me in terms of my own poetic process while crafting this manuscript. Instead of attempting to assemble a collection from the shards of a life lived, much less a pastiche of fragments, while writing the poems included in *Collateral*, I tried to remain cognizant of a lyric tradition that expresses a desire to attain what T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets* refers to as "the still point of the turning world." For me, to yearn after the still point does not mean one must necessarily believe in its existence. What matters is the yearning for it, the desiring of meaning and beauty through the process of bearing witness to the real.

In *A Symbolic of Motives*, Kenneth Burke writes that "the essential motives both of poetry in particular and of human relations in general" are fused together and "inspirited" in the process of seeking "truth, goodness, and power...[and] into the corresponding quest for beauty" (310). One poet who has been immeasurably influential on the composition of *Collateral* is Charles Wright, whose poetry demonstrates the desire that we want poetry to mean and that our quest after truth and beauty is enough even though access to a transcendent order and even the order itself may not actually exist. For Wright, the yearning after Eliot's "still point of the turning world" is relevant in that Wright's yearning connects us with the world even as the world appears to us in its brokenness. The essential difference between Wright and Eliot is that Wright is uncertain the "still point" is accessible or even that it was ever there to begin with. For Wright, there is a means in poetry maybe, but more importantly, the means do not necessitate an end.

Wright's poetic mode could be described as restlessly observant, and in his work over the past twenty-five years, much of his subject matter is culled from what he calls "looking around" in his backyard where he lives near Charlottesville, Virginia. His poems amount to catalogs of what he sees. In fact, Wright's recent work has included a series of poems titled "Looking Around," this in addition to a number of other poems throughout his late work that have the word "looking" in the title. Wright's looking is, however, not merely a taking in and putting down on paper what he observes, and this process is immediately apparent in the opening lines of a poem like "River Run."

Wright conducts his looking from his chair during breakfast, yet his observation is not about the physical, it is "in spite" of the physical. Paradoxically, Wright's cataloging of his physical senses' observance is accompanied by the presence of what is *not* there, "the things of the other side" which are not available but longed for: "A little river of come and go, / A heartbeat of sorts, a watch tick, a splash in the night" (5-6). Instead of Wright's visual reports yielding an associative atmosphere (the armchair and omelet and the backyard *are like*...), Wright's poem turns away from the typical narrative reality and normative urgencies of the sociopolitical world which readers of contemporary poetry expect. The observed physical world is described in terms of something else just as much as it is a jumping off point for contemplation.

For Wright, lyric doubt does not mean the lyric poem becomes irrelevant, ineffective, or barbaric, or that he cannot continue seeking Eliot's "still point." For Wright, as he states in "River Run," "What isn't available is always what's longed for" (13), and he cannot attain it because, "It's written, erased, then written again" (14). The recognition that the "longed for" is bound to be erased again and the grief which necessarily accompanies this recognition is all that is left. The unadulterated "real" in this

poem is given a total of two lines. Wright's lyric "still point" is agon itself. The greatest importance for Wright is the process of coming to recognize this difference between *what is* and *what should be* as the "still point," that any reconciliation with any ultimate order is unattainable.

In his essay "Halflife: A Common Place Notebook," Wright describes how he freely engages with the world's complex presences. By shifting from observation and precise description to meditation and what feels like epiphany, and doing this all at a breakneck velocity, Wright has created what he calls "a metaphysics of the commonplace, the metaphysics of the quotidian" (22) that allows him to catalog his world and for his readers to participate alongside. Even if a resolution to agon is unavailable to us, Wright's work exhibits a kind of satisfying mourning at our loss of "order," one which is so skilled in its impartation that "even the accents of lamentation can be transformed into the pleasurable" (Burke 281).

I believe that the fragmentation of the contemporary lyric, the competing schools and fashions of poetry, and that poetry has become more and more irrelevant in the public sphere, stem from a central paradox at the core of the lyric poem and the inability of recent lyric approaches to resolve the paradox. The lyric poem, regardless of the time period in which it was composed, expresses and organically emerges from the struggle of human experience, a struggle that has yet to find a resolution. Consequently, the lyric impulse and expression arises from an irreconcilable ontology and thus proceeds on a trajectory toward a paradoxical conclusion: an end to agon would mean an end to lyric itself. Our everyday lives exist in the space between *what is* and *what should be*. I believe the fragmentation of the contemporary American lyric is ultimately a teleological problem. The frustration contemporary poets have with the lyric's ability to mean stems from the

poets' inability to exist with agon and their doubt that poetry can, in the end, truly matter. Their frustration and doubt in the possibilities of the lyric are made manifest in the creation of false binaries and fashionable play.

I do not believe that the lyric ought to resolve agon, nor do I believe lyric poets should strive to locate an end to its inherent tension. My contention is that contemporary lyric poets should embrace the doubt that comes from an existence within agon and they should use the doubt and frustration and anxiety they feel to strive after meaning even if an ultimate transcendent end does not exist. It is the process of making the personal into the political and vice versa, the process of making meaning and connections between people, it is the process of living together in agon, that makes poems mean. I have tried to do as much in these poems.

Poetry is in trouble. At best, it exists on the margins of American life and only becomes visible during great tragedy as when Yeats's "September 1913" found its way into the unsuspecting e-mail inboxes of indifferent housewives and retirees during the weeks following 9/11. At worst, it is irrelevant in public spheres and relegated to university lecterns, prize committees, and big-box bookstores' foyer bargain bins. It is essential, then, that poetry's contemporary discourse get beyond the turf wars of competing styles, between traditional and experimental poetries, which have perpetuated if not caused the trouble altogether. Many contemporary poets and critics have written about what is at issue concerning American poetry and the lyric, and yet no matter how many arguments are made about lyric poetry's relevance, no matter how many false genre binaries are created, all the essays in *Poetry*, articles in *Boston Review*, provocative social media postings, and panel presentations at AWP combined will never be able to provide a *pharmakon* for an American poetry which is being poisoned by its own hand. I

believe that if lyric doubt is the toxin in American poetics discourse, faith in the possibility and process of what the lyric can do is also the cure for American lyric poetry.

Faith and doubt: any discussion of these and American lyric must first put down roots in rocky rhetorical ground. One way I have tried to understand the roles of faith and doubt in the lyric expression of my work is by considering the ways a lyric poem's social performance and a hymn's intersect. At its core, a lyric poem is necessarily unstable. As a consequence of this instability, lyric figuration tends to equate a thing with its anti-self as a way to locate constancy. Similarly, a hymn offers a way of slipping out of oneself and into an encounter with that which the singer is not. The ability of both to dislocate the self and commune with, for lack of a better word, the *Logos*, facilitates the emergence of meaning from the relationship between word and thing, tenor and vehicle, god and human being. Or, at least that is how we would like it to be. For many of us, there is no one thing to which everything corresponds, which raises the question: If there is no Ultimate Correspondence, how can there be meaning in our poems? What would a doubter's hymn sound like?

The poems in this dissertation, many of which are written in direct response to hymns I sang in church as a boy, explore the emotional exhaustion that accompanies the realization of rhetoric and language's broken connection to ideal meaning, how both are ultimately unable to fully correspond to the tangible, everyday objects of our lives, our desires, to the past and memory. Poems like "When I Say *Hymn*," "The Sky, Not the Grave," and "Sung By Flaming Tongues Above," attempt to reconcile a profound desire for religious faith in the face of doubt generated by family history, loss, and economic despair.

While writing *Collateral* and searching for a means within my writing process to more deeply explore my own lyric agon of my subjective experience of religious faith and doubt, one poet I returned to repeatedly for instruction was Emily Dickinson who is, as critic Glenn Hughes writes, "a brilliant poetic explicator of what it means to live in the anxious openness of the 'tension' of the *metaxy*—that is, the unrestful, inescapable, and irresolvable tension of existence in between world and transcendence, time and eternity, ignorance and knowledge, despair and faith, hope and fulfillment" (63). Hughes' description of Dickinson's subject is analogous to Carl Phillips' description of lyric agon and what it means to live within and between the gulf separating *what is* and *what should be*. In Dickinson, I find a religiosity that longs for communion with the unknown. She is also one who shuns the pulpit and organized Christianity as forces that seek to dull the serration of her sharp lyric questioning. At their core, Dickinson's poems are a doubter's hymns because they express an exploration of a human condition that cannot find transcendence but can, through a process of question and answer, find great comfort in an expression of yearning for fulfillment and meaning.

Through metaxy and a mode of questioning which emerges from a state of between-ness, Dickinson's exploration of the human condition is a venture that several poets essential to my thinking about lyric agon and religious faith and doubt have also taken on. John Berryman's "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" from *Love and Fame* beautifully expresses the lyric complication of searching for a language of faith. Berryman's desire for faith is, as Mark Jarman writes, "emotional, not rational, but the method—witnessing—is still part of our social make up" ("Poetry and Religion" 68). An end to suffering or an escape from doubt is not Berryman's goal. Through writing and publishing these eleven poems, Berryman transforms his personal suffering and yearning

for redemption into a public testimony. The process of the poems makes a public argument for a deeper understanding of how we might live more deeply within our own individual capacities for belief. I have published many of the poems in this manuscript in literary journals and poetry anthologies, but with the submission and eventual publication of this collection as a dissertation manuscript, I feel for the first time the whole combined weight of participating in a poetic tradition of expressing religious doubt because my poems, like Berryman's, risk "witnessing" the world.

There are many religious or Christian poets who have been foundational to my work, and they include obvious figures like John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot. Many contemporary Christian poets have also proven to be similarly influential on my own process for engaging faith and doubt in *Collateral.* Perhaps most essential to writing these poems are poets Laurie Lamon, Scott Cairns, Andrew Hudgins, and Mark Jarman, who each use the lyric to transform matters of theology and subjective experience into testimony similar to Berryman's. While I cannot say that their stylistic or craft idiosyncrasies have influenced my own voice in considerable ways, I can say that their unique ways of addressing religious doubt and theological concerns have been extremely helpful as I have come to a new realization in regards to lyric agon in my own work. Lyric poetry addresses the space between *what is* and *what should be*, and, for me that agon is located in years of wrestling with the theological Problem of Evil.

Traditionally, the Problem of Evil has been presented as the following dilemma: If God is all-good, then God must wish to eliminate evil; and if God is omnipotent, God must be able to eliminate evil. And yet, evil exists; therefore God cannot be both all-good and omnipotent (Hick 40). For me, the Problem of Evil essentially presents the same consequence as the paradoxical problem at the core of the lyric: doubt. For years I have

searched for a response to the Problem of Evil that would quench my doubt. I have read theological treatises, philosophical arguments, contemporary evangelical Christian popular theology: none of it is persuasive.

I do not intend my dissertation manuscript to propose any specific religion or theology as a solution to either my personal religious doubt or this problem at the core of the lyric, but theodicy has offered me, as a lyric poet, an additional scaffolding for thinking about approaches to addressing lyric doubt. Strictly defined, "theodicy" is a term created by Gottfried Leibniz who combined the Greek terms *theos*, "god," and *dike*, "righteous," as a technical term for attempts to solve the theological problem of evil. There are many Christian theodicies, the most famous, perhaps, are Augustine, Luther, and Calvin's variations on free-will defense, Ireneaus's soul-making argument, and contemporary philospher Alvin Plantiga's incompatibilist defense. The theodicy that has proved the most influential to me in terms of my own religious faith and doubt and their correlation to lyric agon has been process theodicy.

Process theodicy is a contemporary theodicy primarily developed by David Ray Griffin which maintains the position that God is not omnipotent, but is developing. Because God is not omnipotent, God is not removed from creation, and so is capable of interacting with and influencing the universe God did not create. As a result, any suffering in creation is also undergone by God, and creation itself is seen as a cooperation between God and all other beings. Whether this cooperation actually takes place is thus up to humanity. In other words, God cannot force humans to do God's will, but can only influence them. Since the world and humans were not created *ex nihilo*, any ultimate reality is not determined but is a process of creativity that is continually ongoing. As with poetry and the experience of lyric agon, in process theodicy, everything, every actuality,

every moment in time, is imbued with creativity and possibility, and therefore to exist is to struggle to create.

In my work, the connection between process theodicy and lyric is this: in the face of an intractable world filled with suffering and doubt, poetry can struggle to create and respond. In fact, poetry is obligated to respond because that is poetry's metaphysical purpose. Although a lyric poem may not be able to end doubt in the world, lyric does participate in a process trying to oppose doubt. One way I think the lyric opposes doubt is through the way it presents itself as being conscious of how it represents its subject.

One criticism of process theodicy is the logical implication that human suffering, injustice, and unfulfilled potential, are somehow acceptable because they are each part of the same complicated process that has also produced many marvelous people and creative achievements. To align lyric poetry with process theodicy in this respect would be to aesthetically justify lyric's creative exploitation of its subject matter. However, I disagree, and there are models of process theodicy that are acutely useful to how we think about a poet's lyric response to *agon* and doubt.

In her book *Suffering*, liberation theologian Dorothee Soelle offers a "practical" theodicy that does not attempt to explain the acceptance of some suffering for the sake of some good, as is the critique of process theodicy. Instead, she argues that Christ's suffering on the cross provides a model for how suffering and doubt can be experienced in solidarity with others, that suffering and doubt are *not* redemptive, and must be resisted. I would argue that lyric is a similar tool of resistance and a process theodicy lyric would by definition be hyper-conscious of the ties between the poet's engagement with the world and the ethics of poetic representation as a means of "witnessing" and dispelling doubt.

In his famous closing sentence to "A Defence of Poetry," Shelley declares poets to be "the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (356). Many poets of my generation have lost sight of the intent of Shelley's defense and are actually more aligned with Plato's assault on mimetic art in Book X of *Republic*, the very issue that Shelley was opposing in his defense. Pick up most any national poetry journal and one inevitably finds a glut of poems by poets whose work meets Plato's requirements for banishment: the work imitates the world and holds up a mirror to it, or offers conjecture about the imitation. This is why Shelley responded to Plato by calling poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." He wanted poets to use language to shape human thought, and by doing so, to shape society. Today, like Shelley, I think we need to ask again, "Shouldn't poetry do more?"

In a 2006 column published in London's *The Guardian*, Adrienne Rich re-contextualizes Shelley for our times. She writes, "Shelley was, no mistake, out to change the legislation of his time. For him there was no contradiction between poetry, political philosophy, and active confrontation with illegitimate authority." As one of our country's great poets and an essential voice especially as her work pertains to the political purposes of poetry, Rich's description of Shelley as "revolutionary-minded" is important because it exposes the feeble rationale for writing that is too often overlooked by lyric poets writing today.

Rich reminds us, "Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy. Neither is it a blueprint, nor an instruction manual, nor a billboard." No matter the brand of poetry or "school" or label, no matter the poetic camp: today there is too much idealizing and universalizing of poetry. The negative consequence has been watered down writing that seems no longer capable of addressing

the world as it is. Is it any wonder that poetry readership is where it is? People are not finding what they need.

It is pretty obvious by now that the Poetry Wars are not winnable, but if they are going to end we need to put down our arms and relinquish the ridiculous notion that there is winnable territory. If we fail, the fighting will continue until poetry is expelled from society, and not "expelled" in the Platonic sense of the word, but rather in a very real way. As Shelley tells us, poetry "awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought" (344). Shelley is addressing poetic vision. "Poetry," he writes, "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world" (344). This is what great poets possess: vision. And vision is not something that is immediately available, but one attains it through a process of engaging what Rich calls "the difficult world around the poem" ("Poetry and the Public Sphere" 119). Adrienne Rich has been a primary influence on my writing since I first began writing poetry and her concepts of "re-vision" and "re-search" have been particularly essential to the poetics underpinning the construction of this dissertation manuscript.

In "'When We Dead Awaken': Writing as Re-vision," Rich recontextualizes feminist challenges to the patriarchal literary canon as an argument that feminist literary scholarship's rediscovery of previously ignored women writers is both a moment of "awakening" and an opportunity for subverting race- and class-based oppression in addition to oppression based on gender. Rich defines "re-vision" as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (11). In her essay, Rich looks back at her own poetic texts as well as at her evolution as a poet and describes her process of discovering how she had "wanted women poets to be the equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same" (16). In order

to break her ties to tradition, patriarchy, and sameness, Rich had to experience an "awakening of consciousness" (27) to the facts that oppression, victimization, and anger "are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, the structures of thought" (28). Rich instructs us that, "We can neither deny them, nor will we rest [on that discovery]" (28) because to do otherwise is to participate in a "mood of isolation, self-pity, and self-imitation that pervades 'nonpolitical' poetry" (28) leaving only a "self-generating energy for destruction" (29).

Twenty-five years after "'When We Dead Awaken': Writing as Re-vision" redefined the word "revision" in a feminist context, Rich redefined "research" in a political context. In "Poetry and the Public Sphere," Rich castigates the "capable mediocrity of American middle-ground status-quo poetry" and poets that are "neither mining the medium of language for subversive purposes, nor are they reaching for words to create a community of resistance" (117). For Rich, poetry is liberatory at its core. Poets are responsible for caring for a public sphere which has been polluted by decades of academic evisceration of meaning from poetry. Poetry made of "threadbare language, frozen metaphors…are part of the problem" (118) when poetry attempts to matter to the public sphere. For Rich "the power of a poem to subvert, to 'intensify / our relationships' depends on its being *poetry*—taking on the medium of language with all its difficulties. Difficulties of relationship and strangeness, of truth-telling and torsion and how the netted bridge is to be suspended over the gorge" (118).

While writing the poems in *Collateral*, I have been acutely conscious of a need to look back and "re-vision" and "re-search" my relationship to "the structures of thought" that uphold my own poems. The drafting of this manuscript has been a process of discovering how my agon of religious background alone is not a sufficient subject matter

for writing the kind of lyric poems I advocate be written. I have had my own "awakening of consciousness" while writing these poems and have discovered that the private religious sphere and the public sphere are not mutually exclusive and that they can and ought to be engaged through a process of tandem exploration.

Walt Whitman is another poet whom I have found particularly useful for thinking about the process of "re-vision" and "re-search" in terms of the public sphere. Whitman is usually discussed as a poet of social encouragement, democratic unity, and a poet of homo/erotic exploration and quest, and yet when his work is critically subjugated as an ideological or historical emblem, much of his grappling with what poetry can do in the public sphere becomes obscured by these cultural illustrations. By limiting one's reading of Whitman to such broad themes, and seeking within his work what Helen Vender calls, "large inferences about civil war or American democracy or nineteenth-century materialism" (5), one risks overlooking the complex developmental process of lyric *agon* embedded in his poetry and, specifically as it concerns the poetics of this dissertation manuscript, within the complexities of *Drum-Taps*.

In particular, the complexities of *Drum-Taps* have been overshadowed by the manner in which they reflect a hubristic North's enthusiasm for war, but in order to trace Whitman's development of lyric *agon* in *Drum-Taps*, one must begin with a poem that lends itself well to thematic reduction, "First O Songs for a Prelude" which presents the reader with a glorious parade of Manhattan soldiers portrayed without individuality and presented without distinction. In his celebration of them, Whitman's men are nameless and faceless, "their brown faces and their clothes and knapsacks cover'd with dust" (33). The celebration in the poem is less about the individual lives of the men marching through the city streets on their way to the battlefront, than it is about the grandeur and

glory of war. Whitman seems more concerned with celebrating war as a storied tradition than with the individuals in the march. As a consequence of Whitman's lax diction and imagery and his refusal to engage the situation's lyric agon, the poem falls flat and is easily reducible to large inferences about Northern attitudes in the early run-up to the North's engagement with the South. There is no sense in the poem of the death and utter destruction, fear and unimaginable pain, the agon that would soon envelop the city Whitman loved and the country he celebrated. Not all of Whitman's early poems from *Drum-Taps*, however, lend themselves to such an easy reduction.

"Eighteen Sixty-One" is an apostrophe to the year 1861, and within the first two lines Whitman demonstrates a far-reaching leap in terms of "re-visioning" and "re-searching" his subject matter and a radical departure from the general, triumphant tone of "First O Songs for a Prelude." One key difference between the two poems is Whitman's use of description to counterpoint and complicate his primary characterization and personification of his subject. Whitman defines the power of the year in terms of its opposite: "some pale poetling seated at a desk lisping cadenzas piano" (3). Whereas in "First O Songs for a Prelude" when Whitman is predominantly absent as a character in the poem, here Whitman refers to himself as "poetling" and juxtaposes the impotence of his own writing to the virility of a year of war which he describes as "a strong man erect…advancing" (4). By inserting himself into the poem and commenting on poetry's weakness when contrasted with the strength of war, the poem takes on a personal tension within the public sphere which leads to new discoveries about the poet's ethical relationship to his subject matter.

One writer who has been essential to my inquiry as it pertains to the ethics of poetic representation is Theodor Adorno whose writing has provided a foundation of

aesthetics upon which I can advocate for poetic vision even under the conditions of late capitalism in which poetic culture itself is an industry, and the arts generally offer, at best, nothing more than a fleeting distraction in the way a 30-second commercial might disrupt a sitcom's laugh-track.

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno states, "[Art] at the same time takes into itself the disaster [of late capital]…rather than merely protesting hopelessly against it. That art enunciates the disaster by identifying with it anticipates [late capital's] enervation" (19). Paradoxically, the source of poetry's power is that it is powerless to abolish materialism in the face of late capital. That it is powerless to do so thus corresponds to the very objective neediness the world has for poetry. Poetry's survival, therefore, depends on this need. What poets must do now is resist the culture industry by attempting to respond to the world's need. We may not be able to meet the need, but we can at least offer a reply.

In the world of poetry, Adorno is probably most famous for his statement that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Metaphysics* 179), a statement that has long been misunderstood as a condemnation of poetry, as if he were actually arguing poetry had become incapable of bearing witness to the world without reducing its subject to an abstraction. It is important to point out that for Adorno, as with Rich and patriarchal oppression and Whitman and the Civil War, the Holocaust did not eliminate the need for poetic response but obliterated the ability of poetry to respond with feelings because "feelings" are an expressed response that draws on the metaphysical bond connecting events here on Earth to some objective or transcendent reality. Adorno writes, "After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim for the positivity of existence as sanctimonious prating, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims fate" (*Negative Dialectics* 361). Adorno's argument is that poetic

expression needed to change lest it become a vehicle for the reification of its subject matter or a subsuming of the subject beneath a kind of transcendentally moralistic evaluation.

This is my concern about poetic vision and the state of contemporary lyric: that we are settling for looking through a glass darkly. In the poems in *Collateral*, I have tried to exist in a state of doubtful longing like Charles Wright and I have tried to engage my soul's betweenness with the questioning of Emily Dickinson. I have tried to examine my life's relationships to others by applying the lenses of Adrienne Rich's "re-vision" and "re-search." I have also tried to see the world as Whitman sees it in a poem like "By Blue Ontario's Shore" in which he says the poet sees the world and judges it "not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing" (sect 10, 138). Poets, like the sun, must touch and perceive all facets of their subject, and do so without pity or bias or reification, and must try to translate this process transparently into their poems.

One poet I have repeatedly turned to within the context of lyric agon and poetic representation is Larry Levis who explores the relation of universal and particular. Levis is clear-eyed and more practical when it comes to the literal act of looking at the world, that which compels us to write poems. Levis describes what he calls the poet's "gaze" in his essay "Some Notes on the Gazer Within," an essay that demands we re-vise and re-search our thinking about representation. For Levis, it is the conscious act of perception, what he calls "authentic experience," that allows for an expression of one's humanity and a preservation of the "delicate linkage" between the perceiver and the perceived in a poem (73). Whether it is "the shopping mall, the suburb, the business loops, [or] the freeways and boutiques with cute names," (71) that we would prefer to forget but cannot, these locations make up the sociological pressure of our reality. The world of tract home

suburbs cannot be separated from us, nor can the fact that there is a self perceiving and interpreting the perception. No matter how much it may seem to exist outside of time, he writes, "To stare for three hours at a K-Mart is to feel *myself* rapidly aging, not K-Mart" (73 "Some Notes," emphasis added). It is this undeniable fact which allows for "even something as negligible as some newspapers lifting in the wind on a street, at night and before a rain, [to be] somehow soiled by an ineradicable humanity" (73), or, to return to Shelley, paying attention in this way, gazing, even momentarily, "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world" (344).

In his poem "Photograph: Migrant Worker, Parlier, California, 1967," Levis confronts the reader with the reader's own undeniable subjectivity at the same time he expresses his own awareness of how a poem's subject can become a reified object. He writes, "I am going to put Johnny Dominguez right here / In front of you on this page so that / You won't mistake him for something else" (1-3). With the lucid deployment of the second-person pronoun, the reader is forced alongside the poet to consider how the object, Mr. Dominguez, is subjectively altered by merely looking at the photograph. Levis reminds the reader that one should not interpret the image or mistake Mr. Dominguez for, "An idea, for example, of how oppressed / He was, rising with his pan of Thompson Seedless / Grapes from a row of vines" (5-6). Instead, Levis presents the photograph as objectively as he can, and similar to his depictions of objects in other poems (grass in "Some Grass Along a Ditch Bank," leaves in *The Widening Spell of the Leaves*), Levis instructs the reader that, "The band / On his [Johnny Dominguez's] white straw hat darkened by sweat, is, / He would remind you, just a hatband. / *His* hatband" (6-9, original emphasis). Levis is unwavering in his desire to maintain the observation of Johnny

Dominguez, the fact-ness of Johnny Dominguez's existence as a real man, and not something to be pondered with "feelings" and consequently reduced to an abstraction.

In my own poetry, particularly in a poem like "Sparrows Sold for a Copper Coin," I have also explored the ramifications of representing the poor. Although there is a slight difference in the exigency of our respective poems, Levis's ostensibly arising from his observation of a photograph and mine arising from a specific memory, both poems seek to interrogate how representation works within a poem's composition. Levis's poem searches for some method by which he might eschew the signification of Johnny Dominguez in order make his argument about how poetry *should* represent, that Johnny Dominguez is not a political concept nor should he be abstracted into one. My poem undergoes the same search in regards to a homeless man I saw camped beneath a freeway overpass: "Surely he signifies something / more" than his body, something more than the match he sheltered from the wind. My poem is yearning for some way to represent the man, and yet, as the poem goes on, the speaker comes to discover that, "This much we know: no one thing / corresponds to any other." Imagery and feeling alone are not sufficient for addressing or representing the subject of a lyric poem. In the end and in the face of great doubt that poetry can mean, all that can be addressed in my poem, as with Levis's photograph of Johnny Dominguez, is the re-vised and re-searched fact-ness of agon.

My hope is that the exploration in this critical introduction and the original poems in *Collateral* scrutinize and exemplify my concerns for the contemporary American lyric and that they would also offer a jumpstart to a conversation about where lyric poetry can go in terms of relating the private composition of lyric poetry to the public sphere.

I. Suburban Hymnal

When I Say *Hymn*

I mean breaker-crashed gunwales, yes,
John Newton's near-shipwreck conversion,
and, of course, "Amazing Grace,"

but as Janis Joplin screaked it,
her voice full-throated and grainy
bending the phrasing. And it's two

young men, homeless on a suburban
church pew, one high or getting there,
the other striking matches,

each small flame tossed
toward a pile of gasoline-soaked hymnals
and how the day after the fire

we sang over the sanctuary's
ashy smolder. It's the photo
tucked in my mother's Bible,

the one she snapped circa 1967:
Pearl's mouth wailing, the stage
set ablaze by the fiery coal

of her heart that Summer of Love.
Sundays, having passed out
the night before, Mom would sing

a wretch like me tuneless
but extra loud, raise her Bible
when the preacher's tongue

cast our sins away.
How we burned then, bright
as when we first believed.

Sparrows Sold for a Copper Coin

A man doubles over
to fit the angled crawl space
beneath the overpass,

his makeshift shelter against January,
its icy transfiguration of every last
façade and exposed city surface.

Surely he signifies something
more than that which two
slumped shoulders and a sunken

chest might represent to those
of us sleepless in surrounding
subdivisions: the last unlit

match perhaps, which, when struck
and held in the cup of a palm
has everything to do with prayer.

This much we know: no one thing
corresponds to any other.
A midnight trucker's jake-braking

detonates soundwall concrete
and we lay awake cursing
suburbia's toothless ordinances,

which comforts no one and is
as useless as questioning
the possibility of mercy,

that *His eye is on the sparrow*.
What I remember are weeknights
spent at church, how the derelicts

gathered below on benches
and cold pavement looked up,
and how, first, we circled

the upright, sang each verse
and refrain. Only then
would we open our doors.

There Is a Fountain

Gasoline stink of just-mowed dry grass,
black-bagged trash, mulch,

station wagon oil driveway stains—out of these
the melody of Midwestern drought:

this Sumac tremolo from a bird I can't name,
this ash-gray lump trilling its fevered hymn

over the dusty tract house roofs.
Bird of Feathered Putty,

Bird of Oblivion's Blur, Smudge Bird,
unlike you, I am exhausted

by the sky's indifference. The ground
is cracked and the world

ready to blaze, yet I need nothing
but this: your song filling

the cul-de-sac, your song of fire
never to burn out.

No Shadow of Turning

April's cold snap
fools next door's
lilac buds, glistens

a white valediction
on last night's roadkill mange.
And if this early

cardinal bloodying
the fenceline were
consolation to dawn's

jerry-rigged claptrap
where cracked curb
and razor gravel crosshatch,

I could listen
to the trash can's
tipped-over plea, the skewbald

hallelu of a dying lawn,
and praise nothing,
let daybreak's

brokenness catch
like glass shards in my throat
and not swallow.

Dawnbreak Postscript

One by one, the street lamps' sodium-purr clicks off
as my neighbor's half-ton coughs
and revs, coughs, and finally turns over

and he heads off: gravel tire-churn
and a gangsta rap bassline thumping from the cab,
circling out like pond water

after a stone's plunk. "In the end it's all
a question of ear," says Kierkegaard, meaning the *next* life:
the next life as pure music, heaven's harmonic

resolve of Being's sour arpeggio. But for now,
suburbia is tuned to dream's white noise,
that octave three steps above wakefulness,

the one right before the clock radio
bleeps on and the percolator auto-grinds,
the front door rehearsing its slam.

Lightning Over Walgreens

I wait at the counter,
watch a lone shopping cart's
chrome flash. For weeks nothing's

changed. But now August's fist
closes and the city
takes it hard on the chin.

All of us sucker-punched,
down for the count. Outside,
the clerk lights another

smoke, coughs, yells at the drunk
pissing into bushes
behind the blue dumpster.

I leave my dollar for
the paper. The front page:
a dark tree, a noose, and

still no one cares waitress
pay is only two bucks
an hour. We all do what

we can. Traffic piles up.
Rain falls. The drivers stare,
wait for the light to change.

Breakage

I'd like to say the scruffy anthem
a boy's rolled-up cuffs and scuffed sneakers
sing to a waning Saturday moon

and his midnight T.P.'ing of the neighborhood
are, together, a kind of code-breaking,
another tally slash in the column

Unsuccessful Ciphers of the Outer World.
But, as the Wash n' Shop's
double-stacked front loaders tumble and smack

in long rows, neither I nor his mother
getting high in the Ladies' could care less
about the signified or how vent steam,

sweet-smelling and inconsequential,
drifts upwards and becomes the sky.
So, tonight, let there be breakage.

Let the strip mall bar next door empty out,
and let the half-tanked stumble home. Let not
one phrase of the turnpike's hum correspond.

Dithyramb with Chain-link

There's a certain slant of dark, too,
a streetlight's flicker, say, cast across
a blocked-up Datsun's hood parked there

behind the vacant K-Mart where
the kids get high to hoist themselves
above the turnpike's high-pitched whine

in their blood, and they know there's no
more to take from heaven, that all
that's left is patched asphalt, chain-link.

Carry Me Home

Easy to envy the juncos for their devotion to sky
and for how stupid they are, lured back down
to continue their frivolous songs
over rush hour's early stop-and-go.
                Surely nothing
is coming for to carry us home now.
This morning, more news of the same:
planes, body counts, incendiary clouds,
and a city burned alive as it slept.
                But what can I say of war?
The Midwestern clouds roll in with their sweaty air,
the sun rises rust-tinged, and I go on
watching a few drab birds flit for seed in the spray
of sprinklers switching on.
                What consolation is there
to be found between heaven and earth,
between here and after? Nothing other
than the fading reassurance of stars
                as day arrives
slant through darkened windows
the way, somewhere, a flourish of concertina wire
might urge us to believe that we'll all be written in,
be it the obits or into *The Book of Life*,
and gathered then
                like cloud shadows
over a street's parked cars and shop awnings
as we drag behind us the pale flags of our wings
and the birds cluster below and offer nothing
but the closed fists of their songs.

Gloria Patri

Because spring's grace by now
is worth nothing more than the vacant wind
as it lays down cheat grass

and smooth brome into the scrawled,
roadside shade of a hand-lettered
billboard's *HE IS RISEN*,

I can raise now this sweating
and half-empty longneck
to August's full bloom and bring it

back to the lips half-full,
blessed by whatever it is
that jinks the last monarchs

fluttering like quarter notes over the driveway,
its flat, sun-glittered tongue,
its hymn of sawdusted motor oil

ascending into nothing
but the wash line's pinned-up t-shirts
and damp shorts flapping pointless

as prayer flags in the sweltering breeze.
And although fall's back soon
with its hard tally of leaf change

and leaf drop, its apostate
yawn of jaundiced light
hung in the barren trees

like torn sackcloth, I'm content
for now to love, to watch
summer's penitents stumble

down the path of sweat and sacrifice:
contrite women with bad knees
and sensible shoes, young mothers

like exhausted pilgrims
pushing their chubby toddlers
who point to the empty sky,

even the bare-chested young men
who jog the tortured asphalt
with furrowed brows seared

by August's mark and headed
God-knows-where, who know
we all take nothing with us,

not even the relief of these
our long purgatorial shadows.

Without Toil

Crossed-out and re-circled, the *Want Ads*' daily litany
of numbers and names lies crumpled on the bar where loose change
for the busted jukebox stacks up, mini nickel-plated silos
looming lusterless over dusty mahogany laminate plains.

Not that there's much chance this out-of-work road crew
in born-again Kansas would ever be seen toe-tapping to any
pentatonic lick, let alone a proper blues, now that crude
is surging again and the county seat has slashed dollars for paving.

Even ten years back: Kaw River corn, grain sorghum,
soybeans. Now, new fields sit fallow: stray strip mall
girders, an LED billboard scrolling *THE FUTURE HOME OF…*
and *BROUGHT TO YOU BY…* as heat coronas skyward from base layer

hot mix like burnt offering stink rising to the small gods
of sprawl whose red ink outstrips and dries up work.
And yet, in the rusty light from the TV, the bar's
empty tallboys glint as if they still had pull, as if we

might become something more than divine backwash, something other
than broke, even the one of us in the back booth lounging
on yellow naugahyde and trying to foretell the aftermath of agri-business
subsidies and a dwindling tax base, though surely no bottle's

peeled-back label will ever reveal anything other than darkened
glass. Besides, what is the chapter and verse of who
owes what? In a couple of hours, this place will clear. Someone
will sign a slip for the tab or else skip out. Someone's truck

will roll into the ditch and he'll walk field rows back toward town.
And someone heading north will tune in "The Gospel Highway,"
and drive until the signal fades, until smoke blooms
from the tailpipe, until it's white like the damning lilies of the field.

II. Passing Paradise

Against Forgiveness

In this life, nothing
need be forgiven. Not
the streetlights' high murmur

or the rattle of shopping carts
windblown across the parking lot.
Not the skir of asphalt

worn to gravel. For what
could be better? This slow
fade of sidewalk weeds

and the sky's dingy light
spread like a rag over the faux-
terracotta roofing tiles

of the strip mall liquor store—
its sad neon wink,
its inventory of forgetting—as a boy

with spiked hair and choke chain
collar waits outside
for a buyer, and none of it

calling anything into question.
So what is this need you have
to ask why you still

can't remember the name
of a lover you had once who could only
come in the backseat of your car,

who knew then that whatever
your thoughts of heaven
by now they'd be long

unutterable. Go ahead.
Take the money. No need
to remember. Buy him a fifth

of whatever's cheap. Pocket
the change and keep walking.

Passing Paradise

Like a man blindfolded and asked to kneel
who cannot hear the bolt strike the cartridge
after it enters the chamber, its *click*
like classroom chalk breaking on black
slate, a sound small but definite:
                one stone
kicked up against the curb, a pocketknife
shut, a finger snapped. So, what then
of the old Romanian sweeping strip mall
theater sidewalk, for whom heaven
has become nothing
                but an age-dulled
marquee gone unlit for years,
its one *Paradiso* meant to entrance
whomever drives past and happens
to look up? I saw a film once in which
a wealthy man moved
                all he owned
into his parlor. Each morning, he fired
two rounds into the pile and, finding it
all still there, returned to sleep
beneath a thin blanket on the lacquered hardwood
of his indoor bowling lane.
                It's not easy
to remember when we first began
to loathe irony. South of Bucharest and beside
the ditch banks and bare hills, the soaked
fields' sheen, where no one is asking if History
is yet up off its knees,
                powerful men
have reproduced TV's *Dallas* ranch. Weekend
getaways for sale. Even Larry Hagman's
been there. When he arrives, the executioner
carries the rifle indifferently,
swings it like a broom.

Theodicy

Cold sweeps east across the asphalt
predestined for the warehouses
of the snow, the darkening suburbs.

I think of Job and wonder
if God ever really returned
to business. After He'd consented

to boils and crushed livestock,
servants' and children's throats slit,
after ash, maybe one still afternoon

God raised both hands above His head
as if to say, "I've had enough,"
and renounced all of it,

took a job behind a desk
wearing khaki-colored scrubs,
filing papers to code and answering

the phones, His voice far away,
disinterested, yet familiar
to those desperate on the other end

of the line. If it were you
fidgeting in the waiting room
you'd not even notice Him.

Just north past the ridgeline's barren
pin oaks, I watch in the rearview
as the office park's cold silhouette

dissolves into the outskirts
of suburban sprawl. If God is with us,
then maybe He lives around here, too,

some duplex on a loop or a single
apartment with a satellite dish.
Maybe right now God is, like us,

commuting across town toward home,
or headed from work to the store, or maybe
to nowhere in particular. He's just

driving, His window cracked to feel
the cold as the sun descends,
while the rest of us pull into our driveways,

jangle our keys at the front door, and try
to keep on believing, even as we
lock it behind us and turn out the light.

Heaven As Nothing but Distance

Maybe it was enough to believe
the Zodiac's blazing entirety
would be cast from the sky,
an effortless handful of salt

scattered to the Kansas plains'
red wheat. Out West,
souls every day were shedding
their Earthly inheritance—the refused

histories of cause and effect,
blight, hunger with a trace
of Santa Fe Railway coal
dusting grocers' displays—

and so my grandfather, too,
who, having left Topeka
for Los Angeles's early sprawl,
exits the train station's dim

into day's white flash,
takes one step onto his upturned
apple crate, a new Bible
in his palm, and he begins

to explain why all things are fire,
what it is that makes you ache
awake, and why this must
be so. Once, on a gritty

city beach in California—flies,
stinking strands of kelp
rotting, Styrofoam—he and I
sat watching a gull choir

first eyeball, then swoop,
then peck, almost in unison,
something tangled in a blue tarp
washed in above the tide's pull.

A drowning victim, maybe.
A vagrant. And though unable
to see what was there, when he
put his hand in mine

I could not have even begun
to count all the things I wished
to believe in, and which would still
be true if what I remembered

was the sound of the waves landing.
But now there is only the lungless
hot breath of L.A.
on my cheek, the cries of gulls,

their wings ruffling into flight.
The night after his memorial,
someone dug a hole into
Kansas silt loam, dropped

into it the plastic baggie
with his ashen remains.
Nothing then but distance in every
direction. Above us, a satellite's

beacon begged the horizon
for home, the heavens' scales
measured the darkness, and that was all.

Looking Across Half-Moon Bay, Thinking of the Missouri

Tidewash skitters the plovers as though something
I could say might reach you in that place
where nothing can stand in for the waves.

I remember, once, standing fifteen hundred miles
from here on a bridge in Kansas City.
Dull as a penny—your listless face drifting beneath me.

How you pitied me then, said all meaning
disappears like a river into the grave
of the sea. Listen. Even now I cannot say your name.

Washing in the Sangam

The believers gather at the Sangam
where the Yumana's dark waters,
the brown currents of the Ganges,

and the Saraswati converge.
They have come: villagers,
astrologers, philanthropists,

ash-smeared expatriates
and hippies seeking salvation.
One man raises his arms,

wades chest-high
into polluted water.
Another sings. This one

begs at the shoreline
as dogs scavenge for food,
their long tongues lapping

puddles of offered milk.
Our breakfast a small handful
of Cheerios, pieces of dry toast,

five tangerine wedges,
I watch my son organize
what I've provided: cold

fruit centered down his
highchair's tray, the cereal
and bread on either side.

Son, through faith you've found
this hunger answered
even as I turn away

in our ordinary house
from the look of awakening
in your face, the expression

Christ must have had seeing
Lazarus raised, or the face
of the Buddha who looked

behind him to find lotus
blossoms opening in praise.

Controlled Burn

A kiss or rather the ruins of one: a swirl

of dust in sunlight, perhaps, as it mingles
with the stifled love-cries of a hotel painting

above an unmade bed even after the lovers

have left, checked out to wherever it is
lovers go hours later, driving a blue Chevrolet

down a two-lane highway in Kansas

watching a controlled burn's flames
flutter, smoke braids rising from black grass

to become the ashen haze of evening

as it jots down its regular inventory
of empty silos and sagging fence posts bound

with rusted wire that mark the miles.

But whatever it is, I'll never know it, trapped
as I am decades now, staring out spotless

window glass forever at God-knows-what.

My sleeves rolled and vest chest-tight,
this sun-muted office severe in its loneliness,

I know you're thinking I could be your father

years back, working late, distracted
by the thought of a woman not your mother,

a woman who even now remains nameless,

though it wasn't what you've thought: Motel 6
and an hour for lunch, Jim Beam in a plastic cup,

lipstick-smeared menthols, the alarm buzzing

get back to work, as if in your imagining of it
you might find some shadowed truth

made visible, something like what would find you here

if you searched long enough, something there
in the foreground, maybe. Right there.

Something knowable, touchable, a single stroke.

Of the Father

Bolted-down in the corner,
the black-and-white hospital set
rebroadcasts *Knute Rockne: All American*

and the Gipper's last wish. My father
stubs out another bummed smoke,
rolls his sleeves, exhales.

Through tear gas and batons,
he once linked arms with others
believing theirs would be the generation

to end it, but in this moment
he is not thinking of his abandoned
life in Kansas wearing down

converts with brimstone and ash,
or of his ghost-pained brother
who jumped from the roof of the VA

and died alone. At the waiting room
window, he watches the afternoon
drop below Berkeley's hills,

the traffic up Ashby brakes
and coughs, and down the hall
his son is born ten weeks

too soon. In a couple of months:
Inauguration Day, though already
the world preps its cruelties.

School children are posed
as practice targets, their bodies
piled like cordwood in the streets.

Makeshift coffins are scavenged
from the walls of bombed-out homes.
And somewhere the televised light

remains the color of smoke
as twenty-one guns salute
and the future struggles to breathe.

The Sky, Not the Grave

I'm beginning now to hear
the voice that sings just beyond memory:

heaven-flung and not quite
an afterthought, something settling

on what shifts in the heart.
It's mid-summer now and the sky

peels back above the turnpike
as another August late-afternoon

boils over. I remember the hard pew,
the voices singing *Soon we'll reach*

the shining river, soon our pilgrimage
will cease. But here there is no ghost,

no elegy, and no wavering
Amen to be found in a hymn's last line

like the one I sang later, off key
and to no one in particular,

as I pulled the soiled mattress out
of the bedroom where my father died,

tipped it over the balcony railing
and onto the grass below.

Even then, what was it I wanted?
Not the river, its murmuring choir.

But something, yes. Something pure
like this asphalt steam's resurrection

of all I've forgotten or have tried
to forget: how after the service

behind the sanctuary, I wrote out
and diagramed my sins. How I'd lied.

Said I'd miss him. That I could hear him
singing with all of those called home.

Then, striking a match, I held
the paper's flame and told myself

I wanted nothing more, nothing less
than ash, and no water to put it out.

Equinoctial

Nearly October and the front oak's branches
    are mostly quicksilvered,

though we watch
    a handful here, a handful there

of leaves tinge copper.
    Beneath the zodiac's turning wheels

and the stars' nocturnal parade,
    the moon, pockmarked and mottled,

stamps night's scroll,
    and luminescence like sealing wax

drips through leaf-lattice,
    puddles around our feet.

Caught in the celestial tilt-and-balance,
    we wear our brief freedom

like constellational moneychangers,
    all glitz and glimmer,

and weigh the disks of sun and moon
    like two coins on the pans of Libra's scales.

We are the essence of darkness
    stepping into darkness.

That is how it mostly goes.
    Blindly, we rummage around for an evener:

the black wick inside the candle's flame,
    our finger-tips licked.

III. Exchange

Exchange

It begins always with what's soon-gone: a fleeting apparition,
some neurochemical firing deep within the gray matter's

pathology of need. It is why the body of the speculator,
falling now from forged steel and into the open palm

of the churning Missouri below, knows all there is to know of value
and why the blank billboard on the bridge railing above him whispers

the one pragmatic sweet nothing we all long to hear: *available*.
And it is why, too, any allegory of desperation must first

be wrenched from the calloused fists of those-that-don't
before it can be transferred, with deference, into the soft,

expectant hands of those-that-do: brokenness and regret
are worth as much as shattered plate-glass or a brick's weight

landing on the lacquered floor inside the mini-mart as they are
the hunger of the woman who threw it, and all remain meaningless

until demand sets in. But for now, the man falling is still a man
and is yet as meaningless as the sky which remains clear and seems

somehow suddenly permanent, like the way two long-constellated
indigo stars tattooed on the skyless, freckled, inner left thigh

of a woman I'd fallen for, how they return in memory
as if out of the blue. How it is as if pressing my lips to them

now wouldn't cost me everything. As if it would. As if every moment,
even one as insignificant as this, someone standing awash

in gas station fluorescence, diesel stench, has its asking price,
that the gears of common disaster are oiled by the prayers

of those who've lost. The world is falling.
The world is falling and this afternoon one errant key stroke

concealed behind Kansas City cubicle walls sent wholesale
systems of mutual exchange into digital collapse. A single

"fat finger" depresses "B" as in "billion" not "M" as in "million,"
and on Wall Street, DiModica's *Charging Bull*, stuck good

and bleeding out, torques its horns to gore and hurtles headlong
toward the pecuniary abyss. As confession, cries of *Buy* or *Sell*

are meager substitutions for remorse while the Big Board scrolls
and glows ever bluer. As blue as the sky over the river now,

or over gray Manhattan sidewalk in '29, "Black Tuesday,"
when the ruined leapt from window ledges and prayed

in their descent that, for a moment, the sky would be willing
to exchange what they knew they'd done for whatever oblivion

it could offer. But, if confession is worth nothing,
what would it have earned her then, when she told me

she was beaten as a girl by her father? How anything was a motive.
Poor grades, forgotten laundry. And what would it gain me now

to say that only once, and without regret, he let fall
from his hand the electric iron, and then held it's hot aluminum

soleplate against his daughter's leg? Because he *had* to. Because
I love you. What wouldn't be a fair wage for what she earned there?

Why not incise her proud flesh with ink where metal burned,
make permanent the pattern of that which losing makes?

Don't deny it: every thing transacts. Always has. Barley for corn
and rock salt for sea—. The first copper ingot's pressed ox hide

for trial-and-error's blistered palms. And now: the express pay's
binary code, its digitized *chirp* for the debit account's swiped plastic

as the pump's electric numerals blink ever closer to zero balance
where the woman behind the register counts down her till. Another day

sold for six dollars an hour at the far-flung periphery of single-zoned
Midwestern sprawl. Here, even the most casual manifestations of desire

triggers in each of us a nerveless shiver of want, like the way
condensation's invisible hand ghosts mini-mart cooler glass,

or how capital's high gloss unconscious drifts on an odor
of citrus-scented industrial cleanser and falls like a kiss upon the lips

and cheeks of the bored waiting for her to take their cash.
Above the checkout, the nightly news is stocks, a local suicide,

and beamed-in highlights of uproar overseas. Again, the ritual
exchange: skull crack for the blackjack's stun, the riot shield's

advancing polycarbonate, a jawbone dislodged. In hi-def,
does the coin-like aftertaste which the brain synthesizes

in the instant before consciousness fades and the body drops,
reveal itself as blood, or as something *more* real? If there were

a stench of paraffin, burning rubber, as the helmeted phalanx
closed, would we know it? Above the megaphone's command,

chopper blades *thwomp* the dusty contours of moonlit cobblestone.
Teargas plumes. And now we go on watching

as if value's vanishing point will never fall below
the horizon, as if this exchange should go on forever.

Collateral

Once I watched my neighbor, returned
from the Gulf, bring a weathered length

of scrap two-by-four down, without
hesitating, upon the wrecked

spine of a Dalmatian stray. Weeks
he'd kept her in the alleyway

behind the garage, her neck tied
to his Ford with an extension

cord. Nights, after he'd stumble home
drunk, I'd listen to him shout and

lay into her until he was
done. In that moment though, it was

as if this world had never been
more pure, that the rasped October

breeze through the birch trees on our street
meant nothing, saw nothing, could say

nothing. There was only silence,
then a clang of wood on concrete

and, somewhere, the dead leaves stirring.

A Soul Petitions Entry

"Big Bopper's casket destined for eBay"

—AP headline, 12/31/08

That heaven would be not a long ways off
from our crash into field rows outside Clear Lake, Iowa, Lord,

and that my soul would be equally as trifling in your sight
as Holly's Beechcraft Bonanza,

though may my flight to your right side
take the exact reverse trajectory.

And please bless Waylon Jennings,
who knew not what he did, Lord,

and couldn't know that when they did bury me
it'd be with my hair coiffed and socks but no shoes

in 16-gauge Batesville Casket steel
which now must be prepped and re-shined for digital sale,

though it suffers from only minor rust and a few white lime stains
after years in Beaumont clay.

That my trespasses would be equally scrubbed in your sight, Lord.
Bestow on me today your grace

like *whshhhoooh White Lightning*,
and may my reward be to glimmer

like a Wurlitzer bubble in color-changing neon, Lord,
even as this song ends and the next begins.

Nameless Grace

As if any discipline might choke back
the syncopate chime of the church bells'

round tones and what I could not yet
distinguish as want, I sat waiting

on the church front's wide steps, an Ash Wednesday
soot cross smudged

on my forehead, and counted
the passing cars caught

in plate glass reflections. Beneath
the sky's after-services light, everything

had the consciousness of the angelic:
opalescent wings of pigeons preening

in the shadows of the open double door.
The rumpled slacks of young men

pushing their way out. The glint of windshields
and chrome, and then the groan

of my friend's car pulling up
to the gutter. Even his hand,

the shape of its motioning. Even
his hand, golden in that light,

became the hand that holds
the shining keys of what was

and is to come, and what did
was this: spilled Bud on the back seat,

a five dollar bill pressed
        into my sweaty palm, then a fumbling

of button-fly and his tongue
        a close-rhyme of desire and cold sky.

Above us, the spring stars were a force
        too familiar to recognize, as if the harmonies

of life and life were the most
        transparent thing in this world, as if being

meant more than to shudder
        beneath their glare.

Blue Spark

Back deck, Adirondack: evening hums.
Fly-by-nights kamikaze iridescence
into the zapper's electric blue.

Due west and past the river,
thunderclouds horizon summer's
thirsty ridgeline and I, moth

to fluorescence, stalk the moon.
Once, in a bar's back booth,
I was flesh jolted AC.

In the dance floor's strobe,
I radiated Plato, the Whitmanesque,
flashed the poetry of drag

and chrome, glittered vinyl, tiger print.
Outside, the city's turbines
churned the river's darkness white.

Now, it's summer rain
on oil-stained driveways, backed-up gutters,
the low river's drift.

Lightning spikes. I inhale the night:
lawn mist. Insect char. Beyond
the clouds, the electric moon.

For Darkness

Come up the red clay hillside
from the reservoir below, morning's summer
breeze is mangy and slumped

in the shade of the side-yard's dogless run.
Real hot. Damn hot. And already

early afternoon's canines, their thick tongues
pink and wagged-out, are asking,
Take it off, Boss? So, if it weren't

for my shirtless back heat-stuck
to the deck chair's vinyl slats,

and if it weren't for the words
I put down now, sprawled out
indolent on the page and getting fatter,

pining for the absent, I'd tell you
even this would be better than leaving you:

your slender shoulders half-cocked,
a whore's vamp Technicolored
in silk-shine, your red kimono

like XXX neon aglow against
your skin, and worthy, you'd say,

of any fallen-from-grace B-Movie It Girl,
any Frances Farmer, whom you loved
because what you loved was the idea

of madness. And so I can say
that somewhere a man's calloused fingers

embroidering silk with unclassifiable
flowers, jade-green fronds, and in thread
like pure silver, dog and dog shadow,

are nothing like the way absence might feel
if absence were the sun high

over the manzanita grove now, its light
thinning and bound for darkness
and without a question of when.

Awake

He could not remember
his tallness or thinness,
the color of his hair or skin.

He would not have seen himself
had there even been a mirror.

He could not remember
the bedroom's length, width, height,
or where the ceiling was supposed to be.

His wife: gone.
And his glasses and books and desk.
Vase, candles, clock, earplugs. Gone.

Papers, photographs.
Thumbtacks pinning postcards to walls.
Postcards and walls gone.

The window gone. Doorframe. Door.
Carpet, plaster, texture. His hands.

He could not remember
his telephone number.
He could not remember the sound of his voice,

if he did or did not have shoes,
where the grocery store was,
where he worked,

the path of his nightly walk,
or what road to travel
to anywhere else.

Dawn Above Sacred Heart

Too easy to remember April and call it
cruel: the precise sutures of crows

across the wires, the low rooftops' tar
oily and frost-scabbed under brown fog

as the hospital-gowned light of false dawn
thinned over the commuter's stop-and-go

and the river's broken prosody.
No sleep. All night a manic *de profundis*,

its metrics a static fused to the drug-bisected
prayers offered by any one of us there:

Sacred Heart, its upper chamber
aflame nightly with the amalgamated light

of ward fluorescence and the psychotics' hellfire,
the flicker behind the eyes of the woman

who reopened her arm. And I would like
to believe what was released then by broken

glass is describable now in the language
of the living, but years later, she is still

on her knees wailing her ruptured prayer
as the city below bleeds out into day.

Stranded

Stranded along the interstate
and hoping the red blinking
might be a far-off sheriff's

cruiser and not the sleepy
Morse of hazard bulbs
on empty grain silos,

their spent concrete stave
shadows braced hard
against the tired lean

of wrack-framed barns,
I thresh the radio's slow
fade: '70s AM

starlet belting something
like, "It's no use,"
the signal sputtering

further into white noise
with each tractor-trailer
grinding by.

Across acres of flat,
the Kansas dusk drops
its dusty partition

of crop chemicals, exhaust
from pickups headed home,
and I stare out the grimed windshield

watching a black scrim
of starlings scatter,
re-collect over

the highway's ditch. Again
and again they lift up,
a fist in the dry wind,

and return broken
to the prairie's dull ache.
When darkness falls, they'll fly

off for the horizon, the edge
of a distant field, settle there
among the dirt, the chaff.

Field Guide to the Second Coming

It will be sudden and flash
like bottle shards or like morning
fracturing against the horizon's
edge of strip mall rooftops
and be a comfort and turn a few
bucks into fistfuls of ordinary
joy expanding in the capillaries
of whoever no longer desires
to sleep there between buildings
as traffic picks up beneath
the telephone wires' high operatics
and it will sing of course and be
sung by the gravel-throated
hallelujahs of dumpsters raised up
and emptied into the truck's dark
which could be something like
a metaphor for grace though nothing
is new here under the sun
beating down in mid-April
where no one is looking for the infinite
and the endlessness one imagines
must come after death
seems like nothing more
than a voice in the void, a strike
of the heel, an empty tomb.

Yardscape Diagram, Good Friday

Late-March, post-lapsarian afternoon.
In this season, metaphysical veins get tapped.

Sometimes like flesh-digging with a needle, uneasily.
Sometimes like a single hammer blow, the nail

driven all the way through: illumination exploding
into the world like the trumpeted heads of fuchsia,

the crocuses' purple song, paradise-edge
of agapanthus and bacopa. It took weeks

to wrench-up and haul away the planking
and joists from the worn out redwood deck,

only a Friday to pour the porch's quick-dry
cement slab. Like a side-fallen tombstone it waits

for the decorative ordination of potted flora
I'll place just so, each clay pot

filled with a measure of earth, a measure of devotion.
Clock-tick approaching the afternoon's fourth hour.

Diminished probability the sun will fully prick through
the clouds, the sky's thin arteries that streak-erase

a dusk-at-hand blue to blank white.
In light such as this, any upward progress

I've made seems otherwise, and the harsh incline
of worldly purgation stretched-out beyond

my stride like an absolute. But even so,
life journeys forward, composes its metaphors.

Sometimes of language transparent as flesh.
Sometimes of language that settles like dust

slant into late-afternoon. Sometimes of light
set off in the pear tree's white-blossomed bloom,

piercing the gray matter, rushing into the soul.

Will of Ash

In the Anatomy classroom,
the clock's red second hand
is nothing if not devoted

to itself, its protracted
humming revolution low
like a sonic monument

to boredom or a spell
conjured by Time
and cast over rows

of students sleepy and sated
on afternoon heat, the pollen count's
Brownian motion.

I remember the plastic
models of the body:
human head

split down the middle,
heart's anterior view,
cartoon-like cutaways

of lungs, paired carotids,
and never did we connect
our own young bodies' end

to Zippo thumbwheel, naphtha
flame, the gravity bong.
And why would we?

Each afternoon senior year,
my girlfriend and I
would hotbox her father's

junk-cramped singlewide,
exhale our respective plans
for work or moving out,

and her wish to finally
be rid of him. In the end,
we'd little of each,

which is to say, in the end,
all of it burned.
Before she left, moved north,

we took up nights
in a department store's stockroom
unloading freight, unpacking

crates resembling the kind
from early-Saturday TV,
ones marked *HANDLE WITH CARE*

and *DANGER*, and always the sympathetic
villain surrounded by TNT,
then the long fuse lit,

then a look of quiet
acquiescence as the blue
sparks flared toward detonation.

She was an addict by then
and hired to wipe dust
off cheap trinkets, bookshelf

knickknacks, the tiny blown glass
figurines I pulled from Styrofoam
and packing straw. "Can you

believe this shit?"
Her single question repeated
again and again under the HVAC's

metallic drone, her words
signifying less each time
she glanced up from her table

and damp rag, her eyes
bloodshot as if an explosive
occlusion, some errant

syringe push's bubble
of air deep in a vein's
claustrophobic dark,

were rigged, gone haywire,
a conflagration set off
in her blood, which is

one way out, perhaps.
Which was hers.
In her face the day she left,

Time lay open.
Pure; skeletal.
We believed in nothing then,

which hardly had to do
with us because already
the tired, blind hands

of statistics—addictions
and foreclosures, all the anonymous
desperations of the elect—

had blessed us, pressed
their cindered palms against
our foreheads and we

understood all of it,
how every thing submits
in the end like smoke

to the elemental will
of ash. Three days ago,
a high school girl vanished,

and because she was no runaway,
and because there'll be
no dumpstered duffle

found days later
jam-packed with spare clothes,
butane refills, Pyrex tubes

stolen from the school's
chem lab racks, and so
none of inevitability's

backstreet Meth mouth,
scabs, it becomes easier
to question how it is

a body becomes nothing,
because we know it's only
a matter of time before the patrol car's

swiveling searchlight coerces
warehouse shadows to confess
the bodies of the beaten

or worse. Then:
bag and tag and two
licked fingers riffling

a ledger's stained columns,
a greasy index dialing
the next of kin,

like Thomas who slipped his
into the resurrected void
of Christ's side which was both

there and gone,
who knew then that whether
on earth or as it is

in heaven, living meant
going on without
all that'd been left behind.

The blast, officials said,
resulted from a fireplace gas leak
negligible enough to have gone

unnoticed—a slow-moving cloud
over the developing cul-de-sac,
a mansion in the sky—

until a single match strike,
as in the slow motion of dream,
shot an instant of light,

then heat, then fire,
from basement sub floor
and out into the unfinished

subdivision's million dollar frames,
and lifted her parents from sleep
and from sleep's second story

interrogation of their underwater mortgage,
how, maybe, it'd be best
to just drop the keys

into the branch manager's
cupped hands and walk away.
Later, someone found

her body, my girlfriend's, I mean,
her small frame collapsed
on itself between snow drifts.

Not long after hearing this,
her father, drunk,
stubbed out a smoke

on the trailer's blue shag.
Even hours after the fire,
after neighbor men had dug in

and scattered suppressing sand,
shovelfuls of gravel
over the grassless hard clay,

the charred ground still
sent up curls of white
chemical smoke

that kissed their bare ankles
as if its touch were final,
as if the future were known.

What do you do when shame
and that which seems like chance
combine, so that if you

and therefore I, or, if anyone,
had stood there fixed,
shoeless, naked to the waist

beside them, we would each
be revealed as nothing
ourselves and worthless

before the flames,
because if it is true
that one must descend

because it is one of the styles
of hell, and if it is meant
to take a while,

then it isn't the fire's
withered hands peeling back
the roof's blistered shingles,

nor the way heat's rage
makes of the contracting space
between drywall a smoldering

lung, warping sheet aluminum,
splitting joists and trusses,
and finally cleaving

the trailer's prefab entirety,
the whole damn thing
fallen in on itself,

that makes it impossible
to find your own face
in the flames. It is the ash.

The ash that fills the air
and blinds us as we
go down unguided,

together, and must do so
until we have arrived, reconciled,
to go on living there

below with all we have
forgotten, to go on living
there with everything.

NOTES:

"Passing Paradise": A resort in Slobozia, Romania, boasts a near-replica of the ranch from the American prime-time soap opera *Dallas*. The actor Larry Hagman played the main character "J.R. Ewing" for the series' entire run. The film referenced is Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*.

"Theodicy": *The Book of Job*, 38: 22-23: "Have you entered the warehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle?"

"Washing in the Sangam": The Triveni Sangam is the location where the Yamuna and Ganges Rivers meet the mythological Saraswati River near Allahabad, India. It is the site of Kumbh Mela, a massive Hindu pilgrimage that concludes with ritualistic bathing on the banks of these waters.

"Controlled Burn": The poem responds to Edward Hopper's 1953 painting *Office in a Small City*.

"Of the Father": The 1940 film *Knute Rockne: All American* starred Ronald Regan as "George 'The Gipper' Gipp."

"The Sky, Not the Grave": The quote is from the hymn "Shall We Gather at the River?" written by Robert Lowry in 1864.

"When I Say *Hymn*": The hymn "Amazing Grace" was written in 1748 by English poet, clergyman, and abolitionist John Newton. Janis Joplin, nicknamed "Pearl," performed the hymn in San Francisco, January 31, 1967.

"Sparrows Sold for a Copper Coin": The quote is from the hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" written by Civilla D. Martin in 1905.

"There Is a Fountain" responds to the hymn by the same name written by English clergyman and poet William Cowper in 1772.

"Breakage": The quote is from Søren Kierkegaard's *Papers and Journals: A Selection* (Penguin, 1996).

"Carry Me Home" alludes to the hymn "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" written by Wallis Willis in 1862.

"Gloria Patri": The specific doxology the poem responds to is "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow," written by Thomas Ken in 1674. It is perhaps the most widely-sung hymn in the world.

"A Soul Petitions Entry": J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson died with Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens when Holly's plane crashed February 3, 1959. Waylon Jennings

gave up his seat on the plane to Richardson, who had a cold. The famous George Jones song "White Lightning" was written by The Big Bopper. In 2007, The Big Bopper's son, Jay, exhumed his father's coffin, and in 2008, announced he would sell the coffin on eBay.

"Will of Ash" alludes to *Looney Tunes* character Wile E. Coyote. The poem also responds to lines from Larry Levis's poem "Caravaggio: Swirl & Vortex," which reads, "You see, you must descend, it is one of the styles / Of Hell. And it takes a while to find the name you might be looking for; it is / Meant to take a while."

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Vita

Joshua Robbins was born in Berkeley, California, and raised in the suburbs of the San Francisco Bay Area. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in Poetry from the University of Oregon. His recognitions include the James Wright Poetry Prize, the *New South* Prize, selection for the *Best New Poets* anthology, and multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. He lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, with his wife and son.