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# The Hungover Romance of "We"

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jonathan Joseph Brehm entitled "The Hungover Romance of "We"." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Arthur Smith, Benjamin Lee

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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# The Hungover Romance of “We”

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

Jonathan Joseph Brehm  
May 2014

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## **DEDICATION**

For my mother and father,  
Jessica, my professors  
and friends who continue  
to inspire me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the professors who helped lay the technical and stylistic foundations for my poetry. Specifically, I thank Dr. Marilyn Kallet for teaching me the economy of words and the greater energy of saying less. I thank Dr. Arthur Smith for supporting my early investment in strong imagery and teaching me the importance of the sonnet impulse. I especially thank Dr. Eric Smith for first inspiring me to write poetry, supporting my earliest talents, and unknowingly carrying me away from the dreariness of physics and chemistry labs.

## ABSTRACT

This collection of poems attempts to capture the author's inner life through a specific perception of his own generation as energetic, ambivalent and lost. The poems, while sometimes personal and autobiographical, portray dreamlike and surreal conceptions of twenty-first century twenty somethings and their landscapes: rocky deserts, expanses of water, and the vibrating city. The poems track the speaker's transitions to and away from a hectic life of drinking and celebrating unspoken and unconventional forms of beauty. The collection concludes with a meditation on the video game *Hotline Miami*, which reflects the collection's interest in alchemical imagery by transacting this often disregarded art form into the high-art of poetry.

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## INTRODUCTION

Starting with my earliest attempts, I found myself driven to write poetry that innovates, surprises, and aggressively confronts the reader with evocative imagery. I rarely aim to write poems that meditate or calmly reflect; instead, I yearn for descriptors such as “explosive” or “dynamite” to be applied to my work. If poetry's primary purpose is to make personal experiences universal and relatable for an unknowable audience, then I want my poems to reinvigorate and inspire readers through energetic decontextualizations of the world – through mysterious, surreal reconceptions of public and private life that root both author and reader in new, exciting landscapes. *The Hungover Romance of “We”* attempts to meet these goals by tracking a fluid speaker from a period of youthful exuberance and abandonment through anxiety and disillusionment. However, the poems often resist overtly personal plots or narratives, instead skewing the speaker's perceptions through a generational lens. By often replacing the “I” of these poems with “we,” these poems attempt to root the dream-like settings in a specific context that reaches towards the personal and relatable and attempts to define the millennial generation. Several recurring themes work to construct a conception of millennials: urban landscapes, alchemical imagery, spiritual disillusionment and the elevation of video games into high art. Frank O'Hara, Brenda Hillman, and Arthur Rimbaud serve as my primary sources of influence and inspiration.

The form and shape of the poems in this collection also play a primary role. My general style consists of staggered lines that play with white space and timing. My decision to indent a line further into the page stems from my desire to surprise the reader;

lines with which I hope to confront the reader hang away from the left margin, forcing the reader to travel further into the page in order to locate it. However, my poetry also makes use of more traditional forms. The sonnet impulse, for example, can be seen in a few poems, including “Megabats,” which uses the sonnet impulse to emphasize its rhetorical turn toward a concluding resolution. I rarely begin poems with a specific form in mind, because I want meaning to carry forward without concern for strict conventions of rhyme or meter. But occasionally, in revision, a completed poem reveals an inherent tendency toward the sonnet form. I find that allowing for these tendencies without forcing them enhances the overall effectiveness of the poem, by imbuing the poem with a sense of literary tradition and rhetorical structure, without sacrificing the freedom and surprise of the language.

The arrangement of these poems loosely constitutes a narrative, in which the speaker, both communal and singular, moves from excited abandonment of responsibility into resulting anxieties, and ultimately develops larger, more mature interests. Early poems, such as “Serrated,” “Yuengling” and “The Cask,” make house parties a shared setting, with alcohol highly influencing the poems' content. Specifically, “Serrated” and “Yuengling” convey a positive, even victorious tone that celebrates youthful vitality and communal identity. “Cobblestone,” on the other hand, finds anxieties beginning to emerge in the speaker, noting a perceived desperation in the millennial generation. “The Cask” later solidifies these anxieties, as the speaker confronts the historical significance of a drunken guest asleep on their basement floor. These anxieties continue on the surface in the paranoid “Once the Busses Go Home” and work into the subconscious in “Sandstone” and “Bad Dreams,” where internal fears disrupt the surface-level pleasures

of previous poems. The collection then transitions into memory and attempts to recover the speaker's identity and place in society. For instance, "Remembering Maryville" and "Early Junes" work to reconstruct images of childhood, but only manage to conjure surreal reconceptions that build on the speaker's anxieties. The speaker's desire to reconstruct a personal identity does not yield successful results until the later poems, where the speaker finds a more stable "I," in the second "I'm a Pigeon" poem, for instance. "Calculus at Night" introduces a more stable "we," one grounded in the intimacy of an identifiable couple.

Yes a broader, more collective and inclusive "we" remains a central aspect of the collection. Poems such as "Serrated" and "Mothership" fully demonstrate the force of the collective, personal pronoun in this collection. Both poems present a speaker fully immersed in a collective consciousness and without a coherent, singular identity. The tension in "Serrated," a heavy storm bearing down on a party, confronts the entire group, and they respond and accept the threat collectively. "Mothership" similarly presents a generation huddled together for survival, relying on each other. As anxieties emerge in the poem, the speaker's commitment to the collective continues, even as the peaceful nature of this relationship dissolves. "Redstone" and "Alexandria" draw on surreal and alchemical concepts and demonstrate the speaker's attempt to define his generation in stable terms. Of course, the presentation of the millennial generation remains entirely subjective, but, for the speaker, millennials harbor a great deal of restlessness and disillusionment. "Enchantment Table" perhaps establishes a working definition of the millennial generation with the most clarity, depicting a rejection of anything other than the strictly practical and physical.

The collective, personal pronoun serves functional purposes as well. For instance, I've found that it allows for a greater sense of tension and consequence. Personal narratives and concerns can be embedded in generational threads; common notions of the millennial generation as disinterested or disillusioned allow for a heavier construction of the speaker's individual personality, which remains tethered to the actions and mentalities of a larger context. In this way, the poems aim to strengthen the connection between author and anonymous reader. The collective subject also allows cultural assumptions and images of the millennial generation to be supplemented or challenged, allowing for the poems to hold greater cultural, even political ramifications without explicit engagement on these grounds.

A collective subject also functions well with my consistent interest in urban landscapes, Knoxville in particular, and allows for the city to function as a coherent figure in the poems. Fortunately, my interests in the collective subject and the city grew alongside each other. As a younger poet, I lacked consistent sources of motivation and inspiration for my writing. Generational themes slowly became an interest, but the objects which attracted my attention were sporadic and often led to uninteresting poems. However, moving out of the University Housing system and into an old house in the historic 4<sup>th</sup> and Gill neighborhood drastically reinvigorated my sense of Knoxville, shifting my once blasé opinions of the city into a passionate and sometimes difficult love affair. With a popular night club next door and a train crossing down the road, a flurry of romantic, urban inspiration suddenly surrounded me, and from the quiet of a small balcony, I gained access to the pulse of larger community. Soon I found myself frequenting Downtown Knoxville on regular business, buying beer and food, visiting my

favorite stores. Gradually a bond formed between me and the space around me. A sense of ownership developed as my knowledge and familiarity grew; as a result, Knoxville remains a source of intimate reflection and a way of generating new poetic frameworks.

My admiration of Frank O'Hara's work further stimulates my interest in urban landscapes, as well as my continuing, desperate infatuation with New York City. In O'Hara, I see a similar desire to merge larger settings with deeply personal content. "The Day Lady Died," one of my favorite poems, depicts the city as a source of distraction and physical nourishment. It reduces the speaker to an ebbing, routinely functioning member of an alarmingly anonymous society, which enhances the sudden trauma of a distinctly collective memory of Billie Holiday: "she whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing" (27-28). My poem "Oranges" plays with this quality in O'Hara's work (as well as O'Hara's poem "Why I Am Not a Painter"), by positioning the speaker in the anxieties of a large and anonymous city. However, "Oranges" further emphasizes the bodily nature of a city's functionality and draws the city as a site of intense, even frightening levels of consumption.

One additional aspect of the poems directly interacts with my interest in the collective subject: alchemical imagery. The emergence of alchemy in my work initially stemmed from my deep admiration for Brenda Hillman's collection *Loose Sugar*, a collection that makes alchemical and scientific language key to its extended metaphors. Ironically, my first readings of *Loose Sugar* focused more on the scientific aspects of her work. When I realized the full weight of Hillman's argument for alchemy as a metaphor for the poetic process, I became suddenly resistant to her work, and I set out to counter *Loose Sugar* with poems that place alchemy and the poetic process in a millennial, anti-

spiritual perspective. However, in doing so, my reticence toward the poetry-as-alchemy metaphor faltered. Even from the cultural standpoint presented in “Enchantment Table,” alchemy retains its value as a metaphor for the poetic process, in that the practice of alchemy contains a great deal of hope and idealism, but also signifies a melancholy search for something new, God-like and impossible, a search which is destined to fail.

Alchemy and alchemical imagery appear frequently in my work. Certain aspects of its usage derive inspiration from Arthur Rimbaud, whose poetic project of dismantling the self through mind-altering substances reflect key aspects of the millennial mindset I attempt to convey. The act of drinking as a generator of poetry works in an alchemical sense, using chemical fact to uncover new poetic avenues and forge more surprising imagery. Another, stronger facet of alchemy's presence in my work stems from an intense focus on raw materials and bodily need. In Hillman's poem “Cheap Gas,” she says of a drop of fuel that “pink dominates for an instant, / then forgets. / Doesn't look like the blood of young men, liquid from bodies: tears, semen, blood, urine” (23-26). Hillman sees pink as a shade of red, which in turn represents the final stages of the alchemical process. “Cheap Gas” demonstrates her success at using alchemical metaphors to represent political ideas through primal, bodily imagery. Similarly, alchemy plays an important role in “Yuengling,” a poem which incorporates free-form “sampling” from various stimuli into a party scene and uses laboratory imagery to construct an animalistic image of the partier: “my head bubbles over / ... / a sticky glass rod / at the window steams” (31-35).

Alchemical themes are most explicit in the “Stone” and “Ore” poems spread throughout the collection. These poems reference the video game *Minecraft*, a fact that

further contributes to the use of alchemy as a metaphor for poetry. *Minecraft*, an indie game released in 2011, places the player in a virtual world and asks him to gather resources to survive. The player begins on randomly generated terrain and, from the materials around him, constructs a functioning, nourishing ecosystem. The game's focus on raw materials interests me most: the player mines ores, builds a house and lives directly off the rawness around them. The “Stone” and “Ore” poems make this into a metaphor for the millennial generation. For example, “Diamond Ore” refers to the precious, end-game ore in *Minecraft* and communicates a sense of lack in the millennial generation, transmuting the importance of diamonds in *Minecraft* into a reflection on spiritual disillusionment and soul-searching. As such, the final line, “crossing the red,” metaphorically relates the dangerous process of gathering diamonds to the last step in the alchemical process (a metaphor which also refers to poetic craft).

Alchemy further relates to *Minecraft* due to its crafting system, which takes on special importance for game players. More than simply collect materials by which to build, players are tasked with converting materials into new, better forms. For instance, the player uses stone to mine iron, and iron is required to mine diamond. In “Gold Ore,” the speakers find themselves confronting improbably good fortunes – days ending early, danger becoming a thrill, the poker player drawing a flush – which reflects the free alchemical exchange of one thing for another. “Redstone” brings electricity and technology into the mix, where the exchange of coal for diamonds transforms the setting into a landscape of binaries.

Finally, *Minecraft*'s history and popularity reinforce its relevance as a metaphor in my poems. *Minecraft* gained massive popularity and sold millions of copies long before

the developers released a finalized version. As a result, Minecraft was arguably never finished; it had a vast, addicted and loyal fanbase, but its developers neglected to create a fully realized objective or scaling challenge. As a result, players continue to lack a purpose for their efforts. For me, Minecraft thus serves as an apt metaphor for the millennial desire to make up for spiritual disillusionment. *Minecraft* quickly became a craze; it promised grand adventure and a chance to start over in a virtual. However, *Minecraft* as a goal-driven game never fully coalesced, leaving the project, and those who continue to play it, somewhat lost. “Iron Ore” contains some of these themes; the first part shows a group of people living off raw materials and acting as aggressors toward their neighbors, yet their motives remain unclear; they simply exist in this state, sharpening sticks and drawing lines in the sand. Meanwhile, vapor trails collide and life moves on without them. *Minecraft*, in this way, fills a gap in the collective consciousness, but fails to satisfy a deeper yearning.

However, the *Minecraft*-based poems are intentionally designed to function apart from their source material. The reader need not understand the reference in order to understand the meanings contained in the poems. This speaks to another purpose of this collection: the incorporation of video games into poetry. On the surface, the two media often seem entirely exclusive. A vast majority of games, in fact, would yield little of interest to even the most observant or reflective poet, due to the dull, generic expectations levied against many big-budget, or even independent games. However, some titles, such as *Minecraft*, yield new lenses through which to view one's surroundings and society.

The same can also be said of *Hotline Miami*, an indie game released in 2012 that forms the concluding section of this collection. *Hotline Miami*, set during the 1980s

Miami crime wave, makes ultra-violence and a lack of self-identity central to its story and gameplay. The player, an unnamed protagonist, must clear various rooms of enemies as rapidly and stylishly as possible, while an 80s-themed electronic soundtrack plays and the play area rotates drunkenly. Once a level is cleared, the game then forces the player to re-exit the level, walking past their enemies and surveying the destruction they left behind. In this way the game meditates on virtual violence and the nature of the player-character relationship. My series of poems based on *Hotline Miami* attempts to follow that theme by placing the speaker in the protagonist's later perspective, tracking his thoughts from before, during and after the events of *Hotline Miami*. Furthermore, the individual poem titles derive from songs on the *Hotline Miami* soundtrack, and the poems aim to capture the energy and mood of those particular songs. "Electric Dreams," for instance, plays with the melancholy mood of the song by Perturbator, which *Hotline Miami* places during the final cinematic sequence and closing credits.

Going forward, I expect that my poems will evolve and perhaps move away from the chaotic and anxious forms in this present collection. My future interest level in millennial themes and the collective subject also remains uncertain, even likely to diminish. However, I believe that my interest in merging the low art of video games with poetry still holds a great deal of potential. The task shares some similarities to the New York School's poetic framework: all materials present in daily life, including popular culture, belong in poetry. While I still argue that a majority of gaming indeed repels exploration through forms of "high" art, due to its reliance on genre and mechanical addictiveness, video games remain our only medium that attempts to physically immerse an audience. Regardless of video game's continuing status as a somewhat niche market

that only marginally interacts with the typical audience for poetry, the nature of the relationship between player and game holds, for me, a great deal of consequence and begs for further exploration as a literary theme or framework. The work of finding new ways to merge these disparate forms will likely define my future poetry.

## THE POEMS

## I'm a Pigeon

flocked and cooing  
with my endless  
fluffy kin,

who scrape their claws  
on concrete, pick crumbs  
beneath bickering couples  
and lonely lunch hours.

Our black eyes jiggle stupid at dusk,  
make the least  
of crumbly strip malls,  
avenues of restless fast food,  
deep fried corridors  
of stormy throat.

We modern-day doves stabbing holes  
in plastic wrappers –  
gentle boot dodgers  
bobbing our heads down gutters –

powerline dancers, strung  
across streets  
like post-war banners.

## **Mothership**

We drink beer as the city grows,  
weeds of steel, concrete tubers  
heartburn fizzing in the dirt –

its corrugated skirt hems  
around tetanus thighs that quake  
to the tumble of Pretty Lights.

We cracks in the pavement,  
last specks of sulfur. We meet  
in the glow of a taco truck,  
hands in our coat pockets, heads turned

against the wind. Ground beef  
and winter, turmeric and the first days  
of city. Breathe the ambivalent snow,

the faint trails of liquor up and down  
the street. Before tonight, we only had  
the whistle of bare plains and unpolluted starfield –

the milky way stretched like a pale midriff.  
Only the cold beat of flint on steel – *crack, crack, crack.*

## Enchantment Table

No magic

in these cobbled-up walls, tumbling  
clucks of jeans and neoprene  
tick-tocking down the hallway

No spirit

orgone, mana in the hands  
that cut the grass  
that catch drunk flipflops at night

Only level-ups, fire damage

3 hits per second:  
flicker-flicker-flicker

Only the hot goo of cookies in the oven –  
so stoned the smell floods the nose  
like a judgment day  
of wine and roux

Only winter on the verge of snow,  
air like slush.

The playhouse emptied: bundled-up necks  
and flush cheekbones, balmed lips  
pursing for steam  
and cardamom

Snow. Only clumps of gray

drifting limp –  
naked torsos  
twisting  
orange  
under streetlights

## Serrated

We milk the universe,  
bite too hard,  
nerves crushed under greedy jaws –

we saw the storm,  
the microburst.  
The radio's whizzing blares

unheard: the pop  
of beer cans,  
slicing of limes

(juices spark,  
citrus tongues).

We stepped outside,  
a humming in our gut.  
Limbs stiff  
for coming floods –

we throw ourselves into cold  
climax rain,  
tank-tread wind.

## **Diamond Ore**

Somewhere, in the scrambling darkness

the finger stretch of tunnel after tunnel,

those perfect facets –  
dim magma glow

we sniff historic dust  
engines bored

we strike iron hands  
against flint and cobble  
crossing the red.

## 4<sup>th</sup> and Gill

A half moon strokes  
our house – rotten fence, yard

bare – bellows cow-like  
behind smog. The drunk

distance glows – crowds  
slip from bar to bar,

coats dusted with snow  
    moonlight on their lips.

We chose the thrills  
of bipolarity: paragraphs

and boxed wine, lopped heads  
and lollipops: now we speak

in chemicals. Fire a fluorescent  
light cloudy with smoke. Our lungs

collide, the buzz of soft hands,  
clean December air.

We sit in the street. The moon, slice  
of sunlit judgment, speaks

in tectonics, barking dogs, plates  
thrown at far-away floors.

## Gold Ore

Purple the sun sets early, summer swims  
    at our knees, car tops dizzy  
with yellow –  
    metal sheets and wheel-arch  
hum, on-coming stars  
    full of danger  
you spin toward nightfall  
    electrons forming bonds.

Shadows stretch cat-like you blow  
    bubbles in melted  
sand, collect smoke  
    in the rafters.  
Night the garbage  
    disposal, the sudden quake  
of mantle we sit naked  
at your table, draw one card,  
    another,  
my entire hand fills  
    with spade.

## Yuengling

2 AM in glass bottle glow  
the street outside swirls  
headlight and hipster,  
epics and embers  
    trickle of molten feather  
    down our faces.

One last Pompeii night  
before kitchen doors  
    crumble, mice breed  
    like samples  
    *streetlights break,*  
*steel avenues low, O'Hara's lunch*  
*hour lower cradle death-car-girl's*  
*fantastic hurdle,      always sample*

I pop cans like peeling  
to novel ends down fizzy amber  
    gems,  
        metallic hop stings *until*  
*our new culture curdles in the sunny heat*  
*of market share and E these feelings*  
    (what feelings)  
belong deep in finger-rich dirt  
    this mouth belongs  
in trenches clutching a Garand  
    quiet    while shadows  
        plow    the ground  
    *historicize, always*  
*Blade Runner glow, late bucolic drives*  
*down Kingston Pike medusa, greys*  
*the cybermen laugh*  
my head bubbles over  
    stirred  
        stirrrrrrrrrred  
    a sticky glass rod  
at the window steams  
    *counting beats*  
    *per precious minute beat*

## **Cobblestone**

Our quivering  
canyon breathes  
shrubs, dead trees,  
hormones tuned  
to strobing  
radio towers

ethanol rolls  
down our walls  
like desert flood,  
mouths agape we  
thirsty birds  
turn arousal

into lead, shy  
bones to quick-  
silver. The rain  
dries we lumber  
as one, overturn  
rocks, lips pressed  
to dark sands

## The Cask

He fell asleep in our basement,  
lotus pod of coal shoots

and cracked floors. A rainbow  
fed him pheromones – his brainstem

Svedka. There he snores  
in the ancient mold. A dream  
    runs fingers  
    through his hair.

Our house warming party  
crawls overhead – anxious  
centipedes, ping-pong  
balls and bonfire.

Questions drip  
from his limestone lips.

What long-ago smoke  
brought him here, torchlights

trickling down the hill, doors  
locked tight. What hungry

revolution, Roman lay-  
waste, amino acid pools

boil in his bones, in  
the body I drag upstairs,  
    shoes knocking.

## Once the Busses Go Home

I've owned this town in the sunlight,  
my footsteps a beacon of taste  
and asphalt knowledge. Tonight

A dark railyard howls beneath me –  
crumbling bridge, the other side gasps.  
Drunken midnight / alleyways

rustle, the anxious myth of streets  
unbound. Orange city, torchlit  
city, quartz panes curtained don't watch,

not willing. This journey home beats  
hollow the chest of another night,  
my city's radio heart growls

bat-like, its ears and jawline  
quiver with metallic waiting.  
Shadows dive down alcoves, ready

as the glass that forged me,  
the pint after pint of echo  
inside me: digestion tearing  
compounds apart.

## **Tavern Pantoum**

Tonight the brew stops foaming.  
We ask each other drinks in hand  
if the bar is safe to leave yet.  
The barkeep cleans a new glass.

We ask each other, drinks in hand,  
if time has finally stopped.  
The barkeep cleans my glass –  
turns it back to sand.

Time has finally stopped,  
left malty stains on our jeans,  
filled our pockets with sand.  
It left the door bricked-open

with a sneer, malty stains on its lips,  
we can still smell the hops  
as snow enters the door bricked-open,  
our drinks dry as laundry sheets.

The brew stopped foaming,  
stopped being beer. The floor  
welcomes wooden and stained,  
the bar unsafe to leave.

## **Sandstone**

cinderblock cars the block  
I live on beat  
beat beat alive with weeds red  
the neon colored  
dreams of nightmare Feds  
fists cracked ready  
to blow their knuckle bones  
hard as bulkheads  
swallow anything sand-like,  
subversive, quick  
to smother floors with gold.

## How to Boil Lobster

Once at the doorway  
enter. Kitchen incandescent  
glints you hear

spiders in the walls  
their happy teeth –

never mind. Lift  
the pot lid      lay  
the flicking legs

downward. Stairwells  
cracked walls   unlit  
                attic - dreams  
                out of date.

Press your chin  
to floor boards,  
                the mildew  
                witness, beneath  
the basement

creeks toward cliff  
tops, roots dipped  
in air. wait  
                for a whistle

## Bad Dreams

I.

Can opener crunch  
cold hotdog  
    mornings

    I join leery-eyed  
    friends hauling  
    trailers with Lambos thighs

horsepowered back heavy  
bedrooms, our day-  
    to-day selves

in circuit-boards  
    buzzing  
we speak in runny  
    print quiet

boarded windows  
plywood ready  
to unfold  
    my job  
    is to break falls.

II.

Seven birthdays, matches, candles  
oozing onto golden frost  
    seven sweaty glasses

A moan, a shiver the spine arches  
    upward a birth certificate's  
railyard drawer      creaks

four brake lights shattered  
    on the street  
sprays of kerosene  
    oozing down the walls.

III.

A hollow ding in those martian  
woods, dimly orange, firelit. A cowbell  
with no cow. *Ding*. Smoke turns  
to face me, eyes wet –

something out there plods, lumbers,  
the ground quivers. *Ding*.  
Palms held to the flame, muddy ground  
bare legs. It rains again, will go on raining,

only birds know common ground.  
*Ding*. There it stands – a lion, flimsy  
on old paws, brass bell around its neck.  
He lays at the fire,  
milky stare groaning  
in the dark, his breath ghostly.

IV.

Bend against the grain, the white current,  
to free a hand, a wrist,

an arm. Rise through empty space,  
a snowy field, white sheets

across a table. Lift from salt, sugar  
into being, arms wide, shake off

the paper afterbirth, a gray cloud of graphite.  
Straighten the cuffs, the tie, the pale look of surprise.

## Remembering Maryville

Raccoons part like swipes of fog as headlights  
beam down your road. Late now and the air breathes  
foreign – this stretch of unknown doors, porch lights  
full of tiny wings. Darkly an oak tree

flaps shade against your house. The neighbor's pug  
circles barking, chain wrapped around her waist.  
Two knocks and the street quiets, a loud hush –  
airlock doors unsealed – midnight's slowness.

Your house creaks in the air growing colder.  
Lawn mowed thin as the weathered surface  
of your door. Two knocks, the pug pants sitting,  
porch light darkens. The knob rustles. Lock slowly  
clicks. Soon the skittering of raccoon feet  
returning to piles of trash. The pug falls asleep.

## Early Junes

We clap our feet  
in thick pavement puddles  
muddy – laughing  
    mud  
        in juicy streaks  
    down our faces  
        black coats wispy  
            young arms  
we smile and stomp  
shove bodies that      clap  
                            muddy  
into plumes of silt  
    jump  
        and laugh  
  
our forms wriggle across the pond  
    tread water like smiling dogs  
  
    handfuls  
of muddy flood  
    glittering  
  
        we backstroke  
Gods  
    in the first hot springs  
        minerals roiling  
down our chests

## Coal Ore

Flies to a goldrush,  
tongues  
dry for tungsten  
neon  
midnight blur  
  
an orange hums  
on the counter.

Starless night

the city blocks  
bend away.

Foggy town where  
dungeons overflow  
porkchops  
in furnace holes brown

only gems  
can say  
your true name.

## Oranges

Drip drip coffee  
steam fshhhhh  
constant crack  
of glossy cups

*pink polished fingernails  
tearing the rind*

downtown december  
the backpack sags, beads  
of thmp thmp sneakers

*waxy peel sheers –  
snow to the plow*

farmer's market tents  
terrapin bearded men  
strum guitars sistine  
and smiling

what sunlight  
drops of sticky

citrus

stopsigns drooooooop  
aluminum ale

*what omnivore teeth  
crack membrane  
and crush*

knoxville  
sunken jawline  
the hollow bones  
of soon to be business  
lofts plush – plumping  
for christmas

banjo snow, rotisserie turning  
trrrrrrrn

*Terrible white stones carve  
their way home*

## Redstone

We animate coal,  
chalky voices  
    echo gold

suck of a bedroom door.

    Diamonds see black  
        and white,

    emberous paintwork cities  
        gorged on yellow

    drills cranked.

The chest beats  
zeroes           ones.  
    Sparks a magic trick  
        spoiled.

The last traces of coal  
    stained on our lips, we kiss whatever  
stands still.

## Rock Tumbler

We threw stones  
at old glass, snap  
by snap, threw stones

at rivers glossy  
fat, the years  
of ozone splash.

We threw stones at passing cars  
to hear them honk

birds  
to hear them honk

other kids  
to hear them scrape  
toward home

with other kid cries.  
We gripped old granite  
our chap-knuckle hands

gloved and young –  
we chucked them across fields  
to find the best arm.

## Alexandria

Until the lighthouse stops, we leap rock to rock like crazed electrons, leap towards horizon always reproducing. The ocean cellular, fish striking sparks of green as they squirm in biotic stew. We pluck our feet from moss covered stones and breath, we salt shakers plunged, cannonballs given alveoli, fingers. Red prongs of lichen across the ocean, the lighthouse licks a yellow arm across our hair.

## Waiting for a Ride

The tremoring  
    taste of glasses  
    full of gold,  
storefronts'  
    fishy glow –  
crosswalks and  
    brakelight  
    flares shot  
    from lifeboats buoyed,  
flooding submarines,  
    a dryer spin  
    of Warhol cheeks  
    red to green  
my attention  
    a rainbow splat  
    of Tarantino  
    flash across  
the wall – sidewalk  
    tide //each rise  
    a free dash  
of salt.  
Big budget  
    meteors  
    brought to bear,  
    nukes drilled  
    their smiling streaks  
dash eager  
    streets with shadow.

## **Drunk at 3 A.M.**

Tonight a murky bed bodes  
sour beer and Netflix. April sores  
ping the window, hours undone,  
the beach a dark brown flooding,  
clumped and muddy with you.

Tomorrow, you say, moans  
a fresh winter pour  
sweeping glow at my feet – frozen  
voices full of cotton sleeves  
and new bodies cool.

The rhythmic phone's  
other end grows over  
night. Soon the cluttered floor is  
all bras and belts, – you a snowy  
barefoot jewel

on the beachhead,  
amber puffs and sandy pores,  
slatboard stairs, mixer fizz  
and open windows, tides foaming,  
a limbful, goose-feathered pool.

## **Black IPA**

A poem dissolves in swamp water –  
poetic acid, muscles come alive, oxygen  
broken over and over. My glass rimmed  
with Belgian bikes, fizzy gold Atlantic  
maw sprays sulfur in careless coughs: relics  
of Denver so far away / a stain  
that won't lift. The poem is hardwater,  
showerhead lime – tomorrow morning drains.

## Thursday Nights

A moon strokes  
Old City for us  
neckbeard kids,

puffing cigars in the rain,  
christmas light trees  
and trimline women,

sweaty synthetic  
beats. A tide of downtown  
strobelight rolls on

and off the street. Trains  
shatter the crossing  
behind us, horn like a rain-soaked

*Sure. Let's dance and do whatever.*  
Tonight flees  
down a wired track

until morning, when the cats  
yawn behind curtains  
and all day my housemate

sits in his sleepwear,  
fermenting like a grape lost  
beneath the fridge.



## Megabats

Packed bars full of Irish  
punk and sack-faced boys  
limp in their own puddles  
of limb; tonight

no eyes remain  
to crowd lofty windows,  
dark and shaded, downtown  
a funnel for the flushed

and lonely, eager  
for bar-top smooth  
beneath their hands. Glasses  
full of murk at their lips; tonight

no strangers drink among the sagging  
young. No strangers lurk around the corner.

## I'm A Pigeon

Five long days I've waited  
at the Crown Hotel's feet,  
    a red crescent  
    of sidewalk rhythm.  
My fluff waves hello  
    as rush hour  
turns the air  
    magenta.

My bottom half in a terrier's  
gut reduces. Proteins indexed  
    and pissed away,  
    he trods my gutters  
    and spillways,  
sniffs my pizza parlors'  
    backdoors – the tap-tap-tap  
his unclipped toes.

Now that dog,  
his friends and every  
other crosswalk idle,  
throb-a-day boot  
    kite shadows along  
    the deepening days  
    of my kin      still full  
    of flap –  
    my sunset town  
stretches downwind,  
its brickwork gods  
    like soda cans  
    collapsing – saving space.

## White House

(with Andrew Dillon)

I've got this intuition  
for the movement of time.  
I fold shirts into squares, palms smooth  
against the kinks.  
I fill the closet, the wardrobe –  
hours unlatched from their docks  
beyond the bedroom,  
Seoul, Miami, the Sunsphere  
the windows darken,  
fridge hums –  
all redshifts.  
All ultraviolets, aurora borealis  
the capital building white as raw glass.

## Iron Ore

I.

They scrape territory  
in river bank mud

and keep to themselves.

They bathe  
in moony tide

handfuls of slosh,

wiggle sand  
in toasted toes –

let ocean  
linger on their lips.

They watch vapor trails  
collide at dusk,

pick their nails  
with driftwood slivers

while neighbors  
sharpen branches  
with their teeth.

II.

Handfuls of slosh  
full of sparkle moon  
silt –muddy  
drain moon.

An ocean pillared  
chalky wet  
turtle green  
those rusted hands  
volcanic  
mud  
uncorked

red tongues  
undone  
bell ropes  
undone  
collared shirts –

feet cold on salty stone  
neighborhood of timid  
nighttime  
feet.

III.

Neighbors,

imagine smoke stacks  
voltage coils,

porch lights that domino down streets  
scraped into veins of coal.

Imagine your hands cleansed  
in hurricanes  
of chemical snow.

## Remembering How We Met

Was it a misty pool  
in the woods, a circle  
of naked howlers spreading  
handfuls of magic,

a flower girl's shy whisper  
and point across the aisle  
you caught the bouquet  
and shrugged, stained glass  
cheaper than ever.

a lighter's flick  
beneath your lips,  
the blue smoke, wet  
street outside a clinic  
tires sluicing,

your sleepless nights,  
was I the protein waste  
building in your brain –

    a dig through lowtide  
sands, the jellyfish  
    in glowing piles

## Calculus at Night

We howl with inertia  
and trail ourselves into dust.

Twin stars  
in the oily cosmos –

orbiting the first colossal  
flicker of light,

the first gas clouds  
calm and waiting to burst.

In heatless depth we spend ourselves  
unaware, distant

a nightly streak for one, then another,  
we erode in atmospheres.

We bounce around dwarf stars  
and crumbling bodies

where oceans steam and tiny globs  
begin to crawl.

When we collide,  
tails crossed, voices full of

yes maker, yes maker:  
then light, heat,

and shreds of age-old rock  
coming clean.

## Globetrotter

I.

I've never  
flown  
on a plane.

Only watched  
others cross  
the gates,

metal rods glazed  
over totem pole  
forms.

Only seen aunts  
and brothers walk  
the shadowy bustle  
of turbine.

II.

She knows the way. Knows  
the candied nuts  
and swear words  
of Europe.

She's driven the Autobahn,  
swam Parisian smoke,

walked through Delhi  
barefoot,  
gold paint sprayed  
across her cheeks.

Now she's with me, a rock  
in contoured sand,  
still as winter –

she misses German Christmas,  
steaming mugs and cobblestone  
streets, cinnamon air specked with snow.

III.

Manhattan you gorgeous  
cliff, massive jaw  
eager for the salty crunch  
of the shy, drooling  
for my brittleness.

You wonderful den  
for bandits, bears,  
erections. You drunk behemoth  
of wombs, wading back  
to your watering hole.

You distant glitter  
on the coast, teeth drenched  
high tide and diesel,  
you howl my name – the wind –  
the night, you hang  
over lava pits, glinting.

IV.

Even boulders shift  
glaciers

slide south  
as water warms

the walls  
of mountains

around me grind  
lower

Even continents  
groan

with tectonic thrust  
even California

finds a way  
across the ocean.

## **Tommy's Theme**

Tommy surf-lit and pruny, row boat weathered. Summer day  
Tommy your guts glow orange – the beachside house  
whitewashed, Skyy draped from your fingers, the tide womb-like  
you fell asleep on the floor. Tommy your face glints lost jewels  
and red towers blinking. You treat past lives like voicemail. You  
dream Manhattan, concrete hubris, deep Florida highways at night,  
only moonlight and swamp gas. Tommy ears plugged with music.  
The beachside rented, diners all full – you wait. High-tide will dig  
you free. Plant you portside and sticky.

## Time Traveler

Miami howls from inside  
me. Skyline green and blue,

Atlantic jaw having its nightly  
swallow. Chests steam

under streetlights. Beach-ridden  
glares from strangers, neon

the knife's whiplash trail.  
Always a beat in these dim-lit streets.

I hate the 80's, I tell some friends –  
a part of me that fills fireworks

with summer nights, the calm  
Pacific, turns the moon inside out

with tides trailing incense  
in the dark – synthetic, glittering.

## **HOTLINE MIAMI**

*Look at my face. We've met before...*  
- Richard

*You're no guest of mine!*  
- Rasmus

*Do you really want me to reveal who you are?*  
- Don Juan

## Hydrogen

Boundless bunsen  
burners, knobs

spun beyond matter.  
Marble counters,  
graduated cylinders

lab notes soiled  
with copper.

Dandelion sex fits a lock –  
which lock I ask, room  
by room

I used to party, drunken  
swish of face after face.

Evolution's tongue.  
The old garden

floods. A goggled man  
lit rare metals  
for a quick smile.

We burnt blue.  
She knew

the caverns of my cells.  
She pounds at my door,  
cranks the knob. Years ago.

Now I see night  
in fresh words. A precious

manifesto, a flask  
passed over flame

## Knock Knock

Miami's green skyline  
                    and steel drums:  
the alleyways groan, beachside darkens pinkly.  
Slap slap puddles,  
the metal taste  
                    of diesel sluices past  
with knife-like  
                    charm.           Let's head home,  
                    heads down,  
ignore the Miami revolutionaries  
on their broken chair barricades  
                    who salute     smiling.  
Did we lock the door before we slipped  
                                    into bed, cold feet cold  
                                    against the footboard.  
Can you hear termites in our walls,  
                    a silver-jawed disco  
of pinewood slosh  
                    and tunnels growing?

## Miami Disco

I.

Rat trails, chemical  
blue flights  
                                  hungry paws  
                                  tails erect  
stretch beneath our  
feet  
                                  a new litter spreads.

Miami told us take  
and be taken –

eye the back  
door. Know  
the megaphone's owner  
                                  night's far away  
  whistle

night's refusal  
                                  to wait for bad news --

trains on fire  
                                  flash the station.

Yellow teeth  
                                  at our window  
                                  chip.

II.

garbage, oh god our burrows  
extend so far, not far enough –

a shoveled man marched  
down 1<sup>st</sup> last night my children, they

saw devil in his throat, a dragon  
breath curled from years of pornographic

soil, they said                    garbage the god  
sought, monsters can wait,

the shoveled man seeks high scores  
and better highs, now we chant our sniffy

song and borrow. Miami knows  
our family scent, home-grown

laughter from shadows, pups  
buried in shreds of money.

III.

We powder gray the penthouse, dazzlers full of sleeves mouths an O shape finger-hole  
pin – we leather-up cars and fuck puffs of glass (steel) – the Nova? Poor man's game a  
pump away from fatal. You want the stars and stripes boarded elevators and scatter-shot  
geese – lungs Cuban, clean muzzles, love us. Twist the silencer slow. Warm rum blue-  
back fire, wine-soaked corks  
    red foam red over crystal lips, broken bra hooks

## Inner Animal

The earth has a pulse. I've heard its pump  
in dreams, where neon is a verb and bare  
arms glisten, a thump in the plaster walls  
and shopping racks

piling into midnight taxis streetlights  
beat steady, necks craned ambivalent  
brake lights an open forge, skylines  
a steel trumpet.

Cannonballs abandoned homes doors flung  
wide flaws steady as drugs. I wear masks,  
hands flat as irons

she tilts the pinball machine.

I wake, life and death a last minute  
flex – heartrate the answering  
machine's terrible chirp

## Turf

City a pink-green pool behind me. Tree-shaped shadows bloom. The streetlights end. To leave the car now is to walk a firm universe. Danger dangles from my fingers, moon a pressure pad, brakes unlit forest bends and black waters – the moist lungs pump.

Tomorrow

the lobby doors open,  
empty, the elevator dings – implode / select a floor. Sidewalks pass unaware my feet  
tread the office floor full of purpose. Wet apartment, pizza boxes / old stains  
forgotten bra beneath the bed all shades pink / green, delicious. My car roots the skyline,  
rattles earth into shape.

Loose bolts in my hands.

Tossed in the sock drawer.



## Deep Cover

A year of quiet meals, car dents  
and sweaty clothes collects  
at our front door, dripping.  
Still you rev the blender. The coffee grinder.  
Put the kettle on, eye full of orange  
and modern. Always staring.

Somewhere these spoons fell headlong  
into a mold. I imagine you  
did the same, before this house,  
cupboards full of glass.

The basement floods.  
Your letterman jacket  
waves at the rafters.  
Owl mask breaks  
the surface,  
smolders,  
eyes a muddy gold.

Where were you last night –  
the screendoor flapping,  
street's cold breath  
slipping down the showerhead –  
what hunger drives you  
through night's neon hum –

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## VITA

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