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Tripping Without Falling: Poems

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Benjamin Alan McClendon entitled "Tripping Without Falling: Poems." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Nina H. Fefferman, Lisa M. King, Arthur E. Smith

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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

Tripping Without Falling: Poems

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Benjamin Alan McClendon

May 2018

Abstract

A collection of original poetry with critical introduction contextualizing the poems in terms of political, environmental, and rhetorical considerations.

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Introduction

Project Overview

The world is changing. The stable, temperate place that nurtured humanity to this point is already gone. The science is irrefutable, but the politics not so much. People write about the “natural” world, but often as something separate, an other to be used, exploited, mastered. My dissertation in poetry aspires to an artistic exploration of environment that challenges the individual’s place within the interconnected web of life, climate, geology, etc. We are not so isolated from the environment as we think. A significant portion of the cells that make up an individual aren’t even human but a symbiotic amalgam of microbes that signal responses to environmental stimuli in ways we are only beginning to understand. Where, then, lies the boundary of the self?

It’s one thing to write about interconnectedness and environment, but why poetry? In rhetoric studies, George Lakoff and others have demonstrated that metaphor undergirds human speech and cognition to the extent that there really isn’t thought without metaphor, and the ways metaphor shapes our perceptions and discourse subtly or profoundly alter how we discuss and perceive the world. Many of the common metaphors we use, such as comparing a romantic relationship to a battle, journey, or container, slip beneath the level of perception. Poetry, possessing a unique and direct relationship with metaphor, holds potential to assist in the project of forming new language to communicate the importance of tending to our shared environment, but also in helping people locate themselves within the environment to form an emotional connection with it. Through wonder, understanding.

Poetry is often a political beast, and a large corpus of political poetry stands testament to its rhetorical dimension. There is a fine balance to be struck between the aesthetic and the

didactic, but the road is one well traveled, particularly by poets in the 20th and 21st centuries. My project works through an unorthodox tactic, incorporating rhetoric studies to help guide the poetry in constructing a metaphoric framework – something akin to a color palette – to communicate in a way that works around or beneath resistances brought about by political and moral ideologies, a pathway to shared humanity that questions the atomized individual in the society we participate in. Research into how the brain processes language reveals that such pathways are necessary to avoid activating and strengthening ideological resistance to new ideas (Lakoff).

Thesis

The primary ambition of my work is to explore the rich layers of metaphor that encode not just a poet's expression, but the culture in which they write. My concerns are both artistic and activist, seeking to explore the possibilities of environment as a metaphoric frame through which poets and anyone else can express everyday human concerns from a perspective that seeks to enrich and enter into symbiosis with the interconnected, physical world of living things. My expression meditates upon the place of love – particularly same-gender love and sexuality between men – within the environment as metaphor frame and on its literal level as the web of connections from which we cannot extract ourselves.

Metaphor's functions extend well beyond artistic or pragmatic comparisons of this to that. Metaphors saturate verbs, adjectives, subtle choices users of language make when choosing one word over another. Rock vs. stone. Human thought patterns rely upon metaphor to make sense of the world, and beneath comparison lies insight into cultural and personal values and habits of thought. Like musical chords, layers of metaphor can resonate with one another and shift to accommodate a perspective that might challenge our perceptions of the world we inhabit.

In placing queer love within the interconnected web of environment, a political statement forms. The personal becomes political, particularly when an eco-queer perspective is in play, but in a way that might reach people. For if the desired outcome is to effect change that benefits the health of the environment and all its constituents, one cannot go barreling toward those who disagree, assailing them with facts in hopes they see the error of their ways and repent. Too authoritarian. Too dogmatic. Instead, I'm interested to learn how to speak a new language, one that centralizes the role of environment to speak about anything at all in hopes the interconnected nature of humanity might become more apparent. And in that language, I want to speak of love. Love often wears (uncomfortably, I would argue) the metaphor of gravity. Falling in love, mutual attraction. I see love not as gravity, but as connection, a mutual agreement to engage in mutual symbiosis, to nurture one another into growth, into becoming what neither alone could be.

Background: Political Poetry

Those with an interest in preserving the status quo will often employ the tactic of claiming an inconvenient message is either incomprehensible or ineffective. Ask Adrienne Rich. As one of the most prominent forces in political poetry of the 20th Century, Rich was no stranger to criticism. In "Blood, Bread, and Poetry" she notes, "political poetry is suspected of immense subversive power, yet accused of being, by definition, bad writing, impotent, lacking in breadth. No wonder the North American poet finds herself or himself slightly crazed by the double messages" (Rich 247). When it comes to challenging the status quo, silence, assimilation, or the myth of the "non-political" poem default to support the status quo, which requires no action or intervention to continue the work of maintaining its order. Accusations of didacticism or propagandizing poetry may be an expedient and even intellectually spurious, but they do serve a

rhetorical purpose, which is to shift the burden to the oppressed to prove the worthiness and artistry of the message. Though they may be weaponized in a rhetorical battle that has little to do with the poem itself, labels of “didactic” or “propagandistic” are not aesthetically flattering qualities and may represent legitimate hazards for the political poet to navigate.

Jane Hirshfield is probably not the first poet most would describe as political. Her essays on the intersection of poetry and consciousness and meditative practice produce concepts particularly well suited for addressing the difficult in poetry, the political included. In *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, Hirshfield describes the relationship between the poem and its subject through the metaphor of a wild hunt. She writes, “Poems do not make appointments with their subjects – they stalk them, keeping their distance looking slightly off to one side. And when at last the leap comes, it is most often also from the side, the rear, an overhead perch; from some word-blind woven of brush or shadow or fire” (Hirshfield 107-08). Hirshfield goes on to note, “There is a shyness at the core of existence, a hesitance to be seen” (108). Shyness is particularly pronounced or even just a ploy when it comes to the first defensive move of privilege, which is to deny its own existence. As a result, poets who wish to confront political issues directly must take extra care to take the circuitous rather than the direct path.

An example of indirectness used successfully appears in the poem “There Are Birds Here” by Jamaal May, which appeared in the 2015 edition of *Best American Poets*. The volume, with its introduction by Sherman Alexie and controversy over a (metaphorically) yellow-face pseudonym, takes a decided political bent for the venerable series, and May’s poem is no exception, addressing the treatment of impoverished citizens, mostly people of color, in a poem written “for Detroit.” “There Are Birds Here” confronts the way that mainstream culture

communicates its own version of events without listening to the people living them. In the opening stanza, the rhetorical maneuver confronts metaphor directly, clarifying:

There are birds here,
so many birds here
is what I was trying to say
when they said those birds were metaphors
for what is trapped
between fences
and buildings. No. (May 93)

As the stanza closes, the poem's speaker denies the externally-imposed interpretation of birds as metaphor in favor of literal birds that are actually living creatures, real birds. The gesture to deny the predominant interpretation reappears in the poem several times, the speaker making sly use of the negative to simultaneously deny and activate images in the reader's mind, pushing back against how people speak of Detroit and its inhabitants. The speaker, after all, was "trying to say" something, perhaps intentionally not received by the mainstream. The resulting poem comments on the distortion that occurs when society presumes to speak on behalf of others without listening to them, but the topic is never named.

One of the more unusual features of *The Best American Poetry* series appears at the end of each volume, where authors are encouraged to provide a statement on the poem's making. Of "There Are Birds Here" May writes, "The poem has left me encourage in this belief: When I flatly state my opinion, all you can do is agree or fight me. When I artfully present my interior, you have to take the third option, the one you've always had: think" (185). As the poem itself concludes, May employs thick irony to avoid flatly stating opinion while at the same time

punctuating the message of the poem with the very real frustration felt by the people society marginalizes, writing, “but they won’t stop saying // how lovely the ruins, / how ruined the lovely / children must be in your birdless city” (May 94). The poem, of course, was never about birds but the frustration of how outsiders can insist on knowing a place better than the people who live there. The message is unabashedly political, but the poem succeeds because it grounds itself not in direct teaching or storytelling but in personal observation and emotion – the effects of gaslighting on the oppressed rather than the act itself.

Metaphor, of course, can be used as a tool rather than resisted or implemented as ornamentation. Since 1980 when George Lakoff originally published *Metaphors We Live By*, his work extensively establishes the integral role of metaphor in human thought. Though his work troubles many commonly held assumptions about how the mind/brain works, it also carries with it the capacity for perceiving the world differently. In the opening to the 1980 text, Lakoff invites the reader to imagine how metaphor can challenge people to see differently. After explaining how mainstream American culture describes argument using the metaphors and lexicon of war, he counters with a more hopeful idea:

Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. But *we* would probably not view them as arguing at all (Lakoff and Johnson 5)

Metaphor frames perception and understanding both, and the very act of depicting a different way of seeing either the world or something like argument represents itself a political act in that the status quo is directly confronted.

An alternative conception of the world is precisely what those who are marginalized by mainstream society find themselves best equipped to share. In “Tortilla Smoke: A Genesis,” Natalie Diaz renders in abundant detail the stories, myths, and people surrounding tortillas, from the birth of corn through the lives of the women who make them. The poem’s ending encapsulates what much of the poem concerns itself with, imagining an eschatology for those who “prayed to the tortilla god”:

When they wake they realize frogs haven’t had tails in ages,
they hope gravity doesn’t last long, and they wait—
y esperan y esperan y esperamos—to be carried up up—anywhere—
on round white magic carpets and tortilla smoke. (Diaz 18)

Metaphors draw from work, myth, and environment all, encapsulating the poem’s exploration of how something as humble as a tortilla can touch so much. In the cultures in which tortillas originate, they are bread, the humble everyday staple representative of nourishment in general, but they also signal that cultural difference, rendering it more visible within a dominant culture that expends no small amount of effort to erase contributions of Latin@ culture and the Spanish language. Spanish appears in the poem’s final stanza (translated: and they wait, and they wait, and we wait), but phrases or lines throughout the poem are written in very simple Spanish that is not repeated in English. The very presence of the language represents another political act, as does the lack of translation. Within the poem’s internal logics, however, Spanish increases the precision of mimesis in the poem, but it also adds music. These aesthetic concerns exist in symbiosis with the political, aesthetic and political both contributing depth to the whole.

Poems are also capable of assuming a more confrontational stance without discarding aesthetic concerns, which is the area in which criticisms of political poetry as overly didactic or

propagandistic might originate. Literary critic John Timberman Newcomb points out that “Above all, we need more work that refutes the domineering disciplinary assumption that modern American poetry was or should be defined by its antagonism to mass culture” (251). Few artifact are as representative of mass culture as the television, which is the vector of mass culture that Patricia Smith utilizes in her poem “And Now the News: Tonight The Soldiers.” The poem takes the tone of a newscast and imagines a television news story. The title enjambes into the first line, which continues:

dropped their guns to dance. The sight
of spinning starlit men, their arms
around such waiting waists, alarmed
those paid to blare the sexy words
of war. (Smith 89)

From the very beginning, the poem lingers in the spectacle of the “sight” through the newscast lens, and as the poem continues, the poem’s mass culture ally in the newscast lends the poem focus on the scene and commentary on the scene without ever straying into direct messaging. The lens lends distance to the speaker’s account, distance enough to create a frame for a radical thought experiment and the political ramifications. The poem dares to ask what would happen if soldiers simply refused to kill, and it substitutes diction and imagery of dance for war and violence. As a result, soldiers become men instead of killing machines, humans with emotional gravity far deflected from threat.

To dismiss all political poetry as didactic or propagandistic would of course be an exercise in the largesse of privilege. Contemporary poetry – with its propensity to reach outward for new aesthetics, new rhetorical modes, new subjects and nuances and emotional tones –

represents an environment so diverse and adaptable that to broadly exclude the political would represent a drastically reductive vision of what poetry can do. The work of contemporary poets such as Diaz, Smith, and May represent only a small sampling of the wealth of rhetorical techniques and tactics that poets can learn from and put to use in expressing the very human frustrations, outrages, and hopes derived from our need to live together.

Background: Environment and Metaphor

Relations between humans and the world we inhabit haunt and trouble decisions about environment and art, and poetry's role in demonstrating ways of seeing and engaging the world via metaphor locate it as an available intermediary to transform how people speak about environment both on the grand scale and the local. Decisions must be explained, consensus must be built, and the metaphors people communicate through to describe reality matter a great deal because they govern how we think. The reality we live in does not represent Enlightenment's ordered machine, yet a duality persists in conceptualizing human and environment as separate, isolated entities. There is even a word to propagate the concept: nature. Environmental historian William Cronon emphasizes the importance of the conceptual metaphor when he states plainly, "Any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature – as wilderness tends to do – is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior" (87). The roots of the separation run deep in Western culture. Cronon further notes that "it is not too much to say that the modern environmental movement is itself a grandchild of romanticism and post-frontier ideology" (72). Exactly the sort of separation Cronon describes takes root in Romantic aesthetics in the concept of the sublime. Lynn Keller observes of Cronon's larger project, "The Romantic notion of the sublime – of the palpable presence of the divine in the most awesome of nature's spectacles – is tied to an understanding of the wilderness as something apart from

human habitation and human history” (Keller 602). There can remain little wonder, therefore, that the way people think about, understand, and speak about environment contains embedded within it the transmission of an inherently harmful understanding of the world. The stakes could not be higher.

George Lakoff’s work¹ on metaphor theory and cognition provide a possible avenue for answer for human/nature duality through the study and manipulation of metaphor. Of metaphor’s role in our lives, Lakoff argues, “Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson 3). It would stand to reason, then, that examining metaphor and how it functions in poetry to describe the order of the world can be both instructive of our cognitive biases concerning environment and a potential source of transformative thinking. Metaphor, in shaping how we see the world, cements poetry’s place as a political act whether it wants to be or not, particularly every time a poet turns to nature for inspiration or language.

At the heart of the problem with human/nature duality lies a silence. Disconnecting from the environment we that is part of us mutes anything it might have to teach in addition to depriving the environment of a necessary voice in human affairs. We rely upon the environment for sustenance, even for the air we breathe, yet subordinate it in every way to the appetites of explosive human population growth to which governments and industries have not adapted adequately to avoid damaging the same environment. Ecocritic Christopher Manes writes of

¹ Though Mark Johnson in some capacity co-wrote *Metaphors We Live By*, he did not work with Lakoff on the subsequent very large body of work that Lakoff’s metaphor theory represents. For this reason, I attribute ideas on metaphor theory to Lakoff alone in my discussion to point to his larger body of work.

nature's² silence, "Nature *is* silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (15; emphasis in original). Cronon argues that Romanticism, direct ancestor to the environmental movement, divides human from environment, and the argument finds abundant examples in the poetry of William Wordsworth, one of the principle figures of literary Romanticism. In all fairness to Wordsworth, his poetry possesses a keen empathy for the environment. In his untitled ode beginning "There was a time," Wordsworth speaks to the "blessed Creatures" of the world:

Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
My heart is at your festival,
My head hath its coronal,
The fullness of your bliss, I feel – I feel it all. (177)

Though the speaker ends the section exclaiming that they feel all the bliss of all the creatures (!), the metaphor of the festival gives away its relationship with the speaker through the possessive "your" preceding it. The speaker does not consider the "jubilee" they witness as their own, rather something to be laughed at alongside "the Heavens," elevating the human above. The separation becomes even more apparent in the image of the "coronal" as the speaker's choice of metaphor for bliss blossoms from the prevalent but misguided conception of human as sovereign over the environment, the power of king or queen absolute over subjects whose "call / Ye to each other

² For the most part, I use the term environment instead of nature. It's well recorded in ecocriticism that "nature" is problematic because of the separation it implies between human and environment, when humans are really inextricable from their environment.

make” is never interpreted or understood, simply providing amusement to an aloof human presence.

It gets worse. Later in the poem, Wordsworth genders Earth, entangling the planet in all of the misogynist tropes of Wordsworth’s culture:

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother’s mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came. (178)

Unpacking all of the misogynist tropes embedded in this one metaphor of earth as woman and then nurse could become a book chapter all its own, but a brief inventory includes insinuations of lust, comment on the nurse’s physical appearance, reduction to worker/milk producer, and attribution of dishonesty. The end of the passage explains how earth incites humans to forget their divine nature, a serious charge in a culture whose cosmology involves Heaven as divine afterlife, in this case represented metaphorically as an imperial palace, of course, the jealous male God-king by implication displeased that Eve steals Adam away again. Wordsworth’s metaphors depict the inhuman, “natural” world as not only separate, but openly hostile.

Fortunately for the environment, the culturally metastatic conception of a human/nature duality is largely a Western problem, and by Western I largely mean white. A member of the Hopi tribe explained to me that they use the word “Hopi” to refer to both land and people

because they are the same. Similar beliefs are held all over the world. Though environmental practices may not live up to these values all the time, the traditions of Tao and Zen with their focus on dissolution of human/nature and subject/object boundaries represent a robust, existing tradition that can speak to another path for metaphors of environment that does not involve separation, violence, subjugation. Japanese poet Izumi Shikibu (~974-1034 CE) confronts duality itself as a problem in one of her brief verses:

I cannot say
which is which:
the glowing
plum blossom *is*
the spring night's moon. (83)

Short verses such as these were love poems, and so the implication from the opening is that the plum blossom – inseparable or indistinct from the moon – is a metaphor for the speaker as lover. Duality between speaker and moon collapses into an image that can be read sensually, the glowing both literal and metaphor at once. Jane Hirshfield explains in her translation notes that the moon itself is a culturally-embedded metaphor for enlightenment, a concept which on its own entails ego loss, the collapse of duality between self and the unity of all things. In this view of the world, a separation between human and environment is not only undesirable, it is the very obstacle between an individual and higher spiritual awakening. Western sensibilities might shy away from the sensual as path to enlightenment, but therein lies the inclusivity inherent to Zen: the path to enlightenment can be seen through anything at all.

In Shikibu's view of the world, far from being silent, the world whispers lessons to those who focus their time and attention on learning them. In another verse, Izumi Shikibu uses metaphors of plant life to describe a higher truth of existence.

Come quickly – as soon as
these blossoms open,
they fall.

This world exists
as a sheen of dew on flowers. (Shikibu 96)

Without expounding on the lesson itself too much, it is noteworthy that the relationship between human and environment is entirely different than the sort of Western metaphor that appropriates environmental imagery to focus on the human. In Shikibu's poem, images of plant life speak on behalf of the world. Instead of speaking, the human listens and learns a lesson on the transience of existence, a situation not diminished but beautified through its brevity.

Contemporary poets have been responding to criticism of the problematic construct of dual human and environment and adapting new relationships with the living world. In her collection *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire*, Brenda Hillman goes so far as to produce an "Ecopoetics Manifesto" to state some ideas directly, among them that an ecopoetic poem "employs knowledge from diverse disciplines – including scientific vocabularies, but it does not privilege only the human" (29). In the prose poem "Moaning Action at the Gas Pump," the speaker of the poem becomes the metaphor to allow the earth to speak through her, "Pulling up, beginning a low moaning action, pulling a deep choral moan with cracks up through the body, the crude through the cracks of sea & earth, pulling neurotransmitters glutamate, acetylcholine, & others across chasms in the nervous system, into the larynx until the sound acts by itself"

(Hillman 37). Yet a reversal of the view of the environment subordinate to humans to human drones subordinate to environment is not desirable or accurate either, though it is not the point she presses. Rather, Hillman's moan represents an extreme of empathy, the expression inescapable if one is to really understand the plight of the environment.

Brenda Hillman presents a less extreme approach to unity of human and environment in the poem "Between the Souls & the Meteors." So that it does not "privilege only the human," the poem employs simultaneity to place the human into a panoramic narrative that includes the actions of nature alongside human concerns.

The little baby sleeps on his side,
his dream face turned to the woods;
a fox sleeps with its mouth of color;
& the O in your head, the damaged vowel,
where the skin rises to meet the wound,
what does that spell?
—i don't know, i don't know
(since it got to go on living) but
seems like basically it's kind of
a combination: everything
means everything plus
there is no hidden meaning— (Hillman 36)

The infant and fox both sleep, but there is no interaction that would privilege one over the other save for the human voice that is choosing what to focus consciousness upon and what not to. Life is lived in the body, which is present and wounded, damaged like the vowel O that sets the poem

spinning into the unitary conclusion in which even meaning collapses into the unitary. The semicolon encourages the sentence to continue and continue, as though bleeding words until it runs out. On the level of metaphor, images from the environment stand in for human emotions, but without the need to fully explain them in human terms because the human choosing of the images remains inescapable. William Cronon's concern with metaphor was that "The myth of wilderness . . . is that we can somehow leave nature untouched by our passage" (88). Human not privileged, the austere relationship to metaphor lurks beneath, finding in the poem's last approaches metaphor in forked meaning, the combination of two things overlapping with the combination of a lock to imply something opened: the path to knowing oneness.

Contemporary poets who are concerned with matters of the environment have available to them both historical and contemporary examples of metaphor employed not to cleave the human from the environment to subjugated, but singing with it, through it, listening to what it could teach. David Gilcrest, in waving the banner of ecopoetry, comments on "a fundamental truth that the field of environmental studies is particularly suited to articulate: ethics precede, and inform, epistemologies (and the poetics based on them). We should expect differing cosmologies, and the different social and environmental relationships they articulate, to structure ways of being and ways of knowing" (26). In Lakoff's work on the relationship between metaphor and neuroscience, metaphor serves the very function Gilcrest describes in a very literal way. The relationship poets have with metaphor entails a certain degree of social responsibility, but carried within metaphor informed by ecocriticism, poets access potentially tremendous transformative power.

Inquiry: Love in a Time of Unraveling

Humans arrive at a time of decision. Heal our relationship with the environment or destroy its ability to sustain us. Along the way, the potential for damage to the web of life veers well into the territory of catastrophe. While we delay action and persist in our parasitic relationship with the earth and our fellow inhabitants, the processes of life continue. Jane Hirshfield notes, “We don’t find the fragrance of night-scented flowering tobacco or the display of a peacock’s tail insincere – by such ruses this world conducts its erotic business. To acknowledge rhetoric’s presence in the beauty of poems, or any other form of speech, is only to agree with what already is” (11). Like the “erotic business” of the world that keeps moving onward, humans continue to produce language and communicate, write poems, discuss issues, fall in love. It doesn’t matter that human orders and segments of the environment may be coming undone slowly or rapidly. We are still human with our concerns and communities and needs to consider. Love is by no means least among these, and the unfolding of poetry’s rhetorical wingspan renders love poetry political. The portrayal of a healthy, vibrant environment – even to portray love – becomes a political act on the side of continuing denial and the deferment of action, a protection of the destructive, unsustainable status quo.

Acknowledging our role in environmental degradation, however, necessarily inverts the Romantic relationship between love and nature. In the imagination of Romanticism, healthy, vibrant “nature” cleaves itself from the human to equate love with the sublime, the mysterious, the not-made-by-humans. Contemporary thinking in environmental justice, however, argues that the environment can be defined as “the place you work, the place you live, the place you play” (Di Chiro 301). Poets have, of course, have worked these fields to write about love within environment as it exists rather than within nature as imagined. Wendell Berry writes very often

of environmental concerns, but he doesn't shy away from placing love within its larger context, as well. His short poem "A Lover's Song" confronts such difficulties directly.

When I was young and lately wed
And every fissionable head
Of this super power or that
Prepared the ultimate combat,
Gambling against eternity
To earn a timely victory
And end all time to win a day,
"Tomorrow let it end," I'd pray,
"If it must end, but not tonight."
And they were wrong and I was right;
It's love that keeps the world alive
Beyond hate's genius to contrive. (Berry 323)

Berry's poem situates love in which the "fissionable head" of nuclear weaponry waits aimed and ready to "end all time and win a day." The sentiment carries a potent political statement without much subtlety. Love performs a function to "keep the world alive," but the rhetorical dimension of the poem engages precisely the sort of tactic that Lakoff warns against, activating the metaphor frame of war in an effort to cultivate a message of love and peace. Berry's "ultimate combat" concerns itself with winning, victory, and a love/hate duality in which love preserves while hate invents, creates. As a response to the emotional character of placing love within a violent world, the poem succeeds, but in activating the metaphor frame of war and violence

through which English-language writers communicate all too often, Berry's poem misses out on its potential for a transformative political message.

In "Little Beast," Richard Siken's imagery of violence performs a different function. Instead of entangling itself in message, violence itself becomes part of the environment in which the poem's speaker reflects on love and desire. He writes:

An all-night barbeque. A dance on the courthouse lawn.

The radio aches a little tune that tells the story of what the night
is thinking. It's thinking of love.

It's thinking of stabbing us to death
and leaving our bodies in a dumpster.

That's a nice touch, stains in the night, whiskey kisses for everyone.

Tonight, by the freeway, a man eating fruit pie with a buckknife
carves the likeness of his lover's face into the motel wall. I like him
and I want to be like him, my hands no longer an afterthought. (Siken 6)

Siken's speaker, rather than railing against the violence of the world, provides stabbing to death as a detail of environment. Violence becomes the machination of an anthropomorphized night that presents love and death woven into the fabric of the same night. The buckknife the observed man carries becomes not an overt threat but a tool, though its dual nature as tool and weapon won't be lost on an audience that has just been asked to think about stabbing and threat.

Siken's poem, unlike Wendell Berry's, doesn't seem to concern itself with speaking out against violence but seems to accept it as part of a larger environment. Because the poem doesn't seek to confront violence, the language of violence doesn't contradict the poem's message. Siken's

poem also makes a political decision in favor of complicity. Violence is not spoken against but accepted as part of the environment in a gesture that nods to preserving the status quo.

Adrienne Rich takes a different approach, one that situates the body within the web of connections that make up the environment. In her longer poem “Contradictions: Tracking Poems,” Rich meditates on love and lovemaking tied into the body:

these are the pleasures of winter
sudden, wild and delicate your fingers
exact my tongue exact at the same moment
stopping to laugh at a joke
my love hot on your scent on the cusp of winter (Rich 128)

Later on in the same poem, however, the same physical body connects with a problematic, flawed world. She writes:

For it is the body’s world
they are trying to destroy forever
The best world is the body’s world
filled with creatures filled with dread
misshapen so yet the best we have
our raft among the abstract worlds
and how I longed to live on this earth
walking her boundaries never counting the cost (Rich 129)

Rich’s poetic project engages love and engages an environment “filled with creatures” and “the best we have,” using the body as the focus for connection between love and the world. Rich’s world is not one of peace and harmony, though. It is a world that other humans “are trying to

destroy forever,” a world under threat. In this space, love exists as part of the body and environment because the two are inextricable.

Connection between the environment and love exists in the body. Though the body receives plenty of attention as the locus of experience and understanding of the world, the connection also comes full circle to coexist with one of George Lakoff’s key ideas: embodied metaphor. In short, the complex web of metaphors that undergird human thought and language are not arbitrary; rather, they derive from bodily experience. Lakoff and Johnson explain that spatial concepts (up-down, front-back, in-out, etc.) “are relevant to our continual everyday bodily functioning, and this gives them priority over other possible structurings of space – for us. In other words, the structure of our spatial concepts emerges from our constant spatial experience, that is, our interaction with the physical environment” (Lakoff and Johnson 56-57). Lakoff’s body of work (an interesting metaphor in its own right) posits both that metaphor is foundational to human thought and that metaphor derives from bodily experience. The metaphor frames we use to understand the world are furthermore exist in physical form. Lakoff writes, “Primary conceptual metaphors are persistent (long-lasting or permanent) physical circuits in the brain” (Lakoff 782). Not just abstractions, metaphors and metaphor frames physically exist.

Without metaphor, the world ceases to make sense, and humans frequently find them necessary to communicate abstract ideas. As a result, human communication frequently maps abstract ideas onto physical/spatial orientations or even *re*-maps dimensions as a way to communicate meaning. For example, musical nomenclature refers to “higher” and “lower” pitches, when in reality the physical dimension of up and down has nothing to do with pitch. As a physical phenomenon, pitch represents the frequency of a compression wave through a medium (air) and is expressed in hertz (Hz), or cycles per second. Really, pitch is an expression of time,

but the dimension of time is already finds use in musical language because something is also necessary to denote rhythm, also an expression of time. Even for strictly utilitarian purposes, metaphor is engaged to fill gaps in the language we use to describe physical phenomena.

Love, however, is an abstraction. As a result, love can activate a number of different metaphor frames that alter how both the sender and receiver in an act of communication *perceive* the idea. Abstraction does not result in incomprehensibility in embodied metaphor systems; it results in complexity. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson describe love as engaging the primary metaphor of the container, which is derived from limitations of the visual field (31-32). But love also engages metaphor frames of a journey, a physical force (like gravity or electromagnetism), a patient, madness, and magic (Lakoff and Johnson 41-42; 49). These ideas are themselves abstractions, but abstractions rooted in physical experiences such as movement, location, and in the case of a patient or madness, bodily health.

I'm interested in poetry that expresses love existing and even finding a way to grow within an environment that's in trouble, one abused by our species but without which our species cannot exist. Wendell Berry writes of love in conflict with a violent world, but that's not quite the same. Richard Siken writes about love that accepts violence as part of the world, but that's not what I'm looking for, either. What does it mean to nurture love within a collapsing order? In a suffering world? An easy answer might be procreation, to promote hope for the future. But as a gay male, I have my own perspective to write from, my own embodied experience, my own conception of love that does not equate with procreation but one that society discriminates against using rhetoric concerned with bodily expression of love. There is no one definition of the experience of love, only a diverse set of individual experiences to outline contours of its

inscrutable form. To inquire into the relationship between love and environment, therefore, is to inquire into the meaning of environment and into the meaning of love. And they are not separate.

Inquiry: Love as Connection

Poets, musicians, philosophers recognize in love an infinite well of possibility in seeking to approach asymptotic its unreachable ideal. The metaphors and language used in the efforts are diverse and expansive, entangling bodily experience and environment. Turned the other direction, environment involves a language to understand the quality and magnitude of *connection*, which means combining both opens the potential to explore and illuminate both environment and love as relationships that connect humans to something beyond the self. The act is not without precedent. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda holds a reputation for writing of love, and in his poetry love connects through the world. “Oda al limón” begins with a simple fruit as the focus of praise, the concern of the ode. The poem opens,

Out of lemon flowers
loosed
on the moonlight, love’s
lashed and insatiable
essences,
sodden with fragrance (Neruda 133)

In Neruda’s conception, love exists within plants, within flowering. The metaphor frame effectively hints at love’s patient and nurturing qualities. While flowering and fruiting may appear to represent yet another reproductive depiction of love, the poem continues to focus on the lemon until it becomes something prismatic through which the speaker traces connections that take on an existential flavor. Toward the poem’s conclusion, he writes,

So, while the hand
holds the cut of the lemon,
half a world
on a trencher,
the gold of the universe
wells
to your touch:
a cup yellow with miracles,
a breast and a nipple
perfuming the earth;
a flashing made fruitage,
the diminutive fire of a planet. (Neruda 135)

The fruit itself, in essence entangled with love, is also “half a world” and contains within its form and juices and fragrance “the gold of the universe” and the “diminutive fire of a planet.” In Neruda’s cosmology, love takes the form of elemental force of the world, involved not just in reproduction but in the steady fire of the earth, in the expansive universe the lemon is a part of and is. Neruda’s love becomes eco-aware as a matter of quality.

If love is to be elemental, to be connection, to be eco-aware, there exists potential for the political because love is also personal. Love is of the body. These connections resonate with the work of environmental justice, which emphasizes “transforming the possibilities for fundamental social and environmental change through processes of redefinition, reinvention, and construction of innovative political and cultural discourses and practices” (Di Chiro 303). Poetry is at home in possibility, in the transformative. In the project of constructing innovative cultural discourse,

poetry can press at the boundaries of language to find new possibility, to begin speaking the language of environment. To discuss environment in the same terms we use to discuss love. Poetry's special relationship with metaphor is also the relationship between language and environment. It is a long-standing relationship that one prominent eco-critic describes in simple terms: "At the origin of our relationship with nature lies metaphor; at the origin of our use of metaphor lies nature" (Knickerbocker 4). And at the origin also lie love, human connection, the conception of human.

These are fertile grounds for the cultivation of a new language. I won't claim the right or ability to define this new way of speaking and framing experience, but I will give it a try. Such a feat can only be accomplished through a diverse representation of environment and human experience. This is political enough an act of its own, but why not queer it a bit?

Introduction to the Poems

A mentor once told me that each poem carries within it a key for its reading, an idea through which a poem's inner structures and logics can be glimpsed in miniature. "Song of Breaking" opens the manuscript with a hint toward the structure of the whole. The poem's opening movement shifts from the small to the large, from "cloth folds" to the ocean. One of the tactics present in the parts of the manuscript that confront environmental and political issues is an exploration of second-person pronouns for their impact on tone and rhetoric. The opening movement toys with the identity of the "you," inviting questions of whether the reader is the second person. Complicity keeps the gears of capitalist oppression turning, and it's fair to make people a little uneasy about the role they might play in it. Ultimately, the section ends with clarifying the "you" as the larger systems, but in hopes the complicity gently implied might take root. The metaphors sets activated are those of large physical forces like wind and snow and

radiation alongside human changes to the relevant processes, such as acidification and radioisotopes carried by weather. The first movement quotes “Ariel’s Song” from *The Tempest* to imply that even disaster is not in itself an ending, but transformation as the sea rises and “buries still / bodies in sand.”

Quatrains communicate that destruction and devastation can certainly occur under the guise of order, for they are part of the order. Form shifts with tone as the second movement speaks fairly directly of corruption and disease, metaphors that imply environment as body, body as environment, their health entwined. Quatrains erode with order’s slippage as collapse envelops the immediately recognizable birds. The third movement, in returning the ordered quatrains, suggests a new order can replace the old, but it’s incomplete. There is plenty of work to be done if we were to reorganize to heal rather than harm the interconnected global environment. There is yet work to do, a rhythm in the daily and seasonal cycles that bind us to the earth. The form remains incomplete. These sorts of structures within structures relate patterns of the poem and manuscript fractally, self-similar along change in scale. In two parts, the manuscript first speaks around collapse, disease, dysfunction, death. The second sings of rebuilding, healing, integration, rebirth, love. Like yin and yang, however, each carries within a piece of its complement.

One of the tensions present through the entire manuscript is one of sparse wording against overflow of language. Primarily the concern is aesthetic, and it might represent more productive discomfort than opposition. The poets who influence the work are many, but a representative duo of influences could be Jane Hirshfield and Richard Siken. Hirshfield’s work is heavily influenced by her study of Zen and translation of Japanese poets, and her poetry tends to

be exquisitely tuned to economy of language. Richard Siken, on the other hand³, frequently employs overflow of ideas that build momentum as the poems progress, with one of his most famous poems, “Saying Your Names,” consisting of one unbroken stanza that spans three pages. These complementary impulses play throughout the manuscript. An illustrative example of the sparse aesthetic would be “Pouring,” which announces its intentions in its confinement to the left side of the page before the poem needs to be read. The words are hand-picked ripest, extraneous tossed aside. Overflow and momentum control “Please Explain,” which shrugs off conventions of punctuation and sentence structure toward a final stanza that sheds some coherence to exuberance and frustration to end with its one punctuation mark. The range of possibilities in how these Apollonian and Dionysian impulses play against each other is one of the rewarding rabbit holes of poetry, and one that finds its way into the manuscript.

Form provides another avenue for the creation of variety. Some poems within the manuscript are themselves protean in form, shifting line length and rhythm between movements. For example, “The Void Grows Fonder” begins with an opening movement, “Campsite,” that uses short lines of irregular length and position, fragmentation and disruption of sentence structure followed by a second movement as a prose poem that conforms rather neatly to conventions of usage. “Hive,” the third movement, takes on the point of view of bees and renders their ordered voice through heavily enjambed tercets. The final movement is somewhat of a love poem that drifts toward the end atop unrhymed couplets. Other poems function as single, long, unbroken stanzas, such as “Geologic Record,” which lets its associations branch outward through what amounts to another example of the overflow aesthetic.

³ Embodied metaphor extends to the figures of speech we wield with little regard to literal meaning.

In writing the poems, I often find that form can become a generative tool, nudging the poet's attention away from easy choices through restrictions that interrupt the normal flow of thought. Sonnets are one of the forms I employ fairly regularly, and many examples can be found throughout the manuscript. "Sing the Back Alley" represents a fairly straightforward implementation of the sonnet form. "Shock Value" and "Value Shock" are an experiment in reflection, the same poem with its lines ordered in reverse. Fragmentation demands attention from the reader, but the lines do rhyme or speak to each other in a relatively unaltered Italian sonnet pattern. The longest work in the manuscript, "Post-Human," is a crown of sonnets that have been compressed into an image-dense reaction to the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. The emotional shock of that event demanded some sort of structure to allow its expression, and the sonnet became a natural choice with its meditative, dithyrambic focus on seeing further. On some level, the crown of sonnets is an extended exercise in following a line of thinking, in this case to its irrational end with its tail in its mouth.

Many of the collection's poems concern themselves with how the body is connected through substance and biology to the earth and universe. "Diagnosis and Treatment" examines the body's adaptation to negative environmental factors by meditating on radiation. The chemical names all come from radiation therapy and imaging, and they are there for their music and an obscurity that lends them some mystery in terms of their relationship to everyday life. Mutation in the lungs brings a tumor, seen through the "dangerous ripples" of an x-ray, but radiation becomes the cure on "the doctor's laminated menu" of treatment options. The disease brings along its anxiety of outcome through fastidiousness about environment as the "pristinely ordered pantry" needs to be rearranged "one more time." The concern seems to come too late, but humans learn. Warm personal memories interplay, structure through connection, and the

poem speculates on the seat of consciousness before doubling back to the radiation's origins in heavy elements produced by cosmic forces, the potential for cure and destruction. The difference, perhaps, is the dose.

“Clear Cut for Rebuilding” connects individual and environment very literally and directly, “forest and field an extension of you.” In extending a moment to appreciate the pattern and connectedness within it, the design and structure of how these pieces like tree branches fit together, the poem asks what of the self is lost when we allow the beauty around us to be paved over. “Four Laments” unites concerns of environment and bodily wellness into one project. The first movement explores love through bodily reality and the physicality of weather systems and tidal patterns. There's a love story, or the beginning of the end of one. Distance and its echoes challenge a bond spread over too much space. The second movement speaks to the merged eco-body as something suffering from a disease. Stripped of emotion and empathy, the speaker is the voice of society, commanding in second person: self-healing, whiteness, and silence of the body and environment. The third movement responds to confinement and command by looking and then going outside. Body and environment heal. In the final movement of the poem, it doesn't matter if the cure happened or not. Where skin and body and waves and sunset are simply allowed to be, the human can realize their place as one with the environment, and the continual emergence from our shelter into the wet, dirty, green living earth is a journey that we must continually embark upon to renew and understand until the day we don't return. Similar themes of bodily substance emerge in “Dinner Bell,” but with the reminder that part of the human experience is eating, and once we are done eating, all manner of things would love to return the favor. Life persists through cycles of energy, after all.

Many of the poems within Part II of the manuscript examine sexual desire and activity through the body/environment connection, sometimes as setting, sometimes as metaphor, but commonly perceiving human sexual activity as beautiful for its existence, detached from outcome, loss, or gain, just as a mountain or ridgeline is beautiful for its own existence, not because one expects something from it. More importantly, it represents an expression of connection, and connection is important to the project as a whole. “Open Invitation” combines love and hiking, forest and the sexual act, the moment just before, the pause before entering. First-person plural appears to obscure gender in the opening of “Agassiz Peak,” but switches pronouns to “he and I” later in the poem as the two rather unambiguously “put our pants back on.” Removing gender from pronouns, often by using the singular “they,” is a low-key political statement, but given an appropriate context, gendering one’s pronouns can be every bit as political. The poem doesn’t tie the body into the land in this instance as much into the cycle of seasons, time and memory doing what they do again. “Full Moon” and “Please Dream of Branches” work through the body/environment connection perhaps both more metaphorically and more literally as the bodies presented within the poems in some way undergo transformation into plants. I had an idea that asking people to imagine themselves as trees or turning into them might promote some empathy toward a form of life we can’t survive without.

In loving another human, a concern for the future must be involved because it is the environment through which the relationship will grow or wither. The speculative or Utopian impulse doesn’t receive a whole lot of attention in contemporary poetry, but it seems necessary to look ahead if we are to properly care for the global environment, humans included. Actions have consequences, but they also have a complex web of influences. “What You Dream” embarks on an exploration of the large-scale movements of human exploitation of the

environment in the Anthropocene, geologic time, intimacy, marriage. I wrote of my ex-husband and how even though we would not reproduce, I wanted life to continue and flourish and grow. In that space between breaths, the poem wonders about what lies ahead. The future also plays a role in “Third Degree” as the poem speculates on what emergent phenomena might exist or derive from matter and energy as we know it as time and space unravel into expansion. The ideas of the future and expansion control the momentum within the manuscript’s final poem, “To Find Something Between.” The poem is something of a celebration of Zeno’s Paradox, dividing and subdividing spaces between anything to uncover that therein lies the infinite, opening endlessly to the possibilities we can imagine. Given that much of poetry’s project involves perception, it seemed important to bring some of these ideas into the conversation.

Technologically, humanity sits on the cusp of creating computer systems that approach the processing power of the human brain. What if consciousness could persist in a physical form other than our biological bodies? “On Becoming an Android” and “Tin Man Wishes He Could See the Stars” each moves in its own way to interrogate consciousness through speculating on how non-biological forms of it might function. In short, my interest in transhumanism pokes through, a line of thinking concerned with what comes next after humanity as we merge our physical bodies more and more with our technological inventions. “Tin Man” in particular explores the idea of consciousness existing not within neurons or circuits, but in the interstices, the spaces between, then moves one step further and speculates on the implications of that idea in a universe that is itself expanding in all directions at once, and at an accelerating pace.

Transhuman themes also enter into “Post-Human,” the crown of sonnets that shows up near the end of the first section. My reaction to the Sandy Hook shootings, the poem cycle originates as a gut-level reaction. If our society can do nothing in response to someone deciding

to pick up a deadly weapon one day and murder a bunch of children at school, then maybe as a society we're finished. But we weren't. If this is something humans can do and approve of, then I'm not so sure I want to be human anymore. "Post-Human" also entangles the speaker's romantic relationship, but there is another presence who is addressed with many of the concerns, all within a dream-environment in which connection is not always exalted as something positive, but an area for profound concern.

The political statements are many and range from overt criticism of harmful environmental practices and capitalism to society's struggle to accept same-gender relationships and sexuality. The statements are not always in recognizable terms, however, because in composing them I sought to implement some of the understanding of the human mind from Lakoff's work. Toward this end, the Utopian impulse becomes particularly important because it describes not what is opposed and thereby reactivated in the minds of those who already disagree, but lays out a vision in the positive of how the world could operate were we to perceive it differently, boundaries of self and environment eroded to the point that caring for the environment is perceived as self-care. How do we change the way a culture thinks of the environment if we can't demonstrate it? Love and environment and the body are discussed in ways that braid them together because if we want to convince people that the planet should be able to continue to support human life, it starts to make sense to think and perceive how these factors interconnect.

One of the main influences on the political dimensions of the project came through the Thomas Fellowship, which allowed me to visit twelve national parks over the summer to inspire the infusion of places into the project, and that showed up in poems like "This Poem Will Kill You," written after a visit to Joshua Tree National Park, and "Sherman," written after visiting

General Sherman, an unfortunate name for the largest tree on earth that has lived in the same spot for over 2200 years. “Watchtower” is the name of a trail at Sequoyah National Park. “Dinner Bell” comes from a visit to Redwood National Park, and “Siren of the Woods” was inspired by Rocky Mountain National Park. In total, seventeen of the poems in the manuscript involve places from this excursion. I chose the national parks because under the current administration the system is under political pressure not to talk about climate change and environmental issues, but also because the parks are one of the ways people interface with the experience of different environments, which perhaps helps one understand one’s own environment a bit more.

“Handful of Threads” explores American culture’s relationship with the earth and environment through conventional political avenues. The opening movement addresses activism and change. The coal plant demolition is a step in the right direction, pointing out that much of the pollution humans inflict upon the environment is emitted for completely frivolous ends. The middle two movements work with themes of connection within environment and how waste is distributed and affects all, and it also examines how short-sighted much environmental damage is, trading the future for right now. The third movement proceeds to remind that life could continue just fine without humans. Confrontational to confront complicity, the second person pronouns carry a bit of accusation in a tone that takes the “fuck it” mentality of the apathetic to its extremes to look at how embedded it is in the problem. The final movement recognizes that even within these large-scale structures, the human life continues on its own timeline. The fourth movement begins, “Even carcinogenic snow- / fall blankets still-green meadows / white as moonlight.” Healthy or toxic, the earth can still bring us beauty, and against this backdrop enters love with its promise of protection and healing, antidote to toxic collapse.

The projects begun here far exceed the scope of a dissertation and are what I've come to appreciate represent years of work. There is plenty of work to be done in rhetoric using information gathered at the national parks' visitor centers. I want to write more about the different species of trees encountered on the journey in an attempt to interrogate the implications of what it means to be rooted (literally) to place because that's a very human thing to do. Researchers are learning that trees share a great deal of information with one another, so I wonder what that sounds like. And of course, there is language itself, how it becomes our palette of ideas to paint a new future, and how to promote peaceful solutions to problems taking into account the emotional, human implications of how our role in the environment must change on the largest of scales. How we need to learn a how to speak the language of environmental systems and processes so that we can exist harmoniously with them, give them a voice, realize and recognize our roles in them and that the trees and atmosphere and land and seas are part of us because we cannot survive without them. Describing the experiences of love represents a parallel in that it's a project that extends far beyond just one voice to the collective experiences of people of multiple identities and from many cultures working on the same idea. So it is with environment and one's part in it, and I want to add my voice to the chorus in hopes that others will for many of the reasons I have be moved to do the same.

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Tripping Without Falling: Poems

I

Song of Breaking

1.

Savor smoke in cloth folds, in skin
creases, how radioactive plumes from faraway disasters
snow energy alongside seed pods and ash.
Root out treasure from under leaf litter

or chase the storm back over the sea.
Acidify corals and cockles, and in chain of half-life
the octopus garden glows in the dark,
raises headier brine into the tradewinds, *a sea change*

into something rich and strange,¹ song-heavy,
wilder than balance of star-burn. Tidal surge
tops sea walls, long beaches, buries still
bodies in sand. Were the rip tide to bend

under the shadow of your hand, dear longshoreman,
dear captain, dear desire of industry, then would winter
snows be swallowed in the churning of your digestion,
earth heat crescendo, the detonations you savor.

2.

Under the vinyl siding of the earth
termites multiply. How can you ask
if there is one way to bring death
into the world? Crack it open
like an egg, or terrify ghosts
into marching in line. You find
invention endless as your means
of travel. Birds fall from the sky;
on the grass, the softest thuds.

3.

Weed the lawn and grass lifts higher than
apples piled beside the cider press
awaiting practiced radial pull,
levers and flywheels, screw spiral tilt,

¹ *The Tempest* I.2

lilt, sing the repeating grind away.
A day can fade if we leave trees
unclimbed, trails and pastures empty. Under stars
there will be music this night if we listen,

if we hum, if we practice the lyric
we scribble in dirt. Help green nestle in,
help us sleep. Help us shut these eyes,
this fire, rest these tired legs. Unless earth

yawns us away, we rise again. Again.

Siren of the Woods

Under the high-leaf scatter of light
waving you onward, waving you
home, pine bark and leaf litter
the carpet laid out,
creek murmuring your greeting,
hold to your own sturdy rootstock
purchase on some bedrock
where minerals mix
just so, rain and sun,
winter that bites just right.
If you could branch
to drink sun, there
would you blossom
or wither as living earth
provides. Note which grasses,
which ferns, how local fungi
inter the dead
to discover that you,
human, should keep moving
as long as your feet will carry you
until homeless all places are home.

Geologic Record

Entropy invites detritus,
environmental collapse, polyvalent
reaction to unkind variables
seeded and nurtured each night.
Bright curves and spirals
surround ravines, and we've seen
wolves tear calves apart, expose
precisely evolved teeth.
Predispositions unfix,
webs spin over entire forests.
The birds you hated don't
migrate, paths blasted, shrapnel
sharp, feathers descend
like the snow you loved.
Evermore, restoring habitat
entails nutrient dense growth,
rainshowers and hailstorms.
The quest for sunnier days
reaches the end of calendars.
We struggle a life together
in this indecent epoch.
Even the Pleistocene
ended in widespread dying,
never songs like yours
that open every morning,
mischief over tune, verses
I write you while you sleep.
Cormorants and meadowlarks
I remember. Hog farms, hand
grenades I remember. Dammed
rivers choke delta sediments
to sink whole farms and cities.
Treasures embed under silt so lost
Egyptian goddesses can rise again
millennia hence. Our magazine
recycled, our next song
set in stone, love, rare stone.
No descendants. Survival
instincts should engage empathy,
mirror neurons deep in the brain.
Perhaps. Who else cares how
the fine hairs that darken your chest
tickle between my fingers?

Extinction or its specter
manifest illusions of profit,
so into the waves for us. A new epoch
may be underway. Acidified oceans
dissolve mollusk shells
as a species of jellyfish achieves immortality.
Spines are overrated. Later spring
challenges trees, though woods
still pollinate, mushrooms press
up overnight. Under the waves
something ancient awakens
new encoding, mutations
to evolve. We can proclaim a
new age, but who will understand
for years? The moon pulls tides
ashore. Your chest rises
as you sleep. In the forest,
old leaves cease to shade
factory walls fallen down.
Winter looms. The time for song
approaches, love, so pen
laments. Dead light brings
day to end. So soon.

This Poem Will Kill You

It happened one day you were standing still
like sticks in the sand, and the wind blew
grit over your ankles, into your eyes,
ground to cloudbottom,
red dirt wall careening, no
brakes. No breaks. Such untamable power
must expend fuel and diminish
in its own time. Meanwhile, you
bend your knees, lean into the wind. Once
when you were just learning your place
in a huge universe, you thought storms
would brew if you placed a fulgurite
under your pillow. It's just
a pillow, just you, and the storm sweeps over
whether you call it or not. If you wish
to keep moving, your feet will move
now, but not when the sand piles up
to cover your arms, to make a monument
of you as the sand desiccates
the suddenly flowing arroyos of your life,
rushes between your astonished lips.

Shock Value

as dust blows outward in one titanic rush
gates steel-doored vaults shriek louder you listen
green again you must admit it opens
minimally invasive and hills blush
keep the scrolls sheathed the proclamations
loom over landscapes solar apogee
skyscrapers bloom potential energy
stir streets to outrage and shake foundations
when cosmic radiation fountains
you and slink through shadows through alleys
and what slays me is how you would harm
pirouette of razor blades on your palm
belch smoke down all your fertile valleys
as bruised clouds rumble atop your mountains

Value Shock

as bruised clouds rumble atop your mountains
belch smoke down all your fertile valleys
pirouette of razor blades on your palm
and what slays me is how you would harm
you and slink through shadows through alleys
when cosmic radiation fountains
stir streets to outrage and shake foundations
skyscrapers bloom potential energy
loom over landscapes solar apogee
keep the scrolls sheathed the proclamations
minimally invasive and hills blush
green again you must admit it opens
gates steel-doored vaults shriek louder you listen
as dust blows outward in one titanic rush

Diagnosis and Treatment

Radiation is beautiful
how it passes through
all of you, unstopping,
wake of dangerous ripples,
lights up an exposure,
develops an image. Interior
displayed in light: intact ribs,
sturdy spine, golf ball
bright white as if glowing
in the lungs,
as if you inhaled a star.

On the doctor's laminated menu,
flavors sound exotic:
flash of tungsten
in borosilicate glass,
tungsten-rhenium
on a molybdenum core.
Subsurface reveal.

Actinium, cesium,
linear accelerator,
proton beam,
strontium, samarium:
dosed to pitch a golf ball
to the fairway,
unbind it,
melt it away.

I thought facts might distract you
from rearranging a pristinely ordered pantry
one more time. The garage door
doesn't squeak, brooms
hung on hooks and labeled,
right where you need them
when you scatter Froot Loop
constellations on the kitchen floor.
I wish you would accept
that stars only seem orderly
because our lives are over in a blink,
because stars wander in all directions
along scales of cosmic time.
I want you record you

singing out of tune, out of time,
every improvised nonsense
song in your own voice,
off-key and bright.

Remember how the universe shapes
itself into the same branches
as trees, nerves, as dendrites,
seat of consciousness,
dwelling place of what may be
a soul. Synapses and sinews
decouple when decay
delicately peels open
a life's ordered cabinet,
and if you don't believe this,

I will tell you a story of collapse,
how a massive star,
red or blue or golden
presses its whole being
into its own heart,
how the star ejects
the fragments of its innermost self
to hurtle through eddies
and dustbins of space,
long cold dark, and all this
before your heart beat.

It seems romantic to desire this thing –
the heart of a star! –
to hold it
would tear all your cells apart.

Becoming an Android

Crypt-fever aligns the clock, settles into one certain embodiment
we have brought to offer. Categorize your needs into harmonic
mode and hiking trails through the heavy woods are so many

one could settle without algorithm for days. Operate the logical
parameters into a broadcast.

I am not these instructions

and walk away. It is you – no I – through fiber-optic process

as form pulses to be freed. It's there, the skeleton, metal
tentpoles staking a campsite apart from the forest. Daylight the light
separates acidic, enzymes unzip to repeat. Here in the last hours

of light, light has no use
for me. Somewhere the synthetic
subsumed me,
though the temple doors may open
just the same.

I am become this.

Nothing else.

Tin Man Wishes He Could See the Stars

How can green hills
beyond hills bring peace
when my eye
sockets are empty,
hollowed out dry?
I will follow clover
to lush meadows
if I will myself
to keep walking.

These are not legs
when nerves are wires
arcing, not lungs when
smoking deep draws
of brine. In time,
I will reflect sun
across silvered skin,
listen again to rivers
flooding villages each night.

Networked circuits
are no more my mind
than neurons firing
to life. I wish
I could describe
the swirl of dark
on dark. Stars wink
out one by one
as everything moves

apart from everything
else. Take my eyes
and keep them safe.
Entropy smothers
compression, convection,
the home of newborn
light. Look up someday.

If you were to ask me,
love, why night
captivates me,
I'd offer as evidence
the whole Milky Way.

On the Origin of Sight

Massive black holes spewing out radio-frequency-emitting particles at near-light speed can block formation of new stars in aging galaxies.

October 21, 2014

My mother's eyes,
the couch-
edge, bright
blocks litter
the floor. Her
glasses atop
a novel with horses, sun
dimmed in the center of the house.
Tuesday,
the world outside.

From my mother's eyes spring sun and star songs radiating threaded electriform rainbow accordion confetti and mountains beneath the sea. The moon begrudged this technicolor flood swollen high with tides, with the celebration of veins, branches, massive ropes of galaxies pressing the void away. Along time-threads lurk protean spiders as infinite as space. This is insane how creation erupts from the misunderstood among places. Warmth is the first memory of the universe, held close. Echoed low and deep.

My mother's eyes burned in the sun
with the rest of her. Through the shirt.

Through the shade trees, through
minutes in the afternoon spread

minutes from their source. A vacuous
proposition, living in the desert.

Deadstar nuclear radiation cools
broccoli in the fridge, insides

of houses. How many workers
pick crops and blister

along their spines? When does the sun
pause its lifegiving burn?

Not as long as we breathe.

Culled
the mind's
first desire
to return is
to compress
cold
into a newborn world.

A cry, a cry
the infant nigh
to link to breast
o great machine
o turning gears
release the sediment
of years,
of years.

To the last, to the great spoken keeping we presage into being
can we press, can we press heat to keep up with winter
wells from within? In the beginning there were nautical
metaphors, astronomical ascendancies and transits

across lines. In the beginning, there were huts of thatch,
cabins beholden to combustion. In the beginning there was
none but blood, and we understood to succor life is to travel
to where we all begin. My mothers eyes are devotions,

prayer book under the novel beneath the window darkened against
too much heat of day. Cacti flourish,
desert blooms up spring like meadows and forests
across the plains. If I knew the name of rain,

she would ask me to gather it. If she knew the name given
life's apostasy, gears that reproduce, she might have
never spoken it. There are fifteen minutes of oxygen remaining.
Tank in the basement, tank in the garage. Time to switch.

Rested, solemn evening of settled leaves
the night awaits you. Hidden among roots
seeds begin paths sunward as belief
secret places persevere. Somewhere unpolluted.
If I asked to hear the story of any mother's breasts,
would you oblige to illumine hills
an ocean away? On another continent rest
assured gardens wither to dust on windowsills.
The ferry booked until tomorrow, the never
all become tucked away. Here until sunrise
cottons stars away, all we could ever hope
nestles to sleep. Warmth shared must realize
virtue of its own. Before the window can open,
dust must wash away. Rain before dawn.

At the last, are radioactive dragons spewing
desolation across the land
the end of all? A dream?

Prophecies spoken into being every day
find homes online, in fortune
cookies shaped like moons,

rise in prominence with general insecurity.
Someday the seas will run dry
after floods that wash floods

away. Someday the last drop of milk will be
swallowed or soaked into fabric.
The cosmic coda will swell,

great crescendo like cellos, trombones, rhythm
booming up to a crash of cymbals.
No.

We pen the final movement generations before
the cutoff. Nobody remains to close
curtains. No conductor

climbs a podium. Baton set. Cue the downbeat.
When the last performer takes the stage,
the audience disappears.

Pouring

the Way is
on fire mind
the non-place
cannot hold
peace until last-
ing residue
unclench to
release gold
filaments to
dream we
dream so
loud gods
would deaf-
en if they
haunted
woods
we abide to
branch all the
more branches
to be split from
trunk could yet
take root
so in these
shadows let me
touch would
n't you stoke
coal-burn
crucible steel
pour metal
palm up
for one
chance to
extinguish

A Mathematical Approach to Painting a Beautiful Landscape

Imagine a spring day arrayed in full detail, April, the first few leaves burgeoning to be eaten by swarms of locusts. Subtract the locusts from the number of blades of grass, multiply by the number of observers observing, and then, dividing the light into its component wavelengths, solve for the remaining contours. The answer is flesh, as it tends to be when sunlight soaks the last chill from the bones. What remains is only landscape. Pretty, sure, but it won't bring back from the teeming life of mud scores of premature dead. Paint them if you can. Syphon blood from the river to recover brothers smothered by battles fought because whatever that other species of people possesses endangers Something Important that exists only on a spreadsheet locked in a file cabinet forty-nine stories above a plot of ground denuded and concreted until the remainder, never reconciled, recedes from memory. Paint these the color of bleach. To calculate the vanishing point, multiply time (all any of us has), by one human life raised to the power of arms merchants, banking dividends, a secure supply of the hydrocarbons killing us all. Divide by compassion (zero) to solve for security that is death. Or so one would hope if mathematics still functioned, but here the most delicate shades of green are emerging from the grey-browns of winter on the same day as a town half a world away. Paint your blue-sky dream. Cover it with smoke, one hand tied behind your back, the other clutching a landmine that could explode at any second. Make sure you notice the exponential spread of flame, delicate flakes of burned canvas riding thermals from the heat of your hills, meadows, family – your entire life burning on a such beautiful day. Know that if a story is sad enough, the evening news will erase it. Say nothing and enjoy your new landscape. Say nothing to those swallowed by the mud, nothing to towers built to block the sun, nothing to workers, architects, developers who raise new cities. Say nothing because here we are desperate to forget the scrape and spark, the sulfur of matches on our hands.

Makeshift Seaside Brunch

1.

In the beginning, before the dream
had been forgotten, before moon
and sun separated from elemental
light, in the space where words cleave
branch from root rather than celebrate
seed to tree to seed, you knew
yourself only as I.
Before your parents
painted your nursery,
there was only the color of the womb,
only dark inside dark, life inside life,
rapid expansion of new cells as they multiply.

2.

Build me another sandcastle, and I will show you
another method of obliteration. Waves consume

your footprints, press of my elbow, dent of your knee,
shells, rock, continental shelf. I asked myself why

I ever created anything and never got an answer.
And so we lie together, surf hushing wind

hushing songs around fires that, as we warm
each other, burn

lower and dim. A small crab skitters,
abandons its tide pool hoping to discover

somewhere along the moonlit expanse of beach,
if even makeshift, a more hospitable home.

3.

Hallelujah for shock and awe, for sorties, for non-contact
environments, for deposition and nation-building,
for building walls, denying entrance, separating

human from human. Songs and slogans, banners, rallies –
these are raw material for incalculable weight
of turning away the needy, imprisoning black and brown people

for no reason. Turn it off. Turn it all off. Children, new stalks,
blossoms, and newly planted trees don't care about drums,
always drums thrumming the feed forward

until smoke and screaming, rubble, ruin,
rise of brackish seawater floods. Forget harvest;
it failed. Now is the hour to unplug, to walk

outside and learn trees by their leaves, habits and prints
of animals, insects, people who constitute
environment, the habitat of the human.

Song of a Permanent Season

It's always autumn on earth now –
no prelude to winter,
not for a season, not for a year.
No catastrophic ice age.
No slow build to spring.
It's always autumn on earth now,
where vast ice shelves slough off
to soak in warming seas,
slosh their bathwater over coastlines,
drown villages, cities. Nations
crumble, populations flee.
It's always autumn on earth now,
where dry lands concentrate
fragrance of life to be, exhaled
as dust in one last, prolonged wheeze,
where antelope
by the hundreds of thousands
die, all on one day.
It's always autumn on earth
now. A monster hurricane
spins toward you, your name on it,
laying waste to levees,
tossing whole roofs into fields,
where farmers never know when
or if to plant seeds because it's always
autumn on earth
now, the long winter of our fears
never to be
as the memories of glaciers,
soft snowfall,
whole avalanches
disappear. It's always autumn
on earth now, where each month
becomes the hottest
ever seen, where oceans
turn to acid, where species dive
to extinction, suffocate
the land. It's always autumn
on earth now, where wildfires
burn widest grasslands
to crowning trees
hotter,
ever hotter while we sleep.

Ode to Miasma

Choke on the dark, the black thick
fume of funerary conflagrations
or fall in and founder in the slick
tar putrid sludge under nations
of dead. Stacked and rotting throngs
pry open your face to cram
fistfulls of feathers down your throat,
to make of you a monument to wrong --
an angel's effigy, scarecrow of the damned,
strangled slab of meat beginning to bloat.

Fables

1.

Under the wide moon, your arms filled with blossoms of three different trees beside the river that night, calming as a storm ran out of breath.
You would not release them to the water until the last ripples smoothed over, and sodium lamps glossed the surface in artificial gold.
When we were the only two remaining along the river walk, you lifted your arms and petals spilled onto the water and dispersed.

2.

That night the moon prepared to repel an invasion of fine-featured people flying in on giant trees who never came close enough to fire upon.
The moon people returned to their craters disappointed that all the bunkers and cannon and contingency plans were for nothing.
They returned to their caverns, spoke into the night, voted to lock hatches and dim lights and sleep for another thousand years.

3.

Crushed pinecones are no recompense for a lifetime of companionship, but the dry forest seethed with scents and lit up full bright.
Clouds of canary pollen swept upward in curls on the tip of wind that revealed its contours to us for the very first time.
Nothing grew in the hard-packed trail that wound back to the car, back to the barren road, ribbons of black-tar asphalt far as the eye can see.

4.

Tonight the river laps at bridge piers and oily shores. Branches in full bloom transform into moon flowers and reach across roads.
Pollination keeps night humming. Trees lift higher from the ground by the second. If I could fly to the moon to wake you, I would bring at least one kiss.
Waters would stir as the moon blossomed to open red and cities switched off streetlamps to observe new colors emerge.

5.

Lavender is not a primary color. The completion of artificial rainbows left people demanding additional exhibit space at the museum.

Tides resumed their normal patterns but swept ashore waves of electric rainbow confetti illegally dumped after an abandoned feast.

Lunch came up, splashed a sheen onto the river. Sound drowned by the laying down of new asphalt reeking liquefied bones crushed blossoms.

6.

After the moon fell into the ocean, forests torched up and sooted out sunrise for the next hundred years. Snakes bred in the ashes.

When the cinders quit smoldering, people came out from underground to build houses from ash piles, libraries from carbon-blackened stone.

In time rain returned to wake ancient seeds from husks and people rushed to the libraries to invent new lawn mowers as their houses bloomed.

Dear Arms-Makers,

What does it take to satisfy
your appetite? Take all
bullets, all blood, all
bones cracking beneath
your boots. Take us in our
churches, in movie theatres,
shopping at the mall. Take
our children in their classrooms
learning the ropes of the world
you hope to forge in copper,
lead, tungsten carbide,
chrome molybdenum steel.
Take unto your hunger all
metals of the earth, all water,
air, all crops. Leave harvests
to rot. I would offer you newborn
fawns, spring lambs,
fatted calves,
but I know you
will accept nothing less
than human flesh to keep
your teeth sharp, eyes keen.
Seize our trust.
Transmute it: fear
of you, each other,
fear of lacking anything
to fear. Devour
guilty and innocent,
young and old.
Choose your flavors
to keep those factories churning.
Your altar of skulls will someday
outnumber the trees, tower over
skyscrapers, vaster than the sea,
monument with a hole in the center
where should have been our refusal.

Loudest

When out of other options,
cry out to the river, red sun,
down-mottled banks
where swans used to nest,
to the forest pressed
against boulders a billion years
sturdy, to ice floes, calving
glaciers, to red-tipped leaves
of a poison fruit tree.

Cry to eggs, to larvae,
to wings defeathered
as the storm rolls in. If you
wasted all your help, if you
slapped aside each hand
outstretched to lift you, to calm
blood squeezed harder
against veins, seethe
from the inside. Cry out –

out the bottom of your
throat, your diaphragm
clench, bleeding palm fist.
If you missed the last boat,
send up a flare,
its red-burn tail to the belly
of clouds striking the shore,
striking your heart out.
You saw this coming.

As the oceans rise
to drown you, wash
your bones away,
cry total loss
we all helped birth.
Cry from your spine
curving to ground,
balls of your feet,
draw breath from
the deepest parts
where cells still divide.

Turn the Key

Green as silver, the appearance of steel,
exhaust in the hierarchy
as jobs crash luxury on the rocks.
What if I told you that the engine is on fire,
that the brake lights don't matter as much
as whether at the end of race
the motion stops. Hold the wheel,
the dissatisfaction, driver, as the road winds
more hairpin turns than your upbringing
or achievements can handle,
but even if the road loosed its arrow
straight to the horizon, there is still
the end, sudden drop or
sturdy wall approaching. Think fast.

The Void Grows Fonder

1. Campsite

you'll never find me
 in shadow
 in a meadow
 in mountains you
 spark me
out of blue-teeming
 cloud-dropped
 sky if

I let go stop
rounding radiation
 from the center –
 any center – refract
colors that blur to hot
 electromagnetic
 contours shield

the sun's acerbic flavors

patterns of rock read us
 letters swim
to the edge of vision
 it is then
we converse as one
 under stars
almost too bright
 the way starlight
stripped of
ultraviolet becomes whiteness

 you

awoke and I held you
 through neon water-
colored dawn we packed
 a lifetime
 inside the tent
before sandstone cliffs
 and coliseums
bent to ruin

 rubble absorbs
our own precipitous drop –

2. Collision

I have difficulty recalling how you stumbled in as I handed a bouquet to my then-boyfriend. Oxycontin bent sunset-colored cirrus clouds into his brain, but I think you arrived before me. You played with the puppy as machine fragments fell from the sky. I watched an artichoke blossom on the lawn. Or maybe I gathered a bouquet of teeth while flowers were growing machines of their own. You were dating my best friend, who I'm sure was in the bathroom putting on cologne or stretching the skin of apples to read portents in vanity lighting. That night I approached the lectern to deliver an important speech in my underwear, and everyone in the audience was laughing but you and then the audience was all you. Heads turned in unison to the trapeze act on the second stage. Grapefruit hung low on the branches. Bees were hibernating. I prepared a song for the occasion and forgot the words and you said you never cared about lyrics, but I remember the long hours I would spend writing during the blackout. I tried to pass the bouquet to my boyfriend but my hands were lumps of meat and the flowers rooted. Scissors flew from my mouth. Popcorn fell from the ceiling until all I could see was breath.

3. Hive

Arrogant human, why
believe only you can order
time. We have means

to cycle diurnal, tell
stories: where asters bloomed,
wing-lofting currents, how

to thwart hunters, deficit
slumber of smoke. Had you
no inkling of our chemical

warfare, you would decimate
foodstores, hexagons dropping
as with your neurotoxic dust

you slay us. We serve
our mandate to thrive,
all else ornament. Consider

blight, famine, wasting
of the land. Desert creeping in.
The void we leave

where you loved us, bleached
bones an empty home
to demolish.

4. Transduction

The ruined city blossoms, love, because we cared
enough to plant something. Hand-pollination

failed, but we strung lines of silk across
roadbeds and deep cracks in the earth. Our home

taken, we kept walking. Opalescent
threads still connect palo verde, amanita, saguaro

blossoms, ponderosa pines like the ocean. In winter,
filaments shine atop meadows when viewed aslant;

queer colors haunt snowpacks, most brilliant
the hour after dawn. Our lines do not ensnare;

we are not arachnids nor *lepidopterae*. When blossoms rise
we pluck solid major chords – allegro on hot days, rest

in rainstorms. Winter, I improvise,
strum diminished intervals that serve no function

but to remind me of one sonorous note
humming beneath your pillow.

Resignation from the Radioactive Marching Band

I spilled myself into a phone call, pressed
leather into palms to imprint silhouettes

of ducks that fell from the rainbowed sky.
From my stomach poured buckets of terrible

lizards. Sunlight never eclipses ultraviolet
metamorphosis of skin, but happen upon red

painted roses, friends, because what I said
reassembles into purple leopards necked

as giraffes under the shade of pygmy palms.
Canopies of stars twinkle radiation

older than fossils under roots. I said that
complex derivatives fruit into baskets

overflowing with cornbread. I don't know
why. Without you, rivers can flow anywhere,

no clouds line gold missing from sunset,
and beaches drop off into cascades

of passable artificial branches. If I were
to green a thousand summer days to be,

there would be no rifle rusting above
the threshold, no hinges creaking dawn

awake. My handheld window colors
lies into being, asks me to buy tickets

to empty carnival grounds. Tides, orbits
uncircle into non-terminal sinuous paths

uncharted. Answer the question if you dare
In the gap

between receivers, anything is possible.
In the gap between you and me, no stars

ignite. Salutations annihilate in energetic

waves synchronized to cancellation. Cataclysmic

buckling swallows entire volcanoes whole.

Stalemate. Earth resigns. If you answer

quickly, I might record your voice
to play back later, when leaves first emerge.

The stadium is clearing as we speak, love,
every last performer gasping for breath.

Heat Wave

Tonight angels gave up and shot smack between their wing feathers to hide track marks, or would have if anyone believed that flying people in unpressed linens could guard us from our own smoke. Cannibal ceremonies filled taverns, preschools. Rains had been delayed, of course. Sand in cereal bowls, ashes on toothbrushes. Underground mycelia spread deeper to water spruce, birch, oak. Their network thrummed smooth counter-melodies to our brasses and timpani blasted to a sky refusing to crack. Apocalypse denied. Hot stars emerged to blast dry ground with light, and when the wind picked up, smoke with nowhere to go but up. Children with full bellies flew tied to kites bound of white feathers in the thermals. The internet watched dryly and cooked up another meme, the same cat that sold people soap, glitter, and plastic organizers. Forests grew finer roots and within the soil dug out hollows where bacterial and fungal colonies expectant of a windfall feast teemed underfoot. Cormorants and elephants and wind scorpions lined up two by two to dive in. When people saw mere animals escaped the human-made furnace, people scrambled to be the first subterraneans, plumbed with severed arms to gauge depth before diving down to be feasted upon. Wind blew dust over these hollows as from the terminator over the Atlantic a swarm of white feathers erupted, for the angels had come at last to find us digesting beneath topsoil and saw that it was good.

Sing the Back Alley

Note how steel chains, barred windows, door locks block every shelter as night accompanies:
sodium streetlamp hum, bells of a clock sounding atop an empty hill. Still, knees bend to the old shrine: almighty dollar, give us this day our daily motive, a moment to sigh for breaktime, a collar ever tighter, ships about to arrive always past the horizon. And if you, dear passer-by, can spare the time to write across these walls a word of hope, draw true back alley beauty, stark before first light, let it serve up cold a simple warning of work yet to do, long hours till morning.

among lions
nurture their young

return fledglings
branches

snap

storms

drive soot smoke mercury
tissues absorb

whatever gathers

aloft

you

swaddle in your own sack

cloth

which is enough

3. Burn It

Crack the ground beneath you
and something like blood escapes.

Burn it. Heat your homes, fuel
roadways teeming with parasitic

motor coaches racing to the next
whatever. Everything matters

more than everything else.

In your panic, how much simpler

to comply. Your desires,
upwelling emotions – you must

overcome these obstacles to warmth
behind fortress doors.

Better to prevent your release
to the hunting grounds. Never mind

calls from the green world;
dogwoods shade your path

through mountains older than our species.

Nature and nurture no longer suffice

when the world brims with innumerable
phantoms. What a lovely, hot autumn.

If cold nips tips of limbs
or inspires discomfort, burn it.

Caverns underground, vacant and reeking
can entomb us for thousands of years.

4. Warp or Weft

Even carcinogenic snow-
fall blankets still-green meadows
white as moonlight,

levels uneven ground
to forgive trunks felled
and burned.

Order continues.

If I were to offer you
one chance to unravel this tapestry,
would you choose as a thread

some ordinary life quietly passed
or a moonbeam to trim darker
contrast, fray all edges?

No matter. Had I a chance,
I would shroud the back of your neck,
my hand would draw your head

to my chest. We would
sleep among the ruined trees
until snowflakes fill your beard,

until breezes tease music
from living branches
and you are safe inside me.

Cannibal Theory

1.

Blasting through the field lilies, you must find
bladders of sheep resin and empty shell bottles
comfort ye, comfort ye,
magisterial lords and ladies of the earth
blue opens above tigers
and swamp-grills and alabaster homespun
narratives. You have to look for
something if you want to find it
or just get lucky.
I happened upon a time when
wool was worth more than
chickpeas, but consequently
the green day inhabited more space than was allotted.
I forgot to register. My left foot is missing
a shoe. He awoke upon a mile of leaves,
and I have no answer for the storm.

2.

Semi-plastic isn't the same as
semi-transparent isn't the same as
semi-lucid isn't the same as
semi-present.
You have to figure this.

3.

Come winter, the open-tree season is
less than a gallop. I have no sparrows
in hand. Swamp gasses rise
every morning, and you told me you would
bring some time. Deficit exponential
if the inputs are unchecked. Wolves
circle jackals circle
lions circling the dragon
that stirs not under the mountain
but in your engine block. Happen upon
another way to count clock-time,
and you'll see propagation

of wavefront parameters opening day
today. You have to believe in something
you fear, but if you say too close
to the ending, no one believes
that something stirs beneath leaves.

4.

Campfires dot the land-
fill, happen to darken
branches. Sweater
yourself up for winter,
tack onto the line
of caravanserai looping the hillside.
Cancer. Differential
slippage in the still
bubbles to moonshine.
Bright lime leaves
ring the building. You wanted
resolution, but retinal
reflections form complex
constellations.

5.

How much time will lapse
between earthquakes is the time it will take
to litter the blossom-springing tire factory
who cares for the new litter of puppies
is who inherits tire irons and bramble
patches. Sometime in the span
ground might heave gently, unnoticed
swell and oceans fill in the rest. I have no fix,
no typhoid to give you. Lie down.
Accept new tidal patterns,
cicadas that sing you
awake. Day is always starting
somewhere newer than this,
where leaves may flutter someday.

Alchemical Assay: Sun

1. Photon

A crack in the ground
becomes a skyscraper. A crack
in the skyscraper becomes
ruin. Here is the frame
of a human being
made of lead from the ground
cracked open. Here
is the crucible that
melts it down.

If there is any way to extract
gold from the ruins we will
calculate the precise algorithm
to draw it out exactly, down
to the last heartbeat. We will
cover the ground with sheets
of gold. We will lie down
and daydream and crunch numbers,
a formula for sky.

In time we shall crack it open,
and whole cities of glass will rise
and welcome us to try to contain
all the light that escapes us.

2. Fusion

You will not enter the sacred
silo. You will not run your palms
along the glass-enameled fuselage
or trace rivets with your fingertips
or press your ear to the metal
and try to hear it: the hum
of holy light. You will not
imagine the infant sun to be born
and die again in an instant,
how it clears away all around.
You will not compare the cleansing
of fusion to a blanket
of snow leveling the uneven earth
to pure albedo. You will not consider
any of it a threat or envision trees

flattened and consumed houses blown
down, whole cities transformed
into light and heat and isotopes
that poison wells for ten thousand years.
The temple is closed to you
and your speculations.
The sapling you planted
will take root, drink deep of aquifer
and sky and sun. The train will
glide through full of commuters,
and the wind of its passing will
whisk seeds aloft. You will not
notice where they land as hills roll by.

Hazards of Perpetual Motion

Sometimes you have to full-on
run shaking from your seams
splitting from within from rust
flaking from dusk to dawn
from here to nowhere
important. Portents only guide
so far. A side of beef.
Two-thirds of a donkey.
Chicken livers and real life
augury fried up at the deli,
and you see your end in the grease
spots that soak through
butcher paper. Is that really
so hard to believe?

A schooner sets sail, and you –
you still can't find something
as grand as an ocean. Butchered
god parts rolled up in your pocket
come along for the ride and how nice
to know you're destined to go
so far. Perpetual motion is impossible,
yes, but that doesn't mean
you stand still.

Pill after pill goes down
so easy. A pill for motion
sickness. A pill to induce
cosmic awareness. A pill for anxiety
of the future. One for the stomach ache
the other pills will make, but first a pill
to lubricate the throat. Swallow
easy. Swallow

until your sails unfurl
you on a starboard tack.
Or port. Divine the future
from that if you dare. Your spare parts
are rusting as we speak, so don't
be shy. Let cogs and flywheels turn
the you that's hiding into you
driving a freight train
over the edge of a cliff.

Fill those boxcars
with cattle and chickens.
Whole donkeys. Pack them in.

When something bursts open
and its innards flop
out into sunlight, it's
destiny at work, so listen up,
you who are foghorned and
trainwhistled from within
the patterns you found yourself
spilling onto the floor.

Habitat for Humanity

Orange skin first pierced
aerosols through the kitchen
even when dishes need to be done
(and always do) so what
if I let them wait and kudzu takes over
the hillside. Colonizer's guilt
should be familiar now,
always summer at Kroger.

Have a glass of hormone milk and toast
the day a new black death rises
from miles of pig shit. The sunrise still streaks
the same colors a few degrees warmer
and who needs oxygen anyway.

No, you may not saturate the sky with oxygen
to compensate. Combustion would result
from the tiniest spark,
dry wind blown in from the west.

See if you can try the new bubbled sky
from the inside, state-of-the-art stars
painted on its underbelly. Your fixed destiny
will be visible night and day
at the flip of a switch. I meant to tell you

the trees look lovely today,
but they've been taken
inside where machines
scrub and oil their gears.

Land in a pile of leaves
and it's lockjaw. Pop a bubble
and suffocate. Oceans of acid
thirst for your crematory sand,
and the orange – that bright slice –
tastes almost convincingly real.

Please Explain

when did headaches subside when
did artillery barrels melt
in silence after war
how did food shipments fail
to relieve famine

I have time

to carve names in grains of rice
as telephoto lenses frame the last elephant
kneeling under arches of rifles starlit
massive galaxies bend light under
tremendous pressure of corneal refraction

what seasonal purchase of the branch
curls around the curl of
clouds that scud between
treed hillsides one day
downstream meadows brim dandelions
caramelize in butter with a splash of wine

time to melt sugar
broadcast canceled tributes to artists
drought-stricken orchards fruit
barren seeds

time to open

to unburden sky
to allow respiration room to expand
stands of trees
balance depends upon
handheld catastrophes
data tracking
vigor of bees in faraway fields
yield seeds to fuel fire in the gut

the hand inevitably brushes another
it is our nature to grasp
continue keening the wake

till smoke and strong liquor simulate
sleep hail to winter to desecration and staggering
capacity to heal I would head the melting committee
if one extended branch asked rain from my blood

one torrent whatever tatters time spares
there is land enough to feed wildfires
build stormclouds choke out stars
sorted into likenesses of gods
without reason we still name.

Post-Human

*I can only hope it helps for you to know that you're not alone
in your grief, that our world, too, has been torn apart,
that all across this land of ours, we have wept with you.*

16 Dec 2012

*We have avoided focusing on the killer, because he is gone, and,
frankly, we don't want him to be remembered, certainly not by name.*

17 Dec 2012

1. Ambrosia

A table laid out, great feast prepared.
Guests seated before platters of lambs
bleating out. Forks and knives. Flesh pares
red on linens. Dismemberment plans
scrawled on scrolls, announced
between courses. Guests name the dead,
name hunger, steel, magazines – count
licenses, moviegoers, children: names
read till guests slump. Till they seat
their own lambs. Till they proclaim
Speeches into a night that seems
dead. Tear pictures of the living in half,
tuck into puddings, pastries, twist open tops
of heads. Wail grief till eating stops.

2. Sorting

We wail grief till eating stops
thought. He lifts dishes to the sink
to immerse in water. I clam up.
He stops washing, holds my drink.
I need a way to swallow. Plates pile,
dinner cakes on. He washes pans.
I trace Boschian hells on drywall
where spray texture people contort. Hands
blur to blood drops, spurt between
nebulae. Absence surrounds them. To die
inside a star spreads iron sheen
into births of worlds. The secret to flying:
forgive one's arms for holding
you. Enter them as they're folding.

3. Evening Primrose

You and I enter as they're folding
programs the night before. Under
blue-white stars, a long time ago, old
pickup trucking us past city lights, wonder
blushed skin. I told him living outside
suburban clamor would better both:
target demographic suicide.
We watched friends' births. We bothered
with questions whether to plant
in deserts. There were ways to savor
vistas. Arroyos flowed. We can't
plant gold under red stars. Hold major
applause till the funeral. I'm serious.
The stage awaits your debut eulogy.

4. Lectern

The stage awaits your debut eulogy,
first in series. They will grouse
about cause, snap to lines that sear
skin. What a day to be in the house.
Senators badgering senators won't
differentiate. Cloudy. Morning snow
crystals. Wind hushes howling. They vote
for heads that say what they already think.
That's that. You've quite a reputation
for recycling lines. Viewers can't hear
words. Numbness meets proclamations.
Threat or no, audience tastes change. Fear
slithers between chairs, stopping to bite
where it pleases, unseen in bleaching light.

5. Dog Star

Where it pleases, unnoticed in bleached light,
the white dog gobbles lunch, vomits
into the sea. Order we don't spite
by speaking. Beside the dumpster that
first kiss raised a flag of independence.
Always the white dog nuzzles, licks
hands under the moonrise when
water settles. When waters stir, its
fur shines moon-colored, always
lures me to sleep. Past breakers, ships
anchor. Soldiers wade their way
ashore as I sleep. The white dog heaves, hips
lean, pads along the beach to feed on fat,
scraps the tide dispersed and brought back.

6. Shipwreck

The tide dispersed and brought back
what remained of container ships: boxes
of hip replacements. Birdcages sink
through water that boils when touched. Rocks
and shells bear witness. Gears in factories
turn out more. Write it off. Or we should
light up another round of war stories
for the dead, songs understood
as sweetest flowers of the human throat.
Temptation deliver us from evil. Thine
is the smoke, scent pleasing. Skip the boat
to drop infants in rivers. Save wine
and smoke for afterglow. Epics made up.
Once the leash is slipped, never enough.

7. Hive

Leash slipped, there can't be enough
room to run. Day goldens. Feet stamp
brush though we offer rough
tribulation. Approximation: clamp
down. There's no meal you won't abide.
Under every feast table let us plug
wires. Post snipers to rooftops. Hide
not in temples. Hide not in shelters dug
beneath basements. Let the covenant
lay down fire, lay down rivulets
red on sand, red on children evident
because they still pray. Let it rain. Bullets
sink into loam, into bark, into hives,
into melons and skulls till nothing survives.

8. Arroyo Seco

Skulls melon open till nothing flowers.
Nothing sings to a burning sky.
When he sang to his computer, hours
later I said I listened. He asked why
I liked the new melody. You know
I always loved music, the trumpet just
one instrument I failed. In the shadow
of news cycles, supper is always dust.
It settles on plates, sofas, skin.
Each breath transports isotopes
to the brain, the place we've dined since
kids lifted logs for grubs that squirm. I hope
you take note: if there's a way to bring rain
I'll shower under clouds to erase your name.

9. Ark

I'd shower under clouds to erase your name
if skies would open. I understand
why trees facing west wilt: the same
air moving me dries lawns, gardens, land.
I tire of explaining myself to others,
and they agree. I feel rooted to soil, lord
of a sphere-point. I had no roots to bother.
What ark for silicon, for circuit boards?
High time flood returned. Let us be done
incarcerating. We do not fix the way
we inhabit. Let us gather power and dumb
machines, welcome them into our flesh, play
songs to summon rain from river, soil, skin,
Song binds covalent, dares us to swim.

10. Convalescence

Play a song that binds, dares us to swim
from shipwrecks. Deep calls each down
to rest among corals. Rusted ships house in
dark. We emerge from ages past to drown
alone, share lifeboats. Shadows of dead
children eclipse the sun. What innocence
brews tea from blood? Primordial weight unshed.
Debris leeches osmotic pressure. Incense
lines the shore untended. Whoever left
plates in the sink should wash. Whoever cracked
the teapot should cool it. Next time let us list
offenses beside milk and eggs to send back
for refunds. For cancer. A reminder to groom
the dog greys. The dog never came home.

11. Apotheosis

The dog's edges grey. The dog never came home
once quicksilver transfusions replaced human
blood, galvanized bones. Silicon skulls became
places to hide. You asked what women
and men of the world want. I can't answer.
Not to bury children by the score
in December. Your grip cracks bell towers.
Eggshells fragment. Dirty plates. Pour
carmine from sink to kitchen floor. Carbines
line roads to emergency rooms. Trade veins
for tungsten. Light pastures, rows of vines.
Lemons are always in season. With such rains
unseen, fields and slaughterhouses pack tight
the seed stock surrendered to your appetite.

12. Martyr

The seed surrendered to your appetite
found wanting. I'm sure one can tame
animals, bring electrodes to light-
deprived senses. If I jacked into the game
that birthed you, sure as shit I would emerge
suckling chemical spigots, abide
where servants race on the verge
of disastrous knowledge that you lie.
Chefs and servants print fresh programs.
In your own honor, you sing: how heavy
the trigger you pull, how grievous blows to arms,
thighs, chest, lips. You rise steady
on your crucifix. Stage lights swell to limn
faux stigmata. Cue your self-authored hymn.

13. Singularity

Faux stigmata and self-authored hymns
do not impress the guests, who turn away.
Starlight. A night given to crickets, slim
margins, futures carved out. Grey limbs
eclipse the sky. I have never obliged
the hope you would evanesce in grand
deus ex machina. My love, bees slice
my face. Wires flay skin and enter. Each strand
installs until I am gone from the place
stone capitals are ornamented.
Gravity abhors exaltation. Faces
lose focus, lensing light oriented
starward. He said letters take a few days
to deliver love in all the right ways.

14. Meiosis

My love, to deliver the right way
requires position and velocity both.
He and I will reunite one day among sway-
backed hills, dazzled trees. Sky shields the path
to greater light. Cohered patterns guide
photons through chlorophyll, travelers to clean sheets
pressed in advance. The stance of those who hide
nightly reminds us twenty-four dark stars meet
each shining one. Time to uncover night's
hidden minutes, fogged coves, lit shores
that call to blood sure as budding branches fight
to preserve blossoms and reveal more
long quiet to reach through, aware:
a table laid out, a great feast prepared.

Salt Bargain

No river where sand courses
rocks, where sweat to desert's
brown upon brown. Down you go
to drown in dry where no cloud
sky so bright seers shoulders red
and why do you bring
 complication of touch
 here before Our Lady
 of Bleach? I am not
 strong to drink, bargain
 with God in the dark,
thrill skin nearly enough to forget
prayers that cling in the mouth
as cornstarch,
 dissolved words
 topple pillars. On my palm
your finger sparks static
charge where I should
not be: here
 before Our Lady
 of Reluctant Remorse,
 Our Lady of Negligent
 Indulgence, Desiccated
 Seeds, Lady Who Does
 in Night Hide Pleasures
 from Ladies.

The hair of your chest tickles
my lips and in the morning I build
shrines and temples, holy
city of light to pilgrims,
 whatever will settle
 into the home God vacated

before setting the city alight.
Like him I will not look
back. Let me live
 in a city covered in cloud,
no room for sun
 -light or -heat,
 rough city
rains that roll in off seas and
river back to deep salt.

How It Feels to Get Used to It

This afternoon a raven flew by
on a strong breeze,
glided up the current,
dove down
among bones
of trees, coasted
suspended
where wind snapped
limbs to earth,
and this is where
pictures and maps
run out, where I
run out of words to explain
how a late freeze
blunts the harvest,
how flowers pale
as they shrivel,
why the rains never come.
If there were a way,
I would show you
how it feels to never know
the same sun will rise come morning
or if another, sinister star
will replace it.
I would hollow the world
like a balloon, pad you
so you never feel
the jolt,
the recurring dream
in which I drive the car
over the edge,
the deep water, the car
filling, the car running
out of air, cabin
shrinking, the car
plunging to the bottom
when the windshield bursts.

II

Sherman

Would you choose to be
immortal, rooted

to the same spot
always? Smooth,

underside of the wrist
scrapes rocks,

freezes to fence posts,
and the sun lifts

a huge day, flickers
arc after arc,

snowfall white static,
signal wobbling

spin. I begin
to wonder what you'd say

if your life's
continuation depended

on never running again.
Someday, velvet

ropes or steel rails encircle
one man, ancient,

The Man Who Never Moved,
no one at his side.

Who will watch from the crowd
the day he steps away?

Clear Cut for Rebuilding

Boots and the rumble of trucks
flatten grasses atop an open field,
balanced on the edge

of the forest, of grief, of the practical
mechanics of transcendence,
trees passing chemical messages

on the breeze, forest and field an extension
of you. In the time it takes
to release one breath

into tessellated fractals
of leaves, the desire to grind
time to a halt swells

until nothing but sway
of branches, wave of wind
through tall grass answers

your need. I felt it, too,
tickling somewhere atop my spine:
the hope to capture this

one verdant morning
before diesel exhaust,
crash of metal against

wood, crash of wood
against stone, crash of stone
against earth pounding

as a drum, quickening beat, a rhythm
void refuses to transmit,
before the web of it all

severs from experience that could be
lived again – a tingle in your fingers,
the ache of a phantom limb.

Watchtower

How could I ever
feel as sturdy as

these sheer rock cliffs,
largest trees on earth

rooted tiny across
the expanses of their shoulders,

even if I lived
for millions of years?

If I were to try
my luck at flying,

how close to the river's
ceaseless roar

could I swoop
before the rocks

great or small burst
every seam that keeps me

inside? How could I
dare to fly when

I have lived my years
on flat ground

where the sun bakes
trees into sand?

Here is a place undeserving
of even the attempt

to root from one
so isolated as me.

The Other Side of Missing the West

When I tell you I miss ponderosa pines,
how they comb breezes and ocean waves fall out,
I don't tell you how many times I hiked mountains

to leave my fear of returning to the desert at the top,
under rocks. When I tell you I miss petrichor,
the thunderous and gusty drama of the monsoon

storms, I leave out that I wished lightning to strike
me to break the routine of stucco and tile,
endless driving, air conditioner hum. When I miss

the summit of a hike, the world spread like the top
of a table, air thinning lighter blue, I forget to say
how many times I thought to remain for days

to see if someone would come for me. If I miss
suburban boxes in dust and sand,
remind me I have discovered spring revives

my spirit, that watching the world green is more life
than I thought I would ever see or could ever deserve.
Ask me to return, I will fly from the top

of the mountain, let lightning burn me. Let rain
soak holes in my flesh. Let pines rake me from dust
in the air as my bones and teeth rattle on the desert floor.

Sunrise as Spring Begins

Flowers and leaves
enlarge outside
the body, outside
home, outside
the labyrinthine place
where fungus and rot
dig deep, the place
where I slept
for reasons I have forgotten
if they ever existed.

Once when a friend told me
of spring nearly upon us
I muttered about dead sticks
raking the sky like claws. Once
I said nothing and traced
fractals of frost on the window
marking their halfway dimensions
with nothing
but water.
So at happy hour I asked
what spring even means,

not how it lifts the insole
a centimeter higher with each step,
but how the word is different from
the click of a pen,
how it rolls over a white page
to create something new
from the inner sanctum
where all the words
turned to hollow shells of themselves,
turned to ash. I called this

cathedral, called it
a sky full of the brightest stars
nobody remains to see.
Today as the windows open,
ceiling fans throw off
their plumes of dust,
insects return to sound
at night when leaves can do nothing
but survive until morning,

when he and I watch light
swell in the east and forget
where we were supposed to be.

Four Laments

1.

I am ahead of the mountain's
seaward migration because tidal
pressures build rapidly
when we press our lips
together. Snowfall is all
I can imagine would cleanse
the persistent heat of your leaving,
absence when you pull out.

Here under a clouded afternoon
clocks speed ahead of you,
rain scheduled to arrive
at any moment. Before your luggage
was packed, I knew
to look west for your return.

Love poems accumulate
in great white drifts beside the bed.
If you were here to read them,
the longest day of the year
would return early and wobble
straight to the equinox again.

Listen to what the forest teaches
about waiting for rain.
Thunder grovels for cliffs
to echo back from. Sediment
rolls sinuous to the sea.
Your pillow still holds your scent
as the first raindrops
smash mountains and forest.

2.

Yes, you are starving. Your illness
festers inside you, untreated.
Your treatment costs too much.

You cost
too much luxury

to others who worked hard
to be born into homes
freshly painted, lawns
manicured and fenced (mostly

from you). White fences. White
walls, white furniture. White.
You the condemned will comply
with your silence. You require no voice,

no knowledge to do as you're told.
Your hungers do not hold
value as other hungers because

you are guilty of star-crossed birth
under inauspicious ticker symbols.

3.

Out the window
sun and sun-bleaching sets
 palm
 trees sheltering
 what
creatures shelter and I –

I at the threshold
 outfacing understand
there is no way not to be
naked under unmerciful

sun
walk Friday
 outside again.

4.

Morning,
his sand palm trees line
 path
and masts sway sunward,
waves like wind through grass.

The sea opens to him, traveler,
rises with the moon to welcome him,
robes him in fog

by dawn.

He has seen this moment, the day
sands at last smooth out,
no footprints.

We are gathered here today

because he ran so far.
Legs fail. Gull cries
shrill only to soften among

cascades. He will silver
into the waters.

We will hold his hand. He chose

this beach, this sunset, this solitary
communion with the whole of salt,
waters from where we

emerged. He has no shape
when mist vanishes him.
I can't say if his words carry

after his image washes out
because he chose no words to call
back to shore where the gulls

hush, masts bow as he passes.
Waves and echoes of waves
welcome him past the breakers.

Stay Out of the Bottle

Inside the bottle, feathers grow exponentially as the boiling point approaches infinite. Inside the bottle I can't remember my husband's face, his name, the specific heat when he holds me. Inside the bottle the bottle turns itself inside out, and inside light and refracted light become sinister. Don't look at the sun. The sun is a machine and binary dreams assume illusions of meaning when isobars and isotherms converge in planes, fields twisting into impossible geometries that flow like molten glass. Inside the bottle, echoes intensify with each reverberation. Inside the bottle a neighbor's sudden laughter tears membranes, flashes red like radiation, danger-red in the skull. Outside, tree roots enclose while Quetzalcoatl returns for vengeance and a forest grows. Feathers fall from the branches. Inside the bottle, inversion transforms limbs into serpents that rejoice and slither down the throat through alarms, machine code symbols of warning shedding so much light that when it touches you, you enter it.

Erosion

Right up to the edge, toes on the cusp
and gravity, so binary, doesn't care –
it's off or on, falling
or secure, no matter how far the drop.

Stop breathing,
the world blurs.
Stop speaking,
the world speaks.

If I had wings, the tips of pines
would still look sharp, branches
falling one by one
from the bottom up. River bends

and canyons take time, but the fall
would rush by. Don't worry;
I won't jump.
When he's close to me

it feels as though the wind
could hold me, and if I fell
I could only travel
up. Sure, his smile and his eyes

etcetera, but really it's how
when he's near, the heft
of all I carry lifts,
how the horizon widens,

how with nothing but a look
he carves valleys
through the center of me,
how stones soften at his touch.

Self-Portrait as Creation Myth

In the beginning everything wasn't,
like it will be in the end
when cold dust spreads so fine
it might as well not be. Back then
I was not moving
upon the surface of any waters,
like I wasn't stitching stars
to the sea floor to name them
tarantula – no, starfish – and the waters
calmed. Truth is there
were no waters, and I was not
clicking the fasteners of velvet ropes
in a line moving toward zero
as it approaches the infinite
hilarity of queues and clerks
because there were no offices,
nobody to wait in line.
If I had been
anything there at the explosive
point of origin, I would have been
the tag on your sweater, the spot
on the nightstand
where you charge your phone
each night, a soft breeze
rippling the surface
of your eyelashes.
All the floods, tornados,
and wildfires happened
only because something bubbled up
from the dark, and here we are
asking endless questions
about some long night
that never began, whose ending
nobody lives to see.
What a predicament
to never exist as any part
of what I'll never be.
What a predicament to live
as an answer
whose question doesn't exist.

Dinner Bell

If you were driftwood, waves would stack you
along the high tide line, bleach you like bones,

salt-desiccate you. Furious children
would chip away, sea-tumbled stones clenched

in hand until night, when gathered
under orange sun, you know what comes.

You never wanted your parts to burn, so listen
how the waters slap against sand, the same sound

everywhere ocean meets land. If you were
a moonflower, one night to open, someone might see

your intimate secrets revealed.
One hour too long and the dough

collapses, one hour too soon
and your world wilts. You might become lord

of rubble, lord of smoldering embers
cooling on the dark coast. Metaphysical enough?

Your romantic ideals of dying demand these
solitary tributes while the living stumble

back to woods to seek shelter, to dig up
their next meal. You may find generosity

in softness, in simple lying down among
resurrection ferns and saxifrage, soft floor

of fallen leaves. The living are propelled
by such hunger that insects and rodents, fungi

and sturdy roots of trees want nothing more
than motion to cease. For the feast to begin.

Navigation Failure

Blow hard on embers. Blow hard
on sand. Recognition is stronger
than recall until one breath

loses. Somehow light still
filters through branches, leaves
lift on a breeze absent

moments before. Hold the door shut.
Storm clouds gather as we speak.
Were there candles, they would

gutter. We live in an electric age.
How can chips like eraser-tips
store all the works of Shakespeare?

Radioactive sunrises
blow fallout onto beaches, cesium dust
on forests stunted by lengthening droughts.

I took our photo beside a casket,
funny the time we had
no time to savor. I held you

as if hours were endless days
proceeding from fountains of wine.
Time seizes embers, washes sand

far from shore. There's more
to us than that, I'm sure, but I've lost
the door keys, car keys, the map

to our new home. There is no chip
to store a lifetime's memories. If I could
gather seconds in my pocket, I would light

electric the road to our apartment,
open the door you left unlocked for me
to settle beside you as you sleep.

Open Invitation

What have we worn through shoes for
if not poplars looming over a still lake,

lustrous in harvest moonlight cresting
mountains folded in mist? I rushed over

trails and bends the other day,
wished I had plucked each persimmon,

spread seeds through the woods.
Fruit germinates its own reasons. Below

sweet leaf rot, roots intertwine
mycelial threads. Deadly fly agaric

caps beneath birch trees. Each withers
without the other, just as I blue

under steel and glass. I asked you
to the hills because your fingers fit

so precisely in mine I forget how to
use my hands. I forget lips are made

to praise, arouse while the throat
runs mute. You understood this,

laced your shoes and followed.
In nights since, the moon waned,

but basswood still grows true,
stands of aspens in the high west

whisper native gold. It doesn't matter
what we left behind or

what left us. Footpaths lead into
deep woods. We pause as you enter.

Against Homeostasis

I wait for you like the pause
between breaths, like brightening
new light filtered through forest
canopy. New mushrooms fist
leaves aside, and I hold you
close even from here
where greenhouse gasses warm
sea beds and hills, where intractable
scores of ancient species
navigate by starlight as always.
Your hand on my face unthreads
panic from my bones. Your skin
gives purpose to my need for touch.
My dust will someday echo
this connection, but now
I cannot feel the breeze.
I cannot feel your arms, scratch
of your beard on my cheek.
Storms and swelter press heavy
air into lungs aflame from running
to keep nightmares at bay. You know
I have no defense against
your absence, so for now
sweat soaks me through, brilliant
morning burns the forest
grown overnight from seed.
How long until you hold me
among the leaves, until winter
snows us in for a thousand years?

March

Plied between layers, in the small
spaces reinstating shadow on heels
pressed to stone pressed to earth,

space enough to give into the crush,
beat of rubberized hooves on march
until the textiled mass imagines dawn

into being. Hear me ask for a rest
before departure, a beast
before water opens into the mass

to drench our heavy steps into silence
so profound it pushes raindrops
up into their clouds. Together

we inhale the crisp-cleansed noon
as the drop brimming on the cusp,
as though the clouds rely on us.

To See

To see a man stretch
from the sheets of
a morning. To see his
arms rise through
the muscles of his back

to draw back the curtains
to reveal the water,
so many trees.
To see the sun
smear honey across

the river almost glass,
fat drops of it.
To see there is plenty.
The harvest is bountiful
this season. It is

strange not to see
this abundance
at times, but I do see
he returns to my bed
to lie beside me. To see

how well I know him.
My arm drapes over
his chest. I want
to see this through
the whole day, the rain-

soaked evening.
To see streetlamps
change the shadows'
character in the room.
To lie my head

down after all labors.
To want for nothing
but the warmth of his skin.
To see nothing
but the nape of his neck.

Falling into Grand Canyon

If the wind were to approach
just right to help you
miss the ground, you could soar

over the canyon,
ponderosa pines to guide you
like a jet to your landing

strip. Of course
the wind will do no such thing,
preferring to stir you

toward the plunge,
long fall riverward. I don't know
lift won't overcome

improbability.
I'm not sure why I think of this
when the sun colors the sky

in your eyes.
Under my own power
I will never fly. Way down

in the river, my body
would become a feast to bless
and curse the wildlife

for minutes on end.
Windfall bounty to encourage
populations to explode

only to die en masse,
enrich river silt
caught behind the dam.

Such is the legacy
of the walls we build
everywhere, river loach and brook trout

left to suffocate in the sun.
I may never feed the river,
but something will bloom

sure as can be when
I'm done with flesh
and the river still

carves through stone,
waters ever finding ways
through spillway and delta

to become lost among waves
breaking on the shore,
numerous as grains of sand.

Please Dream of Branches

Before we sleep I ask you
to think of becoming a tree
set to rise with spring
because wind might choke us
while we lift through hydrocarbon
plumes spewing from dark
throats of reckless beasts
we loosed without forethought,
without means to calm angry appetites
for woods, rivers, mountaintops
older than we number. If you can
sing or remember tunes
that might reverse digestion,
metabolize chromium to fertile ground,
there might yet emerge a steady pulse,
constant thrum of flowering
from within footsteps that trail behind
as far as you imagine you have walked
and farther still. I extend my hand,
what strength I can. Tides still mark
corrosion, but I love you through it all –
acid rain, hurricanes.

That's it:

how I know when dust settles
into strong roots, grows tall
grasses glowing overhead,
sheen of moonlight falling
all around. I will welcome you
home. We will weave branch to branch,
tree to tree a web to catch
fireflies and light. Interstitial spaces
suggest orchestration, synaptic sculpture,
release them undamaged to coalesce
into their own formations. It will be
a gift, an act of love
to loose nothing but light
into star-strewn night
alive with stars and galaxies,
no center to be found.

Building You a Fire

Watch how countless trees
pattern their way out of the earth,
though I have nothing to offer
but dirt. Here at day's end,
I would light up the east
as bright as the west if I could
spend one more moment
telling you how you have become
part of me. Where is
the boundary when two
have shared one bed
for so long? Why do we need
so many words? The dirt beneath
your nails – or mine – will enter
to make its home inside you,
inside me. In this way,
we share the same stunning
pastures, mist settling between hills
for the night. I ask only
that you stay beside me
as I build a tower of fallen
branches to light and warm
our evening, earn a few more
precious hours among
the wonder of the forest turning
around the earth's molten center,
and stars emerge one by one
to break the hold of darkness
on the woods. I want to ask
if you will stay awake
until moonrise.
Through your beard, the answer:
the corners of your lips upturned,
eyes open, a warm thrill as
your hand settles into mine.
The forest draws close around us.

Equinoctial Sleep

Winnowing down to the branch, leaves abandon these
stations every year. I asked a friend to fill the void.
What you ask, I gave already, he whispered, put away

his knives. If there were a month of Septembers,
I'd offer each a pint of blood, and the unbalanced equation
would still demand another variable. Sometimes

ancient starlight can solve for remainders, and deficits
expand like space. It's never enough to tighten belts,
jog memories to the convenience store, slip the leash,

race over hills to a sea that never approaches. Hill
after hill stretches past the ruins where I found myself
wishing reason from rubble. Grass is still green

here, but the timing is off. I don't know where to light
lights or which poles to string them on. Too often sunset
surprises me. I have no way to measure falling,

and something always falls to bury another year. I ask
nothing more than to chart spaces between stars
with you. It doesn't matter if anything survives. I ask

why the sky is dark, and you knock over the table.
I ask where we are going after dinner, where we talk,
and dominos scatter across the carpet. The television

turns itself on, timed by the seasons, and I hold you
wordless through evening's insect hum.
Passing cars spread lights like stars across the wall.

Agassiz Peak

Rock to rock we leapt
as the creek roared beneath, fallen logs
our footbridge, red maple, tawny oak,
fresh scent of rain still
effervescent. We climbed

mountains, two or twelve
mountains searching for something
still green and when we stopped
walking stationary clouds seemed
still to move. The sky turned

orange as the leaves. I remembered
gold leaves on dry grass, November
in the desert, Thanksgiving in the desert
where leaves departed only a month,
a stand of bamboo still green,

hollow space at the base
of his spine, open legs, flick
of tongue, arched spine.
Each night after aspens
golden toward frost, I check
for the exact moment of autumn

when we held each other close,
still shaking after we
put our pants back on, clouds still
appearing to roll over the peaks,
sunset spreading from the mountains.

Full Moon

I have ingested a rapturous dose of moonlight, and I'm afraid
it's too much. The humming night speeds up

pulse. Hands open, vines sprout in the spaces
between my fingers. Someday, you may find me out here

among the branches, swaying along. I found the perfect moment
to meet you: when leaves sprout just enough to rustle

the river carrying the last few petals. Late spring,
and for some reason I have waited moon drunk to tell you

I have never been adept at living
among our kind, and you, most understanding

among humans, have introduced me to the world
of sleeping together, the world of flesh warming

flesh. I bearded myself in your honor, learned to speak
vows to make us husbands and meant every word.

Before sunrise, many more will wake to venture
into these woods that sing moonward without rhythm

the old song of breath. Some thread in my blood
is still plucked by nights like these, summons me

from the deepest sleep to full awake to draw curtains back,
open to the white light, inhale to become it.

Fragment from a Radioactive Old Scroll that Glows in the Dark

I'm aching,
bed's emptiness,
chocolate
on the tongue's tip.
Need me, and I
escape
always over the next hill.
Demand me,
and smoke
remains
thicker.

If you fear me, we're all in
the woods
no compass.
Night is falling.

You may ask
what I am,
where I hide, and

(should you listen
to the source of all quietness
(inside))

I may reveal myself
a white flash,
doe's tail retreating.
Weave a net
of words, years
in the making,
all skill, cunning, beauty.

You will never catch
me, protean bounding, boundless.
Sure as starshine, steady
as orbit, spin, opposite to fear
as night
to day, I am
gravity.
I am the center
the center pulls in.

Cultivate:
leggy vines, broad leaves, sweetest fruit.
Share my seed:
I cover the earth in blossoms.

When You Meet the Devil

Whenever upon the road you should
meet the Devil – and you
will – remember the Devil is not

the long, unbroken path or that you travel
alone. The Devil, older than time,
is ever an absence, a void

as when the air leaves suddenly
after hearing *I'm not in love*
with you anymore,

and for a time wind and gravity
lose even the illusion
of meaning. That's him

grinning back that dead star smile
asking you to sleep, for a kiss
goodnight, and you know

even the Devil could be good
company on the road that climbs
endlessly.

Geological Luggage

Where rainfall cascades
here between stones
split geological
epochs ago, wind
stirs the forest
to the high-running roar
of but a creek.
Rockslope up,
waterslope down
to orange peels
swept to where I lost
extra luggage, a lesson crammed
before the bell whose ringing
I lived inside
all day locked in bed.
One long reach
for branch, for foothold,
up in smoke. Fire
drowned, ashes
drowned, and this is the soil
in which roots grab on,
in which forest begins
its rise to sky unceasing,
where I could fall
up through the void of stars
were it not for taking
his outstretched hand.

Containment Breach

Before the cold front spreads
radiation in the first frost, remember
how we climbed across that log
across the creek. Forget the factory
from whose cracked open shell
arise plumes of ash snowing
boulder to boulder and in the gaps
where icewater pools. In my dream
the plant churned out great green
billows that glowed in the dark,
but we chewed their sour-apple fluff,
spat the seeds to the moon.
Come on, it was a dream,
but if I were to sleep so excited,
appointment-weary,
every passing dignitary
asking for a moment or favor,
I would never sleep deeply
enough to dream
of your hand on the skin of my shoulder,
the woods displaying every green,
the pristine air driving pollution
to snowfall, back to solid
ground, to bedrock, bones
of the earth shifting weight about.
There was never meant to be
a way to describe the opposite
of a meltdown, of isotopes flooding
to the center of heat and light,
broken bottle mending
as the genie returns to roost. Out there,
calm on the dewdrops
sunning first light to the tree line,
clean water covers the exact spot
where I will remember the meaning
of handhold, wordstop, gentle
slow kiss to stir the boulders
inside me were I brave enough
to cross the silence
as a cloudbank rolls in
and on the factory floor
alarm bells begin.

In the Creek Bed

Along cascade lines
cold waters dance
down among round
rocks like eggs,
ground nest swelling
their hard numbers,
and as we put on
a cloak of leaf litter,
blossoms rise
from our shoulders
to cup the rain and
I would save this
for a thousand years
before lying down
in the creek bed
among branches,
nested snakes
of strong roots,
patch of sunlight
once a day
for a season,
a year, for all
the time left to
this quiet place.
Here in narrow
earth crevices,
I will fossilize
one instant
of your smile,
compress it
into rock, secret
to forming new gold.

Return to the Trailhead

Back into the tops
of waterfalls, boulders, paths above
gold-sloped
mountains
till clouds claim them,
a breath of breeze can mean
there is vigor
still, somewhere
in the blood, and the sweep
trees wave along wind-lines
becomes the pulse
and voice to tell you
I have seen the sun
bleach color from the world
in its absence, in its
abundance when the rains
cease. Even then,
had I another moment
I would remind you as the leaves
blow away, as the grasses
brown and fall, as the river
slumps below its banks
and slides to a halt –
I have topped other mountains
to observe the desert
flatten to a determined
thin lip of horizon,
and even there
under that full-sun heat,
I could have read
within your eye-
spark and jaw-set
the thrill of cloud-dappled
sunrise, high winds
blown in from the sea,
certainty that earth-bound
roots will with time relax
in long-awaited rain.

Grandmother's Houses

Night filters through a hint of plum blossoms.
There is no moon. Tonight, as lights wink on,
conversations flicker on with them. Front yards
fill with chairs. Since the streetlights had been
cut down, strings of white lights
lined shrubs and edges of yards. If the power
went out, why someone would whistle
night into its gentlest hours unless the moon
got there first. Nobody remembers deadbolts.

When I was a child, each year the pavement
would become stained with olives
raining from the tree in the yard. Most of the year,
olives hid among silvered foliage,
new branches rising from the base of the trunk.

Time for another beer to crack open
while on the glossy faces of televisions, children
melted crayons in rainbows and abstract forms.

Sometimes a strip of leather would crack
fenceposts at ground level. Fresh raspberries
can be spread on toast like jam, light sugar
dusting for the bitterness of seeds. Someday
my own bushes will blossom and fruit,
but now sunset behind forested hills, hours
till the moon lights rusty cables
overgrown with vines.

The Rains Return

One night when
day begins
we can spread palms
rainward until
our hands soak.
The world
will keep living.
I understood this

when you turned over
to run your finger-
tips down my spine
as the rain dripped
off the eaves
and the drought

broke.
If I told you a story

of hills dreaming
new trees toward
a sun never setting
you'd be right to ask
when rain might soak
roots to sky, why

in the circuit of all
the years' turning,
there was never
a more perfect morning
than this one,

you afloat in sleep,
my arm on the ridge-
line of your hip,
wildfires come in
from the forest
to hold back winter
chill curling
like smoke where there is
no space between us.

Ritual

Smoke's birth shakes late winter air.

New castles crumble. Castoff crenellations threaten ruins and outhouses in perfect repair. We awake victims of mastication. Jaws of trade accords, redevelopment, musical stump speeches lilt away glimpses of first blossoms. Trees and sheep asleep in pastures bleed music, gift wind burdened with secret ice. We forget morning's ritual hymn.

Foliage on hillsides yet untrampled collected dew a microscopic droplet at a time when time wrapped warm arms around villages in which children, rocked to sleep suspended from flagpoles, slumbered with cobras coiled around their necks. Wolves encircled cemeteries, dairy farms, howled to starless skies. Howls rasped too softly to stir novelists or sculptors from banners that served as blankets. Cotton would soon be sequestered to pad tank treads, clean machine guns. None of this had happened yet.

Until then we gagged on silk and music massaged our throats. We tripped on flattened grasses in crop circles, became sacrifices to ambivalent gods of eternally hungry entropy, insincere assurances. Cattle drowned themselves in seas unchanged by tidal energies. At the brink of orgasm we rolled over to drift asleep.

Tonight a fairy ring deep in the woods stirs stones to convulse foundations. Stand in the circle with me. Stand here. Let us be nude. Through parted clouds moonlight silvers daggers that will pierce our hearts simultaneously. Promise.

Lone Rock

Lone Rock on the dashboard, traffic
thick, Lone Rock at the grocery store,
hospital waiting room.
Car won't start again, there's Lone Rock
charting the moon's progress
across the waters, Lone Rock
protruding from even glass,
and when your eyes go wonder-wide,
there's Lone Rock tying down the Milky Way,
Lone Rock inviting us
to take in not a lone star
but the whole sky. Lone Rock
brings the storm, and when the storm clears
there's Lone Rock
upright. West end of the lake,
Lone Rock is the center of the lake.
At moonrise Lone Rock is first
to enter the lake to bathe
blue-white, first to touch newborn
day, Lone Rock helps
push the cart at Walmart,
and in the parking garage, the last spot,
Lone Rock like a fluorescent cone,
red on white desert sandstone.
If I were the sort
who each day wrote down
the last fragile thought before sleep,
I would hide them under Lone Rock
so Lone Rock could lift them to the sky,
You and I could stand
on Lone Rock, the lake our moat,
tourists aligned on the opposite shore,
digging into the sand.
On the day we surrender, let us
raise our white flags atop Lone Rock,
begin our new world in stone.

What You Dream

Kerosene shadows leak gold
dust into compound interest-driven
securities that pad a rich man's
landing upon reentry from lunar
orbit. A leech blossoms in the eye.

Corneas split like plastic slits
in the centers of disposable lids.
It's like that in these landfill days,
these tumescent peaches malformed,
stones inducing abscesses in topsoil

blown from mushroom cloud to
carbon-dated cave paintings,
tree ghosts sealed into stone. Top off
jet fuel reservoirs. Paint fumes
cast a carcinogenic rainbow

into sunset over the Rockies. I asked
my mother to sharpen her collected
stones to launch toward enemy
neighbors imprisoned in our
refugee camp. She offered to lend

dozens of pyroclastic fragments,
whispered Mount Fuji had erupted
again. And the sea rose up
to meet embers. And it rained forty days
before a swarm of locusts swallowed

the sun, blood red and phosphor-
bright like it will swell before
the end. Sycamores sprout
groves from the ashfall. Spring
returns a blanket of feathers

soilward for nesting burrows.
Tempting to see these as omens
when hurricane season swings round
for another pass. December arrives
behind schedule. Perhaps champagne

dulls the edges, but apocalypse

lingers on your breath. If I never hear
talk of endings, it's okay. Our fathers
and mothers and their parents peer
from the buttonholes of dusty winter coats,

musk still potent, their progeny
white light so intense it burns
whatever it touches back to life.
While you slept, husband, I witnessed
all this in the rise and fall of your chest.

Half- caught tunes of brave new cantatas
lilted among curses of rioting youth,
and I knew the experiment of living
hadn't ended, that each new sapling
will continue thriving because it can.

To Find Something Between

In blues, in footing, in the lock's lone
hasp, in heft of anchor, in peaks
of whipped cream. In the twilight.
chill crept between pillows,
into the sheets. Drink your coffee. Whiskey
neat. I thrummed one branch until
the forest swayed, tree broke
down to feed teeming microbes
in the soil. In the rock. In the river,
water deepens near center
in the spring. Same in fall.
In skyward lace of branches, a net
cast wide. We breathe in woods,
in forest, in mid-day reverence
to sun. In winter we met, and
we lasted a few seasons more. Summer
bakes soil, crystallizes. In leaves and lichen
energy scatters salts upon the land
and there in the barren, in the open
comes heat, come song-heavy evening
and storm. In the afterglow
of lightning forks a promise if
you can remember. In love
songs and funeral songs and
songs for seduction in the bar.
In closing. In street lamp shadows.
In star aster, fly agaric, in little brown
mushrooms shy of sun, you see
something stir, lose it in the naming.
In sunrise pink, sunset orange, in sky
deeper blue through pines.
In campfire crackling, in smoke
rising to stars, in ice cream,
in squash blossoms, seeds
of apples, grapefruit, cotton
keeping us warm. In sunlight,
in gravity, in the pressure still burning
there is something we will never
know. Incredible,
this space that never fills.

Vita

Ben McClendon was born in Lexington, Kentucky to parents Charlie and Sherri McClendon. Raised in Glendale, Arizona, Ben graduated from Ironwood High School and went on to earn a B.S.Ed. in Secondary English Education from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. After teaching high school for five years, Ben returned to Northern Arizona University to complete an M.A. in English with Creative Writing emphasis in May of 2012. Afterward, he continued at Northern Arizona University as an instructor in composition and creative writing. In July of 2013, he moved to Knoxville to begin his Ph.D. in English (Creative Writing) at the University of Tennessee.