

FROM NEAR DARKNESS:
EXPERIMENTING A WAY INTO CONTEMPORARY POETRY

by

William Brown

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Gaylord Brewer, Chair

Dr. David Lavery

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the creative process of writing poetry through the course of fourteen months, beginning in March 2014 through May 2015. These poems are organized around different theoretical influences and demonstrate an intentional course of action in attempting to write engaging verse that is current with today's publishable modes, thoughts, and forms. My purpose was to begin with the little knowledge of contemporary poetry I had, and by reading and engaging poet's work from the last fifty years, experiment my way into publication and discover for myself a positive and productive method of working. These poems are introduced by a process/contextualization essay that frames the four sections of verse with the philosophical lenses I was using as I wrote them and follows my thoughts as I put each group together. As a whole, they form a snapshot of a rigorously creative time and demonstrate a progression in thought from Postmodernism to lyricism.

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CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXTUALIZATION

1. Purpose and Conversation

This work represents a mid-life decision to write poetry. In the spring of 2014—at the age of 42—I took stock of my creative abilities and interests and put into motion a plan to not only publish poetry but, likewise, to establish an academic career to support my efforts. The leap from fifteen years as a songwriter to the daily work of a poet only required a shift in focus: to make a musical whole out of words alone. It, too, required a journeyman’s discipline, and I set aside time early each morning to experiment with, explore, and read poetry. Over the course of fourteen months, while pursuing a graduate degree, I wrote over 150 poems and published five. What is collected here, then, is both the process and product of discovery, of a concentrated effort to understand how the raw feeling of ideas translates into words and form on a page. There are plenty of “mistakes” here in the sense of failed experiments, but the value of this work (to its author, at least) lies in the progress of understanding what makes an effective poem. Emerging from a “near darkness” of my knowledge about contemporary poetry, these poems are the crucible where I mixed and grew my understanding of new verse until, at last, I had at least partially caught up to my times in the form of publication. Each one, in a sense, works without a rope and succeeds or fails more for what it attempts than for what heights of perfection it achieves. They cohere around a philosophy of trial and error as I work to find a suitable voice, form, and content for my poetic impulse.

This is not to say that I was or am ignorant of poetry altogether. To the contrary, I have read poetry most of my life, but at the time I began this project, my working knowledge only included verse up until the mid-twentieth century. Leading up to my decision to write, I had even spent a year studying and writing about T.S. Eliot (primarily the *Four Quartets*) and Wallace Stevens, which—aside from some personal reading in the Beats, some Berryman, and a fascination with Bukowski—brought me as current in the poetry conversation as I had ever been. Besides actually writing, my first task was to figure out what had happened in the last 50 years, where poetry had come, and what it was doing now. This group of poems, then, is also an engagement—or an attempt to engage—the ideas I found not only in contemporary anthologies, but by reading new journals both in print and on the internet. The chronological ordering of this work is divided into clusters of poems that represent a particular set of ideas I was wrestling with at the time, ideas pulled from both current and antiquated poetic thought. As I grew my knowledge of the state of poetry in America, I worked with my “obsessions” (as Hugo would put it) (7) alongside what I felt to be the current conversation taking shape in the anthologies and journals to produce work that not only challenges the imagination (as much postmodern work does, thrusting—as it is prone to do—responsibility on the reader for meaning) but satisfies the readerly impulse for connection and empathy (which the Romantic project put forth). What is offered here, then, is a portrait of the beginner’s business, where the foundational mechanics of a stock-in-trade are being worked out with various degrees of success, but nonetheless flying high its ideational banners in an attempt to signal its more obvious intentions. They are a story of what it means to fully invest oneself in a new art form, leaving behind rules in favor of experiment and the

calculated risk that with enough imagination something worthwhile will eventually emerge.

Like all collections of work, these poems act as a rough portrait of its author in a particular place and time. The fourteen month stretch over which they were written saw me in a daily enterprise to find what works in a poem while using that same medium to clarify developing thoughts about identity, relationship, language, and just being alive. The messiness of such a portrait stems from the clash of these ideas with each other on the page, and the reader may find contrary impulses working themselves out even within a single piece. But viewed as a progression, many of the poems toward the end serve as solutions to problems presented earlier. In an introduction as brief as this, the possibility of tracing each decision that went onto the page is next to zero, and my approach here is to account for the larger concerns that inform the product. Essentially I began this project by (as Sidney implores the “foole”) looking in my heart and writing (qtd. in Brown, Finch, and Kumin 18) only to discover the endless complexity of that dictum. It would seem, in fact, that the problems of a rational mind interfere perpetually with getting at the resonant language of the heart. But where some of these poems succeed is when the pressures of thoughts, ideas, and philosophies—with which my portrait is rife—break down into simpler, more direct expressions of faith and fellowship. These moments round out and soften a collection that is, admittedly, overburdened with a greenhorn’s cleverness and his desire to flash intellectual muscles. But I had to work through these problems myself with very little in the way of feedback, so it seems productive to view these poems as a snapshot of that process, complete with all the diversions and wanderings of the author. On the other side of this work, I am a better poet; but it took

exactly the kind of experimentation presented here to find even the fundamental footholds in a subtle and difficult art.

2. Early Efforts: Reacting to Postmodernism

As I began this project, I had to recognize that I valued poetry for many reasons, the most salient of which was its expressivism and its power to unify ideas. Features of the Romantic project as well as the (neo-Romantic) early modernist impulse (Baym, 2646) were large in my mind, namely the value of the self as moderator of language (within a poem) and the impulse to construct a viable “meaning” from words alone. Through my reading, I discovered, however, that contemporary thought and verse—especially in its avant-garde examples—had, as the Postmodern movement, strayed away from such stances in favor of an oppositional ethos that decried the “centrist values of unity, significance, linearity, expressiveness, and any heroic portrayal of the bourgeois self and its concerns” (Hoover, xxxv). The prevailing thought of my times, it turned out, was working against my natural inclination to use the page as a place of residence for the “I” which held my experiences and ideas as well as its constructional motive to build up a world of foundational signifiers around which any reader’s life and thought might be challenged. At least according to contemporary anthologies (The Norton’s and Oxford’s especially), the poetic landscape was largely filled with a pluralistic worldview that gave little if any attention to the concerns of empathy between an author and her reader, or of any communion between human beings at the intersection of a poem. Poetry, as I understood its prevailing condition, had divorced itself from any semblance of a rhetorical situation, largely abandoning the voice of the author in favor of forms that

reflect “a culture deeply skeptical of any single version of reality,” a place where “multiple versions of reality compete” and “ideas of unity and totality are suspect” (Baym 2646). Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day*, which transcribes the *New York Times* from September 11, 2000 as a poem (Hoover 700), became the signal work that defined authorial distance as absence for me as I began to write. Despite some of its persuasiveness, the Postmodern became an obstacle to the fundamental drive I had to put forth my words in a world where I was clearly a synchronous “something,” despite the diversity of centers from which I worked.

What I discovered in my reading of the most current verse (in journals like *Poetry* and *Rattle*), however, was that some of these ideas were being directly challenged. Although there remained a level of inaccessibility to even the shortest or simplest poems, some writers had begun to gravitate toward a contingent view of unity (especially of the self) that gave meaning to the limited reality of a conscious center, a “self” in the now with its meanings and consequences in harmony—no matter how fractured—with a unity that serves its immediate purposes. The universe of the poem was not merely a surface, but a depth not so distant from a familiar version of human experience in which suffering, love, and compassion form the fundamental conditions of existence. Unanthologized poets such as Melissa Broder (216), Linda Bamber (28), and David Radavich (43) each put forth poems in current journals that speak to a different sensibility, one of a self-in-relation to the other of the world, whether it be nature or another human being. Poets such as these, it turns out, are speaking today in ways that reflect a more traditional view of verse—in the sense of narration, authorship, formalism, and sincerity—all the while maintaining a lower case “t” version of truth that empathizes with readers in their

contemporary uncertainty about the absolute nature of anything. By evidence of the internet's avant-garde—or anything goes—support of radical experiment, the Postmodern can still be said to dominate the overall landscape of verse being published now; it is not hard to find, in other words, a poet working to dismantle even the most plausible centers of experience. But editors are beginning to find value in work that returns us to a familiar ground of being, even if that ground will shift in future iterations or even within the same work. Language poetry is being replaced, in my estimation, with something different, something both cognizant of poststructuralist and deconstructionist ethics but antithetical to a view of the poetic art as somehow (as Stevens might have attested) an isolated act of mind (or imagination) alone in a world of its own making. The author has, in a sense, returned to a balanced place in the sphere of art, meaning that it carries the burden—even as a narrative “I”—of being in league with the world around it, taking its identity as a form of interaction rather than of circumscription or distance. Regardless of where this trend leads, at the time this collection was being written, I felt a complicity with it enough to champion a sense of authorship in my poetic landscape. I wanted, in other words, to push forward similar trends that bucked against a deflating and—to me—otherwise spiritless movement (postmodernism) in verse that denied even the simple act of expression because it failed to inhabit an absolute perspective.

My early efforts, then, tend toward this simpler mode of expression, one that at least carries reminders of a constructed form familiar in older forms of verse and carries with it a narrative voice unencumbered by notions of contemporary erasure or displacement. Nothing absolute is posited here—say, for example, like the transcendental signifier put forth in Eliot's *Four Quartets*—but, rather, everything is

contingent on place, time, and personalities existing in real space outside the language itself. The poems in this section, I believe, succeed poetically in the places where this “real” is most evident in everyday imagery and situations. I anchor them with natural imagery and only sidestep into artistic self-reflection (“Fustian”) to point out the deictic quality of language—that regardless of the deconstructionist notion of a “text only” universe inside the poem, that language is always “pointing” to this or that either in the physical world or in the emotional landscape within us. Like Williams advocated, the ideas in this section are in the things of the poem itself rather than in suggestions of abstract language. The narrative voice, which is important to me as an author, at least attempts to deny the irony prevalent in the Postmodern and refuses to question its own sincerity. These poems—more than any in the collection—refuse to destabilize themselves and, as far as is possible in contemporary verse, assume a stable moment in which an unstable self finds a contingent center.

3. “Flowers”: Turning Toward Hybridity

After my initial burst of writing and reading, I began to realize that I was—to my own detriment—limiting myself to lyrical modes and old-fashioned approaches to form that did not necessarily satisfy or hold the breadth of ideas I was wishing to express. My early efforts were in effect the residue of my love of writers like Frost and Millay, whose conservative and traditional forms typified the Romantic impulse evident in many modern poets. My natural inclination to use the page as ground for self-expression found some relief in writing lyrically, but after encountering different approaches to the same impulse across a vast continuum of current publications and anthologies, I began to

wonder if some of the techniques and forms that I had initially derided as postmodern could not be employed to a different end. The sophistication and complexity of works such as Lyn Hejnenian's *My Life* (1980) and Michael Burkard's *Fictions From the Self* (1988) seemed to be addressing philosophical concerns similar to mine but in ways that were neither strictly Romantic nor postmodern. I began to notice, too, that current journals—despite often representing a particular “school” of poetry—contained a large number works that didn't fit neatly into any strict category, but were a meshing of both formal and experimental methods and contained ideas that fluctuated (even within the same poem) from a unified view of self to a fragmented and immanent view of identity. I started to become convinced, in fact, that the simple “self” I was wishing to put forth on the page was in fact a more complicated matter than I had previously imagined. I became convinced that it was worth exploring a more radical approach in order to discover the limits of what I could do with form and syntax to express the more complicated views that I was developing. How could I get across the idea of an oscillating identity? One that is both sincere and at the same time capable of assuming inauthentic roles?

I discovered Swensen and St. John's anthology *American Hybrid* (2009) at this time and immediately gravitated toward the poets and ideas which it included. The two camp model of American poetry which centered around strains of both the pastoral/Romantic as well as the avant-garde had, according to the editors, begun to break down since the 1950's and had progressively developed into its own unique strain of poetry that “hybridize[s] core attributes of previous ‘camps’ in diverse and unprecedented ways” (Swensen xvii). As Swensen contends:

Today's hybrid poem might engage such conventional approaches as narrative that presumes a stable first person, yet complicate it by disrupting the linear temporal path or by scrambling the normal syntactical sequence. Or it might foreground recognizably experimental modes such as illogicality or fragmentation, yet follow the strict formal rules of a sonnet or villanelle.... Considering the traits associated with "conventional" work, such as coherence, linearity, formal clarity, narrative, firm closure, symbolic resonance, and stable voice, and those generally assumed of "experimental" work, such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspective, open forms, and resistance to closure, hybrid poets access a wealth of tools, each one of which can change dramatically depending on how it is combined with others and the particular role it plays in the composition.

(xxi)

I gravitated toward the poetry of Norma Cole, James Galvin, and especially the long broken lines of D.A. Powell. In each writer, the experimental forms add sophistication and depth to the content, especially the sometimes fragmented narrator speaking across the syntax of physical white space on the page.

The "Flowers," then, represent a radical break from what I was attempting earlier. As an experimental sequence, I first of all engage a semi-procedural approach by deploying an external language—the language of flowers found in books and on the internet that associate certain flowers with a quality or concept—to anchor one particular

“meaning” to the poem; each piece contains the name of at least one flower and includes its associated concept as part of the underpinning of the work. Likewise, most of the poems eschew a strictly traditional form by either breaking the line internally, refusing to adhere to the left margin, or breaking into prose sequences. Conversely, I maintain a type of traditional formalization throughout each piece by utilizing stanza and section breaks in a more regular and recognizable way. Voice, too, becomes more hybridized in these pieces in the sense that sometimes it remains stable and constant (nos. 3 and 9), sometimes shifting between speakers in different stanzas (no. 20), and even sometimes shifting voice line by line (no. 14). Topically, the “Flowers” deal with a range of ideas. Principle among these is, again, the nature of identity as both a contingent center and a flexible container for differing roles; they maintain an undercurrent of Romanticism by valuing the subject as their principle concern, while—in a trial and error way—searching out the complications of such a belief by playing with the stability of point of view, syntax (which holds the speaking subject together), and subject matter. They deploy psychologist James Hillman’s call for a return to the psychic structures of Greek polytheism by deploying mythical figures as a method of viewing identity from a distance, and they allude to poetical characters such as, for example, the Lady of Shallot (no. 19), whose confused identity and death serve as a mode of questioning stable identity centers altogether. As the sequence continues, the poems reach an apex of complication in no. 20 then begin a process of simplification, where in the end, the shortened and more familiar line (excluding the breaks) serves as the signal feature of a collection that began with long lines and sentences. What we come to at the end of the “Flowers” is a more pastoral content with experimental breaks within the line as my personal form of

hybridization—one with a stable syntax, but questionable unity. Altogether, they represent a long period of experimentation with form and voice that, I believe, culminates with ideas that I will cling to down the road in later efforts.

4. “Self-Portraits”: The Confessional Possibilities of Metamodernism

As I reached the end of the “Flower” sequence, I wanted to experiment more with contemporary ideas but in a different way. What I had discovered was that the narrative “I” was a complex trope and that maybe I was looking at it with too much microscopic care to use it effectively in a poem. There was, in a sense, less conviction in my previous experiments than I had hoped to put forth as an author with Romantic sensibilities. If I was, in fact, hoping to posit some type of stability in the synchronous experience of a self, I may have to reach forward toward conclusive expressions of identity that exist in types of poetry like the confession. I was intrigued and inspired by Charles Wright’s poems that he simply titled individually as “Self-Portraits” from his 1981 collection *The Southern Cross*. Like other poems in his book, they dealt with the particulars of what held his personal identity together, whether it be personal narratives or the things in his personal purview that surround him. I decided to begin an experimental sequence in this vein that would explore my own personal landscape in a more direct way, bringing the narrative voice as close to my actual experience as possible. Unlike the “Flowers,” these poems would deal with my actual life to the degree that they reflected a more day-to-day experience from the “inside,” as it were.

Simultaneously, I was searching for a philosophical landscape that would accommodate my ideas. What I discovered was that ideas were being put forth beyond

postmodernism, ideas that at least try to account for the current situation in art and society in its present condition. Not only have thinkers posited concepts like post-postmodernism, but a few commentators have generated a view of contemporary times held under the rubric of metamodernism. Luke Turner, in particular, has come up with a *Metamodernist Manifesto* (2011) that thinks through several concepts pertinent to our view of art today. The principal thrust comes from Plato's idea of *metaxy*, which defines an oscillation between diametrically opposed positions but includes the possibility of an "excess" movement that transcends the extremes. The main tenet suggests that we exist somewhere between the ideological extremes of modernism and postmodernism, claiming that as a society we must seek to oscillate between these poles as a contemporary form of authenticity with the hope that this movement will reflect the new type of presence we find in culture and art today. It is likewise an "informed naivety" that includes both the modernist ideological certainty with the postmodern irony that claims no certainty whatsoever. For Turner this is a "pragmatic romanticism" (2) without any philosophical certainties or positions other than the movement of oscillation it requires. As I began to think through these concepts, it seemed clear to me that the notion of a confessional poetry in today's milieu might be considered extremely naïve given the pervasiveness of information today, but it also seemed to lend itself to movement toward the modernist pole. As a "knowing" oscillation, confessional poetry which includes as its narrative trope a relational "I"—a speaker, in other words, whose self extends beyond the boundaries of his own ego to include the world around him—might be pertinent and reflective of our contemporary condition.

The “Self-Portraits,” then, attempt to poetically account for my experience in the world without flinching at the details. What remains pertinent, however, is the developing relational quality of the narrative speaker. In this sequence, many of the poems are framed as direct address, and they are in fact written to a real “you” in the world. My idea is to situate the speaker in a direct relationship with another (as well as the world around him) in order to temper the “I”ness with the “other.” My thinking here is that—given my metamodern stance—the naivety of pure confession only puts the bourgeois ego on display; but to frame the poem as a direct communication brings the other into the sphere of the speaker’s identity and in fact shapes and molds it. It creates, in my estimation, a type of empathic identity in which the self as narrator is accountable in some way to the “you,” making the “I” much more nominal and the “we” much more indicative of the expansive self present in the poem. The narrator must oscillate between his naïve expressiveness and the knowing otherness that receives his speech. They are not love poems (explicitly), and several do not work in this vein at all. But the principal development in this series is the working out of this relational quality between the self as writer and the subject of his address. As experiments (which accounts for the bland scientific titles) these poems attempt to solve the difficulties put forth in the “Flowers” by making the questions of identity personal rather than distanced. I shine a light on myself and, in the poems, discover that I hardly exist in the vacuum of verse without a world and a beloved to help inform me of who I am. Likewise, the variety of formal approaches still suggest a restlessness in coming to terms with an appropriate style, but overall there is much greater simplification and a traditional stance in this particular group.

5. Later Efforts: The Fragmented Lyric

After about a year of experimenting, I felt that it was time to come to some conclusions about what kind of verse I wanted to focus on and bring some of the lessons I learned to bear on my poems. My earliest work revolved around a kind of simplicity I was happy and comfortable with, but showed some clumsiness in execution. Likewise, despite the successful moments, those poems display a too forceful reaction against the postmodern array, which as I came to discover later, I had an affinity with (to a degree). They lacked the formal sophistication I was looking for and which I found later in many of the hybrid poets. The “Flowers,” of course, display the greatest range of experiment and hence, perhaps, the most failure as effective poems. But through those pieces, I began to realize many possibilities in how form and content can work together to achieve my desired ends. I grew to see how the poetic line need not be tyrannically linear and complete, and how my thoughts on a complicated self could be served by breaking apart the line into singular phrases, giving weight to the fragment. I wanted to express some form of unity that connects the fragments, but in the “Flowers” I rarely made the syntax connecting them strong enough to suggest any type of cohesion. I knew, however, that I felt comfortable with the broken line and that it might work for me in the future. As I further experimented with the “Self-Portraits,” I came to realize that the complex self is difficult to put forth without resorting to a potentially limiting form of direct address; and although there are successful moments of empathy and communion there, the wild-ish forms I created to present it didn’t really fit with my designs to come at such a delicate relationship simply and with little pretense. What I needed was a formal approach that was indicative of my desire to express unity (something more traditional) but something

that also expressed the complications and sophistications of an often fragmentary experience.

The later efforts of this collection embrace a lyrical format in the sense of a singular non-stanzaic group of lines, which are broken in the middle, to express both a traditional ethos as well as a contemporary hybrid direction. My stance in these last poems is to privilege the phrase while connecting them with a strong syntax, which can be read across the breaks. In this group, I pull together many of the competing ideas from previous poems and simplify them into lyrical arrangements. Despite the fragmentary nature of the line, much of the imagery is natural and disposes itself toward the everyday. Here, the big ideas I thought I wanted to interject into my poetry is reduced down to smaller details of my chosen subject, and the larger concerns are left to be inferred. One of the principle creative features here is a leaving behind of the philosophies and concepts that drove my earlier work. Instead—in a more effective mode, I believe—I let the subject matter speak for itself without my intervention as a thinker or my trying to force concepts onto the verse. Bits and pieces of earlier ideas, such as direct address and concepts of self, come into play, but they are subsumed by an attention to the effectiveness of the poem. These poems, I believe, are more engaging and successful for lack of an extracurricular agenda, and they work—even with the pause in the line—because the syntax of the poem is strong and leads the reader through it (across the breaks). To some degree, the form suits my agenda, but it doesn't get in the way of reading the poem straight through with a clear sense of purpose. There is no heavy lifting required (like in the “Flowers”) nor philosophy to be gleaned that would make the poem make sense. By privileging the phrase, however, I give the reader

opportunities to expand on the simple (syntactical) meaning of the poem by reading out of the fragments another separate entity that can stand on its own. Sometimes a fragment will expand on its own and offer different insights into what is otherwise a straightforward statement—when read across the breaks as a sentence. These poems begin to show the form I am capable of as a poet, one who is interested in communing with his reader. The lines are shorter and more accessible. The ideas are anchored in a common reality of things and personalities. There is a relational aspect to a few of them, but the concept behind them doesn't dominate the simple sense of fellowship that it conveys.

Although there is still much work to be done to bring my poetry up to a level I am content with, these particular poems are exemplars for a new direction and show some of the techniques that I believe will support me in my efforts. The valuable work of experiment, however, cannot be derided for lack of success. All the poems in this collection are driving at one final goal: to write an effective and memorable poem. It sometimes takes a painstaking process to work through the pieces and parts that make such an event possible. In each section of this collection, there are moments worth remembering, and publication has validated that claim. Though not every poem stands to see print, it is my belief that there is much to applaud in a trial and error approach to learning a new craft, and my daily dedication to learning it has helped me make long strides toward reaching my goal. Ultimately, there is great value for me in letting go of rigid philosophies and letting the poem speak its own ideas. As Hugo intimates, it is better to let the truth fit the music than the other way around (3).

CHAPTER TWO: EARLY EFFORTS

Transitional Space

When you said Come live with me and be my love

You offered up sleep, put boundaries in the reliquary

To save yourself a seat in that chair, where I find you

Hovering over my dreams, asking with eyes if my absence

From bed speaks to the other side of this dark morning

Where light may prove our pleasures mixed with rain.

Fustian

Is it evidence of a windy mind, high-flying a hawk in a poem?
Circling her, suggesting beneath the image an ignorant mouse
nonetheless nounced into being now? Can you even say “hawk”

without saying too much these days—pointing at a pattern,
a practice, emitting at this distance only its aegis of air?
But when she talons the mouse and flies out of sight,

who will not think to sniff the wind for all its hidden eyes?

Augur

This is the last of magnolias
rusting their ivories in the duff, whitening our walks.

The cosmos persist but, too, are purpling
their way into last glories, gone soon.

Beyond calendars, we know by chill
how quickly the tiger lily will fade
out of arrangements.

Already, see, the pansies have gone in

to keep us through the snow.

What shall I make, then, of your brightening geranium
still holding all its pink between us

against the coming cold?

After the Eclipse

Our nativist anxiety at losing the sun
makes for mention everywhere, but at six
the only drum we're beating in protest
of a mystifying God ill-spinning the planets
is a t-bone in need of tenderization.

After dinner you say it happened, and we wonder
if the light was any different

or if this mood came on then,
making clean-up a flirty affair,
which quelled our nervous energy.

Now we are content
to lie quietly in the scud,
touching toes in the aftermath of
blotted stars and cold cold moons.

Fire Twirler

Because we huddle together
with a 'carriage-rug' between us
at night on my porch
someone is bound
to light the ends of a tremendous pole
and accompany our radio
with wild performances
of looping flame.

Did you not say
The Universe sends signs
announcing change?
Could we not expect him then
to come out of the pitch
like a parade?
Can we not say now—
watching him blaze across the lot—
that something is certainly said
for the turn of color in our togetherness,
for this mysterious mortar
holding us close
in the dark?

Relict

It repeats out of ancestral blood, finding purchase
in my mouth strong with Beaujolais. These words
lusted into arrangement around your breasts.

The thought of your thighs a rubric not uncalculable
to even the steady Cherokee speaking out of my past
into your ear: Stay, sweet one. Stay till it is light.

Neither corrupted nor spoiled, it freshens
from the open window of moments here at dusk.
With the light low on your green knee, that song
lightly in the accepting air around us.

Here it wears each other's face, speaking a familiar tongue
long ago devising its rhetoric to bless the breathless vowel.

Our mashed lips—a universe of stars piling the night cloth
in which we roll. Totems flashing from loaded bodies
not too young to never have heard its ancient story before.

His Madness

I am silence now. And shadows are my home.

By sly technology I nimbly hoist a husk at days
then reel my body home at night where I sleep
inside it like a maggot in a rotting flank of steak,
drawing strength from dreams of colliding trains.

I have programmed my body to perform well
enough that sometimes it will bring lovers to
my hovel, where I wonder at their love-making,
musing over the sanity of huffs and groans.

But is this not how it began?
Begging in thrusts for surfaces to reveal their depth?
Some confirmation of the sleuthing pearl
reckoning in its shell?

I confess:

If blood would settle doubt, I would kill them all.

The Missing

--for Agapi & Aaron Shapiro

1

It is a new forever with dimmed suns, with grief that will never fully cool. It is an endlessly absent heartbeat still knocking at the drum in your ears, echoing out of that vast canyon where your heart was full of hope. Goodnight, sweet someone.

I can tell you—

It must be broken into equal sums, the whole space that contains it. But how can this not become distempered to its place in flux, among other things, the distaff of a day? Because made of feathers it would fly us home to be brilliant Makers, some life between. Because it would make us happy to be parents. To be a family.

2

And we love, which has a direction in our sense of time. Toward every reunion, our feet in the air. With reconciliation of every possibility. So we love beyond the comings-and-goings that so often render low places where we would raise mountains. There in our invisible heart, it keeps us beyond the repairs we need or will ever need. It keeps us with eager ears turned to the wind because one day we may hear our own names called in a familiar coo. So we love: each other, ourselves, and always the little ones who elude us

3

I can be quiet with you outside that tiny room of every unanswer. Amen. After your tears: Let us break bread. Make a new-worded world between us. One far deeper for everything it no longer is—for those it no longer harbors.

Water at Dusk

What will it be to reckon with dissolution of all
but some anthracite blacking in your soil? You
are much in the way of water, lightly wrecking
tonight the loose shoal rubbed already from its
tight boundary in our dinner. This will go away
tomorrow, be drained of its unstable phrases.
This is to say: I am a word dropped in the wind.
We are the symbol of a boat corroding in time
from the hard smack of salt clinging to the brine,
a wave as much as particle in the slit of experiment.
It wants to say: Something persists as our light fades,
something washed so cleanly of its endeavor that we
think it doesn't destroy us, or nearly so. The element
floats us, keeps this lamb raw on our tongue then
takes it away down to the leviathans pocking the
cold alleys with stony memory. It is a rosy
hour when we take up our wine, pressed to its
purposes. You are to say: Shouldn't you be working?
But we dine instead, and this glass of water is a
margin. I take it as a suggestion that this meal
is like my last, as if the gibbet awaited me from your
question. As if you had said: Go jump in the ocean.
As if I had said: What can I do to please you?

Every Fantasy Is Threatened at the Edges

I had marvelous parents, sanity in all my affairs, a devout attention to my health.

I succeeded in school and took a high paying job with benefits. My wife loves me beyond all measure. Little children are drawn to my gentle nature because I have always been genuinely content.

It is hard to fathom, then, the homeless man today who came up to my car asking for change. I gave him the last bill in my wallet, a five. He rubbed it between his fingers, looked at it then me. He crammed it in his jeans then poked his head in my window. "Die," he said. "Die scumbag die."

Your Photo of a Four Foot Timber Rattler

Don't show me that, the twisted
rope of its body, its crushed head.
Don't you know about my dreams.
About the fanged warnings they
shake behind every shadowy stump.
Can't you imagine the nights
where that creature will soon return
from out of your bland phone into
the path of some journey. Some
fearless obstacle, it will send me
running—haunt my steps. When
I wake up, it will be your fault
no certainty remains, that nothing
but dissolution awaits me in the day.
It will be your fault. For my part
I'll deny your pictures—this fellow
in the grass—like hisses in a bramble
I bat away with prayers.

A Morning Commute

I.

These lazy bends, marked as the Trail Of Tears, now
 my sunpatched highway edged with quiet picnic pull-offs.
 I am driving east against the grain of sorrow into sod-farm communities
 where wan Regents have anchored a college
 and asked me to teach their striving young the art of the essay.

It is like powering back to natal sanctuaries to pray
 that local gods stay buried under the hillside or that memories be
 washed of their detail, leaving only signposts—
 terse capitalized words decipherable in a drive-by—
 as a new structure of feeling.

But the beauty here: the way rounded hills
 offer a suggestion of buckskin hips, the plural earth
 a quorum of green and umber maidens coming and going.

II.

Skirt of feathers in a flock of late-waking starlings, squadron of interlopers.

They have been released from a giant hand.

One moment an explosion: They startle my windshield in a black rush.
 I lose the lines, drift, swerve into a danger path,
 bully ironworks of the oncoming lane. In that instant

I see before me a frozen brown foot in a hide slipper, dead in the snow.
Tires, the all-weather horseshoe, things touching the ground as we travel—
things that have abandoned themselves in the valley as
the frictious wear of transitions.

I wonder if my wheels will lay along the road
as evidence that I, too, have hunted this game trail,
that I have glided through tracking the quailing verb to its thicket.

The starlings evaporate.

And back in my lane, I continue hurtling.

Just rolling.

Rolling.

Rolling as always with my Destination riding beside me,
her ivory arm out the window, flinging yellowed maps into the motorwind.

Raconteur in the Aviary

You have heard, of course, Maitlin Goes Ashore, the gem of caution, less weft
 than warping a picture of true responsibility. Have you terror or pity to appreciate
 falling? Chirrup

more than matecall, twitter beyond the push of morningsong—bitter ruin on a Barbary
 Coast makes dirges, mates. Shall I repeat: put him into a sky for you to think through?

 Pinions, hollow

bones? Released weight the glyph of vital absence, the Maitlin not there in his own
 demise?

So apt to rise.... Here you are safe but that disease or broken hearts prevail, these
 clippings

 the nest of limits

in a dirty kingdom. Tragedy, but that I make him an eagle, eludes the harassed budgie,
 your

purposive corpus without a heaven to know: You are not apt to feel the heavy legs,
 slogging.

 Great Illigius

cut him down, Maitlin most proud. But familiar came the forces: urgent hands,
 generations

of ill-will lurking in the blood, voices in shrines confounding the agent. But did you
 choose

 this? Listen, then:

Maitlin—sparrow-bodied prince—longed to o'erleap his hawk mother into a chancellery
 above

clouds, and there: the larger sun the palace of the Peregrine, the attic of appetency

 unfit

for slim vaulting wishes, the unaccounted-for urge compelling—can you see the little one
 soaring?

Above rain dark vibration of wing bursting lung hung in a field of blue, peak
of aspiration and with swollen light in his eye unseen from the side comes ripping
a spangle of pain occlusion of beak and talon dominion in full say, esperance
tumbling.

And thus he fell, plucked—as all—from his palace by terrific vision in a suspect eye,
the gift of gods to spur the chattel to grand finales, the great pleasure of Olympus.

Illigius, too,

clown of the Oracle, will never anticipate the reckoning propeller gnawing through a
salty horizon.

Can you see him explode, mates, and hear the laughter howling in the wind?

CHAPTER THREE: FLOWERS

Flower no. 3

unless she, like One that is looked at So with this exchange, uncollapsible
into either Erebung or bathun Whose voice, eloquent eructation, belies the nothing

made of Madeline, such the uninvested view. A flattened football in the dry culvert,
fish bones, the usual tire and—surprisingly—concrete blocks; I cannot wish away

the distant creek that provides them, diverts metonyms from flow Into foreign beds

I have left the impression of my body speaking in my aftermath of

more than tossed pillows, irreverent positions. You cannot receive unsubjected this:
she in her vase, waiting on a round table in an unoccupied room toward which Rondee

has directed his eventual steps, and arriving—having desired more than the bodies of
words (whispering lasses plump with news)—

steals her removes the carmine blossom just below the ovule, fixes the flame in a
breast

buttonhole, strolls the unoriginal city with her raw feel over his heart. It is like

the story: the climactic revelation of the golden coin in an unfurling palm (as am I
(like running into Rondee at The Midway, seeing him turn and and the inviolate flash

her shining in the dimglow known beneath

Flower no. 5

Saying a morning sky picked of whiteness offering azure
 like a goblet at an Eternal's table by inviting asks my thoughts so
 pointed at the empirium—gatherer gamboling with infants as the agéd
 like fixed points orienting a revelry wide as the Adriatic
 cannot unsmall this town, nor putty its interstices
 neither fabulation accounts for how it was removed
 70S a march of ants looking to crumbs to inveigle commissions
 marauding, then, a countryside parsing its daughters decamps with composure
 forward, spritely clouds are blather come from unsourceable mouths
 within a bountiful range regardless of my location there full
 flatly--to avoid exposure and contempt--spoke only yes
 but with him, pouring into the truck, conjoined approbation
 nothing, never plied tools of vast distances emptied of space, contraction
 vying as opposed sounds, growl and twitter this nature, tarmac black on blue
 speak a price, rebound the shoots come back now rain from pleasantness
 in accord with tenor harmony, stretching base arrangements, your waiting room
 emits memories, in the long ago way of a secret keeper
 none know this land, impending vistas only watchers, glass
 ebullient staggerer, launching a South with Artic circles pasture capped with ululalia
 heave this way, Clay altimeter puissant some conceive vortices concentration of
 aligning efforts, though many are certain of permanent fissure residues, earthenware
 glaze
 plural past concomitants overlapping, despite evolvment warmth in latent faces,
 torsos

come Ella, the day is wide & no pique to spoil a drive together
pinching buds for drying, the scent of unwritten books on the mantle
lest we flail, harvest now—let its perfume remind stridently. King Protea

tilting in the yard

Flower no. 6

one says

you become surly with the gritty minutiae of a day at the lake, heat-robbed
 you obviate invitations, pulling the rug on your own person, claiming viewlessness
 some braggadocio, some feint of Caesar closing the gate from behind, sometimes
 you are the imperiled hunted from within a closet red lichen on the brass handle

age is no guarantee, she whispers, licking a finger. You had held your breath

two goes

desistance a song, the end of line and a vacuum Put away the book, Pandra, and
 lapse into ostranenie; that was not the world—the familiar feeling something un-
 somethinged in a wash of resin, soft coat of font Figurines, that pockled data made of
 mispronunciations. See Diana dissembled in habiliments crawling with fauns. Fortuna
 at play with the scissors

He cannot read you so you will be known without your introductory material,
 occluding the experience, so necessary for the Johnny-raw @ odds with expectation. I
 forestall, not wishing to make “an entrance” put purple fruit back in the ice-box; you
 would not appreciate the note These toddlers swerving about in floaties, cherub-armed

three states

so you are there fidelius among faces razed with M. Marceau’s last gesture
 are your eyes as full of? The hanker of transfer, ardor worded with its down
 anticipation, the anemone the bluette of violet popping in full sunlight espouses

like light, only itself but the tremolo, the dirl whisks around the other end, dips
 over the edge of the water, suddenly yellow this polyp, waiting for time to engage
 candid streaks of laughter, pukka lemonade with zest over ice

Flower no. 7

1

To have strength of character, I (in plurality, a rickety
Soul lost to irony) say You
must be made non compos mentis, the imtemerate image of meddling
gods, those Nosey Parkers. I am but one complex, striding
in a universe occupied/manured
with an electorate jealous of my
Titan. They cut her with disguises (bedtricks), metaplasia the document
of Pneuma. To have clout—
to BE a character—Thomas must forsake Thomas, then find a
gladioulus cruising in its carved-up commonwealth, pink the pink of
winging flags. Go to your republic with muscle ample to be engaged in the
debate! You are subject-enough in the palpable breach of human expectation.

Dissolve before you can
say Jack Robinson, plucking pruina
in Persephone's glad fields. Such a Daughter
deploys both ways from center: fold into Hel as Queen or as suits,
salute wheat in open air, to-and-fro as your mother has exonerated you.

2

Let us go and halt the blossoms with our gaze. Warhol: nothing but them at the last, an
obsession taking him to the bell. There's nothing in their qualia unpleasing, even the
come-and-go—the shock of full-measure efflorescence then the blank page of late winter
spring where we write our laments in memory. We visit our photos, the founder where
we account for an esse because—unsteadied of its becoming—we know it is often there
holding forth in the humus with snails, waiting for its body to come back.

Flower no. 9

He accounted for the reverie with modeling She, with astute accuracy as
 imaginal method of accounting, delusive as maker but there are quanta there—

Micha devolves the split with
 the story the recombination a moonshine:
 hostile lash now a seraph cobra hastening
 the flight to Taos where there—sidereal
 strolls and wags of dactyls made of meaning

ah, Glenda, who wants it all back
 sticks to the image, vies at arresting flow
 You have given them ground, those foul-
 mouthed children making them what
 none are, any longer

Some have tried to tell their story. if not for next in a string of beads, of a plastic
 rosary, we might have history But every prayer is a new heaven and a new god,
 waiting in the static, foot-high Remembrance the sea lavender pulsing in clusters

fragile little trumpets produced with squeaks, the art of jazzladies pooling a ragged
 night at Sharkey's its one odium smoked into a shine of blistering perils crafting
 in this Vale the smoothest run of a ballad, almost swinging a glistening penumbra

above every head, pocking the hot show with catches

Flower no. 11

--for A.D.

We have gone-on together for some time, without a name like troubadors
 in a long-running gypsy band You, the mandolin; I, a woody bass and both
 our voices crashing the hurdling stars with lilted concert It has been enough

 in a small town with orangepeel mornings & grassy afternoons with light
 from your reading lamp landing on nape & touching-toes, the painting of an
 apple (scotched with purpling ripeness), a teacup crusted with daisies & dregs with

 enjambment of schedules, our overlapping durance mixed with apertif & fume
 as the radio listens in on us, there on your porch at dusk, admiring the clouds
 We are foundlings, sharing our second parents. Their voices peak through the

 breeze, saying Slowly to indicate the friendship & Truly to nod at fidelity among
 bandits Some have seen us shaking our tits at the moon, our rattles rousing
 a throng to abandon all sense some, our quiet ladle over a crockpot of beans &

 a board of pain cheese grapes. Listen feel the vibration oscillate beyond a dusty
 road, a Carolina vista It goes on and on We do not require the rose-bushes
 begging questions in your neighbor's yard, mistasting our sophisticated red. I

 will boil the water, put a minty sachet in the cup, fill just above halfway You
 will come down, silken & nodding take the steaming bouquet & the cooling
 napkin as declaration enough to continue to the next town--bristling and high,

 anticipating the revelers-- dirge & stomp ticking from our blouses

Flower no. 12

teeters there, moment made of withers This—
 bright trim or plunge—glides with your consent:
 a joke must find a friend
 and I have let fly. As they say,
 in your court. Yocking

can read so many ways, the stitches you're in
 Perhaps the larkspur fuss in your hair multiparti
 nails, matching your socks
 for levity, that wispy scarf—
 Confirmed candid

light in your eye, smile. It's like threads
 have woven us together made of the order
 Ranunculales, the buttercup
 family glowing under
 your chin

made of discrete nutrients, cachinnations as
 softened membrane letting me pass Through
 risk new mandalas
 that easy grin mirthing
 at the pivot

Flower no. 14

in with the bank paperwork, last I saw—days ago now
He comes; we have held him back, but this seems just
How beautiful! It's like I dreamed. So trim and elegant
in flowing: without trying: riding it out: at ease: guiding
By a sense of intention, defending where necessary, she
is this one thing confounding you so? It's not like multiple
Personalities from the world of entertainment have come
To perform your duties we require you to be properly attired
at the time of entry, the ship had begun rolling, pushing
four big ones. Big ones with a capital M for million, no
“Small Change got rained on...,” he sang, gravely and low
Down in the pit she moshed where she could find room
For another dollar you get both knives & the block. CALL
back on the pitch, Business As Usual was another matter
squeezed to its highest mass; it must go back to formula
One is faster. We have clinical ways to evaluate. It seems
that even without the glasses his sense of footing improved
to the point we 1) have reached 60% of our goal and 2) show
more than you realize. People have noticed the glow. Once
Rasheed looked deep into his glass. He was reversed at the
basement floor—but his presence was everywhere, as if
Austerity used to be a form of seriousness; now, one's candid
Photos have kept the evidence in tact. Even with the loss of
The last of the summer hyacinth was a brief reprieve from

A constancy that belies the sporadic disappearance of sense
enough to know better. But be strengthened. There's time.
riding in the murk. Look

Flower no. 15

Some are poets of decay vamping on the bilge
with gassy brilliant colors & bunkum pay-off

Songs of an age of waste Thick as two short planks
in each something comes and something goes

routinely Used up, one becomes unstabled, fixless,
just some wiley guile holding it together some

cruel Ulixes ten years at swords & the same to chasten
steering the drifting ship between discomfortures

No matter how tired the stock return,
glut of colors and snowy white. Smells

retaining the token of synchronosis a durable flam
dropping from a horse the same as splinters an eye
He comes home everytime a different hue: bellicose red
witty blue ashen yellow, the conquerable fear black as

moon scripture It lasts beyond some churlish diurnalcy.
Sometimes the old agons renew Flush with gist,

these songwriters invigorate the familiar,
bleaking the American blushing eye with

Flower no. 16

I.

in her mind—an oriental lily Nothing withers in a majesterial sky, fulvous
filled with sunset but never falling sun roiling fixture, captured cloud & ladders
stretched with unnecessary promises It is sufficient to have most vibrant eyes.

A luster fixed to the jewel

reflecting How she gives grandeur? She wets baked fields with the look of rain
nurtures expectancy with undisputed monsoons giving each afternoon adequate
splendor. Each sound subliminal trumpets harking in the wave, calling

each tallyer to her own château

II.

This ditty has rung in my ear since Murtaugh, whistleable.
See how it transposes up at the bridge, crossing into hymn.
Where you find vain gesture, there resides vital exercise.
Spare tones dighted with only the obscuring hair of Venus.
How else shall we clothe the Arcanum, rootweave appalling
certainty with reticence...?

III.

as it stood at the end, with only convictions left
There we were, and I saw you more than deftly
betokening calm. Who could say you were not
delivering a message with wings on your heels, a
homily spry with unflappability, the cool of
cattle thieves? It has been captured in stone
without your elaboration zeal-trimmed gesture:

one pointed finger locked on sternum
another at tip of near right-angled elbow
signaling the entablature friezed with triflers

Flower no. 17

1

in abstrusion, donning dusky garb not mourning but
 waiting. She twines through gardens, foil for radiance.
 A dim channel locking eyes out by defining limns
 of sparklers hopping at the sun. Watch them shine
 against the lack of her thigh! Each clutch of ruddles
 stands her by in accordance with paucity, glowing pips
 at the expense of her as shadow. Pedastaled, their
 star-heads echo at the base of her train—
 little more than inky wash crawling on the sod.

2

Give it a while, Aster, he had said. He meant, Stand firm independently for the now. See what develops. I think he means organically, without putting it in boxes. But he had brought an herb tray for the windowsill.

His words were: My god, you are ravishing in black! Sometimes he says gorgeous or dazzling, always with a soft palm on my back, a little kiss. Ravishing seems poetic for him, as if he's reaching for something lofty. I prefer it.

This, he says, is for you, and each time there's something behind his back. Out comes the arm and the winning smile. Always humbly done. Some papered basket of waxed pears with a note. A chapbook wrapped in muslin. A ticket.

He gladhands in the atrium. Others are bolstered and charmed. I am more than of use, stunning as I am. **The Lady in Black.** It comes out tonight. But this time he puts an arm around my waist. Miles, he says, let me introduce you to

Flower no. 18

Those who have not gone mad—crashed street windows with their hairless bodies or willingly contemplated the hemlock with its lacey umbels—will never come to rest. They will always be standing on Alum’s Bluff patting their pants for a smartphone, thinking the next text will save them the distance down. But one must step into the fiery maw, be dissolved in acid bowels, be shit-out in a lump on a Knoxville sidewalk, repair home to begin growing arms again.

Dearest Jack, it read, Things are improving. Nothing that I was afraid of has come to pass. Mornings are serene, and I walk the edge of the wooded lot picking Queen Anne’s lace to put on the table at dinner. I paint in the afternoons, and its wonderful how this much sanctuary goes toward concentration. I think I’ve found a new mode, and the work is effortless. Tell me you’ll come in August. I should be fully fit for your company by then and look forward to one small whiskey as a reunion celebration. Yours with fresh yellows—Nydia

came out of the woods a new man. I tell you, Coconino is filled with demons. At night the coyotes slink at about fifty yards, but I swear their eyes glow. Under a bright moon, I saw the greasy head of Pan lolling in a birch stand and heard the awful shrieks of his revelers tearing a deer to pieces. A scorpion in the heat with a silver bull emblazoned on his carapace, thrusting his stinger at the sun

You woke up last Sunday in a half-empty bed. Some fights are final, the unspoken crush of accumulated years winging in a rush from your mouth like a wind-up Sybil with the key finally released. There was no identifying you. And Monday you were a haint, knocking at the drywall. Tuesday and Wednesday—a bleating Chimera, snapping your fangs at the tip of your tail. Thursday saw you agitating the saints, Mara in a whirlwind with crows. Friday you found form, a Valkyrie with glittering breasts. By Saturday you were half yourself and half Marilyn Monroe, your eyes as large as cutting boards. And today, today it looks like you again. If not for the cloud of whispers sussing in your hair, I’d say you had returned.

When crossing the stream, be prepared for minnows to suck at your naked legs. When you reach the field, fresh clothes and a smoking briar will be hidden in a holly bush. Look for a gap in the hills. When gaining the prairie, a slow song you have never heard will suddenly be on your lips. Sing it all the way to the ocean. When reaching the

sandbar, a hint of sandalwood will mingle with the brine. Float on your back, nipples and nose to the sky. Let the Leviathans hurdle the slipstream beneath you. Lag your way to the Galapagos. See the others hailing from the crashing rocks.

Flower no. 19

I.

From one, an incandescence counselling bright
 thoughts, his bearings landed in spacious
 meadows tricked with crowfoot
 waving its white lashes beneath
 the stream.

Another—half sick of shadows—came to them
 in a boat with her name on it There like
 light they played out in ripples sung
 across the bow What would
 it be to bob

her head beneath the water and
 pluck one with her gloomy teeth?

II.

You could have lain in my arms, my rich flesh a tenement
 of comfort in the vast slum of your battle-life, corsair.
 She said, But you cannot see the radiance with freebooter's
 eyes nor feel beyond the nerve with a seawolf's pelt. Each
 surface the latest stinking grimpen to founder your cutter,
 such a shallow bottom. I squirmed in my trousers.
 I will retire to the east and walk my mother's lands.
 The heart of the sedge warbler beats in the field, wood, air,
 and her song the murmur tickling ears of godwits ducking
 for mollusks in the sandy bottoms, lusting for sweet centers.

Flower no. 20

Bouquet Continuum

1. A YELLOW CARNATION FOR NO

Tell me, Isla, how can you stand there—reconnoitering my look down to its details as you do—and tell me I'm not sparkling enough to take you out on the town? Remember San Francisco last spring when we raided Muzzy's for those ball masks and swept through SoMa performing ourselves in song and dance? You were a cat and I a raven, my beak as sharp as whorehouse humor. Ha! Is this—this black suit with creaking wingtips, flourished with a red bowtie—not what you want to be seen with? Or must I be someone else, a poet's bird?

Tell me, darling—most dear friend—have you not seen my eyes peering over a menu, veiling urgency with the look of hunger? Have you no idea what could be so pressing, what requires sublimated earnestness to achieve? To say?

Tell me: to whom shall you turn in the night, away from eyes, with your cuckoo calling out the approaching dawn? Who will lead you through the darkened hallways, flicking the switches as you go? Could you ever take an unadorned hand (undressed of every token) and let it lead you to the candid valley? Shall we not go to Morton's, where I will ask you again without asking? Shall we?

2. A STRIPED CARNATION FOR MAYBE

:that living as if were sufficient, purblind in a box:

“Perhaps an enormous pink hippopotamus sits on the throne of Heaven, commanding food chains and our suffering. The weather, her stinking breath. A sense of Self, her balancing act the night she dreamed up death.”—Or it might just be turtles all the way down

Possibly, he intoned. Certainty certainly doesn't go with this terrain, this vale of suspects running from laws, this unknowable hothouse ripening cultivars under filtered sun. Teethmarks on the gold nugget—the measure of authenticity panning our rivers. He looked slyly around. Loan us a Jackson, Bennett. Quick! We'll test the barkeep for cold pints. See if he knows his game.

Conceivably our electromagnetic field carries on when we expire, humming down the centuries as little shivers on spines, intuitions in the poker player's hand, the fortune teller's utterance. They say it makes flowers grow, makes them blink and nod. Look in this bloom, for example. I think it is Hume's soul wagging in the petals.

For all you know, Terissa will return.
 She's angry and that's understandable.
 Sit and wait; or go about your business.
 But put her away for now. Anticipate
 Nothing.

(Perchance to dream? Is that what he meant to say? Is that all there is to long for when we come to that spot, that place of reckoning? And it is no longer 'being' that we must question, but 'to become' or not, unlashd as we are from sticky stability. Why then do I collapse into something solid the moment you expect a show, frame me in that way? And who is the dream that contains me as a player, fretting in the nightmare?)

—that PERADVENTURE this is real: soft nuzzle of your cheek on my shoulder: a small bed in which we lie: scent of cinnamon in your hair: warmth amplified with pressing flesh: contentment as the qualia of aligned breathing, hussing in a silty darkness. Is this what God has WROTH?—can it be spoken without slippage?

3. A RED CARNATION FOR YES

I have lead you here and given you this as a gesture of affirmation— of saying (of betokening of decrying) that the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying among

the rhododendrons on Howth head in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me thinking in this moment how clear affection has become with its borders sewn up with bona fide thread and at first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now when all that has been projecting forth in my life has halted in a glom and sits on my heart like the feeling that day you stopped to look at me 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath as if being shocked to learn you cherished me when you said so after many winters of waltzing around like coy tipplers and he said I was a flower of the mountain beckoning at the sun and caught in a moment of flority unbound to decay in that seeming so we are flowers all a woman's body like mine deployed here for you in this moment of revelation so that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today to illuminate the collapse of time that holds you above the stream for me and that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say just what my purpose was and I thought of all my performances and every way I had deceived you by playing the trifler's role when what I wanted deep down was to cast off this exhausting pretense and reveal the way I felt and had always felt which till you asked me had been too derided a thing in this world to reach me at the sudden center I discovered was in me around you and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens where something like myself found her voice and is saying things now so full of vitality as to warrant inquiry into just who I am and where I have come from though it seems so plain as I speak to you and all the queer little streets and pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain sprouting the fresh buds that after such a dormant age in the cold but productive ground of our courtship seems to have returned again at last when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear this so that you have a token of what I'm saying when you look at me and will know something truer if only truer for this moment which above all others resonates with something pure and lush and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again and you did and I knew my answer and I let it spill out of me from that other voice the one so close to bone as to be a strength in my structure and then he asked me would I dance with you and we are dancing and looking in each other's eyes to say more than our voices that only point at hidden places within us and you are my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him to get your hefty feel so full of raw movement and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume and this clean smell of moving into fresh rooms filled with a horizon of new certainties and his heart was going like mad so it's obviously true and I know you know me in this embrace in this way as we move in slow circles and I said I love you and I will never forget in a life of forgetting just what it means when I see the red petals exploded on its stalk in any summer where we find each other Yes

Flower no. 22

Between roles your whiskey consumption becomes the periphery
of what some would call a “problem”—as if other solutions
to the release from definition go any further toward eternal life.
At least, you whisper (with your pinked lips so near to mine),
I’ll never fret heaven with begging for a line. Give us a kiss, handsome.
You are a star, as able an Ophelia as Martha in Baltimore’s mind
and sober for every run, clear and full of those others whose light

or darkness are never more intermixed than when on your tongue.

The only problem I see is in recognizing this blue satyr overlaying
you in shine as she glides from the wings bringing hooves and breasts
out of the dark forest onto these living room boards, where she
struts her thick flanks, cooing a druid wisdom out of a hot mouth.

You enfold me with azure spurs of columbine wet on your chin, and
coursing undimmed in the naked footlight, we scatter even the fauns
piping in the boughs. And you—half fabulous, in roisting made of some
hydromancy with arcane choruses—bubble into the bright spot and

the house goes still.

*Aye, you say, drawing from your hidden folio, the crown has been blasted from the
Tower, and soaked in yods I tumble from the highest window, sweet sweet sweet death
this drop to rocks, where crashing I will rise without my crow-plucked eyes to wander by
the pools of Themis, who nakedly walks the water and seems a Star reflecting in my mind.
Ah, the blind calm so newly made from the tumult of an era of bore & stroke. I am
released to reflecting the Moon and shining in the Sun, and refusing the Judgement to
find the World, where I am the agent of am what I am made—with fresh eyes, newly
named.*

Thus I know you, Elanora-Jayne, wizener of the black wood, reclining.

Flower no. 25

1

when the multifoliate flavors of a handful of jelly beans expands on your tongue.

The voluminous feeling

moments of rapport coming unsuspected from the south of her usually distant voice.

Estrangement tumbling over in

desiring return affection, having chanced a volley into his heart with look-language.

My bright jonquil speaks of

breaks back into sanctified pieces, fat minutiae swollen with every last suggestion....

O, When the final *kingdom* stresses and

in Flagstaff with your sunshine and rain tap-tapping slow grays on the sidewalk café.

“So here we are, at last!, Nina—

2

The poem belongs to a time because the poet lives there. The poem is like a convergence in the modal description of comets flung in orbit around a grounding pull. That is to say—the poem belongs to a center about which it only relates and never touches, though exhausted, it may lose enough mass to crash its star, failing. The poet lives there, hidden in the radiation, regardless of her confessions. Galaxies of migrant voices spin out. They carve a path around, speaking elliptically of something that cannot be said, truths contingent on questions of self. Truths in a time when the poet lives, poems in a poet where truths are timed with words.

3

At the level of inversion presence remains her only reality. Though I cannot fully assault her stony palace,

the whipping blue & orange pennants are signal enough
to question the armaments as illusion (her eternal trick)
and knock instead at her giant gate
to beg shelter from this December night.

Flower no. 27

This is the sweerbriar, the pinking eglantine,
grace of summer above its prickles.

When it tilts in our wildish grove
you say *Apples!*

sorting its breath from a confusion of smells.

Disguising its escape
hottened bodies make camp along the wall.

You say *Lovely!*
but, darling,

the Rambler has made away, flush in another country.

Flower no. 31

Deictic

This acanthus (the fine arts, artifice)
grows thorny in the wild
from which it spread to marble
in Corinthian capitals.

Dove white—the one—over green.
And threatening—the other—
to forget its brother in the grove.

Flower no. 32

Arum maculatum

Wild and abundant in Turkey, we could stumble over it
 On expedition through *ormans* secreted with presence,
 Its adder's head coming out of darkness
 With a foreign morning weaving in silent mottos.
 We would have to consider ourselves, there in a bramble
 Or on a patted path where lords-and-ladies trod,
 We, too, uncertain of even so clear a look
 At accommodating parts nettled together in one frame—
 There at your ashy feet.

But this wake robin in the air
 Over our couch, that is something else. A boon. A View.
 It says we could have been empty, but tore out our straw
 For ardor instead to fill our baffles.

Spanix and spathe, waxy green and yellow in this field.
 Shall we doubt it anymore? Pester it with questions?
 Will you not simply pull me down in groves across Europe
 And crush it beneath our flesh and flame?
 Will it not hover—hum—here in our little boro

Of air, breathing us out of the soil?

Flower no. 34

In the dream it came apart, that coreopsis
 we found yellowing abruptly on the morning
 our nudes came out of a dawn forest. We looked

across a cow's field with its rail fence to the
 cabin softening the sky with chimney smoke.
 It grew in bunches low to ground. You said

How cheerful! taking me by hand
 across the footpath of petals. I paused
 clutching up bouquets for your red hair that

you said *Keep*. I held one tightly all through
 the long weightless day we lead there, until
 at last—with the moon coming up—you said

Give. But, Lover, it was gone, undone
 in all that between time flashing our lives at the hook
 of each other.

Flower no. 35

Opia Mentis

If the poppy is consolation for the physical hurts (pain
in the hips) and distress of spirit (wreck of soul) then we
must attend it at least with our eye see its red with local care.
It pulls with a structure of feeling. It begs against dismissal.
If the poppy were in a movie it would dissolve the screen,
such is the spell we cannot anticipate on golden roads.
As it pops out of mind glowing past scarlet, it abstracts
into something veiled
some balm of light soiled to a bitter earth.

CHAPTER FOUR: SELF-PORTRAITS

Self-Portrait no. 2

Your face is a mesmerizing calm.

Your steady touch the archon of composure.

.

Here let us not forget a moment where steadiness overcame us. I had been awake all night sizzling in a chemical starlight, looking for the April morning to relieve us all. (They are still in my bosom, those revelers). But I was alone then on the porch amid persistent wonder at a universe always betraying me. *The pastness of everything. Other agents at odds with my desires. Friction in a world of accepted facts.* At that moment the Sun yellowed a strip of horizon and for thirty seconds or an age justice and beauty held sway together. And my unterror birthed a confidence that populated the world with invisible treasure, little revelations everywhere. Then my lover found me, breaking the spell when she touched my hand. Though returned, I kept small portions of that dawn beneath the usual hum of anxiousness and with a kiss gave her reassurances I didn't ever before know I had to offer.

.

Every door is death's door, my lady.

But each time I open one on you,

I relight to days I thought were gone,

Pass by into your velvet morning,

Sit and happily forego interrogation for this, our repose

So denuded of all its anticipations.

Self-Portrait no. 3

1

Your light is in my eye before I see you. Your scent of sweetened soil in my nose before I smell you. *Come hither* in my ear before I hear you. Your salt dissolves on my tongue before I taste your skin. Your hand is gone before I feel it asking at my back.

We can never be current together. We are apple trees

Endlessly reaching across a fence

At each other.

But as you linger (as I linger) I make a Now of having you here. Your light the very moment of arrival. Your scent the instant of apprehension. Your voice the very creation of words. Your taste simultaneous with a kiss. Your touch unremoved from the flash of desire.

Is not the currency of our approximation the *real*

Kept closest the to the heart of us,

Hot like stones?

2

I am a study of blue in a living room world rife with dog smell and minute claticles of each habit belonging to my practice of *a little of this/a little of that*.

This pipe, half-packed. A mug, silty with coffee dregs. My phone, lashed to its outlet. And it's cold this morning, so there's my scarf. Undone dishes. The unmade bed. My steady cur, gently wheezing in his dotage. They are always here when I return.

With your filter I am a cobalt angel hovering above them, gliding on cornflower wings with azure eyes. You see me without my reds, anything that would boil my calm. For you I pop out of a spectrum of trifles, always cooling the needless heat of everything else. The drained shot glasses. The notecards at the end of my day.

And you are everything orange, brightening. Bringing me out.

In your wake this morning, how perfectly you remain. I brush up against little halos you left behind--orange auras still holding the night together. You are of a mighty host, too. I still see you dropping off your eternal robes and winging into my bed, quickly to dodge the cold. We tucked-in with our simple flesh to share, close enough at last.

Self-Portrait no. 5

Is not this morning the same as contentment
With cooling black coffee in a wooden chair
Smoking the sun up over the horizon?

She left too soon, after couch time,
But laid her quiet on my spinning head
Before a kiss goodbye saw her off

Into a day of specimens.
Even the dog is calm
Wrinkled in a third nap.

Does not this morning, elided so well
With what we blithely made of a whiskey evening,
Speak to Spring

And its snub of the hard fact of long cold?
Is not some reddening bud popping out of this frost,
November, now, asking all its questions?

Self-Portrait no. 7

There's something always wrong around the eyes, to look
Clearly for a likeness so near to light
When what's lurking there—in the hardened space
Where something is said to be captured—remains
Fuller than form, larger for its absence while
Elsewhere, it strolls an avenue or launches from a tree
Or rises to meet the morning hungry for seedcake and coffee.
You bristle not to find me here, but nearer to bone
Something floats up to assurance. Yesterday's touch
Still rings on your nerve....Portraits are placeholders
For the departed, who are always leaving us alone
In our gardens to claw at the soil, pulling at weeds
In preparation of a bright return (and you *will* come back to me,
Dearest, with this poem in your pocket, bouncing
The hem of your turquoise skirt while you lash around
In laughter). There is always something more here
Or *there* on a plank of dawn with sun finally coming into
Your mind, probing the gray gallery for my presence.
Nothing can hold this look into life
Beyond putting it in print, where misaligned eyes
Will stare back at us forever so we may know
The monument of calm speaking out of those blues.

Self-Portrait no. 8

Woodsmoke before sunrise couched in cold air adumbrates a day of hidden fire, its rustic odor the whiff of a world warmed at the local level in spite of our star. Late Fall has handed out its warnings. Color defeated in favor of the fruitless bough. The first pinch of frost. Darkness before dinner. But not everything coming speaks with a black frigid tongue. Somewhere a man or a woman or a stranger pulls blocks from a piney cord and warms the morning over a rock-edged pit, igniting gross materials against all that is inimical in December.

Where is that flame? Out of some heart, it asks me out of doors into the birded air where my poor man's clothes are hardly enough. And there is another warmth, making suspect the quiet company I keep so alone this morning with only my tawny dog to nevermind me. There must be voices there, hovering around the smoky circle. Or pairs of watery eyes to siphon out the radiant warp of light above the light, knowing another's figure over the glow. Where are they, who together see something like a past that can never disappear even from the page of our constant erasures? Mud still sings in their blood, and their voices still carry the undecipherable signs that came before description and still linger beneath it.

When you left last night, the fire started; and you left me alone to wonder at them inside me, those gathered in their feathers at the other end of this waft of ash. Those who have been building an invitation between us, mounding wood to issue a beacon in the quiet soot of Monday's morning canvas. With a pointed stick, I write your name in it, thinking of a dance the strangers are doing.

Prior to this—alone in my bed—your absent legs questioned everything in my dreams. And now it is an inquisition in my nose, asking if I believe in a communion of souls even at the icy end of night. Should we not be there now, together around the pit? Should we not be streaked with paint to make our naked hides fit for the dance? It makes me want to flap my wings over your frizzy head to pull out your stoking breath, keeping up the heat. But it is always you in the air. The one thing always lightly there, circling your little feet out of sight. Somewhere, a host of strangers camps the foreign woods, burning their howls in the remove. I smell you now across this balcony. I see you sparking in the rising light.

Self-Portrait no. 10

If I had gotten my way—
had I dazzled the world
singing folkish hymns
to youthful eroticism—

I'd be high & drunk
in a big house all alone
except for my fourth wife
sleeping it off in another wing.

I'd be thinking, Goddamn
I wish like all hell
I'd never opened my mouth
in the first place.

Self-Portrait no. 11

you can consult a travelogue, dictionary, stars...but not even God leans over with a convincing palm full of red gems—the certainties that solve the problem of all the cold to come

you can ask a lover, friend, neighbor...but only the ice will never lie when it tells you the world is descending into madness with its slick face mouthing on the stairs, seeming to speak apocalypse

you may turn card after card, flip endless pages of scripture...and nowhere will you be coated with gold to know just how far into the future you cannot see, not even to the Spring we hope for

you will question me again, “Why the long face?” and still I won’t be able to speak it, only smile and seem to say *frozen* by gently putting the back of my naked hand on your cheek to explain

Self-Portrait no. 13

Transition

It's not as if I don't love being here. Toh-ess makes
 mornings smooth to touch with my dream-heavy face;
 your Christmas hat anchors your sachès across oceans
 of floor; my room in which to work—everything

better than before. And that says nothing of the richness
 in covering our bellies with an after-dinner blanket to hide
 our satisfaction, the muse and poet at ease in the plump
 world together. There is so little threat in this beautiful

place. So much accord.

Only, I'm fractionally lost without the roaches, the shitty
 wall unit pissing me off with its slow heat, the hard-luck
 neighbors, long trudges to let the dog go. All so ponderous

like me—as always—at the base of things. Where did my
 burdens go? The one's that kept synchrony over forty years
 of ass-kickings, the hard slaps of *crazy* and *drunk* and *poor*?
 Has my endless walk in aching boots across Atlanta and

Knoxville and everywhere I am finally ended in relief? It's
 not that I don't love it here. But you have lifted me out of
 the meat of my knowledge: edges of cliffs, graves, sand in
 every situation—scrupling the quiet over my loss for words.

Self-Portrait no. 15

That the moon presides now over my death with all its
angles overhead through mornings of wondering—when

will it come? It keeps its Kingdom holding all its secrets.

You sleep as I write about what compels me to write

at all. To get up early to the uncertainty, stave off its madness
with words—that works well enough for a snow-promised day

in February. It suffices to bring me here beneath its questions
shining over us. It brings me here to say true *small and firm,*

as each moment reaches its conclusion glad to account we
made it to this morning clear as a bell ringing us forward.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE FRAGMENTED LYRIC

Margin

Out there a dark ocean
holds its breath for us.
This morning I found
you walking a strand of
discontent looking out
for waves to bring in a
whale. It throws up more
restraint than bullion
more shells with sea
whistling in them than
answers as obvious as bodies.
We sat with it. We let it
wet our naked feet. Still
it waits out our hoping
we don't have to dive in.
That we don't now have
a swim to make beneath it.

A Little Place of Rest

For the eye white spaces suffice. The ear
needs ties of whole notes without counter-
point. Flesh the pressureless feather. In
a wash of spice the tongue asks for ginger
to relax. Orchids for the busy nose.
This compendium of feeling that hardly sleeps:
It needs a white lie. It requires beautiful illusions.
Something about how much you love me. Some
fractured certainty we repair over & over
with kisses. With our faith beyond sense.
With toes at the touching end of isolate days.
Whispers. Words that finally choke out
the truth of so much excruciating doubt.

Tone

This was not mermaids singing. Each motet emitted from a *cantus firmus* hidden in rock kept by cowls only the destitute confess to. I was in the desert. A drunk wobbled into heat smacking on dry sand.

He poured his whiskey down a hole turned his ear to listen. I heard from hiding this soft song bubble up. Words in some chthonic tongue reeled above the basso continuo sung under 'ah' with no 'men'

to conclude its organum. He wept to hear the dark flames tickle his ear. Some forgiveness from foreign powers haunted his song. I was not lost to its language but all I could gather was a texture

some obscure flavor. Ambrosia perhaps. Something I'd never tasted. It seemed to satisfy the drunk. He wandered out of the heat with a halo. I put my ear to the hole. Nothing but laughter remained for me to take.

Poultice

To be born naked again out of
 a dream wet with slick floss
 from the dewy field. There constrictors
 triangulated at the fringes. Your
 blackest armor creaked. A doubled moon
 exposed you above the tilting grasses.
 And it was more than snakes. Rumbles of jets
 blew by invisibly. Who knew
 what they carried? Even smoke sought you out
 choking you to the ground. You tore
 off your helmet for air. Beetles raided
 your skin from bunkers in the earth. It seemed
 affliction required capitulation, required
 a cleansing death. But other hands
 ripped away your shell. Some stranger brushed
 away the plague of insects cleared the air
 of its foul cloud & began dressing
 your wounds with mash from the damp
 ground. You dreamt it was like a
 vagary covered *cap-a-pie* in astringent
 soil and brush. After the darkness
 you broke out. You woke
 to a threnody of suns cool
 in a vacant sky. Alone
 in blue quiet with
 only your body.

Bipolar

An angry God sweetens on the Sabbath
or at intervals between fucking the earth
with red thunder & pestilence. He topples
beautiful women & hobbles devout men.
Sometimes loving the miserable
commemorates another state of mind.
He considers His wrath one-sided
flips to grace like a card trick. It appears
no connection exists between them
the poles of bitterness & concern. To conquer
vast spaces between burning & balm
He doubles as my familiar. He speaks
equipoise in my ear. All I want
is to cool His turns keep Him off the edges.
All I desire between wrack & euphoria
is a painless compromise to satisfy us Both.
A longer span of hours with the level between the lines.

The Distribution of Wealth

I received scant sanity while others
roll in piles of composure. Nature
looked at Her creation and thought
This will make an interesting show. Of all
superstructures biology is the least
communist. It shits on the poor
of advantages, gives nothing but lip service
to the un-capitalized. What it never expects
is a Heroine. It never sees a wound
making bright gold in the blood of its carrier.
She looks at her poverty as a gift
as an opportunity for extraction. She flies
out of her body. She hovers over the rich
like a memory of stars a warmth
from the beginning of time when outliers
were the first bomb in a revolution of form.

An Angle

Its strange being on the outside. Light
looking different cleaner. Without its lenses.
Anchors are less frequent. There's
no context. Others absent from their pressure—
The world vacated of concern. Only
stones keep the tick of time. Shells
like thorns. You are an iris.
Light on petals. White with veins of violet.
With everything that seems so real. So solid.

Licked

From down here it's a new world. Fighting—all
that effort wasted throwing punches—finally
looks like what it is: a rigged match. I had hoped
otherwise. As if something this large
could be beaten. Could be denied its inevitability.

I hear two cats mewling in the dark. I think,
The fight goes on. “Eye of the Tiger” drums out
of my imagination. Survivor must have thought
the little victories would chart well. That it would soundtrack
every personal battle. With feline pride at stake, I'd
buy tickets to see these two square off in the Garden.

You hardly stir when I crawl in beside you a little bloody
from the wee hours where I put up my dukes. Where
I have tried to be the conqueror you need. Tonight, though,
I threw in the towel offered an olive branch spoke of concord
to the moon & its shadows whose fists are enormous.
I waved a little white flag and limped to your bed
just to hear you breathing. To resign my fingers to your gentle hair.
My torn knuckles to your forgiving flesh. To surrender
under your naked banner and press for mercy
against your softening dreams.

Hot Sauce

I'm reckless still in the kitchen
deseeding habaneros bare-handed.
The price is burning flesh. The result
however glows bright orange
flavors even an egg with sunshine
and wind. It compensates for heat
with the alertness of angels, with
a brightened heart ready to attack
the day out of a new generosity.
What matter the fire in my knuckles
my genitals? Pour it over me. Skin
can rage to attest the inward light.
Slather it on everything. A world
this color would at least have promise
inside its sacraments. Inside
the varnish of pains waiting on every
surface. On everything we hunger for.

Gypsy

She flourished with local gods always collecting
her prayers paying in return accommodation
to villages where she danced. Bells on her anklets
spoke at the loins of young men. Yet she seemed
safe to carry on her beggary with a firm brown belly
winking through the dusty market.

Last night
I heard that shake of tinny voices twinkling
in the rough plot. Her feet thumped slow and steady
invisibly out of the dark. I didn't know but I wanted
to believe she was calling me to come
behind the moony pines to give alms in the scrub. That
this was for me. This dirge of earthy toes. I held
the porch post. It seemed the kind of promise unbearable
to bathe in. But it seemed a death to go. To exact
knowledge out of enchantment. I listened for the dance
to end. As it faded she seemed to be skipping away
over the hill into another world. A place I wanted to be.

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