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Votre Polka

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A Thesis submitted to The Graduate School at The University of Missouri - St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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Pitz, Patz, Putz

It is like watching my mother
lick an envelope and make a sour face.
More specifically, it is the postal glue
I smell when she kisses my forehead goodnight.

I often perplex myself.
I hold puzzle pieces to the light
before I eat them. This, I believe,
puts things in perspective.

An art teacher once drew two parallel lines
and asked me to connect them.
I did but he said
I would never understand. So

tonight I think past my window. I look
into the passenger seat of vehicles
stopped before train tracks
hoping to see someone along for the ride
violently laughing with bright teeth,
and sometimes I do.

I.

Now the sun is shining
Through the tall windows.
The library is a quiet place.
Angels and gods huddled
In dark unopened books.
The great secret lies
On some shelf Miss Jones
Passes every day on her rounds.

- Charles Simic, from "In the Library"

Remembering the Prostitute in New York

Today I learned some lizards eat baby monkeys,
and am better for it, because I've been noticing
some things. Like, the older I get, the more
I resemble a baby monkey, wrinkled and hairless, small,

and lizards seem to be all around me.
The special on PBS showed one, a baby monkey,
get snatched by a lizard. It made me
feel like closing my eyes a long time.

Next, the camera zoomed to a special, red faced monkey
safe in a tree. I thought, my wife.
Next, one with a yellow moustache.
I thought, me again.

Tonight is part two and I'm excited to make my little connections.
For example, its preview showed a flat-faced monkey
with what looked like blue eye shadow. Immediately
I remembered the prostitute in New York.

Holiday Poem

Lost in the new city,
I used karaoke singers
to guide me while the snow fell.

There was a convention.
The Japanese vendors screamed numbers
holding out pink elephants.

I was in Milwaukee then,
and surprised by a man
in a wheelchair who said

You're in the wrong place, my friend
as he rolled back and forth on a little hill
to a pet store, closed, but with shadows

of parrots and lizards dancing on the walls
in a play titled "If These Bars Were Chocolate."
Yes, I said

and sat my pink elephant in his lap
as a sign of love for the less fortunate.
Merry Christmas.

The Escape

The earthquake shook the city buildings' foundations
to sand. Those walking with weak bones

had their legs broken and pulled themselves
to the nearest parking meter rattling out change.

The blind men on their weekly stroll
lost their canes and moved in the city

like zombies, grabbing at
the ponytails of little girls.

I was drinking coffee in the halfway house
when I noticed the first ripple in my cup,

then the doors blowing open
where everyone rushed out before the building crumbled.

You were in the street with the car alarms,
rolling in ecstasy between potholes. I called

and you looked at me, or past me into the helicopters
like a flock of birds that were calling our names.

A Trip to The Dentist

A dark man enters the novena; manholes
cover our stink; words tangle themselves
in pasture barbwire, and are put down.

The dentist says *open*
your mouth so he might see
the nuclear winter of our thoughts.

And I do: I gargle saltwater
at his advice later in the day
after I've shaken everyone's hand I know.

Our language on nuchal plates
or knuckled napes? A closer look:

darks hands marry his day
to the sandstone along the bread rind; sewer
workers dance alligators to the rat den; adjectives
sleep with your mother, and are put down.

How warm were my fingers
in your head? What
is the number theory backwards
if only one fist will fit?
Open your mouth.

In The Sloth You See Yourself, Hoping Long

Think of the time it took the sloth
to escape from its Florida zoo
then settle in a peach tree
to claw soft fruit.

*

How long
before the farmer
whispered

...the hell...

then settled the rifle
into his shoulder?

Control Panel

Many post-its surround a red button
reading do not push.

The night guard
asleep as in a spy film.

Mice dance over his shoes
in a prom of rye crumbs.

The brave at the ham bits
in his moustache,

and now the fat mouse smelling coffee
climbs his clothes to the countertop and overturned cup.

In his dream he is clean shaven
without a cleft lip and makes love to many women

while his father counts them with nail scratches
on the prison cell wall.

Most of the mice are asleep now too,
some curled into the warm pocket

of the man's hand he softly opens and closes,
most nesting in his crotch.

The fat mouse shakes and prepares for a run.
In his dream the women are endless.

Three Streets

The street named after a famous poet
was covered in yellow leaves,
as if 100 legal pads had been shredded.

Along the curb women sat tying scraps
into loose bracelets the youngest
could not stop licking.

On the street the governor has just made
his own, he stands on a horse's back
passing out buttons and religious paraphernalia.

Cars that circle wear their bumper stickers
like the yellow stains
in his underpants.

The street called Love
has been graffitied so often
the girl with red nails

points me there with her middle finger,
which when I start to thank her
she slips in my mouth and moans.

The Sun Will One Day Burn Out is a Cheap Excuse on Avoiding Love

This morning I woke up ready
for a fight with an orange.

My wife turned slowly on her side
and said in her sleep,

Potato, then Digging, and I fell
in love again because I love digging potatoes,
with her, then slicing them for frying.

We sometimes talk of children,
the way we'd have to clean the apartment

So spare change and batteries aren't eaten.
Soon, we say.

I won my fight with the orange
and left half on the table
before leaving for work. I know

She ate it and was thankful,
reading the paper,

Making shadow puppets on the pages
with thin fingers in the sunlight.

Dance Hall, Black Shoe

We had stopped on the way
to the car, and it was uncomfortable.

We avoided each other's eyes,
played with lint in pockets, allowed

the silence to say again,
we're done, which was then broken

by taps coming from the dancehall
where, through the window,

the one-legged man stared out at us
dancing in his black shoe.

Mirrors

We descended
to the chamber

of horrors and paid
our two dollars
to enter.

A girl was with me.
She had just eaten

a mint and breathed
warmly on my neck

in a way I can't forget.

The mechanical
chain gang of monsters
at times left us breathless,

with their loud hisses, bangs
and screams, but the exhibits
greatest trick

allowed the pulling of a rope
to a black curtain
which revealed our reflection
in broken glass
and children behind us on fire.

Goat's Milk

Blue flowers of Stoke's aster
rise on the slope like synthesis

and the goat fills her stomach
with a few of the leaves

turning her milk light purple next morning
when the farm-child fresh

from a greased tractor washes
hands and quickly strokes milk to pail

with the exhilaration of some fallen
blessing from God

At the End

There is the line of Kalashnikov rifles
and a pile of fish

skeletons, but the man
taking his temperature beneath the banana tree

worries me most. Because he has noticed
I show him my map.

Ah, yes, the continental shelf—come.

So I do. He offers a banana,
and I make a joke about the blue sticker woman

and her breasts and how she is a cartoon

and I was a child but so sexy, those lines, but this whole time
he does not laugh, takes back his hand

that had really been in front of me too long—then

ah, some wind from the ocean, a stunt plane
writing my name in the sky.

Reading the Funny Pages

Bitmapped paper plates
liven up the evening: the paste
that spreads thin conversation
to point break or
Suez Canal, I read through
the funny pages for quips
of meaning, disproportionate
taste, to tell you what color
and shape said to color
and shape; how

funny is the last fruit wedge on a plate,
and how funny is the biotic rock
in space, if it's there
add bitters to the drink, sourpuss
creation at the bottom of a bank,

and the boys along the road
don't know what to call
flinging cornflower pods
into a man-made sink, where
the katydids rest, dropped

like diphthongs
on your mother's waist,
waiting to spring like buttons
in the funniest cartoon in the world.

American Primatology

Milk tooth,
we count our fingers
and toes, romanticize

an uncle's thumb
in a potato field,
Lincoln-Log Alamo

war scenes with movie sounds
and fists. We say:
but my mother

does it, dropping
our pants in the classroom
to stare down a cardboard

scarecrow, inanimate,
waiting to flinch. We say:
but he said it, fuck

from the lips at God camp
praising grace, eating romaine
in the romp house alone

or with the weird guy, who
is everyone else, because the semaphore
of strangers' is a silent stare

two inches above the shoulder,
the eyes dark flags
against paper.

Your note is confiscated;
that drawing
too many swords;

the black crayon, gone.
For years you'll keep
a fat eraser in your pocket.

Eulogy of a Face

A woman on TV described placenta art.
It's thrown on a white canvas, she said simply.
The talk show host swiveled his chair.
The audience looked at their shoes.
A commercial with a bear happened, then another
about cars. When the show resumed
the subject had changed.

I've thought about this art for a long time
and will never look at the freckled girl's face
that I wink at from across the counter
the same. When I think of all the people I love
whose skin has taken the sun

in patterns, I hear myself saying, But you lived in that.
They all seem confused. *What do you mean? But what,
lived in what?* And each moves back
when I try to touch their foreheads.

Wall Street

Where is the crowd
you think
on this slow Tuesday morning.
On busses, seats sit empty
and the bus driver eats a sandwich.

But I want a sandwich
you whisper to no one, and the driver
baseball in his cheek
stares into your face,
shaking his head No.

Spitting in The Bowl

She looks at her soup
like a skeptic studying Job,

delicately as a Korean girl
timing rice paper above coals.

A hair has fallen from her head,
resting with the tomato red pepper

soup at Vera Mae's
Bistro on this slow Tuesday noon.

The waiters walk in slow motion,
traceable patterns, balancing

French presses above bow-ties.
Their knees bend to tables

and their bodies absorb the pops
that seem to rattle the ribcage

when one reaches old age. That,
she thinks, acid working past her throat, and now this.

Conducting an Execution for The State, I Think of My Sister

Across the room,
the chemicals blend
in the blood
 of the condemned man,

and I take his salty taste
from the air. It stings
my eyes, the way
 the ocean might,

but didn't
when you said drown.
Why did you want
 that then,

when we had lost sight
of land, and I jumped
off the deck to cool myself?
 What doll had I crushed?

Grand Guignol October

A mechanical snake's hiss
and the crack of a rope-pulled
monster. We are being moved
through the chamber of horrors
by a man whose eyes
we never see. Everything
designed to send the blood
to our faces, so when we glimpse

the goat lit in brilliance
through a tear in the curtain,
head stuck to the block,
we will yell out for the axe
not to fall, which we aren't allowed to see,
having been pushed into shadow,
but our minds project
along the wall
when the dull
chop comes through it.

Belief Monkey

When I suddenly feel very aware,
having kissed my wife and said my prayers
for the Himalayan children,
a monkey flicks his cigarette in my eye
and there is pain.

Currently, it rains in St. Louis
and my hand presses against the window
leaving a print that repeatedly dissolves.
This, I say, is important,
which makes the monkey cough.
He continues on to other apartments,
waiting for eyes to open
and my ear is against the wall
to hear what the neighbors might tell him.

fruit stall, swell

where enunciate more slowly
is a sweet sexual act
there is a pineapple
being split by an angry mexican
recently stung by a jewel wasp.

the way he slices the air in vain,
the hope of a sweet reconciliation,
and the terror of his six children
and the swelling in his palm near popping,

he eyes you so intently at the booth
with your crumpled dollar bill.

Dakota

The old men are gathered
with their noses towards
some storm in South Dakota
that, by smelling, they no
longer worry about,

and return to their tables
inside the glass box

and their papers and their hard
eyes on the waitress, resting

now moving in a blue cut
that reminds one

he was so lucky
to have boys
as he holds his cup
near his barrel chest
just to make her lean a little.

With Judgment, Prejudice

- *After winning a gold medal, Muhammad Ali was refused service at a diner in Ohio, and threw it into the Ohio River.*

When he walks in his fists still ache, his brain
repairing cells with extra fluid. The farmer

at the bar grips his cup arthritically; the couple

in the corner stop speaking. It is morning
in Ohio, and this diner creates community with pie

and hotcakes, handshakes and sugared apples.

A recognition: this black man waiting for a hostess.
With flat-billed caps and the Reds. Sun washes

his shoe tops—he waits—a stillness occurs

as in the recognition of an affair, the hotel note
in the dryer. With head nods and the local paper.

What do you want a voice like eggs in hot oil.

To eat breakfast With handwritten menus and malteds.
Well can't help you here, might es well get

The feeling of two dozen focused eyes. With denim

and bright ketchup. He watches a man butter toast,
and a woman light a cigarette. The sudden ruffle of newspaper.

He feels the metal in his pocket, asks *How far to the river*

With fishing stories and grain prices. He walks
in the direction of their fingers.

Political Poem

It is beginning to be easier
to cross my right leg over
my left. Do not mistake this
for politics.

On television a man's powdered face
tells me
a women's powdered face
is wrong.

That is one of those political things.

My legs have been criss-crossing
awhile here on the couch
for comfort, and I'm
just noting

how knees bend,
hips shift,
and the time it takes
to feel numb.

Ausfahrt

You are the native English speaker
who reads Ausfahrt for the first time
above a parking garage in Germany
and doesn't laugh, today
passing women in pink hats.

This poem is not your taste,
passing women in pink hats
and smelling the chocolate store
confections that you will buy
for your mother. Sound:

“A marimba player is called a marimbist.”
You write that down, fold it into the small
pocket above the pocket in your jeans.

Perhaps breast cancer
awareness, perhaps
Easter Seals.

Many cars stall by the corner flower shop—a red light.
They have spilled from the parking garage.
Ausfahrt whispers through your lips,
approaching the second exit, passed
the women in pink hats, passed
English from a car radio, a marimba,
marimbist, you touch yourself, reassuring,
pull out the paper, add a note to check spelling.

Perhaps Oprah's book club, perhaps
World Orphan's Awareness.

You walk slowly and see people laughing in their cars.
The flowers and the chocolates. You admire business
placement, admire the window drapery, admire
the red lights against the sun.

This poem is not to your liking—you
finger a truffle bathed in gooseberry liqueur,
say *three of these* in German with little accent
leaving below a bright sign.

The Orangutan at the San Diego Zoo

Two men holding hands stare
through a glass museum case
at a photo series titled: *What
is Gender?* One picture
shows a man in a purple flower dress
kicking footballs over tree limbs.
Another, a woman
shaving her balls.

A hermaphrodite
with moosewood shoes
clops into a women's bathroom,
pisses standing up
then changes her mind,
decides to sit
and read a magazine article
from her purse titled "Who Dey?"
about the Cincinnati Bengals.

Home from a white-collar
plastics plant supervisor job, Jim
lays next to his wife
asleep under a yellow electric blanket.
He wakes her on purpose
and she smiles with eyes closed,
moving her hand to the back of his head,
rubbing the oil from it between her fingers.

Because Janet says *I love you*,
Alice says *Kiss me harder*.

An Orangutan at the San Diego Zoo
sits on his haunches and stares
absentmindedly over the tiger's den.
You watch him lean side to side,
flexing his great, orange arms to the sky before flicking
a purple lady bug from an arm pit.
A tiger roars,
and the orangutan, excited, stands
expectantly, masturbating with both hands.

A Thin Novel

Watch
for the point
where the spine breaks

On what page
was a mark made by a raindrop
when you left her
on that park bench last spring

Where is she now
you think,
opening and closing
opening and closing
a thin novel.

Your Mother's Gynecologist

They say Dr. Hilton goes to *Koodie-Whose*,
that he smiles at the thigh skin
of high school girls serving steaks
on paper plates, imagines
what their elbows feel like on tired fingers,
if their breath smells like bonfire.

During the day, under fluorescents,
he tells women to relax,
breathe, it's just a pap smear, easy does it.
They say: nothing. *I'm nervous. Easy does it?*

Tonight Dr. Hilton's at the corner booth
by himself smiling into a fresh washed glass
full of amber beer. A waitress brings him a steak.
He says, *Thank you—Babe*, and as she walks away
he counts the steps it takes to reach the kitchen's swing door.

Your mother is across the room.
It's her birthday and she's celebrating
with friends and stories and cheap shots of rum
for her fifty-first. After an hour
she excuses herself to the bathroom,
and, passing Dr. Hilton,
she can't help but feel something
when he smiles at her like a white-toothed god.

The Mother's Expensive Purse

The permanent tooth sat in the book of poetry
before the child stole
and pushed it
snugly against red velvet lining.

Back on the pages there was the absence of blood.
The purse, however, had soaked through,
and on returning the child was ruthlessly
slapped on the porch of her house
that sits picturesquely against
a field of wheat where, at times,
deer will be found making love
in dawn light, or slamming their heads
like stiff handshakes agreeing to bomb
the collapsible city.

Constructs in Stockings

Pieced together
wooden cube on the table
You were the brainteaser
in a coarse cloth stocking
above the fireplace.
Mystical and religious
Your claim was time
and causality. Tonight
the rain falls thoughtlessly
into the street gutter. Tonight
to be rain. Christmas has been
over for months, and still the cube
sits on the table, perhaps holding
a laugh, or only waiting
to be dismembered in a move
where it will call out to God
as a martyr inside the lion's head
where sound travels quickest
and no longer matters.

II.

If you didn't see the six-legged dog,
It doesn't matter.
We did, and he mostly lay in the corner.
As for the extra legs,

One got used to them quickly
And thought of other things.
Like, what a cold, dark night
To be out at the fair.

- Charles Simic, from "Country Fair"

Chutzpah

As a child, I only liked Peter Pan
because his shadow had strength.
I would try goading my own
into mischief because of this idea.
My uncle called it chutzpah

but he's still in jail.
I once asked him for advice. He said,
When kissing a girl
from another country
say Yes when she asks,
Is that what is done here?

That night I had found yellow ribbons
in a desk drawer. I tried tying them
to my shadow. Look what I've done,
I said, turning in circles around the living room.

My uncle's face was so shiny just then,
as my mother and sister
went on sewing little socks.

Vernon

Perhaps, from my youth, the coal
burning at Vernon
will give me cancer. Perhaps
not. Though

today, not far from there, I woke
to the rain
burning the road
and also

the chickens in their coop,
on this little farm.
More honestly, I woke
to something

screaming in the woods,
from the rain,
and saw the road,
the chicken's yellow.

Childhood Red

Corn leaves licked dew onto our jeans before dawn,
until the sun burned them dry, also our necks,
raw with youth. I detassled corn as a boy
in a motorized metal basket, my fingers
timidly entering the plant
and grabbing hard what I was

paid to remove. At lunch we swallowed white bread
sandwiches in the shade of the bus that brought us,
its two tone seats a reminder of our smell
masked by pickles and salt—someone
always licking their fingers, touching their arms
to watch the blood flash to the surface,

and my knuckles, guessing a cut's depth
after a sudden realization of skin,
how I questioned missing it
after my first paycheck paid for gloves—
and with each day at its end, my walk
home, occasionally in a sweet rain,

how I'd flatten my hand, hold the back
of it to the warmth in my neck
while asking God, once the skin peeled
and the softness recalled his red hair,
to remind me of my father's face,
please remind me of his face.

Deck Hands

Old ships on fire in the middle of the day,
that's sunlight this afternoon.

I watch children play with a rubber ball
on the concrete. They lose it in the grass.

I've never wanted kids, and I tell you this
every time I forget to buy gas for the mower.

You are baking sweet things, *For them*, you say coyly
passing me to the lawn with a plateful of colors,

shifting your hips in that special way,
taut sails on a windy day, just for my eyes

while the ships burn themselves into evening
and I whisper *Goddamn it* as the children smile.

Polka

My fiancé and I are huddled in a crowd
pressed to a railing that, by faith, we all take
as a measure of safety, here in the St. Louis Zoo.

We are looking at a sun bear's best attempt
to kill a black plastic ball.
The man to my left whispers
yeah, yeah, kill that fucker,
feeling for his camera. His child,
face painted like a tiger's,
jumps in place. Others
eat their various ice-creams.

I pull the woman I will marry closer
to say something severe, like, wow
can you imagine a sun bear
boxing your face like a play toy,

but she speaks first and says
can you imagine
a sun bear boxing your face
like a play toy,

and I felt love then
as we guessed at the length of its claws.

How the Plush Chairs at Yard Sales Easy-Bake Our Afternoon

I cannot stomach gingerbread.
I cannot Machiavelli the toaster oven.

I will cook our walks spent alone
measuring curbs for children
we don't know but place
in Catholic schools to keep face
with the Carlson's.

How wild it all seems,
the smell of buses rusting
behind their houses. What
to make of the rabbits
in the engine—What to make
with the telephone poles collapsed
beside it when the unrelenting realness
of a FedEx truck brushing your shoulder
means we'll be OK

You say
The air chooses our greatest
shuffleboard mistakes. This
stalls me for a moment

To The Giant Panda in a China Zoo

I know you've just bitten your third victim.
Maybe it was a child trying to feed you a leaf
and you thought, *arm*. Or a man backing up to your cage
for a photograph by his wife
and you thought, *shoulder blade*. But hopefully
it was some asshole poking your eye with a stick
and your stillness was misinterpreted as sleep
instead of, your emotion, quiet rage. If this is the case,
good job giant panda of China, please teach me your ways
of dealing with criticism.

Winner

I learned today that baby eagles are called eaglets.
I also learned that they sometimes kill one another
in what the birdwatcher called Cain and Able Syndrome.

Sometimes the parents decide the winner
accidentally, stepping on a head when they fly
into the nest. I'd like to believe

I'd luck out somehow, if I were an eaglet.
That I would instinctively fly away from the nest,
snap a fish, look interesting in the sky, be confused

as a chicken hawk even, just for the fun
of a gunshot late some afternoon by two brothers
betting on who will have sex first,

who's the better man, and watch what happens
when they both miss, when their father watching
from the truck bed calls them pussies.

Wanted:

a word that begins with you
baking pies over campfire
and we'd talk of dragons
inside our tent for two people
smaller than us and how hot
the summer was back from school
like dragon's breath you said
yes it was you and you laughed
when the berries were stolen
by raccoons.

a word that equals nights removing
diphthongs because accents were like coats
to us then with copies of dialect maps
you threw into the river because the ocean
is our universal tongue you said
philosophical and suspicious of love
for particular cadences.

a word that has hands to cover buried items
your winter hat with the red ball
and you said it didn't matter you
just wanted to feel reassured
something stayed but not me.

a word with ends.

a word that ends with.

a word meaning kettle.

The Old World is Not Better Than Mexico

I have been watching a Mexican parade
celebrate with colors found inside a donkey shaped piñata.

People jump out of the picture,
back in. The camera calls them, pans.

In the kitchen I hear my grandmother cough.
She is eating blood pudding because she does those things.

The microwave is beeping because she likes all food hot,
Don't you want some hot food she calls.

I've stopped trying to understand, and instead stare
listlessly at the young man

counting time with quick fingers
on a costume maker's bench, now folding a tortilla.

While Stocking For Winter, I Think of My Father

1.

Wheelbarrows of old wood
become heavier when it snows.

The few hundred feet from the barn:
wet concrete sucking my boots.

There is time to think of this, and stare
into a tree's face, count the lines,

trace the maze to its branches, heavier
now, and now, always until it stops.

2.

Pushing through a drift my muscles
tense, the way I imagine
an Indian boy's body does

when he dances—until peace
is the clapped dirt above his feet
when his father smiles and says *Enough*

Walking By the Airport, I Think of When You Left

You spun up the street
like a 1940s musical.

We held each other
like broken toys

and let people put us
back together with their eyes.

“Look what I’ve made,”
they thought, with just a little thinking,

then walked around a corner
able to forget us completely.

“I want it,”
you said

“to be a happy thing.”
But today I’ve seen seven goodbyes.

Raccoon

That whiteness of your page
scratched by dull pencils
in summer, night, and the pliant
emotion within the hook
of all those J's.

How many times
will you write her name
now that you've heard
the garbage cans rattle
and the raccoon has climbed

the tree with its bacon-greased napkin
covered, likely, with your clumps of hair?

Stanislavsky

That name could be a drink's, as in
give me a double Stanislavsky,
Mr. Bartender, and the heavy
glass knob to its bottle held
like a pool ball in his hand
would more or less be its magnificent proof.

Names, lately, an issue.
I have proposed to a small woman
from a small town in Ohio
who has said yes,
she will love me
tomorrow, too. Soon she will take

my name, and my female friends say take
it easy for awhile, with the change,
she is losing something, you know?
and the shrug in their shoulders means
she is losing something.

So, Ms. Stanislavsky
I toast to your name and swallow,
have asked the bartender,
whose hands are too small
and still wet from washing glasses,
to reach again for your high bottle
he nudges with his middle finger.

The I

sits like an upright guitar on the page.
I tell you this in the car
while we pass billboards
and giant crosses
on our way to Saint Louis.
Don't you think so
I want to push
but your focus
is a steel cage
the orangutans have stopped punching.

We will take our kids to the zoo.
We will catch someone eating plastic.

Mile seventy equals one hour
and the left side of my body tingles
like that electric fence, and in that field
a cow plants a strawberry seed with its hoof
staring at us not aloofly while we pass
but with the recognition you give bald heads
to baby bottoms and the scientific method
to late-night romps.

Now I think what to do with my hand
so place it on your knee for comfort.
The classically conditioned cap.
The sky is out after rain.

We will tell our kids of weather.
We will one day hide in the bathtub.

The I sits on the page
like the last beer bottle.

The I
 like evangelists' arms.

The Cold, Deal

Seventeen year locusts lynchpin the Pacific northwest,
underground and huddling.

Tonight I read the weather's machine language,
which is cold, and therefore Washington state
on my mind, where I have a friend called Sean
and a fiancé's hope of living.

It is because of the cold?

Yes, the cold.

She always answers quickly like that.

At times we make promises to avoid
difficult to pronounce illnesses
that, genetically determined, may huddle in our blood—
I promise not to catch lymphosarcoma—
so we might tell our families years later
when they ask about the other
Yes, the cold
and not look in their faces, which won't then show worry,
their attention returned to the great melons on the table
adjacent the empty chair.

Cottonmouth Hunt

The boy who couldn't smell
was at a disadvantage in the cattails
ringing the lake. Our skin browning, throats
hoarse from whisper, we urged him

further to the shallows—we in our galoshes
settled thinly in the mud. Looking out
the sky had started its pink,
so we knew the time was nearly up

and our chances to see the snake
perhaps lost in our own shortcomings,
but then the smell of cucumber
rolled thick about him there

as we watched his hand shock down into the water
and him scream out our oldest fear.

Sleeping Game

I sometimes look at the clock
to depress myself, but only
during times of severe desperation,
like tonight when I've stopped watching
flamingos trace patterns on an ice rink
near Florida. I still hear the reporter saying
Look at that figure-eight Kathy
but I won't go back to the TV
because the secondhand frustrates my perception,
or dimension, or philosophy, or flamingo,
and the scraping sound of their leather feet
is in perfect time with the rhythmic silence,
and that's enough to do it now,
to help me close my eyes a little.

Line

A child plays with a ball in the park, the sun
bright on her skin, she cares for its roundness,
the way it feels in her hand—tossing it that way,

and I want to relate that to your breasts
but feel the church turn its head, remember
my mother's face redden when I stumbled into the bath,

so I make a drawing in the sand,
quickly erased by the wind, of our first hug,
the way I held you so tightly with reason.

Rebuttal

I've never been good at insults. I would memorize
standup routines overheard from corner men
begging money, only to lose focus
when surrounded by boys my age
foaming for the rebuttal, and sputter—

 curse words, gone. The description
of his mother's mouth, too distant.

Their laughter stored itself
deep in me, rolling
enigmatic circles at night
under my eyelids, after I had
stared at my mother's face, asking her
questions about the weather
to watch its muscles move before
she turned off the light, thinking
what is it what is it what is it

Beard Fields

Spinning clicks of combines have dispersed into ash and chaff
and red-rusted handles.

They sit in a row, lining a corn field
that will never feel them again. Around their flat tires, cows eat

brown grass burned autumn leaf orange by rust and midday sun,
chewing their lips into smiles.

On a two lane road, Amish pass
me in a caravan of Chevys. Their beards—soothed by windshields

and air conditioning—relax. I enjoy driving in Ohio. I enjoy seeing the passing parishes
through the safety of my window,

through the danger I create with waned attention given to roadside cats
and ostrich farms. Forgetting my

speedometer I forget my gas pedal,
and with this

my truck stops. I stand surrounded by rowed fields ready to grow my lunch
in months to come, or days,

or now because the seeds dug
feel fresh enough to eat standing here among dirt and insects,

all of them waiting, too, for the great harvest,
or death. What a terrible thing to say.

My Day At The Park

When the fire truck passes with a belly
full of covered men, children
smack their ears in pain,
mothers stop conversing,
and everyone flinches, if just
at first, but the deaf-mute
by the picnic tables,
reaching past the earth
to push an angel
through the sun.

Sock

My brain must have completed itself
for now I fear death. To talk
of yesterday is to say the fallen peaches
are covered with insects. Today
the larvae shine and I am happy
when they fly off. However,
I remember filling socks with rolls
of nickels and gravel from the driveway.
My stepfather took me at dusk to the yard.
Thinking back on the barn now,
its open doors stark black
could be the entrance to hell.
He wound the sock like David
and let it go into the air. A bird
attacked, coming as if by magic,
and clutched the sock for a moment
before letting it fall. Not
a bird, he said. A bat. Soon, the sky
was thick with their swooping.

The Big Red Dog's Epiphanic Water Bowl

Caustic like republics
governing the placement
of city buildings; the many
disparate voices; I am
desperate like the mother
baking pies sweeter than
hard candy.
Cavities in the tooth.
Harry Matthews.
Children's books
like the Big Red Dog
and Glory of the Magpie Plots.

I remember being seven and breaking through arms
in a game. It was my first metaphor.
When someone broke and the game was banned
with discussions on growth plates
and the importance of milk for bones
that became my second. I've looked
for the third in a school desk but you stole it,
and that's okay. Tonight I've got a picture book
in my lap and can't stop seeing new faces in the pages.
Yours smiles every so often,
and I think of playtime outdoors in jeans
so inappropriate for the weather it made my mother give
her first apology. Pie. The coldest water I'd ever tasted.

Walking to the Poet's Church

In Wales, I look past the laughter of bricks.
The buildings, side by side in a gray slick,
lead me in a straight line to St. David's church,

and I'm reading about his discipline
from a book found on the plane,
the way his hands sweated thin beads
through pink, near transparent palms
writing his poems and sermons
in a quiet, candlelit box.

People would come to him, and they came to his doorstep,
waited to be let in for days but first stripped everything,
a letting go of the world as they felt it on their naked legs
and through the laughs of passers to the quay.

Seeing the church, it rises only some, humble like a saint,
but colored like one, too, in the same slick gray.
I've only wanted to touch a beginning, so I push the door
with a fingertip. It swings wide on red wood hinges
in a slow quarter circle, and looking to the vanishing point of rows,
I see, faintly, a final black point.