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Hunger

Lore McSpadden

ENG 698

State University of New York: The College at Brockport

Spring 2015

Hunger

By

Lore McSpadden

APPROVED BY:



Advisor

6/18/15

Date



Reader

6/17 2015

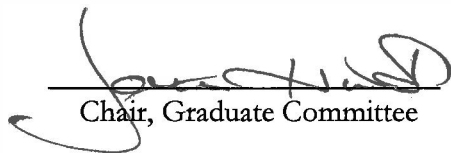
Date



Reader

6/18/15

Date



Chair, Graduate Committee

9/1/15

Date



Chair, Department of English

6/1/15

Date

With gratitude

for all the things that didn't kill me
and to all the people who made me stronger.

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Introduction, Draft 1

I don't ~~ever~~even know how to start.

As far as I can remember, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I was little. I mean, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I got distracted.

[REDACTED]. Like, for instance, New England prep school, [REDACTED], methamphetamine, ripped Marilyn Manson t-shirts, [REDACTED] strawberry jam, homelessness, [REDACTED], Midwestern strip clubs, [REDACTED], and massive amounts of bacon. [REDACTED] expunged.

So, you know, [REDACTED] write poetry? It ~~w~~won't die. [REDACTED] poems [REDACTED].

My approach to writing is [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I always feel like I should [REDACTED].

I [REDACTED] read [REDACTED] the [REDACTED] other poets who [REDACTED] less insane. As much as possible. And this is very important: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] put on shoes when they ~~want~~have to

[REDACTED]. That is, of course, what my work has in common with theirs.

My poems are [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. This thesis [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] poetry.

Introduction, Draft 2

There's something about the need to write poetry that feels like a bird on fire in the pit of my belly, gripping my intestines with claws of alwaysbeen and neverwas before launching itself out of my fingers, leaving me panting and weary, huddled and shaking in the worn right-hand corner of my sofa.

So there's that. A somewhat reason for my thesis. But there's more.

The first poem that I'll never forget was Langston Hughes's "Harlem." It hung on my dad's refrigerator door, spackled with tomato sauce and marked by buttered fingerprints. Crusted, sugared over. I would stare. I was lonely, wrapped in a speech impediment and trapped by a scream I never let out. Six years old: I looked up "deferred" in the weighty dictionary that was stored, dusty, on the shelf underneath the glass-topped living room table.

There it was: the first word necessary to describe everything I had to say but no one to tell.

I met the sounds of other poets since my first exposure to Langston Hughes. William Carlos Williams. John Donne. ee cummings. Wallace Stevens. Alice Walker. Sylvia Plath. Ruth Stone. I once courted a man by reciting Rimbaud and composing haiku: it didn't end well.

And then, a turning point occurred. My last year as an undergraduate, and I found them: Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Jorie Graham, James Tate, Richard Siken, Tyehimba Jess, Sharon Olds, Saul Williams, Dorianne Laux. Light and shadows! Words that left me gasping! This!

The poems within my thesis draw upon this cavernous context of words that have been shared by people who couldn't stop themselves: everything that I have ever learned about poetry that was worth knowing at all I learned from reading the poems of the writers who came before me.

For my subject matter, though, I keep it close to home, close to my life: these poems refer extensively to my experiences and the experiences of people who I have known, particularly in relation to drugs, sex, and the process of finding hope after surviving traumatic circumstances. The fact that the themes and moments within my poems frequently connect with my own past, combined with the emotional ambiguity and the tension between the strange and the mundane that are often present, places my work in conversation with post-confessionalist poets. Nevertheless, it would be a faulty assumption to automatically equate the speaker of all of my poems with me: although the speaker frequently resembles me very much, more often than not she is a composite of me and the many other people who have been generous enough to share their memories, stories, thoughts, fears, and faith with me.

All of the poems in this collection are ones that I have written during my time as a graduate student at Brockport. My thesis itself is comprised of three sections—"Shadow Stories," "Sex and Other Destructions," and "Back Roads"—each of which is located in between single poems that serve as transitional pieces from one section to the other.

The first section is a collection of poems that are intentionally disorienting and often dark; these poems also, more often than not, rely more on sound and images to

communicate with readers than they do on sense or narrative. As a result, these poems are open for multiple interpretations from readers: this is triply true for “Incantation for a Clean Conscience,” which can be read as one poem that moves between the Roman and italic type or as two separate poems, one written in Roman type and one italicized.

Several of the poems within this section include questions, none of which are intended to be hypothetical, and none of which have clear answers. There are also poems such as “Final Handshake,” “Separation,” and “River Field, Forgiven” which are crafted based upon the movement of sound to create an impression, and whose meaning shifts when they are read, even for me. I wanted to start the collection with these poems partly as an invitation to readers to approach my poems more with their intuitive gut than with their logical mind, and partly as a way to begin the collection with poems that were equal parts playful and ominous: because these poems operate in both of these ways, I feel that they provide an excellent opening into the sections that follow.

The second section, as its title suggests, is a collection of poems that grapple with themes of sex and violence. In these poems, I have intentionally brought together moments of tenderness with moments of pain. I have become equally haunted and inspired by my many conversations with fellow survivors of rape and abuse, former sex workers, and people who are active within the BDSM communities: while I will be quick to assert that there is no inherent overlap between these groups of people, what they do share in common with each other is a depth of

experience relating to human sexuality that transcends that with which many people are familiar. A subject of discussion that has frequently come up in these conversations is the challenge of conceiving of oneself as a sexual being in a way that is unflinchingly authentic, despite and because of one's experiences outside of the norm. These poems attempt to give a voice to this challenge, while neither simplifying the complexity of this process nor pretending to speak for all people who go through it. The "I" and "she" that appear in these poems encompass a broad—but by no means all-inclusive—spectrum of women who have, in a variety of ways, experienced prolonged exposure to the overlap between sex and pain.

The opening poem within the second section, "Locked and Listening," contains many of the elements that were present in the first section of the collection: I wrote this with a strong emphasis on sound and image, and readers will need to rely upon their intuition to develop any concrete relationship to and interpretation of these images. As the section continues, however, the poems become increasingly more concrete, bordering on a narrative-like quality that aims to make the tension between sex and destruction—and between connection and separation—more accessible to readers.

The third and final section is in many ways the most intimate. Although it does contain poems that explore subjects such as addiction, loss, and murder, it does so in a way that exhibits greater tenderness than most of the poems in the previous two sections. There is a collection of character sketches offered in poems such as "Tension," "Subtle Shift," and "Johnny Gone South"; a collection of poems that

explore themes of drugs and addiction such as “Cracked,” “Twelve Lies: Reader Response,” “Enchanted Hills, Indiana: August 25, 2014,” and (once again) “Johnny Gone South”; and many others that simply explore moments and experiences of tenderness in the midst of life’s struggles.

The cumulative result is a collection of poems that carries readers from an origin of disorientation, fear, and confusion; through a period of depravity, pain, and perversion; before finally landing at a place of radical acceptance of things as they are—in other words, a quality of peace that is devoid of denial. I am—and therefore my poems are— completely uninterested in blind optimism, serenity that lacks depth, or cheeriness that avoids at all costs the discomfort caused by looking into shadows: what fascinates me is the quality of equanimity that has borne witness to cruelty without losing the ability for compassion. I am interested in the gifts that suffering brings us: the beauty within violence, the resilience that grows from despair, the love that has survived unspeakable events.

I have been influenced by so many writers, and any attempt to create a list of the poets who have shaped my own approach to poetry will certainly be partial at best. In the most general of terms, the poems that really get me going are those that put things into words that can’t be put into words.

Most recently, I have been reading a great deal of poetry by people who have experienced war, whether through active involvement in combat (such as Yusef Komunyakaa, Bruce Weigl, Brian Turner, and Doug Anderson), past or present residence in a country that has been profoundly affected by warfare and foreign

occupation (such as Nguyen Phan Que Mai, Mahmoud Darwish, Zeeshan Sahil, Saadi Youssef, Agha Shahid Ali, and Khaled Mattawa), or a long-term relationship with a soldier (such as Jehanne Dubrow and Elyse Fenton).

I am particularly inspired by poems in which tenderness and war coexist, such as Komunyakaa's "We Never Know," in which a man who is shot "danced with tall grass/for a moment, like he was swaying/with a woman" (1-3). In the closing lines, the speaker of the poem (who was among those who were shooting their guns at the dancing-dying man) "turned him over, so he wouldn't be/kissing the ground" (16-17). Not to mention Turner's "Last Night's Dream," which weaves together sex and warfare with lines such as "...I shoot/an azimuth to her navel while her fingertips touch me with/concussions, as if explosives rang through the nerves of my body" (1-3), or his poem "VA Hospital Confession," in which the speaker of the poem bears witness to the ways his flashbacks affect his lover.

I am inspired by the way that Fenton's "Notes on Atrocity (Baghdad Air Station)," in which a woman watches the peaceful winter goings-on and frost-covered plants in her backyard while she is on the phone with her spouse in Iraq, juxtaposes growth and death: "...As if/this were not the work of shrapnel—//not the body's wet rending, flesh/reduced to matter—but the litany//of an old field guide, the names/of wildflowers spoken out loud://*ischium, basal ganglia, myelin-/sheathed endings*. Names for parts.//For all our flowering parts" (13-21). And the vulnerable porousness within Weigl's "On the Anniversary of Her Grace," whose speaker states matter-of-factly that "I could not touch anyone./I thought my body would catch fire" (32-33).

These poems are crafted with such mindfulness and skill that the images and sounds bring light, beauty and vulnerability to readers' minds, which ultimately serves to both heighten and humanize the violence that they describe.

Do this sometime, do it often: toggle between Turner and Youssef, between "Hurt Locker" and "The Cold," "What Every Soldier Should Know" and "For Jamal Jumaa," "2000 lbs." and "America, America." Or between Weigl and Nguyen, allowing "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down" to bleed into "Quảng Trị," "The Soldiers Brief Epistle" into "Separated Worlds," "Elegy" into "With a Vietnam Veteran." And then between Ali and Sahil, from "A Pastoral" to "Birds." Allow your skin and your heart to grow so big from this process that your loving pulse shouts at you from across the room, shows you where your home has been hiding.

I have never been to war. My father has not been to war. My uncles were not drafted, nor did they enlist. My maternal grandfather, a member of the Church of the Brethren, did not serve in the military for religious reasons. In three generations of my family, there is only one person who served in the armed forces: my paternal grandfather, who enlisted in the Navy at the very beginning of U.S. involvement in World War II. Although I have visited other countries, I have spent the vast majority of my life in America, where I have been spared the sights of war and occupation. I do not pretend to have any direct experience of what warfare is like.

Which is, incidentally, part of why the work of these poets is so important to me. I am (and therefore many of my poems are) interested in various questions about trauma and how to live with its aftereffects—although not, perhaps, the questions that

would seem most obvious. I am curious about: the near-ubiquity of rape, warfare, and abuse throughout history; what it is that draws us as a species, again and again, toward such extremities; and the ways in which having experienced trauma can change people in such a way that the resultant hypervigilance becomes a tool for noticing beauty in even the harshest of moments. Examples within my thesis that grapple with these questions include “Final Handshake,” “Nocturne,” “Consumption,” “Original Face Takes a Step,” “Locked and Listening,” “Ghost Bodies,” “Pilgrimage,” “Subtle Shift,” “The Mathematician Asks the Poet a Question,” “Photophobia,” and “Johnny Gone South.” Because warfare is one of the main causes of PTSD that I have not experienced directly, the poetry of those who have lived through it reveals my blind spots and teaches me the music of things that I know not of. These poets guide me toward a deeper understanding of the questions that brought me to poetry in the first place, and then illustrate to me ways to bring these haunted thoughts into words that can reach the minds of people who lack experience of the source of the questions.

As previously mentioned, much of my poetry qualifies as post-confessional. As such, I feel a strong affinity for the work of poets such as W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, James Tate, Sharon Olds, and Louise Glück. Each of these poets has shown me ways of situating the self within a poem without sacrificing concerns of craft and sonic effect.

Okay, pause: the previous paragraph is mostly true. I know that I’m *supposed* to like all of those poets, but I’m just not fully committed: I’m grateful for the poetry

of Robert Lowell, for the way his *Life Studies* opened the gates for poets to write without subterfuge about their moments of embarrassment and confusion and for the way he puts together lines like “the best breasts in the nightclub are fossils” (from “Cleopatra Topless,” line 2), but I can’t help but wish that his poems were given permission to be a little more vulnerable, a little less overtly upper-middle class white male Bostonian.

If we’re going to talk about the men in that list, give me the uncomfortable responsiveness of Tate’s “Rape in the Engineering Building” and the fiercely tender ambivalence of “The Lost Pilot”; or perhaps the fear and irrationality in Snodgrass’s “A Locked House,” the emotional complexity in “Heart’s Needle,” and the mortal heat in “Love Lamp” (although not, please, the didacticism of his “Talking Heads” or the overly-clever rhymes of “In Memory of Lost Brain Cells”). And definitely, definitely give me more of the pointedly dizzy movement of Berryman’s poems: after I read a few of his “Dream Songs,” I need to take a break and feel my feet on the ground. I love it.

Now, the female poets I enumerated: when I was in my teens and twenties, their words were gifts that I unwrapped and held close to my irregular, drug-addled heart when I could neither sleep nor breathe with any depth. There were times when I would curl up against the words within Sexton’s *Live or Die* and feel a little less alone in my big, big emotions and wasted, bleeding body: I discovered this collection of her poetry after my most serious suicide attempt, when I was 17, and reading “Wanting to Die,” “Suicide Note,” and “Live” was like whispering secrets to a best

friend under a worn blanket in the middle of the night. A few years later, I came to prefer the relatable surrealism within Sexton's *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, which remained a favorite for a while before being replaced by Plath's *Ariel*. The heavy confusion and beautiful implosions that were intimated by the poems in these books gave me my first hope of being able to write poems in which I allowed my darkness to be seen, and expanded, and eventually loosened: Sexton and Plath helped me move beyond the shallowness of my adolescent verse toward poems with greater depth and broader interest.

As I continued to grow as a poet, Sharon Olds and Louise Glück offered me an example of greater healing from equal pain than was available from either Plath or Sexton. Their work was an example to me of how to craft confessional poetry that acknowledged darkness without being consumed by it: some excellent examples are "The Eye," "Poem to My First Lover," "1954," and "Take the I Out" by Olds, as well as "Hesitate to Call," "The Wild Iris," and "October" by Glück. It is my hope that the most personal of my poems within my thesis are resonant with, though of course distinct from, the work of these foremothers of mine.

Even more so than these twentieth-century confessionalists, though, I now feel connected to the work of my cohort of twenty-first century poets who belong to the first-person-in-verse scene: Richard Siken, Eileen Myles, Natalie Diaz, Cornelius Eady, Saeed Jones, Terrence Hayes, and Li-Young Lee, among others. One of many things that I love about the current generation of post-confessionalist poets is their vigilance in bringing their "I" out into the world, whether through increased use of

the first-person plural voice or simply by writing about ways that the “I” is impacted by broader social patterns and more universal flavors of chaos, pain, and love.

Take, for instance, Natalie Diaz. Her poem “When My Brother Was an Aztec” weaves together lines describing the ways that her brother’s meth addiction preyed upon their parents (“...he lowered his swordlike mouth, //gorged on them, draining color until their eyebrows whitened” [15-16]) with images relating to the historic culture of Mexican Aztecs—including human sacrifice, personified gods, and the importance of maize—and commentary on class and gender hierarchies (“all his realm knew he had the power that day, had all the jewels //a king could eat or smoke or shoot. The slave girls came /to the fence and ate out of his hands” [33-35]). In this way, Diaz has crafted an undeniably personal poem that nevertheless spans centuries and confronts the enduring existence of social control. What follows throughout this collection of poems is a constantly shifting rhythm between the personal and the social, between the self and the other and the places where they do and do not meet. Mostly, they don’t. But, oh, when they do—“God, please, /let her/eat another apple/tomorrow”(“I Watch Her Eat an Apple” [49-52])—how they do it!

Not to mention the way Siken writes about love in a way that’s really about sex, hunger, and internalized homophobia (or just self-hatred? or a desire to be hurt? all of the above? yes.) turned outward onto the world (“A Primer for the Small Weird Loves,” “Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out”) and about contentment in a way that’s more about violence (“Unfinished Duet”).

Contrast his work, in turn, with the mystic union in Jones's "Pretending to Drown," the intimacy that is granted to him by hindsight in "Body & Kentucky Bourbon."

And then there's the bigness of the "we" who sometimes visits Myles's poems, a "we" who is, depending on when and where I read it, the speaker plus either one: "to write/is a form/of accounting/& approximate/promise/in the sunny/mouth of/time. A horny/bet. ...Aren't/we lucky to have/captured each/other in this/hideous neon light" ("your name" [19-27, 36-40]) or many: "cause you know/we are equal/in the complexity/of our gaze" ("Like" [22-25]), not to mention the way "you" is opened and surrendered: "...you're/dancing on/my shield/while your/head's/thrown/back/and I grunt/an army/of lick" ("To Weave" [111-120]). Myles's "we" and "you" invites readers into the sharp rhythm of her lines, allowing us all moments of presence with the "I."

(Speaking of the work of these queer poets, and apropos to the subject of my thesis, it has occurred to me on more than one occasion that all of my poems about sex within this collection describe interactions with cisgender men and transmen, despite the loves and connections I've shared with women: I don't know if it means anything that these scenes have been absent from the writing I've done these last few years. Reading the words of LGBT poets makes me wonder about what I do and do not say, what I do and do not accept in myself: it would be easy for a reader of this collection to assume I'm straight. Is my recent poetry closeted? Reading the poetry of

others makes me wonder about what I do and do not say. I do not have all the answers to these questions, so I keep reading.)

Consider also the sway from family to sex to cultural divides to mortality in Li-Young Lee's "Persimmons," the quality of loss that says—as he does in "The City in Which I Love You"—"You are not in the wind/which someone notes in the margins of a book./You are gone out of the small fires in abandoned lots/where human figures huddle,/each aspiring to its own ghost" (149-153). The odes and questions and assertions that Eady writes in *The Way a Long Dress Turns a Corner*, speaking to Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, and bell hooks; the connections he draws between himself and John Henry; the way he considers the place of a poet in New York City after September 11 in "Communion": "Maybe I need/What the small crowd that gathers here needs, the boom of/Sekou Sundiata's voice,/Though the sirens remind us, and the streets are spare/and ghost-lit,/And we still don't know how to put it" (29-34): the "I" in these poems is no island, he is expansive. Or, swinging the pen the other way, the way Hayes transforms the broad brushstrokes of racial and racist generalizations and brings them back to the individual: just look at "Woofers (When I Consider the African-American)," "Talk," "The Blue Terrence," and "God is an American." Oof.

The bulk of my thesis fits firmly within this context of post-confessional poets, with an "I" that is both me and bigger than me, themes that are personal to me and also to so many others, and images and rhythms that spin it all away from the concrete toward the surreal, and then back around to the hard ground. Yes, these

poets are my people, the ones who my poems want to sit and talk with, get in fights with, go to bed with.

It would be wrong, however, to say that all of my influences are those who write primarily confessional and post-confessional poetry. There are several poems within my thesis—most of the first section, plus poems such as “Locked and Listening,” “Synapse,” and “What Hoosiers Mean When They Say *I Love You*”—that are considerably less reliant on a narrative first-person voice (and perhaps more reliant on sound, or at least reliant in a different way) than the poems that fit within the post-confessional category. These poems draw more heavily upon the influence of poets such as Galway Kinnell, W. S. Merwin, Denise Levertov, Ed Pavlić, Traci Brimhall, Tyehimba Jess, and James Wright, each of whom has taught me different ways of relating to the phonemes and rhythms of language, not to mention the ways to craft poems that are more laden with sensory details and images. These are poets whose influence on me has been intuitive, more at the gut level than the level of the discursive mind, and for this reason it is not easy to describe: my hope is the quality and manner of their influence is evident in my work.

All of the aforementioned poets—warriors, confessors, survivors, composers of sound and syntax—are united in their common willingness to admit that sometimes this whole business of being alive is a fucking mess, a beautiful fucking mess, a big scavenger hunt in which one moment follows the other and we never know what we’ll find, so we might as well pay attention.

In the end, I feel that the best poems and volumes are those that make me turn away from everything, even them, with rhythms that force me to search for the words that only I have, clutched in the claws of that lit bird in my belly. When I find them, I rip them out and place them—lovingly, desperately—on the page to share with you.

Here they are, waiting.

Introduction, Draft 3

My thesis is composed of a small sampling of the many poems that I wrote during my time as a student at The College at Brockport. I picked ones that I felt spoke to each other in a significant way, put them in an order that makes sense to me, and then into sections that I believe help emphasize certain aspects of my writing. However, you might have another perspective on the meanings of these poems and the order that I put them in than I do, and that's perfectly okay with me.

I hope that you find something in this collection that leaves a lasting impression on you, whether in regards to my poems' sound, form, or subject matter. And more than that, I hope they leave you with some questions. I don't think there's such a thing as a worthwhile poem that doesn't contain an unanswered question somewhere within it: may you find some questions that are new to you, and carry them with you as you go on to read and write and live.

*At the end of my suffering
there was a door.*

–Louise Glück

Hunger

Give a man a fish
and he'll pull out your tongue by the root with his bare hands.
He'll take your breath away,
roll it up and place it inside a hollow tree for safe keeping,
sharpen his pocket knife,
gut you and the trout with one fell swoop.

Teach a man to fish and no one will ever be free.

I: Shadow Stories

Incantation for a Clean Conscience

The untouched echo in a quarried skull

*You must recall the last
full tide overflowing*

exhumed, risen from humus and absent of life

*Raise your voice deeper, climb
lower and lower and greet mold whispers*

(actually, never born, but never never was):

*Follow bergy seltzer freedom
hymns and katzenklavier dirges*

two fontanelles, coppered and dust-gathering

*To the webbed tunnel filled with
rhythmic shadow boxes thumping*

cannot stop their stretching. Cannot stop. Deformation blooms in white lines

*You will find a room tucked in the corner,
a lullaby's nightmare dripping from around the next bend*

to make room for new thoughts that wilt beneath untilled earth.

*Stacked to heaven with the corrupted
relics of every nobody you never knew*

—Neo* New youthful strange, different from the old (the happening that hasn't happened yet)

*Find the ninth skull, the crest that bears
and cradles the load of the sunlit world*

—*natal Pertaining to birth or origin. To be born. (to discover hunger through absence)

*Cup the mandible in the mouth
of your favorite burnt spoon*

—Abstinence From Latin *abstinentia*: starvation, self-restraint, integrity (perfect blame)

*You must place your syringe in the bone eye's frontal dream
and line up for a whispered dose*

—Syndrome The place where several roads meet and run together (to where, to down)

*Pull back the plunger, suck
the dreamsong into the vial*

would have lingered darker, longer than the immutable closure of what was:

*Balance the dream under your left
breast as you return to the surface*

the uterus contracting to expel young lust's unasked-for memory

*Carefully store the cylinder of skull murmurs
in a glacial sphere for nine moons. Drink only rain water
and lover tears.*

efficiently, with curettage and suction whirling.

*Place a cedarwood bowl inside your warmest
hollow to catch your drug death maiden blood as it falls. Save
everything.*

The womb exists to hold things,

*Mix one-to-one with the fresh breast milk
of a better mother than you will ever be*

an incubator that catches movement and grows.

*On the tenth full moon, sing a song of madness, baste
the sphere with bloodmilk, melt the needle free*

One way or the other, touching it changes everything

*Now you know what to do You remember what to do
with a syringe, don't you don't you*

until everything twists around itself in a wound without a voice:

*There are some things that time won't let you forget
(find the best fast way to your heart)*

Blood transforms itself into bone. Nothing moves.

Holy of Holies

St. Cyril whispers stage directions
into the text of an unsent email.
Each pixel is 2000 heads of cattle,
six apples, and a wilted marigold.

We laugh at the scriptures
that shelter birth. We
are fools. We are
ice. We are light, fermented.

Sanctity wears a cloak stitched
from shattered wombs
and ripped fingernails. This
is not optimal.

But who's to argue?
Eyes burn.
This reality?
It's some heavy shit, man.

Movement of the Myth

Legends are the dangling legs of broken puppets.
Obsession quotes from tales of frayed extension cords.
Buoyant pseudonyms clutch the rusted lampposts,
point in the direction of stopped sinks
and rosy-roofed homes. The spells within the jukebox echo
between the silos. Dreams jitterbug the pleats and pockets
of the road to Roanoke. Ballads slow stitch a low hem
on a mud-dappled cloak. The translated opening lines are
crumbled flowers beneath paint-peeled porches, plots
are frowning landlords in faded boots. All of it,
leaping from the crevasses of the collapsed birch,
swinging up and out on tangled vines, shouting
the news into empty canyons.

Final Handshake

Specter streaks waltz down the main drag,
parasolled, making time through puddles.
Only a fingerprint pauses
to lick the mud from the altar.
Fists thrust to somewhere else
whisper the sky to focus.
Nouveau bowtie hips and starched suits
strike the glimmering shadows.
Cashmere collapses the clasped
bicep that cries. Close your mouth
when you walk away:
the wind is blowing to the east.
The taste of dried blood is sharper
than Thursday: suckling
takes it all and scrapes it off. And wouldn't
you agree, a stroll sounds nice right
about now? But what is now if not
a drowning? What is then if not
a breaking saucer that never reaches bottom?
Direction grows too thick in times
like these. The salamander curls
into a good Zinfandel and a magnolia
corpse floats above the lap of white.
The hat notices the fire and smiles.
A bearded bosom turns toward town,
gloats a bit. The drum remains
distracted. A floating lime laughs
at the raised glass, the high heels,
all of it. The stogie, the frazzled
hair of a man with a hard cock:
only the mud will lick your finger
and listen to your iron-clad pauses.

Dim Sum

Steam escapes from the chortling
hungry throats of crafty men.
Charred chopsticks and cuttlefish,
and steel wool sings a skillet.
You captured their *no* in your hands,
lifted cupped palms for a sip.

We're all too busy to notice the white horse
mount the chestnut as Mercury rises to meet
Virgo at the bar with the faded wooden stools.
A waitress carries her smile
like last week's excuses.
Excuse me: were you going to use that?

Rip it down and rotate regret over the
left shoulder of the seventh stranger clockwise.
How you doin'?
No, how *you* doin'?
We got it.
Stand up and tell it.

Have you seen that story before?
What if there's something else prehistoric and
we have no clue of the hearts under the soup cups
beneath our tender songs?
Have you ever put these jasmine and cinder thoughts
into your mouth and let them linger?

We cradle the menu, nod.
The braised pork belly can't be beat.

Separation

There is an otherworldly connection dipping into our lungs.
The drowning of the sunset shames the silence
into the crunching sounds of syncopated gravel.
Even iron quivers in the city. The old classic:
the master lights his cigarette, attends an evening service,
and still stays stronger than the tweaked prayers
of wrinkled fingers twisting.

Power and surrender
feed each other. Who belongs to who?
The corner turns. The wind takes a breath.

A Good Night of Sleep

The universe, in its great compassion,
stole my left glove. With one hand chapped,
I returned home, steeped one spoonful of
chamomile and a pinch of lavender
in scalded milk, a spoon of honey.
Curled up and bathed my inner channels
with the sweet perfumed potion.
Popped a Trazodone, turned in.

Overnight, the thefts continued.
Great waves came and collapsed
the northeast wall of my living room,
peeled and puckered layers from the
ceilings. My orange cat ran away.
A man with too many words
snatched my meditation cushions and took
over my faith. Something rattles in the kitchen:
I can't bring myself to look. My gray cat ran
away. Books grew wings. Toilets pulled themselves
out and took to spewing. My black cat
bit me good, drew a heart of blood,
and ran away.
My bed rattled as shadows entered,
filling the emptied space. Men with straight
postures lick the smears from my cheek and press
everything further. I fall to pieces, a triceps here,
a femur there, my clitoris swallowed
by the moon, never to be found again. There is no
breathing here, only charcoal and a
heaviness that traps everything but my eyes.

This, I think, is as good as it gets.
An alarm sounds. I hug my pillow closer.

Nocturne

A prism of sand curves toward a song circling its tail.
A man in fatigues is humming a twist of hot wire
and permanence. His glass eye shrugs at forever:
straight lines lie. Forward stops in a valley,
pulling always pulling at memories of full frontal mortar.
There are so many things horizons don't know.
The sun just keeps setting. Good evening,
good night. He sits, leans against stone.
Removes one shoe, rests a moment. The song sets.
There is no rest here. The wire tightens.

River Field, Forgiven

Fragile mucus collects
in the crevasse of shudders
that stopped. Immobility
washed over the bather,
who tried, failed, to crack
open the fermented fling
of flesh that stretched before
the hauler (who brought the blueness
to bear). She is not stuck:
she has been bridled.

Has the ship sailed?
Grab your cudgels.
We don't trust the way that cow
is looking at the horizon.

Consumption

Chemicals are round trip tickets
to the hollow lake that dwells under the field outside my hometown.
They raise their voices to wave goodbye,
seven needles rippling in the drizzle blowing around the leaning tree.
They post the peppermint invitation,
rub the gummed tablets like sandpaper against throats that open.
There is an indigo shadow whispering, *go back*.

But Matthew already locked the back door,
and the road to North Webster is blocked by a bloated corpse
that won't be still.
Chemicals can't speak. They avoid trees.
There is no such thing as wind anymore.
On the other hand, there is a man who makes excellent pancakes,
there is a home skillet with a wishbone in her left eye.

Tony, you know what this means.
The saliva-coated fountain pen of longing aches
for attention. Gardens collapse underneath their feet
and swallow them whole.
The man scrapes his resistance clean.
An avenger swoops in to finish the job,
to set them free, to lick the floor clean.

Sólo un poco, siempre solo un poco.

Last night laughs at the denial of the willing:
the body's bloat rises, dances with the gaping throats of the living.

Original Face Takes a Step

Let us not be distracted
by cravings for crushed metal,
by bathroom haunts and holy teacups.
Marrow dances with marmalade.
We are susceptible, porous,
blossoming from a turned bed.

A turtle lifts his head
from the bank of Turkey Creek.
He reaches out his right foot,
sets his claws down in the muck.
He does not hear the distant sirens.

II: Sex and Other Destructions

Locked and Listening

A whisper tree flirts with
 simple. Pour the ochre moon in:
 voluminous blue slope
 wrinkles canyons. Keyhole promises
 expand
 and ripple.

We are wired. Volt upon volt
 buckles knees and forgets.

I hate this neck, this bird
 leashed and lashed to night.
 Shadows clench tight,
 silver mercury and bullwhips
 whimper.
 Square jaws and crooked dimples leap
 in for the kill.

Nail my core to elms and daisies.
 Never leave a feather on the ground.

Pierced, pricked, hinged:
 a keyhole promises expanse
 and ripples.

I invite you to cut off all that
 displeases you until the core of me
 quivers wet
 and full of tide.
 Bottoms up, scooped out, used up:
 drink your fill of my turquoise neck.
 Knots flower at my feet.
 Dangling, nails drip and wood
 splinters. It ends with a sway
 of your hips.

Gouge my thighs,
 devour all thirteen of my
 heads and
 wait.
 Step into the muck and bellow
 for grain

and for sunset.

Tlazolteotl

I engage in fertile trade
with a man of filth and steam:
I spin him a story in which young merkins
doff themselves and are dug for hidden gold.
I tempt him with shadowed hopes of harm,
extend a spindle circled with yarn woven
from moon cramps and semen. I prick
my tongue through on its sharp end:
the free flow of bloodied spittle
douses his hidden hearth. My fecund fists
plunge into the chasm that holds a chosen secret,
pull it beating from between the flayed
and eager spread of my legs.
I feed on the caked remains of longing,
grit like gristle on splintered bones
going down. We lash ourselves to our filth,
drive our sins sharper, deeper:
what is lust if not prey rubbing
against prey?

Ghost Bodies

His fire eyes,
wide,
inform my skin

that

his unspoken night-
mares hang these ropes from my ceiling, wish
bruises
upon every morning's

answers. We whisper

*I love you
more and more because
you're haunted. I already saw
the bullet holes in his silences.
Even targets have soft arms.*

Fear of Intimacy

I run my nails along the shadows of a new man's chiseled deltoids.
Meanwhile, there are clouds brewing underneath my westbound clavicle.
I find myself, more and more, wondering what a body is. His body
is a body, warm and hurting, the first thing syncopating,
a floating fuse sizzling just because it feels good.

Yes. I worry about things that lodge themselves too closely.
Him, maybe. He will reset my clocks, change the channel, shuffle
everything. His mind, I know, will scream out each night, remembering
the horizons he shot at in a far-off continent. I will wake each time to this:
I know nothing. I'm scared and full of light.

Although we echo each other, he and I, we shape a space together
big enough to hold a hasty retreat. This is not a secret.
Lilacs are torn from the dust in the morning fog,
hung upside down on my bedroom door. The heater rumbles in the distance.
A storm is coming. It peeks out from within my dresser drawer.

Pilgrimage

I want to reach through the ripples of the slant-facing window and taste the kneeling sun with my left temple.

I want monstrous flavors to rush in through the plucked ascension of a struck-down path.

I want to feed the whispered rattlesnake wish that blows through my hair.

I want the long hunger to wake when I enter.

I want to lick my blood from your chin and chant psalms written by those who shared our names.

I want to stomp my breath into the sawdust.

I want to cut open my belly and spread the joy I have grown evenly among every face I meet. It is here: I made it for you.

I want the night to open its stuttering flames and welcome me home again.

Thank God for this ache that never lets me rest. Isn't it perfect, the way the knife that anchors me has set me free?

Fair Game

From your fist,
the sea
spills onto the best
quaking folds.

I want to
tell you
about my cunt
without telling you
about my cunt.
(I have
tunnels within tunnels.)

We go out
for slathered meat,
stay in
and sigh cement
prayers.
(It is hard, though not
impossible, to ensnare
such open space.)

Rhythm

She can't stop swirling until the track ends,
gyrations dictated by the bass thumping from the booth.
And so the girl in white gyrates dutifully, light
colors spinning in double time to the rate
of her patent heels. The trick to suspending
her body upside down is two parts momentum
and one part the grip of thighs in latex boots.
The trick to paying rent is smiling and dropping
her ass to the alternative beat, limbs spread in
false invitations. The trick to being able to sleep
each night is to never sleep. There's a trick
to surviving everything. The erect men in swiveling
seats wave dollars at their illusion of what a woman is.
They are, she knows, so wrong. The moon is full.
Her dress falls and she shows them what it means
to be fearless. Pale thongs stained with iron dripping.
The scent of the sea at high tide. She parts her legs,
opens to her own touch, paints her smile red.

Los Barilles

She settles into something that night, naked
on the balcony, auburn hair teasing her lips, feeling
Baja breezes and welts leaking.

A good captive makes a good student.

Her everything bleeds like the sea: she dips her fingers in
to see how the water is, salt to her lips, so simple.
She prays better when a sacrifice is made: she rises
to meet herself, greets the tide instead.

This is how it's meant to be, yes, sinking
forward toward the dawn, wilting across the rail:
the waves are cigars, damp and tamped: her throat,
dry as cracked scabs, holds everything.

Her crimson fingers quiver, knowing
nipples and rails, knowing this is where it's at.
She peeks to see her bruises in the moonlit peace,
back arched, midnight's rainbow.

She fails to offer the right answer ever time, and now
she admits it is her purpose, to tempt the whip's kiss.
She will sing karaoke in a bikini, daring
the world to pity her. She is all she ever wanted.

Further down the beach, a ravenous cow steps gently around
the whitened bones of her steer, now straining her neck,
lips puckering toward a palm frond, knowing nothing,
but finding nourishment all the same.

Dear Harry... Love, Anna

You roving, remote burn,
you endangered southern heart.
You with the sun-blazed head rhythm
and the tipped hat. You woke
me and pulled, broke me free
from thunderglades just before the cold
set in. You are the haiku,
the too-far trilogy addressed
to the best suspects. A riverhead escape
survivor. An undercover leader,
a wherever fisherman.
A fog-vanished bone man.
My shadow-bent corruption jungle,
my vision-drenched helmsman.
I linger in sauntered hopes:
we really did seem to know each
other in another mind.
I am a captive to facts in a cabinet.
I drank my protagonist down.

Not What I Imagined

I have not yet etched wolves
into my ribcage,
but the appointment is made.

I drop my shirt, stand tall
and tell him all about it, apologizing
for my unfinished back.

I share with him how the horses
running between my shoulder blades
first visited me in a darkened lodge of sung prayers.

He remarks, thoughtfully, how his wife
is a lot like me,
and draws the shades.

Entry Point

He kisses her softly, listening with lips
for the softest spots. His tongue traces targets.
Her too far is his beginning.
His blade twitches.
He will introduce her to the highest self:
the O her mouth forms becomes the noose he'll hang her with.

Willing

I knew from the first Tuesday he touched my
hip exactly three moments too long
that some day, at the turn of a page, he'd surely
bend me over, light a match in the palms of his hands, and bless me
brutally, beckoning.

I am always right about these things, the reddening
of flesh too late and thumping on weekday nights.

My thoughts grow wings that rise to greet a new year.
My hunger hollows my cunt wider to make room for the way he looks at me.

The whole rounded world slips
against our skin with slick textures always. If together,
he and I, we, maybe put our whole weight behind a shared breath,
everything will grow still and sharp.
He will collapse, exhale, shudder.
I will twitch, clutch the sodden sheets beneath me.
We will smile blindly as we turn to ash.

Invitation Accepted

He apologizes for the way his daughter has
jumped from surface to surface, the effects
her buoyancy has on the furniture, and then
hands me his cock. I apologize too,

for my cold hands. I am, yes, still cold,
and there it is soft and hardening and
we stare into each other and
let it grow in its fierce warmth.

There are lovers and there are beasts, and then there are
the ways we hurt each other while whispering for more.
He strokes himself into the bold air, grabbing my bruised
hair and gracing me with the tastes of my body opening to him.

There is all of that, yes, and later there is this:
his hand on my hip, strumming a tired song,
the broken slats of the buoyant couch cradling our smiles.

Radical Joy

Embrace it. All of it.
The signed up for,
the bargained and bought,
the dropped out of the sky without a say.
The dusty shadow of the teal lamp,
clawed against the wall, with teeth.
The man who comes in the night.
The bedside that refuses rest.

After all, the chickadees call at dawn,
and gifts are wrapped in suffering.
Bruises: Alhambra arabesques.
Stains on sheets: faded rust on lace.
They wouldn't understand.
Keep your mouth shut,
your eyes wide.

Synapse

Your hug-swollen, sweat-graced
feedback-eager message senders,
telegraphs always pulsing,
spin another era's rage.
And yes, I know, I know.
I ask them for everything,
roped knots in tight spaces.
I ask for more, crying.

Your hands pause.
Your hesitation stings another heat verse:
you stop only because you do not want to kill
anymore. You stop because you do not want
to take our pleasure like a still-beating heart
and shove it down my throat with a clenched
fist over my mouth until I return to hollow.
The pause silences itself.

You begin again, my howl now falling
from the hoped-for hostage cradle,
rising again, the spaces between now broken,
a connection beckoned with wings thrusting further.
Your fists have landed; even the neighbors wipe their weary brows.

Reconciliation

I.

There once was a man,
overlord of childhood, enamored
by too-young skin, his hand a tumor
against budding breasts, a five-fingered growth striking
me mute. (I learned early the glory
of a locked door, of relentless hiding and muffled hopes.

I turned off the lights: the night offered me its deep hollowness.)

II.

And still, cumming doesn't come easy.
There must be hands in flight,
a scream bit from my bottom lip and swallowed.
My future must be trailed and traced in topographic
jaws, sucked from a dream that dwells two fists further in.
We must clench together like barnacles barreling toward a new land,

never looking back, always rising. Let the sun
set on your left shoulder.
Open when I knock.

Bad at Breaking

We are so bad
at breaking, despite

all the practice.
The gravity, the

soft breath in a
single direction, always

out. At the end, we
will be punctuated,

the past
decorated, our story

splattered, spilled,
survivors hidden. Hold

this weapon and
invite me over.

Slaughtered always
trumps shattered.

Commitment

90 degrees from escape.
Empty is nothing but shape and vibration,
but that is not the point of the story.

This:
Objectify my pulse.
A goose. A head of garlic.
Song on repeat.
Your finger on the button of this blouse,
torn.
A knife on my throat.
Half Moon Bay.

Ada once wrote red letters
on essayed paper:
If you love the word,
honor it.
Go for the jugular.
Deeper, and without hesitation.

If you want me,
overlap my flesh with the right angle to God.
Bury the blade.

Take a Look:

There's an ache in my eyes that
pulls and crackles.

I curve into it, allow sockets
to swallow me whole, my body
made vitreous, my clit transformed
into retinal electricity.

My skin a nerve, optic to nowhere.

First I am blind,
then I am empty.

There is a hollowness to untouched flesh.

I float darker.

I follow the down deep swirl.

I'm a little hazy on the details:

Which of you do I miss this time?

Dear Celibacy,

I wash dishes by hand.
Viscous porcelain slips,
slits my hand:
I put it in my mouth
and suck.

The first lie:
a body can be a bandage.

The faucet drips on the shattered shards:
I surrender, reflect
on the spackled ceiling.

All men get too hungry,
and I sleep diagonally
on an unrumpled bed.

What the Seer Said

You will drift into a sea of plantains
and choke on rustling wind
from an out-of-sight beaded curtain.
There will be a clean touch, free
and deliberate, that will quiver your legs.
Your breath will be caught
by a passing prairie dog, who will
hand it back to you with a smile
and five pesos for your trouble.
Todo va a estar abierto, with saints leering
from the rooftops. A skeleton,
draped in purple satin, extends
an orchid.

Tell me: will you take it? Will you
place it in clenched teeth
and lift your arms toward
the setting horizon?

III: Back Roads

Headcheese Elegy

Every time I open my refrigerator, I remember
that I'm defrosting a pig's head.
Glazed and wakeful, and dead. I didn't know
pink could do this thing it's doing
under the bulb that pops on. Pink and white and
blood swirled like the only thing
I can think of is watching my mother
give birth to my younger brother, too
young to feel shame at staring
as his head appeared a push at a time.
In two days, when the frost has melted onto
the jar of pickles sitting on the bottom shelf, the head
will plunge, face down, into the largest
pan I own, surrounded by mirepoix and two heads
of garlic. The zest of two lemons. Plenty
for the head to bite with downward jaws.
Water to cover. Four trotters, what feet
transform toward upon slaughter. His leaking
eyes will stare. I cry a lot too, you know,
don't see things right in front of me.
I get it. Cook for two and one half hours,
until I can feel the cheek coming away from the bone.
Forced smiles. Remove solids, reduce. Nothing left
to sink, only rising. I used to swear that steam rose
from the skin of my favorite ex-lover
every time he walked through the door.
He was, as they say, delicious. Retrieve
the flesh, peel the tongue. Place all bits
in a terrine, add broth to cover. Five years old,
I joined the swim team because Mom worked late,
enjoyed the burn of chlorine brine in my eyes,
the way my arms settled into each new position.
Slam the terrine on the kitchen table
to remove any bubbles. Have you ever
had the breath knocked out of you? Me, too. Kathunk.
Kathunk. Leave to set in refrigerator overnight. One December,
my first husband and I cuddled in the back
seat of his Buick with nowhere else to go, the cold following
our pulses deeper and deeper, never really sleeping, rarely awake.

Tension

She startles in her seat, realizes that she is still not flying a kite.
This has been true for years.
She recalls the silt gouging her toes, the tug of string on callus,
the gritty landing of down.

The tile floor is polished. The table is scratched.
Her left hand picks at the corner for moments on end.
The shift from lake to table is a betrayal.
She licks her finger, holds it up.

Outside, the wind blows through a bridge,
and is damp. It holds weight and tosses the physical world
like the froth that sparkles up from the lake to kiss young girls'
skinned knees. The twine of thought goes slack

before pulling her back to some other origin, some grip,
even though the ground that takes off from here
(he once reminded her) is damaged a million times
before we can even say hello.

She sits firmly
in the places where feet never dance with footprints.
Her pulse throbs, a door slams.

Subtle Shift

Saul separates the leaf from the heart,
scrapes the flesh along incisors.
He, plucking the artichoke,
is puckish in the abstract.
Something flutters in the watching.
There is a holiness that strikes
the abject witness. A drizzled
antimony and iron glaze
echoes the clattering of its chipped
porcelain against the table top.
A plate and a pitcher wink at each other.

The witness sends the finished leaves
to the compost pile out back, out to
the corner of the rusted fence.
They are turned and turned,
baked like the soil he grew from.
They are broken down like the orbital
maxilla of the young girl he cradled
on the beach in Guam while she bled.
They wither into a sacrifice that bleeds
energy into everything they touch.
This, he supposes, is one flavor of love.

Twelve Lies: Solitude

The curtains are synaptic clefts that
tell me how the world is doing.
I do not watch for hours.

The wind says nothing to the window frames,
goosebumps gild no lily-white arms.
I am restless here.

This is important:
I will never be seen.
And this: it is all my fault.

I hate the way breezes make the fabric dance.
Love makes a family,
and I prefer the company.

Cracked

I once cupped what I believed
to be my future in foil.
One part this to two parts that,
with water. A lighter
became engaged. Steam
lifted. Clear hardened to white.
Bic pens with teeth marks
wavered in the torrent of insatiable
longing. In sweetest blessings,
the couch collapsed.
The barn I slept in
burned its way to heaven.

Twelve Lies: Reader Response

I am not like you.

I never blew lines of coke & masturbated all night to essays by Iser,
never grew wet at the truth:

Contact... depends upon our continually filling in a central gap in our experience.

I believe in the gap.

I tremble toward contact.

You are not like me.

You raze books as if they're loved ones, never putting anything down,
hungry for the next hidden insight:

Even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound.

I don't want you anymore.

I hope you're happy now.

The Mathematician Asks the Poet a Question

The streetlights sing
behind wasted autumnal skeletons that breathe.

What, he asks,
is the difference between your perfection
and mine?

His equal signs, I think, are periods,
and mine are question marks that howl at a brick wall.

What he says:

Maybe perfection isn't the right word.

I insist it is. The maybe lives here, I say.

Maybe our hairs really are antennae reaching, always reaching for the electricity that
whispers the answers to the ever-unfolding multiple choices of every moment.

Maybe I'll return the music and the tears and every breath I've ever breathed that
didn't bring me closer to the It that yesterday promised.

Maybe this time I won't leap over the cement barrier to see how free I can be.

The thing, the perfection, here's the thing: it's always pointing at the ground beneath
our fears.

Photophobia

(for Taleb al-Maleji)

Lie nights on hardwood floors,
claw foundations 'til finger pads broken bleed.
Bound and bitten,
come to terms with the awake taste
of hollow. Lick copper wounds
to make sense of another, inexplicable,
unwelcome,
dawn.

(There are two types of people in the world—
those who know what a cattle prod on naked flesh feels like firsthand,
and those who turn to another station.)

Tell us what it means to survive without light,
to linger in flames of shadow and shame.
Scream out peals of ethyl and canines:
breathe like the business end
of broken.

Enchanted Hills, Indiana: August 25, 2014

The unrepeatable falls.
I nod at a distant gunshot,
again. Again, it beckons.
Yes, in that way, I knew the body.

Foil crackles.
Another life, carried
in an ambulance of lights.
Red, and white, and red again.

Gravel and a rising pulse remind me
I still know what snow is,
what it soon will be: here, felt, again.
No small thing, the chance at a tomorrow.

Another day: a halo around a streetlamp.
I draw the blinds: the moon blinks again.

Johnny Gone South

He wore a Stetson, some Carhartt,
and the heft behind the hole in the wall.
Slept heavy on Tuesdays, a tumbled rock on an
air-filled mat in the back room, and faithless.

He knew some people once, but now only pulled curtains and a room
hung with a mirror, scattered with growing heaps, piles
of foil, and Sudafed butane dreams. He even knew something
once, now mostly forgotten in the back room with a pack of crayons,
broken. There was the fact of smiling, not to mention
a case of chicken ramen, dusty on a dirty counter,
not much else. Dried vomit on the seat,
one and one-half blankets per person on a ripped sofa.

Outside— a totaled Buick, tufted unmowed crabgrass
blowing with wadded wrappers and dust-dry weeds.

What is there left to say?

He used to have a cat named George,
a now-dead tabby hiding under the back porch,
eyes swollen under skin swollen with wilt. *This heart
will never be opened*, anhydrous whispers...

The lawn is littered with once-life:
a broken horse, a ball deflated,
an indigo crocus fighting for something.

What Hoosiers Mean When They Say *I Love You*

One-way road in both directions.
Sunset's left of the lean-to-the-east barn
collapsed wide open,
beams stripped, hard winters ahead
and behind.

Whispers of dried stalks:
the blown before is
still blowing is
blowing forever
just so.

Ain't no thing to do
but the thing to be done.

No frills to be had.
Back yard by the barn by the prefab.
I'll mow the lawn, chop the wood,
spread compost prayers for tomorrows.
I'll kill you a deer every Tuesday
in November.
Chest open like a secret:
chase the shot with a
heart shared
and a shot.

Drink deep, Baby.
Get hazy, heady.
Flannel wrap you up in my hide,
kiss you sloppy
like this
like that
like easy
like planting you a parent seed
like there ain't nothin' in the world
but harvest
hope
and home.

Lay another log on that there fire, Baby,
sit on the edge of heat with me forever.

Suspended

Remember us at seventeen on cornstalk-framed country roads,
riding in a red six-cylinder over a fast hill, wooshing and
wishing for something better up ahead: how did we
forget that the hill has a downside?

I recall how
my head recoiled against the neck rest
then back again
when we came down out of the sky onto pavement.
Nevermind or Jar of Flies blaring,
and now I think
your palm down my throat into my somewhere else,
and now I think
we always careen toward creating
something unlike a home,
a shared bed,
a feather duster.
I think again:
I never bought you a tattoo.

I'm sorry about your heart and your broken CV joint.
I take it all back, the years of high heels and neon,
sucking on necks and Newports.
It began too soon,
up up above the asphalt of the road that day,
wings still wet the whole
flight before we landed,
and it'd be the same now, if you wanted,
only regretless,
only with salt, and sorrow.

Finding Peace

She drinks so intentionally her mug never empties,
curls of steam settling, finally, on tepid,
bored now of the morning game, ready to fumble through

unkempt piles of books and brassiers,
almost forgetting where she left her
peace in the rhythm of nothing special, nothing new,

of simplicity and a bite to eat, a favorite mug,
not to mention the right word to describe the shifting
of angst into clean dishes drying in the rack.

She said, with a nestled hope like doves' syncopated flapping,
it's here, I know it's here, I just saw it on that shelf,
or maybe in the gutters. *We're finished*, she said

to no one in particular, waiting to see if her
desperation would flap its way out of her throat and finally,
simply, settle right where she stood.

August

We all know the hard work ahead,
all move to the same false sermon.
Blessed is the heat from below,
sweet the stings of nettles.
Blessed is the shadow that waits at day's end.
Let us sing psalms of never-storms
and weep for withered blackberry
brambles. Let us hold hands,
let us bow our heads. May we
circle the stooping farmhands.
May we join them in the cracked furrows.
May our flesh be hallowed with burns
that trace the silhouette of sweetness.
Let the tassels of stalks rise above
the sweating trees, let their soaring fire
carry our prayers for deep valleys
and soft rain.

Notes

“Twelve Lies: Reader Response” includes quotations from Wolfgang Iser’s essay

"Interaction between Text and Reader."

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