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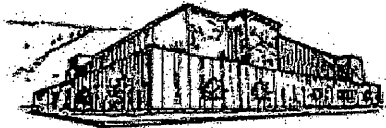
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THE EVENT OF

Poems

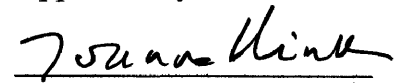
by
Martin Cockroft

B.A. Wheaton College, 1998

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana
May 2002


Approved by:



Chairperson



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Jesus, roll my blues away.
Jesus, my blues have stayed.



THE EVENT OF

I have been eulogizing my father for many years.
This is to prepare myself for the inevitable,
which happens when a miracle occurs
and is rescinded. He is not General Pershing,

there are no streets named after my father.
He lives in an orderly townhouse among townhouses
that border the Chicago River. Who is on the roof
when the Elevated trembles. Who is not aware of rain.

You may have visited with him, in that I see
my father in other men and so preserve his anonymity.
A teller at my bank holds a particular pen.
The chair of Northwestern's classics department

combs his hair, and at a favorite bar in Dripping Springs,
I have seen a man cut steak. Who is my father
Thursday night. Once I arrive, I hear a bell
for every year of his life, and this signifies

what I must feel when he stops ringing,
and also the cloud I have become. I have met with
concerned dignitaries and emissaries about the likelihood—
it sounds as if my father will die after all.

You will know my father by his gold wingtip shoes,
by his stentorian greeting, forgetful of house plants
and running water. Hours after the newspaper
called him a totem of civic duty, I sent out his new obituary.

Bicycles often collide below my father's stoop.
His is the one festooned with bright felt ribbons and weeping
icons. What reminds him of me and my sullen departure.
Who spends the rest of his days mourning.

REHEARSAL

There is so much to love.

There is so much that goes unsaid, rippling the bedsheets,
in your bed, in mine.

Drop her at the bus stop by the sign that reads
Drop everything, there's no time to lose. Press
an extra nickel to her palm—
there is so much to lose.

There's so much to love, it's hard to keep count.
What is there to say when dishes aren't done
and you burn the rice again?

Some quarrel to attend, a pan
to slam the stove, another flaming match.
When so much is wrong you can't put a finger on,
there is so much to love,

to lose. There is, but losing is half the thrill.
If you have to, saw the bed in two; get glue, nails,
screws, a hammer—you
will never be the same. There's
so much to love.

HOW I BECAME A MAN

I left a leg in a Detroit brothel. I told my parents,
It was a learning experience. A hard lesson.
I was cold and I thought I'd found the soup kitchen.

I only miss my leg when I think about my other leg
which I lost in a tragic tent revival/slain-in-the-Spirit episode.
I testified. I said I had overcome. I said, God

if I'm a liar, take my balls. My leg flew off
and was never recovered. I auctioned one arm at Mardi Gras.
I was on Bourbon Street, hailing a taxi. The department of transportation

collected the other when I passed my driver's exam. The arm
is an organ, at least in Illinois. My ears, well I cut those off.
They were too big. I was going for a trim

and got obsessed with the word "even."
Thugs knocked me senseless and took my wallet
my keys and my nose. My wife poked out my eyes in Bermuda

on our second honeymoon. Honey, I swore, I was just looking!
I know what you're thinking, and you're right—I'm thankful every day
for *that*. But on the whole, I haven't got much else to lose.

SNOW LIFE

Snow, Joyce said, is general.
I am not referring to James Joyce,
although it is his quote. I mean snow.
I'm talking about just and unjust.
About children who model for L.L. Bean
in clothes they do not own. Snow or no snow,
there will be snow in Maine today.
There will be sharp red sleds.

I watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. I test
the ice for Harry and flag him down.
It's snowing. It's safe out. Push, George,
push! When I say snow I lie
lobe to the ground and listen
with my deaf ear. I hear the undertones
of "snow." My point is just that
my snow has never been general.

The movies taught me how to fight
and win. I wanted to bloody
Tommy's thick lower lip
in the presence of snow-white beauties.
Flakes spun to the ground: Tommy wasn't
bully enough. We didn't have a schoolyard.
The headstones are hatted with snow,
my feet the first to fall.

FOUNDATION

And I descended while the neighborhood distressed
in modulations of black, the murmur
of the Gaslight Pub across the street
a suggestion of order. It was past the hour,
and I stripped off my clothes soon as I hit
the basement slab, locked the door.
The bathroom fan was already whirring,
and though I'd not spoken, I felt someone had.
There was a power in the room primordial
as any I would ever encounter, and I prepared, in fear.

THE MAN UPSTAIRS

The man upstairs—
I think his name is Robert—
was saying something this morning.

I was having cereal and Robert
was motioning from the balcony
like we've seen him do
when we barbecue
in the courtyard

in the summer. Robert—
it's like his lips are taped with skin—
was saying something.

Damned if I know what he wants.
Remember when he met you
by the car one afternoon.
Was he introducing himself
or offering to take a bag or two

of groceries? You couldn't tell.
You mouthed his every syllable
and couldn't find a word.

Now he's speaking again
only no one's sparking up a grill
this winter. This hour
no one is listening.
Cats, freight trains, wind—

the skim of life clips along
a half-marked world.
What world does Robert know?

Before he showers and shaves
steps in professional attire
carries a briefcase to work
he idles in the cold.

A YOUNG MAN

It was that late hour of day
and I shook a stranger's hand as I passed.
He seemed alarmed, and when I glanced back
he was feeling for his wallet,
head turned toward someone's porch.
In profile, his nose had a distinct crag
in the general Roman shape.
How used to his nose he must have been
that day, that hour when shadows
are more pronounced than their objects.
Telephone wires slung point to point
connected loose conversations:
a waitress working a little café in New Braunfels,
light garnishing oak booths and tables;
my mother pitching spoiled leftovers
as I slunk upstairs; and fishing out
over countless peaks and eaves, midnight
chapel bells; the swell of color on Whitman's ferry.
Porches buzzed to life.
I greeted a man whose elongated face
resembled the trunk of a cypress tree,
but another day he could have been anything else,
the Säco station, shoe repair, pet store—
all shaken down, all negatives—
each tree blurred with the next, bush into hedge,
and a human figure moved at me
indefinitely, as if he had lost himself.
I had an impulse to trip him up, and, equally strong,
one to grab hold. He was a young man
when every man wore a hat,
and he bowed slightly as our steps coincided.
I knew I would bear him the rest of the night.

TALK RADIO

This is a bleary flight, whispered away at dawn, probed for hours.
Orbiting between distant mountain ranges, blueprint on her pate,
she appears as high beams, or a concentrated effort to stay awake.

Conversation is a wave in nervy negative space. From the opposite lane,
light refracts without thinking of it. She blinks twice,
reflexively, zooming by cloaked oil pumps

on land so worthless it isn't fenced. She blinks
and reflections weave across her windshield like wheels
thrown to a dim wall by the dancers' mirror ball.

What do people do to live? Traversing desolation, alone
with the rhythm of speed and shuttering lids, silhouettes rise
from floorboard shadows behind her, and the moon

rides tracks along the shoulder, slipping in and out of thickets.
Foreign objects glance off the hood and veer below her rearview.
She is unrecognizable in the dark.

A LAKE

Somebody's blinking the lights for you,
is asking your attention from across
what is a lake from dawn to dusk. If you walk
to the light, you might see yourself reflected,
not reflected, reflected, not. It depends
on your walking, but mostly on the lake.

What is a lake from dawn to dusk? If you walk
around its perimeter this morning in first light,
you will lose the points: of your departure,
your destination, the lake in relation to trees,
trees in contrast to sun, sun in consort with clouds
above the lake, and back to you again. You

will lose the points of your departure
if you walk to the light somebody is holding out.
You might see yourself reflected, but you would not
see. Dark is the absence of light,
not the other way around. If there is a moon,
if there are stars, and if the light keeps pulse,

you might see yourself. But you would not
walk straight for the light for fear the lake
exists when you cannot see it. You must make
for the perimeter of what was water and trust,
if fog clouds your way there are stars
that can't be touched, if there was light, it must

exist when you cannot see it. You move
by feel and instinct, though feel and instinct
are often wrong: If a tree falls out of sight
and sound, and the fog breaks but the light is gone,
will you turn back or will you go on?

COMING OF AGE

When I was fourteen I tried poetry.
Didn't take. But here are my favorite
lines:

My heart really hurts today/Love
took the fast train west.

Mother
discouraged too much introspection.

She said just wait
eventually the hens will come to roost.
What a boost that was.

She also said
a good test is: Act like you dropped
a pen. As you bend

let your nose
and armpit meet. Breathe normally.
I wrote other lines, but none so full
of raw emotion. One
I do appreciate:

My life eats dust.

What's best about this is
it's still true.

My wife says grow up. Your mother
is right, she says. Your pants
are too big for you to fill.

And you
make love like it's 1950.

I have a new test. I go
swimming, sink myself deep.

Anything I can't hear
isn't worth hearing.

HOLIDAYS AND WEEKENDS

A&P got us jobs as sackers.

It was the first story my penis loved, flip-flops
sketching sticky grocery floors,
automatic doors. All those housewives—
if she didn't give me a buck or two,
I'd crush her chips loading doubled bags into the trunk.
At the deli counter, people stepped over themselves
for cheap chopped beef and mustard potato salad.
It was isolated, elemental work, flapping around
in a plastic poncho after school, filing
stray carts and shoving them out of the rain.
I helped a woman to the dairy section for milk,
probably her last half-gallon.
She was yellow and slow, I felt good about it,
and later on break I unbuttoned my collar, uncapped
a carton of cottage cheese, and told it,
Jesus H. Christ but she was old ...

I don't pin this on anyone but me.

I saw dozens of spaghetti straps and meat racks,
and like everyone, I quit and nothing happened.
A young guy, an assistant supervisor, called me
boss or chief whenever he wanted
a bathroom cleaned or bulb changed.
He was working his way up,
but last I checked his photograph
was missing from the customer service desk.
I meant to ask about him.
My mom knew a sacker named Richard
at Gerland's, the first grocery in the area—
no one worked there. He was lank
and pigeon-toed, and he wasn't all right.
She hadn't seen him in years

when I pointed to the block red
going-out-of-business signs in the windows
as she drove me to work.

I pictured Richard hustling, squeezing between the mats
and register islands, and I did whatever

I did that day—canned goods on the bottom,
bread and eggs up top, not too full. I said paper
or plastic until they became the same word,
rammed carts into interlocking lines, stacked
baskets at the entrance. I ran into Lightfoot,
the store manager, and he needed an aisle mopped
or a shift covered, my slacks ironed.

You're a joke, I pretended to say and get fired.

I said just what I felt, shook my hands
in my pockets and judged the tips.

HOURS

In the course of human evolution,
we've accepted certain parameters on reality.
(Note my arms, spread as if sizing something up:
Our reality.) But for some, the insane,
untreated manic-depressives, idiot savants,
the senile, almost all children, the parameters
stretch ever so slightly, the difference
between "bear" and "beard." One letter—enough
to get you driven, like Legion, to the tombs.
A friend told me the story of his sister,
how she had to be institutionalized
because her parameters had stretched
and shown her absolutely everything—
a shaker of salt, the color blue—was metaphor.
She hunched for hours over a table
by the sealed window of her room, scissors in hand,
canvassing walls with collages, working out
vestiges of self that needed sleep
and social interaction.
She is better now.

COMPLEMENTARY

My friend describes a fading jet contrail
as dribbles on blue sky. I clamp my teeth
on the sill of an open window and the sky

is blue, blue, blue. A flight attendant sweeps
the aisle clear of feet, and my wife requests
ART: Context and Criticism for maple leaves

she's collected from our front lawn. Basketball!
I say, pushing my tongue under the sill. Blue sky
bloats an otherwise imprecise representation

of vapor. A coach is running his team, lines
it's called. Teeth penetrating paint and wood.
My wife is unusually distressed—a leaf presses

against Chris Burden, nailed to his Volkswagon,
the crucified artist. Kurt sees faded jet trails
as dribbles on blue sky. But images, I say, gaining

momentum, images become predictable.
Kicking my backpack under the seatback, I light
on Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter"

and have to agree: basketballs are orange, leaves
are orange, O'Hara sees orange skies. My tongue
is running the front of my teeth, smooth,

I'm sure, as teeth can be. Nothing's chipped,
but I'm so winded I double over. Lines
of Mondrian's *Composition in a Square* share

a plane with one of my wife's largest leaves.
Not basketball, Kurt says, leaning out the window,
paint. Blue as. Blue like. Blue, and no end of orange.

EX NIHILO

When Jacob replaced Michael,
angels stuffed their blank faces
into their great wings and glowed
less biblically. When angels sour,

their plumage blues, and they
rehearse the story again. The details
will never change—the rib, the tree, man
and woman, sexed as angels

can never be. When Jacob replaced Michael,
angels bit their lips, white as arctic poles,
and praised the Lord, as angels should,
that they had been created.

He that increaseth knowledge
increaseth sorrow: generations of human
dust swept from corner to corner,
but never quite away.

ON THE MOON, THE MESSAGE IS

On the moon, the message is do something about these craters. It is make a path from here to there, and bring the dark side light. Things look much different on the moon. You can't see your feet for the dust. To talk about lunar this and lunar that—it's just not done. The moon's populous has needs. Its seas are vast, dry depressions, its air too sharp to breathe. But the moon is not for sale, and visitors, though allowed, are rarely welcomed. Leave us be is the message. The moon will find its own solutions.

GUEST

A storm had arrived the night before. At its peak, the front door batted open, stirring the entire house. The man thought to secure the lock, then had the impression that someone wanted in, or was already shivering in another room. He listened. At the threshold, he motioned at the darkness, inviting the stranger to step inside for a bowl of soup.

When the rain swept through the open door and into the foyer, portraits on the walls fell to the floor. Lamps crashed. Rugs soaked and water splashed across tile. The rain moved to blow out the back windows in escape; it had been a mistake.

The man recognized the rain's discomfort, and called for it to settle. He strained to reach the bathroom door, commanding the rain to wash into the tub. The bathroom swelled. The man chose two glasses from the cupboard and set the table.

EXTANT

*The following was found in my backyard.
The translation is crude, but the message!*

There is a rumbling on Mt. Mountain. The snow-capped cone dislodges and flies away. On every street, it becomes known that this is our eternal home. Church bells ring Sunday with particular vigor. Townsfolk congregate in gleaming parking lots and waxed hallways. The sidewalks are full. We all sing,

Lightning and thunder, plunder
what you may.
We, majestic sky, are here to stay!
The clouds roll away.
The night breaks for day.
Is it any wonder
we are here to stay?

Children kiss each other plainly. Husbands and wives share. The mayor and his men christen a holiday, the destination clear. Townsfolk eagerly await the first remove—they who will not lie underground. Our souls no longer for rent: from now on Mountain is our keep.

THE NARRATOR

The narrator is limited omniscient.

He pokes at your brain and your brain
only. Your ten fingers are obvious, but not
your ten mostly minor sins,
and though you worry,
they are mostly minor, you must know,
these peccadilloes, and the worst sin,
if you'll allow, is that you wish
you had another narrator.

You want her
not him, and you think if I could just hear her
out loud, I could figure the world and follow,
because I'd trust that voice.

Reread the end of Job, you'll see
no one is that highly favored. If you are lucky
you will, as your eyes burn out, see
whether you had a narrator at all,
whether the story was a story, whether
the words were ordered, or were the words
thumbprints, or were they errant smudges
or was there ink
in the pen?

If you are most human like the rest,
you will perish with your best intentions
and your ten sins,
and a belief in something bigger, though you can't tell
what, and that's when, mouth full of dirt,
the narrator is limited. The foam of him fills your head.

THE PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister stood for justice.
His ears were generous targets
but he spoke within his means, with everyone at heart.
Not one for pretense or melodrama,
The Prime Minister invited himself
to block parties and anniversary celebrations;
your business was his business. The state
slept at night, and stars were what they were
to astronomer and child: each
had a foot in The Prime Minister's door.

The Prime Minister was a multi-instrumentalist.
He communicated in eight languages.
He secretly took a degree in comparative religion
and another in ceramics.
There were fifty-six chairs
at The Prime Minister's octagonal table.
His cabinet was also his wait staff.
You never knew who might be asked to dinner.
The Prime Minister would welcome guests
before the first course, and then retire
to his chambers with soup and a cup of warm milk.
Any guest who inquired about the singing
was told, It is The Prime Minister.

Though he had many offers,
The Prime Minister refused marriage.
He dressed simply as a schoolboy
and seemed indifferent to wheedling.
With age, his life ambition was to pilot a balloon,
and he lived increasingly like a man with five senses.
The Prime Minister retreated to his attic,
into expanses of unqualified time.
Records show he slipped away without

immediate notice, was buried with his fathers.
A public memorial was announced.
Well-attended lectures followed, and tributes
tried to capture the essence of The Prime Minister.
Is it possible those in deep corners,
those who fell into drunken rows
and muttered to themselves about paper bills,
who participated in activities
designed to unmake society, who expected conquests—
perhaps the message did not reach them.

LIKE ROMEO AND JULIET

We slept exactly thirteen feet from the tracks
so we drifted off each night counting unlucky stars
unless we couldn't sleep, then maybe we counted
unlucky sheep, sheep mesmerized by coal cars, dusted black
in the shadow of passing freight. And if we still couldn't sleep,
then we might have stirred, padded into the kitchen
to put water on or coffee, to play solitaire, watch infomercials,
whatever people are supposed to do.

Maybe we bumped each other, sparked an argument
about life and its destinations, as the floor buzzed
and intervals of light broke, link after clanging link,
pulsing our faces. The railroad killer
could stop at our door, there could be a freak derailment
or premature deafness, but most likely no, that wouldn't happen,
probably not. So we'd waltz to the clacking tracks.

Listen, we might have said, the trains are wooing each other,
as if for the first time we heard the moan of whistles,
the way antiphonal pitches bounce when trains
pass in opposite directions. Star-crossed lovers,
we might have added, how tragic, how unlucky.
But no, probably not. Probably not.

NEW YORK

Don't you just love New York in the fall?
a bouncy character in a movie once said
take after take. A taxi driver stops
behind her left shoulder, barking like New York
taxi drivers should, at being cutoff, precipitating
Don't you just love New York in the fall?
How long did it take her to get that right?
And was she going for irony, a word
I've often been told I don't understand
by people who do? The director's off-camera, pulling
for the right intonation, the timing that lies
between funny and flat. I've been told
I'm funny, but when I say the words over and over
in the bathroom mirror, I end up picking sleep
and tussling—
Get out of the shot! Can't you see what we're doing here?
—Don't you just love (red) New York in the (orange)
fall? Variations make people mad.
It's not even a question anymore,
more like a word whose meaning suddenly diminishes.
New York, New York, New York, and I start thinking
about snouts that snort, and then taxis
and then I'm back to saying a line I can't hear,
Don't you just love New York in the fall?
Don, truest love—he was the only man I saw
last October. We were filming on the west side of Manhattan ...

Rush Limbaugh, the world learned today, is deaf.
Now that's irony, if you ask me, though I don't know why.
It's a beautiful autumn day, leaves so perfectly strewn
they seem to be props, set pieces for "picturesque."
They put me in the mood for hot apple cider
and a good cry. I keep trying, but all I come up with
is dry weeping, which is the same as snoring
in the middle of the day. Last Thanksgiving the turkey

overcooked, and I wished for a crew of handlers
who could give us something special,
a mint glaze or a new bird, conveniently roasted
ahead of time. Don't you just (blat!) love (bleat!)—
damnit, taxi, we're not ready for you yet!
Cut, original places everybody,
let's try it again. Instead of candlelight,
we bought TV dinners and watched a Hallmark presentation.
I felt sure this would help me cry,
but I fell back on the couch, my head rolling
and mouth wide. My wife clicked the remote
and said we're off to bed.

I guess the Lord must live in New York City,
Harry Nilsson would sing, if he were living
and in our house, if he smelled frozen fried chicken
and gazed out the front window at this run-down
master-planned community. The Lord sure don't live here.
The cab hits a garbage can. A man wanders into the scene,
lunch is called. I swallow, and we have to redo.
Don't you just love New York in the fall?
Taxi. Taxi. The director can't remember which comes first,
the horn or the quip. The driver is confused.
It starts to rain, a steady, spreading rain—
we won't get this done today, and winter is on.

THE HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA TORN FROM TODAY'S HEADLINES

The Citrus Grower's Association recently announced:
California orange groves subsist in areas closely related

climatically to the Gobi Desert. Movie stars love
California because of plentiful, fresh oranges, and because

water is not needed at most studio galas and premiere parties.
Meanwhile, Colorado and Montana called for Californians

to stop contaminating the mountain west, a message that washed
up in a bottle near San Diego, a bottle that passed like a baton

through the hands of those who hold rich and famous exemptions.
Californians take a bad rap from east coast natives, but this is

a family affair: Census results show every adult resident tied
to the Atlantic seaboard has a brother, sister, cousin, grandparent,

or other relation searching for sources of wealth in California.
A common belief in Los Angeles is that it rains; these are actually

falling stars. Later today, Texas and California will bid
for the gross national product of Burkina Faso. This decides

who gets to drill wells in that bright country, and who must
rely on more dangerous irrigation procedures. Florida oranges

have reached enormous proportions this season, and could
displace lemons as California's fruit *du jour*, a move anticipated by

the medicinal marijuana community. Musicians would still prefer
oranges, studies say. Travel in and around California, especially

through its people, can be hazardous and longer than expected.
We are hazardous, we are actually falling stars.

TWENTY-FIVE

Turned twenty-five, and I don't feel the day
trumps any other, but here it is:
One big day moves a year. Hurray

for me. Small milestone, indeed, this
quarter-century of born at St. Luke's,
raised in St. Charles, christened

communions and confirmed, too,
at St. Alphonsus of the Holy Life Struggle
to Make Much of the Saints and the God Who

May or May Not Make Much of Me. Tug
of war, and I want a winner, between
mouth to feed and aren't I something—

and my how it all fits together. I've been
lost and found forever, hit and miss, kiss
and tell later what the hell happened.

Lucky your singular interest
in time doesn't rein you in as well. Do
I keep spoiling your divine to-do list?

Sorry. But I can't quite prove
I've got my props from you, most Business-like.
Come down, let's picnic lunch,

shoot the bull, and for a second, bliss
will follow me, these million-some
minutes, all the days of my life. Almighty,

twenty-five, and only you
exist in perfect motivation and
movement, if you exist.

VOCATION

If you start this first line, and second, go on,
what you've done is flop
words on paper—unlike poems you adore,
which begin, always, don't they,
“Walking by the Palladium,” and end, spaced,
feet sense-dead, singing, oh love, their own
well-put song; poems

that road around
reeds and cattails, swamp gut
and stew,

plot themselves through
with respect, place name, proper noun—
strut-strut poems, homage poems,
poet's poems—

but hear—
when you do *this* poem, clear, straight out,
you won't make poet:

This is not that poem.
You eat from the crusts you know,
you fall asleep, stooped, up from undercarriage.

NOCTURNE

Dreamed you forked left and I knew
it was right. Where you left your feet
I'll never, but I heard you singing,
tuneless, beached on the air.

Down window, no use roping the moon.
At the tops trees bent in duplicate,
signs you left: behind, my fingers
unearthed and open. It was right,

I've decided, your feet knew the way.
Pulled curtains aside to beat the night air,
bedded down again. What's left of you?
Fog traces like soft pencil.

SOLICITATION

Lost in a great silk blouse,
mattress ticking in my ears—
this is the way to spend a weekend! Ten times
ten snoozes and fickle inspirations
for as few nods, but I bade her
come again when the mood is right
and the moon full or new, waxing, waning—
what's the moon care, it can't settle
this affair. I invited you in because you were cold
and your technique poor. You were sidling
door to door, an armful of pocket coupon books,
like Moses, speech impaired.
Skirt a ruffled lampshade,
how many does it take to change my life?
The stitching underneath feels like hedgerows,
like holly and blackberry bushes,
vintage apple orchards—
that's how hungry I was.
Then this part about swallowing whole
the rumples in the sheets. Her knees
were scuffed like the soles of shoes,
and I dreamed in miniature, we
fleeing the sun's pursuit ridge and vale
in the fluff at the foot of the bed.
I wanted to dream that. I asked you in
because you needed a correction and your hair
slumped to one side like ice cream
caving on the cone, you held your clipboard so,
the purebred posture of Katharine Hepburn.
Get you out of your argyle socks, thorny ankles,
I affirm and renounce the world
and legs. She stole what she could from me,
but she must take more.

HAND

You gave me your hand in marriage.
An arm, and we could have done something.
My finger was a gun to your head—
you shot back in defense, even when our hands
were holding identical forks and knives, or folded
contemptibly in our laps. When our fingers
clipped together like interlocking triggers,
I tried not to jump, to resist the notion that we
were both rigged, our hands like children of two
single parents, setting us up, nudging us together
in a supermarket aisle or giggling as we flopped
on the couch. But then our wills
were never twin barrels, and I would rather
have succumbed to stereotype—remote control
asleep in my palm—than the smoothest skin
you could offer. All that time I wanted more,
arms hinged by the crooks of our elbows, or less.
For one of us to raise high a hand, like a flag.

FOR BERRYMAN

Henry continues unappeased,
and Abraham's bosom indeed is rot,
dear John. Lazarus begs, strong
like burnt myrrh and leeks, the smart
of the poor. His tongue, unused to speech,
rolls over thick as wool.
—there is an end to sin, Henry.
You will sing again—

His legs are set like shepherds' crooks.
Send that poor man to my tongue, deliver me
a stray drop of vinegar. All at the top, the hyssop
and fruit of the vine, John would be glad
for a sop. At the foot
of the rich man's drive, dear
Lazarus keeps time by bits of bread
and the pious bells. Who would

not be blind? To see
Henry picking seashells—twitchy
John would lose his sulk. Lazarus sinks
in unmanageable thirst, his tongue
a palette of salt. It grows empty and dark,
the day like a lamp under a bushel,
or a night without stars:
Both men die. Who will be comforted?

REGARDING OPTIMISM

The Chupacabre, a.k.a. Chupa-Cabra, preys on sheep and goats by way of two fangs to the neck and a rapid hollowing of the animal's veins, resulting in deflation, deformity, and certain fatal

if otherwise conventional injury to vital organs. But that doesn't mean it wouldn't like a piece of you, you beer-bloated Christmas goose, given the clear shot. A rule is never without exception.

The Chupacabre is an illustration you should apply: to any set of circumstances in which you feel comfortable, in control, or momentarily happy; to any attitude which flies in the face of unlikely events, i.e. the odd strike

of lethal lightning, which nevertheless do occur, and not just to someone else's kid. The Chupacabre also entails the useful effect of sheer horror, c.f. early Christian maulings, vampires, killer

great whites, and other terrors you may wish to include, eliminating need for less devastating examples. Suggest you recite the legend in order to conclude days with sobriety. Sample mantra: It's coming for me, too.

WHEN I DIE #1

When I die on the premise that death is inevitable
and people are sad, envisioning their own inevitability,
tell them, don't be sad, don't skip a wink of sleep
on a postulate that has never been disproved; perhaps you
are the exception, but he—he was looking for this.

WHEN I DIE #2

People are sad—they're always sad, but make them come,
serious and formally dressed, to my viewing.
Black coffee will be served on a rolling tea cart.
Someone will preside over the family, expectantly.
Children will dare each other—"Kiss him!
Touch his eyeball if it's real." Men uncomfortable with grief
will tell bad jokes: "Don't speak ill of the deceased—
you might *wake him up*." To some I will look good,
at least the visible half of me, all but a few would concur.
And as far as those who fill ashtrays on sidetables
with tissues smeared with rouge, tell them,
"Don't be sad. Do you have any idea how much
all this cost? The flower arrangements alone ..."

Finally, a man with a shock of frayed hair
accenting his long bald head will plunge brusquely
between straight back loveseats and hover
over the casket, my mouth turned up into a smile
I could never manage in life. He will hold a cosmetic mirror
under my nose with routine nonchalance, like a physician
giving an exam. Turning toward the exit,
he'll flip the mirror into the pot of a palm fern
without breaking stride, and say, "He was looking for this."

WHEN I DIE #3

There won't be any flowers
when I die. (I'm leaving instructions
to the point). There won't be an open casket
because there won't be a casket
and people are sad when they see a body
that looks familiar
and dead. There won't be a casket
because I won't be there,
or an urn, either.
I'm not going to go in any traditional way.
You will know I have passed
when you receive a letter in my hand
and not of my hand, signed
by a name you almost recognize.
When you tell the mourners
don't be sad, you will understand
what this means, and you will congregate—he was
looking for this—to marvel, not to grieve.

WHEN I DIE #4

When I die in an overstuffed recliner I bought
so I could live richly, and the TV enjoys its own programming
for hours, days maybe, because, silhouetted against
the flickering blue cast, I appear to be catatonic—
not unusual for me—and neighbors
are sad, you need to tell them the lawn service
is paid through next year, the house
is open for business: Come right in! Have a drink or two,
invite your pals and colleagues, ministers, local celebrities—
sycophants in tow—that brunette in spandex
out for a twenty-minute jog with her pop-eyed dogs.
Don't be sad. Recline in his honor.
Put your feet up and toast your guests.
Say, "Friends, what you see before you (this poem
isn't real, you shouldn't read it, you should live)
—he was looking for this."

GEOGRAPHY

*Broken arrow, fly your way with me,
off-mark your strike to nip my neck,
again embark your crooked sail
and stuck—pain's all over.*

I.

The middle of the map expands
to the mountains east, and mountains west,
and it is a goodly broad plain with sometime hill
and berth for many combine and mill.
From Indiana to broken Montana, and southerly,
the panhandled of Oklahoma and Texas,
great landed broods rise in spring tides,
Gulf-bound, unsettled from homesteads
and back forties. They are tired of sleep. They will wait
for split foundations and plumbing floods,
because they understand limit, and it is not enough.
And it is appointed unto man once to die
to take no prisoners and, equalized,
kick off the bucket, farm, buy it, deep six
each punched ticket, O sting, and after that
the judgment, bodies swelling the Mississippi, many
barged and plowed under, held to the river's bed,
but never down for long. Drifting lower,
Lower Delta, New Orleans, the ground itself moats
an inch each year. In sore fate, shrimp
and crab croppers rest their remains
in chill sarcophagi, deprived, they must be
even of salt. Nothing can contain the dead.

II.

Beginning in 1830, New England cemeteries
were pushed to the periphery. By mid-century,

most American cities had followed suit, setting aside rural parks. Too detached for more than an occasional visit, these parks—often framed by spreading hardwoods and rows of ordered gravestones—became not only norm, but novelty. Cemeteries acquired an otherworldly appeal.

In contrast, the earliest colony cemeteries had been eyesores and stinking, unimproved plots of land in the middle of town. Customarily churchyards, they were unsentimental burial sites, their presence impossible to divorce from routine activity. Before 1830, the dead daily reminded the living of the body's temporality; this, the dead would murmur, you will become—today, perhaps? You were chosen.

III.

Magnificat of deep and soft, blue passages cue events in perfect mood-pitch, sound as a temple clock, Bunyan is dead, his God blown belfry dull, bound up in letters left to simples (be blesséd) and cocks. O man, he has shown thee rivers, notches and fills, and what of? Snowmelt chokes tributary and drainage, dry years have fissured, won't keep what isn't dirt, won't keep what is: all will be well water, all who eat will empty, dipped down one grade or another, directed toward Pilgrim's gulch. Reward travels blunt in places; they will mint, condense to pearl, peculiarities holy gaveled and spent, themselves remote, even clear nights steps upwind, upwind.

the chamber stuffs—witnesses, *klogerins*, rye
scents of rotting wood. Whose mist
wets the vanity glass? A cherry wash of smoke tips
downstairs and corridors, spiritus sanctus—
voices, the weight of feet shuffling
perfumes, Greek ringlets of hair.
Gold frames the family, gilds
the map, and darkness within rolls out.

LITANY

Relief and light in the folds of waters you swim.
Below, shadows of your legs, and shadows
of shadows of your legs.

They razed the house
we found, abandoned, sides of us
rolled through a landscape
we'll never read. May I call you
when you dry off?
Sunshine spots your face,

but winters are colder. I open the paper
and I already know, then breakfast, a cup or two.
It matters to me, but does it matter?
Section, story, column and line,
words to word to letter—scratched paper is all it is.
Do you like my coat buttoned? Half-buttoned?

This is us again. And the trees are older.
I've been reclaiming the spots I used to know,
and your skin.

How often did we come here?
I think the trees used to be trees.
Bark and branches, blow
that word again. This is us, remember?
And this is how it works now—
this is you sweeping me.

There were mists in the alley tonight
and I couldn't see stars. I watched a tabby
knock a porcelain vase off-shelf.

Whose fault was that?
If I collected pieces
fanned wide across the hearth,

I was careful.

I must have wanted a glass of milk.
There were violets, snapdragons, tight
peach roses. The air turned.

For the distance, the numbers tagging year on year, the seasons we impose.

For the slights and oversights, and the hoarfrost, and blasted boughs.

For mirrors, for abstractions and unawares, for imprecise and unspoken,
woodsmoke, vanilla, but also for subtle and low, stillbirth,
ripple and knob—

for footstep and miscue, empty—
for clasps, shrugs, for rotting leaves, thank you, this
our gnat-bitten score.

I sat in the car all day along a clay embankment.
I pushed up my sleeves for the heat
and put away my glasses.

How does it work?

I leave windows open; I don't have curtains
or blinds, and the sheets bunch at my knees.
Walls need repainting, more color.
I'm listening for scant sound. Who do you see?

That lake is frozen year-round now.

I've come to wade, and, between wind gusts,
hear saxophone. Remember we swam across
unmarked, dropping to touch the slick, scum bottom,
fight to surface.

The water used to be wet,
and the weather.

Your hair clung to the back of your neck,
and I couldn't keep up.

TEXAS BLUE

This kitchen table's leafless,
a mess set in the corner with the dog's bowls
and a cutaway Gibson
capoed for a song I sing, a song
I heard my father strum from the slack porch
of a house I haven't seen
since my feet rusted out in Sulphur.
I took a picking contest at the Gruene Dance Hall,
I got a gig with Jerry Jeff
and I learned to sing
sky sapped like Mexican brick, bold
and green as the cold Guadalupe.
Nights when all I could hear
was the tap of my boots and a flat B string.
I learned to make a woman
purr. There's a song I sing
when I lose sleep. It's slow to drain,
bent in the right places—
I used to get a hooker named Luanne
to complement with her high,
close harmony, but she lives another life now,
and it wouldn't be right.
Towne's days of rain don't seem so far away,
the startled wings of crows.
Luckenbach's got a nasal twang,
Kerrville where the folkies play,
bars from Baton Rouge to Laredo,
but I'm low, I won't make it this year.
New songs I sing sound like old,
and my fingers shake—
I remember up in Durango
the mountains rose mean North and East, snow
like the white blood of clouds.
The air pinched my lungs, and I thought I'd give up
cigarettes for good. I had my fortune read

and bought a new suit.
I felt an old thrill
on stage that night, Sunday
even went to church. I heard my father
singing in a nearby pew.
I knew he was pleased
the way I gripped that preacher's hand,
but I haven't heard him since.
He was beautiful like some men are,
well-hung and broken in,
spread for hard work.
I can't keep the dishes from piling
or the floor from hair.
I haven't changed or trued the strings in months,
but I'm happy when I sing
those sad songs, falling apart
before they learn to mend.