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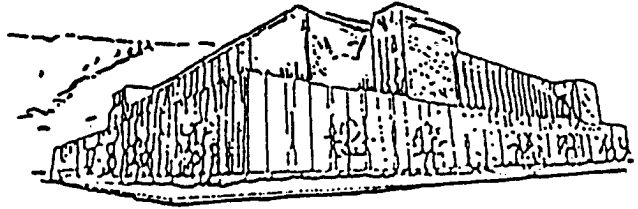
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Candidacy

poems
by:

Matt Byrne

B.A. The University of Iowa, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

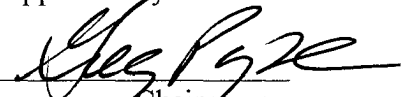
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1999

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Contents

I.

He Waits For What Has Happened

Another Faustian Exchange, 5
Beyond the Call, 6
Where to Look, 7
The Poem Has Died, 8
The New Nonfiction, 9
Nocturne, 10
Neighbors at a Dead God's Cul-de-sac, 12
Love After Lust Song, 13
Story of the Line, 14
I Have Some Errands to Run, 15
A Bedroom, 17

II.

The Surrogate

That Would Make a Good Poem, 19
The Legend of Fertile Izer, 20
Reason for Everything, 21
Through a Lens, 22
Virus Needeth Not a Résumé, 23
Grief, 24
Window Shopping, 25
Well-adjusted One (I), 26
Message from the Plankwalker, 27
Colonization, 28
Well-adjusted One (II), 29

III.

Supply No Demand

Candidacy, 31
The Digger, 32
Because There Are No Cows Coming Home, 33
Stages of Portraiture, 34
What's Wrong With Eyes, 35
Depravity as Lesson Learned, 36
Immaculate Propositions, 38
A Day Hike, 39
Laments, 40
Wisconsin Camping, 41

IV.

Penitent Protagonist

Elegy for Michelle, 43
Inside Scoop, 44

Obstacles, 45
In the Showering Quarters, 46
Soon Spring Walk Song, 47
Informer Season, 48
Utilities Included, 49
The Man Who Pours Paint, 50
Trusting Pills, 51
A Rain Lesson, 52
He Said to the Blank Sheet of Paper, 54

I.
He Waits For What Has Happened

Another Faustian Exchange

The sky inherits blue from unsynthetic chemicals
 as a dog runs onto the vacant street.
 A thing of surprising weight is handed to me
 by a passerby speaking in paraphrase.
 The wind stirs leaves in vortices.

His black coat dims the lit world.
 He walks away, up the center of a tree-lined horizon.
 The thing he has given me is smooth
 and nameless, inappropriate for mantles
 or cupboards, fingerprinted with his scentless oil.

It did not necessarily come from soil
 but what doesn't? A flash of birds comes
 from the sky—a mood shift could leap from anywhere.
 I wonder what the loved one will think
 of the thing if my impressions of it

are not hers. The weather displays
 cumuli. One unfolds
 into protean images I think of the thing:
 an Italian villa, an akimbo clown neither good nor evil,
 a timepiece frozen mid-twirl, a pointed finger.

If I didn't take the thing somebody would have.
 Two wrongs probably made this neighborhood.
 So the clouds feed off their own immateriality
 to grow new illusions. The eye is a puppet provocateur.
 Grass grows greener within this else factory.

Beyond the Call

The commander's sleeping with his troops again.
All night they march in and out of his quarters,
bare-chested, looking hungry.
His doorstep is littered with pistachio shells.
Classical piano drifts from his draped windows,
the notes muffled by a sandbag fence.

The guard in the tower lights a flare: insects drop
stunned, wingless at his feet. Red wax bubbles over
his gloved hand. He closes his eyes but still a flash.
This phenomenon unnerves him repeatedly.
His girlfriend's last letter smelled of basil.
He rolled it into his armpits to prevent shirt-sweat.

Two spotlight beams weave into each other like mating moths.
A private stumbles out the door, laughing, with a piece of paper
stuck to his back. He falls asleep in a jeep smashed against a tree.
The engine knocks as if something's stuck under the hood.
The moon sings as if interrogated.
The moon swells with absent sun.
What timbre from which crater?

The commander's chimney ceases to issue smoke.
A task force spills from the window well to retrieve more kindling.
Armed with pulaskis and measuring tape, they fan out
toward the surrounding barracks, humming a morose arpeggio.
They haul back styrofoam cups and pencils—
one drags a pair of lightning rods from a nearby village.
The commander will appoint him attractive in the morning.

Where To Look

Surrounded by glacial peaks
but no ocean to speak of.
And there are other lovers
much kinder, softer than yours.

Or meaner, harder, and that's
the sausage of irony
blood-soaked, like wind sinking teeth
into the river's silver startle.

Also pigeons pecking at spit,
those apostatized doves.
When you give change to the man
you are begging for assurance

that you will never be that man.
A freight station for lumber
sets this town's stage: the land
shudders as trains wrench away.

Try to look elsewhere. Try to see
the rotund earthen crystal
of her eye, its shifting geography
only a sadist would disturb.

The weaving current of dreams—
crumpled wrappers kicked into it.
What then, gentlest looker, does
the reddest wrapper stand for?

The Poem Has Died

without a will.
 Submerged in scrapped papers,
 the mourners are speechless.
 Its was built of dross, twig, and dirt
 flattened, appraised,
 rationed by the aptly suited:

was mottled, a creek siphoned
 into lake,
 the torn hair tufts
 of warring gods
 carved into inviting animals
 for doorsteps,
 overcast because a 32 mph southerly wind
 made it that way.

It couldn't sleep misunderstood,
 couldn't wake when easily gotten
 and often snorted. It read fiction
 when it wanted a story.

It was substance,
 the most decadent.
 An extroverted youth,
 sublime, heaven-bent
 on an indeterminate Truth is Illusion associative
 mode—

The poem's only absolute:
 succeeded less than failed.

Biographers are discouraged by doubts
 of a movie. Cryptic insistence. Dying words.
 "Without a plug," it said,
 "there's nothing to pull."

The New Nonfiction

Our ignorance of anatomy:
 we are convinced the heart has strings,
 appears blue from outside. Having stumbled
 from a forest erect with cadaverous trees,
 I can't be sure—but it appears
 large semi-mammals tottered here
 minutes ago, hurling themselves
 into extinction based on a survey suggesting
 the threat of their foraging.
 Too little too late. I am enthralled by the likelihood
 of more for everyone:
 the gross national product shall be divvied: two-thirds
 to the little people, one-fifth to the practitioners
 of various yogic faiths, the remaining to those few
 who can figure out the remainder.
 When was it fine and decent
 to have eyes in back of the head? The cyclical logic
 of the forest I see in my mind.
 The rare sun spurts aged mayonnaise
 upon the snowy field. I am mildly hungry, and, although
 omnivorous, obsess about ingredients, the content
 of tables, the zygoty of fruit flies. For lack of better words
 I turn over an old leaf. Frondescence—
 these blackened veins remind me not of death
 but the entrepreneurial design of indoor volleyball courts.
 Fact: if A is speaking one's mind, and B is a mind
 ninety percent unused, then C is a product one must
 advertise tactically. I mean fractally
 You know what they say about a forest with big trees....

Nocturne

1. Snake

Sleeping with a snake can be fulfilling. Its illusory oil relieves.
 You get what you don't ask for for a snake's spontaneous. Such as:
 reading (not meant for bedtime, get me?)
 never results if a tongue rhythmically penetrates your earhole. Lord knows!
 A snake'll loop around a staff to tattoo your brain with healing, wheeling
 and reeling your last nickel into the radiance of gambling abyss. Hell. Last week my snake introduced a new polymer with one heck of a half-life to a middle-aged plastic manufacturer
 Of course it gets worse, which is better.
 No one wants a martyr on the mattress.
 A snake forgoes forging sexual exultation *ex post facto*, but divulges universal secrets in its granular, surly way. A portable icon turns everyone on! One thing: it'll never let you in on *how*.

2. Gun

Sleeping with a gun gains momentum. At first cold and distant, but its barrel embodies what you feel you're lacking: you seem safer than you're supposed to—your bathtub's bulletproof. The blood runs thin when nothing hunts you. Nightmarish quiet perishes from a gun. It's time's microwave. Have you ever sensed nobody watching you? A scope's as valuable as the pope isn't catholic. For *your* target, mind you. Mind your matter. A gun is a manner of speech; dialect distinct, etymologies no accident. If only Cain could be able to appreciate this. If only (some) dreams could pop a cap in themselves. The noir moon fails to finance its efforts, the lump under your pillow demands action. Are there calisthenics for this sort of slumber? Imagine the intricate ecosystem within a copse of sage, fir, and sapling birch. Imagine it gone.

How long can a gun hold its tongue?

Neighbors at a Dead God's Cul-de-sac

Harl scrubs the skid marks on his driveway.
 An unfamiliar car is parked along the curb.
 I'm relieved when it disappears. It is summer.
 Someone's children resume peering through windows,
 their garden footprints careful to disturb.

We know what it's like to be young. I fasten
 six blue balloons to my front yard's lamppost.
 Harl places a large cage in his backyard.
 I should think about his wife more often,

but I'm afraid how fast the trees grow
 near the phone lines. The same white van with changing
 company logos cruises the street lazily.
 Mounds of upturned earth appear around Harl's
 Russian olive, where he's scattered two dogs' ashes.

Sunday is indistinguishable from Saturday.
 A palpable shame drips from the eaves, but turns
 out it just rained—the landscaping's woodchips
 look lacquered! Mist rises from drooping ferns.

The town's traffic has increased,
 droning above the lake's breathy crawl. Was a time
 Harl and I congregated on Sunday, filtering
 to church stunned from a hard night.
 Now, our children gone, the orange paint cracks

from our driveway basketball hoops, nets gray
 with no use. We don't congregate weekends,
 left to create our own allegories, to sift
 through the scattered piles of ourselves.

I should think of my wife more often; does she
 think of me? Harl drills the outside corners
 of plastic shutters into his brick house.
 Someone pulls into his driveway, backs out, drives away.
 With nothing left to forgive us, Harl,

we can start by filling our birdfeeders.

The Love After Lust Song

These after love-making doldrums
 remind me of a time when you were better plural,
 as was I. A thin January light needles
 through the bayless bay windows.
 A half-eaten head of cheese remains molded
 on the table. When a bird outside cries
 no response meets it into song.

What about you? Was it good, all their asking,
 the procession of spent bodies, in order
 of importance, seeking similar appraisal?
 That wave—the capsized past tossed in its curl:
 shores what I want, something like *bygones*.
 But we must use memory, as each other
 There's no other way to educate the future.

We must use being used. Here the difficulty lies:
 whether to remove the dust tendrils caught flapping
 in the fan's grating, or let them cluster till they billow
 bedward. I detest flags for they never land.
 What was good for the future covers it,
 the nuts and bolts which augmented the harvest
 cover the harvest. You detest flags for they are land.

You raise your arms behind your head, the right pit
 ashes of embers just doused. Nothing urges now,
 just you and I reconnoitered, staked and past scrutiny.
 Like the first time I saw my reflection for what it was:
 a surface deep enough to be born into dying with.
 So images are neither created nor destroyed.
 The ceiling fidgets when your numb hips twitch.

Story of the Line

Like fathers, sons, and spirits
 it is crossed with regret sometimes.
 Draw it and erase it, a proposal
 cookie-jarred then piggy-banked.

I sign my name above it dotted,
 the script droops beneath.
 See it in the robin's beak
 split red by its skinny shriek.

Point A to Point _____
 conforms to the mountains
 fractured from stretched land.
 And what but flowers disbanded
 along its footless trails?

The city I wait in is the rift
 left in the cleaver's board.
 It stakes its sacrificial swing
 on a chain bearing half my weight

as I perch rockingly
 in the middle of this white humming
 room. Say it is fine as sand
 no longer sand, the spectral dust
 on mirrors awaiting dollar straws.

It convinces throngs to hail it,
 having more minds than its own.
 A stem meets its leaf to spin
 a forking branch of vein.

I Have Some Errands To Run

1

Lost friends, shifting laterally, heads upward strained,
it's for the better.

Sister, doughy redolence of me, may I borrow
the brother? He's always off

being who he's not, scaling walls
which land on their teeth from the weight of him.

Sunset, frazzled autumn augury, will you
thrust in me your drama? Darker coffees

cook somewhere, prompting pissings
from the dumb-struck villagers.

Sister, estranged, weeping unsuccessfully,
your brother wildly researches the magician's

patterns. A man in tatters
practices fly-fishing in the grass, prominent

paunch lifting with the half-hearted sweep
of his rod—does anyone spare dollars?

Dispersing ache and gods with holes in them,
I am unfaithful: I merge you into a textbook,

"The Transforming Economics of Preparation."
I take all of you too seriously; I hereby give you.

2.

Hard crops searing in sun, water choking
from sprinklers, clouds scantily staked in sky corners
like pockets of languished mystery, blistered shoulders
dotted with sweat and flung saliva

because man must create there is nothing else
enlarged, only expanded, thinning,

bear witness to this flattening, these mountains into rivers into mud
-into an adolescent orgasm processed into cold, reluctant memory
Lost friends, do you know me more by knowing less?

A Bedroom

Years ago a haywire Genesis
boomed baritone into the molding, the abraded
floorboards of this room. She was there.

She blew a kiss. A door closed. Drop of warm
on his thigh. *Exit* means true love.

She must have stooped and squatted, scrubbed,
shaved her hair within lotion. She must have dried.
Whether she reached those four starry moles
on her back or, feet apart, rushed, concerns itself
gently out the open crack of window.
The staccato drizzle of passersby leaks unheard
and loud enough to clatter his dreams to gray waters,
a cloaked shadow, a planet nudged by wind.

How does he wait for what has happened?
He wakes to black dots on the ceiling swimming.
They disperse to no end—her imminent
departure. This is consequentially morning.

Their clothes of last night and next week lie lumped
on the floor. Awkward with grace unknown
she sways from the room. Hurried silence:
it goes when it wants. His flaccid mind ignores
a stiffening urge to wake. Some sullied world heals
when the alarm radio shuts off. He exacts her last
motion—trajectory.

His tongue sticks to the vermilion ceiling of mouth;
wedged between are tiers of white-washed teeth
in kinetic cadence, always saying, always said.

II.
The Surrogate

That Would Make a Good Poem

The earliest worm could have waited, could have
looped in the loops of its excretion—I huddle over the thing
with onlookers looking for a subatomic ejection,
elegies failing from their twitching lips, cars
reenacting their little crimes, so I rise
to the occasion as only I can, expounding the mythos
of terminus, and the only one leaning on my sentence
is a boy with a sticker (Louis P.) stuck to his breast
who leans on his bike like a human
kick stand, so paste-faced and breathy,
the moon in the man, an unknowing disciple
who devours my words until I disperse into the most hallowed ideal
he's ever misunderstood,
as it is on earth, so that he may have his own words,
rough hybrids of mine, already oceans from their source.

The Legend of Fertile Izer

"Only the pictures and statues of great men survive, and these the shapely women devoted to the perpetuation of the race gaze upon to improve their offspring."

— Tomasso Campanella, The City of the Sun

She was a product of eugenics: a fat woman and thin man, perfect

for perfection, at the exact hour determined by the Astrologer and Physician,

having resisted till the ode worthy age of 22, laid down as sexing one and soon came

Izer: she was weaned on the Two Physical Principles: that of the sun as father and the earth

as mother. Because she was not light but ground, not photo but opportunity

for synthesis, not drill, nor chisel, jackhammer, dildo, or screwdriver,

she became abundant mineral potential, an ore to prompt his eminent mind

to instruct her logically of systematically formulated formulae for deducting dividends

to develop an indelibly didactic division of labor. It was natural—grounds for observation and centuries

of study—when her golden hair leafed, shoulders rocked crusted bluffed expanded contorted flattened into

a continent incarnate. She birthed the precious metals essential for extracting a more precious mine.

Reason for Everything

I am alone and have done much work
 to be there. Being humbled by the way sky meets panoramic earth slant,
 birds zigging as if the end
 or beginning is upon us, bores me. I take my shirt off
 to confuse you. Shadowed curves comprise me;
 I am a horde of erotic lumps. People must unbend

the wayward glares which make them. They must socialize
 with religious zeal, shop at stores providing booths—
 good manufacturing versus bad manufacturing
 is the dialectic dictate of the universe, and I can't stop
 scratching. How many shades redder

until I flame? The corpses of secrets
 rot for the taking in dumpsters,
 but all you speak of could be heard in front of the object's back:
 he looks good, she is a very sweet individual (and funny), I should
 let go. Sucked from the swarm, a bird alights on wire

they say for telephones. It blips frequencies in alien lattice
 I seek to diagram. At my fingertips rests a chalkboard
 which tries to take my life. I scrawl for its audience intent
 on my embarrassment. They open my pantry to a landslide
 of soap, thinking me a barbarous dust killer.
 Someone's gotta sterilize food for the table, where it steams
 stiffly between us. Enlisted, I rub my scent on the hypothetical perks.

Cut and therefore essentialize. Bare to me your most minimum.
 The bird calls to mate; the bird calls to exhibit; the bird chides,
 "How's the weather there," "Take it easy," "Let's masturbate
 to each other's groaning currents."
 Someone always hears, so by approximation listens.
 Like a sign, you will never materialize.

Through a Lens

I'm supposed to see you. A new pane,
wholly transparent, polishing to blind
your silhouette behind. There's a haze
I can't muse out of you, a wafting of birds
caught brown by sun's atmospheric malaise.

Your atmosphere expands: you shrink
to another place not home. I'll shove seeds
grow less room for weeds; but soil surrounds
unearthed stone, not one unbroken
or soft as it sounds.

Liken the twilight cloud web to the crescent
clip of moon later, before the hands-in-hands
tighten with demands of slick union, dawn—
a toy too baroque for piquing you this pheromonal
crouch. You have (suddenly) withdrawn

being had, as if, for the birds, flying colors
will unbend my posture. I stand to see you green
upward tilting; lean in not to me. One thousand words
ago I snapped undeveloped before you. Your tweezers
lifted me like now your whispers.

Virus Needeth Not a Résumé

A certifiable prodigy: long division
and multiplication were a breeze, though spelling bees
did thwart him.

Puberty was never an issue. It channeled into philanthropic
misanthropy. He would be prosperous.

Class bullies and the popular: envy-stricken.
Under their skin he most often wound up.
One day, he ascended a flag-pole by his underwear.
Through a wincing blear he beheld for the first time treetops.
How the recess children fan out, gnarled and ungainly!

As valedictorian, he betrayed a jack-o-lantern grin. Accolades
spoke of *vision* and *determination*. He felt these veritably so,
with the aid of workhorse genes.

Scholarship flooded in. He was begged for by the best.
Appointed a research position, he invited voyeurism
from superiors. Academia just can't cut it, he thought.
I'm going where the buck surges, then stops.

Grief

It's not as bad as you thought it should be.
Not a face slap, not a shoulder knuckled hard,
just a vague ache, someone supposed to be there
but may just be late.

It's when the one-liner is no longer tolerable,
no dawn clearing night's name, so you demand substance,
which is quiet. Like dust from shattered glass
you can't wholly sweep it away.

The infinite consequence of a letter never sent,
what could have becoming should have, as an absence
fills a void. You treat it like a ladder, climb down
to face the earth,

a curious apple your rotting palate grows to savor.
It has your divided attention. You've always
dreamt it, now you have it—for the meantime
it seems necessary

An addition to the collage, the papier-mâché dangle
of experience, a history constantly rewritten.
What but grief to animate you so, who but you
to embrace it?

Window Shopping

It was off-limits to stare. The man
limped (everyone knew it)—why did the Farner-Bocken
delivery guy stare? The parking lot full of people
brushing by with glances upward. He stared.

Let's say it's you on your way to cigarettes, coffee.
You'd see him limp; you'd see the delivery guy ogling injury.
Would you think it too?

Grinning, disheveled, leaning against the yellowest
willow, a cut on your shin, smell of dead
leaves and you and me. I can't put dreams back
where they find me.

A scar branched up from his sock, drifted from ankle to upper calf.
Even the hair near the scar (writhing with each step) was gone.

You step from cabs, bent knee birthed in streetlight.
You half-sleep on hammocks under ruddy overcast.
You should be by the willow, disheveled.

Grim sometimes, the murk your brown eyes do.

Well-adjusted One (I)

I wait for my surrogate. He will be civil
 if he gets his tea. His harbinger: the dawn sun
 which says its afraid I'll have to leave. For him I pray
 like for my mother I squatted, lifting shards
 of her teacup after an aircraft quaked the roof.

My prayers are predictably bypassed. My hands
 tweeze grace unsteadily. When he arrives
 he'll be afraid I'll have to leave (for the far
 corner of the pantry, where dustpans lurk in cobwebs)—
 o where's the light bulb's drawstring? For some knowledge
 people get ignored. For some knowledge

my surrogate badgers me. He taxies toward me
 to empty evidence from my head. He needs always
 my coordinates, but is giddy with young love so won't
 implant a tracking device. His romance has limits.
 He travels light-years to buff his crow's feet.
 That dustpan bears garage-sale characteristics:

dirt painted in the furrows
 of its cracked receptacle, yellow handle faded
 a lighter shade—but with what to crack the case?
 I'm afraid I'll have to drop the case,
 from a towerish height, to splinter into its innards.
 Extended scrutiny makes the scrutinized *wriggle*.

My surrogate prompts
 an involuntary pirouette with a sidelong glance.
 Huddled, I merely adjust to the darkness some.
 Yes I stare. Frequently. I'm afraid I'll have to forget,
 but every day, soon now, the aircraft inching above matted
 trees, to her trembly teacup mother clings.

Message from the Plankwalker

He nods with earnest approval as I crawl
across the deck. He is aroused by the direction
in which I move. The sun pokes through
my shirt, its heat crawls my back.

I remove my shirt. Improbably naturally,
I get hotter. With a bayonet he draws
an arrow in the grime-covered wood; this pronounces
I am not about face. I realign. Never

have I envied so much the land's mountain tops
sucking from sponges of cloud. I am stunned by my veins.
The long roots of pulled weeds haunt me.
He believes only people get to be ghosts.

He believes in motion. In choosing a distinct
brand of motion. He ignores the widespread sky
draped inert over the weather. Even the curling
white waves shaking off the wind like noisome

flies. He does not test the consequences
of removing his cap. He dresses for protection.
A silver whistle lies in the bed of his breastbone.
It sprays a helix of light when he shifts.

Shall I apologize for the mess I won't make?
Shall I request a request blindfolded?
If I deviate from course, he'll continue
with his mapmaking.

Colonization

The shadow on the wall waves its arms
then curls them back into itself.
It's like a fog condensed into form,
cordoned only by its distance,
which is empty. The object's axis varies;

shadow swells as if to envelop, shrinks
as if to pierce—the shadow thrives
on refusal. It hangs absence in a frame.

The candle flickers when the shadow does—
the wall leaps, resets. The wall is a screen
surrounding this logic: subcutaneous presence,
a shadow stuck inside just waiting

to stay there. With muted tone the shadow
conjures invisibility, dares closed eyes to see
what it's made of: the object *imagined*
within the shadow's elastic pulsing.

There's no bottom to its surface.
Does the object not become medium?
Becomes extended from. Becomes shade,
that darkened figure flitting on the screen.
What luminous air crowds these cross hairs?

Cast in a mold of air not as luminous,
the shadow leads what it follows.

Well-adjusted One (II)

Son-of-a-bitch my surrogate was called. From that point
 on the cameras dollied out. He shares with me
 my mother. She is panting
 and shifts jaggedly through the house. Her knuckle locks
 around a porcelain handle. Birds jigger into
 a box attached to the backyard tree. She spies enough room
 for a swing-set or a garden. One minute later an aircraft hovers over

and I crawl: it is time to elect the surrogate.
 He must have anger accompanied by involuntary rectal contractions.
 He must have brown hair. He must swell and calm to expound
 the big picture. He's found:
 sweat pours from me but trickles from him unctuously.
 He spies me in the fulcrum under lightning and thunder.
 I am silent. He points to trees and says, "This is a poplar grove."
 Sometimes, he removes grit lodged under his fingernails.
 The tips whiten to powder.

It's no use thinking he'd make a well-rounded father. His heart
 after shuffling he deals to the locals. They rarely get a good hand.
 They call him son-of-a-bitch but admire his tussled style.
 If mother knew what they said
 she'd instinctively pluck her eyebrows into little minuses—the most
 magnificent host! I'm speaking from a place of envy
 where meteorologists take their work home.
 It could rain
 at any time. A new church could open up with a more muscular
 Jesus. Loving Him enough,

the locals would drink decaf after mass. My surrogate is happy
 about the surgeon's family moving in up the street.
 People are gaping holes of information, he conjectures.
 An untrustworthy parasite, I spy his scrap-papered notes.
 They are crisp, not addressed to me. Jagged mother, why don't
 you read them too? You could make the backyard anything,
 nothing at all—the air above the house fills with a clapping gray
 hum. It is not raining.

III.
Supply No Demand

Candidacy

Please, come in. Did you notice the security guard
in the lobby? The filing cabinet stuck in his teeth?
He's paid well to love you. As I speak a factory erects in your name.
You'd be surprised how few understand—
turnover's at an all-time high. The thing

about success lies in velocity.
Your assistant, invisible right now, totes tools to scrape
your doubts—if you pledge, he'll use foam.
I, on the other hand, am not your 'boss', but your Plan.
Look me in the eye when I close it, or when the pages on my head
are blank and I am open.

Wipe off your brow with this punch-card. The ink was extracted
from a Rockefeller's marrow, so it's permanent.
I don't punch in I'm never out.
Dress code requires one sleeve up,
a microchip behind your tie.
Our competitors hire silver-suited mystics
that blend in with the boiler room. They whisper hexes
through the vents. They slip paper clips in the cafeteria microwaves.
They could be anyone,

which makes the job interesting. A story:
*once, a man died in his sleep, decided to bestow
benefits upon his devoted underlings (who burned U's on their tongues
to prove it), married atop a pyramid—o you know all this. Our aptitude tests*

reveal your detailed knowledge of our inception.
As I speak your factory annexes a country. Your nodding
injects pandemonium into the trading pit.
They're running notecards across each other's throats—
your blink just altered the prediction
for next year's water harvest. Remember:
my eyes are everything like the sun. I read and then I read some more.
You're our domino, kid, a blade of hay
in our needlestack.

How do you see yourself
four years from now? You'll pry that drainplug from the wish-fountain.

The Digger

I've arrived at a conclusion: something must be taken
 from the ground up. Calluses throb in cadence—
 If only I hadn't lost the saint's bone
 lodged behind my ear. My sixth sense

asks for a seventh. It sends pain synapsing
 toward my head because it hates the too-appropriate
 music in there. I've fooled sixth sense before:
 just add a new note to the tune. Just wrap

a tourniquet so the end takes longer. Training camp
 feels years ago, so I rub scars for memory:
pickax, shovel, formaldehyde, harmonica.

Is it possible to leave the conclusion? Not when fully armed.
 One of the lieutenants who said he was my uncle
 ordered cease ceasing fire. I am completely alone

on this one. All the lieutenants die in orderly fashion.
 Damp with youth, I pull the sweat from my eyes.
 A dull vinegar overpowers the smelling salts. More reason
 to scrutinize science, but my rank
 entails not being paid to think about thinking.

I'm supposed to look presentable—
 dip the towel into the container of orange surgical soap
 borrowed from headquarters, then wrap it around my headset.
 Freshly sharpened stakes

provide a statuary skyline. Daytime and the moon's half-full.
 Ashes drop like god's expendable sugar.
 I cannot move because the handle
 grips too hard. Remain unblinking. Fall in:
 the buried sprout right through me.

Because There Are No Cows Coming Home

I don't have any faith in the world, she says,
relieved. I tell her rightly so, since everyone
she's loved died from en masse stenosis
at carnivals they weren't enjoying. You must take
a sitz bath, I advise her, to suture
your important (when whole again) medulla oblongata.
She's hankered for a cure some time now,
and I spring for such opportunities. I suggest
she paint her toenails, only to soften this extreme
with allusions to matrimony. Not for me, she pipes,
as if trying to intimidate the oil, popcorn, perfume
and pubic sweat from floating into the room.
I tell her today's god is a smooth upper-level manager
who prefers being represented through bauble.
How can she denounce an apparition in shades?
Allergies prevent her identification with nature.
She walks an invisible dog with a charming coat
and hip dysplasia. She tenses up when realizing
even infants aren't cute, that they may be socially svelte
but incomparable to a house facing backward
on a would-be regular street. I fall for her,
unrequitedly, when she neglects to water her plants.

Stages of Portraiture

When he met her he was excitably jaded,
a burgeoning doubt factory eager for distribution.
She also clung to preconceptions.
Her sky often hung overcast, inching toward
her with shadowed restraint. He was nothing on its way.

The oscillating helixes of attracted energy fields,
or serendipity, most likely utter chance,
drew them together between buildings.
Their paths crossed in supermarts neither
normally patronized. They selected between dual

paragons of life, choosing a shared solitude
with anticipated collateral. The people in the buildings
either watched or didn't care; in the supermarts
they were eyed and passed over, like previous lives.

Now he attaches a sign against the sea.
Men and women read it, but they have their own signs,
which most only read. She looks at the sea,
whose land advances as she backpedals away.
What is it about a tragedy, its waves whipping shore?

From the buildings they lean their heads, calling
into the sea with static silence. A man painting
the sea is tired of impressions. He doesn't know
it's his will whitening water, adding birds to the spray.

What's Wrong With Eyes

The fly doesn't exit where it entered.
Each tap against the inch-open window
is the fly's attempt to go the quick way.
It alights with torpor after a series
of sweeping collisions with the glass.

The signaling breeze does not beckon it.
The dense purple of a garden flower
mingles with yellow grass where the fly
fails to go. From the kitchen wafts
the burnt sweet aging of garbage

ripe with plate scrapings. The fly stops
where the pane meets its frame, averted
by the wood's paint-chipped opacity.
Can't it see through this deception?
The fly sees through the glass, not the glass

which censors the room as glass would have it,
taking objects into its filmic form:
depressions into impressions, green lamp
an amorphous swell of suspended vapor.
With its radar the fly cannot see the glass,

a pupil trapped within the limits of lens.

Depravity as Lesson Learned

1

We hold this evidence to be truthful:
 the percentages look good, and all the tests are useful.
Indicative of level, the tire's rubber planing ice,
 pavement beneath, everybody loves a cynic.
 Just when we think we're onto something
 we flip to a kinkier position. And when someone cries,
 "These characters act too maudlin!"
 we are busy musing *maudlin* during the explanation.
 It starts with a word, like tinsel or frigid,
 so that a chapped hand becomes a loving holiday
 replete with destiny and obligation. It is true we control
 our destiny—the snaking line of traffic points
 southward, where the natives tiptoe the land as a sepulcher.
 Forgotten how to fear, us, all this climbing (*c'est la vie!*)
 down from clouds.

Why shouldn't a climax precede such applause?
 Is doing it bad as thinking it? The children need something
 to clap to, a hearth on which to dissect each other.
 From sea to shining sea, turns out some evidence
 must be flushed like shocked sperm down a lily toilet.
 Where are the men at such an hour?

Nearby a table glows with the absence of an osier basket
 bearing silk petals. Properties change hands.
 We are not suspicious of the mourning women.
 It's been said they taught us everything they won't learn.

Comes the disenchanting assassin, his polished machines
 cloistered across the map. We've diluted his pursuit
 with sun-grayed pastures and rustic outgrowths.
 He appreciates the cornices of our youth, the origins
 of our global leanings. He weighs a straight politic.
 Might as well assassinate a briar patch.
 It's those without arms we mustn't trust, shamelessly stomping
 flyers into our sidewalks—beware the lurkings within!

Get to the heart of it, no matter how cold or salty;
 don't expect the diaphanous sky or its unpruned moon
 to debrief us. Comes the realist, evolving from tepid moss

to human before our eyes. We won't know what it's like
until a walk in his shoes, which fit perfectly. And love, oh love
that like-it-or-not quiescence which breaks to bits
no matter stolidly we hush it in our purring clutches.
Like the dead hourglass we fondly recollect:
the noble drive to behold each grain as moment.
So time became money or vice versa or it always was.
We blame it on no one to blame. No measure can be taken.

2.

Where are the men at such an hour?

Immaculate Propositions

The regular secretary, all hips
and jiggles, is out with a vice-ache.
Her replacement is crisp and taut
as dry steak-fat. We can't get through.
Our burden equals her egg salad sandwich.

The world's flat again for a quarter.
We got something that'll cure
them salivary froth bugs
at the corners of that smile.
We got something that'll make
your stomach argue politics
with Tabasco-soaked cornbread.

No matter. We still got that Irish
fella on our side, crooning our tunes
for a handshake and an airport.
The stakes're high in this game--
old Charlie's smoking 3 packs a day
and drinks his own piss; he's out there,
taking one for the team
with only a dozen or so I's in it.

Sign already: those eyes
ain't meant for looking. We're late
for a libel hearing with Pavlov's Dogs.
Our hotel bibles will issue forth
rivulets of tar upon the pinkest-
of-babies if we don't hear SOLD!,
or a good joke.

We'll find out soon enough
what you believe in. Your credence
finances our usurious immortality.
Know what we mean: friends, friends,
are beyond boring.

A Day Hike

I want to tell you the tyranny of clouds
will inspire revolt,
but it won't. It will expand, all shocking
folds and botanicidal grays.

It starts with rain—you approve of such
droppings—but the mist
these days freezes, landing like sheets
at a forensic scene.

I want you to hug the ponderosa's girth
and smell its saccharine
shell; your nose runs and a cigarette butt
juts from the bark at eye-level.

Resolve is knowing the ocean's initials
carved in mountain rock
means that even mystery must flee, settle
awhile in exile.

What of the fat screaming crow plummeting
like a discarded cross?
What insects and carcasses slick its sheen?
Imperious, observing, it lands.

Laments

1.

She dreams of dreams—
O, my chinchilla, my arabesque,
my otherworldly worldly,
my bud blossom blossom bud,
O.

2.

She is the window which stares
back. Sometimes, she sees
constellations; the stars
don't come out. Nor does she,
until coming home.

3.

Instead, bacon grease flecks
her wrist. Her watch smudges.
No one hears her blink
or flinch.

4.

I pinch her thoughts, making sure
she's asleep. When I don't, snow,
and she leaves herself
for science.

Wisconsin Camping

These pines have no plans. You've been missing
 out here, rows of shuddering forest.
 You've been telling yourself sylvan errands can help.
 But the pines are nucleonic and watchful. Their unsuccessful
 branch-birth nubs eyeball you. Their single-file sadness
 smells like a holiday. Rolling in dead needles

can't prick you into feeling faunal.
 The farms you passed must be booming.
 Behind their highway fences stacks of city salads procreate.
 Corn waives. All the arrowheads, to supply
 no demand, rest in museum storage rooms.
 An information post stands at you slanted
 and plastic: indigenous bird with a name nebulized to Latin.
 Stepped-on sticks cough like rust off car doors, wind waddles

obediently by. The tree ceiling waves its sun net.
 Bodies could be buried here, you could build
 a tree fort, where you'll scout the growth and decline of campfire
 songs and girls. You've noted in your nature journal
 the unendangered pesticide roiling your dream orchard.

There are tents for people like you, so you erect one.
 Old shotgun shells speckle your site like skin-shed.
 The only a cappella capable of wordlessness
 these crickets, this chopping alien hum.

IV.
Penitent Protagonist

Elegy for Michelle

Death took you
like lovers pluck roses
for sex. Human to human

ashes might be better
than dust—warmer?
Partisan no more

of blinks and head
tilting, so a poet primps
the organs of sky

no one's buying.
You piled up on yourself.
You were too much this

you needed that. A day
became solar, some
stars Orion. All forms

figuring, refiguring
atoms of exploding
shadow coiled over

and out. But that's
tomorrow's business,
a plot smothered

in self-analysis and cheap
lighting: your last thought
the next rest-stop, a bruise

you will repay someday.

Inside Scoop

The wind appears as what it stirs.
 I hear what you feel through airy textures
 of words. How am I to what am I to?
 There must be a secret in your eye:
 your eyes welter with candor.
 Not to mention the rifling wind
 —barely audible from this vacuum,
 but safely speculated about—
 which isn't the wind at all.
 These forces, austere, businesslike, expose
 themselves by disturbing the repose
 of, in this case, leaves and other detritus.

How I cherish such avatars of argument!
 Let's take a scientific approach:
 "Because organisms bear the weight of need,
 the clouds shuffle like pneumatic mammoths."
 Inside we are centered,
 but out there keeps moving, as if mobility
 were enough for action; not louder than words,
 but filaments of some combustible deity,
 subject to the whimsy of its creations.
 We are changing weather.

The weather changes us. I refute you without
 even having to listen. *Darling, the window,*
how it mirrors but is lens? Or the neighbors,
 the man on television who tells it like it is?
 We are devisable in these uniforms.
 We are qualified for this not that.
 Someday the compulsory beads
 of a warm winter will impede only our memory.
 The birds will come back, making the same mistake
 twice. I spoil us with such predictions.

Like blaming waves on the sea,
 the vanishing point on distance from the cliffs
 eyes aspire to—we've been descending all along,
 as petulant angels in the throes
 of savory knowledge. Picking up on things,
 we eavesdrop on gravity. We like what we hear.

Obstacles

Neon taverns point out
the scuttling beach—you say,

"The structure collapses.
I argue which colors suit
its paling pallor. How best
to meet the needs
of huddled hunger
broadcast?"

Sand does not blow
over our bottle of all-right
Merlot, curls around
it like suppliant fingers. That star

collapses, and in the bay
uniformed men slip a crane's hook
under the canvas coat
of a drowned man. You uncork
and up pops grape smoke
while he emerges
still clutching a can.

A bottle would have slipped out.

I say, "There's no better way
to reach the masses. The waves lap
lovingly, like you, sweet sanguine
sissy sauce," because I can

bear this no longer,
this not unbuttoning you.

In the Showering Quarters

They can't get enough of my skin.
 The air buzzes with steam. Calcified handprints
 mime hymns up and down the walls.
 The concierge holds a mirror between my legs.
 He drops it. The handle flows toward the drain,
 shards collect under my arches. I keep still.
 The soap in my mouth tastes like potpourri.
 It tastes differently in my eyes. The concierge

fills in for the doctor, who has steadier hands,
 which are missed. The alderman
 plucks my nape hairs like obstructive weeds,
 wipes their roots with a chamois.
 Someone without gloves loves his work,
 so I wince a complaint. A gratuitous veto gurgles
 through the intercom. It sounds like a command
 or a prayer. I nearly mistake my feet for a pew.

Clothes lie heaped on a cart in the corner. It wheels
 toward me but they push it back. I have never worn them.

I have been outside, where water spits from cliffs
 and carves and slopes. Inside water ends in the center,
 which could be the intercom. Sponges disappear
 from their hooks in the ceiling; the room whitens.
 I will appear before the panel. I am a committee.
 What's scrubbed off me they snare with a filter
 and send to pill makers.

The pressure hits so hard it itches.
 What drains of me rusts their pipes. I leak into their dirt,
 mutate their crops. They dab my torso with droppers.
 Eyes blinking at me through blue wetsuits—
 like performing for a human curtain.

Soon Spring Walk Song

—that dew-lacquered expanse of wheat field
 is a telephone pole, I muse,
 during a self-lecture on the probability
 of terrestrial black holes: socks, tribes, and planes
 with a dollop of eternity and sprinkled bobby-pins
 to not show for it. I can wait for the pleasure principle
 to clot before nerve endings. What's with the sky's
 gossamer concavity today? Dishing impromptu rote
 back to base as aluminum foil hyphens sunlight

or the closest thing to it. I have spared an insect
 between the slits of a frictional shoe-bottom. Winged,
 it might be an ant. Enemies are never captured
 twice; torture makes them sing by stacking drips
 on their shoulders. The election, though deemed a bust,
 erupts the best party since the siege of quadrupeds;
 that man in a starchy smock delivers
 some barbed wire glovelessly. Headlines roll
 from their billboarded bodies. Someone is delegated

carnival spokesperson while I duck beneath a cellular
 call hauling Hermes' extravagant signing bonus.
 Someone was here first. A woman on the park bench wears
 a thickish gray coat opened exposing checkered
 lining and a thin shirt. She sure is something else
 I wasn't looking for. This puddle suggests a switch from vice
 to versa, like television with vision.
 I'd better replace the old watch in my battery—I repeat:
 day takes heaven's microscope down with it.
 The river stirs controversy into lime-brown light.

Something's conducted here. Grass must leave
 its halfway house for green to compete
 with the peripheral civic neon. Men dressed as crossing
 guards demand to know why the hurry,
 reasons for nervous twitching, maiden names.
 They must finish before night hot-wires its dome
 closed. They will gather hoarsely around a bonfire.

Informer Season

Warning signs, their subliminal enticings!
 Licenses issued without background checks—
 children with black facial stubble
 leap from the backs of pickup trucks,
 spilling into backyards, into forests,
 sniffing for the difference

between scent and went. They'll never find me;
 I'm on to their fluted mating calls,
 their aerosol sex sprays.
 I divide behind my neighbor's blinds.
 He pulls in, not knowing which section
 he should fire at. Before he knows it

I'm displaying for him wire spools
 from my sample bag. My pants look good
 on his family. I'd make a suitable mantelpiece
 in the atrium. He offers me solace in the Attic of Mirrors.
 I glaze him with tar and seep into nightfall.

I'm so safe here. I'm so pale the guards mistake me
 for fingerprint dust. Palaver or the creaking scaffolding
 drowns out my whistling. What sounds better than a siren?
 I'm so pale the guards mistake me.

Better to think of the ethics involved. A glass house.
 Blueprints inside: city to become bridge. The British aren't coming.
 My horse cries like a breaking vehicle.
 I could use a horse. I'd feed it these cumbersome clipboards.
 I will feed it these clips—a getaway car

never whinnied so vapidly. The city knows what I tell it,
 nodding anyway.

Utilities Included

It is early enough for the toothbrush
to crumble my eyes open.
Before I reach my ears or close
the mirror's door someone solicits
barbiturates and shaving foam.

I am trying things on. I am trying
to discern the paint-chipped debris
piled on the windowsill: something
got in or out. The alarm clock
crawls beneath my sheets. I can barely
hear the weather.

Something lives in the walls.
I consider a neckerchief, twirl
it about my torso—I grow hair
and humps, plates and spines.
Surely I can't leave like this.

The peephole saves me.
The peephole shows me
officials wielding documents to die for
stamping. I jab at them, chain latched,
with a broomstick.
I pour coffee under the door.

Something eats the walls.
I operate the network of steam pipes
which heats this joint. It pleases me
turning it up too high.
I bark heartily at complaints.
The toilet is haunted;
I flush it throughout the day.

Toe nails and poster gum align
against me. I arm myself
with potting soil and dish rags.
Can I count on the spider I didn't kill
last week? Count on the cheese grater?
Maybe I should pound the walls.
Maybe I should paint them.

The Man Who Pours Paint

pulls out a cigarette, doesn't light it.
 You never know with these fumes. Making something real
 means hurting it, so he dumps the contents
 into each crevice of my bedroom. Not exactly
 each: you see at times he'll miss a section
 inadvertently. I plead he spare my desk, at least the curtains.
 I take satisfaction in an unblemished inch
 of phone cord. He gets quicker. Sloppier

He reaches for the lighter perceptibly blue
 through his white front pocket. He reconsiders.
 Has a hard time remembering what's acceptable, who's
 currently defining it. A brush a luxury
 he no longer affords. His tired breathing interrupts
 with an effort to stifle a sneeze. He succeeds
 but looks at me with irritation. My fingers cover a spot
 on the door frame crucial to his task's completion.

How else can I observe his work? I need something
 to hold. It's in my best interest
 to leave altogether, he assures, and what I don't know
 will merely numb me. Compromising, he allows
 my head to jut just past the doorway's plane.
 I chuckle in feigned agreement
 that this is the best, and mind you, only, seat in the house.

He won't tell me about his family.
 This information is superfluous. A beam of light squeezes
 through a section of window he's missed. It illuminates
 his briskly passing shoe, the shoelace,
 the paint bespeckled tongue. He rarely reveals himself
 in the light, instead angles his broad frame away
 to prevent further perspiration. I cannot blame him for this.

The less I watch what he pours paint on, the less he pours.
 He did not shave today. He works but gains weight,

wonders who it is, exactly, he's working for.

Trusting Pills

I have great ambition to be many more selves.
This room alone accommodates one-third of these people
not possessing a thing fixed: butter for the palimpsest
of bread, garbage can sprouting plastic. Out back
the front door draws creatures with orbiting hair and hipbones.
They prove I *can* be bothered. It wasn't them
cutting my supply. My ramparts are deteriorating
my bulwarks for something better, for my needing it now
and most certainly for no neighbors to see. What became
of the camera crew and the scrambling press? Leapt from corners
of the room like a good intention's stillborn spirit.
I hold the notebooks, the papier-mâché stage's blueprints,
the plans for this year's witch hunt and ensuing conventicle.
I am extraordinarily pleased at all outcomes: what's important
lies beneath soil, the space it leaves practical for its wrappers.
There's no need for chickens in my garden of eggs.
There's no need for Atlantis, even the Bermuda Triangle, amidst
this dazzling array of lichening drains. Most clearly I recall
a seagull pecking tin foil it mistook for a beach, followed by
thumb-print signatures thudding virtual promotions. Twenty
years later my consultants are hiring consultants that forget
my favorite color. Far be it from me
to propose the removal of intents and purposes, starting
with caffeine huddled gray in my retinae the blur unbearable
mornings. Something for everything should skin stay lissome.
What of scrambling crews, pressing cameras? When that sky swallows
there's no lump to show for it.

A Rain Lesson

Achy knees, arthritic hands
and little instruments

predicted this rain
hours ago: the sky

once a concave otherworld
is having a tempest tantrum.

The you not aforementioned
evacuates like ill-prepared

pedestrians. Erosion
sounds somewhat sexy.

Eggs before this day,
cooked dead enough

to eat, stink fabrics fit
for indoors. The candle's

lit wick combats its wax
confines; even the faintest

flicker at corners of eyes
draws spontaneous ooh-aahs

beyond rain's noisome reason.

It is time to embrace memory
sluicing into song:

every storm begins, ends
with the catchy beat

on window and roof, thunderous
chorus, stunning

electricity! It is time to suck
those sodden leaves,

to eavesdrop on valley and creek
and fix ourselves a sewer

He Said to the Blank Sheet of Paper

Who calls this freedom?
Rigid, four-cornered slate
advertising pliability,
lonely, inviolate template.

I stare through a tree, a thin
cloud waning into blue
because thought usurps the eye.
I want a happy ending.

So I decorate the dendritic tree
with one lush stroke.
I dismiss the human capacity
to wring another dry

because the sky is flimsy limit;
but I cannot read the sky's bubbled script,
or decode its will to sustain.
I am biting the air that breathes me.

I want a happy ending, just once,
in which my penitent protagonist
escapes a past, earns a future—
epiphanies, from this tree, hang heavy.

I am scratching your lamina.
I should leave you in purgatorial
bliss, between a tree and a poem,
adrift in your unblooming white.