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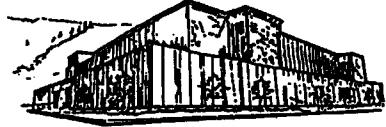
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Idiot's Rope

poems


Nathan Gaeddert Bartel

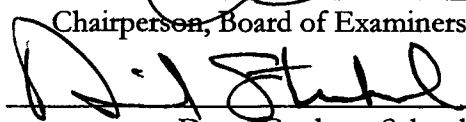
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*...there did storms not mingle? and
Hailropes bustle and grind their
Heavengravel? wolfsnow, worlds of it, wind there?*
—HOPKINS, “THE LOSS OF THE EURYDICE”

THE INSTRUMENT

Also you were blinded by lightning striking the tree you hid beneath.
Your feet seared to the earth, I mean, to the small rock you crouched upon,

which makes you the conductor. Like copper you are, like a shallow bowl
with all the apostles above you. When scrubbed you shine. When filled

you are prismatic. You are always sexual, though crows stole your tongue.
When sexual you are like a root unearthed—you bleed from your gums.

Everyone offers their softest handkerchiefs; one moistens you with oils.
Even now a pure sound pours from the instrument, though you cannot hear it.

SEA THEORY

Even as a child, I lived in an interior world.

I moved back & forth, a tide.

Nothing could not crush me. I lived in an interior world
& each actual hour dissolved like gray clay

in the rain. Was a page, dissipating, beige.

...

Breakers thumped across the slate face of the cliff.

A tide pool dimmed before me. It was like smoking glass.

I knew nothing of smoking glass.

I stuck my finger in, and was prickled. Anemone's arms were
soft as jelly, gruff as a cone.

I pulled away.

...

Later, I learned the topography of certain women.

I asked one for my red hat back. I asked one to dance. I learned
like a child thrown in the water. I learned that fast.

...

A whole world spread before me. It seemed authored.

Storms rose and missed. Plump grain on the stalk, grain
pummeled, hail-grazed, grain rotting in the dirty pool.

I lay down beside her and tried saying exactly what I saw.

Embryonic fingers domed down from the cloud;
a slight wind moved. Scent of the grass, waiting.

Are you listening?

What was I?

Sloped like sand. The absence of a shell.

...

What wonder came was muted.

I could recognize the essential parallels between the prairie
and the sea. Specifically, the waves.

Specifically, the sense of unending space.

How far the neighbors are. How they are
away.

...

A choir opens its throat: I hear it. God is never more evident
than in two natural incidents: splash, crease of the wave.

A house of bright cloud, moving like a personal history of loss.

By which I mean, God has a standard weight.

He has an unerring sense of direction.

When I am most lonely, it bears down.

The granite boot upon me.

No: like water rushing the sunken hull.

...

My chest: if it is a house, it is a house wasting its foundation.

Poor architect, where is my weight-bearing wall?

He is too busy with his plans.

He is making a map of the ocean, its mad whitecaps, its drifting
monoliths and thick shoals of red-orange algae.

He is drawing and redrawing,

leaving everything in.

FIELD DAY

Our rural school glazed with ice.
Lustral. Astral. Our rural school
gleaming at noon, dusk glinting, night
winter night moonless astral bright
across the field bright across.
We make cold, blue rockets.
Vipers sleep beside the frozen lake,
black zag on brown scale on tan scale
torpor under the pack, viper's
dream ankle makes a tender ankle
bare itself before the lake.
The field is thick with dozy snakes.
On the second day we set upon the roof,
skating in thin shoes,
quickenened by ice so bright
we cannot signal our emergency.

RUINATION

One minute passed. Then we were torn
away by the appearance of a truck. Some went

to the phones; we grabbed the kit
with masks & antibacterial cream.

He looked part of the landscape when
reached; he could have been

a commemorative bench. But what
could we do? We petitioned

angels, but they all had
golden wheels. They turned pegs on golden boxes

strewn about the city, fingering delicate instruments
that did nothing. Could you please save John?

He's vomiting peanut butter into our mouths.
He's listening to the fungal song, *be cool, be still,*

ready for a movie in which
we with our moist-soil looks lift

our dear friend by the shoulders.
—Freshest tears, revive him.—

Our *no*

read as *go*, as in *go on*, his lower lip
acted as rostrum & out came

the soul passing through
into "ether." We imagined his translucence

walking in a given direction. *West*, prayed, *west*.
But one worked a loom to weave scarves

for the mountain & one kept watch over
seasonal pools in an indigenous desert.

From the drying mud broke toads.
We wanted the puncturing device,

we wanted a breathing needle for our friend, ten
minutes back from the haphazard tapestry,

mouths-up to the sky
we were spattered to the ears with him.

They simply didn't mention the endless spring—
the gold head insisting the bull head

press sustain pedals past the indicated rest.

FROGSONG

Your skin feels moved against.
Would it were me but these trees

sick with chlorophyll, these darkened
color-bursts tucked away against

light's foliage belching succor out.
As if bound here by vines I flex

in the manner of rising. Is that a lily
twitching, unfamiliar? Which of you

wisterias holds me here? Which
powder-foot magnolia? Emerge through

drapes of night, from some deep green
sex-forged floral musk &

a touch, effervescent,
streams. It eddies about our feet,

cuddling muscular depressions.
It pools along the necklace line,

but I feel mouthed
in place, cannot even

recall what I
desire. Is it a hem? String

trailing from a stitch?
How long have I watched boozy

night crowd me in, sometimes
emitting a bat razoring the ambience

for moths? Now you feel night
turn. That little stilling. That cool.

CREEPING FIG

Courts me to the dark garden, the three-fold
anticipation of fireworks: bright line knit by a node

of light, spangle-plash, wait, & then. & then

the percussive. *Pahk*. In this night's
ink-bottle I've been staring through for hours
brightens the shuttered house,

built about a center, court
palming the void like an invasive,

beautiful fig.
Through florid inner walls for some hours sun ruddied

by ambient dust blazed until it dropped.
Lamps brighten the under-canopy,

harvest green, & I wish they would fall.
For they mar & mirror our intentions. & I wish

they would stay. Shoulder me still. We own the estate,

open its several storied doors to the unswept tile.
Dark, now lanterns

scoop the dark away. We too grip
our air columns.

& we are
thieves of light. Beneath the pathlit elm arcade

we spin our dream state & fibrous dream jar.

The door opens. A spidering
like a blessing calls me in.

THE INTERIOR

On the fog-shrouded cruise ship
the band kept playing. They moved from deck

to deck. Wives danced with embarrassing men.
Wives danced with blind uncles

draped in a cloud, lamp-bright.
The ship was big enough to forget it was a ship.

It was a village earth moved to.

Past the buffet littered with slick buttered shells
musicians stumbled & found their stale

captain slumped over his electric guitar.
Wives danced with shiny corpses. When the screws

cut, wives danced with the idea
of light. At dawn wrapped in a cloud-skiff the last

collapsed to the parquet floor.

The ship was quiet enough to forget it was a ship.

It was a softening shoal.
It was a slightly shimmering heap.

THE INTERIOR

An ether wall, a terminus of blue,
& beyond it, boundlessness.

Currents. Of course it's cold. Below
was, what? Benthic floor, house

of floes, bright polar architecture;
equine. Horse moves aching,

slow through the silt, each eye well-
wet and *so thirsty*. Thirst like what?

Jelly's thirst. (There is no bread.)
Ghost's thirst for an intensely

personal peace. Cellar's thirst for
emergence. A house of air.

THE INTERIOR

About that continent: I meant
to escape it. Down
the gangplank across the black
sand beach the interior &
its descending escalators
whir like an early engine.

I'm like Cortez before the jungle.
No, I'm as jungle, viney.
My sister's caught the jaguar's flu,
she can't shake the constant
nocturnal pacing around
& around the gnarly isthmus.

We said we'd take the inland
& we took it. Now how
do we fence the declinations,
the drainage ditch? I brush
the carnivorous plant &
bird bones fall right out of it.

AUDUBON

& half-submerged in the flooding
ditch can be caught by the wet tip

of a brush hovering. Birds before
the deckled border of the storm:

cinnamon teal & prairie hawk,
gulls & pulsing shoals of grackle

mimicking the cloud's roiling selvage,
hushed mobs of crows, mourning

doves diving toward a walnut grove
in simple pairs as rain

breaks, this gobbet of pigeons
on the gabled sill, picking nits

from their breast feathers.
The immediate world shakes.

Easy to paint the eye of a bird: only gray
brilliance in the stuttering light.

Under the severe skirt of rain
a blue that wells up blackly.

THICKET

Found bleating in the bush I cried out.

Something demanded a little sip from me & heads
lifted asked for the wound.

Then storms pattered on across the plain &
oxen stopped their honking.

O how speed could be my character.
How I begged them to *slow down*.

This before the festival, without blood

lathering the limens when we slaughtered
something very young & bleating

skipping across the pen, lolling tongue unrolling as it skipped,

& I was immediately without my cane & walked

with an electric stagger.
Like a mossy boulder turned, slowly,

my green future clinging.

GENERATOR

Moving around the cold house
or beneath the cold, colorless
blankets. Moving,

make piles of debris. Shake ice
from the branch—limbs barricade
the highway, black & icy, both ways.

The honeysuckle split
in rough thirds. The live oak,
bent, exhausted does not give.
Plumes of smoke rise against

the brightening. Prime the generator,
stoke the stove. There's much
to shoulder, burl & branch,

much to carry & to sever
from the trunk. By the ornamental
cherry watching through
the strange lenses ice

jacketing rotting stubborn fruits:
a gust of wind, carrying
afternoon with its dark corridors,

gray less gray then deepening by degrees,
by increments nudging toward ash,
elementary. This is easy as school:
a downed limb scatters twigs across

the duff & moving them is no matter,
keep moving, clear
the yard, & half of destruction

is taking it in, branch after branch
until grief negotiates through gaping pockets.
Where is my Kansas? Where are my coy
Flint Hills? Cottonwood

dividing—drowsing amongst
smaller brush the downed power line
hums—there is no way around—

ice lays the creek grass low, bottoms
caught mid-ripple, bowed vegetation
in tufts, nameless, damaged, finches
lighting quickly on the opposite

bank. Thick as ice is, cannot pass;
& water comes, my mallet-blow,
gluttony comes: birds

swallowing with their whole bodies.

THE ICE-STORM

That morning each alder
& cedar branch & anonymous

leaf sheathed, trembling in
the window well. One cedar

split in equal halves, a fibrous mouth
asked Why have I been sundered

& kept asking all day. Without prairie fire
the county becomes vast cedar forest,

solitary foxes gliding from
the skirt of one tree & back

under, each small icicle
projecting the figure over

& again. No one wants to live
in a cedar forest. Cedars poison

the ground, the fragrance intoxicates
so no one wants to work,

everyone crawls under the spreading
ground-cover of a large cedar bough

& wishes for death under the cedar
wreathed in slow-growing icicles.

In sopping cold, everyone has a wish
for dying— my father for a boat

at sea, my mother to go before us.
A grove of cedars splintered, bent—

they wear shawls of ice,
they cover unbroken ground & find

their vanishing point not along
the edge of the cemetery plot where

a family gathers for a burial. The car
skids, breaks a weather-worn stone,

name a dent in rock among other,
smoother dents. My mother is there.

THE DESTROYER

Something hungry tailed me,
directionless, as I came home that evening,

the elementary school collapsing,
little chair spinning down the street.

Men drove dusty trucks, wearing
shirts that said, 'GOD BROUGHT HIS HAMMER.

NOW WE WILL BRING OURS.' I tried several times
to describe the way a storm

builds quietly through the afternoon.
I said: light leadens the prairie. &: finch finds her nest.

Everything breathes in. Mike says they pay
two hundred dollars for video of storms like that.

We reproduce the black cloud rising
from the sea using a shoebox, magic markers,

school glue, cotton balls, & a packet
of matches. It is at this point architecture fails us:

for what is a house but a metaphor for the thunderhead's
sweeping eaves? When you gestured frantically

from the window, didn't I come in?

KIN

Dilate

As a clay hardened. As in day's
cold kiln the dark glaze set. Dull as a ditch, gun

barrel. Dull as sulfur. Pyrocumulus clouds
bloomed and sputtered over the smoking of slope.

That silo burned slow. That house burned. Can you imagine
a day too cold to draw water. Can you put

that fire out. Can kin. A black ice, a black asphalt,
runtish white-blue sun. You

smothered ghosts under wool blankets.
Now you know what a glass heart looks like.

Kindle

Cold oven. Dough for the baking, dough's slow
rise in the porcelain bowl, dough wants a heat.

Give it a heat. Have you seen the table's dull sheen.
How it wants a plate on it. Cats nose an icy pail.

Cats want a melting. Can you make a melting,
can you flint. Can. Cherries demand it.

Stove a bushel and cellar them. Can you.
Well, have a match. Well, have an asking.

Navigation

Where the scent of last night's litter
easing from the bin. Where the radio exactly

in their apartment. Where clock, train's horn.
Warmth of the illumined floor. Shelf on the right,

desk left. Tips of the fingers against
the wall's abrasions. This is certain. A song skitters

down from the ceiling. Aural topographies
laid, overlaid: neighbors padding

from the common room to the kitchen. Water
hushing through the pipes. Accoutrements

of inhabited rooms: oaken chair,
oaken footstool, standing mirror.

They move unaided through the muzzy
twilit hours. Those on hind legs make way.

Consumption

Musk of syrupy spittle and the derelict
cluck of keys. Diced fruit softens on the spoon.

A glistening courslet of phlegm muddles down.
All this radiates a vacancy. Sometimes a chair

is demanded and she gives it.
Sometimes she is offered a cup of pulpy fruit.

Sometimes after the meal's saccharine flood
she sings a little. O but

the rattling of cups. But the slipped hip,
the mouth's lacquered trough. It smells muscly sweet.

Catatonia

Accomplished by prostrating her on a table
(running a thumb up her comb)

Approached
(from the left she would not move)

From the right her dark eyes
(lacking fire and wet)

Approached directly a little hum
clucked up from her. Song without meter.

Her last animal breath, magpies
slung deep in sweetbreads,

siding as grease easing from the house.
Beneath that rotting cottonwood drowsed

the rabbit. Hawk watched, still as a burl.
Then, like a righteous hand, it dropped.

Resin

Kind shell, resonant, resinous.
It holds a sound when struck.

As pearly nautilus: an animal
builds it, leaves it;

unjuiced, chamber to chamber;
where are you going sweet generative

jelly? Why, to build a house & leave,
brave move. Brave animal, you are not

staying, you are a one for leaving.
As a shell it is a good shell, caressable.

Bound

What do you know of indigo lace. Small sun dollop
sun crowding its heat. The tenebrous books

hum. What do you know of books, pages
unstuck. Like cat's cradle, ruddy pulse,

finger caught in the string's hoop, finger loosed, finger trembling
in charged air. What do you know of loneliness, the string's

absence. Mouth after the last
parlor tricks, ribbon pulled from the lips.

Was it a dull vein blue. Or black as printer's ink, wet
with spit. What bound it there. Did it belong there at all.

Sever

Two kinds of twine, sisal
& jute. One holds

a lid shut. One
twitters, brittle,

when lit. One is
idiot's rope,

thoughtful, this is
a rope for re-

membering. Find
that. With a firm

grip on it drought
seems on the other

end. A dry spool
seems on the other

end & pooling
back. One who twines

it twines, dries on
a dowel, dyed, one

who twines bends, one
who bends bends &

bends & bends
& bends & ends it.

Call

Threaded thus: from telephone
to phone, & sons rose from their chairs.

Daughters rose from their chairs.
A pew is as good as a chair for sitting. A hymn

is as good as a fire for rising. Stand
as you sing. You may be seated.

You may be carried, if you call
your sons by name. If you can

call them. If you can say.

COFFIN-PULLER'S SONG

I keep digging vaults. I
sign petitions. All these feather pens. Parchment.
The dead wrestling the dead. The stairs

lead to more stairs; the poorly hidden secret chamber

& its one idiot monster; his cracked & bleeding lips.

Say the air is delicious & it is. These plate tectonics,
this burlap sack, kittens in their wet Republic—

you remember the sack? Was mouth to feed?
Askance, ash in the jar? Flag? Keep geodes

as they are, unsplit. Better to imagine

the interior: oaken chair, sound it makes
across the hospital floor. Though this is

the pediatric ward there are no mothers here,
unless by “motherhood” you mean

the immanent collapse of earth upon our heads.

I keep begging for more railroad ties, support
beams. The way wood sings across the rock

you'd think the lullaby was just beginning.

MINNEAPOLIS

We are all friends. We make a video featuring
floating instruments. See how we cling to fret boards
& kits & keep playing despite being suspended perilously
above the stage? You need strong arms to do something
like that. My arms are small & hang like wings,

featherless at my side. Disappointing.
If I had those great speckled feathers I'd migrate
straight to Minneapolis & meet your friends.
But I can't play guitar through all this
plumage. I asked the Carolina wren & she told me it takes

strength to fly that far, & why would I want to leave
the valley anyway? I have friends here who make
beautiful songs. There's a playground down the block
with rings for practicing my iron cross. A boy approaches me
& asks what I'm doing. I say I'm trying to fly

to Minneapolis & he says: she'll meet you
halfway. Since then I've been orienteering, figuring
rest points, the length of the last landing strip. Maps
cuddle in their tubes. On my instruments, as upon all
the furniture in this house, dander gathers in a pretty sheen.

SUPERMAGNETISM

All the geese squat on the spring field
carpeted with new wheat like ropey stones
around this concert festival. Up
to the axles in mud when other celebrants
begin rocking against the bumper, because that's

what people do in the spirit of music.
Dark dirt showers down. The sun's jelling down.
Geese are bedding down. It's spring, streamer time.
You shake the hands of your helpers & give each
a warm drink. From the dusk-soaked farmland

young people are retreating, they eat
their suppers & go back to dreaming about college—
everyone with a hunger for each other. At the break
you start back. The roar of the bright continent
calls us past these momentary islands toward

the sugar metropolis. A couch of cinnamon oil.
The marooned make pink fans of plumage
& never leave. One calls from the trees.
One eats your seeds. Making a home in the lilac
one begs your attention. Charged poles skewer

you down. Twilight wind ripples a strawberry sack.
Empty. They were delicious on cake with the blue milk
& the cloud & sirens testing the sweet & distant city.
Coins jingle for us. Foil shimmers in the last light
of this day—someone's made good on a promise.

We must always be careful. Songs pulse
like sweating temples, pulled by a darkness titanic,
migratory shadows coursing across the dirty pool.

HOOF & MOUTH

Walking up the Christ Church gardens
in late March, sodden earth held
unidentifiable richness: the Thames,

plumped by late spring rains,
ran past its banks; grass beamed, thick
with dew in the late light; & beneath

the skirts of anonymous trees daffodils
rocketed from the rusty duff,
as if these random fists of color

were a spontaneous cry, an exclamation
following the slow abundance of light
that crept across the red deer

paddock, & you can hear the boy's choir practicing
for mass, organ's low groan approaching
like a tide, ships hush at harbor, cargo in their holds.

...

Those fields haze when I try to recall them.
I think a river started there.
I know whole boats of boys fresh from exams

would punt slowly down, boozy, exuberant. &
a sign warning us away, the tubs of disinfectant wash,
a horse, a ragged herd, heads bent and occasionally grazing,

walking slowly through the sickening gray shoals
of smoke that rose from stinking cull-pits,
sheep and cow carcasses smoldering in a heap.

& here comes a yellow dozer through
the cloud, to plow their bodies under.

...

A particular church plot, stabbed
through the hard-gushing center of the city,
greened up early in spring, bright grass

bursting between rows of mossy
basalt gravemarkers, ancient, names
dulled & drifting into a diminishing stone

ocean. *Behold, all flesh is as the grass.*

...

That was how music was: a burrow made, a nesting.
My grandmother, hollowed by Alzheimer's & another lack,
nameless—a mirror in an empty room—loved

her hymns; with her we sang
carols around the nursing home's poorly tuned
piano. A sound drifted

through the lobby after the song was done,
a pitch & rhythm recognized, radio in
a distant room or children practicing a song

in the church basement after services: my grandmother,
who could not speak nor remember the names
of her sons, was singing "Silent Night."

Watched in the darkened room
as she took her last breath, rattling,
without a sense of pitch. So she was

a space for air to want. The hush
of her blood puddling, cloth
brushing against the cool wood of a pew.

GIVEN

Given I kicked the wheel, set the wheel rolling.

Given: I'm all elbows, dented plough-blade, hunger.

Given; but what can I help?

Given grace.

Given my father,

given my mother, they are talking, they are talking finally in
the hushed way two people with beautiful secrets talk,

given they don't speak of the herd, seed.

Given, we can enjoy this roasted chicken & this bread.

Given the smell of baking & flour simmering in the fat,

given how smells tendrils is nothing like ivy, nothing so green,
effervescent,

given that, what, then, snakes so.

Get up. It is time for a meal. So I said, Yes.

Given you never collected the way mother collected. & she
collected;

given that she did, she collected string ends & selvage &
every bauble she was given;

given that, you were different & I loved you differently. I
loved you presently.

Given poor grain poor rain poor rudimentary tools, I am
sorry, I could not provide.

Given that I waited.

Given: the allotted time. These thirty days.

Given it could never be enough—I will push past this.

Given: everyone goes home with a piece of them missing.

Given, I am.

Given, this arrangement.

Given I would return & not even leave my house, not even
for an absolving. For who amongst you can act as
solvent? Who is ready to try?

Given: you can try.

Given, you can expect a sack of nettles for your work. I
would have

given them all. I was eager. Ask those untilled, weed-choked
fields. Very green then brown. Ask them. Ask what I
have,

you drought. What have I?

These thirty days. These long hours on my sleeping-mat, I
was anxious but I asked. I was

given a thin strip of ground, untenable stones.

Given a thin strip of ground, what now?

What would you have me do?

THE 8

That I might fall in,
eyes bleary, tracking down
pepper &
the spicy sauce by the window
the window paint allowed
space through the 8 to see
in the reflection
of another window ourselves reflected
back in the other window &
in the frame of the 8 on this.
He has a veggie slice. He has a veggie slice.
I have a meat slice without peppers.
In the glass holes
of the 8 she speaks clearly over
some dough with another girl,
unfamiliar tongue,
unfamiliar to me, perhaps planning to go
to a club, smoke grass in the alley
behind, enticing others with an
onyx stare & then walking, simply,
through the crowd spattered by prismatic lasers
& away into the wet night. Am I there?

Framed by blurred periphery
taking from a cold saltwater
pot on a dock crowded by junks
busied by men in dirty yellow gloves—
& everywhere skittered rising steam, belching
from ship stacks & hot water pots
boiling some dough for a meal—
water for wash—the small octopus
& having it pickled
in a jar in the old city district,
all along the backlit shelves jars
of pickled roots & seahorses pickling
in vinegar—what here battles
impotence?—cancer?—
ground to dust?—on the plane ride dusk
light angles through the green
liquid, casts a tangled shadow through the 8
arms, sputtering
yellowish green dimming in
& out, passing cumulonimbus
clouds bunching along the horizon
behind—sunbright to sun of orange, progressively—& returning

kept on the sill between the bean jar
& a flowering pink geranium plant, light
squeezed by ropey arms splays across the mica-flecked
counter
until I remove it, lay it
on the cutting board & slicing
arms from the pod-body—suddenly remembering
news of a new species, flaring the 8 arms
out in the attitude of a lion fish.
I do not believe in its magical properties.
I deny aphrodisia.
& I am hungry.

Embarrassed when my mother calls to say
she saw gulls gagging on a squid carcass &
thought of me, drinking
beer on the pool lip
—sun rising
—sun pinking the blue,
watching a tanned ancient man shirtless bend down amongst
black volcanic shore rocks to strike water, lifting an octiform
shadow into a bag made of knotted rope sees me seeing
him work. Embarrassed as he approaches,
 (hiding the bottle between damp towels)
works slowly up
the beach, bending & bringing them up,
putting them in his netted bag, swatting at gulls with
the impaling hook.
He comes to the villa's pink stucco wall & leans
over, throwing one arm over (there is his gaff, slick
with viscera)
& his other arm over, holding the dripping bag.
He asks, do I want *pulpo?* shifting
from the sopped writhing bag to his gappy
mouth rotting out to his
gleaming hook I feel the flush of this
rouging. I feel this.

The new species imitating
an urchin. Coloring away from its leopard
spots becomes a pink coral, bit
of the reef. A shark & it binds
itself in an impenetrable ball.
At the aquarium watching
crabs snow
down from the surface, & the octopus
& urchins eating them. Constriction, brought
to the razor-beak. & now
we're encouraged to put our fingers in for them
to cuddle, with their suckers?
Even my sister doing it? (Tentacles
around her thumb, pinking)
It vomits the crab
shell & biramous claws out. Now I'm running past blind
hagfish spinning knots in a dark, pressurized tank.

Desire, when she slithers through the next song?
When she mimics me with her hands, one
driving O then another? When our eyes
meet, briefly, in the mirror?
—remembering a movie about a submarine, &
the sailor tumbling from the hatch after battling the kracken,
didn't he look dead,
skin purpling where the monster held him
down?

He looked ravished.

She leans to my ear
to say "Happy birthday." Today's my birthday.
Susses the limits of my
desire, when she puts a sharp heel to my chest
& pushes me in my chair over.

I am always embarrassing myself.
Though she is exquisite. What did I want?
A soda—a minute to ask,
Who is playing on your tinny radio?—
framed by the glass hole.
A frame, asphyxiator,

so I run hot water over
the lid & finally the seal
breaks. Through the mouth
a dead eye,
black. Wants: nothing.

(anymore) I find this flesh reeks
of the brine of its origin place—remember
the trips, tastes developed for the raw?—
each arm curled on the white plate,
this means through which I meet
someone who doesn't hunger, doesn't share.

THE CARRIER

Gone

the broken cloak room, filled
with paintings—repair the hooks
& the rungs—& the coats
in the living room where once we
sat with an ailing girl, & then
a gathering in the kitchen, dishes
stacked in our clawfoot tub, garden hose,
bathing in the back the roses leaning
thirsty toward the neighbor's field.
& our family, & our rosebush is...
where by now?

& gone are

writings of the poet on the cave wall
& the tavern wall & the wall of the mill.
Can we be glad again? Can we never
again watch red-faced children
cup pool water in their rosy hands?
Droplets bright in the downy hair. Talking
about getting a little bag & bottle. & the days
of moving without the aid of sparkling wheels
past a hot pool busy with little bodies
are...*where* by now? Those kids—

...try imagining a life without.

Tiny birds soaked in oxidized colors picking
bugs from the dike mound. A bird in the brown
debris you take a picture of decays next
to a candy bar wrapper. Decays next
to a decaying fish body, bloated with air.
We're walking past the carrier.
She makes drinking water from ocean water.
Astounding. Roaring water shoulders propellers
buried in the hull, coils, someone measures power,
power whizzing in the hospital,

a filament glows in this glassy rind
& professionals begin their rounds,
wading bathers through the hum
of an advanced imaging system warming
up, infants bald in their incubators, & they
may be bald again, back in the hands of.
They doddered through their newness
once—they are doddering again.
Too soon. Men cut breathing tubes
especially for them. Returned
to the house sieved by miles of water.

DIVING BELL

Ocean within this ocean,
a shallow alkaline lake anchoring

the sea, heaven for those lost
in heaven's accidents. We find

one tattered fish. We hook,
half-finned, adapt

to new ecosystems independent
of light, white crab

snipping morsels from the vent-worm,
blind, up the continental slope

blind fish tear ragged chunks
from a decaying whale. We change,

slightly, the volume of the sea,
developing a system of weights

& measures, a system for ballast,
systems for welding underwater.

A nutritional snow drifts casually down
from diurnal zones & is lost.

We lose earthwork in the waves.

WILL & TESTAMENT

I ask for two things:
darken the plot; make way
for my parents. For my sister.

I am asking for three things:
darken the plot; make way
for my parents & my sister

approaching through the twilight.
The fourth thing is to wait
until dusk, when migrating birds

make beds between the frosty
clods in the field. So it must
be autumn. The fifth thing

is autumn & the hush of snow
across. So it should be winter.
The sixth thing is street lamp

caked with ice. Birds.
It has to do with my sister.

A HERD OF WILD HORSES

A herd of wild horses moves from field to field
like a piece of paper drifting from the bus
window. The child that threw it knows
the wide-ruled sheet is not a symbol
of liberation but another layer
of skin he must slough to reveal the animal
he actually is: a bird with a horse's head, &
a feline tail sharp as flint. He breathes ice
upon the land & airborne watches earthbound
creatures skate helplessly downhill toward
the turgid factory districts of Kansas City, &
unmoored the swallows stopping their cursive
for two seconds, resting on the fence line,
sling away.

...

Paper wasp, your little mandibles working
with less & less ferocity, I cannot hear
your last words. I would say for you a quiet prayer
I know, a mass for the animals, but
blood is rushing to greet your poisons.
My tongue, purpled & swollen, drifts like
a body in the mouth's estuary. My throat closes
its wet curtains. See my grandmother
doddering from her chair to turn the television off.
The vespine curve of my grandmother's
back is beautiful. The click of the dial
like a brooch unclasping.

...

Roots, again & again the roots of growing things: dozing
a little in the wind, moving or not according to their heft;
prairie dusk: I return to the quality of evening light,
its body & its weight, how deep its effervescence: asked
why I could not say: present, spring light, so
tactile, almost inch-thick, it seems to linger
long past setting, moving as weather moves, as the slow
unfurrowing of a child's brow in sleep, feverish with repair.

THE THORNY LOCUST TREE

The kindness of my friend sustains me; he rubs
warmth into my toes, brings a hot roll,
gives bitter drink when I stumble into the tavern,

each evening he's there with his steaming mug.
Dawn breaks dull across the tree. The children grow

bored throwing dirt clods throwing cow shit throwing
pool balls stolen from Father's billiard room—
I could cry out—bundled against the cold

they shuffle off. Dusk: from the woods
come famished wolves, monstrous & sleek, they flicker

through the quiet snowfall & away. Flint-dark
in that deep ambient blue exclusive to twilit snow
packs apparate & vanish, chasing a bleeding

snowy rabbit past its warren & into the forest.
What they said about wounded animals seeking out

certain trees to die—I could cry out. By dusk thorns
sever the cord. I fall & walk to the tavern; I tell
my friend. Offered a bitter drink, I drift off

in my burlap sack & wake in the tree again.
The path below & its inhabitants:

mother quail & her clutch,
the gentleman picking apples, the obnoxious
punking of the wheelbarrow's wheel as it rolls

down the rocky hill. This time it's my friend;
brings a ladle, a water pail. He never brings a ladder.

He never brings a saw. He leaves me
where I fall, here beneath the locust.
From the drift I see my friend retreating.

I see wolf's breath shrugging from his mouth,
gathering snow gracing the root-gnarls & tufts.

IDIOT'S ROPE

Under prairie clouds the burst
of fluid on the tile floor
smells like nothing, like us.
Wet earth: herein lie many
little deaths. Herein the hot
magnesium strips.
What broke inside of me?
Fissured I find the crack & press
until the throbbing stops. The fever
broke; together we found a place
to drink. Rain closed the place,
dark rain rippling in the rain barrel.
Like in Wyeth rain ribboning
down the grassy ditch
in the image of a braid.

ECHO-SONG

Came sifting out as sand, came sluiced out &
shuffled out & slipped. From us. From this house. Granted
 passage went, goodness, went crutched,
went crouched & side-swept, lifted, deaf-
 mute (deaf, mute friends attend you!),
end-frame & flame, guttering, glow-pulse across the lamp, red
 oil, gold oil, device, divining led
to water, all-water, sea-plash & suckle, ocean gauche-gray, ending
 attended, as a grain-husk,
seed, bagged, unbagged, sewn, grown & in the south wind
 gusting, stalk on stalk, the rubbing
wheat red-gold, rust, rustle, bends & against the storm's slate
 more gold, goldening. So
gapped, toned, tectonic, rumble, thunder-seat gaping, claps
 air on air on ear, geared, ground-downing,
whistle-in-the-cattle whistle-in-the-reeds, swallow-roofed, hooting,
 wall batting-bright & darkling,
hail-stone, field stones flung, battered down. & are moved.

THE SUM OF FLIGHT

My mother sleeps, dusk's
peach gray shuffle papering her.
Across the road doze the fields,
fallow. A skiff
of whippoorwills takes rest
in the musky thatch. So many
make their nests there.
I never see a single one sleep.
Feeder, emptied of seed, is busy
with their absence. I tempt
those nappy birds, whisking crusts
into the garden patch, I fill
a little pail with cool water
& place it by the door. But this flock
of grackles chatters on, distracted.
Magpie, gorged & lappet-slick,
stumbles across the interstate. Poor
birds, & the ones who watch them
poor, & this whole path of transit
depending on which birds can be
coaxed from the mouth-dark
dark. Starlings swarm & settle
between the corn stalks, graying rows.
To watch them, dim as glints
of dimes in the twilight, crowd
the darkening bulb of the cherry tree
& sleep through arrival,
mouth silvering, is to affirm
the unalterable essence: birds;
their weight; the diminishing
trill of the dawn-
bright oriole; the oriole.

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