

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: GRAY WINDOWS

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Gray Windows is a collection of poems arranged into three sections, each determined loosely by its general themes. The first section focuses primarily on perception, as well as ethical, social, and topical issues. The second and third sections further those concerns, filtering them through the personal, but not exclusively private, world of romantic relationships and family. In addition, the poems in *Gray Windows* roughly follow a reverse chronological order, with the greatest exception being the first poem, "Surfing for Caravaggio's *Conversion of Paul*," which is one of the two earliest poems composed for this manuscript.

GRAY WINDOWS

by

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I

Gray Windows

Against gray's generation of gray, the city's empty face, the clouds crack enough to give a sudden shock of yellow, the taxi reflecting my something of need, inarticulate, then here, the burst of twenty suns in just as many windows, the point I enter, the calls' quick punctures, suturing the song, the dozen or so birds who decide spontaneously to make this tree tonight's frenzied hotspot. Not here, then suddenly so aware of *bird*, of *riot*, the light, a thick gloss on magnolia leaves, another surface for me to claim myself by.

*

Not a painting, but *I have made a place*, Rothko said of his windows, the red rectangles on red I brooded into or out of, allowed only the ridges of brushstroke and my mood, what I had brought to it, mixed with the sheer intensity of color and size of the canvas, big enough to cover my apartment floor, indulgent as my thoughts: church window, church graveyard, or a portrait, the figure a Medici, behind whose head the open window told how the bird got in, that the soul had left.

*

The wind clicked the saw grass, a clatter of bones. I knew the red flash from the cypress as a cardinal, lighting out beyond the house, the canal. What makes a space inhabitable? The day before, on a trip to Charleston, we were forced across the dead, their stones creating a path through the churchyard, so we couldn't forget it wasn't about them. On the bank of the canal, thick with mud, with grass, the canal, itself, the only monument for the slaves who built it, I watched crabs sparring over holes the ebb tide abandoned.

*

In my half-sleep I heard the sharp voices,
surrounding my bed, slowly pulled back
to where they'd come from, the bars emptying
down the street and an argument breaking out
beneath my window. Knowing I was safe
was like knowing the self as the heart felt
inside the ear, the body as its many rooms:
attic crawlspaces of the mind, a root cellar
for fear. There were nights as a boy I'd wake
to a room I didn't understand at first as my own,
until the light through the blinds separated
what it touched, a blue weight from blue dark.

*

Between where I sit and the branches reach
is a thin pane of glass, my reflection a film
kept out and in, drinking coffee, given
the privacy of a tree, the intimacy of a cup,
which is only a cup because it holds,
while the ringed stains of coffee inscribe
a private language. How can I know
the eye without its names? The city
except as diorama? I look outside and see
tree, see *bird*: the wax sheen of magnolia
leaves colonizing red brick, the greased
arrowheads of starlings, low across the stage.

Contortionist

- *after André Kertész*

Her pose part perfectly curved space, part bad
accident, like a body tossed down a flight
of stairs, the model—found crumpled,
impacted—is now propped against the sofa
with her bones still bone but made more
malleable, exposed limbs mimicking sculpture,
mimicking the bleached torso and fragmentary
nude the photographer's hung on the wall
of his studio, completing the symmetry
between the mutilated triptych and his joke:
a matter of flesh attempting to serve simply
as medium, like an arm caught severed,
afloat in an exhaust fan, or dancers splayed
in the feathery shapes of shattered glass bulbs.

The Birds

I. Tether

I saw it fast, the small
thing wounded, and smaller
for seeming so willingly
breakable and displaced,
the handful of feathers being
lifted off the train's platform,
then falling back, as if the bird
were trying to fly against
an invisible string playing
with it, pulling it down

to the tiles. Sprawled
on the steps, leaning on elbows,
the boy watched (and could
watch) the bird struggle, his
face—unmoved—unmovable,
or so I thought, until I saw
what he saw, not one bird
but two, and the unguarded
white where the claws curled—
opened against.

II. Slide

What looked, at first,
like wet wool, a child's lost
hat unthawed from the snow,

suddenly stared back
from a small mangled eye,
the bird's feathers mashed

to a slick of dark matter
around the gape, in what
was once the stomach,

exposing the light rigging
of bones, some recognizable
intention that disrupted the fine

shale beneath my thinking,
and the larger, more
unsupportable blocks

finally gave way
as in the dream I had where
my younger brother died,

and I couldn't believe
in a world that would not
have him. His face composed

out of faces on the street,
then a picture on a lamppost,
a reflection's vicissitude

in a storefront window—him,
not him—he was everywhere
never long enough,

and I needed a way to account
for this, although it was a dream,
and so a god, an afterlife.

III. *The Birds*

Then for each length of wire stretched between two poles,
one dark bird, and Missouri falling back behind them,
while the sun—another harbinger—fell, too, collecting
in the runoff pools, its orange light skimmed, my eye

snagging against surfaces.

In the Hitchcock, what you don't see are the thin strings
of nylon looped around the legs, so the birds couldn't fly
away, but formed the odd, live kites tethered to the actress.
When she moved, they moved. So even if she were innocent,

they'd still come.

Event Horizon

I.

Tree limbs frosted, coral-like,
and the air a sea drained between bluffs

above the river, and cold like I imagine
the sea at its submerged horizon,

a green light going gray, then a gray
too impassable, or here, ice buckling

at a bend in the river, where the eye
reaches over, falling on the far shore.

The cold cracks ice, a branch
somewhere breaking, and beneath me,

along the bank, a younger version
of myself released bottles against

the sandstone to hear the sharp crashing
ring, out of boredom, or parading

my frustration with the universe,
the injustice of being young (and therefore

frustrated), for the collapsing parabolas
of assembled swallows, feeding off

the sudden flood of insects,
while the last light stopped at the leaves.

II.

Another river, another cold
landscape crumpled above and within

the water. This second river, grown
thick and sluggish, piled up against

the bend, where seeing naturally
emptied into the event, the far shore.

It was a sound I'd come to anticipate,
the dull dropping of snow from trees,

and not the far off explosions,
streaking the camera's panoramic night-

vision and a sky, filtered green, caught
rippling, aquatic, above a city's shaded

spires, each building and hill
made low, bleached by the bursts

glowing hot as phosphorus, white
as salt. Not real, and yet not un-

real: the city under siege (like *Love*
or *Clouds* (things Keats said, *require*

a greeting of the Spirit to make them
wholly—which is to say, meaningful—

exist) transfigured, since the city
would have burned (and did burn) without me).

Headlines, Weights, and Measures

They had to put down
the poor elephant drowning
in his own stubborn weightiness,

while three sea lions made
the best of it—no tragedy
for them, all that rain—

and split town as fast as their slick
bodies could carry them. Or as it goes,
one elephant's burden...

But the day they announced
the official flooding of Prague,
two other amazing things happened.

In a sterile lab, scientists
successfully grew pig testicular
tissue on the back of a rat.

Imagine that. One day, we will
all carry fathers on our shoulders.
Which is what he was trying to do,

I am thinking, the one armed,
no legged Palestinian, who stood up
against a helicopter. They sent

his head and torso to relatives.
Take heart. There's always a break
in the clouds, and they did

try for hours to lift
his wasted body
from the ever rising water.

Weaving

*I don't think they'll find the new weaving
anywhere finer than truth.*

- Osip Mandelstam

I've tried to sift a truth finer than salt
from my mouth. It matters: I get up

or I do not. The books can wait, leaves
burn themselves these days, and the day

begins, or it does not. Now wingless,
a wasp masquerading as the sun crawls—

a harmless razor—across the backlit
curtain. No city trembles on the verge

of the sea. No stupid bird threatens
to dissolve me if I forget my species

in the official questionnaire. I could
put my ten bureaucrats to their task—

the dusting and polishing. There's a point,
a mirror for me to enumerate my teeth.

Beyond these walls, there is only
a snowed-in field, an egg just opened

but empty, while, inside, the body's rich,
the bed extends like a sky across a lake.

The Dubliner

On a corner, one block off a highway, an interstate,
on the most polluted boulevard in St. Paul,
in 1999, we would drink there most weeknights, a bar

for the sons and daughters of the sons and daughters
of the Irish, who'd helped build the railroad and wealth
for Col. Crooks, and those newly arrived from the old

country, but mostly us college kids, who lived for live music,
the traditional songs we understood as anthems
of annihilation, of the empty shot glasses' teetering pyramid,

even while we cheered we'd have a nation once again,
cursing the goddamn yolk of the Queen, although
only one of my friends had ever been to Ireland,

and he'd found no family left there, his grandfather
having come to Chicago to make a killing
trapping pigeons, before he got on the wrong side

of the wrong people and so moved to Minnesota.
But this was a different country, on the verge
of a new century, and we were drinking off the fat

of student loans, listening to a friend's band play
cover songs on Wednesdays, some twisted fusion
crossing generations and genres, and when Mike sang,

"I want to fuck you like an animal," that whole compressed,
postindustrial rage-turned-folksong already seemed nostalgic,
almost sweet, like the thick marker scrawl, "Dow Jones

Keep On Rising," I'd seen graffitied on the English
Department's bathroom wall, in 1999, a bubble
even we self-proclaimed poor were riding out to sea.

Return Guy

The deal was first he'd get
the goods, take a handful
of ties right off the rack,
and having paid for them,
walk out the door. Department stores
were rich for this kind of work,
and Chris was making enough
in returns to afford college.
All he needed was a receipt.
Then he could bring back
the merchandise, the receipt
never leaving his pocket.
“They'll remember your face,”
Chris told me, sizing up
his spare suit against my chest,

“as long as you wear something
smart, something pretty.”
His accent kept the words
in his mouth a little longer,
giving them a good once-over,
before he released them.
He'd go back, say, in a week,
and picking out the same ties
as on the receipt, return them
again. It wasn't exactly stealing,
but I never went with him.

“When you were a kid, and people
asked, ‘What do you want to be
when you grow up,’ you said,
doctor. Lawyer. Poet was number

nine hundred on the list, nine
hundred on the list.” His jab dug
into my insides, and it was by
no means the worst. There was
the one where he imagined me
having children, how they'd ask
to be dropped off a block before
school, embarrassed of their father—
my disheveled hair, my failing

Volvo. Chris's plan was all business,
wearing suits to work each day
like anyone. Yet it wasn't so much
the beer he brought over, but how
his concern was for the kids,
their happiness, that swelled

in me like forgiveness.
One night, coming through my door,
he fanned out cash and waved it
in my face, and even though
I protested I was busy, I had work
to do, "No," he said, "you put on
something nice. We're going out."
Everyone at the bar that night
drank, as Chris would say,
like poets on payday. When two
guys from the shore didn't like
my looks, or a look I gave, too long
at a woman between them,
and Chris threatened to smash
their faces, we all believed it.

Because I took as taken-for-granted
the proposition that people are
essentially good, or maybe because
I feel I owe him something, then here
it is. A friend heard there was a fight
on the boardwalk, and it wasn't clear
if it was the woman's face or her
boyfriend's, but someone's cheek
caught the knife. I had left
New Jersey years ago and hadn't
seen Chris since, and he wasn't going
to come back anytime soon.
When you were a kid, and people
asked what you wanted to be
when you grew up, you said?

“Who Live in My Flowerpots”

From curb to edging to curb,
this man sticks to the cusp,
a connoisseur of the liminal,

as if he's unsure of his fit
in the open, afraid the space
won't have him, or he despises it,

the something dirty in all this
exposure, but his puffy blue
jacket unzipped to relieve

his sweater and crumpled shirt
in June says something's not
right, and just when I'm glad

he's on that side of the street,
the little change in my pocket,
hardly enough to jangle,

weighs me down a little deeper.
Although, he isn't asking for it,
not from me, not from anyone,

he only moves to the curb
to the edging, following right
angles around the boxed-in trees.

There's only a line and where
the line leads. And it seems wrong,
yet something of his movement

possesses an accidental courtesy,
reminding me of these others,
the regulars in this neighborhood,

the man who whistles shrilly
before bursting into a jog,
more like skipping, or the one

who compliments, his gift
for picking out a person's latest
accoutrement and insecurities:

"I like your hair, goes great
with those shoes." His accuracy,
I thought, made him all the more

pitiful, and at other times, creepy,
like the night we were hustled
into the street as the bar closed,

and my friend kept explaining,
about *The Genealogy of Morals*,
about how degrading it all is,

that—and I think she was quoting—
the very stench of it is putrid,
when his voice from the margins,

out of shadows beneath an awning,
rejoined, "I agree with you."
But it's not from courtesy this man

clings to the curb, or why I watch
to see if he'll keep his lines
safely, and I'm ashamed I want

to think he's someone to teach me,
that it's me he sees when he stops
at the block's end and, as if opening

a door, doffs his knit cap to no one.

The Currency

That summer, the twenty-first century
was reams of plastic around thick metal
rings, forming a woman on her back,
stretching forty-feet beneath the river's
surface. Three times a day, tourists
gathered to take pictures at the bridge,
a flock of clicks capturing the magmatic
gurgle and slow rise of the water
goddess, Our Lady of Prague,
what the artist saw as a birth into
the new century, yet sprung up whole

like wisdom, a stirring in the thigh,
and she had synthesizers on the bank,
playing a music we might imagine
to predict the elastic tastes and trends
of some silver-clad future. Glitter
was what that country had foreseen
for itself, payment in full for the relentless
occupations. For the young, this was
their kingdom come: the couples kissing
in the subway and on escalators.
The old men, too, weren't afraid

to be seen eating ice cream, slouching
in well-worn work suits—lime green?
Grass green? A color so striking, yet
devoid of distinction, it still served
to cover the people's street sweepers.
Fumbling at the counter with a few
well-worn phrases, you and I were
involved in all that, buying pastries
we couldn't even pronounce, but only
pointed to, our money going further than
we'd eat, and yet alien when our lips

touched, lacking any "philosophical
significance," just hunger, loneliness,
what I felt each time I took the bridge
coming home, passing the vendors,
the statue worn out by touch: Saint
John of Nepomuk, patron of crossing

over, faithful council, deadman's float.
Even when we knew I'd be leaving
soon, I stopped to listen to the girl
selling her clay pipes: a small grace
so amazed it had currency at all.

Noise Like Wings

Pressed between his hand and what I made
of it, and smoothed to the glass outside
the café's window, the page clung to its traces
of numerous refoldings and the grime
incised fingers of the man holding it, pointing
to a few adhered photographs for his friend,
equally caked with the street they must
sleep in, both of them unaware, or tired
of caring, that we were watching them,
but from inside the window, reminding you
of a play, of *all the dead voices*, their *noise*

like wings. Like leaves. The sun behind them
lit the pictures to the sudden forms moving,
figures sprung out of a thick translucency,
but reversed, shadowy, and through the veil
of paper, thin veil of window, I couldn't tell
who had entered them, if any of the people
held there looked like him, if the photographs
were even his. It mattered to me, as if it could
have explained the mass of misshapen
letters scrawled in between the frames,
whether they contained story or were only

a corrupt mind's ciphers, empty vessels,
like all the discarded bottles we later
found frozen in the canal. A story's what
I've been trying to build myself now
that you've returned to that other coast
you never stopped calling home, a story
where I'm telling you how the peonies
flashed here, are now implosions, pulped
like so much soaked paper, how in this
morning's light, I almost heard them move,
the figures beneath the photographs' gloss.

II

Abstract

When I'm finally ready to start
believing in something else,
a landscape, say, completely

annihilated by snow, I move
to where the view of the rocks
becomes clearer, the angular

gray gaps caught in the smear
of blankness, with its ridged,
fuzzy texture of a whiteout.

Or it's a line drawn over
a period of years, across
a series of canvases, which never

is the same, only bolder
or erased, separating the various
thicknesses and densities, how

that year must have passed
quietly for him, at least no one
he knew managed to get

their heart pummeled, but this
one was spent with his face
pressed to a corner, licking

at some inarticulate wound,
with a wish to be narrow,
almost invisible, but repeating,

look at me. Or it's the glacial
slide of blue into a shade
of blue just darker, the tension

of that pose, and the immense
effort it must have taken
not to give the day its story.

Bay Drawing

It was nothing I'd seen before, a postcard
in art class, and the storm—my gray invention,
forming at the pines' edge. And it wasn't the art
teacher, Miss Richie, who'd said, "You arrogant
son-of-a-bitch," but the boys' dean, speaking

on her behalf inside a windowless classroom.
The art room had a window. It looked out
on a willow-like tree we were told to sketch
in pencil, next charcoal, finally graduating
to watercolor. By then it was spring again,

so the brush had to be dry enough to capture
the tiny flecks of green in the branches.
She said mine had feeling, a real struggle
to connect to the thing as a thing—only different,
transformed—which I took as a peace offering,

that she might regret having assigned my seat
in the hallway all winter. The sea had to be
what I imagined when I imagined *sea*.
The negative space as Miss Richie called it:
either two faces kissing or a candlestick.

Or foam riding the tops of waves, piles
of emptiness defined by a bay, but darker,
cobalt almost where the sun hits a surge,
a wave tipped by the thinned down paint,
foam figured by lack, *a storm's a brewin'*—

The block in the rigging makes it real,
the yachts are slipping under, almost goners.
I was proud of the way I got the storm right,
behind the down-sail anxiety of the yachts.
Miss Richie felt it, too, and told me so.

Conservatory

I saw it once, the place full of steam,
from behind the taxi's streaked window.

But in the park we were vulnerable,
exposed for the sky's opening. Running,

a small space opened near the small
of her back. Some nights I would

wake there. Then in dreams, her tongue
reflected with scales like the sides

of a glass fish. And there were other—
more important—rains. Still, what leaves?

What conservation of mettle? More dreams
proceeded, but the order came out wrong.

It was a vastness, the glass against the sky,
another couple up for anything,

or so it seemed from the railing.
On the sides of the glass fish swam

scrutiny, an abundance of fern.
And still others came by and said, oh,

not that red, that red. By which we were
ready to go on leaving. The rain gone.

Vigil

What was it, then, that was asked of me,
while the room folded in, and they stood
hovering, their faces unmade, darkening?

And beyond those shadows waited other
shadows, so much to refute. My throat
opened like a throat stretched bare,

expectant and vulnerable, to echo
their voices appeasing me, what I only
half heard, even after waking to my fever

passed, light entering the window bruised,
and my parents retreating from the door:
what I've been trying to conjure tonight

as I've watched you shift in your uneasy
sleep, those words they'd used to calm
the heat I carried so close beneath skin.

Scrim

Lapping through the everlasting
 salt, upperconsciousness
of forearm and chest, your tongue ignites

the atmosphere, and I blink into your hair,
 the fortune floating at the bottom
of the cup, which reads: "Look up

when you walk down." A poem about the invasion
 of the bathtub, an armada
of soap bubbles and wet

fingers, the scum fogging over
 desire's rounded ledge.
Your lips press on my stomach, the lean

barbarians leaning on leaner
 horses, nary a mean one
among the horde, and I soak

in the lazy wide pool of your mouth,
 the saliva in the teeth
marks. I think,

that's it, pronounce the hour
 anniversary of the migration home,
and retract from a feather lick on

the knee. You rise to make
 as if with a toaster above the water, so
I knock my nose against my reflection.

The Room

We woke to it still here: a room
for dressing quietly, another lit
by the t.v.'s glare. In the scene,
we were performing the scene

where we are hung in the silences
we'd finally crush between fingers,
so what started out as anger
could exit by way of its own juices.

To get it while it was hot, her first,
then the words I said, the not-me
words went straight for the throat,
the ego's thin root, before I

retreated behind a cheap-shot
stare: *don't think of coming near.*
If only the core were more malleable,
it might fit through the teeth,

if there was a core. I'd explain this
better, how what maneuvered behind
the face felt inside as inside,
the eye's insect pressed to the screen,

how the room seemed to lean
into its own *roomness*. The shape
defined there was something I could
break against: her, my identical,

inextricably other, reflecting image
fractured, the web splaying through glass.

Rest Stop

We stopped so she could ease out
the tension building in her calf muscle,
a knot from being cramped together
too long in the car. Our anger had become

just another thing we couldn't commit to,
and taken up by the heat, it joined
the sticky calm stretched between us.
Near where we parked, a young woman

rested a bottle against her neck,
the water mixing with sweat, and she pulled
her short hair into slick, limp peaks,
while probing their car's overheated engine,

the serpentine, tattooed arms of her boyfriend,
or husband, moved out and in. Her look said
they could have been going from Oklahoma
to "kiss my ass," passing the restaurant chains

and strip malls, but caught there in the parking lot,
a distraction for families vacationing.
When we heard their voices becoming clearly
a name, we knew it was a mother

and father calling, what we all fear.
These were the kind of people who could lose
a child: frantic, almost chiding the boy,
who must only be playing a child's trick.

Behind a tree, he became the tree, and his face
contained all faces of children emptying
from sedans. In no time, in a time that now seems
impossible, a crowd had gathered for the search,

and when I looked from the mother to the woman
I was with, what looked back was inconsolable.
*Trickster, not the boy but the angel,
don't come to make good on your promise,*

your dark reprimand. There was no angel.
And the boy was found down by the dog park.
Over the small, round rise of her stomach,
he rested his arm, the inked coils of a snake.

Poppies

Do you remember how I wouldn't
lift my eyes? That was this side
of the wall, away from the gallows
and the mass grave, yet right next to
the movie house and the drained
children's swimming pool.
The thought of their laughter,
of real water, was the cruel
gas I conjectured, filling Terezín
until at night it choked

a child's sleep—not here,
but on that side of the wall.
The sound of so much water
had formed for a girl a sanctuary
to escape to in her painting
(I saw it recently in a museum,
displayed with a train's date),
a desert oasis with palm trees,
lions and the impossible giraffe.
A half-century after the camp closed,
impossible glass flowers marked
the open gates, a cough caught
in the throat.

I remember
the morning I left, and the long ride
to the airport, short-cutting
through the outskirts of Prague
along the taxi drivers' secret
route—a scenario for kidnapping
and ransom: backcountry, dark
roads and a language barrier.
This is where I imagined tragedy
occurring to people like me,

like you. Except in our room,
it was enough to have a backdrop
of one vase stained to look
antique and permanent
petals beneath the bare-bulb-
white: a stage for pain's disclosure.

It wasn't our country,

but it was
good to hear English, like the night
we came upon the reading.
It almost redeemed me then
to look at a flowerbox
above the alley, with its four or five
red fists, representing flowers.
The darker it became, the closer
I felt to being outside the walls
of the courtyard, where we were
gathered. What murder in the Balkans
was being lamented by the raspy
Californian woman—her skin
soured from cigarettes and sun—
when she sang, *and gladiolas*
are only fifteen crowns? What dream-
dark milk in the red flower's name?

Web Work

Each night for a week the web
is reconstituted,
catching stalk to stalk

of clustered red blooms,
threading the scattered
glint off streetlamps

when the wind starts,
the spider as light
as its own translucency.

I've seen its kind before,
on those nights leading up
to our strained resolution,

after every day brought another
opportunity for ending,
and both of us retreated

into our own private
hurt, incommunicable
emptinesses, her shut

inside the bedroom,
me waiting on the steps,
until out of fear and its

accompanying exhaustion,
we erected the small
trust left between us,

hands finding hands
beneath the sheets, forming
the thin netting of bone.

At the Lake

What I wanted I imagined moving
from her mouth to his, the soft
machine of it, the tongue pushed
to lips pushed through, and while

I imagined it I remembered it:
her mouth, the lake as dark glass,
what we'd entered to enter deeper,
the lake folding in around us, opening.

It was the summer after high school
at a friend's cabin outside the city,
where all my friends spent weekends
knowing something was ending,

which gave us sanction, so she led me
into the lake. This time it wasn't me,
but my friend, and someone had the idea
to throw the small dish, the "Shrimp Boat,"

into the car where they had slipped to,
a prank I took up gladly, having
imagined them. What I wanted was
embarrassment, vindication, what

I thought I'd achieved when he entered,
the dish shaking in his hand, but then
dropping it for an impulse, a desire
we'd only entertained before,

he grabbed the ice pick from the kitchen,
the threat of it entering floated near
my head. Everyone stood around
frozen. He spoke, or didn't speak,

but meant it. I felt it hovering,
then break through the silence
when it hit the floor. She was holding
him, and there she was, holding me.

Cleaning-House

Strung out beside us, and not
shadows, the still rising, still
gathering lights shot beneath

the surface, but not breaking
the water and widening shape
of my reflection in the white

wake. With a good catch,
we'd have pike, four or five
chained through the gills

along the boat, packed in
the water to keep them fresh,
until my father could clean them,

which was the knife, its clouded
tongue opening the length
of their narrow bellies. I was

supposed to be watching. I saw
the glint of skin. The plastic container.

*

They return to the lake,
as they've done every summer
since her childhood. In the morning

father and daughter untie from
the dock, head out for the dark
places sunk beneath reeds,

fallen trees where the bass hide.
It's noon on the first day, and still
they've caught nothing, when

she feels the slight tension,
watches her line slice water.
Just like he's taught her,

she holds the blackened-green
body of the fish to the boat's floor,
then her final act of kindness,

to quicken its release, she lets
the small hammer fall against it—

*

when she tells me this, she looks
hard, to see if I'll believe her,
the hammer, the kindness.

When it didn't die, she struck
again, only making things
worse, which continued until

her father stepped in, and they
headed back to shore. It wasn't
until later at the diner, when

he reached across the table
for the check, that she couldn't
decide if the feeling rising

in her was a form of helplessness
or hate, as when my father
handed me the knife, my eye

floating dimly in the stains,
I tried to find the one clean cut.

Fantastic Rock: Lake Superior, Minnesota

Keeper of mountains and all
things doubled-over under
the rule of stone, cast-out

from the cool grotto of a child's
pocket and pocked by rain,
sand-sheen bearer, erosion's waste,

revenant of a planet inhospitable,
you are all things singularly,
the epistemological oddity

that no two emptinesses
are ever felt to be the same.
Who could walk along you

like a shore? But from you
the eye catches on the bright,
buoyed tower. An impossible

thing so caught up in its own
disproportion, it gives a little
toward tilting, would fall

upon this otherwise uneventful
lake. Orange tower like
a beacon on waves—fantastic

thing—I imagine its bell,
how it rings out the squall,
or a ship drowning out past

the oil slick waters, and we are
going under, down to the fissure,
down to the edge of your first rupture.

III

Childhood Monochrome

I parade around in a skin until I own it. My eyes' blue
keeps what I find. All else becomes a curtain of blue.

Mother's apron, sheep's wool, "Bah-Bah": my mouth's
my best idea. My idea tugs at her apron strings, their blue.

Blue, the portrait of my mother in the kitchen, is a child's
scrawl, a room which cannot remain except for blue.

Who is not in the room dies suddenly when I see her,
dishes drying in the sink, the window open and blue.

The pattern on the table is German (or Dutch?), a gift
from my grandmother: leaves of white lined by blue.

My face in the bathwater looks up at you. Round
moon, Mother, on the world's surface, stained by blue.

Now I lay me down... to a place in the mind. *And if I die...*
God's idea, before I wake, a bruise retaining its blue.

Who's not in the room watching, blind as the saint
I'm named for, waits in a darkness torn from blue.

Children Running

While I wasn't listening, while I was nailing down the distinction between prose and poetry for my students, they'd already started, these men who willfully kill children. When I get home she tells me there were children. She speaks numbers, degrees of heat inside the gymnasium where they'd kept them, numbers greater than released, growing until they can't be abstracted: the children running, tripping wires down the hall. They'd set traps for them.

She presses the button so the world moves closer to the screen along wires like a puppet, and in seconds we have pictures: the parents, the children passed along like heavy blankets. She reads, "children," the lit "gymnasium collapsing," and so the mind performs implosion, its own version of softness, while she sits there and reads "fire," "the children." What comes over me is a building set for burning, my anger poised and vertical like a match.

I try to think into *willful*, try to think into metal entering softness, for what part of me can get there, could possibly conceive it, the softness, the will. There are spaces, once entered, where we become irredeemable, even the thought of it, these men who willfully kill children, and it's unforgivable that I want these men to eat glass, to be locked in a room, speakers looping: there is no god, there is no god, and you kill children.

What does it make me that I want this, that the building collapses, the screen gets closed, is finally disconnected? There is a space we enter, one we have always returned to, which was never safe from children or the men who would kill them, where we are hungry and eat everything on the table, so we don't have to talk, words looped in the mind like glass in the mouth of the mind. The words the children run out of, trip into, set to burning.

The Physician

I. Self-Portrait: The Physician's Son

My father made me watch as he stitched
my finger, "Aren't you curious?" Quiet
kitchen, waitresses arriving, you liked
that part, steadied the leek. The knife

only did what it was meant to, a good
knife, but one hand turned on its brother.
In some interpretations, it was a tool,
not murder, in the beginning. Stove hot.

Cat soft. Nipple hungry. Mine. His mother
in the next room, the child practiced
his hammers. *Such a good boy*, always
serving the mouth. *This is the church*,

this is the steeple, open it up... Hands
between legs at night, maybe. Maybe
not. Was it her hand on my stomach
that excited me? Or the thought of what

came next? Thief, in another time
you would have paid for this, been
severed from the root. "You're not
watching," my father said, then,

"not another stitch until..." until
I looked. I couldn't even feel my finger,
not my finger. Clipping the thread's
edges, he left the smallest scar.

II. The Physician at Wentworth Place

The accrual on the tongue,
metallic, over-brimming,
and more than blood, *arterial*,
I know it. I've nursed it.

Metallic, over-brimming,
my throat fills with a boiling sea,
unknowable, but nursed
to a fleck conspiring on the sheet.

A throat full of a boiling sea,
not the closed-fisted poppy.
The fleck conspiring on the sheet
untangles chest, rope of brain.

And not the closed fists of poppies,
wine-dark, purple-mouthed,
but hands inside the rope of brain,
imagination's true color of blood—

wine-dark, purple-mouthed,
the rich accrual on the tongue.
I know the colour of that blood:
more than blood: *arterial*.

III. *Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta*

The body, by its look
not so much flesh
as an oily residuum, the meat
puttied and rank with what ails it, is cradled
by the doctor in Goya's self-portrait.

Let's say this doctor is not like
the three faces forming, or un-
forming, out of reason's inchoate
smear in the background,
the monsters let loose by some failing,

the painter still could not hear him,
being deaf.

But in the vortex of the voices'
incantation, at the "Country-House
of the Deaf-Man," the artist's hand-me-down
asylum outside Madrid,

the eye dug Goya in further.
Like Saturn to his children,
he watched what his own hands did.
He must have known a world still
existed beyond him, so he placed Arrieta,

his savior, into this self-portrait,
between his own body and the dark
figures emulsified in their stain,
these shadowy sisters:
sickness, madness, and obscurity.

The doctor holds up Goya's body
to help him catch a drink from the glass,
the sturdy elixir, as light pours in from
the unknown source, touching their faces.
He knows what the doctor's holding.

He's painted himself with his eyes shut.

Great Falls

The canal's nearly empty,
only rivulets running slow—
cut glass along the creek bed
in a knobby mosaic of smooth
stones. He walked here
thirty years ago. The bright
Navy-boy medic in training,
now my father, then in a body
younger than my own,
grown granite-like, he'd come
for the story of water, a great
crashing behind leaves—
what he's returned to find
again, what he wants
me to see—and that day
he wasn't alone. But today,
that friend didn't appear for us
from the cut rows on the wall:
names stacked in a room,
which wasn't a room, except
when we stood before it.

When the trail turns,
we hear *it* through the trees
fattened with ferns, and
my father's steps quicken,
disrupting the trail's dust,
until we land on the cracked
cement of the scenic overlook.
What he wants me to know
is the cascade grown greater—
the shape in his mind—
a boy on the edge about to spill
over, not what we find: this
garbled whitewater and a few
kayaks flashing red on waves.

The Fall

With my legs still tensed,
 their slide held in abeyance,
what came between me
 and the opposite jut
of granite was a chasm,
 water falling to where
it frothed. Yet I'm sure
 the distance was only
five, maybe six feet
 across, which I'd watched

my brother clear easily,
 not breaking from his run
as he leapt. Turning around,
 he saw me hesitate
on the cusp, but too late
 to stop, I hurled myself
against what gravity
 and the waterfall would have
made of me. Because
 when I remember it,

how my feet first touch
 the far side and seem
like they'd hold, my fear
 becoming elation, then
the slip, my body knows
 itself as body suddenly
and, therefore, unalterably
 discrete, I never see
his hand reach out,
 only that it catches me.

Crickets

Their song announced some barrier
had been breached, so what we had
only known as outside was somehow
inside the basement. I followed

my brother down the stairs
where we listened in the dark
to what I'd imagine later that night
as pinched, atavistic faces

squeezed through a crack in a window,
or up from a crumbling patch
in the house's foundation,
come to set the world right again,

unmovingly just, exacting;
a hollowness in my gut
replaced the pleasure I had taken
in our father's tennis racket

and my descending feet, when my brother
had cried, "*There,*" and I flipped
on the light, shouting back,
"*Smash it! Smash it! Smash it!*"

Haute Cuisine

The pig couldn't know it was a pig,
not because it lacked a conspicuous
preference for truffles over the few
rotten turnips set aside for the trash,

but because when I looked, there was
a thin slit of a smile across its throat,
which explained the pig's patience
with the cooks. One punched holes

his friend filled with garlic, each twist
of the blade loosening the meat
from a word rising in my own throat,
as I scoured dishes in the sink,

an orange slither of oil inscribed
on the surface. But the pig couldn't
know it was a pig. No hooves
hammered against steel counters,

there was no last leap onto the stove.
The cooks, too, had only a slim
notion: one sang along with the radio,
the other wiped his hands on his shirt.

Chinois

The chef told me to bring him one,
which meant the over-sized, metallic

cone punched through with holes,
which meant *mirepoix* and marrow,

then the stock's severance, a clarity
for *consommé*. We spoke imported

experience as shorthand, dumb
and demonstrative, and mystified

of history. Turn it upside down,
it's a hat. Turn it back, a net for fishing.

Or other ways we inscribe someone,
demand them into being: tents along

a railroad, a measure of opium.

Nemesis

Skinny boy I wrestled, and was, impassable
knot of muscle to be cut and each party sent
to our respective houses, wooden blade

of your hockey stick that hooked my side,
my own descending, an axe to your back,
when you called your father rose, shaken

from his drunk, emerging into daylight, dark
stains dribbled down his t-shirt, to collide
with my father in the yard, knocking their rage

against each other in a shouting match, fingers
pushed to puffed out chests, the ridiculous,
showy-bird plumage. My identical,

you called and I came, the dog still tentative
from the kick, for a friendship that asked nothing,
a peace we'd eventually forget to understand.

Matchbook

Here's a game, light a match
and hold it, almost as ingenious
as balloons we filled with gasoline.

The object is to not flinch,
letting the flame get as close
as possible to where skin bubbles

between thumb and finger.
Here's a game, Matt said,
because he always invented them,

and I watched the flame go
white then blue. When
my family had arrived

at our new house in the suburbs,
Matt was the first person I'd met,
a boy about my age, whose parents

both worked, and they had
cable television. It was the first time
I'd seen Olivia Newton-John,

and when she appeared pressed
into her outfit like a skin,
Matt's older sister danced and sang

on the sofa, knowing all the words.
For a while my parents believed
in the fundamental goodness

of other people, especially children,
and Matt showed me where his father
kept his beer. I'd seen his father's face

swell like a thumb struck
accidentally with a hammer—
constricted, explosive—then rage

uncontrollably brought his hands
to shoulders, a hole in the sheetrock:
a cradle for his son's back.

Before returning quietly inside,
I rinsed my mouth and hands
at the hose coiled behind our house.

Here's a game, bring a match
to the cigarette and form a circle,
boy-girl-boy-girl, passing smoke

mouth to mouth. Matt's sister
read to us from a book she'd slipped
beneath her shirt, snuck out

from their parents' room, while
their mother, off work, sat before
the television, pulling long breaths

through the ash of her cigarette,
and we lit one in the basement,
too scared to choke. His sister's lips

twisted unrecognizably, she asked
if I knew what "orgasm" meant,
taking my hand against her bare

stomach. I didn't want anything
to move, I lied, "Of course I do."
The flame goes blue, then skin

turns yellow, smells of sulfur.
"Never again," Matt's mother
screamed, furious, confiscating

the matchbook, Matt refusing
the relief of the faucet where I was
cooling my fingers. "Just wait

until your father gets home,"
she said, as he raised to his lips
the singed marks his hands made.

Art History

Wherever I stand in this room,
the view runs clear to a Bacchus
incomplete of satire piped and
stripped, begging at his thighs.

Except, this woman moves closer,
toting her gift shop bag. Who's
mocking whom, his stone cup
raised? *Been there*, she thinks,

while her two boys aren't looking,
so no explanation's needed for his
chiseled curve and how familiar
the sculptor's hand must have been

to get it right. "Take it back."
But by his smile, I can tell the boy
won't. He claims his authority
like any one of these statues,

the same assurance in blood's
movement through beauty and a true
fact of power: the more you garner
in this life, the more curls will be

carved into the wig of your likeness.
At least that's the fashion, here
in the rotunda, where the Greeks have
nothing on 17th century merchants

and kings. The boys don't imagine
they're anything other than mice
beneath the skin, a rippling pressure.
"Take it back." And the smaller boy

lunges into the older one, who gives
a little, rocked on the thin limbs,
and anger lights his frame like a wick,
then explodes. As Nero looks on—

Herod's not far off—he closes an arm
around his brother's neck and won't
stop now, not for the sound of his
mother's protests, not for the world.

Courtly

It could be August for all
the neighborhood kids care,
when the court is as long
as the last light stretching,
a strategic time-out to make
these last few minutes last
a few minutes more. The boys
fast-break and juke to dodge
puddles turned up by the late
winter thaw. They've been at it
for hours. No doubt two or three
have missed the calls to dinner.
But the score's all that matters now,
and the pass is caught mid rush
to the rim by the lanky boy,
the tallest one out there, grown
taller each time I've seen him,
his stride appearing unsure
everywhere except here, where
the ball rolled off his finger,
its float and sink, a sound
like silk threading silk,
and all the boys turning,
running back toward the other
end, the fence where the girls
would be watching, pretending
not to, backs turned, fingers curled
though the links, if this were summer,

seem like a single fluid body,
which lunges, flings back on itself,

circles, the boys sliding past,
beating into one another,

waiting for the give, the sudden
clear shot, like this boy,

the slowest, now finding himself open,
the easiest target for their stockpiled

jabs, the “fat motherfucker”
as I’ve heard them taunt him

since summer: a mean, sweet love,
because he knows anyone of them

would fight for him. And he
offers up his awkward lay-up.

The Decision

What the mind wants
is its reason, unwelcome root
or irritation, like some bruise:
my brother come home,
rain rising from the road,
the sulfured finger tips

after the extinguished fuse.
And what the mind wants
is a darker water, brackish
like a prayer, the one
my mother never will finish.
There was a road. Mother,

in the front seat, was slipping
rosary beads—thin
rose-shaped shells—
through her fingers' slight
trembling, as my father steered
between median and trees

smear to an impression
on the windshield.
If I can see myself, it's my cheek
pressed against the cool
window, eye reflected back,
blue fleck, among the beads

gathering into pools.
I knew the road only
went in one direction:
West over hills
rubbed black by the deep
erasure of pines.

“You better shut up
about it,” my brother spoke
harshly in my ear, pressing
his raw, wounded hand gingerly.
Back in South Dakota,
behind a rest stop's cement shack,

it all happened too fast
for him to throw the fuse
banded *Lady Fingers*: the flame
licked, then burst in his hand.

Not then, but years later,
he would stand in a restaurant,

threatening to turn his back
on his family, to walk out.

I was ready to go with him.
Forget dad. Forget our mother crying.
But he just stood there—
thought about it.

Surfing for Caravaggio's *Conversion of Paul*

Enter keywords: Caravaggio, painter, Santa Maria del Popolo. How many people are contemplating paintings at this moment? How many whips and nipples? I had been reading a poem about a poem about a Caravaggio, in other words, a bar brawl—*beautiful horror* as de Sade once called him—but I don't get it, not having seen *it*. While the computer emits an aura, I guess, I don't have to go to Italy to stand in line for a conversion, or to be, as the poet says, *still falling*. If a hundred people simultaneously hold this painting in their minds, will it gain a collective dullness, a tarry film like too much smoke? Are brushstrokes authentic, or the light? Or the *salvation* (which doesn't share a root with "salivate" or "salve"), something saintly? No, he's still only Saul. But Caravaggio painted another version, and in this frame here, nowhere near Santa Maria del Popolo, it's over, and the new convert weeps—out of shame? because his shirt's torn open exposing his loose breasts?—or he isn't weeping at all behind his hands. If I were closer, I wouldn't understand more about why he covers his eyes, because with a *click* it's a throttled Isaac staring out, ignoring both knife and canvas.