

Abstract

Title of Thesis: Evening Interruption

Austin Duck (Master of Fine Arts, 2013)

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Drawing heavily on the tradition of the Romantic lyric and using this form to further understanding of the past and present, “Evening Interruption” engages radical formal and sonic disruptions in an attempt, for the speaker, to reconcile the traditional movement of the poetic mind with the rapid degradation of the physical, psychological, and cultural landscapes.

Evening Interruption

By

Austin Duck (Master of Fine Arts, 2013)

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Evening Interruption

-after Degas' *Four Dancers*

the evening clouds are red, dimpled
like enormous fingers, slightly crooked,
thick knuckle skin stretched
with bone—

the liver-spotted fingers of the old poet
who is dying, finger-light steering, a finger stirring,
a finger in several pies ... and a small boy rides
his bicycle on the other side of the tracks while
I walk through a parking lot, cars scuffed, flushed
cheeks, a hot January;

the dandelions
months early, a train's moments away and already
the wail so loud the boy stops to watch, tightens
his grip on the handlebar, pinky hanging off
in the air like a bare thigh, the clouds a bare
thigh, we—the boy and I—holding our breaths
as the air tightens, the sky swelling

warm,
as the train presses between us and the sound
of car after car starting to slow undresses
the evergreens, the asphalt, even my chest
hums in the tempo of a woman writhing,
a woman with hands laid on her, fingers,
drawn by hand, four women, dancers,
peeling pink straps from their pale shoulders
as, behind them, the sun sets

over a far field and though fixed
the motion in the red paint below shows fingers
beginning to open, the daylight falling
from collarbones, *the air we see*
in paintings... never the air we breathe says Degas
but the wind is moving, the field, each
spray painted container-car, and

I can't see but the boy
is moving, me too, we are the fingers of
the woman on the far right dropping her cuff-
sleeve, reddened, dimpled, dropping down
toward the skirt disappearing into the brush
behind, and the old poet has said
there are only six shapes in nature: branching, circle,
meander... and feeling shape I have to know
what shape am I

Some Darkness

While waiting behind a pickup that carries
two broken fences sending
the shadow of a cross scissoring into
two points on my chest,
my eye spasms; two houses, one
on either side of the road, slide together,
wood rotten and freshly weather-proofed join
into a bridge, a porch, the asphalt blurs
and over it a serious house stands, blinks
as I do, disappears. Dad, you called things
serious when impressed by them,
the serious laughing gas at the dentist,
the serious fireworks on the Fourth. And
they spread in the sky like the voice
on the radio through static, far off but
coming closer as the signal strengthens, saying
*We must.... women, whose bodies.... defile
the ordinations of the Lord*, in a way I couldn't
understand, though as you blew smoke
from your mouth, I saw its shape circling
the light on the lawn and Tyler
spun a sparkler, ringing in some darkness.
As the signal strengthens, it's clear someone's
legislating bodies with the word of the Lord,
that these and this earth are less
than the "O" in the word, the word itself
so small on my tongue, I repeat it over
the talk to hear it strike against the music
*in our great, god-fearing nation we must
take the Lord into our lives*, shattering
of grace crossed with violence
to a serious audience, the high song sung low.
Dad, are the firework, the radio, radios,
Father, are the eye seeing, how strong is what smells of
the laughing gas? In what car, your cars, what voices
coming from radio, yours are Father is the earth
serious, the bodies of the living, dead,
the dead broken, ringed in, Father are the points
on my chest originating, Father, were
the houses ever one? When preparing to build materials,
what are a fence, a truck, whose is the shadow, Lord,
how the whole great globe, the hand writing the and?

Conversation

At lunch, grandmother tells
me about Lucy, her sister,
in the Alzheimer's home, and how
before Lucy moved in, her roommate
had the place all to herself so that now,
every week, she opens Lucy's closet, takes all
the clothes and throws them into the trash!
Into the trash! and Grandmother says this laughing.
One day, she says, she'd brought
lunch and the lady's wearing Lucy's
wedding band, that Lucy doesn't know
any better, that she's got on a gold watch
that Grandmother doesn't know where
it came from and Lucy doesn't know
any better. She says to me how terrible it must be
to forget what's yours, to watch
two strangers swap the last bracelet your husband
gave you, the very last one, for a purple
coat covered in molted peacock feathers
and not to realize that's what you've seen.
Grandmother looks out the window, says
the oak's leaves are a blistering yellow,
look at them, she says, look at them, they're proof
of the Lord's creation, they're so magnificent
Austin, it's so magnificent to watch them falling.

Salt Nostril

That's what I want isn't it,
find heaven near the ashtray
in the shadow of the faux-zen garden?

The problem, the ground,
chiseled stones with the carefully imperfectly leveled
edges, the way they butt against one

another and gap like two posed, kissing
in an ad, one with jeans, shirtless,
and the other in a violet sundress.

They're on a beach somewhere or were
when filmed or photographed
and maybe again, maybe waking

about now in the predawn (although on the west coast
it must be something like 4am) to watch
waves roll and feel romantic

but I doubt it because the waves in the Pacific
are cold as old French fries
and breaking on sandy feet, the body

kicks back with nausea... salt nostrils.
My mother first introduced me to Zen gardens,
and I'm no longer sure what makes a garden "faux,"

which rake drawn through what sand is authentic,
whether scale matters and, if so, is dragging
a forked tree branch through the desert

hope? But even then there are mountains,
fields, eventually the coast, the rock-ledges, that
frigid water... and the lines drawn behind me...

A squirrel climbs a tree in the periphery of this place
and his bottlebrush tail follows him,
each hair born and formed,

each the result of a particular eating, September morning,
each in which the heart of an acorn is eaten while the legs
each hold half the weight of the whole body upright, hand to mouth,
swallowing

the part of the day where I think
of my mind as coming *unchained* and then
have I stepped into the garden or am I letting

it go, dog or chain,
steel chain
or the flimsy fools

gold resting across that model's pectorals,
how folded against her in their embrace,
it seemed not his but a big cheap

mobius band shot through their hearts.
That's what I want isn't it
find ash... the tray.

Pigs

Mother named my toes pigs, hungry and at home
or eating in the city and always trailing the
others, the sound of a cry of running
and crying in the city built each time my feet are flat
on the rug or against the pale blanket
I slept under in the room with blue carpet
painting her toenails she told me this
told me that the pigs lived in an ocean village
that their houses were made of shells that
she and her sister rebuilt them each year
when they went to Florida that pigs couldn't keep
houses couldn't keep their fridges full couldn't
find their ways home at night her nightgown
resting over her knees pink like the paint
she rubbed on her toes and she told
me how pigs need help the wallpaper
peeling in our front room and the enamel
on my bathtub broken from a falling ashtray
where once I cut my hand and held it bleeding
making the blue rug red pressed it there with the
figurines on the dresser looking down on me as if
I were a house losing shingles siding gutters
spilling over with leaves as if someone walking
by could look into the window and know
the floor plan of the old farmhouse
or the sound of the ocean inside the shells
on my bookshelf remnants of the city by the ocean
Mother fondly called St. Pete but not after the fisherman
for the Rubens one shoulder in the dark eyes
upward with an papal robe bunched at the
elbows eyes of a man who will die upside down
who will be led *where you do not want to go*
to become the name of a college in the news
this morning accused of *not being fit to educate*
pigs the ones Mother follows to the ocean and
I follow after her the ones whose cries can't be
separated from the sound of waves or my voice

Mackerel Sky

A nest sat on the porch in the space between pale yellow columns and the roof and, though I never saw the inhabitants, I still hear the small, stilted songs that drove the cats to the windows each afternoon. had them scattering across the living room, jumping over arm-chairs, pressing their faces against the screen, Tufts of hair like young sores pushed up into the light. A day's dirt and the afternoon rubbed red into evening: mountains cratered with starlight, as in the Greek "krasis" or mixture, my loneliness on a nothing day sown into the mounds of cloud's tilled rows. Herringbone, some call it, a mackerel sky. A boy and his father will drive beneath it, where dozens of failed farms flood over the road though the towns have populations of thirteen or less and no one around to give direction. His father will talk of the price of pet food in 1967, mornings at the lake listening to fish jump in the distance, and how to determine where the drop-line is. The boy will lie later in a hotel room, boil under the sheets, push his fingertips into the wide pads of his palms, trying to bring the skin up around the impressions.

Punch, 2006

Memphis wasn't even here when it happened,
and even if it had been, no one
would have seen it coming—categorically
intraplate, as in, occurring
within a single tectonic plate,
as in, no collision or disruption,
just failure somewhere within the large slab—
or will when it comes again.
certainly they didn't in New Madrid,
those two brothers axing George Lewis

in front of the other slaves and hiding
his body in a chimney when the ground
shook too hard to light a pyre, and the river
flowed backwards. Twenty-four-hundred
miles long, intertwined with tributaries
and feeders, and as long as any on earth,
and the water rushed north for ten minutes,
growing a swamp five miles from the basin,
the way tonight, from the river-bank,
the glow of traffic lights swims against

the current, across the river's length.
I've come here often with friends
but tonight I sit alone in the gravel
looking the two miles across to Arkansas
and watching the drift-logs and red leaves
passing. The far side is barely visible,
all flood-plains, sopping farmland,
black trees drowned mid-branch in high water,
and, in the light breaking against small ripples,
it resembles the horizons both upstream

and down. The water slowly rises
from the northern rains, and the flood-tide
inches toward my bare toes. In a childhood
dream, I asked a woman to drown my friend
and, after, I followed her shadow into
the bathroom where his body lay, 6-years old
and stark-white, just atop the endless
streaming claw-foot, steady, still,
and in the guilt all I could think was where
I should hide him. Cities grow up that way too,

first the engine, then the housing
for its operators. And though we'd never
blame the victims for the soldering
of their bodies into the electrical
grid, mourning them or trying to pull
their remains from a collapsed smoke-stack
in New Madrid is cupping water
in open fingers. But here it is,
silt in my hand, rock and grind gathered

from somewhere I know nothing about except
that it's there: Paducah, Smithland,
maybe what's left of the Lewis farm,
blacking the lines of my palm. And
the water from the north keeps coming,
coming apart, branching over my feet
on the east bank as the current pulls south
toward the ocean. I've just come
from my grandfather's fresh grave, from
watching my grandmother curl around

the grave-marker and dig her hands, pulling, into
the loose dirt. *What a sonofabitch*
I'd thought, watching, *leaving her here*
with nothing, leaving me with nothing but the memory
of a man who'd turn my Miles Davis t-shirt
inside-out while I was in the shower,
and would apologize every time
the black newscaster came on tv.
from cars crossing the bridge, lights skitter
across the water, but I can't see even half

of everything, only the closest waves
and only their southward faces.
beyond them, it's darker and darker,
a lineage of waves I'll never see
the end of and the bulk of the rush moving
quickly below the surface. Once,
waking during a tremor, I hid myself
in the bathtub waiting for the shaking
to stop, waiting for the electricity
to come back on, waiting

to be found. The transistor said it came
from the failure of an ancient rift,
a portion of the plate both field and canyon,

and a surface slippage into the buried
scar. The city will fall in much the same
way, hotel marquees collapsed on the one-ways,
waves of glass, the civil war cannons
buried under tree-branch and mud. Though,
it's a mistake to think of destruction
as erasure, but rather a rearrangement

of the landscape I've driven over
to get here. Who is it that, driving,
crosses the river tonight? And how
do they do it, the structural "M"
stretching so far that the framing lights
are indistinguishable from stars?
I've crossed before, but only
as a passenger and, watching the water
and the passing steel cables blur into
a row of dark bathroom mirrors,

I wondered how anyone could watch
the road. From the back seat, my grandfather
muttered about the "blacks in charge"
ruining the city, about the late 40's
and the restaurant in the Peabody
where "those" waiters knew their place
and my father agreed. Looking now across
to the flood-planes, I know that when
the water recedes, grass will grow,
and the land will be worked until the floods

come again, burying everything.
from the bridge, it would even be possible
to see except that there's no stopping,
only a one-way drive between the girders
into another state. I can see
that much at least, the framework,
the two banks, the traffic throwing
its light against the river...
When my mother found me, face against
the tub, she turned the lights on

and said I should go back to sleep,
but how can I sleep when the ground moves
like water, when water moves under
the bridge, when the bridge carries cars
casting light, cars carrying people

like my grandfather and I casting light?
what then, to see my face in the water,
to watch it break in the dark water's
tide-break, and to feel it soaking my clothes?
Where does this breeze come from, this wind

off the river? This chill that cuts through
the humidity so that my damp pant-legs
tremble coolly against my calves, heat
abating, pricking the water-in-light.
My grandfather once told me how
his assistant Jerson had legs
thicker than tree trunks and how he didn't
know his own strength, how in a fight he killed
a man with a single punch and showed up
at Grandfather's house crying. I know

that then, when he told me, I couldn't
stop laughing at the thought of a weeping
giant, the heaped tangle of scar tissue,
and how he probably hunched like steel,
swaying when he couldn't piece through
how he'd done it before being led away.
But I'll always
be impressed with that punch, the single
extension of a single arm,

muscle by muscle knotting like waves
breaking or lines of cars clicking one
after another over the bridge.
and how, extended, the other
man's face must have immediately blackened,
eyes rolling back into his head. With
that punch, he wouldn't crumple,
he'd slide backward across the floor, all
bar-light and glass-sheen, head dancing out
of consciousness with the force of it.

Hips

All awash, the morning grey with yellow
leaves the shape of a woman's hips, hips
piled up the curb, hundreds of thighs
ankle deep, a few riding me foot-to-car
on my way out, the passing from here to there
like the old poet who, going to teach Lowell, slips,
falls down the stairs, lands sitting
on her feet as she shakes, leans down fumbling
the plastic of her broken cup of milk. She looks
like a child at an aquarium at the water and only
the color of the fish: no bubble or flora, no species
names or reticulated overbite making
a thresher of the mouth. Only there is a look
on her face, the face against the glass, the glass
the colors of light from the surface pulled through
water, a valentine-heart-pink and luminous grey
on the face looking back at the undersea world
raised up, miniaturized, the scale of the slip
of the heel—could you call something so small a body
of water? The puddle, the leaf stuck to the shoe
that sends me sliding down a hill of cold grass, the leaf
a woman's body, her hips, legs, the sweet heart
her ass makes that I've carried from home, one fall
after another, seeing the poet just fallen and me pulling up
from the ground. There's some thing about time
of day, the hour waking with a wife's body, the minute
of seeing it littered in the world,
there's the poet lecturing after she's fallen stuttering
ummm...I've lost my place... St. Gaudens' propped infantry
... the dinosaur steamshovels... yellow, ribbed, dipping
into the lot just beyond the hill and dragging out high
a mess of earth. An obsessive sculptor of civil war figures,
Saint Gaudens raised Lincoln in Boston, in Chicago,
Lincoln in Washington, Lincoln again
and again and at once a cedar box of bones.

Wooden House

And as we clear out the bags
of old shoes, clothes, plastic containers
stuffed with streamers and rubber bands,
the air sharpens while the room itself,
our bedroom, still sits as stacks of photographs
and sweaters, and you tell me you'll rest,
lie down a minute, and as you go to the couch,
I study a photograph of you in high school: hands
up, exalted, you stand in a field, gray light
filtering through trees onto your face. Two other girls
behind you talk, one on each side,
wearing sneers and looking at you from the corners
of their eyes, either thinking that you, alone in that
light, are ridiculous or that they don't want to be
caught like that, here, pulled out and seen, creased and under
the evening light, as people freighted
heavy with the shadows of leaves cast over
the dark parts of their bodies, above their mouths,
just below their eyes.

I remember our conversation
from a few days earlier when I told you most of us
in America could never bear witness
to anything except our own complicity
in whatever was the problem of the moment
and instead of answering, you told
me how everything was built from wood in Norway,
your aunt's house seeming out of a fairy-tale,
but I didn't understand what you were telling me and I watched
as the heavy lines under your eyes each branched
into two as you continued, about the church
there taller than it was wide and the way
the cold air stood still inside it, like stepping
out of a forest you said, and all I could think
about was that you must be tired and how
you should lie down and as I started to say
so, the syllables caught in my throat
and I stopped to listen. I heard a train
passing outside and through

the open window
it filled our room with its whine and roar
almost exactly timed to the sound of our new
neighbor hammering. I haven't met him
but I hear him moving around at night, dropping
things on the hardwood, the grind of a small

drill through drywall, the kinds of sounds
where you think you'll never be able to think
again, or sleep but when he stops I keep hearing
them as though they are a part of hearing,
as though hearing is a part of drilling,
as though I am living in a house made
out of these sounds, and though you can't see it,
I can tell you it's made of drilling and whining
and wind and the chatter of two little girls
not wanting to be seen, though you can't see it,
and I hope that you never see it, I can
see it and, stepping out of it now, in our
bedroom tonight, I can see you lying
in the soft lamp-light resting.

Still Life with Cicadas

A sliver of opal in the blue-black sky,
the moon rests like a rock in the cotton field loom
that as a child you were afraid you might never find
your way out of,

overwhelming but calculable, in the way the pounds-
per-square-inch-impact of a truck slamming into the side
of your car is.

A far-off bird chickers while cicadas saw
out their music from everywhere
below, and the air hangs
with wood-smoke and car-smoke

and the moisture
off the river, making it hard to breathe easy.
The cat watches it all from his perch, following

with his whole head as I move my hands to the left
or right. I'm not sure if he follows my fingers
or palms, or the movements of dark
in the dark, but he watches, and his grey

and black and brown striping divides him
out, disappearing into the colors in the air.
I wonder what Ena is doing,
and what she looks like right now.

Epithalamium in the Kitchen

And your face blurred from the closed-door-no-fan-full-heat-steam
of the shower
and my own
naked water-driven no glasses, two
I couldn't see on two bodies touching

a problem of particular eyes maybe
but there's a real sense it couldn't be other...

the sidewalk from earlier, the one I dragged trash bags leaking
over, their criss-cross trails like wave-ridges in short
wake until the bag opened dropped full water

the way we sit in traffic
on our way to Target for cat food
all hundreds in this city waiting to turn
right on Georgia

a proximity to store and each other
just down the street
to my gut that keeps our collars from touching
our eyes from getting close enough for me to see
yours and mine in them

I'm not saying this right
now, six months we've been married,
the water falling from the bag, the head, the flood
lights of Best Buy right over
the car, I'm not even here

in the shower, the car, I'm not taking out
the trash, don't you get it, I'm taking it out and watching
whatever's mixed together in there, fallen or rotted
from rinds mix out

and inside
the shower again, even with eyes, with glass,
with I, and you will look strange, I look
at you strange in the water, water your breasts, cheeks,
shoulders, chin, water running from each of your hair,
no your no you

just water,

the label on a cat food can drenched
on the sidewalk or fresh in hand from pantry in eye
bright orange with tiny print with *white meat chicken*
is the first ingredient!

printed 'longside but when
open all liquid with flakes and so much so quick
so full it spills on my hand from the can.

Sonnet To Eleanor

Here's the thing to remember Eleanor
when you are drawing
vegetarian hotdogs on your restaurant menu
you must draw the mustard
it must be yellow even if that is the same color
as the bun and even if it doesn't show
against the red veggie mass, you have to move
your hand over it, press the crayon
hard enough to cake it on, trust that each thing
deserves to be put in its place

unless you don't like mustard.
Then, remember that, when singing your song
about sharing rainbows
from your car seat, even when you forget the words
and you start describing the flowers outside
while your mother and my wife talk
and even when those words run out
and you sing about the speaker, the nice boy
who loves the rainbow but shares
because *sharing shows more love than...*

The other morning before work I sat
in a faux-Zen garden behind the office building
reading and it started to rain. After the sunrise,
before work, behind a building, inside a garden,
as the rain was beginning, and I was reading
what does it matter, an idea in the falling rain
in the garden in the back lot of a morning, Eleanor,
remember an idea is a faux-Zen garden behind a government
building. I was sitting in the morning, in the rain,
and men in Switzerland saw for the first time
the particle that gives matter mass.

Vine Ripened Radio

A long teller of stories
the voice of man
sleeps on my couch
in the early morning and late
and the early afternoon and
he stinks of bourbon and when I try
to lift him he falls limp swats
the air hits me so hard my glasses
fall off and my nose
purples like the rising sun
on a stormy day

A teller of long stories of tall
limbs I've seen him laugh
at nothing at all grow wistful
in the falling porchlight telling
a two-house property one by
the water and the family wedding
where husband and wife jumped in together
as the sun was setting The voice of man
and wife hitting the water
two made parts of an other
two glasses held together by a plastic frame

slapped from my face when I try
to wake him Long stories, tall tales
is long tall if you're looking
from above And stories he's partly
asleep from the drinking and partly
from helping me carry this couch
down three flights of stairs
and up a few others A man's voice
from the radio in the bedroom tells
*give kids our vine-ripened canned tomatoes
for Halloween this year big surprise*

be the talk of the neighborhood
he hero long teller of man the voice
of children handling stripped tomatoes
peeled steamed tomatoes so red and soft
what will children do with tomatoes he
never said what I want and
what I want are different
he never said your nose is purple and running

with tomatoes the children have thrown
he never said I can't lift this with you

its hurting my back though as he lays so long
his back spasms it coughs like water with heads
just under it's the sound of a can opening the voice
of the back of man so long in his lying
across the sofa radio static a static radio
what's coming comes from underwater
from under wires vined in just right
and my god it's stupid its so quiet
you could sleep all days
tall yourself through it

Bird in Snow

I wake outside in the rain
beneath a sheet
and tossing it back my knee's
the spot for three giant bees. The others
fly off but one hunched buries
its head and then whole body pain-
lessly inside me. In this dream
I run to the medic who tells me
not to worry, that there's a name for it
I don't remember, look to Wordsworth's
first *Prelude, the life/ in common
things ... the self-congratulation's*
the answer, she tells me this and
the infirmary we're in has the wood paneling
and the counter and then the peeling door-
frame of a general store I worked in
town one summer and the bee's coming
out of my leg like a bird in snow like
a ladle filled with soup the weight
just so that for a second
floats and the look on her face
and the size of the bee and my open knee
not bleeding, not sore, open
like the word "move-ie," I really hear
for the first time waking at home, my wife
moaning it slow in her sleep, an endearing
little thing that moves, a talkie, a pony
or puppy, a CB radio catching trucker-
talk in the background while I sold gum
and dinner to the campers—last night, the night
before, in the bar we talked about the challenge
of film, of moving from one scene to the next, shot
to shot, with a coherence that doesn't draw
the eye to change and we got to
the first scene in *The Werckmeister
Harmonies*, the village boy setting the town
drunks in motion, recreating the revolutions
of the sun, the planets around it, and the moons
around them. There's never
a pause or break, each man placed and fumbling,
spinning and bumping until after
a while, everything's in time.

Psalm

The forest at sunset with leaves
covering the trail with trees laid on their sides
the length of churches with the bare
branches of those standing pointing upward
toward a sky with Ena
and I hiking with a fallen trunk over a stream
black and too slick to walk on but I try anyway
and fall into the shallow water up
to my ankles and the creekwater
fills my shoes as though a window
were open and it were my brother's
baptism and I seated in a gold chair as he
walked down the aisle toward
the old preacher waiting at the threshold
to lead him to the pool outside and everyone's
standing and the old man's speaking
of the spirit purified by ritual and I sat feeling
the cold wind chilling the chairback the cushions
the thin pages of the hymnbook in
my lap the faces of my father my aunt
their skin gone cold and graying as the light
died and my brother getting closer to the water
and the weight of the book the psalms each
psalm the weight in my lap held me
down and I see the names lovers have carved
onto this tree this fallen tree that I've fallen
from and pulled myself back up on two of my fingers
in the right angle of an "F" and it doesn't roll
and it doesn't move except in falling
and trees have fallen everywhere uprooted
made bridges blocked paths lying like
tangles of hair a row of women in front
of me watched my brother and I watched
him over and between and through their hair
and his head was pushed into the water and
we've come into this park for walking to make
a short circle around a large hill but what we've
found is the sun setting on the trees the water
filling my shoes my socks heavier the walk heavier
the forest of logs losing shape in the darkness
my brother's hair wet as he walked
back inside as he sat down next to me smiling

Lincoln Park

Three golden dogs and a brown
one wrestle in the shadow
of a bronze Abraham Lincoln
who pats a slave boy on the shoulder
as if to say *you're free, you're free*

but in the low-light afternoon
what falls of them are two
dark heads joined at the ear, shuddering
as the cardinal-leaves take flight
in the coming storm.
Everything living is silent: cars pass,
dogs snap,

Ena and I talk,
without hearing each other, of owning
a dog, of money, of how we could live
here forever, or I do, because coming
from her mouth is wind-in-leaves,
the heavy hind
of a yellow mutt throwing
his whole weight to pull the brown one
to the ground.

*I've been driven many times
to my knees by the conviction
that I had nowhere else to go*
said Lincoln, scarred,
ugly, but what voice
holds bodies to seats, declaring
and driving

them to imagine the country
as a humane place where people
might gather on a lawn to talk,
a place without dogs? Rewrites
the labor in their hems
as a pair of dark hands tossing satin
into the air on a sunny afternoon?
Would it tell me

that this shadow, these black
heads bathing the violence
of dogs are nothing to fear, that my fear

of them is nothing,

that fear and fear
and a country without dogs
what is a country without dogs
and why not see them? A dog
park without dogs, a dog park with no
trees or grass, without a derby
running full time, stop time
the circuit around it. Here, Lincoln is nothing
without that boy he's laid hands on.
What a beautiful afternoon, what yips
and shrieks in the sun.

Still Life

Standing barefoot on gravel, I watched
wasps thread the cracks in the railroad ties
dividing the property, the way they'd shove
themselves into anything and come out as fast,
their sun-glazed bodies, the bulb-and-barb
for a moment like the handle of a spoon,

a table with a vine, over-ripe pears, the sunset:
at grandmother's house, the setting
was always the same. Cheese cubes, green olives
stuffed with pimentos, oranges, what lives
in any still-life arranged around a lazy-susan
that never quite turned when we tried passing food.

All just past the garage, knives and torn envelopes
and the basket of corn muffins grandfather choked
down when he wasn't able to eat anything else,
the dining room and the leather chair whose gold
buttons were speckled with wear and I stood just outside
of it in the driveway, dodging left and right

as the wasps flew out a few feet and back
to the wall. The sun setting behind the house
laid so long a shadow that wherever I stood,
my feet were dark and my legs, and everything,
the wall included, up over my head. Only the wasps
were moving and even then only a little,

landing again small against the length
of the wood. Afraid of the sting, allergic
to the venom, I couldn't get any closer.
And who would want to? Father came out
for a cigarette and I watched the silver hairs
reaching from the lines in his face flicker as he lit it.

Comic Strip

Wile E Coyote hungry for the whole bird
orders away for dynamite to blow her to pieces.

My father lets firecrackers explode off his palm.
First his hand, then the dark air around it, moving.

When the building downtown is demolished
we see the white light work its way up from the first floor.

Homer Simpson screams *Leaves of Grass my ass*,
kicks the leafy Whitman memorial he's always mistaken

for his mother's grave. When Dad lights them,
I cover my eyes, afraid of the mangled hand

I'll find when it's over. First we hear the charges,
then the building slumps forward, first to its knees

then its head to the road. A charred head,
ears peak from a broken barrel, two blood-shot

eyes stare, blinking as the Road-Runner disappears
over the horizon though, we know, not

off the page, out of the story. Homer's
mother, gone since childhood, returns again

and leaves again: part of a commune, radical activist,
prisoner, homemaker, a cremated body scattered

from a hillside whose ashes ruin a nearby missile
guidance system. My father is trying to impress

me, he says let me impress upon you one thing:
do not close your hand after it's lit. From the street

watching the building fall in the early morning, I share
a joint with an old man who laughs, talks about the houses

knocked down to build the hospital now falling
to make another. There's a certain elasticity

to Wile E's neck as he slides down the mountain
on roller-skis, his head by the road where he started

and his feet far below. Homer asks his mother
Why didn't you stay? Didn't you love me enough?

to which she of course replies *Of course I did,*
It's hard to explain where I needed to go. A police

officer approaches the man and I, tells us to please
step back, that there was always the possibility

that the blast crew has miscalculated, that debris
could really land anywhere in the area. My father

says be careful, says be sure not to forget that I love
you, says look at how the rockets shower apart. The Acme

dynamite-airplanes he's launched pin Wile E
down, his body driven into the earth, his shoulders

pinned by rocks, the rocks pinned by the planes
and he covers his eyes with his ears, waiting

to be blasted himself but it doesn't come; instead they unfurl
like scrolls as his whiskers curl, his eyes black X's, him grinning.

Turning Engines

Range of sunlight obscured, weeper-leaves hang low in the gap of the blinds. There's a distant sound of an airplane, air-conditioning, and a yellow moth drifting in and out of sight out the window-screen.

Here I know that in a year I will have been married for one day, that over the squares of wood-grain my feet will pass differently, though I don't know how, carrying the weight of my body,

through the city and up the stairs and into these lavender sheets, seam-patterns stitched like railroad ties and sheet-ruffle of far hills of home. But the weeper-leaves are so close, so dull, a waxy-white

in the white cloud-light, and wild, without symmetry or balance down the vines, some yellow, dying, and all wet with humidity. Thick too, an almost endless branching, thousands of spines, a thousand sharp noses.

When I was eight, I discovered that my ear-drums wouldn't allow pressure change while flying with my mother. I asked the attendant how she did it, over and over boarding different planes;

I assumed that everyone had the same problem I did. She told me Honey, soon you'll be in a different place on solid ground and by tomorrow you won't even remember how bad this hurts and I looked at the stained "V"

of her red vest, the way her fingers trembled as she pinned plastic wings against my shirt. The pain in my ears made my whole body shake and, looking out at the wing, I saw the turning engine flying us.

Syntax

oh now I say these are the soul a stack of invitations in orange envelopes meticulously lettered and stamped and waiting to be mailed to be stuck in a sack in a truck in the belly of a plane to be flown to Europe to arrive in the hands to arrive in the hands of family though not my family soon to be my family people I will likely never meet but whom by imagination imagination being the concept underpinning the mail the letters the lettering wait what underpins the soul mail body desire imagination what syntax what is the syntax of a woman lettering envelopes as it snows outside the snow touches the ground I think we all understand that the snow covers the grass if conditions are right but what are the conditions the air must be cold the ground cold the ground must lose the heat from walking from tires the heat it gathers from the sun from cars from turning engines must lose it all to hold up the snow we get all this from Whitman but what is the sentence the procession seems clear enough the snow whitening over the sidewalk the road over curbs and cars only contours now in white the shape but not the sentence itself and if death is the mother of beauty what is the mother of this connection is it simply a binary simply singularity sentences don't start from but with a word

Still Life With Long Distance Call and Feline Sleeping

It comes and then it doesn't, the soft coo of the cat sleeping, dreaming of running if her white pedaling feet indicate anything though it's hard to imagine *where* as she's hardly ever been outside. It comes like a shutting cupboard, one with rubber padding along the contacts, the *thwack* of force dispersing like a stepmother's voice from another room. Come'ere, come'ere she cried to us, calling us to watch her cat bring eight kittens, and I can imagine it but won't ever hear it again. They came out in what looked like a sack, a fleshy balloon bursting over and over on the kitchen floor, our groans fading as the number rose.

It goes the way we left that house, the way our parents married, the way we had bedrooms and then we didn't, just a small space with our beds stacked and a tv in the upper corner. It goes the way I'd hit you and you'd hit me back and we'd cry each in different rooms, though I don't remember which, one of us maybe in the yellow room with the crib, the other who-knows-even-where. Once it snowed and we dragged one another down the street on trashcan lids, the handles cutting criss-crosses in the ice as the day wore on and later, we sat together in the bathtub, thawing our extremities. It goes that way, the creeping warmth and the disappearing freeze,

fat as the Mississippi dwindling into a small inlet. The lines were cast and we stood oblivious to God and the force of the current shuttling the logs down toward elsewhere, fishing for anything, for sport, for an excuse to watch the cars cross the bridge. From nowhere, a catfish grabbed your line and you brought him in, pulled a hook clean through his jaw in the cruelty of young wanting, his tail swinging slowly between upstream and down while I sat there, my own bobber still floating. You couldn't get it off, the barb-in-bone, fin-slice and line twist, and I watched and you cried, helpless as it drowned in the air.

Train

On the train sixty feet over Rhode Island Avenue,
I see *Who are you today?* painted across a bicycle path.
an advertisement, maybe, or an existential street artist
working to jar those commuters from one long walk
to another. In the rind of mid-day light,
there's nothing to feel except wind
rattling plexi-glass cold, uneven tracks
shaking the car as the electric rail
guides it forward. It's the pockmarked flesh
of the faux-leather seats, those cratered sections
where the padding is torn out that I find
my fingers wandering. The way
I made it through the first chorus
of *St. James Infirmary* before losing
the melody. Another two bars and I lost time
altogether. Thirteen, the whole auditorium
watching, and I butchered it, had no idea
whether the hollow sound coming from the piano
was a G-sharp or an A-flat, my left hand changing
the key faster than the right could keep it together.

*He's laid out on a cold white table, so so cold,
so white, so fair,* the lyrics I stumbled on but am remembering
now, like the letters laid over the path or, next to it,
the three-story storage-space overgrown with the curves of ivy.
like a secret let loose, the kind that gets somebody killed,
the kind that prompts a friend to scatter
his skull across a neighbor's dining room,
we move underground into the heart of the city,
our small chatter loud over the chatter of the undercarriage.
they didn't show his body at the funeral
but I knew what I'd done, tone-deaf
I told someone who told my friend's lover
about the few nights he'd spent
with someone else. What does the truth come to?
is it that off-note, those gears grinding as everything
comes to a stop? It seems trivial
but when you hear it, your hearing changes,
you walk out into the tunnel's dark
knowing that all you need is the flick of a wrist
or a few words for a train to come.

Coconut Bra

*Ena types a letter as though
she were not herself, soft coral
nails knocking like the rain on the patio,
her fingers spidered,
with a different intelligence
altogether, of the blue-white cleansing mask
she wears, of erasing small lines
and adding new ones as the cream cracks
in drying, as*

later, stepping out of the car
at night, something
trite about the stars being
tunnels of light toward another place,
I get the call
you've asphyxiated in a house fire.

I lose my breath it leaves,
alone
in my body, beneath
the evergreen, the stars,
and it's not
as though no one else knows the loss
of a distant friend, that the wind
stops for me,
there is a silence
on the pavement, every muscle,
the tiny movements in the grass you
kicked in the locked door, Adam
to get the liquor
we'd left behind, and
the next day, fixed it fine, puttied cracks
in the frame, re-drilled holes that were stripped
of screw-lines. You turned to me, Adam, joking
that the door was so fixed the roaches
can't get it, but Adam, they did,
the next morning
I found them
in the scorched sandwich
you'd been eating, I turned
on the water, scattered
legs like Ena's fingers,
spending the space just touched, running
beyond
the laminate, into a crack in the wall.

*I don't know who or what
she's writing, pausing between
words, straining,
and a long break
where the mask's dry
pinks past blush
past pink, red
of fire ants; her skin finally breathing,
taking a heavy breath:*

to breathe, to take,
infinitive, a grammatical function suggesting an action,
even in the past,
always almost occurring, as in *I started to write
the italicized sections above before
I knew what happened to you.*

*I follow her into the bathroom, lie face up on a towel
like when I was a child and the croupe would come,
awake gasping and my mother leading me
to the floor to breathe the hot steam
to breathe again and Ena's bathing and a cat is playing
and I'm singing
about the toilet, singing*

Here are the Mirror:

What great grief God,
where
is the teeth, God,
here're the teeth the grief
not my own, god hear the teeth,
hearer hearing the teeth in the great God, hearer
the mirror here when
my mother lay me down on the bathroom rug, Adam
you were a boy who loved butter, who cried
when shoved in the mud and laughed when cobbler
came out of the fire bubbling. I didn't know
you then except for the weekends that all the families
went away together, and even then only
in passing
the way I know you now,
and my mother tells me those nights I was "beyond
composure," de-composed,
gasping in my sleep. From breathing
as straight as a sentence
to waking for a single piece
of breath
to build a series, a whole, I'd woke

when the wrong verb tense
is employed, the subject dividing or multiplying,
Adam,
there is a simple joy in doing a thing until
you're not doing it anymore,
but my! what is not doing
what is anymore: by naming an event, even in the negative, it becomes a positive, a piece
of language brought forward again and
again, anymore, alive,
any:
an infinite range of whatever is being described
more:
an increase
Adam, after I knew you, before now, I readed about magnitudes
of infinity,
so I know you didn't know your breathing stopped
but lying here I gasp, catching your breath.
I can't stop singing and
soothing Ena mother cat, old roaches' toilet, run and look mask, the
rejuvenate that; Adam, mirror but I:
we are along-side one another, Adam, but without syntax.

Below me, ants carry food
somewhere in the grass. I'm sure they can see;
they find their ways
over the cement lip,
across the impossible grout gap
two ant-lengths long and at least three deep
and I see them single-file-climb up
and down, pincher to poison-sac
reaching again the light
on the walk. Adam, not
talked in years but hears you
stoned, telling me how best to build
a coconut bra, what rope
holds them best together
but I forget what knife
cuts them
best apart
I hears you
like we're talking now, like I'm not talking
to myself, the last of the ants disappeared, and
I sing
heee-rar the meer-ar

so loud the cat's frightened so loud

Ena drags back the shower curtain

and stares so loud

*I wonder what I'm saying,
what are these sounds and why*

*am I saying them, why are
the mirror the hearer*

hears why aren't the

*Adam, the k-
not coming apart?*

Structural Study

After the earthquake my
grandmother told me that
it never feels the way
you'd think it would, she
wanting to know that we're
okay and I not sure
what happened except I
watched the landscape Ena
painted, a grey-green
island in a white sea
and the water shoved so
hard the island turned side
to side and I felt the
floor shift beneath us.

Afterwards we walked a
while through a fabric store,
the miles of muslin and
taffeta in rows of
colors and patterns,
the way spume drags back in
over sand in bubbles
and cross hatching or how-
ever the shore keeps the
small puddles dimpling
its contours until the
next wave breaks, and the
surface changes and though

you can't see that in the
painting, only the scene
and more closely the brush-
strokes and the gaps of dark
brown from what I remember
was there before, a
portrait whose face had not
exactly translated
because of the textures
there before even that,
an etching of two swans
resting their heads like Ena's
hands on a spool of lace.

Weather Report

In the city below sea-level that I've never been to
my brother sits today having lost someone he loves,
today, like every other day, where men and women play
trumpets and accordions, where low brass thumps
and peacocks walk, and dishes clink against tables and wash-sinks
and a strong wind rubs through window-screens
and even far from the water you hear the water
sloshing in the air-turning-over. I bet he can hear
the full of it from the room he's rented, it's a second-story
and across the street there's a beautiful, old
plantation-house with trumpet-creepers climbing
the columns and, in the orange bulbs, humming-birds,
drinking easily. Or so he tells me in the few minutes
we've talked over the last few years.

What distance is the distance in which we
are really not together? In the city below sea level,
below the grey-green sea-water lapping
and spilling at the levees I've never seen,
below storm-plumage, air and water
feathering and feathering as it is just out my window...

In the city below sea-level, it's already spring,
humidity is rising, and though some might think
otherwise, thunderheads roll off the ocean
with no relation to loss, full-bellied in grays
and whites, spilling their undersides through
the city below sea level, and away.

“If you’re not in heaven, gurl

than it doesn’t exist” my mother writes
to Linda who’s just today died
somewhere in rural Maine. “She was found
unbreathing and unresponsive” I read, “it’s my birthday
‘n Mom’s dead” I read “Please pray for her”
written all over the internet
processional, the pomp and circumstance

of a ceremony too big for words or place or
any real decorum: “ If... than it doesn’t exist,
if, than if, than” If mother’s grief [is redder]
than heaven’s cease

If mother’s sad [is less] than heaven’s gad
If if is the hinge then what follows than
in that small room she’s in, if than
holds magnolia branches scratch-
ing the window with mother’s keyboard plucking,

watching animated cows play slot machines,
where’s heaven, what’s heaven,
what’s bigger those big green waxy leaves
or the white bulbs they’ll fall beneath
and are they electric
in heaven, the bulbs

or the cows?

The bulbs then the cows, the bulbs
than the cows, each bulb a red berry in
a cold winter shrub, clustered packed so bright
that the long evening stretched tight out the window
fades like old laundry. For years Linda lived
across the lawn

but now that time’s nonsense, it doesn’t exist, now
there’s the computer screen, pages
of people reaching out, offering flowers, there’s
cows feeding slots, blinking cows
plug bright boxes, a whole world

of bulbs

if I walked in later than this,
if I walked in later then
what would mother be doing,
if I walked in later than mother then heaven,
you’ve walked into heaven,
mother what d’you think to understand?

One Way Glass

Among the bushes and scrub brush
at the riverbank, I read Alcman's long lists
of things he wouldn't fight for,
and the one thing he would, his "heartache

for Hagesichora." Thirty feet
up, a museum's windows reflected
the sun's pink off the water,
and in the slurry at my feet, littered

with soda cans and cigarettes, the same,
the cut and bend of long-paneled, one-way
glass alight in the shore-wash. Small tour-
ships passed, steaming upstream before

floating back down, white paddle-wheels
turning slow in the current's hold.
Who knows why I'm remembering this
all the time now, the cat screaming, scratching

against the sliding glass door as if she
could swim or dance through it to the balcony
outside. I don't know what the apartment
is to her, but it seems a kennel

of reflection and angle: a box of her toys
and the quarter skyline above the dining
table. I think she wants out into it,
to step into the winter air and sink

freezing into the road of sunlight. Hagesichora
was the dance leader, "a racehorse set
among the sheep," and yet, with audience,
she struggled to mirror Agido

and the other girls. What could Alcman
have known of that? Before he could meet
her eyes, she'd moved on to another
step, and another, and there was a war

on, and "our purple finery is not
the treasure that defends us."

Pet Sematary

The dog of my mother's friend
mid-sized non-descript
Flame whose ears long not
narrow thin I ran my fingers over
and pinched feeling for the first time
the body of a woman... that's not
what I meant to say it must have been
fall there were leaves yellow as Flame's
red and coming down
in a slow rain some in spirals
some ends flapping like wings
some a ship steady coming in

and my mother inside reading
and the radio playing the Ramones'
"Pet Sematary" and held between
thumb and forefinger the heartbeat
in tiny blood vessels covered in down

this the day after Flame chewed
the chest of Jennifer Kitty Kat
after I'd found her
rasping and choking blood on her side
and pouring from her mouth
the day after I'd asked the vet to fix her please
and heard the silence of his smile
in the waiting room

he meant nice I'm sure I looked so sad
a red boy in tears and cats blood
stuttering please because a world in order
and science could repair it
build molecules like cooking
a few electrons some nuclei and Jennifer
would breathe again its only a hole a single lung
hole and a few ribs sticking through

and quiet mom led me to the cat to sit
while they put the car to sleep. And sleep
in dreams the length of the cat
of each her 18-year-old whiskers
the car and each her 8 year old pistons
sleep was silent inimitable length
of one breath to the next

and that breath never catching
and that breath never catching
no one told a lie and hearing
I don't want to be buried
in a pet cemetery/ I don't want
to live my life again and the leaves turning
their circles or not I fell
in love I mean I bent down wrenched
Flame's head to my chest and she
struggled, running to the garage to hide.

Plea

Snow on the trees, snow
on the birds, snow falling
in the creek beyond
the lawn, it's eight degrees
and I'm freezing thinking
of nothing, of cooking
the gelatinous slack of pork belly
I got from the butcher.

Snow on the trees, snow
on the birds, it's eight
degrees in the morning,
the snow's covered
the steps I walked
from parking lot to office
and here I've stopped to stand
by the frost on the window,
the faint light inside.

Snow on the trees, snow
in the bones of birds, I don't
know it's true but I've heard
bird-hearts freeze, bird-bones
fill with ice, bird-
belly, Bird-Butcher, I've heard
birds dropping, the crack
of body on limbs falling
where it flew.

Bird through the trees, caught
in the snow, bent bones broken king
Dick III under a parking lot,
people will talk, people begin
talking of histories
unsure of where they're going
as where they've been

I've been in the cookbooks,
I've been in the snow,
the oven to five hundred for half an hour
then turned down
low to render the fat but not char it,
confit the directions call it, I'm rehearsing now,
they sell off the pig wrapped in newsprint

piece by piece till he
is nothing strips of fat and muscle,
what's out come back through flesh,
muscle, a hole in the head

Notes

“Evening Interruption” responds to Edgar Degas’ “Four Dancers” on display at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. “Some Darkness” contains lines from John Ashbery’s translation of Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* (New York: Norton, 2011). “Bird in Snow” contains lines from William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (New York: Norton, 1979). “Comic Strip” contains descriptions from a sub-conscious amalgamation of years of Road-Runner cartoons and specific quotations from the Simpsons’ episode “Mother Simpson” (*The Simpsons: The Complete Seventh Season*. Writ. Richard Appel. Dir. David Silverman. 20th Century Fox, 2005. DVD). “Train” contains lines from the anonymous folk song “St. James Infirmary.” “One Way Glass” contains lines from the poet Alcman (*Greek Lyric Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1993). “Pet Sematary” contains lines from the Ramones’ song “Pet Sematary” (*Brain Drain*. Sire, 1989).