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## ENVELOPE ELEGY

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ENVELOPE ELEGY

By

Caleb Paul Nelson

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

ENVELOPE ELEGY

This thesis by Caleb P. Nelson is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### ENVELOPE ELEGY

By

Caleb Paul Nelson

What would it mean to understand the essence of a discipline? What would it mean to find the center of poetry? I argue in the introduction to this thesis that poetry has no center. One cannot come to know the capital “T” truth of poetry. Our language is too unstable, our intentions too vast, and our experiences are too varied. Thus, I interrogate what this might mean for the writer and the poetic experience more generally. By doing this, I ultimately interrogate what this means for me. However, I also accept T.S. Eliot’s claim that mature poetry has the unique ability to understand the “presence of the past.” The poems the reader will find after the introduction represent my attempt to answer some of these questions. Additionally, the poems in this thesis fall under the heading, “Envelope Elegy.” To me, this title suggests something I think a good majority of poems examine: what would it mean to miss or lose something that is just about to disappear but has not yet done so? These poems wrestle with this element of the human experience or that is my distinct hope.

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## DEDICATION,

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful poetry teachers, to my loving family and friends,  
and to my grandfather who died too soon.

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Elusive Center: Poetry as an Unstable Enterprise

The center is not the center  
- Jacques Derrida

#### I. Examining the Poetic Experience

How does one speak of an enterprise or structure that appears to have no center? How does one write about a discipline or craft that seems to consist of never ending vanishing points? For this is exactly the difficulty in writing about poetry and the poetic experience. Poetry has no center, but how? Lacking some central point or purpose does not mean poems magically materialize. As Larry Levis argues in *The Gazer Within*, a poem may come from “some localization of energy” (Levis 69). However, the writer quickly notices that the poem tends to take on a life of its own. The language of a piece may betray or bend this initial “localization” or center. Pulitzer Prize winning poet John Ashbery seems to share this sentiment when he says, “I write with experiences in mind, but I don't write about them, I write out of them” (Ashbery 1). The life of poetry can begin with a centralized perception of some experience or some “energy,” but then it moves out into the far country of the imagination where myth precedes fact, where metaphor is law.

Thus, poetry, in terms of the literary landscape, moves discursively, subversively, and circuitously. At every turn poetry avoids easy definitions. Poetry, as a genre, works like a game of hide and seek. The moment one thinks they have discovered poetry, it disappears again. Thus, there is no good place to start talking about poetry. As poet Dean Young argues in *The Art of Recklessness*, “no one knows how to write a poem” (Young 2). So we cannot talk about poetry as

a stable enterprise. However, we can talk about what has been attempted under the heading of “poetry.”

Similar to the life of prose, poems tell stories, but they do not primarily concern themselves with story. One could argue that the poet’s primary allegiance has historically fallen to imagery, rhythm, and sound. Concrete imagery and rhythmically pleasing words can carry the writer a long way, but we know this is not the whole story. As Frank O’Hara writes in *Personism: A Manifesto*, “I don’t even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on nerve.” You just go on nerve, I like this idea. This is not to say poetry has no craft. Learning to write along the nerves of psyche and self undoubtedly takes craft. However, this idea that poetry flows off a nerve probably comes across to some as overly metaphorical. Although, if we take O’Hara’s suggestion literally, going off a nerve, the process might be slightly unbecomable, but also it could be pleasurable. Negotiating this strange tension may also be what we call craft. Let’s try something else.

Consider Richard Hugo writing in *The Triggering Town*: “Assuming you can write clear English sentences, give up all worry about communication. If you want to communicate, use the telephone” (Hugo 20). Here’s Hugo’s assertion pushed to the extreme: the act of consciously trying *not to communicate*, one might say, defines poetic craft. The conscious infusion of any technique or convention can probably be considered the poet’s craft. If we are going to consider this act of non-communication as craft, then it can perhaps best be explained by way of example. If in daily living I say to someone,

“I need to go the supermarket,”

then one can reasonably assume I really do need to go to the supermarket. However, in poetry, statements that use language only to convey information, primarily from one person to another,

tend not to constitute the poetic line. I suppose to some extent I'm saying that we define communication through intention, which is partly true. By contrast, Consider James Wright in his poem "A Blessing," when he writes:

"Suddenly I realize  
that if I stepped out of my body I would break  
into blossom" (Wright 277).

What's immediately different about our two statements seems obvious. First, Wright's language is broken by lines, the poetic convention, but additionally his statements do not necessarily tell us something practical nor do they tell us something immediate. As readers we have to imagine and reflect on what it would mean to "break into blossom." Also, how does one step out of one's own body? This, I submit, is the point. *Breaking into blossom* does not necessarily demand to be immediately understood (the immediacy is key here) whereas "the bank closes at 5p.m." or "turn right on Elm street" does demand this kind of immediate unanalytical attention or what I'm calling (along with Hugo) "communication."

Let's return to Hugo again. Hugo also says: "I hope I don't teach you how to write but how to teach yourself how to write." So if there is "a center" in the field of poetry it's the individual, which is a way of saying poetry has an elusive center or no center at all. The self, as scholars Amartya Sen argues (like Sartre before him) "the identity of an individual is essentially a function of her choices, rather than the discovery of an immutable attribute." As Sen argues, we continually choose to create our identities, they are not fixed. Not only are our identities not fixed, but they are caught between so many disparate categories that any hope of finding "the center" is, at best, an illusion. Sen also writes:

“The increasing tendency towards seeing people in terms of one dominant ‘identity’ (‘this is your duty as an American’, ‘you must commit these acts as a Muslim’, or ‘as a Chinese you should give priority to this national engagement’) is not only an imposition of an external and arbitrary priority, but also the denial of an important liberty of a person who can decide on their respective loyalties to different groups (to all of which he or she belongs)” (Sen pg).

Thus, the self remains elusive, free to be chosen, unstable in some sense, pushed and pulled between various categories, choices, and allegiances (all of which can shift at any moment). Our choices always remain before us in a bewildering freedom. This may seem like a departure from the discussion of poetry, but in reality we are approaching one of the more significant debates about the nature of poetry. In some sense, we are still having the old debates about poetry.

Consider the notable Romantic era poet William Wordsworth in “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”: “For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth 3). What’s surprising about Wordsworth and Romantic literary preoccupations is not the call for more “emphatic language.” Instead, what’s surprising about Romanticism is what scholars like Francis Waterhouse now call “romantic originality.” The term “romantic originality” does not mean that Romantic era poetry fulfilled its wish to be original, the term only means that romantics like Wordsworth valued originality in a serious way. In other words, the anxiety of Romantic poetry appears to be influence. Poets like Wordsworth shifted the focus from the rules and history and meter of poetry to a focus on individual “feelings.” In some ways, Wordsworth may be responsible for contemporary slam poetry. However, he might also be responsible for the emphatic poetry of James Wright, who is for me, one of the finest American poets.

Although, eventually the Romantic obsession with originality comes under fire. Modernist poets like T.S. Eliot criticize Romanticism in a number of significant ways. First, Eliot challenges Romanticism's apparent disdain for tradition. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot recalls, "Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know" (Eliot 2). This kind of thinking stands in opposition to Wordsworth and many of his cohort because they tried to get away from the past, these "dead writers." In Eliot's calculation, and I agree, hard-won historical awareness constitutes poetic maturity, "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (Eliot 3). For Eliot, the inability to acknowledge the presence of the past, the poetic "tradition," represents a failure on the part of the poet.

Eliot also goes on to critique the Romantic era turn toward individuality, which has led to contemporary poetry's obsession with "personality." Already one can see we have come full circle to our discussion of Sen and identity and our elusive center. Nonetheless, contrary to Romanticism's yearnings, Eliot argues that, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot 4). Here, I would like to give an example. I think Eliot is correct, but his point is easy to miss. Consider these lines from the tortured English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins in his poem "No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief.":

"My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief  
Woe, wórl-d-sorrow; on an áge-old anvil wince and sing —  
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-  
ering!" (Hopkins 1).

What strikes me about Hopkins's verse, composed near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is its striking similarity to the verse of Hart Crane, who was born in Garrettsville Ohio. Consider these lines from Crane's poem "The Broken Tower":

"The bells, I say, the bells break down their tower;  
And swing I know not where. Their tongues engrave  
Membrane through marrow, my long-scattered score  
broken intervals... And I, their sexton slave!" (Crane 1).

The insistent alliteration of Hopkins sounds remarkably similar to the lugubrious alteration of Crane. Aside from the acute accents in Hopkins, it seems to me that these stanzas could have easily been written by either poet. In this sense, I agree with Eliot. Here we see the ghost of Hopkins carrying the lines of Crane's brilliant poem. Here we also see, instead of a distinct personality emerging, we see a sort of "extinction of personality." This does not mean individual poems cannot have particular qualities or eccentricities, but it does mean that some mysterious quality of language, sentiment, and rhythm must meet or exceed our "dead writers," which is what Eliot argues as well.

So I return to my initial claim, that poetry has no center. Try to find the center of history. A rather impossible task. I do not find the two claims mutually exclusive, first, that poetry has no center, and second, that the history of an art form demands attention. Let's return to Leavis and his "localization of energy" because I think he arrives at an important idea, one that echoes the thinking of Eliot's views on tradition. Leavis's "localization" would seem to suggest that poetry comes from a center. However, a localization in the imagination can still be periphery, I contend. Perhaps a memory or a painful experience can become central in the poetic imagination precisely because it flutters somewhere on the edge of consciousness. Yet this is exactly the moment when

craft can save the writer. Levis explains this idea as such, “The best beginning poets I know are also the most literary: what they demonstrate is a love for poetry rather than a love for themselves” (Levis 69). One danger of confessional poetry will always be this central focus on the self. Paradoxically, this is also the strength of confessional poetry.

The strength of confessional poetry is simple: it lends itself to honesty and to the divulging of “secrets.” There exists power in the midnight confession. Sylvia Plath, perhaps a little unfairly, probably comes to mind when one mentions confessional poetry. Consider these lines in her poem “Mirror”:

“I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.” (Plath 154).

Plath is of course an immense talent and these lines are beautiful because of their simplicity and clarity (and honesty). Also, here the speaker embodies, literally, the mirror, and Plath pulls off this move skillfully. Still, the danger of confessional poetry comes from the ease at which one can slip into sentimentality (that does not happen to Plath here). Historically, as ethically powerful poems have avoided this trap, like those of Hopkins and Crane no doubt.

Oddly enough, the question still remains. How does a love of poetry versus a love of self save the poet? What is the difference? Love of self, in the extreme, has a name: narcissism. To put it bluntly, narcissism isn’t all that interesting. It’s not that we can reduce all of Romanticism to mere narcissism, but love of one’s self in the extreme is narcissistic, which, as we know from the Greek tragedies, is a form of blindness. We want poets who can see. At any rate, a narcissist can probably never read or write poetry. We expect poets to produce complex insights about their own lives, but we also ask poets to reflect more generally about the human condition

everywhere. So if there is a difference between a love of poetry versus a love of self, the binary Levis sets up, this is difference: poets who love poetry more than themselves will produce more nuanced and compassionate insights about the human condition. Dean Young describes another dimension of this love of poetry over love of self. The poet whose primary concern is attempting to produce quality writing, as Young argues, must “be ready to abandon any prior intention in the welcome expectation of what the poem is beginning to signal” (Young 4). It’s a slightly abstract idea and it probably only makes sense to those of us who attempt to make or write or as Young suggests “attend to poetry.” However, Young’s claim here seems to hold water. The poet must be ready, at any moment, to allow his or her imaginative and musical intelligence to take control of the poem. This can happen only when the poet surrenders some amount of control. It is this letting go of the desire to be in control that signals a poet's devotion to craft as opposed to the devotion to self.

## **II. Intellectual Framework**

As we have discussed, the poetic experience comes from some “localization” or “center,” but this center remains elusive. Likewise, dissecting one’s intellectual framework and the potential impact of this framework on poetry is, at best, guess work. This does not mean it cannot be done. It simply means that any discussion of this kind comes with a disclaimer.

During my undergraduate years, writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Albert Camus, and Andre Gide probably most influenced my intellectual outlook. Their strange and convincing mixture of humor, absurdity, and existentialism formed some of my deeply skeptical attitudes. In addition, I had read Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism*. I admired Sartre's calls for responsibility and authenticity. In these writers I saw or found complex validation for things I was sensing at the time anyway: namely, the going sense that reality was or is absurd. If we find

a burdensome freedom and poignant bewilderment at the center of reality, then it becomes hard to accept institutional doctrines and dogmas.

I want to move in slightly different direction. In essay called “Some Notes on the Gazer Within” Levis summarizes an idea by Husserl: “Consciousness is always consciousness of something” (Levis 70). In many ways no pursuit or interest can hide from the poetic experience. The poetic experience is the human experience. So everything influences the discipline of poetry, but poetry does not influence every discipline. In this sense, the poet remains free to explore any and all disciplines. My argument is that it will only benefit a writer to know sociology and anthropology and, say, theoretical physics. Any information can potentially expand the poet’s imagination and intellectual landscape. This, in turn, will almost certainly enhance the landscape of the poetry itself.

I believe in this idea so strongly that I am probably underread in terms of books and essays on poetic craft. I spend the majority of my time reading other things. Often, the intellectual rigor of dense theoretical or philosophical texts fuels my creative energy. Again, this might be what Levis calls a localization of energy. Let’s look at an example. One of my favorite writers and thinkers is French sociologist and theorist Jean Baudrillard. If I read a passage in his work *Cool Memories*, for example, I could probably trace its influence on a poetic line. *Cool Memories* follows Baudrillard during his travels across America, one the first page he writes:

Very Zarathustrian, this silent laughter. Flowers laugh silently. Grass and plants and the whole forest laugh silently. The sky and the stars laugh silently. If there is a background noise to the universe, it is this silent laughter, this inaudible sound like a distant echo of man’s emergence and the catastrophe of the real world (Baudrillard 1).

Baudrillard's poetic rousing probably sounds more like poetry than sociology or "theory." Yet, I take this point seriously even though Baudrillard is commenting on Lacan's conception of "The Real." Beautiful, inspiring language can be found anywhere: sociology, anthropology, philosophy, poetry, etc. Percy Shelley first defined this idea in his now famous essay "A Defense of Poetry," where he states: "The distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error. The distinction between philosophers and poets has been anticipated. Plato was essentially a poet" (Shelley 4). One can easily follow Shelley's argument, Plato's use of excellent use of language, at times, transformed his philosophy into poetry. Anything can be poetry. Similarly, I hold very closely to Theodore Roethke's idea that poets should, "Reject nothing, but re-order all" and his declaration "Say to yourself: I will learn and treasure every good turn of speech ever made" (Roethke 89). I have been repeating these phrases to myself over and over: I will learn and treasure every good turn of speech ever made.

I. Collusion in a Bureaucratic Hallway

*Flashlight*

What we have left without our secrets,  
bits of sweet venom, blackberry and bread.

When I ride my bike for punishment, you  
do not even watch me go. One basket of bananas,

Perugia, pomegranates, none of these things are capable  
of neglect, but I'm going to be honest with you,

my tongue is stupid. My heart isn't.  
I know the beginning of mercy is trauma

*Disasters of Marginal Consequence*

At this bar, on 1st avenue,  
while I eat some crab cakes,

you tell me  
the tongue of a blue whale

weighs as much as an elephant.  
That's crazy, I say.

When you're in pain, you say  
it really hurts. Stupid pain,

I say, stupid hurt. Outside,  
the wind is behaving

like the wind. We sound  
like a bag of wet leaves.

*Where Feet Go*

All these years of silence, a ribbon  
on my tongue. Someone is lying  
face down in the rain and again  
I am not a cauliflower. I am not  
a curse, not a bag of tricks.

Everyone is so creative. At night,  
I clean dinosaur bones with a wooden toothbrush,  
wrap orange garlands around them, stack them  
under my bed, for luck. Everyone is so beautiful  
and everything is so funny and love is a microscope,  
a tiny altar of raptor teeth, my mutilated sister riding  
in a sinking boat. With all this satin in my mouth, it's  
hard to talk.

## *Toast*

Your cool friends are wrong about gratitude.  
They halve the wrong mangos. They find no  
crack in the whip. No one can hear you sobbing.  
No one dings the bell. What if vanity is the magic  
trick the mail rejects for years? Someone reads  
Cicero in the shower, *here's the tennis court that broke  
my heart. Here's the reward for being an asshole. It hides  
in the crotch of the person I loved once*, to paraphrase.  
Let's put it another way. What else am I going  
to do in these final days. Steal pumpkins? Be  
passionate? See the harpsichord  
drowning in the dogwater. See  
how poorly it plays in a bowl.

*Crumpets*

At last, the honey in your head  
is boiling and your murky heart

shoots fire petals into the ashtray.  
They don't tell you this in school:

you can find someone to tell you  
anything you want.

Purple clouds of acid will storm  
over the lake, cautious flecks of jelly

will invade my barren pantry, white tigers  
will parade in my shower and tell me

to fuck off. I've been thinking about  
naming our dog narcolepsy.

I've been thinking of filming a documentary  
concerning the tiny pianist

living inside my ribcage, that kingdom  
of crumpets and lemon bars and narcissism

*Jet Fuel*

The whittlebone drives the shaft nut  
and the sludge pump squeezes goo

through a tiny square hole. Do you really  
think you have a chance? Only guts salute

this gory bag of bricks. Flesh and blood:  
the origin of all sadness. Spindle cranes

rise high above the sleepy town. Blanket  
sunrise, wafer pink, muskrat orange.

The last time we spoke you said very little.

Wave after wave of artichoke hearts. Nothing.  
I still remember the distillery, its vast dome

and encased artifacts. Rows of boiling seeds.  
No one knows what ordinary means.

I don't even want to. Glory glory  
goes the battered broom. Glory glory

goes the greasy garbage truck. Fuel  
for all the things I don't understand.

Waste is the only serious business. I start  
to dissect my organs with the butterknife.

## II. The Coagulated Kiss

*Driving Texas*

Balmy night and the sweat that never left you. Water's  
edge and the sad coyotes sing. God how the prophets  
died, shattered in their beds. Some secrets can't be  
given away. My taste of you is arrow, bent wood  
in a sweet notch. Whenever I let go, you dig  
another well. You laugh at cathedrals of dust.

We never talk about the stars, thank god. I'm glad  
you eat dinner over the sink, I'm glad you wear chaps  
like a prince wearing sneakers. But listen to me now,  
whatever plans you cut, whatever shit you stammer,  
amnesia has the final say. You ache in the winter's heat.  
Where they whip you like a dog. No one is around.  
The cattle cart just trots on by. Wheels and bells  
and whistles. The weirdest jingle in the world.

*Keurig*

Today in Denver the sun is very big. The world looks bright. All the cars buzz around like huge ants smoking cigarettes. Somewhere young energy consultants are signing important papers. Orchestra students lug large cellos on their backs into the music hall. The giant department stores preside everywhere opening their enormous mouths of glass. They drink up all the people. Under the cellophane sky. I'm visiting some friends and I feel like a mountain of empty coffee cartridges. Every time I come here people wave signs telling me I'm going to hell. I wonder what that would feel like. To really be in the presence of a great evil forever. I don't know what anyone is after. I just want to press one button and have my cup quickly filled.

*Embargo*

Don't you want  
this cursed mouth  
of flame

to kiss the sparkling tips  
of your  
brother's pekingese?

Don't you need, suddenly,  
all the bad praise, all  
the voodoo

in the gravy, waiting  
for its birth, patiently,  
like a blister

on your one blue toe, silent  
as the venom in your gin?  
Inside, with all that

machinery, you  
inadvertently name  
your child Nato.

Meanwhile, I watch  
the bright little flags  
on the factory suffer

in the wind. It's a pity  
pity is so useless.

*Cryogenic Freezing: Part I*

One morning, as the soft orange skin  
of the cherry tomato starts to char

under the whitest crisp of yolk, miserable  
and bulbous, I end up saying to my omelet,

“what have I been doing all these  
years with all these frozen tulips?”

It’s not that the spotted  
red hens never cluck

or bawk (they do),  
and it’s not that I can’t pirouette

whenever I damn well please  
as I stack bowls of chocolate

in the freezer. Maybe  
it’s the piles of cardboard

smacked stiff into little rows  
near the multicolored garbage bins,

or maybe it’s the lack of mellifluous camels  
or my oversized antlers caught in every

web, the ones made of miracles, mercy,  
and beer-cheese pretzels, — it’s just that when

I think about a concept like synchronicity, I  
realize there are no simple concepts. There

are no precious geese singing precious  
songs into the tomb of my refrigerator.

*Paper Sail, Paper Sun*

I can only  
guess at your shame: awkward

bodies and umbrellas line the shore,  
Marquez demands searing orange

papayas because the sunlight  
tastes like paper. What rude

dimensions of my plyometric bark  
do you rescind? The kind wrapped

in meticulous frost? I overhear you  
quietly laughing at the keyboard's

silly music, the way it breathes  
its cheetah breath, the way it circles

the lone crest of a sail, tracing  
the safaris of some afterlife.

*Gecko Languages*

Funny how she slips the blade  
into my mouth. I don't even

notice the sharpness, or the damselflies  
coupling on the window. In their wingbeats

the last breath of Borges, his terrible,  
terrible liver. My gums produce

the purple slime he would have loved  
to dream about as I spit hurt

at all my friends. They wave goodbye  
in their monastic robes, twirling thick braided

tassels, laughing at the river of my wounds.  
How long does it take to heal a lacerated mouth

with feather grass? I honestly don't know. I suspect  
years, but now I say:

*So much for your small blue candles, your  
burning elephant trees, your esoteric truths.*

*This is not some cordial banishment, this  
is not the last of the gecko's fiery green scales.*

But you hear none of this  
high on your wooden stoop,

casually admiring enormous bells  
and towers, licking the polished stone.

### III. Revenge of the Strange Ritual

*Dented Silver Trumpet*

This is not the story of my father,  
waterlogged in the basement,

trapped with blue wrenches in his hands,  
equations rising

from his elastic mouth. This  
is not the silence of feathers

in a crown-white grove, some  
turtle green sea. We

face each other like broken shells  
beneath the furnace.

*Parking Lots in Paradise*

For a moment, I press hard on the reality of physics  
and sorrow and the corn on the cob we buy for two dollars.

This must be what's happening to my head, this must be  
what happened to my father.

I feel like jam in a bottle,  
like soup in bread. Hear me out,

even if love suspends the grammatical notes in my  
parenthetical spine, I have to keep going. I have to drive

my beat to shit Ford to the saddest bar in California.  
What if heaven is busted like the sun you can't quite

kick in. I'm tired of mystery. Tired of the theories  
of mystery. One day you tell me that cranial bone

makes devil stone and what's bereft of music  
can never be said again.

*Envelope Elegy*

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, the hotels and casinos of this world never close. Someone is serving a platter of carnitas to customers who cannot remember what they ordered. Someone in leather boots throws dice at red felt. Look over your shoulder. Nothing is happening. Who knows, maybe you finally forget about the past and all that horrifying nonsense. But look at it this way— even the bones in the desert lay choked with mossy lace. Even the inkblack mountains spit fire at your perfect teeth.

*Recovery*

Two clownfish  
are mourning the cathedrals  
of coral

and the soggy bootlaces  
waving like tiny nooses

at the bottom of the sea.

This has nothing to do  
with you, nothing

to do with the magenta pills you say  
cannot break you, not even

your bluest branch. Maybe  
you're right, maybe the tide

in your head will whip the breeze  
off this cliff into some hemispheric

paradise, one where Courtney Love  
plays the harmonica for depressed

orchestra kids all week  
as they try to heal their wooden bones.

The evening blackens, slows. I have not said  
one word to you about Trakl's

mermaid head or his white,  
white shell.

*The Blessing of Not Expecting Anything*

You see me drowning  
under microphones  
and creepy tabloids

near perfect stacks of butterfingers  
and tic-tacs: my face turns blue,  
a ruinous fusion of junkfood

and ropey cords. The last thing  
you said was, *have a good  
flight, eat this tuna bagel.*

A quiet farewell to the slower  
arcs of steel, the bonepile, one  
last analog heaven

of keystrokes? The gracious  
weight of silicone on a string?  
Some flirtatious trance

of geography gives me hysterical  
pause. Wanting and having, I have  
learned, are not the same thing.

Angry pelicans dot this October sky.  
They murder whomever they please,  
cold like efficiency, merciless bling.

*Trailer Park Underwater*

I'm tired of the half grown robins  
you bake in our yellow kitchen, tired

of the maple bourbon gravy. Another  
another break in our water line. Another

slice of bacon quiche. No one plans for the last  
sweetness of coal in a dying town. I guess

I'm no longer bored with the final train  
splitting this skyline, your bathrobe made

of viridian silk. Because if we bruise snow,  
if we bury the tracks with our handbags and socks,

if glory doesn't ring like a bell, then I can't keep you  
safe from the wind's pointed nose, let alone

your mother's  
albino boa.

Twenty years of worship and we've  
nipped not a single demon in the bud.

Specters in the floorboards. Tombstones  
on the hill catching pink light as it passes

through the evergreens as they yellow.

Here, there is no other bird you  
can stick inside your mouth.

*Warhorse*

The storm drain opens it's mouth, flicks  
it's heavy tongue and watches me levitate,  
red and sorry for all the things I've done.

The breeze is oddly cool today. I step  
over the bones of sewers  
in Denver. Pubs

and buses. Pulse of the light rail. Because  
I'm mostly sorry, lost inside the loose string  
on your jacket, a redder corridor, a hallway  
of musical gifts. The daylight kills you, me,

us, one morning at a time. The sun yawns, scratches  
my back. The sun is older. I'm older, washed  
in the happy guilt of a peaceful day. Where

pigeons cry in white coffins. Where mummies  
dream of milk. So we are talking about the funny songs  
in your head, the railroad ties in your thumb, the little

centers of your silver breath. The weight of our plastic lungs.  
Deep in the city, the statue of a warhorse flashes its miserable  
eyes. Our silly fears persevere in weathered stone.

*Meridians*

The long arc of this street stands naked  
behind the whiter elms, some veridical sky,

bluer even now. My mother's face is a small jewel  
at the bottom of a well, the color of mint.

In August, ants crawl over the graves  
of my childhood friends and bone-marrow

buzzes in the trees. Your hands are frail and green.  
Farther still, the giant forests sway and heave

in the cratering wind, Promethean  
as it is and not two blocks from here

the paper mills will turn off their lights  
and darken. Yes, we have made those sacrifices.

And you have beaten down all the improbable  
pockets of air living inside my

satin coat and sometimes I take the antiquated  
plumes of smoke right out of your mouth.

But I digress, because when I walk home tonight,  
I'll cast a shadow, red as a honeycomb, one

that sinks and falls away into each  
and every crevice of the west.

*A Note on Responsibility*

The sea rises up, waves its terrible hands,  
and crashes. It washes over Florida, now Georgia,  
a single concoction of decadence and foam,

a dark cocktail for the emperor. How lucky  
for the swollen gulls blue with nets. Seaweed  
and guilt. This is nearly the land of your birth.

This is mostly the geography of your skin,  
moving, shifting  
like indigenous ice.

Crowded in the theories of mystery, we breath  
in little gasps, the weight  
of wire lungs and so

we say morality  
in subterranean trailer parks,  
we yield to bitter tides.

Look around, the same  
waves crash everywhere. This country  
flows like a river

of nobility. We give it whatever art  
we have, the brave animals  
that live in our bones.

*Pity as Object*

Then father lost a limb,  
but not a real one.

He turned his pain  
into a tiny house,

which was part of him  
but outside of him.

The Victorian siding  
was ancient, cracked.

Inside, a kingdom of darker  
fruit bats reigned: sleeping

shadows that dove over the surface  
of his pool, eating his floating bees,

ants, and gnats. Flower petals too.  
That summer it stormed.

When it rained it would rain  
all day and he would sit

wondering why wood looks wet  
when soaked in water.

So he ran away  
into the mountains

like a sky, clipped  
at the wing. When

he died I cupped  
his ash, tasted

his lemon vodka, placed  
his penis in a paper jar.

*Harpoon*

And now, in the hot dust, near the end of June,  
when heat is tribal, lion-oppressive,  
I am in the courtyard in my crocodile shoes  
listening to you speak of pasture and bad song.  
Here, malice is a flock of lilies passing over  
like drizzle.

This bench is not made of bones, but you lie  
down on it anyway, warm to a nimble finger.  
You ask, how many sailors does it take  
to lift a hammerhead?

I wait for the light to smash your eyes,  
and you are everywhere, embellished  
in tea robes and silver silk slippers.  
The harbor wind snatches up your hair,  
tosses it like a wave, your need for presence  
and punchline, equally insatiable.

## *Atomic Energy*

Here's a proposition: Crusoe  
was an idiot. He held his yellow bib  
to the lightning, muttered something  
about Apollo's prophylactic (the one  
made of snakeskin). And yet, we're  
always dividing our share of the liquor mart,  
always diving like hail in a hailstorm. Famous  
mathematicians we've never heard of have  
determined that jury duty is good for the slope  
of our damaged livers. Good for Gödel's  
theorems about proof and logic and choice,  
however incomplete. People all over the world,  
people just like you and me, think love  
is happening to them right now. Think it's  
caked in their mother's blue rouge. Whenever  
I think about beliefs either being or not being  
axiomatic, I start to cry, a little. I need to find joy,  
you tell me, in the grand adventure of the grocery  
store, in the vociferous clanking of my metallic  
wheels, in the fanatical light fingering its way  
through my blinds. The score-scattered bruises  
of the sun rest over my mattress: the apples, the rue,  
the orange detergent, it's all on sale again, and still  
nobody's buying. Atomic energy, fucking titles.  
Whenever I think about either wearing or not wearing  
blue jeans, I stare at the ceiling for hours, which  
is not as romantic as it sounds.

#### IV. Trouble in the Spanish Peaks

*Requiem for Baxter Lane*

Four corners of sky and sudden breach,  
the open barns crack like easter rice, redder  
than eggs, and from my window

I can see the Spanish Peaks,  
a silent court of stone, heavy  
and wide. Here, the city cuts

back at the wilderness. The little rows of wheat say *order*,  
*order* as my Aussie chases meadowlarks, he doesn't  
catch a single one. He pisses in the rabbitbrush.

Today, like most days, my sister  
peels back her sadness in layers. She paints  
thin figs of pain across the mirror with casual ease.

In this, she has learned a great trick: the magic  
of deflection, the grammar of all bitter light. She rises  
like a purple trout, one that dances high over greener shadows

masking grievous wounds, which is her only chance. My only chance.  
How much or how little we care to risk our foolish qualms with life.  
That is the bullish business of this land, but dear sister,

we have made enough peace with this world. We have paid  
for every broken slight of steel, winged beasts of death. Even now  
redthroated loons cover themselves in mountain ash, crying themselves to sleep.

*Civil Society*

Oh yes, I paint candy skulls on the horns  
of the barn-goat. I stitch my boots  
to the leather tide of the pipelayer's  
final dream: his popsicle lung flapping, frying,  
frowning in the boney sand. These begging days,  
the rabbit's rancid leg, the throat of the horsefly,  
the carnation of its wing. This is what I want  
from the world. This is what I want

from Mel Gibson. He still doesn't care  
about my bondage, but he weeps into the black  
of the blindfold, his mother's nylon stocking.  
Paint thinner, the last hemming of this web, every  
person I hate wearing spider-print. Such is the quasi-  
feudal state of permanent benediction, the goat  
and the hen bound to some cruel characteristic of my  
cousin's second nose job. She's never smelt better.

*The Coalition Against Collective Sadness*

If we were once worried about the rampant use of canola oil in every dish then let us worry no more: avocados are making

a comeback, and if we were once again worried that words limit reality and our special relationships to sex and love, worry no more:

the newly formed coalition against collective sadness has renewed its commitment to fresh salad bars and substantive therapy. Four

days a week. See a local MAD@SAD™ representative. But I digress. How difficult this story. And if we do it at all the Russians will not return our

frozen bananas. Again, this is really beside the point because the psychological health of middle aged/young adults shouldn't really be determined by the various

actions of world tyrants or the global fruit trade. The point is that the last time I saw the ocean I was coming home from Paris and Zurich. I walked down through the ferns

to the sea where the monkeys howl and decided to throw rocks at the waves, which was when I realized I've never actually seen or heard a monkey howl so in truth there

were no monkeys. Anyway I realized one day, years from now, I'll buy a car, probably an enormous blue SUV, one with an onboard computing system called *Cheetah 2.7*

probably, and I'll be nearly sick with joy because I'll finally be able to drive to group therapy (Wednesday's at 7pm in the high school auditorium because the symphonic

orchestra had all its funding cut). Hell, I might even buy a soda from the vending machine. What I'm trying to say is, shit. It's a beautiful day.

*Cry Falcon Cry*

I falcon I cry in this tent full of weather  
maps. The ferryboat goes away.

At the sound of the gong, I panther  
I lie with my dog and his leash.

If I speak like rain to astral flowers  
and lavender kings and clown-faced

woodpeckers, do I  
find relief?

So cry falcon  
cry. Cry

for the easel in Toledo,  
for the stinging kiss

of freezer bags. There is  
nowhere left to run.

*Dublin Port*

We haven't spoken in years. We haven't braved the moonlit taverns  
of bread and wine in years, finally puking laughter into the streets.

I miss the way you could tell me things  
like it cost you nothing. You could exist  
in the bones of your skin without raising a finger.

One morning we stood looking at the beach-white fog  
as it bubbled over the surreptitious hills, stupid as they were,  
beyond a glint of canebrake. We didn't find any solace in the high

cliffs or in the mutiny of seachange. We didn't speak in any clover-kissed  
threadbare language of hope. We sat there as we were: heavy  
like broken stones and the stones towered like ancient gods

unfolding in their prehistoric day. And so, sitting there, trying to press on the physics  
of that place, we wagered that there can be life, but there can also be its opposite  
and no amount of wishing hard into Joyce's tomb or the gorgeous harbor dawn  
would ever change this. None of this would ever change our marble heads.

*Armadillo Rain*

You step right into the silo ring, your newest song  
in the blue disco box, candy rhythm, candle slow.

There goes another  
electric fetus. You are not coming back

with a basket of love beads. I have songs of my own.  
Lateralus, for example. And still the goon squad fires

at watermelons. Pop goes the metal gun. This  
is a question: see the barnyard racoon dead

in the wire crate. This is it.  
Feed the ivory cobra your broken

tulip glass. You're not hungry. You're starving  
as the weather. Armadillo rain on the bamboo patio.

You cut my slimy fish on a sandalwood block  
and I clean the guts from the knife-edge,

but there's no sheetlightning, which, in the face of this liver,  
this purple gill, is another kind of inauthentic answer.

*Sneezing in Zero Gravity*

Here's the best case scenario: I sacrifice the gecko's brain to the desert, only then the snow. You can't play the bongos with frozen wheat. You can't find cosmic love in emergency waiting rooms, unless you do. Maybe psychic pain, maybe violet gums, maybe you whisper "chocolate mousse" and "winter garden" in a winter garden. In a winter garden of whales. In a winter garden of whales and ash, and poached eggs. In a winter garden of whales and ash and eggs and now this, one armadillo lizard cradling its lonely cup of guilt.

Now this: perfect pink umbrellas in a marble hot tub. God, now this: the zoo keeper tallies up his bill. A pitbull walking a lobster on a leash. Neil Armstrong frying a mountain of sugar ham. Neil says,

*If I ignite the old war between pancakes and abstraction.  
If I destroy the lonely forests of paradise. Or something.*

Neil floats above the rain over the valley, over the lake, this circus town. His light show of forever His head like one silent particle of space dust.

*Indispensable Tales of Woe or Gallatin River Valley 2013*

Driving past the once again beautiful sage-green river  
I pretend to shrug off my loneliness: “not that I

have it so bad,” is what I say out my window,  
casually addressing the huge stone boulders  
meditating like ancient monks.

You went away to California  
forever, along some bright floral  
coast, so you could sing Pearl Jam  
in a topless Jeep Durango. Forever.

I decided I would only wear coats  
made of sunbears and lizard skin  
to keep your syrups stains  
off my rusting track.

And later I decide to wax my feather  
table and bleach my studded belt  
and polish my rubber snowboots  
with really expensive gin.

It didn't work.

Your stupid name: *Hannah. Hannah.  
Hannah.*

*Swimming in the Signified*

If nothing else, this hotel keeps an immaculate  
garden near the central plaza where two bronze

lions guard the entrance and where guests dine  
on the outdoor patio, wild oysters and gin martinis

under the spider palms. The fronds sing aria or dirge,  
or ugly rock n roll. Everything here depends

on the ocean's breeze. I have a fetish  
for sand and pork shoulder. This is a fact:

I worship your stupid tan line and my  
worship feeds my hunger and my hunger

breeds in the trash, brilliant waterways of guilt.  
This is my blockheaded approach to romance,

the taste your broken toe. I want to hear your name,  
swim in the slop of its canal. I want the seven fucking

seas to drown this town in a tidal wave. I don't  
want to know what's coming.

*The Origins of Feeling Only Somewhat Strange*

Sometimes I tell you old songs  
cure sadness in Burma, but wtf

do I know about Burma? Imagine now  
the sound of one thousand tiny fossil fragments

falling to the floor. Imagine darting through the streets  
like a fish made of thick violet wires. We're so close

to fully understanding the brain, except, not really.  
I want to dig around in the trash and announce

the smell of chaos in sorted plastic bags. I want  
to go into the mountains and photograph

all the sleeping rams. Snowy horns sheltered  
by ancient rock, the trick is not to weep.

## V. Digital Dogwater

*Barnes & Noble*

I survive the anthropological speculations  
of another day. Working in a bookstore

is like *so* fun. A swell time  
you might say. Words are things

you cannot be deprived of unless  
Dan Marino punches a hole in your

throat box. And trust me, Marino wants  
to punch a hole in your throat box.

Dogged mundane hours, but for a moment,  
near the acrylic displays and the magazine

racks, suddenly, I feel like pure possibility.  
Suddenly, Katy Perry sucks a little less,

the chocolate muffin tastes a little better.  
I feel weightless as if I might rise, even fly,

as if the ceiling of this building might effortlessly  
detach itself, go hurtling off into the sky and I'd

go with it. Then, my boss walks over  
and shows me a book about jellyfish.

*The Fluted Song of Spring*

I must have looked as lost as trees in snow.  
I must have croaked the fluted song of spring.  
When I die inside the mountain's velvet heart,  
I'll breathe like wheat and whistle as I go, which  
simply means this crest of time beats slow  
and burns like little fires on little wings, red  
as the barns we hope will fill the summer dawn.  
Who are you to look so bright on this scrape  
of moon? To be so calm like a palm  
inside this brass spittoon.

*Muffin Pan*

Figure out why cholera is killings us you  
can't or we couldn't once. We think or thought

it was in the air. It wasn't. I suppose

I should praise that mixture of shit and water

but it doesn't feel right. I suppose I should  
stack one thousand stones on my head

and drown like a rat in a pipebeam. Roaches  
crawl on wet bricks crawl on wet stone. One

thousand years of suffering is still not enough

apparently apparently 10,000 days in the fire

is still not enough. I look over my shoulder and I  
say nothing new. Because then and then

you say the gift or the point of this is not

throat pain.

*Monument (Blink Blink)*

love in the loveless riverbed we stitched on a blanket once  
in a photo cool memory of sunday ham and KFC which is  
more and less sad than it sounds on a strip of ice cream parlor  
and sunglass hut like we're ha ha ha in the congo running off into  
the canebrake somewhere warm sitting on a mountain of rotting peaches.  
we're not really friends. we're not really anything anymore, sons, daughters,  
mothers, brothers, fathers, if inevitable then say or breathe if I could breathe  
I could rest or stop the furnace this infinite regress of splitting the little eaves.

*fusebox*

You can only fake an orgasm so many times  
in outerspace. Gravity puts on her shoes, she  
whispers something about the miracle  
of shaving cream. Signs

and wonders. Republicans dance like waves  
on the sea. I want to be freer than you. I'm  
asking, finally, for a fusebox in my chest, above  
or below my diaphragm, what's the difference?  
Do you stuff bonecubes in peppered chickenwings?  
I do and I sleep on a three legged stool by the fire  
forever.

*City Hall*

Under the umbrella's shade  
I sip coconut water. Each time  
I tilt my body toward the ceremony  
of lunch. Knives, napkins, and ice cubes  
lightly chiming. The streets is made entirely  
of cloth. Ribbons fall in the city square,  
red and orange, purple and teal, because  
confetti displeases the mayor. One last  
ritual, creatures are dying far away from here.  
Our waitress: yellow tassels, braided hair, blue  
rubber bands on her wrists. She brings us fried  
mushrooms. They look like tiny brains  
baking in a paper basket.

*The Endless Deterrence of Miracles*

Dour grass, graveyard, apple bone.  
One might call this love.

Or one might say: your spike-studded  
belt turns my faith to smoke.

Miracles, the tricks of minor  
hairdressers. Now,

I shall patch together  
the ignorant threads

of my elbow, this time,  
with a squirt gun.

## *Wyoming*

I walk my australian shepherd along the edge of saddlehorn ridge, it looks like a purple nose. To the west, a rotting shed is being filled with lime from the quarry. As I trace my hand across the frame of the shed, in a bonesaw wood, in a crow-beaten world, near the poisonous water, near the low-lying ravines piled high with metal junk, near the boiling rivers of gooey ash, near the lonely villages of stinking spit and cattle cud, nothing happens. Nothing happens in a country of sacked wagon trains. Nothing except the rodeo. And the lights of the rodeo are shining even now. An army of sleeping hats under a shimmering electric sign: WHEN YOU'RE HERE, YOU'RE HERE. The bullet riddled train of feathered spears does not stop for years, it burns like wheat like in the desert, it sends sad pillars of smoke to search the face of a moorish sky. Quirky riders dance in poofy gowns. We join, finally, the ambling platoons stepping in long lines like heavy trees to play one last round of balloon darts.

*Mammoth Day*

Behind the fence, the train halves my neighbor.  
Just this morning, he spray-painted his skateboard  
maroon and silver, sang a song about Jupiter and bacon  
salad. This has nothing to do with insanity, joy. Nothing  
to do with his girlfriend, who in mourning tattoos colorful  
mutilated flamingoes into her wrists. Things get better.  
Grocery store scene: live band playing “Hey Jude.”  
Drummer cries out, “Sing along, everyone in  
the produce section!” In the parking lot I  
smash my grandfather’s only perfect silver  
watch into the cement as hard as I can.  
It splits like a head of lettuce.

*Costa Mesa, 2009*

This beach is all onion and spinach, the frying  
omelet of memory, and here you are, in the foam

of the fattest wave. You sag before you tumble,  
the sea turtles glide below the wreckage

of wooden ships. Dark plots of sage trees sway  
in the oceanic wind as if all prophesy were terrible,

sad. I'm not afraid of you anymore, I'm not  
afraid of your iron chains. Someday, I'll relive

that heat as rain: the redemption  
of those burning palms, muting

the merciless sand, some final death  
of water, the birth of the air.

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