

2013

Ghost Work

John Minser

Northern Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.nmu.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Minser, John, "Ghost Work" (2013). *All NMU Master's Theses*. 464.
<https://commons.nmu.edu/theses/464>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All NMU Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact kmcdonou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.

GHOST WORK

by

John Minser

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Graduate Studies Office

2013

ABSTRACT

GHOST WORK

by

John W. Minser

Ghost Work is a collection of poems united by the exploration of a common theme and aesthetic: that of the significance of the domestic sphere. Following poets such as Hart Crane, Robert Frost, Theodore Roethke, and Jack Gilbert, and novelists like Mark Z. Danielewski, *Ghost Work* explores the idea of home and the primacy it assumes in the emotional life of many families. Despite Leo Tolstoy's claim in *Anna Karenina* that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," part of the premise of *Ghost Work* is that no home is just like any other. Therefore, the collection uses a multivocal strategy to explore multiple stories, characters, and domestic occasions, each with its own complexities and difficulties.

The aesthetics of *Ghost Work* center on short, vivid poems with concrete imagery forming the basis of each poem. The poems frequently utilize turns, and the development of characters and a sense of movement are crucial to the overall effect of the collection. Some sense of continuity is also important: though all of the poems are linked by thematic elements, some are also connected by a recurring character or exploration of similar questions and exigencies. These aesthetic and rhetorical movements were selected to best illuminate specific aspects of the content – a focus on the out-of-place in the domestic world, the speed with which home life changes, and the way that all homes have some similarities, but ones that aren't yours still manage to feel so alien.

Copyright by

John William Minser

2013

This book is dedicated to all those who have shown me the way home.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the following magazines, in which the noted poems have appeared:

DIAGRAM: "Ghost Work"

Eunoia Review: "Why Magic Happens in the Woods"

Ghost Town: "Stock" and "Salt Vanilla"

Lifelines: "Love Poem" (as "A Breast Poem")

The Monarch Review: "Astronomy" (as "The Astronomer's Lament")

Scholars and Rogues: "The Mining Town" and "Blood and Calendars"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Body:	
Chapter One: Snow Gallery.....	15
Chapter Two: Mihizashi.....	38
Chapter Three: Villain Song.....	47

INTRODUCTION

I. Thresholds

Home is so sad.

At least, Philip Larkin would have it so. Poets have written about home so often that it feels dangerous to retread that old ground, and yet, *Ghost Work* represents my attempt to open this attic door and rearrange some of what other writers have left behind.

Respectfully, I find myself disagreeing with Larkin's wistful and beautiful poem. So too, I can't bring myself to agree with the often-sentimentalized picture of home espoused by other writers. Even fine poems like "Papa's Waltz," by Theodore Roethke find it difficult not to sound a sentimental note when remembering fond childhoods. And in this spirit of rejection, I feel compelled to throw out the vitriol levied at the domestic sphere by writers like Sylvia Plath, who never found comfort in that place or with the figures who inhabited it.

But maybe it is wrong to say that I reject these poets' conceptions of home. Rather, it's that I instinctively agree with each one – perhaps too much. When I read Roethke (You beat time on my head / With a palm caked hard by dirt, / Then waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt), the tiny, perfect memories of home seem so obvious, so powerfully realized, that it would be outright dishonest to reject his loving attitude toward his father and his youth. Larkin's empty house and Jack Gilbert's long strand of his dead wife's hair in "Married" also recall an undeniable truth – the inevitability of loss and the upcoming day when our homes will be silent. And when Plath rages against her father in "Daddy," it's impossible not to remember that people do grow up under the sword of absent, cruel, and abusive families. Home can be a dirty word.

Ghost Work is a multivocal work about home, a book that raises voices from the past and the present to create forty-plus homes, or at least forty characters in search of a home. Rather than move from voice to voice between poems, however, I have attempted to create short poems that twist these disparate strands into one strong narrative line. Each poem is a space on which a complicated home is built, populated with characters who love and fear, who cherish and abandon, who hate and yet cannot forget.

One such character arrived fully formed in this story, an ex-gangster from Japan whose new life in the United States has left him unable to develop a permanent and stable home. The Mihizashi cycle of poems, which anchors the center of *Ghost Work*, details a character whose primary difficulty in establishing a home does not lie with others, but with himself. His memories push him across the Pacific Ocean, and yet his pride in his youthful crimes keeps him from letting the past recede. As William Faulkner observed, “the past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

II. Other Peoples’ Houses: Writers on the Concept of Home

I have mentioned Larkin, Roethke, Plath, and Gilbert as examples of writers whose poetry on home prompted the clutch of poems that became *Ghost Work*. They certainly influenced my aesthetic, especially Gilbert, whose poems rarely exceed one page, yet which manage to transmit considerable emotional energy and logical pleasure as they continually surprise the reader. When the speaker in “The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart” moves from “How astonishing that language can almost mean, / and frightening that it does not quite” to “What we feel most / has no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses, and birds” he goes from an intellectual curiosity about language to the visceral need to express a deep and abiding emotion, tinged with a sorrow that knows that he will never get it quite right. Gilbert’s poems describe a great heart whose positive memories have been contaminated by loss and age – a

complex system that helps to inform my work's attitude toward its speakers.

Other writers, though, have shaped my thinking on home and on poetic aesthetics. Mark Z. Danielewski's powerful postmodern tale *House of Leaves* imagines the home as an infinite maze of corridors, dotted with recognizable but moving landmarks. The tangible reality of this no-space in between the walls of the house quickly becomes a metaphor for the interior landscapes of the dwellers in that home. The owner of the house, Will Navidson, tells a documentary filmmaker, "If one day you find yourself passing by that house, don't stop, don't slow down, just keep going. There's nothing there. Beware." Though "beware" and "there's nothing there" sound like contradictory pieces of advice, it's precisely the emptiness of the home and Navidson's home life – the vast and enticing emptiness – that constitute the greatest danger in the novel.

House of Leaves also served to spark or solidify some of the connections that I make in *Ghost Work*: the totemic quality that the home has for some many people, the magical qualities of the liminal area between physical space and emotional space, and the way that literature can help to elucidate or define these relationships – the title is a pun, after all. The house, for Navidson, is also the home. The physical bleeds into the emotional and social, and the landmarks of the house, meaningless in themselves, take on a significance that sends Navidson on a hunt for "meaning," wherever that may be.

Bonnie Jo Campbell's Michigan-centered short story collection *American Salvage* also provided incisive models of homes in distress. One story, "The Solutions to Brian's Problem", masterfully captures the feeling of living in a home struggling with secrets and drug abuse: each "solution" is wilder and more violent, until the surprisingly submissive last "solution" lets the readers in on the way that Brian actually approaches his wife's addiction. The emotional and psychic damage done by events beyond the narrator's control forces him into fantasies of

reasserting the ability to steer his own life – though those fantasies have grown gross and violent. The monster-making capability of home is presented starkly, without pretensions.

Robert Frost's "Home Burial" similarly presents a home in crisis. Crucially, Frost's poem creates a home with a specific problem that manifests itself as a general malaise – this connection between the physical presence and the emotional one acts as a model for Danielewski and my own work. The main characters talk past each other, each fundamentally misunderstanding the emotional turmoil that the other is suffering:

"What is it – what?"

'Just that I see.'

'You don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me what it is.'

'The wonder is I didn't see at once.

I never noticed it from here before.

I must be wonted to it—that's the reason.

The little graveyard where my people are!

So small the window frames the whole of it.

Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,

Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight

On the sidehill. We haven't to mind *those*.

But I understand: it is not the stones,

But the child's mound—'

'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

At the core of the family's resentment is a key difference in the way that the father and

the mother grieve. The lost son deserves a more tangible grief in the eyes of the mother; the father's labor is not enough to process the son's loss in her mind. This poem is especially important to me because of the differing ways in which the relationship is interpreted – when pressed, readers feel differently about who is “really” at fault for the deterioration of the parents' relationship. Who readers agree with speaks volumes about the way that reader processes grief, loss, and relational dynamics. I hope in my poems to capture some of this ambiguity of responsibility.

But, as described in section I, I have no interest in presenting home as a place solely defined by its negative relationships. Sad stories are not enough to accurately describe a home – despite the august reputation of the speaker, *Ghost Work* also rejects Tolstoy's claim in *Anna Karenina* that “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Happiness is elusive, often incomplete, and occasionally only recognized in hindsight. If there were indeed only one path to happiness, then we would be forgiven for thinking that happiness could not possibly exist; the homes people have established differ too greatly.

One happy family that models the voices in *Ghost Work* is the description of the Clutter family from Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Though their life is not without difficulty – Herbert Clutter's success is achieved through hard-nosed business decisions that make him no Pollyanna figure – they nevertheless do not manifest the desperate or despondent sensation associated with an unhappy family. This type of happiness is integral to the project of *Ghost Work*: even happy families are not fairy tale families, and the realist portrayal of the Clutters accurately models a family that, at least internally and at least temporarily, has achieved happiness.

But of course, there are families that, while not unhappy, are also not truly happy. These models perhaps best describe the project of *Ghost Work*: moments of change, conflicted priorities, and the sweet sorrow of having attained something that cannot last. Dylan Thomas, in

“Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” shows a speaker who cries out against his father’s death, lashing out at all those whose deaths fail to achieve meaning. To the speaker, the father’s death seems equally meaningless, and thus the poem stands as a frustrated howl of anger that his father seems so ready for death. The speaker needs his father, and the father’s willingness to “go gentle” seems fundamentally wrong, when so many others have struggled to hang on to a few more days of life.

Hart Crane also conjures the image of a once-happy home in his poem “My Grandmother’s Love Letters.” Though memory – and its dissolution – constitutes the main tension of this poem, what is remembered is happy: love, family, and a house that has endured. Despite Dante’s mournful observation that “there is no greater sorrow than thinking back upon a happy time in misery,” to accept Dante’s maxim is to accept that happiness is itself an affliction, since it will fuel greater pain in the future. The titular grandmother actually cannot remember her happier days, and the poem’s speaker’s sorrow comes from both the loss of the primary happiness and the loss of the memories. It is a received sorrow, the secondary sorrow of one who observes something he cannot change. Though Crane’s lines admit sorrow, they do not invalidate the once-happy character of the home or the value of the memories that the speaker now possesses for his grandmother.

Finally, Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Mr. Flood’s Party” is also the story of a man who has also lost his once-happy home. Flood lives alone and without friends, but his loneliness is shot through with old memory, and when Flood “raise[s] the jug up to the light” in a toast to the moon, the gesture is simultaneously sincere and ironic. Flood knows that in town, “strangers would have shut the many doors / That many friends had opened long ago,” a meditation on the loss that makes growing older difficult but does not devalue those days of former friendship. Though loss is undoubtedly painful, there may be some merit to the idea that lost happiness is

better than happiness never achieved at all.

III. Raiding the Pantry: Aesthetics and Technique

Poetically, Kay Ryan's short, emotionally active, and surprising poems have encouraged me to pack as much logical and emotional tension into my poems as I can. When I read Ryan's poems, I am amazed at her ability to make her readers care about the subjects while also reserving room for a turn at the end of many of her poems. From "Blandeur,"

Make valleys
slightly higher,
widen fissures
to arable land,
remand your
terrible glaciers
and silence
their calving,
halving or doubling
all geographical features
toward the mean.
Unlean against our hearts.
Withdraw your grandeur
from these parts.

This poem begins with large-scale, imaginative images, and in the final few lines, becomes personal – vulnerable, even. My poems, like Ryan's, rarely exceed one page of text. I find that this is the ideal length for creating a *sense* of home that can narrow to a personal revelation at the end of the poem. Almost paradoxically, I find that confining myself to select, specific details makes it easier for me to create a picture of a single, unique, and differentiated home.

I believe this is the case because of the way home works in the mind. A home represents a lifetime of collection: each object reveals something about the person who lives in that space, and whether we are guests in another's home or merely occupying our own space, the details that catch our attention necessarily take on a significance beyond the personal. The key details

tell us what is out of order, what is in flux, or what is hidden. Since everything in a home reveals personality, the truly important objects and configurations are important because they reveal more than they are meant to. Like the clink of glass in a toilet tank or the glint of metal in an underwear drawer, it is the out-of-place that attracts and explains.

One example of a poet who understands the importance of the out-of-place is Robert Hass, who writes in his poem “Old Dominion” that “everything is easy but wrong.” Hass is not describing a home, specifically, though he is dealing with a place that is very much like a home: an old alma mater. In the case of “Old Dominion,” it takes the speaker some time before he realizes what is out of place – Hass repeats the phrase “tennis whites” three times in this short poem, though in the final instance he breaks it over two lines. It’s not what’s present that bothers the speaker of “Old Dominion,” it’s what missing. Despite being a Southern college, Old Dominion is conspicuously white. This detail, combined with the now-charged name of the college, reveals that the campus does indeed represent an old dominion: a dominion of privileged, exclusive, white children of power. The speaker’s complicity in this structure complicates the whole of the poem.

My poetry also seeks to avoid unnecessary abstraction, instead preferring to create ambiguity (where appropriate) through the images themselves. In this, I draw inspiration from Carl Sandburg, who makes general points about his subjects through highly specific images. In this example from “I am the People, the Mob,” the force of labor history is embodied as multiple forms of natural power:

I am the seed ground. I am a prairie that will stand for much plowing. Terrible storms pass over me. I forget. The best of me is sucked out and wasted. I forget. Everything but Death comes to me and makes me work and give up what I have. And I forget.

In this example, when abstraction (“the best of me,” “everything but Death”) does begin to enter into the language, it is as part of the process of forgetting – the People, through forgetfulness, change from a fertile force of nature to an abstracted, weakened entity. My poems also strive to put necessary abstractions in the mouths of characters that *feel* abstracted rather than burden the poetry with authorial generalizations.

Finally, I hope to bring imaginative power to the often-overlooked domestic sphere. The images of home number among the most commonplace: the turkey trimmed for Thanksgiving, the couch facing the TV, the unmade bed. These conventional objects appear on television and in movies as stock signals, almost stereotyped. But home is more than that to me – it is the unusual, the individual, even the magical. To draw the appropriate comparisons – to raise home to a level of significance and transcendence rather than drag comparatives down to the level of the “merely” domestic – I look to writers like W.B. Yeats, who compared his love to the god Eros “hid[ing] his face amid a crowd of stars,” and Wallace Stevens, who in “Sunday Morning” takes readers on a spiritual journey across the River Jordan without ever leaving a woman’s solarium.

Poetry, to me, is about allowing the small and the forgotten to take on the mythic proportions which they have been wrongfully stripped of. Perhaps not all commonplace things need to have their grandeur restored. Home, however, is a concept that we invest deeply with importance until we have one. It is amazing how quickly we take it for granted. My poetics seek to extend the impact of the small.

IV. One Home

The influences and intentions described in this essay cannot remain mere guiding principles; the poems in this volume are an attempt to reify my beliefs about home and poetry into something concrete. To illustrate how I hope to realize the lessons of other writers and my own reflective process, I turn to a short examination of one of the poems that helped to bring

this book together and helped shape it into the examination of homes and aesthetics that it has become.

Ghost Work draws its name from a poem near the end of the collection, whose speaker looks back on his childhood with decidedly mixed feelings. The poem begins with a statement designed to be attention grabbing: “Mom cuts my palm / with an old precision”. This line grounds the poem in the area of domestic and familial relationships, while also introducing a first-line tension and a touch of mystery. Whose mother cuts their hands? Why the “old precision,” implying both intentionality and practice?

When the “life line” appears in line five, the palm reference begins to make sense: the mother is trying to manually change the speaker’s palm reading. There’s a kind of backward-causality operating in the mother. Her knifework is meant to change the son’s destiny, though tension remains in the fact that the changes will occur on the mother’s terms. The next stanza maintains this tension, from the mother’s backhanded concern about the speaker’s “malevolent” birth to her belief that the speaker’s loves will not be “manageable” without her intervention.

The last stanza reinforces the tension between the mother and the speaker without fully resolving it. The speaker’s plea for “luck” reflects a fear of a life completely planned out by his mother’s higher power. The final lines of the poem – advice directed by the mother toward the speaker – maintain the irony and the ambivalence generated earlier. Though she suggests that a life managed by choice is better for the speaker, the implication is that it would be better for him if *she* managed his life. When Antonio Negri claims that “Power (*potestas*) [force] is superstition, the organization of fear, nonbeing...” that works toward “legitimation of command,” he does not have in mind the mother of “Ghost Work,” but she could very well have him in mind. The advice – to break free of malign influences – takes on a significant level of irony

when coming from the mother.

“Ghost Work,” the poem, is constructed according to many of the aesthetic principles outlined in this essay. It is short and linguistically dense, totaling less than sixty words. Despite this brevity, the poem tries to delve deeply into one, unique domestic relationship and outline the parameters of one family. It uses images as the primary vehicle of storytelling, staying largely away from abstract concepts – except for when the speaker begs for luck, his way of ambivalently fighting back against his mother’s very specific plans for him.

Furthermore, the very premise of the poem is based on the idea of the out-of-place detail that reveals the essential truth of a situation. The characters’ confusion regarding the best way to manage one’s destiny, and who should be in charge of managing a destiny, mark their essential uniqueness. They behave according to a set of rules that verge on dream logic. And yet, the events of the poem matter greatly to the characters, whose small home-dwelling relationships take on cosmic importance in the schema of a single life.

This poem, then, can stand in as a model for the book as a whole. “Ghost Work” is the sketch of a character and his relationship, both fraught with ambivalent feelings and unusual activities. The details that matter are the strange and the personal, the mystical and the physical. In this book, I want to tap into the way that the small and outstanding elements of home make me feel, and I want to provide readers with a window into the homes of multiple, fully realized characters. Though I have nothing but positive associations with home, the fact of the matter is that many people hate home, or fear it. The characters in *Ghost Work* acknowledge the divergent, thunderous emotions that constantly vie for our attention and our direction. They do not always make the best choices. But this, too, is a factor in the representation of a home, and a feature of the search for a place that we can call ours. Desperation drives some characters, love others. They are afflicted with indolence, desire,

frustration, and hope. In short, *Ghost Work* is the story of home because home is the place you go back to – whether you want to or not.

Thanks for reading.

John Minser, March 2013

Bibliography

- Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno: The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. Bantam Classic, 2004. Print.
- Campbell, Bonnie Jo. "The Solutions to Brian's Problem." *American Salvage*. Wayne State University Press, 2009. Print.
- Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. Vintage International, 1994. Print.
- Crane, Hart. "My Grandmother's Love Letters." *100 Great Poets of the English Language*. Ed. Dana Gioia. Penguin Academics, 2005. Print.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. Pantheon Books, 2000. Print.
- Frost, Robert. "Home Burial." *100 Great Poets of the English Language*. Ed. Dana Gioia. Penguin Academics, 2005. Print.
- Gilbert, Jack. "Married." *The Great Fires*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Hass, Robert. "Old Dominion." *Praise*. Ecco, 1979. Print.
- Larkin, Philip. "Home is So Sad." *100 Great Poets of the English Language*. Ed. Dana Gioia. Penguin Academics, 2005. Print.
- Negri, Antonio. "Difference and the Future." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. "Daddy." Poetry Foundation. Web. 30 March 2013.
- Robinson, Edwin Arlington. "Mr. Flood's Party." *100 Great Poets of the English Language*. Ed. Dana Gioia. Penguin Academics, 2005. Print.
- Roethke, Theodore. "My Papa's Waltz." *100 Great Poets of the English Language*. Ed. Dana Gioia. Penguin Academics, 2005. Print.
- Ryan, Kay. "Blandeur." *100 Great Poets of the English Language*. Ed. Dana Gioia. Penguin Academics, 2005. Print.
- Sandburg, Carl. "I am the People, the Mob." *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003. Print.
- Stevens, Wallace. "Sunday Morning." *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*. Ed. Holly Stevens. Vintage Books, 1990. Print.

Thomas, Dylan. "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." *100 Great Poets of the English Language*. Ed. Dana Gioia. Penguin Academics, 2005. Print.

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. Gutenberg Project ebook, 2005. Web. 30 March 2013.

Yeats, William Butler. "When You Are Old." *100 Great Poets of the English Language*. Ed. Dana Gioia. Penguin Academics, 2005. Print.

I. Snow Gallery

SNOW GALLERY

Let's believe: afternoons will be studies
of peasant bread and streptococcus;
wood-wick candles will snap forever
lazily behind black and white films.

The girl on the screen is quick
to turn a spring of lily showers
to her advantage, exactly as you wouldn't.
Behind you, a ribbon of desire.

For us, sparrows are a projection
of shadows, but at the window-box,
only the flit of snowbirds
watching us from power lines.
Chill feathers, insulated eyes.

WINTER BEGINS

The desk is clean, the books arranged
by type. We can live like this
a season, or longer. Soup frozen
for dinners. You turn in your sleep
like in a child's crib, whispering.

Mildew, you say. Sage and savory.
Tomorrow, we'll be eating
out of cans, the season closed
for fruit and harvest. The last food
chased in cold woods, pairs
well with Pinot Noir. Spirits,
don't let me take on the strength
of animals: tenderness, richness.

BREAD

I baked when no one was hiring
and flour was cheaper than bought.
Things turn up when you sift:
Legos and BBs; once, an eight-track,
a sacrifice from some village
where parents grind by day
and, by firelight, bring the bags
from house to house, collecting.

I never got tired of the gifts,
even when the checks stopped coming
and the focaccia wouldn't rise.
Once, dice with no eyes.
Later, a pair of dead bees.

ABOUT CHEESECAKE

Cheesecake is for divination,
discovering love in the marbling.
Eating without guilt. Discover cheesecake
at the gym, expect intrigue.
Avoid rum extract.

Cut it thin, see it wobble. Serve it on Fiestaware.
There are protocols to be observed, onions
to unravel, sudden unexpected flavors
lingering on your palate.

Think of cheesecake while eating French fries.
Watch it on TV. Cheesecake likes being
a topic of discussion, will take over your cereal shelf.

ASTRONOMY

I'll admit that absence
has a place: between words,
on gray divans,
but not in hands.
How can I clutch at nothing
when guiderails open
to a stone-black sky?

Space leads, always,
to unfilled space.
A point of light expands
but not enough –
the stars are spread
too thin, and no fire burns
behind the dark.

LENT

The pastor read hymns
in a soft, lover's voice. *To hell,*
she said, *with carpeting.*
We tore up the felt-tables, tossed dice
down the toilet, smooth
as emptying the fridge. Like watching
compulsives burn pamphlets in the park.

I gave up coffee cups, goblets,
drinking out of bowls. Prayed every day
for solitude. Mendicants knocked
down statues in the blessed yard
because they could.

Sin, she said, is a matter of speaking.
I confess, there is nothing more cruel
than a god who writes all down,
never losing a word,
and sizzles anyway with absolution.

SALT VANILLA

I wanted the winding
to end the river,
not merely mark the return.
In summer, I floated
feathers on water,
counting the surfacing loons.

The night we met, I vowed
to snuff every lamp in the city.
Narrow boats sway at mooring,
and I have never been anywhere.

STEREOGNOSIS

Action figure, pipe.

We can hold these.

They have heft, size, significance.

They go on mantels. It's how we know

a finger from a flute. Something live
from something less. Test it,

with both hands. The left would tell a cane
from a candle. The right,

only know what's missing.

SHOP

Drill press, shingle axe, bolt hammer:
he wants the words to mean
heavy, a curve along the striking edge.
He's warped a thumbnail, mangled
a ring in the spring assembly.
I should know the tension gauge,
the belt pressure, the way a lathe
both shapes and rips the wood.

He keeps our cars running, straightens
antennae in blizzards, makes me
need fragile footing and a wrist
scored with close calls. Engines
come with prop bars and without. He says:
forget sometimes. Our hands manage.

RUST NOON

The Harvester plant waits at the end
of the road for workers to return.
Dad looks at the locked chain gate
and sighs. The health plan, the IRA –
gone, like Tokheim, where grandpa
lost a hand.

Gas isn't cheap,
but we keep driving, stopping
at Coney Place: white paper hats
and steamed hot dogs. Grandpa
orders chili cheese and fries.
Back in the car, we talk about beer
and something like dinner.

We've circled home, six miles out,
driven for hours. I want to drive
every night, mosquitoes crashing
against the windshield. I want
to kill them all, sickness they bring.

FORT WAYNE '65

Like skin tags, like a broken
mattress, coming home.

Ice under the collar
to blunt the heat.

I remember saving dimes,
finding lint and silver
in the cushion. How I glowed
under the cinema projector.

In summer, rain. The film
burning and the *rattatat*.

I learned about endings
spoiled, cul-de-sacs
and things dropped. We
streamed into the street,
the steaming asphalt, blinking.

PROVIDER

A light goes on above the door.
My father is rolling steel, the heat
flashing out in coils. He has promised us
roller skates, a set of keys,
the fender to a '66 Mustang.
We linger and play with bearings.

When the crucible is full,
presents come easy. The press
and powder-coater burn darkness,
turning cold iron. We ask
for leather grips, plastic nubs.
Waxed cardboard, denim.
Our desks, our beds are steel.

ARS AMATORIA

Dad, who knew about transistors,
lost in the squalid Lake Erie foam
his white-gold ring. Mom
cried till he drove back to get it.
He brought, instead, a purple
bathrobe, a wreath, crepe paper.
I thought I saw the dolphin
in him, then. I thought I saw
the conversion of pulses. When my wife
turns her tongue to mine
stones themselves can't hide
the monster-killers we have become
in the shadow of the uncoiling sea.

GEOMETRY

Down the center of the figure,
he draws one clear line.
He performs careful division.

But there is no formal logic
to drive a wedge down the fault.
Nothing intrinsic
to hold the hemispheres
together at the joint.

We bend digits to the task.
Engineer some solution
to a problem of scope and subtlety.

THE MINING TOWN

Wherever people are going, it isn't here.
A new ruin every year; today
a wall collapsed on Silver Street.
We never feel so foolish as when
a relic of our fathers needs replacement.
Restored interiors, historical replicas,
all so stupid. Originals persevere
forever, when they can. I never repaired
the basketball court on Grandpa's land.
The weeds broken through.

SAVORY

The best thing you ever tasted
was cotton and chocolate.
Except for the marriage of red wine
and your mother's death,
your favorite sound is sleigh bells
in Mahler's Fourth.

As for pomegranate, you never
cared for picking out the seeds,
or the grit in your pocket.
Surprise, jaded palate.
Love is a napkin boat,
pointed home.

STATISTICS

Weights and measures:

constancy of form, standards.

We want shape,

a particular grain.

Method, a means

to an end. With faith in numbers

we insist on accuracy. The heart

demands eighty-three gallons

per hour. A stack of hands

that looks so small. Three forty milligrams

per kilogram of weight. Pour the oil

just to the line. Don't let it go to waste.

BRUNCH

The morning vanishes into ink
and closed windows. We try again.
I serve waffles and toast. Oatmeal.
The sun touches the snow and the table
turns white. You cook sugar
and blackberries. Our hands cross
at the oven.

A moment. The fruit or bread
could be lost. You could press
me against the coil. I see myself
stripped of skin, burned, burning
on the range, my voice
a note, a flute, the way you smile
when you don't quite understand.

DOLLHOUSE

The Dutch set every beam carefully,
fixed the tiles straight. In season,
they hosted Sinterklaas and the Lord
of Orange's daughter. They stopped,
eventually. It was too easy,
shattered walls back up in an hour.
There are eleven hundred
recipes for toasted pecan pie.
Every goddamn one is wrong.

CAESAREAN

Cut from the womb, bone-birtherd,
I loved whoever fed me. Wolf, knife,
cottonmouth; words for *mother*
quieted the rumble.

Blood is thick, and sings
in spurts. Founder of thieves,

no one knows why sons
look for fathers in tears.

Kiss the snake at your brother's foot.
Fear fire. It raised you up
above the shuddering, the dead,
those who eat the raw.

DEVIL'S FOOD

This is the lesser cake,
the discontinued brand.

She brooks neither talk of meringues
nor compotes. The cake

comes first. If she loves it,
she defends it from the box to the bowl,

chocolate filling the kitchen, the house,
the street. Don't fake surprise

when she piles your clothes
at the curb. You can't beat the cake.

We eat what we earn,
whipped or red velvet.

BREADBOX

Thinner than the space by which
the falling window missed your fingers.
Fluorescence on water.
Brighter than blood on sand.

In your hand, it reminds you
that not all memories need drowning.
Some do. A strait divides
the sunny coast from the rock
where we made our stand.
These boats we build, some founder.

2. Mihizashi

MR MIHIZASHI RETIRES

The woman behind the glass
looks at his severed pinkie,
the ink-spot teardrops on his cheek.
She tells him to sign here,
here, and here.

Sometimes, it comes back to him:
the kneecaps and the fishing line,
the hot tarmac while he waits
for delivery of a plastic bag. Once,
he recovered from a crime scene
a tiny, shaking dog and the license
that proved the stud and bitch.

He wonders how tattoos will look
folding into his skin,
whether Chihuahuas are happy
with hands that cradle them.

MR MIHIZASHI'S CHRISTMAS

Expect snow.

Kids do; Christmas is magical
and delivers. He delivers also,
three fingers and a thumb.

He doesn't like when children
snap between his hands. Or wives.

A miracle: Christmas brunch
left unattended, a sprinkle
of cyanide salt.

Afterward, the house goes quiet.

Mihizashi sits outside.

He hears a scuff beneath him,
a cat beneath the porch.

He squeezes into the snow-dark space
and cradles the shivering animal.

He checks the cat for claws.

Wet streaks spread across his back.

MR MIHIZASHI GETS A TATTOO

The sidewalk is cold as Tokyo gin.
Someone's always after his jacket.
Before the crack of bone to pavement
he gets in one good whack
across a kid's knees. It reminds him
of the dragon on his back. Then he breaks
under the knuckles of a whiteboy.

One of the boys forces him
to his chest. They strip
off the designer leather.

It's good to know your place in the world.
Better to cut one out
from a foot soldier's back.
Mihizashi makes a broken smile,
wondering if he should send flowers.

MR MIHIZASHI LIVES ALONE NOW

Mihizashi once walked a jazz-dream
before the lye and ginger
and the deer-knife just below the knuckle.
He hates Kabuki
and sees karaoke bars
as natural platforms.

Mihizashi believes in smoke,
its feel on his hands. He writes queries
to the bosses of his dead brothers.

He might be up for promotion soon.
Maybe a scenic transfer.
He has never stayed for a shitty movie,
has never shared a beer he didn't like.

MR MIHIZASHI TAKES IN A FLICK

Nothing is criminal until
the aftermath, waiting for the SWAT team.
Living like that,
not even gravy is gravy.
In the flicker-dark room,
Mihizashi crunches popcorn.

Onscreen, good guys win
despite the awful precision of evil.
Mihizashi resents the implication
that effort is meaningless,
that caution is nothing more
than salve for the severed hand.

A pound of Twizzlers pressed
against his bladder,
he scurries to the toilets.
There is nothing as fine as release,
knowing your part in the inevitable.

MR MIHIZASHI'S FIRST MILLION

Dirty hands mean work
getting done. He loves his fingers,
the plunge. Raindrops spatter
the sidewalk and someone in need
of a little push.

In the penthouse, Mihizashi
admires the cherrywood, the silk scarves,
the stain-resistant rugs. Beside the pool
witnesses are gathering.

It's the first shirt ruined this way:
bleaches, citrus, soda water. The rust
softens to orange but still won't go.
Mihizashi can't look at it, throws the shirt away.
He wonders what kind
of man these clothes make.

MR MIHIZASHI'S TAX RETURN

Amazing, the riff and tangle
of paper in motion. Machines
have mastered the art. Toner
burns the lungs as crisp
as hand-rolled cigarettes.

This is the place of consequence,
not the docks or the warehouses
or the boats adrift in the bay. Money
is the right to another's hands,
one way or another.

Mihizashi used to dream of office:
ties, cufflinks, secretaries. A lake
beside a house, a tree out back.
A tire hangs listless from the branches.
He is paying it off in pieces.

MR MIHIZASHI TAKES A BOAT

Stolen, they call it, but the sea
has torn apart more hulls than bombs,
dragged down more sailors
than debts and foolishness combined.
He plunges his hand in the surf,
watches narwhals play.

He's here to dump garbage,
but there's a beam in the east
that makes him want to gun the engine,
shoot the tattooed men beside him.
Even when he sells it,
Mihizashi is not in the business of regret.

By Sunday, they'll know him
across the prefectures, but his feet
will be dry, his hands, healed.
His heart will pump new blood.

3. Villain Song

VILLAIN SONG

A slash across the eye
and we know it's bad news,
lights out, death's
in the aisle.

Of the stuff we aren't sure of,
phenomenology and ugly fruit,
the way we get behind
anyone with a little music.

After all, we're the villagers,
the hyenas, the crab philharmonic.
Some of us are napping
while the princess phones it in.
Thanks for greenskin
witches, for offscreen goodbyes.

BLOOD AND CALENDARS

Keep to yourself how the world
wants to curl around your hand.
It is too easy.

I want to play video games
for whole afternoons. Found
a banking empire. If I strap myself down,
I can even stop floods.

Before there were clocks, men built ships.
They were done when they were. War could go
forever, if it held their interest.

There's plenty of time to finish the story.
We have years to decide.
But the days are full.

Bind the sea before us.
String up ropes.

STOCK

We keep anything with flavor.
Windows steam, your skin

floured in flaxseed. The kitchen
is like a kitchen

on TV. A bedroom,
sheets stripped like salt beef.

I want your shirt
in with the lentils.

I want this taste
everywhere: the ribs,

the thighs, the meat.

TATTER

There is a pocket
that hates the seam,
a pocket that wants to be whole

cloth, that fears the spoon
concealed too quickly.
Sometimes a split means
an unraveling, sometimes not.

We are in this together,
we are in on this together,
tinfoil-sealed, a weave of wicker chairs.

Let's face it: a pocket is two pieces of cloth
sown together. This is nothing like us.

LOVE POEM

Let's envision – a mammogram
gone to disaster, quick diagnosis,
men in vinyl masks. They come off.
Fine – but still, they're out there
somewhere in a bag marked HAZARD.
They are not held for long, marked
for immediate destruction.

I said I'd love you hairless,
stripped to the frame.
I meant that I would suck
the chemo from your wounds. I loved
how your nipples point the way
to my tongue, but I let the doctors
cut away the softest parts of us,
as long as there is something left to shiver,
bend, and sway.

COOKIE

Tonight, having processed the final order
and voided the terms of service,
the telephone man will lean back,
light a Salem, and watch his porn in peace.
The sun will light the pale tablecloth,
yesterday's USA Today.

He packs his own lunch now,
rewards himself with sandwich bags
of Snickerdoodles.
Throughout the day, he checks
the refrigerator. They are always there.

Sometimes, he buys them from the deli.
When sleep fails, he makes them
in his tiny oven. No one ever steals them.
He can't get his head around that.

FIXATION

My girlfriend calls them *ostomies*,
in colons and elsewhere. There are places
where surgeons can bore holes
and affix a bag, things
to which we can be fixed.

Last week, I read online about a mall
where snakes got fat on toddler shoes
stored behind a pretzel stand.

A special on TV showed
a family collecting cats.
My experience is that one cat is enough.
One day, our hearts are weighed against a feather.
The next, we're biting our tails.

BELLS

The bell-thunder comes slow
over the false hills of campus
and this could be anywhere,
Bowling Green or Miami of Ohio,

anywhere with space for bells
and quiet pedestrian streets.
We are not, in this generation,
adapting. The wine

is cheap at the off-licence,
no one checks our ages.
Someone heats our food
and washes the molded plates.

A small place in me
has not been broken at all
and will not change. When
I am lonely I will not know why.

REAL WORLD

He suspects there's something feigned
in all this paper.

A, B, C -. Mysterious,
intangible. His father
would have smacked him if he'd known.

He hates the blood in his mouth
after surgery. The doctor,
a love story
to American action.

Once, he wished for an office
with an easy chair, a wall of books.
It makes him nervous now.
The uncertainty, dental work
on credit. As if only academics
cling to fragile things.

PASSAGE

The boy whose veins
learned a way to be wise.

The mystic whose breath
wings her to the dark,
trembling heaven.

For the magician
it is the first rabbit. The woman
whose parts finally fold
perfectly back together.

THE CAT'S BIRTHDAY

Sometimes I return, unexpected,
to the apartment
where we keep our cats
and they are doing people things,

the tabby watching Netflix
while the Manx reads Wallace.

It seems good to relax at night
somewhere calico, where small, sleepy things
look at us and marvel.

They see us as we see stone,
depth and duration,
wondering at the vast exhaustion of our years.

LEGEND

He came to the sea -
this is in Scotland – and on the crag
shouted down where the spray cuts ankles,
“ocean,

“you’ve sodden one son, stolen
another, left me on the pebble beach
fishless and empty-netted,

“after I offered you the cold
body of my Alicia, slipped between
the silt islands” and you might think
he jumped then, swept
to the sea-house, but in life
reunions are few, and the sea
gives back nothing but shells.

LETTERBOMB

Parcel post.

That summer we were going green.

The tablecloth was spotless.

Ashes get into everything,
keeping a sliver of shape:
a bit of bannister or blanket.

You arrived as suddenly as sight
and departed as quietly as the police
from a house of dust and vinegar.

CLEANING AFTERWARD

We need fuel in our lives,
coffee, cardboard, sex, a Mustang
we promise to restore.

When we arrive, sparks over the pampas grass.
Brickbats, charcoal dust. The house,
back to dirt.

Memory clamps to our chests: the pool
gone to wildflowers, the salt left out
Thanksgiving day.

We haul the lawnmowers out first. The oven
is easiest, nothing of ancestry there.
The tapes are harder. The book on magic.
Records of belief, paintings
on a cavern wall.

Kabbalists saw God
in every circle and wave,
as alchemists saw Him in silver,
in the fuzz on top of radiators.
Places without animals
never gather dust; in homes
it is skin, hair, bits of ourselves.

CAKE DESIGN

Sugar and fat for frosting,
beat it to peaks. A clear
imagination for sprinkles. Once,
we kept wisdom, cupcakes
cooling already, kitchen overflowing.
It wasn't clear how ingredients melted:
stone wheat, roast roots, cow
and fire. Someone found a raw
cake splitting as it rose. Discovered
eggs that held together.

Now it's effort, a miracle too close
to marvel at. We still want bread
fresh on winter mornings, cookies
spilling from the jar. Mothers, forgive us.

DANCE IN C MAJOR

Listen to Mozart, Schopenhauer,
anything with strings. It adds points
to your score. Play Sudoku, cross
words, tell puns to your family.
Some days you won't feel like writing.
You'll pull clouds from your ears,
fight the stupidity settling in your eyes.
Feign ambition. Take sales jobs,
greet strangers like family. Kiss them.
The last part to go is the swears.
Shout *fuck* into the mirror – practice.
Get used to stained shirts, forgetting
lunch menus. Tremble. Remember
what you can. Streets, lovers,
names of department stores. Let
other things go. Throw out your sponges.

SALT AND EARTH

When sowing, we must take care
that in the growing hours the stalks and shoots

that rise are those we sent to seed.
Here in the frays of the world

it is easy to muddle our day's work:
corn and wheat, wheat and thistle,

so that when we are together
on the outlook at twilight

I cannot say which fields are mine
and which are fallow.

FAMILY HISTORY

When I die like my grandfather
they will find rows of haiku

inked in careful lines,
ordered by date, by hour,

by revision, arranged against
the empty bottles .

I want to remember
even the night he wept,

surrounded by strange children
who held his hand and terrified him

with unfamiliar prayers.
If he recognized me, he chose

not to let it show.
At home, I order his books by touch

afraid that when I close them
the words will be gone.

THE BLUEBERRIES

The woman who savored
the structure of names,
Bellicco and Lappetoten,
married me beneath the ash
and elm, beside a cake,

of blueberries, her mother grew in a circle
at their place in Mellon County.

On our honeymoon we shot
bourbon with grandma,
who reminded me that

you can't tear out your arteries,
wash them clean of blood.

We froze a berry in the basement
which ten years later we split
to commemorate a birth. Our son

inherited a line of china and a hobby-horse
softened by a sort of filmy hair,
which my father loved to handle
and which I, poisoned by the years,
could never bring myself to touch.

GHOST WORK

Mom cuts my palm
with an old precision:
tick, slip, then stanch
the upswell as the life-line
lengthens or deepens.

She calls my birth,
'malevolent,' and points
the knife to parcel loves
into a manageable pattern.

I beg for luck.
My mother spills the salt.
*You have to seize the stars,
shake them down.*

WINTER FINALLY ENDING

We have all day been moving
thyme and lavender into ceramic pots
for which we will make room on our porch.
You are making plans: fresh pasta, perfume.
I am playing in the dirt, black loam
and bits of white plastic. You tell me
how polypeptides unfold, why roots
choose to tangle in the dust. I remember
key terms. Beneath the riots
there are greater riots, fractals and geometries,
things called buckyballs. It could overwhelm us.
Instead, I focus on math's small minutes:
one plus one, imaginary numbers,
the creative accounting of matter.