2009

SELF-PORTRAIT AS WESTERN SADDLE

Casey Thayer
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SELF-PORTRAIT AS WESTERN SADDLE

By

Casey Thayer

THESIS

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2009
This thesis by Casey Thayer is recommended for approval by the student’s Thesis Committee and the Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

SELF-PORTRAIT AS WESTERN SADDLE

By

Casey Thayer

The poems in Self-Portrait as Western Saddle are split into three sections, either grouped by subject matter in the case of the second section or by style, as in the first and third sections. However, the entire collection is centered thematically around the idea of “liminality.” A term borrowed from anthropology, notably the theories of Victor Turner, liminality defines the state of existence between two thresholds or borders. The term doesn’t simply designate physical borders but includes more metaphysical borders, such as that strange middle ground between youth and adulthood we call adolescence, or the symbol of a hotel, which stands as the liminal state between traveling and being home. Inherent in the concept of liminality is discomfort and a longing for change, either back to an earlier state or to whatever comes next. It is this underlying sense of unease that vibrates through the characters in the poems of Self-Portrait as Western Saddle and imbues them with energy and frustration; ultimately, even the poems themselves push against borders, blurring the line between lyric verse and manifesto, love letters and parable, narrative verse and religious oratory.
I would like to thank Dr. Austin Hummell, a great writer and teacher, for his continued support, Dr. David Wood for his willingness to step in and provide insightful analysis, and to Dr. Ray Ventre for checking my sentimentality and coining the terms “titular enjambment” and “The Thayer Tercet Sonnet Form.” Also, thanks to Adam Houle for his guidance and advice. Finally, to Leslie Kuhn, still point of my turning world, you are the best thing. This thesis is dedicated to my family.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following journals in which some of these poems, or earlier versions of them, first appeared:

32 Poems: “After One Thousand Nights,” “Child Support”
Crab Orchard Review: “Martí’s Prom Dress”
Iron Horse Review: “Trying Not to Love You Shania Twain”
Pebble Lake Review: “Self-Portrait as Western Saddle”

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.
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INTRODUCTION

The primary theme running through most of the poems in *Self-Portrait as Western Saddle* is the concept of liminality, a term borrowed from anthropology that identifies the stage of existence between two thresholds (for instance, twilight as the liminal time between day and night). As Richard E. Palmer writes, when one is in a liminal state, “one is an outsider; one is on the margins, in an indeterminate state” (para. 3). This idea of borders, especially in regard to place, is something I found compelling, especially when considered in the context of America’s legacy of manifest destiny and westward expansion. Beyond those political implications, I find that outsiders, characters pushed to margins or indeterminate states, make much more interesting subjects. Their position outside of society equips them with unique views of the world. Victor Turner, an anthropologist who has written extensively on liminality, argues that the position of an outsider, of being in the “marginal zone,” allows great artists, writers, and social critics to “look past the social forms in order to see society from the outside and to bring in a message from beyond it” (qtd. in Palmer para. 3). This outside perspective, this chronicle of life from the margins, plays a prominent role in this collection.

Liminality defines the physical. Think property lines and fences or the symbol of a hotel, which stands as the liminal state between traveling and being home. But it also defines metaphysical borders, like the strange middle ground between youth and adulthood we call adolescence, and the events between stages, such as the rite of passage ritual. This movement is fraught with conflict and tension. It is accompanied by discomfort and a restless longing for change, either back to an earlier state or to whatever comes next. Vibrating through the characters in these poems, this underlying sense of unease imbues them with energy and frustration.
In the collection’s lead-off poem, “Aubade,” this conflict is manifested in a yearning for the past. The aubade is a lyric poem that traditionally takes on one of two tones: praise or lament; more specifically, it is either a “joyous celebration of morning, or it may be a lament that two lovers must part” (Elliot Myers 29). Keeping with the theme of the collection, “Aubade” is a lament, a hesitance toward change, and since the couple is heading to the airport (presumably to send the speaker home), there is resistance on behalf of the speaker toward entering the liminal state of travel.

For similar thematic reasons, I chose to end the collection with the poem “After One Thousand Nights.” This poem chronicles two lovers who have tried but cannot conceive a child. The act of attempting to conceive illustrates the woman’s need to break out of her liminal state; being married, her and her husband are no longer dating, but they are not a family yet, at least in her mind, because they do not have children. This is one of the few poems in the collection that finds a level of comfort in a liminal state. The poem concludes with the woman resisting resignation. Instead, she focuses on what she has available to her, on what is in her power and under her control. She decides, “I can make coffee… / Coffee is what I can make.”

Ultimately, even the poems themselves push against borders, blurring the line between lyric verse and manifesto, love letters and parable, narrative verse and religious oratory, especially in the collection’s second and third section. Though the separate poems in the second section stand alone as contemporary sonnets, they are intended to cohere as a single narrative between two lovers, as the correspondence a man sends back to the woman he’s left. In that way, they work equally in lyric as they do in narrative. Partly influenced by Paul Guest’s Exit Interview, Babel by Barbara Hamby, and the language of praise in John Donne’s “Holy Sonnets,” the third section draws on contemporary colloquialisms and explores religious exaltation, complaint, and desire. The poems center on the idea that real love demands conflict and that without it, one is not in love but
in a kind of devotion. I am also intrigued by intersection of religion and contemporary pop culture, by the blurred line between our praise of different gods and our adoration for flat-screen televisions.

This cultural hodgepodge can be found throughout the poems of the third section but perhaps most clearly in “Newsletter of the World-Weary.” The content of the poem draws inspiration from the odes in Barbara Hamby’s *Babel*, some of which are written to hardware stores, barbeque, and “my 1977 Toyota.” Among other things, “Newsletter of the World-Weary” pulls in references to the Beatles (“Why are you the walrus?”), political buzzwords (“good family values”), inspiration pep talks (“We give 110% to sleep”), and Picasso (“Personally, we preferred the world’s Blue Period”). By the end, the poem reaches a point of exhaustion with the world’s constant and tiring barrage of popular culture, rejecting the whole lot of it while recognizing the futility of longing for escape: “Hold still, the doctor told us. This will only hurt / forever. Then thankfully, it will all be over.”

Later on, many of the poems in the third section weave popular culture references (somewhat in the manner of Chad Davidson) into their lines, coupling these references with religious language that serves as the backbone for many of the poems. One work in particular, “Gospel According to Garth,” a poem that reaches a more tender conclusion than “Newsletter of the World-Weary,” lifts language directly from the Bible, such as “lived among them,” “cast himself down,” and the string of “begots”:

an invitation begot a coffee break

begot a matinee begot her legs wrapped tightly

around his legs begot a mortgage begot a child.

The poem also contains allusions to The Temptation of Christ and Jesus as a fisher of men. I don’t intend for any of these allusions to be blasphemous. Instead, by evoking Biblical language and by
drawing on Christian myths, I’m attempting to understand my faith in the context of our contemporary culture and to give it cultural relevance at a time when church attendance is dropping and faith seems more and more out of touch with our daily lives.

In the third section of poems, there is a bitter and critical undercurrent toward materialism and the desire bred by capitalism to be constant consumers. When times get tough, politicians tell us to shop. After 9/11, the president told us to see America, to fly and support tourism. Purchasing is touted as the magic medicine, the cure-all. In one of Chad Davidson’s poems, “Target,” a poem that first appeared in Passages North, he chronicles, somewhat satirically, the lust Americans have for shopping: “I love to finger // the Milano-style whatnot, bend the necks / of five-headed floor lamps” (10-12). Later, he equates shopping to religion, calling storage bins his church and evoking the phrase “dearly beloved,” the opening line of traditional Christian wedding vows (33). By the end, he has to “[feed] the nuisance of class consciousness // little biscuits” in order to quiet the voice of outrage and disgust within him (28-29).

My poem “Our Community of the Hopelessly Reckless” revels in the lifestyle of the rich, comparing those who have yachts, hang gliders, and disposable income with the Prodigal Son parable from the Bible. The Prodigal Son parable has always been one of the harder to swallow parables for me (and I’m sure many other more devout Christians). Though I understand its lesson and its appeal to those who’ve fallen away from the church, I can’t help but feel unfairness at play, a similar injustice to the class divisions stratifying America. In my poem, the “community” is less contrite than the disgraced son from the parable; however, they still get the reward of a luxurious lifestyle without any of the penalties, divine or otherwise.

“Our Church of the Immaculately Clean” follows a similar theme. In that poem, I evoke the language of commercials within a larger comment on organized religion to show how the fervor and devotion we have for religion has been supplanted or confused by our love of material goods.
Also, the poem attempts to show how religion itself has become a commodity. A phrase from a Scrubbing Bubbles commercial takes on added depth when used to describe contemporary organized religion: “Observe the foaming action that works / so you don’t have to.” With this line, I’m hoping to illustrate how pervasive commercials and commercialism have become in our society (and to explain why I, and many others, can whistle the jingle to at least a dozen products and services) while making a claim about how hands-off and lazy organized religion has become.

What I’m hoping will lend weight and substance to this project is not only my inquiry into religion and how it merges with consumerism or my exploration of borders and the walls we construct to separate ourselves from one another, but also my attention to meter and language. While I do not work in strict iambic or trochaic meter, I am highly attentive to the musicality of my lines. I concur with Robert Pinsky that “poetry is a vocal, which is to say a bodily, art” (8). By drawing on the musical history of poetry, I hope to ingrain my poems in the minds of my readers and “to achieve intensity and sensuous appeal [by] express[ing] feelings and ideas rapidly and memorably” (Pinsky 9). Through this attention to language, I ultimately hope my words will achieve sonic permanence in the consciousness of my audience even after their sentiment and ideas have tired.

My aesthetic was first formed by an editorial I encountered in my undergraduate study in the back pages of Poetry. In the November 2003 issue, Christian Wiman explains his preference for poetry that exhibits a tension between language and life or, as he writes, “poems in which you feel… life and language trying to be each other” (93). Later in the editorial, he writes that it is “the quality of the engagement between language and experience that matters, the depth at which it occurs,” which I interpret as the pervasiveness of the form and its importance in helping to create meaning (93). Consider, for instance, the first three lines of “Elegy,” a poem by Rick Barot, taken from that same issue of Poetry:
In this rain we are moved to anecdotes.

That people float candles out to the river.

That in the field there is the crickets’ grief. (1-3)

Though this poem neither rhymes nor establishes a set meter, it’s very attentive to form in its line construction. Appropriate to the heavy sadness of an elegy, Barot purposefully end-stops each line, giving each image its own finality and, therefore, weight. Also, the end-stopped lines reinforce the brokenness of the speaker’s grief and its inability to make sense of what has occurred. Beyond the structure, the first two lines draw on anapests (“In this rain | we are moved” and “to the river”) to imbue the lines with a sense of breathless rush and to speed the pacing (1-2). The next line is textbook iambic pentameter. Following the anapestic foot that ends the second line, the iambic pentameter gives the line a sense of importance and weight.

As Jason Guriel pointed out in a recent review of John Poch’s second collection, Two Men Fighting with a Knife, “Poch’s commitment to craft—to ensuring that his lines scan and rhyme—guarantees that the slightest of his works are always readable, even enjoyable (an advantage that mediocre formal verse has over mediocre free verse)” (562). When reading poems, I too often find that an adherence to formal elements can carry what otherwise might be a weak or uninteresting poem. However, without an attention to language, there is no measurable way, beyond reader response, to decipher the success of a poem or judge its craft. For me, I draw on formal techniques not with the hopes of securing posterity or “pulling a fast one” over on my readers by passing along weak poems masked in rhyme and meter. Instead, I closely scrutinize the rhythms of my lines because musicality first drew me to and still excites me about poetry.

Like Wiman, poems infused with music and this tension “wake me up” (93). Writing first off the guidance of Frost and Dickinson and later off the work of A.E. Stallings, Kay Ryan, and John Poch, I attempt to adhere to a set meter and often work in forms. The second section is comprised
of a sequence of narrative poems in the form of letters. These “letters” are first person, loosely iambic fourteen-line stanzas. While they don’t fall into the traditional sonnet rhyme scheme, they attempt to employ the essential element of the sonnet: the volta or “turn,” which in my poems, often comes in the final couplet. Also, when drafting the sonnets, I was attentive to the traditional stanzaic forms of the Italian and English sonnets, and, therefore, I conceived of the poems mostly in quatrains and tercet pairs.

Since I first considered the arc of the narrative, I drafted and grouped poems in the second section in service of the story. However, as I worked more in rhythm and meter, they began moving away from a strict narrative chronology, becoming much less cerebral, more musical, and in my opinion, more creative and interesting. Because of this movement toward formal rhythms, gaps began to form in the narrative; the story became less and less clear. As the poems moved further away from rational, prose constructions, the story began to grow more metaphorically and impressionistically. At the end, it’s become less a story about two people and more about the many permutations of life, the different people we have been and become as a result of our choices.

Despite my deviations from rhyme scheme and unbroken meter, I chose to capture the speaker’s voice in contemporary sonnets mostly because of the form’s historic context. One of the most well-known sonnet sequences, Petrarch’s Canzoniere, widely influenced later writers and established the sonnet as an effective vessel for “[making] a narrative out of a necklace of short poems” (Strand 56). I see my sequence as a contemporary rendering of Petrarch’s romantic addresses to his lover Laura, embodied in my work through the speaker’s constant longing for his own “Laura,” a woman that the pressures of daily life and his self-imposed exile has kept him from. The short, impressionistic punch of each sonnet, and how the sonnets work in chorus with one another, allowed me to create this story organically, to build up and defamiliarize what is otherwise a recognizable and somewhat tired narrative.
Also, I’ve moved away from strict, formal meter in order to work more closely with natural speech patterns, or what Frost calls the “ear of the imagination.” Frost describes the “ear of the imagination” as the tendency for a poet to approach her subject with a consideration of sound over image. He argues, and I mostly agree, that writers who give more consideration to sound than image, who let sound dictate their subject, are writing something closer to the original purpose and traditions of poetry. He wrote on the “ear of the imagination” in one of his notebooks:

We value poetry too much as it makes pictures. The imagination of the ear is more particularly poetical than the imaginative eye, since it deals with sound[,] which is what poetry is before it is sight. Write with the ear to the speaking voice. Seek first in poetry images of sound—concrete tone images. (qtd. in Lewis Tuten 280)

It’s hard to think of a poet who better exemplifies his aesthetic than Frost. His work has provided the best example I have found of poetry that adheres to a set meter and at times, poetic rhyme scheme, without losing its natural speech rhythms. Today a number of poets attempt to work in form—Adam Kirsch, John Poch, and A.E. Stallings among them—but as critics have noted, the iambics don’t flow as smoothly, the rhymes aren’t as natural, or as Frost might say, their ears and their speaking voices aren’t lining up. Of course, this is no fault of theirs, and I don’t disparage them for the attempt. However, as Campion writes in a review of Kirsch’s The Thousand Wells, “If the best poems require the most artifice, they also demand the strength and pliancy of living speech” (103). Perhaps that’s why I’ve deviated, in places drastically, from strict formal meter. It is incredibly difficult to mask iambics and make meter read as smoothly as living speech. But with the poems in the second section, especially, this has been my dual goal, to adhere, even loosely, to rhythm while avoiding the syntactical inversions and belabored language that often plague and undercut contemporary formal verse.
Buried within Wiman’s personal aesthetic and related to Frost’s concept of “the ear of the imagination” is the theory that language is unable to fully express emotions. Any person who’s sat down at a blank computer screen, typewriter, greeting card, or memo can attest to the difficulty of communicating ideas in words. This conflict forms the core of the writing process and is why we teach and study composition. It is why there is no drop in the demand for personal editors, why there’s been a proliferation in MFA programs and students eager to sign up for them.

Some of the most powerful poetry has been written in response to this conflict. In The Great Fires, a collection largely about his wife who had died from cancer, Jack Gilbert frequently centers poems on his inability to articulate his grief. Even those that don’t directly tackle this idea do so symbolically. Instead of describing the details of her death in the poem “Michiko Dead,” Gilbert spends the entire poem describing the way a man can carry a heavy box without ever having to put it down:

first with his arms
underneath. When their strength gives out,
he moved his hands forward, hooking them
on the corners. (2-5)

Later, the constant reshifting has given his arms enough rest that he “can hold underneath again” and restart the cycle (12). Metaphorically, the poem is about managing grief, about how to deal with the loss of a loved one; however, Gilbert filters this emotion through the idea of carrying a heavy box because he cannot communicate the heaviness of the loss in any other meaningful way.

One of the finest examples of the failure of language in Gilbert’s poetry comes again from The Great Fires. In “Finding Something,” he uses cryptic metaphors and similes in an attempt to relate the delicate sweetness of helping his sick wife use the bathroom. He begins the poem: “I say moon is horses in the tempered dark, / because horse is the closet I can get to it” (1-2). Already, he
is admitting the failure of language to represent the world around him. By the end, it is his acceptance and recognition of the shortcomings of language that makes the final two similes so powerful. He will never be able to keep her or record his final moments with her in his poems but only some loose approximation, some crude sketch that at the end becomes its own beauty:

The arches of her feet are like voices of children calling in the grove of lemon trees, where my heart is as helpless as crushed birds. (16-18)

The first poem of my collection, “Aubade,” deals with this same inability to capture moments in poetry and to articulate emotions. As I’ve discussed above, the aubade follows the moment two lovers must leave one another. This poem intensifies the departure by hinting that one of the lovers will be leaving on an airplane, presumably to fly a long distance away. Like in Gilbert’s poems, the speaker cannot find the right words to encapsulate his grief, and perhaps more importantly, to communicate his feelings to his lover:

I have nothing for moments when grief comes heavily like a mouthful of peanut butter. (5-7)

He must settle for using his hands, and later his mouth, but still he is haunted by the words that he cannot find, even in a city that “like a book, [is] covered in words.” The frustration that accompanies this inability to speak accurately or communicate his feelings in words parallels the struggles of many of the characters in this collection to break from their liminal states and find a comfortable position in life. On a larger level, it also serves as a metaphor for the struggle inherent in the writing process.

Despite all I’ve discussed about the inability of poetry to capture life, I do think that writing poetry is still relevant and necessary in helping to record our history, observe
contemporary culture, and diagnose our faults. As Carl Phillips writes, “Art can become, eventually, all we have of what was true” (12). Though this is a lofty statement and perhaps a little too grand for me to fully support, I believe that without writing, without art, we risk, as Yusef Komunyakaa called it, “a deficit in memory” (12). For me, I will keep struggling to compromise life and language, tuning my lines with Frost’s “ear of the imagination.” The struggle is what excites me about writing and what I hope readers find exciting about these poems.
Leaving Hotel Skandia in the night’s growl of car horns, we trade our hands for luggage, haul off what I’m carrying home: a bag of salt licorice, a list of useless Danish words: My ham is frozen and Spot me. I have nothing for moments when grief comes heavily like a mouthful of peanut butter. I choke out an order for two train tickets, lights flicking off at Tivoli, the terminal hunkering over us. The clock tower calls out the hour and keeps on counting. When I tell you, The stars like your hip bones shine, and, If you sing, you mold me like a pastry, I misspeak. I mean to say love’s hard when we have just our hands to help. The train, filled with passengers asleep on one another, winds its way to the airport. The morning nearer now, we press our lips together. Where we open, we close. The city, like a book, covered in words.
ONE
NEWSLETTER OF THE WORLD-WEARY

The world translates one way as a close shave with teenage pregnancy. It translates as a car–bomb, as cat litter that clumps for quick clean-up. Why are we on the list of every chain letter? Why does this itch? Why are you the walrus? The world translates as a crude pictograph scrawled in ink on the arm of our waitress. We too have mapped the body and want a word with the architect. We too swam the elementary backstroke through the waters of high school, repeating: chicken, airplane, jet; chicken, airplane, jet; and on and on until we grew out of our clothes. The world translates, loosely, as a constant attack on good family values. Let’s run down our checklists of necessities: A healthy fear of sexually transmitted diseases? Check. A desperate need to have our penises envied? Check. We’ll have you know we sleep in the nude. We sleep like we mean it. We give 110% to sleep. What about the world? So many people have versions with different endings. Personally, we preferred the world’s Blue Period. Personally, we thought we had one timeout left. Hold still, the doctor told us. This will only hurt forever. Then thankfully, it will all be over.
SELF-PORTRAIT AS WESTERN SADDLE

What keeps you from slipping off the sway–backed horse but me? I’m bear-hugged around the palomino’s belly. I brace

every thundered hoof beat, each breath that batters her ribcage. I make the ride endurable. Let me stirrup your rattlesnake boots. Let me relive the rub-down of your hands smoothing my swell, the leather oil working my soft skin

even softer. Lay me on a sawhorse for the night. We’ll relive the tightening straps tomorrow, your legs pinning down my fenders. We’ll relive the gallop another time. With cows milling dirt in the creek bed, the horse hurtling through the current, give up the reins for a desperate grip on my pommel. Let me hold us together through fields penned in with burdock thistle and barbwire, each bump, a pain I’ll protect you from, each bump that digs you deeper into me.
ANTI-LOVE LETTER TO LOVE LETTERS

In this world of rock ‘n roll, this world of role playing games, this roll-back Wal-Mart world, I can’t comfort you with Keats, with nightingales, with songs of *Hush, little baby* and hemlock Kool-Aid. In this world, Daddy’s going to buy you an ark with a silicon bulkhead and plenty of cup holders. Daddy will invest in cedar, ten penny nails, Fleet Farm. I’ll construct a water-tight home on the banks of the Wishkah for a good view of California washing away. No lie. I’ll stock pile water purification tablets, canned goods, indulgences. In light of all this, the heart makes a poor metaphor. The rose is terrible at telling you, Yes, we’re screwed, but I’d love to watch this go to shit with you. So I’ll buy gifts, I’ll build. I want you to know, I’m not bad— mouthing metaphors. I’m a huge fan of metaphors. Some of my best friends are metaphors. I just want water to be water, no rainbow promises, a world where you have nothing to compare me to. We’ll promenade two-by-two up the gangplank. Truth is—I’m paraphrasing here— you’re beautiful. It’s simple. That’s all I know and all I need to know.
WHEN I TAMED THE WILD OUT OF THE WILD BLUE YONDER

Near the Nevada border, you slip
to your ankles, in the conditioned cold

of the Cactus Motel, panty liners and lace,
small sails of underwear caught

in a dervish. Then, you close around us.
I understand older women, how sharp

the body can shave itself, how frail,
as I hold your shoulder blades, your crystal–

nothing bones. Nothing left to break as dusk
hands over a flush of red and sets on us.

This is the life we know, this crapshoot,
this gamble we’ll always crave.

Past the window, highways run ramrod
straight all the way until ocean stops them.

The water’s surf smash and grabs the sand,
a hustle Monterey’s already shook on.
On the rail all the way to Amarillo,
addicted to hot sheet motels, I place bets

for the rush of loss, a sap for speed and desolate tracts of roads patched with rattler skins.

Crushed into the seat of the Chevy,
I palm the stick shift as the canyon

gapes along the strip of highway, shocked
and wide-mouthed. St. Christopher swings

the neck of the rear-view mirror, patron saint
of toothpaste and hauling heavy loads. I pray

because the Lord’s another gamble.
Like most, he’s never done a thing for me.

Nearly losing the center line from the speed
and touchy steering, I spin closer to the ritual

of shattered glass, thrown clover, to the skim
of water bedding the ditch. I hadn’t been clean

long before I loved a girl, shimmied her
out of her stockings and skirt on a night

not unlike this night. This same thumbprint
moon and grit of panhandle clay letting blood.

Didn’t mean to hurt her but it happened.
Rolling down the window, I flick a smoke

to the tangled arms of junipers, prairie dogs
snaked in the soil. It’s the stars.

Either they’re falling or the engine’s
pulsing fast enough to run them down.
NOT EXACTLY A RESURRECTION, BUT CLOSE

He thinks of stopping. A spare battery
in the back flogs the truck bed like the tongue
of a bell every time he coasts a bend
in the road, but he’s past St. James
before he knows it. He won’t turn back,
has gas enough for thirty-some miles,
bitter coffee to keep him up for brake lights
or white tails caught in the median strip.
He’s passed a lot of mileage signs on I-90
without marking more than a handful. Distant
ridges of wheat fields knotted like a spine,
rain kicking up off the concrete, the clouds.
He thinks he’s left behind Idaho but he can’t
stop the radio, a cough in the pickup’s cab.
The gospel station cues up his father’s voice
and he’s buckled in the passenger seat, balancing
Pop’s tool box on his knees, balancing
the deep baritone with his squeaky voice. I’ll
never fall in love again. And they sing. The rain
hits the cab like maracas, the battery tolls
out another mile as the highway flutes
from four lanes into two and comes together.
REPAIRS

He sacks the grain bag faces himself
with hay, inks on smiles with acrylic paint left
from the milk house so the corn is rowed
with clowns. Let them keep the birds clear
of the farm. Cracking open his window,
he listens to the crows gather minutes
after midnight. His father on the first floor,
slips the fowling piece from its fur-lined case,
his long johns yellow ever since the bleach ran out
and with it, his mother. His dad prefers to live
this way, womanless, just him and the boy
and the endless harvest. Something mystical
stirs in the scarecrows— their witch hats
and ragged overalls or maybe the moon’s pale
spotlight, but the birds see through this.
His father frees the dogs, scatters buckshot
into the darkest spot of crows. The crops
are saved another night. Next afternoon
they patch the barn’s roof. Don’t be a sissy.
He mutters his mantra beneath his breath
as his father points to the ladder, boot-bitten
and worn. The view from up there works
the boy’s stomach. In the distance he traces
clouds of birds swooping to attack something—
a field mouse or jackrabbit matted by rain.
Past the slack jump ropes of power lines
that spine the fields and look to him
like stitching, past the crosses of scarecrows,
their clownish smiles, they dive to rent
the fur as his father, hand-over-hand,
pulleys up another batch of shingles.
TRYING NOT TO LOVE YOU, SHANIA TWAIN

In the beginning, nothing but the black
burnt out cut of my tire-rubber. It was good
enough to be moving across the Bible Belt
quickly, rushing past billboards signed God.

My radio ruined it all, cued up a country
song full of sadness and sin. I try
not to love you, Shania Twain, but dogs
in every country song die and I
get teary-eyed. My motor howling
like an organ can’t drown out the thought

of sharing a flat bed with you in a field
shocked full of frozen wheat, the air chilled

a few degrees below zero. Under a tiara of stars,
I’d blanket you. I’d light your signal flare.

If you’re listening, let me carriage you
to the End of Days in my pick-up,
gun down moose for food as weeds overrun
the Capitol and the oceans choke us

slowly down. At least consider it. You—
the cradle of civilization. Me--the deer-skinner,

the clothes-sewer. If I swear to badger the blue
state of my heart, will you please keep me?
Lonely in Las Vegas, he shoulders open the door to a topless place, looking for a Heineken, a dirty bowl of peanuts. Someplace that won’t throw him too far out of whack. It’s not the women he wants but a church for men like him—smoke-filled, no dress code. Men with nothing better to do than peel singles from their rolls and tuck them in the strings laced on the hips of the strippers. He wants a faith for men who come to watch them dance. This is a classy joint. The girls never shed their bottoms and bartenders cut off those who’ve had too much.

That’s how the outlaw finds himself sprawled in the alley. It’s better, he thinks, to get it out, so he coughs up tequila, prays as sick men always do: Why me, Lord? A praise of vomit spews out on the concrete, and he’s whole again. Why stop? There must be a strip joint where he’s clean or at least a little cleaner than the guy next to him. Whiskey heavy with water, girls under-thumbing their thongs to tease the men because they can. Because the night’s just so damn long.
It’s easy, he tells me, to take a life. His knuckles snap like matches that won’t strike as he eyes the table’s torn felt and blue tattoos of chalk, the chrome for his reflection, and picks a house cue off the rack to break. From his breast pocket, he unfurls a roll of twenties. I’m all he has to hustle. Lining up a shot, he spouts his motto: *Warrants are paper and paper burns*. Each visit, I window over with more charcoal and grease, settle deeper into barstools and cheap tap beer. At some point, he’ll sift through pockets, searching out scraps of his heart. He’ll come up lint, show me the right way to chalk my thumb, to chalk up wins, to cut shots. *How’s your mother?* he asks a few pints in, cracking the 8 ball home. *Any other men?* My cue spins a blue dot in my palm. Pitchers sweat rings on the table. Racking a new game, he wants to stake money, the risk of losing to shoo away the night.
ON THE LEMON

Because Abe’s the father and the father must win, Isaac muffs the lag then racks. Rolling the cue up to the kitchen, balls click like prayer beads. Die cut pockets shine mirror-white where the pool table opens itself up at the corners. Abe circles, nose flush with the scent of salt peanuts and prey. There is no let up here, no safety shots. He banks the three ball then runs the rest of the table. Eyes hawk-keen, he’s kicking his weak chick from the nest, giving up whatever the world can steal from him before it’s gone. Isaac nods, refilling the pitcher. He watches the slaughter and praises its speed. The arcade’s music reminds them some games can be reset with a button, some games call for Mulligans and make-up shots. And some do not. Chalking his cue, Abe leans over the rail for another combination. It’s a scratch no matter the English, he knows it. Still Abe lines up. He calls for the crutch.
LAST WORD FROM THE NURSING HOME

On a night as dark and unloved as this, her body won’t do. So she leaves it

for stars, for car ferries stitching the channel with water rings, with waves

aside a beach pinned with driftwood and alewife bones. She barely notices

she can wade a half mile before the water flushes up her nightshift, past her knees.

By then she’s the buoy at the center of the lake, swaying with the tide, water like blacktop

around her. What’s the moon if not a wafer she holds on her tongue before swallowing?

The waves rough her up but never tip her all the way over. She’s just hanging out.
TRUCKER’S LAMENT

Loneliness needles him like a ghost limb on Sunday nights, so he porch-sits. He cracks the tab from a can of Bud, scans the valley’s gallery of streetlights. Sometimes it’s the Soo Line’s whistle calling distances in him. Sometimes he hears the liner at the oar dock moan, a chute in his chest slide open, his sea legs leaving him. He scans the CB for chatter, grips the beer can like a stick shift of a rig he’s driving through Loveland Pass, the big slab of I-90 unwinding a bandage beneath him he’ll wrap his wounds in. He’s sorry he left himself at a café in Bismarck with a coffee and a slice of Key lime pie, sorry he can’t find rest without the sleeper cab. In the house he won’t leave come morning, the TV repeats commercials, the couch and her splayed across it, a long six steps away.
FINAL LETTER TO 6 A.M.

Sharing my mornings with this later hour,
I sometimes think of you, how easily I sleep
through your alarm of daybreak, your street
sweepers, garbage trucks, snow plows, and no,
I’ll not be staying up to write this testament.
I’ll be in bed long before you get up.
Let me tell you how much I regret the hours
I’ve spent wandering your dewy fields wishing
for other hours. Those few nights that turned
into many nights when I couldn’t sleep and you
were all I had. You and your morning talk shows.
9 o’clock has made me healthy. I can touch
my toes, recite the alphabet in Spanish. Sure,
she’s not as flashy as you. Sure, she doesn’t open
the city’s bakeries. But I’m a better man
without the water you drowned me in.
There I was, along your bottom watching
people walk across you. All I see are feet:
a foot-sole, then nothing, then another foot.
HARVESTING

Miles from the clapboard farmhouse, the John Deere humming beneath his seat, he wonders if he’s forgotten
to turn off the oven. Some nights he’ll wake, the house
tinted blue by the moon, to the oven’s slow burn and hiss.

When he shuts it off and climbs again the stairs to bed,
his groin pains him from that woman years ago

who whispered *Darling hold me close* then kicked him
in the balls and stole twenties from his wallet,

leaving him to beg for a beer. Back on the combine,
he stubs his hand across his chin bristle, chuckles.

He kindles images of what could be memories:
the death of a collie he might’ve had as a child,

the tab he swears he split with John Fucking Wayne
or a guy who looked just like him. Rolling along,

he keeps harvesting. He breathes in the sweet hay,
but there is no hay, no hay he’s ever grown here.
GIVE US THIS DAY

Sap-smell of cut wood and charcoal
grease is a reminder of her

cooking. Her parsnips and stock.
I stalk about planting seeds

and dead wives as farmers argue
the rainy season, the howl

of wind aching to carry us all away.
The sockets of forsaken mines

congested with runoff, the field mud
rust-orange with the surplus of copper.

Once, the Soo Line robbed the quarries
of ore. It ran steel rails and boxcars
to the bay, past districts of bread,
stations of tomatoes and scotch.

But the Soo Line is a dead line,
the freight cars abandoned on

the overpass, cold tracks stitching
this forty acres to the next. To the trails

of corn and wheat, shoots
so withered we forget why we trust

anything but our hands, I give up
this body. This body rootless and thin,

this soil too poor to support the grain
the almanac told me with some work

would grow here, would thrive.
THOSE THREE AMERICANS

are my three Americans in the crushed
nose of the airplane, sawed off from the body.
The wings on the runway. Wind flags, hushed.

I waited for their call, my cell to brush
my leg, my pocket, to vibrate against my keys
because these three American can’t be crushed,

can’t be at the center of the paramedics, the rush
to the scene, the flashing lights. All I can see
are wings flagging the runway. Wind, a hushed

whisper. Blame it on the snowfall, the slush
on the runway, but by God blame someone. These
are my three Americans being crushed

with the two-hundred Germans on that Airbus,
with the twenty-eight Iranians. Oh God, the irony.
Loan them wings, a runway, the same flag. Hush

our allegiance, calm the gas fires, this fuss.
Lord, paddle us through to the other side, keep
us, all of us, even though we’re crushed
wings, broken flags, broken runway. Now hush.
DAILY AFFIRMATION

Props to the nothing-fights. Props to burnt toast, to stubbed toes, to lumps that turn out to be bruises. We get mornings like this because there will be many mornings nothing like this. Against all the future grief, all we feel coming, let us cupboard these mornings like coffee mugs. We have nothing but love for you God, you goof. You’re a big softy regardless of Job, no matter what the Old Testament testifies. You give us cavities, but candy too. You let us sleep in while the rest slog through the snow toward the cathedral. You let us be holy in our own way: our prayer for coordination before beating Mario Bros., our hymn to licorice-flavored Jelly Bellies. Let us sing out loud and proud as we strike the killing blow: Here’s to purple thumbs, to carpal tunnel, to jelly beans. Nothing can faze us. We’re Marios with many lives. We bounce back.
TWO
INVOCATION

O Mercy of Construction Zones and Bottlenecks, turn all the roads in me to crossroads. Release the traffic knots, the jam. Provide me with side street, an alleyway, a fool’s retreat. In this Bible Belt radio, these talk shows and weather, I’m stuck here, thirsty for song, thirsty for a mouth harp and hymn that shouts:

Yes, I shot my woman but didn’t mean to hurt her bad. I’m afflicted, more wimpy than whip smart, more “Macarena” than “Amazing Grace.” I’ll win her back, my woman draped in smoke. What’s horseplay, without the pinch? Love without my skin on hers? O Baby, dear Muse of the Cloverleaf, which way are you leaning on this?
POSTMARKED YUMA, HOME OF THE WORLD’S SMALLEST CHAPEL

Baby, found twenty-seven cents for stamps
in my pickup’s ashtray, wanted to say
don’t leave the porch light on. I heard of you,
how you’ve grown hallways inside your bones
and need me to fill them. I’ll owe you. Please,
forgive me if I’m mean. Blame recklessness,
blame the war, blame my mother for dropping
me on my head too many times. It took
two days and seven states to admit this,
to be honest. Next I’ll list my sins.
Next letter I’ll catalogue my short-comings,
take my soul out back and beat it like a rug.
I’d pray for patience and good Keno cards,
but God’s gone house. I’m nothing to rake in.
PRAISE FOR MOTEL 8

Come rain. Bow the plain-grass to its knees.  
Let lightening flicker like an old projector.  
If I was tenting, I’d be drawing my Coleman  
close to my shoulders, hoping the fabric holds,  
hoping the rain guard shies away the storm.  
But I’m not. I pray for rain when I’ve rented  
a room flush with two double beds and dark roast,  
when I’m King of the Remote and flip through  
every station like an insatiable tyrant.  
Swallowed in the rush of Soo Line steamers,  
in the storm’s belly, send praise. I’m master  
of the mini bar, cloaked in vellux throws.  
Praise me, I make ice on demand. I turn water  
into colder water. I calm storms by closing blinds.
Baby, I started to get ready to come
to bed but something went wrong in getting
ready. I wanted smokes. And suddenly,
I’m passing Sacramento with a half
tank of gas, working out an alibi,
hands slammed against the steering wheel. I’d not
be missed. I’d not miss you either, the sail
of your gown caught in the car door, the tail
trailing as you left the hospital.
Let’s pretend some other lovers found us,
straightened us out like shelves of books, ordered
our children’s clothes on the bed so when we
walked in we saw the shapes of babies, boys
and girls, waiting for Mom and Dad, annoyed.
DREAM SONG

Last night, I dreamed of my father folding laundry, spooling shirts around their hangers, pulling socks out of the dryer, standing there in boxer shorts. My mom had not yet passed so we could hear her birdsong from the bath, sand fall from her until she made a beach. The beach that turned the kitchen to a desert, a door from which this leaving grew. I called, I love you, Dad, etcetera, as sand built mounds between us. Ditto, he yelled. Me too. How can I describe the failed attempts to cross—faulty camels, the constant thirst? Tonight, I hope I dream him doing dishes. He’ll call me Champ. We’ll wipe the china dry.
MEXICAN HAT: HOME OF THE BEST NAVAJO TACOS

Baby, you’d hate hiking the Valley of the Gods. It’s unzipped like a fly, the rock gaping, thin-lipped, all fissures and teeth. When I break for lunch, I fork fry bread, a bit of beef, and I’m glad you’re not here. You never took to grease like me, never shotgunned a beer, never stopped worrying that a safe bet’s still a risk. What’s a win without that black dog we can’t bait off with steak? The bread goes down like cotton. It chokes me up. Though my faith’s been shaken, I pray for rain to rattle on my windshield, clouds to roll like bowling balls. Sure, it’s a gamble, but it’s my only chance at getting clean.
POSTCARD FROM UTAH: STILL THE RIGHT PLACE

O Girl, I know my plans have never worked
but I could hit it big with satellites.
Sales are up in Provo ‘til the bishop
speaks of sin and suddenly the desert
lining town is filled with them. Satellites
sore-spotting the clay. Miles away I see
antennae, the wreckage of sets. No one
claims them. Nightly, they show up because sin
builds until the houses blare with Springer.
Curiosity, it’s partly that. We sin
because it cleans up nicely. You know me.
I’m not a pious man. Of course, I’d like
to change a thing or two, but I’m better
than most. Let me in the back door once more.
Beloved, last night, I dreamt a millstone
grew around my chest, an albatross clawed
my lungs until my breath caught, a snare
sprung inside me. I worried I’d wake up
a statue, a tin man in this motel,
a cold body. I know my tumbler lungs
can’t support the phlegm, the cough that moves
a landslide through my bones. Some nights the signs
outside don’t bother me. Some nights I go
hours without rolling a smoke. My hands twitch.
They betray me. Lord, if it’s hands you want,
I give my hands. If my eyes fail me, take
my eyes. I’ll be cut and paste, a tape-job.
God-willing, I’ll be battered up, but yours.
Baby, I just jerry-rigged a hotplate
from a Super 8 coffeepot to cook some
pork & beans. See? I can be resourceful.
It only takes an hour to get them lukewarm
and nearly edible. Let’s say I’ve spent
the interim remembering your body
like a menu, picking out what I’d order.
Let’s say I’m wearing the wool sweater
your mom knit, and I’m busy with scratching
my rashes. What else? I’ll wear the socks she knit,
the scarf she knit, I’ll make my body itch
to bring you back. For love, I’d wear this
homemade costume. For love, I’d even light
the gas stove to cook feasts of pork & beans.
HYMN FOR THE WASTELAND

Spend a month locked up in Mexico
and see if you come out the same. I whittled
at the window, watched dogs wrestle dogs
for bone scraps, for skeletons. We’d say
grace for the space freed up when someone
got sprung. Sue’s cold hands, I wished for them.
I wished for some of her cooking. You know
I never liked creeds but I needed to tell
myself something. I’ll live forever
and ever, amen. It’ll be alright.

When I got out, I shit you not, I spoke
homilies for water, drank nothing but water.
Coming in, El Paso like a welcome mat,
the city dawned on me. The sun, the light.
ON THE LAM

Hey Dude, saw the shell of a Ford stripped clean
by rain & scores of mice, thought of bones you broke
getting your ass beat outside that Dallas bar—
the dealer dealing the wrong cards. You thought
you’d change our odds with aces. In this town,
everything’s so worn you’d like it. Coffee
grit, bitter with grounds & never too warm,
smokes cheaper here than even Delaware.
I’ll bring you a carton. Though I could use
a letter I can’t tell you where I’m at,
but there’s the ghost currents of the Rio Grande,
a big damn wasteland for them to search.
Keep that hand bandaged up so we can run
another table soon. I’ll need the win.
DISPATCH FROM DEADWOOD

Baby, you should’ve seen him slumped there at that poker table. Bill’s a mean drunk and when he’s been gunned down four times today, he gets ornery, needs to slip bar-side for a pull of Jack, needs to shrug off tourists. That’s why I’m here. All this drama has me thinking to write. I’m alive, still playing the outlaw in the road shows and feeling at home here with these failures. Like McCall, who shot a hole in the back of Bill’s head, then ran to a butcher shop, I’m primed to screw up. When I hang, I hope I go alone. When I hang, I hope you stop running to the mailbox. Forget me. Forget.
THREE
All gospels spell it out the same way. In the beginning, there was a promising baseball card collection and casserole dinners. From there, the stories diverge.

One goes thus: an invitation begot a coffee break begot a matinee begot her legs wrapped tightly around his legs begot a mortgage begot a child.
The child wasn’t the child they wished for but he was a child. He had many qualities that marked him as a child. His first word was alpha, the word they knew him by thereafter. He grew and lived among them until they kicked him out for general laziness. Take a bath, they called. Take your comic books. Take a hike, so he hiked for forty minutes at a comfortable pace of forty meters per hour. Then he spent time wandering the desert in his Honda Civic hatchback, drinking from a canteen and talking to stick figures he drew in the sand. Then he cast himself down on a friend’s couch. He mastered Metroid there, perfected Mac and Cheese. There he gathered men around him, saying “Let’s go fish,” saying, “Someone bring some goddamn beer.” Someone brought some goddamn beer.
They fashioned a fishing boat from a life raft, cast out nets and caught lake trout. That night they feasted on everything but bones.
An “I-Can’t-Stand-My-Father” chant started up, but soon it lost their interest.
Someone pointed to the stars and said, “We made all this. Can you believe it?” No one could believe it.
OUR PARISH OF THE PERPETUALLY LAZY

observes the god-given right of the afternoon nap. We’ll do all that’s asked of us tomorrow. The Blessing of Nintendo Mass starts whenever enough of us wander in and stake our seats, fit ourselves like Tetris squares into the pews, which, we’ll have you know, we bought used from a city park that was closing. We don’t want to put you out but ask that if you come you come half-hearted, if you sing, you forget most of the words. And please, don’t bother to shower. Our church is in disarray but we’d have it no other way, pillars cracked and stained with dust, the balcony too hazardous a place to hold our cherub choir practices. Let’s stay home instead. Yes, we’re blockheads but bless the blockheads. Bless Ben and Jerry too, patron saints of ice cream by the pint. Protect us from the persecution of angry parents everywhere. In the face of all who tempt us with thoughts of motivation, we must be steadfast in our procrastinations. We must hold out in the world’s basements. When the world needs us, we shall answer nah.
APOCALYPSE

As we decreed, it started discreetly: ceiling tiles, a cracked bone from the shoulder of Atlas a dog picked up and carried away. Rainfall and with it cloudfall. In all fairness, you were warned. There were town meetings and even Jefferson, who never speaks up, spoke up. You dismissed us as an empty threat, a scare tactic conjured up in an election year. But look, the sky’s falling and all you can think of is the women you haven’t touched and the ones you held but will never hold again. Forget the food left to spoil in your broken down iceboxes, the tailgating you had planned. Atlas is losing bones and stray dogs keep taking them away to bury. To top it off, the dead start falling from heaven, casting their ephemeral glow, a sky of fireflies and sparks of flame. It’s creepy, to be honest, but we can’t help picking out our loved ones like we’re pointing to kites, the whole mess converging on us. The church’s stance on all this: confusion. We thought we’d be taken before the end, they say in a press release. We’re stuck in this together. Watching this eclipse, you wear sunglasses, eye-protection in case God changes his mind. But we know better. Atlas is running out of bones. The world’s a puzzle with pieces missing. The sky. No one has hands to catch it.
UPON JULIA’S UNDERARMS AND MISCELLANY

You'll miss her underarms, her underwear
and how she wore the same pair
each day of the week. Thursday lace,
Monday cotton, Sunday none.
Sometimes you wanted to take scissors
and sheer her in half. Sometimes
you wanted her pocket-sized like a paperback.
Except for the times you wished
she was so big she’d stomp you,
so big she could wreck you all at once.
MARTI’S PROM DRESS

The long drive to New Glarus for ice blue Swiss Miss Fabric stretches the waiting into more periods of waiting. Her father’s Beetle huffs with the effort of hills.

Back home, her mom bakes because of her nerves, the house warming with smells of poppy seed cake and cream puffs. Across the floor, the sun in streaks.

Of course, Marti will stick herself with a pin picking the stitching from the bodice sleeves her mother has sewn on in the night, petals of blood spotting the lace of her slip.

Across the city, boys shuffle along with their mothers. All the living room carpets brushed down with feet. Look here, John’s pants aren’t quite long enough.

He’s borrowed his brother’s suit and keeps glancing toward the car, the flower a damp rag on his chest. Marti’s hand spans the distance and finds John’s just as the camera winks closed its shutter, the ice cube of a flashbulb spotting their eyes. Everything is so wonderfully out of place, she thinks as they leave the house, evening coming on in a dance of wind and rain.
LEARNING ANATOMY AT THE ST. JOHN’S DANCE

Appraisal, you called it, the way you groped the flanks of boys, a horse dealer looking for a steal. You corralled them by their waists in the basement of St. John’s as Sisters snapped their sticks. I’ve test-driven a dozen, you said, and you’re all who’s left. Slouched against the concessions stand, I should’ve rolled some smokes, should’ve thrown a pocket knife into the wood then pulled it out. Except, of course, I didn’t. Shrugged in my father’s suit, I let your hands hogtie my hands. Sure, this’ll work for awhile, you whispered into my chest.

Sometime later, we lay in the field grass so they couldn’t find us. They called and called.
OUR COMMUNITY OF THE HOPELESSLY RECKLESS

gambles with the treasury. We’ll beat you at your own game, one-upmanship and rivalry, our founding charters. Go play in the street. Declare your break from the Shaky-Kneed and Hesitant. Drive at least ten miles over the speed limit. Goddess of Level-Headedness, leave us to our adrenaline rush. When we hang-glide, it takes so long to touch down we think we’re flying. When we scuba dive with sharks, we feel the water wash our wetsuits clean. We surface reborn. We are the fisherman of big game marlin from the decks of our yachts, sanction shotgun weddings and poor judgment. We repeat the Parable of the Prodigal Son: keg stands, poker, whores, but still he gets the fatted calf. Let us too make our brothers jealous. Let our water never run out of wine.
OUR UNION OF HOLY KNOW-IT-ALLS

is against subliminal, implied, and underlying messages. We call it like we see it. We’re straight shooters and stand up for those who stand up for others. Go ahead, ignore us. For that we’ll love you even more, for that we’ll let our tissue-paper memories dissolve, our heads fill cathedrals of air, our rafters nest a diverse ecosystem of birds. Do we even have to tell you about the special offer? Here goes: if you join in the next ten minutes, we’ll throw in a mild personality disorder free of charge, a lifetime supply of stubborn ignorance. You can’t put a price on that. Sit this one out with us. We’re waiting for the next round. Sure, we have advice on a range of topics. First, fish make good pets. Second, nod along and all will be kosher.
OUR CHURCH OF THE IMMACULATELY CLEAN

is filthy with soap-scum and dust. How could we
let this happen? Consider this homily a notice:
roll-up your sleeves, scan all the furniture
of your hearts and Armor All the leather
that needs it. First, test on an inconspicuous
area. Take it easy, Mister Clean. Your mother
doesn’t live here. The floor is not the largest
shelf in the sanctuary. We agree it wasn’t cool
to leave the kitchen stacked with spinach
casserole dishes from the potluck, so scrub
the bubbles from us Goddess of When I’m Stressed,
I Clean. Observe the foaming action that works
so you don’t have to. After all, we need
to be rug-beaten, to be diluted at a ratio
of one part water, two parts us. We’ll stand
upwards of 15 minutes, dress in rubber gloves.
Let us not leave this church until we leave it,
and when we do, by god, it will be spotless.
UPON JULIA’S SOMETIME PERSISTENT CAT

What do you think of that calico
pawing the chair leg, springing up
to fill your lap with fur?
Want to take a Louisville bat to her?
Want to hear the metal ting and Julia,
stepping from the shower saying, did you
hear anything?
RANCHER’S LAMENT

Smoking could bring this shake to my skin.
Lord knows it’s not a woman. Haven’t touched one since Santa Fe & don’t intend to.
Desert sky’s all broken yokes & sides of beef, knolls cloaked in yellow jack & heat, slowly killing the stock of cattle.
I save all I can. Stomp my boots through the catclaw & muck of the riverbed,
string lines & lines of fence, barbs to quarter the fields. If the canyon’s lip is a path only asses follow,
I’ll follow it too, though I’m careworn, choked by soil & chamomile if that tugs at any tissues folded in your pockets.
Hammered clefts of silt-rock, a row of thumbs. The desert leached, blasted about by sand. Past Palo Duro, I pound down another post for the barbwire,
clear to the hard clay two feet under the topsoil. Cable hand-knotted & caught with cotton from my clothes, a few pricks of blood. It’s twisted around itself, taut & set to snag cur-dogs, to screen the she-wolves I won’t give up on.
OUR SOCIAL CLUB OF THE DESPERATELY HORNY

runs through the same list of new business:
repeat the Sermon of the Evils of Soft-Core
Porn and Kleenex under our breath, hail
our efforts at keeping our hands to ourselves.
Even when the woman at work points out
her skirt and asks how short’s too short and hey,
she drops her pencil again. With co-workers
who never let slip which bar they’ll hit
for happy hour, who needs friends?
The long and short of it, we’re lonely, even
grouped here at the Clubhouse bar watching
Miss America on TV, hoping for a fall. We take
cold showers, wrestle with the desire to kneel
and let the water wash away all that’s dirty.
Free us from the shackles of scotch
taped glasses, forgive us our morning weeping,
our wet bed sheets. So what if we prefer
a thermos to a paper-bag lunch? So what
if women ignore us? We’ll praise them,
sit in phone booths off the interstate and mouth
our wishes to a pretty voice over in Idaho.
Let not our late-night calls fall on deaf ears
as we take the bread but never get the body,
the body shed for us and for all things.
OUR ORDER OF THE LONELY-HEARTED

convenes every Friday evening in front of the TV
with fold-up trays, suppers of Salisbury
steak, cream corn, and brownies. It’s only
me, but calling the Order “our,” reassures
my mother that other men are doing this,
watching reruns of Night Court, praying for
the woman at work to stop saying she loves
how well we listen. Let the meek inherit
the earth immediately. Let us be less than honest
and waste our money on a Harley. We’ll ignore
our mothers, ride helmetless, wear leather.
In this New Year of Our Lord, we pray for more
responses to our personal ads. Please, we ask
that you send us single women who don’t
smoke and can live on a librarian’s salary.
Women who laugh at John Larroquette as hard
as us. Women our mothers will approve of.
For love, we’d sell our whole collection
of unopened figurines. Hear our plea, God.
We know you know the sting of hostility.
SHE LOVES ME FOR MY HARLEY

We leave her parents waiting on the lawn, their hands locking like a fence. One ride, she’d begged and didn’t even need their nod before she pulled a helmet on and belted my waist with her arms. Above, the sky is snaked with clouds and pimpled stars. Down the lane, the lake like a nickel shines. We shouldn’t stop at all—her parents know how long the motorcycle ride should last. Still we stop. Who cares who catches on? The waves, a braided mess of noise, bite the sand as if to say, Go, no one’s looking. Behind the trees, so gorgeously wrapped in trees, we don’t see their car, stopping.
OUR SYNOD OF THE SEASONALLY-AFFECTED

hates Isis. We’ve not woken up for months without seeing rain. When the world shrugs, we let the weather cow-tip us back to bed. We don’t fight it. We believe in one mattress, acknowledge the comfort of goose-down and the forgiveness of our children who tell their friends that Mom’s just a little sick and tired of drawing smiley faces in mustard on bologna sandwiches. Deal our hands out of this one. Call us, someone, call us from our sleep. We’ll rise like zombies, drool and embarrass you. Like grain gods, we are seasonal. The furniture strips away from us because we are rooms being emptied. Lord, take us up in a whirlwind. Deliver us from this never-ending season of leaves. You’ve taken most of us, now take the rest.
UPON JULIA’S UPPER BODY STRENGTH

Hard to get a firm hold on a TV set.
Impossible to throw it farther
than a few feet. But it falls
through a third-story window easily.
I hesitate to say, Lift with your legs,
as I dodge a suitcase, a flower vase.
I hesitate to say, Let me palm you
like a basketball. Let
the bath towel slip. Your body,
a desert so endless and thirsty,
so generously framed in the window.
Hit me with something. Knock me out.
Teach my hands how to be hands.
WE OFFER THIS FOR BEING LATE

Because we’ve stopped to watch the trout rising through rings of other trout. Because it’s less an exercise in digestion and more they jaw our hooks. We feel the pull. Feed slack to keep the line from snapping.

Silver flashes of fish sticking to our scales, the stream’s a circus of bait with evergreens and the bedrock layers of mica and flint trimming the edge.

A toothache of guilt flairs before a bobber, a snared steelhead settles it.

The water lures us here. What is it, even Jesus asked, about fishing?

It’s where he found his finest men. On Sunday we can’t help what we become, disciples of worms squirming as the hook runs them through.

We expect nothing except suckers, but when we cast our nets, they are so heavy we struggle to pull them in. The hymn of water holds its note and never stops.
HOW IT CALLS TO HIM

Calls to him as it always has,
   plainsong of wading, the endless
static waves, the sun’s open throat.
   They said the beach would kill him.
X-rays of decay as if his bones
   ground down to dust inside him,
his body an invaded body. Change in him
   sustained itself on such small clouds.
The drainage channel banked
   with algae, sandbanks pinned with alewives
to puncture him so he’ll never stop
   bleeding. The windbreak along the brae
is a brand, sutures that tether
   him to Neshotah, separating the road
from the lake and the shifting edge
   of shoreline. He was belligerent.
We had to bring him here, the sands
   of beach he runs down as he often has
in other years, sinews of his muscles tight,
   his body brilliant and out of breath.
BREEDER OF MANY DOGS

Across the forty, dragging bones, the hounds come home with parts they’ve pulled from deer scraps left by hunters. Skulls too heavy to haul, the farmer finds them piled and picked through along the border fence. Shifting the John Deere into second gear, a can of Bud snug in its holder, he finds it easier to be far from the farmhouse, folded deep in the plot of land his father left.

His sightline a mile wide, vision bounded by the state forest to the west and highways. The dogs, snarling as they drag their catch across corrugated rows of cornfield, worry meat from bone, roll in filth and mud. They nip each other’s ears because they’re mutts and have no one else to love. Just the farmer. Just him, the Bearer of Good Harvests, their Producer.

He hopes they’ll always need his hands and roll on their stomachs when they start to wrestle. The half-bites that don’t draw blood, dogs circling the fight, fur they leave in the carpet.

They howl through the Plexiglas windshield, through what he thought would never break in him until he’s a dog. He’s part of the wolf pack or their scruffy leader. He keeps them fed.

Plowing a rough patch, the engine gives out thin trails of smoke the dogs target after he’s gone over the next hill, a bad quart of oil or something worse in the engine’s machinery.

He’ll push the tractor on, his trail through the field weaving like a wound. He senses the dogs running inside him as deep as the corn–stitched roots, deep as the roots of those roots.
AFTER ONE THOUSAND NIGHTS

Slipping through her sleeping bag, early morning runs its hands along her knees,
up the outside of her hips until she suffers it moving inside her. A rattle of ice skeins
the water in the canteen. The weight of dew presses down the dome of canvas.

Last night they tried again, and after he came, she could feel the twitch of it
inside her failing to take hold, then him curled against her stomach. Unzipping,
she leaves the tent and finds the stock of coals in the fire pit, the seedlings,
still lit and glowing. She begins breathing back the flames. She tosses in matches,
balled newspaper. I can make coffee, she thinks. Coffee is what I can make.
WORKS CITED


