Candidacy| Poems

Matt Byrne

The University of Montana

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Candidacy

poems
by:

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I.

He Waits For What Has Happened
Another Faustian Exchange

The sky inherits blue from unsynthetic chemicals
as a dog runs onto the vacant street.
A thing of surprising weight is handed to me
by a passerby speaking in paraphrase.
The wind stirs leaves in vortices.

His black coat dims the lit world.
He walks away, up the center of a tree-lined horizon.
The thing he has given me is smooth
and nameless, inappropriate for mantles
or cupboards, fingerprinted with his scentless oil.

It did not necessarily come from soil
but what doesn't? A flash of birds comes
from the sky—a mood shift could leap from anywhere.
I wonder what the loved one will think
of the thing if my impressions of it

are not hers. The weather displays
cumuli. One unfolds
into protean images I think of the thing:
an Italian villa, an akimbo clown neither good nor evil,
a timepiece frozen mid-twirl, a pointed finger.

If I didn't take the thing somebody would have.
Two wrongs probably made this neighborhood.
So the clouds feed off their own immateriality
to grow new illusions. The eye is a puppet provocateur.
Grass grows greener within this else factory.
Beyond the Call

The commander’s sleeping with his troops again.
All night they march in and out of his quarters,
bare-chested, looking hungry.
His doorstep is littered with pistachio shells.
Classical piano drifts from his draped windows,
the notes muffled by a sandbag fence.

The guard in the tower lights a flare: insects drop
stunned, wingless at his feet. Red wax bubbles over
his gloved hand. He closes his eyes but still a flash.
This phenomenon unnerves him repeatedly.
His girlfriend's last letter smelled of basil.
He rolled it into his armpits to prevent shirt-sweat.

Two spotlight beams weave into each other like mating moths.
A private stumbles out the door, laughing, with a piece of paper
stuck to his back. He falls asleep in a jeep smashed against a tree.
The engine knocks as if something's stuck under the hood.
The moon sings as if interrogated.
The moon swells with absent sun.
What timbre from which crater?

The commander's chimney ceases to issue smoke.
A task force spills from the window well to retrieve more kindling.
Armed with pulaskis and measuring tape, they fan out
toward the surrounding barracks, humming a morose arpeggio.
They haul back styrofoam cups and pencils—
one drags a pair of lightning rods from a nearby village.
The commander will appoint him attractive in the morning.
Where To Look

Surrounded by glacial peaks
but no ocean to speak of.
And there are other lovers
much kinder, softer than yours.

Or meaner, harder, and that's
the sausage of irony
blood-soaked, like wind sinking teeth
into the river's silver startle.

Also pigeons pecking at spit,
those apostatized doves.
When you give change to the man
you are begging for assurance

that you will never be that man.
A freight station for lumber
sets this town's stage: the land
shudders as trains wrench away.

Try to look elsewhere. Try to see
the rotund earthen crystal
of her eye, its shifting geography
only a sadist would disturb.

The weaving current of dreams—
crumpled wrappers kicked into it.
What then, gentlest looker, does
the reddest wrapper stand for?
The Poem Has Died

without a will.
Submerged in scrapped papers,
the mourners are speechless.
Its was built of dross, twig, and dirt
flattened, appraised,
rationed by the aptly suited:

was mottled, a creek siphoned
into lake,
the torn hair tufts
of warring gods
carved into inviting animals
for doorsteps,
overcast because a 32 mph southerly wind
made it that way.

It couldn't sleep misunderstood,
couldn't wake when easily gotten
and often snorted. It read fiction
when it wanted a story.

It was substance,
the most decadent.
An extroverted youth,
sublime, heaven-bent
on an indeterminate Truth is Illusion associative

The poem's only absolute:
succeeded less than failed.

Biographers are discouraged by doubts
"Without a plug," it said,
"there's nothing to pull."
The New Nonfiction

Our ignorance of anatomy:
we are convinced the heart has strings,
appears blue from outside. Having stumbled
from a forest erect with cadaverous trees,
I can't be sure—but it appears
large semi-mammals tottered here
minutes ago, hurling themselves
into extinction based on a survey suggesting
the threat of their foraging.
Too little too late. I am enthralled by the likelihood
of more for everyone:
the gross national product shall be divvied: two-thirds
to the little people, one-fifth to the practitioners
of various yogic faiths, the remaining to those few
who can figure out the remainder.
When was it fine and decent
to have eyes in back of the head? The cyclical logic
of the forest I see in my mind.
The rare sun spurts aged mayonnaise
upon the snowy field. I am mildly hungry, and, although
omnivorous, obsess about ingredients, the content
of tables, the zygosity of fruit flies. For lack of better words
I turn over an old leaf. Frondescence—
these blackened veins remind me not of death
but the entrepreneurial design of indoor volleyball courts.
Fact: if A is speaking one's mind, and B is a mind
ninety percent unused, then C is a product one must
advertise tactically. I mean fractally
You know what they say about a forest with big trees....
Nocturne

1. Snake
Sleeping with a snake can be fulfilling. Its illusory oil relieves.
You get what you don’t ask for for a snake’s spontaneous. Such as:
reading (not meant for bedtime, get me?)
ever results if a tongue rhythmically penetrates your earhole. Lord knows!
A snake’ll loop around a staff to tattoo your brain with healing, wheeling
and reeling your last nickel into the radiance of gambling abyss. Hell. Last week my snake
introduced a new polymer with one heck of a half-life to a middle-aged plastic manufacturer
Of course it gets worse, which is better. No one wants a martyr on the mattress.
A snake forgoes forging sexual exultation ex post facto, but divulges universal secrets
in its granular, surly way. A portable icon turns everyone on! One thing: it'll never
let you in on how.

2. Gun
Sleeping with a gun gains momentum. At first cold and distant, but its barrel embodies
what you feel you’re lacking: you seem safer than you’re supposed to—your bathtub's bulletproof.
The blood runs thin when nothing hunts you. Nightmarish quiet perishes from a gun.
It's time's microwave. Have you ever sensed nobody watching you? A scope's as valuable
as the pope isn't catholic. For your target, mind you.
Mind your matter. A gun is a manner of speech;
dialect distinct, etymologies no accident.
If only Cain could be able to appreciate this.
If only (some) dreams could pop a cap in themselves.
The noir moon fails to finance its efforts, the lump under your pillow demands action.
Are there calisthenics for this sort of slumber?
Imagine the intricate ecosystem within a copse of sage, fir, and sapling birch. Imagine it gone.
How long can a gun hold its tongue?
Neighbors at a Dead God's Cul-de-sac

Harl scrubs the skid marks on his driveway.
An unfamiliar car is parked along the curb.
I'm relieved when it disappears. It is summer.
Someone's children resume peering through windows,
their garden footprints careful to disturb.

We know what it's like to be young. I fasten
six blue balloons to my front yard's lamppost.
Harl places a large cage in his backyard.
I should think about his wife more often,

but I'm afraid how fast the trees grow
near the phone lines. The same white van with changing
company logos cruises the street lazily.
Mounds of upturned earth appear around Harl's
Russian olive, where he's scattered two dogs' ashes.

Sunday is indistinguishable from Saturday.
A palpable shame drips from the eaves, but turns
out it just rained—the landscaping's woodchips
look lacquered! Mist rises from drooping ferns.

The town's traffic has increased,
droning above the lake's breathy crawl. Was a time
Harl and I congregated on Sunday, filtering
to church stunned from a hard night.
Now, our children gone, the orange paint cracks

from our driveway basketball hoops, nets gray
with no use. We don't congregate weekends,
left to create our own allegories, to sift
through the scattered piles of ourselves.

I should think of my wife more often, does she
think of me? Harl drills the outside corners
of plastic shutters into his brick house.
Someone pulls into his driveway, backs out, drives away.
With nothing left to forgive us, Harl,

we can start by filling our birdfeeders.
The Love After Lust Song

These after love-making doldrums
remind me of a time when you were better plural,
as was I. A thin January light needles
through the bayless bay windows.
A half-eaten head of cheese remains molded
on the table. When a bird outside cries
no response meets it into song.

What about you? Was it good, all their asking,
the procession of spent bodies, in order
of importance, seeking similar appraisal?
That wave—the capsized past tossed in its curl:
shores what I want, something like bygones.
But we must use memory, as each other
There's no other way to educate the future.

We must use being used. Here the difficulty lies:
whether to remove the dust tendrils caught flapping
in the fan's grating, or let them cluster till they billow
bedward. I detest flags for they never land.
What was good for the future covers it,
the nuts and bolts which augmented the harvest
cover the harvest. You detest flags for they are land.

You raise your arms behind your head, the right pit
ashes of embers just doused. Nothing urges now,
just you and I reconnoitered, staked and past scrutiny.
Like the first time I saw my reflection for what it was:
a surface deep enough to be born into dying with.
So images are neither created nor destroyed.
The ceiling fidgets when your numb hips twitch.
Story of the Line

Like fathers, sons, and spirits
it is crossed with regret sometimes.
Draw it and erase it, a proposal
cookie-jarred then piggy-banked.

I sign my name above it dotted,
the script droops beneath.
See it in the robin's beak
split red by its skinny shriek.

Point A to Point _____
conforms to the mountains
fractured from stretched land.
And what but flowers disbanded
along its footless trails?

The city I wait in is the rift
left in the cleaver's board.
It stakes its sacrificial swing
on a chain bearing half my weight

as I perch rockingly
in the middle of this white humming
room. Say it is fine as sand
no longer sand, the spectral dust
on mirrors awaiting dollar straws.

It convinces throngs to hail it,
having more minds than its own.
A stem meets its leaf to spin
a forking branch of vein.
I Have Some Errands To Run

1
Lost friends, shifting laterally, heads upward strained, it's for the better.

Sister, doughy redolence of me, may I borrow the brother? He's always off being who he's not, scaling walls which land on their teeth from the weight of him.

Sunset, frazzled autumn augury, will you thrust in me your drama? Darker coffees cook somewhere, prompting pissings from the dumb-struck villagers.

Sister, estranged, weeping unsuccessfully, your brother wildly researches the magician's patterns. A man in tatters practices fly-fishing in the grass, prominent paunch lifting with the half-hearted sweep of his rod—does anyone spare dollars?

Dispersing ache and gods with holes in them, I am unfaithful: I merge you into a textbook, "The Transforming Economics of Preparation." I take all of you too seriously; I hereby give you.

2.
Hard crops searing in sun, water choking from sprinklers, clouds scantily staked in sky corners like pockets of languished mystery, blistered shoulders dotted with sweat and flung saliva because man must create there is nothing else enlarged, only expanded, thinning, bear witness to this flattening, these mountains into rivers into mud -into an adolescent orgasm processed into cold, reluctant memory Lost friends, do you know me more by knowing less?
Do your dreams, dislocated vertebrae, whine for the spine they've moved from? We broke and spilled, little creation casualties.

How firm is it, sisters, your position in the firms? The bamboo-palmed islet I made for you shrinks, see the surf sipping it away, the kaleidoscopic fauna losing to luster—you evacuate for a more stable environment, where angels plummet into cement like civic kamikazes and the mortals say, "It was such a troubled angel."

Do you know the combination, sister? Ask your sisters. The mortals are far too busy realizing that they are—there they go again, shouting in plastic jumpsuits throughout the park, "We are sunlight and dirt, but water's the raison d'etre!"

If we could meet one more time, sisters, once more before the opening hush, the memorized script, before the smirking usher hands us programs while his underpaid heart sleeps elsewhere. We have a section, aisle, and seat number.

No one breathes during the performance. Please. Be quiet, sisters.

A smart man would pawn his rod and invest the results. Would crack a book open into entrails of information.

Would use the information to deposit the results into shining telephones bathed in light undiluted by the glass protecting it.

A smart man bends anemic toward his tall appliances, asking, "Are there more of you?"

I must purchase the pieces of meat wrapped in cellophane. A rock on which to fry them. Newspaper for the remains.
A Bedroom

Years ago a haywire Genesis
boomed baritone into the molding, the abraded
floorboards of this room. She was there.

She blew a kiss. A door closed. Drop of warm
on his thigh. Exit means true love.

She must have stooped and squatted, scrubbed,
shaved her hair within lotion. She must have dried.
Whether she reached those four starry moles
on her back or, feet apart, rushed, concerns itself
gently out the open crack of window.
The staccato drizzle of passersby leaks unheard
and loud enough to clatter his dreams to gray waters,
a cloaked shadow, a planet nudged by wind.

How does he wait for what has happened?
He wakes to black dots on the ceiling swimming.
They disperse to no end—her imminent
departure. This is consequentially morning.

Their clothes of last night and next week lie lumped
on the floor. Awkward with grace unknown
she sways from the room. Hurried silence:
it goes when it wants. His flaccid mind ignores
a stiffening urge to wake. Some sullied world heals
when the alarm radio shuts off. He exacts her last
motion—trajectory.

His tongue sticks to the vermilion ceiling of mouth;
wedged between are tiers of white-washed teeth
in kinetic cadence, always saying, always said.
II.

*The Surrogate*
That Would Make a Good Poem

The earliest worm could have waited, could have
looped in the loops of its excretion—I huddle over the thing
with onlookers looking for a subatomic ejection,
elegies failing from their twitching lips, cars
reenacting their little crimes, so I rise
to the occasion as only I can, expounding the mythos
of terminus, and the only one leaning on my sentence
is a boy with a sticker (Louis P.) stuck to his breast
who leans on his bike like a human
kick stand, so paste-faced and breathy,
the moon in the man, an unknowing disciple
who devours my words until I disperse into the most hallowed ideal
he's ever misunderstood,
as it is on earth, so that he may have his own words,
rough hybrids of mine, already oceans from their source.
The Legend of Fertile Izer

"Only the pictures and statues of great men
survive, and these the shapely women devoted
to the perpetuation of the race gaze upon to
improve their offspring."

— Tomasso Campanella, The City of the Sun

She was a product of eugenics: a fat woman
and thin man, perfect

for perfection, at the exact hour
determined by the Astrologer and Physician,

having resisted till the ode worthy age of 22,
laid down as sexing one and soon came

Izer: she was weaned on the Two Physical Principles:
that of the sun as father and the earth

as mother. Because she was not light
but ground, not photo but opportunity

for synthesis, not drill, nor chisel,
jackhammer, dildo, or screwdriver,

she became abundant mineral potential, an ore
to prompt his eminent mind

to instruct her logically of systematically
formulated formulae for deducting dividends

to develop an indelibly didactic division of labor.
It was natural—grounds for observation and centuries

of study—when her golden hair leafed, shoulders rocked
crusted bluffed expanded contorted flattened into

a continent incarnate. She birthed the precious metals
essential for extracting a more precious mine.
Reason for Everything

I am alone and have done much work
to be there. Being humbled by the way sky meets panoramic earth slant,
birds ziggng as if the end
or beginning is upon us, bores me. I take my shirt off
to confuse you. Shadowed curves comprise me;
I am a horde of erotic lumps. People must unbend

the wayward glares which make them. They must socialize
with religious zeal, shop at stores providing booths—
good manufacturing versus bad manufacturing
is the dialectic dictate of the universe, and I can't stop
scratching. How many shades redder

until I flame? The corpses of secrets
rot for the taking in dumpsters,
but all you speak of could be heard in front of the object's back:
he looks good, she is a very sweet individual (and funny), I should
let go. Sucked from the swarm, a bird alights on wire

they say for telephones. It blips frequencies in alien lattice
I seek to diagram. At my fingertips rests a chalkboard
which tries to take my life. I scrawl for its audience intent
on my embarrassment. They open my pantry to a landslide
of soap, thinking me a barbarous dust killer.
Someone's gotta sterilize food for the table, where it steams
stiffly between us. Enlisted, I rub my scent on the hypothetical perks.

Cut and therefore essentialize. Bare to me your most minimum.
The bird calls to mate; the bird calls to exhibit; the bird chides,
"How's the weather there," "Take it easy," "Let's masturbate
to each other's groaning currents."
Someone always hears, so by approximation listens.
Like a sign, you will never materialize.
Through a Lens

I'm supposed to see you. A new pane, wholly transparent, polishing to blind your silhouette behind. There's a haze I can't muse out of you, a wafting of birds caught brown by sun's atmospheric malaise.

Your atmosphere expands: you shrink to another place not home. I'll shove seeds grow less room for weeds; but soil surrounds unearthed stone, not one unbroken or soft as it sounds.

Liken the twilight cloud web to the crescent clip of moon later, before the hands-in-hands tighten with demands of slick union, dawn—a toy too baroque for piquing you this pheromonal crouch. You have (suddenly) withdrawn

being had, as if, for the birds, flying colors will unbend my posture. I stand to see you green upward lilting; lean in not to me. One thousand words ago I snapped undeveloped before you. Your tweezers lifted me like now your whispers.
Virus Needeth Not a Résumé

A certifiable prodigy: long division and multiplication were a breeze, though spelling bees did thwart him.

Puberty was never an issue. It channeled into philanthropic misanthropy. He would be prosperous.

Class bullies and the popular: envy-stricken. Under their skin he most often wound up. One day, he ascended a flag-pole by his underwear. Through a wincing bearet he beheld for the first time treetops. How the recess children fan out, gnarled and ungainly!

As valedictorian, he betrayed a jack-o-lantern grin. Accolades spoke of vision and determination. He felt these veritably so, with the aid of workhorse genes.

Scholarship flooded in. He was begged for by the best. Appointed a research position, he invited voyeurism from superiors. Academia just can't cut it, he thought. I'm going where the buck surges, then stops.
Grief

It's not as bad as you thought it should be.
Not a face slap, not a shoulder knuckled hard,
just a vague ache, someone supposed to be there
but may just be late.

It's when the one-liner is no longer tolerable,
no dawn clearing night's name, so you demand substance,
which is quiet. Like dust from shattered glass
you can't wholly sweep it away.

The infinite consequence of a letter never sent,
what could have becoming should have, as an absence
fills a void. You treat it like a ladder, climb down
to face the earth,

a curious apple your rotting palate grows to savor.
It has your divided attention. You've always
dreamt it, now you have it—for the meantime
it seems necessary

An addition to the collage, the papier-mâché dangle
of experience, a history constantly rewritten.
What but grief to animate you so, who but you
to embrace it?
Window Shopping

It was off-limits to stare. The man
limped (everyone knew it)—why did the Farner-Bocken
delivery guy stare? The parking lot full of people
brushing by with glances upward. He stared.

Let's say it's you on your way to cigarettes, coffee.
You'd see him limp; you'd see the delivery guy ogling injury.
Would you think it too?

Grinning, disheveled, leaning against the yellowest
willow, a cut on your shin, smell of dead
leaves and you and me. I can't put dreams back
where they find me.

A scar branched up from his sock, drifted from ankle to upper calf.
Even the hair near the scar (writhe with each step) was gone.

You step from cabs, bent knee birthed in streetlight.
You half-sleep on hammocks under ruddy overcast.
You should be by the willow, disheveled.

Grim sometimes, the murk your brown eyes do.
Well-adjusted One (I)

I wait for my surrogate. He will be civil
if he gets his tea. His harbinger: the dawn sun
which says its afraid I'll have to leave. For him I pray
like for my mother I squatted, lifting shards
of her teacup after an aircraft quaked the roof.

My prayers are predictably bypassed. My hands
tweeze grace unsteadily. When he arrives
he'll be afraid I'll have to leave (for the far
corner of the pantry, where dustpans lurk in cobwebs)—
o where's the light bulb's drawstring? For some knowledge
people get ignored. For some knowledge

my surrogate badgers me. He taxies toward me
to empty evidence from my head. He needs always
my coordinates, but is giddy with young love so won't
implant a tracking device. His romance has limits.
He travels light-years to buff his crow's feet.
That dustpan bears garage-sale characteristics:

dirt painted in the furrows
of its cracked receptacle, yellow handle faded
a lighter shade—but with what to crack the case?
I'm afraid I'll have to drop the case,
from a towerish height, to splinter into its innards.
Extended scrutiny makes the scrutinized *wriggle*.

My surrogate prompts
an involuntary pirouette with a sidelong glance.
Huddled, I merely adjust to the darkness some.
Yes I stare. Frequently I'm afraid I'll have to forget,
but every day, soon now, the aircraft inching above matted
trees, to her trembly teacup mother clings.
Message from the Plankwalker

He nods with earnest approval as I crawl across the deck. He is aroused by the direction in which I move. The sun pokes through my shirt, its heat crawls my back.

I remove my shirt. Improbably naturally, I get hotter. With a bayonet he draws an arrow in the grime-covered wood; this pronounces I am not about face. I realign. Never

have I envied so much the land's mountain tops sucking from sponges of cloud. I am stunned by my veins. The long roots of pulled weeds haunt me. He believes only people get to be ghosts.

He believes in motion. In choosing a distinct brand of motion. He ignores the widespread sky draped inert over the weather. Even the curling white waves shaking off the wind like noisome flies. He does not test the consequences of removing his cap. He dresses for protection. A silver whistle lies in the bed of his breastbone. It sprays a helix of light when he shifts.

Shall I apologize for the mess I won't make? Shall I request a request blindfolded? If I deviate from course, he'll continue with his mapmaking.
Colonization

The shadow on the wall waves its arms then curls them back into itself. It's like a fog condensed into form, cordoned only by its distance, which is empty. The object's axis varies;

shadow swells as if to envelop, shrinks as if to pierce—the shadow thrives on refusal. It hangs absence in a frame.

The candle flickers when the shadow does—the wall leaps, resets. The wall is a screen surrounding this logic: subcutaneous presence, a shadow stuck inside just waiting to stay there. With muted tone the shadow conjures invisibility, dares closed eyes to see what it's made of: the object imagined within the shadow's elastic pulsing.

There's no bottom to its surface. Does the object not become medium? Becomes extended from. Becomes shade, that darkened figure flitting on the screen. What luminous air crowds these cross hairs?

Cast in a mold of air not as luminous, the shadow leads what it follows.
Well-adjusted One (II)

Son-of-a-bitch my surrogate was called. From that point on the cameras dollied out. He shares with me my mother. She is panting and shifts jaggedly through the house. Her knuckle locks around a porcelain handle. Birds jigger into a box attached to the backyard tree. She spies enough room for a swing-set or a garden. One minute later an aircraft hovers over and I crawl: it is time to elect the surrogate. He must have anger accompanied by involuntary rectal contractions. He must have brown hair. He must swell and calm to expound the big picture. He's found: sweat pours from me but trickles from him unctuously. He spies me in the fulcrum under lightning and thunder. I am silent. He points to trees and says, "This is a poplar grove." Sometimes, he removes grit lodged under his fingernails. The tips whiten to powder.

It's no use thinking he'd make a well-rounded father. His heart after shuffling he deals to the locals. They rarely get a good hand. They call him son-of-a-bitch but admire his tussled style. If mother knew what they said she'd instinctively pluck her eyebrows into little minuses—the most magnificent host! I'm speaking from a place of envy where meteorologists take their work home. It could rain at any time. A new church could open up with a more muscular Jesus. Loving Him enough, the locals would drink decaf after mass. My surrogate is happy about the surgeon's family moving in up the street. People are gaping holes of information, he conjectures. An untrustworthy parasite, I spy his scrap-papered notes. They are crisp, not addressed to me. Jagged mother, why don't you read them too? You could make the backyard anything, nothing at all—the air above the house fills with a clapping gray hum. It is not raining.
III.

*Supply No Demand*
Candidacy

Please, come in. Did you notice the security guard in the lobby? The filing cabinet stuck in his teeth?
He's paid well to love you. As I speak a factory erects in your name.
You'd be surprised how few understand—turnover's at an all-time high. The thing

about success lies in velocity.
Your assistant, invisible right now, totes tools to scrape your doubts—if you pledge, he'll use foam.
I, on the other hand, am not your 'boss', but your Plan.
Look me in the eye when I close it, or when the pages on my head are blank and I am open.

Wipe off your brow with this punch-card. The ink was extracted from a Rockefeller's marrow, so it's permanent.
I don't punch in I'm never out.
Dress code requires one sleeve up, a microchip behind your tie.
Our competitors hire silver-suited mystics that blend in with the boiler room. They whisper hexes through the vents. They slip paper clips in the cafeteria microwaves.
They could be anyone,

which makes the job interesting. A story:

*once, a man died in his sleep, decided to bestow benefits upon his devoted underlings (who burned U's on their tongues to prove it), married atop a pyramid*—o you know all this. Our aptitude tests reveal your detailed knowledge of our inception.

As I speak your factory annexes a country. Your nodding injects pandemonium into the trading pit.
They're running notecards across each other's throats—your blink just altered the prediction for next year's water harvest. Remember:

my eyes are everything like the sun. I read and then I read some more.
You're our domino, kid, a blade of hay in our needlestack.

How do you see yourself four years from now? You'll pry that drainplug from the wish-fountain.
The Digger

I've arrived at a conclusion: something must be taken from the ground up. Calluses throb in cadence—
If only I hadn't lost the saint's bone lodged behind my ear. My sixth sense

asks for a seventh. It sends pain synapsing toward my head because it hates the too-appropriate music in there. I've fooled sixth sense before:
just add a new note to the tune. Just wrap

a tourniquet so the end takes longer. Training camp feels years ago, so I rub scars for memory:
pickax, shovel, formaldehyde, harmonica.

Is it possible to leave the conclusion? Not when fully armed. One of the lieutenants who said he was my uncle ordered cease ceasing fire. I am completely alone

on this one. All the lieutenants die in orderly fashion. Damp with youth, I pull the sweat from my eyes. A dull vinegar overpowers the smelling salts. More reason to scrutinize science, but my rank entails not being paid to think about thinking.

I'm supposed to look presentable—
dip the towel into the container of orange surgical soap borrowed from headquarters, then wrap it around my headset. Freshly sharpened stakes

provide a statuary skyline. Daytime and the moon's half-full. Ashes drop like god's expendable sugar. I cannot move because the handle grips too hard. Remain unblinking. Fall in:
the buried sprout right through me.
Because There Are No Cows Coming Home

I don't have any faith in the world, she says, relieved. I tell her rightly so, since everyone she's loved died from en masse stenosis at carnivals they weren't enjoying. You must take a sitz bath, I advise her, to suture your important (when whole again) medulla oblongata. She's hankered for a cure some time now, and I spring for such opportunities. I suggest she paint her toenails, only to soften this extreme with allusions to matrimony. Not for me, she pipes, as if trying to intimidate the oil, popcorn, perfume and pubic sweat from floating into the room. I tell her today's god is a smooth upper-level manager who prefers being represented through bauble. How can she denounce an apparition in shades? Allergies prevent her identification with nature. She walks an invisible dog with a charming coat and hip dysplasia. She tenses up when realizing even infants aren't cute, that they may be socially svelte but incomparable to a house facing backward on a would-be regular street. I fall for her, unrequitedly, when she neglects to water her plants.
Stages of Portraiture

When he met her he was excitably jaded,
a burgeoning doubt factory eager for distribution.
She also clung to preconceptions.
Her sky often hung overcast, inching toward
her with shadowed restraint. He was nothing on its way.

The oscillating helixes of attracted energy fields,
or serendipity, most likely utter chance,
drew them together between buildings.
Their paths crossed in supermarts neither
normally patronized. They selected between dual
paragons of life, choosing a shared solitude
with anticipated collateral. The people in the buildings
either watched or didn't care; in the supermarts
they were eyed and passed over, like previous lives.

Now he attaches a sign against the sea.
Men and women read it, but they have their own signs,
which most only read. She looks at the sea,
whose land advances as she backpedals away.
What is it about a tragedy, its waves whipping shore?

From the buildings they lean their heads, calling
into the sea with static silence. A man painting
the sea is tired of impressions. He doesn't know
it's his will whitening water, adding birds to the spray.
What's Wrong With Eyes

The fly doesn't exit where it entered. Each tap against the inch-open window is the fly's attempt to go the quick way. It alights with torpor after a series of sweeping collisions with the glass.

The signaling breeze does not beckon it. The dense purple of a garden flower mingles with yellow grass where the fly fails to go. From the kitchen wafts the burnt sweet aging of garbage ripe with plate scrapings. The fly stops where the pane meets its frame, averted by the wood's paint-chipped opacity. Can't it see through this deception? The fly sees through the glass, not the glass which censors the room as glass would have it, taking objects into its filmic form: depressions into impressions, green lamp an amorphous swell of suspended vapor. With its radar the fly cannot see the glass, a pupil trapped within the limits of lens.
Depravity as Lesson Learned

1
We hold this evidence to be truthful:
the percentages look good, and all the tests are useful.
*Indicative of level*, the tire's rubber planing ice,
pavement beneath, everybody loves a cynic.
Just when we think we're onto something
we flip to a kinkier position. And when someone cries,
"These characters act too maudlin!"
we are busy musing *maudlin* during the explanation.
It starts with a word, like tinsel or frigid,
so that a chapped hand becomes a loving holiday
replete with destiny and obligation. It is true we control
our destiny—the snaking line of traffic points
southward, where the natives tiptoe the land as a sepulcher.
Forgotten how to fear, us, all this climbing (c'est la vie!)
down from clouds.

Why shouldn't a climax precede such applause?
Is doing it bad as thinking it? The children need something
to clap to, a hearth on which to dissect each other.
From sea to shining sea, turns out some evidence
must be flushed like shocked sperm down a lily toilet.
Where are the men at such an hour?

Nearby a table glows with the absence of an osier basket
bearing silk petals. Properties change hands.
We are not suspicious of the mourning women.
It's been said they taught us everything they won't learn.

Comes the disenchanted assassin, his polished machines
cloistered across the map. We've diluted his pursuit
with sun-grayed pastures and rustic outgrowths.
He appreciates the cornices of our youth, the origins
of our global leanings. He weighs a straight politic.
Might as well assassinate a briar patch.
It's those without arms we mustn't trust, shamelessly stomping
flyers into our sidewalks—beware the lurkings within!

Get to the heart of it, no matter how cold or salty;
don't expect the diaphanous sky or its unpruned moon
to debrief us. Comes the realist, evolving from tepid moss
to human before our eyes. We won't know what it's like
until a walk in his shoes, which fit perfectly. And love, oh love
that like-it-or-not quiescence which breaks to bits
no matter stolidly we hush it in our purring clutches.
Like the dead hourglass we fondly recollect:
the noble drive to behold each grain as moment.
So time became money or vice versa or it always was.
We blame it on no one to blame. No measure can be taken.

2.
Where are the men at such an hour?
Immaculate Propositions

The regular secretary, all hips
and jiggles, is out with a vice-ache.
Her replacement is crisp and taut
as dry steak-fat. We can't get through.
Our burden equals her egg salad sandwich.

The world's flat again for a quarter.
We got something that'll cure
them salivary froth bugs
at the corners of that smile.
We got something that'll make
your stomach argue politics
with Tabasco-soaked cornbread.

No matter. We still got that Irish
fella on our side, crooning our tunes
for a handshake and an airport.
The stakes're high in this game--
old Charlie's smoking 3 packs a day
and drinks his own piss; he's out there,
taking one for the team
with only a dozen or so I's in it.

Sign already: those eyes
ain't meant for looking. We're late
for a libel hearing with Pavlov's Dogs.
Our hotel bibles will issue forth
rivulets of tar upon the pinkest-
of-babies if we don't hear SOLD!,
or a good joke.

We'll find out soon enough
what you believe in. Your credence
finances our usurious immortality.
Know what we mean: friends, friends,
are beyond boring.
A Day Hike

I want to tell you the tyranny of clouds will inspire revolt, but it won't. It will expand, all shocking folds and botanicidal grays.

It starts with rain—you approve of such droppings—but the mist these days freezes, landing like sheets at a forensic scene.

I want you to hug the ponderosa's girth and smell its saccharine shell; your nose runs and a cigarette butt juts from the bark at eye-level.

Resolve is knowing the ocean's initials carved in mountain rock means that even mystery must flee, settle awhile in exile.

What of the fat screaming crow plummeting like a discarded cross? What insects and carcasses slick its sheen? Imperious, observing, it lands.
Laments

1.
She dreams of dreams—
O, my chinchilla, my arabesque,
my otherworldly worldly,
my bud blossom blossom bud,
O.

2.
She is the window which stares
back. Sometimes, she sees
constellations; the stars
don't come out. Nor does she,
until coming home.

3.
Instead, bacon grease flecks
her wrist. Her watch smudges.
No one hears her blink
or flinch.

4.
I pinch her thoughts, making sure
she's asleep. When I don't, snow,
and she leaves herself
for science.
Wisconsin Camping

These pines have no plans. You've been missing out here, rows of shuddering forest. You've been telling yourself sylvan errands can help. But the pines are nucleonic and watchful. Their unsuccessful branch-birth nubs eyeball you. Their single-file sadness smells like a holiday. Rolling in dead needles can't prick you into feeling faunal. The farms you passed must be booming. Behind their highway fences stacks of city salads procreate. Corn waivers. All the arrowheads, to supply no demand, rest in museum storage rooms. An information post stands at you slanted and plastic: indigenous bird with a name nebulized to Latin. Stepped-on sticks cough like rust off car doors, wind waddles obediently by. The tree ceiling waves its sun net. Bodies could be buried here; you could build a tree fort, where you'll scout the growth and decline of campfire songs and girls. You've noted in your nature journal the unendangered pesticide roiling your dream orchard.

There are tents for people like you, so you erect one. Old shotgun shells speckle your site like skin-shed. The only a cappella capable of wordlessness these crickets, this chopping alien hum.
IV.

*Penitent Protagonist*
Elegy for Michelle

Death took you
like lovers pluck roses
for sex. Human to human

ashes might be better
than dust—warmer?
Partisan no more

of blinks and head
tilting, so a poet primps
the organs of sky

no one's buying.
You piled up on yourself.
You were too much this

you needed that. A day
became solar, some
stars Orion. All forms

figuring, refiguring
atoms of exploding
shadow coiled over

and out. But that's
tomorrow's business,
a plot smothered

in self-analysis and cheap
lighting: your last thought
the next rest-stop, a bruise

you will repay someday.
Inside Scoop

The wind appears as what it stirs.
I hear what you feel through airy textures
of words. How am I to what am I to?
There must be a secret in your eye:
your eyes welter with candor.
Not to mention the rifling wind
—barely audible from this vacuum,
but safely speculated about—
which isn't the wind at all.
These forces, austere, businesslike, expose
themselves by disturbing the repose
of, in this case, leaves and other detritus.

How I cherish such avatars of argument!
Let's take a scientific approach:
"Because organisms bear the weight of need,
the clouds shuffle like pneumatic mammoths."
Inside we are centered,
but out there keeps moving, as if mobility
were enough for action, not louder than words,
but filaments of some combustible deity,
subject to the whimsy of its creations.
We are changing weather.

The weather changes us. I refute you without
even having to listen. Darling, the window,
how it mirrors but is lens? Or the neighbors,
the man on television who tells it like it is?
We are devisable in these uniforms.
We are qualified for this not that.
Someday the compulsory beads
of a warm winter will impede only our memory.
The birds will come back, making the same mistake
twice. I spoil us with such predictions.

Like blaming waves on the sea,
the vanishing point on distance from the cliffs
eyes aspire to—we've been descending all along,
as petulant angels in the throes
of savory knowledge. Picking up on things,
we eavesdrop on gravity. We like what we hear.
Obstacles

Neon taverns point out
the scuttling beach—you say,

"The structure collapses.
I argue which colors suit
its paling pallor. How best
to meet the needs
of huddled hunger
broadcast?"

Sand does not blow
over our bottle of all-right
Merlot, curls around
it like suppliant fingers. That star
collapses, and in the bay
uniformed men slip a crane's hook
under the canvas coat
of a drowned man. You uncork
and up pops grape smoke
while he emerges
still clutching a can.

A bottle would have slipped out.

I say, "There's no better way
to reach the masses. The waves lap
lovingly, like you, sweet sanguine
sissy sauce," because I can

bear this no longer,
this not unbuttoning you.
In the Showering Quarters

They can't get enough of my skin.
The air buzzes with steam. Calcified handprints
mime hymns up and down the walls.
The concierge holds a mirror between my legs.
He drops it. The handle flows toward the drain,
shards collect under my arches. I keep still.
The soap in my mouth tastes like potpourri.
It tastes differently in my eyes. The concierge

fills in for the doctor, who has steadier hands,
which are missed. The alderman
plucks my nape hairs like obstructive weeds,
wipes their roots with a chamois.
Someone without gloves loves his work,
so I wince a complaint. A gratuitous veto gurgles
through the intercom. It sounds like a command
or a prayer. I nearly mistake my feet for a pew.

Clothes lie heaped on a cart in the corner. It wheels
toward me but they push it back. I have never worn them.

I have been outside, where water spits from cliffs
and carves and slopes. Inside water ends in the center,
which could be the intercom. Sponges disappear
from their hooks in the ceiling; the room whitens.
I will appear before the panel. I am a committee.
What's scrubbed off me they snare with a filter
and send to pill makers.

The pressure hits so hard it itches.
What drains of me rusts their pipes. I leak into their dirt,
mutate their crops. They dab my torso with droppers.
Eyes blinking at me through blue wetsuits—
like performing for a human curtain.
Soon Spring Walk Song

—that dew-lacquered expanse of wheat field
is a telephone pole, I muse,
during a self-lecture on the probability
of terrestrial black holes: socks, tribes, and planes
with a dollop of eternity and sprinkled bobby-pins
to not show for it. I can wait for the pleasure principle
to clot before nerve endings. What's with the sky's
gossamer concavity today? Dishing impromptu rote
back to base as aluminum foil hyphens sunlight

or the closest thing to it. I have spared an insect
between the slits of a frictional shoe-bottom. Winged,
it might be an ant. Enemies are never captured
twice; torture makes them sing by stacking drips
on their shoulders. The election, though deemed a bust,
erupts the best party since the siege of quadrupeds;
that man in a starchy smock delivers
some barbed wire glovelessly. Headlines roll
from their billboarded bodies. Someone is delegated
carnival spokesperson while I duck beneath a cellular
call hauling Hermes' extravagant signing bonus.
Someone was here first. A woman on the park bench wears
a thickish gray coat opened exposing checkered
lining and a thin shirt. She sure is something else
I wasn't looking for. This puddle suggests a switch from vice
to versa, like television with vision.
I'd better replace the old watch in my battery—I repeat:
day takes heaven's microscope down with it.
The river stirs controversy into lime-brown light.

Something's conducted here. Grass must leave
its halfway house for green to compete
with the peripheral civic neon. Men dressed as crossing
guards demand to know why the hurry,
reasons for nervous twitching, maiden names.
They must finish before night hot-wires its dome
closed. They will gather hoarsely around a bonfire.
Informer Season

Warning signs, their subliminal enticings!
Licenses issued without background checks—
children with black facial stubble
leap from the backs of pickup trucks,
spilling into backyards, into forests,
sniffing for the difference

between scent and went. They'll never find me,
I'm on to their fluted mating calls,
their aerosol sex sprays.
I divide behind my neighbor's blinds.
He pulls in, not knowing which section
he should fire at. Before he knows it

I'm displaying for him wire spools
from my sample bag. My pants look good
on his family. I'd make a suitable mantelpiece
in the atrium. He offers me solace in the Attic of Mirrors.
I glaze him with tar and seep into nightfall.

I'm so pale the guards mistake me
for fingerprint dust. Palaver or the creaking scaffolding
drowns out my whistling. What sounds better than a siren?
I'm so pale the guards mistake me.

Better to think of the ethics involved. A glass house.
Blueprints inside: city to become bridge. The British aren't coming.
My horse cries like a breaking vehicle.
I could use a horse. I'd feed it these cumbersome clipboards.
I will feed it these clips—a getaway car

never whinnied so vapidly. The city knows what I tell it,
nodding anyway.
Utilities Included

It is early enough for the toothbrush to crumble my eyes open.
Before I reach my ears or close the mirror's door someone solicits barbiturates and shaving foam.

I am trying things on. I am trying to discern the paint-chipped debris piled on the windowsill: something got in or out. The alarm clock crawls beneath my sheets. I can barely hear the weather.

Something lives in the walls.
I consider a neckerchief, twirl it about my torso—I grow hair and humps, plates and spines. Surely I can't leave like this.

The peephole saves me.
The peephole shows me officials wielding documents to die for stamping. I jab at them, chain latched, with a broomstick.
I pour coffee under the door.

Something eats the walls.
I operate the network of steam pipes which heats this joint. It pleases me turning it up too high.
I bark heartily at complaints. The toilet is haunted;
I flush it throughout the day.

Toe nails and poster gum align against me. I arm myself with potting soil and dish rags.
Can I count on the spider I didn't kill last week? Count on the cheese grater?
Maybe I should pound the walls.
Maybe I should paint them.
The Man Who Pours Paint

pulls out a cigarette, doesn't light it.
You never know with these fumes. Making something real
means hurting it, so he dumps the contents
into each crevice of my bedroom. Not exactly
each: you see at times he'll miss a section
inadvertently. I plead he spare my desk, at least the curtains.
I take satisfaction in an unblemished inch
of phone cord. He gets quicker. Sloppier

He reaches for the lighter perceptibly blue
through his white front pocket. He reconsiders.
Has a hard time remembering what's acceptable, who's
currently defining it. A brush a luxury
he no longer affords. His tired breathing interrupts
with an effort to stifle a sneeze. He succeeds
but looks at me with irritation. My fingers cover a spot
on the door frame crucial to his task's completion.

How else can I observe his work? I need something
to hold. It's in my best interest
to leave altogether, he assures, and what I don't know
will merely numb me. Compromising, he allows
my head to jut just past the doorway's plane.
I chuckle in feigned agreement
that this is the best, and mind you, only, seat in the house.

He won't tell me about his family.
This information is superfluous. A beam of light squeezes
through a section of window he's missed. It illuminates
his briskly passing shoe, the shoelace,
the paint bespeckled tongue. He rarely reveals himself
in the light, instead angles his broad frame away
to prevent further perspiration. I cannot blame him for this.

The less I watch what he pours paint on, the less he pours.
He did not shave today. He works but gains weight,
wonders who it is, exactly, he's working for.
Trusty Pills

I have great ambition to be many more selves. This room alone accommodates one-third of these people not possessing a thing fixed: butter for the palimpsest of bread, garbage can sprouting plastic. Out back the front door draws creatures with orbiting hair and hipbones. They prove I can be bothered. It wasn't them cutting my supply. My ramparts are deteriorating my bulwarks for something better, for my needing it now and most certainly for no neighbors to see. What became of the camera crew and the scrambling press? Leapt from corners of the room like a good intention's stillborn spirit. I hold the notebooks, the papier-mâché stage's blueprints, the plans for this year's witch hunt and ensuing conventicle. I am extraordinarily pleased at all outcomes: what's important lies beneath soil, the space it leaves practical for its wrappers. There's no need for chickens in my garden of eggs. There's no need for Atlantis, even the Bermuda Triangle, amidst this dazzling array of lichen-ing drains. Most clearly I recall a seagull pecking tin foil it mistook for a beach, followed by thumb-print signatures thudding virtual promotions. Twenty years later my consultants are hiring consultants that forget my favorite color. Far be it from me to propose the removal of intents and purposes, starting with caffeine huddled gray in my retinae the blur unbearable mornings. Something for everything should skin stay lissome. What of scrambling crews, pressing cameras? When that sky swallows there's no lump to show for it.
A Rain Lesson

Achy knees, arthritic hands
and little instruments

predicted this rain
hours ago: the sky

once a concave otherworld
is having a tempest tantrum.

The you not aforementioned
evacuates like ill-prepared

pedestrians. Erosion
sounds somewhat sexy.

Eggs before this day,
cooked dead enough
to eat, stink fabrics fit
for indoors. The candle's

lit wick combats its wax
confines; even the faintest

flicker at corners of eyes
draws spontaneous ooh-aahs

beyond rain's noisome reason.

It is time to embrace memory
sluicing into song:

every storm begins, ends
with the catchy beat

on window and roof, thunderous
chorus, stunning

electricity! It is time to suck
those sodden leaves,
to eavesdrop on valley and creek
and fix ourselves a sewer
He Said to the Blank Sheet of Paper

Who calls this freedom?
Rigid, four-cornered slate
advertising pliability,
lonely, inviolate template.

I stare through a tree, a thin
cloud waning into blue
because thought usurps the eye.
I want a happy ending.

So I decorate the dendritic tree
with one lush stroke.
I dismiss the human capacity
to wring another dry

because the sky is flimsy limit;
but I cannot read the sky's bubbled script,
or decode its will to sustain.
I am biting the air that breathes me.

I want a happy ending, just once,
in which my penitent protagonist
escapes a past, earns a future—
epiphanies, from this tree, hang heavy.

I am scratching your lamina.
I should leave you in purgatorial
bliss, between a tree and a poem,
adrift in your unblooming white.