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OTHER ORCHARDS

By

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BA Literary Studies, Eugene Lang College, New York, NY 2015

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Other Orchards

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Other Orchards is comprised of poems each suspect in their own way of those boundaries that might separate humans from nature, rural from urban, worker from scholar, or human from beast. Using the figure of the orchard, a kind of “false forest,” this collection studies the ways we map ourselves onto our work and the way work might inform an understanding of the self. Ultimately, these are poems that emerge from the seams of things—the shoulder of highway strewn with dead antelope, the feral apple tree lost to the woods, the farmer lost in their work, slowing becoming less and less distinguishable from the soil and fruit and birds. These poems bear necessary and tender witness to animals living and animals dying. They situate the worker as curious philosopher, daydreamer, and a student of an already-changed ecology, extolling the virtues of endurance, patience, pressing-on, adaptability. Here, the old tractor is as vital and lovely as the first blossom, the abandoned lamb as worthy of consideration as the vast, green wild.

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EPIGRAPH

*False forest standing
cut and clipped into
neat one-hundred-tree rows, one
hundred trees six feet apart, six feet on center
ordered by type, trait, time-of-blossom
ordered by order, class, kingdom, whatever
they promise*

*Understory an understudy of grass, pig-weed, thistle, canopy
kept short, dressed the same season to season
kept low, kept wanting*

*Just outside, outside the limit of cut field,
tilled acre and lazy fence, peeled away from
this complex carpet of fruit, rye, tractor, tarp, pipe,
stands the first forest*

*It's damp, feral, sick with safety—call it
unordered or ordered by un-understandable codes,
encased in age, dripping with slow, green time*

*The trees quiet out there, wind-whispering
down to these distant and mutant cousins
something un-hearable, something like smoke*

WILDFLOWERS

Walk far enough into the woods above town and you'll find

apple trees, the odd asthmatic lilac.

They are there, the pamphlet at the trailhead suggests,

because there had once been a town.

A post office, good road

Something like a school.

The apples were planted in the backyards of homes

now gone, whatever roughhewn wood, soft chinking, shingled roofs

now eaten by the soil which bore them.

McIntosh, if I had a guess—the apples. A Wealthy or Wolf River, maybe.

No bittersharps, but choices versatile: sweet enough for a pie,

tart enough for cider. Cultivars worth snacking on here and there.

Somedays, I think hiking up there, taking a cutting, letting it root out

in a pot back home. Or else, a simple graft.

Harder, I could go up with a thick sack, hauling some fruit home, see

what the seeds do.

What stops me? Usually, it's: leave them

for the bears, those critters who've enfolded them into their ecology.

Or it's: better let the old things rest, whittle away

their last slow decades spared the crude pestering of my picking.

As I think of them today, they're ghoully. Tattered flags of an occupation

gone sour. The clinging red signposts of a ghost town

with virtually no ghosts. The remnant whisper of some folks

who, for loss of profit or premise, ceded to the howl and press of these hills.

What needs saying: apples themselves are not invasive.

They're persnickety and non-rhizomatic. The fruit that falls
or is by bear-gut taken away won't set seed. If it did
the resulting apple would be uncategorisable, a lonely
anomalous pip.

In winter, lacking the decoration of fruit and leaves, the trees are undistinguished.

Each spring, their understory thickens and spurts, their deadfall falls.

In May, they bloom and waft out only a faint sweetness.

How long until they're wildflowers?

THE ORCHARD

In the orchard I practice tedium.
Or, I practice practicing tedium.

In the orchard I practice a certain
doomed patience during clipping. I'm clipping
for dressing and keeping, to dress and keep
living, to keep drinking during clipping.

I cut out dead wood and I cut out
too-living wood, wood which
threatens partner, wood which threatens
 droop, wood which promises to
 us too much fruit.

In the orchard I think unbelievably beautiful thoughts
 big, dumb tableaux, arching and dripping
 into orderly bucolic green runs and
 in the orchard I love the wasp
 I love the heron, the kestrel, the earwig,
 the goose breeding egglets from dead weeds.

In the orchard there is the orchard
and the orchard of the mind.
 There, dull dreams humming dim-lit
 turn duller in my dressing and keeping, this
 constant keeping kept breathing by boredom.

And so, in the orchard
I practice listening to the big orchard
of boredom, practice walking down balmy
aisles and find most often worry-wort
 mealy-mouth imprints hanging
 from childhood-colored trees.
I pick the fruit there lurching toward
 forgotten, rolling down the stale berm
 of the almost-lost.

And also always in the orchard is the
orchard of the future, the orchard grown old.
 It's there I place my most tender thoughts, thoughts
 tenderized by the spacious abandon of big time, by
 the difficult release of the right-now, by enduring
 knowing or knowing enduring, and
 in the orchard of future, in its slurry of hope,

there are enormous lithe trees
and dazzling habits and bins and bins
of bittersweet fruit awash in a honey-hung sun.

In the orchard I breathe.

In the orchard I rarely pause.

In the orchard I keep clipping and
clipping'll feel like shaping, can
feel like sculpting, but it's cutting and
keeping keeping-moving moving
because all around in each orchard in this orchard
soundless trees blush and quake and start their bloom.

HYACINTH DOG

in my house, an interplay
of pink hyacinth and dog piss:
 a kind of sour olfactory
 language, smirking and sharp.

the hyacinth's naked, pregnant blubs say
 muddy things: mound and muck—really
 alive, really wet. they speak soft: little earthen
 nodules, crimped to their
 terracotta cradle.

the hyacinth's proud flower, asparagus-like, says:
 confection, heat—a caramel aerosol.
 the little bud-mouths mouth: *clean, keep, primp,*
 cheap pylons wafting out a syrup-glower.

the dog piss puddles (warm, sleeping) mumble
 old stories: carpet a kind of understory, under-
 story and kind of carpet. seeping in they say:
 un-outside, un-inside, troubling what the
 threshold might hold.

that the puddles are inside means what
it means that the hyacinth is. also means:
 violation of container, reconsideration of
 supposed boundary, a flimsiness of film.

dog, undifferentiating: knoll and rug.
i, sniffing around: it is a house, or hillock?

FALLOW SEASON

Again I gnaw on this gummy fallow, tacky
with the confusion of use— to make, to pretend
not to, to rest, (to rust) to slake the thirst of boredom with obligation's
cloudy swill. I ask my partner (a farmer) for
thoughts on the fallow field. She says: it's something
that's done. In her perfect curtness, a prim puzzle.
Come see the weeds gobble opportunity, come see
the yearning grasses tower and lecture and drool.

A sleeping field foretells its own use, awaiting,
concentrated there, the implement's warm and
familiar teeth. With them, a return to gashes, to that sunny
metabolic sluice. The thing about a fallow field is
it's never really fallow, it's sleep a proposal of purpose, and
after all, to let a field rest needs a field.

MEADOW

Hello meadow

look how we tore you open
to insert our new biology—there
and there and there in clean rows
as if over a blueprint of jaws.

And riverbed,

we see you, too, dry now
beneath the linen of dirt, pebbly
still but leach-less and cloaked,
arable, diverted, a workable ghost.

Here, trees

spring up from you and pop
with big fruits and wriggle down
the orange worms of their roots.

We gave

you this forest and we feed to you
copper and compost, a slurry on wet days
of sweet black molasses. We care for you
by abiding these odd, old almanac rules.

But meadow,

you feed us as we feed you, you lend us
the secret machines of your substrate.

Drink from your wounds, meadow. Forgive us.

When eat we forget it means you eat—
this meal you never asked for
garnished with splatters of
progress.

In the end, so woven.

We eat and we eat
and we
eat.

ANATOMY OF THE OLD NEW HOLLAND TRACTOR

For your brain, a canvas sack of old tools.

The screwdriver to start you, riddled
With pocks of electric shock. The hammer
To hammer out your rusted-in pins.
One crescent to twist off
Your old battery before
The fall of every dusk.

Your veins predictable, very vein-like—tubes

Running hot with hydraulic blood.
I've taped them up all
Around you. I keep them
Far from your gray-rubber
Wheels, from the teeth
You use to open the earth
On my behalf.

Your innards I fill, the cage of my body

Fits right into yours. Within
Your clear network of welded-on ribs,
I'm safe from the sprays of soil and thicket
I ask you to churn.

For your skeleton, a compression.

You are thin and limber, a little
Lanky, narrowed just so
To fit down the orchard rows.
And so, beloved old tractor, you are
Made for this purpose and
This one alone. Perhaps, you've
Risen to the highest call of your kind:
To be pinched and nimble enough
To angle your way down
These prim, wet aisles,
To be used this way, blathering
Out your black, sour smoke.

ORCHARD OF BOREDOM

Two rows of crabapples nearest the creek
offer easy access to the orchard of boredom.

Limbs leggy, their new wood wild with breathy Spring,
push out the smallest pomes, the stubbornest stems.

Some harvesters clip the fruit off come Autumn but
I pinch and pluck, walk down along the slow rows

into the shallow valleys of boredom, steep in the blank
not-pain din of repetition, reiteration.

In this cold spring, the same pale scene erects
itself before me all day: dead-gray arms donning

dead-brown batches of last year's leaves, purple bruises,
always ovaloid (anthracnose) sucking life from the trunk, fungus

in the shelter of one woody armpit or the next (phytophthora).
And they are mine to prune, these trees, mine to clean,

and the boredom they hold around me like humidity
is born of small focus. They demand thought,

ask for some strategy from me. To keep cuts clean, to
anticipate fruit, to save mother-wood, to keep the top

half in step with the invisible bottom (roots), to make note of wounds.
The orchard of boredom prefers I don't daydream, prefers that

I work, that I drag on in a dull procession of precision, that the eye
Of my I, growing crabapple-pink, softly evaporates.

SALTLICK

A mistake to use this perfect
fallow field to metaphor my floundering, I funnel myself down instead
and rot here, and leach
my sugars and spoilage to the tansy roots, the crabgrass, the dock.

My invitation:
mildew my membrane, intern me, rhizomes, and drink of my melt.

Enfolded here, I avert my gaze
from every imaginable threshold—my debts the dandelion, my progress
a spray of mole-mounds spouting
buckwheat and spurge, lazy, agog in sunlight.

Here, a stump, I
negotiate a precarity wrought of distance—man, beast; field, bird. I eat
them (peaches, celeriac too) and
offer my bulk that they might eat me, recognize
this deferral of order, of class—
this kingdom of ubiquitous accidents, unclean.

To this pasture I take from: take
off my boundary, glaze my skin with your spit, that dew.

To the shepherd: ignore
me (or crook me, or sheer me) but let me erode here,
a saltlick for lambs.

PASTORAL

All year, save lambing season,
they had trouble having babies.

She was 40, worrying. He
was patient, careful.

In early spring their ewes
always bore duplicates—
twins here, triplets there.
Once one pushed out five.

Small, wet, sorrowful things,
the lambs. Bleating and stumbling,

dragging their remnant umbilica
through wet dirt for days.

When, one season, an ewe
rejected her lamb, She took it home.

Soon, it was sleeping between them,
shitting in the sheets, nibbling the carpet
As if it were grass.

Evenings, it laid on the dogbed near the stove
where they broiled lambchops for dinner.

He began to carry the lamb around cradled
on his shoulder. He trained his dog that
this was Baby and Baby needed no herding.

Of all this, we, their friends, said
nearly nothing. Besides,
what would we do
if we had to?

Just a family: two tired parents
and their baby
wrapped in stinking wool.

ROADKILL ON THE SHOULDER OF CALVING SEASON

Yes, the world and the long brown
Path unroll before me, but my road's

Soft shoulder's strewn with the lumps
Of animal carcasses, their older or newer

Blood rusting in sprays all around them.
Coyotes most often—gutsier amblers—but

All others too: skunks, antelope, the odd tabby,
A lost dog. On some, buzzards have uncovered

A cage of ribs. Others, intact, might as well
Be resting, sprawled out in a graceless sleep.

I both hurtle by and don't. The insistent fact
Of them—dead there, bloating, in hundreds—

Erupts against the scene just out of frame:
Fields of infant cows, lolling their heads

Testing their legs, still wet with the grease
Of their mothers, at play in the fresh alfalfa.

If I look closely, I think I can see them
Daydream. They drift off and come too

And run, so full of this pink spring, back
To the udder, to the perfect warmth

Of a milk-full belly. I am not interested in
The metaphor here, spring and all, but

The barbed wire—unspooled for uncountable
Miles—and the strange membrane that

It, in its tines, makes all around me. On the highway,
An unimaginably fast wilderness, grown dense

With shatter and slam and maggots.
Beyond the small fence, a soft meadow.

GOSLINGS

they drowned in the mud
like they might've in
nature, someone says
as in tarpit, as in sinkhole

fell into the shallow hole
couldn't climb out for the rain
drowned in the mud there
and in their fear there
cold, wet

found them in the morning
one morning, kingdom of daylight
draining through trees
their bodies rolled through mud
little-caramel-apple-like, little beaks
dimly open, drinking up soot

a dead thing is not a novel thing here
violence stitches this beauty together
 every bed dug a kind of violence
 every row planted a new unnatural laceration
 an imposition of bad order, another
 wound to dress

still, often death is happened upon
and its drama is recapitulated in an instant
 their fall there
 their trying to clamber out
 their failure, their slips and
 mother goose yells, father
 goose hisses, a scene
 of bird-brained helplessness, a
 fever of helplessness snuffed out
 by boredom, a slow, gurgling death

two gosling bodies, wrapped in mud, dried now
caking a little there, unexpected and
the grief absorbs the air all around you
for one flickering frame

and then gloves
then shovel

ORCHARD OF THE FUTURE

I.

The orchard of the future is most obvious
in Spring, most vivid at least, bare here,
blank, sudden. Twists of new growth
unfurl their intentions and it is beautiful
here and supple and wet. In spring
it's easy to ask what how will this orchard
become, how might this straightened garden
look like later? Lately, there's later and later
frost so for whatever hope lies latent in this
orchard of the future, there's equal parts
threat and fright, damage, blight

II.

My boss and I consider buying then
lighting smudge pots, space

Them out down the rows
in our heads. Wordless,

we consider lighting them
against the cold dusks of March,
 letting their dull heat eke
 out among the branches.

We see the skin of ice wrapped
around pre-fruit melt, a welcome

smoke choking cracking winter air.
We wonder to ourselves, which of us
 would be the one to slink out
 in pre-frost evening and
 slide a spark of fire into
 the oil, who'd gag on smoke.

I watch the smudge pots rust, their
hot metal bottom loosing wet
 from frozen earth, sleet.

I watch them tip over in
wind, splash their chemicals
 over the trunks
 of these trees.

We consider buying smudge
pots to make the outside resemble
inside—erect a greenhouse lacking
walls, wrap or sun. It'd be just
dumb fire-furnace heat in coldness's
roofless cave.

But so much depends
on so many deep ends, the
fruit that might
hang from these
twigs.

CONTAMINATION

Handsome weeds, you signal the breach

Of the septic.

Tall there and talkative you arrange

Yourself in modernity's shape, those

Clean lines embroidered in your

Succulent green. O you live well

Off that blackwater failure.

Towering, lithe, you press at the

Threshold—the concrete hull, the

Smaller ideas, that wobbly thinking

Which undergirds waste.

O you stall me, weeds. How you slurp opportunity out there.

How you convert those ruined dregs.

Come in: unpack your flowers.

Yellow my whole house

With pollen and seeds. Spoil my garden

With your reckless fruit.

KILLING A HORSE

Bill was a good horse, but Bill was a mean horse.

I did not ride him, but I did, in a cold way, love him.

Bill was not my horse but my neighbor Alice's.

Though really: Alice did not live next door but kept her horses (four of them) on the hundred acre spread just west of my little house.

She paid me some to feed these horses, to toss hay over their fence and come summer, to toggle them from grass-dense paddocks to barer ones.

I did weekly change the horses' water and dripped medication into one's eyes when he scraped them against the bramble, the low brush, the wires.

This horse was blind but, unlike Bill, did not die.

Though I cared for Bill and the rest, and though I don't blame him, he did not acknowledge my dominion—he would bite and kick and bully and would not go to where I led him.

In spring, when the grass shot up charged with new sun-sugar and was green, lithe and everywhere, the horses risked over-eating, getting colic.

Colic does not always kill a horse, the knot it puts in the intestines can be sometimes un-wrung.

Of course, I could not get Bill off grass in time.

Carrots rolled in sugar, his halter, a rope, my stamping, swearing, howling, not enough.

By the time I pulled him into a muddy pen he'd begun to bloat.

I gave him only water for two days, but the knot was set and come morning, I found Bill dead in a corner, an enormous, wet, horse-shaped stone.

Alice took the ferry from Bellingham and got out of her car already crying.

Not your fault, she kept promising.

Of course, I knew it was.

We tied Bill to the bucket of her tractor and dragged him to the level driveway.

Of course, he stank and seeped.

As a counterweight—we would have to lift him—we attached a field mower to the rear of the tractor, and we re-affixed his legs to the bucket.

It was natural that Alice would drive.

When she raised the bucket, the weight of his body snapped all four ankles, and as she inched away, he hung from his ties by strength of his tendons alone.

Like a roast pig, he hung.

She angled down the hill towards our easterly neighbor who had an excavator and could dig the right hole.

We would bring the horse to his machine.

And so softly went our weird funeral procession, the diesel hum a perfect dirge.

Black, dead horse, aloft, then tractor, the crying woman driving, then unmoving mower, then me, so small.

A hole was dug, two horses wide, one and a half deep, and Alice slid Bill in.

THE HANGING OF JOHNNY APPLESEED

Funny story.

Pruning one day or picking fruit

High on a wobbling ladder Johnny

Slips. His head, the story goes

Gets caught in the crook

Of a branch which holds him there dangling.

Johnny ensnared in its wooden claw.

Johnny squirming, groping

For purchase. His little helper,

A child of eight comes climbing.

Too small to wrest Johnny free he flees

For the axe. In time, the tree

With Appleseed hanging,

Is felled. Here's the nurseryman

A victim (of hubris, dizziness, dumbness) Here's

The nurseryman troubling his myth.

THE MISERY OF JOHNNY APPLESEED

..whether impelled in his eccentricities by some absolute misery of the heart that could only find relief in incessant motion or governed by a benevolent mono-mania, his whole after-life was devoted to the work of planting apple seeds in remote places.

Johnny Appleseed: A Pioneer Hero, 1955

Are you sad out there, Johnny
Waddling barefoot
With all the weight
Of your *leathern*
Sacks of seeds?

You are by most accounts alone,
A singular, unwashed
Supplicant, your invented
Cause a personal tannic and
Sweet-fleshed god.

Why pepper the *outpost of civilization*
With fruit for the bears,
The deer, the *droves of wild hogs*?

Who waits for you, attends to your
Callused soles, your burlap
Holes? Who do you weep
For under the streamside
Weeping willows?

Through the generous lighting
Of your wholesome myth
I see you bedding down.
Tired, sore, matted
With the mud of your
Paddocks.

In your *keen black eyes*
The flicker of your small
Fire and the promise of
Tomorrow's slog.

Is it boring, Johnny?
To *penetrate some remote*
Spot, to twine together
Sticks for another rickety fence,
To wait for years
For the fruit to bare,
Fruit you'll never eat?

JOHNNY APPLESEED IN TIMES OF DROUGHT

To pray for rain

over drought summers at summer camp
they had us sing *Johnny Appleseed*
before lunch.

*O the lord is good to me
And so, I thank the lord
For giving me the things I need:
The sun and the rain and the apple seed.*

What did you make, Johnny,

of that mess hall full of sunburnt
smiling children pounding the tables,
invoking your name to beg for rain?
Or the years of recitation that turned
“apple” into “yapple”?—*Soon there’ll be
yapples there, we sang.*

For everyone in the world to share.

Was it wrong that you became our rainmaker, Johnny,

that we give you a voice, a slack-jaw
diphthong hymnody? We sang you into
a kind of whistling supplicant fool
and through you thought we grew closer
to God, to the big open heaven beating down.

As you morphed the riverbanks and hillsides

of the dewy Midwest, so could you
re-slick the dead creek bed, unyellow
the brittle meadow, replenish
the gasping well here in high
dry desert West.

Johnny, was it you who deserted us, despite

our faith in your bare feet and tinpot hat,
your humble burlap? Someone
let your fruits shrink and wither—

*For every seed I sow
There grows another tree,
remember? That happy promise.*

Even now, Johnny, I wonder who listens

to whatever prayers limp up and
keep this bright green world
from spinning to dust?

EASTBOUND I-90, END OF SUMMER

Driving back to Montana, sweetened still from
a trip to home, the radio told us
about fire south of the interstate
and dust and high wind blowing down.
Didn't know we'd be pulled off, told
the only way east of west was north.

Didn't know that over Odessa, Wa., where went to cut
around the dust, the northern dirt and
southern smoke would fuse, whip
one another into fresh fervor
muddy the sky with Mars-like light.

What we knew was the day before we were drunk, warmed
by the low heat of old friends and
sitting on a stony beach in just the right moment
to slip our hands into the gray nighttime
summertime water and twist them around
to agitate perfect little white swarms, dull
starry sparks, which globbed onto our wrists,
wrapped around our thumbs, coated our fingers,
gloves of quiet, unlikely bright magic.

On that beach we thought of dropping our whole bodies into the slurry
of glowing germs and considered a friend's
explanation: *unusually long summer, lazy
lingering heat.*

Outside Odessa as our little truck stamped down backroads, an archway
of soot and dead earth boiling above us, we
wonder if our world's now an odd unripe berry,
full of beautiful baby blue energy but
so unbearably tart.

ORCHARD OF THE MIND

today in the orchard of the mind
my mind is lilting, lithe, doomed and happy
 pacified somehow, candy-content

here one thousand trees need pruned
each with as many branches, a bad scaffolding of bad knots

here I train my eye on the length of my tool and
cut leggy limbs to be its equal, try to trim in some order
 trim out each tree's confusion

what falls to the understory falls like untaken avenues
on a reticulate map, like side-streets, a city's back-of-house houses

today the orchard of the mind grows thoughts
of possibilities, unhopeful, potential-less, passed-by
 but buoyant with a lemony beauty

I follow threads dropped years ago, before
returning to the country, before the slaking of this dumb thirst

 my friend who would take the train
all the way out just to smoke on my roof, the roof
 lunar, shimmering some, dappled with tar

 the 33 gallon bag full of VHSs found on the sidewalk
how we took it home, how we watched, how we never could watch them all

 the bugs in the seams of the floor, the bugs in the wainscoting
the absolute terra-cotta clatter rippling around the canyon
 of buildings around us, our window within it

 the geraniums this girl grew on her fire escape
her lavender in willow-water—slated for gardens unavailable

but my clipping pulls to me back, my being here, alone,
to dress and to keep this big garden, the snow below me
 how it sours the grass, how it crackles

in the orchard of the mind, you can spill
every last daydream drop if duty is dull enough

I let the trees wrap me up
I ask them: swaddle this chore

LEACH / LEECH

Leech latch on to me

Let me leech me into you

like a winestain
sucked through
the tablecloth's
fibers, slow

so it's not Donne's lovers'
blood entwining
but ours and ours and
ours Leach field, let's hope

You're alive with leeches your

wastewater basin a kind

of bloodletting your
drainpipes so thick
with fecund laid out
in lines like
radish rows

Leech, balance these *humours*

the mudslicks of want of need of whatever
leaches

from this big
carnivorous garden

SONG FOR ALL PICKERS

What good's my singing, Pickers?
That a song could thank
You or spare you or soothe you
At all is worth my pause.
Me: in this chair. You: working.

If I sing to you, it's to complicate the image
In my small way, to trouble the easy metaphor:

The innards of this song, you already know,
Are boredom—its constant heavy leaning, its
Occasional dull pleasure. This boredom a cost
You pay.

O big, green boredom,
That that offsets
The small price for berries,
That that I in the clean-lit
produce aisle can ignore.
That boredom that you,
Picker picking now, strap into
All the time, never novel, not sweet.

If I sing here it's to see you a little,
Your lumbar rip, forearm rend,
How your hard red hours
Under total heat are so
Quietly woven into this wet
Clamshell full of really juicy fruit.

I want to sing because I've seen you
Hoisted above the rows, cinched
Into a slow-grinding machine.
I want to sing through that real irony:
You trading one hard
Elsewhere for this one, piped
In like the water that feeds
The fruit you care for.

Can my singing wash a little romance
From verisimilitude?—
There's the one Port-a-John
The law had them drag.
There's the looming miles
Of the thick, unpicked

Acres. There's the red
Plum-smooth unpaid
Overtime sun. There's
The days-worth of ideas
Unspooling in the scaffold
Of leaves, earwigs and twigs.

You are spread all over, Pickers.
Peppered over acres like fruit
Through the bush. That a song
Could find you, that it could be
Useful, I wonder.

That it could pluck you up now
In a tender pinch and lay you down soft
In this clean basket of dusk.

UNSPOKEN APOLOGY WITH SHREK THE SHEEP

Why I am eager to identify the pinnacle of Shrek's humiliation?
Maybe my human guilt, a fetish for narrative, a distraction

It could be the televised sheering, the technological testament
to the defiant wether's capture, his re-enfolding, his cordoning

They tell us his wool alone could make a handful of suits—
so maybe it's the suits, the ideas embedded in them, the high
price they'd fetch, their rarity, their strange preciousness

Maybe it's the naming of him—as ogre, as awful beast come down
from his wet caves, drizzling lanolin, stinking, feral

Likely, it's that he bears forever the damage of this feral stint
The sixty-odd pounds of wool so warped his skin that even now
in whatever hard, green paddock they keep him, he's a curiosity—
all sag and droop, an always melting thing, sloughing to the earth

Yes, those robe-like rolls, now useless, a permanent brand of his evading
and avoiding and trying, against his tampered-with nature, to be wild again, free

He must drag himself around like I drag you around, the apology
I owe you, the apology I have not, for fear or stubbornness, ever offered

If I hide from you forever, if I stave off whatever hurt
an honest *sorry* might ignite, what happens to me, to my sorry hide?

Or, should I catch myself, round myself up, cut away the thick
comfort of silence and distance, what happens to you?

I know I deserve the weight of you, it stretching me out, straining me
My penance is that I carry you around, and that that carrying hurts
I know too that my silence makes me the ogre—bullheaded, safe, far away

What if they never catch Shrek? What if I keep quiet?

He dies
in his cave, made lame by his own wool, or drowned in it, I
drift farther away from you, in this pasture of cowardice

SETTING A WILDFIRE

I killed so many animals.

Burned a house or two, sure—
ruined a trail system
sent up needless gas
killed a hotshot, likely.

And I feel the weight
laying down for bed, my
neighbors coughing, distant
deer bleating out, birds
dying I imagine the worst death.

Is it the birds I smell, them burning,
the calcium of their feathers, that
sour keratin stink?

I do dream of bears on fire,
wailing as they tumble
out of my dumb conflagration.

I want to come home.
to retreat off the ledge
of hot guilt.

It wasn't me who
yellowed the grass or
brittled the woods, drew
that boundary, choked
the old brook.

Yet the blame heaps
and heaps, and I will
melt under it.

The birds again, yes.
Their small dry nest
filling with sparks.

ORCHARD OF BOREDOM

we call it “tractor brain.”
a mental state unique to folks
who have driven the tractor
all day. the explicitly
circular nature of tractor work
is the likeliest cause, of course, the
driving necessity of driving necessarily
in steady long, loops redundantly enough.

to till hard earth hard enough—so
it’s soft enough to quickly plant
out a new crop—so it’s *downy*
we sometimes say—so, without
so much effort or back-bending you
could, in a day or two, stick
in a thousand seedlings—requires
a significant number of passes with
a variety of implements.

the ripper begins, and the ripper
does what it proclaims to do: rippers
rip. rippers, of course, must rip
the same six-foot path several times
for the earth it passes through to be
considered ripped. ripping is followed
by—if you’ve got a tiller—tilling.
tilling is churning the ripped earth
with a tiller enough times
to incorporate the topsoil into
the nearest substrate. thus, you
“till-in” until tilling feels to the
body of the tiller (in this case, the
tractor operator—in this case, you) easy.

to follow tilling with discing in an
option available. the discer is made
of what it proclaims to be—discs. the
discer (in this case the person doing
whatever discing needs doing) drags
the discer’s discs through the ripped
and tilled earth creating (ideally) uniform
mounds of dirt. at the very least, the
discer discs-in (ideally) straight rows

ideally each long enough to host enough of whatever you (in the case, the planter) wish to plant say six-feet—make it three-feet on center.

THE WHIP AND TONGUE GRAFT

Fingers taped, blood possible,
I slide the rootstock from its
Cold container and measure
Out a handlength of wood
Above the tangle of red, infant roots.

There, on the diagonal, I
Carve out a face so that
This twig becomes a prod.
This carving reveals an oval.
In the oval center, I drive
A small incision into the face
No more than half an inch, and
Set the rootstock down.

From where it soaks, I
A find a scion—a bare twig, no
No roots, but buds—and compare
Its width with the rootstocks'.
If mirrors, I carve out
The same oval-face
And drive down the same
earthward cut.

Firm now, slow, I shim
The faces together—scion
And stock, freshly hewn—
So that each incision receives

The tongue of the other.

If I eyed it right, these faces,
held fast by this clean, sour kiss
should eclipse one another, should
meet at their edges, the
live, green rings which run
beneath their bark conjoined.

Whatever life lives within
These layers will reach
For its new, smarting partner,
And I wrap this union in rubber
 (the sun will break you)
And I slather on an anerobic glue.

ERODING VILLANELLE FOR THE GULLY

What'll be done with this wide old gully?
Beneath spent cans and jar-shards it's
Slick with cool water and pocked with glib laurels

It couldn't've staved off this blister, this blight
Each downpour encoded with plastic-sick specks
Not nature, not culture, not bug-like, not space

What'll be done for its graying substrate,
Its heaving and hewing bittersweet breath?
So slick with cool water and littered with symbols

It eats its own dander and deadfall and duff
But spittles up imprints, soft petroleum kisses
Not nature, not culture, not yard, not scree

Wouldn't've wanted it all cordoned off,
To lose its molasses miasma, its mulch, its
Slick, cool water, its stench, its grassy embrace

Its saddle a wired-wilderness now, weedy
And without good words for its new caricature cute—
Not nature, not culture, not resource, not heat
But slick with cool water, twisting and blue

AMERICAN IN CRAYON

I went to America today and stayed for an hour or an hour and a half
saw really green hills and soft plummy woods
saw needles running through thready cloth
saw a little rain on the asphalt

I went to America and wanted to think about bread but redressed
myself for thinking about bread wanted
hale visions of shredded wheat, wanted
to use the word *chaff* but there were big
flakes of asphalt in scrub-oak and there were
new wires singeing the dust-brittle attic

I went to America wanted to sing about America started
to sing about the blueness of it the late
evening of it where we're warm
and humming and empty

I went to America to find hope in the late evening,
went looking for glowworms found lint
and wires and shards of glass
when I dug through the downy dirt

There were endless couch cushions in America upholstered
in crumbs and kernels spent crusts and seamed with
bottlecaps and melted crayons: purples and browns and a splotch
of yellow and unbelievable blues

In America, there was giardia in the water
and glass in your hair and glass in your eyebrows

It was in America that you burned off your eyebrows.

In America we licked our fingers and wetted them with lemons
and water and rubbing alcohol

In America we slunk behind the fence
walked over the dam, ate ham from plastic wrappers
smelled the tar seams in asphalt watched the
coal-seam burn in the hill

We sat in the garage in America and smelled gasoline

looked through the plastic tub filled with
stamps and coins and old cigarettes

I saw us take out the axe and roll our fingers over its head

DOG AND COYOTE

And it's not the gulf of misunderstanding
But its character— that it's composed of
What feels to me, on my skin, up the trail
A ways, looking at my dog nose to nose
With the coyote he's rustled from the scrub,
 Like violence.

Maybe, misunderstanding is a mistake—
I understand nothing about the coyote, its
Hunger, its practice, and little more about my dog,
Small there, duff-colored, the quickening crank
Of his little mutt-heart.

But they stare into one another for a handful
Of slow seconds, each to the other uncanny and
Strange. Maybe, recognition is too slick, too.
In that yellow field, I think mutant cousins, I think
Of the time between them, the grayness of it.

And the coyote gives chase, hard. I start to yell
The clean, guttural sounds I've learned to use
To move animals—the stubborn horse, the bear
Lavishing the dumpster. These are embarrassing and
 Very loud and don't work.

I run toward the two of them running toward me
And am resolved: I will shove both hands into the thrash
Of fur and jaw-muscle, let my own blood into the snarl
And snot and kick away this wild dog. Beast, I think.
And I will carry the leftover tatters back down
 To the road, however broken.

I don't have to—the dumb volume of my noise
Or stumbling stops it all. My dog makes it to me
And I cradle him, coo a little, start to talk it over.
The coyote ducks into the vast spread of bramble.

Later, headed home, I know it won't be the brawl stuck in
My head. Not blood, not heat, not the prying off of jaws.
But the soft moment before—three motionless animals
Looking for a way to look at one another, caught in the
The precarity of distance, slow in proximity's honey.

ORCHARD OF THE MIND

Today, the orchard of the mind stays
in the orchard, stays on the subject
of the orchard. Words like *dormant*
circle slowly around me. *Senescence*, *j-root*,
rot, and a kind of magic view settles over me,
over the cold and naked trees like low smoke.

At hours five or six, clipping and
clipping, I start to see myself from
above, as if from the eyes of the egg-hungry crow
shuffling on the highest wire trellis, plotting.

From such vantage, I am perfectly small, still
moving (clipping and shifting) but silent save
the thrush of old snow and dead grass, but
for the soft, small sounds of snapped twigs
falling to earth. God, they whisper.

I move mechanical, in this orchard, in this winter.
I move careful, taking always an incremental
sideways step that must to the crow look
awkward but to me feels memorized, known.

In the orchard, I cannot always see myself.
I stop seeing myself, stop body-ing my body
no coldness in hands, no callus, not wet sock.

Just clipping, drifting slowly down the slew
of a day's work in my small orchard scored
by the smallest animal sounds.

I move down the row
 (soft small thrush sound)
and farther off and farther off
 (a whisper gets fainter)
until I slip from view.

SMALL SICKNESSES

Truth is, it's a small orchard
My orchard. Not one of the sweeping
Spreads of Eastern Washington,
Not faceless that way, enormous
And anonymous in its enormity.

10 acres planted and change, meager.
And it's varied, my orchard—
Full of more cultivars than
I can recall now, humble clutches
Of trees with lovely names:
 Kingston Black, Belle De Boskoop,
 Golden Russet, Hewe's Virginia.

Easy to think someday, it's a loose
Collage, this orchard. An experiment
Or series of trials, which I, in the course
Of my keeping—my clipping, my cleaning—
Almost accidentally monitor.

How has the Brown Snout flowered?
And the Ashmead's Kernel? How's its habit?
 And who's sick?

I log hours in the rows, making note
Of the bruises on branches, the rusts
On leaves. When I prune, I spray
My clippers (Felcos—almost always)
With unadulterated rubbing alcohol,
My reminder that there's disease here
And if careless, I'm its preferred vector,
 A duplicitous host.

It's true that every orchard is sick. Even those vast
Lush spreads that flank every highway
Outside Yakima. However green, however
Old, there's a fungus there, a virus, a worm
Girdling the trunk, coiling the leaves.

The point is my orchard's small
And somewhere in the wash of twigs
And brush and wires, it's hurting.
Each plump green wall and
Each swollen, tart fruit mask

The small sicknesses all around. From
Afar—like anything, like anyone—
My small orchard shimmers and
Smiles. In its pits, there's sourness,
And greed, and something so repellant.

MUSHROOM HUNTING

I.

I call it mushroom hunting because when it began, it was morel season. The little coppice of cottonwoods, so close to the city, is almost certainly devoid of enough fruiting bodies, though. And we don't exactly hunt, so much as amble, my dog and me. Though, if I know anything of what he knows, he seems clear that we were looking for something. In his steps, something I recognize as intention, search.

II.

My dog learns the phrase. You want to go mushroom hunting, I ask. He bends up from whatever afternoon dream, leaves off whatever bone, and I leash him, and we walk to up to the creek.

III.

Most days, I follow my dog. Let him lead me down the tangle of paths trod hard by the soft feet of so many children who play here evenings. There are forts all along the trails of the coppice. Jack studs of round, knotted pine, roofs shingled with plates of furrowed bark, exterior walls shellacked with deer oak. We do not peer into these forts. There are no mushrooms there.

IV.

There are no mushrooms anywhere. Though this is where they might be. A riparian wealth of cottonwood rot. Moss, yes. And gentle deadfall, churned duff. But people, too. Joggers, school trips, teenagers in earth tones, smirking down the lesser-known avenues, sometimes smoking, looking into the creek.

V.

So much I could say about this manipulated nature. The false river: an antiquated irrigation ditch, dry in the dry seasons, smoother than the trail. The fish catch: there always, stream or not, the handiwork of one concerned citizen or another, made of plywood and an old horse trough. The stonework. The forest-green bags tied neatly, full of dog shit, forgotten, no one's responsibility now. The cigarette butt that has remained just there, for weeks. The whole weird network of it, its scree, its ghouls, its beauty.

VI.

We find one day not mushrooms but several hidden talismans, runes. Someone—encouraging us to stall our lazy hunt and notice—has inserted them into the knots and owl-holes of the young cottonwoods along the main drag. These are stones, mechanically etched with figurations that beckon us back to nature. An open hand, a sturdy tree, a swirling eddy, a moth. I consider their presence a violence. My dog and I are not here to draw from this coppice a new enlightened ontology. We are here to go mushroom hunting without the promise of mushrooms.

VII.

Still, I look at the bases of the cottonwoods, and I study the lengths of those that have fallen. Everything out here in April looks like a morel. Each puckered leaf, each pistil, each cast-down stamen: these purple, amorphous pimples.

VIII.

My dog leads me another day down into a new gully. Down there, though I don't let it sink into me, a realer hope for mushrooms. Wet down there, a little distant, out of sight. The deeper we go, the

more I guess it's private property. My dog negotiates the barbed wire, yes. I feel the faint path which leads us down grow fainter. When the coppice affords us places like this, I imagine my dog and me fully lost. That the branches we've pushed back to slip in have recoiled and sealed tightly behind us, that the understory comes welling up, caresses my ankles, scratches his belly. I imagine sitting for a long while. I imagine having to find and cook morels.

IX.

Instead, in this damp gully, we find a crying person. One the phone, assuring those on the other end she'll come home soon. She scares my dog. In my own way, she scares me. But of course there's sorrow here, and fear.

X.

As always, we go on hunting for mushrooms alongside the fear we might find them. Maybe one day we strike out at the right hour, after a rain, as the sun comes back down to the grove. Maybe one day we find them, our false spoils turned real. Maybe then, my dog and I come back with a basket. Maybe then, we find a different use.