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A CONSTELLATION IN TRAINING

By

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BA, English, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 2019

Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing - Poetry

The University of Montana, Missoula, MT

December 2023

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Light, Loneliness, and Location

Chairperson: Sean Hill

In many better-known works by the 20th century painter Edward Hopper, I find a locus of visual concerns that overlay the fixations of the majority—if not all—of the poems that comprise my thesis, what I like to think of as the three L's: light, loneliness, and location (to which I could also add, as secondary colors, longing and landscape). Additionally, there are what Mark Strand identifies as “two imperatives” in Hopper’s work, “the one that urges us to continue and the other that compels us to stay” (3). These dueling imperatives, along with the abovementioned attributes of Hopper’s paintings, are very much in conversation with my experience of America as I have come to understand it over the last decade and a half of travel, study, writing, thinking, and living and working in a multitude of places and landscapes around this country.

When I think about and try to process “America” via my identity and life experience, I’m inevitably led to thoughts about empire, whiteness, masculinity, patrilineality, westward expansion, place and placelessness, belonging and alienation, isolation as corollary to the ideal of rugged individualism, how that ideal works with (or more often against) attempts at interpersonal intimacy, an immensity of space that is “[l]arge and without mercy” (Olson 11), and the multiple, ongoing tragedies that have given birth to this country and my ability to navigate its contours, both figurative and literal, while attempting to live a fulfilled and conscious life.

As Carolyn Merchant writes, “[w]e act out our roles in the stories into which we were born” (4). These poems are one small way I have tried to step outside of my own subjectivity, to see the story I was born into from a further vantage, to interrogate the narrative of my life thus far in the context of a larger story, to see how I am helplessly, inextricably linked to the forces that have made me and my place in the world, and to hopefully begin thinking a more complex role for myself as an artist and thinker in this frayed century.

Works Cited

Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. Routledge. 2003.

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Strand, Mark. *Hopper*. Ecco. First paperback edition. 1995.

Contents

Self-portrait with Elegy.....	1
Edward Hopper, <i>Summer Evening</i>	3
Still Life with Lightning.....	4
A Story, or Just the Past.....	5
Christmas Eve in New Jersey,.....	6
Self-portrait with Elegy.....	9
Edward Hopper, <i>Morning in a City</i>	10
Serenade / A Constellation in Training.....	11
San Gorgonio.....	12
Stages of Decay (questions for Everett Ruess).....	13
God Save the Human Cannonball.....	15
Contemplating the Lateness of Everything.....	16
To Break into Flower, or Simply to Break.....	17
Smoke Season Eclogue.....	19
Birthmarks.....	21
Edward Hopper, <i>Old Ice Pond at Nyack</i>	24
Winter Comes to Wood River, Nebraska.....	25
Christmas Eve in New Jersey (Another Year).....	26
Self-portrait with Elegy.....	27
Edward Hopper, <i>Cape Cod Evening</i>	28
Imperial Beach.....	29

Day breaks and does not mend anything.....	31
Day breaks and does not mend anything.....	32
Day breaks and does not mend anything.....	33
Fidelity.....	34
A Motel by the Salton Sea in Niland, California.....	35
Edward Hopper, <i>Shakespeare at Dusk</i>	37
One Morning in Spearfish, South Dakota.....	38
Self-portrait with Elegy.....	39

*How many dead lives and fading memories were buried
in and beneath the names of the places in this country.*

—Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

*Who is my father in this world, in this house,
At the spirit's base?*

—Wallace Stevens, “The Irish Cliffs of Moher”

*It's a long way between horizons
and it gets farther everyday*

—Jason Molina, “O! Grace”

*...all we can do from where we stand is meditate
on the unspoken barriers between us.*

—Mark Strand, *Hopper*

Self-portrait with Elegy

Whenever I am adrift
a faroff earthbound watery star
means home a house

in the fields where
it's always evening
an ending just out of reach

and therefore welcome
And I'm always that kid
kicking dirt clods

the clotted remains
of a growing season gone
down the tubes too much rain

too little time to breathe
between the wet hoof beats
clopping their way

down the roof
into my ruined sleep Hearing
mosquitoes swarm into a chord

a single car muffler sputtering
down into the dark
of the closing day

At the window
bruise-colored waves of rain
wash in from the west

fireflies compel
their own morse code
with cricket and thrush

and distant thunder
hollering like a father

from up the stairs

I wasn't much more than
than the result of old growth
that grew close enough

to rub away the rough in each other
But the world turns
on the momentum of leaving

There's a moment
when it feels like twilight
can go either way the way

maple leaves can seem
to keep waving goodbye
even after the wind stops blowing

Edward Hopper, *Summer Evening* (1947, oil on canvas, 30 x 42 in.)

The breath comes
at its intervals, like distances.

An ingratiating posture
towards others has been,

and continues to be, a front.
Not falsehood, but like weather

changes from dusk
to dusk, an appetite for blinding

the horizon, which means
just another kind of horizon.

Still Life with Lightning

He could smell a thunderstorm from ten miles
off or more—the last moments taste like
dull copper. That's what he would have said,
drawling out a word or two to make sure
it sticks like a penny on your tongue, cheap
communion for once not so easy to forgo.

*

The west cracks its shell. For a second
sunlight leans hard then tumbles off the sill.
For one brief second everything is a window
before the shade drops.

Meanwhile I reminisce in movies replayed
and cut up with commercials when the signal
flashes and goes dead. The sky laughs
in tectonics—this, he also might have said
—with textbook quavers and splits, and then
like a lyric to an old song, a farmhouse
torn down in the growing wind and no
downcast bystander left shuffling their feet
through the dust of the fallout.

He could spin weather in his loam of words
into sky the color of a grounded, half eaten peach
thick and humming in a blaze of wasps. His
weather was always an epigraph, a wind
just starting up in the tips of the leaves.

*

This might all be spoken in memoriam
to what isn't even gone yet, but a glimmering
shard that I know will leave so soon
and leave a mark bright enough to read by.

A Story, or just the Past

from a Greyhound near Kearney, Nebraska

My face facsimiled in the bus window is my father's face,
because I'm pressed into the kind of dark that makes space
a crossable thing. How my nose slopes and my brow
withholds, how lines add up to a lifetime's worth of turning
away. I see this because outside it's hard to see much, but
I'm sure whatever's out there goes on a long time sounding
a hollowed-out vowel. And bloodlines are just like this:
topographies expressed instinctively like ivy vines red brick,
sketched for me before I had a chance. And if I did, I'd still be
turning over stones and state lines to gauge the ambiguous
distances between men. And the silences? Let me spin a wreath
of dead leaves, place it on an effigy's neck and the flames
can do the talking for us, give the night its name, its loose
credos, pennies dropped in a shallow pool. The land
at such an hour looks almost free of acrimony, a kindness
without consolation; what might be a house five miles away,
where good news glows, might be a house on fire.

Christmas Eve in New Jersey,

like an empty
church that turned
the orphans out
in vain. My father

limps along, remembering
age, slapping puddles
in the concrete walk warping
their grey mirrors

which re-form to face
the bland damp day
between seasons, after rain,
without leaves, nothing

growing in the fields. And light
is here, briefly, near
the solstice. The orphans
were crowded

on the road this morning;
the sound of their cars
a sick frequency
of our age, grinding

awake at dawn
and evening out
beyond the tree line. But
something has to wax

and wane, I'm told, something
has to keep time for
us. My father sinks
his cane into

the weakened ground
with each step. It comes up
with a sucking sound,

leaves a hole fit for planting

a tree whose shade
will be known by
others sometime
in a faroff May

sick with hope,
delicate skin, a light
that you could trace,
and an ocean breeze

that crawls across the blooming
miles. Thirty miles
from the Atlantic here
where the sky echoes

back at night the cities'
cruel fire; maybe
that's where the light
comes from. "We only

grow exhaust and blowing
newspapers around here
these days," he tells me.
He would flick a spent butt

if he were a smoker, but
he never was. It's a day
between grace and giving
in, be thankful you're alive

and not in
too much pain. These are
the middle years, with a day
to match their weather.

I'm growing older
too, or maybe it's just
later in the year. At some point

there is no addition.

Self-portrait with Elegy

Just like we were on the Great Plains
in 1949, my father and I would gather
summer nights with neighbors
lining our country road to watch
constellations disbanding. Whether tragedy
or a tragic lack of imagination, it's hard
to say—he and I simply could not see
any threads or their severing. Then,
as now, telephone wires also lined the road
linking the night one lighted island
at a time, though the wires are now dead
gestures, props to a faded empire
of distant voices made close but never
close enough to turn that light
into warmth. What's left—sinking
into my own humidity, my own
expanse of darkness, and he
to his own. As you read this
it is surely a summer night some place
the land extends forever
until it gives up where the visible
begins to visibly waver, either
from the heat or from the failure
of the possibilities of sight.

Edward Hopper, *Morning in a City* (1944, oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 59 $\frac{13}{16}$ in.)

I promise to keep
my wheels clean and whole

so that one sun-blurred noon
I might come

into town all full
of want and witness to

my own traveling through
the brightest part of

any day anyone's likely
to see again.

Serenade / A Constellation in Training

/ every night / I think the stars are missing
teeth from all the bar fights in America /
simply there / quietly menacing /

reminders / of a pattern that has / forever / been
my ceiling / and foundation / the absent architect /
like salt / scattered on a sky / as tender and open

as a wound / each star / is a separate city
simmering in its own exhaust / untethered /
ignorant / until framed / until I lace a grid

of buried bones between them / into unseen
highways / with certain destinations / silent
fires that outlast their extinguishing / every night

I watch / whole valleys drape with fatigue /
little lights sprinkle on knowingly / cars
trailing red ribbons / hot flares / rose petals /

old standards to ring in the end / or beginning /
of another war / look around / and see / things
live longer / when they are given a name /

which is why / we are now allowed /
to believe these quiet storms are names /
strewn and burning over the old / where

they lay / in kindling of lost propositions / hard
eyes made of wanting / populate our nights
and times / chiseled in obsidian / that shatters

when desire and rage / faultline
the skin
of every gentle face / every land / every
body made a light / by such friction /

San Gorgonio

White paper coffee cups collect in drifts
by the freeway exit ramp—the hearts of ghosts
once held tight then tossed out the window
of a car speeding across the desert at four a.m.

trying to stay awake to see, when the light
came back, what the battered face of the land
could tell me about myself: how the mountains
were stark and risen; how I was sunk dumb

in between, a scathing plain of wind turbines
resonating unearthly as Amelia Earhart's flooded engines
chugging their final gasp on the ocean floor;
how the sea was here once and swallowed heights,

long since yawned and pulled away paving
this desert with a tired yellow dirt now blown
through my teeth, through my beating pistons,
and a few black rounded stones as souvenirs

from lost time; how thistle-studded towns
were hardly refuge; how the many stones
I had gathered were bright and jagged,
too young by design to tell any real story;

how *lust* and *lost* became an exchange in glances
through a motel's cracked facade; how these roads
kept on dressing down like lightning on a postcard
running fingers in the hot mouth of experience.

Stages of Decay (questions for Everett Ruess)

Is it true sandstone falls
into water and dissolves
at the same speed
as a man?

Slower? I've heard things,
that's all.

Surely
you were too young
to take note; but did you know
one of our late poets said
that our country
has *its own ways*
of making people disappear?

How does it feel
to have your story
written for you—
remembered
for being so quickly forgotten?

It wasn't your fault.

Trails go cold
all the time, and I
may be waiting
for my own moment
to take the blinding leap.

Then can you show me
your maps, the ones printed
with a private ambition
so obscure
no one was left waiting
for the sequel?

Is death really just

another proverb:

a first morning light
in the desert so brilliant and clear
you see your breath
hangs
like a cold
hint of smoke
containing your last words
before it vanishes?

What else might you have said
to those rocks
waiting for the heat of day?

What does anybody say?

How gauche, to disappear
first thing in the morning
with at least a whole new day
ahead of you.

God Save the Human Cannonball

the best disinfectant gravity is
I'm still struggling a statement
on its own to let fly
that it hovers wings and hope
than a man for longer
any story is only half- normally can
mimicking flight perfect: there's an arc
to sea level that falters
where it started not far from
the old story consider
drowning of a man
shivering and the surface
like applause with rain
and the moth for his vanishing act
of ash a floating speck
the night who loves
and ends that way like a fire
to vanish with any luck
of memory without a trace
being *saved* what we might call

Contemplating the Lateness of Everything

From the silent jets incessantly overhead
to the interstate's one brooding song—

I will only ever be a flickering wind
in bare branches, barely heard across these acres

of held breath, unmarked graves. And I'm tired
of my own impossible quiet a sleepwalker

bystander unwitting conscript
numb to walk these old battlefields sucking up

the last tender sap of a dusk already fraught
with sentiment: pink shadow dead oak

homeward dove teetering in flight, lost to all
but itself like a fugitive a shot

across the apricot gloom. If only I had that
sense of trajectory, the way the earth heaves

glowing agates even out of the deepest
fatigue. I just want to rest for weeks

but that would be considered a sickness.
I arrived here so tired that

it suddenly feels late like everything
around me—my body the oncoming

stars my country falling fast asleep—
came into being already obsolete.

To Break into Flower or Simply to Break

Late May, Missoula, MT

Something takes place in my town
at the end of May, like the occurrence
of a random thought, something forgotten
though not. It happens in the rain
so the aroma of what seemed lost rises
to meet what is transpiring and passes

into the near-dusk that rides my back, passes
into the soon-to-be past like a town
cartographers didn't name. What rises
inside the soon-to-be relived occurrence
is the scent of a memory of rain,
or it's actually rain but I've forgotten

what its scent reminds me of. To be forgotten
is to become something new, what passes
my field of vision blurred by rain
while I ply the streets of my town
at the end of May. An occurrence
of random flowering, my memory rises

to meet wet streaks of old color, rises
out of incessant falling. Forgotten
amongst this damp, repeated occurrence,
the scene in my car window passes
and passes like the memory of towns
I passed through once in rain,

a memory that stains life like rain
darkens stone. I believe in the rising
of blinking red neon at noon, the town
otherwise gone cold, ruminating, forgotten,
becoming something new, midday passing
for dusk. I could call it an occurrence,

or, call it anything *but* an occurrence,
but I won't mistake lashing rain
for the sound of traffic as it passes,

or some gasping apparition that rises
up just when I most want to forget
they're gone. The presence dusting my town

like last season's flurries: will it pass? It occurs
to me I know no town, hardly the rain,
what it means to rise or how not to forget.

Smoke Season Eclogue

Late August, Missoula, MT

Every day
 Washington State sends her love
I roll over
 for the noon matinee

a sick baby bird stretching
its pathetic pencil neck
 to catch an answer

but heaven
 is one massive ash heap
 of questions

 a porchlight left on
in the middle of the day

 the mail that comes late
 or not at all

Turns out
I've slept straight through
 eviction notices
 radios
repeating—
 like flies trapped behind glass
 —weather on the hour
 no good news from the front

Expecting an arraignment
 that won't arrive

I'm all out of options

except
 counting down
 the cast-iron days
by the number
 and direction
of weathervanes

 Washington State sends her love
and some latent night
clutches its pearl
 at the core

of all this

fever
that won't break

cedar waxwing's whine
become a ringing
in the ears

that dogs my days
and my sleep
when if

it comes again

Birthmarks

Late December, Missoula, MT

It's Sunday
in America. A country

is one kind of body:
raw, crawling with bodies,

singular and needing.
I too am alone today,

rapt in the tyranny
of needing,

tracing
my smoothed-over scars

and wondering
what rivers

they mimic: anemic
Rio Grande, anoxic

Mississippi, the weeping
from the eye of a roadkill crow

or the cars treading water
outside my window.

Sunday in America
and it's raining,

winter giving up
its former claim. The sky

like a country
is lying again.

My breath
fogs the window

and in it I trace
meandering rivers,

skewed and seeking
from source to mouth.

Every river has a mouth.
So do bodies.

You could say
the mouth

is where evolution
left off, left an incision

that didn't close
and so we have

a place to be emptied
or to enter, to feed

or be fed.
I find

the scar in the center
of my gut, little mouth

where my mother
cut me loose

so I could go
and get myself lost

in America,
to become my own

river, to flicker
through the center

of a country collecting refuse,
rubbing shoulders

with the nothing
and indifference

of a litany of Sundays
without sun.

Edward Hopper, *Old Ice Pond at Nyack* (1897, oil on canvas, 11 ³/₄ x 19 ³/₄ in.)

Strictly speaking it is winter
inside the mind, where all things

beg for more. The ground
is choiceless. Whenever

a voice stuns into speech
there's singing under the eaves.

Icicles tremble with
an inkling, like the teeth

of some dog that can't stop
dreaming of the chase.

Winter Comes to Wood River, Nebraska

No one chooses when to go,
or where. The most impolite season
for a funeral. A continent is still

an island, and this is how
it feels to be cold-threaded into
the center. Air so thin it finds

the weak places in my lungs
to tag with initials and *was here*.
If I cry it's the sound of the wind—

loaded with the vacancy of all
this land, it passes through
only to keep going, bending

the cottonwoods at their dark,
papery stems. I'm a brittle flame,
a wild tendril seeking a path,

same as the Platte pushes aside
cold clumps of prairie and will
never stop, or reach the sea. I cup

and blow these hands veined blue
with dim life, fold them close like I hold
a warm stone, stay one step ahead

of night's remnants and that
headstone kind of frost that settles
like moth dust just before first light.

Christmas Eve in New Jersey (Another Year)

Dusk, minus any respite or ceremony. It's a warm kind of snow, brittle ash, winter at its most limp and vague with stark injustice: the cold can still kill only slower. The tepid air can't decide to rain

or freeze and time's a bastard that won't hand over the keys to the truck, who knows that speed has always been my preferred remedy. Like prayer, I make room for the unintended consequence, turn up

my hands to weigh the air, give in to what fate might provide: a dark house on a long road, night like an old red wine left uncorked, the regular erratic *thrush* of melting flakes on the walls of a house where all

healed wounds are stored. Standing still as cold carved stone I think I feel the earth move under the stars but there are no stars—it's an illusion, tonight's test pattern, another channel down and out and who

is even watching? Neighbors' homes go blank one by one; they're already asleep and awaiting a second coming. In the window so dark it's a mirror I can't tell if the solstice shrugged its shoulders and arrived late, or if it's me.

Self-portrait with Elegy

Somebody once—honest to god—really believed
the past was innocent enough, like the mythic
“search for a father” was anything more than
a constellation in training, glimmering shards
tied together in vain trusting the aftermath
of car crash or calamity that some assembly
could be required. And isn’t it just like history
to roll the bones then send us ahead to sift
through avenues of settling detritus and always
play it as it lays. Still, I’ve come to love the wreckage
of that one unwasted night, prophecy or elegy
written out in shattered remains of machines
and the late waning moon a cool eye above it all
demeaned as ever in the streetlights. I’ve come
to regard that slow walk home like leaving
the scene of a petty crime in progress, deep scar
of my tracks in the roadside weeds and the solitary
rustle for company, the darkening stars without
witness, without even the faintest shade
of regard. A slow and self-conscious walk home
kicking the dew waiting to be born.

Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Evening* (1939, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in.)

We build up our muscles
for waiting. And what it is

that time adds up to still
hasn't showed. I'll be

the silence that hides
inside the storm. You be

the connective tissue
that tenses its sinew into

twilight's superlative
giving-way.

Imperial Beach

Like those listless
skittering shorebirds
uniform
in their surge,
you and I
are pulled
to the tideline,
its long
bent arm of sand,
the land
sighing something
about giving in
to the sizzle
of tides,
to ways of breaking.

Your arm bent around my waist,
your breath
a wash
in my ear;
what I hear
is waves
talk to the shore
in syllables
of a singular sense,
a sound
that I'm told
holds the highest
and lowest
known frequencies, which
is compelling
somehow: the sound
of endings.

We saved
for months
for the chance
to stand

at this tear
in the fabric
 of our everyday,
or, a seam that stitches
two of the many
 broken
ways
of being.

Faith: a form
of wanting
to be right

about what we want,
 what we know
is there, and is not,
 like a new moon.

Two Marine jets
fly low
 up the coast
back to Camp Pendleton,
heat and grievance
leaving
 not a trace
in the air
except,
 one time,
having been there.

Day breaks and does not mend anything

Suppose movement and stillness are two strangers
crossing paths on the street in a silence
I would easily mistake for polite when they are

the street and everything passing over it.
The wind, the trash that answers the wind,
the blunted sunlight sliding along

dark storefronts at a certain hour
and all the people stopping and adjusting
their watches to the rhythm. There's a *you*

in one of those shadows, and I'm still stuck
inside that empty pocket, the fleck
of dirt a snowflake gathers around

before it falls, over and over in a faint
and airy haze. Something like half-static
I see straight through to the many

wandering lives behind. And it's not
cinematic, how the air continues shaping
itself into days, how I manage to find myself

inside of them, or the thousand tiny ways
I still believe god is just another
name for tomorrow.

Day breaks and does not mend anything

At some point I learned I could make anyone
into a window using only my words and sometimes
less. Even you, there on the far, darker side

of daylight. You, a past participle or dangling star
seen clear from the side of the eye but gone
when looked at straight on. Do you recall

the storm that swept through and glazed
the night to glittering astonishment, viewed
from that anonymous illuminated room, the folks

rushing home in their garments of rain and regret,
flushing the scene twice—first like striking a match
then like one that's long been struck. Can you recall

the room that sweat, the town that sweat its pores
clean and, in the morning, the street that gleamed
like an affliction, a beached and helpless whale,

a lover still wet with you. Recall that we only wanted
to watch our breath hazing the space around us—
not our words or anything resembling a reflection

of the present tense. And if you won't, I will recall
that we were each centers of gravity, deftly swallowing
sense and choking on the bones. That I made you

into a window so I could draw down the shade.
Outside, the still-sleeping shapes of trees traced
fingers across your back and shivered in tandem.

Day breaks and does not mend anything

It's the dream again where I'm too drunk to stand. I tilt and the world tilts with me. Nighttime, a bonfire of pallets. My friends, some missing teeth, some missing jobs, their backs to me, flames spitting like shrapnel through

the black bars of their legs. You're on the other side of the circle, alone, unmoving, unnoticed, face lit by the flash when someone adds a paper cup of gasoline. Or, it's a recurring dream where I'm late for the last train home—

only its gust remains and the scrape of last year's leaves scouring the platform. The empty train crosses a bridge between two cities waning from sleep like two pasts rectifying themselves, you and I in separate rooms under separate

skies paling with the same dawn. Or it's not a dream at all, and from east to west a cloud of swallows drags behind them a massive golden sheet; this I had once misunderstood to mean permanent day. (Is the hardest part of loving

or dawn knowing when to call it a day?) Remember me as you would the end of a movie where an absence turns back and tries to speak. Then against the dawndark plane rolls the litany of names I grind to a fine powder between

my teeth when I'm asleep. The house lights come up and my feet are stuck to the floor. The light returns and like always I briefly remember who, where, whether I am—and isn't that a blessing? For a second, yes.

Fidelity

I drove through six states and half a week to play
last chance to your *next-best effort*. We walked

along beneath the gulls, their cracked calls to and from
an echo of one another. We pet a stranger's shaggy dog

still slick from the surf, didn't look up or say hello, didn't say
a thing. We watched a small boy dance the line where sea

and sand are both, and not. He twirled off, became something
between flesh and secret, seemed to hover within that split-

second transmission from thought to song. We nearly
touched the parts of each other that stand in for infinity.

We didn't. And one wave followed the next, no two alike
in any measurable sense. Would you have believed me

if I said "this used to be a forest," and then ducked behind
an invisible beech tree, whose name is itself a kind of

misdirection, a species whose elephant seal-skin bark grows
fat with its carvings: pledges, devotions, bulbous hearts. I

would have believed your lies if you had told them truly. But
I've always been a coastal thing, shifty that way. See,

I was once—perhaps still was—that small boy; I only
wanted meaning to be more than gears that turned.

A Motel by the Salton Sea in Niland, California

here
the world ends
 with us

 it does that
 from time to time

where you and I
find ourselves

caught
 in a regret
the earth is having
about its hard fall
from abstraction
to brutal truth

the truth of matter
is that rust
dreams
of making love to metal

and what kind of dream
are we having?

tiny waves licking the fishscale shore
sunset's tryst with the dying inland sea:

 they're not metaphors
 not fingers pointing
 at the thing
we've become
but
 the thing itself:

two bodies
our warmth mostly evaporated

you say
some species of bird
can fuck
 even in flight

is that a dream

or a pretense?

the hum of traffic
 on the road
 going nowhere

is the sound of blood
running in my veins

the rasp of both our bodies
honed
 to a cutting edge

the sound of ghost water
in long dead rivers
no longer
 loving the stones

no longer
 coming to rest
 in the dead sea

and the salt
crusting the shore
is the same

as the salt
in our bodies

the same
as the salt in the earth
under our bodies

 and between us

the fetid scent
of something
violently alive

that's on the verge
of knowing

its days are numbered

Edward Hopper, *Shakespeare at Dusk* (1935, oil on canvas, 17 x 25 in.)

Define *horizon*. An anecdote.

Exoskeleton. Bestiary of lost idols.

Excuse for an absence. The hive
hunting its bees. Outer limit

of an echo, where the story
ratchets back more unsure

than when it left. Still pond
waiting for a pebble. Answer

in search of a question to make
it whole, to make it home.

One Morning in Spearfish, South Dakota

remember, you gave up drinking to better recollect: the morning at the end of August, the light so simple as to require validation that cottonwood leaves shocked themselves into flaming banter with the day a soft hot vein of quartz from the east faulting the dual darknesses of *what's been* and *what's to come* after all it comes down to hours those that seem to hold their breath.

remember, you opened your motel door and spoke with the woman from the next room whose Minnesota plates and shiftlessness gave a sense of flight from a life half-revoked, whether hers or yours is impossible to say at this late hour in the snows of this latitude. remember, she said: some years you pass through blind and some pass through you like a blade.

but that morning the light was so full of its failure to be anything more than itself yes it was that far from the solstice further still from the next. beyond the nearby rush of blacktop there were horses in summer-stilled grass kicking up sun if there were mountains somewhere they were quiet about it.

you wanted to believe that woman made it to some place beyond doubt beyond time itself. remember the past tense is always perfect, dust motes that danced before the mind bright enough to be mistaken for now.

Self-portrait with Elegy

with a line from Larry Levis

The present can't remember
what it is: the exact color
and feel of glass

the very instant before
it breaks, or the minute
surface tensions built up

under a lifetime of surrender.
Or, a sky so stalled you wait for it
to rust. A little distant fire

that never grows and therefore
never dies. The mechanical
bull precisely after the last

rider has been thrown
and the final stiff drink served
with a bell. The bell waving

on its chain as the sound
dissipates into an emptying room,
neon tubes gone cold, wet

rings that evaporate and stain
every surface for tomorrow's
rags to gloss over.

I've insulated the past thick
with regret. What gets to be
called history, and by whom,

might be discovered
only when it bends away
from the victors

as it was written. Only then
can I seek to revise or discredit

the conclusion, which

is right now: the clocktower
ringing the hour across
the river, the river pulsing

over its bed of stones,
keeping time. But I know
that time cannot be kept, or killed,

and the present can't remember
what it is: a beggar's cup
rattling a single coin.