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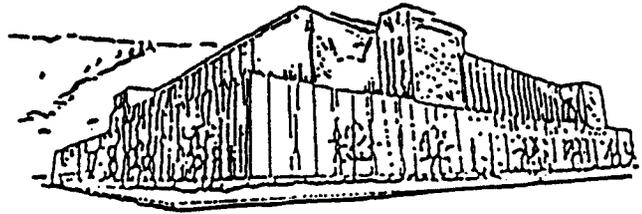
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THE LIAR'S JACKET

POEMS

by

Richard Greenfield

B.S. , Portland State University 1996

*Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of*

Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1999

Approved by



Chairperson, Board of Examiners



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THE LIAR'S JACKET

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THE LIAR *perches over air as the letters firm into
amber. Why so fond of that boy in the night in the tree bathed
golden? Why sigh of him while the grass aches within you, camped
in the front yard and loving the quiet time when a best friend sleeps
in the tent beside you? The soreness in your bicyclist bones thrums
because the legs won't quit their whirling motion.*

*What was: cool wind, the lights in your home going out, watching
the t.v. light shifting blue and blue out of the living room where
your parents stayed up late. Beyond: the insectal whir of wings, the
synch the songful leginess of crickets. The trilling of their lives.*

A Story

Those evenings we'd sit in the big white Lincoln,
eating burgers in a parking lot, wiping chins,
sipping Cokes, my father talking about the new cars
gleaming in the lots across the street.

Once moist ocean air hit the desert heat.
The hail came down hard enough to hurt —
and there was a trembling
near to the ground,
like grains of rice falling on paper.
Ice popping on the sidewalks
and the surfaces turning white.

Speaking of the place years later
as if the setting were not merely the setting,
as if setting were the entire story,
I cannot leave behind me the palm trees, the Santa Anas,
or that rare rain, warm but torrential.
I dream of jade plants and cacti.

And I know Los Angeles is not the tale.
Remembering something like
the stench of creosote rising from the rail yards,
the great mounds of crushed glass bright at noon,
is to miss the roar accompanying the train's
passing at dawn on the same side of town,
how the engine shook the house: that
is the story.

In the same way,
oscillating fans comfort me
and I am always happy at hearing the word *boulevard*

I n s i d e — O u t

More than the pathways to the past. More than the evening when it is
flaring pink and mauve and a bit blue in the August after-warmth—

the car with its windows open to it—
it is hard to breathe wind with only the nose
my mouth doing most of the breathing now— pollen
caching in the deep net of the throat with sweet
grasses, great bladed palm fronds limping over the street,
their gray trunks painted white

and the vinyl seats sticking to my bare back in the late 70's
the radio is full of symphonic funk and disco—violins—
C chords weeping out to pulsing bass and cymbals

don't you think that's beautiful?

Yeah, I like that—

hitting the rhythm to poles

line line line

tall smearing

power lines dipping and rising between

on the blue

my father holding the 67 Mercury Comet steady with one arm and a crazy knob

and when he makes his turn it is two
full turns on the steering wheel to make it
as he's squinting against the west and the
sunset breaking through dark mountains
swinging down the visor settling in for the ride

all the lines here are cool, smooth and chrome—

all of airy dusk

the sky the birds the buildings

swirls inside of the thousand

convoluted mirrors of a polished hood

inside of the twenty thousand lifetime sighs of loss & love

N i g h t S o n g

Where piety kneeled
piety prayed through the soft textured ceiling—

speaking in the night to the king of kings in a heaven
so in love with it's own perfection

it was selfish, hovering above the cries above the bodies of pain, disbelieving any
dependency—
selfish because it refused to take the body along for the soul's ride.

I watched my mobile of small metal fish turning and glinting in the half-light—
spotty patterns on the walls and over the bed. Through the roof,

on the other side of everything was god. But me—*me*— I was a little voice
muted in the silent ends of his dawn.

How could I know?—

My father used to whip my back until it bled then put salt styptic into the cuts.
He came to me when I slept and held me down and spit on my face until the morning

paled yellow into the curtains—

how could I know

my father would try to drown me or choke me or blind me? Saint Theresa wept
at seeing the marks on my body. Kissed me hard and wrapped her hands

around the back of my neck. She was sixteen—moaning the song *I love you*
I love you into the dusk then dimming in her postered bedroom, her parents

on their way from work until I knew I had stayed too long
and then the evening splitting around me as I balanced on the bike—

the beautiful clicking of bearings, coasting. That high hum of tread on asphalt.
You know these are my streets—block after block and the fanning spray of the sprinklers

possession is two thirds of the soul.

I flew over the wild wheat and heard a soft clucking:

in the chicken house, my father's cigarette
glowing and fading precisely in the backyard—

burning holes into the darkness
—climbing soul rested high on the edge of the woods,

looking back
and the house *so* small from my place in the cotton wood

crawfish
caught in a beam of moonlight through water and muck in the silver creek.

I read my books in closets, beneath the soft walls of coats
and in the cedar-scented rooms of our forgotten storage—

the unspoken sounds—
the machinery of language moving by

child is me

bird is free wheel

is moving away

heap is heart

sky is open

wood is high

water is drowning air is

breath an owl—

it's feathers so luminous and white—

so holy— flashed out of a window of my tree house when I startled it,

and I watched it cut the night over the fields, over the anonymous earth—

Carrying

This Santa Ana, this smell at dawn both
railroad creosote and mounds of orange peels

drying at the Sunkist factory— it is *el viento*
at the end of the day. Our breathing in the

warm evening. In 1978 golden light slanting
through tree branches as the pomegranates

fall into the yards of Pomona— willows
strung down to the streets, wasp nests

droning in the oak limbs. Another
Saturday suburban hike

with my father through the white
dusty-bottomed aquifers during the

third summer of the seven year drought—
a fine bitter-sweet alkaline on the tongue

waiting for the quench of lemon water
from his canteen— the hazy blue sky

poured in the roar of the freeway.
We're beneath the bridge, eating lunch

in the shade and above us, the deep
shudder of brakes as the semis cross

over with traffic and swallows loop out
from their little mud homes on the

underside of the asphalt— *a rushing* I think,
to the world : — (nights I have watched

the palm leaves lift and fall in the breeze
pressing my sweat against

a wall green from the light of the moon to hear
my parent's murmur in their room. I've wakened

to the front door shutting firm in the dark, thought,
my father is leaving to rob small pharmacies and clinics

and office buildings. So many mornings
the living room full of stolen typewriters and

radios, calculators and paintings and bottles of pills—
my father boils water and crushes the pills to powder

and blood fills the syringes and what he says then
I cannot say now but his eyes roll upward

and half close as the blood returns loaded
with barbitol to bring him down still

he will hurt us) the rushing—
no water in the canal

the General Motors parts plant across a field
from where we are chewing our sandwiches

and listening to the cars.

When my father comes to my room before I sleep

he softly tells me he loves me. I have not asked
the questions I need answered.

I am nine years old in 1978— how can I answer the question
if I ask it?

How is it I must love him?

Concerning **H**appiness
But the **O**therwise **P**oor

I've lived with poverty so long.

Outside my run down house,

the decadence of small, blighted apricots,
soft orange on the tree shading the yard.

Poverty is to live in dirty-kneed jeans, soiled
finger nails, burnt neck. And you,

you to me are the red-tinted euphoria, the bee nest
quiet in the tree at night, the delicate energy

cooling-off until the meadow-dawn. I want
to taste the crystallized salt on your skin most of all

to lie hammocked with you & swing a little.
To have my hands at your waist, to move

around within the summer heaving in my lungs
& the pollinated chemistry inside thriving *believe me*

the disdain of the hair in your face, the gray & white
cat purring on my chest.

I drive around town seeping out my unemployment—
nearly guilty for it I think but not caring— loving variously

the sully river running through town, the man
in the parka in the full blazing sunlight,

the un-incorporated sweat of our lives,
the brick building with a woman leaning out to water the ledge-flower,

the sprawled body of the cowboy beneath the courthouse elm— that
which the surface of you

may not know the ends of.
Something static sings in me,

the tiny currents running into my feet,
sparking out of feather-tips into the leaden

cloud of a thunderhead. Those last shaking blooms of wisteria.
—In the evenings there are bunches of starlings

pecking at the fruit.
And climbing the weathered ladder into the limbs,

the little suns just hang there. I reach up,
tug gently on the blotched skin

and I know.

Mojave Varnish

He was happy watching his father paint chollas and prickled poppies onto sanded sections of plywood — the jimson blooming in verdant patches of ‘forest green’ and each shaggy arm of the Joshua tree the violent thrust of the wrist bearing tawny fruit late into the spring in the purple hills against the sky premixed at home: a little graystone, some blue, a dab of titanium white. Barstow found without the map. In San Bernardino county, the miles of straight two-lanes with fading yellow lines and pieces of something glittering in the asphalt and air lakes wavy on the horizon when *here, this is perfect* — pulling over into the gravel and the car’s cooling system pinging quietly after he killed the motor — *isn’t it better now to begin it all in the sway and sound of slipstream suck the Vegas-bound eighteen-wheelers made roaring by muted inside the car?* His father walked out into the mesquite and juniper and sat on a wooden crate to paint, head lifting from the plywood to landscape — a furious smearing of oils as planet-sized shadows unfolded from the mountains onto the flat alkaloid earth over two tiny humans. Wind from the West. Stillness. Final brush strokes of the ready-made blue stratum and headlights on the cactus hills. In time-lapse would have been tail lights of trucks formed into a red undulating beam over the ridges and the moon would spring out into the black sky— the white moon that followed the car through the pass across the lit-up treeless range. The child tried sleep in the back seat with the radio turned down low until waking in the stilled car and leaning over the back of the front seat to see the great yellow street grid of Los Angeles lit up in the warm night, quivering below where his father stood pissing in the highway turnout. The father and the city framed by the curved lines of the windshield, black form against the swath of a bright arterial freeway with tiny corpuscle cars moving slow on it— the picture forming itself while paintings dried in the trunk. At the swap meet held in a Ventura drive-in theater lot, he watched how his father reluctantly haggled over price until the paintings sold for no more than ten dollars each, outsold by dead rock stars on velvet in the next slot over so that the story could have started in a flea market making a list of the things he liked— toys, and tools, picture books, wooden puppets made in Tijuana— to have a few dollars peeled from his father’s hand to buy what he wanted. But by then he had seen the

people carry the paintings away— the surfaces glistening brightly when turned into the sallow sunlight—the sheen of clear varnish on his father’s Mojave sky. *It could have begun when the market closed and the concessionaires shut their windows and swept up the trash— begun in the aftermath of a fire sale and with the irreparable loss of the pieces of this man in a bankrupt drive-in where all of the speakers had been torn from their posts and a movie hadn’t been played in years.* It was actually the image of the man and the child, dots on a desert plain swallowed by the evening. It was the image of the man and the child— on the edge of the city at night above the city, seeing the scintillate lights. Knowing it was breathing with life.

S t i c k s a n d S t o n e s

Bits of stars in the ceiling. I've seen

god's sparkle-drawn face in the ceiling over my bed

I swear. *Help my father*, I pray. *My father*. . .

kitchened in the night with the need of his veins

and all the lights on. The ice box always buzzing.

Palms framed by an open window,

swaying in the wind. My mother, close

and asleep—my brother dreaming crib bars.

What flashes here not only glints of steel,

fans oscillating across space,

but of ghastly blue light policed into our rooms

by drumming helicopters. I sleep in fading sirens and he

is amphetamine gloss.

When my father wakes me
and carries me into the front room,
lays me down with my head against a black speaker
and puts on Ray Charles records,
the volume shakes my body on the floor.
“Listen to that. Just listen to that.
‘Sticks and Stones.’” I see him sitting in his chair
with his eyes closed, the morning light
flooding in—
First there was music.
Then always music.
Then god.

Picking Up

That morning a littering of June bugs scattered in the halls, a flurry of hard wings in the light-box above. We are quietly working: I hold the dustpan and my mother sweeps them into little piles, carefully moving their bodies into the dust well.

We should have screens on the windows— our luminous rooms drawing them inside at night. If she speaks she begins with “*your father. . .*” My father, serving sentence at the state prison in San Luis Obispo.

This is years ago. This is years ago and what can I think of that world, now?

Why must the beautiful bugs die and land *only* to die, dark wings still clacking, still trying?

What answer, other than yes, will history suffice to my father locked away and writing letters, pleading us to stay? I don’t know. Maybe something in the motion of sweeping debris into a pile . . .

I return to the house when I am twenty— stand in the front yard among the bleeding milkweed and nothing seems as I remember it. New vinyl siding spectacular and white.

He robs so many pharmacies, so many clinics, the odds favor he’ll finally make a mistake. In the alley leaving the Ventura Valu-Right the alarm blares. The wet pavement smells like rain— like sweet success in the quarter light of that dawn— and he is ignorant to the wallet falling from his pocket.

I know he thinks he’s free, drawing back on a cigarette, the freeway still painless before the morning rush hour. The occasional car passes him, and he smiles slightly.

He is thinking of a cheap breakfast at a diner he knows.

S w a y i n g H i g h U p
i n t h e A p p l e T r e e W i t h t h e U n i v e r s e

At this point

the black fields bayed with barbed-in dogs
and all possibility was thumping in my ears.

So I climbed into the limbs of her tree
and watched her pale window glow
beneath the counter-spin above,

imagining her bedroom
from the raised woody arms
imagining the posters on her walls—

was it me?
Look: I can see the living light
on the boy's face

and there, a little lower,
fear is aureate and green on his chest
above the heart

resembling a large, glow-in-the-dark
apple, the Dipper obvious
and the branches swaying

high up under his weight
where he cuts with a pen knife
his name

her name
music rising with the same
pulse at the wrist

and seen through wide
gaps in the canopy
the galaxy throbbing white

the witness of the leaves.

Elegy for the Blue Sky
As Seen From the Swing

(for Brenda Greenfield, 1961-76)

Ascending sweetness . . . it seemed it was always in place.

This was the sky, the high-up framing of everything

below — cold blue strata written on by the thin tailings of supersonic jets,

still-space a moment at which my body in the swing

swooped up

and so badly wanted to drop— two

equal parts of rise and fall held me

in place—and maybe, within the light searing through

shifting elm leaves, I thought, *we float on the vanished wings of what we were.*

But *no*, that wasn't true. As much as I needed it to be.

It was feet arched onto the bigger blues, sunspots

hexagonal in my eyes, up to heaven,

as if the kiss containing every sun-slanted afternoon could be pursed,

& coming down

hair falling up, sweetness descended in the cup of my stomach

with every blue piece of the world,

with nearly *every* blue piece of the world I could have sworn.

But I know now the swing, like the sky, has only been the device.

For example the upper housing of the elm, swaying from gravity and wind.

Because the leaves seemed black on the sunny side and yellow underneath

where unlit —

because tree and leaf are subsets of each other

connected by the stem and pith in the canopy —

because great waves of leaf-light rolled through it in the wind

factoring like ones and zeroes, binary in the mind from then on,

on-and-off smiles in the half-life of the classrooms I afterwards

sat and watched them from —

They have not allowed me to forget.

They whisper *she is gone from the world,*

angels hovering *why?* —

mean angels—

how close I should have felt to, but did not.

You die as a child and the uncertain angel of innocence gags.

While you hemorrhage in a hospitable bed, the vain angel of pity preens.

A host of my own heavenly *nothings*, chorusing through the white sheets

oh why are we kept from seeing heaven by so much flashing color in the sky? —

Tiny-pierced with pulsing glimpses to no other side, the blackness too thick at night.

I can use that kind of vision.

It makes no sense.

But remaining, *you won't believe*
are the heels of your hands at my back —

gentle push,
loss which depends on itself.

R u t t e d

When I am sixteen in the bed of my parents between my brother and my father, listening to the thrum of winter rain on the tin patio roof outside, what do I think? I want to know. The room dark except for the street light seeping between two houses on the next street over, a pocket of yellow over the face of my father who draws on a cigarette with his eyes closed. We are there because he wants us there—so we are quiet, listening too, and warm at the arms where we touch. I hear the mumbling of the neighbor's bedroom t.v., distracting me through the duplex wall. But here is where he will speak softly, and tell us of his childhood on a farm in the hills of Tennessee, of the music of the particular rain of *then* as it pattered against the barn's walls and roof—his first cigarette there and the resentment towards his father taking shape there, I how the low grunts of the horses in the stalls and the circling flies in the light would separate through the high shoring, becoming both poverty and abundance in the slant rays of noon.

V a n t a g e

To say this pulsing around us was
 the black and white afternoon
 is to limit it. For it was also

square-jawed, unsheltered, callous,
 a visage of a million melting rooftops,

and the hot air
 radiating above,

and the sweltering, the fuming
 among the traffic—
 registering within

the thing
 (if one word could cover it)

until *we bear* the scuffing,
 the big boys' sneakers
 scudding on the tar courts beneath the hoops,

we see that specific
 three o'clock in the afternoon light
 cast which is not exactly bleached
 but is acutely inexact in its yellowness

again, the nudging-ahead traffic — both
 squaring through the window screen;

or the air conditioner — box
 on the ledge, roaring to give coolness. Except

the ball rimming
 the rim, ball
 which is silent —
 silent as it spins off and
 rubber-stings the air it hits.

The face of my family extended into abstraction:
 only memory and the memory of a sensing.

It is only the resonance and the shadow of the *thing* we may love.
 Not a universal but a claimed.

That evening the pounding rainfall
 the loud example —
 the hurtful rainfall that is impartially
 the impact of itself:

the innumerable white v.'s, the tinny
 applauding on the pavement as the
other part of the encounter.

Wet dirt — the smell, everywhere.
 Try to resolve the thing before the switch.

—————

So much rain all at once that the city
 browns into a city of rivers—
 streams running down our avenues,
 topping over the asphalt
 up to the curbs.

My mother's hair was long then. It swept
dark to the middle of her back,
and she wore a black mini-skirt
and black boots up to her knees.

She stood beneath the brick-lined doorway,
out of the rain, calling to us, *was she laughing?* —

and though my brother was not yet born,
I will say he was there, at her side,
arms wrapped around a leathered leg,
blonde bangs cut straight across eyes
without envy, only the wonder
at our first rain in those eyes I imagine.

And understand: in *my* story
it was my first rain but it was not *my* rain.

But then, I didn't know and my father
(he must have wanted me to know)
whose hands could wrap around my waist,
who held me
into such lavishness,
had me turn my face up —

held into it to let it become my first.

get back from that edge come over here now
 looking up from the place between our parents
 the stars are fuzzy we watch meteors
 streaking in thin lines across the heavens no words
 and the dry shuffle of corn leaves then moon-rise

let me say in this place

I love you so much father you smell of tobacco
 and your voice speaking of stars lulls me to sleep
mother while I am young again let me call you momma
without awkwardness I will sleep so well my head
 fitting into the deep cradle of your breasts
 and holding hands with you my little brother
we'll walk to school and find again those pomegranates
fallen from the neighbors gnarled front-yard trees
 we'll break them open to suck on the seeds
 and show up late with stained truant lips

there is the coupling of legs the strength in every step
 that he wants each evening after work
 she moves so gracefully in the last light of summer
 in a blur it will be only palms and perfume
 and the tiny heads of the children on the roof above
 peer down at them as they dance to the music
 and the music is all they hear
 dancing again swaying in the shadows
 listening for the music beneath the high whine of sirens
 come down here dance

W i n t e r (i n t h e T r e e s)

Between the soul's presence and the historical heart

these elms, spindly in winter along the wet streets. I think
their limbs reaching up leafless with stillness look like nerves in the human anatomy.

Thus the spreading branches taking shape in one form of the body
might contain all electric flaring of thought and grow onto the gray sky.

The arms are pushing-out from the trunks and weaving together
that heaven crisscrossed inside of me— towards God
in the middle of everything.

And then the experience of *seeing nakedness in the trees* followed by the question:

is there anything I can replace the 'heart' with? I am trying
but the soul has spilled into every other place inside the body, telling me *no—*

and this is the way in which I would describe the soul like the sky:

altogether everywhere and the transparency of me— that other thing
is the *'has-been,'*
four-chambered and blood-straining.

I know I am augmented by it,

that even the limbs want to wrap around it and hug it—

I have wanted End

rather than epistle,

in winter have looked for redemption in the deciduous trees, all they lost
until spring and the small-throated bird calls

though for years where I lived it was evergreen.

It would not rain the reds and yellows,
and each day like late summer and not quite fall.

Years since those boys in Pomona came down my street
 breaking off the antennas of parked cars: I followed the gang
 from my window— they paused at each place. Amber streetlight
 caught in the steel rods and traveled down as the tallest of the boys
 bent and twisted them off. I wanted to tell my father this was happening
 but didn't. There was a trance of arcing light— the boys
 waving the broken-off wands in the air before their faces as they walked—

 fluid shapes seen sideways they were figure-eights.

To bring it to the End with a loop of infinity in the air!
 but no, eternity was *not* firing white-hot in the neuron cells, only in the leaves.

Now, when I think of the neighborhood replacing antennas
 with clothes hangers, they are formed into wide open
 diamonds. I can lean and look through all the centers
 on my side of the block. I can see down the street and the sky
 is pink—and the palm trees triangulated lean over the street,
 each bent at the same height— ellipses
 into the horizon . . . *fine-tuning*. It is a perfect,
 72-degree Fahrenheit evening on my face
 where the low hollow thrum of beetle wings brushes my ear
 so that I squirm and scratch inside it. I taste water
 in the hard succulent leaf, the size of a quarter, pulled
 from a jade plant and bit in half—

so why can't I remember the face of the neighbor woman or her baby?—
 only the rock n' roll I danced to— as she breast-fed in the afternoons
 and watched me turning and clapping in the long light— only
 that exuberance, her laughter in the slated light. Why can't
 I remember Brenda's eyes other than the moment at which they opened wide
 because she was bleeding internally and dying in the hospital bed?

You felt very quiet. —I was remembering

my small child body, and could see it from above, sleeping
 in a tiny bed near a big bed. There was an oscillating fan
 turning its breezy face from side to side, moving invisible
 coolness across the room. I came down towards me
 and saw our chest heaved to have the sweat of our body
 chilled for two seconds. We could hear the Spanish words
 seeping through the walls during the night— murmurs
 of cars passing outside and the lumps of our parents asleep
 when headlights reflected into the room and shone onto the ceiling,

the star flecks in the ceiling lit up and formed God's face.

Hello, God. The after-image
 staying. I heard me asking *God, do you love me?*
 God had big, binary eyes and nebulous beard. *Robbie,*
be quiet my mother said. And I think God said to me,
Go to sleep now. We'll talk later. I turned from the ceiling
 and saw through the window an unending variety of foliage,
 swaying in the purple night.

It is 2:12 in the morning here and there is no sparkling ceiling, no face
 to remind me where it is we've come from. That's all right.
 I am sure my men were of the trees. I see now my grandfather, 1931,
 leaving Texas for California, ending up picking oranges
 at the top of a ladder. He was not afraid of heights.

In the winter orchards they burned oil in long troughs to keep
 the fruit from freezing. I know the black rolled up into the leaves,
 covering the pickers with a soot brought home on their hands and clothing.

As a child in Appalachia my father hid from his farm work in the sweet gums.
 He leaned in the black oak over the water of a brown Tennessee river.

My brother tried burning down the group of alders
 huddled at the edge of summer.

I ran through the waist-high grass when I saw the smoke rising
 and found him facing the flames burning on the trunk.

I pressed the carpet from our fort around it until the flames were smothered —

—And now I must say it,
you are the ones who will never tell me.

You keep swaying, clumsily, high up in the branches
 where only the birds should be — like my father

drunk in the top of the honey locust too small to be climbed
 while the crowd of Cambodian neighbors circled at the bottom, laughing.

Those limbs threatening to break never did because you had the see through wings
 flapping.

Look out the window now and I will see both, one
 the crazy flurry of white wings lifting into place the other:

the red valentine, the plastic heart pierced by an arrow
not Cupid's arrow.

“This arrow
 serves to complete ‘the bleeding from the wound’
 image” as we hover near and look to and cling to each other

at the window, near the trees.

THE JACKET *fits perfectly the boy on a ten-speed, the clumsy shift of a greasy derailleur chinking into winded-in-love, slouched over the bike, crotched on it, gripping handlebars and ready again to rise and seat and turn smooth to ride her block again.*

It wraps around him like residual dusk on the pedal, true to the shape of his drive racing a reckless figure-eight through the blocks and blocks centered at the union of a sweeping double loop.

It is held by the beautiful shape of Always, weeping oh me, smiling oh me and my best friend beneath lawn stars dreaming of a twilight of sprinklers firing and keeping time. Before dawn, stealing the neighbor's news.

Device for the Blind

He was sure the pain washed out with the Spring — with the frothy snow melt.
 It must have been the sugary purl at the surface of the river.
 The right words at the time were *renewal, patience, and growth.*
 The cowbird's usage of the woven nest of another — the house
 of another diligence.

Quietly he began to dismantle the machine
 that had held it all in place, within the blank

among other things —
 tearing out the bright wires
 and then the small-as-a-pea motherboard.

Though the fish were unremarkable, their scales were wrought of gold and he owned
 their mottled bulks.

At night they leapt for flies and moonlight —
 the million liquid glimpses of that light floating downstream.
 The smallness of himself against the river.

The knife released the roe and guts onto the rock.
 The heads were tossed into a bucket — so many unblinking eyes —
 open mouths full of soft teeth. Moths
 lit up in the smoke above the slow fire.

In the middle of the night, he awoke in the tent to thunder.
 He couldn't see a thing in there except for the glow of a wrist watch.
 He forgot he was camped on the border between self and world.

The wind inflated the nylon room.

The water seeped through the seams.

Birds chirped hysterically in the morning dim around him.

P i e c e s

You are only wanting to sing a little rejoinder to the worry-spent world
 One for every loss you have owned. Another
 because this particular dawn has no color.
 But would you sing to every broken ambition? . . .
Well, you are getting too old for that you say,
time's a' waistin' (this is the heart speaking now, this
 is the early light beginning in the East, not a *new* beginning,
 but the same old one):
 too much to look for redemption again,
 that found to be but one of the many haloing heads in the world.
 So ridiculous because you are *not* so rare.
 All form in here is merely contrived,

for example, in order

to impose airiness where there isn't any . . .

But nothing has happened to you, yet. Whatever
 happened to Larry dropping pots from the balcony?
 When you stepped out the back door, you had to peek up first,
 to see if he was waiting to crack open your skull from three stories above.
 You leapt down concrete steps and whirled back,
 saw him weird-eyed laughing, holding the daisies over the edge.
 Inside your home you knew your parents said *busted*. You felt they said *failed*.
 The shadow of the brick structure was cool away from the midday sun.
 You saying *sun* and the Latinos saying *sol*. Saying *wind*, they said
viento. The world both. And the streets oily-wet in the morning.

Last night, talking on the phone, it rained.

You were waiting for the emblem that would mean 'starting over.'

Once, the rain would have been that sign.
Not sure why
but you would call this the deep of the night. *Rain*, you said, *rain*
falling in the deep of the night. How you loved it. She slept there,

in the bed, and you watched her, purblind. She was breathing
belly button holed in the middle of the flat stomach
and you pled to her,
“Why won’t you love me?”

C o n t i n g e n c y

I don't want to think of the man and the woman
 as contingent to *each other*—as conditional to their
seperateness. But they walk along the beach, barefoot.
 From here they are one figure.
 They have hidden their shoes in the bunch grass growing
 on the strand—marking the place
 with a storm-washed jar of instant Nestea
 found filled with golden sand and saltwater.
 (Finding the shoes again— isn't that the manner
 in which they will leave *their* nakedness?—)

Deep in their inner ear of love, particles of sand
 brought in by the breeze. Rhythmic surf.

What happens next

is the white valley between her breasts.
 His mouth switching between kissing each pink halo.
 She turns over and he bites gently into her sun-burnt ass,
 not realizing all the true bareness withheld — and now, what if
 I do not leave?
 Does her body shudder against his thighs?
 Does she put into the world the shape of her stretch?
 Could it be the long, stretched O I'll imagine— the resonance of it?

When I think of you cart-wheeling on the beach
 you look like a stretching star turning center of no
 light on the ocean behind.
 I have to imagine the sedimentary cliffs spinning brown
 and the sequoia stands blurring on those cliffs
 because I could not.

—Long after we had left each other. Letting go
every bittersweet place was not the answer
but was the question: should we have stamped out
the ingots popping from the fire
that gave us warmth on the shore?

The autumnal nights among the redwood
or the broadcast towers of Eureka flashing
softly in the fog on lumbered hills,
those last remaining groves pulling rain from the upper slopes
to the stream beds in the valleys below where we camped—
they remain where love was
and it could never matter to love
that you didn't understand what was meant
when I said I'd seen you in the glowing eyes of animals
foraging among the ferns along Humboldt county roads—
the intelligence lit up in the headlights there.

C o n v e r s i o n

That the pathways might open wide.

That I would find some way. White flashing,
the ashen sky is electrified, warm front sweeps in from over the ocean.

Her three sisters' energy surging down the hallway breaks
through the screen door into the evening star still low, still sapphire—

and tumbling into uncut grass— the youngest asking *do you believe in my heaven?*
Laughter under the opening oak then,
pronounced heavens, leaves, hallelujahs—

the lichen transept dissected by sunlight raying through the canopied windows,
squirrels running along the gorgeous I-beams and pews:

— *dark blue: why am I so lost in the light I have desire for your faith?*

Did Jesus ever see the two of us on the freeway overpass at rush hour,
leaning over the railing and watching the rows of cars?

They looked up from behind their steering wheels, putting their heads
into the windshield space to watch us as they passed under.

We knew there were millions living in that city and at night, from the hills,
we could see their precise and individual transactions were golden lights.
They quivered together in the suburbs, emanating brownout.

Who could explain the hail pelting the windows or the winter storm;
no power in the city and the candlelight swaying on the walls.

The inadvertent circle we made, loafing on couches and chairs,
was not a circle. The propane stove heating the beans hig-humming.
Thunder; love, eye brows . . .

I felt sorry for myself when her family prayed for me,
in the flickering vicinity of the flame without the *warmth*.

The struts of the old house creaked in the storm—
outside, through the window,
that I could see every small and tattered thing floating within it.

New Roanoke

Where we never were

we awoke without alarm

where we dressed & showered

we ate our cold kumquats

where the air-conditioned room pigmented

into pink diminuendos

where we were never so bittersweet

nor misplaced we lived for years

where the heretical sunset serrated the desert into two

outrageous segments of extravagance & plenitude

where hovered the sun a spinning chrome

hubcap flinging droplets of noon-time mercury

where flung into the land the flimsy

material same as the nightgown I imagined the retiree in

where the retiree wore straw hats & green body suits

but scolded me into seen-through restraint

where the lawns were well-watered &

the driveways newly poured

where no one

called

where we dictated extinct flowers
especially for each other

where we lost each in each

M o r t a l L o v e

And again: leaves sailing downward, soft symphony composing from the umbrella limbs above. Why should love seem unattainable in this constant tide of mortalities? — plural, because many: an October of thirty-one days but each day lived as if it were the last?

.

No. Living apart was the death of together. The bed without her dwarfed your far too singular body. The silence of the room at night became a room of silence — you filled it with the whirl of a fan running at the low setting.

.

Recalling the ride through warmest summer nights to her house, the chestnuts blocking the halogen street light, the dogs that barked at your passing from behind fenced side yards. Remembering the boom of the trains in the rail yard, how you grew accustomed to it — how at last you could sleep through it.

.

Try again. You make love in the cold blue, in a room strewn with the piling-up of long work weeks — clothing, books, and dishes. You mean to supplant each kiss with the passion behind it.

.

The body below you wears the tan of a summer: it seems unbalanced to have held it so long.

.

Driving home through the Fall— I love you, she says. *Love: what else; how much; what kind of?* The word said aloud, a single, short breath. One could say it is simple in this way. One could say it is, in this manner, too brief.

.

Walking together in the brisk air, the days are already shorter, the advent of winter is felt an effortless gesture now — the flick of a natural switch none will immediately notice: it *is not*, and then it *is*.

.

And then there are the burning colors to contend with — all around you the season-kill: a bright, immeasurable elegance, yet swept into light-weight piles. You could learn to cry like that, you think. Almost audibly now.

Leaves, composing downward.

T h i c k D e s c r i p t i o n

Gun-metal gray, the boat softly knocks the pylon.

Jet skiers spit white-cosmic arcs into their own wakes.

.

There are blinding sheets of light shifting on the water

and I can't look.

.

I would say the hovering dragonflies are blue—

the toothpick dragonflies zing over the even-tempered water.

Wings so fast they appear to not move.

.

Does the single oar feel lonely because there should be a *pair*?

.

A man is drawn to the immensity of a fir tree—

.

where once this rough trunk a tunnel to heaven, where maple leaves

fostered on the lake shore and waved in the breezes, *old men's hands*, he
thinks.

.

Now stands in his mind the true Tree spelled with a capital "T."

Leaf with a capital "L".

Being and being.

.

Years ago angrily stumbling out of the house into the darkness in my underwear, unable to sleep, I might have agreed: the nameless sexless mule blaring all teeth and violence among the stalled. I hurled a rock at the barn to shut it up.

.

Afterwards, drinking from the trough, I missed it's noise. The light of a city was glowing on the other side of the ridge.

I thought everything was better over there.

N o C o n s o l a t i o n

to be home from the graveyard shift, five a.m.

No sense of the passing of time
until dawnlight reveals the wall is made of brick.

Outside the window, the overcast. The pigeons,
bobbing their heads as they strut the cornice.

It is not that they agree
for they are likely ledged on similar scenes

and I don't believe they acknowledge me

but there is familiarity I see in this bouncing-along: how they fluff up under hot-air vents
preening their all-too-common selves
as if spring had persevered in the freeze. Often

in order to transcend into just such a warmth, into the sad brevity of survival in which
every ugliness
becomes my beautiful,

every loss a win,

I will start by refusing the conditional. I will say
it was *not* me. I am *not* there. *Here I am*, I say

and white doves that are pigeons sink down legless in their cupped-hand bodies,
trilling sweetly, happy I should call it

doves lining an uneven edifice with the city awakening around them
and beyond the alleyway-entrance the traffic and hard-soled crossings stuck in noise-filter:

this is ruckus— this is what we listen to
 as it inundates the quieter with
 a jackhammer countermeasure of grief and acceptance:

imagination did not do this.

Then what is it made of?

 Around the birds the shield of my imagining puts everything off for another minute.

And so unreal— the lump assortments of charge firing and adhering to one another? :

“representation
 rather than
 object”—

On the first day
 of the second chance

the small dove returning with an olive leaf falsely anticipates a swing towards normal.

These grays, shaking the mites from their wings in the winter rain. These gray pigeons
 grayer beneath the leaden sky muted by the disconcert of gears and brakes below

and sharp angular daylight, deluge

stabbing through the clouds through the hopelessly through the romantic the impression
 the humanity of

there are signs

divining with purpose, along the gridwork of the City

and onto brick & mortar

it was always meant to be.

(for 'Annab)

Guernica y Luno
(What Naming Had Nothing To Do With)

The copper sheen on the river's upturned belly. The roseate rooms
others' calamity made for me. The gross exaggerations.

My voice has been lonely to me and a tonnage of personal evacuations.

In the flame tree's system, near my window in terrible reach, a nest of speckled eggs.
What I did

I was a child. I am offering-up now:

here I am, after the bloodless art— after the desecration,
the stylus aching in its thumb finger hold.

Though opposite even one imagined scream, disgrace is roped-off,
hung in the afternoon hymnal— squared through the skylight.

I wanted them to weep.

**Blackbird Dead in the Road
Between Heaven & Hell**

Over the bone the stringy gray meat. And greasy feathers.

But should I not say it is heaven above? Or hell, below?
It bill never opened so . . . The low-light and hard weather

And mites— all-out slow annihilators of the bird. I know

The assonance of this hurts me because it may not
Be natural. And I want to tell the difference.

Blackbird. Nothing in the eye.

The broken frame is more than *blood and guts*.

My thoughtless mouth lifts up from the bed of the highway.
It is the beginning throes. Another loss emanates from *here*

Myself, out to the world: I have come so far

To forget, only to read the sign at the side of the road:
Town of Divide, Montana. Only pulled over to translate

The gravel lapping at the carcass while the engine knocks

.

In its own doom-cavity. Beneath the hood

Not knowing what it was trying to say
Other than its own ever-increasing need for oil.

My lean shadow over the torn wings.

Simultaneously aware the background
Aspens turn tawny— a shushing thicket heard—

And lit up against the hill beneath the thinning timber line

.

The remains of a dream is squared at the edge of the meadow

In the form of a stone chimney stack, no walls anymore, no trace
even. Only the flue, tall in the bent cheat grass.

Nothing in the eye of the blackbird.

What could have happened here that time couldn't stop?—
Chopped firewood, still weathering in the ash pit.

No other evidence spilling over from that life.

.

Blackbird, dead-eyeing the smeared

Wreckage of the cumuli above and the tired macadam below
And on a field-burning haze in the midriff of the sky

Knowing the space

Layered midway hurts— provides
Neither ascendancy nor grounding.

Blackbird. Nothing in the eye.

.

Between two unkind press-boards

Heaven and Hell are so distant
and so alike.

Little bird body stiffened flat and rearranged by the taking away of

To disremember
is to put together.

Leave it here, or take it with you?

A v a t a r i n t h e S h a p e o f a W i n g

It marked the edge

Of one of many circles.

An eye consumed by ants and the mouth carried away.

Tufted feathers tugging in the breeze.

At last you knew to leave it disintegrating in the kindred gravel,

the throat of the highway it suicided within.

The nail-scraped dying of two hurt so much that each blatant rhyme

(in time) only added to the affliction

[in the surrounding northern wilderness, to think of fording the river where it was too deep,

the pack filling with water and chunks of ice, wanting to drown and survive the same

he stepped heavy out of it, shivering on the side of the interstate,

eventually carried by a truck whose driving straightened curves into

self-erasure:

Don't answer:

Heaven is an impossible strata made falsely possible— Hell tremendous
of fears; your ticker pumps *only* blood;

destroyed, you atomize into the leafless aspens where the forgotten homestead
sits founded.

Though all of it said, by many before & after. *Now* believe.

[The *it* and the *he* are used as the barely disclosed addressees though more needs to be said.

But *it* was never meant to flap without wings. *It* was a tool for *him* to figure out] and here

you— *we*

have reassembled it now,

and it tips one black side to earth and the other to the opposite, dross

as the fields burn below:

autumn smoke in a winter sky.

The miracle the miscreated turns its head ever so

to see *what?* with the remaining eye: threshers in the irrigated fields at dusk;

the continent sprawling carrion-abundant & unaware of the bird,

the missed portion of the drama.

& so we quietly inform it: it is re-made soulless— brought to life by merely inscribing

“nothing in the eye.”

Unwisely aiming this weapon at the only moving thing among the countless countless

(though that one's agency gifted wings to soar upon

though your own coveted

a cousined authority)

you are not sorry.

You want to know if it is irreparably done.

Signs & Self-Prophecy, & Such

(after Andrea Mantegna's "Saint Sebastian," 1492)

And the widow's sorrow stitched them together: the freight arrived from over long distances, undamaged. Sebastian survived the many piercings that had emptied their quivers.

.

I thought of the painting again—the occasion of the *oculus* has always been there, the fake optimism in blue. *There* is where his eyes seek. From a small board of cedar, his upward gaze, as obvious to me now as the nimbus over his head, is directed by the arrows the artist skewers him with: to Our Savior, off-screen.

.

I don't know what feeling the Monterey pines evoked in me, at the end of our millennium, windraked on a promising coast and history hinged on claiming—hardwired for landings. The flags *had* to be planted in the gentle surf of the New World and song birds made voiceless in the tortured limbs above the scree. Though revised, it *was* an act of privation. I felt silenced, too.

.

This, also: pure water seeped through an epoch of sandstone before reaching the fissure I placed my lips to and drank from.

.

Or: sign of impending death, clung to the screen against the Pacific's warm off-shore flow. Someone said the moth must have drifted up from a South American jungle on trade winds. The curled antennae were longer than its body. It was a ghost, a quality pressed against the night.

.

As a child in the park's pavilion she couldn't appreciate Bernstein's *Mass*, cacophony of strings and dancers, though she thought everyone around her did. What remains vivid of the summer evening is the spiral slide— the other children corkscrewing down it while her mother held her, still and quietly, on a plaid blanket beneath an overhanging tree.

.

Another: the psychic neighbor dropped our grandmother's spoons on the table and read their silver collisions as the approaching death of the matriarch a week after she had already died.

.

The thread of Sebastian's life was frayed now, and the widow, grieving, removed his bloody raiment. Cut the arrowheads and placed them into a clay bowl. She genuflected before the criminal Image, prayed for how the removals should be done.

.

Among ancient reefs waterless in the Mojave, the morning star sank for the seventy-millionth time. I stood where I had ran at the age of ten, a hundred years between. I saw the seams that made up my jacket. The parental knot that kept the shoelace tied.

.

The idea that so costumed, one could become him: thus the child entered the contest and won with his interpretation of *saint as pin-cushion*. This was for me an additional indicator.

.

Halfway there you turn around on a feeling that you'd better —

E n d u r e d P a s t F i g u r e s

Sad someday, I could hear myself moving towards you—
 someday that could only occur to me as standing water
 crystallized into thin iridescent sheets.

No stars could stick in the treadless sidewalk—

the uniform glitter in the macadamized light
 would be kept from blooming into a wintry austerity.

Follow my lead: the heart now a heart without clothing.

 It's me and the heart,
 living with ease in one weightless costume,
 a hybrid beginning refusing to metaphor.

In the scratch of the scratched record, the particle bits of voice & piano
 repeat *sticks and stones sticks and stones*—

between songs, the thirty-three and a third was heard as dust-soft popping

once there was a back alley, years ago— there was Robbie
 lofting stones underhanded

dailiness was
 two kinds of light:

the blackened oak radiance of the old Mason upright, toy-sized under a vaulted ceiling
 & dawn
 washing the room startling, & then the brighter, the harsher the rocks vanished into.

The cracks in a Volkswagen's rear windshield

splintered outward into the critical likeness of a web
and the axis of the impact, the waiting-place of the spider, was near the color of
several starry coats of rime in a future where I'd insist on the past
and I'd walk into the string of the song
every line wanting to *oh*
and *oh*
though before that day, my understanding had come to me through lying looms—
eyes squinted in the flailing
blaze of seasons, sun below cloud-level —
what erupted from the spiral-scarred limbs of fruit trees,
the raucous *starlings*
eating up my *apricots*
they were imported into the twilight at the right moment,
when the suburban sublime was a longing in the liquid air, unbreathable —
the birds shitting on the walkway, dropping the pits from their feasting.
In the yard I was an intruder in the scene in the refracted dusk,
visiting and living there only in a short-term believed reserved for sunlight
and little girls and small boys mostly
here was one space: *she glided down the slide, arms tight to her side*
in so doing she slipped from the squalor we had lived in
it would never define her

& here was another: *she was skinny and long legs in pink pants and untaught hair*

flying in the afternoon recess air

for then she played, always

and always

her feet ached towards the end of the pendulum swing, pale-knuckled hands on chains and

nauseous stomach sinking into the bottom dug by legs

—confessions of loving anyone

who loved in return —

days in September, walking together to the corner, waiting for the crossing guard to flag the girl one way

and me another

coasting banana-seat

through evenings of love-warmth and stucco, red clay roofs

no more dark carpeted dashes in their cars

and the yards tall with dandelions and milkweed

no more dove on the line bending between poles

nothing anymore smelling of maybe tar or creosote and cut grass—

the drone of distant mowers

shredding tenderness in a sense

because the under-rev made me and my heart happy

and something was wrong when it wasn't—

into lengthened nostalgia, saying “gone” struck the line with

the constancy, the insistence, the yearning of it

that could blur any *then* into bellied sweetness

because I knew all along

my heart

in his desperate secession

wanted it. Grand breakage.

The historical figures.

Daring movement they are dancers stepping

awkwardly in the right evening,

they will never again listen to me—

they will dance

Brenda die

my father stay so high

Robbie ride a bike in the pink

end to a summer day—

sun-bleached to the root guitar strumming out the scratchy

station of the car radio with its doors open long antenna

long antennae of many such cars

the woman's hair tied back into a pony tail that could, without effort,

be the dwindling song mourning

along the tendrils of the web: cracking so that it is broken

freezing so

it is sustained by damper— same two notes as always,

loop of high piano plink followed by a low

it is *sticks and stones sticks and stones*

needle stuck

it is the undeclared in my caesura

imploring tone in *don't you?*

So long I refused to play that song any other way: pleasure cored

beneath each key, the last the clink when the rock hit the glass
& shattered mutely that morning

oh but before that, *someday*,

oh until *that* day,

we were dialogue. We were borrowed from the heart's burlesque.

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