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SQUARE OF BLUE

by

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B.A. University of Montana, 2001

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2003

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*Her language I knew not, but what her eyes said
will forever remain eloquent in its anguish.*

(Rabindranath Tagore)

Square of Blue

To see nothing but sky through a window,
distance come home in a square
of light spoken blue over blue—
I claim no gold past the simplest awe.
A bird eases across frame,
too far to identify, then
a leaf flutters down, held up by the air's
resistance. I think *Maple*,
and for a moment wind pins this leaf
against the window, its veins
standing out—an old man's hand—
before it falls away
and I do not track its descent
because in my knowing,
this leaf, middle-red and edge-
yellowed, floats back up into
frame, answer to wind as I ask
myself how I was tricked
again, what is this that goes
unquestioned what I know about
the world will diminish
and this leaf like a living thing,
isn't it beautiful?
Why chagrined, then, why
disgruntled, when the path of a dead leaf
becomes the most important part of my day?
Pray for the wind to calm,
for this leaf to take its place

on the cold grass, to cease
its challenge and confirm
this world of gravity, this clear station.

Daybreak, Miller's Meadow

Behind the house, across the cedar fence into Miller's Meadow,
the center of the meadow where the ground rises up
in quiet, I face east.

The grass here is waist-high and wet and from time to time
it shivers at the wind's touch like a hand run through fur
on a dog's back
as birds, tiny black creatures flecked with yellow, fly up around me
and just as quickly sink back into the grass.

I have stumbled upon their nests
more than once: small rounds of dried grass and twigs
containing tiny eggs the color of cream and butter.

There is a ritual to it,
a breathing in, the loon calling out to the sun that will soon
breach the forest at the meadow's far reach,
as when I was very young
and discovered a dead robin on our front porch,
held this bird, still warm, blew hot air into its face like I imagined
a doctor might. And grew cold.

I held this bird and a flood of early light washed over me yet
I assumed nothing angelic in this lifting of shadow.

A mother dies and grief
becomes a heart-clamp. A child dies and into this hole
the lifting of sun above the trees that will not
dry the wet grass, or
translate the meaning of sorrow into a neat flower.

What?

Asked like a person thrown open
as a candle thrown

as a candle
the dark is uncreated
rare as witness to a web's construction.

You will not lay your hands low they flit about
weave and move

a button, the air itself:
place them over your cold cheeks,

take my spot under
this old maple tree. All I want
is one moment,
a robin's song of morning, echoes rung out
from bunched hills
white and bright at the receding dawn.
You turn and listen away.

What is it? I close my eyes and urge the cry
of birds.

What?

Thunder backs up, I know that much.
There are thorns sprouting. There are black cards.
Your hands are sticks
that beat against your own body.

What is it?

We have drawn a cloud of birds: robins, starlings, crows.

 You cannot stop the swallows' dive,
or the joyful paw of a cat that would knock these birds from the air.

 I turn,
the most urgent questions, the ones
that sink, oblivious the wind all chuff and stammer
 the questions best answered

to the beat of a skyful of wings and it may be I see
 this wind as your breath
but the birds not harnessed
 and here, feathers
begin floating down around us, soft down we might gather
 and weave the ground

around us the field the branches of our great maple tree
 every utterance
 swallowed down to its purest rhythm
 until we forego
and lie back the bare sky
calling out come to me
 you are in need.

Palette

How can you turn away?
How do you say no to this voice
 leaping out of the sky?
 Wait for full black
 and write me a note, if you wish. I could
threaten you, I could say
 you have nothing I want—
do you see what happens
when you turn? I have only these two hands
and they will go where they will go
 and you could curve
 over their red brilliance without
 that palm of doubt, see,
you were mistaken but we know
 what touch brings
 running into the world.

I will spread the work
 of a palette into a small box
until you attend and run your fingers
 over the filigree and read, out loud,
 your life in hues and your palm
against my chest
 and the sound of this life
we have sampled until we were sure we would
never get beyond the lines
 to that place where an idea turns upon itself

Helper

1.

We kick away boxes and collapse in the back yard,
facing east toward late August cutwinds that turn our
light sweat to chill. Across the river, slopes come

green at a certain time late in the day alive
and black down the roil of clouds risen up behind.
Yesterday my son lost control again and I wonder

what he's missed after three years under needles
and prednisone, the constant cold tap of gloved hands
on his chest. Now, at the slightest disappointment,

he collapses to the ground and contorts back
to those days of spinal taps and sterile smells, nurses
that hover like hummingbirds. We have told him

over and over *be proud*, you have stomped this monster
out, but he must wonder whether it lurks, still,
in the darker closet of his blood.

The first stars emerge shortly after dusk and the sky
opens. A doe and her fawn trip the night light
on the neighbor's garage and trim grass from shadow.

2.

The day we discovered his illness I burned yellow
inside, passed through ghostcool shade in layers beyond
the first sloughing echoes of understanding.

He was napping in an ICU room when the doctor told us.
I had only a short time to fight through the panic I knew
the way geese know south, a matter of minutes to wadedive

through this black song rolling over and come out
ready to hear the beeps sounding every few seconds,
filling the room with the near course of his life.

3.

I have made this short walk to the river countless times,
watched light play off hills rising to the east as
two fat squirrels race around the trunk

of a pine tree. In late winter the plunge of my hand
into pools sends swarms of tiny trout darting under
caves of ice. Shadows flit across my wrist and the cold

burn feels necessary, like a shedding. Once, in Summer,
I witnessed the death throes of a garter snake caught
in the jaws of a feral cat. I hissed until the cat ran off.

I approached the snake, not for rescue or pity, but
to see the exact moment of its death, the way it
curled up and grew still. I thought of you curled into

a tight fist on the examining table, chin pressed firm
into chest, pictured that long needle plunging into
your spine while people you trusted held you down.

Wouldn't the paper crinkling under you terrify?
Wouldn't the disembodied voices of your parents heighten
the cold grip of latex across your back? I can say only

how slowly drops filled the vial. I can tell you how
deep the small, hard grip of your hand cut me, how
the panic heat rolling off your body met my cool skin.

4.

At the top of Mount Sentinel I discover six
brown bottles implanted in the snow, surrounding
a matchbook placed like a tent in their midst.

Last night he had the terrors, sleepwalked
into our room at three a.m. and stared through us
at this thing he will never describe. No matter

how hard we push there is no entry into that world
and it feels as if he is on the brink of slipping
all the way in. We hold him to us as he rants and thrashes.

Once he is settled in his own bed I analyze this
latest episode until I drift under, willing myself
into his sleep: mail-clad protector, slayer of night demons,

dreamcatcher. The next morning, swallows pluck
insects off the river's stagnant inroads, then rise
like dark gems against the sun.

5.

When your treatments ended they excised
the line dug into your chest you called helper,
where medicine went in and blood came out.

You were terrified, by then, each time they
put you under, and lately you have asked for details.
I have described to you how your words tangled

and your eyes glazed full over but I have never shared
the way it was that last time, as I stood over you
in the same room I'd learned of your illness

and watched someone's fingers manipulate a syringe
filled with amber liquid that crept down toward
your heartvein like a hammer. Later,

I waited as they tried to bring you back
and waited as they tried again. Three times the man
pushed something clear into your i.v. before he

murmured to the nurse and I heard "waking" and "not".
You would like me to tell how it was when
your eyes opened that last time, but even now

I wait, though I have closed mine and have
traveled to that place, and would not know more truth
than the overlapping of hearts at your approach.

6.

Two weeks after the move, you spotted a young moose
in our back yard and shrieked. Together we
held back the dog and watched as this bull grazed

and shook his antlers, then followed a path
of his own making across fence and road and past
the neighbor's barn until he disappeared into a dark

stand of trees far in the distance. I had not yet
discovered the river past these trees, running
fast over rocks that bent the water's surface,

or the sandbar jutting into the river on which
I'd lay for hour upon hour, carefully
folding your past into the blue-burnt sky.

Blue Ridge

On the hike up to Blue Ridge she voices concerns.

The one is doing poorly in school. The other

may or may not have sinus troubles.

We have emerged from the dense forest
of pine and fir onto a stretch of open trail

high on the side of the ridge. Looking down-valley,
we see the path we traveled.

There was the creek we crossed. There
the steep scree slope where I nearly tumbled.

Her voice rises above the scolding chit

of a chipmunk. What'll we do

when the money's gone?

She peels out of her day pack and drains her canteen.

Below us, a stand of quaking aspen
holds forth its rattling whisper.

The trail switches back and forth
to the top of the ridge and the ground drops away
on either side, precipitous.

Scrub brush and hardy juniper cling to the thin soil.

I should have brought my jacket, she says.

I should have kept that job.

She looks back down the trail and I see
she has dragged it all up behind her—how hard

she has labored this afternoon.

*

We have climbed past the swarms of biting bugs.
We have risen above the forest,
 above the tree line, until nothing
 but rock and lichen and sick little shrubs
surround us. We could continue on the ridge and turn east
toward the summit of Chapman Peak.
 The way is clear and uncomplicated.
 We would not have to rope up.
A few hours, a bit of extra care, and we could be standing
 above ten thousand feet, looking back
 to where we stand now.

We could sign the guest register they keep
in a metal box up there.
What for? she says, and I see what she must
 take with her to the top—how far it must seem—
 and I understand in the way she looks
outside of this place, that we will soon be turning back.

Night Vision

In the dirt as a sea of flowers
grows up around you,
barely visible,
as the mist cooling your bare legs
sounds to the thrill
of knowing the one place
you can go to shake off the weight
of a week's worth of gray days.
Say nothing out loud and still, listen:
there are warbles here that will not be identified,
thick, green branches that hang
low in your night vision
and give off scent like the day
gives off last light.
Lie in the stream's glide over stone
agleam with the moon's
quiet, reflected power that will pull you up,
will shake the last remnants of grief
taken up in a heavier place
where night-song moves out and away
and fades into the dull crash
of steel against steel,
of days borne on days until the sun
itself debates its own rising.

Sandman

Three red birds alight on a sill
and all this matchless shining down will not
alter one bird's feast of music, working
the night meant for those who

sleep dead away any pretense,
for whom the slightest shift of a curtain throws
lilacs inside, adrift, and here
is the keen edge of your cynic's heart

saying the grander the dream, the grander.
I will continue to sleep even as you
shoo away the birds and brush off remnants
of their night song.

I understand what a rare thing you offer, rarer
than the shrill scree of an eagle,
or the intentional brush of limb on limb, your body
lifting over this smell of lilacs, you intentional,

you unadmitted dreamer, these birds
swirling around our bed now and you,
giving chase, prolonging this in-between.
If only I understood the movement

*

of thought to wing fought off,
 every breach of light caught
in the act of revealing some fragment we were
unaware of. There were birds, but more than that—

something pulled you in through its dark eye
until every shift of moment reflected back
on itself the way mirrors will
 show themselves and show again the depth

of the unreal—did I witness this—
 did I see more than the hump
of your shoulder—this idea of birdsong, this late hour,
a blending across lines drawn by

 that part of us unwilling to forego solid touch.
Forgive me, but I must ask: what are your
plans for the song, the red, the sweet, last part
of the last part? Gently, you—gently.

Pinõn

Three nights ago I dreamt a mesa, its flat top
scourged by the wind's action down to near life,

 stunted brown bushes leaning
to the east, rocks the color of copper and lapis
 rocks the size of a small fist.

Two condors feasting on something small and red
and then I'm with them, working my teeth
between the ribs of a carcass and this is enough to send me
back and I'm back

 and what do you want from me?

I take notes. I keep a notebook and record your voice in colors
and lines and yes, did you expect more?

It may not come from your flower.

The mesa stretched on and the sky was not

and the horizon was not Really, you've been no help
 at all. And you there,

 cowering behind that pinõn tree, what's that

 you've got behind your back?

Open your palm—we'll see which way it flies.

 From the mesa I saw Tacoma, the city of my birth,
spread out dark and uninviting
under a brown pall.

A wail, and then another and you were next to me,
plotting that stitch in my side, that flutter that tells me
 to look,

and the rest of you know this
as you know the prey of condors and fists of rock the color
of copper and these strange gravities
that alight upon us and deliver their strange echoes
against the warm body of the earth.

Bench

1.

That quiet part of the river where the current
slows and pools and gives off the scent of deadwood and old water.

Here is the else I am not allowed to think.

Two couples paddle their canoes in close to shore.

I wave my arms and clear my throat.

What I thought was the slow trickle of water

over rock becomes conversation—

I say this is irrelevant.

The water speaks in a way that makes this irrelevant.

Listen from this bench

rooted in sod, verge of rot,

verge of slow reclamation,

the river reaching up

and taking from the bank what it needs,

up to the steel bridge as swallows drop

down to the water.

From the bridge, I look down to the river and the empty bench

I look down to the water shallowing as it passes under

the bridge, sunlight diamonds off rills

the smooth, green rocks below the surface

*

looking up under the bridge to the swallows' nests
glued onto girders every few feet
the surface of the river reaching up even as it moves away,
may examine the rocks

the trout swimming against the current may look up
to the nests the mothers darting
just above until what is over and what is under is no more clear
than its own speechless divide

to which we might ascribe that sound
furious and halting as the rings formed
by fish feeding
on great swarms of insects

then a circus of swallows darting to the surface, feeding
on the same swarm then flashing bellies
as they arc over the bridge and disappear
and the silence

moving outward in a pattern breaking out of itself
I could not if I wanted to the bench
the people walking past the bench they

miss the way every movement around them
like the season returning
their spoken lines moving off
into some flat plane

*

the river fingering inward the shallows
the plunge of a hand below the surface
as hatchlings dart under rocks
beyond my reach the river pooling toward the bank

the shadows of the rocks thrown across a hand
pulled from the water
stretched toward the far bank stretching
back toward the bench perched above its shadow

by the sun far out into the current
and the surface holding back
and holding back and then downstream, dappled,
the dappled surface, every instance a different pattern of glint, and

the river, the bench,
the man on the bench—
we are all taken in by it.

2.

You'd think I would have noticed the water slowing,
the seat of the bench thick with snow
the clouds that hang like a pall against the gray steel

of the bridge the concrete of the bridge
jutting out into the current
or into the ice where the current slowstops
no sun: no blaze color: deer tone to earth and vanishes,

*

3.

I heard what I wanted to hear and if I address you
I will not expect an answer and if I plunge my hand beneath
your surface you will not shudder but will close
around the unexpected

thought was real shrinking down
to the size of my palm, lead-heavy,
and from this bench, upstream, downstream or across to the park
to struggle against this problem—
you are not where you
thought. You are not where you thought. Say it again,
this dream floating down-river
on a raft built of thick saplings lashed together
with cornsilk, how at night
the stars do not change from one hour
to the next,
looking down on myself splayed out on the saplings,
the raft a speck the river a twisted ribbon the bridge
a line over and under which nothing discernible flies.

Inversion

At the river an osprey nest,
empty, perched atop a telephone pole.
The wind pushes against it like a living thing—
I think of the chest in my attic, filled with old clothes,
take in the smell
of something withered
and resident
in that place I see sideways
like the lingering
of air on a hot day, crouched low to the pavement.

What space there is between a mind
and what it fumbles after.
I wipe the grime from a cracked
cellar window
and look out to a world erupting—
the wind could push me up and out
and I will out.
There are things that cannot be held at such distance.
I will flee its resonance,
the chirp of osprey chicks,
a leaf's lift from the river path.

Whales

The smell of a dead leaf means
more to me
than any old story.
I agree, I am not a listener.

You were saying something about the time
You were saying ear, and hearing aid,
and what must a person do?

I waited for the escalation
and inevitable litany and as it came I turned
toward the window frame and admired,
through the ancient, warped glass,

admired openly the space beyond
and then beyond until your voice tapered off
and I was alone with the yellow drop.

One may learn from the love songs of whales.
I have heard the tapes, and they tell me
I am not a bad man simply because

the first frost finds me robed, standing
in the front yard next to a pile of leaves.
As the day progresses, this pile
will go warm with scent and yes I know

*

I listen selectively, you have no idea
how clear this is to me.

Right now the wind is picking up

and I rut in the leaves, kick up
a thick brown cloud
and rake them through my hair.

They fall about like crisp, frozen birds
while inside you have the suitcase out again
and I will ask as you go, again,
if you were aware dead leaves

weigh less than live ones.

This is the story you will tell our children
after your next return, that death

is a sad thing and must be avoided.

I would point to the fall and say
children, these leaves, look how they

flit in the wind. Look how they mingle
up and over the house.

You must believe this simple lesson.

You must not be angry.

Hummingblur

Call: *Welcome home.*

Response: *If you knew the beauty of that place.*

Laden with tools, we tunnel
under our industrious whistle
yet where you have been

only a glimpse, you reminding me
my bricks do not align
yet still I build bright

inside my palm and instantly
you flatten: a dark, missive thing.
Admit that we have woven

to this point of busy spiders.
See how we hesitate?
You know the down-edged light

as a blur of whistles, you see
this gem shining through my fingers,
its odd light thrown across your path.

Call: *Here, let me unravel—*

Response: *I must record everything.*

*

Call: *Let me take your coat.*

As you reach across the catch
in your voice plucking at my hand
you are forced elsewhere,

toward the smell of hot asphalt,
gullcry balanced in wind
and you flee the hang

of your own sung atoms
in a mad paddle, say loose and sing
spirit into the dumbest of rocks.

I am much more than this wall
you push against but you are a leaner,
a composer, you of the voice

laid clear, voting on stars
that turn and unfold their white light
like brilliant, answering flowers.

Response: *Yes, you know the spot,*
there and there,
where you belong, may

hum down to bone
through marrow, or whatever it is
you think we are.

Hunting, Railroad Creek Valley

That buck turning ear toward the crunch of footfall
moves beyond the forest, up past the spires
of lodgepole pines, into the thin air above.
When he caught my scent and bounded off
through brambles I moved as if to follow, then listened
to the wind as it bent saplings and raised a chorus of crows.
This buck disappearing and the water I inhaled
directly from that small stream sent me further
into the stream's bank, down past the last root
to the forest's core.

When the Holden Mining Company ceased operations,
they left a mountain of orange tailings a mile long
and a half-mile across. Nothing grew on this big thumb
but the deer grazed it anyway, lapping up poison
like salt and dropping dead soon after. Cougar
and bear sniffed at the carcasses and left them to rot.
When the hunters that frequented the valley complained
to each other about the scarcity of game,

they told

stories of phantom bucks leaping
the orange rocks of Railroad Creek and vanishing,
the hunters' bullets digging into tree trunks or
stirring up dust on the dead ground.
Clouds of insects swarm the hunters
and any other human visitors, clogging weapons,
fouling meals, biting, biting,
until they give up and move to another valley,

where deer drop to the ground
as they are supposed to. There is nothing mysterious
about the warm stench of their dressing out.

Dear communers, weekend warriors, scribes
for hunting magazines, throw up your hands
and lick the sweat-salt off your skin.

Do not ask
if that deer was real, or whether
the splash you heard was the feeding jump

of a lunker trout. If you feel as if you
are being watched, then pull up your collars
as you make your way through the ruins of the mine
and across the great plateau of tailings
and turn your eyes to the sky, up past the sparse
canopy, above the peaks towering over this
little valley, and into that space where deer go
when the earth will no longer contain them.

and the limb—an arm
by the weight of it, was it not placed?

Song of Glass

We have turned to pluck blossoms from a tree.

Behind us, voices rise.

If only we were capable of more
than that which—lit above—the oddly hushed,
unseemly glow we cringe beneath and hold
our hands above, a shelter from every
undropped silent time and turn,
alike and yet departed toward a light
held high like two fingers adept at pulling
apart the seams that hold our dreamt, plain, lives
beneath this song of glass.

If in looking through it, someone falls against
that sound like reaching, sound of bright against
a different turn away, we will join the song
and celebrate the unlikely lofted voice
and aim to follow quickly, knowing as we do
the risk of sinking time as time might do
when hands come down and feather, sight unseen,

any cry out, when what is reached for drifts

akimbo, we silent, we masked

like frost built up on blades of grass grown up

around a house collapsing into earth,

the light within withdrawn, caressed and blown

out, that wisp of smoke curling above the flame

that was, we turn away, we turn against

the remnant of a life gone down, gone out.

Path

Something lit up as I moved from the road
through a narrow band of fir trees, then
a meadow crowded with waist-high grass
and monarch butterflies. A trail meandered
through this grass to the trees beyond, curves
I knew like the sound of my daughter's
ragged night-time breathing, or the sharp,
welcome smell of an approaching storm.
Halfway across, a family of grouse flushed
to my left, and past the clearing, the fallen oak,
worn smooth and still solid. Further on, the light
grew and circles of sun broke through
the thinning canopy until I shaded my eyes against
that familiar low gleam and here was
the riverbank, eroded close in to the trees,
the river curving sharp-shallow over round
stones backed up against the bare roots
of a huge fir. I dangled my legs over the bank's
sharp edge and closed my eyes and tried
to hold this sound of river water but it would
not, as it had not before, this river-bend
caught up inside like the start of quail
flushed, the brush of branch on water,
the sound a mind makes.

The Beach Chronicles

1.

The ocean's reach dries to a thin, marking strip
I follow up the beach,
circling through the backlight of another morning
and I have found a comb wedged between
a crab's half-buried back shell
and a child's plastic sand shovel,
look again for the shack I was told still stands
among the dunes, the old man who lives there
testing the beach each morning, turning rocks
with the care of someone who knows how easily
the slightest misstep impacts the smallest shell.
But I am not where I thought
and anyway, this shack is no more real than it was when I was young,
and even though I have found much here—
gull feather, dog prints, the carcass of a sandpiper—
I have found no sign of the old man, or of you,
fallen into long shadows thrown by the dunes.

2.

A pearled shell.
A particular wave beyond the break
that would connect me in some small way
and offer up a giving back, like a shell held up
to my ear, like the solid footing offered up
by sand below the tide line, we have all tried this break

like the grab of hands
and I have spotted a small shell: a drill, or a periwinkle
and if you were here, you would agree
that beach light grows into itself each morning,
the sun ramping up
until it seems to push like a palm through the low clouds
and all this leadgray gives way to some blue whistle—why not your whistle—
why not this weight of blue given to the sea
by that old man—holed up in his shack or combing the shore,
accompanied by the remains of your shadow.

3.

There is something close and breakable
in the waves receding, the look down
to motion like a gliding forth on water:
understand the mission of the surf and the wind
that hurries the surf beachward: understand that to speak into this wind
implies a throwing back to a place where each broken crab shell
signifies as much as a hand brushing sand off a shoulder—
as much as the distance between the solitary figures
spaced evenly up and down the beach,
as much or more than the story each will tell about this morning's
low tide and the way the gulls pull tiny fish from one another's beaks
until the heavy cloud cover burns off,
inviting a warmth that will not count for much
against the windsting of sand on faces
turned into it like stubborn ships.

4.

Someone has stuffed wood into the stove.

 heat radiates about the cabin like a blur:
the sound of wet wood drying and igniting: the light of a kerosene lamp.
 In these black windows the reflection of a child's bedtime protests,
 the shuffle and deal of cards,
 the quiet conversation of adults gathered around a table.

5.

Walk the driftwood piles pushed up against
the raised foundation, then carve kelp into fine loud horns.
 This cabin in gray clapboard, worn smooth
by waves thrown against it each winter,
a dead gull washed in by the tide rests
 in a bed of brown seaweed,
 its beak agape as if in gullsong, its eyes
still intact but a brace of tiny crabs hurrying over,
 the schooners carved rough from firewood
and launched into the Strait, the return of the schooners

with the tide, the linger
 of salt on driftwood, kelp horns useless
 the second day, cast into the surf
dawn and dawn and dusk and the black shake
of windows inside cabins that will never free
the smell of kelp and kerosene

and woodfire, reflecting
in the light of the lamp what we want solid and therefore
bring into this world, a vision, the beach vanishing
a few miles north as it rounds the cape,
a bird's winding trail as the wind
rushes in and claims and blows sand from
the dunes, into our mouths—into our hair.

Heat of Plants

This is more than the smell of cut grass.

 This goes deeper,
this precarious dew,
deep inside a different cluster of trees,
goes balanced against this huck of bark
 peeled back
 to a bare trunk.

This tree has done nothing wrong, you say,
clutching toward the solid heat of plants
 that resist our stroke.

Some small light filters through the canopy.
Something stirs in the mist hovering
above the wet dirt.

 Outside this oppressive heat
all is crisply pressed,
every living thing in a row and it is dry, so dry
 the ground itself withers
yet you make the circle of stones anyway—
do not make that circle of stones—
we will try to trust

 this wet heat
and the light that has pierced the canopy,
leafsweat dripping down,
 turn up to it turn up to the drops
and I will pretend to understand
under the greensward
 and heavy branches

why you have stepped off the path
and burrowed down
into the roots of a cypress tree,
and why
as the rain begins in earnest
you sing vines
around your hiding place,
sing down the hug of willows
and leave me to find my way
draped only in the certainty of brush and thorn
and the haunt of your voice,
receding like the faint cry of a thrush
moving out against the world.

By the Watchtower

Three times I said the word *now* and look,
we are lovely, still,
walking across this empty square.

There might be a place for this one.
The rest I left inside that hollow
made from the breath of a child

mystified by my simple magic—
three times only. I have found, midthrown,
coins by the fountain

and tossed them in and watched
the simplest of ideas like light through a prism
and the benches fill with children

and what are we doing
over here, next to this abandoned watchtower,
waiting out the squall? Had I this town

to live in I would brush against it, charmed
into something less than solid and softly, whisper
mine as what was stripped off

like veneer from an old table refuses
to remember its station.

I am not talking about death among the living.

*

This veneer, was it very much intact? And that
will be that, until men in columns appear
to the north, determined

to make a different kind of music,
and the watchtower no longer needs
the soft eyes of the watcher, no longer

needs anything but voices risen up
like a chorus of magpies zipping in and out
of the thin, dark slots

where a few moments
before, the gaze moved outward
and scoured away any dangerous thought,

lovely or not. We place our palms against
the old red brick of the tower. Endure
a shower of coins. Look up,

past the slots, beyond
the turret, where the magpies circle now.
They will not come down.

Volvo

When I looked in the rear-view mirror
I saw my daughter singing along
to a song I'd known for twenty years.
She was smiling as she sang and her eyes hung
between open and shut.
I began to cry as I drove, what I felt
at that moment a reminder that the smallest thing
can fix the wreck of a life long enough
to make another day,
and the coffee stain on the seat next to me
did not matter, and the belly spilling out
above my belt did not matter
any more than the crumbling shingles on our old house,
but the sound of something I had missed
and nearly forgotten, the taste
of a three year old's heart cutting
through the thick skin of my life and hanging there,
a little fist working against the shield I'd created
in the face of the unbearable
glare of days.

Chamomile

Our instincts tell us not to breathe. All around now,
 filling the gaps with fat drops we feel
as a moment, clawing toward its own
whistling pronouncement.
The teapot goes off like this.

 Let be the teapot.

 The gold couch—stained—one leg gone—holding up
under the weight of need.

What if one simple spell were enough to throw it down,
fleshed out substantial the way a baby's thin cry
 arrows into the heart?

Or is it enough to feel something brush against the skin
implacable against every reaching out?

 Don't breathe—

 the tea is brewing—not sanguine—not the color of blood.
Outside, snow begins to fall, vertical, as if the wind has held
its own breath, the white muffle exposing
 that space between a lie and a good night's sleep,
between what has not been voiced and the faucet
no one has thought to repair. We have chosen

tonight: faint yellow—taste of sun—

 much lighter than the gold fade of the couch,
the liquid burn of this familiar act speaking more directly than you
ever could. But we are not asking for more.

Obsidian

From the top of the cinder cone
we see dead lava flows
spread out for miles like black fingers.

The man next to me checks his watch
and motions to his wife.
They fight against the wind to their car

as my son examines the chunk of black glass
that caught his eye on the walk up.
I don't understand the difference

between pumice and obsidian.
One is lightweight and full of holes, sure,
one is smooth and dense

and sucks in light like a black hole.
But how are they made?
For some reason the mother of my children

is not enjoying this excursion.
She would like to head back down,
back to ground level.

I would like to stay up here.
There is so much to see in the distance:
other cinder cones, the abrupt boundaries of flows

sharp enough to cut through thin shoes,
trees spared death by a few feet—towering, still,
into the air.

She is yelling now.
She is saying something about
the wind and the dust

but her words collapse back on themselves
and I am able to ignore her
and focus on the crater of this cone

dropping out of sight
and then a small rumble that might be
a large RV rolling down the road

or the earth-shake
of an impending eruption.
I imagine the ground cracking

beneath my feet.
I tumble through the earth's crust
into a river of molten rock.

She looks down
into the chasm. There are certain things
she would take back now.

*

Certain words she regrets.
She grabs a shovel and motions
to my son and daughter.

Help me, children, she says.
We must get on with our lives.
The river, smoking.

This is the Walk in the Park

when something
 will end
with precious little warning.

Is it true these leaves
 have not fallen
for three years?
Where have I been?

Outside of thought we wake
into a different surrounding.
By this age I should know the name
 of every tree,

 the veining of roots
that work down into the earth
together, please, continue
and I will do my best to open

and take in what I have not yet seen
 and let these in turn
push me
away from the cloaking

elements that do their best work
in fitful climates,
 for all these years
holding me in all the wrong places

and I suspect that here,
under this drape of branches,
the hard work of letting go
 becomes more than a letting go

 and vertigo is nothing more
than looking ahead.
There is a way to prolong
an instant until it splinters

under the skin but even so,
 the leaves have not fallen.
I could pull them down one by one
and create a fine green carpet,

I could carve my name
 into the trunk of an oak,
then pull myself into myself, undone,
not the vision of what we have

learned, but each sight plunged into
 recklessness, the way a child
takes up a new task, the way this place
reeks of constant light.

Animus

1.

The place of the halving of time.

the slow-hung

delivery of a dream, shifting pace against

each small step I took toward the center of what I knew.

[The wind moves slowly. A tree doubles.]

No one was sure what knowing meant.

Some were patient and called out.

Others paused at the changing of the light. Even as light.

The stretch of moments into water dripping.

Not as moments.

I had not known time as a passing but as a movement

away from the dimmest recognition of yes,

as in a spinning of the mind back

and the thinnest stream of what had gone, or not

I have lost the track.

To wit: to the convincing lies I have been told.

He has holed himself up in the reach, they will say.

Causes shadows to be thrown

great distances until some of the elements, the fire, the water,

the passage of minutes

he knows as he knows the holes in his body, until such a time

as these rocks come together, stunned to a quiet ticking.

*

I am warmed by the sun.

Light streams from my head.

At night the spinning begins and nothing in the sky will lower itself for me

yet my untrained hands close on something ancient,

a kind of passing:

there is a passing and the instant is relegated to the past

and all the revolutions I have undergone come together,

the flowers in my garden unleashed, Thompson roses, gardenia,

lilacs sprung to their fullest color,

lilies and lilies every strand of light like wings flown apart from the body

causing an opening of the mind's hand the spilling out of a day

staining its events and no permission was granted, rather,

taken for granted, so many days have gone this way

and the great injustice of an hour

and every strand pulls a separate night into itself.

2.

Take it back.

The great losses of my life.

The unsaid. The unthought, the unsaid.

I was driving and the simple act of making a left turn

sent it away

and it would not come back in form—

only in a kind of grieving.

Say evolution.

Say amalgamation. Synthesis. Say progression.

The harvest was not complete.

*

Look there—she is waiting at the appointed bench.
A trail of white, a litter of rings,

what the mind sees
vis à vis what the body feels, the uncertain lean
toward that other course.

Having never been less substantial.

Having never reached back in that way.
There are things I might do over and still:
that place will not want to come forward.

Balanced against the push of the current, I called out
to the sharp boulders
stacked against each bank, to the crows
gathered invisible among firs grown thick
together, jaggging the sky's rim.

Pulling my voice in, safe, the late-spoken,
the animus.

3.

I have sent parts of myself forward and back, forward and back.

That old maple tree in my yard,
the idea of counting rings, the idea
of working back into heartwood and opening out into days
lost into years, the grope back and back
until something wet, frangible, ancient
springs out of this growing thing.

I will take back that one and that one.

*

Have I been here before?

Yes—I recognize the fine, sharp sugar of your sap.

The past,

its sharp ridges carved by one's path, the woman waiting at the bench

fixed in time like a bas relief or the way days

seem unsure by looking back,

this knowing filtered down to roots

that reach through the earth meant as water or light.

NOTES

1. **“Sandman”**: Thanks to Elisabeth Whitehead for a variation on the ending of her poem “to fall as white paper”. “gentle you goodnight” becomes “Gently, you—gently”.
2. **“By the Watchtower”**: Thanks to Elisabeth for loaning me her coin imagery.
3. **“Obsidian”**: Thanks to Chris Theim for loaning me his voice.