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Sinking of Clay City, Illinois

Robert Wrigley

The University of Montana

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THE SINKING OF CLAY CITY, ILLINOIS

by

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the degree of

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1 FALLING
FALLING

The plums have begun their gradual rot, making a bog of the backyard. Birds, drunk with decay in their beaks, thump against the wall like men falling in their sleep.

A beetle leaves a plum hollow-- the bruised skin holding its place. The sleeper never lands but wakes in the empty pocket of the bed feeling around for his life like small change.
JACKDAW

Grackles whirr in the alders:
you have come for berries,
dark landlords looking for rent.

We take long corridors from the wind,
and now and then, the birds sail clear
into the lies of windows.

Small stains dot the sidewalks,
as though someone had walked by wounded,
his voice still hung in the trees.
TREES IN MY YARD

They seem desperate
in their loneliness,
wrinkled women in halter blouses.
Cement in the knotholes
like coldcream
imbedded under earlobes.

And in the bulk
of their hairdos,
there are nests and old kites
like rhinestone barrettes.

They have only themselves.
Sometimes on windy
Friday nights, I catch them
dancing with each other.

My yard has become a failed bar,
the corner of the dancehall
nearest the restrooms.
Over here a twisted mimosa
wilts through the fall,
a pale ash dreams
of rigid cedar root.
THE SCENTS OF THE BODY

There is a music in closets,
parties we weren't invited to:
the swish of clothes rubbing elbows,
the shuffle of empty shoes.

Scents of the body. Oils hardening
on cuffs and collars, the phosphorescent
layer of foot left within a sock: they go on
without us, without the clumsiness of skin.

If we rise suddenly from a failed sleep
and open the vibrating door, all is quiet.
Boots are still upended, shoestrings askew.
We return to bed troubled and lonely.

Then, across the muffled air, a tinkle
of coathangers, like crowds of unsteady wineglasses,
the laughter of buttons undoing themselves . . .
and your breath, a cold wind nosing the windows.
RAPUNZEL

At first it was nice simply to do something, the lonely nights of sitting and rising, my bottom waffled by the wicker, my head light among the heavy weights of the fortress.

I'd have rather cut my hair off, braided it like hemp to hang between the buttresses, but there was her to contend with: the nightly checks: scanning the dark landscape for reflections, checking the sheets (though she only supposed they'd been used for ropes).

And him. I should have noticed my own aggressiveness. Fool. But femininity hung in my spitcurls. I thought of myself as, say, dropping a hankie . . .

It could never be hidden when retrieved, but lay around us like a bedroll scattered in the nearest thicket. Thirty yards of reminder, motel keys flashing in my eyes.

Soon there was tension between us. He railed about new curls (designed for another's foothold?), the split-ends dangling like a stranger's climbing gear.
Now the dying locusts sing. I can feel a growl in my own legs. Curled on the balcony, my bottom cushioned by the chain of my hair, braided and ready. I lean once a night over the balustrade and test the length.

The Prince will never return. There are others, perhaps, who'd not be frightened by the weight I can bear. Just last night, by chance, I snared and raised a dead limb, larger, heavier than any man.
ICEFISHING

Ice the color of windows
in official envelopes, and below,
the absurd addresses of fish.

A fire twists its bit
into the roof of a pool
and air hisses out.

Men gather around the hole
and a boy with a rake
turns the water over and over,
cultivating a fishvine
longer than the wind.
WATCHING FROM THE FOOTBRIDGE

Heads thrown back, throats perpendicular
to shoesoles, two children laugh
and spin themselves into piles of loose elbows.

They think of themselves as saucers
wobbling on a tabletop,
the last draught of bathwater
captured in the drain. Their mother
thinks of brain damage,
one of them throwing up in the car.

Watching from the footbridge
over the slow creek,
she feels herself drifting,
her balance gone and nothing to hold onto.
THE MIDWEST

Desolation rich as topsoil.
This plain, flat-chested wife
bears children who are all body:
the farmer is a fist
sprinkling wolfsbane, charmed bones;
a young girl shaped like a forearm
holds the future
with bone thighs
and the ability to cook.

Out of bankruptcy
comes the richness: whole
fields of corn and wheat
march off to the city
while the country sinks farther
into the flatness.
And lurching bright out of the rattle
of dark furrows, a geranium,
stem thick and gnarled
as an old woman's finger
pushing down a seed.
She is pregnant again, staggering
under the simple, breathing
dead weight.
LATE DECEMBER

1
Next year approaches like a train,
tossing blueprints aside
like brush from a cowcatcher.

2
In the faint mist
and dark, lights flash weakly,
bad memories.
A whistle screeches
rigid as a rail.

3
Next week will be a party.
I will get drunk
and drive miraculously home.
I will greet the feathered plunk
of the pillow with snores.
Your eyes will burn awake.
You'll mumble against my shoulder.

4
A bum sprints from the ditch
toward the train. He is unafraid
and experienced, but pulling himself
into the car, drops his paper bag.
Two bottles, seals unbroken,
shattered on the right-of-way.
I hear him shouting for miles
motherfuckermotherfucker
from the train that will take him to next year.
ANOTHER WINTER

The pale earth, dizzy
from a sudden stop
or sick with thoughts of another winter.

The principal movement is falling:
thermometers repeat their memories,
birds drop headlong from branches.

Climbing down the gutted stump,
a squirrel stares oddly across the cornfields,
dazed, already fat with night.
WINTER OF SILENCE

Wind is a whisper you can't make out:
the arm leaving the sleeve,
a fly's hiss fading in the ear of a cow.
The mind hollows out, listening.
Sleep settles over the eyes of the day
like a snow sheet.

Winter of silence,
when sound spends a holiday in the south,
when voices lie in brittle drifts.

A bell rings in a distant country,
faint, as if someone has died.
Old cornfields buzz into themselves.
A hawk brushes his wings against air,
your nostrils set free the last breath.
2 HESITATIONS
HESITATIONS

The night sounds finally reach us:

pinecones skittering down the roof
on their rings of feet, alley cats
revving the chainsaws of their contentment.

In the corner the heater carries on.
Last month it stopped
being a good listener.

A light in the other room bleeds over us
and suddenly pops. You think
a stroke would be like that.

The wind is away, knotted somewhere
in a canyon, and on the highway, a truck gears
down, the exhaust like a groan.

In the still air
the sound dies away, a sentence thinning
itself in the backwash of the breath . . .

Then a shudder: the long fall
a sleeper makes from the pillow,
and the night starts up again.
BUILDING A SHACK

No one builds a shack says my friend.
But we go ahead, in the architecture of scavenged
twobyfours, the style of nothing but time.

I take the north and west walls,
he the south and east.
That's the most congenial division:

the diagonal. The beveled wedges
of souls coming together
like fine mitred veneer.

And this is where we come,
each to his corner and two halves,
to make up new walls,

to make excuses for our return:
seasons coming around for nothing
except to weather the bare wood.
PLANETARY MOVEMENTS

1 Waking in the Tent

Pine needles skid down the flaps like mercury. The dark etched around the stars peels back as though lifted from a child's slate.

We are suddenly awake in the green sun, our arms outside the sleeping bag; fountain pens clipped into a pocket.

There are paths in the air we walk through faint as handwriting wrung from frozen fingers, the sketches skin makes on the wind.

All these trails we can follow, the tails of comets that disappear at sunrise, but stay on the dark tablet of the eyes for months.
We sit in the polished quarry
of the kitchen, the sink dripping
like the echo of a landslide,
the light's dust sifting over us.

In the drawers and cabinets
spoons and spatulas are becoming fossils.
Leftovers decorate the icebox
like cave paintings.

We get by with our old tools:
anger with its thin skins,
the stone axe of laughter,
the time between it takes to survive.
3 Clouds

It rains for nine days
and our shadows mold.
Every morning the clouds rise . . .

I have made a detailed cartography
of the house: the delicate
contours of the rug, the plumbing's
intermittent streams. And I know
how it all rotates
on the square axis of the chimney.

Your head bent over the stove
passes behind a cloud of steam,
like all the other stars I know.
4 Planetary Movements

In the ocean of the bed
we are a warm continent;
the foothills where the cat sleeps,
the upper lakes of pillows
where ears go icefishing.

This house is our earth
and in its slow revolution
around a foundry, a few small businesses,
the rest of the solar system
comes into view.

Already other planets
are showing signs of life.
THE DISTANT SHAKING OF HANDS

You that I'm glad to be alive with:
fingers in a closed hand,
at the grip of which the mingled
moistures of our lives flow over themselves
and never begin to dry.

Mornings on the way to work I cross
a creek that will never flow down
your side of the country. Still,
I can be thankful: that I come out of my house,
survey the vanished fringes of my life
and wonder how they got out of reach,
on the same morning, in the same year as you;
thankful that just before we lapse and postpone
each other, we touch a handle or a tree,
and those nerves that sleep between us tingle.
CHECKING FOR TICKS

for John

Stick with the bristled places. Search your skull for the braille of their hard backs, sift through your genitals like a border guard. For all their six legs, they move only one at a time, and the first tick could still be sidling down the stalk of a tangle, mouth-parts ratcheting, feeling for nuts, for nearby places to sink in. He will be easy to remove. If there are more, with squatters' rights, the silly filaments of their legs flexed for the best move--none at all--gripping, then leave anger at your wrists. Take them softly with fingertips or tweezers (a wrong squeeze can empty them into you) and tug. Firm, business-like, but not in hatred. Toss them over the fence toward the neighbors' poodle, into the street to fend off fenders. Or, if you've a mind for revenge, remember: ticks, without the bulk they sought from you, are nearly uncrushable. Put them on a sidewalk and jump; they walk sidewise away; thump them with the heel of your knife and they pinwheel off like spun plates. You must slice down the length of them, cut across, quarter the quarters and grind. They'll crack,
disintegrate and die. And in the low crunch of their husks, you'll read your own future: that one, near the left: notice how he still hangs together, his parts still bound in bodily fluids, bright red, warm and not his own.
THE WALK

We went up the mountain in gusts.
On the other hillsides,
logroads like blueprints in bruises.
And I remembered our wooden possessions:
the heavy oak of my desk,
tender pine in the pie cabinet.
I saw how thin
you smile had become, marred
in places only I could see.
On Mormon Peak you curled your fist
around a bundle of wildflowers
while I gathered up the fallen rungs
of the lookout ladder,
as if it could be repaired.
ONCE MORE THE GIRLS DRESS LIKE PARATROOPERS

for Bill Turner

Out of afternoon's mouth,
the glue of sweat,
a whole season evaporated.
The midriff ambles back
to its hideout
in the woolen cave of imagination.

The slap of bare feet
and the transparent whizz of baseballs
are replaced. Whole communities
knot themselves into the laces
of shoulderpads, impale each other
on the helmet's crack.

I must make adjustments
for this shift in matter:
what plants have shed,
people have taken on.
Let's lay odds
on the tenacity of leaves.
MIGRATORY HABITS

for my father

Someone called your hair salt and pepper.
You laughed: more like sparrow droppings.

Now it's white, so white
it must repel water. And when you walk
down the hill to feed the ducks

eye circle around the pond
following the beacon of your hair.
Shy mallards. Muscovies, domestic and ugly.

But it's the large whites you seem to cherish:
fragile, always sitting. Unlike the others, the ducks,
the days, they don't very often fly away.
"It will form as a habit and seep in your soul
Til the stream of your blood runs as black as the coal."

--Merle Travis
The black dome stays around us.  
We walk toward the crepe of its walls, 
an international dateline, 
but days bleed into one 
another, the tunnel always ahead.

To the man afloat on six children, 
the bell in the coal car rings like a buoy. 
Years later, spread on the spit 
of time payments, he straddles 
his future: one leg up on tomorrow, 
the other dragging behind.
The other men are solemn and strong,
their lungs already black and bituminous.
Behind the photographer, Peabody's goons.

The woman, half-visible on the fringe
of the vignette, feels that way:
her husband vanished in the dark snow of a cave in.

And closely, through the heavy grain,
you can see they are armed.
The blunt handle of a shovel curled
in an arm's crook, a chain
wrapped around a fist
like a large and fraternal ring.

This is a show of force: it is not
important that the pale-skinned Peabody men
sweat around the butts of revolvers,

but that they know for once
the isolation of the mines,
the impenetrable blackness off camera.
LEGACY

for Jack Conroy, novelist and coal miner

I'm a tired man and getting
to be an old one. I know all the octaves
a mine's roof can chime: when it will fall.
And in certain lights I can see
in the eyes around me, who it will fall on.

The pick hangs on my shoulder,
a crippled child I thought would stop growing.
So far three sons have
followed me into the mine. I am the old
buffalo, first over the pishkun.

There is nothing in a contract for a coughing son
and all I have to pass on
is the wisdom of darkness, something
to bite on for pain. The elevator comes
down the shaft dried on one side by daylight.
Old miners read it like a sundial.
THE WIVES OF TRAPPED MINERS

In thick shoes, they huddle under the tarpaulin, elbows burrowing from the sleeves of sweaters: they are as young as they have ever been.

The eldest is the only one crying. Her future settles around her like slag. She has gotten used to the spice of coal dust or the scent of gas from the hat behind the door.

One woman rubs her large belly and smiles. She has noticed the enclosure of her family: the child coiled in the womb, the husband in the mineshaft.

The wait has gone on for two days and not all the wives are here: some are home practicing widowhood. Some are praying in the company church. Others are dancing in the bright halls of their dreams, where their husbands bring them waltz after waltz, and stride to the long tables for punch. The wives swing into overstuffed chairs, suddenly shocked at their white dresses, the fronts of them covered with a fine black soot.
THE HERRIN MASSACRE

(June 22, 1922)

Nurses are not allowed. These scabs' wounds will never heal. Small boys piss on a bullet hole, pump the lead of their pockets in a cut throat. A young mother burps her baby and shuffles dust over a blood puddle, her toes distant things working the pile in a carpet.

The men are off collecting corn and red beans, their strike-pay gone on bullets, the bullets gone. And if tomorrow they enter the empty church, it would only be to give thanks, to speak in low tones for a change, to pay another month's dues.
DIARY OF THE STRIKE
(May 21, 1939)

Picket lines are for fingers and legs; how thin they are, how easy they'd give under axe handles.

At noon the Union rep comes with a bag of radishes and rye bread. We give thanks for our fortunes: Billy Carruthers ran the length of Mascoutah, Illinois with his ankle bones chiseled off and two nickels ringing in his pocket; he could have lost it all.

The strikebreakers, cleaning their teeth near the pool hall, are rumored to spit-shine their boots with miners' blood.

Still, when my line-duty's over I'll get right home. Potatoes and cabbage for dinner again, but who'd complain? The goons slice their steaks with the same knives that cut off noses and thumbs. Near dark we're all thumbs: the placards shaking, the alleys lit with shadows.

No one's afraid really. Just hungry, looking forward to dinner, walking quietly home.
THE SINKING OF CLAY CITY, ILLINOIS

When the last mine closed
and its timbers turned pliable as treesap,
the town began to tilt, to slide
back into its past like a wave.

Old men, caught by the musk
of seeping gas, arrived at the mainshafts
hours before dawn. Their soft hands
turned the air, like handles on new picks.

Here and there a house split,
a cracked wishbone;
and another disappeared like crawlspace
behind a landslide.

So the townspeople descended the sloping entrances,
found them filled with a green,
noxious water. Each took a sip
and forgot about the sun.

Some dug at rusted beercans
or poked at a drowned rat, more patient
than dedicated archaeologists,
and waited for their other lives to join them.
OH YEAH, THE MINE TALKS

Secrets

ain't no part of it though, just good learnin'. And you better pay attention. When them timbers creak just so it means they're givin' up and lettin' down--sorta like bones, the way a knee pops a little too loud one last time. You smack the roof of the loadin' room a few times with the handle of your shovel before steppin' in. Coal up there's supposed to sound good, thunka thunka like a ripe melon. If it don't, if it sounds muddy or don't ring even a little, she's gonna fall. Maybe right then. You gotta move fast. Then there's the sounds a miner can't hear. Too high, a dog whistle, a train way outa town. Watch cause rats hear it. A little hiss of gas comin' in. That's when you wish. All that time cussin' them rats for stealin' your sandwich, laughin' about the one what stole Henry's false teeth, or them whiskers drug across your ankles that made your bones go cold: you wish they was all here. But that rat, she's gone. Crawled out through her hole. And you ain't never leavin' yours.
Dear Father,

Eleven days without sunlight. We go in in the black, morning fog, work and come out having missed it all. We begin to appreciate the dark. It's too bright outside: faces white as carbide, the shrill discs of real dishes. It takes two days to get used to peripheral vision again, the head light without the lamp.

We rest after loading each car. In that silence the seeping gas trickles, as if we fished an underground stream for hours without hearing water. So the pain comes too, when the muscles are still.

I write while the others sleep. By the light of my headgear, the pencil feels like a pickaxe. The moon is my sun and the dark sculptures on the mine walls shimmer like constellations. I have learned how not to see.

Sometimes I am shocked by the whiteness of my cuticles, glowing out of the black nails like slivers from an eclipse. They bob across the page, fireflies, or men walking up a shaft with lit lamps. And the worn shovels, the hands, hang alongside the body, coal dust healed into the calluses. They seem odd, astir in the milk of the bedclothes like frail and discolored spoons.

We all come up the same. Dust fills in the oldest wrinkles, the deepest scars. You see, the rest of me, Father, is blackening: grey knuckles, ears silting over. And my eyes black as anthracite. The sun could ignite them and they would burn for days.