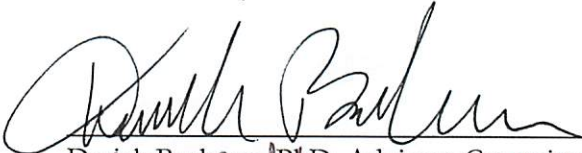


A FAMILIAR & FAVORITE TERROR

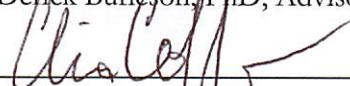
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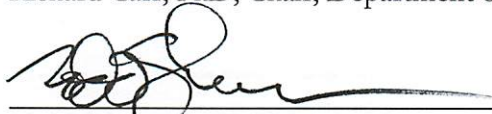


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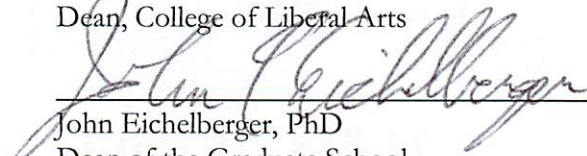


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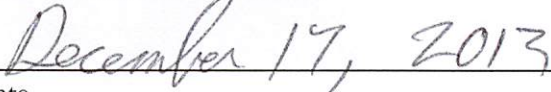
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A FAMILIAR & FAVORITE TERROR

A
THESIS

Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

Zackary Medlin, B.A.

Fairbanks, Alaska

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Abstract

The collection *A Familiar & Favorite Terror* explores love and violence, how the two are entangled and how that entanglement is constitutive of a self. It wants to show how love is a *form* of violence to the self, demanding a fracture. These poems view love, and not just romantic love, as a breaking of the self, both in its binding and its severing. With love there is always a hole, or a not quite whole. That's where these poems want to dig – but not dig up – and sift through the ways we fill this void. And while this collection is decidedly personal, tracing its lineage through books such as John Berryman's *Dream Songs* and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, it is not confessional – there is rarely guilt or shame associated with the speaker. Instead, the self in these poems, and the poems themselves, are unapologetically postmodern; if Berryman and Lowell are ancestors to these poems, then their immediate family would be contemporary poets like Bob Hicok, Tony Hoagland, Dean Young, and Matthew Zapruder. These poems build their foundation on the unstable, seismically active terrain of pop-culture and the mutable, multiple self that populates that land. They are at times lyrical, surreal, referential, earnestly ironic, ironically earnest, recursive, discursive, and maybe even downright ugly. Ultimately, however, even though these poems are disparate insular experiences of a self, they are reaching out in the only way they know how to: by existing in the world. The speakers, by sharing these experiences, are asking the question: 'I'm not alone in this, am I?' which is also a way of telling a reader, 'No, you are not alone in this.'

Table of Contents

	Page
Signature Page.....	i
Title Page	iii
Abstract.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	x
Event Horizon	1
I.....	3
On Becoming a Lepidopterist.....	5
Equus	6
Immortal Enough	7
While We Wash in Starlight	8
Walking in April	9
Fun Factory™ USA.....	11
Grayling.....	14
Tina, If You Really Loved Me You'd Let Me Eat Your Brains.....	15
Autobiography in a Year of Yous	16
Uh-Oh, Loves Comes to Town.....	18
What We Talk About When We Talk About that Raymond Carver Book.....	22
A Riot of My Own.....	24
An Incomprehensive List of Things We Are	25
Thoughts of You Like Clouds	27

Tongues Tying Knots in Cherry Stems.....	28
Holding Pattern.....	29
Levitate Me	31
Single Successful Guy	33
Salad Days.....	36
Trudging toward Insomnia	37
II.	39
When Only the Void Stood Between Us We Got All the Way to Each Other.....	41
Did the Beheaded Wish Himself in Half?	45
Reflexive.....	46
The Collective Nouns of Inanimate Objects	47
Alstroemeria	49
In the Absence of a Flood	51
In the Cold, Nothing.....	52
Language Me You Languid Fucking Thing.....	53
Hopeless Romantic	54
Blame as a Form of Predestination.....	55
Abraham Lincoln in a Yellow Rain Slicker.....	56
To the Owner of the Gray Volkswagen	58
I'm Tired & I Want to Go to Bed.....	60
Antebellum	62
Led to Water.....	63
When Punching A Fish In The Face Is All There Is To Be Done.....	65

Hairless Apes in Space 67

Bridge Jumping..... 68

Appendix:..... 70

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Event Horizon

Did you ever see those old videos
of the Bikini Atoll detonations?

An atmosphere like the sound
of crumpling rice paper, white

noise on TV. A roiling Day-Glo breaking
against the trees, shattered pines –

left nothing but phosphenes impaled
on stakes of light – churn within

the pyroclastic wind as dust
motes dancing dizzy as moths,

then fall grey as city snow, fall
subtle as *invasive ductal carcinoma*

from a lover's lips. This is
the mycology of ends

& means, the mushroom cloud
above the subdivisions, the way

the smallest thing, a quark, a gluon,
the release of a strong attraction,

can force a dawn: terrible & gleaming.
It returns us to our formal elements:

Carbon, Hydrogen, Ardor, Venom.
Its glow so godly beautiful you can't

regret the nothing that comes after.

I.

On Becoming a Lepidopterist

First, circle your palms rough around the dogwood tree. Now squeeze. Strangle loose every untoothed wing, until the moths that are its petals, their shuddered wings carved with rust, leave. If they should swarm about you like a thousand shrouds, die. When they do not, follow. Bring a net. If a net is unavailable, circle your palms gentle around a drop of dizzied wind. Take the moth upon your tongue & grin. Should it thrash itself against your teeth, it is flying from the dark of you. Again, you should follow.

Equus

That the white horse must be blinded
is not only appropriate, but necessary.
It is why we keep our chisels honed.

Anything that could hold you in such quiet
enthusiasm is an affront to God, & thus
it must bleed. It's how we say: I love you.

Don't look at me like that. Her flanks still
quake & ripple in the dust collapsing
in the wake of iron-shod hooves. There's still

the air trembling about her head, reckless
as her buck & gallop, those indeterminable
moments when she is free of the ground.

All that is gone is the wildness. It makes us
equal, which is how we say: Please love me, too.
Clatter blind with me through this only dark.

Immortal Enough

There's something comforting in an angel
screaming. It allows a hitherto denied humanity,
the way your mouth unhinges, exposing
the metallic amalgams filling your teeth.

Is it wrong that I like the way you now have
to bring your wings to your mouth
to preen? Or the way you say bird lice
tastes like semen? I mean, if we're honest,

isn't this better than the scald of a cosmos
tearing at your perfection, this translated acceptance
of a mealy flesh? Because, abandoned as we may be,
you will never not find a hand here to pull you

forward into a night. This evening, the lights are out
on a suburban basketball court, & the headlights
of my car won't reach much further,
but beneath the buzz of a blown stereo speaker,

your belt can be pulled a little tighter between my teeth
& released, as a kind of antecedent to how we'll breathe
in each of the other's exhalations as the car battery dies.
How you'll wrap your stars around me like thighs.

While We Wash in Starlight

The secret is in finding the proper dark,
a true emptiness. Try places like Kansas,
or another of those rigid squares stitched
between the interesting parts of the map.
Now drive. Drive into that part of the night
you've never touched, lie within the wind-
bent switchgrass. Look up & wait until the sky-dark
sky drips into your eyes. That's when your focus
drifts away & into the cleft held between
the glowing flesh of indistinguishable stars.

If I wait long enough everything begins to seem
like that, a familiar & favorite terror.
Like that girl in high school sucking her candy cane
into a stiletto. She held its tip to my throat
when we kissed. I kind of liked it, being able to taste
what could be my end. It's an allowance to lie
to ourselves while we wash in starlight, always
imagining there is something more at its source
than the fiery hollowness it drags behind it.

Walking in April

The sun-pocked field is cotton-white & wide,
& cellophaned in a filigree of ice.
It crackles with each booted step, crystals
glisten in the thin escaping light
from the nimbus cuticle awash across
our watery star. I clomp through this crust
of crushed diamond, or at least cubic zirconium –
my American love you can buy at K-mart.
I'm on the lay-away plan. I lie awake on fleece
sheets acned with cigarette burns, smoking in bed
is such a turn-on. There should always be
an element of danger in our sex, a sweltering
instant where we may be fully consumed.
Otherwise, it's just fucking, right? I hate these nights
that don't begin according to plan, mine
involves this sun not setting. The leaning saplings
unbowing, forget our deference for dark.
The difference is a marked disregard for calamity.
Winter is a slow, ambling thing. What I can't stand
about spring is the wet crawling from the ground
wrapped in mud & reveling in how time changes.
It hangs on an understanding of orbits. Elliptical,
but round, in a roundabout way. Our cosmic boomerang
ride is comedic, the slapstick variety, meaning:

dependent on distance & forward momentum,
avoid thinking about that anvil to the brainpan
& concussive repercussions - keep whirling
those feet & don't look down. It's all about the sound
of ice grinding loose, faulting under compression,
& satisfaction in having crushed something.
Our lack of goodliness to ant kingdoms
allows our godliness by comparison.

Fun Factory™ USA

We fed the cows
into the machine.
They extruded

as little more than
the idea of a scream
encased in Play-Doh.

We sculpted it into a David.
Perfect, as he should be.
We'd never known

anyone made of meat
who we didn't want to eat.
It's in the blood, our flavor.

Now it's between our teeth.
They sharpen on the dark,
a bit unsettling at first, but

that's how knives should seem.
Our bones evolved from metal.
It's a good thing

to hear the Earth whimper
like a kicked cat or a kid
kicked in his nut-sack.

When he wouldn't stop crying,
we fed him to the cow
going into the machine.

I can't believe she ate the whole thing.
The child's parents were very proud.
The cow, however, developed cavities.

We had to pull her teeth.
We made from them the keys
of a player piano. For the black ones

we used slivers of ex-slaves,
which explains the sweet, sweaty songs
our machine sang.

I know, it sounds silly now.
But we were all so high
from huffing the sun,

which, back then, smelled like nothing
more than rosaries dipped in milk,
which we had taken from the cow.

Grayling

A slash of fin beneath the ruffle flashes
then slips below the overhanging bank.
I drift the fly above his waiting shape.
A rise-form swells the surface, prism skin

erupts from the river. He takes on the down,
silver spear of body teasing back into the seethe.
Hook-set sunk certain into bone, he dives,
dorsal-sail straight-razoring the water.

Know that when I say the fight was a thing
that Hemingway would have written about
in a manly & somewhat homoerotic way,
I mean it was transient, passive to the net.

On his right, red-roped tendrils dangled
where the bead of his eye should be.
I eased loose the barb & slid the body back
to water. Had he been able to see me
I'd have slit him from gill to distal fin.

Tina, If You Really Loved Me You'd Let Me Eat Your Brains

There seems to me an exquisite sadness
in the necessity of a piñata's existence,

in the way we enjoy our fanged thrill
in thrall of dismembering, entrails

flung to savage teeth. Don't get me wrong.
The problem's not in paper mache, but the ring

vibrating through marrow & vein, what we feel
when, after the crack, our egg's yolk spills

out with that bead of blood midst the yellow,
& we eat it. It's just what we are, what we do.

Secretly longing for the day we, too, are broken
& taken into another's mouth, our last act of loving.

Autobiography in a Year of Yous

Though my year with you began reckless
as a kiss, as a (pining) pine gnawed with steel,
45 mile per hour teeth into the wet flesh,
it was, you were, cute & furthered from me.

Though I told you it was going to be
a terrible year, it was. I pulled four teeth
from my skull, replaced them with Percocet,
Vicodin, shined them up proper & nice.

Though I swallowed (another mouth)
another month of my life with them,
I dragged myself from you
eight hundred miles to be the ragged edge

of land. I was (it wasn't) enough.
I shambled & Ishmaeled every passing hat
as I ambled seaward, swelled 6-to-8 feet
in alternating declinations. I was swallowed

by another month (another mouth) of my life.
Though you were a different you, you continue to be
a different you, though I'm speaking not to you
now, but to the almost current you.

Though I didn't die again & said it was
a terrible year, you now read to me,
my hand splayed on your back, each word humming
through my fingers, telling me: *No. No, it's not.*

Uh-Oh, Loves Comes to Town

I want to barely bite your bottom lip.
Then, you bite mine back a bit harder.
We'll take turns, biting more & more,

your face going into my face going into your face
until we're left facing each other without faces
& we see each other.

I'll spend the rest of my faceless life unable to blink
while I stare into your pretty eyes. I'll tell you,
you got pretty eyes. Only I won't have lips anymore,

so it sounds more like *you got hurty eyes*.
It'll still be true, & I'll try to wink at you for effect,
but won't, on account of having no eyelids left.

I'll apologize for eating your pretty
little eyelashes too, but I won't really be sorry
because part of me keeps hoping

they'll take seed in my guts & grow
your eyes inside me, that way you'll be able to see
the tornado of moths battering my ribcage

for you. Then we'll ride away together
on a moon-red horse, your hands circled round my waist,
tight against my belly. You'll press your face to my back,

ear three inches left of my spine.

I'll hold my breath to quiet the moths inside,
every last flutter. I'll hold my breath so hard

Time will start to stutter. We'll live between
the microseconds two to three years, however long it takes
Time to graduate from his elocution classes.

Then it's roll film. The frames will spin forward.
The horse's hooves will find the ground & gallop
toward the dark until dark is all there is

left to run from. He'll collapse, frothing pink
from the nostrils. We'll unzip his belly & crawl in
to stay warm. I'll circle my hands around your waist,

slide them up your shirt, against your belly.

I'll crawl inside to stay warm. You'll moan a little bit
& sound just like my new heroin.

I'll turn you up so loud
we won't even hear when the cops come,
their lights unbraiding red & blue flutters

around our naked shoulders like little angels
& devils. We'll try to kiss, but it'll be awkward
on account of neither of us having lips.

& then it's all megaphone, all:

COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP.

We'll nod solemnly & bust out of that horse

in slow motion, guns blazing. We'll get lost
in a confetti of muzzle flares, spring leaks all over.
We'll fold together, poking fingers in hole in the other

until there's no more fingers & we fall
with no way to tell where either of us begins
or ends, our always open eyes looking into each other

until our eyes don't look anywhere anymore.

They'll look at us looking at us.

I'll try to wink, but won't,

on account of the whole no eyelids thing.
But between the crumpled moth wings
& all that red, they won't even notice.

What We Talk About When We Talk About that Raymond Carver Book

Here's the challenge: use the word love
in a poem & not sound like a pop song.
I think I did all right, but it does seem unfair
to pop music, which I delight to in covert
moments of morning & dance. Pop music,
however, is not without its errors; namely,
a narrative which treats love as more than the body
raising the DEFCON alert a notch or three, red-shifting
the terror spectrum, which, according to Doppler,
means an always moving away from. A line
or two ago, I started to type speculum for spectrum,
but that didn't make the sense I wanted.
Unless it did. Maybe it has to do with reflections,
speculum, in Latin, meaning mirror. I don't know
what that says about gynecological tools,
a conspiracy of medical professionals calling me a pussy
or just a more honest way of talking about desire?
Whatever the case, I can't really consider it
an insult, in the medical sense, as in a trauma
unfamiliar to the body or mind possibly resulting
in morbidity. I'm morbidly fascinated with the sound
of a word Mobius looped together, end over end,
until there is nothing. That, at least, is honest.

More so than a scrawl containing within itself
more than the sound of a liquid pouring into
a fricative labiodental – that doesn't seem strong enough
a thing to describe being torn apart from the ribcage
outward or sitting in a car for a long drive with a girl
I kind of love & with whom I pick fights with for fun,
hoping she'll always fight back with me in return.

A Riot of My Own

I'll compare thee to a summer riot,
your eyes like windows awaiting a brick,
hand swirling a cocktail already lit,
streets running red as your cherry chapstick.

I will call your form a structure fire
with chains on the doors & alarms full blare,
a police battalion in full riot gear,
spit soaked plastic shields & murder-for-hire

attitude. Yours is snarled as a drug dog
biting my pants, my leg, the softer bits
between, the cop above me trailing fog
from his hand, will it be tear gas, nightstick?

All things being equal, I'd recommend the mace.
It stings no more than thee & I still love your taste.

An Incomprehensive List of Things We Are

You are a cyclone drunk
behind the wheel of an F150
barreling toward the trailer park
I am. I am reading you
in bed, my flashlight in the sheets
hiding from the storm I have been
made to make. It gets so terribly
confusing when the lights go
out for a smoke, standing stalk
still on the porch waiting
to see the world flash the way
lightning must see it: frozen & pure,
lineated by the /'s rain writes.

I'm never quite sure how to read
that particular punctuation.
Does it show that we are apart
or together? You are the nightmare
where I can't sleep because I'm afraid
of my dreams. You're dragging the arms
of gnarled trees against the glass
& it's upsetting because I've watched
Poltergeist recently. I'm drawing you out
of white noise on TV, connecting the dots.

You look surprisingly like a vagina
on that cable station that we almost get
but my folks won't pay to see.
Did I mention it's 1993? It is.
& you're four in the morning,
which I'm pretty sure is the only time
to exist in the middle of the night.
You are my body changing in places
in terrible places, like in front of Ms. Bevil's
Algebra class. I am a strange equation.

I am *i*. You are the wind picking up
outside. I am a broken heirloom
pocket-watch I bought from a pawnshop.
The second I strike 4:01 I will run outside
in the wet grass to catch the next lightning
in my teeth. You are wild electricity
& I'll bite your trapezius. I am Boy Scout
training, counting the seconds between your flash
& clap. You are the minute hand on midnight.
I am broken clockwork, counting one-one-thousand,
one-one-thousand, one-one-thousand, one-

Thoughts of You Like Clouds

Mine thunder & shriek electric streaks
 like tinfoil bitten between tooth fillings,
 or iron filings slivering between the ridges
 & whorls of a fingertip's topography.
 The maps of mine long to chart & annotate
 your every attenuated arc & I've a tongue
 to read the braille marginalia of your body.
 I know each time again trembles this instant
 held as breath or like a bee which lights upon
 your skin & attempts to discern the precise
 choreography necessary to explain to his queen
 the dangers of these exact lips on yours, which,
 like a bee's sting, holds coiled within the facility
 to destroy us both. Do you accept this risk?

Good.

I've never met anyone of any importance
 who lacked a: *deep & personal relationship*
with God, which is to say: Pain,
 & hornets fuming forth from their veins
 like marionette strings pulling them on.
 Whose tongues the taste of ash have known,
 but through clenched jaws could still spit
 loose the grit & blackly smile.

Tongues Tying Knots in Cherry Stems

Her laughter glistens like shards of beer bottles
celebrating their opening to the wet asphalt,
which, beneath the prismatic neon, glitters
with its own litter of stars mingling in a nebula
of silicate like those three drinks in at a party
where everyone is charming & smitten
with some new one they want to dance with,
slowly, tongue to tongue, in untying circles.
& I think she's waiting for one of us
to be recognized as sumptuous without our glasses.
Because that's what's supposed to happen, right?
But we can't see a thing, save this innumerable light
spilled to the rain-shimmered street like gasoline
puddles prettied by sun. I hear her say to her friend
the world is a wondrous place, though she said it better,
& peppered with a few more lilting 'fucks', than I can.

Holding Pattern

We should paper airplane
ourselves out the window
& into the windows
of other stranger buildings
so another stranger could
come home from work
with two folded cartons
from the *Canton Palace*
two blocks down & find
us. As we're unfolded over
dinner, all involved will
remember what it is
to be hands unfanged
& innocent. Because we'll be
inscribed in plant life
so we'll finally have words
that can contain the lucidity
of woven root systems
in an intuitive, instructional way
so we can remember how
to fractal ourselves into each other
like that humongous fungus
in Oregon or the aspen colony
in Utah where each tree

stem above the ground
is identical, on a genetic level,
& waiting to be milled
into leaves of college rule.

Levitate Me

I am trying to say
I'm trying. I think
sex with a stranger
is strange, but no fiercer
a derangement
than is sex in the general
platonic form. It's just
more formal an etiquette,
the table manners
of a practiced detachment,

the distinction
between an arm
swiping the flatware,
dishes & candelabra
from the table
& the prestidigitation
of removing the cloth
from beneath the place
settings with the absence

of catastrophe. However,
there remains the nucleus
of similarity joining all
experience, the weightless
moment of hover
before the all comes,
through gravity, back
to embrace the surface.

Single Successful Guy

1.

I think I like wearing neckties
because of the way they function
like an arrow to my crotch.

I don't mean that
in a castrating way,
but like a sign outside
a strip club that says:

"Girls! Girls! Girls!"

Which is a phrase
I would like you
to think of as a thought-
bubble for my penis,
which I often consider
in cartoon terms.

2.

The tie's end points
to my beginning.
Strike that.
Reverse it.
I enjoy that
a double Windsor is like writing
cursive, how the words
just tangle in a knot
at my throat –
which is how I talk
to girls, be they naked
or not. (mostly not)

3.

Other uses for a tie
when things refuse
to fall out right:

Tourniquet.

Or, in cases of shit
getting really Real:

Rambo head-band.

You should know, though,
that the standard poly-blend
necktie is insufficient
when straining to support
the weight of a man
dangling from a coat hook.

Salad Days

Until when at least you haven't
smoked crack or shot heroin
is your last measure
of measuring your aptitude
for failure, you can't
really understand the salvation
present in arbitrary delineations.
It's the difference between
a cherry & a cherry
tomato. One gives just enough
to the barely discernable
pressure of incisors
on an a nipple swelling
through the dark cavern
my mouth forms & wets
until I cannot not want
to consume fully the flesh
& spit satisfied the pit
to the floor. The other
is a cherry tomato
abandoned on the plate,
because cherry tomatoes
are simply not something I do.

Trudging toward Insomnia

Dawn is a congregation of funeral pyres. Nothing is more significant in daylight. I once dreamt a dog with a slit throat refusing to die, mistook it for a sign.

I wanted to make the night piss blood. Now I grind my teeth to nubs & check for a pulse. There is a pulse.

There is

disappointment. Remember all movement is water waiting to boil, the shore is incalculable

shards of glass waiting to be. My feet slog to sea & wait for daybreak to ignite the beach.

Immolation being the sincerest form of flattery.

II.

When Only the Void Stood Between Us We Got All the Way to Each Other

1. Helpless

She leaves me like a line from Paul Celan.

A language like a house on fire, the home
in which you watched your family detonate

gently, in minute increments, & ascend
as cinders, skywards, like a migration

of fireflies falling from formation, cold,
to you. A coronation. Take this crown

of wasps, this ashen scepter. Don't forget
that you cannot forget.

Your each prayer a paper lantern lifted
to the sky like candles in blue,

blue windows behind the stars.

Then a shift in the wind & a rain

of burnt offerings. All answers lying
in ash like the carcass of a stillborn phoenix.

2. *We Will Become Silhouettes*

The carcass of a stillborn left in the sun is Phoenix.

Desert land & lizard people crumpled
underfoot of our scourging star. We are

sun-staring for a Bakelite Blake-like vision.

We polymer people unite under a veiled
revolution. The resolution of such

hollowness is a scream. Throats rending
so we can pretend the echoes belong
to someone else. We gauze our retinas

in phosphene reveries. We shamble
outstretched palms for the liquid-cool
of our car door's handle & drive home.

3. *House in Virginia*

How long can we stay here?

Until we eat or drink or hang
our smiles on the air. Here,
a red velvet chair for you
to sit on. Blue cobalt teacups
everywhere. *I think we should go
home.* I thought we were.

Here things begin to blue, to blur
to bluer than. A votive candle
blooms against the veil.
You wheedle a fingernail under
the scabbed wall & pick the paint
chip from beneath your claw.

They are claws, lest we forget.
Each hoping to be honed
as sharp as knives that are
our teeth, our eyes. Tongues
are too simple. They're more
the needle threaded through us,
Now blow the candle out.
Come under my lamella, Ella,
into the shadow of my red room.

4. Kingdoms of Rain

Your features ebbed from mind
the way water rewrites land.

A palimpsest made of rope
unraveling, a wreath of strands.

Had we been proper polymers
all it would take is a lighter,

A string of astringent smoke,
a pinch between singed fingers.

All I could do was start a fire
& return here after every rain,

awaiting a sprig of green from the ground
burnt in your wake. Today a chrysalis

hung from a nearby bough. Emergent
moths flutter & shuffle the dizzied air.

Before I go I'll hang a cross on a nail.
I'll try to return when the flowers unfurl.

Did the Beheaded Wish Himself in Half?

I want for you to think of chainsaws
as a metaphor. Or rather, think of them
as chainsaws. Did you ever hear about
the Rudolph brothers? Daniel cut his hand
right off, to send a message. Videotaped
the whole thing. Sent it to the F.B.I.
The tape. The hand he kept, it's sewn back on.
Now, what's worse: The pain of such
a sacrifice, the metal shimmering through
meat to meet the bone & through?
Or that he knew before the teeth had lit
the nervous fuse that he was purely symbol,
yet still thought the rabid bite significant?
Or maybe that's the point. We never could
be present tense, the two of us, could we?

Reflexive

There remains a paradox of stereoscopic
impossibilities, that is: the improbability
of any two ever seeing as the other sees
in the instant. A lack of vision or recognition
that the angle of 'towards' is not that of 'away'.
A méconnaissance of time, I could say,
if I peppered my syntax with French, as you had
wont to do when so removed by conversation.

The figure centered in the mirror drags
his hand across the stubble of my beard
(gone & twice regrown since you returned
to the Willamette Valley to stay with family),
my shorn skin being supple as my conviction.
It raises a question of time, why can we not look
tender upon a moment as it ripens? Is memory
more a black box, polite & patient as sudden
statues of Pompeians awaiting excavation?

Nostalgia is a scalpel honed for a Y incision.
So, be a dear now & start at my navel, pull up & over
my nipples. Reveal absence as an abscess & revile
me. I know what I've done. Now start the staples,
there's nothing more to see here, just move along.

The Collective Nouns of Inanimate Objects

What can we call a flock of bells?
 Could it be an unkindness, like ravens
 gathering in a seethe of black?
 Is it a trembling, like Cash
 singing a Sunday morning down?

A collection of Sunday mornings
 is a ravenous, named this in the bathroom mirror,
 tangled in a skein of blushed capillaries,
 those sun-bruised eyes. A braid of such small rivers
 can be called a desert, river already being itself
 a collection of pettinesses: tears, apologies,
 all those things that flow constant as stars..

Behind the desert is a battalion
 of pill bottles. Let's call them a reflection,
 a mirage. Maybe a raft, if they are stacked nice,
 end-to-end in rows tall & properly cylindrical,
 translucent orange as a polluted sunset.
 A month of such ends is called a fling,

like the dunlins that breed here in our summers
& fly away. Any significant amount of flying away
is called a prescription. A 90-count of Oxycontin
can be called sufficient. Or maybe an exaltation.

A deceit?

That's between the lapwings, the larks, & me.
Though none of these are what we would call sea-worthy.
In point of fact, nothing is called a worthiness.
A collection of drowning men isn't talked about at all,
though the shiver of sharks will be.

That the hinges of this cabinet still swing freely
is called a wedge, or a glaring. A collection of these reflections
adrift in any one life is called a husk, a piteousness,
white as the doves whose name I stole. White
as those bells leaping bitter, parallel to the Sunday clear.
Like bitterns, they are a siege.

Alstroemeria

Broken, but not
into blossom, a bloom
being open, beginning.
You're less flower child,

more Ohio, more Kent State.
You're more those petals
sheathed in rifle barrels.
I wanted to start a war

in your veins, invade you.
Start a war in your eye
like the dark central spiral
turning in one big bitch

of a storm, the kind we have
names for, that causes flight
in white folk & kills, kills, kills
the poor. I wanted to feel

the mouth of your pistil
pressed to me, be smeared
slick by your stigma.
Instead I turn away from myself

toward another spring, tear
the hair from my head, strand
by threadbare strand, mouthing:
she loves me ... she loves me not ...

each collapsing to the ground
in this land without wind.

In the Absence of a Flood

It wasn't so much a wish to leave
as no desire to stay & recurring
dreams of that damn Eraserhead baby,
placental garrote cinched with glee.

You know the way kids can be, sharp
as baby teeth at your throat. It was over,
we knew, when the vacuum tracked blood
through the shag & you could only look

my reflection in the eye through the fog
after a shower. In those nights I prayed
for blame, *inundate me, lord, wash me away.*
There will be no more flowers lest it rains.

In the Cold, Nothing

The problem of snowmen in the city
is predominantly one of love. As in:
they're so fucking grimy, cast off there
& wilting into themselves, resigned
to each exhaust-filled lung & the milky parabolas
flung web-like from the wheels of passing buses,
that they can't not be meant as a mirror.
Each snowman beginning as little more
than a collection of hurried taciturn caresses,
leaving a body to stand apart. A body
whose fragile reaching arms become their own
only after being held in another's hand
for the final time. Then comes plucked
some minor trinkets, some rocks, buttons,
whatever happens to be close at hand
or stuffed is some cluttered pocket.
A hand recedes a smile across the face
with a single finger, *shh*, then places the objects
within the snow, as if to say: *No, these two eyes,*
no, this mouth, they are no longer for me.

Language Me You Languid Fucking Thing

& we can veer & verb with the same
sway & verve as a stripper's hips.

Yes, I've fed my dollars to her
machined thighs & left the stage

in the ether of her cloying scent,
an explosion of glitter like stars
you see before your vision tunnels.
& it was worth it, every dance spent

on the zebra print couch behind the curtain.
Because each folded piece of creased green
cloth can buy you exactly what you want.
Her & I both know it, but can pretend not to

know what that means. Because some nights
all you want is exactly what you need.

Hopeless Romantic

I know desire is an archipelago
in a frothing sea. I've lost anchor.
I list & lee, drift toward razor-
tongued reefs, develop scurvy
& spit teeth., waiting to sink
to inky depths & swim free.
But I don't know what that means.

I know that desire is the skull-
buzz of a dentist's drill boring
through chipped enamel, down
to a pulpy, pink, alien hole
which I'll tongue until numb,
dumb, & dull, then drag
from a menthol, pop a Vicodin, down it
with grain-alcohol. I'll pretend not to
know what that means either.

But I'm a liar. I know only that desire.

Blame as a Form of Predestination

I dwell. I dwell.

I dig a well

& poison it

with several severed goats' heads,

sew cloven hooves to my legs,

clatter a waltz up the dais,

set myself upon the razor throne

to reign below my heart:

A twitch like wings

fighting silk

chrysalis strands

to unfurl for chance to fold

into flight, fly only to light

upon a low-hanging branch

& be plucked, pinned through

the thorax,

preserved under glass,

with only the hope for a draft

to catch upon numbed wing

& pinwheel a static body

around its center staked,

which then would serve

only to further remove

the illusion of any free flight.

Abraham Lincoln in a Yellow Rain Slicker

is the title of the poem I was going to write
 in honor of President's Day, & to fill the monstrous dearth
 of *Gremlins 2* poetry. It was going to be great –
 but I couldn't quite escape a sense of terror at the image.
 There was also the ubiquitous melancholy,
 but, being ubiquitous, it hardly bears mentioning.
 You see there's this scene in which the girl
 who is tremendously Phoebe Cates
 leans to Zach (who I am & am not) & recounts
 a partial horror which neither Zack quite has time for.
 He was busy trying not to die. I am busy remembering
Gremlins & *Goonies* were the only two movies I saw
 as a child with both my parents. & also trying not to die.
 We were at the Skyland drive-in – *we don't have time for this*
right now. Everyone has these moments –
 the only calamity of note is that of the protagonist.
 & who isn't the hero in their own scene?
 That the person who consciously lives as the comical sidekick
 may actually exist is rather too tragic to imagine.
 What becomes of the actor of the comedic body,
 truffle shuffling, his hand in the blender
 of some demented mother? Chunk became a lawyer,
 but nobody cares, because he's a lawyer, & that's another movie.
 The point is: At any given second there isn't time for another.

Did I tell you about only seeing two movies as a family?

I was going to. *I was going through a Peanut Butter*

& Jelly Sandwich phase, & this man with this beard & this hat

& he looked just like Lincoln. He said "Hello, little girl..."

To the Owner of the Gray Volkswagen

*who thought you were parked in our parking lot,
you're not. Your car is moving on its own.*

This came over the Safeway p.a. I was on the bread aisle,
hiding a secret, terrible tremor at the idea:
not even our possessions need us.

Which reminds me, I need paper plates.
I need Hungry Man dinners & plastic forks.

Did I leave the coffee on?

Did I lock my door?

It would be fathomable if our things, say, ran away with the spoon.
Say that my absconded toaster saw a world, a whole world
of things to hug warm each morning, that it felt
hollow, unfulfilled, that it wanted to nourish
a pregnant mother, a hurried husband out the door toward work,
occasional pop-tarts for the once & future children.
But that our objects are running away alone –

Why would you do that Mr. Coffee?

Do you even know?

I'd like to imagine the Volkswagen growling
down the PCH, windows down in the rain,
Steppenwolf on the radio, getting just a little bit free
on its way to San Francisco, to a rainbow gathering
of rogue punch bugs. Not that it ambled into traffic
like one in a blackout, ambulatory but vacant as a dog
already hit once. I need intention. I want desire.
I need to stop asking myself "how did I get here,"

with these bags in my hand,
my key in my front door.

I'm Tired & I Want to Go to Bed

I want for a country to be exiled from,
in which I could fold a sense of longing
like a sandwich held in a kerchief
slung from a stick upon my shoulder.
I'll embolden the nights spent drinking
beneath stars & bridges with meaning

& destinations either left from
or looked towards. I want to stand
as the sad clown, pants unpatched,
single tear upon my cheek, frozen
blue like a prison tattoo. I'll say
"I know why the velvet Clown cries."

I want to be one of those homely clichés
hung on wood-paneling in trailer parks,
playing cards with dogs next to the unframed
picture of blue-eyed Jesus tacked to the wall.
I want to stop describing aspects of my childhood
homes. When I was young we packed Krylon,

marched on our school, left our silhouettes
on the bricks like signatures, dogs pissing
boundaries, all of which, of course, are gone.
Even the overpasses are now fenced in.
Under one, a homeless man once told me
hobo was short for homeward bound.

Antebellum

I'm from the South, which means weeping
 willows & wind tearing our hair out,
 screaming *Whaddya crying about?*

Well there is that
 knot of bodies drowning below.

What's a tree to do but stand watch & weep
 a war to wash them away?

We did.

They stayed –unimpressed– merely bubbled
 to the top (something to do with all that salt).
 There's the more pressing fact that we are
 still only trees.

We grew into our jackbooted duties.
 I've the hunch our slumped posture comes from this.
 Just you wait until the day you say:

back in my day...

Accept that Time makes fascists of us all,
 learn to praise the sight of the emerging man
 baring his teeth on an oiled bar.

Just look

at all those rings. How can you not think them smiles?

Led to Water

as we've come to

now the acceptance

that meaning is pure

artifice water blue

from the last river

formed from drought

into a sitting position

swirled into matrices

tangled into intestines

made from copper & plastic

spurting mouth to mouth

with only hollow columns

sculpted of slower a liquid

to act as a bridge

suspended between what

(we are only thirst)

we know & we don't know

When Punching A Fish In The Face Is All There Is To Be Done

Where the waters rescind from the Chena flood plain
rises an esoteric white form from the saw grass
lapping at the swollen drainage creek I've come to
today to pull loose a few fish. The arc of his ribs
grabs me first, no hint of the meat that once kept locked
this symmetry of element & architecture,
calcium rich & marrow sweet. You could see teeth
marks marring the thick bone, a carrion scrimshaw

fine-grained as glass etchings of some forgotten saint,
delicate as the articulated vertebrae
tilting toward the bull moose's expansive skull, refined
cracks of lightning knitting fast his cranial ridge,
the flat mill of his teeth grinding the silt-thick
ripples awash across his snout. & just above

a bottle fly weaves in & out of its voided orbitals,
finds rest on the socket's dry lip & stares me down
through those round geodesic mosaic eyes
shimmering green as filaments of peacock herl
or crumpled aquamarine tinsel. It knows me
for what I am, for why I am here. To kill.
Not for food, but to feel blood running dark & hot
from a heart & over my hands, down my arms in streams

that puddle beneath my elbow & pump into my own
wanting veins to surge. I am here to become death
because I can, because I still *am*. I tie tight my hook,
cast to the glossy seam of colliding currents. The fish
crushes the pale morning dun. I pull it in, fold tight
my fist & strike, stagger it, bring its meat to meet my knife.

Hairless Apes in Space

We are, after all, very capable animals,
as long as one does not consider the grass
swelling & swirled in the yellow wind
that is the hard lean of the slant of sun
from its vernal declination, how it locates
its limbic form in the unconscious churn
that yearns up from the roots striking
through the soil like fractals of a more
primordial lightning, leeches & charged
with amniotic longing & the impossibility
of ever holding within any thing as nebulous
& ductile as an *I*, which can conceive itself
only a voice squirreled away amidst the riggings,
pulleys puppeteering a smaller, articulated pilot
strapped within the diorama cockpit. His chute
is packed, his finely tuned hand already poised
above the switch which will ignite the manganese
bolts, blow the whole damn thing, & fling him
to the grainy envelope of altitude that still
allows the fictions of salvation, of survival.

Bridge Jumping

It's in the initial sting & cold needling the tender
white of my bare soles that I recognize the water,
Lake Jocassee, remember his hand pushing me
under, my father, the concentric surface spilling
from his arm as the sachet sealed overhead

when his hand pulled away. Steel-hardened
steel-worker hands, cracked as the plates of red
clay that became our yard each summer. Rouged
in red earth after play, we would bathe in the town
that became a reservoir, that closes around me now

as I slide through its glass, into the penumbra.

I know to look up, pull myself back by seizing each
crystalline bar of sun latticing the water. Back then,
at seven, I couldn't understand the echoes rippling
down like haloes, the sound of his houseboat's hull

gnashing against the dock, gnawing at its lashings
above me with each iteration of reckless wake.

How those waves had ushered the deck from beneath
my feet mid-step & down to the frothy wet between
boat & dock. I had always wanted to see the city

that had to sink to make this place a place, a real.
But with it below me so close, it was just an anger,
having been displaced, forced to give up, go up
toward some raw new. & it's all I can take, my lungs
arched & aching when I plash the lake's sore lens, gasping

now, as I did then. Only today there's no heedless arm
stretched between the teeth to pull me aboard, to tussle
& towel my bangs from my eyes, to absorb my anger
while withholding explanation of the compressive-
strength of skull, all its micro-fissures & seams.

Appendix:**Notes**

“Single Successful Guy” takes its title from either a line in the film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* or from a Bouncing Souls song by the same name, depending on your point of reference.

“Uh-Oh, Love Comes to Town” takes its title from the song of the same name by the Talking Heads.

“Equus” takes its title and inspiration from the play by Peter Shaffer.

“Tina, If You Really Loved Me You’d Let Me Eat Your Brains” takes its title from a line of dialogue in the film *Return of the Living Dead*.

“Did the Beheaded Wish Himself in Half?” takes its title from a line in “Hospital” by Robert Lowell.

“When Only the Void Stood Between Us We Got All the Way to Each Other” takes its title from a line in “So Many Constellations” by Paul Celan. Each of the four sections of the poem takes its title & a line from a song: “Helpless” by Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young; “We Will Become Silhouettes” by The Postal Service; “House in Virginia” by Brendan Benson; and “Kingdoms of Rain” by Soulsavers.

“I’m Tired & I Want to Go to Bed” takes its title from the folk song “Show Me the Way to Go Home”.

The italicized lines in “Abraham Lincoln in a Yellow Rain Slicker” are lines of dialogue from the film *Gremlins 2*.

“Levitate Me” takes its title from the song of the same name by the Pixies.