A RAIN OF DUST

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A RAIN OF DUST

A

THESIS

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By

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ABSTRACT

*A Rain of Dust* is a metaphor of confrontation, a facing of the enormous mystery of what it means to be born, to live, to die. Rather than attempt to find meaning, this collection celebrates the centrality of created meaning; Love and Hate, Good and Evil, Connection and Alienation, Life and Death are all presented as subjective spokes on a wheel with Art at its hub. As such, these poems are no more and no less than an expression of what it is to be Jefferson Arthur Gaskin, 32, struggling poet, lover of spooky women, kung-fu films, and robots, making his way from the swamps of Houston, Texas, to the frozen fields of Fairbanks, Alaska, and grasping at memories, fantasies, visions and dreams all along the way.
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Allegory

1
The boy notices for the first time,
as he pastes a photograph of an iceberg
onto a sheet of green construction paper,
the way in which the ball of his teacher's ankle
fits neatly into the curve of her sandal strap.
The pale rise catches him,
the beige strap smooth across the top,
a thin blue vein looped along the bottom,
so that it seems her ankle is an eye,
ashen and large, gazing boldly back at him.

He stares into this eye, transfixed,
until she saunters over to his table.
She tickles the back of his crew cut,
kisses the crown of his head,
and despite the warmth of her hand,
he shivers.

She tells him that she admires the way
in which he has evenly distributed the glue
beneath the glossy layers of his collage.
Her breath smells cool and clean,
like an apple flavored snow cone.

He tries to speak to her, but his tongue sticks
like a pencil in the paste-pot.
Instead, he raises a closely cropped photograph
of a snowflake for her inspection,
flushing when he realizes
his fingertips have left a trail
of white smudges across its surface.

During naptime, the boy steals
his writing tablet and a handful of broken
crayons from his knapsack
and crawls into the cloakroom.
There, by the blue light seeping in through the jamb,
his hands shaking,
he begins a poem.

That night the boy finishes the poem.
Next morning, he slips it under her grade book
as she gropes on hands and knees
for lumps of clay lost in the dark
spaces under the supply cabinet.
She has not seen him;
he takes a seat in the corner of the room
and waits.

2
The poem is about another boy,
a boy who begins to freeze.
There is no reason why
the boy should begin to freeze—
he lives on the beach of a tropical island
where the sun shines hotly throughout the year,
a place so warm that the boy can barely comprehend
what it means to be cold—
but one morning he climbs out of bed
and realizes that his teeth are chattering.
The situation annoys him;
the clickety-clacking of his teeth
makes it difficult to chew the buttered waffles
his mother has made him for breakfast.
He tells her that he cannot eat,
that he cannot stop his teeth from bouncing up and down,
but she doesn’t believe him.
She sends him back to bed
with a quick swat on the rear
and feeds his waffles to the crabs.
Within hours the shaking has spread
from his teeth to his limbs.
He goes back to his mother, and this time,
his shoulders, arms, and legs shudder violently.
She calls his father in
from the coconut grove behind the house,
and the two quickly wrap the boy
from chin to toe in bed sheets and towels.
Still the boy grows colder.
By nightfall, his lips have grown purple,
his breath comes out in cotton ball puffs.
By midnight, the boy is so cold
that the glass of water his mother gives him
freezes solid in his hand.
Finally, he becomes so cold
that his parents cannot stay in the room with him.
The boy’s father, his eyelashes heavy
with the ice of frozen tears,
heats up a fire iron and uses its white-hot tip
to herd the boy out of the house.
The boy flees from the stings of the poker,
stumbling down the beach
before finally collapsing at the edge of the surf.
He stays there for hours, huddled in sheets,
until he feels a caress at the back of his neck.
He looks up and sees the sun,
warm and white, rising from the ocean,
sending a corridor of glittering fire
across the waves toward him.
Slowly, he rises and discards his sheets.
He steps into the water,
which begins to freeze around him.
The last thing he remembers is the heat
of that white sun on his forehead,
pulling him forward even as his legs stick
fast in the thickening ice.
His parents find him, there in the frozen
surf, white and motionless,
staring into the morning sun
with glacier blue eyes.

3
He waits there still, for her
to stand, to brush her long fingers
down her khaki skirt,
to stretch and arch her feet
and send her ankle-eye
into a spasm of blinks.

He waits for her to make her way
back to her desk,
to tilt her head so that waves
of her copper hair
spill over the left side of her face,
to dust her grade book
of its cloud of sprinkled chalk
and to shut it with an efficient snap,
to notice the poem, his poem,
written on Big Chief lined paper,
its margins adorned with somber drawings
of blue crabs, swaying coconut trees,
and a white sun.

He waits for her to read that poem.
He waits for her to look up,
He waits for her to pin him
there, in the corner,
with the wideness of her eyes,
the slightness of her smile.
BAREFOOT AND FOUND
When We Go Looking for the Moon

On the far side of the reservoir,
a rat snake hangs from the branches of a brown oak;

the diamonds on his back flash yellow
in the lights of the nearby refinery.

Beyond, in a forest of tall grass,
hundreds of banana spiders

stretch limbs twice the length of their bodies
toward the carcass of a terrier,

newly ripe, swollen,
lying near the rim of an empty culvert.

Somewhere above, a polyphemus moth
stutters its way across the night,

the beat of its broad wings like the patter
of rain on dried leaves.

Ours is the laughter of wild dogs,
as we wait for the clouds to descend

and lift us, barefoot and found.
Lemon Skirt Brushes Faded Corduroy

I could not tell
Freckles and Cream
how the milk
of her voice,
spilled so close
to my ear,
and the pop
of her bubblegum
toes in the dark
of naptime
were enough to
tickle the child
right out of me,
so instead, I
wet my pants.
Behind the Rectory

We sneak from our lines
to watch the nuns play
blackjack for rosary beads
in the oak-lined yard.
Fresh from the glory
of Father Malcolm's
morning mass,
their crisp hands shuffle
gilded holy cards
across tops of stained
picnic tables.

Sister Zachary, tapping
her painted Uriel,
says *Hit me* and waits
for the coming of her King.

Sister Vincent stands
firm on the shoulders
of two St. Christophers,
any other card--even
poor Padre Pio--
enough to bust.

The rustle of their habits
slides across our giggles
like a feather duster
over communion bells,
and as The Baptist
comes down on
Sister Mary's Madonna,
an ace for a queen,
wreathed faces turn,
bow to pressed palms,
so that we,
in that moment,
might understand devotion.
Grade School Conversion

It all began when Roy Flack took our four-square ball and ran on-field to start his corps of fifth-grade boys in a game of Kill-The-Man. We stood, frozen, until someone began to cry -- a third grader, I think -- and then Big Julia was off, her triple chin rippling with each hard stride. Now Roy was god of sport, and Kill-The-Man was his jihad; he'd broken bones and crippled kids who'd tried to take the ball from him, while thunder-thighed Big Julia, though huge, had never harmed a soul. We watched in awe as she stiff-armed and plowed her way through slack-jawed boys, until she had Roy in her sights. Atop the hill in center field he stood, holding the ball above his head, and I can still recall the way he jerked and shrieked before she smashed into his side. He flew ten feet, then crashed to the ground. No one spoke as Julia pried the ball from Roy's thick hands and, satisfied, walked slowly back to the four-square court. Roy was through. From that day, the field was Julia's.
What You Remember of your First Fight

that it happened in a ditch
behind the school,
between the recess field
and the public park
where shirtless teens
played basketball
and smoked found
cigarette butts;

how the dying grass
cut into your palms
and how the dust
kicked up by your knees
choked in the back
of your throat;

the scrape of his knee,
rough corduroy,
against your cheek,
as you clutched
at his calves,
tried to bring him down;

how you scuttled
in the dirt at his feet,
bleeding from the nose
and one ear, knowing
that this was the greatest
moment of your ten-year-old life;

his sobs, even
as his fingers closed
over your eyes.
Desert Pastoral

A new mobile home,
aluminum sides still dusted white,
perches atop a ridge spotted
with Joshua trees and creosote bushes,
overlooking the lake.

Inside, late afternoon,
a woman bakes oatmeal-raisin cookies
for her children, a boy and a girl
whose bare feet and knees are covered
with scrapes and fine sand.

Outside, her husband,
face red from a day at the lake,
points a telescope toward the horizon
and waits for night,
waits for the sky to dazzle
like the glitter of sand in his palm,
struck by the setting sun.

Beyond the man and down the ridge,
amid a cluster of barrel cacti,
a lone jackrabbit cautiously munches
an old prickly pear,
his ears high and full as sails,
ready to catch the wind
should anything stray too close.

Under the house, in the crawlspace,
a wandering bark scorpion
sits in the dirt,
flexing his stinger with each thump
from the floor above,
waiting in the dark
for a hand, or a foot,
to find him.
Driving from the Grand Canyon after a Near Accident

While his sister sleeps, finally,
in the back of the car,
and his mother stares blankly
into the coffee-cup’s emptiness,
his father whispers to him:

_If she had fallen in,
I would have thrown you
in after her._
I grew up on the edge of town, surrounded by a dappled wood of lavender myrtle and brown bur oak, a rural neighborhood of bold raccoons and screeching hawks. An only child, I spent my days exploring far on lonely walks, or building tree branch hideaways of purple-pink magnolia brush. Deep in the bush, I often caught brief glimpses of his densely lush and massive form, a juggernaut of earth and plant. His wooly face, though wrapped in moss, was like a child’s and though he wore a carapace of bark, he moved through tangled wilds with grace and ease. He often rolled in tufts of buffalo grass and chewed on blooms of yellow marigold. At other times, he was subdued and gazed in silence at the light that shone from town. Sometimes I’d hear him moan, a gentle roar at night that shook the leaves and spooked the deer.

He never let me get too close, would lope away on tree trunk thighs and sulk behind a hill, morose. He’d stare at me with emerald eyes, then shake his head and stomp his heel, as though he feared what I might be, as though he were real and I was simply fantasy.
FADE TO BLACK
High Concept

FADE IN upon PROTAGONIST, who overcomes ANTAGONIST, gains vengeance for his dead SIDEKICK, and romances the LOVE INTEREST; He wins his PRIZE, fulfills his LACK, Loose ends wrap up, and FADE TO BLACK.

(25% of the time, reverse gender of pronouns)
Shell Shock

Sometimes in battle
against the red robots,
a scratch or a knick
on blue robot’s arm will catch
the light from a stray laser
and shine like a star against
the twilight of his shell.

He stops then,
shard of light streaking
across metal skin--
so deep, so dark--
and imagines that he is a boy
gazing through a telescope
at the blistered surface
of a comet as it trails
across an indigo sky,

where a lone blue robot
fights a horde of red robots
with fists and rockets
so that the boy and his city
can, once again, be safe,

a robot whose armor smolders
under geysers of energy,
blasts from the swarm
of scuttling red machines,

a robot so blue
that he seems an ink dot
against the glowing light
of the comet’s surface,

a robot who can’t help
but stare at his arm mid-battle
and imagine that he is a boy
who wishes he could ride
on a comet as it falls
and fades into night.
An Intimate Moment between Presley and Wayne

Two figures sit on a bone white raft that bobs in the blackened, silty waves of a wide river. One is the King, in sparkling white jumpsuit. His eyes flash silver in the sun and rest upon the scowling face of the Duke.

*Now listen, Pilgrim,* says the Duke, *I want to go back home.* The raft loses the current and comes to rest against an old cypress, where waves have shaped a break. With cobalt eyes, the leathered man stares down the King.

*You don’t know what it’s like,* says the King. He flips his collar and grins at the Duke, raises the lids of bloodshot eyes. The river catches the wooden raft and pulls it out into the waves once more. *They never let you rest.*

The Sequined One lies back to rest his head. *Let them forget,* says the King. The other sets his jaw and waves his guns, spells out his name: The Duke, in bullet holes along the raft. *Stand up, so I can black your eyes,* he yells. His foe just rolls his eyes and lays a pudgy hand to rest like a lazy fish alongside the raft. The men float on—the side-burned King of rock-and-roll, and the red-necked Duke in chaps and spurs—riding the waves of the dark stream. *I’ll miss their waves,* The Cowboy cries, *their loving eyes.* *What if the world still needs the Duke?* He drops next to his friend. *The rest of them can deal,* replies the King, and the two lie back upon the raft.
I do want to rest awhile, sighs the Duke. The King hums gently, shuts his eyes, and the raft spins slowly on the waves.
Our Blue Movie

An unknown man chases a blonde across the Mojave in a cadillac that carries a warm revolver and the absence of your love in its trunk.
Words

The better the shot,
the tighter the pattern
when they slam into your head.
Or your heart.
Every Time I Sit at My Desk

The almond eyed brunette in pink kimono comes gliding to my window on cables of braided spider silk. Like bamboo in a gentle wind, her fingers beckon and whisper until my face presses itself to the dusty pane between us. The page spreads behind me then like a sea of milk, and as she blows me a kiss before drifting up into the clouds, I can think of nothing better than floating on my back in its unstained whiteness for one more day.
The Death of blue robot

One night a thousand years from now
blue robot's heart will wind down
on the peak of Mount Fuji.

Rubbing his bald head, silver
and pitted like the moon,
gazing down on the lights of Tokyo,
he will marvel at the strangeness
of his demise—no secret plot
by Doctor Technotron, no frenzied
attack from the Isotope Brothers,
enemies long since dead, forgotten
by all but blue robot.

Instead his passing will be stillness,
waiting for the life at his core to split
from half to quarter to eighth
to sixteenth and burn out,
waiting for the hum in his rusted chest
to fade, for the crack of capacitors
in his head to fizzle
into silence.

Snow will fall softly
onto blue robot's square shoulders,
neutrino blasters will retract
into dented forearms,
steel eyelids will click shut
and he will finally,
simply sleep.

And he will have no regrets:
a thousand years of saving the earth,
a thousand years of beaten joints,
blown pistons, shattered circuit boards,
a thousand years so that Tokyo
can blaze up tonight
like a blizzard of fireflies,
despite earthquakes, invasions,
the occasional radioactive cockroach.
Tokyo will survive, but not
blue robot.
CALLING FOR THE SUN
Succession of Still Frames

1
Burnt red Suburban sloping forward
toward a young girl, maybe ten,
running for the ice-cream truck;

2
the driver, a middle aged woman in neon pink,
bracing her arms against the steering wheel,
trying to brake;

3
the young girl turning her head at impact,
mouth level with the enormous hood,
lips pursed as if to kiss

4
the grill; the girl twisting diagonally
over the corner of the Suburban's cab,
face now blank and red enough

5
to match her hair; the Suburban
teetering, hanging over the side ditch,
wheels scrabbling furiously on grass;

6
the Suburban in the ditch, resting on its side,
back doors flung wide,
vomiting a mass of linens and old newspapers;

7
the girl lying face down in the road,
arm twisted up and across
her back, her hand

8
in her hair; her hair, that
red-gold hair, rising in the breeze:
bloodflower calling for the sun.
Sunday

The smell of cut grass,
chlorinated swimming pools
and fresh motor oil
breezes across lawns
laid tight and trim
as the back of a marine’s head.
Plastic mailboxes sprout,
give shade to manicured plumes
of lemon mints, bluebonnets,
daisies and purple cornflowers.
A cat the color
of an Oreo cookie
rises from his bed of azaleas,
ears twitching to the soft
drumming of cicadas
and the hum of cars
from the nearby highway.
An audience of houses,
sleepy-eyed with half-raised blinds,
waits for a door to yawn and a man
to emerge, hair mussed, shirtless,
blinking in the morning sun
like a stagehand caught
by the early rise of the curtain,
suddenly thrust center stage
with no role to play,
no lines to read.
Summer Flood

The strip of water coursing down the drainage ditch swells like an infected tongue.

A water moccasin swimming up-current goes nowhere; his undulations form a permanent ripple mid-stream.

Hunched against one grassy wall, legs splayed, a young alligator clutches for purchase.

Minutes ago, the water licked at his tail. Now, its edges kiss the corners of his mouth.

A cluster of fire-ants floats by. They cling to one another in concentric red rings, synchronized skydivers in free-fall.

The alligator’s mouth opens, closes. His eyes roll back as though regarding the stream:

how deep would one have to go
to plunge claws into the soft mud below?
June Bug

His copper legs kick
like wires in an electric field:
three auburn hairs
fluttering from the corner
of the baby’s mouth.
Houston Shotgun

They say you can fire
a shotgun from the front yard
of one these old houses
and kill a chicken
in the back,
which would be true
for this old fellow
if the weight of a century
of Augusts hadn’t tipped him
off his foundation:

tin roof sagging,
the gables soft and bowed
as an old felt hat,
splintered clapboard bristling
like an unkempt beard,
front windows tilting forward,
an old man peering down
into his own burial plot.
Service at Sundown

In a small church outside of Juarez,
a girl with skin the color of tallow berries,
wrapped in white linens, waits for a man
wearing the coming dusk for his shirt
and bruised white sage for his collar.
Outside among the prickly-pears,
old women sit silent as lizards
and as still as a garden of old stones;
soon, they know, and so early,
the girl will understand the desert,
dry and hard as the trails of dust
baked deep into the furrows of their cheeks.
Somewhere

Near the blasted
heart of the Mojave,
along the rocky bottom
of an ancient wash,
sprouts a patch of mariposa lilies.

In summer, they are red-orange,
a smoldering brushfire
nourished by the urine of coyotes,
who range down the wash
searching for geckoes
among the volcanic stones.

In winter, they pale
and drop their petals—
a scattering of snow
white as the stars,
and as silent.
Olla

She has northern eyes,
blue as the calves
of a rolling glacier,
like silhouettes of bears
padding through fog,
reflections of longboat sails
shimmering off the bergs,
like fingernails drifting
below a winter tide.
Flash Freeze

The cold sun races
across tundra on silver shoes,
eating the shadows
of huddled caribou
for its lunch.

In the afternoon
it will spew them out,
frozen fingers,
black and clutching
at the snow.
Blue

My reflection slides beneath
the frozen lakes of your eyes,

a hapless ice-fisherman
floating under and away.
Day Moon

The freshly struck chip
on your sapphire ring;
a monkey skull leering
through a curtain of blue silk;
a sump drain at the bottom
of a swimming pool;
the frozen nipple
of an icebound caveman;
the reflection of your iris,
cold, in mine.
Driving past the Earthman Cemetery on the Way to Work

Crosses in a frost covered field:
rimed men stuttering their testament,
t...t...t...
Chalk

This finger of dust,
this charred bone
spreading trails of ash:
a dead man
grinding his skull
against a gravestone,
erasing himself
for his own epitaph.
In a Stall in the Men's Room at Harrah's, Las Vegas

A large sticker runs across
the top of a toilet tank,
perfectly placed for anyone
relieving their stomach
of the burden of lunch.
And on this sticker,
white crested Mount Fuji
squats against a purple sky,
with the words:
RAVE TOKYO LIFE
screaming across the bottom.
In its upper left corner,
a smiling cloud man floats
with puffed cheeks,
blowing a jet of curling
wind lines across the mountain.
Tiny figures, little
more than silhouettes,
dance in his wind
as musical notes flutter
around their empty faces.
Touch your forehead
to the sticker, and
for a moment,
the odor of vomit fades,
the stray strings of yellow
from your lips disappear,
and you can weep
in the breeze of a smiling
Japanese wind god,
or the chilly blast
from the overhead
air-conditioner vent.
ONLY WAITING
When Entering a Room

Lengthen yourself:  
imagine God has hold  
of your topknot  
and is pulling you  
into the sky.  
Make sure everyone can see  
that tattoo of an asp  
climbing your neck.  
Swallow a few times, even,  
make it squirm.  
Pull your shoulders  
down and back,  
as though behind you  
someone is tugging  
on both arms,  
like your mother did  
the day you fell in love  
with the local anchorwoman  
while watching the news  
and threatened to leave her.  
Place your feet  
shoulder width apart.  
Stand like you mean it,  
Atlas straddling  
Greece's backbone,  
or Jake the Snake  
riding the top rope  
of the wrestling mat.  
Point your toes out  
and feel your crotch  
press delicately forward.  
Make eye contact  
with the nearest blonde  
and wink.  
Make sure she sees  
the scars.  
Say something to yourself  
in French, like  
*J'aime faire du sport,*  
or *Je voudrais parler  
avec le responsable.*  
Turn your gaze
to an empty corner
of the room.
Smile and wave
to that emptiness,
past the elbows
of tanned arms
holding vodka gimlets
and business cards
so that later—
after you've worked
the room, of course—
you can stand there
with back to the wall
and everyone will think
you are only waiting
for an absent friend,
sure to arrive
at any moment.
Room 210 at an Unnamed Hotel in Las Cruces, New Mexico

As soon as you enter,
the scent of old cigarettes
leans forward to greet you
like a lady-killer in satin
burgundy smoking jacket.
A brown pleather chair
stretches its legs
in one corner of the room,
and waits with a nearby table
shaped like an ace of spades
for someone to bring them
a Harvey Wallbanger
or Pomegranate Sangria.
Over their heads,
a low hanging lamp swings,
shamelessly curved,
an upturned breast
in scalloped brassiere;
the dust from her tassles
catches the light as she sways,
a puff of peach rouge
on her cream colored skin.
Across the room, however,
on the short side of sea of mauve shag,
squats the double bed,
wrapped in a blue and red frock
of clipper ships and anchors.
She glares at her compatriots
from under the heavy lids
of plastic-covered pillows,
as though daring them to steal you
from the safety of her felt
and linen undergarments.
Pater Familias

My dad hands me two
brand new bills, sharp
and flat as razors, and I don’t
know what to do. Do I
risk a glance, check the denominations
on the pass? Do I slide them casually
into my pocket as if money means nothing,
as if I trust him completely.

So I compromise, crumple
the bills like used kleenex
in my fist, then swing my eyes down
in shame-faced gratitude,
swing them down to see
Grant—thank God it’s Grant—
and his scruffy green beard
peeping from underneath
the bridge of my thumb.
Buddy, Grant seems to be saying,
you lucked out this time.

And all I had to do was
duck my head a bit,
keep my eyes low, crank
my mouth into a close-lipped grin,
the grin of an idiot. Just let him know
I’d be sucking cold pintos from a can
in the empty dark of an efficiency

if it weren’t for his generosity,
that I wouldn’t be
here, once again—fumbling
for the pocket of my unwashed jeans
while crisp businessmen step into and out of
his office-building—if only
I’d listened to him in the first place.
Lake Mead

I can't help but stare at her breasts as we skim for threadfin in gin-clear water, with tied-off shirts for nets, our shorts flat on the bank—three bathers with tans as dark as the volcanic sand that blows off the peaks surrounding us—my shag of hair, wet for the first time in days, flopping thankfully over my eyes so that I can't notice, while Michael splashes like an idiot after darting fish, that she notices.
Tijuana Night Life

She has Delicious tattooed across the top of her ass. The word flows over the rise of her cheeks, and waves like the tail of a rosy boa.

But she’s dancing with the man with tattoos of lightning bolts on his neck and spidery bullet scars shivering across his forearms, a man I’ve seen before, in depictions of Aztec sacrifice, the man who always sticks the knife in and smiles.

So, for now, I’ll just hunch at my table and sip my margarita, peering over the row of empty glasses in front of me, a lean dog crouching in tall grass.
This Road Before

He went for a drink
and he wanted to be happy,
but ugly and just thinking about
contact with other people
seemed like killing a puppy,
so when she tried to get sick to him,
talk to be friends—All I want,
to feel incredible—he was
so many doubts, not excited
but broken: just one more obstacle
to the drink he would never have—
a few steps off, a few steps off—
calling from the bar
like a candle in the window,
or a bird on fire.
Wedding Guest

He wants to steal a tiny bit
from these young women
to get some cash back, so to speak,
such a good friend of their fathers,
and their facial features
are so much more important now,
he notes—large eyed as deer,
these daughters of his friends—
he wants to meet one in the bathroom,
the one who, whiney and pert,
splattered ketchup over her dress,
and he is such a good friend,
and she is so young—twenty-five, perhaps—
and he wants to be the most amazing man,
the doc she wants the most,
but tonight he is just the same job
he always was, a lazy bum
with a serious relationship
to depicted fiction,
a fifty-two year old man,
still speechless.
I Hate This Party

Rhapsodize all you want, but nothing is so electric--knucklehead, cheap-jack, gimcrack--as the kiss (in the dark?...maybe; trembling?...definitely), the jigger from the lips, of an empty light socket. Sorry to set you straight--you jerk--but I'm tired and there's no one else here to watch me spill cabernet into the sputtering cup of your ruby chandelier.
SOME SORT OF END
Behind the Demolished School

A swing set teeters
in this corner of the playground,
where the rotted remnants
of a wooden fence,
stoop like bashful children
waiting their turn to fly.
The plastic seats of the swing
hang loose as dog tongues
in wet heat.
I whack one of the legs
with a dried branch.
It shivers, hollow, like a rung bell,
sends paper wasps out and up,
to flutter with flakes of rust
against my cheeks.
I fall forward to escape their buzzing.
The ground here is soft,
alive, the grass is thick,
and when I press my ear down,
I can hear the rustling,
a hundred tiny eyelids
flickering open after naptime.
I’m in Her Living Room

The television is on, plays
an old episode of *Three’s Company*,
the one where Chrissy and Jack
handcuff themselves together.
Across the room, her cat Rusty paws
for a toy mouse stuck under the sofa,
a russet blotch squirming in the corner.

I am looking down the hallway.
I can hear her crying in the next room,
just barely, over the canned laughter
from the television.

Rusty catches the mouse, meows
and then bats it back under the sofa again.

The pieces of a broken lamp
lie on the carpet before me.

I will step over the shards.
I will walk down the hallway.
I will walk past the jagged edges,
past the polaroid photographs
of friends and former lovers taped to the walls,
past the bathroom decorated
with plastic dalmatians.
I will walk into her bedroom,
and as Rusty bounds in behind me,
I will kiss her on the side of the mouth
until her eyes are as bright again
as the light from the VCR clock flashing
12:00 at me over and over,
and her cheeks are as red as Rusty’s fur,
and her forehead is as smooth as milk.
At Three A.M. on the Express Greyhound to Laredo

*I hurt her,*
said the bald man,
as tattoos of teardrops
quivered on his cheeks
in the yellow glow
of the overhead light.
*Hid behind her door*
*with a tire iron.*
I was startled.
He hadn't spoken a word
since taking the seat next to mine,
four hours and several towns ago.
I shifted in my seat,
raising my chin slowly
like a dog looking for scraps.
*She drove me to it,*
he continued, though
he didn't seem to notice me,
just stared out the window.
He might have been talking
to the passing desert,
to the saguaro and sand,
to the ridge of mountains
looming against the horizon
"What did she do?" I asked,
and waited for him to continue,
hovering in the shadow
at the edge of the light.
*She was a good woman,*
he answered, and that was it.
We rode in silence until we hit
the broken edge
of the Texas border,
where he slipped from the bus
at an old rest stop
and headed east into the rocks:
a scorpion running
into the sun.
What I Have Left

A thin scar, one 
quarter-inch long, 
running over my knuckle, 
still red and humped, 
like a dried worm 
on a hot sidewalk, 
from the time you threw 
a dart at my butt 
and I barely blocked it, 
used a ninja chop 
like we’d seen on TV, 
Kung-Fu Theater 
on Sunday afternoons, 
then picked up a stick 
and smacked you on the temple, 
left a bruise as dark 
as the cocoa we’d drunk 
that morning, 
in the same exact spot 
you would aim the gun 
twenty years later 
when your sister had died, 
and your girlfriend had left you, 
and you felt alone, 
although one look 
at that ridge on my finger— 
which I rub every day 
like those rings we found 
and thought held genies— 
would have told you otherwise.
Sometimes the Blank Page Is Best

A hurricane sweeps a thousand
homes into the ocean,

but the air does smell
of rain on wood,

while the earth, like a moebius strip,
opens to infinity

and calls for the name
to finally be put to the corpse.
Day Dream

Sometimes late at night
I sleep in a tall oak tree
with goose down beds
nested in its broad limbs.
A winding stair
leads round the trunk,
and at every level,
a sister, or brother,
or friend waves and offers
the warmth of a soft comforter.
Always, however, I pass them by
until I’ve made my way to the top,
where a purple bumblebee
with a cherub’s face buzzes
over the one bed perched
high upon the tree’s crown.
I climb under the covers,
this bee buzzing
a lullaby on my cheek
until the wind kisses
my nose and rocks
the branches below me,
until a chorus of sweet snores
rises, rumbling, to my ears
like the sound of the earth
pulling the blanket of night
gently up to its chin.