

WAVELENGTH

by
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Abstract

A collection of poems.

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Wavelength

That feeling won't fit in a tackle box.
It won't sit still in a safe. Impossible,
you'd think, for a single dream to reopen the wound
cauterized by years, until the figure emerges
cinematically from the tree line swept with fog.
You haven't slept in days. As it turns out
no one made you king, although the boardwalk lights
illuminate precisely where you pass.
Each morning, inexplicably: a murder
of crows comes flocking across the dunes.
From the window you watch, horrified somehow
by the prone position the horizon assumes.
White noise signals what's approaching. A shadow
falls across your beach read. Try not to worry.
Odds are it's someone else's turn. So you work
the jigsaw puzzle, the pieces all sea and sky.
Memorize some lines of eighteenth-century verse.
Curse your deity of choice, or blame your father
for what he failed to say, but don't forget
that the average stature of man makes
climbing most trees an impossible task.
That there is no fifth chamber inside the human heart.
Soon we'll be leaving this city for good,
though it seems we've just arrived.
I'm sorry, I too was coaxed out of hiding
under the impression that things would be greener.
I too was told there would be a chorus of bells.

ONE

Routine

For a week, I did almost nothing: each day I'd wake,
take two pills, pour my cup of coffee, ignore a sheet of paper,

stare out the window. Am I allowed to say I marveled at the leaves,
which had flared so suddenly from green to red? It's true.

For a week, that was enough. For once I thought I understood
the meaning of simplicity, of small pleasure. There were moments

when I almost forgot myself. Then one morning I glanced out,
surprised somehow by the gaunt and leafless wood,

which had finished the ritual it performs each year,
around the same time, and without warning.

Live Oak on Fire

My brother has just hung up on me.
If I had a gun I'd spray my fucking brains
all over daddy's kitchen is what he said
this time, meaning every word. Outside
my window, a car drives by a little too fast.
It is three forty-three in the morning
on a Tuesday, October 16th,
and for a moment I catch myself wondering
who could be at the wheel at this hour.
Who is driving away from a fist-sized hole
in a wall, or responding to the late night call
that comes as no surprise?
The screen of my phone goes dark.
I close my eyes and ask out loud
how much longer my brother will have
to live in his tree on fire, the giant live oak we climbed
when we were boys. Its branches are all blackened
now, bark peeling off in strips, spitting sparks.
I know my brother is alone.
Somewhere, sitting up there behind the smoke,
he can no longer even tell how hot it is,
no longer remember what it means,
the word *beat*. He doesn't notice much
at all, except perhaps how small
and selfish I look down here on Earth,
circling the trunk below him, trying
and failing to catch the falling ashes
before they touch the ground.

Vardaman

My brother is Darl. He went to Jackson on the train.

I saw my brother crying on the box
where my mother is. A big moon
sawed in half above him crying for
what my mother took with her when
she left the day. Where did she go
I asked my brother. It is always
night where she is he said.
My brother's head is full of flames.
I can't see them. I can see two blue
circles like holes of sky punched through
a fence and why is there no smoke.
One day I found something she wrote.
I showed my brother and he took it
and he said you can keep a secret good
so I knew it was something
that could be mine and his but not for my father
and not for my mother. My brother's brain
is wrong but my brother is right. It was night
when he went on the train. A train runs on
tracks and my brother is crazy. The sun is on fire
too and it runs on tracks too. First
it is night and then it goes up up and over
and then it goes down and then
it is night again. Time
must run on tracks too because it goes
in a big circle and that is why clocks.
A clock is a long time
and it is also a short time. I have
to do all the not-telling myself now.
Crying on the box of my mother
under a moonhalf. Bright blue holes
of shining. One day I'll go in a box
too with night in it like my mother
and my mother will be there
and we will get on a red train
and ride through the night trees and black
leaves with moon on them
to where my brother is
waiting in the cool air
with no more fire inside his head.

Riches Ready

It begins with the opening of a door:
someone coming in out of the rain. Perhaps
it is the father resurrected. Or the lover
wearing yellow, her eyes like iridescent bulbs.
And then, as quickly as you understand *This is*—
from the watercolor mountainside,
the café with the orchid tablecloths—
you wake into an empty room; walls bare;
dull gray morning lazing through the blinds.
Again, for the eleventh time,

your father dies. Your lover climbs into the blue
sedan and drives away. It happened
while you were sleeping: across the harbor,
the horizon went about its work of propping up
the little lights. See how they tremble
in the distance, seeming to wave in greeting.
Each night, from a quiver I draw a golden arrow
and fire it over the sea. For a moment
it sings, flying without apex.
Then, in the air, something shifts.

At the Precise Moment of Your Awakening

It will be raining. You will be watching
TV when your son walks
into the room. He will be crying

and holding the stuffed gazelle you bought.
What's that noise? he will ask,
sounding scared. On the screen,

an armadillo singing show tunes. To humor him,
you'll pretend to listen:
outside, down the street, coming closer,

a sound like a train. *It's just a train*
you'll shrug. *Here, look at this armadillo.*
A flashing red banner scrolling from right

to left across the screen. Such tiny print.
You will squint. Undoubtedly,
you'll have left your glasses in the other room

with your credit cards and shoes. Turning
your attention back to the show,
you will gather up your son. Front door

rattling against the jamb. All of the windows
black. *But you said there aren't any trains.*
He won't stop sobbing. *You said they—*

Hush you'll say, annoyed
at missing your show. Where is your wife?
By now, the sound has become a roar. The gazelle

lying on the carpet, your son's mouth
stuck open like a doll's. When the portraits drop
to the floor and break, you will shake

your head: he is so small for his age, the world
will be hard on him. *T-R-A-I-N*
you'll mouth, as if he's deaf, when the windows

start to blow out. You'll be shouting
It'll pass, it's just a train
as the roof is ripped from the house.

The Water Room

at the Science Place
in Dallas was where our mom would turn
us loose to learn about the properties of liquids,

how they take the form
of what holds them and flow freely
with increasing speed on a downward slope. My brother

would watch
as my hands removed a small
red sliding gate, here, to divert the stream,

added a blue one, there,
to capture the water, block
its flow into a lower trough. Each time

I would step
back to look with awe
at what I'd done, and then I would run

on to other rooms,
hardly glancing as I raced
past the teeth of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, pausing

to touch the globe
full of purple lightning, feeling
the static startle my finger for the hundredth time.

I always ended up
in the planetarium, staring up
at the immaculate dome. I had learned the shapes

and names of constellations:
Orion, a hunter like my grandfather; Pegasus,
like his paint horse but winged; the Big and Little Dippers,

which I imagined
had contained, in the beginning,
all the other stars, like the two buckets

my father set under
the leaks in our roof when it rained.
Someone must have kicked them over

by accident,
scattering light like glinting
shards of glass. Sitting there, I turned

to my brother
to point out Polaris,
and to teach him how to find it,

but he was not there
beside me: I had forgotten and left
him alone among the toy tugboats and wheels.

I did not see him
standing still, as he watched
the water rise, slowly, against the dam,

until it rocked level with the top
of the blue plastic, and then — as if by magic — higher,
hesitating for a moment, held together, impossibly, by its tension,

before whelming
what I'd put so carefully in place
and rushing over and falling in a tiny, terrible cascade.

Dream

Again, we are standing on the shore of an alpine lake.
There is no wind to disturb the pines, or the mountains
upside down on the surface of the water. It seems
we are waiting for something. From the other side
of the lake, a cardinal flies across the water toward us.

I turn and watch it come to rest among the needles
behind you. I look at you and open my mouth to speak.
Something stops me. You are staring across the water.
The sky is cloudless. It is colder than I remember.
Suddenly I realize why we've come here.

The Naming of Things

When I was nineteen, I paid someone to pierce my ear at the mall. *You look absurd* they told me after, but I never took it out. *Pierce did what?* my dad asked on the phone, thinking he'd heard my brother's name. Hadn't he?

Somewhere,
a man stares at the stone. He mulls over sounds,
settles on something he likes. Then he writes
the name down in the book of names
and staples the name to the stone, *Onyx*. In this manner,
each thing becomes itself: a tree becomes
an apple tree; waves multiplied become an ocean
of waves; a weapon becomes a gun becomes *gun*—
because as quickly as the thing has been named
it vanishes, just as a red bird captured mid-flight
in a photograph is no longer a bird,
but is caged, is changed into something else. What,
I don't know. Not a bird. *Nothing's more absurd*
my brother said once *than a cardinal perched*
on a stone birdbath. *Why?* I asked.

The night he called
at 4 am, he was asking for something. I was lying
in bed. In Baltimore I had been reading,
in Kansas he couldn't tell me who he was.
When he finally stopped talking, I coughed.
I pressed the phone to my ear, and while
I listened for the words that would come
flying out of my mouth, the silence
gave voice to the name we could not say.

Telltale

They spin at the top of the Ferris wheel, the children
were spinning. I am poking my eye
through a pinpoint hole in the bottom of a Styrofoam cup.
Like an orange, it peels away
from my teeth, my mouth filling up
with little white canoes. Midnight, and we found new
antlers hanging on the wall, shadows hanging on the wall
behind them cast by the yellow moon hanging outside
the glass. The ceiling ribboned and bowed.
Cast at the peak, cast at the peak.
What sails sings
through the air, flies over the flung-
across surface in the general direction of swans. Blue
not black like the barrel with pumpkinseed floating,
where my head shoved, my mouth filling up
with scales and fins, with nothing,
the nothing sour and wet on my tongue. I must say,
the frogs in the yard, I must say.
But the sun, warm on the white skin on my arm,
and my bare feet touching cool dirt,
walking on the soft green needles. *Ting*
the hidden bird *Ting* like tapping the silver triangle
like dangling upside down among springtime leaves,
shins shining in the light.
I was the king of deserts, I cradled a little glacier
under my tongue. The fraction of an inch
where the sand dune meets the sea, that,
that is the salt I was talking about
exactly! Me and my brother found
a bronze key on the ground under the aspen.
No, not with my eyes closed.
In the meadow, the aspens
dropping gold in the quiet in the snow.
But you are my brother but there is a ghost on your face
I said. You said listen the chimes have
and then we were running with the scarecrow
on our heels the face the yarn hair sliced off coming
from its mouth the stuck open gaping, and my mouth filling up
with the soundlessness we were running
across the meadow away from
the legs the terrible wound and she
was running and we were running and the sawdust
is running out behind her across the field.

TWO

Vantage Point

Seven stories up I was
leaning out my window

smoking half a cigarette
The homes

shingled and bricked stretched

out before me
in rows The cars
arranged

in perfect parallel lines

against the curbs
Looking at the pavement
leaning over

empty space I thought

not of jumping
as you might expect

from someone
in a film but
of the woman

I would never meet
in Montreal wiping apricot jam
from someone's mouth

of the man
in Laredo just then coming
too quickly again into

the sheets
of his lover's bed

I have prided myself
on not loving

myself too well
but once again the maple
was beginning

to catch fire
in the neighbor's yard

Its branches seemed
to gesture in my direction

The language of

its leaves was garbled
confused No

I must remind myself again

There is no woman
There is no man

The tree was not speaking

No Wonder

Always on the brink of new discoveries,
we floated calmly through the quiet parts
like houseboats. Behind the quotable lines

of every morning's monologue something lay
hidden, dormant and fierce. The spruces
alternately cradled us and leered. Like noon

on a winter day, the world persisted in seeming
merely ambivalent. Nevertheless, we reveled
in certainty, patted ourselves on the back,

promised one another we hadn't been had—
though we were never quite sure of the season,
where the music was coming from. Stepwise

through the tunnel we ascended toward the light.
Speaking in code. Moving monotony around
in our pockets. Each night, the downtown

tourists congregated around the clowns,
who juggled bowling pins under neon lights.
But we were past all that, we told ourselves,

sipping gin. We knew there was nothing.
Still, there were moments, finding ourselves
alone, when we'd sneak the hopeful glances

we'd inherited from our fathers toward the sky,
which on some mornings was so absurdly blue
it might have been a painting of the sky.

The Tourist

Across the street, Death
was leaning over the fire
escape. On the gutter
the pigeons gathered,
rehearsing the same old
argument about flight,
whether to go, to stay.
We weren't sure what

to make of it: the pigeons
squabbling like pigeons,
the heap of wire burning
on the corner, casual passers-
by capturing the blaze
on their phones. Sitting
in a circle on the grass,
we went on talking

as usual about our dreams:
teeth falling out, horses
with wings, our mothers
growing antlers. Later,
matching up socks alone
in my studio apartment,
I wondered what it meant—
the pigeons, the people

taking pictures of the fire
and Death just standing there
in full view. My blinds
were drawn. Moving on
to my shirts, I hummed
a holiday song. Hoping
Death didn't see me.
Hoping Death did.

Small Talk at the Arboretum

Meanwhile, the snow insists on itself, year
after sleepy year, falling on all the anachronistic
holidays: this year, wearing our goofy plastic hats,
we determined to think deeply
about things, promised not to take
for granted green and blue. Someone dropped
a globe from a bridge outside, and we watched the world
bob away and disappear. Thankfully
none of our concern. Tending to
our hangovers, we looked the other way.
Soon enough we were wandering again
down paths lined with tulips and hyacinths,
checking the morning box scores, licking stamps.
Wasn't that what was expected of us?
After all, we were recent arrivals,
it would have been rude to interrupt
without all the facts, before at least sampling
the hors d'oeuvres. So, with self-conscious poise, we went on
answering each windy conundrum the weather posed.
Don't you see? It is a set-up
reached by mutual consent: we're to be kept safely
occupied, and in return we grant passage
to the seasons, which—grateful for our lenience—
never stray far.

To Whoever Broke into My Car

and stole my black backpack last night,
thank you, sir or madam, for giving
me another excuse to talk
about disappearing, to express
my gratitude again for *leaves*,
how fitting it is, only November
and already they're all gone
from my favorite tree,
the maple down the block
communicating something about
decline, about what's lost, like
the manila folder of poems which
you must have been disappointed
to find, sifting through my bag,
sitting in your getaway car,
but those words were all I have
is a stupid thing to say, I have
had much more taken from me,
which believe it or not I'd forgotten
briefly inside the budget theater
watching a movie about two girls
who are stolen, go missing for days
and turn up alive.

Fair Day Fantasia

at the gumstuck ferris wheel's peak two brunettes necking
against a premature belt of stars peppermint awnings a child's
caramel apple disaster clowns wigged in rainbows saddled
to stilts tectonic funhouse tiles dead ends trap doors
labyrinthine passages multiplied by mirrors echoes
peripheral hallway rumors of around-the-corner wraiths
in robes freed the wooden coaster's lurch & heave
its rickety latticework its neon darting october's slate-orange
twilight the saltwater taffy sky a slight breeze skirting
through shadows of faded marquees which oversee this makeshift
midway these aisles of rinds & wrappers
these for the moment ghostless blacktop acres

And the Mountains Grew Sirens

It was her lavender hands,
the wrinkles soft like crinkled cellophane, and the valley
where we stayed full of log cabins, yellow tents,
schools of rainbow trout shimmering the pond.
Like a shepherd's crook the moon
guarded us, a tear in the canvas of dark, throwing
its light on the nervous mares stamping
the stable muck. The pines, all the pines glossed
with milk. Glued to the window, studying wings. Azure
flash: blue jay. Blacktop smeared with blood:
red-winged blackbird. Her hands. In any case,
I wondered aloud, overwhelmed by the whoosh of the highway
cars curling by out of sight down the hill.
And the clifftop triplet of crosses some hiker had strung up
with aspen and twine. Bodiless. Looming like
a ciderless mug. She showed me them
but then that night. Her face,
no one saw me see her face, all its light burning out.
She was not a deer in the meadow then she was
a ghost. A skipping stone
makes circles, but a body makes a stone.
They washed the lavender off
the pillowcases. They caught me looking for her
bones in the piano, and if it was not her why else
would the middle pedal stick halfway down like that.
What is left over is less than before.
The word for that is *stop*. Forever
my dad said, which was a zooming out. I was small,
they wouldn't let me see when the curtain closed. The black
between stars, up and far away. They said *God* but
when they sang their eyes were shut. But if
prayer. I held my brother's hand and we stood
when they stood, and I could see it
leaning on them, heavy their carrying hands
when they passed in the aisle. But did she stop. Then
and there I made myself, all the streaming-in light
stained by paint on the glass. And the snow
erased the Indian paintbrushes and the birds
went with her, the field where
no one walked, all a rushing, like bats,
the storm of her going.

Dialectic

Back then, I always felt I was on the edge
of something. A boulder half-drowned
in the Adriatic, a ridge overlooking the plains.
I was a pioneer and didn't want to be.
In one dream I ran from tornadoes,
in another I floated through space,
out past Jupiter, body long gone,
looking around at the darkness, but with what eyes?
You can't imagine that darkness. Nowadays
I wonder if fear is the appropriate response,
given that we are, after all, going nowhere.
Or not going anywhere. Words muddle.
Maybe we're already ghosts and don't know
my friend said while we were losing our minds
in the park. A month later, huddled inside his Carhartt,
he watched them lower her body into the earth,
the poplar coffin touched by snow. No,
we must be here, because my phone keeps ringing,
the alarm on the egg-shaped clock on my desk
is always threatening to sing, and I can't stop
saying I'm sorry, I'm running late for the dentist,
another conference with my student who never shows up.
Maybe he knows more than I do, sees the edge
clearly and doesn't care, as he waters tomatoes
on the roof of his building, smokes a spliff midday,
lobs a balloon at a man's third attempt to parallel park—
Forgive me, I'm just a collection of thoughts
that buzz like newborn wasps, the sum of affects
at perpetual war, never sure which one's on top.
Even now, I'm elsewhere and running behind,
but you are waiting for me where the cobblestone path
winds down to the harbor's edge. I head
for everything lit-up and distant. Aiming for you
and the sea, I cut through these drifts of fog
that hang like tinsel on the Tennessee pines.

THREE

Lament at Gettysburg

Not for the soldiers, ragged and sick,
perhaps still clad somewhere
in gray and blue, not for Lee's
outmoded honor, not for Meade
forgotten, but for the afternoon
we spent, faithfully on foot
retraced the out-of-order
movement of troops, battle lines
erased and revised, climbed
Little Round Top, paused
before the bronze plaque where
as usual I was quickly bored
with history, smoking, checking
my phone, while you unironically
ran your fingers over engraved
insignias, mouthed the names
from the lists of the long dead,
as perhaps an idiot at war
with himself stumbled by or
a Mennonite carriage passed
on the road, I don't know,
I was looking at the sky, saying
it's going to rain over you saying
come look at this so of course
we left early, headed south
in my car with its driver side door
dented in, drove past fields where
cattle grazed stupidly and I was
planning what little was left
of the day as we rose and
fell over Pennsylvania, my hands
holding the wheel, your hand
raised like a tentative question
over my thigh, each of us looking
out our separate windows,
something else I failed to notice then.

The Ambassador

Predictably, the maples
are caught between seasons.
I am cradling a giant

pumpkin in my arms, hoping
to preserve October,
which in the past has served

my expectations for color
and laughter. My landlady is
smoking an extra-long cigarette,

telling me how on Thursday
she watched a hawk
dart like a homing missile down

and rip apart a pigeon
in the yard. *Be careful* she says,
dead serious, her old eyes

making room for pigeon tears.
I've been looking for a way
out of here, a chance to make

a grand exit, so I drop the pumpkin
and sprint across the lawn,
looking up, shouting *take me,*

take me into the hawkless after-
noon. Nothing. Like someone's fool
I've lost the plot again.

When she was a girl, her father raised
pigeons in a coop he built himself
on the side of a little pink house,

and she was trying to tell me.

Anachronistic Elegy

Drunk last night as a teapot full
of river I was, when my body walked
outside this afternoon, my mind could
not remember where I'd left it, my car
I mean, could it be at your house, no
that was three days ago, which is
it turns out the same as ten years
as far as the feeling goes, fumbling
through my headache for my keys,
no matter how long I am dumbstruck
parked back at the avenue of
your asking, the street of your face
where someone whispered it's okay
and we'll be fine the other said
so all I know is they both lied now
idling in my car which is not sitting
in front of your house where the stone
fell in my chest when you spoke
and I was frozen there looking at
your house and my hands and the sky
which for the first time I could imagine
becoming, how the sky must feel
looking down at what glitters
and say, okay I am the sky I am
unblemished therefore empty
therefore charged with morning.

What's That You Said?

That's it! that's exactly what I meant!
said no one. Some days, even the weather
seems drunk. It was snowing, and it was going
to flood, lost dog poster racing along
the curb. For a year, he repeated her name until
it sounded like gobbledygook. The brook
babbles beside the trail, saying more than a person
could hope to take in at once. Date circled,
the calendar stares at the woman sitting rigidly
at the table, waiting for her husband to come home.
In the blender: raspberries, benzodiazepines, sleet.
Overnight, fresh powder fell on the slope,
but this morning you're stuck inside on hold,
on the phone with the cable company,
with the woman who bathes your mom.
She thinks you're her mother now. You were sure
you understood what all this was about,
where the curtain was, what was behind it.
Stretched taut as a drumhead over the sea,
the sky is blue, but I can never remember why,
just as the bull elk that defines the meadow
communicates something it can't understand.
Most days it's hard to make out anything,
what with the distant thunder, the freeway all blare
and whoosh, familiar voice picked up
on the shortwave, parents' murmurs overheard
in the kitchen downstairs, then, at once:
silence. No violins. No wind setting fire
to leaves. No rain on the gutter, storm siren,
one-man band. Only the hush settling
over the houses, which signifies absolutely
nothing, and makes what little difference there is.

Parable

I was running away from
my apartment and everything
this morning on the trail
that winds along the creek where
last week a woman was
mugged behind a stack of brush
and limbs felled by last year's storm
when I saw on the trail in my way
a quail barking and ruffling
its feathers and behind it
a nest, presumably its nest,
lying slantwise against a rock
and at once different parts of me
wanted respectively to smash
the quail's blue unborn eggs, scream
sentimentality at the author of
the quail, and start crying,
this is how confused I am
by need, our need to love and
protect what we love, knowing
we can't, though this is not
a true story but if it were now
is when I would run up to the quail
cradle its quivering in my hands
and say how can you be afraid
of me, I can't even do
my taxes, I can't look down
the hill without not seeing her face
on the porch, can't close my eyes
without hearing me not breathing,
yes, I would write all of this
and more down on a post-it note
and because I don't know anything
about birds tie it to the quail's leg
and say, please, take this
to her, I don't know where she is.

Two Modes

As one might assemble a puzzle without a picture as a model.

As one might imagine oneself winding through
the autumn-gold Alleghenies.

Like a hammer dropped at random, a clamor
of bells in the abbey, the box-canyon's thunderous echo.

Like your lover asleep in the margins of the next room and
snoring not at all like an angel, while, pencil in hand,
you study the whitetails nibbling clover in the pasture.

Like the same woman's face, traced again from memory
in blue ink: *boldly*—

as in, Death

boldly hummed a country song at the guillotine—

or *aimlessly*—as in, Death stumbled

aimlessly through the puddles downtown—though surely
the difference makes all the difference:

take, for instance,

van Gogh, whose crow-slashed field of wheat was

not, it turns out, his final act of prayer, though

it has suited our notion of suffering to think so.

No,

his last was one of the unassuming gardens,

which though less dramatic must have been labored over.

After breakfast one morning

he wandered out into the sunlit crowless field—an anonymous figure
in someone else's landscape—

and either aimed, in accusation, a revolver at the canvas

of his chest, or mid-day found himself suddenly

shot by mistake: marked by a stray

bullet fired in jubilation

by the neighborhood boys, who presumably

had in mind no design at all,

and with whom he had conversed about the weather, amicably,

on several occasions.

There and Back Ode

*Father, I've come back, I cry,
not knowing where I am.*

The boomerang whips around
the flagpole. For better or worse,
the comet makes a cameo overhead, goes off
again on its long elliptical jaunt. What you want
will turn out to be not what you thought,
the fortune promises the crumpled napkin.
Bleary eyed, a woman drags a suitcase
up the ramp. Declaration garbled
by telephone; hydrogen and oxygen reunited
at sea; shovels still leaning patiently
against the wall of the garage. The hedge maze
circles back on itself to spit you out alone
at the booth where, only moments ago
it seems, you were buying your ex-lover's ticket.
Out of the darkness, then into the dark again:
surely Freud would have something to say
about that. The tides touch base with shore.
Big Dipper blinking a Doppler farewell,
the closer's hanging curve is belted to right. A boy
hops a freight train stopped in the yard, rides
across the Mojave, holding a loaf of bread—
his people are still out there, back east,
he thinks, in a Pennsylvania town lined
with red and white colonial homes. Clouds
dump snow on the churchyard, a girl
works a Rubik's cube in a tire swing, and
at noon the leaves are blown into little piles
by a nameless man, who one version of the story
tells us used to be someone's son.

Today's Forecast

Androgynous, the hurricane made landfall
historically far north. First, it was quiet.
Then it was every man for himself:
We filled our tubs with rusty water, duct-taped
crucifixes to the glass. We learned appearances
meant more than a little. Tonight, above our heads,
the stars realign, revise our definition of Cassiopeia.
Down the street, my friend wrongly believes
she goes unnoticed. She is losing a battle
with her brain. Tomorrow is a new day,
I tell her when she calls, not sure which me is talking,
whether I believe him. Somewhere, an engine sputters
and fails. Like so much else, its energy no longer
factors into the scheme of things. Tomorrow,
hardly anything has changed, yet nothing
will ever be the same again, not for my friend
curled up on her kitchen tile, not for me remembering
my grandfather gutting trout: I was a boy,
I couldn't tell whose blood it was. If only
she had the right pills. If only she could see
what we meant to say. Morning comes
sooner than you'd think, I tell her. It answers us
with its hangovers, its glories and acid rain.
Across the country, weathervanes in a tizzy.
My love, take this as a token
of my depreciation, and forgive me what I said
when I was drunk. I wanted you to kiss me
without my saying so. Let's go downtown
and receive what little the harbor lights afford. Hurry.
The waves are already rising against the dock.

FOUR

Composition in Red

I decided to draw a bird into the foliage
of the page. First, according to habit,
I outlined a wing. Next, I traced the egg-
shaped body and head, the tail feather,
the split triangular beak. Already, the bird
was becoming restless, it would be difficult
to shade. Quickly I filled in the plumage
and added a mask. What had started elusive,
vague as breath, had narrowed,
defined itself on a bough.

I crowned it. Again:
a cardinal.

Why? No longer mine, it assumed its redness
against a backdrop of swollen clouds.
But I was wingless. I watched it, reduced
by its flight. I knew I could not
follow it to the place it had come from.

Nocturne

Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see.

Behind each painting: The possibility of a safe holding locks of hair: Presumably:
The murmuring outside is the river: Presumably: Her face had turned blue

Beneath the shroud: Indefinite: Unfamiliar: On the bridge
He painted a lion: Regal: Bored: A winged man homesick for:

From the bridge she flew: A swan into the Sambre: Presumably:
It was her body: Which they dragged onto the bank: Bloated: Waterlogged:

Which they did not let him see: Vanishing: Clinging to her breasts: The night
Stood up around him: All of the men like spies in bowler hats: Black overcoats:

Look: Through the painting: Through the window: Now they are falling
From the sky like rain: Apparently: Impossibly: For no reason: Precisely so:

Watermark

Strange things are happening in the sky again.
Like a bullet, a purple stork streaks overhead,
dangling an anvil on fishing line from its beak.
The afternoon sun rubs shoulders with the moon.
An enormous pair of scissors is slicing up
the origami clouds, the remnants of which
filter down like factory ash, piling up
on the shiny hoods congregating in overflow lots.
Would it comfort you if I said it was all a dream,
just something you ate? Could you finally approach
that crowd of strangers? There are alternatives: ask
that white tiger about its designs, what it's doing here
on the wrong side of town. Try to make sense
of things, see how far that gets you. Believe me,
I know the feeling of chasing a ball down an alley
only to forget which fence was yours,
and it seems like only yesterday you left
your binoculars beside an anthill, traded in
your old records for a list of synonyms. But
I still don't understand it, this preoccupation
with maps, which often seems inescapable
no matter which outfit we fashion for ourselves.
It's funny, really, when you think about it.
As if you could rectify your situation
by simply naming where you are, or get
in the ocean's good graces by measuring
all the rain we've had this year.

Cease and Desist

Taken at face value, the rooftop stripped of shingles
is a sieve. Make of this what you will. In any case
our deal with the dirt will settle things: her long-
anticipated flight,

his skull's competing polyphonies,
all our songs—the ditties we bought on sale, tried on,
found out didn't fit, forgot. Someone taught me
bodies in motion keep moving, but I've seen them
slowly circle a crippled yearling in the field, and
there's where it gets hard

for me: imagining
waking up alone on a hot air balloon.

There it is, the wide bend in the river ahead,
manic current somersaulting toward its estuary,
guaranteed

no mercy from the moon. Perhaps
it goes like this: soon you'll see a breezeless
quiver run through the beetle-browed pines.
You'll feel your bare wrist stung by snow, flung
like dust off a beaten rug from

the clouds,
clouds that—as a matter of fact, clouds just like
those clouds, which all afternoon have been hanging
out in the troposphere, posing as someone's breath.

Jamais Vu

And in the car, my face pressed against November glass?
I wrote each thing she said on a post-it note,
I hid them inside a hollowed-out cinder block. But would it ever
appear at the feeder, as they'd promised it would,
as it had in the Christmas dream?
What I miss I find
eventually frosted in silence,
in my pocket pulled out of yesterday's wash
with the Budapest key ring, the rusted quarters,
the penny with no face. There are moments
that melt like snow through finger ravines, and moments
that stand stock-still in the street. Live wires
fallen across the bridge, dead wasp twitching on the path.
Trench coat full of chocolate bars and nails. Thank you,
she kept saying to me, thank you
for sliding the noose from my neck.
All winter we lay in the swing.
All that practice writing gibberish with a glow stick in the sand,
still I spill the song like wine across the sheet.
All the photographs candle-curved.
But tell me again my favorite part,
where the waited-for, barely believed-in shining thing
walks out of the forest fire,
the secret draped around its neck. Divine
as waking to a hand against your cheek, and autumn drifting
through the punctured screen. From the refrigerator,
blue construction paper waves. Dust settles over the plastic
sofa coffins in our home.
No time worth the price of nothingness.
O my city, your colors and sounds
and all the blinking lights, hello, we've come back! For years
I walked blindfolded by their white and black
checkerboard scarf, but on the day
the piñata burst open, hummingbirds swarmed
from the entry wound like nightly rumors
of bats from under the bridge.
Believe me: at that instant my stature
was of such little worth... Indian-style in the wet green grass,
I sat and wept like nothing—like it was absolutely nothing for me
to see the sky falling over the hills
and bleeding across the fenced-in fields, the trees
at attention dripping paint, sprouting armies of doves like nothing
we'd seen so many times before.

Ghost Town

Say we were dead. What name would we give
 this endless loitering in grocery aisles?
What if we were ghosts? Would anything change?
 Would we no longer celebrate ourselves
by tossing empty forties off the roof?
 Maybe we've been recycled, come back grayer,
translucent, even more confused: not halves
 of once-connected selves, or wind-blown shades,
but slant rhymes of our lives already lived.
 So we roam old haunts—that karaoke bar
on Sixth, the Comal River where we floated
 inner tubes, the ranch house with the porch...
One night, sitting on the steps, I held someone
 and heard her murmur distantly *I can't*
explain this feeling, this—what? I wonder.
 Will we ever know better?

White Room

Sterile isn't quite the word
for his sense of the walls; neither
a hare's tail, nor snow: the man
thinks this to himself, sitting
in the chair in the center of
the room. His gown has no color.
He listens to the voices and
wonders who keeps piping them
in from the invisible speakers
which over time he has decided
must be placed in the elbows of
the room, where the ceiling meets
the right-angled walls. How did I
get here? What is my name?

He toes his house shoes against
the legs of the chair. Sometimes
he sees what might be the rectangle
of a door sketched into the wall
directly to his left. The doorknob
shaped like a plum. Not a plum,
he thinks, looking at the knob
which again clarifies itself
on the wall, but an orange.
Though he would like to leave
the room, he does not bother
to stand and try the door,
because it is late, he is tired, and
the artist erased his hands years ago.

Spring Bulletin

Then, one afternoon, the sirens stopped.
Soon after, spring resurrected itself as bluebonnets,
new styles. Jazz was back that year,
the blues was out. Everywhere: sunlight on bare knees.
Still, winter spoke to us sometimes
through its lexicon of vanishings, its lingering pull
of icicles like phantom limbs on trees. Something
vaguely unsettling about the quality of air.
Something about the humidity that left us
glancing over our shoulders when we mowed the lawn.
Now that we can go outside again,
one wonders as a result—Should I buy that ticket
to the mountains? Should I become a postman after all?
Or should we wait a little longer,
until the telegram arrives? Yes,
we thought to ourselves, we'll sit right here. No reason
to feel guilty. It's a lot to think about: holes to paper over, stains
to scrub from dresses
never worn. On days like this one,
sitting among the trees with their makeup on, it may be normal
or not to think *Now I see, all this time*
I have never loved anyone. Not the way they do in films,
saturated with color, wearing fancy clothes
at the beach, clutching daggers.
It's colder here than you imagined. We're always getting it wrong.
Three birthdays since you spoke
to her, and then one April morning she called, *Quick*
it's happening just like they said. How did she get this number?
Sure enough, on every channel:
the elk were walking slowly across the bridge,
news helicopters buzzing around like flies.
In preparation, all the city's hearses lined up around the block,
each driver waiting his turn
to lay on the horn. But all you could think about
were the fireworks at the county fair,
where, years ago, you held the giant red mallet,
standing on stacked bales of hay at evening, turning first
to make sure she was watching.

2

Epilogue

In the film, the boy hears a crash and the leaf-
blower drops. In my room, a gasoline can. Swans
on a crystal lake in a country that is not this one.
Figure the heart as a suitcase. A music box.
Autumn blown every which way. It's rained

like hell for weeks, but the cracked mug you left
on the fencepost won't fill. This has been
said before. Please: on the day these feet leave
the earth, do not console yourself with flight.
Excuse me, this is my stop. I've tried to be small.

Notes

“Riches Ready”:

The title comes from Caliban’s speech in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare (III.ii.134-42).

“Vardaman”:

The epigraph comes from *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner.

“There and Back Ode”:

The epigraph comes from “Lives of the Dead” by Dean Young, from *Skid*.

“Nocturne”:

The epigraph is attributed to René Magritte from a 1965 radio interview with Jean Neyens, cited in Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, trans. Richard Millen (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979). The poem draws from Magritte’s biography and alludes to several of his paintings.

“There it is the young street”:

The title comes from “Zone” by Guillaume Apollinaire, translated by Samuel Beckett.

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POETRY IN PERIODICALS

<i>West Branch</i> (forthcoming)	“To Whoever Broke into My Car”
<i>Parcel</i> (forthcoming)	“To Sadness”
<i>The Journal</i> (forthcoming)	“There and Back Ode”
<i>Devil’s Lake</i> (forthcoming)	“Spring Bulletin”
<i>Puerto del Sol</i> (forthcoming)	“Fair Day Fantasia”
<i>The Cincinnati Review</i> (forthcoming)	“Ghost Town”
<i>Redivider</i> (forthcoming)	“Lament at Gettysburg”
<i>Salamander</i> (forthcoming)	“Fermata”
<i>American Literary Review</i> (forthcoming)	“Wavelength”
<i>Cream City Review</i> (forthcoming)	“Vardaman”
<i>Colorado Review</i> (forthcoming)	“Telltale”
<i>Subtropics</i> (forthcoming)	“Today’s Forecast” “Composition in Red”
<i>New Ohio Review</i> 15 (Spring 2014)	“At the Precise Moment of Your Awakening”

<i>Weave Magazine</i> 10 (January 2014)	“Jamais Vu”
<i>The Paris-American</i> (January 2014)	“Dream” “Because”
<i>Tar River Poetry</i> 53.1 (Fall 2013)	“Live Oak on Fire” “Flame Maple”
<i>Hayden’s Ferry Review</i> 53 (Fall/Winter 2013)	“Nocturne”
<i>32 Poems</i> 11.2 (Fall/Winter 2013)	“Riches Ready”
<i>diode</i> 6.3 (Fall 2013)	“Parable” and “Cause of Death”
<i>New Orleans Review</i> Web Feature (October 2013)	“Dialectic”
<i>Bateau</i> 4.2 (Fall 2011)	“Maybe They Will Sing for Us Tomorrow”
<i>Washington Square</i> 28 (Summer/Fall 2011)	“Still Life of Hummingbird”

HONORS AND AWARDS

2014:	Archives Fellowship, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University
2013:	Finalist, Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship, Poetry Foundation Finalist, 30 Below Story and Poetry Contest, <i>Narrative</i> M.A./M.F.A./Ph.D. Scholarship, Sewanee Writers’ Conference
2012:	Owen Scholars Fellowship, Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars
2009:	Phi Beta Kappa, Alpha of Texas Janet Guthrie Andrews Endowed Presidential Scholarship in English, The University of Texas at Austin Mr. and Mrs. Marvin K. Collie Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Humanities, The University of Texas at Austin 1 st Place, Burleson and Thaman Writing Contest in Poetry, The University of Texas at Austin
2008:	Stanley N. Werbow Memorial Scholarship in Humanities, The University of Texas at Austin

SELECTED PROSE

“A Rift Between the Lines: On Michael Hamolka’s ‘Lake House.’” *32 Poems* Contributor’s Marginalia. February 3, 2013

“Honor, Rebellion, and Camus’s Absurd in the Works of William Faulkner.” Submitted in partial requirement for Special Honors in English, The University of Texas at Austin, May 2010

TEACHING

Johns Hopkins University, Instructor (2012-14)
Introduction to Fiction and Poetry I (Fall 2012, Spring 2013)
Introduction to Fiction and Poetry II (Fall 2013, Spring 2014)
Poetry Breaking the Rule (Winter 2013)

MASTER CLASSES

2013: Mark Strand and A.E. Stallings: Sewanee Writers' Conference
2010: Dean Young: Directed Study on Poetry, The University of Texas at Austin

SELECTED READINGS

Poetry Reading: Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, April 2014
Poetry Reading: "Hey You Come Back!" Baltimore, Maryland, October 2013
Poetry Reading: Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, October 2013
Poetry Reading: Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, March 2013
Poetry Reading: Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, September 2012

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

Editorial Assistant, *32 Poems*, 2013—
Press Intern, United States Senator Mary Landrieu, 2012
Co-Editor/Editor-in-Chief, *Echo*, 2008-2010

SERVICE

Archives Fellow, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, 2014—
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Archives Intern, American and British Literature Collections, Harry Ransom Humanities
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