

Saving daylight

by

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Waiting for Dawn

A Call to Dreams

Is it so hard
to enter a willing body?
I'm here, horizontal and open-
minded as any, yet
silence
and not so much as
your whisper for me.

If water,
my cupped hands
forever pull back
empty black.
If lover,
your absence has left
a hollow in the cold
bedspace by me.

My temple beats thick
in small hours,
the tongue-click ticking
of fictitious words
slinging off seconds
into irretrievable night,
pursed lips popping
flurries of punches,
attacking the air
where you should be.

Tongue-tipped lead
wisps through my room,
a ghost, a half-
formed memory of you.
Feed on me, ride
in the space between cells
like the night-blue current
arcs for the circuit.

This is where you belong,
this home waits for you.
I breathe the deep breath,
the calming breath,
the long breath that lingers
in the lungs.
You will come, you will come.

The Parade

The show started quite grandly,
ersatz heartbeat of marching feet
down the asphalt causeway,
drums and trumpets blowing
over cotton candy and souvenirs.
Floats cascaded paper ribbons
around the square. Clowns wove
through the crowd like old secrets.
The firetruck rolled along proudly,
flashed, blared, echoed
through downtown.
The mayor waved and smiled
next to Homecoming Queen,
who waved and smiled
and whispered to the mayor.
A three-year-old kneeled
at the town bank and watched with awe
as the worm inched upside the brick wall.

Reflex

I spasm poetry,
twitch it off my pen
like others swat flies
or gag on stench.

It seizes me,
steals breath until I
sweat words in a
fevered rush.

We are extremes fused
in a circuit of expression.
I am in it, it in me,
an accidental marriage
of flesh and idea,
the twilight weaving
of smoke and blood.

The alchemy of art
sparks behind the eyes.
It burns a ragged
path through muscle.
Here,
in the genetics of spirit,
of pens pulled taut,
we are words.

Des Moines International Airport, at first sight

This is no Houston Hobby, no Laganardia, no LAX.
Don't miss the two-by-three-foot brown sign with its little
white arrow pointing to the unprotected left turn.

A short walk from the parking ramp brings you to the entrance
where herds of well-packed, tired travelers bemoan the crashed
Northwest computer and the apologetic attendants.

An old man in overalls drags his fallen arches through Terminal
B to the gate where his visiting daughter arrives. She left home
after graduation in search of better prospects.

In the sky, a Boston man catching a connecting flight
marvels at the lines and intersections of the Midwest grid,
the miles and miles of unhappy squares.

Moving to Iowa

I woke from a drowning dream,
my crooked arms flying, untamed
as these cackling Midwest crows
struck dumb from early snow.
My heavy legs tread sleep,
kicking at the shape
of dream-stained creatures in my bed.

I spilled out into blue daylight,
still choking on bits of night,
determined to build
some defense against the pale
light of morning,
this strange way of drowning.
Waking in this space puts fears in my head.

Or I could be wrong.
Was it a dream all along,
this incredible open space,
the snow and crows that chase
the blue across the sky,
the thick black of night
that hangs heavy as lead?

I have no word for this,
no mantra or phrase
to slow down this blue sky engine.
I live in a peregrine season,
a world of shaking sky
and windblown birds at play.
Who knows what makes a blackbird sing?

Every morning the new fear,
that huge blue sky leering
down on me, down on me, down
to the very earth, that damn
blue everywhere, the heavy steel pressing

in, an inescapable net pinning
me to the ground. The open sky stings.

This is no dream. I don't believe
I can live on this ocean of land, or dive
deep to its murky hearth
and hide there, curling myself
into some safe cave, a blanket
of shadows clear from the cast of the net,
hidden from the awful flap of the dumb-struck crow's wings.

Jasmine Watts from Arizona was here 6/27/00

– graffiti found on a covered bridge in Iowa

How many bridges did you visit, Jasmine,
with your sharpie and your fine penmanship?

I can see you (isn't that what you wanted?)
packing into the car with the family
on a dry mid-summer morning,
leaving Tucson behind you in the dust.

I bet I could trace your ink
scrawling across America
like I trace the curve of your 'J'
here on this bridge with my finger.

But covered bridges are scarce, Jasmine.
How did you live through Kansas?
Would I find your mark on a rest-stop picnic table
somewhere between Bucklin and Pratt?

Are you carved into a young pine, Jasmine,
somewhere in east Texas, where years
from now your pen-knife monument
will tower above everyone's heads?

Or are you only immortal here,
in Madison County, on a handful
of red bridges that even now
see lines of visitors every day?

City Boy

Midwest fields swallow
landmarks for lunch.
Their bellies roll over
horizons. Old farmhouses
are snacks nibbled through
the years, a fencepost here,
an overhang there, the odd
shingle or chimney brick.

Roads split this grid
like veins, feed these
cells of earth. The fields
never yield their space.

I am a city boy, always
have been. Bring on the cement,
scrape the sky, choke these
mouths with asphalt,
every one a welcome cancer.

Motel Christmas '95, or The Perils of a Snoring Father

After midnight complete insanity scribbling
in a motel bathroom to the rumble
of bison snoring no sleep headache
gathering steam like a black train
shuffling off to nowhere non-stop
whistle scream through the middle of my skull.
Bodies shift to quickburn REM
while my eyes can't blink
onto dreams over thundering clack
of black sky steam engine breathing.
Hectic white fleck paint on four walls
underneath dead white light like white hot stars.
Bodies rustle scratch into sleep while
I sit on a closed toilet wishing
for anything to help me to unconsciousness.

My fault all this noise, this scribbling.
My fault the 'What's wrong' repetitions,
the angry silences of morning.
I can't rest my head on apologies.
My fault the tense body of thinking.
My fault life.

Want to grab hammer smash the air to stillness,
monster kill spring from under beds
like the dreams I wish on them.
Wish myself just 5 hours of silent night
holy night of anything but this.
Hot morning stench breath burns my throat,
flames my head of the night before,
insanes me of deprivation.
Shove the ear plugs and cotton balls,
and while you're at it, shut up
so I can get 4 hours.
I could staple your damn blue eyes open,
father or not,
for just 3 hours.

Midnight in Paris

but outside my window, Texas
is dusk and cold.

You're dancing in some street
while I stare out my window.
Later, you'll stand on a balcony
overlooking a strange river,
a silhouette scratched
into a perfect white moon.

Paris is romance,
but sitting at my desk it's Tuesday
and the work is hard.
My hands haven't moved for so long
they don't feel like hands anymore.
But a heart pumps against these ribs,
and I will see to it
that you hear its beat
calling you to join me beneath this cratered moon.

Short Poem on Being Alone

In the halogen hours,
 my room is too big.
I feel like a fool,
 but your name brings the walls
closer,
 fills the chasm between here and
 the door.
Darkness doesn't scare me. Darkness
 without you does.

Verse, Chorus

This guitar is so old
it could play the song without me.
Listen closely. The strings hum
against the smooth body.

The chords roll
around inside, vowels
waiting to be plucked
by my forgetful fingers.

Let my forgetful fingers
curl around yours. Let
the vowels roll out
in their own time.

Listen to the quiet
hum against the body.

Rattling

You won't sleep well here.
The heater rattles all night,
trains come and go
like clumsy-footed thieves,
neighbors slam doors all hours.

The echoes will shuffle and scratch
their way into your dreams, drag
their airy weight over your sleep.
You'll only lie here with me
counting breaths until dawn.

So lie here, then, in this circus
of creaking foundations and shifting
earth. Roll with me in fitful sleep
until the pale light of morning
chases away the rattling night.

Old Men, Old Women

What is in the eyes, a night-
blue current that passes from
one to the other? They speak
a twin language cultivated
in all these years together.

What is it when she takes his hand,
frail and light like a feather, saying
absolutely nothing? Still, some
species of speech passes between
them, some unseen tongue whispers.

Invocation

I call on you, my long-entrusted muse,
to fashion my fumbling pen with new wings,
to place your steady flame upon my fuse.

Without your hand, lines strangle in a noose,
thoughts resume their penetrating sting.
I call on you, my long-entrusted muse.

The light subsides, and swift night knows its cue;
when darkness clings, I offer anything
to place your steady flame upon my fuse.

As loyal servants know their rank and choose
to lower their eyes in presence of kings,
I call on you, my long-entrusted muse.

Inspire me and set my spirit loose,
come forth to find my hanging heart begging
to place your steady flame upon my fuse.

I pray to you in secret whispers whose
deep pleadings long to hear your sweet voice sing.
I look to you, my resurrected muse.
Come, place your steady flame upon my fuse.

Small Forever

San Antonio Before We Kissed

We stood on the bridge just inches closer
than friends amid music and laughter.
Our hands did not touch, not once.

The air was thick and cool
on this Riverwalk February night
as we counted silently to ourselves.

The oh-so-tiny inches between us
filled with guitar and light.
We counted drum beats in groups of four,

heartbeats and breaths as they rushed
into our bodies and escaped again
into the mingled air. And yes,

the sky was black, but here
the light on your face and hands
glowed white and yellow and red

and the slap of water on the ferries
passing below was like a chord
strummed for us, a serenade

careening off the stone bank through a haze
of noise and color to accompany us.
We counted stones and seconds

and we counted one, two, and jumped
into drink, another conversation,
anything to keep hold of this night,

to urge on our water-slap song,
that one chord flying furiously into the air,
spinning past us up to uncounted stars.

Never Again

It was the soft curve
of her throat that started
me, some slope of skin
that slid under the smooth
folds of her dress.

Overhead, the clouds
cut into the night sky
like cool bruises. Her eyes bit
into the small space between us.
Our breath hitched
and stuttered. Irregular beats
of air pressed against our lips.

I say this to tell you
her kiss has ruined me.

Learning to Touch

When winter starts, the air
is dry as our lips. We become
walking lightning rods.
Every faucet, car handle, doorknob
threatens us with grounding.

An old couple in the lobby
of a doctor's office leans in to kiss.
Her hand lands softly on his chest,
his fingers feather her shoulder
a moment before lips touch.

And clumsy us, we fall toward each
other, pinprick sparks jumping from mouth
to mouth, always forgetting. Forgetting
the importance of a touch, the soft
necessity of hands reaching out.

When we are that couple, we'll have learned
to slow our mouths eager for friction,
to master the everyday alchemy
of charged touch, but to remember
forgetfulness when winter quits.

Quickburn

Matchmakers

know the rules.

Friction. Ignition.

The white-hot flame
of something new. Then,
quiet, waiting, breath held
to see if it sustains.

Meanwhile, the sulfur lingers,
the taste of a bitten tongue.

Fever

There is a moment
when you come to lie beside me.
My heavy eyes make out a white dress
in the darkness, how it trails behind you, a comet.

There is a moment when nothing moves
but the wind across pliant limbs.
Nothing moves but blood in the hollow of my chest.

There is a moment
when even the wind quiets. Your lips
seek the heat of my forehead,
cool stars in the darkness.

Roadtrip in February

Ice as far as I can see.
Snow and sleet and glass-stained trees
seize into a panoply.

White sheets form a shining sea
freezing the horizon. The
driver's window reflects me.

Inside the car you sleep away
the miles as I watch the road.
Our breathing helps to keep us warm.

You dream, I hope, for longer days.
The cold night stars begin to fade.
The road will shortly bring us home.

What She Said

*I want to see what's out there,
dip my feet into strange rivers.*

The trees moaned with the weight
of a late afternoon breeze, and
somewhere unseen, a dog barked.

*I want to leave. You won't
come with me, I know.*

A cardinal landed on the fence,
then took flight again. Houses
deadened the nearby roar of cars.

*You can't argue me out of this
again. It's not working.*

She sometimes smiled in her sleep,
dreaming of better things. I thought
maybe I should say something.

At the Station, Morning

Waiting for the five-fifteen,
a broken watch around my wrist—
this loneliness won't give me rest.
I'm standing sentry for the sun.

I feel the light will never come.
She quit me in this morning mist
waiting for the five-fifteen,
a broken watch around my wrist.

I didn't speak. No words would come.
What could I say to make this last?
The waking sun begins to cast
a shadow on the coming train.
Waiting for the five-fifteen,
a broken watch around my wrist.

In the Upstairs Hallway

I was making room in the closet,
looking for things I didn't need.
I came across a box taped
and tucked into the corner,
buried behind an old trunk and
some suits that don't fit anymore.

Sometimes I think the walls
remember your laughter
and the dry stomp of your bare feet
has soaked into the upstairs hallway,
where we spent so many long nights
listening to the stars circle above us.

The neighbor's dog barks a lot at night.
The house creaks and shifts
on its foundation, ice tumbles in the freezer
at odd hours, overgrown branches scrape
the walls. There's no sound of breathing
in the dark next to me. It's quiet.

I don't use the air conditioning as much
and a few picture frames hang crooked
in the upstairs hallway. Today
I had some free time, and in the closet
I found one earring and a box of letters.

Not This Way

Nikki writes poems about flowers and cats.
Her legs dangle off the balcony. The late sun
squints down the empty street onto her.
Their dinner is burning.

Nikki sees dust glinting in sunlight.
So like newborn stars, she thinks.
There is a word for this.

He touches her face, his hand
a bloom of red petals in season.
He whispers over the smoke alarm.
It's cold. Come inside.
The dust, the word, the poem has gone astray.

Bank Line, Noon Saturday

The clock ticks away
the morning's final seconds
while we stand here,
thinking of bills, groceries, rent.

The pack of us,
but for some broken clock,
some traffic jam, some lingered
kiss, could be park-bound
by now, having lunch, swatting flies,
smoothing sunscreen liberally
on our lover's neck.

But here we are,
endorsed checks curling
in our clammy hands,
focused breath held in the heat
of our waiting. Waiting to be
through with this line, waiting to spill
back into the bloodstream
of what calls beyond
these locked doors.

Tuesday, 3:00

It was coming. I knew it.
The trees said so.
They spoke to me of thirst.
They said wait. Listen.

I stood in the dust,
and past the cars,
the forgotten bulldozer
and scattered cicadas,
the trees filled with their waiting.

The silence was the pause
between heartbeats, the moment
of suspension between two worlds.

Every sidewalk-crack blade of grass
was green and still.
Each evergreen hung in the air,
thick and sweet,
leaning in to be seduced.

Overhead, the sun
slanted and faded.
A cool bruise of clouds rolled
slowly over the horizon.
This was love.

On Giving Blood

I felt a little like Jesus,
the familiar sting
of the needle we've all felt.
I spent the day thinking of you,
always thinking of you,
and it didn't matter who you were.

This is my body,
this is my blood,
do this in remembrance of me.

No wine is sweeter,
no bread more filling
than the communion we now have.

When you feel me rush into you,
think of storms and floods,
of barriers broken.
Take a deep breath under those clouds,
the sun will come soon enough.

No, Sleep, Not Yet

I am not tired I am not tired I am not
going to give in so early tonight.
I'll fight with every fiber and muscle and nerve
and swerve your course with every possible delay.

I'll sway your favor with words, drown you in ink.
I think you love me too much. Yes, much
too much for any good. Yet every hour I push your
sour rim from my lips, only to have you return.

I am not tired I am not tired I am not
bowing my head to a shadow in the wind
who bends my thoughts until they dip into the dark
sparkless water, that cold deep well of sleep.

Keep your promises off my body. The dreams
you offer mean nothing to me. Don't
you see? I am not tired, I am not
ready. The world is too much for sleep.

Took a Second

to look into the mirror,
I hadn't done it in weeks, not the slow
careful look that we do by routine.

Some strange person stared back,
a wide-eyed man short on sleep
in a permanent hurry.

A fractured grid of red lines
made a map across the unhappy
country of his eyes.

His hair, a month overgrown and sloppy,
hung in tired limp strands,
so many lost kite strings.

So many other things were abandoned
on him, a patchwork of stubble,
the wreckage of lines and creases.

I took a second look,
and in that second saw what time
was doing while I was gone.

Standing at a Urinal with an Old Man

He doesn't use his hands,
leans in like a museum-goer
looking at high art.
His balance amazing,
the stream arcs against the waterfall wall,

his yellow and orange tie so
vertical, dangling
to gravity's insistence.

Does he ever use his hands
to make love, to make toast?
Does his wife whisper
"Touch me" as their grandfather
clock strikes eleven?

And does he, wordlessly,
succumb to her pleading?
Is his touch rough, abrupt,
or is everything fragile for him?

As I use my I'm-not-looking look,
he finishes,
zips with ease, exits.

I'm left with these hands
cold in the chrome sink,
this chore of life,
the flushing echoing off tile walls.

Faith in Numbers

I.

I've heard of tribes in North Africa
trained to smell animal urine at forty paces
and tell what species left the mark.

They do it as easily as we shift
gears or simplify fractions.

They live growing closer to the earth
while we busy ourselves fighting gravity
and meting order out into the world.

For us there is always something smaller,
always an answer in something larger.

II.

These tribes know plants and seasons
so well that science is useless.

Their best technology is a stone ax.

They are not afraid of the dark.

While we chase away shadows
from corners and quantify reactions,
they don't hunger for reasons.

They bury their dead without prayers
and stare unblinking at Venus.

In places, there is fire without spark.

I Remember

My dark-haired professor
had a voice smooth as night.
It let you know this was nothing new.
She never offered up her own writing
in spite of how exacting her commentary was,
how true. I remember her long neck,

the scar she showed us the last week of class.
A stab scar. She nearly died that night in some city
from a mugger who didn't even take her purse.
I never pictured blood when she told that story,
never saw the stained concrete, the gore.
Just that scar.

In a book years later I found her name.
Her poetry was about all this. That night.
That man (in a red sweater, she remembers).
Waiting on the ground for the ambulance.
Lights. Sirens. A thin film of hate
for the hand, arm and body that launched the knife.

The Old House on the Hill

Afraid to even speak,
not moving, not breathing,
they stood at the Gothic doorway
of the old house on the hill.

Not moving, not breathing,
the windows busted and boarded up
in the old house on the hill
and the children missing for weeks.

The windows busted and boarded up,
shards of glass hanging like cut skin,
the children missing for weeks and
the odd quiet man alone in the old house.

Shards of glass hanging like cut skin
and the strange smell of candy and flowers,
the odd quiet man alone in the old house
and the sound that sound what is that sound?

So strange the smell of candy and flowers,
such shifting shadows here
and the sound what is that sound
clinging still to these old walls?

Such shifting shadows here and
police checking muffled screams at night
clinging still to these old walls,
nothing more than an empty shell.

The police and the muffled screams at night
drifting down the hill from the old house,
nothing more than an empty shell except
for the lonely unsmiling man with knives.

They stood at the Gothic doorway
afraid to even speak.

Saving Daylight

Mother in Wartime

She greets her flowers at the rising sun.
 They bloom brightly in careful rows,
 eager to meet the morning.
 She keeps newspaper clippings buried
 in the yard. She only reads the headlines.
 The ink sometimes runs from tears.

The mail comes early today. She tears
 open the letter, squints in the sun,
 reads the carefully composed lines.
 She's surrounded by roses.
 They've been conditioned to bear
 anything. She reads in the pale light of morning.

She's always loved the morning,
 her blossoms bright on tiers
 built with the care of her own bare
 hands. She keeps her son's
 picture in her pocket, the red rose
 petals in his lapel forever in season. Line

after line the letter unfolds. Line
 after line the words spill into the morning
 like rain. The sun's rays
 form prisms through the tears.
 The growing morning sun
 begins to burn against her bare

skin. She has barely
 moved. These lines
 are the last she'll read of her son,
 how he went marching into the morning,
 how even at the end there were no tears,
 how he carried with him this dried rose.

She collapses among her roses.
The letter is too much weight to bear.
She quietly catches the tears
on the letter's blurring lines.
She stays long into the morning
under the hot, hot sun.

Her Faint Voice

These are the things
I remember: how songs bring
memories rushing back, how a fire
felt one cold night long ago, how a tired
old man once had a wife whose smile turned
everything into something good, even while she burned
with stubborn fever.

That night the stars kept their company in the dark
when she sat up, her eyes alive with spark.
For a moment, she looked as vibrant as on our wedding day.
She rose from the bed and turned to me to say
she wished we could linger, to delay our needed rest.
She flickered in my arms, her face a flame against my chest.

I dreamed she'd be well soon, a dream threaded with smoke.
She clung to me, a vine held fast to oak
and hummed a tune, some childhood memory.
Her voice filled the room and lifted the melody
so that we floated with it, weaving through the rafters
like leaves on the wind. My heart ached with laughter
that we could dance again.

The fire faded to embers and a stillness took the air.
Even now I remember her sweet auburn hair
glancing my cheek as she whispered the song's soft end.
I laid her on the bed hoping rest would mend
her burning body. I stayed awake. It wasn't long
before I knew that was her last song.

Chimneys cascade their frayed ribbons into the night
while I watch the autumn leaves dissolve into flight.
The days grow shorter. The wind reacquaints
itself with the hills. I swear I hear her faint
voice as it still touches that final song,
then recedes like fog along
the darkened path.

The Note

Sean, why
the gun
and locked
room on
Tuesday morning
Junior year
when you should
have been in
Spanish class
conjugating
'to sleep'?

Your dad
mule-kicked
the door
and saw first
the red-gray
spray across
the wall,
then the
black hole in
the sheetrock.
No,

it wasn't
pretty, Sean.
Your mom,
gasping like
a fish,
stumbled
outside to
vomit in
the birdbath.
A decade later
a new family,

freshly landscaped
yard, thick coat
of white paint,
Barney poster,
interior doors
with no locks.
Police
never could
read the ink
through the blood-
smeared note you left.

The Farmhouse

The slats on the porch rail,
 cracked like broken teeth,
 chew on stale secrets.
Past the door with one hinge missing,
 the air hints of stagnant water,
 of forgotten bread and old flowers.
On an oak dinner table,
 a yellowed family photo -
 folded in half - rests like a teepee,
 the wife's image staring into the fireplace,
 the husband's glaring out the window.
In the field, the crows aren't scared anymore
 by the stuffed plaid shirt
 hung on the farmer's cross,
 the rotting pumpkin head and straw body.

Saving Daylight

If I rewind the clock, gather these pebbles of time
together in an old jar, we'll just have the same fight
all over again. I'll say the same wrong things.

And when the phone rings this time,
it will still be the same bad news,
Grandpa whittled away by cancer.

Maybe I could set everything back two hours,
or a day or a year, and make time undo
all the mistakes and missteps that undo us.

Or let me push those heavy hands forward,
spin the Earth like a big blue roulette ball
to the point where all pain stops.

Leveling

In this club, jazz once swayed from glistening saxes. Streamers sang off the balcony overlooking the electric city. Everything was young, fresh, wide-eyed. Drums hit and beat and pulsed like hearts on fire. Horns blared, rubbed rough over skin in a breathless caress of thick blue notes.

Pianos and people swooned, swinging, working in the fever of ever-ticking seconds, stretching each measured minute, always reaching, eager fingers drawn from shaded corners, splayed in hot array, a complex of jet shadows and cerulean light. Smoke wrapped gently around bodies steeped in a hunger to stay the night.

The gray building now fades and whispers.
The dancing and music are only memories.
The foreman has plugged wires to its heart
and trailed them out to the whitewashed curb.
His hand is on the lever. He waits to complete the circuit.

Behind the twisted yellow tape the crowd gathers.
The picketers let their hand-painted signs cry
skyward in a unison of unvoiced voices. Noiseless bits
of bitter conflict and outrage raise like fists, hubs
of flesh shaken white and numb. The sweat-

stained workers race to safety. The workers
do only what they are told. The assembly
took what they could: the chandelier, the cornerstone, eight
panes of stained glass, a crate of dinnerware. A crab-
faced grandfather slid these slices of past into his attic.

Trampoline Kids

We jumped through the weekends
and nearly every summer day,
bounding into the sky,
playing Crack the Egg,
coming so close to the edge,
socked feet peeking over the frayed nylon lip.

Then we rested.

Sprawled out like fallen branches,
we looked skyward.
The clouds shaped our thoughts
into faces, dragons, looming mountains.
Each pointing finger woke the surface
and the edge was forgotten,
the danger faded into blue and white.

That was long ago,
the jumping, the sky dreaming,
the shoes sitting discarded while
pines leaned in on us.

When I Came Back from New Hampshire

after Sheenagh Pugh

Everything had paled. It was the sky
I left behind, the dawn and the sky. I
tried saying it, even, but who speaks

the language of lake water, as if every
drop had found its place? Who knows
the alphabet scratched into dirt paths?
Who could speak how the eyes glowed,

how our simple sounds couldn't convey
the vast, wordless blue? How breathing
was like tasting ice cream? When I got back
to Houston and walked out of Hobby,

I got sick on the salt gulf spray
that raised me, and on the thought
that I'd ease back into a world
that couldn't see past the horizon.

Library Hours

From within this universe
of defining moments,
pages upon pages,
books upon books,
shelves upon shelves
of identity and certainty,
this is where it happens
I've never been as defined
as a volume of poetic forms,
never as concrete
as a book on technique,
never this linear.
I've always been identity's curse,
a poet's heart giving life
to a cynic's eye.
The heart embraces blindly,
senses the closeness
as nothing can.
The eye focuses flaw,
pushes details where
broad strokes would do.
So, while one hand inks these words,
the other taps the watch.
I am the eternal contest
between the fermatta and the metronome,
the lingering kiss and the curfew.

A Letter to Her Dad

You are the sun, and though
my orbit stretches out across miles,
know that you are my center.

We share more than our eyes, our smile, our laugh.
We share this circle. It keeps
us together with the everyday alchemy of family.

But words are only placeholders, fish hooks on a line.
All of love is translatable
as the day we found the fox pup lying in the road,

the small body, unmoving. You pulled
the car to the shoulder, took
my hand and walked to where the lost thing was struck.

Always the explainer,
you said the pup's mistake
was straying too far from her father.

Gone

He says he'll sell it all,
tools, guns, plates, furniture.
The farther he throws these bits of home
the lighter load he'll have to carry.

He'll leave behind the walls
he holed up for shelves, pictures, clocks.
He'll leave the holes unfilled
and find a home again.

His heart is the hammer through drywall,
a ten-penny nail driven home.
This is the blood he drips,
a sawdust film wherever he walks.

He's old, he says.
He needs his tools no more
than he needs some damn suit
with a diploma to sign a severance check.

Tour

This town is dying.
There's something wrong
with its heart, I think. See
the square, how the fountain
is cracked and empty? See
the 'space for lease' signs?
Listen to how far the voice
travels, how it tries to fill the street.

Our old house is being torn down.
This one, here, on Ash Drive.
They say the foundation is weak,
that it's better to start over.
Dad shook the walls when he
stumbled in like a wounded bear
late at night. That was long ago.

It's been so long, but here
is where his handprint was,
and here is where he put
his fist through the plaster,
and here is where I buried
the jar when I thought
I finally caught his screaming.

Chores

I.

Their father is sick,
his hair gray and loose
from radiation. He talks
and coughs into the phone
about his lawn, the long
abandoned grass going brown.
He asks his three sons
to take the long trip home
with rakes, brooms, a mower.

II.

The oldest son, red-faced
and laughing, pants sagging,
steals some shade while
the youngest pushes the mower
ahead of his bad knees.
Somewhere in some old
corner of lawn,
the middle son sweeps
every speck of dirt
into a small pile.

III.

Later, at the fold-out table
the four will play dominoes
late into the night.
They'll drink beer
and speak German.
The sons will wander
outside under a country sky
black as tar to sneak cigarettes,
to look over the yard,
to talk about the way
things are going.

Memory for a Grandfather

There was the dirt road
ribboning out ahead,
teasing through piecemealed pastures

and the van, the ugly
brown step-side van
like a mud-stained boot.

On your knee, I steered
the beast with a million miles
of dirt kicking up behind

while you coaxed,
nudged me right,
watched for crossroads.

The scent of your pipe,
the puff of your breath in my ear,
your eye framed in the rearview mirror.

Coming Home

Grandpa called everyone to his bedroom
in the small house in the country
where the air hung with Lysol and old flowers.
A clock ticked, counting off relatives,
their shoulders pressed and carrying such weight.

The twins, just speaking, climbed into his bed
and rested their heads on the pillow with him.
They traded secrets in strange tongues, laughed.
When his laughing stopped,

the room grew bigger for a moment,
everyone had space enough to drop shoulders,
the walls stretched their unseen wall lungs.
Outside, neighbor children ran bases,
somewhere a pie cooled on a window ledge.

Autumn Leaves

The box of Boston's leaves you mailed me
on my birthday has been sitting in the closet
almost three years now. Longer than we went out.
Another box spills over with notes scribbled
on the backs of cash register receipts, Hallmark cards
filled to the edges with hair-thin writing
and the driftwood of memories scrawled across
ticket stubs, photographs and trolley car souvenirs.

Today this pile of the past towered on my unmade bed
like a beautiful unfinished monument,
not ruined because it was never complete to ruin,
just unfinished. I can live
with the unfinishing. I can live
with the consequence of losing you.
I can live knowing your notes
are scratched out on
someone else's wrinkled sheets.

I kept all these things because I fancied it
insult to discard them, figured it a figurative slap
to slip them into a can on the curb.
Today things seem different. Singly, the notes
are nothing but lines on paper, singular bricks
in a brilliant architecture. The can
on the curb is full because the blueprint
that was us is not in a box.
Tomorrow, I'll mail you a leaf
to prove what I've not forgotten.

Boxed In

It's funny how we group things—

After high school.

Before the break-up.

During those odd two years

we didn't speak.

And it's funny how we live

inside these imaginary walls,

as if some era were over,

as if these changes weren't fluid

and we could separate time like pebbles.

It's strange sometimes, remembering

you're still the same person

I met nine years ago,

grew to love in one way

and then another,

a part of me that

isn't quite me:

a poison flower,

the winter sun,

my forceful angel.

There and Back

We've got the map and suitcase,
like we've done so many times,
and as your finger traces our next route,
I'm traveling through yesterdays.

I remember a balcony in some city,
and you a silhouette on a full moon backdrop,
how your hair tapered from the spotlight,
and I, speechless, lingered in the shadows.

I remember a quiet cabin,
waking up early one morning
to hear birds instead of traffic.
You were smiling in your sleep.

I remember five seconds one summer
as you looked out over the water,
how the light sinking into the sea
brought out the burgundy of your eyes.

We'll pack the suitcase, fold the map,
like so many times before,
but I've never cared about the plans,
just what I might see of you.

Weave

The turquoise light in this old truck glows twelve-fifteen and the sound of my loose speedometer cable ticks the miles until I turn onto her street, hoping for her touch. I want to weave with her	Tonight is the aftershock of our extremes. We bounced around each other, trussed our hearts and tabled too worried minds until the burning of being two people was too much. I want to weave with him
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into something new,
an entanglement of grace
and sheets and sweet
loud wordless love.

We are food
for each other
and I have been starving
far too long.
And I have been

driving much too fast and not fast enough, and it's all the same when all I want is her	thinking about the most recent weeks of this courtship game, and I think I want his
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hand on my skin and in
my hand, palms kissing,
our breath mingling
like steam off
two cups of coffee.

The Sun Never Sets on Jim Thorpe

'Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world.'

– King Gustav V of Sweden, at the 1912 Olympics

"Thanks, King."

– Jim Thorpe

You kicked up dirt for miles and years, Jim.
Track, baseball, football, gold medals,
the fastest thing on two legs, they said.

Now you lie in Jim Thorpe, PA, which used
to be called Mauch Chunk and East Mauch Chunk.

Can we find you here, roaming the hike trails,
pounding cleats to the turf in a rhythmic beat?
Do you round third with the summer boys?

The town celebrates you with parades, floats.
Grade schoolers sell T-shirts with your name.

The tourists don't know you never set one
lightning step here or hit a homer over the high
school wall that bears your name like a badge.

They don't know Patsy sold you like cordwood,
swapped your body for cash to the highest bidder.

Your sons want to bring you home, Jim,
give you back to the red Oklahoma earth,
help you find your fathers and mothers.

They say you're not at rest, that your soul
wanders the fields. You never could sit still.