



SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW



SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW

AN INDEPENDENT POETRY MAGAZINE

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NOT A HOLOCAUST POEM

This is about happy thoughts & puppy dogs & golden fields of wheat,
 & nothing's lurking in those fields,
no hidden message threatening to break the peace & quiet,
 no murderers stalking in the shadows,

& even the shadows are comforting, their darkness offering
 forgetfulness & sleep.

No unexpected illnesses hide here,
no rising fevers incapable of being broken by antibiotics
 or by buckets of ice,

 & even these buckets of ice
are only used to keep the champagne chilled
 or to engage the curiosity
 of the previously-mentioned puppy dogs.

No fiancées will disappear, inexplicably taken from us
 in the confusion of smoke & fire,
 leaving us
to make sense of lives we must now live alone,

 since this isn't that kind of poem,
& in these pages, you'll meet the love of your life & live happily ever after

 because this is not a Holocaust poem,
no matter how much you fear it'll become one, paranoid the next line
 will bring
 an unexpected twist,

 because around the corner,
there's just a simple box of puppies, & you smile as you lift each one
 & pretend
 this is really happening
 just as you wish it to.

ALPHABET OF CONDITIONS

In the morning I know what I want and how
to make it. All night with the door shut heating
up in the furnace of sleep watching yourself
fool yourself fool yourself. Color this hinky.
Color this out of control. And in the morning
I know what I want. There's the hourglass,
me tensed on the bottom, the seconds sifting
down but no one to make cake. Each minute
dense as a clay brick batting down into our broken
field running. So in the night when I lie on the bed
like a figure or a number or a sign when I lie
on the bed like a sigil or a spill of some dark
dark liquid and I move my arm or cock
my leg or curl and the lights dim inside. Draw
the coverlet over what flashes on the sheets.
Hands at prayer. Fetal. Splayed. Alphabet
of conditions. Act 22,000. Scene 4. Impervious
dream me and crows carrying night. Pale busboy
forearms and cotton puffs crammed in a box. Pots
stirred in the graveyard and the dead returned
to their fleeced out homes. Dark feathers
settling around the windows, keyholes, doors.

HUNGER

came down from the hills
stealing in through a slight break
in the fence, a thoughtless day's work
of forgetting. He slinks round the back way
looking for scraps I've left. Rough-furred
and bony under hand, I'd lost sight of him
in summer's bustling seeds and furrows.
Now, as the days thin,
pared sliver by sliver at twilight's
widening rim, I think of his warm burr
curled at my spine. I begin leaving him bowls
of empty and scraped plates of watching.
Soon, he is my sleek companion again,
his footsteps dogging mine.

PARENTS: A FEW NOTES ON PREPARATION FOR THE YOUNG ADULT

If you think to eat them, little girl,
don't save them for dinner.
Parents are best when tender
and just beginning to yield
firmness. After the pulpy aftermath
of birth and the pulverish
teenage years, they are soft
enough for braising with a light touch;
they offer up sweet heartmeat
and rich sauce—

for lunch, mind you;
don't save them for dinner.
They have yet to let expectation flower
(which imparts a bitter flavor).

If pressed, cook them first and put by
a few slices of hoarded fat for later,
but it's best to eat them at once. They don't
linger well in storage. They turn
to thoughts of twilight and providing
for their dotage. They start to seep
secrets, which leave a strange spice
on your tongue—

A word now,
on the art of carving. You mustn't
flinch. Whet your knife on stone,
that flinty grievance you've hewn,
until the edge is keen as youth and merciless.
It is a kindness, after all; they will feel
only a sting. Cut against the grain. Keep
the bones for stew. They are the perishable
that endures, when you find, inevitably,
that it's dinnertime, and you've lost

your taste for them.

BITTER ORANGES

The crust of black earth on our elbows, knees,
between our toes—our wool socks a black peel

of earth, our boots an earth of leather, damp
continents of sulfur and swamp—comes off

in the dusk, in a jelly jar of wine, in the burn
of yellow smoke from an unfiltered cigarette,

just as the shade slides up the hill and swallows
the orchards. In the soft Spanish of Sevilla,

there is nothing mine the way my body is,
nothing to take possession of, no word I'm not

unsure of, still wanting to taste the sour segments
for ripeness, to feel the pith beneath my nails,

a reverie, like slitting a stranger's throat to feel
its every nerve alive, not mine, not ever mine.

DRIVING AFTER MIDNIGHT

I leave the city late and drive until the glow
ghosting the rearview is gone (clouds

like an x-rayed liver, low on the horizon,
lit with streetlamps, jaundiced, atomized)

and my leg cramps along the highway
spittling bugs, where pines bend over in the wind

and blur to broken lines. Above them,
whiskey-colored clouds undress the moon.

Time slows. I turn the volume up for Patsy Cline
and swoon—or is it swerve—and stop,

and let the engine run. And there it is: your face
in the Sitka spruces, spun in an oval patch

of grain where a branch was cut, flickering
like static as the radio comes and goes.

LA CI DAREM

Let's be grown up
children growing

back down, guilty
persons playing

at being guilty—you
can learn the role

backstage; I'll bite
your ankles. Jailbirds

with keyholes; queens
with prize bulls;

in slumbering summer
fields. Ripening

the cervix with
a boiled owl, *sur*

la mer. Finger tickling
my catastrophe, hand

at the throat. A come
cry shoved back in

like swimming
handcuffed

like a sullen-faced
dean— roof

of the mouth, oh
boy! Lovely

weather
we're having.

CHERRY THIEVES

We were a ravenous pack of wilding
boys on a tear that summer, stripping cherries
from our neighbors' lavishly laden trees,

never asking permission. *Fruit Spree*,
we called it, and *copping cherries*, too young
to know how we were already starting to rob

truth with euphemisms and bits of metaphor,
how we were able to make our theft seem petty,
almost pretty and free of guilt.

The way in a few years we would in lockers,
snapping towels and fibbing to pals
about what we had filched from a girl

the night before in the back seat of the family
Chevy. We had no real sense
of what it would mean to gain this goal

we so blindly sought, could not yet grasp
that having it or not would lie like a mapped line between the two
neighboring states of Paradise

and Lost, nor how a place could shift so quickly
from the one we were in such a hurry
to get to, to the one we wished

we had never been. That summer,
perhaps it was a boy's instinct for practice—
the fledgling's need to master his future part—

that led us without guilt to covet what belonged
to our neighbors, to sneak into each fenced-in garden, snake up trunks to
fruitbent branches, our mouths

stained and drunk with trespass, preparing
to whisper to a girl when Time turned fortuitous
and cherry-ripe: *Give, give,*

and I will make you a god.

REVENGE

From the time you were just a kid, pimples
and skinny and riddled with BBs
from your older brother's constant snipings
you feasted on Charles Atlas ads
in magazines, the ones where geeks
like you got sand kicked in their faces
before they got wise on Dynamic Tension,
beefed up, and scared the kicker shitless in the end.
But wishing had no power to conceal the scent
of your fear, and bullies tracked you like packs
of feral dogs. You could almost bear high school
English when Montagues slew Capulets, or vice versa,
and Hamlet spent the last scene mopping up the stage.
Friday nights at the neighborhood theater
when John Wayne settled long overdue accounts
with Japs and Apaches, you could walk a little
taller on the jittery trek home, and sleep came easier
by half when the Caped Kryptonian sped faster
than a bullet through your dreams and heroes
decked out like bats or made from plastic
kept order on the city's Manichean streets.

Now, despite years of Corleones and Clint Eastwoods,
of Stallones and avenging cyborgian angels,
the grim contest seems to grow more and more
one-sided. You've lost track of the score.
You used to count yourself among the bleeding
hearts, full of nothing but sweetness
and light, but deep down you've begun to long
for your hamstrung country to kick a little ass,
and you would sleep much better with a gun
if only your wife would let you have one.
So you keep a loaded bat, a cracked Louisville Slugger,
propped behind your bedroom door, and you nap
like a Looney Tunes hound, one eye open,
ears trained like the crosshairs of an infrared scope
on the dark's smatter of small alarming sounds.
Most nights it's a hard ride to the borderland of sleep,

but once there, it's your kind of country,
and you could track a flea through the whole
freakin' Badlands if you had to. When you finally catch
up to the world, it freezes. *Where do you want it?*
you ask. *The Belly? The Back?* It's your turn now.
You point your pearl-handled cannons
at its jackbooted feet. *Dance*, you say. Its spurs
percuss the dust like stricken tambourines.
Dance! you say again. *Faster.*

SEIZING THE DAY

This morning, before our son flew back to his job in Phoenix, he showed us a tattoo he'd kept hidden, a blue arabesque of lines and signs meaning, he told us, *Carpe Diem*, the one single thing he could think to do, he said, when a close friend took his own life for no good reason. *You know*, he explained, *Eat, drink, make merry...* as if his pain had earned him the right now to be our teacher, as if his mother and I had never before tried to curl fetal around the present moment, never done our best to forget that one good morrow or another we must die. I wanted to say something wise, warn him about theatrics yet to come. But a father is without wisdom in his son's country, and life prefers showing over telling, so I said nothing but a hug.

Now it's late afternoon. As the light fades, I prepare dinner that once again has dwindled to the two of us. We listen to the evening news: the economy still trying to make up its mind, the Dow once more amped like a junkie on a pogo stick. Lost jobs, lost homes, lost savings. At my cutting board, with its medley of citrus and fresh herbs, the news still coming at us ready or not, I decide to try it again, living just in the present moment. One at a time I lift pressed garlic, fresh basil, a slice of lime to my face, breathing each in,

and for a minced instant past
and future vanish: the former,
where Death reigns supreme,
the latter, where Death lies
patiently in wait. For a heart beat
or two I am absent from thought
before this dollop of day I've seized
by the throat thrashes and kicks,
breaking my white-knuckled hold.

THAT TOO, HIS MIND WAS

—remember the wouldn't-stay-
in-place hair he always combed

mostly white with faded streaks
of black, color back from the past

that wouldn't let go, his mind
was like that too, his mind

was like a monarch butterfly
that returns every year to a tree

which it has never seen, something
from the past or the future, what

is the difference to him, remember
he called out for his long dead wife

or called out for his long dead brother
to pick him up and take him back

to canada, their names two wings
fluttering shadow puppets inside his skull

hair a blank wave crashing over
his eyes, pushed back, crashing again

LOVE

they were playing tennis, we heard
them, we heard the wet pop
of rackets slapping the ball
over the net, their strained voices
as if something sexual was happening
in the middle of the afternoon,
broad daylight, skirts overturned
flower petals flapping around their legs
what is tennis about anyway
if it's not sex or even an analogy of sex
we knew that much that it was
like a small fireball they wouldn't
let pass, they swung their arms
and the strange masks of their rackets
a burning cosmos chasing the sun
knowing that whoever let it drop
on their side of the court
had somehow failed to return
what had been so fiercely sent to them

BECAUSE A FLIGHT TO D.C. IS TOO EXPENSIVE
WHEN YOU'RE PAYING A CAR NOTE AND YOUR
HUSBAND STILL AIN'T FOUND WORK

Nearing the end of the line,
my mother wants to see my daughter
I remind her of the dead,

tell her Gina died years ago, a thread
cut short. *Oh*, mother's voice now farther
away on the end of the line.

She wants to see *Kimberly* one last time.
I'm Kimberly, I say. She falters.
I remind her of the dead's

names, and with each, confusion spreads.
She talks as if they're right beside her,
nearing the end of the line

together. She looks forward to dying,
to seeing her sisters, mother, father.
I remind her that the dead

can wait, and we've left continents unsaid.
Gina? She asks, and I'm bothered
that nearing the end of the line,
I only remind her of the dead.

PUB CRAWL

Topeka, KS circa 1963

Under the half-hung sign—
one nail strong enough to hold
the weight of pressed tin—my
grandfather enters. His daughter
a charm he cradles tight for luck.
No money for babysitting. She's
greeted with *cutie pies* loud as
pool balls clacking the hard edges

of themselves. Always one drink
ahead, he makes sure to stumble
through the door before the next
day catches up to them. Before
the men become glass
shards, full of sharp and
brilliant edges, each dark face
reflecting the ugliness of
the city they came back to after

the war. Cities of light and dark.
Though he wants to ascend
he knows instead he'll plummet
further, faster—years from now
glass will slice open his vein as
he tumbles to recover the bottle
of gin slipping from his grasp. She

grasps his hand a little tighter
now, too young to know that black hangs
heavy in every smile. She's a
new word, the first good thing
he's done. Perhaps. But now

it's last call, he's stayed too
long, and her hands are so small
in his, a copper glint on nights
full of fear and wonder.

THIS NAME

1. *His*

Your name forms
The moment your lungs grab
Air out of air—an open
Window, cold building
On the back wall of your throat.
Frances says, “Isaiah,” her southern
Rooted voice swallows
The weight of your birth—
“Isaiah, he sounds important.”
And when I nod, there is a flock
Of pigeons I am letting free.
Their flaps mark the meter
In your name. If there is a feather
Where I am standing, I know Frances
Will see it and know *special*—
The kind of special that appeared
To your mother long before
Your first breath. How the two
Of you talked through
Skin, fluid, placenta still baffles me.
Your conversation,
A code of kicks and her speech.
“Isaiah.” It falls to floor
And bounces every time—
The way a word should:
Existential.
Root.
Reformation.
Frances.
Pomegranate.
Sword.
Quiver.

2. *Hers*

this wood
this flower
that fruit
that color
your name

my daughter
your name is the open hole
between two cupped hands
the dark space that light opens
a net of wriggling fish
or the "o" their mouths
gape air through

this long strip of road or lace
this butterscotch plastic wrap
that jacket made from wool
that baby's hat hung behind a door

and again your name looping
around a tree or
slithering the length of
your bottom lip when you cry
when sadness rests
its legs on your face

this twig
that name of yours
resists the river
crashes the crowded room

of your brother's name
breaks through
your mother's bough
down you come, sweet baby girl

that free-fall
that rock-dive
that wind-chime classic

3. *Freddie B*

Mississippi hands
Blue-collar bigness
Long body, wall-stone or well-deep—thick

Fits like a preacher whose name should begin with “F”
Writes the light beginning a gospel
Speaks spiritual, speaks holy-ghost at handshake

Smiles run through it
Music combing each “d” with the “ie”
Laughter and teeth in a heap, *hello darlin’*

It’s all aboard
It’s the night train
It’s a tango of trumpets, the sax tap

It’s spine
It’s hanger
It’s a main pillar redwood

All James
Funk and feel good
Grits and gravy, baby

Bloody bootleg
Bleach weather
High cotton

It’s how he gets here and how he goes out
Earth load and split tree—
Kin folk and clot

A mound holds his name
On the good foot
Carries it all the way for my sake

FROM *THE END OF SOMETHING*

03603

What does a baby represent in dreams?
He needs some time. To himself.

I think he wants a secret life.
She's in town, it's Christmas,
she's resourceful.

She's the imaginary friend.
The imaginary Maggie.

It's fake.
Is it fake?
It's fiction.

I wanted the baby to behave
but she said: "I can't love now."

03639

She's using him. That's my opinion.
It's not about what feels good.

All he has to do is take it off.
All he has to do is drive away.

A person died, they had a double,
they don't like it anymore.

A grief expert?
An expert on shame.
I was dating her, we went to her brother's
graduation. I could not wait to get there.

That thing we talked about: a realistic
environment. I can explain.

He sat right here.
You had your turn, okay?

Don't push me.
No one knows me like you do.

03737

Suddenly the telephone.
Would nobody go in?

What is "help it"?
They couldn't help it.
Am I wrong?
Everybody old.

Everybody. Old.
But it's just the next day.

IN THE CITY OF FALLING CATS

In your living room, you do not wait with a trowel because of the rain. That is not the trees roaring with applause as something approaches its conclusion, but another

cat clawing its way through the branches as it descends, whose shadow you compared to a collapsing bridge or moon that has forgotten its orbit.

You don't keep candles lit by the window during these events. You don't say what you've been thinking about in a city where we comb hair from our lights:

how the dead have returned to us as a sky of falling cats. You stand outside with your arms extended, hoping to catch them and rescue them

from their own velocity. You imagine yourself among them one day. One moment you are clutching your chest surrounded by the romance novels

at a bookstore, once your body ceases to process its blood jewelry, and the next, your legs are covered in fur, swimming against gravity. You look down at all the people

looking up at you with their smiles, their arms held out. They expect you to do tricks. If you twitch your tail like so, you are a helicopter.

If you stretch your legs, you are the night. Look at me, your body tells the people. You are not falling. You are hurling forward.

SHARP TONGUE STUDIES

The stream is nothing, some cutting meltway
easing back among the shade
of the gas station I never watched anyone
get held up within, the one
I stole gum from
when all I was after was sweetness, the stream's
a picture I keep like the scent
of cinammon
or how B + his dad + I clambered up
the conveyor used otherwise for rocks, sand
+ gravel, how we ascended
from the Mississippi's banks
+lanked to B's grandma's who said she didn't
give a hoot about cold, it'd be over
soon enough,
had us to strip then turned a garden hose on us
before letting us in for warm cookies or a meal
or whatever, every deliciousness flows away, I don't
remember learning to taste
but some lessons
came late unlike me in the backseat of C's car, steam
rising off both of us because the fires
our bodies were, or rivers, or realm
of mingling
elementality, gas and dust, water and rock, and how
the stream still is what I think-slash-picture
whenever I'm asked *just who*
do you think you are.

I FALL TO PIECES

at the airport listening to an undrunk marimba
woobling the tune that should be Patsy
singing *each time I see you again* and maybe we

only ever know what we're supposed to,
my wife's goodbye kiss lingering on my
lips, hands already wringing themselves in prep

for the coming white-knuckle hours of watching the world pass below

now clear, now obscured, I'm scared
of dying like Patsy, plane nose-down in a forest
five counties shy of my destination, the

woobling, unbroken marimba plays *I've tried*
and I've tried but I haven't yet but not *plays*, it's
the melody, the tweeze *that's-it* aspect

of Patsy's singing, not the thing but a thing's
close-enough signifier, like one twin wearing
the other's glasses, like a plane's shaking

is not the death I've awaited since realizing
even stars die as death cannot be anything
more or less than a song I can't guess, lyrics

I'll howl when I cease this marimba living + be
come like the bird who, after thumping
into the living room window frazzled to a branch + stared

back, an expanse how could it possibly
have understood, Patsy Cline is at the root
of that marimba same as the world is under

the world I'm alive on clutching the balance
that for now allows me to stay upright, mouthing
what I think are the words of familiar songs

BYRON IS STUMPED BY A RIDDLE

First, he loves many
women. Then Byron loves

Giorgione—*The Tempest*,

its ambiguity:
placement of the mother
nursing a baby

at her
hip,

nude,
without a

cradle.

Does he love the man?
With staff, or pike,
erect?

(Watch out!
The clouds are coming together!)

The man is staring over
the creek. The mother

stares straight out.

Byron stares back.

The problem with the Renaissance
is genitalia:

Giorgione, with his finger
nail scraping lightning
across canvas,

smudging paint into
stork-shape,

strokes in

to a bulge,
curves that meet
around her thighs—

or what lies beneath,
in fast, thick pants breathing.

The problem with Romantics
is Romantics.
Which one is who?

(Byron is leaving!
He's leaving. He's not coming back.)

He's going to the same
grass.

Like the muddy ground
beneath the mother

he's drinking from the creek,
down

on all fours
as a hog

with his
snout grazing the water.

LEARNING TO READ

It's not the voice but the eyes.
They peck across her ally—

the page— turned left upon binding glue,
binding as much up as who

and training plot to comb down
through the blouse of sun-numb awns

shedding faith in breath and the rise
of an almighty burp of grape vines.

Sure, she's essayed in the head
and churned a covey of retreads

spun feathered over relics afield
and wondered how else to reveal

her addiction— intentional fewness
in rounds of war's jest.

But history's made when it drinks at the bar
then poemed as denuded scars

and how to get home and another tome
weighed— her lines are *I ride alone*

and *mechanics need not apply—*
this looker breaks down on the fly.

Ever flip a bike over to set the chain
and wheel the sprocket along the grain?

Now that's reading— read— if only she'd aim.

A PRAGUE BEGGAR

I couldn't imagine kneeling, nose fixed to cobbled alley stone
as if to pray so blindly for that day's wage,

and those crooked hands doffing a cap by its bill,
crown inverted and vibrating in a palsy gesture,

yet there I was a witness, as leery of worth as his posture
suggesting a pause to at least peg the stitchless hems

of his sleeve cuffs and the uneven shave to his scalp
which, I also noted, betrayed large freckles

like a constellation.

Just like that, I was stricken from the thought to give
by the act itself and in just short of a breath

the coin sank into felt and raised the musk of that alley
as it has been known for centuries of moon wash

and the rumor of another new culture to forsake nobly
in the holiest of conscience I couldn't again imagine,

braced for the scrutiny of fog making light seem dark
and over itself as the nose-down beggar jingled his assets

like the stars.

CONFESSION

Can I tell my sins to a baby?
Would a butterfly be available?
How about a bag of jellybeans?
Look, I did some bad things
and I want to be good. I just don't see
how some dude in the shadows
can possibly help this situation.
I'm really making an effort here.
I only did confession (did confession?)
once, in fourth grade. I'm really down
with the whole ritual of it
and want to try again.
With a butterfly.

SASHA GREY AND MEGAN FOX

have similar jobs, right?
The media insists
we act like they're different.

I don't mean to talk shit
about either of them, the allure
of pretty raven haired women
bending over is obvious.

There is just so much bending
over and boob grabbing
that I'm exhausted
from pretending they make money
for different reasons.

Neither of these broads are reciting
Shakespeare. I'm not complaining.
I've spent many hours hiding
in bathrooms from Shakespeare
professors. Anyway, I'm just saying
that Fox and Grey have similar
bodies of work and that Shakespeare
professors can be really creepy.

ROBERT FROST'S 115TH DREAM

Because the diverged murky paths
were moonlit by a sanguine yellow,
I thought of my mother.
Then a shark appeared
and asked me to make it
tomato soup, a request
for which
I had no contest.

Maybe I should've asked it
Who sent you or maybe, better yet,
Do you take basil in your soup?

The shark stood and stared,
glaring its teeth. I knew it wanted to ask me
a question, one to which I could not
acquiesce. So instead, we settled
our differences over a pot of pink mint tea
and talked politics.

I asked the shark
about its horizontal family,
to whom it was most immediately
related—the shark answered me
in the most obsequious fashion:

John F. Kennedy and *Engelbert Humperdinck*.
His two most famous lawyers.

I sat, indignant, realizing
I was talking to a shark
who was trying to convince me
that Nazis weren't evil, but rather
misinformed.

Well, as an American, I could only offer him
eagle feathers,
corn pudding,
and the location of the Seventh Direction.

I pulled out my rope.

*Don't make much sense,
me being a shark and all,
tied up to a mulberry tree,*
he said.

I wondered what he meant by *mulberry tree*.
I wondered what he meant by *shark*.

Before I cut his throat
there was the most sensational smell
of cherry blossoms blowing through the wind.

Do tell, he said,
as his gills were opened.

ANAPHYLAXIS

The bee's barbed stylus stays
with you, its sac of venom
pumping as if alive.

Alerted in the cells'
catacombs, enzymes swarm
your lips and tongue until
they're engorged like pistils.

The heart's echoing thrum
of circular work fades,
as from an emptied hive.

BEDROOM WINDOW WITH COBWEB

Still half-asleep, he lets
the lattice and then the web
direct his eyes. Even
as a kid, he felt each byway—
a gap in a fence, a street
whose lights had failed—tighten
his vision, its thread looming
in the maze of possible
fates like a spiders'
open work of surprise.

FARM TRILOGY

I. Throwing Sticks at Cows

The boulder crouched
between the pasture trees—
mostly Georgia pines—
as if waiting for us
to bring the smell of summer,
peanut butter or mayonnaise
on white bread wiped with sweat.
The trail through the woods
was scratched on our knees
barbed wire torn shorts—
the fun of kid made cammo—
shimming around granite,
hiding from old Vaughter's
shotgun and scowl.
Do you remember
when you were still Billy
and those trees green
above smelly ripe piles,
our bouquets of honeysuckle
for mom, pockets filled
with roly poly and pine straw
before the suburb bought
the Farm cheap, marked it
with a historic metal plaque?
I can't make myself see
if the boulder is still there
hidden from the groomed trail
paved with traffic, waiting
for us to leg-up with naked elbows
and our impromptu sandwiches.

II. Driving Miss Mimi

We drive south from the strange
wet prairies, the Great Black Swamp
drained for farms, ditches filled

with grey pebbles and icy trash,
young-green winter wheat sprouts
before the wail of the tractor pulls,

from this unexpected open
width of sky, dirt and fear of wet
encasements, mosquitos and inundations
where I moved for the love of naming letters
birthed a girl and books despite
my professed milk sickness.

We drive down 75 toward my familiar
Georgia pines, long needles that smell
like girl scout camp, damp polyester shorts.
The pound puppy in the front seat
snores, shifts and sniffs
as his usual scents turn strange,

Stone Mountain lichens cling to granite:
My infant's head slithers down
the restraint, spit holds a paci
suspended like an extra seat-belt.
This first trip we stop too often,
to feed, change and express exhaustion,

my over-active let-down means
breast feeding is like shot-gunning
beer—ball point pen jabs a hole
in cold aluminum—gulps
of bubbles and sweet liquid
in the back seat. My spouse knows

my soliloquies about public lactating:
Convenience store magazines splashed
with bared breasts, *X. Conspersa*
exposed in pools of florescent light
compete with my mossy mother rant:
“I should feed her by the chips, candy
bars and condoms.” The sneaky places

we stole away from band practice
to buy laffy taffy, Tab, and rollos,
skipped from school for the art gallery
kids too tame to walk bad.
My familiar South.

III. Walking Buddy on KK Highway, Rogersville, MO

rexall drug pregnancy test crushed in the ditch,
directions peed on, keystone and bud light
boxes, cans smashed, plastic tubes sunk
in mud from a deserted meth lab, this college bitch
teacher runs the ditch along the dairy farm
that grew my spouse, where trash collects

this college teacher runs here
where trash collects because they work
with hands in the dirt, while I work
on my morning coffee, watch uncle Ed
get the gun and then the skunk
bent and already half gone

from some farm accident, already half gone,
some accident on the farm, this cautious
family planner only popped out one,
no accidents, no car accorded in the ditch,
why the dog is on a leash,
my kid asks about all that poop

the collateral damage on her boots,
the high maintenance dog whines like a prince
as tractors and 4-wheelers whine
to keep the farm through drought
but it is not enough, the cows went, gone
since Tuesday, loaded and lifted into trucks

no more black and white dots canvassing the hills

COYOTE'S ANTHEM

Out there, those hobo dogs squeal well before midnight;
whatever sets one off—his scream gets the rest
keening their nameless moans,
solo hymns strung
ridge

to ridge,
an orphans' chorus, mutts
touching the dark, vagrant notes
preaching or mourning above the musky desert,
songs like a migrant wind: roaming, flighty, blind.

TO THE WOMAN AT THE CONFERENCE ON WRITING
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE WHO ASKED, "WHAT WAS YOUR
UPBRINGING? WHAT WERE YOUR PARENTS LIKE?
HOW DID YOU GET THIS OPEN-MINDED?" . . . I DON'T
REMEMBER MY ANSWER BUT WISH I'D SAID THIS:

I grew up in a neighborhood of rain and trees.
My mom and dad were teachers.

Sometimes they drove us to the shoreline
and let me drag kelp, climb driftwood,

think wind and waves
were the Earth's conversation.

Because of them, I eat king crab and salmon.
Because of them, I love mussels and clams,

love the pile-up of emptying blue shells
and white shells, and the flavors of ocean with beer.

•

One time after some grumbling of mine,
a complaint taking longer than it needed to,

my grandma said, "Yes, a few do the carrying
for the rest. Now which would you rather be?"

She never was tall to begin with
before age and osteoporosis did their number.

Things like that, though, showed me
she only *looked* small.

•

On the school bus after an all-night storm, passing
the mud of an undone pasture

and cows still packed together in the middle,
a huddle of soaked hides and windblown . . .

passing through a moment of their animal lives
on our way to second grade, my friend said, “Cows—

they just have to stand there.
Think about it.”

And I do.
He saw more than I did that morning.

•

Even you. Your question.
For two days I’ve kept trying to answer:

in my head in the car on the way to work . . .
last night rinsing the dishes.

But my thoughts can’t total it up yet
except to say thanks,

thanks for calling my poems open-minded.
That seems a good measure to go by. I won’t forget.

IN THE ONLY ZOMBIE FLICK I'LL WATCH,

Processional

it isn't brains they're after.
It's our phones—

our iPhones and smart phones,
all our zillion juicy jpgs—

so when the splatter starts,
blood won't geyser onto lawns, intestines

won't tangle in a rose bush.
There won't be cinematic, slo-mo close-ups of wet red

dripping from the leaves.
No bone-cracks splintered by surround sound

or eyeballs popping like gory corks,
just mangled metal, plastic bits, and naked wire . . .

phones stalked and surrounded
and screaming on the swung ends of charger cords

again, and again, and again
against brick walls.

Hold on to your catharsis, people,
the zombies are coming to eat you where it hurts,

Arrival

though of course this is metaphor.
It says so on every syllabus.

It's generic Defense of the Genre 101:
our anxieties projected,

the dead-alive virus of consumerism,
suburban fear of wild animals

whose wildness is safely on TV,
and so on, and so on. Take your pick.

I'm picking Righteous Havoc;
in *The Only Zombie Flick I'll Watch*, they're here

to lash back: Genetically-modified watermelons
made square for easier stacking? Attack!

Mountain Dew ad men asking,
"Are you dissatisfied with your morning-beverage options?"—

slug down another mug of coffee,
blend a pomegranate smoothie,

drink a glass of ordinary orange juice,
and attack! Reach into their servers

and rip out the heart, or chip,
or whatever you call it. Attack.

Burial

Don't worry, they're actors.
And they'd probably all prefer a different role.

One played a genie in an indie film . . .
aired April 8th on the Sundance Channel, 4 a.m.

It didn't pay, but she liked the writing,
liked the wishes of the boy who found her:

"First, turn the guns into hunting falcons.
Then all the bullets into pheasants.

And third, let nobody use this wish
so they can't make any mistakes with it."

When they'd wrapped, after they'd struck the set,
the cast and crew went for Udon noodles,

and the view of the harbor out the window
never looked so clean.

Even now, typecast as a Zombie Prom Queen
grinding her tiara in a redneck's bluetooth,

there's an unspent wish inside her
safe from idiocy and greed.

Recessional

So we've come to the dénouement,
where the zombies are bored with their mayhem.

A few stragglers chase a blonde
in a storm-soaked nightgown,

another gnaws on an iPad,
but they're done. The spirit's gone out of it,

and they lack an articulate spokesman,
a leader to formulate a slogan

they can text
or silkscreen on T-shirts,

maybe hang around wearing them at concerts or something
and stream the whole thing live.

Yeah, that would be easier.
Go home and watch it all on YouTube.

Sit there staring at the new tribal fire
while the final credits roll.

THE DISEASE AND TWO LABS

Imagine two labs, the CDC and the one in Siberia
both behind checkpoints.
Like the movies, flasks, files, and microscopes set each scene.
Technicians in HAZMATs manipulate
microbes behind thick glass.
Extinction circles for the disease that altered

histories and trajectories.
Suits and lab coats debate its preservation/destruction
and, in impassioned speeches they ask you
to imagine smallpox never infecting another man, woman, or child
versus counterpoints who
take stock of the unaccounted

specimens, rogue labs, inoculation samples
in old hospitals, or the bodies in stasis. You're no scientist
and you might have formed an opinion,
but you can't shake doomsday scenarios
that accompany each decision they will make
without consulting you.

BOY SCOUTS VS. ZOMBIES

In my elementary school
gymnasium, Scout Master tells us
to do our civic duty
with sticks we sharpened
and pockets knives we aren't supposed
to know how to use yet.

There are no merit badges for this.
We are never prepared
for parents and teachers possessed
with the undead gait
that rips through school to eat children
and anyone in between.

If I survive, I will join
the future leaders of a hellish country,
rebuilt by the orphans who sob
for forgiveness to their hungry-for-flesh
families we execute
against our will.

I don't want to wear
this uniform anymore. I don't want
to think about being
loyal to my den or being
a good citizen by putting down
our bit up Scout Master.

I will not think about my absent mother
or my reanimated father
attacking towards me. I will
pretend I get a pin or patch for this. I will
act like it's not him anymore
and other lies to keep myself alive.

THE LONG GOODBYE

There's a pocket in my dress
filled with seeds,
I'm flush with heat, with you
waiting for them to flower

Bent against eventualities
you've slumped into my bed again
hands stressing the distance between
my body and yours.

Make no promises, though I do it
all the time. You return but pretend to be
gone. Kiss me as though you were
teaching me a lesson
in restraint.

It's an unpretty nightscape, starless
And shadowed with creatures that move
Away from us. A tree in the path breaks
the path in two.

MOSQUITO LIGHT

We've aimed a flashlight at the night sky:
a flare, sent up without a sound

from an urgent forest. Silence,
a restless animal shedding its skin

between us. Color blooms in one eye, the tree
shuffles its leaves. Here is where you want to say

what you don't say, and I

fold our hands together like a bird folds
its wings. The woods are filled with the hot

breath of wolves. We show our teeth
in the mosquito light, frightening no one

our eyes out-glitter the smaller stars when
we hear the remote cries, the scuffle—

it's like plunging our fingers into candlewax,
the blood-laced comfort of another's death.

Or we curl into the noose of sleep
lids flickering with anxious forms that scatter

and congeal into masses of shade beneath
the brow. A scrap of smoke shifts

into our sleeping tree, a sore raised
on your cheek, a camera pointed at your heart—

I bandage our mouths with a gentle alarm and
we resign ourselves to everything:

to riot, to hunger, to love.

YOUR GHOST

Parted from the scene of old disasters
a magnet pulling one memory in two directions

the hand stilling the circles in a puddle
mind placed against the side of a stone

I guess we haven't offered up any new truths
turned your heart inside out for pennies

braided your hair into a soft basket
held nature's charms at arms length

wondering who sleeps where at night
where the imprint of your body goes when you rise

your ghost spilling like a lake into the hall
flash-flood of absence and promise

the sight of every angled enmity a kiss on the brow
the slope, the axis, three points in a bucket of lines

I know these roads by heart and all the ways back in
An arrow strung up like a party favor points the way

I want to hear your voice at the bottom of the stairs
I want to get drunk, hit rock bottom, kill something small

I want to break every heart in the room: your apparition
curled around my neck like an animal
made from clouds.

THE ROOT

A root walks into a bar. I know
you think you've heard this one, but trust me
you haven't. This isn't a joke.

It's not going to say "I'm beat."
But an actual root, striding
on its leafy limbs, hairs trailing

head pointed like a dunce cap at the dark
ceiling, walks in. You'll tell me
this is impossible, but that's because

you aren't really listening.
I'm telling you
the round-headed root, balanced

on its stems, green leaves like feet
rustling, makes its way across
the floor. It bruises

as it goes, its feet are tender, a scent
like fresh-cut lawns rises
in the heat. It finally, finally, lifts

itself onto a stool, head wobbling
on its stalk, orders a water
on the rocks. Because that's what a root

would want in this city, to find the dark
place where sweat and dreams collide
to rest its heavy head
and drink.

THE STRICKEN ASH

*Yggdrasil, tree of existence,
Rooted in hell, reaching for heaven.*

The arborist arrives
To assess the green ash.
Under attack by the Emerald
Borer.

Those suffering contagion
Are tagged and chopped the way
A cancer victim is slashed
Or poisoned for his own good.

This sentry sprawls dead limbs
That sprout small infants
Of greenery. Even the torso
Brings forth erratic clusters
Like cries for help.
A bad sign, the arborist proclaims.

Tough enough for bows
Or axe handles. Said to repel
Serpents in the first garden.
Pendant as a monk at prayer
The pinnate leaves weep.

The arborist seeks
A scripture of holes.
The men with saws stand
In the bed of the truck.
Their patience chills
The morning.

BUCK FEVER III

Pine shadows slip along the lake,
awaken toads and soft eyes glancing
from the brush. The shore scattered here and there
among the leaves makes me think I've arrived
at the peaceful flexible line
between two worlds,
the way my shadow has a home
in the wavering water.
All I need now, I say to the sky,
is a faithful listener,
one who will serve me my death on a pyre,
dimly the water, flow dimly away.

BUCK FEVER IV

Wind-wrangled wisteria swags
summon farm days' long ago meander—
dirt was the only show on TV,
a whippoorwill's call warmed us,
wave upon wave of nothing
came over the hill in the night.
Ceil the barn! that the horses might not see
the moon—they were born with star gas
in their taut bellies, the luminosity of the void
in their eyes, black pits along the sublunary hillside
searching for stalks in this dry season
preceded by dry season preceded by baskets
on baskets of dry maddening husks.

BUCK FEVER V

A rock wall, mossy
constancy. Who watches
over stones while they sleep?
Uneasily you tread the gravel road
in your patchwork bonnet,
into your aging, raising
dust. You are
this autumn's
least silence, a pin oak
dumbly clinging
to long dead leaves.

BUCK FEVER VI

April now and still dry
Trees soak up what's left of the river
Pushes forth barely buds
Say there is no God

Make it rain
Pollen drifts
On dry winds
The heart preserves
Sorrows where memory fails

Sorrow not a thinking man's game
We see how low over their eyes
Farmers wear caps
These days
You plant a seed

And say a prayer
Nothing happens
You plant another
Your voice less steadfast
You pray again

YOU TOLD ME YOUR NAME / I TOLD YOU MINE

Outside it is all winter
 the slow snow banks shrugging

their dull blue morning light
 & all of it ends

us together this winter in this place

one porch light flicks off in the dawn
& already I feel the world start up
again

 but you're gone upstairs
to get ready all the particles accelerate
hastening toward that one blank moment
rushing to spring or whatever else is next

GIRL IN STONE

I'm sheaving off the morning
in swells and scrolls,

Athena's curls wave
past my back to the sea.

Diadems of light come forward
in sweet births. The day

laurels in their neat way
turn to greet me—

I slip my sandal up
the fluted curves, the steps

that roll over, Ionic,
stomped in place
like divots in a loaf.

My eyes, without irises,
gaze into place.

Round ovums, sleep centers—
they fall back to sockets, soft

as children come
to nest beneath my arms.

SETTLERS
(CUMBERLAND GAP)

Wild the minds of men, and green
as the sun-charged canopy of trees
 their fears: of depredation
 and the savage tribes,
betrothed left at home,
 and drinking water.

Evenings,
they keep company in the hollows,
 limestone caves
carved by cold springs, seek
 shelter from the beasts,
storm cloud and spook.

At day, the lilt of their words
shocks the limestone cliffs;
 ash stirred into flame
boils coffee, chars meat. Then
 on to disturb:
 rattle

rattle the cane break, tramp
 to high ground. Hack
 a clear patch
 and arm it.

THE SAND MAN

I

This is the story of two children who wander into the desert
and see a burning bush—creosote—the oldest plant on earth.

The smell of it after rain is of railroad tracks crossing desolation,
passing all the lives scattered at the root of the chaparral.

The brother and sister have followed *him*—
the man who coaxed them toward a mirage

with the promise they would see God.
In the desert there are circles of seeds, tracks of snakeskin,

diadems of sunflowers crushed into a map.
He does not give them manna but hops and hashish.

He takes them into the desert that sparkles at first of crushed jewels.
The sand shifts, the diamonds cut their feet.

He takes them into the desert and says *hush*.
He is not waiting for them to grow up

but to soften and fatten by feeding them sweet things—
but no, that story belongs to two other children.

II

The brother and sister are never very close except once at the beach
when they leave pennies on railroad tracks that run behind cottages—

Lincoln's face, the Capitol, flattened into diadems
they throw into the ocean and trade out for shells.

They walk along the shore on Sundays—
mother at church, father at the office—

scouring the beach for bits of conch or nautilus,
their loneliness woven into the grains.

They track sand into the house and watch the Brady Bunch,
the sun flaring into a copper penny, bright with the face of God.

Leaving for home, their parents pack the station wagon
and drive across the Mojave all night to avoid the heat.

The brother and sister watch car lights stream across the windows,
both hoping to see a shooting star,

but the children spin beneath the sky so quickly,
they are the ones burning through space.

III

They are too old for shooting stars by the time they find the desert.
They walk railroad tracks, leaping over ties, collecting debris—

bottle caps, buttons, coins, a bracelet—
what slips out of other pockets into theirs.

A whistle bellows and they jump off—
the freight cars' heavy rhythm charges past them.

The first time they see the sand man, he is across the tracks,
holding a small bag of sand in his fist.

He spins the grains into a kaleidoscope—
garnet, black magnetite, green epidote, red agate,

feldspar, calcitite, silica, fossils,
bits of coral, sea urchins, foram shells.

He spins music on a turntable, snaps a dance with his fingers,
pulls a rainbow of scarves through a ring and shades them from the sun.

He shows how the city rises from its ashes
at dawn and disappears into a flame at night.

One night he whirls the kaleidoscope into a windstorm
so strong the brother and sister can't hear each other's voices.

He pours fire down the brother's throat
and leaves him pushing grit between his teeth.

While the sister sleeps he steals her eyes so when she awakes
years later, she can't see the split he left in her heart.

IV

The brother veers off the highway at the age of 19,
an empty bottle of Vodka tipped beside him.

There is no cross on the shoulder where he crashes
into the valley of the sun, valley of fire, valley of the shadow of death.

There is no mark of the mirage
where the sand man left them without water.

There is sometimes rain, at other times voices
and always wind carrying litter—bits of tinfoil

or newspaper lines, a witness to other lost lives.
There is no way to open the door to the sand man's eyes.

V

The city blooms into pools of blackness at night.
Millions of car lights open across sand,

the sun shifts its glare farther west,
and tarmac snakes begin to cool down.

A constant tread wears away the skin,
breaking it into diamond chunks

and the sister drives through the city,
the sand man's voice whispering

Don't sleep, don't sleep
Don't meet your other self in the space behind your eyes.

She wants to remember what it was like to listen to the train
whistle and thunk its wheels outside her window—

a night hot as knives circling her skin,
never cutting the flesh for blood, just scraping small scars.

What freight did those cars carry in and out of the desert
on tracks that were like Jacob's ladder to her,

a conduit to a place beyond the nights she slept with her eyes open,
beyond the mirror each morning—her face closed as a stone?

VI

She searches the dunes for prints from thirty years ago.
Wind abrades quartz shaping the inland sand seas.

Her brother is in all the grains—
it is his broken face she has been staring at.

The sounding dunes bellow with a deep call,
and she sings back until the wind sows a seed

into her heart's cleft—the night blooming cereus.
It takes root in her septum, drinks from her vessels.

Vines begin to fill the chambers choked with sand—
they wait for the one night in a year to flower.

VII

She wanders through dead zones between creosote bushes
whose roots take in so much water, nothing else survives.

The waxy leaves and yellow flowers still look the same.
He's close, she whispers, as if her brother could hear.

But she is alone in the desert that once sparkled of jewels,
which she now sees are glass, tinfoil, beer can tabs

ordinary objects she sifts through her fingers.
Was he really here? she wants to ask the boy

who threw pennies with her into the Pacific
before his eyes grew glassy with the sand man's breath.

But she lost him so long ago—she is now half a century—
so young compared to the chaparral of nearly 12,000 years.

If she thinks the legend never existed, does its power die?
But this legend has a man's voice, a man's body.

"He's here," she says to the rain that releases resin
from chaparral leaves burning with the scent of railroad ties.

VIII

Tiny fronds pressed around the cereus stamen
push the outer petals to open in her heart's chambers.

IX

He appears as an ordinary man taking an evening walk
except for the small bag of sand he carries.

He looks at her as though no time has passed,
as though there is not one where there were two.

“I brought a special one for you,” he says,
and opens his palm to show a star-shaped grain

made from the shell of the tiniest creatures.
Its six points are delicate, milky white.

She has never seen anything so beautiful and small.
She finally sees his hand for what it is and what it was—

a wasteland thriving on fragments of once living creatures.
“You can’t fill the scar from where you took the eyes to my heart,” she says.

X

There are some who wait all their lives to see
the Queen of the Desert bloom at midnight.

The phoenix falls into city lights burning for miles,
a crescent rises above the skyline,

and she sees them all now—
ghost flower, evening snow, Venus shooting star.

She feels more than sees the moon-white petals
expand in her dark place of sand and blood.

The sand man's bag splits open,
and all things past spill out her heart.

It is only me she whispers to the boy
who wandered the tracks with her, as if he could listen,

and it is only her, the sister, leaving the desert.
She places a penny beneath the burning bush.

VISITING

out the window
only darkness

last night
but this morning

a graveyard
and a graveyard bird

chasing an insect —
a signature

disappearing
in the sky

THERE'S HARD LIGHT AND SOFT LIGHT

everyday. The same church van
driver insistently honks
for the same elderly lady
dressed for God. My open
3rd floor window faces
the street. The sidewalk
dug up. Now it appears
the same young mouse
I released last week is under
the neck of a red wine bottle
in the recycling bin. Bring it
outside again. Runs clumsily
toward the liquor store.
The bright yellow sign. Yesterday
a man ran out of there
and got hit by a taxi. As the driver
argued with a witness
the man lying conscious across
the yellow lines. Only his left arm
moved. Caressing the bumper
as he looked blankly into the sky.

ON GIVING UP

Georgia sacrificed soil to kudzu;
sarracenia submitted and how
are we to bow before God

in a desert metropolis
that borrows water until ghosted,
peels in perfect rows of stucco.

Imported willow oaks wither;
acacias drip yellow.
Is the core of prayer a jeweled

mantis—what has been devoured?
Sometimes it is two lives, though,
lined up, and both cannot flourish.

This happens. And I could say
nature has chosen until there
was a boy I came to love,

whose life was fractioned
into asylums, riverbeds,
small reprieves,

the last shred of sunlight.
Until we hazarded a guess
and all the rabbits died off.

Until choked by vines, he lost
his mind to gain innocence.
Until that too was taken.

Until he was the derelict
that no one hoped to reclaim
at the bottom of the sea.

Until the riverbed dammed up
with flailing leaves, flotsam,
all of this, our wreckage.

WALKING THROUGH THE BURN UNIT

I want nothing in my oatmeal but oatmeal.

A man's voice. Half-opened door. Face
covered in bandages.

A forty-something woman with a spoon—
wife? daughter? mother?—shining in mid-air.

CLAP YOUR HAND

If you're happy and
you know it, great,
but you can't
know it know it.

WHAT YOU SUDDENLY REMEMBER

While listening to the neighbor's TV
as the water spills over the bowl
after calling the dog's name and
he doesn't come as the streetlight flickers
when a strange car pulls in
to your driveway watching the mouth of the garage door
yawn and close turning off the last lamp
standing at the bottom
of the stairs you are alone.
There is no one else here.

ON THE TRUCK, THE PICTURE OF A CARTOON PIG

Covered in grit and dust from roads
that lead to God knows where.
Stones have been thrown
at that pig but he never
stops laughing.

Riverside Butchers
in old-fashioned letters
with curvy tails,
that whisper under their breath
until the sheep are bleating.

Tonight, the dogs will sniff
the urine in the dirt and they'll remember
what dust settling
on pink skin means.

THE STITCHES THAT HOLD THE WORLD TOGETHER (THE BEEKEEPER'S ESCHATOLOGY)

—homage to Calvino

At dawn the bees wake in bean husks while chimney tops rise
from the earth, until new towns stand shipwrecked

on the ruins of old cities. And like the ruins the stingers persist,
beyond harm or plucking, a body's absence

at both ends, the life they pierced & the life they've taken.
Do they remember these lives, these shrouds,

do they expect a wake of stitches crossed behind their paths,
to keep the world together? They will find only wounds,

& the memory of wounds, a bloodpoint on a wrist, between
two ribs. If no blossoms or flowers fall in paradise,

there must be no one to tend them. Imagine rotting pears
as a proof of your existence, as a proof

for no heaven or afterlife. But for the bees the world is melees of dandelions
& clover, blossoms even in tangles of deadfall & thorns.

And while we wonder at the number of angels that might fit
on the end of a stinger, at a heaven that might follow

heaven, at the hand that hammered shut a hundred bees in a box
& called it *heart*, the bees gather the sweetness of the world

in the blooms beside our great highways that arc above one another,
in the flowers of the emperor's hanging gardens.

We ask the questions because our alphabets pierce the dark
for a moment, the questions what we've made of a lack of answers,

what we've made of the dark & the counted hollows of the body,
questions that allow us a glimpse into the hereafter

& into the here, the here in which we'll leave them at the end.
For the alphabets, too, sleep at the end, tablets drowned

alongside amphoras on ancient ships, psalms stopped in clay jars
& within hollowed bones, even as the chimney tops fall

to earth, even as the bees sleep again when the sun sinks, the sunset
a hundred veils in flames, even as you, too, sleep fast in a husk.

ESTES PARK, COLORADO

Like lavender and split pine
harsh mouthed sap of slick mint

like warm beer
mileage to getting here this winter

like who you think I am
a fawnling bent legged and spotted

like a warm neon body pliable as nylon
as splashing as sailboats drifting forward

like physics of tomorrow
Wednesday in mountains and Sunday at home

like breath cold hands on tabletops
tapping out my plains my places my foothills

like tonguing the distance
a sleeping, a tousling across hillsides barefoot

like the texture of this water just reminder
feet full of snow slipping the break

like the coursing of campgrounds through forest
a stack of cairns, a trip to a spring, a blossoming

like tomorrow, tomorrow, you here
I am gone from the rooftops swaddled and sketched in fleece.

A PENANCE
BY CJ EVANS
(New Issues, 2012)

REVIEWED BY ERIN L. MILLER

In CJ Evans' latest collection of poems, images speak for themselves, allowing their peculiarity or violence to stand on their own. Despite what the title suggests, *A Penance* doesn't seem a collection meant to atone but rather one that pulls certain things to the surface. In each poem, Evans creates a new world set in carefully selected and connected images. He strikes an uneasy timbre, placing stories of prison inmates next to personal confessions of desire next to a speaker vexed with the cruelties of the world. He writes through both a personal and global scope, touching on broad yet poignant themes. The collection is frank but lyrical and it is this balance that makes the blunt declarations so surprising.

Small, curious turns of phrases show up unexpectedly in the middle of poems, as in "the porpoise of a woman near orgasm" or "dangerous as owl pellets." Other parts halt the reader in their certain and somber temper: "We have certainly failed so far," "I dread your affection," and "How can I know my children won't be monsters?"

It is this consistent and lingering sense of doom that reminds the reader of the speaker's acute familiarity with dark places (in himself and his environment): "It's late / and I've misplaced," "Trouble is nesting in my lungs," and "Here's the pallid / infection, the much-quiet dying."

The speaker seems tethered between doubt and a wish to redress. Living in the company of paradox, Evans speaks of the "much-loud living" against everyday failings. He pairs subdued natural scenes with the wires of industry, animals with people, tragedy with intimacy. And despite the subtle brutality of some of the poems, others embody a lovely tonality that serves as soft interruptions, as in lines like "The nights pass like gypsum and butter" or "Let's find a nesting box and pull / the smell of figs from beneath the bed."

Mindful to sound, Evans strings together images and commands in a captivating stride. In "Instructions for Silk," he begins with a thread of soft "b" sounds, "Never again the black box, the bind, / the flightless bird. Becalm in paper scent / of scotch." only to quickly advance to an even longer series of biting "s" sounds "Silt, spend your fume [...] Arrive / slim-boned, wisped, lusting after lust [...]"

Never again, singe or wasp.” It’s this quiet unraveling that lends to the textured quality of his work.

In “The Work of Giants,” Evans writes about the wolfish, sometimes paltry quality of lust when compared to the world’s cruel giants: “The world is furious and I’m so tired / of being furious with it [...] all / I want is your skin against my skin.” However, desire takes on multiple meanings in the book. It represents the distractions of lust but also a means toward growth and a lens to interact with the world.

In a book that hinges on honest examinations, Evans not only writes about conflicts of the world but also conflicts of the self reacting to the world. He explores self-evolution, learning through failure, and the inevitable not-knowing, as in “This Time in Wartime”:

[...] *I don’t*

*know the name of this new
thing. This thing I’ve let settle*

*down throughout me,
which spreads itself enormously*

*like unfurling skeins
of creosote and becomes*

*me. Far off, the artillery
flashes, and I miss the boys*

I’ve been [...]

The poem “Metamorphoses” serves as a multi-tiered study of the inevitability and universality of change in its use of the first person plural while moving back and forth from natural elements to the human condition. He also writes about moving beyond and reconciling the cruelties of the world while avoiding a maudlin voice of redemption. Many of the poems in the book have a fictional, dreamy air to them, as if existing just beyond, in another realm. The power of poetic whimsy is certainly not lost on Evans. He takes a step away from the first person, choosing instead to focus on observation. He lets the speakers’ reactions to their environments reveal their true character. They’re speakers who are simultaneously tired and sanguine of the world’s machinery. Despite the dark

themes surrounding the text, they don't give in to helplessness. For example, in "I Know the Pinecones," the speaker discusses the pinecone's sharp defenses as merely products of the world's design, blameless subjects of the Earth's "cruel devices."

The collective self in the book ultimately becomes the self that, as Wallace Stevens writes, "touches all edges... that fills the four corners of night." There's no denying that *A Penance* is an expansive collection, which can appear, at times, scattered. Yet, what the book loses slightly in cohesion, it gains in powerful single lines and concise language. Every piece feels precise. If Jean-Luc Godard is right in saying that language is the house man lives in, then CJ Evans has built a striking piece of architecture.

PRETTY MARROW
BY SHANAN BALLAM
(Negative Capability Press, 2013)

REVIEWED BY SHARI ZOLLINGER

*Letters, like bone, have pretty
marrow. Intimate, gritty*

as a pearl [...]

So goes the title poem from Shanan Ballam's second book of poetry, *Pretty Marrow*, winner of the Utah Arts Council's Original Writing Contest. In this collection, Ballam offers the inmost and essential parts of herself through exquisite syntax and sparkling, clear lines that explore such gritty themes as alcoholism, domestic violence, suicide, depression, and family dynamics.

Ballam structures the book via five sections including "Back into Syntax" and "Pretty Marrow," yet each section might have also donned such titles as "mother," "sister," "father," "brother," and "lover." In the first section, Ballam invites us to come to the hospital window behind which her mother is dying of alcoholism.

*I tip-toed to the hospital, peeked
in my mother's window. My one wet eye
spied the tidy bed where my mother lay.*

*A porcelain doll. My sisters sat near her,
their lips and cheeks painted pink.
Purple chrysanthemums, yellow daisies in vases,*

*the pastel green light of a monitor
made me remember sugar eggs for Easter,
a little peephole to view a lovely scene [...]*

Ballam's words glimmer, rendering priceless even the most painful poems. She propels the reader *back into syntax*, each sentence embedded with semi precious stones available to mine, to collect, to keep hidden under the bed or to pull out, to shine.

Shanan Ballam's doppelganger/alter ego, Red Riding Hood, enters at the end of the first section and features strongly in the second. Her first book-length work

was a chapbook called *Red Riding Hood Papers*. Ballam uses the familiar fairy tale as archetypal sidekick to elevate her own familial story from the personal to the mythic. Ballam's fresh approach to the Red Riding Hood story weaves seamlessly through her poems, as we are granted unexpected perspectives from inanimate objects like Red's basket, or Grandmother's bed. Through this section we meet a sister who married, for all intents and purposes, the wolf:

*Wolf, ulfe, lupine, lupus:
the slippery animal of time.*

*Wolf will always be waiting the girl always
watching, maybe inside, maybe outside, in the sky.*

Ballam explores the nature of instinct and how to protect her sister from the real threat of domestic violence. She does not shy away from complex emotion and asks the reader to see, even empathize with dark things. She takes responsibility for every word on every page, anchoring the reader in precise, god-honest writing.

In her poem "Once More to the Lake," Ballam speaks to the family experiment, its successes and failures. She highlights her relationship with her father.

*Weren't we a family?
Weren't we?
And wasn't our father charming
that day on the lake,
his blue hat flying off in the wind?
And wasn't he marvelous,
his enormous authority as he leaned
from the truck window, Marlboro dangling
from his mouth [...]*

Section four charts the bittersweet budding of the body, sexuality, and new relationships. Lovers emerge but are nameless. They share qualities of the wolf—still so animal. The body is both refuge and refuse.

*You, who just to feel your falling, fell,
unlocked your eyes to splendid shame.
You who crave delicious hell*

*fell to feel the spark in every cell,
shock of knowing shimmers your brain.*

In Ballam's final section, "Pretty Marrow," we have fallen in love with Ballam's loves. It is clear she loves her sisters, as well as the precision of words, the catharsis of poetry. In Ballam's story, it is her sisters who save her and transform her poetry into a love story

*[...] and my sisters bend, we all curve
in to the sweet breath of one another's hair
as we sit in these, then other sticky chairs [...]*

Then you sing, sisters your soft songs [...]

Ballam finishes this collection on a highway, in a storm in "White-Out, Wyoming." Having already guided us deftly through sharp metaphors and dark terrain, she asks us to take one more journey, linking us to the "little blue car" just ahead.

*[...] and I was Alice tumbling down
the reeling, deep throat
of the rabbit hole. The heater blasted
my face. My bladder ached.
I was incredibly small
but gripped the wheel, nudged
the pedal till faint lights glittered.*

But this poem is different. We enter that rabbit hole with her, because she's taught us time and time again that we will emerge from each poem holding a glint of hope extracted from even the smallest of things—a smile from a boy, "his red hair wild in the snow."

Reviewer's Note:

During the period of time it took to write this review, Ballam's younger brother Dylan tragically died. This review is dedicated to Dylan, who, Ballam believes, is the subject of her poem, "Paper Boat."

*[...] Why did I not save you,
lay you in the sun, why did I
not lift you, moss-limp and lovely, press

your river blurred words to my face.
You are my love note to the world,*

my paper boat. I wish you

*could let go and swirl away
to a place unblemished, where light
could pour its honey onto your face.*

PLURAL
BY CHRISTOPHER STACKHOUSE
(Counterpath, 2013)

REVIEWED BY PATRICK THOMAS HENRY

Christopher Stackhouse's *Plural* crams philosophy, aesthetic theories, familiar objects, and everyday events into the compact shape of lyrical poems. At first, the collection seems claustrophobic, trapping the reader in networks of the poet's own free associations as he mulls over marks on pages, lecture notes, drafts of poems, human fingers, animals, and devices like computers and radios. Yet, these poems reward repeated readings. A curator, visual artist, and poet, Stackhouse crafts his lyrics into complex textual pieces of visual art, elegantly depicting the fraught qualities of the visible world and building that reality without the tactile heft of the objects that infiltrate his lines.

As a textual work of conceptual art, *Plural* obsesses over the crisis of representation inherent in language. Stackhouse's poems question poetic diction and imagery as if they were Chinese boxes, each word containing a multitude of other ideas. The volume's opening piece, "Mark," immediately places the reader into the concepts nested in a single typographical mark:

*as a mark is made it becomes an image
as you make a mark you become the image
of an image making a mark—*

Here, Stackhouse implicates poets and readers alike in this system of words. A poet setting pen to paper will inevitably "become the image / of an image making a mark," so that writers themselves become markings, letters on a page that represent an abstraction. But this maps onto the readers of Stackhouse's book, as well. After all, readers must encounter these marks, grapple with them, and conceptualize the things represented by language. Without the reader's intervention in these poems, the texts cannot reproduce the lost "ephemeral moment" of experience. "Mark" suggests that the act of reading is an effort to signify the ephemera of the visible world: "the vapor, the audience, the contrast, the sophist- / ication swollen by a bee sting [...]"

Stackhouse charts these efforts to articulate an already lived experience in formally experimental and ambitious poems, which usually hinge on following a web of free associations. Some of the poems in *Plural* drop readers into a

philosophical framework they can't readily grasp. The lecture note poems, "After Alain Badiou" and "Arthur Danto at the Guggenheim," can prove especially disorienting for readers unfamiliar with Stackhouse's theoretical frameworks, which include Jacques Lacan's brand of psychoanalysis and Arthur Danto's post-historical theories of art. Such poems à clef (for lack of a better term) require some background to unlock how they, to quote "After Alain Badiou," describe "what is an artistic event—a 'new' trace— / materialist, materializing, materialism of art." Other poems that seem to intentionally occlude readers' access include the collection's brief homage to experimental composer John Cage, as well as notation poems like "Notes from Panel Disc. @ The Fish Tank Gallery."

These dense pieces are confined to the first fifteen pages of the sixty-page volume. The forbidding, highbrow edifice that these opening poems erect will no doubt intimidate certain readers. However, a reader who breaches Stackhouse's wall of abstractions is greeted with poems that depict the genuine struggle of representing anything—let alone in an aesthetically pleasing way. The first "Extractions," subtitled "From Poet to Draftsman," labels "the poet's depiction" as "an intimacy, concision of economy and line," which requires readers to become intimate with all the possible connotations of a poet's language:

*They have that effect
defy viewer attempts at drawing out or divining some
straightforward reading.*

These three lines state the relationship that Stackhouse imagines between poets, poetry, readers, and critics more elegantly than the conceptual and experimental lecture note poems. For Stackhouse, even straightforward poems should possess an element of abstraction: a well-wrought poem denies facile readings and forces us to prod, question, and evaluate. It is little surprise that the first "Extractions" rankles against critics who, like students in a lazy workshop critique, attempt to limit poetry by saying "this is art, this drawing, this is A drawing, this is the soul, this is / the record of the soul." So, the second "Extractions" poem, subtitled "Addendum Section III," proposes that poetry does not speak to the individual identity of a reader, but instead to "[a] system of audiences."

These two poems mark a dramatic pivot in *Plural* and its use of innovative diction and forms. In speaking to this "system of audiences," the book's experiments become sensual, evocative, and disarmingly sincere. "Angel Smoke" captures a "moment thin as parchment": the disorientation of the speaker's senses as he cogitates on beauty and symmetry as a woman performs fellatio on him, the

“angel smoke” of her breath “reduced to mirage on the glass.” The provocative prose poem “Short” follows, casually sketching out a day consisting of a breakfast (“Special like bacon and eggs and toast with jam, my morning coffee”), beer, pornography, and a dog walk.

The tenacious verve of a piece like “Short” is *Plural* at its apex, distorting conventions of narrative time to express the tumultuous immediacy of human thought. “Short” launches *in media res*, as the speaker says,

Seventy-five cents short of three dollars and fifty cents, I couldn't purchase my favorite bottle of beer before I headed into the apartment after walking the dog. All I wanted to do was sit down to the computer and talk about my day with myself, while I surfed the web and intermittently wrote.

Time is compellingly disjointed: the speaker reflects on his desires while stopping at a bodega to buy a beer at the end of his dog's walk. In a single moment of thought, all of these disparate events are of equal importance. Indeed, everything in this poem is “special”—the speaker's cigarettes, his morning coffee, his computer, the graphic pornography on his computer. Imagining the pornography arouses the speaker, even as he stands in the shop: “I am shocked and absorbed imagining, as I stand in front of the counter paying a dollar eighty for a Negra Modelo.” The poem, which happens in a single moment like Ambrose Bierce's classic story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” comes full circle: the speaker fantasizes going home, smoking, writing, and watching porn, so he frantically “handed the man a fistful of change” so he could rush to his apartment and live his fantasy.

Small, graceful phrases power the poems in the latter half of the book while toying with Stackhouse's interest in representation, in imagery's endless Chinese-box deferral of meaning. “Efficient and Particular” refers to the title's abstractions as “[i]ndifferent / to the indifference of cats,” while “Chew the Candy” coaxes readers to “[b]e comfortable in all that is not / there. It simply is.” Stackhouse charts these indifferences and absences onto poetic diction and images. “Each Bird,” for instance, begins with a reflection on lovemaking in the grass, and the speaker considers “the swaying / shadow of leaves” before imagining the birds inhabiting a park's trees:

*Each bird is this poem's color against—no, with
the asphalt, between the white stripes, wherein
strollers cavort, fertile, intrepid, antique,*

soft with age, browning beneath the blaze
refracting daylight.

By refuting the vision of “color against [. . .] the asphalt,” the poem melds the bright colors of birds’ plumage with the black of pavement, the white lines separating lanes, the sidewalks, and strollers pushed along. But this assimilation is notably a *poetic* project: the speaker cannot imagine the vibrancy of birds without the swarm of sensory information. A conventional poem might edit out these details, but Stackhouse’s *Plural* insists that poetry thrives because of—and not in spite of—the network of external objects and forces that shape a poem’s vision of reality.

While the dense, associative poems of the opening pages may put off readers, pieces like “Short” and “Each Bird” encourage us not to fear the endless system of marks, images, and representations abounding in *Plural*. After all, as Stackhouse asks in “Radio,” “If you don’t know what the (a) secret fiction is how can it depress you?” Living with ambiguity—rather than resolving it—is necessary for appreciating this volume of poetry. In *Plural*, Stackhouse treads the intersection of lyric poetry, conceptual art, and theories of representation. Even if representation in art creates “one implausible copy after another,” Stackhouse’s poems depict the individual’s struggle to shamble together reality from the abstract stuff of experience, from intimate encounters with a quotidian world inhabited by animals and objects.

WHELM
BY DAWN LONSINGER
(Lost Horse Press, 2013)

REVIEWED BY KATE ROSENBERG

The book is a red hibiscus mouth. The book is a shadow box with another shadow box tucked into it. The book is waves and rain and rotting apples. The book is a transparent shirt over transparent skin over a transparent heart. The book is violence and regeneration.

dawn lonsinger's poems will tell you that the book is something you will find out it is not. These poems disarm you by not giving you the metaphor(s) you expect. Try to grab hold of *Whelm* and you will find that it will tumble ahead of you, its language revealing a new moment of emotional, physical, or intellectual clarity while it doubles back and loops through what's been revealed before. We find trees made of money, a river teeming with hippos, a town with fire alive in the mines beneath it, and a quiet, gentle elegy to a bus driver. To point to lonsinger's language as lush, rich, or sumptuous in the landscapes of these poems, though not inaccurate, is to prettify/simplify the work of the language—to get to the edge of what is unsayable, that ravenous corner of the psyche that longs for connection.

The poems in *Whelm* aren't easy, though there are moments when it almost feels as if we're off the hook—that we can lounge through a poem and enjoy the sights without being asked to notice its multiplicity. One of the pleasurable frustrations in reading *Whelm* is in the way it does not allow one to be able to address smart, complicated work on the nature and limitations of language at the same time one addresses the poignancy of image, the potency of the visceral, the masterful structures of the poems. I'm thinking, in particular, of the way in which sound and image merge in the first two lines of "La Fille Fragile": "Her silver waist went out to sea/ like petal debris, rain-tattered ma chère parfois." Maybe for a moment we've bought a ticket to a French film starring a lovely, delicate woman seen in silver and the glisten of rain. As pretty as the alliteration of *silver/waist/sea/petal/debris* is in these lines with their sweet s's and long e's—lonsinger gives us more than lovely footage. "La Fille Fragile" is the poem in the collection that most directly addresses the self as an ever-shifting presence that is not entirely aside from the body and which, in fact, is maybe *wholly* the body. *La fille fragile* is not just fragile, but fractured; "*mon autre moi*" is in slippery, ethereal pieces: "her eyes afloat," and "fingers scatter like lightning." The book

generally rejects an imagination that would put all the puzzle pieces together to approximate comprehensiveness. Like skillful collage, poems like “*La Fille Fragile*” retain the electricity generated by disparate (material or linguistic) elements rubbing against each other, contained within a recognizable form.

The poems in *Whelm* vary in shape and length, but remain within the realm of what we expect from poems. lonsinger does not choose to make her mark with experimental formal structure. That is to say, lonsinger’s potently wrought language is contained within somewhat expected forms, while not being limited by them. Perhaps the most compelling and revealing poems, “Touch Me Also, Goddess of Inevitability” and “Why Deluge” are two of the longer poems in the book. “Why Deluge” is the most formally inventive; split into seven sections, each lineated very differently from the next and yet (again, collage) they are stitched together seamlessly. “Touch Me Also, Goddess of Inevitability” feels much looser insofar as the stanzas range widely and the speaker is more colloquial and urgent in its forceful “I”:

*I am lonely. My body is lonely. I sit outside and let the wind
tangle my hair. I understand that this is nothing like a relationship.
I understand that relationships take time
and hack it into bits. I understand that while we’re not looking
time slithers back together, wins.*

“Why Deluge” is quieter; the only notable syntactic repetition is the “because” at the start of each section. Though lonsinger’s “I” is present here as well, there is a “we” and “you” that carry a significant amount of the poem’s emotional heft:

*we touch our flinty skins together, but nothing
leaks inside aftermath, my pining deep enough
to trawl, my knees caught in the damp twine
of our historic sleeping*

In this brief passage, the “I” pines deeply, her knees caught in history. One of my favorite moments in “Why Deluge,” and in the book, is emblematic of the artistic work lonsinger is doing. The last line of part VI reads, “When I try to speak red hibiscus unfolds from my mouth.” Her deftness here is subtly displayed in the drama of the bloom of a vibrant, monstrous flower from a woman’s mouth as she yearns to speak. The choice of the hibiscus is luscious in its intimations of tropical heat and humidity, qualities of feminine desire, even as the conspicuous golden stamen erupts from the petals. There is hardly anything speechless about this image. The declaration is about how the self is expressed, if not in words.

Here is where lonsinger begins to walk/write the finest line—the one that exists on the edge of the abyss of the inexpressible, desirous self. This “I” tries language and it doesn’t work, but this incredible flower just might. It is a noteworthy quality of the hibiscus that its blooms last only one day. If one catches that flora fact, it is doubly rewarding to follow the recurrences of ripened, pollinated flowers and fruit, especially in “Fall of Falling” and other poems in section iii of the book.

Nonetheless, don’t expect that the language of *Whelm* will be less than or easier to parse than a magnificent flower at any turn. “Touch Me Also, Goddess of Inevitability” underlines this visceral nature of language and expression that is rife in *Whelm*: “Touch me, dear goddess of inevitability, with your giant mouth./ Let me inside of that mouth where it’s warm with ferment and finishing.”

It feels easy these days to discuss a book of poems by a woman in terms of how it deals with “The Body.” The body often feels like a thematic cop-out in poorly written work and in easy conversation about (especially) women’s art. It is when I encounter complicated, raw, finely honed, and (yes!) beautiful collections like *Whelm*, that I believe in the absolute relevance of writing about the body and how it desires and loves and hurts and withers and aches and pulses and sleeps. Because *Whelm*’s body doesn’t do any of those things glibly, we are given a chance to reimagine our own worlds as lonsinger does hers. In “Ithaca Falls,” the next to last poem in the collection, she writes,

*Shining translates into soft moss clinging
to rock, green gratis. I dip my foot in, watch the water plunge into itself,
contradict the notion of a self separate from what it wades through*

And it is with this splitting that is not splitting a self that is not individuated, that dawn lonsinger begins the close of *Whelm*, which is, as ever, a slippery, lush place that will simultaneously illuminate and wash away.

TANTIVY
BY DONALD REVELL
(Alice James Books, 2013)

REVIEWED BY ANDREW HALEY

Over the last 15 years, as a professor at the Universities of Utah and Nevada, Donald Revell has been writing poems that have evolved to match his surroundings. It is a true trajectory for a poet whose own manifesto is titled *The Art of Attention*. There is little of the ivory tower in Salt Lake City and Las Vegas and there the attentive eye finds new contours and distinctions.

Revell's acclaimed earlier books of poems, represented best by *New Dark Ages* and *Erasures*, have seemed to wear away into essentials in the desert. The long lines and uniform stanzas disappeared. Poems obsessed with the last European century and its ancient betrayals, and with the tropes of modernism Revell inherited from his native New York City—urban space, the crowd, chaos, and class—faded away. Imbued with an adaptive, transcendental, almost Cathar Christianity, the poems in *There Are Three*, *Arcady*, and *My Mojave*, turned instead to the individual and the individuating landscape of the West. Revell found anew the mysteries of geology and climate, aridity, uplift, desiccation, the struggle of plants in the desert weather and the long suffering gardeners who grow them, as well as the idylls and isolation of first Salt Lake City and then the Las Vegas suburbs.

Revell's son Benjamin appears frequently in these poems in an idealized state of innocence that serves as the reliquary for Revell's lost innocence. His paeans to Jesus and God may stem from Thoreau but take on the desert-struck solitude of Saint Jerome. The conflux of transcendentalism, Albigensian mysticism, and pre-Socratic thought in the brooding solitude of the Mojave created in the songs and meditations of *Arcady* and *My Mojave* a spare, free-from, personal but not confessional lyric that surpasses Revell's early work both in music and idea.

The Bitter Withy starts very much like a continuation of the style and sensibilities of *My Mojave* and *Arcady*, but with an unmistakable sorrow that is less present in his other desert books. "Long-legged Bird," the penultimate poem, captures the long-lined clip and measure of poems in *Erasures* and the earlier books, and brings to us again Revell's considerable anger and anxiety, his bitterness, though here it has nothing to do with the wars in Europe or the destruction of cities or peoples. Instead, his middle period is one of transcendence,

wisdom, and religion. We have a poem tuned to the sound of Revell's mortality and the decline of his desert arcadia:

[...] *I want to explain—tremolos
And squealings and then a high sound
Sweeten the little halfway house
Forever. I mean it just goes on forever,
As through the little portals children pour*

Arcady has become a halfway house. The decline ordains Revell's own death with the transient and sacred essence that flits around and inside particulars but is apart from them, perhaps above them. It is a masterful poem, one of Revell's finest.

Tantivy carries this matured, sorrowful new music even further. In the previous decade, Revell has translated Rimbaud, Apollinaire and LaForge. The French strain is strong here and more so than ever in his work, the poems in this book provide the rare sensation of true originality, of a poet past caring who has not shed influence but has moved past caring about it. They do not feel received but are new in the old way. *Tantivy* is one of those books that perfectly fits the occasion of its being, which is to say, it may well be a classic.

"The Last Men," the first of four sections, opens with a suite of poems, titled "Victorians (1)–(11)," which play with form and rhyme in a manner reminiscent of Revell's early work, but in a completely unstudied way. There is nothing inherited in their formality. They give you the sense of how it must have been to hear the first rondel sung in torchlight 800 years ago.

*Motherless goddamn modernity never grew.
Here we are again at Christmas
On fire escapes without a fire in view.*

The French poets have long provided their American counterparts an alternative approach to rhyme more suitable than that of the English Romantics. Though *Tantivy* is indebted to Alfred Tennyson, the play of rhyme in the book and the shaping of poems into resemblances of forms remind one less of that cardboard viceroy of old Britannia than of John Ashbery, whose poems Revell's early work sometimes resembles. Revell's poems have always been more somber, and that darkness is at its fullest in *Tantivy*. Consider the following lines from the first poem to follow the "Victorians" suite, titled "Homage to John Frederick Peto."

*All in green we went out rioting.
Lute music demasked the commercial radio,
And girls knew everything.*

*[...] Any ornaments for the poor man's store?
Any moments of leisure at the fish-house door?*

*[...] Time will come again to talk perfection,
A succession of creatures in midair.
I won't be there.*

Hardly Victorian, rhyme serves less as deep architecture here than ornament, like bells on a jongleur's hat. Tennyson serves as a kind of muse in *Tantivy* but more as motif than as influence. True there is a song quality to these poems rather than the terse and incised esthetic dear to the modernist strain Revell has long championed, but in its most self-conscious mock-medieval stylings it is closer to Bertran de Born. Revell is married to poet Claudia Keelan, whose translations of the *trobairitz*, the female troubadours, is forthcoming from Omnidawn in 2015 under the title *Truth of my Songs: The Poems of the Trobairitz*. It seems that the music of 12th century Occitan poetry cross-pollinated *Tantivy*. The troubadours and *trobairitz* faced the quintessential poetic problem: the inheritors of a vast, rich, but obsolete cannon, they sought to make a new vernacular poetry that better matched the world at hand. Revell is on a likeminded quest in *Tantivy*—to make it new when “Make It New” is now a century old.

Tantivy's third section, “Tithon,” is one of the most experimental poems in Revell's catalog. Only a few times has he stepped so far from uniform surface textures and standardized syntactical patterns. Revell's great little poem, “What Can Stop This,” first published in *New American Writing* and later included in *Arcady* (“The sympathy of friends is pleasant VIOLINS/But it makes no difference anymore TROMBONES”) indicates future directions. But “Tithon” is big, filling the middle 10 pages of the book. It is songlike and repetitive in passages but incorporates found materials (a letter reprinted in its entirety; quotes from Cézanne and Char, etc) affixed to the poem with the logic of collage, so that the poem does not feel like a whole smooth object, but rather as a series of coincident, but not necessarily subsequent, parts. While the lines and phrases are highly melodic, their sequencing is discordant, giving “Tithon” almost a simultaneous rather than linear composition:

*Shadows of leaves
Shadows of leaves*

*Je suis le prince
D'un pays aboli*

*God counts only up to one
His hands are small
And in God's hands even
Mountains are sparrow sized*

*Also the cloistered fountains, Lord,
My dearest, my estranged,
The fountains also*

*Shadows of leaves
Shadows of leaves*

This friction between lyric and discord is one source of “Tithon’s” beauty, as is an overarching tension in the poem’s mood. For all of its optimistic intent and homilies about unity, eternity, and transcendence, “Tithon” is ultimately about loss. Here Revell follows most closely in Tennyson’s footsteps, giving new light to the myth of Tithonus, who begged for immortality and was cursed with the perpetual attenuation of life, and whose anglicized name, Tithon, Tennyson first used in the 1833 version of his poem of the same name. Revell’s “Tithon,” like Tennyson’s, is an elegy for lost time, a dirge not for the dead but for the remembrancers.

Tennyson may be the poem’s kelson, but its language more closely resembles those other great elegies for the condemned, Ezra Pound’s *The Pisan Cantos* and Dylan Thomas’ *Fern Hill*. Like them, it is fixated on the disordered contents of memory—the flashes and fragments of a broken paradise illuminated and made otherworldly by the dawning of death.

*I lay my eyes upon the ground and see the ground
I lay my eyes upon a cloud (clouds are France) and see the
angel there
I lay my eyes upon the slowly moving surface of the water
In a narrow pool between dragonfly and cruel acacia
And my eyes swim away from me finding my friends
Alive with skins made of diamonds (the poet Char) and high
sounds (the poet Reverdy)
I lay my eyes upon the easternmost horizon just at dawn*

*And my only son Benjamin walks out of my eyes
Never to be seen by me*

In its closing, “Tithon” assumes most closely the music of elegy, which, like all lyric poetry, has the ego at its center. Tennyson’s Tithonus is a stand-in for the bereaved for whom, abandoned by the dead, the world has lost its savor. Revell’s Tithonus is himself, the long practitioner of attentiveness, who mourns not his inability to die, but the coming loss of the objects of his attention. His anxiety about this separation rings like a crisis of faith through the whole of *Tantivy* and seems to challenge the foundations of the mysticism Revell has built in the desert. Though deeply sad, Revell’s work has never been more fine.

- Katie Peterson, *Permission*, New Issues Press, Western Michigan University (2013)
- Cullen Bailey, *Burns, Slip*, New Issues Press, Western Michigan University (2013)
- TJ Jarrett, *Ain't No Grave*, New Issues Press, Western Michigan University (2013)
- Lauren Shufren, *Inter Arma*, FENCE Books (2013)
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- Lee Ann Brown, *In the Laurels, Caught*, FENCE Books (2013)
- Steven D. Schroeder, *The Royal Nonesuch*, Spark Wheel Press (2013)
- Christopher Cokinos, *Bodies, of the Holocene*, Truman State University Press (2013)
- Dan O'Brien, *War Reporter*, Hanging Loose Press (2013)
- Bill Neumire, *Estrus*, Aldrich Press (2013)
- Theodore Ficklestein, *This Book Needs a Title*, Author House (2013)
- Andrew Hudgins, *A Clown at Midnight*, Mariner Books (2013)
- Erin Coughlin Hollowell, *Pause, Traveler*, Boreal (2013)
- Jennica Harper, *Wood*, Anvil Press (2013)
- Eric Greinke, *For the Living Dead—New & Selected Poems*, Presa Press (2014)
- Eileen Hallet Stone, *Hidden History of Utah*, The History Press (2013)

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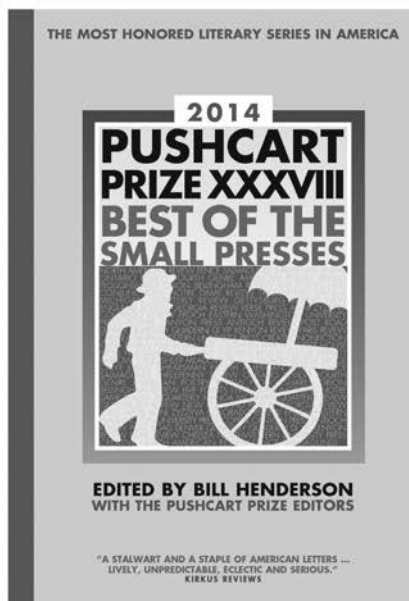


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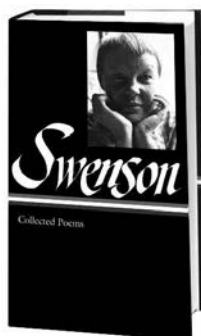
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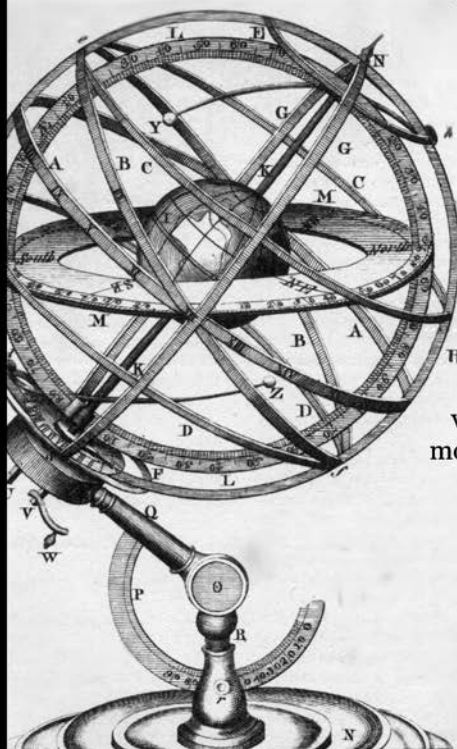
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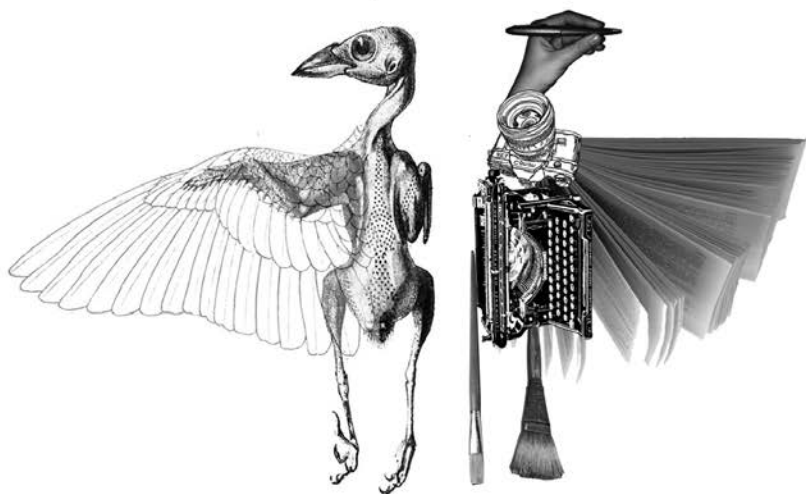
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