

Abstract

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RABBIT RABBIT

Adam Binkley, Master of Fine Arts, 2012

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Drawn from personal and collective history, the poems collected in "Rabbit Rabbit" emerge from narrative and lyric traditions using a variety of formal and dramatic techniques. Relying on irony, the poems often present a speaker who struggles with his past and is redeemed only in brief moments of recognition and self-awareness.

RABBIT RABBIT

by

Adam Binkley

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And if the voice of a broken king were to come in the dusk & whisper
To the world, that grandstand with its thousands of empty seats,

Who among the numberless you have become desires this moment

Which comprehends nothing more than loss & fragility & the fleeing of flesh?
He would have to look up at quickening dark & say: *Me. I do. It's mine.*

- Larry Levis

Rabbit Rabbit

Cold April morning as March turns over,
and wet; the windows covered with dew
and the grass fresh, not crisp
but cold, the moon
above the room, refusing to sleep.
I steal a glance at you
still sleeping and refuse to breathe.

I've turned this over and over in my head
a hundred times and I can't keep
still, I'm always forgetting something.
When did you wake? Did we fuck?
Or turn ourselves against the cold
and put on our clothes before the moon could rest?

And the rest is going like your breath,
has left my comprehension. I can't remember.

Who was it who said we should build little rooms for memories?
Dollhouses to return to whenever we like, to overlook,
exact task, *what was where when we left it?*

Was it here I've placed you at the desk?
Making with your mother's pattern a new dress,
red, the double color of need and loss,
the machine needle
punching in stitch after stitch,
straight and timely,
a tap, tap, tap and hum,
like a quiet machine gun.

You looked over your shoulder
and said *rabbit rabbit*
aloud to no one in particular
but it found me,
not the moon's light

but my breath visible in the cold room,
the white of your slip fading
as the saying fell into the red.

Off into silence this new beginning,
over as soon as it started
but beginning again and ending
always ending.

For Eve, a Vision

On your way away from me the sparrows in their nests startled around you. Wings became blurs. For a moment, I perceived the coming of an age of doors. Time warping the landscape of stone to façade. I saw you climbing eternal glass windows that breached a dense sky. On the ground, on my knees, I went only to see you so far up. My reflection was there, in the lowest mirror. He and I tried to grieve you going; let the path of finger smudges fade like mist in the morning light. But look! A turnstile door. I left myself, pushed through to the stairwell, went up flight after flight; sailing, flying until I reached the roof. Only to step out into the garden. And I was alone again in the dark and the dirt.

Bats as the Others of Birds

From Belfast a friend wrote me
of a low soundless cloud of starlings,
hundreds who turned in unison
as if following unseen arcs of wind
or, more startling, as if flight
was determined by a collective mind
and the rise and fall more prison than dance.

We call a group of them *murmuration*,
murmur also meaning continuous, inaudible speech:
the noise of wind pushing through trees
or across the surface of water, the sound
crowds of people make, waiting
for a performance to start
or moving across a train platform as one.

I don't know if I've ever heard a starling
but I imagine if so many sang
their song would be as terrifying as a gale,
able to shake with blunt force
anything unlucky enough
to fall within that blast.
But, writing back, and knowing

how easy it was to get tired of hearing
about my personal life going to hell,
I didn't say this. I wrote of a mutual friend,
her young son and his night escapes
through the dog door. The boy would laugh
as I left the world by covering my face,
disappearing again and again,

only to return, his discovery always fresh;
the same thrill driving him to flight,
careening across the linoleum,
with a recklessness I no longer have.
I chased him out onto the lawn, reaching
as he reached up for the moon
only to fall face first on the grass.

I picked him up and held him
as high as I could toward the sky,

listening as he spoke in a language
meaningless to everyone else, free
from what he has yet to learn,
his laugh, his babbling chatter,
sounding out beyond all of it

when a single bat flickered before us,
a scar revealed and quickly hidden again,
diving into the moonlight and rising,
until the boy could no longer see him
and was silent. I pulled him to my chest,
nothing like fear in his eyes.
Say the thing, I said,

say it, and it's yours.

Working Through Pain

I see it now: immaculate white flanked
by rows on rows of corn, the sweeping porch
and the drooping balcony unsafe for step
even when I weighed less than a bale of hay.
And the length of wire fence adorned
with barbs and crows coming for miles,
to perch and wait for something to scavenge.
Long Farm— where my father was raised
like a thick stalk by his mother and a man
who was kind to everyone else but him.
Spaceman to half of Robertson County
from the round helmet
he wore when he rode his motorcycle,
resurrected from used parts. And by providence
that thick black orb held his head intact
when he flipped his bike over the bridge
on Palestine Road, tearing up his ankle.
The same screw, five inches of ridge,
is still there holding his leg in place
and the discs in his back too,
from a lifetime of heavy lifting—
spikes for the railroad or muscling
a washing machine, alone, up a flight of stairs.
I wonder how many times he stood
in front of that great house and thought
about leaving. Alone there against the skyline,
no other houses for miles, just the heavy smell
of tobacco, thick in the air as he watched
the crows line up on the fence, one on top of the next
until the whole wire was night, until turning felt impossible.
Except the orbital return of those birds,
each afternoon picking at corn, getting thick and black.

Declaration of Intent to Confiscate the World's Birds into Trash Bags

Yellow-breasted and crest fallen, nestless
warblers pick grass to nestle in. Come here,
I've got a home for you. Same oriole,
thrush and white-throated winter sparrow.

I'll hook goose neck honking in fist
and shove into endless black *Hefty*.
Same with crow, whose nerve I need
to feather my spine in a slick dark coat.

'The action of the poem should be *muscular*,'
all those desperate bird bodies say, rustling
against one another, beating every wing,
all wings restless in plastic making

a whirling frantic friction, too much noise.
Somewhere in there is the first bird
I ever loved, a tiny colored ball
scratching its way out hopelessly.

This is the pet cockatiel my neighbor kept,
who climbed his cage and flourished for me,
each meaningless chirp a burst I tried to turn
into meaningful human speech, but failing

spoke back anyways. *Don't worry canary,*
kitty won't come, keep beating your wings
on a blue white-drum. I found that bird
in my neighbor's trash one morning, wrapped

in the Sunday paper like a birthday gift.
And what should I say for him now that I can?
Sing a song as real as the bright dream a boy had,
used to still the dizzy coming of *what*

(he wasn't sure) but knew he had to beat back.
No, it seems I've had it wrong. That body
is not made for mindless music making,
electronic keyboard programmed to repeat

a series of keys pressed down, serving only
instinct. But instead, perhaps it's purpose
more simple—to *find one's love and take it*.
And whether meant or not I hear it that way:

rising and falling, courageous in crescendo and dip,
even in the evenings when I'm trying to sleep,
not particular in meaning but in drive, the way claws
cling to bars regardless of any potential opening.

Snake Doctor

Why save the orchids in the box from those reliable stranglers, weeds? Rain is usually never enough to satiate or is flooding, but praying for either is a waste of time. To prove this: as a boy I helped my father hide his infidelity; later I'd hide from Mother after she'd taken her anti-depressants. Did I have a choice in keeping peace? *We get our first moral idea about the world from somewhere.* When I was little I loved to trap fireflies in jars, unaware they'd die. Japanese children play similar games with dragonflies. They tie a pebble to a long strand of hair and toss it into the sky. The dragonflies mistake it for prey and get tangled, dragged down by the weight. Some cultures believe they'd deserve this; that dragonflies are ill-omens, *snake doctors* or *devil's darning needles* because their purpose was to follow serpents and mend their wounds. But doesn't that make them something else? I imagine they heal as fast as they fly.

Sealcoat

Tom's hands are charred, heavy hammers.
They ring with blunt force. They take on
the stain, the tar we drink. We swallow
the tar because it hangs in the air.
He lays it on asphalt, thick coats
of black coal, it covers his hands
until he sleeps them in solvent.
I dipped my own there once
and felt them burn and tasted the tar,
the tobacco smell that clings and rises,
over cracked grocery store parking lots,
over the gaudy lights adorning the town's
strip clubs and strip malls, past projects
and more parking lots, the over-packed
elementary schools, Bransford, Westside,
Cheatham Park, where my mother
suffered smacks from autistic boys
who knew nothing but the trauma
of being struck, their mouths so thick
with tar they couldn't even speak,
unaware like everyone else
that you drink the tar and the solvent,
one after another, you pray
for absolution until you can't taste
the shame of your father
as he comes home from the double at Frigidaire,
his hours assembling appliances
for barely enough scratch to make sobriety
an afterthought, just enough
to get a local girl drunk,
the girl who sweeps up hair
at the barbershop,
so young she could be your sister,
she herself just trying to make her way,
fucking for whatever love she can get,
her mouth tasting of that black.
It sticks to the tongue;
I drink of her and the thick sky,
I ask for the solvent that tastes
like God's will. God help her,
my mother has chosen Tom to love,
a man again after being abandoned to tar.

She told me once her grandmother
made her wring a chicken's neck
when she was ten. To think of her hands
circling around softness, intertwined
with feathers. This while tobacco dried
on the barn wall, while her grandfather
rubber-banded bull balls without mercy.
She wants me to forgive her, although
I don't know why. What else can I say?
I haven't worked a day like that in my life.

Anna

When reading Freud there's always the risk of knowing enough to wake up one night with a mind on too much fucking. But without him it would be impossible to name the monsters we see in our sleep. When I think of his death I try to imagine what cancer would look like in a dream. Kudzu like, life choking life until lungs shrunk into black knots. A room smelling of vomit and piss. And as a child I did understand the occasional impossibility of breathing. Skinny, asthmatic and sickly, I often wished my father would get cancer because his chronic smoking choked me up. I rode to school with my window down, inhaling the rush, always freezing. But I never said anything. Freud, too, had a dutiful daughter. I wonder what it was like for her. Features so plain they were striking. Accustomed to hands on her skirt that wanted a glass of water. She kept the nature of his disease from him because she was afraid he'd commit suicide. Yet eventually, she did grant him that mercy. It's too easy to convince myself I possess the same force of will.

King

I.

Incredibly he's calm. This horse,
who's appeared in my dream
wearing my grandfather's face as a mask.

Those big black eyes: a pitiful, unblinking wet.
He's leading me even with his one bad leg.

I can't look away from the man's face
elongated over his: cheeks stretched
like cheap rubber, a bit clinched
by square yellowed teeth behind human lips.

What do you ask a horse like this anyway?

We keep going. Soon I'm knee deep in water,
and the condemned moon that hangs
in the river with us recoils like me
from the touch of his breath,
the hot smell of peanuts in Coke.

II.

When I was 8 my grandfather
took me to see a dying horse,
a cold morning when he lay
sweating in the dirt. He'd no muscle
to do anything about us, that leg
wouldn't let him get up and stumble away.

I thought I heard him wheezing,
but it was me, inhaling the dust.

It's much harder to bury a horse than I imagined.
So we didn't.

III.

We've crossed the river
and the coarse horse hair under my hand
has started to dry.

I want to touch
my grandfather's shallow cheeks
but he scares me. Instead I ask:
where are we going?

The moon lies down now
in the black sheen of the grass.

IV.

I had to climb to the top rung of the fence
to see my grandfather riding around the ring.

I called out to him:
What's his name?

He told me the horse's name: *King*.

V.

Now I'm walking beside him in the dark.

We've left the moon and the river
some ways away, and the only sound
our breathing as we move toward
a nameless place.

I want to ask him again,
where are we going?
But I don't.

Soon this holding back
feels like thirst.

VI.

At the end of his life,
my grandfather relied on a pig's valve
to keep his heart from shutting down.

It didn't occur to me until now
that this would make him think
any differently about the pigs
he hung, blacking
on the smokehouse wall.

After all, an animal tried to kill him once.

It was King, who kicked him in the back
that one instant when the broken thing within him returned.

VII.

Like a blind person,

I try to read his face with my fingers,
but they only remember saddle leather.

If I want to I could take it off,
bury it.

But no,

we move farther,
march on

and the grass
 makes no marker
of our footsteps.

Timberwolves

in memory of Jeff Barksdale

Those *Junior Pro* years I was the bench,
my skinny arms shaky the minute I had to run.
I had mastered the box out but reverse,
hiding behind the bigger kid I had to guard
while the rest of the chubby pack scrambled,
all wobbly knees unsure and diving to the floor,
each squeak a black mark skidded across the gym floor.
Bright orange wolves after a round leather rabbit.
Jeff, the scrappiest one, usually would come up
clutching the prize same size as his head
and, defying gravity, would wheel down the court
and swing his arms to flop the lay-up in.
The only time I ever came up with the ball,
I fired him a pass that careened across the court
and bounced right out of bounds, rolling
past Jeff's sneakers and towards the stands.
I sometimes still see him that way, when I shoot
at the worn hoop hanging on the garage: his skinny
defeated shoulders slinking a split second
before he hustled back, the whistle blown
all around us *In memoriam of play*.
After that we only played pickup, sweating,
dodging each other, always after or away
from something, executing crossover
after crossover, Jeff launching from his quick half-step
to bury the fadeaway before collecting his change,
mocking the garbage three
after garbage three I'd try to bank.

On that Summer Spent at Higgs Beach, Key West, FL

If it is important that I saw it,
the suicide, I didn't know it then.
The truth is, I was dealing
with my own embarrassment,
so unsure if one could ever be happy or not.
I was sixteen and had come to live there for a time,
down at the beach. A lot had changed and I,
perhaps just passionate, had come that night
to swim out as far as possible,
that warm ocean with no moonlight.
But I couldn't. And coming back,
I could see a car had arrived there,
beaming out at me its brights.
And really there was nothing else to see.

The Shark

The young boy's cheeks are blushing, flush with rouge,
a soft pink that makes him appear to be of porcelain
or one of those models Caravaggio would hire,

Isaac's stand-in or the angel
with gray wings the color of ram's wool.

If he sees his father coming up behind him
he does not show it,
although the girl at the make-up counter does
and turns away quickly to do something else.

Looking into the circular mirror,
he was allowed to love himself without fear

the way a young colt might see his reflection in a trough
with no awareness of anything other than being perfect in his nature.

Now over his shoulder, in the image,
he can see rage appearing in his father's face.
I've seen it in my father's face before,

as a boy who was often afraid that I was not
masculine enough. And once,
to prove a point I tried to cut a trophy out of a lemon shark's head.

My father and I had gone fishing and hooked him
driving the gaff through the muscular gray,
dragging him up. I was 16.

I took a serrated knife and set to work
and worked in silence and sweat, the sea water
stinging sores on my palms.

It was like sawing wood.

Who knows why my father let me do it?
Eventually I quit. We dumped the body
down channel, two mafiosos slipping
a rolled carpet into the East River,
then riding back to the shore
without speaking to each other.

But if his father is capable of subtlety
he does not show it: dragging him
through Macy's by the wrist, *faggot*,

as the boy fights back, tugging against the grip.
Good for him. I thought. *Good for him.*

Autumn and Dead Bees

On my way home I almost step on the curled exoskeletons of twelve, thirteen dead bees. I almost step in a scatter-shot of broken glass. A cop watches me through the window of the diner where he's taking his coffee. We won't disturb each other. It's hot and the rain comes to ripple the dark, to create noise because there's no traffic. Maybe this killed the bees. Maybe they swallowed the traffic sounds and choked on them. In the wood beside the road the moon shines, an old man ordering his last effects. He shines there on an over-turned shopping cart covered by a flannel blanket. Someone else's just been there, sleeping among the moon's relics. I want to crawl inside and count myself among them—trespass in the light that'll straighten me until dawn. I will. Here on the ground, everything's as dangerous as it should be.

Letter to Larry Levis

Walking home from the bar I see my eyes
in a series of lit-up bus windows that pass.

And then I'm gone. I'm tired.

No one else is on the street and the noise of cars
seems far away. Or around the corner.
There's a car parked alone under a burned out street light.

It's been broken into, the window framed
by sharp teeth of glass, the rest of it on the pavement,
darkness and wires in the empty car, no lights of others
to slash the black, nothing to lead me on.

I go.

I showed my students a recording of you
reading poetry today, the last one made.

They couldn't make out much of what you said,
and you couldn't keep your head up, drunk
until midway through the poem,
when something took over, took you over
as you read and everything straightened.

Then I felt you had returned, to show me
the will to keep going, unbroken.

*So you tried to destroy yourself, you'd say,
Are still trying. Big fucking deal, kid.*

The shallow wind persists, I look up, startled to see
a sleepless hawk working his skinny arms,
riding and turning toward the home he's made
in the ceiling of a failed fast food restaurant.

It lords there over mouse shit and aluminum,
king of the Coke cans faded to white.
An American triumph, clearly. And yet
you'd believe in it. *In me.*
I saw it in your eyes as they swam.

And would you believe my father used to keep
a sawed-off chair leg in his truck
in case he needed to beat sense
into something that didn't understand him.

Once I saw him use it to put a doe out of her misery.
And all there could be of her now are bones,

for all of us the same, ash or bones,
the earth will fill our dead cracked ribs
or our ribs will be nothing.

By now you've been dead for fifteen years,
you should know this better than anyone.

I imagine you find it funny.

All of the light
of the moon comes now,
confines me in the visible.

I thought I knew why we do it.

To steady the stars as they quiver.
To outlast the silence of the sullen,
tireless night. Who goes but will return,
again and again. And quietly.

But I was wrong.

The drunk falls away with the words,
amounting to only a cold bed or a hard branch.

Or I'm a boy again, feeling my nose pressed
to the screen door, looking out,
refusing to become what I became,
building the nothing out of my breath.

And yet time and oblivion alone, you remind me.
They have the power to heal. They and nothing else

Kwidee

*What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?*

- Robert Hayden

As a boy I didn't know the killdeer's
broken wing was feint, an act
to lead predators astray from speckled eggs,
small stones huddled in circles on the ground.
I didn't know its name wasn't *Kwidee*,
the same cry I heard when it hobbled away
as I carried those six stones home in my hands.
My father wouldn't let me keep them.
Those nights, I would dream of crossings:
a body of water, an open field, railroad tracks.
Once I was diving from a plane and mid-flight
crossed a hawk, also falling.
And waking my flailing arms were wings,
wild in the dark and not my own.
When I hear the killdeer again
I see my hands as small, a nest
whose eggs won't survive.
I don't even know what happened to them.
To the killdeer fighting the brush,
beating back the blood rising in its chest,
reenacting the feint. Then I didn't understand
what it meant to lose anything. My father,
whose father left when he was three, did.
He taught me to imitate the killdeer's cry,
to never disturb eggs in nests.
And when his father returned
it was to die. He took his ashes
in a mason jar, to give them
to the snow on Lookout Mountain.
There, in the white, he believed he saw him,
his father coming to claim the stone,
the mind doing whatever it could
to ease the pain of loss, the ghost
a simple gift. I don't believe in it.
And I haven't spoken to my father in almost a year.
He gently took those eggs from me when I couldn't
tell them from stones. And in my dreams
I can't thank him, can't keep my arms
from shaking, mid-flight, broken wings.

Argument for Solo-Traveling

Now they have courtesy curtains in hotel rooms to separate designer couch from bed and bed from wall-mounted flat-screen. I make another room inside the room by turning up the TV's volume and crawling inside the shower. Earlier today I stopped and listened as a man on the street told me about his cancer and begged. And begged. I was able to walk away from him prepared for the day's bloodletting; readied to offer tithe to the cathedral-like feelings a strange city brings, the iron gates that shut out the noise of my daily life. But who says convenience has to be a luxury? I have more than enough room in my bags for all these gothic arches, these greasy ravens, the rain water that runs down the digital marquee keeping weather and time. There's no humiliation in sympathizing with carrion birds who feed on garbage. Sometimes I see them eating alone, picking apart fast food wrappers with their teeth.

Why I Think Zoos Are Important

The stripped trees and their bare shadows
come in accord with the gray winter clouds,
to exist together like the negatives of photographs:
evidence that makes emptiness easy to believe in.

I hurry home if only to keep myself
from becoming one of these shadows,
that another me might come out of this space—
the self I see when I dream of cages,

his teeth bared behind bars: crumbling, charcoal
colored things (it isn't pleasant). But inside
the small safety of my room now, the TV
is showing me a muddy-white polar bear

who has been swimming for miles
in dirty, warm water. She is returning home
to eat her son or die of starvation.
Somehow we got it all on film.

It gets easier every day, though,
to see sadness in the lives of animals
and easier still to ignore it.
Like I had an alcoholic dog once

who used to knock beer cans out of my hand,
who had a desperation in his eyes
that created solidarity between us,
so you've got habits too, to keep you alive.

And when he was hit by a car I found myself
making all these promises—
to find a way to give up
my pride and paranoia, to sleep

no longer through daylight, not to worry
so much about taking my own life.
But it was easy to get over it.

Without language, animals can't articulate
anything about longing, and we, in turn,
don't need to explain why we love
walls so much, that we build them
to keep out the other dangers we've also built.

Kindness

When he jumped no one was there to stop him but there were people to take pictures. I myself wished I'd had a camera, and I said so to the well-dressed lady sitting beside me. Her son, she replied, had killed himself by climbing into a trash bag and blowing his brains out. Which was considerate, she thought, not having to clean anything up, and I told her I agreed. I would think about this later, when the Metro started again and a tourist threw up as the Green Line swerved past Fort Totten. I was the tourist. I tried to apologize, but before I could the man across the aisle dropped down to his knees and scrubbed with a newspaper he had been asleep under then asked me if I had any change.

Song for a Girl's Skin Graft

She gets her food
under the table
but at least she gets
to eat. She catches
shit for the hair
on her nose,
but at least
she isn't beat.
Her forehead
has a scar
from the cut
to save her nose
and at school she gets
called *piggy, piggy, piglet*
everywhere she goes.
She digs in dirt
after school
and tries to write
her name. She watches
older kids play house,
but doesn't get
the game. She jumps
rope when they let her
but almost always
trips, her shoes
were never hers
so they don't seem
to fit. She dreams
of tasseled handle-bars
and dresses
without holes.
When her mother
isn't home
she tries on
all her clothes.
She drowns
in their size, and hides
from her nose,
she does all her chores
and doesn't answer the phone.
She loves *Three by the Sea*
and other books for kids

and in the dirt she catches
Frog and Toad
then puts them in a script.
She lies awake at night
wondering what they'd dream,
she knows that Toad is jealous
but Frog is never mean,
and when they dance
and play with her
she always likes to sing.

Derek Jeter

Somewhere I took a wrong step and got lost
in this new landscape of American lives.
Nothing looks familiar. Somewhere
in an endless flicker of digital images
I've been collected and streamed
between Derek Jeter and Antoine Dodson,
whose 15 seconds came from his response
to the rapist that broke into his house
and tried to attack his sister.
They made a song about it
everyone thinks is funny.
I myself sent it to everyone I cared about.
Why not? In the shadow of no towers
everyone is important while they're being looked at.
Still, I sometimes send messages from my laptop
hoping that myself nine years ago will respond.
But instead of getting an answer I win things:
fortunes from African princes, promotionals
from clothing stores and notices of new music I just might like:
Kanye and Jay-Z's newest video
and the hundreds of blog posts and comments on it,
a front row seat to a politician's latest fall from grace
along with his inevitable political plea, a free X-Box
if I answer the right questions and a cam girl
who wants to get to know me and show me that she cares.
I read on the internet though,
that if it exists once on the web it exists forever.
I'm there somewhere, in the background
of an old photograph. Three years before that passing
I went on a choir trip to New York and threw a penny
off the Empire State Building. I bet if I retraced my steps
I'd come across me up there, at least a fragment,
enough to take to a seat in old Yankee Stadium
so that I can show myself what it sounded like,
that first time they played baseball after.
To be there around the opening pitch,
me and Derek Jeter and everyone else still standing.

Asleep Under the Overpass

This is how the world will end or keep on going,
he isn't sure, but after waking under the overpass
he marched out to provide poems to people,
people poems for spare change or spare food.
Going out he had trouble walking, and trouble
means no one takes him seriously: not hard hat,
winter coat, or the girl in the J.C. Penny window.
There was the thin waitress who served him eggs
and that free cup of cold morning coffee, no cop
calling after he ran out which itself is a kind
of listening. Maybe if he went back she'd loan him
a cigarette? He tried to buy one from a young man
with rolling papers and pouch tobacco
but he just asked him *have you heard about*
and yadda yadda, so he walked on and a good
natured boy tried to give him a dollar,
but he only accepts commissions. Once he got
five from a girl on her birthday when he wrote
her a few lines about the clouds becoming rabbits
in the river sheen. If worth that much he thought
about keeping it, but when he found it crumpled
a few blocks later he took the remaining two seventy
and dumped it in a red Santa's bucket. Salutations!
Merry Christmas! He misses the weight in his pocket
but feels less bad about coming back later to take a coat
from the bin and new shoes, almost worn through, to replace
the entirely done, cold sidewalk on his bare feet, pair.

He keeps going some many blocks, keeps freezing
arms busy, fingers counting themselves one by one.
Once his brother had a birthday, a magician pulled
balloons into rabbit shapes, blue balloon brother rabbit
worth whatever commission, he thinks, the magician
could make. Once he sold a magician's secrets,
lines he pulled out from a notebook left behind
on a lunch break. Worth keeping he thought then
but needing a cigarette, crouched under coat soaked
like a wet cardboard box top almost pulling itself apart.
Good luck being taken seriously, he thinks, walking
past a woman walking a dog. And talking to him!
Who talks to barking tail waggors, flea bitten and warm
in deep fur coat. Unsoakable. Once a pretty waitress

offered him an umbrella, walking together for six blocks. Maybe if he went back for a cup of coffee, but trouble walking back he isn't sure he remembers how many blocks or how long to follow the river or which side of which overpass, space to fall asleep under, worth keeping awake in case he came up with a few lines, worth keeping themselves he thinks, like the pages from library books his brother pulled out on his birthday. One Christmas he and his brother donated their presents in case they got lucky, got them back times two. Letter to Red Bucket Santa unanswered but published in the newspaper, pulled out and saved in his back pocket, slept on and kept for a rainy day

He keeps a picture in his pocket, a yellow sun, a universe of inspiration handy, fresh for those days of straight sheet rain, unending crouch under awning until shewed back into mess, the crawl, another place to crouch, an overpass finally to pass the time. He huddles there, producing that page pulled out of a book his brother borrowed years ago, an afternoon after school carried on brother's back he, small him, clinging to neck and worried about nothing him reading the book aloud, two boys riding an airplane over a brigade of elephants down the street passing a magician doing tricks, the pages he carries. The street was called Mulberry he remembers about a boy who saw what everyone around him missed. Good thing for good inspiration, good eyesight. Straight seeing always good for lines, he scribbles down now *my brother has a birthday on his birthday my brother has elephants doing tricks in magician hat, planes shaped from clouds floating on the river in rows* and happy then he folds them up for commission later. Once he sold some lines to a girl on her birthday, airplanes reflected in the river air. Worth keeping then, he thought, a few good lines scribbled down and folding the picture too he pockets to carry it back out into rain, freezing and soaking in thin shoes not knowing where to go to sell anything he keeps, his brother's nose buried in a borrowed book, oblivious to his face looking at pages over shoulders,

the face kept now folded in a back pocket picture
as the rain comes in cold sheets after sheets after
blank sheets, a unending series of pages clear
and freezing, this how the world will end, he thinks,
with water on top of water and all of the things
you saved kept somewhere close, a close place
you keep all of the things you saved to say.

Your Billboard

Before you first saw your billboard, the real you up there, you thought it would have been you but brighter: a last stay against solitude broadcast for all to see, glowing, you cleaning countertops haltingly enough to cause pileups. How you'd flourish then, so congenially above the overpass! Too bad the average roadside motorist neglected to care for your bravado in suggesting alcohol free hand sanitizer. And what did you become? Weather beaten and dwarfed by the latest attempt to get superstar athlete X to come play for city Y, a 20 X 60 screen peeling in places, a skin shedding nothing came out of. Perhaps they'd be appeased if you transfigured yourself by layering over a reality based version of you? Reveal your darker more vulnerable moments: lying alone in bed with a glass of boxed wine, the TV muted while the vanity 800 numbers flashed at the bottom of the screen. Have you tried the latest pharmaceutical options for that nervous leg condition that has you mildly panicked? People want to see your private, most intimate, sicknesses so why not show them? Build stilts high enough to sustain vertigo. Alone in the sky, your billboard will only be visible to airline passengers looking through thick porthole windows. Where, at that great distance, the scale of you to everything else would be impossible to manage, your loneliness a horizon expansive enough that it overwhelms what lies below, tiny moving things now seen like a boy's set of matchbox cars.

Orpheus in Disgrace

*Shrined as an oracle, the lovely head
went on with its talking, talking, talking,
- Alan Dugan*

Whenever I hear the highway traffic reach peak
I think they've come again and I shake,
those small hands like knives
tearing into me the way one animal
tears into another, these women
stripping the flesh raw as I talked
and talked and talked,

as they stood in the warmth of my blood,
begging me to sing.

And I did.

And still am.

Yet no one asks me to sing
of my cowardice. Nothing
of Eurydice, but that last glimpse.

Haven't I lived?

That's the curse. I couldn't join,
and now I (a head!)
am carried on invisible currents,
a grotesque surrogate to love, *to love*.

*

In an apartment complex of faded brick
and barred windows I arrived singing,
watched one girl give herself to another
whose love was true,
giving in part because
a man had hurt her as a child.

On the floor,
on an old mattress with no sheets,
unsure of what she was doing,
she rose and fell to my song
like an oracle drunk on fumes,
dancing, a need to be touched
without flinching.

And yet without the lyre, the song failed.

They slept, and the starlight fell in the space
between their backs, split
by the black columns the bars' shadow made.

More and more loneliness turns me
to the things that help me feel less human,

so on I went.

*

I came and sang
in the ear

of an agoraphobe who pays
a college girl he met online
100 dollars an hour to let him watch
as she puts on a leash
and crawls across the kitchen floor

on her hands and knees,
as she drinks her urine out of a dog dish.

Then in the safety
of their own private darkness,

she listens as he weeps and,
in her way,
 holds him
against her trembling shoulder.

*

Along the freeway, dark sullen trees
are emerging from hell.

Apollo, why won't you come?

I ask and the voice isn't mine.
The trees have come to mock me,

Her body,
 coward, you sing
of love!

Clutched in tree branches, Eurydice's tattered dress
hangs as a grocery bag
or a bit of newspaper.

To show me what I've had,
my mouth fills with the material.

I'm tired of coming and going,
I would follow her now if I could.

Desire even in ruin. I alone
among derelict monuments, the high-rises
who stare faithless at one another.

And the people, singing. Always singing.

Animal Conditions

Only when Courage has ceased mewling and cowering in bed sheets. When daylight stops feeling like a time of alibis. Then I will be able to drink dirt and bare my mud covered breast. I will sleep alone, on my back in the garden like my namesake once did. You see, I had forgotten how easily entropy can strike down good roots. I waited too long for dreams to kill my need to drink. Go ahead Muses, ask me to saturate my tongue. How else does one please the Gods? *And also with you's?* Gladly do I use this space to beg premature forgiveness. I've lain awake more than once wishing to taste the beauty of the serpent handler's daughter. She drank strychnine to show the strength of her faith. Can I believe there's only hell for suicides? They say her seizures looked like oracles channeling spirits. God, I feel like dancing.

Raven on Noah

When the old drunk came to claim me
I had not yet learned to feed on the dead.

I was tricked from the flowering branch

and given to the dark of the cage,
the woman I shared it with,

she who I could not touch
until water had cleaned all civilization.

What did I eat?
I don't remember.

But I can still smell starvation
on his woman's lips as she came

and sang to me,
off key through the bars.

I'm still turning away.

Letter to Faye Reagan

Every morning some reckless bird flies into my window
because he doesn't understand glass.

I don't understand either.
When I wake up alone I often use you

to ease my solitude, those few seconds
when the glass isn't real and the hands
on your breasts become my hands.

Tell me Faye, do you feel
as my slow, lonely orgasm
empties itself into a towel?

Like the light fleeing from a star,
it's happened already somewhere else for you.

And like this I habitually turn away
from all of my endings,
a window wearing curtains
because there's something to be ashamed of.

But isn't there always something?

I write it because I know a poem is a graveyard.
The place to go to be with all my dead.

For example: in the poem, unlike the dream,
I can look on Jeff's face
and not choke on black milk,

taking Death's nipples into my mouth,
not for nourishment but perverse pleasure—

because I was never able to see his body,
because they couldn't salvage enough body
for an open casket.

Tell me Faye, what would you do
when the bird shattered the window glass
and trapped himself in the room,
beating relentlessly against the walls?

What else could you do?
I picked up a broom to strike him down,

to drive him broken
back out into the broken world.

Wedding Party

Barefoot on the hardwood floor a bridesmaid
in blue chiffon dances with the bride,
bare legs in a sea of white ruffle,

the two of them pressing into one another
in time with slow music.

They were lovers once, although
there's nothing between them now.

At the bar, facing long windows,
I can see both their reflection and the night:
the stillness the moon drowns in,

high and alone, Sidney's or Larkin's.
No. This is another moon, surrounded

by the stars as they shiver,
an ideal of beauty and sadness.

And I see sadness in their pleasure,
that this moment will survive
only in imagination, a slow dance

at the end of a long day, performed
for the stars and the lonely moon.

As I watch them, the last of the guests
are leaving, only the wedding party remains.

I'm waiting for someone to raise the lights,
to take the bridesmaid home with me.
If I moved on her now, in this low light

we might find some mutual sympathy,
a transference of desire

in the almost dark. But I don't want to.
I want them to keep dancing.

Inheritance

Before you learned of leaving,
how hard it is to hold time
at arm's length, but still hold it,
to know my fingers rolling down
your leggings, my fingertips
trying to name the unnamed
color of bruises.

Before that, any
or all of it, your mother
pushed her long slender form
through the cold forceful
Atlantic, shaped
the raw muscle of will
she'd pass to you. Passed
to you. In the night
she'd watch the wild horses
of Assateague churn and plunge,
plunge and turn, dive their noses
into the wet nothing
and drink the moonlight.

Bridled by them,
all ribs, she'd kneel in the sand
and speak to nothing. This before
your father knew of her nakedness.
At once she puts her fingers
in her mouth and closes her eyes
around the wild stillness
of the strange dark,
and at once the sound emerges from her,
vanishes in the silence
of things to come. The wild endless lapping
of water taking everything,
the inhale continuous, eternal,
what I needed to build out of nothing,
built out of nothing so I could learn
to forget what was written in you:
to know breaking. The wild storm.

All the Cherry Blossoms are Dead

Maybe it was because of the glance,
her confidence as her lips tightened
when the Metrobus streaked by
as I looked from the crosswalk
that made me want to see the worst.
But she had been too quick for the bus,
and as the light changed and people
started pushing forward I found myself
in the spot, almost exactly,
where she would have been.
Maybe if a heel, one of the black pumps
that had been clicking in front of me,
had caught for one half-second,
it would have been enough for her to pause
and try to free herself from the pavement.
It's not that there was anything particular about her,
but it's spring now and the gray is washing
over the river and the white dome behind it:
the Jefferson Memorial, where a few sad
tourists pace the steps, just missing the season.
You are waiting there under the empty trees
as I arrive with nothing new to say.

Lot's Wife

Out the window she follows the construction of the new complex across the street, the crowds of blackbirds twisting in around each other, chased from the telephone wires by a piece of equipment dropping steel beam on steel beam. She doesn't know the names of all the machines but she loves machinery sounds, has learned to fall asleep to the jackhammer's rapid punch pushing dirt into clouds, into the cold wind. And it is cold. The gas bill hasn't been paid, no heat or stove. So this the year the marriage dies. The year the filth and smallness of the house breaks her; the year the food crusted on the dishes in the sink, the carpet stained with beer become too much. In the morning when he slips away to masturbate alone at the computer she lies awake in bed and dreams of Lot's unnamed wife, body shivering into pillar of salt, carried up into the clouds. No, this time she'll go without turning.

Punch & Judy Go Skating

Punch is already forgetting how tired his legs were that day he and Judy went skating on the outdoor rink at the National Sculpture Garden, the bronze and aluminum figures just visible in the white haze as they cut sharp lines into the surface of ice, as they moved awkwardly within the crowd of children and other couples. Judy was always a little ahead while Punch clung to the rails, slipping, almost stepping on his laces as the skates came untied, wobbling as if he wasn't wearing them at all, as much presence on the ice as a fish flopping in the bottom of a barrel, barely able to move. Judy had spun effortlessly backwards, shouting words of encouragement at Punch. It wasn't helping. Then he had been working slowly, his writing going nowhere. He'd wake early and sit at the window, watch the traffic thin out, unable to feel complicated but protected by the glass from the noise of other people coming and going, the rush of cars that made him sleepy.

Judy would try to distract him from that feeling. They'd pass time drinking boxed wine and watching old Disney movies on VHS. Judy's favorite was *Beauty and the Beast*, she would stand on the arm of the couch and sing Belle's songs with her arms outstretched, laughing at the rivalry between the cartoon clock and cartoon candelabra, accusing Punch of being wound as tight as "Cogsworth." He laughed it off but really wasn't paying attention. The whole time he couldn't stop thinking about Jean Cocteau's version, *La Belle et la Bête*, and how the Beast had won her over before losing her again: when he was transformed back into man he was no longer muscular and frightening but foppish and skinny, dressed in a gaudy suit, his face almost feminine. Belle was clearly disappointed.

Punch is surprised he's returned here now, alone. There is light snowfall and a lone skater curves and slices around the rink, nearly closed.

The light is gone except for the lights from buildings
and he imagines being with her in the dark,
removing the layers of her clothing,
her tights as white as snow, to find
her lithe dancer's body, the same as the figurine
of a ballerina spinning in a jewelry box.
Hadn't Judy danced as a girl?
She'd hung a print of Degas's *L'etoile*
over their piano and would often just sit
and stare at it without playing.
Or she would push back the carpet and dance,
spinning in her socks across the hardwood floor,
stopping on point while he watched without speaking.
And this is what he sees now
as the girl glides across the ice,
as if Judy existed somewhere unchanged
and has been brought here to leave again.
He knows how it ends.

One night when she had stopped dancing Punch
convinced Judy to let him film themselves fucking.
They'd both had a little too much to drink
and she was giggling as he set up the camera,
the room bright as he pulled her on top of him.
Soon she was grinding and grinding
as he stared over her shoulder, too drunk
to do much for her. They fell asleep
with the lights on, without speaking.
Later they would watch it together without sound,
Punch embarrassed because he'd looked
at the camera the whole time, Judy laughing
for the same reason; at this absurd dumbshow,
what he was doing with his hands and his wine teeth.
They deleted it after watching it once
but made love again, this time with the lights off,
he unable to distract himself from the body,
his mouth on her breast as she breathed,
he thought, impatiently. Had she been annoyed?
She kept opening her eyes and he thought
what matters was that it would be over soon.
But he could not stop hearing her and the wind
turning on itself outside, the light pushing in
through the open slits of the blinds
as if someone was looking through the window
and could see the blood leaving him,
emptied of something essential, Cocteau's Beast,

who's masculinity had fallen away
and lay like a Halloween costume on the ground,
while in Belle's eyes this loss: she would not desire
a man robbed of his violence, incapable
of anything but shivering, frail and naked
as she said to herself, *I'll have to get used to it.*

On the bench the girl is taking off her skates.
He walks away through the garden,
now too dark to make out much of the sculpture,
the forms imprisoned in twilight. He is thinking
about Degas, how after his death they discovered
his wax figures (incomplete, crumbling, failing)
and cast them in bronze, the metal eternal and cold,
the color the same as the only figure
he was ever proud enough to show,
The Little Dancer Aged Fourteen.
She arched her shoulders and stuck out her toe,
expressionless but almost wincing, frozen
in a forced unnatural tilt. Not a pretty girl
but realistic looking. And what would she think
of her confinement? Perhaps she would imagine
pulling the ribbon out of her hair.

When Judy finally left him she did so suddenly,
taking her things without warning.
He had returned to the apartment to find
a white rectangle of empty space where *L'etoile* had been,
framed by dust above the piano. He'd sat on the bench
banging keys, distracting himself with the discordant sounds
that sang without meaning at his touch, while the TV
talked on in the background, talking to him
even though he wasn't listening.
Later on in the night he could not sleep,
he could hear the couple on the other side
of his bedroom, fucking relentlessly, for over an hour.
He could not stop thinking about love and grief,
how one should not feel those things while having sex,
only an animal thing: possessed by the body's need,
oblivious to the dark cage of the room, the always diminishing
want for one another, in the moment seeing nothing.

The figure of the young skater is gone now
as he watches cars move through the intersection,
only their headlights visible in the dark.
Punch knows his lost skin is out there somewhere,

shed from his body like the Beast's,
hanging as a taxidermy likeness,
arrested in one last lifelike gesture,
ferocious, yes, but no longer threatening.
There is nothing written in his notebook,
nothing new except a sketch of the girl
unlacing her skates, his attempt to still her
quivering legs in the white of the page
as cold and sharp as the winter moonlight.
She is the kind of girl that Degas
would want to possess, delicately tracing
her thin limbs while mastering her movement,
the dance visible in the drawing as a blur,
an aura of color permeating from her body
but her face impossible to see, isolated
in a moment tilted away from our gaze,
an unfinished half-circle, he can't fill in,
can't make alive with the detail of memory,
what's already slipping away. Because it's difficult.
Difficult to find anything that refuses to be reclaimed.