



SICK BOY

by

Patrick Rock McGinty

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2016

Advisory Committee:  
Professor Stanley Plumly, Chair  
Professor Michael Collier  
Professor Elizabeth Arnold

© Copyright by  
Patrick Rock McGinty  
2016

## Preface

In preparation of this collection, it has been the author's aim to present an examination of the events that shaped the narrator's views, usually through the avoidance of internal monologue but rather through showing the events from an objective viewpoint. At times, however, certain poems dip into the surreal and examine the subjective reality that the narrator views when looking at the objective world. The goal, however, is not to tell the reader what the narrator feels, but rather lead them to the discovery on their own by interpreting how the external events influence the life and outlook of the narrator, specifically in regards to his relationships with women, friends, and chemical love.

## Foreword

This collection came about through a series of many varied experiences accumulated over a span of several years. From sleeping on rooftops in Baltimore overlooking factories to living between parked bicycles in a basement in Savannah, Georgia. From Annapolis, to DC, to Baltimore, to Jacksonville, Florida and beyond, the experiences (especially those of the most surreal nature in the darkest recesses of the cities) turned into the vignettes that became the poems in this collection. Through the friendships and relationships, many lost to time, I discovered in them poetry in a very straightforward, almost storytelling form. These small, sometimes seemingly insignificant snapshots of life, come together to reveal a deeper truth about relationships and desperation. If not for the pain caused by me and inflicted upon me, there would be little worth writing about. If I have learned any one thing through writing it is that pain and strife are a fertile breeding ground for poetry, and a poet must explore that suffering to find something worth saying.

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this collection to the memories of Nimo Thande, Rob Viti, and countless other close friends who left this world well before their time.

## Acknowledgements

This collection would not be possible without the guidance of many professors within the University of Maryland system. I would like to thank Stanley Plumly for directing my thesis, as well as Michael Collier, Elizabeth Arnold, and Joshua Weiner for guiding me through the Graduate Program and pushing me to create works outside of my general comfort zone. I would also like to thank Johnna Schmidt and the Writers House Living/Learning program that I attended as an undergraduate at the University of Maryland that make me come to the realization that I wanted to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing at the Graduate School. Aside from academia, I feel that it is necessary to thank my friends who encouraged me to continue writing no matter how daunting it may have seemed at the time.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	ii
Foreword.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Tunnels.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The Fall.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Bright Young Things.....	3
Recurring Dreams of Socialite Weekdays.....	4
Another Shot, Icarus.....	5
I'm Not Jackson Pollock.....	6
The Fallacy of Slothful Induction.....	7
Another Quiet Evening In.....	8
The Midwest Always Lets Me Down.....	9
For All the Starving Children with Mechanical Hands.....	10
Some People Say We Were Made in the Image of God.....	11
Four Parts Water and Swirl.....	12
Scramble.....	15
North Ave.....	16
Calvert Street.....	17
Hold 'Em.....	18
When the Needle Hits Vinyl.....	19
The Fever.....	20
boy.....	21
Legs, I Missed, Though Still Unclean.....	28
Caliban and Madeline.....	34
The Rise.....	37
For M., I Swear Again It's the Laste Time.....	38
Black Grease Repeated.....	39
Take the Money.....	40
Hope House, Crownsville.....	41
Undeveloped Film in the Backseat.....	42
Reading Plato in a Southen Motel.....	43
Callouses.....	44
Her First Black Dress Morning.....	45
Canvas.....	46
Downtown One Bedroom.....	47
How to Paint an American Horse.....	48

## **Tunnels**

We will dig tunnels

Under concrete and asphalt:

The veins of your arm.

# **The Fall**

## **Bright Young Things**

We spoke sullen drama  
in a cheap hotel room five miles from the city.

It was:

cigarette smoke, cheap wine,  
and a mahogany coffee table

with an old  
clay ashtray,  
overflowing.

You said:

I've never felt so cliché.

Like an image clipped from a magazine

you sat with a curious plastic smile,  
then hopped up to your feet,

fingers moving along the ivory keys  
of an invisible piano,

hair tied up in a tight knot,

You said:

Watch me dance,

swallowed a pill  
and smashed another wine glass  
on the hardwood floor.

## **Recurring Dreams of Socialite Weekdays**

Her hands were strong and calloused from climbing  
out of windows and strangers' beds;  
her voice lowered from a shrill falsetto  
into a gruff whisper after days without sleep.

We stayed in the apartment, counting walls and comparing answers  
for seven days and, when we emerged,  
our fingernails, stained yellow and sharp,  
dug into each other's arms at the sight of neon signs.

Some nights we slept on rooftops,  
enjoying the moonlight's uncanny ability  
to make our skin softly glow, momentarily erasing  
the scars and blemishes that made us blush in sunlight.

Maybe it was the thinness of the air above the city,  
but we spoke like servants  
forcing laughter;  
even in silence the conversation continued

with sideways glances and electric energy  
singing static songs of white noise,  
the noise of creation, between our withered bodies.

I ripped away calendar pages, folded them into paper planes,

and watched my days float over factories before crashing  
to the asphalt below.

## **Another Shot, Icarus**

There's nothing up north worth settling  
for and the south has nothing to offer.  
We could stay in the dark, stay hidden in  
sheets, let our bones grow brittle and sharper.

If I had the cash, I could take us out  
but we need to save up for tomorrow,  
Angel will be here by two and I doubt  
that this city stays dry in the snow.

I pray for the same sting, with veins thirsty  
and wanting, I've called and called everyone,  
don't blame me— crying won't stop the hurting  
and I hate to see you slip from the sun,

so let's rebuild our wings with steel and with glass,  
soar higher again, sure this  
time will last.

## **I'm Not Jackson Pollock**

Wake up. Have coffee. Have a wife. Have kids. Have a degree and a hospital-clean apartment. Have a five o'clock shadow, a nicotine patch, and fingernails free of dirt. Drink scotch, drink bottled water, and drive an SUV three miles under the speed limit in the right lane. Go to sleep at ten, wake up at six. Go to sleep after you lock the door and double-check the oven.

Move west. When you find that the same people are on either coast, give away the dog and go back east. You can't give away the kids, but someday someone will take your daughter. Your sons will love you, then they will hate you, then they will love you again. Read Tolstoy. Cheat on your wife, read Dostoevsky. Iron your shirt. Clip coupons. Repeat the same jokes you heard at work, the same jokes your coworkers heard the night before. Smile at the clerk. Buy black sock and shine black shoes. Remove the tattoo you got when you were seventeen.

Piss yourself and try to remember the names and the faces and places and the café where you met your first wife. Try to remember the differences between what happened and what you imagined. Shoplift (they raise the prices because they know you will).

Pick up smoking again. Smoke inside your house. Smoke inside someone else's house. Watch the street performers breathe fire. Repeat yourself. Call your children and tell them about the smoke and the fire. Ask them about their children. Ask them if they have read Tolstoy. Hang up. Ask God for help and stay awake as long as you can.

## **The Fallacy of Slothful Induction**

Wading through white noise,  
static from the stereo  
seems to sing  
every song we have ever heard,

Huddled together  
hoping to speed up the blood  
that scrapes like rust  
through our veins,

we wait and wonder  
whether past decisions  
have brought us to this structure  
or, perhaps, if we truly are untouchable.

## **Another Quiet Evening In**

You were in the shower.  
You were singing in the shower  
with a cigarette in one hand  
and a bottle in the other.

I hummed along to the songs  
that escaped over the white noise  
of falling water.

I hummed along as your voice  
mingled with steam,  
creeping under the door.

Pressing steel against cotton,  
arm steadied, tied tightly,  
I filled the glass chamber  
and aimed for blue,

and felt the familiar sting  
as skin swelled and warmth spread,  
I hummed from crescendo to coda

as you sang to me  
from the shower.

## **The Midwest Always Lets Me Down**

We stole your father's wine and crept back home,  
landlocked and far from East Coast city lights,  
I watched as you walked through winter cold.

You said don't let me drink alone tonight  
so we cracked the cap and passed the bottle back  
and forth, December frozen to our cheeks

and chins, past trees and stones that showed the path  
that would bring our bodies back to warming sleep.  
With careful steps we crossed over the rocks

that stuck through earth to catch our heels, and when  
you laughed that high-pitched laugh, took off your socks  
and shoes to feel the grass against your skin,

I saw the sun come through the canopy,  
far more beautiful than you will ever be.

## **For All the Starving Children With Mechanical Hands**

Cold showers  
and hours hanging out  
in front of the urinal.

Burn out, and burn down that cherry tree  
because honesty is just another crutch  
for the hopelessly clean.

We embrace whiskey slurs and slot machines,  
cremating our cash and watching  
it float past the smoke stacks.

The beauty of brothels and broken radiators  
stay stuck in our peripheral vision,  
and the chants in unison:

“We gave up on heaven”

We, the people, who always fight  
on both sides and share fine cigars  
on the battlefield.

We, the people, who always  
pour out the last pull,  
but never the first.

Sometimes it seems as though snow angels  
are just boyhood mockeries  
of chalk outlines strewn across asphalt,

and I can't help but laugh as I wade  
through the feverish dreams that sting  
my waking hours like boots worn for weeks.

## Some People Say We Were Made in the Image of God

She took pictures of strangers  
in convenience stores  
and on street corners.

She took pictures of people she had seen before,  
carrying walking sticks in parking lots  
or stumbling home in the morning.

I asked her about the camera  
and why she never seemed to sleep.

Someday she would write a book  
and hang photographs on gallery walls.

Not yet. Soon.

She never laughed at the strangers  
or passed judgment,  
but she would stare longingly,  
for hours on end  
at their faces on gloss paper.

### Four Parts Water and Swirl

It was Baltimore in the summer  
or Savannah in the spring:  
a rooftop shoeless, a cloudy night—

six months after catching glances  
in the crowded café,  
three weeks after I found her diary.

She still calculates the stutters  
of speech as valleys steam with choral hymns,  
breaking the flow of brooks,  
praising captive celibacy and royalty in exile,

but I'm still static in last week's boxers,  
still wearing her dead ex-boyfriend's boots.

She said it was time to settle down  
away from streetlights and sidewalks;

I told her I believed in God, tides,

and movements unending;  
the sacred quotes  
scrawled across my chest.

We stayed inside for weeks spinning records  
from her father's basement stock:  
the youth of Gil Scott stumbling  
over bongos and black berets;

cubes clinked against glass  
and we sank into classics and scratches,  
into nicotine clouds that stayed for a song  
but floated on to better things.

I wrote her a letter last year:  
"To whom it may concern,"

melancholy, it must have been,  
peppered with broken French proverbs,  
closing with a worn-out poem of longing—  
she never wrote back.

December slid frozen soil under my feet  
and a few more friends overshot their tolerance

on couches and backseats up and down  
the East Coast.

I spit bile, still sick from caps and tabs,  
praying to plastic planets  
glued to the ceiling,

but I dragged my body,  
from the soft glow of basic cable reruns  
to check the daily dry-erase specials;

I tiptoed through the minefield of ladies night  
and carved her name  
on the bathroom stall divider:  
the best of public monuments.

With a single shot of rail,  
I popped the last of the reds,  
heavenly blues, and tricolors—

moving wildly through sweat-soaked dress shirts,

complete with snakebites and the Holy Ghost  
scraping through veins,  
but soon the season ended.

I showered in my clothes,  
traced scars and lathered bruises;  
the canyons were filled with asphalt  
and for the first time I slept sober  
and warm with windows open.

I bought bullets and paper plates  
to hush the valley echoes—

traded in my mattress  
to pay penance for fevered dreams  
of slender frames  
and beauty marks.

Maybe I'll change my name,  
clean my system with quick shots  
of ammonia and bleach;

start again with the same mistakes  
but different faces taped  
next to my mirror,  
imagining new mouths for pleasure  
in the morning before work.

I'll shake off the habit,  
learn to carry a conversation,  
effortless and elegant,  
find a reason to raise my voice  
or listen collected in silence;

I'll slow the sinking of the ship,  
straighten the crooked framed paintings  
hanging in the halls of an apartment  
set to fall.

But it still comes back sometimes,  
in a room full of friends  
and familiar bodies,  
through laughter crowded  
over Manhattan or Old Fashion:

I'll remember the cheap car,

back when the world was ending;

with gutter steam climbing from sewer grates,  
our eyes on slow-shutter speed,  
we raced through lamp-lit one-ways,  
smiling in the face of another electric  
teenage death-game.

And she laughed,  
that shrill, reckless laugh,  
flicking ashes out the window,  
taking quick sips from a bottle  
between her legs.

## Scramble

Purgatory is a car seat overheating  
behind a Brooklyn complex,  
skin peeling from fake leather  
in the static between stations—  
sixty folded in a front pocket.

Boys on bicycles in the rearview know  
the boy you're waiting for—  
static, praying it won't be another burner  
or you'll be shooting sugar,  
revisiting the fever that rises after twelve  
hours dry.

## North Ave

Rolling through the last dark  
hours of near-morning, sleepless  
and restless, hoping to be home  
before dawn. From the backseat,  
Destiny scanned the sidewalks for familiar  
faces in the crowd of crooked bodies  
propped against brick or stumbling  
across asphalt before fading from streetlight.

The praying hours before the city sleeps,  
when voices quiver scratched with thirst  
and slip from the throat in low and lower  
tones, when you begin regretting the half-hour  
drive from Brooklyn and the four dollar toll,  
when you begin to hope that the friend  
of your friends doesn't have too many bills  
to pay or a gun in the glove box.

Maybe nobody minds and maybe  
you're just being dramatic,  
filled with fear an unknown off-ramps,  
but you're certain of the corner-eye flashes  
of red and blue along the avenue—  
and one way or another,  
your eyes will miss the high  
noon sun brightening the grind  
of another day spent hiding under the sheets.

## Calvert Street

I crawl under an oriental rug to press  
my cheek against the floorboards and sing songs  
of Brooklyn nights and Baltimore daydreams—  
the pigeons sit on wires like music notes.

As fevers break along the shore, we push forward  
to the horizon of desire, hoping for solace  
with sunlight burning our bodies deep and deeper red,  
cooling sweat evaporates into the breeze.

I will find you in the Black Sea,  
lighting fires along the coast as night falls.  
I will find you reciting poetry upon a peak in Darien,  
howling as the moon rises and falls over an obsidian sky.

You will breathe deeply and keep me awake  
with gently prodding and uncovered conversation  
while I examine every thread from words weaved  
into a quilt for our shoulders and laps.

We pull tightly until our figures  
are silhouettes in a frame,  
and become the same shadows  
that we have been chasing  
for twenty-two years.

## Hold 'Em

Through pot smoke and muffled curses  
to the top bunk, my brother below, unaware  
of how the cards will fall one room over,

whether we will wake up in silence  
and slip to the bus stop unnoticed,  
or to breakfast and bagged lunch.

I hear my father slap the wooden table top  
and laugh Irish, a hollow burst of lightning  
and growl of thunder rock the bed,

our eyes shoot open and close quickly,  
speeding through silent repeated prayers  
until the sky clears again.

Still, staring up at glow-in-the-dark  
plastic planets and stars glued  
to the ceiling, water stains shifting

into patterns and shapes  
that move and march, fade  
into overhead eggshell white

while outside blind insects build temples,  
unaware that they will be brought down  
by morning, by the bare feet of a new god  
growing.

## **When the Needle Hits Vinyl**

Belt out a twenty-two ounce melody  
while I crawl across hardwood floors,  
sniffing shoes and skirts,  
speaking in past tense  
like the present is already a memory.

Later, wide awake in the backseat,  
I'll be watching street-signs dance and spin  
in a symphony of barking dogs  
and exhaust pipe backfires,  
but you'll be sleeping

in a stranger's bed,  
blowing clouds of smoke  
out the window  
to mingle with ghosts  
rising from sewer grates.

Belt out a new melody, kid.  
Become another fading Polaroid  
in my back packet,  
and we'll see where we go.

## **The Fever**

**boy.**

I

I used to choke on the sterile air of hospital hallways and could feel the white bleached walls readying themselves to compact sick patient bodies into a single brick of concentrated disease, but I'd been here before and walked out alive, bandaged and bruised, breathing easier each time I tore off the green ID bracelet.

You told me that I turned blue, and my tongue and throat were blue, they filled me with sodium chloride to bring me back and asked where I was and what day it was, I got the first one right and sat up while they shined a small light into the pinpoint of my pupils. I don't think any of us knew the answer.

Sickness came with the comedown and the buzzing of overhead fluorescence grew, shaking loose teeth and ceiling tiles rained down the dust of dead skin onto yellowing, sweat-stained sheets, and my own skin, heated with fever, wept chemical rivers across the floor.

II

Somewhere near Calvert, away from needlepoint outskirts, in warehouses converted to low-rent one-bedrooms, we slept with windows open, cursed in distant comfort, grew closer, farther, and returned to youthful destruction of lung, liver, and vein.

We nodded five floors above asphalt, itching in heat, unapologetic, with roses blooming behind glass before being buried in the soil of skin, someone, maybe you, sang down for Severin. Looking back, the hooks stayed through following seasons and I still have

the skull on my chest, the lines  
on my sides, the cursive letters  
spelling “glory fades,” now fading,  
all homemade, and still, when the rush  
comes up, I swear someone is singing  
down to all of us from five  
floors above.

### III

They swabbed my veins at intake  
and gave me a plastic cup to take  
to the bathroom, followed me  
into the bathroom to watch,  
and I wondered who brings in clean piss,  
and how they get clean piss,  
and what kind of person sells clean piss

or gives it away, but the people here  
can get anything, and somebody  
somewhere is making a killing staying clean,  
selling yellow bottles on a corner,  
asking what you need, saying  
“Don’t worry about anything.  
I got you.”

The first nurse saw the first signs  
of sickness and I mumbled pale  
from sunken cheeks and black lines  
under eyes from days without sleep,  
they ease the pain with synthetic orange  
dissolved under the tongue, but it blocks

the next shot and the trade can’t be taken  
back. I asked for another and they took  
my picture, handed over the polaroid,  
and told me to look at it when I’m out  
and fat and clean and I looked then and thought  
I looked fine.

The upstairs inpatient carpet was stained  
with detox vomit and the center station  
gave sublinguals to keep the lobby clean,  
every hour another meeting and another  
higher power and another promise repeated  
and forgotten.

Bleached blonde, dark roots showing  
in the morning when dust hangs and floats  
through the corridor. You had the same  
bruises in the same places and knew the same  
places and maybe, in passing, we had  
met before,

just north of Brooklyn or west, or  
The Whiskey before they tore it down,  
and we spent breaks counting walls,  
comparing answers, finding god and watching  
him wash away when the tide moved in  
and backed out,

clearing the canvas, erasing tracks set  
along the path to find the way back home.  
Sometimes lines ran down your cheeks  
and your arms shook in the nicotine clouds  
outside. You gave up after a few weeks and  
so did I.

#### IV

Slowly rolling through the last dark hours  
of near-morning, sleepless and restless,  
hoping to be home before dawn. In the backseat,  
Destiny scanned the sidewalk for familiar  
faces in a crowd of crooked bodies propped  
against brick or stumbling across asphalt  
and fading.

The desperate hours before the heart slows,  
when voices quiver, scratched with thirst  
and slip from the throat in low and lower tones,  
when you begin regretting the half-hour  
drive and four-dollar toll, when you begin to hope  
that the friend of your friends doesn't have anything in  
the glove box.

Maybe nobody minds, maybe you're just  
being dramatic, but you're certain of the corner-eye  
flashes, red and blue and silver along the avenue,  
and one way or another, you'll miss the high  
noon sun brightening the grind of another day  
spent hiding under sheets.

## V

We spoke of walls from here to home,  
of yellow paint peeling from every corner  
of every ceiling, of bile and of plaster,  
though neither of us came from a broken  
home, and it was you: godless, savage,  
pushed onto a bus with books to  
pass the time,

pushed by your parents for the ten  
or twenty minute ride from the comfort  
of photographs and magazine cut-outs  
taped above the bed, before you purged  
and before I begged. Blue eyed and blonde,  
you never chose between a push-off  
or the grave.

You said “fuck anonymity” and gave  
us your lids in group-meetings, steel  
chair circles, wanting nothing more  
or less than another cigarettes or to watch  
the motions of the sun from a park bench.  
You saw choirs

and I learned about masochism sitting  
cross-legged across from you  
and your brazen black skirt and knee-high  
leather boots, sharing the same view  
from twenty-one, static, sinking and laughing  
at sinking.

## VI

We burned for new avenues and burned  
from the inside at cracks and prayers  
from anyone to anyone or anything  
above, thanking ourselves for the wheel  
and express energy that lit both floors,  
thankful for finding the best way to dispose  
of the dead.

Talking enough for two, singing praises  
for the sake of singing praises, you stayed  
hooked, fashioning hypodermic hooks,  
hidden hooks pressed into blue beads,

then lower, whispering about state-lines and  
classic cars,

asking who deserved the body, silently  
slipping out against regulations to attack  
vodka like Saigon, starting slow like Ali  
before catching Houdini in the gut  
along pint-stained wood, and we played  
new games in new alleys with short sleeves  
and lighters.

The cap-gun was a gift you insisted  
I keep on the dashboard when we went  
inside the pool hall. You wept when they  
shut it down but never at the funerals  
to follow, standing stoic instead, glazed  
and shaded, refusing to age as far as  
I could tell.

## VII

We drank fire in an empty room,  
stale breath yellowing motel walls,  
watching morning creep through  
white blinds to cast long lines  
of luminescent jail bars across  
the carpet.

We kicked the habit with daytime  
television, whiskey, and an overflowing  
medicine cabinet. We kicked the habit  
and drove back down south, ready to return  
and repeat when we find our arms  
dry again.

## VIII

Emily, you never did age, did you?  
I wrote you a letter last year but you  
never wrote back. Frozen soil slid  
under my feet and a few more friends  
overshot their tolerance on couches  
and backseats up and down  
the East Coast.

They filled in the valleys and I considered  
sleeping sober for the first time with  
the windows open, trading in my mattress  
and the polaroids taped next to the mirror,  
cleaning my system with ammonia and bleach,  
but instead

I dragged my body from the soft  
glow of basic cable reruns to check  
the daily dry-erase specials, tiptoed  
through the mine fields of ladies' night  
and carved your name into the plastic  
bathroom stall,

popped the last of the reds and blues,  
inhaled the greens that gel up, and moved  
wild through sweat-soaked dress shirts  
and snake bites with the Holy Ghost  
unloaded and emptied, scraping through  
worn-out veins.

## IX

I still remember the cheap car,  
back when the world was ending,  
when we sped around corners and raced  
through lamp-lit one-ways, smiling  
in the face of another electric death-game,  
steam rising

from sewer grates to mingle  
with late-night factory ghosts,  
and you laughed that kind of shrill,  
reckless laugh, flicking ashes  
out the window, taking quick sips  
from a bottle between your legs.

## X

The carousel stopped and the room  
was still, still sore from resuscitation  
and desperate chest compressions,  
I waited and watched the ceiling stretch  
and contract, you told me I turned blue  
and my throat

and face and tongue were blue,  
you told me where I was and what day  
it was, leaning over the books in your lap.  
The clock sped up and I began to age again,  
but you stopped soon after and I started  
repeating the same stories in the same shackles  
of storytelling,

searching for your name carved in stalls  
and under the academic desks of fevered dreams,  
and there I found you blue, floating  
through the fever, floating in the Atlantic  
or Aegean, blue in the moonlight,  
but not bloated, still and silent, but  
never bloated.

## Legs, I Missed

We spoke of walls from here to home,  
of yellow paint peeling from every corner  
of every ceiling, of bile and of plaster,  
though neither of us came from a  
broken home,  
and it was

You, the godless,  
savage,  
pushed onto a bus with books  
to pass the time,  
pushed by your parents  
for the ten or twenty minute  
ride from the comfort  
of photographs  
and magazine cut-outs  
taped above your bed,  
before you purged,  
before I begged.

You, unexpected,  
blue-eyed and blonde,  
who agreed that God shouldn't get credit,  
who understood and embraced the Thirteenth Step,  
who knew the Thirteenth Step,  
who could never choose  
between six feet  
or another push-off,  
who said "Fuck anonymity"  
and gave us lids in group-meetings,  
steel-chair circles,  
wanting nothing more  
than a cigarette,  
to watch the motions  
of the sun from a park bench,  
who heard choirs,  
who called me "Choir Boy",  
who turned onto masochism,  
and made me sit cross-legged  
across from you and your  
brazen black skirt  
and knee-high leather boots.

You, the last one we thought  
would be hiding  
secrets at our table,  
plastic and paper,  
who complimented the lines of my eyes,  
“mystique”, you called it,

You, the prophet:  
“Juglans regia”,  
though your hands were never clasped,  
owning mistakes with detox-vomit  
aside the inpatient bed in a room  
you shared with another above our age,  
the one we would never become,  
who shared the view  
from twenty-one: static,  
the view from twenty-one,  
laughing with sunken cheeks  
at sunken cheeks,  
who burned for new avenues,  
who burned for familiar boulevards,  
who burned from the inside  
at cracks and prayers,  
from anyone to anyone  
for anything above,

You, who talked enough for two,  
who thanked yourself for the wheel,  
for the pyramids,  
for the express energy that lit  
the hallways of both floors,  
who talked enough for two,  
thankful that we found  
the best way to bury the dead,  
who sang praises for the sake  
of singing praises,  
if only because we found  
a way to stay hooked,  
fashioning non-hypodermic hooks,  
hidden hooks pressed into  
blue Injun-beads.

You, who told me about Williams,  
who suggested your own name across my neck,  
who called me out on Brando  
and called out bullshit,

who taught me about state-lines  
and Cadillacs,  
asking who deserved the body,

You, who skipped out  
against regulations  
to attack vodka like Saigon  
who whispered light-heartedly  
about the life Townes  
designed for himself,  
who knew girls prefer scars and,  
through glittered gloss,  
admitted it without hesitation,  
who talked with every wretch  
along pint-stained wood,  
starting slow like Ali  
before catching Houdini in the gut,  
who taught me new games with one lit jack,  
new games in an alley with short-sleeves,  
who took the six-shooter as a gift,  
insisting I keep it on the dashboard,  
who traversed alleys and sang folk songs through  
cemeteries, Cash, Dylan,  
Hardin, and so was I  
from time to time,  
who wept when they closed the pool-hall  
but never at a funeral,  
who placed freshly-polished pink  
toenails on a trigger  
and left lipstick stained  
on the barrel,  
who painted eyelids  
in a mirror like Edie,  
glazed and shaded,  
who never aged  
as far as I could tell.

You, who got off on assumptions,  
braced with tight shoulders,  
both arms around the plastic tray  
like an inmate, and as an inmate  
refused to give me your name,  
who spoke in color-codes,  
who kept your mouth sealed in church  
basement meetings  
until we got in the car and you spilled

laughter on the faux-leather passenger seat,  
who knew latex and broomsticks,  
sick stories you swore were true  
and for lighting to strike if not,  
who showed me your mother's note,  
reading it as the diary  
of an atheist in waiting,  
aware of what was waiting,  
who told me to take it to heart,  
that Hell is waiting too,  
and eventually torment  
makes you come,  
who could recite Wilde,  
who called Wilde a fag  
along with every great  
fag to follow him,  
who knew of amyl  
and why it worked so well,  
who told me to loosen up too,  
who knew hot-rails and watched white  
lines move up and out as vapor,  
who told stories of China-White,  
who thought it would be  
a brilliant break-out,  
who preferred vinyl,  
who preferred to stare into indigenous eyes  
and say the first fake thing that trickled  
from the throat of Zarathustra,  
who claimed to be the embodiment of East Coast  
wet-dreams (an idea I couldn't disagree with,)  
who knew Babylon and Zion and burned  
my only copy of the Bhagavad-Gita,  
who said Liston and Frazier should have won,  
who said: "The other cocky cunt  
could throw a punch  
but couldn't take a bullet,  
and goddammit,  
even Elvis was up for that!"

You, who wanted the Nile black with ink,  
who wanted to be present when we ransack  
the last vessels of accuracy,  
to take a wayward stance  
between torches and arches,  
who wanted to chop the index finger  
of that little bastard in Holland

who kept the ocean back,  
who hated the assumption  
that the cities are better off dry  
and that we should stay dry,  
that blood looks better  
before it coagulates.

You, who wanted people to panic  
and scurry from bed-sheets,  
to follow rats and mice to higher ground,  
who knew the sun was only necessary to  
show us seasons and keep track of  
when you're supposed to kick,  
and the moon only to show tidal shifts,  
who never gave a fuck about cycles,  
even those that held half of us captive,  
who knew that God did not begin  
with a white beard and blue eyes,  
but with an overgrown ass and tits,  
who saw Venus of Willendorf  
and spit on the concrete between your feet,  
who wanted to paint the walls of Xibalba,  
to install neon signs showing  
a path for new travelers with neon arrows  
and lap dance incentives,  
who believed the Reds didn't know  
what it meant to find visions  
after days without food or sleep,  
who had gone days without food or sleep  
and seen shadow-men  
creeping across the wall,  
hoping to catch unprotected  
flesh with closed eyes.

You, who knew the institutions  
as well as I did,  
who knew institutions  
as new corners to explore,  
who offered the yourself in fair exchange,  
though I never took the deal,  
who showed me the right way  
to push and pull,  
who asked for chords but never  
bothered to listen,  
who wanted a background soundtrack  
for background action.

You, who begged to change the station  
on the way to Delaware  
even though my radio was broken,  
who touched my thigh,  
pretending it was accidental,  
who held the blade like a brush  
against a glass table,  
who climbed the fire-escape  
to watch headlights shimmer,  
to stand on an even keel  
with the monoliths of Baltimore.

You, who kissed me once,  
but only once—  
who kissed me once  
out of anger.

You, who watched me drown in Kentucky Tea,  
who left me stranded in a parking lot  
outside of Davidsonville,  
somewhere near Fifty or Ninety-Seven,  
who asked me not to call,  
who called at three in the morning  
and begged into the cell  
to come bring you back from Virginia,

You, who cursed devil-speed  
and amphetamines but stayed  
up for six days on the same six records,

You, who never stopped weaving,  
new ways to recite the same story  
and told me to stop repeating myself,  
who would say the same now while  
tracing the lines under my eyes  
with a nicotine finger,

You, still stuck under the academic  
desks of fever-dreams,  
perched atop a peak in Darien,  
but never silent,  
who I find floating through blue ,the fever,  
onward, unsinkable.

## **Caliban and Madeline**

Somewhere near Calvert and a cross,  
After we crossed at crosswalks in plastic shoes,  
undefiled, away from needlepoint outskirts

and warehouses converted to low-rent  
one-bedrooms, we slept in tatters  
with windows open, singing songs  
to Baltimore all-nighters,

after we cast off felt for faux  
leather and broken trainers,  
slipped from fathers  
on policy and economics,

stole bread and bagels  
from delivery cabins at sunrise  
to keep clean funds and quell  
questions of profit,

switched to sympathy  
for statements washed  
in starch oxford press,

after we cursed in distant comfort,  
grew closer, further, and returned  
to youthful convictions and holy  
destruction of lungs, liver, and veins,

after we held City Hall at gunpoint  
and found new speech and soapbox tenor  
in black night and neon drenched  
backstory: fragments of overproduced  
protest catch-phrases, tagging  
bricks and trains at three,

after you said “shoot”  
without powder or barrel,  
white horse on rooftops,  
thirsting for vibrato, ivory,  
and strings to conduct  
the swaying of the torso,  
anticipating the beauty  
of bullet-ridden Bolivian walls,

inventing odes  
and hymns for the fallen  
and soon-to-be,  
straight-spines before Sinclair  
struggles and waterfront contenders,  
when you wore sundresses to show skin  
and catch half-mile rides  
with uncovered thighs and knees,

I understood the necessity,  
and when you came back up  
we found glory in gilded pages,  
antiquated binding, melodies  
of last week's fuck—

after you searched for desaparecidos  
under bridges but instead found  
roommates from the sickly stench  
of decay and bowels emptied on the carpet;  
mistakes from tying and binding  
necktie to gullet, begging for the money  
shot to come before the stepstool slipped—

but we stayed unafraid, unapologetic,  
preferring pawned whispers traded  
naked in the dark apartment  
with debt-red ecstasy  
slowly dissolving the septum,

after you waited on four-year lovers  
that couldn't commit to a single payment,  
after you waited in new clubs for new throats  
and lips and tongues and bleached teeth,  
rubbing away rusted pleasure blossoming  
from salted skin, gambled on preachers,  
after you waiter for the right alignment,  
the right prayers and colors,  
knowing it could only come from  
capillaries thirsting behind blue  
streaks and pin-pricks,

after we were readmitted  
from persistence to make the same  
mistakes in dormitory hallways,  
carving stories too scarring to share:  
boredom wounds, new compositions,

after our canvas split and rose in value,  
after you tied the noose  
with the best of intentions, hanging  
the body of a lantern above the kitchen  
sink for a new homely fixture,

after I shit blood for weeks  
while the esophagus scarred,  
back when I held locks of hair  
from the heads of children  
known from childhood,  
the hair they sought and shaved,  
caught and pinned against oak  
or slipped into outgoing envelopes—  
sent but never discovered under  
sterile hospital doorways,

you never forgot about my nights  
with Disney blondes and brunettes  
with the night-glow unplugged,  
but still we held and smelled vinyl  
from the basement crate, spinning  
to quench cottonmouth silence  
with the cool waters of valley ballads  
and mountain blues,

you never blame me  
for reciting the same stories  
in the same shackles of storytelling  
and cave-drawn visions smudge-black,  
filled with the burnt aroma of torch light.

## **The Rise**

**For M., to Swear Again it's the Last Time**

We were in a car,  
we were speeding.

Our eyes were closed.  
I can't remember  
who was driving.

You spoke with fury only  
after a handful of blues

washed down with red wine

I emptied my pockets of pennies and pills  
and dropped them on the dashboard.

You crawled under my skin.

I dug you out of my arm and dropped  
you in the ashtray.

We were speeding,

our eyes were closed;  
I can't remember  
who was driving.

Brackish skin  
left me sleepless; speaking only

with my eyes,  
my hands  
and teeth.

## **Black Grease Repeated**

They found her from the smell  
leaking under the doorframe.  
She left four days before  
and for four days her body waited,  
staining the carpet.  
Ari called to tell me,  
then the cops called me  
to come in.

I told them how she left,  
how she had the same smile  
and same gait on her way  
out the door, into the evening,  
how she took rejection  
with serene ease and laughed  
at herself for feeling the need  
to tell me.

Pulling one leg over the other  
to appear unfazed,  
knuckles whitening to steady  
my ankle, and staring down  
into black-grease darkened denim,  
I waited for it to hit me,  
that she left because I didn't care,  
but I couldn't care—

And I dove into the façade,  
walked through the station  
with joints weakened from  
the downward pull of her  
hands under soil,  
and twisted my features to reflect  
a face I'd seen before  
in every on-screen scene of loss,

but broke halfway out the door,  
unsure if it was shock  
or delay, if soon I would  
be overtaken, fall and pray,  
or double-up for next year  
when another call comes in,  
from Ari or another friend,  
to reprise the same role.

## **Take the Money**

I took off the sweat-stained shirt and covered my head  
but the stale sulfur air of the paper mill crept under  
the door and the alley caterwaul continued through the night.

It was hard enough to sleep on concrete in midsummer  
Georgia heat, but a door on Braddock was unlocked  
so I slipped in and down behind the first-floor bicycle rack.

I thanked Christopher, John days without the water,  
I thanked whoever dropped a ten earlier in the day,  
and I thanked the city's open-container laws for giving

me one less thing to worry about while wandering  
through streets and parks and houses of students  
having parties big enough for me to go unnoticed,

searching medicine cabinets and coat pockets,  
looking for anything to shoot, sell, or swallow. Tonight  
wasn't the best night: half a pack, two pinks, and a white

line given by a black-eyed girl too far gone for introductions  
but with convictions too strong to take me to bed.  
It must have been the beard, I thought, drifting

into the fevered dream of sore muscle burning twilight.

## **Hope House, Crownsville**

He came downstairs  
still high from hidden valium  
popped before the strip search  
and asked us who we knew  
through brown teeth broken  
from sleepless years of serotonin boosting  
and occasional injections to level out.

I was still on black-out and four days off,  
but I told him it gets easier  
and to get through the kick quickly  
while he can, but each night I stared  
up at the water-damaged ceiling tiles,  
finding shapes in brown rot  
of spoons and stamps,

wondering if I could get through  
the sealed window and out to the street,  
it had been done before, but soon the room darkened,  
my roommate snored in heavy, uneven breaths,  
and the medicated weight of my body  
pulled my limbs down into plastic sheets  
and the unwanted movements of trazadone dreams.

## **Undeveloped Film in the Backseat**

The boy at the table saw with a broken-tooth grin  
and dirty canvas shoes,  
    he writes in small black letters  
    on his arm.

All this  
    while music-box prophets laugh  
    and shriek broken phrases  
    from leather-bound books  
    hidden under their beds.

He speaks only through telephones,  
hoping someone can see his shaking hands  
or feel the red line of a paper-cut throat.

He hasn't been baptized, but held underwater  
    by the strong arms or a eulogizing mother,  
    and with each gasp comes a song or sonnet;  
    her golden pages can't drown out the sounds  
    that exist in the black burned skin of effigies.

And when the lights dim  
    and the cold air comes through the panes,  
    he shivers, and a burning sensation flows  
    from his feet to his hands.

## Reading Plato in a Southern Motel

Shifting grains in Technicolor  
cascaded down the far white wall,  
the shadow of her head bobbed

and nodded in the center, her aura  
alternated across the spectrum,  
a black cloud floating in smoke  
over a sea of varied hues.

We wasted days dragging  
our bodies across the carpet,  
through a minefield of dirt dished

and overflown ashtrays, pennies  
and pills dropped and forgotten,  
from couch to bed to bathroom  
and back again,

shades drawn to hide  
from the ever-present threat  
of sunlight, of the natural

motions and infinite cycles  
that loosen and fold skin  
at the edges of our eyes  
and darken the bags below.

We invented our own language  
in love and slang, gave new  
names to the nighttime strangers

rocking bedposts in rhythm  
against shared walls, who  
parked, staggered, and scraped  
keys, who came and went unseen,

unaware of our blessings.

## Callouses

He pressed down on the cherry with his fingertip  
and flicked the filter into the street,  
watched the cars pass, feeling leather  
replace the cold air blowing against his back,

and back inside, in the attic, he looked at the phone,  
trying to remember the numbers  
of his mother, father, or brothers.

He took off his jacket, balled it into a pillow  
and slept on the hardwood floor. Come December  
he would have to leave, and as he slept  
he dreamed of Argentina and waitresses

in Paraguay, of attacking vodka  
like Saigon in Southeast,  
but for now he waded through November

fallen leaves, wasting paper in the rented  
attic space, days without eating,  
watching the small square light of the window  
move between shadows down the wall.

## **Her First Black Dress Morning**

He wept for Iris, his daughter,  
at home with her mother,  
restless and unknowing,

while he healed, while skin  
grew and tightened around  
muscle and bone, and she grew

slowly. First wishing and wanting  
more than the sound of his voice,  
to craft new memories devoid

of blue lips, the sting of smoke  
from an overn set to burn  
and turned away from,

when she opened the bedroom  
door, his fram slumped  
against the wall, and she ran

to her mother, to tell her:  
“Daddy’s sleeping  
with his eyes open.”

## Canvas

For us, there were twelve colors and we cleaned the house once a month, painted the walls, washed the sheets and dishes. That was back when I was still sleeping on the couch. You said the bed was too small for two,

but made up for it by asking the neighbors for ice and waking me up when the cars pulled in; you would get your wallet and I would get warm under an itchy blanket and hold my arm with one hand.

We had twelve colors and never knew which was next. You wrote them down in a leather-bound journal that your mother gave you for graduating high school, Black and white never seemed to last. Blue and grey never seemed to end.

One morning you said:

“Today is red.”

We celebrated with a bottle of wine. Yellow days came like a hurricane working its way up the east coast. The house would shake until the walls began leaning in, we had to hold them up with our hands. Yellow days gave up after a few hours. We would repaint the walls when the sky cleared and everything would feel clean again.

## **Downtown One Bedroom**

We took the alley back from the bar,  
fumbled for keys, lighters and light switches,  
and she spoke low with open windows  
of tens at two and twos by ten,

blemishes blooming in sunlight,  
makeup smeared across sheets.  
She showed me scars that came from staying,  
I showed her the kind you earn to escape.

Soon the sun rose and she began the slow  
walk home, uncounted and untouched.  
Hot shower water washed away my scales,  
steam rose and spread between bathroom walls,

filling and fogging the mirror, blurring  
the lines and ridges of my body in glass.

## **How to Paint an American Horse**

Someone kicked the couch.

I was still watching  
white horses with long

white manes. White  
horses never change color.

Some of have blue  
eyes. Some are born

with a genetic disorder called  
Lethal White Syndrome.

They euthanize  
those ones.