

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: A NEW ALONE, POEMS

Merton Lee, MFA, 2004

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In my poems, I'm interested in exploring the kinds of fragmented narratives and deep images that comprise memory. I think that we experience life mostly in recollection and I try to work with the sense of loss inherent in remembering and the discontinuities that let us go forward. So on the whole, I am trying to write poems that are mimetic to experience.

A lot of these poems happen in their nouns more than with verbs, partly because I'm trying to capture the heaviness of memory, and partly to keep the voice at enough narrative distance in the poems. I've observed more verbs in my newer poems, so perhaps I'll get to writing poems more alive with presence and so more truly mimetic.

A NEW ALONE, POEMS

By

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Farmland by Nanjemoy, MD

Afternoon coming early and spare,
four o'clock and the wet ground from a wet fall.
Father and I let Mom talk to the realtor
and they flip over the sheets of tax records
this December,
the white light getting dull and cold.
The land is old
and scarred up with
washing machines and oil tanks,
abandoned trailers. Across the street a dog is barking.
I look at the ice sealing off water in a puddle
in its glassy sheen
against the leaf rot.
Something about it makes my lungs feel light
full of thin clean air all fresh with newness
like the turn of a month.

And thinking
about the girls with their cool, long arms
in the bars and empty classrooms
of deepening winter,
smiling these weak lustful smiles.
It's snowing where you are
with your broken car and job interviews.
Late tonight you'll call and who knows
what we mean.
A few things we repeat to each other
and can't decide
and can't decide.

Sleepwalking

When he found out he was HIV positive
he started calling me again, as though he thought
we ought to be friends again. I went to see him,
but I didn't know what to feel. I said "George!"
but I guess I wasn't convincing.
When we got to his place the first thing we did was smoke pot.
There wasn't much to say and he mentioned
his blood test once. The next day,
while we were on the train
it rained briefly, so that coming back
to the ground, everything was just a little wet.
I bought some cheap Chinese food and then
we went to meet his dealer.

During my visit, he asked about you
but I didn't say much. I remembered
a long time ago you said – not everyone
who loves you will want to take care of you.
And today, I've been leaning toward sleep
and walking down halls, it's hard to talk.
Some birds cross the sky too small to see,
black, temporary. I am tired
though its hearing that's exhausting me.
When it's night I finally feel awake.

Before Your Exam for National Certification

Going around the apartment there are all these
small things to do – knobs getting loose, dust
with its desolate sleep getting thick on surfaces.
Folding my clothes I think that an education is just
a congress of days, wearing down. I hear the wind
against the walls outside, and another wasp has come
in through the rotting window frame. It is testing
the glass before collapsing, later in the day. And now,
here is your phone call, full of silences and long distance.
There are still so many of your things here
so many things still hoping for you to come back.

Imagination and Taste

1.

There are in our existence *spots of time* that with distinct preeminence retain or aught, or heavier ordinary intercourse our minds are nourished and *invisibly repaired*. The mind is lord and master the obedient servant could scarcely hold a bridle. Sweating in sleep at what point first childhood I remember well. I led my horse and stumbling on and stumbling on. Tasha who had pale blonde hair and Amber squinting and laughing and I sat on the step *disjoined* from my comrades. The sun was out.

Last season in the snow with José who was a year older and Norma could not remember her phone number, pushed my face in the snow, last season.

The sun was out and *not travelled long*. Tasha's pale blond hair and she beside me. There are in our existence spots of time. Jennifer, half-Korean with one greasy bang. I am going to sleep now and my heart is beating so loud like it will stop. I open my eyes and see the *pink light* of the alarm clock which is broken and reluctantly will turn a number, an increment of a minute, after many minutes with a soft sounding flip. The radio is on and it announces, KLEN light FM. This is so I don't get scared. I mounted, and we journeyed toward the hills.

Mother has the television on and it is warm in the house. My sister comes home crying. Are scattered everywhere. Eating wet rice.

Mrs. Mansell is not mother. Mrs. Billstad is not mother. Mrs. Billstad is pregnant and her belly swells and swells. The round of ordinary intercourse our minds and the sun. I remember well.

On the step sitting, Tasha's pale blonde hair she sits. The sun is out. Amber is laughing and squinting her eyes. Tasha is not mother. Some unknown hand mouldered down the bones. Tasha's pale blonde hair and pale blue eyes and pale skin pulls down her skirt and panties. Inside there there is a pale wrinkle, a wrinkle in her white skin between her legs. Amber is laughing and squinting her eyes and Tasha looks down and then at me with her pale blue eyes. I led my horse, and, and, stumbling, stumbled on.

Tasha is not mother. Amber is not mother. José is not mother. Norma is not mother. Norma cannot remember her phone number. Norma's family has no phone. I know my mother's face even when other ladies are in the parking lot. My mother is smiling.

Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought, I am sleeping in the pink light of the broken alarm clock and KLEN light FM is on. I think of the white floors of convenience stores, gas station floor tiles where the white of ceiling lights are bright

squares like *a beacon on a summit*. The air is so dry here and my nose is bleeding. I can't forget Tasha's vagina.

An ordinary sight; but I should need colours and words that are unknown to man. I can't forget Tasha's vagina and I know that God doesn't like this. Tasha came back from the principal's office crying and I had fallen on the playground and hurt my hand. Mrs. Hoffman is helping me to pray in her living room. I can't forget Tasha's vagina and I know that God doesn't like this. He doesn't like me to think of Tasha's vagina when I pray to him because he can see my thoughts. It was, in truth, an ordinary sight. God is, afterall, like me.

Amber doesn't like me. Tasha doesn't like me. José doesn't like me and he is pushing my face into the snow. Jennifer is half-Korean and I am Korean. In ESL, the kids say "how do you say 'crayon' in Korean?"

The female and her garments vexed and tossed. I am sleeping in the pink light from the alarm clock. Amen. I wake up soaked in urine.

2.

Awake all night
in the nauseous cold: drinking.
A small scratch with its slim red
and a needling rain when it is finally light.
You are creeping into a different tone
when we go up to the bookstore to wait,
riding the curve of land with the
sawdust smoke in my throat.

I guess even childhood was an assault
and maybe because of that I shouldn't apologize or
expect apology. All the blonde-skinned girls
up and down playgrounds with their squeals.
They are in love with white boys with brown hair
and call their taunts from the dry air.
Some time and I'll be beat up after school
or in the bus, crying through the air of a short fall
before the earliest cold and finally winter.

I left out the part
about reading Eugene O'Neill
with my hand in your panties.
There, the windy broken-up barns
black with holes, and high grass
in the tired hour between Ithaca

and Binghamton.
Carlos was the first one to notice the snow,
while we were at work,
and I looked up from filleting the chicken.

The meat of chicken is pink and wet.

Yeah, and watching the black girls at the pool
in their suits and tight braids. The lugubrious cops
sweating in their tight black shirts, tight piggy shirts
and chlorine, the smoke of grills.

Sleep is the fruition of all stories
the only way to find me out against all these miles.

As a child I would sit in the mud with the garden hose on low, watching the trickle of water cut the dirt into river beds, and then collect further down in a frothy puddle, the sea from which all life springs. I'd imagine that God would see the world like this. There was nothing I wanted more from childhood, or life that is, than a layer of removal from the interactions with people that are always a little sad, to look at life happening like a reader reads a story. I guess I have no sense of tragedy. From this perspective, it is very easy to write about anything.

706 East Seneca

Some time, in my difficulty with jobs
I sat in my underwear doing a jigsaw puzzle.
Megan was thin and red-headed sucking her lips
came in and didn't help, moved piece against piece
that didn't fit. Breath getting on the windows
and now to think, that I had touched her bony shoulders
her skin flecked with scars and taking a joint
from her fingers the smoke's curly lines in the
dead air of fall. She is who her friends set up on dates.
Anyway, doing a puzzle I look up across the apartment
and she's changing clothes, the bare white of her
thin sleepy limbs, moving each against the other.

A New Alone

Buying books ticking off
the minutes between an hour
the next hour and next.
The clouds are like
scratches in glass
lying paper-flat.
Oh well
to the raspy cold
breath high up in my lungs.

Instead, your hair: lying in your hair
with its faint smell.
My back is wet in bed
turning in my face
threads squeezed out from a spider
the clear silk of hair
clear bright hair
and just hair.
The black of streets

swallow light
and roll
with a sibilant roar
dividing thick
pubic trees
like a scar.
I see the pinpoint
stars in a sky that absorbs sound
like water does

filling your ears.
The pinstars tiny
and shifting, like a drink of
seltzer. I can smell the bread
dough getting mixed from
sugar the men with
plastic shower caps
blinking at noon on the streets
the loaves of sugary

white bread.
Cooking kills the appetite
and inhaling steam
draws it out: rain,
sweat pulling my clothes to me,
the white of your wrists
or the sleep of the lights
of the windows of
high silent rooms.

Paraphrasable Content

Kevin and Darren went to buy drugs while I slept this one hot morning. I woke up and smoked some cigarettes for breakfast. It was humid and I could hear cicadas. In the girl's apartment, Becky, a big blonde, they all were hanging out. Becky was rolling around on her bed, her vagina showing. They came home and we smoked some pot and they told me that story.

A wide face like a spoon, I picture her up in the snow a birthday intervening, her soft bones of hands, hair falling out. After the black streets with their mist of ice, the spines of books against your arm. Under the leaf litter is a broken eggshell – she laughs through the phone as an invitation.

The Potomac running softly at the end of winter, black taut water. I discover: feel your legs under my legs that morning with a runny nose. A road curves up this hill and you pitched about, lighting votives in a hot chapel of wind and dry dirt. I kneel and can't think of what to say. With his light short hair we pulled straight and laughed. He clicked his fingers. I saw a finger across your mouth and a shadow fall between finger and mouth. But no light, just the night getting pale into a wet, hot morning.

The gray sky you need a measure of grayness to see, or the fat-trunked palms. Sleeping all night under heavy blankets, I smell a thin string of steam. Morning, the old men waiters of South America have ladies' asses, walk with a woman's full ass under their black slacks, serve blank coffees with cream. Old waiter Tiresias, shemale, mediator between sexes, watching the air pile up against the sun.

The last thing was the sound of a recording on the phone, someone's unremarkable voice. What do we want more from the present tense than just continuation. For example, I am in my Chevy Malibu drunk driving into the needle-drop night where the roads slow like a pulse through veins. I hear the vibration of my car, like the sound of my own ear, air which registers as air.

We were in a cab going to the gentrified part of Harlem. Jorge was taking me to meet his new boyfriend who we were gonna get some drugs from. Jorge kept calling him on a cell phone he borrowed. The boyfriend didn't seem to be home. "It's alright. I've already fucked around on him" he said. Then he tried again. "That little faggot," he said, "oh God I hate fags." I watched another dollar turn on the cab's meter. Jorge laughed a little. "What?" I asked. "Nothing." Then he laughed again. "Come on" I said. "Okay," he said, "last night we were fucking each other with a two-headed dildo – oh it was awesome." We both laughed. "Oh Jorge," I said, as though I knew him. Jorge took out the phone and dialed again.

Humiliations

That night with Johanna
looking for her boyfriend when
finally all the bars closed and the
silence of the oily harbor
as we walked back. Who knows
if the ocean's salt is really mixed in
with this water. She used to be
a gymnast, and she was very thin
still. I think of that, how
in the office, the next day, she'd be blinking
having not slept. There was the light scrawl
of her pubic hair when she put her hands
in her pockets, pants sliding low on her hips.
I'd pour some water to prove
I was disinterested.

Drawing my face to your hair walking to the car
after you were felt up by the attendant
at the spa, and had browsed for a souvenir
for your sister – a stranger points out that
the air is humid, that the earth is deep
black under the dead leaves. And it's true
I looked at the little streams and dark bogs
in the naked woods. Having sex during your period
you apologized for the blood on my thigh and we are
only somewhat careful. I guess I should feel relieved
when you start to bleed,
but part of me is also a little disappointed.
Last night, the tractor-trailers
passed under the motel window
rattling the walls with their machine loneliness,
and we were in this same position.
The wetness of air with the plants getting ready
for the thickness of their growth.

In the Mouth of a Desert

The hot dirt with its smell
and in the sour loam,
fertilizer, a high arid silence. Spring, the daytime
moon and covering my face
 the swarm of gnats
I feel nothing, expect nothing.

 The fat lesbian who sold you that
copy of Pound's *Cantos*, Philomela
that piss-swallow, vainglorious
 And out into the night
smoking a blunt with cocaine
the fat bald king with his ring
clicking against your bare ribs.
 So rudely forced.

 Pomegranates, the bitter skin of
kumquats – it's true I hate to read
and hate all literature.
Can't find the passage, and read it
in an undistinguished translation.
"Balls" he said, and I likened him
 [to someone]

 Montana, parched yellow,
the cattle lying down in the
retreated snow, the grass is singing
 and under this the deep
nuclear missiles, lying down also.
Here, the one traffic light town where you
go if you get a paper cut
 shuffling the papers of nuclear defense,
 If I pop a
boner, we are this far underground,
 no one around.

In the garden you picked the
flowers with the stringy stems,
with the ants and their spiral trail.
 I give these

to the young lady with sweat on her legs
whose sweat on her bare legs
gleams. Laying my
brown arms against a sofa and waiting
to feel my hands push the clothes
from her skin,
in the darkness of mouths.

The pure sound of a key
turning in a door, the small, clear click
vague with hunger, a miserly knot of
vomit,
and water
and also water
the sound of water only.

What passes for local color out here
is a couple playing
Keno in the smoky rooms, their yellow
hair, the yellow drinks
with their clear,
glossy chips of ice.

(blinking traffic lights and a
dunkin donuts scone)

I am the things that stay and those that flow

An infant hydrocephalus
wandering the pews a chapel
at the bridge's end. The wind declined, and eating tubers
she bent her back and hair was thick with grease. Lightning.
fire,
and Water.

What in all creation is there to say to you?

I pull the cake out from the oven.
It looks like a thigh, like a bent leg
rounded off.
My mother and sister discuss
whether to use the high altitude recipe.
I see the loaf-pans with
their rust and burns.
Even this is just habit.

Sex ed is boring,
unsexual. A bubble of
an ovum and the
watery pink soundtrack
like sleeping in the bath.

When
the fog dissipates I try to balance
my water table.
The cheerleader bends over
at the teacher's desk
and I mean to give you a high-five.

I found the cheapest gas station
in the area but when I pulled out
the nozzle it turned out to be
Don DeLillo's penis. I was surprised
his penis was so bent
because you know what they say
about people with bent penises.

Cups of coffee,
dry toast with margarine.
You part my hair in the bathroom mirror.
I have left all my soiled underwear on the floor!

Bible Black

Red flies the fruit flies in the piss yellow
leftover wine. Darren swats the air,
humid, you know, as we all sink down
into the old, urine-tinged sofas. It really was
a pretty bad record playing when you lost your virginity.

Waking up last night scratching my neck
in the weird blind fury. It was a dream
something about. My dick's hard though.
God. My neck is so itchy. I hear the cars
whispering past each other out on the highway.

Winter, after that AIDS thing drinking
the last golden coating out of the whiskey bottle
the snow blowing like wisps of the dead
and we are dividing the cigarettes between
flips from a deck of cards, as the sun gets ready.

Deeply Loved Aged Individual Dies

A very terrible thing is happening to me. My name is Quaalude and my Gammy is dying today. I love Gammy very much and her death is very natural and I only want Gammy to die very naturally and with a lot of love. Gammy's name is Edna. I am named Quaalude because I was born with eyes all around and around my head so that I can see everything in a room all at once. I am autistic. Gammy loves me so very much because she has gone blind and because I can see so much. Right now I am looking at Gammy's bed with its metal frame and I am also choking my sister whose name is Bathtub Crank. I am watching her tongue ease out of her mouth and I am putting her tongue against the metal bed frame while Gammy dies. I am doing this because a very terrible thing is happening to me. A terrible and permanent thing. Bathtub crank has just broken a glass of water over my head and the shards of glass have entered one of my eyes. It is like a solid tear in my eye because not only am I sad about Gammy dying, but I am in physical pain also. The glass shard is as sad and beautiful as if it were a permanent tear stuck in my freakish eye located on my anterior ear lobe. My face is gradually becoming moist with tears and what I fear to be blood, but far from causing me anxiety I note the gentle yet sad breeze entering through a large window. The small alarm clock passes the last few minutes of Gammy's life through its merciless little red numbers which I avidly watch pass because I want Gammy to die naturally and in a room full of love. I decide to end my reign of terror on Bathtub Crank and put a quarter in the coin-op tv above Gammy's deathbed. Bathtub Crank appreciates my magnanimity and puts a box of Kleenex tissues into the crotch of her romper suit because sometimes her uterus bleeds though she has not reached puberty. The Kleenex acquires a deep affecting red, like the flowers of a very fine funeral for someone very loved. And I note how if someone I loved as deeply as I loved Gammy were dying, absolutely had to die, I would want them to die naturally and in a room full of love and love drenched items like this very room.

Alan Dugan, Dead at 80

Trash-filled brown arm of the sea
lying down beneath fat unnamable
barges. I go through the aisles
in Walmart, Port Covington, MD
eating McDonald's looking for
a pillow. Outside, think of how
the highways are like strings
strung over and next to salty
unmoving Baltimore harbor.
What I meant to say to Jon
before all that: the first boring
rains of a hurricane, the
wispy edge of it making the
noise of plastic bags. I am sinking in
the warm salty water that burns my nose
and now I surface to the black air.

The dusty brown camels at the zoo
with their goat eyes doing nothing
their humps of water collapsed
and no use for it. One time,
I shivered drunk outside a
bowling alley smoking the
wrong end of a clove cigarette
in the dark, trying to flirt
with two Turkish girls.
Beer makes you thirsty and
work makes you thirsty and
bowling is a murder of thirst.
But out here, the dumb sparrows
flying in the dust and the ragged
camel perseverant in not doing what
he need not do, dead grass, evening.

And this evening, drawing a
bath green with rust that
won't stay warm, it's raining
or about to rain. There is a
TIME magazine on the floor
by the toilet that I left there
after shitting and I open it up:
DIED. ALAN DUGAN, 80.

American poet who alternately
endeared and offended readers
with his language – with its
liberal scatological references –
and such prosaic themes as
drinking, irksome jobs
and masturbation; of
pneumonia; in Hyannis, Mass.

Pale Skin

Thinking about the blue nights
riding home on the bus wasted,
George's thin laughter in a
note he signs, and barely
space for this white
shambling moon.

Dusk comes on
from this wet day
like the rubbing of arms.
Thin girls leaning forward their
white backs edging out
the wet leaves flat on the road.

The absolute
paleness of the incandescent lamps
and on the edge of thinking
are Sarah's ice blue eyes
thirty-five in the disappointed
twilight. Looking away from here.

One Easter with its empty arms
and once cleaning the floor
once I come home or the light is on
and one's lips open a little
a warmth of wet air
and you draw your mouth close.

A Boring Day

this is the contemplative quality of x
in the long crease of your hand that can
be placed, like me, into your life.

I have wakened this morning to the sun.
I have wakened, and this silence from last night
is still not mapped, is still like the time
that separates
us. (the sun forced into a sentence while
the wind will blow on your skin, while
this air touches me)

the thin clean arms of the boy you used to date
today in a navy blue tee shirt. bones so
lengthy white, & I think about what it might've
felt like, you against those arms

I wait, your yellow faced admirer, in this interminable space

Verse

A lot of worry reading the notes, turning the pages
and worry is a word that has been going around lately,
being used unconventionally, for its associations.
I, with this bitter black beer thinking of
cigarettes I don't smoke anymore, mean it
the regular way. Not having sex anymore
I think of it in the plainest way. In the morning
the light will be so hot it'll be hard to stay asleep
hard to keep remembering in a half-wakeful dream.
In the car, you sang along quietly to the radio
and a little snow had just started coming down
falling slow on top of the air.

Lake Cayuga

In bed waking up early
hearing Megan in the
next room, or no
it's May, the warm
mornings in your windy room.
They all tire me out wearing
their dumb clothes in all the
parties the night before
except for Katie with her
hair she never brushes.
The air is light and fine when
we go out to the lake and
watch the boats. There
aren't many birds around or
anything, and the sky
feels so clean like
cold air runs in blood
and keeps everything you love.

Diurnal

the shudder of air conditioning
sleeping into life toward
sleep a boring muffled
hour (dust, residue)

in the dusty room's hours O
I am sweating because of the light
outside is the sound of cars flitting through trees

I've got you by the arm
and you are talking
your shadow over my shadow

a car pulls up with
your sister and her hair wet
she is humming

in the onset of night
the well dressed fags with their fags
pulling their collars
and my hand on your breast
as two teaspoons of come
throb through my urethra
into a condom.

Air, and More Air

We got to the party and Olivia saw me and walked over, but I didn't say much to her. She looked small and her hair was pulled back. Later, she disappeared to fuck John Davis, which everyone knew about, and the ball dropped on TV. You and I, we kissed, and then you went to talk to someone. Someone said "Happy New Year" and I said "I hope so" which was a joke I was using all night. "I hope so," I said.

◦

On the way to the post office today, at a stoplight I saw a high school boy run out of a car to talk to someone in another car. As he ran, his pants went down a little, so that I saw his slim white waist. He bent over to put his face by the car's window. When I made it to the post office the air was cool and humid. The air was not fresh but smelled good.

◦

Thinking about New Year's, I came up with these two lines:
between the white pages
of a calendar year.

◦

Well, a few years ago I remember that Olivia had put on her bathing suit wrong trying to get dressed in the dark. Her breasts were small and round, and she moved her arms as she tried to cover them. We had been drinking vodka from a big plastic bottle and Abe, who was her boyfriend, or soon to be her boyfriend, I don't know, he might've said something from another room. There was a bathtub full of hot water, steam in the bathroom, the hum of a fan.

◦

In the hallway the dogs run around and yelp their tense short barks. I put my hand down and one dog licks it, its eyes rolling back in its head. The other dog is still barking. Back in my apartment I picture myself out there, enormous, and making small sounds for the dogs. Maybe that's the way I really am.

◦

And because there are so many girls like Olivia I should say that while researching a rare pine tree in the Dominican Republic, she and someone else lost their trail near Pico Duarte. They were lost for three days until a search team rescued them. I am told that at the time of rescue, they had not eaten for two days, and suffered from fatigue, diarrhea and minor scratches.

Afterwards

At some tired juncture the grass waving
a somnolent hum. The doctor putting her hand
against my brown belly
like instinct
the leaves of grass, the leaves of grass.

Katie Liederman's big tits she
flips her hair there is one lamp on
her brown hair and as she squats in front of me
she flips her hair and lays one hand on
the leprosy of my body

swollen like that of the drowned.
Her nipples straining against her red
shirt, the laying on of hands and
one lamp on her big tits and her mouth
which looks white in the light

Bowling tonight drinking cups of beer
and riding in the bed of a pick up truck
the black grass accumulates dew
and the thousand bugs flying
toward the lights out in the parking lot.

At Eva Perón's Grave

The tiles of the bathroom are very cold and the tub is large and cold.
It takes some time for the water to get warm. Morning:
I pierce the egg's yolk and it runs against the gloss of the dish
runs against pieces of toast and so on, a cup of coffee. Sister's got
a box of pastries that are the hard foam of cakes and bread. And leaving here,
the waiter with his gray hair is a rock, rock-silent, watching us go.
I don't think of anything, washing my hands, slipping my arms into sleeves of coats,
or getting on some bus and you can't tell where it'll go. So then,
the greasy fur of stray cats, that they are neither suspicious nor trusting as they
slip from your hands, all fluid with indifference, or maybe it's that they watch
in the finality of day, the traffic surging home against the humid air,
the planes touching down. And here, the granite slats the fat
worm of a rat's tail, disappearing into a tomb, weeds in the cracks and
mausoleums, broken windows. So what do I do?
At night, the fog coming off the streets after rain, the lights blurring into that water
and more cars. Later, I'll have to split the bed again with my sister,
each of us on opposite edges of a mattress, and then all space
makes for loneliness. So at the bar in Recoleta, when that beautiful girl
keeps looking at me, and then finally talks, well, I guess it should all feel like
something.

Another Season

A breath of air
whining through small
promiscuous birds. The length
of sleep is just sustaining
the taut surface of skin
against something that makes no sense.
Garbage wet down by rain
and winter,
which is like cold smoke in your eyes
dry as dust,
passes. Peeling a grapefruit
and opening its fat
pink fringe.

It's a nervous life for the wildlife around here.
Damp soil like night
listening to your breath moving
in the black.
Poor worms blind with wet mouths
come back to life
in rain
in the morning.

The Sun Brings Joy to Some

A large black bird on a
thin branch. Good Friday.
It's sunny. I get home with
bleach on my hands.

Later on,
the soil of house plants, and
hearing of a lack of rain
it will rain. My housemate
is cooking eggs and
stuttering on the phone.

I left work and ran home
as it rained – there were earthworms
lying thin as dashes on the
blank sidewalk. O
and the white girls with their
skin unlike my skin leaning and
sighing, fogging windows
as they sweat their smell
like a myth
into the bedclothes.

Here, On the Surface

Sleeping a thin sleep
in the cycles of air conditioning.
Someone's headlights flashing
its blue gaze into the dark of these rooms.
I am alive in someone's memory
laughing suddenly, like a threat.
These roads are a track into the veins
that line my dead throat, empty air.

Well, the hot air on the white clothes
of nurses in the parking lot.
It is another invisible sunset
falling in love late in life
crossing your long, long legs
as everything fails.

Warm Weather

Someone had cut some branches off the trees
and laying the sour mulch on the earth, the air
sour and all the lying in your arms I did while
you decided about me. Looking out my window
at trucks making deliveries and the cars creeping
home, this gray morning: how they slip uneasily
into uneven parking jobs, and that we become so
desperate for this kind of temporary home. I guess I am
trying not to remember, or was trying not to.
I read somewhere that someone is always tired
of a pretty girl, how just before being abandoned
they go to animal shelters to flirt with need.
And looking at the cut branches, it seems like winter
might end. The small points of buds on the tips,
small as fingernails, but these won't grow.
Who bit the hard, bitter radish, some warm night in fall
and who here with their quiet, dried up urge?

Frank Bidart Reads His Favorite Poems at the Library of Congress October 22, 2003

His huge body white-capped,
hand grabbing air
while he talks his deflating voice
hand at his side, grabbing
as though to show us the pain of constipation,
he murmurs
then sings.

“...Randal [sic] Jarrell’s reading of his poem *Lady Bates*, in The Library of Congress series, is very dramatic, very emotional, and very bad: I am unable to hear it without the conviction Jarrell felt his emotions about his subject so readily and so uncritically that he did not trouble himself to write the poem.”

-- Yvor Winters, “The Audible Reading of Poetry”

I Work in a Restaurant

At work at nine and I am washing lettuce
in this big metal sink. Then Sam comes in
and puts his hand against my back, the other
hand holds the cash drawer. What a republican

he secretly must be with all his meetings
his talks with that asshole barber the one
who listens to Limbaugh, pushing the comb
into your head hard, and Sam says “Merton,

the truck is coming later” and he means
that I’ll have to unload it, running down
and up the ramps while he bums smokes and talks.
I’ll look at the cars driving slowly downtown.

But really, it’s not so awful, overall
the clear of morning and the white of buildings.
The steam is clearing from the windows
and outside, kitchen noise disappearing.

Proteus changes shape to slip me

Reading library books in the dust of footsteps
the thin dogs and their white fingers in a house
under trees. I put mother and father to bed
and it has been a long time learning this –
the quiet darkness gathering in your eye
as the wind moves its blank long distance
and through a car window we say goodbye.
Here on TV, the breasts of some girls to
nuzzle into sleep your leg across my legs.
Alan with the lisp tries to coax your white
ribs from your shirt and these trees millions
of years ago took to land and thrived. He is
circling back. These black roads are like veins
in your wrist and I hold you and hold you and hold you.

All the Desperate Measures

I feel the cold air when you
get in the car. At your waist
the soft fat lightly yellow and that
yellow reminds me of this
 morning's sallow light.
You are all done up, but not as
much as sometimes. We go
into the club and buy beers.

At the end of the night
your long hair starting to unstraighten
in the sweat and breath of the bar.
 And, the light is pale like fog
here in your apartment.
I'm up against the dirty walls
looking at this bed that's still warm,
and a long black hair,
while you are in the bathroom.

Going to work, the cut of
inhaling the cold morning.
Now, my feet
wet from the ground,
and I guess it won't be long.
 Another cigarette break
drinking Diet Pepsi and
pissing in the snow.
My hands are cut up from washing pots.

I exhale this wet gray breath
dissolving into the blue.

the bookstore bookshelves are dry
and narrow and somnolence of unfamiliar
cities

who was that girl who Darren and Andrea
fought about that Darren says threatened suicide

passing between here and Detroit

I guess I could believe it

the lives of books: another book

on the bus home the high air clear with dark cold
I trust this hum
that a good machine can be
tamed, like an animal
 huge and docile as it
winds the road like a spool takes up thread

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Sensationalism

The thick air before night
eating green beans cooked
to hell over a steam table,
and your folded arms as we
push our dinner plate
back and forth.

Watching TV is a kind of
restraint in the dark, a
steadiness of sound spilling
its blueness onto your sleepy face.
The night Amiri Baraka's wife
was sick he stood on the stage
yelling "you white motherfuckers"
and dancing a little; side to side,
without mirth. I got separated
and went to a bar,
drank alone with whoever
drinks alone.

At a departure
it's time and not me
who will reunite us.
The sky is a name
for distance and
consolation is
the alchemy that makes
miles into minutes.
I have no choice but to
acknowledge this feeling that
I am really tired, my breath
is bad and one more thing
could set me to crying.

Part of me is stuck
at this punk show five years
ago unable to grow.
there was a pale boy with
thin arms, smoking by me
outside with a shy smile.
Inside the song was called
'Beastiality Pride' and it said
just gimme a pig or a hippo
and watch my little cock grow.

Garbage everywhere
mixed with bills, socks,
receipts. There was a time
my father's friend who was
a drunk in an old dust-colored
jacket lived in the orange
projection of streetlights
and I unbuttoned my pants
to show him. The TV was on,
the whole thing was dim,
trying to be forgotten.

Watching TV
Watching TV
Watching TV

Dew Point

snowing again
all these guys sitting in the living room
and catch this fragment of his voice on the phone
they're all talking
so how I wanted

the bed gets hot with us both in it
and that is honestly all that I can think about watching this snow fall
feeling so empty today

waking up dry
this morning

I think the heat must be off
I think the fat squirrels are glad to escape
barking dogs

miss him
he with personality most like a dog you
miss everything
suspended in a hanging breath
I try very hard to smell you & I am trying very hard

School Year

1.

I watched the rat crawl into Paul's coat
in the orange streetlight but didn't say
anything. We were by the back stairs
and breath showed. Paul started walking
toward the field and at the edge of that
the lights of some gas stations on Grand Avenue.
It was cold, and I thought about the rat's
small hot body against Paul's chest.

Mom and Dad drove home.

I looked at the flat of the golf course pass
then at home, in our clean white living room,
maybe I felt a little sad. I remembered
the rat's pink feet, its pink nose twitching in the air
like something skinned raw.
Later, Leslie and I kissed at school
but I guess we didn't know how to do it.

2.

Dear Mom:

So, I read in Sister's diary how she cried
at the pool from missing you
which I did not do. Instead, at night
I go on the balcony and look at the moon.
I get to thinking that you must be under it too
and it makes me feel weird. You call
on the phone and at Thanksgiving,
there'll be a fever. I'll wake to the snow
before sunrise with the sky dimly bright.
All I have is that we are under the same sky
and I might've stolen that idea
from that song "Somewhere Out There."

3.

It's a small relief: the interim
between classes. The daylight sticks
to dirty windows, and sweat making
my bald armpits
glabrous,
underneath my clothes, walking
through the halls.
The girl I'm in love with
in the milk and silver gloss
of this photo for the school paper.
I know you're wondering who she is,
caught laughing while the partial second
fades, or it's already gone.
The gray of the hall that never changes
and here comes Annie with
her dry crackers, and some words.

4.

Mr. Randolph lets us go outside
for the annular solar eclipse
after saying annular comes from
a word meaning 'ring' and not
year. Sure enough, when the moon
goes over the sun, the sun makes a
little white ring around it, after-
noon gets a little darker and
a lot of people are out.
When I get back home, I think that
'annular' is a beautiful word like
a beautiful girl that doesn't exist
and also that the solar eclipse was
kind of a let-down.

5.

The open cans of Sprite and pop songs playing
and it could fizz in blood like a vaccine
while lying on a carpet in the full dark
and all the cars along the street are parked
in their neat rows. And Tara, Emily,
those girls in the moonlight at apogee
and Tara's witch face, wet eyes, her eyes wet
and our friendships were made in the alphabet.

She mouths the pointless crushes where nothing
will happen but rain, stains on the beveling
of basement walls, it's always in the meanwhile
when everything becomes strange: the vibratile
air of her name the white of arms and she
fixes on my eyes, inexplicably.

The unseen fuzz of her body and the waste
of anything in all the endless weekdays.