

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document:

IN GRAVITY'S CURRENT

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In Gravity's Current is a collection of poems centering around the trauma of war, the fluidity of memory, and the act of memorializing as a way of coming to terms with mortality. It raises questions about what constitutes a home, and how our memory and attempts at memorializing construct that idea of home. Through a metaphor of falling, I attempt to share my grandfather's stories of being an air corps navigator for the US Army and prisoner of war during World War II, and engage it with my own experiences abroad, and the responsibility I feel as my grandfather's biographer.

IN GRAVITY'S CURRENT

By

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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  
2010

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## Preface

Many of these poems began as conversations with my grandfather about his experiences as a navigator for the US Army Air Corps during WWII, as well as his experiences as a prisoner of war at Sagan Stalag Luft III in Poland. The poem “Memorial at Sagan III” makes use of a list of items utilized to build an escape tunnel from the camp in 1944, made famous in the 1963 film *The Great Escape*.

The series titled “Five Departure Poems” consists of my original translations of the German-Jewish poet Hilde Domin’s poems “Fünf Ausreiselieder.” These poems were originally published in German in her 1964 collection *Hier*.

# Dedication

For Pop.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Liz, my thesis committee, my family, and my friends for all of the support and guidance over these past years.

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But this isn't what I ever want to write.

## **Falling**

Opposite of an elevator going up  
the before-the-floor-is-found  
absence of breath in the atmosphere  
the drop after the squatter's deadlift  
thoughts of Daedalus' bad dream or  
a broken yo-yo snapping away  
less ticker tape and more lead  
strings snipped from a marionette midstride  
or the Gravity's Gate carnival ride  
the bird being pushed from the nest  
the rocket lifting off boosters breaking away:  
aloft but not in-flight.

## Alpengeist

Cows scatter across the meadows  
like sun across the mountaintops,  
faint moo and cowbell in the funicular  
drifting further from the air  
growing colder. We ride halfway to the top  
each cog popping into place with a clink.  
The wind whips our faces pink at this altitude,  
the mountain is green and brown  
but higher looms the purple.

Our hair glints as the wind whips  
through the meadow flowers  
and sun glints on glacial lakes  
the way light scatters like cows.  
Sun falls on mountaintops above  
and wind blows debris through the air,  
flower seeds falling from the sky,  
the cows moo and the mountainside is green.  
The wind, the meadows, your face,  
your face is pink, or what I can see of it  
through my whipping hair. I call out.  
My voice is stripped away by wind that echoes  
through the mountains, and the sun  
scatters like shrapnel  
like debris glinting like

plane wreckage happened  
here and from the funicular, the cows, the milkmaids  
watch the smoke trail down purple as meadow flowers  
watch the mountain whip the plane into debris  
watch for the jumpers, the flower seeds.

## War Letters

In the pause that it takes you just to find the right words  
the beer bottles rattle on the bottom shelf of the icebox,  
the beard clippings cling to the wash basin,  
the lunch meat, the undershirt on the floor: they all wait.

Each moment between us is a mile, our conversations  
empty banana peels. I can't decide if we talk too little  
or we talk too much. In my dreams, your hands  
cup my breasts and my hair is in your mouth.  
Each moment is a breath. Each moment is a moment.  
Each moment is a pause. And a pause. And pause.

You don't come home to me at night, but your hand  
rests empty, open, grasping ghost hair on your pillow.  
While you sleep, my hair splays across the mattress  
an ocean away, and is tangled in knots when I wake up.

The distance is an ellipsis in your voice in letters.

I'll see you soon and pause, pause, pause  
is never enough.

## In Morocco

Stranded in Marrakech with a brand new broken plane, he had to wait. He sopped up alcohol and finding beer was plenty enough to do. He took what he wanted when he wasn't understood, with the other soldiers, all served in one pub, dark, the windows open, the hot stench of market and bitter dust blowing in with the breeze. He didn't learn a lick of Arabic. Local men, like rose-sellers stumbling into New York cafes, tried to sell him old guns, brass swords, cheap jewelry, and *souvenir, souvenir, souvenir, you give this to your lady, or you give this to our ladies here!* behind the pub, in the alleyways, the ones with the western hair styles. Their clever English, or only English, only acquiescing to the soldiers' curses and demands. The bus stopped in front of the pub and fights broke out as people tried to cram on, the soldiers laughing themselves stupid at the spectacle—there was no fuel, the bus pulled by mules—and they hollered as young men with souvenir sacks pushed old ladies out of the way, these soldiers, vigilantes with their toy swords.

## **Falling**

The emergency siren blasts louder than the dron  
of the only engine left. The plane is going down.  
The sound of falling in a falling plane is loud, the nose-gunner  
pounding on the steel door trapping him in his turret.  
Just try to lift that door handle, the steel clanking  
the siren blasting and the engine droning  
louder than before. Hear the sound of rockets on the 4th of July?  
Something starts to whistle, the plane a rocket's shell  
returning to earth, screaming as it falls.

## Little Boy Blue

Little boy blue straps a bugle over one shoulder and a rifle over the other. His hair is the color of wheat straw, his cheeks rosy and windburnt. He doesn't have socks, and the military-issue boots are too big on his feet, mashing his toes as he marches the perimeters of the village, tracing the edges of the long empty cowfields. He thinks of how in May, when he was littler, the cows would be paraded through the streets covered with wreaths of flowers, clunking bells, and tiny swastika flags, ready to go to pasture, and how his older brother had hoisted a maypole high in the lawn of his sweetheart, and how all the children had chased around it with ribbons. How in September, he'd helped herd the cows back down the mountain, and his brother was married, and how, come next May, there was a baby, blonde, named Heike. There is smoke shooting across the sky now. There is the sound of bombs echoing in the distance. They ate cheese and eggs and sugar when she was born. They ate bread. His brother is dead and he's protecting empty fields now. He comes to the field's edge, where the woods meet fence, and sees the jumper's body, tangled in the trees.

## **Falling**

It isn't blue at 20,000 feet.

I move too fast to know anything but light, white.

I try to imagine the shape of my body falling, arms wrenched  
against the wind, cheeks flapping, lips pulled back

air sucked against my clenched teeth, flesh made cartoon.

This must be hilarious. This must be a feeling of hilarity.

I've pulled the strings on my pack, but nothing has happened.

I can only imagine the shape of my body falling, limbs stretched  
to grasp at nothing but the distant earth.

Me, as a newborn spider, tiny and stripped from the egg sac  
on a gust of wind. I've got to pull the chute out

by hand, a spider pulling web, throwing forth silk like a lasso  
for the wind that only wants to snap a hold, carry me forever.

## **Five Departure Songs**

**By Hilde Domin**

(Translated from German by Natalie Corbin)

**I**

**Here**

Unwished for children  
my words  
are freezing.

Come,  
I want you all to set  
on my warm  
fingertips  
butterflies in winter.

The sun,  
pale as a moon,  
shines here, too,  
in this land  
where we savor  
that stranger-existence  
till the very end.

## II

### Departure Poem

The objects see me coming  
barefoot.  
I give them freedom again  
my bed that wanted to be my bed  
my nightstand  
the walls, which promised to wait for me  
like the walls of my childhood.  
My gentle things  
you wanted to center me.  
Belongings,  
you see me go.

### III

#### **I Take Refuge in the Tiniest Thing**

I take refuge in the tiniest thing  
the perpetuity of moss  
damp  
fingerbig  
from childhood  
until today.  
I, Gulliver,  
lay my face in the moss.  
Gulliver,  
I'm on his side,  
whose footstep  
overruns the border of the land.

## IV

### No Time for Adventures

When the end of the world is your suburb  
you know the scent  
you know the jostle of the letters parallel  
the letters open  
and you go therein  
not  
into width  
into another limitedness.  
Out of your door,  
and whereto then?  
Don't you live comfortably  
like everyone  
lonely  
like everyone  
in the tiger's maw?  
No, it's not the time  
for adventures.

V

**“Silence and Exile”**

Unloseable exile  
you drag it behind you  
you schluepfst inside it  
folding labyrinth,  
wasteland,  
and pocketable.

## **P.O.W. March From Poland**

It's a long walk from east to west  
in January in the middle of the night.  
There is snow on the ground  
and snow in your hair.  
The leather of your boots  
has frozen stiff and you're walking  
on disembodied legs.  
The brain has lost track  
of everything lungs down.  
You're a stomachless, spleenless,  
legless, dickless man.  
The shit in your bowels is frozen  
hard as diamonds, but the brain  
doesn't know that. It only knows  
the splintering of each inhalation,  
the halo of frozen breath and snow  
cupping the head of the man a step ahead  
and the pattern of footsteps  
sounding on snow, letting you know  
you're moving. Keep moving.  
You started walking on Saturday.  
It's Monday. It's dark again.  
The trees echo bootcrunch, the heavy  
breaths and coughs of 2,000 brothers  
back into your ears until it all muffles  
with the wind as a deafening  
frozen silence.

It's a long walk from Zagan to Muskau.  
It takes 28 hours in a blizzard:  
24 spent on foot and 4 spent  
sleeping in piles of men draped  
like dogs or bearskins across each other.  
Breath of sleep melting frozen snot  
from each others noses in salty floes.  
Sometime in the second night before  
the edge of dawn is arrival.  
Reprieve, a dusty abandoned tile factory.

The only water melted snow  
in tin drums coated with tile-grime  
and for 30 hours the dust becomes you:  
drink it, breathe it, your nostrils and spit  
black. Come Wednesday  
you puke grit and you're walking again.

This time the brain feels  
your body as a blowtorch  
or hot ore slicing through snow.  
The man a step ahead  
just grew antlers and fur:  
He's looking like Bigfoot,  
and it's gotten too hot  
so you're packing snow down your shoes  
and under your belt, and back  
against your neck, sit down to rest  
on snow cozy as goosedown.  
And you'd finally get some real sleep  
but Bigfoot is growling in your face  
now digging snow from the cuffs  
of your pants, someone's got your arms  
telling you to walk, Jim. Walk.

## Memorial

The sky stretches bluest over Frickenhofen,  
a tiny mountain village, a heartblip  
in the Schwabian Alb,  
that home of lilting language,  
the words curling up and consonants crushed.  
This ancient and free imperial place  
is rich with salt: each salt town another spot,  
another *dorf* along the river valley.  
Each old and split-timbered. Each road  
a narrow column cutting down from the sky.  
This town has a church and an old tower.  
This town has a courtyard and a community theater.  
This town has good families, good blood, thick accents,  
their salted hands and their fat cows in pastures.  
And a plaque underfoot, a tablet of grey marble,  
black granite, a six pointed star.  
Here on this site (and this site, and this site)  
all along the valley, the narrow streets echo  
with a theater of glass breaking. Now the streetlights  
dim. Shoes scrape against the memorials as children  
angle in their seats for a better view  
of the show.

## Bison Grass Vodka

Grasses can live for centuries. The tops can be cut,  
torn, or chewed to stubs and the roots live on.  
I am an old man, and I think of the blood that soaked  
these roots. I think of the crumbled bones  
feeding the grasses with bitterness, the grasses still  
growing sweet. I think of the frozen mud, the dry blades  
that stuck to my boots. I think of how much my tongue  
loves sugar. How much I missed the taste of sugar.

The grass underfoot is thick as carpet and sweet  
like American sorghum, a grass you won't find here,  
nor the thick molasses from its sugars.  
The grasses here will be distilled into vodkas instead.  
Where I come from, the fields are flat,  
and we like our meals very sweet, sweeter.  
We tap our grass, pull its sweetness out.  
The grass fights back by secreting cyanide,  
but I like it with the sweetness; I like that bite.  
But here, it's winters that bite and sweetness is a sin.  
Here, the trains chug up hills towing cattle  
and hay. The sweetness is pulled from the grass  
until it's no longer sweet and burns bitter in your throat:  
*Żubrówka*, the bison grass vodka, thank the Wisent grazing  
like our bison in ancient forests, quiet, slow beasts  
snorting and chewing the sweet away in the shade.

These trees were named for kings and tsars  
and famous fallen war heroes. These trees  
are where I always look for you. Captives, you receive  
this oak in your name. Captives, you chew  
this grass like a cud. Captives, your ghosts  
no longer reside within these trees. Your ghosts are restless  
and wander the train tracks, wander the empty plains,  
wander far from your home amidst Polish buffaloes.  
But Captives, I won't be here for long either  
echoing through this meadow like a faint bird call,  
my long fingers like tall grass don't dig anymore—  
not holes for hidden vodka stills, for fleeing fugitives;  
there isn't any dirt beneath my nail beds.

My long fingers have grown old.  
My long fingers have turned to wax tapers in their idle rest.  
Today, I return and find you all here, for once.  
I hold my hand up to shield the light coming through the trees.  
My fingertips turn translucent in the sunlight  
and reach out to try to touch your ghosts,  
which I can almost see, asleep like bison in grass.

## Kaiser's Gleis, Potsdam

Slickness on cobblestones  
and snail-shine on the platform  
glisten like vapor trails in the sun.  
It's early. Ravens tear at trash  
and since yesterday, fresh  
graffiti has been painted:  
JokStarZ in black, teal, collides  
with DMNZCREWZ in acrid silver  
painted over the switch house,  
which is filled with wasp's nests  
tiny holes dot the mandible-chewed  
brick mortar as they come and go  
lazy in the morning light.  
This place is half ghost-station  
with faulty ticket machines,  
old signs that flip. A train stops  
each hour at 46 minutes past,  
but the four just spins  
till the next train comes, no rest—  
Regional train to Berlin Ostbahnhof  
at 7-"spin-spin-spin"-6 o'clock.  
Track two heads west;  
tracks one and three, east.  
Track four doesn't lead anywhere  
except overgrown brambles.  
It used to be the *Kaiser's Gleis*—  
an emperor's gate imposing  
itself on the flat landscape  
with high-arching ceilings  
and neo-gothic spires  
crumbling now next to plebian  
tracks one, two, and three,  
terribly functional and cold-war born.  
They carry only trains,  
not the grandeur of empires  
or Prussian fleets. These bricks  
with their wasps and snails.  
These bricks upon bricks.  
A century of Reichs and comrades  
a century of stations upon stations.

So easy to forget the dead-end tracks  
while silently waiting  
for the next commuter train.

## **In Budapest**

Cast iron shoes peer over the ledge  
into the Duna.  
They wonder if they'll make it to the other side  
set foot in Buda.  
But from where I stand, I know they'd sink,  
rest like heavy stones in the riverbed.

## Hiking From Biassa, Italy

Once, for a week, Jack and I travelled to the Mediterranean in wintertime, because it was cheaper then.

The hostel was painted the color of butter, inside and out.

From the window, we could see cliffs and sea.

One morning, we hiked five miles along a trail, past vineyards coiled impossibly around rocky outcroppings, thinking of the village down mountain, on the shore.

The bored hostel worker didn't promise anything special this time of year, or that the wine and food would be excellent.

He only assured us there was nothing better to do.

Less than a mile from the end, we heard the sound of water on rocks, and I asked Jack if he'd ever seen sharks in the ocean. It just slipped out, and he'd replied *Sharks?*

My grandfather, navigator of a grounded plane, told me once about Italy, his weeks off a western coast of little more than sheer slate rock, a runway, and the barracks of the military base. At night, he'd walk to the island's edge and look down over the cliff.

Far below, dark shapes moved through the water like phantoms chasing the coastline, like mermaids.

They'd writhe into the shallows, fins cresting the water and pulling it into foam around them before they'd turn back for the deep.

They were dark on dark, and he'd squint to keep track of them, following them into shore, then out again, then into shore, until the sky turned a shade he'd learned to call "very late" in navigation school. He'd return to base camp then to let the image of sharks in water keep him earthbound, waterbound, let them pull him from the sky, and then he'd sleep.

Just before the trail's head, the path was blocked off closed for winter repairs. The next day we took the train to the village instead, ate fried fish in the only open trattoria with a bottle of rough red wine. Jack complained *Italy in wintertime!* Boarded up shops, trails closed at the end, salt air stinking. The fish, he said, was not even fresh.

Two bottles in, I convinced him to climb the steps cut into the cliff side, 500 of them to the trail's head.

This is the view we'd missed, I'd said. Looking down,

the water was murky and green, dark with shapes.  
But he said the shadows in the water were just more rocks.

## Red to Red

A line. A penumbra edge  
of window at night,  
tinted by streetlight.  
It's not the indigo we imagine  
shadows, but a thin  
strip of focus in the dark  
shifting from red to red.  
It catches my eye as I seek  
the shape to blame  
for making a dream sound  
loud enough to wake the dreamer.

## **Memorial at Sagan III**

A single row of stones follow each other behind a platform named Harry, who hoarded, they discovered, when the inventory was taken, 4,000 bed boards and 90 entire beds—where did those men sleep at night?—52 tables and 34 chairs—harder to share seats than space at the supper table?—76 benches, 1219 knives, 478 spoons, 582 forks, 69 lamps, 246 water cans, 30 shovels—shovels?!—1,000 feet of electrical wire, 600 feet of rope, 3,424 towels, 1,700 blankets, and 1,400 honorable, honorable klim tins.

## Falling

This is the bed he's fallen into this time, and he's not getting up.  
A slip in the kitchen— and his back is so bad—  
the rag rug is like a blanket of trees to fall into.  
He's not sure why gravity leaves him sometimes,  
or why it leaves the legs first. His eyes can't see the blackout  
and at 88, he only wants to sleep in for a while.  
But this is a new lying down, this parachuter's drop  
without the chute. Why does the blood leave his arm?  
Why these tingles like tiny bells in the bloodstream?  
He doesn't know where the blood goes, or if there is space for it.  
The blood in small rivers chasing from one chamber of the body  
to the next, a pool here, a pool there, how does it choose?  
Gravity and blood have left his head now and they're all  
headed for the floor, the rag rug, a forest of trees to sink into.  
Their soft branches will break his fall, the gravity and blood  
racing to the floor, to his feet.  
He's 88. He thinks he'd like to sleep for awhile.

## **Falling**

The plane is going down. You've got the pack on.  
You've jumped.  
The sound of falling outside of a plane is silence.

## Navigation

Leaving Flint, you travel south first, either due south on 1-75, or you bend west, just a touch, on 69, which makes sense if west is where you're headed. There's nothing north worth going towards, just the Saginaw Valley sighing its dying breaths into the bay, all the way to Sault Ste. Marie, but even then you'd need to bend west some. It's important to note this, since we're working on leaving Flint, and if you're leaving, you want to leave in the right direction. Otherwise, it's like not leaving at all. It's also important to consider the following:  
If palmistry and cartography could be related, in Michigan, I-69 becomes the Life Line, and 1-75, Fate.

My grandfather left Flint in 1940 for Illinois to make plane panels with his father in a factory in Peoria. This is travelling south and west, making I-69 the sensible choice, but then it was only a country road. He was 19, and at 19 you don't want just the parts anymore, you want flight. This is why he enlisted to be a navigator. It took fifteen months to complete basic training, and it's key to notice that's only fifteen months to learn north under cloud cover, how to map the ocean. Fifteen months to map the sky. Imagine my grandfather now, driving down I-69, then taking 94 to visit me, west. His cars were always oldsmobiles, I remember the oldest one was brown, then blue, then gold. But now it's an Impala, and it's new. Imagine him learning to navigate, the compasses all new, and who wouldn't choose a new one of those to hammering out fenders or welding jet rudders. But to me, he's always been an old man, driving an old man's car.

Except, my grandfather cannot drive anymore. His second wife, Karen, takes him where he needs to go, but won't drive the Impala—too big. It's his eyes that have grown empty over the last year, not his mind, and as she shuttles him toward the passenger seat, she says "Ok, Navigator, where to?" and this is the trick: he can tell you where north is, and he can tell you it's not where you want to go. But in combat, that didn't matter. Flight, it turns out, is only about follow the leader, and he could never navigate prop wash or mountain tops. The training station for navigation was in Akron, which was south and east from Flint (since he'd gone home to visit his mother)

and for that you'd take I-75, no doubt, which is a very flat trip filled with cornfields. But it's important to remember that this was 1940, there was a war, and the interstate wasn't built yet.

And how do you navigate that?

## Rag Curls

My mother taught me how to curl my wet hair using rags  
each coiled tight like a snail shell then knotted down.  
I learned to sit propped like a doll on the pillows  
and sleep through the night, my hair a pile of pebbles.  
Her mother taught her too, and at five, in photos  
my mother resembles Shirley Temple, and at five, in photos  
I resemble Shirley Temple, but only if each curl  
was unwound with enough care, only if I'd remembered  
not to touch my hair all day. I think of the three generations  
of hair in rags, of stiff necks, when my grandfather calls me Gayle  
then Dorothy . . . and for a moment,  
I'm inside his mind as he tells me his stories.  
A mind that sees only his daughter's fine brown hair,  
and his dead wife's blue eyes.

## A Reflex

His sister must have yelled at him  
but taken the photo anyway.  
The Polaroid is darkened with age,  
but the mild weather is obvious:  
the porch wood damp, trees not quite  
full of leaves. The man in yellow  
holds a baby in red tights, a white dress,  
rosebud print and rosebud mouth.  
She looks her daddy in the eye,  
sternly, bald eyebrow raised  
and fat lips pouting.  
His mouth hangs open in a half grin  
under the thick line of a moustache.  
The baby's bottom is small enough  
to rest in his catcher's mitt palm.  
He's balancing her wobbling weight  
like a small sack of rice: his whole world  
in his palm, his wife scolding but laughing,  
or gasping—it's hard to tell—  
her eyes are on his free hand.  
The dog, too, is standing guard,  
whites of the eyes showing,  
lips curled back as if in criticism of the stunt.

Yesterday, the baby, grown now,  
caught him dropping the sugar bowl  
as he pulled it from the cabinet,  
him swearing *goddammitgodblessit*  
as it shattered, his reflexes too slow,  
his hands trembling as he stooped  
to scoop broken pieces into his palm.

## Flight

At twelve, my hair fell out in clumps and I had fevered dreams  
of math class and Nike shoes: find all the sums  
the numbers floating around my head—then I bumped  
into Michael Jordan, yes like Mike, and he said I'm a human slam dunk!  
then jumped into the sky, tongue wagging like a propeller, and flew away

It turned out to be mumps,  
only a mild case, but the loss of my hair left me numb.

My mother sheared off what was left, tying a keepsake lock with ribbon, then dumped  
the rest off the deck for the birds, every nest full of my red hair  
glinting gold and soft for the chicks plumping up  
on grubs hard won by the parents terrorized by the neighbor's dog, so dumb  
he'd chase anything, spending the days trying to pounce on robins.

Those birds still fought for crumbs  
to feed to their babies swathed in my hair, tinges of plum  
showing through the dun of their baby feathers. Too soon, babies jump  
from the nest to fly off into the sky like Jordan, a strand of my hair  
still tangled in their wings, a gold thread of my own knowing  
the feeling of flight.

## Paper Moons

The vase of cattails on the mantle: when cut  
they were soft as velveteen. Any hint of fluff  
was picked clean then lacquered stiff  
with hairspray. No seeds this way.  
It's the contrast I remember: the softness lost  
to a bristled scruff.

Like the time I reached for my father  
but found the rough hand of a stranger  
in the Burger King parking lot.  
I'd wandered off and absently slipped  
my hand into the one nearest  
while looking back to the U-Haul packed  
with old end tables, a blue striped chaise,  
crystal candlesticks, silk throw pillows  
a sofa, my grandmother's whole house  
in a truck and my hand clasping the unknown.  
No more nights in the yellow bedroom  
underneath glow-in-the-dark paper moons.

The stranger was startled at my touch, and I turned  
to see my father running, calling.

## Emergency Room

I saw a mouse breathe underwater once.  
It was albino. A scientist shoved it  
into a beaker of oxygen-saturated water.  
The legs shook to swim, head arched upward,  
but it was hopeless. Jaw dropped  
for the drowning. Chest  
heaved hard at the shock of an aquatic lung,  
the flick of the tail weightless in water.  
It worked like this:

Years ago, we stepped from the sea  
to feel the first shock of air  
dry in our throats.  
We learned the burning itch of holding  
our breath, kept the rhythm of waves  
rubbing up against the shore  
deep and steady in our pulses—  
a mouse is ready to step back,  
its lungs papery, thirsty:  
it longs for filaments, the gentle lap  
of water in, then water out.

You see, sometimes my lungs hiss like green wood  
burning in the space behind my ribs:  
I'm filled with smoke.  
I want the wetness to flood my bellows chest,  
thicker than air, cocooned in my electrodes,  
hum of nebulized breath pumping.  
This metamorphosis. This next first step.

## On Leaving the World

*After Miodrag Stojkovic*

Nicholas is leaving Michigan. He sits silently watching planes take off. He looks at the sky and thinks of a life in Michigan with a job in a bank, married to the girl down the street, owning a house in a new subdivision, being a child, growing up, having children, then growing old into a child again. He looks at the sky and wants it to be a sky he can live under. He turns to me and says "Detroit is only nice if you like the post-apocalyptic feel." I take the newspaper from his lap; the front page bemoans the slow bleed of population out of the state, the blood pressure dropping, dropping with each job gone: thumbs down to the auto industry, to engineering, and state image.

Thumbs up to a college education, to football, but thumbs down to a job in-state come graduation. Thumbs down to the small town, to Lake Michigan, which waits for an influx of Asian carp swimming up from the Mississippi delta. They're hungry fish. They jump from the waters into our boats. They want to learn how to fly, how to rid themselves of the lakeshore's limits. They are willing to move across the country for entry-level pay, move into middle management and coastal waters. They'll send back letters to their grandparents still swimming around the Great Lakes, writing *Miss you so! The water's fine and salty, but nothing on the coast is as sweet as freshwater.*

## **On the Shoulder of US 131**

The man walks down the highway, it is nighttime, the sky is dark swirls of purple and orange glow at the horizon line, and the sweet mixed chorus of spring peepers and the dull roar of highway traffic sings in his ears. The rush of each passing car tugs at his shirtsleeves. The passing 18-wheelers pull at his balance. He's drunk. He's walking because it's important for him to be walking right now. He thinks it's important. It is nighttime in spring, in Michigan, and the man walking down the highway has his tie loosened and kicks at the scraps of blown tires on the shoulder, all this trash, cans, paper cups, flattened cigarette cartons, roadkill. What possesses the deer to cross the road? To bound into traffic like soldiers into hails of gunfire, pushing the front, or are they fleeing refugees, or do those other fields just always look so much sweeter across all those lanes of traffic? He has a job, a young son, a bulldog named Lulu. The night noise rings in his ears like the song in his blood right now, and oh, how he only wants to do the right things. He'll look both ways before he crosses. He'll stare down the headlights, floating towards him in the distance.

## Semiotics

In trying to grasp that a mouse is not a mouse, mice in all their mousiness, rats, rabbits become to you costs expendable for the greater good. I know you sit for hours, scalpel in hand, isolating test sites, your fingers tracing to the point where the artery stems from the aorta. You've learned to ignore that nice softness of rabbit fur. You focus on the independent tics of heart cells cut from the beating heart. Your brain omits the living rabbit. You can't wonder how you've come this far or how you've changed. In conversation, you cite medical rhetoric. Your crafty hand with this move ties off blood to the ocular nerves, slices soft tissue, and ices feeling in the face, bringing blindness. Which sets off screams.

## **Frau Holle's Snow**

The sky is a blue colander turned upside down. It is iron and enamel and belongs to Frau Holle, and she placed the pan on top of the world to keep the birds from flying away. The geese now just fly from side to side, looking for a way out. She likes the birds—they make her happy, and she presses an eye to a hole to watch them flying, north to south, then south to north. Her tiny terrarium. She likes us people too, but pays us less attention; she'd like us better if we too flew to the edges, looking for a seam to slip through. The less willing captives endear her to them more. They try and try to escape.

The colander sits on her kitchen counter. When she sifts flour to bake bread, clouds fill the skies. When she kneads the dough, she slaps it onto the countertops and the earth moves. The bread is sweet and filled with raisins black as goose eyes. When she sprinkles it with icing sugar, it snows.

## Beaver Island Ferry

Close up, water is infinite  
as from far away,  
lapping miles of grey  
and dark. The wake  
is brown behind the boat,  
rolling lines reaching  
out then fading.  
Some birds dive  
at the dying ripples,  
the water flashing  
like feigned fish.  
Those confused seabirds,  
coming up empty  
again and again,  
and hours from shore.

## Tahquamenon Falls Park

We took a riverboat, then walked the final miles  
towards the river. The ground and the trees  
were spongy with moss. It was raining.  
The guide told us the falls looked like rootbeer,  
and my brother asked *Why not coke?*  
then complained he was thirsty.  
In fourth grade, we learn to find north  
by feeling the moss on trees. I hugged one,  
pointed north, but the guide said I was wrong.  
And yet, the moss was thickest *that way*.  
Then we heard the rush of water in the distance,  
the water falling promising to be red,  
brown, and gold instead of blue.  
My brother danced hearing the far-off crash,  
but the vantage point brought us no wonder,  
only the copper-stained water. Walking back,  
the rain stopped and a chorus of frog calls  
echoed through the canopy. Something slick  
and cold hit my neck, and my hand found a tiny frog.  
They were raining from the trees, tiny as thumbnails,  
translucent nearly, bouncing off leaf and branch.  
My brother and I squealed, catching them in our hands,  
watching them land belly up, turn,  
and flop to the path below,  
in gravity's current,  
cascading and caught.

## The Green Heron

He stands on one foot on a rotted log, and moves slow, slowly  
his slender throat unfolds like an accordion's exhale  
as he stretches his beak towards the hazy summer's sky.

His feathers are the green sheen of an oil slick, and his eye  
gold as a cat's, catches mine. He watches me watch him  
prepare to hunt. He says I'm cleverer than you, just wait!

I've read that the Green Heron will use small insects as bait  
like an angler. This one draws his neck in close like a loaded harpoon  
aimed at the small fish and box turtles swimming in the shallows

Their shapes reflecting across the mud as shimmering shadows,  
That cat-eyed bird sees something different than I do as he strikes  
into the water so cleanly and quick, the surface barely ripples

And he's back to the slow unfolding towards the sky, morsels  
of minnows sliding down the sly hunter's fine throat.

## Magiccada

You've furrowed and tilled and the summers have yielded to your hands sweet  
grasses.

Such a stubborn persistence, seventeen years of dark earth between your fingers.  
I remember watching you scrape the seeds of alfalfa or wheat with your thumbnail  
Down the stalk, how easily they'd give, then fall into your palm.

You pocketed them and told me I was born in your least favorite year  
While rising in the heat was the familiar locust buzz of summer, a hot and hungry  
clatter.

You sighed *But what does it matter? They're like all plagues in that they plague us.*  
Squinting at the sun, you pointed out the first dark falling shape of a cicada  
Dropping dead midflight. It wasn't personal. I was seventeen and the earth was  
giving

way to rising clouds.

Think of the smoke of fires, or think how heat shimmers in the distance  
Like insect wings or water. The year I was born was catastrophic; that's not personal.  
I imagine what it would be like to dig for so long through the dark,  
To be milky pale, translucent, the ground like a trap. I could push the dirt away,  
I could swim through it like water. I think of the command to rise  
coursing through me and all my generation. What choice is there in calamity?  
We will shed our skins, let them litter the ground. We will be green.  
I think of how the numbers combine, how rarely in life they align.  
They alight—the earth rising into the sky, the clouds hissing and shimmering,  
The bodies raining down on the fields, stripping them bare like firestorm.

## Falling

The feeling of space in the brain  
the dark behind the eyes, above the jaw—  
the jaw aches in remembering.  
I've only told you that I remember the sky was blue,  
or the sky was white.  
The sound was the sound of blood rushing in my ears,  
but maybe the sound was the sound of snow drifting.  
Maybe the feeling was God laughing.  
I've only just remembered the feeling  
of falling.

## **Bibliography**

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