

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: *Time's Arrow*
Conor Burke
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Directed By: Professor Michael Collier,
Department of English

Using narrative and lyric modes, the poems of *Time's Arrow* address the experiences of childhood in the Midwest, of growing up with a handicapped brother, of coming to terms with the humanness of one's parents, and of reconciling the inescapable aloneness of being a conscious creature. *Time's Arrow* is itself an act of memory, of putting back together— perhaps inexactly— the pieces of a life; for time inevitably changes the past.

TIME'S ARROW

By

Conor Burke

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Michael Collier, Chair
Professor Stanley Plumly
Professor Joshua Weiner

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Part One



Genesis

In the beginning, I remember fire first.

Fire from the cast black stove jutting its belly toward
the center of the house, red bricks beneath its feet.

In the beginning I remember fire first, then water.
Through the backyard the river twisted like a snake,
mist rising from its face in morning like breath.

First fire and water, then bladed seeds spinning down
in waves from the maples that stood like sentinels
throughout the yard. And then, as if a thousand hands
of feather-weight descended, leaves in colors like the fire fell.

There were frogs and deer, raccoons and possums, a cat.
There were stars that made the night sky shimmer
like the river's face in day. There were raspberries
burning in a tangle of thorn along yard's edge and
from the white trellis my mother nailed to the garage.

A wood stove burning. A river flowing. Maples,
oaks, birch and ash all growing. Things that crawled.
Things that crept. The night, the sky, the day.
My mother. My father, too. The whole world
then was caught in bloom. It burned with life.
I saw it. I was there. I breathed the whole thing in.

And it was so.

Genesis, Chapter Two

Then there was the long night. Me left with Papa and Nana in the brick house in Flint while my mother and father rushed away to the hospital—my brother was coming.

But they were gone a long time. He came too early. For Nathan, in the beginning there was no fire. No—there was fire in his veins. He was sick and too small. I imagine he burned with the cold of his almost dying.

For Nathan, in the beginning there was a glass house in a white room, rivers of food and antibiotics shuttled through plastic tubes into his veins, the quiet pulsing of his own heart given electronic life.

But then he came home. He got fat. We called him Chubber. Our father prodded his great belly as if it were made of dough. He rolled his way from room to room. We lined the bricks around the stove so he wouldn't hit his head. We waited and waited, though I didn't then know what it was we waited for.

The Snapping Turtle

My father leaps backward pulling
into himself as the water churns white
at the emerging, prehistoric face and beak
of a snapping turtle, big as the silver plate
my mother uses for turkeys and hams.

He'd been squatting at the edge
of the three concrete steps that carry
the distance between the dock
and river, washing the blood and
scales of bluegills from his hands,

when the river stone had come to life.
Now, at the top of the steps, his hands
cradled to his chest, he sits down on the dock
and from him a slow exhale of breath,
long and hollow, like that last deflating sigh

my cousin and I force with our bodies
from the air mattress after he's spent the night.
I pick up the basket cage and fillets,
white and almost translucent, then sidle
next to him. He's staring at the spot where it

had been, though it's hard to see, the setting sun
swaddling the river in gunmetal dark.
After a few minutes he stands, descends,
then washes the rest of the blood from his hands
right there where the turtle had been.

I remember, years ago, I'd woken him
after a nightmare: I dreamed I'd fallen into the river
during the spring melt, the water cold and turgid,
running high, running fast, and that I'd
somehow managed to grab the last dock leg,

but the water had been too heavy and it had
carried me away. The next day he forced his breath
into a pair of little, plastic swimming wings,
tied a rope around my waist and to the rope
a silver-painted anchor. And then he threw me in.

The Carp

He leaves us there on the dock to go
and fetch another can of corn
from the house (pepperoni for pike,
corn for carp), telling me to keep an eye
on Nate. We've cradled him into
a little aluminum folding chair
and tied him to the river with my old
Mickey Mouse pole: blue and white, only
two-and-a-half feet, with one of those
covered spin-cast reels, the kind that's always
tangling on itself. The rod's not meant for
anything other than panfish, but then
he's struggling with his line, tugging the rod
toward his chest against some weight.
I kneel down behind him to help:
whatever's on the other end moves—
but it doesn't fight. So the two of us
start leaning back and winding down,
the tip of the pole bending comically low,
so low I'm afraid it might shatter.
And then, sideways in the water, before us
appears a rounded, almost circular,
deformed carp, its brownish scales
tinged a sickly green, its gills fluttering
weakly, erratically. We try and try, but the carp
is too heavy to lift up to the dock, and so
we let it hang there at the edge, swaying
half inside the river, half above, our hands
wrapped tight around the creaking rod,
waiting for our father to return.

The Claw

-Kindergarten, Argentine Elementary, 1993

It appeared suddenly. One day at recess
we rounded the corner to the playground and beheld
The Claw, gleaming yellow and black
in the late morning sun, all around it, a fresh,

even circle of dirt, calling to be broken.
At first, we didn't quite know how to begin,
so awed were we by its size and splendor. But then
Charlie clambered into the seat, running his hands

over the array of levers and slammed
the hard metal teeth of the toy excavator down
into the clean earth. And so it went, each of us
each day racing out the doors, taking time only

in avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk,
so that we might be the first, the one
to climb into the high seat, the one who might
that day uncover what lay beneath.

Storm, 1994

That night it rained ice.
Trees groaned under the piling, glassy weight.
And even in the fort we'd made
from chairs, blankets, couch cushions—
I couldn't sleep.
I could see, in the dark,
the darker shape my brother made, unaware
of the storm raging all around us.
Our father had given up the monster
hours ago, leaving the two of us to round after round
of Battleship. Who won or lost
is of no matter, just that I was alone then—
no brother, no father or mother—just me,
or so it seemed, keeping watch as they who I loved
slept through the frantic storm
that grew and grew until I too fell
into sleep— I must have slept,
because suddenly we were standing at the window.
The world, by then sheathed thick with ice,
filling with a flaring light.

The Window

For long moments, we'd watch her
as she leaned against the bright sill, sometimes
dragging an old ivory brush through the thick layers
of her hair, sometimes dancing just inside alone.
Sometimes she'd catch us stopped outside the window
on our bikes, but she'd only smile and wave
as we scrambled to climb back into our seats.
One day she wasn't there, her window
boarded up with old pieces of plywood
nailed into a looming X. Even the little things
she'd strewn about her yard— cat figurines,
tiny neon windmills, clay-potted sunflowers—
had vanished. That night we took a crowbar
to the back door. We tore our way through
the emptied rooms of her house finding
nothing. Nothing— except the dress.
The once-white dress left alone in the closet
as a ghost. Across the chest, a jagged tear
as if a knife had been taken to it.
I reached out and as my fingers grazed
the bits of satin cloth that once must have held
her ribs, three moths flew from the wound,
and we darted away, dispersing into the dark.

The Ewe

In the air, the smell of old oak and hay.
The weathered barn still stands. Through its slats
light weaves a net of shadow over the dirt
damp with dew. I kick loose stones from the light
while my granddad digs through boxes in the dark.
On the wall a hand-scythe, a few shovels,
some spare hoses, and a huge rusted chain,
its links thicker than my wrist. "For ripping trees,"
he says, then, "Son of a bitch!" and his hand comes up
bleeding. We make our way to where he's penned the sheep.
They gather quickly at the gate, throwing wide
their wavery voices. "Never feed 'em before a shearing,"
he says. I spread my arms out and push them back
while he separates one from the herd that suddenly
goes frantic and tries to pull away, but then
he wraps his thick arms around its hips and
forces it to sit, its back against his legs.
It calms, seeming almost ready to fall asleep. He says,
"She's got the sulks. See, she can't do anything about me,
so she doesn't try." He pins her head between his knees
and starts in with the buzzer, clearing her belly.
Then he works his way up her hind leg to her neck,
flips her, does the other side the same, and then
he's got the wool off all in one piece. "Now watch."
He lets her go. She bolts to her feet and back
to the herd, shivering bloody and pink in the morning light.

God in the Midwest

Most days it was the river I heard first—
fat with rain, its winding path unrehearsed.

But today I rise to a steady sound,
my father tearing oak trees to the ground.

Against their wood he sets his metal blade,
draws back his arms, a fearsome silhouette.

I'd never seen such violence from the man,
nor anger manifested by his hands.

My mother, in their bedroom, sat alone.
Beside her, on the floor, the beeping phone.

All day my father laid the backyard bare,
the giants felled all serving as prayer.

Losing the Squirrel Call

Outside, bursts of orange and red
from the crowns of maples, oaks,
and elms between spruces and pines
dressed in green. Inside, the boy
burns too: an orange vest over his brown
camo jacket, a blazing hat
with flaps that fall warmly
on his ears, a pair of woolen gloves
his father's dipped in dye.
The boy's made round
slipping his small shoulders
through the fat, heavy straps
of his pack, into which his father
places: apples, cheese, a thermos
full of water, spare gloves.
Then he turns to the boy and
lays into his palm the squirrel call,
a smooth brown cylinder
of hollowed wood, a black
rubber plunger as its top.
The boy finds it light
as when his mother's hand
cradles his neck. He flicks
his thumb against the plunger
and fills the garage with a hungry
chatter. Then two of them
set off into the woods,
and it isn't long before
they're finally settled in a tree,
sitting back to back in two stands
anchored opposite on the trunk.
As his father whispers from
the other side, *Time to try*,
a silence seems to grow inside
the tree between them,
and as that distance slowly
stretches out, the boy grows cold,
cold, colder, until at last
he hears a familiar chatter
drifting through the trees.
He readies his pellet gun,
but no squirrel appears, and

as he listens, the boy finds
the sound close, too close.
It's father, his voice working
through the quick staccato barking,
rising now, falling, falling, rising,
the whole forest filled by the
crackling echo of the sound until
I join in too, casting the pitch
of my boy's voice into the leaves,
the two of us sitting back to back,
him facing one way, me another.

How We Built a Snowman

-for my brother

Come on, come on! Run! my brother yells, then whoops and takes off down the road toward Danny's, me behind him tugging on my gloves, shouting, *Wait!*, but he's already way ahead. After big snow for days and days the weather's finally warmer, the snow made perfect for packing. My brother and I are hoping for a fight—trenches to dig, ammunition to shape— but with Danny we never really know. He's up high, perched on his porch, waving everyone close when I make it to the drive. Nathan's at his feet. Around him, like birds to a feeder full of seed, all the boys we run with. *Today*, Danny bellows, *the biggest snowman ever made!* We rustle with glee like leaves glad for their wind. After the sound settles Danny divides us up: Nate and I have the middle, Tracy, Cory, Charlie the base, the McClouds the head— all while Danny sets off to patch together the face and arms. The base-builders begin their rolling. Nate and I keep a close eye, waiting for them to stop, but they just go on making the thing bigger, till it's monstrous, almost as tall as Danny. We have to go out back to roll the middle, and when we've got it big enough to match the base, we try to move it up front, but we have to call the rest around to help. It takes all of us to get it there and up and on the base, but finally we manage. The McClouds give Danny a boost to place the head and face. And then it's done, the snowman given life, and he's smiling down at us and we're all howling to the sky, chasing what we can't see in wild rings around the biggest snowman we ever made... If only I didn't have to make it up. We tried and failed to make that snowman, everything just got away from us. When we tried to lift the middle I'd rolled with the McClouds it was just too much and we had to leave the pieces there, the snowman made but his body never gathered whole. And Nathan, Nathan wasn't there, Nathan was never there, he was back at home, his legs strapped into those plastic braces, those fucking plastic braces, anchored in front of the T.V. I sat down next to him, after I'd left my coat and gloves hanging near the door, and I wanted to tell him all about it, about how we built the snowman, but I didn't, we didn't speak. He already knew.

Husk

This is where it happened.
The yellow shadow of
a low moon bleeding into
a haze of cloud, and, in the distance,
the wailing of some siren, while,
down here, in the cornfield,
you led me down the rows of
those tall stalks bending heavily
under their own yellow weight.
With a little more light,
we would've seen our breath
billowing out before us. But,
in that almost dark, we stumbled over
the ruts and stones, our own feet.
It seemed to go on for hours,
our search, before we came
to where the stalks had been run
down, thick marks in the dirt
where the truck had cut in
from the twotrack, chasing the deer.
What was left of its body
lay discarded, forgotten—
like a sack of rotten feed—
its stomach already distending.
It made me angry. I wanted to know
how many lights they'd shown
from the rusted roof as a way
of stunning it— how many it had taken
the four, maybe five men
to halt the buck long enough
for a shot, and then, the deer
shuddering blood onto the dark field,
the bone-yellow branches of its rack
shining white in that false light,
I wanted to know what
they had used to sever its head
before mounting it to the hood
with a frayed slew of rope.

We stood there in dark a long time
before you knelt down and laid your ear
to its ribs. I wondered what you hoped
to hear from the bloated belly:

the last echo of its heart's fading thrum?
All that was left was silence.
All that is left now is silence,
this fallowed field, the trophy memory
of a headless deer.

Four A.M.

Against the early winter dark, my father calls.
I don't have to be up till seven to catch the bus,
but there's fresh snow on the drive. *Eggs and potatoes*
on the stove, he says, letting his hand fall away:
he seems a shadow slipping from my room.
Stepping outside, already I hear the heavy scraping
as he draws a grid into the snow, revealing gray.
There's not much down, but it's cold, cold enough
that even breathing becomes a kind of work.
My father's nearly half done with his side.
The streetlamp's burned out, so the only light
comes from behind, from the garage, but soon
the over-head's timer finishes and it falls dark, too.
Still, somehow I can see. It's as if the snow
stretched out and collected other light—
from the streetlamps farther down the road,
from the city miles off, from anywhere other snow
might be — and carried it here, to us.

Twin Horses

I wake to the quick roll of thunder
from the hooves of twin horses set finally free
from their little nightly stalls into the pasture.
Their breath mists the air before them,
and even from this distance, through my window
I can see how they begin to fill
with the pleasure of movement,
their warming blood turning to a kind
of liquid joy, as they crest a hill and spill
like twin rivers rushing towards a sea
into the watery yellow-gray light of morning.
Last night, as I lay listening to the quiet
nocturne of the Midwest, a different kind
of thunder shook the house. My brother,
alone at last, emerged from his darkened room,
both his arms held over his head as if
on the edge of beginning some familiar dance,
and he began swaying heavily side to side,
his thick, oversized shoes slapping hard
against the kitchen floor. I didn't think of it then,
but now I remember how my father
taught him to walk, by setting him upright
on the path that led to the garage
and placing a plunger in each
of his chubby, little hands. I remember it
now. The way my brother's face lit up
with that steely new-born light. The way it broke
like a river sent rushing towards the sea.

Volley

A week before I move nearly six hundred miles away,
I'm sitting across the counter from my mother

who's telling me she doesn't love my father anymore.
He's on the roof above us, locking feathers

to the corner of his mouth. I can close my eyes,
see him breathing steadily, precisely, a final exhale

before he turns the key of his fingers, lets loose an arrow.
He was so selfish when I first met him, she's saying, her fingers

wrapping loosely around her coffee mug. *Of course*
he's much better now, she says, looking up. *He's really quite a catch.*

What she really means to say is that time has caught her
and she's scared nothing new will come. And what can I do

but sit silently and listen as another arrow sails
surely into the foam heart of a fake deer.

Part Two



How the Wind Learned Sorrow

Donnie found a dying bird.
The dumb little thing had flown
right into the window. Knocked
clean out. Donnie didn't know
it was a dying. Donnie
didn't know death. He made
a tiny bed of tissue paper
in a cereal box. He put
the bird inside and sang
lullabies. When it got dark
he put a nightlight on, and then
he sang some more. Soon, he had
no songs to sing, he hummed instead.
The wind then carried it away.

How Donnie Learned to Dance

I remember the train-yard.
I remember the train-yard
at night. A few pale bulbs
appearing then disappearing
between the cars rattling
along the rails. Or, between
the cars as we rattled and
ran quickly past. Someone dared
Donnie to stand against a train.
He wouldn't. They called him names.
He wouldn't still. They cursed
his mother's name. He raised his chin
up on the tracks. Michael had to
pull him from the wailing thunder.

Hearing Tell

Someone told Donnie the Rogue
was full of trout. He took his rod,
a bucket for a creel, a ball of bright
pink yarn, and ran straightaway.
He sat by the water all day long.
Never once did he see a rippling.
The next day they told him it was
the Rabbit they'd meant. He ran again.
There were so many trout! Donnie
didn't know what needed doing.
He stood by the water all day long.
Ah! he took off all his clothes.
He danced into the current, chasing
trout of steel and fading light.

Procession

Donnie had a clumsy heart.
Meanwhile, his mother worried
over groceries. How to stop
the ice cream's melting?
Donnie's father sipped his shame
in the hayloft. Two horses
from their stables watched.
He found himself a hammer.
Then there was one horse left.
Donnie held a funeral. His heart
came tumbling out. He chipped
a name into a stone, *Shadow*,
and a few kind words. He left flowers
every Tuesday, but one day forgot.

How Donnie Came to Own a Kite

My father brought home a bullfrog.
It was the biggest frog I
had ever seen. Bunched, big as a
basketball; stretched, long
as the longest of the icicles
over the back porch in winter.
We gave it to Donnie.
He went to work building a pen,
drew plans to dig a pond, but
he wasn't careful keeping watch.
The frog got run over. Donnie
wasn't sad. He let it dry.
He strung it to some yarn,
he taught the frog to fly.

The Pine

1

The pine was weeping in the
highest heat. Donnie decided
it was high time to climb
the tree. He shed his shoes and
socks, he cast his shirt off
toward some leaves, he started dancing
underneath the tree. He leapt
and pulled, and pulled, and pulled
until there was no higher place
to be. He started shifting side
to side, the whole tree swaying
awkwardly. Loudly, he began to sing.
We gathered there beneath him,
formed a ring around the tree.

2

He said he meant to sleep there
all that night, waiting waiting
for the morning's morning light.
But far off at the skyline,
all angry, gray, and loud we
heard the thick clouds churning,
turning near. We called him down,
and called him down again, again,
but Donnie would not clamber
back down to earth again. Then
Michael fetched his father, fetched
a ladder too. The two of them fetched
Donnie, bleeding hands and feet,
right off the weeping tree.

How the Whole Block Missed School

We were pitching stones we pulled
from off the road at the fat and
papery hornet's nest that hung
from the lowest branches of
the oak in Billy's yard.
Big stones. Stones like fists.
It seemed like a good idea,
there, waiting for the bus
to come pick us up. Of course
we kept missing. We agreed
without agreeing. But then
Donnie came along and sailed
a rock dead and true. Suddenly,
the whole hive billowed toward us.

How The Moon Caught Fire

He'd been chasing her a long while.
He was out of breath. But when
the old cat slid into the wreckage
of The Moon, Donnie made
to go inside. But he didn't like
the dark, and the theater still held
its pitch, so he bought a candle
and a box of matches and...
you know what happened next.
When they pulled him from the flames,
his face blackened by ash, somehow
he wasn't burned or even bruised,
and within the cradle of his arms
the cat clung wild to his chest.

Donnie Makes a New Friend

1

He said her name was Alva
and that he'd met her near
the Highbanks, past the birch hole
where Tracy'd fought and beached
that lunker rainbow late
last spring. He said she'd risen
from the river's steely face
and kissed him. How we teased
and teased! Donnie had himself
a mermaid girlfriend! But then,
when he cut class to bring her
flowers, we followed close behind.
We saw him crawl a fallen pine,
to a body snagged and pale.

2

He tied the tulips to her
wrist with string and sang a wordless
song of sounds a river
might use to speak to stone,
as we sat and stared wordless
from the trees. He stayed with her
what seemed a long while, pitching
stones, laughing now and then
at what only he could hear.
Then he left suddenly
in the failing light. We emerged
darkly. We did not speak.
We could not speak as Michael
sent her drifting from the tree.

Windows

1

I saw him, three years
after the Easter incident
in church when he'd run the aisles
naked, dancing in the middle
of the intersection, eyes
held shut, grinning, as all the cars,
all the rusted Ford flatbeds
blared their horns, and their drivers,
all men (except old Mary Connell,
who had come to town for feed),
hung out their windows and bellowed,
"Move, goddammit!" But he kept
swinging himself around,
his arms cast up to the sky.

2

It was a while before
the county sheriff showed up
(he was one of only two),
and by then the whole town
had taken notice. All the shopkeepers
had come out of their stores and
they all stood staring at the dancer—
silent, locked away in himself.
"What in the hell is that boy doin'?"
asked Will Stevens, who owned
the local bar, to no one
in particular. Mary
leaned out her window.
"Listening. That boy is listening."

Part Three



Kalamazoo Snow

In the morning, when you wake up,
the snow has already been piling
on itself for hours. Little flakes, frenzy
falling. Already six or seven inches down,

still nothing closes. No, not here. Not
here. Plow trucks have been running
all night, aging fathers driving themselves
against the driven snow, all night.

You bundle up, layer like snow does,
build warmth, like snow. Outside
everyone's turned into snowmen and
snowwomen. Snowchildren too, across the street,

building themselves out of snow.
You even see a snowdog or two, each
bright and wild and shaking, like ghosts
come back to run through the living world.

Later, on your way home, through the white dark,
as you begin to shake off the day's worries, you see
a young couple shrugging off their clothes
in a running car, lights off, keeping warm.

Looking away to the distant tree line,
you see a buck who turns at the small sounds
from you, the car. He tips his wide antlers
side to side, to free them of the still falling snow.

Two Swallows

-after Constantine Cavafy

Even in the spring sun he's cold. Still,
the light helps. He pulls a blanket around
his shoulders and lays his head against
the dormer window. The trees grow heavy
with wind and bow as two swallows rise and swoop,
turning the light to song. Then a man, young,
maybe twenty-three or four, jogging along
the sidewalk in dark gray shorts, shirtless,
his hair lightly matted against his brow (so
fit, so lean and muscled, posture perfect).
He watches the man, and goes on watching
as he suddenly kicks ahead sprinting,
and for a moment, for just a moment, feels
himself carried, feels the two of them lift off,
away, one carrying the other, toward the sun.

Harbor

Light pours in through the kitchen window.
I'm washing mushrooms. You're stepping
stove to fridge to counter, stirring,
tasting, adding salt, dicing herbs:
rosemary, thyme, a little lemon.

Your heart's a funny thing.
Weeks ago we had to leave the concert
when it started skipping beats, palpitating.
But the music's here again and we
are sailing slow. The smell of lamb grows,

but still I have to lean in twice before
you halt your dancing. The oven's alarm sounds
and, by now, the whole room is gilded,
full up with the oven's heat, with ours,
and the window's shimmering like a sea,

like it can't contain all that's pouring through.
Where will this tide take us? I don't know.
But, for now, we're listening to some song about
the heart's paper weight, the tips of my fingers
tracing your spine, waiting for the next taste.

Yellow, Blue, Water, Sky

-for Steven Kleinman

Somewhere in another world, a boy wanders the ruin of a factory. The man who once owned it is his father, or, at least, someone's. The boy steps into one of the many forgotten rooms and finds a pile of steel billets mottled with the orange blossoms of rust. He runs his hands over the steel lightly—as if touching, for the first time, a girl's wrist. Why, he doesn't know—something about the way the metal still holds some memory of light. Through what was once a window in the factory's crumbling wall, he sees heaps of slag slipping into squatter mounds, but he keeps walking, room to room, his hands tracing every small, abandoned thing.

Meanwhile, in this world, another boy stands at the bank of a river. He counts the tar-black bullfrogs burrowed in the mud of the far shore. Upstream, voices rise and fall—not his name, no, excitement over some thrashing in the water. The boy turns from his counting and waits.

Then time starts moving faster, the boy counting, waiting, waiting, counting, until the first boy somehow makes his way into this world. He's come from the darkened wood on the other shore. He pulls from his pocket a piece of burnished steel that glitters like small fire in a dark room. He tosses it to this boy, and as I turn it over in my hands I know I cannot count all the colors in the light. I try to anyway: yellow, blue, water, sky... And the two of us stand there like trees: as best we can. That's how I remember it anyway: you on the other side of the river, looking already for the next thing to pocket, and me, trying desperately to name the world as the light slowly diminished, the river beginning to darken, darkening, and then, at last, dark.

Riding the D.C. Metro

Fuck, I've always hated these trains:
the rows and rows of bodies pressed together
in every narrow car, the floors sticky from
one discarded thing or another: gum,
spilled pop, a wrapper crumpled around
half-eaten food. And then the people running,
shoving others from their path just to scramble
between doors shuddering to close. And what about
the way everyone folds into themselves, like flowers
in reverse bloom, after huddling into a seat?
Or the way one is almost made to feel guilty for making
the slightest contact with another? All right,
I admit mostly I just hate the being underground,
the uneasiness that comes thinking about the weight
of all that concrete and steel arcing above me, and,
above that, more weight: pavement and sidewalk, people,
cars and buses, and oh the buildings stretching upward
in pilings of more steel, more iron. But tonight,
having been out in the city late, wandering along
the deserted platform for fifteen long minutes, I find myself
stepping into the empty head car alone, and as the train
scratches against its rails, everything begins to change:
I can see into the dark tunnel that isn't dark after all.
It's not at all like being in the cars farther back, where one feels
caged. No: lights approach slowly, and, as they near,
accelerate to whiz past on either side and, by some trick
with the fluorescents inside the car and the curvature
of the glass, shoot forward again at identical speed across
the windshield like stars spinning across the curved ceiling
of a planetarium... and then I'm there, settling in, listening
to my brother breathing in the seat beside me, to
my parents on the far side breathing too, the four of us
a little uneasy, listening to the narrator explaining calmly,
a little excitedly, how, sometimes, when all conditions are right,
a star, having expanded too far beyond itself, can collapse
suddenly, under its own weight, to black gravity.

Big Spoon, Little Spoon

It was the first time I had shared a bed with anyone,
and when I say “shared a bed,” I mean exactly that,
and not that we were having sex, though maybe this’d be
more interesting to you if it *was* what I implied, but
anyway, it felt as if it were a landmark in my life,
which is why I bring it up at all, and even though
I could tell you what went on before we fell to sleep—
big spoon, little spoon— it wouldn’t be nearly
as important as my telling you that when I woke later
in the dark without any sense of how much time
had passed or how much then was left, my arm
all pins and needles underneath her pillow, underneath
her heavy head, I was uncertain as to what I then
should do, for fear that if I turned to rest upon
my other side, she wouldn’t turn as well. But at last
I turned, and she turned too. What then to do but sleep
before time made us rise, and go our separate ways?

Letter to Amelia

-December 18th, 2010

Yesterday they say they may have found your bones.
Three small fragments on an island along the course
you're supposed to have taken before you disappeared.
Found along with the bones: a shattered knife,
shelled mollusks, bits of makeup, a bottle
filled with lanolin and oil, and a few buttons
and a zipper from a pilot's jacket. The report warned
that we shouldn't let ourselves get too carried away
because nothing's guaranteed— the bones may in fact
belong to a turtle who's shell was also found nearby.
Some say the shell should harbor no doubt
because you probably used it to collect rain.
They remind us too that on the same island over the years
they've found: a piece of metal said to be of the same
curvature as your Lockheed Electra, a chunk of shoe
said to resemble a 1930s woman's heel a great deal like
those you're wearing in a pre-takeoff photo in New Guinea,
and a sextant they believe Noonan might have used
in his navigations. But... I don't know. This isn't at all like the story
I was told as a boy: how you and Noonan had already flown
22,000 miles of your journey around the world, just
7,000 more to go; how the two of you set off from Lae
across the Pacific, but when you approached Howland,
where you were to set down for fuel, you couldn't
hear us calling through the radio, some mistake with time
or an antenna dislodged, and though the *Itasca* ran
her oil-fired boilers for hours, sending up smoke, trying
to signal you down, before you all you saw was sea.
I've always wondered what that looked like, how it felt flying
at a thousand feet, nothing but sky and water, some clouds,
two shades of blue and one of white, but nothing green—
how vulnerable you and Noonan must have felt,
vulnerable... still, somehow, I imagine, free. Anyway,
that was it, that was how the story'd end:
you crashed into the sea when the Electra had
nothing left to burn. Now, already they're composing
new stories to tell: how you set the plane down
on the nearby reef; how you shattered the knife
so you could take the blade and make a spear for fish;
how the two of you must have lived on the island for some time
before dying to thirst or hunger... But why this need to know
of a slow death? Why can't they just leave you alone? Maybe

it's me that needs the mystery to go on, but I don't think
that's how you'd have wanted to go, or at least how
you would have wanted to be remembered. Dying not to thirst. No:
Dying— having plummeted those last one thousand feet, weightless
for a moment, into a wall of water so blue it was turning black.

U Bílého Lva
-*The White Lion*

Three weeks you've been here
in Prague, and still the dislocation
has yet to fade. You've learned
děkuji, dobrý den, mluvíte anglicky?—

*thank you, good day, do you speak
English?*— but not enough of the language
to feel any less a tourist,
an invader. Though you have found

U Bílého Lva, *The White Lion*,
whose wide, arcing doors speak
one word: *Welcome*. The good food and
beer has drawn you again and again,

this time with friends who you hope
will share your sense of belonging.
But tonight, your server doesn't speak
a measure of English, and everyone's frustration

builds like tension in guitar strings,
till the music goes all out of tune
and the girl across the circular table
makes a crack about the server having

cerebral palsy, and out of her mouth
oozes an approximation of the sound
of idiocy. Everyone laughs. You hold
your tongue still in its cradle of bone,

not then knowing the words.

She asked, *Why?*

-after Giuseppe Arcimboldo's Elements series

Because you are mostly made of water,
your heart a green flame leading you outward. Because
the compass of you shows north as more than one direction.
Because we are drawn on a map as floating islands—
homeless & divided— but it isn't impossible
to see this bridge between us. Because your voice
is the lens of a lighthouse, and, after dark,
your words change into the years' fallen leaves,
yellow collectors of light. Because in this strange city I see you
in the dark hair of women everywhere. Because
in a curved room you become his portrait of fire,
and in another on the wall, there is a glass housing—
great gray clouds rising in the distance,
two orange lights burning away at the horizon.

Boat, Water, Sky

-for Melinda Moustakis

She said, *Boat, water, sky*, and there
before us, some centuries old painting
of a shipwreck upon jagged, gray rock.
There was nothing special about it,
we were surrounded by many others just the same,
but she was talking about something else.

She narrowed her eyes, said, *If you steal my title,*
I'll be so upset with you, then walked off,
her heels clicking against the smooth,
white tile polished so precisely, looking down
you could see yourself as if outlined
by a single, unending cloud. She didn't notice.
Just—*click, click, click*—away.

She was always filing things for later use.
Like earlier when she'd said she loved spicy food
because all that heat dancing across her lips
made her want to grab someone, anyone,
and start making out— I wasn't supposed
to use that either, but I was the only one around
and there was no grabbing.

Turning back to the painting, I see the unmasked
terror of the crew, their ship torn to pieces,
and realize why she so ordered her title.
The boat must come first. I know. I know
we all want something between us and that
water. But—

The Moose

This moose is drunk. Each year late autumn apples
tumble to the ground all over Sweden
and there ferment, enough of them to get
whole herds drunk. Even the calves join in,
and side by side, tipsy, buzzed, they defend
their hoard of apples, alcoholic beneath
the shiny skins. Some then stumble through
the orchard fence or break a window's glass,
but this moose: he's had his fill and so
he's wandered out onto the lake ice
all alone. No one there to point
his reddened eyes back towards the herd.
Just him, the churning apples in his gut,
lake ice cracking beneath his hooves.

Invincible

-for Matthew Ray Corey

January 12th, 1987-December 19th, 2010

Inside the coffin, I hardly recognize your face.

Its pallor I expected, but not the jaw
disfigured and askew, the cheeks and nose

puffed full of air, thick layers of makeup
over all of it, hiding bruises, cuts and scrapes
that came when you went hurtling through the trees.

The stupid thought that sent you back into the seat
after far too many drinks, is easy to imagine. Still, I'm angry.
On the drive here, as I took the road around McCaslin Lake,

I saw a black mink, winter-skinny, bounding
across the snow and ice. For a moment it seemed
it would collide with me, the car, and I tensed, but

as I swung around the rim, our paths did not
converge. In the florist's shop across the street,
I couldn't decide on any of the arrangements. Fuck tradition.

What business did I have deciding on a thing to be
displayed beside your corpse? What business did I have
in coming at all? We haven't talked in ten years, the last time

at your father's passing to pancreatic cancer. I stood
in this same room I stand in now, I shook your hand,
mumbled some apology about loss before awkwardly

walking the room until it wasn't rude anymore
for me to leave. Now, there are no apologies to make.
You did a stupid thing. Still, I'm sorry. I'm sorry

because I can imagine the dreams you must have had,
I know the way you loved this world: summers spent
out on the lake in neon-colored inner tubes pulled

behind your father's boat, the way your mother
laid out fruit and sandwiches cut diagonally at lunch,
the wild, flailing way your twin sister ran the dock and leapt.

Cardinal

-for my mother

1

This morning, through my kitchen window,
I see the redbird flitting branch to branch,
turning up his black face to the left, to the right,
searching for seeds or some other kind of feed,
perhaps for the dulled brown feathers of another,
because, after all, it is spring, and time for the year's
first clutch. You told me once that cardinals
mark territory with song, learning early a slew of whistles
and chips it later patchworks into a score of wrought
metallic sound it casts out from atop the trees.
But, for now, this one holds his tongue as he darts
between the shrinking shadows, perch to perch,
a red blur of flurry against the unfolding green.

2

You told me your father would steal materials
from one job to fix things at another. You told me
his thick callused hands knew how to haul him
up the shaved body of a telephone pole and
too, the thin metal rungs of a ladder to a roof.
Always fixing things: setting plumbing right,
replacing broken panes, the peeling linoleum
in the kitchen of a house I live not far from now,
your grandmother's, the one you remember
in rice pudding. But, red faced, his breath soured,
he broke your mother by putting his boot between
her brain and skull. Blood leaked there all that night,
and, by the morning, the pressure killed her.

3

How you sat by him in that pale white hospice room
some fifteen years later, your own years doubled,
I'll never know. But there, in the dark, shrouded
in the weak, electronically amplified sound of his
slowing heart, you sat and waited, waited, sat,
your hand over his, thinking, I hope, about the days
spent plucking bay crabs, their claws snapping back
at that large body pulling them from sea and life,

from lines baited with chunks of chicken made pale
by the brine. He waited too, refusing to let go,
the slow drip of the IV his only lashing to shore,
until you left, to find food, to sleep, to bathe, until,
at last, he was finally alone in that dark room.

4

And then the mornings we spent shuttling Nathan
in his caged body to Flint or Detroit for tests or
the next terrible procedure meant to loosen the clog
in his brain, to send some kind of light or heat
into those twisted black wires. Every waiting room
was built the same: a little table with some magazines,
stiff, plastic chairs that collected static and bodies,
and in a corner, atop a colored rug, some blocks
and puzzles I taught myself to solve. It became
routine, the three of us drifting through the bare
uneasy light of those two cities, of the many numbered
offices that harbored the same exhausted faces— faces
that never turned us away, but always pointed us home.

5

But on the days we stayed at home, no appointment
calling us away, I woke to the sound
of you, your resonant, throaty voice unfolding
in the tide sent out by the needle of the old turntable.
Each time you became a woman I'd never known,
I'd never know, singing the same songs over
in that yellow, heavy light spilling from the kitchen.
But now, inside the quiet of this kitchen, inside
the unsung song of the bird outside, I can't remember
a word of what you sang. Only the way
the sound of you carried itself darkly through the house,
how it worked through brick and stone, the way
it wrapped me up and held me until I was full.

6

From where this new rain? The light fades
into a quiet gray as the water comes on quicker,
ringing its one note against the black roof.
The cardinal sits on the sill now, beneath
the green fingers of the big oak that reach slowly
closer toward the house. He's found some seeds,

and a female, too. He passes them to her
one by one, beak to beak, the two of them never
quite touching. Still, when the last seed is gone,
they stay there in the window, shielded a little
from the rain, both turning their faces, listening.
And then my kitchen floods in a flurry of sound,
before the cardinal begins to sing.

Midwestern Field, Late Afternoon

My father's walking the treeline. I don't know
what he's after, disappearing into the dark,
but I know it gladdens me each time he returns.
I can't say where my mother and brother are,
my only tie to the world outside this field
is his tan Chevy, parked way off at the head
of the twotrack. He's wearing his red shirt,
and it's somehow important the way it makes him
bright against the dry field and brush. The sun
grows duller as it begins to fall behind the trees
at the far end of the field. Their shadows
stretch across a yellow memory of corn and
cold, exposed earth. Above me: the whole sky.
So big, so devastating, I almost fall.

Three Raccoons

Below our apartment, across South Leroy,
in the park around the old millpond,
some women string lace and carnations
up the columns of a white-lacquered gazebo.
Soon a truck arrives and two men
start stacking plastic folding chairs on the grass.
Then they're rolling tables down a ramp
that slides from the back of the truck like
a slim, metal tongue. A minister shows up,
and then some families and couples dressed
to match the little multi-colored flags
unfurled by all the trees. Children play tag
up and down the lawns, along the river,
until their mothers chase and straighten
and set them into their seats. They won't stay.
The band plays pop songs, but it isn't long
before they switch to the Bridal Chorus and
a small, young woman slowly, slowly
glides between the rows. There's a kiss,
some whooping and cheering, a few sobs,
and then, in the evening sun they share a dance,
the two of them, swaying in front of the crowd
like cattails in the marsh wind, hardly able
to stand the exposure of their display.
Later, I lie awake next to you. The moon
has anchored herself between the curtains
roping our ankles with a tether of light.
From the open window I hear a crash,
and, slipping from the moon's loose hold,
I look to see three raccoons, fat
and clumsy, gorging themselves on all
the party couldn't contain. I watch them
a long time. The moon has gone when I lie down
next to you again, and with her, that frail light
which tied your bare ankles and mine.

Rails

Leaves gather quietly between
the rails rusting
into reddish-brown.
Leaves yellowed and green
bed down
on the scattered,
flaking gravel.
Once these rails hummed
a quiet tune,
a song sent onward
in their doubled throats
tortoise-slow only
to the sun's tide of light.
Once, other steel and iron followed,
bearing food, bearing people,
bearing other steel still,
all the while coughing
great black clouds
into darkening air.
But now, before the face
of the small tunnel built to bear
Lahring Road,
in the undisturbed silence
you and I name the places these rails
lead: first Gaines, and then Durand,
and then over the Shiawassee, northwest
maybe, on to Cadillac,
near Sleeping Bear, or
maybe the track juts a little east,
runs all the way to the Bridge,
over to Sault St. Marie...
but no, no rails cross the big water.
Where do they end?
Where would they take us?
How far would we be from here?
From here— just
where are we now,
mist gathering to the tunnel's
other face, yellow
falling all around us.