

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE BODY YET BECOMES THE LIGHT

Preet Bhela, Master of Fine Arts, 2025

Thesis Directed By: Professor Joshua Weiner,
Department of English

THE BODY YET BECOMES THE LIGHT examines the mind's fluidity, how it fills in gaps in family history, encounters racial alterity, and what a writer brings to the poetic line even if they do not intend to. These poems investigate the self as a site of interruption, how a bird's eye can reflect unspoken violence—how a candle can capture the dream burning in it. The collection explores how we constitute ourselves through our surroundings, whether that be through the child working at the restaurant or the writer at the desk. These poems scrutinize the edges of dream, work, and nature through a situation of personal diaspora; how does labor affect a child, a family? What does it mean to want to become a myth, or animal-like, or to write at all? The collection contends with escape—exploring how language collides with a fraught world and in turn reinvigorates, relinquishes, and reveals parts of us that lay unsprung.

THE BODY YET BECOMES THE LIGHT

by

Preet Bhela

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
2025

Advisory Committee:

Professor Joshua Weiner, Chair
Dr. Lillian-Yvonne Bertram
Professor Rion Amilcar Scott

©Copyright by

Preet Bhela

2025

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
Hollows	1
Self-Portrait.....	3
All You Can Eat.....	4
Departure	7
Bro Please	9
Mithridatism.....	11
Monster of the Week.....	13
History of My Name	15
Pyaj	17
Ode to the Mets	19
Ghee	20
Wind.....	22
The Taj Mahal.....	23
Deflections	26
True Forest.....	31
Revelation	32
Animal Gazing.....	35
Polaris	37
Forgetting Yourself Completely	39
The Golden Record.....	41
Eigengrau	42
Clavicle Craving to Catch.....	43

Hollows

It is astonishing the flock of birds
that must exist

beyond this canvas.
It could be October

the way the sun has been emptied,
weathered into a vapor

of pinking plumes and
I can only be reminded again

that it does no good to trick the mind
into effacing its true intrusions—but

as it stands, these birds
are vying for a way back, endlessly

dreaming for another likeness
to evaporate into—and I know them,

know their span is not unlike a human's.
Wing mimics spine
both measuring

the distance they are held
from an already spalting sky,
but the body is too burdened—

the body cannot yet become that light—
and I know the multitude of birds
are made to dart

into a darkening gulf—the cacophony
of jays, owls, hawks, and doves
are dissipating

before me—as if knowing
the conclusion smeared
before them and

isn't it astonishing the pressure of birds
that the body can pack

inside itself? A funeral of beaks
poking out of the body like noses

pressed against a pall—herding a storm
necessary to return out of that frame

and into this one. Here,
the thin cloudage

is only scudding its cracked skin, the pines
pluck down to their brown bones—

and the moon grows
tender from witnessing

all the bodies
leaving their bodies

behind.

Self-Portrait

no one asks / for me to be another / Achilles / Heracles / Carrion crow / eye close / to wanting /
lips and myths / to stoop lower / slurping another / skin / escape / alchemy / of a hero / or what
a *man* could be / that this body is not the one / that needs to be / kept in the cheek / to chew /
desperate arsenal / of men / or what men / could do / if they did not skirt / around their currents /
still checking the reflection / to see / if it holds / any difference / like foam on a river / seal and
stasis / neither here / nor air / an eddy / a mouth / trap / whorl trembling / barely touched / sent
shuddering / a bargain / *keep going* / so I can tell myself / there is no war / no demi-god / no
touch / necessary / that I can be more / than this stripping / this naked wrestling / with no one /
vulnerability only / as far / as it exposes / some deeper meaning / Achilles was named *pain* / right
after he was squeezed out / and I don't even care / about Heracles / just his madness / that he
could never be his own man / that my own name in Punjabi means *love* / means nothing / without
this / context / same as any myth / if there were a choice / would I tend to this self? / Transmute
the body / like a beak / tending to the aqueous chamber / and then the cranial butter within / but
never considering the corpse of the same likeness / the crows just loom around the dead / crow
simply acknowledging crow / knowing there's already enough / of everyone else to go around

All You Can Eat

All afternoon the strip mall melts neon
 signage, stalls my departing
taekwondo class and going next door.

Sky's sepia coughs-up summer
 tongue, sun-seared
and cobbled against construction

trucks braking. The metal herd
 reddens street, taillights teeth
concrete, wheels unpen from another

evening escaping my family's restaurant.
 Next door, past *BUFFET HERE*, Ma waits
tables. Customers nest neck in menus

faultline faces fall back on their usual;
 the cash register
preserves more than usual—

Vishnu and Lakshmi stretch thin,
 mummify, flank and fix
beneath tape and fair fluorescence.

Excavated God skin
 plasters machine,
printed furtively before school

now laboring just like Ma,
 surrounded by customers
lifting steamships

brimming marinated chicken,
 unstitching butter-muscle
tapestries chunk cleavered

between teeth, puzzling
 the flesh out
into simpler sinew

small enough to perceive
 that kid was too small
for the register and

should he be working?

Fingers fidgeting calculator—
palm-small key
splits open the coffer,

accepts the help
he can offer.
Last week

one of them grabbed him.
Ma, busied in the back
did not hear the accusation:

*they are forcing you
to work aren't they.*

It's astonishing the good
a body thinks it can do.

Gory array, dogged muscling
to what kicks the heart

so plain. How certainly sinew
wishes to be good for any reason.

Outside, the restaurant feels
like another body balancing

side by side, stalling atop the curb with him.
He cannot put words to the pit. He cannot

understand wrongness, why help is
enough to be grabbed and lump

the throat like a gristle problem,
undecipherable except for feeling.

He knows loyalty, how it can lie

silently as heat in glass, or specters
that have turned to language

trying to understand why they've become
see through, appendaged to nothing

except figuration—loyal
to the memory. Here: he goes on

unnoticing the light wicking
across the restaurant's front pane

faintly waxing and waning
in the peripheral

from a hand—out of reach
waving him in.

Departure

Ma basically lived in that place,
I point, slowing down our U-Haul
in the middle of downtown.

The wispy USPS *HIRING!!!* sign sags
atop brutalist musculature, still
cementing its contracted position
as the fugliest thing in Milwaukee.

She hated working there—I don't mention
the coworkers mocking her
English, how bad
her body ached, how
she had no other choice.

I was selfish
at a fresh eight: only caring
about computer games and
whether or not she would make it
to this year's Halloween parade
to watch me strutting the fenced perimeter
of my elementary school
for twenty minutes;

adorned in the vampire costume
she would scrounge from St. Vinny's
after a night of tears—

a waxing ignorance
of wanting to be
just like those kids.
A simple mythology

constituting a can of chalky face paint,
purple cape and those plastic fangs
that make your gums bleed.

Those days it would be a miracle
to see her except the nights
where dad would let me stow
into the back of our Toyota,
under the blankets, to surprise her,
wanting to see if she had missed me too.

By that October morning, dregs of rain had emptied,
so, our parade of kids were shaking
ferns and thin spruces, watching roosting
droplets fall across us: dizzy of diminutive skeletons,
Disney princesses, and a vampire—
the lot of us rattling the chained perimeter
with our jack-o-lantern pails just to make sure
the parents heard our racket, and she did,
poking her head out of the thicket of parents, waving.

I know it is my mother's voice I hear
when another October rolls its weathered hands
through trees. Nothing stays firm, leaves
tatter and turn inward, fibers freeze.
Half the country away, memory
turns into medium until I am alive again

in that little vampire—
struck by the bad things,
how they always come
to mind first:
the dying

months tearing
another sheaf
of leaves. My shoelaces, untied,
soaking up every puddle. Me
not wanting own name—
or my mouth
watering from the taste
of my own blood.

Bro Please

I say not to my brother—

through clenched teeth as I scour
and scrub my arms again—just hear me out
it's not my fault that my hands are still
sunrise soaked with your bodies. Bro

I call towards the blinds
always dust furred and hungry
through the window and out
the yard. Bro did you hear me

when I slipped
into the tub this morning
and stayed put
the porcelain turned den

just like your nest so I curled
and waited the same way

you kept waiting. Bro what am I
supposed to do when all that is left

is a memory in cardboard casket I
buried in the corner

of my mother's garden
its gate mourning with rot and unuse.

Bones do not become seeds

no matter how deep you bury them.

I pray their life was more
than my mistake.

They had laid huddled—
ears twig shorn leaflets
pressed thin things like roses
in a papery coffin. They could have been
dead already
except their breathing
hurried but dreaming
of some mother, her missing milk.

Their eyes hadn't opened
yet I felt like they had seen more
than I had. Bro, I cry, to my brother—
how was I supposed to know
not to touch
the baby bunnies

Mithridatism

In the piling driveway
a blue jay twitches among the dead

leaves, no longer
by its own design.

Wind striations dull nerve and
absolve sky-crashed wings—and all I am

cannot articulate what it must feel like
to change—and be changed in this way:

cellular fizzling, molecular katabasis
filing down each numbing

rung. A surrender to vacancy
filled by this frigid Styx

spew—hoping this mortal strain grows
to be sustainable. And it does no good

to know you are afraid of everything.

Must do some good to feel disenchantment,
this fiber Decembling: neuron, leukocyte—

ruptures of vulnerability.
Another diminishing, the same

as the piebald doe that leapt
into your garden, its flank

half-disintegrated by rain rot,
in my head it was a mom too

so, I could only watch
it's shivered masticating,

each swallow of tomato a life-
line tethering warm

steaming huffs to shadow, kept
against the snow. How

to carry this dying?

I can only abandon
the wishful thinking—

when I come home
it will not be to a hospital

growing in the house, no mending
needed yet this paradox of needing:

how to stomach
an accreting wound,

how to return to this fluorescent
box of pain. She hides

any new pains, grits teeth
and bites her tongue

and isn't that the problem
with life? Microdosing pain,

each pang feeling the same as the last.

Here, nets of gnats, hum in this sickly summer,
where I accumulate all of it, stomach

this visit like the others because I need it.
Need all that can be and hope

I'm the first to survive.

Monster of the Week

 Around this pool of static and glass the TV growls
grovels its antlers on metal scalp attempts to conduct god
 to no longer interrupt
this signal. This week there can be no *Nightmare at 2,000 Feet*—no
 The Body episode of Buffy—it's been sealed behind black and white
intestines but I know enough.
 There was no monster
except the unexpected
 absence of one.
Her mother splayed out of frame
the silence a twitching jaw accreting tension
until it makes you believe this is all a dream.
 I want to call my mom afterwards.
I don't know if I should call.
 I have kept track of every injured year.
In the mornings I can feel my jaw has learned to lock itself away
 and ignore what that means.
As a kid, startled in the dark, the pillow a makeshift sponge of snot and salt
 not sure what the dream was but I knew
I had to hold you.
 Here, the TV churns its living MRI
its head could be any head a labyrinth of signals

a conduit for noise conscious or otherwise.

Static flows like an unending exhalation,

unstoppable until it isn't.

Whatever signal it is that gives power

let it rise here—bow my head

until it could be any head—staring

onward in some trance until

it is caught, the way any deer is by a glare—

its petrification, an unutterable signal

in awe of what monster this is

History of My Name

Let me begin with your names,
though they will not disappear I must
keep track of them. Names I have
said aloud only to doctors or bank tellers. Written
on the odd elementary school worksheet, forged
on detention slip. Held my tongue
when one kid twisted them
in his mouth, even laughed
with him at first, but I have changed,
I have changed enough to know
a betrayal you two never will;
the way a memory betrays
its nest—a home squealing
from floorboards shifting
underfoot. And don't you feel it?
The container of both your syllables
cannot be mined out by query.
No canary for this quarry
of questions, only hunting
for the right lull, a perfect
silence. What lives in you
can be more than imagination.
Once, home was your names,
safe, before stolen away
for good. Away
from the fat and green
guavas rattling against the balcony
where I fell and cracked my head;
past the calves kicking up stamps
of old feed, where I would
maim that baby chick
and cry until the morning.
Where my cousin
took his cricket bat to war
against a wasp's nest
that swarmed me, the same
cousin who told you
not to name me *Honey*
because of how kids are
to other kids. But I'm not
anymore, have grown past
my hollow name. Grown
into an ocean, islands
submerged like tongues

under wells of saliva. Bubbling up
some story to mend
this gap between us.
What about you?
There must be something
you're not telling me.
The same as this
unceremonious
fabrication I keep
from you—it must mean something
more than syllables. Must allow some
connection to what bubbles
out of my blood, the history
you don't have the breath
for. Perhaps that it is nothing
special. Perhaps it is looted,
the same as that house now.
Abandoned and betrayed
still standing like some
dry watcher, waiting
for some sign.
Let's not lose anymore.
What is me begun
with your names
and it can only end
with them.

Pyaj

My hands stink sick of it—
stick like rattails to rats,
house purple skin beneath
my fingernails that won't come out
before school tomorrow. My first month

and these private school kids already ask
why I spice—aroma abundant
kitchen cabinet. How can I hide
this part of me from middle schoolers
when restaurant slinks into school
bag and uniform, how can I hide

any of this poor inventory:
cousin-creased dress shoes, hand
me downs sporting the wrong shade
khaki. Even the other brown kids
make me feel wrong
with their iPads, questions
of what *my* parents do.

Already prodding something
by my barely meeting
dress code, hiding
hands in pocket—
every part of me realizes
it's foreign to someone.

When I come to help on the weekends
Ma brings me kulfi, pinches my cheek
to force a smile out of me. Pa sits
besides me and shells a bucket
of pyaj in-between orders,
finishes off the tough ones.
There are tough days—refusing
to come out of the freezer, unable to
stomach skinning another
damn pyaj but here,
turned half the country away
I am thinking how close the word pyaj
is to pyar. The single letter
transmuting stench, uncovers—
recovers our shortest distance.

The restaurant won't stay open
forever, a body only labors
so long before it learns

from its labor—witnesses
its tired making, its own going.

When you sent me to private school
I couldn't help but feel guilty,

for debt, penny pinching,
seven days a week spent waning
your body down to each daily core—

so, I offered up my hands, gave the bare
bones a kid can lend to his parents.
Tricked myself into thinking it was just

for you—that this was pyar:
convincing myself to pare

innocence, to rough up soft hands, ruin them
for a little while. Sometimes, when I can

recall myself there, I realize how slowly
I have lost you—how far you've been sifted

through aching weeks, years
wrung, sweat out—

how all this work has been catalog,
dissipation calendar. A way to leave

me. I tell you to be more careful, take time
to rest, to somehow buy more time

for your hands—your hands
all the reason for mine.

Ode to the Mets

I know nothing about baseball.
Or my blood. Except
that my mother and father
zip shut again, lips, limbs, and all—
wedge back into the cheap seats
stitched to our living room, after weathering another visit
to the hospital. They switch the big game on,
crank it up to the max—
until it's the only thing besides me
escaping the house. My body is only my body
until it is next to theirs—an ivory tooth
subsumed by the organ.
My mother's bones
are whittling, my father's blood
pressure is like every father's—
boiling over into mine.
I can't sleep some nights.
I wane during the day. I cannot cry
until I see someone else cry.
My mom's mom can only cry
about if she'll be able to
see me one last time.
I am already rattling the fence.
I can only watch as my team loses again.
These days, on the phone
with my mother, my blood
oars past me louder than her.
I can barely hear my father
in the back burying himself
in the game. We were never made for winning.

In the last game I watch—a pitcher balks the throw
the ball unstitches still in his hand—splitting open
to wind-picked bone it wanes its yarned hair
like an eye first unearthing from surgery
wet dome now pared down to a darkened
beating core stitch now loosening itself
born anew finally free of its history.
After that, everyone stands up—everyone goes back home.

The word *ghee* comes from Sanskrit: घृत 'clarified butter', from घृ, *ghr-*, 'to sprinkle'; cognate with the Ancient Greek word (*khristós*, 'rubbed, anointed'), from which derives the English word *Christ*.

Ghee

The *Taj Mahal Indian Restaurant*
cathedrals today. Simmers hungry
congregations, sweats Easter churchers

and children dragged to the sole place
open in Hales Corners. I drag
from spring break bed

to make my hands reek
pyaj and labor, neither comes out
no matter the scraping. It's crucial,

Ma and Papaji, alone, but sick of being
needed I wanted instead
senior year to be time crossed

on my own.
I was lucky
today, appointed to man

the register, run orders, refill paani and wine
while they cooked in the back. Could not help
my crooked spine shaking at these strangers—

all kind, sure to mention that
I resembled my mother.
Some regulars recognizing me

assured me I was a good son
for still helping when I could.

Ma brings the food out in heaps
everyone turns neck, hoping
it's their meal that's delivered—

pools of dal, dunes of rice flattening
tracts of naan glistening in ghee
but not everyone knows the difference

from butter. One family turns nose
baffled by smell, nutty anomaly
notches question—*has it gone bad?*

Ma, reassures them, looks lost
as they just nod and stare
at one another.

They can't recognize what it is:
the butter—browned—water changed.
Rubbed on the bread in front of them.

Divine snuck past senses, their melted mess-
iah unconsecrated here because of its stench.

No matter how much you believe
faith is faithless. No rewiring
the brain can make you

see what wasn't meant for you.
This sacred mystery of sacrament
and sacrilege. Who destroys who—

breaks what? Religion, understanding—the anointed
naan in front of them? Untouched.

They leave the restaurant. I help
wipe clean the waste, lentil kernels,
rice splats. Ma tsks her tongue

flinging the ordinary heaven
to the bottom of the bin.
Just another thing

misunderstood,
understood.

Wind

So we're wind. It's most apparent here
at the restaurant where the shop next to ours
has changed hands over ten times.

Where the parking lot cracks over
and seals beneath pages
of tar. My parents switch and clean

the signs, turn the half
burnt neons off for the night and
if we're lucky we'll forget

all we could've done today.

One day, the zoos will call us,
that the animals have been asking

what's taking us so long
and I won't have to say we're dying

to see the critters but you know how it is—
work and all. At night we won't watch

discovery channel—
gawk at all those animals

as good as myth, how they hide
twiggy cathedrals, submerge in scabbed lakes

as my parents ask
if this is all real.

At this rate, what is real is worried
and what is fleeing was never possible.
Sometimes the eroding object stands

as testament, hoping to decipher
lessening—how wind can thrive
clean the brain, its duration and motion

until it believes this is its lot:
to stick to the handed meaning
until it is plain.

The Taj Mahal

Today and tomorrow agitate a mausoleum
in the brain, a pang that knows
how it all ends—so why
does it hurt to wonder
why you can't turn to parents
can't turn into something else—
birds

gathering in our parking lot, half reflecting
neon signage and sun, half
way between mending
and splitting. I've seen them
meander, strip moon-length. Span
their abated stomachs
once spun with dreams.
I've learned to live

in this disenchanted
territory, solving grief
before it happens.
A child always fails
this equation:
how to solve a family
before themselves,
how to live among the ancient
procession, all imperfect
symmetry.

When the restaurant went bankrupt
they spent weeks praying, barely leaving the house.
Silence became a house, boarding
us all in, windows and doors sealed
against the summer heat.

Silence exerts its own grip
churns an awareness, tenuous balance
of what lays beyond the doors
we lay hidden—how we would rather
reduce than decipher what it means to
shrink in the bar mirror, siphon into
beer mugs, too close or too far away
to be understood by any customer
or inanimate plastered printer paper gods—
even by one another.

When we returned
local newspapers praised
us and we clipped those headlines
to the front door as living proof
of us, of the *Taj Mahal Indian Restaurant*
and as if it weren't all so close
to pain—all made from this place
where I learned work:

cutting change, and facing strangers, learned
that I would never feel ease when met with strangers, learned
that I never wanted to work again. Here, I became
acquainted with regulars,
gratitude, indifference,
where I learned difference.
Would later learn Liz had been here
years before we even met. To me this place was a locus
stitching together all there was to me, as long
as it would let it but ever since then
the hour feels so close to over and I know
outside these doors, the world clangs

open. It knows how to take
and it will take this place away, even this
attempt at reckoning with the truth.
When I do find myself back here,
all that surges out is how easy it is
to become empty: the lot's crumpling
concrete, the restaurant's signage
burnt out, stripped to its shaded patch
where the letters will fade
as flat as memory.

Here is where people will point
and remember that *Indian place*.
Here is where I am,
the disintegrating locality
holding me in this strip mall

where we left nests
roosting in signage last summer—
all twigs and fluff, let them be
because that could be a family too, but now,
forced far away or worse—
who knows what happens after that.

In my mind it does the mind some good to think
of the end. To learn to wrestle the simplest truth.
It's true, the body agitates its own suite of trap
pitting ourselves against the self
but maybe its toward something—
tolerance? Understanding

why I have already buried this place
and one day, will bury you.
A neat ending
as there are only
endings. Years pack
in the chest, inside bricks
and hearts that take me

on our road home
where there used to be more
beauty than now, more

flapping those red mornings—red bellies
and darting plumage
living longer than innocence. Later, flattened
and turned into asphalt.

Leaving the restaurant
all those nights, I could sense the world,
its slow reveal, it only seemed to change
for the worse.

Transforming and repaving
the view day by day, until it seemed as if
the world had always worked this way:

the pristine, wrecked—expectations
interrupted.

Sometimes agitation is the same
as hope, the intense sensation and attempt

at willing the field or a parking lot to stay still.
To have it all just be there for a moment longer,

to conjure its return like a flock
just hanging overhead
like fog.

Deflections

Awoken, in a dark room
my hands ferry a waning
warmth given to me at fourteen

by my mother—the candle—
a decade-old birthday gift
navigates fingers, drywall to glass.

The flame flits, a ghost
light lain across a stage
of blue veins. A core stirred

for this extinguishing. The tooth of heat
files down into crumpled sheets,
chews out against palm and pane—

oxygenating energy to resurface
a reminder: this face

has started to change
without me. The reflection

rearranges
its herd
of bones

divines a life, unconceived
by this grafted shock
of here and now.

Outside, the storm supplants
any signs of life. Dark scalps

bare wet palms, reaching in
to eclipse the forecast.

In crumpled cold hands
the flame tongue respirates—recedes
into its glass throat. Incandescent
lotus—interrupted. Choked
auto-cannibalism.
Dissolution of all this
flesh—forced to be
spent again, yet

beyond this bed
a streetlight plumes
dream under a willow's
sopped shoulders—also still

awake. Preserving a body
with only a body—
a mother dredging

a foal out of the mud
into the mud

exhausted.

Sleep is packed into his brother
both molding the brain
with a hypnotic pattern, wax gilds

over wet dome oaring the lidded vessel until I
am watching myself be ferried
out of this self and

listen: hooves beating on earth
knowing where I am. a storm
of limbs penned in. eager
to free into another beast,
trapped by their rearing. a full oculus
is borne into pale dust, starry bones
blink in: light left behind a bird's eye,
and the bodies curled below feel dawn
buckle—legs uncoil from torso, rehearsing
movement for when we were gone, and

the constellation of starlings were made
to dart out of their hollow enclosure, ransacking
another day. a flight of static, a turret
of bladed heads jutting through a pall
like men next to other men, all felled
by sleep: soldiers refashioned
by revenant limbs. shrunk from fight,
nerved back to infants, still
shielded on a mother's infinite arms,
rehearsing irretrievable language.

a figure: a wright of shapes, dream
vessels slipping out from wings,
a flock wrested by this morphine.
in the electric meridian of the brain
there beats the ticking of an astrolabe
navigating murmurs, reeling in lost names.
a stream of shifting winds
skins bone and frame—yet
safeguards the mind, stirred
for this rehearsal of escape.

In vivid oils and flame the mind
still paves a new scape—skimmed synaptic
clefts, cliffs of neuron—oceans of form
exceeding scale, so that the sea, still

wine-dark! Foams, drifts a lord
of lies and his men away from home.
Ten days blood sober, eyes caked in salt.
Spit and skin thinned by wet manes—until
he spies land, lost in streams.

Swarthy legs beach in sandy guts,
hunger descends into the jungle, still warm
from a long afternoon, growing.
Stooped faces distort in freshwater basins,

vine tracts cover canopy, braiding
clumps of petal worn on stemmed
limb. The pinking petals
fall by mouthfuls and drown
in the stream. The Lotus—

separated from bud, brought to tooth
and heat, that belly subsumed
into another belly...hiding
a pattern in the veins...longing
to be free...must we appreciate this fog

as all humans do? Unstill
the mind reminds...an aging face
worried sick...this panacea
some vacuous spider's silk
heavying our heads—its woven net
still snagged faraway

beyond mountains and storms. Yet,
folded up there in his dark room he stalls
on these hills, by his godly shadow, grand
and emboldened in the afternoon. He tries
to toss a voice out of the thing, hoping

the black flame keeps.
That the marine horizon stays
afame. The stitch of skin and shade
unseals—its purchase lost
for the next deflection—

another shadow interrupts his escape—
blankets his own, the embrace
passes right through:

a familiar warm, unwavering
from the cylinder of her belly—

unconceived bones adrift until the next
formation—blink of an eye dreaming

through your shape. He stirs, a body of red glass,
cut out of you—see through, and what did you see

months later when that same boy would fall
over balcony and crack

his shiny new head all over the tiling. A phantom
cord still tethered—worry and only worry

when you would work yourself down
all day, sorting postage, fighting

for life, even on days off. Barely days, trapped
in bed—that blue blanket webbed

overhead, a false night preserving
the finite light boarded under lids, fluttering,

a familiar flight. Transporting
a face, disparate,

wrinkling—waning
like the glassy cylinder

carried on a palm,
its veins melting into veins,

the solid state sublimating
into vapor; the spine's curvature

a wick
tugging our cores

from primordial to extinction—
attempting to cast light

on the figure stowing itself
in this dark

True Forest

Deep in this sprung darkness I test my flesh
against sapwood, press wound
to fresh wound... whatever was here

has run away from me. It didn't
know what I was—
that I was not

only the trampling through the thicket,
this crush of bud-limbs—mud-bruising—
but knew I was noise, a pillar of searching.

In this forest, the darkness makes short work of light.
Is another type of light. It wrings,
wedges pupil, greys

in to see what bleeds. But I bleed, brace in briars,
taste the tongue's iron but never believe
in its logic. It escapes

me here, standing at the foot of this oak.
How to put my hands on this thing
and say what matters. Can it matter? What creature does

this—digs and desecrates. All of us
run away. Run breath shallow, know it's not enough
air. Breath, lose it, lose sensation

of this flood-dark, the river that was once
remembered for breaking a rogue
loon-call, breaks my hands clean

submerges them in undertow—cleaves the shoulder,
blades the clavicle—lustrates
the head under. Gives the lack.

Leaves self behind—detaches the tongue from its shrine,
puts out its candle-teeth: watch it wriggle—not knowing
where it's going next

Revelation

This world is for trembling. Scraping up
to see how we are

crucial. I've always dreamed
to be born

to another weakness—another awareness
waking in the winter

of a cardinal's throat.
Its body an explanation:

how to flesh music
out of what is given. It's crucial
to remember

how a world assembles you:

before memory—
when marshes wove
misty nets, hiding
glinting foxes, all full
and bloody—when yards darkened
without warning,

smalled into caves
never to retrieve
their rivers. Back then

a sole oak witnessed
my plunging
into leaves, into
mangling
something.

A bird—all vermillion
and buckling
in cold light.

Carrion inheritance. It's never clear
how much the universe wants of us.
Helms us each an animal

in the head. And no one can
imagine the sound it carves
in the back of your brain—

this work cannot
be that precise, never exactly
here or there but on each one

of those wings it's easy to decipher
some truths:

that this was my first realization
of living—

that I was born
in the somber attention
of a yard.

Tested and estranged from
nascent privacy. And perhaps we are all made
to be useful. And that the most useful
I had ever felt

was when I buried the cardinal,
rolling it into a hollow patch.

I want to tremble
in my own body now,

To say I am here instead,

paying attention.
I promise

myself it's not change I fear
but the one continuous living

wrapped around
the chest:

how an ambushing wind
can thrive

clean the past,
and wings

that have fallen
a long way.

We are reliving the blood
formed between the words, then and now.

What we carry with us
becomes us, shapes the

hands to bury and beat, to know enough
to be here. I don't know what the universe wants

of me, only that what it has made
is worth only my own value. The weight

given to this attention, paid in full
on the minor details.

Today, at my desk, there is a mystery
wanting to be taken into the hands.

It hums, how to hold
and what to discard. It all balances

on the black of a bird's eye,
on distant smoke signaling
a growing blaze—the heat

akin to this imbued muscle
kicking its life out, its last heat
before the end

of the poem.

Animal Gazing

And then I kept trying, trying to see more
than inability. All afternoon spent

biting twitching upper lip like
some fucking animal wanting

to suppress—no
surpass its lack, to reach

beyond eyes pecking blurred fields,
wobbling anxious hotness and boundary

fleshed against my scrimshaw
columns, ivory erosion shouldering

what else but me—me!
And how to be

more than dark
centeredness: this night,

more night, dims the same
as this jay putting its eyes away,

darting inward—utterly body.
Its slack air spirals above

plucked ponderosa, pining an end
away from these farmstead ruins.

I will not think of home, how
night interrupts even the ordinary

room. Makes make-believe
math: how much weight

to place on a foot, how many bones
to shift in my face

today—I wonder how many
jays could live

inside this hollow house?
How many jays could live

inside me? Their exacting
 strains and light-built bones.

Why even try to see myself in them.

No way to be the same
 animal. So certainly

hollow. My body collects instead,
 fills up with dark dust

houses hours spent
 clenching

my jaw, no fix
 for fixation

but this could change my life:
 a gaze, met.

For this hiding bird to stir and see me.
 As if acknowledging a threat or

greater detail
 creeping towards its perch,

yawping hollers, stamping down grass
 in yellowed tracts. Nothing

stirs. Sky tunnels out
 its last vermillion strands,

foreground packs it in;
 another perimeter shuts and never reopens

while I have nothing
 to show for today

or to hold tonight—no one

to teach me how to use this body
 and all this life

stuck
in it.

Polaris

Amidst midnight snow
cars coalesce cold toupees,
steer stern towards destiny, and
I say destiny but maybe it's destination
the mind magnetizes toward, the same
as this aimlessness—the *what next*
of one thought-step in front of the other:
worth-keeping and baying of what I resist
the urge to call lost, and it helps to believe
rather than think; believe that this work is enough:
the heart's fulcrum, archaic leverage
and machinery, the mind's multitude
of wheels guiding us on ungovernable telemetry—anyway,
when the cars pass by my third-story window
they burn with a vacancy, hollow torsos
thumping sidereal sound, repetitious engines,
vehicles of movement that might as well be
going nowhere. But that's wrong
we are going somewhere.
Blood at odds with genealogy
of metallic rigor that is innate
to my body too. Every question

of who we are comes down to space,
how to traverse it correctly. I don't think I can,
not correctly. Isn't that what's terrifying
about the self? Itself. The swaying
compass—compassion
or otherwise, earthly-axis trappings,
our efficacy tied to another thing.
I don't know the first thing about being
useful, about destiny. I only take
in this night, look past
my reflection—believe:
this is what changes
my life.

Forgetting Yourself Completely

All summer, fireflies wear dying
 suns to bed, silky lanterns burden
 mass and minutiae until
my body weakens its own light, chooses rather
 to stick in sickness:

 twin boots heavy my temple
box me in this boundary
 where I refuse to believe
 the body was ever distinguishable
from its end. Just so, it wanders—

 wants the cradle drinking
an acre, billows those well lived blue
 barns and patchwork
 hounds picking clean
another rabbit's nest.

The front stoop's bare mint pots
 the backyard's starving
 thicket, its stewing
pond layered in translucent
 thresholds.

It's all aired out now.
How often bodies are—

once see through, not glint
parched, undusted at first
 like a finger
 swabbing clean the forgotten
mirror. It becomes so dizzying
recognizing the self—

Perhaps who we are to the world
amounts to what runnels in the neck, down
the thoracic where what we feel
collides with our ability to make sense of it.

Where words eddy, language bubbling
and catching a glimpse
of itself, learning
its own vacancy.

Pain knows its own language—
it is lure.
Perched

on each moment like tension
on water surface, each a threshold

held together by force—a reflection
 showing everything
but the other side.

The Golden Record

Try and take some space away—
 away from your chest, its concentric circles
of circulation and caving for a little while. Choose
 instead to carve out this middle: the shoddy music,
the animal-step of the brain falling

on each one of these syllables. Our shared time,
 like we're each apart of a marching
of ants that a child watches, a black vein
 winding back into the Earth. And
I'm here—in the sound of this heart, flowing its red

gown no one will ever see. No one will ever see me
 the way you see me. When I want space
I take a step back from my body, trace it toward
 a core. I am trying to see what it is
that tethers us. Or at least me to this

feat of engineering, a disc of Earthly starlight—
 contained in that record,
I can only think of language,
 the ways to remain
in provisional eternity. I have read

it will survive us. An ark of sound, of containment,
 human-step catalogued, tinny laugh housed
in gold-plated copper along with a beating heart,
 its diameter an uneven measurement of mystery—
the way we were, in our living and dying.

But sometimes a heart is just a heart.
 And your body is just the space given
between the beginning and end. But I am in the middle—
 laying here, head against your chest. I do not know how to live
but I can hear you, against my ear, now, for now.

Eigengrau

in the dark light of late autumn
enough luminance remains
to recall
beech trunks

once reflected
on this marsh surface.
that murk-nest

revolves a loon
lamenting: solitary
successive echoes
flaring into a grey beyond
brittle stumps—a *here I am*

where are you—
neck column chords song

quiver in hunt
as iris rolls

back under horizon
exhuming sheafs
of itinerant fog—
past cattail lashes
on all sides
past the yelps

of soaked dogs yanked breathless
by their chains—towards a sleeper,
languid, laid open—wimpled
in unavoidable current,

a hum of summer
sprouting from shell—
a sealed home
lugged piously
on a crab's back.

Clavicle Craving to Catch

No door
shows inside

the vivid dream—here
night floors a metroplex

mausoleum, borrows
last year's barrows. Wolf moon

exhumes withered rooms: new year
old omens, salt and sickness

cranium an altar
for alteration, conclude

I have already failed

to resurrect
this dwindling world—so what

else to do but make a
new creature

of the curtains—frame
the photographs for being born

to such minor details:
our muddled puddle of colors

arms around another we
like rivers leaking from maps

all unlyric
all rot.

Levis talks to me
in one of his feather voices: how

to attain oneness with an animal
but I am already

mounted above the mantle.
Clavicle craving to catch

light in its bowl, face
cemented towards the given

dark. It does no good to want
the world

changed—given
to kinder hands.
 (My love) my lover

in another room, preserved
against the arch
 of the covers. If God

is the room that stops trembling,
then January is the wings
 unable to enter. Janus'

vermiculate patterns
on each of us:
 mazes and maps;

fickle, flecked; scarred foundlings;
snare, lure: my love lays

like a hand
 on a head.

Tomorrow will be
 hard to enter

impossible
 to leave.