

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Edgeland

Pierce Brown, Master of Fine Arts, 2018

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Ranging in subjects—from the destruction of Appalachian landscapes to observations of grief, from the wonderment of the natural world to the art of Pavel Tchelitchew—the poems in *Edgeland* question the indelible and cyclical impact that humans leave on their environments and on one another.

EDGELAND

by

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I

remember when clouds were less than effort: unadorned shapes
a lion chasing a frog kissing a pair of floating lips

instead of cumulous, nimbus,
cumulonimbus

Doors

Doors cannot escape.
We walk through them,

opening,
closing

one space from
another.

Set to frame —
gone off the hinge:

Sarah Winchester's
doors inside doors

and doors in the floor,
doors go outside

with a two-story
drop in a blink.

Nothing but ground to catch.
Schrei.

As strange as the drawer
in grandma's kitchen

that held
more keys

than doors
a body could know.

Floaters

The vitreous humor has grown
too full and can no longer hold
everything there is to hold in my eye,
so the floaters come like small shadows
formed from within.

 If I shift, pivot
away from my desktop at the office, they turn
into the claw of a spider's web unloosed
into smoke, smog from the coal mill near the village
where I grew to distrust smiles and exclamation marks.

So much of my body has been fixed
by modern medicine, my sister jokes
I would be dead if I had lived at another time,
but still so much more they cannot fix,
so much more, these floaters,
an example.

 They have become
a familiar glitch, a nuisance still,
gnats caught on a fly strip by the dozens
so many I could cover my skin
with their tiny, black mouths.

When I take a photograph, through the lens
I sometimes see floaters over Tim's face, shades,
and I wonder if this is a sign, because for me
everything is a sign, an omen of what once was.

Visit to the Body Farm

at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville

Carrion bird, limb-loosener, perches on the still flesh-toned skin of a new face
turned downward into dirt, birdfooting toward the eyes, head cocked, almost
as if to look into them and expect someone to see something in return
before returning to its post on a hemlock's caustic branch.

It is hard to ignore the mushrooms shooting up through someone's ribs,
the mycelial growth growing patchlike by their hand,
the strange intimacy of teeth hanging open as a wound I would crawl inside,
and understanding that this is the mouth of someone who smiled
at a joke that was not funny, imagining how they yawned,
how they've already spoken any words I have said and any words you will say.

And I turn to you and say, though it is in this moment completely banal
that this will be our bodies someday and I wonder how cold our cheekbones will feel,
our jaws gone slack, mere afterthoughts. And I think about how this morning
when I woke, my feet were cold. I knew you'd kicked your socks off in the night.
I found them tucked into the sheets and pulled them over my feet.
I could hear you in the bathroom, the weight of your steps, the familiar
impression of your head in the pillow smelled like dreamsweat and armpits,
a memory unremembered yet unforgotten like echoes in a canyon,
almost the same shape the head resting against the ground now makes in the mud.
And I feel your hand cold-fingered on the back of my neck, almost in comfort,

almost the way my father would place his hand on the back of my neck
after planting a tree or during a picture or at a funeral, as a way to comfort himself.

Aubade

Stay if you want to stay he says,
expecting me to leave;
I consider staying simply to stay
and watch droop that unexpected look

across his face, facing sideward, eyes drawn away
from mine into themselves, his gloved hands
hidden from view in the folds of his frayed
coat's pockets, our breaths visible in the clay-cold

cold, each one a separate act of condensation
nearly similar to the formation of a slow, brackwater fog
laying itself close to the ground, just like
hours before we were lying with each other.

Later

Later, after dark — near Goshen — on Blueberry Hill
I point out the Milky Way. It is too late
in the summer for blueberries and you say
we should have come sooner, and I nod silently,
think about how many times I said let's go
and we didn't, how many times I came already
alone, watching the moon appear gradually
from behind the far side of the mountains.
There *might* be some blackberries, I say
offhandedly thinking about the blackberry bushes
in the woods growing up, grabbing the brambles
full-fisted the first time I went berry-picking,
full well expecting everything that came after.

I watch your shadow
move to the rhythm of your body's movements.
Sometimes I feel closer to you when I see you
indirectly, like now, with your shadow or when
I watch your reflection in the bathroom mirror shave,
wash your face, pat your neck dry, aftershave, cologne.
I look away when you begin to brush your teeth.
I look at Cygnus when I see the outline of your hand
reach from a bush to your mouth, briefly wonder
if you found something bitter, something rotten sour,
never letting it cross my mind that you might
have found exactly what you went in search of.

The Mousetrap

Somehow, the mouse only finds the trap
once I am in the room,
as if to say *if you are going to kill me*
you must listen to me.

Gloves

I only have gloves
that fit my left hand.
What has happened?
I suppose I could
turn one glove inside out,
but what good would that do
for all the lost ones?
They are still lost and
where they have gone
I simply have no idea.

Downcycle

Nothing disabused my mind of its own unease:
not the river, not the sea, not the shape of saltwater-wind
between my fingers.

I forgot to refill my prescriptions
when it was time, or maybe fought remembering,
barely able to talk about anything aside from whales

we didn't see, bowering their songs
deeper into the movement of waves folding back.
What capacity for feeling they have.

I stayed in bed with no will to sleep.
Barely walked,
even to the bathroom.

I begin to lose any sense of identity.
I lose myself to my self
like a shadow to a wall,

my shadow separated
by cold light,
lifted out of my body's logic.

Possum

Frightened by the possibility of seeing its own reflection in a diurnal mirror
drives it deeper, reaching to touch the night turning

inward on its own disturbances, loitering with opposable thumbs
thumbing their way along the edges of a trashcan.

It's hungry.

Animals are driven by basic hungers, even ones sitting on sun porches
watching other animals move as three-dimensional shadows, see it

still its body against the ground in expectation of a predator or
anticipating pain, the smell of it thick on the air forcing it to force itself inert,

seemingly comatose, staring forward, unflinching.
Nothing else could ever learn to play dead like that,

to lie so still as to believe its own pretending —
the throat-guttles of a broken tailpipe catches its ear, holding

in its eyes that brief ecstasy of light pilling forward from a machine, humming
vibrations across concrete, asphalt-patched, breathing in

through its nostrils an updraft of gasoline.

It heaves its body to the side,
throwing its weight into the weight of the light.

Rush Run, Ohio

In the distance, coal towers'
morning smoke-rise goes up
thick-mouthed, carcinogens
swallowing workers' lungs black,
death-driven by income.

Dogs run on neighbors'
steel leashes staked in yards.
Shock collars keep 'em in line
so they don't cross the property line,
nearly choking themselves
as they stretch their thewy necks,
as if they don't care if they break.

The dog in Shirley's yard
throws a mean bark at the smoke
rising from the crickbed out back.
She's burning her garbage again
in her well-water source, in the crick
her son fell into when he was five,
scraped his knee, cried until his mother

found him, hooked him out,
shushed him he'd be fine.
This road's eaten five people's lives
with cancer in the last two years:
lung, breast, liver, breast, breast,
but ol' garbage burner's
still alive and kicking,

lighting up her black garbage bags.
Sits at night screening calls, talking about
dead neighbors, their children, their homes,
who's sick now and who'll die soon,
bragging she hasn't been to a doctor
since she birth *nearly fifty years ago*,
half a lifetime and still *healthy as a horse*.

Her brothers, husband, sons
worked in the mines,
but she can't give two fucks

about the plastic bag
floating on the crick.
Downstream. Riverbound.

There's a church down the way
she goes Sunday mornings.
She wants to be sure
she's not going to hell *if it exists*.
Stoke the fire. Kick dirt over debris.
Pat the dog. Tells herself that
everything's going to be fine, just fine.

Recurrence

(1)

This year the long summer cycles
into November fields.
Days shorten coldly.

The wind no longer knows its place
when the down-worn men come
to roll out the hay

and forage with worn-down tractors,
retracting at day's end
each to his own home.

(2)

The pale sun moves from east to west
without once getting lost.
This is no small feat.

(3)

The worlds inside a city are
large and subsuming worlds.
I get lost with ease

crossing streets, misremembering the
place from which I came.

No sense of direction, this one,

Fabi tells anyone with an ear.

Is it any wonder I am
tired of this *beautiful*
mechanical world? —

this difficulty always of
having to face the world,
the faces in it

waiting on the sidewalk for the crosswalk
light to change orange to white
stick figures blinking

cautiously — the time I waste
waiting for things to change,
having already been changed.

...later the sky closes after a storm, smell of petrichor rises in sharp exhalations, small, inaudible hisses from earthcracks, the formation of aerosols, scent carried by small winds. Rubble of the barn that burned down when I was five still stands, way back down the long gravel road stretching like the body of a snake to the neighbor's pond. Later, when we visit our parents, Old Man McCoy is on the riding lawnmower going over the grass still damp from yesterday's rain. Uncanny to see a man in the same spot as he was two decades ago, doing the same action, the same belt grinding. He looks up, smiles, waves as we pull into the drive. The wind spikes up. Smell of grass, allergies stir, pollen carried in the air. My sister always joked I was allergic to home. The whirligig on the porch twirls itself like a child dizzyingly spinning around and round to make the world seem like it's about to drop. On the radio, Dr Dave reports clear skies this afternoon, and if the weatherman foretells it, it must be true. Out the car window, see smoke rising from smoke stacks at the Brilliant cardinal plant, some man fell in and burned to death, others injured, News 9 on the scene. My father inhaled loose fibers into his lungs, walking through buildings filled with asbestos. And the ground doesn't grow anything, this reclaimed soil too acidic to let a single tree grow past my knee, save the weeping willow that died last year. They say if you put lime in the soil the carbonates, oxides, hydroxides help restore it, give it calcium like a child drinking milk to strengthen teeth. Later my father tells us that it's *pretty rare to see a willow dead like that*, almost proudly. Later in the living room, my mother lies on her sister's dead mother in law's couch, a flat beige floral pattern that looks like something a dead woman owned, but it's *nice that Margie thought to give it to her...*

II

Edgeland

Fog, cold-pressed, comes
across the fields.

This early, the fog
spreads itself thick as glaucoma,

sloping into the shape of a fear
without antecedent.

As children
we read about Paul Bunyon's

second cousin, Tony Beaver West Virginian
who walked the length of now

abandoned towns, long-limbed,
across the Appalachians

before they were harvested, these hills,
mined like organs for a black market,

our father repeating his father:
even giants never live forever,

these hills
distant before my eyes

withdrawing into themselves.
Each layer of rock tells a different tall tale.

A teacher once told me *the Appalachians may have been
some of the first mountains,*

*located in the center of Pangea,
elongate belts of folded and thrust*

*faulted marine sedimentary rocks,
volcanic rocks and slivers of*

ancient ocean floor,
that world whose plates shifted and would not hold

as nothing holds,
as all things return to being

fragments that are, themselves, whole —
return, in the way I am returning

to my village near the coal mines,
where I learned to distrust smiles and exclamation marks.

*

A boy once climbed an oak tree
until he could not descend.
he reached forward, toward
each upward branch determined
not to return. And when he
sat on the highest branch he could reach,
he looked down and knew
what it was like to look down
from the top of that tree.

I tried to climb down, but —
my footing was off. I slipped
and fear curled itself inside my body.
I clung to the tree
with small, little-boy hands
and waited until my father
hailed himself up a ladder
wordless: too relieved for anger,
too angry for love.

* * *

a sign off the road:
Prepare to Meet God

God here the shape of a coalmine
a miracle
trying to keep my eyes on the road, fixating on this sign —
a hallelujah
a threat?
the tracks behind it weighed down by rusted railcars
that once moved all the coal Heimlich'd from God's trachea
expelling pollution out of his body
in our lungs
black-phlegmed

while God skips to paradise —

* *

Through the sliding door, finger-streaked, screen

cat-clawed, letting mosquitoes inside
I step outside.

The lawn needs mown.
The lawn needs mown, it is nearly halfway up my calves,

but it is too early still too wet,
spider webs still untouched,

ant carrying its dead brother on its back,
black and deliberate, to the deathpile.

I step into a patch of burweed,
stepping, unawares, into

its camouflage and damage,
the risk of this not-knowingness —

sometimes the only way to live is to be
anonymous with yourself in waking fields

where not one living thing
speaks your name,

where silence barely opens.
The closest thing to language:

dull fricatives
down by McCoy's pond

of bullfrogs bullfrogging baritone
jug-a-rum bellows,

vocal sacs flaring
like two fat balloons

swelling inside their mouths
aroused by desire or, possibly, fear?

* * *

pulling into the mouth of Big Rush-Run off Route 7, heading north.
Hillside exposed like rockbone — a dirt path carved out for draglines and
cranes to move further up and excavate. Not mountaintop removal but a
smaller version of how I might imagine mountaintop removal looks. A bit
like how we would disfigure Mars if given the chance. The mud an
orange, oily tint, dirt-dust misting the windshield like a sparse fog.

all those homes bought and bulldozed. No more broken trampolines in
front yards. Barrage of garbage along the unmown lawn. How you learn
most from people by what they throw away and even more by what they
leave to be seen.

all that's in view now is earth's underskin. All these machines, surgeons
grafting together earthskins, will later reclaim the land they've already
claimed and maimed to retain its "original" worth, its beauty, if beauty is
worthy and worthiness original in the objects we choose to see.

* *

The wind banshees into
its own hollow throat,

the clothes from the clothesline
swinging slack-bodied

in an uptake of wind,
mere apparitions,

the smell of grass
folding

into their fabrics.
A killdeer calls. The cat has got it.

Quick sound of bird-cry
deflates into

memory of watching *The Birds*
at the drive-in.

In the attic. Tippi Hedron,
her screams

finding her mouth.
Her screams.

Swallowed by crows'
wings-flaps licking together.

*And remember the last
scream you hear could be your own.*

* * *

Across the river,
the Follansbee Plant

converts crude coke oven tars into chemical oil,
naphthalene, middle distillate oils, refined tars, various grades of coal tar pitch
the taste of acid rain the well-water
carcinogens in the bloodstream

Ackermann, Beech Bottom, Benwood, Labelle
Martins Ferry, Steubenville — North, South, East —
Steelcrete, Wheeling, Yorkville
hot rolled sheets, each
steelwork's unique to a specific product
processed, galvanized, treated

deep exhales from the kitchen table
father's job to tell workers they're out of a job, laid off again, the stress

no reprieve

in a bowl a bag of forgotten potatoes on the kitchen island stares wart-eyed, too far gone
learning to read the register of his sighs
to be of use, a small comfort
full well believing I could be

* * *

Off the ridge, I see, again,
they've begun carving the mountain
scalpel to the bone
strip mining on steroids

redesigning the earth to resemble
an upturned hand
without will

a woman superstitious says her father warns that when the mountains are gone,
tornadoes will ravage the valley

an upswell of earthdust licks the windshield, a sharp asthmatic drag —
the throat-guttle of draglines, cranes in my ears

as I take a turn onto Blues Run, I see the bus

*some rummy used to live in
like a fuckin hoopie*

spray-painted blue with wenge-colored metal exposed from age —

it'd be hard to tell if it was vacant if there weren't a Port-a-John beside automatic doors
and run-off from the hills slicking sourly

off strip-mine sites blockaded by signs,
a clump of children playing in the foreground despite
warning DANGER STRAIGHT AHEAD
for there is danger straight ahead
and, inescapably, in all other directions

*

the past moves through my body
like the memory of water on Mars too cold to move

* *

looking over the river-pier's edge,
trying to skip my river-teeth

back into the river's mouth,
try to make a small presence.

my father warning
about undercurrents

eddying small boys away,
stay away from the edge, now

always drawn to the edge,
listening to my father

storying about moans, the echoes
traveling through Appalachian valleys,

winds-vowels
echo-trapped in and around the hills,

the river's
low grief-laden moans of a lost bargeman

looking for his ghost
like the ghosts that haunted his mother,

the ghost of his father
or the ghost of a child

that jumped into the river or the silent
ghost of the vision he envisioned for himself.

Even now
every river I seen somehow resembles the Ohio,

its sleek blackness
the blue-moist back of a wet crow,

all the loose barges
scattered across the river:

its industry,
onslaught,

misshapen steel lily pads
haphazard, ugly, moving

toward the mills,
away,

where fog and smog,
nearly looked the same,

mixed in the air
like a smokescreen

that trapped light.

* * *

pulling into the drive to help my sister
sorting through the box of my father's mother's belongings

the woman who said

a green Christmas means a fat graveyard

the blue-shag carpet smells of mildew, like piss, the smell of hard well water streamlined with
minerals, corrosive
and in the corner of the *utility room* by the washer garbage bags filled with blue jean rags

I need to use the bathroom
but still can't sit on the 1980s porcelain blue
commode,
the plush-blue toilet cushion we were always
too scared to use

my sister says I could use the
outhouse by the crick
holding the tail of a mounted taxidermy raccoon
wearing a *shit-eating grin*
I give her the finger,
and she, taking our father's tone,
better a smart ass than a dumbass

* * *

In one of the boxes,
reaching into a repository of fear:

photographs remembering the coal-breakers:

the bitter cry of young boys breaking
themselves, forced labor, nonunioned
smothered lungs, leg-scabbed
burns to the fourth degree,
black-coal-dust-coughs, wondering
how long it must compact until
it becomes carbon-compressed lung-diamond
or coal workers' pneumoconiosis,

what we call black lung disease.

* *

limp outline of headlights
out from the road, these headlights, a disruption, and the opacity

anticipating the sound of an engine, the sole silhouette of a pickup truck
lonely as a carton's last egg or nine on the microwave,

my grandmother driving Rush Run, Blues Run, Turkey Point,
hit all the marks like a child at an amusement park,

graveyards in churchyards, the small cemetery off the Ridge,
artificial flowers rooted in green foam that broke off, particles

staining my hands, jeans, as I held them in my backseat lap,
veterans' flags, tacky knickknacks tucked between my feet, visiting

Lem, Billy, Ginny, Lem, Shelby, Carl, Joycie, Danny,
Jeff, Jim, the Reverend, Heather, Mike, Lem

that Louise, Wayne, Wes, Fithens, Browns, Bensies,
Lem, visiting names to bring up in conversations, jokes, soliloquies.

as if the only way she knew how to relate to me was by
talking about the dead faces she saw in mine.

* *

Nothing feels stranger now
than the small light I must have left on in the kitchen,

forgotten, throwing its light out
like an old man's back,

nearly a shadow of itself
a small call for return.

Out of the corner of my eye,
I see faint edgelines,

the sounds of shadows,
Must be deer

from far fields
moving nearer.

The door lets my hand go.
I move to sit on a metal rocker

paint-scraped
weatherworn.

I sit and wait
and wait for the fog to lift me lifeless and disperse.

III

Mantis

(1)

Underfoot

boards on the dock creak

settle an old argument – when –

suddenly without feeling sudden

a praying mantis sits on the air
with its muscular-looking head!
tilted sidelong toward me, considering,
belonging of this world but
something alien I've seen before
its eyes
mirror slick as the jeweler's finished black agate
searching for something in my eyes

 this moment
oddly intimate –
how intimacy always is strange for me
who under close inspection,
by this mantis, by my love,
fears vulnerability's tendon.

(2)

Hovering over Connie's pond,

my mantis swift-flits down to land

on a landing rock an outcropping an island,

 standing naked and green proud

 swinging its forelimbs outward

catching, soon to have caught
water striders, mosquitoes, immature caddisflies,
all-knowing as it strikes and waits to strike,
how perilous its reach —

(3)

near a spigot outside the damp basement

where I'd lay on cold concrete with my dog
to keep cool and for the company, even though

I was allergic to him.

My mother, always looking for luck
in the lottery, in the slots, in religion,
in *Maneki Neko*, in numerology,
in placing bags of money and bread
in the windowsill on New Year's Eve
(which, always, I forgot, let mold and rot until spring)
tells me there is luck
in the sighting of a praying mantis,

tells me to hold my luck.

Love is nothing but fat luck,

and superstitions feed no one but those
whose fears
threaten to consume them...

(4)

...a slow realization
coming on:
this is the longest

I have gone without
thinking about
(after sighting a mantis)
having learned that females will kill
males after the false thrill
ironic little death
drive to satisfy desire

how he might try to escape
this, seemingly, natural fate
unable to regain composure
to flee, too exposed
to imagine the closest threat
is his first and final insect duet,

(5)

watching the mantis
stop
its hunt,
suddenly — without feeling sudden.
Poise guides its limbs patiently

climbing down
into the water. I grow anxious.
I grow concrete-sick with anxiety
as it slicks its angular body wet,
soon-to-be submerged.
I expect it to retreat or flail or drown,
sitting transfixed,
anticipating any outcome but the one
in which it spreads its limbs
frame-by-frame
throwing itself into the current

waywardly

until it reaches a hemlock branch floating
unrooted on the water's edge
clinging to its bark for a breather
until it throws itself
back into the water's windstruck current
over and over repeating this
repetition, small butterfly strokes
until it reaches the shore
shrugging off its swim and the sick odor of muskgrass.

This is how it leaves me
empty, staring emptily
until its body
blends into the grass, the twigs,

until I must work to convince myself
that I see the outline of its body,
see it still, even after it has disappeared.

Wearing the Pajamas of Someone Who Has Died

I catch her running
the dishwasher
empty, just to
hear something
outside her own
body —

— like an
infant's new mother
mimicking sounds
the baby heard while
still in her womb,
sound-mimicking
to calm her cries:
long vowels rise,
quickly deflate —

— this woman
a child even now
in this small room
quivering limbs
like a small dog
in a cold rain
bone-numbed useless
and shaking from
a visit of
lost grief
never really lost.

For some reason the air
feels incomplete
without something
to recognize:
small reminders,
even if they're not
human touch or
contact or voice,
just a small sound,

anything to stave
off this fear of
only existing
in relation to someone else —

as though she will never
find a way to be alone

Obituaries

I think about the nails on their fingers.

Love in the End

Love in the end
is the cat who
eats her newborn
with a cruel love.
cruel love being
the state of mind
in which the cat
mother cannot
watch another
grow up confined
in a house she
will never leave,
only feel sun-
light through the glass
of sliding doors
sliding across
the kitchen floors
over her skin,
only know hands
these human hands
that hold her still
to take a bath,
clean her litter
so she'll piss in-
side a plastic
bin downstairs in
the basement where
you can lay in
summer months when
it's hot, too hot,
receive scolds for
scratching things that
hold no real worth,
learn in the end
that humans will
always punish
you for having
animal instincts
because, somehow,
you remind them
of each themselves
without refrain,
animal instincts

being the state
in which you see
yourself without
a mirror, when
you understand love
not as a clear
reflection but
a refraction,
more catwise, her
love in the end
being self love,
eating her child
being one way
to consume herself.

On Bringing Back the Woolly Mammoth for C.

*Man selects only for his own good:
Nature only for that of the being which she tends.*
— Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*

(1)

Last week: an email
emailed from my father. Inboxed.

*SUBJECT: NG article. interesting.
thought you might like.*

Nothing in the body. All information
latched to the heading.

The article: Russian scientists'
resurrect, no, attempt to resurrect

the woolly mammoth,
try to fuse them with a species of Asian elephant.

So, don't confuse: not an "*authentic*" mammoth.
Learn: *It's possible to write DNA.*

Leave it to humans, these scientists,
not to let sleeping dogs lie,

try to bring back what nature let die,
see if they can later save what they'll soon kill.

Start to reply:
So strange. It's like a

mammophant. Smile. Wordplay.
Trying to be clever. Clever? Cleverness abides.

(2)

When we speak, I tell him
it feels like time has become

an invasive species
breaking through to the present,

spilling out of the Arctic,
ric-o-cheting into ideas, these ideas,

these ideas that excite the mind,
frighten it. Frighten me.

What if it this works? What next?
Compose the DNA text of a distant cousin?,

fuse us with another *sapiens*,
put them on display,

study how we tick,
our kind?

Is it fear that drives
them, these scientists?

Curiosity? Does truth
drive them to seek?

Or, is their curiosity
a replacement emotion

that fails to replace
their fear?

Downcycle

I begin to lose any sense of me.

I lose my shadow
like my self to a wall,

the shadow lifted
out of my body
by the cold logic of light.

IV

for A.W.

Today I realized that your body is a coffin:
the cells that aren't dying are already dead
from steady proliferation, a result of cell growth and cell division.
Today I realized that your body is a coffin
when you wrote because you can no longer speak, how every so often
your hand tremored: what you wrote, I could not read or guiltily misread.
Today I realized that your body is a coffin:
the cells that aren't dying are already dead.

If I Became the Air
for J.

Bird-barren and dry the air

airs itself
without one peacockish air —

If I became the air
there would be
nothing left of me,

moving

through the fingers on my man's hand
lifting to reach his mouth,
taking the shape of each
obstacle I reached,
resting in the spaces between
the fabrics of his shirts on the clothesline
as they air themselves dry.

If the pressure changes, I stir:
stasis turned motion:
I become the wind

expanding the chest below his wrinkled neckline.

Displacement

The tent-flaps are mouths that
refuse speech,
 tell you no-
thing of this place, no clock
 to keep watch

of each slow somnolent
minute that
 passes, pilfers
your circadian
 comfort against thrums of rain,

the overflow of
unfamiliar
 bodies, and,
in your right ear, patters
 unfamiliar breaths breathing into dreams

Beside you, the boy who
ordinarily feels
 “old enough to...”
act older than his age,
tonight feels small, curls into his mother:

watch him kick at the air!
with brief dream tremors,
 as though he
must, even in sleep, keep his
body alert until exhausted or subdued.

This shared loss of home, this transitory life,
mudworn windblown skull-skied-hell.

The Juggler

after Pavel Tchelitchev

Along his back you'll find naked men's
bodies tattooed into his skin,
each one the color of blood turned
to rust or blushed red lichen

grown taut and stiff across granite.
He concentrates on each red ball
as though each one is his last hope
to will away these tired red walls.

His bare hands tease disaster coolly.
Skin-symbols climb into the hole
above his thighs. We watch him now.
I want to see him lose control,

but he keeps this impressive stance
like a Mapplethorpe model
in an Otto Dix *Zirkusbild*
folded into the terror of collapse.

Fallout

(1)

I know no better
world because this is
the only world I know:

(2)

the sky taking the
saltbleached look
of a post-winter country road

after the salt-trucks
after the plow has pocked
divots out of the road's surface:

a sky like Wyeth's skies
numb-felt and absent,
its atmosphere thinned by a fourth.

Twilight at noon.
Ultraviolet spring.
Nuclear winter.

Call it what you will,
all the same
carbon-cluttered mess we've made

of things,
all the same
all the same.

(3)

Steel wheels turn the sky,
automotive rims in a body shop
rejecting light from their skins,

hurtling reflected light into far distances or some nearby onlooker's eye,
cold and necessary
as The Year without a Summer —

1816, the Little Ice Age,
during which Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*
while the world outside

covered itself in
ash clouds,
atmospheric dust,

a stratospheric sulfur aerosols veil
that precipitated a cooldown —
such change, such sudden change,

Nothing is so painful
to the human mind as a great and sudden
change.

(4)

Birds piled — flightless —
fallen dumb-blind
midflight — frozen.

The sky now is nothing but
a fossil without suggestion of movement,
no wingprints, no birdsong —

all sound having become
archeoacoustics
lost to all ears —

mere vibrating matter
along the corridors of
our history, souging.

(5)

Note here:
scientists have built simulations

simulating the experience of
future nuclear devastation

like photographers who take
photographs that make it seem

as though we can collect the world
and hold its pain,

exposing the limits of our empathy.

(6)

You tell me
I'm so wrapped up in the

whositwhatsithowsitwhy

I'm like Chicken Little
making a map of the falling sky,

tell me to let it go
how to let it go,

blowing up balloons — distractions —
just so I can watch them drift

no-armed floaters
in some eyeless skies, looking up at clouds

as they change into another
version of themselves.

(7)

*Makes no sense, my father says,
why people even entertain*

*surviving nuclear war.
Who the hell would want to see that?*

Who wants to be a fucking human cockroach?

(8)

Black carbon rain
falls,

takes out
anything that might survive.

A sucker punch.
K.O.

One swift
lift and swing

ending it all
or, probably, more like

the double suicide
down the road on the Run

when I was a kid —
an older couple

without disease
or, seemingly, disaster —

thinking about how there could be
no room for error,

how their love could be so
violent so invitingly.

What it must be like to be
a spectator of the end,

witnessing as small an instant
as that —

unless we are all already
spectators of each other's end,

having already
imagined it.

Edgeplay

Rope lay down.
The wrist unties

one word
to signal

distress-
ed pleasure.

Call it living on the edge,
rough around the edges,

waiting to be cutting edge
on the edge of your seat,

set my teeth on edge
to take the edge off by

edging by, edging in,
edging out of, edging with

teetering on the edge
of being driven over the edge,

have an edge on me
on the razor's edge,

have the edge on
this double-edged sword.

By double-edged sword, I mean,
well, I think you know what I mean.

Get your head
in the gutter.

It can be fun
to eat clichés,

swallow dignity
like a gag

or a choke
of bad air

or the last bite
of a cake you don't need.

Surrender.
The sensuality of *Babette's Feast*.

Give me the wax.
Give me candle.

Give me the light
I need to see.

An eye opener,
so to speak,

that opens
another opening

with its
heat-drip.

Give me my body tense
enough to relax

like a body
empty-bowelled.

What a riot.
Selbstshadenfreude?

Is this a word? Do I really care?
Germans can make anything a word.

That reminds me. You know what?
I'll tell you what.

One time a cabbie
told me

German porn
after the Second World War

took a turn to
BDSM.

His mouth lectured
like his arms had a lectern to lean on.

Conspirer.
Slick.

Said he liked to think
about how *history*

affected pornography's aesthetics.
Like I believed his interests

were purely intellectual.
I think he liked

getting off,
got off on

telling someone, me,
about his fantasies

Give me more, baby,
information than I need.

My mind flocks.
If I'm thinking, then

this just
isn't working.

Trump card.
Split the deck.

Now, here, listen:
give me excess. Now.

You won't
hear me speak

until I feel
as though I can't.

Thoughts Spiraling after Considering a Formula

*“An instant has no time. Time is made of movement of the instant,
and instants are the boundaries of time.”*

– Leonardo Da Vinci

If time is
distance divided by speed
how much faster and farther
do we need to go
until
we find the answer to things?

— things to come?
If the bed in which I lay
now, here, is, what?, shall we say
point A, where, then, is
point B,
or is this (all) a question of

space and place,
geography? Would it be
(more) correct to use memory
as a measurement
for one
sly of time's variables?

(see): memory
as the definition for
how we measure the distance
we are known to have
traveled
between (two) memories (and) recall.

(e.g.) the time I
first saw a praying mantis
near the blackberry bushes
scratching (legs) near my childhood
home to
when I watched one swim that time

by a pond
in Virginia during an
unseasonably warm fall
that now I might (re)call
season-
ably, on account of shifts

in weather
patterns, realizing that the
weather no longer reflects
a time fixed in sense.
Capture
the feeling of two instants (at once).

Boundaries
collide. Chronon. Higgs Boson.
Particles charging along in-
side a vessel like
something
discovering existence.

(Earlier) today at
a protest on the Mall, mind
of mine pitters around, asks:
why isn't there a
noun to
thingify something we have

forgotten?
Memorial, fossil, clone,
ritual, souvenir, grave-
site, monument, cairn,
tomb, plaque,
cenotaph, book, funeral:

how many
words we use to trigger help
from the patron of (all) lost things:
memento mori
arti-
facts we must handle with care.

We forget
even as we remember.
If those nouns truly served
 their purpose to
 retrieve
our memories, we wouldn't

live in this
state of things, or how we will
sometimes conditionally
 anticipate for-
 getting
things we will have forgotten:

(e.g.) that time we
took that trip to Virginia
and you paused before the (front) door,
 eyes scrunch-furrowed-up,
 asking,
"Have I forgotten something?"
("What am I forgetting?")

Your forget-
me-nots (late-blooms) flooding the garden,
their name calqued from German roots.
 Vergissmeinnicht. Please.

 This fear.
Vergiss dich mein Gesicht nicht.

Bitte. Right
there, on the stoop, as marks ticked
off in your head, I stood there,
 memorized your face,
 pictured
you dead. This is how I know

what I could
love: by how much I will miss
what I could lose. Memories
 gone. Oxidized to
 scab-rust
on the cerebral cortex.

At point A,
night has taken you, and I
start sleep-falling into the
 sound of Tarkovsky's

Stalker,
the colors from the TV

remind me
I'm alive until "until".
(Point B) Tomorrow takes us back to
 Virginia. Old words

 echo:
"Have I forgotten something?"
("What am I forgetting?")