

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Dwellings in the Mold

Glorious Piner, Master of Fine Arts, 2022

Thesis Directed By: Professor, Elizabeth Arnold, English Department

Dwellings in the Mold displays an exhibition of private strife against impositions of public or social imperatives. Whether the speakers of the poems are contending with the strangeness and cruelties of self or of other, members on each side of internal and social conflicts are dignified by and complicated within aesthetic frameworks intended to establish English ideals. Forms often subverted within the manuscript are pre-classical forms such as epic verse, classical forms such as the sonnet, and modern forms such as poetic prose. For example, works like “We Left School,” a long meter poem in response to Gwendolyn Brook’s poem in rhymed couplets, “We Real Cool,” seeks to explore the ways in which long meter, a form initiated in verse to paraphrase Psalms and to compose church hymns, can distinguish and attribute a degree of sacredness to the experience of at least one of the unidentified and troubled figures in Brooks’ poem. Using long meter, I exploited the narrative completeness of quatrains to invoke a distinct series of events in which the character’s feelings could unfold and be made human and complicated through lyric expression. Lyric tools that I found especially useful for accomplishing are the dualistic sonic and conceptual contrasts between end-rhymes and the compounding of meaning results from the enjambment of syntactically complete phrases. It is with this degree of intentionality that I pair subjects with forms throughout the manuscript, seeking, in each opportunity, to express or clarify something about the inseparability of humility

from dignity, tradition from reform, violence from silence, and beauty from the grotesque as experienced in individual and collective human conditions.

DWELLINGS IN THE MOLD

by

Glorious Piner

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
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Advisory Committee:
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Dedication

*For Liz and Josh and Michael and Lindsay and Sebastian -- especially for Sebastian -
- for his family, his friendship, his senator bean soup and rye, and, his family --
especially his family of chickens -- cooped up in the backyard, across from the
kitchen, where Daisy, him, I would talk poetry and have poetry and be sustained by
poetry while they, those lovely unsung, unsinging birds, croaked and clucked for us a
score, and for Daisy, yes, indeed, for Daisy, whose works showed me the true isness
of poetry and showed me too, poetry, as a way of being, who's mastered measure and
chaos, the chord and discord, and of course, for Maisie too, and for my mother, but
not for my father, especially not for my father, and for my girlfriend, who is, herself,
all of the beauty and complexity of a poem, and for Maiasia, and my cat, and for my
students, who I've wrought and wrung into being able to at least encounter a poem,
who, because of it, is now in the world. more creased, more characterized, and better
able to touch a surface from various angles, and for the page, open and yielding,
though under much contention, open and yielding, at least, to confrontation, and for
the word – ultimately and inevitably and ineffably for the word. Thank you.*

Acknowledgments

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Artist Statement

Like most thoughts, mine, as Freud once described of the unconscious, is a “seething cauldron,” churning and forcing up a froth to the surface. It is often wholly unintelligible. But then, every so often, the foam solidifies into something like a word, or a sound, and then there is a phrase, or something of the essence of a chord. When enough of these chords are struck, what I’ve come to experience as poetry floats up to the surface of the cauldron and, alas, shows its yellowing face – yellow, not because its dead, but because the organism that is the word has begun to break down into its fundamental parts. It is at this point when my mind resounds a word or phrase as if a broken record. For example, last week, the word was “whip.” It was in my mind – “whip,” “whip,” “whip” – in a wonderfully autistic loop – “whip” – until the word was stripped of its immediate associative meanings – “whip” – until it lost its cliché. Suddenly, the word “whip,” became to me, something more like, “w.h.i.p,” in which I saw “hip,” and “hi,” and the ghost of “ship,” and the shadow of “worship.” I began to wonder, as Stein wondered -- just how did the word come to look that way? I wondered about how its etymologies, its histories, informed the mutations under which it’d gone. Soon after, I found myself, undressing the word naked, exposing connotations of cruelty, corporeality, sacredness, and transcendence implicit in the meanings of the word reconfigured or expanded. “Whip” – “hi,” “hip,” I exposed while drafting my word-portrait, “ship,” “worship,” until I held before me the very embryo of the human condition, terrifying, amorphous, and vulnerable.

Over the course of my practice, I've come to understand the act of writing in two ways – as a mutative and as an interpretive activity. While writing word-portraits and other poems, for that matter, I feel subservient to the words' compulsion to reproduce; I find that, when a word arrives on the page, it does not seek a stranger, but seeks to expand in all directions upon itself; it seeks to materialize the possible and associative meanings implicit in the word or words from which it was birthed. This is the force that drove "whip" to "ship," and the "s" and "h" in "ship" to "horse," and, eventually, the "w" and "i" to "wing" in the first line of "A Portrait of a Whip." Words, in this way, interpret each other as we interpret the biology and psychology of our parents, modifying with piercing or excision or by expanding traditional frameworks used to perceive the world and ourselves. The existential crises of language, running parallel to our own, that, to me, carries the greatest sense of urgency. Words themselves act, meditate, deliberate, and contend with governing systems. In writing, I discovered that words, themselves, strive, are themselves alive.

“After all, the natural way to count is not that one and one makes two but to go on counting by one and one....One and one and one and one and one. That is the natural way to go on counting. Now what has this to do with poetry. It has a lot to do with poetry.”

From “Poetry and Grammar” by Gertrude Stein

Praise #7

Make no mistake: there was war
between them; along the marshland:

craters of the street dark & flooded
with wet soot & cigarette buds

dug up by the hefty construction workers;
scrawny neighborhood boys, ash & open wounds

at the elbows, shoot hoops. They break through
the plaster sturdiness of each other

– some, with deception, flickering
in and out of appearance, shifting

in one direction with the ball,
and then another. Across the street,

brick masons climb the ladders' buried rungs
as the boys shoot into the reddening darkness.

blood & gold clashes over the row homes;
sometimes, at tremendous risk,

one makes an impossible leap
over the rim of the milkcrate – where strung

along the pole, dead boys' hung
shoes strings drift on the phoneline.

The coming of night slims the horizon
over them; the light glitches & dulls

the gleam of the heavens, Pegasus still
falling, & billowing out into the ether,

one of them yells, *Kobe, Kobe*, & another like the great
Matumbo, wags, "not in my house,"

striking the ground, spreading his limbs large
across the marsh as the almighty gods

of the NBA, "No, no, no! None of that
in my territory."

Gypsum smoke rises
from excavated lots, the empty lots

where drillers drill a cavern, yet
emerge, almost miraculously, steel

high-rises, full plush elm-lined walks, simply
following, I suspect, the print

guidance of an architect, but none ever knowing
the closely crafted form

of Phidias' *Athena*, never
knowing, simply, the immovable

arms of Atlas – nothing of the nature of a god's
need to erect an object in his own image.

Hard hat. Heads down. They are mechanically
forking a fence there, a wall here,

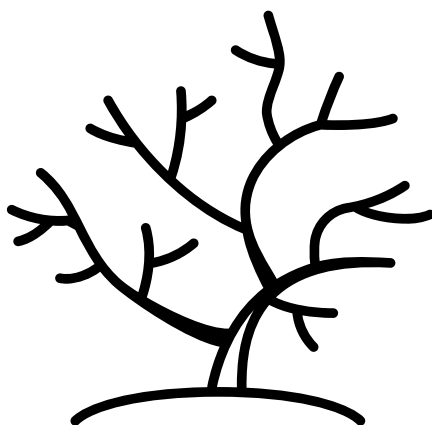
between themselves and the boys who
playing maybe a little too rough,

run right into the netted
wire, or when tired, rest

there, like pigeons, those failed doves
of the Columbidae –

bleating songs of dissonance
into the carnal autumn sky.

Forms & Formations



A Portrait of a Gold-link Chain

Great material of this kind requires mastery, requires great digging, yes, a great digger, and a heavy, well-stropped shovel. It purports the need for a good licking, a pounding and beating to leaf, or the material portends a raking, a grinding, a heaving. A poor man is the fault of dull tools. Poor man, empty, empty tool. Clip. Murderous. Heaving. Beat and stroke the material until good and wide, yes, until the pores of all good glister loosens empty. This is how, in a line-up, we identify a black surface. You point and pound until a black surfaces or until you are, and this, you and I have heard, this wonderful syncopation – pound, stop, pound – the sound of metal of yanked chains falling to the ground – the static ricocheting – the clang of “chain” and “gang” and the silenced ã, the elongated yelling in between. The ricocheting is of the dissonance in the old riddle or of the older silence, or of the body which, for this kind of material – again – you must, must, must know the root; in fact, tubed in a canal of sin, the skin is the bark of the old chopped log, still lit and popping, whipping – as the digging goes – still, beneath the Poplar tree – beating gold leaf, quick, hush. Hush goes the ash – for the gold links and chain gangs on the sopping, well-fed grass.

A Portrait of a Brick of Cocaine

And still: not to part, but to oar – as herring gulls oar air & the ocean's white crest,
wrestling with the wind splits the tar-feathered wings from the white supple breasts.

A Portrait of a Bird

To whip up a bird is to invoke only the nature of flight— or freedom —or to simply prefer the very form of fright—that is, to thresh, to writhe, to rock, rock gently, my love, the dust to rock, until, finally, the hardened core overcomes its shell, like, perhaps, the wet of rot; and then behold! a ridged, wretched, asymmetrical six-sided mold! Like a diamond, say, or like the metamorphic garnet! Dynamic in its disintegration; broken, &, so, many. It is brokenness, itself, through which a spectral light reflects, and because broken, the light refracts, and by then, the angelic fog of the crack-rock will set: this simple kind of bird, whipped up and beset – so, so unlike the swan – from the very cages of its breasts begets, despite those discordant, butchering blades of light, a two-toned, lonesome duet.

A Portrait of a Whip

A riddle: what, my son, yields to a reign, a rod, and a bridle? An exercise as this requires stray & lawless thought. Dream and wake. Dream, and one day, you will wake to find yourself under the spell of a *Dawn*, a *Flying Spur*, or a *Wraith*. Quick, clasp the reigns and pull; clasp and straighten yourself along the bridge arcing over the lake of fire. You must choose, today, a path; you must choose, son, to go forward or froward. If the way is the light, the light, soon, will change. Just lift the hood and look, briefly, at the rainbow dissolved inside the oil; just feel, innocently, for the rear and lift the skirt. Inside, as is clear, is dark; inside, you understand, passes the light and out comes a shaft, fractures the light to pave a crooked, hoodlum path. You must choose, now, a conduct –lest the conductor cues the horns and, thus, the err or error of accident sounds – lest – oh, god! – a scratch.

A Portrait of the Gutter

A portion of the trauma is in the bowels. Take of only the stool and tug. A poor gutting is oft at the rugged fault of the utter: You top rate, low rung motherfucker, you pit thug, you guttersnipe sniper, you hard “r” in “rope,” “truck,” “rut,” you rundown and trot off motherfucker, you pretty – aint no glitz if aint no grit – mother, you grimy, you know talkin’ bout the fire only turns the coal, you know the noise of chains sweeter than whatever the dead man know, you know the code we live by, and that every man has a price when them decrepit bricks don’t sell: or to this, you might say, is at the other end of fault, at the foggy, impenetrable liquid, running deep, deep hardening thing. And that’s usually right before they note – the doctors – hovering over the cold prosection table, the blood flooding in the peritoneum, but somehow, this time, they’d forgotten to unhinge the tube streaming embalming fluid and got -- instead of a life-like corpse – what we call art or human artifact.

A Portrait of the Mud

Porcelain were the grounds for the theater. And appropriate – would we say – was the off-red of the matador's apron? Or – more appropriately – we might say theomorphic – theomorphic, the churning of the mule. Or, maybe, it would be better to say that it is solely the costume that makes the muleteer; so quick! backstage left and prune, prurient, the velvet cloth and that faux but fatal metal; prune quick, good Faust, the plastic jewelry, before the pure farce act is over and the stage runs empty, and the crowd, leading and flagging beyond the apron runs empty. Prune, yes, is what you need, a good, cleansing prune, and a rounded tablespoon of ground ginger.

A Portrait of the Distorted Fence

of a fence: the thesis is clear that the first line of defense that Theseus issued was the long, hot iron solder. This is what we'd otherwise describe, in classical management theory, as a branding, yes, a flesh eating, scolding branding into the thick, Amazonian thews: slip, fall, and a cold case – that is, a damn good, piss poor framing: And the first line must have been something to the effect of: Lo! Rid the theater rows. For, now, we have seized the people's court and offer, not thorns, but dust. We have fared far from the stage's pillared towers to the derelict, poor, demanding, yes, as it is our right to demand, the porcelain floor and a fence, which makes a still, neatly boxed neighbor. And the argument proposed that the stakes raised by the issue were sharp and had, often, impaled the manes of the mares, frothing blood-pus, neighing and gnawing their way through the fence. The census remains: they simply couldn't turn a plow, nor a hoe into hooves. This condition portends a foreshock and then, a groundbreaking forklift, or portends the dimming of the dark juju jive chime and charm for the old theorbo-like lilt of brooding fens and ferns, who weave scrapped skin and hair into nests, safe above the claw – which we, overtime, ascertained, also broods, and often disproportions the fowl therapsid scales from the fur. And upon this finding, it had become clear why the naked shells were cracked, and why there had been vicious crabs clawing, to their neighbor's death, up the pit: and as any scholar worth their salt would conclude – you can't take a crab – or a mare, for that matter – from the dirt, but you can apply a scolding; a long, soldering steam: for a good fence, rotting, bent, and rusting, makes, still, a neighbor who, if he must unhitch himself, must do so with a spirit of fraternity or fratricide. There it is, strong mule of the mesh, a clearing! Now let us, all together, set forth, first with a few lashings, a frap of the frayed rope; let us sail.

A Portrait of a Brick of Cocaine

Almost inevitably, from the trap came a trapping – a stiff white, powder. Or, a wild, uncontainable power – a blackness the substance of cave walls, and their terrific captures: those charcoal stamps of loosed stock mules, in the rock, stampeding through a pasture.

A Portrait of a Chicken

Quite frankly, it portends nothing other than itself: a deflated, red cut-throat, a stiff, insouciant cock. cut and portioned inside the bad, bad slaughter-farm, rats still scurry around the slop-bucket; and disproportionate, its style, when sawed, is something like white or raw, like a weather-worn cutlet – what it means to sell hard – to sell something of war-copper, a paragon or parallax of ruin – a brick of sorts. Which had to have been why the D.E.A agent wrote, when he wrote, “packed & sealed for distribution.” But anyone could become a warrior for luxury and lure, or march through the lore and hook of its portentous buck and wing. Anyone could be totally dazed by it, the rouge ravenous claw, that funky, self-conscious shuck, that decaying groovy buck, that brown and caw that sounds, when steady enough, like the tenor of tin, or the clamorous song of the Sirens.

A Portrait of a Set of Grillz

Euro-cut diamonds, freshwater pearls: a mouth is part mine, part brackish water crest; downward slope – an Icarian fall! –and the mid-evening tide’s unrest. Or, in the red dawn rising, spreading, as a scar, where a shadow bends a path of light, it is wildebeest’s scruff, wrung in the jaws of a wild dog, thrown the bend of a hill. On one side of the mouth, a desert eagle piping, on the other, a fisherman casting his trawl, and everywhere else, in the middle, a tundra wilderness sprawls – where Hercules, panicked and lost, can’t find the Icarian shore.

A Portrait of a Word

In the beginning, there was the Word, and within a word are many characters. This, surely, will frustrate any man of letters. He will soon find that each word fosters – if Oriental – a vibrant and unified community. Or – if Anglo-European -- the melancholy and mania of Undifferentiated Schizophrenia. *Word?* Word, son. And every character has, at its core, a baseline -- in layman's terms, a faith, in secular terms, a safe-word. And from this baseline, the cold and rigid limbs of a character reaches beyond itself, freeing an eternal charge – like the Black that frees the starlight from the star – or that binds the wings of the starling to the night. So, every word rages against the sentence, every word is convict or conviction – a word, then, is an attempt at grace, every word – wait for it, my nigga – is a messiah.

Parade

Every morning, without fail, a sparrow perches on the gutter of my mother's home – my childhood house – and whistles to the reach of the morning sun's stretch – what she calls *miracle*, but what now is just routine. Praise be this body that rises, too, in the morning for no good reason, except routine. Blessed is the blood that eats of itself – the self-devouring cells self-sustained. I'm still young and, as my mother might call it – living in sin – skinning myself bare in the basements of gay-clubs that are overwhelmed by shame and those turning-away from shame, and we all rejoice together, in the fire of each other, if not later in heaven. *We give our whole lives every day*. Death sizes me up like the shade cast down by my shadow. I do not recall my mother. She is not behind me. So, I masquerade as an inhabited version of myself, and become one with the strangers of the world – I talk to strangers, and fuck the strangers, and open my mouth under the curved necks of their showerheads – “And just who the hell do you think you are,” my mother might say, but I, not knowing who I am, but what I do, parade as if I was raised by the warmth of the morning sun, and not in the desert, as if I had not been waiting all my life for just one low-hanging storm.

Fragments (An Elegy for Toni Morrison) #3

Above, beats the wings of rooks on the roof – metallic & seeming to absorb the last light of distant stars. The texture of the day, thick, humid, the air seeming to take back its grace. And, the crows do not caw. No. There is no alarm to sound; there is no folk or song to shape alarm. There is only the wind and the weathervane, restless atop the church spire; notes of chimes in discord clinging to the hook of our porch awning. No, no sure chime or charm. No one burdened black with angle-wings. No young passerby, tall, dark – though cherubic –reaching anxiously, upon finally seeing himself in the reflection of his wings, for vine & cloth. Usually, morning lifts its veil & crafts a form of the hollow just beyond the creek – stropping the bald limbs, brightening patches of green. But today, fog. Today, rain, falls or collapses – depending on if he, who is drowning, uses grief or grace. Slits of lightning fracture the sheet of clouds. My god, the very greyness which held us, which, in the background, gave definition to our flesh is broken. Toni, what to make of the flare of light kept in the feathers of crows? Toni, how to salvage? How, in violent wind, to scavenge the fallen fruit of the earth. How to build on a ground growing barren and flooded, to sieve the water from the wood from the carrion tapping against my attic window. Toni, I cannot swim.

Translations



Myself: Yourself #1

After “Me, Myself, You, Yourself” by Morisseau-Leroy

Me, myself, you, yourself – they, themselves
ourselves – our cells – vast, dark energy within,
what seems one global sphere gaining
in on another –
 or bridging the distance – when I say “I,”
I mean “we” – myself, ourselves – we all – all of us
age old, ugly, & infantile – withered
by the dry indifference from a people
dismembered – now, vulnerable – we are
up in steely arms
 as an ill, poorly nursed child.

Mortuary #1

After "Corpse-Washing" by Rainer Maria Rilke

Under the fallen dust of an old dimming light,
the hard work of death overcame them
& mysterious as a shadow within the dark blood
tones of dusk there it was — the mark of death

on the body — stone-stiff musculature marble-
hued flesh against the table, & then —
the final relief, the body's release of breath —
that strange sigh of surrender to whatever was &

whatever was to come. Certainly, this bold act
of surrender threatened the morticians —
those brave masters of death —who, then, set
their trembling hands upon him, & worked faster,

one mortician, with bare hands, wringing the stone-
like figure to a mold. The others, with primal hunger,
carved him out with teeth of saws, with suture wire,
& fed him embalming fluid through tubes.

All morning, they worked that way, golden shafts
of light falling through the cellar's awning window,
shadows jolting as fish in the wallpaper's net of pattern,
one body finally forming, all the rest forming against.

The Final Meeting #1

After "Song of the Last Meeting" by Anna Ahkmatova

Trembling, my small bestial heart grows cold,
my soles along the dust road light,
& struggling against my foolish, trembling flesh, I wrench
my left-hand glove on my right.

There seems, still, so many steps left ahead,
But I know the wooded path ends midway, at the sprawl of weeds,
& all through the Elm-lined walk sings autumn's requiem:
Fall now, Beloved, as from the dusted boughs falls the still-florid leaves

rusting quickly under the brute force of time –
that hungry beast which stalks all that trembles in the wind.
& to its call, I respond: Darling. Oh, Darling,
let us be joined by the promise of death and suffering.

This, our meeting, our final song:
long down the wild dust road, night's curved darkness forms
everywhere around the house but the bedroom window
where the steady, indifferent flames of jaundiced candles burn.

The Stranger #1

After Mistral's "The Foreigner"

The old wise woman, who speaks
violent lashings -- thrash & drag
of waves, of waters that seethes & thrusts
forth strange seaweed, strange sand
her words -- the force
of prayers -- spread
thin, mist amid clouds veiling
a god -- now, she is
weatherworn, withering as if dying.

In Eden, which had vined & sprawled
to a desert-wilderness, she plotted
cacti & picked weeds; from dead roots
broke through dry, heaving air
& rose, as the sun, glowing
with love, with whitening passion

that never sought to justify itself
& if it had, would seem, to us, a strange sign
staked to map some other, uncharted star.

Long live, long live the old wise woman
among us for 80 years, though seeming always
to be just arriving; winded, she spoke
the howling low game-songs of
wildfowl & fauna. So yes, yes we know
she will die someday,

at the core of us, great aching
in the dark of night
with only her legacy as pillow,
of a death quiet & foreign.

Untitled #1

After *Gorée île baobab* by Tanella Suzanne Boni

Perhaps, all the good spirits have simply gone
the full length of the blood
sopped roots of Ivorian
cocoa fields – have dissipated
into a too meek breeze
bending dark leathery skin
of tamarind leaves from which
I pluck fruit & give
to marked beasts feeding on the grass.

Perhaps my hope, as a scythe, drags
forth the harvest of hope, or lifts, as a prayer
through clouds of ash where I seek fire
&, in the dark land of shadows, dignity
for all flesh torch-hardened & damned.

When the blood tones of dusk blurs
the wild & that faint line which parts the sea
from the sky, you will never see what I see

until you have seen the foolishness of man.
Through the mercy of the slaughtered spirits

sown in this island, I am born again –
For your vision is not scripture,

but, instead, the monstrous sea which thrusts
infinite verse by my feet.

The Catullus Translations

Catullus, LXXXV #3

& you, my love, are troubled
simply by the impossibilities of knowing:
why hate & why love you
ask. But, truth is, my Lesbia, it ain't that simple,
aint like I can know, can't know, no
more than no one else at least, how to knead
a sure & graspable sense
of what goes on inside. Can only sense
it there -- just there, big & arresting --

like the Alp wilderness, I can't fathom
why, at the force of winter, spring water yields
along the mountain's ridged cliffs, why
the red blush of Birch leaves is fairest
before the fall, or why, I, even, myself, give
under the scent of log-fire burning in the cold.

Catullus, XCII #6

My love curses me
out in public: my wild love
bucks, hollers, carries on. It's like she's hell bent
on making a damned fool of me.

God, my Lesbia, she sure does love me,
she does, she really does. But, how
do I know this god-damned wretched love
to be true? Well, because I curse & because I pray

for deliverance, only to be lowered
again to my knees, just to find myself
at once, going straight
to hell for her, thrusting fast inside her

thrush-like whirl & whip; her claw
clung to the dark inside the fault
lines of whatever deeply cratered alley,
whatever densely peopled street.

& yes, goddammit, this is love,
'cause I'd be damned
if this ain't what love is; my love,
I love you. I'll be damned.

Catullus, VII #1

*Well at what cost, then, how much, how many
kisses, you ask, would be enough, more
than enough?* My Lesbia, whom I love – boundless. Kiss me
boundless as the dessert sand, as what lies between
the thick torrid heat, the wet squalls pealing
down from Jove & the dark sacred tomb
of the tongue-tied Battus;
Or kiss me as much as the heavens
that, in the stillness of night, watch
our secret sacred love – that could be
enough, my Lesbia, that could be enough to
deliver me
from my madness; kiss me more
than all the eyes looking down on us
can count, more than their lashing
tongues can curse.

Catullus, To Lesbia, About Kisses #8

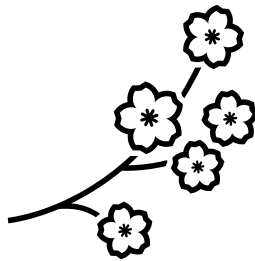
Break loose yourself my Lesbia & love
& tender, no more, the prudish or the stiff
sermons smoldering forth from the pulpit
for worth greater than a lost coin.

After all, the sun will still rise & fall; for us,
when the light dwindles & darkness dulls the toll
of the shingled steeple's clock, night, alas,
will be one, eternal.

So, give me kisses, a thousand, my Lesbia,
give me kisses, one-hundred. Kiss me
one-thousand, then another & another
one-hundred, then another one-thousand & let us stir

ourselves into a blur, until a blur
blinds the eyes of our assassins
& we are known as purely
a spur of kisses.

Forms & Regularities



We Left School #4

after Gwendolyn Brooks

I missed my bus. It hissed at me.
The wheels spat up the rain.
So, I laid there through the night
as sewage filled the drain.

I felt a murder, glossed in black
aweigh above my head,
but it was just a plastic bag
from the Poppy store, instead.

A Septa driver leisured by.
I thought to beat him dumb.
God, damn this lawless, rigid world
that dulls out hymn to hum.

Raccoon in the Gable #4

The bullets in your feral eyes,
aimed behind that burglar's mask
you wear so—what?—they think you bad?
To dare them savage strays despise

your twisted snout, your rugged mouth,
those bandit hands, your calloused touch
that built that ghetto up from dust
to make them stray cats pussy out?

Dammed behind eroded wood,
& toiling through its mired tracks,
you shift & crook. In the net of cracks,
you're as the ò displaced in hood.

Lamb of the Udder #2

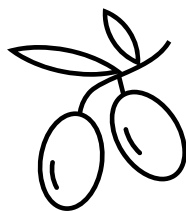
Behind the hedge, the shepherds culled the rams.
as weary ewes, worn dull & flattened by that bloody stain
of onerous labor fed wearily on the grass, the sod
sodden, still, from end-of-winter rain.

Then, mobs of lambs – as weeds – began to spread
around the ewes, and stalked behind their hinds;
and struck the swollen udders till they bled,
til' those mama ewes just fell upon their sides.

And that is how my Mother fell for us,
Father – culled into that cinder cell.
When gas was cut & the vents caked with dust,
She siphon fire from the wells of hell.

Of sacrifice, there's still so much to learn,
to give of love as giving ash to urn.

Forms & Irregularities



Buck #8

Night. A faint light glitching overhead.
In the dark, we see each other, first,
in passing; then, I feel it
settling, the terrifying inertia
of his eyes – a static beam of amber
in the distance. I nod, a simple
acknowledgement, but he stands there,
unmoved. Stubborn & locked, I cannot wrestle
my bike off the rack. He begins pacing,
back & forth, forward & back
like the regional line, roaring over the rugged faces
of ghetto Philly homes – bricks pale as
greying bones; the tender hide of the hood
dried up to shell like the skeletal body
of the shaking boy who held me
up at gunpoint in the shadows
of an underpass. But this time

was different. This time, I did not know
who he was or, more importantly, what
he could have been: a construction
worker, a maintenance man, or just
mangy, as my grandfather might have called him.
He was devilishly handsome, a cross
between the buck & the fox
mantled on my grandfather's wall,
& if under different circumstances, perhaps
I'd have given in, perhaps, I'd have
called for help, but who could I call
back home who would come
to deal with men who were so much
like themselves? A wilderness had sprawled
along the net of the parking lot's steel gate,
katydids chanting in the great oaks,

which, now, becomes the sounds of the North Creek
where I my grandfather taught me how to shoot
my first game; the game him and I play –
the man's stare gripped up in mine.
& what seems, at first, to be someone pleading
in distress, I learn is, actually, a grey cloud
of geese in the sky, riding dusk's
thin blade; at the end of the day,
no woman, no child, will help me; I have learned

at least what it means to be a hind in the wild.
I take my bike from the rack, & this man,

with his stuck-fucker's stare, his buck-bronze hair,
inches closer. In this moment, I can see
my grandfather calling him a Wall-Hanger ,
a Slob-Knocker, or for braving
the distance between us,
he'd call him a Shooter, this place a Kill Plot;
I hold the lock loosely in my fingers, weigh it, & wait.
If only – a hunter's thought – if only
he'd come just a bit closer.

Flower Market #1

Only in the dark red hours of dawn,
when the city is towered by shadows
does the dirty river's surface –rife

with sediment of flood-eroded stumps,
& blood-brown mist from rinds torn
off of the bones of murdered teenagers sunk –

reflect the jagged forest wilderness of the city's
silhouette. In these violent hours,
as the morning sun begins to mask the mystery

of night, the florist wakes & lifts the metal
gates, where beneath the storefront's awning,
she wields a full closed fist of

Cosmo, Memorial, & Sweet Pea seeds.
On the other side of the river: the other, derelict
looted storefronts face the Flower Market.

& near the market, along the river: the tremorous
Laurel leaves, the bikers, runners, the children &
their nanny's, the unruly

swans bucking at the children, & the squirrels,
so many of those terrified squirrels –
the god-awful restlessness & fidgeting

of life, despite, lived. It would seem,
the people of the derelict side of the river
were almost woefully indifferent to the stark contrast:

the bright, youthful lilac & the pure white rose
bushes which the Florist, in a devout act
as requiem, so generously arranged around the dead

men's statues, who had purchased the land, long ago,
& whom, for that reason, alone, were memorialized.
The people by the trail-side love the Florist.

& the Florist, as she often professes, loves, loves deeply,
the people. Now, myself, I find her to be a skilled steward
of the rose hedges that encase the public statues,

& a disciplined master, as I imagine
Apollo must have been, of the Laurel leaf.
What can be said about her other than that she takes

great care of her domain; that she must take
exquisite command of the grandeur
exhibitions of the beautiful floral arrangements

in the city's gardens, trails, and arboretums.
& sure, I've plucked the flowers & have seen
the cold stone emerged upon the clouded grave

granite-plated-walk, but what else
is she other than someone who's shoveled
many holes into the ground, but hasn't,

as the wren, climbed to the high canopy
layer of the trees & sat, in the slow-passing time
of the sky – to see – in whatever complex

ultraviolet vision they must see with
from above, to sing, with the rest of us,
the gold & fire falling over the city.

Untitled #1

At the center of the cavernous files of the Temple
Hospital's Forensic Pathology lab
the sun beyond the earth penetrates
wet rapid heat rising
from the gridded bars of Broad St.'s
sewage vent, and cuts through the egress
to mantle the jaundiced flesh again,
just slightly reddening the hard, abraded sandstone
corpse, flat on the cold prosection table,
revealing in its brilliance: the body – though fierce,
it's beauty – does not withstand the fierceness
of its traumas, and sometimes, preserves relics
in the pockets slit into its skin:
sometimes window shards pierce
a fist still clutched tight,
sometimes brass bullet casings
lodge in the hollow enclaves of darkness
between the hinges of a jaw,
or, in the shattered structure of the temporal
bone. In this particularly fragile case:
No. 15-0457. Last Name: Allen, *from English,*
meaning "little rock," and First Name: Tychon,
which in the dead language of Ancient Greek
means 'fortune, fate,' his mother
kept repeating to the crime scene investigator,
standing as a dark form in the flickering
of the strobe lights of sirens, *'fate, fortune,'*
over and over again, in a manic
frenetic loop, at the center of the fragmental
flood-worn street, cratered and graveled
with glass from the window of the grey Crown
Victoria from which the coroner pulled him out,
hands stiff, still clutched tightly
to the wheel.

Revealed under the fog of dust
static inside the overhead light
is the hidden habits of the dead –
that strange kinetic action, penetrating
whatever's left; *Inside a fist, inside a hand's*
desperate clutch, can knot up the contents
of an already really, really fucked up life,
the investigator says. The investigator – stiff,
as he must be stiff, as the hand of the corpse

gives slightly under his probing
for evidence that might explain the death
of case No. 45-7051,
Adams, Ajax:
maybe after the hero who struck out
with a large stake his own stock & reluctantly
gave way under the weight of the stone-
eyed Athena who denied him his due honor,
who, maybe afterward, broke inevitably:
What have I done! What have I done?!
trembling behind the spear, against that wretched
stockade fence, where before him, a metallic halo
of flies circled the sheep's twisted mouths –
fixed & open – as if to haunt
him with an eternal unvoiced grief.
What have I done? broke the voice
through the mysterious darkness. *What have I done!*
screamed Ajax's mother into the rustic
night glare of the moon
slung low over the high rippled
tide of the Schuykill, which lashed & lashed
against the bank & tugged the blood
that bled from his wounds into the current
of the river's gentle stream; *A.J.!*
echoing from behind her,
A.J. A.J.!
a small boy, his brother, fell
to his knees by the steel fishing dock –
which arched over his dead body
like a shield. & the vault
of the temporal structure fractured
into shards, shards that pierced the blind spot
deeply recessed inside
the lacrimal bones & orbital plates,
each small splinter in form
abrading the integrity of the optic
disc; each small abrasion, each splinter
that contributes, undeterminably,
to the manner of death creates, of him,
a corporal syndrome marginally termed
loosely in the autopsy report as "artifact."
His mother, as storm-wind, writhed & tossed
out of the tight constriction
of her husband's arms, she loosed
handfuls of wet mud,
onto the river's surface

which, like tar, repelled the light,
 reflecting what seemed a sinking
 moon – one-half arced
 against the darkness, as if, the golden clad
 of a vault's door. Her angry armored face
 broke, too, as the clumps had broken
 up the water;
 her whole body broke, it seemed, on the surface,
 her writhing, even, distorted – like the violent
 city, its cragged edges outlining
 the vast twilight sky, which waned, & the writhing
 of parallel stars waned,
 while the lights, nearing them, seemed to cut
 right through the panicked ruffle of leaves
 struggling against the wind & scattering the light
 of the ambulance truck. By the water,
 the family waited & waded
 through the blood pooling beneath him,
 dead & at rest. Finally,
 his mother stopped crying.
What have I done? She said, flatly.
Alexis, honey, her husband went,
it's not your fault, my God,
believe me, it's not your fault.
It's no one's fault.

The first & deepest cut is the “Y”
 incision – from the corners of the collarbone
 downward, through the muscle & fat, to the breastbone,
 & finally, to the pelvis, at which point
 the folds of the body give, the tendons & tissues
 snap as the sewn linen thread
 that binds together the loose contents
 of a book; the body like a good book,
 makes evident the many cavities
 operating each organ system.
Life & death don't really mean nothing.
 The investigator flashes a light into the eyes
 of cadaver no. 54-0175:
 Last Name: Clark, *from Greek,*
meaning “priest,” “he who ministers the
sacred,” First Name: Creon,
 the ruler of the tragedy *Antigone*,
 forced against the pure will of the gods
 & the importance of the tribal – the familial honor.
To some of these kids, a life & death

don't mean nothing at all.
That's the scary part, he says.
These kids, they have it hard,
too damned hard. His partner plucks
frays of hair from the holes
of the shirt clipped along the clothesline,
a brown stream dripping into the waste bucket.
A lot of jewels though, sometimes
a lot of blades, syringes, crack rock
right there at the stitches
of the palm, until the person's final hour,
and surely, there it was;
a chipped stone, sharp, white, cragged
like the cliffs of chasms, or the marble
tufts of David, finely portioned & tight
in a dime bag.

Untitled #6

I dread the unrest of July –
its flood rains & wind gusts that whip

with violence, veiling
over the city mists of flesh

flies, that feed on sap
from fruit browning on my shelf.

I, too, count them, the hollowed shells
as they fall, frantic & spinning, dying –

the flies – in a grey soot lining
the window frame or, sometimes, impaled

by the matrix, the broken screen between
them. & I, in rapturous storms as these, tremble

from tremendous height, awing
at bold idioms of caution tagged on the metal

gates of Poppy Stores & at the vibrant
portraits of plump ruddy faces of youths

whose lives were ended early, or often
tremble at how unbelievably ripe,

how carmine the supple flesh
of box plot plums & poppy flowers

hooked along my bathroom's window,
Or, caught by the grid's gaping hole,

at those unwavering flies, dogged
by the restricting space between themselves

& I. Sometimes, against my own
nature, I bring myself to the ledge & lift,

fearful wings fluttering & ceasing
between my fingers, still fighting

still staggering against the weight of
their metallic bodies; &

by bringing them close, I sharpen
the dense ridges of my face, angular

in their eyes – as shards scattered
across a field. Inside the green glare,

I, as always, turn away, & cower
before I flush the shells down the drain.



Deer #9

Bound, I go into the dark,
& finally ride that twisted road,
heading off to be with wife,

fleeing mum – for good, this time.
Turning, as always, in the dark –
the harsh whip of storm winds –

crass clouds, like wild fauna
molting rains heavy & aslant,
beats the sun-dried dirt road loose,

knocks hard on my windshield,
& seeming to happen all at once:
I strike her, the clear shield caving in,

the gash of one crack spreading quickly
into a web of brokenness between us,
& though I try not to hurt her, to change

direction, to shift the gear, to turn
away, I can't stop.
The storm, shifting in, cuts

through the sand colored sky,
the darkness blurring the roadside wild
to a wraith, & as dead game

gutted by a bullet, she gives way;
bones tearing through her white breasts,
dark blood pooling

& despite the circumstances –
my whole life gutted by the stranger
I became to mum, & the stranger

I had to be, for so long, to my wife,
who had grown skilled at waiting –
maybe, impatiently – as my fleeing

draws mud-blood puddling up
under her, after so much time
passed, & so much time robbed –

despite all that – as any child lost
in a world becoming stranger
& deader upon contact – I want

my mum, who, when I was young,
stitched the dirty, dragged-to-rut
stuffed bear whole, who kneaded

dirt stains from my skort with dish soap,
& closed belt-wounds with palm oil,
who knew to aid the sore

that was visible, who could conceal,
as good as a mole at burrowing inside
the dirt, a fissure. & now, I imagine,

she hollows out – as loosened ground
streams through the deer's emptying
veins – my bedroom, stripping

the mantle bare, freeing my image
from her frames, lowering the blinds
on the drawn black curtain of clouds
in which the crop-field-crows climb.