

MAPPING THE CATACOMBS

Poems by

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# Mapping the Catacombs

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This collection exists because of the time, care, and honesty provided by Rick Hilles, Mark Jarman, Ann Mikkelsen, Kate Daniels and Aimee Nezhukumatathil— guides to whom I owe unending thanks.

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## INTRODUCTION

Communication is the heart of my interest in poetry and creative writing. The opportunity to connect with readers and feel connected with them is invaluable to me. I have never been outgoing or extroverted, but have always found mediums of artistic expression to be comfortable and important ways of connecting with others. Since I was 13 I have played in bands, ages 16 to 22 included touring, so my original attraction to the written word was through song lyrics. Here, I began to appreciate the innumerable ways one can connect with a reader; there seemed to be no restrictions: things I was hesitant to say aloud were fair game. One of the first run-ins I had with poetry was seeing Robert Frost and Ralph Emerson quoted in a punk band's album liner notes. It seemed like such a foreign idea at the time, that music which seemed to exist on the margins of society could share the ideals of these figures, these thinkers, respected writers. Yet, these were musicians who wrote essays; attended Harvard. This altered the punk image, which was never important to me, but I still found it fascinating that these two worlds could come together; that loud, abrasive music was creating a discourse with literature. This intersection of influences altered the way I looked at writing by showing me that an unlimited field of content was available.

With this new appeal that poetry had for me, I began to seek out more of it, and I began writing song lyrics. This focus on writing a narrative became a stepping stone towards writing short fiction pieces. I wrote often, but it didn't become a serious part of my life until my freshman year of college. A semester long journal writing assignment in a composition course provided my class with a list of prompts to write from. My teacher gave me an A, which was important, but paled in comparison to the comments she left me, namely that my writing had

made her cry. I felt bad, but also empowered, and encouraged. It birthed the idea that I could affect someone with my writing, which up until then was a solitary act.

Since then, poetry has grown to be a staple in my life, though my re-introduction to it was through spoken word and slam poetry. I had the interest in poetry, but had no idea where to start, and listening to spoken word was an accessible style for me to acquaint myself with rhyme, meter, and the rise and fall of emotion over the course of a poem. The performance itself was not the attraction for me, but the content was easily relatable. Certainly, without a foundation of knowledge and familiarity with poetry, some poets will seem to be speaking a foreign language. Poets like Buddy Wakefield and Derrick Brown were examples of performance driven writers whom I admired for their engaging content. Though I no longer share the same enthusiasm for spoken word, it was a welcoming invitation, to which I owe thanks.

I believe that for some, poetry is irrelevant because they have little exposure to it. For example, when speaking with bosses or coworkers in the past, I've mentioned my interest in writing and poetry, to which their response is either "...like Shakespeare?" or "you mean like *Roses are red, violets are blue.*" In both instances, the way some present these options places poetry as something that is easily dismissed, either because it isn't understood or they view poetry as a childish exercise. The surprising amount of interaction I had with people who have expressed this derisive tone towards poetry, a growing passion of mine, was encouragement to learn more.

In looking for a guide to writing and a foundation of poets, I began taking as many seminars and workshops as an undergraduate as I could, particularly courses on the Modern and Contemporary eras. Reading the Modernist poets was eye-opening for me. I gravitated towards T.S. Eliot, not because he was presented as *the* Modernist poet, but because there was darkness

in his writing that I wanted to emulate. I looked carefully at the ways he would tease out a subject, at times with ambiguity, placing a moat between the reader and his intentions. Despite this distancing, he would always manage to sneak in a line that would resonate, that would move through you as if he was reaching into your chest, wrapping his fingers around your heart, and when necessary, clenching his fist.

My study of Modernism translated to a phase of writing that was echoing the voices of poets like Eliot, and the mindset of H.D.'s *Trilogy*, where I began to write about my own personal wars. For example, I transplanted the worries and struggles of citizens in London, 1942, in ways that would parallel experiences of my personal life. Stepping out of the collage of my undergraduate experience and exposure with a foundation of poets that were now familiar, I began to develop my own voice. In an August 2008 interview with Billy Collins from the Barnes & Noble Review, Collins states:

While I don't much like the expression "finding your voice," my sense is that the important breakthrough moment for a poet is when he or she has developed a kind of character through which he or she can speak with ease.

While I don't much like the poetry of Billy Collins, I can relate to this idea of developing a voice or character on the page. For me, this voice hasn't been a ripple in another poet's pond, but it carries elements of other poets that I have wanted to incorporate into my work.

A contemporary poet whose tone and approach I liken to mine is Tony Hoagland. In his collection of poetics essays, *Real Sofistikashun*, he identifies poets as having a "most characteristic emotion" and aesthetic to their work, which he then exemplifies, as in: "James Wright sobs... Robert Hass *discerns*." If someone were to identify a characteristic emotion of my work, I would be grateful if they were to say *Michael Sarnowski marvels*, *not in the sense that his poems are marvelous, but that "to marvel" is the prevailing action of the narrator of the*



*poem*. I feel that my tendency to marvel is born directly out of an inquisitive sensibility.

Countless poems of mine are an attempt to better understand the world, and one of the biggest motivators for me is wanting to know more—the desire to understand why things are the way they are. I hope for my poems to teeter tonally between being enamored with their content and being completely at risk: to have something at stake in the poems.

Inquiry is essential to my work. I intend for my poetry to be like an example of the scientific method put into action: a question is asked, tested, and some semblance of a response is given, though not always a clear cut answer, often times a new way to approach the question. Though I am not putting myself on par with the following writers, in addition to Eliot and H.D., my work, and this manuscript in particular incorporates elements of Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Michael Collier, Tony Hoagland, Jeffrey McDaniel, and Brian Turner.

The name that most sticks out from the aforementioned list of poets as inspiration for this manuscript is perhaps Wallace Stevens. The intricacy and depth of language inscribed by Stevens is admirable, but his scope of a collection as a whole, and attention to the tensions that can be created through ordering poems is what I am trying to offer with *Mapping the Catacombs*. Specifically, studying the overarching intentions of his book *Harmonium* has encouraged me to analyze how my manuscript will be viewed in its entirety, and how to bring out these effects. This was the first time I saw a book that placed emphasis not just on the individual poems, but how the poems interacted with one another. The idea of poems not working as individual notes, but as chords, or notes harmonizing with one another (thus the title *Harmonium*), was a revolutionary idea for me. Though I did not write or arrange *Mapping the Catacombs* to mirror this same idea, it made me step back and seriously consider different ways to organize my manuscript and focused my attention towards which poems are connected to others in some way.

As a result, my manuscript is more of a work as a whole than just a collection of individual poems.

Sylvia Plath is a poet who I admire for her approach to emotionally heavy subjects. In Plath's poetry, themes of mortality are unavoidable because of her suicide, but there is a confidence in her voice when she works through personal fears and haunting realities, particularly in her collection, *Ariel*. Through writing highly confessional work, I feel Plath was able to get at a new consciousness by not masking motives, but exploring the desperation, as if she walked around the house with it like a blanket around her shoulders, most potent in her poems that explore domesticity and family life. For example, in "The Applicant" she concludes "it's your last resort. / Will you marry it, marry it, marry it." Her awareness when using sound and repetition becomes a vehicle for her tone to come through, often allowing it to haunt and echo, such as the *oo* sounds in the poem "Daddy" which contains lines like "If I've killed one man, I've killed two— / The vampire who said he was you." Her artful handling of topics like suicide is so well crafted that, on the page, the reader is enraptured, and yet, when the reader finishes a poem, lines and images stick like burrs in a dog's fur.

A kindred soul who I think of in tandem with Sylvia Plath is Anne Sexton. Knowing that they knew each other, were writing at the same time, both struggled with personal issues, and who both committed suicide has been cause for closer examination by many. Personal history aside, both of these writers possessed a voice and talent that I find mesmerizing. Sexton's poems, though more direct and overtly critical towards their targets than my own, work as a guide to navigating content that may seem tricky or treacherous. For instance, her boldness when writing about the idea of God or the role within one's own family is what amplified her already staggering command of voice into something scathing and unforgettable.

The poems that I find most successful are the ones that find ways to temper fierceness. So in the wake of the ferocity of Plath and Sexton's poetry, looking at a poet like Michael Collier, allowed me to see the effectiveness of patient and tempered verse. To me, Collier stands out as a poet who is always in control. He will not let an explosive idea take control of the poem, but rather, he will calmly work out an issue over the course of the poem. His form, line break, metaphor, sets of images, and pacing are all parts of the poem that he keeps in working order.

Tony Hoagland is a poet who was recommended to me in undergrad by my workshop professor who saw similarities in our styles. When I read his collection *Donkey Gospel* for the first time, I didn't like it. When again his work was recommended to me here at Vanderbilt for the same reason, I gave it another chance and loved it. I think this change of opinion showed my maturation as a reader and a competence towards different narrative styles in poetry, something that I attribute to my exposure to more poets. What I take most from Hoagland's poetry is his ability to compartmentalize issues, wander to an offshoot issue, and allowing himself to explore the offshoot as a way of getting closer to the original idea, such as in the poem "Mistaken Identity," where the speaker believes to see his mother in a lesbian bar, which leads into a discussion on self-worth and the place of the speaker, before returning to the woman who resembles his mother. His work shows that there are poems to be found in seemingly ordinary moments because even they can be used as a lens through which to see things in a new way. I firmly believe that anything that happens, any thought, and any perception is poem-worthy. To use examples from Hoagland, drinking on a porch with friends becomes an avenue to cherish the moments that we lose with age ("Jet"), or how learning to give better oral sex is a step into a conversation on talent and suffering ("Self Improvement"). Hoagland is often able to set aside

ego and shame in order to reach a clearer sense of honesty, yet, he also knows how to utilize the overblown ego for the same effect.

Though Jeffrey McDaniel's early work had him pegged as a slam poet, now with four books published through University of Pittsburgh Press and Manic D press, he's a poet I look to for vivid and often bizarre imagery, and the use of similes and metaphors. At its best, it meshes images that are unequivocally unique within content that is personal and oftentimes tragic, such as describing a car's exhaust pipe like the lips of a snorkeler in the poem, "The Pool." This attention to imagery can tie a life-saving act, inhaling air when underwater, to a deadly act, inhaling car exhaust, consolidating the contrast and tension in the poem with a single image.

The poet Brian Turner uses the observant eye of a soldier at war to create unsettling atmospheres. His poetry book *Here, Bullet*, which chronicles his experience as an American soldier in Iraq, is tonally aggressive when using military terminology as a way to demonstrate one's sense of humanity, such in the poem "In the Leupold Scope" where he begins "With a 40x60mm spotting scope" he finds a woman hanging laundry; a calm domestic scene found through the scope of a gun. At a reading in September of 2008, Turner encouraged writers to write about the current war because even if they were not directly involved or felt entitled to it, if they opt not to write about it, that leaves only a small group of writers in the Army to cover it along with journalists and politicians. This open discourse through writing could encompass emotions and perspectives which may not be adequately represented through other mediums.

\* \* \*

As *Mapping the Catacombs* has developed and transformed, there has remained a number of thematic threads that I intend to represent with the title. *Mapping the Catacombs* is a title that represents the mental excavation that happens when writing poetry and simply being alive. In

some ways, I read the title “mapping the catacombs of the mind” as this book explores ways to look at the world, relationships, people, art, death, and how they all coincide. I want my poetry, and all poetry, to reinforce the idea that creativity and asking questions are invaluable to our time in life; an act of reclamation for artistic expression. “Mapping” captures this idea of exploration, the act of inquiry, and to focus this act in the locale of “Catacombs” brings images of bones and the body, which are a recurring source of imagery in my work. For me, catacombs are a locale that will remind the reader that the topics of this poetry are inherently human and embedded in who we are. A darker interpretation of catacombs is unavoidable, and rightly so: there is much trouble and vulnerability in this collection which serves to question what we are to make of tragedy in our lives. The final section on death is perhaps the most directly related concentration of poems that calls attention to the stark reminder of mortality to which the catacombs allude.

\* \* \*

Outside of academia, poetry has been consistently measured down in culture, like the caricature of the poet as a beret-wearing somber snob, or simply the mention of poetry as a punch line. Increasingly common today is the idea that poetry is just a playful expression of rhymes, writing that is seen as being as relevant as greeting cards, because that is one place where poetry can be found for the masses. I don’t believe that poetry is an art that is understood the way visual art or music is; people hear the word “painting” and will think of Monet, Rembrandt, while people I’ve worked with hear “poetry” and they recite *roses are red, violets are blue*, or a dirty limerick, or think of quotes taken out of context and placed on motivational posters; unfortunately thinking this is all that poetry has to offer.

I believe poetry is an incredible form of expression, and just as importantly, communication. Much of my manuscript looks at examples of successful communication and

times when communication fails. This manuscript asks questions and tries to understand a multitude of issues, which is a product of the speaker's vulnerability, whether it is returning to a moment earlier in life with a new perspective or looking ahead with all human limitations in mind. This manuscript is about asking questions and searching for answers, which returns to the aesthetic of inquiry that I've identified as central to my work.

I've organized my manuscript in five sections, the first of which chronicles topics of growing up and self-identification. Naturally, it made sense to me to start where I started and move chronologically through life. My hope is that this sets up an overarching narrative in the manuscript. An essential aspect of this narrative focuses on communication, especially the triumphs and failures. At the end of the first section, the poem "Memoir" thematically concludes the process of self-identification by reflecting on the type of character the speaker is.

The second section highlights different triumphs and failures of communication, is meant to be an explosion of language, and begins to incorporate poetry itself. This section serves as a palimpsest for many of the ideas in the manuscript, bringing in foreign languages and culture as well, particularly in "Reading Akhmatova" where Russian culture and imagery is explored out of fascination for a foreign poet. Essentially, this section, and entire manuscript, is supposed to serve as product of what happens when one *maps one's own catacombs*. The closing poem in this section, "On Writing, On Life," is a lead-in to the third section, a precursor of content, as we see Dante and the speaker seeing that the only direction they can go "was down." This initial descent for Dante was the beginning of his search for his beloved, Beatrice. For my speaker, the conclusion of this section leads into the third section, which focuses on love and relationships.

Though the third section is comprised of poems about love, they are not always direct, and not always positive. I like the idea of writing "unconventional love poems." This is a term

I've used for a while for poems that ultimately are in support of love and relationships, though they may not initially come across that way. At times, some poems may come off as a backhanded compliment, such as "When We Fight," which is an analysis of how when things aren't going well in a relationship it can feel completely devoid of love and concern, leading to outbursts of damaging statements or actions. The third section is intended to establish a narrative through a carry-over in either images or ideas from one poem to the next. This carry-over is as if someone has sprinkled words, images, or other concepts over the poems of this section, so that they are interrelated, even if an explicit story does not emerge, most notably seen by "Listening to Gershwin's *Someone to Watch Over Me*" picking up where "Morning Comes Through the Blinds" leaves off.

The fourth section of my manuscript engages both historical figures and lesser known individuals through the act of portraiture. For the most part, the self that has guided the reader through the terrain of the poems up until this point is absent from the fourth section. The only overt series of poems in this manuscript comes in this section, where four poems have historical or iconic female figures transposed into times (and often places) that were after their own lives. These poems present Helen of Troy in contemporary times working at a bowling alley, Joan of Arc working as a switchboard operator at the beginning of World War II, Audrey Hepburn at a modern day senior prom, and Judy Garland waking up the morning after she overdosed. Each is intended to draw upon the allure of each of these figures and present them in a new context, not to draw more attention to these icons, but rather open the reader up to the concept of the everyday roles being valuable and rich stories worth telling. For instance, the life of a bowling alley attendant can be just as intriguing as that of an iconic figure if you explore the intricacies of their lives.

The fifth and final section of is a comprised of poems that deal with death and the transition of life into death, which content-wise was a chronologically logical choice to reflect the life cycle. Both metaphorical and literal death is examined though a multitude of angles as a form of acceptance, of having a communication with the self, a way to cope, to deal with the inevitability of death. Much of the section deals with coming to terms with unanswerable questions about mortality. The fifth section closes with the poem “Bombs Away” which exists as a statement of purpose for my life; an example of uncertainty that nonetheless resolves to contribute in whatever way possible to create a more livable world.

\* \* \*

The poems in *Mapping the Catacombs* work in a variety of narrative styles to explore their content. A poem like “From Rochester, a Narrative History in Snapshots” employs a series of mini-narratives (portraits) to explore themes of travel, creation, history, and death, while a poem like “In the Aviary, They Wait for Release” exists entirely as an unfolding of a metaphor that conveys the emotion of panic and the desire for breaking free. Though poems that use a guiding narrative voice are less open to interpretation, it is with the hopes that a direct and honest discussion will come from them. It is in these narrative poems that I try to introduce or analyze tones or topics that the reader can become emotionally invested in, whether it is the history of two men a century apart in the same city or the emotional terrain of a couple in an argument.

If I were to align my aesthetic characteristics with three contemporary poets, they would be Tony Hoagland, Jeffrey McDaniel, and to a lesser extent, Bob Hicok. Though directed by these poets, I’d believe I’ve cultivated my own voice. Rather than writing ethereal, language guided poetry, which runs the risk of placing a barrier between the poem and reader, I believe my work is quite accessible. Though Hoagland, McDaniel, and Hicok are all influences, I feel as



if where we stray from one another is in imagery. Of the three, McDaniel has had the largest impact on the way I write similes, metaphors, and use images, but I learned from him the potential and value of a creative image. My imagery comes from a personal desire for my poems to be fierce when necessary. The poet Brian Turner helped with this idea with language of violence and war, topics which are inherently emotional. Whether the poem is documenting a fistfight or slow dancing, I need my imagery to convey heightened senses.

One thing that has become increasingly clear is how reading influences my poetry. Though I will never be as well read as I aspire, and am still unfamiliar with many poets that are referenced in academic discussion, I have read a good deal of Modern and Contemporary poets. In the past five to six years, I have changed immensely as a reader as shown when I revisit work that I haven't read in a while. I have acquired a better ear and eye for trends in poetry, and possess a much more mature mind when it comes to understanding the movement and trajectory of a poem. As exemplified with my newfound admiration for Tony Hoagland's poetry, there have been many instances where I've returned to poetry with a different response, conversely shown with my rapidly waning interest in slam poetry.

Having mentioned all of this transition, it is important to note that I am in one early phase in my relationship with and study of poetry. Though *Mapping the Catacombs* has elements of confessional poetry and memoir, it is a collection of free verse lyric poetry that tries to balance imagery and narrative. Rather than applying titles, perhaps a more accurate way to understand my poetry is to understand the underlying motivation: I write because I believe everyone has a story to tell. My life has not been illustrious or legendary, but I don't think it needs to be. To repeat, I write to better understand my life and the world I live in.

Though the multiple directives of *Mapping the Catacombs* were touched on earlier, I think it is important to revisit my aims in a number of poems. I believe that art is invaluable, and poetry is my contribution. I want to write, read, promote, teach, and discuss poetry because it is my personal passion and a fascinating opportunity for human interaction and learning.

“Hail Mary,” the poem which begins the manuscript, is filled with the ideas classmates will associate with someone’s name, an unspoken bond between friends, and also the failure of communication to bring people that have grown apart back together. This poem ends with a note of outpouring as a way of acknowledging the failure of communication, but a sign that from this point on (in life and in the manuscript) things will be revealed and explored, no matter how difficult, in an attempt to move forward.

The preoccupation with mortality can be traced to Dante and beyond. It has driven a poet like Czeslaw Milosz, who in his poem “Dedication” asks:

What is poetry which does not save  
Nations or people?

The art of storytelling— whether in poetry, novels, songs, or any medium— is something that can save people’s lives; though storytelling may not literally prevent or stave off death, poetry can save people from other things. It can influence, inspire, and open people up to new ideas. The act of poetry is that of expression, a desire to communicate, even if the only receiver of the expression is the self, the writer. To return to Milosz, his lines are less about poetry directly and more so about the concept of moving forward in a world after tragedy. What role does poetry play in the lives of people that can be swiftly extinguished? Milosz offers poetry as a gift, a defense, in writing “I put this book here for you, who once lived/ So that you should visit us no more.”

Another answer to Milosz's question one can always fall back on is Robert Frost's statement from his essay "The Figure a Poem Makes" that one justification for poetry is to exist as "a momentary stay against confusion." Poetry exists to provide the writer and reader with a moment of clarity, an escape from the world. Frost presents the poem as a window to understanding, as if during the breadth of a poem the surrounding world is paused or kept at bay. Though nations and people are still subject to the dangers of the world, poetry exists to give them release, both as an escape from reality and as a way to understand it.

*Mapping the Catacombs* contains a number of different narrative approaches: the poem "Bloodspitters" for example, is a collage where each line stands alone, though each line is given new meanings by the lines around it. I think one strength of this manuscript is the range the poems have, even within focused sections. In the fourth section, I am able to tell the story of my grandfather's personal history ("82<sup>nd</sup> and Edison"), explore the legacy of George Eastman on my hometown of Rochester, New York as it is meshed with anecdotes from my youth ("From Rochester, a Narrative History in Snapshots"), and ruminate on the feelings of seclusion and distance through the first moon landing ("48 Minutes").

One personal goal that I have with this manuscript is for emotional momentum to be sustained from beginning to end. When submissions are sent out, just like when you pick what tracks will be at the beginning and end of an album, many look to start and finish strong so that the reader/ listener can be pulled in from the beginning, and be given reason to get through a weaker mid-section in order for the payoff of the end, which is not my goal. Though there are poems that hold a special resonance with me over others, I don't want there to be peaks and valleys of good to mediocre poems in this collection. I want to draw readers in and churn through from cover to cover, dragging them through all of the emotion that is embedded within. Whether

or not I will succeed with this is to be determined, but if I have the opportunity to release a book, I want it to be worth reading and re-reading.

I view the sections of *Mapping the Catacombs* working in specific ways. The first section is an introduction, a way to give readers a narrative of elements of my life so that they can feel up to speed with what follows. The second section broadens the narrative scope to poems far less centered in the identity of the first section while engaging readers with issues of language, communication, and poetry. The third section delves into issues of love, whether it is feeling enamored or completely miserable the poems in this section address both. The fourth section weaves an array of historical narratives together in an attempt to contextualize them in more personable ways. Lastly, the fifth section is grounded in the theme of death, where many curiosities are played out, primarily questions about the role and acceptance of death in ones life. This section is both personal and impersonal, an attempt to come to terms with death and to learn how to live fully, despite the inevitability of death. Concluding with the poem “Bombs Away” is meant to be a moment of encouragement, a way to reaffirm a sense of worth and accomplishment, and to draw the focus away from death in favor of the contributions one can make; a message I hope will echo long after my life.

Scope, voice, and tradition are examples of that which distinguishes poetry from simply entertainment. Poetry is a medium that is used throughout the world, in cultures that all contribute in different ways, whether it is with new forms, new content, or just new voices. T.S. Eliot presents the idea in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that each poem is a product of everything that has come before it, and will influence everything that comes after it. In this dialogue, I feel responsible as a writer to tell my story and the stories of those who have passed in and out of my life, for none other than the reason that I, like everyone in the world, have a

unique voice and story to tell. This concept of putting ink to page to make a physical product that records the thoughts that I have shaped and crafted is a victory in itself. Poetry is still alive and vibrant, and I don't imagine that will change. The catacombs of life and mind extend far beyond what we can see, and this act of mapping is just a start towards the questions and search for understanding that drives us all.

## Mapping the Catacombs

## **Hail Mary**

*For R.H. 1984-2007*

Your name transformed into myth,  
a boy balancing love and addiction.  
A hero searching for his heroine.  
Some things I remember clearer  
than others. Like when we were five  
and you killed frogs  
by throwing them  
against the brick foundation  
under your back deck.  
Or by pinning their bodies  
between rocks.  
You told your parents it was me.  
I said nothing.  
You were taller, brash,  
the ideal best friend  
for a quiet kid  
who avoided confrontation.  
You told me to stand up for myself.  
This was code for  
*you'll never have to,*  
*as long as we're together.*  
It worked both ways.  
I learned about pride  
and shame, the day I alone  
sent fifth-grade fists,  
like gavels, into a bully's ribcage.  
They needed to feel the *all rise* verdict.  
The standing ovation  
of knuckles clapping bone.  
I cried when I was done, and again  
when he returned to school,  
cloaked in a plaster white cast.  
You were proud of me.  
I didn't know how to feel.  
I won't lie to you  
about how I felt  
when you dropped out of school,  
or the days you listened  
to the tap of cocked syringes  
like they were lullabies.  
What I choose to remember  
are the backyard football games,  
with our feet on frozen ground,

ready to explode from the line,  
breath barreling into the air  
like we were making promises to our ghosts,  
you would sense a blitz coming  
and shout out an audible,  
so that the other wide receivers and I  
knew to go deep, because now  
was finally the time  
to air it all out.



# I.

*I had a lover's quarrel with the world.*

-Robert Frost, "The Lesson for Today"

## The Embarrassing Soundtrack to the Opening Scene of My Life

I wish I could tell you  
there were walls of amplifiers,  
snare drums firing off  
like Gettysburg that morning,  
and scrawny black-clad boys  
shouting through a hail of stage dives,  
but the day I was born  
REO Speedwagon had the #1 song in America.  
An overwrought ballad of conflicted love  
had its delicate stranglehold  
on the radio waves that March. My mother  
re-tells the story with the only detail that stands out,  
the peanut butter cup ice cream that she thought  
was giving her a stomachache. That nine month ache  
that burrowed inside her was me. Here I am,  
the third and final brown-haired boy in the series.  
If I could have braced her ahead of time  
for having to raise a short-tempered fussy eater  
who shuts everyone out, to no fault of hers,  
I would have. If I could have prepared her for the weeks  
I'd spend as a teenager, playing music on the road,  
forgetting to call from towns short of the destination,  
when a broken down van on the roadside  
or a stranger's dirty kitchen floor became beds for the night.  
I don't get worried phone calls wondering where I am  
anymore, but I still listen to the rhythms  
that come from small towns, the way songs  
can become atlases of loneliness, the deep kind  
you only learn when surrounded by familiar faces.  
There are times when I see my mother  
and want to relate, to tell her that I too have held things  
inside, allowed them to grow into unimaginable tangles  
of love, conflicted, and one day I will learn  
how to let them go. I will. It won't matter  
what song is playing, or what cue I'll use  
to remember the moment, so long as it happens,  
so long as it's deafening.

## A Little Bit About Myself

Born quiet  
chipped tooth boy  
youngest of three  
scrawny frame  
cowpoke hero of the backyard  
all squints  
featherweight firecracker  
number one fan of heat lightning  
    the conductor that accents the evening  
paper lantern heart  
jaw suspended in constant awe  
inspired by those who create like every rib was a stick of dynamite  
    each limb a lit fuse  
wears state lines like pinstripes  
    tallies miles in the creases of the face  
        packs bags under eyes  
now a ghostwriter  
who works overtime to perfect last words  
    proofreads epitaph  
keeps copy of resignation behind smile

## A People's History of The Schoolyard

Elementary me,  
undisputed split-lip champion.  
Underweight king of nowhere,  
decorated in a crown of bruises.  
I learned to wear them  
with pride. Schoolyard fights  
were a bouquet of fists  
exchanged like a virgin white corsage  
on the wrist of the first girl  
I ever dreamt about kissing.  
For the swelled stretch of skin  
around my orbital bones  
and every misaligned finger  
shocked loose from my knuckles.  
For the moments  
I thought ten years would heal  
and fifteen would forget.  
I'd never speak again  
if it meant I could erase how it felt  
to change dental records in my backswing.  
Forget the shrill of a mother cursing my name.  
Forget the oxygen-laced current of red alarm.  
Elementary me,  
undisputed split-lip champion.  
Underweight king of nowhere,  
decorated in a crown of bruises.

## Scoliosis Test

Once a year, the gym teachers  
would file us into the locker room. We,  
awkward and misshapen boys, reluctant  
to take off our shirts and shoes,  
slouched like wet cigarettes against tan lockers.  
It was a museum of sweat, propped wooden benches  
and paint-smoothed walls that everyone touched.  
The humid smell of wet shirts and running shoes  
hung, regardless of how long you held your breath.  
We'd spin the Master locks and test the handles  
until it was our turn to go. Two at a time, we stood  
on a strip of tape and bent forward, arms draped  
over the ground like gorilla skeletons. The cool metal touch  
of a scoliometer read the bare skin over our vertebrae and discs  
like we were made of illegible lines of Braille. Filtered  
by the inadequacies of our bodies, the fractures  
and deficiencies. We would take our places and bow,  
to show the geometry of our bones. To lower our heads  
for a curtain call where no one was thrown flowers  
or applauded.

## Mapping the Catacombs

We met in hell. And learned to dig our way out  
through miles of skeleton fragments  
and shards of mirrors. On our way up  
to the surface you French-kissed death  
only to spit up black coffee wet breath.  
I helped you cough out the dirt.

I've tasted that same tongue. I've heard  
the way it lapped and rattled over  
on itself, as it came like rocks  
ripping through the hull of a ship.

The breath was sucked out from deep within us.  
Our bodies were handfuls of chipped shells,  
arms waving the armadas into our chests,  
eyes like switchblades, waving them in.

## Vanishing Act

I was glassware about to shatter,  
my face, a layer of film negatives  
pulled tight over cheekbones. My ribs  
looked like plantation shutters  
draped and drawn in my chest. I never  
lost control of how I treated my body.  
That was the problem. I wasn't fighting disease,  
just science.

I tested the amount of hours I could go  
without passing out from hunger.

I proved the ease with which a human body  
can disappear. How it can vanish and re-emerge on cue,  
like a white rabbit lifted by a handle of neck skin.

I convinced myself I wasn't doing harm, a speech I recited  
each morning. I was supposed to grow into a man.  
I'd eat so little that my body began to rip itself apart.  
My back is stitched with stretch marks  
from the tug-of-war between growth and starvation,  
like twin sheets extended over a queen-sized bed.

Scars are something we have in common.  
They're storytellers. I never felt the need  
to say anything, I figured my body could speak for itself.

## **Self Portrait**

A flock of blackbirds  
crowding a weather worn statue  
of a man getting back to his feet.



## **Memoir**

I.

My favorite pastime  
is writhing like a prisoner of war.

II.

I am considered a child prodigy for teaching myself  
how to suffocate in social settings.

III.

I dream in breaking news headlines  
that document the reaction of the first person on the scene.

IV.

I want to act with the courage I get away with  
when I speak.

V.

I felt warmth in honesty  
and now it won't stop scalding.

VI.

My friendships are lifeboats  
taking on water.

VII.

If I told you how much it meant that you listened  
you wouldn't leave the waiting room.

VIII.

I'm not quiet because I don't have much to say,  
I simply don't know the words that will make you believe me.

IX.

I speak in 21 gun salutes  
for the graduating class that never came back.

X.

I was raised to be more than a row of flowers  
jack-hammered into the soil of your bed.

## II.

*I am, each day  
Typing out the God  
My typewriter believes in.  
-Anne Sexton, "Frenzy"*

## This Is Not Ukraine, This Is My Apartment

I twist the wand that opens the blinds  
and let the late morning stumble in  
with a plume of upshot dust. The surrounding tenants  
are quiet. For them, English is not a first language. Every now  
and then, Andrii will stand out on the balcony,  
forearms planted on the railing, a cigarette pinched  
between fingers like a pencil stub. It burns to his knuckles  
while wisps of conversation rise and dissolve. He looks  
out over rooftops and sees that even though  
this is not Ukraine, the sun still catches the tops of the leaves  
like a candlelight vigil. I turn the key in the thin mail slot  
and the noise catches his attention. I ask *How's it going?*  
and he nods and says *Hello*. We are both learning  
what it is like to live alone. To lie in bed  
and let our minds turn like a reel-to-reel,  
flashing images of our loved ones, the lives we envision  
making for ourselves. These scenes play between  
our eyes and the ceiling, like illuminated dust  
drifting in the light of the projector. Most nights,  
I can't sleep, so I'll read until I tire. Or I'll sit  
at the edge of the bed with my guitar, and accept  
that my hands aren't what they used to be. Rhythm,  
speed, precision, gone. I want the notes to tuck themselves  
back into chords, chords back into progressions  
like images unfolding in metaphor. When I try  
to play along to some old records, I often forget  
to clear the dust from the needle. I'm learning  
that the dust will keep coming, it will occupy  
the grooves of the vinyl, and the songs I play  
to make this apartment feel less like exile,  
won't sound the same.

## **Bloodspitters**

We crash the white of saint's teeth with Rorschach blots of cardinal sin red.  
We curse permanent press sheets.  
We are split-gum ammunition clips.  
We are the end of the assembly line generation.  
We are stay-at-home wives who've come to fill the voids and arm the boys.  
We are teachers.  
We are lost.  
We are Red Cross runway models.  
We are bedridden ballroom dancers.  
We are full of regret seen in the hunched shoulders of our fathers.  
We find beauty in a boy's first fistfight.  
We are the rattlesnake blood drive.  
We flinch in natural light.  
We are the potato in the plight.  
We are red soaked jawbones.  
We are reminders of life.  
We one, two, three four, five, six our steps.  
We soak our words up with chalk dust.  
We stitch the water murky.  
We are the grizzle in the voices of torn men.  
We sound like knives dragged over concrete.  
We aren't asked to speak up.  
We do anyway.  
We taste clarity in an empty embrace.  
We paint our hands in flecks when we cough.  
We are the scattered bricks of bombed buildings.  
We are detonated.  
We are the blueprint of the New World.  
We make love in front of green screens and superimpose our lies.  
We measure hours with doses.  
We dance to trigger hammer snaps.  
We sneak cathedral wine into confessional.  
We shiver for more.  
We say our prayers on fire escapes.  
We are lit matches.  
We are not done.

## Bring to a Boil

Stirring angel hair pasta, occasionally, in my kitchen  
I can hear the television regurgitate lines of poetry  
by Gertrude Stein. *A rose is a rose is a rose* is the beginning  
of a commercial for a kitchen counter cleaner.  
Engineered, mass produced, and marketed  
to make homes smell the way digitized gardens  
exploding with tight clasps of hyacinths do. This,  
the second time in a week I've heard that line— the first,  
a sports broadcaster that replaced *rose* with *point*,  
which made me wonder if the staff writer on set had studied cubism  
or the Modernist era, or, if he was just familiar  
with the solution to the lingering smell of mildew.

In taking all of those classes, I thought I was starting to grasp  
what it meant to write poetry in America. Even though I pictured  
that legacy, flailing around like my mother, trying to keep glassware  
from vibrating off the ledges of our cabinets while my old punk band  
practiced in the basement, I never imagined either would shatter.  
And no, these days I don't seem to have as good a grasp  
on anything. Not poetry or punk, just the ways I find them used  
to keep things fresh. But what are they if not a mess of emotion?  
Neither needs my fingers on their pulse, or traces  
of sweat from my palms on the backs of their necks  
as I pull them close, let them whisper in my ear. Really, who am I  
to claim ownership or feel entitled to any of it?

And do I really care about Gertrude Stein?  
My dinner is getting cold. Her words, constantly shifting  
perspectives, weaving in and out of one another  
like thin strands of pasta in a colander, tossed and straining water  
into the sink, steam rising to my face like a blessing, a cleansing  
of all the dirt that builds up in the day.

## Prayer

Mother, father, write me a note  
for the rainy days we let our sins soak,  
for our skin that erodes  
and wears out through our lives,  
for cold nights afloat  
in the arms of the tide.

Doctor, doctor, give me a cure  
for the blues in our throat  
and the songs that burn.  
Like fireflies that swim through the rye,  
we are heroes and saviors  
that outlive our time.

Please shady eyes, sing me a song,  
and never stop singing.  
Keep the cathedral bells  
that sway in your throat  
ring, ring,  
ringing.

## A Day at the Carnival

When I told you *your smile is contagious*  
I didn't mean it makes everyone around you smile.

It reads like a choose-your-own adventure  
horror novel, a funhouse complete with monsters

and plot twists. It is the sequel that never  
should have been made. Your gaped mouth

is a carnival game, each tooth a pin  
that men are begging to break, all of them

wrapped in silly balloon animal lips.  
Your clown caked cheeks are filled

with words only written on banners  
shot from the throats of fake six-shooters.

Enter the ring. Put on a show. You are  
the sword-swallower with a sensitive gag reflex.

An acrobat with motion sickness. The trapeze artist  
afraid of heights— all spotlight, no substance.

When I told you *your smile is contagious*  
I meant it is a sickness I just can't seem to shake.

## **In the Aviary, They Wait for Release**

Like hearing an argument through the walls, the pipes have burst  
in the floor of the aviary. Heavy surges of water  
overflow baths and pools. Gallons per second  
push at glass walls, rise to branch level, the ground  
becomes seabed. A drowned ecology of botanical barnacles,  
leaves cling to branches like coral. Waterlogged flora.  
Fauna fluttering at the ceiling. Beaks clicking like crochet needles.  
Birds hover, kick water, beat wings at glass.



**Reading Akhmatova (читает Ахмáтова)**

Russian reads like a city's first snowfall  
where syllables gather for warmth. A response  
to rigid Cyrillic characters bundled on wartime prints,  
red political text that grips like frostbite.

To hear the names aloud, V's surrounding O's  
like bare fingers shaping snow. Words that open the mouth  
like Matryoshka dolls, capture the echoes of metro tunnels,  
teach the patience of rivers that sleep still, and wake ice.

In the poems of Akhmatova, silhouettes haunt streets  
and last lines read like scripture for the sleepless.  
Anna, you should know, you're not the only one  
who translates the winged, the falling, as angels.

## **Sleep Soundly, Katyusha**

because true rest  
never comes. Sleep soundly, Katyusha

because tomorrow you start over  
apart from the ones you love. Sleep soundly,

like blood vessels broken around bruises. Go quietly  
to the road. Stay as long as it takes. You may find home

in a new place, or love in a new face. Some of us never will.  
So we sleep soundly, Katyusha, to find calm. To learn

why rest is so important  
for the days we choose to speak,

to stand, to run and not look back.

## **On Writing, On Life**

Dante placed himself  
at the mouth of hell.  
Sometimes I wonder,  
as he wrote from exile,  
if he too had days  
where the only direction  
he could see himself go  
was down.

### III.

*Le vide, je vais le remplir.*

-Ariane Moffatt, "Je Veux Tout"

## Quiet Nights in the Afterlife

I've been running late these first few days  
in the afterlife. I still forget where I put my keys.  
I still cradle the backbones of the wrong girls.  
They leave imprints on the bed, carbon-copy  
sheet angels that dissolve like my desire

to speak. Each morning, I wake in the place  
where fear begins. The indent of your body  
on the bed is a topographical map of Chernobyl.  
My fingertips are cartographers in training, committing  
the outskirts of your ghost town to memory. It's quiet here.

Everything untouched. This is where the clocks have stopped,  
where wives waited for their husbands to come home. The empty space  
expands, it carries the echo of children being called to come inside.  
Clothes still hang on the line. They've been drying  
for decades. Roots have grown through the concrete.

Every sign here is ironic now. When I walk into town,  
the marketplace is empty, there is no sound of people,  
cars, or movement. It is just you and I. We are the unevacuated.  
I will continue to walk the empty streets of this place  
where you are still the only thing that moves, hums, radiates.

## The Way It Finds You

It can come like a thawing glacier. It exhales fog  
to match the tremolo in their shivers. It moves  
like wind off water, a lake effect sweep to leave you numb.  
You will find comfort in the snow day of its arms.  
You will lose control like its body is black ice  
on familiar roads. It is danger and permanence  
reassured. The road salt rusted metal frailty  
you hear in every refrain. The receding ice ages  
you can taste in every kiss. The promise  
that the four valves of its heart, in decrescendo  
every winter, will churn like cylinders  
to meet you when the seasons are ready to shift.

Or it will speak to you like slide guitars, necks warped  
by the sun's slow burn. It is the daughter  
of dumbstruck heartbreak. It will sing, sing, sing  
until its braided nickel strings saturate in distortion.  
Each smile will rise like a wave of heat from the street.  
It will look like lightning bugs that set the evening on fire,  
bring their warmth in from the tree line, flutter  
from broken boughs to panes of glass. It is tradition  
revised, a history of lives, patient as the search teams  
that wake at dawn, to begin at the banks  
and drag the river. To sift through miles of silt  
for any sign left behind in the riverbed.

## **When We Fight**

it feels like a first kiss.

A fresh bruise on the lips. A canvas cut  
with switchblade strokes, no color, no image.  
When we fight you don't pull punches  
and so far you haven't missed. I am a refrain  
of dial tones. You are an electric nightmare  
of blown circuits and tangled wires. Together  
we are a grand finale set to stars and stripes  
forever drowning each other out. Our words  
are imposters, grenades rolling with tumbleweeds.  
They are traitors bricking glass, a riot in the streets  
just to navigate our past. It is here in the debris  
where we met, where we tried to burn the blueprints  
of our hometowns. Still, I'll ask you to dance  
once more, we can count each step by the rise  
and release of air raid sirens. This is the music we make  
and it never plays softly. It hums like an anthem  
we take turns conducting. I still fall asleep  
with your anger on repeat.

## Where Violence Comes From

The aisles of the grocery store are laid out like ribs  
cut in two by a walkway of sternum.  
Through the corridors of low fat campaigns  
and organic re-creations, her elbow is locked in mine.  
We just need a salsa we can agree on.

We turn the corner and cross men who whistle  
as she walks by, muttering about her body. I flip  
through a card catalog of reactions. Sarcastic degradation,  
a verbal devouring, the ridges and valleys of knuckles  
I pray to etch like a map's mountain range into their faces.

This is just minutes after our talk about confrontation  
and those who set it in motion. I'm still trying  
to understand where violence comes from, where in history  
the itch was born. Like always I walk away, say nothing,  
fume. This unopened can of black beans in my hand—

I want to send it through their teeth like a brick  
through abandoned factory windows. We both know better.  
She more than I. She tugs lightly at my arm  
and tells me to *just let it go*. Eyes like ball turrets. Blood pumping  
to the alleyways of my fists. And this aluminum can, a miracle,

like the first crop of potatoes after the famine. I'm ashamed  
to know what it feels like to break another man's bones,  
to know that I can take a punch well, and want that again.  
It can't just be about sore knuckles or redrawing the structure  
of the body. We walk to the checkout, place our items

on the black conveyer as they drift away from our touch,  
only to get them back, to use them in the ways they were intended  
no matter how difficult, sometimes, that can be.



## **The Violinist**

Her bow frays,  
and like physics  
of flight, horse hair  
is sent out in arcs. Her  
legs are set wide for balance  
to send her hips in motion like  
the weighted hammer of an oil drill.  
She falls in time, matches the rhythm  
of the beat, her body a swinging pendulum.  
One hand tight on the neck with each finger  
making melody from movement. Muscle memory  
takes over and her head tilts back, eyes closed, taken.  
When she finishes, like a sculpture, she is perfection  
translated into every language. Hair bonded to sweat  
on her face. Arms splayed out like Ancient Rome.

## Morning Comes Through the Blinds

to highlight  
our clothes abandoned like splintered driftwood  
in the middle of the floor. Our bodies, shipwrecked  
on the bed, leaving a down comforter to calmly cascade  
away from us. I dreamt we were drowning, arms and legs  
wrapped in arms and legs. Your hair like brown ropes  
cut free from an anchor. Now awake, shored and breathless,  
resting in the sway of your siren song. A melody  
to trace to the root of the calm. My irises scan the surface.  
They illuminate the breakers that build and crash  
over me. You are the figurehead who leads me down.  
Each sound echoes out like a sky full of heat lightning.  
Here I'll stay, a buoy drifting your horizon,  
watching you spread for miles.

## Listening to Gershwin's *Someone To Watch Over Me*

In a shower of pale winter light, you're getting dressed.  
I'm convinced you were made for another place  
and time. Your shirt flares out, mid-torso, to tiptoe  
the waistline of your jeans. The dark denim pair  
raised from the muck of 80's punk, sending feedback  
through the five boroughs. Then a mustard yellow coat  
pounded with oversized buttons, all fashion, no function.  
A scarf wavers like a contrail behind you. You slide your feet  
into slippers like skeleton keys. Your skin like a primed canvas,  
peeking out from under a first coat. Yet, I see you  
time and again, exiting doorways like you're taking that first step  
from a Parisian metro car onto the crowded platform,  
to rise to the streets, climb the stairs, curl around  
the neighborhoods of Montmartre just to drop  
a coin into a heavy shield-shaped binocular  
and watch over the City of Light as it finds its way home,  
so it can fall asleep without setting an alarm.

## **One Year Anniversary, Western New York**

The snowplows ran all night. Pairs of headlights pushing endless white walls into one another. We knew, from years digging ourselves out of places like this, we'd be stuck here for a while. The next morning, your friend called for help, her car was lodged in a snow bank in front of the house. So I went. As I stood knee deep, reinforcing my stance for leverage, I thought of how today was supposed to be our day, a day without interruption. That didn't matter when I saw you walking from the front door in that ugly yellow jacket to help me push. A splotch of mustard on a landscape of Wonder Bread white. Together, we treaded through snow but hardly moved, like synchronized swimmers kicking, smiling, afloat. It was a reminder to ourselves that we come from a place where winter loiters like teenagers outside of a strip mall. It lingers until the sun, like a cop, rolls by to move it along, if only for a while. These seasons mean nothing until they change. So let it snow. We'll dig. We'll push. We'll take all afternoon. The car will break free from the bank, it's got to soon.

## Thawing the Bones

You said you didn't think I had a mean bone in my body  
but, darling, I don't believe you've seen the marrow.  
The town between us is frozen over with angel grace,  
but I'd melt it all, capsize these lives, and make this hell  
a Venice to row through. There will be white flags  
draped from Town Hall windows and abandoned cars  
at stoplights to mouth S.O.S. through the cracked skeleton  
of these roads. I'd clear these lanes, ignite everything in my way  
all, all, all just to put those breathtaking bluebird wings in a sling.

We painted our eyes this shade of bloodshot, and drink  
late night still water nightmares. So we keep tonguing  
our fears, bathe in straitjackets and the doe-eyed danger  
of spaghetti western dreams. But I won't wait for these glaciers  
to melt. With ice pick eyes and a blizzard in my fists  
I'll let the cold undress you.

Show me how long you have to freeze before you thaw.

## Aubade

I never had the courage  
to carve our initials into keystones                      to tell you how beautiful you looked  
to brace battered bridge arches                              charting open water  
under slow rumble storm clouds                              with an armada at your sides  
separating the *I* and *U* in disgust                              and every tragic hero  
smoldering in your wake.

## IV.

*If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change,  
and sustain the ravages of time and the savage beats of hearts and stars and saints.*  
-The Rabbits Red Thread, "Change"

## **Helen of Troy, Working Nights at the Bowl-a-Roll**

Seeking that one perfect strike,  
patrons send globes of reactive urethane  
barreling down waxed hardwood lanes toward pins  
like a bull through Spanish streets. Nearby,  
Helen stands in front of wooden compartments  
that hold pairs of split-color shoes, tongues lifted  
mid-inflection, as if they're cheering,  
or settling back into place.  
She shoots them with disinfectant  
like cheap breath spray. She thinks of her daughter  
who is being watched at a friend's house.  
How she'll need to wake her up  
and carry her to the car, still sleeping.  
Her moment of ceasefire at the end of the day.

Breaking through any hope of a ceasefire  
is the noise of rally cries and sighs over near misses.  
On Helen's word, new cavalries are sent to their places.  
Frontlines that project and release,  
pace the rumbles into a trebled crash.  
They aim and discharge, try to overpower  
ordered rows that stand in their way.  
Helen has become used to the high-pitched  
crash and rattle. Traffic and neighbors keep her up  
at night. There are times she doesn't want  
to be found or expected home, knowing  
that tomorrow more reserves will come  
just to feel the coating build like sweat on their hands  
as they seek that one perfect strike.



## 82<sup>nd</sup> and Edison

My grandfather kept a pair of boxing gloves  
in the basement. They were faded brown  
with a wooden grip inside, as if fingers  
were threaded around the spool  
used to stitch men to the floor of the ring.  
When I slid my hands into them, there was  
a larger space that his bones had worn into the leather.  
I could feel a history of aching muscles, the strain  
of opening jaws just to eat. I could see the broken noses  
that hung on Irish faces for the next half century.  
I could taste sweat mixing with blood and dirt.  
The leather began to crack along the knuckles.  
This was where fear came clean.  
This was where bandages unwrapped like rosaries.  
These fights were held in the basement of the church  
he helped build. Next to storage areas was a ring  
where men could come late in the day. They became  
thin silhouettes sparring in the twilight.  
Each came for their own reasons. My grandfather  
fought so he could afford food, and kept fighting  
long after he told my grandmother he had stopped.  
He did it for the good of the family. Funny, how  
even after a man has seen the tired face of war, he learns  
there are other battles that need to be fought.  
I set the gloves down on the old piano bench,  
a coffin of sheet music. There were new refrains  
that needed to be sung, a shadowbox tune  
of left hand accents over a crescendo of rights.

## Joan of Arc, 1939

I picture her, born centuries later, taking a job  
as an operator on the eve of World War II.  
Working nights transcribing clicks  
from her transmissions with God. Headphones tight,  
she connects cables to slots, commander  
of the switchboard cavalry. Hushkiller.  
She shows us there is war to be found  
in beauty, and beauty in war. Her pale face  
reads like a shorthand telegram. Lips like carbon paper.  
Was it rain that kept her awake? It comes like Morse code  
on the gutters, a mayday message. A distress call  
from the clouds. She closes her eyes, lets the visions come,  
listens for the voice that repeats

*You must be my tongue, speaking.*

*You must be my hand, reaching.*

## Relocating

It's true.  
I drove way too fast

to you,  
in the cold snap winter

to keep you safe from open air phantoms.  
They marveled at the curve of your back,  
the way it reminded them  
of cloaked breath. Ghostly.

I didn't listen  
to the terms we set.

I didn't listen  
to the steel picket guard rails  
saying *no*,  
*slow*,  
*please*.

Instead, I listened to orange city lights  
scattered in the valley like spilt salt detours.  
Each flutter of light pulled me closer  
to the deep blue you wore like a bruise.

You marked this path, a rumble strip  
for each knuckle crease. Branding your memories  
into the face of the road, and the crooked mile markers  
I count until I know I'm too far to turn back.

You are today's ration of foxhole romance,  
a long walk home, alone, kept warm with friendly fire.  
I won't ask his name.  
I won't say a word.

I just wanted to rest my eyes.

**Judy Garland Live in Chelsea, London: June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1969**

*You're out of the woods*  
*You're out of the dark*  
*You're out of the night*  
-“Optimistic Voices” from *The Wizard of Oz*

As if from a field of flowers, she rises like a voice. She grabs hold of the porcelain edge of the sink to brace herself as she stands. And in this rising wonders if this is how Norma felt just seven years before. After all, wasn't it girls like Norma who made beauty a more difficult word to pronounce? In the mirror she doesn't see her face, not black flutter eyelashes or red roulette lips, just life passing slowly around her as if she is a time lapse photograph. In this London house, though far from small Minnesota towns at the source of the Mississippi, she is on her way but she is not yet home. Somewhere under a thick cloud cover that had gathered in her mind, she finds herself calm, slow to awareness, repeating *why, oh why can't I?*

## **Inheritance**

When Madeleine tore the wallpaper down in the kitchen  
she found a topographical map of dents and stains.

Each mark a scar under long sleeves, an archipelago  
of depressions from the time her father came home

with distilled breath. He remodeled the house:  
a broken screen door, silverware on dirty linoleum,

a softer patch of skin under Madeleine's hair.  
Where the wall met the ceiling was weak and discolored

from the first time her mother tried to fall asleep  
at the bottom of an overflowing bathtub.

Madeleine stood in the corner of the kitchen,  
steeped in a mess of torn floral prints, ready to paint.

She re-colored her history. The wall became  
an off-white portrait of sisters in off-white dresses,

thrown bottles became white wedding bouquets  
blooming in her hands, getting hit

was an afternoon spent watching the wind tumble  
into a row of linen drying in the yard.

With each stroke, the bristles of the brush  
would bend and drag, erasing the tally marks

of each day she spent holding her breath.

## **Audrey Hepburn, Moon River High School Senior Prom**

She remembers: streamers, colored lights,  
and palms pulling palms onto the dance floor.  
Tuxedo jackets draped over chairs. Gloves pulled

free from fingers. Legs that teetered on high heels  
like cords wound to electric plugs. Soldered limbs.  
Bodies fused. The hopeful ones along the walls

like unused AA batteries rolling loose in a drawer.  
Pictures taken in low watt light. The wet glow  
of flashbulbs between strokes of mascara. A stairwell

of neck. She thinks of the night that stretched out afterwards  
like limos and lips and legs. How she kept the wilted flowers,  
colorlost and cradled in a complimentary champagne glass,

like ingredients waiting to be crushed. She shrugged off  
envy and lust. Her audience a still-life of broken pirouettes.  
She would move unrehearsed, the way the others wanted to

when everyone was looking.

## From Rochester, a Narrative History in Snapshots

*[Photography] is an enduring record of many things seen only once in a lifetime and enables the fortunate possessor to go back by the light of his own fireside to scenes which would otherwise fade from memory and be lost.*

-George Eastman, speaking of the Brownie Camera, 1900

*April 1, 1948*

A black and white photograph taken from the backseat of a late fifties Chevy, the driver turned and speaking to the passenger riding shotgun. One hand on the wheel, a tear in the fabric of the roof.

*July, 1990- June, 2007*

I've done my time in the backseat,  
summers tucked between older brothers  
headed to the Adirondacks. And in *the loft*  
of a van, a name for sleeping bags  
spread over guitar cabinets.

*August 15, 2007*

I've fallen asleep while searing into valleys  
in Southern Kentucky. I've collided  
with eighteen wheels of metal sheeting.  
I've woken up on the wrong side  
of rumble strips.

*October 14, 1884*

I come from the place where roll film was invented,  
giving way to the moving picture. You could put life to film,  
document anything as it happened.

*Year Unknown*

My worries will be confirmed.  
This unexplainable premonition  
that I'll see my end, devoid of heroism,  
chock full of the ordinary,  
behind a steering wheel.

*March 5, 1912*

Eastman developed his legacy  
by proving that a single frame,  
the exposure of light to film,  
beauty bathed in bleach,  
can resonate.

*May, 1914*

I want to write like early cameras, to open  
like an accordion gasping air, pulled into the shape  
of a pyramid turned on its side.

*March 14, 1932*

Eastman made a living of pausing time, of making instants  
infinite. From darkrooms to billboards to the walls  
of our homes. But even he learned his limitations,  
needed words to justify taking his life. *To my friends,*  
*My work is done, why wait?*

*1949- present*

You can still walk through his house, a movement  
like a stop bath over a print, to absorb the images  
that surrounded him. An elephant head  
mounted on the wall. Tusks that reach out  
like calcified arms. Floral patterns shaped  
from wrought iron, black vines crawling  
up walls and over archways. Ashtrays  
crafted from animal hooves. Table top flower pots  
crafted from animal hooves. An endless archive  
of prints and films. Open gardens cut with brick walkways,  
an explosion of red shades. Transmission fluid. Dried blood.  
The throats of orchids in bloom.



## Good Intentions and Locomotives

The train station drones like hospital machines.  
It is an abandoned respirator that keeps empty city lights

burning. Smokestacks on the perimeter  
redraw the rail yard as an industrial forest

and make the sky a charcoal drawing.  
A blurred panoramic of clouds made from gunpowder

and cancer coughs. The station is smudged awake  
by the calloused hands that laid the tracks. It is not

a scene fit for big screen danger and thrill.  
There is no damsel in distress tied to the tracks.

No golden locks to shimmer around a dirty, beautiful face.  
No collarbones reaching from a torn nightgown.

No damsels, but it's not hard to believe  
these rail lines were laid out in their image.

Boys will come from miles in every direction  
to feel the pressure of the freight

steam driven in their embrace.

## **Then In the Spring Something Happened to Me**

*For J.S.*

All day I waited for the fog to clear. It kept crawling in  
off the water like boys on the shores of Normandy. I wondered  
if you could hear the foghorn on your side of town. If it kept you

up at night. You've been packing your things, deciding  
what stays when you leave. I try to make a mental list  
of what will go with you. Stacks of Eugene O'Neill

and Tennessee Williams, the Cassavetes box set and library  
of films. Your prophets never asked for saviors. Neither did you.  
The words were always more important than the vessel that sent them.

I know those vessels won't stop coming. From the harbors  
and the gutters, through the nights you lie awake  
trying to convince yourself, trying to hear your own voice

over the sirens. Don't forget, that your voice alone,  
from the bottom of every well you've found yourself in  
has found a way to rise, to resonate.

## 48 Minutes

I am alone now, truly alone, and absolutely isolated from any known life. I am it.  
If a count were taken, the score would be 3 billion plus two on the other side of the moon,  
and one plus God only knows what on this side.

-Michael Collins, from *Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journey*

Imagine making it all the way to the moon

and not being able to step foot on it. To wait  
in the never-ending everything, orbiting

while Armstrong and Aldrin dug oversized footprints

into the dusty surface for the first time. He goes  
unremembered among the trio. The entire world

tuned in to live vicariously through Neil

as he delivered a solitary sentence, grammatically flawed,  
that would be canonized as the first words of man

reaching outside himself, into the out there, the honest unknown.

A culminating moment for a generation  
of kids who stayed up on weeknights, holding flashlights

under their covers, pretending to move in zero gravity

and catch condensed space food in their mouths  
as it floated from their hands. They'd look back to earth

and see how even tension could appear peaceful.

In Apollo, he drifts away from the landing. He rotates  
further from earth than anyone in history. Alone,

he reaches the back porch of the moon, and is taken

into unrelenting darkness. Shadowed from Earth and Sun,  
unreachable by radio for 48 minutes.

He learns new definitions of silence. It sounds

like the waiting room for death. He exhales  
just to see the mist that gathers on the glass.

He speaks the names of his children aloud

and wonders if right and wrong mean anything  
in a time and place that will never exist to anyone else.

With his head bowed, this is his confessional:

A vessel where he could speak without guilt. Where he could  
fill a place without gravity with the stories of those held down by it.

How many walked out of their homes that night,

into a light breeze, catching the reflection of their faces  
in wood-framed windows, just to look at the moon,

because it was different now? Attainable. How many walked out

to their streets, backyards, and rooftops without a word,  
eyes wide, lit up and moon white because they wanted to feel

the night like he did? To stand, as still as the axis on which we spin.

V.

*I am courting a madness I cannot explain.*  
-Sarah Slean, "Parasol"

## Bury Us Quick

How are soldiers to feel  
when assigned to pack the personal items  
of a deceased infantry member  
they pulled guard duty with?  
To gather the pictures, letters, and few belongings  
that distinguished them in the barracks  
as *the guy who liked to work on cars*,  
or *the one with terrible rhythm who still loved to dance*,  
or *the new father*. It seems too easy  
for us to whittle life down to a few small things  
we can call our own.

So if two men in fatigues  
ever come to speak to my mother, without  
coming into the house, to give her the news  
about her youngest son, I wouldn't want  
them to leave a letter from the government  
and a folded flag in my place. *Things*  
never meant much to us. When I'm gone  
from this place for good, I don't want to leave behind  
a mausoleum of me, a museum of dust.  
So pack nothing,  
keep moving.

## **An Open Letter to the Natural World**

Unending overcast has me thinking, who decided  
on the image of heaven as a cluster of clouds?

Let's hope it wasn't the news anchors  
who narrate wild fires as they swallow California. Or the preachers

who try to convince us these fires are the fingertips of hell  
reaching through the crust of the earth.

*To whom it may concern,  
some of us are content, shivering here,*

*we don't need to be told what to feel,  
or to be taught to repent,*

*because your end is never-ending  
and our end is never near.*

## **If Genetics Has Taught Me Anything**

it is to not wait up for the disease  
that will eventually take my life from me.  
When you know what's coming,  
you are never taken before your time.  
I can't say I'll be surprised when I wake up  
in a shower of dull overcast  
and notice the change my body has accepted.  
Whether it tints my skin, or burrows deep  
inside me, I'm prepared.

Sure, I haven't seen a snow globe morning  
in the frigid heart of Moscow  
or walked along The Seine  
as the streetlights, like lit matches, radiate  
and reflect in the river. I haven't  
published a book or owned a house, so much  
is still undone.

These checklists I make  
aren't to motivate me. I shouldn't need  
encouragement to live  
or reminders of death  
when there are days I feel  
like my health ran away,  
like the family dog  
when he shot through the screen door  
to chase something  
none of us saw come  
or go.



## Dear Doctors

I've decided to donate my body when I die. The miles of potholes and rumble strips driven into my face have no destination, leave them behind. Let the crows feet carry my eyes to the blind in Poland so they can see the countryside that never left my grandparents. Let students research the disease that will stitch itself into me. I don't know who would want the traces of gun barrel gray in my hair, so I'll leave that up to you. The lungs are good, don't worry. I'd like to believe my heart is too. My knees crack when they bend, haven't had practice praying in years, but the legs can still slow dance. So if there's an older couple that needs hips or knees to remember what earlier times felt like, take them. My ears have been plugged in and amplified. If they can play back the years like electric seashells, you could listen for the movement of ghosts through gutters, the self among others. If science can make use of brain folds packed with bad directions and questions about life, hockey stats and unfinished guitar parts, they're all yours. I just have one request. Bury me with my hands. I made a promise to someone that I love, and I intend to keep it.

## Thoughts from 20,000 Feet and Falling

At this height, I imagine  
both wings of the airplane ripping free,  
taking Row 20 away in a vacuum of cabin pressure.

The large man at my side is filled with a caged disbelief.  
For imagination's sake, he can be The Big Bopper. I don't mind  
being the bookworm Buddy Holly at his side,

guitar tight in my arms like an infant  
that needs to be soothed. Everything goes slow motion  
and the voices around me explode in a tangle of panic.

Yet I'm thankful,  
because today I have a window seat,  
and I can see I'll be landing in mountains

where greens have begun to shift to pale yellow  
and poison apple red, my eternal traffic light bedspread.  
If only Etta James were here to croon us through cumulus—

*At last, my love has come along, my lonely days are over.*  
I like to envision her telling us not to worry  
about finding the right words to say,

as long as we mean the ones we do. Hard to imagine  
this plane making a stop for me in the clouds  
on its way down. I don't think I'd fit in

up here anyway. I've never had faith in anything  
I couldn't crush in my palms.

**Reminder**

*Altered quote from a church sign in Bellevue, Tennessee*

The only thing we can take with us to hell is other people.

## **I'm Making a Time Capsule**

If I'm still alive in ten or twenty years,  
it will be a key towards understanding how.  
My time capsule will be in the shape of my body  
and it will open like a coffin. I will bury it  
in the woods behind my house, between tree roots  
that fan outward like octopus arms. All the characteristics  
I've grown tired of in myself will go.  
First, will be my reluctance to speak.  
The cords strung through my throat  
have been frayed and bristled, like the guts  
of a rotary phone ripped from the wall.  
On top of that will be the reckless concept  
of how sleep was my answer to hunger.  
How stripping myself down to a shell  
was supposed to harden me. I could read  
my bones like words carved in marble. Each day  
was an ax blade cutting deeper into my branch  
of the family tree. The last thing I'll put in the capsule  
will be my recollection of the days I waited for death  
to find me. The hours that hung next to each other  
like old clothes. The way they felt familiar,  
like the smell of home, the faces of my family,  
and the solid black suit I will wear  
as they lower me into the ground.

## Legacy

Don't put a cross on my tombstone.  
I never carried one worth holding onto.

Please don't carve flowers into it either, I don't want  
an everlasting curtain call with roses at my feet.

Don't lay me down under a statue of an angel. Unlike them,  
I never could fight the demons out of my paradise.

Let me tell you why. My body has been a drop box  
filled with letters stamped *Return To Sender*.

I feel time envelope me like water over a sandbag barricade.  
Life has always carried me like a twig in talons.

These hot air balloon lungs need a flame to keep them afloat.  
So let me rest with my name and my years engraved,

the first and last things given to me,  
a trademark for what little I've left.

## Elegy

Last night, my town saw five girls learn death  
like a bundle of lit ladyfingers that broke open the calm.  
The back roads I learned to drive on  
were covered in broken glass, a tide  
of transmission fluid sparkling under police lights.

I dreamt I could slow things down. I could  
walk to the solid lines where the car began to drift,  
trace my fingers over the hood.  
Lightning bugs were drowning in the headlights  
and reappearing in the tree line.

I wanted to take the girls from the wreck  
like an apparition,  
or an older brother,  
and leave the four doors open  
so the car would look like a dragonfly from above.

I wanted to lay them down holding hands  
in the grass beside the road,  
like construction paper cutouts,  
so they'd know they weren't alone.  
So they know they aren't alone.

## **Bombs Away**

Our years have been a process of dismantlement  
and rebuilding. We find comfort in places  
only to destroy them. We are nuclear knuckles  
that drop from the hatches, we have moments of brilliance  
but only in flashes. We paint our self portraits  
with fingers in soot, in the dirt and the dust  
of our own neighborhoods.

Everything we know and everything we love  
is in a variable state of crumbling,  
so let us be the embodiment of unrest.

Let us open our chests, like suicide bombers  
in a crowded street, and show the living world  
we have more than death to give.