

GETTING HOME

*“There is As Much In a Home As Away”*

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## PREFACE to “GETTING HOME”

The home might look like this: if there were a wall in a room, a bedroom perhaps, and everything scratching inside the self was wallpapered to it, a poster might distract the pattern, the arrangement you have set out and carefully designed, but it might fit because frankly it is a decent poster, and goes well with the rest of the room, and nothing would be lost; but if you die or move or just happen to be out shopping for tahini or catching music on Saturday night, and someone enters that room, sees the poster and thinks, “whoa, this guy’s really into Bono, that’s all he’s got in here?” and everything else becomes a backdrop for modern Irish rock nationalism, and you come home to find your name on a watch-list or a U2 list-serve, or discover the IRA pamphlets under the pillow. Effectively whatever judgment made, it is a judgment, separate from the aesthetic intention which might propose a likeness toward Bono, but certainly not a means to argue for or against this perspective. It frames and crops the vision of the poem in light of a general misconception, (not misinterpretation) and offers a realization entirely out of tune with the poem’s considerations.

This engagement with the poems should examine the clarity and quality of this obfuscation of intentions, how well the poem negotiates a loose, lyrical, and free workspace on the page. That space is something I can relate to a sense of “home” which at its primary focus maintains a lack or absence in familiar ground. The poems point or pivot or center the imagination in a haven that may or may not look like home to anyone, it might be the perfect fold of wave, or the color blue, or a constellation, or a toothbrush, but the meaning of home arrives into its own existence in a process of tuning to the specific and personal creation of each home-state these poems inhabit. To that effect, the

poems develop an acute awareness, are highly interested in themselves, not necessarily through an originality of revelations, but through an attention to their relation with one another. It would be better to read these poems not as a sequence, but more closely as a neighborhood whose neighbors (the poems) are cordial enough to have brunch or carpool every once in awhile. I wanted to find nearly human and quite limited discoveries occurring within the poem. This intention hinges on the process of the imagination on the page and if the poem offers this phenomenon unique to poetry, the human interest becomes inwardly the poem's interest; one whose weaknesses or successes depend upon a delicate tension through an inventiveness of words on the page to admit a sense of place for this poetry. In my mind, these poems have entered the neighborhood of poetry.

### **A Context For Poetry**

It seems impossible to ask poetry to incite the former kinds of action it performed through words. Poetry seems to be further removed from an identity with action, political, social, satirical, the subjects and matters that could keep movements and changes alive; so distant, that this distinction might seem unnecessary to make. In 1962, Ezra Pound recognized this rise in other matters, the “competition that was never there before” and he elaborates on the contenders of his day, “now one has got with the camera an enormous correlation of particulars. That capacity for making contact is a tremendous challenge to literature.” I was delighted to come across this interview in paperback, but I probably could have Googled it. How would Pound begin to approach YouTube or Facebook and society's access to “particulars”? Essentially Pound's issue with what poetry can claim is exacerbated when almost any imaginable issue has access to over-watched and outspoken media. A crisp and targeted reality is safely harbored in websites and posted for millions

of people to see. We “make contact” and are conditioned to a visibility of reality without illusion or presentation, a reality formed through a plethora of “particulars” that has never existed before. Thus, depending on the intent of the poem, this environment may be problematic and hostile to poetry. The following poetry does not intend to write about Google and “particulars” or the changing state of the imagination, because it is separate from that reality. What still separates a poem from any other experience in life is the rewarding collision of the artificial and ordinary through language.

### **Pitching The Poem**

It is becoming easier to say I am confident in the poetry I write. Certainly I am comfortable with the art I have invested in it, otherwise I would never expose myself in this way. It is the way a pitcher is comfortable standing on the mound, envisioning the ball sailing through the strike zone and making it unhittable. The way he is trained not to pitch straight across the plate each time because he has stockpiled the curves, and sliders, and knuckle balls that hug corners of the plate. But how confident is he that each pitch takes the line of sight he imagines before it is released? In many ways, a poem flirts with a similar perception of talent and authority. The poet might know how to deliver the poem, and oftentimes delivers it well, but there will always be the ones that fail, the homerun pitches that derail a poem’s achievement, sent into the vague and plain and unshocking land of bad poetry. Words can create brilliant surprises, but after the wind up, and the release on the page, the gesture seems entirely out of the poet’s reach. Readers are prepared to scrutinize each gesture, each adjustment of the ball in flight.

My issue with the reception of a poem became clearer to me after I asked why I watch the pitcher, or professional sports, so energetically in the first place. In many ways I am attracted to sports, not because of the play-makers, the golden gloves, or the most valuable players, because the majority have reached that pinnacle of sport's most talented and are just waiting for a greater recognition if it comes. Nobody is perfect, but I can assume the players are, the way the home crowd at a ballpark assumes that their closer can complete a scoreless inning and traffic incidents that night will not increase significantly on the drive home when in fact, the most intense human interests lie in the blown save, the reach-on-error, a dropped pop-up, those moments which keep the greatest talents and athletes in check; even the stats reveal that errors in baseball are much less common, and much more significant than a homerun. They are truly game changing events. The intentions of error in a poem, the drive for something that is not natural or expected can have an adverse effect on its audience. Their reaction can become so visceral that the surprise in a wild pitch, or an inexplicable metaphor is gratifying and at its core maintains a level of entertainment and surprise.

The difference with poetry over other forms of expression relies on this element of expectations. Approval or objection in poetry should not be, at its source, analytical. If my poem has a narrative function, it is meant to support an outstanding sentiment, it might be as simple as the pleasure of a single word, or as unanswerable as a comparison between cows and surfing (a connection brought to my attention by some readers of "Riding into the Evening"). For example, in the crafting of "The Publican's Smile," I heard the word "crestfallen" earlier that day and asked myself how something can be crestfallen. And the notion of a toothbrush, still wet with toothpaste that fell on a floor

offered itself, at first as a convenient pun; I had not conceived of its origin, but its quirky appearance and texture felt right and uncanny enough to explore further.

A poem achieves that inexhaustible quality when it successfully takes the reader into an existence that can suspend itself without explanation beyond the poem. This persuasion towards resisting narrative highlights the attraction of a lyrical precision which forms in the tuning of word to content. There is a liberating effect in capturing an idea or image in a transmutable way, a way that invites the reader to attach a meaning like a painting or a sound. I recall Kate Light speaking a few years back about a recurring struggle with her poetry in describing music in a subtle way, and resisting an obvious musical lexicon. How, for example, can language tune to the crack of a bat in the absence of sound?

a ball drives low from the mound  
the swinging club splinters on impact  
there, a crowded section snaps up  
behind a fielder's eye wide and nervous  
tracing the ball at the warning track...

This attempt to pivot around the sound might suggest elements of a bat cracking, but it does not narrow to the focus of the sound itself. It implies some elements and ignores others yet the lyrical precision resides in yanking this sound further from itself to defamiliarize and unhinge the reader from an understood idea or perception.

Any poem works under many assumptions and responsibilities of the reader. As a poem by nature is limited to the currency of words the formation of new words can stretch the lyrical value of a poem further. Inventiveness appeals to the emancipatory quality of a poem and essentially the displacement of realistic proposals towards life riddled in realities. The use of arresting, experimental language can perform several tasks

for a poem, by placing less emphasis or entirely lacking a direct treatment of history, moral revelation, or argument at large. If poetry is an inherently ambiguous medium as I have prescribed it, I hope to unshackle the reader from the experience of ordinary realities or imaginations and offer a closer sensory and visual experience with words. If at its end, a poem does not make sense, one can at least make a musical sense of words, which can be greater, and more accessible, in the act of expression, than one assumes from its appearance.

### **Musicality and Home**

In defining the sense of place grown out of this work, I find more material and identity in the “sense” of it than the “place”. The “sense” of a position like a home inherently lacks a stasis or limit. The poem that works out of a “home”, at an aesthetic level, and more precisely, on a level of diction, must invest in an immediate deference to the lyric framework of that singular word, it must render a life in the word and provide a vision or material value because language should not be the way to clarify or overarch the feeling, intention, or heart vested in the poem. In other words, the poem at its heart, does not care to reflect an expression or particular experience; rather it become the experience, the home, the living and breathing expression through language.

There is a musical attraction natural to words in a poem that in many ways can answer to the physical agency I am approaching. Stephen Sondheim accounts for not just the importance of music, but a kind of eminence and life music gives to a narrative, when he says “numbers go out front, no matter how intense, they go out front... and the performers are lucky if they get away with their lives, if they don’t fall into the pit, get run over by some of the moving scenery.” Sondheim suggests not only a sort of peril in



the performative aspect but also the risk in keeping an even interest with plot in a musical when he states “inventive narrative is very hard to do, so it isn’t about ‘great’ or even ‘good’.” Essentially, for Sondheim, the musicality makes it a unique performance, one which cannot be sacrificed for narrative, and presents a general point of departure in understanding the presentational quality of poetry, which relies on its foundation, the musicality and objective relation of words in a poem.

Poetry can unravel in a different way with language; it is the musical thing to do with words, where words perform like a tuner for the concerns of the poem. It can be seen as a musical system by which words organize and match any sound, any racket that can be heard; though it is only the sound we pick to listen to, that experience which attracts us and becomes important enough to organize into a poem. If there were organizing principles for letters the same way there are notes to a composition, in that each letter of the alphabet were attributed a note, and several notes put together made a chord, and the chords offered the poems chordal quality or set tone, alongside its tonal shifts, cadences and multiplicity of departures, then we might begin to hear various things in a poem. For an arrangement of sounds to be recognized as a chord (a set of notes in tune with one another) it must have a specific duration, and like a poem, the duration of a particular sound is often offset by rests, caesuras, tonal or rhythmic shifts, and a slew of other musical interests.

I think this structure for the poem is possible, and it begins with a home key, a tonal center through which the chords, the words or phrases modulate. The poem identifies with a singular tone and each word forms a relationship to the one next to it. Like notes in a composition, a word adjusts and modifies and acts relative to the other

notes it stands with, to form the complete sound and structure of the poem. Where there is little or no transitional material to afford the movement of the poem, a repeated phrase or word which performs like a coda or reference back to a home key might enter, for example in the use of “open” and “broken” in “Open and False Glass.” This effect provides a return to the original movement while keeping images or ideas relatively fresh, unrepeated and remote from one another. Essentially it is a lyrical way of not restating an entire idea, but reminding us of it, and modulating from it.

This poetry is not entirely about words, but it develops a sense of home in its physicality with this music, and gives a sensory and tangible dimension to a word in itself. Through this inherent musical connectivity, poetry is closer to the musical than the play. The actors, the motions, the “events” in the following poems are rather scarce and when available are attached to be quite common realities that the reader could recognize.

What is more difficult and struggling through me in these poems is a captivation with the evolution and energy of words, how they shape the vision to find the word that performs the thought or idea in mind. The poem’s material life requires words tuned to one another to create the individual landscape of the poem. This reflexive aspect benefits from the rhythmic movement in a poem whether a combination of words can be separate but rhythmically parallel to one another (“Riding into the Evening”) or clumped together and nearly tripping over one another, (“Blue”) or gracefully divided and slowly meditating over their own individual sonorous quality (“This Morning, Charm City”), the words in a poem operate through unique phrases. Like the name “Susquehanna” or the word “crestfallen”, they can inhabit a place and a texture separate from the other aesthetic interests of the poem.

## **On Blue**

To approach the natural identity and life that words can inhabit in the poem more directly, there is an intelligence in the word blue from “Blue” which is entirely musical in its affect. The word is not leveraging the psychological implications of the poem, the fixation and desire repeated and repealed in various forms of blue; rather the word “blue” evolves into the object sought after and the very idea of “blue” offers resolution to the poem’s subjective underpinnings. The hurried, frustrated, and busy spirit in the “blue” itself supports the emergence of musical intelligence directly in “blue”. This object is self-contained and tuned to the poem through an excitable improvisation which the word “blue” permits. The blueness of blue introduces an extravagance in the word blue, the non-word blue, associations with blue, all of which bear a musicality, and force a kind of indelible mark on one's experience with the state of blue throughout the poem. It evolves into an aesthetic experience that clearly complements a gesture toward a pure, unfiltered and concrete musicality of blue, a common and objective and very possible idea for the poem. Blue is the origin of intelligence which must be handled objectively, to write it, kick out everything about it, and render the experience of it, to gain the knowledge and existence of blue, and understand the objective experience through the simple sound of all blue having been blued, now blue is home.

## **Conclusions**

Though these considerations at a level of diction are of high interest in my idea of poetry there is a greater balancing act of a lyric and narrative with which I am contending through these poems. The lyric seems to be the underpinnings, and the musicality then

often invites attention-grabbing or non-word words, and this occurrence implements directional pulls towards an individual material existence and singular effect of a word. An event in the second stanza of “Dog’s Food” which reads, “A frame within it a very blind dog,/who sits pushing his butt, rear-/regardant, sitting freely/ Descartent on the cement plot,/guarding it/” has an observant quality in the pair “freely Descartent.” It contains an existence and logic, a definitive and limited history of this description that distinguishes from word-play, or the purely explanatory factors of a sketch of a dog on a porch. Though it maintains a lighter and more playful vocabulary, the poem does not laze in its reach towards a material or accessible existence of the words on the page.

There is a quality of freedom, of lyrical departures and disparate flourishings, in any word which set against another that calculates the dimensions and presence it gains and loses, and which surpasses the general descriptive effectiveness within the poem. In other words, an abrupt shift in a poem might act like a dog chin deep in the kitchen trash, who knows he is getting into trouble. It is a way of being disobedient, or simply enjoying the messy playful moments in life, but the dog consciously knows it is in digging through trash, and as mischievous as it appears, will listen intently for the owner’s snap of fingers or a quiet whistle to call it back. So a home key works in the same way, sometimes quietly asserting its presence, letting some flourishes sift through the pleasures of lyrical digressions, but always getting back to the hand that feeds it, for the poem cannot survive otherwise and one might revisit Pound’s complaint about trashy poetry through his any-idiot-can-be-spontaneous lens to realize the priority of the home-key. If a poem was to take on life’s questions, its darkness and proclivities, it must first reconcile its own representation of experience through words and tune itself to a level stripped to its

necessary expression. And if a poem can create a space and locale for a consciously acting language, which offers its own identity, then these poems should bear enough of a witness unto a place I can call home.

# DOMESTIC MUSIC

## Home-Made

I only need to slap the sky  
and I would find myself  
in the arms of a mother who could reinvent me  
M. Kahir-Eddine

I remember falling  
asleep at the city station  
and waking up to winter  
with the city lights  
frosting over.

Under a dewy light men ambled  
in rhythm toward  
a tall minaret.  
Some left homes in baseball caps  
or red and white knit scarves,  
bundled to their eyes.

They pressed hard against  
the wind, pouring into the streets  
for a sacred moment  
in the world.

They mumbled to themselves  
and to the sky, their words, or sounds  
like words, moved  
away from their mouths  
and into the sky,  
through café smoke and the deepest voice—  
descending much deeper  
than my sleep cut-short in a railway  
station chair—  
this voice sired the morning call to prayer.

To enter the mosque was not  
a possible thing to ask,  
so I went for the snow,  
shedding at the Atlas foothills,  
slung over rooftops,  
and icicling down  
the station doorway.

Prayer in this town  
draws a blanket  
of bodies to the streets,

winding through the stone paths  
of the medina;  
paths I still never learned.

Like a dog's first hydrant,  
the sky rained curious affections  
over, but naturally and even gently.  
It was my first snow  
and my first  
disservice to her hollow stone walls:  
I turned with a path  
where a stray  
was pissing over a crack on the wall  
of a café  
and the dogsteam rose,  
then dissipated.

In this alley, the snow  
and the cold flew  
between him  
and where I watched him.  
And he watched me  
with furious eyes and tore across  
the frozen stone and into a hole.

The ground was sharp,  
and sheeted  
in frost and dirt  
that pricked  
at the knees when I slipped,  
dodging a mule that carted colas  
to drink machines.

As I picked myself up  
from the uncobbled path  
a woman waved me  
toward her cloth-roof kiosk.  
Behind her, food  
was buzzing with flies.

She could have been cooking dinner  
in a beautiful dress at night,  
or the same mother with children  
clung to her side, who want home  
instead of a place to sell.

She invited me to the back,



and handed me a cold slab  
of morning jello and bread  
for a few coins and smiled  
like a vendor  
who sells to visitors.

I ate and it tasted like summer,  
and I smiled and was silent  
on the weather and things other  
than the food  
and the nearest taxi station.

And when she spoke of directions  
I needed to listen,  
but the unbroken buzz  
of flies drew my attention  
to the cold golden plate of jello in my lap,  
and separating its fruitflies with my teeth,  
and I thought nothing  
of leaving this city again.

## Desert Lights

Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned,  
unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,  
where we cannot see.

E. Bishop

The brightest light, a lone headlamp motorcycled steady  
twenty miles, flickered gently through the city, and failed  
just after sundown, along the night road

where we found as much in night as road and neither  
held back. As the electrical leftovers of turn signals  
and dash lights died, we throttled blind along the highway,

passing mile-marked tombstones whose digits a municipal  
worker carved by hand, whose numbers rose with the depth  
of dunes, and the crust of a moon that fit in a pill box of sand.

In shapeless shrouds, the dunes cleared around us and the sanded  
air shot in pressed blanks at us, scratching the breeze through  
our leathers and our sheltered skin, funneled between the stiff

desert brush. At either shoulder scarabs crawled through dromedary  
shit and tacked under our treads repeatedly, (repeatedly) rising  
and tumbling down a dune's side to the flat, gravelling part

in the road;  
between their crackles rose a blistering smell that can only feel  
so abandoned in desert. Where the cracked gravel became cracked  
pavement, an automobile on highbeams trailed us and mixed

the rattling two-stroke we'd tuned to with the smooth night trail  
of four axled balanced tires and six cylinders firing away.  
The taxicab headlights pooled into our vision, into sand I could grind

with my eyes when they blinked, and rocks that ticked  
at the full fairing's face. The sanded air skipped off into wind-  
streams as I sat behind the cold-blown back of a body I clenched

tight with white knuckles since we first left Rabat and headed  
where? Still grinding our electrical failure into the broken—  
unlit highway posts and cracked seams of concrete

road. They grew smaller and finer in the pit of desert,  
and a tremble of our shadows grew out the light behind us,  
the brightest light I was beginning to trust.

## Over the Roadside, Flares

*-in memoriam of HW Longfellow*

When she is not the moon  
    they call her Helen,  
in a brothel in Tyre.  
When she is not the waiting,  
smiling pock of ashen light,  
the desert's melon rind above,  
    they call her Helen.

When she is clothed only  
in the morning and a man's  
hand possessively stretched  
    on the back of her neck,  
when she hands him back to  
the night-tracing hours of the sun,  
    they call her Helen.

But when her body staples  
itself to nightfall, it splits  
from *the name upon men's*  
*lips*. Once the sun settles,  
like a blue pill dissolved in water,  
and disappears into her star-spread  
    sheet— she is above,  
where the white dints  
    of eyes cinder into fires  
for drivers along a highway.

The road-weary can trace the body  
    and light for miles  
from truck stop to truck stop.  
Into a cold slippery highway,  
she drifts out as ether  
in the slice of cerulean wind,  
and drifts from the hand  
    still red and ripe,  
burning the night's signature  
forged in morning's eyes.

Tonight she waits, suspended  
as the moon that drops  
    into your eyes, that Helen  
with her head thrown back,  
her flushed face and hair  
    anthologized in the pages

of rest-stop literature. She is ashen  
and waiting to take you to exile,  
    where no one sent you,  
and there she offers  
    the fires of night along the road,  
the desire which she can  
    always abandon.

## Home Rearrangements

The flame  
drifts out like a breath from the carpet runner,  
but travels faster, breathing harder than its body  
can inhale, and into a burning smell, a something  
in the room that catches. The smoke gathers  
in threads of window light, scaffolding  
the hemmed and weak wrought-iron escape,  
already stretching out of its stitches. Momentarily,  
as the landing gives into the heat, the bolts turn  
looser into the tenth-story grout, billowing  
the interior into the back-lit air. Dinner table  
leaves slip through the flames, folding under  
the street-curbed sleeves, and a brass headboard  
melts fast a candlestick wax around a poorly  
spun wick, as iron and brickdust of iron scatter  
into concrete muscles. They gather into a torso,  
skipping towards crosswalks' red hand (or where  
it used to be waving) chipping high as eyes above  
the powerline's sag of a smile, or landing  
at the foot of the booted coupe flapping a wind-  
shield of parking tickets. As the night turns into  
sirens and the flames taper off and on, the street  
empties of the lonesome damage. Scrambled  
and sealed off in fragments, and again misplaced  
back together. The see-through bags and latex  
gloves dust close but far removed from the weapon,  
swabbing only for a print. And by morning light,  
the street empties away, crossing over the shadows  
of iron passing into the road, over the echo of drapes  
singing in the tug of flames, and a torch still picking  
at the carpet.

## Portrait of Lichtenstein, As A Young Man

Fading through the backboard  
of the old-fashioned pinball machine,  
the whitened slash of teeth in the woman's mouth  
turns unmarked-van white,  
behind the man pictured with her,  
sharing the dusty glass casing—

To play his picture on a pinball machine,  
Roy, the boy in himself, thumbs in a quarter,  
plays with palms turned out,  
pressed against the spring loaded plunger.

He drives a pair of marbles  
up the wire track and out,  
as his eye wanders with the metallic ball,  
shooting through the ramps,  
and vacuumed portals, skillshots and a *jackpot*—

back-scratches pluck from  
the tack of pinballs,  
between bumpers,  
and both shot straight down between the rubber flippers  
cackling and cackling again.

Roy's playing hands try again, timing the groin,  
cheating with a pelvic thrust to the pinball frame,  
hoping the woman won't catch on, and say *tilt* through the backbox.

Her image under that glass, the straight smile,  
with teeth white and bold,  
brace for the smooth jolt of hips that slither,  
keeping him this side of orgasm.

When he painted the mysterious crime,  
was the heartbreak steady in Lichtenstein's man?  
That night she came home, was he polishing candlesticks,  
cooking dinner at the time,  
or picking a romantic channel in advance?

Roy looks in the way of the man in the frame,  
and imagines him-and-her,  
encased and alone:

Roy and his image in the dark arcade glass,  
scavenging for language through tilts and jolts  
each replay plunges away at the captioned cry  
    the first words that ever left her red swath of lips:  
*Forget it/ Forget me/ I'm fed up with your kind!*

## Blue

Handing me the mail, he fusses  
you could be my mother,  
in the same-  
    changing story of you,  
slides the wallet print  
across the counter— when you  
  
    were a cuter you,  
        he jokes— at the stationery store,  
    fingering through needless postcards,  
        studying the intense bodies  
in the blank space  
        of blue backgrounds  
    as if they could alter  
themselves,  
change midday like the color  
        of your eyes,  
  
but not a new-born blue or Paris blue  
        soft against an Eiffel tower  
or the blue beyond a passenger  
        who stares out windows  
with everything in view:  
  
the bluegrass rushing under a train  
    or the opposite coastal  
sky over a new blue Atlantic and  
    a plane landing into European smoke  
and the endless transfers from tarmacs to towns  
    back to tarmacs or churches  
    and cobbled histories  
    rolled into blue cigaretting puffs.  
  
In the Belgian rain, faces turn  
    lonesome in their boots  
        sloshing the milk-  
fed gray from a southern country street,  
    under skies north of the Cote D'Azur,  
        a distant cousin once-removed,  
brusque  
    and mudding the lavenders  
where the border splits.



## A Near-Purple

And back home,  
    Taylor leaves the apartment  
    in his postal blues  
His work spills over the seat  
A stack of envelopes coffee-stains  
    And sours with half-and-half,  
dampening and curdling  
into passenger corners.  
    The smell of cards,  
    of coffee-stained letters, bills,  
    envelopes and darkening inks  
thickens in the windshield under a dusty blue  
    and baggy morning light  
    His waits each morning until it fades,  
    for the good grief to slide  
like clouds off postcards  
with her head cropped into a Belgian night  
    and the postal sky drains out  
hopped moonless blues over  
    green-cowering beet fields.

## And Red

But enough on nights  
    what about the mornings?  
Does your coffee red and the bean, glint red,  
    as it ticks and the grinder  
    blinks  
        its on-off eyes,  
groaning from sleep, and churns red  
    and warm southern grounds still  
    wrestle into your head  
night after night after  
    afterdrinks  
        at the bar?

You're still the prettiest  
alcoholic wife  
    from Memphis,  
        Taylor says;  
    they haven't forgotten you  
Your toes stubbing curbs  
    all the way home,  
    when you went everywhere  
but the bathroom, and every man's head,  
    but Taylor's, rushed with redfish thick  
and slimy necks, slapping skin  
    and cackling  
    about 'bar-bait' and whores.

The nights your skinwhite eyes  
    rolled over if they closed,  
and turned coffee-red by morning  
    and nothing looked like baby blues,  
        but still-born  
and you blinked into the fall light  
and his neck in bed turned  
    and the blood-shot settled in a pair of beans,  
    the color of your beaming eyes,  
settled  
    like sediment at a bottom  
    or bread crumbs dissolving in the Seine.  
and the coffee-red he strings you  
    up in your cards on Christmas trees  
a color red, threading back from blue, a near-purple  
spreads skeptic spirits over holidays and each day

the way you have coffee colored blue  
the way he pictured your eyes closed,  
makes him close his mouth  
and makes you closer.

## The Note

Don't you hear what —  
is quietly promising me?  
Goethe

On the kitchen table a note read: "Darling, the waters have broken. Taxi your ass to the hospital. Come." I was unreachable, my fault. The thing would be born dead and Lia would die with it. The way I woke up again with a headache and Mahler's 4<sup>th</sup> still ringing in my head, certainly. Swiveling around, my brother's became a vast and caving apartment, with dividing walls demolished, and a mansard roof where light entered obliquely. The glass panes were dirty or frosted, and a heap of objects on all sides of me proclaimed the fear of empty spaces, like the odd and hollow atelier that Stradivarius abandoned, accumulating dust on the uncracked bellies of lutes.

Into dusk, my eyes adjusted and I was in a petrified zoo: a bear cub with glassy eyes climbed an artificial bough, a dazed owl stood beside me, and a marten or skunk on the table in front of me, I couldn't tell as I shifted from the dead marbled stares. "Tomorrow, my girlfriend's having a baby," My voice danced between the dusty coughs. He offered congratulations, haltingly, as if not certain who the father was.

I came home to the clean air and the note in the kitchen that buried my lifeless ideas of her. Lia was in flight, slowly moving objects through, her creature still yeasting in her, living and dining. Rooms for them.

I wobbled into the ward with unsteady legs, hustling people who knew nothing about anything. Shouting in jerks and leaping eyes, Lia is having a baby. Doors swinging and closing at supersonic speeds, cream pies flying, and old cars crashing. *The* lack of surprise, their *hard eyes asking* me to calm, *down to the settled* idle moments shaped in slow motion, in the discipline of gymnastics, in the senseless waits in baseball. *But I searched for the stitched ball bruised and sailing over head*, taped ankles and wrists, banded heads, the wrong invention muscling its way out.

I panted my way into a room, living, and Lia was pearly pale, but smiling. Beside her was a boy, whole. Ten toes, ten fingers, two lips, two ears, two eyes...He was into a nap and cradled in the night, softly breathing to Mahler's 4<sup>th</sup>. The poco adagio, he wrapped so tight and easy in, it seemed, as if no body ever danced this close to their dreams.

## **DOMESTIC SILENCE**

## Return

I came home to a ghost town  
    with people in it. Homes  
lit along a cold country road  
and dodged through the stiffness of silos.  
These still borders  
snaked, gathering gently  
    through the nightly frost and slowed  
a creek, stuffed bedside in the sleepy road,  
to a percussive dripping drool  
    into the reservoir.  
As the water nearly unruffled, untangling  
the faces of bald cypress trees  
from a kiss out waist-deep in the water,  
their stretching branching necks went slack,  
and their roots dangling off the bank  
    froze in place.

    A worry had risen slowly,  
perhaps an unsettled rock rose this ripple  
from its bottom,  
or the moonlight whiling  
    over my head  
was this stone light wobbling, as if turned  
face down with strong hands.  
Standing at the bank my weary  
    reflection splashed up on boots  
with people in them. Two bodies  
and three canoes moaned and loaded  
into an unmarked white van.  
    They sat with their lights off  
unflinching but about to flicker,  
if we snapped our tailing shadows  
back, and backing from the bank,  
    from the certain collared,  
    dragging sound  
with people in it  
which crept us back in between  
    the softening silo lights.

## Open and False Glass (the consciousness with a smile)

The day whose hours' hours you spent  
with a smile that  
was not yours

Her lips butterfly  
across the room  
Vaulted your skull  
Danced in curled fingers  
Tiptoeing evenly over your bony knots  
Combing out a desire

So warm in smoke  
sweating like an open  
broken hand  
you sat held out to her eyes  
Blue glass mistakes which were not yours  
When they opened and waited  
for the back of the head behind you  
to turn  
Sitting there at the barstool  
so warm inhaling the air  
of the cloud ribbed sky

The shot  
below sat lonely as a broken open fist  
A rock of comfort  
you downed before the flash outside  
ripped its white  
sun into pieces  
Shook loose a canine tooth of rays  
from it black and bruised gums

The sky you prepared to toast  
Seizured  
Broke open  
as if no light sprayed  
but packed against the clouds  
plastered the windows  
with beads of rain and shadows

The room in the storm  
filled with people  
you wanted to leave

Rain bled the sky  
and cried like a banished lamb  
nipping at its wounded skin

till the clouds drifting disappeared  
and single pearling flares left  
steaming out the window

Your false white silhouettes that entered in dreams  
were saving seats around you now

Their covered eyes smuggled  
in the weather  
under their hoods

At every  
doorswing the barroom opened  
Offered you flight from the soaking  
bodies that stood between it  
Bolted it seemed to the crooked stabs  
in the sky

The ripped light entered  
between their lips even flirted in a darkness  
and a crackle of nothing  
Conversation finally struck up  
then drifted away from the smiles

you drew with the light of the evening flash  
in the crooked the night



## Exchanges w/an Officer (Slovakia)

We sat for hours in the train car, trading  
the tatters of a dictionary like winter trappers  
half-trusting an offer. Russian to English-  
English to Russian. From far away a red  
phone is ringing off its hook, and we are  
in the room and stare at it for cavernous  
moments, but it's not a wall-phone  
and it rings like a pickle-jar half-spun  
and falling off the table. He passed me  
a scrap of Pirozkhies, and the heap had  
qualities of gifts. Sagging, and greasing  
through the napkin in my palm,  
which was buried and distant-looking  
beneath this souvenir sprung deep  
from a Siberian paperweightfood factory.  
The meat kept suitcase warm, breaded-stiff  
from the pastry layers, and shook out  
in grains and more than slightly meatless,  
like his mild history of the Russian beard,  
clip clap the words fell softly from his mouth  
like a pair of old sneakers. When he stroked  
the growth drawn down his chin it sounded  
like a forest we entered and a team of dogs  
were his fingers sledding through it.  
I opened my pocket calendar of Czars,  
dolls and famous ballerinas. The officer grinned  
among all of them, and crossed the Danube  
with them, like a slate pebble that skips  
and castles and dispatches. One river bank  
to the next. Out the window the Castle  
of Bratislava rose from the river, was something  
already glanced at, though, and signaled  
goodbye to our things and ourselves sunk  
back into the bleak, fitted faces. He left  
the width of a pepper stem in his smile,  
but otherwise stood looking blank on  
the platform, out toward a clear shadow  
of kindness matrioskaed away in the Old  
City homes: where faces drew from windows  
to against mantled walls, and their smiles  
precious as a fragile painted wood,  
grew smaller the more inward they went.

## This Morning, Charm City

Whoever reflects on four things...that which is above,  
that which is below, that which is before, that which is after.  
—Talmud Hagigah, 2:1

*Where were you last night, when we were  
interrupted by the man wearing a j— ?*

\*

Lia, you will never know it,  
but the half-line hanging in space  
was the beginning of a long sentence  
I wrote you.

Wish I hadn't even thought,  
let alone written it.  
When I pressed the key  
and milky film spread  
over fatal lines,  
I gave up trying to establish  
where my progress lay.

\*

Sometimes,  
I jump out a window  
and change my mind  
between the eight floor  
and the seventh.

When I try to go back,  
my image hangs in this dream,  
then shatters along  
the dotted city lines  
directing the traffic,  
disappearing  
in the morning street sweep.

\*

When you come to mind  
like detail in Miro  
or Rimbaud sinking,  
pivoting drunk,  
harbored at the table  
or ice-cubed and swimming  
like the name  
*Susquehanna*  
that melts from the lips  
when I think the nights over,  
and morning ebbs towards you  
(not against),  
when I am softly breathing,  
and wordless and waking up  
to see you and touch you,  
the words might run free.

## The Publican's Smile

The dog spread out with him  
on the cold face of the bathroom floor;  
he sniffed and lapped away  
in morning light near a toothbrush, knocked to the tiled,  
shower-damp floor, discolored and crestfallen.  
The brown-stained bristles wilted  
into the flattened cup of the owner's  
motionless palm spoiled and stinking in the whiskey  
mountain of mouth-wash  
pooling from the bellied-up stomach.  
His open shirt retained  
a higher alcohol content than the bottle  
of Listerine, still, on the bathroom countertop.

The dog's tongue  
tapped the handle of the brush  
hardly across a tile, and the toothpaste smeared  
off the bristles, left white dashes on the floor  
and flicked like something quick:  
that friendly smile across the bar,  
the worn haggard face in the barroom mirror,  
straightened into a smile  
in a moment of freshness regained;  
but the next moment never entered.  
Instead a mouth bristled and drooping pressed to his lips  
and they dribbled into the morning.

## Dog's Food

*In America only a dog  
Can spend his days  
On the streets or by the river  
In quiet contemplation  
And be fed*  
D. Budbill

Because  
the best friend in a boy wants  
a dog to pet in the sweat  
of a summer evening.  
Taking shelter in the high, brown  
maple awning of a stoop,  
that lets fresh crisp drafts  
enter the despairing light  
in its frame.

A frame within it a very blind dog,  
who sits pushing his butt, rear-  
regardant, sitting freely  
Descartent on the cement plot,  
guarding it.

He's nibbling  
for some knuckling acorns  
at his paws, sitting more  
disrepentant  
as he heaves the non-word: *woof*  
arguing with a string of maple leaves  
settling into the breeze.

The sitter takes a dog bowl  
of food to the rumbling foyer  
with folded clothes,  
and sets it near warm empty  
hampers. Her voice inside  
trails tawny brown shoulders,  
a thin arching back; showing  
summer skin  
through the torn folds in her top.

Splattering her voice  
against the screen panel door,  
she calls the blind dog  
to a bowling tear,

with his loose and threading  
blue leash corded to the collar.

It whips away the acorns, the leaves,  
his own old tail, frightening  
all things off the porch in different directions.  
He finds a way that hardly reaches her,  
but it must. Panting with his head  
through a return patch.

## A Place To Meet

-for Roadie

Curled in a knot  
in my neck,  
your soul  
rattled to sleep.  
It shook  
like your stomach  
churning, or bad  
indigestion or both.  
It crept out like a purr  
through ruddy air,  
or your mother  
from the bushes,  
this morning,  
pawing outside  
where you tested  
the leaves  
last night. She sniffs  
at them, or hears you  
testing the leaves.  
They tell her  
to look inside,  
but not exactly there.  
She hasn't scratched  
out the trash bin walls  
and by Friday  
when it goes out,  
she will be madness,  
confusion. Imagine  
how I take that in  
to explain things.  
Let her trace  
the bed, the litter box,  
the pillow where you  
slept, my chest.  
The difference  
is nothing  
if she claws you out,  
or does nothing instead  
for as long as she needs,  
to dig and dig  
with her stiff mange growing,  
the sad riddle forming  
in her back.  
Her tail wafting

like a quill  
into a thick stack  
of smells she initials,  
and half her work  
is already there,  
across the bedding,  
where the pulse  
was nearly in my hand,  
a hand over  
nothing now and  
swelling with you.



## Edibility

-for Arthur

The fresh peach in my hand  
throbs from the pit. It's a swollen  
head I'm holding, with tiny cloth hairs  
and peels of red ripened skin.

I give it to Aunt Jo at the panhandle.  
She likes to laugh and sweeten tea  
on the front porch there. And I watch  
her spread and disappearing feed

for the birds, bits like the stories I pretend  
to forget. She bites into soft skin,  
the day snaps into the morning I hit  
mom with a cast iron truck.

The backyard was still rowing peaches  
when my small hands could barely  
balance it, So I used two hands,  
like dad taught me at tee-ball

practice and swung. And mom's head  
jolted and he snapped,  
said *Norm!* I think I cried.  
But I hit her again, and dad spun around

*what the fuck, Norm!* And mom snapped again,  
and squeezed her head and the juice trickled  
onto the cloth headrest and she yelled *shit,*  
*Norm quit it.* We were only two hours

out of Macon. He screeched off the road,  
his massive hand felt under my seat,  
between legs— he brandished the truck  
as he stepped closer where the cars whizzed.

He stuck my hand in his back pocket to watch  
the truck clear across the highway, smack a tree  
like a bag of frozen gulf shrimp and limbs emptied  
their peaches onto the sweet, clumping rubble.

## Fall Break

Dad is out again, looking smaller through the attic window, and whirling leaves over and under the cedar hanging rails that run the edge of the driveway. In the attic, I sift through third grade observations on the habitat of crickets I caught at home and brought to the school terrarium. *1. Egg cartons upside down 2. They are eating smaller bugs, they hate water, doing other things too I think.* Blank spaces of the grid-lined lab sheet stack up like forgotten crates, stowing irretrievable distractions I wish were there *1. The trees that day, like now, fade to coal, fade when the leaves are there, brightest and tucking the acorns under. 2. Dad's leaf blower cranks to life, like the old pair of Velcro shoes that sit in another storage bin. I pull them out, and strap them up and suck a thumb and swing at recess when no one else is watching.* Habitual things— sucking thumbs and swings, the parent teacher watching, nodding off to warm wet thumbs and worn out sneakers that drag through wood chips... today the thumb tastes dry and the tongue is uninterested in it, the sneakers have scuffmarks I can't buff and the old pair of shoes is too small to fit into, the difference is a foot's length maybe, frankly the height we need for our leaning post-and-rail fence to get the newly installed look. But dad keeps saying it is fine how it leans, just push it slightly and prop it back up, and buy stakes from the cheapest hardware store. And I get them and he hammers the stakes in deep, so the stakes are deep and never high, between the graded concrete and the dry cracked season he is pushing back each fall.

## Sounds Familiar

The faucet's eyes would drip  
    with glass  
the counter shoulders shrugging wet,  
the wine that rushed us carelessly  
    fell from our hands, our touch-me's  
and hold-me's, shattered  
    trampled and circled under  
the kitchen's light, glasses fell,

and scratches riddled the bellyfloor  
    where the kitchen light limped out,  
limp like hair on the pillow when

    "I love you" needles  
backwards through its threading tune,  
and crinkles, poured over fresh ice,  
    is nothing personal poured in a cold  
square glass.

I cup it with two hands for parenthesis,  
    and swallow the night  
    gripping words,  
or the stack of air that was between us.

*This* is getting used  
    to each silver morning  
    away from that morning or the one  
put together in goodbyes last week.

When there was a way to rub the love in, love,  
there was the way we slipped drunk  
    like nightingales with their eyes  
crossed out, and snuck out of bed,  
each other before  
    each  
other's mornings...  
    Whoever left it up to us,  
    to choose each other's  
dreams after, and discover them  
in clean corners  
of pockets,  
and uncrush the lint picked  
from a corner of a pocket

turned inside out,  
    whoever left us to the soft,  
bundled and familiar sweep  
of glass, the morning shards  
chirping in the waste bin,  
    one by one  
            out the pan...  
whoever left that chore to us  
left everything to pile up  
and return to bed, but the wrapping  
of bodyweight  
back.

## **SHEDS OF HOME**

## The Cottage in Twilight

Below it dims as we peer over the basket's  
wicker edge, the hot air lifts us at twilight  
and hovers above dark howling winds—  
churning under a toothpaste moon  
and light pushes out and further out to sea.  
The heat of helium above our bones,  
steals the cold air that absorbs our breath  
and the burner throws and rocks the basket  
sliding the terrain and flesh below  
in and back and away from us:  
the chaffed and wood-planked crust  
of fry stands pushed on bicycle carts,  
with fat-pink babies strapped to strollers  
and sand bars dotting wind-fed bays  
along a straight and restless highway...  
The grease thick air, black between  
the gaseous lamps that slug forward and aft,  
dims over the drag of coast, and stretches  
the word *aboriginal from the pattern*,  
                  *the model, words to copy from a book*  
across pages of my copybook kept closed  
from this moment and grafted only  
to the rashes spreading on coastal skin,  
where the cover peels back a town of reels  
and inlet fishing spots, with drunks  
or crab pots anchored out. The oxygen  
reduced air slinks through the basket  
wicker weaves. Who, but us, hears  
the hot air rising, while tracing the coupled  
suns of passing cars, or the dimming  
of lamps behind window panes? The frog light  
shine of sleeping towns recedes like planets  
in orbit with the ghostshells of packed  
high-rise condos, low-leaning pines  
and a still ferris wheel hanging at the edge  
of the inlet pier.  
These disappear when the night passing,  
flashes through bright crepuscular terrain  
and clean twinkling of the high-pines and dunes.

A band of constellations forms the stellar air  
with one million porch lights to dangle  
and heat the living. The basket pulls closer  
to ground, under a layer of marsh mosquitoes  
that circled close so many nights to stay warm.  
As we touch ground, where the hot air drops us,  
my hand holds a pen to a page of the copybook.  
I draw the porch lights of that cottage  
lifted above me like hands from a caress,  
a home wrested from its haven  
in the borders of a vision, leaf-buzzing,  
vibrant, and rounded as mosquitoes' sight. Now,  
climbing from the wicker basket weaves  
with one-two-legs and freshly planted feet,  
the lights of the porch, bright with sunrise  
trace my shadow from twilight's closing door.

## The Wave

I charged into it. A home with  
windows blasted out,  
sparing no breath against the salt-green air.  
The face was howling  
    and stiff as slate,  
offshore winds coasted unbreaking  
    across it and the foam shuffled slowly,  
back and sideways over the frost.

A diamonded angle of light rippled  
    the ocean's surface in white keys  
which if pressed with a finger  
wrote a letter home, or about a place  
    that felt near enough.

As the paddle out grew colder and into a struggle  
towards the breakers my wrists would lift,  
    sweating off wintered strips of foam  
which chased what the wave had rumbled away:  
    a sand-lit fire undertow, a bed of shells  
dredged into ruin, buried in the soft sand bottom,  
in a layer of shelling scrapes.

    Rising again,  
the crest shaped a shutting eye in full, and clenched  
tight around my body turned ragged  
    in the flame-white brows.

And rising again,  
the curl smoked like a flower  
kicked high across the summer backwash.  
I drove under the pluming wedge  
    and wormed up through the ruin,  
    through the winter's sea-charred roots.

And as I reached out ripping away the foam,  
cold as driveway snow, the heavy salts from the sand-lit  
hearth extinguished in my throat.  
And the raw shoveling of it flamed  
    into a breaking case  
of vapors, a home with  
windows blasted out,  
sparing no breath against the salt-green air.



## Riding into the Evening

Taffy shops, crabshacks, and several  
neon boardwalk signs  
begin their buzz against the open air and dunes  
as the body in soft focus emerges.

A single wave begins  
breaking into the nightly pasture  
that runs out of Atlantic ocean.  
A silhouette slides under the break,  
legs shoulder-width apart and  
bent at the knees,  
feet grip the waxy resin  
coat of polyurethane.

Propped up to a sky with no air  
the body glides under, the rushing wavecrest  
tries on yellow, then blue, then red  
marbling through the darkening fingers—  
that fan out and skim a shoulderwall of water.

As the strip of sirloin ocean ends,  
unravels from its ribcage,  
a full collapse of the waterline  
flushes out the last of evening surf.

The waxy resin plank shoots up,  
flashes into bright walkway lights,  
streaking the coast like city moons.

Taffy shops, crab shacks, and several  
neon boardwalk signs  
begin their buzz against the ocean and dunes  
as the bodies in soft focus emerge.

## Bearings (for a poem, when day is breaking)

We're kindred souls...  
but different enough that my soul  
has to eat your kind of soul

-written above a urinal in Nashville

### Kindred Soul:

Jump him  
    alone in the midnight pond  
Run him out  
    of bright jungles  
Shake his bed out  
    and find his hand  
    on the rug  
    and then shake that too  
Take all of it  
his land  
    the wild prairie of night  
Pack  
    the non commissioned trunk  
    you threw him in  
with fierce light  
    and fasten a latch  
w/out a lock  
    So he can softly hardly struggle  
    with his kidnap  
    though never reach for daylight  
    ever and never sleep  
    in a sweeter  
loving  
more lovelier  
    shed of lights than this