

2017-01-01

Burning Signs of Blue

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BURNING SIGNS OF BLUE

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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2017

BURNING SIGNS OF BLUE

by

JOHN VELDT, B.A., M.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2017

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	iv
Preface	1
Works Cited	26
Burning Signs of Blue	27
/	28
//	43
///	60
////	68
////	79
Vita	92

Critical Preface

I first read Federico García Lorca over ten years ago. "The Iguana will bite those who do not DREAM!" was emblazoned in blue on a bright orange background over an enormous, lime green iguana. As a work of art, it stood on its own. As a project in my first year of teaching a high school cross-curricular literature/art/philosophy class, it floored me.

Years passed. In late August of 2006, I flew to Pamplona for the funeral of Allison, my thirteen year old niece who unexpectedly dropped dead on a Sunday afternoon in front of her mother. I neither heard nor saw anything directly of Lorca, but to this day, my brother and his wife talk of the wonderful spirit of the Spanish people surrounding them during that time. Edward Hirsch writes about this spirit, "There are countries that draw the curtains on death, treating it as a finality roped off from the rest of life, Lorca noted, but Spain is a country where the curtains are flung open, the ropes are cut, and death is invited into the room . . . 'A dead man in Spain is more alive as a dead man than any place else in the world'" (13).

On the night after the funeral, I wandered down to the town square, and my spirit made new connections with the spirit of the Spaniards there. I vowed to return.

The following year my marriage of 23 years and four children ended. A friend gave me a stack of Leonard Cohen cds. Leonard and I spent that entire first winter together alone.

Two years later I took a weekend trip to New York to visit my oldest daughter. Like Lorca, "depressed and grieving over a broken love affair" (Medina and Statman, p. xv), I stumbled across a Lorca exhibit at the main branch of the New York City Public Library. I gleaned from his spirit and went back to my room at the Chelsea Hotel.

Nudged by Lorca, and the spirits of Patti Smith and Leonard Cohen, I tried to write a final paper for my first graduate literature class. It was centered around post 9-11 novels. For the first time in my life, I came unglued in the writing process. There were too many connections. Too much pain. I was pushed to the edge of the abyss. I never finished the paper.

It took me five years to venture back into graduate school. In only my second term at the University of Texas El Paso, I traveled to Europe, heartbroken (again) from a second divorce, in the summer of 2014 for my studies. In London, I walked and talked at midnight through unknown streets with my professor. He read some of my poetry. He insisted: "You've got to read Lorca." I listened. The second week we traveled to Madrid. We read the poem, "On the Meeting of García Lorca and Hart Crane" by Philip Levine. I was intrigued. I found a statue of Lorca releasing a dove in the Plaza de Santa Ana. I grew wings. I found Velázquez' "Las Meninas" at Museo del Prado. I learned. Met Goya, his monsters, and his dog. Wrote a poem. Crossed the street. Stood and stared at Picasso's "Guernica" for an hour. Stumbled out onto a bench in the sunshine. Tried to breathe. That night, my last night in Madrid, I experienced authentic flamenco -- yet another piece of the foreshadowed fabric of my duende education.

The class ended. Classmates returned to the States. I got on a train to Barcelona. Spent the entire day listening to Leonard Cohen. I wept. In Barcelona, I found more Picasso -- an entire room filled with his imitations of "Las Meninas".

I returned to the States. My closest friend and fellow graduate student, Aaron, heard my stories and handed me "The Midget" by Philip Levine. I went to the library, devoured Levine, and our Spain/Detroit/California connections cemented our relationship.

I started dating Mary that Labor Day weekend. After learning that Jim Harrison was my favorite author, she shared *Songs of Unreason*, and I read “A Part of My History”. Here are a few lines:

I took the train from Seville to Granada with a vintner friend. I had been reading Federico Garcia Lorca for over fifty years and needed to see where he was murdered on the mountainside near Granada. Beware old man! . . . I began to drown in melancholy. . . . We went to a magnificent flamenco concert . . . I became quite ill . . . At 5 a.m. I went to an airport hours away in the darkness, flew to Madrid, then from Madrid to Chicago sitting next to a girl of surpassing beauty . . . At a Chicago airport hotel I thought I was slipping away and was taken to a hospital in an ambulance . . . I stayed in ER for seven hours and a Chinese magician restored me. At dawn I flew to Montana and barely recognized our dog. My advice is, do not try to inhabit another’s soul. You have your own. (15)

The next term I took Narrative Theory and Poetics. Saw Lorca on the reading list. Bought and read the Pablo Medina and Mark Statman translation of *Poet in New York* before the first class. On the second page of the foreword by Edward Hirsch, I read this line from Lorca’s “Nocturne of the Brooklyn Bridge”: “Live iguanas will come to bite the men who don’t dream” (xii). I knew this line. From where? Then I remembered. I walked over to my classroom cupboards, climbed up on a chair, and there it was in bright orange and lime green. I took it over and set it up behind my desk.

I took about a week to read through *Poet in New York*. On the last day, I read “Small Viennese Waltz”. Again, this sounded familiar. Why? And then I remembered, Leonard Cohen’s “Take this Waltz”, a song I had heard so many times that of course I recognized the lyrics. I googled away. Found the lyrics and poem side by side. Found Cohen’s dedication to Lorca. Heard him acknowledge that Lorca was the single most powerful influence in his writing. Learned that Leonard named his only daughter Lorca.

This is how Federico Garcia Lorca’s duende became the foundation for my poetry.

Hirsch gives us plenty of help to identify this mysterious spirit: “Whatever has black sounds, has duende,” Lorca declared: These ‘black sounds’ are the mystery” (xi). “The duende arrives and rises downward when language is stressed and stretched almost to the breaking point under the burden of emotion” (95). “For him, the concept of duende . . . was associated with the spirit of earth, with visible anguish, demonic enthusiasm, and a fascination with death” (10).

I am a beginning poet, and these are my beginning poems. Indeed, I am not Lorca. However, I do believe that his spirit of duende is visible in my work. There is the visible anguish of desire in these poems (just to name a few): the desire to receive a father’s love (“Fisherman’s Waltz”), the desire to be the human animal (“The Prodigal Son’s More Likely Return”), the desire to find truth (“Bought to Destroy - Betsy and Ai”), and a parent’s desire to protect her children (“Breathless Brown Eyes”, “Someday I Will”). It is a longing, a melancholic desire, tinged and/or consumed with the knowledge of death and loss (“Ode to Saudade”, “Maybe/I Want to Leave You Behind”). There is the desire for lost lovers and lost children, the desire for lost selves -- past and future.

And there is the fascination with death. Oh, oh, so much death. From beginning to end: freezing to death in “Last Week”, drowning in “Drowning”, hanging in “A Large Window In”, turning to stone and dust in “Deconstructed in DC”, and (the best death of all) death by sex in “Lying Teachers”. This heightened sense of death is at the heart of this collection, but it is accompanied closely by another strand of duende: irrationality.

Trying to make sense of love and death on this earth is the dance of these poems. The deep longings of love and desire are often accompanied by a soft, somewhat naive optimism; the terrible losses and deaths often accompanied by loneliness and futility. As these strands unfold, they also unravel and are found strewn throughout the collection,

sometimes separate, sometimes hopelessly knotted. The existence of both is undeniable. There is no rational explanation for love and death and so we seem to return frequently to these apparently competing desires (“Ouroborus, Again”, “Pulse”, “Fall Burial”).

The intensity of Lorca’s duende influence seems to give some ground in sections *////* and *////*. Hopefully, it is in these poems where the effects of my relatively new intellectual exercise routine with John Keats’ negative capability begins to show. By practicing “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”, I believe I have created a space for an acceptance and calm in the mind. If there is any relief for the reader, I attribute these feelings to the influence not only of Lorca, but also of William Stafford and Leonard Cohen, poets whose unblinking honesty at life’s difficult questions comes with an arm around my shoulder and a whisper of, “You’re going to be alright.”

“Burning Signs of Blue” is a collection of poems in which I also hope to recreate the constant cyclical movement of desire, death, and renewal. There is an overall arc of experience from section */* to section *////* in which the narrator grows through a general process of searching in section */*, strong unmet desires in section *//*, numerous deaths in section *///*, acceptance in section *////*, and a letting go in section *////*. At the height of this arc is section *///*. This section of poems relates death after death after death. Within each section there is also vertical movement from one poem to the next, an arc that travels from the first to the last, and includes circular movement containing echoes of growth and regression via images and diction repetition.

This movement is key. It reflects my search for truth which started in a restrictive, brainwashing Baptist childhood. One of my earliest memories of moving away from this was when I encountered Walt Whitman and Stephen Crane at Grand

Rapids Baptist College in my freshman American Literature class. Two of their poems, “A Noiseless Patient Spider” and “I saw a man pursuing the horizon”, have stuck with me, and now represent well, my ongoing search. At times my search is quiet and patient like Whitman’s spider, launching “filament, filament, filament” with the warm soft touch of optimistic “seeking the spheres, to connect them, till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold”. At other times, the search feels more like the futility of Crane’s man pursuing the horizon, “round and round they sped”. It is the movement of these poems, and of all of life, that is important to “Burning Signs of Blue” for both their circularity and their paradoxical feelings.

As previously mentioned, this circular motion is represented in the arrangement of the poems, the life-death-burial-resurrection/renewal patterns, as well as highlighted in the Ouroboros poems, “Self Portrait as an Ouroboros” and “Ouroboros, Again”. This is nothing new in art or poetry. Here’s a favorite excerpt from Terrance Hayes’ “How to Draw a Perfect Circle”:

From her gaze. Everything the eye sees enters a circle,
The world is connected to a circle: breath spools from the nostrils
And any love to be open becomes an O. The shape inside the circle

Is a circle, the egg fallen outside the nest the serpent circles
Rests in the serpent’s gaze the way my gaze rests on the model.
In a blind contour drawing the eye tracks the subject

Without observing what the hand is doing. Everything is connected
By a line curling and canceling itself like the shape of a snake
Swallowing its own decadent tail or a mind that means to destroy itself (90)

Here’s another, shorter, Ouroboros reference from Leonard Cohen’s “Last Year’s Man”:

And when we fell together all our flesh was like a veil
That I had to draw aside to see
The serpent eat its tail.

The circle itself contains paradox, as it represents the whole and the hole. It can be both complete and empty. The Ouroboros adds another layer of contradictory feelings to the circle. This idea that life eats its tail contains both Crane's man and Whitman's spheres. When faced with a circle, an Ouroboros, a disappearing bobber, or a black sun, I am faced with exercising my negative capability.

I have resisted meaning making since my movement away from my early Baptist upbringing. I have been relentless in my pursuit of making meaning of life since my movement away from my early Baptist upbringing. In both cases, my irritability has been high. It is only through my studies of poetry over the last four years that I have become stronger in my ability to lessen that irritability while resisting and pursuing meaning making in my worlds of popular culture, family gatherings, everyday practical work experiences, and nature. I have experienced what Matthew Zapruder experienced after discovering this Keats' principle, "It was intensely liberating as a writer to realize that the poem is not a place to be categorically convinced of anything" (103). From my unequivocal - "This is Truth. Believe it and live forever in Paradise. Vary it one jot or tittle and burn forever in the Lake of Fire" - upbringing, to a place of celebrating mystery and the personality traits that are able to embrace those great mysteries of life -- this is where I have found eternal rewards here on earth. Praise be to John Keats!

In an interview with Kaveh Akbar, Jericho Brown puts it this way, "I don't think any other art can get at how we move back and forth between fear and faith in the way poetry does. That's what I'm really interested in doing and that's what I'm really interested in reading. I'm really interested in reading the work that makes that which is complex, complex. Makes difficult that which is difficult." At a time in our popular

culture when it seems everyone and everything is decided by a thumbs up or thumbs down or the oversimplified dualistic choice of Republican or Democrat, this acknowledgement, acceptance, and celebration of difficult mystery over bumper-sticker dogma is profoundly, and often surprisingly, liberating. To not force my experience into an other's truth that doesn't fit and to not feel the need to condemn or discount an other's experience and truth, frees me to explore the unknown, limitless possibilities.

One of the ways negative capability shows itself in my poetry is in the endings. When faced with death or loss of relationships or major decisions, instead of a definitive answer being given, the poem ends with a question or leaves the reader pondering the possibilities.

In writing "Breathless Brown Eyes" I encountered this liberation of writing the difficult as difficult. The poem relates one of the most difficult times in my life: the sudden death of my thirteen year old niece, literally dropping dead in front of her mother. But the conclusion steers clear of the popular culminating image at Christian funerals of happily-ever-after in the arms of Jesus. Instead, "drop/you forever at Mother's feet" leaves the reader with that mixed power of love and death. It's not easy to look at, but it liberated me from the over-simplistic cliché that doesn't ring of any truth for me. Instead, I hope to liberate the reader, as I was liberated, by portraying the most difficult of all realities: the loss of an innocent child at her mother's feet.

Again, at the end of "Drowning" we face the shadow of death with a mother and father:

The bottom disappears, and the dark trough
swallows me. Holding my breath, my feet

seek the solid hidden gravel to push against
and break back through. Somewhere down-

river I hear your mother calling, *When*
will we know?

The reader finds herself with the narrator/father drifting downstream hearing his son's mother asking, "When will we know what the cancer diagnosis is?" Not only is the reader left not knowing, but she is also left seeking the solid hidden gravel to push back through with no assurance, given the title, that she will find it.

Jim Harrison does this nicely at the end of "Death Again":

We'll know as children again all that we are
destined to know, that the water is cold
and deep, and the sun penetrates only so far. (141)

Harrison models the ultimate negative capability -- to hold life and death up for inspection -- and matter-of-factly delivers the incomplete news via our own childhood knowledge. He returns the reader to the place of original seeking, after a lifetime of seeking, and says, "This is all we know." Fittingly, these are the last words of the last poem in his book, *Songs of Unreason*.

George Saunders reflects a little different slant of negative capability and desire, "For me, the book was about that terrible conundrum: We seem to be born to love, but everything we love comes to an end." In "Apart on a Wednesday Evening", the reader is left with a similar tension of undecidedness:

it. Let it
disperse its bitter

tea. Let it
bathe in its own

mix of orange
power. Let it be

what it needs to

be. In time, a sea
of warm may
bring us together.

Though the reader may be inclined to feel a bit of optimism with *tea*, *bathe*, *warm*, and *bring us together*, she is still left with the residuals of *bitter* and *power* that bring out serious doubt in *may* and the lingering certainty that at some point we will be separated forever.

When I first started my pursuit of “serious” poetry writing, I aimed for shorter, tighter lines that moved fairly rapidly down the page. I had read and fallen in love with Philip Levine. I had even, for the first time since grade school, memorized one of his poems:

Wisteria

The first purple wisteria
I recall from boyhood hung
on a wire outside the windows
of the breakfast room next door
at the home of Steve Pizaris.
I loved his tall, skinny daughter,
or so I thought, and I would wait
beside the back door, prostrate,
begging to be taken in. Perhaps
it was only the flowers of spring
with their sickening perfumes
that had infected me. When Steve
and Sophie and the three children
packed up and made the move west,
I went on spring after spring,
leaden with desire, half-asleep,
praying to die. Now I know
those prayers were answered.
That boy died, the brick houses
deepened and darkened with rain,
age, use, and finally closed
their eyes and dreamed the sleep
of California. I learned this

only today. Wakened early
in an empty house not lately
battered by storms, I looked
for nothing. On the surface
of the rain barrel, the paled,
shredded blossoms floated. (17)

This poem so matched my personal experience, that I quickly decided I needed to memorize it -- at age 52. As I set to the actual task, I was amazed how easy it was. At any point where I would substitute a different word -- even the smallest, say, *the* instead of *this* -- I immediately knew that it wasn't correct. Throughout the length of the entire poem, every word, every syllable, every line break, every breath, fit the form and the content perfectly. This memorization experience -- highlighted by the line breaks and the short lines -- convinced me that this would be the form for me and my poetry. Oh, I'd try other forms, and I could produce the required sonnet or ghazal, but I continued to rely on my own personal translation of the Levine Model until very recently.

During the spring of 2017, I began my Thesis work with Prof. Sasha Pimentel, and at the same time, I finished my last required poetry class with visiting writer Prof. Natalie Diaz. It took this dynamic duo to break me free from imposing form on content. They didn't know of each other's relentless work at breaking me down, but there was no escape for me. While Prof. Pimentel was educating me on the Charles Olson essay, "Projective Verse", and helping me see and hear where my poems needed to be broken apart with a sledge hammer, Prof. Diaz was demanding that I write across the page. To say it was a formidable one-two punch is to define understatement.

It was also at this time that I read Claudia Rankine and CD Wright. I will forever connect Wright's quote of challenge and permission, "Poetry should not be the default

for every writer's mess. Otherwise, it is a poem if I say it is" (37) with Rankine's phenomenal *Citizen*, poetry appearing on the page in a way I had never seen.

The results? I don't think there's a single poem in this collection that wasn't significantly influenced by my new-found principles: listen to the poem and consider the entire page.

As I began my revision work, I was repeatedly advised to listen to the poem because "Content Reveals Form Reveals Content's Tensions". I was encouraged to bring the tensions of the poems to the surface, in part by having the subject of the poem at the beginning and in the present tense. The results were immediate.

Two weeks later, I confided to Aaron that I felt especially good about two poems. The first, "Breathless Brown Eyes", was now "the tightest poem I have ever written." The second poem was "Desert Horse". I struggled to find the words to explain what happened as I revised. I was giddy with having an experience that seemed to reflect the artistic experience of being a conduit more than an originator. I liked what emerged, and I loved the way in which it had emerged.

As I continued the revision process, I read "Lamentation of the Hanged Man" by Monica Youn. Here are the first few stanzas:

The minor winds hemmed all around
with little brass hooks of birdsong.

They fasten
on me bonelessly,

failed wings.
They tug at me,

each with its own
pained sense
of imperative.

What jumped out at me was the tension existing in every line between at least two objects or elements. I compared it to my improved version of “Breathless Brown Eyes”.

Here were the first few stanzas:

After Sunday dinner,
Forever
You stand

In front of
Your
mother. She

Sits on the
Edge
Of her

I noticed in “Lamentation of the Hanged Man” how the little lines pushed against the vast white space. Every line did this. The very concept was encapsulated within the poem in these lines:

They tug at me,

each with its own
pained sense

of imperative.

Organically the line breaks emerged and the tension revealed the meaning. There was no inorganic form imposed on the words and lines. Instead, the poem was allowed to form on its own. It was like parenting and allowing children to grow -- the difficult part of watching children make different choices than the ones parents would impose on them.

The one word middle lines in “Breathless Brown Eyes” jumped out at me. They needed to be joined with others. They now stood out too boldly and too detached.

And then, something else clicked.

In my revising of “Breathless Brown Eyes”, I had held onto an inorganic form: three-word first line, one-word second line, and two-word last line. Several times during the revision process, I chose particular words to fit that form, rather than going with the words/images that the poem was suggesting. I had forced the poem to conform to my predetermined inorganic form instead of listening to the poem’s tension and allowing the organic form to show itself.

And then, another click.

I remembered a conversation with Aaron about “Desert Horse”. The poem had started out as:

A Lone Horse

in the morning shade
under a lone oak beside
a lone white concrete wall of
an abandoned roofless building
alongside the eight lanes of smooth
black asphalt leaving madrid. i catch
a glimpse of her between the bill-
boards. no barn. a short leash. a long
day of hot sun looms before her. she
stands stiff-legged. no batting eye-
lashes. no swishing tail. motionless.
waiting.

One of the reasons I included it in my packet of thesis poems was because it had been the first time I followed Aaron’s suggestion to jot down images that struck me. This particular image captured two of the feelings I carried throughout that trip to London and Spain: the loneliness (not so cleverly “hidden” in the title) I had packed into my

body from the recent finalizing of my second divorce and the warm sadness accompanying it.

I went back to the revision process like so many of my first dates on Match.com -- skeptically. This new technique had some attraction for me, but I already decided that its use was going to be limited. As I began to spend time with "Desert Horse", I found myself returning to Spain. I boarded the bus. I sat alone. I looked out the window at the Texas-like countryside. And I remembered to move "her" from the middle of the poem to the second line. "Under a lone oak / A glimpse of her".

I spent more time with the poem. Listening. Playing with the combinations of words, their order, their place in the poem. "One Sentence, One Action" - a lesson I teach each semester to my high school creative writing students - kept coming back to me in the form of the question: What happens next?

In time the poem revealed to me a distinctive triangle of "her", "horse", and "me". Each twist gave off a different refraction. Any time I moved a line, it affected all three (much like dating after divorce does to children). The placement of surroundings (abandoned building, oak tree, billboard, highway, the weather) dictated different evocations from each of the three primary characters.

As I spent even more time with the poem, it kept reminding me how blurry these distinctions were. I prioritized "her". Put "her" in the first line, "Before her", but in doing so, I equated her and the horse, and forced myself (unseen) into the (chronological) picture. Of course, none of this was done consciously, other than the placement of "her" into the first line with the intention of starting the reader off in the present, "Before her / A roofless building". I was off and running. Running in circles. Circling these three

characters, circling the objects surrounding them. Listening all the while to the different accents resulting from changing perspectives.

Here are a few stanzas of the next draft:

Desert Horse

Before her
A roofless building

Abandoned
On a short leash

Under a lone oak
A glimpse of her between

The billboards standing
Stiff-legged

The “horse”, “her”, and “me” all became one, by each one finding its place in the poem. Yet, the poem still moves. I see different parts of “me” and “her” each time I move the shade, the building, the highway. This, both the process and the product, was unlike anything I had ever written. I walked away with an ambiguous exhaustion. Thrilled at a recognition of my entry into the poetic world of art, daunted by the work that lay in front of me.

As I continued to listen to “Desert Horse”, it continued to evolve, and so the finished product that appears in this manuscript is not the same as the above. However, both of these transforming revelations are still readily apparent in it.

My next experience was with “Summer Solstice”:

I wake and stumble into the shower,
splash sleep out of my eyes, open to
what the day may bring me. I towel
off with plush cotton, slip on some

blue jeans, wander into the kitchen.
I grind coffee, boil water, and select

a song. While a slice of bread toasts,
Billie Holiday reminds me *it ain't no-*

The tension of routine versus disruption was too unpredictable for the predictable
normal quatrains. The tabs I had started towards the end -

today: I ain't watchin' no needle
pierce below his heart,
ain't watchin' no radioactive dye
spread to his lymph nodes,
ain't watchin' no scalpel
carve his bare chest,

ain't watchin' no black thread
tattoo his flesh,
ain't watchin' no body ooze
my son's bloody business

- matched the syncopation of jazz. I listened. I liked it. I felt the need for this to happen
earlier in the poem.

Many of the verbs were strong: slip, boil, slice, toasts, crawl, crunch, drain,
plunge, transport, twitch, squirm -- these were my "tab" moments. I listened closely to
these moments, to the rhythm, and then started to play with space and silence and
syncopation. I love the changes:

I wake and stumble
into the shower. I splash sleep

out of my eyes, open to what
the day may bring me. I towel

off with plush cotton, slip
on some blue

jeans. I wander into
the kitchen, grind

coffee, boil water, and choose
a song. A slice of bread toasts.

Billie Holiday reminds me
It ain't nobody's business

if I clean up crumbs or read
William Stafford before I text

my oldest daughter a birthday wish
on the morning of the longest day.

I pour coffee too hot to drink. *It ain't
nobody's business* if I do the dishes

undone in the sink. I watch
a lone black ant crawl over

a piece of fruit. I extend my finger,
press his abdomen, crunch his legs

wild. His body *ain't nobody's*
skin-clinging *business*. Against dark

The form now brings out the content, the couplets work better to separate the *I* and the
ant and the *dishes*, and the indentations add a bouncing back and forth feel of
anxiousness.

The listening and play continued with the ending and resulted in:

to the living of today. I ain't watchin'

no more.
Ain't watchin'

no needle pierce below
his heart, ain't watchin'

no radioactive dye spread to
his lymph nodes, ain't watchin'

no scalpel carve
his bare chest, ain't watchin'

no black thread tattoo
his flesh, ain't watchin'

no body ooze

my son's bloody business

all over. The longest day
ain't nobody's business.

Again, notice how the jazz beat and line breaks bring out the rhythm and repetition especially in the second line of each couplet: "his heart, ain't watchin' / his lymph nodes / ain't watchin' / his bare chest, ain't watchin' / his flesh ain't watchin'". This litany brings the reader through the longest day in a way that leaves her breathless by the end, exhausted in a way that understands that no one should have to endure such a day.

Repeating my mantra: *form will reveal the content, content will reveal tension*, I moved on to "Guernica". This was my starting point:

Guernica

I grasp the bow,
draw the string,
release the arrow,
wait, then follow

the bright red trail,
kneel over the fallen
carcass, draw knife,
puncture leathery

Yes, I loved my short lines and quatrains. They extended for the entire poem. The poem needed breathlessness, but the first half and second half of the poem were not both served by the long list of short lines -- there was too much pausing in the second half. By replacing the line breaks with "space:space" and adding the same "space:space" wherever there was a comma, the poem divided itself into two paragraphs that work.

Guernica

I grasp the bow, : draw the string, : release the arrow, : wait, then follow : the
bright red trail, : kneel over the fallen : carcass, : draw knife, : puncture leathery :
skin, cut : lengthwise : belly-white, aspirate : gaseous expungement, : spill

entrails, and reach : up into the cavity, : wrap : my fingers round tough : muscle-bound heart --

Guernica -- I cannot : separate your arching : backs stretching necks : gaping mouths : wailing : horse call above electric : light bulb eye invisible : silent gods your lone : horrified mother still : dead baby fragments : of man : pieces of beast : in one great body pile : both bull eyes watch : a long arm carrying lamp : blood fertilized : sprouts broken : sword flower : more than my hope, : -- Guernica.

The first paragraph now gives the reader the step by step tension, leading her through the process in a deliberate matter that matches the content of the hunter's deliberateness. Then, in the second paragraph, after the reader has wrapped her hand around the heart -- all of the guts spill out into one big inseparable pile. With the regularity of a heartbeat, the spaces and colons allow the reader to make her way through the mess.

These endings stretched and strengthened my negative capability skills, and I would need them for my greatest challenges. "The Only Sin" and "This is not a poem." are my two favorite poems in "Burning Signs of Blue". They also provide me with the greatest challenges: Do I have the right and/or the desire to publish poems about the killing of Timothy Caughman?

"This is not a poem." relates a phone call I received from my daughter on a Tuesday afternoon in the spring of 2017. The news (which came out in bits and pieces surrounded by tears and profanity and gulpings): her boyfriend's brother had driven from Baltimore to New York City with the sole intent of murdering a random black man in order to gain as much media attention as possible. I had met the brother, James Harris Jackson, on one of my visits to Baltimore. I had held the very sword that was used to kill a fellow human being, Timothy Caughman, solely for being a black man.

This was one of those moments where the personal intersected with the national conversation. I had been attracted to Black Lives Matter, and I hadn't been able to look away from the ongoing string of murdered black men by police. I was reading and listening to the ongoing racial conversations, especially tuned in to Ta-Nehisi Coates, Junot Diaz, and Charles Blow. I was also immersing myself in contemporary African American poets: Patricia Smith, Jericho Brown, Terrance Hayes, Jamaal May, Rita Dove, and Claudia Rankine. And so when I received the phone call, my body exploded. It took weeks before I could even think to write about this event, but as spring gave way to summer, my body's energy demanded that I write about it.

My initial attempts were clouded by the questions that persist today: Is my writing respectful of Timothy Caughman? Do I want to publish a poem that draws attention to my daughter's horrified boyfriend and his family?

"The Only Sin" originated from my first moment of clarity: if I was going to write about this murder, Timothy Caughman needed to be seen and remembered. He needed to be the center of the poem. As the murder circulated through me that spring and summer, I watched two cardinals make a nest, lay eggs, and feed two newborns just inches outside my dining room window. This image ended up at the core of my poem. As the poem took its finished form -- and the nest emptied -- I again faced the question of whether or not to seek publication. It was in this space of contemplation that I encountered U.S. poet Roger Reeves addressing the issue of how to write about contemporary violence without re-enacting this violence or offering the reader pleasure through the violence.

Reeves centers much of his talk around the Irish poet Seamus Heaney's term "Artful Voyeur" and his poem "Punishment". Here are the first three stanzas:

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

In this poem, Heaney struggles with the writer/artist's place in recreating the violence. In doing so, the narrator/writer ends up indicting himself, accepting that if he had been there, he would have taken part in the woman's murder. Such an unusual twist: *Here is the horror. I am guilty.* Reeves takes this and applies it to Facebook and the thoughtless replicating that takes place in response to popular horrific events. Reeves argues that there is no artistic gain here, that it is just more violence. This dramatic contrast between finger pointing and self-indictment hit at the core of one of my fears around trying to write and/or publish a poem connected to Timothy Caughman's death.

The power of Heaney's poem and Reeves talk, took me back in time. My first significant encounter with the artful voyeur -- my first literature graduate class: Post 9/11 Novels. We read beautifully written novel after novel, any one of which was enough to paralyze me with sadness and futility. The more experienced students in the class were taking in the novels in a different manner than I. They had to. But I didn't want to give up my style of reading (to be emotionally immersed in the novel), for what I perceived theirs to be (to study the novel as a tool for greater understanding). I found

myself in such a depressed, dark space that I literally could not function in my day-to-day world.

My second awareness of the artful voyeur was through reflection on the process of writing about significant, sad events in my life: divorce, poor parenting, contemplating my father's yet-to-happen death, being asked to write a poem for a colleague's daughter's funeral. As I reflected on these occasions, I became aware and uncomfortable with my own "pleasure" in writing. To write about these incidents and to be pleased with the "success" of my writing seemed wrong; seemed to magnify my ego. In a combination of Roger Reeves and Jericho Brown's words - it seemed to forefront my skill instead of the tremendous individual loss and pain of the primary occurrence and its victims.

The third example I offer comes from reading David Shields' book *War Is Beautiful: The New York Times Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of Armed Conflict*. Shields' book makes the argument that through its artful photography of war, specifically its front page photos, the New York Times feeds and supports the United States Military and its war-making machine. Because of this, Shields no longer reads the New York Times. Because of Shields, I no longer read the New York Times uncritically.

When I write, I gaze at the object(s) that I perceive to be the trigger(s) of strong personal emotion. I write to work through these strong emotions. When/if I gaze long enough, I become aware of my own ego. When/if I continue to gaze and critique my own investment "successfully", I believe that it comes through the openness of self-incrimination that Seamus Heaney displays in "Punishment".

All of which reminds me of my judgment on my father of his most offensive sin. It was not that as a Baptist preacher he had an affair with the church organist, but that he

used himself as an example (that he, a preacher, would be so humble as to do the custodian's job of mopping up a spill) in a sermon on the humility of Christ. I think it is his lack of awareness that is most troubling to me, and even as I write this, I am aware of how this revelation of my father's "sins", says nothing about my own.

The most troubling part of my gaze is when I don't gaze long enough to be aware of my connectedness to everyone and everything. I want my poems to show my process of viewing and struggling with "the spectacle", to follow the details of the spectacle into my own shortcomings/failings/"sins", and thereby connect me with the universal Everywo/man.

I'm left with the question of what other ways there might be to deal with my own artful voyeur. This no finger-pointing, self-identification seems like a strong tool, but there must be additional ways. Awareness is a powerful first step, perhaps even as a source of wisdom to simply not write or publish the poem that only replicates the violence and the pain. This awareness to not forefront my own struggle or sadness over that of the individual(s) who experienced the loss is helpful to me as I write about sexism, racism, deportation, US Military might, etc., in that, it reminds me I am doing so from a place of privilege. I am not at direct risk. I am not the central target of these ills. But how am I to use that place of privilege? What am I to write? What other ways are there to avoid the replication of the spectacle I wish to denounce? Perhaps at the core of this, is the need to answer the question, "Why am I publishing this poem?" Or as Roger Reeves put it, "What pleasure am I hoping to give my reader?"

Jamaal May provided context for my quandry:

Art, be it poetry, music, sculpture, puppetry—the whole of it, inspires change on a personal level rather than a global one. This is important because the individual is the whole. The creation of art argues that people are connected, ideas are

connected, the past and future are connected by this moment. Meanwhile, exploitation of the poor, drone strikes that kill hundreds of children, slavery, genocide, land theft—these are all acts that depend upon convincing large groups of usually well-meaning people that “they are not us.” Dean Young once said, “The highest accomplishment of the human consciousness is the imagination, and the highest accomplishment of the imagination is empathy.” Poetry, along with every other art, is a tool for teaching and expanding empathy. Violence and injustice cannot endure empathy.

And so I offer up “This is not a poem.” and “The Only Sin” in the spirit of connection and empathy. If there is connection, I believe it comes through my (most) Lorcan-like images contained in these poems. My negative capability was stretched again, beyond what I thought possible. Conflicting desires of love and death competed. I lived in those horrific moments. I testified. I learned. I am the other. I am responsible and guilty.

May my experience help the reader to see herself as the other. May we all strive to do better at living in the moment. And may our imaginations create a future without violence.

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/

Like a bird on a wire
Like a drunk in a midnight choir
I have tried in my way to be free

Leonard Cohen

Burning Signs of Blue

A thick yellow towel hangs on one of two brass hooks like a motel's DO NOT DISTURB screwed on the outside of his solid oak bedroom door shut for silence. Surrounding blue walls harbor a Picasso reproduction, a New Orleans trumpet, a cloudy lake. Deeper blue rugs hide scratched planks, soften his morning meditations. A king sized bed anchors the northeast corner. A night stand - gone. An oscillating fan no longer blows. On top of a chest of mahogany drawers, candles bathe the back edge in unlit blue. Under those, two men gaze empty at one side of unwrinkled covers. From Baltimore: H.L. Mencken stands guard, facing with heavy broadhead ax. Handle and elbow lean on neatly split stacks of firewood rising behind and above his unblinking stare, snug-straight tie, ironed white shirt. *Not Pictured*: Sara Haardt – Alabamian, eighteen years younger. Married five years. Sickly. Died. I hold the postcard close, squint at the blurry shed behind him: WARNING TEAR GAS. I put down that photograph and pick up James Baldwin. Loose crooked tie, unbuttoned collar shoot flares of confidence from Harlem to Paris. Resting on those left-leaning shoulders under flecked tight curls: the imagination fueling his exit from church and country hating the color of his black skin and blue loves of his heart. I take another look: lips pursed, chin dropped, brows raised, lids heavy. Unwavering, he gives it to me straight: *Prepare yourself, man*. I stare back at the shadows then bow beneath paper postcards. Enflamed, I dance the blue in me, smudged incense of ash.

Ode to the North

Two quarters silver on the soft gray
fabric in the back seat morning moon-
light. Slipped out of some side pocket,
last night's last Lyft passengers' change

buys us enough gas to drive all day
in the blue hybrid. She brings snacks -
a sliced apple, some cheddar, an orange
LaCroix. I want to drink the road North,

always North. It's dark and still as I chew
on Jevon standing in the cracked concrete
of my front porch leaning against red brick
walls. I need this quiet drive to digest his

need, a man's quiet scream for help, but I
can't swallow. It's stuck in my craw with
multiplying divisions the New Regime
tries to force down our throats. I turn

the radio to NPR, stumble into an episode
of *Saudade* the Portuguese desire for sad-
ness and absence. North I drive, always
North. Snow falls, lines disappear, and

the windshield blurs. Various voices fill
the still space with samba, blues, Bossa
nova, jazz, and salsa. Yes! North I drive,
always North. Passed often, we're in no

hurry. We come to in a small town off
the main highway. An old hotel drapes
a new sign: VOTE FOR TRUMP!
We accelerate through, past. The snow

continues to pile higher, though not
high enough to bury the Confederate
flag waving at the top of a steel pole
marking the end

of a driveway. In the median white
crosses mark another accident. On
the other side of the road a crow
stands atop a deer's frozen carcass

tearing at death. Snow falls.
We drive on, always, North.

Last Week

On Monday
I shovel
a foot
of snow

and then

discover and open
a box of cereal you
bought before you left
five months ago. On Tuesday

I remember
to empty the dirty
water from the sink
right after finishing
the dishes

and then

read that our accumulation
is the most in one
hundred and thirty
years. On Wednesday

while sweeping dust
out from under
the bed, I find
your tiger-eye
barrette

and then

stains
on my new bed-
room curtains lead
me to cracks
in my plastered
ceiling. In our morning

commutes on Thursday

I recognize you
as we pass, headed in
opposite directions, I listen
to *Wilco: A Ghost is Born* -

*Remember to remember
me standing still in
your past holding fast
like a hummingbird -*

and then

hear the prediction
of yet another
Polar Vortex,
suddenly a popular
term unheard of
in my previous fifty
years. On Friday

I watch
the only video
clip that I have of you
seventeen times

and then

from a ladder,
hatchet-chop
at twelve inch thick
ice dams
on the roof. On Saturday

I re-read our old love
chats on Facebook, make
your chicken cheese dip,

and then

I'm nearly run over
in a crosswalk
because ten foot snow-
banks obstruct
my view. On Sunday

I finish
the cereal, miss
our Bloody Mary
brunches, imagine
my future,

and then

freeze to death.

Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow

The blue gray statue sits cross-legged still, eyes closed, left hand bent down in open invitation, the right one up as if to slow and say *One at a time please*, and a smile most would consider smug if it wasn't

the Buddha. He never laughs or frowns, never questions or worries about tomorrow. He already knows. His stone ears have heard all. I want everything his unmoved lips won't tell me. I close my eyes

to look closer. I straighten my back, round my shoulders, unclench my fists. But on the couch I am too comfortable. Sinking into the dark green cushion, my thin legs reach for the matching ottoman. Open

windows carry birdsongs through a warm summer breeze. The late afternoon sun casts long shadows across my face. My fingers twitch. My toes tap a nervous dream. My whisper echoes my son's doctor --

melanoma melanoma melanoma

Letter to Cold Creek in Northern Michigan in Early June

I strip
and stride

down the hill. You lie
waiting for me. Patient.

Hidden. Your mosquitos and
muck, your twists and turns keep

others at a distance. But I know you are
there. My bare toes slide off the path careful

among slick rocks and sharp sticks. I eye
your shallows. A lone brook trout darts out and across,

down and gone. A crow
caws. Minnows maintain

their space mid-stream, their pelvic fins wave
effortless. I choose the softest place between

your damp
logs. Under the dark

green cedar branches,
I step out of my blue

flip-flops and into your flow. Goose bumps fly
up my legs and down my arms. I bend

my knees and place my right
then left hands into the water. I stretch

my left then right
legs downstream. Hover

over you. My arms lock
straight. My eyes explore

and stare. I count one, two, three,
release my elbows and my naked

body falls into you you receive all of me you surround me you massage me you steal my
breath and you breathe into me. I float just under the surface. My left thumb and
forefinger clutch a smooth root, holding me in place, keeping me from drifting
downstream. I push up. My hair drips. My lungs gasp. My arms shake. I release again.
You accept and receive again. You speak.

*She entered you. She broke you. She remains
in you. You are in me. Let go. We need to --*

I push up.
I gasp and drip

and shake. I
cannot hold

on.
I release

and plunge --

Self-Portrait as an Ouroborus

Eat or be eaten they say, but I don't
believe it's a case of either/or. I choose

both/and - my very existence demands
it. I am a puzzle. I see myself in every

thing I want. To devour I circle my prey.
Pray for eternity to circle back to me.

I am multitudes of contradiction, Walt,
are you proud? I am the beagle chasing

and the rabbit chased. Stephen Crane's
man pursuing the horizon. I consume. I

am consumed. While mountains watch,
rivers wind. I am the water and the dirt.

I am the ant with his friends crawling on
my counter. I am thumb and fist hesitating

to smash, whack, flick. I don't like to kill. I
like to be born. I don't like clinging to my

skin. I like the shedding of old. I remember
a French Buddhist vegetarian I dated a few

years ago. Standing at the kitchen counter,
she guided an ant onto the edge of a blade

she chopped with, carried and ushered it
out into the world a new being. Born again.

But I am atheist and Buddhist, carnivore
and vegetarian, more English speaking

American than French so I flaunt my pow-
er, exercise my privilege: smash, whack, flick

crawling black insects across the counter,
into the sink, and flood them into the drain,

around and around and around, disappear
into the down. A part of me dies. A part of

black clings to the circling of my white skin's
print at the end of several fingers. They wash

each other, invisibly stained, blood and flesh
mixing as one, my work of writing and eating.

//

*Like a baby stillborn
Like a beast with a horn
I have torn everyone
Who reached out for me.*

Leonard Cohen

Bought to Destroy - Betsy and Ai

It is sixty one degrees
in Michigan
in February.

Winter is lost,
and

I am wandering
through Meijer Gardens'
outdoor sculptures.

DaVinci's horse
towers over brown grass
bathed in sunshine.

Bare trees
backdrop
Rodin.

Walking
past
the dead

grocery store billionaire
who created
this

heavenly space
and

sits
in bronze
with his wife
by the backdoor,

I leave
Eden.

I enter

the museum.

I

skip

the exotic plants

thriving

inside the popular

tropical

butterfly-strewn

greenhouse

and

the \$22 million Zen

Center.

I

am

here

to see

the Chinese
artist,

Ai

Wei Wei,

an exiled
poet's son

I

absorbed

during another

dark season -

a cool spring

under California

rainbow shadows

of Alcatraz'

cells.

Betsy's family

funded

this exhibit

and

has just

bought

a room

in the White House

to destroy

public education.

I

love

Ai Wei Wei.

His gold-plated
Twitter bird
machines

carry

my love and me
into the next room.

Blown-up
skull Xrays

bulging white
- eyeballs -

cover

bright blossomed
bicycle baskets
of paper flowers --

hidden

in the black
spaces,
the crack
of communist control.

I

round

the corner,

and

a Mingh Vase

drops

in tryptych:

Legos

on the wall -

black, white,
gray pieces

and

blur.

I

back-pedal

farther away,
and

the details

	clarify.	
Much larger vases	painted	shiny metallic -
authentic BMW Mercedes colors -		and
	fill	the white room
		with emptiness.
A small child	runs	gleeful,
	reaching	towards the high gloss. Mother
	calls	out. Father
	runs	behind,
	grabs	the hood,
	snaps	the toddler
	stop.	to an instant
Tiny fingers	drop	inches
		from the work.
Cries	follow	as
the docent	sighs	

relief
and
smiles
with the parents.
I
watch
and
wonder
who has got it
right?
What would Ai Wei Wei
do?

Ode to Saudade

You are the forecast

for all day rain

on the first Saturday

of the Little League season -

and the twelve year old shortstop

standing

on the top step

of the dugout

waiting

for the game

to be called -

You are the lightning bolt

beyond the shallow left field fence -

the dangerous flash and pop

triggering oohs and ahs

despite the fact

we've all been counting

quietly to ourselves

ever since we heard

the thunder roll -

You are even more

that shortstop's well-oiled glove

broken-in last month -

his grandfather's arthritic fingers

barely moving -

the padded oversized fingers -

sitting wet -

on the empty edge -

of a nursing home bed.

Maybe/I Want to Leave You Behind

I've carried you far too long. You whisper
in my dreams while I fly across oceans trying

to sleep, walk through the airport weighing
me down. It's like you're sitting

in my backpack, straps pulling
so heavy my skin tears. I plead

to stop thinking
of you near Bloomsbury,

but hot weather calls
for iced tea. Distracted

by street artists' magic
in the crowds of Trafalgar Square, you disappear

for a few moments before I find you again
in tall red phone booths calling back

across the Atlantic. I can't even escape
you in this small London apartment - your recipes linger

in the kitchen, your red polished toenails bloody
my long legs in this short double bed, your blue eyes

and shiny dark hair hold
reflections in the hallway mirror,

your sharp memory and critical questions seethe
in a lone leather chair remembering

our books, our conversations, our cooking, our sex scattered
throughout. I trash crumpled

receipts and hope
to leave

my desire and fear
on the dining room table

with the keys, pulling
the door closed behind

me.

A Smooth Thin Strip

In a crowded Irish bar she serves Americanos
Jameson and Guinness. Her black boots

with worn black laces and brass eyelets circulate
wooden chairs and smooth table legs. Her strong

steady hand balances the brown
round tray covered by cubed-filled

glasses. Orange lights glow dim
amber. As she approaches, I try

to catch her eye, but my companions catch her ears
with their tongues. They chat and laugh in Spanish

while unnoticed, I take her
in: a smooth thin strip

of satin green strap
stretches me over her

bare
right shoulder,

sleeveless white
blouse - buttoned -

tucks me
into her

jeans unbelted.
My blues building

in the middle of Madrid, I mumble
A round for everyone. She retreats

to the dark mahogany bar, places
my order, scans the room unseen

by all those World Cup watching
eyes. Her gaze matches

mine. Unblinking,
she grasps the sweating

beer and slowly screws
the cap off. Bottle

topless, she licks
the rim, brings

fire to her lips, brings
ice into her smile.

Finding Our Way

We met last night, both travelers
in foreign territory. This morning

we agree to spend the day together,
seeing the sights. Each of us carries

a heavy sadness. Mine? My second
divorce, the uninvited companion,

followed me across the ocean and
now magnifies your Barcelona blue

eyes. Bright orange hair anchors my
gaze and lightens my steps. I follow

your dark purple toenails curved
in jeweled white sandals. Your ankle

tattoo draws me up the smooth steep
incline. In Spanish sunshine, we share

sweet cherries and indecision. Despite
the barriers – language, age, the past –

we find our way to the castle. Leaning on
an outside wall – neither of us wants

to pay the admission fee - we breathe
easier. We rest in the shade. We share

our drink and panoramic view with a
dog. Looking back down on the miles

of white concrete, his master points us
a greener path through the maze - not

by tram, not by bus, not by train – we
walk again along a quiet curving road

of ancient houses. Buddha watches our
leisurely descent from a rooftop hedge,

watches us share a streetside cafe with
silver-haired, Estrella-soaked locals as

I watch their cigarette smoke drift over
our Catalan noodle paella, watch your

matching purple fingers pick at bones,
peel the chicken skin, grasp the bottle

of Budweiser lightening your guarded
depression, you speak your fear briefly -

I don't want to return home defeated
again - you pay the smeared check, and

we spend the rest of the afternoon in cold
museums filled with empty Viking ships.

*When you smile, I am undone, my son
I fall apart and I thought I was so smart*

Leslie Odom, Jr., Lin-Manuel Miranda

I Will Someday
(for Gerrit)

It's Father's Day. My only son is sleeping in
the next room. He will wake & wash. We will hug & eat break-
fast. After we run to the store for steak & potatoes, I will listen
to him singing *Hamilton*. On the other side of town, my father
will not listen to his wife cold in the air-conditioned church.
His back still sticks to the old wooden pew. The church bells
remind him that his grandson peels & sweats in my kitchen.
I will watch thin slices fall into the oil as my son will smile &
fry the unwashed skins his grandparents love. Saving him
from the heat, they will arrive to help. Ignorant of their own
grandson's worry & boyfriends, they never question the obvious
signs. They will not see his rainbow flags & burning flesh as
vital to him. Regardless, next Wednesday the doctor will cut
him, explaining all the possibilities of life & death for a 19 year
old with skin cancer to his divorced parents on a hot, muggy
morning in June. He graduated just two weeks ago. Another
sunny day when all anyone could talk about was weather or --
no, not again Death! I won't think of it. I won't let you ruin
another one of mine! No. Today *I am dedicating my every
day to him. I will hold him as tight as I can*, absorb his
breath on my cheek, take his charred steak onto my plate.
In exchange I will give the best I have - still dripping red
over flaming coals - a promise - *Someday I will make it
right for him. Just you wait. Just you wait.*

///

*If it isn't the birds
covered with ashes,
if it isn't the cries beating on the windows of the wedding,
it must be the delicate creatures of air
that pour out new blood in the unending night.*

Federico Garcia Lorca

March 20, 2017, New York City, NY -- Timothy Caughman, 66, was stabbed to death by a 28 year old white Army Veteran who had come to NYC from Baltimore for the express purpose of killing black men on the world's largest media stage.

The Only Sin

(in conversation with Louis Armstrong and Patricia Smith)

is the color of my skin
so black it makes you blue

enough to wish I was
dead. Even the white mouse blows

his silver trumpet warnings -
Cats in the neighborhood!

two baby birds screech
like cicadas from brown nestled

sticks among the ivy just outside
the clear pane that separates

me from them. I learn
to look when I hear that call, and sure

enough, the drab mother lands
on the edge with blood

red beak plunging in
vertical maw: first one and then

the other, jaw breaking wonder
feeding me, feeding

my neck-stretched hunger
for the regurgitated worm of truth.

I swallow the trombones' *Why?*
sliding home to Queens

in the early morning

dark. *What did I do? What did I do?*

March 22, 2017, Grand Rapids, Michigan -- My daughter called. Sobbing. Gasping. Grasping. Her boyfriend's brother. Stabbed a black man. Murdered Timothy Caughman.

This is not a poem.
(for Haley)

My daughter calling from Baltimore

yesterday

with news

sending me

following

other orbits -

My moon

perfect white

against

night

howling -

We

chasing

the light

like dogs

circling

alien to

our tails

barking

echoes -

Another

disposable

black

beginning.

Death of Sisyphus - June 12, 2016

Orlando this time. The view from the bottom
is the same. I look to my left and to my right. Again
millions of Facebook and Twitter feeds. Guns.

Religion. Sex. Ethnicity. Again each picks
a handful of familiar soil, throws it down,
and begins to push. Again our freedom

of speech divides
us. To my left
and to my right

each is alone
again.
To hang

on we cling
to our favorite
rock. We shout. We whisper. We pray

again. Again nothing
happens. We are
dead. I realize

nothing changes. I
stop climbing. I
stop pushing. I

stop looking
to my left and
right. I let go

of the boulder. I
stand. I
breathe. I

get out
of the way. I listen
to the tumble

and the silence
in the distance. I
hope

to hope

again, to hear
Pulse

again.

Breathless Brown Eyes
(for Allison)

After Sunday dinner
in the living

room in Pamplona,
you stand in front

of mother. She
sits on the edge

of her cushion. Coupled
alone, you will soon be

no more together.
It is the end

of your thirteen
years. You have never

mouthed-off
to her. Today

you mouth
I can't feel my arms -

breathless brown eyes
widen, voiceless vessels

no longer carry oxygen
to your brain, cell walls

crumble, your blood
bursts all expectations,

your knees buckle, drop
you forever at Mother's feet.

Summer Solstice

I wake and stumble
into the shower. I splash sleep

out of my eyes, open to what
the day may bring me. I towel

off with plush cotton, slip
on some blue

jeans. I wander into
the kitchen, grind

coffee, boil water, and choose
a song. A slice of bread toasts.

Billie Holiday reminds me
It ain't nobody's business

if I clean up crumbs or read
William Stafford before I text

my oldest daughter a birthday wish
on the morning of the longest day. I

pour coffee too hot to drink. *It ain't
nobody's business* if I do the dishes

undone in the sink. I watch
a lone black ant crawl over

a piece of fruit. I extend my finger,
press his abdomen, crunch his legs

wild. His body *ain't nobody's*
skin-clinging *business*. Against dark

draining *if I do* water, *ain't nobody's*
unmoved empty *business*. I plunge

into my work with the dead. Last
week I watched a fellow father push

his finger on my son's belly, watched
my boy twitch watchin' his Mother

squirm, as the doctor delivered
news of melanoma - *Ain't nobody's*

business - Billie transports me back
to the living of today. I ain't watchin'

no more.
Ain't watchin'

no needle pierce below
his heart, ain't watchin'

no radioactive dye spread to
his lymph nodes, ain't watchin'

no scalpel carve
his bare chest, ain't watchin'

no black thread tattoo
his flesh, ain't watchin'

no body ooze
my son's bloody business

all over. The longest day
ain't nobody's business.

Drowning

I sit with your mother on opposites sides
of the bed, curtained off from the public,
waiting for you to open your eyes. Blue

scrubs shuffle in and out, checking vital
signs. I see myself in your blond curls
and long arms. From your wrist, I follow

the clear tube winding up the silver pole,
terminating into the transparent plastic
bag. It drips like the one whose swimming

orange goldfish carried you, leaking, all
the way back from the parking lot carnival
to your mother's house that first post-divorce

Saturday - a dripping echo of last week's
diagnosis - the doctor's one word drop, now
a steady

Melanoma Melanoma Melanoma

stream. I am
anesthetized with you. We float back
thirteen years. I wade into the middle

of the river, cast at the white flash of life
and death. The female's belly dancing attracts
the long-toothed circling males - spawning

salmon - soon to die. They hold my gaze
until they don't. I awaken from the repetitive
game. I look up, but now you are gone

from this grassy brown earth. Still
in the water, I search the dead leaves
on shore, seeking any sign. I find nothing.

No green sweatshirt, no hidden five year
old smile, no laughter, no blond curls.
But then, I catch a glimpse of movement

off to the right, hanging halfway down the bank,
five tiny fingers claw for the empty edge above
while another five fingers at the end of an arm

stretched, cling to thin roots, exposed. I follow
the tumbling clay loosened by your digging, down
past dangling black shoelaces, dropping, then

dissolving silently into swift water. I lunge.
The bottom disappears, and the dark trough
swallows me. Holding my breath, my feet

seek the solid hidden gravel to push against
and break back through. Somewhere down-
river I hear your mother calling, *When*

will we know?

////

*Except for the dying this would be heaven
and I, 37 years old, would be a man I could talk to
or a body fallen away to the dust of Spain . . .
except for the dying I could believe.*

Philip Levine

Fall Burial

You buy me ugly
bulbs in crisp brown sacks with white paper slips stapled on folded
tops. I forget

them, lost behind hats
on the top shelf in the front closet until autumn's chill finds me wanting
a woolen cap. I carry

the bags through my living
room, leave them waiting by the back door unplanted
beneath the empty

coat hooks. It's late
October, and just before midnight, we decide to bury
our flowers. In

the backyard bare
spot, we circle the growing white pine in front of stone guarded by dead
roses. We dig,

take turns hitting
solid rock with pointed shovel. You lead us along simple steps: loose, dig, push,
plant - loose, dig, push,

plant - a whispering
rhythm. We hear a near match of soft chords strummed
from two young boarders

hidden in alley light
shadows. Under thick branches of crabapple-hung darkness,
their prized guitars leak

heartbreak, and cigarette smoke
mixes with misting rain. From a corner of weathered wooden deck, their beat
finds the vein of our burial rites,

and before the cancer sticks
turn to ash, before moon-slivered ghosts cling to shattered

whiskey glasses - stalks

begin to rise
through the fallen needles, green stems of April sprout leaves,
May buds burst

tulip blooms -- then wilt.
Gone, you miss the brief spring
of yellow-red beauty.

Guernica

I grasp the bow, : draw the string, : release the arrow, : wait, then follow : the bright red
trail, : kneel over the fallen : carcass, : draw knife, : puncture leathery : skin, cut :
lengthwise : belly-white, aspirate : gaseous expungement, : spill entrails, and reach : up
into the cavity, : wrap : my fingers round tough : muscle-bound heart --

Guernica -- I cannot : separate your arching : backs stretching necks : gaping mouths :
wailing : horse call above electric : light bulb eye invisible : silent gods your lone :
horrified mother still : dead baby fragments : of man : pieces of beast : in one great body
pile : both bull eyes watch : a long arm carrying lamp : blood fertilized : sprouts broken
: sword flower : more than my hope, : -- Guernica.

A Large Window In

the small room creates
enough space

for my feet
to hang at the end

of the bed, toes touching
the wall. I lie

just inches
below the four foot panes

of glass that swing inward,
and yet all I

want is you
back here on your side, or

face to face even, on top of
me. The open

window reveals
old layers of paint, flaking

the underside of the metal
sash. A plain

cloth curtain
billows red with each faint

breeze. Song birds begin the
early morning.

A single pair
of sneakered steps approach

on the narrow street below.
A broom sweeps.

Silence travels
up the Gothic Quarter's old

stone walls. The quiet scratch
of a clay cup

on a clay saucer
stirs the baby across the way.

I peak from behind the curtain
and over the sill.

I see the familiar
embrace of secret lovers. Hungry,

they growl and devour, trying to
stifle their moans.

Soft cries. Baby
wakens. I remember. Morning
cathedral bells toll. Traffic hums.
Wire prongs line

yellow shadows
on a ledge. Out of sight, pigeons'
throaty warbles garble. The baby
cries. A jogger's

keys clang like
cymbals. Birds still sing. Brakes

squeak. Vespas buzz. Trucks
shift. The young

neighbors grope
into the kitchen. Fierce dogs

bark. The baby continues
crying. The back-up

warning *beep beep*
beep of another truck pierces

my drums. A long silence
follows. Then last

night's empty glass
bottle falls, shatters on the black

asphalt streets below, a gull scolds
an unanswered alarm

clock, church bells
toll again, traffic increases, I tilt

my head out through the red
curtain, closer

to the yellow,
I stand, and I see clearly

a patch of satisfaction and Barcelona
blue sky, I hear another

jogger with keys muffled
in a pocket, two Brits chat on bicycles,

the baby cries, and I step, the curtain
surrounds me, hanging

red, above motion, bare,
breathing, still, tolling cathedral bells.

Desert Horse

Standing stiff-legged
beside a white block

concrete wall of morning
shade, tied to a lone oak

on a short leash,
abandoned

under a roofless sky,
a long afternoon

of hot sun
looms

before her.
Before me,

eight smooth asphalt lanes
of black leaving Madrid. I

catch a glimpse
of her between

billboards -
motionless, waiting.

No blink. No barn.
No swishing tail.

Apart on a Wednesday Evening
(for Mary)

Hot tea burns
my lips, even

though I try
to wait - even

though I try
to sip. The dark

cloud fills the white
porcelain. I pinch

its handle. Without
my fingers burning,

I tilt the cup
but can't stop

my lips from burning -
can't stop

drinking the white thread
that floats, curves

in motion. I set
the cup down on

its matching saucer.
Somewhere under

the surface - attached
to the other end -

undulates a bag
from China. Leave
it. Let it
disperse its bitter

tea. Let it
bathe in its own

mix of orange
power. Let it be

what it needs to
be. In time, a sea

of warm may
bring us together.

Ouroboros, Again

I bite my tail. It's the first day
of the last week of the last
semester of classes for this
thirty year veteran of a different

kind of war. I remember
students from my first fifth
grade classroom in the heat
of downtown San Antonio. Hell,

I still remember running
home from kindergarten
so excited by gold stars

I wet my pants. It's also

the first day of the last week
of the month of April - poetry
month - a poem a day - quite
a challenge each year. The calendar

wants to help us mark beginning
and end times with clumps
of numbers - sevens, twenty-fours,
twelves - but when it comes right

down to these days - nothing helps
knowing when to begin and where
to end - or how to end and where
to begin - today could be the end

for me - or maybe yesterday was
the beginning - I don't know -
routine circulation through this
world makes my head spin -

I'm afraid like everyone else -
of being alone at the end. Will
I know where my tail ends and
my tongue begins to swallow?

///

*In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan
and mountains of the Mexican border
I've followed the calls of birds
that don't exist
into thickets and up canyons.
I'm unsure
if all of me returned.*

Jim Harrison

Deconstructed in DC

I wake early,
 tie the white laces
 of my New Balance,
 and
 leave 100% white
 cotton, high-
 count threads
 of the luxurious
hotel. I
 maneuver the beige maze
 of replicated halls,
 stand before
 spotless
 mirrors,
 press bone white
 ceramic arrows,
 and
doors
 open
 for me.

I

descend

and

exit into the dark

morning. Uneven

slate sidewalks

zig-zag

toward the White House.

Protecting me

from north winds, solid

walls

of unseen history

museums

block
and
guide

my way.

I ignore red lights.

I am the white man.

Nothing

can stop

me.

In the moon-set shadows

of the monuments,

I circle

the long reflection pool, blind

to my own blending

into the white

marble,

surrounded

by steel poles

of blue and red, hanging

still.

The sun

rises. Black

chain links

sag

along decorative borders,

an old, odd request

to help

preserve

tired winter

grass. Worn

rats

scrap

in metal garbage cans

lined

with plastic. Jefferson

watches

from downriver. Lincoln

sits

at the right hand

of MLK. I continue

circling

the pool. I

begin

to see

myself magnified. Distorted

details come into focus. I

stop

and

look

over my shoulder:

benches, empty.

I

turn

back

and

in my turning,

I become stone.

Liberty and justice for all?

Please

demolish this white rock.

Pound
and
pulverize,

every piece of me. Let

the dust

remain a monument for all.

The Letting Go
(ending by Emily Dickinson)

I wake to move her car and avoid
a ticket or a tow. The cold rain is
perfect for an Americano at a cafe

across the street. I enter with my
novel that needs to be read within
three days. I sit on an old yellow

couch and discover my hidden line
of sight includes a dark patch under
soft cotton, an open lap of long white

fingers. I sink further into the cush-
ions with each glance more revealed:
this tall young paralyzingly beautiful

woman moves me. The novel is
sad. The father dies. The romance
dies. I die. There is a beauty here

and back asleep in the apartment
I witness but can't touch. I am
in a different world. I cannot solve

my daughter's car problems or her
health issues or her job stresses.
I can no longer be the one to give

suggestions. She carries an anger
like I carry this desire for tangible
beauties. I want to stop wanting. I

want to finish the novel, write poems,
buy my daughter's happiness. I want
to get up off the old yellow couch,

walk directly across to her, push
the ringlet behind her ear, whispering
I can't breathe, to take her hand

as freezing persons recollect the snow:
first chill then stupor then the letting go.

Fisherman's Waltz

My father could be spending his last summer with us. Fishing lines trail through his eyelets, out the back corner of the boat. Anchored in a warm quiet bay, he doesn't see the red bobber

sinking slowly like the black sun behind him. I watch his long fingers fumble. Reaching, I grasp his hand and close the old tacklebox - save us from wasting what little time we have left

cleaning up his spilled contents. The same mess every winter I dumped in my bedroom, reliving nightmares of his lost dream fish. Pulsing bluegill broke lines in downward spirals. Monster

pike straightened trebles of old Daredevils. Trophy largemouth jumped, spitting dull hooks in his face. Yellow perch flipped mid-air, bounced off boat's edge, splashed into the lake. I resolved

never to lose. I threw away rusty and defective lures, sharpened spinners, and replaced flashy loud buzz baits with the dependable crawler harness. Lipless jointed Rapalas, unspooled monofilament

tangled - tossed in the corner trash. I am unsure if he ever knew me to be the one wanting for him, the one pinching at the impossible knots through the night, the one organizing and polishing his silver

spoons. Reflecting now in my father's long shadow, I let go. His hand trembles. His eyes squint. His mind wanders. Aware of his own failing eyesight, he wonders aloud, "Where's my bobber?" Over his shoulder

all is disappearing.

The Prodigal Son's More Likely Return

My brother tempts me with my first movie
on my eighteenth birthday, casts me out in-

to our Baptist preacher's forbidden dark
of salted popcorn & fruity Jujubes. Chevy

Chase flickers in *Oh Heavenly Dog's* light
blasphemy. Dead, he seeks to retrieve God's

mistake. Reincarnated, he pounces on life
as Dog. I lick & chew, lick & chew. Jane

Seymour's soapy smooth bathtub legs dilate
me. I leap dirty into the bubbling waters &

nestle our snout between her breasts. Heaven
waits. I emerge from the evil theater cleansed

& confused by a drooling desire to paw, to be
true to the animal in me. I swallow my lust &

confess to my Dad who beats & banishes me
to the fenced backyard. I soak in the digestive

juices of sin. Gnawing in-between, I dig & bury,
dig & bury moonlit bones howling at my future

shame. That Sunday my Father preaches his most
polished sermon, exposes & berates the Prodigal

Son's numerous debaucheries to the adoring stained-
glass congregation. His reflections glaring omissions -

robe, ring, and fattened calf – hound me so I turn
& trot back to the concession lands of Good & Plenty.

Lying Teachers
(A Golden Shovel)

Half-eaten apples drop on our old wooden deck. We
look up to see the same fox squirrel chattering, real
fat. A pair of ribbon-thin Michigan brooks bend cool
clear water twisting through our wild forty acres. We
rest here alone together for three months. The nine left
we teach teenagers. Sharing poetry seasons our school-
separate lives. We hunt with Harrison in October. We
hibernate with Levine through dark winter, dreams lurk
behind black masks of single digit temperatures. Late
awakening spring thaws us in Roethke's far field. We
bury May deadlines eulogized by Thomas Lynch. Strike
out at commencement's end. True North is due! Straight
up 131 we fly non-stop & kid-free. Red-eyed & alive we
arrive hot & sticky. Juniper berries & blackthorns sing
welcome songs, neither blind to our shared secret sin.
In the backseat under our clothes the teachers lie. We
strip to reveal the treasures: his Hendrick's & hers - thin
patience groans – Bombay. Lust for quick sex & sloe gin
explodes. We grope. We grab. The bottles lead us on. We
finger the rusty key, jiggle it in, and unlock. The old jazz
records wait. The mothballed mattress waits. All of June
waits. We can't wait. We unscrew the cap. We pour. We
drink. We dance in cobwebs. Our old legs tangle and die
together. We drop. Our half-eaten apples squirreled soon.

At the Mouth of the Two-Hearted Near Paradise

We finish tying the last rainfly over the tent
just as the clouds pour. We dive into the blue

sedan, wind our way on narrow logging roads,
and arrive an hour later in a town we've never

been before. Cold and wet, we enter the only
bar. All eyes watch us sit, eat, drink and exit

without conversation - the crack of pool balls
left to echo the lightning as we begin again

our return down the dark gravel. Uncertain,
I find myself accelerating out of each curve.

Ricocheting stones against the floorboards
take me back to the green Chrysler station-

wagon of my childhood. Facing behind from
the third seat, I shared a dusty view of trees

and bits of sky in Michigan's Upper Peninsula
with my brother. I wonder if the fish are still

biting at Thunder Lake. My drifting dreams
allow the car to slide its blue into a soft sand

corner, jarring us awake. We realize we are
lost in the middle of this nowhere woods. We

proceed slowly. I take the next sharp turn and
stop, avoiding certain death. An old snapping

turtle sticks her neck out of her plate-sized shell
in the headlights' high beam. Her moss-crossing

carries the earth. She crawls into tall damp grass
while we wait. We watch her lay eggs at midnight.

Vita

John Veldt earned a B.A. in English from Cornerstone University, a B.S. in Education from Calvin College, and an M.A. in School Counseling from Michigan State University. He lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan and teaches at Jenison Public Schools.

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