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Cautery

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CAUTERY

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CAUTERY

by

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THESIS

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1. The Conversation

As a young writer I sometimes would day-dream about my photograph on the cover of *Poets & Writers* magazine. Of course the photo would capture the complications of living as an artist. The look on my face would balance intelligence and humility, both streetwise and vulnerable. The head line, placed somewhere to the left of the page and near my shoulder would state something about the originality and unique qualities of my body of work. As a young writer I felt the pressure to say something in a manner never said before on the page. Now more than twenty years into this process, I can recognize that this day-dream was born from a fear of vulnerability. The seed of this dream was the unconscious recognition that I had no idea how to construct a poem. With a strong desire and little skill to write, this was frightening. Reading across a wide spectrum of diverse poets delighted me. These early poets included Charles Simic, Sharon Olds, Annie Dillard, Charles Bukowski, Sam Shepard, Jack Kerouac, Louis Erdrich, and Jim Harrison to name just a smattering. Each of these writers possessed incredibly clear visions and clear voices. Each of these writers were so different from each other and yet each of them excited the burgeoning writer inside me. However, I had no idea how to articulate the similarities and differences I witnessed in their work. I had a popular image of a writer sitting in a small room with little lighting hunched over a keyboard working feverishly alone. The most important part of that image was sitting alone trying to make something original. This life seemed destined to resemble the lonely life of panning for gold in the Blackhills of South Dakota.

Now many years into the writing I am happy to recognize this image as false. Every poet writing is in conversation with every other poet writing or has written. Throughout my work here in the M.F.A. the poetic conversation that spans across centuries among a diverse population of poets has proven influential to the work in *Cautery*.

Jeanette Winterson discusses the necessary idea of artists in conversation with past, present, and future artists.

That is one reason why the calling of the artist, in any medium, is to make it new. I do not mean that in new work the past is repudiated; quite the opposite, the past is reclaimed. It is not lost to authority, it is not absorbed at a level of familiarity. It is re-stated and re-instated in its original vigor. Leonardo is present in Cezanne, Michelangelo flows through Picasso and on into Hockney. This is not ancestor worship, it is the lineage of art. It is not so much influence as it is connection.

I do not want to argue here about great artists, I want to concentrate on true artists, major or minor, who are connected to the past and who themselves make a connection to the future. The true artist is connected. The true artist studies the past, not as a copyist or a pasticheur will study the past, those people are interested only in the final product, the art object, signed sealed and delivered to a public drugged on reproduction. The true artist is interested in the art object as an art process, the thing in being, the being of the thing, the struggle, the excitement, the energy, that have found expression in a particular way. The true artist is after the problem. The false artist wants it solved (by somebody else). (12)

Cautery is a detailed conversation with poets across race, gender, class, styles and schools. This collection works through a speaker growing up in a house where a preacher's son attempts to reconcile the mired messages of Sunday sermons and the daily silence that accompanies living with an addict. The collection moves from the speaker's impressionable young identity toward the greater world and its complexities. To achieve this *Cautery* works with the tools of language and archetypes exploring memory, imagination, ecstasy, and suffering as

well as life and death. The poems work to cauterize wounds and give scarred shape, but shape nonetheless, toward the future.

My first introduction to poetry in high school began in my British literature class with Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepard to His Love". This particular piece of Renaissance poetry helped fuel some of my own romantic longings at the time. However, Renaissance poetry as a whole failed to ignite my curiosity, so I turned back to music listening to the Beastie Boys, U2, and classic rock. I think this happens to many individuals.

During college I studied business administration out of sheer practicality. Even though I did not enjoy my classes at the time, I figured that the business landscape was large enough that I would find my niche. By my senior year I realized I made a mistake, but I still did not understand myself well enough to know where I wanted to take my life. After surfing in Southern California the first winter out of college, I then moved to Chicago to study film and acting. Within the first year there I realized that the theatre world was not a comfortable fit. I found myself living alone and wandering the streets at night. On one of these nights I walked past a used bookstore and saw in the window display a copy of "Buried Child" written by Sam Shepard. That moment changed my life. Sam Shepard's dusty independence was something in which I could identify. From "Buried Child" I discovered "Hawk Moon" and "Motel Chronicles". His use of plain speech and cowboy vernacular felt grounded. The thematic drive of writing about father and son relationships was a concept close to me. On the back cover of *Motel Chronicles*, Frank Rich describes the collection as "a scrapbook of short stories, autobiographical reveries, poetry and photographs...". Shepard does not title any single piece, but on page 61 he includes the following poem.

on a hot day
mayonnaise is supposed to kill you
that's what my aunt told me

she also told me
never to go out without my wallet
in case I got killed
they'd need to identify the corpse

Much time has passed since discovering Sam Shepard but his influence of writing with plain language and intuitive imagery remain a strong aspect of this collection. Examples of it can be seen in both the longer poems as well as some of the shorter poems. Some of this influence is demonstrated in a poem such as "Pottawottamie Indian Preaches". The theme in this poem is that of the relationship between a father and his sons. The sons try to understand their father better.

At the podium, in the basement, dad sculpts his sermon.
Outside my brother and I melt army figures with fire.
I whisper to him *only with a sense of humor will you understand dad*.
Then we shape shift into Geronimo and Crazy Horse and sing Indian
songs. Time will never erase the river,
and the bird is forever buried in the mud.

This is all pretty straight forward narrative poetry. The stanzas continue in this fashion like a drum beat luring the listener into the story. In final stanza it takes its turn into the dramatic influence of Shepard. The poem finishes on a Shepard influence.

In my dream the Indian preaches the sermon.
My father finds peace knee deep in the cool mud
and the fire burns inside the river.

This Shepard influence can also be detected in some of the shorter pieces. For example in the first "Fever Ghost: Parsonage".

At the kitchen table with porcupine
quills lodged in his gums,
my father types his sermon

I scamper wild, skinned for stew.

My mother drowns the two heads
of a blind snake in a barrel of wine.

Summer heat
and a dozen marbles
hidden in my mouth.

A more concentrated poetic conversation began in my mid twenties when a friend gifted me Charles Simic's book, *Walking the Black Cat*. Back in high school I found it difficult to enter into the poetry of the 1590's, but the poetry of the late twentieth century put its hooks into me. I sought out anything I could find written by Simic. I read more of his poetry, as well as his essays and interviews conducted with him. In an interview with George Starbuck, Simic responds to question regarding his use of the word "madness."

What I try to do, when I have these young poets, I try to discourage them. I try to find that native nuttiness. It's there. And of course that's the only interesting thing. If there's anything to be built there, it's going to be built on that.

I was reading Rimbaud's letters. *Letters of a Seer*, a *voyant*. And he uses the word *cultivate*. How important that is. Cultivating your own obsession, your own madness. Poetry requires a superhuman stubbornness. You realize, if you write for a number of years, that there is a realm which is your own. You realize certain things about that realm. As in my case: that it doesn't come out easily, that it doesn't translate itself into words readily. It requires patience. Patience. Coming back to the young poets, what is hard is to convince them that this is the only thing worth giving their allegiance to. The important thing is that solitude, almost monastic solitude, and obsession. To cultivate that madness. 'Madness' I throw around in a large way, but it means *your own sense*

of reality, your own sense of yourself existing in this world. *Consciousness*
of yourself existing in this world. That's it. (Simic 44)

From there, I started reading more essays by writers as well as their poetry. Without realizing it, I had joined the poetic conversation. As Simic stated, writing can take an “almost monastic solitude”, but a writer is always in conversation with other writers.

The following critical analysis will focus on the collection's prioritization of image, diction, and the themes, forms (Sestina, litany, ghazal, ekphrastic) and threads (Fever Ghosts and ghazals) that give the manuscript its structure.

2. Image, Diction, and Themes

In the movie *Rocky*, Rocky Balboa wakes up before the sun rises, stumbles to the refrigerator, opens the door and proceeds to take out five eggs and crack them one by one into a glass which he then drinks. This has always been the iconic image of discipline for me. In this manuscript, imagery is the foundation. Williams Carlos Williams statement, “No ideas but in things” and T.S. Eliot's theory of an objective correlative are the raw eggs I drink each cold morning. Eliot wrote in an essay on *Hamlet*, “The only way of finding emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in a sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.” These ideas are operating in the manuscript from the first poem.

Cracked China, Broken Bone

There were Air Force reserve pilots rupturing the sound barrier directly

over our house, cracking the china, plates and cups, in the hutch.

There were sunflowers weighted down by September snow and
Our samoyed named Pasha, Lara's younger lover, in *Dr. Zhivago*.

There was my fear of massasauga rattlesnakes slithering in my tractor tire
sandbox and wandering aimless and lost in the green husks of cornfields.

There was excitement in my veins when my dad's church was robbed.
(And grown ups following tire tracks to the trailer of Kenny's dad)

There was my dad lying on the couch with a broken ankle eggplant
between calf & toes, too much to drink, leaning and peeing in a Jiff Jar.

The poem includes Air Force pilots moving beyond the speed of sound, images of snow and
sunflowers, followed by rattlesnakes, robbery and the witnessing of drunken father.

All of these images combine for an sum emotion greater than the parts.

"Antrim County Beach, 1975" demonstrates power of image to change direction in a
poem. As a mother sits on the beach watching her two sons she contemplates suicide. At the end
of the poem the image brings the reader back to a time of her innocence. The final stanza reads.

These salty boys swimming before her,
cast against the horizon, buoy her,
hold her head above
the thin water line, redirect her
imagination back in time, to the girl
who spoke words to storm and drive,
to the girl with her socks crumpled
around her ankles and her shoes untied.

Like Imagery, the diction in *Cautery* plays an important role. Poets celebrate language
and a poet living in the twenty-first century has a smorgasbord of choices. In his essay
"Altitudes, a Homemade Taxonomy", Tony Hoagland writes,

The ability of images to carry complex information is tremendous.

But when the image making process grows more self-conscious,

a poet's attention may shift to the resources of diction. If the instinct

underlying the image is visual, the instinct underlying diction is not just auditory, as the word implies, but also that of the discriminating intellect, intent upon inflections of weight and implication.

(Hoagland 5)

The language of this collection follows the tradition of a plain spoken lyric. In this sense a poet such as Philip Levine comes to mind. Levine begins his poem *Every Blessed Day* as follows.

First with a glass of water
tasting of iron and then
with more and colder water
over his head he gasps himself
awake. He hears the *cheep*
of winter birds searching
the snow for crumbs of garbage
and knows exactly how much light
and how much darkness is there
before the dawn, gray and weak,
slips between the buildings.

The language appears to be reportage, but it is deceiving. The construction seems plain enough, but reading a sentence without its line breaks one can hear the intended rhythm, “First with a glass of water tasting of iron and then with more and colder water over his head he gasps himself awake.” An example of this is in the poem “This is Supposed To Be”. Toward the midway point of the poem I write.

...Because
we don't wear guns in rooms where
teenagers learn, my state Senator
says I am working in the last mass
murder empowerment zone.
Then my aunt leaves a note
and dies. In a home. Not her
home. She writes, “No visitation.
No memorial. Just think of me.

The diction in Levine's poem manipulates the syntax of his line. In my example the diction is manipulated not in the syntax of the words in each sentence, but rather the control of punctuation and line breaks throughout the stanza. Written in prose it reads, "...Because we don't wear guns in rooms where teenagers learn, my state Senator says I am working in the last mass murder empowerment zone. Then my aunt leaves a note and dies. In a home. Not her home. She writes, 'No visitation. No memorial. Just think of me.'" Poetry empowers itself in its ability to use language, the precision of poetic language needs to have greater focus compared to other genres. In a poem, the reader can study the sentences as a whole, but they can also study each line as a complete entity to itself, and study how each individual line relates to the lines that directly precede. This allows lines to augment the multiplicity of meaning. For example, "and dies. In a home. Not her". Separated from the context of each sentence the line suggests that the aunt was no longer the same person she once had been which then destabilizes the sincerity of her final note.

A fundamental component of poetry is its music. Traditionally, Michigan's economy is an environment of heavy manufacturing. I have always felt that our speech rhythms, and at times our artistic expression, are born not only out of a combination of the heavy percussion of machinery pounding in each factory, but also out the blues music that traveled with so many moving from the deep south looking for work after WWII. This is where the diverse music of Jack White, Kid Rock, and Eminem is produced. Each of them different, but also riffing off a shared history of mechanization and the Delta Blues influence. In this collection I see it at work the following example.

"Burning Ghazal: Spoken Like a True Shadow".

Shadows of branches boogie in the breeze
across the pavement outside my front door.

Poems in boxes, poems in bottles,
poems in police reports— always a new bird's

egg to be hatched or cracked. Too tired to
climb this mountain, too far to turn around.

How is it possible that I feel both raw
and cooked? Sun burned and frost bitten?

Let me stand on the kick drum and clap my
hands. Let me stay under the sheet from

head to toe. Help hoodoo me, mumble
some mumbo jumbo, scramble me numb.

3. Forms

Cautery as a collection fits very much in the early twenty-first century with its concentration on free verse, imagery, and in its rhetoric. However, the collection also incorporates traditional poetic forms to give structure to various poems. These structures include the ghazal (discussed in greater detail later in the preface), a sestina, several litanies and ekphrastic poems, as well as a newer form introduced by Terrence Hayes, the golden shovel.

The oldest poem in this collection is a sestina titled, “A Pottawattamie Indian Preaches”. To hold a sestina together is to walk a tight rope. Line by line the stability of a poem is threatened. It is challenging for a sestina to hold taught from beginning to end. The dialectical achievement in “A Pottawattamie Indian Preaches” is that it holds together as a sestina, but at the same time reads as a plainly spoken associative narrative.

A running motif throughout *Cautery* is that of Christianity and the speaker's relationship to the church. With most church services, when an audience member arrives at the sanctuary they are greeted by a member of that church and handed a bulletin that will help guide them through the service. A minister will often use various of forms of litany throughout a service. The motif then lends itself to the form of poetic litany incorporated in *Cautery*. The collection begins with a

litany of memory and image in “Cracked China, Broken Bone”. Litany is also used in “Summer After the Divorce” in a similar way. Images juxtapose to express memories but also to build tension.

The relationship between visual artists and poets is highly prominent in modern and postmodern eras. A wide range of poets have incorporated the ekphrastic form into their work including poets such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden, Frank O’Hara, Denise Levertov, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Jorie Graham to name a few. In her book, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux writes in her introduction.

The widespread presence of ekphrasis in twentieth-century poetry can be understood as both a response to and a participant in what W.J.T. Mitchell has called ‘the pictorial turn’ from a culture of words into a culture of images that began in the late nineteenth century with the advent of photography with the advent of photography and then film, and has accelerated since the mid twentieth century with the invention of television, and now digital media. Excited—and haunted— by a sense of images’ increasing power in western culture, poets have taken up ekphrasis as a way of engaging and understanding their allure and force.

(4)

In *Cautery* this relationship between the visual artist and poetry is expressed in several ekphrastic poems from various artists including Albrecht Durer, Joseph Cornell, Richard Diebenkorn, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Finally, the poem “The Sorrow Will Cool” is a “Golden Shovel”, a form introduced by Terrence Hayes. The directions say to take a line or sentence from an admired poem. Then use

each word in the line as an end word in your poem. It is important to keep the words in order and give credit to the original poet. Hayes used the method when he wrote his poem “The Golden Shovel” based on Gwendlyn Brooks’ poem, “We Real Cool”. In “The Sorrow Will Cool” the line borrowed is from Nick Flynn’s poem, “Curse” from his collection *Some Ether*. The original line is, “Let the field burn clean, let you children beat the flames with brooms.”(55)

4. Fever Ghosts and Ghazals

It is important for a writer to remain open to all possibilities. To do that a writer must maintain a healthy form of wonder. It is not ignorance or naivety, but rather a cultivated sense of childlike wonderment. Dean Young acknowledges this in his extended essay titled, *The Art of Recklessness*. He writes, “A few years ago Robert Hass said to me, I still don’t know what I’m doing, at which point it occurred to me that not knowing what we’re doing is obviously the thing to do.”(89) He continues, “The conscious mind can adopt the discoveries of the imagination and turn them into technical possibilities. But the imagination will not tolerate being known, mastered by the conscious for long, so it then leapfrogs further, and in this way the poet gets more sophisticated at not knowing what he or she is doing. The other condition can only be complacency, the greatest enemy of art.” (90) It is in this spirit that the *Fever Ghost* poems and the ghazal poems find inclusion in this manuscript.

Edward Hirsch deeply explores Lorca’s concept of duende, that mysterious power to conjure attraction to a work of art, in his book titled *The Demon and the Angel: Searching for the Source of Artistic Inspiration*. Each chapter explores an artist’s relationship to the concept. In the chapter titled “The Black Paintings” Hirsch examines the artist Goya to further his exploration.

Lorca was using the idea of duende to try to account for artistic moments that seem to defy accountability. The presence of duende

is illustrated by that moment late in his life when Goya passed under the portals of death. In *Self Portrait with Dr. Arrieta (1820)*, a prelude to the black paintings, the seventy four year old artist portrayed himself at a point of mortal exhaustion, at death's door. He is pictured wearing a gray dressing robe, his hands lying limply on the covers of his bed, his shoulders falling back against the doctor sitting behind him, holding him up, silently urging him to take a glassful of medicine. The patient looks stricken, the doctor implacable. These two figures are so striking that it can take the viewer a while to discover the vague slate dark figures, insubstantial presences, painted into the background. They are apparitions welling up from the darkness of the sickroom. They are the spooky phosphorescent specter—the fever ghosts—who would be secretly unleashed into the black paintings. (55)

It is both the concept of duende and Hirsch's reference to "the fever ghosts" that becomes the thread that stitches together the shorter poems. These poems tend to lean into the mysterious and intuitive compared to some of the more narrative poems in the collection. However, though short and mysterious these poems also have the potential to linger in the mind of a reader. The spirit and motivation for these poems derives from many sources. On one hand they can read much like a Zen koan whose immediacy typically isn't on a logical plane. Consider for example the following Zen koan titled "The Most Valuable Thing in the World".

"Sozen, a Chinese Zen Master, was asked by a student: 'What is the most valuable thing in the world?'

The master replied: 'The head of a dead cat.'

‘Why is the head of a dead cat the most valuable thing in the world?’
inquired the student.

Sozan replied: ‘Because no one can name its price.’”

The power of an image, metaphor, or archetype is equal to its ability to stir multiple layers of meaning. Images are an integral part of the human experience. The power of an image is pre-language as witnessed in the drawings of bison in the Cave of Altamira, Spain, or Cueva de las Manos, and the multiple hands painted on the rock walls in Argentina. A philosopher might say that the meaning of life is to make meaning of life. A viewer asks what does the image of hundreds of hands on a rock wall mean? Meaning making is as natural a desire for human beings as blinking, breathing, eating and sex. When a lesson or moral direction is scripted in a work of art, taking the need to make meaning out, it tends to be dead on arrival.

The first poem in the manuscript is a short litany titled “Cracked China, Broken Bone” which is a narrative poem that creates tension on page one. *Fever Ghost: Skin of Wine* follows, working on a metaphysical level at once destabilizing the experience, but hopefully furthering a reader’s curiosity.

Fever Ghost: Skin of Wine

Never would my grandfather dream
of the mountains of mail order catalogues

or Catholics honoring a gypsy, isolated
from the news in a basement full of snakes.

The “Fever Ghost” poems took their title from Hirsch’s commentary on Goya’s painting, but the structure of these poems is broad. Two Yugoslavian poets, Novice Tadic and Vasko Popa, act as influences to these poems. Charles Simic writes in the introduction to his translations of Novice Tadic’s poems, “The religion of the short poem, in every age and in every literature, has a single

commandment: Less is always more. The short poem rejects preamble and summary. It's about all and everything, the metaphysics of a few words surrounded by much silence." (Night Mail: Selected Poems 9) The tone and structure of the short poems in *Cautery* find influence in Tadic's work.

Pocket Watch

Under it a puddle of blood
So it looks like
It's doing its work
Make someone inside march

When the cuckoo bird flies in
It goes quiet
 doesn't dare make a peep
Covers itself with metal ears
 and leaves me
 to her motionless
 supervision
 (Tadic 34)

A similar influence appears when studying Vasko Popa's work.

White Pebble

Without head without limbs
It appears
With mad pulse of chance
It moves
With shameless pace of time
It holds each thing
In its passionate inner embrace

A white polished virgin corpse
Smiling with the eyebrow of the moon.
 (Popa 19)

Simic describes this work, "They all start as descriptions and then proceed to withhold the usual attributes of the thing being described. They defamiliarize perception." (Simic 93).

To make the familiar strange again, as is the case with much modern art, is one of the objectives in this manuscript. The following poem pays homage to the tradition of butchering rabbits that existed for generations in my family.

Fever Ghost: Tradition

In a Dark Box
One rabbit at a time
Snatched from coop
To the cardboard box.

The .22 barrel is a steel snake.
The bullet its poisonous tongue.

In the dark box the rabbit eyeballs
the snake in the mouth and waits.

Much of what has been previously written about the “Fever Ghost” poems is also applicable to the series of Ghazals spread throughout the manuscript. The Ghazal is a form that relies heavily on a reader’s intuition and subconscious. However, the Ghazal is not a random stitching of couplets. The Ghazal greatly leans toward an associative logic. The topic of Ghazal poems enters the manuscript’s metaphoric conversation with many ancient and contemporary poets. Jim Harrison published a collection titled *Outlyer and Ghazals* in 1969. He writes a brief introduction before the Ghazals to properly situate the reader.

The Ghazal is an antique form dating from the thirteenth century
and practiced by hundreds of poets since in languages as varied
as Urdu, Arabic, Pashto, Turkish, Persian, German, French, Spanish.
Even Goethe and Schlegel wrote ghazals. Among my own contemporaries
Adrienne Rich has been especially successful with the form. I have not
adhered to the strictness of metrics and structure of the ancient
practitioners, with the exception of using a minimum of five couplets.

The couplets are not related by reason or logic and their only continuity is made by a metaphorical jump. Ghazals are essentially lyrics and I have worked with whatever aspect of our life now that seemed to want to enter my field of vision. Crude, holy, natural, political, sexual. After several years spent with longer forms I've tried to regain some of the spontaneity of the dance, the song unencumbered by any philosophical apparatus, faithful only to its own music. (26)

The second ghazal in his collection is a good example of the type of ghazal that influenced the ghazals in the manuscript under consideration.

II

I load my own shells and have a suitcase of pressed
cardboard. Naturally I'm poor and picturesque.

My father is dead and doesn't care if his vault leaks,
that his casket is cheap, his son a poet and a liar.

All the honest farmers in my family's last are watching
me through the barn slats, from the corncrib and hog pen.

Ghosts demand more than wives & teachers. I'll make a
"V" of my two books and plow a furrow in the garden.

And I want to judge the poetry table at the County Fair.
A new form, poems stacked in pyramids like prize potatoes.

This county agent of poetry will tell poets "more potash
& nitrogen, the rows are crooked and the field limp, depleted."

In Part 1 of the *Cautery* the poems have an underlying unease with the past and a sensed frustration with the attempts to articulate how the speaker feels about powerlessness. The attempt through language, the poetry itself, is that attempt manifest on the page. The speaker desires

greater coherence from the immediate world. In Part II a healing takes further strides. The speaker begins to allow a greater sense of abandon to guide the way. This is where the ghazal becomes the ideal form to seek both the raw and holy.

Burning Ghazal: Easter Sunday

Reverend Green suffers from infirmities and needs a little wine,
and because he is Christian he embodies many *infirmities*. God Bless the wine.

Putting my butt into a pew today is its own kind of resurrection.
Don't believe the way they taught me to believe, yet I bath in their wine.

Two six year old girls, one white, one black — color together on the same
page — some crazy ass elephant wearing a birthday hat — my kind of wine.

Under a guitar signed by Othar Turner we order pulled pork in spicy
barbecue sauce, cole slaw — Mississippi pecan brown beer — no wine.

I say to myself, “Hey Beady Eye, you should’ve learned to play guitar.”
No whine—life is fine— as long as you keep steady the pour on my wine.

Rather than wrestling with the unknown the ghazals begin to look directly at the unknown
without seeking out any answers. They exist and concede to the world as it is.

5. Conversation Continues

My relationship with poetry has evolved over the years. Now even if I am at a table
writing poetry alone, I know that I am actually not alone, but rather participating in a long and
rich conversation. Mary Oliver in her book *A Poetry Handbook* writes about the enormity of the
art form.

Poetry is a river; many voices travel in it; poem after poem
moves along in the exciting crests and falls of the river waves.

None is timeless; each arrives in a historical context; almost

everything, in the world's willingness to receive it—indeed the world's need of it—these never pass.

If it is all poetry, and not just one's accomplishment, that carries one from this green and mortal world—that lifts the latch and gives glimpse into a greater paradise—then perhaps one has the sensibility: a gratitude apart from authorship, a fervor and desire beyond the margins of the self. (9)

My gratitude to poets is immeasurable. When I was in high school reading “A Passionate Shepard to His Love” I was already being invited to the poetic conversation. I looked at the poem as a tool to woo young ladies. What I didn't recognize was the beautiful ambiguity in the line. From its initial stanza it is possible that poem was in the process of seducing me toward the written word. “Come live with me and be my love, / And we will all the pleasures prove / That hills and valleys, dale and field, / and all the craggy mountains yield.” From that framework I moved forward in life, and I am privileged to still focus on the world through poetry's lens.

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Part I

Wherever we go we do harm, forgiving
ourselves as wheels do cement for wearing
each other out. We set this house
on fire, forgetting that we live within.

Jim Harrison

Cracked China, Broken Bone

There were Air Force reserve pilots rupturing the sound barrier directly over our house, cracking the china, plates and cups, in the hutch.

There were sunflowers weighted down by September snow and our samoyed named Pasha, Lara's younger lover in *Dr. Zhivago*.

There was my fear of massasauga rattlesnakes slithering in my tractor tire sandbox and wandering aimless and lost in the green husks of cornfields.

There was excitement in my veins when my dad's church was robbed.
(And grown ups following tire tracks to the trailer of Kenny's dad).

There was my dad lying on the couch with a broken ankle eggplant between calf & toes, too much to drink, leaning and peeing in a Jiff Jar.

Fever Ghost:
The Parsonage

At the kitchen table with porcupine
quills lodged in his gums,
 my father types his sermon.

 I scamper wild, skinned for stew.

My mother drowns the two heads
of a blind snake in a barrel of wine.

 Summer heat
 and a dozen marbles
 hidden in my mouth.

A Poet Who Serviced a Church Clock

My father's life as a Joseph Cornell box

I spy him crouching on his knees with a rock raised high above his sobbing eyes directly over a tiny yellow deformed baby duck. Its neck curled like a lowercase n, its vision of the world upside down. Beaver Island, on a summer afternoon in 1981.

Grandma dropped a nickel in a canning jar everyday for a year to donate to John Birch.

Always the smell of pipe tobacco as he would lurk. He said he put the duck out of its misery behind the boathouse.

After his Easter sermon, my father sat across the street from us eating bread, each bite soaked in red wine.

The weather in my father's box is always the cornucopia of November under steel grey skies. The John Birch society labeled Eisenhower a Communist dupe.

Beaver Island, on a summer afternoon in 1981, he reclines across the street smelling of pipe tobacco.

Firing up his pipe, my father took his seat at the kitchen table in front of his manual typewriter surrounded by piles of books, thick books, heavy books, serious books. No fiction. Books written by men attempting to understand, explain, or justify their ideas regarding *Our Father Hallowed Be Thy Name. Our Father Who Art in Heaven.*

After the John Birch society labeled Eisenhower a Communist dupe, Grandma plopped two nickels in the canning jar everyday for a year to donate to J.B. .

Alone with waves and bolts of lightening, he feels at ease with his piles of books, thick books, heavy books, serious books.

If the typewriter keys no longer produce the words to soothe the fire in his soul he stands up, and slides his chair away from the table, and rambles toward his sons with tears in his eyes, with sadness due to the pending dead leaves of his life; he stumbles toward us to hold us. Chest pressed to chest we can feel each other's heart beat.

Eisenhower — Communist dupe.

In his desk drawer I unearth a postcard of a bird like Julie Christie, elbow cloaking her nipple under steel grey skies.

In his dreams he never abandons the lighthouse.

He bellows his sermon from the cylindrical pulpit high above the water. Next to him a picture of a bird like Julie Christie elbow shadowing her nipple, but exposing the rest of her breast.

My father would tip toe toward us. His box. His resurrection Easter.

In his dreams he never surrenders the lighthouse. Instead he sits at his perch listening to the wind roar and the waves pound against the pier. Alone with waves and bolts of lightening, he seals his eyes.

A hawk flies out of a birch. Always the cornucopia of November.

The statue in my mind is him crouching near the fire place on his knees with a rock raised high above his sobbing eyes with Julie Christie posing naked in the background. *Our Father Who Art in Heaven.*

Our Father Hallowed Be Thy Name. Our father who art in heaven no longer births the words to extinguish the fire.

He slides his chair away from the table, and crawls toward his sons with tears in his eyes, with sadness due to the pending dead leaves of his life.

A bird like Julie Christie naked.

Julie Christie Julie Christie Julie Christie a bird Julie Christie Julie Christie Julie Christie
writhing Julie Christie Julie Christie Julie Christie storms Julie Christie Julie Christie Julie
Christie pounding Julie Christie Jesus Christie Julie Christ Jesus Christie.

Summer After the Divorce

The older boys in the neighborhood would punch us with rhino head fists, middle knuckles raised
— its horn—in the thighs until we no longer could walk.

Devoured piles of kidney beans and ground beef, lucky if it included small pieces of
translucent onions.

Popped a wheelie on my Evil Knievel bike in front of our duplex and the front wheel kept
rolling down the sidewalk.

My mother shimmied in a Vegas-esque performance at
the high school auditorium. Her costume Caribbean water and head piece blue feathers.

Along with his six pack he purchased, for us a tin of chew. The tobacco conveniently sealed in
tiny tea bag like pouches.

On Thursdays, before he would deliver us to a pizza, my dad would mow the lawn even though
he no longer hung his pants in our closets.

My mother smoked cigarettes, cried, and stared out into the backyard until the middle of the
night.

She left a note for us that our Samoyed was escorted to the farm.

Swindled a kid out his Joe Namath rookie card and found my body shaking when my
friend put me in a Chinese finger trap.

We learned to swim out of an undertow, not against it. This was true even
away from the beach.

Listened to the neighbors shoot hoops in the evenings. Started conceiving my escape.

Discovered that after awhile we all wash our dreams with wine and our hands
with turpentine.

Burned the rule book, then the Bible, so I could see where I traveled in the dark.

**Fever Ghost:
Tradition**

In a Dark Box
One rabbit at a time
Snatched from coop
To the cardboard pen.

The .22 barrel is a steel snake.
The bullet its poisonous tongue.

In the dark box the rabbit eyeballs
the snake in the mouth and waits.

Burning Ghazal: Body Full of Holes

With snake shot in his .22 he cratered hundreds
of holes in the rat snake: a scarlet constellation

in a body resembling a black garden hose. Dead
crow on the deck this morning, on the shovels

steel blade it is soft and light. At times I am mute
to my own attacks. I only know what I'm working

by trusting not knowing what I am working. Tonight
I play my fiddle standing on the ribs of the beast.

The lady in my woods is the seed, the root,
and the flower to the ailing animal that is me.

To Face the Fire

In the dark she places her hand
on my shoulder, her mouth near
my ear, she whispers my name
so my little brother, sleeping in the
next bed, remains. In the middle of
the night he is a burr bouncing
super ball thrown hard against
the wall. I wake and she holds
my hand and leads me down
the dark stairs, past the vodka bottle
on the coffee table, and my father asleep
on the couch and into the kitchen.
Sitting on the table in the nook,
we watch the Shooks' barn burn
in the distance. The colors orange
and yellow dance a terrible pumpkin
dance raging to life. The bones, studs
& joists, of the barn look skinny
compared to the expanding
fat flames. The leaves on nearby
trees rattle away in the winds of heat.
Tiny flames stay to the ground and
crawl outward across the property
like small waves crashing against
Lake Michigan's shores. Exiting the
barn's mouth a horse gallops out
of the inferno, its mane and the rope
around its neck an orange signature
across the starless black night.

Antrim County Beach, 1975

She sits on a towel, feet buried
in the sand, fingers braided
under her knees, watching her two
boys breaking in waves, altering
the waters current and the pulse
moving under her rib cage.

People surround her: laughing,
reading paperbacks, or lying
on towels, toasting in the sun,
even so she is alone.

Three lady bugs scramble in the surf
two escape the back peddling tide
one is pulled out under the wave's claw.

She carves words in the wet sand
with her finger but ebb and flow fill
the negative space with water.
Words disappear into the earth and
she dreams of following them.

She remembers the night she waded
into the lake, water filling
her nostrils, silencing
her backache of loneliness.
Then crawling back to shore.

Somedays her life feels like reading
the written pages of someone else's
journal, a forgery of days, but pasted
on the seventh page is a picture of her
sons in matching firefighter costumes.

These salty boys swimming before her,
cast against the horizon, buoy her,
hold her head above
the thin water line, redirect her
imagination back in time, to the girl
who spoke words to storm and drive,
to the girl with her socks crumpled
around her ankles and her shoes untied.

What's On Tonight

My mother's B & E took place when owning
a color T.V. still remained outside the monthly
budget, before President Carter stood
at the podium ramrod and tied the P.L.O.
to the Ku Klux Klan. Earlier that fall,
the Dodgers slammed into the magic
of Reggie Jackson, who stitched wings
on baseballs to fly over centerfield walls.
The year Rick James deserted the Mynah
Birds to soar solo, and Charlie's Angels
perched in my dreams. That winter my dad
drove across town to shack with his dad.
His new woman living five or six red lights
down the road in a neighboring town. I think
she rented a green aluminum sided house.
It's hard to articulate because by the time
my mom told me and my brother to button
our coats and tie our shoes, it was dark outside
and parked in the other woman's driveway, engine
idling, heat blasting, our heads sleepy, Mom

let herself in

and I watched her silhouette shadow through
the picture window, shadow slashing
across the drawn drapes. As my brother
began to wake, I told him to glance
out the rear window, look at the dog,
circling and peeing on the snowman
with the pipe in his mouth. We crumpled over
cackling; we crumpled over crying. Driving
back to our skinny duplex, I leaned over
the front seat, whispered to my mom,
I am proud of you letting the words settle
like snowflakes, and then we made pancakes
for dinner and cruised the channels on T.V..

Boyhood

My mom coos for me
from the backdoor
to say goodbye. I hide
on my belly in the grass
where I am a plastic army
figure with no face,
Jessie James on the lam,
the Bionic Man. I spy
on her exit. She is wearing
a turquoise dress and eyeliner
to match. The curl in her
hair fresh as a birthday
ribbon. She says goodbye
to Hope, my sitter, and skips
down the walkway smiling
and taking the offered hand
of a man I haven't met.

He opens the door of his Trans
Am, stands over her as she slips
in the passenger seat and shuts her in.

Where is my walkie talkie
with my dad on the other
end? And my dog who moved
with him when he left? I need
my baseball bat, or the rifle
used to butcher the rabbits. Or the
grenade my grandfather found
marching through Bernay? Or
my great grandfather's axe
that back in the day took care
of that undisciplined ox?

Hope calls me to dinner,
but I pretend not to hear
her. I'll return after
she wipes the grease
off the stove and then
make my demands for dinner.

When the evening moves
from Honolulu blue to
Coca-Cola black night, I will
hide in my mother's bed

staring at the buzzing street light
outside her bedroom window
until I hear her return
and Hope drive away.

Long Gone, Never Gone

is the smoke —
the aroma of Captain Black

tobacco. What the mind chooses
to resurrect cannot

be tethered to a chain
in the backyard of yesterday. Why

the afternoon he tilled the garden
emptying mouthfuls of blood

into the soil and not the day the kittens
heaped together in a cheap football helmet?

Tonight, I remember my father
taking his father and my brother

and me with him—fishing. The dog
fish caught flopping in the bottom

of the aluminum boat, echoing
across the entire bayou. I don't

recall stepping into the boat, or
rigging my line, but here and now

I feel the sun burning on my neck
just after lunch time. Maybe

my father already had his vodka
on, or maybe he forgot the stringer. But

the fish continues to pound and suffer,
gills snapping open and shut

in desperation. Finally,
my grandfather takes the stem

of his pipe, like the handle on a hammer,
and beats the fish upside the head,

in a rage rivaling the fire of the sun,
until blood leaks from the fish's eyes.

Pottawottamie Indian Preaches

a sestina

October fog lurks over the goose pimpled river.
Just us. Me, my brother, and dad.
Huddling with cigars dad snaps a match. We circle on the fire.
Standing in earth's cold sweat our boots heavy with mud.
The river hums dad his sermon
and sings to my brother and I about Indians.

Stories of Pottawottamie Indian
summers and prayers given at the mouth of the Grand River.
Dad's eyes swim in his sermon.
A swallow perches on a cattail. *Should I shoot it dad?*
He nods and smiles at my immature bravado knee deep in mud.
The gun breathes its fire.

Dad's eyes reflect the fire.
Shotgun bells ring funeral songs disturbing ancient Indians
and I wish I would be swallowed by the mud.
I beg God to say something and the bird alive, but even the river
won't speak to me. We stare at death: me, my brother, and dad.
Dad digs the bird's grave while he thinks of words for his sermon.

At the podium, in the basement, dad sculpts his sermon.
Outside my brother and I melt army figures with fire.
I whisper to him *only with a sense of humor will you understand dad.*
Then we shape shift into Geronimo and Crazy Horse and sing Indian
songs. Time will never erase the river,
and the bird is forever buried in the mud.

Images of that day—caked behind my eyes like mud.
I don't remember a single sermon,
but I'm haunted by the lesson learned at the river.
I sit watching smoke fade above the fire
listening for the truth from the ghosts of Indians
and pondering about the dreams that afflict my dad.

I don't want to be haunted like my dad,
but some things just can't be buried in the mud.
I wait for the Indian.
I listen to the sermons.
I stare into the fire,
but the truth is the secret of the river.

In my dream the Indian preaches the sermon.
My father finds peace knee deep in the cool mud
and the fire burns inside the river.

Part II

Mercy, like the carcasses of animals in a foyer, being burned.

Fragrant, dreaming, unreal, and having to do, terribly with love.

Laura Kasischke

Fever Ghost:
Skin of Wine

Never would my grandfather dream
of the mountains of mail order catalogues

or Catholics honoring a gypsy, isolated
from the news in a basement full of snakes.

Ars Poetica #790

Men would saunter through the front door and sit for pea soup
at the kitchen table with me. When full, they'd exit out the back-

door and flee. I claim only one beautiful mother, but at the card
table of my wandering mind I was dealt a royal flush of daddies.

One of my daddies suffered a gnarled ring finger fighting a rabbit
that struggled to stay out of the crock pot. Crouched behind home

plate in the third inning, another daddy busted his thumb in four
places. Never looked to the dug out. Healed crooked, his finger.

Didn't stop him during timeouts from pinching my stomach until
it bled. He taught me to stand still and stare up at the rafters.

My daddies! One daddy fell asleep in the woods and dreamt
he was a wolf. Another daddy rolled a '72 Dodge Charger

fleeing the over under double barrels of an angry cuckold. That
daddy married a movie star. And lost her. One daddy taught inside

a trailer during the day and baked Toll House cookies for dinner.
What's yr daddy do? My daddies stood behind the pulpit, stormed

the sidelines, mowed the lawn weekly, drank gallons of vodka, got
hooked on heroin, and lost some teeth. In the end they all wound up

on their knees, and weeping buckets at my beautiful mother's feet.

Multipath

*Definition: Static, noisy, distorted stereo sound,
like "ghosts" in TV reception*

The morning that repeats itself is the one
where the beet juice bled from the red flannel
hash into your butter drenched rye toast.

Sitting across the table from you,
your eyes run rivers that also bled beat.
You lift your bandaged left hand out

from under the table — the result of waking
up and attempting to stop the naked blade
of the fan. Again, I threaten to mail fist

you sober. The more I understand the hole
you shoveled out of yourself the tougher
it is for me to redeem the momentum

of your departure. The foozle rhythm
of your years on the planet beats uneven
in my ears through the static reception of days.

The Drink We Never Shared

Unexpectedly, my father lifted
up his hospital gown, I glimpsed,
hanging between his thighs,
sagging and stretched, his purple
boxers.

On the chair beside me, his cane hangs
off the back. His hand seeks this stick
and he loses his balance. He leans into me

and whispers *did you bring her?*

Across the room, my denim jacket hangs
on the hook. It lives on
that hook. I take her out,
grab two cups off the counter,
and bring her back to the table. Muted
on the television the Angels
battle the Pirates. World
Series and nothing changes.
Wind and freezing rain buckshot
against the nursing home's window.
At the table we drink our whiskey,
avoiding the words that should be dealt.

Hear the heavy roaring
as the storm rolls away.

Bird Hole

Through my windshield, red wing black birds perch on
telephone wires above soggy ditches and cattails. Yellow, red,
& black feathers, colors of my father cremating. Another red wing
black bird dogfights a green darner dragon fly too big to swallow.
In its beak, thorax cracked,
the fight & flight is over.
Since he died, I feel
a bird in the center of my
rib cage, thrusting its wings in vain. To exhaust my bird,
drown my bird, I tried. Considered putting a bullet in my bird. Instead, I
imagine my bird as a hole in the sky, behind which is an alley, my
escape. In the paper people are reported missing everyday.

Sweeping Up Broken Glass

Of course there is none near / the pool or its dressing rooms. / Material unwillingly pulverized from its original / form is always more interesting. We tell / our best stories in the form of jagged edges. The butcher's floor — / spotless. A ninth grade girl wrote that her stepfather / taught her to draw on her visits to see him in prison. He served seven years / time for his involvement in a drive-by. On the sidewalk / no glass. / Instead a mouse belly up with rain matted hair. Another student / wrote that when her father left she was told / he was on a golfing trip. Two years later he showed / at the doorway of her second grade classroom / unannounced. Tears / are a form of broken glass, / as well as gasps for breath. / It's a shame we hide our shards of days. / We should wear them as jewels in our crowns.

Burning Ghazal: Spoken Like a True Shadow

Shadows of branches boogie in the breeze
across the pavement outside my front door.

Poems in boxes, poems in bottles,
poems in police reports — always a new bird's

egg to be hatched or cracked. Too tired to
climb this mountain, too far to turn around.

How is it possible that I feel both raw
and cooked? Sun burned and frost bitten?

Let me stand on the kick drum and clap my
hands. Let me stay under the sheet from

head to toe. Help hoodoo me, mumble
some mumbo jumbo, scramble me numb.

Cold Nipples

Too many months since I've glimpsed
the moon or whispered to a woman
in a mini-skirt. Stray cats don't even drink

the milk I leave them at night while
I wander the streets—a drunk—
en beetle. In Chinatown, I beg Dr. Lau

to proscribe love tea. He fingers my pulse
and speaks in Chinese. His resplendent
daughter translates, "You have weak heart."

Cornering love? More difficult than catching
crows on my tongue. On the sidewalk, a lady
shakes her cup—three quarters & a dime.

She howls, like a wolf toward the moon, as I
eye a younger woman wearing a t-shirt
and jeans, jaywalking against the biting wind.

Burning Ghazal: Garden of Earthly Delights

A book of Flemish & Dutch paintings splayed open on my floor;
Images of the Christ child & the Madonna's nipple on my floor.

*Animals symbolizing the deadly sins, with horrible genital organs
spewing torrents of fire and darkening the earth floor*

with mud. Though I'm still in town my mind is already in Memphis.
Under a disco ball, Isaac the Murderer and Lady X grind on the dance floor.

Oh where did the black nights go when we could satisfy our love & lust
naked and hidden in the beach grass with only a blanket and sandy floor.

In the morning sky, the murmuration of swallows spell their story;
the papyrus on which it is recorded—shadows on the Southern floor.

Fever Ghost:
Murmuration

Over boiling rapids:
black starlings cloud
and undulate in patterns:
mottle on Petoskey stones:

black cherry stains: my
white shirt, traces of lips:
movement of your mouth.

This Is Supposed to Be

an ode to a girl wearing red
shoes, but it got fucked up
along the way by reports
of pink slime supplementing
our ground beef like packing
socks in your crotch to add
girth to your limp meat. Then
a Presidential candidate
yacks it up in the Sunshine State
about building colonies on Mars
while a black kid is shot armed
with Skittles & an ice tea. Because
we don't wear guns in rooms where
teenagers learn, my state Senator
says I am working in the last mass
murder empowerment zone.
Then my aunt leaves a note
and dies. In a home. Not her
home. She writes, "No visitation.
No memorial. Just think of me."
Which I am, though I'm also
thinking about the girl in the red
shoes, and what she did to save
that three legged dog dodging
cars in the street. But then Carlos
tells me Fabian was jumped. He
says this giggling. His brother.
Broken orbital. He points to his eye.
Broken cheekbone. Splattered nose.

Burning Ghazal: Easter Sunday

Reverend Green suffers from infirmities and needs a little wine,
and because he is Christian he embodies many *infirmities*. God Bless the wine.

Putting my butt into a pew today is its own kind of resurrection.
Don't believe the way they taught me to believe, yet I bath in their wine.

Two six year old girls, one white, one black — color together on the same
page — some crazy ass elephant wearing a birthday hat — my kind of wine.

Under a guitar signed by Othar Turner we order pulled pork in spicy
barbecue sauce, cole slaw — Mississippi pecan brown beer — no wine.

I say to myself, “Hey Beady Eye, you should’ve learned to play guitar.”
No whine—life is fine— as long as you keep steady the pour on my wine.

Rabbit X
for Gerrit

My brother pointed out the birth of a ten foot rabbit
with X's for eyes, born from the tip of an aerosol can,
underneath the overpass, near a mini-golf course
across the street from Arby's in a town
that claims a gay bashing diesel truck repair
man who might regret his post now
that he is up to his dirty fingernails with hate
comments that include, among other
things, the egging of his property and a personal
threat to his nuts and bolt and this morning
the discovery outside his screen door that leads to his
cellar, a bushel full of dead rabbits with X's for eyes.

Fever Ghost:
A Sentence Weighs on Me

Oklahoma inmate, who shot a teenage girl and buried her alive, finds himself writhing and gnashing his teeth while strapped to an execution gurney — a lethal concoction burning open his veins.

Bardo

for Adam Yauch

What is the word when a plane
taxi out to the runway and takes flight

before schedule? A word opposite of delay.
I never fret about the sun setting too early,

or celebrating my birthday on the 4th of July
rather than the 5th of November. Day after

day burns off. Year after year the sun shines,
leaves turn orange, snow falls, flowers bloom.

When I sported my baseball hat cockeyed
and my sleeveless t-shirt soaked in the swill

of cheap beer, *fighting for my right to party*,
I never saw the similarities between the boom

box and the shape of your gravestone. I never
dreamed your exit from the stage could take place

before your daughter's doe eyes burned with her
own rebellion. In my dreams I am unable to erase

your face from the cover of Rolling Stone. I imagine
you with Monarch wings taking flight with the wind.

Where Accidents Happen

On the shoulder of any American highway — two pieces of wood can be found forming a tiny cross. A screw connecting tiny boards, typically painted white; at times stenciled with names of the deceased: *Luckey Haskins*, or *Wannamaker*, the ones no longer riding along.

At times, the memorials are gussied up with fake white carnations frosted blue or pink at the petal's edge. Maybe a red ribbon looped at the intersection of boards. At times, a soggy teddy bear slumps at the base, head hanging, one eye missing.

Near Bluelick, Kentucky, instead of a cross, someone planted a metal stake and hung wooden wind chimes. Each time the chimes touch, clapped by wind stirring from the velocity of semis, hauling heifers or swine, a note is struck giving voice to a life ended unwittingly in that particular spot.

Postmortem Questions for My Dad

Do you believe you ever penetrated the surface of a day?
How do I find my harbor if the lighthouse is destroyed?
Was your loneliness always the ocean or did you spend
 nights in the moonless desert as well?
While alive did you learn a birdsong?
When you entered the abyss what did you believe?
Did you ever find a harbor to anchor?
What should I say to my son?
What do I tell my daughter?
Is what isn't said a part of your song?

Nobody Fathered My Blind Eye

I can't even smell the onions on my fingers,
as I wipe the bulbous tears from my cheeks. Nobody
asked me where
I shoplifted my suit of skin, tonight's dented armor;
 or delivered me his supererogatory opinion
on the menace of men wearing hoodies while humping the street.
During the day I push my way through throngs of people;
but I pretend to live in a sealed cave.
I am so sad I can't stop laughing,
“Pull me over,” I howl
though Nobody hasn't opened his ears to me.

Nobody said February snow would grow deep enough to bury black history;
 Nobody said I would never fit the description;
 Nobody said this chalice from which we drink is patriarchs' nectar.

Nobody is stationed in the control tower that we cannot eyeball because privilege is as invisible and ravenous as the measles. Empathy my only vaccine.

I thought I had been governing myself the whole time; setting alarms, scrambling eggs, and sizing up the punk on the train threatening my alabaster life. Tonight, I recognize my collective reflection in the kitchen window, ghosts hanging in my tears, history carving its path down the wrinkles on my face.

What Ivor Thord Grey Would Say

My Dutch relatives don't understand the Spanish
bandied about El Elegante barbershop, or why

Los Dias de Muertos is celebrated at Cesar Chavez
Elementary. They stare at their shoes instead

of validating the young *Ponch "o" Villas* hanging
outside the doorway of Canita's hip hop store. They pound

Budweiser at the bar, Coctailz, which advertises
POLASKI DAYS & FREE POOL. Aunt Isla

used to toe the line on these curbs during Memorial
Day parades and sculpt dough into palm sized windmill

cookies everyday of the week. The '57 chevy is still
wedged into the lobby of John & Sons Used Cars

and Body Shop. Dutch names linger on neighborhood
signs: Sommerdyke Plumbing; Van Raalte and Tulip Streets.

Ivor would warn, borders lead to vulnerability as Island
Latinos keep the bus stop bench between themselves

and the Mexicans. Ivor would prophesize. *Beware amigos,*
just past the Dollar Store and Four Star Gas,

Taco Bell gringo managers keep the drive-thru
open to assimilate & satiate hungry bellies late into the night.

Part III

Now in the cool of evening I catch
a hint of the forest, of that taking
of sudden breath that pines demand;
it's on my skin, a light oil, a sweat
born of some forgotten leaning into fire.

Philip Levine

October

I.

If I stop pushing and pulling the spatula
across the cast iron pan, the pine nuts
turn the color of bark. Sitting on my lap
staring at the computer screen, my daughter
and I harmonize on the word “Whoa”
when the photo of the Gila monster’s
cauliflower shaped skull appears. Meatballs
in the oven make tiny popping noises
on the rack above the orange heating coil.
The wind rattles leaves down the street;
the sun dissolves slowly into Lake Michigan;
the book of poems is splayed open
on the glass table; my hand settles
between two thighs; your fingers are cold
as darkness descends on burgundy trees.

II.

A woman's teeth litter the sidewalk,
white bone bullets on dried blood; knuckle of a cop;

amid reports of another movie star flashing side boob;

amid pictures of a soldier missing a leg,
hopping on the foot still in its boot;

amid drone planes punching holes in apartment buildings
where a girl wearing a red hijab stands on a coffee can to boil cardamom.

amid a classroom of students writing, one standing at my desk,
assignment in hand, tears pooling in the lower half of her eyelids; tea cups;

III.

The cat purrs near my feet;
it's the white bowl filled with tuna in my hands.
Other than semi-trucks migrating through
the nearest intersection, the house is silent
after the coffee machine stops percolating.
Morning remains the color of a velvet navy dress.

IV.

A weatherman points
to the animated snowflakes
over Lake Michigan;
salmon served with zucchini
and pine nuts;

coriander and orange
peel in wheat beer;
apparitions swing
from the birch trees;

Japanese maple drips
evening rain; I leave
the oven door open
to warm my hands.

My Fading

On the darkest days I feel my fading.
My reflection stares back at me
from the window as night stands
in morning's way. Outside a storm
is blowing, the trees are twisting.
Red taillights on cars pierce the black
rain. When I speak to my reflection,
his lips move with my lips. He nods
when I nod, scratches when I scratch.
In the dark I identify with my reflection more
than my own flesh and bones. Wordless.

The Wild One

I feel my son cracking the cocoon
of my embrace as we lie in the bottom
bunk of our vacation cabin. It's the stones
of muscle growing in his shoulders.
A couple of years ago these shoulders
felt thin enough to thread through a hook.
He's built himself on dunes and snake
grass, pulling fish from the lake. Tomorrow
he will explode through the screen door,
letting it slam behind. He'll hit the dock,
legs churning, until he reaches the end,
vaulting above the water, attempting to turn
both arms into helicopter blades against
gravity's invincibility.

For me there is the dreaded silence.
My reflection as a father in the water.
Life wrapping her hands around my throat,
but not before I breathe words into my son.

Under water, eyes open, my son will hesitate
before dark weeds,
recalling last year's hungry snapping
turtle hovering under the dock. Later, back
in the bunk, at night, stone muscles flexed,
he'll save his fear for his mother's ear
and instead recite to me stories of the mutant
crawfish that scurries away from the rocks,
sustains itself on gasoline and run-off fertilizer,
growing its pinchers to the size of row boats,
ready to snap his legs from his body.

Through the Dead Trees the Moon Shines

Most days start *mostly cloudy* this time of year,
but a day is also capable of opening its robe
and letting us peak at its blue sky
and yellow daffodils.

At my age I can look at my
life as half over or half done. It's up to me.

Swollen buds on the tree branches protrude like spikes
on a torture stick. Yet last year's rabbit birthed
pink bunnies under the deck and already
grown into fuzzy softballs with ears and legs. By
summer's end the neighbors dog will do them in.

Anyway, there is more parking at my son's guitar
lessons now that the building next door imploded
under the weight of February snow. The heel
of my shoe peels and a hole coils to spring
near the knuckle of my big toe. It could be worse.

I thought what I wanted would shine.
I thought whiskey would taste terrible in a paper cup.
I thought life insurance would protect my survival.

Opening my car door I am reminded the hinges
scream like a fox with
its leg in the jaws of a trap and a broken back,
but when I drive through the bohemian section
of town, a tattooed couple kisses on a bench in the sun.

The Point of It

According to the Big Bang theory, the universe was born as a very hot, very dense, single point in space.

Imagine the stored energy it takes kevlar to halt the bullet
from entering my chest and exiting through my spine. The universe

is an energy bank managing constant deposits and withdrawals.
I borrowed the energy I use to hoist the bar and plates off my chest

Once a basketball is in the air, it takes buffalo energy to stop
an alley oop, but not so much as a breath to launch the Monarch off

the perch of my finger. If I snatch up a book, I am elevating it with energy older than
the blind poet who constructed Odysseus out of song.

Calculate the energy it takes a rocket to escape the bonds of gravity. Imagine the energy
it takes to push the moon out of earth's orbit.

I know it requires work to scale the fire escape, only the moon spotlighting my way.
It takes my all to hope you will let me climb through your window at this hour. It's hauntingly

too long since I felt the 80 watts of heat produced by another human suspiring near my ear. In
hurricane history, this desire is the kinetic energy of Katrina. I imagine myself as a forest

fire, releasing heat and light through thousands of burning trees and you the howling wind.

Spring Music

Today, the sun gives me cheer
 and I wag my tail
 and lower my ears.
Starving for blue skies teaches one to submit. Oh,
the long legged ladies run,
once again around the lake
 which is a teardrop stain on earth's crust.

On days like this a young man a choir boy
 who, despite the blue skies, suffers
 from the unrequited song of
 a Puerto Rican girl
 with long notes
and peanut butter colored eyes.

The ice still drips from the eaves
onto the sidewalk as I enter
the market to purchase bottles of red wine,
to soften an already soft afternoon.
The black guy at the entrance,
 holding the door open, wears
a black cowboy hat embroidered
with eagles.

He hums.

Inside the butcher looks bored
 pouring buckets of ice
 onto dead sea creatures: raw
shrimp, bluepoint oysters,
smoked white fish, and orange
salmon filets. In the eddies of aisles

from the corner of mine eye
a Siren with waterfall long hair
sings.

I tie myself to my shopping cart.

The body has its own song
that finds its rhythm in its own desires.
You must learn to love its sounds
to maximize happiness. Sometimes
it is a humid night with Nina Simon,
and sometimes

a silky night slowly
unbuttoning itself to Marvin Gaye.

Okay, the lyric I feel guilty about
is probably necessary, or
I might be swept up in my own
self pitying percussion. Over
the years I discovered
 the gold on my canine tongue
usually turns out to be tinstone.

Adam and Eve

After Albrecht Durer

Instead of painting a Mountain Ash, ancient Tree
of Knowledge, with looming snake hovering over Adam & Eve,
he parts the two from holding hands; individual panels,

each standing their ground on scorched clay pocked with stones,
tough on tender feet. Adam and Eve stand naked and gazing
on the edge of the world with a choice to make.

Instead of their golden hair & perfectly proportioned bodies,
firm breasts, parenthetical hips, strong arms and thighs, I
lust for the black abyss, always there in the background, waiting

patiently. At times I wish to reduce my life back to gesso
and white canvas: absent of moose & cow, rabbit & cat,
absent of a roof & kitchen, shirt & tie, absent of children

in need. This is the twisted apple lodged within me; a need
for silence as necessary as the need for water; a thirst
quenched only by lowering myself, in the bucket, down

the dark well of words. A toast: to the void before us,
to the wonder and awe of the Fall, to those of us
without angel wings, to space in life, that emptiness.

Sorrow Will Cool

Fingers massage aloe into the scar that will never let
go of your body. This branding is a contract, a
marriage of a molten sear and skin on the field
of all your days. Do not build a fence around the burn,
rather day and night, like prayer, keep the memory clean
and one day your children will finger it. Let
them explore the calloused bump of flesh. Your
hands may tremble, lips quiver, eyes blur. The children
will question you, open this burning drawer often. Beat
back the desire to shut and lock the drawer on fire, the
desire to wash away yesterdays and douse the flames.
This branding iron heated in fire with
sorrow will cool, the embers swept away with brooms.

Ingleside

by Richard Diebenkorn

Despite the blue sky and radiant sun,
The houses up the hill are barren
Of trees abutting empty grass
Land. Soon the empty space will crawl full
Yellow backhoes and bulldozers, heavy
Metal and horsepower caged in steel
Preparing to cobble more houses, pave snaky
Black streets and pour white sidewalks.
Transplanted trees stand black. But the grass
Bleeds green and the houses shine bright white
With red and blue roofs. I am drawn to its
Possibility in my imagination.
A life of symmetry, rows upon rows
Of houses all brightly lit from above. Yet
The unspoken rocks loudest. No four year
Olds churning their legs on big wheels, no
Middle school boys In sleeveless t-shirts
Riding dirt bikes on the streets. No girls.
Nobody mowing a lawn or picking up the trash.

Tiny Tips

To contemplate my daughter's drawing for fifteen minutes per day works magic on my self pity. I could beg her to point her blue colored pencil at me like a wand. Long tentacles of electricity hissing from the pointy lead of her pencil biting into my flesh with molten hooks. I scream, but I tell her *not to stop. Lift me over your head and shake the salt out of the paper cuts I call wounds*. The reality is much simpler than all that. The solace of my short suffering doesn't need the spectacle of cinematic proportions. The real balm is to watch her place her pencil and move from point A to point B, and from point C to point D and so on until the lines begin to reveal a portrait of a man with tiny tips of hair on his head and along his jawline. A child's portrait of a father is really a map, a topographical recording of the routes he took through the mountains and valleys until his ashes float across the surface of Lake Michigan. Let the record show, the smile on his face was of the highest elevations ever recorded.

This Bread is My Flesh

I

Sun reflects off of storefront windows.
Inside the bakery warm brown loaves slide
into plastic bags, knotted & displayed on shelves.

II

On the counter is a bag of wheat berries,
a pitcher of cold well water, and measured
half cup of sea salt, flour, and brown eggs.

III

Fingers and forearms dusted with flour
claw and push raw dough across
the butchers block.

IV

Other than ingredients, the bread is
shaped in long aluminum molds, or glass,
or drop biscuit pans.

V

Jesus sits with both hands on the table,
palms up. On the plate between his hands,
the bread. The disciples look away, toward
each other and whisper.

VI

As a child in church, it is the bread passed across
adult hands right in front of my face. A
pile of neatly cut squares on a large gold
plate.

VII

At the dinner table the loaf remains whole
until our fingers touch it and pull it apart.

VIII

Eating with my father he dips his roll
in his glass of red wine. His
eyes bloodshot, but gentle in the waning
light.

IX

He knew by morning his hands would
be bound and he would wear a crown
of thorns, but now he focused on the
bread in his mouth, flavors of honey
and salt.

X

Two empty bottles of wine on the table.
You reach across the table with a piece
dripping with olive oil toward my mouth.
The crust is tough, but the bread is wet
and warm.

XI

Standing high above the congregation,
my father would raise his arms, palms
toward the sky and say, "Unless you eat
the flesh of the Son of God and drink
his blood, you have no life in you.

XII

Crumbs on the plate, some on the floor.

XIII

This morning I serve it to my daughter
and my son, with the sweet blood
of raspberry jam, each piece resting
on the palms of my hands.

Over the Hills & Far Away

After Robert Rauschenberg

Many are the moves
my ballerina makes, her leg
in white tights, a steeple
rising from hip, past ear
and pointing to a world
without end. These words

ring like the church bells
of my past. My father
standing behind the podium,
potato juice instead of water
in his glass, which after the sermon
will help him find deep sleep.

Through the riddle, not
the narcotics, I find myself,
far from evening's visible moon,
walking backwards with my
eyes closed on Shook's farm,
lost to dusk, the blood of strawberries.

Later, lying on my back
looking at the sky, I wonder
when did we stop dropping our
jaws at the sight of jumbo jets
releasing their white thread into
the wind and the blinding sunset.

Pilgrim's Progress

I went to find him and found him
buried in a book somewhere on the shelves.

We must first walk with him through that terrible silence, accusers
pointing fingers and demanding blood. Through the darkness of the cross.

Hell is everything you wanted bloated and satiated
Hell is life turned in upon itself
 life cut off from the river
 life lived reaching for the moon
 life with endless bread, but always an empty stomach
 life with turpentine soak skinned and a lit match

Our mourning for all that we ought to be, but fail to be. Our mourning
 for the world with its groaning travail.

God who could command sap from a tree and invented galaxies and archangels
also invented cow manure.

Maybe love always involves the emptying of ourselves for the sake of the other.

He opened his mouth to me.

But this story is spoken from my tongue.

Vita

Aaron Brossiet earned a B.A. degree in business administration from Hope College, a M.A. in the Art of Teaching from Aquinas College, and a M.A. in Humanities from Central Michigan University. His work has been published in *The Mac Guffin*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Sky Magazine*, *Mudfish Magazine*, and online at *Redneck Review*. He lives in East Grand Rapids, MI with his wife, his son, and his daughter.

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