
Stonecoast MFA

Student Scholarship

6-27-2022

There Was Confusion

Carter Cumbo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/stonecoast>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Stonecoast MFA by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

There Was Confusion

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Carter Cumbo

2022

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

May 20, 2022

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Carter Cumbo entitled *There Was Confusion* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts



_____ Advisor
Chen Chen

Cate Marvin
_____ Reader
Cate Marvin

_____ Director
Justin Tussing

Accepted

_____ Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and
Social Sciences
Adam-Max Tuchinsky

Abstract

This collection is about a young man with an overactive mind trying to make sense of life in early recovery from alcoholism. It focuses on the reckoning of his past, how it appears to go with him into the present, and the relationships that exist on the periphery of his adamant self-examination. It is about the realization that his obsessive process of self-examination, and desperation for answers to life's universal questions, pale in comparison to the wisdom of his own lived experience. It is a journey through current and past life, and the reckoning of a confused mind.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	1
<u>I.....</u>	17
BLACK DIAMOND LIQUORS.....	19
THE OTHER TATTERED BLACK SNEAKER WAS NOT UNDER THE CAR SEAT.	21
NOW (I AM TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHY)	22
DENVER 1.....	23
THERE WAS CONFUSION.....	24
AT THE START	25
NOW (I AM TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO BE NOW)	26
WHEN ASKED WHY I MOVED TO MAINE	27
DAD, AFTER CARL DIED	28
BY THE WATER.....	29
<u>II.....</u>	31
NIGHTLY WALKS.....	33
DENVER 2.....	34
AIRPORT BLUES.....	35
GOD POEM.....	37
KATIE’S POEM.....	38
THE BACKPACK.....	40
THE REAL MEDICINE	41
A FLIGHT HOME.....	42
MY DAD, THE DRAGON.	43
THEN II.....	44
<u>III.....</u>	47
NOW (EITHER TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE).....	49
HOW TO ABANDON YOURSELF	50
THE WAR.....	52
FOR HIS THESIS ART PROJECT THE STUDENT DROPPED OUT	53
A REAL MIC DROP MOMENT	54
A STUDENT CAN SEE OUT THE WINDOW FROM THE FLOOR	55
THE MIRACLE	56
FUCKED.....	58
DENVER 3: HEADING EAST	59
<u>IV.....</u>	61

AMERICAN PSYCHE	63
THE STAR.....	65
AWAN 1	66
AWAN 2	67
FOR THE BOY WHO SEES RED WHEN GOD IS MENTIONED	68
AWAN 3	69
NOW (I'M TRYING TO WRITE ABOUT WOMEN)	70
PARK DAY.....	72
NOW (HERE IN PORTLAND).....	73
THE TIME I THOUGHT I WAS CATHOLIC.....	75
THURSDAY	77
A SYMPOSIUM ON WHY YOU ARE POOR AND WORTHLESS	78
AT THE 2021 ANNUAL MAINE REAL ESTATE CONFERENCE IN NEW HAMPSHIRE	79
THEN (AND WHATEVER HAPPENS NOW).....	81
ON MY WAY TO WATERBORO.....	83
 <u>V.....</u>	 <u>85</u>
 LAFAYETTE, ANYWHERE	 87
THEN (THE FIRST TIME I GOT HIGH)	89
7 MONTHS AFTER.....	91
DARK NIGHT.....	92
APOCRYPHAL.....	93
NOW (I READ RILKE)	94
BIBLIOGRAPHY	95

THERE WAS CONFUSION

Preface

I am, at this point, not a great writer by most standards of craft and canon. I am, I believe, a slow learner. I am, however, still a writer. This is true because, somehow, I keep writing. I attribute this consistent return to the page to the frank and supportive guidance of my numerous mentors, peers, and all the poets I have read, both living and deceased. I have begun to find myself on the page, through the trials of craft and writing in an authentic voice and by finding permission to experiment and find the balance of content and craft, exposition, and metaphor. I have realized that my deepest compulsion in writing poetry is the desire to be seen openly, un-shadowed by cumbersome craft or obscuring metaphors. My time at Stonecoast has been a process of finding my own where-with-all, so that I might, one day, call myself a good poet.

This thesis collection of poetry is about my daily and past life. It is about specifically, a journey into recovery and the confusing process of attempting to heal the past, and let it go. Though it focuses on many aspects of what the speaker's life was like before he got sober and the early days of recovery, the manuscript is told from the lens of now. A major formative theme that is carried throughout the work is the speaker's struggle with current life, no longer in active addiction or the awkward early days of recovery. It is about the adamant self-searching of a person determined to unlock and somehow decipher themselves in relation to their relationships, career in affordable housing, and environment. In many

ways this collection is derived from the regularity of daily life, and what is regular for the speaker is this searching, and obsession.

I wrote many of the poems that take place in the present, while going through a painful breakup. This relationship and its ending exist largely on the periphery of the collection but its emotional weight colors much of the speaker's pain and observation. I was hesitant to include the poems that explicitly deal with the relationship, but as the collection developed, I found that the emotion of the manuscript was inseparable from the separation that was happening in my life. Break ups alone are confusing, a first major break up in recovery, baffling. It is from the intersection of these elements, a career, a breakup, recovery, that the title was born. If my life were to have ended during the writing of this collection, and I were asked on my deathbed how I would describe my twenty-seven years of life, I would have answered, *there was confusion*. The title loses much of its resonance without the acknowledgment of the breakup.

I didn't write a proper, lineated poem until the final semester of my undergrad. I don't remember writing any verse before that save for the countless rap songs I had scrawled, recorded, and performed across the Colorado front range during my late teens and early twenties. I knew very little about musical craft, about beats to a measure, about breath control. Outside of rapping, I could not keep a beat. I was fueled almost entirely by a deep desire to create, to be heard, and to be high. I wrote like a man

desperately searching for a way out of himself. That is, by hand in notebooks and I would often need many takes in the studio stumbling over my frantic chicken scratch. In my mind, there was no time to write it legibly, or type it. I had an overwhelming sense of urgency.

The lyrics I was putting down were abstract, and open to interpretation. I rapped at a frantic pace with breakneck rhyme schemes and poor breath control. I packed as many syllables and images as I could into each bar. I had a lot to say but I wasn't quite sure what I meant or how to say it. I recall being agitated by the impatience and restlessness I brought to my lyrics, and I was fascinated and arrested by the rappers that sounded the opposite in style and delivery. Instead of emulating them, I continued with my anxiety of spilling streams of cryptic images and opinions that danced around the heart of my subject matter. I often wrote about social issues but failed to place myself inside the experiences. I was also struggling with drug and alcohol addiction, so my consistency and ability to put deep contemplations into my lyrics were greatly stalled by the pursuit of inebriation. Along with consistency and focus, my alcoholism barred me from technical growth. My entire mission, it would have seemed from the outside, was to find relief and grasp desperately at the rotating diamond of fame that I pictured in my mind's eye. An image I spent more time refining than my actual lyrical abilities.

When I moved to Maine and found Stonecoast, I used mostly rap lyrics in my application manuscript. Lyrics, and the handful of poems I

had written while in my final semester of undergrad, a degree I finished online while living in a Portland sober house. I remember sitting in front of the Stonecoast webpage and having to make up my mind about what genre I felt most called towards. My associations were closely tied to addiction and the toxic nightlife of local rap music, so I sought some level of creative absolution and new perspective. I chose poetry because it was the closest thing to rap. And because I could use its autobiographical nature to help me process the years of struggling with alcoholism and mental illness.

I fumbled my way from a basement recording studio to a residency where poets like Lauren Marie Schmidt and Cate Marvin were re-breaking the lines of one of my first attempts at lineated poetry. I had a tenuous grasp on grammar (something Martin Espada assured me was an indictment of the public school system and not a lack of comprehension), was sparsely read, and wrote in redundant and archaic language. It wasn't until Cate Marvin showed me Denis Johnson that I began to understand how poetry is a larger world than what was written in 19th and 20th century canon. *Incognito Lounge* was one of the first books of poetry I had ever read, and it blew me away that someone could write so conversationally and concretely about the darker side of society.

When I reflect on the following collection, and what elements were instrumental to my process, I think mostly of the word permission. In the midst of my time at Stonecoast, the poet Robert Strong, while we both sat

on his screened in porch in Lewiston, explained to me the importance of external inspiration; how the attempts and tendencies of other writers and creatives can lend us internal permission to either imitate these influences or try something new. Paradoxically, it is this idea that led me to finding a sense of permission from the words of Rilke:

I know no advice for you save this: to go into yourself and test the deeps in which your life takes rise; at its source you will find the answer to the question whether you must create. Accept it, just as it sounds, without inquiring into it. (Rilke 9)

It is these words of Rilke that helped give me the permission to realize how, early in my pursuit of poetry, I was distracted by feelings of inadequacy. I placed great importance on the technical aspects of the poetic craft and ridiculed myself for my lack of formal English education. I felt paralyzed by the mountainous task of learning the ropes of a genre I had little experience in. I was a rapper before I wrote poems, I felt like an imposter at Stonecoast, and I robbed myself of my own experimentation and exploration. In other words, I was not allowing myself to write bad poems, I was avoiding revision. I wanted to understand beyond my ability. Though I will confidently affirm the study and imitation of craft, Rilke helped me to realize I am the only person that can write my poems, and craft is useless without content. What I lacked in formal craft, I made up for in urgency. As Linda Gregg writes in her essay “The Art of Finding”, “The poet must have craft, but he/she must also locate the substance, the art within a poem, which is at the center of the best poetry, and is upon

what the craft works.” In these early years of poetry, I am slowly emerging from the unawareness of believing I am unique in my unbelonging, and more realistically assessing the truer stage of my development. I, like my peers, have strengths and weaknesses, and whatever my perceived deficit or lack, I am more relatable to my peers than I can often discern, whatever our respective struggles may be at the time. I have been learning to locate my content. I am slowly learning the craft. I am reading poetry like never before.

When I was rapping, I listened to music constantly. I had my ear to the streets; I knew who was dropping and when. Despite having Kendrick Lamar or J Cole on repeat, I never sat down with their words. I never picked apart their bars or memorized their flows. I was mostly taking it in for my subconscious to mix its typical smoothie of passive influence, so I could rack my brain and frantically scrawl words onto a page. As I began to write poetry, I found myself reading more than I wrote. Although I struggled to decipher the technical aspects of what I was reading, I spent my first semester at Stonecoast taking a pencil to the assigned collections. I then attempted to imitate what I read, or as Linda Aldridge would say, “try other poets on.” I tried to write outside of my comfort zone and in another’s voice.

My first semester mentor, Martín Espada, impressed on me through repetitive and hard learned feedback, that I ought to write what I mean and lower my diction to better suit the voice of a 21st century writer.

I am not sure why amateur poets write like they were born in 18th century England, but I imagine it's a similar reason as to why whenever someone saw me rap, they asked me if I was going to be the next Eminem. What I believe Martín was saying to me was that I was trying too hard to sound like a poet, rather than myself. I believe that because he said it to me on numerous occasions. I had preconceived ideas of what literature was at the point in which I entered it—without focusing on how the medium related directly to my life—trying to assimilate into some archaic voice in the canon. Ginsberg said it well in his *Paris Review* interview, “there should be no distinction between what we write down, and what we really know, to begin with. As we know it every day, with each other.” (*Paris Review* 396)

In the process of imitation and colloquializing my language, I began to realize my tendencies as a writer, that I went for big words over simple truths, large abstractions over concrete details, and subconsciously was a subscriber to the “more is more” mentality. Martín was giving me permission to write about my experience, as myself, whoever that was. A truth can be read no matter who wrote it or who reads it, so can a lie. I came to learn that writing is somatic, you can feel it in your body when something feels truthful or uninspired. Locating poetry in the body was legitimated to me by poets like C.A. Conrad, by the love poems of Pablo Neruda and Jack Agüeros. Much in line with Gregg's point on locating the content of a piece is Emily Dicksonson's famous line, “If I read a book

and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry.” Federico García Lorca’s concept of *duende* exemplifies the ineffable quality of a poetic spirit, he defines duende, “A mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained.” A force that, “delights in struggling freely with the creator on the edge of the pit.” (Lorca 4) My journey in poetry so far has taught me that balance is vital. I must bring both duende, a somatic and emotional spirit, paired with the where-with-all to locate that connection with words, syntax, and line. A poor vocabulary or grammatical ability has meant less facets for me to express myself, and an over-importance placed on craft blocks me from the deeper somatic journey of the desire to access myself, to allow for passion to emerge. Balance is hard because it is a risk, a risk of losing structure, a risk of lost passion.

It was Lauren Schmidt, during my second semester at Stonecoast who gave me permission to take risks and to be more appreciative with failure (*more* being the operative word). After two residencies and a full semester of writing poems under my belt, I was becoming acutely aware of my social presence in the context of my writing. I had put an immense amount of stock into my identity as a white person who had a degree in ethnic studies. There was a lot of self-congratulation going on between the ages of 18 and well, now. An example of this posturing happened somewhere in the bowels of my second semester in the form of a lengthy prose poem about marching across the stage to receive my undergrad

degree. I wrote confessionally about how uncomfortable and embarrassed I was when my major's graduating class of mostly women of color knelt during the national anthem. I had told them I would follow them down to one knee once the music started, but when the time came, I froze up and shuffled over to the history majors standing next to us. I blended in very easily.

I sent the poem to Lauren for feedback, and she wrote the following at the end of the poem: "you risk coming off as just another white liberal who doesn't know what to do with being woke." She also wrote, "There's too much genuflecting going on here to read as sincere." This feedback granted me two specific and embarrassing forms of permission. The first was the same permission Martín had given me: don't try so hard, the second: good witnesses don't editorialize. I learned working with Lauren that risk doesn't come from writing exactly what happened during a controversial moment but from how the poet captures the moment. Instead of man-handling my poems with exposition, I began to understand how to consider the reader, and how people want to be shown subject matter in a way that gives *them* permission to relate and interpret, not to be told flat out what everything is supposed to mean. Unlike with rapping, I realized writing poetry was a more careful exercise, I couldn't slam words together and hide behind abstractions. Most people don't spend time deciphering lyrics with the same intensity as one annotates literature, though I hope that one day changes. I have identified

my compulsion to write about intense experiences comes from my days in Hip-Hop, as do the difficulties getting to the heart of the matters I felt so called to explore. Where Lauren critiqued my editorializing, she also exposed the pulled punches of padding an experience with framing and explanation. It wasn't the experience that I needed to put more words around, it was the form itself that needed to hold the chaos or intensity of my subject matter.

It was Cate Marvin in my third semester who made me read grammar books and pay close attention to form. She would take my poems apart and rearrange them, then suggest a poet who could do what I was trying to do but successfully. She told me that my work was chaotic, and as a result my line and craft needed to be agents of control. Ginsberg was a good example of this control. With poems like *Howl* or *Kaddish*, the urgency and freedom of association grant an effect of untethered-ness. But when I took my pen to their lines, there was a profound sense of control:

who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley,
death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night
with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock
and endless balls, (*Howl* 1)

The long lines feel sporadic when the reader's experience is really being guided between the breakneck images with punctuation, rhythm and conjunctions ('and' being an operative instrument of breath and momentum). Outside of a focus on craft, Cate gave me permission to

believe in my work, that I was capable of showing up authentically on the page. Cate seemed to understand my work on a level that encouraged me to do the same. Strong mentorship has shown itself to be invaluable in my process.

It is in this paradoxical relationship of outside inspiration unlocking the internal doors of self that has colored my journey through Stonecoast and to this point of a finished manuscript. The collection I have assembled is its own legend to the map of permissions I have been granted during the process of its creation. It is a deeply personal work, one that is hyper centered on the self, but very clearly influenced by the work and behavior of others, another microcosm of this paradox of permission. I believe this concept is universal, no work of art is created in a vacuum. However, what is noteworthy about the synthesis of a writer giving themselves permission through other writers, friends, or life experiences, is the paradigm of confusion and self-avoidance that proceeds an influence sinking in and unlocking internal doors for the writer. It is instrumental to my journey to note how certain works of another not only shaped my words but enabled me to engage with my own passion for the content and context in which I feel called to write. To finish Rilke's point:

and after all I do only want to advise you to keep growing quietly and seriously throughout your whole development; you cannot disturb it more rudely than by looking outward and expecting from outside replies to questions that only your inmost feeling in your most hushed hour can perhaps answer. (Rilke 10)

To accept influence into my inner world, I believe there has to be an inner world that is a large enough container, emotionally and contemplatively, to hold and synthesize, to be fully inspired by said influences. If I am not working on my inner world, or heeding to my innermost feeling, I will remain in denial or cheap imitation, my container will be small and non-discerning. Because I choose to write about my history, my childhood, and experiences with love and addiction, it is a dangerous process to write without careful consideration of intent. As Rilke writes in *Letters to a Young Poet*, “A work of art is good if it has sprung from necessity.” (Rilke 9) If I am in touch with myself, my compulsion to write the taboo is noticed as either egoic, for the sake of entertainment, or vulnerable, for the sake of interrogation and self-actualization, and the relatability that comes along with it. As has been echoed to me for years by an endless stream of artists, readers know when the writing isn't honest. Though my aim is never to conflate honesty with correctness. If I write myself down, it will be controversial, probably to me as much as any reader.

I admittedly have struggled with that in this collection, finding the balance between what to reveal and how to frame it. To answer this question, I ask myself, is it necessary to say this? And more importantly, do I believe that somebody, somewhere, will relate? If the collection is mostly a series of cheap war stories, or the self-indulgent telling of woes, I will have largely diminished my usefulness as a poet. I do not think I have

completely evaded this risk or that my work is fully enlightened in craft or any related facet. What I do hope is that at least one reader, one poet who reads this work, one person in recovery who reads this work, will take away some form of permission for themselves and their own pursuits of creation.

It is in the realization and interrogation of confusion, that I remember Rilke:

Nobody can counsel you and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bid you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. (Rilke 8)

In these busy and final weeks of Stonecoast, I have found, greatly aided by the mentorship of Chen Chen, a more mature relationship with uncertainty. In the compiling of this manuscript, I have expressed a discomfort and near obsession with a need for certainty in how the themes and content of individual pieces come together. Chen has affirmed to me the permission to tinker. To wander into poems without knowing where I will end up. He has shown me the guiding light of his own acceptance, his embracing of being lost when he begins to develop a book. A poet of certain magnitude, Chen Chen demonstrates how important the experience of a more advanced poet can aid one younger in his craft, younger in general. I have heard so many iterations of “poetry is not a luxury” but what has been more resonant to me, is the idea that poetry is only in its most restrictive outcome, literature. It is a microcosm, a metaphor for the

journey one must choose to take towards self-actualization. Through Chen's questioning or praise of my craft choices, his vulnerability around his own process, how he pretends that what he writes will never see the light of day, I realized we are really in the business of facing ourselves.

Of all the awareness gained from external influence and permission, I have written what feels to be the most urgent, and most authentic. As a poet, I have come to understand that where I would like to be is not where I write, I must write where I am. And I am to this day wholly and unequivocally confused. Confused about where this all leads, about who I am in relation to my past, this is not a manuscript of resolution, but of dark humor and an underlying hope. The humor of how preposterous the human experience can be, the hope that we will all be O.K. as long as somebody, somewhere can relate.

The Symptom

Dear Newly Sober:

If you ask me, what are the symptoms of my sickness?
I will admit there are many. It is easy to blame
the reasons for war on weapons, the way
a bottle is, so too is a gun.

Symptom:

A physical or mental feature which is regarded as indicating a condition of disease, particularly such a feature that is apparent to the patient.

Never let anyone tell you differently. Especially yourself.

I.

A poem about birds.

*Me, morphing into a blackwinged bird,
locked, cage bound by calloused hands.
My resistance, a crowman hysterical
against the bars, fed caffeine capsules*

*by the gruff hands, a wide, maniacal
grin against the long teeth of thin bars,
my spread of feathers the black mirror
of a smile. A small child's delicate*

*hand reaches from behind a curtain
towards the latch, opens it. A calm
before the opening, a quick head cock
and a leap into nothing. A short drop*

*before my wings' brilliant smile catch
wind, a timer in my birdmind, counting
down toward the deceptive calamity
of a window appearing open.*

Black Diamond Liquors

I didn't drive around any alleys prowling for bins.
I parked out front and drank a Coke to the logo,
vanished two shooters into effervescence, an old
alchemy of my new reflection a thousand times

pale in the spritz. I chose the strip mall old town
west, I wouldn't relapse on Public Road at the drive-
through, *your* liquor store. Four walls held shaky
by Modelo posters, brown paper bags wind-

dancing the lot like ghosts on a bender, ghosts
of Lafayette fathers, ejecting crushed cans
from driver side windows into the alleyway bins,
each can a live detonator, each a nuclear test site,

the whole town unstable, houses rigged to blow.
The color of shutter paint, the brown grass, array
of flower beds, it was old town, everyone liable,
could have moved one house over and exploded.

//

Up on the westside, Black Diamond Liquors, as teenagers
they never carded, we'd pop the trunk and wait
for the bravest of us, knocking a double fist of Evan
to the register. I bought shooters though, hands

fumbling my of-age ID, the empty faced clerk artfully
swiping the scanner, three bottles between her four
knuckles. These memories. I don't remember what kind
of pants. Only that they shuttered in the car seat

afterwards. I parked out front of the house and drank
a Coke to the logo, dumped two shooters into the black-
ness, kept the rest in my pocket went inside and drank
my blind spot into a slanted picture of blue walls burnt

in sunset, rays peeking to catch me in slats
of the office blinds while you snored over a golf
announcer in the family room, vibrating a can of flat seltzer.
In your blue ottoman like an inflatable life raft,

I swam the edges while you slept. Long strokes

through rugburn and hardwood to grab at the armrests,
counting the dorsal fins in the dark water of carpet
disappearing into the blackness beneath us.

Maybe I thought you'd save me, those calloused hands
dragging me up the beach, leaving me for sun,
sand peppered in my hair.

The other tattered black sneaker was not under the car seat. Nor did it not join its mate when cast lazily into a mudroom closet. With only one of the pair found, I assumed the old shoe was gone forever. The next week CBS This Morning reported a mile long, tangled black shoelace hovering high above Lynn, Massachusetts. The governor was ordering drone strikes amidst townsfolk hysteria about aliens. I thought to myself: sensational fools, aliens are the least of our worries. If the laces are there, my old shoe is somewhere else, massive, and waiting to drop.

The giant black sole of a sneaker grows its shadow over a boy with an ice cream cone, stunned and watching up at the rocks and dog poop jammed inside the lines of the worn-out design.

NOW (I am trying to figure out why)

I am trying to figure out why Now feels like Then. I am trying to separate what has been with what continues to be. Somehow the turmoil inside,

Then and Now careen in my head, felt in-body like a crow cage-bound, hysterical against the bars, two wolves, jaws locked, growling, and matted

in spit, with no ground covered, exhausted. Like a grain of sand containing eternity dropped clumsily on a crowded beach and trampled by a fat child

with fudgsicle drooling on his chest. My time Now is scattered, utterly lost. I can't fake turmoil; I wear it like a sticky beard of fudge. Turmoil begs

me to write in metaphors, has a turnstile and a funhouse mirror, that's cliché, my inner turmoil is cliché. It's a museum full of blurry polaroid's the subject

is me apologizing to someone uncaptured. It's the rollercoaster I hadn't the heart to tell my parents I hated. I continue my regular purchase of a one-way ticket.

I return to the front of a long line. The world is growing, I am growing up, I am in love and not in love, if I write what is happening now my turmoil

might stop: I have stopped eating eggs in the morning, I've begun drinking kale in smoothies. The kale makes me worry about being unhealthy again,

and just like that, the feeling of Then once more. And I'm back at the turnstile, going somewhere.

Denver 1

Denver International Airport is not a series of congested terminals, not lodged in the heart of the city, but is a spiked oasis on a vast prairie, a desert of tan grass and prairie dog dens. It reminds one of a medieval keep with its white tents, snaking walkways, and isolation. At the entrance road's juncture is a statue, a midnight blue bronco with glowing red eyes, when stared at directly, it conjures a single lightning bolt to strike on the prairie's horizon.

The Bronco's head had toppled during its creation and crushed the sculptor. It was re-capitated by the sculptor's son and erected into a sentinel over the divergent lanes of Arrivals and Departures. Its mane is matted eels, reared up and wild, it welcomes all first time and frequent flyers with a fiery gaze. Ferocity is what feeling they decided must accompany a passenger before flight. Before hurtling through ozone—the interrupted habitat of birds—in a long metal tube... at 500 miles per hour. The midnight bronco watches over all who pass, a protector, or are we sinners under its burning stare? Or is it poised? Head craning down like a contorted expression in Guernica, patient for the freak timing of its next self-decapitation. The head appears small from the road but if toppled, would crater the asphalt like a small horse-faced meteor. Or perhaps, in a more fitting fate, crush the aluminum can roof of a holiday bound station wagon, where Johnson Family Vacation meets Final Destination. A chaos of metal and long faces and torqued, un-sized bodies, a surreal violence, a new and bizarre fact about DIA, a tradition, that of a family of sculptors' re-heading a murderous and midnight blue horse.

There Was Confusion

If I give you everything, I will have nothing left to know myself,
to feel the places I am hard, and quiet, soft, where I give in.
Holding my hand up for re-assurance, to see a silhouette,

the thin outline, that aura, a transition of skin to open air. I fear
that slight glow is a process of decay, leaving nothing
for myself. If I give you nothing, a twilight of ideas,

I will be lost in a dark reach of options paralyzed by opinions,
ones I'm convinced were never mine. In the mirror I am sure
my aura is a halo, tell me It's not decaying.

What do you know? I will fade, reassure me, angelic or dust?
What do you know? Look at my hand, at the withering
glow. Tell me that's not decay, reassure me. Stop it.

Impulsively, I cannot stop explaining myself, talking in big strokes,
circling the truth like the professor does, circles answers.
What is left to say? study the board, the math,

do it yourself. My entire life— what even is entirety? To sell
myself short: I'm a small boy in a poorly lashed raft
grounded on the riverbed, stabbing with a long

stick into mud, and I'd sell that self-portrait for grocery money.
No. Gas. Bills. No, a new pair of pants, just not jeans.
I am running out of viable pairs of pants and winter

is here. As soon as I step through the threshold, department
stores expand brutally into unobstructed brightness.
I buy pants without trying them on, nervous

to use the dressing room, everyone can see my feet
under the stall door.

At the Start

How you hold the small
of my back when the pace

quickens and your face
contorts, remember you teased

me about mine? After, leaning
in to kiss me in a thousand

places, plant seeds of small
wet that sprout as eyes,

eyes bloom, I use them all
to watch you sleep.

NOW (I am trying to figure out how to be Now)

I am trying to figure out how to be Now. Not Now, though, later. Old shit keeps coming up.

Old shit Now, like Then. I picture myself Now as I was five years ago, at least four. I am not satisfied.

Call back the turnstile. Bunk metaphors. I'm afraid I've phoned it in. Metaphors are soft hands boring,

how I locate myself. Then and Now are a grandfather clock, a pendulum lyre soothes, I like them flat, and predictable.

I picture myself Now an old man in a filthy house, returned to the long line's terminus one too many times.

He still sways on his feet. Picture me a man nearly dust, a man about a town of couches but eventually,

even myself as dust, a mound of allergens, a tomb of soft particles obsequious to wind, dematerializing, a star

is a speck is actually a goliath, growling its *dont forget me* into the yawning vacuum, lit up like an electric shop vac

set to reverse-suck. My particles loose in the windows' light, settled on a book cover, same as me Then,

but Now, ready to divorce the next time I gather too close to a roofs' edge, like Then, rooftop binge

on the Spanish Towers above South Boulder Road, where it bends to shape Table Mesa Drive.

If I had leapt into timelessness, died into dust over that wavy organization of lines and names, blown

into indecipherable sand, a splash of grains on the tongues of onlookers taken by my awkward constellation,

am I no match for the breeze? Or would I fall heavy to cave in a car roof? Where the EMT responds

to only rigid blue, splayed out and twisted, painted with the features of my tinder profile, all smoothed, all cold walls and paint.

When Asked Why I Moved to Maine

I struggled to summarize
the confusion of arrival.
For instance, when a new
hire asked me while picking out
novels for a property book
shelf and I said, I ran my life
backwards and came here
to turn it back again.

I didn't mention how dad
sat with me in the back seat
to the hospital, afraid his son
would spill out at a stop light
and run. How, flown to the forest,
in-patient time contracts
inwards like a drying sponge.
Outpatient time is nebulous.

All I could wonder, driving
two hours from Plymouth
to Portland: had I left one
back woods rehab for transit
to another one? I wondered,
were there people there *not* in Air
Max's and gray elastic sweats,
and the Red Sox fitted cap?
Would we stop for a smoke

sometime before we got there?

Dad, After Carl Died

A burst tomato face, whole body a pew,
legs like Pentecostals, like holy tremors,
fighting the call to trance. His grip, two
tunnels made for escaped rope, on his lap,
sightless, like unraveled strands of hair.

Part man, the rest: rattle of a motorcar
shaking its bearing, abusing the seams
nearly sprung. My mother pressing his
shoulders into a teetering stool, pinning
him, a jack hammer, his body begging up

crying for levitation, whimpering calm
over his knees like steep cliffs, seeing
Carl fall, crampons catch his pant leg,
tumbling out into all that white.
A fledgling burst on the hardwood,

feathers float elsewhere, to small spaces
become dusk and delicate bones.
In me they rattle, bird bones. Children
are shockwaves, they hold grief better
than a stool, but not by much.

By the Water

It is an empty fight, to house
in the same mind
and moment

the power of tide and city,
the gathering of moon
and grief,

unlike any night, unstuck
from their usual cemetery,
moving at will,

hunting. The gravel crunches
behind me, before me,
the tall grass

disturbed, a duck in earshot,
a fading and guttural
kazoo solo.

Risen to a blind, the white
moon, crown of a rogue
cloud

climbs fast, like a seagull off
a pocket of air gracefully
poised

for a Cheeto, no flap, no
fear of gold dusted
fingers

and their god given powers
to throttle chicken heads
like dice.

In a perfect note of silence
the rustle of grass
is off tempo,

the moon leaves my bench
floating unforgiven
in blackness,

returns through the shadow
of leaves playing
light like ash

on my shaky white hand,
like I've been caught
smoking again,

scolded, mouth like a dry
purse filled by the fist
of a throbbing
heart.

II.

*Before the poems I was a local act.
Hole in the wall Emcee.
Empty but energized,
street lyricist from the suburbs
a self-decided poet now, its whatever it took
to keep writing,
the transformation wasn't rap to poetry,
despite what I'll tell you,
It was ashes to ink,
closed fist to open palm.*

Nightly Walks

The white utility markers on my street are clues.
Hieroglyphics to show how much is beneath
Us all the time. The white arrows are a maze. Arrow north could also be
Arrow in a pattern, a map,
A Street Fighter joystick combo: north, west, north
South, up, down, left left left
Left to my own devices, conspiracies
Form everywhere, at the end of pine needles as water
And gather their pregnant
Bodies for the labor of a long drop.
I take note of each one, each tiny whap on the pavement,
Morse Code? Perhaps. You'd have to be insane to believe it, and to never
Question the careful spacing between impacts, avoidant. One second, two,
Two seconds, one and so on.
You must be open to madness, most are too lazy,
Not enough head chatter to dedicate them
To the next clue. No willingness
To waste time,
To fall underneath the current of one's own credibility,
Too busy walking briskly home to dip tea bags,
To splash the dredges into the sink without studying the leaves
Settled in silt.
I once searched for a small bag of cocaine
In my parents' backyard. I must have been out there for an hour spreading
Mulch, lifting up the same stones. It takes a mind like that, one which has
Gone to places:
Complete delusion, a sock mind, inside out and stuffed
Into a claustrophobic corner of a tightly made bed.
My nightly walk follows a dead ended street
But I see beyond it a fence and a park and a baseball field,
A wicker wreath nailed to a front door
Spirals outwards in chaos,
The porchlight shadow bisects it perfectly in a vertical line.
The side door is open, beyond the screen
Clock hands finger a strange hour,
The white arrows were still there after the backhoes left.
I never found the coke.

Denver 2

The oil derricks live on either side of E-470 south, the barren lanes stretching towards the airport, what my mother calls her private highway. They graze between new developments like mechanized livestock, chewing at earth like cows, stationary like... cows. Amongst the proliferating houses they appear on the verge of displacement. They are solitary, tar drenched insects endangered by house wrap and plywood skeletons, the womb-less embryonic growth of lumber and nail, held still in poured concrete and wind-safe in pink insulation. On the highway the Rockies are a blue backdrop, habitat of the plodding derricks, of the infant outbreak of boxes. However, when descending South Boulder Road into the foothills, the Rockies are green. The third flatiron is a downed ship, a terraneous wreck. Driving E-470 at night is like driving on the still waters of a vast ocean, where the unseen derricks reach deep into the earth, alabaster mosquitoes drawing on what has died long ago, shaking the bones of so many recent and road-killed prairie dogs.

Airport Blues

If purgatory were my own invention, it would be waiting for a flight at gate C78, a woman garbles into an intercom assuring a fast, thirty-minute eternity, pre-board slog. My headphones have been holding my brain in, no music on except I leave them snug to avoid anything shaken loose from my ear canals. Because goddamn it! I will have to find a bathroom to stuff all the pink back and miss the mouthful of static that is boarding. The rug patterns are shaped like abstracted animals, road-killed by a late stampede of wheeled suitcases. Travelers are amalgamations of future lost and found items, rolling frantic as the long airport hallway extends itself in and out of every memory dragging ankles over it. Our autopilot is better than the airplanes we wait for. Bodies around the gate stir, an old woman wheeled down the sky bridge. I ask under the mute of headphones, to myself: remember when trips had wonder? When airplanes were exciting? Remember when you felt famous in airports? You imagined that's exactly where fame could lead: through many security checkpoints en-route to where thousands waited in adoration. I answer, how terrible to be a star, readily replaced after fading behind a curtain call passing like clouds. Raise them up as religious parables, wrest them into boxes, burn them out, ugly metaphor, no one escapes their own expiration and none of us at C78 are famous. But we are bored, and still waiting to board, my boredom buys a box of mints that cost me seven dollars, another man's boredom drinks a beer at the gate, his hands heavily tattooed with letters. His friends in camo easily spotted against the blue carpet tiles, I can tell by looking, the Carhart smells stale like unwashed denim. Their boredom won't stop looking at me. My boredom imagines me biting one of their fingers off, for the shock value. An arriving woman's boredom interrupts mine by dragging an old lumpy chihuahua to the gate, harness bunched over his head like a windbreaker. If she pulls any harder, his already bugging eyes

will surely pop out as little white eggs, eyelids stretched like two mid-birth chicken sewers. How long dragging his dead weight before she turned

around? After his head wedged between suitcases or his whitening hair eaten by the escalator's teeth? C78 finally boards, the sky bridge serves

as a bridge between our boredom. C78 is purgatory, the afterlife is hurtling 500 miles per hour in a tube, and no one on board has been less amazed.

Even above the clouds, where few before us felt sun like this, heating our face, beaming. For a moment, in the light of burnt sky I feel oneness.

For a moment, I am myself, sun. A single gesture, head-turn of something seeing itself while being a thing that considers itself separate,

squinting, amazed at how far away from its own light it sits. The man beside me snuffles and is surely ill, my legs are restless, a man is hunched

below in the aisle under the illuminated seat belt sign, his eyes two black holes, a glare sucking a stare from the stewardess. My boredom orders

a Sprite, complains quietly under its breath when they don't give me the entire can. Twenty minutes in, every window is shut like we grew tired

of seeing God as the sky, the sunset, a horizon rusted red between heaven and earth, and settled for the static voice guaranteeing us safe landing,

prayers answered by the intercom, *Uhhhhhhh, hello folks, twenty minutes into our descent into...* under my headphones, music devours tone. I open

my window to dark sky and imagine the wing bursting into flames, all of us screaming as we plummet to whatever stretch of earth awaits to destroy us.

GOD POEM

Look. I went to check the eggs O.K., in the aisle
and I squeezed too hard on the carton. I stuck
them behind, avoiding eyes while I left. The next
week, during check out, the lady asked did I see

my eggs, I hadn't. She opened the carton, intact
eggs. Nice. I told her ring them up twice, told her
Where she could find what I had broken, hidden
In the back for the stock boy to deal. Following

the M of her brow, as if she had seen a thumbprint
depression on my temple, a flakey skull, the shell
shed, picked raw since last week. If I squatted
like a white chicken boy, laid eggs on the belt
I was buying twice; I could have slid my smooth

ovals into her open mouth, barely grazing lips.
Something real boy scout about it. The receipt
was a badge, clutching it felt like I was better,
ready. A slow nod to the bag boy, building-up

to what next egg-shaped lesson hovered outside,
the violent dueling of abstractions, guilt and god,
erupting from a smooth orb, two angels clawing
each other to red cirrus, high over the Portland

Hannaford parking lot, shoppers yanking bloody
feathers from cartwheels, heads back to see
clouds shredded, receiving what appears to be snow
in July.

Katie's Poem

Her words wispy now, the white ashes off a last match,
she makes a courteous ghost, a careful haunt of a regret,
flushing all those gum drooping benzos, 200mg ferrying

across the Stix. And the last time, fingers on the fence
in the front yard, she promised not to kill herself before
her parents died. Later on, I thought: even after, all rots,

I wouldn't be so keen, left behind as only body, no one
leaves a considerate corpse. You are beautiful and alive,
rigor mortis is therapy for life's obsession with symmetry,

death's mouth takes you in bloated, infested, rutted.
Hours old a cold body I saw overdosed, the shoulder
hardened to the touch of turned up floorboards, blue

ugly and shrunken, how it echoed. Like a hallway's
when you scream the name that used to claim, hearing
back only the sound of your own voice cracking-up,

broken away, like brittle ribs pumped hard with palms,
like parted clouds to reveal a hardened stone. I felt it,
the strange embarrassment of being the one who finds,

like a wave meant for the stranger behind you. Really
you are the stranger. Really, finding someone dead is
like opening the door and your sister is there peeing.

The cops coming are you having to explain to your parents how
it was an accident. I knew a woman who meant to do it,
load a hot shot and burn herself in a parking lot. Vanity

no longer greater than her desperation, blue lips, wax
eyes for her were a waning deterrent. When she opened
the final baggy, there was only a single crouton inside.

What I mean is, despite an inevitable and eternal blue,
there is hope. To you I am naïve. Me the naïve,
half-way reformed, the cracked earth in my cheeks

too hopeful, by the fence with tears, the cracked earth
In my cheeks, dousing the drought in my smile lines,
were convinced the tears were never coming back. Half-

way reformed to hopeful. No, I am the final fractal
off a star sucked by a black hole, the last cookie in
the bag you meant to throw away empty, the death

bed *I forgive you*. I am the words I never told you
by the fence in your front yard: There is nothing
more naïve thinking it all means nothing.

The Backpack

East Waterboro with you, in a small pool of your arms,
shivering and Lyme ridden I occupy the waters,

in the small pool of your arms the water past my ears,
the sound of a womb where I have never felt

so safe, somehow, I am parched, aggravated, a numbed
heart still somehow hurts. Somehow, I see you,

like my purpose is to decipher your Idiosyncronicity,
to praise a thin line of acne on your back

draw new constellations with my finger tracing down
to the bottom of your pool where a shimmer

spreads its tentacles out. Somedays, I am a little spoon
a fold of comforter, tear in a chin crook,

a weak boy jostled and lost in a crowd of you, all of you
my absent parent. Every day I am a half

zippered backpack by the bottom steps, defenseless
against a hand hoisting me to a shoulder,

carried off for good. A numb heart still somehow hurts
in Portland. Alone, mourning doves

on my porch railing and lawn chair, I google: symbolism
of mourning doves outside my door.

The Real Medicine

None of these movies get it right.
Where some tech in a lanyard runs the meeting
and calls on people, the sheepish shares
of protagonists, all war stories and silence, all egging
on and whispers without a single exhausted slogan.
Keep coming back, keep coming back keep coming
no exasperation,
no homegroup no business meetings, no dull drone of pure
democracy, no drunks patient for that old timer to shut the fuck up.
No same story shopped, cut and imitated
no bad jokes at chip club, how at nine months
it's a blue chip, "so your lips don't have to be,"
one day at a time one day at a time
no church basement in movies, always the main room and altar,
no big books no Grapevines, the shit coffee checks out,
swill water. But what bothers me the most, everyone's so rigid
and depressed. No character chuckles at death or makes a morbid
joke about overdose, or pissing the bed,
or divorce, families left, no punchlines on souls lost.
They don't laugh hard, in the ribs hard,
jails institutions death jails institutions death
they don't laugh like their lives depend on it.

A Flight Home

I saw a shadow, the black smudge of a dead bug smushed in a lamp shade,
peel Itself from the wall of my parents' kitchen, liberation of a black dot,
paper thin wings and cracked plexiglass vision and launched into space,
suspended, dimensional witness to its own personification. A fly:
a little motor that hums. A bug whose name is what it does.
A fly is its own verb. Alive and buzzing, the fly
was bothersome to my father, an adjective
he swatted at across his head,
as if the fly were words
he could brush off:
interruptions to his ritual of thumbing pieces into a jigsaw puzzle, a
garden
lush and cottage-green, a portal on the kitchen table, dinner set in the den.
I wonder what the fly saw in the flattened garden? Itself as a shadow?
did it discover father painted-in amongst the flat green, right
hand with a hose, his face empty table for the left
hand to waive above. In a rare moment
of her sitting still, if you asked
my mother, she would say
a fly is sacred,
like all life. Only when the fly nearly lost itself to the high swoop of her
pseudo
-bang was her swiping hand an interpretative dance of *that's enough*.
When the fly landed on her food she swiped again, using
the same hand to bless the empty space it left for her.
I believe the fly saw in her, in the cracked
mirror of its sight, itself as a verb.
Perhaps it thought her quiet
shrieking, her restless
motoring legs,
a mating call.
The fly left one room alone, where my sister read. It must have sensed
how fast
She would have flattened it back into a black shadow on the wall with the
palm
of her hand or closed it in the pages of her book. Eventually, the fly
orbited my legs. I let it land on my kneecap and left it there.
Leaving it peacefully felt like a secret from my family.
A stowaway. A fly is a noun.
Still and silent.

My Dad, the Dragon.

The dragon lived in the space between antiquity and the drive thru liquor store. Somewhere between the dumpsters and back door. Think chain-link and stubborn bushes, think of a blind spot on an old car, remember the slogan: *easy to find, impossible to notice*. He was one of those dragons with tiny hands, and oh so fat, and would roast his whole pack trying to light a single Pall Mall, his tiny hands with the long talons made smoking very hard. Mostly the dragon just hung around the imagined space between the loss of childlike wonder and the Tacate poster. I should know, my father was that dragon. He hoards the empty bottles somewhere between the imagination of the ten-year-old who created him and the dumpster, and it's my turn to take out the trash again.

Then II

in and out of cars and beds I never once slept in,
in and out until the car window is down and I'm
mostly all out, counting how many drinks are left
in and out of my head,

in and out of my parents' house
in my head, out of black, back from blackness, in
and, and out of my parents' house until I'm so close
to the road, which eclipses pleasure

until popularity, imagined or
not, is a yard full of people watching me stumble
into the dusk of a college town neighborhood:
A gremlin, mooch, whisky dicked cokehead,
drunken embodiment
of a lecture from 8th grade health class, always
whole-body humming, even when still, lit.
Burning edges of my actual spirit, possessing myself,
lit because cheeks hold fire.

In and out of black, out
of cars and beds I never once slept in. Were you
to see the side of people they didn't know existed,
anger is a deep pool. All these years later, sober,
a broken-hearted lover

with a shattered expression,
absorbing blame like a piss cushion. I am going
to leave her, my lover. Like I am back in the dusk
fallen street of a Fort Collins cul-de-sac.
A protagonist's punching bag, the echo
of another hollow vowel.

I'm sorry but no, my dear, it's not that I'm sorry
for your fractured and haunted distance, for my
leaving, you are the next party on the lawn,
the procession of eyes

to which I am apologizing
for having existed at all.

And there are those we use,
the ones larger than life.
Shamed friends and guilty lovers,
when the party's over,
finding her alone under porch light,
where she whispers, *I am promised to another*
and you push her shorts up
to where the thigh shivers in white.
How after so many years, my new shame, feeding
off my buttering-up by a gay man,
I am supposed to help him stay sober, he trusts
me, how I hold his trauma like a mirror and peer in,
the identical features of how we sink our claws
into people. How he sees my fluidity,
how women ask if I'm gay before they kiss
me. How he says *that's gay* different
than my straight friends, how my laughter
sounds the same.
As a straight boy I've learned
to code-switch complicity, mostly we hold it with silence,
phobia and erotica are a thin cape worn tight
where our genders bulge beautifully.
Where his joking and not so joking praise
of my body is not lost on my vanity. *Keep talking,*
how we both hang thumbs over a text
better off left on read. What we sacrifice to open
and respond. Who can help me disarm women.
We are learning how to set boundaries.
I am helping him stay sober.

III.

*From the back bedroom of his mother's house
Straight From the buzzard's mouth
Kounter Kulture
I can resurrect a dead rapper
No hologram we haven't the budget
For a local act a dark character
Achieved with fabric and light tricks
Sometimes you need
Your past
To make sense of the present.*

NOW (Either too much or too little)

Either too much or too little, I am in love and not in love.
Feeling where this Now love ends, the Then love eats away at it.

All my Now and Then and Later lovers, which shit is yours,
and mine? Whose shit is worse? Did I leave shit, did I leave

you with shit? Your shit is not mine to write and my shit:
ninety percent metaphors and turnstiles. At your own risk,

I invite you regardless, I am trying to figure out how to heal
myself. But first, come down in the shit with me. Wade here,

push off the wall, hold your arms forward like you are fallen.
Push your breasts through the water and be here. Feel the old rot,

I made you a flower out of shit, the stem is made of shit, too.
The floor is an endless membrane of shit sunk in, the softened

brain of a career drunk. I call it delirium, life perceived smooth
in the reflection of a bubble, like the pink elephant suspended

above my family tree, a wind-cast dandelion, branch hopping.
Much of this shit is neither of ours', spread your fingers

that's your grandma's shit, my mothers. The whole reason you
are down here is because you love me. The reason I am down

here is because I don't love myself enough to leave. Leaving
the shit involves shit, I tell you, we are not resigned to shit.

Shit, it's so dark in here. Perhaps when the lights finally go up
and everyone claps, I'll notice this is not shit at all, but pudding.

And you'll look at me while drawing lines underneath your eyes
and smile and say *see, it's not so bad down here.*

How to Abandon Yourself

1.

Not to be confused as living with abandon,
as in, losing oneself in good art, in a poem,
in the mannerisms of a lover as they munch—
where you cannot look away—grapes across
the table, you can't stop staring, the bends
of a pinky joint, a gap between teeth, love
is realized in a lip habitually pulled upwards.

No. It's not there, or in any spiritual sense.
More ether than evangelical, think hotel
vacancy, an empty bedside drawer, think
house window, staring into the blackness
of another room across the street, a light
on, and empty. Think: a rained-out parade.
You are the parade, whoever calls it off,

tangle of hoodie and sweatpants.
Think crawling out the bottom pant leg
a street dog, transformed and mangy
who will lank off, up cobblestoned
side streets in search of old diapers
and beer vomit.

2

tell them you got jumped, maybe
tell them you were drunk,
they got the jump,
sucker punched you good.

But you weren't jumped,
you put your head down, let one
fist load a second, blue cheek,
the rest of them hammered

your friend, who quite frankly
deserved it. His cheeks' puffy
like he had eaten the fists
and forgot to swallow the punches.

I know you said,
I will kill you all
but what you really meant was,

I'm embarrassed.

The problem with a hoodie
in winter—that long walk
home—snow makes a shovel,
a wet reflection, you and Benj

knocked flat by eight fraternity
bros. Had you remembered, later,
the congregation of graphic tee
cut offs grilling you from behind

a squat rack at the campus rec center.
But you don't remember,
how you don't need to recall trauma,
how you dipped your head, escaped,

a clump of hoodie and sweatpants,
wrestled from the bottom pant leg
as a mangy, snow dusted
street dog, slunk off, searching.

The War

Selfish me, superimposed across the city lit sky like a simulation in mid-breakdown (someone was there the whole time). Or is that a friend? Kieran or Will? Or more likely my mother, hulking over a city as it burns in lights and with her shoulder turned down, looming. The truth smarts like scraped knees, the truth is a night run without a headlamp across the bay, and there is the city burning in life and ammonia, in stench and people. In concrete, which is simple. I'm doing an experiment. The city is a simulation, and the bay goes in an oval, I run towards it, I run away, I feel the lights and see the hulk of human lingering in the sky above the city like The Colossus, like Goya's shattering grief. But the lights in the city aren't blood, the war circles the bay, the lights are pedestrian, the war is cramped and small, the war is predictable, it runs up towards the lights, it runs away, it stops and watches two ducks, it sees the shape of another on the trail, it hopes they are attractive, shapely. It annihilates a shape's ability to belong to a home, the way a bomb makes a house planks and pebbles, tiny shreds of bone. To reduce another to a rubble of tucks and curves, I got to where, even under the glow, I fought to recognize.

For his thesis art project, the student dropped out and began panhandling on the arterial with a three-legged dog named Phantasma, who wore a bandana, and claimed a set the student had never heard of. When from a rolled down car window the student was given his first dollar, his abstract wrote itself right there on the street. When a sack of airplane peanuts smacked across his face, he'd been awarded a fellowship. And for his cardboard sign scrawled in sharpie: *Hungry, need food for me and dog, God bless*, he'd been awarded a Green Room prize under the category of fringe theater.

Under a nearby bridge, a homeless man morphs and collapses into a large rat and eats food in the cupboards of a nearby dormitory. The rat's mane is calico pelt and seagull feathers. The cat was competition, the seagull burst by a school bus tire into an Avant Garde museum exhibit on the asphalt.

The man wakes up human again, crumbs in his beard and feathers matted to his hair.

A Real Mic Drop Moment

I have these vivid relapse dreams where I wake up and feel something in my bloodstream that isn't there. People visit me in them, the dreams, friends from my past. Like the one where Aaron came to my parents' house. The house had stairs that never existed. Aaron was late. I had spent most of the dream texting the wrong woman to come over. I meant to text a crush, but the message kept sending to my ex-girlfriend. The one with a "?" next to her name in my phone. As if to say: "what is missing here?" Something sexual happened and then Aaron came over. We went up to my room, I guess it was my room. It was the first time I'd been there. It was up the stairs that never existed. I sat on the floor by foot of my bed but there was also a desk right there, pushed close so I wedged myself between the bed and this desk with my face against the wood grain, my legs were splayed out under the chair legs. Aaron had pills, he pulled out a revolver, loaded a Xanax into the chamber and blasted me with it. Center mass. An impossible shot with my chest hidden by the desk. Then my dad came upstairs and had Aaron produce the wax paper roll he kept all his pills in. Wax paper like those white souffles you put ketchup in at McDonalds. He had a long cylinder of that. Dad took the wax roll and manipulated it into little trays like a weekly pill dispenser, with an equal number of pills in each section. He then gave it back to Aaron. Aaron presented it to me, perfectly organized by appropriate dosage. It was a real mic drop moment for dad, he was so confident, then just left. I was astounded. I think that was supposed to make us think twice about getting high. The gunshot in my chest felt like the pimples I have underneath all the pubic hair. The dream ended as I was still sitting there with the side of the desk in my face and my legs out in front of me. His shot was incredible, an impossible angle.

A Student Can See Out the Window from the Floor

Crouched breathing the heat of knees, reads *City Midnight Junk Strains*, he knows What Ginsberg means by *40's only half a life* but he doesn't know, know.

Soon his attention is the knocking of faint windchimes, the harmony of lawn mowers; low chants rising up, pausing, rising again like suburban monks noo-noooooo-

Invisible blood dances his boxers, the student makes notes on poetry, his attention loiters below a fixture of hung boobs, his psyche... his notes a list written not # but No.

One, then blank. Memory comes, body swells, reads: *gaudy poet dead*, dog, his dog... is dead. Remembers the little white and black snout sensing the creeping rain, their noses know

before clouds glow green and dust levitates wet. When between the chain link gate posts the small dog once tucked his head, fit it between, dislodged, eyes focused, noticing no-

Where. He read a report that dogs mirror their owner's personality, in a photo of his dog dead his mother showed him, matted fur, eyes swirling wing dings, nose

Still glistening. Back in his room, cast lazily on his bed, staring empty out the window; the student imitates Ginsberg: cum legs and cum pants, can't smell rain coming with a dry nose.

The Miracle

After Allan Ginsberg

I saw the most brilliant and doomed of my generation raised to ashes, risen through them screaming, burned out again, again rising in endless cycles of miracle and sickness.

Who came yanked from madness, smoking their last butt under a rehab gazebo nerves hot off the last high.

Elastic sweatpants and half plugged in eyelids, The Miracle sucking Pepsi on sober house couches beside them.

Pushing mops as plungers of clogged work ethics, saving for cigarette money, and burning the rest in effigy on energy drinks and anything but dope.

Faces painted in dark bruises by young dope dealers over ten dollars of crack, found the windshield of their dusty truck bed soul caved into a million piercing pebbles reflecting a million of the same dark rings, back smoking in the gazebo again, the cigarettes would cost more that time.

Who smuggled heroin halfway to mecca and sold bibles to Jerusalem, broken down like cardboard by Russian bouncers in the back alley of Israeli nightclubs,

Who throttled dixie cups of hot bleach into the faces of cell block rapists and wept in bottom bunks reading Dostoevsky pulled from the type-set tidal wave of prison library carts.

Who both men and women fucked for a dollar or dope, fucked their arm with a needle and unfucked it from a shredded vein with shrieks and the pucker of post coital ecstasy.

Who found god and kept stripping, pleased and guilted the patriarchy, pleased and brilliant with women's studies degrees and flush with steady gigs at The Premier Gentleman's night club.

Who left Denver half dead and lizard brained, who slithered through the airport and returned a godman pterodactyl of sober house dogma and only half believing The Miracle,

who left Maine half enlightened for Denver, birthed babies genderless and just fucking winged it.

And the one, found unresponsive on the mass pike, his foot on the break, life blown back and sent him still uniformed screaming down the highway in a split-second survival.

And the one who found Jesus in a sock drawer, crucified on lingerie, whose second coming was coming out, who learned that addiction is indiscriminate to even the most beautiful discoveries of the self.

The one who left his friend at the gas pumps pockets ran, done, rigid and blue

The one who got better
The one who got better
The one who got better then died

who went mad from white blinding of SWAT flash bangs and wound up
with a toothbrush on the morning o'clock news and a ragged goatee, a
silhouetted grief, a fountain under an open blue, a big blue, a fucking
endless blue sky.

Fucked

A state of hopelessness turned term of endearment,
for a dope sick priest sitting—for the mayor next to him, the four sober
house kids' heads planted in Dunkin' cups, chewing ice. A single mother,
a married couple, a woman with the permanent word of love tattooed on
her face all holding hands and interlocking souls, the gist of their chant:
What is fucked is unfucked what is unfucked can be fucked once again
and no one can tell where the last tragedy started and whose whole
existence is bubbling up the window wells of old basements, not the ones
with the stiff bodies and smell of socks and rancid ball sack,
the one with the stillness of life the smell of Folgers coffee and stale
cigarette prayers that sinks down between the cracks where the grief burns
off like vinegar.

Fucked, we left and came again.

Fucked, we went looking desperate under bridges and bus terminals, into
the clinics and in my parent's spare bedroom. Fucked, we escaped into
liquor store parking lots under the flashing neon of abandon, the low brick
walls, that lonely stretch of carpet on the floor beside the bed.
We eventually found it there in the cracks, swollen, shaky and fleeting:
freedom. reaching down from two sunken cheekbones we seized it.

Denver 3: Heading East

There are no black people left in east Denver, Josh told me, as we drove from downtown. I never saw a white woman with a stroller as a colonist before. And in the starkness of her stride against the red brick row houses, I felt a vast emptiness pushing itself as a wind strong enough to blow Denver back to a boom town, a flattened facade of casino fronts and brothels, the earlier displacement of who was there first. I wanted to remind everyone *we are on a field, a big fucking field, a stolen one*. But mostly I sensed a nervousness in the car, in myself, driving towards Aurora with a passenger mourning something lost, eclipsed over by where I saw nothing but cracked earth and cement, repaired. That time I drove Josh home with an empty car seat in the back, he had picked it up from an apartment while I idled outside. I couldn't tell you the street, I do not know this city, I am a fair-weather face in a knot of one-ways and dive bars. Of confusing bus routes, of underpass murals and restricted chain-link lots, of Colfax Ave and its legacy of sex work. It has known me in the dive bars, the small stages in the back, the larger stages of the Roxy and Cervantes, that bush in five points sucking off a foil, and the basement of The Church, where I first saw a circle of b-boys alchemize bass and send rhythm through their bodies with the power to marry water and bone in a continuous break. I know the fringes, the wasteland of Motel 8 and dispensaries all named "Mile High" *something*, the worn-out billboards, and the reek of Commerce City smokestacks. I know I was at one moment an Emcee on stage, half spilt into the mesh of a microphone, and at another, a hooded co-ed in a brisk strut down Walton Street, the evidence for two men on front steps wondering out loud where their city had gone, naming me the omen of its absence. But still, I don't know this city, not the same as Josh, I could never know... how would I ever know, hand signs elude me, the affiliations of my peers, the way survival makes the ego do funny things, how the last time I saw Josh he was engaged, he was full in face and body, cheekbone with a fresh tattoo of three red dots. He was in love; he was again an expecting father. We ate at Torchy's Tacos. It was the last time. If I could ask him now, I'd ask, *how does it feel?* And he'd lift his shirt up and I'd touch his ribs where it entered, a belly button scar on his side, the tattoo of a single pink dot.

I mean it when I tell you, I never stay long in the city now, I drive clean through and carry on, left with vacant recalls meant for a memory. He was shot in September, I learned in November, Josh and I had no mutual friends. I googled his obituary.

IV.

*hope starved and hungry,
one more verse from a mind of runny yolks,*

*bright orange and runny like a burst bulb,
smoke for the vowels jokes from the gallows,*

*dope runs and shallow quotes from Foucault
and other dead minds I only barely understand.*

*I am just trying to get back to the boy
I was before all the feelings stopped,*

*long road but its working,
long road and it's worth it,*

*I hope I haven't lost you yet
blessed readers, I hope.*

American Psyche

means the day is dying, dusk and traffic Lana Del Rey on the radio,
The Aloneness, with the commuters gridlocked around me, heads framed
in the windows with their eyes shut, pushing into their headrests, the day's

smoke held since breakfast, the modern endurance of nine-to-five
radio meant to disperse the small and steady hand tapping at the base
of my spine. A frail grip on my heart, two palms pushing my knees to
tremor.

*We play the Eagles down in Malibu and I want it
There's something that I never knew I wanted.*

Old Hollywood, its enduring ghost in my cab, Lana Del Rey,
queen of melancholic dream pop, her lips chap when she sings:

*All I want to do is get high by the beach
High by the beach*

The cadence like a well-placed metaphor, the catharsis of patterns,
of where noise catches rhythm and turns music. Her words score my
fantasy, contouring the Atlantic coast I look out and see the Pacific, steep

blue and red convertibles hugging a cliffside road, places I've never
been. But I'm in the convertible, I'm in a bathroom, a mansion in the hills
cutting lines on pink pastel countertop, I bend over, my face in a little
mirror,

I stand-up and project into a bigger one, reflected is me as a celebrity,
behind me are other celebrities eager for the little mirror, people never
introduced. I grip the wheel hard to remember my sobriety, my anonymity

returns, the relief is euphoric. This music is bad for me I think:
what an ugly feeling to overdose on California dreamscape, leaves
an irritable need for silence, a need to return to myself, sober. Lana's
voice:

*Oh god, I love you on my lips
It's me your little Venice bitch*

my mind's eye, I expect sex positions and polaroid breasts. Instead,
I am shocked by the rotting veal cutlet of a Harvey Weinstein mugshot.
The hideous curtain reveal of a Hollywood reality where, judging by the
face

one can bloat drowning in anything. A rogue wave of water,
overflowing obsession with fame. A sea of hands and fingers, shockingly
like mine, groping outwards towards any blouse before receding back
deftly

into a corner office. Have you ever made a movie in your head?
What did it take from you? On the highway, driver's picking their nose
never hold back, like their nostril birthed a finger, rarely do they flick the
booger.

I see in each window a busy tour of Graceland, a tourist paying
to watch Elvis O.D. on the toilet over and over and over and head back
eyes back, everything backed up. In traffic I stay ten and two, when things
start

to break out I fly, one finger on the bottom crescent of the wheel
head back like a nod, eyes front, ready for the fight of fading rays.

The Star

Lassie has a bigger trailer than you, you new star. Lassie will do more cocaine than you and then eat cucumber soup with the governor. Lassie can lap soup without splatter. Lassie's trailer is bigger than Robert Downey's. Lassie had sex with Channing Tatum. Channing Tatum is in prison for bestiality. Lassie refuses to visit. Lassie gets bored seeing her name on the marquee. Lassie does all her own stunts; she can play catch better than your dad. Lassie has had seventeen managers; she fired one once for buying the wrong rawhide, or milk bone? It's a rumor. Still, Lassie has her frontline applied by a masseuse and eats thick crunchy kibbles like a poodle and gets into the trash like a bear, struck by the mad scent of many old Lunchables; eating from the blown-out carcass of last night's garbage, shredded into myriad. A wasted pinata, pulling it up to its mouth, letting it scatter back down as wretched crumbs, shameful at the people watching from the window in horror, the crunch and nudge of chops, the first order grip, the powerless paw shoulder deep in the ruptured stomach of a fattened and dead seagull, lost in the burst appendix of humanity. Lassie is 7. Her favorite color is catch.

Awan 1

Weeks after, Cain
paints spires like crops
on the wall in his blood,

my blood does not
come. Same blood flowing
in Adam's gap, in my womb,

my son, his face,
the lungs of his first
breath, torn loose and dripping.

It is the blood
of Abel and the feast
of dirt, the rotten fruit of Eve.

Under the named
shadow of men I am Awan,
daughter of Eden, nameless

in time, when the dove
was not risen I buried it,
Cain wept.

Awan 2

The second night,
heavy gusts ushered
into the huts open arch

a dove, pacing,
cooing and cockeyed.
Cain fed the bird handfuls

of wine, the red
dripping to the earth
floor, it trusted Him.

Leaning to kiss
its smooth crown,
Cain released a loose

brick from the wall
and caved the pigeons'
head, prayed for Resurrection.

The mark anointed
with blood he climbed
back to the straw, pulled

me under with bloody
hands, named me his wife,
thrusting into me, whispering

into my nape
of a son and a city
with endless spires.

For the boy who sees red when God is mentioned

I can see from the low curb, un-confessed,
The driven white lace of a Sunday bested
By grace, inside, the plastic Christ mounted.
To walk and scoff at the steepled entrance
The good word of the glorious, a red crown
Of melted max, my old veil, my old lens
Of rage, women in Sunday best swell
The entrance into the city heat with degeneracy.
A flower-patterned organ moving, do I watch
them leave? Do I resist at each stone step?
Do I enter alone? hidden by the break of noon
In the grand echo, the silent organ a dark city-
scape, blue painted eyes follow mine, unblinking.

Awan 3

The first
night as outcasts
Cain writhed on straw,

gnarled his
hands over the mark
The Lord left on his cheek,

Fingers shadows
of tree branches over
a dripping cross, or knife,

unsure if those
who see it are meant
to see God, or their own fate.

On the wall side
of our straw bed Cain
paced, spoke in tongues, rolled

his eyes unconvinced
the mark would protect him,
cursed the mouth of the dirt for

ratting him to God,
cursed the mark for its pain,
begged the pain would keep him

from the same
fate as Abel. The hut
dripped water when it rained,

his mark irritated,
Cain clawed, howled
for the soil, before it knew blood.

Now (I'm trying to write about women)

I'm trying to write about women. I keep writing about destructive men instead.

Can I fully appreciate what I partly objectify?

My greatest fear is that underneath the proud barb of my heart is a thumb sucker.

It reminds me of when Breena Clarke said

to our workshop group, said she wasn't so sure a white person could love a black face. Ever since, I've had a hunch.

Maya told me every man has a little bit of creep in them. She told me at bathhouses in Berlin, there's always one guy fixed on boobs free in the mist, fixated on the pink and brown.

But that's normal.

I am only writing about this because I am searching for absolution.

Jay, I can't remember what we did in the pool, anything? In our underwear, does he know? Waded out of the blue glow, out of the black-out rising through the next week, the way the dark stayed, gathered around your eye when I saw you, I know he left it there, my dog and his darkness. Now yours. It's normal.

It's normal. how many young women we see on the news, fished out from under a bridge, found wedged between a guardrail and the unkempt bushes of our collective taboo.

It happens over there, not here. Until it doesn't. Until it's my dog, yours. Most of the women my age have known assault,

my only jury duty was a rape case. Four counts on the same day, the same perp. I learned how the prosecutors prep defendants with an empty stare looking at and past you, laced up as though it were impossible to imagine him drunk, all fallen out, grabbing.

Most of the women my age have known assault, waking up to something stolen and a window left open.

Most of the men my age, oblivious to what they have stolen. In jury duty, they brought me in a small room with everyone, the judge, the prosecutor, the defense, the defendants' vacant stare sucking the distance out of the room's dimensions, his rigid shoulders, like the court officer wheeled him in on a dolly. They asked did I know victims, aggressors, and I said: both. It wasn't an answer, it was a Venn Diagram.

Many of the men I know in recovery experienced sexual abuse as children,
watching scenes in movies where people are held down
they must leave the room. Their lungs suction shut. other men my age are
dead.

I want to know what it feels like in my body,
in an instant, to have guilt eradicated. Corey told me the women in his life
taught him how to hate himself
The men taught him how to hate men.

Without Planned Parenthood I'd be an uncle that didn't know he had
hepatitis.

Recently, I've been told by many women that I am *one of the good ones*...

(At five years sober and I gave my number to two newcomers, two
women, I feel a man in power is a man one 'yes' away from predator.

One *put your number in my phone*, away:

~~No~~ *puts number in phone*)

...I think some of the ones
who used to say
that, don't anymore.

//

I understand, if only provisionally,
and second hand to my own density,
there is really no such thing as men
and women.

//

Alone, I hold my sex down, pointing it towards my knees... pressing my
length between my legs and flexing them to stimulate a heavy intercourse.
One that presses from many angles, and I fantasize about having no
feelings other than lust, no guilt or repression. Naked in the vacant white
of an oceanside mansion, present before the orgy of it all. Of what parts of
myself would I sell to be accustomed... of what parts of another, of what
cold touch of skin.

Park Day

For Mariah

I noticed there were only five addicts in the park today and fifty-six geese. Normally, there are a lot more addicts and the guy I've seen overdose a bunch of times was panhandling and I couldn't make out what his sign said. I normally would say, man, I hope those people aren't bothering the geese. But this time I said: Man, I hope these geese aren't bothering these people. But I guess the geese don't have anywhere to go, either. They are both stuck in the park. Down the street a homeless couple moved in behind an apartment, interior decorated with lamps and coffee tables, a throw rug right there on all the needles and dirt. The maintenance man caught them in bed, sharing an intimate moment.

Now (Here in Portland)

Here in Portland, no one on the road trusts,
the intersections are warzones... the Lincoln doesn't wait their turn, the
Corolla relents... nobody looks at each other. We are all watching closely
for body language.

The new sandwich shop owner with a twinkle in her eye... ogles the
business casual regulars,
their faux leather loafers and sweaters bloomed with collars.

The housing project on the west end—four years in construction—is
complete.

The new tenant nods-out as the lease... dictated aloud, is as information
through a clogged drain, he hears
a phrase about dumpster etiquette... something about 7am and 10pm.
It's a new construction and he is the only tenant on the floor. It's a
new construction and the tenants' first home in seven years.

The landlords and case managers chirping around his slowly descending
head, he is what they call a Long-Term Stayer... because the shelter was
his home before the new home... and its 80-page lease.

The landlord immerses his hands in a tenant's fish tank, it is too many
gallons,
the water makes his hand look enormous.

The landlord finds roaches... the tenants receive a violation.
The violation leads to another, the tenants call to move
in their cousin and report another neighbor in distress.
They are the properties' eyes.

Another tenant brings in a procession of people with backpacks
and facial sores, the cameras record them... the other set of eyes.

The landlord calls them again... meets them, deescalates, promises
patience and overdelivers.
Soon after, the custodian cleans urine in the laundry room from a guest...
the culprit had a backpack and pajama bottoms on.

The landlord calls Avian Haven again... to explain that pigeons are not
pets, to free a bird from captivity.

One tenant has enough saved to buy a house... the next summer they do.

//

This time. It was shit in the sink and blood on the carpet and light in the still vacant apartment

on the corner of Pearl Street and Oxford.

Squad cars there and not at all, the ghostly beat of blue and air,

the sirens we call and remain skeptical,

call again and remain skeptical.

A family is desperate for housing, the freezing homeless desperate for the empty and vacant,

a promised night of warmth. Word spreads like hands over a fire, the family will be homeless soon enough,

the homeless know how frost blossoms

on wool and nylon.

The maintenance man had unhooked the toilet, steamed the carpets, and had unstuck the sink stopper. The shit was an urgent splatter of pond muck,

the blood an untold story of drops and fingers pressed into light switches and carpet fabric. This time it's just two weeks more

then the two weeks before that to replace flooring and clean.

To de-shit the sink.

The family's case worker sends an email:

It reads: *The family will soon be on the street, remember this tomorrow in the warmth of a home*

with your loved ones

at Thanksgiving.

The manager's response:

We are going the fastest we can.

On the corner of Pearl Street and Oxford,

a rock near the window, the outer pane shattered,

the maintenance man framed in the window,

holding up a two-by-four.

The Time I Thought I Was Catholic

Came back to God like mother fucker, you promised.
-Billy Woods

Dylan's outside Planned Parenthood
again, amongst a gaggle of white perms

haloed by picket signs, the dead fetus
like thin air above his head.

The guilty punch of his god, hands
with coffee on the corner, as fists in my gut

from those nights the office off his bedroom,
open concept confessional. We sat

in opposing chairs, an aura where olive
walls haloed his head, saints framed

on his wall, in his stillness became them. Once
seeing through me to the hung picture of his daughter,

became himself again. Saint of the holy repressive
chest tatted in illegible cursive, angry sex in his stare,

cocaine in old braille up his arms,
Saint Francis hovering.

He spoke slow of vitality, the purity of not cumming,
banish it, the urges, to the foot of the cross,
the foot of the cross.

To Jesus's feet dripping, cocaine in old braille up his arms,
Saint Francis watching, purity and crude ink

I imagined Jesus's toes hairy, like my palms.
In his office I had a habit of becoming Catholic,

back in the house, up the backstairs
rotating psalm about vaginas, *banish them*

to the foot... then in my sock. I'd suffer myself appropriate,
walls bowing to my angst like the bad perspective

on his daughter's crayon art. He'd stay up all night for an
addict in need, let the virtue in the woman

he fancied in the church pews, be loved
by another. Rubbed prayer beads smooth,

neo-monk, tats and track marks, mouth of washed-out soap.

Dylan is out there again, Saint Francis hovering,
eyes showing God and receipts of sex and virtue.

Ruddy ink, illegible, in the mirror,
stained fingers reaching up my neck.

Thursday

It was the colonoscopy six months ago, I resisted the propofol because I wanted to feel myself leave, like a safe high. Safe because it's not heroin, I won't wake up and pay an old man to whack me with his ratty loafer to mimic the effects of propofol; or pull a leather belt until it growls around my neck to see how far away I can get before the lights go out.

I couldn't eat for days, all that orange and yellow Gatorade mixed with laxatives, an urgent parade from my ass, colors turned to bile making derivative butt-pollock originals against the bowl of my landlord's cheap porcelain toilet. In the name of health. I was told sobriety means taking care of yourself.

I got pretty far with the propofol, 7 seconds before I went out. The nurses liked my colon because it was young and plushy and not the burned end of a refried cigarette like most of those old people with ugly, prolapsed rectums. I had to fight them to not shoot me up with fentanyl. I had to request propofol. Adamantly.

A request met with every medical excuse ever made for probing, every needle prick and patch of numb, and liquid tablet of happiness and anti-depressants administered with tongue depressants.

Western Medicine, you breeding ground for cutting edge porno inspiration. Giving all the addicts better ideas on how to efficiently find oblivion, ass-less gowns and IV Benadryl. Intravenous everything. Suppository rocket ship to ecstasy. It's not that medicine wants me high, or psychiatry, it's not that a therapist wants me high. It's the unsettling realization—one I had on the front stoop of a sober house—that if I would have walked down the street to the Big Apple, the clerk would sell me every nip on the shelf if I had the cash—the doctor with his finger up my ass, would pump fentanyl into my veins unless—A room full of drunks would welcome me back, beaten and torn up again, as if nothing ever happened. A room full of sober ones would do the same.

I accidentally ate some mousse with Marnier. The other night. I felt it immediately, like a blood vessel popped and it was full of ether. I stood in the narrow bathroom, I held my own eyes in the mirror and before I looked away, I said: *I love you.*

I felt like I had a balloon in my head, nobody else thought it was a big deal.

A Symposium on Why You Are Poor and Worthless

I am wearing too many ties for you, you t-shirt goblin. I have seven hundred ties. They turn into snakes and bite people who with bad investments sit in my chairs, my chairs. I went to rehab, and it fixed me, O.K.? Now I'm on the side of the bus, and I have more ties than anyone, O.K.? You in the crowd in the line with the mic, I fucked your dog, I married your baby and feed it golden mush. It's a good investment, I write it off on my taxes, you pay taxes like a mush eating baby that I married. O.K. next question, yes, hmm, yes. Shut the fuck up. How's that for an answer you, you fairy? Oh, you got offended. Typical. I can say that because I've consumed the life force of five hundred gay men, I'm gayer than an entire dance floor at Provincetown, and I could say the n-word because some of them were black. I have a name that is blown up every Thanksgiving and knocks Snoopy out of the parade, fuck Snoopy, buy my merchandise. Get rich, fuck Snoopy, marry a baby, that's my motto, buy the t-shirt, you t-shirt goblin. I don't pay taxes, my t-shirt proceeds built a children's hospital, there's a fountain out front with a statue of me pouring water down a sickly child's parched throat.

At The 2021 Annual Maine Real Estate Conference in New Hampshire

Hotel Washington

The emerald carpet runs
the length of the great hall,
with golden spots, with gray
embroidery, gold and gray.

The carpet in my room
is sea foam green... my age
rises at the interest of ornamental
patterns...in years of taste,
I am 37.

The plush upholstery of
the rooms desk chair is a darker
green,
half-healed-bruise green.
Same color on the drapes
I associate with that little
tablecloth beneath
a casket.
A butterfly emblem flutters near
the chairs' wooden top rail
it doesn't flutter, it is still,
but it moves when I swing
my head fast back and forth.

Butterfly Chair

It is a chair my grandma would buy but never sit in,
its stuffy color is dust ridden, furniture for next
to the cheese platter at the wake,
near a stack of discarded programs
home for a boy on his iPad,
and with bad posture.

At the conference, at the hotel Washington
in my room,
by the butterfly chair, by the ice bucket,
is a discarded program
and almost everyone downstairs has bad posture.

Forgive me when I call the keynote father.

Forgive me... at the next funeral when I ask the father
for his business card,

and mistake a cold oak box
for a raffle box,

tightly creased paper gives me gooseflesh.

Frank Flynn

As with a funeral, at the conference,
after a seminar, smokers gather as a pasture
of dark color and flexible yet formal pants.

I see them from the windowed walkway above.
A woman holds the crease of her arm while
she draws deep on a... Marlboro light?

Their slack and moving mouths, silent
chatter, cigarette talk when you're forty...
twenty felt different than it looks down

there, a line at a mall food court minus
the food, and the line more of a sparse and
anxious herd on a concrete patio, a smoker

is always vicarious. Escape is a palindrome.
In the great hall, the small talk over coffee
is painfully unaware of anything addictive.

After all, it's networking time, and I count
10 comments about wine being a licensed
therapist. Frank Flynn, attorney at law,

rather, Frank Flynn of Flynn Law Group,
pulls a lone business card from a wooden
box, one woman wins a 1.75 of Jack.

The next, an advent calendar of mini wine
bottles. I had put my card in before I knew
the prizes were booze but was too awkward

to fish it out.

Then (And whatever happens Now)

And whatever happens Now... whatever happens, happens. Whatever happens Now,

Hey!

Whatever... happens. What-ever-happens Now.

Whatever happens Now is because of what was set in motion all the way back home, the back seat of a beater Honda,

passed from the back seat of said beater

into the open window of another rust touched Honda or Toyota... or Grand Marquis or some

Mazda, defiant of the age of its peers by a decade and which has become a family heirloom.

Like the 25-year-old cat,

born of a rut in the back-alley asphalt... a cat who will die on a mantle and petrify and succumb to immediate taxidermy.

And whatever happens Now...

no matter how many rips off the foil; how many pulls off the bottle, powered on lines of my sister's dirty yellow and uncut cocaine,

The Honda's fly... not like a bird or airliner but just enough to hover over the road to where the only friction,

the only friction moving the car... is the chatter back and forth, knocked into a rabbit hole

over the merits of an obscure Hip-Hop album. Where everyone is still in the back seat.

Back and forth between there and the open window of the other Honda.

Where a hooded figure is tinted dark in the nightly oblivion,

poorly made out from across the white dotted line,

spaced-out on the interstate.

Space of suck of time and exchange... the sickly-sweet vinegar of a torched hunk of dope... and the echo of many mothers' cautions whistling into a black sleet night.

As one Honda finally takes an exit... leaving the chatter and Hip-Hop of the other backseat, of the other Frankenstein, paid-in-full, hair-tie around the stick shift sedan, alone,

hovering over the paved line like tarmac.

Ill prepared for liftoff... ill prepared for anything but just enough lift to give its tires a much-needed rest.

And Now I catch my breath.

Rather, my breath catches me. That is cliché.
I am with my breath and left alone with it,
with a great burden and responsibility, manual breathing because I
cannot stop thinking about breathing, and I am afraid I will suffocate. But
really, I am fearful of eternity,
of having to pump this pipe and bag for the rest of my life,
analog, sans automation.
The first advancement in technology was an animal both breathing and
thinking about food. When you first get sober, all I thought about was how
long everything takes.

On My Way to Waterboro

There is a powerlessness
When the road breaks
From the forested hill
And comes down into expansive
Farmland— a wide smear
Of rolling green plunked with golden
Brown bales
Taught with dark twine.
I can't picture the farmhouse
Or any fences,
The hallmark
Stereotypes
That one mistakes
For a memory.
It's not the farmland
I care about, or any swaying,
No forced gratitude,
The grass is still.
I sense no wind.
No subtle push of my car,
No over-adjustment,
No animals grazing—
No hesitation—
A single passing car— the field
Is not a field anymore
In my periphery,
It is a surging body
Of color
With amber
Streaks and a sense
Of momentary
Relief followed by the dread
Of knowing I will never
Make that drive
For the same reason
Again,
I will never
Come towards you
With the same uncertainty.

V.

*Picture: ripped t-shirt. Picture no t-shirt at all.
Basquiat self-portrait tattooed in black ink across the chest.
Young white boy with rage
And a microphone
Rising from a coil of dropped curtains,
And then the beat*

drops

Lafayette, Anywhere

I dream my friends speak to me, the ones I left behind.
The ones shrunk to spittle
in the yawning oval of an airplane window.
Little Lafayette, Colorado, cracked cement porches

entombing haunted mine shafts.
Behind gates on the skirts of town,
one percenters with pregnant teen daughters.
Single mothers east of Old Town, Sir Galahad

and Minotaur Drive, with teen sons in rehab,
stretching paychecks and losing sleep daily.
The dead brothers on drugs in the arms of live brothers
on the same drugs, the young

lovers mourning spirits with bottom shelf
ghosts, sat against the car,
butt on the asphalt,
taking deep drags from a cigarette.

I heard the Boulder money rumbled in, booming cannons
of Patagonia clad conquistadores,
hailing down indie
boutiques and a dozen options for brunch,
attacking any empty space inside brick
and mortar with craft beer and cornhole.

I heard the Sonic is now a bar for dogs.

Dear Lafayette, Colorado little Anywhere, America,
Dear Anywhere Americans.
It's ok if you don't love me back,
I drank your mom's whiskey and slept with your girlfriend,
I befriended your boyfriend
after. I rarely call. I love you.

I have not forgotten, here in Portland, Maine
wondering if every hometown
feels as cursed
for the kids who grow there,
joined by a collective survival.
How Jerry died on cut Xans,
why not us? Remember,

we did dumber shit than that.
Remember:

*Half a gram of dope inside
a cowboy killer hard pack
Aaron's tattoo says his parents are on fire,*

*blacked out, strung out,
bombing dad's minivan down 36th
Jaime's parents are just her mom,*

*one of us half hung
out the window
Wesley's parents aren't parents anymore,*

*eating all that air through
smoke-stained teeth
my parents are doing just fine.*

As though I was bathed in a whiter light,
my friends bursting incandescent, burning cigarette-
yellow, smoldering over apartment
railings and under parked cars,
inhaling the exhaust
like addled street cats, eyes glowing
to behold a bloody sunrise.

I dream my friends speak to me, those cats,
slyly from the corner of their mouths,
the cigarette bobbing between
chattering teeth, mumbling,
we were never really friends.

Then (The first time I got high)

The first time I got high I was 14. Everyone's mouths
looked upside down. I was terrified of leaving the basement.
The grief of too many doors to open in a row.
And when I finally left, walked up and out:

Vomit, so much vomit. Vomit swallowed, vomit
like a fire hose vomit in a parking lot.
Vomit on my favorite pants. And shit. A pair
of shit-stained boxers stuffed in a hamper.

A bookshelf, empty, collapsed, and wet boots
on the carpet, leaves on the kitchen tile, blood stain on
the linoleum, a stale bagel cooked soft for eating,
blackened puck of pizza, smoke. The same person

in two different places. Leaning back from
the smokers' circle to ask a young woman *how much*.
Fingers grasping a skirt as the anchor to stabilize
a spinning room. The surprise punch

to the mouth by two of the same fist. The hour
spent the next morning wondering who did it.
A bored kid at a restaurant bothering the koi.
The same person in two different places.

A heavy shadow denting the tops of parked
cars. An hour spent the next morning wondering who
did it. The wobbly sound of metal still bowing.
The last cigarette smoked backwards, a cough,

the cigarette turned around, sucking on the singed
filter. Misjudging 15 miles per hour, leaping
without so much as a tuck, a careening jeopardy
wheel dispensing cigarettes and pocket change,

I swear I let off sparks when I hit. I swear for
each coin, a small and careful sound. A dozen bells
excited by asphalt, my body a dropped duffel
bag. I watch my friend from the porch hose down

his mother's soiled couch cushions, the booze
falling out of love with me. I learn not to move on.
Walk across intramural fields from dorm to
dorm in disembodied grief, unsure of the pain

and its location, the grief of too many doors opening
at once. I drank because I loved the awkwardness,
drank the excitement of a hand releasing a bottleneck,
my knuckles white even when I put it down,

so I could pick it up again, so you could see me with it,
like a trophy, I wrung its neck to impress, to feel
impressive, to later piss myself and pour beer to cover
the urine, to wash out shame, to realize piss and

beer are the different stench of the same liquid.
Everyone's face was so wide and the walls so
narrow, we were lying in a match box.
All it took was a pinch of embers.

7 Months After

On the first day the Lyme in my head was a creep
lurking down the hallway, ducking off
every time I turned, like red light, greenish light-
blue capsules of doxycycline hit the stomach

Like a cheap shot. The madness left two days
after the first dose, after the beaten
and crimson dot work of my armpit rash hued
to resemble an Icee with the cherry

Flavor near sucked out. The bullseye rash stopped
the nurse short on her meningitis ramble
one finger to my armpit, *that's Lyme*, not lymph nodes,
I guessed the lymph nodes.

I guessed the ticks from Acadia, I guessed it was stress
and a relationship I was grieving while still inside of,
my body in revolt. The day I knew, I broke into tears
after our sex went soft and I hit my head on the sill,

She fondled me from the back and asked if I *liked*
that? I said, I don't know, she said, *that's not enthusiastic*
consent, I told her I was unhappy. She told me she
loved me.

Dark Night

Recently, my friends echo old beliefs of mine,
they sound strange; I tell them I have never heard
anything so bizarre in my life.
Before the meaning left
I was full of advice. Now I have nothing to tell the parents
of young addicts,
or the young addicts either.
What is there to say? *I pray they don't
carry your bodies awkwardly in a black zippered bag
down the narrow
backstairs
of a New England
triple-decker.*

I could be lost
in some claustrophobic pocket
of misunderstanding,
unsure if this twilight
is transcendence, rising
past the need to answer
for the paradoxes of a god
who hopped artfully from the end
of a needle, cruised the lip of a bottle,
sent burning down
into the blackened coffee pot
of a church basement.
Either that or I am in the blackness
of a fall, a plummet towards isolation,
terminal velocity towards the fatal conclusion:
I can do this on my own.

Apocryphal

Because my father told me he's been saying the same shit, the same “pre-recorded” responses to questions about himself for decades. Because I noticed, every person is a collage

of photoshop and gossip, their own protagonist, yet public opinion conjures awkward celebrity from us all. I know kids, kids who lie, who will tell you someone said what they didn't

say, so you will believe them cooler than they are, but you don't. Nobody does. They do shit like get Jello tattooed on their inner thigh and buy alligator loafers. And no matter who stole

the peanut butter, it was them. And it gets to be when a politician dies, or a protest turns violent, when someone leaves a glob of dry toothpaste in the sink, they are the immediate person

of interest, the knee jerk guilty. These perfect mirrors of our collective ballooning egos, a good way to never hear the truth amongst all the renditions of Jello and lies, the scapegoat for our most

urgent storytelling. How many have to believe I am a nervous wreck before I become one. How many people have to claim me a hypocrite before it's true. I will tell you, the number

is astonishingly less than how many people it would take to know me as beautiful, the sheer horde of validation it would require for me to believe them. I mean this for endearment, we are the butts

of a grand joke, our butts being proof—our relationship to each other's butts—that god really gets our sense of humor, and supplied us with endless material. Below the jokes, an endless web of irony.

Prayer: Lord—for the love of god—please don't let the joke go over our heads, keep us always from the purchase of alligator loafers.

Now (I read Rilke)

I read Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, after,
I went to the theater alone. Faint explosions
rumbled: an adjacent movie through the wall,
our protagonists having sex on a bunk bed.

There were four other people with me in the
theater: a couple two rows behind me, a guy
I know from AA who came in ten minutes

late and couldn't stop laughing, a type of laugh
by which the whole body convulses.
He may have been sobbing. The fourth was a shadow

near the screen, which cast toward the exit
once the credits began. I swear I am the young
poet. Rilke wrote himself down and it turned

out to be me. As a sober man, I love
solitude, I hate aloneness, I love the solitude,
in the solitude I read. I am typing this in my phone,

alone at a urinal.

When I am older
I want to write poetry about birds.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Addonizio, Kim, and Dorianne Laux. *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- Agüeros Jack. *Sonnets from the Puerto Rican*. Hanging Loose Press, 1996.
- Anderson, Doug. *The Moon Reflected Fire: Poems*. Alice James Books, 1994.
- Barnstone, Tony. *The Golem of Los Angeles*. Red Hen Press, 2007.
- Baudelaire, Charles, et al. *From Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen*. BOA Editions, 1991.
- Biss, Eula. *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*. Graywolf Press, 2018.
- Brown, Jericho. *The Tradition*. Copper Canyon Press, 2021.
- Caro, Robert A. *Working*. Vintage Books, 2020.
- Chute, Carolyn. *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts*. Harcourt Brace & Co., 1995.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage Books, 1991.
- Conrad, C. A. *Ecodeviance: (Soma)Tics for the Future Wilderness*. Wave Books, 2014.
- Diaz, Natalie. *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Copper Canyon Press, 2012.
- Edson, Russell. *The Tunnel: Selected Poems*. Oberlin College Press, 1994.
- Eliot, T. S., et al. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Vintage Books, 2021.
- Gay, Ross. *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*. Project Muse, 2015.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl*. Museum of American Poetics Publications, 2006.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Kaddish*. Arion Press, 1992.
- Graham, David, and Kate Sontag. *After Confession Poetry as Autobiography*. Graywolf Press, 2003.

- Gray, Jan-Henry. *Documents*. BOA Editions, Ltd., 2019.
- Gray, Spalding, and Kathleen Russo. *Swimming to Cambodia*. Dramatic Publishing, 2008.
- Gregg, Linda. "The Art of Finding." *Poets & Writers*, 10 July 2012, https://www.pw.org/content/the_art_of_finding.
- Hamill, Sam. *Avocations: On Poets and Poetry*. Red Hen Press, 2007.
- Hayes, Terrance. *How to Be Drawn*. Penguin Books, 2015.
- Hetherington, Paul, and Cassandra L. Atherton. *Prose Poetry: An Introduction*. Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Hoagland, Tony, and Kay Cosgrove. *The Art of Voice: Poetic Principles and Practice*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2020.
- Johnson, Denis. *Jesus' Son*. Methuen, 2004.
- Kaminsky, Ilya. *Deaf Republic*. Faber & Faber, 2019.
- Kennedy, Christopher. *Encouragement for a Man Falling to His Death: Poems*. BOA Editions, Ltd, 2007.
- Knight, Etheridge. *The Essential Etheridge Knight*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986.
- Kuipers, Keetje. *All Its Charms: Poems*. Boa Editions, Ltd., 2019.
- Lynch, David. *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*. TarcherPerigee, 2016.
- Keyes, Ralph. *The Courage to Write: How Writers Transcend Fear*. H. Holt, 2003.
- Marvin, Cate, and Robert Pinsky. *World's Tallest Disaster: Poems*. Sarabande Books, 2001.
- McDowell, Gary L., and F. Daniel Rzicznek. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice*. Rose Metal Press, 2010.
- McDowell, Gary L., and F. Daniel Rzicznek. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice*. Rose Metal Press, 2010.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc, 2019.

Mura, David. *A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing*. The University of Georgia Press, 2018.

Murillo, John. *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry: Poems*. Four Way Books, 2020.

Navicky, Jefferson. *Antique Densities: Modern Parables & Other Experiments in Short Prose*. Deerbrook Editions, 2021.

Neruda, Pablo, and Mark Eisner. *Essential Neruda Esencial: Selected Poems = Poemas Seleccionados*. City Lights Books, 2004.

Nethercott, GennaRose. *Lumberjack's Dove: A Poem*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. Harvest Books, 1994.

Orr, Gregory. *Poetry as Survival*. University of Georgia Press, 2006.

Orwell, George, and Pak Ch'ung-sŏn. *K'at'Allonia Ch'an'Ga Oe / Homage to Catalonia / George Orwell*. Hagwŏnsa, 1984.

Orwell, George, et al. *1984 & Animal Farm: 2 in 1*. Sanage Publishing House, 2020.

Pineda, Jon, and De la Paz Oliver. *Little Anodynes: Poems*. The University of South Carolina Press, 2015.

Plath, Sylvia, and Ted Hughes. *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems*. Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993.

Plimpton, George. *Poets at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. Penguin, 1989.

Press, Crisis Chronicles, and Crisis Chronicles Press. "Theory and Play of the Duende (by Federico García Lorca)." *Crisis Chronicles Cyber Litmag (2008-2015)*, 9 Sept. 2012, <https://cclitmag.wordpress.com/2012/09/09/theory-and-play-of-the-duende-by-federico-garcia-lorca/>.

Rankine, Claudia. *Just Us*. Allen Lane, 2020.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Ixia Press, an Imprint of Dover Publications, 2021.

Sexton, Anne, and Maxine Kumin. *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*. Mariner Books, 1999.

Smith, Danez. *Don't Call Us Dead: Poems*. Chatto & Windus, 2018.

- Smith, Patricia. *Blood Dazzler: Poems*. Coffee House Press, 2008.
- Strand, Mark, and Eavan Boland. *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.
- Tate, James. *The Government Lake: Last Poems*. Ecco, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2020.
- Weinberger, Eliot, and William Carlos Williams. *The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry*. New Directions Publ. Corp, 2003.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- Williams, William Carlos, and Robert Pinsky. *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*. The Library of America, 2004.
- Wright, Franz. *Walking to Martha's Vineyard: Poems*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.
- Yang, Peter. *Art of Writing; Four Principles for Great Writing That Everyone Needs to Know*. TCK PUBLISHING, 2019.
- Yanyi, and Carl Phillips. *The Year of Blue Water*. Yale University Press, 2019.
- Young, Kevin. *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle Song*. The Library of America, 2020.
- Ziegler, Alan. *Short: An International Anthology of Five Centuries of Short-Short Stories, Prose Poems, Brief Essays, and Other Short Prose Forms*. Persea Books, 2014.