

BROKEN PASTORAL

by

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*And the dust that is swirled into a shape
And crumbles and is swirled again had but one shape...*

- Galway Kinnell

Transmission

In another world

We will not motor.

— *Louis Zukofsky*

All sunsets droop in their day clothes,
shriveled, mundane. What is there now except
consumption—

The numerical rates depict a snorting
of all the shimmering rails of words, rigid
in dust jackets, glorious in light—

Soft as golden pears, transmitting
meaning from inside a humming shed of skin.
I listen to the paring knife. Out of fear I listen.

After all, my inner-self, we aren't allowed
to see inside the design, to hear a single
sonar wave around which the country

protrudes its orders. Please, continue meaningful
work: the running and finding of all things never
seen—the bustling cocktail bar

of syllables, a red carafe of headlines, the fresh
produce to supplement this inner-world craving.
Here, write of the body: a submarine!

Its water must be oxygen. When does
the soul surface, shrilling a breach alarm?
Does it shill out a bag of silver? Help me

make sense of this. Speak to me,
even as a whisper—even as a prayer,
show me. I'm asking, for once.

[/]

Landscape with an Alcoholic

First, I was there
where rain collects in pools.

Then I was the emptiness
before the urge—a prayer

or desire to see a winter
sky, how it imprints

patterns on each
flake of snow.

This was not the surface
of the earth,

but beyond it.
I was losing oxygen

so rapidly the snow
asked why

they were special—
they wanted to be

a body again &
begged me to un-

dress into them.
The past-life promises

painlessness—;
The earth is filled with

what I have named
or touched—;

The present tells me to lie
in mud, letting roots of trees,

or rust veining through the earth
from a street sign, or even a person

touch me.

I want to be the cherry tree
in front of my father's house.

Its solitude: winter pitted by crows
whose calls are mine...

Today, the sky is empty.
It's perfect. It's full.

I shrug out of my form, I walk
amidst my father's ghost.

Poem with a Dead Parable Inside

It's the form of everything I can't see into:

stalks of tobacco, drying in the rafters of a windless barn,
their leaves weep long into summer evenings;

the ten peach trees, all in jagged rows, whose limbs
sagged under the weight of ripe fruit, and I never

thought to prop them up; and, knowing that I didn't
like the taste of peaches, I ignored my father who,

one summer evening, soaked each tree
in gasoline and burned them—

the ripe ones falling like dead birds, their fleshy skins
bursting open, their seeds ashing into the hillside;

and the old freezer we stored deer meat in every winter—
how, when the barn caught fire, it had cooked the meat

and the tobacco barn it sat in from the inside out,
there was no way of knowing if the wiring

had caused the first spark; and the small wood-stove
I remember feeding—how I would look into the flames

hoping to combust into a corrected version of myself,
all my flaws falling away like charred wood paneling.

[N]

But what of those who left this form behind?
There are two hundred bodies still on Mt. Everest,

some preserved so well by the dry cold and altitude,
they *look* alive—

How it must be to know that, despite death, you could see
those you've lost. What of the lone climber, David Sharp?

How did it feel to huddle inside a cave a few hundred feet
from Everest's peak attempting to breathe at the cruising

altitude of a Boeing 747—becoming just as cold, just as
thoughtless, as his skin turned the color of coal?

I've no way of knowing, but maybe he imagined
floating far from that mountain and his body,

only to become the shadow of a plane billowing
over any town as it flies into the fire of the sun.

[N]

But if all matter, all energy, cannot be destroyed—
as in the tale of Shadrach who, *after*

he denied Nebuchadnezzar, and *after* he was bound
and thrown into the supposed king's raging furnace,

knew he didn't need to defend himself. Not in the way
Jesus, or Sharp, knew they'd be forsaken by the father,

but like a retired race horse slowly forgets how
the soil of a track felt beneath it. It doesn't know

those tracks have all closed—the ticket booths and seats
emptied of everything except a few reels of tickets,

once yellow, now faded and coming apart in rain.
But even that old horse will be destroyed, and even

if Shadrach or Sharp knew their skin would not burn,
would not give up its energy, then I believe that these parables

are full of emptiness the way fields are left clean, like all parables,
after farmhands scorch them, leaving behind the richest, blackest soil.

Under a Country Sky

Without sound, her legs were broken
after my uncle backed over them
with his truck. Calm. Tail wagging,
but unable to walk—unable to drag
even her body from the driveway into
the grass. Scooping her up, my father
carries her into the level field behind
the house, into the wild grasses.
He couldn't stop the shaking, the gun's
grip still sweat-stained when I take it,
inserting its barrel into her ear. Then,
just before it happens, she seems
happy to have me opening a door,
with its heavy hinge, to let her in.

[/]

The applause of birds & bleat of a fawn
felled the work of the hayfield into silence.
I found my grandfather staring down
at it, balled up in a pile of mown hay—
the blades of the mower cut off its legs.
Walking to the tractor, he grabs a wrench
and, without looking back, hands it to me.
I felt the weight of the tool, so familiar,
but this was a different way of repair.
The sky bows down, two turkey vultures
sit shrugging on the old antenna tower.
I approach and the fawn quiets, but when
I hit it the first time I was too soft—it began
crying again. Harder, I beat it three more times
before hauling it by the ears to the wood's edge.
Covering it best I could, a makeshift burial
of leaves and briars, I hear a doe's call deep
within the holler. Then the wind settles as
the sun begins slipping a blanket of orange
over everything, calling us all into the dark.

On Cremation

The black oak tree stands empty in front of the barn, its gnarled roots,
discolored from years of my grandfather pouring oil from tractors over them,

reach through the grasses as though they are searching for someone. He'd wanted
the tree gone, but he's nothing but ash now. The family scattered them in the woods

among a circle of Osage orange trees. He'd called them *crabapple trees*. He'd called
their green fruit *monkey brains*. May his energy, what's left of it, become one

with those apples—may his spirit go mad when a doe, driven by drought, takes a hoof
to a monkey brain and eats her fill of madness; I laugh but didn't know.

Later, when the doe lies down beside the empty pond behind the barn, filled
only with gray mud, & dies, I know buzzards will begin to circle—

the coyotes will howl & gather in their patchy summer furs like a funeral procession.
I know the night will be wrong & violent.

[N]

Here are four-hundred acres of hay fields that once held tobacco, cedar thickets
that held headstones of previous families—but even those things are stories

my uncle tells me only when we're alone. The tobacco business dried up years ago,
the hay industry withered away, & when I asked why I couldn't find

the headstones anywhere, he said they'd been crushed to dust by men my grandfather
had hired to log the land. Besides, he said, the dead don't care what the living do.

He smoked a cigar & sipped his bourbon. I laughed but didn't know.

When we tore down the stripping shed—pulled its walls away from the barn's body, I stood in the
gray ash of its floor & could've sworn someone was speaking.

The black-oak stood empty in front of the barn, its roots searching
for my grandfather. Or maybe they've found him.

My uncle pours gas onto the tree, hands me a rag & a lighter: *Best be sure nothing's left.*

Inheritance

Mother said not to be
too serious about it.

So I laughed instead,

tendons still tight from years
of his weight.

Gone. But still, ice melts
in a whiskey glass

as if I took up his crutch
to keep the memory

sterile.

Still, the teak table is waxed
in water ringlets

left from his glass I would fill
with ice.

His hand no longer pours
work from a bottle—

no longer does his finger
prick my chest.

Soon the bourbon's fang grips
its negative space:

brick-like, as if I were cut
from the slab of clay

he was coaxed from.

My tendons were tight after years
of holding his fists

away from my walls
that caved in anyhow.

Post-Modernity

The AA pamphlet perks, pours out its details.
Lemon-bright linoleum, your bagging laugh lines,
a T.V. set sits on, silent, in the corner.
It says it sees itself, it says it repeats itself—is not
funny. *Friends* is re-running, and you round down
numbers, names, and even the cost of Nicaraguan
tobacco, in your head. Harmlessly unseen, but heard.
Data does that to a body. Data does that to a disc
that contains history, however violent, and horribly
(like a laughed at Looney-Toon sketch) keeps loading.
What the eye watches persists, takes power,
and even if you don't want to watch, you will.
You forget all about taste until it touches you,
and the linoleum laughs, and so you laugh back—
the numbness like a canopy of wings, the eyes of owls.

Cold Reading After Your Suicide

A white jawbreaker
in a cigarette tray—

found yesterday on
my desk. Loomed in:

the light falls surefooted,
cut into shafts around

my bed. At which end
did you place your head?

A curtain in the breeze blows
transparent in the sun.

This feeling is a razor blade
on my neck, shaving

the past away like stubble—
like carpet cut away

from a departure. Why
is transparency a gift

we never received? Always
like paste, the years,

sticking to the skin, not
allowing us to gaze

up at the sky. Today
it's full of blooms.

And these feelings, like chalk,
make me want to swallow

them whole. I should've called—
the birds are too loud now.

If This Were a Parable

for Stanley Plumly

If this were a parable, I could make these landscapes
roll on greenly for miles. They would mean more

than they are and we could own them, though time
creates limitations so like moments of childhood

that stretch out, yawning even to themselves now,
creating a canopy of jungle-gym bars where I could

rest and watch the sun shine unevenly across my
past. But this is no place to live, this memory,

and even you cannot stay here. The elm trees
seem to hold still in the sun, stiffening as if

they were preparing to hug you, or even me,
but there's nothing in nature that cares

for us—nothing speaks back on purpose. Writing
this is like acknowledging a *goodbye*, but I want to be

bottomless. I want to refill the cup that is already,
in this moment, overflowing like a heart's chamber

clogged with a love that is deadly. I want
your foot to stick into the clay path that leads

into the trees, each foot forming an imprint
so that I could find you again. I look at the earth

for your name, something so light under my boot
that gulls picking trash from a parking lot

could take it with them, fade back into clouds
that build and clog the sky with snow, which falls

so painfully quiet, like an absence around a table.
This life knocks one tooth in at a time.

I spend the days guiding my tongue to
where the hollows widen and then go numb.

Poem Wrapped Around a Tree,
New Carlisle, Ohio, 1993

The asphalt at midnight, empty
of any vehicle, unrolls itself
and becomes so selfish—so like us.

I've stopped believing in anything
the headlights can't see, though
I know the road is there, and will be

each mile until I'm home. The moon reflects
the cold side of the sun, the light falling
unevenly around me across the fields filled

only with the final stalks of corn, forgotten
by their farmers. The light begins to feel thin,
as though I were seeing everything through

a bottle of gin & I can only imagine my father,
driving this same road in '93, must have wanted
to become full—to careen into the field of husks

& grow again, left to brown & dissolve
under the strange light until finally
finding himself at home again.

I remember how, stretched out on the couch,
his body stitched together like a corpse, he said
his headlights, uneven after the whiskey he'd had before

speeding off into the darkness, had granted his wish.
That the road became a blank page of black asphalt
to project himself onto. Only looking away to reach

for his cigarettes, he must have believed
in the oncoming tree the way I now believe in home:
a flat black sheet formed for no one, I imagine it.

Separation

What does it mean to behold the curtain of the temple, torn
after the crucifixion? We're told that after His last sigh

the earth shook, rocks split, & a separation of all that was
holy from all that was flesh was loosed & free.

[/]

My mother was headed home when she watched
the car cross the median & into her lane. She tells me

she tried to stop, the car swerved at the last minute,
& my mother's SUV buried its nose in the driver side.

[/]

In the stillness of wind, ravens lighted on the third cross
& ate the thief's eyes first, separating his soul from sight—

wind through a torn curtain fills every mouth until
a hush fills our empty form & what was made from the dirt

is returned to the dirt—every tombstone intact,
everybody turned to dirt within dirt.

[/]

When it was over, my mother slid from her vehicle
& looked over at the car, split like wood

& splinters of upholstery & metal littered
the road. Without thinking, she took a photo.

Not as evidence, exactly, but a memento for
what suffering looks like, though it failed

to capture the wind or texture of cracked pavement.

[/]

Later, she saw the body of a young girl torn in two:
her left side folded into the passenger seat & her right

upright & stiff, a hand limply holding the steering wheel
as though attempting to navigate her way to the next life.

I tell my mother to delete the photo
but she can't.

What it means to unsee a body
—to forget how air moved unevenly

across a face, the hush of a wreck in the throat.

Hushed

Language is the house of being, Heidegger said.

A hole dug in the ground is a *kind* of house.

Cost of putting your pet down: one .45 caliber bullet.

We don't dig up what's buried.

We don't dig the bullet out after.

The truth of any moment is image, the eye ushering in the new.

We forget the old. We don't dig up what's buried.

Once, I unearthed a gun in the garden. It shone obsidian at dusk.

The dusk's hush holds not time, but memory.

A forgotten place where you cannot live.

A moth bumping against a porch light.

A dog limps away into the dust-dark of a tree line.

I can see the tar-papered outside of the farmhouse.

I can see the thumb-smudge of my young smile.

Here's the house where I find truth (it is rotten).

The sky today, imperfect with pink clouds at dusk.

Traffic in the distance, roaring, and so many people, and me.

Poem Loaded in a Manila Envelope

It was after he'd discussed it, with the dirge of a sentence inside his brain,
Budd Dwyer wrote on a legal pad, "Tomorrow is going to be so difficult

and I hope that I can go through with it." He went through with it,
and, remembering his last press conference, I noticed his voice—

how it shook with a strange music, the way the ocean sounds as it washes,
recedes, and goes out to sea again. This was a quiet, almost mute, music.

It was like plugging both your ears to hear the heart pounding deep
within the body. It was like listening to the sounds of gulls in January,

as you walk a beach, unable to bathe in the ocean because it's still too cold.
But it is not January 1987, and I am not inside a Pennsylvania conference

room waiting to hear what Dwyer would say—or didn't say. Instead,
I am watching a different event unfold again, one that unfolds itself

like the wingspan of a gull, so secondary, so thoughtless, even this memory
takes over without complaint. At the edge of an intensive care unit in Kentucky,

where outside the November wind blows leaves away from the trees like air,
where, from his hospital bed, my father begins to apologize for forcing me

to spend Thanksgiving with him here, in an ICU. But he does not look at me.
He looks towards the ceiling, as if apologizing not to me but to the white plaster—

a man trying to understand how a heart attack comes on before fifty. His face,
to me, seems just as pale and urgent as Dwyer's had been, twisting with pain.

His mouth, moving from smooth to curved, like the way a wave breaks against
the shore only to break and recede. The music of these two instances only differing

in their urgency: one a distant memory of water, froth and white foam, the other,
just as far, as though I were hearing my father's voice on the other side

of a forest fire, as he attempts to explain to me, the nurses, doctors—his pain:

Someone's hammering a nail through my chest and into my back. But the morphine drip kept dripping to no effect, and I could do nothing but think of when my father first took me hunting. Walking through patches of bare trees, our feet rustling through their amber paper, he'd said, "The trick with rabbits is you scare them from the underbrush. That's when you shoot—but be quick."

We walked for a while in silence before he added, "be sure to shoot them in the head, we don't want to eat any buckshot." But I'd been a bad shot and hit the body of a brown one. After skinning it, pulling out any remnants left inside the flesh, he fried the meat in a cast-iron skillet over a fire lit from kindling and a match pulled from a pack he carried in his back pocket, "for just such emergencies," and each face from a news broadcast crackled into focus. A woman saying Dwyer always handed a pack of matches and a nail file to anyone he shook hands with while campaigning. Another woman, the camera entirely too close to her face, her eyes red from wind and tears, stared off at the white of the walls around her, attempting to understand how a man she knew as State Treasurer could've stolen anything from anyone—that he couldn't be guilty of bribery, and then the camera pans: Dwyer's face again, caught as he walked from the courtroom, face in a sweat and white with disbelief.

"This is a sad and shocking day for me...I don't know how this could happen." Inside his home, where I can't know for sure, where outside the November wind blew, perhaps, the leaves from trees, where, from the sofa, he said the case was stupid and, feeling helpless, asked his wife what they were to do now, staring up at the ceiling as if not asking her, but asking the empty spackled plaster above him, maybe even asking god floating in his attic—a man trying to understand how honesty had earned him 22 years—how his family would survive after the courts had taken his pension. And as he lay there, maybe his mouth moved from its smooth, taut line, and curved itself into a shape resembling a foaming wave of sea, his face receding back into my thoughts with a cough from my father in his hospital

bed, where I attempt to make him laugh. *It's obvious*, I tell him, *you can't scratch the heart*. He grinned and it was 1998 again. I was standing behind him in a general store, watching as the cashier rang up the purchases: the avocados, a case of Miller Lite, and always a pack of Marlboro Reds. The cashier was young, her pace uneven, and he was in a hurry, tapping his fingers against the side of the counter as her voice rang for a price check through the empty store. Another cashier, aisles over, told us, "Please be patient. Someone will assist you momentarily." I remember how, then, *momentarily* had felt like eternity, though I had no sense of how permanent that really was, how I had reached up and tapped the counter along with him, hoping to help in the only way I knew how: to make him laugh, just as I am doing now, watching him hold the tiny blue hospital pillow to his chest, laughing up phlegm and wiping it away with his wrist. His grip on the pillow lessens, his eyes glaze over as though he has finally discovered what he really wants to say. For the lies he told me when I was a child, asking if he were still in love with my mother—or if they were coming apart like leaves in the hospital yard, dissolving in mists of rain or how, even now, as I call out to a hospital night attendant in a panic—how she replies "Please be patient, someone will assist you momentarily." As I stood beside my father, fingers tapping the cold railing of his bed, *momentarily* began to feel permanent—his bed's railing feeling so similar to the one I'd grip inside a speeding Metro car, his heart monitor shrieking into the darkness of his little room in an ICU like passing through a Metro tunnel—sparks flying from tracks below, the lights flickering, causing my eyes to readjust, the shift in pressure dampening my ears, the sounds of everything around me. How everything felt so far away, yet right in front of me. As though I were becoming a sea-shell—if someone held me perfectly, they'd hear a secret music loaded inside flesh, tucked away in a manila envelope until the glue dried, cracked, and spilled each sheet of my libretti into this shrinking room. If I were to hone my own years, strip away every layer, whittle it

to dust, and scatter it onto a mat beneath my feet, would it matter? Would the dust stay even if I resisted an urge to shake the rug out over my balcony, spread every piece of myself among the passing cars, the people, the tiny waves in the sidewalk from a worker's trowel. Would I remain in the interiors of passing vehicles? The jacket of the boy, his red backpack, as he ran to his bus? Would they know they carried pieces of me with them? Would I wear rug-thin after I've shuffled my feet across it each night, moving towards my desk to reach for something hidden among books that will scatter me into bed? And then I'm having lunch with Amanda. She says there's nothing after—that we make meaning out of the shell we're breathed into, make choices of what is right, what is wrong. She grimaces, looks down at her sandwich. and I nod, just as I am doing now, nodding at my father's shape covered up to the neck with a sheet as he breathes and breathes after passing out from morphine. The doctors, hoping that his pain will ease up instead of forcing their hands to cut open his chest, crack his sternum and part his ribs, in order to get to the arteries—clear them, replace them if they must, tell us to go rest in the waiting room. Outside in the sterile lit hall, my mother leans against a wall and begins to cry, asks my brothers and me what we should do. She wants to pray, but doesn't know how. Doesn't know where to start. My brother gathers us around her and bows his head, everyone follows him except me. I stare at my mother, I listen to my brother's prayer—I listen for music. Where had it gone? How does it dissipate when washed in hospital light? My brother finishes his prayer, taps my shoulder, the two of us alone now in the corridor, "I want to know where dad will go if he dies tonight." He looks at me, as if not asking me but someone who was standing over my shoulder, and I stand there, unable to feel anything, knowing I should be feeling something—how to bond in a broken corridor after a broken prayer? I tell him I don't want to think about that, not until the night was over, not until we walked outside in the rain and thinning leaves, pushing our father away from this place in a wheelchair, his heart unburdened—lighter. And then I thought about what

comes after. My mind goes to Dwyer's final speech, expected to resign from office, walk from the conference room and be stripped of everything—of the notes that composed his life. Notes he chose for, the sheet music for the cello of a magnum tucked inside a manila envelope on the lectern in front of him—in front of everyone, as he read his statement, "I would also urge you...to work for the repeal of the death penalty." How his eyes searched the room, aware of who he was, where he was, surrounded by the people who'd helped elect him, helped compose his concerto, and were now listening, unknowingly, to his final solo emitting its fading sound from his curled mouth,

"And I'm on the last page now, and I don't have enough to pass out...I thank the good Lord for giving my 47 years of exciting challenges.... Now my life has changed for no apparent reason. People who call...are exasperated and feel helpless...They want to help." How to help? My brother composes his face before we walk to the waiting room where we listen for the ring of the hospital telephone that sings for anyone. I watch my mother struggle to sleep on the cold green sofa, her eyes still open, bloodshot. I fall onto a couch in a sweat, my youth creeping through my eyelids at last—a childhood swept up in a November breeze, guided by some unseen hand, where it fans the green-tiled floors of my life, gathers the sodden leaves and memories together in a raftered barn and ignites them—burns them in some unquenchable fire, leaving me to see what there is to see: my father walking through the remnants of my grandfather's barn, nudging the burnt-black tinder that had been fifty year old hand-hued rafters just hours before shoddy electrical work sparked the dust-covered floor, creating a relentless furnace that burned up the chaff with my grain—purified it all to ash. That was fifteen years ago.

This is now: a hospital waiting room, a crying mother and praying brother. Where *now* begins to resemble a discussion I'd had with my father months ago, the two of us drunk, sitting on the back porch where, from his seat, he read some of my poems, a cigarette smoking between his lips as he mouthed the words silently to himself. After he finished, he looked at me the way he had looked at grandfather's barn as it burned heavily into that summer evening—as though he were trying to understand what started

the fire in the first place. He asked if any of my poems were about him, why I wrote the way I did—why he couldn't find *me* in any of them. I told him that I wrote in the voices

of other people; that I wrote around myself until I disappeared, as though I were being blown away in a November breeze or my voice, drowned out by the roar of a fire,

thinned into the smallest sweeping notes, was lost across the wind—across the green-tiled ceiling of the earth, the floor of another place I've yet to see, the waiting room's

floor glistening with each swish of a janitor's mop. How the water sloshed in the bucket like the ocean's emerald-green waves, forever encroaching and receding—forever in

motion, in music. The waiting room phone sits silent, and the crumpled opening of a manila envelope speaks on a lectern inside a Pennsylvania conference room,

where outside the leaves dream of a green-tiled ceiling and a wind filled with sheet music and fire sweeping the ears away from everyone inside the room listening to Dwyer

speak. Their eyes on the manila envelope in front of Dwyer, whose contents they were unconcerned with until it was too late. How they had cut his last sentence short, the one

for his family, the reason behind his choice. How the dirge of a sentence became motion, motion became energy, and energy became his wrist pulling the gun

from the paper bag and putting it into his mouth, allowing the weight of his finger on the trigger to do all of the work, the energy turning into music, a stiff bow drawn

across all the strings of a cello—a music that no one could hear, far off, as though it were receding, like an ocean's wave at daybreak or dusk, back into a manila envelope,

waiting for a new ear to press itself against its bruised opening, holding it just right, allowing the music to be swept out and carried away.

For the Memory of the Dead

For Eric Gentry

The evening light is pulled into the skyline
as the sun sinks. October, and the sun works
the landscape into an unreachable distance:

the rust of an exhaust pipe on a Ford tractor,
the gray of tobacco sticks stacked in a corner,
the thin grooves in the barn's concrete floor—

even the silence of concrete as it cures, how it stings
to stand there beside Miguel, my grandfather's foreman.
He said nothing, knowing little English. And I, in my dumb

age, said nothing. We listened to cicadas hum from the woods,
their song becoming lost in the evening heat or the soft
scrapes of trowels as other workers worked something

unnatural into a wet sheet, covering Kentucky clay and gravel,
until silence itself became muffled—the sun receding, pulling
the day's color, the sounds of speech, into an understanding

that all images will be drawn towards a vanishing point,
an idea of the infinite—as if time were paintbrush bristles
whose spines, soaked in water each night, lost all trace

of everything it once painted. A small jar of cold water
beside a sink. The jar becomes a cloud separate from the
others, which seem to bloom in the evening sky like isolated

explosions. These clouds are the memories of the dead.
The concrete floor of that barn has since cracked,
the stack of tobacco sticks, sold or burned. Time doesn't

hold like dust in a palm. Time is just as unnatural as
that concrete floor, it keeps cracking like a decaying tooth
and the pain radiates so roundly it could make a fist

like the smoke inside a cigar bar on the downtown square
of Bowling Green, where a man sits
at its long walnut bar, the smoke pooling, drifting

out the open door—lost across the wind
towards a vanishing point.
Yet no one notices. I've become a part of it.

The rusting scab-like roofs of buildings circling
the fountain square—the tops of poplars, cedars,
and maples dulling beyond the city limits—

the barmaid's flats tap against the green linoleum,
the perspiration splays itself on the man's glasses
from an August heat, the cough of the bar's tap-line

before the barmaid pulls the handle. A smoke-faded
clock behind the bar tilts towards the door; even it knows
the end of day. The construction worker, framed by the bar's

window, looks down at the fresh sidewalk, as if he wants
to remember what it looks like, curing in the sun as it sets,
and he's pulled away, lost in tiny explosions—those clouds.

Letter for Our Time

You've asked, and it's true, I cannot have a room designated for smoking. The smell seeps through the walls like memory, colors the wallpaper brown, films over the windows—nothing sheds.

When I left you told me to be thankful for mornings that felt like forgiveness. Here the word for forgiveness means “uncountable”. I've seen to it: a week ago, bombs were dropped on Syria—barrels of yellow fog on Aleppo.

The child survivors plead with our cameras: *it feels like a cat clawing our lungs*. Currently, no ideas but in things: when shrapnel was short they packed their bombs full of jewelry—the face of a watch lodged in the knee of a shopkeeper in the market...

Once, I would have offered a syllable—a partition of tubes and lambskin, a compost of thread. But that *yes* is hidden in the curve of my throat, the coral of my heels. Besides, it appears ideas are useless unless they're dropped from the sky.

Dukkha: A Meditation

There's a Buddhist word, *dukkha*, which means too much to be translated properly: a meld of regret & death

after walking up and down the earth, like hide stretched across a drum that's beaten until almost transparent, or

gold beaten until it's so thin even chefs at Michelin star restaurants use it to cover the buns of gourmet burgers.

Why are there so few words for this—so little language offered for what the world gives?

Perhaps instinct is necessary, like a country fog at 5 a.m., after building its shape through the night, is felled

by the first axe of light, leaving the day clean & composed. Here's an inner space I had bricked up so well,

watching my ceiling rising: morning. The coffee steams as it cools, the whistles of birds waking—

strutting their music, boiling it up into my rafters. Why are there so few words for this?

Here's dew, clung to a sole blade of grass, which will be gone in the evening, taken into some realm of clouds

only to return in another form. And there are other stories: a friend calling to say he wondered if he was a person.

I couldn't speak, he told me. The next day I went to his apartment littered with beer bottles arranged

in a small circle filled with piss & cigarette butts. Shirtless, he had cut a small circle into his chest—

To be sure, he said, *that I wasn't faking it.*

Another friend took to the road in his Volvo in search of,

he didn't say what, but when he came back he was shingled with thoughts—little ribs of his weather, telling

him to turn around for his wallet, his keys, or his cat.

So he did, and I wonder now if *dukkha* means

too little to be translated perfectly. Like attempting to remember
when you were born, or asking your father, the missing cat,

torn from a coma, what he saw in that blackness—the face of god—
or did he just sit quiet and alone there in the dark?

Instead, he says he sat in a room where an empty mirror hummed
each syllable of his life back to him.

Who is it that picks up the mirror in this life, the one with all
your humility, your sadness, and says *I'm here, here.*

Waking

Some mornings I wake before the sun
peaks over the tops of trees,
before the coyote finishes every
feather of one of my father's chickens,
before the rooster, who sits
on the top of the tall coop witnesses
the coyote creeping in like ashes, does
nothing—doesn't even crow. He clucks
softly to himself. Perhaps he is dreaming?
If roosters can dream—light breaking
through the chicken wire, maybe he sees
himself flying above natural selection
and through the locked gate, opened
by no hand at all, (to wherever roosters
dream of going). I confess I dreamt
of being eaten by those chickens—
the hens and roosters picking away
in the moments before the earth wakes;
my flesh became bread and so
the animals ate until they were full, until
their lord rooster crowed dominion over
their little coop—and I woke to find
that nothing extraordinary had happened.

When I'm walking empty rows
of Texas fields where a woman is running,
naked and screaming, towards the interstate.
Pre-dawn, the sky empty of anything to make
me feel one way or another, I know she
could be a woman who married a drunk South
Texas farmer. Who whittles too many toys
for her children. After witnessing the toys gather
dust in a barn's loft among dried skins shed by
cicadas or the legless pincushions that were once
daddy-long-legs, she feels anger fall inside her
instead of love. When she reaches me, grabs me,
she says she's dreamt of running anywhere
her husband wouldn't find her. She has a bell
tied to her ankle, its ringing so similar to the summer

chimes my mother had.

The woman said she'd confessed her dreams to her husband, who believed them. Believed they were real, and so tied a bell around her ankle—not to keep track of her during the day, like he did his cattle, but to warn him while he slept. But today, upon waking—I thought there could be a story in the paper, a news headline—anything. But no. No woman tied to a stove who slips away, like a strand of hair falling from a horse's mane—her bell ringing for no one as a car full of teenagers hits her as she reaches the interstate, their lights off listening to wind howl before ads hunt. And no husband who, if questioned, would say he'd gone to sleep listening to her screams, to their infant son's dreams, and of fire engulfing his bed. He didn't say it was soundless, the dream, or that he ran through fire until the sun came up, and ran until every sign of himself—his house, land, child, even his wife—disappeared. I don't know if that man loved his wife and children, if they were real to him—or if dreams mean anything. Outside a coyote is caught by my father. My mother watches as he runs a metal stake through its spine, its bloodied grin shining in the fresh day.

Silhouette

We're up in the slump.
Morning, sloughed all nuclear, left day burnt
perfect & in place. Camera crew action:
claymation in perpetual immobilization—
the thrush song of television sets sweeping
into dissonance of what never was.

A man stands in the middle
of a busy street & grips a book. Sound has
bound his dreadlocks at the tips with electrical
tape—pushes the signal of his broadcast over
into static: *Where's wife? Wake up wife!*
We're math! We're math!

Elsewhere, the clay shudders—
calls an Uber from inside the kiln
while a refrain rolls loose from crowds
contorted into cufflinks:
*Hella hot behind a wall. Hella ICE(E) too: Is this not
symbiotic with the body? Come,*

let us sink into the silks of our skin,
remake sense of our new shimmer—these
bedazzled hems of flesh. Orange forms a synecdoche,
asks if we believe how his heaven will be—*Yes, the clay
breathes, Like a black cloud of swarming bees.*

Rehearsing the Death of My Father

In the garden there is snow where there once was
snow & the sun fades into the trees.

In the snow that was always snow, the blue-
tailed skink does not dream of thawing

in spring to find its tail gone & so must grow
a new one. Dusk's light inches across

leftover lawn chairs from a summer barbeque
(I'd considered moving them inside).

What you do when weather holds its pattern
& life persists—when you turn & find

only the thick, cold fog from the river filling
the field—what now can be kept secret?

I keep quiet. I do not move.
Somewhere, between garden & field,

I think of my father, in memory,
in the middle distance, hauling

a deer carcass behind him,
his lumbering shape almost formless,

almost lost as I bend over this desk
& he never reaches the garden. Alone

in the snow that was always snow, in
the sleeping garden, the crunch of ice beneath

my boot allows all grief on the earth
to open before me, where the lights

above burn like cuts along my gums, & burn
the lizard lying on the heart turned to ice.

For Whatever Had a Song Inside

The three-syllable song of the whippoorwill composes the night,
stiches together a blanket of humidity & indifferent country sky,

with its litany of stars whose hollow shine is a blackness I dream
of falling into, or a rare song I miss at times sitting on a balcony

overlooking the buildings of a city, just as indifferent & colorless
in its music. Just inside the screen door a vinyl spins—

whippoorwill, whippoorwill, which may only be in my head,
though this jazz is so like that bird's song, so similar

in its rising & falling, just as another bird adds to the singing.
I'm going to put the drumming teenage figure of my brother in front

of you, in this darkening cityscape, so you can watch him ride a rhythm
hidden in air inside a thick theatre filled with people who bob

their heads, like birds, hunting for a purpose. Keep your eyes on him
as he hits his sticks against drum heads & cymbals, then watch

as the curtain falls, covering the stage in a black sheet, signaling
the show's end. When my brother walks out the back of that theatre

into a filling side street in Cincinnati, no one will notice. He wore
black jeans with a fading shirt whose color slips him into crowds,

the buildings tagged with graffiti echo, the sounds of breaking bottles
& voices, as he steals away like the whippoorwill, running

along a forest floor at dusk, or the middle of night, and disappears
into a hollow dark filled only with his song.

[N]

Why do we race towards the part of ourselves that's incomplete?
All day the other birds sound like wounded rabbits.

I stay indoors, listening, watching as their shadows hit the sill
soft as the sun on my niece's cheek, who chases them

in an understanding of what it means, though she's never felt pursued
by anything. My brother's off somewhere,

pawning his drums for rent money as his song, his shadow, roping away
from him across a city's asphalt, waves

goodbye. I sit at his desk, silent & waiting for the singing—

or the memory of song; speech is an afterthought, and the corners
of my mouth crack each time I mouth a syllable.

I know memory distorts past images: here's a kite, here's a cat, here's
a kite's tail disappearing into the mouth of a cat.

That's what it's like. To imagine it all over & over until
everything in this world becomes

overexposed: silhouettes slanting silently toward a tomorrow
that's become harder to return to—

a song that's increasingly incomplete & so I must keep writing
the parts for the other players.

Out of all conditions, I call this one mine.

[\]

This one, with the rustling leaves saying the fading song,
Whippoorwill, Whippoorwill, as the basement

of my brother's home is emptied of song
& filled with the babble of his daughter

as she attempts to sing along to the bird's dying song
outside the windows & beyond the fields

of our Uncle's farm filled with bales of hay where
a horse named Phantom would graze.

Sometimes our aunt would sing to him, walking along
the white fence as he followed.

Each time she would change the words, but never
the melody, "Horses have good memory for melodies"

she'd say. Then one day there wasn't a song,
but the sounds of gunshots from my aunt's porch,

where she stood dressed only in an opened
button-down shirt & her underwear, holding a revolver

and firing all six shots towards Phantom's grayish-white
body, as four buzzards flew away, leaving the fifth

bloodied & silent. I remember thinking maybe it was only
to preserve the horse's memory, preserve

some unending melody that shakes back & forth inside
the horse's head as it shuffled along the fence,

grazing—even now, in some invisible field
or empty pastures under a darkening, & empty sky.

[/]

This one, with all the birds muted;

This one, with each tree blurring into a single, insignificant landscape.

This one, with every cat wandering off to die.

This one, with the brain of my dog blasted by a .45 in the ear.

Each one amounting to a larger silence continually revisited
within the mind.

The mind says there are no songs—you invented them, you wrote each part for every player.

You never had a brother or a niece; there was never a whippoorwill fading against the forest floor.

I'll be song-less. I'll be a mime encasing myself in a coffin of air.

I'll be the bullet busting through the earth beside a horse's carcass, singing sweetly beside grief, anyway.

[/]

I like the weather, its fields filling with dust—
I even enjoy the dust, as it piles in burnt grasses.

But what I enjoy most is the meaninglessness.

Today the birds have kept singing;
nothing moves except the mocking jay, who mimes

each movement I make in the sun. Today everyone

forgave me and I didn't thank them. Today wind
licks air like an envelope, a letter my brother

meant to send me, but never did & should have.

It's all a single rainbow floating silently in oil
across asphalt in summer.

[/]

Language is difficult; my niece understands: *Bird, uncle! Bird!*
she seems to sing, as I nod at the feeder in the front yard,

swaying from the stump limb of a black cherry tree.
Pink blossoms fall from its living half like an earache

or a gift. My niece hands her father a blossom. She laughs
and runs away into the low weeds, into the thin world.

Whippoorwill, Whippoorwill the weeds say as wind whips
them like waves on a choppy lake, but then grows

still again, leaving my brother and me in a silence so loud
it seems to hum someone else's song,

intermittently, while birds graze at the feeder & a muted
world tumbles forward, like a child, without end.

Poem with a Celestial Body Inside

after Fellini's 8 1/2

The moon, a single interstellar mirror, sees
the sun's light and gives it back to the earth
the way it would like to imagine it—

cold and thoughtless like petals falling
from a cherry tree in early spring.
But it isn't spring, and the moon knows

no season but night—as if light forgot itself,
became a body of flesh, and lost its name
in the moon's surface only to remember

it in the morning. When Armstrong
was asked what he thought of his footprints,
eternal in the dust of the moon's surface,

he frowned and said, "I hope someone will go
back and erase them."

[N]

Guido, what happens next? The script is unwritten.
You still dream of flying endlessly, and without

being caught, although you cough inside the cab
of a car until you are dead. You cough and the Shakers

changed their burial traditions. Uprooting every headstone,
they took away the names of their dead—repurposed

them into sidewalks, countertops, and ironing boards.
As if an elder had a vision of an empty field where

wind could fill it with memory—of a New England before
the dead arrived, the light of the sun free to walk over them.
And what of memory? One day, in a creaking church pew,
that elder begins to die. He will leave none of it behind.

And what of the dead, Guido—what happens next?

[N]

“I don’t know, everything’s confused. The truth hurts. In dreams I stare at my model rocket ship, its scaffolding torn away, the silent band around it.

Even now, the sand has banked beneath it—banked inside, even, the fat man’s tuba as he

clumsily sways back and forth in a breeze. He knows nothing about dreams. He knows nothing about music or my vision. I wanted to tell a story, one that was so

simple—I wanted to have music, direct everything from a stool, drink from a spring in Italy—*maybe* smoke a cigarette

maybe fuck women. But there are no more good actors—no stars. Everything feels like a worn-out reel

of film. Lucia rolls over in our satin sheets as though she’s done this all before. What happens next? I suppose a fat man will hit a tuba note full of sand, the set lights

will keep burning—the light of the moon washing the room—I suppose the dead will keep seeing the dead.”

On Epicureanism

Forget your body & your head—
let the spirit remember

what it came for in the first place.
Let the illuminated facial features

of a man and his family slip away,
which they did, in green flood

waters as if in memory, as it receded
from the attic where they'd slept

while outside, the flood continued
abstracting into different narratives.

This is work. This is distance.
We tell ourselves to leave if

the waters are too great—
that the morning will yellow

with each shade of a news headline.
We've been asleep on a silver table

with a buoy attached to our big toes—
we've been leaning closer

to the storyteller, we've invented
it all! The moth-eaten sheet is pulled

pulled away to reveal the new hull,
the bottle of chardonnay shimmering

green in a bay's evening heat, the cork
is coaxed from its seat. So too

the old mind is loosed like a first
frost, forgets its work.

[/]

Returning

Sometimes I think the dead come back
disguised as rain falling across forked rows
of tobacco, or even as the plants themselves,

whose songs are their leaves as they yellow and fall
in early October into the fields. At times I feel
silly believing the dead would return—

if they do, it's as a teenager whose obsession
with bar bands and amplified music lures them
away from their parent's basement for the night

and into the dim lighting of a coastal bar. They smoke
a joint for the first time; they stare at the band on a stage
made of reprised wood. Then they hear a note move past

the others, its fingers of rain drumming against their skull.
The music began to sound, as it had sounded once,
like the thick bell of grief emptying itself across a sound.

What does it mean to leave? To be called out, like fog
out of a field's pore. Maybe we were once all of this:
a teenager, music, smoke—electricity? We've returned

from our run through the rain, no longer hearing music,
but something else entirely. Something we've unlearned:
how desire falls inside us as if it were a brick dropped

from an overpass onto the windshield of a garbage truck—
or the way water pools in the curve of a corpse's back. But
I must admit I've made this up. You aren't that teenager—

neither am I. Could never be. We're stepping out of the music,
our ears no longer ringing, realizing when that teenager walks
home along the shoreline, we must go with them.

What's here is not for us. The spirit waits, the day opens—
the dead hold out their hands and they're full
as the ocean washing against our knees.

Notes

“Transmission.” The epigraph comes from “3” from Louis Zukofsky’s “A”

“If This Were a Parable.” is for poet Stanley Plumly.

“Hushed.” The poem begins with a phrase lifted from philosopher Martin Heidegger’s *Being in Time*. The full phrase reads “Language is the house of the truth of Being.”

“Poem Loaded in a Manila Envelope.” The narrative of the poem deals with the life of R. Budd Dwyer, who committed suicide on live television while serving as Pennsylvania’s State Treasurer from January 20, 1981 to January 22, 1987. The quotations are sampled from the documentary *Honest Man: The Life of R. Budd Dwyer*.

“For the Memory of the Dead.” is for Eric Gentry, who was the vocalist for the band A Feast for Kings until his death in 2014 after becoming trapped inside a portable cement mixer. The construction worker is Eric.

“Letter for Our Time.” references multiple news reports about the bombings of Aleppo from April of 2016 to July 2016.

“Waking.” Samples portions of dialogue from director Wim Wenders’ 1984 film *Paris, Texas*.

“Poem with a Celestial Body Inside.” Includes a quote from an NBC interview with Neil Armstrong. It also samples dialogue and narrative details from Federico Fellini’s 1963 film *8 ½*.