

SICK BOY

by

Patrick Rock McGinty

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Stanley Plumly, Chair
Professor Michael Collier
Professor Elizabeth Arnold

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Preface

In preparation of this collection, it has been the author's aim to present an examination of the events that shaped the narrator's views, usually through the avoidance of internal monologue but rather through showing the events from an objective viewpoint. At times, however, certain poems dip into the surreal and examine the subjective reality that the narrator views when looking at the objective world. The goal, however, is not to tell the reader what the narrator feels, but rather lead them to the discovery on their own by interpreting how the external events influence the life and outlook of the narrator, specifically in regards to his relationships with women, friends, and chemical love.

Foreword

This collection came about through a series of many varied experiences accumulated over a span of several years. From sleeping on rooftops in Baltimore overlooking factories to living between parked bicycles in a basement in Savannah, Georgia. From Annapolis, to DC, to Baltimore, to Jacksonville, Florida and beyond, the experiences (especially those of the most surreal nature in the darkest recesses of the cities) turned into the vignettes that became the poems in this collection. Through the friendships and relationships, many lost to time, I discovered in them poetry in a very straightforward, almost storytelling form. These small, sometimes seemingly insignificant snapshots of life, come together to reveal a deeper truth about relationships and desperation. If not for the pain caused by me and inflicted upon me, there would be little worth writing about. If I have learned any one thing through writing it is that pain and strife are a fertile breeding ground for poetry, and a poet must explore that suffering to find something worth saying.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this collection to the memories of Nimo Thande, Rob Viti, and countless other close friends who left this world well before their time.

Acknowledgements

This collection would not be possible without the guidance of many professors within the University of Maryland system. I would like to thank Stanley Plumly for directing my thesis, as well as Michael Collier, Elizabeth Arnold, and Joshua Weiner for guiding me through the Graduate Program and pushing me to create works outside of my general comfort zone. I would also like to thank Johnna Schmidt and the Writers House Living/Learning program that I attended as an undergraduate at the University of Maryland that make me come to the realization that I wanted to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing at the Graduate School. Aside from academia, I feel that it is necessary to thank my friends who encouraged me to continue writing no matter how daunting it may have seemed at the time.

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Tunnels

We will dig tunnels

Under concrete and asphalt:

The veins of your arm.

The Fall

Bright Young Things

We spoke sullen drama
in a cheap hotel room five miles from the city.

It was:

cigarette smoke, cheap wine,
and a mahogany coffee table

with an old
clay ashtray,
overflowing.

You said:

I've never felt so cliché.

Like an image clipped from a magazine

you sat with a curious plastic smile,
then hopped up to your feet,

fingers moving along the ivory keys
of an invisible piano,

hair tied up in a tight knot,

You said:

Watch me dance,

swallowed a pill
and smashed another wine glass
on the hardwood floor.

Recurring Dreams of Socialite Weekdays

Her hands were strong and calloused from climbing
out of windows and strangers' beds;
her voice lowered from a shrill falsetto
into a gruff whisper after days without sleep.

We stayed in the apartment, counting walls and comparing answers
for seven days and, when we emerged,
our fingernails, stained yellow and sharp,
dug into each other's arms at the sight of neon signs.

Some nights we slept on rooftops,
enjoying the moonlight's uncanny ability
to make our skin softly glow, momentarily erasing
the scars and blemishes that made us blush in sunlight.

Maybe it was the thinness of the air above the city,
but we spoke like servants
forcing laughter;
even in silence the conversation continued

with sideways glances and electric energy
singing static songs of white noise,
the noise of creation, between our withered bodies.

I ripped away calendar pages, folded them into paper planes,

and watched my days float over factories before crashing
to the asphalt below.

Another Shot, Icarus

There's nothing up north worth settling
for and the south has nothing to offer.
We could stay in the dark, stay hidden in
sheets, let our bones grow brittle and sharper.

If I had the cash, I could take us out
but we need to save up for tomorrow,
Angel will be here by two and I doubt
that this city stays dry in the snow.

I pray for the same sting, with veins thirsty
and wanting, I've called and called everyone,
don't blame me— crying won't stop the hurting
and I hate to see you slip from the sun,

so let's rebuild our wings with steel and with glass,
soar higher again, sure this
time will last.

I'm Not Jackson Pollock

Wake up. Have coffee. Have a wife. Have kids. Have a degree and a hospital-clean apartment. Have a five o'clock shadow, a nicotine patch, and fingernails free of dirt. Drink scotch, drink bottled water, and drive an SUV three miles under the speed limit in the right lane. Go to sleep at ten, wake up at six. Go to sleep after you lock the door and double-check the oven.

Move west. When you find that the same people are on either coast, give away the dog and go back east. You can't give away the kids, but someday someone will take your daughter. Your sons will love you, then they will hate you, then they will love you again. Read Tolstoy. Cheat on your wife, read Dostoevsky. Iron your shirt. Clip coupons. Repeat the same jokes you heard at work, the same jokes your coworkers heard the night before. Smile at the clerk. Buy black sock and shine black shoes. Remove the tattoo you got when you were seventeen.

Piss yourself and try to remember the names and the faces and places and the café where you met your first wife. Try to remember the differences between what happened and what you imagined. Shoplift (they raise the prices because they know you will).

Pick up smoking again. Smoke inside your house. Smoke inside someone else's house. Watch the street performers breathe fire. Repeat yourself. Call your children and tell them about the smoke and the fire. Ask them about their children. Ask them if they have read Tolstoy. Hang up. Ask God for help and stay awake as long as you can.

The Fallacy of Slothful Induction

Wading through white noise,
static from the stereo
seems to sing
every song we have ever heard,

Huddled together
hoping to speed up the blood
that scrapes like rust
through our veins,

we wait and wonder
whether past decisions
have brought us to this structure
or, perhaps, if we truly are untouchable.

Another Quiet Evening In

You were in the shower.
You were singing in the shower
with a cigarette in one hand
and a bottle in the other.

I hummed along to the songs
that escaped over the white noise
of falling water.

I hummed along as your voice
mingled with steam,
creeping under the door.

Pressing steel against cotton,
arm steadied, tied tightly,
I filled the glass chamber
and aimed for blue,

and felt the familiar sting
as skin swelled and warmth spread,
I hummed from crescendo to coda

as you sang to me
from the shower.

The Midwest Always Lets Me Down

We stole your father's wine and crept back home,
landlocked and far from East Coast city lights,
I watched as you walked through winter cold.

You said don't let me drink alone tonight
so we cracked the cap and passed the bottle back
and forth, December frozen to our cheeks

and chins, past trees and stones that showed the path
that would bring our bodies back to warming sleep.
With careful steps we crossed over the rocks

that stuck through earth to catch our heels, and when
you laughed that high-pitched laugh, took off your socks
and shoes to feel the grass against your skin,

I saw the sun come through the canopy,
far more beautiful than you will ever be.

For All the Starving Children With Mechanical Hands

Cold showers
and hours hanging out
in front of the urinal.

Burn out, and burn down that cherry tree
because honesty is just another crutch
for the hopelessly clean.

We embrace whiskey slurs and slot machines,
cremating our cash and watching
it float past the smoke stacks.

The beauty of brothels and broken radiators
stay stuck in our peripheral vision,
and the chants in unison:

“We gave up on heaven”

We, the people, who always fight
on both sides and share fine cigars
on the battlefield.

We, the people, who always
pour out the last pull,
but never the first.

Sometimes it seems as though snow angels
are just boyhood mockeries
of chalk outlines strewn across asphalt,

and I can't help but laugh as I wade
through the feverish dreams that sting
my waking hours like boots worn for weeks.

Some People Say We Were Made in the Image of God

She took pictures of strangers
in convenience stores
and on street corners.

She took pictures of people she had seen before,
carrying walking sticks in parking lots
or stumbling home in the morning.

I asked her about the camera
and why she never seemed to sleep.

Someday she would write a book
and hang photographs on gallery walls.

Not yet. Soon.

She never laughed at the strangers
or passed judgment,
but she would stare longingly,
for hours on end
at their faces on gloss paper.

Four Parts Water and Swirl

It was Baltimore in the summer
or Savannah in the spring:
a rooftop shoeless, a cloudy night—

six months after catching glances
in the crowded café,
three weeks after I found her diary.

She still calculates the stutters
of speech as valleys steam with choral hymns,
breaking the flow of brooks,
praising captive celibacy and royalty in exile,

but I'm still static in last week's boxers,
still wearing her dead ex-boyfriend's boots.

She said it was time to settle down
away from streetlights and sidewalks;

I told her I believed in God, tides,

and movements unending;
the sacred quotes
scrawled across my chest.

We stayed inside for weeks spinning records
from her father's basement stock:
the youth of Gil Scott stumbling
over bongos and black berets;

cubes clinked against glass
and we sank into classics and scratches,
into nicotine clouds that stayed for a song
but floated on to better things.

I wrote her a letter last year:
"To whom it may concern,"

melancholy, it must have been,
peppered with broken French proverbs,
closing with a worn-out poem of longing—
she never wrote back.

December slid frozen soil under my feet
and a few more friends overshot their tolerance

on couches and backseats up and down
the East Coast.

I spit bile, still sick from caps and tabs,
praying to plastic planets
glued to the ceiling,

but I dragged my body,
from the soft glow of basic cable reruns
to check the daily dry-erase specials;

I tiptoed through the minefield of ladies night
and carved her name
on the bathroom stall divider:
the best of public monuments.

With a single shot of rail,
I popped the last of the reds,
heavenly blues, and tricolors—

moving wildly through sweat-soaked dress shirts,

complete with snakebites and the Holy Ghost
scraping through veins,
but soon the season ended.

I showered in my clothes,
traced scars and lathered bruises;
the canyons were filled with asphalt
and for the first time I slept sober
and warm with windows open.

I bought bullets and paper plates
to hush the valley echoes—

traded in my mattress
to pay penance for fevered dreams
of slender frames
and beauty marks.

Maybe I'll change my name,
clean my system with quick shots
of ammonia and bleach;

start again with the same mistakes
but different faces taped
next to my mirror,
imagining new mouths for pleasure
in the morning before work.

I'll shake off the habit,
learn to carry a conversation,
effortless and elegant,
find a reason to raise my voice
or listen collected in silence;

I'll slow the sinking of the ship,
straighten the crooked framed paintings
hanging in the halls of an apartment
set to fall.

But it still comes back sometimes,
in a room full of friends
and familiar bodies,
through laughter crowded
over Manhattan or Old Fashion:

I'll remember the cheap car,

back when the world was ending;

with gutter steam climbing from sewer grates,
our eyes on slow-shutter speed,
we raced through lamp-lit one-ways,
smiling in the face of another electric
teenage death-game.

And she laughed,
that shrill, reckless laugh,
flicking ashes out the window,
taking quick sips from a bottle
between her legs.

Scramble

Purgatory is a car seat overheating
behind a Brooklyn complex,
skin peeling from fake leather
in the static between stations—
sixty folded in a front pocket.

Boys on bicycles in the rearview know
the boy you're waiting for—
static, praying it won't be another burner
or you'll be shooting sugar,
revisiting the fever that rises after twelve
hours dry.

North Ave

Rolling through the last dark
hours of near-morning, sleepless
and restless, hoping to be home
before dawn. From the backseat,
Destiny scanned the sidewalks for familiar
faces in the crowd of crooked bodies
propped against brick or stumbling
across asphalt before fading from streetlight.

The praying hours before the city sleeps,
when voices quiver scratched with thirst
and slip from the throat in low and lower
tones, when you begin regretting the half-hour
drive from Brooklyn and the four dollar toll,
when you begin to hope that the friend
of your friends doesn't have too many bills
to pay or a gun in the glove box.

Maybe nobody minds and maybe
you're just being dramatic,
filled with fear an unknown off-ramps,
but you're certain of the corner-eye flashes
of red and blue along the avenue—
and one way or another,
your eyes will miss the high
noon sun brightening the grind
of another day spent hiding under the sheets.

Calvert Street

I crawl under an oriental rug to press
my cheek against the floorboards and sing songs
of Brooklyn nights and Baltimore daydreams—
the pigeons sit on wires like music notes.

As fevers break along the shore, we push forward
to the horizon of desire, hoping for solace
with sunlight burning our bodies deep and deeper red,
cooling sweat evaporates into the breeze.

I will find you in the Black Sea,
lighting fires along the coast as night falls.
I will find you reciting poetry upon a peak in Darien,
howling as the moon rises and falls over an obsidian sky.

You will breathe deeply and keep me awake
with gently prodding and uncovered conversation
while I examine every thread from words weaved
into a quilt for our shoulders and laps.

We pull tightly until our figures
are silhouettes in a frame,
and become the same shadows
that we have been chasing
for twenty-two years.

Hold 'Em

Through pot smoke and muffled curses
to the top bunk, my brother below, unaware
of how the cards will fall one room over,

whether we will wake up in silence
and slip to the bus stop unnoticed,
or to breakfast and bagged lunch.

I hear my father slap the wooden table top
and laugh Irish, a hollow burst of lightning
and growl of thunder rock the bed,

our eyes shoot open and close quickly,
speeding through silent repeated prayers
until the sky clears again.

Still, staring up at glow-in-the-dark
plastic planets and stars glued
to the ceiling, water stains shifting

into patterns and shapes
that move and march, fade
into overhead eggshell white

while outside blind insects build temples,
unaware that they will be brought down
by morning, by the bare feet of a new god
growing.

When the Needle Hits Vinyl

Belt out a twenty-two ounce melody
while I crawl across hardwood floors,
sniffing shoes and skirts,
speaking in past tense
like the present is already a memory.

Later, wide awake in the backseat,
I'll be watching street-signs dance and spin
in a symphony of barking dogs
and exhaust pipe backfires,
but you'll be sleeping

in a stranger's bed,
blowing clouds of smoke
out the window
to mingle with ghosts
rising from sewer grates.

Belt out a new melody, kid.
Become another fading Polaroid
in my back packet,
and we'll see where we go.

The Fever

boy.

I

I used to choke on the sterile air of hospital hallways and could feel the white bleached walls readying themselves to compact sick patient bodies into a single brick of concentrated disease, but I'd been here before and walked out alive, bandaged and bruised, breathing easier each time I tore off the green ID bracelet.

You told me that I turned blue, and my tongue and throat were blue, they filled me with sodium chloride to bring me back and asked where I was and what day it was, I got the first one right and sat up while they shined a small light into the pinpoints of my pupils. I don't think any of us knew the answer.

Sickness came with the comedown and the buzzing of overhead fluorescence grew, shaking loose teeth and ceiling tiles rained down the dust of dead skin onto yellowing, sweat-stained sheets, and my own skin, heated with fever, wept chemical rivers across the floor.

II

Somewhere near Calvert, away from needlepoint outskirts, in warehouses converted to low-rent one-bedrooms, we slept with windows open, cursed in distant comfort, grew closer, farther, and returned to youthful destruction of lung, liver, and vein.

We nodded five floors above asphalt, itching in heat, unapologetic, with roses blooming behind glass before being buried in the soil of skin, someone, maybe you, sang down for Severin. Looking back, the hooks stayed through following seasons and I still have

the skull on my chest, the lines
on my sides, the cursive letters
spelling “glory fades,” now fading,
all homemade, and still, when the rush
comes up, I swear someone is singing
down to all of us from five
floors above.

III

They swabbed my veins at intake
and gave me a plastic cup to take
to the bathroom, followed me
into the bathroom to watch,
and I wondered who brings in clean piss,
and how they get clean piss,
and what kind of person sells clean piss

or gives it away, but the people here
can get anything, and somebody
somewhere is making a killing staying clean,
selling yellow bottles on a corner,
asking what you need, saying
“Don’t worry about anything.
I got you.”

The first nurse saw the first signs
of sickness and I mumbled pale
from sunken cheeks and black lines
under eyes from days without sleep,
they ease the pain with synthetic orange
dissolved under the tongue, but it blocks

the next shot and the trade can’t be taken
back. I asked for another and they took
my picture, handed over the polaroid,
and told me to look at it when I’m out
and fat and clean and I looked then and thought
I looked fine.

The upstairs inpatient carpet was stained
with detox vomit and the center station
gave sublinguals to keep the lobby clean,
every hour another meeting and another
higher power and another promise repeated
and forgotten.

Bleached blonde, dark roots showing
in the morning when dust hangs and floats
through the corridor. You had the same
bruises in the same places and knew the same
places and maybe, in passing, we had
met before,

just north of Brooklyn or west, or
The Whiskey before they tore it down,
and we spent breaks counting walls,
comparing answers, finding god and watching
him wash away when the tide moved in
and backed out,

clearing the canvas, erasing tracks set
along the path to find the way back home.
Sometimes lines ran down your cheeks
and your arms shook in the nicotine clouds
outside. You gave up after a few weeks and
so did I.

IV

Slowly rolling through the last dark hours
of near-morning, sleepless and restless,
hoping to be home before dawn. In the backseat,
Destiny scanned the sidewalk for familiar
faces in a crowd of crooked bodies propped
against brick or stumbling across asphalt
and fading.

The desperate hours before the heart slows,
when voices quiver, scratched with thirst
and slip from the throat in low and lower tones,
when you begin regretting the half-hour
drive and four-dollar toll, when you begin to hope
that the friend of your friends doesn't have anything in
the glove box.

Maybe nobody minds, maybe you're just
being dramatic, but you're certain of the corner-eye
flashes, red and blue and silver along the avenue,
and one way or another, you'll miss the high
noon sun brightening the grind of another day
spent hiding under sheets.

V

We spoke of walls from here to home,
of yellow paint peeling from every corner
of every ceiling, of bile and of plaster,
though neither of us came from a broken
home, and it was you: godless, savage,
pushed onto a bus with books to
pass the time,

pushed by your parents for the ten
or twenty minute ride from the comfort
of photographs and magazine cut-outs
taped above the bed, before you purged
and before I begged. Blue eyed and blonde,
you never chose between a push-off
or the grave.

You said “fuck anonymity” and gave
us your lids in group-meetings, steel
chair circles, wanting nothing more
or less than another cigarettes or to watch
the motions of the sun from a park bench.
You saw choirs

and I learned about masochism sitting
cross-legged across from you
and your brazen black skirt and knee-high
leather boots, sharing the same view
from twenty-one, static, sinking and laughing
at sinking.

VI

We burned for new avenues and burned
from the inside at cracks and prayers
from anyone to anyone or anything
above, thanking ourselves for the wheel
and express energy that lit both floors,
thankful for finding the best way to dispose
of the dead.

Talking enough for two, singing praises
for the sake of singing praises, you stayed
hooked, fashioning hypodermic hooks,
hidden hooks pressed into blue beads,

then lower, whispering about state-lines and
classic cars,

asking who deserved the body, silently
slipping out against regulations to attack
vodka like Saigon, starting slow like Ali
before catching Houdini in the gut
along pint-stained wood, and we played
new games in new alleys with short sleeves
and lighters.

The cap-gun was a gift you insisted
I keep on the dashboard when we went
inside the pool hall. You wept when they
shut it down but never at the funerals
to follow, standing stoic instead, glazed
and shaded, refusing to age as far as
I could tell.

VII

We drank fire in an empty room,
stale breath yellowing motel walls,
watching morning creep through
white blinds to cast long lines
of luminescent jail bars across
the carpet.

We kicked the habit with daytime
television, whiskey, and an overflowing
medicine cabinet. We kicked the habit
and drove back down south, ready to return
and repeat when we find our arms
dry again.

VIII

Emily, you never did age, did you?
I wrote you a letter last year but you
never wrote back. Frozen soil slid
under my feet and a few more friends
overshot their tolerance on couches
and backseats up and down
the East Coast.

They filled in the valleys and I considered
sleeping sober for the first time with
the windows open, trading in my mattress
and the polaroids taped next to the mirror,
cleaning my system with ammonia and bleach,
but instead

I dragged my body from the soft
glow of basic cable reruns to check
the daily dry-erase specials, tiptoed
through the mine fields of ladies' night
and carved your name into the plastic
bathroom stall,

popped the last of the reds and blues,
inhaled the greens that gel up, and moved
wild through sweat-soaked dress shirts
and snake bites with the Holy Ghost
unloaded and emptied, scraping through
worn-out veins.

IX

I still remember the cheap car,
back when the world was ending,
when we sped around corners and raced
through lamp-lit one-ways, smiling
in the face of another electric death-game,
steam rising

from sewer grates to mingle
with late-night factory ghosts,
and you laughed that kind of shrill,
reckless laugh, flicking ashes
out the window, taking quick sips
from a bottle between your legs.

X

The carousel stopped and the room
was still, still sore from resuscitation
and desperate chest compressions,
I waited and watched the ceiling stretch
and contract, you told me I turned blue
and my throat

and face and tongue were blue,
you told me where I was and what day
it was, leaning over the books in your lap.
The clock sped up and I began to age again,
but you stopped soon after and I started
repeating the same stories in the same shackles
of storytelling,

searching for your name carved in stalls
and under the academic desks of fevered dreams,
and there I found you blue, floating
through the fever, floating in the Atlantic
or Aegean, blue in the moonlight,
but not bloated, still and silent, but
never bloated.

Legs, I Missed

We spoke of walls from here to home,
of yellow paint peeling from every corner
of every ceiling, of bile and of plaster,
though neither of us came from a
broken home,
and it was

You, the godless,
savage,
pushed onto a bus with books
to pass the time,
pushed by your parents
for the ten or twenty minute
ride from the comfort
of photographs
and magazine cut-outs
taped above your bed,
before you purged,
before I begged.

You, unexpected,
blue-eyed and blonde,
who agreed that God shouldn't get credit,
who understood and embraced the Thirteenth Step,
who knew the Thirteenth Step,
who could never choose
between six feet
or another push-off,
who said "Fuck anonymity"
and gave us lids in group-meetings,
steel-chair circles,
wanting nothing more
than a cigarette,
to watch the motions
of the sun from a park bench,
who heard choirs,
who called me "Choir Boy",
who turned onto masochism,
and made me sit cross-legged
across from you and your
brazen black skirt
and knee-high leather boots.

You, the last one we thought
would be hiding
secrets at our table,
plastic and paper,
who complimented the lines of my eyes,
“mystique”, you called it,

You, the prophet:
“Juglans regia”,
though your hands were never clasped,
owning mistakes with detox-vomit
aside the inpatient bed in a room
you shared with another above our age,
the one we would never become,
who shared the view
from twenty-one: static,
the view from twenty-one,
laughing with sunken cheeks
at sunken cheeks,
who burned for new avenues,
who burned for familiar boulevards,
who burned from the inside
at cracks and prayers,
from anyone to anyone
for anything above,

You, who talked enough for two,
who thanked yourself for the wheel,
for the pyramids,
for the express energy that lit
the hallways of both floors,
who talked enough for two,
thankful that we found
the best way to bury the dead,
who sang praises for the sake
of singing praises,
if only because we found
a way to stay hooked,
fashioning non-hypodermic hooks,
hidden hooks pressed into
blue Injun-beads.

You, who told me about Williams,
who suggested your own name across my neck,
who called me out on Brando
and called out bullshit,

who taught me about state-lines
and Cadillacs,
asking who deserved the body,

You, who skipped out
against regulations
to attack vodka like Saigon
who whispered light-heartedly
about the life Townes
designed for himself,
who knew girls prefer scars and,
through glittered gloss,
admitted it without hesitation,
who talked with every wretch
along pint-stained wood,
starting slow like Ali
before catching Houdini in the gut,
who taught me new games with one lit jack,
new games in an alley with short-sleeves,
who took the six-shooter as a gift,
insisting I keep it on the dashboard,
who traversed alleys and sang folk songs through
cemeteries, Cash, Dylan,
Hardin, and so was I
from time to time,
who wept when they closed the pool-hall
but never at a funeral,
who placed freshly-polished pink
toenails on a trigger
and left lipstick stained
on the barrel,
who painted eyelids
in a mirror like Edie,
glazed and shaded,
who never aged
as far as I could tell.

You, who got off on assumptions,
braced with tight shoulders,
both arms around the plastic tray
like an inmate, and as an inmate
refused to give me your name,
who spoke in color-codes,
who kept your mouth sealed in church
basement meetings
until we got in the car and you spilled

laughter on the faux-leather passenger seat,
who knew latex and broomsticks,
sick stories you swore were true
and for lighting to strike if not,
who showed me your mother's note,
reading it as the diary
of an atheist in waiting,
aware of what was waiting,
who told me to take it to heart,
that Hell is waiting too,
and eventually torment
makes you come,
who could recite Wilde,
who called Wilde a fag
along with every great
fag to follow him,
who knew of amyl
and why it worked so well,
who told me to loosen up too,
who knew hot-rails and watched white
lines move up and out as vapor,
who told stories of China-White,
who thought it would be
a brilliant break-out,
who preferred vinyl,
who preferred to stare into indigenous eyes
and say the first fake thing that trickled
from the throat of Zarathustra,
who claimed to be the embodiment of East Coast
wet-dreams (an idea I couldn't disagree with,)
who knew Babylon and Zion and burned
my only copy of the Bhagavad-Gita,
who said Liston and Frazier should have won,
who said: "The other cocky cunt
could throw a punch
but couldn't take a bullet,
and goddammit,
even Elvis was up for that!"

You, who wanted the Nile black with ink,
who wanted to be present when we ransack
the last vessels of accuracy,
to take a wayward stance
between torches and arches,
who wanted to chop the index finger
of that little bastard in Holland

who kept the ocean back,
who hated the assumption
that the cities are better off dry
and that we should stay dry,
that blood looks better
before it coagulates.

You, who wanted people to panic
and scurry from bed-sheets,
to follow rats and mice to higher ground,
who knew the sun was only necessary to
show us seasons and keep track of
when you're supposed to kick,
and the moon only to show tidal shifts,
who never gave a fuck about cycles,
even those that held half of us captive,
who knew that God did not begin
with a white beard and blue eyes,
but with an overgrown ass and tits,
who saw Venus of Willendorf
and spit on the concrete between your feet,
who wanted to paint the walls of Xibalba,
to install neon signs showing
a path for new travelers with neon arrows
and lap dance incentives,
who believed the Reds didn't know
what it meant to find visions
after days without food or sleep,
who had gone days without food or sleep
and seen shadow-men
creeping across the wall,
hoping to catch unprotected
flesh with closed eyes.

You, who knew the institutions
as well as I did,
who knew institutions
as new corners to explore,
who offered the yourself in fair exchange,
though I never took the deal,
who showed me the right way
to push and pull,
who asked for chords but never
bothered to listen,
who wanted a background soundtrack
for background action.

You, who begged to change the station
on the way to Delaware
even though my radio was broken,
who touched my thigh,
pretending it was accidental,
who held the blade like a brush
against a glass table,
who climbed the fire-escape
to watch headlights shimmer,
to stand on an even keel
with the monoliths of Baltimore.

You, who kissed me once,
but only once—
who kissed me once
out of anger.

You, who watched me drown in Kentucky Tea,
who left me stranded in a parking lot
outside of Davidsonville,
somewhere near Fifty or Ninety-Seven,
who asked me not to call,
who called at three in the morning
and begged into the cell
to come bring you back from Virginia,

You, who cursed devil-speed
and amphetamines but stayed
up for six days on the same six records,

You, who never stopped weaving,
new ways to recite the same story
and told me to stop repeating myself,
who would say the same now while
tracing the lines under my eyes
with a nicotine finger,

You, still stuck under the academic
desks of fever-dreams,
perched atop a peak in Darien,
but never silent,
who I find floating through blue ,the fever,
onward, unsinkable.

Caliban and Madeline

Somewhere near Calvert and a cross,
After we crossed at crosswalks in plastic shoes,
undefiled, away from needlepoint outskirts

and warehouses converted to low-rent
one-bedrooms, we slept in tatters
with windows open, singing songs
to Baltimore all-nighters,

after we cast off felt for faux
leather and broken trainers,
slipped from fathers
on policy and economics,

stole bread and bagels
from delivery cabins at sunrise
to keep clean funds and quell
questions of profit,

switched to sympathy
for statements washed
in starch oxford press,

after we cursed in distant comfort,
grew closer, further, and returned
to youthful convictions and holy
destruction of lungs, liver, and veins,

after we held City Hall at gunpoint
and found new speech and soapbox tenor
in black night and neon drenched
backstory: fragments of overproduced
protest catch-phrases, tagging
bricks and trains at three,

after you said “shoot”
without powder or barrel,
white horse on rooftops,
thirsting for vibrato, ivory,
and strings to conduct
the swaying of the torso,
anticipating the beauty
of bullet-ridden Bolivian walls,

inventing odes
and hymns for the fallen
and soon-to-be,
straight-spines before Sinclair
struggles and waterfront contenders,
when you wore sundresses to show skin
and catch half-mile rides
with uncovered thighs and knees,

I understood the necessity,
and when you came back up
we found glory in gilded pages,
antiquated binding, melodies
of last week's fuck—

after you searched for desaparecidos
under bridges but instead found
roommates from the sickly stench
of decay and bowels emptied on the carpet;
mistakes from tying and binding
necktie to gullet, begging for the money
shot to come before the stepstool slipped—

but we stayed unafraid, unapologetic,
preferring pawned whispers traded
naked in the dark apartment
with debt-red ecstasy
slowly dissolving the septum,

after you waited on four-year lovers
that couldn't commit to a single payment,
after you waited in new clubs for new throats
and lips and tongues and bleached teeth,
rubbing away rusted pleasure blossoming
from salted skin, gambled on preachers,
after you waiter for the right alignment,
the right prayers and colors,
knowing it could only come from
capillaries thirsting behind blue
streaks and pin-pricks,

after we were readmitted
from persistence to make the same
mistakes in dormitory hallways,
carving stories too scarring to share:
boredom wounds, new compositions,

after our canvas split and rose in value,
after you tied the noose
with the best of intentions, hanging
the body of a lantern above the kitchen
sink for a new homely fixture,

after I shit blood for weeks
while the esophagus scarred,
back when I held locks of hair
from the heads of children
known from childhood,
the hair they sought and shaved,
caught and pinned against oak
or slipped into outgoing envelopes—
sent but never discovered under
sterile hospital doorways,

you never forgot about my nights
with Disney blondes and brunettes
with the night-glow unplugged,
but still we held and smelled vinyl
from the basement crate, spinning
to quench cottonmouth silence
with the cool waters of valley ballads
and mountain blues,

you never blame me
for reciting the same stories
in the same shackles of storytelling
and cave-drawn visions smudge-black,
filled with the burnt aroma of torch light.

The Rise

For M., to Swear Again it's the Last Time

We were in a car,
we were speeding.

Our eyes were closed.
I can't remember
who was driving.

You spoke with fury only
after a handful of blues

washed down with red wine

I emptied my pockets of pennies and pills
and dropped them on the dashboard.

You crawled under my skin.

I dug you out of my arm and dropped
you in the ashtray.

We were speeding,

our eyes were closed;
I can't remember
who was driving.

Brackish skin
left me sleepless; speaking only

with my eyes,
my hands
and teeth.

Black Grease Repeated

They found her from the smell
leaking under the doorframe.
She left four days before
and for four days her body waited,
staining the carpet.
Ari called to tell me,
then the cops called me
to come in.

I told them how she left,
how she had the same smile
and same gait on her way
out the door, into the evening,
how she took rejection
with serene ease and laughed
at herself for feeling the need
to tell me.

Pulling one leg over the other
to appear unfazed,
knuckles whitening to steady
my ankle, and staring down
into black-grease darkened denim,
I waited for it to hit me,
that she left because I didn't care,
but I couldn't care—

And I dove into the façade,
walked through the station
with joints weakened from
the downward pull of her
hands under soil,
and twisted my features to reflect
a face I'd seen before
in every on-screen scene of loss,

but broke halfway out the door,
unsure if it was shock
or delay, if soon I would
be overtaken, fall and pray,
or double-up for next year
when another call comes in,
from Ari or another friend,
to reprise the same role.

Take the Money

I took off the sweat-stained shirt and covered my head
but the stale sulfur air of the paper mill crept under
the door and the alley caterwaul continued through the night.

It was hard enough to sleep on concrete in midsummer
Georgia heat, but a door on Braddock was unlocked
so I slipped in and down behind the first-floor bicycle rack.

I thanked Christopher, John days without the water,
I thanked whoever dropped a ten earlier in the day,
and I thanked the city's open-container laws for giving

me one less thing to worry about while wandering
through streets and parks and houses of students
having parties big enough for me to go unnoticed,

searching medicine cabinets and coat pockets,
looking for anything to shoot, sell, or swallow. Tonight
wasn't the best night: half a pack, two pinks, and a white

line given by a black-eyed girl too far gone for introductions
but with convictions too strong to take me to bed.
It must have been the beard, I thought, drifting

into the fevered dream of sore muscle burning twilight.

Hope House, Crownsville

He came downstairs
still high from hidden valium
popped before the strip search
and asked us who we knew
through brown teeth broken
from sleepless years of serotonin boosting
and occasional injections to level out.

I was still on black-out and four days off,
but I told him it gets easier
and to get through the kick quickly
while he can, but each night I stared
up at the water-damaged ceiling tiles,
finding shapes in brown rot
of spoons and stamps,

wondering if I could get through
the sealed window and out to the street,
it had been done before, but soon the room darkened,
my roommate snored in heavy, uneven breaths,
and the medicated weight of my body
pulled my limbs down into plastic sheets
and the unwanted movements of trazadone dreams.

Undeveloped Film in the Backseat

The boy at the table saw with a broken-tooth grin
and dirty canvas shoes,
 he writes in small black letters
 on his arm.

All this
 while music-box prophets laugh
 and shriek broken phrases
 from leather-bound books
 hidden under their beds.

He speaks only through telephones,
hoping someone can see his shaking hands
or feel the red line of a paper-cut throat.

He hasn't been baptized, but held underwater
 by the strong arms or a eulogizing mother,
 and with each gasp comes a song or sonnet;
 her golden pages can't drown out the sounds
 that exist in the black burned skin of effigies.

And when the lights dim
 and the cold air comes through the panes,
 he shivers, and a burning sensation flows
 from his feet to his hands.

Reading Plato in a Southern Motel

Shifting grains in Technicolor
cascaded down the far white wall,
the shadow of her head bobbed

and nodded in the center, her aura
alternated across the spectrum,
a black cloud floating in smoke
over a sea of varied hues.

We wasted days dragging
our bodies across the carpet,
through a minefield of dirt dished

and overflown ashtrays, pennies
and pills dropped and forgotten,
from couch to bed to bathroom
and back again,

shades drawn to hide
from the ever-present threat
of sunlight, of the natural

motions and infinite cycles
that loosen and fold skin
at the edges of our eyes
and darken the bags below.

We invented our own language
in love and slang, gave new
names to the nighttime strangers

rocking bedposts in rhythm
against shared walls, who
parked, staggered, and scraped
keys, who came and went unseen,

unaware of our blessings.

Callouses

He pressed down on the cherry with his fingertip
and flicked the filter into the street,
watched the cars pass, feeling leather
replace the cold air blowing against his back,

and back inside, in the attic, he looked at the phone,
trying to remember the numbers
of his mother, father, or brothers.

He took off his jacket, balled it into a pillow
and slept on the hardwood floor. Come December
he would have to leave, and as he slept
he dreamed of Argentina and waitresses

in Paraguay, of attacking vodka
like Saigon in Southeast,
but for now he waded through November

fallen leaves, wasting paper in the rented
attic space, days without eating,
watching the small square light of the window
move between shadows down the wall.

Her First Black Dress Morning

He wept for Iris, his daughter,
at home with her mother,
restless and unknowing,

while he healed, while skin
grew and tightened around
muscle and bone, and she grew

slowly. First wishing and wanting
more than the sound of his voice,
to craft new memories devoid

of blue lips, the sting of smoke
from an overn set to burn
and turned away from,

when she opened the bedroom
door, his fram slumped
against the wall, and she ran

to her mother, to tell her:
“Daddy’s sleeping
with his eyes open.”

Canvas

For us, there were twelve colors and we cleaned the house once a month, painted the walls, washed the sheets and dishes. That was back when I was still sleeping on the couch. You said the bed was too small for two,

but made up for it by asking the neighbors for ice and waking me up when the cars pulled in; you would get your wallet and I would get warm under an itchy blanket and hold my arm with one hand.

We had twelve colors and never knew which was next. You wrote them down in a leather-bound journal that your mother gave you for graduating high school, Black and white never seemed to last. Blue and grey never seemed to end.

One morning you said:

“Today is red.”

We celebrated with a bottle of wine. Yellow days came like a hurricane working its way up the east coast. The house would shake until the walls began leaning in, we had to hold them up with our hands. Yellow days gave up after a few hours. We would repaint the walls when the sky cleared and everything would feel clean again.

Downtown One Bedroom

We took the alley back from the bar,
fumbled for keys, lighters and light switches,
and she spoke low with open windows
of tens at two and twos by ten,

blemishes blooming in sunlight,
makeup smeared across sheets.
She showed me scars that came from staying,
I showed her the kind you earn to escape.

Soon the sun rose and she began the slow
walk home, uncounted and untouched.
Hot shower water washed away my scales,
steam rose and spread between bathroom walls,

filling and fogging the mirror, blurring
the lines and ridges of my body in glass.

How to Paint an American Horse

Someone kicked the couch.

I was still watching
white horses with long

white manes. White
horses never change color.

Some of have blue
eyes. Some are born

with a genetic disorder called
Lethal White Syndrome.

They euthanize
those ones.