

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE WHAT
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Deer, ghosts, holes, storms, questions, voices make appearances in the poems collected in *The What*. The poems are driven by voice, in particular, the voice of a speaker trying and often failing to find the exact language for an experience or image. Voice and form work to express the idiomatic character of the participant and observer, the poet. Many of the poems try to explore the liminal space of shadows and edges, and to show what connects but also separates the personal and philosophical, and the terrestrial and celestial worlds. The sometimes irregular, angular and winding syntax attempts to enact the feeling and process by which moments arrive, are stepped inside of, walked around, forgotten, or remembered.

THE WHAT

by

Frederick M Stringer III

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“Where is the main stress, for instance, in *being-there* (être-là): on *being*, or on *there*?”
—Bachelard

“Minerals, ice deposits daily, dropped off
the first shiny robe”
—Pavement

Potpourri for 800

Not that I'd ever be on *Jeopardy!*
but I want to have a question ready
in case Alex Trebek ever answers:
The word for what rises in you
when through the dark you notice
a goldfinch's momentary weight break
a frost-gripped branch of the birch
you carved your initials in once,
the sound it makes, the goldfinch
taking wing back into the black sky,
your attention returning, always
returning to the shrinking
hole in the night
inside of you.

*What is that bird doing
this far north so deep in winter?*
But again I'm beating
around the birch, failing to ask
the right question. What is it? What is
the question that opens
the answer, opens the hole
shrinking within us
until it becomes nothing, until
it turns us inside out
and spills our bloody light
across the snowy field?
What is it? And when I know, finally,
what it is, will I ask it?

Phone Call

I can hear my father's voice slipping
off the edge of what he's saying,

that he's going to finish the shed
out back in the summer,

the time of year he loves most
for the hours it gives work.

I picture him out there in torn jeans
under the molting beech,

hammering away, patterned
by the late sun hanging

bloodied in the heavy evening
through the weave

of golden shapes above him—
my mother inside,

sliding a lasagne from the oven,
listening to CNN buzz

from the nautically-themed living room—
the hand-carved mallard on the mantel,

old salt and lighthouse statues, lamps
made to look like ship wheels...

Upstairs, the sinking day beams trapezoids
on the floor, trapping dust in light.

My old room is suspended
in how I left it—

Rolling Stones stacked and twine-tied,
little league caps, a shoe box

packed with things to not toss out—
photos, ticket stubs, toys—

a small velvet bag of marbles
my father brought back

from somewhere.
Never for keeps we shot them

hard across the carpet.
So much time spent

memorizing each glass eye—
clear and blooming color

or a globe of bloom itself—
for its galaxy,

pinwheel, whirlpool—cat's eye,
cane-cut, corkscrew—the web

of a latticinio core hanging brilliant
in the jewel of its negative.

The Donut of the Heart
for J Dilla

The universe is not a sphere.

Not because the sphere has shape, can be
plotted, graphed, assigned figures,
that it ends—

What sound is made by everything
swinging in the great ellipse
forward into untouched time?

The song is the voice called
into the universe by the turn.

Galaxy

The gradient of the sky's
evening blue-pink slides,
a slow cover/uncovering,

a shade across exposed
June-brushed skin, or the opening
of the world's eye

to a one-way mirror.
I'm listening for the song stars make
when they first appear,

thrumming phonetic, violin stabs.
Once I heard them pluck
the "Eleanor Rigby" intro out.

I was maybe eleven, camping up north
next to an ebony cedar-smelling lake
with my father. Open-mouthed, I followed

his certain index finger up and out and
onto the backside of the bear,
the cluster "Ursa Major,"

*—Remember, count the pinpricks
in its wake, the hunters, from front to back:
archer, cook, fire-builder.*

It's not the only story for it.
It's not even his story.
But here in Baltimore, watching

the stars fail inside
scuzz-golden smog from Mercy
Hospital, Camden Yards, etc.,

it's the order of things that feels
furthest from me,
like trying to alphabetize

a sequence of clouds
hovering the surface
of a polished black locust table,

reflecting each one.

*

—Older, lying on
my back on a black-green hill
with the girl I loved then,

the promised Leonids ticking closer.
We were eager, wild, and together.
I pointed out Polaris, the brightest star

in Arcas, burned into the sky
by Zeus. We'd found the darkest
spot and waited.

I have this dream sometimes.
It reminds me of her.
I'm rocking back and forth

on a unicycle, with one hand
spinning a ceramic plate
into the air,

with the other, catching it
on a long, lithe wand,
repeating it,

balancing the plates and wands
on my forehead and chin, shoulders,
unicycling stupidly,

until there's nothing above me
but each circular underside
catching, slipping off, re-catching

absolute center—
and the only audible thing is
the wasp-rasp clicking a turntable

needle with no more groove.

*

Some nights I wake myself
trying to recreate it with my mouth—

the song, I mean, a version,

rising from inside
the disarming wrinkle of sleep—
against her hair.

Rather, its shadow, but
it always comes out funny.
I've got a voice like a garbage disposal,

I joke to nobody, and no one answers.
How long's it been?, I'm asking next,
not knowing what I mean.

Outside, the sky folds over and over itself,
catching soft washes,
milklight on the outlines of clouds,

as if to declare witness to its own opacity.
In a couple hours, morning
will tremble across

the x-axis of the city,
the moon will cling as long
as it can as it tires,

an enthusiastic catbird will rattle off
his latest from the limb
of a leaning beech outside my window.

Where'd he learn that?

Invitation

A woman pushes her husband, who is juggling a map and camera, and absent-looking child, who I like to think is engaged in a game in her imagination, past McKeldin fountain, the concrete bunker at the Northwest corner of the harbor. In the summer it's beautiful

in a terrific, ugly way. Today it's dry: the white-grey of a dirty bone. The woman's insisting "nothing new to see here," herding the other two toward the USS Constellation and a patio of chain-restaurant umbrellas, and I wonder if there's anything new to see anywhere these days.

I mostly hate this part of town but I love this fountain. Watching the family move away and disappear across Light Street I think of inviting you to see it. I feel you'd appreciate its uglinesses as once you appreciated mine. We'd walk the bridge that crosses it and toss pennies over

our shoulders, listening for the *plunk!* that never comes, swallowed by the gentle crush of falling water beneath us. Of course, I'd ask you what you wished for and, of course, you wouldn't tell me, and that would be fine because at that moment the sun would catch our negatives on the pool just right.

Just right. You know, I tell you this not to apologize for myself, failing to extend the invitation—or for the fountain and its grim, nearly cemetery obstinance—not even for the sun, which we know would rather catch an old clipper's image across the gold of harbor afternoon than ours.

Deer Hour

On my walk to the metro, I saw a deer emerge
from the shallow woods to my left, curious—a half-step first,
ears pricked skyward, busy antennas, then
a cocky bound across the road's shoulder,
into the path of an ugly, box-shaped blue Honda.

Once a friend called me after his evening shift
bussing tables at The Chapter House.

*I hit a deer, he said. I killed it.
I heard its neck break. Its head slammed the hood
and bounced off like a spiked football.*

He said there was a definite, real stretch of time
between that sound and feeling
the car respond, the seat belt slice his neck.

It was almost October, like now.

The blood, he mentioned days later, was surprising.
What he meant—Was there more or less than he felt
there should have been?—he never told me.

But mythical—that's the word—this deer tonight
leaping the point of intersection
where I was sure the blue car had her—

her tail's alarming whiteness reflective
in the headlight's beam—hanging there impossibly
at the apex of just-escape,

then
onto the other side of the road,
into a low field, joining three smaller deer

I hadn't noticed nibbling at the dimming ground,
butting each other in play...

In those moments dusk had gathered body.

The deer all scattered.

For what seemed like a long time
the Honda stayed stopped in its lane.

It looked to be trembling, spooked—

leaking clouds of exhaust that puffed uselessly
into the air and dissolved.

Burial

The dead bee on my windowsill
is frozen in attack position,
as if by finding a crack with its barb

it could have rejoined the world.
I scoop the bee up, hold it closer.
One wing's gone, and a splotch

from her sunny mane, which endears
her to me more, drawn as I am
to the disintegrating. O bee,

I see now bees are guardian angels
for the allergic stung. To find
a dead bee is a blessing, a reminder

that a sting's red swell is really
the self's toxin exiting
the heart through the skin.

What luck, dear bee. I'm trying
lately to believe
that on the days I feel something

sinking down on me
like a harpooned zeppelin,
a sheet of cosmic glass,

it is not my father's god
come to crush me
but a word I'd use to pray myself

into a new hour.
It feels wrong to toss you out, Bee.
One mustn't trash the dead.

I'd never forgive myself.
So let's rest you here on the floor

where, maybe tomorrow

when I stomp blind downstairs
I'll find you eaten by one
of the mice that come out

at night, find you
devoured—how I see
a soul is loosed,

reborn a new sun
in a deeper, wilder black.

The What
for A.L.

Carson paraphrases, *hell's as deep as the sun is high*
you say (or was it me?) and pull another white bump

off a house key's uneven end, waxing: considering
the model of the universe
as we understand it, or make

from cheesy relativity-diagram CGI
on afterhours Discovery, Sagan going on

about dots, the what
of everything is infinitely bigger than that,
right?—whole galaxies

galaxies-further than the sun is away from us—
what are we to make of a hell whole hells
deeper?

You do the thing where your eyes parse the room—the kind of party
where nobody knows what song is playing—touching
only momentarily

on each refocusing detail: a potted spider-plant's
spindly reach, the slit

of light appearing at the refrigerator door's opening
suck, heads on bodies

all buoying a weird dance—those eyes
a pair of scavengers flickering a parking lot

littered with the chilly bones of Olde
English bottles,

unable to land, not quite.

There's something hard and weightless keeping us
from each other's irises,

asking anything, even
continuing the conversation,

which circles
upward on the humming thermal column

at the center of all conversation,
through the ceiling and away.

**

San Francisco:

It's afternoon. We're crossing the heaving lung of the Tenderloin

past grim building-fronts
named in typefaces from another time—

circled in bulbs, tubed neon, unlit,
sleeping, or embering a fading,
anonymous red—

what maybe once could've been
a different town,
but probably not. You say

this last part easy as somebody orders coffee,

barely twenty and already certain there are places
that are graves, where

stopping turns to staying just another couple weeks
in a gutted squat,

working on a mural that is swirls of stolen paint, a churning
face remembered.

From when?

Since dropping out of art school you don't see faces the same way,
you tell me,

and kick a stone down the weed-split sidewalk, its squares
just barely

wobbled out of level by time or tremor, both—
an angular passage

along which we, too, are moved
by some unnameable force—

The what of the face—

The binary of what is and isn't in it—

an ex-lover's red wink, your mother's rice-paper mouth,
the damning syllables passing through it—

and in your own, becoming

more and more the movement of colors
into one another than what comes after.

You begin to draw small circles in the heavy air,
squinting as each invisible lick

overlaps the one before it,
so what I imagine

is a form ending itself over and over
on the blade of what replaces it.

Perfect From Now On

The man at the bar had a sweetheart
he gave up. Lost would be inaccurate,

he says, I was twenty-five
and so in love with chasing

the night's electric drunk—
refilling that glass—that I

became an envelope
licking itself

in anticipation of a letter.
Again and again I wrote

that damn letter, addressed it
to myself, and sent it off

to wherever junk mail goes.
That's the algebra of the glass,

and folks like me can't get the sides
of the thing to come up even.

The man looks Anglo as hell,
ruddy, soft, and boyish,

with a gaze that alternates between
thousand-yard and cross-eyed.

He's not a mirror, but I want
to touch his face to make sure.

Not a mirror (I'd never
do that to him)

but with every glass refilled a portal
like an eye ending a wink opens—

a sidwinding walk at 3 a.m.,
then a joke misheard as cruel,

now a lock rejecting a key,
my mother recoiling from my breath,

the affront of it a new terror,
a dome of rain I want to touch

to watch break—wider,
more welcoming and terrible

than each portal before, as if in time
we'd become whole with it.

To become a kind of whole. I'm sorry.
To put this on him, dreadful.

I ask the man what was in the letters,
the ones that flew nowhere.

He looks at me, then off.
You'll know them

when they show, he says.
Never open them.

*

Anvil

I gave an anvil my voice & dropped it
off the dock at Kiely Pond,

watched the water move to fill
the vacuum that the anvil made

dropping faster than a heart:
the anvil in the black black world

& me hearing echoed that sound
a surface broken by an anvil

makes as it reforms
into its cold mirror.

Freehold

1.

I had a friend who said he'd been away from his body,
that it had felt he'd never had a body, never would.

This was 2008, just after the election.

We were in a too-well-lit room pasted with pages
from a Magic Eye calendar—

 one made a tarantula, another
 a sailboat—checker-boarded on the wall

so we had to stand, press our noses up against them,
and move away to watch the images reveal.

We were inexperienced decorators.

“It’s like the Internet,” he laughed. It made
a kind of sense: out of body, dismembered.

2.

There’s this discussion thread online, archived. You can find it.

It’s stamped 08:52 a.m. EST, September 11, 2001, beginning:

“I just woke up after hearing a crash. There’s a big-ass hole in the World Trade Center and
smoke pouring out of it.”

Others followed: linking headlines and speculations,
posting lousy photos through apartment windows
 as the gray devoured them.

Reading it all I felt out of my body myself—transmitted
into not somebody else’s body,
but a version of my own,
 a roving eye—

No—

A roving head of eyes.

And the world plated in mirrors.

3.

I've heard that now some people invent themselves
into the story—
the dust-thick corridors of lower Manhattan,

the air a propeller of 98% brightness white paper
swirling through skin, flesh—a sky meteoring steel and fire—

or say they know somebody who knows somebody
who called out of work that morning, missed the subway,
stopped a minute longer to chat the girl at Starbucks
into a blush—,

somebody who died in the towers
then showed up alive days later
as if they'd spent the interim on the moon, unaware.

Me—it's not a new one—I was in Social Studies class
with Mr. Napoleon, his tongue split down the middle
half an inch for a reason I never learned,
the news
streaming on the television in the corner—

4.

“Hijacked plane. God Almighty” (09:19 a.m.)

“We need to turn the fucking desert into a sheet of glass” (09:20 a.m.)

“...does anyone know if or how many people died?” (09:21 a.m.)

5.

—and names over the loudspeaker
This was New Jersey after all.

One girl's dad had moved their family from the city
but still took the early bus to the tunnel. She got called.

Another sat in the back corner unnoticed until past ten
(hadn't we changed classrooms?)
when the pencil he'd been scraping back and forth
ran out of graphite and squealed against his desk.

Did he?

I don't remember being afraid—not the way
I know the word now—
just seeing it all over and over
in the warp that was the following days.

At home my mother sat unmoving in the living room
watching first one plane hit, then the second, then the first
again from a different angle,

then an amateur video
with the screaming dubbed out, studio faces
boxed in the screen's corner—windows in the sky.

6.

“WATCH BUSH START A FUCKING WAR” (09:18 a.m. EST)

7.

Thinking back, there had to have been twelve panels,
twelve Magic Eye puzzles—the spider, the boat—mountains?

A range of layers stacked, emerging from the page
only at a certain distance?

And what were the others?

I can *make* myself see them—a face, a forest—

The room was bright with a tile floor, a kitchen
nook with a two-basin sink, a wooden sign
with “Reduce Reuse Recycle” carved into it,

painted green and hanging over a bin of empty
cans, the tv and couch, a coffee table, magazines, papers,

a big wide window looking out—

Globe
from DC

40 degrees isn't *cold*, but I wasn't ready for the rain—
jagged gemstones. They cut nylon, then skin—leaving
dots of hard blood on my jacket's liner.

Or so it feels gripping the sponging *Express*,
waiting with the blurring other bodies
at the bus stop for the next ride.

Today everything's a shittier version of itself.

The storm knocked a tree on the sidewalk over,
flipping one concrete square open
like the lid of a box with mud-water rising in it.

Stepping around the new mouth
I imagine it tomorrow when the rain's stopped,
drying and sucking inward
from the skeletal rest of the world.

My pocket rumbles and I barely feel it:

“Hope you are okay. Bad here. Still no power or heat.”

—my mother's text message bending in the rain—beads
of refractive half-sphere, varicose crystalline on the screen.

In every direction—down 7th, down O,
across waterlogged lots half-developed with beams
and the blue plastic tarps stretched across them,

parallelograms of sandbags and orange cylinders
snaking a shaky line toward a downed traffic light:
Do Not Go Here—is gray

like the sound an out-of-tune piano
wire makes, struck as if in error.

When did I call home last?

A younger me hides behind a closed door upstairs,
pitting one action figure against another
 while a dark limb thunks against the window
 and a lightning bolt
 sizzles a white vein down the glass.

My thumb hovers on the phone's wet screen
 as the dome above this city completes an atonal
 sealing-off—the fearsome, smooth

capping of a jar half-filled with dirt,
a stick, a couple blades of grass
 picked from the backyard

I'd stuck in there to satisfy the hunger
 of a few nightcrawlers
 I kept on my bedroom shelf until they died.

Thresher

Two extra-large black garbage bags:
One used condom, yellowed and crispy from the sun,
its contents, if it had any, dried transparent or dribbled out.
One square gold-foil wrapper crunched into a loose ball
found on the other side of the concrete backyard
between the rusting Weber and the AC unit.
Two cigar-shaped plastic sleeves and a baggie
like one for a shirt's extra button.
A newspaper. Three-and-a-half beer cans
(Natural Ice, Natural Light,
Bud Light Lime-a-Rita, half a Coors).
Probably one hundred potato chip bags.
Three styrofoam cups. Two plastic Solo cups,
one half-full with damp cigarette butts, spotted
here and there with holes melted by ember-cherries
that avoided the rainwater at the cup's bottom
and instead extinguished themselves in dioxin fizzles.
That one's on me. A Safeway bag. A Whole Foods bag.
Browned, disintegrating leaves left over from autumn,
bunches of them stuffed by the wind
under the wooden back step. A rotting layer beneath,
and beneath that, an intestine crawl of earthworms
tasting its way through the dank
hidden-space untouched by light or domestic care
that, if it had eyes, might eye me:
*Go on, giant, four-eyed Cyclops,
hairless-bellied sky-bear, bearer of the shovel, go on.
Builder of the unyielding tectonics
on which the world churns, go on.*
—an opening fist, a brain
unclenching in the soil
chasing a dissolving thought
away from my reach and back under
what remains of the detritus as if to say
If only we had hands to lift this harvest.

*

Portrait of a Girl in the Food Court

She's ordered a Happy Meal,
the child-sized portion of hamburger or chicken
nuggets served sometimes in a cardboard,
cartoon-themed box, sometimes not,

and dips
a golden coin-shaped nugget into a little cup
filled with ketchup, eats it in three bites,
then eats three French fries,

elegant in picking up
exactly the same amount of ketchup
on each, dripping none on the flimsy
napkin-plate on the rickety table.

Sometimes I can't help
but leave a mark, a footprint
in fresh cement or initials in the bench
in the square,

but I don't speak to her.
To do so would be to destroy something
deeper than her solitude, more sublime
than mine,

not so unlike once
when I wandered past a window, its curtains
drawn, and saw inside it the profile of a man
rapturously jerking off

in a moon-blue
MacBook glow. How easy to knock
on the window, to tear him
from that mounting pleasure.

People don't usually masturbate
in food courts, but now I'm wondering
if she does it in her home, and, even though it's not

my business, wonder also,

if she does,
what she thinks about, or who, but mostly
if it brings her joy like it used to bring me joy
when my body was a discovered

body, and the way
to that white heat was not yet so familiar
that it became mechanical, a blunt ritual
despite an understood freedom—

when it was a dance.
I have to look away. Under the too-many fluorescent
panels above us, everybody in the big room sharpens
into surgical focus,

even those so much farther
away than where the girl with the Happy Meal is,
by now, maybe, bagging up her wrappers
and leaving,

but I don't turn back.

Loveless

A pressing from the old world, it's the language
and the tongue with language carved in it.

One perfect groove on the A side, ditto the B, I can hold
its voice longer than it takes to hear and
unhear it.

I can spin it in my hands, catch light with it, test its flex
too far, destroy it. I can watch it turning under the needle, a flat planet,
want to know its secrets, place it under an electron

microscope like I could a shred of skin:

At two-hundred times magnification, the groove is one drunk
bicycle track flighting the edge inward—*flighting*:

the helical blade of an auger pulling cold earth out of itself
with calculated brutality.

A dark wall heaves into a convex of itself.
Beneath it surge anonymous fish.

And then a lacuna:
in speaking sound we speak its opposite.

At five-hundred times, the groove is a dream of untouched half-pipe
with a line of mounded snow atop both edges,
a landscape flecked with boulders that are specks of dust.

When this record came out, I was three years old—

I don't know how many hands have wiped its surface clean.
It's sad, I think, that the fallen bits of trace,

floated into its crevice, altering the music in some way,
are or can be *gone*—erased

as easily as lines from a word processor, or as characters
in a script reconfigured to their exclusion.

I want to feel the gloss-jet membrane rip
and loose the true words

howling like the ghosts of fallen birches
in a coded plot of memory.

Reaching, shrinking away,
I'm standing on a dock overlooking a black hole.

Doubled now, one thousand times what eyes default to,
those rocks of dust are crags of mountain
jutting from a canyon-side, drips of sediment from space.

An atomic craft runs the river of the groove on a vibrating
wave of energy and on it is a tiny god, pointing to each
monolith as it appears before him, and not naming them.

Sonnet

I did it to you in my head again last night,
formed your body—the just off-white tongue
your back is, a gentle shelf of collarbone, your hips—
draped it in that Mickey Mouse shirt you wore.
I put eyes in your head, big brown ones
made of tortoise-shell-shaped light, sliced
the skin below your nose open, rolled it into lips.
I stuck you in my life. Back into it.
I stuck you on the couch where I was too,
touched your hair & had you let me kiss you
there in the pale smallness of time.
And you—in this, you didn't take my eyes,

say:

Look at me.

See what you've wasted.

Cross-Sectioning the Tongue

Falling asleep on our friend's floor
in Philly as the cars outside sputtered
to life. You remember.

As I dozed I let myself speak my disarmed head's tongue,
a thing I try not to do
for, mostly, a fear of consequence.

The drift was then as it is now—
an almost-sleep—but pushed through me
like a head is always pushed through

by that which carries or is dissolved: a voice
flitting a tunnel full of kinks, sidewinder jags,
refractive stone—
out its mouth and into the air sounding: *hey—*

love me longer than you will.
Or try to. Soon it'll be summer

and I'd hate to miss your hair chopped short,
sticky on your forehead.

In that time just before sleep prevails,
what came out was maybe not this verbatim,
was something more

the meander of things I know
and the outnumbering things I'll never
that comes now still,

years later, cocooning
against the morning

in my upstairs bedroom, bright,
unmistakably January.

Cassadaga Death Metal
not for Jerry

“Hail Satan”
—The Mountain Goats

I like to believe
if we could talk again
you’d laugh

instead of warning
against intersecting headlights,
unexpected cancellation:

that song blast-beating
from the dashboard
stereo as you too blasted,

pinball off a plunger,
around the dark
curves of unsensational

near-midnight, low
back roads hugged
uncomfortably

by hills, black
with obstruction—
Laugh, like:

What are you all *doing*
down there?

*

The best ever death metal band
out of Colts Neck, New Jersey,
never toured,

never played unboxed
by garage aluminum, as far
as I’m aware—

maybe underneath the net
of your High School gymnasium,

or in a church basement

somewhere,
but Carl when read
your lyrics at the funeral

I could feel
your voice inside
them, low

for the age you were.
You played the medicine
man in the Boy Scout

ceremony and I
assumed the role
after you died.

It's strange the ways we fail to be
as water filling in.

*

In this scenario I've travelled
through the swamps
of Piggly Wiggly Florida,

and you speak
through a bronze, cracked
medium named Charlotte.

A poem...
you know, if you want
to honor me

you ought to
haul a Marshall full-stack
off the Southern tip

of South America,
deep, to where the plates
Pacific, Nacza, Antarctic

all collide, swell the great
acoustic drones of movement.
The loudest fucking place on Earth.

Charlotte's fist springs two golden fingers
in devil's horns.

*

I have to confess: I
didn't cry when I heard.
Not even when I took

your younger brother's handshake,
was projected momentarily
to the passenger seat

he throttled in beside you;
or over your impossible stillness,
not even in the guidance office

framed by watercolor
paintings of inoffensive flowers.

Phone Call

Red-bearded fire chaser, veteran, woodsman,
(voice at the other end of the line,) my father:

hoister of boy-me onto his shoulders
so I could better see the world below

Devil's Elbow, Mt Diablo, the canyon
with its shadows made to look

like moss-gripped rocks breaking
the surface of a stream

by the position of the sun
and my childhood smallness.

I wonder if, looking over, gripping my knees
while I watched a condor glide,

a soft missile through slowed air,
he saw in the condor's place my body

tumbling down from where,
an accident, he dropped me.

I mean, I wonder if it's from him
I learned imagining death.

He says he's been trying to get back in shape,
doing workout videos in the dark mornings

once my mother's left for the hospital,
but every time he takes his chainsaw

to a leaning tree, a dead tree threatening
those live ones around it,

he feels tired, slow, and breaks often.
Once I saw him rip a stump from the ground,

roots and all, his arms cable-strong,
his back ribbed with sweat

and greater power than the power
in the mako shark he holds

proud above his head in a photo
on his office bookshelf

next to *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *The Last
Whole Earth Catalog*, *Centennial...*

—their spines cracked white
from 30—no—40 years...

He looks younger than me in that photo,
waves lapping rocks in the ocean behind him—

salt-blasted sea air compounding with gull-calls,
his hair a wildfire blaze around his face.

Picturing this as his voice moves
to how my week was, is a kind of time travel

I can only be half of. I shoot forward, arriving
at my curated life—the day outside

marbled white and gray
like a stone—to give him his.

Ghost

for Gossett

At the window of my second-story bedroom
there's a deer licking his nose,
fogging the glass.

He must be the deer that watched you
back out the drive the morning you left,
the deer that followed you for months before,

through doorways, down halls, outside—
hoofing the dew-flecked earth
while you wrote all those goddamn deer poems.

Deer, bodies of deer, deer in the bodies
of those not themselves deer,
but who are crowned with bone lightning,

who watch with black unshakable eye
spotting before it's spotted, curious. Gone.
Deer the word (the *BEAD?*), dissolved—

What then between the pieces.
What order for together what they are
interchangeably, forever.

Beginning again, unendingly, my life!
You asked if I had the shakes
and I said no. Sorry, I'm a coward.

Beginning again, for real this time, clean
and reaching for its figure, or its opposite's.
It could be anything, that deer at my window.

When was it that you learned his names?
Was one of them *Hunger*? I'm sure it was *Hunger*.
He's still out there, multitudinous

in the sky—Dark, hard music
sluicing through the glass,
an unfastening, a bloodletting.

Last Leaves

Enough about jars, their insipid anecdotes
& what they can't hold: the room I lay
my dumb head down in, a heart
that is another room also haunted,
a deer, Freehold, NJ, a hardbound
Collected Creeley (It doesn't fit. I tried.), an ex
mouthing "Can I eat/ what you give me. I/ am
allergic to peanuts."

Enough about deer, rooms, love,
the body, clumsy pale man-bodies
like mine, their axis mundi
an adolescent yawn into excitement,
curl into sleep: a water snake toy
retreating into itself like a hall
revising you—*desire, lust, doubt, guilt*—
the hall the light inside the body paces

endlessly.—& sex, geometry, crooked me
—Enough. Outside it's gray-blue the way
only November can be, chippy as a birch
shaking off its—Love that smell!
Bottled I'd call it Disintegration Ode.
The last leaves leave the ground, bare the birches
ash-stark, scarred, spindling the finchless sky.
Love that smell. Taste it.

Anemone

Gum-pink, supple, pulpy, how it still holds its petals,
a ring-shaped ceremony of edges.

I picked it on my last trip home and have carried it
in a capped jar since.

The jar is on the table where I am
not writing a letter
because I'm trying to remember a word.

Inside the jar, time moves slower than it does out
here in my kitchen, inside of which
time is slower than it is still farther out
where spring unclenches terribly.

Just last year it was spring.

I want to write to Tehila about how
when I was sitting on my front step
the sun caught a window across the street
and blinded me.

I want to write that glass.

Adam wrote a bee droning against a windowpane
as if it was an affront to flesh.
Over beers, we talked poets and lovers,
and toasted our respective lost.
(Terrible to lose a poet!)

A bountiful sadness, their accumulated weight.

Outside my kitchen, in the yard,
a bee tumbles from one blossom to another

in the cherry tree a storm took in December
that cracked over my neighbor's fence

so I had to cut it down.

Tehila,

When we are taken—cracked, broken—
and go to where the broken go,
will we flower terrible flowers?

Some things are older than the world
and some things will outlast it.

I saw a color in a window—

iris-bright, glinting, knife-hard,
cross-section of an edge, its dizzy wonder—

I thought I knew what it was.

That's gone now. (Whatever it was)
In its place, a new word.