

ABSTRACT

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Spear is a collection of poems in three parts, all orbiting the titular long poem. In the first section, poems sample individual people and landscapes, working to establish a speaker with a coherent public and private mythos. The second section descends into elegy, using a father's loneliness and a lover's loss as vehicles for the speaker to examine his own values. The poems in the third section return to the private and public spheres as if emerging from underground, lyrical and distorted.

SPEAR

By

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Part I

In Old Quebec

My grandfather farmed river cattle with a rake,
wading into their water pastures, his calves parting
the current, searching calmly for the gleaming bodies
at the end of his senses. There would be the scrape
of soft belly scales, the leverage, and the torquing
dance of light on armor. Somewhere downstream,
my great uncle Danny was eating bananas, a whole
bunch of them, which was a decadence in Quebec,
where all the crops have faces like the people—brown
and wishing they were back in France. And so when
Danny began to cramp up, floating somewhere between
Lake Memphremagog and the Saint Lawrence Seaway,
I am certain he was not thinking of how the brave carp
in the Chinese folktales threw *themselves* out of the water
and became dragons way off in the swift headwaters of
the Yellow River. And as my grandfather flung bright
fish onto the lawn, the weight of a body against the rake's
bamboo teeth was welcome and expected, and nothing
else was happening in his world except the sun's pinking
shears slicing through a shroud of soft-bellied clouds and
the gills of the carp on the grass, hand-cut by the creator,
turning deep red and filling with air.

My Father Takes a Lover

This is a man who sleeps hooked up
to a little machine
that helps him not to snore, who sharpens
knives compulsively
and calls me on the weekend if he can,
who lives in the shell
of the trailer of the shell of his uncle,
who died last summer,
and upon whose loneliness I depend
to explain certain things
about myself: the hermetically-sealed
box of old lovers I keep
in my closet (their letters only, I'm afraid),
the need to go fishing
when I'm lost, to set the bail and crank
an invisible line out of
the current again and again until I know
the universe starts at
my rod tip, the way I go fishing when I'm
inconsolable, casting out
over the gray deadfalls and the luminous,
green weeds, envisioning
my spinner as a fish might see it: hypnotic,
whirling off into the dark.
But today his rod leans unused in the shed,
and I call to discover him
at a small vineyard with a woman who is not
his grief, or the patient trout,
or the coiled line that strings me to both—
he will not be with me
later to see the despised oak growing just
downstream from the old
dam, how the evening light is even further
thinned, strangled by its
branches, and not just the branches, but the
lost lures, hanging there
like useless ornaments: eyes unblinking,
not catching anything.

At the Navy Memorial

I'm standing in Russia, above the narrow smudge of Lake Baikal.
An hour ago, you walked, as you sometimes do, off the edge

of this world. *Read a book*, you suggested, you'd be back soon.
Meanwhile, some young boys have found Portugal. No, just

Iberia (the Prime Meridian?)—they yelp and stamp their feet.
Watching a straw wrapper slide sidelong across the Sahara, I find

the geography of this place troubling: the masts, benches, falling
water: this flat, slick henge where children can run across

the ocean's dark, splash themselves on the faces of countries
quarried from the same unconcerned granite. I'll be waiting here

quietly when you crest the rim of open space, at which point
we'll stand on opposite shores of the world's deepest lake, feeling

the stone, smooth as ice, and watching the boys dance over
the Atlantic...or are they swimming? No. Their feet can touch.

Train Jumping: Monongahela, PA

A picture of failure:

Chuang Tzu weaves a fish trap
off in my brain's brown hills:

finger braid, finger wrap:

an engine bearing coal west
to the future:

two more figures: would-be jumpers
by the track, backs to the river,

and beyond...

trout:
silver discourses on emptiness,

hawk:
two slim strokes bothering
the hilltop with small wind,

brush heap:
promising smoke
upon the green, clear channel...

but where the open foothold?

where the passage
through brittle woods?

Chuang Tzu places the trap:

hollow valley: challenge from
the blasted ledge:

say something
(memory trace of boxcars,
the ghost of a

yawp) to we who hesitated:

two silhouettes,
or emptier.

Three of the Same Feeling

Here is the barn where the bats hang
quiet until the sun clots and scabs
filled with tractor parts and grit and
sometimes fifty or more shoot out
between the boards unsteady blots
of antimatter hungry for whatever
brought us here tonight to watch.

Here is the sea where I swim and
where I piss when I have to because
they say the ocean's big enough for
that and another wave always comes
big and green and later when you
and I share taffy I think we should
assume the salt is our shared secret.

Here is the sour pain in the jaw
after chewing too long or whistling
like my father did once so well he
called a bird to prayer and when
the bird rose and came upon us he
balked and flew off angrily to where
the world ends utterly agnostic.

For the Owner of the Bike with Antlers Tied to the Handlebars

I feel like I've known you for years, watched you
grow up: with your baseball caps, your rough talk,
your slight twang that says *I can speak
eloquently, but won't.*

Is that unfair?

Let's start over. I feel like I've seen you around,
but didn't know this bike belongs to you.

I mean, it really *belongs* to you, belongs to you, maybe, in a way
it didn't the first time your legs strained against a hill,
or when a girl you knew recognized you
bestride its fairly typical seat and in her eyes you saw that
quickly-masked surprise—

*You: on a bike? Oh, it really is You...but not in a truck,
or a low-slung whip—something with a bit of perceptible
muscle, a bulked-up mass on which to rub your musk—
but it really is YOU, and I should correct my eyes
to show you I'm not disappointed...*

(That look, if my slowing of the ocular vernacular works.)

The two of you spoke, then parted, and as the traffic
flashed its auroras across your ceiling that night, you felt
the suck of the city like swamp mud pulling at your boot,
dirty liquid seeping in to fill the steps behind you.

So you lashed 'em to the handlebars with rope—lots of it,
white and wound tight—and when my paranoid friends
walk by, they say, *imagine getting impaled on those antlers
if you crash. Imagine losing control and losing an eye!*
But maybe that's the point for you—you like that sort of risk
imbued in your rides.

Sorry. I don't mean to draw this out, but there's
a picture in my head, a Polaroid, in which my father holds
an eight-point rack, his largest kill, which he mounted to
the lacquered board that still hangs over his couch
with the slug his shotgun spat.

Beautiful slug, beautiful rusted metal chair in the thicket where
he fell asleep that morning and woke to find the answer

standing ankle-deep in mist, looking at him.

What I'm saying is: I understand the need to make talismans from what grows out of your head. I get that when the ground is frozen and you're pumping with rut, curved bone is the thing to follow like a dowsing twig through the wind. It leads you, pierces even the thicker ice forming like sugar glass over all the standing water.

But tell me,

in the spring, when the world's cold fat is rendered, will you stop a moment and weigh your head against the sky, feel how heavy the tines, how tight the rope, and find a private spot to shed them?

Out of Print

Up in Heaven, Joseph and Jesus are giving things another shot. There are tools, a dirt floor, the smell of straw. When Joseph approaches Him from behind and tries to guide the inefficient pitch of His saw, Jesus jerks away. He can *do it Himself*. This continues until dinnertime, Joseph removing his sandals outside the hut, Mary, singing in the kitchen, calling her men to meal. Jesus walks right by the water basin though, doesn't fill it, doesn't bathe His father's feet (remember, we're in Heaven, where the dirt is translucent), and Joseph simply can't believe it, looks up at the desert sky (which in Heaven is just more sky, or perhaps the beard of God), thinks, *Thanks, thanks a lot*, and finds some small comfort in the smell of roasting meat and herbs. Meanwhile, on the Orange Line, I see a young guy reading an out-of-print book called *The Expectant Father*. I imagine he's imagining all the sleep he'll lose soon, imagine he's going home to a woman with a swollen abdomen, or maybe nothing noticeable yet, imagine he'll lie in bed when he gets there, the print percolating in the text like hard water in the old, metal radiator of time, calling him to fear the always unraveling potency in his scrotum. He thinks back to that night it rained, how he felt or thought he felt someone pass through the wall, someone made of light, and place the child in her (it clicks in its binding). His lips begin to move the same way Joseph's must have as he muttered to himself the day he packed up the burro, ready to make tracks out of town. An experienced lip reader would be able to tell you exactly what each one was saying to himself there in the haze of history or Heaven or exhaustion, but I'm not a lip reader. So few people are.

Corner

You take it fast, in a way I'm still learning
to get used to: arms swinging, faint smile,
and that's all. Above us, a couple squirrels
startle each other against the afternoon's
brown and blue, some sap flows slower
than it has, and your boots are loud and hard
enough to describe how far ahead of me
you are getting. My memory, dirty
with autumn, begins to make its way back
to my father, who tended to walk fast
in grocery stores, like he was afraid
the shelves were disappearing, and slow
in the woods, heel-to-toe down aisles of
fir and spruce. This was an abandoned
Christmas tree farm, he told me often,
where someone poked his finger in the ground
a thousand times and rolled a thousand
tiny pine cones down the earth's throat.
That's why they're in rows. Then we'd
separate, him parting the whippy brush,
and I toward the sound of running water—
a beaver pond with ducks, both of us
hoping we might scare something up,
let its blood, bring it home. I never asked
why it never worked, why two bodies
plumbing the proto-dark at dawn could
only come across themselves. Meanwhile,
you and I have made it back home, where
the couch is, where you're sitting, that
collection of Russian stories now open
in your hands. You look up and ask me
how Yegor Vlassich can live with himself,
how anyone can describe hair to be the color
of wheat when he knows that crumpled ruble
note is coming out at the end and that dead
gamecock is going bad in the heat, and you
eventually rule it a poor story, a plot set up
to fail: you who have never unloaded my gun
as my father and I neared the houses and roads,
never thought back on his face, appearing
suddenly where two footpaths meet, as he looks
at me and I turn my palm over, signaling
“no game.” In my mind, he takes it slower than
you did. He doesn't smile, cradles his gun

in the crook of his elbow, and looks around,
his face a little red from walking. Behind him,
acres of sharp, green needles impinge quietly
on the hollow cart roads we sneak through
every weekend when it gets cold enough to see
our breath. Sometimes, puncturing these moments,
there would be gunfire in the surrounding hills
or the snapping of sticks too far away to matter.
You thank me for rubbing your shoulders, say
it feels good, and I see you haven't moved
on to the next story, a finger still pressed to
the page. In the kitchen, the kettle is getting
ready to whistle, and my father's boots are still
pressed into the ground, bending the pale grass
into beds like deer make, steam rising from
the world, the whole landscape becoming wet
and disappearing.

Consensus

Walking far from home, I am certain sushi
was the idea of the cherry branch, which,

having flowered for three days, is made
by forces coded in the seed to begin

the parting of its fine, papery petals,
revealing what least-expected leaves will

take their place. And I, in this instant
of the dawning of the death of beauty,

am suddenly a man whom the universe has
kept locked in the long, florescent tunnel

of thought, and who, suddenly released,
stumbles blinking round a corner to find his

double staring at this very branch, which
we agree, when viewed from a distance,

resembles closely the cool, dark flesh of
tuna, wrapped in seaweed, rolled in rice.

This Band-Aid

For when I close my eyes and listen to the upstairs neighbors
wreathed in each other's sex smoke, the wandering sound
particles drifting down through my ceiling,

and for the image of a bird flying into a very clean window in
my throat: sip of tea gone down wrong.

For when I cut myself—for the split-second when the skin does not
yet recognize the cut and the dermis opens its tender meat to the probing air.

You must understand it, vegetable splayed across your plastic board,
And you also, neighbor woman severed by the afternoon's diamond edge,
eyes wide, holding your lover in a grip of blood—

you know what it's like to spill out across this hammer-beaten plane,
yourself a flock of red birds always landing and dispersing.

Let us clean ourselves up, you in your bathroom and I in mine

(I hear your feet plying the floorboards above me, the water from your sink
flowing down the pipe behind my wall. I hear you move toward
your window, curtained with sheer, thin linen),

and as creamy sunlight seeps through glass, applies itself to your arms and face,
I'll apply this band-aid, which goes on the color of a closed eyelid

lifted toward the sun.

Part II

To Lance Corporal Christopher Burgess

I imagine your deployment: the iron hills,
lead food, rust plants. The dust, a brown so light

it can be breathed, drifts into your ears and nose all night,
filling the clay pots on your mind's vacant sills—

have you planted the black poppies, or the white?

My Father Invokes His Own Ashes

“Just scatter me over the brook,” he says, as if already powder and bone shards, potted up, headed straight for the mantle (not just sitting on his steps, head cocked toward the five sacred mountain ranges of someone else’s poem),

as if it’s not a fine, clear day, the tips of everything aren’t giving up their sap, and even the small green acorns scattered across the sidewalk below my window haven’t somehow been arranged sympathetically.

We share a weather, he mentions offhand—a vast, high system arched between us—and what he doesn’t mention, the phone at my ear stretching each pause into a plea, is that the pared down blue is an abyss

he’s been plummeting through for years now, and if he looks up, his head will flip open and spill out across the grass. *“Low pressure,”* he’d say back then, *“and low clouds”* would make the birds fly low,

circle back when called. His body was a furnace next to mine, a bastion set against the chill, and when the air whistled against a set of cupped wings, poised for landing—that was it. We’d rise, unload the chambers,

and the fine, unbloodied belly feathers that drifted down then turned grayer than the sky reflected in the tarnished pond, always floating for a second, and we’d watch them, and do I even have to say it?

Spear

1. November

Thinking back like this, all I amount to is loaded into a small boat
and rowed out into the gulf of space, where,

from a growing distance, I watch these few cold orbs

shrinking in suspended motion around the stars: their total weight
equal to the leverage of each oar stroke—the scrape of varnished wood against a pin

against a lock—plus nothing.

And you might turn from me in disappointment, thinking,

this is no way to treat the world: a bead of mercury left on a table,
the closing eye at the center of an old-fashioned T.V.

as the knob is turned, the hot tubes power down, and all the dust
gathered in the fine cracks of everything settles flat for another night.

But I would tell you pine pollen settles this way, gradually

like chalk: dregs of a figure, gesture tracers, compacted lime of sea
creatures suddenly released, just as your sister was the night her car slammed into

that pine tree in the curve.

There was a skin of water on the road, eyes closing all over
the east coast, and the feeling of being flung as your wrecked voice
found me beside a solitary desk lamp:

yellow orb I reviled the instant you said not to come to you, that I couldn't
die on the road that night, too.

Back then, I thought of light as a wave, but now

the swell is opaque, heaving, and if you blame me for any of this, remember that
rowing, you face the land as it shrinks, a projectile moving through the dark.

*

Keep track as they pierce you:

spear of car against wood and sap

body on stainless steel
obituary:

spear of me prodding the cold body with words
the body multiplying

night into day:

a dawn line scratched
in ash with flint:

birdsong aubade
muffled in the
underground garden:

one tender spear

(flower? weed?)

buried in a plot by the fence
uncurling and
arching up below
the seen

the sun falling again in shafts
of prying
light

2. *Shatter*

In a used bookshop, I'm taken in
by the picture of Queequeg carving
runes on the lid of his own coffin

as Ishmael looks on from his berth
and an adorned harpoon shaft lies
obligingly on a sea trunk in the corner.

Another page shows him using it to shave:
blade laying waste to the fine, dark
hairs on his wood pulp cheeks.

I imagine it's there in the still reflection
of that sharp plane: he sees me watching,
thinking how little it would take.

*

And suddenly the elementary experiment makes sense—the broken pencil in the glass of water (but not broken, just refracted! the light glancing off at so many

confused angles), the shell I've dropped in the shallows: always a little farther than it seems, my arm a little shorter than it appears. The birds,

hovering low, maybe see a severed thing. They cry out when it emerges whole and glistening, both miracle and failure...

On particularly hard days, I'd like to be dissolved, but in a liquid of my own choosing: absorb the world-spectrum through myself

like a shot man absorbs a bullet (feels the burn,

wonders at the strange carnation growing from his lapel)...except I can't. The world isn't weaponized enough. Wound doors open and shut like

the mouths of tame koi circling a pond at twilight, the dusk-swirled pool responding like tar: the revolving bodies, the thought-vortex...

I reach into myself a gloved hand...

The reservoir is thick and slow to stir, a grease trap, and I hang the viscous bodies I remove above an oil pan to dry, sludge streaming off like an end you can see

coming from an immense distance, shrinking as it nears, the stream of foul liquid slowing to a trickle, then a series of drips.

I coat each figure afresh: running fingers through hair, limp yet familiar, anointing with good oil until the skins glow tender, responsive, the eyes

flick on, receiving the color-slaked world, and the chests swell, astonished; then stay that way...

What to do with these mutes but drape a towel over the back seat and drive to the ridge overlooking town, to the Civil War

monument beneath which I seduced almost exclusively myself so many times? Once there, the bodies reanimate, remembering their roles:

the figure to my left cools beneath an imagined moon, that cunning scar atop the sky-bruise, waxing silver...she moves closer, the veins in her neck

glowing blue-green.

Another works hard to be unconcerned with the veil dark has suspended over the field: thousands of lightning bugs, all doing what the mind cannot.

She asks, breaking silence, how many riddled bodies once lay down upon the ancestors of this very grass and bled to death, and I,

swathed in wisdom, (my costume) can only quote a number...

It's easy to pack them back into the car when I'm done: these old lovers, these good little ghosts who come when called.

They have lives somewhere else now, plumbing full of blood, electricity wired into every inch of flesh, lines to the world in-coming and out-going, full of sound.

I pick a dark stretch of road and let them all out: free to melt into the woods with the same expressions they had on when driving me silently to the airport, telling me to say goodbye to the cat, or hanging up the phone.

This isn't about them, I tell myself, but these questions about death seem to be answered in the ways they refuse me:

longing *ex machina*.

*

Where is the stick the child once held as he ran along the slatted fence?

Where is the bark-streak, the stern, staccato clatter of wood-on-wood disappearing down the street?

What stick? What kid?

Where is the girl I once saw, hypnotized by the whizzing blue lights that say: you're on a train under the English Channel, and above you an ocean is making plans to come through the roof?

Did she disintegrate when I lost sight of her on that platform years ago in Dover?

What train? What girl?

A hand, coated in oil and run along the length of a monument leaves a dark streak, but the fingers remain ghostly.

Moving this fast, the vehicle senses an exit, dreams
an opening through which light will pour, and not the writhing sea.

The mortician man applies foundation the color of skin as we approach.

How long can I sit in this refracted room,
tangled in myself?

3. *Hollow*

What I said that day was that the mortician had apologized profusely, that he wasn't upset when he came out after an hour and a half and asked: could we leave and let him do his work? and why was the body exposed? the sheet pulled up to reveal her tattoos, a nipple half-showing (a nipple, so familiar, even in death). So I stayed back to apologize, to represent the reasonable, image-conscious people of the world who had not just lost a daughter or a sister...but he didn't even look at me—just pulled the sheet back over her chest and began to wheel her through a set of swinging doors.

So I said it again, and louder: "I'm sorry..."

He turned, nodded. Then drifted coolly into the afterlife to finish doing her makeup.

On the ride home, there was terror in your voice: *What if he treats her badly?* his desecration rich and rampant under the cold lights? mocking hands peeling the world off its familiar bones...

and that was all I needed.

The lie bloomed like salty blood beneath my tongue, welling, dribbling through my whiskers, until what we had here was a bona-fide saint! a man on whose behalf my apology was so melodious, so lush, that everyone began to float just above their seats in the ecstasy of being understood by a man so sacredly aware of the one fact they all kept repeating incredulously back in the scone-lit viewing room that morning:

she's cold; so cold.

*

Earth, a vehicle cruising round a track:
autumn in Washington again, and the rays
that shoot out from the Capitol are empty
enough to run a bare finger through: cars
sparse, people only pips and catkins flung
breezily as the grit roused by street sweepers

takes to air. Inspired, it coats the lungs with
fine dust: dry city, white domes crisp for
lack of heat haze...though one dome stays
emptier than the rest: my deaf neighbor and
his wife, also deaf: the small murmurs
they make when signing, the silent sphere
of their hand holding, the not much said
then: a space carved in the shape of silence;
I hear them in the evening, intoning to
their dog behind the building: an animal
that has a name but doesn't know it, the
flailing cords in their throats so weak that
the hands must take to air, thumb the wet,
invisible lump of spinning thought until
it's an urn or the toppling curve of a wave
so large it could drown the world—but won't.

*

Sometimes, I'm just the stainless steel bowl the meat is thrown into,
her still warm flesh slipped from its silver fascia by my father as

the neighborhood men watch and select their cuts.
I'm the heat of the wood stove, the motion of his hand gently sliding
through her: the victim of another November

road, in another state, another time. It's beautiful to watch him

break her down like this, to open her up to air and know it's only the bones
that are broken, that the flesh is good and will nourish if he can only

circumscribe it with his bright, sharp knife. This is why the animal was lifted
tenderly from wet pavement and brought to him,

the son of a chef: to be laid out and processed by an expert of too-late
anointment, a man above whose head the hunter's prayer hangs at night,
and everything he does is right by her—

the new shape of her body fills me and others like me until the stove is banked and
the men depart, each with a portion of her wrapped in foil.

4. *Lucretian*

I found an instruction one day:
Proceed to the furthest boundary

and throw a spear.

Simple, such a task, simple
also the notion that the universe is
endless, I thought.

Less simple the spear, though
an easy concept: any slender vector
made to be flung—

barb, single nettle, whittled
branch, etcetera...
the materials hardly matter.

The key, it seems, is to
leave the hand empty, emptier
than could ever be thought, empty

to a point that no spear
could ever have lain there:
harmless, barely

a weapon (just a body at rest).
In these moments, something
about motion becomes

suspicious: Lovely Void,
where in the endless quiet
have you put it?

Where is the spear?

*

Summers, her father and I go to the channel where she liked to swim, lowering
herself from the transom, where we drink and talk about things like

tomorrow's tide, the marshes' greenness, the feeding habits of spectral night
herons...all to keep from lowering in after the light.

Not that she's on our minds (not that she's not) but the bay's always
below us: a dark slick obscuring

the crabs and rusted sea junk it always contains,
and also the heat of the sun, which has warmed it to be almost inviting,
a mass that holds

what once passed through it. On truly still nights, we turn toward the lit homes lining the far end of the channel, and let the throttle out—our speed whetting the boat's

proW with wind, every atom in me aching to be a living

figurehead, to test the approaching shore's integrity by smashing through it, a fist through a pane. On the other side, I sense I'll find myself

at the end of another black channel, advancing toward another radiant strand, and on and on, racing forward and eviscerating glistening cavities as if

I myself am a projectile, and everyone I know

is a body in my path, a cavern in which the sound is dying to escape itself, its own chambered repetition, and my wake bores

cleanly through them: a puncture wound filled with brackish water and rushing air.

*

The books on grief say
a caesura has been cast
between us,

a pause, in which
the pot of misunderstanding
boils and boils, and

yet nothing
flung at your grief
wall ever sticks.

The books also say
I do not divide
myself from *it*—

the cast-out corpse—
that I'm just
standing at its side...

tainting it,
(and all creation)
with these *feelings*.

5. *Monument*

No one knew that to find her
in the necropolis

so much stone
would have to be
cut in the world
of the living

our pile of fragments

growing monstrous
day by day.

*

There's something to be said for the mountain
of despair: the blinding ideal of what it means
to be distraught to the point of silence. *A STONE
OF HOPE*. Doctor King stands alone all night
staring across the water at Jefferson, smug as hell
in his little dome of light. When the King's tattoo
started itching, Maya Angelou took a sandblaster
and scratched it. The *STONE* is blank now, and
all the lovelier for the words he clenches in his
hand, rolled up tight in their white granite sheaf.
I try to stand like him: arms folded into a pretzel
of human strength, eyes narrowed, defying the
electric idea that fizzes in my brain at night, the
people who swarm and circulate by day, their
whittling *OF HOPE* somehow out of the words
scrawled on the walls around me when the point
is so clearly the standing with the arms crossed
just so—the ironic conjuring of white from black,
flesh from rock, a little powder ground from the
rubbing of time against the monolithic scab that
can be dissolved in a glass of water and taken on
a full stomach right before bed to bring on sleep.

*

We're talking, and suddenly the curve where your sister died
swings open—We bend around it—on dry days, windows down,

on wet nights, the road remembering itself

back to the accident, this slick thing that twists through
massive tracts of third growth pine: the silence of woods and farmland.

The exact location hardly matters: the local route number, the mile
marker, the section of low guardrail newer than the rest,

the little clearing behind the crash site with maybe enough light
for the hydrangeas planted there in tribute.

Always at this point, the conversation

warps:

radio overthrown
by an inmost

static:

flinching question of if
the world would pause

somehow

as the steering
let go and we joined her

in the swerve, the matter clash

wherein the universe

is constantly

rearranged

in patterns most befitting:

cracked skull, wrenched arm,

last thoughts blazoned across

the windshield like

a red Rorschach blot...

And then we're out of it.

The car straightens, the woods either open greenly in front of us, or night
loops the headlights around its neck like a lanyard, we two

resting gently on the chest of this impenetrable landscape as our talk
picks up again, becomes almost normal.

*

Earth, a body pierced through by the axis-spear, turns quietly at the cuticle-
edge of space. That's it. And if you're looking for the end,

keep rowing—oars plunging and creaking in the vacuum, galaxies
wheeling like gulls, then shrinking to scrimshaw on a burnt jaw bone,

until eventually with a sigh like sand scraping against a hull,
you come suddenly upon it.

Starting out, I thought it would be the flank of a vast animal I could search
for the hole where the spear passed through, singed around the edges

by the hot soul; thought I could poke my finger through it, feel
the weather on the windward side of space.

Truth is, the end isn't like that.

It's a plume of steam rising from a manhole in an empty parking lot.
You park your vehicle next to it, watch the undulating swerve of

atoms streaming through the cymbal-shaped beam of a single street light
until the wind changes and suddenly you're in it:

one mass of particles consumed by another, writhing, more diffuse.
The end is when you watch this for a moment:

car bathing in steam like the first peoples bathed in smoke
(end as fire; scent that clings), and you roll the window down

and a little blows in and condenses on your cheek.

In newer cars, the lights and radio turn off after a while to save the battery.
When this happens, you've entered it totally, the sudden quiet

clasping around you with a clink, and all you hear then is the thin sound
of steam being created underground, feel it pouring out like
a pressure exiting your body.

You: this place: this vapor: this blank hunger working at the edge of
everything like a blur: this, you sense, is the container of the end

and not the end at all.

It all ends with a key turn, a console blossoming with green and orange light:
radio and silence evaporating into some third thing: not grief,

and not the end of grief.

Grief Alley

If the body sits up by the window at night, listening to heavy voices passing through the alley, that's *its* business. Why sit up with it?

Two years, and by now the foot traffic is recognizable: man who drags his feet taking out the trash, woman cursing. All the while, you darn

your sister's soul: sewing, up places where you've loved it past the limits of the fabric, the alley ambient as you work. Your thread, as I drift off,

turns into a charcoal line in the portrait above our dresser—grainy track of her gouged between us. The dream shuttle darts in and out. She appears,

standing under a flood light, smoking, and I go out to her, say *why not come in? She's still up, longing for you. We'll make some coffee.*

Waking later, I see headlights flaring, twin universes swelling just outside the blinds; your now-nude body whimpers in sleep beside me. The glow

stays a minute then moves off with the sound of the motor: out the alley, up North Capitol St., and off into a city of pillars and friezes and

statuary, marbled over and dormant until dawn, and I follow those lights in my head, confused, thinking: maybe they were here to pick me up.

Part III

Tuning Fork

I watch the wind scratch patterns in
the bay: a crosshatch current, a glow
set quivering against night's arch.

Whatever sound is here must be
risen to, I think: matched or struck
as a match. *Once lit, you take it*

and you stuff it in the world's ear,
afame. Thirsting across the page
this way, hopped-up on purpose,

every surface makes a wound-notch
in me: grey islet, tidal basin, pain
lagoon in which a blood-tide blooms

and fades. The point is to become
a channel: repeat the going vibration
verbatim, let it spiral down the spine:

half-shocked current flowing down. O,
how glassy and cool it sounds to me:
this spirit set to quivering at dusk!

Elegy for a Tuesday

When I wake up, mouth dry as the hills of Judea,
the rumor will be that the old monk who had been illuminating
my life's vellum pages since anyone can remember
has passed away.

The other monks will have missed him at vespers, and
the joke will be that they all thought he was sleeping, face-down,
half-way through *Proverbs*, a little stream of drool
darkening the page.

*(the words of the mouth
are as deep waters...)*

O, brother _____, who steadied his trembling quill
with ale! The consensus will be that God, walking early, will find
him hung over by the half-scale replica of the Jordan
flowing through the afterlife.

God, of course, will be respectful. He'll dim the lights and
lead the departed by the hand to a quiet café, where the coffee flows
dark and the sparrows on the sidewalk outside are quieter
than sparrows here.

*(taste and see
the goodness of the LORD)*

Blood Spatter on Gold Leaf

My friend beneath the gaudy ginkgo tree
looks dejected. A cardinal arrives.

What a red secret says my friend.
what a tragic little bird!

It's a dry fall and no one except
my friend is feeling dead

until another cardinal lands in the tree
and then another. *Step back* he says.

The tree lays its gold chiffon
shadow like a puddle at our feet.

Look!

Red Bird for Sarah

We can sit here and wait for it to rise: this thing
you say is not a scarlet tanager or a talon-
beaked macaw, not even a dove dipped in ochre.
It's a different bird entirely. I could say: I've seen
its tracks speckle the snow-dusted world-egg, which
would be a lie. You know as well as I do this
poem is not a bird, a gift, an onion, or a new ending
to the dreams in which you drown or are killed:
It's a stand of pines in a windy canyon, swaying
darkly. Do you hear them creaking like ship masts,
cracking in the cold? This grove is where
the bird roosts when color drains from the sky
and the atmosphere drags its soft belly across
the serrated treetops: ripping, dropping, it drips.
I can't give you the bird, Sarah. But I can
show you where it sleeps, remind you of the falling
light. I can even hand you this rough thing
I've fashioned: drag your hand over it, and try
not to cut yourself...or do! maybe break the skin,
and listen for the sound the bird makes then.

Advice to Myself in the Apocalypse

This is you as the world boils down and reconstitutes itself: you startled by how quickly grow the weeds in all this black moisture, fecund quiet; weather in which hard edges break down, spongy to the touch, and all the small tasks loom: gathering of food and wood for fire, tracking days and seasons through undergrowth, preserving seeds, cleansing crotches now struck sensitive with purpose: days in which you fight the tilt: your life set to slide like spaghetti off a plate. Speak softly as the anarchists take their pick of your canned goods (softly at gunpoint, or, better, not at all), softly as the mutant horde emerges bloodily from the woods to feast on your cat. Everything you say is a body flinging itself off a high bluff, over and over, and as you read this, a separate message is scrubbed from yesterday's grimy pane, though it hangs there for just a moment like wampum once hung in these woods all those vacuum-sealed centuries ago: strings of shells strung like geese across the eyes. Recall, if you will, the salamander you killed when you were four, shining like glazed rust on the cellar steps (Remember, but don't hate yourself). Remember the pleasure of brutality as your little boot descended and your runny nose inhaled the life as it left that rubbery little form. It's part of you! Sure, you can sit up at night, coming out of some dream in which you've hacked a path through the creeping vines that resembles the road back to civilization: that burning web of plasma, that presence on the end of the line you've slipped into time's dark pool: the one that gives a yank now and then to let you know it's still there...but what's the point of dreams? Better to descend casually into violence: arm yourself with the sharpest gardening tool in your shed: practice decapitating leather-clad soldiers of the New World Order with an air of Zen nonchalance—not wildly, with the venom you once directed at your grinning neighbor who, one day, as summer's canine sank toward civility's blue jugular, stuck his own mouth full of teeth above the fence and extended in his hand a red fruit so bulbous it could have been a cancerous tongue, intoning joyously: *heirloom!* Remember feeling it in your hand and wishing for voodoo: to plunge your nails into a tomato and crack his glib little skull. Remember and understand: it doesn't work this way anymore. There are tiny holes punched in everything now: letting light in, letting out the rule-based rage that once drove you with hydraulic force

through every day...let it all go, and don't blow this new life like a globe of molten glass, into something so ungainly it overtakes itself, imploding. Sure, there's going to be a little looting, probably a good deal of brutality before the grass grows thick enough to deaden the sharper sounds...so what? Take all these artifacts you've been boiling down for soup and weave their clean bones into the lovely, unkempt bower growing all around you: inherent goodness, public transit, the thirst for life in another human's eyes. Look upon the raw landscape as it devours these things, and be yourself devoured: make yourself a nest within it, hunker down, and meld whatever voices come to you in sleep into a pulsing hum: a sound without sense as heard from within a womb.

Disguise

World as a woman in a dark mirror, doesn't expect her own eyes
(she turns quickly). There is light rustling in a corner somewhere

—not much, but some. Skim milk in the fridge fantasizing about
wearing the red cape, being whole again, the light unable to pass

through it. Rain falling since midnight, the road, a glistening garter
snake, gives birth to other roads, the sky a dark mirror, lightening.

Coat rack mumbled something to me as I walked in, dripping, (old
man in the corner wearing two hats, an old jacket and a scarf) but I

didn't hear, wasn't ready. There was a record of something hidden
in the black box by the TV: a button, a sudden vat of liquid crystal

blooming. Saw myself in a chair, sitting, watching, face a mirror
reflecting sterile light. My program is interrupted to show her, a

woman drinking milk. A serpent approaches from behind. Look,
woman. Save yourself. Coat rack leans in, whispers, *it's harmless*.

Crepuscule

I.

Outside the window on a hill:
the flash before death;
a bare tree gnawing at the sun:
spidery middle branches
disappearing: a gold ball
in a wicker-dry gullet:
a beast swallowing fire
instead of breathing it:
a late winter hunger show:
in this way, the day is
consumed: a dark cherry,
and we turn it against
our teeth, sucking, leaving
nothing but the pit.

II.

Above: thin clouds scrolling
The speed of movie credits,
just fast enough that the
eyes can't keep up: the wind
playing a game sly and beyond
understanding...the music
of the light, though, keeps
rolling, and you stay
until time, a theatre, empties
around you: each second a
soft procession of rubber soles
down stairs carpeted to
hide the diegesis: make this
a room in which you can
laugh and cry and hold
your bladder for eternity.

III.

Look around: this house,
this room, the vague, comforting
furniture of your life:
see how the light leaving
makes a trail for you to follow:
dust motes eddying invisibly

in your wake, the evening
billowing, curtain-esque, as you
pass through: a capsule
gliding down a pillowy throat,
dissolving: set to spill
your fine-ground particles
like medicine into the aching
belly where everything
ends up eventually.

Mantis

A mantis, yesterday, on the steps,
whose empty exoskeleton I found

brittle in a flowerpot today—
and my feet! peeling like dried apples!

Overhead, a sun-scab dries on
on afternoon's dirty knee, gulls buzzing

round it like flies. The little swarms
of tourists have evaporated

back to the 'burbs, and here
I am: under this vague, beige sky,

picking at calluses. The slough
pile next to me says little-to-nothing

beside this insect's perfect carapace:
empty eyes and hollow legs,

delicate tear through which it
escaped everything but what it used

to be. Some breeze, wandering
in from the dunes, mumbles

a bleached platitude as it passes,
but I'm oblivious: occupied instead by

the shape of yesterday's prayer:
silent now, and light as breath.

My Father Explains the Weather

Horse tails and fish scales are all one
needs to teach a child to predict rain.
The first come swiftly. The second

do not stream, but overlap like mail.
What's a front? a swinging maul
that splits through dark's rich grain.

The weather radio pipes its metal
voice into the dim kitchen where
he stands, hands lost in a sink full

of brown water. Outside, a thin blur
coats every plant in the yard: lilac
and hosta, clematis and douglas fir

alike. In my dreams, he and I talk
about the rain smell, a heavy wind
sweeping all the pliant branches back

in a fit of silver. He doesn't mind
that I've learned such wispy words:
cirrus, altocumulus, and in the end,

it matters little. "Wind is wound
around the globe-spool in precise
tracks," he says, "each storm one

pass around the clear lump of ice
that hardens inside you every night."

Aubade with Rimbaud

Lo! morning: the gold barge approaches, propelled by the sweat of golden mules!

They displace such water in the canals of sense!

A smoke-complexioned queen holds court amid peacocks and sacks of spice, perched atop a silver-stitched carpet, dressed in silks. What she intends is inevitable.

O malevolent Caliphs of the Dark Country, what decadent tribute you send!

A dozen courtiers scurry about my bone-ceilinged chamber.

Bronze-shod hooves thunder and spark beyond the trees, causing steam to rise from the world's shoulders.

I strain to chart the land: a familiar tract painted incomprehensible.

My feet become nomads in their slippers of cold. My eyes, two monarchs of this single pane of glass!

The hour is late! The hour is early!

Come to me in all my insignificance, you bearded creatures of night! Come, and we will cower together as the sky-fruit drops and shrivels and the woods thrum, flexing their bushy secrets,

as the window before use fogs over, spreading,

spreading, and the dark becomes the light. And the light becomes itself.

Jubilate

For I have been awaiting you in a bright, empty city by the sea, among these clay water jugs and blinding courtyards, a place deserted by its people: the Turks have gone, the Greeks have gone, and the daughters of Cyprus and Macedon.

For they have left me the negative gift of emptiness.

For as the walls and hillsides set about forgetting the simple noise of goat bells, the doors stand open like mouths, and the tide crawls up and down the rocks according to its own needs, I flatten and curl into a quiet scroll, left behind and preserved by the dry air,

For this is how you once desired to live: sequestered amid the perfect ruins of no civilization in particular.

•

Let me spread my arms, then, in the pale evening when the paving stones still retain a memory of the day.

Let it be a symbol to you, should you stroll someday through these gates and past the dry fountains and the silent cafés with their numerous abandoned games of checkers, your hair tousled as after long sleep, and see me standing here, scaffolding the sky. And even if you never find this city,

Let me absorb the mere possibility like a cormorant, wings splayed wide, worshipping the sun against the surf upon the cliffs.

Let this be enough because it feels like enough.

•

For when I lost you, we were lost together in knot of barren towns and winter fields where the wind blew itself beyond sound, and it blew a mist between us, and I can only now begin to make out your face: an expression like a slipped disc as you drift away.

For I have been drawing this face and what I think to be the pain you nurse, and erasing and erasing until you become each time a Madonna of rubber shreds in a parchment desert.

For the nights here are beautiful and have no temperature, and a glowing absence keeps me awake.

For by now, you may have found a kind family to take you in, even though you do not speak their language, and who cook you meals and grow to love you.

For though this simple life may suffice, it's possible that you still hear me off in the fog, around some bend in the path, and run a little farther, and think you're stuck in this dream

Forever—I don't know.

For despite all this, I prefer to picture you somewhere in the rain listening to a traveler seated high on a horse-cart full of turnips, or leaning out the window of his car, or talking to himself on a bus; he mentions something about a city in a dream, and the world seems to thaw.

•

Let me finally utter the prayer that has carved me out like a citadel:

Let your feet be stirred each day to spend a moment facing in the direction of the hundreds of empty hearths waiting to be occupied and filled with noise.

Let the world bombard you with signs of my existence, from the turning of a plant to face the sun, to the work of termites somewhere deep in the walls, to the flooding of rivers, the snapping of a stick, a voice—not mine—but close—or else,

Let me die—but place me in the catacombs holding the small rock I have formed by taking every morning the sleep from my eyes, understanding it to be a crystal that somehow contains you.

Let our city be in the crystal, and I in the city, and let's pretend it's enough.