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# Vistor Parking Only

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VISITOR PARKING ONLY

by

Jeremy R. Caldwell

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Grace Bauer

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## VISITOR PARKING ONLY

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University of Nebraska, 2018

Advisor: Grace Bauer

VISITOR PARKING ONLY is a thesis comprised of 40 poems and a fifteen-page introduction that travels simultaneously through the climatic seasons and familial generations, creating a cyclical effect of inevitable loss and regrowth. The poems start in late spring, early summer and dive into adolescent wonder, vulnerable, and loss of innocence. Gradually as the seasons change so does the speaker, diving into young adulthood and parenting and the sense of responsibility, guilt, and confusion that has played such a large role in developing me as a person. The poems transition into the winter months where older generations, such as my parents and grandparents, allow for opportunities to reflect on their influence on me, and how I carry a little of them with me everywhere I go. There is a gradually transition into early spring and renewal of generations as I pass down who I am and what I know to my son. The introduction dives deeper into my own persona history as a young parent and how that has informed some of these poems around ideas of guilt, responsibility, loss, as well as hope.

## **Dedication**

*To my wife, who somehow gives the appearance that living with me has left her unscathed and not traumatized. This, despite my best efforts to leave the toilet seat up and never put away my laundry.*

*To my son, who doesn't believe in poetry that doesn't rhyme. May I one day write something worth your time.*

*But seriously, without them none of this thesis would be possible. They embody the strength, patience, trust, and hope I can only dream of aspiring to.*

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was twenty-one I became a father. It was unexpected, and the last thing on my mind at the time. I was not married, and had recently arrived on campus at a public university in my home state as a transfer student. My girlfriend was also there—just starting her freshman year. She barely had the chance to enjoy her newfound freedoms that come with being eighteen—voting, opening a bank account in her own name, getting a tattoo, being sued. Within the first month of that college year I found myself in her dorm room. It was humid, and like most college dorm rooms, poorly ventilated, so the air was sitting stagnant. The blinds were down, but open, and sunlight spread across the tile floor. I was sitting on her floor, fiddling with the television when she came back into the room. She sat down beside me and looked me in the eye. She held out the pregnancy test. Honestly, I had never seen one before. I remember I thought it was a thermometer, and wondered about the sense of urgency that came with her furrowed brow and attentive stare. The dye was pink, such a pretty color for most things. We cried for a long time after that. Some of this moment is captured in my poem “Equivalent Exchange”:

She was barely old enough to sue someone.  
For me, I still believed in sunsets and hoped I  
wouldn't have to wake up. When I did  
it was a few months later from two small feet  
kicking in a womb. I remember telling myself to man up.  
I'm not sure I'll ever know what that means.

To use lyrics from the Khalid song, we were young, dumb, and broke. When she became visibly pregnant, I wondered how she internalized her appearance and if she felt embarrassed. I wondered if she noticed the glances in the cafeteria, or if she thought every whisper was about her. Growing up in a sort of conservative, Calvin-inspired religious environment, guilt became my preeminent motivator moving through life. I felt

guilty for having pre-marital sex, for having a child out of wedlock, for not getting married until six months after my son was born. But even with all of that, I still cannot comprehend what it must have been like to be eighteen and pregnant in a college environment, without the guarantee of a partner or financial stability. I know the saying is “it takes two,” but I felt personally responsible. I did not want her to see herself as another statistic of teenage pregnancy.

Looking back, I think what I felt most guilty about was the possibility that I had ruined her college years—the chance for her to “find herself” and all the opportunities that came with university life. Actually, that is only partially true. What I really felt guilty about that by getting her pregnant, maybe I ruined her life. In the back of my mind, all I could think was that maybe she never wanted any of this. And I know if anyone were to ask her if she would want it any differently, she would say “no”—that everything was meant to be this way. That it was fate. But when something life-altering occurs at such a young age, I think it only natural to think about the “what ifs.” These sorts of self-deprecating thoughts gave me anxiety. I was also haunted by the fear that I would never be a good husband or father—that even if those were definable terms and I could pin down those “good” qualities, I would never live up to the expectations of what the baby and she deserved.

Obviously, my life altered dramatically after my son, Hayden, was born. My first twenty-one years of life left me with little sense of personal responsibility, so I felt ill prepared to handle raising a child. Writing gave me an avenue to express my feelings—moments of understanding myself as a father, and being the type of role model my son deserved. It also gave me a reason to interrogate myself and reflect back on who I was

and who I have become. In becoming a parent, I found myself under a daily frontal assault of who I was a person, and I have come to believe that nothing makes us question who we are more than when we raise our own children. For most of us, our children represent small fragments of ourselves, not only because they share our DNA, but also because we raise and care for them, spend time with them, and nurture them in the best way we can. For all these reasons, we cannot help but raise them in our own image because who we are as individuals is sure to impact their development in some way. And that is what has been the most terrifying to me—to confront that responsibility.

When Hayden was about four years old, my now wife, Paula, and I were notified by his preschool teacher that he had been acting out, becoming agitated with little provocation, getting angry and frustrated during transitions from activities, and being mean-spirited toward friends and other staff members. Individually these could be described as “typical” behaviors for a toddler—the terrible twos and troublesome threes extended—but the frequency, duration, and degree of outbursts had his teacher worried, and us as well. To top things off, he was not communicating what was wrong, and did not know how to express his problems or feelings. Instead, he would simply shut down or have an outburst. Out of the thirteen categories covered under the I.D.E.A. (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), the school psychologist placed him within the “emotional disturbance” group. This cause for concern eventually formulated into Paula and I working with Hayden’s preschool teacher and school psychologist to develop an I.E.P. (Individualized Education Program), which is a document for every public school child who needs special education services.



It was in this moment that I was confronted with the idea that maybe what I did in this world had true consequences. I know that might sound melodramatic, but the stakes of having a negative impact on my child were, and still are, high. As we were developing the I.E.P. with school administrators and psychologists, the language and behavior they described seeing in my son seemed uncanny, at least pieces and fragments of it did. Phrases like “shutting down,” “not communicating feelings or emotions,” and “keeping distance” have been, to varying degrees, ones used to describe my own behavior. Some of my thoughts about this were expressed in the aptly named poem, “Creating an Individualized Education Program”:

I get that way sometimes, afraid of my own voice. I wear my emotions on my feet, covered always. See, I can't even do metaphor correctly. What I really mean to say is I fear when my son plays copycat. People tell me they see a lot of me in him, though, he won't understand when I tell him sorry for that.

Recognizing the fact that my behavior influenced the way my son has come to view the world and behaves may not be a very revolutionary idea—in fact it sounds like common sense—but in the constellation of people that enter a child’s life, sometimes the easiest thing to do is to justify or rationalize what others are doing without taking a close look at yourself.

This internalization or introspection of self gave greater clarity into how one should move about in the world. It goes without saying that a person changes after they become the guardian of a child, so much so that it may be more useful to address their prior self as an entirely different being altogether. Parenthood can manifest one’s most urgent paranoias and anxieties in interesting ways, both logical and irrational. In a world where we have grown accustomed to seeing a mass shooting every few weeks, wars that

never end, and resources that get depleted, one has to wonder where our fears lead us, and whether we control them or whether they control us. As Hayden got older, I found myself doing things I could not quite explain. These things included propping a chair up against the entrance door at night, or staying a couple minutes after dropping Hayden off to school and he had already entered the building, just to make sure no gunshots go off. When he was three, I laid on his bedroom floor until he fell asleep. I did this every night for eight months straight. I began to see threats and possibilities of harm in the most innocuous of things, as I assume most parents do after having children. I cannot think of any other way to explain these actions other than to say that I felt a huge amount of pressure placed upon me as a parent. In the poem “Double Checking,” these anxieties become visible through the smallest of creatures. I notice a firefly resting on a door screen, when out of the darkness comes a praying mantis and kills the firefly. The poem ends with, “After awhile I get up to go to bed, turning the light off, seeing my reflection disappear, checking my son's yellow spark of a night-light on the way.” The transition from insect killing mantis to checking the safety of my son is made without pause or contemplation so that the reader has to deal with their connection, and forced to recognize the action at the end. I felt it necessary to convey the type of irrational fears that can occur from seemingly innocuous things.

Even though my son is still young (seven at the moment of this writing), the inevitability of his eventual absence from my life hangs over almost every moment. Eventually, he will leave—probably go to college, maybe fall in love, and maybe start his own family. Time does not so much fly as much as it fleets, and we are all running on borrowed time with a time slot in history we did not ask for. I address this eventuality of

absence in the poem “For my Son.” As humans get older, our bodies start to fall apart in ways we cannot control, but this poem is about what puts us together—what connects those pieces of ourselves. It is our loved ones, our family, and our friends who put us back together, and in the case of our children, there is a fear that they may never return to hold us again, so this poem also serves as a plea—an address to this eventuality:

When I get old and frail,  
 hold me like you do the cats -  
 tight and overbearing.  
 I won't mind, not like the cats do.  
 I'm sure by that time,  
 I will need something  
 to keep me together;  
 my mind wandering  
 into the bones of the past,  
 and my body leaving  
 pieces in places I've forgotten.

If you spend enough time with someone, especially a child, the ways they change and develop can become imperceptible to you—like watching water freeze to ice.

Occasionally you will have family or friends, who have not seen the child in a while, say things like, “Oh, he’s getting so big,” and “he’s reading chapter books now?” I saw writing “For my Son” as my chance to address the eventuality of him leaving and the fear that thought generated for me.

As I have come to learn, every moment counts. I would say that what this collection offers is moments, sprouting from the transient nature of all memories and experience. Many of these poems are, in effect, much like photos, but the moments they capture are often ephemeral. As Hayden grew older, I noticed many of my poems have begun to deal with the topic of childhood—my own to be more precise—as if I am trying to relive or control my own memory. Nostalgia can be dangerous, a neighbor to

sentimentality, especially when it involves childhood and adolescence, which are often symbolized by innocence, weakness, and tenderness. A number of my poems that reminisce on childhood show the tearing down of innocence and the vulnerable state kids can be in.

Death, being the obvious antithesis to life, shatters our expectations of the world when one is young and impressionable. After growing up in rural Iowa and spending a lot of time outside, death seemed to permeate everything in some way, or at least seemed to broadcast its time stamp more visibly on things. Often I have wondered if rural life experiences death more sharply than urban or suburban landscapes. And I am not talking about people from these various landscapes, but the actual structures of rural life. Think of all the abandoned barns, farmhouses, or windmills that once were inhabited and used to sustain life, but now sit, disintegrating with time, forgotten to the world. Real death is being forgotten, and having grown up in a rural community, I think that happens more profoundly in rural places.

However, death is not just the end of something; it is also an opportunity in some ways. If we invest the time in understanding the lessons that the cycle of life and death has to present, we can better prepare, cope, and empathize in the cold, harsh reality of the universe. What death allows us to realize is that life may be transient, but if we do not preserve it, we may lose it forever. If a poem is a sort of artifact, then preserving life within poetry is a small step to giving the subject of the poem a quarter in its immortality meter. In “Extinction,” I share a moment outside with my son, who is chasing a monarch butterfly. At the time, the monarch butterfly was an insect I had not seen in a long while, which created a moment for me to reflect on the “status” of the monarch. Their

population was, and still is, dwindling because of suburban expansion, the use of herbicides, and climate change, but during this reflection I also took time to recognize their importance to the ecosystem. In comparison to some of my other works, this poem might be more heavy-handed, more overtly political, and because of that, it was challenging to write without sounding “preachy”:

Entomologists tell us they are a barometer  
for our planet's health, but even barometers  
try to touch what can't be seen, much like  
our own web of actions, the ripple of footprints,  
and so what will happen without you,  
what will happen to the Viceroy who sought  
only to imitate, or the orb weaver spider  
who rests at the height of the monarch's roost,  
or my son's curiosity, who has caught  
his breathe now, asking *where is it going?*

“Real” death is being forgotten, so it is up to our memories and words to work their way, however minutely, into others, to stave off death just long enough for someone else to notice.

Writing came to me relatively late as a specific form of self-expression. Growing up, my poets were musicians, and I would spend my study halls writing lyrics for songs. As I got older and my world seemed to get larger and more complicated, I turned to more traditional uses of poetry and poetry writing. Poetry has offered me a way to be my own photographer with words and to capture all life’s moments, no matter how small—to show and express the range of human emotion. I want my poems to be tiny containers, seeds of self-expression—tiny, with the possibility of growing larger if given the proper attention. And I want them to be accessible to as many people as possible. I want the syntax to be conversational, the diction drawn from common speech, and I want them to show

a large emotional range, so each poem can carry a weight larger than what appears. Maybe this is a product of my Midwestern humility—to be humble and modest before a task and not call attention to something beyond your means—though I recognize it ceases to be humility when I call it out as such. I have little interest in stylistic complexity, and I do not have much interest in complicated philosophical ideas. Instead, I prefer my poetry to be grounded. Take some of the last lines of the poem “Library Book Mender” for instance, which recounts a dying profession:

The days that remain can be  
 counted on fingers, those same  
 fingers I imagine as being  
 warm and inviting, yet rough  
 and calloused like a deckled edge,  
 old fingers working the last day  
 on the last book, which he remembers,  
 like always, not one thing about it,  
 but knows he's kept one book  
 from time, a little longer.

I am interested in showcasing the small moments in my poetry, the quiet things that no one notices. I think life is lived through these moments, and because they often go unnoticed, I think illuminating them is an important function and purpose of poetry. Sometimes I juxtapose these moments with larger concepts, not necessarily as a form of commentary, but to help the reader understand that even though we are infinitesimally small in the grand scheme of the universe, our actions—however meaningless to us—define who we are to the rest of the world. We are the center of our own universes, but our actions determine how others perceive us.

An example of this appears in the poem “Supermoon,” which opens with the speaker pondering about the moon and earth’s dance on the “cosmic dance floor,” but then quickly moves to the ground—to the level of human experience: “And look at us, / down here, gazing up as if we’re lost. / Maybe instead look next to you, / where you see her, or him. / Move a couple inches closer. / The space between is too much.” In many ways, this poem is reminiscent of “The Reason for Stars” by James Hearst a poet from Iowa who I very much admire and grew up reading. The last stanza of his poem ends with the line, “I’m greater for holding one fruit in my hand / Than a heaven of stars in my eye.” The way I interpret this into my life and my poetry is that no matter how far we reach or how high our ideas elevate us, we are nothing without understanding what we have in front of us—the material life that surrounds and sustains us. A similar sentiment can be found in Ted Kooser’s book *The Wheeling Year: A Poet’s Field Book* where he writes: “Don’t talk to me about the stars, about how cold and indifferent they are, about the unimaginable distances. There are millions of stars within us that are just as far, and people like me sometimes burn up a whole life trying to reach them.”

Kooser’s poetry has been of great importance to my own—the attention to detail, the imagination, and the wonder, altered my perception of what poetry could be. As a teenager, I envisioned poets as a small group of eccentric scribes, writing about obscure concepts from theoretical precepts. “Small” – yes; “eccentric” – probably; but reading Kooser’s poetry showed me that poetry is all around us, and it does not have to come from places as dramatic as Hollywood, or as dangerous as the streets of New York, or as exotic as Maui. Though these places are obviously more than acceptable places to write about, Kooser’s poetry gave me the opportunity to write about love, loss, and the scars in-

between—from things that were right in front of me, like watching a beetle scamper across the carpet or hearing my wife’s footsteps at dawn. Nothing seemed off limits anymore, and a life without limits is the greatest possibility of all. Around every corner stands a chance to create, to shape, to redefine, to challenge, and to embark upon.

However, these moments require a poet’s senses to be active and engaged, and their imaginations to wander and roam. Details are not just useful in “painting a picture” for the reader, but they can also help change the perception, however so slightly, of the picture into something new. Additionally, similar to my own writing preferences and style, Kooser does not trouble himself with difficult diction or the relentless dodging of expectation. Instead, the clarity of language provides an opening for as many English readers as possible to understand and appreciate his works—which is one of my hopes for my own work.

What I have learned to appreciate the most from Kooser’s poetry is his willingness to strive toward basic human truths. The term “universality” gets a bad rap in most English departments, and for good reason, but I find the aspiration to attempt to find universality admirable, and I would like to think poets have the chance to stand humbly before the world to suggest ways to ponder these basic human truths. Kooser, however, is always grounded to sensory experience and the practice of paying attention is rooted in one’s ability to become vulnerable—something I have struggled with my whole life, not just in writing poetry. Vulnerability in poetry is not just about the question of whether a reader will conflate speaker and poet, but it is also inherently about the paradoxes and contradictions we confront as humans. The idiom “write what you know” is not really helpful if you already know it. Rather, it might be more helpful to write in order to



discover what you do not know, or what you want to know. I can honestly say, without irony, that maybe I have been afraid of what I would discover when writing—which sounds a little cheesy but there is a grain of truth somewhere in there. In workshops, common comments on my work were usually framed something like: “what’s at stake in this poem?” or “the distant perspective makes me a little uncomfortable.” I think what was at the heart of these comments has been my unwillingness to implicate myself, or my inability to locate what some of my poems were really about—where the center was, so to speak.

In my own teaching I use Maxine Kumin’s poem “Woodchucks” as a prime example of how to implicate self in writing, and how doing so can lead not only to self-discovery, but also invite the reader to acknowledge their own duplicity in causing trauma or inflicting pain (physical, psychological, or otherwise) on humans or non-human animals. The last line of Kumin’s poem – “the quiet Nazi way” – is so charged that it elevates the poem to an entirely new arena of understanding. Gradually, the poem builds toward this new perspective, but by the end of poem, readers are asked to consider what they show empathy for and whom they show it. This derives from the speaker implicating their self, creating the link between “gassing woodchucks” and Nazism, the method by which many Jews were killed in Nazi Germany. Unlike Kumin, I have had difficulty establishing the “aboutness” of my poems.

Take my poem “Snowman” for instance, and how it developed and transformed over time based on feedback. Like a few other poems, comments I received during workshop included “The ‘I’ needs to work itself out in this poem,” and “this seems to cross the line to almost an omniscient narrator, which I’m not sure we need.” My goal for

the poem was to attempt to address the fleeting nature of childhood and the realization that there is a limited amount of time parents can spend with their children before they grow up to, hopefully, do bigger and better things. The metaphor for this in my poem was the snowman and the physical building of it. Throughout the poem, an omniscient narrator takes the reader through the moment. In the draft starting on line five, after my son attempts to put clothes on himself that do not fit, the speaker moves into the mind of the child: “The struggle was worth the effort though / and so says *I look finished* like a masterpiece / only he himself could see.” Never mind the fact that “the struggle” appears to be doing the speaking instead of the child, but later on, after father and son begin building the snowman, there is another line from this all-knowing narrator: “His smile was that of the child he saw / himself to be – strong, confident, endless.” This last line drew its inspiration from Galway Kinnell’s poem, “After Making Love We Hear Footsteps.” Kinnell ends the first stanza with the line, “his face gleaming with satisfaction at being this very child,” after said child interrupts the speaker making love and crawls into bed with the two lovers. The influence had more to do with sentiment than craft, because in Kinnell’s line the child’s “satisfaction” is made visible by his very being. It does not matter what occurred before that line. The fact remains that the child is satisfied with being the child that he already is. The speaker is not moving into the mind of the child, whereas in my piece, the line used directly inserted the speaker into the child’s mind. Additionally, with my poem the first line begins, “You’d swear he’d never seen snow before,” a sort of colloquial way of stating something very strongly. Why I chose to start a poem about my son and myself using second person narration is beyond me, but it has something to do my anxiety about implicating myself, in whatever way,

within my poems. In fact, the “I” does not appear until the second to last line. The cumulative effect of the poem becomes very distant in perspective—so distant that many readers might ask “what this poem is about? What is at stake for whom?” And this shows in the balance of the content of the poem. A majority of the draft focused on the child, my son, and what he was seeing and doing. However, when asked “who is this poem about?” I responded, “me.” That one question—what is at stake for whom—was a question I did not quite take seriously going into the poem, but it ended up impacting the shape, the distance, and the stakes of the piece.

Once I seriously grappled with that question—who is the poem about—I found the revision process clearer to navigate, like a fog lifting over a mountain pass. This is not to say the poem necessarily turned out “better,” but it had more of a center to hold onto. And the changes were not drastic by any means, with the primary edits occurring by making a shift in the ending:

We stacked them one by one, neat as legos,  
and he looked upon what we had made,  
and I upon something worth holding onto,  
however fleetingly.

Eventually was revised into:

After he rolled each sphere we stacked them,  
together, neat as marshmallows,  
and I looked upon what we had made,  
the beauty of crystal forged by hand,  
caressed by patience and sculpted with care.  
And for a moment I naively believed  
I had stopped the sun from setting.

Legos changed to marshmallows, and the assortment of “he,” “we,” and “I” was streamlined slightly for clarity of subject. Beyond all that, I believe a shift was made to highlight the vulnerability of the speaker, resulting in a focus on the emotional core of the

poem—namely, the cryogenic state we wish to inhabit with our children and the sudden reality of that time-frame being short lived. All of this resulted from finding the “through line” in the comments concerning my poems, and this is one example of a particular poem that was shaped as a result of that critical and constructive feedback.

I have never been comfortable with the vulnerability of writing about myself. I essentially wished to not be noticed. So why write? Why pick the one task where you are forced to display some version of yourself publically. It could be narcissism, though I am liable to talk myself out of that. Maybe writing fits my personality better than speaking and thus is a more “natural” form of self-expression for me. I think that is an okay answer when I am at the bar talking to people who do not really give a shit, but no, what it really comes down to is a need to connect, to reach out to others through my own personal experience and lay bare what I have to offer. I believe I have something important to say, and even if only one person listens then that’s a start. Where vulnerability and writing join is in the expression of fears, obsessions, and anxieties. And even though I grew up in a stable home, never experienced war, or sexual violence, or racism, or sexism, I see have things that haunt me, that keep me awake at night. Writing your most vulnerable self is about dispelling those fears, controlling them, but also reaching out to connect with other people’s fears. In poems such as “Equivalent Exchange,” “Creating an Individualized Education Program,” and even “Injured Robin,” one sees a more overt vulnerability to my poetry, themes that continue to haunt me, which isn’t to say that fear and anxiety doesn’t permeate through the rest of the poems, because it does, but those are examples directly related to my own personal experience, an easier vehicle I think to express those fears.

Pondering how these poems spoke or echo off each other was quite the task. Generally—and I am sure that I am not alone in terms of how I compose poems, in fact it is probably commonplace—I never intend to write a group of poems or a collection. I write a poem here, and I write a poem there. There is never any intentionality in trying to draw connections between my poems. So, upon thinking of any overlap in terms of content or poetic craft, I found myself lacking experience on where to begin. After spreading the poems out on the ground—advice I received from Grace Bauer—I noticed two main threads: (1) all four climatic seasons were displayed throughout the pieces, and (2) multiple generations of my family were prominent. Between these two, a cycle occurs. In the Great Plains the seasons change, sometimes weekly, sometimes daily, but they move cyclically. The same too goes for families, legacies if you will. We pass on what we've learned, how we love, how we fight, and the things change the more they stay the same as the saying goes. And both the seasons and family histories seem almost indomitable, forces we cannot stop and cannot control.

I have compiled the poems in this collection using the cycle of seasons as a way to navigate my family's history, as well as my placement in it. So, as one might expect, the collection starts with spring and summer poems, but many of them also center on my own childhood and adolescence—the youth of spring if you will. As the collection progresses, so do the seasons and myself. Summer turns into autumn and my own adolescence dissolves into young adulthood and becoming a parent. Finally, the last section has a variety of poems with winter as a backdrop, but also delves into the stories of my grandparents and older generations whom I have observed and admired. I end with

a poem about my son, because, as is fitting with cycles, I will help him learn and develop, but maybe just as important, he will also teach me a thing or two as well.

## **An Anthill**

and only two ants streamed in and out  
of their neatly crafted veins. I'm ten,  
equipped with a mason jar my mother  
stored green beans in. That day it held a spider,  
legs snapped but still attached. The truth is  
I needed them broken so it wouldn't run off.  
I turned the jar over, nice and slow.  
The spider plopped without a sound.  
So effortless, so novel did this entertain me  
that I soon stopped laughing. The ants  
pierced and twisted their mandibles  
into the fleshy pea-shaped body.  
Eventually an army surfaced, engulfed the spider,  
and slowly disassembled it for convenience  
to drag below. What I learned years later  
was that preparation was needed for genocide.

## Injured Robin

Heading east, I pursue slowly behind  
soft crunches of the underbrush;  
punctured tree tops shoot sunlight  
to the forest floor. A red tinge blotched

across the gray-brown feathered wings,  
white pus or exposed bone jutting out from  
the shoulder. The wing flutters erratically,  
barely holding itself together.

Chirps swell the air, and I don't know  
her language, but I'm sure that "help"  
is somewhere in those trills.  
After a minute, without pause or notice,

she hops just once and sits down,  
resigned to soil and leaves, her cries  
mere episodes now, distant,  
incidental. For a moment I stop

and stare, helpless, afraid in my small  
self because for all intents and purposes,  
many of which I don't yet understand,  
she seems to have given up, lost

all appearance of carrying on. Weak,  
ready to die, not a song left in her now.  
And it is with that I walk back home,  
as hollow as the chamber of my gun.



## Equivalent Exchange

She told me she was pregnant before  
the first commercial break. We weren't married  
or anything like that. She was barely old enough  
to sue someone, and I still believed in sunsets  
and hoped I wouldn't have to wake up. When I did  
it was a few months later because of two feet  
kicking in her womb. I remember telling myself to man-up.  
I'm still not sure I'll ever know what that means.  
She hadn't even regretted getting a tattoo yet,  
or voted Democrat to piss off her parents.  
It took months before I told my friends.  
Stupidity looks like that, you know - feeble and easy.  
I've been thinking about this television series lately.  
The opening credit scene says humanity can't obtain  
without first giving something of equal value in return.  
I have always wondered if creation and destruction  
occupy the same side of the same coin, and if, in fact,  
they are something like how I destroyed her life  
while making another.

## Creating an Individualized Education Program

Our meeting is in the preschool breakroom. Pictures of rainbow homes and stick figures line the walls, each a little bit the same in a different way. One of the people with post-nominal titles sitting around the table tells me *he qualifies*, which is funny because I don't remember entering him into anything. *Emotional disturbance and risk of depression* they finish. After that they tell me it's nobody's fault, which I translate as being mine and why I begin to imagine myself in front of a mirror, crumbling like week-old pastries, unable to say anything worth saying. I hear my wife in the background ask me *why can't you tell me how you feel?* I get that way sometimes, afraid of my own voice. I wear my emotions like socks, covered always when I go out. See, I can't even do metaphor correctly. What I really mean to say is that I fear when my son plays copycat. People tell me they see a lot of me in him, though he won't understand when I tell him I'm sorry for that. What I hope for by the end of this meeting is they have a plan for saving me from myself. They won't though. And I feel small and useless for being so selfish. This is for him, and there's no magic spell. It's always something tiny, something incremental. *We just need him to use his words.* Yes, lets start there.

## Moving Out of Grandma's House

I'm sitting in the chair where Grandma stitched her last piece quilt, which still hangs above the alcove in the Victorian. She moved out two months ago, quiet and stubborn, reaching the age where the cupboards got too high and stairs too steep.

The new owners are here too, checking each nook I hid in as a boy, hearing the creak of the attic stairs. Nothing seems ready to leave: the electric organ is still bolted down in the living room, in the kitchen, a jar of candy corn, years past softness,

and in the basement I can almost taste the canned beans waiting for supper. In the living room, a Veteran's calendar reads: *the greatest casualty is being forgotten*. As the room slowly empties, I'm scrambling to gather the scattered shards of what remains,

a dustpan of memories to carry back, bit by bit, but instead my thoughts are broken by one of the movers, who tells me the chair has got to go, and he throws them in his truck, leaving me to stare at the impression, deep in the carpet.