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The Skinny House

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THE SKINNY HOUSE

By

Leo A. Jilk

Bachelor of Arts - English
Columbia University
2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts -- Creative Writing

Department of English
College of Liberal Arts
The Graduate College

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Thesis Approval

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Abstract

The title of my thesis is *The Skinny House*, a phrase which might indicate: 1) The body of a human or other animal, 2) A coffin or grave, and 3) A residence in Mamaroneck, New York built of recycled materials (e.g. railroad ties and a chicken coop) by an African-American carpenter named Nathan T. Seely in 1932. Seely and his brother ran a business that thrived for several years prior to the Great Depression, catering specifically to Southern blacks moving north. While only a few pages of my thesis are directly concerned with the Mamaroneck residence and its social implications, I was intrigued by this ten-foot wide house on a narrow lot which was a gift from one friend (an Italian-American neighbor to whom Seely had originally sold the plot of land on which the home is built) to another down on his luck (Seely). The phenomenon of the “skinny house” is also associated with an architectural phenomenon spiritually antithetical to Seely’s gift—the “spite house,” a home built primarily to obstruct another property, prevent construction in a given neighborhood, or more generally to inconvenience and offend a neighbor.

What else do skinny houses and spite houses have to do with my poems? Before pursuing my Master’s degree, I worked as a marketing manager at an architecture firm. I have always been fascinated by how buildings and landscapes are intertwined with people’s inner lives—even more so now that I am raising a child abroad. Audre Lorde said, “We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.” “Skeleton architecture” suggests the bones of an architectural or animal body—that framework without which the structure will not stand but which is only apparent when revealed by 1) an artist’s rendering—i.e. a sectional drawing or floor plan— or

2) the destruction, or gradual decay of said structure with the passage of time. These two possible forms of revelation tell me that art is a labor of both construction and salvage.

Salvage in art is honoring the small, momentary, else neglected objects and perceptions in the world (to include the writings of others). One must honor particularly that which resists interpretation, which remains itself and not (or not any longer) part of a system. As George Oppen slightly misquotes Charles Reznikoff: “The girder, still itself among the rubble.” As Hannah Arendt has written of Walter Benjamin (the lover of verbal scraps, debris, and the past for its own sake), “For him the size of an object was in inverse ratio to its significance.” Benjamin himself wrote, “What seems paradoxical about everything that is justly called beautiful is the fact that it appears.” The poet is tasked with recording not only beauty, but also the phenomenon of its appearance, the change that it makes in the world and the poet.

An architect friend said to me, “When I was young I thought the aim of architecture was beauty, poetry, sculpture. Now I realize the most important thing is that it doesn’t leak.” While I attempt to seal the leaks in my verse, to make solid musical and intellectual constructions, I do not mask or shelter the core of a poem—whether it is emotionally warm and dry, or cold and wet. A poem is also what Philip Whalen called “a picture or graph of a mind moving.” If “recollected in tranquility” (Wordsworth), that graph nonetheless records the seismic spikes of rage and fear; at times it mimes the lull of workaday heartbreak and regret. My poems are bound to the weather in the mountains and the desert, the oceans and the rivers, the factories and the graveyards of the places where I was raised and where I have passed the seasons—I hope you will hear them.

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PERIODIC TABLES

We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.
(Henry David Thoreau)

*

I would crawl back over my humble beginnings
a beaten dog cowering in a corner of the garage behind those once-intimate clothings.
Delancey Street at the edge of my thumb,
Hell's Kitchen the line of my middle finger—friends
a distance, the green
rivers around the island like jaws,
piers spacing the teeth of the Hudson—

A father and a son.
I want to be a rider.
My hand rests on the map marking the place where
I sit in relief.
I could tell the story of the harp that draws the islands
to the land like a hook in the lip

But if she won't come back to me, with my tomahawk stick
raised—the brave isn't afraid to jump.
A maimed dog's voice behind the steel Mistral
memorial in Valpo—you might—
and she raised her finger rusted knife-level to her throat.

Times I would rather sleep in the cold
bridge hooked in the crook of my hip, plunging me
out to the sea.

I want to be a rider.
Poppy behind my ear.
If only they knew my cosmopolitan sympathies.
Turning this orange brick over and over in my hand.

For the Asbestos Abatement Workers of the United Nations Capital Master Plan

*... hic veneficiis resistit omnibus privatim Magorum ... Regum inde funebres tunicae corporis favillam ab reliquo separant cinere. (Pliny the Elder)**

At the sunny 49th Street gate
I received the dispositions of men
Keeping one eye
On their idling pickups' hazard lights, come in on the turnpikes
From the Island, Jersey, Connecticut, Mamaroneck
To deliver notarized statements to no one
To me:

Manufacture of narcotics, second-degree murder, embezzlement,
Unleashed dogs, eventually forgiven
After an eventless decade's
Passage, background checks.

*

Our offices are cold this winter. They bring in
Bedbug-sniffing dogs.

One worker wears the collar of a priest
In his passport photograph.

The dead wish
To forget

Begs,
Does this exile outlast grief,
Burning in the lungs all day?

*

Each heart, upended ziggurat,
Wears around her amphibian rooms, the trauma
Of a puddled prison grounds.

The skeleton of some Detroit, some straits, some skinny house.

*

Each crime is a half-life, past which vanishes—

Penultimate of mourning:
Pain as wished for presence, final
False name match.

* ... it wards off spells, especially those of Magi ... in the tombs of kings it separates the ashes of the corpse from the remaining cinders.

Ontario

You offered me your old pills. I said
It's alright, I've got poetry to deal with it.
Of course it doesn't work. If it did
I would never work. Anne Carson said
I want to be unbearable. America, I stopped
At the right time, loving you too much,
Going to poor extremes.

I loved you too far on Second Street,
Black edges of the linden trees
Where the cold road curves
Out alone along the blue-faced river.
Bats chase weary eyes, used Pontiacs veer off
Heading for the bridge.

Meanwhile, I never will get back to the sparkling lake.
Only you can bear to hear this.

21, New York

the man standing upright in the dream

(Kenneth Koch)

Set yourself to write a poem about the elements. It doesn't work
To speak of alloy, minor aerospace components,
When the skeleton architecture of a building hangs upon the air, loose
Mantle leaning,
Small.

Let someone else parcel out the limbs, the absent space, wrinkles in the sheet.
You are the wrong person altogether
To speak of these Columns of Smoke, watching
From a rooftop bar, while kids throw Frisbees in the park.

Pain comes later,
Going to work on the river--
Little cups of foam on wave.

Along the South Street Seaport
Feel no one
Running
Numb as a woman
Fallen drunk in the snow.

Words also come slowly (mixing up the decades now), like centuries
Or airplane bottles stuck in tops of soda cans.
I was alive for most of them—winds carrying always, a cloth.

Bronx, 21

The heart
does not close
so no one holds her

perfunctory consumptive nightmares;
rigor in the limbs; the building starts
to slide out from beneath
the feet and stairs crumble
tearing with the nails to climb back
to the only child

and so one holds her

Down the street from My Place Pizza, kitty-corner from the C-Town
Supermarket (sawdust in the aisles) is Poe's Cottage,
Hapless prey of family horrors *de rigueur*--

When in fact all that came later, unpreserved
by correspondences' formaldehyde.
This lettered time, by all accounts,
was one of *supreme sweetness*, charming ghosts,

Graham-cracker walls.
So neat, so poor, so unfurnished
The place is a beautiful one.

Arrowheads

Then let us fly. Let us fly back, whistling up
Against the water stains on mossy walls.
Let waystations caption us for children. Let the plains climb out over us
From under sea blue bottle shards.

Hear us Lord. We are nigh.
You will know our earth as we do, damn all
Nebraska.

*

William Taft is out since midnight walking
Helen, quiet among the sapling cherries.
Helen still along the basin, William fluffing God's pillows.

Lord, let the Delaware flow back over the gentle armies of the night.
We sink to sleep in flint fatigues beneath your banks.

Then draw ourselves back in, mute fingers signing: We will not be free until we fall
Into the open-armed water of our death. Lord,
Kiss our chipped and burrowed skulls:
Here, where our fevers fill with sand.

January Tenth, Winona, Minnesota

once

in a house I know:

I have a pain in my mother

*Your costume isn't ready
for the Christmas play*

*I haven't even dressed you to be
the sea anemone*

*your costume isn't ready for
the Christmas play*

now who knows
there may never be a nativity scene

in a tidal pool

we are too naked to say
we are not perpetually dreaming

Pocatello

Oh, distances
In distances
The soul outweighed

The body.

When I took the poet
At his word,
Behind each sounded bird

Some dark wound

And flowered
Plain,
I sought a death

Of lead

In keeping
With the mocking syllables
Of endless yellow

Seas of straw.

Gulls wing across
Drawn by the shine
Of machinery

A Western death—

Bird, throw yourself
Into slow motion,
Our hunters' path

Clack!

We both are shot
I in my
Imagination

You through your racing heart

Eyes muddled
With maudlin tears,

Lungs down in the bloody

Grass.

The milky plains
Preach their own
Desperate beginnings

In the death

Of a boy still pretending.
Truly,
Adios

To saying it to keep it

From happening,
Eyes
A little drier

If only
For the dust
Then shall we pray

This dust rise up again
Between us

And them

Stones
Who mark our
Trail.

That Life is a Rumour, Death a Town Gossip

Let's face it, by hardship I mean the price of cheese
Or sending my kid to the Ivy League. I grew up
In a suburb of Highway 61, one of those 10,000
Well-heeled Midwestern kids. The smart ones all went on
To faceless posts. Those who could not had kids early
And are working at the Dairy Queen, or off
Swelling the grave of an elipsed kiss.

I would remain here forever in the apse, Cerah,
Desperate to fuck you on the tracks. I can see our lives
Hunched up against the sagebrush and the crushing Union Pacific
But I lie. I remember nothing but your face, its bones
In me.

For James Wright

The ocean never solved the whole loneliness
Of the Midwest, though I see it there, unburdening
The lakes themselves of their spilled, rusted harvest. In the silt,
Drivers licenses explain those dead fifty years before
Went missing. We kids were bereft. My friend was the son
Of the police chief. He spilled some secrets about their faces
Hunched up against the windshields. The Mississippi sounds kind; I guess
It's all those consonants, but she does nothing for her lovers,
Those boys who went back down. A river freezes
Her lovers in their bulk.

Viatique (Wamic)

Smoke rises up out of the valley
Which emerges after dreams
Of catastrophe, I, climbing from the wreckage
Into the first sunset breaking long
Against the mountain, underside of day.

I reach down under moss stones
Heaving fresh green skeins to the blind
Sunfish at the bottom of the crick-bed.

The first one who kissed me
Became a sylph, a slender fish, and finally
The shadows of the slightest rushes.

I stare down into the arrowheads
Buried in my thighs, encrusted
With tiny freshwater stones, willow
Branches and the molted fur of my first dog.

Her ghosts are dancing in the fields grown over
With excessive sleep and care. She flings herself,
Heart bursting through the reeds, the slender rushes
Fishes never dreamed, nuzzling their orange bellies
Deep and deeper in, burying their children down among
A thousand windows in the silt.

Kyiv Evening Tram

The conductor climbs out
in her long wool skirt
to shut the catching doors.

The cold sinks in ancient
clothes
beneath the skin.

Lights all out
but one bare
bulb the shadows chase

The ceiling
rails climb us
old men scrape

Letters
in the frost
windows

The seatbacks
of sleeping women dream

*

Gogol wrote a letter
to Nabokov

Sometimes I too think language is our one redeeming cause. And now I'm going to sleep for a long time—call it eternity when I wake up

My country will not recognize me

*The language
I don't know*

*Become the one
I understand*

Envoi

time to leave the weather of this
lily country white
spring with a little carpel enjambment

a year ago I was writing
a kind of sestina
now it's too noisy

my little family
all the while
our lives a train
following me

and our children small
through the station

FROM THE RUSSIAN

*count me again on the fingers of a single hand
that's more than enough for me
one who never made it
one always running late
one terrified
one forever
waking up along the way*

*and one other
nameless*

(Stanislav Lvovsky)

On Reading (Zukofsky's Essays Again)

the force of it
that is music

in words as through stone
with words *entire*

canto against canto, and the time pauses between each

*the music is always an immediacy of the entire
structure*
of

which I always think the

robbery of these, *the suggested music
of all the Cantos at once:*

truth *sea-sickness*

expression of an
entire life within a

life boat

George Cabot Lodge in
Henry Adams

late morning dying

meaning a light
was known to fall—peacockish

dashed with scarlet oaks
amber-dusted keepsakes

of a saint's gauntlet
mother's hair
absolutely refined by it

Pepper Flowers

Construction

in whose eye
the earth trembles
the zero
ground after
backhoes teeth unframe her
the other
day
evil eyes of glass
hung along the terrace with piperacae
now the weight of chalk

the third floor daughter

has for-
got to take
her toy 6 train
with a diamond bullet
cries for days
bodies tremble, arms jut free
rails thrust our skulls
into this orange soda sun on the shelves
and sawdust floors

with lean blood
don't be afraid
they maudlin say

to her

over years
alfalfa
stems scratch the leather soccer ball

a bloom springs

the dust cloud opens
trachea startle and swim
kiss him kiss him say goodbye

straw stalks

stubble in a

fall field

breathing

Père Corot

I see a way forward
precluding any marital bond
some lindens there I need to paint
on the faces of my children—a road
opening (not just yet—canvasbacks

not much made for memoir.
Far better mud, simple lead to melt
the local ruins.

*I made a quick descent,
the bees followed me like punctuation
into the brackish pool
full of posies
and the weddings I forgot:
the sun not setting on a single branch.*

He trudges out face bent away
not just from her—alas we see her face!
In rosy profile handcuffed,
his thumb measures her
pulse through the sights of the lyre

In an hour the singer is torn to shreds.
The myths will see to that.

In this hour we are the onlookers,
shroud-faced household gods, must-grey
statues in a sea-red wood.

de Chirico

standing in an anonymous New York gallery or is it Venice, black
and while you can see that the tiles are likely some
awful green like in that village outside Rivne municipal forestry station
where I observed the local elections right up til the end
and at the end they shared with us in the back room some sausage,
coffee, greatly needed, dark bread and a little cheap cognac
maybe they fixed the elections in those 10 minutes when
more awake than I had been all that day I stood behind
a half-closed door well that was also de Chirico making the same expression
as the sculpture of a dead hand head eyes closed resting on a platter but it doesn't matter I
mean

it does that this old man the white-haired artist is laughing
inside while he puts on the most dour expression for the tanned playboy standing
next to him thin tie smiling thinking here I will be remembered next to the great
artist anyway it's monochrome directly to the left of the statue's head quite white
a lobster below that a few fish turned to the side the one closest
to the viewer with a single eye wide open it's how it is, like James Wright's
Paris in autumn or I mean to say Venice Apollo the fisherman's the only face where
the God is alive to learn you are terminal is a hell of a thing I guess
my aunt took it in stride though I wasn't there and it's awfully awkward
to ask but there she is smiling bald in a wheelchair where a few months before
she was the caretaker of a child grown up on tumultuous plains I know a man
the moon's fire itself the picture of the young fisherman's face kissing
the calm rain as the coral sends its mystery so

The Naming of Rivers (after A.R. Ammons)

The day wincing in the breeze from its bulk
Shaggy treetops hunch shadowing the fallen needles
In the park and the rain above sits casting supercilious
Axes down broken crooked smiles upon the unsuspecting
Masses.

It is Christmas and the diplomats have left
Their tenderly resplendent tree-filled homes susceptible
To abnegation and gone caroling. Times I would like to sing
Some of the shore pine, lilted by a wind that blindly
Cuts from off the gunmetal Pacific in
December.

Still, it is left to me to name other places—the workshop
In the shed down from the farmhouse where the earth
Is crusted black with oil, and I dig for discarded shocks
From machinery that blinds the eyes of seagulls, sets them
Wandering.

The origins of my birth are sufficiently scattered
In the chock-full basements of the antique stores, here
And there a volume of some old Ivy Leaguer who won
The Yale Younger Poets' prize then listed off
Into obscurity. The owner is impatient behind the cashier's desk
Tinkering with a watch or ancient wind-up toy and knows
Just a little better than you how every single word in his shop is
Weighed.

As for my death, that long, loose outsider who meets me in a car,
Along the fence at playground's edge, on a bench beneath
The sugar pine in some foreign park feigning a familiar glance,
Where does he leave me? Remembering, I guess, the old blanket
Authorization of nostalgia. Though my funereal mound be long forgot
Beneath the gamesmanship of winter leaves and careless, unforgiving
Frost.

The snake of our birth rambles through the undergrowth
Smiling blankly at the fulfillment of the lowest branches
And the chaff. Blisslessly he slithers out the wrack of dry
Ribs, the snake in a dream may also be the undercarriage of the heart
A memory one whistles not to end—James Joyce's daughter
In her festal gown glancing confusedly at everything in
Joy.

The deep. Mindblowing disguises. My thoracic cavity
Is rent from me. Far be it from me in the undergrowth here
Where the kissing termites glisten through. *Just like old Saxophone Joe*
Oh me oh my I am become the air between the
Notes.

O the madness of another's notes left blankly on the ironing board
The television set the microwave half-infested with infant roaches
The bookcases and especially the tomes themselves when no one comes home with
A pizza, a box of storebought cookies, and whole milk to entice them back to
Sanity.

Me who couldn't follow through with acceptance of the spiritual facts
Desultory in the back of the L-shaped hall where a dumpster sits against the freight
Elevator carrying the outlines of our wishes back across the Holland Tunnel
To the other side and drops us from our
Day.

Beneath me the sounds of other machines, the pewter clasp-
Bracelets of a further love who walks the town abroad already
In the pitter patter of an aphid from the wheat field causelessly preferring the company of Lovers.

The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher

About a half a dozen miles out
Beyond the last bud that blossomed, or
Thereabouts, the thirsting obelisk that was the sky took a last
Look down and fell. At the outer edges of its compound eye
Of some melon-eater, like a dream that lasts so long one begins
To think only of the dream in the dream: even-clustered grapes.

A figure who appears piece-meal on the page, drawn by the berries
Of a red day that bore the eyes out to their last conjecture, then died.
One begins to wonder whether, arms outstretched, it's something else
He is after. If it's the opposite of that? Instead of these berries standing in
For whatever sweet maternal offering or cold soldiered soul, these hints
Are nothing. One hungers for cold berries.

Yet joy is mystery, the blanched quintessence of the birches, some
Newts appearing in the air from a Volkswagen van afloat as if a helium taxidermist
Were sleeping in the back. Life is not a Beuys installation, even if
Every artist is a human being

Daubed in honey and gold, speaking to a rabbit
Not from a hat, but dying in her arms

The real world waits out there, though one has been dreaming so long
One begins to wonder, just past the breaking point of the last wave in sight
From Sandymount. And here you are a pinprick for a moment, white as sand:
There, splash.

Desultory Dream of Frank Stanford

After leftovers of spinach and lamb, I struggle to sleep. The languages
Of my daughter cut my lungs like a wind
Off the absent sea. I have been conspicuously praying to my own eyes
In negative rhyme, hitting the nail in the face until
It's bent over to the side like a stump behind the house where my father
Let me beat crooked nails. You can't see me,

That's how it goes these days. Try to string it
Into epic and it breaks along a single line of song.

The dead he knew saw someone like a signalman, flashing the light you used to find in
books.

The internet is crawling
As my girl begins to cry for me, I must have shut my eyes
For no one but myself. I can stand it. Although a quivering, an itch
Creeps up my calves, rends its clothes and shivers out over my skull
Like a dog's dish overturned to let the writhing maggots
Breathe, or a corpse kicked loose into a rhythm of shimmering wings.

Speaking of the dead he meant the helpless without sleep who wonder
At the beginning of each night if this tremendous dream will pass--
Withdrawal from what exactly? The light on the Algerian oaks
Swings out a metronome, or a pendulum ride with the same drunken pause
At the height of its rude ark.

Secretary

He was expert in dissembling, in making his way among others without arousing suspicion. Only a few of us who knew him well, who knew what he was experiencing, could see him falter and waver, manipulate others into doing things for him that he was afraid he might fumble ...

(Paul Metcalf)

I must force myself into this territory—despite the occasional impulses fathering me on. It is nothing like a diary, she explained, this is keeping the calendar of others, this is keeping secrets. Yet there is a fine feeling comes over one when it is done, the boat resting calmly above the waters in a reeling slowness which must be the opposite of speed, though it were speed I was seeking. The clock sings out beyond transparent walls of ballistic glass where the mist out over Algiers Harbor lies, barely seen, and hardly walked,

The canopy sings

I use the word because it is magical: daughter. Like the male but unsullied by sidereal baggage—naught but Earth. Daughter. And I watch her close the door to her room and disappear. Before she was born, this was the distance I had prayed for in warding off (for a long time I struggle to recall the word *superstitiously*, the son. (Her door is open again,

And she paces the dark space between the lintel and the jamb

A burden responding. Ajar. A crack between the doors. Light empties out over her bed from the hardly diaphanous curtain—a short bridge to the house of the general: fir trees, ants, beneath the road sand: blocks of outrageous crimson and dun that quickly turn opaque,

Caramel beige when mixed with rainwater

A burthen to read the letters, a time-sensitive approach to words—the distance implied by certain. Aphasia, what was it came over me these years—Life is not a baseball diamond, a pizza party, I never heard Judy Garland sing “The Trolley Song,”

The little hunchback

A burthen, so much so I am terrified and tremble in my room before I can think not to respond

The drafts folder fills with leaves they say we have become desensitized, unresponsive in a Vegas hospital, filled with printer toner, spiny dust of holly-grape, coagulants, eyebright, rat poison, hibiscus, pulmonary emboli,

Whatever could be found, lucky day

A burthen. The impulse seeds into another region of the room—over spent magazines, makeup troughs, Ziploc bags of expired membership cards to where the light fled, not to say the image, bright elsewhere, end of the line

Brown Hair, Soft Light

Interesting, this gray frame of sky around the grass
Of which no single blade but swathes,
Armies faded green, advance
Beneath reporters' leather heels in an enormous
Washed-out light—Precarious director's filters,
The telling arraignment of weather, and the lintel's shadow
Hollowing her open face.

That was Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman walking
In *All the President's Men*, circa 1975.

This is 2015, and our catholic wounds bleat into sight,
Ambulance bells in the sun,
Would leap the perimeter of the Embassy
In Election season, one almost thinks. She answers her suburban door
Onto platitudes, cobalt eyes. (small talk about the expected,
Invisible child)

Gun grey ocean air vivifies the light—
Iris like children's blankets worn
Lackluster, threadbare in the careless hands of love.

The directness of Hypocrisy, her innocence,
Is medicine in desperate times. She appears unfeelingly
the victim.

That said,
Nature be comforted
by all things manmade worn thin
from use:

Rubber soles of shoes,
green paper wrists
translucent

blank tympanum
gone colorless as
light

Poem in Another Language

I saw her too. That virgin running
Who will never be kissed, a brunette
I would love wouldn't you? For me she is
A bookstore in Brussels where I hear the explosions
In black and white photographs. My heart quivers in the cellars
Of Lviv. Singing in the meadows of Turgenev's
Hunter's daybook is her heart. There!
Squirting bloody kisses on the ground.

Envoi (Tephra)

leave comfort root-room

in other words no ex
ample précis for the buriables
of survival legend rising from ash
the dead—splinters in the lake's grey foot

distance shrinks

hollow straw

for warmth
burnt matchstick iconography

bone flakes under ground

THE SKINNY HOUSE

leave comfort root-room ...
(Gerard Manley Hopkins)

The Skinny House

Every colored man needs a home.

(Nathan T. Seely)

I just moved to the neighborhood and I'm not here anymore. It's not a sense of grief, just how it is, I guess.

I can see—no, can recount—the townhouses—every goddamn one possible reflected in the window of this burger joint. Every space is filled, every eye is taken up, but I am new here, I am not.

An orange light covets me from afar, behind the fauns. I don't mean to think of them tonight, but it's October, and the will is calm, like the will that brought me here. I need to look without seeing, at the antennae and the ancient chandeliers. There is someone like me on the top floors. He owns half the apse, his is the only light on.

If I could wear the clothes, if I could pull off the old man buttons, if I could afford the simple tragedies of wealth, it would be a nice touch. But I was always a tad impoverished. Even in those salad days before they figured me out for a welsher and I fell on hard times.

I am a little bigger than the rest of the universe. It seems an apt description of the New York architect, driving at a million miles an hour through New Mexico to his failure, billing it all to the client to whom the money means nothing, reading *The Fountainhead* as he goes. It will be a lawsuit, and after all, who knows the story of a man?

Taking a shower while my girlfriend sleeps, back porches of the neighborhood visible from the bathroom window. It's like what Frank said to them still out there chasing his ghost on the Internet: *How shitty white people treat them. And the blood came out like a bird / We ran into a sycamore tree*

For me I suppose it a linden. I've tried before to talk about the swallows I saw hunched up in their cave in space. Mother was playing *The Four Seasons*. Maryhill was in my distant mind, conjuring you smashed against the rapid tires. Closed box ceremony, which meant. It meant your head was squashed, exploded, irrecoverable, whatever. *Painless*, as they say,

To die so fast.

It looks. It burns in me, though I see nothing. Still. Good that it still sees me then, that I put in the coffin what I did, whatever toy we touched together. *Death is a good word.* He saw the separation between the living and the dead, but fell in love with the one that was in the beginning, those birds of prey my father gestured to from behind the wheel of our old Pontiac.

Lately I've been working in security, drilling, putting the casual in casualty. Say again for morale, how copy? Death is a curse on the living, a stumbling block. I forsake you now. I abandon you for fame. Your mother was a stupid Christian, father I don't know, brother a grocery bag. Fuck you

Brian. You would have become one of them, more than them, if you had the chance. But you never did. Fuck you Francis.

Coney Island Baby

So shall it be swamp-rat Rimbaud
your heart is a curse
you dinosaur
you make me / I must breathe
harde yron. I cannot love you as I did
Herman, Frank. I have a daughter
You know what this means. Not a lot I spose M
y heart in gloveboxes to you
who lost your gloves. My suicide is over
let it ride to misery in sunsets let it be. This cowardice is courage

It's all failed, every aspect of your death. Every rowboat you set out from taking off your shirt
holding out your hand. I hold the knife up to her throat and cake myself in your sweet blood. I'll
be your Huckleberry, drink your gin.

I mean no language exists up there in whatever nonsense sky of this the earth. Chthonic gods
whose phalli crack the earth, whose business is show business—that's our racket. I can sit in calm
and recollect a passion or I can stake a claim. Then let me goddamn stake my claim.

At every dock the dockmaster's heart
breaks at 5am the storm. I go swimming
Back to my country, where the dust flies over the pond
And we swallow arrowheads, swallow
Snakes into the shaking heart. Thumb. Thump.
The caddis-worm wallows in his web of stone
As anger darkens the alfalfa plains, stretches out into enmities of mailboxes magic to the boy alone.

In Algiers, where the foxes cry, falling
Into mountains where a few hunters lie
In wait with only knives—I sail home, first diving deep
Into the waters of my last breath, then hovering
Again, whistling a tune to bring the angel who sits reading
Next to me. Once in a while she lets out mortified anaphora—*never, never.*
Never, never.

Wisdom comes from elsewhere, quickly
Melting, and those airdrops, though foreseen,
Are the impulse of an other
Energy, one who drank too much and foresees
Darkness in every chamber of the living.

I've begun a long poem, one I hope might pull me into the twenty-first century.

One might do well to keep one's distance

among em the folk from whom all poetry flows and dreadfully much else.

The pure products of America go crazy

The roots of words gone mad in the subways

I never believed those lines. Madness yes. Of course you had not

This world clean fails me

This going mad of a friend or acquaintance comes straight home to every man who feels his soul in him,—which but few men do. For in all of us lodges the same fuel

Seen what I had seen, Mimus Polyglottos,

Differing from isle to isle. Ever

Question the immutability of species

In this blue world.

Regard all sentient beings as your mirror.

Goodnight, Lou.

*In memory
of the
many colored servants
of the
Washington Family
Buried at
Mount Vernon
From
1760-1860
their
unidentified graves
surround this spot
1929*

Someone in a park ranger's costume is
Not playing Washington, that would not be fair.
Honors him by the placing of a wreath.
I don't say there's anything wrong
With that random century.

I never left off loving death
Who calms me when the clock is wrong,
Closes my eyes when he writes the music
And throws me farther than I dare to walk
In childhood fields,
Crossing the barbwire
Wading through the flooded ditch
Leaving me the sloughed off dream of what's to come
In the mountains, the shadow deep in tree-side
Twisting the branches into a blazing
Ark.

To reach his grave climb just out of earshot.
That I do believe, Will Lee.

No, it's the dead that rankle me--
Rose upon rose of lamp-black windowpanes,
White houses.

Inscriptions

*Now do mind inter here our how precious gift more our parent home ...
of their kin perpetual, brother, ever out here fare well.
(Zukofsky/Catullus 101)*

*Dear thou art, and pretty dear
To one that's left alone
In this wild world of care.
(inscribed on a grave in Pioneer Masonic Cemetery)*

John Atterbury

Lord you ride unbridled,
None signed the release. I found you here after
A bout with mortality.

I was on the losing end. I too sang once
Of the dinners taken with this couple
And that.

Still, I think I taught my daughter right—
I was neither persnickety nor an angel
Nor an angel, certainly.

The kingdom of heaven is a kingdom
Alright. The waters are
Hardly clean
And the Bolsheviks bang their ladders
Almost all night long.

Sometimes signs swing for decades in the wind
Over the same shop:
РЕМОНТ.

*

The truth is we don't have much
To tell. The waiters walk in
And out.

A Russian couple looks at me like an
Objet d'Art. I sit writing
A poem about these artists of the sixties

Influenced no doubt
By that new flick
With the girl who's also a villain
In Batman

She wanders
Door to door begging her fellow employees
To let her

(Take her pills
In moderation.

Keep her job, I mean.
I saw it in Zagreb, in my broken French.
Didn't understand
A thing. Except

As Creeley says
*And death also
can still propose the old labors.*

Hoc opus, hic labor est. Yes

That's it,

deux
jours,
une
nuit

*

The crux may be
These characters—let's face it--
We look down on

Almost every one.

The klieg lights in the park bark
Insouciances
Why should I care
What sage tree speaks
Its wooly mansion
About forty degrees from my heart.

The spruces tangle arms,
Their hearts have no leaves
Just tender skeletons for limbs.

The Algerians
Have had their fill of beer
And are yelling in the park

Punching each other
Behind the cigarette stand
Brothers, it's alright. For you

It's the first time. Soon
You will be sick.
Me, I must find excuses.

*

Bernhart Korten, Crossing of the Snake

Conserve your ammunition, friends,
Buried here among the paltry pine.

Save your bullets. Though there's no one
Here to spend them on, take heart—the enemy
Awaits us in the trees. This land is ours,
By God, then let them come.

In ten hours,
Steptoe ordered fire thirty-seven times.

By aid of a time-piece
Or his inner clock, he was wise to the hours
Of the clock. For here I lay,
Twenty-two years later, dead
Of my own accord. Ha ha.

My headstone knocked off to the side
Likely as not my gravest foe will be
Some bus driver gone East
To gather stones for his garden.

We beat retreat, left our bivouac

In pouring rain at night. Left, three rounds a piece,
Flak jackets dripping rain.

Here I lay with little Quinn, the neighbor's
Child and safe by his inscription:

*Tread softly, for an angel band doth guard the silent dust, And we can safely leave our boy, our
darling, in their trust.*

Pictures of Me

Many tiny fenced in areas on ranches are used as burial grounds, often largely forgotten. But not by God, for they lie where the rains fall and the snows pile up and the winds blow free in the eternal cycle of sunshine and storms, by George!
(The Dalles Chronicle, June 9, 1966)

Oh everybody's dying just to get the disease.
(Elliott Smith)

Whitman Adios,
Said the prospector
To the chief
Of the Geographical Survey.

One by one we make
Our way to the starting line.
Because we are poor,
Because our parents don't much care
For this kind of thing,
No photographs,
No uniforms.

People didn't live in photographs those days.
Perhaps it was a sign of progress, ingress.

We strung these small green placards on us.
It began to rain.

Singing on the bus back home, we stopped at a bar. Twelve-year old children. Our red-faced coach was depressed, but we had already forgotten that he screamed at us, felt naught but empathy.

We walked into the tavern
Notched grey scar on White River Falls down
Over our children's eyes squinting
Out of the foothills route
197 heads up a gulch

We all drank what our parents drank little Jamie had a vodka Quinn had a vodka on the rocks beer after beer into the late evening when Will slumped over in a booth I lumbered over to the jukebox didn't recognize the songs

Jamie silent until then
Walked over handed me a heart
Knitted white and pink striped

Cotton me in black spandex shorts black with broad vertical yellow neon bands down the thighs
note says *Leo, you are such a sweat boy do you love me*

Yes

No

With checkboxes readymade on graph paper

She tumbled over into the barstool in front of me and collapsed on the carpet

Jamie I slipped down off my stool leaping from the first rung to the ground she was laying with her
head cocked up out peaceful quiet one eye-half open staring at the ceiling

Twelve-year-old hips
Knobby knees in ruddy black
Cigarette-burned carpet
Short jean shorts black hair curled
Up above her shoulder blades

One more Jim

Perched in the center is the Virgin
Decked out in azure blue behind a rusted chicken-wire grate made to retard flame

Beside the fenced-off grotto in the darkened corner farthest from the door upon a cracked brown
plastic booth beneath a tiny clerestory with exhaust fan
five former patrons' graves seated

Where'd you get these stones, Jim
I took em

1876 - 1913 Father

Where

From here and there

Don't you suppose you'd better put em back

I hadn't heard of anybody missin em

From the chirping of birds it is light outside

Algiers Diptych

i. City

These islands guarded by the towers of the dead
Are the noble ones, the good from whose femurs
Salt trickles gently as droplets from a curled leaf
Staying on one last winter.

From the bluffs, from the geanticline cliffs, their bones
Watch from the arches
Of barbed wire, from beneath the shredded boards
Of abandoned houses, from the hoarse voices
Of dogs tortured
By day and tied in the cold by night.

We cannot speak except in platitudes,
So they speak for us, limbs piled
Upon limbs.

Within the walls we work,
Dumbed by our own paperwork
Which when it speaks repeats its old
Mistakes, leaves in the details of overwritten
Templates.

Meanwhile they keep vigil from the holes in castles,
Shattered windows, fruit-sellers' stands,
And shopkeepers windows, lined with silver safes,
Black paperweights.

ii. The New Year

*The last year he'd a neighbor's face,
In this he's known by none.*
(John Clare)

What are you?
Some daughter's mother? Some son's child?
Father, husband
We never were, or if once
Then who can say if we ate dessert,
Which wine we left
At this couple's house or that,
If we could make a decent sandwich,

Or even find good bread.

Nor will we ever meet you
The dead who guard another city
Not even on an intimate street. Our time is buried.
Our time is hushed, electric fog on eucalyptus,
Wet sand under the swings in the park.
Our bones crawl under pine floorboards into mud.

Never say we are naïve.
We are not here to stand watch over your so-called flags.
We defend the crystal night, the tears
Of Shakers, the crucibles of wood
Where children sleep, the snow between
The railroad tracks where you write
Your name.

Speech, speech, everywhere, but who
Wrote these prayers? Whose voice will you hear
When bullets fly like butterflies
Hovering behind your ear, obsessed
With your own mercenary creatures—
The *pouvoir* or its lonely instruments.

If the money is good, I provide protection,
I understand the little stars
I have to lose or gain.
Meaningless insignia. Rootless bark.
An Appalachian solitude unflinching.

The unseen care little for the seen.
Until the morning, when darkness contours
The hierarchy of the still.

You drift as if you'd never even heard
Of dropping anchor on earth

Brothers, I see pieces of you
Floating in the dry grey grass: Fingerprints,
Sideways passport stamps, hollowed out mother memories,
Forgotten halves of painted nights,
Eyelids, the pale undersides of arms,
Veins in cardboard boxes, rusted copper wires,
The burst mist of your blood cries
Floating, on the surface of the snow
Until you mash it in your sleep.

Christ, you are a villain on your cross forever.

You have given up the weariness of routines
And hunt your fears. The skin of your lips
Mingles with the herds of freezing cattle
Tromping through their own manure.
I have swallowed it. It is nothing

But grass. But who,
Who thinks of frost
On the rails of paradise?

I lob a heart made of grenades, a half-
Moon heart drinking in the sunset. I watch
The wisps of insidious childhood memories that make
You dream of manhood, womanhood. It's getting dark.

Chinese construction workers sing with hammers
On the dusk. So little is known.
And the dark is deep
In this world, the float of fingers, prints
Of souls. Look at the sky, it's gone all yellow.
Look at this moon. You have to sit in the sunset
To understand the bird talk.

I'm fishing for a little time.
I caught something.

*

Hello John. I'm here.
Why does a man bind himself in marriage?
To nurture a child who has no other means of
Knowing her own mind.

And we can have a silent day
No words exchanged. So what
If the price is empty spaces
In diaries on land.

The Prophets Say So

I hardly concede
The point. The mind is endless. Knowing
Is one path. Another dips the fingers, already
Red, into the blood. Not me. We are no
Insurgents, no *integristes*, no mercenaries. Well,
Perhaps, only if the ravens on the wind today—
Screaming in unison in my headphones—
Are also soldiers of fortune—brains arrows—
We hardly
Can shoulder a gun.

Their underwings are black against the blinding blue
Clouds that shift like sand against the shell-shocked pines
Once in a blue moon casting shattered glass on this mauve minaret
They scream into the long night that comes early in November.

These first years with you
I will never forget. The rest of time
Could be this way
If you would forgive me.
So you don't.

The wings of crows rush toward the vegetable satellites
Then for no reason we discern,
Slash down into the branches of the park,
Still razor-green in winter, teeming emerald with lilies
Of the field. Every father is alive there but me. I was a fear
Of the wind and these orange parasites
That drop from the crowns of palms, imploding
Fireworks in early fall.

Life is the only place in time
With Paradise. I mean this vase of concrete,
Stairs into the basement
Of the Iranian Embassy. Placid is he who sees
Forever in the graveyard steps, strewn with swords of plexiglass,
Discarded barbwire, sounding boards, speakers of rusted tin.
Magpie heart. This gray industry
That sucks the very lungs from out
Your vest. This Motherfucker. This unconscionable, still
Beauty.

*Burning hot is the ground, liquid gold is the air;
Whoever looks round sees Eternity there.*

John Clare said that, God bless him,
Let us go. Let go,
Let go, let go, let go.

Minister of the Interior

Mes chers gauchistes

Are your eyes fast enough to see the night?
Dark enough to see the blood that paints sand? These gulls
Pass languidly as desert women in their shawls.
At night I am a dyed in the wool orientalist.
These gulls flash over the crossroads in slow motion

Where the police listening post lies in shambles.
I walk with so much terror in my mind—no art.
I suppose we are the only ones
Hoarding guns beneath the boards of kitchen floors,
Behind the cradles and the swinging tigers
Our cursed trailers melt into the autumn
Park, dismantled spirits in the wake of gulls over Didouche Mourad.

It's a photograph I sent my godmother of war:
Men in turbans and sunglasses supervise the half-constructed
Martyr's arch behind the sickle of the moon and stars, the thrush lunges
Earthward like a common knife, and at once the hills fade,
Shoved deep into the disembarking
Sun with the scrub-brush of my youth.

Of these thousand-dollar guns I think not of the bullets
But what they make of the body
Of a child.

Are your ears slow enough to hear the night in Paradou?
My lungs are wet with terror, eyes so full
I cannot see a private citizen
With an honest eye. I have never felt
Such warmth meeting a policeman.
Je suis saturé de tout ce gâchis, this correspondence
Of photographs between un Algerois et une Nantaise.

Imagine forever losing
A daughter in the blinding music of
A carousel alight in winter, delirium
Tremens in the chest.

Once after the war, we met. I gave my godmother a Kabyle doll.

These gulls pass over me, her gray
Magnificence. Cold and calm, assured
As the wings of my own death.

SDF

No water in Paradou this morning,
No mixing of the heart-spent blood.
We filled the bath last night, fearing
Milena might fall in.

A hole in the heart of my dream,
A spandrel haunted pale
By chrysanthemums, the grave of my father's infant
Sister—funny, my mother is the one whose sister
Died so suddenly after birth. Some booksellers
Come in for cider from the Autumn street. Serious
Midwestern types, who know the words they sell.

I am looking for a book
That no one else can see.

As she talks herself to sleep I hear
The birds speak to each other.

Again I forget to say when
The dream ends. With such stupid warmth
The gulls pass over.

Algiers—Taghit—Algiers

Après l'indépendance nous avons changé des peaux.

(Kamel Daoud)

Sundays were our drunken days,
We were the lieutenants of an itinerant army
That wept among the dunes at night. The calves climbed.
We heard them bleat along the crick-bed
And in the hollow valleys where the scrub reach out like octopi.

The camel's huge crucified eye regards me with the smile
Of a woman deserted. His cheeks puff out the smiles
Of a man comprehended in the act. My poetry has
Gone to bed with an old German girl who fucked Hitler and she says

Selon le calendrier lunaire nous devons avoir les nuits sans lune.

Je dois prendre une consultation avec la pharmacienne.

I have no idea what she's saying.
I will carry nothing with me when I go, unless my
Daughter needs it for her taxes. We have to run. I saw the flames
Come across the ridge. I can't sit still anymore
Among her household Gods that watch you from their grandfathers'
Illuminated books.

Viatique (Glasnevin Cemetery, January 2016)

Here is regret, and here is the traveler
Rounding the pre-dawn corner into a world of mist
To take the same steps twice, to little smoking houses
Set in the frozen earth. Some are cracked
Like rent thoracic cavities: One cannot help
But peek within. Frost pours out like animal light, saying

If you must follow me forever
Follow the breath-white, curling in
Among the fugitive peasants circling the cross
In insular bands. Follow me
To the rounded edges of the stone, never

To eternity. Carrying our burdens of straw
And stillborn sheep, we must tether the stars
And the living who walk before dawn,
Heaving ropes around the snows.

*

I am the child lying on her side, staring at an echo
Of a prayer. It is black and black, loose lines crossing
In a net over a bound orange body on the wall.
A child knows how Buddha and now Christ
Linn sweet pedestrian tales, that further out

There is a blue beyond belief, a stream so deep,
Deeper than the diamond sky of Glasnevin
Ringed round with stones in the January dawn:

I squint up to see her fingers climbing down to taste
The branches, trace the outlines of a bud.

Envoi (La Cave de Cervantes)

his dashed off words
 might die they said

so he imagined around
 the eucalyptus
 where my daughter daily says *ghost*
and drags her friends through other herbs
i cannot name

he is walking with a friend
 we are very jealous

the Chinese
buildings rise so quickly
their contractors sleeping yet
 when you round the corner quick
to graciously
 move their truck

EPHEMERA

Poem for the New Year and the Embassy Newsletter

Sometimes I hold myself perfectly
Erect stock still to keep myself from mewling
Like a small baby in a trundle bed
Midway between Flatbush and Fort Greene

As though you know me stranger

Out there beyond the limits of my scene is
The world, her hands grazing slowly as an Algerian
Barber, cursed to his crazy patterns and accepting
However many Dinars one thinks reasonable whether one hundred
Or a thousand God forgive you if you think you're paid
Some other way

*

We are not poor we must choose
Between a checked bag and a silver ring
Cumulonimbus and isosceles a jury and a
Bloodless execution egg-based proteins and the
Walk of shame national parks and a national park
In our neighborhood

Half-built concrete buildings feel full
Air pushing through the first half of the day small triumphal
Arches raised up over the Slovenian Embassy
Shims of wood between the cars interoffice envelopes
Slid under doors and us without invitations
Pour down the self-inflicted cliffs all evening

In our time paradise is no place
To be climbing alone in rush-hour traffic
Which will not see you no matter how long
You put in your time waving howling at
All these so-called things that carry weight

Dear Sir—

I do not care for the sound of your special effects, or the scrolling words at the bottom of the screen. The kids who wrote them spent too long, or too short a time, in college. Their slap-happy metaphors catch the eye only when they use the word *canister*.

Also, though I admit I have a dearth of friends, the faces of your newsladies are better fitted for another age—I speak of generations here. And they look too much like those paths of gold from the 1940s which lead to nothing much

Except another white apartment building at the top of the hill,
The spilt white seed of sun upon ivy
Past which each day the milliners and haberdashers walk,
Hardly conscious of the secret path which lights their eyes
Each night on the evening news.

Color TV. Each one more saturated than the next
With paper-thin walls of paranoia. Is it because
You can only hire those who believe what they are
Saying, no matter how hackneyed the melody or key?

It makes one miss the age of fustian
And cursive script.

Heartthrobs

Where are they now? How
They have grown gray-hearted, lost
Their dog-eared lives, or gone on to play
Some unprepossessing survivor type
Holed up in a sleepy Connecticut town.

It is the coming home outside the home where one is born.
Down the stairs you smell the food cooking
In a house where you have never lived; and still
The black and white plastic television is playing
In your mother's bedroom—the young wife watches, a
Tear stifled, as her husband shoots off on a rocket he made
In 1951, chrome rabbit ears spread-eagled to the ceiling stars.

Who can say he is a novelty at 40?
Is this a game, or another life that went on while ours remained.
Or perhaps what this poem is. A hungry wind plays each
Solitary shard. The new family tears up the gayly warring green
And crimson carpeting, its Winston cigarette burns.

The bird of my grandmother's death beats at the windowpane.
Out with it all, she says. Why if I didn't eat with the right silver,
My mother would have *wham* she spasms, hit me in the head.
The wind plays catch through the broken window.

Low End Theory

Through the doorway I can still hear their voices
Consistent with the hum of the electric train
That rattles snowflakes just beyond the screen-door's reach.
What they are saying I cannot repeat. Only they are speaking

As if these problems belong to you, anyone
But themselves I mean. I understand
Why confessional poetry went out
Of fashion. You want to say it is *unworthy* of us,

So go out. We are walking down 7th Street
In the autumn again. I can't remember
How many times we've gone this way. I lost my path
One of those autumn years, and it took so long for us to tell.

One generation's trash is another treasure, and
Vice versa, does it go without saying? Yes. Leaves
Are coming down now all around us, one lands on my ear,
Another in my sleeve.

What's that, you want me to rake through them
With you? I would rake them down your thighs
And along the crowns of your feet. But it's too late.
By morning they are ground to purple powder, dust.

The Lie and How We Told It

It seems that everyone has just enough
To get through the day. Of whatever sitcom keeps
Us from laughing the whole thing off once
And for all. Ergo, nothing is essential. You don't need
To read this, i.e. Think of me sometimes,

A man who won't fall asleep, who stops breathing
In his sleep, whose eyes are filled with milky fits and
Stars, who breathes out racist epithets in broad of day,
Whose cells attack each other in a preordained space station,
Whose bones grind themselves to viscid dust like opium
In the choreographed bloodstream beneath
The spandrel of a reef with a sweating glass in hand.

A chrysalis hangs from that tree yonder. A yellow bird
Flew through our window yesterday. The maid
Caught him, and he can't take that afternoon back.
O for the love of gold, we don't need each other all at once.

Kafka to Milena

*the recipient
between the lines*

one's own ghost

*one corroborates
witness
O distant person*

*human strength
to denude oneself*

*means before the ghosts
greedily wait*

drunk on the way

*the railway, the motorcar
inventions*

*at the moment of crashing
after the postal
the radiograph*

*service
The ghosts*

kiss

!

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Curriculum Vitae

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