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One Day There Will Be Nothing to Show That We Were Ever Here

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ONE DAY THERE WILL BE NOTHING TO SHOW
THAT WE WERE EVER HERE

By

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Bachelor of Arts in English, The University of Texas at Austin, 2006
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Thesis presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Poetry
The University of Montana
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ABSTRACT

Jones, Scott Alexander, MFA, Spring 2009

Poetry

One Day There Will Be Nothing to Show That We Were Ever Here

Chairperson: Gregory Pape

A book of poems addressing the transitory nature of existence, from individual lives to civilizations to the world itself, with an incessant awareness that even if human apes are able to narrowly avert nuclear or otherwise apocalypse, the sun will without the shred of a doubt one day stop converting hydrogen into helium.

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Bombay Gin. "This Rusty Copper Roman Coin" (appeared as "Coins")

Camas. "Indian Summer's End" and "Northwest Passage"

The Cape Rock. "Sleepers Cut from Cypress"

Ellipsis. "The Elsewhereabouts"

Forklift, Ohio. "When Amsterdam Becomes New Atlantis"

Monkey Puzzle. "The One-Eyed Poet Speaks in a Library Basement Two & a Half Years Postmortem" and "Pantoum from the Actual Diary of Christopher Columbus"

Sixty Six: A Journal of Sonnet Studies. "False On It"

Third Coast. "The Ambulance Driver Assures Us *Self-Inflicted* Says Nothing of Intention"

Zero Ducats. "Apoptosis" (appeared as "If I Talk Too Much About Bones") and "Bonnie & Clyde Settle Down in the Suburbs"

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They called Coney Island "The Playground of the World." There was no place like it. In the whole world. Like Coney Island when I was a youngster. No place in the world like it. It was so fabulous. Now it's shrunk down to almost nothing. But I still remember, in my mind, how things used to be. And I feel very bad. But people from all over the world came here. When I was very small I even got lost in Coney Island. But they found me. On the beach. We used to sleep on the beach here. Sleep overnight. They don't do it anymore. Things changed. They don't sleep anymore on the beach.

— from an interview with Murray Ostril in the song
"Sleep" by Godspeed You! Black Emperor

ARLINGTON, TEXAS: 1986

Not far from the grave
of Lee Harvey Oswald, yearless

as if the stonemason never returned from lunchbreak—
Not far from Ranger Stadium, the old GM plant—

Not far from a theme park
named for the flags of six nations

two of which no longer exist—
We cringe at what beer must taste like

sipping the sour froth
of summer pesticide runoff

from a nameless creek that runs under streets
named for the trees that once grew

wild here.

THE SUNFLOWER

Oh Sunflower, golden as a sun,
How often have I seen thee
In the fields of my native land,
Where the wind blows from the west.

And when I see thee in the field,
How often do I think of thee,
And how I long to see thee
In the fields of my native land.

Oh Sunflower, golden as a sun,
How often have I seen thee
In the fields of my native land,
Where the wind blows from the west.

I.

Sunflowers Wilted By the Sun

BEHIND THAT RADISH SILHOUETTE

of Russian Orthodox spire
 blue rumors of daybreak
 over the East River, dark

and skeletal with dockside remains
 and you are sleeping.
 Your face buried in flannel

despite the summer night's heat.
 And in the 1893
 photograph above your sink

*Fighting Tuberculosis
 on the Tenement Rooftop*
 a nameless woman smiles

despite the snow
 and inside an army tent
 her final breaths

made visible for no one.
 And her cloudy, colorless face
 will come to replace yours

in the coming winter
 that will soon separate us.
 And I tip-toe barefoot outside

your train-style Brooklyn flat
 to make the morning Chinatown
 Express to New Hampshire

creaking down stairs
 she might've creaked up
 on her way to wintry quarantine—

Stairs nailed down far too long ago
 for successive boards to cling
 as desperately together

as they once did.

SUNFLOWERS

The half of me that knows how birds are spies
who report unwhispered secrets back to trees
this Sunday morning sees your aquiline
profile coded in the shower
curtain shampoo stains—
Rorschached & translucent
like the face of the patron saint of lost causes
in the seed pattern of a sliced tomato.
And the water erasing
your silhouette smells sulfuric
like hardboiled aquifers outside
Los Angeles, where Helena's old roommate
found herself in sudden snowfall
stranded not far from the highway—
Risking tetanus in a rusty Model T,
the body's most violent shiverings
can't compare with flint on flint
or prevent the transformation of veins
into branches of bluest ice.
And the half of me that doesn't think birds are spies
sees the strands of morning light in steam
that melt yesterday's curtained apparitions
simply as wisps of thin geometry—
An equation for the break of day
calculated as gravity's routine.
Cold like warmth,
warm like the comfort
of falling asleep in snow.
And that girl who found herself shrouded in snow—
Helena said how her mouth froze shut—
How everyone in the vegan co-op
glided thru spiral notebooks
in futile search of her last name
& anyone who might share it—
How she'd clipped sunflowers that morning
& adorned them above the kitchen sink,
beside the bathroom mirror,
along the spiral staircase—
How she hid some sunflowers in secret places:
Their yellow & yellowish & yellowing leaves
behind frozen peas in the freezer,
inside spring blouses, frayed pea coats,

cowboy boots at the back of the closet—
How they lasted all winter.

The usual post-holiday
mess, the deep freeze,
the snow on the roof.

The snow on the roof,
the deep freeze,
the usual post-holiday

mess, the snow on the roof,
the deep freeze,
the usual post-holiday

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YELLOW & YELLOWISH & YELLOWING LEAVES

We steal stale sunflower
seeds from decapitated sun-
flowers wilted by the sun

& talk of death by hemlock.
How the sun will someday
cease to fuse certain atoms

& the earth will go dark
just before it goes cold, how starry
seascapes will blend with sky

shortly before all fish turn to ice—
I've seen rainbow trout evade seines
in stranger spans of time.

This abandoned Monte Carlo
still runs & the British woman's voice
on the radio crackles ember

& static: how the oldest
living member of our species
is always dying, like Maria

de Jesus of Portugal, who
didn't wake up this morning.
We wake to windsong in a wheat field

that's never seen a single harvest.
And when I say *windsong*
I no longer distinguish between:

sunlight warming particles of air,
& wordless melodies
whistled thru clenched teeth.

Yet the half of me who thinks
of love in terms of DNA
traces all windburn back to sunlight—

And this '71 Monte Carlo
empty with the ghosts of
what passengers once drove

nomadic distances in a matter of days
to recall the color of her eyes,
what ratio between gray & hazel—

All the way back to this sun
I trace the hum of its engine—
How it turns over the remains

of ancient creatures who once ate
sagebrush, nourished & wilted
by sunlight. Or wheat fields

in the only dream Maria
de Jesus never woke from.
And let's say her earliest memory,

yesterday among the living,
involved this very summer light
setting on stalks of wheat—

That soft inhale of wind
visible only when
crops sway to take it in.

ENCOUNTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD

In the Herzog film on Antarctica
one penguin waddles neither seaward
nor returns to the colony
but slides off toward the interior:
Certain death & snowcapped
peaks he'll certainly never reach.
And the Marine Ecologist
who rarely speaks with humans
ruminates on penguin prostitution—
On penguin ménage à trois—
How you can return rogues to the colony
but they'll always gravitate
toward mountains resembling
those screens that monitor
earthquakes & heart rates.
Once, before we left Austin
I called you late one school night
beneath one of the remaining moontowers.
Stimulants of the central nervous system
blocking all sense of direction, my
lost premonition for magnetic north, my
chin bloody from failed breakdancing.
On the ride home we drove past the hospital
where you took me once
when poison oak or ivy sealed my eyes
& I rattled off about scars—
How a scar over a scar isn't a scar.
It's a serendipitous palimpsest—
Gift of a second invincible kiss.
The tongues I spoke in never woke me.
Lisp & stammer of a Pentecostal auctioneer
they filled the night with things you will never repeat.
And when I woke, reluctantly circadian
I heard no clatter from the kitchen.
My nose scentless & clotted
in the quiet amnesia of morning.
Your side of the bed still warm.

GIRL RIDING SOLO ON A TANDEM BIKE

This has nothing to do with Sisyphus
 or the curve of your clockwork calves.
 If I ask whether you pedal uphill
 in evasion of sunrise
 or pursuit of sunset
 I need you to know that
 the Buddhist in me still bites nails
 which expand at the exact speed
 of Pangæa's glacial explosion across the sea.
 The speed of the sky is 1,040 mph—
 But you'll have to ditch your bike to fly
 endlessly around the equator
 & pause the sun so it's always
 setting or rising or always night.
 I don't mention high noon
 assuming you're not eyeless
 to faint starlight, low sunlight,
 any cycle of moon.
 If I ask how you chose the front seat—
 (Was it a foreign penny you flipped,
 antique from a thousand secret fingerprints?
 What breed of bird on that side we rarely call?
 Have you since spent it on blue Dahlias?)
 I need you to know
 efficiency is my only concern.
 I promise not to whistle or offer you a ride.
 My tiny BMX barely fits in the trunk of my Saturn,
 currently occupied with wine bottles
 & those bowling pins we pilfered
 while crawling thru abandoned machinery
 for heavy things we have no use for.
 Last night Tuvan throat-singing induced
 scenes of us painting hearts on
 bowling pins made of wine bottles.
 An assembly line of two
 decked out in white jumpsuits,
 the girl may as well be you:
 You paint variations of a valentine heart:
 purple, arrow-pierced, cracked
 with lightning bolt faultlines—
 As I duplicate & duplicate
 the same identical bloodthumping

clenched fist of a muscle, straight
out of an anatomy textbook.

There is a
great deal of
work to be done
in the world
and it is
not to be
done by
the few
but by
the many.

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NOT FAR FROM THE SKATEPARK IN ST. IGNATIUS

where Salish boys
sport tank tops emblazoned
with: *Skate Ignatius*—
Where they model mohawks
more after the Sex Pistols
than characters contrived
by my many-greats grandfather
James Fenimore Cooper
who mistook Mohegan
for Mohican—
Inside the old Jesuit mission
my digital camera
quietly converts stained
light into zeros & zeros.
It refuses to capture the life-
sized, wide & blue-
eyed portrait
of a Flathead chief
a few wounds shy
of stigmata.
His dim halo dilates
to accommodate a bouquet
of feathers, iridescent
as mother of pearl,
or the mossy blue
skulls of male ducks—
And the cold periscope of my camera
thru which I've witnessed
the Calvinist choreography
of countless ceremonies
both wedding
& funeral,
blinks a red message
like an alarm clock
reset by a summer storm—
Or stoplights pulsing
in the lifeless, still-
life hours before dawn—
It blinks back at me:
Battery low.
Memory card full.

Closed eyes have been detected.

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

Several months ago, the author of this book was invited to give the commencement address at the University of California, Berkeley. The occasion was particularly significant because it was the first time that a woman had ever given the commencement address at the university.

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AN ABANDONED FACTORY
NEAR THE SYMES HOTEL

—for Kevin Cashman

It was either a bee serenading a buttercup
or a housefly harassing that dead fox's obsidian eye
in the dried-out riverbed—

Or I was photographing your
faded Levi's catching on barbwire,
struggling to define *Vipassana*

in terms of letting teardrops evaporate on their
own terms, when three calico horses
began to charge toward us

down the sagebrushed ravine.
I admit, I was mostly sober last week
when I shaved my head

to learn the exact boundaries of a skull.
And I'd like to think I could resign myself
to fall beneath horseshoes

with gratitude for my one skull
fractured far beyond repair
yet not by Firestone or any tire tread.

Though we are far outside the rainswept city
I request my final thoughts be flickering
neon, spilled lime antifreeze on damp

blacktop, like in *Bladerunner*—
Like the neon sign of the Symes Hotel
or my green headlamp down the road

in that long abandoned factory
you said looked just like Warsaw—
And we caught no scent of ghost or asbestos

in those dark, waterlogged rooms of stonewashed
grackles, fluttering, like us, to recall
which crevice they flew in thru.

TO MINE & MOLLY'S LIVERS

May we call you lover
 for all the lovely
 though far from lovely

 things we've put you thru.
 Waking vampiric into a late afternoon
 we could fly to Shanghai or Taiwan

 & not punish these truant bodies with jetlag.
 From Missoula we wake in unison
 with Beijing factory workers

 who rise to a feeble sun
 safe to stare at thru smokestack plumes—
 Who dream a frantic, delicate choreography

 that is both memory & premonition.
 And somewhere within bruised ribcages
 like fingers unable to clench into a cradling fist

 your soundless clockwork softens a little.
 Like the severed tails of strange reptiles
 it's no secret you generate anew

 the lost cells & dignity we often take from you
 while the heart steadfastly refuses to appease.
 But it's not that we drink

 the first definition of: *spirits*
 to embody frail machinery with
 the third definition of: *spirits*—

 To locate wolves, whales, centaurs
 in one-line drawings between dots of starlight
 tunneling lightyears

 to light our path in the woods
 long after gravity ceases to keep things together.
 Lightning's not quite so longwinded.

And it's not that we drink moonshine
to tempt electricity on rainy nights.
We wake as if lost seven days in the desert

so we may replenish all that we set out to lose.
And the wayward mind that fears heights
for the impulse to overcome gravity

concedes to clean the kitchen sink in silence.
It's not that we enjoy suffocating
naked bodies with blue acrylic—

Or crashing into corduroy self-portraits
& unsheathing glass from our shoulders for weeks—
Or wallpapering the floor with an Oxford dictionary—

Or fire-extinguishing fireless bedrooms—
Or triangulating vacant bottles
of Evan Williams like hollow bowling pins—

It's just we desperately need you
captive & cowering in the dusty corner
of a room rarely reached by daylight.

And thru days when alarm clocks blind us,
when crickets resound like sinister belfries

we will keep trying to discover
somewhere in these
untrustworthy bodies

something worth healing.

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II.

A Thousand Origami Bladerunner Unicorns

WHEN AMSTERDAM BECOMES NEW ATLANTIS

I'll be guilty of boasting things like:
I have been there. And you will never go there.
I carved: *I ♥ Red Emma*
fall '99 on a park bench, now driftwood.
Sure, there's footage of the WTO riots
in Seattle that very year & season
& I'm running from a tank called *The Peacemaker*.
A French journalist interviewed me at Pike Place
& her Roman nose was running—
I gave her my bandana, revealing my face
& she asked if *regrets* or *teargas*
were worse on the eyes.
But who's going to recognize me.
I got a common face.
Been told I look like lots of people.
Once during Mardi Gras in Pioneer Square
the year a kid got knocked into a coma
never to sit up & say *How long was I asleep?*
a girl named Emma kissed me
& kept calling me Lane
& I never corrected her
& my friends played along
& I went home with her
& I wasn't even wearing a mask.

THE ELSEWHEREABOUTS

My face remains the same
though I switch from knight to clown
to cowboy in a single scene.
I'm played by Heath Ledger's ghost—
by outtakes & paparazzi footage
& you, by a different tall blond each week
who reads from a teleprompter
before a green screen.
Your pinstriped dress
is always oxblood & goldenrod.
We have a son, a daughter, a marmot,
a grandfather with an ear trumpet.
We're called: *The Elsewhereabouts*.
It's painted on the side of our Winnebago.
We pick up one hitchhiker per episode—
He's full of roadspun Zen wisdom
& envies our tribal unit.
We envy his rucksack solitude.
Except to accentuate awkward silences
the laughtrack never stops—
It's jarring at first, this relentless
white noise of feverish voices.
But by the end of each show
before we fall asleep under the stars
the live studio audience grows convinced
that's rainfall they're hearing.
And as we point out lost constellations—
Harvestkeeper, Sundial, Printshop
some claim to see raindrops
falling into our unblinking eyes.

APOPTOSIS

If I talk too much about bones
 what I mean is our ancestors sucked marrow.
 When I say some of my forefathers traded slaves

& some escaped the holocaust
 you'll notice I don't use the word *blood*.
 And if I say *blood is thicker than water*

I mean 1,060 kg/m³ is thicker than 1,000 kg/m³.
 The times I mention scar tissue
 I simply mean don't worry—

Blood will clot to stop your bleeding.
 Skin will patch things back together.
 This is not a metaphor for relationships.

By *skin* I don't mean *sin*.
 When I talk too much about the body
 of parts at times dislocated or conjoined

what I mean is let's sleep together.
 Whether you say my mind is in the gutter
 or the clouds, I can only assume you mean

the cerebral cortex. It's somewhere
 between my ears such elegant words take shape.
 And by *words* of course I mean:

fluctuations of air passing thru the larynx.
 Might I remind you that come dawn or dusk
 all eyes struggle between color & grayscale.

Might I remind you painters call this the golden hour.
 I don't feel I need to address the heart.
 Yes, it is shaped like: *The Delta of Venus*.

In fact, choose any curve of her Botticellian form.
 But the heart also resembles a prostate gland.
 It can stop beating but don't say it's been broken.

Don't say it's been stolen.
 Unless we are talking about Shelley.
 If we say his fiery heart was plucked

from that seaside funeral pyre
 let us quote yellowed medical journals:
A progressively calcifying heart resists cremation

like a skull, a jaw, or fragments of bone.
 If you swear it was me who stole Shelley's heart—
 If you say it's cold, it's hard, it's made of stone

I will list my family's history of frailty:
 How one heart was coked-out on the dancefloor.
 Its female counterpart, a jetlagged narcoleptic.

If you insist my own heart's made of wood
 that it sustains all colors of flame—
 If you insist it's made of clay,

layers eroding with each season of rain—
 If you insist my heart is a flaking onion
 & I dismiss the makeup running down your cheek

as *lachrymation*, what I mean is:
 my brain has convinced my mind the lows
 like love, are nothing more than

the blushing embers of synapses firing.
 If you press your ear to my chest
 & tell me to hold my breath—

If you say tectonic shifts give pulse to stone—
 that hearts are closer to stone
 than to what's lodged in this soundless ribcage—

I will explain how the brain can train the heart to stop:
 How one yogi flat-lined into hibernation
 underground for seven days

& when the doctors woke him
 began to shiver.

THIS RUSTY COPPER ROMAN COIN . THE SIMPSONS

in the Austin art museum
depicts a Roman couple
copulating
doggy-style.
I asked the curator
was it heads or tails
& what was on the other side.
All she knew was
before the empire fell
it was worth about \$2
& the highest bidder
paid \$13.49 on eBay™
not including taxes
for one just like it.
I said if she soaks it
for the timespan
of my high school lunchbreak
in Taco Bell fire sauce
it'll be reborn with luster—
Shiny as Scrooge McDuck's
prized 1875 Seated Liberty dime
earned from his first shoeshine
it could reenter the marketplace.
I told her how as a kid
I minted coins
out of red Texas clay
& carved my profile
smiling on one side
frowning on the other—
How after a heavy Texas rain
I mistook my own currency
for carefully arranged
possum droppings.

BONNIE & CLYDE SETTLE DOWN IN THE SUBURBS

You put the *cute* in *execute*
I put the *ex* in *exclamation point!*

We put the *pair* in *paranoia*
I put the *annoy* in *paranoia*

You put the *cunt* in *ctrl-alt-delete*
I put the *cock* in *ridiculous*

& the occasional orifice
We put the *warship* in *worship*

I put the *slightly-attracted-to-certain-skinny-mantypes*
in *shoegazer, sungazer, stargazer, seagazer*

You put the keys beneath the TV stand
so I'll be late for work

When my dead confederate grandfather
says *Jew's-harp* I hear *juice-harp*

I put neither in *Juniper*—
that pinecone smell of gin on my breath

come morning, like green
Listerine, not whisky

I put the *Adam* in *atom bomb*
which you put in the *bomp-a-bomp-a-bomp*

I put our *Dodge Ram* in the *ram-a-lam-a-ding-dong*
You put the *Eve* in *EVOL*

which is *LOVE* in pink lipstick cursive
on the bathroom wall behind the mirror

We put the *fence* in *offensive*
& down the center of our queen size—

It was off-white & picket

I whitewashed my side to spite you

I SHOULD TAKE UP SMOKING

A pretzel vendor in Wenceslas Square
pantomimes rolling papers
& I say: *I don't smoke.*
And to the blind girl who sings opera karaoke
to a green jambox on Charles Bridge
I say: *I'm all out.*
I won't be so duplicitous
when I take up smoking.
I'll get off at an unplanned tram stop
& approach that sorceress in stilettos
blowing formaldehyde Venn diagrams—
Say she's 60 years old, that's
39 during the Velvet Revolution
43 during the Velvet Divorce
17 during the Velvet Underground
& 1968 Prague Spring
where she's captured in 8mm—
Immortally colorless & taunting
young commie tank commanders
in knee-highs longer than her neon miniskirt.
Say she kissed strangers on lunchbreak
long before the Soviet invasion.
I already know by heart: *Can I bum a smoke?*
in Arabic, Inuit, Esperanto.
Assuming she's Czech
I'll whisper vaporously in her tongue:
To converse with you
I'm willing to die just a little.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

According to the New York Times
September 14, 2007: a Friday, the fabled

northwest passage has opened at last
for business. It's now fully navigable.

Yet *The Octavius* conquered these icy waters in 1762,
a year whose treaties balanced its battles—

For centuries crystallized in the belly of an aimless whale
drifting in arctic circles

her captain's bloodless hand
pinching a quill half-filled with cuttlefish ink.

Soon what's left of his body will float to the surface.
Soon polar bears will stop trying to sink teeth

into four inches of acrid walrus skin.
Such thawings have been known to reveal

frost ogres (whence came maggots
known as men) & a cow called Audhumla.

But there's only so much time between Lorimer
& transferring at Union Square.

Perhaps instead you read how Beckham denies rumors
he'll play a gay neighbor on *Desperate Housewives*.

That the largest ever jackpot lottery winner
plans to buy back his granddaughter's overdose—

That he's put an ad in the paper
addressed to the devil.

That Pavarotti's rotting in a piano box.
That blood can trigger the tongue as it exits the brain.

That his deathrattle, addressed to some dead princess,
shuddered the larynx in a lost ancient language.

That the mortician thought himself an alchemist
 when that fat cadaver turned to him & whispered:

*My kiss will dissolve the silence
 that makes you mine.*

THANK YOU FOR NOT TRYING TO SELL ME
AN ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH

—for Laura Dunn

For instead attempting to trace
with the point of a porcupine's quill
the shadow of its feather.
There is nothing Frank O'Hara
can do for us
& he is doing it
& that is poetry
& that is adjectivish nouns verbing adverbally
& we share the velvet defect of his lungs.
When I say we breathe out
more than we breathe in
what I mean is:
we remove more carbon dioxide
than oxygen creates in the bloodstream—
And by *blood* this time I do mean
something about the sun in limbo.
Like deep into that night I called to say
I would not join you come morning
to pull root vegetables
not so much planted as buried.
Something was crawling
into the corner of my room
disguised as diffused blue Christmas lights—
Not so much solarility
as venetian blinds
letting some of the darkness out.
And the silhouette of Mt. Sentinel
outside my dusty window
woke me from dreams
where I lose my teeth, to say:
Look, it is tomorrow already.
& I replied: *Yes.*
It is still tomorrow.

THEY DON'T SLEEP ANYMORE ON THE BEACH

The children
 who were born
 in the land
 of the dead
 are now
 in the land
 of the living
 and they are
 sleeping on the beach

III.

They Don't Sleep Anymore on the Beach

A TEMPLATE FOR ABANDONMENT

Crossroads
of a ghost town
christened
for black blades
of grass
a tree grows
from an open
sewer hatch.

DECIDUOUS

In one cellphone message I have yet to delete
you say you followed the sun to Dublin
& jetlag makes it set so sadly.

You say deciduous trees have been spiderwebbed
with blue Christmas lights along the canal
& it's pretty goddamn magical.

You say there's \$39 in our Wells Fargo account
& your paycheck should go thru on Tuesday
& you wish you could loan me

your eyes on moonlit water.
And I will let this binary ether
gradually delete

each recording of your voice
until you vanish completely come summer.
But I will not listen to your voice.

I will keep your voice out there
so that some echo of you may exist
somewhere

for some time—
So that no ears will come to catch
that subliminal music that groundlessly hopes:

after tomorrow
comes tomorrow
will come tomorrow.

In the messages I have yet to delete
we grow toward death
together.

ARGYLE

My father's father
in an oxblood mahogany
coffin, sunken
cheekbones like a
clean-shaven Abe Lincoln—
A confederate mannequin
rendered feminine by
the mortician's cosmetics.
Those argyle sox
you can't see
that will never
touch the ground,
the boxers, I picked
those out. None of these
are sold individually
so I've kept the remaining
pairs for myself.
Today we are wearing
exactly the same
undergarments.

PANTOUM FROM THE ACTUAL DIARY OF
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

—13 October 1492, a Saturday

Their eyes are very beautiful & not small.
Their hair not curly but flowing like the mane of a horse.
At sunrise many handsome young men came to the shore.
They came to the ship in dugouts made of tree-trunks

with hair not curly but flowing like the mane of a horse.
I watched closely the gold that hung from holes in the nose
as they came to the ship in dugouts made of tree-trunks.
Tomorrow we will search for gold & precious stones.

I watched closely the gold that hung from holes in the nose
& how even the women go naked as their mother's bore them.
Tomorrow we will search for gold, for precious stones.
And when I show them my sword they cut their hands on the blade,

even the women who go naked as their mother's bore them.
They'll make good slaves for they are quick to repeat what I say
and when I show them my sword they cut their hands on the blade.
They'll make good Christians since they have no religion

& they'll make good slaves for they are quick to repeat what I say
at sunrise, those handsome young men who came to the shore.
They'll make good Christians since they have no religion
& their eyes are very beautiful & not small.

FALSE ON IT

Out of a paramedic's grip, out of a cesarean palm
that pulls her out a dirty breathing rabbit
from a West Texas well, a gun would fall.
Not far from here, in the suburbs we used to inhabit
in keeping, of course, with Newton's law of gravity
your father slipped on a patch of autumn leaves
the blood & sunrise colors of Tibetan habits.
And the wind that rustled his hair rustled the trees.
And his skull never rose from the curb & the sticks & debris.
Fall: in line or from grace, empires and stars and water
and snow and rain, into a coma or a well or asleep—
Henry Miller once *fell in with a photographer*.
And at first I filled in *love* and heard *tongues*
when he sang: *To sing you must first have a pair of lungs.*

SLEEPERS CUT FROM CYPRESS

Certain you'll follow
she'll lower herself down to the tracks.
Kneel down
to listen
for as long as you will listen.
Say sound
among all things invisible
travels faster thru solid objects
such as us.

Thru steel beams that sleep in separate beds
& tempt lightning.

Oaken wheels once drove trenches into fields
of Etruscan soil.

And sleepers
cut from cypress trees
still promise enough walkspace
for charioteer
& bloodspiller.

Perhaps our paths have crossed before.
One held the reigns

the other a sword
and we both of us carried shields.

THE AMBULANCE DRIVER ASSURES US
SELF-INFLICTED SAYS NOTHING OF
 INTENTION

When a hand of yours slips
 & sinks a fishing knife
 into the other

our eyes remain locked.

Sunset a seagull dove & cut with less precision
 into water.

Bulgarian women's choirs
 could turn this Miami Airport parking lot
 into Saint Peters.

Amanda hears soda on concrete.

Aaron a bum pissing shamelessly.
 Not the color nor the shape—

It's the spill of bloodfall mute in all war films
 that finally breaks our gaze.

* * *

Most of your body is water.
 Even more of those lungs
 you breathe & speak
 & sometimes scream in your sleep with.
 We three (you, me, she)
 screamed before we learned to speak.
 Most of the blood we share
 is water

and when spilled
 will evaporate.

When laid bare
 leaves only an aftertaste
 of the deeper stain trying to remain.

You'd be surprised the waterlogged letters
left in textbooks fed to the dumpster:

Dearest,

*Let's talk about the weather.
Clouds are forming in the east.
Clouds are condensed bodies of water vapor
in the sky.*

*Dylan says I don't need Steve Pool
to know which way the wind blows.
Flags flown at half-mast help.
Heavy winds are coming in from the east.*

—yours hopefully

Doesn't occur to me to bare my chest.
That you'd go naked
if I were the one losing blood.

Most of your body is water.
Even more of those lungs
you strangely aren't screaming with.

I freeze before a moviescreen:
as if for a misplaced pack of cigarettes
or passport,
you're riffling
one-handed
thru your duffelbag

in quiet search of the cleanest shirt
worth losing.

INDIAN SUMMER'S END

In the gathering wind I stop to listen
to the rumor of rattlesnakes rustling thru the serviceberry.

Lately I've been spotting half-smoked cigarettes everywhere.
Here, for example, near the top of Mt. Sentinel

where I pass a mother who shouts to her son:
If you fall & crack your skull on a stone

what wolves are left will lick up all your blood.
I pass a man with dyed-black hair, sideburns left gray.

He says: *They say it's gonna get ugly. Lotsa wind. Lotta snow.*
Lately I've been spotting spent condoms everywhere.

Here in the ninebark, in the chokecherry, the snowberry,
dogwood overlooking a cloudshadowed town.

It's a brazen celebration of death
the way the young hike up & the old down.

I'm afraid it's as obvious as the skeleton dance
of a deathbed poet listing places he'll never go:

Bulgaria, Lhasa, Rio, painted bodies of the Borneo forest.
His skeleton says the *seize* in *carpe diem* means *pluck* as in *fruit*—

that it applies as much to *love* as it does to *the day*.
And when the first flakes of snow begin to fall

I'll take shelter in that trailhead kiosk below
with a new display on *Shrubs in Winter*.

What color & shape are the buds & stems?
Are there spines or thorns on the stem?

Are the buds arranged opposite each other on the stem?
This trail goes on far above that rock I thought was the peak.

Conchcall of a freight train, windsong, now my cellphone—
It's Aaron, he calculates if we read a book a week

& our hair falls out gray we'll take in only four bookshelves
in the Boulder library. As my pen runs out of ink

& my cellphone dies he tells me of an ancient library
devoted solely to the study of bees.

And somewhere by those faraway smokestacks—
somewhere between the roots of a leafless oak

you can rub charcoal over faded newsprint
until something Richard Hugo said about eating stones

cuts thru. And I heard how when word of his death
reached the smokey Milltown Union bar

a man unplugged the jukebox & stood on it
& the bikers told the bartender to let the man speak.

THE ONE-EYED POET SPEAKS IN A LIBRARY
BASEMENT TWO & A HALF YEARS POSTMORTEM

Lullabying one pair of sleepwalking eyes
your voice via headphones *crossing from shore to shore*
as I shelve books in the dim morning underground.

Until you choke on: *I am with you*
& on: *I too lived*
I forget you are speaking.

I forget it's you who is speaking.
I forget it's you who is speaking to me.
I forget you are reciting Whitman's poem

about a once ferry-crossed river
now a subway-pierced river.
Now a river spanned by three bridges.

Last summer I waded out to some dockside remains
as the glass palisades of Manhattan blushed into dusk.
And I heard a girl with an arm like Sandy Koufax

whose stepfather is Sandy Koufax
accuse Shane of stalking or telepathy
when he said where in Brooklyn Sandy Koufax lives.

And I watched her pitch a stone past the farthest rotting pillar.
I admit I'm less aware of the Whitman who makes you cry—
the deadman who makes you cry

the deadman who makes a deadman cry
than of the sniper *Charles* Whitman.
The Whitman who spared two young lovers atop a clocktower

for mistaking blood on his boots for varnish.
For asking if he'd come to shoot pigeons & albino squirrels.
The Whitman who took the very elevator I once loaded

with watersoaked volumes of *Gray's Anatomy*
scouring smudged muscles & eyeballs
for what's been proven false about our bodies.

* * *

As I shelve *Days of War, Nights of Love*
 I forget you're reciting Whitman just across the street
 from where I drove to drop off Nora's clothes & inhaler

& she yelled to Aaron: *You're not invincible, my love*
 & whispered to me: *You're not invisible*
 & she threw a peppergrinder at his windshield

& reminded him of the near unifying power of human language—
 How her name in reverse is nearly his.
 How his name in reverse is nearly hers.

* * *

As I shelve *Other Names for the Heart*
 I forget it's always the summer of '86.
 That a tape machine traps you in the summer of '86.

Perhaps by now you know by heart
 how in one lingering silence
 your hand will reach into your pocket for a cigarette

& return to the podium with an empty pack
 & you no longer fight it.
 Perhaps by now you know by heart

the exact wavering of air passing thru your larynx as you read:
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky...

by heart the creak of chairs, the paper rustle
 the span of silence it takes to say:

so I felt.