After Horses

Weston Cutter

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Chair: Bob Hicok
Reader: Ed Falco
Reader: Tom Gardner

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ABSTRACT

*After Horses* is a collection of narrative and verse poems centered loosely around the idea or theme of how to create meaning from the fracture and detritus of daily life. Also under obsessive consideration throughout: loneliness, the risk of human connection, the risk of a lack of human connection, the impossibility of language, hope as illuminating and good thing, hope as desperate and devouring thing, and an underlying fear and awareness of the fact that no one can be sure of what ultimately matters, anyway.
Acknowledgments

The following poems appeared in the following journals:

2Rivers: “Last Prayer of Summer,” “In Defense of Kissing…”
42Opus: "Dream of the X-Rayed Rose"
Alaska Quarterly Review: "Spring Prayer/Every River" as “Every River”
Artful Dodge: "So/Yes/Limited"
Beloit Poetry Journal: “Salt”
Borderlands: “Same Animal”
Boxcar Poetry: "Trust"
Controlled Burn: "Nightshowers"
Diagram: "One Dollar vs. Furniture Arrangement"
Fiddlehead: “Fix Infinity”
Greensboro Review: “A Capella”
Hayden’s Ferry Review: “Bananas” and “Evolution”
Mid-American Review: “Rain Means Every Single Drop” and “Lovesong for Boxwrenches”
Ninth Letter: “From Aisle 14”
Passages North: "Spring Prayer/Follows" as "What Follows"
Red Cedar Review: "Minehaha Creek"
Willow Springs: "Lucinda Williams vs. Weinerdogs"

"You Could Call it a Shift" was included in the anthology Best New Poets 2008

"So/Yes/Limited" was a winner of the 2008-09 AWP Intro Journals Award.

"The Waiting Room is Empty at 3am" was cited as an honorable mention in The Atlantic’s 2008 College Writing Contest

"A Capella" was a featured poem on VerseDaily.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lights</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How We Will Eat</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Science</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnehaha Creek</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Boys Across the River</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Yes vs. Death of Binary</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Animal</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolution</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rain Means Every Single Drop</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothesline as Weather Forecast</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After We Were Monkeys but Before We Became Fish Again</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faulty Travel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Decided to Quit Having Fun</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Picked at Scabs Till Fresh Skin</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Didn't Know How Not To Be</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Were Calling Silence</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Sat Down With Our Fear</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Imagined How We Appeared</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Forgave Ourselves For Only</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Whispered &quot;I Love You&quot; To</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes It's Good to Spell It Out</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Prayer of Summer</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Waiting Room is Empty at 3am</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fix Infinity</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bananas</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Over Water</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then the Real Fight Began</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knocking Before Entering vs. the Unknown</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightshowers</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And So Perhaps (After CL)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasonal Gamble</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grip vs. Gravity</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Could Call It a Shift</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Capella</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spring Prayers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pumpernickel</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Follows</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Movie Version We'll All Be</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer-Animated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reveal</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Prayer No. 26</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every River</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hats</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call It Sin</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Defense of Kissing Despite Massive Evidence to the Contrary</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh the Things You'll Learn</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Aisle 14</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz Murderers</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daylight Savings vs. Ornette Coleman's* Line</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'If You're Not Making Mistakes, You're Not Really Trying.'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatass</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Not Winter</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Maybe Can Mean</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So/Yes/Limited</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dream of the X-Rayed Rose</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarticulation of Flow</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Dollar vs. Furniture Arrangement</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucinda Williams vs. Weinerdogs</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonder</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lovesongs for Boxwrenches</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ars Mathematica</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sometimes the story is the truck rumbling
down the highway, making great time.
Sometimes the story is how they sat in the cab
together, silent, both feeling pockets
for a match for the cigarette neither of them
wanted to be smoking anymore, all
this time, a dozen years and the stupid goddamn
habit following like a scent. Sometimes
the story is the sitting still, how the headlights
are losing their fuse and so when you pull
the knob to turn them on you've got to smack
the dash to make sure they stay on. Dusty
half-rotted floorboards and how they creak
Saturday night, last song before the last
slow dance. Sometimes the story's the dance, or
what happens afterward, or how
what happens between the nightcooled dancing
bodies is hardly different from the sound
the floorboards make, all scuffling and some
creaks, things giving little by little by—
How We Will Eat

Stole a refrigerator from the abandoned house next door and kept it cold, stole a microwave from the dog-shat shack down the street that nobody’s been in since those dogs bit those kids, heated it up, stole a cooling rack from the memory of my grandmother who died before I was born and there it cooled, steam curling like the unironed collars of still-stiff shirts, stole a knife from a burglar, cut it into pieces small enough to have + devour like lungs or starfish, snuck and stole a goblet from the church I don’t kneel enough within and I found this plate on the table I took from the window display of the store that never announced it was going out of business, just went, and soon you, to steal you, to sit across from each other this bounty between us and, heads bowed and eyes half shut to mouth (but not say) thanks for this meal regardless of its provenance or providence, to silently mouth thanks that whatever god there must be is.
No Science

If you can’t find yr way in, written on the edge of a brick: it’s August, heat and wetness thick as a scent but I can find winter anywhere: the brick a member of an old wall’s army, remnants of cement: scabs: too hot to sleep well: last night I lay down in my bed but awoke in the next room’s chair: and if the phrase is complete in itself: if you can’t find yr way in: perhaps brick as answer: perhaps nothing: no answer: I’m thinking snow: thinking my way arctic: relieving: the brick’s been sitting on a table I’ve passed dozens of times, been sitting like a doomed prince, the kingdom already fallen and him sitting in his last throne: all brick walls just iterations of until: on the way home the long walls of the church hold the summer day’s heat: heat as confession, brick as priest: private unto darkness: amen: + at night, when it’s cooler, 3pm August will still be stuck in the wall, trapped: a name not quite forgotten: spare heat for absent touches: if you can’t find yr way in and perhaps there is no way in: no in: how warmth moves into brick: voices into dark: and before dawn, day’s bricks finally cool, their heat like secrets told to the dark: ready again: again:
Minnehaha Creek

We were looking for something more powerful. Startle
of starlight, sodium bulbs buzzing dim and steady
as a headache. And the stairs leading down, then down
again: the old creek choked with, what—

same old pennies. And not even unfolded wishes. Late
enough and in the wind the willow limbs touched
steady moving water like what, like words, like this:
We were looking for something new
to sing along to, the water humming against the stream
-bed’s stones, against the path of rocks too unstable
to walk across but for one week, two out of the year. And
what of those old matchbooks. The
scribbled notes we never meant to remember this long. Never
meant to keep. We were walking toward where one
water fell upon another water, where grass turned to mud
turned to the music of passing. How

little we can ever see, even with everything all nightlit,
plain and laid out as a whisper. Remind me, we said,
put our hands beneath that water, feeling for movement. Show
me again, we said, one silence into another.
Trust

Born into your name you make space in it—
Constance is anything but, Peter's rock is too small
to build anything on. Affection's affixed
to each of us like a tag in a game at recess,
you're it, you're it, you're—. Pins stuck in a map—
red in Deersfield, yellow in Anchorage—show
the few spots you've touched, all the country
you've yet to drive. One Anna was never loved
and another couldn't get away fast enough
and the cars that kept crashing behind her
were the days of every week. Named after
yr parent's favorite murder ballad, named after
some dimly recalled legend. It's an armchair,
stitching ripped and stuffing about to spill.
It's yr heart. The world makes a Moses of you
everytime you drift away, the water
slowly making its way past you. And the voices
coming to find you, save you again. And love
is never enough, the voices say as they near,
is never enough. You're named Yes, named
Tomorrow night's mystery. And love
is never enough, the voices say as they leave.
When the phone rings, you learn to never say hello,
learn to turn the lights off, whisper who are you calling for.
The Boys Across the River

softly scratch words into pieces of dried bark. Tree long dead, end of autumn. Megan. Allison. It's quiet, nearly nighttime, I'm on the far side and haven't been one of them in years. Greg. Katherine. They're old loves and friends, consistent mistakes: things lost to whim or worse, let go of as smoke. Each piece crackles into the fire they built earlier in the day when night had just begun gathering, when the heat's spidery profile couldn't yet be seen. Tony. Elizabeth. One of them writes Des Moines and the rest blink. It's all burning. The river they sit near used to freeze solid halfway through October and into it we'd drill holes, dare each other to keep a hand beneath the frozen water for twenty seconds, for thirty. Danger hovered somewhere near a minute and we steered as close as we could. Fifty-five seconds, we'd howl. Fifty-nine. We counted each second slow as a stalling train, the skin beneath ice whitening then going blue. The river's still warm now, 20th night, October. We lost plenty but none of us ever lost fingers, a hand. Madrid one writes, and the one sitting nearest sneers, writes Spain. The next writes Europe. Who's to say what won't go up in flames eventually? They're scribbling through our pasts, hardly pausing, 1996 one of them scratches and another sees it, one-ups, 1997. They're coming for us, faster. They're still for now but soon fire won't be enough. Midwinter, when the ice was three feet thick, solid as a god, we'd drive across the river's widest stretch, thrilled by the unsure grip of loose hand on steering wheel, of car wheels on ice. We'd buck and bump our way up the riverbank's frozen edge, heading home heady with how close we'd come to losing control. Yesterday one of them writes, tosses it to flame, all eyes on the fire. They're coming. How close we came to losing without letting go. Even from this side of the river I know the word being written next, know the shape the smoke will take as it curls from that single bright instant and the sound that'll follow, how they'll howl, searching for more to burn.
There is a world: down beneath where we’re driving:
  late/dark: highway as lull: stretch of mis/dis/placement:
  we’re what’s both returning and what’s returned: down
below are real lights in real houses: real people sleeping
  just like we’d like to be but we’re never there: not quite:
  it’s been a day: twelve hours: there’s no need to complain
  about this: inside the head of a boy a hundred feet down
  from the road I’m driving a dream’s blooming: of fire-
crackers: of who knows: I didn’t believe in girls until I’d
  kissed one: didn’t believe in frogs until I’d caught one:
  only now believe in hunger since it’s the only food I crave:
  and down below: in his mother’s purse?: in my mother’s purse,
  as I dreamed about baseball: ninjas: a whole winter in the
fancy purse she rarely used: an orange rotted: turned green:
  smell of citrus coming from the closet like a burning: and
stuck into the skin of the orange: stuck on: from beside me
  my love lays a hand soft on my neck: we’re what happens
  when yes is repeated: yes as it approaches infinity: tires
at 30psi: engine at 3000rpm: the truth is far less interesting
  as a number than as a smell: a bird: we set off as robins
  and are coasting now: in dark: not crows nor grackles but
  herons: cranes: there’s a glide in how you approach anything
  familiar: how my mom: one hand in that purse: pulled out
  a shriveled orange: barely solid: barely spherical: almost liquid:
  and in the orange’s flesh: a dazzling: a pierce: the pearl earring
she’d been missing since early winter: she told us in the morning
  and we laughed for minutes: hours: and the next Sunday,
  before church, she asked how her oranges looked, pointing to
  her small earlobes: what’s he dreaming: what was it I dreamt:
  and later: years later: when we moved the piano and from
behind it pulled a picture we could all imagine (the one of me
  almost kissing the fish) but couldn’t for years find: he’s
down there: all of us: dreaming: her eyes are closed but
  her hand’s soft against my neck: the road curves: lights obscured
by the next hill: the world: out there: real as a whisper: as the sound
she makes when she turns her head: there is story: recollection:
  there is the way a wheel feels against tired hands in the dark.
Same Animal

In the desert with Kate
we felt our evolution,
felt our bodies
still-being-blown, sifting.

We’d hold our
hands up at the end
of each day: see,
still here, proof

we still had to hold
onto each other.

After the coyote called
from the rock next to the rock
we were trying to fall
asleep next to,

after the coyote sloped
down the rock face
and stalked past our camp, after
we’d watched him,

I touched my ears:
see, still here, proof
we still needed to listen
for what was wild,

but she shook her head,

opened the tent and crawled,
fingers curling to the pebble,
glancing back to see if
I was the same animal.
Evolution

Think of the innumerable chimps who’ve died to let you take these breaths, make these mistakes, decide between types of salad dressings and varieties of juice. The chimps who never had a science teacher explain that fruit is like gasoline is like a battery: something to store energy. *Like the minute before a kiss* you thought in eighth grade. Blood of a billion chimps each time you lean to kiss! That’s what’s gushing Saturday night, the jukebox two songs away from playing your tune and old Lucy, old Rachel, old blue eyed gone forever girl, they’re not drinking what you’re buying. A billion chimps died for you to wrap that thumb around that bottle, to lean in for that kiss that was never there, to crawl to the fridge at dawn: once you’ve devoured the earth, sucked the nectar from each blossom, rise from your knees and learn, again, to stand, to hold on. Tighter next time.
The Rain Means Every Single Drop

We say we’re hunting for love, but off we go, dressed for winter. It’s cold, yes, and also far too late for the thinly veiled: I love you but when you die I’ll bury you just like a seed, like treasure or a grandmother, near a tall tree and lilacs. Beneath this skin? A heart that only knows to shout a single word.

Beneath the tall tree and lilacs? An earth which, like the rarest of loves, doesn’t tally beginnings or ends. The sparrows keep throwing themselves into the sky like they’re proving some -thing. The rain comes down in random waves but it means every single drop. It’s cold here, tonight, yes, but miles beneath where we stand the earth is hot for us, is even now making new dirt just for you, for me, for lilacs, even sparrows. For when we’ve finished this hunt and no longer need these winter clothes.
Clothesline as Weather Forecast

: and even if not for rain, beneath
trees always there'll be some
THING dripping: I've washed+hung
candy-colored bathroom rug and
the word for the desire to eat
that which isn't food is pica: sunny,
50% chance: etc.: what's weird yet true
is that everything is made of heat:
a match has as much heat as a snow
flake lacks and in just this way my bath
room now has one lack of rug: my guitar
is inside, being played by nonhands
as I watch my rug drip in sunlight: it was
supposed to rain three days ago+without
rain we have: we are: pretend other
than that everything's one part ex-
pectation/one part lint: that meaning's
the difference between the two: a neighbor
put a sign on the mailboxes saying he'd received
someone's French book on birds + would this
someone please pick it up: then another sign,
same thing: then another, angry: come on, just
take your damn French bird book already and
instead of making signs I wondered
why he wasn't learning the French word
for sparrow, how to Frenchly tongue
the whippoorwill's trill: the world, my friend,
is the heat that's there and the heat
that's not, like the amputee who, his phantom fist
clenched for all nine years he'd been handless,
watched his remaining hand in a mirror
open wide + felt the missing fist's ungrasping:
felt the letting go: I live where there's a word
for the craving to taste the uneatable
but no way to live with that need:
what's most amazing is not, really, that a bird
might find my rug on the line to shit on,
but that all the nonbirds will shit so much
nonshit on it: how strangers come together,
road over land, rain + thunder missing a town:
I have only guesses.
here is the summer night with the prowling wolf of light’s absence proving something about beauty—
it’s here, it’s on the way, it’s nothing versus darkness—as grackles squawk to remind stars where phone lines block the ground, where the world is cleaved between sky and earth, what’s shining and what’s shone upon, even with the day’s eye shut these splits and delineations exist because naming things makes them safe, so when you ask for salt no one passes your failed pop quiz from sixth grade when you couldn’t name the dead white guy who killed everything dark 500 years ago because you’d just learned that your heart stopped every time you sneezed, which proved the math of existence is one part glow plus one part disaster and it’s never clear which is which, every heart is just one more farmer anxious of the sneeze of the explorer always on the horizon under the dog bone constellations and there again go the birds calling their reminders, after even eons of darkness something still has to call it dark because nothing’s ready for the name we give it and something’s constantly being proven about beauty, for example: here is the soft edge of my love’s hand and, past that, all I can imagine of oblivion.
Whatever we can't roll up and smoke we'll mix with our last drams of sadnesses and paint first our faces then our thumbs: o the tapioca moon from the lowest branches of the tree we keep telling everyone we're not really hiding in it's just we like keeping quiet, look at our thumbs: oh untanned midwestern thigh of a moon, we shout, climb further: the quickmixed paint is something like blue trying to show its yellowest: we believe in the technology of rocks thrown hard: the invention of language: blood in hand worth more than any amount spilled: teeth in moonlight and we'll make up the words for whatever we haven't burned yet once the fire's out: we'll pay with howls what we can't buy with muscles: coffee: an affection for dim, un-bell-struck midnight stretched black as intent over the tree and all of us and our art, past the wide lake none of us has died in yet.
Faulty Travel
We decided to quit having fun
then invented pizza boxes
that scraped themselves clean
of all the cheese we failed
to pull free with our slices. Like
how the TV said to be:
we stayed on the couch, inflated
in love and consumption,
we touched greasy finger to greasy
finger. How we made
each other feel, pretty and close
as a commercial. Jingle
me timbers: no one we knew
knew how to dance
like we felt like we should feel.
We picked at scabs till fresh skin
came off in the process
and we made timelines of visible
hurt. **This is how it started**

*but then we got involved.* How
nobody wanted to wear
Band-Aids, none of us wanted
to appear weak. Feel?
Feel whatever, the itchy burn
marking where old wound
was picked at + made new, how
to keep the hurt moving.

It was, we knew, how countries
were first (and still) formed.

---

**We Picked at Scabs Till Fresh Skin**

We picked at scabs till fresh skin
came off in the process
and we made timelines of visible
hurt. *This is how it started*

*but then we got involved.* How
nobody wanted to wear
Band-Aids, none of us wanted
to appear weak. Feel?
Feel whatever, the itchy burn
marking where old wound
was picked at + made new, how
to keep the hurt moving.

It was, we knew, how countries
were first (and still) formed.
We Didn't Know How Not to Be

We didn't know how not to be
obsessed with breath
and holding it. With lungs, big
pink envelopes that kept
screams and long-distance swimming
possible. Kept songs.
And how important it must be
that breath's so close
to heartbeat, there inside the cave's
dark body or the body's
dark cavity or whatever. And in
the dream we couldn't tell
if the dogs were chasing us or running
along, happy slobber
+loving. We listened, but they were
only dreams, dogs
of sleep. We woke big-breathed and
yipped mornings, unsure
what it all meant, the dreaming+the
dogs,
and it was like this with everything.
We were calling silence
   silence and letting things
go. Rubbing two sticks together,
   saying remember
whenever the friction sparked. How
   the trees were there
before us. No one spoke, said love,
   meant it. In snow
-fall, in March. And how where
we hoped to arrive
was still not in view. We were
   on hills and our last packs
of cigarettes, on our own just like
everyone else
who couldn't decide between
crying and finding
small rocks to pocket while sniffing.
   Between whispering,
how we wished to sound.
We sat down with our fear
across from us and
watched it become a tree
under which we huddled
and stayed protected from rain
for a night then heard
the thing give tremendous
groaning as it ached
in wind and in the morning
we woke bird-shat-upon,
pulled ourselves from what comfort
we pretended was enough
and went looking for any other.
Really, anything. We thought
we were done telling the stories
of how we'd burned ourselves
and on what, but no, all day
blisters and stoves. The
helicopters in the distance, we
imagined them crashed,
burning, imagined standing next to
whatever was left charred,
hands-out for heat, saying coulda
been me: almost happened to me like that.
We imagined how we appeared
from above. The forward-
phalanx movement and regroup,
borderless as scent. We couldn't
remember why we'd left to begin with,
each morning woke next to trees
which we'd notch at night so we'd know
if we'd moved in our sleep.
Would whisper home, home, home but couldn't
recall if it was the shirtless girl's name
we'd made out with in the gas station's
stock-room or the word we were
supposed to say once we'd learned
our lesson. Lessons. Each morning
same trees. We awoke not knowing
if we were even supposed to be.
Running. If we were even trying to go back
or further on. We'd follow
the birds we awoke to, to rivers + canyons,
and kill them at day's end,
eat them and dream their muscles spoke
to our bones of maps and
direction. We didn't know what to call it,
the speaking we expected to hear.
We Forgave Ourselves for Only

We forgave ourselves for only
being good enough, for how
we couldn't get the videogame guy
to kill as many
of the bad guys as the guy
before us could, how
it really was just because we sweat
a lot, it wasn't like we'd
forgotten the deoderant. Obviously. We
forgave, over nachos
and cheese, under staticky
televisions that kept showing
this one guy spinning his car over
and over
and over
and over. Again, we forgave
ourselves again: it's sport,
hunting, like the bowling we were
surrounded by: knock
shit down, wait for it to get set
back up, knock it the fuck
back down.
We whispered "I Love You" To

We whispered I love you to each other's bare feet once it got warm enough to go shoeless as a joe. Started taking off jackets and looking at each other's hands, wondering. Motorcycles, a roaring in spring; we said allergies but they were real tears. And we didn't ask each other Do you really mean it? + Forever? How every thing smelled different, wet + possible. Later we slept in the bed next to the chair which held the guitar, we remembered stories about songs we'd been scared to sing. Tra la la, I'll be yours, etc. We dreamed people stopped cars and got out, kissed mail -boxes+dented fenders. We woke and the guitar was right there, the plane not yet crashed, it's amazing how many engines need to fail, how even passing traffic can't quite drown out what's really being said.
Sometimes It’s Good to Spell It Out

these aren’t just
old names: some girl
got rained on first and then
I kissed her after: wet
and wet: and trying so hard
to be wild: or how about:
not even six weeks ago: back
of her mother’s car: car neither
of us could afford now anyway:
love may be ______ and
________ but romance is
just: new taste: old fruit:
forgiveness:
tell me the stories: hear
the rain? I’m just
trying to set things right: straight: lengthwise: the
mistake that led to the kiss
that led to the party from which
I’ve never really left: warm Kool Aid
+ vodka: how in her skirt all
bunched+wrinkled she came over
and over again: to me: whispered
that she’d fucked three guys
already that night because that’s
how many times I’d said no: tell yrself
(quiet)(right now): what you’d have
done: (blue eyes): party almost
over: the key in yr pocket: tell yrself
(louder now) that you’ve always
known the way home: remember:
remember:
Last Prayer of Summer

God of lightning bolts and
butter churns these hands felt
the bread rise then broke the cantaloupe
and split the strawberries,
now teach the final conjugation,
the past tense of love and

God of cooking grease and
red thread share new parables
of wine and risings, you’ve taken her
from my touch, allow my heart’s summer
to finish as I eat this meal that tastes
of yesterday, autumn,

and God of stopped watches, the cup
empty of sugar, I don’t believe
it’s a shattered world despite these
songless guitar hands, the cold that knows
my name, all your heart-shaped fruit
so bloodred and devourable,

dressed in finest thorns, amen.
**The Waiting Room is Empty at 3AM**

In ten minutes the tired nurse will come call my name, tell me I'm not dying, that what I really feel is a lie. I page through a magazine and find someone's drawing of a naked lady in the margin of an advertisement for a big black car I'll never buy.

The naked lady's cute, in a pencil-sketched sort of way. She's not someone you'd set a friend up with and say, *well, she's got a great personality.* Her pubic hair is someone's version of a pom pom. Each hair on her head curves up at her neck like snakes held by their tails. I can't remember the last time I drew a naked lady. The waiting room is empty at 3am and I want to shout my own name just so someone's calling it. I start drawing and my naked lady looks sad compared to the other one. I want to know if whoever drew the first naked lady was married, if he was at the hospital because he had the clap and was trying to remember how his infector looked. Did he want to take his skinny naked lady into the big black car of the advertisement, show off his own upgrades and creature comforts? When the nurse opens the door she doesn't even say my name, just points. From my naked lady's mouth I draw a bubble, scribble my name: if I am dying I want one last sad beauty calling for me, a false record no one will know to correct.
Fix Infinity

Getting drunk is the mind’s way of moving back to the country

but you get there and bemoan o hands you failed tree roots,

forgetting how to reach.

So you sober to the city and its snaz, hope for better reception until

the next bloodfuse blows and its o heart you broken radio station,

nothing but bad jazz.

You’re just one more mechanic trying to fix infinity with a hammer, two

lips and o eyes you supernovas,
quit trying to count the sparks.

Raise your hammer again.
Bananas

A hundred years ago to taste a banana you had to be a king or savage yet now you can’t fall on a city street without thinking of one and before the invention of highways distance existed in a different color. Without houses lightning is not pretty, nor sunsets nor full moons. Taste of blood, centuries older than the taste of banana. To say nothing of mustard both on hotdogs and killing European infantry, 1916. I hope you’re happy, tongue. Time pulls the flesh from meaning, the heart from where you believed it was; still it beats but from behind your eyes, from inside your feet. From your hand before your own eyes. The future is simply a matter of footsteps and apologies. Imagine when electricity was discovered, like a kid reading late into the night, captured: electricity sentenced to an eternity of you’d better/or else. A hundred years ago the song of motion was only one verse and one chorus but it took days to sing, yet now—. Come here, sugarlove. Closer, full lips. We’ll never live to be one hundred, not after these decisions: I don’t want to think of how tomorrow may taste. None of this food will be saved.
We’re closer to ocean than the limits of sky but it doesn’t feel that way—I’m three hours from a woman who whispered *I'll miss you* in a language I barely speak, five from anything I’d point to if asked *what’s home*? In the seat next to me a young man cradles a woman he didn’t have to leave in a country he never dreamt he’d dream so often about. They’re maybe five years younger, eight, than I was when I believed I could take my love with me anywhere—a darker side of town, a different country. She stirs, he shifts, we bump arms. I long ago gave up the idea that distance has any relationship with hearts, fondness or strength, yet here I am, miles high, still wanting love to be more like wine—close at hand, plentiful, in containers which, once opened, stay opened until every drop’s consumed. *Sorry*, he smiles, I smile, then turn again to the window. I suppose there’s an ocean down there beneath the oceanic clouds, and beneath that ocean there must be whole whorls of life gone undocumented—creatures uncatalogued, imagination-boggling monsters of shadow and privacy. We believe the monsters are down there waiting for us and our nature documentaries, believe the monsters will wait. His sigh is massive, big as a time zone, and we both look at the woman restlessly resting in his arms. Fatigue pocks his face but I want to whisper *you’re lucky: We have to keep letting each other go to hold on and our only real discussions are tactile, our only stories of longing* and for months it was magic, her fluid and strange words, yet now all I want is to understand her when she says *I’ll miss you*. Something’s important in the hearing it. His finger grazes the tiny cup of water on his tray and he brings his pregnant finger to his girlfriend’s lower lip, rubs the small wetness in. She doesn’t move but to me he whispers *She’s burning up; she’s been like this since Umbria.*

The first night. Dim hills stretching darkly beyond the house’s clay walls. The hearth lit with so much fire it seemed ceremonial, even our shadows trailed smoke. The kitchen dark after our long meal—mussels, bread, wine—the bedroom upstairs with sheets turned down and pillows arranged but for now, off her kitchen we sat in an old stone room. Wide screenless windows, long cool benches, the night gathering around and around us. Bats swooping among hills and her hand smooth, calm on mine. *The windows* I pointed: *what if they get in? The bats?* We could just barely communicate, had traveled from Madrid to Trieste with a window always nearby, view as sketch pad, pictorial
dictionary, we told our stories to each other, stripped and un-
elaborate: the barest bits of self, just enough.

Bats? she asked, and I pointed to the dark shapes beyond
in the dark sky, used my free hand to mimic
a wing, some flying thing, she shook her head and rubbed her nose
on my cheek. *No come in*, she said, and we watched
a handful of bats swoop, glide pale-bellied almost within
reach, right past the window, and she was right:
they didn’t come in. *An unseen screen*, I thought, *something Italian,*
and we sat together, letting our silence seep
and our exhaustion deepen, watching bats fling themselves
through dark before we finished the wine, spread
the fire to embers climbed the stairs to the bed in which she
above me whispered *All the love* and I beneath her
didn’t say or think a word of translation.

She groans, he shifts again
into me. Ten minutes ago the pilot told us to look down, that we
were above the deepest trench on the planet.

*If you flipped Everest over, shoved it down there, it still wouldn’t reach bottom.*
Her cheeks are flush, eyes for a moment wild—
she didn’t expect to wake up this far from the ground, you can tell.

*Are you okay?* he asks her and I hold my breath,
translate, practice. *Siete buono?* Nods. Smiles. *It’s so hot,* she says
and though he already must’ve known—his own
love as oven, there in his arms, of course he could feel—her saying it
changes something. *Here,* he says brings the cup
of water to her lips. The plane shudders, sending messages
to our stomachs that now is the moment to fear,
the moment to clutch at anything stable. Shudders again—a throat
readying to shout, a surface of water broken by a pebble—
them we stabilize. We look at each other, the young man and I, then
at the woman in his arms. She says *water over water*
and settles deeper into his arms and chest, and with a different faith
I might believe there was some difference between
our tin cradle and the crescent moon way out, gibbous and ghostly,
though both float so seemingly easy across great gashes
of night. Pretend destination. He sets the small cup of water back
down, it’s nearly empty: there’s a story she
keeps trying to tell me, about her father and mother, some boat trip they took
and ended up stranded, some island—*they burn*
the boat she keeps telling me and it’s not metaphor or story but real,
true: I’ve looked up all the words, for burning, for boat,
for stranded. Two nights and their only warmth the burning bits
of what she’ve been able to take them back.

*How long?* asks the girl in his arms, the girl next to me. Out the window
there’s so much distance to the next cloud, far light, it’s hard
to believe there’s such a thing as touch, arrival: *how long until we’re back?*
Then The Real Fight Began

We'd started arguing and decided instead to go out, skip rocks, nine hops, ten, the water slow-running, midsummer heat upon us like hats and gloves. We skipped rocks and the rest of the day's meals and whatever else we had inside to fight with each other about, and we walked the riverbank scanning for the furthest bit of far shore, a challenge we'd be forced to rise to. Dragonflies, the electric iridescence of a whole world of bugs: we were surrounded. And the mucky steps we took through over-grown weeds. And passing boats, driven by the hatless old men we swore we'd never become, sunspotted, shaky-handed, their formerly blond brides visored and in thrall not to the whitefalling spray behind the boats but $5.99 books about love and roses, new hands+touches. We found the widest part, a score of scrub trees surrounding us, shade dappling like something through a swinging screen door. And the roar further north, citybarges pushing slow in depths we could only guess. We skipped rocks, eleven skips, twelve. We'd kissed each other's sister and pushed each other down hills, had found at thirteen a way to make shared silence a form of speech. We'd never get closer than that, never be able to get far enough away, too much living by just one river. Fourteen hops got the rock a ways across the river but we wanted the other side. And how we had to keep emigrating, little by little,
further south, running the beaches clean

of flat, skippable shale, crusty layerings
of limestone. Fourteen hops, fifteen.
We'd use the flattest, best stones first,

round our way out, keep moving. Hours
and we ached, low-slung hands kept
the shape of stones long tossed. We saw

the flattest pieces and they glinted and we'd
earlier said no glass but we'd grown
too tired not to try. Forefingers wrapped

around glinting edges and of course
we drew back and tossed and the glass
skipped glittering across the glittering

river, drew blood and gasps as it
fifteen then sixteen then almost hops
stopped short of the far bank, skidded

out into water. Cool, we said
to each other, to the river we'd almost
skipped our way across, to the day we wore

as dirt and sweat on necks and shins, Cool
we said, spit and rubbed mud into our cuts
and let it cake on, let it stay till the blood

was dry and the split skin along each
our fingers' length looked like some
easy river, simple to get across, just blood.
Knocking Before Entering vs. the Unknown

There are keys for this: the door without a window:
and inside always music: the sound of water running:
even in the same room it's hard to know if you're
hearing everything right: sometimes she calls: sometimes
not: and behind door number three: today we ran
out of carrots: making soup: plenty of celery slash
peppers slash chicken but no carrots: and I reached for
keys: walked toward the door as she asked isn't it weird
that something so orange grows in the dark? you'd think we'd be
ready by now: to admit it all: cravings for certain skin:
not that it hasn't all been said before: that we have said it all:
she looked at me: at my keys+hands: I know too many
names: remember too many kisses with each blink: some days
every number: color: and what algebra solves for the x
of memory when: when: when: she looks away sometimes:
certain questions: I look away: there are songs we sing
together, off key voices next to each other like a drunk
with a belly full of several different liquors: it's the lilt
in her voice: when she comes over: unannounced: uncalled-
ahead: the way my name is her question and: and what's
known: and what's not: and what shouldn't be: not even
that there's a darkness: just that there could be: that
a flashlight is what it is because it focuses: is shone
toward whatever sound woke you: + there's a reason
the friend who's been married longest swears by the earplugs
he wears: right next to love: every night: whiles he sleeps:
Nightshowers

She steps through the kitchen and leaves
her ceramic mug on the lip of the sink, moves
into the bathroom and out of her clothes. It’s nearly
eleven, long past dark. Almost May. As she starts
the water for a shower she hums some pretty three note
string, steps behind the curtain. I’m in the other room,
looking at mail. Max has started crawling,
my cousin writes to tell us, and Jeanette thinks she’s
found a man to love. My love has left the bathroom door
open and water makes different sounds on different
parts of her body. On the table in front of me are
three empty mugs, each mine. I bring the mugs to the sink,
then stand in front of the bathroom door, listening to
my wife in water. When I was thirteen and cleanliness
was something more rare than a dollar in my pocket,
I dreamed of beautiful women taking nightshowers
for me, dreamed of the promise of it, the unsubtle
yes, soon. My wife turns the water off, pulls a towel
behind the green curtain, emerges wrapped in white.
She’s not showering for me, though it’s more than
cleanliness she wants to lie down in tonight, more than
washed, softened skin. She catches me staring at her bare
shoulder, tells me to move it, that she wants to be in bed
in ten minutes. Half a lifetime of staying awake till 3am
comes down to a bare shoulder. Her voice drops, insistent,
but then she smiles. Says I mean it. The trick is spending
half a lifetime thinking you know what’ll happen next.
And So Perhaps (After CL)

Every letter I didn’t write to CL before he died hangs from a tree in my dreams and I keep chopping but never felling the thing because what I’d meant to say—about that squirrel I watched get run over then get up and run away; about the brick wall my neighbor built all summer which then fell in fall, and how he rebuilt it winter long, seemed even glad—it’s all still there, shaking in some wind through my mind’s branches, and so perhaps memory as wind. Today I watched a boy help his grandmother cross a street, watched him cross back to the corner he’d just left, watched them wave at each other in sunlight, and then he crossed again and they continued on. And so perhaps distance as opened thing which opens more, and so the letters I meant to send mean as much now that CL’s dead as those I did write. And so perhaps sent mail and almost sent mail aren’t opposites but cousins, distant. And so perhaps what’s meant means no matter what’s read. And so perhaps I’m no fool to move slow, avoid disturbing these addressed + stamped unfilled envelopes, lying here unsent in sunlight.
Seasonal Gamble

I see yr 7pm sundown +
raise you a firelit autumn
tree, recollection of woodsmoke;
time lost like a fruit uneaten,
fruit lost til rot: the trick of living
must be in finding uses beyond
sweetness, of finding unJuly-ed warmth:
and once the pencil's done
with love notes must it be burned?:
the rope may be handmade+beautiful
but we choke on the loose noose
of pleasure: she got out of her clothes
and into the lake. This was an earlier
September, still warm. She got
this tone in her voice when she wanted.
And set the clock back, wake
to more dark and frost. And eventually
November. The world tilts one way
one season, another another; the world
is not unlike how Nicole seemed
that September and lake-swum night,
kiss-ready and yessful, and the next day
quieter, farther. We tell ourselves
it is the world, a Nicole: some other
that tilts one way or another, not
ourselves. Not ourselves making
deals with trees, whispering
as we pass trunks hold onto your leaves,
please, hold on. Not ourselves
trying sweetwild and manic to tug
every last juiceful bit of summer
before the same old clicking despondence
clacks the air like teeth, a bone
dug up and dropped on tile, dice.
Grip vs. Gravity

I'm building a new muscle, something that's never kissed daylight or regret and after seeing enough cars crash it's hard not to think the only slash best way out of anything is through: mangled wrecks get shouldered, traffic slows a bit life's caught gawking, then the next turn turns and real movement returns. I'm building a new muscle for what, for arms + heart, for the hardened parts of my fingers which've lost feeling and grip from holding so tight onto one thing for decades, a life.

It takes newspaper and wax, string and old tea leaves: it takes letting go. New muscle takes ages to get going but once it takes it takes hold hard, a car crash, a song, like reaching for a tipping-over vase, a framed picture slipping: how things considered stable can surprise, catch light, make you move fast into a fallen, falling thing's path.
You Could Call It A Shift

It's a beach: after the dreams of heat
in a too hot room in a country
I came to because: because: it was there
though because is never enough
nor is the yellow gray of
sunrise following the orangepink
of sunset: or the man, beach's edge,
untethered moon up and left, straight
ahead enough stars still to believe in
something: the man: large arms:
manufacturing nets from splintery remains,
broken bowlines, windwrecked
wooden ribs: not even nets: but:
like the man once loved who made the painting
of the heart on the painting of the fire
on the painting of the fingers
on the painting of the stone
on the painting of some stranger's

face:

none of it is enough: not the discernable sigh
from some still-sleeping form, away from
the waves' tilt: not the man making nets from old
breakings: and how moving closer there's a hole the size
of a thought, a fist, a face: the face you meant to make
when he showed you the painting
and said see? I never meant any of it: how enough is not even enough:
and how when you ask the man now about
the net, how there's too big a hole in it
to gather much he doesn't from his work look
up: says this catches all I need: how
each wave takes whatever the last left:
A Capella

I left while you
were still
singing,
while the snow
was still
but a threat.

What I mean
is that
I left
went away and
you were
singing about—

You used to sing
of mistakes
you wanted to make.

I left
expecting snow
as you sang
what it was
you sang alone
that night.

I left.
Not because
you sang
but
because something
you were singing
alone
made things
in me
start leaving.
Spring Prayers
Earth movers stand at rest beside mounds of earth, a hundred unsent love letters, bone white moon ghosting above abandoned machinery + desolated highway, and Dr. Max is on latenight AM radio talking about training dogs, how it's arbitrary, language is loose as topsoil, one could just as easily say pumpernickel in place of lie down, in place of come here: makes no difference to the dog. I've been on the road for a dozen hours, nearly a day, one long enactment of almost: a zero-sum game of betweens. I'm in Kentucky, or still Illinois, or I'm three hours from one coast but driving demands measurement with different string: a thousand miles from one idea of home, several hundred from another. I'm half a tank of gas from just giving up, lying down among corn in moonlight and waiting for day.

Dr. Max is going on and on, says most things come down to repetition, cause and effect, call and someone will—, seek and ye shall—, etcetera. Home's a shirt you've loved to pieces, worn good holes in. The bulldozer at the hill's rocky base means nothing if you know behind the rock the hill's heart's still wet, that a small stream is its core, that face is one thing but what's inside is still being made, riverfinger by riverfinger, like how since I was six years old I've never been able to fold my hands— even over a steering wheel, 2am, past a construction site, under a sky littered with more stars than there are names—without an empty cup in my chest righting itself in longing for some watery, incantatory amen.
What Follows

What follows: what follows: try
nothing: take the sort of breath
you shouldn't hold and then hold
on: till blue and stars: till
the past is just another empty bucket
at the base of a tree and next
to the bucket marked past is one marked
love and next to the one
marked love is one marked forgiveness
and next to the one marked forgiveness
is one marked pity and next to the one
marked pity there’s a horse
drinking: it seems it’s hard to let go yet
my hand is now empty save
the memory of fire: there’s too much
carpeting in these rooms, the walls
too white and unpainted: right now
someone somewhere must be
setting a clock: down the street a
moving truck’s been parked
outside a home for weeks and weeks:
ready?: something will come:
something always does: later: after
the lambs of spring come lions:
after horses come hopes of escape
and distance, everything chasing
over hills up-and-downing like a sine wave’s
dream of itself: what follows won’t
even be called letting go: even spring:
nothing: a straw in some
new, brightly colored drink that’s
nearly full: is something
like taste: warm hand on cold glass:
At night I leave the boots beneath
the chair next to the bed as if I'll need
to escape. This itch for fence-hopping,
it's genetic: not me+mine, but all us+
ours. Isn't the tug named escape the glint
in everyone's eye in line at the grocery store
next to the display of gum, bubbly sparkles
catching glare + tossing it, repeating
the senseless bright like some drooling
retard? Is is is is is is. To chew+ chew.
Like light's enough, like something pink
for the mouth ever will be. How the food
comes boxed and in servings always too large
therefore leftovers as borderline psychological
malady. In each aisle there's too much
of everything but nothing satisfying: such is
life as driven home, all those dark streets
branching away, certainly someone must be
driving them, and how many mysteries aren't
even mysteries but somebody else's bored
routine? Those kids in that next car, the shining
red one, music louder there, them laughing
harder than you do. Usually. Heavenly father
of deli meats and removed shoes kept close,
what's the way out of wanting a way out?
To sometimes make it through the almost
of the yellow light before coming to a complete
stop even if none of us will taste all the selves
we've craved. In the grocery store late after
everyone's been fed a woman will wrap
a mylar balloon in double-sided tape, will wander
aisles with her satellite way up+shining,
gathering all those balloons that that day
floated away, and will if asked say Well
either I catch them or they just shrivel and fall
eventually, and she will if asked admit that
when they pop up there they're not
as loud as you'd expect.
Reveal

This is the letting go: how the light slips from the room, arms from a sweater. Cast wide enough, you’ll find your real wound: the street, alive with memory, springstrewn: last year’s leaves, debris like fragments of once-great machinery. I left this and this along that street; I keep leaving. Dark and two cars pass, one red overtaking another. This is the only view, all that’ll ever be revealed.
Next door the cat's finally quiet, fed, the mewing suppressed for another day and on the way out into another spring night I hear stereos from the next several apartments and a woman's voice laughing, no, crying, no, there's music where you least expect: I could've killed that cat yesterday, bawling like a fucking newborn while the water was boiling and the coffee still in separate stages, grounds on one side/water on the other, like stages of grief as described in a book for Dummies, first denial then anger, it's not ever how it feels but this is how I've come to April, thinking as always of an old name I keep remembering so I can forget it anew, she's laughing now, I think, a TV on in the background and the windows in the church across the street were all removed and replaced over a month in winter + one night after work was finished I crept up and licked each pane of glass where new window met old wood, licked like to seal an envelope, like to secure the new view and if, instead of going to see a friend who may never ask me what I really want, I could stand in there now with the pipeorgan quiet and looming behind me + all I know of God reverent in the curved, shining woodwork above I'd ask not for song or silence but for a way to know each from each, real woman's voice from fake, light of two candles from one flickering bulb, feel of sleep from feel of falling to sleep, the name D__ from the word denial, go away from don't fade, holy from April, April from the word almost, etc., amen, etc.
The birds start the auction in trees decked with sex, dawn is the moment another song begins on some faraway stereo. It’s spring and the last time I heard this song I wasn’t listening to California train whistles but the brass peals of barge horns groaning yellow through the dark like the unbuckling belts of former lovers who don’t miss me. Her face a blade behind my eyes so of course I can’t remember the name of every river and lake I’ve offered my body to. I’m awake tasting rust after a long night spent licking the gray steel of distance and maybe it’s not an auction they’re chirping out there: maybe a show on the latest in featherware, strategic worm maps for novitiates, serenades for the red hints hidden in the green blasts tongueing from the tree’s ruddy brown skin. Or revelry and regret sound similar at this hour and I don’t mean a blade but something lightgrabbing and with a ferocious taste for my Minnesota blood. The photosynthetic fine print of the branches’ advertisements, the birds selling melodies: how if you want to know the whole story you have to cut the trunk right through and start counting from zero? All anyone’s saying is sing along, not even the birds know the next notes.
Hats

The ones I love all come from
the cold but
they don’t come for me. Spring’s
tricked us
here on the coast, turned its back
with a ba ba
and fled. The first worst mistake
is thinking
there’s a reason, the second
is thinking
you can figure the reason out
for yourself.
I’ve got four knit hats from four
different women
I love. Currency as woven warmth,
as just in case,
as it’s sure to get cold outside but
I’d rather you
didn’t. At eight I was sure I wanted
kisses,
eighteen what ever magic transpired
between sheets.
At twenty-eight I no longer know.
Perhaps warmth,
sometimes less. Knit hats from women
who’ve seen
their share of springs, who know
a little some
-thing of what comes and goes. I send
back thanks,
assurances: yes, I reply, I’m warm,
it fits, it’s perfect,
thank you. The third mistake is watching
small rivers
melt and refreeze all spring long
and thinking
you’re in any way different.
Call It Sin

What if dust. Past yearning. How each touch is like-a-glove fitting. Name the fruit before you open your eyes: apple tastes red as a thousand yesses. An embarrassment of riches: to have someone even know yr name, let alone call it, whispery as distant water. Let alone mean it, mean come here, mean you. What if yes instead of crouching away from any reaching. What if stepping toward instead of staying still. And tomorrow a thousand oblusions stretched out, cavernous and ready. And the fruit of touch the only sweetness worth its taste.
In Defense of Kissing Despite Massive Evidence to the Contrary

Once when you said “I’m hungry” someone kissed you as if tongues were ever enough food, lips and intentions of bliss, low gutturals broken because vowels seem so flimsy and how many times will you say country instead of

the name you miss so, like the color green or the number eleven or the gun you were taught so well to fire, age nine, how when you sighted down the barrel as you pointed at the sun you knew you’d never hit it, ever, but you still had to try?
Oh The Things You’ll Learn

The water’s all empty from the sink’s pans, crumbs scrubbed out, the light from beneath the door in the other room went out minutes ago: twenty: thirty: there’s no sound from where she sleeps and yet: maybe sound: some drip: small creakings/light steps from above: a few nights back they screamed+banged late: some event looked different: same as always: depends on stance, distance from action: like how the trees seem scraggly dim washed-out all winter and what's incredible is what you can see when someone points: says see? says:

the trees look like veins reaching up. She’s asleep: next room: I’ve run the faucet quiet even though she won't hear it: and now all the work still undone in the next room slopped onto one pile like each day’s a digging like the bottom of the pile means done: below the pile, a table: below the pans empty of water, a sink I should’ve cleaned yesterday: should’ve scrubbed the day before, a gray Friday: would’ve been nice to work a gleam from some -thing + the wind that day: maybe: they fought that night because of the wind and the fist-dented metal sky: because she’d read the weather report for the next day but he hadn’t: perhaps that’s what she meant when she screamed (after his loud bang) I don't want you here like that! (;)

I click lights and unshoe: it's dark before I’ve become ready: the smell of sleep: unrustle of sheets: she mumbles something as I lay a hand on her: lies flat on her back when I lie next to her: (not) looking up (eyes closed): I can’t see trees as veins: yet: can barely taste (in memory) the basil I’ve purchased as seeds: the ones I’ve shoveled 2” into dirt: have covered+watered them: July’s neither figment nor direction: is just a boat: someone else's harbor: some -thing I’ve seen but have never considered buying: and before I fall asleep I’m thinking of water and July: of how we'll look on waves in sunlight: and in the morning she'll tell me again that sometimes in the night when she wakes up she finds me sleeping with my eyes open:

and I'll be just as surprised: again:

every time:
It’s best not to shop for a new bathroom faucet when sad. My wife and I are arguing color and style, we’re arguing about the judgments people pass after they’ve just peed.

There’s more to this than clean hands, but I’m sad because I’m a little hungry, because I wonder if my wife really loves the house we’ve built and rebuilt for ourselves: the replaced windowshades and coffee tables, the updated cabinetry and the chairs so expensive I feel bad sitting in them. When I pick up a standard, chrome faucet and say see, my wife tells me

I’m mired in what is, not in what could be. There’s a woman down the aisle rubbing her eyes with her forefinger and thumb, while her husband points angrily at the showerheads around him.

In the next aisle are locks and keys, beyond that, lamps and ceiling fans. We come here so often the store sends us cards on our birthdays. We come on weekends to rip apart beauty,

thinking we can make it more beautiful still. When I tell my wife it’s just a house, it’s just a faucet, it’s just clean hands she points angrily at a faucet next to me and says it’s a home, that it’s not

just anything; it’s presentation and value and a sense of how to best make the world work. I take off my glasses and rub my eyes with my forefinger and thumb, look down the aisle and see

the other woman smiling toward me. I’m looking for a chair, something to hold me. I want to cry it’s just water. I want to tell my wife that I used to feel electric when I unlocked the door to her long dark hair and nightsmile, that hunger didn’t use to stand so close to sorrow. I move beside her and hold my breath, sure she knows I’m waiting again, listening for whatever’s next.
Jazz Murderers

We were all of us reading the stories about the jazz murderers, dudes who snuck up at 10:10 each night and before the hand struck or the light tore there'd be some brief etude, we'd heard of others hearing of it—moments of eclipse and simplicity, nothing like what the murderers were about to enact, shattering moments of brass enunciations, whole bestiaries of noise we didn't even know the nature of, were scared to consider, thought maybe there was something offered in that last bit of music this guy or that guy or the next (the one shot three times bang bang bang right behind his right ear) heard and we read and read but nobody said shit about sound everybody just kept writing about the little red cards left behind, three red cards on the ground by the body, bang bang bang, one word to each card—

improvise
mother
fucker
Daylight Savings vs. Ornette Coleman's* Line 'If you're Not Making Mistakes, You're Not Really Trying.'

It's just another hour lost to darkness, another snatch of rock and roll on the radio in the bar after the new year's begun and Clarity's the name of the last song I put a dollar in the jukebox to hear between bouts across a table from one more woman whose mouth I'd stare into looking for blue skies as she said my name, sure something like mouths full of blue skies mattered, sure things mattered at all despite the gradual yearly seasonal indistinction, the fact that Yesterday used to be something I walked away from and today it's the song that's blasting from the bright yellow truck that's stopped in the crosswalk I'm making my way across on the way to buy the cigarettes I swore I'd quit smoking yesterday, quit smoking the day before: what I want isn't even to smoke, not the this-is-one-thing/this-is-another of a hand's edge but to believe that an hour sucked from a clock and fed into daylight will make any difference in anything, in how I can see or what the day might mean, to believe that the friend's wife who took her son trick-or-treating last year on her own Halloween birthday was right to fill a sippy cup with vodka for herself, to be mom and other, so she could watch tipsy as her little Batman/son scurried through overlapping swathes of darkness and light and returned to her, face full of smile + pillowcase full of candy because there really are windows: of free candy, of being drunk parents slash smoking nonsmokers slash missingly found people slash folks with unnamed names: what I want is just enough meaning for the jam to stick to the toast in the morning and the coffee machine to do its job so I can do mine, for the next song I hear to have some swell of guitars and a rhythm I can tap my foot to, for the matches I'm handed with the cigarettes I don't want to want to work just like a new name, a song: flash brightness, offer old things new, go dark.

* it was Coleman Hawkins
Fatass

In my dream someone kept shouting you're too fat! but never let me shout back all I've been eating is celery! In my dream perhaps I'd been eating more than celery, but before I fell asleep I'd been remembering Alison what'shername, the one who’d tell us at lunch that eating celery actually gave you negative calories, which fact for just a few seconds took my mind off the several zits always on my face and the multitude of unimaginable blemishless inches of Alison what'shername’s etc.
and etc.
and etc. Yesterday I chopped a pineapple and wondered how eleventh graders in Hawaii feel, if they dip dark bread in thick stew just one night each tropical winter and think of Minnesota like I thought of them in high school when Nancy with her white spork jabbed at cubes of pineapple and asked something about someone the details of which are both long gone. Love and kitchens seem about the only things I enter happily and exit too late and in my dream the man they led me to, the man they promised would kill me quickly (after I'd been fed one last time, miserable hungry fucker that I was), stood on a table with forks strapped to his biceps and asked if I'd ever seen anything more beautiful than how the light shone right through him, how skin was no barrier at all, really, and when I laughed he seemed like he wanted to laugh too but stopped himself, and when I died in the dream I woke right up, head full of laughter and shouting and hunger.
If Not Winter

World cast in blue, winter’s moonlight
at the edge of morning and still
it’s a burning that draws eye, memory:
and if happiness isn’t a sport? what about
today? the way your heart suddenly
races: that ball you keep throwing: and if
I love you isn’t a line in sand: in glass:
isn’t a resurgence, a slope in any direction:
and if nothing’s a line: not even edge of
season: at the bus stop one shape (woman)
leans forward against the back of
another shape (man): what she
says stays shaped in air: passing slow
but not dispersing: cast in blue,
wintermoonlight: see it is sport,
a pursuit: faith that in blue moon
-light anything’s worth belief, even
a ball’s bounce, even you:
even winter: a smile: a smile
you’ve been holding tight
as a knife, as a wish: how will I know
if God’s a fist letting go or squeezing tighter?
what can you see: the light changes:
cars pass: is winter: just winter:
what she said stays in the air: moves:
and inside: how warmth is a state
of matter: an excitement: what’s invisible
in every room moving more quickly:
What Maybe Can Mean

She opens the door still buttoning
    the last buttons of her shirt
with one hand, smiles hi and we’ve been
    this way two times already, now three—
we know the chances but haven’t yet
    kissed. It’s early enough to be
both sure and incorrect. Two minutes,

she says, fingers up and walking away.
    She leaves the bathroom door open
as she fixes stray elements of herself.
    On her living room walls are pictures
of her with friends—pretty groups
    of pretty girls in pretty places, smiling
like they mean it—and I’m sorry my friends

and I have no pictures of the moments
    we’ve come to love and retell
most— the midnight frisbee games, lakeside
    wrestling stemming from too much beer and too few thoughts to the contrary.
    The time Dag and I climbed that tree,
age eleven, and halfway up, twenty feet into limbs,

Dag blanched and got a nosebleed,
    admitted he was scared of heights,
how I had to unclimb the tree with him
    on my back, his blood marked across
my neck, smeared on my ear as he held close
    and whispered apologies the whole descent—Come here, she calls from within her room

and I smile. I believe in Saturday night,
    in a woman’s voice asking for me
from another room, in what maybe can
    mean. She’s at her computer, one hand
on the keyboard and the other reaching back
    for me, opening and closing like something senseless, mechanical and charged.

I walk toward her clasping and unclasping
    hand but can’t touch, fearful something’ll spark, shatter, both. She uses both hands now
and with a keyboard click she summons
to the screen a picture of a penis with a woman’s hand
    wrapped around it, with another click.
the hand begins to move slowly,

with a silent *click* my body sweats
    and howls. She looks up and over
her shoulder but I look down, past her face,
eying all the space between our bodies.
She draws my eye for a moment, offers an unsure
    smile—nervous, questioning—then takes
my hand in hers, puts both on the back of her neck.

The hand so slowly on screen moves
    and moves and I can’t look away
though her eyes prey over my face. I don’t know
    how to ask *What the hell is going on*
and the video’s sounds—small human moans
    of assent, a slow-building pleasure—charge
and recharge, repeating. To touch now would mean

an ignition, a shuddering beyond good
    or bad and I look down at her nose
thinking *blood*, remembering how Dag looked
    from the lowest branch as I lowered him almost
to the ground, his blood smeared across both our faces,
    how his color returned as he left my grip
and fell to the earth’s, that final second

when his feet finally touched and how
    he looked up so grateful, changed,
the edge of his mouth stark as something haunted.
    *It’s okay*, she says, her hand on my hand
on her neck and my eyes on her made-up, shining lips,
    watching her form words. *Right?*
I say nothing. I nod. Dag was most scared,

he said later, of those last four feet—
    the difference between two reachings,
couldn’t breathe from anxiousness for gravity
to grab and reclaim his shape, for his feet
to catch on something trustable. *Right?* she asks
    again, her smile growing, hopeful,
drawing me into itself, something new. *Right?*
Afternoons in November and there’s no yes
great enough to rub the small maybe of self against,
no friction enough to create spark or true

movement. What meaning means on gray days
is a matter of debate: the morning’s best thoughts
don’t last past noon and what’s true at two

won’t do at sundown. Listen. Try good enough:
hold tight to the hopeful notion that today’s whisperings
are some measure more articulate than

yesterday’s, that these stethoscopic days may be
evidence that getting better’s better than being good:
perhaps today we build only the first wheel,

tomorrow the next, then a steering column, later
the frame for whatever vehicle we’ll finally create
to take us from our lives’ quiet: perhaps

what’s possible is only possible if never imagined,
not even incompletely, not even dimly. Listen.
We ourselves and not days are history’s sugar

and ache—our talismanic names, our taste for gray
amazements, our need to build beds and homes
in the droning howl of time’s wind. There is

a route out, even if unmarked: some days we must
set out carrying nothing but umbrellas and no notion
where we’re going, looking only for some small sip

to keep the cup just shy of empty. There are days
we must return with old pockets full of new rain. The map
points one way held upright, clutched otherwise

another. Listen. The spark goes out, comes lit, is not one
thing but a gathering, bits we unthinkingly clutch as a bunch
for warmth, for light. Call it held onto, say dark:
It was the dream of the x-rayed rose, of the dentist in Seville and his love for a Flamenco dancer, of how when he took an x-ray of her jaw she refused to let go of the rose she held in her teeth while she danced.

It was the dream again of the x-rayed rose, of how, once the dancer had once again left the dentist stared at the film and saw each rose petal was made of tiny, broken bones, and onto each bone were etched names.

It was the dream of the names etched onto the broken bones of the rose petals in that Spanish dentist’s office and I awoke past midnight, burning with fever. I put my hand on my bare chest, felt my heart whirl and spin, pounding out something like a language.

I stood at my window watching trees stand still and cars not carrying you pass by. In the dream it was only for a moment, a heartbeat that the dentist looked at the x-rayed rose traced a finger over the black and white.

Beyond the trees, beyond the street, the river's edge was beginning to freeze. My open hand on the window left a temporary outline, heat that disappeared before I even walked away.
Disarticulation of Flow

There's a guy running past the window a girl giving chase, and along this road something's always coming: it's almost dusk, September, in another day/two the loose pages around the house will once again flatten, their curled edges'll lose humidity like altitude: attitude:
past the window the young man darts, looks back over his shoulder at the girl following + they're playing, grinning: she's gaining: the river's changing direction, a friend writes, says the old island we used to motor to, used to drag cases of beer out onto is getting lapped + cat-tongued by a shifting:
she's got an arm out toward him, has almost reached him, half a foot more and it'll be his shirt in her fist and the scene's footstep/almost/footstep/almost/footstep/closer and they run right out of the frame, past my window's limit:

You should see that old tree we used to climb
and swing out from, my friend writes: this room's brick, has a brick wall between the two windows and I can hardly breathe: they were both (I could hear them) laughing when they disappeared from the frame:
You should see the old tree he writes but you can't really see it anymore. It's half underwater and buried in sand, and where we carved our names in it? Can't see it.

We lived on that water, May through August, worked boats and motors in heat and black pants, lived radiator lives, our movement along fixed paths, the back and forth of the river's lean, the swell and sub-side of sunlight, the ladders we climbed back up after we'd climbed down to feed more oil to a growling we couldn't stand next to for more than a minute without going temporarily deaf: I'm watching the second window, waiting/breathing: they'll have to reappear, guy still just barely leading, or girl leading by now: or just guy and girl, walking together from behind/within the breath/pause/break of brick wall:

and I could just sit here like this, could just make up reasons for their running, for reaching: It happens, he writes: the people who really know rivers say it happens. In a hundred years, tiny sand islands, they come and go, it's nothing for a river: I could just sit here, keep watching:

a minute, two, and they haven't emerged: I haven't looked away: other walkers walk past, runners pass both windows, cars as always rolling noisily down the street: but: but:
What did they first stand next to that started them running, running from, running toward, together?

It’s strange to not be able to stand on sand you used to be able to stand on:

I get up and at the window finger the metal mesh, feel day’s air: it’s already autumn but doesn’t feel that way: I’m not even sure they were(n’t) there:

Weird to think, he writes, that where we stood’s underwater now

signs off:
One Dollar vs. Furniture Arrangement

We're moving the couch. A new view. Behind it
I'm hoping for money but likely only dust.
Perhaps paper clips. Leave something still long enough
+ sometimes treasure just materializes. I've had
this cough for two days, she's been sniffling longer,
and when she asked tonight when she got home
if I wanted to move the couch I coughed, asked her
to define want. The living alone has made
a submarine of my heart, my self. I never know where
to leave the scissors, which lamp looks best in which
room. The newspapers stay on the ground for days and
when she came the first time I thought goodbye
stories I didn't ever read. She puts a shoulder down, hands
beneath the couch, and tonight from across the room
we'll sit, she wiping her nose, me nursing tea. This is
the Duluth of want: how cold and rocky-hilled.
Someone must have one night said this will do, found a place
to rest + three generations later people ask about
being native. This is where we are. This couch hasn't always
even been mine, was last year furniture for friends
and, before them, their parents, + now I'm sitting, calling it
mine, home. The view's basically the same
from either side of the room: before it was one window,
now it's another. There was no treasure, not even
a picture. Directions I could barely read scribbled on a quarter
of a quarter of a piece of paper I must've meant
to throw away but lost the will. And what if we're all just
where we end up. And what if it really is all for
the best. And what if 'the best' is something we're doomed
to always be both sure and wrong about. She puts
her head on my shoulder and we're a movie, a song, an
advertisement for an orange couch. Sunset.
When she falls asleep later tonight I'll take one of her loose
hairs, wrap it around a dollar and slip both behind
the couch, tell myself to forget, here I am, never forget,
fall asleep, forget, wake up, remember: surprise.
Lucinda Williams vs. Weinerdogs

I’ve been circling: wandering around, looking
for something bright: maybe chewable: to
day the rain: enough to set the grass on fire
with runoff: and the neighbor’s weinerdog
had his first impression of ocean: and I
just walked through it: through worms: through
old Lucinda Williams songs all day about seeing
something in someone’s eyes: all day, songs
about almost-but-not-quite being alone: the coded
what-if of a lovesong: an umbrella: the first
guy I walked past this afternoon, both us watching
the wetground in front of us, had an umbrella with
words printed on the inside: Sunny! it said:
Clearing up!: my umbrella’s black as a sixteen
year-old’s wishes: as a lung: the man and I
did not nod as we passed, and later, over
coffee, I told K I’d been looking for something
bright all day and she asked if I’d ever heard that
Lucinda Williams grew up in the same town she
kept singing about, song after song after: and
if that wasn’t enough circling, looking for some-
ting bright there was, she said, a place across
the street that baked cookies every ten minutes
all day long: and past that an animal hospital:
then hills: memories of drives I wanted to take
but didn’t because I couldn’t figure out where
I wanted to end up and finally, eventually, if there’s
enough gas in the light in the car in the sky she
leaned in, black coffee just below her light light
face, eventually, she said there’s the ocean: the
sky’s edge shaped way out by dull, blinking bouys.
Wonder

Just a little bit more, and then less. These hands deep
  in bread dough, outside barely sunlight, and I know I've tasted
the food I keep trying to make. Something honeyed
with a sweetness so deep in it's afterthought, the thrown-away glance
given out the car window to a house impervious to burn
or time's warp, a picture you can't imagine fading. There's
a stirring. How inside the bread, while I make oatmeal and drink coffee,
a little bit of living
will keep living and, with its own life, give off air, breath. There's hardly
a way to taste it: the air in the bread will be tasteless but caused
by what once was a taste. Beyond the kitchen window
there's a tree still standing though it's half-dead, a tree I sat under
two summers back and ran a hand along the hair
of the dog of the woman I wanted to want to love me more. There's distance
of miles and distance of iteration.
  Bread rising. The honey
  and brown sugar in the bread shape it ghostly, constituent bits
like an equation's zero, placeholders, a word thought
  and kept, not forgotten but never said. A kiss
imagined over and over until, eventually, the matter
of involved lips doesn't matter at all. And how it is
  in the long aisles, fluorescent-lit, how we reach
to all those softnesses, feeling for a give, wondering
  at the polka dots on some bags, the bright colors
and assurances of purity.
  I've tasted the bread I want most,
tasted it warm as it gets. There's actual taste
then remembered sense. If I've done everything right
  there will be airy nothingness
at the bread's core, pocked hollows left where sweetness
has been feasted on. It's breakfast, a rising. I wake alone
  and am hungry, just like anyone;
  I whistle small songs that last just until the meal is ready.
I built this mobile because I believe in gravity but not Calder and I built these lips because I wondereded how you’d taste after and I wrote all this music, these lovesongs for box wrenches and ballads to leafless trees and fugues for the confusion of constant movement, just so I’d have something to sing when it got too dark to look you in the eye. I wrote all this yet still god leaves, the earth slips the nets we set each night. We wear our layers like the leaves of autumn trees, whole rivers swim within fish, the oceans pull moons from my infinite body but my next song has only the word Goodbye and it’s incorrectly whispered. I built these legs because beauty is its own reason (though not the reason for these legs) and I built this house to hide in but I built this window for you, for you to come see me. My next song will begin soon enough with the last words of the first Bible but until then come sit at my window and pretend again that god is lightning and thunder. If god is not these fingers nor these guns nor the squaredances people shake to ask for rain, come sit with me and try not to pray as the thunder finds its home.
The hallelujah's that we're only
given one machine, broken
gear of teeth to grind senseless
in sleep, hands to lacerate
in our attempts at lassoing.
The fat neighbor goes out
every night at dark, walks half
a block, runs the second half,
and in this way he's creating
less of himself. A distilation
maybe: the glory's that we're given
enough wood to stoke the fire,
to keep the inside cauldron at
a rolling boil, to end up
with self as precipitate, what's
left over after made mistakes+
quick fixes: the world eventually
makes confetti of each heart's
calculations+calibrations. Repeat
the word learned, third grade
math: remainder. We are ourselves
what's carried.