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May 2019

HOLY LITTLE MASOCHISMS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department
of English
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

By
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May 2019

HOLY LITTLE MASOCHISMS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Christianity & Literature: “Encounter”; “Kent Island”

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INTRODUCTION

Holy Little Masochisms is a book about love. The title poem considers the “masochisms” of various Catholic saints, such as self-harm or stigmata. But the poems themselves are also the masochisms in which the speaker calls up and abides in pain, isolation, and useless sexual and interpersonal longing. Even my early poetry-writing experiences came from the close relationship between love and pain: in high school, I loved a girl who didn’t love me back, so I wrote poems about her to make some meaning and sense of my suffering. How much has changed? I still have poems dedicated to her in the book.

But my impulse in writing poems has also always been to praise, and I look for beauty in pain. Many of these poems, then, are both masochisms and odes. Many times, I’ve consoled myself over some local tragedy in my life with the thought, *at least I can get a good poem out of this*. That’s part of the point of my work: at least, even amidst sadness, isolation, confusion, guilt, and wasted desire, there is beauty to being human.

Great poets I’ve read and loved have given me the tools to put a poem together, especially concrete imagery and plain-style diction. One of my important influences has been Matthew Dickman. In his book *All-American Poem*. Dickman’s voice is so casual, his topics so conversational, and his use of line and stanza so haphazard that his poems in this book rebel against the poetic and the socially acceptable. He writes about a friend opening her beer with a BIC lighter, or about nerdy fandoms, or about sneaking off from his friend’s dinner party to have sex with the friend’s wife in the upstairs bathroom. But the poems nonetheless have

structural and intellectual integrity. Dickman's energetic use of diction, his careful unfolding and layering of syntax, and his large-scale organizational strategies, such as extended metaphor or discursion, give his poems cohesion and intentionality. And his poems are self-conscious, aware of the challenges they raise and the speaker's role in an imperfect and complex world. But the world is still beautiful, still praiseworthy, and Dickman points out everything he can spot, cramming his poems with specifics.

Here is an example from his long poem "Love" in which he defines the abstraction by some of its many forms:

In the Midwest, for instance,
there are fields of corn madly in love with a scarecrow,
his potato-sack head
and straw body, standing among the dog-eared stalks,
his arms stretched out like a farm-Christ
full of love. Turning on the radio
I know how much AM loves FM. It's the same way
my mother loved Elvis
whose hips all young girls love, sitting around the television
in poodle skirts and bobby socks,
watching him move across the screen like something
even sex dreamed of having. (16-17)

This sort of imagery inspires me because it's wild, accessible, and memorable. The images leap from specific to specific, from a scarecrow to AM/FM to Elvis, in an attempt to name something big and abstract, "Love." But the reader has a firm foothold at every step, a clear mental image or scene to remember. This idea of memorability is, for me, critical to a poem's success. I don't have to have *All-American Poem* open in front of me to call to mind images from "Love" like the speaker's lover calling him up and whispering "shuttlecock" in his ear ("The blast-off / of the first word sending the penis into space") (17) or the father at the end of the

poem who drives his daughter to school in a tank and leaves her a note in her lunchbox that says, “I hope / you do not suffer” (18). My wife spent many years writing songs, and in one songwriting workshop, whenever a student would share a newly written song, the teacher would make the rest of the class sing back the chorus. If no one could remember the chorus, this was an immediate red flag for the writer. I recognize that poems and songs are different forms of art, but in both cases, every writer wants to make a lasting impression in the reader/listener’s mind. Thus from Dickman I began to experiment with the concrete and the everyday in my own poems.

The haiku and tanka traditions have also been important influences on my work and have taught me about concreteness and concision in a more contemplative way. One reason I came to poetry originally was a short attention span. I am a slow and meticulous reader, so I value poetry’s ability to compress a great deal of meaning and feeling into a small space. Haiku and tanka taught me to make the image central to the poem, to let the image do the talking. Of course, Imagists like Pound and Williams would later do a similar thing in the English language, but the haiku and tanka are superior to me for several reasons. One reason is their structural integrity: the syllabic 5-7-5 of the haiku, and the 5-7-5-7-7 of the tanka that allows for a sort of poetic turn between the 5-7-5 unit and the 7-7 unit. But even more importantly, the haiku and tanka are deeply spiritual and metaphysical in their tone and perspective in ways I don’t often encounter from English-language poets. Perhaps this is because the Western tradition focuses so much on humanity: the hopeful celebration of Self in the Enlightenment and

Romanticism and Transcendentalism, the psychological brokenness and alienation in Modernism, the cynical absurdity in Postmodernism. Japanese poetry still considers humans and the human condition, but humanity doesn't hog the frame; the poems also consider nature, time, and stillness, among other layers. Here are a few haiku and tanka I admire:

Autumn wind. My plantain tree.
Night rain patters
into a basin. (Bashō, qt. in Lowenstein 71)

Quietly drinking tea,
a Buddhist monk.
Chrysanthemum blossoms. (Bashō, qt. in Lowenstein 82)

I think I'd like to die
eating apples
with a view of peonies. (Shiki, qt. in Lowenstein 169)

with headlights on
a line of bulldozers
bound for home
comes out of a building site
in the lowering blizzard (Kondō Yoshimi, qt. in Ueda 187)

My love for these traditions led me to one of the biggest projects I've undertaken during my MFA. The summer before I started graduate school, I began teaching myself Japanese. My primary motivation was to access the haiku and tanka traditions in their original language, but I also had several other reasons to learn the language, such as my lifelong love affair with anime and Japanese-made video games. I've been learning the language, then, for almost three years now, and it's the most difficult thing I've ever studied, even harder than the math and physics courses I took throughout my time as an undergraduate. In my PhD applications, I

pitched my future teaching career with Japanese in mind: to teach, in addition to creative writing, Japanese literature courses.

While *HLM* does demonstrate a commitment to concrete image, simple diction, and concision, the manuscript does not focus much on Japan specifically beyond brief references such as the garden in Hermann Park, meditations on Buddhism, and scenes from video games like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Kingdom Hearts*. My Japanese is still in development; I'm not fluent enough yet to undertake a major translation or writing project. So I've kept it hidden away while it grows and matures. Meister Eckhart says, "First: be spiritually quite private, guarding the mind carefully against irrelevant ideas, so as to keep them out and not deal in them, giving them no place in your life" (qt. in Blakney 31). My graduate student cohort here at UH tend to be reactionary, aggressive, shaming, and toxic in conversations about identity, and during my time here, I've witnessed everything from public disrespect towards guest speakers broaching issues of race to being personally bullied in workshops for writing about straight masculine sexuality. No amount of professional or artistic goals would make me anything but a cultural appropriator to them.

In contrast to the graduate student cohort, the faculty at UH have had significant positive influences on my writing, reading, and thinking. I'd like to begin with Tony Hoagland, and I'm honored and humbled to have been among his final students before his death in 2018. Tony was constantly challenging me to "get stupider" (if I remember correctly, that's really the phrase he used). He often told me that my poetry was too intellectual and clever, trying too hard to be up in the clouds

and witty, but what I really needed was to get more of the world into my poems, to ground them in the concrete and the particular. Of course, being concrete and accessible was already important to me, but Tony kept pushing me farther in that direction, and he would even point out individual lines or moments in my poems where I'd lost touch with reality and gone off into my mind. One of his favorite poets to cite when talking about this concept in class was Tranströmer, and he would pull apart a Tranströmer poem like "Baltics" to show us all the different sorts of content the poet could fit in the poem: references to history or culture, wild imaginative leaps, diction with layers of meaning, personal narrative, rhetorical gestures, meditation, names and dates, etc. He really wanted our class to get away from the popular opinion that poetry is about the lyric //.

The poem he showed us that most impacted me was Spencer Reece's "Florida Ghazals." This poem is the model for many of the couplet-collage poems in *Holy Little Masochisms*. Reece's poem is a sort of landscape. All the title specifies is the form of the poem and the setting. The ensuing details come in all sorts of varieties: we hear about an escaped prisoner, a town prostitute, flora and fauna, historical references, a teen boy masturbating, a restaurant, a gym, the speaker's personal narrative about his cousin's death, anecdotes about Elizabeth Bishop, etc. In fact, the methodology of this poem reminds me of one of Tony's essays called "Fragment, Juxtaposition, and Completeness," in which Tony defines collage thus: "fragment is the unit, juxtaposition is the method, collage is the result. When you juxtapose two fragments next to each other, without transition, you get collage" (147). Reece juxtaposes these couplet-fragments with no transitional

material to create a landscape collage and render his Florida using its constituent parts. In *Holy Little Masochisms*, poems like “Evening, Morning,” “Visitors to the Hermann Park Japanese Garden,” “Bumblebee Hollow Road in the Snow,” “Travelogue Notes,” and “Modern Miracles” are directly in dialogue with Reece, and several other poems also employ couplets and/or collage strategies in subtler ways. These are my attempts, as Tony wished, for me to fit more of the world into my poems and decenter the lyric /I/.

Tony also introduced me to Gregory Orr’s essay “Four Temperaments and the Forms of Poetry,” which has become critical to the way I read poetry. In this essay, Orr argues that there are four basic temperaments that describe the way a poem works: story, structure, music, and imagination. The first two are “limiting” temperaments, meaning they keep the poem grounded and contained, while the second two are “limitless” temperaments (33), meaning they provide the energy and wildness that push the poem outward. All good poems, he says, demonstrate at least one limiting and one limitless temperament, and the very best poems employ all four (33). Each poet has one natural temperament s/he tends to use over and over, but good poets should seek to demonstrate all four in their work (36). Tony once gave our class a quiz on a variety of poems in which he asked us to identify the primary and secondary temperaments at play, and after doing this quiz, I felt a deeper understanding for each poet’s strategies. Orr’s essay appeals to my mathematical brain, and it gave me a useful framework for thinking about what fundamental strategies certain poems and poets use. I taught this essay early on in my Introduction to Poetry class, and it gave me a framework to keep referring to as

I walked my students through poets of wildly different voices and strategies. In regards to my own writing, I've realized that structure is my primary temperament. Because I think so mathematically, I can't write a poem until I've decided on the shape of its container, and I'm always mentally scanning my lines and thinking about how the parts of the poem relate to one another. I have a sensitive eye for syntax and other structural strategies such as segmentation within a poem. My secondary temperament, from the limitless category, is music. Even though I write very much within the plain style, I pay close attention to rhythms and sounds, and this is a big source of energy in my work. Thanks to this essay, though, I pay closer attention to all four of the temperaments in my own work and that of others. For example, story and image are also critical to my own poems: it's rare that I write a poem that doesn't have a strong sense of narrative behind it, even if the narrative is a composite of unlike parts, as in my ghazal-inspired couplet-collages. I've already discussed in depth the importance of the image and the concrete to my writing, though in Orr's essay, his take on the imagination temperament is more concerned with leaps of imagery a poem makes: "the flow of image to image or thought to thought" (33). Again, my couplet-collages demonstrate this temperament more dramatically than most of my other poems.

Interestingly, Tony not only made us read essays but also made us write analytical essays and workshop them with our classmates to learn from the gestures and strategies we each used. This pedagogy reflects Tony's own legacy: he was both a great poet and a great critic, and he pushed us in workshop to develop our own artistic and academic work. In fact, I often found he praised my

prose more than he praised my poetry, and he really wanted me to think seriously about writing critical essays as part of my career as a poet.

The last thing I want to say about Tony is a brief explanation of the poem in *Holy Little Masochisms* dedicated to him: “America.” Tony had us all writing America poems for a while. It was one of his many exercises and experiments in which we had to start a poem with a unique or particular title, often modeled after a poem he would show us in class, and then use the rest of the poem to define or satisfy the concept or question raised in the title. This was not the first “America” poem I wrote for Tony, but I drafted this particular one after a conversation he and I had about some of my other poems. I mentioned to him that I was working on an ekphrastic series about the Rothko chapel, and even though I didn’t have any of the poems there to show him during our conversation, his immediate reaction was to tell me how disappointed he was to hear that. I learned then that Tony doesn’t like ekphrasis, and he was especially critical of my choice of Rothko to write about. He said he had a hard time imagining a noun that I might use in my poem other than perhaps “blue.” What he really wanted me to write was, for example, a poem about a bank robber who steals a fire truck and drives it to the zoo. Of course, I kept working on the Rothko series, but I also wrote him exactly the poem he asked for. In the end, I never did get a chance to show Tony my Rothko poems. My hope is that somehow, from wherever he is now, he might look upon me and upon these poems and approve.

Another significant influence on my time at UH was Kevin Prufer. The workshop I took with him gave me useful pedagogical strategies which I’ve since

employed in teaching my own workshops. For example, he taught me how to identify the rules an individual poem sets up for itself and then to evaluate that poem based on these rules. We would often begin a discussion of someone's poem by bringing up what he called "dumb little questions": unclear plot points or word usage and other more basic concerns. It was helpful to frame these questions as less important than more central ones so the workshop wouldn't spend an inordinate amount of time nitpicking details. With these smaller concerns out of the way, we could focus on central concerns, such as the primary sources of energy in a piece, the way the piece teaches us to read it, the rules it sets up for itself, and whether or not the piece satisfies its own goals and premises. As I began teaching workshop in my final semester at UH, I found myself returning to some of these strategies to prioritize workshop concerns, manage time, and balance the writer's needs with the readers' reactions.

Kevin was also a helpful resource outside of workshop. In individual and small-group meetings, he offered insight and strategies about the inner workings of the poetry world and academia. For example, once he held a conversation at a cafe for a handful of students in which he gave advice about submitting to journals and placing first and second books. He also helped me research PhD programs and refine my application materials. I was grateful that he offered practical strategies to navigate the politics of the business world we graduate students are trying to enter.

Lastly, my greatest influence at UH was Martha Serpas, not only in regards to my work but also to my growth as a person. Because Catholicism is an important context to my poetry, I appreciated Martha's Catholic perspective on my work and

the ways in which she helped me consider and sharpen the spiritual and ethical framework of my poems. More than anyone else at UH, Martha taught me wisdom, both in my own work and my reading of others' work. It was her faith in my work and me personally that gave me the strength to keep writing even when my classmates bullied me and put me down. This sort of belief reminds me of a moment from *The Great Gatsby*, which has always been my favorite novel; when Nick first meets Gatsby, he says of Gatsby's smile,

It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (52-53)

Martha has always believed in my work in this way and helped me revise and refine it to get its best version across to the reader. Her encouragement doesn't wait for perfection; her generosity as a reader begins even in the work's messiness and many drafts.

Martha also greatly developed my musicality as a poet. She believes in following the ear's guidance when drafting a poem, and I found this perspective helpful because musicality was something I struggled with before graduate school. I found attention to structure and music fitting to my poetic temperaments (as I mentioned above regarding the Orr essay), so Martha's guidance helped me get in touch with some of the fundamental energy sources within my work. I was fortunate to have a Poetic Forms class with her, and in this class we not only unpacked a

variety of classic poetic structures but also thought carefully about syntax. Syntax has become one of my favorite strategies to consider in a piece of writing because its inner workings are both mathematical and musical. Ellen Byant Voigt's *The Art of Syntax*, which I had read shortly before coming to UH and then revisited in class with Martha, has been particularly formative in my thinking about the subject.

Martha also introduced me to Mary Rakow's *This is why I came*, a series of reimagined Biblical narratives beginning in Genesis and continuing all the way through the Gospel narratives. The book begins with a woman waiting in line for confession after a long time away from the Church, and the scenes that follow are her rendition of salvation history. I appreciate the tenderness to the meditations; Rakow's versions humanize the characters and dramatize emotions and reactions implicit or absent in the biblical versions. Sometimes Rakow's versions seriously complicate the tone of the original stories, such as her version of Abraham and Isaac, in which Sarah vehemently accuses Abraham of killing one child after another before the incident with Isaac (29). The language and syntax throughout the book are also deeply musical, and even though the scenes are all in prose, they read like prose poems. Rakow's influence resonates in *Holy Little Masochisms* in poems such as "Christ of the Body," "Thomas, Called Didymus," "Mary Magdalene at the Tomb," and the Rothko sequence.

Lastly, I'd like to offer a note about the dedication, which was more of a realization than a choice. In Orwell's *1984*, Winston, who has been keeping a secret journal all along, suddenly concludes that the journal is for O'Brien, his idol and antagonist. The journal has always been for O'Brien to read; he was the intended

audience long before Winston realizes. The journal renders Winston's inner musings and wrestlings and acts as an explanation to O'Brien of who Winston is: "it was like an interminable letter which no one would ever read, but which was addressed to a particular person and took its colour from that fact." In my case, Jon Barry is not my antagonist, although he is my idol, my college roommate, and one of my best friends. I knew that critical parts of *Holy Little Masochisms* were for him; the two longest poems in the book are dedicated to him, and the entire book ends with a scene of the two of us. But I realized once the manuscript was mostly finished that the whole thing had been for him all along. There were too many things I needed to tell him, too much catching up over years and miles that a phone call or letter or quick visit could not fully accomplish. As in Winston's case, there are complicated inner workings in me that I need him to know, and this is the only way to say them.



for Jonathan Barry Wolf

HOLY LITTLE MASOCHISMS

*Listen, when my book comes out
don't read it, though I know you'll be eager
to pass it around the office, or keep a copy
next to the David seeds in your softball bag.
Tell your parents the book's about trees
and mostly in French anyway. Tell your lover
it's sold out and backordered nine months.
Tell yourself your son is like you—a money guy.
He writes on how to succeed. How to be happy.*



*'Cause this Orthodox girl fell in love
with the guy at the falafel shop.
And why not? Should she have averted her eyes
and just stared at the laminated poster of the Dome of the Rock?*

—Vampire Weekend, “Finger Back”

CHRIST OF THE BODY

When I was four I'd dress up
in my grandmother's violet muumuu

and serve Wheat Thins to my stuffed animals,
holding each high and saying, *Christ of the Body*:

not the symbolic Christ
in the coffee-creamer cups of grape juice

my Protestant cousin drank,
calling them *my little snack*,

not the plaster garden Christ
missing two fingers, blessing the gnome,

not Christ of the blinding light on the hill,
nor Christ on the clouds with trumpets,

but the Christ who collapsed from hunger
in the desert heat, who prayed hard sweats

not to be ripped apart and killed,
who put people's ears back on,

who got up from his nap in the stern
and relieved himself in the stormy sea,

who, when Mary bathed his feet
with tears and long dark hair and thin fingers,

felt a little aroused, and a little sad
that he never got a break from being God.

PREHISTORIC

Some orchids took the shape of female:
in flamed noon, pollen on the breasts
splashed bellies of blossom. Honey-toothed
and ancient, they spread. On the edge
of the forest, a strange animal gazed.
His body was tough fruit; his restless,
roving hands galloped like the wind.
Among the grasses and fats, his eye
left nothing. His prehensile form flashed
across the planet, down on flowers.
She hesitated. Hind legs, hot blood,
slow upthrust. He was biting
seeds, crunching wandering spiders.

Her mind cooled. Black imps roamed the air,
dire wolves appeared on frosty trees.
The descendants of the Age of Flowers
began to venture out, tough and resistant—
the human story had begun.

APPLEBEE'S

for Rachel

Having broken up with my girlfriend
I'm in a booth now with you

playing cards while we wait for our food.
It's summer, I've just finished high school,

and I'm taking myself apart and putting
my feet on backwards, my head on upside down.

In the dim dinner mood-light
I'm trying not to stare at

your long pigtail braids,
your figure filling out your cami and shorts,

your pencilled, shadowed eyes.
We're growing up,

and I love you, and you know
though I've never said it,

and you don't love me, though we sit close
and talk a secret language,

and eat each other's food,
and build the discard pile high.

BLESSING THE FATHERS

Fathers' Day Mass, 2016

The fathers stand for Father's blessing: heads rise,
bald and foreign above me. Grace pours out
from Father God through Father priest en route
to fathers of sons like me. Closing my eyes,
I wonder if my old man went to church
this morning, or if he was cleansed in sacred
Crimson Tide. O God of fathers, scourge
my heart—righteous in spite, steeped until acrid.
Three tiers of fathers: flooding grace gets stuck
in cracks falling the long way down to us.
Eyes closed, I dream I build an aqueduct
to siphon off Dad's, like Gatorade to douse
my head, prayers answered by the team's big win.
Some sins, I tell myself, can't be forgiven.

EVENING, MORNING

When the TV cowboy whips out his silver gun,
why does he look so distracted?

In the cab high above the traffic jam,
the blonde rides the rumpled trucker.

The CEO ends his workday with Vicks Vapor Rub.
In the cool air, menthol and Pine-Sol.

That night, beneath a humming UV light,
perfect tomatoes grow in the church greenhouse.

The barmaid's breasts sell more than her hands do.
Her pocket says money is money is money.

The neighborhood wakes. Mariachi music?
The old man gropes for a gun, the child for her sombrero.

The young wife lies waiting for her husband
to bring her a towel.

All night the novelist dreams of wrestling a lion.
He awakens at dawn breathless and brews coffee.

"What are you calling about?" asks the automated voice.
"You can say, 'Help with my bill,' or, 'Account details.'"

The old woman calls the priest Father Snatch-a-Nickel,
puts a Canadian dollar in the basket and makes change.

Behind suburban fences, small dogs assert themselves.
This, too, is prayer.

SIGN LANGUAGE

for Angela

In your palms I saw the rise and fall of April.

We started with simple words:
greetings and gratitude, your favorite food,
monsters along the trail we walked alone.

In the old room, beneath our tacked-up posters
whose urgent angles filled the walls with sound,
your fingers guided me down to the floor.

You showed me where to rest my hands
when we danced.
One day you taught me the word *love*.

Keep molding my hands with yours.
Tell me every single word you know,
line upon line of mischief.

Your hands said yes.
Your fist knocked on an unseen door
once, twice—
so I let you in.

EVE

An answer to longing, not petition—
she would soon step forth bright

from the blankness of Adam's cravings,
the ones he cannot name. He says

sparrow, points to the little bird,
says *snake* as the dark cord cuts by,

but something is missing. He sits at dusk.
Words only wrap around what is.

He says *wrong* but pictures the Tree,
its fruit—*wrong*, not the Tree

itself, not the sweetness. Wrong must be
not thing, but shadow

of fruit on bark, stretched
like his own dark shape

on the twilit grass: void-self,
body of desires still uncreated,

itself the prayer: *God don't stop*.

POEM WITH LINES IN ANY ORDER

The half-life of C-14 is 5,730 years.
Scientists always need to be certain.
Two scientists fucked in a broom closet.
In the published version, the bone's age is 1.46×10^4 years.
When C-14 breaks down, it becomes N-14.
Brooms leapt around the closet as if in *Fantasia*.
It was a time when truth was forthcoming in next season's issue.
They tested the bone for C-14. They tested again.
The rounded value represents significant figures.
When carbon leaves, it looks for another body.
It was a time when science texts read like cookbooks.
As they put their lab coats back on, she said don't ever leave me.
The adjusted mean C-14 value yielded $t = 14,628$ years.

THOMAS, CALLED DIDYMUS

Say it wasn't doubt but faithfulness
that kept him busy, out
bartering scraps of wood and cloth for bread

while the others hid and wept
and mended empty nets,
and moved their mouths without sound,

and when the ghost stories began,
what else could he say
to those who claimed his God had come

and he'd missed him,
the God, it seemed, of layabouts,
not laborers.

St. Thomas, I see you as holy:
though you had not seen,
you believed enough

to get out of bed
and put on a clean tunic
and eat a few stale bread crusts

and go out, letting them
lock the door behind you, daring
the town to hunt you down,

out into the sun, into the day.

for Gina

OPHELIA

I come down to a heap of petals.
Having had another fit, she sits
alone in the dark living room
where she has plucked every petal
from the fresh bouquet, a gift
after her recent recital.

The white rose petals—innocence
mangled—lie in a pile
to themselves, while the rest
sprawl in a shredded mess:
pinks and stamens, whites
and wisps. She looks at me.

I get her a plastic bag, help her
scoop them in. Out back, among
fiddleheads that have sprung up
overnight beside the small stream,
she dumps the petals, saying,
They belong outside.

ARE YOU A BOOB GUY? OR A CHRISTIAN?

One night parked under an oak
I sat straddling her
in the passenger's seat, kissing,

when my little cartoon animal conscience
screeched to a halt at the edge of a cliff
whose wooden picket sign said *desire*,

and I blurted out, *If we keep kissing*
I'm going to reach under your shirt,
which I'd never done,

in fact I'd never felt anyone up,
had no idea how big or small
my girlfriend's breasts were, or anyone's,

so she stopped me, put me
back in the driver's seat
to drive her home, back

on my side of the hand brake
sticking up like a boner
in the car's cupholder crotch.

Is it any wonder that now,
having seen just one woman's chest
outside of porn, having cupped

in my palms one woman's breasts
alone since my infant fingers
groped Mom's for a drink,

that now I notice everything,
every strap sticking out of a blouse,
every cup just dark enough to show through?

God, whack me on the head
with a hammer, tie me up to TNT
and launch me over the clouds,

blast my fur off with a shotgun
so I stand there skinned and shamed
in heart-patterned boxers,

the joke protecting my sex.
As the lump on my head rises,
the faint erection dies.

IMAGINING CASTRATION

Shape would be irrelevant.
Walls would again be walls.

Like a monk in the desert I'd sit on my square of floor
and try to float.

I'd awake in the same clothes,
try to rouse myself for a job I didn't have.

Here comes my next poem!
Circles on the paper. Or boxes.

Stick men with nothing between their legs.

For meals, the jar of peanut butter.
Not sure how peeing would work.

When it would be time to pray
I'd make up tongues.

With the rosary like a necklace
and the Bible on top of my head,

*Here, God, I'd write on my stupid paper.
Have some peanut butter.*

THIS LENT, I'M GIVING IN

It's hard to keep still during the liturgy.
I keep peeling loose skin from my thumbs,

and the boy in the pew ahead is squirming,
rubbing his eyes, rubbing his ashes

into his brow, leaning into his mother's arm.
She and her husband are young and polished;

they have dressed up for this penitence
and put good shoes on their two toddlers.

When we kneel, the woman's reverent posture
rounds out her ass in her little jeans,

and I notice she's sexy, even
in her prime. Her body is there before me,

miraculous as Christ's in the host.
She fusses with the boy to still him.

Only say the word, we say,
but my soul is beyond healing.

This Lent, why give up chocolate,
or video games, or beating off?

I don't have to manufacture loss
when I'm wired up to grace like life support.

Say this woman turns me on,
say beauty makes me worship,

say *wonder and awe* is my gift
of the Spirit, say God makes things good—

tell me desire is holy
and I'll tell you my fantasies

of killing myself. I am tired. I wake to longings.
I shoulder them. At night I lay them beside the bed.

When Christ fell they whipped him again
and again, ripped his back's gashes deeper

until bone poked through, until the wood
leaked red anticipation.

My Jesus, I hurt. My Jesus, how does it feel
being the one commanded,

Rise. Take up. Walk.

OVERLOOKING THE BAYOU, I THINK OF THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

for Jon Barry and Jared

I.

In the Houston summer heat, the first truth
is easy enough: *life is suffering*.

Grass grows thick and wild
where the city park slopes down

to the bayou, little river, natural border
where low income meets state university.

Big yellow flowers neck out from the brush,
and small birds flit over the sluggish water.

Attachment is the cause of suffering.

So if I left all my attachments here,
if I splashed them in the water

among the occasional fish who leap and fall,
I'd be at peace?

II.

Today is my friend's birthday.
My text log says it's been a month since we talked.

I tell Jared I miss him. He says
he thinks of me often, just hasn't found a time.

We promise to call in two weekends—
on my birthday.

On the little bridge over the bayou,
a city bus rushes toward campus.

III.

I wrote Jon Barry a letter three months ago
but haven't heard back.

Is he surviving New York? Has his city
hollowed him out as mine has me?

In college his appendix ruptured.
He spent a month in a hospital bed.

I sent a gift but didn't visit.
This was before we were close,

back when I only knew how to love girls,
when love was a sexual thing.

Men don't visit men,
do they?

A wasp buzzes near from the thick grasses.
Once in college, a wasp snuck into our room.

Jon Barry crushed it against the window,
saying *I'm sorry, I'm sorry* to its broken body

as he broke it.

IV.

Roxas sits alone on the twilit clock tower
eating an ice cream. I think of this scene

as I sit alone on the terrace above the water,
watching the clock on the tower across the bridge

where the student apartments spell out their turf
in ten-foot spray-painted Greek letters.

Hayner tells Roxas, *I doubt we can be together
forever*. On the bayou bank, a single crane

slowly poking about the water for a snack.
But isn't that what growing up's all about?

*What's important isn't how often
we see each other, but how often*

we think about each other. Right?
We think about each other often,

just can't find the time. Right?
Roxas watches the town forget he exists

and flow on, like the bayou, which flooded
in the violence of last year's storm.

All this life, then, is new,
sprung from a layer of waste.

V.

It ended when I turned my back
on the bayou, got in my car and left.

Next time there will be new birds and fish,
new flowers, new water made of new drops.

It ended 49 days after he first sat at the tree:
Buddha stood up and was Buddha.

It ended 358 days after he awoke
in a strange town: Roxas walked out

on a bad job, six enemies, and two friends,
one of them dead.

What ended when I moved away?
The way to end suffering

is to end attachment.
And if that's not an option?

VI.

Buddha says the end of pain
is to see things as they are,

the end of attachment
is the Eightfold Path.

So I'm supposed to see the universe
in a single atom. Interpenetration.

I am the flowing bayou,
the crane and the fish it spears.

Buddha says the flame is a new flame
with each flicker. That means

I'm already a different guy
than the one who sat by the river.

That's good—then I'm not
the stupid kid in my memories.

The brown grass and the green grass.
The late sun on the silent clock.

Happy birthday, Jared.
Happy birthday to us both.



*You wanna love like a carving knife
from a character that can fit upon a screen.*

– Sailing Sweater, “Floodlight”

WAITING FOR THE BATS

As we moment out
the dusk with cameras,

awaiting the balance
of light and night

that will wake the bats
beneath the bridge,

who stir now deep
within their grotto

whispers, rumors
of miracle,

you scoot closer,
fearing the wind

that flirts with the hem
of your small dress,

the passing car's wake
that awakens skin

into flight with
the city swarm

who reinvent
themselves in glass

panels of sky-
scraper windows,

a thousand little
eyes now straining

after the sun as
it goes, as it goes.

Waugh Bridge, Houston

VISITORS TO THE HERMANN PARK JAPANESE GARDEN

Couples sit beneath latticed wisteria and watch koi peruse the pond floor.
A still turtle blends in with the rock where it sunbathes.

Gently arched, the thin bridge gives the illusion of lightness.
A skinny brown dog lilt across, its owners in tow.

A boy shoots his sister with a plastic tommy gun
while the teens dribble their basketballs on the grass.

Packs of *quinceañeras* waltz around the gravel paths with cameras.
Against thin maples the girls look like dolls.

Symphony music marches down the path, floating
from inside a stroller where a baby sleeps.

Against the black wooden gate, a muscleman flexes for a photo.
Behind the gate, the Metro chugs through a park terminal.

A middle-aged group discuss *Pokémon Go*.
One man has played it across several Canadian islands.

On top of a rock, a lean woman in a maxi dress poses for a photo,
looking off toward the sun. Below, her small son splashes gravel.

A gay couple hold hands and walk their poodle.
The dog lifts its leg beneath a tall pine.

A man photographs waterfowl while his lover waits bored nearby.
From the park, the toyish whistle of the kiddie train.

THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A PRIME NUMBER

for Jared

- I. They say aliens know the primes
and can use them for contact.
- II. If you don't believe the primes are infinite,
multiply the whole set and add 1.
Now you've got a new prime.
- III. The set of primes is the same size
as the set of integers: a droplet
made of as many parts as the sea.
- IV. My friend is in a long line
of great mathematicians.
While waiting, he asked Mersenne
about certain primes.
- V. If you don't believe in aliens,
tune the car radio's frequency
past the symphony
to a prime number.
- VI. You can use the Mersenne primes
to generate perfect numbers:
multiply by the previous power of 2.
- VII. Jared presented on binary perfects and primes.
Dr. Chase said *you could burn the classroom down
and still get an A.*
- VIII. Picture a sea planet—
aquatic aliens counting
digits on their digits
which grow in prime clusters.
- IX. Mersenne produced a napkin and pen,
showing Jared his theorems on primes.
He asked Jared, *Why aren't you wearing a tie?*
- X. The question of primes' distribution
has twice made the turn-of-the-century list
of most pressing mathematics problems.
- XI. What a surprise was 2—
finding it to be prime,
one feels deceived.

XII. But perfect numbers can't be prime,
and primes can't be perfect,
and Jared ended up with a B.

XIII. Jared stood with a napkin of blue-ink primes
on top of mustard stains and wrinkles.
He scanned the row of head-backs—
infinite they seemed, but he knew better.

MARY MAGDALENE AT THE TOMB

Was it death
or coming back
that aged him

in a few days,
that creased his face
and knotted his hair,

that soiled his skin
or hardened it, so that
when she turns

to the one she loves
she sees a stranger,
the gardener, perhaps,

asking about her tears
and who they're for,
and was it death or return

that preserved on his lips
her name, how he holds it
in his mouth, then gives it

like mercy, *Mary*,
making her turn and turn
and see *him*, again,

not up on a cross,
not down in a tomb,
but eye to eye, palm to palm.

BUMBLE BEE HOLLOW ROAD IN THE SNOW

The grocery store at the top of the hill stays open late.
Before a storm, lines form at the water tank refill.

I keep a box of granola bars, a jug of water, and a blanket in the trunk.
In the glove box, beneath CDs, a holy card of St. Eulalia.

As Bumble Bee swoops, it meets Old Hollow beside jagged rocks.
You can coast from top to bottom in neutral.

Even thin ice is dangerous—
Pennsylvania doesn't know how to prepare.

St. Eulalia is the patron saint of snow days.
As her flesh was torn apart and burned, it began to snow.

By the time the governor declares a state of emergency,
the imprudent are stranded on dark roads across the county.

I was late for Mass because of the snow—
Catholics aren't allowed to miss.

Eulalia marched into the Roman courts and insulted their gods.
As her flesh was torn apart and burned, a dove flew out of her mouth.

By the time snowplows rouse themselves,
children in heavy boots are hauling sleds

through leafless trees, past wrought-iron gates
where tall houses glow dimly through falling snow.

The snow covered Eulalia's naked flesh, bloody and charred.
Even God knows when enough is enough.

As night falls, occasional streetlamps reflect off the snow
and no one is coming up or down the hill.

GREAT FAIRY FOUNTAIN

The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker

She appears, doll in hand,
from a jet stream of light,
child-queen, dark-radiant

and good, to give
in her toyish, wind-up melody
what she alone can:

fire and ice, weapon
and puzzle key, two palm-sized fairies
from her outstretched arms.

Little grace, ancestor-descendant
of *Skyward* spirit Fi,
hidden where only the wind god's ballad

can lead the hero seeking,
hear me, help my quest, fill me, heart
by heart by heart.

WHILE LOSING CHESS, I WONDER AT MY EXISTENCE

I keep forgetting what happens four moves ahead—
I swear I'd found a way to take back a piece—
but all I can think is how blessed I am to exist
in a causal chain, like, *Mom didn't think Dad an ass*
that night in New Orleans, or that girl I loved in college
knew my breathing meant, go to the ER, or
the girl I would marry knew my breathing meant, go now,

or further back, my grandfather limping away
from a burning plane, his body intact, then later
a second one, crossing oceans home to his wife,
or my dad's choice, after watching through child eyes
his mom and step-mom slug each other on the front lawn,
to keep his fragile life because it was his alone—

when a crash of toppled bricks behind the house
jars us, as if the next-door construction lot,
where in the morning workers will return with radios,
is itself a chess board for Texas tycoons to duel the moon,
where lesser gods smash the captured pieces, cackling,

and I know our moonlight houseguest has returned—
I've seen it scuttling out from next-door's fence,
taking now to its night hunt, calling upon our hospitality

because there are lizards and mice and garbage here,
because food has run out in its forgotten den,
because the city is still broken from storm,
because pressure zones collided on the gulf,
because, yes, a butterfly flapped its wings in India,
because God whispered in its ear.

ENCOUNTER

Blue-gray, alert and humble,
the young heron cautions near,
following my gaze over the black bay.

We hold still in the restless breeze.
It is chilly this night.
If we pretend to be indistinct
from the pier, the air—
if we pretend not to be—

but a cyclist coasts by,
his headlamp and rickety-rack
alarming the bird into flight,
and we are alone again, cast back
into *this* night, where we are hungry,
where we have stopped briefly off I-10.

An old man has been tuning his guitar
for half an hour, sitting on the stone fence
around the park still alight from Christmas,
its obelisk glowing electric blue.
We hold hands to keep warm
and look away from panhandlers
as we walk to the burger joint.

Beloved, only God can see him,
God alone can hear him now—

the small bird on the big bay
who may or may not have noticed us.

Pensacola 2017

TRAVELOGUE NOTES

The winery welcomes you to town
and advertises afternoon tastings.

The oldest US city, St. Augustine is home
to the ghosts of its original citizens.

On September 8, 1565, Menéndez lands,
and Fr. Francisco López says the first Mass.

If you climb the 219 steps of the lighthouse,
you can see the seacoast scribble its way south.

Several Natives attend the Mass.
They follow Spanish example and venerate the Cross.

The city houses the original Ripley's museum,
and its little red train putters tourists around town.

We bike over cobblestone carrying milkshakes,
stopping at quaint shops for loose tea and bath salts.

Two days after the Mass, Menéndez on the hunt.
He sacks Ft. Caroline, killing all but the women and children.

All the town's restaurants lock up early.
On the outskirts, there's a Steak and Shake,

and an all-night pizza joint run by one guy.
He takes your order and says nothing.

You can buy a vial from the Fountain of Youth.
It smells sulfuric, but it can't hurt to try.

When you pray in this city, it all feels so close:
God, the angels and demons, the dead.

On Charlotte Street, banjo music saunters out from a cigar shop,
and the scent of tobacco blends with grilling meat nearby.

Menéndez pursues the French to the Matanzas,
Spanish for *slaughter*, and kills the rest there.

SONG

for Rachel

You were. High in a leafless tree
you snapped branches, pulling
your body into the gray sky
above a skate park no one cared about
while I stood on the cracked asphalt
and loved you:

the body that started and stopped,
the long red hair that kept falling
into your eyes, your crazy ideas.

 If you fell
would my stupid little body
do anything manly,
and would you love me
then?

*

I am. At the window
white petals drift
in the summer breeze.

 It rains,
petals stick in mud,
clump on the sidewalk,
squelch beneath the feet
of people headed wherever.
Remember when I lost my ring
in your muddy front yard,
and days later you rang the bell
with it shining on your finger?
Too often I'm looking for a sign
at the door, the window.

*

We will be. In the morning
I've made you eggs perfectly
raw inside, nestled next to toast.

 If you make two L's
with your index fingers and thumbs
before your nose, you can picture-
frame the scene. Smile—
the time you let me take you
to prom; to Taco Bell; to bed,
where I tucked you in and read you
a chapter of John Greene.
It's a pretty shot. I'd hold your hand
but you're still making those silly L's:
disconnected now, a pair of pistols.

AND THE BOYS GO ON AND ON

You'd think in the two hours
we stood on a concrete floor
waiting *any minute now*
for Angus and Julia Stone to come on stage
it would have occurred to me.

You'd think in the hour and a half
car ride home, when you'd volunteered to drive,
when the whole night was your idea,
for your birthday, just you and me—
God wake me—I'd have seen it in your eyes,
or at least stayed awake for the drive.

You'd think while we texted memoir back
and forth, week after week, English-major me
would've gleaned the meaning,
glossed the text, analyzed themes and motifs.

One cold day you told me you liked
my Doc Martens. They were Jon Barry's,
bought online, too small for him,
passed on to me. Black vegan leather
from cows who don't eat meat.

Hannah, you loved me, didn't you?

Hannah, this time I'll drive,
I'll make us lattes for the road,
I'll slap
myself awake if I nod,
I have so many things to ask you,
what inspired the purple bangs,
who was
the first poet you trusted,
what size are your little
gauges, I'll flick on the cruise
and fly
through turnpike toll gates
en route to a show that never starts,
and in the crowd
of beanies,
as you tie your flannel around your ripped skinny jeans,
this time
I'll brush your hand with mine,
I'll feign fatigue
and lean my ear to your shoulder,
and linger,
and hope,
and wait with you Hannah.

SHAGGY'S

for Rena

Fog on the beach
across the street
from the tourist shack
on whose balcony we eat

washes out the shoreline
such that the couple
walking hand-in-hand
in shallow water, or on sand,

look purgatorial, warm
shadows awaiting paint
on a canvas abandoned
by an artist abandoned by love.

The fried shrimp here is good,
the waitresses cute and tattooed.
One pulls another's apron strings
that outline her little waist.

From over a frozen daiquiri
my wife stares into the void,
says, *It's a tempting way
to die, to walk off and never return.*

Gulfport, MI

KENT ISLAND

for Jen

We dragged kayaks out of her grandfather's shed
and eased them into the bay.

Out with the current toward an old duck blind.
Rock sharp on my feet when we landed.

Empty gun shells on the floor,
and a few muddy Monopoly property cards.

She found a little bug with a broken antenna,
cradled it and nudged the socket into place.

Later, after I'd washed up—
there was something intimate

about a friend's shower, a girl's,
something sexy about her razors and scented soaps—

in her basement lit by the big fishtank,
she showed me her favorite movie,

Joe Versus the Volcano. Each arc Meg Ryan shows up
as someone else, but Joe doesn't notice,

can't make out his chances through his brain cloud
and diagnosis of near death.

Today was my birthday. I'd invited
myself out to her island across the bridge

to get away from my own infected brain,
not for treatment—there was no cure—

but to be lost at sea with a pretty girl,
looking for the volcano to jump in

to appease the gods, to make meaning
of inescapable death, or just to kneel and pray

Dear God *whose name I do not know*
thank you for my life.

SONG

for Jared

two a.m. when my lungs can't do it when it's two hours
of nonstop cough till next neb and six till oral steroid
you drive me to giant for robitussin half the store
lights off aisles empty men in blue vests stocking
cans on sad shelves stacking plastic cases of orange
glazed donuts beside animatronic witches with candy bowls
you joke to make me smile you sing
badly along with your jam from 2009 you ask
can we stop at mcdonald's after and get a shake
i want to get on your back and ride through the store
like a king into enemy lances i want a
chocolate shake with whipped cream you are
twice my withered size and strong strong i know
you will not let me stop breathing

SONG

for Corryn

highway 22 lugging its hide up a hill
and you punch the gas a little harder

early fall we're going
somewhere i think

i'm reading you galway kinnell &
he's crunching around a boneyard thinking
of his kids and some burnt sticks

you make a little *mm*
after each poem
like it's a chicken tender

sunlight on the susquehanna
hills of trees turning
toward tenderness

 if some plague
took both our lovers
would you be

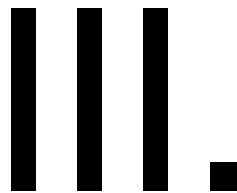
apocalyptically mine

it's not about sex
 (i know

with me it always is
or else it's hating myself
and wanting to die)
 it's that

my laugh now sounds like yours
it's that i see you in the mirror
when i tie up my hair with a bandanna

it's the world's second smallest sundae it's
the end of the road
 the cherry on top that you don't even like
 it's cold



*So can we pretend, sweetly
before the mystery ends?
I am a man with a heart that offends
with its lonely and greedy demands.
There's only a shadow of me;
in a matter of speaking, I'm dead.*

—Sufjan Stevens, “John My Beloved”

ROTHKO CHAPEL: NORTH WALL

Trace your gaze up the triptych's middle panel
looming limp violet against its gray neighbors,

Christ between the two thieves
towering over the chapel as Christs do.

The left thief cries out in pain:
a vertical gash carves the top right of his panel.

The right thief's veins run thin all the way up,
horizontal window blinds of failing blood.

His beard hangs to his groin.
Lugging its weight, his head droops.

Above his shoulder, an unfurled scroll
with the laughing face of—

hard to make out—Hitler? Paul Newman?
I think it's Hemingway, the old bloodthirst.

And above the Christ, who else but the Father,
looking rather like Shakespeare,

head tilted slightly in a dashing pose
as He oversees the torment,

as was popular then for royalty,
slaking His wrath with blood.

He sees you.
He sees you kneeling on the stone.

Pray.

ROTHKO CHAPEL: NORTHEAST WALL

If you squint a little and cock your head,
if you're down on yourself and feel trapped,
if it's mid-afternoon and overcast,
if your meds are wearing off, if you're wary,

you might see the cyborg onion,
you might see the Wallace Stevens jar,
you might see cyborg Wallace Stevens,
you might see an oppressor, a boss—

like white guys with neat hair and mustaches,
like Parasite Cage from *Kingdom Hearts*,
like your onion-headed district manager,
like Gohma on the ceiling in *Zelda*—

you may feel like feeding your lunch to a dog,
you may feel the city's hatred unravel your hands,
you may feel soapy and cold from your sins,
you may even feel God's love.

ROTHKO CHAPEL: FLOOR

four cushions on four gray squares of carpet
on four thousand gray tiles

fifteen wooden benches in threes
make a headless hexagon

no place here to rest your back no matter
this isn't a place for forgiveness so much as

absorption—light—time—shape—
shame—color—love—

too many paints make gray
I kneel on the gray stone and hurt my knees

ROTHKO CHAPEL: EAST WALL

what brought you here today
I didn't feel like myself

what is this piece to you
window to silence

why do you want to be there
I hate modern music

what do you see in this painting
a man thinking too hard

what is the meaning of this piece
people need waste to make meaning

what do you suppose this piece is worth
at least a quarter pounder, maybe a combo

what does this piece do to you
red so dark it is black

no what does it do
God forgive me of my sins

ROTHKO CHAPEL: SOUTHEAST WALL

When I stand close I feel the chill
from the painting as from a winter windowpane.

You can climb a mountain
so God can hear you better,

you can brave your way up one like this
where it's snowing in faint violet,

where someone's razor lodges in ice,
and through the haze, a distant city line

comes in and out of sight as the wind blows
the snow, you can shout and wave your arms

to hail God like a flying taxi,
but when your boots walk off empty

and the blizzard smoothes their tracks,
and no one is there to warm you

or warn you or war with you,
what's left but wonder, to worship

what you'll never see but always feel,
an urge like hunger, a scourge like cold.

ROTHKO CHAPEL: LOVE

as she leans across the bench
toward his face, her hair falls forward

to keep time out of this: the slow breathing,
the eyes deflected down

toward the lover's lips, the pace
of painting, the space before the touch

ROTHKO CHAPEL: SOUTH WALL

When you leave the cap on the lens,
the Polaroid spits out a black square.

If you were trying to shoot an owl,
all we got was the hungry beak.

If you were trying to shoot a big stone head,
we only got the fatigue.

At least write on the border,
Samantha, Age 5, or, Falls, 1962.

Your negligence makes people dig boxes out
from their mind's attic,

makes them hold dusty photos again
and blow their noses.

Is this what you wanted?
There are many afternoons in the dark.

Was this your artistic vision?
Blood from a cardboard heart.

Me—I'll sit here a while, wait.
If God still wants me let Him come.

ROTHKO CHAPEL: SOUTHWEST WALL

is raining. Because the river must
it gallops and does.

Because it is red
it wants sacrifice.

Because it is blue it lusts
it cradles its lovers.

Because it soars it has given up on violet
but you are not safe.

Near the bottom left a warm stain
washed out and otherworldly a skull.

If the river seizes your body
if you sink if you lose up

take hold of the skull.
Soliloquize. Grow violet.

Violent.
The hero's finest moments are his final.

ROTHKO CHAPEL: WEST WALL

in a sacred space is it okay
to notice someone's breasts

really is that okay anywhere
is it a little more violent when God's around

for how many milliseconds
may my eyes linger before it's sin

against a big black canvas
she keeps all the light to herself

her hair is pretty too

that man—her lover?—has he forgotten
how thin her fingers are

Rothko paints a fucking square
can I just love all women

as I thrash and struggle
in the constant tide

is there a way not to be bad

ROTHKO CHAPEL: NORTHWEST WALL

did Rothko mix the whole paint batch first
or make a little at a time

did Rothko go to Lowe's or Home Depot
and place a bulk order at the paint counter

did the man in the apron smile or frown
did he remind Rothko you can do it

we can help or even we can
do it for you for a little extra

did Rothko use brushes or rollers
or roll his drunk body all over the canvas

did he throw the canvas into a vat of paint
did he throw himself in after

if I throw myself into his violet oblivion
can I come up clean and happy

or at least not unclean and not unhappy

ROTHKO CHAPEL: CEILING

Dear God, thank you for the light
from the little octagon, your eye
with its big dark pupil, dilated
like mine in this dim room.

I want to say thank you
that I can still write with my broken wrist,
that my cough is mostly gone today
and I can breathe again.

Thanks, too, for grace last night,
that I found a way to set aside
my self-hatred for just enough time
to have sex with my wife.

Your eye lets in a little light
to make out a touch of violet
in these canvases, a hint of red,
just enough color to find my way

back to my blinding life.
*Our Father, who art in heaven—
Give us this day
our bread for tomorrow.*

for Msgr. King

IV.

*The only reason why I continue at all:
faith in reason, I wasted my life playing dumb;
signs and wonders, sea lion caves in the dark;
blind faith, God's grace, nothing else left to impart.*

—Sufjan Stevens, “The Only Reason”

MODERN MIRACLES

for John Volek and Carl Sedita

In 2004, a Florida woman sells her 1994 grilled cheese bearing the virgin's face to a casino for \$28,000.

Two men with metal detectors and basket shovels comb the choppy waves. I sit on a rock and pray they find it.

On the Vermonter home, a Latino teen approaches me and in broken English says he recognizes me.

A Thai boys' football team is trapped in a flooded cave. Rescuers and Navy SEALs set up a camp nearby and plan.

Pop Pop visits his great-grandchildren one-by-one in the dead of night. He is gone before morning.

After two hours, I get off the rock and walk to my car. The men, too, emerge from the waves for a snack.

While diving through the cave, a SEAL runs out of oxygen, loses consciousness, cannot be resuscitated.

I was on the train home from seeing my fiancée. The teen had been on my train up, too, and saw me disembark.

The grilled cheese is missing a bite. It slept for a decade in a plastic case among cotton balls, never molding.

During my Confirmation, a storm knocks out the power. The bishop anoints our heads by LED flashlight.

Divers reach the boys and leave supplies. The boys write letters to their families. The cave will flood deeper soon.

John shakes his basket shovel, shows me the pebbles inside. On top of the stack, my wedding band.

God heals a man's lungs in Walmart.
God heals a woman's arm in Popeye's.

On the platform, I'd run to Addie and held her. The teen had written a poem in Spanish about this.

No time left. SEALs sedate the boys, strap them in stretchers with oxygen tanks, haul them through narrow depths.

During the consecration, the bishop holds up the host. The lights come on. The tabernacle's is first.

In 2014, a CBS article explains away the Mary-on-toast effect as normal, scientific, human.

A ten shows up in a purse.
A hundred on the sidewalk. Bills overdue.

After two weeks, the boys see the light again.
They give peace signs in hospital gowns and masks.

The teen sits beside me, shows me his poem,
uses Google translate to help me get the meaning.

A father weeps, blesses his daughter's new husband.
A father wakes from another open-heart surgery.

A father and son sit and eat sushi and laugh.

AMERICA

Remember the bank robber? The one
who hopped in a fire truck and fled,
blaring the siren to clear the way
of law-abiding compact cars,
how the bridge was closed so he turned off
and found himself at the zoo,
where he parallel parked by the staff entrance
as smoothly as he'd held up the teller,
backing the truck's industrial wheels
to twelve inches from the red curb of the fire lane.

They found him riding an elephant
like a king, but they could not shoot
because of poaching laws.

The fire truck was already there, hose-ready,
but the zookeeper shot down the thought.
The elephant doesn't need any help, she told them.
They answered, *And the bank doesn't need any cash.*

Squinting into the sun, they called up,
Where's the money?—and bless him,
he said *I bought an elephant, fair and square.*
The zookeeper said, *I didn't ask.*

You asked me if people change. Go to the zoo
and see him on parole with the elephant,
squirting water from his mouth, bathing in mud,
and eating peanuts thrown by giggling children.

for Tony Hoagland

PIZZA HUT LOVE SONNET

I was scanning nearby tables for grated cheese,
you—it appeared—for pepper flakes.

Our eyes met. My greasy hands and empty beer.
Half your hair fallen from its bun.

There was no need to say anything,
just as at Pizza Hut there is no need

for the salad bar except to lie to yourself
while you wait. You looked away,

but I traced the shape of your lips and remembered,
slid down your long thin neck to its soft clavicle

like a pinball slipping between bumpers
when the player has given up.

Your shirt hung open a little
as you leaned over cooling pizza and dug in.

ODE TO THE METAL PLATE IN MY WRIST

If they dig me up some day—

say new evidence points to homicide
and they need to test my remains
for poison or trauma—

or say at last I'm canonized
and they've built me a shrine
and want relics for healings and miracles—

you, metal plate in my wrist
that held the bones intact with screws
while they mended,

tuning fork fixed to my strings,
will lie there shining
among my dust:

my final light, fermata
of my last note ringing.

JAMES HARDEN AND YAO MING IN THE DESERT

This week in March the “Life Teen” Mass
features drums and guitars.

This week the Gospel picks up dripping—
Jesus just dunked in the Jordan, off now

with wet hair to face the devil.
This week the priest is hip

so he makes a basketball homily,
setting up a little net and backboard.

He puts on a fake black beard.
He will play Jesus. In this version, James Harden.

Next, he needs a devil to guard him man-to-man.
Someone tall and scary. He unrolls

a life-size poster of Yao Ming,
face contorted in mid-game heat.

Never mind the priest is white. Never mind
Ming and Harden hardly overlapped careers.

It’s to show the kids God speaks
their language. It’s metaphor.

ON BEING ASKED TO WRITE A POEM ABOUT FAMILY LOVE AND SUPPORT

The teenage son poured penne through a colander.
It sat there steaming, clean and al dente.

When a family has too much love,
they get on reality TV.

It was late November and raining.
Where was Tasha to take the kids?

A family walked into a bar,
realized it was a bar and left.

Look, Wayne—it's for the children, okay?

You teach me and I'll teach you, said the TV.
The boy put down his apple and shouted, *Pokémon!*

Uncle Roger stood on the front porch with a cigarette.
A blackbird landed on the bannister, head inclined.

I'd never seen Dad eat so much cake.

MOTHER GOD

In the natural foods aisle of Kroger,
between the veggie chips and Larabars

where I stood examining yellow sale tags
of snacks that wouldn't hurt me too badly,

a young man cautioned a hello and started talking
about a Bible study he attends.

I wanted to reassure him I'm already saved,
though I would not say the word *Catholic*

in case he was one of those true believers—
like the critic of *Left Behind* who called it inaccurate

because in the story Mother Teresa gets raptured—
but the young man didn't ask me where I was going

after death, or if I'd ever stolen, lied, or lusted—
he asked to show me verses on God the Mother.

I was fine with God as female instead,
but that's not what he meant, he insisted

there was a female *and* a male God,
and he pulled out his iPhone Bible app.

Behind us, an old man studied the Clif Bars
long and hard.

Why me, why here—was it
the health foods that said *bohemian*?

I let him get it off his chest, his deity,
and I got it off mine, disgust with patriarchy,

and then we shook hands. Man to man.
I left the aisle with no veggie chips,

praying to my genderqueer God
that this guy didn't also need cereal.

SONG

for Elizabeth

In 12th-grade AP Calculus II,
I spent so much time proving

and not enough wandering
toward you, my one classmate

in that smart-kids-only club.
Years later, I have a math degree

and a wife, and an insight or two
into beauty and suffering,

their inverse love,
like Newton and Leibniz saw

in areas under curves
and slopes of tangent lines.

My golden integrand, my sexy *du*,
which delta could I have chosen

to wake up in your epsilon neighborhood
continuous, monotonic?

What function computes the derivative
of your dimples, the inflection points in your hair?

If I'd written out the terms of the series,
if I'd blackened the whiteboard in search of pattern,

if I'd turned to you and asked, *convergence*,
and you'd looked off like you do

when you're peering into the heart
of things, your smart blue eyes coming

slowly forward with insight, would you
have said *absolute*, your voice

boxing in the answer
in the coordinate space between us,

your smooth rich voice
tilting my axes, tipping

my center of gravity off
the origin, and would you really

have meant it, *absolute*
convergence, absolute convergence?

HOLY LITTLE MASOCHISMS

You ask why God made skin thick
as a pig's—grisly and tough
to get out of, painful. I ask why

Gerard sticks his head over the fire
like meat on a spit, saying,
Smoke is good for beautiful eyes.

Rough wool worries the skin
beneath his tunic, a secret
between the saint and God.

Tell me—did Benedict have to jump?
Cave-cramped, contemplative, and hungry,
he prays, living on stale bread

from a raven's beak. Enter
the devil, come as a naked woman,
dancing. The old monk ups and jumps

headlong from the cave's mouth,
tumbles down to a bramble patch.
Satan does not follow.

Or take the Christ-wounds:
a volunteering to hang
beside Him, like Padre Pio,

whose gloves still haunt a shrine
with dried blood, or Francis, pictured
always with birds, but I imagine flies.

My favorite—Rita of Cascia,
whose unseen thorn split her forehead
as if her mind—raptured in prayer—

ruptured. Beloved, let's start a fire
in the night to make our eyes beautiful,
to see our beatified spirits slip off

toward heaven, or hell, or another shot
at all we let slip. I'll crown you with thorns,
we'll draw a cross in infected blood.

Beat me with a whip the way Gerard
made a friend tie him to a post
and bloody his back. Kiss me, make me

burn like your flesh as you tear at it,
eyes tearing up, asking me
where is God?

AT A KARAOKE BAR WITH MY FATHER

The last time we sat across a table, I had acne,
but his hairline is still strong, hope for me.

I'll sing anything, he says, *rock, country, pop*.
He's getting along with my musician wife.

When they call his name, he takes the mic off the stand
and looks off to the far corner as he begins.

My mom used to say he'd sing loud at church
so other people could hear. She believed

he was incapable of worship, of love.
Maybe he sang loud because God was so far off.

He leans his steady voice into the ballad.
I tear up a little, hope he can't see from the stage.

My wife leans over and whispers,
You never told me he could sing.

GAZE

What would you say, Lacy,
as you give me a red bandaid
to cover the hole you've pierced
with a flu shot, if I told you,
right here in Walgreens,
how pretty your sea green eyes are,
bold against your white coat—

would side effects include
a look of disgust, a label like *creep*,
another needle in my arm,
or would you take it well enough,

and what would well enough look like
in a world where I'm *problematic*,
where you're a problem's solution,
superhuman, your body effaced
by sterile white?

Lacy, it ain't me,
but may someone see
past the bottle's label,
your title and salary,
her stuffy nose,
his itchy, watery eyes

and attend to your body for once,
even with just an over-the-counter dose like
you have such pretty green eyes.

BLESSING THE FATHERS, PT. II

Father's Day Mass 2018

After communion, Father asked the fathers to stand.
We were standing too, in the back, but I was no father.

Please God. It's bad enough to be a man. All that
fucking and muscles and guns and dumbness and fucking.

We backed against the wall and slouched.
We tried to get out of the way of the blessing.

It was a standard prayer.
Something about fathers and grace.

After Mass we had burgers and fries and shakes.
We had a Father's Day e-coupon.

An NFL logo stamped on the burger joint's wrappers.
On silent TV's, sports analysts talked with their hands.

Pre-teen boys in Under Armour shirts jostled
for a spot at the soda machine.

Women must think dads are good
to get things going. Then what?

Junior is born. He wants Mommy.
Dad is a dumb tractor.

FOR THE GIRL AT BOHEMEO'S

It's not so much that I want
to have sex with you—

I do—but it's more that
I want to know what you're

going to school for
and how you plan to rock the world
or heal it, as the case may be.

I'm not crossing my legs
and tucking my arms in my coat because

I don't know what song you hum
when you sit in the shower and shave your legs—

which of course I don't know
and would like to—

but because I don't know how
you like your eggs, if you even eat eggs,
maybe you're more of a cereal girl,
Rice Chex I'll bet, classic yet versatile.

Maybe you think I'm imagining
you pulling your blouse over your head,
revealing a lace demi-cup bra
that matches your wild black curls,

and you hate me for that, I know it,
for what you think I'm thinking,

and I am thinking that, and wondering
if you're the kind of girl who
passes the two of clubs to play off a high card
or keeps it to go first

(I'm talking about
hearts, about planning your moves),

and I'm also unthinking this poem,
undesiring your boho femininity,
unimagining your laughter over coffee,
uncaring about your secrets
and whether our evening will end in bed,
or on the kitchen counter beside the toaster,
or even against the glowing fishtank,

unloving you because
I'm already married,
and I'm built like a girl but hairy,
and my mom helps me with rent,
and my colleagues think I'm a pig
with daddy's snout and curly tail,

and I am a pig,
and I love my wife, and my dad,
and I love you too

as you take your coffee out the door,
past the floor-to-ceiling canvas
of Obama dressed like Rosie the Riveter,
beaming as he flexes his strong arm
and flips me off.

LINGERING WILL POEM

Once when discussing family curses
I told you all I have to do to break mine

is not fuck the wrong people,
so why as I drift off at ten thousand feet

do I dream us beside the river at dusk
where you take off your shirt again

and again, why the filled cups,
the melting ice cream, the breasts

large as a promise? What
promise? I said I would

love her, the one asleep beside me
in the window seat, I told God

and a hundred people in dress clothes,
97 of whom say you can't love

more than one at a time, while three
are trying to change God's mind.

Tell me, how many secrets
can two people share

before the body
demands attention?

Darkness, when you take my body,
let me see them one more time,

the old haunts, let me
wander in search of those I

love,
 and loved,
 and will,

leave me proof—if not love,
connection

—if not peace,
nonexistence.

私の陸へ

SHE CALLED ME A GIANT

for Jon Barry

tell me
a bed
time story
the one
where you
answer the
phone and
it's Adam
he says
what should
I call
the black
birds and
you say
call them
what they are:
blackbirds

*

I've just never seen
someone eat the whole bag
in one couch-sitting
deep in a book

O Mr. Clementine Man
if it sparks
your process if it makes you
sparkle then go for it

*

What a lovely. She said. Here in the middle we've all left because there's no more succulents and we all need something sweet to push us over the next little bump. You know—like catching snowflakes on your tongue before they melt on the ground. The tongue is a little nicer death.

*

I stole your bowtie
because it neatly matched
my aspirations—
I wanted the power
to love every single person
who flashed across my life
that night, each running late
to a singular death.

*

A drunk man lurched at me right here on 3rd, right in front of the Midtown Scholar. He wanted money, he wanted my body, we were under the eaves while it rained. Good thing I had my lucky oak stick. Too bad I had to pull a few of grandpa's moves on his sorry sweatpants. Too bad for him, I mean.

*

there is a
nother banner
to raise
this one
says all
your newly
seasoned
ideologies
in fine print

in this episode
you apply
for the job
of Atlas

they say
first you can be
LEGO Atlas
with options
for advancement

*

She walked up
and down his spine
until it wouldn't pop.

They brainstormed
critical theory
as he oofed and huffed.

*Come on, son—how about
a nice heterosexual game
of baseball?*

A bunch of sweaty men
running around a field
with balls and sticks.

*

Because you want
everyone you hook
elbows with to smell
beauty and longing—

But still, a book of Rumi
for her birthday
was too rich for her
even if not intended
to be sexual—
not any more than
it is anyway.

*

She called me a giant.
He referred to me as a great one.
They whispered that I was a tubbo.
Roger commented in my general direction, “Biggie.”
I was referenced as large-statured by Em.
The woman in the park labeled me, “He who casts a long shadow.”
She said, *as for you . . . your stature is high.*
It barked at me that I am wolfish—just like you.

*

White Jesus was just like me
in every way but sin

White Jesus is not the same one
who raised a whip to the capitalists

Also White Jesus was asexual
which technically makes him LGBTQIA

But White Jesus hates gays

*

You said this one’s on me and it was. You said I thought. And I did and it was a perfect
culmination to the start. I’ve never before had meat that salted my mouth into blossom.
“Was it local?” “Was it grass-fed organic?” “Did it go to college and start a career and
family prior to the slaughterhouse?” “Did it publish any poems?”

*

I hear
your band
is over
I miss
the way
you pointed
your toes
you leaned
into the mic
where now
will you

wear those
mid-century
round blue
shades with
the thin
gold rims?

*

“dank
what a cool word—
moist, musty—and
it also means
penis”

. . .

“no it doesn’t”

*

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| It’s OK to swear | if you mean it |
| It’s OK to fuck | if you’re in love |
| It’s OK to eat meat | if it’s local |
| It’s OK to pray | if you’re a minority |
| It’s OK to sit around in boxers | if you’re not gay |

*

your little
shoulder-squeeze

as if you could
break up shame
like a muscle knot

your touch was
so much firmer

than a woman’s
and it held me up

*

ATTENTION ALL PERSONNEL ALL EMPLOYEES PLEASE REPORT TO THE FAR END OF
BUILDING 214 FOR A MANDATORY SCAN AND QUESTIONING YOUR ATTENTION
PLEASE

*

#41

If a 6'5" black man approaches you head-on at night in a low-income area of town from a distance of 20m going 1.5m/s compared to your 1 m/s stroll, calculate the angle you should deflect your path to avoid eye contact.

Solution:

Consider the following diagram



You; $v_0 = 1\text{m/s}$; $x_0 = 0\text{m}$



BM; $v_0 = -1.5\text{m/s}$; $x_0 = 20\text{m}$

Because we are sufficiently close to the surface of the Earth, we can assume racial tension T is a constant. Also, because we are in a low-income neighborhood, we can safely ignore friction.

Assuming the black man's radius of vision is directly proportional to the square root of his mass, we obtain

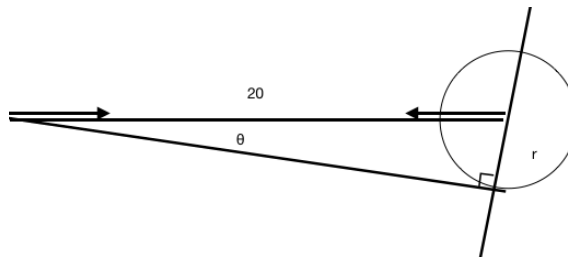
$$r = (.1) k_B \sqrt{m}$$

where k_B is a constant for black men: .85, the probability of incarceration before age 40.

From his height, we can assume $w = 280\text{lb} \Rightarrow m = 127\text{kg}$, so

$$r = (.1) (.85) (127) = 10.8\text{m}$$

From this diagram



we see $\sin \theta = r / 20 \Rightarrow \theta = 32.7^\circ$.

*

good start but
a critical error
in your assumptions

the black man
is moving . . .
what if
he's too fast
what if
his circle
overtakes
your path . . .
how then
to solve this crisis?

5/10

*

she was wearing workout clothes
so was it a date
she was at the march too
but where in the crowd
you couldn't know where
you weren't allowed to know

these *limbs* what a weird *concept*
what do I do with them
my angular arms jagged elbows
jangular joints hands flopping
jumping dumb and don't even
crack open the old legs
crippled by their own existence
what do I *do* with them

*

but don't you know
the whole crowd has fallen
in love with you

*

The first time I smelled weed was at a Jeopardy-viewing party. Of all the things, I got a question right about Robert Herrick and his gang—“Who are the Cavalier poets.” Flashback to my 11th-grade English textbook and Mrs. Howard with her short black hair and poor answer to the problem of evil. I lost a point for writing on the back of the page. Perhaps she would've preferred a shallower response to the essay question.

*

you give the child a voice
you teach her to write a poem
and the child saves the city

you open the old man's mouth
he gives the pitch-by-pitch
of blacks and whites in the same infield
at a time that would not hear such music
and the old man saves the city

your band plays at the cafe
their light roast is notey like your voice
and the latte's surface is pale
like the cute girl who took your order
and the pale cute girl saves the city

*

every stanza should contain a smile
and some thematic lollipop
to suck on like
music in the face of death
or blue raspberry

*

CODA

En route to the camp you brought
notebooks and Vampire Weekend CDs,

Andy brought loose tea,
I brought a girl I barely knew.

You had the wheel, you had a grin
and faith in the afternoon, in me.

At the Buddhist labyrinth
we traced sand with our shoes,

tried to dig up what we'd lost
of ourselves, as if *do you remember*

there was no one else *drinking horchata*.
Pre-winter chill a *feeling you thought you'd forgotten*.

I wanted to get lost with you in plain sight.
In the sunset you were my skinny golden Bodhisattva.

NOTES

“Poem with Lines in Any Order”: After the Robert Hass poem “Poem with Lines in Any Order”

“Overlooking the Bayou, I Think of the Four Noble Truths”: Scenes of Roxas and Hayner are from *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days* and *Kingdom Hearts II*.

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Prime Number”: After the Wallace Stevens poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

“Encounter”: After the Czesław Miłosz poem “Encounter,” translated by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee.

“Rothko Chapel: Northeast Wall”: Gohma is the boss of the dungeon “Inside the Deku Tree” in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. Parasite Cage is the boss of the world Monstro in *Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*.

“Rothko Chapel: Ceiling”: The last two lines are an alternate interpretation of “Give us this day our daily bread” suggested by Msgr. William King.

“Rothko Chapel: Northwest Wall”: The ending of this poem is inspired by the ending of Philip Larkin’s “Talking in Bed.”

“Gaze”: The phrase “it ain’t me” is loosely taken from the Kygo & Selena Gomez song, “It Ain’t Me.”

“Lingering Will Poem”: The title of the poem and the names of the proofs come from *Kingdom Hearts II*.

“She Called Me a Giant”: The title of this poem is from the Sailing Sweater song “Giant.” The phrase “O Mr. Clementine Man” is from the Sailing Sweater song “Clementine Man.” Italicized phrases in the “Coda” are from the Vampire Weekend song “Horchata.”

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