The Boy with the Aluminum Hat

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This thesis titled
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by

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Abstract

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The Boy with the Aluminum Hat

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These poems are the culmination of an experiment toward understanding how certain celestial phenomena influence our inner and outer lives in an abundance of ways that simply go undetected by the senses. In an effort to both understand the inner life's relation to the outer, the poems undertake the project (through a dream-like tone, crafted to convey the speaker's journey of rediscovering senses) of understanding the relationship of humans and the world, perspective and self.

Split between the concepts of refraction and reflection, The Boy with the Aluminum Hat is a metaphor, a voice-piece to vocalize both the paranoia of never understanding our lives and the desire to know the truth of existence. Both sections collide with the anxiety of living in the world on a daily basis. Simultaneously, the poems illustrate the body's relation to this world that it is rooted to and from which it is occasionally uprooted.
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Fading Refractions and Lasting Reflections: A Critical Introduction

Let’s begin with a small science lesson. As you will notice, these poems are split into two sections: refractions and reflections. Both words describe the ways in which waves, sound or light, change directions upon hitting something, be it glass, water, skin, whatever eyes are made of; the sky, carpet, grass, gold, or it can simply travel on until it hits something distant in space, something otherworldly. I have appropriated these two scientific terms to describe the way in which someone who is perhaps anxious, depressed, but also optimistic, even more than occasionally realistic, internalizes the world he or she lives in, and what they reject in it. What is reflected or refracted all depends on the person standing in the light at the right moments. So, I will try to answer the question of why such a voice has anything valuable to say as well as providing evidence for why these poems should be heard. I will also try to prove why these terms have enough metaphorical and poetic energy to sustain themselves alongside the title, which is also meant to be strongly metaphorical enough to suggest that all three, the two parts and the title, work together in unison to create meaning. I am the boy with the aluminum hat in the way that John Berryman was Henry. And while I’ve never actually worn an aluminum hat (it seems like a poor fashion statement), the caricature to me is emblematic of a still-developing adult who is too anxious to listen to his own advice yet earnest enough in the pursuit of some universal truth or untruth. If I were to wear the flashy silver hat in public and were spotted by someone I know at a restaurant, or eyed strangely by someone I don’t know at a café, by the time the boy with the aluminum hat finishes speaking to them, they’re purchasing two sandwiches just to get some tin foil for themselves to fashion a hat. And if
they don’t actually do that, they’ll at least make a joke about how they feel overwhelmed living in the world at times, too. So, while some of the poems may have a fanciful, unpractical nature about them, I feel that by getting caught up in both the rhythms and conversational energy of the speakers, who are often persuasive and didactic in tone, the reader will be left with a feeling that a poem is supposed to give: a feeling of surprise and the echo of hearing something that matters, a piece of fleeting wisdom or well-translated communication.

Sometimes, when I think of obscurity, the way poems seem to just disappear, the way people just seem to disappear too, I’ll become pessimistic, alienated, and apathetic. I would probably attribute this to being a young writer. Sometimes, I think it’s because poets are always coming to terms with the fact that they have to write poetry for the rest of their lives that I am so often writing speakers who share these views on the world, inside and outside. But I certainly feel an allegiance to keep writing. And I am occasionally laughing at my stereotypically apathetic self, too. Yet, now that I am nearing my twenty-fifth year in this world, the intersection of disillusioned apathy with my love for poetry has become an opportunity to write poems that are not simply caricatures of someone strange (in an aluminum hat) but more of an in-depth look at the way someone tries to live in a world that tells you you’re not allowed to complain or whine or focus on yourself too much. Nevertheless that’s what so many of us, especially in poetry, do. These critical points of development of voice and an adulthood, complete with an ugly driver’s license picture and a noisy cell phone, will allow for me to have conversations with others who live a life in which to stop, stare, and question means possibly missing out on the real stuff life is supposed to be made of. For those who don’t identify with what I have to say or
value, I suppose I’ll hope they view me as a curious member of a generation of people who struggle with all the flashing lights and sounds of the growing technologically hybrid world.

A street artist named Banksy is quoted saying one of my most cherished thoughts on being realistic about this idea of the collective value of individual voice, obscurity, and death: “I mean, they say you die twice: one time when you stop breathing, and a second time, a bit later on, when someone says your name for the last time.” If you add on top of Banksy’s concept what Auden said, “poetry makes nothing happen,” it seems as if one could become quite cynical about the current state and future of poetry. In other words, sometimes I wonder if I have chosen an antiquated medium. Yet, because of every poem’s versatility to become something unintended I have to wonder if Auden has other meaning in this quote. Perhaps he was just trying to be mysterious much in the way I wish to write and remain mysterious too, elusive in my absolute meaning. A poet like Kay Ryan to me encapsulates this kind of elusiveness. Not to mention, her ability to compact a great deal into very small poems has always left a big impression on me. Since I have come to understand how a poem can transform in ways I didn’t expect, I know now how to more carefully and easily manipulate the words to achieve the desired effects I want. As I become more aware of how my poem is transforming, it allows me to find the ways to make an audience get excited, even leave them on a note of something mystical and powerful or even the original thought.

But I don’t always want my poetry to be mysterious. For instance, “Dream in which We’re Flying,” ends on an otherwise placid moment; whereas earlier in the poem, the speaker is dreaming of a race with Eternity. After the speaker loses the race, he says “The
clouds fasten themselves to sky as we touch the ground / and recede into the bed where
our placid bodies slept and never left” to establish his return to a safe place, one that is
clear and grounding, yet still holding the weight of an abstract moment of dreaming. I
suppose this example may seem unfitting because the bulk of the poem is fairly abstract.
But I think knowing that it is a dream helps clear up this problem. I believe that if you can
end on a concrete note, or if the final line is really good, many of the poem’s problems or
lines before it may be forgiven. Perhaps, even the preceding lines become untangled in the
final moment, even illumined, acting almost as if the final line were a prism through
which many of the lines achieve their fullest color.

Sometimes though, instead of something mysterious, I will be satisfied with a new
spin on an old thought. “Hush of a Cannonball” deals with a speaker’s knowledge that our
lives are fragile and can be disrupted at any moment by tragedy or misfortune. Yet, we
must try to live. Early in the poem, the speaker describes how everyone is dealing with this
old thought: “we are shrapnel side-steppers, / dancing like planets as debris / careens
toward us like stray asteroids.” While most of the poem spends its time contemplating the
real world responses to narrow avoidances of death or tragedy, this moment acts as a way
to both spin the old thought in a new way and capture the celestial nature of forces out of
control, which was something I was grappling with when I wrote the poem.

A lot of good ideas have already been taken in poetry, so it’s important to me to
keep up on what’s being said in the world of poetry and what isn’t. By doing this, I will
avoid any desperation for creativity. I will not find myself lineating a poem to look like a
tiger or a swan. Though it may seem mysterious, a serious writer should want to find new
ways in which he or she can say something that’s been said before in a way people
wouldn’t expect to hear it. But all of poetry really comes down to what is being communicated, understood, and misinterpreted in both positive and negative ways. Simultaneous mysteriousness, edginess, and word-level clarity are values I hold as a poet. It’s what I want to see in the poems I read.

While I have never thought of myself as writing poems under a kind of project, I feel like it has worked out the way, at least for this current project of refraction and reflection. Refraction, as mentioned earlier, is the binary opposite of reflection. It is absorbing of things, the inner world and what and who lives inside it. My use of it, is metaphorical and is further emphasized with the three stars spread out open across the section’s title page. The reflections section has stars grouped together, forming a wall, blocking things from entering—reflecting. So, this beginning section of refraction has many poems that take place in or have to do with dreams, dream life, and how we reconcile all the strange things we see and misinterpret as valuable from our dreams. Essentially, the first section deals with my interior life. Immediately the question arises of why my dreams matter at all as compared to someone else’s, since all of our dreams are different. But these poems about them are not in any danger of solipsism. Although dreams are fairly easy to access in some ways and perplexing when communicated to others, there are ways to map the dreamscapes and begin to understand how many people psychologically concoct these settings and feelings of both the quotidian and the sublime. When someone explains his or her dreams, it most listeners lose attention right away. And if one were to wake up from a bad dream and a person was next to them, he or she would say “It was just a dream. Go back to sleep.” Such a response is typical for anybody having to listen to another’s dream.
But why would I want to jump back into a world that was terrifying me only a few seconds ago? To find answers. I can see there is something to unpack there, something worth digging out. That something might be the key to what would allow a conversation on dreams to occur, or at least for a speaker who addresses them in a poem. I hope I lead the reader to an eventual understanding and an appreciation of writing poems about dreams. It’s a difficult project without doing the cliché “dream journal” project. I hope readers will appreciate my attempt to understand my interior life and how it influences all aspects of my being. I want to know the rules of dreams and how they are bent and see if others could imagine them being bent the way I have experienced. In many ways, it seems that the scariest dreams people will discuss will be dreams that are happening in places that are unremarkable, normal, and encountered daily. So in order to capture these feelings and images, I undertook this project of trying to understand and even chart the line between reality and dream. My interests in surrealism also fueled this need to explore such a subject. For instance, “Nightmares” begins not in some strange place, foreign to the speaker, but in his home. As he awakens, he is actually curious, even intrigued, by the voices of his nightmares personified echoing down the hallway. He says “the sound of chatter travels down the hallway; / guests you weren’t expecting have arrived. / The casual chatter continues as you slowly / find your way down the hallway where / your latest nightmares sit, bony legs folded at your kitchen table.” What should be noticed here is how the home no longer feels safe. Yet, the speaker does not shiver in fear under his sheets, he gets up to explore. The nightmares then become almost more comforting than his home. There is a reversal of what’s safe and unsafe, though as the poem continues, he
contemplates and begins to realize this confusion and reversal. This poem is a good example of what I believe to be a successful dream-poem.

“Geography of Dreams” is the first in a series of poems taking place within dreams or from a dream-rooted speaker. It is actually similar to “Nightmares” in that the speaker is looking for something safe from the real world, to give him some comfort as he tries to move through his alternate reality of dreams. The poem is different from “Nightmares” though because of the setting’s tone. He is in a sublime, distant land in “Geography of Dreams” whereas in Nightmares, he hasn’t left his home. One can see that in both of these poems, a similar reversal of what’s comforting occurs again. The speaker may seem lost but he is still daring and curious enough to keep moving, climbing, and swimming through everything strange. In some ways the speaker is like a tourist in his own country somehow become foreign. He knows but doesn’t know. But this speaker finds more comfort in the sublime features of the landscape, whereas normal settings of the quotidian like the hallway or the kitchen in “Nightmares,” are spoken of in a way that suggests the speaker does not wish to return to them. The speaker does however realize he will have to return, to wake up.

By the penultimate stanza, the speaker is more than just aware of being in his dreams, and that there is an outside world. He is in fact falling through space between dream and reality. The italicized words are meant to further suggest this effect. I felt that falling was appropriate because many dreams with this effect end with a sudden waking up, with everything returning to normal. The fear in such dreams is actually the realization while falling, that you will have to hit ground. The inevitability of it is what you fear, rather than careening through the air at a high speed. So, the poem ends with the
speaker observing a great deal of things around his place of rest, his bed. There are birds and shadows covering the walls because of the haziness of a cloudy morning, and most importantly, the trees are blowing but they always seem to return to their stasis, normal, as if nothing had been changed. Every little echo, every push and pull from the forces of the world and the universe, has an influence on us. It’s just difficult to notice until one actually acts or tries to communicate. Then, we may notice the ways in which we have changed, and how the changes of the world are changing us at speeds we simply can’t ever catch up with, at least not in this life. This final image, with its simple words “…the way they were” is meant to illustrate how this speaker has just arrived back in the real world unscathed and unruffled. Yet what the dream does to a person is, on a micro-level, the effect of so many forces that are too small to see unless in a space where rationality is a guiding focus but does not work out—rationality does not triumph in dream space. It fizzles out in dreams, and in other surreal spaces. One must move through the foreign atmosphere of dreams in search of any reliable reference point to find safety, such as the time of day, which is what the speaker pursues throughout the poem.

The other two poems in the series further attempt to chart in both literal and metaphorical ways how dreams impact our thoughts and how our bodies act when in our deepest REM cycles. I think of them as still in the head of the same speaker. The final poem in the series called “Geography of Morning” is small and nearly fragmented in its narrative. It is the shortest in the series of the poems for a reason. Perhaps at this point negative capability is the glue holding my concept together. I want to it be a possibility that one could see that this poem could actually be the speaker finally awakening, in the purest reality he knows, which is one of fighting sleep, where we are fumbling and
confused, tired and fuzzy in our perspective. Because it is the most fragmented I hope to suggest the fragmentation and destruction that is reality. The dream life, though wild and strange, with speakers that seem odd or displaced, was more comforting in certain ways that this moment is not. The reason this moment of awakening needs to happen in a strenuous manner, as your eyes would having to adjust from a light suddenly coming on, blinding you, is to emphasize the power and unknown forces and feelings living inside all of us. And to suddenly leave one state for another, such as waking from a dream, creates a feeling of onset jetlag from a disturbing clarity realized.

But I do not wish to create poems that are only dreamscapes and the real world flipped on its head. I think this is where more of my sense of humor comes out, in the reflections section. Many of the poems in “reflections” are actually reflections. It is a pun. But the pun serves a good purpose because it provides an easy clue for someone to figure out the significance of separating the sections into refractions and reflections. It’s an easy hint to an otherwise strange concept, I think. In regards to the Aluminum hat and the boy, many of these poems have many moments where speakers reject an aspect of life after reflecting on what’s being reflected. They are certain of their convictions and therefore are not easily influenced or persuaded. Ironically, I am trying to be persuasive and conversational in these poems, hoping that the reader will buy into the fanciful nature and that within a few lines, the reader will hopefully be on my side. The reader will be searching for the nearest place to grab some aluminum foil to form a hat. In this way, I think this title also allows for a kind of hope to exist around these poems (but not too much). An aluminum hat itself is a thing certain people use to find comfort from things stressing them out. But I do not wish to write an ethnography of aluminum hat wearers. I
wish to explore how this image has metaphorical power to illuminate the poems I have written.

_The Boy with the Aluminum Hat_ is my way of giving a solid, yet empathetically absurd image that suggests many of the emotional themes of my poems. An example of this idea in reflections might be “Solar Flare” in which I describe the phenomenon of solar flares causing a great deal of anxiety and emotional eccentricity unbeknownst to so many human beings feeling the pressure and heat of life. In fact, at a certain point in the poem, it is hinted at by the speaker’s change in tone that he’s actually just been affected by a solar flare, as he speaks and explains, contemplates and rationalizes. Also, I wanted to create a poem that created a speaker who is trying to displace emotions and blame, a characteristic I can empathize with and try to understand as someone who has had to deal with overblown issues and emotions in relationships.

Another example in which the image of a boy with an aluminum hat is useful as a lens to the reflection idea, would be the final poem, “Distant Signals.” In this poem, the speaker is discussing a unique woman in the universe who has trouble perfecting her art to the point that it becomes a great frustration. By the end of the poem, the speaker via the unique woman is explaining that the signals we ourselves create all fade away, everything dies or disappears. While this particular poem does highlight some of the previously written-about emotions like anxiety or fear of loneliness, it also stresses alienation and the issue of obscurity all artists and humans must face. With the last line, the speaker is nearly smug with fact that some people don’t know about this great woman; they’ve missed out! The title also hints that’s it’s our duty as humans to remember other humans who have passed. Memory, then also becomes integral to many of the poems.
“Privacy Platter” shares a similar theme of alienation intersecting with memory and the traces of it. But by the end the speaker wishes to “disillusion the disillusionment” and does so by leaving the town. The reason “Privacy Platter” is in the “refractions” section is due to the fact that the speaker is looking from the outside in to himself, so much so that it forces him to act defiantly against being caught in a place that will guarantee little growth as a person. There is little reflection, so categorizing it as refraction seemed appropriate. But I suppose there is metaphorical reflection happening. Either way, both of these poems address similar themes and issues in ways relevant and decipherable by using the section headings as frames for the poems. On a side note, I think the second poem and the final poem of every book are the two most important and first looked at most seriously by a reader. These two poems I have mentioned are what I believe to be my favorite of my own work.

When I consider how I’ve conceived this concept for organizing the poetry I have written for this thesis, I am a little shocked. It’s certainly not what I expected for myself. However, I feel that things have managed to build in ways that I cannot necessarily keep track of, ideas and concepts developed subconsciously at times. I certainly never could’ve expected that I would always rely on the sun, light, stars, and the universe as symbolic-go-tos in my poetry. Things sort of fall into place as they fall apart. And I love going back to see what mattered to me in an old poem I’ve written. Many of these poems have been in the works for at least two years. I’d like to give every poem twenty years, but I’m not Elizabeth Bishop, not yet at least.

If I try to trace back some of my influences though, I can’t quite see how I arrived at my poems. Most of my life, I’ve admired the confessional poets like John Berryman and
surreal poets like Charles Simic, mostly for their disturbing qualities. But the creativity and energy of the New York School poets like Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, Dean Young, Ron Padgett, have also been an impetus to my poetry ideas. All of these poets have helped me realize and understand how poetry has an energy that can fall off but be restarted with the right tools. I think it was Paul Valery, who was an influence to the first generation of New York School poets, who said poetry has “programming” almost as if it were a computer. While this idea might terrify some readers, I love the idea that we are wired a certain way, with little control. We might even have a collective unconscious! Which is the idea that we all have much more in common in our dreams and thoughts than we know. It’s all connected. If viewed in this way, the artifice of poetry no longer feels or exists in an antiquated space for me. It escapes that cage and joins the world where the living are on the move, where there are cell phones, digital everything, and thousands of voices from media speaking to us at any given moment of the day. We’ve all got programming like the poems we write. But if there is anything living these twenty-five years has taught me, there’s always a way to hack the standard system.

Hopefully, the “Refraction” and “Reflection” sections have enough poetic energy to illuminate many of the poems’ mysterious and abstract qualities. I hope the title also works to help show why my voice is even worth listening to more than once if at all. I hope that with my work, I will show how a poem can be distilled into something that has simple language but a complicated programming. I want to fit big ideas and complex thoughts into the simplest of words, heavy enough to make your eyes widen but easy enough to read that you feel as if you’ve only tasted part of what’s being offered. Good enough to make you want more. I want to walk the line between dream and reality in my
poetry and come back from either with trinkets and snapshots to examine enjoyably in the other. Poetry is a medium that illuminates silences as well as calling attention to these things lost in translation. It is the fragments of what's wanting to be said in poetry, and the thorough sense-based examination of them, in which we figure out what we need to hear.
Work Cited


Refractions

* * *

“How many phases of a man’s life can crowd their way into a single moment?”
-Reception Good, Kenneth Fearing

“The wind is rising! We must try to live.”
-Paul Valéry
Self-Portrait in Ugly Suit

My eyes hurt it’s so bright this morning. So bright.
It’s too early to feel this heavy and yet I do. I really do!
Yesterday, grey clouds shifted together. Today, away.
The coffee attempting to perk up my apartment percolates
as I try to forget when I tripped in a murky puddle of rain.
Again, I wear yesterday’s worries like a three-piece suit.
I would trade them in though I suspect most people dress
about the same: trousers rumpled, jacket torn, vests
stretched, buttons missing here and there, splits and rips
in everything we wear. But I’d rather not put your suit on
and invest time in more threads unraveling, turning bare.
I’ve got my own patches to sew on what I cannot outgrow.
But how many more days can I go before another tear?
How many days of wearing worry before I won’t care?
Nightmares

As you stir in your bed with its ruffled sheets, the sound of chatter travels down the hallway; guests you weren’t expecting have arrived. The casual chatter continues as you slowly find your way down the hallway where your latest nightmares sit, bony legs folded at your kitchen table; cups of black coffee between them, spilling secret after secret about you.

You overhear “self-destruction” and it makes you think of a black Camaro careening off an ochre-colored cliff; You overhear fear of loneliness and it makes you think of an endless sea with a tiny, silent island wedged midway. All the nightmares laugh a little to each other, under the hoods of their thick, closed robes. But not too much laughter. They would prefer to mind their own business: you.

There is the incubus of childhood fears joking quietly with the incubus of adult anxieties. It sounds like they have a lot in common, as if they were always meant to meet but only waiting for you to introduce them at this table, in this nightmare: one of self-assessment.

You sit down and pour yourself a cup, too. The rippling black liquid splashes down your throat. The chairs around the table stay un-pushed in after the nightmares shuffle out. What appears to be relief turns to a hollowness in your stomach, as if you’re still hungry for what nightmares can tell you about the world and the world inside you that they occupy.

What strains your mind the most though is not that they left so abruptly between sips of coffee, without even a goodbye or a bony-fingered wave but how they have so darkened your peripheries.

The stains and spills they’ve left on the table
and on the armrests will not wash away.
They remain at the places where you sit
in the morning or in the middle of the night
even under the tree where your soul sits
in the sanctity of an undreamt dream,
waiting patiently for you to return to it
before the nightmares creep in as quiet
as low, silver clouds passing over land
or the flash of pronged lightning that follows.
Privacy Platter

The only red barstool to sit on in a small diner.
The only menu reflects light like a storm-soaked road.
The only song you recognize on the radio, ends.

The only person working the counter takes your order.
The only smell you smell is the charring of onions.
The only people talking are a couple in the corner.

The only subject they seem to talk about is the weather.
The only window is at your back. It holds a neon sign.
The only things outside the window are tufts of clouds

Growing above town. On the way, it rained hard. And
At a stop sign, the only thing you wanted was the rainfall
To churn the cool air into your open car window as it hit

The street like many tiny jackhammers upturning dust;
—now, a muffled sizzle rises off the griddle. The only
Change you’ve got clinks together on the blue counter top.

The only weather. It’s only rain. The loud sky, pouring more.
The lonely customers eat as the only couple speaks but you
Don’t listen. You leave. The only business you mind is your own.

The parking lot leading to the road paving your only escape.
The road’s yellow lines like tape coming unstuck, disillusioning
The disillusionment of leaving: the only place left to go is to go.
Geography of Dreams I

No one cares to ask for the time in a dream
which is unfortunate because I always want
to know it but am afraid to ask in normal settings:
the dream kitchen, the dream bedroom, dream café.
Even the dream bar can become nightmarish.

* And the answer might mean more anyway
  if disclosed atop a mountain or an endless sea,
  perhaps as I sink to the bottom
  or fall from the peak.
  But in the air, whether falling or flying
time is only a flat circle staring back.

* The path on my map indicates north so
  I return into a heavy-eyed stupor
  as if a concrete dam resisting a tide of melatonin
  leaked then crumbled under pressure and flooded
  the ground I hover on like the rise of river-water.
  I can’t feel myself walking. Yet, I move!

* Some nights I hope to hear myself speak time’s echo and follow
  my voice leaping off the mountain it was shouted from,
  landing like the dust of a meteor in the arctic. Other nights,
  I am sitting in places once-familiar turned strange and inflamed.
  The rooms with chairs and tables shift as I grow more fearful.

How long must my eyes be lost inside the ticking
  circular void on the plain wall of every room? If I wake up,
  I will be relieved to find the things around me aren’t
  any less normal than when I left them, when my eyes went shut.

* The dream forest is calm. The dream sea is cold but pleasant
  which means to return to civilization with windowless rooms,
  exits in hallways you can’t use, would be a nightmare.
  In the distance, speckled with people, there are tiny islands
  where their tiny moments live their cycle of uncertain life.
I've heard of applications to get out of dreams, stolen passports
to get you to where you need to be to catch the sun rise
or to watch it fall as Time murmurs to every star
that its light will linger but lose all luster.
But there are things I've found, trails and paths,
on the ground, in the sky and sea, so close to the life
I remember when awake, to return to it will not do.
I have starlight to lock away in my head like toys in a chest
before catching my breath as I fall through into the world...

*  

Time,

Where will my body go today? Can I prefer not to?
How will I enter the day today? Will I crash into my sheets
or wake up in someone else's bed, on the floor?
Will I suddenly be pulled by a cloudless gust to a tiny, silent island
upon trying to make sense of all I dreamed of the night before?
Will the words I'll need to live stay unspoken by strangers?
Who tell me the time and if I cannot ask, who will speak for me?

*  

I awake with one hand open, the other clenched, tightened into a fist.
Morning light beams onto fledgling birds when I unfurl my blinds.
Their mother is gone. Each bird has feathers growing in, patches of pink
and white mixing to red. Their wings will do their best to carry Time
until the weight is too much for each decaying body, built only
to be so strong. Trembling trees outside my window bend with
the rising wind, then return to where they were, the way they were.
Tomorrow

There is no weight on my chest where her head used to rest, yet it feels as if she never left me.

My empty stomach growls and grumbles as persistently as the thunder outside. But I know it is not a hunger to be right again or to have the last word in the fight but for longer rest and calm, muted nights.

A summer rain cascades out the cracked window. My thoughts pop like the rippling puddles on the sidewalk; the murmurs of my dreams pool, undulating within the folds of my skin, my being like small wind-doused currents until the surface of my face can no longer help but scowl and wince at the thought of another poltergeist of pain possessing and following us wherever we might go.

I stare outside through blinds hungry for the hope I cannot let myself have: her appearing in my door and entering as if she needs to prove she’s returned not just as a vision or a ghost, but as my reality of today ready to be misinterpreted, misunderstood, then accepted.
First Day of Dancing Lessons
--After Henri Matisse’s “Dancer Resting”

I was loosening up, watching my step, avoiding your toes, but got too confident, too daring. I bent your back like a fishing pole arched between a man and a marlin. Each of my dips went too far and you said too far. Each of my spins went too fast and you said slow down. It was as if our ears were listening to different music as we tried to danced together that afternoon before sundown.

You were a formal dance concerto and I was a sloppy waltz. You were a ballerina and I was a blotto half-stepping bum. You were teaching me not just to move, but to relax, too, to stride and glide gracefully like a nude drawing itself onto a canvas, silently twisting out her cool contours across each smooth inch of space, a knot untangling itself. But before we could figure out which direction you needed to lead me in, I needed to lead you, to demonstrate my uncontrollably senseless motions I called dancing.

And after leading you in all the wrong directions on the sun porch, we were resting after dancing, laughing at how bad I was. But you didn’t seem to be bothered by my wild moves. You didn’t seem to mind helping this rhythm-less amateur. And you didn’t deny with a bat of your eyelashes that the glance you were sharing with me said let’s try again, after this rest.

So I will wait for you on this sofa, as you catch that second wind. But once the cool, window-trimmed breeze fills your lungs, we will dance again but with more ease, a slower tempo, like that of single piano playing as a chanteuse in a red dress croons in a dimly lit gin bar. We will share an empty floor and sway together like a grove of palm trees over an island beach or like shadows on a wall, shifting as one, as night leans down to bow. We will dance to wake ourselves up and put ourselves to sleep. We will dance in our dreams and we will dance with our dreams.

But we will not monitor our steps or watch our toes nor will we hold back any turns or dips or spins, for you will have trained me how to shake any space’s rhythm loose like a hand jingling pocket change. Our mantra will be if there’s room to breathe in, there’s room to dance.
Honey

If you stepped close enough you’d smell the cigarettes smoked from the stress of how stressed I looked all day. And you might even catch the redolence of tomorrow’s stress beginning to stink before I head off to bed where the dream, the one where people are so nosy and always inhaling so deeply that they can smell everything you’ve done in the past few hours, even days, restarts: They smell the cigarettes and turn their nose to the sky. They smell the sweat from stress and hold their breath. There is this rotting smell in this dream. In their black and white clothes, stiff collars and tightened belts, you can catch a whiff of it as they pass you on Dream St. The ending is always me with the same psychotherapist from high school who told me that it is human to talk about how everyone’s judging and staring at everyone judging and staring. I respond with a nod and deep sighs out my nostrils. She does the same. Sometimes the room is just us breathing if she doesn’t end up saying everything sweet rots, honey which makes it sound as if all reality could be a ripe fruit waiting to be plucked off its branch, bitten into, tasted, and tossed aside.
The Silence of Everything

Again, I awake to white noise: my fan against the open window. One noise amongst an orchestra of nighttime calamity! But where noises crash, there is a wake of silence. And when there is no fan, or TV, or something buzzing, I'll search for hidden sounds or just the possibility. The faucet has great potential. The curling wood of broken floorboard like a springy diving board might be what jumpstarts my sleep and kick-start the REM motor. I love a creak or a drip, a leak, a whistle, a buzz—any din. Even a few monotone neighbors talking on the other side can drowse me if they can keep it at a demure decibel. But I need not tangle with every thread of sound unraveling in the rooms around me. Though they need my snoring presence as much as I need them before all of us let darkness fall onto us like a big blanket, the beginning layer of long silences. Last night, the bedroom door, the window, and the heat vent were shut. And behind these gates of soundlessness, other things thrived: snores, sleep-talking, tiny strings of noise vibrating like the pizzicato of violins, echoing distinctly, with reverence to silence contrived from privacy. As I sleep, the little moans of the couple in the room next to mine begin, the words of a guilty spouse next to theirs are shouted, and the fast-paced prayers of a religious neighbor ascend, all underneath the imperfect silence of everything.
Geography of Dreams II

The book of dreams
is encyclopedic
and filled with folded maps.
Outlines of hidden mountains;
rivers disguised as still.

Green pines bend outward,
as if a helicopter were always
lowering itself to land.
A long, whistle-filled wind
from nowhere scrapes
at my neck and creeps into
my eyes, these places
so naked and exposed.
Endurance

Leave, and the dream will unweave,
along with your dress, swarthy as midnight.

But after stitches and strings undo,
will a body remain, or will air flood the space you've left?

A queen bed is too small for all of us:
you, me, and my dream of you.

Your sleep-talk of yesterday’s conversations
speaks to me like a tombstone to a mourner

or like a doll’s obsidian pupils to a child’s eyes,
capturing his indiscriminate imagination,

his fixed gaze attempting to reach further into reflection.

Our phases bunch together like fingers in a tightened fist.

I wake up in a fog and my neck’s killing me
and I’m dealing with it all day long until it’s gone.
What to Do If You Bring Someone Back to Life

Though she may have forgotten your face
Or what you represented, if she has not,
Do not amble anxiously by her grave.
She will feel rushed; which is the first feeling

She may have been very happy to be rid of.
Do not hesitate to help dig the soil above her.
For she may want to feel a great weight lifted
Like when she passed away: a great rebirth.

Once free, you may greet her, but do not jog her
Memory yet; retentions can be slow to regrow.
Though do not be afraid to embrace her
Once your memories start to match and align—

Like that time we skipped all the stream's flat rocks;
That time we grew tired of what our small town
Had to offer and drove for hours till we hit the sea—
Do not fear reminiscing about the sky for fear that

It might unfold memories in time she would've
Wanted to kept folded: the gas stations at night, the
Peeling billboards in tall grass below an atmosphere
Grey like pavement: the shade of quiet decay. Yet

There's a chance that the words left unsaid could unlock
Something happy instead. But don't be too sad or
Disappointed if something does not click or align.
What you've been looking for may have slipped away

Like that time she talked about chasing the moon with
Drunk eyes as she shared a flask with you in a yellow cab.
Of course, she then realized it was not you with her at all.
She couldn't stop laughing about it. Did you laugh too?
Trends

Wounded by evening,
dying by moonrise,
we wish to slip out
of our lone reality
as if it were an old coat
we could exchange
for a less tattered one—
one that fits better at least,
a sharper-looking one
with big pockets
packed to the brim
with all the time
you'd ever need
or ever want to spend.
Then morning comes
and yesterday’s way of being
becomes as old as
some hand-me-downs
you've long grown out of.
Was that big head of yours
ever meant to fit through
that itchy, blue collar?
Are the sleeves of today’s suit
uneven, too? Left sleeve is a little
longer than the right sleeve?
It’s enough to make you
ache for new trends
but not enough
to forget who you are.
What keeps you colorful
and lively though, you throw
to the ground like dirty
laundry that's for now
easy to neglect but soon
there will be nothing left
to wear other than what
you've abandoned on the floor.
All old coats that have been
faded, stained or dyed
are yours to wear;
yours to hide inside.
Pathway to Memory

*Gustav Tammann, a German physicist who was among the first to study glass as a thermodynamic system suggested glass is a supercooled [or undercooled] "liquid" which suggests it is in fact unsolidified after being made into materials.*

Viscous windows on an abandoned home blur in the rain. From this shrinking distance, I look in and claim witness to cobwebs and ghosts made from years of spiders and dust mingling though I will awake thinking I was reminiscing about visiting dead relatives. And as I gaze from a distance at this decrepit house it seems possible the windows could drip over time, the top half thinner than the lower half and perhaps this is why the belief that our eyes always see what they are seeing may follow a train of assumptions. We are its passengers inside, forever waving goodbye to ourselves. We depart toward long tunnels of reverie. Rushing. Racing. But, behind our skin we can feel our hearts and minds speeding fast enough to catch up with every illusion we see in our worlds, and in others. A tunnel can’t begin without ever ending, so when we wake to find the light at the end is morning, it shouldn’t be strange to us; how all our memories of people are coherently housed in glass that could shatter in absolute silence, with each shard reflecting nothing but a light.
Heart Filled With Crude

If a roller coaster looping through iron loops starts juddering and jerking, and the riders scream as their stomachs drop that means it’s working.

If an elevator moving floor to floor clinks and clunks, the shirking janitors will complain saying if it moves like wind-kicked rain that means it’s working.

If a coffee maker bubbles and gurgles as it brews the morning cup of joe during its perking, your tongue will burn once you drink it. Though, the pain is forgotten when the caffeine starts working.

If your car on the night highway starts to smoke black smoke and sputters in the lurking moonlight, chill out. Have a cigarette while I look under the hood at the inner workings.

If you smoke black smoke, day after day, on much-needed breaks between bad news or working, your heart will jolt like an old elevator with its iron strings shuddering, pulling tight. Still, it’s working.
Geography of Dreams III

The book of dreams opens
as you succumb to drowsiness.
Sometimes, it opens to a highlighted,
dog-eared entry of script and dialogues
between the in-charge parts of the body.
For the heart and mind, the book
of dreams is like a table to unfold
and sit at and talk shop about
how to plot out shortcuts for
the body they continue to share.
The heart and mind use their providence
to make transitions between sleeping,
waking, and getting up more fluid.

They sit with the book of dreams
and its maps between them as well as
a silver compass and pencil nearby
as they plot around the tragedy
and maelstrom of our bodies
and its many foreign languages.
But the book of dreams and its wafting pages
of words and pictures can overlap like a high tide
onto its land’s shining sands. And when
the heart and mind forget this flood, they end up
plotting a path leading to their own destruction,
their separation, lost on disparate paths—
while the mind races to find the heart’s thumping,
the heart overworks itself, red and desperate
to know if the mind can hear the pulse traveling
up the spine, on the neck, where the mind never rests.
Solar Flare

When the radio fuzzed
and our cell phones died
I knew that there wouldn’t
be another distraction from
what was hanging in the air.
I wanted to tell you but the
words came out all wrong
as if the old codes I run through
to unlock the encryption of
what I’ve programmed myself
to say when I feel these ways
with you, had gone helplessly awry.

We need to account for the sun.
You never consider that the cause
could be another solar flare,
an expulsion of kinetic energy
turned into thermal power
from the surface of a nearby star;
a long loose strand of blazing fire
causing all of our quarrels.
It can also freeze radio signals midair
and send satellites spinning like
dreidels picked up and dropped.
Thick ribbons of frayed fire tangle
with the frail strings of our lives,
setting aflame our shortest fuses.

And we might never know and never
even question that it’s the heat waves
sending us into arguments,
causing us to cry out of nowhere.
The waves overcharge our insensitivity
and overcharge oversensitivity to
things of incredible insignificance.
We blame each other
and sadly, not the universe!
For all we know it could be
the one steering, making
the decision of whether today
is good or bad or just okay.
Did you think of that?
Until now, I hadn’t really considered how when it’s just so nice out, red ejections of flared light can unfreeze something inside us awakening all these frozen neurons ready to spark and fire away. I feel like a technology always on the fritz. I think you do too you’re just not saying so.

So much of my being wants to know why the universe bothered to twist the wires in my head this way and yours another. Perhaps if I take some small steps to stay out of the center of the universe, something good will happen. But I won’t get far if it means being too far from your touch. It is my energy.
Fluorescence

When I close the blinds, quite sure every slat has been tightened shut, the shining of outside fluorescents undermines my sleep-protected eyes.

My torso endlessly tossing and turning is how I come to terms with the futility of rest, how even if I were to wall myself in, lay bricks in front of my bedroom window, seal the space between each brick with well-mixed cement, the persistence of light would find a crack like pooling rainwater finding pinhole leaks in the roof.

Were it not for the scattering of light across my blinds from passing cars or porch lamps, my deep sleeping would enclose me and allure me into deeper hypnosis where you float on the sea. But as I lie beneath the white, ruffled sheets, I can sense the yellow and orange light trickling in between the slats, beaming onto my bed like the affixed stares of thieves invested in my next move.
**Against Birdsong**

Bird shrilling in the tree outside my sloped window, why won’t you let me sleep? I do not bother your eggs with any predatory caws and threaten to knock your nest onto the cold hard ground with sharpened talons I don’t have. My six hours of sleep are as important to me as your tiny, blue-speckled eggs: I fear them disappearing or being taken away; they all belong together. And even the one I sometimes share them with can be an enemy stealing the one thing I love. Do you flap and flutter and peck in the face of anyone who dare disturb the bed where your six top priorities sit in silence around you, keeping you solaced until the time comes when you must part ways? Do you enjoy waking to an empty nest with only twigs as company? I sympathize with you but please sympathize with me too. My hours fly off out of sight as fast as your starlings. In seconds, they’re gone!
Dream in which We're Flying

We slip out from our cotton sheets and chase each other into the sky overlooking the ground where flowers writhe. Eternity wishes to race us beyond the horizon, to the vanishing point of our lives, then back into the bodies we’ve left behind. We say okay on the chance his shoelaces will unloosen like the black hands of a melting Dali clock. A good head start and as we catch our second wind, I consider what’ll happen if we win.

And for a handful of moments it appears as if our heavy steps will plunge through the rickety boards bridging the voids in our chests and the heart-shaped visions that fill such emptiness. As always, eternity wins and always we return with downcast eyes, trudging through the trauma of falling while you hold my hand like a child’s. The clouds fasten themselves to sky as we touch the ground and recede into the bed where our placid bodies slept and never left.
An Apology Before the Storm Arrives

The green sky scars our vision yet we stare to distract ourselves; lightning ready to strike at our feet; the still blinds ready to smack hard against delicate windows and the rain ready to fall and form puddles to reflect the silhouette of us on the porch.

We’ve spent too much time imagining the twitch in the hurricane’s eye when it resists telling the truth, and the hesitancy of touch in the torso of a twisting tornado.

A bead of sweat forms on your face then falls like a star but it may just be the rain. Your lips are pressed together as if you have words so harsh to say yet you’ve kept them hidden due to their vulgar reproach for my imposition. They’ll prick us both if spoken too soft or delicately. Please, tonight, let me be your lightning rod. Say the things you need to get out, to release. You’ve let calm moments like this one fade away too often. Right now, even the wind knows to bite its lip.

Rip me apart like a storm rips apart old red barns. Let me get what I deserve for staying so silent after saying too much about the way we used to be. Our puddle will form soon. And in the ripples the silhouette of us will be blurry and indistinguishable between a single person upset the other has left or both of us as one, pressing our bodies close together at the chest.
Geography of Morning

A headache throbbed
painfully
behind my eyes
as I awoke, my
tremulous mind
churned
with a vision of you—
a shadow played
across the screen
of my mind—
it was as if I’d
stepped out
from a movie
in a dark, old theater
aisles
of padded red seats
into the bright world
I forgot existed.
Reflections

***

“Nobody is ever missing.”
—Dreamsong 29, John Berryman

“In the reflections and the reflected reflections
Of the sun and of the sea-suns
In the mirrors after
The Bath, the coffee, the cereberations,
Naked in the sun on my bed flooded with light,
Naked, alone, mad,
myself!”
—“In the Sun,” Paul Valery
Hush of a Cannonball

Upon opening the door,
I could smell the gas
from the oven left on
    but my space remained flameless.
No candles dancing near
    the blur of gas.

Lukewarm noodles with pepper
    left on the stove.
    I ate them
like it was my last supper.

I’ve heard from others too.
Always seconds or inches away
    from the radiance of explosions

how anything from a flying stone
to a shooting microwave door,

    could’ve taken off their head
taken away their torso;
    we are shrapnel side-steppers,
dancing like planets as debris
careens toward us like stray asteroids.

But their flight paths have a wake
    wider than we question.

And a false sense of invulnerability
can develop from luck’s immeasurability too.
    How lucky do the unlucky get to be?—
    who gives that permission?

Who gives the okay to let a few boys and their clicking bikes
take a rest on the side of the highway
too close to the blurred rush
    of summertime traffic;

who gives the pass for a man
    in the heart of some cold, seductive city
to only hear a bullet ricochet
    off the brick wall he’s leaning on
and not through his flesh?
Ifs and could’ve beens
    widen like air and water
but impact and stick in our skin
    where we can’t see—
hidden shards of shrapnel
    healing to scars
we can’t touch
    or let someone
slide a finger over during a story.

If the man returns to his whiskey bar
he’ll hear the whistling ricochet
    of a bullet passing in front of his face,
no matter where he sits.

If I cook, I won’t start a fire
    but it’ll come to mind
as the pan heats or smokes,
    sending me back
to when the walls yellowed from escaping gas—
the thought of it all aflame.

The kids get permission to forget though.
    Even if the speeding SUV
booming down the shiny highway swerved
    just in time
to avoid the fragile-headed boys,
    who were so irreverent of traffic,
it wouldn’t matter. They’ll hop
    on their bikes
and let the close calls of living
    give air to their tires.

They’ll ride away no more invincible than before,
spinning their clean, silver spokes
    at the speeds they like, alive no less.
To The Paramedic

Despite the severity of my trauma you responded
in the nick of time; though semi-conscious, blood clotted
in my head like fogginess over a dark, sunken universe.
My arteries throbbed and thumped and beat offbeat.
Neck and wrist pulses palpitated more and more out of
rhythm as if the drummer inside had broken every stick
to play with. What I wanted, I could not have: the power
to distinguish between your fingers and the world’s
heaviness, pressing on my chest, holding me to the stretcher.
Every second wished to shift to the next without us and did.
In the windows, streetlights and stars had both yellowed
and blurred into the unrecognizable and therefore,
the indeterminable and undependable. I’m grateful to
have had you to depend on for stabilization before triage.
Your deliberate urgency pierced death like sirens through
the silenced night. You parted traffic like a choppy sea
as we rushed down the streets, a red light spinning atop.
While other drivers rushed to brake, your sharp turns and
shortcuts got us to the hospital and white emergency room.
We came close to arriving at another conclusion though:
a corpse, and therefore, you: a human drained of adrenaline
with a sense of diluted hope with every life lost on the job.
Then again, you may have just moved on with only a tinge
of sorrow in your chest as you answered the next call,
ready, practically unchanged, an unsung tone in your voice,
reattaching soul after soul to the bodies they've been
wrenched from, and convincing all those in need that their
convictions to live by never disappear. They are always there.
Leftovers

Colorful tufts of food sit, congealing in plastic Tupperware. Sitting, and congealing in everyone’s refrigerator. That’s what they do though. No surprises there except when they start to pile up and you forget about them—the chunky yellow stuff, the green premade salads half eaten, getting soggy, then they are surprises—each wasted bite of meat or vegetable carries with it the flavor and sinew of memory: who made this dish, was it good or bad, did you have to lie about how good or bad it was to someone who made it just for you. Maybe you even think of the best version of it you’ve ever had made by a grandparent or in some bistro in France—delicious and fleeting, its path of mouth to throat, soul to mind, each bite a wild meadow or vista. If you can just remember this refrigerated meal as if it were something breathtaking, something it’s not, feeding your own fantasy of it into something more enticing and enjoyable than it actually is, then the ambiguous smite of life and everything in yours might for once let you slide and enjoy it that way— you might be able to taste it the way you want to remember it. But after your hand reaches to the back of the fridge and you pull out some thick red soup, or sweet potato casserole, you’ll peel back the lid, ready to lie in the canopied hammock of food nostalgia only to be thrown on the ground, shocked but not too surprised as you say jesus this smells awful, ugh! But I’d like to think there are others holding the see-through containers, who see much more, sniffling the near-foul odor and are simply happy for the experience of not forgetting as it’s pushed back further into the annals of the fridge while the ingredients sit in front waiting to be cooked for tonight.
Sunrise, Sunset, Eclipse

So often does Night argue with Day. No one knows how tough it is raising a daughter as bright and rebellious as her. Day is always talking back. She refuses dinner; locks herself in her room. Now, Day runs away and Night is so worried, angry, yet alive. A couple of tears drip down her façade of calmness and quiet. She phones the police, cries to neighbors, calls Day’s father who never answers in time or responds unconcernedly. Determined to teach her daughter a good lesson, perhaps a displaced one, Night flies into the streets to find her runaway child. But just as Night leaves, Day reappears, looking for a way back inside. She’s locked out and frightened of storm winds rustling leaves, bending trees and their encroaching heights as their long shadows whisper the way her parents thought they did in secret behind bedroom walls. Now, Day calls fearfully through the mail slot but there is no response, not even the cat to investigate any of her noise. There is only her short-lived echo swaddled in the silence of a hate-filled household where the walls were dense enough to eclipse Day out but just too thin to hide Night’s secrets about all the things that happen after dark.
Spare Change

I went to a pawn shop to get a price on a childhood promise. On the walls hung some electric guitars without strings, a stack of old china sat in the corner and on the carpet, some wood-paneled TV sets lie with the echo of static frozen into them. A tweed suit on a slouching mannequin; toys protruding from their dusty boxes, crying out at me, as if their stiff arms were affirmation then objection. I wasn't looking to buy. I removed the yellow jingling envelope from my jacket and told the owner reading a newspaper on the glass counter that I got these old coins and I'm wondering what you'll give me for them. He lifted his eyes at me the way an agnostic lifts a bible. I assured him of their priceless value and authenticity with a small story about keeping up my grandfather's hobbies after he died. He used to love the meticulous collection of small things: coins, stamps, even buckshot from antique guns he fired with his father, or grandfather, or uncle, my great uncle? I couldn't remember. Does it matter? He didn't buy the story. But he bought the coins and paid me in more pity than I wanted and less cash than I needed. A few more stops and I wound up in a motel parking lot, slouched behind the steering wheel. The freshly broken bottles around me leaked out their shadows as the day fell wounded with the blue bruise of evening. A round imprint from a penny I had clutched hard into my hand earlier that day hadn't vanished yet. Its last drop of luck felt greasy in the tightening of my fist. But I wasn't about to let it slip away.
On Miscellaneous Tragedy
   -After Alan Dugan

You wake up.
You stretch. You shower.
You pour coffee.
You put on your coat.
You leave for work.
You lock the door.
You take the train.
You sit at your desk.
You go to a meeting.
You go to lunch.
You come back from lunch.
You go to another meeting.
You say it’s hard
To get any work done
With all these meetings.
You stare into your screen
And think what does it mean
That we go to these places
To do these unremitting things?
You try to leave “it” at work.
You put on your coat.
You take the train.
You unlock the door.
You have a meal.
You shower. You stretch.
You lie in your bed.
You try to fall asleep.
You try to fall asleep.
You don’t. You wonder
If you can’t know when
You’re asleep. You’re unaware
Like the way you can’t ever know
When the day before
Is going to be the day before
A plane crash or a mudslide,
Or a tornado or a bomb.
You can’t help but wonder
If you were dreaming before.
You are not dreaming anymore.
So you get up from bed and
You lock your door just to be safe
To be sure of your own illusions.
The Magician’s Wife

“No surprise there,” she said as he disappeared.
Existential Pollination

1

It’s funny how much the living
think about dying
as if a honeybee
could obsess
about whose skin his
stinger would be left in
after having stung
someone he didn’t know.
But when you die,
and you reincarnate
as a bee in a hive,
your old, forgotten body
as well as the life ripped
from it are only
a speck of concern
in comparison
to your thoughts of
fresh flowers and honeycomb.

2

One day in a garden
someone swats at you
so you stab your stinger
in the skin of their palm.
You try to twist free
and your head lurches
not with thoughts
of the queen, honey,
or the hive, but of whose
hand this might be
and how it stings
to sting someone,
no matter whom or why.
Funny, how your antennae
before were only thin black
hairs bouncing as you danced.
Now they’re picking up voices
and throwing off your balance.
You manage to escape unscathed
and retreat to a nearby sunflower.
On and on, voices of the past
determined for answers, ask
what does it mean to hear bees
buzzing in a summer garden?
What does it mean to chase
the sunlight with such
overwhelmed wings and eyes?
And is it your six-legged body
heavy with yellow pollen
that's distracting your mind
and stopping your wings from
flying? *Tell us what you know.*

3

The weight of each unfinished
thought is too much. It
holds you down and droops
this gold sunflower over as if it
had also become so aware of what
it's like to be alive—for it too
had once felt a hand seize upon
its neck, stopping its breath,
ready to uproot its soul from
this world and place it into
another that it couldn't fully know
but could live in all the same—
as a bee or a flower or a human
or a small garden shouldering
the weight of them all, including the sun.
Keep Yodeling if you want to go to Jail

There's a strange law in this old town stating that
no one's allowed to sing poorly, night or noon or day.
But only to outsiders does it sounds like cacophony.
To them, it sounds like everyone in town is breaking the law!
In the church, the town choir sings its hymns off-key.
In homes, tired parents lullaby their children to sleep.
In garages, high-school kids wail in their awful garage bands.
Outsiders to the town learn to hum under their breath
at the sight of the town firemen singing opera around flames
and at the town drunk jabbering wild tunes behind bars.
The barbers cut customer's hair and sing in kitschy quartets.
Even the town doctor croons bad news to his patients.
The judge rules with a voice as odd as a keyless piano.
The town police are guilty of whistling on patrol and
when they're directing traffic, they conduct all the cars
like they're silver instruments in a grand symphony.
It's been said that a town is only as good as the orchestra
it produces. This town used to be only a barn and a general store.
But in order to survive, it had to be so much more.
So the sheriff will give you a ticket if she doesn't like your tone.
She's making sure the town doesn't ever fall into silence.
One day, the town will need to grow even more in order to live,
expanding like a chest in need of breath. And in the sunlit buildings
more voices will rise and rise and rise filling the city with the sounds
of hardhat workers humming as their jackhammers buzz
to widen the streets and hammers knocking to secure nails into
support beams for homes, containing lives both intimate and orchestral.
But once in a while you can overhear the sheriff whispering to others
about the old days when people were more restrained with their noise.
There was a time when people measured themselves by the silences
they broke. Spaces filled with music were hidden but treasured.
Heart Attack in an Orange Garden

To stay alive three times
sounds as if he’s still got one more climb
or fall before he’s done spiraling
as if having fallen off a mountain.
Soon he can relax and unzip at base camp
surrounded by those who could make it.

Sometimes all you need is a good distraction,
or just a decent one, something makeshift—

outside, trees futilely shake off their
rings of time. Maple leaves
face fears of vertigo and seed repression.

Just as you cannot choose when
the cement of the psyche will dry,
and the wind’s whistle gets no say in the discourse
of rain and air pressure to form a riotous storm

you get little say if any at all
in how you get to where you die—
a heart attack in a garden of oranges,
a stroke in a test-drive convertible,
or a stray cat turns rabid and bites you—

the elderly woman behind the aquamarine privacy curtain
hacking deep from her chest, a bloody cough
as we joke and chat around our injured friend’s bed, still shaken
though at least a week had passed.

Her coughs are livid and loud.
At least the hospital TV admits to her
that it’s been a slow news day,
she can have her limelight before
the last leg of her soul shakes off
the weathered jumpsuit stuck at the ankle.
Ancient Advice

The thin red paper cut means I need to start a god-fearing family, the four-day old peels of an orange under the sheets mean it’s time to stop drinking, at least in the morning. The wilting leaves on vines around the garden mean I should see my grandmother today or at least call her. But by now, advice untaken has to have gone stale like the chorus of a classic rock song to its first admirers. It’s high time the symbiosis of taking and giving end. It’s high time we let low moments work themselves out. And though we will all probably be fine there is this yelping question as if coming from the smile and yell-melded mouth of a motivational speaker: how long?! How long before no advice can be remembered, before it evaporates from our soaked heads? How long before any poster or sound-bite that says Stay in School, Fight the good fight, Keep your chin up, and Stay positive or Life will suck are re-envisioned as valued artifacts, things to be dug up and dusted off by once-cynical archaeologists. Then, reluctantly admired by skeptics as families and tourists circle around them on docent tours in national museums, their oohs and ahhs filling the space between the crowds and the marble pedestals each piece of advice stands on. The biggest marvel will be a stone that says Believe now. People will pay to place their fingers in its cold and smooth, curved etchings, running their nails through the grooves as if they were not just reading with hands and touch but wading in the cool wet space where a vast ancient river used to flow to all those who were thirsty for its water and were ready to be reborn in its shallows. The ancient cycle of platitudes disappearing will continue as all of us walk down the steps of museums and after lectures, some feeling enlightened. Others sighing deeply, unimpressed, with nothing better to do than kick a rock the whole walk home until it bounces into a rain gutter, gone.
Ghosts: The Old Rationale

Poltergeists and apparitions are things he clings to, like an old pillow or an unraveled blanket. Lying in bed at night, thinking the room is only getting colder because ghosts are haunting the vent, rattling around inside the central air system made of silver steel and loose bolts.

If the door creaks, or a gust blows branches close enough to scratch a window, he really hopes it is you, ghosts. It must be you keeping him watchful, on edge and half-awake at night. It must've been you flying past his eye so quickly as he awoke. Your shadow’s tail barely there for more than a second.

*—That knock in the closet, it must be you, ghosts but what is your origin? Pedestrians buried under parking lots? Dead children of the hospital? Did you follow me home after my doctor’s appointment? Are those your laughs I’m hearing or are they the echoes of the living? I think the noise of walking I’m hearing must be a restless soldier, haunting the only hall of my home by dripping like an old faucet. But is that you, breathing hot air from the vent above my bedroom door? Is it because I march over your hidden grave every day and pretend not to know it? Do my steps fall heavier than yours? Wailing mothers of insane asylums, with blurred faces made of light, victims of crime, coming through cracks in the walls, all of you are my hope, my reason for waking in the middle of the night. Without you, the implications would wash away my being revealing nothing underneath—”

*—Ghosts, one day he is going to find out what’s really going on. Like you, he may reappear to others to talk. But he may not. Lately, he’s caught himself thinking hard on this, staring into the dark mirror there, worried, curious;— something to unpack there.
An Exchange near Evening

In the shade under your stairwell before sundown
I want to tell you something: someone as unique
as you shouldn’t preoccupy yourself with everyone
on this deceivingly small planet. There are fair reasons to know
lots of people, and fair reasons to know only a few or so.
The reasons to know no one are widely debated.
But is there really a need to know everyone?
That’s a lot of names to forget then remember.
Many are simply going to remain forgotten. In this way,
it’s quite near impossible to know everyone.
Let me just say, it’s the paradox within the word,
that’s wrong. Like the color of sky or a sea,
all other colors are held but not held individually.
Not all the variegated shades and hues are put on display.
For it is the infinitesimal, individual molecules of blue
that sky and sea expel, bursting them outward for our
eyes to see in waves or in between the wisps of clouds.
And though we are not rain or waves, sky or sea,
we do reach out from our bodies from time to time;
hoping to cling to something or someone, not everyone,
but a someone; that you’re-not-just-anyone type of person
who sometimes whispers something good into the curve
of your ear. It’s something not just anyone can say to you.
But it can reverse your blueness into brilliantness as
you have a warm exchange that’ll take us to here, now,
in the shade under your stairwell before sundown.
Distant Signals

Out there,
there is a star with this woman living around its brightness.

There are a lot of stars out there!
But only one of her out there.

Really, it’s her you should care about
as opposed to this star, this simple ball of light.
Even though it is this ball of light
that makes her similes bright and vibrant

like when it shines bright enough
to be her study lamp to study the dark corners, the lost light,

or, like when it flickers and she
can’t come up with a good second part to her simile
about how a star sounds in her galaxy.

It’s not that she’s deaf or unintelligent or something.

She lives in her own universe.
She has no “we” out there to help her.
And as much as she would love to tell us
what this ball of light-sound might sound like,

she’d rather not guess. She’d rather wait
for the star to explode, then be precise.

But the more her time grows closer,
the more she understands there will be

only a great luminous flash—an infinitesimal
singularity of her entire galaxy—and then nothing.

She won’t hear anything. Many others won’t hear anything.
And all the stars in the universe won’t hear anything either.

But they were never listening anyway.