So Much for Sensation

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This thesis titled
So Much for Sensation

by

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ABSTRACT

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So Much for Sensation

Director of Thesis: J. Allyn Rosser

This collection of poems explores modes of sensation, memory, time, family, the extent to which language can be used to communicate, identity, and existence.
DEDICATION

For Jenn
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I must thank Jill Rosser for her unwavering support and for reading and offering insightful feedback on countless versions of the poems herein. I would also like to graciously thank Mark Halliday and Patrick O’Keeffe for their guidance and input.
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INTRODUCTION

PART I.

I leaned against the wall of Fugakyu Japanese restaurant, on Washington Street in Brookline, Massachusetts, beneath a streetlight holding a book in gloved hands. The back of my jacket read, in neat, silver letters, VALET. It was cold but slow, and such nights afforded me the time to read. The book I held contained selected translations from the Austrian poet, Georg Trakl, which my brother had found by chance in a small bookstall during a recent trip to Germany.

At first, I read these poems for distraction (from the cold, from the job) and without understanding them. If no one was around, I read them aloud, or under my breath, in an attempt to absorb their meaning through sound, and in this manner images in the poems began to surface. In Trakl’s best poems, each line constructs an image, each seemingly independent from the one before, but also, simultaneously, each building upon the next to create a more complete image (scene, mood, gestalt) until the stanza ends. Then he begins again, introducing a new circumstance with a new series of images, which do not simply work to assemble a different scene, but circle back to inform and alter the previous one(s). Perhaps my favorite example comes from the sonnet, “An Autumn Evening,” translated from the German by Margitt Lehbert.

The brown village. Something dark and striding
Often appears on walls that stand in fall,
Figures: men and women, the deceased go
To cool chambers to prepare the beds.

Here boys play. Heavy shadows spreading
Over pools of brown manure. Maidens go
Through the damp blue and sometimes look
From eyes that are filled with nocturnal chiming.

For lonely things there is a tavern here.
They tarry patiently beneath dark arches,
Cloaked in golden cloud-banks of tobacco.

But always what is yours is black and near.
In ancient arches’ shade the drunk man reflects
On flocks of birds that left for distant places.

I admire a number of things in these lines. Trakl’s speaker affects a non-presence,
causing his wildly subjective and, at times, synesthetic impressions to stand objectively.
In this poem, he neither uses the first person nor does he attempt to qualify his
descriptions; Trakl feels no need to tell readers how eyes can hold sound or be nocturnal
but instead allows readers to participate in the poem, bringing their own impressions to
his language. While it might be argued that this approach is vague and lazy, Trakl’s choice of language is very precise, which is evident in his creation of mood through color. The manure is of course brown, but it is framed by both the “heavy shadows” and the “damp blue,” helping it to become more than brown: *damp, heavy* and *pooled.* Further, the brown of the manure is an echo of the brown of the village, and in the third stanza the “golden cloud-banks of tobacco,” also contain an inherent brown, sensually drawing together the three stanzas.

The first line of the final stanza is the place where the poem comes closest to being unified. That which is “black and near” brings us back to the first line: “Something dark and striding.” The literal darkness (blackness, shadows) to which this poem alludes evokes the feeling that the poem itself is trying to capture. Daniel Simko’s translation of that antepenultimate line reads, “Yet always, there is the self, black and near.” *Eigne,* which Lehbert translates as “yours” and Simko translates as “self” is commonly translated as “own.” So the line can read fairly literally “But always the own is black and near.” It’s as if Trakl is referring to the inaccessibility of our moods or our selves. Though that which we possess is near, it is also obscured, or at least not articulable; that there is a certain mood that comes from this specific village, with these people, at this time of year. It is a feeling that inhabits death, dark colors, heaviness—loneliness and longing.

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1 Daniel Simko translates this line as, “Look out through eyes filled with sheer night,” an attempt to make sense of the line in a way that Trakl did not seem to intend, as the German “geläuten” is most commonly translated as “ringings” or “peals” in the sense of the sound a bell makes. Therefore, “Nachtgeläuten” literally translates as “nighth-ringings” or “night peals.”
I’ve often tried to employ Trakl’s techniques of evoking mood in my own poetry. In the poem “Jamaica Plain: Autumn 2010,” I attempt to use the autumnal wetness to capture the attitudes and emotions of two wayward young men living in an unfamiliar place. From the speaker’s perspective, whose vantage is retrospective, the period of time, the objects, ideas and people involved are all colored by the wetness. Some of this imagery is explicit: “rain daily,” “wet asphalt,” “ice cubes melting,” “mist.” At other times the speaker applies words that connote moisture to objects or ideas that aren’t inherently wet, “a wash of exhaust,” “the streets steeped,” “stream of umbrellas.” And still at other times the moisture rises from the sound of the words themselves, particularly with the sounds of the “s,” “streets swelled with strangers,” “passing,” “expressed…discussed.” In spite of the dreary wetness, it would not be sufficient to characterize the mood of this poem as melancholy, for there is a certain level of blissful ignorance and a touch of idealism in the two characters, which unravels somewhat as the poem moves forward and as they become absorbed by their environment. This is apparent in the final lines of the poem, “the days became a black car/with someone unknown driving/us through the mist.” They have become part of the scenery, part of the weather, part of the anonymity, part of the bland repetition, from which they believe they are set apart at the beginning of the poem.
Eight months after I stood in the street reading Trakl and parking cars, I left for a two and a half month trip to Spain, during which time I spent about a month in the city of Granada, where Lorca’s family had a house and where he resided for part of the year. Having little money and plenty of time, I spent a few hours almost every day of my stay in the gardens that surrounded his house, which has since been transformed into a museum, picking up pieces of his life: that he believed his best writing was done in this place, that he was also a visual artist and flamenco musician, that he disappeared days before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil war and is thought to have been executed by the right-wing nationalists as a result of his left-leaning politics. More importantly, his poems themselves, especially when dealing with internal struggle, showed me that filtering the world through a personalized speaker can be effective for capturing a universal mood.

I also wrote a good deal during my time in Granada, and, in terms of poetry, read almost exclusively Lorca (my supply of books being limited) and even attempted some of my own ultimately unsuccessful translations. One poem of his that I continually return to is “Vueltas de Paseo” (“After a Walk”), translated by Greg Simon and Steven F. White. It is a small poem and cryptic, and like much of Trakl’s poetry, articulates a mood, more than it seeks to express a particular idea.

Cut down by the sky.
Between shapes moving toward the serpent
and crystal-carving shapes,
I’ll let my hair grow.

With the amputated tree that doesn’t sing
and the child with the blank face of an egg.

With the little animals whose skulls are cracked
and the water, dressed in rags, but with dry feet.

With all the bone-tired, deaf and dumb things
and a butterfly drowned in the inkwell.

Bumping into my own face, different each day.

Cut down by the sky!

Part of what drew me to this poem initially is that it captures well internal strife that
comes with being alone in a foreign place (falling aptly under the section titled “Poems of
Solitude at Columbia University”). Unlike Trakl, Lorca’s speaker does not distance
himself from the images. They are immediate; they would not exist without him. Where
Trakl’s speaker gives the impression of being omnipresent, Lorca’s is tied to specific
moments of observation transforming into feeling. The water is wearing rags because
that is how the speaker understood water in a particular instant and becomes more of a
reflection of how the speaker, himself, perceived the moment. Lorca, here, is more
interested in communicating how the speaker understands his surroundings than
presenting them objectively. He presents his impressions as if his environment were
happening to him instead of around him.

Further, where Trakl is more often interested in simply presenting a mood and
letting the reader fill in what she will, Lorca points the reader in a direction. He at least
answers the question, Why is this moment, this mood significant? The answer, though
maybe not a complete one, comes in the second-to-last line. It becomes clear that the
speaker in this poem feels as if he is stumbling through his days, but the poem is really an
attempt to describe how that stumbling feels to him on this particular day in this
particular moment.

PART III.

When I first arrived in Boston, a place that would make its way into many of my
poems, I discovered early on a large new and used independent bookstore called
Brookline Booksmith. I was browsing in the used section one day and came across The
Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. Having been moved by “Sunday Morning” and
“Thirteen Ways of looking at a Blackbird” (the only two poems of Stevens I was then
aware of), and despite having little money and no current employment, I bought it. I read
the poems often, beginning in the middle with no design. I found that Stevens could
seemingly take anything as a subject and unearth its latent significance. He would take an ordinary object, such as a glass of water and make it appear foreign, theoretical even. Or, in a poem like “On the Road Home,” take speculative theory and place its significance in ordinary situations.

Stevens grounds his poems in a way that neither Trakl nor Lorca does. In the poem “Domination of Black,” he uses the repetition of a single image and applies it to multiple objects, in order to address a feeling of human insignificance in the face of mortality.

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding:
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
In the twilight wind.
They swept over the room,
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks
Down to the ground.
I heard them cry—the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

Out of the window
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks
I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

Immediately Stevens’s speaker is set in place “by the fire,” from which he narrates the poem, whereas Trakl’s speaker is set amorphously about “the brown village” and Lorca’s exists only in his impressions as he observes each scene. However, much like both Lorca and Trakl, Stevens creates a mood out of which can arise a particular feeling about the world, or at least recreates the mood-evocative setting in which the speaker once found himself. Though he does not specify the color of the bushes, the fallen leaves or the hemlocks, the entire poem is imbued with blackness, as the title suggests and with shadow and twilight. That “the heavy hemlocks/Came striding” recalls Trakl’s Something in the first line of “An Autumn Evening,” which if not black is at least “dark and striding.” The word “striding” recurs in the antepenultimate line of Stevens’s poem to describe the night, which immediately precedes the speaker’s assertion that he “felt afraid.” In both poems the word indicates that darkness, mortality and human perception of it, is both unrelenting and inevitable.

While Lorca and Trakl both create a mood by stacking many images upon one another, Stevens, in this poem, repeats relatively few images in order to create a sense of similarity, interconnectedness. The bushes are like the leaves turning, which are like the tails of the peacocks, which are like the leaves leaving the trees, which is, somehow, like the cry of the peacocks, which is like the flames turning in the fire; and then the sound of the fire also like the cry of the peacocks and then back to the leaves, which are in turn like the gathering planets. However, we don’t learn of the speaker’s feelings about these
oddly interconnected images, until the penultimate line, much as in Lorca’s poem above. And it takes only one line—“I felt afraid”—to shift the mood of the entire poem. Up until this point, I read the speaker as being in awe of the natural patterns “repeating themselves;” perhaps because I, as a reader, am in awe of the connections Stevens has succeeding in making. However, that line lands like a blow to the gut and one must think, “of course. The cry of the peacocks. What an eerie and horrifying sound.” The speaker’s fear does not arise directly from the peacock’s cry, but instead he is unsettled by the gathering of the planets, which, to him recalls the “cry of the peacocks.” What is most interesting is that the poem’s images almost seem to appear without the speaker’s consent, as if he is not voluntarily making the connections between the leaves and fire, the hemlocks and peacocks, but instead is just observing and reporting what he sees. It is because these patterns occur to him unwilled, however, that the speaker seems to have lost his sense of control of his own existence, which is central to understanding the poem. The night comes striding in the final stanza as the hemlocks came striding in the first. Both cause him to remember the peacocks and both times it is beyond his control.

PART IV.

I have often tried to imitate these three writers in my own work; to combine and transform their approaches. Trakl’s poems, I think, are effective because their moods are as intriguing as they are familiar. When they work, it is often because they elicit a tip-of-the-tongue sensation. He manages to use language, not only the meaning of the words
but its sounds and connotations, to articulate, albeit cryptically, a feeling, a sense of existing in a particular moment. I do not believe that I have ever succeeded in writing solely a mood poem in the way Trakl does. Among the ones I’ve included in this selection, “Afterlife” probably comes the closest. The perspective is third person and no concrete character appears to further explain or qualify the scene. The images exist for the sake of mood above all else: the trees are yellow and possess doubts, silence floats, the sky is “filed.” Nonetheless, the poem’s premise is in its title, which allows the poem to somewhat more credibly explore its dream-like atmosphere, as readers are informed (or warned) from the beginning that the poem does not operate in a reality that we know. What’s more, the images in this poem don’t interlock in the same way that images do in Trakl’s best poems. Where Trakl builds images that function to inform one another by repetition of color, texture and sensation, the images in “Afterlife” are more disconnected. Like many of Trakl’s poems the stanzas in “Afterlife” do jump without warning to different areas of the same setting without explanation—shifting from a yard, to a porch, to a lake—but they still never completely cohere. Nevertheless, I think that the poem is surprising yet consistent enough in its images—“bodies shift like tides,” “rush of floating silence”—to evoke, perhaps only momentarily, a sense of unreality.

Where I find more success in borrowing from Trakl is in creating mood through individual lines. My favorite example comes from the poem, “This Side of This Day.” The line comes from the final section and reads, “sleep empties us like a theater.” The reason that this line works better than many in “Afterlife” is not only because the image is evocative and surprising and less dreamy, but also because it coheres thematically.
The speaker and his brother contend with sleep and waking throughout the poem. Further, they are often caught between their memories and the present situation, between what’s happening externally and what’s happening internally. Therefore, sleep, in this line, allows them a reprieve from their constant movement, their confusion, but simultaneously suggests the sense of melancholy that comes with being in a public space after it has emptied out, which in turn, I hope, helps not only to situate the mood of the section, but urges readers to reflect back on the poem as a whole.

More often than simply creating mood, I filter images through a (somewhat) tangible character, as Lorca does. In section IV of “At a Loss…,” for example, I use a subjective, abstract image “watching the outside close in on the windows,” in an attempt to convey a specific feeling that the speaker has had. The poem strives, much like Lorca’s “After a Walk,” to convey the emotional landscape of a speaker by using abstract and frequently disparate images. However, unlike Lorca (or Trakl), I am interested in offering an explanation for the speaker’s perspective, or at least what the speaker thinks is contributing to his mood—the deaths of an actor and a singer.

I think where “At A Loss…” finally doesn’t succeed is in its attempt to handle death universally. It makes a motion towards struggling with its implications, but does not ultimately come around to addressing the subject in a way that extends beyond the speaker’s perspective. Instead, it remains too close to the his own emotions, never allowing the poem to fit in a line like Lorca’s, “Bumping into my own face, different each day.” It is in this line that the poem moves beyond simply stating the speaker’s
cryptic impressions, and enables it (the poem) to take on some universal relevance in its expression of a semi-concrete universal emotion.

Of the three poets I’m discussing, Stevens is the one who is best able to distill complex, mentally tortuous concepts into poems that are both moving and approachable. The poem of my own, which I think most closely succeeds in this is “Significance.” It is set in a fairly ordinary situation—washing dishes in a kitchen—much like Stevens’s “at night by the fire.” There are images (oil in the basin, strands of light, polyurethane stars), but they exist primarily in service of the central questions being asked by the poem: “How well do we understand each other through language? How much understanding is necessary in order to feel like we’ve connected with somebody else?” The poem also suggests potential answers: “Maybe it is more fulfilling not to understand exactly what people mean. Maybe connections can be made in spite of a lack of complete understanding.” Generally, my poems resist the impulse to explain, as I often find myself thinking that explanation is somehow too obvious, or that it allows the reader to see the gears of the machine turning (though any poem handled clumsily must contend with this), but in this case the mechanism and the complexity of the ideas seem cloaked in the simplicity of the language.

Many of the poems I have chosen to include here exhibit my shifting thoughts about poetry and my continuing search for how to write it. Like many of the poems themselves these changes have not happened linearly. I frequently jump from one approach to another, or attempt to combine approaches, moving from a narrative-driven section, to an image-driven one, attempt to use haiku-like sparsity and then lapse into a
Ginsbergian overflowing of language, at times within one poem but more often from one to the next. The sense this gives, I’m afraid, is of a fractured, or worse, unfocused body of work. On the other hand, it is my hope that these poems collectively convey what I believe to be the abundant potentials for poetry as an art form.
POEMS
SEPTEMBER: SEASONAL MEMORY

...so the universe retains its shape by repetition: the universe is Time’s body. And how will we perceive this body, how operate on it?...by the means we perceive duration and repetition and change: by Memory

- John Crowley, *Little, Big*

Again, the days grow shorter
by inches and by inches
leaving behind summer
mornings, thick and dense,
as heavy cream.

Hours weigh out minutes,
pulling down eyelids,
dragging pool covers across
the blue vacancy for winter.

The seconds
when it began to hail,
the same ones my mother and I
squandered by measuring
the floral-print fabric to attach to the couch
before I left for Boston.

Seconds re-collecting themselves—

The time we drove
from Maine to Chicago straight
through and the hours were dropped
stones collecting at the bottom
of an old well. The silence settling
in the car adjacent

to the measured silence
in the living room,
my father in his plaid chair,
Hemingway in lap in a wash
of his own smoky breath.
Sickness collecting
in the back of my throat.

Moments re-assembling each other—
The rising pitch of locked tires.
A boy with blonde shaggy hair
running from a house.
The car is gone, but the fawn's eyes
look up at him still blinking.
He grabs its hind legs, dragging it toward
the ditch, leaving a long smear across
the asphalt. The turkey vultures have begun
to gather.

And again into seasons
of lengthening evenings
gathering on the horizon
like over-folded skin
peeling from an old tomato.

Seasons collide by repetition
and by repetition return:
A familiar scent
in a foreign place;
pressed flowers
forgotten in an old book.
STORY OF MY GRANDFATHER (STILL ALIVE)

If I were to write a story about him,
I might begin by showing how the world
has been pushed to a new age.
It's getting older. Streaks of worn
earth like the wrinkles
across his forehead.

He joined when he was sixteen,
and reappeared
three years later selling clothes
at Brooks on Madison and pouring
himself into three-martini lunches;
("hold the vermouth").

Or, maybe I'd recount the time
he came to visit, when I was newly
18 and about to graduate. When we went
to the Weathervane and I ran my
fingers through the grooves in the soft
wood of the chipped table and he ordered
another. "One for the gooks," he said and smiled at something
over my head. The voices
of other patrons seeming to gather
around us, like rain outside the window,
or a brush fire in the backyard.

And maybe I'd defend him saying
his moment was lost beneath ours,
like a trash compactor making room
for new material.
FIRST DAY OF SPRING

After days running together, stringy and gray like oatmeal down a child’s face, I receive a text saying, “65 today, tomorrow 70!” And something in me slides into place, something metallic and satisfying. All at once I’m drinking a kale smoothie, and whistling the theme to The Andy Griffith Show on the side-balcony. The birds sound as if they have nested in the crook of my ear. I think about years of Spring, piled on each other like bedsheets at the top of a closet. I think about bologna sandwiches with mustard, rubbery grass, and the smell of hardened moisture lifted from the earth. I think about the Spring my dad, brother and I drove to Florida to gather my grandmother’s belongings. The three of us, strewn across the coffee-stained bench seat of a Ryder Rental truck. 24 hours from Maine. That night, my brother and I fell asleep to the superfluous voices on the radio, while my father balanced cigarettes between his lips and blew smoke in thin streams out the window. When we arrived, we found the fridge empty aside from Coca-Cola and Baldwin apples. The hutch she had salvaged from a dumpster was missing three panes of glass in its right door. There were diving rings scattered around the yard, and the pool filter was repeatedly coughing and choking, like the sound of a chunk of apple released from a trachea. I think maybe I should take up praying. Or yoga. I think of Spring as an object I can hold in my pocket that clinks against my keys. I think maybe I should forgive Kathy for using our March rent money to buy cocaine.
LOOKING AT A PHOTOGRAPH OF MY COUSIN AND ME AFTER A FRIEND EXPLAINED ABOUT THE GOLDEN RATIO

I wonder if they made you,
“go take a picture with your cousin.”
I don’t remember.
I don’t remember much.
I, the second oldest cousin,
was four and bare-chested;
you, the oldest, thirteen
with a shirt reading, “Earthsaver.”
I copied your expression like, “I don’t give two guffs
about photos but my mom does, so I’ll sit here.”

The porch is there
beneath us,
your Nikes so white and so red.

Then you were gone.
Back to Texas, appearing
only in holiday pictures sporting
a thin new beard.
I imagine you listening to Jimmy Buffet,
smoking pot. The patterns of the world mixing
around a mass of color and light,
like a photograph of traffic at night.
You must have seen the seams,
where the patterns came apart,
irrational or arrational, you followed them:
wood grain, ferns falling
into ferns, veins falling
into branches, fear
falling into laughter,
until you were left with only your shoes,
a gown and the sterile smell of rubbing alcohol.
White walls, needles.
You laced together the beams of the ceiling
and let yourself fall back through nineteen years.

I don’t know.
I don’t know much about it.
THIS SIDE OF THIS DAY

For Ben, my brother

I. On Graduating

It’s superstition, or something close,
a shower of green glass across the hull of an old ship.
What’s the difference between blackened leaves and dirt?
It’s drinking yourself away from the fire’s edge and into the cabin’s electric light.
What’s the difference between dead skin and dust?
It’s the dream-catcher hanging from the rearview of an old VW.

II. You Say

Frost slicks the grass like an aging man’s hair.

III. Things That May Happen, Have Happened

We tote bedrolls like shadows between our shoulder blades.
Sometimes we sleep beneath tarps we carry like small oceans.
Sometimes we sleep beneath tarps we drag behind us like trash bags full of leaves.
When we can’t sleep we find the old VW and talk and smoke through the night.

IV. Addition

What of it?
Memories add up not like first-edition Michener novels in our grandfather’s basement,
but more like a notebook
left in the rain,
the pages becoming each other,
the ink running into itself.

V. You Say

*The snow is pulled around the edges of the field like a blanket.*

VI. Narrative

There was night,
you were fifteen
and talked me into buying a pack of GPC’s.
We smoked and you paced and shouted that
the sky was too low, your fingers, satellites
around your head,
(you said,
*the night clouds look like scrapes across the wall of an empty house*)
none of it needing interpretation.
Five years later, with a backpack
and a blue tarp you walked from a German airport.
The streets were full but the bars were empty
and you thought ‘maybe a beer?’
You woke atop car seats folded into a bed in back
of the old VW. The van was moving
and the music felt as if it were in your eyes,
like rings from the sun.

VII. You Say

*Snow equalizes that which lies beneath it.*

VIII. Interpretation

Our mother says,
*beginning the fourth grade is a big deal.*
Our mother says,
*The world is short and shallow like a poorly drilled well.*
Our father says,
*Well, I don’t know what to tell you...*
Our father says,
your eyes are pennies on the railroad tracks.

IX. Fin/Memory/Begin

Sometimes we sleep beneath a tarp
that feels like sinking below the surface of a lake.
Sometimes we wake up in a different state
and the VW pulls up to the edge
of the field. We climb in with grass-stained pants.
Sometimes we lose consciousness.
Sleep empties us like a theater.
Sometimes the tarps have leaves and we are
dragging them around with our small bodies.
We bang snow from our hats.
Sometimes we sleep while we drive.
The sheets are safe and clean.
HEAVY ON THE BORDERLINE

Jonah looked at his brother and laughed and laid out two lines on the black-oak coffee table.

His brother acquired the farm three years back, after he'd been asked to manage the rig (mostly busted fences and straggly fields).

Jonah flipped on the lamp. His brother smiled.

Further away there was another conversation.

His brother laughed and Jonah laughed again, wiping his nose. "The seasons come in waves," he thought.

Light shifted like a restless dog in the corner of the room, touching the corner of the cover of the *King James Bible*, the torn pages lying fanned out, next to Castaneda's *Teachings*…

His brother looked at him and smiled uneasily. Jonah dragged on a cigarette and listened to his wife laughing in another room.

Individual words had been cut from the pages of each book and pasted to the table. Jonah ran his fingers over them.

His brother nodded his head confidently.

The light steadied itself.

Jonah looked at his brother.

Something was about to change.
THE END OF SOMETHING

Following days collecting like cigarette butts around my feet, I pull the car into the driveway and forget to turn it off. I admit I’ve been too long at a desk in a protracted room with no windows. I’ve been too long in the middle of something I’m forgetting to do. It’s like waking from a dream to realize that I’m still alive. My father calls to tell me he’s been fired and I say, “I’m sorry.” I say, “the guy sounds like an asshole.” I say, “what will you do?” I say, “I’ll call you later.” I wash my hands and leave the water running. I admit I cannot pull the evening from the horizon like a glass from the cupboard. Still, it feels like the end of something. Like grass coming up for air through the softened ground.
TO ABSENCE

You are a myth or a rumor. I’ve never seen you. Whenever I am there you are not. Thinking about you is like trying to carry water in cupped hands across a windy beach. At times, I can almost smell you, almost taste or hear you. Steam rising from a cup of tea. Or, in the morning, when I am left alone in bed, I think I might feel you in the warm imprint on the sheets beside me.

I was sure you’d be there, at Logan when I was bound for Madrid. Jake dropped me off and I thought you might walk me past the baggage handlers, and taxi drivers through the automatic doors. Instead, I imagine you rode back to Allston, in the seat I’d just occupied.

Maybe I can think of you this way: years ago, before the old Kennebec Ice Arena fell into itself, even before they built the bowling alley next door, on Sundays, my father would pull me from bed into cold Maine mornings, where I would choke and cough on my breath. He'd drive us twenty miles to the rink where the locker rooms smelled like sweat and mold and shit from the unflushed toilets in the back. Might you be the menu lost beneath the crumbled snack bar where the kids no longer line up to buy fried dough after the game? Or the scoreboard with its bulbs burnt out? Might you be my father as the puck touches my stick, standing, face against the glass, voice straining across twenty-years, shouting "you got it. You got it, Jave. Go. Go."
WHILE TRAVELING FROM MADRID TO ST. JEAN PIED DE PORT

I.

trees fold into each other
locking fingers.
I lean like I’m waiting
for a drink.
two days inside avoiding the rot
of the mushroom.
two days sleeping in the train
station, watching the doors open and close
like eyelids.
I lean like I’m waiting for a ride.

II.

the desert is dark and narrow
looking through a cardboard tube.
a day begging change
to use the bathroom.
my breath tastes of old beer,
stale and metallic.
a day taking bites from a sword
of bread.

III.

wake to the sound of high-heels.
wake to flowers shouting
from their stalls.
wake to the sound of shadows
buzzing like fluorescent bulbs.
wake to your own face sliding past
for a week.
wake with an orange under your hand.
wake to a throbbing voice—
what’s your name?
who are you?
where are you from?
THE SENSATION OF FRIENDSHIP

The point is focus.
The point is clear and sharp:

(sunlight through laced curtains)
small and scattered across a sparse room
(tack holes on a bare wall)
it becomes too abstract
like wood grain or birthmarks.
Or looking at a photograph of yourself that you can’t remember being taken.

The point is antipathetic.
The point is elusive:

billboards strung outside smudged windows,
wavering and blurring and unclear,
like looking through an unfocused camera lens, or having been drunk the night before.

The point is a siren in the distance which always sounds the same as any siren far away.
The point is I really can’t say,

except to talk about someone I knew.
We met on the border of France and Spain. Later, I visited his home in Italy. I met his parents.
We became friends, which isn’t the same thing as falling in love, but more like soft edges:
mixing nicotine and alcohol.
More like snowdrifts (clear and sharp) on short, windy days.
More like coming to the point, of what I’ve been trying to say.
HOTELS

Hotel Derivation of Saints

When you left
to go back to Providence,
I sat in the yard
with my pockets turned out
staring down at the drooping flowers,
like thousands of dogs’ tongues
on an August afternoon.
I whistled through my teeth
and made some phone calls.
At dusk, I walked down to the interstate
to see if I could bum a ride west.

Hotel of Ashes on the Windowsill

We wake inside,
with rain on the roof,
a familiar hand
on your shoulder
on a crowded street
in a foreign city

Hotel de los Sueños Perdidos

I sip my breakfast
and you slug yours.
(¿Es muy buena, no?)
says a man tipping his glass toward us
from the other end of the bar;
his face only half illuminated by the sun
through the slatted blinds).
Outside the window I see the flowers
dropping their petals, like music
falling from the crackling speakers
overhead. We drink our breakfast
into the day, watching our socks
dry on the line,
icicles along a gutter.
Hotel of Self-Hatred

Buildings drop into the city; cigarette butts into the ashtray. I catch my breath (hands on my knees), after missing the train. The clouds are a vein opened in bathwater. I spend hours and all of my money on cabs, riding from hospital to hospital, saying your name but nobody has heard of you.

Hotel From the East

We hang together in the bus station, scuffing our shoes against the tile. Eventually we open our wallets and you buy me a ticket. The sun above the buildings struggles, for a moment, like a kid backed into a corner, then drops.

Hotel Winter from Another Time

As the sun descends the sky gradually conforms to the city: cut stone finding its pattern.

Hotel of Stale Czech Cigarettes

We sit on the carpet cutting squares of construction paper, and watching a film with close-ups of white flowers. The swatches of light coming through the window, tip their heads at us as the day falls like a stone dropped from a bridge.
Hung together like a street theater troupe,
the snowflakes clump together outside.
Better leave the mattress where it leans,
someone says in English,
though it’ll block the heater.
¿Tienes frio? whispers a neighbor.
Any whisky left? You say,
We’ll leave after we sleep.
The sound turns out with the light
leaving scraps of itself:
agitated murmurs,
the hushed crackle of a man’s cigarette.
JAMAICA PLAIN: AUTUMN OF 2010

Rain daily. Everyday rain.
The apartment with plywood counters. The streets swelled with strangers.
We were adult.
Passing. Everyday passing like a wash of exhaust, car tires singing the wet asphalt.
$1100 monthly. The streets: a stream of umbrellas.
We knew what we were doing.
Darkness nightly. Every night darkness abruptly, like the silence after thunder. The moist sounds of sex and alcohol coming through the vents.
The streets steeped with Spanish.
We discussed the extent to which the sound of traffic keeping us up at night could be expressed through language.
We discussed the way the fading day resembled ice cubes melting in the sink, jobs we let pass by: we resolved to turn off the heat. The streets pooled with voices. Occasionally fireworks or a gunshot at night: we stopped going outside to smoke cigarettes.
The days became a black car with someone unknown driving us through the mist.
NIGHT. WINTER. BOSTON.

We lean against the wall outside
the station like folding chairs
against the wall of an empty auditorium.
You say, *remember that time
in Portland...*
I listen.

I don’t mind the smell of beer
on your breath. I don’t mind
the way the cold collects
on our coats. The night,
with mist coming off the water
by the docks,
beneath the sodium streetlights,
has settled on the color green.

Your gestures follow your words,
like the sound of an ax strike
through the forest.
You say, *business cards, receipts,*
you say, *movie ticket stubs,* and something
about folding the day like a piece of paper
and carrying it in your wallet…
*Or the night like a stepladder
and stash it in the parking garage,* I say.

We miss the last train.
Maybe the snow will hold off
until we get inside.
You say, *what’s the use?*
*Let’s go somewhere else,* you say.
These nights are contiguous.
A horn sounds somewhere in the distance.
A dryer vent blows into the night.
GETTING READY TO GO TO WORK IN THE RAIN

The eyes are the prison,  
the back is turned away.  
A pale shadow lies along  
the sill. I answer  
the phone and take  
a message. The letters  
are slanted and unclear.  
The letters are a boot-print  
on the tile floor.

The eyes take for granted  
the way the water is slanted through  
the screen. The breath  
catches itself. I take a photo  
of the naked room  
and send it to the realtor.

The day is already a handprint  
dragged across  
the window.

Getting to the bus stop,  
beneath the overpass.  
I see the bus. The bus  
misses me. The eyes  
are cloudy. The boots  
are swampy. The graffiti  
illegible.
LOOKING FOR ANGLES

Inside we sit down at a table
as tired and hungry as we ever intend to be.
As if the horizon were propped carelessly against a stool,
the dark spots in the corners of the room wobble.
Outside, the deer come right up to the fence,

Confused.

Expecting fallen crabapples.

The thinning trees are spiders
with stars between them.
Out by the porch,
yellowed grass hunches awkwardly
between the steps.
A terrible moment passes in the dark,

I'm looking out from two sides of myself.

I know it would be wrong to fall from the stairs
onto the shadowed walkway—
I've had enough of the raucous intellect of these seasons.
Where is the satisfaction of correct decisions?
I'm taking myself too seriously.
I'd like to leave again, go back to Florida
and prop myself up at the front of a grocery store.
I might rather have been a photograph
that some man pulls carefully from his breast pocket
a thousand times to show other men
in airports and at dinner parties
and a woman sitting across the table,
Saying, That's him. Saying,
Beautiful and first marriage.
Saying, Kids of his own.

Still, I'm here.

I'll wake up tomorrow and the earth will have inched over
letting the sun hit the house at a different angle,
and slowly the ground will heave
as the seasons stand back to back,
like two kids comparing their growth.
There's no stopping it,
the pupils of the coneflowers
already blackening.
PAVEMENT

In the morning, when the road is wet and the clouds are bowls of pavement, we hear a small voice in the street, asking us to follow the pavement.

When we try to think of the stories we told ourselves when we were younger, we can only ever remember summers, making our way down the dusty pavement.

We sit for awhile cross-legged on the grass, almost empty, wondering what might fill us again. Maybe pavement.

When we enter the kitchen and tell each other about the wet newspapers slipping into themselves on the front lawn, we are thankful for pavement.

It's unsettling and comforting, when we're in airplanes and you say, from up here we might map the world with pavement.

Sometimes we go to a bar with lamps on the tables and sticky wood floors. Sometimes, we find ourselves in the wrong bathroom. Then we find the pavement.

When we're traveling, we often stop and worry about where we're going to sleep, then continue when we remember there's usually pavement.
AT A LOSS (FOR A WHILE AFTER LEARNING THAT PETE SEEGER AND PHILLIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN ARE DEAD)

I.

It shouldn’t matter, really.
You can’t sit down and buy
the songs a cup of coffee,
and look at their knobby knees
protrude from beneath the table,
still somehow adolescent.
The films won’t slide
up the left leg of their pants
to reveal a hair-line scar,
beside the Achilles, and say,
holding up two fingers to demonstrate
space, *That much closer…*
and look at you shaking their heads
with an expression of accepted bafflement.

II.

It should matter maybe—maybe,
or, maybe like scraping paint
off of the side of a house—
maybe just pennies
stuffed into breast pockets,
caught in the cellophane
of a pack of cigarettes—
Or, all too familiar, maybe,
rain collecting
in blocked gutters.

III.

An apple for your thoughts?
Asks a man on the corner
outside the train station extending an empty hand.
Confused. Turn back
the way you’ve come.
*Fuck you, faggot.*
Slow moving. Short thinking.
It shouldn’t matter.  
The city exhales a breath  
of silty garbage.  
The clouds open: a pupil widening  
in the darkness, turning the streets auburn,  
as if flecked with palagonite.

IV.

Days beneath the falling snow.  
Days with breath too short to catch.  
There’s a limp feeling  
to sitting for too many days in an overstuffed red chair  
watching the outside close in on the windows:  
rain collecting in a five-gallon bucket;  
a jar filling with pennies; books (unread)  
stacked on the shelf next to the radio.  
It should matter,  
like the sound that comes at the end of a sentence  
(a low grunt, an escalating “hm,”  
the cracking of knuckles).
THE WASP

I.

A man slides records from cardboard boxes, six of them, medium sized. He pulls a sweatshirt on over his head, considering how to put them in order, as a zipper clinks arrhythmically in the dryer. The heat clicks on. Between the window and screen a dying wasp flutters. The man considers how he came to stand in the middle of this living room and sips from a coffee mug.

II.

On the back deck, a woman shivers, hugging herself, and lights a cigarette. The sun is still only a whisper. She studies the season splayed across the lawn: the leaves hold frost in their palms, the fingers of grass stained nicotine brown. A plane flies low overhead. She tries to imagine its passengers, and, leaning her arms against the railing wonders if any see her.

III.

In the kitchen, the coffee maker sighs. When the woman enters through the back door, the man crouching over the boxes looks up at her. Neither knows what to say. The faint “thling, thling” as if somebody had been tapping on the bathroom window now stops. A breath goes out of the house.
AFTERLIFE

Theory is lost beneath speculation, 
like a body slipping 
under a wave. The yellow trees 
cast doubts over the yard, growing 
long as afternoons in mid-July.

For the porch, there is a man 
who sits in a lawn-chair studying 
the rush of floating silence 
after the wind, 
like jumping head-first into a pool. Pressure 
has nothing to do with it. 
Clouds move in as if the sky 
were filed into a drawer.

During sleep, bodies shift like tides, 
out and into themselves. 
The clouds falter. 
A lake is found 
and a specular reflection beginning 
at its edge. The sun 
moves along beneath the sky. 
Bodies bloated and blue wash ashore, 
coughing and gasping, 
you have it all wrong.
SIGNIFICANCE

While I was washing the dishes
you said, sometimes I feel
like the world rests in every moment.
What did you mean? Maybe that you sensed
the entirety of existence in our kitchen:
the greasy plates in the basin,
oil running into the ocean.
Or, maybe only that you were satisfied
with the course of the evening.
I didn't ask because I wanted to write a poem
about it and about how
outside the window
strands of light fell between the tree's branches
while you spoke.

Later, we sat smoking in fluorescent
lawn chairs on the back porch.
Right now, I said, it seems that my thoughts
could replace time. The thin clouds stripped
the stars of their polyurethane sheen.
What do you mean? you asked.
I may have been thinking
that my thoughts were the stars
themselves and the stars
were eternity. Or, that the night
air was cool and satiating
and I wanted to talk awhile.