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**BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL**

**Vol. 69 N°1 Spring 2019**

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Seth Pennington, design

Richard Ahnert, "What Once Was Not," oil on canvas, 2018

[www.instagram.com/richardahnert](http://www.instagram.com/richardahnert)



An arrow at the bottom of a page indicates the stanza does not break.

**Room Tone**

Each body's presence alters the room tone  
so no one may leave. For twenty seconds  
the soundman wants nothing of us.  
Only that we not be the action, the breath, the story,  
not stir the particular air of this particular room.  
Painful, such necessary stillness.  
How our restless histories rise up, batter  
the throat's confessional.  
The whole business takes forever.  
Someone always coughs or cracks a knuckle,  
shifts weight heel to toe, a sleeve inside a jacket  
rustles and we must begin again  
until our smallest human gestures,  
tilt of head, finger held to lips, fall away.  
We try to be only body, only mass,  
unplayed piano, unstruck bow, rectangle  
of amber rosin gleaming in a bamboo box.  
What frauds we are, how ridiculous our lies,  
how deep and wide our neediness,  
bellows the din inside our heads.  
Our ears fill with hum. Headphones on,  
eyes closed, the soundman looks skyward.  
We become armchair, bowtie, floorboard, cello, shoe.  
Become only what the air plays through.

JENNIFER ATKINSON

## Spiral Leap

A NASA simulation  
in fuchsia: the orbit  
without the orbiter. Or

the spiral you draw on the air  
as you whirl,  
encircled, your sparkler a wand

in your hand. Its fizzy light a line  
that leaps  
when you think to leap,  
that spells your name—

a line that stops,  
tucked back into darkness,

gone, as quick as fun. Used up, bobbed,  
burnt out like the mineral ice

that trails a comet  
across a passage of night.

**If Orion Is**

nothing else it is  
refusal

refusal  
to surrender to  
concede

refusal  
to pretend  
her one voice one  
story could tell history  
as if one  
vision were as  
like another as one  
stroke to the next  
or next

refusal  
to let  
color be dimmed  
or muted  
by narrative  
premise.

She refused  
to let Orion's line  
of stars  
apparent form  
among the random  
distances be "belt"  
be anything less  
than rest  
in the scatter.

She refused  
to let her fiery  
paint re-tell  
the hunter's storied  
swagger and sword  
mere illustration mere  
example of  
"what men are like."



## CHRISTOPHER PHELPS

### Sound Belies

The stuttering toward,  
the frittering away.

The man beside me sleeping,  
breathing gently, by all appearances

resting in peace, a phrase  
I wish could be returned to the living.

There's time to worry about the rest,  
or else there isn't.

The carrying on, the cutting away.  
One way or another,

the souging wind around a tent,  
and miles astray, the sound of lint

not yet formed and husk  
not yet hardened.

The dross from truth to beauty,  
one way as a letter.

The sun somewhere,  
in and out, after and before,

an overthought,  
an underthought,

a body with its own  
problems and pressures,

own fissures of rest  
and restless motion.

One way as a letter at a time,  
that is, the car doors

closing somewhere else,  
the echo here unheard, except

in this winsome wind  
somehow to form

CHRISTOPHER PHELPS

the bearings of a storm,  
say reports, rumors,

narrators about as reliable  
as the several pack of boar

we startled across,  
just past sunset.

And sure we shouted,  
and sure they clod

their heavy hoofs away,  
and sure the gibbous moon

was hours from rising,  
and sure the air was

too still to be a comfort,  
and sure the stars

looked, as ever,  
in such a dark, implausible.

CHRISTOPHER PHELPS

**Demagogue**

A thrash held in the mouth,  
his threshold

hellmouth

fishing for the sweet spot,  
testing for the rot.

Taste testing us,

*vindictiveness* and *vindication*  
came from the same Latin word.

Twice, the same bitter root

cleft to us. In the same absurd,  
susceptible tongue—with its

same fork to choose from.

**A-Tisket, A-Tasket**

***Lancaster County, Virginia, 1855***

*A-tisket A-tasket a brown and yellow basket*

Ol' Pharoah Douglass perched Rosetta in his buggy  
making haste, for she was, they say, in the full act  
and article of parturition; "great with child" was she.

*On the way*

Rosetta bulged and bit she breached until her body preached.  
Eight miles that buggy panted through Virginia woods,  
eight miles Rosetta coiled and spat 'til like a stone

*I dropped it I dropped it*

her baby boy landed in the cool belly of Ol Pharoah's caravan.  
Born alive he wriggled and swooned  
slick with caul and vernix glazed. He wailed, Rosetta cried

and Pharoah whipped that aged mule. "Giddeyup old boy,  
the going's got to get!" But soon, the cord not yet cut  
that tied Rosetta to her son strangled him good and he died.

*A-tisket A-tasket I lost my yellow basket*

Rosetta, faint and almost grey around her lips, she moaned  
and brayed and pushed the afterbirth; she held the warm blue  
body of the boy. Ol' Pharoah pulled his mule to halt.

Rosetta was a hired slave on loan to earn a master's wage,  
belonged to Towles and great with child;  
he'd sent her off to work that day so as not a day to waste.

*And if the good lord don't return it  
Don't know what I'll do.*

## Hetty's Tale

*An enslaved woman in British Jamaica went into premature labor after being stripped naked, tied to a tree, and flogged incessantly by her master with both whip and cow skin. She died a few days later.*

To own it—  
    the cattle prod  
    the cow skin  
        her back, neck, calves  
        the child in her belly

To own it—  
    the fatigue  
    of the beating  
        she kept on  
        taking taking taking

To own it—  
    the rage  
    the loss  
        of the cow the loss  
        of the stillborn child

To own it—  
    the fear  
    of the loss  
        of the cow  
        of the woman who latched it

so loosely  
    it took flight.

**In the Garden: A Tomb**

*When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. —John 19:23*

1.

It hasn't happened to me personally, but I've heard,  
I've read about the ripping of shirts and shorts,  
the narrow alley at the mall, the dark rooms in every house-

boat, city condo, white house. I don't know personally,  
but it seems like there is no soul in the well anymore,  
no little girl that can play alone on a private street.

Though I don't know that room personally, I am careful  
opening the front door at noon when my kids are home—  
whatever you are selling, others are trying too—

(Did you know that—to sell girls like her?) I don't know  
personally, but I know it's not wise to go to the park alone  
with my three young kids; there are not enough hands

to keep them all safe or the others that swing in low secret  
waves, squinting up to the sun. I don't personally know anyone  
who doesn't think about the ripping and the dark room. *If you don't*

*see me*, if you get lost, remember to press the button with the star,  
find a crowd. Look first for a momma, then a *mami*, a papa,  
but never just a man alone. I tell them, knowing this is personal,

knowing that God will at last remain silent for any man  
who's decided to do publicly what he has been thinking privately.  
I don't want you to be in that dark bruised-purple room.

2.

Your first words  
are leaf pirouettes, a ring  
on a glass counter, my best  
and worst—an echo of my ways.

Your words are a silent lonely work, Isaac  
down the road, pulled faster than he can walk.  
And you sway, singing *no, no, no*.

3.

He is your only Son. She is my only daughter.

Am I to believe that this is the trouble  
you meant—this disrobing, stripping  
of before and after? That you would  
be the Father of this kind of pruning  
where there is a field of stones  
to aim for every part of you?  
That you would open and lay bare  
your knees and shoulders and high thigh,  
that you would be willing to allow dirtier nails  
to dig up this earth that you created, this earth  
you created by tearing a hole and speaking into it?

4.

Eve to her son:

I am not worried about my sin  
but yours, your sin that sleeps  
for three years after a faithful  
fifteen—the full snail of you  
that no one knows. Do you know  
what I was doing fifteen years ago?  
I was cradling a city as if it had tiny  
fingers and toes. I was in love  
with the work of my brown hands.  
I loved the law and not the person  
it was supposed to love. Now you,  
without memory of being born, see  
only the full fruit trees. Open your eyes,  
boy: the apple is ripe and ready  
for the shaken eye. You have a memory now,  
so I pray you will know: everything wasn't ours  
to have, to hold, and pursue.

5.

Cain to Abel:

I know I was young, but I was with God walking, talking with him  
in the cool of the day, watching him draw lines, an august gesture, in the damp sand—  
a design for tic-tac-toe or perhaps hangman?—I didn't know

how to play then, with words, with a winner and a loser, with the knowledge  
of good and evil, but I saw a line drawn just for me, pointing me  
toward the flavor of speech, protesting, what she took from the garden  
and what I took for your grave.

6.

When they come, they take the front door first,  
then your whole home—the broken chairs, the wide  
table, your linens. They take the firewood,  
the wedding jewelry, your hand lotion  
and water glasses. But your clothes.  
Your clothes are the last thing they take;  
your clothes are your last earthly possession.

7.

Rebekah: *Why is this happening to me?*

Moses: *Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me?*

Naomi: *Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.*

Saul: *Why have you not answered your servant today?*

Job: *Why have you made me your target?*

Habakkuk: *Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*

Jeremiah: *Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?*

Jesus: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

8.

The Living Water is thirsty? After all the sin, He was thirsty?



9.

Let me be clear: He was naked  
before He died. All but one man  
He called friends left, but the women—  
four of them—stayed at the cross, hoping  
to wrap Him in burial clothes. Did you honor them  
as they honored you? Let me

be clear: you were naked but not alone—  
the women, did they know

that they would die too? Should I trust  
the linen you have made  
for me to wear?

10.

Someone somewhere is teaching me  
how to be vulnerable, to be a julienned  
carrot turned stew, a meatloaf kneaded  
in a blue kitchen. There are buffets, you know,  
where you can find everything on display.  
You can find pineapple and Italian dressing and everyone  
loves it because everything is available in every aisle—  
please say something. Are you hungry? Are you thirsty?  
Say something about my furrowed brow, about my turning  
to the side to sleep now, not on my stomach, not again. The stomach,  
the curl, the turning inside, the disappearing belly, the turning into  
pride the way a man says *I'm tired* or *That's right*.

11.

All day, she has been wailing over what's gone—a ball, a broccoli floret,  
her yellow duck lost on a sidewalk. She's been drinking new cups of trembling.  
Somehow we are getting up and walking and finding new clothes—  
like He did—to wear. Sweet girl, *celebrate*: the old garment is gone,  
but the tomb is empty. Sweet girl, *celebrate*: the linen is on the floor.  
*Celebrate*. The curtain is torn. *Celebrate*. Somewhere

He went and found new clothes, new clothes  
to show us that He is alive, to show how His faithfulness looks  
like summer in Finland  
where darkness doesn't know how long to stay—

12.  
Should I trust this linen,  
this new veil—

There is no other covering—  
you say—Father,  
forgive *me* for the places  
I have sat and known:  
there is no place for you  
to lay your head.  
Father forgive *me*.

I didn't notice  
the splendid place,  
the shelter under  
your straw hat.

Poem with Three Names of God + a Promise to Myself

And in the beginning, I thought my father's hands  
looked like old countries. I thought the dried rivers

running through his palms were all that remained  
of the land he carried with him. I have been making

a list of the promises my favorite things can and can  
not keep. A bridge over the river promises you're not

too heavy. A father promises to eventually be a knot  
of electric seconds between synapses called a memory.

Our spines promise to remember their shape, but some  
promises break. In the beginning God promised light

but this might have meant fire. God promised his name  
but some names break. *Abba* means father, *Elohim*

means something has just been made. A wolf maybe.  
A series of rivers to trap it. A group of fathers leaving

because God told them to. My friends are always reminding  
me how patient God is. Whether in the form of a sixteenth

century church at the bottom of a river in Mexico  
slowly reappearing in the drought season

or as the diamond my grandmother lost at the edge  
of the woods while chopping firewood. How

my mother over and over returned to the tree line  
to search on her knees, as if she were trying to unearth

one of *YHWH's* misplaced names. Maybe a handful of wet soil  
despite a month of no rain. Maybe red fungal spore that somehow

smears gold under the fingernails. Maybe God lost his name  
and whispered sounds until it flew back to him in the dark.

+

One day, strangers will drink water from each other's  
cupped hands. We won't call this a miracle. One day,

we'll build a library that lets you borrow birds  
instead of books. Don't call this place heaven,

because you'll want everyone to feel welcome.  
You can be lost. Like the diamond from a wedding

ring lost to the woods, we'll tell stories about you  
knowing you're somewhere shining. We just

haven't found you yet. One day you'll look  
at your open hands and realize how much country

your father gave you. Your rivers. Your dried deltas.  
Are you listening? Every bridge you've ever crossed

will eventually collapse, heavy with rust. The miracle  
here is that you weren't standing on any of them.

DEDE WILSON

**Insomnia**

I tell you  
    starlings  
ripped my sleep

little wicks  
    above the eaves  
as if a twist

of twigs  
    and bent wind  
poured

over the asphalt night  
    and I  
was the only room

every window open  
    every door  
unlocked.

**What Being in the Army Did**

Things you'd expect.  
Taught me a trigger's weight—

its pull—depends on the gun  
and doesn't matter much

if you practice  
proper follow through.

Follow through here means holding  
the squeeze through the kick

like you won't have to do it again,  
like you'll never have to do it again.

The army taught me torsos  
and tailgates

are useful for gauging distance.  
That swaying grass

or flags or scarves  
can estimate windspeed,

and traveling from an artifact  
to a fundamental constant

requires loss.  
It takes me sixty steps

to walk one hundred meters.  
Assuming my body weight

and leg lengths remain  
roughly constant

and I'm using a compass,  
which means I'm moving

in very straight lines, then sixty  
ten times is a kilometer,

and sixty  
one hundred times is ten.

In France, they have a lump  
of platinum and iridium made in 1879.

They named it Le Grand K,  
and that's how much a kilogram is.

They keep it under glass.  
Won't even touch it wearing gloves

because of however much  
a fingerprint weighs.

They used to have a metal rod,  
but now a meter is how fast light travels

in 1/299,792,458ths  
of a second.

Five liters is still the same  
as a little over a gallon

but any amount of blood looks  
like more blood than it is.

When I say things like that  
my girlfriend asks if I'm proud

of being dangerous.  
I can safely say

I used to be and now at least  
I know the dull machine chunk

of a rifle's sear reset between rounds,  
a sound my father asked about once.

He asked if I knew any words  
that sound like a prison door locking.

Abduction? Deconstruction?  
He shook his head.

So I said maybe there is no word.  
Maybe if there are bars,

describe the feeling  
of the air between them.

If there are keys, the distance  
between the sound of them

touching and the sound  
of them touching the door.

The weight of your days  
approaching that closure—

No, he said,  
there is definitely a word.



**Her Instinct**

*a found poem: Virginia Woolf's The Waves*

She stands among the stealthy and assured  
in a corner of the barnyard.  
There is no light. Dressed as a beast—  
a bird's beak nailed to her,  
speared by the sharp moment—  
her face assumes a dazed futility.  
She is a wild creature now.  
And yet—the alarming wish to be loved.

Note: to write the poems in this series, the poet selects a paragraph of text from a Woolf novel and uses only the words from that paragraph, without repeating or adding words or editing the language for tense or any other consideration.

**Kink**

as in the bent link between words  
    how *sex* leads to *sects* to *sectioned* to

the lobster boiled with lemongrass and bay leaf  
    split on my dinner plate

the way *umami* sounds like a pleasure cry  
    cut loose in the kitchen

praise or don't but allow yourself to open  
    for the fork in the sea urchin's shell

pulsing even after it's split  
    *offal* fried with capers their pretty names

*sweetbreads* concealing glands that fold beneath the fork  
    we hold our breath before the first bite

mean to or not how lovely the percussive *fucks*  
    grunts that mark consumption

heat anything long enough it loses its form  
    flame that coaxes layers of flavor

from collagen and cartilage marrow sloughing  
    from bones halved and broiled

the cooking twine that fastens Sunday's roast  
    shrinking tighter below

the bubbled skin Love how good to feel  
    this craving stretch the rope of me

and you tie it

**Motel**

How dared my parents  
make love across the room  
in that motel where the child I was  
slept on a cot—or where  
they thought that child slept—  
a starless night somewhere  
out West, a thin curtain  
of dark between us,  
then my father's cigarette,  
its roving red tip,  
and the match struck just before  
that exposed their dear, wicked faces.

**I Woke Today Thinking of Chloe Robinson**

You once told me that Chloe Robinson  
got it into her head  
that you wanted to marry her  
and before you knew it, her mother  
had selected Chloe's wedding dress  
and all the bridesmaid dresses  
and was about to order the flowers  
when you had to quick disabuse her  
of that crazy notion. Soon after,  
you married me. So why is it  
that some days I mistake myself  
for Chloe Robinson, though I have never  
even seen her photo. There I'll be,  
walking past a store window  
on a balmy afternoon, and I'll turn  
and say *Hello, Chloe* to my image  
in the glass. And always  
we are wearing a long white gown,  
the most beautiful, translucent veil billows  
out behind, and the look  
on our face, well, it's sad.

SVÅR UPPLÖSNING

My boyfriend broke up with me and he changed  
his profile picture of us to a picture of soup.

He keeps texting me though. *I'm in IKEA*  
*and everything here makes me think of you.*

He wants to have his breakup  
and eat it too. Is he in the section with all the beds?

The food court? The parking lot? Where?  
I have so many questions.

It feels like an accomplishment  
to be so linked to IKEA in likeness.

He misses me, he says. I say  
that's a very thin emotion.

**A Man in an Illinois Toll Booth Called Me a “Beautiful Woman”  
as I Was Driving Away**

and I turned my car around, jumped into  
his small sanctuary, and started a family there  
in that dirty box. We subsist on nickels and rubber  
gloves, snips of song lyrics pouring out of sedan  
windows. *Now, love, love don't come easy. But  
I keep on waiting, anticipating for that soft voice...*

*You're a beautiful woman* he told me, and now we live  
in this toll booth collecting coins. Our seven children  
tap dance on the median. We sleep in a pile like puppies.  
They don't go to school but we don't get in trouble  
because the police are scared of our strange family.  
Windows open and shut. I'm beautiful. We have all this.

**An Appreciation**

This time, I took the window seat.  
Awake alone in the darkened cabin,  
I slid open the shade to look for what you  
had often marveled at—the aurora borealis  
glamorizing the polar route.  
But filling the entire frame instead, the dim  
connect-the-dots of the Big Dipper.  
Big deal. There had to be more!  
I stared a while at the curved handle,  
the squared-off bowl forever ladling  
darkness. So this, I thought, is mine.  
Soup on a cold night: familiar tune  
written on the staff of an empty ocean:  
sleeping question mark of ordinary light.

DMV

To a mixed-up Roman, it might mean  
five hundred five which is about the same  
number as my place in the queue  
among my fellow citizens, whom  
I have come to admire as we wait  
to be questioned and fingerprinted,  
to cover our eyes, first one then the other,  
to read from a diminishing list  
of letters on the wall chart, to sit  
with a cane sliding unnoticed into an aisle,  
to cup the elbow of an elderly parent  
as the line snakes on, and to sigh and shake  
our heads as the photo guy takes  
a coffee break, to state our political parties  
or assert that we have none, to agree  
to donate our organs, or not, to look into  
each other's faces and see that what  
we have agreed to is not always to our liking,  
before our number flashes on the screen.





Even in the dry you can feel the shadows of minnows and shad that used to  
shiver in the aerated water.

And don't a Coke taste as fine right now as tin cup water back at Trevor's well?

It's dark enough in here you could about be there in his no-window pump shack now.

Or be six on a dead-dark road about to light the sparkler in a Nehi bottle.

Or twenty with your eyes closed. Feeling her hair ease in all around your breathing.

Except for that sick that's in your face that shock or crazy or whatnot.

What say we break out the phone about now?

Light up some guitar in here some conspiracy politics. A little sexy stuff a little  
Wrigley Field.

You can forget about that sick sometimes if you just keep scrolling.

You can look up roads you used to drive or friends you used to have.

You can post a photo of a big bright doorhole in a wall of dark.

You can touch here for help if you need to. You can phone home if you have one.

3.  
Shuffling through the bar ditch weeds  
soaked and rank already my head blazing  
needing a ride and afraid to flag one down—

I can see over the fields a haze that's  
come a thousand miles to show us  
half the forest world's on fire.

The shed and silo waver in a blur I once  
believed was only heat. Clouds to the south  
swirl in on clouds circulating

hail and lightning working up their fury.  
A zero's twisting in my belly and I can sense  
what's troubling the minds of two whirlwinds

harrowing the furrows    churning inward  
suffering their smoke of sand    inhaling  
shredded ropes and sacks    but what could ever

satisfy the hole at the eye of what you are?  
The huge one blows on through the fence  
a low roaring stays behind    a tractor's

stopped where the air clears. The glassed-in  
driver has the fierce gasping look  
of a drowner    and I almost call out *Brother!*

But he cuts the engine    opening  
the high door    and I can hear hate radio  
up loud in there as he steps down

all that sound behind him    driving him  
my way like a wind. I can't make out words  
though I understand completely    *Stranger*

*I will shoot you if I need to.* He yells out  
*Can I help you?*    and I don't speak or move  
but I have my thumb out toward the road.

Then a flash is rushing over the weeds  
a truck is idling    and I understand—  
the rumbling's come for me. I turn

and see the dark-haired driver    two huge  
mongrels in the seat beside him. He shouts *Abajo*  
pointing to the empty flatbed. Back there.

The one approaching yells *Can I help you?*  
The driver shouts *¿A dónde vas?* I close my eyes  
feeling the way the oak stick pulls    blurt out *North!*

jump up on the truck bed    and crouch    my back  
to the generator strapped there    the watcher  
standing at the fence a long time as we roll.

4.

Wheat rows shudder by side roads blur and rattle. Anyone  
with teeth and bones would understand the ground  
has had enough of us all the way down  
to the shale.

Sorghum now. A shack with a cow  
half in it. Boot prints leading out survivors  
staying one day's work ahead of famished.

All this brutal  
wind that's worse than useless. How hot can sun get?

Maybe just hum a little and shield our eyes.  
Maybe hold that feed sack on our head unless  
we like it blistered.

Just rattle like that a while.  
In the sack shade. The oat smell. Until it's nigh well  
third grade again.

Nigh well high up on the rumbling  
trailer next to you Ofelia and your brothers.  
Sliding off at your shack's dirt yard. Straightway  
to the roped tire to swing you

a gold girl over the cotton rows.  
Your five brothers grinning skinny and angry  
a shade of gold called brown. We all knew it was wrong  
for a kid to be there white but not why.

Caramel eyes  
quick at math you only stayed in school one season.  
If you're alive I glimpsed you then I see you now  
jarred and blistered with my eyes closed on this rig—

smaller than I was and brighter offering what you had  
hot wind leaves rushing by your quick smile  
and flying hair—

5.

What say we collect ourself here on the underpass's shady side a while?

Lean the oak stick on the concrete and mop our eyes and try to come to terms.

Lost now on the way to where?

Sky with all that high white smoke. Mosquitoes all over us. The ground rumbling.

Far off a couple of dogs. Not half a chance of rubbing their backs or handling  
their ears.

Maybe just duck our head a minute and give it up. Sorry as we are.

Who didn't have the sense to stay in out of a tornado. Who couldn't maintain enough  
wherewithal to feed our own animals.

And climbed up into all this again. The ladder wiped out behind in a crash of glare.

Lost here brother an overpass for a roof and thunderheads swelling in the southerly haze.

Dry lightning then the dim roar. In a while we'll flag another ride and maybe have a bed.

Don't believe it's traffic. Knowing all these houses are riding on a shuddering in the  
ground.

So shaky or not we get up from the shade. The low sun brutal in the haze.

And let our mind give in so the pull and zag have ahold of us. And the tremors.

And from here on find our way by glare and smoke.

How You Should Have Passed, Brother

As  
the  
car

dives  
from  
the

bridge

a  
pen  
will

slide  
out  
of

your  
shirt  
pocket

and  
your  
hair

will  
sit  
back

and  
coins  
and

a  
napkin  
and

a  
note  
about

a  
meeting  
you

missed  
at  
a

taco  
shop  
will

catch  
up  
to

the  
parking  
pass

slipping  
by,  
and

the  
river  
below

will  
be  
a

green  
vein,  
maybe

a  
crooked  
smile.

A  
few  
swallows

will  
have  
banked

up  
the  
canyon

before  
lighting  
in

their  
mud  
nests.

You'll  
be  
impressed

by  
angles,  
by

the  
smell  
your

girlfriend's  
Marlboros  
left

in  
the  
fabric,

by  
the  
pinch

of  
the  
slip-on

shoes  
she  
says

are  
worth  
forty

bucks,  
and  
then

you'll  
sense  
the

green  
river  
below

up  
here  
like

a  
star  
you're

not  
quite  
looking

at,  
and  
your

tongue  
will  
find

its  
roof  
and

the  
ridge  
will

be  
dry,  
hard,

and  
dusty  
like

forest  
road  
washboards

where  
every  
goddam

driver  
has  
jammed

his  
brakes  
to

make  
waves  
that

rattle  
your  
pelvis

and  
you'll  
taste

citrus  
and  
iron.

Your tie will	crawl over your	shoulder, and you'll	think to kill	the motor.
As the river	grows and the	sky narrows, you'll	skip the stages	of grief and
find the car's	slow corrective rotation,	as if it	had tail feathers,	calming.
You'll follow the	lines in your	palm until they	meet at the	guardrail you punctured
over a desert	gorge with a	river as long	as talks with	your dead.
You feel the	sun like an	itch that takes	care of itself,	and though dead,



you are trying	still to find	the perfect rhythm	to catch your	fall, to lure
the sentence you've	been given at	this late moment	into sharp music	made of forms.

CAMERON MCGILL

44.6336° N, 86.2345° W

This is not a nightmare this is how the world looks  
in a forest at night phantasmagoric  
in the canopy There is the sound of sleet ticking on bark  
Bark that quakes like tuning forks  
in the crowns of pine Crowns like the heads of waves  
seen by no one

but my father and me  
in the four o'clock dark He starts in with noises  
of his life A fluency of branches swimming at the window  
means I wake in blue The room a vanity mirror with rain on it

Downstairs he rises with his cough  
His small lamp hung in the dark Who smokes must be  
talking to himself There is a freighter skulking full of ore  
pounding sleep-knots to Charlevoix

This distant country called me home  
Why have I only brought it adjectives

I try to sleep  
She is not next to me I cannot put my hand on her back  
I have only a stormful of trees in the dark

**One Significant Landscape #2**

In this, Cézanne as always  
pulls the eye to the heart  
of verdant hills and orange slate  
slopes of houses, square shades  
tongued by brush.

Something red draws here, in the blue  
formal middle of our lives.  
We know the midpoint  
of the eye, the oracular optic disk, is a locus

of insight without sight. For the hill,  
those figures, that story,  
this love, are  
only sometimes as substantial  
as the image. Appleyness

supplants apples, and slips  
from the frame. The slope  
slides to wrinkle, the mind to weight.

**Tournament Hopeful**

My interest in the sport is only theoretical.  
Like a Roman augur counting crows that turn  
in a vermillion sunrise stripped of the colors of astonishment,  
who never looks past number and direction to the art of chance  
or to the way bright wings lift when they beat out the sound  
of passing, who never wonders, awestruck,  
where they're going, or why, or sees more than the future  
in the flash and flutter of the straight-flying dawn, every year

I fill out my bracket using the A.P. stats as guide  
and watch your team win or lose. What do I know  
about this court with its tall kings, its royal advisors?  
See how they surge together at the time-out, huddling  
and praying and flaring out like a ten-armed hallelujah  
exploding into motion? And in the air, like fate,  
a three-point shot swishes true to the basket and the world  
erupts in applause. I duly notch my bracket but thrill  
when your crow's feet lift with surprise. Love,  
you have me good arc and all net.

**Dear Anne Spencer**

From cherry blossom season, I write  
to inform you the parties are still  
stupid here. Last night I succumbed  
to cocktails at the book-strewn home  
of a fund-raising politician, trim as a  
tulip, who set out platters of shrimp:  
pink fingers, crooked. High-ceilinged rooms  
were jammed with old men gone septic  
under buttons, under powdery cheeks.  
Over tea in your garden, I'd say more,  
but for now let's admit I was rude,  
escaping through a racket of  
invisible birds, finding a friendlier  
table, nibbling syllables of cheese  
with women in mourning, whose  
joints are painfully inflamed.  
I'm tired, Mrs. Spencer, of meanness  
and NDAs. I wish I could bring by  
some birdsong, or the rose-scented  
argument of what I've been reading,  
this rainy heap of magazines.  
One hopes for a breeze, impolite,  
rowdy, to rip the gorgeous petals  
down. One hopes to be it. I'd pen  
you a note from that town in pretty tatters.  
Until then I am admiringly  
yours, a flock of cedar waxwings,  
a bristle of spears that would rather,  
some unsecretive day, be lush  
and ant-starred peonies. Sincerely.

**Resistance**

If you tell me what you're selling I'll tell you what I'm not buying, or sticking in, or in between meals, or pushing inside—this is the way I feel about Formica, is it even a surface? If you don't try it you're not going to like it, I'm tired of trying. My skin's sagging a little, as if it's snagged on something—I don't think my appetite is a problem, I mean everybody has one, by the time you figure out what you need you don't even need it anymore. Smoothing my ribs, making sure the cage is closed, covering my face and looking through the cracks in my fingers, don't you dare. I'm thinking *that's enough for now*, and *enough is enough*, as far as the dependent variables are concerned I'm going to act as if I've never even heard of them—it's kind of like medical resistance where you don't even get something in the first place. Of course it's easier to fix what isn't broken. Breathing deeply, pulling the air into my body, as if resistance is a kind of resuscitation—difficult at first, then it's difficult not to. Sometimes I don't even feel like it: indifference is also a form of resistance. When something is broken you fix it, if it keeps breaking you don't even bother.

**“Mr. Hipp, ca. 1940”: The Rain Does the Plow**

That’s what they used to say—water  
will follow the work. This might’ve made some measure of sense

at the time. If you plant, the crop starts to make its own kind of moisture.  
Dew on the leaves gathers

the clouds while you sit in a pasture  
sucking on sugar cubes with the sun not on the rise but giving you a break, trusting

in the lay of the land and phony scripture made up by farm salesmen. One way  
or another, we got to the plains

by following a lie. Like lie down  
in that ditch, a tornado of thorny sand is on the way. Lie down on any cot,

that’s your bed. Get settled. Lie down too long and you might be dead.  
A lie follows any flat surface.

Flat like clapboard with only its little notches. Flat like Kansas.

Flat my credit at the Union Bank and flat my pocketbook in winter.

**Note:** This poem is part of a larger work on the photographs and life of Arkansas  
portrait photographer Mike Disfarmer, 1884-1959.

**Diorama (the uses of the girl and the location of the 45 buildings)**

First: the poorest. Put them downwind. In the smoke. By the water.

Then the finest. Put them up on the bluff,  
great grey houses that know like sleeping owls.

In the center, spiraling: the furnace,  
the factory, the queen they're feeding, the tooth  
they're taking out of the earth's head.  
Picture a building in which you tie down the darkness  
and work on it with enormous tools.

Next: the opera house, the red and gold.  
The sashes and the beautiful, disembodied voice.  
Announcements on a wall tell people what's going to happen:  
singing, singing, and singing.

Then the boarding house, the school, the church, the store.

Then back to the houses. Establish the various ways  
people can see one another.

A town is one pronunciation of an old word. You say it  
by opening your door.

At the third house from the end of the road:  
a girl running to the front door and telling the charred man inside  
to get out as fast as he can.

The charred man inside the house saying no.  
He makes a good life for himself out of smoke,  
and he gets to start from scratch every day.

In the man's yard, a stump. When it stops smoldering,  
a girl sitting down on the stump.

A girl drawing the town in the dirt and tapping her stick.  
What she needs to remember: a few feelings to stuff in their hearts  
and where the buildings were.



**Diorama (woman given all the children)**

Perhaps they're pretending to be weak minded?  
Perhaps they've been pounded into an allegory like spikes?

Seven children walk into a snow-dead forest, and six crows fly out.

Maybe the children are horses or stools for mounting horses?  
I've stood on them.  
I've brushed the quivering dumbness of their coats.

They look like they've committed crimes in other states—  
vegetable, liquid.

Perhaps they're the bars of a jail or the main points in a treaty? If you see them,  
tell them to come home.  
It's time for supper.

They're so crudely emblematic:  
this one is fire, this one water, here earth, here semen.  
Don't forget stupidity, stomach acid, and steel. I suppose, though,  
these are the materials one needs to build a strong ship.

Where do you think they're planning to go?

Perhaps I become topographical and elaborate  
when they require an odyssey to endure?  
Perhaps I become an arrow for them to spin  
when there's only one way out?

I'm living in someone's house, folding linens,  
a long row of children damp and pupal beside me in bed each night.  
Before I can close my eyes, I'm supposed to mend three dresses  
and attend a long series of negotiations. Instead I consent immediately  
to your destruction, roll over, and blow out the light.

**Diorama (woman who watches the forest fill with twinkling lights)**

Slowly, the town recovered, and we all became women. The only things left were white pines and our long streaks of sweat.

We gladly joined the slash marks and counting of the forest.

Oh, the repetitive, vertical things that we did at night. The unreportable events. Oh, the choral activity characteristic of young women.

We worked hard and surrounded the object. We picked it up and sang to it, no matter what it was: laundry tub, baby, husband, secret, map, bone.

**Diorama (back to the factory)**

A quick tour: this is the blowing house.

Now as you prepare to exit:

Now as you calculate the best way to the surface:

be grateful.

Be grateful and remember the buildings:  
the buildings aren't resting.

Not resting:  
is a factory.

Not resting, the buildings:  
have assumed responsibility for reproduction.  
We were necessary

to create a great race of houses.  
We were necessary:

you cannot roll up the map  
of all the forthcoming houses.  
You cannot:

you can go out or up. Yes, that's why  
we started to stack them.

In each of our rooms:  
we undo one thing done by the people who lived here before us.  
Thus the machine eats our hearts.

Thus we feed it our hearts.  
Thus it becomes our large, indestructible heart.

Now as you triangulate the exit:  
Now as you prepare to scuttle on the wet surface:  
Now as you remember the buildings:

remember also how few bodies are left.  
If you must inflict the blow:

you must also pivot to absorb it.

SARAH BURKE

Dear Desert

I expected a wasteland of dead rock  
whittled to dust. Instead I found you

alive, brimming with purple  
wisps of lupine, cactus tips flaming

like candles and thought *Fuck you.*  
All you needed to offer up a flower

was a white sheet of sand,  
a seed, a thimble of rain. Fuck

every failure, every trail of blood  
I thought might lead to a daughter,

a son. Under your sky I poured whiskey  
into my cider, devoured raw fish,

smoked meat, soft cheese, all the fruits  
I wanted so badly to be forbidden.

**March**

As we forget to buy cat food  
As the bed must be soaked from the open window  
As we're blowing our noses  
into our bare hands  
As the mythic farm father crossing some icebound lake  
hears it crack under his horse  
We hurry in the door, pour cubes of dry bread stuffing  
in the cat's bowl like an apology and see  
how the wind has stilled  
And do not close the window  
And step over the hungry cat  
As the father, scarf floating in a slow S, arms  
upraised, looks above him at the ice  
re-forming, thinking *Oh, it's spring*

**Time is a Country**

Which busted house with its back to the road is your house,  
in which acre of logged-out woods with which exact, particular  
lost Ford pickups gone to moss?

Or

When you get up naked to bring me water in bed, in which  
sleepy voice do you say *Time is a country* or which dead  
European philosopher do you quote for me to forget, or  
Tell me

Which forests of the earth will you stride over as a long-legg'd giant,  
so foxes small as caterpillars can see you and run?

The Lesson

She said *He is everywhere,*  
*even inside you.* I felt  
my bones bow, my organs  
crowd with words  
whispered from within.  
The thin black dog  
leaning against a white fence,  
the seamstress pricking  
her finger, my father sleeping  
at the end of the pew—  
inside us all, He listened,  
a black phone with a stiff dial  
connecting one mind  
to the next. I listened to  
the circuits of my body  
jam with sounds, then  
a stillness I feared.  
*Eve left the garden,*  
she said. *Eve disobeyed,*  
*and He marched her*  
*through gates leading*  
*nowhere,* and nowhere  
stretches. He knew  
before she covered  
herself in leaves, before  
the core swarmed with bees.  
He lived inside her  
and felt the thought form.

**Hemingway**  
*after Szymborska*

Devil, here we have lunatics.  
                    Devil, here we get ill.  
Here we get Christmas cards  
from cigarette companies and famous chefs  
                    leave skilletts in their wills.  
We've got a lot to look at, Devil,  
                    and ropes to pull them closed.  
Devil, there is watercolor,  
there is soot and dice and once, Devil,  
I swear we made the clothes ourselves.  
Devil, they were intricate.  
                    Devil, it looms.  
Devil, and spearmint, and trestles, and Devil,  
                    we were all pretty once the docks slid  
                            like ghosts through walls into the rising tide  
                            and then higher still to the porches.  
Once we fastened our lips together with buttons.  
                    Devil, we'll break a truce.  
Devil, there are pacifiers and thermometers.  
                    Devil, we bruise.  
                    There are bruises everywhere.  
Devil, what about the wires?  
What about the pile of burnt clothes and the patch  
of bent grass where someone walked out of the woods?  
Devil, we burrow deep into the core.  
                    Devil, we shine.  
When the glass breaks, we sweep.  
                    Devil, when it cuts us, we bleed.  
Devil, sometimes we stain and stand, like you,  
one boot pressed to the head of something slain.  
Like you, a thirsty one, mouth to the hose.  
                    Like you, Devil, sipping from the dark glass, thirsty.  
                    And then, like you, sipping from the barrel.



MICHAEL HURLEY

His father

broke the legs off an antique telephone table  
to make a Ouija board in the basement.

He carved each letter  
carefully.

Told me

*To pluralize Jesus,*

*one must know*

*what he is getting into.*

Curled rinds

sprang from the cold beak  
of his claw hammer.

*Even to sin he said*

*is a matter of faith.*

**Anointed**

My father tilts the vial of holy oil over his finger  
& smears it across the forehead of my best friend's mother.

I imagine the cells inside her breasts as dark archangels  
rioting in the streets of heaven. On Monday,

she cancels her chemo. Belief  
ripens in her chest. She dies.



I never did tell my friend about the time I walked in on my father  
refilling the vial with our Dollar General vegetable oil. I want to be

cynical, but the light glowed through the oil's gold  
as it glugged into the vial & over his hand.



Remember after the revival?  
We found your mom in the kitchen.

Your dad was kissing her,  
dancing her around the silence.

The thick yellow light oiled  
her tightly stitched skin.

When they caught us staring,  
they pulled apart into two

separate blushes, his hand  
falling back from her breast.

**Mud**

When I muttered the word I'd learned at school, my mom said, "Your name's mud, mister" & washed my mouth out with soap. On my tongue the cuss did taste like mud:

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* Sunday, the boy who taught me was hauled to church by his mother. The old ladies whispered how his dad had dragged the family name through the mud.

My mom says a name means something, says the Christian meaning of my name is *Strong in Victory*, but the baby names book says *bill covered in broomweed*. Only mud

seeped up no matter how deep I dug in our backyard—never the unnamed bones of another time, never those rumored diamonds. Deep under my fingernails: mud.

Pastor once said if we conquer our bodies God will give us a new name carved into a clean white stone. The boy wrestled me in my Sunday clothes into the mud

but never thought to lay a hand in the hollow of my hip. I'd have thrown the fight, climbed the ladder to heaven or hell, taken my true name. Come summer, dried mud

caked my legs after my baptism in the lake. "You know," my mom said, "we almost called you..." She held the name like an unborn child, picking absently at the mud.

Still Life with Escaped [Lamb]

In the beginning, a small [ ]  
split open upon an altar, blood  
spilled from a body still  
warm. This is how some men worship,  
a father's blade against the neck of a boy,  
his son a vessel of obedient sin.

How else to cleanse sin  
except to slaughter the [ ]?  
Gush-warm as the thigh of a boy.  
A body bathed in another's blood  
learns how to properly worship,  
shudders, gasps, then goes still.

What remains still  
is the question of where sin  
seeps when the body ceases worship,  
how even what is ruined becomes [ ]  
when cleansed in blood,  
a field of limb-wrecked boys.

The splatter of a boy  
becomes bloodborne warship.  
He grasps your head like a sacrificial [ ].  
You clean your face & still  
taste the sour tart of sin,  
metallic, almost like blood.

A new song enters the blood,  
cleanses the body in antithesis to worship.  
How miraculous the factory of sin,  
what slips in through the boy's  
mouth, corrupts every organ until stilled.  
An altar without a [ ].

**My Mother's Aubade Says My Father is a Clown**

Little as I am, I too, know the devil. He goes into my mother's room with the same rough hands as my father's, the same boots tracking soiled dirt into her room, the same voice that tilts around like a typhoon overlooking a city from a hill. Little as I am, I know the devil's voice. Every night, I imagine the devil straddled over an angel like an emperor leading a war against the dead. Every night my prayer is a mollusk. Every morning, a hull of monologue left on my mother's tongue. Little as I am, I too know the angel. She goes into my father's room with hands that have tended gardens like my mother's, her feet silent as the fall of a feather on snow, her lips parched with a hymn that opens like a bird's wings. Every night, I wait for the devil's boots to knock the tiles of the house as if summoning ghosts, then kneel as my mother's cries run off the walls to my room without her legs. Every night, I sob into the body of an imagined god, hoping my mouth will burst into sunlight, hoping my mother will sing a new aubade while she tends the garden in the morning, when my father is away counting birds with his teeth: clown!

House of Gold

When my father lost his job, we thanked God it wasn't his heart.  
My mother became the greatest philosopher  
*don't worry when there is life there's hope* she'd say  
in the shady stillness of air between teeth & tongue.  
We survived on his gleanings for three years  
before the story took the shape of a tragedy:  
*garri is gold, if you have it thank God*  
*your mates are under the bridge, on the highways you hear?*  
My mother's voice has lost the bird in it & often  
I think this is the first war I get conscripted into.  
Years have rolled past our faces. My father is a rusty silence.  
I can barely recognize him.  
In the morning, we have *garri* & cubes of Louis sugar.  
At noon, my mother gets fried fish on credit  
& breaks them amongst us like Jesus  
though there never were any baskets of remains, no bread,  
we eat it with *garri*.  
We just gather on the balcony & swallow all the silence  
until we're filled with fireflies & sleep.  
In school, I tell the bullies I have a house of gold.  
When they look puzzled, my heart pirouettes  
& when they ask how, I say *garri is gold* & they laugh  
until the urge to run leaves my heart & sticks to my feet.  
My cheeks burn & I remember the last time they burned  
I was holding a spade full of sand over father's lifeless body,  
the priest's voice at the edge of the grave drying away in the sun.

**A Foundation Laid on Which the Wall Had Not Yet Been Built**

—we were held up/we held on  
apprehended little enough—  
the parenthetical children,  
the set aside children suspended in the bridgeless border,  
remember:  
kept long and far: preserved  
for later  
use: the father's seed-grown garden beyond the chain-  
link fence, his pride of white roses weighing  
down the white  
trellis in his doorway  
arch (*point of eternal return*): I remember, I  
can't remember ever  
being at home: late last  
night I lay awake and listened in bed to the recorded unheard  
-of  
children, wailing, playing  
on an endless loop, a taste  
of perfect hell:  
world stalled  
between event and news of event: watched  
world taking your tender place behind glass:  
far-fetched  
world, we were told:  
there are many rooms in the father's house:

**Temptation to Say Words that Cause Pain**

told world:

“there are many rooms in my father’s house”: words  
meant for many, not for all, the novice master said  
to his school of young monks:

wind  
turned the pages of the priest’s left-open books  
(his hands

cupping the air to make

rooms): I was among those other

kids

told to write: *I will not lie to my teacher, I would  
not lie:*

in the master’s story the room is a word

to be

filled, fulfilled:

truthfully

... in the locked cathedral, God  
died: image of hands flailing in total darkness in a red

sea,

and the sea was the father,

and the red was the dead

son,

and the hands were gesticulations of the void

in a void: one

day the children showed up at the gate, having left behind

all belongings: the flailing, so many:

words lost on me:



**We Splurge on a Glass of Wine at the Top of the World Trade Center**

The glasses we hold, tall, with thin stems. The Chardonnay, crisp.  
And the towers

that yearn up beneath us, ours.  
Ours, the curve of Long Island fading

into the Atlantic's cocktail-blues.  
Steak tartare, coconut shrimp: half our grocery budget before us, plated.

Giddy, I grow  
into our luxury. As the tower sways slightly in wind, weights sunk deep

in the rocks of Manhattan  
make delicate adjustments as you turn

and say *Another glass?*  
Now lights flicker on, votives in the haze of the Bronx.

Bridges light up, airy necklaces strung across the East River. I want  
another glass. Want

to bring the planet to my mouth,  
tip it, and drink. It's ours, the height of the tower, the lengthening shadow

it flings. Somewhere, someone  
is adding up the bill.





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