

University of Nevada, Reno

Stuck Passing Through

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in
English

by

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Abstract

Stuck Passing Through is a collection of poems hoping for, contemplating, and ultimately expressing gratitude through various experiences of personal, familial, and religious loss. Divided into three sections, this thesis follows a speaker struggling to accept the deconstruction of former beliefs and values and construct new foundations.

“Honey, sometimes life gets so mixed up,
you might not get the gist
until you done gone through something
and wonder where you been.”

—Gladys Chambers: Dec. 15, 1929-August 25, 2016

Dedicated to the above, Gladys Williams (March 28, 1925—March 3, 2016), and S.M.T

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I believe

in a poetry ever-dying never dead:
an entropic lyric narrative; rivers
and dams; oceans shaping lands;
sanding another stain; making
the bed again; soul: animal
magnetism; inevitable waste;
marriage...arguments; self-
forgetfulness; Beethoven deaf;
Milton blind, dictating *Paradise
Lost* from dreams; freedom through
self-containment; reality beyond;
body; thoughts; defining presence;
definition: objective restriction; the
actual; getting carried away; being
wrong; getting corrected; giving;
taking part; transformation; time:
privilege; light; intangible seas;
oceans full of nothing; love: death:
mysterious dive; unfathomable

Scaphism (The Boats)

"...Thou hast not brought us into a land that flouted with milk and honey, or given us inheritance of fields and vineyards: wilt thou put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up." — Numbers 16:14

is a word which stems from a Greek root meaning "anything scooped or hollowed out," in this case a form of Persian torture. Carved from a family tree, I was born in the grief between God and the devil parting, Israel's thirteen branches carving my own space in nature until nameless anti-bolts struck from an unknowing cloud and I splintered. Between two stacked boats closed by bolts the living bodies lay, covered except for holes exposing arms, legs, and face to direct sunlight. They were fed a mix of milk and honey unto nausea. Refusal meant their eyes were stabbed. I could no longer see these things as sweet as King Solomon did, body parts smeared with the mix, inviting flies, wasps, bees— whatever could fester skin. Distension brought defecation, a buildup over days that went on this way and bred worms, or "creeping things and vermin, sprung

from the rotten corruption
of excrement” only to re-enter
the bowels and consume
the body’s insides until death.

So long I forded through oh
so protective waters, guided
by the lamps of Abraham,
Isaac, and Jacob, but silence
drowned them and I moved on
into it, not knowing if I’d ever see
again. But what of the tree is left
of me I now use as kindling
for a fire that burns to live,
and the longer I tread this
valley blind, the more
I see through it.

Born Again

I was born through my mother's belly at 12:34 in the morning,
a time I notice whenever I shouldn't be awake for it.

I was born again sitting in a family salad bowl, my head christened
a couple days after my skin had been washed of my mother's blood.

I was born again, again, next to a child I remember only as an image,
our fathers waiting in the attic of the church behind a pastoral painting

of a sunset, the backdrop for an immersive baptismal font
where the pastor dipped us under in the name of the trinity;

a door opened where the sun was, and we passed through.
My father hugged me, gave me a new set of clothes

while I shook blue next to a heater, soaked in a white cloak.
Changing, I felt warmer naked. At 12 or 13 I fell in the ocean

pulling up an anchor and began drowning between two boats
clapping together like hands holding me down as I drank salt.

Throwing my hands up when I saw light,
someone else's father pulled me up

and I heard a congregation cheer,
taking my desperation as testament.

Eternal Flames

—If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And when I am for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?—Hillel the Elder

There are fires that never cease all over this altar of earth. A whole mountain burns coal through sandstone underground in New South Wales, discolored from 6,000 years of the persistent heat underneath, smoke seeping out. I let my other self out once daylight abandons the horizon so he can grey our skin. Each night he mines our nadir, leaves me for night's descant cant I cannot chant, burning to remove me from the inside out with smoke and liquid spirits while I search the sky for our zenith. In Azerbaijan, or "The land of fire," another mount found accidentally in the 1950s burns natural gas on the Absheron Peninsula so widespread, nearby streams can light by match and are known as "burning springs" where locals take curative baths. Our highs and lows move when we do, and we are never stable; our self-destruction is a cleanse. Iraq's Baba Gurgur, or "Father of eternal fire," has burned a 40-meter diameter over 2,500 years: some believe this the blaze Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were tossed in by King Nebuchadnezzar for refusing to worship his golden image—Who have I been when I thought I knew myself if I don't know who I am now?—only for them to walk its heart unscathed, accompanied by a fourth figure the King feared an angel. People evacuated Centralia, PA not long after a coal mine fire was noticed May 27, 1962, its starting source unknown. Now they have no Z.I.P. code and PA Route 61 has a portion named The Graffiti Highway. Do I run to, or from my selves? The "Door to Hell," is in Turkmenistan. Geologists ignited a natural gas field in 1971 to prevent the spread of methane, expecting burn-off in weeks which have stretched four decades, the field collapsed into a crater 30-meters deep. I oscillate back and forth like two-faced Janus, one face looking back, the other toward the future, thoughts of who I've been and becoming kept embedded within one befuddled head exploring heart-carved corridors for that door behind which burns an eternal flame for the taking, finding only chimeras of his making at each end, so far as the I has been—so far. Priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth, kept a sacred flame in Rome which meant protection if lit, disfavor if out. In 394 A.D. Christian emperor Theodosius I ordered the flame extinguished, and Vesta's worshippers disbanded. Mt. Chimaera of Lycia was the place rumors say chimeras were born, which "...burned undying flames day and night." Historians believe the modern-day

location Yanartas, Turkey, where flames still emerge from the earth.

Going Downstream

I drown what I create so I can fish for it later,
or as of late let the current take, let myself believe
I'll find what I've given washed up on shore
when I need it, though I've walked the beach
and there's nothing but me, sand and debris.

Is faith a fish dodging bait, or the hope
to escape once caught on the line?
What about one's will causes
the body to move with the spine?

The only times I've felt aligned
have been when I've let water take me
while I float directionless.

Living speechless between
me and my becoming,
mum is my possible Self.
The logos beneath the words
murmurs. I could stand to sit a while.

The Fever

It's more exciting right before the levy
is pulled, cards turned, or dice settles—
the anticipation of what may become
more of a rush because of the risk
than what is lost or won. It feels great

to win but most want to play again,
and losing often creates the drive to play;
but if you can't part with something you've lost,
what you had lingers in the mind, and will be
missing from whatever else you try to win.

An unwanted fish too hooked
can't be pried off, wastes
the fishing pole's line,
the fisherman's time, its own
water-bound breath in the air.

Gelatin

I can't flashback, can't remember the moment in this photo, a dated projection of my younger self, a product of light, an object milked out onto culled, collagen-derived gelatinous paper, from horns, hooves, cattle bones, chickens, pigs, fish, horses, those proteins and peptides which bind all animals, us included, who eat it in various marshmallow, gummy snack, candy-corn, and Jell-O forms, who mold it into slides for shading theatre stage colors, knocking to stay synchronized swimmer's hairs, LSD squares called "windowpanes," shells for pharmaceuticals as well as paint, blocks for testing ammunition impact, sticks with fuses which, when lit (thank it even for the match head grafted on its strip) would blow us apart in ways no stitch or glue (it too) can fix. How we are conceived carries as much potential for bonds as for destruction.

Does my mind simply digest information my body processes, or is my identity an essence digesting the processes of my mind? This portrait is at least five years old and aging, but I barely remember who I am in it, on the porch at my first apartment in worn-down shoes, huge carbon fiber glasses, holding a mug, a replica of one I had before but not the same, not unlike the marrow in my hands now compared to that of the version of me holding this mug, toasting whoever is behind the fish eye lens.

I've Only Seen Shooting Stars When You've Been Around

At twilight we will lie down a bed of sands,
making stars of sky jealous of those stars of land,
while wind and moon reflection allow both to catch
your skin, an imprint left, so when we leave
our impression stands, until those same powers
get rid of the evidence, the vanishing we go
through to get us where we're going.

NON-

I. A SEQUITUR

"It's not about tactics or messaging. It's about something simpler and much more important: Donald Trump is not of sound mind."—Stephen F. Hayes, July 22, 2016, *The Weekly Standard*

Nature makes no leap not
of sound mind, not- withstanding
any contrary statutes
bound by negated presence
over time—

like, dislike or disaster
meaning torn
asunder utterly on its own path

which is not dissimilar
to most matter
in the universe

less than a tenth
of what we know directly visible,

unobservable existence
inferred by gravitational pull,
the curve of nature
a fragmented state

like Greco-Roman statues
with their missing heads
arms legs what little is left
on display
in museums
because of when and where
they came from, and the body
they once represented

from a new democracy
whose politics provided
sculptors
space

time

means to play with
and materials to chip

not against what there is to work with
but to carve a block of rock
into a man, and show
their shared essence.

2. PERSONA NON-GRATA

It is not pleasing to be-
come the unwelcomed person.

I have become
my own unwelcomed person

who has become our diplomatic
representative: an in-

dispensable position, requisite con-
dition, or cause to go without?
There are disputes.

3. NOT

Nature acts
for heat, creates
 its own
 entropy.

We are salt
of the earth, screwing
what we need to turn into
food into compost we can't use.

Transubstantiate us into the void
we already are but with more, and different,
into a reason to keep from "put em'up, put em'up."

4. THAT NATURE MAKES NO LEAP

a requisite
 not of sound mind:
 photons know no age
 yet if absorbed they die; over time
 all rules change. No movement
 can be framed, eyes always reacting

 to the speed of light,
 which shows things as they are
 changed by their changing
 surroundings. No limits

unless you make them, life
 breathes blameless—we create
 so many problems, compelled
 to cause nonsense.

5. NOT OF SOUND MIND

We belong, are everyone
 else's invocation,

divine head
 contemplative,

 survival urges only substantial
 when satisfied, needs influenced

by likes, to think myself inside
 when I set limits
 to what I let in. It's all
 disproportionate,

that which I have to give
 against what I can
 against what I get
 against what Self
 against what
 against

6. PREFIXED NOTIONS

Nature makes no
 leap not of sound
 mind, withstanding
an expression or vote

 of dissent
 or disapproval.

 A person not welcome
is not an indispensable condition,

but a cause without which
there is no disputing
 our negation,
 refusal, failure.

Excluded persons
 indicate our lack,
 our absence.

II

Seeing Through Dark Glass

"For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." -1st Corinthians 13:12

I sense your absence even hiking in the snow
through an abandoned tunnel up Donner Pass,
where an eye is painted with a rainbow out of
its iris in a wave along the wall from a box
containing a question mark at one edge
where sunlight and the tunnel's darkness

blend. I walk in, feel the crevices from dynamite
when the summit was hollowed out
to lay tracks that have since been removed.
I stop in the middle of the tunnel,
glad to see I can't see
my hand in front of my face
as I stand between two separated stills
of sunlight defining these ends
or entrances of the same path.

I'll love you all my days and I'm coming for you
has started to look more like words on a page
there for the sake of language rather than
the light behind your heart pumping the veins
of your arm, leading to your hand turning
the pen, spreading the ink that expressed them.

I woke one night after you said we were done
with my arm in a spasm, a phantom curl
over the space where you would've been.

Another night I woke to leg cramps;
one was on the other like one
thought the other was you.

It's dry here. I've been drinking too much.
Last night I was restless, got up to the sink
and chugged a glass of water. You always left
yourself a glass of water by the bed.

Walking down the hallway with the lights
off, I stopped when I saw my body refracting
amorphous onto the mirror perverse, lean,
warped, careening—and all the other ways
I don't want to see myself—then I looked away
and saw the world in the same ways.

Blinds and Screens

I've been taking pictures of the sun's light
going down my bedroom wall. Shadows
from the blinds cause bars. I like sunsets
this way, not the sky charred by smoke
from wildfires hundreds of miles away
blowing through the city as it has been.
I've lived here four months without rain.
I should burn that pile of drafts. I could
go ahead and burn those dead branches
hanging in my doorway too, obstructing
my view of Reno's casinos. I mean mountains.

∞

I will be exposed by the computer in my class.
I will try to login, and it will deny me with a note:
I won't work for you because I'm not supposed to.

My teaching is like the goose shit littered prolific
on the sidewalk by the man-made pond next to
the class windows; all over the place. But
none of the students seem bothered.

∞

I'm stacking used filters along the windowsill
since I threw away my ashtray because I was
quitting, since moving 3,000 miles from people
who watch monsoons from porch swings
and heal wounds by soaking in the ocean's salt
is supposed to make it easy to start over, away
from the city my parents grew up in and never left,
the city my sister won't leave, where you are now,
leaving downtown on occasion to visit Memaw
and Mimi, who I fear will die while I'm here
without poems glorifying their lives even after
Alzheimer's and senility made them forget
times already lost between us all. I can't

find a balance of contact with you. I'm in

your room while in my living room through
computer camera while prepping a lesson plan,
or on FaceTime while walking to class, little
to share except anxieties. I'd reach out,
but there's a screen in the way.

I Know You Are, but What Am I?

If I get old I will have the furriest ears!
 The rims a coat of peach fuzz, lobes
 with little beards. My nose hairs
 will connect below my septum
 as a hair-ring the child I've forgotten
 I was will use as a swing, pushing off
 the philtrum, releasing wordless secrets
 from the angel who sealed them there
 when I grew enough in the womb
 the world pushed me out into itself.
 My eyebrows will reveal the one line
 I have always hidden by plucked revision,
 so thick a caterpillar could walk across
 when I stand. My head hairs will leave
 like light, leaving hair on my chin
 as compensation. I'll look like
 a method actor for Nosferatu,
 a Werewolf, and The Hunchback
 combined—who would call me lover
 then, if not bound by obligation?

∞

I'm losing my desire for marriage—
 but when I hold you, your arm falls
 inside mine, and I feel a rhythm
 I can't own alone, or know
 as wholly yours. It hums
 through me in your presence.
 I want to witness the world
 and tuck in with you nightly,
 not knowing who is resting
 whose head on the nape
 of the other's neck.

Seeing Light

Visit a palm reader. If you could look
into their eyes when they're reading
your hand, you could see the future too,
but you can't look through your hand
while they're reading to catch their faces.

As a kid I dreamed I walked into
the kitchen and saw my dad spill coffee
then cuss, unusual for him. When I woke up
I walked into the kitchen, saw my dad spill coffee

then cuss. I felt like I'd passed through some tunnel
I didn't know existed until I was on the other side.
I walked back into my room and waited until I heard
the front door click to go pour a bowl of cereal.

My aunt Phyllis went on slamming the door
to Memaw's hospice room, saying she heard
the death-rattle in her breath, upsetting the family
until death did come—then she called it prophetic.

I've got a story about a dream I always tell my friends
they won't believe, while my aunt can keep believing
she's a clairvoyant, which true or not, certainly
influenced the memory of Memaw's death.

Light doesn't bend without interference,
has no business being anything other than
the straightest line. But something is in the air.
You're not *not* here by yourself, and I can say that
without any religion or religious affiliation.

A Visitation

A day or two before she entered hospice,
about two months ago now, Memaw,

my mom's mother, who passed away today,
said she saw Mimi, my dad's mother, who passed

six months ago, sitting on a sofa across from her
in my aunt Linda's living room. Linda walked by

and heard Memaw say *Goin' to say hi to Gladys
aren't you? She's come to visit.* Linda went into

the room not too thrown off at first since
both grandmother's forenames were Gladys,

coincidentally. Linda figured Memaw, as in
her mother Gladys Chambers, was referring

to herself in third person—she'd been senile
for some time. But when Linda sat down

and realized she was apparently sitting next
to someone she didn't see, Gladys Williams,

she had to call my mother. I want a form
I'll never have to shed. Are we always

becoming what we're headed toward,
our destination right behind us?

Make me a concrete abstraction

mixed as the water with the air at a waterfall's edge,
as a whole slew of felled trees on their shadows,
as the imprint of leaves on a sidewalk and the light
of stars seen in the night until they are taken
from our eyes by the sun. I do not wish attainment
of this desire for its sake alone, but also to know
why I desire to know, and to know my place.
What if Angels pull souls from funeral pyres
with songs so high you'd need to be a dog
to hear them singing over whistling logs?

Visiting Mimi's Grave

Since she requested
I stay in Reno
while she passed,

I went straight
from the airport for a visit
on my first trip back home,

having decided it was best
to go ahead and say
my peace, or whatever

I was supposed to say.
When I got to the graveyard
I paced, wondering how

much time I would need,
until I walked through
the mausoleum gate

to the marble block
behind which her body
rots, and knocked.

With no response,
I'd already had my fill
of emptiness, a whole

lifetime of our first and last
one-sided conversation,
accepting we'd never

 speak again.

Good Mourning

— *To Mimi*

A mourning dove cooed
outside my window

the exact same
time each morning

two weeks straight
after you'd passed

and in my letter
for your funeral

(more to please
those in attendance

than assuage
my own pain)

I mentioned you
looking upon all

us from afar;
but when I consider

the you of you within
me I see you looking

from not far at all—
and we both know

why the mourning
dove called.

Cracks in the Sidewalk

When I arrived in Reno
I walked along the river
to see the drought's still flow.

Sunflowers bend down to spread seed.

I still tried to avoid cracks in the sidewalk
like a kid, "step on a crack, break your momma's back,"
—someone also told me I might fall to hell.
Walking to the riverbank I saw a couple fucking
under bushes. Falling sunlight hit the river's dry rocks
I quickly tip-toed across so they wouldn't know I'd seen.
As I sat beside the river I watched the sun go down,
ducks quacking over where to go together.

Sunflowers follow the day's orbit
without eyes and look down each night.

Moonlight walked with me across the water
back to my apartment. A homeless man gestured
with his hands for a cigarette, which I silently gave.
We parted ways. What is avoided grows wider unseen.

Sunflowers dip over the cracks in the sidewalk.

The cracks in the sidewalk spread their seeds.

I Quit Smoking for Nine Months the Day After We First Were Us

Scent all over
touch first time
lights off meet
under sheets
the moon aches
body heat radiates
each running down
connecting under
want massage my
hand moves your
hand responds

freezing fire
charged blood
pulsing slip
in night
dark ocean
blue world
pulls here
no place this
hands lightly
kiss lean arch
reach neurons
sun flower
light heaves
constellation

At the Griffith Observatory

I overheard the passing
of a piece of knowledge

that forever changed
a child's perspective

as a man at a telescope
on the lawn explained

the sun is a star in
no uncertain terms

sun star
star sun

to drive home
the association

my friends and I
walking away

the lines too long
too late in the day

our stomachs empty
my heartbeat saying

we are little galaxies
and the whole universe

black holes connecting
each to the other

A World of His Own, or Spaghettification

spaghettification —*n.* *Physics, Astronomy*: the theoretical stretching of an object as it encounters extreme differences in gravitational forces, especially those associated with a black hole.

What is a body of work? Does it breathe? Can it turn in on itself
 and still stop? When you get older, drinks that make you thirsty
 sound nice. Everyone spends enough time looking at themselves
 in the mirror they end up wanting more than what they see,
 so more self-representations stand before them in their fashion.
 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word wrote itself out. All
 us letters were written into the Word and are constantly rewritten.
 I laugh at the hat-hair my mirage wears. Please bear with me.
 If all pride is a bad thing, all who move have much to confess.
 There's a line out the door for a confession booth
 with Silence as a priest, who listens until there's nothing
 except the sound of steps as one leaves
 and someone else comes in. Thy will be done.
 Thy work in progress. Words come to life. Break
 mirrors. You can only be so many times
 before you need to be your own. If you made time
 for yourself, there'd be enough left over
 for passing. You don't have to roll the dice. You're free
 to come or leave, though there's an elephant in the room.
 I can make it go if you want. You can too.
 But I'd like you to stay. You're such a character.

Mirror Image

We have the same suitcase but
I haven't been where you've been

and I'm only going where I'm going—
maybe even the same place you recently departed

but not where you've been and when. Nothing
the matter and nobody behind me; I've been

there before, and before, and before.
Baggage. Everything starts over

all the time, I have it and I don't.
Apocalyptic birth, my twisted mirror

full of dirt. My use of tools. I see the news
in what I noose and what I nurse.

What if I were to see you, myself,
not the image? Take a leap or stay.

I'm your doppelganger. I promise
I don't see anything differently.

But I won't know your story
because I'm looking for what

you're telling. I'm more than
willing to do what I can. Help.

A Weak Excuse to Someone Who Deserves an Apology

When she wasn't home
I let myself in and ended up

sniffing her underwear for reasons
I don't understand other than

I was pubescent. In Terrence Malick's
The Tree of Life, a boy sneaks into

a neighbor's empty house, to their daughter's
room, picking up her brush and hairclip,

examining himself in her vanity mirror
before he opens a drawer and pulls out

a lacy slip, holding it up by the straps,
laying it down on her bed like a holy relic,

then carries it around until he feels remorse
for the theft or, Lord knows, something more

suggestive...hard to tell, but the camera cuts
to him hiding the slip under some fallen wood

near the neighborhood creek, then changing
his mind—threads now balled in his hand,

confident no one sees, slipping it downstream,
as a sacrifice to free his new and frenzied thoughts,

this new maturity against primal nature, trying
to pretend what happened didn't, oh the loss

of innocence; or I convinced myself
of this in hopes of self-reconciliation.

∞

Another show starts: a woman with a man.
We know they belong to others, not each other,

but tonight they're fooling around on the end
of a yacht. He bends her over the rail, her dress
like flower petals plucked to decide no or yes,

and all the hearts she has broken come spilling out
as blue as veins, falling to the water, covering

their reflection. When he drops his pants and unbuttons
his shirt, all the hearts he has broken spill onto hers,

then their own hearts fall too, broken over
what they're doing before they're even through,

causing them all to sink. A dead body emerges,
the woman screams, the theme song starts on cue.

Pierre Girieud's *Nu au bas noir*, 1905

"...and He placed at the East of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life."—Genesis 3:22-24 (KJV)

What grief possesses this downcast
person naked and leaning listlessly
without any sign of a shadow?
A wing's haunches spread
far right, lighter shaded
than the edges. Same on left.
Hair is up or hanging off
the canvas, a red figure
supports the head. Waiting
for what's next, rest, or death?
Leaning unsteady against
angel, or demon? The mark
of a tree brands the hip. Fig
leaf covers privates. A flaming
sword burns round the door.

III

Take

these pictures of yourself from me
trying to keep your memory.
I shouldn't have them,
however loud my urge
to slowly shred you
of your you's and all senses
before we'd be underneath
each other's skin again. Look
how yes your yes meeting
sunlight. I smell you fresh
from sleep. Cut or keep
your hair however you
wish. Share your face.
Freckles, scarred neck. Lips.
Nudged cheeks. Found lost,
my mouth agape. A word
for you and I would use it,
cover the world's closing sight,
night a slow fall of snow and ashes.
I will find you by your echoes along
canyon walls, burn my wounds to heal
yours, make myself a fire for your warmth
until the morning that already was.

Among Barren Trees

I can hear wind rush leaves
off trees surrounding this

cabin you rented us for
my 26th birthday weekend.

I see you draw me as we
sit on a pile of dead leaves

among barren trees
while I tap a fallen trunk

with a branch I broke
and your eyes look at me

wondering what's missing.
I sit there silent, head down.

I see us frozen through
memory's broken windows

as we warm the night
walls against the cold.

On my 28th birthday

Brien and I walked Bloomington,
 Indiana, where he'd just moved.
 The Eskenazi Art Museum was closed;
 Turzuak Cafe was too. No comedian
 would be at The Comedy Attic
 for a couple more days. What once was
 a record store now looked like a good place
 for a show—the only sign of its history
 the logos along the windows. I saw

a famous poet and failed to say “Ross
 Gay! It's my birthday! I know you!
 Take a picture with me! Teach me
 your ways! Let's start a friendship
 that lasts forever!” We made slight
 eye contact and moved on. Then

Brien decided it was a good idea to use
 a Starbucks gift card someone gave him.
 We waited twenty minutes for two coffees.
 Brien tossed his after a couple sips.
 I objectively agreed it was nasty,
 but at that point I was holding on

to anything that would remind me
 I was there, like Frank O'Hara's
Meditations in an Emergency I found
 at *The Book Corner* on a shelf next to
 Ross Gay books. I almost bought
 the *I Ching* but Brien said he had a copy
 at his place we could read, so we did.

Tossing three coins six times sent me to
 a page that read: *he who comes too late
 to share in union must suffer as one who
 finds locked doors.* After many failed tries
 we did our American duty and moved on
 to something else more quickly satisfying.

We looked up a movie only to discover

there weren't any local showings.
It was like a lesson in negative theology,
all these denials guiding us to
where we'd started, Brien's
new home, where he and his
wife Katie let me in, gave me
shelter, food, a cake with candles
to blow out, then on to *Bluetip*
Billiards where we played for hours.
Once they'd gone to bed I tried
to sneak out for a smoke, but
I would've had to jolt the door-jam
and didn't want to wake them.

To Anonymous Person, Ruiner of Note

The thing about writing "I ♥U" on the window is that
the time it takes to think of it and remember to switch I and U
so any hapless student who sees the gesture from the outside
can rest assured a window loves them, or a ghost, or a loved one,
or any ol' what-have-you because they just see this sign
made by erasing accumulated dead skin cells,
these particles of the past attached to the glass
into a living language for live cells to take in—well,
that's plenty of time to've gone ahead and smudged it in,
and plenty of time to get busted if one is like me, and deliberated
too long before just writing when the idea came.

I wanted just as bad for me to be someone outside
who could've seen it on their way to a final, or
after turning a paper in they think stinks, or
having a generally shit day, looking for anything
to make it better. But you had to come waltzing in on me
mid-sentence, half a heart and I bolting around the corner then
back to get my water bottle on the steps, our paths crossing,
your eyebrow raised, my awkward laugh like nothing was up
before you exited, and I wiped out what I'd started.

I Dream of You Having a Night of Sleep Alone in Charleston

You were lying between your bedposts
 your head on your hands on your pillows
 looking out the window the rain outside
 hiding the night under heavy sheets
 like you went under your own
 communing union with an ocean
 falling from the sky
 by crying
 under your covers
 eyes like
 dying plasma
 shining
 light
 to darkness
 what is
 the universe
 without stars?
 Your dead skin
 mingled with the dust of others
 or stuff brought into your room
 kicked up when you made your bed
 and floated into your field of vision
 thanks to daylight through your window—
 puddles in the heat steam on the concrete
 and every grass blade breathes petrichor

If This Is the End, I Want to Go Out

We unhinged in a patch woods
above Nevada City, unlike
when we'd been a part of the same skin.

Your eyes I saw welled as I came down
from a climb back where we'd been
after we realized I'd left my eyes.

The first time we'd woven ourselves
in the wilderness, we left objects
as relics to consecrate the place;
this time we had no intention
to leave anything but each other.

I retrieved my eyes and put them back
into my sockets, but under sunglasses
so you couldn't see them welling

a wish for more time
before I died to you
and you moved on.

Another

I. The Dream

Vitamin D
 UV streaming
 straight into our skin
 through a cloudless
 atmosphere, the wind
 moves salt in the air
 and things seem okay.

She is reading in a chair,
 sunglasses on, hair down.

I'm in the water
 right in sight, but
 waist-high distance—

that kind of line
 parents can't draw
 in the sand but
 children understand
 they cannot pass—

I look down at my hands
 and they're playing with the surface,
 waving around like swaying algae
 pushing foam like they have any control,
 as if they could make the ocean
 do anything.

How many times
 must I sit attached to a drink
 as if it's a part of me,
 so I can do nothing
 but think I'm participating
 actively with life?

In this copper salt water
 muck and light reflection
 something taupe comes up

and stops at my side. I grip
 a dorsal fin, and holes
 my fingers find.

Then I'm walking to shore,
 guided by a hammerhead
 held by gouged eye-
 sockets, already dead,
 the body floating,

and this lack of resistance
 on the way out of the water,
 and a stillness once on shore

save for the mouth
 which opens on its own
 revealing large, sharp teeth
 which speak to me
 through appearance
 though I won't know
 what they say.

Bringing the body
 I walk to tell her
 what has happened,
 so if she can believe it
 I know I can ask what to do
 and what she thinks—

but before I can say anything
 she looks up from her book,
 stands, says she knows,
 was reading it, actually.

2. **The Waking**

I so often feel someone else
 with me even when I know
 I'm the only one

and I continue to talk
 to those I love

long after
they've moved on:

an equal lack of ability
to communicate
with whatever created
the first germ

and makes breath
in my lungs possible

as it would be
to have a conversation
with smoke.

I know no God in knowledge
or spirit, don't know why
sometimes I call out
like answers will arrive,

and I may never find out
where my thoughts
come from or go.

Go to Sleep (Little Man Being Erased)

1. Go to Sleep

If only I could figure out why
 I keep waking with a bloody nose
 without a doctor. If I could only
 make those bills disappear so I
 could get my truck fixed, so I
 could pass the smog test, so I
 could register where I live, so I
 can legally drive. If only I could
 get up earlier. If I could only go
 to bed at a decent hour. If only
 I could be on time. If I could only
 have more free time. If only I could
 pass more time in the present. If I
 could only *open up! Open up!*
 I wonder what would happen
 if I fell asleep when I went to bed
 and didn't need prescriptions,
 acupuncture, homeopathy,
 meditation, hypnosis, therapy,
 prayer, incense, candles, oils,
 flower essences, mindfulness,
 as many vitamins as an old man.
 If only I was saved like I thought
 I was when I was a kid. If I could
 only be enlightened. I should've
 taken the first flight available
 when she called in hysterics
 and sent me that picture
 of her face in the ambulance
 battered from the accident.
 I never should've left. I haven't
 learned from leaving besides this.

2. (Little Man Being Erased)

I have at least one stone in each kidney.
Could be twins, doctor says.
 I should call my family and friends!

How old am I again? Most say too young
for this. I can hear every digestion
in my G.I. tract—and wipe enough
blood the doctor doesn't joke about it.
After a couple weeks I learn to check
the blood I am, mixed with the stuff of me
I waste on a thin sheet of tree
I contaminate water with
before flushing down pipes
leading to everyone else's shit.
I should teach myself piano! But
I can't even pop this damn zit
on the back of my neck. I can
reach, but with where it is
I can't get any leverage.
All I can do is wait and hope
it doesn't get too big. I've tried
everything except another's fingers.

Where Does Help Come From?

“I cover myself with the blood of Christ, taking authority over all demons of the night.”—variation of the “Pleading the Blood of Jesus” prayer for protection

I am frozen
 between reality
 and REM

watching this
 shaman apparition
 float over the bed

black mane
 swarming around
 a grey decayed head

 colorless pupils
 burning inside
 colorless irises

 a white robe covering
 Nothing over
 Why God—

 her neck brace
 holds her
 smashed face

while street-smear'd
 sockets shroud her
 green, scraped eyes

praising crepuscular rays—
 from hospital lights
 shining undefined

 on nosebleeds
 anointing her
 busted cheeks

Catoptromancy

—*n.* “divination by means of a mirror,” 1610s, from Latinized comb. form of Greek *katoptron* “mirror”

Wanting out my skin, I shave my face
repeatedly. A candle lit, a wish
to escape the predicament, I ask
the mirror if I can accept the end

of us. A Valkyrie appears, her heavy fur
draped around the toilet. “*The fat lady*,”
as she says she prefers—wears nothing
but candlelight. She is an aura in the tub

singing *Ave Maria*. I blow out the wick,
say *Bloody Mary* three times like this
antiquated ritual, many women hoping
to see their future husband or death,

depending on fortune. *Bloody Mary*,
like kids during a sleepover hoping
to scare themselves into seeing the queen
of miscarriages and executions covered in blood,

out for massacre. *Bloody Mary*. I search the dark
for anything but my own composition, while
the fat lady reaches for Valhalla, singing
her last note so hard my reflection cracks.

A Knockout Wedding

I would've preferred you punch me in the face
when we met in Louisiana instead of waiting
states removed to tell your daughter
you disapproved of me. You could've done it
when I was smoking out that hive at the bank
of your pond where your puppy drops in;
you could've done it while I waded next to you,
pushing logs so the turtles you bought
could have a spot to sun, all while you sat on your john-
boat. Would've been funny to see if I could maintain
composure, keep the needle straight in the hip
and finish the job, if you'd done it
when I gave your horse a shot since he was sick.
I could've used a shot, though, during dinner
at your family land, Valhalla—you and your son
having a casual conversation about whether or not
God allows those of other religions into heaven,
you feeling open in your old age, as you said,
to think maybe Muslims too, with Christians.
I thought of interjecting, but aside from no one else
getting a word in except your wife on occasion,
all I could think was for this conversation to even happen
assumptions were presumed, laid down on a foundation
I don't find nearly as stable, and even if the trinity
is true, even if there's a heaven, so a hell too,
and we're all judged by what we say and do,
bound by a root of faith while on this earth,

what was this conversation worth? For me
not a thing other than choosing not to
pick that fight, especially sitting on your turf
named after the Norse “hall of the slain,”
where warriors who died valiantly hung
out until another battle. It was worth waiting
for a better moment to discuss those matters,
meanwhile do everything else I could to earn
your favor, and make sure you knew I was serious
about your daughter. You didn’t have to jab
at us months from your son’s wedding,
even with others telling you there was no need
to take her on that walk and have that talk,
so the pressure would silently accrue. You did your part
in disuniting us when she uninvited me because of you.

Charlotte to Philadelphia

It's worth the time you sacrifice,
 the price you pay for affordability,
 this train delayed at every stop
 since you came onboard,
 and it's only getting later.

Who needs an app
 explaining how far
 you are from where you believe
 you're supposed to be because
 you have a ticket with a time
 picked by a computer or some person
 when the elderly woman across the table
 puts down her Jehovah's Witness magazine
 it seems she's underlined entirely to show you
Let anyone that wishes take life's water free—
 and so she can check her watch at each station,
 providing free updates, no requests necessary

from you or the middle-aged woman behind her
 you started undressing with your brain
 but now love more fully-clothed,

and the young woman at the adjacent table
 who has been on both trains you've been on
 so far this trip, spending the same time in Charlotte,
 making you wonder when she's supposed to depart,
 if you're supposed to talk, how much coincidence
 must happen until it is considered prescience,

if meant to be is meant to be something our minds decide
 or something guided by decisions, if you should see this
 coincidence as a sign, nothing, or a little bit of both
 plus too much of yourself: the dilemma.

The elderly woman delay app has now been replaced
 by a large man after a stretch-break you took at a stop,
 feeling the train's movement still in your legs.

Eventually the middle-aged woman you did not see naked

and the young woman you either weren't attracted to
or found too attractive to talk to are also gone—

but not before the train is pulled off and halted,
side-tracked, everyone watching a train
that would've collided pass beside,
had the conductor unknown to you
not known and planned this miss.

LA to Sacramento

I asked you for your presence to keep me from feeling incomplete:
no wonder you left.

Who would want to be themselves and someone else for someone else
unless they saw themselves in everything

and nothing, in between and outward, complete
completely fractured?

You said we were not meant to be, a view of destiny
left waiting for a sign, which if not realized but desired enough

one can convince themselves of—their own epiphany as truth
fitting the dream of self.

You said you weren't what I needed, which I took to mean
I wasn't in your thoughts when you thought of a future

"us," picking the idea of a person over me incarnate, choosing
to focus on what lies ahead instead of the present happening

now, just as I have written this from premises, thoughts
I have entertained, which can flee quick

as they came, quick as they made me think
myself away from being where I am,

on a bus headed to a station
where we've been before.

In the Sacramento Greyhound Station

We were here a mere three months ago.
There's the table where we sat with the chair bent back
like it's weighed down by the past.

When we saw it, we thought someone real big
must've been really relaxed, but the time separating
now and then has changed my perception.

Then the chair sat between us filled
with our absence. I stare, compare all the obvious reasons
this visit is different: you're not here, we're not together,

this road trip was financially ignorant
and I'm on the last leg still unable to distract myself
from the separation—so I sit down in the chair,

get settled, lean back and close my eyes.
I occupy this space for nothing but my weight
while I wait for the bus to Reno and meditate,

letting every thought of the past pass
to a state where all I sense is
what I sense with my senses.

Driving by Old Family Land

That we saw Memaw's land
heading home from Gatlinburg
is up to how you define sight:
however you see it, we're all liars.

The land was somewhere between
two subdivisions on an unmarked path
far from the highway. We rode back-
and-forth, my father growing more
impatient at each U-turn. In theory

we must've seen it, my sister looking
left while I looked right, all eyes peeled
for a yellow and white real estate sign.
But we couldn't tell the land apart, and
my father's fingers gripping the wheel
harder each call from Memaw. After
the third call he left the backroad.

She wanted to know if we walked it,
but we were already headed home
when my mother told her no—
it was too cold, but the land
was beautiful. *Beautiful.*
That she used that word
made my stomach churn.
Beautiful is not beautiful
and this was just a lie.

All the trees looked the same.
We got lost looking for a sign.

First Night Sober, Again

How real
dreams feel
bothers me
 kissing her
the first time
in two years
 then she is not
with me
at a fast-food joint
 where a friend
plays piano
and non-descript
people sing along.

I awake groaning
detached from my body
in a guest bed
where I feel safe
to have withdrawals
 from my tunnel
vision for spirits.
The body seizes

 a figure amoebic
 swarms on the wall
like hive-mind bees
then comes near
hovers beside
presses the chest

I fight for breath
to get back in
and decide
 what's real
and what isn't
instead of bearing
witness to what
I can't explain.

When My Two Selves Unified

There could be seen: a giant
KFC bucket high alongside

tree tops in this wild empty
city of real plasticity: steps

either covered by sod or
made of mother nature—

a steel straw mouthed
by the concrete sidewalk

drunk off a Heineken,
upset about the people

who walk all over it
and never say thanks:

a shop window sign
of renovation to come

with general reformation:
every version of the same

self filling each shard
of a broken mirror:

I ate my hunger, saw
lemon-lime, a Sprite tree:

a trimmed bush smiled,
blew a kiss, absolute

nonsense—its clippings
growing out a trash can.

The Last Supper

I thawed out
the last meal
we made together
months after you were gone
a soup with most anything
one could ask for

cannellini beans
tomatoes shredded
chicken red potatoes
yellow squash zucchini
and what had been left
of us and I was afraid

I wouldn't get it down
afraid I'd eat nothing
but the loss of you
in every spoon
but not afraid
enough to keep
from pouring a bowl

and the taste of thanks
for all that grace had me eating
from the ladle over the stove

until I'd had my fill
and could not imagine
having more yet still
there was more leftover