

Singing Saw

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## **Singing Saw**

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ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

*Wallace Stevens*

## Lacuna

Noon wraps the lumber frame  
of our neighbor's would-be garage  
in gauze. Winter unlimbers me:  
It seeps into my workgloves,

an old pair of my father's,  
and fills the vacancies  
my thinner hands leave.  
Churned earth rusts the snow.

He and the other men talk,  
their vowels shouldered and slung  
and split with a shovel blade  
like bags of cement. The burden  
of dialogue is weightless

for them. I only listen, and think,  
and hope for the mute offer  
to leverage a nailgun's shudder, or guide  
a beam down the tablesaw edge,  
let fragrant dust dust my wrists.

Besides, how can I describe to them  
the two dark birds tearing at the woolen sky?  
They're like kings, I want to say.  
But my mouth fills with gravel.

When quiet flocks the yard they caw  
and the men begin. So have I  
only begun to translate the crows:  
Look around you. Make yourself of use.

## Passion Play

A field of waxen fescue grass,  
dry and fallow from too much sun;

metal fans turning lazy strobes  
in the dining hall noon of mesh

and whitewashed cinder; orchard trees  
receiving a notion of fruit inside

their limbs; vespers-hymns drifting over  
the lake like brush-fire steam in rain.

I keep all this in mind as it begins.  
Strangers in white come up the path,

and we gape at what's been raised:  
some barn's crossbeam,

bale-roped and gray.  
What can be done

against unmeant terror? I close  
my eyes. I start to hum.

The sun covers itself with clouds.  
How cool the air becomes.

## Aristaeus, bildungsroman

Up past the huge chaos  
of charred brush and tree limbs  
which, after a little rain, steam and  
reek of the kerosene fire that dwelled there  
the day before; past the world  
of the toolshed, where sand  
roughs slicks of motor oil  
and the skeleton of a '67 Triumph  
soaks in halogen light  
from its corner near the table saw;  
past the yellow flesh of apples  
threshed by August sun;  
past what's visible from the house's porch  
is a stretch of parched earth  
edging along some pines.

Nothing grows there but stones  
and rushes, which cradle the glinting shell  
of a champagne Cadillac  
left there to turn aside the years  
like a stone dividing the rapids  
of a creek, and watch a boy carrying  
in the square blade of a shovel  
a cat's unmoving shape, and behind him,  
a younger boy, shuffling  
the back of a hand across his nose.

He found it maculate  
with blood, torn by a stray, he says,  
and having no knowledge  
of settling the affairs of animals,  
came running.

Not that the other  
knows any better. He knows only  
that place where rust opens  
like the wings of moths and  
glass bottles of Coca-Cola  
are buried: that place  
where things can be left  
in disremembrance, left to reflect  
whatever pearl-blue light  
does not shun the dead. He strikes  
the solid ground and looks over  
at the other's widened eyes,  
then shrugs and gathers stones.





## Epilogue

Pressed between the pages of a book  
I've only just begun reading,  
I find a narrow, brittlegreen leaf  
Only you could have left there.  
It is rough on my fingers.  
I think of decay and all  
That comes after decay is done.

## A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of California

First, know that roses are shameless there.  
Their red wallets unfurl along the streets  
year-round. Mornings stretch among the villas and banks  
and parking structures in tendriled fog  
and honeysuckle; by midday, the men begin wishing  
to be sculptures, and the women wake  
and remember staring up through their skylights  
at the wheeling cosmopolitan night, unable to sleep.  
Understand that they consider every memory holy—  
even these—the way one might consider  
the Bayeux Tapestry: the crowning work of many hands,  
a market spilling over with vegetables  
made radiant in the sun. But I too  
have stared upward in a vertigo of loss, unable to sleep  
in California as a streetlamp threads through the blinds  
and stripes the bed. Lying there I considered  
the sudden ending of desire: How a wanted thing changes form  
once it's had, how Ariadne was left naked  
on one of the Cyclades with knots of bloody hair  
in her fists, thinking *This is flesh of my flesh  
and bone of my bone*. She comes to mind, even now,  
crawling into view like the desiccated feral squash  
stealing over the patio wall: one morning  
and then the next and then the easy symbolism  
of spent yellow flowers. Lying there I also considered  
the act of distinguishing among passions—namely,  
love of self and love of another—and whether  
there might be a great synthesis of the two,  
or whether mine is an orderless world  
where a hundred moths circle a streetlamp,  
where curtains collapse between acts  
and the audience can only stare,  
unsure in the red velvet of their disbelief,  
where I walk barefoot to the window  
in the house where I was raised  
for the blurry comfort of another streetlamp,  
where the bridge I have raised across this divide  
is trussed with kudzu and roses,  
where pattern ceases and doubt subsides.  
What more could I know of that place?  
I have seen the twenty sundowns of Santa Monica  
and cannot recover from their seduction.

## **Andromache, Years Later**

There are nights she wakes him when she wakes and nights she wakes alone. A streetlamp casts the room in amber. Near the patio, there is an old, whitewashed wall that retains the dirt and knotted undergrowth of a thin treeline above. The wall leans with the weight but remains upright, like a man who dozes waiting for the train, caught outside himself. But all that is in her memory. In the hushed week leading up to the blizzard, workers dismantled the wall, and the fecund cinderblocks' dark moss was lost in the debris. A body can be unmade in such a way. Now anonymous roots string down from the sheer dark face of earth that remains, and in the cold nights, sip the ice that sheaths them.

## Pantoum

Outside, the apparition of dew,  
its quiet dialogue with morning,  
obliterating what he thought true.  
He rises from the bed's liquid mooring,

quiets its dialogue with morning.  
He thinks of elegant leaves swept like snow,  
rising above the dry riverbed mooring  
but meaning a bird, a small fire, high above

a lone country road. He leaves the room like a snow  
that melts into itself and feeds rivers.

*Meaning is a bird, a small fire, high above, alone.*  
To catch fire in the gaze of another, and shiver

and melt into oneself, freeing rivers  
from their courses, bringing down the moon  
to belong to the gaze of another and shiver  
in her heat, hands buried in snow at noon.

Bringing down the last of the moon,  
the apparition of morning's dew:  
shining hands buried in snow at noon,  
obliterating what he thought true.

## The Famous Classicist in Love

I say further this song I have been humming  
quietly to myself only when alone  
has taken physical shape my fingertips have told me  
it is not unlike a linothorax  
a word meaning linen-torso a kind of armor

made by adhering squares of said linen with glue  
and sewn with some sort of thread perhaps ivy  
such that one's lungs and heart may ward off  
whatever evil is set against them  
typically the doru a spear or the xiphos a sword

all this is beside the point  
though how I love to pronounce such words  
in my mouth like bread and wine yes  
this song has been such a private thing  
but with you it could be different

here I have found that augury works best  
hold up your hands yes it is night and quite clear and late  
frame a square with your hands against the sky  
if a bird any of them will do enters from the west  
you may enter as an arrow cannot

if from the east well it is complicated  
if from the east you will be instead  
like certain prisoners of war working the quarries near fifth-century Syracuse  
who could win their freedom by reciting without error  
scenes of *The Bacchae* by heart

you will be like the ones who could not remember  
each time you began you confused  
many-echoed Mt. Kithairon for some other  
and you rinsed your calloused hands in the stream  
yet quarry-dust still stained them

but if you come with your raining palms and lay them on me  
the water will weaken the glue the ivy  
will travel like fire to the ground we will look up  
and every uncrossed ankle in the hazeless night sky  
will pierce or dissolve

west or east I do not make the rules

but yes these are the only ways  
yes there have been others but I have been waiting for you  
now be still and watch how the birds  
enter the temple of your hands and egress

## A Halo and Some Doves

*Henri Lévy's The Death of Orpheus, Art Institute of Chicago*

Dirt and grass in violent repose  
under the pale, separate body.

White birds kite over the water  
with eyes of distribution.

You are what gleams most in this dusk,  
you and your extinct words that conjoin

and phosphoresce in a halo  
above you. That strange sound

is the women with rabbit bones  
in their hair keening like cicadas

as they escape downriver. It is  
too late to kneel in the shallows

and gather you back together: Already  
you have seized this canyon of mine

and filled its rooms with honey and rain.



## Malacasoma

For several weeks in summer the crowns  
and branches  
of the apple trees wear silk

densely and withheld, like a word shouted underwater.

On clear nights  
it's like an ill-timed Halloween,  
the globes of pale, huge fruit  
glowing above the indigo grass  
with dozens or hundreds of animated seeds.

In the boring afternoons a boy  
likes to swing into them  
with a stick to make the curled bodies fall  
from the wound  
like rain from a cloud  
if rain were ink and solid

—because after all  
there are so many tents  
who will miss just these few?

He is a barbarian of the field,  
teaching himself religion.  
Songbirds converge

and raise a violent din.

## Ache

The foxes and their goldenrod eyes  
lithe in the million June leaves.  
Soot-licked and ember-  
licked. Royal as sphinxes and as  
unkind. Honeysuckle carves the air  
in the way of Roman fountains.  
What is there to eat here?  
Field mice and the tendons  
of squirrels. A fat cardinal,  
slow on the ascent. Raspberries.  
The yellow squash to bloom  
again in later months. Kudzu vines,  
the sucrose glaze of a soda bottle.  
And fox-bones aching of praise,  
yes, whose marrow I  
have now consumed.

## Reckoned

He (the boy who had lately been dead and revived)  
is about to tell us about it. Listen.

“...how dozens of monarchs  
would settle like glowing embers on your shoes  
while you sift for arrowheads in the creek.

Death alights upon you like that. Five memories  
carried with you like lucky coins in your pocket,  
coins the size of eyes. One for each lost sense.  
Redolent apples near the roots, a first sip  
of vertiginous shine, your mother's hands,  
the scratch of treebark, the gunshot of the limb

snapping. Then you are a peregrine over a painless country  
of falling leaves. Longing for seed or water or dirt

and then longing for nothing. You are not supposed to go  
back. It starts as a small fire and consumes the air around you  
until your wings are pinioned by licks. Infinite flight  
for the broken world of your body.”

Look. He is wiping soot from his lips.  
Now he holds his head in his hands  
and tremors move swiftly across him  
like clouds.

## To Memory

Let me speak of the rattle  
down the cutback path  
where oaklight parsed shadows  
onto the mountain dirt.  
Here I am years later

made of stone, still thinking  
of what I never saw:  
its swaying head, its eyes  
like drops of pitch, its beaded tail.  
Still thinking of the unimagined

sound, an echo of where there is no wind,  
a relic to take to heaven  
if nowhere else, a shattering  
of everything into place: Around me  
leaves brushed static from the air;

red ants drank their wine of fear  
somewhere belowground  
in fist-sized caverns smelling of old rain.  
Still thinking of the trail shelter  
called Gods-Eye-View—

was it even called that?  
Walk through fifty feet of trees  
out to a brow of rock  
and a valley would stretch immense  
and green. *Ecstasy like a floating spirit's,*

Keats would say. Fear like a hand reaching  
up from the stomach. Yes, and a rattle  
does this also. Remember years before,  
near the pond we'd begun to tame,  
some burnished thing

had slid over the ground, markings indistinct.  
You bruised my shoulder pulling me back  
so hard. Father said *run get*  
*a shovel* and later he told me  
how the head kept snapping at air,

how the long separate body

drew calligraphy  
in the dry grass. Softly, how like a rattle  
that sound was. I hear it now,  
how it shatters softly. Mother,

I have invented whatever I fail  
to remember. I take notes everywhere,  
on scraps throughout the house and my palm  
is inked and erased anew each day.  
I am sorry to invoke this fear of yours

but fear concerns me.  
In a yellowed issue of *Life* magazine,  
in an article titled “Holiness Faith Healers,”  
there’s a photograph  
of a thick canebrake rattler

that seems to pour from a Bible  
spread open like a fossilized rose,  
held up by a stonefaced preacher.  
Its head emerges from his midsentence mouth  
like infallible speech.

The believers starve the serpents dumb  
but cannot sap the venom.  
They leave them knotted in pine boxes  
with walls carved in scripture  
until a congreant is compelled to fill his hands

with the coils, just as a child  
is compelled to meet his father’s eyes.  
In another photograph, a girlish mother-to-be  
leans back her head to sing, and the curving shadow  
moves like a river

through the desert of her white dress.  
Through it all, guitars and tambourines  
roar full of joy, roar full of joy.  
Is cacophony what subdues death  
in the chapel? I have read that the only sound

on White Oak Mountain was  
the restless, dry voice of George Hensley  
begging for revelation  
before he took up the timberback rattling  
in a rock-gap and bore it calmly

to his church ten miles away.  
You cannot conceive of doing this  
or what follows, I know.  
Should he be struck, the good handler refuses  
secular care. Should he be struck,

the good handler says things like  
*It must be my time*  
with eyes like towering mountains.  
Imagine the body relinquished like that.  
Has he already gone out of it?

Does he watch from the ceiling?  
When I invent for you the alarm of the rattle,  
I see a child struck still on the path.  
The handlers say things like  
*Boys I don't care about this old flesh*

*or I am glad to the brink of fear*  
—no, isn't that only what I hope to say.  
I am sorry to write you like this,  
but fear concerns me. That other  
loosener of limbs, that rattle of memory

to life, that door flung open  
to the fireflies and lamp-moths of the night,  
by which the soul may depart  
when threatened.  
I never saw the diamond back.

I left the trail and pushed through sumac  
and fern to rejoin farther along.  
But the fact of the rattle  
has not left me. The death of you  
and how I could remake you

is my fear. Do you still live  
an assumed life? Show me this letter  
if I begin to forget.  
I will need it to gather  
my self from the notes.

## Motion Studies

*Eadweard Muybridge to Leland Stanford, Palo Alto, 1878*

Dust in a haze over the racetrack  
reduces the horses to fabric.  
Something stirs; it could be them.

When their muscles have warmed  
they rest, standing like the township  
across the arroyo bathed in valley fog.

For thirty years, my life, I believed  
words were best for luring  
a beautiful thing into the sun

but that has changed. You want  
to know if, at the canter and gallop,  
hooves aloft and crashing, tidal,

their great necks like falcons,  
they, the horses, for a moment fly.  
I have brought six cameras; I will need

more. The track lined with a wall  
of white linen. Spools of thread to break  
against their knees. And I will give you

new eyes to captivate this new velocity,  
distilled onto plates lined with silver  
and a few quickened grains of salt.

## The Road to Delphi

The closets of Los Angeles  
had huge sliding mirrors for doors.  
Therefore let us turn to nostalgia.  
The hot, shining lights of a vanity  
uncover the shaded country beneath my eyes  
where long grasses tide in a dark, pristine way  
and a red-tailed hawk above some pines  
loses itself in the throat of noon.  
Elsewhere under the remembered sun  
a boy and his father  
pour buckets of mineshaft-blue dye  
from the red fuse of a canoe into a pond  
thick with algae  
to sever its tie to light.  
No etymology is forthcoming.  
That precinct of London deserted before dawn  
five years ago, the huge concrete towers  
breaking the threshold morning apart  
like chisels into marble, seeking the soft muscles  
that must lie underneath. I wandered there  
for three blue hours, a threadbare impious boy.  
Looking for evidence of the park near my rented room,  
the garden across the street. Anything.  
There was a woman that night whose name  
I never learned, but her hair was like  
the thickets of barbed vines  
the boy's parents took to with machetes,  
making paths to the wild pond.  
When I try to remember the woman's name  
I realize it isn't important. Therefore let us turn  
to nostalgia. Let us turn  
to the peaceful discourse of statues  
lining the last mile of the way.



## Hic Abundant Lupi

*The Book of Highland Minstrelsy, 1860*

The text describes Eddrachillis,  
a Sutherland village of the early Medieval period  
set against the north Atlantic and  
the hungering winter.

The villagers woke in the frost  
to their newly endangered deceased.  
*Wolves*, they said, their hands  
over the churchyard's rent earth,  
the rent faces of their fathers,  
shrouds shorn to lace.

So began the tradition of burial  
on a barren stump of land  
just off the coast. *Push off for the sea-dashed  
grave*, they said. *The wolf may lurk at home,  
May prowl in the Dirí Moir  
Till nightfall bids him roam;  
But the grave is void in the mountain kirk,  
And the dead hath crossed the foam...*

Those were pious times.  
We believe the ones first discovered  
were not buried again like that, liable  
to spoil the beauty of Heaven.  
We believe the living patched the throats  
and jaws of the dead  
with clay. We believe they did this thing  
which augments the story and us.

“And when the baron ordains to hunt and chase the Woolfe, the tenants shall rise with the baron.”

—*Records of the Parliaments of Scotland: March 6, 1428*

Gleaming in silk, he waves the harvest-heavy  
everymen  
                  through a lattice of pine and pale sun.

They cannot defy the law’s appetite  
for the tainchel, the fatal circle of bodies  
tightening like a knot.

Regal sighthounds are set loose  
to show by example  
                  pleasure in the hunt.

Look how morning sweeps like a wing!

Now they seem a forest themselves,  
men as trees  
gliding cruelly  
                  into trees,  
caught in a gesture  
of dominion over every Adam-named thing.

*Ardross Wolf Stone, 6<sup>th</sup> c.*

We can barely call it a fragment,  
it frames the image  
so neatly. The stone's edges sheared and softened  
as though by water's coursing touch.  
As for the inscribed wolf:  
hungry ribs open  
into a lyre or high-prowed ship;  
muscular limbs curve and escape;  
spiral eyes widen above the muzzle.  
Easy to go there

as autumn closes in and the carver's hand shakes.  
Red leaves leap and bank around him  
like birds in flight.  
His last line is the thing's tongue,  
falling between the jaws just so.  
He knows how to ward off what comes  
in cold nights—what pads across the moors  
in a frictionless soot coat  
when roe and hare grow scarce.  
For whatever he makes an image  
cannot harm him  
or those he loves.  
A terror to contain all terrors.  
Cage it away in stone.

## Devotionals

This is where the treeline tends to the fresh bruise  
of night. Where among the witchgrass  
and bloomed fennel wrapped in bolts

of shadow, empty bottles with worn labels  
nest in the roots. In this light

you begin to believe their burnt umber  
can serve as religion, that carrying  
the image like a gene  
and gifting it  
until all images end

will keep you from evaporating. This must be  
how to build a shrine in the new century.

\*

In blinding solar June, a catastrophe  
of rapids:  
The canoe's ricochet

slams you and your father out  
but then

he is there: His arms  
invert the pale red hull above you  
and he bears the waters like the frame of a globe.

And you are riven (then, as now)  
by the thought  
that a shrine can be a man.

## Ekphrastics

### *Days of Heaven*

O palms of wheat, warm embers in the hollow months ever pressing westward. A vagrant red from quiet suns, the end of a kind of life. Tossing above the growing earth. Fire circles the blessed hands. For vespers and the sculpted air, let anyone make a smiling fiancée of the moon. Let anyone praise the terrible heart.

### *No. 61*

Never before has the hour been this blue, blue as the bruise still to be. Your mouth is a well whose depths I have stared into. What we have made is more beautiful than our hollow heads—let it decide our steps. Yes, I would like to see you through the veil of your own sewing. Wrap it around my eyes. The well echoes with my voice, whose only words are synonyms for love.

### “Ghost”

Rapt in its winging down, indistinguishable from a spinning leaf, the thrush gathers us up. A city of stone built over a city of air, the old battlements eroding as mist: like this the bird lays claim to our eyes. What else do we know of holy things? Pulling weeds this morning their roots came out like arrows, reaching down to the rivers we cannot see. Mist stung my eyes like smoke. There is a limit to the earth’s favor.

## Pastorals

*1997*

Algae veins the ice  
archipelago  
at the pond's center;  
afternoon's pale owl  
eyes the man and his son  
through the leafless weave.

The .22 is in the boy's hands,  
iron barrel full  
and rising for this lesson  
in which he will learn to lay down fire  
on frozen water.

*2004*

This summer we decide the algae has grown  
monstrous. It inhabits even the air.  
The dog goes in; a wake grows where she swims  
then sews itself together  
with green thread and a sigh.  
She comes out in a caul of wet moss  
to the crook of her jaw.  
We push the canoe out,  
oars splaying the stuff thickly.  
We pour out the dye.  
The hull grows indigo wings.

*2013*

Metal arms tense and release  
clay discs called pigeons  
through the heavy air.  
My friend squares his feet  
and sets the stock against his chest.  
A bird thrums out;  
he turns, mechanical;  
there is a sound like compressed thunder  
and a pale red cloud.

After weekends in the country,  
he used to bring home a few pheasants—

a stark white ring of down  
around their necks,  
their plumage the dull gold of winter grass.  
We would find fragments of shot  
in the meat after grilling it  
and gouge out the metal  
like splinters from a palm,  
or sharp seeds  
armed men could grow from  
it put in the right soil.

## Still Life

The city of Leptis, blooming,  
washed its exhausted soil down  
into the harbor over many years  
and over and over,  
the generations of citizens  
never remembering  
it had happened before,  
content to get dressed in the morning and enter  
rooms alive with the scent of rosemary bread,  
mothers eyeing their children,  
fathers under red pavilions,  
the gossip of travelers—  
the heat, O it creeps up through May,  
doesn't it, it does, it has  
happened before—but unlike summer  
a port was a thing  
that could be changed,  
so when the great hulls began to run aground  
they dug out another bay for the Mediterranean  
to fill, and grew their golden wheat again  
until the wheat failed,  
and then olives, until the olives failed  
and finally they left, drifting softly  
over the harbor of sand,  
having heard of arable land elsewhere.



## Violets

The starlings are a collective breath  
let out over hours.  
Each bird sings itself  
at a distance the dusk can't sustain  
for long: the sky of flesh  
and feather curls its finger  
to invite assembly.  
A hundred lives tumble and rise,  
restless to bed down for the night.  
Our house's shadow disappears.  
I follow the peaks of her ribs  
to her hips  
to her tapering ankles.

## Midas

The one who fixates my love  
is a moth, pale and lunatic,

come to bask against the glass  
that walls me. Her plectrum eyes,

her cautious feet, every night  
alighting outside, far-near,

far again, frail with mastery  
of me. I shift; she shifts.

She goes;  
I whirl, aimless,

wracked by betrayal  
and enraged.

Lush with the barbed thickets,  
fluent in dusk's caress,

why return to me at all?  
To make my want burn brighter?

Speak of anything but touch.  
I can imagine. It is enough.

## Archers

Home is a city invoking its own gray sky,  
sheering cold air from windowpanes  
like fingers of mist over a pond.  
My friend and I meet to unravel time spent  
away in Los Angeles and Chicago,  
toasting St. Nostalgia with whiskey.  
We examine the last few years like an antique spyglass,  
how the scratched lenses still collapse distance  
but distort all they see. We wonder if  
it's so much to ask for an arrow in the heart.  
And if there's a nameless woman notching a bow,  
standing across Lake Michigan  
on the rail of a frozen scarlet lighthouse  
wearing a gown of ice this winter:  
She is wiser and more terrifying  
than a hundred owls opening their eyes at once  
and calling down to a boy  
whose feet have led him astray in the woods.  
Regret falls from the sky, rain fletched with vapor,  
and drums on the leaves in a maddening way.  
The boy leans back his head to drink.

## Helen in America

Just like a Kennedy she had nine thousand ghosts  
courting in her veins, nine thousand names

scratched on the sterling heirloom she wore  
only for the camera. How could we not admire

her eccentricities? Terra japonica kept in a jar  
and dusted over meals, her leaving one eyelet empty

on each laced boot, nine thousand strands of hair  
in a helical braid. A prehistoric fascination, we admit.

The best of all potential things rising from the river of her  
lips, the canals of her fingers, so obvious even in the gloss

of magazines. In the court of desire all the men  
are guilty. Who here has not been a thief with his eyes?

## Interview

“I prefer to be reminded that what I am seeing is not quite real,”

the famous photographer says, shifting portraits with half-developed coronas into the bath and out while the reporter, erasing a word, shakes her head at the caustic smell. Dispossessed in the heavy red glow, she writes *What better place than this for insanity? Nothing feeds it like the eye.* Unprompted, the photographer says: “Everything I knew of gesture I learned by the age of nine. Thereafter, I became concerned only with the space from which bodies emerge, until I turned eleven, when I was taken to the ballet.” He pauses. “Yes—to the Kirov Ballet. The *prima*, she—she was witchgrass against skin, evening’s vellum over the steppe, an azimuth by which I might measure, for the first time, the concept of God.” He turns away. “I cannot—” *Frustrated by memory*, the reporter writes. She lifts a negative to the red bulb, which casts shadow onto her shoulders. “Can you imagine”—the old man suddenly turns—“another chalice to take her place?” His pale eyes long, as a torn thing does, to once again be whole.

“The day’s frustrations leap and disappear like dust clapped out from a doormat,”

he says. He clicks through the carousel  
and roseate color clouds the screen: a woman  
looking over her shoulder at a man in a suit leaving the house.  
The photographer gestures and says, “I consider this my mythic work.  
Gorgeous fragments of love pass between them and they try  
not to overthink their suspicious lives.”  
A band of gold glints above the reporter’s notepad.  
She writes *creates narrative where there is none*.  
“Surely you have been in love,” he says. “Is it not unlike lightning  
striking a tree, which for years after continues to grow but never blooms?”  
He coughs and taps a cigarette out on his palm. “And isn’t it like  
a holy city in the unnavigable reaches of some rainforest?  
You can watch as the pilgrims give up trying to reach it.  
The wheels of their covered wagons breaking on the roots,  
their empty boots like islands in the mud.”  
His lighter opens a flame in the dark.  
“Though of course in the end one prefers ruined cities.  
Ivy strung from the towers, wildflowers like yellow fires  
through cracks in the stones. Have you ever woken  
to find yourself in the ruins?  
They are always so familiar.”

*Professes skepticism of Freud but loves to play the analysand,*

the reporter writes. Her pencil carves the quiet morning apart.  
She thinks of the recurring dream the photographer feigned  
reluctance to tell: "I do not like dreams. They reek of self-importance.  
But in this one, I am pulling a man by his shirt collar from a lake  
that does not exist to a porch that does, where my family watches,  
gaunt and strangely shining. It is winter: the trees have disrobed  
to their shameless charcoal limbs. The wet fabric in my hand begins  
to tear, and I wake." Through the guest room window  
she can see the gathered folds of conifers reaching into the low hills.  
She writes *How does a sunrise define the day to come?*  
She walks to the kitchen and finds him  
at the table with two mugs, staring at a pot of coffee.  
She sits and writes *Often lost in thought, a guest even in his own rooms.*  
She reaches for a mug and sips the coffee, which has been sweetened  
to the point of nausea. He watches her cough it down  
and says, "Every morning I consume the same pot of coffee, in which  
is dissolved two cups of sugar. I believe it to be the closest  
approximation to the nectar hummingbirds drink."  
He drains his mug in a single practiced motion.  
Smiling, he says, "Your hand is trembling.  
There is no cure for that  
except becoming a hummingbird."

*Possible title: Lear on the Heath: The Maddening of an Artist,*

the reporter writes, following the photographer into the north wing. *Too oblique, but the gist is there.* Soft, jaundiced light falls against the polished boiserie of the hallway. *To be born into this kind of wealth is a sort of illness,* she writes. The photographer says nothing until they reach his studio, a spotless, white cube of a room. She writes, *If a cliché is taken to its logical extreme, does it circle around and become original?* He nods his head back toward the hallway and says, “I never speak in that corridor. It is where the dead reside. They are mute, and to utter anything in their presence is gravely impolite, for they cannot respond.” He turns, then stops and says, “Art, by the way, is whatever we do to embellish death. Write that down.” She does not. He walks to the center of the blinding floor. “A week ago this room was red. Before that, lavender. Before that, a painstaking damask. Each layer of paint makes the room smaller. I intend to live to see the room disappear.” Just inside the hallway, he opens a closet where dozens of paint cans line the walls. “Please,” he says, gesturing toward them, “It would be an honor.” The reporter steps in, glances around, and hands him a can of white.



“After all, what is this adopted landscape if not lifetimes spent in the study of stories?”

the photographer says. He gestures toward the untouched trees pressed tight to the balcony. “What does nature say that we do not put in its mouth?” The air has a dull orange hue, as though the sun were a lone piece of stage lighting left humming into the night, forgotten as the actors depart to receive their roses in the atrium. “Centuries ago wolves in Scotland would disinter graves during famine. I like to imagine the villagers as sculptors, patching the throats and jaws of their fathers then burying them again on a holy island off the coast.” The reporter writes *Lover of counterfactuals, lover of the bright unreal country*. “Of course by 1750 the wolf had been hunted to extinction in Scotland,” he says. “Nothing gray can stay, no?” He runs his hand along the stonework. “And what of my kind,” he says. “Will I be hunted to extinction? In what sort of light am I to be portrayed?” The reporter’s words fade as she writes; she shakes the pen and presses harder. *The light that quickens and dismantles, composes, suffuses, but does not—* The pen dies, leaving nothing in its wake. The photographer rubs his eyes. The dark palisade of trees moves casually with the wind and beckons.

## Catalogue

The word means to scroll one's eyes  
down a list, as though stapled to a post,  
and there, the name of a sister  
not seen since the collapse.  
Those are her lilies in the vase  
on the table. The word means  
clothing you and I can buy. The word comes  
from the Greek *kata*, O vertiginous, and *legein*,  
to force breath through teeth, and there are other  
words, other joinings. *Catapult*, *selection*, *catechism*—  
a throwing down, as though by a force from a height;  
to be gathered and set apart; a resounding noise that teaches  
or does not. Also *catastrophe*, a great turning downward, as in  
“a catastrophe of clouds releasing rain.”  
Translating these is another way to resist  
forgetting. Here is the word *pain*, clouding  
what follows. The word *why*, split  
like a pillar. And the word  
*winter*, which signifies  
those oblivious birds  
building their nests  
with red and green  
fabric there among  
this new debris.

## Revision

The wax Icarus used  
to fasten the great wings

does not melt. It freezes  
solid as he climbs through

the further atmosphere.  
He becomes a boy of ice,

a skipping stone  
across the pale sky.

The ending is the same.  
But at least this way

his rigid arms retain  
the gesture of flight

the whole way down.

## Aubade

Sloughing apart in the dawn full of rain,  
The riverbank took train cars and their crude  
Down into the James. The gray light of morning  
Turned iridescent over the oil, as though  
Stained glass windows had melted  
And been poured over the water:  
Iconography softened into  
The mere impressions of roses,  
Apples, suns, cinnamon, myrrh. And now  
A column of flame, no metaphor,  
The plain fact of sparked fire burning on water.  
Shouting distance from where we watched  
*Casablanca* on the wall of a warehouse  
And stifled the reaching hands of our youth  
Under a quilt of heat, where we learned  
To touch is to leave a mark. The plain fact  
Of oil-water fused and rising ravenous  
To ten stories, black smoke like waves  
Of thousands of starlings rising to fifty.  
Fire burning on water, smoke drifting east  
Over the Piedmont. Traces of red glass gleaming  
As far as Richmond, and farther, to the canvas sea.

—Lynchburg, VA: April 30, 2014

## Self-Portrait: Robert Cornelius, 1839

Too little of me remains in place.  
Shy as lips behind a wrist, the photograph's  
eyes meeting mine seems an endeavor

at best, heretical at worst, this  
lifelikeness from a lifeless thing  
that is me: a bay leaf pressed

for a watermark, a veil lifted  
for a hardened stare, right hand  
jacket-tucked and discerning a pulse.

It makes me a tourist of seasons.  
It says, *Call me to your hushed  
moments of snowfall, your embers*

*and tea leaves and cards, that I might know you.  
We will learn a common vernacular.  
Wherever you carry me, windows will follow.*

## John Keats, Serpent Handler

You carried the pine box in a sling on your back.  
On the wooden slats you had carved  
the language of birds.  
Under the susurrus of pines  
you were on your way to church.  
Wearing your best blue suit  
on your way to church for the funeral,  
on your way bearing all  
the artifacts heaven had need of  
on your back.  
You stopped to watch  
the light through the canopy  
flickering like the rapid movement of golden bees.  
You knelt and drank of their honey.

## Taliesin

To fill the drawing studio with broken light,  
the famous architect made the ceiling  
ragged as the fabric of tree limbs.  
His students would not forget the labor of wind  
through branches, the gift of tossing shadow.  
What we cannot know is whether he carried in his pocket  
a frayed *Collected Works* of the ancient Welsh poet  
whose name he gave to the house, which juts softly  
from a hill in southern Wisconsin.  
Which dog-eared pages would he break the spine for?  
Were there lines that entered his flesh like thorns?  
For example: *The mountain has become crooked, the woods have become a kiln.*  
This doomful sort of insight accommodates our pressing concerns,  
he might say. It forgives loose translation. A few options:  
The earth has changed its shape, the forest air darkens.  
The Appalachians have been shorn, fire fuses the trees.  
The flatlands are full of slurry, our tap is full of propane.  
When the famous architect considered his beloved  
curtains of icicles, draped like giant bougainvillea from the roof,  
did he understand that collapse was their price?  
He installed no gutters, made no paths for snow.  
His students observed how the hill and house would erode.

## Autumn Leaves

After the seams came apart  
on the gown of light they'd sewn together,  
there lay its shape in air. If not in the end  
a proof of their bond, they later agreed,

at least a way to find one's keys in the dark.  
*Still*, he said. *Little comfort in utility.*  
*But some*, she said, slicing  
an apple for lunch.



## **Mosaic Floor Depicting the Rape of Persephone, Uncovered at a Tomb in Amphipolis, Greece, October 2014**

Unchecked, desire ruptures through the earth—unchecked desire, the charioteer. He is taking her somewhere obscene, an underground room of powdered dogwoods blossoming under no sun. The ten thousand painted stones are cool and rough under our bare feet as we watch. Note the horses' musculature as warehouses of white ceramic. Note the spokes of the wheel as sycamores stripped to bare limbs. Among her colors the delicious red of ivy leaves climbing oak-sides in November. Her white arm pushing the tips of white fingers out of the frame. His left hand around her waist, that rider, blisped and dreamy, laurel-crowned, with his prize. A third figure, loyal Hermes, leading them down with a gesture of palms. A third figure, loyal Hermes, looking without expression directly at us.

## In Nocte

Little rest now in the dark pool of the bedroom  
where our legs turn over and over.  
The smoke alarm glares in the night  
like the electric red eyes  
of imperfect photographs.  
Her pain has crushed her for months.  
I cannot enter it; there is no doorway  
nor even the soft outline  
where a door once opened.  
She cries like a fox  
in the rake-teeth of a trap,  
she cries like broken stones.  
About suffering neither of us  
has been wrong. About empathy  
neither of us has been anything  
except hands on rough walls of brick,  
or hands passing through  
a dark pool of water.

## Cortege

you

flower-strewn, forward.  
such darkening

swinging lanterns

caves

our eyes. I remember

with what splendor  
love that first time

your gathered hair.

painters will never match it.

We gaze

before to wish I'd died

this.  
again

sixteen winters

water

your whole life. thirsted for

## Epithalamion

On the blacktop road leaving  
footprints in the roux of pollen they glance  
at the black clouds ahead they glance  
at each other and whelmed trees as if singing sway  
he designs a proof for beauty it is her  
nimbus of hair rising in the damp air now  
broken piano keys appear in the sky  
now some hand plays the diluvian music  
now they know to begin running their throats  
fill with water he is afraid of dying  
yet there at the treeline an abandoned yellow bus  
dividing the rain around itself she pulls him there  
and under the timpani under the speechless roar  
her mouth finds his and under the iron-black branches  
they say only the vowels of their throats  
and the shape of them is left in the mud  
after the storm has passed

## Gloss in the Margins of the Book of Taliesin

I would like to say something  
about the shining panoply. Turn  
the bright country of your face  
to me now.

The having-been-stained of us  
makes no difference.

These are my acorn eyes.  
All I see  
grows.

Before the broken foam comes  
from my lips,  
may there be festivals to my soul!

Something wears the panoply  
of California dust-light.

Eidolon mine, why, why?

The mournful sounds  
of Euripides' *Trojan Women*  
cannot be translated  
except as the barking of dogs.

This is a wonderful beginning but  
it is only a beginning.

He will compose, and decompose.  
He will form languages.

## Singing Saw

Have you ever heard a singing saw it sounds  
like a ghost no  
like a hundred ghosts their mouths shaped like moons  
to make the song bend the metal  
face the teeth and slide a bow across it  
like a cello at least that is how it is done these days  
the sound is such a delicate thing it climbs above  
every tree cuts through every knot of limb  
and your own limbs too feel it  
running the length of your arm  
and down into your legs  
here are words that remind me of the singing saw  
tether bower gallop aloft believe release  
how did the singing saw come about  
I suppose like most beautiful things it was accident  
like icicles like algae marbled in ice  
but this was in summer at night a man  
familiar with sand rust sweat  
hung his saw up on its pegs the shed dim  
with oil-light that warm clinging smell  
he had worked hard all day this was how he liked it  
the calluses on his hands were pleurably sore  
the apples had been falling from the bower limbs  
gathered in piles along the tree roots nudging their way  
out of the earth  
the lodis and golds were rotting sweet smelling  
the nature of sweetness  
is that it comes from corrupted flesh  
everyone knows this  
he was thinking of this smell this cloying in the August heat  
there was comfort in it  
he knew the apples would give themselves back to the roots  
and those hungry for fruit had praised the season with song  
orioles blue jays thrashers tanagers  
finches cardinals strange to see their crimson throats  
not against a field of snow  
I like this he had thought this collection of birds  
how symphonic he removed his gloves  
their fingertips shone from years of friction  
as though from below the skin of a thing there might be light  
then quite suddenly  
a wind spilled down from the west aloft  
rolling down the eastern face of the Blue Ridge

this wind is called katabatic a word I have always loved  
it means a going-down like down the coast  
and also means the demigods who used to reach  
into the underworld for varying reasons  
desire sadness necessity among them  
such a trip is called a katabasis  
but as I was saying the wind  
blew down from the west in a hurry  
one cannot begin to comprehend this wind it spreads  
like water on a paper napkin over the land  
one gust reached the field of this man  
the windchimes his wife loved to make  
from sundry pieces of metal  
washers hex bolts casings  
played against themselves the air was filled with music  
she was reading in bed a novel she read in August every year  
before she knew him this was how  
she understood love is it not  
to give oneself to something again and again  
she was saying one sentence quietly to herself  
in his blue gardens men and girls came and went  
like moths among the whisperings and the champagne  
she heard the chimes and smiled  
the gust moved past the house pushed through  
the long grasses the blades turned a little this way  
and that their slender silver selves turned  
like a lover I do not think it is so strange to say so  
it reached the heavy apple limbs released  
the ripest ones to fall to the ground  
for several seconds it was as though  
there were heavy footsteps in the field who  
could it be a weightless heavy-stepping thing  
it is the wind at a gallop and it has reached the shed  
the man did not latch the nail into its eyelet  
the door was closed but not shut  
then like a bird's wing swinging open in fright  
the man jerked his head toward the noise  
the gust filled the small room swallowed the lamplight  
it entered tracing its way to the four corners of the room  
touching each surface it made no difference  
the wind had all of itself to give  
now where the saw hung from its pegs on the wall  
I believe you have already guessed what comes next  
just as the coursing river meets the rocks jutting from the shore  
and slides around them  
the wind met the saw and a nearly silent

note was held against the edge bent  
into shallow curves only out of age and use  
the man in terror heard a ghost for he  
was alone in the shed  
his eyes began to widen what light there was  
entered through the door  
and there the only thing moving the saw  
tapping gently against the wall  
the sound had died out  
but he knew then what instrument could be  
made he walked to it slowly then quickly  
before the wind was gone for good  
he would make it sing more  
he took it down unsure held it unlettered  
again he felt the cold steel shiver in the wind  
he turned it it bent it rose in pitch  
ghosts wailed he could tell they were joyous a voice is a gift  
the sound sustained in breathless air  
it straightened again it deepened  
he was shocked and alarmed a man of the world  
what do I care for music he said out loud  
bending the pitch higher and then  
like a gunshot the wind  
left him standing with a saw curved like waxing moons  
what do I care for music  
his hands were shaking with terrible love  
he heard the windchimes climb and go quiet  
and the gust had gone out from that place  
but the high note still rang in his ears  
O let it ring even now let it carry in my limbs  
they are ready to bend a song out of air  
here are the words that remind me  
tether bower gallop aloft believe release  
they are ready  
have you ever heard them  
they sound.



## Paradise City

When the curtain rose it was  
a wall of birds. Springing vines  
embraced the stage, and willow limbs  
whipped like hair, and ivy twined  
with ivy along the walls.  
I looked at my flowering arms.  
I looked at the faces around me  
and saw fields of chrysanthemum  
where faces used to be.

## Notes

The italicized text in “A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of California” comes from Genesis 2:23.

The concept of “Reckoned” is loosely based on a passage in Thomas Hariot’s *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, published in 1588.

My deep thanks to Dr. Ralph Hood, professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee–Chattanooga, for sending me a copy of the 1947 monograph *Tennessee Snake Handlers* by J.B. Collins, a document that was essential for the poem “To Memory.” Some of the speech attributed to the handlers, “Boys I don’t care about this old flesh,” comes from a sermon recorded by Dr. Hood in his book *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-handling Tradition*. “I am glad to the brink of fear” is, famously, from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*. The phrase from Keats comes from *Endymion*.

Hic abundant lupi—“Here wolves abound”—was a phrase placed near Sutherland, Scotland, on a map of the British Isles made during the time of Edward II (ca. 1280). The “tainchel” (in Scots, “timchail”) is a ring of hunters that slowly encloses a section of forest to trap game therein. By the 15th century, formalized hunting of wolves had become commonplace in Scotland, with compulsory participation for the tenants of a lord’s land. In *The Book of Highland Minstrelsy* (D. Ogilvy, 1860, Glasgow), the folkloric tale of burial at the island of Handa is recorded. “Diri Moir,” as Ogilvy writes, is “a wild and desolate region extending over much of the western side of Sutherland.”

The works of art in “Ekphrastics” are the film *Days of Heaven*, directed by Terrence Malick; the painting *No. 61* (often called *Rust and Blue*) by Mark Rothko; and the song “Ghost” by Neutral Milk Hotel.

“Catalogue” is in response to the collapse in 2013 of Rana Plaza, a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in which more than 1,100 people died.

Frank Lloyd Wright named the home he built for his family “Taliesin,” a Welsh word that translates to “shining brow,” after the way the structure would freeze and shine in winter. Taliesin is also the name of a Dark Ages Welsh poet whose extant work exists in English in a beautiful, strange translation by W. F. Skene, completed in 1858. “The mountain has become crooked, the woods have become a kiln” is one small example of the document’s fascinating, vatic language. Some of the lines from “Gloss in the Margins of the Book of Taliesin” also come directly or with slight modification from this text. “All I see grows” is a modification of Bachelard, from *The Poetics of Space*.

The etymology of the English word “saw” includes the Old English *sagu*, “saying, discourse, study, tradition, tale.”

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