Autumn's Velocity

Austin Robert Smith
Freeport, Illinois

Master of Arts, University of California-Davis, 2009
Bachelor of Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005

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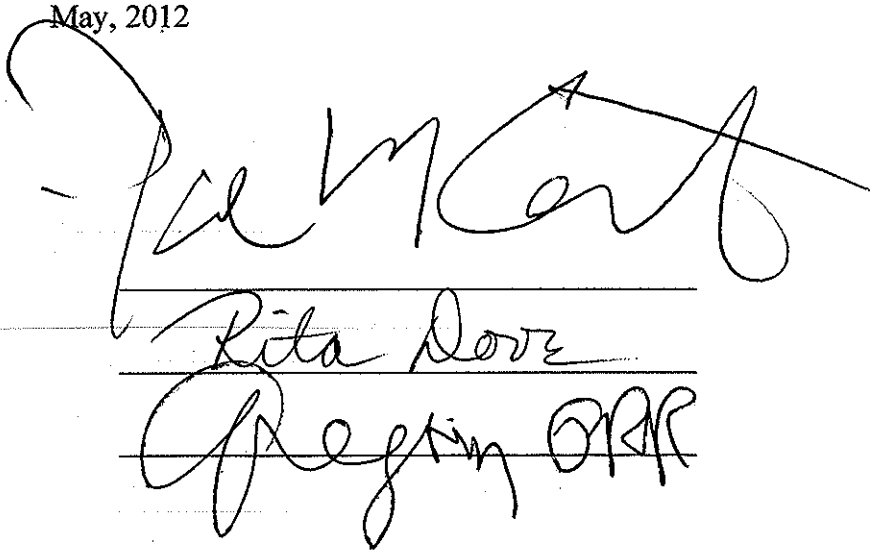

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This book is dedicated to five who didn't make it to thirty:

Breece D'J Pancake, Thomas James, Frank Stanford, Nick Drake, John Keats

“What ya doin' there, Andy?”

“Rocks,” the boy said. “They's pitchers on 'em.” He handed Buddy a piece of shale.

“Fossils. Ol' dead stuff.”

“I'm collectin' 'em.”

“What ya wanna save ol' dead stuff for?” he said, handing the shale back.

The boy looked down and shrugged.

“You get on home, hear?” Buddy said, watching as Andy disappeared down the secondary, leaving him to the hum of the transformer. He wondered why the boy looked so old.

— Breece D'J Pancake, “Hollow”

I am full of the old fear of coming home,
Stopping in darkness, under the maples.

— Thomas James, “Jason”

And we wake up
And we know the first nights
With summer visitors
In the three storied house of our childhood.

— Frank Stanford, “You”

When I was young, younger than before
I never saw the truth hanging from the door
Now I'm older, see it face to face
Now I'm older, gotta get up clean the place

And I was green, greener than the hill
Where the flowers grow and the sun shines still
Now I'm darker than the deepest sea
Just hand me down, give me a place to be

— Nick Drake, “Place To Be”

...thy hook
spares the next swath and all its twinèd flowers...

— John Keats, “Ode to Autumn”

Mission

I return to the Midwest as light
returns to a black hole, having
thought itself sufficiently disguised
as music, hobbling along
on its disparate staff. I've been called
back to describe the trembling
light the granaries can barely contain,
the blades of windmills still
as the petals of pressed flowers,
the horse no one has noticed
has died standing up, who will
not fall until the boy who loved him
points. Then everything collapses:
the granaries explode and send
slivers of light deep into everything,
the windmills spin so fast
they take flight, and the impact
of the horse's fall is so great
it makes its own grave. Then
there is nothing left for me
to do but go up to the boy and gently
crumble the gun of his hand.

Abecedarius

Aunt Harriet, who raised my orphaned grandfather,
Bought me a book called *The Shaker Abecedarius* and inside the front
Cover signed the
Date of my birth and my name so that, upon
Entering the world, I received the alphabet
From a woman I never met, who died before I
Grew old enough to thank
Her, though the book scared me, for
I knew that it had been given me by someone who had
Just died, and so I always associated it with death,
Keeping it hidden beneath my other books,
Looking at it only when something in
Me yearned to be afraid, maybe on one of those
Nights I was sent to my room early for some transgression,
Opening the book to the
Pictures of strange animals and
Quotes from the Shaker faith that
Rhymed and thus remained in my mind, which was the point, I guess,
Shaker children learning morals along with
The alphabet, but the way the book smelled as I lay
Under its menagerie, my
Vision blurry with fatigue and insufficient light,
Was enough to make me pray for forgiveness before I even reached
Xanthos. I associated the smell with Aunt Harriet, who I associated with death: it was a
Yellow smell, like of saved obituaries. And I still don't like going to the
Zoo: an insufficient alphabet when you're desperate to explain.

The Trencher

How it ended up on our farm no one
ever explained. It had come to rest
in their lives and what it might mean
to us boys born to find it sitting there
must never have crossed their minds.

It was as constant to me as any tree.
No, it was even more constant. A tree
moves out in rings but The Trencher
didn't move out in rings or in anything.
It didn't move at all but only grazed

in the silo's shadow, its great claw
curl-flopped forward in the guerilla rye
like the feet of barn pigeons we'd kill
for quarters. Days of a certain gray
we seemed particularly drawn to it.

It was the yellow of machines of
excavation and caution, but where
the paint had peeled off in continent-
shaped patches, rust grew like moss.
When we climbed up on it, our palms

the softest things it knew besides birds,
it must have loved us, and loved
our little bodies that were, combined,
the weight of our father's. One of us
sat on the seat steering, one worked

the pedals, and one kneeled down
at the controls, the dials beseeching
nothing through glass shattered
as if by sea pressure. That was me
kneeling. The oldest, I believed

the correct combination of buttons
pressed and levers pulled might
wake it. Maybe our father had tried
to start it too when he was our age
before he forgot about it completely.

Invariably failing and walking away,

The Trencher seemed disappointed
in us, like a substitute bus driver
who drove me home once, an old
black man who said nothing until

we came to the end of the farm lane.
I was the last one on and I had been
sitting in the way back because
I was shy. Swaying up the swaying
aisle I stood there waiting for him

to open the door and let me out.
Instead he asked me something
having to do with rabbits.
I think he wanted to know
how the hunting in our woods was

and to ask me to ask my father
if he could have permission to hunt
them. Finally, after asking him
to repeat himself three times,
he said, in the clearest voice, "Never

mind." I understood that, at least.
I still remember his bloodshot eyes,
watery with embarrassment. One
day a new trencher came, bright
orange, beautiful in its greased utility.

We were digging a pit into which
we were going to push everything
that would fit. First we tore the silo
down, leaving The Trencher trembling
there naked in the naked sun. Then,

before the pit was full, we pushed
The Trencher in. It made a little hill
of grass I grew up to have to mow.
When I think back on it now, I wonder
what the hell we would have done

had The Trencher started all of a sudden,
rabbits darting out of the grass, mice
spilling from the engine, swallows
pouring from the muffler, our father

running towards us in exuberance

or anger and the claw lifting from
the earth like an old man lifting
his hand to rub his eyes. Now, mine
claws a pen in praise of a thing I
am grateful I couldn't wake. It lies

there still, The Trencher, fetal
under that poisoned knoll
like something waiting to be
born. And those woods are gone
quick with rabbits.

Directions for How to Use Crest Whitening Strips

The rust stains on my teeth are from years
I sucked water from the faucet
of the downstairs farmhouse bathroom.

Every dentist I've ever met with my mouth
wide open (what a way to meet a person)
has suggested I pay to have them polished off.

Last Christmas, my mother bought me a box
of Crest Whitening Strips. At night I would
lie down and lay them across my teeth

like bandages and read Frost. I was living
in my parents' barn, obsessed with what
"Directive" means. Perhaps I was looking too

deeply into those lines *Here are your waters
and your watering place. Drink and be whole
again beyond confusion.* Some nights I would

forget to take them off. To think now of how
all the winter night my teeth were whitening
in my dark mouth...I suppose I should tell you that

yes they work, though not much. The stains
are still noticeable, though probably to no one
but my mother and I. But do I regret those days

I ran into the house, some tick my mother
would find weeks later already beginning
to burrow into and drink from my soft, blood-

shelled scalp, to turn my face sideways to fill
my mouth with that water that was always
the same wonderful cold no matter whether

it was summer or winter? Of course I don't.
I just smile and bear the rust of whatever
was distilled in that limestone well.

The farm having been sold, this rust is the only
thing I still carry from that place, and I carry
it literally, by the skin of my teeth.

Autumn's Velocity

An egg-shaped acre of the lower night is lit
and they drive in in droves, their faces sea-
green with radio, to watch the last rage
and violence of adolescence burn itself out
in the bodies of boys who, years from now,
having become their fathers, will come
to watch their sons do the same, and on
and on like this forever. They agreed upon
this night and town years before and descend
upon it now, driving down its Main Street slow
in the long shadow of a defeat suffered decades
ago, remembering a late hit or well-aimed spit.
And so they meet on this predetermined field
and hour in the bodies of their sons to settle
something impossible to settle. The sonless
ones either stay home listening to it on battered
radios or remain in the bleacher-shadows, picking
a number for a son for the night, rooting him on
as if it is their blood that purls in his body. But first
the band, those sons and daughters who, told to
take up instruments, have begun to become
obsessed with them. They march in militarily,
the music angular, incantatory, the drums booming
like distant canons, the music the music of a field
more ancient and ragged than this one. The loud-
speaker speaks and the voice of the local mechanic
reaches into the oak grove where boys who don't
care who wins smoke. Beyond the egg of light
in which a violence is incubating and beyond even
the smoking boys is darkness, tools of harvest
left in fields taken two months before, legendarily
huge and elusive deer, and something unnamable.
Bleachers full, the crowd shifts and breathes, hot
chocolates steaming so that the crowd creates
a kind of weather. Flasks are pulled from pockets
and passed around tight pockets of men, some
mother invariably muttering, “For God's sake
this is a Catholic school,” but where there will be
violence there will be whiskey, and they take
the shots hard like soldiers about to have a limb
sawn off. Indeed, watching their sons play is
like watching some part of themselves breaking
off and becoming winged. Across the field

the visitor stands are smaller but full. It is
a big game and in that other town almost no
one walks down the dark and leaf-strewn streets.
The visiting team comes out first, their cleats
clicking on the asphalt like the hooves of a cavalry,
helmets glaring, savage-looking in their foreignness,
though they're just boys from the next town north
trotting around a rectangle of grass. Programs flutter
out and the air is alive with their Midwestern names.
For the senior this will be the last autumn his last
name will be in the mouths of another town,
his last chance to be interviewed for the paper,
to get free breakfast at the cafe in praise of the hit
or catch he will or won't make tonight. Soon
he'll be one of the watchers, clinging to the chain-
link fence; then, older, standing in the shadows
beside the bleachers, picking a kid about his size
and speed to breathe through. Some are aware
that soon all all this will be will be a memory,
especially those whose fathers drove them hardest:
for these, each second rings with the knowledge
they are nearing the end. There are those who,
no matter how good they are, can't wait for this
last game to be over, who would, if they could,
join the boys smoking in the oaks, who, hearing
something in the corn, have turned their backs
to the game. But now the home team appears
and the crowd is standing on its collective foot
and it is inevitable: the game must be played.
What took the home team so long was the prayer,
the boys kneeling as if receiving absolution,
and in a way they were, though what sins
they were being absolved of it is difficult to say.
Maybe it was the sin of being sons at all. Tonight
they have been asked to be great for the sake
of their aging fathers. If the bleachers were empty
they would play with the giddiness of boys. Instead,
because their fathers are watching, they approach
the field solemnly, despite the fact that they are
sprinting now. Deep in the masks their faces are
pale, as if it is perfectly possible they could die.

Dean

They found his father dead in the machine
shed, holding a monkey wrench in his hand
as if trying to adjust to the changes, and sent
some men down the road to where he was
cutting hay to tell him what had happened.

They found him with half his body under the blades,
trying to unclog the hay that had been too wet to mow.

“Dean, you wanna come up from under there
for a second we got ta tell you something.”

“I can hear just as good from down here.”

“Alright then, Dean, well I hate to have to
tell you this but your Dad died...Dean?”

“I heard you.”

“Now why doncha go on home, your Ma's all by herself.”

“How's that any different from what it's been like all these years?”

“Come on now Dean, just go home.”

It was really clogged and the wrench he had
wasn't the right size to loosen the bolts
of the blades but he pretended it fit, knocking
the wrench around to make it sound
like he was making progress, just so
he could stay under there awhile longer,
just to lay in the cool and bruised hay.

Aerial Photograph, Glasser Farm, 1972

From here, the silo is open to the sky:
one can see the black grain it contains.
Roofs also, damaged by hail that hurried
through here like a boy throwing stones
at an abandoned greenhouse. That one
there is the roof of the old Glasser house,
its windows dark, but maybe old Glasser
is in there, leaning over the porcelain sink,
raising his head at the sound of the copter
while in the air above him the photograph
of his farm is taken. But it's impossible
to know whether Glasser is living there.
One could pay a visit to the Stephenson
County Historical Society and consult
the ledgers of old land claims, turning
the brittle shale of their pages but all
we have is this photograph and we must
trust it. It was taken before I was born,
maybe before you were and it is, after
all, all we have. It must be November
or March because the fields are open
from fall or spring plowing. But what
do you make of this washed-out lane
that looks as if it may have been paved
with shells brought inland in great difficulty?
Why does it gleam so whitely and flow
through the farm like a river conscripted
for the commerce of pesticides? And see
driving down it that white car I'm sure
has been buried since in one of the many
heaps of junked cars one sees set back
in the woods of the Midwest? It is sheer
surface, as the lane is. But if you look
closely, there are moments of depth here,
where the eye of the camera has plunged
through the missing shingles of the barn
to show us the dark baled hay, and here
the root cellar dug into the haymow hill
where potatoes are tapping their canes
down the white roads of their blindness.
I can see down the chimney to the nothing
that burns there. And I can almost see
the names on the gravestones in the family

plot. But this distance is our only privilege,
and the privilege is only ours. I know
the photographer is descending to spend
the night in a dark room, that in the morning
he will drive down this lane, the framed
photograph resting on his lap, and knock
on the door, that Glasser will rise and answer.
Nodding at the man's offer, he will turn
away to find his wallet in a pair of chair-
flung blue jeans and buy the photograph
of his farm back from the man who has
taken it. After the man leaves he will set it
down on the kitchen table so that the idea
of his farm, which he will keep forever,
is framed by his farm, which he must lose.
And then he will wait until evening when,
finally ready, he will steady a nail
against the blank plaster wall, another
nail clenched between his lips, and hang
the photograph, curator of his own life.

Jane Addams' Grave

Offered burial in the National Cathedral beside Woodrow Wilson
where you would have rested forever beneath government-
funded bouquets and the murmurings of mothers explaining
incorrectly to their children who you were before shuffling
a few paces over to stand above the wren-colored ashes of Helen
Keller, you decided, on behalf of your body, to be buried
in the family plot in Cedarville, Illinois where no one
visits you but lonely high school history teachers and boys
like myself, doomed to have been born within a mile
of your birthplace and your grave and who, exploring
the limestone caves along that stretch of the Pecatonica,
accidentally stumble upon your obelisk, the only obelisk
in that cemetery of low, gnawed tombstones bearing the fading
names of farmers and the Union dead. Nor would you suffer
the honor of being remembered for winning the Nobel Prize
but penned your own epitaph *Jane Addams of Hull House*
as if you were one of those recently arrived men swaying
through the doors seeking anything, a meal, a handshake,
a simple glance of welcome. No one bows in obeisance
to you, or to Woodrow Wilson. A few will stoop to read
the Braille of Keller's tomb, and that is good, and as
it should be. But none bow to you, not even the lonely
history teacher who has driven all night from Ellsworth,
Nebraska to give you a rose, who drops it with a gesture that,
from a distance and to a boy, might appear dismissive,
or dramatic, or both, and who, when people ask her
back in Ellsworth where she was, says she was sick.

Stephenson County Fair In Wartime

The man taking tickets fantasizes
he's taking souls, and maybe he is.
He takes mine, tears it in half
and hands me the lesser part.

The man running the Ferris wheel
has a tattoo of a spider spinning
a web on his arm: as he starts it
spinning yet again he imagines

himself a spider and the lovers
captured flies: he thinks of their blood
as something sweet and commingled.
The man who hands the kid

the BB gun assumes he'll hit one,
maybe two of the dented targets.
The stuffed animal he's trying to win
for the girl standing behind him

cost half as much as the kid pays
to play for it. But then, as if suddenly
realizing that the man is taking
advantage of his desire to take

the girl's virginity, the kid swings
the gun towards him slow and says,
softly, “Bang," and everyone
around them stops breathing,

and the Ferris wheel stops spinning,
and the couple at the very top
stop kissing, realizing, suddenly,
how alone they are, and far from earth.

Romeo and Juliet In the Tomb

After, in the darkness of the tomb,
after the fathers of the two families
had passed one another in the street
and exchanged condolences, after
but before the first ravages
of death undid their beauty, as when,
unthinking, a poor woman reaches back
and unties her apron, before anything
could be said to be over but after
the playwright had moved on
to his next play, after
the actors had gone
to the tavern still slightly not
themselves, still moving and speaking
in the ways of their characters,
after the actor who'd played him
and the actor who'd played her
had stood for a moment embarrassed
on the terrace outside the Globe
before the Globe burned, wondering
if what they felt was real love
or just a common and deep belief
in the power of becoming another,
after they decided they didn't know,
weren't sure, and went on walking
together without touching
through London, in no particular
direction, over the bridges
that vault the Thames like horses,
the real Romeo and the real Juliet,
lying finally in the peace
of the forgotten, turned towards
one another and because
their god had left them nothing
to say, said nothing.

#43

A farmer asks no one
out loud whose blood
spatters his barn wall.

In the kitchen his wife
Margie is kindly drowning
the doves of her hands.

“We're gonna have to stand at the end
of the lane Margie and turn
the tricker-treaters away.

Someone's gone and shot 43
looks like. Now why
would somebody do that?”

“And how did we not hear it?”

“I heard it but it was
way back deep in a dream.”

“Come to think of it I think
it woke me but I thought it
was the barn door slamming.”

“Come on now Margie
you know I keep all doors
latched tight
nights windy as these.”

Bingo

The night before the river won the bingo game
by rising up suddenly in its secondhand corduroy suit,
the arms of which were too short, to fill the square
of every acre, they sat playing bingo while the rain
lashed the windows like a jockey and the cars
swung the motion sickness of their fists at the dark
like drunk pugilists and the town grocer kept his store open
two hours later than usual to give the people a chance
to stock up for the big storm and if you'd been walking
down a street in that town that night you'd have noticed
that all the rooms were lit blue as jazz clubs with the radar of it
and the people in the bingo hall were talking about it
in the silence between coordinates and whoever won big
that night was forgotten. And when they walked out
they had to confront the brute fact of the flood, the way drunks
walking out of a bar are confronted with the fact of space,
the rain coming down now in long cords like the chords
of a church organ, the rumble of the river which was like the sound
of a train coming at you through a tunnel before its light reaches you.
There were those who had left for the high country with what
they could carry, but they had packed in shame in the night
because of the myth that the river could feel fear
and that the worst floods were after the mass evacuations,
that later those people would return to find that the river
had taken over their houses like an occupying army,
that it had thumbed through the diaries of their daughters,
that it had drunk all the liquor and replaced it with sand,
that it had put on the women's clothes like a cross-dresser,
that it had climbed the stairs like an alcoholic father
only to find no one to beat up on in the attic,
that it had sat in the bathtub for four days in its own filth,
that it had also flooded the New England town depicted on the wallpaper,
that it had interred the graves of relatives its grandfather had killed,
that it had put on cowboys boots too small for its feet and danced on the table
to some banjo song of death that has never been sung above water,
that it had written itself into the will and named itself the sole inheritor of everything,
that it had put its head in the stove and stabbed itself in the heart with several knives
and swallowed forty aspirin and hadn't died, that it had not died
when it left but simply wrote its number on the fridge in mud
and went back to bed to roll and pitch in fitful sleep for another twenty years.
But we were speaking of the night before the flood, the night the man who won big
in bingo walked across the street to buy a round for the sandbaggers.

Seth

My cousin lives in Manhattan now. When I see him
Christmases in the dying town
we both escaped, he says he cannot fall asleep
in the quiet of Stephenson Street and when
he finally does, it isn't long before the silence
wakes him and he lies there fearing the world
has ended. I don't believe the world ending
will sound like Freeport, Illinois but nodding
I say nothing. His tie hangs like a pendulum
gone mysteriously still in a closed museum.
His office looks down, he is saying,
on Rockefeller Center. All December
the tree blazes, bedecked in the holiday roar
my cousin can't hear anymore, my cousin
for whom noise is silence and silence noise.
Now, in the room his mother keeps clean
even though she knows it will be months
before he comes home to hold, twice,
her frail body marbled by varicose veins,
he lies awake the way I would if I were
in Manhattan. If any house is going to burn,
let it burn tonight. If anyone is going to wake
to find they can't feel their feet nor speak,
let them wake paralyzed tonight. Then at least
let the house that burns be foreclosed and empty
and the stroke that freezes be temporary.
But my cousin Seth's eyes are still open: he is
a little boy waiting for his lullaby.

Egypt

In the cracked canopic jar packed
in sand, the forgotten pharaoh's heart
contracts and expands. In all that desert,
what does it beat for? Marooned so far
from limbs it once flushed full with blood,
limbs last fleshed long before Christ was,
long stricken into bone by now, could
its beating mean anything beyond
the context of its chest? Is it not as
music in the ears of the deaf? But when
the rock the boy in Tahrir Square throws
glances off the scarab-faced tank,
the great gun swings its hollow length
towards him, and the heart stops.

A Refusal To Mourn The Birth Of My Cousin's Little Boy

Yesterday my cousin's wife gave birth
to a little boy with Down's Syndrome.
We'd known for months it was likely
he'd have it, based on the music of his heart.
Just five months ago I shook their hands
at the wedding. It was clear how happy
they were: when they weren't shaking
hands their hands sought one another's.
No one knew then. No one would have
blamed them if they would have ended
his life before it began. We would have
nodded and said to one another but never
to them, “It's for the best.” But they didn't
and yesterday their little boy was born.
I know there was a night they must have
decided, after the doctor heard the music
with holes in it and sat staring for a moment
at nothing, listening with the stethoscope
in his ears like a lonely man listening
to classical music in the Borders of
a snowy city, and, sighing, took them off
and told them what it was he was hearing.
I know there was a night they had to
choose. And I don't know but want to
believe that they each took a pen
and piece of paper and went into two
separate rooms as the last snow of winter
fell into Chicago, and that one waited
a moment longer than the other
before writing, and that when they came
back together into the same room lit
only by snow and the moon they agreed
that no matter what the other had written
there would be no blame. And when
they handed each other their answers
and saw by the snowlight they were
the same, Death died, and a boy
was to be born, a boy as holy as any
Christ or any of us, who will live,
I know, with more joy than most of us,
and who will be loved as much
as whomever it is loves us loves us.

Hooky

In homeroom she sat and traced
her veins in blue ink while he,
famous for the fact that he was
already smoking, watched her.
Although the supervisor made them
sit as far apart as possible it was
inevitable and everyone knew it
was only a matter of time before one
day both were absent. I knew he was
driving, tobacco smoke suspended
in his lungs like a rare blue moth
while she sat wide-eyed beside him
taking the wild orphaned landscape in.

Field Trip

Where are we going?
Lovely ones we're going
through streets
swept by curfew, a daisy
chain of hands
from curb to curb.

Where are we going?
My children we're going
past the stilled millwheel
holding its nineteen
mugs of water, one
for each of you.

Where are we going?
My darlings we're going
with a black branch walking
over hidden water.
We are going
to have to be very quiet.

Where are we going?
Little girl we're going
to a meadow where
flowers die
into butterflies and butterflies
into flowers.

Where are we going?
Saintly child we're going
to ring the bells
of milk cows
lifting their heads, their mouths
full of blades.

Where are we going?
Someone's daughter we're going
with paper stars eclipsing
our hearts we're
going
to have to be brave.

Where are we going?

Sweet ones we're going
to count the baby
teeth of the bone
saw, then bury
the number.

Where are we going?
Someone's son we're going
to donate our shoes
to the earth because she is
barefoot and cold and has
to walk day and night.

Where are we going?
Little boy we're going
to the station where
the train is breathing
like distance
runners in their sleep.

Where are we going?
Little ones we're going
to the green room, the room
where all your ancestors are.
There's space for you
near the ceiling.

The Poolroom

I dreamt of a poolroom in a mansion
sometime after one of the great wars
that were supposed to be, each of them,
the last war. It was a small room,
just large enough for the pool table
and the mustachioed man leaning over it,
squinting down the length of a cue stick
the way one sights down the barrel
of a gun in the company of friends
in peacetime. Someone had already
broken and I had the distinct feeling
they weren't coming back, that now
he was going to have to play the game
out alone. Except I was there. Except
he didn't seem to notice me, so intently
was he staring down the length
of the cue. Maybe it was I who
broke. It doesn't matter. They were
well-spaced like spheres in an astronomy
diagram, the planets signified by color
rather than size, colors like those of old
maps of Europe. And that man seemed
a kind of god, poised to bash the spheres
against one another, to sink them all
in those pockets dark as the pocket
a man pulls his watch from to record
the time in a shaky hand in a little book.
But for some reason the man seemed
incapable of shooting: he just kept
gouging out the pale blue eye socket
of the chalk, gauging his shot. And
maybe out of boredom my attention
drifted to the tall windows suffering
cataracts of cobwebs as if it had been
years since anyone had dusted them,
then to the wallpaper with its pattern
like a young engineer scrawls along
the margins of notes he's quit taking
on the *metacentre*, then to a painting
on the wall, hung in a gilded frame,
of an iceberg, cerulean blue save
for a smudge of red paint along its base,
as if of whale blood, or dusk light.

And it seems to me remembering it
now the only way the painter could
have painted it with any accuracy is if
he'd been standing on the bow of a ship
that was just about to ram into it.
The mustachioed man had turned
away from the table and was looking
at it, too, or maybe it would be better
to say we were both looking *through*
it because it had begun to seem more
like a window than a painting. And
indeed at first imperceptibly and then
faster and faster the iceberg grew
until the whole frame was filled
with that blue that was like the other-
worldly blue that sometimes powders
the fingers of lepidopterists when,
after a long day of netting, they finally
sit down to list what new species
they've gassed, and then the room
was listing, the mustachioed man
and I clutching at anything we could
hold on to, the chandelier swaying,
the spiders scurrying up their webs
like sailors into the rigging, the billiard
balls rolling around wildly before
disappearing, one by one, into the dark
pockets. And as the room began to fill
with cold seawater the color of green
glass, the mustachioed man seemed
to see me for the first time. Leaning there
on his cue in the rapidly rising water,
he looked proud, as if he'd sunk them all
with his eyes closed, with a single shot.

The Battlefield

Before the armies came, before they were
even formed, the land began preparing,
as when in a room the windows of which
have been left open to sunlight and wind
the marriage bed prepares itself, the colors
of the quilt deepen. Years before, the streams
were burying themselves deeper. Once
or twice a year a boulder rolled downhill,
splintering young trees: afterwards the air
smelled like lightning though there had been
none. Trees fell. The wind took these
and whatever farmer owned the woodlot
would go out with his son or sons and stare
at the tree as if it were a sign of grace.
They'd let it season a winter or two
before cording it, though some forgot
about it entirely and the tree became a part
of the order of things. Without knowing
they were, the farmers were preparing
for the battle, too. They built their barns
right where the wounded would need shelter.
When the generals came they would find
the house a good headquarters, centrally
located, with a good chandelier hanging
over a good kitchen table, just big enough
for the battle map, and in that light
they would look beautiful, with a light
in their eyes that would make the orderlies
say later they knew which ones were going
to die the next day. One farmer spent
one whole summer building a stone wall
as if he knew what it would be used for
and was going to build it one layer higher
but it had been a foul year and the cattle
were too starved to get out and anyway
he'd have to go all the way down to the dry
streambed to get more stones, so he left
the wall a little short and went in where
his son sat at the kitchen table whittling
a gun halfheartedly. Years later, when
the battle came like a moth to the flame,
the boy began to recognize the old land-
marks of home. When he kneeled behind

the stone wall he didn't peer through the smoke
as the others did but at the wall, recognizing
the stonework of his father. Trusting it,
he let the other half of his heart, the half
with which he hadn't been whittling that toy
gun all those years before, rise above the wall
where there should have been a stone, setting
his heart upon the wall as if it were one.

The Equation

He has solved it so many times before
he almost trusted the chalk to walk his hand
along the board as if upon a plain, but all
of a sudden something went out in him,
not like a bulb, but like something he did
not know was capable of going out:
a moon, maybe. No, not a moon: a moon
thins before it goes out. More like a child
who goes out into a dark so suddenly
dark it makes him nauseous, like someone
went out *from* him, onto the green-black
plain dusted with the snow of the chalk.

He stands there still, the class hushed,
expectant, holding their judgment back
like a boxer after the bell, waiting for him
to finish. But he just stares at the figures
that seem so strange now, like cattle
sheds on the Plains, like buildings built
so some specific violence might be done
to voiceless things. The numbers are cattle
sheds while the erasures, still faintly visible,
are the foundations of vanished houses.

A cough lodges in his back like a hatchet
in a tree but cannot raise him from where
he is: a boy walking out of a dark house
into the darker dark, sobbing. Then
he is freed even of that. The bell rings.

Forty men wearing blood-covered clothes
walk out to cold pickups in the dawn.

The Ferry

Returning from the island at dusk
it is only the pilot, the doctor, and myself,
a poet. The pilot may as well be dead
because we all know the ferry is
crawling along on long greenish chains
that run under the water, each link
the size of my body. The pilot
doesn't seem to be doing much,
his steering arbitrary. Occasionally
he pulls a lever that shivers
a long beam of light out
over the choppy waters so
of course we need him.
And yet I get the impression
he isn't getting paid, that whoever
employed him is long dead
and that he does his job now
out of a sense of obligation,
knowing the ferry is sluggishly obedient
to the green chains.

I mentioned the other man
is a doctor. He works
in the clinic on the island and it turns
out is strangely immune to leprosy.
He keeps his hands
hidden in the pockets of his great
white coat out of habit but someone
might assume he keeps them hidden
out of shame. The worthless coin
of his stethoscope hangs
from his neck. As if my noticing it
reminds him of its existence, he does
a strange thing: he puts the earpieces
in his ears, then presses the cold coin
to his chest, moving it from place
to place as if unable to hear his heart.

When he finally finds it he seems
relieved, as relieved as a heroin
addict who finally finds the vein. He closes
his eyes, moving his lips a little
as if, instead of beating, his heart

is saying something he must try to remember.
After awhile he takes the earpieces out,
sits back against the wooden seat
and sighs. He looks very tired. He's spent
the day with people who are eroding
away and now he is going home
to an empty house. What woman
would want those hands
that have touched what flesh
they've touched to touch hers?
I feel sorry for him and want
him to know it but he hasn't so
much as glanced at me,
as if I'm not here,
as if I'm a ghost.

The ferry, named “The Fairy,”
groans on its green chains.
When the doctor
dies this very ferry will bear
his body back to the island
where the lepers will bury him.
They all love him, but the one
who loves him most won't be there.
Some evening she will come alone,
trying not to crush
the tender stems of flowers
clenched between her teeth.

The Harrington's

The paper claimed when the grain
bin burst the Harrington's were
asleep, suggesting they didn't suffer.

But Mike Harrington had just lain down
and because he was a grain farmer
lay awake thinking about what grain
farmers always think about: grain.

And Judy Harrington lay turned away
from him, also not asleep, thinking
how to mix watercolor to get
a shade like that of violets dying.

And Sarah Harrington lay staring
up at the ceiling, thinking of the boy
her mother loved and her father
approved of, his corn silk hair.

And Sam Harrington had just turned
the lamp on again to read one last
chapter in his book about dinosaurs.
It was one of those big picture books.
He had it propped up against his knees,
a picture of a brontosaurus
spreading across both pages.

Memoir of My Imaginary Sister

Growing up in a world of men,
she was tougher than all of us combined.
She never brushed her hair. Some
evenings our mother would come
downstairs with her brass brush, begging
to brush it for her, for her hair was beautiful,
long and golden. When she was younger
our father called her Rapunzel but she grew
to despise the name. Sometimes she'd
say no when our mother asked her
if she could brush her hair.
Watching her climb back up those stairs
after she had been denied
with that brush that had been her
mother's and her mother's mother's
was the saddest thing. My sister
wasn't coldhearted, she just loved horses
more than people. She spoke of Montana
as if it were the only place where there
were horses and where, when you died,
you became a horse and everyone
just smiled, like when a boy
says he wants to be an astronaut.
But she meant it when she said
she was moving there. The night before
she left she came downstairs and let
our mother brush her hair one last time.
“Just like Rapunzel,” our father said
under his breath, a mischievous look
in his eye. She allowed it. That night
she and I stayed up long after everyone
had gone to bed, listening to the radio.
In the morning she was gone before anyone
could say goodbye. My parents went out
West once to see her but came back shaking
their heads. She'd met a man who called
himself a cowboy and lived with him
on what he called a ranch where they kept
what he called two horses. She worked
waiting tables at a diner in town and he,
he claimed, worked cattle. To this day
I haven't heard from her but I know
I had a sister once because I found

my mother's brush in a drawer one day
and saw matted there hair the color of gold
or of straw ready to bale.

Letter to My Father Written in a Bar in Mitchell, South Dakota

When you were my age you passed through
these towns on the wheat harvest, drank
in this bar, got served beer by this bartender
who was a young woman then, and beautiful:
thirty years dragging the same cigarette
through her lungs like freight has ruined her
looks: thirty years feeling the same bottle
of beer sweat in her hand, she's not what
she was those nights you and Dale wore
your cowboy boots and hats and shirts
and leaned against this bar gashed with stars
and drank until the brown bottles seemed
grain silos on a horizon, her cigarette
good enough for a sunset. There are still
a few tunes in this jukebox you might
have played, bought with the dimes
your sweat became. You blew it all
on beer and Grateful Dead songs, singing
at the apex of your lungs *Driving that train*
high on cocaine Casey Jones you better
watch your speed, then stumbling across
the road to the motel where your boss
lay drowned under a downpour of snores.
It was the first leg of harvest: the whole
summer lay ahead of you, all
of Kansas, Texas, all those miles
of road and acres of wheat. Dale's
death was small then: it was a moon-
shaped disk of ice on some country road
in Missouri half a summer and an autumn
and half a winter away. How could either
of you have seen it? You slept in the same bed
shirtless in your blue jeans like brothers.

Autumn

My first love was a girl named Autumn.
Autumn played soccer, she was the goalie,
and her denial was beautiful. No one scored
on her all year until the last game. I remember her
mascara running down her face as she walked
off the field. We sat in her car and I tried
to console her. Autumn worked at Kmart.
I would go see her nights she was closing
and help her check the aisles for customers.
There was never anyone and sometimes
we'd make-out in the fishing gear. Autumn
had red hair and, already, her mother's hips.
I made love to Autumn that winter on a hay bale
on my father's farm, after which we itched for
days and made love thenceforth in her bed
while her parents watched TV. Autumn's father
worked at a factory so he could come home
and watch TV. He never said a word. I thought
he hated me. Autumn's mother, on the other hand,
she loved me. Some nights Autumn would go
to her room and I would stand in the kitchen
and make her mother laugh. I know she knew
I was sleeping with her daughter and I know
she hoped we would do the right thing
and get married. Autumn had a brother named
Dylan, named after Bob Dylan. One night
Dylan walked in on Autumn and me making love
on the screen porch. Autumn told me
I had to go and talk to him. He was standing
in the kitchen, red-faced, peeling an orange.
“Dylan, Autumn and I...” “I know,” he said.
“Dylan, I'm sorry.” One day at the grocery store
the woman ringing Autumn up said, "Honey,
you're pregnant. I can see it clear as day.”
Autumn came home and told me. I laid
my head on her stomach. It made a sound.
She was hungry. There was nothing in it,
not even a baby. Autumn pretended she was
relieved but I think she was disappointed.
That fall I went away to college and she moved
to Chicago to become a masseuse. We tried
to stay together that first year, to make it
work, but she spent her days with her hands

on the bodies of other men, and I spent my
nights studying meiosis. Autumn and I
broke up in the spring over the phone.
We shouted at each other because it was easier
that way. To this day I've never loved anyone
the way I loved Autumn. She was the one I lost
my virginity to on a hay bale my father made.

Interlude

In my late twenties I began to turn
away from everything I've ever loved.
I grew bitter like tea left on a sill

during an eclipse. People noticed,
suggested I eat more, drink less,
do pilates, see a therapist.

I went to see a therapist. He said,
“Do you wish your father was dead?”
Then he said, “Is it an issue for you

that I'm black?” I left his office
and drove out to the Reservoir
where I knew everything

was simple and would ask me nothing.
Nothing asked me if I wished
my father were dead. Nothing

asked me if the color it was offended me.
But back in the world, the question
came up again: what was wrong

with me? My folks told me I should
“look forward to all the opportunities”
I have ahead of me, but all I saw

was the other date, debt, attempts
at singing, mingled joy and sorrow
as when light and shadow dance

on a canvas, mocking the painter.
In other words, I didn't see much
I haven't seen before, aside from

my reflection in the visors of riot police,
medallions, degrees, a woman
whose face was a blur of beautiful

features like the first rough outlines
of an opera inspired by snow. Sure
I knew these things could draw me

through the common book of days
but always there was the gnawing
sense I was fleeing something.

So I turned around and saw,
standing there, the boy I once was,
and not to scare him but I got down

on my knees and apologized, because
one thing is certain: the life I have
been living is my childhood's hell.

If nothing else I want it to be
my childhood's heaven. After all,
it's not fair, after all it has taken

to be here, to decline one's life
like a glass of tap water.

*

I almost died in a concentration
camp, in the sperm of my grandfather,
in the eggs of my grandmother,

in 1944. But my great-grandfather,
who my mother still claims was
the meanest man who ever lived,

fled to New York, then Chicago, long
before it was a crime to be a Jew.
I also almost died in a four-poster

in the back bedroom of a thatch-roofed
hut on the western coast of Ireland
inside a woman too weak to give

birth to my great-great-grandfather,
the stench of rotten potatoes in her hair.
Her body would have been his grave

and I would have had nothing to do
with this world. It really is a miracle
we're here at all. Thomas Merton said

if we realized this the only problem
would be we'd all be bowing down
to each other all the time,

blocking doorways and fire escapes.

*

The water towers that stand at the edge
of each town, that is where the grief-
water is stored. It is dark and tastes

of containment and metal. And in one house
the swan-necked faucets drip all night,
helping the young nurse find the vein.

Varicose lightning veins the sky. The train
of the thunder is always late. In the cellar,
the spiders all have hung themselves

in their own houses, by their own hair.
The planchette of the storm passes over
the right answer and right off the board.

*

Christ tried to come back through the legs
of a teenage girl in Fort Kearney, Nebraska
but was disposed of in a grain bin

because she couldn't figure out how
she was going to support him. The Mary
of our age takes extra shifts at Dairy

Queen. Each snowflake is a unique love
letter from God written in an arcane hand
no one can make meaning of. Things

offer themselves to us every day. No hunter
ever killed a deer who didn't choose to
walk into the truculent moon of the gun's

range, not out of martyrdom, but to
give the man a reason to kneel

beside his wide-eyed son and show him

the curled unborn fawn inside her.

*

I'm sorry I ever asked my friend
if I could keep this photograph
of his younger sister. The other day

she fell out of the pages of *The Letters
of James Agee to Father Flye*.
She'd been holding my place

all these years and I never thanked her.
She's as beautiful as I remember her
being and I'm happy to see her again

but for the first time it strikes me
as strange that here I am in America
with a picture of my friend's sister,

who lives in Germany and who must
not even know I exist. It's creepy,
really. I thought at the time I asked him

for it it was no different from wishing
to keep anything beautiful, a pine cone
or a photograph of pines or a memory

of pines, but now I know I should
never have taken it. I want to give it
back to him but I don't know where

he is or how to find him or to find her.
Until I do, I've put her back in the pages
of this book, which I just happened to

open to a letter in which Agee writes,
“If I were a beautiful child I'd want
my choice of whose eyes were on me.”

*

The chaplain is carried into the church,

his hand still raised in benediction.
Falling through midair, her cell

phone rings. They lay him gently
in the pew. In the night for no reason
the Jenga game on the coffee table falls.

*

There is plenty of room for the dead.
With each footstep we leave
entire worlds to them. They move

into the tenements time evicts us
from. We keep them up all night
singing and dancing in the floors

above, and their brooms don't
quite reach the ceiling.

*

The moon belongs equally tonight
to the banker nodding that the wine
is alright and to the man asleep

in the five walls of a TV box.
The young couple watching the TV
are watching a show in which the moon

makes a guest appearance. Remembering
there is such a thing as the moon,
they pause the show and go out

onto the balcony. The banker, a little
drunk, leaves a dollar on the front
flap of the TV box, and the man

in the moon feels less lonely.

*

There are stranger sounds than the sound
a mason jar of cold milk makes
being placed on a tombstone. There is,

for instance, the sound of the under-
taker's breathing as he resumes digging,
the gasps of his spade in the soil,

the sound of thunder and the sound
the murder makes alighting upon
the outstretched arms of the scarecrow.

*

The deer my brother shot abound
in my dreams. Though red sand pours
always from their wounds like the sand

of hourglasses shattered in a world
in which time has been outlawed,
they feel no pain. And when the bucks

lie down at night their antlers become
those oaks that hail you from far off,
the ones you would lie down beneath

were you not going beyond them
to check the snare of the moon,
crossing your fingers you've failed.

*

The spring rain is a church
organ moved from parish
to parish in a godless time.

In the same town, a skeleton
key picks a lock, enters a room,
deadbolts the door, and falls

asleep on top of the sheets
with its shoes on. But when death
blows its bruised trumpet

in his ear, a man wakes wide up
from the dream of his life and walks
barefoot into the roses of the wallpaper.

*

An old man dying is not a moonset.
An old man dying doesn't rage against
the dying of the light, but is the light

itself dying. Dying, my grandfather
surprised the nurses with his strength
because he *was* the November dusk

he was dying in, was that hour when
the toyless mobiles of the branches tear
at day's hem and beg her to stay and all

manners are lost in the blusterous rush
of dying. Things that should have been said
are snowed under the blizzard of the bed-

side Bible. Sons stand before vending
machines, their lives atrophied to choices
over which candy bar to buy. Dying

is always more ridiculous than poets
wish to admit. Elegies have resulted
in more deaths than lightning strikes have.

*

It's clear not everything was meant to go
underground. Much is carried into old
daylight. Wearing the shirts of the dead

is one way, I suppose, to do it. I didn't
inherit my grandfather's work shirts.
Exactly nothing of mine was his

though everything that was his is mine.
I haven't been to his grave in years
but I've written him nine hundred

and seventy-two poems on winter
windowpanes I have breathed upon.

*

Nights the blinds would drag the river
of my body with their nets of light
and shade and find nothing were nights

I was gone. Though I lay as still in bed
as any body upon a bier,
if death were to have come to hush

the long vowel of my life he would have
been disappointed to find I was
as a cicada shell clinging to an elm.

*

It's just as likely that God is an aging
mechanic living in Paso Robles,
California as it is that He is God.

It's just as likely that we've all already
died and that this is the highly-touted
afterlife. Next autumn I'll be thirty

whether this is the afterlife or not
and while no I don't want my father
to die I still won't have told him

I love him in my own voice.
I've only ever told him I love him
in ink because I am in love with how

beautifully silent on a page it is.

*

Many have died. So many cattle have
died some nights I wake to find
massive herds grazing on my chest.

Their bodies are lunar atlases hung
in the bedrooms of astronauts
who didn't get to go. They graze

out of habit, not to be sustained.
Most all of the hired hands have died.
In death they've been given

their hands back like collateral
they forgot they were ever
asked to provide. The hands

attach a little crookedly at the wrist
and have minds of their own
as when a couple comes back

from years overseas and is the bane
of every dinner party. Several horses
are dead, including Lady, the oldest

mare in the history of Stephenson
County, who, those last years, stood
as if taxidermized, her back left hoof

slightly raised, her mane like a band
of rain desperately needed but that's
sure to miss. My cousin died, surfing

on the hood of a car, far from any sea.
Many are spelunking headlampless.

*

When you grow up on a farm
your growth is measured by cornstalks
and by the calves that live and die

in the long chime of your life.
Whole harvests throw themselves
through the mows of your eyes.

Autumn passes through the lax
checkpoint of your heart and you
grow accustomed to saying *no*

to precisely nothing. If you were to
have denied one single thing
how could anything have survived?

Even old winter achieves himself
in you: your heart is a shed of free
stalls you must bed down with straw

before mercury and night fall.

*

This century is someone chopping corn
all night in a hollow you thought
was long ago developed into the sub-

division you've moved your young
family into. *Developed.* What a word.
It eclipses *Destroyed* so perfectly:

each letter is asked to put its mask on,
to literally put on a good face. You're
hot and can't sleep. You throw off

the sheets. Your wife's breasts are flat
and hideous due to the way she lies
on her back: they look like they're trying

to hide in her armpits out of terror.
Her nipples are like old Buffalo nickels
they try to sell you in infomercials.

You thought if you kept the yard
butch and the pool filled you could
keep the dead farmers and Indians

from coming up with the tulips.
But every dawn, in that hour when
the factories of the stars are closing

for the change of shifts, you walk out
to the edge of the woods and listen
to the unmistakable sound of acres

and acres of ears being torn from
their stalks. You stand there, bird-
sown, far from harvest, pardoned.

*

All at once an entire cornfield kneels
with a rustle like of homespun clothing

to be knighted. Knock-kneed, arising,

the regiment goes walking over the back-
roads, astonishing farmers who spill
black coffee in their laps and feel

again the warm boyhood sensation
of peeing themselves, stopped
in their trucks like at railroad crossings.

One field heaves into another and
the carnage is massive. The murder
of crows, night's particulate, settles

and rises, settles and rises, a medic
who goes from wounded to wounded
too quickly, looking for his brother.

*

How desperately I wanted to join
the nunnery of violets under all
the oaks of my childhood.

My father would mow over them,
but when he would think of it
he would raise the deck of blades

and they'd only shiver awhile
under the whir, then go still.
Once too I remember walking

over the fresh-mown lawn to find
lashed in grass clippings five
baby rabbits so young their bluish

hearts were visible through their skin.
Something had saved them. If nothing
else, their smallness had saved them.

Summers I'd sit in the swivel chair
and allow Jack the hunchbacked
barber to make me priestly for half

an hour by tying the paper collar

a little too tightly around my scrawny
neck. I was terrified of him,

the starling of the scissors pecking
at my scalp, the long black teeth
of the comb, all the while the tumor

of his back rising doubled in the mirror
like when you're washing your face
in a stream and know you're being

stalked by a mountain. But when
he'd take the brush and dust off
the astonished furniture of my face

I knew he was done and that again
I'd been pardoned, leaving him
to sweep up the clippings

like a monk raking leaves
out of the shadow of his back.

*

Most lost boomerangs are lost
on the first throw, while those
that come back always come back

as if fully intending to behead us.
Either you remember and it hurts
or you forget and have to wait

until your father has reaped the rye,
by which time you have forgotten
what it was you were even looking for.

*

I don't believe one single thing
I have ever written. It's all part
of the long lull-a-bye I've been

singing to myself all my life
like a boy who, thinking he's found
a new shortcut home, finds himself

in the falling dusk in a graveyard
he thought was a park because
where else would so many

trees be allowed to live unmolested?
But then he sees the headstones
scattered like books at an autumn

book sale and, deciding that
the fastest way out is through,
begins humming, then singing,

softly at first, then louder, and
feels comforted by the sound
of his own voice, even as still

it is growing darker, even
as all the dead softly close
their eyes better to hear him.

Elegy for My Cousin Colby

I.
There was a song we used to urge you
to sing it was “Do Wah Diddy Diddy”
it went *There she was just a-walkin'
down the street singin' do wah diddy
diddy dum diddy do* you'd sing it for us
in the summer kitchen filled with light
like watered-down lemonade we knew
the song was about love for there was
something forbidden about your singing
it to us in the strength of your young
voice something about your singing it
that made us admire you and ask you
to sing it again whole summers you sang
Do wah diddy diddy dum diddy do
you sang it over the chasm of your voice
changing sang it before and after you
lost your virginity were you singing
it that night you stood up on the hood
of the car and if so did you sing louder
the faster the car plunged down the hill
or did you make yourself very quiet

II.
I remember watching you rake hay
your bare back beginning to redden
watching you I always had the feeling
you'd rather have been anywhere else
than on a tractor on your father's farm
watching behind you the dry green
wave of hay turn like a woman turning
deep in her sleep or a man turning his
hand in storytelling where you would
have liked to have been instead I can't
say I don't want to say what I think
which is that I think you wanted even
then to die Colby I think maybe you
should have been a painter you needed
to find a way to bleed and you found
a way and I wish it hadn't been that
way the way of real blood and a real
street that it would instead have been

the way I've found to in ink or paint
a page or a canvas but you were in love
with the way the green hay broke
like waves you couldn't tear your eyes away
from it to watch where you were going

III.
In the machine shed you and your sisters
converted a flatbed wagon into a float
for the homecoming parade blasting
“Free Falling” by Tom Petty and the Heart
Breakers you told me the key to making
a float float was to conceal the wheels
so it would appear to hover over the street
you stuffed the diamonds of chicken wire
with napkins spray-painted yellow and blue
what had been built to carry a few hundred
scarecrows-worth of hay was turned into
something to carry you homecoming
king they set a bright crown on your dark
head your features brutally handsome
like Brutus your hair the color of the shade
of knives you wore an umber cloak
held a scepter in my unremembered
myth really you wore your football jersey
probably and threw my pillowcase full
of candy and winked at me and waved

IV.
The night you died was the first warm night
of the year you called your buddies and said
nothing but a place and an hour you called
her and told her you'd be home late and would
she kiss the kids for you she said she would
when she did her kisses were warm while
yours were cold and etched little white roses
on their cheeks it took their blood all night
to color in red and being the Midwest
the only place to go after the bar closed
was out under the stars somewhere where
there was a shore you could have gone
swimming in the ocean and drowned
but in Illinois far from any sea you felt

the need to climb up on the hood of your
buddy's car as if surfing maybe singing
through the windshield the laughter
of your friends like laughter in a silent
film beginning not to laugh beginning
to focus on what it was you were doing
understanding that if you fell you weren't
going to fall into any pillowy greenish sea
but onto the hard asphalt of a dark street
in Freeport Illinois cruelly named for a town
far from any port and far from free
beginning now to sway now to hum
now to sing beginning to fall silent
beginning now to begin to fall
beginning to fall and falling

V.
Since you were buried your father
has visited your grave every day
to tend the flowers that painlessly
stab your chest see Colby this is what
your death has done it has narrowed
a man's life down he used to farm
three hundred acres with my dad now
he tends your little garden whenever
he isn't climbing wind turbines high
above the earth to check to see they are
still in love with turning despising
their power he is so alone up there
the fields so far below just thread-
bare quilts and the earth essentially
a cold man trying to stay warm
he could if he wanted to fall right
straight through them to the depth
at which you lie but he feels closer
to you when he begins feeling the dew
bleeding through his jeans as he kneels
tending to the flowers you've become

White Lie

Christmas Eves our dad would bring
home from the farm real hay
for the reindeer that didn't exist
and after we were finally asleep
would go out and take the slabs
up in his arms and carry them
back to the bed of his pickup,
making sure to litter the snow
with chaff so he could show us
in the morning the place where
they'd stood eating, their harness
bells dulled by cold, their breath
steam, all while we were dreaming.

First Date

In the movie house the beam of light
falls apart, and the bodies of the actor
and actress kissing fall apart along
with the trees they're kissing under
and the very sky: all become a snow
falling on Milwaukee on a December
night in 1941, on my grandfather's
felt hat and my grandmother's
calfskin gloves, the flakes retaining
their shapes for a moment before
dissolving as that beam of light
is dissolving in that movie house
even now in Milwaukee in 1941.

The Vampire

The poor man probably just worked third-shift
at Honeywell where they made light switches
before the outsourcing, but we convinced ourselves
that Behind the drawn yellow curtains the color
of mustard and the signs in the yard admonishing us
to keep out lived a vampire. *Maybe it was the fact*
that Across the street sprawled Lincoln Cemetery,
named after that man who visited Freeport once
and maybe this is why I always imagined the vampire
as tall and gaunt, lying long in a custom-built coffin.
How deep must be the sleep of small-town vampires
so similar to the sleep of weary fathers, or of men
who've lost sons, who sleep in the light of the muted
world news for whom our dusk is dawn and our
dawn dusk, who *it isn't true* drink one vial of blood
every evening as some swear by one glass of red
wine to conclude the workday with a little grace,
who *don't* visit the new graves in fresh thirst,
who are *not* evil and *don't* deserve to die gasping
around the silver letter opener of a hero. I'm *not*
glad we threw the rock through his window and ran.
I'm *not* glad we woke the vampire. I *don't* hope
the sudden inrush of light killed him. Trust me,
the sick motherfucker *probably a father holding*
his son's purple heart or a very tired man crying
in his bed littered with glass deserved to die.

Advice Whispered to Edgar Allan Poe as He Sits Down to Gamble

These men are already dead.
Don't you see how their hands
are trees incapable of leafing out?

Leave. You'll lose. These men
are ghosts: they can see
what cards you're holding. See

how their money is yellow,
curled and brittle like pictures
of naked girls in a smoker's house?

You can't win, I tell you.
Drop the leaves of your cards.
You must be the autumn.

Coach Chance

Brief were the boys who came to him,
but they grew larger rushing toward him
in the aperture of their need. There were
those who came to him every practice,
feigning injury, though these were
the more deeply injured, boys who,
at home, were berated for gentleness,
and came to him as if he were
a surrogate grandfather. These boys
he would tape slowly, winding
the bandage around and around
the unsprained ankle, the painless wrist,
whispering *So So So So* as one whispers
to skittish horses. And he would say
they couldn't play that day, to stay off it,
sit it out, and so they would sit and watch
the dramatized violence of football
and be saved from both the violence
of the field and the violence of home.
Coach Chance knew who these boys were,
for it was the same boy every year,
come to him in a different body, bearing
the burden of a different father's name.
His sympathy was hidden, guised as gauze
and linen, but it healed them all the same.

The Reenactment

"Are you gonna die today?"
she asks him over a breakfast of salt
pork and hardtack she only agrees
to eat on battle mornings and
because she loves him. "Yea but
not 'til the end. Captain says I can
carry the flag in the final charge."
"That's nice, hun," sipping her
rough-brewed coffee, the grounds
lodging in her teeth, but her mind
seems elsewhere. As he gets up
she prepares herself for his kiss:
his beard brushes her forehead
and he kisses in her hair deliberately,
the way a man touches the head
of an old horse gently but specifically
with the gun. And as he prepares
to leave: "Hun you sure you
have your musket?...Ramrod?...
Bayonet?...Cap box?...Canteen?..."

Some days he goes off, doesn't
die, comes home. Other days
he goes off, dies, comes home.
Like any war.

Nosebleed: Sixth Grade

And then all of a sudden there
it is, an eyebrow-shaped slash
along the back of his hand,
along the long bone of the index
finger before the knuckle
where we bring it under
the nose when it starts running.
The shock of it. For here
he is, unwounded, in no pain,
and suddenly this errant birth-
mark, bright, flagrant,
irrevocable. He knows
what happens next and isn't
surprised when he feels it
beginning to break
gravity's delinquent dam,
then one runnel's breaching
the hasty levee of his lip
and he tastes his own blood:
metallic, old penny taste,
disturbingly familiar.
Meanwhile the teacher talking
about history, something
that happened to someone
named Kaiser that started
a great war he wasn't alive
for. Then he can't stand it
anymore and raises his bloody hand.

Sharpener of Knives

When he is older the boy will remember
days the sharpener of knives
came, days like today: a gray day
gray as the whetstones he lays
on the white cloth he spreads
on the folding table he sets
on its legs like a newborn foal
in the unmown grass of their yards.
For their knives have grown
dull in time from cleaving potatoes,
chopping garlic, parsing parsley,
to the point where they're becoming
dangerous. The women press them
against their wrists in remembrance
of their dead wish to be actresses
and draw nothing, like an illustrator
of children's books in the weeks after
his son has been bedridden with polio.
The boy will remember lying paralyzed
in his room of drawn curtains,
listening to the sound of stone
on steel, a dry rasping like a demigod
makes trying to imitate human
breathing in jealousy, or the sound
of the almost room-sized breathing
machines he has seen while being
pushed past the door that isn't
supposed to be open. And when
he's done and the knives lie
gleaming and capable before being
carried in wrapped up in the cloth,
the silver dust of blades will fall
into blades of grass long as his mother's
hair, the tiniest snow, the size
of the dust that will fall years
later when he takes the crutches
down from the highest closet shelf
to tell his son for the first time
about the day he walked downstairs
and his mother dropped a knife
on her foot and cried out in joy.

Elegy For Missing Teeth

The toothless roofer, his son
was killed by a drunk driver
the other night. I never
met his son, but I remember
the roofer, who shall remain
nameless (even to send
the sympathy card my father
couldn't find his name
in the phonebook).
I remember his truck
lengthened by ladders,
and his body on the roof
silhouetted against the sky.
Even in the worst heat
he would wear overalls.
Because he had no teeth,
his joy was a darkness.

This isn't an elegy for his son,
though I was sorry to hear
of his death. Nor is it one
for his father, who is still alive,
and will be alive this summer
working on the failing roofs
of the barns of Stephenson
County in the awesome heat.
It's an elegy for his teeth,
gone all those years ago.
Where are they now and why
has everything bright,
his son, his teeth, gone
before him into the dark earth
while he looks down upon us
with nails between his lips?

Jim the Baptist

The river lay like a whip on the table
or like a woman's braid on the floor
after she's made a decision. The man
he'd met in the freight yard,
who called himself Jim the Baptist,
led him down the steep bank
towards it, the trees half-heartedly
offering roots to grasp. There was a mist
on the river, and they waded into it
before they waded into the water.
Then he gasped in sharply from the cold.
When they were in it up to their waists
Jim the Baptist, who within an hour
of meeting him had convinced him
they needed to find the nearest body
of water to submerge him in and save
his damned soul, put one hand in the small
of his back and one on his forehead
as if checking for fever and, beginning
to say a prayer, dunked him backwards
under the water. He could hear the current
rushing in his ears and through it Jim
talking and talking and the last
thing the man thought was *God
damn this is a long prayer.*

The Man Accused of Fucking Horses

That first night he slept in the dark
attic in fear, amongst things he'd try
to sell on Craigslist where no one knew
him, and sure enough he woke to tires
spinning out in slushy gravel, the red
glow of brake lights in the octagonal
window, and lay listening to the yawn
of doors, then his name shouted hoarsely,
distorted a little, as if there was shame
in saying it, then their boots in the house
growing louder and louder, thinking
he wasn't there, all apotheosizing
in breaking glass. And when they left
he knew that that would be it then,
that they had done all anyone in that
county had the heart to do. Everyone
knew his punishment wasn't a few
broken windows, nor the few times
a year he would walk out to find *FAG*
or *HORSEFUCKER* spray-painted red
across the side of the barn, his white-
washing it afterwards simply giving
them a fresh page. They all knew
his punishment was he would find
it impossible to sell all that tack
and from time to time find himself
taking the saddles out to scrub
a shine back in them, and it was that,
moving the brush in circles the way
his dad had taught him, he'd begin
thinking back to that night he'd felt
so lonely, not lustful, just lonely,
and gone out and stood on the gate
and done it quick, saying "Sorry"
out loud in the quiet barn, thinking
to himself as he put himself away,

There are men like this in this world,
and I am one of them.

Neon Apotheosis

Friday nights the machinist ceases being
a machinist. Teetotalers and alcoholics
in recovery seethe in, touch fists
with the previous shift, and night grows
from the loam of the day's dying.
Home in a light the color of obituary
clippings found in the killer's house,
he only stops long enough to have
a beer that cools him as if his body
has overheated in fission, and to get
the guitar and amp. Then it's westward
toward the gig, through the green
and apostolic corn, something fervent
about the fields, as if an absolution
were being pronounced over them
by something maimed and invisible.
The guitar is in its case like a coffin
maker taking a nap in a casket. Four
cigarettes pass passively through him
and he drives with his wrists, his hands
hanging like pheasant wings pinioned
on a barn wall, the radio on but on
the lowest volume, the approximate
volume of someone murmuring names
on the Wall. But within him the music is
beginning like nameless white birds
rising out of a demilitarized zone.
"You can't sing the blues in the sun,"
he sings, and the sun leans its sledge
against his forehead and heads home.
The land is a grave being shoveled
in. The bikers are out. They move
from bar to bar like flocks of birds
moving from body of water to body
of water. They pass him in pairs,
headed towards the bar. By the time
he gets there they'll all already be
on third beers. Walking in, the owner
says, "You must be the music"
and the machinist nods, though
it isn't intoned as a question:
he says it like a command. A few
turn to see who it is he's hired

to try to move them tonight.
Breathless the bikers are
in their black bodices, the leather
still hot from the day as if the heat
has found harborage in what was once
flesh. A few plunge their stares into him
as if cooling red-hot tools in cold water.
He is cold water. The bar is full
of white people wearing black
leather and in walks a black man
wearing a white shirt and even
though this is northern Illinois still
he knows he's going to have to earn it,
having played gigs even further north
only to find himself singing to their
backs and the backs of their graying
heads, his audience their skull-
and-flame bandanas, swaying in spite
of themselves to his music. *You must*
be the music, he whispers through
a smile as he plugs the amp in and it
seethes the radiant snow of its static.
The light outside is dying, and desperate
in its dying: a broke man donating blood.
One of the waitresses, the nice one,
brings him a burger and a beer.
Setting them down on the amp
she says, "You jess let me know
if you need enny-thin baby I know
Dave says the music only gets one
burger and two beers but you need
enny-thin you jess let me know
awright baby?" He nods. Now all
that the day has promised from its birth
amongst what was eastward strewn,
all he's gleaned from what elements
staggered forward to compose his day
he draws up out of his blood like a knife
and the first note lops the night's
ear clean off. It lies like a sound-
less conch on the floor. A few
pennies of attention are tossed
towards him as if he's a commissioned
fountain finally finished, and as a few
swivel around to watch him the first

thought that comes to more than one
is, *That poor guitar.* Because it is
clear now what wasn't before when
he walked in carrying it in its case.
Someone says to no one in particular,
"This guy isn't fucking around," and though
no one responds you get the feeling
everyone agrees. Another flock (tougher,
drunker, how they stay balanced
on their bikes after all those bars
always a mystery) comes in on a warm
front of tobacco and with the door open
the day, thought dead, sees its last
chance and throws its lance clattering
on the floor. But soon even it
disappears. There's no denying it
is night now and the machinist is
playing for real. It sounds like a quarry
being flooded. It sounds like glass
swept under the oven. Between
the music and the smoke it seems
as though the bar were burning.
The exit signs rise like several
warning moons, and now he's biting
off the notes like they're paper
cartridges, spilling gunpowder
everywhere. The burger is cold
flesh and the beer forgotten,
though dark fjords of sweat flood
his shirt. The music is beginning
to rise up in him like water.
I'd say that it's Hendrix but it isn't:
Hendrix is dead and the machinist
is alive and the whole bar ceases
speaking and seems to drift towards
him, even the drink orders slowing,
Dave almost angry thinking, *How
dare he be this good*. It's best
for business the music be mediocre.
That way no one's driven away by it,
but no one forgets what they're there
for, either, which is to eat and drink.
But now he's holding the guitar
like it's all he has, and maybe it is.
He's losing his life: it's ebbing out

of him like blood. The women, hard
as they are, are beginning to fear
for him. And I think that this, then, is
what art is: this machinist from Rockford,
Illinois sweating out a song in some
godforsaken tavern for nothing
but a free meal and a few beers,
but really, for him, for the moment when,
in the seething silence between songs,
he hears Dave say to himself "God
damn this motherfucker can play."

Kerouac at Kesey's

Drunk of course, nose bulbous
and red with drink, flannel-
shirted, another soiled
notebook crammed in breast-
pocket, beginning to decline.

You'd fall further: shoot
at your mother, proposition
your biographer, then that night
you'd die in St. Petersburg,
Florida vomiting blood.

But all of that is still ahead
of you. Tonight you've been
invited to this Prankster party
to meet Kesey, but morose
you wander into another room

to see the flag draped over
the back of the couch,
its white stripes tanned
by the sweaty shirts of
people lying back against it

after getting high, but before
you start screaming at Kesey
for disrespecting America
(you loved America, but it was
one of several Americas:

the America of the poor,
of fathers and battered
hats and grace said at gray
tables and sooty rivers
murmuring their names)

you folded the flag
carefully, like women
in the War Department
folding flags that will be
handed to mothers,

like your mother folding

your red and white flannel
shirts with dry eyes
some late October
morning, 1969.

Nazi Soldier With a Book in His Pants

Put on book-burning duty, two youths
share a flask in the light of the fire.
When, every hour or so, a new load
is dumped off, they offer the flask
to a third soldier who, drunk, drives
so wildly books fall out of the bed.
The farmer's family is gone and no
one will come along and find them
lying face-down in the pasture.
Sometimes they flip through a book
by firelight before throwing it in.
It's like touching a woman's face
before you shoot her, the younger
one says. What? Nothing, he says
and picks up another. But while
his friend is pissing into the blaze,
he picks up one that feels different.
Thin as the spine of a seahorse, he says.
What? his friend says, spinning around
and dribbling on himself. Nothing,
nothing, the youth says. You're drunk,
says the other. Maybe, he answers.
He's still holding the book. In the light
of the fire he can see it's a book
of letters by a poet he remembers
reading in school. The letters themselves
don't interest him, it's the feeling
of the book in his hands. Flipping
through it, he slams it shut the way
he has slammed certain doors in order
to put them between himself and what is
behind them. Aren't you going
to throw that one in? asks the other.
This one? This one I hate so much
I'm going to take it home to burn it.
He shoves the book down his pants
and picks up another. They work fast,
burning all the piles before their friend
can come back with more. When the bed
is empty they cram into the cab, empty
the flask, and head towards the lights
where the bars and brothels are.

A Serious House on Serious Earth

Having gone off to school on opposite coasts,
brother and sister will come home to Michigan,
their flights like sleeves of a thin sweater
being folded, she from her room at Berkeley
with its Klimts, he from his room at Brown
with its Van Goghs, to this their childhood
home with its Paint-by-Numbers and photo-
graphs. The latter will make her nostalgic
and sad, while he'll ignore all but one.
At the table they'll take turns telling
about school, trying to answer the question
"What do you think you might want to do?"
It will only be the four of them this year
and the dining room table will feel much
too long, its tablecloth much too white
and smooth, the turkey too dead, the wine
too red, and when they bow their heads
to say grace their shadows will smudge
the cloth with the rushed ash of thanks.
While he thanks the Lord for the meal
he'll twist his ring four times moonwise.
Then "Amen" and they'll eat: bite by bite
she'll feed her entire meal to Stanley,
who by then will be arthritic and nearly
blind, shrugging when her mother suggests
she's grown too thin. He'll drink too much,
turn red, begin talking about what it is
he really wants to be, an artist, whereupon
their mother will spit a glob of fat out
into her napkin, squeezing it between
her finger and thumb through the linen.
Their father will keep chewing his, his
veins jutting out of his temples huge
and blue as turnpikes, finally swallowing
it down with the help of a gulp of wine.
The next year there will only be three
of them and a leaf missing from the table
as if in sympathy with the missing
leaves of autumn.

American Backyard

The clocks of the flowers freeze.
The fountain stands valiantly,
the blood of a legendary horse
when the horse has been taken
away. Somewhere, the sea
breathes under the anesthesia
of the sky, but somewhere is
never here, where birds eye
the bower: it stares through
them at him, to whom only
literal things happen: his breath
catching like a shirtsleeve
on a thorn and his heart
(no one is home: his wife
debating between three kinds
of quinoa, his daughter singing
under the tremulous water
of the choir) stopping.

Toy Soldiers

The man who made these toy soldiers
trudging through the thin snow of dust
on my windowsill died last summer
in his little shop in Galena, Illinois,
the town Grant retired to to write
his memoirs wrapped in a shawl
on the front porch of his yellowed
Victorian house, finishing them
three days before he died, penniless,
from smoking too many cigars.
They found him sitting in his chair,
surrounded on all sides by soldiers,
some painted, some still a dull pewter,
waiting for him to bring them to life
with his brush, so that he was to them
a kind of god. I remember the day
my mom took me into that store
and told me I could choose any one
I wanted, and I chose the one I was
sure was Grant, though I was too shy
to ask if it was, and too young to care
about his policy of Indian removal.
All I knew was he was some kind
of hero who had lived near where
I lived, though in another time,
and that he had died not far from there,
gazing out over the hills of Galena
and the river, remembering the pink
blossoms of Shiloh before they fell.

The Pit

There is a pit in those woods
no one understands, too deep
for leaf- or snowfall to fill,
too far in the forest for trash.

I hear deer bed down there,
that hunters have seen sleep-
shapes in leaves or snow
and know they'll have no luck.

Generations grow up and make
myths, hunker low, squint
along crooked branches,
shout *BANG* and *POW*. Older,

a boy brings a girl there, lays
a blanket down. She says no.
Not knowing what else to say,
he talks of owls.

The boys become their fathers,
promise one day they'll take
a day off, drive up and fill
that goddamn pit in. But the day

comes when their only spade
is a playing card and they
know when they die the pit
will still be there. They

start making their peace with it.

How a Calf Comes Into the World

In the middle of a midwinter night, a light
comes on in a house. Something in his dream
woke him and now his wife is awake and now
his son, who follows him out to the barn lit
by one mercury light. One look and he goes
off to wake some poor man (*his* wife, *his* kids),
leaving his son standing there, the calf's face
stretching the skin of the vagina like a mask,
gazing the opposite direction of its mother,
strangled by something her body made
to feed it and which now must be cut, the cow
bellaring and shitting into her calf's mouth.
The boy will grow up and not understand
most things some people say because one night
he watched a cow shit into her own calf's mouth
and it seemed as natural to him as sky. His father
comes back, takes a handful of straw the boy
bed the pen down with earlier that day and cleans
the manure away, reaches in and clears the throat
of fluid, reaches deeper and says he feels the cord.
When the vet arrives he comes in with his sleeves
rolled up, carrying a pail of bright tools plunged
in hot water. The farmer tells his son to take down
from where they hang on the wall obstetrical chains
that have pulled countless calves into the world.
They're heavy and the boy has to drag them
across the straw-strewn floor. The vet talks of high
school basketball as he reaches in and cinches
the chains tight around forelegs that will be white,
then steps back to let father and son pull,
not at all angry it wasn't necessary to call him,
knowing what it must have looked like before.
And when the calf comes pouring out, landing
hard despite the straw, he knows to leave
as soon as he knows the calf will live
so a man can show his son how
to get her to stand and drink, then wash
the chain link by link, even as the barn
cats slink in, ravenous for the afterbirth.

Robert Smith

My great-great grandfather, my namesake,
stopped eating before any of the others did.
When no one was looking he'd spill the few
blighted potatoes into his lap and, later,
make his youngest brother eat them.
The salt barely disguised how they tasted
of death, like the air in a tomb, but he
forced the boy to eat them while he grew
thin, so thin his clothes hung upon him
like the clothes of a scarecrow. He knew
his mother had ceased eating, too, and knew
she knew that his father still spent a little
to keep his flask full, but that she loved him
as if it were nothing of his doing, a scar
marring a once-beautiful face. Strange,
but the ones who were given the most
to eat were the first to thin into ghosts:
these were taken under the ground as if
in their near-empty stomachs the potatoes
desired the darkness of the earth again.
And he who had not eaten for months,
who had sustained himself solely on water
and a teaspoon of butter a day, my great-
great grandfather, my namesake, threw
the last shovelful on his father's grave,
stood the spade straight up in the earth
in lieu of a stone, and walked for three days
to the coast where it was said the boat was.

That Particular Village

On October 22nd and 23rd, 2002, U.S. warplanes strafed the farming village of Chowkar-Karez, twenty-five miles north of Kandahar, killing at least ninety-three civilians. When asked about the incident at Chowkar, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said, "I cannot deal with that particular village."

Alright friends. Let's get started, shall we?

Yes?

I cannot deal with that particular village.
Look, here's the thing. I can deal with it
about as well today as I could deal with it
yesterday, which is to say, I cannot deal
with that particular village at all.
Other villages I can deal with, have dealt
with and will deal with in the future, but
not that particular village. Look, think
of the situation I'm in like this: I'm a tightrope
walker in a circus tent in a prairie town
in 1911. I perform always with my wife
and without a net. Unbeknownst to me
my wife, who is very beautiful, has fallen
in love with the tiger tamer. On this night,
while tightrope walking towards her
where she stands on the platform, I see
she has a big pair of golden garden shears
and she's preparing to cut the rope.
Tell me, what do I do? If I start to scream,
she'll cut the rope. If I say nothing,
she'll cut the rope. I can't deal with that
village in particular because I really
have to try to focus on sinking this
putt. I can't deal with it because this week
I was invited to participate in the Associated
Writing Programs conference in Chicago.
I'll be on a panel called "Tangled Umbilical:
What We Can Learn from Paying Attention
to Syntax in Contemporary Political Discourse
and How We Can Use It to Write Better
Flash Fiction." I can't deal with that particular
village because I was born in 1932. I cannot
deal with it today or yesterday because
my senior thesis at Princeton was entitled

“The Steel Seizure Case of 1952
and Its Effect on Presidential Powers.”
I can't deal with it because I have three children
and six grandchildren none of whom will have to go
to the holy wars. I can't deal with that
village, that particular village, right now
because I live in Mount Misery, the former
plantation house where a young Frederick
Douglass was sent to have his teen spirit
broken by the brutal slaveholder Edward
Covey. I can't because one day, after
being beaten many times by his master,
in the very yard where my wife keeps camellias,
Douglass fought off Covey's cousin and then
fought Covey himself. I can't because the fight
ended in a draw. I can't because Douglass
was never assaulted by Covey again. I can't
deal with that particular village in this life
nor shall I be made to answer for what happened there
in the next. Certain things about my past
make it impossible for me to: I was an Eagle
Scout, I wrestled in high school, I didn't graduate
from Georgetown Law. Nixon said I was
a ruthless little bastard. I sold the company
I was CEO of to Monsanto for $12 million.
I cannot deal with that *particular* village.
I can't deal with it because once upon a time
I delivered a few pistols, some medieval
spiked hammers, and a pair of golden cowboy
boots to Saddam Hussein on behalf of
President Reagan. I can't deal with it because
a few years ago I had to make a special trip
to Abu Graib to personally turn the volume
of a Bach symphony up so as to make a man's
ears bleed yet more profusely. I can't deal
because on the afternoon of September 11th
an aide observed me speaking quickly
and scribbled down in shorthand what I said.
I said, “Best info fast — Judge whether good
enough hit Saddam at same time — not only Bin
Laden — Need to move swiftly — Near term
target needs — go massive — sweep it all up
— Things related and not.” I can't...Look...
That particular village? That particular one.

Primary Campaign Footage: Wisconsin, 1960

I.
The young prince making his way
through the crowd to give his speech
is already dead. Nothing can hurt him.
The rain of their hands is gentle as spring
rain falling upon an aviary. And on the dais
the princess his wife is already thinking
of which poems she'll collect like flowers
for an herbarium in the long afternoons
of her widowhood. His smiling brother
is dead also, already suffers a subtle fear
of kitchens. Their wounds are well hidden
in their boyish hair and they have ceased
bleeding. They're only a little sore now.
The young prince touches his from time
to time as he makes his way through
this crowd of Poles crammed into a banquet
hall in a hotel on Milwaukee's affluent
east side, moving slowly towards his wife
and brother, wincing and shaking hands.

II.
Meanwhile, on the other side of the state,
in *In Cold Blood* country, country of white
houses and flayed red barns, Humphrey
stands in a church trying to hear again a music
he heard once while reading a biography
of Jefferson. Something, some feeling
made him put the book down that night
and go walking out under the moon,
over the frozen Minnesota heartscape,
its lakes closed like the lids of deep
sleepers or corpses. And when he came in
and his wife demanded to know what it was
he was thinking going out in that weather
he said, “I've been thinking about agrarianism”
and she covered her face with her hands
and said, “Hubert I'm tired” and went to bed.
He read a while longer, then climbed
the stairs heavily and did not wake her
to make love, but lay on his back, thinking
about the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party.

Now he is standing in this church, the pews
filled with farmers waiting for him to speak
so they can get home and finish milking,
but for what is beginning to seem like an hour
Humphrey has been standing there with his head
down like a priest pausing in his sermon to pray,
or as if listening for something. And then
from far off he begins to hear it, as when
you hear the distant insane strain of the loon.
Hearing the brassy music of democracy,
he raises his head and begins to speak.

III.
The prince has been speaking for an hour
and though he's growing tired and his mouth
is dry, he knows he must go on because
he can feel the crowd leaning towards him:
"...I cannot believe that in these difficult
and changing times when we are surrounded
by revolution and hazard, that the American
people are going to choose to sit still,
that they are going to give their confidence
to a political party, the Republicans,
who have opposed every measure of progress
in the last 25 years, led by a candidate
who for the last 14 years has opposed
progress. [Applause.] Can you tell me one
piece of legislation of benefit to the people?
Housing? Civil rights? Aid for the farmer?
Aid for the retired? Rights for labor?
Can you tell me one program that either
Mr. Nixon or the Republicans
have supported. [Response from the audience.]
I said in Cleveland about 3 weeks ago
that I could not think of one program,
and the Cleveland paper said I had forgotten
what President Taft did about child labor.
All right. What have they done since then?
What have they done in the last 50 years?
[Response from the audience and applause.]
This fight is important, because unless
this country is moving ahead, this country
will not lead a world which is moving ahead.
The same political party, the Republicans,

who could vote against social security
in the thirties could vote unanimously
against medical care for the aged
in the sixties. The same political party
that could vote against the minimum wage
of 25 cents an hour in 1935 could vote
against $1.25 an hour in 1960, and this
goes to the heart of the issue, a party
which fights progress, a party which is not
prepared to associate with it, a party
which has stood athwart the great social,
international, and national movements
of this century, sponsored by Wilson
and Roosevelt and Truman - how can they lead
in the dangerous sixties? How can they lead
and move this country forward? How can they
demonstrate to a watching world that we are
a strong and vital society? In outer space,
in the world around us, in Latin America,
in Africa, in Asia, in Wisconsin, we are
associated with a forward motion and they
have stood still, and I believe on November 8,
the people of this country are going
to choose to move again. [Applause.]
I don't believe that this generation
of Americans wants it said about us
what T. S. Eliot in his poem “The Rock”
said: 'And the wind shall say: “These were
decent people, their only monument
the asphalt road and a thousand lost
golf balls. ”' I don't believe that is what
the people want. I think they want
to move forward... ”

IV.
And as Humphrey talks the farmers stare
down at the plat maps of their hands, their eyes
dark under seed company caps. The straps
of their overalls are like the straps of a sky
diver's parachute the moment before
the parachute fails to open: they sit as if
fallen in the pews, pews they sat in as boys
and in which a few of their boys sit now,
wondering who this man is their fathers

have told them they have to come along
and listen to. And as they sit there their bodies
assume poses of listening as if something
about the building itself makes them
more receptive to his words. He's saying,
in the third-person, as if observing himself
from a distance, that Humphrey will fight
for them, that no one in Washington
gives a damn about a farmer way out here
in Wisconsin but that Humphrey does
and that Humphrey will fight for them.
But rather than rousing them into cheers
they seem to sadden, as if all Humphrey is
is a messenger come to tell them how little
their lives matter. And in this boy's restless
folding and unfolding of the campaign
literature is the suppressed anger he feels
for this man, this Humphrey, for having come
all this way to hurt his father the way
he can tell his father is hurt by the way
he sits with his head bowed, as if praying.
So Humphrey retreats, steps back, says,
“Now, folks, folks, lemme tell you
why agriculture matters. Jefferson said...”

V.
After the young prince has given his speech
like a gift to each of them, the reception
line passes through him. At first he tries
to stare into each face but in time they flicker
past so fast he can see the skulls under their skin.
They become ghosts to him. After, in the car
flexing his hand he wants to ask her did she
see it too but by the weight of her head
on his shoulder he knows she's asleep.
It is the weight of a recurring dream he knows
she's been having, a dream of his death,
and he almost wakes her to spare her
from it but stops himself, remembering
how tired she must be. She has told him
the dream. It is a simple dream. He simply
turns around, to fill a glass of water
at the kitchen sink, or to walk to the edge
of the garden, and she sees the back

half of his skull is missing. At the hotel
he carries her up the great stairs to their suite
to the delight of the well-wishers in the lobby.
They applaud as if it's a campaign ploy,
something that was planned, but it's nothing
but a man carrying his tired wife up to bed.

VI.
The day Kennedy was shot Humphrey
disappeared. He was gone so long
she went out driving beneath the flags
at half-mast and the cerement factory
of the sky but she couldn't find him
and she returned home to wait. Deep
in the night she heard the door, felt
the familiar weight of his body
in the house, on the stairs, but heavier
somehow, as if in walking he had taken
into himself all the grief of the city,
the city's grief a bottomless millpond
and his body the waterwheel lifting
cup after cup up in an obsessive
and solitary toast. Years later he'll die
in a Minnesota hospital, but not before
calling friends to invite them to his funeral
as if to a party, even calling Nixon whose
voice by then will be a ditch, or something
similar, the entire purpose of which is to be
empty. And once everyone had been invited
he will begin going from room to room
telling jokes, trying to cheer the last days
of the dying. He died and no one sweeps
the snow off your grave these days, Humphrey,
and no flame burns forever for you, nor do
any soldiers guard your tomb. Hubert
Humphrey, may you rest in peace.
You were not an attractive man but you
had a good heart to stand there in that cold
church in Wisconsin that April day in 1960
to talk to those farmers, shuffling through
the hymnals out of habit while you spoke,
and to afterwards descend amongst them
to ruffle that boy's hair as if he was your son.

Two Fireflies Dying in a Jar

In the morning the boy's mother
found the mason jar on the sill.
Shaking them out into the grass,
she washed the glass out, filled
it half-full of water, and drank.

When he came downstairs,
rubbing his eyes, she opened
her mouth to say something
but decided against it. Instead,
she thought of the two fireflies.

One must have held out longer,
illuminating the other's dying,
though the one that lived longer
was neither stronger nor wiser:
this was just the way they died,

staggered like most deaths are.
Widowed, the one still alive
began glowing weaker and weaker
but then, strengthening, shone
brightly before doubling the dark.

The Key in the Stone

Our grandma kept an extra key in a false stone
set down in her violets. It was easy to tell it
from the others because it was trying so hard
to be a stone. We'd pick it up (it was so light)
and flip it over to see the little plastic door
like the battery latch of a child's toy.
I remember the evening she showed it to us.
Our parents were gone to a wedding
in Ohio and she was watching us.
We were shy and didn't know how to act
or that she had lung cancer. In the morning
after lying in starchy beds listening
for the sound of her moving about the kitchen
we'd comb our hair with our fingers
and walk barefoot across the cold linoleum
to the breakfast table. Strict in every other way,
she let us use all the sugar we wanted
but it would've been evening she led us out
back to pick up that stone that wasn't
a stone, turning it over and sliding the little door
open to empty the bright key into her hand,
saying, “If you ever need to get in the house.
If for whatever reason you find yourselves
locked out...” For a moment it seemed
she forgot we were there and why
she was holding a hollow stone. And then
she let us hold the key, as her father had
let her hold his bright tools on snow days
in his office in Milwaukee: a rubber hammer
he told her to tap his knee with, kicking wildly,
or a stethoscope he placed gently in her ears
so she could be astonished at the sound
of her own heart. And as we passed the key
around and around, not knowing what else
to do, she stood there holding that stone
that was like a lung holding its breath forever.

Will

At your wake which was your sleep I saw
him place the envelope of dirt in the breast
pocket of your coffin coat and now I want
to give you something too so you may rest
in the company of things you loved the way
Egyptian pharaohs were buried with what
it was thought they'd need in the afterlife
and so with you my grandfather I bury three
hundred cubic acres of soil with all that soil
is its dormant and dead seeds its cicadas asleep
seventeen summers its worms its arrowheads
also trees you loved yes even those still green
with life I lay them beside you root and branch
young trees of twenty and old trees of a hundred
rings trees singed by lightning of course you
may have two tarnished forks of lightning too
to eat the steaming food I will prepare for you
sure the tree the foxes loved to make dens under
yes you may have a fox too but only the smallest
and least likely to live the rest get to go free
and why not all twenty acres of woods and all
the woods contain its birds the meadow in its
heart the fascicles of its birch bark the fictive
fjords of its leaves both held and fallen its deer
under the deltas of their antlers the deer stand
missing several necessary rungs the three-
walled shack it can all fit snow of winter scat
of summer owl pellets of autumn first violets
of spring everything the fields themselves
the huge wreathes of windrows the new corn
the shattered corn shattered like shinbones
in November light November light of course
the light of every month for that matter light
of warm and cool evenings and every evening's
and morning's birds all birds even those only
soaring over I will snatch whole flocks down
out of air and bury them with you Grandpa
and yes of course you may keep your tractors
and wagons and the boards and shingles and
nails of the barns and sheds I'll employ two
tornados to take them down for you and yes
you may have their darkness too yes their mice
and chaff and that screw you lost in 1952 you

get 1952 back too every year and every day
and night she lay latticed in moonlight yes
laughter of your children food you ate ale
you drank anything that sustained you your
work jeans work shirts pliers hammers anvils
all your beloved tools there's plenty of room
of course both farmhouses their doorknobs light
fixtures dishware table-leaves all of it every
thing anything you like take the hill of coal
you kept in the basement the green light
of bad weather the gold light of good the salt
that softened the water the bare sole swaying
bulb that lit the milking hour every Holstein
and every gallon of milk the rope swing
you made them the looks you gave them
gifts you gave them Christmas mornings
you get these back too all that you gave
comes back to you Grandpa this and nothing
else is the promise of Heaven bruises advice
hugs birth charity a shit it all everything
you gave comes back to you and your father
and mother sure you get them too yes even
your mother who you never met who died
giving birth to you you get her back too
you worked so hard you were so beautiful
so gentle you get everything you thought
you'd lost forever by dying we lose nothing
by dying we get it all back

Acknowledgments

Asheville Poetry Review: "Bingo"

Cortland Review: "Memoir of My Imaginary Sister"

Lo-Ball: "Advice Whispered to Edgar Allan Poe as He Sits Down to Gamble"

Off-Channel: "Letter to My Father Written in a Bar in Mitchell, South Dakota, " "Elegy for My Cousin Colby"

Sewanee Review: "Stephenson County Fair in Wartime," "Toy Soldiers"

Spoon River Poetry Review: "Mission," "Aerial Photograph, Glasser Farm, 1972," "Romeo and Juliet in the Tomb," "The Vampire"