

DIFFERENT JARS

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### DIFFERENT JARS

By SCOTT OLIVER

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There will be no return to the “salad days” of poetry, not because there is no longer an attachment between the great-ones that have lain along the worn road of poetry & those lucky few whom choose similar roads, but because we are unwilling to see what exists in our own jars of creativity. It seems that we either steal from our predecessors—making it so new poets are no different than the old—or feign growing & learning in our private, sealed jars. A jar is only what is inside of it. If left empty, it is no longer a jar. Too often, poets seem speaking to & taking from the same old jar. There is nothing wrong with old jars, but if we do not fill in old jars with new content, all is lost.

Broken into five sections, *Different Jars* analyzes the place of the poet today through a lens of religion, family, war, city-life & our predecessors. While inspecting what was poetry & what has it done for us lately, the poems beg one question: What is poetry? Though similar themes & questions breathe in the manuscript, the use of portmanteaus (or cobbled-words) to comment on attachments made with poetry & words—both individually & as a society—was essential.

If a jar is opened & used enough, some spills will occur. The beauty of it—the poetry—is in what is left on our countertops, a mix of many flavors. The question for the reader is what tastes best.

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I.

## JUXATAPOSED FRAGMENTS OF KNOWLEDGE

I'm a lone poem made undone. Inside the mine of mind, there is little to no place to run.

So, I'll ask my breaths  
 Can I try freebasing meditation?  
 Instead of hitting my soul straight.  
     No room for souls in poems or bronchioles.

I'm fed up with fitting my whole weight of the  
 world in the inch between my eyebrows.

Each time I try to purse my lids,  
 I find that these damn zippers stick.  
 The bags holding in my dirty bowling balls  
 are stretched too thin.

I can't make things well while these nervous waters rush  
 wildly beneath my bridge.

My bell doesn't toll.  
 It wasn't made hollow.

I try to meditate. Try to mediate the mash of media  
 that slips in through the spaces  
 between my eye lids. Schizofrantic. ADHD divided.

I treat my breaths like a carton of eggs,  
 like thought  
 counting the whole, won't toss back the cracked.  
 I keep even the ones that match the aftermath  
 of a sniper's shot & shatter: our widow                      (no-longer-the-lady)  
 as she was sent scrambling  
 to grab handfuls of her husband.

I'm losing my mind in this attempt to silence the whirring  
 of Zapruder's film.

Breathe. In & out  
 Back & to the left  
 In & out. In & out  
 Back & to the left

I wonder who drew junior's last bath.  
 Did they look before letting out the water?

(BREAK)



The balcony will fall, along with everything  
breathing on it. The hypotactic peaceful speaker  
taken down before the pulpit by another shot.

Another shatter. His other—brother of parataxis—shot,  
ex'ed & gone from behind his pulpit with his family in the audience.

All kings limp from thrones if left living long enough to try.  
Symbols become too symbolic if left in the hands of critics.  
I can't free ideas from my lungs.  
Each lay still like dust on our jagged tongues.

Still,  
I know if meditation was tangible

I'd buy, steal & borrow all those slow counted breaths,  
beget them soft winded rhymes.

I'd be an addict,  
a cat lady,  
a hoarder of hot air & syllables,  
homeless with a cart full of calm like puffed bronchiole.

But meditation is not yet FDA approved.  
Those amber, plastic childproof-bottles never quite closed,  
& this medication like media  
will not be removed.



## RELAVIATIONSHIPS

*For Liz*

i.

Watching my wife take a piss, I noticed that at least in the terminology of aviation, men must be the fighter jets & women are our bombers. Men brave the sky with our tracer bullets, dogfightdie at anyall cost—sincere protectors. We're as bawdybrawn as poetry of a postwar Homer; they're our Polybius our Herodotus, both the history & the beginning, the endstops of all that's to come & those few that won't ever be because we're nothing more than flying sacks of tracer bullets, rapidly ratta-tatting, waiting on our bombardier to grow their pair & drop some lastlaugh snugly beside schools & hospitals. On weapon-factories—as many as the fuel gauges, presidential orders, wives or God allows.

ii.

Pregnant. I'll no longer be her only bomb or her baby. Not a Fat Boy, no Little Man. In fact, I think I'm only just the U-238 to her rare U-235, lesser half of radical ingredients with which exact chemistry matters. These collisions happen within instants. When it does; when it's done right; when the flashes of flesh & life crack through, up & into fine clouds, I will look at our weapon, cower at it.

## DOVES' BLUE CUPS THROUGHOUT STILL TREES

War wants another poem. Even the doves  
 are marching single file into the blue,  
 chests pluming abroad on others' orders to cup  
 the scent of sun & son's blood spilled throughout  
 a youngenfield. They move on. The rest stay still  
 because there's no use flying back to those trees.

Can any go back into the leaves of nesting trees?  
 Can there be but two loveasily doves?  
 If the wind's pact is that it can never be still,  
 why arch our wings into the wide blue  
 back to mothers, forgetting mothers who threw out  
 weakwings with only our beggar's cup?

We do anything in order to fill cups,  
 sharpen men-tall spears—hundreds—from fallen trees,  
 kisswarm sap running with that day's sun throughout  
 it. Hawks nest like snipers. A dove  
 with pressed feathers inspects the blue  
 skyviolence above, keeping an eye on his one love. Still,

we know that lovebirds are a myth of peace. Still,  
 any dove would end the war, give the cup  
 back to the sky, asking only, Why so blue?  
 before thatching those hundred spears to build one tree  
 that during a war won't house each dove  
 but might fit a squad of battlangst hawks throughout.

When the wars are worn down to the nub & through, out  
 roll talliers like tanks & eggs. They're counting still.  
 Along the field, two by two, the doves  
 grasp what is left of neverfull cups.  
 Beak & breast plume like tombstones or fallen trees.  
 Lone hawks screech in twos inside the skysilent blue

that never knew until just then it was blue.  
 What shouldn't be mourned or forgotten of wars throughout  
 & above the trees? Who will look to plant those new trees  
 when each leaf & half of the doves fall, keep still?  
 Will hawks, having worlds of time, cup  
 wings & hold the rots smoke of the doves?

Watch the blue of old trees, the mourning doves  
 throughout each, the forgotten cups laying cold, still.

## BIRD'S EYES ON WAR

Fallen shell casings roll on the ground.  
Each sits like a baby's lost finger, limp  
with the failed promise of an armistice  
that is already beginning to turn sour.

Long barrel guns rest in figure eights  
against the sun, each one ricocheting  
glares into the privates' eyes, praying,  
baiting, preying, betting on their fates.

Muzzleloaders waltz to odd silences,  
broken by flyby buzzards. They wait  
for today's first fire, which consecrates  
the battlefield & raises dawn violets

with every new standing sun. Free souls  
will jut from bullet holes & shrapnel.  
The bulge of still, warm bodies will welt  
the hill's soil. When once sweetly sown

with the tiniest of seeds, it now fissures  
with the red of a whole people wilting.  
The buzzards will land on the dead quilting  
& caw bawdily as if to say, *We are the winners.*

## THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOVING A KILLER

I wish I'd have hugged  
 Hitler when he was just  
 that pillowscared child

Bridged Caligula's spaces  
 & taught him the lessons  
 of family. It's in descent

Bit Elizabeth Bathory's  
 ear, whispered a sweet  
 thing her husband didn't

Known what got Saddam  
 to become so sad a man  
 that he'd Curdle milk

Given Attila the sum of  
 all a heart's heavydrunk  
 that drowns all roaming

Polled Pol Pot's list-  
 eners like radio shows  
 & read each poor result

Looked from Ivan's eye  
 & showed him a beautiful  
 grandson. His sansdream

Shot pics of Stalin grad-  
 uating from that school  
 before those posthistories

Got Nero violin lessons  
 & watch violence lessen,  
 then round his applause

Made Idi Amin care for  
 where he came from &  
 settle all in squarerings

Asked Leopold to bounce  
 back from the continent,  
 let grandeur go & sleep

Told Robespierre, *don't*  
*lose your head, try tennis*  
*instead.* It starts at love

Theorized Oppenheimer  
 & saw the fights between  
 a mind, a might & a heart

# THE AIR BEHIND THE WHITES OF OUR FINGERNAILS

Some fingernails won't grow old  
     or reach their white tips,  
     won't crease & fold,  
 or show young valleys roll to wise hills.

These fingernails shake with our hands, split  
 with nibbles. Bits spill from our mouths  
                     fall & take      what moister exists in the aridness.

Some nails grow too old to stay whole.  
     Too many memories,  
 cracks of hard-labor mornings,  
 slip down during the four good hours of sleep.  
     Some fingernails erode,  
     tugging bedsheet-skin.  
 Too thin, they rest in their beds,  
     left to fend for themselves. Mine tend to shred & fall like bed-crumbs  
 or daffodil petals. The edges pin-itch tired ribs. I wake to find them missing  
     like odd numbered dreams

Fingernails are pale. The older ones, even blue.  
     Most crumble like burning books atop ice  
 shelves, collapse under an over packed      knowledge &  
     too little brains. Like how glaciers become      brittle,      sink-in,  
                     & dilute  
                     our   saline   solution.  
     This begins another rain's cycle.  
             & the air  
     only drowns in the area  
 beneath our fingernails.

## PUSHING BIG BUTTONS

What is said of those who have attempted  
the riddle surrounding forefatherly gifts?  
Bones made of oil—Adam's redemption.  
Lips curled in with each crumbling cliff  
of ancient blue glaciers dying in droves.  
Those driving through floods fear a radio's  
complaint of drought dusting lime groves &  
alchemcollisions staining glass with the sand.  
Could that fungus be fuel? Everything burns.  
Under weak desks [...]rest our ostracized kids,  
ducked under laced fingers, taped beneath lids.  
    Some six billion light bulbs: everyone learns  
    that dueling for power is War torn from shelves.  
    When fools part with the bard, we barter ourselves.

## HIS FEAT

A soldier hunkers down in a trench, a huddling tree.

A long song of mortar fire.

A leaf in the breeze, he's dug between two impeding currents.

He untwines fingers from beneath dents of his helmet.

Crevasse-moon fingernails stick to lips like scythes  
in hay bales.

Trench barrels sag,        take breaths,        cool down.

He juts up with a field phone, wipes his mouth.

His boots scar his dugout's loose walls, stones fall.

They clunk like wet bones.

His boots are U.S. issue with hard, low-bid soles.

His dad's were softer, but prone to running holes.

He hops over the stench

of rotting comrade meat,

steps in angles

hits the ground like mothers' hopes & lays like fallen wheat.

He's the Allies eyes,

phoning in the sweet coordinates because he's a running heart.

He's two good feet.

## SILENCE &amp; RESPECT

*One out of every four individuals who is sleeping in a doorway, alley or box in our cities & rural communities has put on a uniform to serve our country. Veterans Assistance Foundation*

I spent my middle school's D.C. trip pining over the neat lines of white books in Arlington International. Mulling over poems, short stories, looking for those few lucky novels who made it off of those old, faraway fields—unscythed. Imagine 1 falling back into the newly strong arms of a trusted wife. The weight. I continued on—grievity grabbing my shoulders—to a section that seemed younger, & I knew that all the empty grass could & would never remain that way. My moorings off, I crept on, my feet morningsoft, mourning softly into the farthest plots, plots hilling with years, embanked by shade & dust. Worn sections smelled like morning glories & thick sulfur of 21 shots after 21 shots, after 21 shots. The older stones were staggered by the ground's aging, or maybe the memory of mortar fire. My finger against the soft satin of 1 marble marker felt no pulse besides my own. I can feel it still: Taps of a dry cadence; stripes of flagnaked crates; stars set into stale, Gov't ground. The marker was warm; the grass just started to come back in. The young chalk outline on my fingers. A silent sort of ground. I didn't think to read the old marker's name. The bus ride back to New Jersey was just long enough to try sleep. The last thing I remembered was 1 homeless man—a pizza-box sign pleading for work in blue marker, his chevron pointing down, & his dull nub's taps—that phantom cadence against stale, Gov't ground.



WHAT IS AMERICA? (A GAS GHAZAL)

An island on the middle of the Earth—life on that crude soil  
fueling the high reach of statues wrought from that crude oil

A perfectly pyramided scheme set to lowball accrued oil  
with armadas setting sail, using, & returning with crude oil

An old aqueduct is retrofitted for running miles of crude oil  
past these walls, a base for protecting our precious crude oil

## MOTHER

A question:  
 Haven't we already done her in?  
 Her roughening breasts inhale  
 & collapse beneath her youngest kin.  
 Vascular rivers bleed slowly. Our mother shivers.  
 She fevers thin & her limbs are cold. We take.  
 Knowing all the will it was us she'd hold.  
 Mother's lumbered legs broke.  
  
 She coughs dust,  
 tongue cracks, teeth chip, nerves implode.  
 Mother chokes on our smoke, & what of the meat  
 in her bones? We young use teeth  
 of our own to shell today what  
 she left us for our tomorrow.  
 In rotation,  
 she is consumed reflected through  
 browncloudy eyes— long jade  
 & deep blue.

## TOUT SURVIVAL

I'll tell you a tale: it's all 'bout survival:  
I'm lion, you, gazelle—dead without survival.

You scout for food. Lion is looking at you.  
Eyes become tongues, you turn, en route survival.

Gazelle is caught in Lion's taut dug claws.  
He licks skin from your face; you sing out survival.

Then Lion's eyes, nails, tongue soften.  
What softens stone & makes lion doubt survival?

They sniff dust from their scruffs with wet noses.  
Rivers spilling out, killing drought. Survival.

Gazelle stands. Lion stands. Lick sand from cuts.  
What's lion, gazelle, or love without survival?

We dance nature's waltz like lion, gazelle. We  
worry as we do—as we live—all 'bout survival.

AT YOUR FINEST.

Who could expect the unwanted surprise of beauty  
in a mirror wedged from earth out & against a tree,  
or recall that all things are inches of time, just  
reflections? You'll do no better a thing than own  
it—the moment—as you stop on one red morning  
before the huddled tide of rib-like pine to say, *I am  
just as beautiful as forever. Forever as I will remember it,  
of course.* So what if the overgrowth of age may make  
us forget trees, forget our own mirrors & memory  
of mist along grass? You'll never forget yourself.  
YOU

II.

## BALLAD FOR A DEAD SOLDIER

If I pulled you from the hills your ashes spilled,  
set you to paper & smoked that lonesome spliff,  
or spread the dust of you on this page, instead,  
would you holler, or call me a buster who riffs?

Would you know I didn't know what you said—  
so raw & sweet, a rose cracked from concrete—  
until the year after you died? Now you're dead.  
I need one last song from you, to a heart's beat:

The Killuminati. Your theory & promise to spark  
the mind that changes a world one day at a time.  
Some things may never change like rifting in parks.  
Skipping rope & tracks. In the event of my demise,

I ask us to turn the page like we didn't do for you, Pac.  
Pac, if you can't hear me, I'll holler on high & ask you  
where your ballot is, ask you for Makavelli's Prince,  
ask you for an encore, those masters, the shooters (those bastards).  
I ask you for your will. Not the one pressed & signed.  
I want the will to spill what kills the writersrhyme—  
that metaphysical smoke we have stoked deep inside.

I'd ask you why you'd never hide. I'd ask you about those times you said, Don't stress, never forget that God isn't finished with me yet. I ask you right now if you'd drop that guise in hindsight. A stomach tat.

Your Life. Or would you still stay blind to the guides that led you from that Tyson fight to a dead-end with a broken rearview BMW, on that gunShook Night. Forgive me how I riff, how my internal record skips.

I listen to the records now & again. The needle's taps skate through the onyx poem, hisses between tracks, reverberating spits & spats of a can't-be-dead rapper. I apologize. Pac: I'm sorry for the fears, for the facts

you faced that fatefilled night—the life you'd recite in song.  
Still, I rise to be that guy you foresaw & take up that fight,  
your birthright & your last rite you fought for too(so)long.  
Finally there'll be, until (& only in the event of) my demise,  
all eyes on we.

## A TULIP PLUCKED FROM THE TRASH

*For Liz*

I think it was a flower,  
*unless* it was a piece of garbage.  
 I watched it pass my stoop outside  
 & the thing was blowing like  
 Small-city wind, but not as kind,  
 sort of sideways & up.

Everything is going up,  
 from the newly dead to older flowers  
 of original scents & kinds,  
 but none match the sweetsmoke of garbage.  
 That's not what it should be like  
 when poets go outside.

All art is born outside—  
 crow's feet & buttercups,  
 God & all His parsed stars alike.  
 The earth, itself, is like a flower  
 covered in subtlelovely garbage.  
 But how can sweet be so unkind?

If it is, what can be truly kind?  
 I'm only myself outside  
 among this mutemoving garbage.  
 Silence. I catch myself looking up  
 to find those lone flowers,  
 owning that summit like

one man on the sea, like  
 the first piece of humankind.  
 Like the last petals of flowers,  
 how they recall outside  
 when each fall. Die. Go up  
 just to add to the garbage.

Everything becomes the garbage; it's a prospect I actually like  
 because down becomes the new up. Humanity can be so quietkind.  
 From inside my house, I watch outside & know all things were once flowers.

## THROUGH THE WALLS OF OUR ROW HOUSES

Life in post-postcard urban Jersey: Home is attacked.  
Memories stick to cities where each home is attached.

For each of we skylinemice rustling to meet each end  
to end the story tonight plights, our home is attached.

From our bathroom, back to my & my brothers' room,  
I hear thumpcrook'd frames. Proof a home's attached.

Don't talk back, began every borrowed lesson & ended  
in songs of makeup-fucks. Oh! Oh! A home is attached.

The family through our kitchen wall taught other tests:  
wet eyed kid, red-throated. A broken home is attached.

Wear our pillows earmufftight & wish the winters away.  
Short summer nights lend reprieve if a home is attached.

The girl in a torn book bag is pushed off our shared stoop  
towards Monday class. No secrets will survive when our home is attached.



## FOR LOVE OF A NEIGHBORHOOD

By the rowhouses, on a stoop, on my stair,  
I watched her through our hydrant's copper spray  
& her beauty swallowing a chest of air.  
I saw no bonnets; she had no bouquets.  
She set those clichéd games down yesterday.  
If she didn't, curbs would have wilted.

It's still funny to think of then today.  
She had a spanner: duct-tape hilted.  
Her feminine muscle pulsed down her wrench.  
Crush of first water, tears struck hot thigh.  
An entire neighborhood dressed in drench.  
If I had the spanner, would I have tried?

At times we're the man; at times we're a mouse  
on my stair, on a stoop, by our rowhouses.

## STOOP EDUCATION (LESSON ONE)

My dad's  
jacked radio  
Stacks high some  
slow & fat static-wrapped jabs.

Our stoop's tunes hit the streets hard.  
The energy: magnetic.  
An impromptu neighborhood dance starts.  
Sticky beats tiptoe                      be-  
tween sidewalk cracks,  
reverberating the smooth  
smooth jazz my dad learned from his dad.  
He picks up my sister,  
spins her, arms strong,  
to the rhythm & blue skies  
remind me that he's always been a good man.  
Clean four years, he's paying back his debts  
starting with her, I guess. He'll get to the rest.  
Playing back the last track  
again & again, so he can swing her hard enough                      bring her back  
to those pigtails.  
Bring her back to dayswhen.  
Gave up bottles & cans,  
took her back into his swaddling hands.  
Our block's last unforgettable checker-cab  
scats past, blasts a horn to the tweet of warm brass  
from—he called them borrowed—speakers. At last, I forgive dad for that.  
Then the track swerves into satin verbiage  
of a maroon crooner  
selling the soul's words.  
King Cole is heard. Then Etta.  
Dad's dancing has gotten better.                      No odd juke for balance.  
No puke.  
No violence.

No sooner the curb is moving  
to cool grooves  
smoother than cold serve.  
A cityslow herd moves  
to words working from a radio's  
wobbly wattage.  
Sure the sounds kicked out  
& in but we kicked back  
all the while, sole-stomped the ground.

We danced to it on credit.

## STOOP EDUCATION (LESSON TWO)

A jacked rubber handball  
slaps against a brick  
backed stoop,  
    bounces up  
                & arcs  
over the slab  
of a wall we'd hop over  
during dusk-through-dawn  
games of manhunt, or crouch behind for a round of ring-&  
run, or just sit against when the sun  
angled a weak edge of shade.

My brother Nicky called the game  
prison-rules stoopball,  
our sister always watched,  
Icee-Pop hanging like a cigarette

When the picking of teams starts,  
all the kids want on to be by Nicky,  
even Dillon & Steve,  
even Ian, all picked first to be part of his  
family, but I'm left always lurching in-between—just a ball behind the wall—wanting,  
waiting on him to call on me,  
sure,  
& half hoping he wouldn't get to me.

## PEOPLE WATCHING

I'm sketching them  
 into a neat package  
 of poetry. I'm using  
 wax & coal pencils,  
 switching line by line  
 so that passersby think  
 their own poem is being  
 transferred to the canvas  
 in shaded, cascading lines,  
 & thumb-rubbed shadow,  
 in ways only true, park sketch artists  
 or one handlucky Titanic stowaway can.

Because who loves poetry anymore, anyway?

Even if we are the poem, no  
 one cares for verse in public.  
 Isn't it terse—indulgent?  
 Like poems about poets,  
 poetry, writing poems, etc.;  
 like using "etcetera" in poems;  
 like using poems to run a mouth  
 until it gasps. Somehow,  
     poetry makes a beautiful world  
     feel                   uglier  
     once the poet stops talking,  
     once we flip the final page.  
 I'm merely a poet, no magician  
 or painter, where the goal is so often  
 an attempt at the real, making something  
 no more beautiful than what's reflected.  
 I'm not that perfect a mirror; my mind is flowing with fractals.  
 A poet takes the seconds from humanity  
 & stretches each to the point  
 before it's misshapen & breaks, making the world  
 perfectly beautiful. & self-serving  
 as all poets appear, there's the fact  
 that someone may, perhaps, buy a sketch, but a poem?  
     Don't be ridiculous.

FROM THE 2<sup>ND</sup> FLOOR RAILING AT MENLO MALL

A fang of water slithers from lips like a slant-rhyme  
       bows in the corridor wind  
       a spider thread              almost clear  
 it swings          silkenlightly  
 with a pre-tragedy-whisper of an opened noose  
       it slices          feathergently  
 with the wisp of a post-riot silence

Just above the heads of window shoppers  
       the end's fuzzy bulge shines  
           like a hand blown thermometer's base  
                           fizzes  
   crackles

no one  
 but I hear the static of expectionation  
 no one  
 but I feel that flaccid expectation

it lingers  
       pendulates  
                           takes some time  
                           makes its rounds

before being sucked back up, forking a bit back over some lips,  
 losing just a little mass to the fast snaking of a spattered return.  
 I wonder if I'd be disgusted if it wasn't so hot out. Leaving,  
 I think about how nice it'd be if we finally got some rain.

## SMELL RIGHT BEFORE (&amp; JUST AFTER) THE RAIN

I breathe from my nose on days I think it might rain,  
bating those scents.  
The clouds are rumbling their apologies,  
hanging out the rain in sheets as if each will dry  
by a chatter of wind. It's a thick kind of rain,  
gusty \* sideways  
keeping up with the rush of passersby.  
I look up & rain bounce into my nose.  
The drips are a beautiful symmetry, translusentual the way it all spreads  
side & side.  
When the wind takes a breath, the rain straightens up. It colloids. It falls vertically certain.  
Storm raise neighborhood blinders  
like three days after Christmas lights come down  
& brown pine needles bleed from this street to that street.  
No one's looking out for anything.  
Johns & Janes are sheltering themselves with free newspapers  
& the popped collars of waterproof coats  
or old leather jackets.  
My coat has no collar & the street vending machines are empty.  
The rain is weakening, anyway,  
only enough to alert a conscious observer.  
Crowds of grass rub elbows. Finish drinking themselves heavy, they fall asleep.  
The cloud's candy paint,  
a lucid mix of grays, blues, & a pink,  
seems dry in the eyes of passersby  
& the white is pushing through.  
I'm looking for that smell of survival,  
the sweetness  
soaking into the concrete,  
the vapor  
always following  
the rain's retreat.

## A MAN GIVES A CAN TO A WOMAN

A bus drips heavy with the scent of city sweat.  
Busy cars sit still like old pills, barely moving.  
Brown or black briefcases are swinging udders.  
The sidewalk grit is shaded by people  
Talking to their cell phones.

Woman with a torn dress pushes a damaged shopping cart—brim busting  
with aluminum cans.

One wheel locks, leaving scars,  
bleeding its rubber onto the sidewalk grit.

Reverberations shake the frame, drumming-up  
the cans. Each one sings part-harmonies, songs asking  
for a hand-up.

Man talking on his phone & enjoying a Coca-Cola sees the torn woman.  
He empties his can, motions with his phone to stop her.

He, too, recycles.

He tosses his can onto her pile,  
walks away with two reasons to be as proud.

## HE'S MAKING A PHOTO-ALBUM (part one)

A black coffee is on the kitchen counter. Talk radio argues over static. Nick Kringowski presses his suit, shines his boots & brushes his beard. His bells were buffed last night. He pulls his attire together, grabs two cookies & his keys, saddles his sleigh, an '89 Sable, & he flies on over to Menlo Mall, leaving behind 359 torn paper-links at his bedside.

Seven days until Christmas & all its children go away. Just one week. He checks both his mirrors; making the right, he checks them twice. Nick can't waste one of these precious days of present in traffic court. The plot is the warm pudding of SUV's & crossovers—an outpouring of children carrying lists & a year of good deeds Nick sweats with joy.

With keys jingling all the way to a side-entrance, Nick sees the flash-drive on the ring. He scratches his bells—jingling too—and he smiles. The mall is wet with families finishing up their season, buying a thick, red & green sweater, or socks, buying iPods before waiting on a line. 8am, & the kids are already wringing lists in their hands & pacing, giving Nick, a Jolly Mall Santa, chills along his spine & down his beard & up his legs. His feet—unclean—sweat & stink under a hard leather.

First kid mounts. “What would you like for Christmas, young man,” Nick asks. The camera's flash explodes, & another young boy follows. Every list, digital camera-flash & kid reminds Nick of his flash-drive, reminds him lunch is close. It's all he ever wants Xmas after Xmas. The last morning child mounts Nick's thighs, relays a toy-list & smiles.

Nick's lap is sweaty; his beard smells of red Bubblelicious. He smiles.



III.

NOAM  
CHOMSKY'S  
JAR  
ADJECTIVE, ADJECTIVE, NOUN, VERB, ADVERB  
A.K.A. NOW THE JAR IS HALF EMPTY

COLORLESS GREEN IDEAS SLEEP FURIOUSLY  
THRIFTY HEATED LEGOS MUSH VIBRANTLY  
EDGY RELAXED TRACTIONS SLIP STEADILY  
HORRIFYING KIND DIABLOS WEEP HAPPILY  
VILE DECENT DICTATORS VOTE SELFLESSLY  
MASTERFUL LAZY SLAVES LIBERATE COZILY  
CHILDISH DULL GODS WORSHIP SELFLESSLY  
TACTILE NUMB SKULLS SOLO HARMONICALLY  
SLOPPY STOIC HOMONYMS BESOUGHT SOBERLY  
FRESH STYLIZED STALACTITES SINK WEIGHTLESSLY  
UGLY PHOTOGRAPHED PARAGONS BOW CAREFULLY  
RIGHTEOUS WRONGING DEMONS ANGLE ROUNDLY  
FOUL EDUCATED TELEVISIONS SHUT LUMINOUSLY  
ACCEPTED BLACK RAINBOWS SATURATE DENSELY  
BAWTY TIMID VILLAINS PROTECT HAPHAZARDLY  
COLORFUL WHITE HOLES FILL TRANSPARENTLY  
COLORLESS GREEN IDEAS SLEEP FURIOUSLY

## I'M NOT DUNN

## i. He (Dunn) Told Me (for S. Dunn's "Decorum")

Jesus fucked Mary Magdalene in the boat-house. She said they made love. She said, Stephen Dunn would agree, God is my witness, & who the hell is He to contend with Dunn? I mean, did His Bible receive the Pulitzer Prize? No? Amen.

## ii. Giving a Clown a Context (for Dunn's "Clown")

A clown, out of the bounds of circus tents,  
 glow swords & animalliable balloons,  
 clops floppy shoes around a poet's tangled lawn,  
 & hums an 'Entrance of the Gladiators' so horrid & unreal, so Stephen King,  
 it ought to have done something  
 to alarm the poet—coax him to stay on his porch—  
 seriously. Like when bears trash cans  
 searching for something humanesque  
 to dull appetites & sharpen teeth.  
 But, you see the clown isn't a bear.  
 No, not this time at least.  
 So our poet strolls to meet it, red nose to nose,  
 & meet his fears, for once,  
 finally, with a home field advantage.

## iii. There &amp; Then (for Dunn's "Here [&amp;] Now")

Although saying, I love you & Let's fuck can feel pretty,  
 I'm not convinced it is better than recitations a of good  
 Our Father. Who artfully requests fornication or love?

Isn't it vulgar to sound heightened like those old masses  
 of Latin? I am not sure. I used to be, but the jury is out  
 fucking with each other's brains as I sit here, an atheist  
 wishing he was more; maybe, some Jew who hates him-  
 self for all of it. The American self. Just something else.  
 Willing wishful words, no belief in them, yet I say again  
 I love you & Let's fuck

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING EARNEST (FROM HEMINGWAY'S *A FAREWELL TO ARMS*)

i.

That Late Summer, the flashes  
from the sun & water & guns going by  
were brown & bare.  
It was like summer of a storm coming.

From the chestnut trees, we heard the river  
& the leaves stirred by the gray motor trucks.  
Troops' trucks splashed mud onto the mountains, at the trees,  
by the house & along the roads.  
Pebbles & boulders dry. The trunks on each side of the rifles were wet.

When the rains come all the country wet rich with crops.  
We lived in Udine. Small & sitting between.

So small that you faced only the white,  
except for the fruit trees. & beyond, they were small,  
grey with autumn.

We could look across; there was much traffic. We heard  
the troops, trucks with loads covered with green branches, & tractors.  
The long barrels slowed in the traffic.

Troops were muddy & moving & blue  
in a forest of chestnut. The men passing on were dusty,  
& the vineyards were thin & bare & the trunks, the belts: grey.

There was fighting for another mountain this year.  
It was not successful. Vines lay over the soldiers marching.  
Afterwards, the dust they raised,  
the packs of clips & cartridges, bulged forward under the mud.

At the start of permanent rain, with the river  
& clouds on the army, in the bed of end,  
only seven thousand things were going.

ii.

In the Army “things went very badly,” was not the feeling.  
 Leaves fell early that year we lived in the capes  
 so that trees & behind it were misted over the road,  
 bare & powdered.

The leaves of the trees,  
 pulled by motor-tractors, were many—  
 Orchards of bare-branched & brown & dead leaves.  
 The Plain was white in the night  
 & many in the Fall.

Sometimes in the dark night we could see lightning,  
 but the nights & the branches were black with rain,  
 the breeze falling, & the sides of the rivers that looked across  
 plain to the mountains, wet in their capes. There was fighting  
 in a valley &, see, that mountain too. But the rain came.  
 The green leafy branches & their pack-saddles died of it.

There were big guns with boxes of ammunition.  
 The day, drawn by motor cars that passed, was clear.  
 & swiftly, the leaves all fell even. & if one of the guns,  
 covered with canvas that moved, could not see his two generals,  
 he himself was probably the King, top of his cap.

Artillery in the dark, leather boxes heavy with the road,  
 marched as the mountain & the road & the months had gone  
 with children marching under the window. There was an officer down the road,  
 & the rivers there were pulled by motor-tractors.  
 & under their capes, tractors to the north carried men & other boxes.

On the front of thin, long 6.5 mm. the troops marching,  
 the dust rising & the plains, the mountains, the driver & more  
 came out in the channels. Troops went in the day to see  
 how the back was very checked  
 & in the car, in the seat,  
 they splashed more.

## HOW TO STEAL A POEM (IT'S A THREE STEP PROCESS)

i.

First, find a poem that is so good that its inherent beauty disgusts the weaker poet inside of you. Take William Carlos Williams's poem entitled XXII, for example. Enjoy the sweet metamorphosis.

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens.

ii.

Next, begin switching out subjects & predicates wherever necessary. Sometimes, this step is as far as you'll need to go, but, fuck it, whoever stopped when the time was right. Go for gold, man!

so much depends  
upon  
a blue set  
of balls  
blown with pain  
too full  
inside my white  
undies.

iii.

Finally, repeat step two. This is a good time to consider maximizing a poem's line breaks, enjambment, or juxtaposition. REMEMBER, do not apologize for it because that suggests to readers an expression of regret or a request for forgiveness, neither of which is a duty of poets.

Too much distends  
inside  
my blue balls—  
barrels,  
engorged, pain-  
ful. Full.  
Where is my white  
knee-sock?

## NINE PARTICULAR LOOKS AT A HEART

A Carbon based  
binary beat—on-  
off-on-off, un/broken

Down in a well  
some fleshy naked  
something spoons & straightens

Camera shutters  
Synapses flash/burn  
images through a clean lens

Deep in covers  
restless youth drifts  
dreams hit & he awakens

Platonic cave  
encompassed creature  
back to the flames' reflection

Hitting the road  
thinly wrapped engine  
belts in perfect rotation

Same car: old now  
stiff fluids, stiff tubes  
dented door will not open

Rose pedals relax  
in late-afternoon  
face toward the fallen

Sagging old house  
chimney chest; a blaze  
pulses & is taken.

## LOW

All this talk about Nabokov,  
time spent on the perfect lattice of his nymphet  
whose name ticks & tocks in the mouth.

Lolita could have aged differently,  
became more or less bubblegumlovely in the event  
Mr. Humbert didn't lose his first love, didn't lose his Annabel Leigh—  
his poem—the love we find before we know how to express love we have.

Lolita, even in her motherlessown  
& with or without her step-father—the center of her tragedy—  
would have found the quiltedcapability of the stage.

Lo's mother, not Humbert sent her away, after all,  
to a camp where childhood games age like an exponent.  
Fun Barbie/Ken late-nights when kids try each other out.

He did not make it rain that day he lost his wife.  
He answered the phone,  
a call he couldn't dream for in good manner outside the gum stains of his journal.

God—as useful as an accent of a literature professor—made the world.

Just as Quilty, Humbert manufactured the pieces to play,  
but the board is God's alone..

Any other living thing on Earth plays with the hand  
he or she or it deals or just so happened to be dealt,  
& men of books understand this all too well.

Nabokov didn't need to be a genius to know low.





## ONE WAY OF LOOKING AT THIRTEEN BLACKBIRDS

This morning, I listened through the sonic impact of rain drops, to a conversation of birds. It sounded like million miniature children singing. When I had finally found their tree, I counted only thirteen.

## LINES

As poets, we should only worry  
 about how to break  
 lines,  
 never  
     whether or not  
     we should  
         cross them.

Was Jesus Christ a zombie  
 or just some new breed  
 of vampire? He could've been Terminator,  
 sent back for John Connor  
 or Sara, I guess.  
 Was he John?

I'd say he was John's dad, Kyle Reese,  
 but I guess that'd be God himself  
 & just enough to get me into hot oil.  
 I can tell you that he was no mere lamb.  
 How can an innocent lamb tend sheep?

I know for sure that Jesus—maybe King David, too—is the closest the Bible gets to Achilles.

I'm getting behind  
 by getting ahead of myself, so I'll just      reiterate.

As poets, we should only worry  
 about how to break lines,  
 not if  
 we should cross them.

DID ACHILLES EVER THINK THE F.T.W.?

For me, youngest born to no great war,  
My mother, no nymphet, my father, no  
Last king, the idea of war seems raw. So,

Fuck the songs of Peleus' son Achilles  
Under which muses raged a murderous,  
Continuous, so zealously ironic doom.  
Keep that poor reekrancid incantation.

There is no returning to stick or stone.  
Haven't the poets too gotten their fill?  
Everything is sullied spear, dull armor.

War is of mans' manufacturing. That's  
Only to say that we gave her her name.  
Rolling from our tongue like war cries,  
Love becomes a blossom of our spoils.  
Does anyone count widows, orphans?

## THE ONE

Abandon me like all your poetry  
like that single, solonesome poem  
you've actually finished, the one  
that your workshop said you didn't,  
like that text message just before  
your driver's test, or  
mold spores on doll clothes,  
the balsawood house you built  
to hold on to them. Abandon me.

Abandon me like a wire hanger  
so sweetly swaddling a baby's  
clothes but unable to expel  
the memories of a sound mistake  
made in an alleyway. Abandon me  
like oceans of oil or bumper stickers  
with dates on them. Abandon me.

Abandon me like Oldsmobile  
Abandon me like wall phones  
Abandon me like we abandon  
top ten lists & beta copies, &

Abandon me like this poem will

## A SUICIDE AT SEA

Slip slithering this Boston Whaler,  
 tap-dancing these swells awake,  
 I sing a psalm I don't quite know.  
 The bay's murk motion mirrors the bridge,  
 & I go on toward the oceans—all of it.  
 Recall when our Father wrote the Sequel?

It reminds me bumper stickers never shut up:  
*Baby on Board, Honor Student, W '04, Yes We Can,*  
 that stupid fucking plastic fish.

It reminds me just how often shit happens  
 & how life was mostly a set of sidesteps,  
 The dragging feet in the neighbor's grass.

I ride the horizon's tail, vertically certain.  
 I go on, windfull, chasing wakes of a young sun  
 as it rises on time behind my father's old tri-  
 hull. The canvas laughs & claps with each burst.  
 I go on ahead, never becoming that artist I said...

The last course I set was the coarsest yet.  
 Eggs don't float in water, even in a bay's brine,  
 where it's too wet to weave the basket.  
 When I try to wash these hands clean, they don't dry.

So I throw all those babies in the bay, watch  
 the rotten float. Are there reasons to save the few?

It's like how pulling the webs of sodium foam  
 from the ocean surface only shows the cracks  
 in the soft blue, as the spread of lightning does  
 just before the clouds rub & shell their thunder.

Storms roll in like sheepdogs out for the shore,  
 but one black sheep sets anchor just past the bridge,  
 writes a loud ode of Myself, long lost in failure.

May it withstand those widest old caravans  
 of heady swells. When this Boston Whaler floods,  
 I'll go on down directly, like all good eggs will.

# INCIPIT WRITING

Sitting. Sighing. I'm writing this, inking this insipid shit with livid witticism, stilting it first with nitwit critics' priggish hindsight. Still, I think if its gist is rid with simplistic gimmicks, it'll stink with rigid chic. It'll insist shtick, highlit with hijinx, glib might, childish limits. It will lisp in its blind bits, drip with wit. In scripting, in scribing, I find I slip, trip, flip in this mind, drilling in drips, filling in lids in six visits. I'll lick lists with skill, killing it. Writing isn't high, is it? It's gliding, isn't it? Binding. This pig. This shrimp.

This fighting fish inks its lip. Kissing thin script. Linking ill lit pit with light. Is it fitting? It's vivid. It's limp. Civics trick limits. Ink is its victim. I'll sift instinct in this. Living in distinct prisms, I pitch ink with rich insight. I dip pins in ink brisk with British spirit, frigid with Irish drink. Writing is scribbling. Shitting pissbright whittlings. Singing signs. It instills indi-visibility with invisibility, implicitly inhibiting inching incisions. It is. It is. It is. It is.

Is it? This is writing. It's driving. I'm imbibing writing, I fill in timid wilds. It's insisting if inviting. Writing rips criticisms, tight sighting kids, stripping, slicking, dipping dick tips in things. Sick. Lighting wicks, it sings. Whilst I, this kind Inn's Nihilist, is writing. I, this critic-itch, it writing. I, this mind, this vivid wiring, this lint, this ditch, this big sifting bin, this this, is writing. Ink is wind fiddling in sills, shrilling, singing twinkling sin. Writing is this tic/tick; it will sip misfit virgin's spills. I'm ink's lispig spit. Writing is I. I will it in. Writing is I. I kill it. Writing is. Writing it. It is.

Fin.

IV.



# SEXY LITTLE DEVIL WITH A CAUSE

*I'm going to tell you something, but it's off the record until I die. OK?*

~Elizabeth Taylor

Did little Jimmy think, at his ripest,  
his minister                      was just  
    making him pay for sins  
he'd commit as a devil without a cause?

Eleven years old,  
caught alone with a neat tautness,  
deep, sweet leaves of torso, hard as  
    bone.

    Heavenly.      James  
couldn't know that James's  
minister was only acting on his spirit.

    A minister's hands are a soft prayer & James  
had the jaw of a god. Eden lay south through his young plains  
    down the zip of worn jeans  
into a son's gilded dawn.

With his mother, Mildred,  
    gone,  
who was left to pray for James?

    James, you knew the power of the knees,  
the hard choice  
of giving yourself up to God  
    for reasons you'll never know  
or talk about,  
except to Elizabeth Taylor.

    Now Liz is gone, so                      who is left to pray for James?

Is it funny  
    or just fate  
that poor child  
    James Dean  
like poor,  
    poor Michael Jackson—draped over an altar  
meant for nothing less than sacrifice—loved the mother  
they found in Elizabeth Taylor too much  
    or just  
enough to be that vulnerable  
again & again?

## FICKLE PAGAN

I've had at least four resurrections of God before  
I was sure that my world revolved around me. I  
was a God as any other of the gods I saw or felt.  
Most often, I switched between Tupac Shakur &  
Bruce Lee. Pac, for his fate-fulfilling scriptures,  
Bruce, for showing me the might of closed hands.  
Maybe because no one else was a much a believer.  
Before them, I worshipped Hulk Hogan because  
everyone else was doing it. I guess my first God  
was just

plain

old

God.

Again, because everyone else was.

IN LIEU OF WATCHING RERUNS OF THE PRICE IS RIGHT ON SUNDAY WITH UNCLE AL

i. The Price is Bob Barker

The last time I remember seeing Bob Barker,  
he was beating the funny out of Adam Sandler.

ii. Steeeeeave! Wilkos

Damn, I want onto that stage, into his chair,  
with the results saying, You told the TRUTH.

iii. Maury Povich

He seems as if he's a sugary enough old man,  
but I would not let him babysit my children.

iv. Richard Bey

I spent my young years watching Richard Bey.  
Now you are thinking: Where is Richard Bey?

v. Montel or Arsenio

What came first, the Arsenio or the Montel?  
Is this a trick question or is it just some filler?

vi. Oprah

No poet is strong enough in his or her craft  
to use Oprah's name successfully in a piece.

vii. Jerry, Jerry, Jerry

I was watching Jerry Springer all afternoon.  
I just really love Jerry Springer...That is all.

## LIKE AN UNCLE

He said we are own  
Gods to lose  
staring at his riddled

almost half winking at them  
then me  
He said, keeping true to what we've  
learned while wading in the muck of pool halls  
or memorizing from the satin of chalkboards  
is faith enough.

My uncle would tear  
at his nails with the music  
of a well-worn canon, he'd wait  
until the white space mounted,  
the silence  
& only then would he bite them to beds.  
It was a Sunday dinner for him.  
Anything worth enjoying is worth a little  
wait, he said.  
Down time.  
Like faith, my uncle said  
spitting a crescent of nail  
onto the dining room rug.

## LOOKING FOR THE MAN WITH ANSWERS

I once met this wonderful  
rover who talked to water.  
One day I confronted him,  
asked him how, why. He  
actually replied, but with a question of his own.  
*You, I ask*, he said.  
*You are the water?*

To which I said, *No*.

*Why then*, he asked, *should I talk to you*

## NO RESURECTION FOR 1 BLACK MALE

Just another dead man of black  
 decent. Born behind a social 8  
 ball; a music & film star...shot.  
 He's gotten shot & shot before,  
 became a movingmartyr to me,  
 knowing at birth the place he'd go to.

Death had good eyes out for 2-  
 Pac Shakur, & as a young black  
 man, he had that All Eyez on Me  
 mentality.... All eyes can hate.  
 Write for the rights white fore-  
 fathers stole to give a nigga one shot,

Pac. This time bullets got shot  
 on friendly grounds, so close to  
 home. Boy, what a reeledfate for  
 Pac, fresh from a fight, to be a Dead Black  
 male.... news served dust he ate  
 that night. I choked when Chris told me.

*Wait, what are you telling me,*  
*Chris, where the fuck was he shot?*  
*Call me... No, it's not too late.*  
 He did & I didn't let it ring two  
 times. I looked at me in the sheen of a gloss-black  
 cordless phone, answered & talked till 4.

What'd someone do that for?  
 It looks like he's looking at me  
 from the passenger side of a black  
 BMW—the last paparazzi shot,  
 on his way to parties & death too,  
 soon stopped alongside his rearviewedfate.

Seven year theories die after 8  
 years past. Another 4. Another 4.  
 The Resurrection will not be on to-  
 night, 2Pac, & it just plain killed me  
 & the world when you got shot  
 ...one dead male, 25 years old, black...

Ashes to ashes, this Black Panther ate  
 every word shot at him before, at us,  
 but he left a door open for me, for you.

## UNTITLED

After all the rafters fall,  
but before  
the cries stop tolling & the blood yellows,  
those on solid ground  
debate the recourse  
that should be taken. As the toll grows

from *too many* to *that's impossible*,  
the lucky-left repent,  
fill cash baskets like every other old Sunday fable:  
Jesus, Hail Mary, Football mascots.

We donate to our pride, listening to the chingcrash of change,  
like glass,  
& scream for the quarter back,  
because you paid Haiti Relief, donated at mass.  
Graves are getting cramped, but your wallet thins  
as you wager donations, paying for sins.

## SECOND COLLECTION REQUESTED FOR LEGAL FUNDING

I formed too many judgments of the Catholic Church  
while I was in the rectory  
before & then after I worked  
a service,

ringing bells & accepting  
offerings, opening my mouth for hosts  
& holding the bible

for Father Zuber where I stood—some young pulpit.

He told me he never believed in God in his private  
room  
but that he used to  
think the world needed Him.

I'd leave Saint Marks in Rahway each Saturday & Sunday,  
walk past the parking lot by my house, converted  
from a playground. Basket Balls switched out for parking meters

Father Zuber left, I moved, & sort-of forgot about God.

Thinking about that old lot & its cars, the lacquered pews,  
the cash baskets, I see how much change matters,  
how much can be made.

I suppose he was right.  
The world can always use another  
Father Zuber.



## HE'S MAKING A PHOTO-ALBUM (part two)

The mall clatters as a North Pole of cotton snow empties. Every child, parent & teen photographer in striped socks nears food-court, leaving Nick & the computer alone. The fat man squeezes past candy canes, holly & gifts—wrapped & hollow. He jellys to the computer counter.

Nick signs-in with a password he traded with one of the stripe-sock girls for seven grams of good weed & a vintage Polly Pocket toy-set she said she'd always wanted for Christmas but never got. He'd have given one to her year after year if he knew, he said. Beyond her years, Nick occasionally wondered if his old lap & her parts had ever rubbed. The desktop chimes open, goosing Nick's chin, tightening his neck. He's fussing through his keys to find the flash-drive, & when he does he pulls down his beard & kisses the tip. Staring into the reflection buffed onto it, he thinks back to the last two weeks, all the gifts he'd be expected to get, all the moments of laughter juxtaposed to crying.

His tongue passes his chapped lips, pricks the USB's tip. He inserts it into the computer. It engorges with electricity. He waits for the beep. Nick jaunts in the digital candy shop, drags & drops photos of smiling, laughing, crying, or screaming children into his drive. He'll sort them when he returns home. Children with their own feels, smells & lists. Nick remembers every little boy & girl he put inside his photo-album.

GOD,

Wrap your knives around the wrists of this arrogance  
Grab & take me through the whirs of a mind's wiring  
& tell me the things you knew you would never know  
Wedge the dumb honesty of my innocence in a crook  
of your medulla, or tack it into the cross of your heart  
Teach me to be dampknowledgeable, how a sponge is  
a sponge on a sink as it is under a sea. It is. Electricity  
like kidrisky moments & other memories. If there is a  
soul (a mitigating innervidual, a blanket or everlasting  
string theory) would it knot-up or wrinkle like a fresh  
cortex, maybe a blanket. But if there was such a thing  
& if it did tangle or wrinkle, it would matter. Would it  
be worth its weight in souls? The jarred interior to our exteriors.

## PLAYING WITH MY DAD WAS AS COMMON AS BIGBANGS &amp; SECOND COMINGS

I want to have another catch with my father.  
 I'm his round, brown boy<sup>2</sup>, after all. All eyes & hair.  
 Even today, I find myself falling in his gravity. Still.  
 3.5 some-odd times from his first toss,  
 I've been on that calculated drift he's coined for me since before me.

It's this son-was-a-son-to-someone-once idea.  
 This sons-are-all-sons-of-the-sun's-suns ideal.

My father would fling full-armed, high-arc'd tosses with well-aimed grace.  
 Green to his cosmos, I lifted a hand to the sky,  
 Wished the ball would be a small one or miss altogether.

Young catches turned to preteen batting practice.  
 Father pitched curves that were stadium worthy.  
 I learned to hug the plate. Swung heavy.  
 Just enough to get half way to the moon.

Inside pitches meant cracked plastic helmets,  
 bruised ribs, & weekly limps.                      Still I hugged that plate.

My varsity letter meant no more games with dad, so  
 I aimed fly balls his way & prayed for home-  
 runs.

I'd let them linger up there against the sun,  
 hoping to settle one into his hands or on lap.

After one particular game—the only time I actually got to him—I asked him:  
 Why not have another catch, Dad?

V.

## NANNY'S MOTHER TOOK A WALK

*My mother took a one-way walk when I was Eight.*

~My Nanny

Nanny held up backyard trees  
with discarded string she found  
in around town

She laced some around each leaf  
each finger  
& she played  
marionettes like it was a life

She tossed & turned those trees  
like dreams  
like windy sheets  
& leaves

There is love in the twinge of each  
finger as it rolls  
out & through  
her knuckles  
bent & blue

I watched like the light  
cutting through the slats & knots

of a fence  
as old as me

every morning

sometimes at night

never reaching  
for apples  
or answers.

## THE BLOOD GROOVE

Pop-pop's trench knife smelled  
like old copper & bad breath. He said it always did

In the center of his tool shed—build when he got back—he lifts a lacquered floor board,  
spreads some dirt, pulls a mound of canvas from the hole.  
It's old enough to be rough & weak,      looking almost soft.

He burrows a workstrained hand into the canvas,  
removing a knife,      a bone hilt customized for quality.

He undresses the blade from its dusty, sued sheath. He coughs from age.  
I cough from a lack of it.

Its patina is dullovely,      almost un-reflecting  
the cuts of sunlight from the shed's mix of slatted boards.

His fingers, a soft cheese cloth, sweep its spine  
clean, rubbing the blade's fuller dust free from the blood groove

His hard thumb flits the dull drop-point  
always look for blood

A whetstone casts a shadow,  
a clean black grave-mark,  
against the loose grain of his worktable,  
Keep this dry, he said  
His voice shows difference.

I wonder around the question:  
How wet were those trenches?

He drags the stone softly along the tabletop.  
He moves the blade in crescent moons  
against the stone, sensing the ruts, working the subtlety  
that separates grinding & sharpening.

The flecks of ironred shed from the scrape, & ting on the table.  
The edge breathes clean, spreads the sun.

He rubs the knife's clean edge  
against, & then slightly through  
the aged topography of his thumb.

Always give a little of your own.

We bury it together,  
his trench knife with the bone hilt.

## POP-POP'S FAULT

His Ballentine Ale never got cold,  
 its pictograms got more difficult when we flipped new caps.  
 Each eked hops like his cheek kisses,  
 we did puzzles slower each time.

Pop-pop lived until he was too old & rusted to kill himself.  
     Drank most of those years  
     Stopped cold  
 when Nanny's gown waved goodbye from the fence, & again through those trees.

They got the bloodless tan of hollow rings.  
 She removed hers when making his eggs.

Pop-pop fussed when eggs ran too much  
 like how Nanny said his mouth always did.  
 After she slipped her ring off & ran—leaving  
 Pop-pop to make his own omelet—the eggs  
 kept running.                      I never asked.

Instead, I grabbed those old pictograms—each waft  
 of hops faded to some degree while the pink returned  
 to Pop-pop's ring finger, like grand, childish questions  
 about relationships.

We memorized the puzzles, but scratched our heads  
 & guessed anyway.  
 Who needed new puzzles?  
 Then, a scribbled letter from Nanny's sister read:

Marie Died. No viewing. Family plot.  
     Regards

Pop-pop called an Army buddy from back in Korea  
 who wore black & carried in a case of *Ballantine's*  
 & a few fingers of Jack in his back pocket.

He welcomed cirrhosis.  
 At the hospital he joked when we were alone:  
 I'll never ask you to   (wink)   pull the plug

I never answered him.  
 I didn't kill my Pop-pop. Nanny did.  
 But it was Pop-pop's fault.

## NO MORE ROME FOR QUESTIONS

My mom called it  
                                   *tomato sauce,*  
 but dad only made  
                                   *mamma's gravy*

dinner was family time  
                                   to point out flaws  
 I ate both in silence  
                                   & maybe just maybe  
 everything gets lost  
                                   in mid-translation.

*Hey, when did the Roman Civilization leave that boot to add to the infestation of the Fed. Housing Adm.?*

*Rocky Marciano was no dancer*

*I doubt I'll ever get to Napoli*

      Va fangul. Va fa Napoli.  
 Lineage is a sedative,  
                                   a cancer. They never acknowledged my question.  
 I never expected an answer.



# A THICK PINE TABLE'S DEEP GOLDEN WINE

Two green bottles rise from Dad's table,  
both left with a sappy ring of dried wine  
on their scuffed insides. One is as gold  
as old kerosene, the other, a thick  
blood, reminded me of our woods, a deep  
warm spring of summeryoung pine.

I remember, still, the tallest totem of our pine,  
straight & long, before dad hacked it to a table  
with his axe, releasing the sapsweet from deep  
hungry-mouthed cuts. Between sips of wine,  
dad slipped his axe head into the thick  
numb trunk, & I'd watch the blood-gold

sap trickle & capture the sun's gold.  
Dad's cancer slowly took hold. A pine  
casket from different tree. The thick  
trickle of mom's tears. Her pounds on his table  
knocked down the sandshaded wine  
bottles. I watched the two mix & sink deep

into that table, watched the wine shade deep  
against the grain & along the knotted gold.  
Dad said that dreams wasted time, took the wine  
from its center place, & knocked on pine.  
He said that was real, not dreams, our table,  
& sunraised a glass of red. Its tears ran thick-

legged as he took his last healthy sip, ran thick  
as tree rings, looked like blood but too deep.  
His eyes emptied, arms fell treelimp. Glass dusted our table.  
His head hit hard & rocked the gold  
from his teeth. Each rolled like change on the pine.  
At his viewing, I finished up that table wine.

When it ended, I took Dad's axe & more wine.  
I disappeared in the lace of our thick  
family of North American Stone-Pine,  
maybe to find a dream inside that deep  
sleeplessness of mourninglabor under gold  
sheets of sun. Each tree looked like my Dad's table.

His last table & those old rings of wine linger like gold mornings  
& the thick undergrowth beneath the deepest of our family pines.

## SANTA CLAUS IS DEAD, SUICIDE NOTE

A dry Christmas tree hangs pointing down from a ceiling fan of my house in some anyold town. Blood shiny glass orbs cling to its quills, reflecting thoughts of last fall—what time never kills. My father won't crawl from our chimney place in his matted red suit, a beard glued to his face, ho-hoing the dreams of flying reindeer to us kids—too old, sure—still his reasons were clear. He sought only to live inside a moment. He was diagnosed with a cancer he'd long circumvent. With each year he survived, out would crawl Santa. No Christmas this year. Instead, my rant: a lament for my father's dusty red suit, his dark gray one for church. I'm wearing his black boots. Life is a snow globe, he said, don't drown. Instead, float all the way down to your funeral boat. I told my loved ones of my intensions to hang the old tree as if my list pled for an intervention. I need a love as deep as my father's jolly red suit. So I'll hang right side up, a clatterer of boots, with one last question about Santa Claus: Why do we insist our kids go on dreaming because children take offense, thinking that their parents had lied. Not me; instead, my note will read:

*My Santa Claus Died*

## WE ALL KNOW HER

She spread her legs like angel's wings  
 & first fucked on her stepdad's table,  
 a hard pine one from his first marriage.  
 He started off by asking her to count  
 her birthmarks & then his own. She  
 blamed her two quick breasts makeup,  
 & short skirts for her turn of events—

when he first forced her, *Dance for me*.  
 Not naked at first, but soon. He'd give  
 his cheap Boone's wine & her mom's  
 pricy lipstick on her buoyant cheeks,  
 then tongue, digging-hard a raw kiss &  
 more. He pressed. She wilted. Shook.  
 Youngbroken. He took off the condom  
 looked into the crease of her eyelids &  
 looked for his reflection in that tearing.

She heard his buckle dancing back up  
 & she never ate dinner at a table again.  
 Wasn't her mother curious? She knew  
 she knew, but why couldn't she ask?  
 This former dawn—this ballet princess  
 would never dance again. Not prettily,  
 at least. Her perfect silhouette is only  
 a long shadow of a train riding alone.  
 Unmoving regret. Her sun hangs slunk,

set with an old acceptance of blame.  
 She never ate at the dinner table again.

# WE MET ON AN ESCALATOR

I caught that first teeth-grinding step, looking up at where I headed,  
her, down to where she'd been.  
Our memories met in-between—bad times of stories of kids being eaten.

We'd get close enough to see those old shadows of zits,  
the canvass of cover-up, & dandruff or just crumbs.  
Both unwilling to touch.  
Too afraid to find the sewer's side of manhole covers,  
too weak to find or pull coins glued to deli-linoleum.

Our railings sucked sweaty to our hands as  
we passed on that impractical escalator's axis—  
the fleeting syllable of clock beats, that part of all trips  
when you could hop out & over, go back the other way—  
I attempt to mumble some concoction of passing-conversation.

*How is it up there?*

*It's just as bad as down there.*      She seemed right.

My pinky finger jiggled & jumped, tugged on the others,  
needing to spill the first blood. The rest of me: a rusty anchor.  
Fused to the rolling stairwell & its rules.  
Her eyes followed mine as we got further way, turned back before I did.

The 2nd floor approached reeking  
the new plastic of Halloween stores,  
the stale-air linger of cigarette & candy stands,  
& the crowded mixture of row house food-court vendors.

I made it to the top & watched her disperse.  
As if nature called, as if there was a stiff pressure filling within,  
I needed the bathroom. The 2nd floor restroom was across the mall,  
& I told myself it was easier to take the escalator  
down. I turned sharply  
    & hustled the wrong way  
        down, bumping into the strangers going up.

## A POET ASKS A STEPFATHER TO GO FISHING

She wrote poems pressed  
 into neat packages, tucked  
 into stale books she'd read,  
 lined in yard sale trunks, never  
 opened again.

When she walked, wrinkles  
 waved hello along her pond water  
 skirt. Her breasts tugged against  
 each woven line of shirt,  
 waddled  
     like  
 bobbbers.

Her back swayed, begged boys  
 her way, but I'd never catch her  
 look over it. Walking shoes wear.  
 Rocking shoulders teeter

like my stepfather's old rowboat—the only link to a past marriage.

He'd arc the cork-handled pole,  
 angle down the bow, jeer, fight, & reel,  
 thumb open his copper spotted cooler,  
 scales hung rancid to plastic.

I recall sipping his O'Doul's on weekend trips  
 to Old Pond, how the cooler  
 slowly stopped bumping, all the talk of fishing,  
 girls.

The last time we went, I was ten. He told me  
 to give my first crush a poem  
 wrapped around a fish—how  
 he caught my mom. His fish was huge, he mythed.  
 The poem: Hallmark's.  
 I tried chocolates & sonnets.

If I asked her for a drink  
 & caught her eyes sink in skirt,  
 if she walked away shoulder-taut,  
 broke the line, I'd write  
 to my stepfather:

*new poems, need fish. I'll bring booze.*

## A WISH ON A POSTCARD SCENE

You come to me. We reap each fruit  
of our labor. We cut the rot to keep the sweet,  
leaving the bruised for the does & those they love.  
In beat with the leaves, the rhythm repeats. Beneath the trees,  
light reflects from the peat, steeping the air a sweet evergreen.

Let's say this was place we'd first meet,  
a place only caught in a postcard's scene.

Our kiss sparks brighter  
than the Sun's ever seen,  
bounces from bark like the shooting of stars,  
bringing to mind what is outside of in-

between.

You capture a star, you say it is ours & we wish  
for us to never leave our own mad world  
as we stream through the nomad's world.

## BIG PUNISHMENT

Dusty static blows from some vinyl,  
 reeks from speakers, along this room.  
 I watch her bob her head to the right  
 & left.

She moves. Me,  
 I watch.  
 I'm trying to forget the first time.  
 That first line. *How is it up there?*

(all the firsts,  
 parsed & paused like  
 syllables & stars)

It's like the first line from Big Pun.  
 No player & I believe it, but he has  
 crushed too much.

Memories run on through the laces in the vinyl,  
 slowly  
 reverberating, lyrics skating  
 slowly  
 as phat as husky old  
 radio waves. A train's track.

This is me. The shadow's back. The shadow—blushing.

My heart, how it's crushing  
 her. Bluscious, she stays. I wait,  
 cheeks red & rested. Rusted.

I watch her.  
 Left, then right.  
 & again.  
 & right when I get that beat,  
 too strong to stand  
 still, I move my feet, but she left.

Has everyone been crushed before?  
 Punished like poems, spit on like a  
 payphone left ringing. Left scuffed.  
 Forgotten like the mall photo-booth.

Stars never touch. Do we?  
 So we are. Parsed dust. Like syllables. Like stars.

## THE COLORS IN POETRY, LIKE BUTTERFLY WINGS

One wing of one butterfly is enough  
to teach us all we need to know  
about color. Even if you are color blind  
or just blind or colored  
white & cold for a mist wisping along  
in you—the thought of the butterfly planting  
its sticky feet against you.

Never mind that there is a rainbow  
ready to clean itself—lick its veins—on your arm.  
Never mind that a vividly colored metaphor, a tattoo, is about to spread out  
    huebueatifully  
along your wrist when the sun seeps through  
Just right. Understand  
in your fears, you are doing something  
no better than what those better have been doing  
since family time by warm cave walls, when

a butterfly brushed its colors past Lucy's nose,  
stuck its legs to a bare, limestone wall like an allegory.

Lucy traces its stained glass shadow & creates  
    Man's first poem.