TITLE PAGE
FOR MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Crocodilopolis
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I. Museum of the Occupation
From the Book of Kings

The day two women stood before Solomon
it is not true that they held a child between them.
They held two.
One had died in the night,
his tiny lungs drawing
mother’s flesh into his mouth
instead of air,
wrinkled face rendered the same
indigo as the king’s
robes. This child as well
as the living, screaming one
bound the women
to that day in court
and hung heavy
in the sling between them
as they asked the sage:
Which of us is a true mother?
Solomon could not proclaim
the woman who loved more
or the woman who loved better –
only the woman
who understood the justice
of a grief that rends the soul in two
and willed it shared.
If you ask Lizzie of that August afternoon, she’ll tell you how she whiled away the time in the loft above the barn, eating pears and spinning tufts of fallen hair to dolls. That she could not speak coherently about the day’s events was evidence enough for her acquittal – capacity, of course, is not what we can do, but how much we can hold while doing it. Lizzie Borden had no memory for psalms, could not stem the roaring nameless freight that cut across the tracks her life was bound to, and if she dreamed her father grinned at some cruel jest, his lips pulled back, and pinecones ripened in his gums, of course she’d fell the tree before it went to seed again.
Mount Vesuvius on Negative Capability

... that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. - Keats

Again you have returned, naming your city Naples for its newness, the old only implied, and its fate.

You name the fertile soil that lines my valleys "virgin," speckle hills with villages that feast on my phosphorus.

Once, awe was your almanac. No prophecy, no projection. Just memory of boiling stone and plains pummeled by my hurling fury.

I don’t want to be worshiped. The green I’ve grown is not a metaphor. Resilience is just Forgetting’s nom de plume.

I dream of stillness. A calm like cool plaster fills my cavities; it’s a quiet death. I wake writhing, branded by my own hot guilt.

Heed me—who you have named Unquenchable. The only truth of negative capability is the people-shaped scars in the pit of my stomach.
The Future, as Seen through the Back Pages of Boys’ Life Magazine

It could be ours: all kinds of magic tricks, bird calls, pin-up comic illustrations (the kind men like), decoder rings and three cent cigars, cigar box guitar plans – oh how we yearned for the halftone treasures in the back of Boys Life Magazine, the fantastic promises of seamonkey fiefdoms, hypno-charms, X-ray hovercraft spy kits of vintage tomorrow look nothing like a drone strike, and there is no charm in how we must build fires now.
I read once that I would be safer walking on a night like this, because bad guys hate weather more than they love girls walking alone to the after-hours drop box with their overdue books. Outside, the heavens are making good on the flash flood warning and the single siren cutting through the storm is an ice cream truck idling on the corner. The only text I got all night was from the city, saying not to fear planes flying low by the river -- it’s a drill, or a celebration, or both. I wonder what Macy’s does with the reject fireworks, the ones that explode into grimace smiles or colors garish even by their standards. Little Boy weighed nearly five tons when he slipped out the hatch over Hiroshima and lit up the sky to that blazing pallor with only two pounds of the poison in his gut. I put on my red boots and think things might be different if that pilot had to pull the lever on Little Girl instead. The planes are not what scares me.
Here I Am

The voice of God does not come
out of silence does not come
to soothe a mumbling soul prostrate
in the face of the ineffable it comes
from the teeming the roiling of a mind

overfull it comes when breathing
stops and starts and stops again
nights when the air is shallow
and dreams are full of glottal stops
Elijahu picks up breath my father

fumbles he emerges prophet
of the Lord come to bring His
peace Elijahu has no children
no timesheets piling up no court
ordered blood tests no voluntary

commitment when the Lord calls
late at night echoing the manic
skittering of the manifesto coursing
through his blood for air what
amygdalar twitch what basal

ganglia mutate in the blinding radiation
of the sublime when God calls what
does voluntary mean when the voice
leaps synapses on fire what is there
to say to your God but Here I am.
Munoz v. Texas

In the Supreme Court of life support, a husband makes his case for death.

It is twofold: his pregnant wife is dead and also he would let her die.

She lies suspended, tuned like traffic, clicks and tones synched to move
her chest, to move blood through the tracks of her, circulating life-stuff
to the life they claim has taken root within this now-closed system.

Her death is not viable, they say. The state must incubate by proxy.

Meanwhile, she calcifies. Her husband testifies to this: he tries to hold her
hands but the bones crack, livid and cold under their own dead weight.

Doctors testify, too, using words like necrotic, pupillary, rigor mortis,
using Latin like the law to draw the boundaries scalpel-clear.


Some claim the child as a contingency, a clause to say the clot can’t kill, or hasn’t.

The husband knows that death is just an injunction ordered by a higher court;
at best it’s granted quickly. In Texas it is high noon in a hospital room
and a husband takes ten paces toward the bench, and waits.
I remember thinking the bear was life-sized. Must have weighed a ton, that bear that stood out front of the military surplus store wearing each season’s military surplus. My mom marched us past him every spring when we’d go camp shopping. God I hated it. They must not have had as many firemen as they’d expected that year because the bear was wearing gumboots and suspenders and was looking just about as inviting as a concrete bear can be when he’s selling you survival gear. Inside, men were pawing through rough canvas merchandise. The guy behind the counter held his belt buckle when he asked if we needed any help and my mom smiled and said no thanks which is weird because my mom never said thanks or smiled. Maybe that’s survival instinct. Everything was scratchy and too big or proportional to those men, not me. The boots felt like someone else’s big dumb feet strapped over mine. I didn’t want the canteen. I knew I would make it feel ashamed. It was trained for Desert Storm and my mother was sending it hiking. I know it wasn’t her fault, she just wanted to buy us sturdy compasses and flashlights, and there would have been military surplus whether or not we bought it, but I hated watching my mom hand money over the glass counter full of knives, and I hated passing the man-sized bear on our way back to the car.
The Use-of-Force Continuum

1. Physical Presence

We are out tonight in force
walking the block two by two
eyes on the crosswalk, eyes on the boys
Idea is, seeing an officer changes their calculus
what’s worth trying tonight
who to shove, what to take
Break a window on our
watch
Watch

2. Verbal Commands

Stop
Don’t move

3. Empty Hand

Holds, joint locks don’t
make this a street brawl
but if he is resisting
   slam the boy against the hood if you must
if he runs, pursue
   if he turns toward you

4. Intermediate Weapons

Chemical deterents, electronic
even batons can be almost peaceful
   in two hands
to shepherd a protest back to the curb, say
or aimed at something fleshy
        upper arm, lower back, damage
minimal, but you must be close
        and it takes no less time to draw a club

5. *Deadly Force*

Threat to life demands no less
        threat of serious bodily harm
        threat is as threat does as threat
feels
Threat to trigger
        in two
        seconds
is average where you live and that is not a threat
        just fact
        just watch, boys
        Watch
Antigone on the God Particle

The law says: our world depends on symmetries.
See: blood for blood.
See: opposing forces balance.
See: two brothers draw their swords, two brothers die.

Two brothers. My brothers.

Polynices circling the seven gates,
charged with pain,
an eagle circling sky he once called home.

Eteocles pacing the walls,
body warm and muscled
as a lion in the grass.

Most birds of prey look back
just before they strike
for fear a larger bird is hunting.

The eagle does not.

The law says: the particle in the center has weight.
The other orbits, massless.
This is how the world hangs together,
all things in opposition.

The law says: bury one brother.
Bury him here, in the warm center of the city.

Let the other be left
for air. Let his feathers disperse in the wind.
Show the world
he has no matter. Does not matter.
When we were small, Polynices
rode around the palace
on my back. I remember the warmth of his body.

I remember his body.

The god particle says: there is a field
where the law does not apply.

A field where we observe electrons have mass.
A field that explains the weak nuclear force
that lets one brother slip from orbit,
that says it is a wonder
that anything in this world hangs together.

My brother’s body lies in a field.
The law says: it has no weight.
The god particle says: remember his weight.

There is a field where the law fails.

I put my fate with the gods.
I will bury my brother in their field.
Such love

The preacher on the train says
he loves God's creatures so much
he loves all people so much
he loves me so much
he'd hate to see me burn in hell.

I want to love like that.
I want my love to be a threat.
I want to say, I love you so much,
love you so hard and deep,
I'd hate to see you cross me.
II. Crocodilopolis
On Finding The Bones

Ndara is the first to come upon
the bones, not far from the trail
but hidden, a bit, by a dry bank.

She lifts them wordlessly, one
by one. Weighing. Drawing
the warm smoothness across
her cheek, trying to remember.
We follow suit in silence, file by to touch
them gently with the soft pads of our feet.

In your myth we are wise enough
to judge when we are used up.
Each alone, we journey to meet
our ancestors across plains
we’ve never seen before, our chests
thrust forth, divining rods borne
within, tuned for the graveyard.
In truth we do not bend our knees
gracefully at the end. Collapsed,
our brothers struggle to prop us up,
mothers bring water, our herds stand
guard long after the body goes cold.

When we can, we cover our own
with grass before we go. We weigh
the bones against the memory
of flesh. You wonder if we mourn.
We feel the jagged ridge where tusk
once was, replace the bones with care.
Hunter’s Lament

When hunters lay a trap, they hope to snare
a single creature stepping down just so,
or tracking, snout down, scents that lead them there.
And something triggered falls, a sharpened bough
impales the beast, or yanks it off its feet,
or seals a cage until the men return.
Each must be laid with care and precious bate
if the human hopes to eat – each pair
of prey and hunter balanced, eye to eye,
their fates entwined. I long to be reborn
a filter-feeder – clam, flamingo, whale –
and pledge allegiance to the world by feeling
it wash through me, nourishment assured
by opening my mouth to greet the krill.
Crocodilopolis

On the banks of the Karawari, crocodile gods would come to the men at night demanding war, click their jaws once for every head the men were to take. When the deed was done the heads were lined up in the mouth of a totem, so the gods could count them with their teeth. Their jaws are more powerful by far than bear traps, crocodiles – stronger than the trash compactor closing in from all sides of your nightmares. My grandmother carried a crocodile pocket book, I assume to appear menacing, and it worked; I remember her snapping at mud trailed onto the carpet, how she looked in gold bangles, feeding filets into a meat grinder because she liked whitefish but couldn’t pick bones on the Sabbath. There was a cult of the crocodile god Sobek that built its own city on the Nile, the Crocodilopolis, where they worshiped Him of the Pointed Teeth, Him of the Dark Waters, Him who Mates while Eating. My grandmother died at sixty of a stroke, in perfect health, snapped from the banks of the living with such sudden force, the deed was done before we sensed the log was not a log. At the base of Sobek’s temple they unearthed crocodile mummies, mouths full of hatchlings, and it’s true: Mother crocs listen for peeps, dig up their eggs and roll them gently in their mouths to help dissolve the shells. I remember my grandmother in the sun, mouth full and grinning.
Black Widows Usually Aren’t

Sure, some spiders
eat their mates

but they’re so
small, the males

less meal
than mealybug

or moth;
mother needs

protein not
a man, but if

he’s offering.
Watch: Feed

half the females
crickets, lay

wounded youths
before the rest.

Once they’ve eaten,
let the little men

choose who
to pursue.

Average Joe
Widow thinks:

I like the scent
of corpse

on a woman,
and sets off.
Ravishing

How close, the desire
to tear limb from limb,
to bear down with one’s
teeth until the skin gives,
to see a smooth stone
and imagine its cooling
weight in the mouth,
to long for the tart flesh
just beneath the skin,
the sweet flesh clinging
to the stone, to lean close
and squeeze the doughy
infant’s foot, to be the stone
carved lioness that wraps
her arm around the shoulders
of a young boy, ravaging.
Welcome to the Neighborhood

It’s always developing but you’ll never get priced out; the afterlife is wide as hyperbole and twice as tall. There’s only one thing left in the world we can’t breed, and that’s ghosts. We import. Could be the place where you were raised was less than humane, or conversely, that you loved it and we let you grow too attached. Could be you thought you had more to learn, or do, but there comes a point where the rain can’t make you any more wet, and it’s the same with living. Death is not a train that picks up speed as you watch your family sprint alongside, grasping for your hand. It’s a field day, and every kickball team is eager to have you. Some folks bring grudges, but they don’t last. See Cassandra there? She had some choice words ready for the boy who cried wolf, but in the end they wound up passing a bottle back and forth, sinking into the warm glow of a good “I told you so.” Grab a chair. The end is here and the weather’s fine.
Sestina for the Stars

Why is it that we measure love by the stars?
Surely there’s something closer, less indifferent,
more alive. Even when they were mysteries
we thought we understood them. We plotted
them from ancient Greece to Yukatán and named
them according to our cultures, finding shapes
to suit our many myths. If men shape
myth as model, there is sense in stars
as guides, ever-present as they are. Naming
them for gods, we filled an indifferent
sky with laws, history, fate, stories plotted
to match the scale of heaven’s mysteries.

There is something democratic about mysteries.
Love too, I guess. Who has not traced shapes
in a lover’s freckles, giddy with hope, plotting
something terribly romantic? We are all stars
of our own Harlequin paperbacks, indifferent
to clichés now bone-true, books with names
like “Fever” and “Strangers” and “Whisper My Name.”
Most other days we may prefer thrillers or mysteries,
but in love we hunger for something different.
Scientists try to sell us research on face shapes
and pheromones, but we’re inclined to trust the stars.
I’ve paid good money to have my birth plotted
against the sky, sat on the phone with the plot
out and traced fine triangles as the woman named
them: Aries rising, Venus in the seventh house. Stars
have predicted any number of life’s mysteries—
after the fact, anyway. Dwarf stars and giants are shaped
the same once they reach our eyes, which are indifferent

as to whether they are already dead. The difference
between those things we call tragic and comedic plots is not death, not really. The difference takes shape in the last act, when final love is declared: if they name each other at the same time, it’s comedy. Misery is a staggered arrival, and it is easiest to blame the stars.
By the Rivers of Babylon

The poplars by the river played our grief
like Pachinko, each pink blossom scattering
notes as it fell through the harps hanging
from the low branches. Our tormentors demanded
songs of praise for you, Jerusalem, but how
could we sing them in a strange land? Home
was knocked from our mouths like teeth.
We spat blood and tongued the aching socket.

If we forget you, O Jerusalem, let our right hands
lose their skill, let hives drop from the trees
as we approach and their honey spill in the dust.
An angry god would have us rise as one to circle
your walls, beat our fists against them, break
ourselves upon your length. Our god left us
by the rivers of Babylon, spread across
the clay banks with hearts heavy as trilobites
in the time of the third great dying, each one
more alone until the very last drifted down
into the red sediment. There we wept ourselves
bare with the trees, bare with the harps, bare
as the moon draining slowly from its vessel.
It was not full, nor bright, but empty and new
when the call of a ram’s horn in the distance
drew us together to prayer once more.
Desire (*disambiguation*)

Food porn:
  gaze not male but predator

Real Estate porn:
  a room for every life imagined

Revenge porn:
  without me you are everywhere

Travel porn:
  how blue the water how grand the past, or,
  as-yet unspoiled

Pregnancy porn:
  it's a stretch

Motorcycle porn:
  wind and a wild power between the legs

Wedding porn:
  blue glass and wicker, or,
  look how this love glistens

Shoe porn:
  this little piggy went to Paris

Cocktail porn:
  better bitters, must have proof

Tentacle porn:
  fear made fullness, or,
  Take me, cephalopod!

Book porn:
  mark my words

Torture porn:
  building to the kill shot

Ruin porn:
  structures gutted and beautiful, or,
isn’t it all
Here’s Why Smoking Will Always Be Cool

Don’t be fooled by e-cig marketing. James Dean did not stare
at a cherry and think, there must be
a better way to breathe

fire. Burning is the point. I carry a box
of straw men, neatly packed

and eager to become effigies, a crude
flint-and-fluid contraption
cupped defiantly against the wind.
On the river Styx at night

it’s hard to tell smokers at a distance
from Charon, whose glowing

c coal eyes flash as he roots around
the mouths of the dead

for coins. I can imagine the Michael Bay
remake of Hell, with sleek

green rings blinking in Charon’s skull
with each collected fare.

It is deeply unsatisfying. May the bad guys
stay ever analogue and smokers

stoic, out flicking their Prometheus thumbs
in the cold face of death.
When the weather is nice I like to steal ten minutes between obligations and read my *Science Daily* on a bench somewhere with people streaming past. It’s where I get my best ideas, like when I learned that vampire bats avoid in-flight collisions by adhering to a single rule: If ever you come close enough to feel another bat within your biosonar range, sync yourself exactly to her movements. Bank and glide and strike with her until the field is clear. So I try out a code like this when walking against traffic near the subway’s mouth: instead of struggling salmon-like toward the origin, I concentrate on the shoulders of a man three steps ahead, and follow. For a moment, just a moment, we sync and it works, and in the joy of my swooping I catch a fleshy shoulder to the jaw, another subway man who cut a quick left turn, unaware of my provisional traffic laws. I taste blood, and feel batty in this too. I too have a snout full of thermoreceptors with which to find the veins running close to the city’s surface. I too will, on occasion, gorge myself too full to fly, will approach a starving stranger in the colony on days when my belly is full enough from the hunt to share. It is a secret dream of mine to sleep like they do, curled tight around the single pup.
I bring into the world with each gestation.
I have been warned against reading science
the way I do, for morals, because it is possible
to read the same article and come to the opposite
conclusion. As if this were our litmus test
for metaphor. You should feel free to read the bats
as you please, to note how they slice up their prey
and lap at the wounds, how they spread their
anticoagulate and keep their hosts from healing,

how they are harem beasts, and rabid, and unclean.
I prefer to dream of them in infrared: of gliding
through those last still minutes of the moon,

of diving down into the bright red roost to find
my bright pink pup, plant my feet by hers
and drift off, upside down and free to fly.
Once my father fed me wild onions we pulled from the front yard, and that night my mother fumed that someone was digging up her tulips again. I called the dog and we slunk out of the kitchen together, an unlikely alliance of the guilty and the blamed. I’d think of this often when they fought about money, one believing there were bulbs growing safely through the winter, the other scrounging for something sweet. My mother still does the house up for Halloween each year, her scarecrow filling out his abandoned shirt. In another city, I find kibble scattered on the front steps of my building, an offering from the young men who give the alley cats collars but not homes. I think if I ever have a child, I’ll dress it always like a vegetable: carrot, peapod, aubergine, each with a jaunty stem, and in October for a change we’ll dress up like our neighbors, filling out old plaids and coats, watching others open pillowcases, hoping for anything but fruit.
Imagine smelling for the first time
when you thought you had been built
to grip. So it was for Tentacle,

engineered to take on tender tasks—
picking fruit, rouging baby beauty queens—
tasks for which no claw or vacuum tube
would do. Attempts to scaffold human
bones and ligaments produced

a knobby, branchy thing, too delicate
itself to thump a melon confidently.

The scientists brought in an elephant
named Darla, strapped ping pong
balls onto her trunk in an elastic grid,

bid her move this way and that,
recall her favorite Bollywood moments.

This mechanism, Tentacle, had its own
elegance, a thickness that inspires trust.
Breathing never crossed his chip,

but after the expo that robot tentacle
stole out with his robot friends, drunk

on terabytes and elbow grease.
A truck self-drove them out beyond
the yellow bonds of the very last

parking spot, brushing past the yellow fists
of bulbs that thrust triumphantly where

the pavement broke. For the joy stretching
his hydraulics, tentacle reached
as a teenager might, a clumsy yawning,

and as the air moved through him
he felt dandy, dandy through and through.
III. The New World
Self-Portrait as Desk Lamp

This light is not general: it is directional. Turn it on when there is a purpose to be served.

Incandescent in the old fashion, not casual in its consumption exactly but unapologetic.

There is work to do, here. A person must have light. Selling point: “articulated.” It moves where you need, or its focus does. Feet remain planted. Foot. There is a remarkable amount of swivel in the joints, rarely groaning (but always in the moment most calling for silence), sturdy and satisfying in counterbalance;

the body’s movement serves only to support the head. To point the lamp where it is needed. When it looks at something full force, everything past is lost in shadow. There is one tight hot wire where the glowing lives:

surge and it blows, but if you find the sweet spot she will be the last thing burning, stubborn and steady through the night. Do not thank her. Bend her down to work, face alive with light and close to your own.
Digital Decay

Seeing the first grey pixels sprout
in the cloudless sky behind us in my favorite
picture, I know I can’t continue to open it
without regard for consequence much longer.

Taxidermists aim for all they do
to be reversible, knowing the next generation
of taxidermists will have better ways to catch
the glow of sunlight through a rabbit's ear,

more believable fibers for the beaver’s snout.
Every mount of death leaves a mark, as every
mounting of a disk corrupts it. In the Hall of Mammals
I read the metadata of a muskrat skin

stitched along the seams of Akeley’s knife,
followed the expert tuck of fur and bulge of fear
-struck muscle sculpted to the moment
her body froze to hear the rifle’s butt settle

in the warm pocket of his firing shoulder.
We know to mind the glass. With every opening
she becomes more brittle, and with her body
will crumble the master’s work. The command Undo

is limited by available memory; I fight the urge to open
all your files and let the night air through — it’s silly
to believe that it might feel, to you, like breath,
and every time I view our picture something in the code

ticks one step closer to destruction. I paint
the errant pixels back into the sky. It’s fading now, for good.
We once believed in undiscovered countries.
Now the earth has been mapped out bit by bit,
and there are no more secrets, she lies naked
beneath our lenses each night. Pity the moon,
who once believed the oceans twinkled just for her.
Pity the explorers who believed the Arctic ice would melt
before their ships, skimming the top of the known
world. Pity us, the satellites who will know the intimate
topography of others, but never ourselves. Feeling lost,
I sent a solemn expedition to find the Northwest Passage
through my heart, but found always more land, always
more lakes, always someone else’s name branded on
the shores. The next time I am swept up in the sight
of the sea, remind me that Henry Hudson died in Hudson Bay,
his shallop keeping pace beside the Half Moon mutineers
until they couldn’t stand it, and unfurled the sails.
Rubbed Raw

My heart is still raw, but you wouldn’t know it. Every morning I groggily bundle it in soft layers and a hood and usher it out the door, making sure it has not forgotten its backpack. I zip angel food cake and encouraging notes into its lunchbox.

I’ve gotten my heart the best headphones money can buy. They fit perfectly over its ears, with a bass boost for the beat so it does not forget its purpose. I pad the cells of my calendar to keep it from rattling, so no emptiness makes sonorous the crumbling void that might echo thoughts of her back upon themselves indefinitely.

Most days it stays pretty well cushioned. The bumps and sharp turns of the day knock my heart against its casing, but it is bottom-heavy and well grounded. It almost always rights itself before anything spills out.

The trick is to make sure that, like a foot in a new shoe, it’s not rubbed too long in the same place. I don’t think there’s a thing in this world I could talk about for twenty minutes through without weeping. Polish a pocketed penny with your thumb for half a day, and tell me its luster restored brings no tear to your eye.
Toward Understanding

As it stands one does not understand.
Standing notwithstanding
one stands to understand.
One understands one stands to understand.
What one stands to understand
one does not understand.
One understands that understanding stands
as misunderstanding stands.
Standing thus one stands to understand understanding
and misunderstanding
notwithstanding understanding nothing.
Misunderstanding notwithstanding it is standard
to stand to understand what one does not.
Nothing one understands withstands misunderstanding
under standard understanding.
To stand for understanding stands.
Standing for understanding is not standard standard
understanding
notwithstanding.
One understands one’s understandings and stands
to understand one’s misunderstandings.
As it stands one stands to understand
a great deal indeed.
Ars Poetica

I can tell my paycheck is good by holding it to the light
so I can read its imprint, THIS IS A CHECK, THIS IS A CHECK

(and not the story of a check). No one will ever sing
about those snow covered hills like Stevie does,

and when I pop a Coke and feel it finish smooth
I know it’s Passover, or maybe it’s from Mexico.

I mention this because you asked me “what is poetry,”
and I punted, “what is prose?” (it is prose, it is prose)
because to be honest I’m not much interested in all this fiddle
of what is good or real or true, except to say that once

a jazz musician, stoned as hell, leaned slant across the bar
and told me the way to listen for a real, honest to god piano

is that you’ll hear all the strings vibrate in sympathy
with the one that’s been struck.
Ice

To say that you know my soft spot understates the point. I know you will reach for it with a shy smile in the morning when you stumble in, phone dead, all whiskey sweat and someone else’s cigarettes. I can’t figure out how to stay mad or leave or do anything about it. I think I am like water, super-cooled to minus ten, waiting in my slowest liquid state for a snowflake to jostle the surface. When I remember how to harden myself, the crack will be deafening. When I remember how, I’ll lash tight to my own crystal structure in a glorious flash, and from that day on the sun of your smile will pass right through me.
I don’t know when it started, exactly, having just met you and summer love does not sleep. Exhaustion is indistinguishable from an onset is indistinguishable from the way I’d say “let’s go” and still be sitting on the edge of your bed twenty minutes later. You are beautiful like a grasshopper, limbs all at striking angles and a soft fuzz all over. When you said we’d never make each other happy I imagined eating you whole, and how you’d catch in my throat, and agreed. It’s been months since the pressure let up in my sinuses and the doctors can’t tell me why. I harbor a secret hope that I am allergic to something pervasive, and soon it will be identified and my lungs will work 20% better than I ever knew they could, my brain will sing on oxygen and everything will be, suddenly, so clear. What is an allergy but the body’s paranoid insistence that a thing is poison, and it becomes true. You make me sick. Or will, if I keep saying it.
Always Already

~

We all contain some essential resin
that gives us away, like
how burnt amber smells of pine

~

Death is not unlike a new lover;
one must learn to loosen the weave
of the self, bend your pleasure around hers

~

When things begin to fall apart, the sailor
in me thinks, there must be a certain kind
of knot for situations such as this
Objective Observer on the F Train

Often, sitting on the train, I imagine the nearest stranger to be my sadness. Sometimes an age-mellowed melancholy balanced owl-eyed on a priority seat, tracing wrinkles, the opposite of palm-lines, divining the past with loose-skinned fingers; sometimes an angst, young and baldly German sadness broadcasting tinny inward-outward headphone ballads, intending to be overheard but angry at the accusation; once a drifter, corduroy-clad and shifty and daring me to ask him to settle or explain himself.

I will always remember this as the year I lost five wallets, or rather, the year I lost the same wallet four times and the fifth—an interim pouch with salvaged twenties and a card—which paused on a corner as I walked on, collecting never-identical snowfall to remind me that there is no law that says you can’t lose two at once.

One of those wallets is still buried in my bedroom somewhere. Some days it is easier to rely on strangers than collect myself.

I read that in a lab, scientists can show you the same object in two places at once, object being a loose term, as the scientists themselves are loose, objective despite having objectives, loose as light, forever spilling, as are the vague objections of reason to electrons disappearing, reappearing, popping in and out of existence, what is existence then, and how can you be in it twice, and how long until someone can guarantee my wallet is also at home on my dresser.

Once a blind man sat down next to me and I considered his dog, a sadness totally tied up in another, utterly unknowable, unaware that she, the sadness, is of any service at all.
Deadly Nightshade

or, moon shadow, smoke screen,
dark tincture, strange that witches
grow things that are not poison

gothic blot, glum ghost, ironically
social creature crone thrives
on gossip heard through hedges

navy hint, lunar mask, she grows
lemongrass and greens
just to tempt the neighbors

slumber tinge, inky hue, often
cross but learns to ice her temper,
plant grudges, sow when ripe

dusk wraith, phantom black,
one witch plays the long game,
cackles over her tobacco plants

sleep specter, darkling dear, most
nightshade isn’t deadly—for every
belladonna seven huckleberries

somber sketch, dismal gloom, keep your
potato secret, eggplant blooms, nightshade
all around us, poised for witching
Prospect Park in the Rain

Past three in the morning, at an impasse, it rained in a way you can barely call rain, just enough to catch the downlight in its ultrasound over the diamond, whirls that seemed significant. You talked about how lazy summers stretched in Argentina, how the bugs are different here, how you were grateful to have learned to play in a place with fewer rules and more imagination, where you didn’t have to leave the beach just because the clouds came.

I couldn’t figure out how to kiss you. The week before it was raining too, when you described your off-leash approach to training, and the dog wrenched the umbrella from your hands joyfully and dragged it into the lake with him. I tried to kiss you late by the plaza, but meeting the dog was as much as you could handle for one night, which I accepted, touched by your bad dog and willingness to let me watch the two of you tussle in the wee hours of July. It was like I wasn’t there, like the whole world came down to a silent stretch of lake.

Late that summer the president came for a daytrip, and they closed the whole park so he could land his helicopter in the outfield. I’d figured it out by then, the kissing, in fact had led you back with a picnic blanket we wound up holding above us because it started raining again. Lying there, I imagined how it must have felt to step off Marine One into the wide open of a ball field, secret service fading for a moment with the chopper noise. I like to think he whistled for his dog and raced him to home, and that they sat in our dugout a few minutes to enjoy the fine mist settling silent over Brooklyn before returning to the great game board of the world, ready to make the next move.
Ode to Toothpaste

How a person could sell enough of a thing to live
amazes me all the time, for example
when I brush my teeth –

everybody uses toothpaste but it still seems
impossible that one could make a living
selling it at three dollars a pop, let alone

efficient to feed a factory full of assembly line
chemists fitting nozzles into empty tubes,
their design lifted from the art supply aisle

to earn high honors from the Metal Tube
Packaging Council of North America
in its new application, while a separate committee

on plastics celebrated the innovation
of the sharp nib on the underside of the cap,
the perfect tool to pierce the virgin seal beneath.

And you must concede their brilliance, to patent
the reckless thrill of squeezing out what can’t be put back;
toothpaste is a sham we buy with abandon,

the air of legitimacy adorning the real work
of brushing, the essential mechanics of health
holding up a whole industry of patents for tubes

that dispense stripes of varying widths, the small arms race
of foaming agents, labs for taste and strength and mouthfeel,
organics gaining market share, all of it distilled

to the back shelf of the corner bodega where I stop
every few months at most to make a purchase
that makes me feel virtuous, each and every time.
**Slug Love**

Snails don't fuck, you know. They hurl love darts across the garden at each other, like children folding valentines into paper planes full of gametes, laughing savagely behind the teacher's back.

Our future is not that of the gerbil, surrounded by a litter of squinting pink tongues and the looming fear of father coming home to snack. There will be no suckling, no placenta-eating, no peering into a crumpled face to decipher its parentage.

Oh to nail you with my ova. To be a proud seahorse papa with a belly full of the very caviar of you. What petri dish could romance like the ocean? What flask swirl like wine? What synthetic pheromones could coax your facile body to declare a camp for procreation?

Oh to stumble on your red termite garden spun of silk, to wind through its paths to the artist at its center, to enter whole-body and collapse in a bed of your pollen. To slime, to be slimed. To wait with you among the cattails as our hatchlings extend their triumphant feet and crackle toward the banks.
Can’t say it comes naturally—the spring and seltzer that swing the shoulders—for mine is a stiff-necked people, more at home in a home surrounded by dark than daylight. Trust not the sun, sister. The moon at least is earnestly obscure. Something about joy is liquid, quick silver and giddy on fumes, but my blood is a Soviet Bloc. I find the word “toil” very appealing, like truncated turmoil or treacherous soil spilling its pathos into an honest day’s work. Something about joy resists even this poem; I catch flashes of it, a peripheral rabbit, and tell myself that even if I brought it home the cat would just eat it. The cat would sit by the screen with a shit-eating grin and groom herself with a mouth full of my joy, souring. Then again, I love that cat, and something about joy says leave the good stuff out, even if your friends are drunk already—they dance so beautifully, your friends.
Notes & Acknowledgements

Extended notes for *Antigone on the God Particle*, addressing the physics to the best of the poet’s understanding, appear on the following page.

*On Finding the Bones* is based on a 2014 Scientific American article by Ferris Jabr, which explores how researchers have, until recently, vastly underestimated elephants’ intelligence by using measures designed to test chimpanzees: *The Science Is In: Elephants Are Even Smarter Than We Realized*

*Crocodilopolis* references the totem canoes carved by indigenous tribes along the Karawari River in Papua New Guinea. It also refers to the ancient Egyptian city of Shedet, which was the center of a cult of the Crocodile god Sobek – hence the Greek name for the city, the Crocodilopolis.

*Ravaging* refers to a carving on exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum, in *Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age*: “Plaque with lioness attacking a youth, Nimrud, Northwest Palace, Neo-Assyrian period, Phoenician style, ninth-eighth century BC”

*Welcome to the Neighborhood* paraphrases a line from Kay Ryan’s *All Your Horses*.

*Ars Poetica* bastardizes lines from, and is dedicated to, a long line of badass poetesses, particularly Adrienne Rich, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, and Emily Dickinson.

Notes: *Antigone on the God Particle*
“The God Particle” refers to the Higgs Boson. The Higgs Boson, and its corresponding field, offer a solution to a number of contradictions between the theoretical laws of particle physics and the observed behavior of particles. The existence of a so-called god particle would explain why fermions such as electrons and quarks are observed to have mass, despite being theoretically massless. It would also make sense of why the weak nuclear force is weak, and explain how many symmetries in the standard model are broken.

The Higgs field – that is, the area where the god particle disrupts the standard model – is believed to be the size of the universe. Its existence was proven in 2013 but not, of course, to everyone’s satisfaction.