The Ghost of Home

by

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A Thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Newark

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program

Written under the direction of

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And approved by

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Newark, New Jersey

May 2015
For William Smolinsky
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Rachel Hadas, for her encouragement, mentorship, and ear; and Professor Rigoberto Gonzalez, for his insightful commentary and instruction. Victoria Pell Smolinsky, Darrach Dolan, and Jerry Harp were excellent and supportive readers. Steve Krantz helped me find the faith to leap. Lastly, my fellow poets in the Rutgers-Newark MFA program taught me how to put my ego aside, at least for the duration of a workshop, and focus on what matters.
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Crossing State Lines

I ran out of gas, abandoned the vehicle and hid myself inside an empty field thousands of miles from the ocean, from the broken lights of home. Then I watched the night-hawks dive, slice the air like a flock of knives. Small tears in the fabric of dusk bled purple in my head. Through the sky I found ink black.
Sunrise, Early Frost

Lift your head: night is turning silvery rose, the pasture lunar, like a world new born—undeveloped, just exposed to light.

In time the ceiling cracks will start to show through motes of dust, our blanket frayed and worn; for now, the roses bathe in silver light

though overnight the bushes almost froze and a light snow fell, clinging to the thorns like dust on damp film, unexposed to light.

Still, in the creek bed, water barely flows. The barn shivered, looking forlorn through the silver light just before you rose.

I saw an apple sapling bent by crows and a scarecrow rise from withered husks of corn—ghosts of the negative, exposed to light.

Your silhouette shimmers, finally disclosed; through the cloudy glass, I watch a fawn. Night has passed from silver into rose: a photograph exposed to morning light.
My Private Things

Somehow a light keeps shining
on the flimsy wood cigar box
I hid my things in as a boy:

eyeballs worried off a threadbare toy
near the imprint of a childish fist
that purpled silently; birthday cards

my parents gave me that I marked
with deep erasures, words struck
through; cheetahs and bluejays

out of stolen books; and later, cut loose
from Mom’s *Cosmo* by a butterfly
knife, a pouting girl, hands on hips.

Still, no matter where I hide—
in the attic crawl space,
linen closet, or shadow

of the vise and Sawz-All under
basement stairs—the box is never
really opened, doesn’t lock.
Gutting It

I.
Whenever I was struck
by those passing upsets
most children are prone to

my father would lock me
in a small, dark room.
To learn a lesson in restraint.

I would beat the fake
wood paneling, my cries
like sheets of composition

paper torn out and swallowed.
Gutted. I composed my
self near bodiless.

II.
My father built a tee-pee
in the woods behind
the pasture when he was a boy

to shield himself against winter
squalls and my grandpa’s temper.
Now his thumb looks like

a tee-pee too, almost split
by an axe he was told to gore
through firewood.

Sometimes his thumb
looks like a proofreader’s
mark, a permanent

symbol where a scream
wanted to be hurled out
but was gutted instead.

III.
Grandpa was just 13
when his own father
drank himself to death.
My great-grandfather
didn’t leave a note—no
tear-stained verse

like his other apologies
for cheating and lies—
just a pool of puke and cheap rye.

He was the last of our men who
didn’t numb himself completely.
Who couldn’t gut his poison.

IV.
Grandpa hardened early,
like catgut for stringing up
stray dogs that steal chickens.

Inert objects quivered too: ash
never fell from his cigarette until
he nodded, giving it permission.

He saved the family from starvation
while his mother fed and dressed
three other kids for school.

And he taught us shame for weakness.
Showed us what to do with pain.
How it burns going down.
Buggy Summers in Finite Number

We could barely move
in a town cramped with debt
and stone, larvae and mold.

There was the arcade,
a removeable feast.
The Big League chew.

That patch of grass burned
sweet in summer, lit
by sticks from bomb pops.

We silenced the crickets
with sex and smoke. In our
heads they never stopped.

We figured any day we’d rattle
the chain link and set down
cinder block, which lies

beneath the jeers and blithe
maulings: sons playing stickball,
daughters smashing glass.

Our dads couldn’t keep fire ants
or Vietnam off the lawns.
Fall came. We signed on
to the Dept. of Public Works
and drank on Ladies Night.
Home from the desert,

Derrick tried to hang himself
but the loop was slack.
Not to be somewhere else

started to shame us: the thought
of shriveling near the public
library with its two small stories

and incapable of ridding the house
of termites. We knew dogs
aren’t children, couldn’t afford
to groom them for the Hamptons
so we had children, who had
lice. Fall came. Tom Cruise

was about to wither up. Soon we’ll all
be a mound of dry spiders in the garage.
Our wives will be forced to sweep.

In a cramped town the hinges rust
and the milk and eggs spoil faster, so we
crossed the bridge and tunneled back.

On top of baby diapers, grass cuttings
and two-day-old BBQ, the maggots
wriggled in the heat: disco rice.

Success came in cans, desire
in knots. Paid in buttons, covered
in DEET, we blinked.
Lawnguyland

Down the commuter railroad tracks
up a tree house we hammered
out of pallets from the nursery,
drinking a jug of funky
funky wine from behind the mower
in your dad’s shed—who could forget?

We were sick for days. No
doorbell was safe from our tilting
carousel during the long yawn
of those summers on Long Island,
no picket fence or swimming pool.
And the girls in the fancy dens—

we hoped they were watching.
Most nights just the rattling of cicadas
broke the drone of TV news
and the Technicolor hum
that settled over everything
within fifty yards of a family room.

Once, just before the receding end
of August—would school ever start?—
we hit the big house with the trampoline.
Suspended in the humid air, we
heard a tableful of cutlery drop:
mom, dad, and three kids jumped up

from the weekly London broil.
Russian dolls lined up
in the kitchen window, their
sour faces couldn’t make us out
except for the little one at the end,
meat stuck in his teeth, grinning.
Sinker

For Felice Ciliberti

He unclamps the vise and cracks the mold, lets the sinker cool. The basement is dark, full of old tools and coffee cans rattling with bolts. It looks like a teardrop made of lead. Unlike mom and dad, he doesn’t need me to beam or shine.

Together we climb through gutter doors to sunrise. The small backyard is all garden: tomatoes in a maze of vines, zucchini curling into orange flower, tiny strawberries like a row of Nonna’s thimbles. The fig tree heavy with fruit, violet and wild.

Grabbing a rusty spade, he digs along the chain link fence for worms. Something’s wrong. “Nonna’s sick. She yells, forgets where she is. They don’t know why,” he says, pulling me close.

In the Buick, I hold a thermos of last night’s espresso with hot milk, next to his knife and whetstone. I love to watch him sharpen the blade, slice a ripe pear.

At the end of a long jetty in the Rockaways, he baits the hook with a worm wrapped in ribbons of squid, ties the sinker. I follow every move—how he hitches up his pants with one hand, holds the rod with the other, and leans back gracefully. Then I taste iodine, the mineral bitterness that’s everywhere, before reeling through air, for a moment, light.
**Surfing Alone**

lifeguards have turned over their towers

the beach is empty of big pink families under yellow umbrellas

they don’t know this Atlantic, wild, warmer than the air long past Labor Day

sunlight bakes the salt on your lips before the North wind turns them blue

kind of day my brother loved and loved to surf with me

he moved away, out of my shadow

remembered being a child, struggling to breathe a little reflected light

I basked in the warmth of the sun—first-born, perfect

perfectly empty, ravenous—

no other surfers mar the horizon this morning

the only finless, featherless creature moving through what remains

seagulls shriek through plastic bags as I pick my way among the rocks

launch into teeming emptiness

the longboard under my feet consumes a clean swell in a sweeping arc

slipping down to where sand and water churn, rising toward the curl

carve my signature into each pristine face

waves crumble, the gesture never ages

erasure the heart of every one
Lee’s Hands

Gaunt, almost elegant—aspiring to formality but soft. Unpolished fingers long as the cigarette she ashes with finesse into her green ceramic tray.

Not dark, meaty balls of muscle like her mother’s, an orphan from the hills of Sicily. Hands that kneaded and scrubbed, made silk neckties in their Brooklyn flat.

Not giant pale pincushions like her father’s, a red-haired tailor from Palermo who died young. Hands that draped and measured but barely wrote English.

Lee’s left hand plays with a set of costume pearls; her right hand fills the Sunday New York Times crossword puzzle with stately letters. On the other side of America, California sleeps like a thirsty lover in the morning sun: open mouth, parched lips, breathing orange and cinnamon.

She didn’t follow her cousins—Louie, Lena, Peter Boy, Marie—when Uncle Jerry was stationed out west during the war. Never married, had kids, made sauce on Sunday. Such exquisite ties! Lee’s mother saved her a box each year to give at Christmas. How quickly it passed, the luxury of Indian summer: ferry rides to visit friends on Fire Island and stirring martinis at sunset, before her mother’s hands grew thin.
Driving Cross-Country With Rose-Tinted Windows

Long Island’s too small, I say. The breath of Walt Whitman rushes past my ear, dying to find acres of pollen-dusted bluegrass, mountains wrapped in cloud, rivers of red sand.

The screen door slams. My family watches from the other side: soon, a colder wind will brush the crowded maples as they rust. Thick snow will fall into small plumes of chimney smoke.

But not on me, not here. If I get carried away, roused by a dream of spring before it strikes the ear and swings, forgive me: I’m just 18, and the breeze always seems to be arriving, even when it leaves.

As I drive, my hand rises and falls like an ocean wave through the window but America must be somewhere, at last. The prairies are dotted with fire that rise from hidden seas of shale oil.

My father lit them too, at 16, from a gully in the Adirondacks before he left for New York City. Our valleys knock with bones, he said. Listen: their song reddens the pages in our attics, clatters the lilacs.

But sometimes I forget, thinking about the uneaten pies cooling behind these August doors I’ll never open. They clap and sing on their hinges as I pass, hungry enough to swallow 50 hardboiled eggs at a sitting.

Miles click by, driveways, Whitman’s perfect silence of the stars. At my age, mom took a Greyhound to see L.A. and her uncle in the Navy. Now I find his rusted Skylark with maps and blueprints curled up on the passenger seat.

Behind the old wheel, I picture the Wright Brothers spinning blades and George Washington Carver cooking fuel from an unassuming legume. I glimpse my great aunt’s unfinished quilt, scraps of silk in her cigarillo tin.

I want to draw a map for all the skinny dippers across America, so many shapes and shades dreaming of a swimming hole. Maps with a symbol for tire swings and bushes to hide jeans from officious moonlit sheriffs.
I’ll roll them up inside millions of flashlights, lay them next to Gideon Bibles in motel nightstands: a small dream scattered like seeds—as if we could cover the bones in our valleys with shade, with sweet and bitter apples.
What the Sky Wants

The sky has no idea
it wants edges

something more
than blue

traversed by
white

lines of rain
as they break

more than the passing
solution of a horizon

what the sky wants
is to be seen and held in place

under the eaves of a porch
on a small farm

in the Adirondack foothills
late afternoon

or through the blinds of a window
facing the East River

Harlem
early evening

where someone is dreaming
of a plain

bathed in orange
scored with rose

the sky dragging night West
trying to close
Finding November Again

I look for autumn outside campus
   in the San Gabriel hills,
   deserted, dogged.

Am I so dazed, dumbstruck
   by citrus and sagebrush
   I’ve lost the trail?

I should be high with the other freshmen
   or home on Long Island
   bracing for a Nor’easter.

Instead, these long blazing days
   keep wrapping me
   in dust and smog:

they make the light deeper but more
   diffuse, as if the sun were falling
   up into the sky.

No, November’s just a hole in me
   here in California
   trying to be golden.

I was always able to glow awhile
   then wither, like coals in a fire—
   it’s the blooming and the blooming

and beyond that makes me shake: hope
   and expectations you can’t stop until
   you’re a petal in the Santa Ana wind.

Mom is working long shifts.
   She writes to me on breaks.
   I ask what happened to

those years of leaves I raked and
   pages turned in piles of books,
   the leafless wreaths she made,

our stone fireplace waiting to be lit:
   it never chased away the drafts
   but you get used to layering
for warmth. Money stretches
  a bit, but loneliness has a way
  of dimming the lights.

Now I’ve left her with my father:
  he paces, checks the stove
  is turned securely off—

left her with my brother
  skulking in the distance,
  selling nickelbags of weed;

each room occupied
  by its own small figurine.
    Like that, the house seemed almost big.

In California, a few eucalyptus leaves lie
  on the ground, but then they always do—
    they’re tropical evergreen: it’s not the end

of anything: no hushed circle closes in
  that I can tell and time
    extends in a straight line past

the Pacific. The sun rises in the east
  and keeps on rising west
    in our dreams.

But really, half these gorges smolder
  before rainy season, shivering
    nearly naked in the dark

I hear my mother’s voice
  fade and stars light the chaparral
    awash with desert flowers in the autumn night.
To My Little Brother at a Zen Monastery

We haven’t spoken since you moved to Maine. Cleaning out the old attic, I found this poem of mine from junior high. Thought of you.

It’s about a bird. Back then I told you it was lame, and something’s still wrong with the thing. Do you think it will ever fly or sing?

We saw a bluebird from our bedroom window almost every day that April—wounded, darting back and forth in a pool of roots and rain.

Watching him, frantic, recalled your voice: He got me! from when I closed the car door on your thumb. That breathless, staggered rhythm—

I don’t know why I laughed. You were in pain. Was I cruel, anxious, caught off guard? Boy, you never made a peep. Once,

at the dentist, the Novocaine failed and you accepted it in silence. Figured I would always be the favorite.

I read the poem in class, then placed my ear on the cold surface of the desk. It was like listening long distance

on our rotary phone: sharp, static, broken full of emptiness. Like laying my head on Dad’s chest while he spoke

just after his mother died. I was seven. He was stoic. Mom was mute and still. You went upstairs alone.
To a Young Man by an Ancient Pine

“Young bristlecone trees of a thousand years of age are not particularly remarkable.”
—A Garden of Bristlecones

Young man, what you don’t know yet about beauty, trees, and time could fill this dry ravine.

Fissured deeply while still green—who isn’t?—I’ve been scorched and scoured almost into stone.

I’m very old, even for a bristlecone. Standing alone as shadow bends around us, you’ve lost the trail.

You believe what your eyes see in me: a gnarled stump corkscrewed from burial ground;

sapless stalk of thorns; the bleached, cast-off steeple of a razed cathedral;

ruins of some majestic tree rent by lightning and then mummified to a horned skull.

I look as unyielding, jagged and barren as you say you feel inside at just 25.

You say you’d rather be redwood or birch, bougainvillea, rainforest kapok, anything

but the stunted figure you see before you, already scored, shot through

with holes and knotted in the cold, bright light, like childhood’s thin air.
The deepest cracks in us
may never be filled, and we can’t
slough off all our lifelessness.

But this warped, inert matter—
dense from pressure, worn down
where others might rot—

isn’t worthless but ballast;
not quite mineral but close to it,
close to what pines to stay alive.

We become monuments
to the lonely rites of survival.
Can’t you see my crown

has fallen? These purple cones
I shed, rich with secret resin,
seeds like flecks of metal.
Memories of Late Adolescence, Iowa

No planes tear the salmon-colored sky
as I lean into a turbine of dusk and silt.
Trucks roar by at arm’s length

in a profusion of lost tongues—
hurt and hunger I can’t translate
yet or begin to fill. But how

good to hear and feel it. To know
my coat is thinner than I thought
and draw it close against the wind.

Only October and already I’m broke,
stopping by some marble monument
that means nothing to me. Cloaked

by the darkening portico I
strike a match: how sad and sweet
to imagine someone watching—

now deep and hushed inhale—
more so to know that no one else is there.
Then cradle the fire against my face

to make it stronger: the solitude,
this fragile space—its lonely sound
and little flash, kindling, desire.
I didn’t have much to offer because I couldn’t really cook and mom would have cringed

had I even considered bringing grilled cheese or canned hash to a pot luck supper,

even if the dress code was Blue Collar Drag with a Heavy Dose of Trailer Kitsch.

Such was a Superbowl party as performed by a group of first-year Ph.D. students.

At the center, an overflowing bowl of chili by the curvy hostess from Detroit—near Detroit—so hot

not even Ernest from Texas could handle more than a spoonful, poor symbol of Americana straining there

while Cal gave Manny a long, ungainly lap dance with Ophelia’s purple boa to prove a point, about machismo.

Oh the beards and soybeans of every hue and texture to greet the vulgar eye!

Hail seitan and tofu, tempeh and nutmeat, the taste of mango is so other.

(Mom shipped me box of pignoli cookies, a decent contribution had I not eaten them alone.)

I learned a thing or two about rennet that night, gender too, mostly class

which didn’t ruffle me much—I was so happy the Jets won and made sure everybody knew—
Endnotes to an Unfinished Dissertation

1. Forgive me, I’ll never finish. Please say goodbye to my friends, who wander the stacks of the Rare Books room or bolt through deserted airport parking lots where the wind keeps calling in the ink-black dark; who digress like Odysseus or David Foster Wallace to forestall the consummation of desire in dissertation topics, Oedipal dramas, final chapters, baby pajamas, or bury themselves in dense and antique typographies.

2. Tell Hannah and Jed not to reminisce about the freedom and the bourbon and our last volatile interval before the end of adolescence: I’ll pretend the future is still arriving packed in cardboard boxes, spines up, to ward off the rigor mortis of commuter trains and mortgages, before our days were measured out in small buckets of blue pills, the books shelved.

3. Still, I hear the echo of our wayward syntax, see your light shine on the torn manuscripts of our faces; I want to call down tornadoes to break open the rotting Victorians stuffed with young scholars like termites, no longer filled with promise but fevered annotations outside the ragged body of the text, scribbling still into fragments and lament or compiling, hovering pointlessly but never touching down or arriving—

4. And wasn’t that the point: to imagine our lives could veer off endlessly, like a picaresque that fails to resolve—out of love, to escape the mundane ends of a sole plodding skull; to believe our thirst could be displaced into serifs or rise to arabesque abstraction: words waiting to pour down the tongue as glossaries of honey, real transfigured presence, second nature run riot off the page.
Do Abandoned Apple Trees Still Bear Edible Fruit?

I walked around the city all spring trying to remember the farm where my father grew up. The last summer we visited. Block after block, coins spilling from my pockets, eyes closed, mouth open to the sky. I caught a fortune cookie on the tip of my tongue but couldn’t swallow. Then a needle, like grandma’s, threaded with yards of yellow string. When grandpa sharpened his axe, I tasted iron filings and walked north. All that was left of the farm was a bare orchard and the toolshed. And the animals, no longer penned but dazed, walking in circles near a dry creek bed. What did I know about beasts of burden, fight or flight? I put a diaper on the sow. The cow’s eyes and milking stool made me blush. I tried to box the hens and wound up with a black eye, eggless. I gave the piglets to a feral housecat, hoping she would raise them to be boars. After the chicks tasted the thrill of flight but realized they couldn’t soar, I held them in my arms and sang a lullaby. There is no way to un-geld a horse. What was lost in those creatures was lost to me. I tried to comb my hair in the reflection of grandpa’s axe and painted the blade red. After I filled grandma’s berry basket with plastic grapes, the memory of winter filled my pockets with dread.
Hauntology

I watched the first one hit on TV
from a treadmill one block south,
seconds after I’d lost
my footing at the boom;
its echo in my belly
(bass, yellow)
filling up the seven-
second tape delay.

Watched my legs
run toward solid ground
past dead letters
suspended in ash.

Then the replay:
remote cries amplified through
skittery stop-motion, falling
out of and into
the real.

Detached from its sense of skin,
the eye pans up,
but only so many stories can be
framed this way.

My friend ran
down the same block, then
was deployed before
he could blink.

All over Iraq
the ground simmered,
erupting like the downtown
sky that day.

Between the two, he writes,
death and death,
a soldier stands, waits, tempts fate,
sings “Rock the Casbah” to the sun.

Hauntology is no museum
of the moving image
but a field study of the phantom
limb, fleshing out a history
that hangs from bodies in time. 
  History is what hurts
he says, even when
  what hurts can’t be seen.

Like the unrecorded stories
  outside of our
our embedded lens.
  Like the ghost of home.
Surveillance

The fat man in front of me pivots
and whispers something about Mo, the tall
cook with pockmarks. I only catch the end.

_People like us line up every day_
_for his curried lamb and saffron rice._
_But have you every heard him speak?_

He looks like me but with bloodshot eyes.
All summer long I follow him
as he follows Mo: over the bridge
to the Halal slaughterhouse at sunrise;
ducking past the boss, who points at his watch;
after the lunch mob thins, as Mo wanders
through flower stalls mouthing Wu Tang Clan;
on weekends even, as we disappear
among soccer mad crowds at the park.

Late one morning at the height of August,
just in sight of the cart, Mo spins, brushes
past the fat man, and puts his arm
around my neck. _What you seek_
is _seeking you_, he says, as the taxis
bleat like lambs at dawn.
What You Have to Swallow


Even if you gag, you have to open wide and say “ahhhh” for the man with cold hands, then gut the splinters. Bite your tongue.

Choked down, pain and shame have a way of repeating.

Maybe you’ll swallow the tale of Jonah and the whale;
I found it went down easier than the rib and the apple.

You’ll inhale stale breath from birthday balloons and your reflection in a spoon.

Cheap cuts of beef threaded with gristle.
Bits of tin foil in the baked potato.

Gulp: your fear of flight and strange fruit—durian, say, or quince.

Salt from her lips and inside of thighs. Taffeta, chintz,
and the rest of the scenery you chewed up in callow youth.

Tea stewed like pride.
Insufficiently strong mints.

A handful of wind scattered soil, its mineral flecks blown back into your teeth.
Ashes of relief.
The scent of mothballs
toward someone else’s debt

followed by flavors of regret.
At day’s end you’ll swallow

all the evidence, even
the evidence of absence.
Aubade: Summer, Avenue B

When you enter, longing, my little room,
slip from your dress in the dark doorway,
I see light like tiny petals fall:
it’s all jasmine, heat and disarray—

until the sound of my alarm
interrupts the silence that lingers
like smoke. On the escape, our charms
begin to cloy and cling. Air hardly stirs.

Everything seems within arm’s reach: regret,
water whistling on the stovetop,
half a pack of French cigarettes,
even the tired line winding past the bus stop.

You come and go, but before you leave,
take my jacket and your lighter. And the extra key.
Our Lease Isn’t Up Yet

Since I’ve numbed the day
with headlines, deadlines,
a pint of General Tso’s
and one more Negro Modelo,
it’s clear again
she’s gone. Still, I miss
our stormy all-night sulks,
days of rage and roses.
Tonight I’d rather feel
grief, guilt, anything
but the echo
in this empty apartment.
Until the dogs come at me
with their terrible mouths:
all they do is wail—
a symphony of thorns,
such pitiful music
I’d rather be mauled.
Claw my way to the door
one last time. Even
hungry dogs despair
of me now—a mouse
stuck to the glue trap
and forgotten. Spared.
My love has split,
maybe not for good.
Either way I’m left
to mop and pay the rent.
February

He should go out to pick a wildflower
but he predicts deep shadows
a long snowy March
like when she first imagined him
a wave swallowing a seagull
while the sky stares back

her gunpowder eyes
have emptied
the place where they first lived
(some things are dangerous in light)
that hazy, stormy coast
is now scoured clear and bright

forget sweet and reckless
their jeans, their fears lost in
the little pile in the grass
wind breathing salt through
the chambers of the heart
let it all decompose

as days drift like clouds or smoke
he still wants to find her
among the dunes
let him lie down in cold sand
turn to loam
a lilac in the center of his chest
Unlocks the Sky

I came home and found
a stone beside our door
where we used to hide
the key. It was broken
and turned toward
me, up toward the sky
like an amulet to draw rain.

Now the water sounds
almost spoken as it rills
down the eaves
onto the hard lawn.
The echo of its falling
music drowns the house,
until the blue is open
and pierced by early moonlight.
Class Cognition

Day begins with affirmation of the good on the production line of happiness. Here in the Division of Auditory Satisfaction piped-in birdsong trebles the air; down the hall, in Olfactory, nebulized bacon. Does any breathing creature still register unresolved minor chords, basso profondo, or live orchids through the walls? Rotting. Strange larvae I imagine; we’re all cogs on the line, where the senses are divided and negative thinking is firmly discouraged. I stare at the one-way mirror like a perp, like an idiot who insists a rhapsody of blue butterflies will erupt at any moment on the other side. Maybe one of them will slip through a crack in the foundation, land on my lips or settle in my eyelashes. Then my nostrils will catch a wisp of clove smoke like the lost years. Idling. Once girl whispered in my ear but I couldn’t transcribe breathing with her nails on the back of my neck so ultraviolet. Top floor: Office of Platonic Enjoyment. Getting off. No one here but me. Once a girl whispered in my ear who could step into the same river twice.

At dawn, Heraclitus wades into a basin of blue; dyed cloth and animal skins hang on a wall in the ancient marketplace. Like trapped fish, the hands of slaves swim inside the vessel.

Can the sun wipe away the gods, their blood? The philosopher’s feet are stained the color of sky. On the production line of happiness the light is absolute as my hands move through the air like birds building nests. Cages for the good. They want to hold a butterfly before following the orchids, wild as grief, behind the complex. Each morning a dram of sunshine pours into my eyes; at night, I can make slot machines spit out any two fruits I please. I prefer cherries. Note: an earlier version of this memorandum appeared in a bin marked reject in the Division of Edutainment.

An earlier version of me disappeared in the Office of Sustainability. When I died, the people I knew were strangers, hovering in pale pink robes. The essence of equanimity.
When I died, his name was Michelino. I told him find our mother’s house. Wait for her to return from the perfection of the afterlife. That way the ghosts of our house will be ours alone forever.

When I died, passing into bodiless geometry, the light in the complex turned off, meaning slant: kind of blue-black, radiant. The goods turned their faces to me: lonely toothbrushes,

smug envelopes, imperious stamps, umbrellas in their bleak glamour, horny keyboards eager for touch, limp jingles, haughty soup spoons, shoes with hardened souls, socks desperate to escape entanglement.

On the line, everything went blank and production stopped.
The body is permanently dyed in this life. It’s true: you can’t slip into the same river twice. But the third time, I can’t help wondering.
Self-Portrait as Memorex

no one wants to hear me pause anymore before droning on about getting old junk consigned to landfills
has a way of coming back when I despised Top 40 spinning my wheels and metal began to settle on the heads with early rap and dancehall dust that cotton swabs remove those small square plastic tabs prevent accidental over-dubbing bits of tape on empty spaces to re-claim punk was finally dead endings are temporal so beginning with new wave pop got angular at last we become reliquary objects of reference or reverence for a golden past that having never occurred cannot be erased are the days when music mattered as my identity politics was the difference between saying I wuz here and asking who are you in the absence of class consciousness makes me nostalgic for what’s in store now do you remember when this technology was not quaint but conjured up a world keeps screeching to stop announcing its arrival like old-time locomotive wheels convey the precious ore of authenticity as if obsolescence isn’t built in to a crisis of currency we try to cure by sincere performance of authority instead of ghosting around this hole (originality) faux real no one believes in origins but sometimes I miss the future in you
Sensible Shoes

Wait, why am I wearing
my mother’s espadrilles
and not my father’s brogues?
I’m stuck in the produce
aisle because one of
the swivel wheels won’t get
in line, and mom’s breezy
jute-and-canvas wedges
are like, Hello, stranger!
from the checkered tiles.
I push and pull and try
to straighten out
that stubbornly bent wheel
toward the butcher shop.
Espadrilles are unisex,
I explain to the man
in the white coat—macho
even. Brassy, like a
speedo on a matador.
Scratch that. What’s the point
of all those spirals and ringlets that
decorate our wingtips?
They’re useless; the holes don’t
breathe. My old man’s shoes are
stifling on summer days.
Just give me a pound
of chopmeat, please.
What flutters in my skull? I should know better than try to measure your faint steps in my ear.

I might as well count how many seraphs can dance across a page or squeeze through the eye of a needle.

Little buzzer, are you bound here with your bookish chatter? Has no one clipped your wings?

Silence. Stop idling in my ear. I only have an hour to eat, and the air already thrums with prattle.

Wait: the days are consumed with bitter purpose, numb violence. Beauty is useless. As petals to a hummingbird.
Instructions for Morning

Once you dreamed a house
full of pretty birds but feared
they couldn’t sing. Now,
arranging them on the couch

with the wind instruments
helps kill the hours after supper.
All you know is on display.
Lights low, audience of one.

But mornings are harder,
seeing yourself in an objective
light. Busy the hands:
wash windows, empty

all rooms, mow the lawn.
Back inside, occupy your-
self by coming apart: left
foot first, then the other.

Each leg below the knee,
each hamstring at the hip.
Unscrewed, genitalia
are little to speak of.

It’ll dawn on you too late:
the hands and heart can’t be
detached. So half-undone,
stare up at the door. Naturally

you forgot to wind the wooden
clock; the time is never right.
But if by chance you breathe
into the mouth of the dusty

tuba next to you, it will sound
like the first sunrise over the earth.
Then out your bay window, after
years in the dark underground,

thousands of cicadas will rain
upward through the grass in
green and silver gusts, drowning
jet engines in their thunder.
Come Fall the Embers Bloom

In the window of the morning train
my father sits next to me wearing
a smart, tightly knotted tie—flash
of yellow against his grey tweed.
He hums a song by Edith Piaf.

On the evening ride home he’s
gone again, sun sinking in his place
until the train is under water. At night,
my teeth grind in sleep to remove
the embers from my mouth,

his voice from my throat. I want
to hear the sound once more. Soon it will
be his birthday, then the day he passed.
Gone from the frayed couch and kitchen.
The chair remains folded in the garage

where he loved to sit and smoke, watching
for Indian summer or twilight
in a possum’s eyes. Leaning in to hear
if a ball thumped by a distant bat
would end with a big bang on the siding.

I stand there now as the trees turn spare,
waiting for the mice in the yard to turn
so hungry they eat the cats he called cruel,
for the Black-Eyed Susans to bloom
early, in a blaze underground.
The Small Pyre You Lit

“Worlds are altered rather than destroyed”—Democritus

Down a nearly forgotten path
steep into the gully
behind what was
the farm where you grew up
maybe an acre or two of stony ground
who knows how many years of hunger
inside rings of trees and layers of leaves
rotting into vapor underfoot
you made a small pyre in the mulch
warm to the touch
showed the way like a pilot
light the size of an open palm
what if the hillside was enveloped
in blue flame all around us
like the entire world was an altar
the saints ask why not be changed
utterly into fire
I’m not ready to let go
you told me on the farm
life and death go hand in hand
everyone sees them walking
but grandpa never spoke
of his brother burned crushed
under that truck so young
we talked Greek philosophy and haiku
if words are altered rather than destroyed
is silence altered too
once we walked the creek
father and son hand in hand sliding
over shale silver fish appear
suspended in ice now
who knows how long
before I see you
Some Dented Wheel

I.
Nobody has ever drawn a circle.
Thousands of years and nothing
but spheroids and a vanishing point.

Because a circle must be perfect. Everything
else is just some bent or dented wheel.
Still, no one doubts they’re real.

This isn’t an oblique proof of god’s existence
but a digression on the restless heliotropes
our words are, and our hearts, turning toward

a kind of warmth or light that never arrives
wholly and complete, when so much else does.
Like Italian buses, which carry us down

Roman and Etruscan roads skirting the edge
of death. The planet holds, more or less.
But who stops to celebrate these weathered rings—

the ones that manage, in various states
of circular pretense, to make their way down
ancient streets and orbit, wobbling, the sun?

II.
This is a digression, too, on the absurd
beauty of our mouths, always open
in the face of something else—the brush

of a moment infinite in its power of flight.
Why can’t your face be more than
a silhouette turning away, apostrophe?

Let’s sing our sweet, lost exorbitance—
those afternoons alone among the ruins
at Fiesole with the wild artichokes

drowsing in the sun and flowering
into seed, when I could feel you
as if moving in this very room.
As if getting somewhere were more than chasing after fullness, scattered among the seed of wild artichokes.

III.
Then whether or not there is a circle (for example, one that a drunk and lonely spider accidentally spun—

for all we know there are millions of them) and long after the sun has slipped out the door that first opened among the ruins

and the lovers have crawled through smaller holes vanishing in the distance, we’ll know that something spilled over:

a surplus reeling in the open field before the sky, because that unforeseen extra, turning for its time, was us.
NOTES

Page 26: “What you seek is seeking you” is from the poet Rumi.

Page 40: “Why not be changed utterly into fire?” is from Sayings of the Desert Fathers.