

# **The Ghost of Home**

by

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For William Smolinsky

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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  
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  
carousal 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.

## Intro to Semiotics

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

Bright lights. Blood. Artificial  
milk and cherry-flavored snot.

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    like when she first imagined him  
but he predicts deep shadows    a wave swallowing a seagull  
a long snowy March    while the sky stares back

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

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

as days drift like clouds or smoke    let him lie down in cold sand  
he still wants to find her    turn to loam  
among the dunes    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 profundo, 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.

## **Hours Poetica**

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*.