FEATHER BREAD

by

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& to my baker.

In memory of

Matthew Edward Pillette
1966-2015
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**HEAT**

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...painters hold that the same motions and grimaces of the face that serve for weeping, serve for laughter, too...

—Michel Montaigne

...little did I know how awfulness could reach perfection...

—Frank O'Hara
Murderous Row

As if in protest against the missing trees, a boulevard-wide row of crows weighs down the power line like a smile, a black-toothed silent abstract of what must be done in a world absent branches.
YEAST
Garden of Babel

We watered paradise.
Daffodils blue
bells tulips
lilacs purple
& white hosta
& calla lilies snap
dragons roses irises
poppies trumpet
vines bleeding
hearts camellia
zinnias peonies white
pink & red black
berries rasp
-berries green
grapes black
caps & fruit
trees in a miniature
orchard of sweet
plums sour apples
pears hammock
strung
between
two cherry
trees
we cheered monogamy.
Spring mating spring
-white blossoms until
a patio-scouring
bleach bath killed
one cherry and grieved
the other barren.
Until then, each
child climbed
their cherry, claimed his
& hers,
but never in season
to pick the fruit—
*that* too closely
resembled work,
though after those
cherry deaths
that summer, they
did daily yank
flowers to lay
at the trunks
of our cherry
tombstones.
On the Eve of Fame

Ha’adam named each bird & beast,
grown gown & sheaf of leaves
until his Grande Dame
angled in on the name game
and got to tag the goodness sprouting
succulent and shy—voiceless greens.

She reveled in His power
—she for God in Eden named the bustling
blossom plot, mobbed by pleading petals
of docile harlotry and gooey dews. Each
to her voice turned,

anticipating identity.
Fatty Canary

Mining Dylan Thomas for all his pap
after booze moves me from Swansea
to swan song, I recite him in the kitchen,

his reputation astral shaped like escarole
flush in the colander dripping loose rinse,
his color a varnish like red leaf lettuce,

its pink stalk veiny, set near a cone
of cabbage curled in on itself, cut half-hearts
of bleeding berries that like Thomas’

heart sit askew, bobbing at sea, a conical
cabbage buoy soaked by blood and a yolky
float of liver, no Walcott aphrodisiac

tern-egg omelet, no thick carved marble
slab of Apollo distilled in Rilke’s
incorrigible turn, no Caribbean

winds flapping the curtains on Crane’s
empty ferry berth, no nesting terns.
My precocial wings permit flight

but my woman then thought poetry
a fabulous bore, worse than wasted
time, she who turned a phrase as easy

as she poached an egg or tossed a salad,
made slaw, toasted seeds, or cackled
like cracked pepper at her smithy

word play, her phrases golden apples,
plucked & skinned, rolled in to make
even Helen drool from the scent.
Cis Turn

So met, she owned it, say that for her, 
she didn’t blink, thus had I been hired.

But for my brother, I might never have 
known this troubled girl’s dismal past.

I stole her from a woman, thieving eggs 
as it were from a bird’s nest, from her

first nest minder, one of many hired
birdwatchers she would usher blind

to the edge of heedless rites, her talents 
ripe for purchase. And, snug with infinite

risk, I wed this nymph at the first
trimester. She held her carnal rituals

until two months in ring, and only when 
I prodded for us both, for the child.
Pasiphae

A knife in her hand dripped
juice from the berries she’d sliced
and plated, and caught me off guard,
which reminded me I knew her
only a little, knew her from one
night before, knew her desire
and came back for more, knew
her body and knew her ability
to please herself, but the knife
took me a moment, made me gasp,
which I suppressed and replaced
with a sluicing smile.
Made Clear

Plastic charisma suits me, brother, more
than you, waterproofs my heart. She sees through
to where it isn’t hard, I said. I surrendered
to her as pure light yields to dark, clear, white—
But clear, he said, sometimes means empty.
My blood in circulation—what should be
red—clears, as if under pressure to bleed
the color of funereal mist that
I accept as weary weather, like love
on the clock, and I feel that I’ve shattered
anger. No small feat. My plastic costume
and waterproofing protect me
from your smile, the smile you use
to be cruel, brother. With my smile now
I hold my judgment all by myself.
Crete Street Ball

This goddamn house, I hate it,
you shrieked once, son, age 7.

A scrape, knee
to scrotum, reddening
your thigh from the jagged
window well you slipped
stepping in to get the ball.

Oafish baby bull. Poor
stroppy, overfed
boy. Father’s perdition.
I tried to keep up
with all the demands,
none that I fully grasped.
I yearned to rule
this corner garden plot
to prove worthy, father
of all plant, human,
animal life. Your scrape,

knee to scrotum, reddened
your thigh, jagged

Don’t let him win. That was the key.
Push him to earn it, I thought

and I shoved you out
of bounds into a well
of damned hate.
Daphne & Apollo

The loppers have a long, smooth action that terminates
in a creamy snip and a burst of green redolence, and limb
after limb plops to grass in compass-needle piles of fresh-snipped
pyre wood, once skyward-pointed, shooters now blot the slope
of blue-green where more laurel shoots defy fall’s purge.
de Kooning's *Woman*

White lies in the explosion of brush strokes behind her, *Woman and Bicycle*, where Willem de Kooning conceives a slattern's smiles and lustful self-admiration. Like lanterns of extinguished light, my eyes stare at the upturned half moons of teeth poised above the wide-splayed breasts and I'm recalled to a party —one where I left the flat-chested woman wanting touch alone in a bathroom untouched & unfilled I feared falling in. Downstairs waiting, your mother —worse for wear in a yellow suit

only de Kooning could have loved enough to paint her in —consumed all space and light of earth, a vision, like de Kooning's catastrophic *Woman* removing her cape, fingers pinching fabric to pull her blouse taut, a tensile and pallet tease. Like a woman grenade gone off, or a cistern in wedding gown, white lies in the explosion of brush strokes behind her.
Harvest Gloom

I. Three living dolls
dressed fancy
for feral dancing and flight.

A puffed moon wire walked
the eastern plain.

Above the strings, they
called his name. Called
to turn, he halts—

by man’s tyranny of hope
absorbed. As four, they

stand in a maze
meant for two.
Staged cannons

boom below the harvest
moon. Bulbous and yellow

it sits fat in black
sparkle ink and the orchestra
plays, too, beneath

his sex-struck gaze. Woeful
bull in the end mates only one.

II. A lone omen, a harvest moon.
A woman hungry for a mate
who prays to make

her fist fat on a spatula.
And years on two

have grown two more
and for a decade toil
& tally injuries by dark.

Alone and distal, grievance
nurthes the maze,

its narrow ways narrow,
its naked moon-less blind alleys
no bull could run.
Intimations of Immorality

Sometimes a guinea pig is nothing but; penned in, they do what penned pigs do. Thus, two pigs that summer came to be thirteen. They did not sell, we tried to give them away. Their globe-black eyes stared up at me, dumb, the dome light of the van above them broke the shadows.

I upturned the box, dumped the horde. Asqueal, free range, they scattered under brush hard by a sewer stream, doomed to the feral cats that haunt this fecund hill.

Perhaps the mighty alpha Noel—who gnawed one eye from his father’s face—survived, or a harem sow or two whom he might protect.

Back home, I lied; said dumping family pets is cruel.
Two Rats

Big ones, super-sized ones, I thought, seeing them, they’re so rich and wide as I kicked one on the nose running straight at me to send it belly sliding, sprawled comatose or opossum, across the kitchen floor. Who knew rats could be so valiant, I thought. They follow food, they nest close, patient to glean like serfs in fall fields after the harvest, seeking their bounty in what husks and crumbs and skins we drop. Our rats harvested bread crusts: the floor, the counter, behind the toaster; stored them in a cavity in the old dishwasher, floor-wired through a hole cut long ago, big enough for fat rats to shinny up into what they must have thought was heaven, but heaven here has a canine Peter, and growling at the swing door of the kitchen, she signaled me, asleep on the couch, commence commence commence the attack. I woke hearing them, their scuttling claws across the linoleum. I hunted up my boots and standing on one foot then the other horned them on silently behind the door. I signaled her: psshh shppppsh shppppsh. She raced in. I always wondered why she’d sat at that dishwasher whining, attentive like a wind-up bird dog, and I’d always wondered who or what had dug up the buried cat and gnawed through the box under the camelia at the end of the patio
near the basement door that wasn't square
with the crumbling cement floor. Now, I knew
answers to both questions, and marveled
as she ushered them each to rat heaven.
Radio Suite

Menace

The radio took my knuckled punch
your face did not
and rain sprinkled the windshield,
not enough for wipers
but enough for you to mention it.
I asked you to stop
talking. I asked for the kids' sake.
I asked in that way
you resented and you responded
with the perturbing
silence of a punch-broke radio.

Silence

The radio took your knuckled punch
my face did not
and rain sprinkled the windshield,
not enough for wipers
but enough for me to mention it.
You asked me to stop
talking. You asked for the kids' sake.
You asked in that way
I resented and I responded
with the perturbing
silence of a punch-broke radio.
You may be addicted to sex:
my doctor’s piquant words
to broach his new topic. A sex
addict, he recaps. I make like I appear
alarmed, distracting like a kitten
cocking to pounce on a spot of light.

Just trying to raise awareness, he
smoothes it, adding 12-step model.
Women seem to do well in support
groups. Like I would ever go to one.
What do they do? Meet and fuck?
Sorry, Doc, that’s only two steps.

I’m not in the mood to be here
any more—clearly his first patient
of the day, before he even rounds
or goes to his office. Sartorial, smart,
my little Sartre looks sweet in his tweed,
his slacks, and his sympathetic eyes.

I accept that my hyper-sexuality
is a presenting feature of mania,
but I also prescribe getting naked
and having the doctor in my mouth.
Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. I am
in the hospital. We all need some fun

and I’m in bed already. Climb in, Doc,
send the sitter out. (I cannot—I can’t
be left alone, I might hurt myself;
They don’t know I’m still thinking
of a way to die. Preoccupied. Little
do they know my takedown plan.

For this enemy, Sister Sitter, do you
have what it takes to stop me? I’m not
for long. I’m nothing, if I’m anything.)
Now, Doc, those slacks, let’s see that
fine ass. Let me make amends today
for making you work this holiday.
Visiting Hours

My husband will visit soon. I wonder what relationship-to-patient he will register in the visitor’s book today? Last time he listed none. N-O-N-E. Written out.

Hard enough to see him here, worse to want him gone to learn his wit.

We’ll chat about our children, and he’ll say they’re fine, that they would rather not see me here, which is fine; that he would rather not come, that this is hard for him to bear, seeing me like this; that work and taking care of kids alone is tough, a difficult juggling of hard and soft stops and starts; that he has no idea what he’ll make for dinner, nor remembers what he made the night before, that it wasn’t as good as anything I would make, if I were home;

that he wishes I were not here but that he’s glad I’m not anywhere I can hurt myself;

that my friends should whisper less by the door as they peek; that it’s rude to stay hidden and spy on others loud enough for them to hear him, as if they are responsible for their interest.
Three Sis Turns

Son, I saw Chekhov
this week, and not as you
would think—not the actor
dead under the jeep—but even
that one is not the original
engine, not by a long shot—

Anton Chekhov, the play-
wright—who to be clear
I must say I didn’t see
because he too is dead—
from consumption a century
ago—what everyone then
most often and for centuries
died from—the playwright’s
play I saw, I mean. Chekhov
deserves that, don’t you think,
that reference like Shakespeare
—I saw Shakespeare last night—
which Shakespeare gets

but Chekhov deserves, too,
as the attraction, over any
of his specific works, though
I did see only one, Three
Sisters, none of them weird,
but one a witch in her own right

and you’d appreciate,
I think, this contemporized
production where the middle
sister slinks about banging soldiers
two at a time, & we have
discussed before why I fell

for your mother. And, I realized
watching, she shares bravado
with this sister, as if Chekhov
served up three clinging stages
of loss and grief and vengeance
& Russian, he served it warm.
Ode to Lark in Steely Pose

Sexual intercourse began at nineteen. Sixty-three times with eight vague girls who knew less than my nothing

but to fill up quick—on in out off. Then, at nineteen a nesting ground,

a woman surpassing form and song, precarious on a branch, I sang in flight about her. She took what I gave,

offered me what she’d learned to do with it. Years later, I showed my wife,

who already knew, but let me feather her nest all the same from that bowl of warm lures. Years later, we swapped bon mots, lark and I, in a corridor at the hospital -- where my wife lay

in the offing from a third try. Acting nonchalant, I tossed off do you remember when and how and who and politely she inquired. I said yes, my wife is here. Do you work here? Of course, you said you would become a nurse when you had finished school and here you are—we were chummy, chatting when what I wanted was for her hospital to let my wife pass. We parted; I couldn't know that years later I would queue in morning chill at the airport curb, making very small talk at Departures with the skycap,
to hand off my mother's luggage, then say goodbye and see her only years later, as if it were yesterday, and there stood the lark like steel in line behind, and she did not see me as I saw her; and I would not see her as she was seeing me.
**Picasso’s Yellow Hair**

A cumbrous yellow woman looms on the town Green. She reminds me of your mother. Of course, you won’t find comfort in that. Mascara dries in rivulets on her freckles, her blond hair greasy snags under a fraying blue bandana. In old knit fingerless gloves her hands harbor for warmth from the crisp air of December. Her stained finger tips, cracked, have bled, her lips outlined with pencil have smudged as if she’s in a one-woman rain storm, her looks singed, a clown in black wool and layers. A cigarette burns low in her fingers close to her face. She makes me think of a Picasso afterglow, what must have become of *Woman with Yellow Hair*, Picasso’s big blond bent upon a table, hair so bright hue carries to the wall behind her. On folded arms, she cradles her radiant head, a tint of rouge purpling her cheek and her ample upper arms. Her summer smock shrouds her bosom as she rests, as if she has received news of a death, or revisits sadness, so similar in burden and grief, in rapport with how your mother received the news of losing her mind. Yet, Picasso’s woman will not smudge or crack, and will not smoke like this one in yellow hair that tints this Green.
FLOUR
War Bride, Holy City, Part I

When we were young, son, myth was truth, and lore of the clan—filled with driven working men handy with their dukes—anchored us in chaste *paisan* magic. My brother and I were kept among the enchanted, but others—broods adorned with unassailable forearm tattoos were kept apart and this separation more than anything should have signaled us that *all* was not *all*, as if a window held some behind it. We sallied out, hit word-bound worlds where minds not hands bid on jobs and we gazed off, ill-equipped to cost them out.

They pointed out our promised land, son, but not what we promised to yield to reach it.
One Brother’s View of Two

The sphere
wearies of being
a sphere,

sees the square,
staid and stoic
set in place

bungling freedom,
inept to spin
unless manipulated

corner-tip down
and spun.
The sphere

has no faces
like a square
has six—unless

you count
hemispheres
drawn at random—

because any point
on a sphere’s surface
obliges a chance

face, thus
spheres can
only know

self as similitude.
Yet, dis-equipoise
from a new face,

a new nose that juts
a new smile smiling
across its half-shell
can shift or tilt
globular mass
of said sphere

and so initiate
a sort of full-
contact, longed-

for rotary. As
spheres control
no direction

or speed, they
rely on surface
for direction

or God’s breath
or a smile from
moving encounters

while square-
jawed, cube
stays put.
Chum Junkie

Brother, heat of mind keeps you alive, though you sit with death a seat away.

Your opal eyes fall vaguely to the floor like dusk, and your trunk sags under siege. Seething, you rasp buried regrets, knotty glyphs under limb bruises,

lips cankered and cracked like mouth bark. From a rotted root in rancid soil,

we were made of foul honey, stemmed to our mother till ripe,

sprouted, you and I, from the same smothering pit of second best. Stood up by want and excess and split open by lightning too ruinous to forget.

I went safe. You went sorry. Here we sit face to face in the expanse.
Out on a Limb, Eggs in One Basket

Years on, something of my mother’s mind
resolves itself in platitudes; her ample opportunities
to render salve, or solve my crimes, knots within her, clots
her thoughts and all I get are generalities.

_time heals_—truth be told, Mother, by scarring over wounds,
leaving tender mounds of taut, pallid ache and never again.

_A promise kept_—is an injury if the promisee caused misery.

_Silence is golden_—has value sold on ships where _loose lips_ wrangle
with _rising tides_, raising all _wells and goods_ to leave me high, dry and alone.

_Tomorrow is another day_—to die, but _God has a plan_—of course —to take the good ones.
_So, you’re better off safe_—then sorry.

Mother, Stick a needle in my eye, camel and all.
With Fire, You Proposed

to do your work. Would it bother you
to learn that a friend did the same
and went up in a rage of flames
and died before his mother’s eyes
an hour or so after his ignition?

Your wife deserved what she got,
you screamed, but in the end
she didn’t and you, swallowed
by rancor, called your own mother
to scry a leaflet on hurt
and she said to turn yourself in.

So, for your birthday you sit
in a cell, the hospital jail, crinkly
in paper pajamas reserved for
the unrepentant. 48-years old
today, still in my memory a boy

whom I chose to leave behind.
Your cell must compel you to see
the horror of life, the brutality
of men, the justice of license
if only to sequester your pity,

your righteous pity in a place
of least harm to self and slow
-to-grow dreams. You were
never alone in this. Drugs have
incinerated my memory,

too. It's a wonder at all that
I remember anything but costs.
As you light the room
with your dark disgusts,
in voice daring timber
& moxie that mix to make
a quiver of round pegs for this square
world, a bare abashed sadness
lights you at the craft table,
your wrists twisted with colorful

stringed beads, your paper cup of water
crimped in your clenched, blistered grip,
spilling truths you kept fast until the sleep
comes from which waking remains
optional, until it is not.
Voluntary Commitment

August 26, 2014: Good Samaritan Hospital, Behavioral Health Unit

Do you remember?
You used to smother my face
with a bed pillow.
We used to wrestle on mom
and dad’s bed—
I hated that

held pillow shit, man,
still dream where I suffocate,
wake up gasping, death
or dread drowning me awake.
God. Sorry. I had no ide—

I missed you, mother
fucker. How long has it been?
Twenty-two years since—
I knew you’d know. I couldn’t
have told...you look good. In shape.

Thanks. I missed you too.
I can’t.
I’m sorry?

Stay in shape.
The drugs they have me
on. They fatten me up good.
Seein’ you reminds me.

My

wife—remember her?
ex-wife—she’s got meds-to-fat
tales. She carped hard, too
about it. I’m—

You should see
the exercise bike in here.
Yeah?

*I tear it up.*

_Dumbass doctors are impressed_

_with my cardio._

**Nice. You doing ok here?**

_Look around._

**What happens next?**

_Want to transfer me_

_someplace. I'm pretty much not_

_compliant._

**Why not?**

_Fuck them. Because I'm gonna_

_put a bullet in this skank_

_mother fucker, right_

_in his eye. When I get out_

_that's where I'm headed._

**What'd he do?**    **Call a cop.**

_I'm no rat. Sick shit deserves—**

_I'm guessing that's why_

_they say you're non-compliant?*

_Yeah._

**So wise up then,**

_stop saying it!**

_So shallow._

_Like a kiddie pool. Hollow—**

_I don't disagree—**

_like papier maché—*

**but why—**

_I really can't stand_

_that about you. You're soft._

_Cushy bitch. An egg white._

_Swank swarms all over_

_your puke._

**Why do you want to kill—**

_You're a cardboard box!**

_My life suggests otherwise._

_Does it? You are a color—*
by-numbers.

    Why kill—
    He took this girl who got clean,
    hooked her up again.
    She deserves better than just
    be the girl he keeps to bang

in his locked basement
with his wife and kids upstairs—

You care about her.
I care 'bout this piece of stink
shit bein’ dead. He is my

mission.

    I see. Well.
    It ain’t a secret mission...
    anymore... in here...
    Mr. Phelps.
    
    Guess not.
    
    D’your meds
    help?
    
    I don’t hear voices, now.

But I still see rats. God
I hate rats, man. Filthy.

Do you like being

    clean?

    Fuck you.

    Do you want to
    stay clean?

    I guess. Who knows? I...

    it’s a fucked up life.

    We all blow a hole in good—
    Would you trade me?

    Of course not.

    I heard your life didn’t go
    so smooth and suave either, man.
Did you? What'd you hear?
That your ex-wife was crazy,
whack as me. And you
stuck that shit out.

Twenty-three
years. I did. Hard time.

I hope you stay clean,
brother.

Yeah, I hope I do
too. I never have.

When did we see each other
last?

You bitched me hard about

a broiler pan I
filched to cart leftover ribs
home. Your next birthday,
I wrapped it, gave you it back.

I don't remember that.

No surprise. You said
you'd done smack the night before.

That was twenty years
ago?

It was a long time
ago—

High so much back then,

Even clean, I was—
supposedly clean—I was
high—

Brother, stay clean.
I'd like to see you again,
visiting hours are over.

I never knew all that—
By then, I was married. Bad
trade, you for her. Bad
bargain.

—never knew all that.

I know.

Take care of yourself.
What He Meant to Say

son, but didn’t
— to save my feelings —

is that I’m a human

palimpsest, washed

and rewritten, returned
to use from older uses,

perhaps a dozen layers

laid and scoured away

that he’d seen young,
each wrangled tale

a story from the stack,
pulled apart to bake

crackling in the sun,
left for morning dew

to unwrinkle then, dry

before pressing, patted

solid singles rejoined

by unguent solvent

and bound back
to back, pages of new

trials, self-scribed

self-loathing & parody,
suffering, and survival.
War Bride, Holy City, Part II

This, son, was the world you were born into, and I stood unprepared to bear its squalls. I could not conjure in my discontent a better choice than to wed a war bride.

We left our holy city for plastic digests of family life without folk, without nigh people who would help, but that is not true. We were the nigh folk unwilling to help others, we were the truculent couple capable to judge and exclude and expect. And, we accepted only praise. This life, we imposed on you, leaned on your body the weight of this dis-ease, companioned pleasantries with pure pain.
Framed in a Bagel Shop

Because the neighbor loading picture frames
into his car took meticulous care to secure them,
I remembered the bundled socks in the box
that I lost when I moved from our home into mine,
careless in fury, fissuring, red—the box
deserved none of the blame—perhaps angry instead
at the pleated scarf I bought that you lost
to the buffeting wind and the deep of that crater.
I accused you of losing yourself there
in the shop at the shore where the owner
showered yeast on your purchasing power
and sugar to powder your marginal smile.
X it,
or
Witch's Kiss

*Apostrophe to X.*

Slink and slide my big X, you must agree I was, as knights go, more Quixote than Lance, more Malvolio

than Mercutio. I would attest I did not meet the white knight-filigree of one who rescues damsels, distressing them rather. I'm one to get witch's kisses, to help each witch fall from her dress and dressings. My sober kisses were few,

I admit in all conscience, I failed that, thus you dismissed me, but I couldn't leave home after you vexed all the exits.
HEAT
Welcome

We came to New Jersey worn and well read, looking for William Carlos Williams, only to learn why Ginsburg howled and Leroi Jones lived under a pseudonym.
Two Dreams

A woman
chases me
and a boy—
I think, my son—
over stony hills,
barren trails
under hot sun,
bleached heat.
In shaded glens
we climb damp
stone fences,
and quietly
I admonish
him to hurry,
to get down,
to stay still,
be unseen.

I start awake
—dreadful ache—
and know
sleep now
is done for
me. Then I
wonder if
or whether
she dreams
of me, this
woman, if
in her dreams
she chases me
and this boy,
or if I, in her
bent frame,
chase her and
perhaps her
little girl.

When she wakes
to know sleep
now is done,
is she relieved
at least that
the hot sun
is a dark room,
and the stone
fences climbed
are twisted,
sweated sheets?
And, to not
disturb her
partner, does she
tip-toe out
to a stiff chair
in an unlit room
to ponder all
that we have
done to dreams?
War Bride, Holy City, Part III

A class war, and you are a soldier now
son, and we its sordid battlefields and try
as you might you can't win because
privilege already has, and you get
to feel lost and still lose out while you brawl.
That's the price of admission to this clan;
we are lower echelon fighters who
were striving to up our status but failed
and rather than climb past our offices
we fell apart and marched off to pure
pleasure battles, to be battered by foes
who knew no loss of that which to us
meant everything. Thus, son, you discovered
why your big people surrendered to blight.
Voice Male

When he called
because our mother
had given up

my number,
he lurched and larked,
happy tonic to angry
tone, manic

oddities to arias
at warp speed, I could sleep
—my side of the dialogue

was superfluous. His flare
for scatology, like flames
licking at sticks, tired

me, irritated me

at our out-of-touch
mother to have thought
this was good for him

or me, that we might
bond over his lack of phone
tact. When I took no

more calls, he left

dissonant messages
that expired the time, or
he could be so jolly,

he had to know

though, I screened him,
ducking further altercation
candids, but he didn’t grow

angry. His calls just
stopped. At the time I was glad,
but I grew blue

wondering: did he die.
Mandible

That which does not kill us
grows within us

Nothing has been able to kill
my brother

But it grows cancer His new
heuristic foe

requires surgery a scrupulous
surgeon
to remove lymph tissue to margin
and all of his soft

pallet 25 years an addict post-op
no narcotic

liquid lidocaine just ice no
bourbon

a recipe for relapse He’s been
a good boy

a tough man and taken
his lumps

When he was four six eight
he thought

of others eased grief around
the house

said sweet pithy things a child
doesn’t say

And as a result of this juvenile
goodness

the world proved a disappointment
and sirens

sang him to the street medicine
being good enough
Whitman noticed two sorts of people: those touched by college and those touched by war. He came to think of them flocked in the courtroom of popular faith as villagers at a reception for broken hearts,

the sweet corners of their eyes upturned. He preferred, in those restless years, brawny dreamers to the well-dressed male clerks in service;
flagstone alleyways to good-looking streets;
this soggy field yielding a flow of damp legends to the epidemics and bodies and parts interred beneath the parade grass and these Potter’s leaves. Whitman knew other shapes, too, in the air here—gone, but remembered—a shadow that falls, like the space an object displaces. In that ether, Rose Butler’s body hangs. Bells silence song birds, drowning them iron on iron to the body’s swing.
Elm Eclipsed

I learned from voice mail, 
not so much from her words 
but her tone when she asked 
in a croak that I call soon 
then sighed a dismal note 
of trenchant mother loss.

She’d called at 10:04. 
I’d left my phone at home 
to charge. I returned 
her call at 11:23, sweating 
from the heat of summer 
along the Hudson mile.

Out front, my wife watered 
the little elm that hates the late 
afternoon light and would keep 
dying this summer. The trunk 
had split in two, and the roots 
seem not to feed one side 
over the other so the spring 
leaves toward the p.m. sun wither & curl. The older, thicker fork 
stays lush and ruby. She moved 
the car to the alternate side, 
then came inside to hear 
my blub, and to listen to me 
listen to my mother say that 
her son died from an overdose, 
and to report that the elm, 
—further dried out, the heat 
won’t relent—keeps dying.
5 Days in Seaside

You told me about death, the soft dying you’d planned
and with your needle friend
you flourished, not that I hail
your death, though I will observe it. I regret
our failure to live

a like nightmare.
In death’s hansom, cruise
by where we played as boys
—that family that never
let go of hurts. Hold close
the closeted reveries
we held for each other.
Priority Male

He arrived on the porch
in a box, his small cabin
cracked by the journey—
    his remains, and what
remained of his stuff.

Scrawl on a yellow post-
it misspelled our family
name. I peered in the box,
    found the pen he’d had
in hand making a lump
between pages of a notebook
where he’d left off writing,
t—
    o begin later perhaps
but never.

What he’d been reading
he’d bookmarked, what will
remain unread, stubbornly
    unlearned, un-self-helpful
    recovery titles, a glimmer.

In a plastic bag closed
with a wire twist, he is
granulated, his sediment—
    my portion of his wild
fired, white-eyed, bone-meal

ash for my plants. You have gone
to shore, brother, crushed
by life’s critique. Dark lured
    you to an indiscreet Innisfree,
to disdain, salted with death.
Speaking at the Gate

My addict-people believed
in my magic,
in my work. I tried
to elevate
their beliefs to death
but I admit
here that the magic
wasn't real.

If it were real, in death
I would be
hard wind at open windows
chilling flesh,
jagged sounds in night
unsettling sleep,
ambient water dripping
to wake

harrowing visions of reductive
haystacks,
needles discomfiting being,
gem stones
scattered in sparkle patterns
of random
literacies found in the comfort
of no words,

or fetid smells of rotted
grist,
water fissures in foundation
pads, a sticky
spot stubborn on the cabinet face,
a water
-browned ceiling stain
to reach for.
Making Light of Death

Feathers are light. Spread ashes, too.

Death is neither dark nor might it be avoided.
Nests never refill.
AT 11TH & 7TH & Greenwich

Where Dylan’s ghost won’t give up used to be St. Vincent’s Hospital where the dread poet died drunk after 12 days care intense rains around him still his sauntering remains tranquil a vapor of rye except the wind makes sails of skirts of New York girls on the way to lunch when winds come —O’Haras— skirts flap umbrellas flunk!

Warm rain swells the street hot smells and lingering sweet grit and oily as phalt & ply wood & larger-than-life face posters say hello: welcome!

It’s spring in the West Village the streets make sticky sounds rubber tires roll past a step away is miles from knowing.

Rivulets stream where awnings’ overhang sidewalk and no scaffolds darken sporadic diners seated at little two-tops colorful dots fearless in light jackets & beauty bursts like flavor at the seam parting wet lips.

Wet brightens the lights— a moist sheen refracts the white man frozeninstride beckoning walk until an orange damp hand blinks caution. Stop or hurry toward it fast.