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# Waking moments

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Waking moments

by

Daniel Joseph Johnson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Daniel Joseph Johnson

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

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Major Professor

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For the Major Program

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## WAKING MOMENTS: A PREFACE

I write to capture all those elusive moments of time that are so easily forgotten. I have never been good at being an impartial observer of life. I have always been in the middle of everything in life and much of my writing stems from these experiences. I feel as if I am making something coherent and even beautiful out of what was, in reality, a messy and inarticulate floundering.

My first love in writing is fiction. I chose poetry as the central focus of my thesis however because I felt that there were many things that I simply could not say by using the medium of fiction. I am trying to explore the "gap" between fiction and poetry by experimenting in a small way with prose poetry. Often these prose poems are very similar to my short fiction and it is the genre boundary that I am trying to explore.

Some of these poems are culled from my life, but all of them are fictions in one way or another. My most recent experimentation with poetry has turned me towards prose poems. They appeal to me more because it feels like I'm writing fiction. The longer lines allow me a greater freedom in using images and phrases that with line breaks might be constrained. The prose poems I write now are more like mini-stories to me. I have

never been comfortable with writing in established forms. My one attempt at a sonnet, “[untitled]”, is perhaps the only time I have succumbed to traditional form.

This collection reflects elements in my life that are most important to me. The first section on women, the longest, is generally about relationships and love. Some of them are intended as love poems, but most have to do with my fascination with the female aesthetic. This connects in part to my earlier interest in life, which was graphic design. As an artist, my favorite subject has always been the human figure in all aspects and this fascination has extended to my writing. These were some of the easiest poems for me to write because inspiration seemed so very close at hand.

Section two has to do with my contact with fiction. I love to experiment with seeing the world through other perspectives and this section is devoted to otherness in all its strange degrees. It also allowed me to see how poetry can be written effectively in something other than the first person point of view that dominates much of my work.

The third section is largely about my brothers and my father. My relationships with them have never been easy, but they are some of the most important in my life. This inherent conflict really fueled my passion for this section and I feel that there will be more of these poems in the future.

Section four explores my own questions about mortality and death. “Driving through Kansas” was one of the most difficult poems I have ever written as it deals with

many of the people I have known in my life who in one way or another encountered their own mortality, i.e. died. The section on fire also deals with mortality, but from a very specific point of view. This section on fire also deals with my fascination with the idea of how an event can be at once terrible and beautiful.

The nature poems in this collection are among the first I have ever attempted but I am looking forward to exploring this new field in my writing. Most of my poems so far have dealt with my relationships with other people, but I am also interested in exploring my relationship to nature and the land. Nature comes up in all my writing in some way or another, but it is usually not my central focus.

My poetry is largely lyrical in its form and substance. What I look for first is some kind of driving image or metaphor that will move the entire work. In capturing these images or metaphors I seek to capture those elusive moments of time that are so easily forgotten.

My poetry as compared to much contemporary work is more in the narrative lyrical tradition. This is part of my aim in my poetry. I have no desire to write poems for shock value, or to wallow in irony or cynicism. I worry at times that my poetry will become too sentimental and I try to temper myself against this inherent tendency. The poetry that I am after will hopefully be a poetry of feeling rather than a poetry of sentimentality.

1

# I

*I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,  
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.*

Pablo Neruda

## One Night Stands

we clutch unevenly, pull apart at the seams, divide sweat on leaden sheets in a wordless melding, linger apart at the bar swaying to misquoted poetry and stabs at humor, why are we doing this, why are you, we're the same, I'm just so fucking lonely sometimes, her bathroom is filled with perfumes, lotions, sprays, silver bracelets dangle from hooks, rings line the toilet back, music thumps through and I press one hand to the wall to stay upright, try to find some center of balance but my heart keeps murmuring, missing beats and the dark is sweet becoming morning, our skin still sings in the pallid edges in her tiny hands as we breed despair, seeking all the rest in the world

### Little thief

She steals my dreams scrawled on napkins  
and scraps eats the food off my plate and  
forks samples between my lips snatches bills  
away and wants rings, skirts, cheap beer and  
shots of vodka, bites my tongue giggling,  
squirms in my lap, stashes in holy places all  
I give her and all she takes

## Cornelia

It's not how she moves in the slow beats  
of my pulse, or how her cursive body  
winds to rise and break, sleepless with passion,  
thrumbing in her grassy heart. It's not for this,  
and not for her hips, shaped like a kiss.  
Not in how she beads the sky together  
or for her rhythms of quiet. Not for the flowers  
I want to tangle in her hair. Not for my frosty hands  
warmed with her breath. Not in her eyes  
singing to me in the boneless dark.  
Not for any of this, but more  
for how she wakes in me,  
like new snow on the boughs,  
waking in piled winter with all  
the bloody molecules of passion  
pressed close.

## Smothered

Ash on fingertips gray with waiting.  
Dry rings slick on table.  
She bumps my elbow.

I kiss the coral skin around her throat.  
Titanium white teeth clench  
my earlobe in greeting.  
Hazel eyes, now green, laugh.

And it's not that flowers are tangled  
in her hair, but more that I always want  
to tangle them there.  
A glance pulls me loose onto ice.

I want to tell her she is the darkness  
curled in my soul like a cat I cannot see,  
that the lilac heat of her belly is tattooed  
on my hands.

And that it isn't this or her cursive body  
or purpling kiss,  
but that she has me  
lashed to life with wanting.

I begin to speak, she yawns,  
I smile and order drinks.

### Dancing by Firestone

Her body is a conch shell  
twisting inward pinkly from a thousand hands  
sheathed in rubber smells. On stage, she is steel wool,  
polished silver twinings. Glassy beaded nipples grainless  
and joints filed frictionless. Golem faces seek her out  
hungry for despair. When she kneels,  
all the bone ends in her body  
grind together like ball bearings.  
They press in, dimly watermarked,  
emptied of desire.  
All the stones in her body  
rubbed smooth by this river of men.

## Construction

torque or torsional shearing stress in that dimpled arch  
of bone before the sacrum when she scrunches her scapula  
together at once to make of the acromion process such a  
heaven of gold in that light ridge  
great trochanters project madly in an excess of sensuality  
and her cells still remember pain deep in the slow densities  
of bone and every molecule is oriented anew with a phrase  
through the permeable skin and ravishment of flesh and all  
those vacuoles those cool captured nothings bubbling up to  
slip between her lips and the gentle percussion of her eyes  
and all of it in this violent spruce of life too sounding

## Being alive

to feel her slipped in beside me the skin of her belly  
caught in my teeth to knuckle her awake at 1 a.m. her  
copper winged shoulders twist into me with shyly sinking  
eyes and ears folded in violet and she bites me till I'm one  
big sulphuring bruise with her tongue a luscious oyster  
crinkling my brain and her giggling blood in my heart the  
pressed tulip of her mouth her caramel skin and rosy  
fingered center ice cream tummy slim boned ankles my  
lunar woman ringed in her ringing in her chrism on my  
chest my limb tangled nymph in her jasmine heat as she  
chants—never stop, never stop— we river together her face  
a milky iris flowering in the dark

## Calamity

knees scraped clean of skin  
knuckles nicked apart  
teeth crumbling blackly  
flaking shedding peeling bleeding  
nose dented, dripping heart's blood for hours  
till I'm dizzy from loss  
shoved under a chain link fence  
hair set on fire twice  
electrocuted three times  
dragged for a mile on concrete  
throat sliced open on unseen wire  
collar bone cracked  
heart shot out  
broken senseless  
by her eyes

When we dance

I want only this, your wiggly hips,  
slippery with sweat, your wet dove  
body to beat against me in drunken sips,  
the cupped water of your belly whorled  
in gold on my hands.

I don't know if it's this shape-delighting  
darkness you move in, or all the darkness  
haloed in your eyes. But I want this  
fey heat, this song of your body  
breathing deep, tunneling in my heart  
unmaking me.

## In Ice

She eats ice in slim crescents  
plucked from her glass  
empty of vodka  
her tongue lifts out to tap  
the slick underside of each sliver  
and pull each clear drop  
of ice-melt inside

### Unmaking Love

In a junkyard is how we do it.  
Among the caged heaps rusting bloody,  
speared through with scarlet  
grass and amber leafed corn.  
The tires pulled free from moorings,  
columned rimless and empty eyed.

In a dark house  
in the dusty center  
a black dog snarls  
on a long chain.

[untitled]

She speaks to me with night's descent,  
As snow covers the wild flowers and crows.  
She stands straight, her cursive body tensed.  
Then secrets fall, of all the people, all I will know  
And have known till I'm made still and clear  
And I lean in, to hold close, for the soft  
Continuing sound. Her voice too quiet to hear,  
Her lips curve without words or law,  
Like new snow on pine boughs.  
She pushes me sweating into the dark,  
Emptied of love and gold and thought,  
To scour my face and hands narrow and hard,  
With streaks of color blown out of the sky  
Till I'm risen and weightless, given flight.

Lost on a far shore

For Sarah

She is twined in eel smoke trailed  
black from distant fires and all the night  
is poured in her eyes. Syllables of sand  
drip from her fingers. The sky opens  
with tulips raining.

She dives, past the thin-fingered breakers,  
gripped in that immense cool palm.  
Petals of kelp are belted round her waist  
and the slow wave of her body is tongued  
with salt.

Haloed in that boneless dark like a drowned  
moon, she pulls hard for the ocean's center,  
through the thermal layers and soundless  
flights of shark, till her heart breathes and breaks  
with wine.

To kiss

We compare palms uncertainly  
like truncated birches.

We gather round the smoky table center,  
outstretched palms to light,

and here is only her hand to kiss,  
like a map for me to find the better paths,

to trace with tongue each new limbed  
seeking, in each grooved continuing,  
in her hand to trail me home.

How I want it

to live with her  
snuggled in the hills  
or loose on the flicker cliffs  
to feel her  
knuckle my heart  
see the world mown clear  
but for her, asleep in an iris  
of field stones  
crowded lush with bees  
I want to sink in  
the slow lead of ocean with her  
till the nickled light grips us  
and ice glides overhead

### How to Love

A girl is welding a bronze sculpture,  
blue sparks explode,  
from that spike of flame,  
her intent face,  
hidden in a mask,  
her thick gloved hands steady.

Toll

She draws them all in  
hands chilled  
hearts anxious  
whispers  
deseo besar  
wraps them in dark dreamings  
her body ringing  
a bell left still  
too long

Woods

For Erika

In the woods deep we wander,  
by a cleared field ringed with roosters.

Dogs howl the night  
with the fog breaking in stars.

I will always return there  
and to her gypsy tangled hair.

We will sit beneath the trees  
and watch the fields rise.

## II

*Due to the curvature of the earth, you see the top of the boat first and the bottom last.  
Black is the hardest color to see on the ocean. So I painted my boat black.*  
Satyam

Dreaming of the dead

I dream of all the dead  
riding icebergs like lost gulls,  
dimly watermarked in indigo,  
alert to hidden life below.

I wake, rise,  
watch the buses,  
blue-lit from within  
steer the night close.

## Elegy for the living

For my sister  
awake in her nights of blood,  
for the hidden disc of my lost son,  
for that hysteric laughter of the nearing dark in her eyes,  
for the burnt angels who wake the night outside Firestone,  
for my mother lost on the ocean's edge,  
for my brother clutching himself to sleep in jail,  
and for me, gobbling up the world  
and spitting out dirt.

## Driving Through Kansas

Blurring green for hours and windows crowded with cicadas. Hills slicked in arctic winds and new wheat sulphured in late autumn. Through Fort Dodge and Cecil, through Cheney, Turon, Lebanon, and circling Wichita onto the back roads, across the Verdigris River and Pamona Lake, through all the vast spaces where people forget to be, with gravel blooming mile long snakes of dust.

I drive through all the ancient graveyards  
with stony angels sleepy on the grass. I wander  
the headstones of their histories,  
trace like a blind man inscriptions lost to rain.  
I find only strangers, but wander still  
with all the old names ringing,  
like bells behind glass.  
All of them and all of me  
lie perished in this graveless sea  
of sewn mouths and shuttered passes.

I crouch low by an over hanging birch, shaped  
like an upturned hand to catch us all.  
I wait for them there, for to love is to wait.  
I wait for them, as they for me.

## Tumor

A black pincushion pushed in deep  
A gluey hole sucking the past  
An octopus to drink her days  
This blind eye planted in her heart  
I whisper to it  
This horrible gift of night  
When she sleeps  
And I can feel that little eclipsed sun  
That fucking thing  
Listening to me

### The dead

On the ride back through Nebraska back to his funeral the right front tire blew out along some nothing stretch of back road crawled with dust and it was okay cause I didn't want to be there anyway to see him in his farewell appearance and listen to that week long squabbling over every last bit of junk he left behind so I walked out into the rusty fields till I found a high cold hill and sat cross-legged like an Indian empty of food and memories to dream in the long sky with night creeping in and all I could hear was a distant train like a saber rattle in my chest

## The Wake

I lean in to look at the loopy gray sky  
At the vanished fields  
At buried fences like spines  
At marshmallow frosting in waves from ditches  
At the passing cars dusty  
At Schneider and Greyhound and Covenant  
At jack knifed semis spilled like caterpillars  
At the rotting world in winter  
At the slinky vanished day  
At you vanished in dry coughing

## The Hill

Termites hold up the hill  
eaten out in intricate constellations,  
pressed back with railroad ties  
seeping shiny black tears,  
runneled with shrews  
and ants spilling mountains  
pilled in bright moss,  
and the light on my wrist  
where I sit  
is where you would once sit  
and there is a light on my wrist  
like all the lost days  
gathered in beads.

### III

*It is a ship, black and unremembered, that grips my sleep.*

Pantagarene

## Brothers

We slept three to a bed,  
but sleepless in summer we knocked out  
Morse code to our sisters next door  
so all night was filled with these indecipherable rappings.  
We would draw on each other's backs  
with our fingers, little shapes and words  
and try to guess at the ghostly tracings,  
those invisible hieroglyphics  
whose messages we could only feel.

## Slingshot

For Dad

He sling-shot ball bearings  
across the river in high summer,  
with a large old rubber sling  
that I could only look at and never use.

I went back there years later,  
across the leaden span  
where they landed,  
and found the bark  
speckled silver.

I went back to that river,  
in an old coat of his, old sling in hand.  
My pockets full of steel shot.  
I load up the sling  
with chrome-mirrored edges  
pulling the leaves around them.  
Aim at the far side and let them fly.

I look for a way  
to cross the river once more,  
some line of stones in the shallows,  
to return me to that spot  
where he stood, sure-footed on the muddy bank  
to loose all his strength across the world.

For my brother

--lost in this whispering sea of corn  
of wet blades slicing up my arms  
in long red traces like slim commas,  
we shuttle to and fro, plucking the hidden tassels  
tucked in slick and deep.  
I watch through the tall green  
continuing, sidelong in wondering glances  
because I know he isn't there,  
and I know he is,  
not vanished on the ocean,  
but loose in these fields ever new--

Maquoketa State Park, 1979

Parents crowd the fiery stump at night  
while children swarm further out.

I run with them, alongside my brother,  
his face a broken ivory mask.

Jostled, thumped, tripped, tagged  
and ditched, I race through the trees.

The hot trunk centered in the bonfire  
burns up and beats with the wind like an angry

orange heart. We orbit further from that burning,  
from our parents unmoored,

skating the sandy cliff sides.

We race the dark with our phantom faces  
till the moon sets bloody in the trees.

## Family Tree

A rotten willow at yard's end,  
crowded with termites till they spill  
from broken limbs in gooey white strings.  
Haloed by woodpeckers in the gray arches hanging over,  
nested with black squirrels, pale suckers  
sprout in a hula skirt on the trunk.  
The bark is stripped back in loosened shingles,  
shiny gray and iron hard beneath.

This is our tree, at our own saddened center,  
this blighted growth,  
this hollow heart flowered with dark.

July 4

tensions build yelling or silent never speaking we wait for night together fireworks dropped into pipes pounded into yard light them quick and leap away some explode on ground inches from our face most hiss away arcing madly in spark heavy crescents over the street like a war zone or waterfall roman candles spin neon amber blooms over roof to scream and bang and packs of sparklers are thrown out whole on fire for one wild phosphorous flare our faces glow in glimpses of light.

## IV

*Sometimes you gotta hit em with a brick.*

Andrew Nease: the perfect quote

### Going through a chain link fence

Lu looked tougher than hell and always started some shit with bad old boys. He fought like a woman and always got fucked up, but he liked it because it fit his image. Swaggering and Turkish with a cigarette dangling from his bottom lip and a variety of weary blond women on his arms. Black hair slicked back. In a crappy thirty man 8-ball tournament in the back of an old bar, he is king. Cuts in shots and breaks like thunder. He scowls and angles around the tables, lean and muscleless with his big jaw and chalk stashed in right pocket. With a t-shirt that says "white trash and proud of it." The bag for his stick is black leather with chrome chains and handcuffs. He knocks back another pitcher and cracks his knuckles and finds his target or it finds him and the room blurs into motion, leaping for a look or a swing and Lu lost in the middle, going down hard and bloody and still scowling. They carry him onto the street. He wakes hours later with the dawn, stick snapped to splinters. Stumbles to a coffee shop around the corner and washes his face slow. Sits at a table in the back, the shop empty but for a waitress cleaning the windows. Her dark hair cropped short and curling and her pale blue dress translucent against the light. Her belly is pushed out, newly pregnant and laughing with the spring. He sips his coffee, hands warm on the sides, and lingers there with her.

## Broken

You want me to talk about it all? Why? What's the point of that? Okay. It was in a basement. I could see the night through the basement window. There was a street light switching randomly from green to red. The floor was cold, concrete with little cracks all over and it smelled like an old dog down there. Yes, I think he had a dog. Just shut up for a second okay? He used to baby sit me. Our neighbor. I dropped my bracelet at some point. It was turquoise, or ad stones all around it. I lost it at some point. I kept wondering if I could slip through the window and I was thinking I should wait till the light switched to green but it only stayed green for a few seconds. And I know I'm stronger for it in the end. A stronger person because I can take more. It let me learn how to become detached so what was happening to my body was just happening to an object. I can do that now, whenever I want, just detach and see myself at a distance. It really helps. And he's dead now. That helps too.

An old man

He holds a sack of cans in front of a building half  
demolished claw dozers pick chunks from the frame crazes  
of dust are hosed down the old man with the cans keeps  
repeating *is it today maybe I should* he feels the destruction  
the entrance of a negative awkwardly crowding in the  
sparrows flee their vanished nests that low hum of  
aggression from the city around us as violets break through  
the soil all around us as all the little pieces find the ground  
again we gather around the heaving mess of twisted rooms  
so careful to catch it all

## Scrapyard

Dean chants changing my tires  
half deaf and oil slicked in denim  
he tells me with a shrug  
the tires will have to be balanced  
so I watch the black dog on its long chain  
in the gravel lot. He snarls and drools  
at me but cringes when I approach.  
Mike shows up later with the beer  
and we sit on upturned buckets  
round the bonfire spiked with weed.  
We scuff up clouds of filmy dust round our boots  
our faces bright among the rusty  
frames, wrecked with our little wars.  
A fox slinks along our radius,  
raccoons clang holy in the cans.

### All Hallow's Eve

Pumpkins are piled high in neon stretches.  
Two brothers and a crook liberate  
a quick dozen. Four apiece teetering,  
veering over the dark racing streets.  
They line the pumpkins along a wall  
sulphuring and cancerous,  
and raise their rifles together.  
They aim at the orange centers  
lined like heads. Shots split them dripping  
gummy. The crook slips his mask over one,  
and grins at the new villain.  
The brothers turn to the crook,  
in the deep night still. Boots  
glide on spent shells. Their rifles raise,  
fire together. The pumpkins weep  
sweetly on the wall.

## The Life

### For Celest

I had a dream about you we were both on this treadmill and it was going backwards and we were in here yeah it was fucking weird ready to rub more more not happy even with spread legs I told this waitress I used to work here back when the buffalo roamed I told her and she didn't get it she said I never heard that about the buffalo I was born in Houston then moved to Dallas and Galveston never more than a year anywhere cause my mom was going crazy and doing drugs she beat me constantly so I moved up to rock island and lived with my grandma and am I talking too fast are you getting all of this I was really shy in grade school and I only had one friend in high school Cathy Myers and I dressed even more freakily than I do now and I was into witchcraft and all of my papers were about it so everyone thought I was into Satanism oh look I took it out I wanted you to see me without any piercings what do you think anyway I never knew my dad and mom always said he was dead so and I'm part Irish no not Gaelic isn't that a lesbian term gay lick you know I don't wanna steal all your money because I like you if I didn't I would anyway I painted murals in high school and I was truant for a year so they let me take lots of art classes cause they knew it was the only thing I wouldn't skip but I wound up in the rubber room for two months and they put me on an iv of thorazine and lithium and all that so it was fun look at those fucking dyke whores over there giving hand jobs and chewing on each other Christ it's getting so you can't make an honest living anymore as a stripper

### The Writer

I roll my sleeves up like an ancient samurai I creep along  
the shore catching frogs the color of wet rocks and squeeze  
them lifeless I kick the ducks like footballs onto the lake  
with mad squawks I tear heads off doves and scoop out the  
brains with my tongue in one swoop I notch trees low with  
my hatchet till they weep sap and wither I shatter windows  
along the highway blasting away with my rifle I cook to  
ash every complacent house and run over cats rip away  
support beams and boil children in oil and stab in the night  
and rip away clouds and spit in the sun and I mow the  
world clean and empty and I mop my brow

## Ars poetica

We sculpt our heads in red clay,  
build a maze of scaffolds inside each  
of right angled empty spaces of captured air,  
set them in the kiln to burn our heads  
hard and we smile at our lumpy selves  
frozen in sienna. We take our heads  
oven heavy and warm outside later,  
line them along a brick wall  
and to recapture the clay for new heads,  
we smash the old ones apart.

### Shooting crows

I knock back my shotgun in the deep spruce  
of liquored night as they fill the trees with a  
monotonous ratcheting.

Sometimes uncooked rice kills them but  
they catch on to that quick so now I load up  
both barrels and aim at a tree's center, then  
tilt up a hand or two and they blow like dark  
bombs, black hearts returned to locus,  
pushing skyward to turn the night ever  
darker.

The crows are not the dead but crows watch  
for the dead so I knock back two whiskeys  
every night and seek out those places where  
crows gather and I knock back my shotgun  
and I give them no peace.

## Slaughterhouse

My wrists ache blue and numb  
from twisting fatty runnels  
out of marbled spines.  
Push the tip of my knife deeper,  
my shoulders bruise in a violet mesh.  
Stainless steel is cinched close,  
legs shake, faint from the blood  
spongy in my socks  
and the smell gags me still,  
a fat golem gripping my heart.

I sharpen my knife.  
Wait for the next spine.  
Hold my little loves close.  
Wake each morning  
with a solid metal weight  
like a gun muzzle on my forehead.

## Questions

What thought when muzzle was pressed to her breast aimed steady at the heart but missing both times what in that knot shaped scar or in those slip knots of people was it like directing lightning out on an open field to strike and strike to burn the ground black was it only the thought that a touch can bless was it a black fissure opened in the day when she pulled the trigger watching the crows circle the trees at dusk and the gold empty eyed sky what did it feel like we all wonder at her like all the corners of the world slammed together

## Action

With the knife held close to my belly Dean raged closer  
punching himself in the chest and screaming eyes rolling  
back feverish lean body quivering and snapping and I knew  
what was coming and pressed back into the corner and saw  
there behind Dean a larger shadow loom up stony and silent  
filling the kitchen with massive granite hands curling  
forward and as Dean gripped my hair I leapt up to meet him  
and pushed the knife deep into that stony golem heart

V

*It's big.*

my mother, on seeing the ocean for the first time

## Wonder

A fawn leaps  
across the interstate  
through heavy traffic.  
Only our hope  
for her and for us all  
lets her reach the other side  
vanishing in green.

## Red tail hawk

He perches fierce on her wrist and we huddle near in listless interest. In the center of a mall. In the center of a group of kids. Blinded in left eye, orbit shattered. Keeps us all on the side of his good eye. Hides that opaque ruin. *He can't be released* the girl tells us. *He would only circle forever following the good eye.* Unable to track the cloudless skies, following a solitary path of circles, lost in that orbit of self.

I'd like him to find the open sky again, to circle endlessly fierce near the sun, to dig a bloody runnel in the girl's arm, to snap and claw clear of our blank world. Bloom rose in every cell. Breathe hard till center splits and wedges of light tilt together, through the limb wrapped beginnings of sky.

Doesn't he see the empty talons, snipped neatly at the ankle joint and lain along the table? But then I like him here too. Blinded and fierce and held on a slim arm before me.

## Wailing song

The whales sadden to a low pitched whistle.  
They live in the houses we abandoned  
when the flood water pushed high round our shingles,  
whales moved in, diving through  
the windows in streamy white shadows.

They circle the empty rooms as if seeking.  
They sing to each other,  
or maybe to the house, and maybe to us,  
but singing. We gather above in boats  
and press our faces close and listen  
for the music ringing in the walls.  
Someday we will swim down  
and dive into their open mouths,  
live inside those watery songs.

## In war

A field crazed with hawks,  
sky thick in sharp winged  
turnings. I walk through  
barefoot in afternoon.  
Bones crunch underway.  
A new army of mice  
scatters ahead.

## VI

*Up, down, in and out,  
turn your partner round and  
round, that's what it's all  
about.*

Hokey Pokey song

heat

he was in the pyrotechnics plant that makes decorative smoke products and it killed him somehow burned another who tried to rescue the body wasn't recovered for four hours so he was cooked through with chemicals bathed in amatol and phosphorene dust made a volatile sizzling wonder and it was all over fast he got hit in the face with brilliance or took a lungful of narcotic smoke but it's like a big open circuit he's standing on like that pause between lightning and thunder he must be a hot brick of charcoal reduced to essentials made clean and pure but he is lifted free at last of the ashy womb leafy bones drifting transformed to carbon to all the blackened molecules of perfection

## In Fire

The house was snaky with flame, a jellyfish  
of heat that firefighters were slow to approach.

But she was saving her brother. Her sister  
was safe on the grass, drowsy still  
among the birds scattering in confusion.

She bumps inside again and gathers  
the smoke inside herself to better see  
and finds him hidden in the bathtub filled  
with water, safe from flame, fanned  
like a starfish as she slips in beside him.

They lift her free of that fiery womb,  
carry her to the yard and press  
on her sparrows ribs  
till a black cloud issues skyward  
from her open mouth.

### Firefighter Dies in Winterset

He strides through the maze of muddy ruts,  
Axe slung on one shoulder and invisible in his gear.  
Through hills set in rubble, to that long bulb  
of a rusted tanker in the empty  
lot bulging with heat. Wrapped in ash,  
he moves ahead strongly, swaddled in asbestos.

He wakes awhirl in a winter fire,  
skinned bright orange. He screams out smoke  
unwound by this warm fingered cyclone.

Not boxed in cement or circled in the sea,  
but blown through with violets. His fire squeezed heart  
and bones hollowed in flame like a bird  
he breaks with every breath  
for the brighter sky. He wakes  
in the desert dark filled with sand.

## Phoenix

They squirted gas, rainbowed in streaks over her eyes and clicked the lighter to life a week before her school pictures were to be taken. She was in fifth grade, but they snapped the flame at her teasing, leapt back as she gushed fire. And it's not in how her skin peeled back like old paint or her soundless shrieks or even at the hospital lost in morphine dreams, but more in how she glowed brighter than the late afternoon sun descending upon them all as every cell of light in her body was released at once so bright the grass was seared glassy as an eye all around. They asked her how she felt to have her skin drunk with gasoline, how did it feel to stand in that, to be that. She only said it hurt

## VII

*That's my opinion. If you don't like  
it, well, I've got other opinions.*

Marx

## Daylight

To sit at river's center and wait for the day to burn through  
the ice to the quick flow to sit with the floodless stars and  
deer wondering in and frogs asleep in muddy graves and  
the city a wary crescent to sit until noon when the center of  
the river falls away as the sun burns through in narrow  
veins to crinkle with black life to fall burned through at  
noon on the river and feel the night fall over slick me in ice  
again to feel those cerulean ribbons reform a crystal at a  
time and feel the icy joy of abandon to live only in that  
vanished place with my blackened face a loosened  
fragment of the night

### Driving the night

I'm driving behind a truck.  
A white sheet is wrapped over the bed,  
like an erratic white heart.  
It fills with wind and empties,  
beating a milky tempo on the miles.

I slept on a wood floor years ago,  
a fan at my head and a sheet tucked  
in by my toes. I let the sheet fill  
like a sail, a seed pod swelled with rain.  
I slept smiling in that rushed womb of wind.

Tonight, the city is far off,  
a dragon in its scaly lights.  
I want it to rise up and take flight,  
fill with leathery air. I want to see  
its empty center and sleep  
in its hot swirl of skin.

## Insides

On a pool by an icy crick I play,  
from a drainage tunnel bloomed shallow.  
I kneel and peer at the clear spots in the ice,  
and look for clues in the rushing darkness.  
My thin shoes skate the milky ice.  
Red fingers trace the silvering bubbles.

The tunnel is shelved in snow,  
almost closed in a white iris,  
center glittering starry. The tunnel whistles  
tarry in its blackened marrow.  
The ice inside is like frozen oil  
slicked round and sticky.  
I crouch low inside, thrust both arms out.  
The snow is like warm bees  
lighting on my hands.

As god

In a bar orbited by loveliness,  
clutching alternately a beer and a cigarette,  
getting numb in turns.

A map is under glass on the bar.

My thumb covers half of Africa,  
dug deep in the Sahara.

My fingers splay over half the earth  
bridging oceans, linking mountains.

Angels do not converge upon  
the touched land, but gather  
round my shoulders half alit  
with brows afire,  
pressing close for want  
of patience.

## Casualties

she isn't in any of the pictures she takes  
but I can still see her in them sipping berry vodka  
from her flask and writing notes about everyone she sees  
her hands shake as she weeps as she keens raphides  
of ice drip from roof she tells me my teeth are so white she  
only wants to kiss them far above and outside the lightning

is horizontal racing from cloud to cloud all answers are  
unsatisfactory her daughter wants to run away just as she  
did and no one wants her I can't take care of her she cries  
over and over the lightning a many fingered hand on the  
sky slamming down for miles her graphite sense is in how

she migrates she'll have to spend Christmas in jail my life  
just keeps falling apart I buy freshwater crabs the biggest  
one has a massive right claw that he waves at the fish or at  
me but they all die I dry them out and she puts them in a  
cigarette box shows it to tattoo guy as they replace her nose  
screw she has astrological signs tattooed on the small of her  
back her daughter steals everything and wrecks the room  
tearing down pictures crabs eat like someone using  
chopsticks at high speed blindfolded Jay the monolithic  
bartender mixes drinks at high speed knows where to get  
pot for 50 bucks an ounce I figured out how to listen to him  
just let the sound waves wash over like a fish

an old friend bumps me by accident one morning and tells  
me a girl I once knew is dead of a heart attack the day after  
Thanksgiving the girl I once loved lies perished or raped in  
a ditch or beaten and arrested and in class we talk about  
angels

## Furnace --part 1

birds thick with winter peck at the steps for bits of bread  
 is this inspiration for this is what I do  
 my older brother joined the navy at eighteen to get away  
 killed a year later onboard ship, a crane snapped in half, fell  
 on his chest

I sent him poetry books that he refused to read he wrote  
 back only once to say how much he hated it all how stupid  
 the routine was, hypnotic he said, and the alien ocean all  
 around

I wondered if he still ground his teeth like he did as a kid so  
 loud it would wake us all up but I can't see him as dead  
 only in the hold of a ship with the waves sounding close  
 gripping the hull to sleep

drink rum and cokes and talk of the dead, of the living, of a  
 younger brother shot twice with shotgun slugs bleeding on  
 his own front lawn and left to die,

that's the way he lived it though so we play cribbage  
 we peg, we count our cards, count them all out, we wait  
 and listen to the night all around us, closer like a punch in  
 the hyoid,

sculpture of a little boy is beheaded, head taken, garbage  
 slide kills 108 in Peru, they called it the promised land but  
 it was a garbage dump but I guess that's just ironic not a  
 poem really or how about apricot women and crows frozen  
 in the lake, but it's all shifting paradigms, all hills mono-  
 chromed in white, a ring of bruises is kissed round my  
 throat, coffee and cigarettes and no vitamins, head shaved  
 watching orange petals fall silkily onto the bar in puddles

ants interrupt my poetry scampering nimbly up the verses,  
 of my pulse, I cannot bear it, my own rhythm, I faint, my  
 heart counted out, but it was a sound like locusts  
 descending that was most wonderful,

I never take the last bite, drink, swallow, taste, card, kiss,  
that I always leave something there unfinished, isn't that a  
poem, shouldn't it be about kittens and stones or children  
stuffed in a cellar or like that trial

when we were all deliberating on this kids fate and he was  
only 16 or something but we laughed and someone  
suggested lobster for our lunch but isn't laughter a form of  
prayer

everyone hated that woman who declared on the first day  
that she was a diabetic lesbian and her braying laugh made  
us all lurch for a window, the old gambler with us stroked  
his white beard, clasped chubby hands over his belly and  
told stories about riverboat days while two women knitted  
on the couch, and we were all sorry about what happened  
because this kid had hit another kid with his car and when  
they put the mother on the stand it was horrible like she  
wanted to expel this tragedy onto us, dilute by sharing, all  
our lives spread out in some garage sale recklessly handled  
by strangers,

lipped in summer heat, kids around the fountain all had  
nametags but one, what's your name, they ask, I don't have  
one, he said, but he was hiding the tag on his butt

## Shopping in empty stores- part 2

I race for the cannon at the end of the park cut diagonally across wires stretched taut and fine over the grass.

I duck under the first, my younger brother a shadow behind catches the wire in his throat and the whole day spills open as I reach the cannon untouched.

A mouse is dead outside our door. Save it, she says, I want the bones. I walk across the Mississippi on the bridge black in summer, banging on metal, gazing over one side at the water deep and wondering. She says the town is called friendship

but it's more like hell. There is no bookstore, only a shop for trading used romance novels and a string of bars that precede the town by miles and dot the highway beyond. This whole fucking place is corrupt, the cops don't do anything, the doctors in our hospital will kill you. There was a guy in prison here, bought a gun out on work leave, picked it up when he got out a week later, walked across town with a .357 stuffed in his pants, to his old house where his wife still lived cause she got him in for abuse, after three years, and knocks on the windows, smiles at her as she calls the cops and they tell her they can't do anything cause he hasn't done anything so he kicks in the door and shoots her four times, shoots the dog too and the cops still don't come so he goes over to the court house and stands at the foot of the stairs and calls for everyone's attention cause he has something to say. He put the gun in his mouth and told them all.

The whole time I lived here it was just hysteria punctuated by moments of insane laughter. That's where I use to live, that's where I fished and partied out along the crick, we cut holes in the ice, that's the guy who molested his daughter for 8 years before they finally put him away. He learned how to carve in prison. Split the profits from his carvings of bears and eagles with the warden who took him out hunting and fishing. He

makes animals out of wood. Uneasy totem poles to front diners and trailer parks. The warden got fired for misconduct but he has a picture of both of them standing over a deer in his new business. We get stuck in the snow with black dogs circling the car and push until the engine steams and tires scream clear. Visit the graveyard where brother is under snow. Scrape headstone clear and listen to the quiet spin donuts in parking lots and talk

about going up the mound with a blue star on its peak. We wait for deer to peek through, sipping coffee the color of caramel. We need to look deeper, find another layer, an image or metaphor for all of this deep in the woods. We sing for all the lost, slam vodka and shed all things. How do you feel, she asks. Like the bottom of a well. Like a cigarette burn. She finds a wasp nest spiraled in gray. How do they make this? From their spit. At home, dad is breathing through his throat and sneaking smokes in the basement, circled with amatol and cracked walls and we watch meteorites fling the sky like angels descending still burning blackened to our threshold.

## The printing life -part 3

Tubbs wore a Harley hat 24 hours a day liked to say I'm a poet don't ya know it gimme a dime I'll give ya a rhyme bear with no hair sitting in his underwear eating a pear on a dare quit army after one week of basic training I ain't doin one more fuckin pushup the rest of my life drinks till he fights every weekend Gary picks his nose at press and eats it grins at me with his two remaining teeth Hairball is jiving to his own beat long hair swinging to some unheard rhythm the presses roar together some primal beast and the place gets hot fast Brian screams the names of women he has fucked and plans to fuck Jen wiggles by winking Jeff frowns at us from his office sipping coffee Rob crosses his huge arms rubs his marine style buzz cut hair and rips another burrito fueled fart with a laugh Chuck frog breathes out to me that he's found a new baseball card very rare Dave tells a blond joke and laughs staccato HAH HAH

I go over anatomy ulna radius styloid process 12 thoracic vertebrae sacrum coccyx iliac crest anterior superior femur fibula birds eat the leaves and hold them up to light true ribs connect to sternum by costal floating humerus dad collapses with a hole punched in trachea I hit every rest stop on interstate munch doritos pepsi chocolate frosty face yells at me semi jack knifed mile ahead spilled in ditches and beaded red for hills cross over barbed wire to piss in lifting dark they gather ahead crack him open like an eggshell what the fuck who is that no one can help they cut him out an hour later a soggy half frozen wreck of a purpling kiss

Amber straddles me in black vinyl squeezes my throat pinches slaps poised on my thigh sugary apex tilted on knee falls forward center pulsing up the drums turned together slicked in ink a hissing black hypnotizing paper flings out

dumped in neck high cartons of rotting cardboard Dave  
caught his thumb in press looked at me curiously I laughed  
he pulled back hard popped free trailing blood minus a  
fingernail smoking in winter knees locked windows fogged  
up Brian gets a blowjob from Jen during lunch break and  
shares with everyone Walt liked to talk about Chaucer and  
deconstruction hit on every woman in plant and peeled  
them like onions inside and out we all throw paper wads at  
him dipped in ink mixing magenta cyan lamp black  
cadmium yellow

crossing streets drunk teetering higher than sky shout  
hallelujah at each completion puke in alley Amber guides  
me to her place three tattoos and a ring in belly button a 2  
year old son that she smiles at sleeping and strips me clean  
talk to me she says talk talk metaphors conceal obfuscate  
her body terracotta crumbling slippery lips arrow dark  
moths her turquoise heart her face a constellation grandly  
dissolves harbor this fugitive silver scratching sheathed in  
amber cast out all the lepers and pecans tiger women in  
wooden clogs the sparking battery is disconnected her  
leather skirt swishes I wore it for you for you  
and all the rest I guess

## Trains

Blue rail freezes my hand, sidelong  
down the stepped tracks, the long whistle

rattles in my chest, icy air  
catches like a punch in the throat

a crow is frozen beside me, glassy black,  
I tip it open, feel the clutch

of ribs and feathers knocked back to fly,  
black jacketed engines hiss, graffiti tagged cars reel,

cloudless above rails parallel over the land,  
the clear sky just a step away.

Savage the day

I wake the shores along the Mississippi.  
Set tractor tires on fire in an emptied lot.

Burn in wild halos and sizzle dripping  
to the concrete and find a Trans Am.

Break through windshield. Shred seats.  
Drive it to a cornfield shorn clear.

Set it alight a merry pyre,  
locusts humming chorus.

Stalk the ditches, muddy feet sticky.  
Smoke dope. Sit cross-legged on asphalt.

Caught in her story

the mountains are unmade in a hurricane of wind, ice  
creeps grainless round blossoms, water blows up from  
wells, deep light weighted warm on my palm with blue  
shelved sky descending, the gray wolves slink close as I  
wait to feel that truth cannot be known even when it hits  
you

Angel takes off her high heels to dance and her feet are too  
large, rough braid swings free, peasant skirt whirls off and  
flutters on the hard wood, new girls knees are bruised for  
weeks when they start, vastly apart her legs  
are one long sunrise as she spins translucent in lattice  
limbed purity, wordless and elemental, demolishing herself  
and all of us as we rid ourselves of all things: clothes,  
paintings, books, dishes, and fly empty onto the road with  
sky

the last yellow jackets of summer are smashed on my heels,  
I walk through the pitched doors like a gunslinger  
swaggering out of town, past the Burger Kings and Wal-  
Marts, gas stations and a dozen churches, out to the fields  
stuffed with corn, past abandoned cars and empty cans, bits  
of glass slipped in my pocket, I only collect the fragments

sun low on hills, trees cracked through with lightning, deer  
smashed in bloody halves over roads and the birds in  
retreat, the world becomes distant and then close and runs  
to a forest, a black shape in its center, alert between the  
trees, deep like a hundred crows gathered, like a smashed  
oak crazed with old burning, now like a man, now like a  
storm cloud as I slip up through the forest to the breaking  
light with all the world dividing roughly, Angel's chest was  
split as a child, six operations on her heart because it was  
broken, a thick finger of scar pressed between her breasts,  
her heart was broken, but they fixed it she says.

## Routes

An old man rides the bus  
day and night, picking his nose

with fat fingers. His belly stretched  
out over his jeans. He looks at me sidelong

or closes his eyes  
and pretends to sleep.

When I was a paramedic,  
no one ever dead in the ambulance.

Death could not be recognized  
in transition. I couldn't pronounce

anyone dead, not even the biker wipe outs  
with their brains all over the highway.

An old man rides the bus  
day and night, skipping meals

to stay on the move,  
to dodge that dim clutch.