What I have done, what I have failed to do

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What I have done, what I have failed to do

by

Joseph J. Capista

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Neal Bowers, Major Professor
Stephen Pett
Karen Bermann

Iowa State University
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2004

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Joseph J. Capista

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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For Shannon, who taught me to believe.
Gut-Bomb

What separates three pounds of ground-chuck elk from three pounds of ground-chuck beef is seven spoonfuls of black pepper, parsley, and seasoned salt. Source: The Group Home Cook Book. To discourage stink and bugs and vermin and coyotes nosing some rancher’s straight-as-hell fence, which will only make double dead, the Game Warden drags headlight-laced carcasses from Highway 12 ditches or a shined elk snuffed by a poacher’s plump trigger finger. If it’s not yet pecked piecemeal by turkey vultures, if its belly warms the pick-up’s bed-liner, he telephones us. Dustin and I load the fist-sized bundles into the van after the kill’s butchered, stack them in the basement freezers before they leak.

Here they become harder and smoother than angry knuckles. Within a year of discharge, Dustin is cuffed and loaded into a van. Pizza delivery boy stick-up. Who could call it unexpected? Thumb through his file in the office sometime while the lead that settles into teenage feet hammers the kitchen linoleum overhead and freezers hum behind the locked door.

Afternoons I didn’t cook, I waded through case-histories trying to distinguish between causes and effects and actions and equal and opposite reactions of all the dear children we forgot to let be children. Then I climbed the stairs, sat at the only open place-setting, always the one closest to the bowl of canned fruit—aluminum canned fruit—and ate supper with the house in Mt. Helena’s lengthening shadow.

Cooking elk taught me you can taste fear in a kill although I cannot describe how its weight or flavor leans on the tongue—like sorghum, say, but not sweet.
House Mother Joan smelled fear-kills as soon
as they hit the skillet, swore they meant hell
for the graveyard shift. Kids thought it was beef
and ate seconds, even—thank you very much—chased it
with cool white milk delivered weekly from the Deer Lodge
Prison Dairy. *Now that* said Dustin one night after his third
serving, *that was a gut-bomb burger.* then rubbed his
enormous swelled arch of belly and spat something which,
when it hit his plate, sounded remarkably like buckshot.
Three New Englanders and One JOP
Descend into Grizzly Country

We arrived still spiffed from baccalaureate,
three tea cake New Englanders and me

who called home Just Outside Philly,
nor’ easters blown Northwest for a year of (paid)

volunteer work, regular lovers of the poor
ready to be ruined for life by life.

But before the first snow sealed our valley
like a pillbox’s lid, we decided to hike

the Highline trail teetering along the Great
Divide, a thread snagged by a jagged ridge.

Up there, we straddled the peak and laughed
at how easy it was to be in two places at once.

And for the first time we noticed that land’s
beauty was really scar upon scar from a violence

we could not begin to fathom—glacial abrasions,
valleys of black ash, lodgepoles mauled by thick

clawed mammals. And because when we
descended back to the treeline from that austere

mountain slope we found ourselves in grizzly
country again, we clapped our hands in uncertain
time hoping to scare whatever lurked just
beyond each switchback. In that manner,

we entered the valley, clapping loud enough
for all the world beneath our feet to hear.
First Shift at the Group Home

I’ve spent the afternoon carting society’s grade-d children to their extra-curricular activities: the knife-point rapist to his pediatrician, the pimped-for-cramp pre-teen to her therapist. Cy climbs into the van after detention and starts right into his own war story. Eighteen months after the firearm-in-locker-217 incident he arrived home loaded with juvy flab to find his mother up and left for Phoenix and his kid brother’s nose shellacked with turpentine. Believe that? he asks. What’s not to believe? Cy says his first night back home after lock-up he reached for one of those braids his mother used to knot tight with copper wire and felt his hair clipped short as a half-singed black cat wick. Gone, but he hated them, anyway. Picked glass from those braids for days once after Pops tossed me through the window. he remembered, and so he decided to get himself state custody. Easy as splitting some sap’s lip. But he misses driving Rocky Boy with his cataracted grandpop, misses chucking anything at anybody —fireworks lit or unlit, his half-sister’s tampons, a handful of nickels, even the cigarette lighter. Pops? Couldn’t see, he says, much less care. By the time I hang a left onto Sheridan, disbelief has unbuckled logic’s safetybelt, tossed it to Helena’s thickening traffic. Yep, that’s his story. All he wants right now, he says, all he really wants is a stinking cheeseburger; that part of me that wants to slather every ache with cheeseburger bites. We drive and drive until I realize I should have dropped him off at counseling half an hour ago. When I say this, he laughs, pitches a wrapper out the window. Between mouthfuls of drive-thru, Cy rambles on about the time his Pops gammed that beater Pontiac through the rez’s corrugated storefront. Swears he shifted to reverse. He hoots, Never saw a thing.
Lewistown, Ground Zero

Old man Farley butts his eight eighty-year-old teeth against a bone of deep fat fried chicken. There are men at Eddy’s Corner who used to share whisky nights with Charlie Russell and wake alone on the crop-dusted hill. They’ve shot too many guns; nothing burns their throats anymore and they heed no sign. Here at Taylor’s Ranch, rain and tears muss Hutterite Dave’s nose, but moments ago, the clouds above were sweet potatoes. Against the Judith Mountains, grain silos look like missiles, and that’s what’s so funny, of course: underground is where they keep the Minuteman, square in the chest of Montana. Just leave the peas raw, dear, and the chicken pink inside, says Phyllis, there’s always a chance they might get cooked.
In the Event of a Fire

All of them. Broken-bottle kids from Butte mines or the offspring of Ravalli gun-runners or those taken into custody after a Kalispell chemical home-explosion—while their P.O.’s slogged through intake paper-work, I sat each kid down to watch the shelter’s fire safety video. State regulation. They listened to burn victims with Bronx inflections describe apartments blackened with smoke, describe waking and thinking someone rubbed black pepper in their eyeballs, roach-sprayed their noses. And the children squirmed as these folks told of losing everything—heirlooms, siblings, the smooth symmetrical contours of their own faces—all erased while they lay dreaming. For a couple days the new kids were cupcakes. Eventually the battered ones punched somebody or the shy survivors of incest lashed out at shower time; familiar roles and usual disasters. Dutifully, I charted their behavior, arithmatized actions and consequences like elusive proofs from the college logic class back east that seared erasers from my pencils, a student hell bent on making sense of things. One graveyard shift, flames raged up the gulch, circled our valley’s outer rim and tumbled across the lake and coulees, bringing the hot terror of wild fire. On rounds I found the boys left a window cracked and fine ash drifted into the bedroom, settled soundlessly on their arms and faces.
Out of Mind

The children’s rage I did not understand. They plucked the yellow cherries of the dog’s eyes, cut their own young skin and that of friends, or inked their arms and hands with poison words: mean cunt, thief, pot leaves. Just another group home rite of passage. I’d dodge flatware flung at dinner, chairs gone airborne, cankered lips that spat insults and phlegm from blackened lungs. Sheer terrors. Now I know the paperclips they twisted into needles, ink they rubbed in cuts, was not to make their skin a map of all the jagged misdeeds they endured; it taught the art of learning to forget, of naming pain before you swallow it.
Helena Valley by Night

All the kettlewhistles are silent
but steam moves through kitchens
easy as snow. This is winter.
Our town has bedded down
as even the wolf must now,
thirsting for water unfrozen,
for Chinook winds warm
and westerly. Cold air tongues
tombstones, erodes them to gravel
roads, which erode to hoof-bitten
trails thin and coarse as twine.
At night, we pace the town’s hem
and cannot, for the life of us, imagine
where this white garment ends.
I. Toady Eagle

Toady, Toady, Toady. Now the first time I ever met Toady was on his third visit to the group home for another middling infraction archived in a small town scissors-and-glue excuse for a newspaper. Interested parties, refer to I. Toady Eagle. “Call me Ignatius,” he’d say, “and I’ll slug you.” And he would and sometimes did. Toady had the smallest hands I ever saw on a boy his size, but his palms were like sinkholes and I swear they had no bottom at all, just kept on deepening to hold whatever fell into them—cutlery, chewpouches, ball-point pens—the usual contraband, like coins into a well but without the wish. Like most of those kids, Toady had a kettle-whistle temper. Trick was keeping him just under a rolling boil; tell him to re-wipe the baseboards cause he didn’t wipe them the first time or that he couldn’t take a home visit cause he didn’t give two-days notice, and his right hand would start to roll and flutter like a skunked woodpecker looking for a tree. All the while, I’d stand there with a clipboard pretending not to notice him wanting to slug me. Hands like Toady’s will land you a job punching-out state tags, and after he was in the system, that was Toady’s problem. Fridays, I’d lug everybody in shelter school to the Historical Society Museum for a bit of culture on state’s expense—some Charlie Russell paintings, looted WW II daggers, an obsolete world-famous engine whose pistons cranked sideways. To an easterner like me, it looked like the town basement or an installation piece. Toady’d go right to the second floor mezzanine bench beside a bald, bug-eaten, magpie-pecked, one-in-five-million white buffalo encased in plexiglas, once revered as sacred and power-incarnate. At first, I took him for lazy, chased him off to the Early Settlers wing, and so on. Well one Friday Toady up and hollers “I’m staying right here with Big Medicine!”
which was the thing’s name, so I just left him there cause by then I learned that, with Toady, some days he’d just slug you.

Next thing I know, he’s detained in the lobby by two senior volunteers for stealing a figurine from the buffalo jump diorama downstairs; just reached out and plucked it like a chokecherry, one said, a disgrace. The other rubbed a shoulder. With a little talking-to, they dropped the charges and we skipped the museum the next week.

Toady? All he had to say for himself was “You know why that thing looks like roadkill? Cause he never left Flathead. He was so sacred, they were scared of him, they just let him rot.”

Come the month’s end, Toady went on run; just charged the hills one afternoon and none of us ever saw him again. Hard to believe it was so simple. When I bagged his possessions for storage, I found that diorama buffalo tucked inside a glove in a drawer. Toady coated it with whiteout—the flailing legs, the nostrils and corkscrewed spine. When I hold it up against the wheezing Baltimore sunset, I try and picture it among the scores of plastic buffalo hurling themselves off that cliff with the help of a few warriors and medicine man, tricked into believing they could fall and fall and never hit the earth.
For an Electric Fence on Mt. Helena

From Last Chance Gulch
the town watches grazed parcels
of mountainside return
to sage or delicate tinder
called meadowgrass.

Inside the electric fence
herded goats raze
noxious weeds—tobadflax,
spotted knapweed, creeping
rootstalk of leafy spurge.

Townsfolk approve, nod
their heads
as the mountain becomes
their mountain again.

Every few days, the fence lengths
are broken-down by bored
teenagers who dare one another
to feel hot voltage
swirl their arms.

A day’s work under
their nails, the boys hum,
tongues rattling
the low steady song
they learned from the generator.
Dressing Room Reflection

The same rotten mirrors are all over this state, their backs chipped bare like nail polish. She leans toward her reflection, applies eyeliner. Something about that ride here today—perhaps the light on the wheat or the rise and fall of the car over the sloping road—something reminded her of rides with her father. As a girl, she preferred the passenger-mirror’s view to lackluster landscapes, preferred the road’s reflected white stripe endlessly spooling from beneath the car. Now it’s showtime. Time to reapply blush, time to fasten each button and strap, to make adjustments. “Never forget,” Red Head Lucille said, “clothes make the man, but unclothing makes the woman.” Her face shines like a dime polished by a velvet pocket.
Johnny Salmon's Dad Enters the Shelter Unannounced

Pennsylvania has no sky for cold-blooded
gilled folk, so I lie down on top of the trout
pen's cyclone fence lid and block their spring
sun. Farm fish. They don't spook easy
or notice the lid sag under my weight.
Men are always talking about trout—rainbow,
cutthroat, brook, brookies here—because
they never listen to anyone. I imagine they
imagine this is a river, so I play along, lie,
whisper *You like Montana?* At the youth
shelter in Helena, there was one named Johnny
Salmon who insisted we call him *Johnny Salmon*
—not John or Johnny—proud as a hangnail, breath
all corndog and loin. Some morning during school
Johnny Salmon's black-braided father walks right
in the shelter shirtless, blurry barbed-wire rez tattoos
on his arms and chest. He demands his kid back.
Johnny Salmon stops his essay *Salmons are one
of the most prettiest fish* and walks out the door
*and salmon immigrate to the sea.* We gather
his belongings from the boy's pod, place
them in a plastic bag and wait for DPS
to claim the load weeks later when Johnny Salmon
is caught in another stolen car with too much
of everything. If I rose right now, I'd have diamonds
dented in the skin along my chest and ribs
where my weight has pushed through what holds
me like a net above all this. When these trout
adjust to creek water, blood slower, cooler, men
will remove the thick thumbs of the locks, scoop
them up with clumsy trays and deposit the fish
throughout the lush Ridley Creek basin.
Nobody Moves, Nobody Gets Hurt

Airborne white tail hit by car on Barren Road, Thursday morning. Deer deflects, spins one 1/2 rotation, smashes windshield of on-coming school bus full of nodding youngsters and faux-sexed teens. One drops the (contraband) pen-knife he’s using to etch L E D Z into the verdant vinyl seat when safety glass blows. Kid in the aisle tastes hoof. His partner by the window weighs the benefits of dying before bio. Odocoileus virginianus is the class spaz. It jerks glassy-eyed down the aisle, shits itself like Tommy Wykowski and collapses under the Emergency Exit’s latched red handle, tongue smudging the rear door’s glass. Maybe Odo couldn’t take the new neighbors—windows, stucco, and dryer-lint instead of the sycamore grove. Maybe it felt guilty nibbling somebody’s conifer sapling in the Birches just to taste pine. Children all over the district heard it that morning—garbled profanities, static fading in and out over the bus radio. Heard screams. Pretended it couldn’t have been them. Thumbs in ears, hands spread open, they slamdance on the playground each morning, sing The deer on the bus goes 'round and 'round. Yeah, there’s a deer problem. Don't worry. They’re taking care of it.
Mischief Songs

I. Listen to Me, Kid. I Stopped Smoking

Because I can’t afford it, I said.
You think I can afford it? he said,
cigarette flimflamming between his
lips. The nerve. Punk kid at fourteen,
marooned by smart-ass friends. Smartasses.
Off my porch, off my lawn. Leave
the jack-o’-lantern alone or I’ll smash
your pumpkin-head. Who’ll clean that tree?
Run you bastard, run till your arches ache,
till that soft roll of fat unwraps from your torso.
You’re lucky my wife’s not home.

II. The Tree Unravels Itself

Mulch, pulp, ply, paper.
The ground knows my roots,
their blind tuck and roll.
My branches know air,

anchors for thick crows.
Children don’t bother
to count the rings when
I’m gone. Remember

instead the patch worn
where feet dragged beneath
the old swing. See, for
some, a broken trunk

is dignity. It’s
the wind finally
stopping, even if
it’s just you that stops.

III. The Hellion Speaks

It was harmless: roll
in my hand, release,
working it off the fingertips.
You should have come back.

The old man reamed me out in a bath robe on the porch. Kook.

You should have come back
to steal his hedgeapples.
We could have bombarded cars from the quarry heights.

You should have come back,

seen the brickshitting look on the his face, shaving-nicks tacked with toilet paper.

_Drive_. Do I smell like cigarettes?

IV. 1Roll • 280 Sheets • 140 sq. ft.

Forget the tree. You’ve never said Hung, _death by its own branch_.

Perfect white arch, sweet release, like unraveling a string of pearls from one pearl.

Do you ever break so gently, so whole in the night?

Unfurling. The very word a perfect arch. Unfurling.

To forgive the hand’s pressure, you must weigh as much as a hand, minus bone.

Who really wants to die a little death everyday?
Catch-and-Release Rat Fishing

You follow Earl’s pal with the blue-ribbon rat tattooed across his chest to his choice hole along the Jones Falls Basin’s concrete banks.

Dusk is thick and moist. Mr. Bill from the Domino plant smells all brown and no sugar. When he says Good fishing weather, the word fishing sticks to his lips like the trill of a dead uncle’s dulcimer. You think of your folk’s folks following streams from places named Justice, Christian, and War to the massive Chesapeake, strung along by the promise of skilled-labor jobs. But the silver water was only silver water, and the jobs lasted exactly three babies.

Beneath the JFX overpass, creeks and toilet-dribble blur into a muck the consistency of milk. You slip bread factory seconds onto the hook’s sharp barb, load the line with six or seven split-shot sinkers, cast past the knocked-about baby stroller blocking the sewer pipe’s murky mouth. Rats stutter in and out.

You catch lots of those little snub-nosed buggers, the ones coughed from flooded Pigtown gutters in spring rain. They bite even after they’re hooked.

Earl and his pal wishbone one, walk opposite ways along the bank, yank hard. Earl wins. You land a long-bellied Norwegian that’s wandered up-stream from the harbor.

Real lunkers, those Norwegians. Set the hook deep enough and they’ll tug their own guts clean inside out. The rod jiggles voodoo-like and you loosen the drag, let this one jerk the nest of slack gathered in your hand, then reel it in real slow and deliberate, so its little friggen’ claws can’t hold onto anything for long. Someone’s transistor flickers on and off about West Virginia, its mighty sea of anthracite. When it’s close enough to count whiskers,
you holler to Gary, who bites the line in half just like he always does. You watch the rat drag a few trophy yards of 20 lb. test back into the black belly of Baltimore.
Pigtown Sketch
—*South Baltimore*

Once, still new to this town,
I accidentally rode the #11
to Pigtown with a girl who
boarded for home on uppity
Charles St., sketch pad and pastel
box in the crook of her arm.

It was draw drive draw
drive the whole way down

Washington Blvd., pictures
lying on plastic seat cushions

or held by passengers' two-
knuckled fingers or wedged

between the window's safety-glass
and frame. Our driver wore a paper
crown she fastened with pins.
And by the time she stepped off

at Carey St., we forgot
that rainwater drips in empty

slaughterhouses and everybody
wishes it was blood again.

Nowadays, when I hold her
bright sketch to the light,

I see the tracks of six thousand
pigs in flight, six thousand pigs

that got up and walked right
out of town on two split knuckles

never looking over
their eye-roast shoulders.
Causeway Toll-Bridge Operator

When the captain radios my booth
I wilco the crackle and stop traffic,
split the bridge’s rusty spine. His
diesely barge eases from bay to sea,
hull brimming with bent wedding bands,
torn portraits of siblings, flowery
cards for the ill gone gray as gristle.
Lost causes, I tell whoever’s engine idles
at my window, explain that our mind
cocoons each sinking hope, waits
for it to emerge and lift from our
lives wet-winged and bright. Usually,
this doesn’t happen. Time trickles by,
bills are collected, children begot,
and what’s-it-called falls from us
like a coin from a torn trouser pocket.
It traces the land’s curves into culverts,
bumbles through creekbeds to the moonlit
inlet. And the causeway’s low-slung
banks are littered with castaways
come sunrise—sadder than a bluebird’s
wing on a spring sidewalk. Captain
Tony’s crew combs the shore and reedy
shallows, scoops the stuff with slick
nets and sinks it out in the canyon miles
offshore along with withering munitions,
dental chairs that won’t recline, and other
such junk. The barge returns when the bay’s
the color of twilight, its hull pickled
with residue of all it used to hold.
At the Nostalgia Factory

We get a lot of requests for stuff
you wouldn’t necessarily expect:
mother cracking an egg
on junior’s head, some girl giving herself
a hickey with a length of medical tubing.
Guess those were the days.
Oh, there’s the usual, too, something
with locomotives or circus peanuts,
this land unfucked and stretching shore
to shore like a great sirloin on the grill
called earth.
And why not?
Who doesn’t love picking sand
from his ear weeks after the beach-
front rental
or remembering, with every sip from the bottle,
the way her lover licked her navel
those May mornings.
Call it the heart’s run-off,
call it the heart’s fuel.
Behind the Municipal
Light & Power plant, our chrome
machines rumble and hiss.
Steam tangles with nose hair
and drips into the brain
like novocaine.
Yearning, thirst, better days.
Hey, they keep us in business.
Emotional-Filter Collector

They're roughly the size of your fist. Once or twice a week, depending, we come on by, yank them like molars from all kinds of chests—barreled, sallow, big-bosomed and hirsute. They pop and flutter on the way out. That's where bats learned it from, I reckon, cause when those bats see us, oh boy, they go canaries. Neighbor dogs just blubber in the moonlight, clocks turn their faces when the deed's done. You would, too. Image reaching on in, fingers slipped through ribs, fumbling between arteries and what feels like meatballs. Then you hook two fingers and muscle it, like pulling off a sock soaked with river water and silt. Don't want to touch much of the stuff, but I suppose that's part of the job. Mostly we dump them 'round back the cemetery by the decoration day trimmings and whatnot. Bet you've seen one blowing the roadside and thought it a tumbleweed or opossum-kid skittering from your steel-belts. Well let me think, at this point, guess I've about done them all: the love-sick, the hate-sick, folks with worry like chum in their blood, filters half soot, half gristle. Saint or sinner, its the bottlers-up I hate worst. Theirs are heavy and squeak why, why, when they rub together inside the sack. Sure, I get frustrated—we can't change a thing; so-and-so still wakes right up in the morning, puts on his bath robe and kisses his wife's portrait above the urn, so-and-so still gasses it after she rams the kid in the cross-walk or signs-off ketchup as a cafeteria vegetable. Eventually, all that stuff'll do it to you. Of course, we're short on help, and sooner or later, it hits one on the list like a wreckingball in Hooverville. Mornings, when I get home,
it's the first thing I do; pick the paper from the doorstep, sit down over scrambled eggs and see who we missed. For some reason, maybe because it's right there in print, everything seems inevitable anyway.
II.
Flatware by Mail
—To S.C.

When the modest box
arrives by post without
a scrape or clink,
we tear it open, sift through
these fifty-two pieces of flatware
intended to serve us
for the rest of our lives.

You place a spoon in your mouth
and it warms, doesn't taste
like metal yet. I admire
the fork's prongs, parallel
and gorgeous, their ease in deciding
what to take, what to let go.

We untangle the pieces and lay
each tiny triptych—fork,
knife, spoon—on the table.

But it's just us out here
in the middle of somewhere,
in the middle of something
that arrives a little more
each passing day.
Migration Theory

Some wisecracks said birds migrate
through this heartland because they’re
tired of arguing with the Sawtooths
and the Gallatins due west. My theory
is it has something to do with the wind,
the way a wingbeat cups this air, cajoles
blood and bone into flight. Evenings we drive
south of town to watch the power company’s
windmills—three spinning blades on a stem,
their tonnage greater than all the corn we see
in all the rows, in all the fields. Maybe one
of these whirligigs will take the wind’s advice,
I say, and lift itself from the earth. No, they
are not so wise, you say. An extra wing gets them
nowhere. We know the heart loves the shape
of a windmill—how it moves, how it stays.
Myth for the Northing Instinct

Walk softer in Gunder Woods.
Wend your way to the perfect S
of heron bent against the riverbank
trying, with its slow wade, to persuade
South Skunk black bass
its legs are only wind-broken branches
creeping downstream slower
than topsoil. Be still.

Listen to what tells you
the oak grove on the far bank
is really the rooted racks of elk
who drank and slept in this valley
long before the flood.
Beneath the earth,
they still dream of colder,
thicker, water and their hooves
are these riverstones
that would rise and drift north
if not for the river’s heavy body
shouldering them south.

Yes, the way the brown grasses
bend and rise in the wind,
it does appear the hills are breathing
this afternoon.

But you know this is not so
and that the river is carrying you south
again, and sometimes you wonder
how much of you is that river,
the way you are always here
while you are always leaving here.
Above, the heron flies,
neck knotted with a bass who
mistook its belly for blue skies ahead.
Dutch Tile Landscape in Blue

Here is the world according to blue:
The blue windmill with its still,  
blue petals; the bent, blue milkmaid,  
strong shouldered, lugging her blue,  
rod-strung pails; blue noiseless canal.

This is outside every Delft window, 1650.  
A scene as commonplace as blue smoke  
from the artisan’s clay pipe. A man paints all day,  
goes home with blue fingertips, and knows  
the tulips under his window will never be so blue.

And when the wind ceases, the sea will tuck  
this land beneath its hem and rise  
over the windmill’s still cogs, oils unbrushing  
themselves from sunken paintings, ink unspooling  
from drowned pages, and the story goes on—blue  
unthreading our land, blue unthreading our lives.
Are you going to play it or are you going to use it?
asks Mr. Hardwarestore. I’m going to give it
I tell him. It’s a birthday present. Maybe you
ought to use it, he says. Mr. Hardwarestore
tells me his grandmother cried when she
received a new washboard for her birthday.
She married that washboard. Behind her house
one morning, by the waterpump and petunias,
he slid a twig across its crumpled tongue
just for the pleasure of resistance, just
to hear the tin’s clank and whir. She slapped
him so hard, he never forgot it’s not a toy.
Grandmother scrubbed savagely that day,
sheets and linens murmuring their afternoon
cadence against the washboard, her bent back
the same loiot he’d always known, the knot
she slipped for them. But those washboards
weren’t the driftwood they make nowadays,
he tells me: flimsy timber, corrugated tin-foil.
So perhaps I’ll paint your washboard, stain it,
add a few nails. Although I know you want
nothing this year, that you’re whittling your life
to a fine, useful point, I’ll give it to you.
May you play this washboard until your knuckles
are soft as a plum that’s rolled from coast
to coast in an El Camino’s sour, rusty bed.
If you wash with it, may your laundry
smell of sweet pine. On quiet nights, laundry-less
nights, remember the use and beauty
of singing the same song in work and play.
How To Fake a Mondrian
—After Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue, and Black, 1921.

Faking a Mondrian is easy.
On white canvas, paint black
parallel vertical lines.
Then paint some horizontals.
Vary lengths. Form 19-22 boxes.
Leave a majority of the boxes white.
Inside some boxes, apply primary colors.
(blue, red, yellow)
Tint a few boxes with non-colors.
(black, gray)
Print a modest ‘PM 21’ for authenticity.

When faking a Mondrian,
balance must reign.
Maintain the absolute balance
of the inequitable, just as the Dutch
did coaxing land from the sea:
with pious ingenuity and wooden shoes.

And when faking a Mondrian, ingest
the universe’s underlying structure
and portray it as pure,
so it resembles Jonah emerging
knock-kneed from the Leviathan.
History of the Inevitable

Fire wants to be ash, which wants
a bucket to hold it with unseeping certainty.

The bucket wants to look like the moon,
which it does some nights, but the moon

wants to be the storefront window, full
of something. But the window’s coats

are tired of the town’s dull hooks and long
to be pitchforks, which long to be trees.

The trees envy the slow moving cow
beneath their boughs, and the cow wants

an engine to propel it though the sharp
fence where the man rests, wondering

how he will ever go to his desire
when the universe so needs his tending hand.
How Love Can Work

Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you.
—Frank O’Hara

From the roof’s gentle pitch
I watch the storm roll in.

The sea behind me is a bowl
held by a man
who cannot stop running—
it spills to and fro.

Because, my dear, I love you
I take another crack with the axe,
swing easy and let the weight
do the work.

Shingle by shingle
I tear the roof from this house,
toss it to the wind.

Each path they take is a tiny
sketch of disaster.

Each disaster brings us closer.

Because, my dear, I love you
I’ll see the trusses split
just enough,
wait for the wind to pick up
and do the work.

Puddles will gather in the center
of each room.
Expect these puddles.

Gulls drop their clams beside me
from heights
just great enough to crack
the kingdom of their shells.

On hot wind they spiral down,
sort through the clutter.

Swing easy, I think,
let logic whet the blade.

Beneath me, this roof is thin and sections bend wherever I stand.

Because, my dear, you fear the thunder and the lightning, I'll hold you tonight.

And I will not look at you, the bowl I'm trying not to spill.
More Photographs of American Barns
—For SC, one year later.

Call them an institution, those flatland barns, wind-blown and weather-beaten, roofs sagged the shape boats press into the sea. We love them, though it’s hard to say why. Remember when you coaxed me into prairie pre-dawn to photograph that roadside leaner we passed for months?

Probably smoke in some farmer’s woodstove, I griped, mentioned abandoned barn-images abound in downtown galleries: one blown base-over-shingles and gaping like a bell’s empty maw, another tucked away in tallgrass, each tinted a tinge of red minus some element.

What possibly makes us think we need another picture of a barn? I wanted to ask. That morning of our lives, I told myself it’s because this place is still new to us, we who, in our stubborn parlance, say back east for out east. Now I wonder if it’s reverence for the enduring art of dilapidation.

No hammer’s arc, no cold keg of nails, no good wood gleaned from Missouri banks alone could hold that posture—barn italicized on the wide horizon by wind and the weight of small things. In this, our first year, we still mistake what’s bent for untrue, are still afraid what leans will fall.

But your pictures of shunted planks and those angles gone awry remind that to last is an agreement: when something gives, something else forgives.
Spring Tide

A man wades in the inlet's rising spring tide
and steps smack on the back of a horseshoe crab.
No, two horseshoe crabs. One was raking her
mate over thin deposits of eggs when—blamo—
down fell a foot from the other world. The crabs
had seen this sort of thing before. And the man?
His mind is jarred from an eddy of man-thoughts:
darkening hair on knuckles, gravity and the belly,
the growing scarcity of good crusty bread. Each
had been crossing his brain like a taut, distant sail.
He squats, examines a greenstick fracture along
the dome of the male's Devonian shell. Goner
for sure; a matter of hours. Least he can do is see
to a proper death—oceanside pyre, maybe
a scattering of ashes at low tide. Something
respectable. Perhaps he should take the crab home
for a final meal? He carries it with stiff-armed
terror, the way men carry things so painfully alive.
He taunts a pincer with his soft pinkie. Let it think
it went down slugging. Above the inlet's soft mouth,
the sun sets on a world in flux and this, he thinks,
this is beautiful! It's as if the beach poured itself
into some freshly dibbled hole in the soft mush
of his head. Mermaid's hair tangles on an ankle
and his guilty foot stings. Heck what's life
without a little pain? Arriving home, the man
is hungry and so he boils the crab in a pot until
the rumba of claws slows to the knocking
of water pipes. Strange, he tells his wife,
so much I never noticed. Maybe it was the light,
or the way the wind slowed on the darkening beach.
For the first time in years, she gathers his words
like shells—touches them to her ear and listens.
She's missed his heavy arm on her shoulder,
missed that kind tongue of his. It laps the long
rudder of a tail as he describes crabs hurling
themselves to the darkening beach guided
by the thin blanket of moonlight. And all for what?
he asks. To go on, she says, to go on. In bed
that night a light sheet moves across his legs
and he wakes thirsty from a dream where he's snug
in the crook of a tremendous pincer, feels his wife's
leg ease across his soft abdomen. She must be sleeping,
he thinks, she must be dreaming of the children.
Pier at 59th St.

Every visit here, something else is gone.  
Last nor’easter, the bait shack tumbled seaward,

planks fell like shucked shells from gull beaks.  
Today we come to this place in the usual tangle:

deep love, deep regrets, deep questions  
not yet ripe for asking. *Toss them to the sea*,

suggest the breakers and the gritty lips of bottles  
along the shore, smooth from the water’s hands.

They won’t put down anything long enough to listen,  
avways pushing, pulling, turning something over.
Aubade Written While Someone Peels an Orange on the #11

In the slow rock of traffic
I remember you against
the red river land,
boughs above us
heavy and bent
with their lanterns of thought.

It must cool the palm,
I think,
glance down the aisle
for a finger under
that skin of rain drops
dried on clay road.

Even if it were pressed
it into my hand,
fingertips steeped in sweet ether,
I could not know you
any more
deep in this city's grid.

Its scent is like a stitch,
there and not there.

What is ripe falls.
What is this called?

Still, it is difficult
to return
after so many nights
in that country.
Enter the Meadow With Your Eyes First, Not Your Clumsy Feet

This sound advice you offer when, first snowfall, I walk out of the kitchen and into the woods. At the meadow’s edge, my foot tangles on a chain beneath the snow fastened with an old nail to a lackadaisical fence post.

When I trip, nuthatches scatter at stutter-steps on fresh snow. To them it must sound like a lifetime of seeds swiftly cracked or trees snapping at their thick bases.

Across the meadow something has told the red-tailed hawk release and so it does with ease—rises from its perch and is gone.

Maybe it wasn’t my fault. Maybe it was only wind’s inflection as it rocked the bough, which bobbed and swayed, tight as a held tongue.

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Love, try this:

Stand on a stump with branches gathered in your arms. Tuck one under you chin, maybe a long one between your teeth like a bit. Don’t move a muscle.

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What did you expect?

We can’t walk into a world with heavy arms, hold
our breath, and wait.
Messenger

You wake and think it’s someone sawing wood, but it’s ambition’s boots against your teeth. For the first time, you taste the grime beneath his feet, and buckets of wrongs pool like blood under your tongue—that bridge of spines you walked to get ahead, those misdeeds you shrugged off. He’s primed your mouth to kiss the lips of death. A conga line of crimes surrounds your bed. With one swift motion, you pin the bastard. You hog-tie him. He sobs, then oinks. Come on he begs I’m just a hired hand. Your head’s already marked. Against his neck you hold a shard of glass. Outside, the pine is gone. Your neighbor’s cutting boxes for the dead.
Death in Bitterroot Country

We buried you four fires deep. 
After three days and nights of searching 
lodgepole boughs, we found you clutched

in jagged river ice. I spat, lit 
touchwood, and dug through hot 
coals till the spade split my boot sole

and the pick’s handle thickened my palms 
to hide. So this is motion, I thought, 
this is motion when motion stops.

And I tried not to admire the water pooled 
and set around the frozen spools 
of your nails, the small valleys they left

when we pulled you from beneath the bridge. 
Only the easily-dead, I remembered 
you said, lay in easily-dug graves.

The limp elders saw you and drooled those 
same toothless oaths you spat together 
in logging camps like wasps into wise little hives.

The rest of us shook our heads, said nothing 
of rotgut booze or the day they found her 
at the Boiling River, its name heavy

and particulate silt on my tongue. 
Don’t tell me what I’ve failed to do. 
When you finally left I forgot my mouth

tasting like someone else’s loose teeth. 
Forgot the time you shattered 
my china, gathered it in your shoes

and walked past the valley’s nervous 
hanging rocks to the frozen banks. 
With you, we knew one hand

was always burning bridges while 
the other, afraid to put down a lit match, 
the other was just burning.
From the Prairie

Out here, sad mothers sew stones
into their children's clothes
with pale, thimbled fingers
—perhaps a pebble under the collar
or stitched inside a pocket or
scattered in trouser hems.
But the children do not stay home.
They wade through Main St. puddles
like their fathers, the way rust
wades through the radiator's long steel
belly. I watch them pass beneath streetlights,
past the public works, town limits,
and into the meadow unaware of what
they carry. Threads tangle on bull
thistle, tattered fabric unravels
and the stones fall from them one
by one. See them coming now,
threadbare from the night.