1989

The rainwater chronicles

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Iowa State University

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The rainwater chronicles

by

Samuel Random Smith

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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FIRST LIGHT: A LULLABY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
DEDICATION

For Jim Booth

...it's a lonesome thing to be passing small towns with the lights shining sideways when the night is down, or going in strange places with a dog noising before you and a dog noising behind, or drawn to the cities where you'd hear a voice kissing and talking deep love in every shadow of the ditch, and you passing on with an empty, hungry stomach failing from your heart.

—John Millington Synge
THE MILES BETWEEN HERE AND HOME

I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

-Bono
THE RAINWATER CHRONICLES
-for Lavonne

1. Baptismal

What is that prescient instant, a synapsee fire raging where December ices the skin, anesthetizing our minds like cognac? Vaporous and ethereal, a there yet not there half thought imagines us where we've never been, leaves us standing slackfaced, ourselves again before we knew we were gone.

We are sometimes fish bones, the skeleton whole and picked clean, waving like rushes in the cross-current, and we thrive in our mire, the cloy and suck at our toes, wishing we were somehow more than we are:

- a slow grass field,
- a rock engraved with our name,
- and a small afternoon pressing its nose against eternity.

Here my myth plays out, my earnest self-deceits little more than a campfire in the storm, the altarcloth dreams of angels now a coal red flicker hungering back, two by two by two, eyes at the edge of the dark.

Stormwater trickles from my face and drinks the fire, boiling it away to steam, the quench and black breath of offering;
and then

the water,
milk pink and neon,
rising,
liquid blue

tendrils of electric
twine my legs and climb,
serpent through my veins

and drink me under
like a genesis,
rising,
overflowing,
forever running down.
2. The Quality of Mercy

We name our nightmares to make them manageable,
explain them from as safe a distance as possible,
and run from the worst until we no longer hear it chasing,
its breath like brimstone flaying our necks,
run until we lose it or we drop,
as good as dead,
and accept our own devouring
like an unleavened wafer
awaiting the grandeur of small bells,

    body of our bodies,
soul of our souls,

the communion of human and beast melding,

and we stare,
as though from miles away,
at the simulacrum in the mirror,
its eyes vacant as still air lingering over a stagnant pond,
so full of absence, ripening in the dead heat,

and something in us crosses over and is gone, like smoke funnelling down a drainpipe.

No matter how much I know that night was clear with a low in the forties, clear again tomorrow,

my memory has made a rainstorm out of 1 January '88 --
the bloated sky
hurling itself at the parking lot
where we sat,
drum roll raindrops
playing the roof
    like static,
pouring a stained glass waterfall
down the windshield,
    shifting
with its blacks and whites,
it shadow and taillight
red diffusion.

I can't help but make it rain,
maybe
to wash the whole night away, to cleanse
what came next:

        How can we say confession?
How do we grope the night air
with our disbelief,
like anesthesia
    playing
hide and seek with pain,
nerve ending to ending,
the pain always one step ahead?

She said a thousand pictures,
gave me my nightmares to hold,
caress,
    to rock in my arms
like a lost feral child,
singing to sleep
its changeling lullabies.

Rain,
    to wash away the things
I never wanted to know.

Canadian Club, straight from the bottle,
burning all the way down,
filing off the sharp edges;

how cocking a .22 pistol sounds
like the breaking of bones --
not
a quick snap, but several slow,
dry cracks spread evenly over
an eighth of a second,
\[\text{and the absolute}\]
certainty of the blue steel blackness
waiting down the barrel,
\[\text{not sure}\]
whether it takes guts to live
or die;
hunger,
\[\text{real, and winding me down,}\]
muscle by muscle,
\[\text{four days since I last ate,}\]
starving myself and
\[\text{still not understanding the indignation}\]
of doing it to God,
taking revenge on one of his,
the only one I could reach;

women,
\[\text{each flesh an aftershock,}\]
one after another,
\[\text{rolling like}\]
distant thunder -- close enough
to feel the air shake a little,
the skin-tight rush when the temperature
drops 10 degrees
\[\text{in 10 minutes,}\]
but far enough away to be safe inside
when the rain arrives --
\[\text{and them}\]
loving me for my pain,
my honesty;

and how love is the blood-sharp
edge of a razor,
\[\text{each smooth pass}\]
across the jugular
\[\text{as close as a twitch;}\]

and after so long, forgiveness:
each step between there and
\[\text{wherever here is}\]
so much like doubt,
convenience,
forgiving because I wasn't strong enough not to, and how much harder it is to forgive the one I loved most; crying, tears flowing from my clenched eyes, wine crushed from a stone, like sacrament and its bitter beauty, making rainstorms.
3. The Stations of Falling

Daylight and streetlight
do a slow crossfade
as the clock tower
  counts to 5.
January raindrops grow sluggish
at 33 Fahrenheit,
like eyelids thinking
  of long, cold sleep;
their frozen dreams must be like prayer,
the faith in sunburst morning
and the silvergreen ricochet
from one crystal minaret
to another,
purple, gold,
and the trumpetfall of water
  on water;

or maybe,
in that last degree before dark,
they sing the litany of falling,
of rising to fall again,
  the oil and water of city streets,
mosquito ponds, rot and steam,
a hymn in the throats of the celebrants,
a benediction like the sea.

I have bathed in this sky before,
or one much like it --
  smoke and liquid glass,
dripping at the edges,
slicketing down the pines,
dipping down,
down and under
the deadfall.

I follow the float of my breath,
its liquecent
  drift and linger
drawing me always
one step deeper
  into the hush

and her waiting arms,
now like darkness
and its silent surrounding,
creeping from tree to tree.
At the center of the woodcut
I know
    that something is warm
    asleep, swaddled
    beneath the frost line...
    slow, even breaths,
    chuckfur,

and I know
    someone is ready for bed
    down a somewhere country road.

The sickle moon swings
    like a lantern,
its kerosene shadows
dodging my boots
    in from the cold.
As If

Do you suppose they quizzed Degas, insisted on her name -- that one, dancing on the left?

Shades of leap and twirl, shadow pinks, cream and gold, as ballerinas stir the sunlight, the mirror full of angles and music and prima dreams on point for a hundred years now, and counting.

Or asked Monet about the horticulture of Les Nymphes, the blues and greens deeper than springwater, as though you could kneel in the shade, cup it to your lips, and drink the reflection.

Did they say so much depends on where you bought the paint?

Did they stare at the blank unfocus of the woman's face, ash gray, as if she's been not here-not there forever, empty as her last sip of absinthe, and demand the what happened like a formula, as if the narrative were lifeblood, as if the truth and the what happened were somehow related?

Did they ever say he's only painting pictures, as if there were something else?
And just what does all of this rain
mean?

As if
the name of my lover,
the name of my friend, and the times
and places they secretly met
could somehow explain
betrayal,
as if the stopping places were somehow
part of the long road back.

As if any of it could explain
the buoyancy
of sitting in an October shower,
forty-two degrees,
without an umbrella
or a hat,
the silent lifting out
like a chip of broken cork,
poured,
for a moment, like wine.

I can't explain it, and wouldn't
if I could...
except to remember
an English Setter I once owned
raising his nose and sniffing
to the southeast
just after the wind shift,
sniffing,
waiting.
5. Shadows in the Rain
   —for John

What can a shadow tell of the man?

How much ground his silhouette
lays dark
is some pedestrian measure —
height, weight —

and if he wears
a hat, a coat, or if the wind
blows his shirt open;

if he's waving
one arm overhead, or leaning
against a tree petting a large dog,
the shadow suddenly

sharper

at the edges
if he strides longer
across a puddle,

or perhaps
if he walks holding hands,
and the figure

of the woman....

These things only, if you
know the time,

the lie of the afternoon,
in its angles as cold and straight
as a cement-steel sundial,

and not even these
from a thousand miles away,
after dark,

in the rain.

What of the things that shadows never show?

How the pulse trips a beat faster,
and what woman

that look desires.

And even if it moves quickly,
runs,
takes the steps by threes,
can you guess the story
the shadow will cast

sideways

on the bedroom floor,
what lies
    it will telephone out
to cover the trail of lies,
in bed with its best friend's
    lover,
and who will say
    I love you
    last?
You cannot know
    the weight
of a forbidden moment,
licking each thirsty nerve
with a separate tongue,
or how the years burn
    like flash-paper,
    this friendship
caught and ashes
    all at once,
and nothing to show but a shadow,
head down vaguely,
    dimly,
walking slow and alone
through the rain.
THE MILES BETWEEN HERE AND HOME

-for Caryn

1. Ames, Iowa

As I turn the taillights
toward Ames
and reel in
the first mile of a thousand,
I remember the last time:
in December,
these roads took me home.

I hold the wheel tight,
as though
it's the only thing
that keeps me from falling back.

I've never found better words,
try as I might,
words that manage to say love
more than
I love you.
Nor have I found
less articulate words,
words that leave
more unsaid.

2. Indiana by Night

If by day along I-80,
Illinois and Indiana are corn and pigs
and flat.

But if by night,
the moon ambles across the farms,
aimless through the passenger window,
and lights
the wood lid of the pic-nicker basket
she filled for the miles home.

Her hand is here and I hold it,
the moon, the night, the road.
3. Florence, Kentucky

Every inch of every road
  is somepoint on a map,
and the coming together of roads
marries all their places.

  Where the heart is.

Every sigh
  of every supplicant cliche
is so much carworn pavement.

Tall in the flood-lit dark,
the water tower pulls a chair
up by the highway, says

"FLORENCE, Y'ALL."

Five miles back
  I-75 falls from the beltloop
toward Knoxville.

Five miles back,
  lost in the dark,
there is a point
that is two places
and nowhere
  at once.

4. The Light Over Lexington

At four a.m.
  the sky simmers over low parking lots,
while dawn flares up the back side of the earth
to meet me;
  she is here
but fading, a blur
like fatigue,
  washing away
the hard edges of vision,

and I hurtle on, driving what road
my headlights reveal,
nightblind faith in the rest.

We hellbend
  for the top of Tennessee,
the car and the sun playing chicken.
5. Knoxville, Tennessee

Here is the sorting place:

sixteen hours of broken yellow line,  
twenty hours since sleep,  

of baby-blue speed,  
two-hundred and fifty miles left.

Spider-silk rainbows  

string my lashes,  
sift sweet the Volunteer drop morning.

6. Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Haywood County, North Carolina

God has not given me enough time  
to watch it  
the way it should be watched.

I lift along ridges and cutaway valleys,  
overcast, the forest thick as fog,  
so thick  

you have to take the mountain  
with a grain of faith,  
now and forever,  

until trees learn  
to leave the ground,  
climb into the morning  
and stand on air.

No metaphor is this green,  
no other place  
the perma-damp smell of time.

This is where clouds are born.

They roll up the trees like the smoky  
ghosts of Cherokee campfires,  
floe down,  
their milky bellies  
swimming in the pine-tips.
I watch the pulling apart, 
the earth and the morning 
and their separate ways, the char-
gray shards of cotton 
thinning and tearing,  
clinging to the forest, 
fingered for the sky.

7. Wallburg, North Carolina

Silent tires and finally, 
sleep.

All is as I left it, 
except

I am strung along a thousand miles, 
concrete and cable and wire, 
connecting the dots, 
coloring the spaces....

where the heart is,

and she is, and home 
the road between homes.
THE WALLBURG BAPTIST CEMETERY

Oh, as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
    Time held me green and dying,
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

-Dylan Thomas
THE BROADMAN HYMNAL

-for Samuel Linville Smith

I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

1. Church
Sam said he wasn't afraid to die.
He'd beaten cancer twice, and
it's hard to beat
anything
three in a row...
and he thought of church,
of churches -- Easton, Union Cross
New Friendship,
and finally
Wallburg, all Baptist,

slur and halleluia
choirs,
joyful noises for the Lord,
the amen
and musty smell of contentment,
like the frayed back of
the Broadman Hymnal,
the smell of "Amazing Grace"
lingering
until
he washed his hands
for Sunday dinner.

And he waited,
as if death

was an old friend
coming down the road
with a dipper and a bucket
full of spring
water, cool at the end of a plow-
long day.
2. Weathervane

There rides the weathercock over
his forgotten barn,
the simple Sunday chanticleer,
herald of the texture of wheatfields.

It's almost as if
they built the barn just for him,
hayloft high and red, brimming over
with horses,
and crowned him like the pride of the shiny new 1920s.

And there he was,
the dance and spin and the glimmer,
golden as the spatter of first light filling the yard,
the mist now like pollen, dusting the tin-cup coolness of daybreak.

He was here like early evening and the drowse
after supper, the dewpoint gathering on tomato vines, the meandering
float of honeysuckle breath,
and the timeless back and forth of the front porch swing.

He was here watching a country sunset
as the moon and the dark
and an early star climbed the sky behind him.

There rides the weathercock above the barn skeleton,
empty bins once full of Indian corn and sheets of tin roof rusting where they fell,
his memory a workday haze, 2pm,
humidity, the loft,
100 degrees and the haydust choke sticking to the skin like sorghum.

3. Evening

Night is an accumulation of small darknesses,
the lazy gathering
of shadows like children playing from tree to tree until their parents call them in.

And the spackled summer of things falls away,
a warmth between winters, and like apples rotting on the ground, we are bound, at last, to where we started.

He lived the fresh turning of soil,
a steady place for the root to hold, loam richness and the mute lift out of the dark,
dirt shoulders for the tree to stand on.

Such men should pass working their sudden fields, or quietly, to the moonyard lament of hoot owls, while beagles dream of running.
OF SOUND MIND AND BODY

I held my tongue tight against the back of my teeth through the whole ordeal, devoutly studied the detail of the carpet, felt the eyes of the mourners climb the knots in my back, hand over hand, hook over hook, to plant their deepest sympathy firmly on the slump of my shoulders.

I clenched my tongue tight and strained what had to be spoken through my teeth in steady, concise streams: this reverence for their way of dying.

Three mornings later
I snapped the kitchen calm and told Grandmother never do this to me.

If they
deck my corpse and fold my hands,
lay me in a box that costs more than my life,
package and display me,
clutter a field with marble
or an afternoon with limousines....

I told Grandmother if they make me a show and sell me into their Southern Baptist heaven no death will hold my rage.
KYRIE

—in memory of Perry Zimmerman

1. Am I somehow diminished when I tell people how I would throw the switch and fry those murdering bastards until their flesh sizzles, runs from their bones, how my hate could eat them whole, with toast and eggs?

How is my rage worse than a coward, a trigger finger, a twelve-gauge, my grief less than his back, exploded at the base of the spine, and blood puddles on the trailer floor? How was his life less than money they never found?

2. I couldn't even get into the church.

The Wesley Memorial United Methodist Family donned their grief like sackcloth, and tears from the book of Christian occasions,

Hear our prayer.

while most of us who knew him from Ledford High cramped the foyer, straining our necks and tip-toes toward the sanctuary, grasping for words trickling warm, like the color of Christ.

Hear our prayer.
When I finally saw his mother,
I took her hand,
    told her I loved him.

Hear our prayer.

It was all I knew to say.
THE LAYING ON OF HANDS
-in memory of Joel Altman

As Thomasville Road rolls out of Winston-Salem, south into Davidson County, it uncoils for the run through Panther Country. There, as the road bends and falls toward Jack Craven's place in Buzzard Holler, it is banked left and truck-high by an iceberg tip of stone, centuries deep in red clay and scrub pine.

Late at night, after a couple of Buds, Joel's rebuilt Gran Torino always felt faster as he wound helltight through the dark.

The Thomasville Times said the deputy was running a poor second when Joel crossed the county line making a hundred.

The paramedics said the rock never knew what hit it.

He didn't look more natural than Brendle had, or Grandpa Rob, or any of the others -- a host of corpses memory refuses to number, distinguish.

Twining through the parlor, the dead listen for their names mingled in the inarticulate breath of the mourning, flip the pages in the snapshot eyes of their kin, seek proof of themselves in the Gathering of the Clans.

At the proper hour, the pensive shuffle quiets: the dead crescent around the hush-burnished brass and hardwood, reverence the initiate with their murk, tatters, the bone-white sadness of their eyes.
One by one, 
the dead stream to the casket, 
fold their arms across his starched chest, 
whisper their welcome, 
breathe across his face 
a bloodless wisp of a smile.
1. Field

This is where the Baptists come when they finish dying.

Laid out between parsonage and pulpit, this dead field of souls and stones sporadically springs to life, flowering for a few appropriate afternoons. Then, the trappings gone, the ground sets about healing the fresh wound in its side.

Season by season, the cemetery encroaches on our Sunday evening football field.

Some old person -- I knew her face and name, but not at the same time -- caught her death from dying and slumbers in the shadow of paydirt.

Over there, beside his older brother, they buried my friend Brendle where he can watch the games -- do Baptist kids still play in the small space between eternity and the parking lot? Brendle's parents became my prayer-parents after their sons were stolen.
2. Monument

Bordered by the parsonage on one side,
the gray-stone sanctuary, brick
fellowship hall, a weed-golden
field, and the concrete
course of
    Wallburg Road,
slowing to meet Highway 109 to Thomasville,
or Winston-Salem....

    In five years,
or ten, death's annexation
of this field
    will be complete,
testament to the triumph of monument-
makers.

    Like turkey buzzards,
circling patiently beyond the bell-
tolls,
    they bide their time
until friends and family finish
their flocking,
    the show of food
and condolence,
    have stayed long enough
and leave.
    Then, their pockets full of brochures,
their hands full of their hats
    and somber,
they swoop down
to honor the deceased.

3. Dominion

This is where Baptists come
when they finish dying.

When some leaf-burnt autumn
finds this field full,
they
will take their stones
on Christian shoulders
and march like dominion
across Wallburg Road
    in search of another.
A PREOCCUPATION WITH THE WEATHER

Looming and phosphorescent against the dark,
Words, always words.
What language does light speak?
Vowels hang down from the pepper tree
  in their green and their gold.
–Charles Wright
STORMWATCH

The air hangs thick
across the last chance miles:
    the smell of yesterday,
    the buzzard smell of tomorrow,
dust, choke,
    and corn
dry-sucking the dewpoint.

The river rides low
    between cicada hills,
laps at the banks
like the nuzzle of dumb beasts
    snuffling their dead mates.

South-by-southwest,
    if the clouds will come,
we stare into the orange
skimming the prairie at burndown:
twilight, crisp, firefly,
    and the waiting.

We reach for each other,
ninety-eight percent water,
fingers flinching
at the static strikes,
    and sweat to sleep,
dreaming the smell of ozone,
thunder.
THE PHYSICS OF FALLING DOWN

The Physics class on PBS is all the excuse necessary
to spin the afternoon
like that newfangled top Granddaddy bought me --
a mesmerizing twirl of red and silver
dervish whose scarlet soul cared
not a damn how I restricted
its metallic exostructure,
but frenzied inside
that skeletal frame
as though each
twist was its
next-to-last
and I never knew

I was doing Physics.

Precession is the word, is the degenerative force.

The same formula spins the gyroscope
that spins a bicycle tire suspended on a string
that spins the Earth on a line from pole to Polaris,
for the time being.

Precession is the force that makes
the gyroscope funnel the air and tip over,
in its own time like us.

It's the word that explains,
in layman's terms,
the world is falling down.

It is hard to imagine that
the same force acts on the Earth
that acts on a bicycle tire --
stranger still to imagine
riding the Earth home for lunch.
THE LAW OF THE PLACE OF PERFORMANCE

-- Acquaintances told authorities that the victim had been studying to become a skydiver.

1: The Law of Gravity

To fly, and nothing else --
to dive from 20,000 feet,
sail
silver through windhover
linings, hanging
spreadeagle on the updraft,
pockets billowing full of
float,
suspended in thick air
like a pearl in syrup --
to fly in
the face of malformity:
not wings, but arms,
and vertigo.

2: The Laws of Aerodynamics

And then a prayer for balance;
the tightrope ledge
and the crosswind,
step, slide,
the thump of adrenaline into his temples,
don't look down, step, slide,

and he sucks every cotton
dream of air
through the olench
in his jaw,
palms the chill
cement at his back,
step, slide,
pray,
and swirls the air like
chardonnay,
a sunfleck through crystal;

finally,
he flails for the updraft,
ine floors
and a backpoint landing.
3: The Law of Causation

Ambulance lights,
    but no sirens,
people say
     "in time to see him hit."

Official voices conjecture
near the slow red lights,
earwitness accounts,
tests and measurements,
then rule this death
    suicide,

a function of
distance from the base of the tower,
trajectory.
MIRAGE

What is more clinical
than the pride with which
we explain the world away?

If God should come again,
arriving around nightfall,
we would call it Venus,
riding low
through the atmosphere,
and we are each an -ism,
a manic or a phobic,
an -itis, an -oia, or an -osis...

and this twist of vision
must have a name and category,
an explanation
in terms of
rods and cones, thermal currents,
diffraction.

But what I know is this:
thigh, twitch, sweat,
afterpulse
and the cooldown,
breathing back toward normal,

and I know
this trick of the eye,
looking skyward,
where stars
swim in our body heat.
WHAT HAPPENS TO OLD MEN AT SUNDOWN

The shades are drawn on another porch-dog day:
   twilight,
and a low, cool
snap of burnt orange
as horizon
   washes over the edge.
The sky that remains
   is purple,
and black, and Venus,
and a semaphore of stars
Trinity and dream-years away.

These are the colors of old men at moonrise.

Here they measure against the wear
of their boots
   the malcontent of this day,
it's place in a week,
the why-Lord of long black cars,
   the champagne wetness of
smooth white girls.

The colors of men at moonrise...

   Redblack,
      the color of grease
and raw hands,

   Green, the cat-tall grass,

   Silver, white, black,
      the alarmface color of weekdays,

   Honeywheat,
      the rivers that flow
beyond the wall of sleep,

and candy-apple, spit-fire,
rumbleseat leather --
   these are the hues
that whisper through their jawslack
dreams,
   as young men
and cars without headlights
race all night
   in the streets.
ELEVATOR LOGIC

Elevator law runs deeper than sin,
our stonecast
  shalt-not-kills and fornicates,

and so much -- what little talk there is --
of doors and buttons.
  Graven in our DNA
we instinct the face-forward,
the tilt of our eyes and
  attention to the numbers,
the correct attitude of posture,
distance.

How well we know unease,
  how fluent
our silence between floors.
STARKEEP

Might once have been a star,  
astronomers say, 
this extra-celestial dust gas ocean  
dangling from the belt of Orion.

Now a spatter  
on a radio pallette  
atop Palomar, 
the Great Nebula pulses,  
an eternity-deep heather bed  
and spray of bloodberries:  
say church-gazing astronomers,  
the gateway to heaven.

    All day and a minute-long day,  
    whisk-broom angels  
    to and fro,  
    fluff, dust,  
    prepare,

while some  
    Saint Pete or other,  
idly by the pearly plated gates,  
    whittles,  

winnows the husks of the Godly.
THE EFFECT OF WIND RESISTANCE
ON THE SPEED OF LIGHT

What are the physics of
birdsongs through the apple trees
Sunday at dusk,
    bloodgray smears
and the rumor of rainwinds
lurking to the southwest,
cloudcover, and the wait until dark?

And if I think of symphony,
and a Carolina Sunday evening
at Tanglewood Park,
    how does memory
settle in D major, like
Pachelbel in a twilight
field of Iowa corn?

Should I question the backwards of things?
When I ponder the farmhouse
across the field,
    does the dark
in the windows reach me
before the silence in the yard?

Or try this:
count the cricket chirps,
the friction of their legs, and stop-
watch until sixty seconds
to find the temperature.
Explain the precise
call of crickets to Fahrenheit.

And when these years become later,
what is left of a pennywhistle
brigade in the peeling
and yellow-white paint of some
River City bandshell --
    or a music-box
ballerina, faded,
and forever on point --
    or a gazebo
at the end of a pier, the dollop,
plash, and rainwater
ripple on lantern-light
across the lake?
And most of all:
the breath, the cloak,
sigh, and hold tight
whispers of the last
night together --
what is the effect
of the ceiling fan
on low light
seeping through a crack
in the bedroom door?
OLD FLORIDA, GIVEN BACK
-for Caryn

1. This song is a canopy road,
as much between times
   as place to place,
and Spanish moss, ghost waters,
kudzu,
sneaking like alligator eyes
through the trees.
And a question,
   like Florida
before the selling:
   not if, but when.

2. There is something of sorrow
even in this sea turtle:
   a missing chunk of shell,
a boat propeller,
   and two centuries to show for it,
and all is much the same except
the ocean is a slow concrete circle,
cloister,
   round and round forever.
3.
Now, as we near the parting,
she is, and her Florida,
the trickle
and swirl of every fountain,
the ice-dark centuries of Wakulla Springs,

and how black and white the world seems
after snorkeling the angelfish reefs
along Key Largo.

These were things we said
or didn't say,
and still I'm stuck
on a footpath
through the Maclay Gardens
in Tallahassee:

here, goodbye is
neither more nor less than the lake shore,
treethick composure,
and the all night ride
of waves in the marshgrass.
Philosophy is a walk on the slippery rocks,
Religion is a light in the fog.  

-Edie Brickell
6. The Rainbarrel Suite

Nothing sings in the rain
   unless it has lost its place.

Here, now, the burnt
smell of hickory
   flutters the air,
alights,
   churrs the memory
backwards for April
and things I think I remember;
   that first night,
and how the voyeur streetlights
fingered the trees
   along Reynolda Road,
drawing them aside to watch,
or deeper in the Gardens,
as the half moon settled, a rose-
flavored powder on everything;
or Myrtle Beach,
   the toss and sugarwhite
froth,
   like the kick of yearling horses
racing the waves back out.

And if I tell myself
it was all cliche,
I remember these things
   just so,
and write them down
   to make them true...

Like Baden Lake that night in August,
the smell of honeysuckle
   and low yellow light
rolling off the boatslip,
   and Sam Cooke
singing "Wonderful World"
somewhere across the water;

if I name my emptiness,
give it form,
if I say I want her
whole and simple,
the curve in, then out
low on her back,
hers tongue, flick,
and the taste of fog,
thick on the windows,

if I say I want a bird singing
here in this rain --

can you hear
how it plinks a tin roof,
beads, channels away?

How strange these thoughtdrops
rushing down --

my hand cups,
stirs the rainbarrel.
LULLABIES IN THE AGE OF VIDEO

-for Lavonne

Scene 1.

Seduce me to sleep as shadow
climbs the city
    window by window,
    your voice the quiet slip
    of a chimney swift through the steam,

and drink me in
like night swallowing day,
    the long,
cool pull drawing me all inside,
sweat and
    the half-gone
glass of chenin blanc by the bed,
the humid breath of heat lightning
like white noise on the skylight,

George Winston piano solos
and the ether
    slide down.
Scene 2.

Your eyes are an electric hum, 
betraying me to sleep 
like the neon 
thaw of icicles, 
my consciousness a slow melt 
trickling through your fingers.

Seduce me to sleep 
and keep watch; 
walk the obsidian 
length of my dreams and back, 
your stride 
the stiletto heel and toe 
click of steel on glass, 
and then the walkaway: 
the electric blue 
thrumming 
in your veins flicks 
like a tongue, 
coils, 
strikes, 
a white-fire umbilical 
arcing from finger to orb; 

I dream the smell of ozone 
as one by one 
the silent street- 
lamps spark, 
simmer awake. 

You flow like phosphorescence 
through purple smoke and shadow 
as distant thunder 
leads the rain this way.
FIRST LIGHT: A LULLABY

I dreamed our walk away from the fires,
their harvest flicker
licking at the moon's dark edges
and flowing away,
a blood copper flood
on the snowfields,

and your eyes the blue
drowning of sapphires in cream.
The tongue and soft swallow
songbirds from branch to branch,
watching,
a slow, celestial fugue
like apple dust
sifting through the trees.

Sleep was the shadow of a butterfly-
thin wing, the delicate
flinch and
shiver of clouds iced over,
then shattered,
wind-chiming down
like shards of broken prism...

and cold as frost I start awake,
alone,
the heat of you
an aftertaste lingering at my lips,
my arms empty
except for the blanket
and fog at the edge of my breath,
the loss
and the have not
now one,
hungering together,

and I want it back
as if it were real,
the small despair
caught in my throat
like first light
come awake,
stretching in the pale
wash of morning.
A JOURNAL OF SOUND AND LIGHT

-for Charles Wright

- Inspired by Sky's the Limit, a lumescent sculpture by Michael Hayden.

Chicago O'Hare on Saturday morning, the sun's flaxen whisper filtering through the vaulted steel-glass atrium, everywhere the ritual of sky.

Each jet has a name --

thousands of pounds of sheet metal, fittings, rivets, turbines -- my lips move in silent prayer to technology, over and over, as we labor into the air.

One stewardess explains the buckling up while another demonstrates, and then they check to make sure.

And if we go down

a hundred yards from the end of the runway, or into the side of some frozen mountain, or if we are blown from the air like a clay pigeon, shards of tooth and blood-stained bone falling 32 feet per second per second,

these belts will no more hold our bodies than our bodies will hold our souls, stay the hand that scoops immortality from our broken flesh.

Just last week, I heard a preacher talking about faith....
I ride the escalator down, like a waterfall down out of the light: crossing from Concourse B to C, the terminal's white-noise cascade pushing my head under and holding it until I go limp and float, breathe sound -- the synthesizers tuned like raindrops, the aimless rhapsody of music relaxing on the composer's day off.

Overhead a spectrum effervesces along the length of the mirrored ceiling, a white spark head-first and lost down a tube of neon, orange and ice-green and purple exploding like flashcubes in the dark,

and I ride the electric sidewalk back and forth, four and a half minutes each way, every nerve straining for air, absorbing this phantasm hewn from living light and sound.

Is there reason to believe the old masters would do it differently: detailed sketches, sighting down their thumbs, choosing their colors to catch a certain light?

Is this what God had in mind, Monday, and all creation in front of him like a blueprint?
When he first noticed vastness, said fill it up — what did he mean?

Let there be light.

I want to talk about grandeur, the resonance of color and how the visible spectrum is a keyboard, how you could compose a fugue in blue minor, and use words like phosphor, luminescence, except I'm not sure I really understand, especially ultraviolet: beyond purple; I want to peel my skin away, jump in, swim to the other side.

We give the mirror our lies and it takes them straightfaced, gives them right back because:

look hard, not at your own face or the reflection of things behind you, but at the mirror itself:

a glass plate laid flush across a silver sheet of foil;

when you stare at life hard enough --

the rich blue of a lover's eyes boiling up out of the dark,
or crystalline pin pricks in October’s night sky,
miles out from the city’s synthetic glow,
the centrifugal twirl of the Milky Way
laid sideways,
   and starlight slung from its edges
dizzy as children falling off a merry-go-round,
giggling and lying in the grass,

or a barnfinch just outside the window,
it’s aimless flit from branch to branch --

    does it all unfocus, pan away,
    leave you staring at
    polished silver
under glass?

 Early March in the North Carolina foothills
and I’m driving at night,
chasing the headlights,
hugging each grassbound curve
like a lost brother,
    the radio
loud as it will go
doing "Stand" by REM.

 Early March warm as April,
windows down,
    and I want to smell
a June cornfield
misted with dew,

    spin the seasons
forward a quarter-turn
    and cue up summer
like the DJ’s next record,

which I wait for, hoping
it will be something I like.

 I drive the night,
    winding it out,
remembering Channel 12 Weather’s
Doppler Radar
    ping like a wind chime,
clear,
    from here to the edge of the screen.
Conceptual Physics -- 101,  
designed for the non-major --

proof that knowledge is sometimes  
more confusing than ignorance --

and we dallied with Einstein  
in much the same way that  
a kitten might ponder a bumblebee.

Light moves at 186,000 miles per second,  
and you can't catch it, they say;  
even if you travel at the speed of light,  
the light you're chasing moves away  
186,000 miles per second.

Dr. Williams, what is the speed of futility?

Imagine starlight  
from the boot of Orion:  
Rigel,

  magnitude .3,  
  5 hours, 11 minutes right ascension,  
  declination 8 degrees south, 17 minutes,

racing millions of years  
toward earth  
with news of the hunt,

and arriving to find cloud cover,  
like a silver lid.

Does it really matter whether  
this stardrop is picked off  
by a stray high cirrus,  
or splashes like rain  
into a cumulo-nimbus formation  
rolling down off the plains?

  Or if it gets through  
while we're indoors  
and is lost,  
like the significance of moonlight  
during a night game?

To tell them apart,  
like the voices of children....
The relationships we always get wrong:
we know that shadow is a breed of darkness,
a question of degree,
as faithful as a photometer
and a straightedge;

but if you seal the windows,
seal them tight as eyelids,
and pullchain the room into darkness,
the light and shadow leave together,
don't return until morning.

Shadow is a woman with two lovers.

We haven't named this particular breeze yet --
this early April
evening wind
that's just cool enough to notice,
but not so cold that
you'd go back inside for a jacket.

So I stand outside and plot the color of the sky,

8:45pm Central Daylight Time,

starting in the east and scanning
across
to the tops of the westernmost trees,

trying to find
where black shades over into
blue-black,

and seeing for the very first time

the intricate weave of wind
and blue eternity
falling towards the horizon.

Get a spoon and separate the ocean
into its equal parts....
Layover in Chicago, sitting at the gate, writing in a notebook; I'm waiting for two patches of ground to connect themselves by air.

And I look up as a man in a wheelchair hands me a yellow pamphlet, blue print:

Good Morning! I am a deaf person --

look back up, fumbling after my wallet, and he is gone, nowhere within 360 degrees, so I read the booklet --

the deaf alphabet manual, 26 ways to hold my hands, and page opposite some basic signs:

name, please, happy, I love you, sorry, work, money, water, God, Jesus, faith, good, talk, home, doctor, thank you, future...

and think of signs it doesn't list:

rustle, chime, staccato, babble, crinkle, harmony, cacaphony, moan, chatter, squeal, rattle, stereo, irony...

The word basic moves away from me at the speed of sound, 1108 feet per second.

I look at my notebook, "Journal of Sound and Light" written at the top of the page, and he is back:

I hand him a dollar and he makes the sign for thank you:

hand open, beginning at mouth and extended forward, as if he is giving me something.
Layover again on the return trip, 
and this time I go out of my way, 
again the escalator down, 

like the steps down into the baptismal pool 
when I was 7 years old, 
the air here 
as blue on my arms as the water, 
the name of the Holy Spirit 
whispered in my ear as the preacher 
immersed me, 
lifted me out....

Did God think of this that first Monday, 
or later? -- 
what it would be like 
to plug rainbows into lightning....

What did he mean 
when he said 
I am the Light....

and I ride back up into the terminal, 
soaked with color, 
surface earth a landing between flights, 
up one more to the sky.
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