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Like I'm Dead

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The Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Project Sample Title Page

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A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri,
St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

April 2011

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Like I'm Dead

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Abstract

Like I'm Dead is a collection of poetry tracing the separate lives of one speaker from the other side of catastrophe—the survivor's side; an epitaph for a past life.

The speaker's disaster is divorce—one that has triggered in the speaker a fracturing floe of identity, a cumulatively dimming source in the process of defracting at the demands of ongoing life, materiality, parenting, dating—

Life goes on, certainly, but where did the other go? the other life? self?

Some of the poems depict the speaker coming to grips with moving on, with the fact that his daughter was born inside the disaster and in a way this disaster cannot be grieved, only possessed. Others actually move on.

The speaker knows his father's moving on too. Some of the poems cover his dying. But there are a few that lie outside this memoir zone (a terrorist attack in suburbia, a scorned man with a gun, there are even love poems that belong to no one) ... and perhaps the challenge the text posits is in the refrain to ask *why* or *how* these fit into a fold—have been placed in common between dissolution and imminence—It is precisely this fold where disaster leaves its survivors, in the unknown, the ungraspable—below a surface—It's where they take place on the way to knowledge. But also in throes of gradual return—the unwelcome newness as grief wanes and life goes on—

How to go on when you are not a whole person? when part of you has actually been obliterated from space and time? when a version of self vaporously struggles for the helm against being, against fact, against action ...

This isn't necessarily the question the text is posing, but it is the question around which the speaker of *Like I'm Dead* is mulling—These poems are evidence of his experience with the question.

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“I didn’t know that it was so hard to die. [...] Just when I am so completely penetrated with the feeling of being responsible for a task ... Precisely now I’m coming to an end and everything is finished for me, yet I know that I must begin everything again from the beginning.”

Edmund Husserl

“Pure happiness is in the moment, but pain chased me from the present moment into waiting for a moment to come, when my pain will be relieved. If pain didn’t separate me from the present moment, *pure happiness* would be within me.

... from this fact an imperceptible misfortune enters me: this language—that I speak—is in search of the future, it struggles against pain ... which is the need in me to talk about happiness. Language never has pure happiness for its subject matter. Language has action for its subject matter, action whose goal is to *recover* lost happiness, but action cannot attain this goal by itself. If I were happy, I would no longer act.

[...] Writing, thinking are never the opposite of work. To live without acting is unthinkable. In the same way, I can *only* represent myself as sleeping, I can *only* represent myself as dead.”

Georges Bataille

Like I'm Dead

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I

Bottom

How were we to know?

We were young,

blind to nature—

what shines

without being consumed?

Photographs send it home.

Something stolen

promises *forever*,

securing

at the very least,

evidence:

something happened.

At the bottom of a box

I come across

the oldest ones,

and their negatives.

Holding them

to light,

I wince a cold reversal,

emptiness

where we are standing,

the shadow of nothing

illumes the rest.

Now I am that shadow,

lunging,

reproducing

what cannot

be captured,

lighting.

You Cheated

a bookstore we frequented, and I had to piss
we don't go anywhere anymore
unless it's something to do with G
who longs for collectivity

a negative you touted for sister,
friends, for your mother
whose scars are the same
you dealt me

a hearty stream,
and so many items on the walls,
collage everywhere, pieces of lives
left in books sold
when reading, or memory,
is undesirable

there, a picture of your father
I shouldn't have known this,
it was his wedding, a second
and there was she, ripped
your half of her still tethered to him

zipping up a thought
to write on the wall
behind your photo—
I knew once I'd told you,
you'd retrieve it

Circumstance

rising from a flatness
I may have poured,

peeling away entirely
like an unforgivable sticker,

 this poem is not for you.

if I can be sure I wrote it,
 I'm certain it's not mine either.

in vapor, you take
what is yours. what
I have taken
is missing.

where sparks
a failed lighter,

a mirror bends
for a moment,
only a moment,

there we are.

Playing in the Littoral

*I have old photos
of the beach,*

the contents
have faded
into sand,

sand which
now,
in tide,

slips,
bunches
into small,
crooked toes,

dissolving
nail polish.

then,

obliquely,

sun-strike
from the top
of her foot

waxes
oblivion,

but whispers,

this too.

Fossil at Stl Science Center

The smudge of an hour transposed where the walk to the car affords a view from the sidewalk, a gam of clouds, their vast undersides—There are plastic containers everywhere, all the supermarket—And gasoline propels us home to a meal, some TV, bath time, bed. The day has nearly unwound. How different are Sue’s bones from my own? Sun, rain, whatever wind ... *there was flesh*, so easy it is to imagine cool scales, un-petrified teeth, somewhere a tongue, wet eyes ... And there would be meat rotting in her stomach.

The exhibit was a blur. There was no silence. Charlie wanted to see this and quickly see that and No matter, “(Look sweetie,) these bones, they were in the earth, people found them, dug them out, brushed them off and put ‘Sue’ back together”—

A sentence dragged from skeleton to fossil room to eyesight simulation kiosk to digging experience box ... She responded better to “That thing would turn you into poo!”

We colored,

and made a mask, finally able to talk about the dead reptile.

And I let her get scared round the T-Rex off the lobby, the one with generous hide, a hole in its neck, red paint ... She ran, played, until we had to make for groceries

It seemed encapsulating on the walk out, watching her run ahead. Below my car where I’m flattening the distance, she’s racing up the back of a snake, both of us subject suddenly to a sea of fat clouds.

II

Soulard, 3am

I can't be who I've intended to be, who I've worked and with whom I've engaged in severe negotiation—Options have been revoked. And the dissolution of these options creates new options, yes, but inside a fire the blossom of which ...

One lie unbends, coheres smooth no creases, while another ...
you open yourself to a state of interpretation
as if your *knowing*, with respect to [Him], *lies ahead*, whereas mine, my knowledge has always been spooky. You said *in need of clinical intervention* and I don't want my marriage to turn out this way but what do I know
... a brutal lack of honesty prescribes the unbearable
The horror of trust has yielded its harvest.

In the morning, we'll argue. We'll utter curses,

litanies but you will break, you'll reveal
a bit, not the truth entire but a sliver, an impermeable corner of it. You will not have said *in love*, and won't confess
who knew (they all knew)

You'll say you owe it to yourself to see where it will go.

I roll home (still co-habiting). I want to retrieve the machete [He] gave me for my birthday (on fire in my mind) prior to our second trip to Costa Rica some years back. (By some measure of fate, I have never had the desire to own a gun.) A thousand times I lay them the fuck out. Meat. A thousand times

I want to kill them. Told my folks *I will kill them both*. My dad phones every day weeks now.

I once dreamt my gran'dad's boots bottomless. I dreamt of falling inside.

What is the spirit? is this the question? then?
Years ago I wrote I'd been born into "one fucked-up shit-shingle of a gene-house." ... capable we are of summoning evidence. I've sensed the movement through me of my grandfather's rage and these times, tragedy rang in my ears

Who can deny the role destruction plays in the execution of desire?
If I keep smoking, I destroy the non-smoker. If I stop,
I create him, destroying me.

The obvious question is not the one to pursue: *Who am I?* I am the father. I am a graduate student. I am the son of my parents, and the grandson of one remaining. I am a brother. I play poker. I am a writer. I am lonely, and spend entirely too much time in pure solitude. If I didn't know you were lying to me ... that you continued to lie until ...

I'm nobody. The question ...

You insisted I was crazy, and the attempt to trust you made me crazy. Today, again, I attempt to let go. We don't communicate, hoping has seamlessly shifted to coping. The sigh lifts but does not close the spirit. The spirit of destruction, the sense of catastrophe sheers

and I, yet settled. Many of my thoughts dawn on flecks rising in narrow solar rays. Some thoughts reek of gasoline. Some take my breath. Others, obscured by smoke. In a thousand places, I'm burning. Every memory fuses while dividing from me. Place, history

not my memories any more. None of this has happened to "me"—He's far gone as actual events comprising hemispheres of memory. How have I let this happen?

Not why, but *how*, How not to kill? if in fact I have been slain, if a version of me having moved forward a thousand times suddenly sheds its covert nature, is stripped of its silence, ... this hidden and secret version reveals my options as he steps from oblivion

I rise ... and, ... All I know, as I disintegrate, is *destroy*. A password, a safe word. It's as if a moment, vast as the world, has stretched, peaked, and is receding. I am aware of not being him, of being him no longer.

I asked you to be honest. Said that's all that remained. I said I need to know. You are being honest. I'm the one who's fucked up. [Actually] my refusal to seek therapy has as much to reckon as anything else. If I truly believe the divorce is about [Him] ...

You've held me together. Can't do it any more. You emphasized, honest.

I tried to believe you, or I see-sawed from believing to madness and back, from one day into the next in numbing disbelief ... Heard in my skull

You can't trust her. But it would be disingenuous not to try. I must embrace the notion, maybe it is me, maybe I'm not in control of my perceptions of reality.

It's after three in the morning. I'm drunk but I've driven to [his] place in Souldard, this after having searched for your car at the homes of others; first, the party where you were to retire, where everyone would retire ...

A week prior, you reveal you've made overnight plans for Charlie, for this particular night upon which you and *your friends* (now the chime resonates) have made plans to party, see the Flaming Lips and post-party 'til crash; plans with Charlie's grandmother (without a word to me, without giving me the option of first refusal (which, incidentally, renders me capable of driving 'round drunk bent on ... You presume I'd "like time to myself." I've nothing but time— If with Charlie ... Instead, I'm standing in the middle of 11th street, teetering at some brink Unimaginably, I'm drunk,

so I sit on the lines and rock Spotted your Toyota parked in front of [his] truck, a silver Ford. Here in the street, I'm flickering I'm instantly weighing possible futures, none of them bereft of cruelty. It is less than a day from our seventh wedding anniversary. It is more than fifteen years after our first kiss. It is just less than five years after your first night with him (after a stint with another ...

Months left of 2007, the girl, for a month, three
... and the truth don't know how long but what I know

I remember sitting with the girl on evenings you were coming home after work
... We in the lawn casting a blue and yellow plastic fishing pole I'd rigged with actual line and more of it. We send our bait across the street, onto the sidewalk or into neighbors' yards, and reel it back before cars speed by

I am the spouse at home. I am the one getting the girl up and putting her to bed most nights, days ... one night at one you asleep on the front porch holding your cell ... some nights you don't come home ... I conceal a lot, it went on for so long
It's ugly.

I resigned from a management gig to raise my daughter. Stay at home.
Gave up painting too. You
a high paying job. You the benefits. It's not ugly yet. These are the best years.

... inconceivable progress on the way to being wrong, the way to lunacy,
I ask in the midst of garbage,
Is it he? You laughed
cocking your skull, eyes roll an instant You insist
absolutely not—The divorce is about taking control of your life, becoming a better woman, "a working and single mother capable of demonstrating to her daughter
all a woman can be."
But I feel like a woman. I feel like a mother. I feel like a feminist.

Without Charlie, had she not could walk away, forget
Be done But I can't,

I want to destroy
because I love Charlie,
and I can't destroy
because I love Charlie.

Honestly, a thousand times, I've killed them. A thousand times we three, dead. Charlie is the non-local variable. She reached back through years to find me in a supermarket in Nashville, to wake me up. She gave me the ability to forgive years before she was born, forgive for two lovers. She ensured her birth. She's saving us.

(The distance between entangled bodies is not a factor with respect to the transfer of information. This distance conveys no time. Time is irrelevant, no matter distance.)

Charlie's three now.

Finally, at the end (of observation, of mining), I say there was something from the future coding my flow, assembling *me* before I was, before I am capable of comprehending ...

People's lives entangle; in these days of violations of inequality reality must be observed in order to exist. Sometimes, knowledge itself does not suffice. These days our lives lack a kind of clarity, our narratives, potent gravity.

One lover reconciled with his wife. Wouldn't have known except we were writing to each other, and you shared the news with me. They disappeared forever. You & me, well, five more years

Stl, MO
September 2007

This is where I am, I am always turning up here

The machete at home, slipped 'tween headboard
& wall, the blade he gave me a year or two back
It was my birthday

They can be killed. They can die.

Before racing home, I sit awhile
the yellow lines The road South
a higher pitch than North
The sky is down on me like a blanket, not crashing
but slowly caving I can't imagine what it is
props up but streetlights repel

There were chairs, an ottoman,
Barcalounger & many blankets for Charlie's fort ...
no asphalt, no fractures filled
with tar, not a truck, not her mother's ride

(She always pulls it down)

Every time I return, the scene darkens.
There are fewer & fewer lights

Dim ones, tiny globes & faces
in my car on the way to a weapon
... I'm talking to them.

II.

... to your lover's condo,
back to Soulard, stepping from your car

x

I almost see the way the door tears open,
the way busted wood is raw,
sharp contrast, new skin.
The front door has its own scream

Know he'll come at me, the bedroom
door's open, the sheets
hang on air

On his feet And I watch
his approach, I know—
Take a step, I am hearing music

but he drops to the floor
when I swipe his shin And,

with his machete, ... you
You cower, accumulating
bedding You see the worst
I'm cruel,

had imagined only the head, quick
like didn't figure you

a tiny creature frozen in a corner—
One of my eyes is on you.

The other sees inside him.

Cohabitation

wanted to retrieve the machete (dazzling my mind)
(By some measure of fate, never wanted to own a gun)

A thousand times I lay them out. Chop. A thousand times
interminable ... One time I retrieve the camera,
your spare keys, a pad of paper, a pen

A thousand times I return to the scene, now four in the morning—
One time I enter your vehicle, place a note. One time,
I snap photos for whatever reason I feel more & more certain

with every shot, *I will not kill, I will not kill*

Last Rites

She outshines lights on the dash, her presence
sends them off as the space behind the wheel
 balloons, or I shrink

I could do you, do him, after that I could do myself
Except for texts, testimonies

She would go to your family, your sister ...
I could do them, right? the sister, the brother-in-law ...
after that, I could do myself.

But your mother, her husband ...
I am imagining the girl growing up
 in Fenton.

Two, four, six ... After that

She'd place with my mother, the third
 custodian (in San Francisco) would
 send her to Nashville ...

but with curses, hers would be a view

Or she can have parents.

To Hell w/Honesty

My gran'dad suggests I find "a Mexican or Indian woman—they won't cheat on you, they'll be good to you—just don't cheat on them! they'll kill you!" In his day, were I *him*, were this to have happened to him, she would be dead, *both of them* and I'd be bragging lifting the heel of my boot to the bar showing everyone the blood

Instead, divorce is difficult. It's murder without corpses.

x

My gran'dad's eighty-five. He's done a lot of bad in his day. Used to be downright mean. Did a lot of drinking, whoring. Loved to fight. Used to run with Hoyle Nix. (*Wha'cha up to W*—would've been 1949. Story goes my gran'dad was sauced when he showed up, sat down, having pulled a milk crate ... replied,

Workin' on the railroad,

sleepin' on the ground,

eatin' saltine crackers,

ten cents a pound.) Always honkey-tonking. He was a songwriter, worked

his ranch, had a family. He abused them. One time he got crazy on liquor and tried to shoot his wife, who happened to have my mother in tow. From his pickup truck,

off dirt road into trees 'til he can no longer manage driving and shooting—

so he open the door, jump out and fire into ...

and when he's empty, realizes they've disappeared

walks back to the house.

My mother and grandmother pass the dead truck the next morning. My gran'dad asleep at the kitchen table when they reach the house.

Another time, he rode a horse over my mother. Another, he forced her to leap from the roof of their home into his arms.

Over Thanksgiving, we bury his wife, Lazell. He's noticeably absent.
I struggle to imagine no, I cope. Can't imagine. I haven't life left
to be married as long as he

My grandmother succumbed to dementia years ago. The extent to which
her subsequent admission to the care of the state of Texas was incremental in
her ultimate demise is not known; atrocious, her years there, and inhumane.

The crawl up the scraggs to law summons defeat
in the imagination. We spread prayers and flowers. I drive my gran'dad
to the liquor store just past a sign

"Now Leaving Cass County" ... We grab our bottles. He goes to the head
of the line, roosting beside the cashier. Some customers in line look at us. Some
don't. The cashier recognizes him, evidently now, proceeding with our
purchases, breaking the rhythm of the line. No one scowls. I'm briefly amazed.

Outside the door, he hands me his bag, *Goin' round back to piss*. I slip
inside my car, roll to the edge of the building. He rounds the corner after a
moment, pulling at his zipper.

No problem getting into my Jetta. He uses a cane now but crows something of
climbing over barbwire and running down poachers in "Little Tango,"
indicating a level of spit remaining in his resources when I apologize
for his having to fall into the seat. We roll back to the house. Getting out of my
car, he walks to the back and again urinates, this time pulling his pecker out mid-
sentence with my following the conversation 'til I'm before the awful member,
spills gold

x

We're worlds apart. We pull on our bottles. It's finally dark. One note here: This
is one of my chosen "landscapes of death." I shall attribute this to a conversation
I once had with the ex after reading a bit of Virilio. *If I could choose, if I can be in
control of place when I die*, it will have been my grandfather's ranch in Texas. (Or
a beach, while I'm being honest. But I didn't have a choice. I died in a living room
on Shenandoah Avenue.) I've been on the ranch in dreams such another history
appears and buds, blurs this one; I've always been here, summers, holidays The
vast pasture is heaven. Leaps into my heart. Fulfills every attempt

We are still worlds apart. His home, my sepulcher. We get drunk. We try and
forget women, and this forgetting renders my grandfather incapable of speech.

x

My gran'dad convinced his wife not only would he kill her if she left him, but first he'd kill their children, force her watch before she was done. *If you love your kids*, he was reported as having said.

It is mad logic. What were my grandmother's options? Who can really say without the benefit of her experience—I think we could all say were she to have left him, and somehow survived; but she didn't. The desire to be free was beyond my grandmother, not an option at all, nowhere on the radar.

The desire to be free was unreal.

In reality, she survived by giving everything in the world away. Around the time of my birth, she took great pride in having her name appear on the title of the ranch I would come to know, and adore; finally, it seemed, something was hers.

Of course, his name was on it too, but this was different. Her name had never gone anywhere.

Never knew the woman my mother describes. She did things I'd heard a lot about. She killed chickens, snakes. She kept a lush garden. She tracked animals ... took me into the woods and taught me how to breathe and listen. She sat with me at night, times the milky way was visible She gave me arrowheads.

He spat behind my ear, having pulled me close, having brandished his pocketknife, saying *I'm gonna cut your ear off, kid*, and pressing the blade ... Outside in the lawn he would often tell me to dance, throwing his knife into the ground close to my feet. He made me dance. He made me run.

When my grandmother *what?* went crazy? lost it? When my grandmother could no longer take care of herself, after she had been diagnosed with dementia, my grandfather took care of her. Until he went ill, nearly died. Then she was placed in the care of the state of Texas.

Gran'dad believes his having to put her in a home killed her. It didn't happen overnight, in fact, she languished, impacted, starving, in an unwashed bed for entirely too long. I imagine her final months charted like the slow spread of bacteria. I understand what he means, the fact of her situation a result of choices

I have the thought he must somehow be experiencing the double of his destroyed wife, who in marriage was the destroyed young woman, of whom it could have been said, *was captive*. But they loved each other. Somehow, impossibly.

These are years I know. There are years wherein only the loud, menacing meanness of the old man lingered. I've never witnessed the cruelty I've heard tell, ripe in the stories with which I grew—I am listening to gran'dad himself. He laughs, sweats and wipes his bald, craggy head. He rejects nothing. He knows

Boy, I woulda hated to run into me back then!

There are doubles of them both. These doubles are assigned in my memory to stages in my life, not necessarily theirs ... but One set, I'm younger, the stories come to me. The other I'm living with and later married to the woman I love, and even later, I'm bringing the great-granddaughter

Charlie doesn't remember my grandmother, but they met. Charlie was young, was fascinated by my grandmother's near comatose state. She was secretly proud of herself at mealtime because she was feeding herself.

My gran'dad's emerged in another state, no longer simply doubled but a different composite, another cast of himself wrenched in twilight, one experience, it seems, ahead of him.

I know this without knowing it. I've witnessed death. Not his. There's a nature to us we can't know. *And it is like a law*. To hell with knowledge, to Hell with honesty. To hell with happiness.

*Stl, MO
November 2007*

To What Who

Knows rhythm, familiar security
of the mattress, blankets, darkness
huddling across from the window—

In question. He knows rhythm. He smells
alcohol ... When she's enervated,
her dispersion into the sheets

is a rhyme sinking, her stillness,
a note subsumed by the rings of a stiff.
If she's been all night drinking

her rhythm adopts infective logic
... she will entangle him.

Mouth dirty, her jeans

come off. Toes below
covers fingers are gripping as if
going nowhere—More nasty

—she says things one doesn't just say

Fuck me like I'm dead, closing her eyes,
But he does it to remember, to
fetch, embrace a bit of life

thinks instead of snapped twigs or
gunshot echoes in through
window, he

holds on, asks *asleep, passed out*,
unconscious pulls her hair, head
up, forces open an eye

... At this moment he's aware there's
more than one of him
vying for position, he's

tuned where fingertips,
underwear ride buttocks ...
where a coven of braille speaks blindly,

where I am pleading, is he sure
that's rhythm he's pulling
from her spurs

Shenandoah

Tonight, we're watching ... Light swells,
shadows squat. Glass
from windows speckle
molten pools in lawn

... The material sum
of our accumulation
out with the curtains, magazines,
photographs, leaves
from books up on
heat, curl,
turn black
and disappear. Some of the forms inside
reside in frozen ashing, their gift to flame yet to collapse.

We are watching it burn, your mother and I, watching
many tongues lick and stab
we are watching all the wild hair vacillating 'tween bricks, a few
trees; spoils out holes
in roof foil dark
where yellow, orange
stars rapt in foliage

I am saying how embers fill the moon

Takes me back to our first flat, a particularly
good trip the night celebrating the move,
having unpacked nothing but the kitchen, the bathroom
... dosed and drinking, we
watched a homeless man out our windows
pick through garbage
a dumpster outside Obie's Pizza. Looked he could be
wearing every article of clothing he owned. I recall
thinking something about that, but then we turned
watched city lights play on wall opposite windows. Antique glass
made legible ripples, lines in slomo waves grey, gold,
blue mute shades. The subtle boxes on white spoke
said something to each of us, each of us heard something different

And now I am saying three nights ago, she in sleep coos satisfyingly
about an egg, an enormous Easter Egg glowing
on hillock, illuminating Roused from sleep as I was, eager
to return to quietus, I neglected to wonder "contents"

I am saying, fire. I am saying she and the fire beneath magnetism
edging to fate, prowling
There is no fire without her.
There is no she without fire.

(I am saying everything and you cannot hear me.
I am saying you are not possible, you don't exist
without her, without me)

x

Two years into Shenandoah, she
that summer takes a lover, takes my friend, she
shoves out of the house A new year
brings me back w/no questions, nothing
ill. While away I wrote to her, a day
supermarket A young mother w/child
Me standing w/freezer door
open, me with the welling
The effort to bring you
to our world
nourished our final hours, the
path to Shenandoah so many
undertaking years We are watching

burn I am saying we're watching

x

Light swells its ribs,
will yowl what joy what sorrow, already
whispers from its lungs

Why deny, it is beautiful,
like the surface of the sun if I can imagine
nuclear

Beautiful, I am saying they are tied, catastrophe,
forward momentum, progress

I am thinking laws in the wake of crashing

(your law, ours)

Shadows squat 'neath hedges wearing
caps of flame The hedges are screaming
I know they imagine
pulling the ground up 'round their thighs
and leaping, they so want
to scamper away

We take the necessary steps back. No one is running. We are watching it burn.

I am saying, *Embers lift and fill* There is a face there,
but it is not a man's face It's ours,
a crater I can neither trace to origin, that is, *impact*,
nor substantiate without pure crime

This will follow us forever.

The way we followed one another

But also the sheer
no turning back

The way our genes go, our blood crawls
to the future

x

She imagines the crime's no crime, I'm telling her
madness is an inability to communicate, but she's
not listening, I see reflected in those eyes the furnace she
... the things we want

Back on Louise Avenue between Obie's and the Exit/In,
our flat downtown, ... one of the windows' shadows
shudders for me, nearly away from the wall, hinting
what might be unseen, and unseen behind us, through the windows,
dumpster on fire It's the flame
wrinkles light, the heat trellis
I say what the box said, and we turn to see it burn
The homeless guy's nowhere anymore Authorities, local vendors
cast their attention, black and grey smoke casts

Combustion completes her face.
My ache for her ear is a wound, I'm saying,

Here's the ink,

like her butterfly, her cocoon's incendiary, is taking
so much with it

... She imagines there's no crime, she must know how necessary

If Shenandoah was mine, if it really happened

this too is mine, this too the beams will give, eaves, the chimney
will topple over, bricks will scatter

I am saying, *This will follow* And she is not listening—a moment
she's different,

I possessed and it's gone

I've nothing and it's here
real, verifiable

What she must

x

Tonight, we're watching through heat
pumpkin-skeletal tremors minutely
crack open there is a bloom, we are
watching emerge

Who throws its bits against the lunar ray,
who spits its own, new sky all the light
it will ever need— I am asking
and I know

We both know, this is why we're watching

II.

(I am saying you cannot hear me, I am saying to myself some betrayal, I am
saying
I am saying) What she must, what she will not say

Half our lives on the path, half our existing selves bent inward, inside
legs kicked us, our halves

Shenandoah didn't pull us apart

But how to live under a spell—reach a destination only to
disallow ... The alternative dispels

(The world we have given you is made again by your reception. What you have
given back eclipses sparks, puts them ...

where the dead me would like a future
but hasn't.

Where the walking me
receives a gift after the fact

of my life, and love,
no longer in sight of fire,

aware what can be seized
is illusion)

x

When to turn, when do we walk away This will burn
 until the end of our lives, her life, mine
This will burn after us, in the sky the day
 lowered & filled in—
 I am imagining you there, a woman
 standing over, peering

... By then *this* ember the way
 a city reduces on the way up
 to space, the way the planet
shrinks on the way out, the way far out—

(Burning's as necessary as my
 shot in the dark, vital
 as her dark, The world

 you know has no other beginning, nothing
 else is possible

 Only fire, only destiny
 to burn)

heavy, the ground can no longer hold me up;
another a distance against the sky

(Nothing rushes.

As you fell to earth, determined
to cook, to grow and become real,
the ground didn't rush up, it didn't come at you

 It opened the world spread open,
 and out)

(I am saying there were fires we hastily put out, covered up,

there were fits to which
you were shielded)

x

I am saying this is how we called it home,
with a shield or an illusion

She was a magician, I was in love.
We made something real.

Some part of the furnace leaves
its mark. Another,

shrinking away, takes me with it—
every trace, all the marks

Isopods

A week in Edisto full of horseshoe crabs

... *But in this one*, we're underwater,
snorkels, fins,
a red two-piece
hovers below me

Imaginary blinds tilt
above us, wrinkle
light & depth, schools

in yellow & black, green hair,
pumpkinesque bulbs, like clumps
of crayon, antennae up
off the reef where you are
combing

Pecking your fingers ... If I'm looking for anything
to connect what's missing
... midst a disconnection
of beaches, getaways but also to lose
knowing you will too
—and now a current
wants us, our muscles, our
lungs, I worry watching ...
as to how long the drink
holding our breaths

I *had* suddenly found what I was looking for when
you did too, giddy it seemed
you, behind the mask, waving
a tiny container

We surface & swim, make shore
Our towels, we sit while the sun
on its west slope
slowly I can't hear

In this one there's a moment
I only glimpse affections, our hands,
... *I have stepped aside*

x

Before sunset, you hold the isopod with a tweezer
Administratively, you say the bug
will make its home at the base of my tongue. You say
it won't hurt. The tongue will wither (starved of blood) but
it won't hurt. You say it will attach to the stump
something about size the thing grows relative
to the missing tongue
and you stick yours out

You ask me to open my mouth,
you lean in front of low sun, and when
wince in your shadow, you ask me

Do I love—

The Pasture

Words are rungs, he said there,
chewing a toothpick, lightly kicking
a patty cracking in the grass.
He held "a letter from his sweetheart"
and seemed to weigh something else
inside his jacket.

I heard him say individual "wrigs"
and imagined every word
squeezing something from him.
She's—looking out now,
never offering text but flinching
again and again such that
I thought a quarrel might erupt—
Would he reveal his hand
Would I

Perhaps there was thunder
in his eyes, between his legs
there's a useless stalk
—we never spoke
of such inadequacies, my salary
in knowledge arrived from under
her skirt, like a diary

One rot out here, he mumbled,
pensive before an expanse
of cattle
then shook his head,
adding something of wolves,
boar,

folding the letter,
placing it

in his back
pocket.

III

The Move

Nothing wanted, every-
thing necessary

New, new to me

nonsense,
unconscionable
new hatred.

x

The kindness of friends

hundreds of miles, they, & me, beer,
Chinese food

marijuana, nomadic adfunct—what
boxes; all the twined-up newspaper,
buckets of paint, plywood yet paintings, unfinished;
actual art in frames, in rolls, and mine;
furniture, kitchen stuff, suitcases;
bags of clothes, so much
old now, older than a failure they return to me
worn before I'd met her

Less than a hundred, I said when J asked
how many boxes of books
... the last books, not packed, reading
on top of documents for the truck,
closing documents, last days mail
at Shenandoah, a menu

A few items came with Blaine:
rugs, washer/dryer, tables
in the kitchen, another where the library will be,
hitherto a dining room—
On top of the last books, keys, a journal, wallet

cameras & antics

music, mattresses, stories & sleeping bags,

a couch after whiskey, after

After

x

the last photographs, gasoline,
adiós, treads

on the road, treads inside

Father's Day

Never have I imagined such a turtle
The slow shrinking stretches
thin in search of a drink

The head-mouth achingly
puckers anticipating straw,
a sip It is almost too much

for a neck. From the sides of the shell,
his arms tremble
'neath the weight
of a card

Blaine Avenue, Autumn Aught Nine

I.

Rumors of frost sun not for days, a wet
week so much work to do, *and when*

in joy, in saintly pose—

Soon the flowers will die, very soon
the courtyard will vanish

Life 'neath leaves, 'neath weeds once lively,
'neath fertilities of feces,
stones, bricks,

remnants of marble liberated here
from a trash heap, iron grating 'neath which

a score of birds pulled
from fountain, not at once but hours, days

(two survive, tho one screws 'round
with a bad wing)

An ornament, a cow skull, a base of busted pedestal

II.

There should be two of me, one to tend
the living, to mulch waste, to trim

to clip to nurture; and another

The dead me needs dictation, it is only through
strict care that he has a voice at all

Need I flush life out of *no pen*, out from
typing, Should I listen to the fountain, should I
refrain from something like natural order

and water the plants— Neglect, summer-past,
yet another me for Nashville,
for an ailing Father, he was losing for a while,
for a while no one was writing

III.

Let us say the courtyard
has a double line,

one to the cigarette,
to nature, and one
to necessity, ordure

and doubled in each line,
not halved,

mending, the care of a fence,
wires, perennials, vines;

coating, garage siding, doors, the shell is
camouflaging;

scouring, a trashcan wherein fowl
have turned gray tar—

How much is too much? Say you're
with a poem, say a speaker
is at stake, say

your dog will not stop pacing
and anyway your neurons
they've mapped a break
for nicotine in ways
like trenches,
embankments,
ramparts ...

IV.

I think I enjoy the idea of the courtyard,
When new, New to me, I was its
possibility, a homeowner

randy by tulip blooms, lemons, hearts,
impossibly delicate keeps wherein laws
of fragility

rule the tongue, and the yard, purple
viscus 'long fences
where moss nears step,
an ugly, aging plank,
breathes still, breathing with clover,
with vines overhead, with

Blue, not today so much, but then, before
the home was mine the courtyard

was something else. Patches of blue today, a struggle
in the sky, to the wind I should send the green,

the last of weeds now, I should hack to keep

takin' it over away, so much green like gray
where once there was brown, I

disconnect when I cannot reconcile
a line or take a movement
of thought I am

still smoking.
My dog has done his business.
Much to do

before winter, but inside—
My business inside.

Light Harvesting

Had an idea stemming,
something read a month or so back but
entering the mind now thinking
back a bit further,
the end of July:

Long day driving hours home
Charlie begins to anticipate
her mother
when *batteries* give out, blanking her screen

[...]

I.

I'm pulling up
in front of the house
on Blaine Avenue;

Pulling to the curb, parallel parking,
looking back for gnarls
long since 'rupted 'tween
sidewalk and road;
fat black oak spurled ago
busted concrete (repaired curb
spared tree) the bottom
appears to have poured over
like a belly

enough to exact damage if not mindful

(An idea decoheres) Seeing my daughter
in the car seat,
surrounded by furry "friends," she's
increasingly yet minutely, wildly
volatile 'neath her seatbelt

No danger of brushing tree,
roll back a bit more and in the

blur back to windshield
I catch a glimpse of the ex
 on the sidewalk,
 moving close to the
window so that her face
burns citric putting
 the vehicle in park;
 killing the engine

her face is there,
and when the eyes blink
 out the windshield, they close for a moment,
 she's still there saying, behind the lids,

 something she
 will not
 have said

II.

A week later, she can't

swiftly tell it. Know
 what she has to say, why

she insisted on having lunch

Fill in her blanks. She

inhales awfully,

twisting her face

toward a spoon

(The coherency of data destroys.
But this is only true
in classic timescales.
At ineffable speeds,
a limit to information
is not possible.

A message sent faster than light will arrive
in the past. However cohesive the knowledge
this message bears, there is a real sense
of how an approach
to faster than light thinking
can be grasped:

The woman is drunk,

has fallen down
with your daughter

She's bounced up; she pursues you
for her; she will not go peacefully
into the ether But that's not where I want to go.

During an automobile accident
the car-reels ...

In one frame,
the car moving toward you

stills In another,
you and it will cohere

There should be no time for
impeccable details Arrows
of varying flight

impose their strategies)

Charlie's mother wants to know
how She insists fewer people know
than she has, emphatically,
fingers on her left hand I see it now,
thumb what's missing from my own

I.

She's pregnant This

from nowhere,

from burnt glimpse-fused windshield and lids, from
a voice I haven't the ability to silence

Unlock the doors, lean back and set Charlie free

The door opens

She and her mother now

Crunching acorns making them,

round the car,

a step up We meander

side walk

She says we need to talk, she says

lunch, next week—

She doesn't look it

Nothing tight fitting, but

she doesn't look it Nor

does she glow

as women

often do

Charlie G.

If a woman lived with me,
I'd repair a sink, a shower

I'd wash my feet every day
(I might bathe every day)

I would empty the dishwasher
I would do more laundry
I would cook more

I would give a shit about the backyard, the basement,
the crow's nest

x

The girl who lives with me
half her life

... she prefers the tub. Between
the two of us
there aren't many dishes.

In the kitchen, we're easy to please.

Now that she uses the toilet
there isn't much laundry.

Neither of us frequent above or below.

She has a fear of insects. I like
to see the plants go wild.

General Economics

To seize is perhaps too much to say
You might say the tiger, it's clenching
the throat of a gaur They will eat,

but say nothing of stalking a drift
into a canyon only to rise
with their hunger, her kindle She's not
capable of thinking *babies* her

genes One with the pulse around them, one
momentum carries forward

Another in space draws out

x

I could say I am that animal,
cornering my plot 'cross a dimpled
river, but I don't know the terror—

Killing to feed, brutal nurture

And I am nowhere near the tiger,
risen and veldted in swelling sun

There's no stench, nothing wet

Inviolably, I have thoughts

Integration City

No eyes can behold it
Unending distance is too thin
Luminescence belongs to electrons
Beaming inside a forge

So fine, all the tiny depth—
Can make silicon pools
At the bottom of a furnace, and
Cooling on the way to foundry

But the eyes cannot make
The distance In unreal expanse
Waves collapse, magnetic forces
Interact to steady the shade—

Eyes don't reach so deep
They make the screen and
Devices phoenix the city
To plunge its people to sleep

To texture, to grade
To the future Make connection
A still place, a sure one, but say
Nothing of volatility beneath

Particles how slow, how cold—
Nothing will stop. What pulse
In the universe wrecks enough
To plume it all back to nothing

A gash of chum
My friend the pirate
Keeps his data
In freezers

Another is still shitting
A golden clothesline
*Smell that—*Watch his breath
Tech repairing tech

Through circuits, reports pilfer
Ambition, as the world were
Petri oxygen rushes up
In a flooding chamber—

Ice is coming, a chain-reaction
At sea, beneath calm water
No matter how cold, how slow
The sun circles like a buzzard

(Yet there are others
Unseen in the sky—
Their beams shine
On some of us)

IV

A Monster's Story

First the rain, the clouds, the sun going away
Then all the trees, all the world, in drenches

And when the sun returns, a rainbow
'neath which a Monster rises

and steals the sun
No one ever sees it again

so they sleep

Notes

Across from a grocery list,
One week ago, sustenance
for 5 days, fare for overnights
at hospice—I begin adding notes
for another trip home

My suit, a dress for my daughter, clothes
for days, more days, more toiletries,
books, blankets, *Operation*,
Zach & Wheezie and one choice
more, reserved for her a plush friend to bring—

And cords, lots of them,
for cell phone, for camera,
Video player, for laptop

In my mind, I've unscattered everything from its place
Notes here on this paper tie to reality—
I gotta gather up all this shit
So many this note for instance, one side
mostly free, *I can write on this*

Spring 2010 Parking Regulations,
the other—pulled from many leaves
after removing a clip

Originally handed to me by random cashier
as \$108 slipped Now I've written,
sideways from *juice*,
Dad goes today
My suit, a dress ...

Directions to the pizza place
on another scrap,

couplets, digits, deadlines, other
lists near identical to this,

to-dos, *the gets*, takes—
Not scattering

Woodlawn

What it does to us

You see the worst possible side
of everyone you love,

'cept for a girl who creeps
up to the hole

pulling petals, I can
make out stems she's holding,

I can see tiny color

I cannot know what it is
she's dropping

x

I'm thinking Her new boots,

in the mud

Her best

How to Die

How do you feel?
I feel fine, he nods—
You're weak, I suggest
 Well, he stops,
 I feel weak

He will not talk, not about

If this isn't the man, it's unreal,
 who taught me ...
 He's the one who convinced me
 to aim

(the program, I am expecting a lesson,
 he has another ...
 I mean, we constantly inscribe ...)

x

He explains, *When I'd had*
 a bad day at work, or
 somethin' was botherin' me,

I put it on my trouble tree
when I walked in through the door—

 This comes through
a mechanic's stories, once
 an oil rigger, once
 a young man, a family man
buys into an auto dealership,
 migrates
 to Tennessee, stories
steep in what is good

Polio, I hear my mother say tho
he was struck in childhood, this
relayed to me years after the dealership dissolved, a
short time after his partner suicided, a day I was there
in the lobby of his auto-shop moving
stuff home. For some reason
he tells me the unbelievable surprise
runnin' long when suddenly one leg
spaghettis under, one
side struck—It would keep him out of the draft—
Something now,

I didn't bring my troubles home—

Hodgkin's Lymphoma, Her voice again, but not
in the seventies, in the seventies I recall
calling him on the telephone,
Say goodnight, I remember
a wooden telephone station bolted to the wall I'm
sitting on the counter or high up
on a chair to reach it or
my mother has me in the kitchen of the house on Bellevue Road
... I can see into the living room, into
the darkening chute of stairs
up. I can see down a few steps too, the fat
RCA's down there ... I know
he told me about a needle going into his big toe

It impressed a boy my age

I hear mom years later, not in my head, she's driving
us away from the hospital—

I knew, she's telling me, telling me
about the seventies, *I can't*
explain but
there was
a trigger

"The cause ... is unknown. It is likely related to complex genetic and environmental factors that lead to alteration of the immune system."

Everything they wanted. He'd beaten cancer. The eighties
 were very good ... Then everything was gone. Most
 everything. They persevered with plans to
 build a new home. Mine too, for
 three years &
 I was graduating high school,
 soon left for college almost
 twenty years ago. What I didn't know
 until my divorce was Dad had walked out
 on mom, sis and me
 sounds like a month or so
 before he returned, She didn't ask, and he
 didn't say (This detail over money—
 a small sum my mother had stashed years since—
Take it, take my granddaughter, leave the country)

She also said, *He sleeps in his chair, he
 won't talk, he cries, she says*
 photos of the ex
 get turned 'round I
 don't want any of this,
 but it is mine, my divorce did something to him

His heart after that. A call I made one Christmas
 in a hotel bed listening all night
 to his catching breath, 'fore that

Prostate, radio-active pellets So,

Pace Maker, I hear myself saying You're a cyborg, Dad
 I recall him falling a lot these months
 I get ER reports

Hodgkin's Lymphoma, "The disease occurrence shows
 two peaks [during the life of the patient]." My mother and I,
 we knew before he was diagnosed ...

Diabetes, Anemia contributed to *why*
he was falling, *why*
the gibberish, It was fever
said *No, look*
for something else

Chemo. My father's left side withers,
a viral phantom from his childhood
phasing in to close a circle—
He can longer get up or walk unassisted. I hear
of good days & bad, I think
he may have dressed himself a coupla times, I know
his demands are onerous, he believes
we're against him When I have been able
I have gone home, assisting in ways
I had not imagined.

Mom tells me he woke her last night
calling for his mother,

And I hear him speaking up again,
despite the tiny volume
in my head, I hear him, he's
talking again
about the dealership

I couldn't let on a particular note here
gradually imperceptible 'cept in sum—*Home*
is where I could get away ...

I say I understand. I say
that was a long time ago. I am
squishing the guilt
of wanting anything from him

II.

Mom says he wants to die at home. (She
can no longer adequately provide ...

He will not talk
about dying.

All my urging like an invite, I want to say
There's no more work to do, I want him
to understand ...

But he's never going home, this *trouble*
can only hang on him, and
in order to quietly drift
he shells

And my knowing nauseates me, my saying
such a lie He has talked a lot actually
I understand how useless, talk

Suddenly makes sense, if life is cruel
there are no more lessons.
Silence divides real from what is not
but it does not quickly dissolve
unreal
before my eyes

So I do not look away, so he sleeps
and quickly, so it blinds me
to see him, so hospice-white confuses
my mind with light
and censure, ... I am not seeing him
at all, Is this
how my girl
will see me

*Nashville, TN
January 2010*

Pain

who will read this poem,

what will I tell them,

“you,” here,
what will you say
if I said, *No*—

*aubergine drapes
flay my heart
in a coughing stove*

*mixed in spat
phlegm
the seeds drop*

*something
grows*

then,

will you begin
to consider

“ winter ”

snow

What if sounds
of limbs cracking,
what if buried
outside the window

What if I said, *After the storm*

devoured sunset

What if *dark*

would not suffice

What if slush and ice
turned the pasture

alabaster,

to raise
“snow”

What if there was a stove,

not a metaphor

who would dare
slip it 'neath
their pillow

and wait

for spring

V

Pawning

Sitting on a stained, kaki couch, it's entirely possible I'm spilling my drink by now, hanging on in a hallway, a long vestibule wherein my last friends in the world have cranked the music to drown the crashing dread of commitment, of my promise; I want to leave, but I am so easily kept—And now I'm thinking I must have left, or imagined the entire feat. A moment, the sun finally through dusty, webbed-up glass into my lenses, against my lids and I'm startled, sitting on a stained, kaki couch, without a drink of course but standing now to look about, shielding the eyes

I'm in a shop, *Yes*—a late breakfast, my journal, lots of coffee. *I haven't made it yet*, this place interrupted me. The coffee table on the sidewalk next to scads of small, pulp novels stuffed into wire carousels tempted me. I glimpsed something of a boy there, feeling impossibly thin, tight blue pajamas, elastic round my waist, wrists, ankles ... Inside, I was drawn to the couch. It was identical ... and after having sat, closed my eyes, considered my hangover

At one point last night I woke in the vestibule, unwrapped myself, stepped over my friends, walked outside, crossed the street to the parking lot adjacent Kingston, and did not look back.

I don't recall it, in fact, I seem to remember leaving again and again and I'm having trouble discerning this morning what in fact transpired last night. This isn't the same couch, but neither was the table outside the same, or the books

Maybe the table is similar enough, perhaps it is an identical table; but it had belonged to someone else. And the books, worn and read, only appear familiar

The Mowing Machine

Re "Al Qaeda's First English Language Magazine is Here"
The Atlantic, June 2010.

It was like those documentaries about how structure, bridges, dams,
houses, actually, it's nature decays ... our endeavors
perish in a world without us. The way material drops into a bay,
high-rises shed their pounds in flesh over & over
Lightning sets a forest.
In suburbia, roofs cave like the tops of blue pumpkins.
Mortar deteriorates, natural gas lines lose their integrity and flare
Even autos not burnt decompose like insects in time-lapse
as an eye watches but there are no eyes That's the point of the story

on television—In a world full of humans,
the sky pure as the lawns
'cured it's Saturday morning, early. Some jogging, some riding bikes, a few
working in their yards, others (it is natural)
a yard sale, or gabbing & more driving with prudence Nearby,
some play basketball, some on trikes spot the sidewalk ahead
—Even the air tastes like Saturday. Soon, the grilling ...

warming meat will compliment grassy sunshine

x

Strolling when I see it, thumbnail up the street but fast & weavy, a staunch
pickup won't stay on the road and people scatter
Screams reach my ears, and the pickup keeps ...
I see it 'tween cars, over curb, through hedges into a man
dropping his hose Another & the mailbox, bikes, tables from ...
everything flies up, even chunks of lawn

When I feel it happening, not a lapse but the brain stuffing more & more into
each flowing second, I begin to sketch escape—the scene slows, I take stock
of the vehicle's trajectory [...] Like trying to pre-know precisely where
the treads will fall The way we know what nature does

We don't know—I remember someone said "It's not natural for nature to
be known." (And) We're leaving, *we're here to go*, but there is no *behind*

Someone behind a revolution—executed, said there was no virtue
without terror; that terror was barbaric without virtue and virtue, impotent,
without terror

I've heard we humans possess an unconscious need for sacrifice, we give
and that makes us *natural*; but to invest, to give oneself by some belief

seems as unnatural as my neighbors still running, still lifting themselves
from the ground

Some do not get up. I shift & turn—when the pickup, frozen,
faces me *What the brain will gather ...* I see the driver, who is obviously
not out of control, has welded blades, spikes & bits of rolled up
sheet metal affixed hazards to the front of his ride
Like absurd kabobs, there are ragged pieces flapping

Turn again when a car,
almost my path,
takes a hydrant I know any moment, water ...

The pickup misses me, plows a retaining wall
in a fellow's driveway. Its rear-end mounts up

What nature does this— *Is it happening everywhere—*

I drop completely, my chin scrapes ...
and water now, puddles

Kindergarten

Must be heaven, I think, for the acorns loitering the schoolyard.
I wonder where the squirrels have gone—if acorns prefer to crack
under tires, beneath our feet; coveting, are they, of remains

Unusually warm this fall. Soon, Thanksgiving
Not my year with G.
(A few have taken pity on me.)

Few have said *hello*. No one here speaks much to me.
Not the middle-aged hair-guy whose appearance is unkempt chic,
blazers & silkscreened tees; not the obese woman, mother of two
through whose split seam in sweat pants
I see a different color each day while she leans
on the stroller; not the pock marked brunette
whose boyfriend is ex-military, tattooed but squeaky clean;
no women, plain or beautiful in suburban shoulders
with rocks; none of the men in golf shirts, standing in anything but kicks

*Who had something to say? was the first to offer more
than a cultured smile? —still summer, late
summer when I was meeting Charlie after her second or third
day of Kindergarten* Sitting in the lawn when a young girl
wearing a floral-blue sundress, puffy with a diaper,
bobs through grass where I'm thinking through my sunglasses
She jabbars, smiling and touching my arm. A happy child,
but one with obvious disabilities. I can't understand
most of what she's saying, but she points, emphasizes
Through the Dogwood near us, sunlight *is* making a pattern.
I give her my attention, returning smiles, eventually picking up
a leaf and after a moment, I repeat, *win-doe* Scoo, she says
Yes, there *are* leaves on the glass of a classroom.
Another moment, her mother, apologizing
Briefly, her mother

I am destroying something. But it was split already,
the larger of two in my hand sort of crumbles
The tinier acorn loses its cap
but won't give its khaki inside to light.
Many parents wearing khakis
seem to know everyone. I'm waiting for the bell,
I'm just here to get the kid.

Yesterday, pulling to Tillman, G says *E*,
 to which I reply something about the car, something
 like hold up ... I see Elizabeth two vehicles over, see her
 in the backseat but I don't recognize the woman
 in the front, she's not the mother

Charlie's never met her friend's nanny. The two
 embrace on the sidewalk, drop their backpacks and speed away.
 This woman looks a little worried, but I note
 she smiles, actually sees me
 We talk so little, we attempt to reel the girls
 and when the bell rings, I have to holler at G
 for making the stairs without her pack.

We're walking back to our cars. I'm not sure how it is
 we're walking back at the same time, except E & G
 holding hands, walked in ...

She used to turn and wave, says the nanny.
 I tell her Charlie used to ask that I watch
 from the stairs to Mrs. Hardy's door

... How we watch them go. Now,

all the yard, such nutrition
 oaks have given to an absence of recipients

and the children, what they know

how they carry on toward what they do not

I neglected to ask her name, Elizabeth's nanny,
 who stopped at her car, giving me a short wave
 but stretching a gaze as I moved on

 I saw her watching
 as I turned to my car, glancing back
 she's still smiling

Patent

Ever wonder about your—she asked, after scolding me
for lacking the good sense to put on my underwear,
standing outside the bathroom where I disinfected,
applied salve I remember

it wasn't easy. *Don't think about it much*, I lied, slow
with the zipper

Seems a doctor nearly botched my circumcision.
A relative watching me, she said,
wouldn't clean it, preferred not to touch
Mom was recovering from difficulties

Me, neonatal infection. She's telling me
to keep it clean, what did I know
of a chasm between the families
I know years later it kept me in a trench

when my friends had begun taking girls
home after school. Years later we had cars.
Before that, awaiting me, I'd be fourteen
riding a bus when I overhear a sophomore

tell her friend, *He had the ugliest dick*
I'm not asking, how many dicks ...
doesn't occur to me, what's a pretty one
like

Mr. Gill

Over Grenache, she says a dead embryo but uses the word for the procedure, adding she'd like to see her dad a grandparent; this happened years ago and she's aware

she hasn't the word for *lament*—Her sister's older, wants to do it *the right way*, the right way, I say She means her sister wants

what she doesn't. A wanted out of a relationship so she moved in with her dad, had the happy fortune to be running late for work

when he fell in the shower,
when his eyes wouldn't move and she couldn't heave

a man's man. Built. Blue collar, a mechanic's shirt
the day he was drinking. I sat next to him, A brought me a beer, offering
no introductions, turning to other patrons

and we started gabbing. His head was shaved, eyes kind, ardent, face pleasant
never would've guessed he had the stroke He told me a story about a couple
at the bar last time he was at the Trophy—

Ever been here 'round closing? he asked. I admitted, no

... the boyfriend, bellicose, drunk, had refused to leave. A called the police.
You wonder what goes through someone's head, he said, reaching the part where
this guy gives it a row—cops hurry him away; the girlfriend, hissing at A, says
cunt

and A snaps stepping up on a cooler,
up on the bar, grabbing this woman by the hair, bringing
exit. We roared, and now, in the know, I can say his face was beaming.

A came back. He bought a round. When A returned with the bottles,
opening her Newcastle, she introduced me to her father.

She's afraid of losing him.
She wants to see his loss revoked, not hers.
Hers isn't loss.

Roxy's

I'd forgotten what it was like,
holding a woman's hand
 when she's no longer holding
 she dips in her purse for passes
Someone had tipped her with passes
 ... And she asked me

I get our drinks, we size up
 stages She signals a spot,
little competition, she says I see the guy,
older than me, a stage later in life
 but I do see him
 perched,
 the look in his eyes when this
 brunette opens her legs ...
I know something

I'm curious what *she* knows,
 my bartender, I'm watching her
can't stop watching her watch ...

Inside her purse is a purple bag
from which she's pulling singles, she's
 sharing her money with me
I say I have money and she—
 This used to be yours

The brunette's adjusting her drawers
 when she makes us, makes piles of singles
& tootles the beat where we sit, where we are now
 leaning out of our chairs—
not touching the money but she's sliding our bottles,
propping her heels, propping
 skin, surface & contents

Iron churns thousands of miles below us
Birds can see magnetism, wild canaries,
nightingales, black birds
 navigate by it
But I can't see what I'm looking at

on the way to need, the way to some
migration

Between us, the brunette rests her ass
on the edge, winds underwear
up her legs
Fingers, after diving & strolling,
find our hands one each
on the brunette
spreading

I'm no longer watching my bartender
I see her hand on the brunette's cheek,
mine on the other

It feels like a crime, I hear the sun
pines for night

... I know I don't wish to see this place
in broad day,
I know there are traces
of the brunette's fluids ...

What the young woman
beside me, who always brings my drinks,
is bringing

Erin's Poem

The origin of relation isn't speech,
or silence punctuating it,
scoring composition—it's exposure
to death, and no longer

mine, but yours
a presence unbearably absent,
eternally gone if mourning fails
to uncover a corpse

this is the place for cadavers

The living experience
of "place" if by *event*
a licit ear offers,
verse tenders,
and not the likely acts
of would-be despicables ...

then we will have survived

and the uncanny vapor
of inevitable defusing
unites we who will not, we
who haven't the bodies to drop,
whose bodies are here, shrugging

Inability to
relate relates
a flicker as unknown
as what we bear
when we meet ourselves
in solitary places

... We do not go alone

Notes

You Cheated—Dunaway Books, 3111 Grand Boulevard, St. Louis, MO.

Fossil at St. Louis Science Center—Spring 2009. "Sue" is the largest & most complete T-Rex around. I believe the dinosaur was on loan from the Field Museum in Chicago when Charlie & I saw it at the Science Center. We dodged the rain, but it fell hard on the car before we pulled away.

Shenandoah—The word "Shenandoah" has no firm etymological origin. Research yields war, heroes & kings, legacies, geography ... A history older than the Union. But the romantic version offers "daughter born of the stars." I like that.

The ex and I were in the habit of naming our homes, usually by street name. There was one in Knoxville I forget (*do I*—was it "Cambridge Arms") ... In Owego, it was "Owego"—(an exception: we lived on Main St. in NY) goin' back to Owego always meant "going home". (We commuted to Binghamton.)

In TN there was "Vineridge". Then Louise Avenue, or "Louise". Then "McChesney". The house in which I was married, in fact the first home

I knew in St. Louis was on Shenandoah Avenue; the same home into which the ex and I brought our daughter, Charlotte Greer

... These days she has two homes, the girl: Parkland and Blaine.
That's what we call them.

The Move—Alphonso Mance, Jennifer Oster & Dannyboy, Dru Drolsum, Marcus Brown & my sister, Toni: They helped save my life. January 2008.

Father's Day—St. Thomas Hospital, 4220 Harding Road, Nashville, TN. June 2009.

Integration City—I am indebted to Elizabeth Bishop for her poem "Night City."

A Monster's Story—Spring or Summer 2007, before the catastrophe.
She's fresh & clean in her pajamas. Her short hair's still wet, I remember
how it took its time
growing. She in her mother's arms.
She has a story to tell us, wants to tell us both,
her mom affirms. Not yet three ...

I have been sleeping.

Woodlawn—660 Thompson Lane, Nashville, TN. February 11, 2010. Charlie was five.

Pawning—634 West Hill Avenue, Knoxville, TN. December 1994.

