THE GREAT WHITE WHILE

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of poems by Stacy Gnall.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Stephen and Gail Gnall.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Ars Perspectiva” ................................................................. The Florida Review
“The Insecticide in Him” .................................................... The Florida Review
“Ode to Superstition” ......................................................... The Indiana Review
“Trespass” ........................................................................... The Indiana Review
“Damsel, stage directions” .................................................. Prairie Schooner
“From a Dance Manual” ....................................................... Prairie Schooner
“Singing the Cannonball to Sleep” ....................................... Prairie Schooner
“What the Child Was Given Next” ....................................... Prairie Schooner
## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................... i

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................ ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................... iii

Primal Elegy ........................................................................................................... 1

From a Dance Manual .......................................................................................... 2

Ode to Superstition .............................................................................................. 3

Goodnight, Shoplifter ........................................................................................... 5

The Insecticide in Him ......................................................................................... 6

Smothering the Howl ........................................................................................... 7

What the Child Was Given Next .......................................................................... 8

Pantoum Before the Killer Comes ....................................................................... 9

In the Basement of the Late Tussaud ................................................................. 11

Trespass ................................................................................................................ 13

Self-Portrait as Thousandfurs ........................................................................... 14

Redhanded in the Fire’s Rise ............................................................................. 15

Inheritance ........................................................................................................... 16

Then We Dropped Our Hands ........................................................................... 17

Postcard in Air ..................................................................................................... 18

Halloween, Ohio, and an Appropriately Named Lake ....................................... 19

Postcard Under Water .......................................................................................... 20

Uninventing the Wheel ....................................................................................... 21

Postcard on Fire ................................................................................................... 23
Primal Elegy

—God’s last animal
lost in the first forest.

Where now that dash, that cower?

Again day ends. Again
dawn spreads its orange encore around.

Time with its muzzle and bridle.

We tame: a book folds over the boldest word.
Our brute only breath on the cold.

But once in a great white while
the prim fog parts for the slight primals.

There in the light by which boys bully.
Whiskey’s burn and scurry.

And in the violet, skyward tonight
the sound of a lover fast unwrapping his sweet.
From a Dance Manual

Treat me nice, treat me good, treat me like you really should.
‘Cause I’m not made of wood. And I don’t have a wooden heart.
—Elvis Presley

Snip the cranky thing from its crib.
Rest its potato-scented head against your lapel

and carry its teacup weight, the world’s
youngest antique in your arms.

Then permit the rug your promenade.
Follow invisible dance map feet.

Behändel sie gut.

Sing, scavenger of the lowest notes.
Make your way through the German verse,

that bit of violence in the back of your throat.
Behändel sie gut, Behändel sie gut.

On TV, the second shuttle’s success.
Outside, the ambient logic of snow.
You’ve lost your job. You dance.

Past the mantel’s burden, past each bashful knick-knack.
Hum, and she will grow to be gruff enough.

Past the blue-gray glances from the photographs.
Bellow, and she will be burr fierce. Coo.

Past the wreath, the hearth, the paisleys in their frenzy
on the ironing board, sway.

And she will chase ghosts and wolves away.
Twist, and men will treat her well. Whirl.

Past the patience of the piebald hobbyhorse,
treat her good, treat her good.

Sing, and the thing will fossilize.
Dance, and it will petrify.
Her heart will be a beating bit of bark.

Behändel sie gut.
Treat her good, and it will turn into wood.
Ode to Superstition

You come on
strong
as sun
in the middle of day,
a grueling matinee—
as imaginary,
as thin
and with consequence
as the equator.
If x,
then a lifetime
of y.
If not
heads side up,
a hex.
What strange
hand-me-downs,
superstitions—
awry heirlooms
swallowing
societies whole,
leaving little
breathers
tied to tethers.
What color
on four legs
crossed
crossed
our path?
How many magpie?
Enter the house
with the right foot
and leave
without sneezing.
You dome
of vain hopes,
throat
with a dirge
built right in,
slow elegy
for sense—
take what escapes
with a yawn
(the soul),
have October’s
immunity
to opals.
Another
frenzied bride
backwards lobbing
her bouquet.
If, then.
Logic slain
like a maiden
name.
Goodnight, Shoplifter

for D.W.

_The Romans had stolen the silkworms from under the very noses of the Chinese._

*World Book Encyclopedia, 1952*

Imagine the monk mid smuggle—

   his task spun roughly before him.

Beneath the scrutiny of the stars

   in their single files, in their handled squares and borderline bears,

   past the stirring in the goblet trees,

and beside the river bent at the waist,

   he rests for the corruptly lit hours in a cave whose acoustics amplify

   desire, disaster, the lack of a gap between.

O, my letch-eyed, tucked, my aberrant hand, what Justinian itch makes you do it?

What just mother couldn’t make him take it back? Hush. Imagine the monk’s clutched slumber. In his hand,

   a fat green secret ready to be spooled.
The Insecticide In Him

Leaning against the stubborn shed, my brother looks right and sinister with his shirt untucked.

He is a hopscotch-skip away, speculating what a second tongue tastes like, the contents of a schoolgirl’s skirt, about babies: how one plus one makes three.

He clacks his gum, his tongue a pin in a pink balloon.

With his hands, he pulls a firefly from the marmalade jar, its thorax, a pulse of magic and flint blaring Sunday! Sunday! Sunday! in his knuckle.

In this light, he looks more like an x-ray of himself than a boy.

He stares square into the insect glow, twists its wings and tosses them back into the air, snaps his fist closed and holds its half-beam body to my nose so I can see: Its insides are a contortionist’s kiss, the sorry smell of blood and iron.

He says witches live in their guts.

He is always teaching me these things, like how the business section makes the best-floating boats, and some stars even wear belts. How when the man comes home to the wife, he fits perfectly inside.
Smothering the Howl

The worst beast has broke from the totem.
Locks spring open at his approach.

Was it mercury caused his mercilessness?
Or having thirsted from footprints?

An epileptic then, born the seventh son squared,
Or from yellow marsh a lycanthrope flower dared?

The worst beast has broken from the totem.
Locks spring open at his approach.

Name him: shape-shifter, skin-walker, unwed
Warrior, pelt from the head of Berserker.

Name him for his bravado—Rogue—
For his fickle cloak—Turncoat—

Warg—a word for the slight realist chance
It’s the cyclic attack of a madman.

Name him for where your mother’s from—
Wendigo, Hombre Lobo, Rougarou,

And for the fear he’ll there find you.
Or just name him for what will be left:

Limb in a field.

The worst beast has broken from the totem.
Locks spring open at his approach. You must know

To remove his shape, his shadow, to the hewn tree go.
You must kneel there for one hundred years,

Say: Come silver’s stream, Come amulet eyes,
Come drool of the dog drugged by honeycake.
Say: Elf, zwölf, come death of the wolf.

Softly fan him as he lies.
What the Child Was Given Next

This is the thanks she gets.
The dark. And the unknown

goings-on as the eye adjusts.
Her foundling fright on all fours.

This is what she gets.
For trusting the beastly embezzler,

for having the sweetest ingredient among the trees:
what’s soft and tropical under a frock.

This is what.
To sit in his breadbox,

a stone, a callow Jonah,
now solemn as if going to school.

She is thinking of her sampler.
She is whiling away the hours,

sees each stitch in the line
from scripture, the stomach now

skeins of skin, brocade.
She is reciting the names of days.

She is walking heart first into the forest.

*That every one may receive the things done
in his body according to that be bath done.*

Yes, this. But what thanks
that when the hunter comes,

though both red,
the heart will come after the head.

That when the hunter comes
to slit the snarl from where it wells,

this will be she: from the bowels
a rouge bowl to be dipped and dipped from.
Pantoum Before the Killer Comes

Nothing at stake in their landscape,
just feet from his father’s wrecker,
stripped straight of their restraint on the vista,
the kids wide-eye their way toward each other.

Just feet from his father’s wrecker,
she’s soft in the yellow clover.
They wide-eye their way toward each other,
ready and open as right answers.

She’s soft in the golden clover.
Hand down, he marvels at her minutiae.
Open and ready as a right answer.
She plants a small red death on his neck.

Hand down, marveling her minutiae,
her body trills below him.
On her neck, he plants a small red death.
Her body bends in oath beneath the oak.

Her body trills below him,
their reflection severed in the wheel rim.
Her body bends in oath beneath the oak.
The girl breathes in, the boy breathes out.

Their reflection severed in the wheel rim,
the sun bright as a front-page headline.
The girl breathes out, the boy breathes in,
light as the sigh before a storm.
The sun bright as a front-page headline,
it will read *In the light of day*.
Light as the sigh before a storm.
In their landscape, nothing at stake.
In the Basement of the Late Tussaud

There is a place
on the skin’s palette for this.
What the sense of touch expects,
but is given instead.
The slash, the brand, the blow.
The message sent
through the cells
as in a water brigade, a baton in relay,
till the world narrows down.
Lost in the red lace of the brain.
There is a place on the skin’s palette
for this. The slash, the brand, the blow.
In the basement of the late Tussaud,
the message sent through barred cells
by a brigade. On the pallet,
an entourage of implements.
A tawdry show and tell.
What meat from the market stolen,
what gossip spoken? Leaving scars,
the loved ones of the blade.
What pageantry pain.
There is a place. In the basement
of the late Tussaud, an eternal
inquisition, accusations in orbit.
The slash, the brand, the blow. Attempting
perennially to blackmail bodies.
Believing underneath their nails,
below the masks’ bolts,
swirling in the eclipses of their hoods
they have secrets.
And on their palates,
answers held captive by wax.
Trespass

_for my mother_

Once

when you could still smell the green on me

back when your looking old was new

we ran to the dark churchyard
    and under God's empty bell.

The dimmed silver held us in its huddle.

Its walls refused
    the lawn’s stichic hieroglyphics.

It was colder than moon.

Together we pushed its great weight up
    but nothing.

Its round rim could only mouth _mother_
    to the night.

A lark then.
    An absent cloud.

The bell with its tonsil out.

The three of us unable to make a sound.
Self-Portrait as Thousandfurs

To have been age enough.
To have been leg enough.
Been enough bold. Said no.
Been a girl grown into that
negative construction. Or said yes
on condition of a dress. To be yours
if my skirts skimmed the floors.
To have demanded each seam
celestial, appealed for planetary pleats.

And when you saw the sun a sequin,
the moon a button shaped from glass,
and in the stars a pattern
for a dress, when the commission
proved too minute, and the frocks
hung before me like hosts,
to have stood then at the edge
of wood, heard a hound’s bark
and my heart hark in return.

To have seen asylum in the scruffs
of neck—mink, lynx, ocelot, fox,
kodiak, ermine, wolf—felt a claw
curve over my sorrow then. Said yes
on condition of a dress. To be yours
if my skirts skimmed the floors.
To have demanded each seam
just short of breathing, my mouth
a-beg for bestial pleats.

And when you saw tails as tassels,
underskins sateen, and in entrails
damasks of flower and fruit,
when the bet proved not too broad
for you, and before me, the cloak held
open as a boast, to have slipped into that
primitive skin, made out towards
another sort of prowling around.
To have turned my how how into a howl.
To have picked up my heavy hem and ran.
Redheaded in the Fire’s Rise

If an adult were guilty of such a sin,
one remedy was to declare the child a witch.
L. DeMause

What’s sweet catches flame more swiftly.
What’s secret, too.
The breath withheld stokes the coal.

A man’s hand on the wrist as to hands tied to a pyre.
Your sex sanctum and savage. All the same.

Match flash and its static—
riding your throat like a radio.
A flue from foot to trite sky.

To say the smoke’s still suspended there,
it refuses to let go of your shape: Untrue.

By the time you took the stand, you were already ash.
There’s nothing, round world, warm girls, that I can do.
Inheritance

In every war history book you read, there is never a description of what the aid man truly feels, and you never will understand.

Medic for Company B, 333rd Infantry, 84th Infantry Division, WWII.

When he reaches for gravy at the table,  
his drowsy arm hardly makes a sound,  
and all I can think is history.

In ’44 he didn’t storm the beach.  
He was brought in after the preamble  
on what I’ve heard called clean-up crew.

What he had to do with arms,  
other limbs that lost courage, deserted,  
how many men, half bled, he had to drag,

learning not to come so close as to even know their names, we want to know, but don’t ask.  
We let him look to his glass.

Our house was built on a hush.  
My grandfather who laughs into his hands,  
keeps his mouth closed when it matters most.

He must have learned this from the coal mines,  
at eight or nine, for as many pennies  
as letters in his name, kneeling into corners

with the floret of a shovel’s head, lungs stuffed from the black damp where he kept his secrets like bees, like he keeps them from this meal,

from me, picking letters like petals now from the alphabet, and writing it all down though I have so little to say.
Then We Dropped Our Hands, and Without a Word,  
Ran to Catch Up With the Rest.

We accepted the cave’s invitation.  
And for the first time, our raw minds registered regret.

Our stomachs dropped with the thermometer,  
and it seemed we'd picked the lock to the place,  
like we were suddenly on leave from life.

Our eyes reflected hypotheticals.  
From above, anvils. Staircases that never touched ground.  
Below, denominators of totem poles reaching eternally to meet their mates.

The tour guide took us through that coliseum of shade,  
sure to point out all of earth’s accidental sculptures. The rocks  
shaped like a lion’s head, our tenth president, a map of half the Great Lakes.

Sure, too, to give us a chemistry lesson.  
Our hands held awful oils, and if we touched the stone,  
it wouldn’t grow for three hundred years.

She moved towards the gash where a man is said to have wept for years,  
but we held back, fugitive from the group,  
feigning interest in some erosion or other.

Something in the rubble had turned us sadists.  
If we never amounted to anything, we knew we could think back  
to how many feet below and know we had  
made one typewriter tap, one fingerprint of impact.

We were ready to found our flinty cities.  
We held those spots hostage in our crosshairs.

Fingers poised and hot for the rock,  
we looked to each other, the dare  
in our eyes making each pupil darken.

The metronome of the dripstone paused for a measure.  
Each echo held its breath.  
All the hanging formations bent their heads to say grace.

Above us, people, places, and their things  
spun like a mobile at a million miles per minute.  
But we were motionless—two brash-faced figurines cut from the crags.  
We blinked, the earth around us so suddenly enormous.
Postcard in Air

Air, we’ve had enough of your heartache,
how you wake in no one’s arms,
but slip through the sieves they make.
Whine, wind, whine.
Cry yourself to sleep.
You fleeting thing, you Indian giver,
you cool breezy bachelor loving then leaving
the lungs. How often have we begged you,
bartered with you, gasped and gasped for you?
And how many times have you turned
your back, snuck up behind,
and with no hand, holding no knife,
softly stabbed us in ours?
Air, you ugly virtue, you lovely lovely vice.
Halloween, Ohio, and an Appropriately Named Lake

This is how we do water in the Midwest:
The waves. Their sound is not as much
a round of applause, as it is a modest golfer’s clap.
You’re so narcissistic. You and your ocean.
You and the sun with your initials scrawled across.
But I think you look good too, so on Halloween
I’ll dress as a hand-held mirror for you.

See, I’ve reserved Lake Erie for us,
and as we push away in our canoe,
our eyes touch everything and it turns
to costume. The sky is a negative of a ghost,
a black sheet with star-slits for eyes,
the lighthouse a hero flashing his x-ray eye,
and the flagpole on the shore is the world’s
tallest matador—waving Ole! Ole! Ole!

Forgive me. I’m from a state that’s shaped
like a heart, and this thought makes my own soul
rise as though by seance: the seaweed bending
in our direction, extending a dance, the undead
eyes of infinite fish surrounding us. And me,
setting aside my oar, bobbing for your Adam’s apple,
whispering See what a haunted house my arms make.
Then like a bully child: I dare you. Spend one night inside.
Postcard Under Water

Think back to your first cell—
to your schools of blind eyes searching

through this barnacle, that urchin,
the slim choreography of seaweed

for something more. An armada
of modest molecules. Minute,

discontented treasure chests
ready to burst through the surface.

Think back before bone, hair, before aba,
before what god or gull come to swoop us up,

come to save us from our kelpiness.
Before we fell out of love with our floating,

rose up from the muck of your lagoon, mouths
watering, our fathers all forgetting how to swim.
Uninventing the Wheel

*after George Ferris*

He must have been a bicycle
in a past life, his ambition
driven like a spoke,
that unsatisfied we were
astonished only once
by a wheel, he set to invent
bewilderment from scratch.

Once, you and I loved
only at certain altitudes—
fire escapes, hot air balloons,
and on the Ferris wheel
your marriage proposal.

If I could go back
in time, I would find him,
divert his attention, change
the subject to something less
mechanical, pour a little whiskey
in his tea so he’d doze off
seconds before the epiphany.

Words that made my ears pop.
I could see the future
from the top, eyes casting lines
and catching the sun, a coy
vanishing point on the horizon.

His idea for its hulking grace,
before he could ever lift lovers,
oblivious voyeurs, their hearts
beating in waltz time,
as the wheel bragged
its way through the day.

But now, I can’t look.
I drive past fairs and stare
straight ahead, tisk-tisking
my periphery. I know
the sly persuasion of the mind,
how it convinces itself
a thing was never there—
That wild-eyed man with wheels
in his head, that architect of pleasure
never alive at all, and this century’s best
napkin scratch set on no inaugural spin,
the O of each mouth never uprising.

I’m parked outside the fairground gate.
One by one the carts in their orbit
vanish. The lines of waiting people
disappear, the whir of the wheel in air,
the breeze, gone, along with you, asking
me to stay suspended together forever.
Postcard on Fire

Fire, what did your father do to you?
And did your mother in her hairpins turn away?

In the mirror you see a master plan.
You will set your bright-hot branches howling,
You say letters, scarves, and scarecrows will be sorry.

One plume, two. You spread your red rumor
through the room. You spread your bejeweled vengeance.

In photos you are always dead center, a rash rising
through the roof of the house. It’s not your fault.

Livid light, where are you going?
And who in your babbling hands will you take with you?
What –osphere do you hope to reach?

You are an irrational dance, a boy in love with nothing
but himself. I light a match and watch your ego grow.
Ars Perspectiva

Taking the long way home, and thinking again of the dead, on a two-faced day, torch-bright but bitter, I walked alone in the middle of the road and the road through me, when a ribbon of deer, outright and easy, spooled ahead, the biggest, the obvious heartthrob, leading the way.

The trees—deer—silently swayed, playing charades, sending their little memoirs to the ground—deer. Underground, bones in beautiful wardrobes, I thought, and still: deer—deer—deer.

The sound of feet meeting ladder, and suddenly aware I was not alone, a man, paintbrush in hand, looked down from a house to the ribbon then me, the look between us the softest of trophies. Big family, he struggled to say, in an English poured first through a sieve. Or was it just wind? Big family, big family.

Nights, when dreams threaten not to look both ways before crossing, I think of him, telling our chapter at market, over dinner, in front of the fire. Sure is, the girl said then, he tells his friends. Sure is, sure is.
Osmosis

She throws stones at the sun so it sets fast, invites the night inside and undresses it, a finger through each black buttonhole.

A pickpocket’s drastic hand, she slips into the bed where her son once slept. She’s curled as a cursive letter in his sheets.

She experiments in sleeping the sleep he sleeps.

As sure as boys grow, she wants to pull him from the lost-and-found of his pillow, extract truant memories from his mattress.

Repose is the chandelier she swings to safety on, but she dreams of the girls who’ve laid here, their legs open and wide as wells,

the nights spent drinking his stomach to a diary of scars, his heart now tangled and hard—an alarming cub scout’s knot.

Tomorrow she takes the handles off of hairbrushes, hand-baskets, and passenger doors. So nothing can be held.
The Lace-Keeper’s Lament

Just as well
that this be my lot.

To tend
such a finely knit flock.

Days, I make
their velvet cribs,

their canopies of glass.
Nights, I call

them home, calm
their open rustling.

Not same as the matron
but just as well.

What man could want
my needle eye,

my neck always
bent to the web?

What man could win
my spinneret

having had bedfellows
so rich, so delicate?
Dissociative, or
Landscape with Missing Hare

now without pounce whole nonchalance you tell me that back of house looking for
a flee to the trees lining chimney and close to the bush where the hutch was kept you
were frightened again in the old house you are frightened the rabbit is gone
mother saying weeks it’s been months gone and when your mouth moves away from the
moment the wired distance drowning your back laid state states away
I wonder what else you’re missing from that place with the pink brick dimmed by
what you don’t remember what else you might as well or worse have never held
Flare

Wait.

Through trees
with bursting limbs

I am running.

A-blend with bark,

a mute blaze.

My eye’s blue stain

on the green

I am running

towards the stream.

Past names scratched,

last summer’s lean-
to, the ravine bridged

by a held breath

I am running

towards the game.

Towards the arm.

The birds cutthroat

in the clearing I am

running towards

the twist. Running

towards the same as

away. Towards the twist-

arm game by the stream.

My eye’s blue, running.

Under canopy, I’m nothing.

Feet between deer tracks,

I’m vanishing. A burst,

held breath, and over
anthill say grace.

Wait.

Bright flash,
big brother I am

catching up to you.
The Funambulist

Name: Girolamo Zini
Occupation: Rope-walker
Location: Istria-Trieste
Cause of Death: Atlanto-Axial Dislocation

- The Mütter Medical Museum, Philadelphia

You live in a disease museum, a physician’s vaudeville, home to cold diagrams and graphs, those attempts to map the tubes and sewage inside us.

Among immodest organs and muscle demanding attention stares a wall of skulls, all hung like death’s dumb trophies.

Below the brain case of a boy who was once a shoemaker’s apprentice, and beside the embroiderer of silk, your skull waits patiently for its next life, Girolamo.

You do not wirewalk to the sound of the calliope. You do not shake the hand of gravity. Your skull just sits, a vase once filled with breath.

This is what you think as you climb the ladder: The women who peer up through the pinholes of hands, the men who pretend they are solid as roman numerals.

You glance at the children you will frighten by simply walking away. Then you will move across the taut rope towards safety, sequins, the girl on the platform with the impossible waist.

Is this what it is to exist, Girolamo? To touch toe to rope for a moment, to test how thin of a world we can stretch our weight over, only to fall when our skin has broken in?

Here, where students of the ache learn to listen to the blub blub of that badge we wear behind our chests, learn to drag our insides like lakes for evidence of infection.

Yes, now Girolamo, as the security guard is turning away, let me blow into your bare nostrils and make them flare, paint the color back in your face as though by number.

Girolamo, I will pull the red breath from your mouth like a magician’s scarf. I will tiptoe you to safety.
Camera Obscura

That was when cameras
were outhouses—

whole pagodas
standing on a pier or in the park,

where tickettakers
under the curves of derbies

charged a dime to see the world
outside reflected upside-down.

It's all getting smaller.

The bulk of ore slung
in the earth’s gut.

The waistlines we admire.
Attention spans and satellites,

the spaces marking
uncharted waters on each map.

Our belief the magician
has nothing up his sleeve.

Each year the microscope
says we are

made of smaller things—
all the electrons around

the protons on top
of the neutrons in our arms.

How low can it go?

Will we one day snuff out
volcanoes like candles

with our cupped hands?
Will the treasure chests
of our breasts shrink,  
the red wax melt

and seal the envelopes  
of our breath shut?

As long as there are those  
who think big,

who kiss lips  
and taste anthems,

see a single snowflake  
and think: yeti, yeti.

As long as there is  
one person

so prehistoric  
in their need

for you, they will  
take you to the days

when everything was  
unashamed and enormous,

to the pterodactyl days,  
when we didn’t only need

a whole room  
to take a picture,

but to hold the weight  
of each creature’s throbbing heart.
Maternalique

Sure as your first balled fist,
    it wells
you awake one morning—
    your chest dressed like a window,
    your breath a ghost
    trapped against its glass.
You’re a home. You’re a nova.
    What you’d do to give your swaddled
    star to the dark.
You walk at night and the landscape lengthens.
    Each parcel of dark
    a mouth to be fed,
    each umbra hunkered
    to its suckling.
    You unfurl.
You, half-ready to catch the moon’s fall.
    Your hand halfway
    to the soft part of that skull.
Singing the Cannonball to Sleep

At night, he sleeps with his mouth just open
and his helmet fastened tight.

See how he hugs his knees—
harm hibernating in his hands there,
always prepared to give the ready sign.

With the light slipped into something more
comfortable, now the dark pulled
up to our chins, and our children’s things

on the carpet—the paddle ball, the army man,
the duck you must pull with a string—
those leftovers from a day of ravenous play

all watch as he talks from within a dream:
Something about hopeless, heftlessness,
taking to the top—the man-made sky of the tent.

Sleep is his most difficult stunt,
but each time since our first time,
this is how I lull him: I tilt back, fill my mouth

with pine needles, clay, a copper coin.
And when we kiss, I slip my tethers in,
say rest your perilous head, and for the first time that day

he can finally feel some weight,
gravity’s good fortune no longer eluding him,
his two felled feet no longer neglecting the ground.
Lost Child in Forgotten Tale

And of a sudden here I am
saying suddenly.

Suddenly
the world went white. Moot.

And though lonesome is best
left unsaid,

I was.
Though nothing had left me.

But what a something
that suddenly

it wasn’t
there. Had never been.

And though I hadn’t known
I’d wanted it,

suddenly
I’d have held my breath forever

for that ember. That pinch-sized
life. Breadcrumb

from a basket.
Tip of a beak of a bird

that suddenly speaks. Please.
Take this

walking flaw.
Awed by it as we have always been:
The body so perfect, so im--.
And it’s
    suddenly
so simple. It’s like this:

Never under the mob-cap clouds
will I
    be a mother.
Never into the green wide wood.

Take me ‘til it suddenly
doesn’t
    double me over.
‘Til it only dips me like a frond.
Aliasing the Alphabet

Oh, sweet poppy seeds at your school seats, I see:
Like birds on an electrical line, each strange-shaped

as the shadows you make on your wall before bed—
they make the frantic wing of your cardinal hearts flap.

But I say to your raised hands, your constellation of questions:
These are twenty-six magic tricks, twenty-six tulip bulbs

ready to sprout in the dark of your mouth. Shh.
Hear the cap-gun crack of the k as it hits the air.
L-m-n-0's avalanche in your throat.

These are twenty-six keys to every city.
Go, you little Marco Polos. Make your way towards them.

Today, the long a like an ankle, tomorrow the b-line of a leg,
the c an arm makes to slip around a waist.

And one day, a thousand second grades away,
as you write those last a's in your lovers' names,

a slide will light up on the projectors of your brains:
A circle and a stick, a circle and a stick, you'll say.

And it will be my voice, my hand curled over yours,
curled around a number two pencil,
writing circle after circle, stick after stick.

And we will win their hearts—those unpeeled apples
in the desk drawers of their chests—together.
The World’s Tallest Graveyard

The dead are tired of all that lounging around,
hands folded across hearts, pledging eternal allegiance to nothing.

The stones on their graves are fixed flags, surname-spangled
banners marking each little empire of earth, the handful of years they conquered.

In Calvary Cemetery in Queens, they are raising these flags to full mast.

Passengers glance off from the freeway and think:
Is someone feeding those stones, like they were rows of growth-spurting boys?
Are sunflowers fossilized inside them and reaching for the sky?

No, they’re just tired of the abandoned corral they’ve become,
tired of all that hide and no seek, of making a colorless and quiet coral reef.

The dead can only keep secrets for so long
and Oh, the gossip, the underground eavesdropping.

They are listening with cups to each other through caskets,
tapping out sentences in Morse code, saying:
Let’s make a bar graph that rivals the skyline we are set behind.

And they have started pushing.

They are pushing against the ceilings of those breadboxes they’re sealed in,
pushing out through the smug, brown soil surrounding them.

They are pushing to remember the sweet weight of work on the shoulder,
the elbow’s compromise, the burlesque of bones in the hand,
and the fine grammar of discriminate fingertips.

They are pushing to feel the wingspan of effort spread in their chests,
and the stones are exhaling for them.
The Cowboy You’ll Become

Mother, thank you for enlisting me in this life, even if it was without asking,

for the basic training of tying shoes, ending lines with punctuation and please

and thank you, for teaching me now that growing old is a gruesome civil war,

the way cells, marrow, and the brain all bayonet themselves toward death.

Already I can sometimes see a memory hanging like a hammock in your head,

swinging somewhere between those trees etched remember and forget. What lawlessness.

I think of the days when talking with you will be a game of cowboys who have lost their Indians. You will grab at moments from your past, the names of neighbors,

holidays, and my face, with the world’s worst lasso, cattle-driving me farther and farther away from you. The words I say will mosey like a tumbleweed through the ghost town of your mind, their meaning flipping back and forth up there like a pair of saloon doors.

You will be confused, but beautiful, holding that dishrag like a sheriff’s badge in your hands.

And of all the things I’ve ever hoped for you in your one-horse life, this is all I will ask when you die: that at the moment when your ghost, that bandito, steals away and hangs over you awning-like, all the memories you’ve ever had and lost will line up like cavalry
in front of you. You will mount them, set
in the direction of god knows where, and ride.
The Hypochondriac’s Canvas

after Poe

For me at least…there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet…

“The Fall of the House of Usher”

Towards the ponderous jaws of the frame,
this flashing forth. This brush. Its gentle violence.
His arabesque. (But if it weren’t for the legs).

From feeble gleam to wild light, his eye
(Not quite what it used to) in electric sympathy
compassions shadow, encoffins color towards gemmary.

To and fro the paint falls promiscuous—
an arresting avalanche, a bowl irreparably broken,
a satellite burst and the pesty breath of its fumes.

(Damn the click of the hip) he moves. He’s double-winded.
He’s bugaboo. His head (Always the deep temple ache)
is a narrow home his sense the rattling of a sash—

one thought pressed and pressing, an oppressive flower
open as an insect wing pinned to point out the structure,
bold as a dog nailed up (mind the shoulder)—its inappropriate splendor.

From pillar to post he chromas ‘til in a half-swoon, with a stroke
simple as to round off a sentence, a stroke as to signature a bank-note,
he steps aside (and for once forgets his arms) to reveal
a single square of color: an enthusiastic epistle of sickly chartreuse.
The Bee’s Recurring Dream

When he wakes to his brother’s hum,
sleep still heavy on his wings,
and the wind through the keyhole of the hive
hints at something sweet,
he tries to shake a feeling.
All bees are petty thieves and their mother’s boys,
bad scouts sent to drink up their badges.
And the floozy flowers are indiscriminate.
They open themselves to anything with wings.
But today, when he’s surrounded
by a harem of flowers, he hesitates.
As he moves from pink to purpler massacre,
he is a dash of nerves.
Even as he’s drawn home
to the other drones and joins them, mad
in their geometric labs, he thinks: what if?
What if the first, as it flirted in the grass
at Adam’s knee, fought off the urge,
the pull to that first generous pistil?
What if the first taste set no bright-hot,
opulent fever burning in his head? What then?
Then would we know only bitter tastes?
Then what would he build? What would grow? What
would be waiting in each dark heart of the honeycomb?
A Brief History of Being Burned to the Ground

The rules to the reconstruction were rigid:

\textit{must haul twice your height in flame, your ashen weight}
written in the ledger left-hand-wise, wretched.

It was the spring she came across a starling, unsewn.
It’s insides so much slender—blue coils, electrical,
and this before electricity in the village was known.

Her mouth brushed open by those wings then, an \textit{O},
the shape disbelief takes, and her blue voice said
Bless it, bless it. Its bones. \textit{Svätit jebo, Svätit jebo.}

And Marek’s mind by then his butcher’s block.
Thick, murk red-riddled calligraphy ink, his threats
to heave from high, drop, and splice. Just watch.

And her mother by then turned to water, a water slick,
a cascade in her apron dancing, always the drafty
dancing, startling everything still intact with a kiss.

She danced to the soft shapes disbelief makes,
pressed her \textit{baba} lips blue. She danced to the shape
of Emelia, vague mother of the Byzantine saint.

But with the missing shapes of scaffolds and trestles,
slants of shutters and cusps of beams, to her it was clear:
The dance, the body, the ankle all superfluous angles.

Every step then a cliff, a risk, and twice their size.
The story in each new warp of wood, of a city between
its buildings, between its build and re-building.
What Gets Me Today, Frank

to O'Hara

What gets me today, frank
world, is the multitude.

The many momentaries.
And the momentum passed

from transient you— confident
as a continent—who moved through

the motives and the mongers,
half man and half morale.

Today, from your blocks,
wafts a big band bouquet.

Subway bison, chorus girl clicks,
the low round growl of the moon.

All the names slipped
lift where you left them.

Denby, Bonnard, Koch, and Joe.
Pennsylvania Station.

Lillian, Fanny, Sonia, Jean—
all your starlets in the sky.

Your hum-colored
cab’s sweet snag on me.

This—a radiator clank, a cap gun’s banner
with its bang—gets me today, Frank.

That though it was all obligato
(this you had in common with the cannibal),

for all your bounds and bountiful,
you knew how always

to find the tender center
of the city, the pulse in the pocket,

[stanza break]
the nerve that, say, runs
Revere-coursed toward Reverdy.

This gets me, this sways,
this really hooks-jabs me
today and, with it, the agony
of your casual, your feigned traipse.

That despite the show-of-hands,
your lines were more preen than plash.

That since you spoke so plain to us,
we—your hidden track—come
to you like a cross street,
think we can talk that way back.
There were no marks of disease or violence on the body, but her mouth had been stuffed with taffeta.

She through the rootlets
She murked by moss
She in its whelm

She the owl in the tree
trunk’s mouth stretched
to canvas a scream

She the taffeta still
in her teeth

She slight in the night’s dark
peignoir, eyes on the sky
so long stars disappear

She flesh left
for the air to edit
She year after year

She first rich gold rush of hair
as she collapse, light
avalanche from the hands
that ferried her there

She slung and set
on his arm—an epaulette
She first dragged
down the woods' brusque
tangent, first taken
from the tousled ground

She first a splurge—scarved
and sexed—She slim consent
She the throat’s spangled cackle
and choke, kaleidoscopic last breath

She first in the trysted park
She in his arms his lips the grass his
hand a slingshot in her back pocket

murked by moss
through the rootlets
in their whelm

She our sleep
thrashed and thrummed

She spurns our nerves
She tips our veins
She missing reel
We scratch the blanks

She for his mantel
She for your mantel
She my trinket too
When the Ambitious Wishes Have Fled the Well

When I have banged out my last beat
like a spoon against the potpan of my chest,

after I have pitched my last tent of breath,
and from my tongue rolls only a tumbleweed,

burn me like you would a banned book
and broom my soot straight into a bottle rocket.

The sky then will be a flag whose stripes have fallen,
a square of bad stars that have been sent to the corner.

The lights will hang in the air like a makeshift chandelier,
as though the horizon had stuck itself in a socket.

I will wear those sparks like a coat of arms.
Telephone poles, whole factories, and fig trees

will lay on their backs so they can see.
Every tongue will send the telegraph $aah$,

a round $ooh$ will pop in each ear like a balloon,
and you, you will for once feel a word—$firework$—

more than you could ever spell or say it.
Because it will be as though Edison invented the sky

and when you blink, you will still see my light
against the black backdrop of your closed eyes.
Escapology

How the world loves the sleight of hand—
trees pulled endlessly from the earth’s black hat,

the sun holding the colors of leaves up its sleeve,
and even the little girl now who waits by the door

of the Houdini museum, exchanging a dollar with her slight hand.
Her eyes are two wide tickets as she steps inside.

What question marks will be around these corners?
The dull-knife light along the carpet leads the way

to a display on the pranks that mirrors pull, a collage of locks
scuffed from struggling—the brawls between his own two fists.

A reel projects stunts: the threat of rope, straitjackets, burlap sacks.
He is suspended from a crane over the Atlantic.

The sights turn the white scarf of her face
into a fluttering dove, slice her and leave the saw inside.

Until now, the only magic she’d seen is bread rise, eggs hatch,
grass that grows between cracks in the street.

But every day was alchemy for him—the finale—
from flat-top to spats, that statue of the man from Budapest.

She goes to step outside—Ladies and gentlemen—
and sees a flash of shadow from the corner of her eye.

Did he just—and for my next trick—move?
Oh!—that little horror from the corner of her mouth.

He steps forward—the cards he holds out
are a blunt bouquet—Pick a flower, any flower.

He makes a diamond dance away from the deck
as a club comes crashing out of the air.

A heart is pulled from her ear. Then he offers
that card with its spade shaped like a dark Valentine.

Eighty years dead and he’s performed this escape act:
As she moves under the exit and squints at the bright of the street,
she feels herself part down the center like a red velvet curtain
and all the mystery that had been hidden behind, steps outside.
Damsel, stage directions

She must wake
in a place she doesn’t recognize—

bound, surrounded by debris
of other lives—find her way out.

She must have broken
away from the group—

 naïve as the number one,
 naïve as she is half-naked

and barefoot now—running
with a limp (injury implied),

a bruise slung mink-wise
about her neck.

She must fall just once in the chase
over bramble, antler, root—

the scene around her
dizzy, a revolving door—

stupefied by the setting
sun and the birds

in on it too, throwing
their voices, trying to confuse.

She must glance always
over her shoulder,

trying in gasps to lose him,
to outsmart the lunatic

trees, her face fallow,
unfurnished, a puddle with nothing

to reflect—glancing—
the fish rolling back in her eye’s

blank lakes—glance—the moon
a fat, white mosquito bite
itching her on to where
she ends at an edge of road,

spots a truck’s grill
waver ing lazy in the horizon’s heat,

laughing a little,
coughing up berry-worths of blood

and muttering what she can
only muster, sputtering into the cement,

into the dense, senseless
air of Texas, I made it.