

AN UNCURLING HAND:
ISOLATION IN PUBLIC PLACES

by

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ABSTRACT

The creative thesis “An Uncurling Hand: Isolation in Public Places” is a collection of poetry concerned with ideological dichotomies: conventional domestication against the exotic, class divides and its implications for identity, and most importantly the feeling of isolation even when surrounded by others.

I am grateful to Terry Thaxton, whose belief in my abilities was unwavering and life altering.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing Life Essay

Words can better the world. The power of language to inquire, discover, redeem, and ultimately transform is tremendous. To speak in the world is to *be* in the world, and the impression language leaves is often a lasting one. Recorded language is not “deadpaper” as Charlotte Gilman Perkins once described it, but living and communicative. The act of writing spans distance and time, and its ultimate power is the potential for influence. When I read I learn not only from the author’s use of language, from their style and mastery of the craft of writing, but from their message as well. J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* describes redemption despite loss and transgressions. This was one of many texts which provoked me not only to write differently, but to be differently, to live in the world with a transformed sense of existence. In *Letters to a Young Poet* Rainer Maria Rilke writes of forbearance and solitude, and his message has been an essential influence in the construction of my writing. Rilke says, “There is but one solitude, and that is great, and not easy to bear,” (34) In “An Uncurling Hand: Isolation in Public Places” patience with the anxiety of waiting is an absolute necessity, and the capacity to bear solitude with grace is a theme largely influenced by Rilke’s writing.

The poems note figurative isolation despite a literal reality. Even with constant stimuli and interaction we are ostracized from the world. “Outside the in-ness of the world./Isolation in public places./There are cars all around you/ and people in them. They fiddle/with the radio. They’re not far from you. Not really” The idea of isolation then, in this text, operates as a mechanism for emphasizing the otherwise mundane elements of day-to-day living. Often the

these moments are surprisingly unsettling. In “White Noise” the speaker’s isolation is amplified by scenes of domestication: grocery stores and shopping malls act as settings which surround her with people whom she never actually interacts with. Just as these setting works to illuminate the speaker’s sense of isolation, subtext in these poems often works to illuminate greater truths.

The message presented in this text has been largely influenced by my writing aesthetic. Though poetry has always been the bread-and-butter of my experience, my studies in the MFA have extended to fiction, creative nonfiction, literary criticism, and rhetoric. Being able to work with so many facets of Language Arts studies has lent greater dimension to my conception of writing and has influenced my craft as a whole.

Working with prose has moved me to integrate elements of story into my texts (as seen in the narrative poem “Sticky Eyed”). I’ve revisited notions of voice since reading Ron Currie Jr.’s composite novel *Everything Matters!* Dinty Moore’s nonlinear memoir *Between Panic and Desire* allowed me to rethink the traditional structure of memoir. I’m especially interested in elements of autobiography in writing and how autobiography can speak to larger populations. Jane Shore’s *Music Minus One* is a poetic reconstruction of adolescent girlhood, a coming-of-age narrative describing the experience of growing up female and Jewish in the 1950s. The autobiographical elements of Shore’s work are notable, however, what I take most from her work is that Shore’s experience has evolved into greater and more global concerns for the world. Her discourse speaks largely to class divides and anti-Semitism, as well as issues of gender and identity. It is in this way that Shore’s writing extends to a wider community and creates an impact more profound than that merely of personal experience.

Through the lens of autobiography I hope to speak to larger populations. Many of my poems are concerned with the nature of identity and transition. As a graduate student I have been

immersed in academia, but as a domestic being I have been part of a larger working class community. The experience of the constant back-and-forth between academic life and a blue-collar workforce is a major concern for my writing. The implications class divides carry for personal identity is tremendous, notable in the poem “Cashing Out” (“Whole/years lost to calling your corners/waiting for your heart to return to its resting point/while you take drink orders.”) What I hope for with this collection is that my poetry may use elements of craft and autobiography to speak to larger populations. It is good I think to put experience to use, to make purpose of suffering and goodness alike, to capture living with language.

JUST THE GOING

Just the Going

The separate parts of town spread away
from one another like the fingers
of an uncurling hand. Jacksonville: A decent amount
of ground to cover no matter
where you want to go.

I time the routes. Outside the in-ness of the world.
Isolation in public places. There are cars all around you
and people in them. They fiddle
with the radio. They're not far from you. Not really.
You could open your car door and touch them. Green
traffic light. Your own fishbowl. Music low and lulling

the bend in the highway pours
into a view of downtown: Southbank of
the St. John's River. A blue-lit drawbridge. The
lights blaze and the barriers collapse. The rapid
warning *drangrangdrangdrang*. I am supposed to be somewhere
but the bridge is rising and I am on the wrong side of the river.

There is no electricity in my apartment. I feel like a cat with three legs.

It is not a conventional drawbridge
whose parts pull back like the flaps of a box, but a vertical bridge rising
on cables skywards. It is wrong to see something so heavy ascend, it is indicative
of my own ability to float away. Plastic piece in a childhood play set, god is
ripping up the tracks. The sound of the crank overwhelms. Fear of the bridge.
I cannot see whatever barge is sliding below me.

On the blacktop people in their cars throw up their hands.
It is Saturday night and the party is on the other side of the river.
Their mouths crease. They bring cell phones to their ears
in their cars, all different colors. I wait.
Like all things the bridge returns to its resting point.

Five Versions

I

There is more than one life one perforated part
there are five people in one body but they are all
susceptible to dominance.

II

Pick the version you like best
discard what cannot be sculpted
a pillow off-kilter.

III

On the bed poised like a crooked
picture on the drywall the symptoms
of a talented housekeeper.

IV

Bathroom drawers organized
toiletries stuffed in asphyxiated Ziploc bags
sconces hung to exacting level and proportion.

V

Split outwards in different directions
popping apart like paper dolls
edges like bottle shards.

Dollhouse

I want to be

Agee, complex as the manuscripts

I have read under the azaleas

The éclat I subtracted from myself behind a veil (a portrait of a doll in a dress undulating at the corner of the wet bar)

drop-bombing bleach to the sink with the rough

side of the sponge, heavy as Bukowski

pinning to be like a reincarnated Faust classic

like a

[record player

stuck on rewind] trigger man to the coquettes,

vocal as a drill call (“Yes Sar!”)

bending line breaks on a bench in the park

wandering the aisles of the grocery store

with my daughter at the bottom of the cart amongst the baguettes, muttering my words revolving past the checkout like a disc on a turn-table

nostalgic as a lost Siamese|esemaiS

Dream|maerD

Trapped inside the dollhouse,

I want a marriage as

carefully constructed as the three-fourths meter

in the first

movement of his lips

redundant and ugly as the leftovers I

plastic wrapped in the placenta inside me

myself and [I

want] to.be.[Stratford-on-Avon]

[to.be.]

erroneous as

my wedding ring.

Mud Mask

In the morning
post-hangover and smears of dried-out eyeliner
I will make the girls
stumbling in lime stilettos
new as the freshly vacuumed carpet.

Filling craters of skin
pores diminished pockmarks bleached
erasing relics of late night shifts
removing weeks

I make them feel the way they did when their mothers combed their hair in the mornings.

*When they raise their faces to the mirror
the earth itself will reject them
into the sky like an Apache—their bodies
gleaming bright as loose change spilled upon blacktop
their visage pristine as the pew closest to the altar.*

Chemical Adolescence

it

 bangs

around

 inside

my

 organs

 upstairs

 running

 from

 serial killers

or looking longingly from windows.

Everyone is at least five versions of themselves.

Buck-

ets of bile

intra-

venously delivered

 damage-control.

Mayday mayday.

We eat oranges from the neighbor's grove.

We swim in the St. John's with chords of twine

bound around our ankles wondering

what perpetuates the search.

Sleepwalk Through Waking Life

The pulse behind my ears
my feet walk fine
lucid dream they fall one after the other after the other
there is no light to walk by
the house is quiet though everyone is home

Dark in the living room. Icy flushing through my forehead
clammy eyeballs. Eternal mother scolds, sends me back to bed
through Hades crossing kitchen laminate and gather pillows
hide quiet on the carpet until daybreak.

Inventing the Plotline

It is open-house day. Or teacher parent day.
a day different and brighter
for children in its wavering instant.

My black plaid jumper one of a small group of lace socks and oxfords.
The parents are helping us write comic strips. The group beside mine
created a narrative with the Coke Bear as a cameo. It is wintertime and he
has made many arrogant television appearances. He has interrupted afternoons
to slurp Coke out of a glass bottle instead of a can as everyone else does.

I am void of ideas for a comic. Our group
stagnates except for my father who invents the plotline:

Panel One: A boy on the sidewalk, old-school skates strapped to his feet. The
the skates have tentative circles for wheels
and as bearing even more tentative circles.

Panel Two: Boy falls. An epic fall. A fall to end all falls. Ass meets
sidewalk and both sets of cheeks redden.

Panel Three: He is skating again. Mouth ajar and upturned in a way
which says the fall never happened, or at least it never mattered.
A pillow is twined to his backside.

In a room where I am usually all quiet and
lonesome and wandering, my father
sits beside me.

Sticky-Eyed

“Strong-eyed” is an expression used to describe sheep-herding dogs who maintain consistent eye-contact with the herd. A dog with particularly intense concentration on the herd will often get “stuck” in a holding position, as opposed to moving the livestock, and is therefore referred to as “Sticky-eyed.”

On your smallest daughter’s birthday
you carried him to your neighboring back forty
black streaks working their way through his coat.

A dog more difficult than any you’d trained, sticky-eyed
and suspicious of the stock. Five years pass
as he vaults through Lochaber, its
temperate weather, the oceanic air of Scotland morning.

Looked down at your thick hands as he
exposed his throat for you and you ruffled the frill of fur.
When you were eleven your father told you of the jugular
it’s where animals go to die
and you felt a hiatus within yourself. You
wake him from his whimpering dog
dreams that bring a deepness
groaning out of the cave of his throat.

He herds with a deeper dynamic than you have
seen in any animal; guides the ewes along
like Banting extracting insulin
from the islets of the pancreas for the first time.

In the beginning you barked commands
take time, way to me, way to me.
Now you merely mutter and he is omniscient.
You stand at the stem while he
gathers the sheep in a pear-shaped outrun.

The remoteness of Rannoch Moor eats at your wife despite
her village adolescence—she is silent at lunches
he prods her with a black snout
and she reprimands him in a singular mutter:
Noboy. He curls and slides onto the tile
she eyes him and picks up her fork.

Time falls away and the dog is a strange religion

in afternoon competition he arches over hurdles
shining oil slick delight paws pressed the
flyball box coat glossier than polished granite
sleeker than your son's pullback turn.

He is loose before nightfall
melting into the rocks (running over hills) returning
to greet a scrap of rawhide your daughter
holds in her outstretched hand.

You ruffle his fur at the withers and creak past him
into bed. Once you are settled he rubs
his neck on the bedrail with a guttural groan. Your sleep is deep and more
dreamless than in the womb.

Red

The table runner on the chest of drawers
A crewneck tee shirt with an oil stain

The bottle opener
A Queens of the Stone Age CD

The line slashed just above “lager”
A song on the radio with the chorus in German

The way I feel about the color itself
Occasionally, the sunset

War certainly
The tape dispenser I’ve neglected to refill

My brother’s car smoky unkempt
The sheen in the coat of a bloodhound

Fake berries in fake foliage above my cabinets
Teeth-after-wine cut roses he gave me

Until he knew better dried stalled like a car broken down
On the road of the table runner—the chest of drawers.

Neptune

Gas giants underneath twilight
the cosmicomic of a red dwarf resting on a branch

from the dock I know Neptune's mass is seventeen times
that of the earth and I will brew my own coffee in the morning

Fishing inverted constellations pulling up sting rays
I wince and snap the line the rushing of the wake

my walk from the end of the dock is a pressure point
the heavy of an evening the ocean brackish of sundown

Remember the Feeling

Start with the grocery store. Wander
its segmented aisles
with trinkets of canned soups, the dried apricots
winking at you from their perches.

Pluck them from on-high. Load rations
of frozen chicken breasts into your cart. Ponder apples:
Granny Smith or Red Delicious? Buy both
unload the bounty. Picture the casserole
not yet prepared the onion
still whole on the chopping block
the touch unfelt.

The emptiness of the house is a textbook. The silence is a test
you haven't studied for. You don't know Rilkean solitude
or how to go into yourself for hours at a time. Some days
you travel to the local mall and handle items you've no desire to own
listen as the crowds flow around you like a hot breeze.

You keep a box fan running in the bedroom
its white noise settling over rug and dressers.

Remember: When you were a child you lived
in a house that often lost power—the neighborhood
transformer shorting out every storm and it was never
the darkness that frightened you but the vacuum of quiet.
It suspended you in the shell of your own body.
It echoed back at you from the kitchen.
Remember the feeling, waking from sleep into sudden noiselessness.

Remember the feeling. The absence of sound.

TWO HALVES

Passing Through St. Augustine on I-95

My mother knows something is wrong
and I am of course her daughter. Her arms around me
frail as a bird, pale and petite. I am all overheated
electric burning in the mulch driveway
waiting to return to a city that isn't mine.

I had this idea: I would fade
just like the sun bleaching clothes left out too long on the line
but my space now is only taller and wider and deeper
and desperate for transition. I will give up
my materials gladly. I will throw away the blanket of moon
in Antalya. The Mediterranean a trembling bowl of milk. My last
love's sea. His father has passed and I only
understand this in relation to my own father's eventual passing. The hypothetical
is astounding, childhood received at all angles. There are many things
that cannot be articulated. I am more closemouthed than ever.
The forced filler of small talk does little to navigate me through the sensation
of living. I merge onto highway and can't remember
the last time I said anything of value and it's a long drive.

Lemon Wedges

I put lemon wedges in his mouth
the face he forms is love extant the hair
that runs down his back is forgetting but when he turns
around I suddenly remember
the sun loaded looking down the barrel into my eyes the backyard
overrun with lawn chairs a collage of organs tied up in pillow shams
my wreck of limbs piled up in his lap
puddled in a car seat in a parking garage
unlatching his belt worn even after the finish
peeled from it like paint from a swing-set
I lie with him in the afternoon knowing exhaustion
is simply a unit of measurement in need of conversion
I rise up finally in my last life and say
here is your laundry
here is a lemon wedge
place it in my open jaw and please tell me
love what face I make.

Cashing Out

The restaurant where you work embodies
the labor of hours that roll into
the half-lived life you couldn't have anticipated. Whole
years lost to calling your corners
waiting for your heart to return to its resting point
while you take drink orders. Barely keeping pace
a job that pays just enough to cover rent
and a few beers, every birthday a new pair of shoes.

What is the void. Starch on your work-shirts.
Online bill pay. What's needed for fulfillment if you get enough sleep.
Every blue moon you eat out, tip your own
waiter well and know breathing has restrictions, the cost of
blood running circles like a greyhound on the racetrack.

Temper

A night at McCool's and some drafts.
A snippet of film repeats on the wall: a girl
on a bike with a boy on the handlebars—cut
to an orchestra covered in blood.

Mood swings. The bowl of a teacup ride.
The toilet reeks of spoiled pilsner.
My wallet gone I am dim and drink hard
live the best which is to wake and split yourself outwards
sectioned off through the trellis of spine partitioned to
forget my days and which direction they travel in.

From What I Can Read Into It

Your hair curls out at the ends. This is an observation.
There is a question of what
trots upon your subconscious. The currents
flow AC/DC along wires of contemplation.
With you I can't tell. This is a way
of saying *I don't really care to know*.

This is hitting the nail upon the head:
only martyrs keep silent.
Your finger hovers before the remote—
The pictures start and start up again.

Rio de Janeiro

Garbage pickers in Rio de Janeiro pull recyclables for thirteen USD daily from the world's largest landfill. They readily accept the wasteland and I wonder at the tremendousness they come directly to the source of their troubles. Plastic bottles PVC pipes, medical waste. They shake the hand of human experience in horrible form. They are beyond visceral. They work with it intimately as the big picture gets bigger.

Waiting Moon

Cars slide past
illuminated road, drivers unaware of my presence
multilayered glow of night
(domestication is sitting
on the trunk of the car) lake
just over the perimeter of the fence
clouds gather like altar boys before mass
the moon Eucharist, suddenly
its parting strange open only to me
was there
and it too waited.

I'd Say It To You Like This

Meaning is key. Fingers through your hair
reciting salutations does not make good manners. Your bitchiest look.

Kindness matters. Intimacy is not a display case. You say, "High horse."
I say, "Place your bet." Who could ever count on forbearance.

I say "Good to see you," and you think it works all the same.

He

made my solar plexus nerves unfeeling
vertical while my knees wound into the bedsheets.
My empty abdomen folded into his
namelessness which rendered me insensible.

The merging of one motor skill into another,
the melting of limbs. The feel of him keying me up,
rising in me like the sweetness of the first time I shoplifted.
The acidity of the memory bites, the past-tenseness of it
is razor—down the aisle of a used bookstore where I fingered
the spine of a first edition.

Language knows me our waists knotted waiting for the devolution of flesh
the kink of a hipbone in the crevice of a torso. He
sleeps days away and I am terribly envious—I pity his
toxic gorgeousness. He is a note-to-self written on college-rule:
be deliciously destroyed (I couldn't arrive for days after).

Once retracted from my inside there isn't guilt, only
impairment which dwells in the womb like an embryo
and wonders if it is going to live. The exit
is poorly planned, the birth canal is a blueprint
not drawn to scale. Nor is it linear.

Chance, carnality, fucked. I struggled to produce
a more temperate word for my female confidant
but there was no better explanation. Nothing could
sound more rational before my short-poured drink.

She nodded her head knowingly and adjusted an earring.

At the door he knows exactly what is not yet expected
that time holds no status amongst sex and I envy his solidity.
The best fraction of him is the last shirt I ever lifted—
the dressing room of a department store where I eyed the plastic hangers
and felt unequivocally bored. Past-present-future held order, stood

in line single file. I regret the silky request for my jeans most
and the pleasure he took in dressing me back together.
He slides the denim along my thighs. Face to mine
his niceness frightening.
The context of tenses is immensely distorted, the relevance

misplaced like a handbag. He runs a finger along my waist
and the instant pulls away from me, quietly, one article of clothing at a time.

Breaking Fast at Sundown on the Sidewalk in Istanbul,
You Give Me a Koran

The evening before my return flight, I am vaguely offended

not by the gift but by your stern advice
that I not read it lying down. Your selection is in good taste.
A fine, expensive edition.
Gilded edges annotations in English.

The annotations try to build bridges,
provide explanations: Your heart is not much different from mine.
The pide is served. *Afiyet olsun.*

Two Halves

My time is divided in two. One-half for love and the other half for ordinary living. I made this careful divide, compartmentalizing my hours because I cannot be in love for all my day. It would be exhausting, I know it, with my heart buzzing around my ears. The dishes would sit forever in the drying rack, the cat would never get fed.

Love for half my day while in the other half I write out a check for the electric bill. It's Wednesday afternoon and as I slip the envelope into the mailbox I know the divide is far from perfect. From the driveway I can picture him in the back of the house, shaving in the bathroom with an old school razor, a thin long blade with a yellow plastic handle. The sun beats down on me in the driveway. I put the thought of him away, shelve it with the other half. This is the bargain I have made for myself and I am good at bartering. My heart for yours. No funny business. Hand it over.

My car sleeps in the driveway like a dog in the sun. The hubcaps are dirty and I grab a rag. From the garage I gather everything for an oil change: four quarts, a filter, a drain pan, a wrench, ramps. I climb into the driver's seat and switch the ignition, squeeze the gas pedal until I've eased it onto the plateau of the ramp. I pull the E brake and slide beneath. The underside of the car is a map of metal, a page from an automotive atlas. With a wrench I loosen the plug and remove it to let the dark syrup stretch down into the drain pan.

I shimmy out and swig from a water bottle while I wait for the oil to drain. This is the other side of living, the separate half in which I am peacefully unmoved. I pop the trunk of the car and see a pair of sneakers, size ten. Poof! There it is. He has snuck inside me. This is the half which should be mine and he has come into it, cross-threaded into me like a bolt I can never drill out. It feels like being punched in the ball of my throat.

It is not until I'm back under the engine that I realize the filter wrench I've picked is too small. I grab another from the garage and I'm glad he's not there to see, he is good with cars, better than me. For the third time I slide underneath the car and with the correct wrench I remove the filter. I slide in a new filter, fresh and creamy white as clotted cream. I come out from under the car, it's a sunny day. I pour fresh quarts into the engine. I drop the hood and finger a coin in my pocket. I don't know it yet but both sides say *tails*.

I wipe my hands on my slacks and open the front door. There in the house, he is there.

My Brother Asks

if I've lost weight

A bit, I say. There was an unkind year of being
thrown over furniture and pinned to tile floors.

About twenty pounds.

There were nicer moments too but they are harder to remember.

When I left grooming became a concern of the aftermath. An invisible
current skimming my face with cosmetics. Plastic strips of adhesive
bleaching my teeth, the mouth

with a talent for clasping shut at inopportune moments. A tan like sun through
a jar of tupelo honey. The bright disk an oblivion.

Don't lose anymore, he says. He knows what I trade it for
he knows a pretty sister is harder to protect.

Call to Prayer

Lying on a cot in Istanbul, 5:00 AM
the cry sailing out
it carves a crisp waking, scaffolded
alleys and the matchbox flat
unity in stillness brick wall built
into sunrise after the bars
with tall glasses of pilsner quit pouring
before the smidt sellers pull out their street carts
it cuts through the silence.

THE LIFE YOU WANT

Marlboro Red 100s Quoting Ginsberg in the Graveyard

The train of speech—Ginsberg's boxcarsboxcarsboxcars barreling
over the palate the collision of the tongue reverberates
tonsils, slide of the esophagus. Reds reach the bronchial tubes
travel in a million shattered directions. One piece in a blood cell
the next streaming out through the nose. Blood pressure rises
ninety-two over one-hundred eleven. Smoldering ginger
between thumb and index finger.

Once before he inhaled the same way, shoulder forward
head to the side illusion of partial decapitation
he holds a paper towel flat to his mouth and filters me through
like charcoal to silk screen. White to piss color to burnt bullion
to black. Mood changes along with the tissue of living
black to burnt bullion to piss color to white (to red blood cell and I travel).
Holds me to his lips again it's love, it's a mother bathing her infant in the sink.
Throws me down.

Nothing Better

There's nothing better on
this whole gun smoking planet
than sitting on an untidy porch
with a novel and no care to inadequacies
the neighbor's kids are laughing their way to cracked ribs
and who gives a damn where my phone is anyways.

Staff Meeting

Wedding rings beside binders.
Meaning is negotiated
I barter, passive female.

Identity is performance and we are
largely indifferent, the image
of gender defeatist questions:

Pedagogy—I'm a paragon of integrity
of course! Interpret me. A conference
table filled with young professionals

our answers are a construction. Now we understand
that everything is in flux.

The Life You Want

Fun is a job requirement, a ritual to perform for the sake of vacationing families who own the life you want. Sports equipment and pool sticks standby as some seven year old kid insists on a piggyback ride. At this point you practically feel strings tugging on your uterus. Some days you are your own stereotype. You like the older kids best, the ones developing awareness of their own adolescence, who can tell you about a home state or hobby and tag along as the rounds are made. For brief interludes you leave the Recreation Office, you've got this strange wandering quality these days that your co-workers wonder at. You check storage for packages and meander the pool deck, you find motion is the only action which softens the sense of perpetuating stillness. The front desk clerks are puzzled by the number of laps you make past them, that particular breezeway a central highway in your trajectory. One clerk wears too much makeup and stands stiffly She has never moved her body in a way which would surprise others, which is awful. On meal break you pace the back stairwell. Someone kissed you here once. It was neither a meaningful nor meaningless kiss. It was a pause you knew how to handle.

Slow Pitch

Hear the crack of the bats
heart like a twist cap
water bottle. Sports complex
heated fields my face the face of a wanderer.

His forward holler
carries over the sonic boom of the bleachers,
my sweat starts his skin humming.

Perfect Serve

It is the toss that matters.

Floating—the arch of knees—limbs

fully extended a phallic statue

open-palmed better than

the wind off the lake

the hum from the speakers is pop music

the daylight brilliant. More colorful than a novel in the backyard

I try to tell myself it's only the afternoon.

When It's the Worst: Work

Going to the grocery store is difficult
but watching a rerun of *The Daily Show* is
the hardest thing I've ever done in my life.
The warm red center of a tough cut of meat.

Teaching is easier, the idea of discourse community
and chit-chat with a co-worker. Their overripe breath
is surprisingly refreshing. A glass of wine is easy
but trickier with every subsequent glass.

Switching off the last light at night is hell. The first
step towards the bottom on an infinitely expanding stairwell.

I never eat breakfast anymore
my stomach salted
floating like the body of a capsized sailor
my belly distended reading anthologies hoping
subtext will illuminate larger truths.

H & N

Only when the shop is vacant of other clients do we curse openly,
barber-shop style with glass bottles of polish in colorful rows
The UV light throbs its pressured rays. Viet tells
me how the Koreans all have dry cleaners, the Chinese take-outs.
The Vietnamese have nails. A hard face, he is usually stingy with his smiles
and I am surprised when he notes with a smirk:
because you don't have to go to college for it.

Days off don't exist, first-generation and he is all slang
with spiked hair and acetone palms
files down my tips while his mother dotes on me in intermittent English,
stuffing handfuls of guava hard candy into my purse.
Fiona, the petite nail tech, flips the channels on the tv while I watch
the language of intermingled silent backward glances
that orient the heart-vessel and set your sights along the
scope of feeling. Viet and Fiona are an item. I am a spectator
and save fills for lonely days. I learn the lexis
in likeness to a mechanic's, while Fiona wanders the shop
a focal point with wide cheekbones: Full set, soak-off, paint change.

When Viet speaks to her there is an excess of inflection, it reassures
his masculinity to speak hard but the care he takes
with her hands is extraordinary his own living pulse
evidenced in the laborious detail of her nail beds.

This week he has molded koi fish in the acrylic—
they swim next to lily pads near her cuticles. With ponderous
hands she pulls me back past the aisle of massage chairs to another
room I frequent. The dogs are veritable mascots of H & N and meet my advancing
hands with enthusiasm. They are named after two-word
food items: Pork Chop and Root Beer. Light as their names
they are good dogs and do not care
about the shape or the shade of my fingertips.

They will never suggest to me that the way I present my hands
somehow lessens what I hold
they see hands and it is all the same
so long as I comb through their soft fur they will reward
my fingertips with loving tongues affirm
that something good can come of my appendages.

Bloodsugar

Hypoglycemia is a matter of communication
static distorts the message at first
concentration at a teetering point: the landline is cut.

Her eyes begin their opening
wan pallor and thermal blankets
body temp 90°

The strange math of illness,
insulin measured in units other dosages
quantified as milliliter, I have never been good

with numbers. Inadequate reading from the meter.
Quick fix of a glucose tab, maybe a mint from her purse
or the Halloween candy I offered—six years old

having rounded the horseshoe road
she passes our house cannot see it. I call out to her. *We are home.*
She blinks, retorts at my calling. *That's not our house.* Her face half lit

she walks on, brain function degraded by a low stock of glucose
if you didn't know you might assume drunkenness
the thickened tongue::::::::::the unenunciated vowel

I've dosed her with the entire bottle of glucagon
probably I only need half but it reassures me
frightened by her convulsions, mouth so tight

I couldn't pry her mouth to even a slot
can't know she hasn't swallowed her tongue.
I hadn't been home to catch her slackness and

my brother smells like whiskey when I meet him
in the waiting room. She's been here before
when she believed it to be gestational

a part of pregnancy to come and go like morning sickness
I was there, learning to breath as her body turned on itself
singled out her pancreas like a black sheep and said it could not belong
her illness where my rhythm began.

After Several Glasses of Scotch (You Tell Me You Love Me)

I adjust the twisted collar on your black button-down
that's the Black Label talking
you insist otherwise then sleep heavy stupor

awaken rutted memory sheen of sweat on your thick neck
at lunch you ask what we spoke of
I pad through the kitchen in leggings chattering

over your cold sandwich and avoid that portion of conversation
that little serving of dessert along with your suggestive eye
There was something else—I deny it lightly

You are all matter-of-fact—*I said it, didn't I*
I take your empty plate and straddle your lap
Don't worry, I say, I won't hold you to it.

AT AN INTERSECTION

Open Jaw

Chic and easily bored they hate any season not summer
girls with Pulp Fiction haircuts subscribe only to
appropriate forms of revenge: shaved legs, sunglasses.

Sunshine in cataracts with a shot of tequila
privileged existence meets the open jaw of paradise
healed with oil life comes

sailing at you like one o'clock conversations
the words settling past the bottom rib the girls
talk about the food they used to eat while the salt and lime fills them up.

Poetry's the Hangover

Prose is regurgitation. The story of a story as vomit.
Words come surging with the first heave
the lexis fertilizer for the lawn the second retch
pushes forth chunkier themes constricting abdomen.

The undigested narrative. Ipecac to get
the storyline moving you know it takes a lot
of dry heaving to develop character (the in-and-out
is only a double entendre). Revision fails

but inebriation is only a method for gathering material.
I stand 4:00 a.m. half mad on the lawn
my soaked garment unraveling is prose
it reweaves a figure which resembles another

too closely in image and purpose. To get acquainted
with your own sickness is the fun part. Hold it
in the basin of your palm, part your appendages.
Let the verbal runnings filter through and hunt for something of substance.

Diver

He descends like a diver from a board
a perfect trajectory of falling
his delicate temple bounces
the corner of the porous stairwell
synapses in his brain firing
he as walked from the downtown library
the muscles contracting
then limp.

The One Time You Didn't Win

A king and knight combo is not mating material.
The board before us, sixty-four squares, two kings. You are not dead yet.
You haven't hung yourself in the backyard
with an electrical cord you are in cheap clothes
winning every game. To celebrate we swim
and then tango in wet underwear. In my house I have the sensation
of selling myself and cannot explain it. I am trying to hang a photo
pressing the frame to the wall
three times missing the nail.
A rook slides across the board and I want many things.
Bus stop. Lunch break. Toy boat.
I want to scream at the sky: *I want more than a stalemate.*

Penmanship

I would be devastated if someone were to ever call it into focus
any page would be bad, chicken scratch
oh irony: the romance is angular
the beau is sloppy. Surely it isn't Freudian. The teacher
holds up my nameless paper and asks
whose is this? Not mine.

Red Rabbit

He abandons the hand-written
style of Agee's authorial yelp
dullness and the will to type
medulla oblongata red rabbit
on the roadside stamping keys
speaking angular print
movie reels acidifying line breaks
period punctuations failed
words into the incomprehensible:

How am I not myself?

A Bird Through the Back Window

I never paid a bill on time. There was no
furniture in the apartment. I didn't eat well.
I hadn't yet started my file cabinet
(the final death stamp of maturity). No eating out. I was always
in the wrong clothes with an awkward thing to say.
But you'd take me by the catchphrase. You'd watch
with me as happiness snuck in a backdoor we'd forgotten to
close. Even when in birdlike panic it busted into the windows
in misaimed escape we marveled at it.

Grammar Book

He is the antecedent of himself

Orkide worked two shifts today, so she is tired tonight.

Your hands are a misplaced modifier. Interjection (Hey, no one suggested that we would find an easy solution).

The sexiness of organization. Peel all the rutabagas.

Transitive verb intransitive crisis. Could we classify our souls this neatly? Dieters prefer green salad.

The seals sun themselves on the warm rocks.

At an Intersection

Longing for the last life forever he
grabbed his little German girl and swung sparrows
her high she bent her calves back in mid-air

they had spent some time in the UN district
looking for apartments and even the shanties
along the Pelham line seemed too expensive
but she told him she'd die before they ever
lived in the Bronx and he wasn't quite sure
how he arrived where he was extant
but he knew the tattooed plum colored waves
that ran the length of his arm the octopus
at the elbow with extended tentacles
the bicep a lighthouse unoccupied that never was finished
she has the scales of justice inked on her ankle
a crop haircut pearl earrings
his own little Vermeer

he lofted a crumpled planet of tin foil towards the curb
out in front of the double doors of the RC Music Hall she considered
the Bronx and its all-right-ness
planted one on him
the parted slot of his mouth open and waiting with the apprehension of air.

How Much

we are willing
to let go of
is astounding (forget

-ting whole
afternoons) wave
to the ones gone by

you have now
lost those faces
those coffee cups liquid regret

throw down
your mail

in the driveway

and say let it
to the wind.

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