Cark

Broc Norman Rossell

University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd

Part of the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/913
CARK

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Broc Rossell
November 2012
Advisor: Bin Ramke
Abstract

A collection of poems with critical preface. The author expresses concern for responsibilities and obligations resulting from utterance and offers a means of reading poetry in light of such concerns. Lyric theory and the legacy of Language poetry with regards to the lyric are loci in a discussion of contemporary poetics. It analyzes the work of poets Tomaz Salamun and Lyn Hejinian, in relation to theorists Theodor Adorno and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to articulate a poetics specific to the poems in the collection. The poetics is described via the literary and anthropological uses of metaphor, which are employed to unify text, writer, and reader. The phenomenology of ritual and ritual theory address these contingents to conclude the preface. The collection of poems is divided into three sections, each a distinct, interrelated collection of poetic modes.
# Table of Contents

Critical Preface..............................................................................................................1

Cark: Poems...................................................................................................................11
  Invocation......................................................................................................................12

Section One....................................................................................................................13
  Artlessness..................................................................................................................13
  In Flight.......................................................................................................................14
  Lupus Metallorum......................................................................................................15
  Scug.............................................................................................................................16
  You Are the Only Body of Water..............................................................................17
  The External Mind.....................................................................................................17
  Thew............................................................................................................................18
  Sometimes I Think I Love Everyone......................................................................21
  Desiderata..................................................................................................................22
  Paterfamilias.............................................................................................................23
  Disseisen.....................................................................................................................24
  Summer Fires.............................................................................................................25
  Resonant Structures.................................................................................................26
  Each Sin is a Disappointment..................................................................................27
  Snare..........................................................................................................................28
  Lyric.............................................................................................................................29

Section Two....................................................................................................................30
  Home............................................................................................................................30
  Platonic Optimism.....................................................................................................31
  Monologue for a Robot..............................................................................................32
  What I Heard From the Mouse in the Warehouse..................................................36
  Red Rubber Atomizer...............................................................................................37
  Putting Out the Conscience Like an Infinitesimal Cigarette...............................39
  Early Morning at Squaw Lake................................................................................40
  Whistle and Snare.....................................................................................................41
  The Summer of Color Television............................................................................42
  Lightning, Lamps, Burning Coal, Amber...............................................................43
  Cento for the Epithalamium.....................................................................................44
  The Minnow Who Lost Her Luggage.....................................................................45
  Acoustic Shadow......................................................................................................46
  City Park......................................................................................................................47

Section Three................................................................................................................48
  Wurlitzer.....................................................................................................................48
  Combing Beamish Cove..........................................................................................49
  Oso Blanco..................................................................................................................51
Critical Preface

Last summer, while attending the School of Criticism and Theory in Ithaca, I heard a highly regarded scholar make an hour-long argument for a “lyric present” tense not found in Huddleston and Pullum’s *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Listening to a scholar attempt a definition of lyric reminded me of my own attempts at describing the hole in my life where God once resided, as a clearly outlined but ultimately unknowable Absolute, a kind of Derridean penumbra. The necessarily caution of the lyric scholar’s academic argument has a counterpoint in my desire to keep the Absolute unknowable, by the desire to both protect and describe a world that needs protection and is ruined by description.

Here is a poem that appears to describe the world. It once meant a great deal to me, but means less now. It’s written by Tomaz Salamun:

> Eternity is
cruel and crystal.
It ruins
everything alive.
It replaces people and
loves and does not
open
the well. With a hand
you dust a glass
you do not
break it. Let every
love
die as
a man does. Death
protects us.

I love the strangely American, slightly biblical utterance; I love to hear the
Whitmanesque echoes along what “is” in this work by the Slovenian who once wrote “It is better to be a new young god in American Poetry than to be President of the United States.” The declarative and confident tone, however, might be mistaken for the poem’s concern, which is not the establishment of theological maxims but the question of how a poem valorizing the human—temporal and mortal, flawed and fleeting—does so via an impersonal and nearly supercilious tone. A poem that purports to valorize “people and loves” contrarily invites “every love [to] die as a man does,” and so the poem does not “open the well” of engagement, emotion, or passion any more than eternity might. The assertion that impermanence fosters beauty is far less interesting than the line breaks in “With a hand/ you dust a glass/ you do not/ break it,” which replicate the spare symbolist gestures of the images and suggest that clipped elocution is a fair approximation of any utterance.

This poem made my weep when I first heard Salamun read it—not for any kind of sentiment it evinces, but because it sounded to me like a rare animal, a pure verbal impulse, irrespective of cant or fad, cutting through a mountain of anonymous contemporary poetry like a train’s lamp through the night. Today that reading means less to me; it has lost its hold over my emotions. I don’t read poetry looking for a rare animal so much as for anything unpretentious. This poem straddles the line.

My resistance to Language poets was in fact a resistance to what I understood to be the values undergirding the movement. In suggesting that Language poetry “was united by its antagonism to lyric voice, coherent self, individual consciousness, or

---

transcendental ego,” Marjorie Perloff identified the poetic backbone of Language poetry and its heirs as the complete rejection of the poetic and philosophical histories embedded in the locus of the lyric. How, I asked myself, does one become an author when *The Death of the Author* is already a cliché? This was the false dichotomy I thought Language poetry presented. Adorno said, “the particular individual owes the possibility of his existence to the universal; proof of this is thought, which is itself a universal and to that extends a social relation.” My resistance to the stance of Language poetry did not stem from any doubt regarding the inherent instability of the “self,” which I accepted and accept as aggregate and as a locus of engagement, but that something like sensibility or voice is nevertheless unavoidable in artistic expression.

A couple years ago, a poet I admire told me that Lyn Hejinian’s *Saga/Circus* – especially the “Saga” sequence – was one of his favorite books. Flabbergasted, I was even more surprised at what I found in those pages:

*Banned from ships as if I were fate*
*Herself I nonetheless long hankered after adventures*
*At sea*
*But buckets, lifeboats, gulls, and fish guts on wharves were as near as I got*
*Or the beach. The ban was inoperative on the sands and there I boarded*
*Wrecks, where the terns, godwits, and gulls were ashore*
*As at sea and from beaches*
*Observed by fine points by which one can distinguish*
*Between the sandpipers*
*Just as I learned there are many fine points to fate*
*Which divulges what comes to pass indefinitely*
*So that we can hardly say of things that happen that they were meant to be*


Or that they weren’t. Like a pupil
I was ruled by obedience
To rules I broke.

That this was the same poet who had famously written against closure, against resolution, that posited the speech act as the embodiment of empire, was difficult for me to accept. The deeply thought relationship to history, the acknowledgement of a poetic mode in action – which as even a fleeting moment of *ars poetica* is as close to an instance of the lyric as one may find in contemporary poetry – and the accumulations of “I” and “fate” built from wave-like cadence into philosophical propositions, is a plainly subjective rendering of the object of the poem. “Saga” rendered the following thoughts as something less an authoritative stance than an artist’s plea for vision: “I can only begin a posteriori, by perceiving the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete. What saves this from becoming a vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation is one’s ability to make distinctions. The open text is one both acknowledging the vastness of the world and differentiating it formally. It is form that provides an opening.”

Hejinian isn’t stating a fact; she’s expressing a hope.

In *The Logic of Inquiry*, Hejinian writes that she has tended “to cast poetics into the role of articulating how and why a poet works, elaborating her reasoning and reasons. Poetics, in this respect, seems as much a philosophical realm as a literary one. But it is a pragmatic realm, nonetheless; the reasons and reasoning that motivate poet (and poem)

---

are embedded in the world and in the language with which we bring it into view.” This
ahistorical definition of poetics, while problematic (how, for instance, does this definition
justify the hundreds of uses for “the poetics of” – of disobedience, DNA, sex, space,
gardens, water, exhibition, the everyday, cinema, decay, science fiction, and so on –
found in a simple Google search?) seems more in line with a theory of aesthetic value I
appreciate than a definition of poetics per se. Literature, and especially poetry, seems at
its very best a mere and momentary intensification of a world already in action: a lens
that is part of the show. It also seems like a very poor medium to prove theoretical points.

Last week my students and I tried to define poetry as something that might
hypothetically be construed as existing without any poems in it. A workshop (at least an
undergraduate workshop) is a place where one develops a critical acumen to improve
one’s creative practice, and the conversation was sparked by a student’s honest question
as to how a poet changes their life to make it more hospitable to the writing of poems.
The conversation about to cultivate the garden, to increase receptivity, and to open one’s
self to the possibility of poetry occurring, was compared to the conversations in class
sparked by discussions of poems. Why write poems? –Because of the life one must lead
to do that well. Why read poems? –Because of what poetry brings closer to
comprehension. The real poem, it was postulated, is never written; it is the life and
thought that surrounds it, constantly under revision. Foucault wrote, “What strikes me is
the fact that in our society, art has become something which his related only to objects
and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is

done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life becomes a work of art?”vi In class, we thought one way such a hypothesis could become reality, would be through the pursuit of writing poems in pursuit of life. In that scenario, what is written is inscribed on a face, rather than a page. I’m not sure what the difference between literature and life is, and it appears Hejinian might agree; when she writes “the reasons and reasoning that motivate poet (and poem) are embedded in the world and in the language with which we bring it into view,” she might suggest that perceiving and engaging with language as a mediation of the self and world might be an end in itself.

The poetic uses of metaphor in poetry and its anthropological uses are essentially the same. Perhaps the fundamental poetic device, the metaphor is not restricted to acts of creative writing. Metaphor is what moves meaning out of one experience or idea and into another; it is the literal vehicle with which we apply “a strategic predication upon an inchoate pronoun,” imaginatively associating an unknown or unidentified subject (he, she, we, they, you) with the quality or qualities of another. Thus, they look like bad people. This is the perfect place. You are a dream. What T.S. Elliot called the objective correlative is the semantic movement accomplished by metaphor from the abstract, inarticulate subject (i.e., the past) to the “easily graspable metaphoric predicate:” your love is actually a red, red rose. The metaphor is comprised of the “imaginative process of outreaching (epiphor) and combining (diaphor),” which lifts the known object out of its literal meaning and into the realm of subjective potentiality. It’s the way we make sense of the past in order to find the courage necessary to continue into the future (it’s also the

way Hejinian breaks her lines in order to replicate the discursive nature of contemporary thought).

I became interested in the anthropological dimension of metaphor when reading a recent book on ritual theory, *Ritual and Its Consequences*, in which ritual is posited as the moment where sincere and prescriptive behaviors are joined together to fashion a sense of order from a chaotic world. The anthropologist James Fernandez argues that rituals, including the ritual of *writing a poem*, are actually the performance of metaphors, and the medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman has persuasively argued that the forces that drive us to enact or embody metaphors – crisis, danger, and uncertainty – are not episodic but a fundamentally endemic part of our lives. Gay Becker, author of *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*, has argued that the metaphor is critical to sustaining a sense of meaning, purpose, and value in the moments of crisis that are almost continuous. Taken together, these anthropologists assert that metaphor is, in the most literal sense, the means by which we migrate from moment to moment, from image to image, and from line to line. Poetry is not cartography.

Hejinian’s last point, that poetics are a “pragmatic realm” and that the reasons why we write are “embedded in the world and in the language with which we bring it into view” is both valuable and problematic. I don’t see any grounds on which to dispute the notion that the reason why I write, why we write, is embedded in the world; I certainly can’t explain why or how I was called to the vocation any more than I can justify poetry’s...

---

existence. But to say that why we write is embedded in language itself seems an almost mystical, a belief in the unstated meaning of Chomskyan deep structure; at the very least it asserts a tautology. Was it language made us human, or was it dogs? This bias privileges language as a mode of expression. Musicians and painters have good reason to disagree, since both music and visual representation predate poetry by millennia; poetry and literature have adopted or co-opted techniques of sound and image, not invented them.

What seems most valuable and interesting about Hejinian’s hypothesis is what she refers to when “we bring it into view.” She cannot be referring to the reason why we write poetry; “it” is the world that is summoned, and it is only brought into a proximity that our facility (or lack of it) with language negotiates the distance of. The question, as I see it, is whether a language act can be an instant of perception if language itself is mediational. What can be written or spoken that is not already seen or felt or heard? Celan says that you must “listen with your mouth,” but might we not also say that we speak with our ears? “The enigma,” says Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “is that the body simultaneously sees and is seen.”

If that’s true (and I think it is – what is perceived enters the body as the phenomenon of perception, when light becomes data), then it changes and, I hope, has changed my work and my relationship to it. When I read philosophy to understand poetry, or poetry to understand philosophy, it is because I believe the truth is in there.

---

someplace, even if it lies hidden at the bottom of a well. If I don’t know the difference between literature and life, and between literature and perception, then my life is an act or a moment of perceiving, and the evidence of that is the work. I don’t mean that I read my poetry for signs of identity the way some people read tea leaves. I mean that my work is more real, whatever that might be, than “I” is. My presence is the present.

This, to me, is not only a spiritual stance, but a pragmatic and even political one; feuds, rivalries, claims to property and inheritance, are grounded in a sense of history that is more often than not illegitimate. What this looks like in my poems are, first, an attempt to write in a post-lyrical, transparently descriptive style. Second, an interrogation of perception, a constant questioning or examination of what I think I see, what I think I am experiencing: looking at how I look, listening to how I listen. I’m not speaking of the trope in contemporary poetics of “defamiliarization” but rather what feels like integrity, a desire to acknowledge as completely and articulately as possible the impossibility of really knowing anything or anyone outside the limits of my own body. If I don’t know who I am, how can I ever assume to know who you are? If I can’t characterize my own experiences with any accuracy, how can I perpetrate the violence of knowing what you’ve been through or even calling you by name, into a name?

What I hope is present in my work is an awareness that every word I choose silences the others left unspoken, and that if I do summon something into being with language, that it exists as closely as it can to the threshold between its name and its pure autonomy, the mystery of what cannot be said. I believe the result of that awareness is what, if anything, produces the eloquence called “poetic” in my work. I don’t know if my poetry is poetic.
I try to write in or through as wide a range of poetic styles or modes to create an impression of instability writ large, not necessarily opposed to the instability of the contemporary discursive line break. Some of the poems are sequences of images, and some are discrete images themselves. The poems in this dissertation are divided into three sections in order to establish a kind of scaffold on which these various voices rest in contrast to each other, a la Bresson. I have arranged the poems so that they speak to each other both rhetorically or vocally, and stylistically or metaphysically. I hope that the overall effect of the sequence is to create a meta-narrative, or a kind of emotional development, so that themes in early poems are enlarged and complicated by its conclusion.

Poets have always been aware of the instability of the medium they were working in; I think it is the degree of that awareness that characterizes much contemporary poetry. I know that my words have histories, I know they assume new lives in other countries. But language is the only medium I have, and I must trust it to communicate some small degree of the strangeness I’m trying to articulate. If the “research” of poetry writing is really the search for a sensibility located in the ambiguity between my intention and language’s inherent intelligence. Lionel Trilling defined sincerity as “the moral life in the process of revising itself,” and if my poetry is at all sincere, it is only sincere in its desire to become the next line. I don’t believe these poems are embattled, in the sense that they strive against themselves; rather, it is my hope that any self-consciousness in these poems emerges from the knowledge that these poems require language to work through thoughts that turn against themselves. Without that doubling, even riving medium, the poem would remain silent.
Illusion is the first of all pleasures.
INVOCATION

and at times when
only the void stood between us, we got
all the way to each other.
-Celan

And to appetite the flavors of desire;
Though I do not pass my hand through yours

But relish instead the resistance of our bodies
To the bridge that joins them;

And in your face I see the perfection of mine,
Which has always been a confusion to me;

And my body builds itself out of the darkness
Only to acknowledge the seed of same in yours;
In each line I hold a knife
Open more of myself to air
So that I become an unthinkably feathered asterisk
And reduce this body to a filament
By way of these questions I only empower with poetry

That these questions open a dark corner in me
To a darkness beyond matters of light or thought
Something passing through trees
Feathering the topography of my viscera

Like every wind, a digression
Like every wind, an inexplicable digression
Like every wind a blind giant wandered away
Like every wind an accidental flare from the core
Indifferent to us, indifferent to trees
IN FLIGHT

I found a word
For the moment I saw them
Crossing the stream

I flowered myself

Into an idea and exchanged it
For this body –

Each day I have thought of bread before it appeared in my hand –

And I turn to another silence –
A white sky

Childbirth on a microscope slide

At the pore
I find you
A collection of tide pools

A new torch
On a dark tree
In a room above Kilimanjaro
I wrap my eyes in muslin
And place them in a basket.
I prepare to leave
But when I stop to check the weather,
All I see is the back of my head.
There is a slight rain.
The sun, a lunge, an apricot cloud.
I glow with a small disease.
Without the eloquence
of sunlight on a whitewashed wall

Birds melt into evidence,
metal splinters into the sun –

I'm an apple with a beak,
an accidental tongue
And on the leaves of my words
Hang the shadows of apricots,

I speak with metaphors
In a world where apricots are orange,

The light bulb in your living room
And the pale sun of the jungle

Separated by an incident
Between two grown men,

Their conspiracy located
Where the slight twitch in your stomach
At the beginning of the night
Confirms what you have just witnessed

Which is not the same thing that is happening now
In the center of the word now,
In the center of the letter O,

The sound I pronounce
At the sight of sweet fruit,

The sensation of a pit
Falling from my gizzard,

The stone that gallops at the head
Of an avalanche of air
Racing to the bottom of the lake.
THE EXTERNAL MIND

You found your way through the wrong veil
Your ear is defective
You are not American
You are not a hole in the head
Your happiness is an anger
And your tears were the visibilities of a stone through moss and grass
Your smile amputated creatures in Micronesia and Alaska
Your sense of place was the sea surrounding an undiscovered island
Your parents were a pair of defibrillators
Your confusion was the only honest thing about you
When you gazed upon your lover
She tore at her chest with claws
And wept tears of rage and of white fear
Your heart has been kept in this box ever since it killed the dinosaurs
Your salads were dressed with elixirs of stolen virginities
Your bread each morning
Cost the lives of itinerant families who infected each other and died

And here you are
Perfectly composed
The eye for seeing sees
And your skin wetly under the gossamer shroud
Opens its pores until you completely
Understand me
Undressed by my voice
Undressed by the unspoken certainty of your error
You stand before me a simulacrum of the stars behind you and nothing more

And what do you remember

Who did you hold dear
against narcissism

My friends have died that I might be alone
They did not ask they could not inquire
After the person they created with their dying
But I walk in the woods and I tell them
That their mothers have forgiven them
And for that I have not forgiven their mothers

against mourning

What is your pallor
Below the utterance of the name
He who left you in the evening
What color was his jacket
Did he leave his hair unruly
His name was Bernardo and he never thinks of you
He barely even works

against contrition

Cut the clothes off
The air bubble a swollen dream exploding in my mind
Left for nothing we walk like broken toys to the gas station

against the deity

Ordered words trailing tresses from a glowing marquee

Words carried around in a two-wheeled tank

Watery vines, imperfect lines

against

Spackle of stars
Woodshed in the snow
Length upon length of mother in the woods
This is how I bake my bread

against testimony

Blossom of wind:
Bosom slab of stone:
Hear me.
I am coming with hands and feet.
I am coming.

Stop me:
Adjudicate,
Dispense,
Delegate,
Show me the dirt
To dig.
Is it a child?

A memory?
A house?
Show me
Nothing. Wind, stone –
Listen.
Listen to your cousins
Playing outside.
It was solace, and the charnel house I took it from –
Violence induced by the necessity of innocent
Brame – by which the silts of suffering lent
Themselves to the deeper disguises of boredom.
Lately I’ve been changing myself;
On the morning’s rise, submerging the sills
In a light that transforms fear into silence,
Comes this guy. So ill a jester as myself –
Broc Rossell, scrap wire, ageing automaton,
Wastrel bumblefuck – should know what’s wrong
When I say, I’m two. And I probably do.
But I still rise, I still believe in you –
My imagined coition, my time to burn. If
I come from the infinite, I can’t return.
DESIDERATA

From a seed that takes the night away
Through my boot soles a spore
Flaring into the gray and red hair waving in my chest cavity

Before the marrow dissipates
The black hole
Whose onset can make a hot air balloon taut and full

Or I stifle with the wave of my hand
What my bones permit themselves in my absence
The hollowness that’s honest for bones
I see a reliquary ankle-deep in dust
A podium in the center and accoutrements of ritual arrayed
A beam of light comes through an opening
Similar to the light that descends on the attic of the library in Rochester, Vermont
Several boxes or chests on the floor, foetid with grime
My head is as tall as a foot
I see these chests clearly
A single spear leaning against the corner directs the light into a half-opened armoire

I roll my head toward the closest chest and open it.
A passport,
Coins or medals,
A globed compass of brass, which tells you where to go
The way the magic 8-ball tells you your future,
And a pair of strange eyeglasses
Which don't look like they will fit my face
But when held up to try
Turn the room into an orange and pink kaleidoscope,
And I see ribbons of myself standing in the armoire,
Decrepit and tall, with a fine red sash,
Holding like an officer’s helmet on the hip
A head that I suddenly see is me.

I put on the glasses
And the room goes dark.
I feel myself being held aloft
Like a wick-lit lantern or the heart of a Mayan virgin,
Undulating as if the darkened room was a docked rowboat
Which is how I know, whoever carries me can potentially fly
And this thought alone
Trains my eyes to a point in space so sharp
They become a quill
I am a wind and
a shirt,
a wind flared briefly
and expelled
in the cut-hay musk of batiste:

lance corporal
of dust,
fugitive of whatever I said.
SUMMER FIRES

Beyond the flaming pines  
I stood selling melons  
Perpendicular to everything I love  
Each melon like a note from the Diabelli Variations  
Into this smoking dark world

The sky still blue  
I flowered above the smoke  
My skull turned into paper  
Fingers elongated El Greco

Lurch-sailing through a thorny crowd  
And home with a truck bed of melons

The driveway at dusk is the real home the home sits next to

On each brown brick a mute brown bird  
Struck and still like hammers on strings  
As in the white air to every black branch  
Art lost, and lost, and lost
RESONANT STRUCTURES

Went to the dirigible
Ate the tendermost point of a cow

In a wicker basket
I floated up against a vaulting wall of flesh and blood
The mummy let me in
I stopped dreaming

I followed the path
But a lemon tree in autumn delays me
Its wax-dark leaves light with dust

I hear a distant engine like the flush of a memory
Of the moment I first found myself alone

At the far end of a field
Come upon a moldered rail of fallen fence
In the dark vale beyond the lights of the tent

Long before this evening, when each time I give someone a balloon
The night says, too
There are ways of revising

The heart held is a thicker thing

Now the victim quivers
Between the shape of a child and the shape of a sandstorm

There are people like you
Who don't lay siege to castles and collapse like pennants lank and flat

Because your hands are trailing waves of watery light

Like The Guinness Book of World Records longest fingernails drill bit tendrils

Your fingers trace one white skim of the night tide along Mozambique or Cali

There is a simulacrum of that truth in most software applications

Also where there was a field fallen arrows have landed they swell and grow

And there are the flumes from spent candles
Tunneling into the dreams of mice and into the soft dark toes of trees

And there are propensities bulging
Between bicycles and low-flying aircraft:

Dianas of your daydream
Globêd noumenons
Water bugs in momentary trees
SNARE

It sleeps. It belongs
To someone or something
Careless. It rests itself
In the folds of aluminum
Stacked by the foreman's shed,
A wattle of clay smudges,
A midden of fingerprints
On the shining metal
Like an eddy of thinking.

How long I have to decide
Is not clear – the sound
Of power tools comes quietly
As they only can mid-morning, and the box
Barely trembles.
It shudders as it
Longs for the pines,
Longs to rumble and combust
Like an enemy of solitude.

On the embankment
I behold Aesop's panoply
Untied from their cunning
By attention to my cause.
None can aid me but each
Will carry my remains

To quiet places in the mountain
Unbeckoned by agency,
My skin cells
A fragrant pollen
Dusting their snouts. The box
Shudders.
LYRIC

I saw a tree
Through a window

And another life
Went away

A needle
From this glassy orb

And somewhere
Someone struck a spade
Section Two

HOME

There are the water tanks. There is a skateboard in the ivy. There is the house I have never seen, with its driveway going behind a fence. There is a broken white rain gutter spanning the row of uncovered trashcans. There is the dirt lot with haphazard BMX jumps eroded into pebbled mounds and hollows, behind the row of shaggy, rotting eucalyptus. There is the owl I once thought was a pole-mounted single-phase transformer. There is the trailer behind the chain-link, next to the other trailer. There is the song that was playing when their car caught fire. There they are, spitting out of their overalls, cruel and white. There is the driveway paved with synthetic river stones, and the planter's box of sour geraniums where the pine tree used to be. There is the cinderblock wall I mortared when they went to the beach. There is my first bicycle. There is my mother. There is the coyote, red as cinnabar and tall as a Shetland pony, cresting over the wall into the flood canal. My brother has been sent away. No one else is home. I take the boxes that are already in the driveway and put them in the car. I can feel the drugs wearing off. There is someone in the passenger seat wearing a shirt with my name across the back. I drive to the end of the block, put the transmission in park. There are cars speeding down the hill and more climbing it. I pass through them. Here I go.
PLATONIC OPTIMISM

The curve in which the leaf
Curls and lifts
Off the limb

Is the pull of your throat
Toward that light
MONOLOGUE FOR A ROBOT

Thought thickens in the veins and swells. Bright arteries run into the pressures of the dark.

-Robert Duncan

There are no pieces, just a point to touch.

I look on at my insides, a cut shaft of fissuring obsidian.

II.

“Crush them up, they won’t bleed.”
“That much is over with, I can tell you that.” “-I’m leaving.”

A silent visit. The music-player broken. No one moves. He leans over, plucks a loose eyelash.

III.

The flower wilts at the stench of the street whose current carries those who can’t make it

To whose old money names make them face an exhibit of synthetic memories they resent on specious grounds

IV.

Piles. Everything arranged into broken, fleshy imperfections.
Something tells me the horizon is my name when I was in heaven.

Rubble that pitches over into a more cobbled order – a map, a face.

V.

Low tide’s muddy grit steaming in a side-hit morning. Wisps, waifs rise like seaweed anchored & undulating in the bracken of ocean floor midnight, not requiring this support of sun.

VI.

Electro-blue of the vacuum tube dusting a thick thrush of faces, near enough to – in the same gesture as – swimming over an open locket.

“The sun used to follow me.” (Pause.)
“The moon too.” Through air filled with solder and sapphires, cosmic meiosis in a neon tube.

The train from the north is blue.

VII.

A boy named Syrus George Halifax Trinidad. Bridges, tunnels, a Cisco truck, a stick in the spoke. He

Wrestles his emotive reflex. A grimacing alchemist. An addict of pleasantries.
VIII.

When he doesn’t remember the system of working things, I remember a story. There were many men honorable enough to dress even their steeds in gold and silk and they also, not only swords, had blades in their boot.

IX.

Monsters rolled their eyes and dice and broke the heaven’s bread. A pinhole of light breaks through – amber kitchen light – *wake up – I’m hungry*

X.

A strange scar. Half-scrubbed henna shot through with scar tissue the color of make-up, weaving its way through august heather like a river of sand,

* muscles beneath the mandibles of one standing on a trapdoor*

XI.

Creek slotted full of fat summer trout. Slotted with stripes of lead-lined and brilliant light. She waits for her most delicate, wet thoughts to become the property of others –
XII.
When he’s on his back, he calls his lovers down out of the bodies of eagles; when he blacks out they touch down like mosquitoes and tickle his urethra. He wakes up with kidney stones.

XIII.
A seagull aching in the head. Between compulsions: compulsion. Headland, compulsion. Hanging in the steady off-shore over the interstate.

XIV.
Something mercurial.
The quickgone airwake of a butterfly redrawn with ions and paint, a sinking skyship.

Pick a straw.

XV.
I could try. What I should do is put my foot down, then put it up.
I hope, in the middle of the next
Century, for wormgrass and rabbit legs
To grow again in the fields, to feel
The heat of a nocturne as I press my ear

To the window and hear an oboe mark
The symptoms of an elected history

But if this were a life
It would not be too different
From the vitals ableep on the screen
And woodwinds would still trail clean thoughts from the trees
Clouds are the result of pressure blown from a valve

cherubs singing
while we don’t
buckle
below.

I consider

whether wishing is worse
or if the longing itself is a wonder

more than cilantro on the fingers
or cunt in the mustache.

The moment he set foot on the island

my great-great-grandfather

received the gift of tongues. He spoke perfect Maori

until he died
a hardware salesman in Highland Park

and still by virtue of this miracle

brings certainty and pleasure to

his grandson my grandfather
when he is woken by the screams of his wife

who no longer recognizes his scent

on her sheets.

When I spent a summer in my kitchen
writing you letters

addressed to a mountain camp in Arizona
what died in me

wished to die
but what grew in me then

furious and dim

drove me all the way to the beach.

From the end of this ocean

he flumes the deaths of islands
to our intermediary
whose garden languishes
in the way pain travels
from hand to hand
from anger to pity.

Sorrow for another man comes from a hole so large
it pulls our earth apart

into a map

the equator a runway
PUTTING OUT THE CONSCIENCE
LIKE AN INFINITESIMAL CIGARETTE

What is broken
when one falls
and the overseer
maintains efficiency

The body
doesn't even leave perspiration
on the floor
of the glacial plain

Who will aid the one
who follows me
will spell them at ten o'clock
will make a motion make a noise

The world is an automobile
the world is a peach pit
the vanishing of human presence
is a ripening fruit

The sun is not light
but fire
faces names words
fathers and sons

Tribes valleys
customs and wine
another convenient amnesia
another ornamental blessing

Another payment of alimony
and various tithes of breath
one moment the wind
is infected and the next

It smells like cocaine
I say this without emotion
from the promontory
of my passable appointment
EARLY MORNING AT SQUAW LAKE

If through the tip of this pencil
The profile of a horse
Blooms above

It is because a horse rose
In the foreground of a moon
Now descending
On a night of total frost
So that the frost speaks to itself urgently

To communicate everything
About the whiteness of paper

And from trees the horse and more horses
Stand and stomp and sniff
Their respective aromas

Expelled from their beautiful large nostrils
Slowly cascading onto this field
Now empty save for sun on pine
On the beach I think about vitrifying glass
About tight collars and clean windows beneath
Adolescent clouds, camels carrying tea trays, breaking clouds
That smell to you like the April in every month
Of days that crawl up your skin into the deep cave
Across the fortuneteller's hand
Moths flicker north from wave to welkin
Nibbling air the way you forage
Like lupine through lichen for a slice of hard bread
The halved pear of your back pulled sleek
They repeat themselves and say
All this darkness is transparency and decay
Taking what the rest of me can't
Take like solid blows
While I am imagining a single pine needle
Against a clear alpine sky
   A green swimming hole for an infinite number of swimmers
Circling into an implacable gray storm that gathers its skirts
Seagulls sing of ashes and salt
Even the swallows are crop dusters
THE SUMMER OF COLOR TELEVISION

Muscles work by accretion
The oldest job is the sun’s
I am dreaming of garlic
The wind’s fingers are ringed with leaves
I am incarcerated
I have discovered the uses of leather
I have no thoughts at night
The squirrel’s body I left is about gone
Its belly perforated like a colander
I hear music blow by from the southern basin
I masturbate in the avocado tree
I sunbathe at the reservoir
I have a transistor radio and a magazine
I am dreaming a menagerie of impossible women
I am waiting for the sun to smooth these marks
A rose bush in the cold is the angriest word
My fingers are starting to curl
The wheel is about to pass by
The water will be cold the sun bright
I will have a new friend he will be me I will ignore him too much
I can hear the soundtrack
At the moment the dancers’ fingertips touch
I don’t stand up very much I’m truly wealthy
My eyes see everything like the semi-precious stones at the Yosemite Gift Shop
My eyes are black stones and see diaphanously into blackness
Insects disappear into each putt

of the motorcycle’s muffler,

Open their mouths and unlock the code

of the theater’s starred ceiling.

I awoke to find a folly of light,

a ripcord of air.

I labored with diligence, uncrowning art with thoughtfulness.

I stripped my house to the ground

And unearthed the silent mare.

She proudly bares her nest of worms –

I lean on the shovel, it writes excellent lines on

ploughed paper.

Your laughter is the rainbow ripped

from the worm by the blue jay’s beak.
What do we do when we're done?  
- We love the things we love for what they are.  
And in knowing who we are  
We have begun to say good-bye to each other  
And cannot say it –

For that silent gaze and  
For you beautiful ones my thought is not changeable.  
The venerable song falls from your fiery wings.  
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Skyward again, without hope, of course –

This is the air left behind.  
The clouds of white flies have risen up into the evening,  
A few white clouds all rushing eastward,  
Flowers whispering in the night, blue whispers  
Disappear into the white. The future begins,

The Clocks have ceased their chiming,  
And the river runs on.  
Truth has its own life we only touch by accident.  
Certain moments will never change or stop being

As for instance the moment when I say  
I love you or I do not live at all.  
Romance has no part in it,  
Saying again if you do not teach me, I shall not learn:  
The bottom of the sea is cruel.

But now in the center of our lives, this time, this day,  
We love the things we love for what they are.  
May you sleep on the breast of your delicate friend.  
May the eyes in your face  
Survive the green ice.
I went to the corner store and the light turned blue.  
Blue light above the marquee, a fish tank  
Full of scrambled refrigerator magnet letters.  
I got a pancake but the fork  
Drove itself through the table  
Into my prosthetic limb.  
I staunched the wound with the pancake  
And went outside - it was snowing  
Scratch-off tickets in my head. I went to the bank  
To have my hair pulled,  
But my girlfriend was there.  
My skull was dusted with sugar.  
My little sister came around the corner  
With a collapsible radio antenna, a twig, it was a rope  
In her small hand that was the head of a miniature deer in blue glass. She saw me  
And her eyes widened,  
Black ants emerged from her dilating pupils  
And wove down her cheeks along shining snail trails,  
Crumbling black tears covering her arms  
In glittering black down.  
This is how she flew away.
ACOUSTIC SHADOW

It becomes necessary to live in ways
Which if I claim are impossible
Become predicated on my definition
Therefore open
To impossibility in the same way I am open to this poem
Nested in a white tree
Molecular in cadence
A home within a home I imbricate
With noise
Elements critique me with division
A yellow dress in an empty field
Tempts me to soliloquy
Burns and turns to ash in the my mouth that holds it
With numbers and notes
Peals of pears
Rain on summer months in May
There is no body to suffer
No university to pay my fee
I flip with a fork the meat in the pan
The emptiness of matter becomes me
CITY PARK

The way my tongue goes out into space comforts me

It's easier to live in this body

When it speaks with birds      aloft in the azure illusion of air

In a park between three busy streets
I walk among a few trees

I find myself speaking
I have a cup in my hand
And someone gives me some thing
My cousin
My friend
Who I paint with

We turn corners
Deliriously
And on pointe –

_Let me in_
The phrase sings loudly
Before the curtain
Rises

Black screen
Flickering screen
Be a ramp
COMBING BEAMISH COVE

There long again
A motion from my tightness

A good one fathered up
In a dim-lit photo

Sunset circularly old
Reaching farflungs but me,

Fiberoptic meowing
The laugh of a parade

In the trajectory of ball-bearings
Packed in a suitcase,

Swans sank when you arrived
Doves rose into the nets of soupmakers

There are more than birds in my head but you
Beneath the swans

Your approach rustles
Like bed sheets intimating air –

Sweet bike’s flexion,
Your pooling navel,

Wrinkles from bed sheets
Like fossils of sea-grass,

Foreign phrase
Drenched in King Arthur:

_A gyante_
_Thus assaylle and guyd riddance –_

And as I scrabble for a pencil
To trace your outline

The eclipse of you
Burns like a cigarette

49
Through white paper,
A penumbra of impending fire

The black shadow
Of a great bird

Pouring through me
Headlong into open world
OSO BLANCO

You go to the creek,
Three fingerlings race upstream in summer shallows.
I stare at this second-hand table
Thinking of metaphors for dappled light.
In the morning the smell of red dust in your hair
Registers right when a dog is barking does, the sun
Almost white. Underneath I feel
The warm day become real
When you do. In the dark
Enough of you runs to make your body move too.
I am a trucker's wife
Humming a tune. I am a white bear
At the window. There is no moon.
To act -

Sail above the sailor
Fringed with lit fast cloud, happily toward

Island, some bright brigand
Given to cisalpine grandeur,
A house below the queen
Birthing her whip-white retinue

Tripping down the distance to the plain
To the shore of the sea
Full of a poem
A mind
Of nothing but air

Ships fill the sea less than pebbles in a stream
Sailors filling ships like breadcrumbs in a toaster

One word for their benediction
One beat on a drum
To the blind eye in the blue sky
Its broken pupil our black sun

Do I hold the ruined foot
Do I hold the tattooed hand
Do I trace with my finger the remains of your ablated arm

Your face is the body you tread

Your face is the answer that belongs to no poem

My finger on your cheek my word in your mouth
To know -

O stranger
Careless blossom
Tall green stalk walking on your tiny knives

May I write with your body
May I speak of its presence and sound a note
May I turn from this wall and witness in silence your little blue flame

Stranger among strangers swimming toward land
A shining shim in the water of speech

In my hand I see yours
Unfurl its pearly lie
I praise with singing the air in your blood

Possible, possible - it is possible

That there eye sockets in the sky
Animals in my arms
Children in our hearts

Bright nightmare swelling the hearts of our children into variable stars

Consuming their bodies with a disease of energy
Some revenge of the sun upon the greediness of grasses
Some delight so sincere that our future’s changed
To be alone -

The attitude of great poets is to single out each one of us
Silhouettes afore the crepuscule
Feverishly pumping in a municipal park every time someone shields a child from gunfire

The sail above is the same simple halo
A kind of lantern some turn to discover
To decide -

You have an animal
You watched and still wait
You fail to speak

My pride as yellow as a salamander's skin
Or the weeds that live in shadows

    I hear low sounds, the high range fading into sky
    I open myself selectively

I roll in a cloud of feathers through the thoroughfare
I plant myself with my ears and brace for the onslaught of the thoroughfare

From a place where change is a function of time
To home

You witness my shadow
The Caravaggio in the corner of Hopper's barn

You have an animal in you is not something we can bear
You have an animal in you is something we wait to hear
To believe -

Inviolable Mother, you do not speak for your children
Who scrabble in the dirt with buildings brushes and pens
Raising scars like mountain ranges on swaths of flat silence
Like the girl parking her 2007 sedan between daytime errands
Or the boy recalling the man who kindly robbed him of only half his ration of rice
Our silence is failure
Failure is reverence to you
THE EROICA, or, EVEN HE WHO SOUGHT REFUGE IN NOBILITY MUST NEEDS RECOGNIZED IN A TORN SCORE THAT THE ENEMY MUST BE PURGED FROM HIS VERY SWORD

Spinning in a drum
Sun low in the old window glass
Furtwängler defeating Hitler in Vienna 1952
What is the poetic context
Spinning in a drum

*

It is darker
The spider rising on legs long as bridges’ spans
I always seem to be able to keep a desk
Or a plank for a desk
Or forage in the alley for fruit
Sun in granular ruin

Bicycle fenders
Mottled blank

Tree branches bowed under a crown weight of silver

Electric lights bound
In sickly circumferences

While the minor tundra despairs
What it can't paint white:

A heliotrope
Fingers itself in a street light
CONGREGATION

The stars have moved closer
They move closer every year

Maybe this year there will be no snow
From leaf to branch
From branch to figure
From figure to ground
From ground into darkness
From the darkness an anomaly
From this anomaly the continuation
From continuation a pattern
From the pattern a structure
From this structure theories of architecture
From architecture the unbridled forest
From the forest a city
From a city the streets
From streets the medications
From medication falls a veil
From a veil a face
The face makes a sound
From the sound this thought
From the thought the hand
From a hand are the facts
From facts is love
From love the void
From the void you emerge

From you all these feathers
EPIGRAPH FOR MY EPITAPH

Dice divine deliver dear thy dead
device to my dry dread

Purple plunder of praised pain
purse my lips and purge this stain

Lies, my love, laid me down
lies like bells a country sound

Hardened heart its hate withheld
holds me holy in hell's compound:

Makers one, makers all, mind
my malice. Move on home.
Appendix

Notes and Acknowledgements

The epigraph is an unattributed line in an unauthorized eighteenth century edition of Voltaire’s poem “The Maid of Orleans.” Not Voltaire’s, and probably that of an anonymous editor, it is often misattributed to Oscar Wilde, as when I found it. “Cento for the Epithalamium” is comprised of lines by W.H. Auden, Samuel Beckett, Hart Crane, Robert Frost, Carl Phillips, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, George Oppen, Theodore Roethke, Sappho, G.C. Waldrep, and William Carlos Williams. The poem “Home” is dedicated to my brother Bennett, and Ashley Capps. The title “The Minnow Who Lost Her Luggage” was given to me by Lara LeMoal and Bin Ramke. “Red Rubber Atomizer” is for Ronald Taylor. In the poem “Sunlight on Symbolic Logic,” “some revenge of the sun upon the greediness of grasses” borrows the phrase from Dan Beachy-Quick’s poem “Arcadian,” in his collection Circle’s Apprentice. The poem also reframes Walt Whitman’s axiom that “the attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots.” The form of the poem “Lamina and Apse” is taken from Elizabeth Willis’ poem “In Strength Sweetness,” in her collection Address.

The following journals placed portions of this book on their pages: Boston Review, Catch-Up, Fence, Green Mountains Review, GutCult, H_ngm_n, Harvard Review, horse less review, and The Laurel Review. Some of these poems first appeared in a chapbook titled Unpublished Poems, published by Brooklyn Arts Press.