

KING OF AMERICA

by

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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

This is a collection of poetry and prose by Curtis Rutherford. The majority of this manuscript was written between April 2010 and February 2011.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Soviet space dog, Laika (c. 1954-1957).

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## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
My Sparkler Bomb.....	1
Your Energy In Memphis.....	3
Mustangs.....	4
March to the Sea.....	5
Diagnostics.....	6
The Missionaries Come to Finish What they Started.....	7
Sharks the Size of Hammers.....	8
Metal.....	9
Spheres of Influence.....	10
At the Oyster Tank.....	11
Heartburn.....	12
Home Plate.....	13
Count Off.....	14
Baby.....	15
Figure.....	16

Boy.....	17
Black Bread Break.....	18
David Lee Roth Vs. R.E.M.....	19
Softball.....	21
Your Energy In Melting.....	22
Master.....	23
Your March In Dreams.....	25
Ticket.....	26
Crotch.....	27
Main Street Crawfish Delivery.....	28
Your Energy In Redemption.....	29
From: Curtis <curtis@gmail.com> [I've got a chocolate bone to pick with you].....	30
King Cake.....	31
Holy.....	32
2 oz.....	33
Move.....	34
Front.....	35
Speak and Think In Figaro Taxi.....	37
From: Curtis <curtis@gmail.com> [Hi Mom].....	39
Blood Inside a Rainbow.....	40
Someone Smoked On this Elevator.....	41
Ways Things Stay In Reserve, NM.....	42

Clown.....	43
What I Read In Many Books.....	44
Country Singer that Didn't Make It.....	46
Trying to Order.....	47
On A Ferry Days After I Give Up Smoking.....	49
Little Strings.....	50
From: Curtis <curtis@gmail.com> [Chicken that crossed the road].....	51
Admission.....	52
Song.....	53
Bats on Reed Street.....	54
Window Seat.....	55
Punk.....	56
Dasha Crosses Khreshatyk After We Say Bye Bye.....	57
Drip Drip.....	58
Cool.....	59
Your Energy In Dreams.....	60
Beat.....	61
<i>Done Come Home?</i> .....	63
Your Rambo In Dreams.....	64
NOTES.....	66

“We live without feeling the country beneath our feet.”

—Osip Mandelstam

# My Sparkler Bomb

story has become prayers over a cup  
of cheese cake pudding. I have a habit of  
mumbling so this works out.

Airplanes are goodly machines because  
they do a lot for us and where else is it  
easier to believe? It's better than church.

Jesus and I go way back.

If you'll indulge me this, at 1 AM and 30,000 ft  
I start to get pious because I'm scared to death  
and even things like glitter start to appear  
decadent.

A group of students studying abroad.

A cart

of tea and ice.

A window full of wet and white. A peculiar tapping  
from the outside on double-plated glass. The  
sound of newspaper passing over  
a tray. Comforts, we have to get there somehow.

*Константин* (my new friend from Odessa, I say his  
name like this for practice)

brought chocolate and bourbon  
onboard and we talk and talk and  
at 2 AM, I feel like I'm in a house.

At 3 AM, I once put a sparkler  
bomb in a neighbor's garbage can  
and from the bushes the police  
looked like

aliens swimming in their  
flashing code, trash streamers and pucks  
of [static-words-static]. I can't even describe  
to you my pithy terrorism.

I'm happy at once and sorry  
I can't say the word *bomb*  
way up here.

*Константин* unbuckles and  
tells me a story of the woman  
he lives with, a story about Greek tourists  
and the wild brown and grey dogs of Kyiv. He  
opens his cellphone and there she is  
posing innocently with such sincerity.  
Certainly she moved into position  
for the photograph with trust.

A capacity for love that enters one positively  
in times when one is at their most helpless  
and vulnerable. I'm desirous of nothing but her  
boundlessness. A spray expanding the breadth of space.  
Pieces of wonders  
once scattered out across  
a bright purple place.

## Your Energy in Memphis

This is US-82 West, baby doll. Driving to Graceland kills me in the best sense. Something about that big beautiful house on Elvis Presley Boulevard just eight miles from the neon crunch of Beale and The Peabody. You feel it? It's the royal aspect. Like some kind of seahorse blowing bubbles in your heart. You feel it? The future at hand.

Did you notice that road sign painted over with a red devil and *The Day is EVIL! King Jesus is Coming?* I should have pointed it out to you. That's my fault—my bad. I should've pulled the car over and snapped a picture. I guess we could take pictures of these autumn leaves, here. Give them their due attention.

Then again, maybe not, probably shouldn't. Looks like rain. Really looks like the sky is about to fall out. Maybe we can outrun it. Did you notice when we left Tuscaloosa, the raindrops here and there? I did. Did you?

I've seen clocks shaped like a dancing Elvis with the legs knocking back and forth, keeping that minute hand beat. (Wags two fingers upside down) You know what I'm talking about? Can you imagine ever living on a king's time? America escaped a king but we hang on to that title. We name people king of this, king of that. Usually something uniquely AMEEERICAN (mimes a grand marquis with hand) gets a royal variation. Babe Ruth was the *Sultan of Swing*. Charles Barkley, *Sir Charles*.

I used to follow this one band around Las Cruces, American Youth. They played college house parties all over New Mexico and I got chummy with Tommy, their bass player who'd let me come up and sing their Misfits cover. I think it was *Last Caress*. Tommy and I would move ourselves to a dark corner after the show and drunk-talk about bands. Sometimes we'd get serious with the politics. His mom was laid off from Xerox. She got that carpal tunnel from twisting screws on copiers.

My favorite Elvis is Fat Elvis and I say that with zero irony. His concerts got more and more embarrassing. Sometimes he held onto his mic stand as if it were a light post in a smoky noir. His clothes got more flamboyant, his belly was, well, he was all belly. He was bleeding sequins. His fans got blue-haired and finicky. He was suffering in public with cash flying out of the trunk.

Maybe he dressed weird at the end for a reason. I used to think it was because he was a poor hick that made good but maybe he wanted to pull on a poverty-proof vest and sing himself. To get down with Fat Elvis, baby doll, you got to get down with all of him. Every old-timer knows he swallowed pills and took loads of young girls. It's wild but you know—it happened and I forgive him. Does that make me kind of assholely? This is a real blind spot. Can I forgive him or do I feel sorry for the girls till I'm dead? Do I have to choose or can the choices exist as a paradox? Should I think of the girls when I hear him? What do you think? The story goes that Elvis was a good, clean as okra, Southern boy. I know that pact. I choose not to see the truth, baby doll. It's a pretty spiritual thing.

# Mustangs

For example, I nearly blew off  
college to become a rodeo clown.  
I don't know what  
you wanted exactly, a life that steered  
away hunger?  
And didn't our coaches  
know it? We grasped above the painted-on,  
down-home feeling. There are young  
well-toned horses involved. A heart  
deferred to the second half.  
A deep snap that lands  
right in the numbers.  
Going deep and never coming back.  
Once, a man with a cowboy hat  
and a red and white  
mouth burned me with his  
breakfast cigar  
and even today bacon strips  
remind me of the American flag.  
13 bars themselves an instrument  
of measure. One bar more than  
the blues. The stripes  
running the crest of your helmet—  
a long highway we could never camp-out on,  
no stories or dreams of breaking  
the 10-yard chains to pieces  
under a night. There's  
no cactus near Swift Lake and harmonicas  
are old-hat. Blunt force, my man,  
young hunger on a  
Friday evening under the same sky  
that could well reflect the grid,  
the ticked away distances and time.  
It's the seconds we had  
in common.  
We're always on our way.

## March to the Sea

When I first heard about Joseph Stalin, I didn't know that *Stalin* meant *Man of Steel*. Like a hero. I'd always kinda thought he was one of the good guys. He fought with us. I read in many books that Jo went to Gori Church School. He poured God out of himself and poured back in the power. He was an armchair chemist of regular folks with a potty mouth full of dry wine. Red mouth like some kind of Caribbean bat but it was Khrushchev who loved Havana. I've had the idea to pour things out of me but you have to pour something else back in or your best qualities will serve the worst and your personality will be ruined. Go have a conversation with a Financial Aid officer and tell me no one, no one at all has real power over you. When Mrs. Q had us looking at The Big Three at the Conference in Yalta on page 94 in History class—it all started for me. Jo was the only one having fun. The only one looking at the camera, or maybe he was looking at the photographer. He was the defiant teenager in a family portrait winking at the *kulaks*. His lower lip rounded under his mustache. A teapot about to whistle out poor people. I read in many books that he had a habit of spitting. The hat, the cuffs, the smile and pock marks, the bumpy road to where it ends. No person. No problem. One odd heartbeat or one ventricle in the head going glug glug can show you how uneventful the end can be. How non-eventual and unnatural it must feel. He's a plug of information. Jo was one of many dams. Page 95 said he was from Georgia. Yeah, he could have been from Savannah, speaking of scorched earth.

## Diagnostics

When his belt thunders its beaten path  
out of his pant loops like rumbles  
on the highway

you look over your shoulder and take out  
across the street. Think about battery fluid.

Be unafraid as you are of the next crosswalk—  
never have your head down  
between your knees. Follow

the dotted line back. One at a time. Every beep  
every beat every track a tic on the tachometer.

You carry too much. You want to take  
where you came from with you.  
It's not a spiritual thing you're gaining.

Running with a rapturous pulse  
is normal

like blasting an air-rifle straight up  
at the sky for the tinkling return.  
Your pulse running

all the way out. The rim of you.  
Where the moon heaves on the waves

alive in the few minutes behind you.  
Your sneakers will park. Doubt.  
Breathless. Doubt is an autopsy.

No matter how far you go  
your sneakers look farther.

You look behind but the sneakers  
look at the future  
and his hair grows from the street.

He's cranking himself at the hip.  
Gonna turn himself over.

## The Missionaries Come to Finish What they Started

Seventeen—and we love-wrestled like morning squirrels  
under the pink and yellow bulbs on a string tacked to corners  
around your bedroom. The thin phosphorescent spit momentarily  
replaced your newborn faith and the daylight of another Sunday.

I remember the skirt and blouse and I remember the truck  
taking shape in the only window—popping the driveway rocks.  
That familiar church truck with the phone number on the side—  
so close the unbuckling riders might have smelled us through the window

glass as if we were wearing gloves and scarves of each other or trying  
to trade bodies underneath the sheets and letterman jackets.  
Sometimes I thought breaking your heart would be divine justice.  
The scramble to burn you could be my cosmic reprisal. The heavy

heels pounded up your porch steps and we were there linked in our tent  
of skin and education. How could a little fear of everlasting flame matter?  
How wrong you were to trade in hope for faith as one cannot stand without  
the other yet hope stands alone in something much closer to desire than faith

alone. We were connected by our mouths—  
and such—but no words. Connected by our mouths  
but no words were spoken so far on the other side that the scrape  
of the door-lock pulling away from its casing was a continent away. Us

so close to the fault line we stood one leg on either side. The slit shining on.  
A voice at the door called you. The voice wanted an answer but our kiss  
was still deep enough to care. The kiss was deep enough to pull the earth down  
with us. The loosening roots plunging down with us into a dark so dark

we felt big and bright inside. I was stupid enough to think the light could flush you  
clean or at least change the color of your heart. The voice wanted an answer  
and we didn't pull apart. We held on only a beat longer and the shafts of light  
hung briefly on the air as if we were happy to glow in hell together

like that.

# Sharks the Size of Hammers

On the work table  
Mom lays out the weekend's catch and  
I stare in wonder  
at these fine instruments.

I could pick one  
and hold it like a guitar.  
It would fit in my arms  
just so.

She disassembles the pieces  
in her fog-light, that kind of privacy.  
Spine from belly, fin from  
framework. I could

fit my nose over the  
thin black fins, their snouts  
not much bigger. Imagine  
swimming

toward a smell then finding yourself  
lost.

How they must have dreamed  
of her dry hands

before moving on across  
the light that finally swims  
for them. She works

deep. Wrenching life  
from life  
as if pulling bluebonnets,  
pounding home

flickering muscles,  
half-trophy,  
half-utility. They're babies  
aren't they?

## Metal

Troy and I were rock stars when we were kids. We'd play heavy metal cassette tapes over his parents' living room stereo and use sport equipment for instruments. Any racquet would do. Troy had tall stacks of tapes in his bedroom. When I knelt in front of the towers to peek at the titles at the bottom I could feel the weight of their shadows laying across my shoulders, *Shout at the Devil, I Am the Night*, like the sword of some dark monarch. Or maybe "monarch" isn't precise enough. There were times I'd look up from my knees and the towers were a row of jagged fangs that left no survivors. I'm still living on the venom from that mouth. The music was a celebration of the lowest of culture plugged directly into swarms of sweaty weirdoes. KISS was our favorite band. They painted their faces and that was cool.

*Alive!* was always Troy's favorite KISS record. I thought it was great too, but calcified in its greatness. It was deep-fried in its romance. I was a fan of 80s KISS and especially the record *Animalize*. It was the confused KISS grasping at the shiny flecks of hair metal. They were copying all the bands that they themselves had influenced. No longer were they the painted bandits. They were the old men at the party.

It was a more interesting time for my America. My parents listened to country music and laughed only when the sun went down. They said words like "faith" and "mercy" a lot. It was iced tea and clean-cut walking shoes for their future economic upswing that was always a year away. Soulful things were judged once then thrown aside. Grim moat-and-castle characters like Gorbachev and Reagan were Ivanhoes and Thomas Jefferson was now from Arkansas.

The album cover to *Animalize* is a tapestry of animal prints. On the back cover the band is dressed in exotic jungle cat skins surrounded by rocks and fire. The music video for a single from that era began with a close-up of lead singer Paul Stanley's pink fingerless gloved hand motioning "come hither"—one, two, three times before the camera pulled away to focus on guys dancing in a locker room shower with guitars. Paul's finger extended and arced forward and up, forward and up like a horse's reigns being snapped in slow motion.

## Spheres of Influence

The kitchen was quiet and I stood at the refrigerator clipping magnets to the corners of my spaceship drawing. I remember Mammaw's back as she cut around on her stool and gave me a big *shush*. Her finger spun up to her face like a cutlass on some Marine pamphlet.

On the television people stood on top of a graphitized wall with brown steel reinforcement bars jutting all around. I pulled myself up next to Mammaw, "So they just let them tear that wall up?" The people were happy. They had big grins showing bows of teeth—at that time I'd only seen that in pictures of me standing over birthday cakes. The camera cut to a pale kid with a drowsy smile and a big green military hat. He had a harelip that shot all the way up to Munich. The mic materialized and he blew into it as God blew into Adam and the translator took it from there, straight on—*Yes this is only a minor setback but it will not hinder our mission* etc. As the words came to him, the foamy bulb of the mic inched its way up between the camera and his nose. He kept right on mocking the smiles at his leisure.

Most of the parenting my generation received was about control, management, organization. There's a lot more out there these days. Love, and the passing on of family and worldly wisdom seems to be secondary, or let's say love is supposed to motivate the giving of orders and waiting for the appropriate, dutiful response. "We, your parents, know for a fact it's in your best interest to abide." I know that sounds harsh. But who wants to see a child press their hand in hot grease? A boss is needed.

Grownups let those other grownups act out and I got shushed for making a clicking noise. Mammaw had decisive control over my well-being. Freedom can exist with or without corrective action. If I had taken a clawhammer to Paw Paw Odom's fence I'd be sent to bed without dinner, and more. What good is freedom if you're hungry? That Statue of Liberty with her copper flame and sandals. When regular folks lose their capacity to dream—the experiment is over. She says *I lift my lamp beside the golden door!* Someone thought of that door to represent dreams.

## At the Oyster Tank

Lord have mercy  
—to eat the heart of a rock!  
We are grateful hunters  
and you  
the oyster  
swallowed in our ritual.  
We lay down our burdens  
when we run you through  
with our shucking knives.  
Your secrets measured out long and bashful  
on your dish of stone. Let us stick you!  
How precious your devotion  
closed in on yourself like an eye  
that watches itself across the back of its lid.  
We drink from the rock.  
We snip your last connection  
your tough button  
and shower you and lift you up.  
Our knives glide across the room  
like dorsal fins and I  
for one  
miss my dorsal fin  
stuck out and bright,  
waiting to be certain.

# Heartburn

The night was so dark it was as if *nothingness*  
were holding a knife to the neck of *ominous*.  
On one side of the Neches River Bridge we  
waited for the fire chief to strike the match  
that would torch the leaden training tower of Fire  
Station No. 4 and before long, the sparks.  
In a city so utterly  
mid-sized, you were always a spectator,  
always, even when you bathed yourself.  
It meant everything.  
Red flame ripped out of the tower  
loud and steady and dug its hips  
into the walls against the star-crushed nebula. We  
watched as firefighters poured out of the engine  
and wobbled into the flames.  
    Battle, struggle, warfare, toil—  
You pointed out to me the orange  
windsock at the tower's tip (as if one can  
anticipate the direction  
ruin may blow). We were hungry and  
the tower windows spat sparks behind us  
and we spoke thunder straight into the heart of downtown.  
We walked all the way to  
Gary's Coffee and settled in a booth. When  
the server came I ordered a slab of ham that reached  
out across my plate, toward you, like a hand.

## Home Plate

It got to the point where I tried to get Dad ejected from my baseball games without being ejected myself. It was a power thing—one of the only ways I could mess with him. I eventually gave up when I realized he had next to no shame at all. I like to think I have some spiritual resources. You can never master someone with little shame. I had a reputation of my own to deal with. I once made the mistake of sliding into home plate headfirst, but it was no accident. I hated Bridge City and their stupid red uniforms and Dad knew I hated them.

“Are you gonna trash talk?”

“Probably.”

“Do any of them play football?”

“I think the catcher.”

“What’s his name?”

Shrug my shoulders.

I slid into home plate full extension and hit that catcher right in his spaghetti house with my shoulder. The ball popped from his mitt and rolled across the grass to the backstop and that was all she wrote, I was ejected.

The boos from bleachers startled me as did the Styrofoam cup that cut a flip over the backstop spraying ice around the batter’s box. The catcher stood up thinking he could box me with all that gear on. I knew nothing about fighting but I knew everything about provocation. The catcher took off his mask and unfurled himself and took two steps toward me. He had freckles and neck muscles like a rifle-stock. “You go to hell,” I said, and didn’t feel his punch across my chin until he was back to swaying behind home plate. Dipping that logger head of his up and down behind his red chest-protector.

While being dragged away I wondered why the dugouts hadn’t cleared and where the hell was the umpire? Dad was shaking the backstop fence screaming, “You pussies!” over and over. The umpire ejected *him* too with an exaggerated gesture. My teammates thought the whole scene was cool. I hid my shame in my bones—faked a limp the next practice.

## Count Off

The world went up, the world came back down. “You guys look like Jerry’s Kids out here doing jumping jacks,” Coach Mayhew yelled out across the practice field. This was routine. “C’mon! In unison. Up. Down. Up.” He’d snatch a water bottle and wave it around like a scepter, “Stop! Everyone stop right now! We’re going to start over. We’re not going to stop until we do this exercise like a well-oiled machine! One body. You’re going to walk on that football field Friday night, and people are going to say ‘Look at that! They’re a machine!’”

He always did that. And when he did, my mind couldn’t help but leave the party. All I had left upstairs was an empty room waiting for him to fill it with whatever he wanted. I wonder if this is close to how they did it in other parts of the world when the river of history needed rerouting?

“Now!” he’d say, “On the count of three you will all exercise.”

He’d stare at the team all in rows. They were his rows and they were his rows since the day we were born and I was all in.

“One. Two. Three. Exercise!”

# Baby

It's the month of August,  
last chance at life.  
Our Dalmatian leaps  
to overtake a squirrel  
seeking deeper brush  
while my dad sinks a long  
jump shot and we fall back to earth  
chest to chest  
and I take the full hilt  
of his wet elbow  
right in the eye.  
The hit is so true,  
and in an instant  
I am stretched out long  
as the roads of our neighborhood.  
Never has a body part felt so masculine.  
I wonder if somehow this is a warning.  
He holds my head and very gently  
pulls back the 2 new  
flaps of flesh  
to assess the damage  
of my brow and leans  
over my face and says  
Don't be such a baby.  
At the physician's office  
I am a curl,  
an unusable face in the doctor's mirror.  
Dad waits in the lobby. There's a TV  
with the volume turned down.  
I pull myself up into the reflection  
stilted on nausea.  
Patiently we hunker down  
in separate rooms  
in aches we never asked for.  
I count the stitches  
the needle works in  
and out. In  
and out. The  
loose ends of thread reaching  
red and bursting  
for the summer's hand to hold.

## Figure

Paw Paw Odom wagged the carving knife at his daughter, my mom, as if inside him some primeval rage had just awakened. “Turkey is good for you,” he said. I stared at my napkin. The Thundercat watch on my wrist beeped once over the silence—my watch, and the plop of a molten gravy heat-bubble in its gravy boat, irritated by the porcelain that held its shape. “It’s unnatural,” he said through his glasses with wrecked expectation, the breached taboo. The turkey was to be distributed to all his family: his wife, his young daughter, and his six year-old grandchild; then enjoyed and talked about until coffee was served and the toothpicks were soft and warm from their purpose.

Mom’s hairline was soggy, fresh from aerobics. She was fleeing from him one calorie at a time. He saw her on a treadmill, running nowhere. He placed the tip of the knife into the dinner table with his hand resting on the top of the handle. “You know how your Uncle Lawrence lost all that weight? He ate nothing but hard-boiled eggs and cleared land *all summer*. You tell me if that’s healthy. That’s the direction you’re headed.” Mammaw touched his hand.

Mom looked at Paw Paw Odom who began to clench his jaw as he balanced the blade. She said, “I eat toast with one and one-half ounces of margarine in the morning, a filling chocolate protein shake for lunch and tossed green salad. I’m sorry but that’s all I’m having.” “Just have a little piece of turkey,” Mammaw urged Mom. “I’m telling you,” Paw Paw Odom said, “you’re not going anywhere until you eat this turkey that I smoked all day in that smoker.” “*I’ll* have some turkey, Paw Paw Odom,” I said.

He brought the blade down into the meat with the weight of his shoulder. Underneath the bird, a chip broke free from the serving platter from the force of the knife and somersaulted to the floor with a click. I heard a bone somewhere in that nest of flesh, snap. He removed the slice and dropped it on his daughter’s plate. “Do it for daddy,” he said.

## Boy

Mom was always saying that I didn't have any practical experience with the world and that's why I got off on grown men wearing animal print. There was only a small parcel of intellect to play with back then and I worked it over into a mush through pure repetition. These were God-fearing people I lived with and there weren't any record stores. No concerts to talk about. From our yard all I saw was Evangeline Lane cutting into Highway 12. In the autumn, when the leaves dropped, Harmony Baptist Church. Instead of being taken over by the love of bull nettles, T-shirts with perfectly centered chest-logos or the satisfaction of well eaten stew or whatever it was I was supposed to love, I made a pact with myself to wreck straight into the light of—something else. I didn't know what it was, but it seemed like it was going to be something uncomplicated and obvious.

## Black Bread Break

The refreshment cart is coming at us again  
and you have a violent way of slicing the bread  
on your tray.

An overhead bin snaps shut  
and could we talk any more  
in our basket of time?

Us two here  
breaking black bread?

In the softening tissue of our fruit  
we feel only Boryspil.

Trying to keep what keeps us kept—  
I hate the turbulence  
and the aroma of other people's plans.

The beveled edges of this:  
the little knife and bottle,  
the sleep mask and socks  
and the little pictures you carry.

There's people waiting on us  
between monasticism  
and a house with a chandelier. Between  
a Hostess cake aisle and a locker room  
in tatters between the meat house  
and turquoise. So say  
again that it matters—this  
ongoing going.

## David Lee Roth Vs. R.E.M.

Synthesizers from the rock music video beat his parents' living room and the boy could feel himself moving and moving on the carpet with the electric eels making love inside him. The frontman of Van Halen, David Lee Roth, was the boy's favorite singer. Blue pulses of light held the room and the boy's face was at the white hot center of it. Close to the TV, mom and dad sat watching along. Fret board taps and smoke bombs took up his entire field of vision. David's neon leg lifted into the sky over and over and left the floor twisting in a broken midair sprint that could take them both away on his silver ship.

The kicks touched the boy with such precision, at school he began to roll up his pant legs into sloppy creases that exposed his white socks as he strolled. "People will see me coming," he told his mom. "They'll know where I'm coming from."

He'll grow out of it, she thought. This flashiness will idle down.

But when the boy started high school, David left Van Halen and tried to get serious as serious was becoming fashionable. He didn't make many videos anymore. David started wearing black jeans and crossing his arms during interviews. The boy's heart was broken. All of his favorite rockers grew goatees. Some traded in their Flying-V guitars for steel-topped sliders. And worst of all—some claimed their playing style had always been peppered with deep blues influences. You could hear it if you listened with thoughtfulness, some would say. The boy equated the blues with raccoon eyes peeking through moss. On the other hand, his dad could hear the remoteness of the synthesizers, their distance from the spirit—ripples of electric keyboard notes just played like soap bubbles.

Soon, the boy was no longer a boy. Soon, he was in college and he became just another college dude with dirty jeans. Soon, he grew little sideburns that became big sideburns that reached down his face as if his hair grew two arms to hold his scalp down across his brains. Diamond Dave Roth was doing it.

His dad was walking through the Wal Mart electronics section and saw a dark little cover in the NEW MUSIC rack. He picked up the disc—*Automatic for the People*. He had heard about R.E.M. on MTV. Kurt Loder said that the band named the album after some convenience store signage in Athens, Georgia. *Automatic for the People*. It was like holding an ash heap in his fingers. He couldn't understand what the title or the cover meant but it made him feel younger as if there would be something to do if he brought this home. He could get in on this new stuff.

Sure, he could give it to his son when he came home for Christmas but his son liked crap music. The first song on the album was titled "Drive," and the sound of it made his ears ring. Who wouldn't want to start everything over again, get in a car and drive toward the mountain? Maybe a life of accumulation could lead to something more than kitchen gadgets and a garage full of new ways to kick your lawn's ass. There could be a sense of belonging to a big new thing that

was dirty and connected to the living waters of humanness—even if it was dulled with reality—even if reality was its artifice.

When the young man came home for Christmas, no one mentioned his new sideburns. His dad sat across from his son after dinner on Christmas Eve, stubble faced and stared at the sideburns. He put his mouth in his hand and really studied them as the young man told stories about his dorm room toilet and burrito fights. Good god how long they were! How they stood out like bricks on either side of his face—those new heavy hairs of his pointing to the ground.

# Softball

You hear nothing but moans these days  
everywhere you go. Even the buckles on  
the catcher's shin-guards cry out. You  
need a break and the air is pleasant here.  
The players' calves are charming. You try to imagine  
how much calf you can fit in your mouth.  
You once heard that sharks are a lot like dogs.  
As a young man, you were fascinated by sharks.  
First, sharks take a mouthful of thigh, a little  
this, little that, eyes go back—  
done. This is what you think about  
while balls crack away like galaxies  
and the runners bend at their waists' to begin. Those  
Palomino Field bleachers are so hard  
and the game goes on relentless waves  
full of tuber-covered dogs.  
The face in your hand. How visible  
this soft universe is. How beguiling its stars can be  
when they twirl. You  
squeeze your bag of popcorn, pieces float down  
on the heads of children collecting soda cans. They  
look up, see only your legs dangling  
and steal into the dark  
where futures are kept  
while the pitcher on the mound  
beats dirt from her thigh.

## Your Energy in Melting

I hallucinate a three-colored milkshake. Shades of clean ice cream snapping their air pockets and popping sugar in a factory painted cup, melting into one another's attics like a fat rain. I come-to in a school district's supply warehouse, pulling massive reams of rainbow flavored construction paper from the top level, filling summer supply orders for uncomplicated teachers with yellow forklifts darting under me.

When we break for lunch my foreman drives me to Sonic where his wife works and I walk inside past the carhops that talk and talk and sweat out hangovers, oil blessing their foreheads from the burger steam. I grab the biggest cup I can and begin pushing the milkshake flavor buttons in turn, the promotional varieties: *Raspberry*, *Dependability*, and *Goddamn* fall into my cup handsome. I walk out the thin glass door over to the back of our delivery truck where I'm thirty-five thousand feet above the chilidogs and bacon, above the milk and salt turning inside a company box. The orders are full. The supplies needed to bring joy and exhaustion to the children of the school district are readily available.

Their hands move slower after lunch. My working days sprinting down the street toward the bells and whistles of a white van's song. Its arch-light of wooden sticks warm and cold end-to-end. Those songs of praise alongside the other children, leaving footprints, waving a flag of faces, dripping faster, chewing warmer, wanting to melt into something so light that it floats.

# Master

I'd be lying if I said I didn't notice the girls wearing their best two-pieces. Their mothers all resemble Wonder Woman—that dark haired Republican thing. All that hairspray doesn't look too natural, if that's even what they want. It's not going to last in this water. I think they're watching my every move, any closing radius to their girls.

Finally inside the Schlitterbahn waterpark gates, Dad finds a picnic table and throws our towels across two chairs.

“Whattdya think? This our spot?”

“Looks good.”

“Yeah it does,” he says nodding toward a group of middle age women dragging their chairs out of the sun. “You can look now too,” he says, and I know he's talking about Hazel.

She held this unpredictable wisdom. She and her family had all decided together to become Mormon. This really threw a wrench in my plans. I was obliged to attend Investigator classes at the Jasper LDS ward. And you bet I had questions.

She was always up to something. She was valedictorian and we sat in her living room the night before her graduation speech, making shark fins out of duct tape and card board for her class of nineteen to wear on their mortar boards. The fins were props for her speech about big fish little pond, big pond little fish, and how we have to be sharks to live to our fullest potential. I growled at all that glue from the tape that kept sticking to my fingers. I tried to wipe it off, lick it off. Lighter fluid helped.

I tried hard to believe her new religion. But I was Baptist. Premortal existence and a mission trip had never been on my radar. After three months the family swept in and I was faced with an ultimatum in Hazel's parents' living room. They were all invited to the conversation, too. A tabernacle of witnesses.

“You're a sinner, you know?”

“I know it.”

“Are you willing to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

“Are you trying to sell me mouthwash?”

“Please be serious.”

“Alright.”

“You know we can’t go on if this is the path you choose.”

“Alright.”

The whole thing wasn’t my finest hour. Neither were the phone calls when I baited her into “religious debates” which were, I admit, excuses to label her and her family loons. I was jealous and hurt. I even copped an attitude with her mom on AOL chat.

Like I said, not my finest hour. I bet all those friars and fathers renaming the river out from under each other were doing it out of spite.

I’d take it back now even if she just wanted someone to be pious with, I mean, you have to commend Hazel’s grit. It moved me. But really, right there in that living room, I would’ve chosen to handle serpents at the Harlan Pentecostal Church of God than be at the acquiescent end of a Jesus-ultimatum. They were buying their tickets at the holy gates invisible and I was just rattling the bars, yelling stuff. I was already baptized at Trinity Baptist for crying out loud. They all knew. They knew how diligently repentant I could be. Though my dad is a disfellowshipped Jehovah’s Witness. I watched the whole incident go down from my window in our trailer. Dad and two men talked a few seconds then they got in their car and drove away. Their taillights were eyes flashing as if to say, “You’re next.” It happened just like that. Dad walked back inside looking beat to earth.

Let’s not forget, three years deep in a high school relationship is nothing to scoff at here. This is how things are done. Both of our parents married young and we never had sex trying to do things right. Kind of thing that makes you love America. We were talking about kids for Christ’s sake. I guess they’re dead now, Alexandra Elizabeth and Vincent Conrad?

“Where’s that Master Blaster waterslide?” Dad asks. “Just over there in Schlitterbahn West.” I say. There it stands, way back there nestled perfect and strategic like milk in a supermarket. The most unique waterslide on earth. The Master Blaster. It actually shoots you *up* with water jets, real innovation. The slide actually *works* to thrill you. No reliance on natural gravity alone. Its electric blue tubes tower and twirl over everything. Breaks the sky open.

“You go ahead, I’m going to find a beer cart,” Dad says.

Master Blaster going to shoot me up straight up into the clouds and let me drop. There’s a beginning and there’s an end like all the good rides. A fine drama. Anticipation, a big splash and boom, it’s over. The good rides work themselves out. Talk about the Lazy River if you want to talk about everlasting. You just, kind of, get in and get out whenever you feel it’s the right time. People tend to put off the Lazy River until the end of the day when they’re all frazzled out from all that walking around, munching on elephant ears and hotdogs. But once you’re in, you feel some relief. You watch all the suckers walk by and you feel like you got the secret.

## Your March In Dreams

Ever get the blues so bad that every Interstate on-ramp looks like a birth canal? Ever think of yourself as snowflake? How many miles is it from Paris to Petrograd? I've tried to carve my heart with a plumber's torch but I needed more heat. Looked for it in many places. Every storm drain. More flame. We're children for so long. Dylan told them to keep their shoulder in it and the world's-a-gonna turn their way and that's what they gave us—*this is our world not yours* and Mine Sweeper. Dylan is from Minnesota. Cold state right up the middle. I keep saying you romance the past too much you'll end up in blue sunglasses with the words your daddy told your momma on your lips. How far is Paris from here? I wanna see something nuclear. Go see what our grandparents gave us. Rods on top of rods. Enriched uranium glowing in the night like it's the crest of the good life. Did Napoleon know that he'd march his own army to pieces? Some futures make a present hell. A big present of hell. Some soldiers left their toes behind in the snow. Huddled, they talked in the drifts. Receding gum-lines made their teeth longer more bone until their faces were white flags. I want to be nuclear. I want to burn the buttons off their gear. Our countries are more alike than I thought. Both held down by trees. Big brown arms and root fingers running below fighting light. Both places roll long rivers that aspire to the sea.

## Ticket

If I want to play college ball Coach Mayhew says I have to gain at least 50 pounds. I put on 15 over the summer with the help of bacon grease, phosphagen supplements and three hours in the weight room a day. My stomach is tight but my problems are in my arms. Feels like I have big heavy cats sleeping inside them all day. My body hurts. Taking a shower is a chore. Sometimes I just take off all my clothes before I have a chance to think and force the soap on myself.

I dyed my hair blonde and had Mom shave a cheeseburger-sized 50 into the back. My dreams are pretty big. I dreamt of George Washington's white wigged horse charging down Main Street last night. She ran down past the Waffle House where I was drinking Mr. Pibb and eating pies.

I got a tattoo of a decapitated eagle a few weeks ago and the tattoo artist asked me loads of questions. I go straight to my room after practice every day and listen to that old song *Welcome to My World* over and over. Makes me moan every time. Then I pace around a few minutes and put the real good stuff on the stereo. I still have an encyclopedia in my head of hair metal bands from Huntington Beach to Japan: Loudness, Killer Dwarfs, Lillian Axe and Mom makes me chocolate milkshakes with raw eggs. I drink a half gallon of that business with lime water before bed.

It's so much food. Eating is like exercise. I actually broke a sweat once scarfing a slab of lasagna the size of the dinner plate itself. Every swallowed noodle is a victory. I'm going to eat myself into some bright new future. I'm not entitled to it. I have to grab it myself. This is my way out. I eat whole supreme pizzas dipped in nacho cheese and patty melts with scorched onions, two, sometimes three at a time. When the McRib comes back this November, I'm buying as many as I can carry and keep the spare ones in my parents' freezer. French fries under a quilt of cream gravy with a Slim Fast is always nice.

Slim Fast is a meal in itself. A heavy can full of protein and calories that tastes like vanilla beans, strawberry, or two different types of chocolate; Dark Chocolate or Chocolate Mousse. I drink three or four a day usually sitting in my little blue pick-up truck in front of Vidor High School's Memorial Stadium. Snickers bars and Slim Fast are a lovely pair. I come home from school and go into my bedroom to find six-packs of Snickers on my pillow.

## Crotch

The cap flies off the eye drop bottle and his body  
tenses and the liquid blasts straight up in a slender stream.  
His eyes close and he imagines the fluid  
as champagne as it cascades onto his teeth.  
He tells girls he doesn't watch sports.  
Tells them he'd rather watch the stars shoot.  
Tells them he wouldn't be caught dead  
wearing a jersey with another dude's name  
on the back. But there is a place in his heart for Troy  
Aikman and the game when Troy misplaced  
his contact lenses and had to play blind.  
That was truth. Truth, mixed with power  
and carelessness. No misrepresentation of facts.  
A meteor unzipping space has a better chance  
of landing in his crotch than for him to surrender  
to the biological nature of things he claims to hate.  
He remembers what authority was. He knows  
he was once one of the boys who would look  
up from a TV, half bored, from a plate  
of Buffalo Wings, rings of sauce around  
his mouth like clown's makeup. And  
that's that.

## Main Street Crawfish Delivery

Easter traffic and you deliver sacks of crawfish to the patient customers ready for Sunday's fellowship. You spread ice carefully amongst the sacks quick to deliver before they thaw and spoil. An occasional claw comes to life and waves from its nylon cell hoping for grace. Instead, you snap the key in the ignition and barrel down 105 praying everything against traffic.

Every familiar billboard, every yard encased in green light. Your concentration hums as you dart in and out of cars full of potato salad. A motorcyclist screams by balancing a platter of ham on his knees.

You can't help but feel like an impatient Roman soldier as sweat unglues your paper hat and ink runs down your nose. Your intense inward focus turns outward cracking apart the highway.

*Procambarus clarkia*. The Latin name resembles that of a guiding star. These customs navigate us through the year as *Aldebaran*, *Dorado*, and *Cor Corali* steered epochs of people and people across sand and sea. A pest in most situations, the crawfish has a heart. It's a whip strung across its back.

# Your Energy In Redemption

I was once saved by God.

I approached the altar  
and took a knee. The pastor

touched my hair and said

*Please take this sinner,  
Mike, and write his name*

*in the Lamb's Book of Life.*

Curtis. Curtis is my name.  
I let the adults talk. When

it was over, I looked up

over the altar, I saw it all  
and committed the sin of envy.

We were poor white folks

in the Bible Belt.  
We fry everything.

From: Curtis <curtis@gmail.com>  
To: Mars, Incorporated <marsinc@marschocolate.com>  
Date: Fri July 2, 2010 at 5:58 PM  
Subject: I've got a chocolate bone to pick with you

Dear Snickers,

I've walked across your nougat landing strips all slick from a caramel downpour. I tell you the weather wasn't nice. You don't seem to mind laughing at us from the top of your CONfectionary Palace, getting fat off of your good-time sugar cigars. There's a war going on in our country—hop to it! What are you doing to help? You think that the war has ever ended? Do you think it will ever end? It WILL NOT as long as you and your colonels are plumbing our toddlers' pipes with garbage. Sometimes I look at your red white blue and brown six-packs and I think about ammunition belts or tank treads or sometimes I think of body bags. You're lucky I'm running wild on a treadmill three days a week and eating tuna fish from a can like a rat eats cheese. I don't even use a spoon sometimes. I think of you when I drain the oil into the sink.

I would come and air my grievances in person, but I don't think either of us wants that.

I would probably bite the steering wheel and growl the entire drive to the airport and that's not very safe, is it? You want to be responsible for another irreversible injury? What if I found your HQ and marched right up and kicked the glass doors apart with my size 11's and pumped the entire reception staff full of Clif Bars? Oh wait! YOU SECRETLY MAKE THOSE TOO! (You almost had me last year but you're lucky I was only buying the 2 oz. minis and not the full on 8 oz. calorie bombs). America was not built on the idea of letting your shit go bad because that's your right. It's about having the right to possession of the TRUTH. Here's truth for you—put a diabetic in your next commercial trying to stick that big insulin needle in their arm for the first time. *Gonna be a while?*

What if I took the elevator to the top floor and stood at the desk of Reginald McSnickler and asked for my mom's refund? What if I looked McSnickler in the eye and asked him how he has made us better? He'd probably start in on one of those uncle-to-nephew talks over Thanksgiving dinner about the "real world" and how we gotta pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and make responsible decisions. I WAS being responsible when I started loving you. Now you'll never leave me alone. You touched everything I love. How does it feel? Tell McSnickler he's got an enemy in me now.

Sincerely, until I'm dead,

Curtis

## King Cake

Despicably refreshing and on the table  
between you and I, baby doll, it's there. We got the last king cake  
from Rao's and it's all I see, well, it, and you behind it,  
then the wall-papered ducks behind your hair. Colorful crescent  
more than the sum of its eggity whiskity parts.  
The full Monty of it runs down our throats' mud  
into that sugar 'shoe cla-clump cla-clump  
big teeth and neck. That whole half moon green purple  
and gold a happy promise as if we could ever live up  
to our baby pictures. A big ol cleat of sweetness.  
We chew and cut in controlled calm  
toward the Jesus figurine inside—that's when you're duty-bound  
to buy next year's. Little Jesus  
covered in gold plastic bouncing around  
our mouths and there is only the future.

# Holy

The Vidor moon is big and white  
and resentful of autumn's long nights.  
It controls the tide and watches high  
school football at Pirate Stadium where  
as team captain I collide with boys  
of different colors. It's my duty to  
defend the ground between us with strange  
anger (we're the smallest team in 20-4A  
football, good Christian boys). When I scream  
the crowd screams back  
and I toss my helmet up by the chin-strap  
and jog to the warm field house to undress  
and urinate. I really live nights like this.  
I really feel safe in the field house filled  
with all this Vidor mouth. The pipes  
in the rafters pump cruelty and the  
energy lingers over the state's heaviest corner—  
here—on this spot where the Baptist wind and I walk  
out of the devil's throat smelling like catfish.  
I hold puberty over my head like a starter-pistol  
and walk into a baptismal and when I do  
my feet slide in the water without a sound, as if  
I am already gone.

2 oz.

When I landed at Boryspil it was like the march of the crabs – people coming at me holding up forms and bags of name labels and I had just enough liquor in me to get aggressive and Constantyn led me past the counter after my little scuffle with the window guy and I actually shook my fist at him because I read in *The Crocodile* that that's what it takes – Next time I fly I'm carrying on everything – I don't care how awkward it is – Half my bag is full of these little bottles of soap that aren't gonna last 3 weeks here – It's like some kind of Buster Keaton – Bip Theatre getting through TSA with their big hands – When I take a shower they force me to think about the soap – Just a bit in my palm – Just enough soap is made in factories that have one specific area of your body in mind and they make bucks off this little bit of you – We had a drink – 2 shots each outside the terminal tunnel and the wind was kicking and my mouth was full of scarf and I couldn't think of anything to say and he handed over a lemon wedge – I gave him a pat on the back

## Move

Food is starting to taste like a soldier coming home. Still, it's not hard to see that I'll never play college ball. This charade is all portable distraction brought on by high praise. My table life is a big angsty casserole with meatballs busting through the top. My heart's a little red bell pepper holding on to its seeds. Not only are these 50 pounds mere jelly beans compared to how much I really need to put on, but most kids from Vidor are recruited by dinky state programs like Cisco or Southern Arkansas with mascots like the Muleriders or the Fighting Okra. I've got about as much dignity as a raccoon up a drainpipe. I want to read books in college. Is that so crazy? I want to. I want to be an expert waiting for my microphone and water. I want to frown down at my tie. I want to get close up to those potential Curtis's and look them up and down. I spring up in front of me all over the place. A copy of a copy of a copy. I want to smell their whiskers and know where they go in the evening. I want to think and decipher and offer my analysis. I want to see cars, stains, riptides going out across a slanted pink arroyo and pick a new grocery store. I lie in bed with the sheets crosswise over my cold legs and guess. I think of homes. I paw the sheets and someone's knocking, wanting inside and I got a big door-knocker slung around my neck. These ten-way crossroads turn everything sensual. I believe there's something big and extraterrestrial in all the triangles forming around my ankles. Pick a piece of the pie. I'm in the middle of the crossroads and all corners point to me. I see peaks. I need to move to the desert. Get some of that purple mountain majesty.

## Front

There I was, pretending to know how to plug a microphone into an amp—supposed to sing a Tomcat Strutters song with this Lost Crosses group. Everyone’s plugged in and electrified in George’s living room. Red walls. Ash trays. No telling how long it’d been since any of us cracked a dryer sheet. We stared at each other ready to launch.

“Well,” Tommy said, behind his bass.

“Well,” I said.

Tommy looked at me, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah I’m ready.”

“Well,” Tommy said once more.

Now, I’d listened to enough punk records and been to enough shows to know there was a certain decorum in which I was held accountable. The song had to start somehow. My brain jogged out to the end of its punk rock track, way out there. The band lurched over their instruments. There was a hum of electricity and amp feedback. A white cat jumped on the couch at my knees. Are microphones supposed to be this heavy? I swear to God this thing weighs eight pounds.

Tek strummed her impossibly pink guitar, “*You* start ‘Faster than Gravity’ dude.”

She was right. I started *Faster than Gravity*. Depending on the band, the song, and the players, there were many ways to go about this. There’s a whole list of beginnings—

Number 1: the high-hat cymbal start. But that’s not me.

Number 2: the three-clicks with the drum sticks start. But that’s not me either. Or there’s— Ah! I remembered something I heard on a Ramones record. This is how you get things started.

Microphone up, “One-two-three-four!”

...  
...

“Dude, you know the song don’t you?” Tommy said. Of course I knew the fucking song. Did *he* know the song? “You *sing* the intro,” Tek said.

Again, she was right.

Maybe I should have just stayed home. I should have just told them all, *Well, there you go. You busted me. I don't know what I'm doing.*

But, yes. I was supposed to sing the intro to the song acapella. This was, after all, an audition of sorts. “That’s right, that’s right,” I said. Mic up. “You guys ready?” George smiled and clomped the bass drum twice, “Yeah!” he said as if he were about to shoot straight off the hilt of rock and roll. So I opened my mouth—

Kids down on the street oh yeah  
They're all so miserable  
Got frowns on their faces  
And my kicks are torn and scuffed

# Speak and Think In Figaro Taxi

*Very pleasant*  
*I drive something very same to this over*  
*there*  
*I'm from South America*  
*I'm from Southern America*  
*I'm from the region South United States*  
*The South in the United States*  
*I live on Alabama*  
*I'm not bereft of proper philosophy*  
*You understand*  
*You understand? No problem?*  
*But I turn the lights out when I leave the*  
*kitchen*  
*And do not flush after proper bathrooms*  
*So there is hope No problem?*  
*Yes, your women are super*  
*Do not put it on this radio station for me*  
*only*  
*Please do not drive on sidewalk this*  
*Take your minutes*  
*Are you a company boss?*  
*We have an artist named "The Boss"*  
*No, just the guitar he tells*  
*I thirst*  
*Where can I buy mineral water?*  
*Excuse me I intended to ask where to buy*  
*water without gas*

Pleasure to meet you  
I have this same car  
I am going to be a major force for good  
Calm could stutter across the arena  
like the heart of a girl, running  
Outside the arena, the screams could drift  
sinking in the pinkening spring  
It is a kind of surrender, isn't it?  
I can't write in a taxi ridiculous I'm  
assuming I should be inspired I want to—  
*The road paved with ashes?*  
What did he just say?  
Wonder if he knows Southern stereotypes?  
Nah.  
Watching another world pursue them  
I hope he understands me  
Graphitized across a bloom on  
As if the past is dead and waving  
1989 was the end of history  
1989 was the year Corbin was born Paula  
Abdul?  
Really? "Straight Up" was #1  
A hall full of teeth and haircuts  
Almost got a vasectomy when I read  
*Denisovich* and *Pilgrim's Progress* back to  
back  
No one wants their daily trivial shaken  
<<"We're in this toge">>  
The fuck is he doing?!  
by a world shooing you back to yourself.  
Are we driving on the sidewalk?  
<<iversary of the>> Is this normal? Is he  
crazy? Or am I a easily impressed whiner?  
Bruce Springsteen  
<<ashes were mixed in the cement and  
poure>>  
<<d outside Prague's new paved  
thoroughfare>>  
<<r the good of humanity," Slánský>>  
Going about their business

*Thank you for your doing car  
Let's not push a beautiful thing  
I will understand if you do not—oh!  
Can you—? Here can you—?  
destroy the engine  
quench the engine here  
let go engine  
please quiet the engine on this place?  
Thank you*

I hope he doesn't think I'm a diva  
These cars can't handle lead-feet  
Plastic balloons full pamphlets  
Could float over a wall  
<<mlinologists were once able to discern  
from how the Politburo st>> Just like my car  
Whoa! Let me out! Let me out! I know  
that's my hotel from the website  
I am going to be a major force for good.  
I am going to be a major force for good.  
I am going to be a major force for good.  
I am going to be a major force for good.  
Thank you  
I am going to be a major force for good.

From: Curtis <curtis@gmail.com>  
To: Jen <jen@aol.com>  
Date: Sun, July 4, 2010 at 3:42 PM  
Subject: Hi Mom

I tried to call you yesterday when I landed but my phone wouldn't work. Sorry about that. I plan to buy a Ukrainian phone tomorrow if I can get up the nerve to cross the street. When we landed, a guy named Constantyn helped me with my papers, my bag and taxi. Boryspil Airport security asked me *Вы из Ирана?* (Are you from Iran?). The bourbon on the flight kept me from going on guard, though I felt helpless and a bit more Southern. I'm trying to imagine Corbin here. I think he'd have a blast!

The police are always prowling Kyiv in ill-fitting blue uniforms. Men and women move across the city center in no particular rush, except their faces. I've adopted this face myself, it's easy to make. I used to make the same face when I worked at Lowe's. You're carrying a clipboard and BINGO! That's the face. People move.

The police wear these great big hats. They kind of look like booted eagles asking questions. When I'm outside the hotel, I feel like they know I'm an American tourist like I'm George Washington's prick moving down the street. I know it's not nice but it's what's in my heart. I carry around an index card full of Russian verbs in case I need to give some kind of explanation. I'm constantly rationalizing my every move. I try to translate my thoughts into Russian. Sometimes I try to justify decisions I had no say in. I just keep telling myself to walk with my heels on the edge of history. Isn't that weird? I'm writing my life, here, in my head.

No guide yet but I'm meeting Sergey tomorrow evening. I met him on that website. I'm really looking forward to everything. Tomorrow morning is the Chernobyl tour. Tell Paw Paw Odom I'll wear long sleeves. ☺ Love you.

Curtis

## Blood Inside a Rainbow

Over Brovary Beach I crest an iron bridge that's got these leather straps—in essence—holding it up. A wonder of modern infrastructure and what a sight on the other side! Dudes huddled over a guy on a scrapped together turquoise bench press and he's pumping and working up a lather with blood going up his chest and neck into his eyes and they're swollen. He's full. His mouth is an O. A wet little nothing. When I say the dudes are huddled—think of a coin in hand that just need be grasped. They just gotta squeeze but they can't because they're talking over the lifter in his moment. Walking him through his triumph in a language I can't understand and the words sound like a hot bath. I didn't know sweat caused rainbows? (Probably the spray from the waves but I'll say it's sweat). What do I know of what rainbows are capable? If the future could be seen you'd know it through me. Too much truth is a bummer and veins are like rainbows. You can never tell which way the goop is pumping. The lifter can lift weights on the beach all day but nothing's gonna change. Not really. I've been possessed by gold too. You can win a lot of basketball games but that doesn't mean you're alive because even when you say YES to the sky you don't see that the sky is blue skin. When you see cirrocumulus clouds you don't think of stretch marks. There's just too much effort. Too much color in nature's broad stroke pulled to the ground—one end pushes one end pulls and it's stretched stiff—itching to pop loose from the earth. At the end of the bridge I can almost feel the sea spray but the wind outruns the droplets. So that's what I feel. The wind. And a bit of salt.

## Someone Smoked On this Elevator

On a wire that splits the world dangles a graphitized pail and Sergey walks out of his apartment leaving behind his wife and new infant son, steps into the wall[5]wall closes like a heavy shower curtain. Serious tar and marker ink. A tourist waits on the sidewalk outside the building for an escort to Park[4]Peremogi. Black and white trees and casual vanilla ice cream. Sergey doesn't know him very well so he'[3]ll tell him the story of his friend the tattoo artist who brought a tuna fish can back from Japan and used the characters on the label as popular kanji art to wild uni[2]versity students. Sergey shakes his head at the half-truths. Ignorance doesn't advertise itself. A forest fire can be seen from hundreds of miles away by the pile of smolder. Yes this means strength. Yep, love[1]. Yes-yes-yes power.

## Ways Things Stay in Reserve, NM

George is driving both of us to his hometown to visit  
his father's

grave. My impression so far: this  
town is an unphotogenic child.

Before we get out of the car, I see  
the Office of Cemetery Records,  
all I can think about are paper-  
cuts and blood. I really think about that.

Impatience  
sits waiting for its moment.  
Weighing on the brain, sitting on your mind  
like a bald man with a meat cleaver.  
Some elk appear and lean on jagged  
mausoleums.

Heading back through town to the 25.  
A car with Colorado plates sits at the gas station. I imagine  
the driver is wondering etiquette, if she should tip the man  
in the blue shirt cleaning her windshield.  
He must feel pretty lousy working  
at the only full-service station in the Southwest with the weather  
so nice out. He probably wants to smash  
a telephone against a wall. *Clunk* goes the fuel nozzle.  
George and I pull up  
to the only traffic light in town with our blinker on. A few more elk  
blush behind  
the green rim of the street.

They turn back into the trees  
blinking their big eyes and moving  
their heads around  
under the god  
damn weight of their antlers.

## Clown

I don't even know if I ever wanted to go to college, to tell you the truth. I thought I was going to get in on the rodeo and be a bullfighter. My dad knew a guy but my dad wanted me to find a university. I was already big and fast enough for the PRCA. The PRCA Texas and Southeast Circuits were made for me, really. I had been going to those shows for years and those bleachers full of screaming cow-johnnies had never beat me out of the coliseums. Though, once when I was young, a girl with a lisp slapped my mouth under the bleachers when I tried to straighten her bolo tie. She turned and walked away. I learned that not everything you do has value and it is possible to feel too free. I was never cowboy enough at heart. I think I just wanted to travel around the country and paint my face.

But I believed in the dream long enough that even today when I put on cowboy boots it's for real. I was an English major because I liked *The Great Gatsby* and Journalism students were dorks. I thought it was hilarious that grown men and women sat around all day talking about "agency." But I would learn to see these words as tools—tools that cut down to the more perfect person. Some of us have to embarrass ourselves to get there.

## What I Read In Many Books

When spiritual ties are cut, that's it. Even economics can't keep you in the game. What comes after Afghanistan? Chernobyl? We fuck up too, Gorby. We've been warring ourselves to pieces and Deep Water Horizon made our water so much more. Deep glowing craters where no one agrees on the significance and torches are never held to the grit. Every word counts. A child takes the malicious tendencies of a parent. Soviet politicians pouted. Lenin was your ideological daddy.

I got lost trying to find my ride to the Chernobyl catastrophe zone. I eventually had to take pictures of the rotting sarcophagus by myself. I was taking lefts and rights and trying to look at my map without looking like I was looking at anything. Your curse was your lack of destination. Like your hair I was falling, falling more than walking, passing this and passing walls and boards of ice cream and sauce—your journey was always clean. When I got to *Севастополь* I had to run across the street fast as these cars bounced off the sidewalk and Gorby, I saw something brown. I had to turn back when I crossed the road. Living on the Gulf, I've had an hour-to-hour relationship with brown. I know the color like I know the alphabet and I didn't see your daddy until he was right on top of me. Tall and brown the big Л. What brown. Lenin was will. Lenin was brain, wasn't he? [the glow inside the crater has diminished] My dad could beat up your dad. My dad was tsar, so I was Red Army. When the Bols stormed the Winter Palace didn't they see the unbearable jewels of the crown? Everything capped and rounded off. The arrogance of bent gold. What's so contrary, I ask you, with wanting a piece of justice? The sleepy dignity of you was influenced by this. A natural contraction from the gleaming jewel of unchecked authority. A perfectly human reaction. Before the Whites and the Reds the Mongols invaded. My dad would have grabbed Lenin around the neck and wrestled him to the ground beneath the family photograph next to the thermostat. The camera would have caught V.I.'s big eyes all the way down.

Son of the Twentieth Congress is what you called yourself, Gorby, I read it in many books. Before the Politburo/Presidium. Presidium. Presidi. Presidium. I read in many books and that's how I know you. I press you, Gorby. Pres I So Dum Free. Dumb. Presidium. Press! tell us we so dumb. Tell us what's what. Power of decree, that's not democracy. Press us down. What names. What bandits.

A red faced man-child stood on a tank indicating the State with a sweep of his hand and looking to the sky, *Down with the infidels!* Talking fast and uninterrupted is often mistaken for charisma, but you know that. What brilliance. What can you tell me about work, Gorby? A red faced man-child has his feet on your desk. A red faced man-child tells you to read the names from the paper aloud. He tells you, *If you want to know the meaning of independence, you have only to name a day and give me a hearing.*

When Soviets spoke we explored their words like halls. We sniffed the plate of caviar to find the fish. We looked at the career trajectory of the Soviet. We looked at their friends and their birth

and where they sat. Where they were allowed to stand. We were elbow deep in spaghetti looking for a meatball. America made a science of it. I remind myself of that.

I look over my shoulder as I run across the street and smack my gum like I did on the baseball diamond. You have to see what I see. You have to see it how I see it. I run to the other side of the street like I'm running to first base. They are really saying things. Their words are twice removed. I read in many books that there were telephones all over your *dacha*. Tell me how that works. Tell me what it's like to always work, room to room. State Committee for the State of Emergency came and put you under house arrest. No army. No ruble. They forgot the army. What do they know about revolution? The Revolution. Room to room house shoes you should never wear your street shoes in the home. I read in many books about Party discipline. I ask for discipline. When I skip breakfast I get testy.

Gorby don't go. Warsaaaw. We want God! Poland wanted God. You can't die with your boots on at home. Tell us about discipline and the Congress of Peoples' Deputies that saw waaar coming. They put it to a vote. That's what a deputy does, they give power away. When I look at books about you I think of my wish for the meek to inherit the earth and avenge. You put your name on a card. A big red card when you vote. What's your job? *Avenger*.

When the wind came I ran back across the street. When the wind came nothing moved. The Russian White House there was like a wedding dress. The palace was shelled. A federation set in motion with dark spots on her sleeves. In many books a red faced man-child is helped down a tank in chortle. The country was on fire. The country burned. Remarks folded in his breast pocket. Near the breast. Gonna nourish that poor thing. The fire took the shape of a hollow chamber, like a ship's sail when the wind fills it. What I read in many books was that there was a new kind of winter. White paper falls on the road. The wind spreads it around. Hardboiled eggs in the pocket of a woman helping gather the report. The wind spreads the poison to the parade across the borders. Her tiara of rockets. Ji's unmoving goatee. I can feel a rumbling [atomic energy power station] in my stomach. It could have been you looking down at me. But it was your daddy looking down at me. Know what that does to us? We can't look down with a clean conscience. The country was starving for you, Gorby. Your daddy looks as if he has the morning in his pocket. [Helicopters have begun dropping red clay and lead] Got the mourning in their chests sad breasts and the air is full of deterrent during the pageant. I read what you said that day in May not May Day but mayday 1986. You said, *Panic is a luxury*.

## Country Singer Who Didn't Make It

And then, of course, there is the question of responsibilities. Moved your wife and boy to Evadale this past Sunday so you could work at the paper mill that stinks up the trees, pet fur and house wood. That whole place sitting inside a flatulent snow globe. Maybe not a snow globe, because it's by no means ever chilly enough for a sweater or even a mug of hot chocolate. It's more like the hot chocolate itself, melting down thrown-in marshmallows into a sugar for your stomach juices to get to know, to lean on. Nothing is absorbed. Nothing is used to make your bones firm and convincing.

Your boy's self-made sword

of rigged together particle board and penny nails, only thought of because you relish your realization of adulthood like his realization of such a haywire toy. Cutting through all that you know of yourself and everything you are aware of. Regretting the dog that developed an allergy and screamed out her lack of understanding when the family slept that first night in the new house. Today is Monday and you drive to the back streets, into the compound. The humidity outside that mill is a demonstration proud of its smashed windows. Every upturned car has its explanation. You approach the front door of the building looking back at your footprints in the oiled grass where you stood for a second and extended your neck upwards just as the shooting pipes stretch, looking for a hint on how to carry yourself inside before you walk in.

Oh God!

Your son is in the yard and your wife is watching him through the living room window darting away on his purple bicycle with the basket big enough to hold saw mill slats. He stops at the end of the sidewalk, off the grass, *I'll come back before long* he yells to his mother. But she believes he says, "Ah yes. At night in my room of course I can hear the trains passing by and I cry the wind in the hedges. And Mama, machines or no machines, friction's burning me. I'm thinking about scarring up with the rhythm of blister snaps on my hands before I have a chance to touch a clear glass of water."

## Trying to Order

chicken McNuggets at this McDonald's  
with a long line behind me. I have to see  
if they taste the same and the  
Lonely Planet Guidebook  
said just point to the menu  
and say the number.  
Fine, fine—*Dva*.  
Nothing but the eyes under the dark blue  
visor with the arches there in the middle  
like a third eye looking through me  
coming on through me knowing my way  
and there's nothing  
to say but *Nomayr dva pazhaloosta* but that  
is even half-hearted as I have already failed at making  
myself understood in my own restaurant like  
I haven't been ordering these  
low hanging birds for years. Their third eye, Ronald's  
camera has never learned to give  
as they all see through me and isn't it weird  
that I would find myself here as if  
I don't remember my twentieth birthday when I  
I was strong and bullhorny  
and Paw Paw Odom told me about  
the happy chickens he raised?  
I sat down at the kitchen bar  
tiles and keys Mac Tonight animatronics  
and sang of the hot razors that sliced off  
the hens' beaks but  
the nuggets might not be the same here—*Dva! Dva!*  
*Prinaseetya mnyeh kooreetsa. Koooreetsa.*  
*Kooreetsa-Kooreetsa-Kooreetsa* it's a sensitive  
dread and like a vat of boiling grease  
I roll my r's hard like I'm supposed to  
and to convince Paw Paw Odom  
that their babies are inside little bleached shells  
shiny frozen liquid nitrogen-like, transparent  
almost, a dim sodium white would keep him  
safe and free from my guilty conscience and I could  
show him how grown up it is to care.  
This recognizable thing. The beaks  
in the workers' aprons  
stiff and clickety clackety—the opening of

a register and coins flutter from their slots—  
the hens can't peck one another  
into Thick Shake Volcanoes  
tossed low into Filet-O-Fish Lake, or  
break the surface with the patties and  
stiff ketchup wings pointing up  
all through the French Fry Bushes.  
Lord have mercy if chicken could fly they would  
slash the sky and the lips of thy enemies  
shall be sealed.

## On a Ferry Days After I Give Up Smoking

Greasers of the sky.  
Pompadours and quiffs of the Bird  
Kingdom. As I pass by the jetty, I can smell their pomade steaming  
off the rocks

and it's easy  
being optimistic, leaning over the edge of the boat holding a bag of  
unopened Cool Ranch Doritos, Nicorette Gum in my cheek.  
Even with a cloud of winged

assholes stinking it up in a  
hungry rumble over my head.  
They frenzy like late hour shoppers  
who hurry through the aisles stuffing containers into their shirts.

I chew harder as gulls glance  
off one another following the ferry face first, their beaks clicking  
like a cloud of switchblades toward the hands reaching up with  
food. I know Americans love the heedless.

I share no Doritos, but throw  
a piece of nicotine gum up—  
one swoops and gulps, then spits it to the water. His black eye  
calls me “queer”

and everyone is watching. Ricocheting  
again, again, their flyboy aerial habits, wing articulation  
precise, Lucky Strikes clenched in teeth,  
dividing the airspace into Dorito-sized intricacies.

Seagull in my ribcage,  
marooned on rocks of corn chips and nicotine,  
get up and get to flapping above my American waters  
made completely of cravings.

## Little Strings

*Toxic shock syndrome* is what Tek calls  
the shade of pink her guitar takes on stage,

and its sound is your dream.  
The light off her guitar on stage

and color has no dominion over people.  
Power chords. A collection of little iron

paths in which she runs and the oak shakes—  
she shakes the stock as if it were a

severed powerline or an enemy's throat—  
an enemy she was surprised to find.

You had to go out and pick your own switch  
when you were bad—

this is your dream—  
and tug at the hardest little stick

until it cracked from its life.  
You would tear the last little cable of bark

holding itself with dignity  
whose little cable of bark reached

to the body of the tree.  
An arm reaches out—

a switch that cuts the air.  
You get to hold a microphone.

From: Curtis <curtis@gmail.com>  
To: Tek <tek@gmail.com>  
Date: Sun July 4, 2010 at 3:58 PM  
Subject: Chicken that crossed the road

How goes it?! Just wanted to drop you a line and let you know that I made it all in one piece. How's the tattoo shop?

The flight wasn't bad. I met a guy named Constantyn and he fed me drinks the entire last leg into Boryspil. You would have laughed so hard! When we landed at Heathrow we had to BOOK IT through the corridors to catch our plane to Munich. They were taking forever getting us off the runway. Constantyn started barking at the male flight attendants about his girlfriend. I didn't want to laugh but it was so funny. I couldn't help it.

Once we touched down in Boryspil an officer gave me guff in some kind of airport sign language since I still have a beard in my passport photo. I kept making a motion of a razor down my face but he kept the signs coming.

Finally made it to the hotel. A very severe place with metal words glued to the walls. I recognized the building from the website. Got my key at reception and walked over to the elevator where an elevator guy sat by the door with his tie down. The elevator itself was full of mirrors browned from cigarettes and I was so tired, Tek, I leaned my head against the back mirror. My face was everywhere. To get the elevator to operate I had to slide this card into the control panel before the doors would shut but no one told me so I was standing there in a brown field of me. Remember on tour that time we stopped in Carrizozo. Everything just going out wide and forever. Even had that burning smell. It was already about three in the morning and the lobby was stone silent except for my head on the mirror waiting for lightning to strike. Elevator guy came over and motioned for my card. I said "chiteryi" and he hit the number and up I flew.

Did you guys do fireworks? Sure wish I could join you.

Curtis

## Admission

Sergey and Dasha hold the taxi door  
while I descend the party's steps  
looking at my shoes  
my heart rolls over  
and I tumble down  
behind gravity's tail—  
one shoulder rubbing the night.  
Sputnik. Laika the space dog  
in her capsule—still—way up there  
over Santa Monica Beach where the Ferris wheel  
turned when I was far away  
pulling sleeping bags down from the van  
in a hot yellow light—  
poor girl can see me in both places  
with the fish fanning their gills  
shaped like haircuts.  
There's meat in places  
only a trained hand can touch.  
A drumbeat smoldering down in my ears  
I hear like a fish ((*wahhh*)) I hear the sea!  
The Ferris Wheel scrapes  
and the color beats down  
down with florescent  
octopus arms from the pulse  
of the sweaty man's gear box  
with yellow labels on everything—  
ELECTRICAL HAZARD.  
ELECTRICAL HAZARD.  
It's a big creature cocktail tonight.  
My repairable self falls before the taxi  
leading the way down the glass.  
The satellite locks into orbit  
and rubs the night like I rub a quarter.  
With one light blinking  
it rubs the night like I rubbed the hem  
on the side of a blouse sinking  
in one direction. The long grate  
of pursuit.

## Song

The garage doors closed and the stars bounced and gathered outside. Paw Paw Odom, our family's shower curtain balladeer, put the needle down on Merle Haggard's *That's the Way Love Goes* record and lifted me, I was about four at the time, onto the ledge that led from the garage to the utility room. A golf club appeared at my arm. I understood it was my microphone.

I can make it a day or two without you  
And maybe I can make it through the night  
I can light I can drink and prob'ly be alright until morning  
But what am I gonna do with the rest of my life?

Mammaw leaned against the hulk of the Chevrolet Suburban, arms crossed and smiling. Normally after supper she would be about the house looking for some dish to soak or bit of grit to slap away with a moistened throw rag, but not then. A show was about to go down in her garage. Our over-weekend visits were frequent and eventful, but still far too short. I remember my face was incredibly hot. The needle dragged with a crick across the black vinyl disc—a snap and the opening chord developed across the chorus into the second verse. Somewhere a man was wondering what to do with the rest of his life. I knew there was at least one fistful of earth and blood down in me. I stuck my hand way down in there, in that dirty, barky energy and opened my mouth to belt it.

## Bats on Reed Street

My head hurts just a bit tonight. There's been so much  
to take in and I still find myself wondering  
what you bats back on Reed Street are up to this evening?  
The way you fling yourselves toward my balcony  
like aerial Chihuahuas lifts my bones.  
It's the same balcony baby doll and I used to share. You  
could outrun the dogs here today. Your  
hairy little prey hold their poses below not  
making a sound. I know a similar distress  
choking on words nearly spoken—believing  
only what you can rub yourself against. Would  
you be more comfortable under water?  
Would fur slow you down? Raw fish  
are for more discriminating tastes I  
know. And you know what? Even submarines  
have sonar—your nuclear cousins. You  
two have a lot in common. Would  
seaweed give you a sore throat? What  
about the chipped glass you mistake for acorns?  
I know it hurts. I know how bad it hurts.  
Gobble up the sharp chips in an attempt  
to deprive your prey of calories.  
They'll grow slower—your job is much too easy.  
I do ask that you spend more time with your pups though.  
One just smacked my chest face-first and looked  
up at me humiliated—still learning I guess.  
When I come home—if I ever see her around Tuscaloosa  
I'll run my fingers through her hair  
and tell her it's okay to have shame. It's okay  
to know you were wrong.

## Window Seat

That radio static on the bus  
that stiletto tapping the edge  
of the Milky Way. Khreshatyk  
turns me into a piece of sonar.  
A piece of salted something  
gets a placard and a  
blip on a console. When I have  
the window seat  
reason and purpose  
gives meaning  
    Int/repi/d/  
    Valo/r  
        and meaning  
    gives something that's  
not yet cou/ra/g/e . .  
        It grows  
    as it should. Love increases  
as he leaves her at the Mission Gate  
and two workers look gravely  
at the hole  
they've dug in the sidewalk  
and it is my duty to see them all  
walking away. I am the one  
with the window seat waiting  
for a codeword.  
Move on from  
the instruments—away from the pedals.  
Below your feet is silence.  
The street's  
not busy enough to be safe.  
The sun is polite  
and keeps the heat to itself. An *Attas* coach  
with the deep blue band bucks  
on the steps passing the Maiden effigy  
on Independence Square where birds—  
yes birds—  
know exactly where they are going.  
One day  
I will not be afraid to say it's God  
that I want tonight.

# Punk

Life at this very moment is as terrifying as olden times. Between that French guy's power whisper at the vodka bar that put me in my place (I had it coming) or finding two emergency umbrellas during two surprise downpours on two different afternoons outside Saint Sophia's bell tower—I could use some history.

The Ramones were part of the reason I dyed my hair and sliced my blue jeans to pieces. It was my first step toward myself. I moved forward. I began to stitch patches into my jackets which coincidentally gave me the skills to stitch up my boss's thigh when he accidentally sliced it wide open with a box cutter. He offered me a dollar an hour raise if he didn't have to go to the hospital. "We're gonna lose our safety bonus," he said holding the two flaps of skin together under his jeans.

I wanted to use that money to hit the road and never go back to Vidor with its New Testament and catfish kitchens. I wanted to be successful at something. Who doesn't? I didn't know what anger was, but I still wanted to head butt someone until we both died. No doubt, this feeling was testosterone, money, rebellion, raw fear and fun meeting at the same coordinate.

If you count the chords in any Ramones song you would see that there's no more than five. Johnny Ramone played all of those chords with a down stroking picking-hand; relentless down strokes. The human arm is not designed to move that way. It's everything unnatural about the body and that's what it took to shatter the musty music scene in the late 70s. His fret hand moved up and down the stock of the guitar grabbing at this chord up here, those strings down there as if in the repetition of these basic chords he could beat away everyone who had ever told him to grab a broom. Johnny's hand kept moving up and down the stock, burning across the wood of the instrument. Hearing that guitar for the first time was like lighting a torch. It touched something that was already inside me. It added nothing because it didn't need to, that was the point. I could give up the game and start to live lean.

Imagine a baseball pitcher's movement toward home plate when delivering the ball. You think the human body is designed for that? You think there is anything more American than baseball? We were meant to defy ourselves.

## Dasha Crosses Khreshatyk After We Say Bye Bye

The periwinkle sky begins its peel away from the lights  
and she watches herself in the plate glass windows.

Banks and book stores.

She passes the Parliament building  
where the glass watches her. The great beakers  
of change.

Wires over Khreshatyk are avenues  
and the rest is pure history. Behind history, blue and yellow  
mean something more than yellow and blue.

They think she cares.

In her unbending grace. The sea  
grows colder all the way down.

Let's watch her go under the street  
blue Cyrillic electric proceeds her down and long overhead  
plugged into them all.

Arcades and fish.

And when she left us here  
the moon broke itself  
it took a fall for the night and  
broke itself  
broke itself down on the city.

# Drip Drip

*Be careful of the air conditioner's tears.*

—Sergey

It's not someone coming up the hotel steps after all it's just the clomping  
of the air conditioner and its loosened water drops on my foot

all night. I was dreaming about fighting the Industrial Revolution  
with my fists with my trusty dog, The Vietnam War (that's his name) at my side

and I tell him, "You could have been one of the great ones," when he drops his ears  
when this one front-loader across the way starts hammering its scoop into the dust

over and over and over—Oh the air conditioner shut off—

Alright, alright, if I'm forced to really go toe-to-toe with the natural weather outside  
it would positively be the only thing more tortuous than the rack

and that's probably a sign of some scarcity on my part.  
I like my temperatures regulated, I don't like it creeping under doors

telling me what to feel. I like to keep it (or me) isolated for maximum happy.  
I like my fish served either cold or piping hot and not salted so much, please,

but I love these salty fish eggs. In a post-Soviet hotel  
you hear everyone's footsteps. Coins fall on the table, down an arcade cabinet

and at breakfast time the stairwells are pregnant with starvation.  
Get into a bed, people. The halls are more than just your avenues

where each has their own potholes cavities of the city addictions pleases controls  
cigarettes pipework with screws that you can't keep tight. You can't

keep all the screws of an avenue turned just right all the time and angled just  
so goodness gracious put your coin into the vending machine panel

hit the two buttons and go be in your room already. Have you ever lived knowing  
everyone knows exactly where you are where you're going where you just came from?

I'll say it now so I never have to say it again—unconditional freedom is overrated.  
It turns some people into slobbering pigs and you know pigs don't have sweat glands.

It takes strong knees and a full stomach to take a roll in your own juice. Little houses  
on blocks, in those you hear everyone's footsteps now I'm going back to sleep.

## Cool

After two years of playing in Lost Crosses, I started to look different. I started to let myself go. All my free time away from music was spent doing school work. I wasn't exercising and I was eating nothing but dry Ramen noodles. I gave vegetarianism a shot for a year and half. Not that I was eating meat anyway. It was a comedy. A cool breeze could've knocked me right over but I looked about 40 pounds overweight from beer calories. I was still wearing the same tight clothes with long orange hair. I'd turned myself into a busting wineskin.

I remember a video of later era Elvis at a press conference, lights popping off the gold chains around his neck. The chains took up most of the screen. A reporter stood and asked, "Whatever happened to that humble Southern Boy?" Elvis looked confused. His entourage slapped their knees. When you leave a controlled environment, things get weird.

## Your Energy In Dreams

A fin of TV blue lights  
fall on my dachshund  
as she poses on my chest. The mattress  
smells of catnaps.  
Her cheek-spit sizzle and ipecac smile  
remind me

of bacon in a pan.  
So (I tell her about)  
churned cups of blonde coffee at a  
Waffle House and  
eavesdropping on  
steam softening grits,  
staring at baby doll's  
jacket patch from across the table.  
She pauses to  
sear it off with cigarette  
fingers, holds it to my wrist,  
*It's yours.*  
I place the square  
under my English muffin while we both thumb  
cream thimbles  
as if we don't notice the blank spot  
now fresh and ruined. Black sprigs  
of string a cracked spider.  
Yolks snap while Mr. Pibb on  
the soda fountain  
buzzes a sigh  
with eyes

revolving back into his  
syrup cartridge;  
a small weight lifts off my chest,  
rolls onto the mattress and mumbles  
*You don't deserve it.*  
The television in the on position.  
The television in the off position.  
There's a choice.

## Beat

The whole warehouse was shaped like a half-shackle and from the stage I watched a girl squirm on the floor over a widening circle of blood fed from her chin's steady drip. The floor swallowed her. Her entire face had gone soft. An open gash. Someone opened the door and more green-haired street kids poured in to see. Two guys stood over her with their skateboards, breathing heavy. Blank.

A thick steam formed over the round heads of the crowd brought on by the summer's blows. I took the microphone off the stand, "Just stop for fuck's sake!" I'd reached the point where a microphone felt good in my hand. It felt so real and natural it's like I could stick a mic in my mouth and it would grow roots in there. I thought I could talk them down—get the guys to help her or split. We hadn't even started. Tek hadn't even adjusted her guitar strap and George hadn't counted us off. Tommy hadn't yet spread his boots with his bass swung up thumping like the pendulum of the world's loudest cuckoo clock.

The girl pushed herself off the floor shaking the stars from her eyes. I remember her shoulder blades moved like dinner plates under her tank top. The two guys who'd smacked her, bolted outside. Some kids came by and swept her up, pulled her limp and coughing out the door and more kids followed in single file. Their heavy shoes shuffled in a Spartan gloom. It happened in a second. The warehouse shared an uncomfortable silence. No one moved.

To my left, disgusted, Tek unplugged her guitar and the abrupt clack went out over the room in an electric stamp of principle. That's all I needed, "Show's over," I said into the mic.

The crowd was quickly becoming one thing. One big angry face. Every stitch of physical and emotional separation had swelled into a strange unity—the kind of unity that follows violence. A pack, jolted from itself must come back together and this forming organism drew its energy from us breaking down our gear. They formed one Face—a dazzling display of collective sleight of hand.

A few outliers held their skateboards on the fringe of The Face. I noticed one dude was wearing a Devil Lock, an elongated Widow's Peak stiffened with product and pulled tight into a dagger straight down between the eyes. This kid's two green eyes peered from either side. He looked right at us with a grin and offered up his hand and extended his middle finger.

The Devil Lock hairstyle was a Glen Danzig calling card. Glen Danzig used to sing for the Misfits, but more recently he had pranced across the cover of muscle fitness magazines and sang radio hits feigning dark poetry with pulled lyrics from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. It pissed me off. This kid's smugness pissed me off. The way he just stood there. There was a linebacker in him and I could see it. He couldn't fool me. For no reason other than my sense of largeness, I pointed at him.

"Hey Glen." I said into the microphone.

The Devil Lock stared back raising his chin. I dropped my shoulders.

“I hope your cock dies y—” a hand from below ripped the mic from my mouth and disappeared into the heaving mass. The chord quickly lost its slack between my legs and for a few seconds a volley of dull thuds went out over the sound system, then a loud clonk as the cord disengaged.

I dropped down to the floor and elbowed my way through The Face toward our van. Voices asked if we were leaving. Voices threatened violence. Someone is going to smash our windows for sure, I thought. The night had dropped her curtain.

I looked ahead from the crowd as if looking at the ocean and focused on the door—so this is blind rebellion, I thought.

“Somebody stole my knife,” Tek yelled from the stage. I’m pretty sure that’s what she yelled.

## *Done Come Home?*

—IAH Parking Shuttle Driver

I mean, his patois could burn teeth or  
bifurcate a tongue.  
One of those Houston accents  
where vowels go flip on a high wire.  
Hours imagining myself back here  
and now here I am. I got one earbud in playing track 3  
on Elvis's *Moody Blue* album—the album he  
did right before he bit the big banana. I mention this  
because to know you're loved is crippling  
and this old man driver's talk feels like a hug.  
He's not saying anything I'll remember  
but I just haven't had so  
much to say to a person other than questions  
and not wanting to betray myself before I left the room  
each morning under the blankets  
praying ten verbs  
as soon as I knew I was awake.  
I'll never again neglect the glory of talk. I'll  
prove it again and again if you let me.  
Oh sir, you know I had a large time!

## Your Rambo In Dreams

Dasha and I are talking on Skype and I apologize—and for what exactly? Late night and Dasha—an attorney working for the poor in a *Ялма* hospital waits in the hospital office for a meeting with The Big Boss. My duty is to talk her down from the perch of fatigue—but I wish to do more than this. The Big Boss will send his driver round after cocktail hour. She says this is how business is done there. We go back and forth—transactions—quid pro quo. She says this is how business is done. Just say you'll come and I'll kick the hospital wall over. America does it best—don't you know? This is how we do business. What comes with me is KFC—a renter's agreement and jazz. The chicken Colonel looks like Lenin if you squint. My every message ends with the word *here*. Gotta ticker-tape Bill of Flights in my head that resists the unfolding of culture. Let's throw baby turtles at the ocean before the gulls come round. Nature and common sense are useless to Rambo. I am a baseball star with a wicked knuckle-curve—it got me outta the trailer park—Dasha—and I'm gonna write a book someday. This is how we do business here. My history is a disassembled futon. You're so brilliant—all of you boiled in the sauce of the monuments. My history can erase chatter. There's a fountain of code that spells out *You kick what you don't understand* but I'm honest enough to admit I need a cipher. My mind runs to the end of the X-axis of sacrifice. That's my runway—Dasha—a commando with a plane ticket. Kick those walls over faster than you can say this is how we do business. Your heart so big and just! I mean—it holds just as much blood as you please. A crate full of painted grenades lifted over a wall. A brick lifted by balloons. I have tattoos that will make you gasp. We'll build a nation that has no secrets. A beautiful republic of sovereign nations. A phenomenal federation of socialist republics. Our democratic union of free-state nations colonizing the islands. Our language. We'll be blankets beneath a super-quilt. Our principality of capitalist democratic unions. A confederation of independent federal states in a free republic. A loosely-knit capital in the non-theocratic democracy of a parliamentary national monarchy. And we'll protect each other. I'll machinegun your name into doors. The veins in my biceps are corduroy. You'll see the comet of my teeth through my big black beard. I'll come down in a helicopter with 20 minutes to go. The moan of saloon doors will follow behind me. My pulse long and red and full of Skoal. Maybe I can give you more than that. Maybe I can be opened up and have my wiring snipped to pieces. We're still young. We can build a wall around us and staple barbs in the blocks. We'll love. We'll reach the finish line and sigh relief. I'm so happy. Believe me when I tell you I will never die. Mouth cancer falls down my throat—Dasha—I live to the end of skin damage and cough up stars into a lily-white napkin. I will never die. Because someday something cosmic is gonna pound this earth into horse-hockey. Please come here—we'll lick ice cream in the wind. We'll show those rascal stars the meaning of the word respect.



## NOTES

“Mustangs” is in memory of Reggie Garrett #12, senior quarterback for West Orange-Stark high school in Texas. He collapsed after throwing a touchdown pass in September 2010.

“March to the Sea” borrows a line from *The God that Failed* edited by Richard H. Crossman. The line in the poem reads, “I’ve had the idea to pour things out of me but you have to pour something else back in or your best qualities will serve the worst and your personality will be ruined.” The line from *The God that Failed* is from a section written by Stephen Spender. He writes, “But apart from courage and sacrifice, it seemed often that their best qualities had been put to the service of their worst and their personalities destroyed.”

The word *kulak*, literally meaning “a fist,” is a Soviet term which connotes any relatively well-off peasant. Marxism-Leninism as well as Stalinism identified *kulaks* as class enemies and attempts were made to liquidate them as such.

The music video referenced in “Metal” is for the song *Who Wants to Be Lonely* from the album *Asylum*. Thanks to Troy Maddox for giving me the second *Creatures of the Night* guitar solo when we were 12.

“Baby” is in memory of Dino.

“Black Bread Break” contains the first reference to Boryspil International Airport—a taxi ride east of Kyiv.

“Main Street Crawfish Delivery” was inspired by my friend Jake Bailleaux and the work he did after class in high school. Sometimes I’d ride along with him.

“Your Energy in Redemption” borrows a line from Simone Weil. The line in the poem reads, “When // it was over, I looked up / over the altar, I saw it all / and committed the sin of envy.” The line from Simone Weil I first read as a quote in Leslie A. Fielder’s introduction to *Waiting for God*, “...every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ I commit the sin of envy.”

“2 oz.” mentions Fyodor Dostoevsky’s short story, *The Crocodile*. A story about a man swallowed alive by a crocodile.

“Front” and many other pieces in this manuscript were inspired by my friends and former band mates in New Mexico.

“Speak and Think In Figaro Taxi” borrows the phrase “major force for good” from *Democracy Matters* by Cornel West. There is also reference to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and the first mention of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan.

Rudolph Slánský was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He was executed after a short trial in 1952.

“Ways Things Stay In Reserve, NM” would not exist without James Wilcox and his generosity.

“What I Read In Many Books” borrows material from *Autopsy of an Empire* by Dmitri Volkogonov, *Memoirs* by Mikhail Gorbachev and “The Martyrdom of Polycarp” from *Early Christian Writings* translated by Maxwell Staniforth.

“Trying to Order” contains characters and landmarks featured in McDonald’s McDonaldland advertisements.

The transliterated Russian reads—

Line 7: *Two*.

Line 13: *Number two please*

Lines 29-31: *Two! Two! / Bring me chicken. Chickeen! / Chicken-Chicken-Chicken*

“On a Ferry Days After I Give Up Smoking” owes a massive debt to Sheila Black and Connie Voisine.

“[Chicken that crossed the road]” makes reference to the Carrizozo Malpais, a lava field west of Carrizozo, New Mexico.

Love and gratitude to Curtis and Gloria Jennings for inspiring “Song.” The letters above the Merle Haggard lyrics represent guitar chords.