

ANY HOLLOW PLACE

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

This is a collection of poems by Ryan James Browne.

Acknowledgements

<i>Bayou:</i>	The boy who constantly considers his mother's infidelity
<i>Broadsided:</i>	Yard work
<i>Colorado Review:</i>	Fear of a gorilla falling
<i>Gulf Coast:</i>	Slow mo bullet
<i>Phoebe</i>	The boy who drops the sky How the boy hears <i>The Right of Spring</i>
<i>The Portland Review:</i>	The flower clock Self-portrait with the Golden Gate Bridge
<i>West Branch:</i>	All we have to do

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The boy who was carried by blood

In the midnight of belly,
her blood touches the boy as a song note,
signals its end,
its beginning,
a path through the labyrinth—
he comes to recognize *mother* in this way.

If the boy is not of the mother,
he'll be eaten alive,
an alien trussed in her tissue, like dry
cement as rain chews away.

If the boy is of her, then
he will never be prepared
for the entailment. He'll be
no more ichor than iron
or liquor, his arms,
they'll be much too smooth,
his tongue almost wholly spun yarn.
He will cucquean.

The boy will be the portrait of a man
who has stepped back-footed off the edge,
a man who was buried here.

Descartes' nightmare

Because Man is a man with a man inside
watching, sleep proves risky. See, we're paralyzed
during REM—that's the dream state—
and these mini-men (whose brothers, like strippers in cakes,
crouch anticipatorily in sperm), these homunculi,

who can say they're not temporarily petrified
too? O! That'd be the mess of an anus—mind's
animal spirits with muscles of wind loose! How they'd howl and neigh!
Because René is a man,

his body a machine made of hard earth, the thighs
of a dreamy princess clap against his ears as he harmonizes
with her, his soul mate. And he's behind now, with only ejaculate
on his brain as he bluntly belches into the auburn, realizing too late:
Man is a man with a man inside.

Slow mo bullet

In all things an explosion waits
for a bullet. This is the case. A bullet
loosed on an apple, a jug of milk, a rose

is beautiful. Its simple will passes
through, and the rose exhales, blows
a kiss. Skin unzips from meat.

Even *that* thought or *that* thought—
the synapse sparked by wending lead.
If we could capture frames fast enough

a slow mo bullet would be seen boring
into the tissue of our language, carom, and then
vowel, seen keeping an egg whole,

seen slipping through a diamond ring,
seen rasping a throat in a starched shirt,
seen lifting all four hooves off the ground.

Not a salvo, but the hollow that coils at the heart of things.
The aesthetics. The quickness of construction
and collapse. Reflection of the world's slowing spin.

Pond Hockey

Wait for the 2nd month
or any with a winter tongue.
Ice thicker than skulls.

Self portrait with the Golden Gate Bridge

My legs shake so hard they
give me up for what I am water
but not only water

I could be anyone walking
I could hold tight
I could have time for one word

When I look down

my shadow is a bridge
Along my penis my ribs I am railed
I'll spray like a whale

The clouds are a blurt belted
out above broken teeth

What I'm made of
will not linger
will throw me off

The boy who constantly considers his mother's infidelity

Our tongues stir
imperceptibly
when we hear
words.

Morning
or *engine*.

Movement.

This is like
the boy's memories.
His mother and a train.
Here his mother
and here, again, a train,
virtually silent
coming head-on,
eating fire.

Fire.

The tongue moves.

Eating.

The tongue moves.

Mother,

the tongue
moves the train
moves the mother moves.

The mother. She moves.

In the distance, a train.

The boy's tongue.

Like

Like an autistic man masturbating in the bathroom at Target. Like right in the middle of the bathroom. Thoughts like *Really?* and *I can't seem to turn off this faucet.* Thoughts that harass like moving hips. Like brown loafers, like a blue button up shirt, like gray slacks, like an unbuckled black leather belt. Like an autistic man peering through a gap. Like a closed stall door. Like a terrified kid behind a closed stall door. Like I'm saying *Stop that,* like an autistic man apologizing, and then like an autistic man pulling up his pants. Like there are two other men in the bathroom who say nothing. Like later statements like *He's sick in the head.* Like how adrenaline unnerves hands like electricity excites neon like when the night's on fire.

O Canada

You send us your teams
from Winnipeg, Quebec; we
send you draft-dodgers.

All we have to do

When one hears rifle fire, one doesn't run.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

All we have to do
is listen.

Rifle fire on the air like *fuck*,
droning bi-plane buzzards,
barbed wire's whine,
shells loaded,
boom.

Sound is pressed past the faces
of buildings blanched and pocked,
into a flat field
where sharp stems are raised
and ground and man become a plume. Then
thud.

And the whistles come back, and the shouts
and the damnings come back, and the rain
that's started to fall taps,
and the horse
with the ammo cart sighs
a throaty horse sigh.

Muck slurps at boots.

The trenches play like a piano.

Listen.

You call out *Gas!*

before the swarm pollinates our lungs
and we cough up sparges, bramble,
what now belongs to the dirt.

Tell us to forget finding letters
in our stitches

and to watch for the sniper's punctuation.

Tell us about home, tits,

beef stew with whole onions.

We polish the stub nose howitzers
as if they were logic's father and listen
to you laugh at that joke.

Listen to the click click of calibration.

The sonorous cast metal.

Boom.

All we have to do
is listen to the rain,

each drop blowing up
the tramp of hooves.

The long and loud hoot of artillery incoming.

Listen to the horse in the rain. And the rain.
And the horse blows up in the rain.

Miller's daughter and King v. R_____

A king knows
fortunes don't flock
together. A girl knows
the weak links
of a promise. Neither
knew my name, thinking
it as fine and rare
as spun gold. But,
litigation in a California court
and threats issued
by Homeland security
wrench arms worse
than a spinning wheel.
The judge ruled—
no pseudonym,
Christian, nick, pen,
or pet name, no
moniker, a.k.a, or alias.
I had to give it up (along
with a large cash sum).
Yes, my name's as long as a freight train
and will clatter
your teeth, too.
It stretches out
like a yawn,
clumps letters
as if it were a magnet,
summersaults,
and twists logic.
It's a seizure
of the alphabet,
and I dare you
to say it.

Colorado Avalanche Fan

It's 1 day old dog
shit that attracts most flies. Think:
the Detroit Red Wings.

The boy whose nocturne is his mother and her lover

It is impossible to remember
it all: lust on the tip,
an octopus arm, strange
comfort in the angle
of an elbow.
A hand gropes
for a knob or a foot
refuses sleep or some horn
happens against the window
as the mother comes
suddenly alive like birds in flight,
and the boy stands still
as if he is the tree from which they flee,
as a blade of light silhouettes
him on the carpet, the bed
skirt, the bed,
as if the boy has been cut out
of the room.
A miracle
our imperfections—
if our bodies
worked flawlessly
we would never forget.

Is

Ryan is a small bird stuck in a bathroom. Brown speckled wings, alight on a stall, trilling but beak open—the slack jaw of a ventriloquist doll is Ryan. Startled, a small bird that flaps in circles is Ryan, a small bird bumping florescent lights is Ryan, a small bird losing bits of feathers is Ryan, a small bird trying to perch on the tile wall is Ryan. Ryan is a small bird becoming frantic at the sight of a person, at the sight of a cardboard box. Ryan is a small bird caught in a cardboard box. Ryan is set free from a window, only to try and fly into another.

The deer sing

On my street, the deer sing
and browse hydrangeas,

test one neighbor's purple impatiens,
sleep under junipers.

The deer sing and with mailboxes they flirt
antlers first and shit in drives,

loaf and collide with cars at night,
entice mountain lions with cul-de-sac stomachs,

stare and snap back at another neighbor's
shouts and claps with slow-hoofed clack-a-clacks.

On my street, the deer sing and—lately—meet
the sing of arrows.

Amidst snow, as a buck strips bark
from an aspen, an arrow grazes

its shoulder, splinters
a board in the neighbor's fence.

The second arrow, notched in taut bow,
torqued forearm, is a potential only realized by gut.

Years of song and the taut fibers of alarm go slack.
To stot: The thought an after shot,

the raw throb easily tracked through yards
of garlanded homes that twinkle, past antlers

of reindeer that light like knife points.
The deer appears to nap, this no longer a deer,

a hastily severed head,
a carving of nature at its joints.

Hat Trick

Score 1 goal. Later
score 2 goal, then score 3 goal.
He needs more ice-time.

Reverie of blue

Of the blue-line horizon at dusk
Of blue-shift, red-shift
Of blue mountains before they were black
Of our mistake
Of the blue bound book, where I find you
Of a woman at the zoo, her hair transparent
Of your man in flak
Of winds forging blue thunderbolts
Of your blood-bruised wrists
Of blue blood from bluegrass veins
Of Goethe
Of the blue light of ritual
Of Chapel Hill blue
Of blue-blind traffic
Of the blue gob of Earth
Of a root in rhyme
Of hot glass blown blue

Make our bodies into geniuses

Each time we saw this hurrying, soundless, hypnotic, enduring performance it impressed us anew...

— John and Elisabeth Buck

Wait for the water to rise, the thicket of roots run
into the river. Fireflies alight on every half-leaf
and blink off and on, in sync, like breathing, like breath.

Shake the branches. They'll rain down from the dark
tissue of mangrove trees and we'll gather them
together. Return to the hotel room, draw the shades

on Bangkok's neon and buzz, open the jars.
We'll theorize to their flutter and thumps on the ceiling.
We'll lie on the floor as some begin to settle on the walls.

We'll deny eye twitches—saccades—as cause.
And once clusters of males begin to flit and flash at the lip
of the door jamb, we'll mouth *sex*

simultaneously. The slow buildup of synchronous pulses,
the gradual perfection of a system, we will mirror,
we will curl over, thicken blood, make our bodies into geniuses.

The flower clock

for a friend

i.

Morning is overwhelmingly yellow
flowers: hawkbit morning glory
marigolds.

She has fallen. An ankle rises
a shoulder slumps is slung in her bra
her rib-bitten lung collapsed.
Around the mountain

rain clouds form a horrible crown.

The daylilies split their mouths
stick out their tongues—their blooms will only last
today. Think of the day

of each day

as flowers opening

as flowers closing. The whirling gazanias

as 9 a.m. Star of Bethlehem

10. The now:

Their search sputters on some other ridge
in Austria. The helicopter's terminal

whorl with or without

her in three hours.

Passion flowers unbutton and will be eaten by bees.

Below she spots bloodstones in the bracken

as a silence begins putting all things in place.

Gordie Howe Hat Trick

1 goal, 1 assist,
1 fight—all in the same game.
True Renaissance man.

The boy who drops the sky

If only it had known, the Earth
would not have tilted.
Each day, the horizon pierced
in the same place,
no solstice,
no first point of cancer,
no country growing colder.
No mother as the boy knows her. She,
the sun, a cairn toward which
straight roads are built
upon the globe. She shepherds
birds, who stitch together the same air,
unstitch it at night. Being a body as well
she feels compelled to find the boy
daydreaming in a hammock, and perfect him
so that he may perfect the evening.
So he will understand her, so forgive her.
But as it stands, the axis wobbles like a jar
about to fall off a shelf. Summer
and winter leave each other
the same bed.
Each day, the boy flexes his muscles
and night grows longer,
night grows shorter.
She'll break him like a season.

Yard work

The hounds are out this morning
Five of them loll in the shade just beyond

the parking lot snout the grass behind a shed
A man wearing a blue t-shirt blue cargo pants

a badge and brogans throws a rag doll
whistles shouts *Get 'em!* and they're off

with long woofs and yelps floppy ears
aware of fear skidding in the wind

Its particles kick up among pollen and sweat
On the other side forty-five pound plates

loaded on the press—the bench's cover
has split and yellowed where heads rest

Clumps of grass are raked and smoothed
Taut forearms are rebar tattooed The fleet

of mowers sound and glide The next day
in another yard the guards have target practice

There's been a rash of stabbings

I heard violence meets heat halfway
like when iron gets glowing
and forged under a hammer Danged
if the tin roof don't blunt
and harden you And the bunks
in there like spits and the industry
fans hollering all night
They say there's been a rash of stabbings
They say *Rash* as in mere irritation Annoyance
Even their *stabbing* sits at home
flipping through the channels
It's more like Clint punching holes in some
Mexican rapid-fire like a sewing machine
like a cock
And the proof lies
in the bed above you
slowly rolling red

4 a.m.

*Dazzling and tremendous how quickly the sunrise would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sunrise out of me.*

—Walt Whitman

Chow hour
Cells open in concert
Move along in columns
Toll of steps until a collision

Gasoline spurts from mouths
A match is struck along cinderblock and tossed
Not the marvel of a body as sunlight leaves it
But bloodless smoke the smell of dirt

From belt to collar skin leaves and can be heard cackling

Whine animals as they lay

Sleep bate shorn and shaved—
whine animals as they lay

Deny a pen
sing to selves

daylight burns a fuse
Line up polished shoes

Heads hung low like a branch bent
about breaking

like lizards on rocks
Yes not as men

(please
not as men)

The Prisoner's Dilemma

Scenario #1:

From the top of my head which is heavy
says the poem the poet John
the cook covered in grease
with lace-less boots the reader
with a deep tongue who hums
like a mounting thunderhead Coming here
past a fire which burns the water and green
from the brush each week
I want expect to pluck lines like blueberries
stain my mouth and smile:
I am a rapist give me the next line
and know I go home tonight

Scenario #2:

Bound to
each other like alloy
iron and slag
boundaries of the game
premises of a paradox
they walk into prison
each with a handful
of years Yet
apply heat unfuse
the vitreous from the ore race
toward the same door They are
bound to

Scenario #3:

Poetry holds me
in its bent arms
Your silence
unbends me so
I am silent

Scenario #4:

He writes around the teacher
At first about the coffee cup
Styrofoam that indents like raw meat
the grounds collected like an ant hill
only hint at an existence On the collapsible table
the straw bent and chewed Teeth that know
teeth that know tongue that knows how to tease
Mouth lips slacked and spotted a hounds maw
The fan's familiar drone His wife
sliding into a hot bath His wife
sliding into a hot bath To displace
the teacher to fill that space with a world
that each day creeps closer to memory
he writes And the teacher rises up
to the brim begins to run over run down puddle
At his feet the teacher reflects what he confesses:
His wife's shoulder blades the water's path

Ladies, send them your sweet smelling

Send those fragile books made of broken bones
With these remind him he is not stone without story
With ease letters burn like poetry ends
stacked each on each
Don't tell him of the abused dog
you rescued from the streets
That dog will not live long
Skin toughens at the elbow
And your hair may lengthen in sarcasm
And he may ask you to *Imagine I am not here*
You can't
make that mistake
You will forget where the nightstand is in the dark
He can't
There will be times during the day when all the birds stop making noise at once
There will be times when steel pipe kisses skull
Hatch a plan for escape
Turn his attention to the moon
Now you are looking at the same thing
And now you're copying the Bible
When something was thought important it was written twice
It was written twice

Jailbirdhouses

Some nod with headphones on
Some nod off
doze on cement

Some speak like snails along razors
Some like lava immolating page upon page
Some smell of straight shit

Some plunge lightning through water
listening to that sound
some are born otherwise

One sits on grass that slopes to the lip
of a pond
and fishes

Some sight
The white birdhouses clunk together
the jailbirdhouses made of gourds

Prayer must work like this

Chickadees soon asleep with full bellies collect seeds
like spells draw light from the arbor
embower the winter sun in their tuck

His wife has tattooed stars where wings should be—
how many times his head hurt against
her body the small of her back the small of the Earth

as he caught smell of exhaust
as he lashed weeds in the ditch
His tongue turns to bone

What's happening precedes them
A lip's corona bruises brown
light wreathes from cloud to ground

This sentence hangs like a nimbus
This sentence will keep them apart
And I I can lie down and dream the whole place

how to score your skin
needle in ink from a Bic
how to link a chain bend
bend and have it mean
the alphabet's

H

heroin
here before time to mark
your life to prop
up infinity on your body
to tear that body down

Let them fall like hard fruit

There are measures to keep me safe
Beyond the nightsticks with their rubber-band grips

locks and keys and humming doors
Beyond razor wire

One rule allows me to carry myself away: Anonymity
Not my own: I'm known

as children know a visiting astronaut
Not them the men the prisoners

who remain faces poems
lovers of Poe No

The crimes all the *Whys*
they cannot be

Let them hang in the yard
as an endless number of pull-ups

and if dropped let them
fall like hard fruit—horse apples—

and huddle in rotting
Leave them for the blinking

shotgun in the clerk's face
for the roaches
rolled and stuffed in elastic bands
for the contusions bloom bruises

for pleads
Leave them for the squirrels

Only once did I stoop in wonder:
In the New York Times I found

the bum on the curb
stabbed and black and

as thunder can only name its flash
read the name I've seen stenciled in block

letters on state-issued whites of a skinhead

skinhead

who yanked the blanket back
as his friends drank and drove

a knife into the man And I am
filthy a snoop rubbernecker inquisitor

confidence man whose briefcase clicks closed
like poetry's door who must now forget

in the way we never really
forget our bones

Before

A pit bull tied to a tree before its owner. One hit in the face with an axe before that. This I've seen before: at a kennel, as a child, before it was big news. Before yowl. Before sic. Long before the one tied to the tree is broken before burned. Dawn is the combination of a shovel's momentum and a bowing before the storm. Before the flock of birds crack the sky. Before rain clouds loom like tombstones to be danced before.

Playoff Beard #1

Look! A Germanic
warlord on skates! Nope—a proud
defenseman in May.

The boy who's of broken lovemaking

The boy has to learn to carefully cup his mouth
to his wife's breasts.

To him, this is a foreign careful.

To let his mouth tender,

let the tongue form gardens,

no saturnalia, no jumble

her, jumble him,

together at the hips only and only

for minutes. The boy's tongue

thrills like that of his mother's,

or he fears it might.

The boy, because his neurons

are shards of an old mirror,

mars his wife with brass kisses.

The dimensions of a horse
Or
The story of Orvar-Odd

It stood in the snow. He knew this horse, his horse,
would kill him. Muscles and veins worked beneath
the lace of flakes, landscape of horse, landscape of acres.

It was foretold. Though it had not eaten his afterbirth
and never had he gone limp as it was about to kick.
Only once did its mane flare like quills,
and that was at the sound of its own feet
skipping against stone in the evening's long sunlight.

Because a hero's story is a country of eyes,
he cut himself a club from the woods. This being
runic. The horse did not moan or creak like a longship.
He buried it deep. Night leapt off branches in strange directions.

Hundreds of years were correctly filled with blood
oaths and war. More horses in more countries. But none
quite appropriately in snow. So, home.

Past the timbered buildings, past his tugged beard, past
undone barrows and strakes, he stumbled on ribs
which held a poisonous serpent. It uncoiled and struck.

A life lived as it was told will shoal all graves.
A buried skull will bare and grind its teeth.

An afternoon with a famous nihilist

Pluto no longer a planet, say astronomers.
—CNN News

It never was a planet he says
walking along on a cloudless day
going stretches of pavement
without stepping on a crack
Nor those astronomers astronomers
and he's skipping now
Bits of dust kick up
and he hollers
I do not exist!
while his arms
flail like nothing

Playoff Beard #2

Don't try it if: Blonde.
Graying. Eighteen. Married. Coach.
Too pretty. Eight Seed.

Must

Come winter
this is what the body does. Becomes
the first band of light in the dawn.
Ribs lift, become braided.
The body becomes braided.
A change in blood.
A becoming of all hands.
A must.
Find her and part her
and pronounce it.
Her inside breath a kiln.
Her inside wreathes a calf.
Skin settles back around bone.

Give the mountain a mouth made of mine

The mountain is alive. It's a deadly mountain.

—Bob Murray

I bear words like coal
and bear them by the ton.
Follow the horizontal line
one foot at a time, chase

the ribbon deep into me.
I, bright and white inside—
you'd be surprised—
have a black that, like a child,

is excised early. I echo *No*
friends but the mountains
as the rocks burst, the pines, the fault,
they bristle, how quickly the loud

lives. Mine is as cavernous,
my emptiness just as humorous,
my scarred face no
different beneath gravestones,

and I need no more convincing
of the hallowed ablution of carbon
than do the obscenities, the husks,
the eyes of obsidian within me.

As

Four Air Force soldiers, as clean shaven as a desert, shave. Near gate C7, Dallas TX, four soldiers—who look as similar as soldiers—groom, while a business man, casual, slides past me as if he took some turbulence to the gut. I, as I might, must determine whether I have to sit or stand. As true as an end rhyme, I become the neighbor of a casual business man. At the sinks, soldiers begin pummeling each other, perhaps as airport bathrooms necessitate. In an airport bathroom, as close as one can get to anonymity, I take a ten minute shit.

How the boy hears *The Rite of Spring*

To the end, my dear.

—Igor Stravinsky

How the primitive is handled.
How, in the story, a boy yells
to the window from below,
That's wrong!
How dare.
How the body is a proscenium
and how the room hovers.
How the new is abhorred.
How it's poured
into the brain's cast
to rehearse.
How to correct nature's hand,
writing in script or lovemaking.
Like bowlegged ballerinas.
How painful it is
but how it could happen no other way.
How proud women move
in bows and pastels,
touch the ground, stay riveted
as the conductor's hand
shakes and shakes
the whole orchestra,
how the score,
whose name is mouthed
in the dark, a dark whose
movements are not man
and should not act so,
is riotous.
How, even as he chokes
the car to life and drives
to her bed, the hows all
hold a bomb to his throat.
How, like moods, silence
can fall harder on a son.

Playoff Hockey

Combine the birth, wedding,
and graduation of your
1st born. Not even close.

In Idi Amin's garden

The sun is a punch to the sky's ribs.
The forest, thick crocodile skin.
A motorcade leaves for a grenade attack

while Idi Amin relaxes in his garden.
He had a dream that mixed with a rumor
so he's here for the day, where flowers

tongue water right from the air.
Sweat makes his skin look polished like the medals
on his chest. His white teeth frame a dragon-red

tongue while he laughs at the sunbirds that
kiss and chase. Their feathers fall like streamers
when they're shot. Under the shade of a tree,

he plunges his boxer's hands into the black
topsoil and lets them sniff around.
The ground is cool and stays between his fingers,

unlike blood. He takes root like a tree:
feeding off this land, looming over women
on break, their breasts finished flint.

He made this garden, bursting at the seams
of history, his hands on its throat.
When he's here, he's not in the car,

doubling-back in Kampala's streets, as the RPG
lodges in the steering column, the blast
only half-surprising kids playing in an alley.

Here he knows that earth's belly is never full,
that a fever spreads through its red dirt.
Here he knows the beautiful word *Uganda*.

Pantoum

Madrid, March 11, 2003

This woman on the train—
she's sitting by the window.
Her face will not leave a smudge.
Her mouth and eyes are open.

She's sitting by the window.
The train's not left the station.
Her mouth and eyes are open,
a fixed and terrible sight.

The train's not left the station,
One car split like a soup can,
A fixed and terrible sight.
Shredded metal, hips without thighs,

one car split like a soup can,
still smoldering upholstery,
shredded metal, thighs without hips.
Like a blanket, the roof's pulled over

still smoldering upholstery.
Up to the woman's chin,
like a blanket, the roof. Pulled over
the scene is a blue tarp.

Up to the woman's chin
no human likeness remains.
The scene is a blue tarp.
The woman is a mannequin.

No human remains,
her face will not leave a smudge.
The woman is a mannequin,
this woman on the train—

Over lunch break

He lays out his first homosexual encounter
like the sliced meats and cheeses
under the sneeze guard:
a bar, a big, burlap sack
of a man, some flirting.
What this looked like,
I cannot be sure:
inching his sweating cocktail
closer, ignoring the protection
of the coaster, slyly swiveling,
craning his neck to comb
the dance floor for someone particular
who's not there, finally settling
on the back of his neck
with the fox paw softness
of this sort of glance, sneaking
the hairs on his nape like a pelt,
the knot in his jaw
like an egg. Perhaps he finally approached
the man and was treated
to his next drink, chatted
about the vagaries of life like lights
glinting off the disco ball.
I imagine
how I'd have wooed
my wife in such a way
when, leaning in over his cold cut sandwich, over mine,
he says the big man
fucked him, yes, fucked him,
not the other way around,
this he makes as clear as the keen
of electricity arching
between the salt and minerals of two fingers
during a stress test.
I begin to wonder what else
this electricity could be mistaken for.

Her hand you wish were still a road

A sun doesn't rise
for another hour. The ceiling fan wags three
tongues, says, *goodbye breath*. In your hand

her hand you wish were still a road
with a start and a still going. Before its savage,
before you are beside a monster.

The pattern that is the human skeleton somehow
more visible, lungs that plumb, a stoma's slight hiss,
the body a failed bridge, the body complicated

matter. All other than mother. So, too, says
your sister on the phone. *That woman is not*
my mother, and she's right. And you've both come to believe this

like how her jade face once traced the intricacies of voice: not
impossibly. That your brother will arrive—just as the sun
slips on its same dress—and rock her in his arms

is not impossible. That your words about her death
can go where you cannot is unimportant, not impossible.
At this moment, only her six grown children seem impossible.

Villanelle

All goings-on are like bone on stone—
me, on the hospital slab, supine.
If only my life could end like an Ashbery poem.

I find no difference between a prayer or moan
if hearts finally thud for those considered divine.
All goings-on are like bone on stone,

like reburying horse skulls or human bones
under prairie grass, sort of a reverse-mine.
If only my life could end like an Ashbery poem,

like the sealing of an ordinary tome
or an expensive bottle of French wine.
All goings-on are like bone on stone

which is why there's *Rocky VI* starring Stallone,
why nails on chalkboard play xylophone on spines.
If only my life could end like an Ashbery poem,

not an entire poem—a vaudeville, a cyclone,
a cartoon—but just the end, the last line
like: “All goings-on are like bone on stone.”
If only my life could end like an Ashbery poem.

Shootout

4-4. 1 on 1.

Stick, skipping puck, stacked pads—lamp.

Enter zamboni.

Night drive with Crazy Horse

~

Here an unbeautiful city
found shining
like a dime in grass.
Snow steals light
from the headlights.
A mile back, Crazy Horse stood
on the shoulder,
and I picked him up.
He speaks a bit.

~

*I once met Socrates
and he was much like us.*
His proof: a story.
It drops like snow,
as if frictionless, as if
its own weight is enough
—only *as if*—
because nothing can move
without friction.
My car along the highway.
Fields lying like a bare back.

~

I tell Crazy Horse a story
about a girl killed
by a tiger in Dakota.
Not in the tall grasses,
but at a photo shoot, all dolled up.
Maybe the click
of the shutter,
or the name *Haley*,
or the perfume,
or the tall grasses of Dakota—
Usually, went the story, the tiger
had cool blood.

~

Later I'd learn
he said something like

*I ache like a tree
that's lost its branches
to hard water.*

Later I'd learn his silence
spoke even more.

~

Black Buffalo Woman,
if you lived, you did not fight.
You died when cars
were worth forty horses,
when another war began
teething in Europe,
when borders already replaced
the Black Hills and the man
who had to earn his name.
Crazy Horse.
The man you did not marry.
But, the man you ran off with
like a coyote with a chicken.
It is he who you feel flex
in your bones as you stroll
city streets in a dress.
The man your husband
hunted and shot in the face,
in front of you.
The man you left bleeding
as you ran. The man
who felt the choke
of the Northern Pacific
and the Union Pacific,
who wore one feather,
who dusted his horse
and himself before war,
who shot the horses
of those refusing war,
who made Sitting Bull
jealous by sitting in rifle
range smoking a pipe,
who named his only daughter
They Are Afraid Of Her.
The man who never danced.
The man whose history
you try to refuse,
but which rages, and you want
to punch out a window
of a parked car, sick at the

sight of blacktop inching
around the thick necks
of hills and horses,
to turn and swallow the Chinook
that is at your back, to forever
bend this golden grass.
Like a setting sun, though,
you just wander out past the town
into the plains.
The moon rises. It's new.
A new moon is a dark moon.

~

To see even a coyote
hurdle a barbed wire fence
at the sound of some bleating
would be better. No,
only those spinning tendrils
of blacktop heaving,
passenger seat empty.

Arresting the Alphabet

S is a lunatic,
all bent out of shape,
probably because of sex,
hanging around with a character
like *x*, trying to score
cheap three-letter thrills,
singeing imaginations
of all ages, starting
words, stopping them
with plurality,
sometimes coming in twos
(thankfully
not in threes)—
if you're on the road
and see *S* speeding
north in the southbound,
dial up the police,
the next toll station,
tell them to deploy spikes.

Lord Stanley's Cup

Each champ got 1 night.
Drank from it, swam with it, filled
it with stripper-ass.

The boy who goes to work with a saw

These are his trophies:

fox, rabbit, deer, raccoon, a mother
bear—the mother's favorite.

His tongue keeps busy between
dip and jaw and telling the boy
about how he's turned the bear

into a wall. *It's much easier
when they're warm. Skin slides
right off.* Two crabapple trees

the mother loved break
and rebreak shade on his face.

Black bears would often daydream
down the mountains and climb
these trees when the boy was young,

straddle the branches, comical
and calamitous like construction
workers taking lunch on girders.

They'd eat bitter fruit and shit and fire
trucks and cops would show up.

Once a bear wandered into a garage,
then into the house while a neighbor
unloaded groceries. It shredded

a lampshade, a bag of cat food,
sat on the couch

staring back at the neighbor
outside calling 911.

By the time they'd shot

and killed it, the boy and his mother
had made their way into the crowd

across the street, where they learned
the bear dashed circles in the living room

as each round struck it, and it had tried to climb
a bookcase but tumbled to the carpet

three times. The boy went back in to his cold

dinner and would forget about the bear for many years.

The mother, upset, would refuse to cut down her trees.

The man, in his best black suit,
backs up against a tree

like a bear rutting. *Your mother
was fascinated by the teeth and tongue
until she learned they were fake.*

He says this slow and quiet
like the faulting of mountains.

Yeah, you want her warm or a bit alive
as he leans slightly aplomb.

At sunset, a chainsaw
rives bark and runs hot.

Fear of a gorilla falling

All the books
said gorillas don't climb,
so a fear of the most
unsophisticated kind,
like mother dying
or, for some boys, living
another year
with another man. Then,
there are moments of coming true
and these are terrible moments.
Our tapping on glass,
our children's laughter
so close to true alarm
we'd swear the gorilla's
loose. And it is. It is
knocking on our door, it is
tickling our necks, it is
atop a peppercorn tree,
a spectacle. The wind blows
and we notice the hair
on its face for the first time.
It appears to have a long
mind, like a child in thought.
It turns away before launching itself.
Shattered glass, breaking
necks, it exhausts
the marrow of gravity.
Once fallen,
the hulk wrecked,
what's found inside is
no circus, no promise
broken because it was never made.

Notes

In “Give the mountain a mouth made of mine,” the epigraph is a quote from Bob Murray, the Crandall Canyon coalmine co-owner.

Usain Bolt is the world record-setting sprinter from Jamaica and the subject of the poem “Usain Bolt.”

In “The deer sing,” the last line is partially taken from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, 265e.

“Reverie of blue” is for Randall Jarrell.

In “Make our bodies into geniuses,” the epigraph is from John and Elizabeth Buck, two eminent researchers who studied the synchronized flashing of fireflies.

“The flower clock” is for a good friend, Jessica Bruinsma.

In “Pantoum,” the date, March 11, 2003, is of the Madrid train bombings.

In “Whine animals as they lay,” the titular, and second, line is from one of my incarcerated students. The italicized line is taken from Etheridge Knight’s “Haiku 1.”

In “The Prisoner’s Dilemma,” the first line of “*Scenario #1*” is from one of my incarcerated students. The Prisoner’s Dilemma is a notorious philosophical thought experiment: Two men suspected of committing a crime together are arrested and placed in separate cells by the police. Each suspect may either confess or remain silent, and each one knows the possible consequences of his action. They are: (1) if one suspect confesses and the other remains silent, the one who confessed goes free and the silent accomplice goes to jail for twenty years. (2) If both suspects confess, they both go to jail for five years. (3) If both suspects remain silent, they both go to jail for a year for a lesser charge. However, neither prisoner knows for sure what choice the other prisoner will make.

“The dimensions of a horse Or The story of Orvar-Odd,” retells the story of the Nordic hero Orvar-Odd.

In “An after noon with a famous nihilist,” the epigraph is from a September 24, 2006 CNN News article. The famous nihilist referred to is Peter Unger.