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## Passing Savage: Poems

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PASSING SAVAGE: POEMS

A Thesis  
Submitted To  
The Faculty in the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

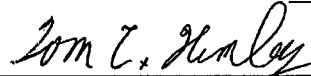
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

By  
Bradley Howard Murff

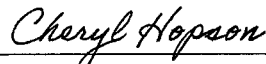
August 2021

PASSING SAVAGE: POEMS

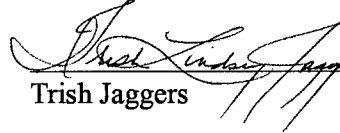
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Dr. Tom Hunley, Director of Thesis



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Associate Provost for Research and Graduate Education

## PREFACE

More than dealing with one subject in particular, these poems are a snapshot of who I am after four decades on earth. They move from the shadows of a crooked tree to the sunlight of the dreaming mind. In this way, they are meant for all audiences. Every day I wake up and feel at once ten, twenty, thirty, and forty years old. My mind moves from light to dark, happiness to sadness on a whim. My goal is to capture that sentiment.

I write in several different styles. In terms of formal poetry, I am interested in bridging the spaces between free verse and form. As a writer interested in formal poetry, I am more interested in being innovative in my use of form rather than being strictly formal. The New Formalists are an intriguing group of writers. They brought form back into the poetic mix at the end of the twentieth century; however, I am not a new formalist. My break from them has to do with what I see as a refusal on their part to embrace free verse as a step forward in English poetics. When a New Formalist sits down to write they find an established form and stick with it regardless of what the poem wants to do. They would agree that moderate substitutions along the way are appropriate, but for them poetry is about following rules. I, on the other hand, see form as a way to generate rhythm and to focus my thoughts. But I am always asking what the poem wants to do, what is it up to, where is it going. The goal is to write poems that can be read just like free verse. I am not asking a reader to like my poem because it follows the rules. I want the reader to appreciate my poem and then say, wow, that was written in rhyme and meter. Maybe they will then read the poem more closely to see how it was made and what they can learn from the formal conventions the poet used—and deviated from.

Sound plays an important role in my poetry. As a writer who started in free verse, I would compose by reading my poems aloud to myself, over and over. I feel this is common amongst most free verse writers. The issue is that as we read one of our poems aloud we can control the way the words are pronounced. This control can cause us to think the poem sounds better than it really does. With form, however, the poet generates sound the way songwriters do, by counting beats per line. If we follow the pattern prescribed by the form—most often iambic—we can rest assured that the poem will sound good. This is one reason I enjoy using form. Form does have its drawbacks; it can be quite regimented and boring. These are two things I do not want my poetry to be. My formal poems—mostly sonnets at this stage—are not doing things that much differently than strictly formal poetry. I am merely making minor alterations that keep poems interesting and alive, the way free verse does, while maintaining conversation with the centuries of formal poets who have come before me.

The form I use most is the sonnet. When I think of this form, I imagine an ancient urn secreted high in the mountains. A poet can approach that urn and pour words in to make fire. The trick is, the words the poet pours must come from the artist's soul or else the finished product will be sing-song verse. Most sonnets deal with love, affection, sadness. However, I am using the sonnet to do something quite different. I have adapted the form to tell micro-narratives. My sonnets "Zedrka" and "Alpine Tundra" are good examples. They are non-fiction narratives. They set the scene then use rising action to build to an epiphany much like a Joycean short story. I want to show the reader what it felt like to be present in the moments of the story.

In “Zedrka”, I use a substitution in line four to snap the reader out of the poem’s iambic cadence. The poem is written from the point of view of an 8-year-old boy. He does not understand what the differences are between his family and his friend’s family. He has been jarred into life by the poem’s events. The stressed syllable followed by a period at the start of the fourth line is designed to give this effect. To be metrical the word “weren’t” could just be divided into “were not.” This is important because it shows that the poet is making a conscious decision; it is not that the poet does not understand iambic pentameter. Quite the opposite, he is deciding to break from the meter to give the speaker’s voice authenticity. The poem’s other substitution occurs in the penultimate line. There, the line is reduced by one syllable. Once again the line retains its five beat stature but refuses to conform to the poem’s iambic scheme. This is the moment when the meter breaks down—and the voice becomes entirely human. A computer could not have written that line. It would not have understood the necessity of deviation.

The poem “Alpine Tundra” also uses an early substitution to achieve dramatic effect. This time there is a substitution at the start of line two. The trochee—*Tundra*, has a booming sound that announces the speaker’s arrival in the high Rocky Mountains—a sparse area where people are above—literally and figuratively—the concerns of the day. As with “Zedrka”, this substitution is appropriate because of the poem’s intention. I am not writing a love poem; I am telling a story, and stories do not flow seamlessly; they are punctuated by moments of clarity. I generate another moment on line six of “Alpine Tundra”. This substitution is similar to the one on line four of “Zedrka.” Here I start the line with the word “storms,” followed by a period (a full stop). This moment is important

because it adds tension to the micro-narrative. Hopefully this gives the piece the quality of a story with the rhythm, brevity, and shape of a sonnet.

I also use form in the poem “Dawn Chorus,” where the meter varies from three beats per line to five beats per line. The couplets are rhyming; however, I use slant rhymes instead of full rhymes. The poem is inspired by Auden’s poem “The More Loving One.” In that piece Auden ponders what the universe would be like if all the stars in the sky were extinguished. The speaker is coming to terms with the universe being beyond our understanding. The rhyming couplets give the poem a nursery-rhyme feel, which is a bit ironic considering the sophisticated, scientific subject matter. As a civilization we are coming to terms with our new understanding of how big the universe is and how small our place in it might be. “Dawn Chorus” is my way of expressing how those concepts make me feel as person and as a poet.

In terms of shape, several of my pieces are shape-driven. Poetry—especially single page poems—are visual in nature. We can see them in their entirety before we even start reading. Because my mind is shaping the visual impression, this is another opportunity for me to address the page in a manner artificial intelligence can never emulate. “You Can’t Put a Ring On” is a poem that shaped itself during the revision process. Even though it’s free verse, I enjoyed putting pressure on the words. I wanted to keep the right margin as straight as possible. Finally the last lines began to sweep out. From there I saw an impression that, for me anyway, symbolizes the poem’s sentiment as well as the language’s literal meaning. “Poet’s House” is more abstract. It has a sort of crookedness that I am aiming for in many of my poems, particularly formal pieces. I want the crookedness to represent a sort of leaning house. Something that is well-built but a bit

too human to stand perfectly rigid. As computers and artificial intelligence take over our world, I want to reveal humanity through the imperfections of my work. This leaning effect or crookedness will show that my work was written by a person and not a machine. Similarly “Zedkra” looks different than most sonnets because of the penultimate line being reduced by one syllable. Since I am deploying substitutions more tactically in my sonnets, these shapes are beginning to emerge. A general crookedness is what I’m aiming for.

Complexity is also an important component of my thesis. It is important that my poems withstand close textual analysis. If I were to set one of my poems on a table in front of five or six literary scholars, would they have something to talk about? That is what I ask of each poem. I want the language of each piece—their essence, not just their literal definition—to be fundamental to its meaning. A good example is my poem “You Can’t Put a Ring On.” On the surface, the poem deals with a difficult time in the speaker’s life many years ago. However, the poem is also about something more: coming to terms with the fact that the things that make us happy can also destroy us. Instead of spoon feeding the reader this idea, the poem uses physical sensation, hallucinatory imagery and juxtaposition of contradictory symbols to inhabit a dark world. Another poem that I believe can stand up to textual analysis is “Forty-One”.

“Forty-One” is an ecstatic poem, a sort of self-elegy. The staggered lines represent the dance one goes through in life. One way to think of the staggered lines is that a person takes a few steps forward then a few steps back. However, the most important thing about the poem is its music and, hopefully, interesting word choices. Many of the poems in my collection strive to use words that conjure a surreal world.



Surrealism is a key ingredient in much of my work. When I speak of surrealism, there are really two different types. For the first, imagine a screen on a wall. Now imagine me throwing images on the screen: angel with a chainsaw, cobra reading a Bible, cat swimming laps, whatever. Those images are interesting, but to call them surreal is a stretch, because I am just making things up, and anyone can do that. However, there is a second kind of surreal. Imagine standing in the room with the angel with a chainsaw or the cobra reading the Bible. They are no longer cast onto a screen. They are real and standing right beside you. That is true surrealism. Best example of this would be the scene in David Lynch's movie *Blue Velvet*, when the protagonist goes into the apartment and finds a man standing with a bullet in his head (Lynch). He is obviously dead but still standing. This is impossible, but because Lynch has built up to the moment by having stranger and stranger things happen in this apartment, there is a feeling that the man could actually remain standing after being shot dead. Upon seeing the film years ago, I did some research to see if people can remain standing after dying. Obviously, that's not possible. It is, however, surreal.

In the poem "Poet's House" I have the speaker, a precarious neighbor—and fledgling novelist—observe increasingly stranger and stranger behavior across the street, so that when the surreal takes place, the surreal events feel more real. Also, it's important not to signal to the reader that we are entering a surreal space. Instead, I just go to the surreal space with confidence that the reader will follow. Although many of my poems feature surrealist elements, I am increasingly more interested in dealing with human relationships. I hope that the human soul and its limitations are front and center in most, if not all, of my poems.

As for my influences, they are various and eclectic. The poets from the past who have most inspired me are Percy Shelley, Gerard Manly Hopkins, Elizabeth Bishop, Philip Levine, and Seamus Heaney. Shelly and Hopkins were formal innovators. They understood that form is great up until the poem wants to go somewhere else. In my poetry, I want to listen to what the poem is trying to say. Often my poems start with a sound or an image and then I begin—to steal from Heaney—to dig (Heaney).

Hopkins has been a recent revelation for me. I love his idea of “sprung meter,” which is a sort of free verse (Hopkins 7). He was one of the first poets to deviate from formal meter, while not diving headfirst into free verse. There is something about form that makes sense musically. Hopkins was both priest and musician. He had a fine ear for sound and a great respect for the past. Instead of throwing form out altogether, he trusted himself enough to know when to deviate and when to conform to established metrical principles. I respect this very much and hope that respect is reflected in my sonnets and other formal pieces.

Percy Shelley is the most important influence on my poetry. My poem “Mammoth Cave” uses the same rhyme and meter as his “Ode to a Skylark.” My poem is 14 stanzas whereas Shelley’s is 21, but we both speak to nature as though it were a living, breathing thing. Using Shelley’s form helped me focus my thoughts and assisted me in crafting a poem which speaks to the healing power of nature. While I was here at Western Kentucky University, I spent hundreds of hours hiking Mammoth Cave National Park. During those many hours, I thought about who I am as a person and as a poet. My poem’s stanzas are quintains which feature three beat lines for the first four lines of each stanza, followed by an alexandrine for each stanza’s final line. This structure gave me

flexibility in the first four lines while culminating each stanza with a sweeping and lyrical flourish through the alexandrine. Shelley knew better than to force iambic pentameter throughout his great poem. It was exhilarating using his technique in my own verse.

Heaney is another poet who seems to know when to let a line breathe rather than forcing it to be absolutely metrical. He is more about conveying truth of experience than impressing strangers. In my opinion most of us read through trochees and other slight metrical modifications without missing a beat, especially deeper in a poem or at the beginning of lines. When I write in form I am not trying to please a critic who reads with ruler in hand, judging whether I follow arbitrary rules. In "Cirque D'Hiver" Elizabeth Bishop uses form to mimic the object being described, a trinket toy horse with a dancer on its back. As the horse canters back and forth we feel the energy moving between Bishop's mind and the page. Poets like Bishop and Philip Levine are examples of poets whose ideas are created by close evaluation of their subjects. Bishop is the contemporary poet whose work as influenced me most. In "At the Fishhouses" Bishop so finely describes the surroundings that she reveals the inner-workings of her own mind (Bishop). The same can be said of Levine's "What Works Is." In that poem we see workers standing in line in the rain waiting for work. Through specific details, Levine shows us what it felt like to stand among those working-class people (Levine). Both Bishop and Levine have emotional depth and respect for the finite nature of people, our creations, dreams, successes, and failures. Instead of announcing what truth I am communicating, in this collection I hone in on subjects so precisely that the reader understands what significance they hold.

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## PASSING SAVAGE: POEMS

Bradley Murff

August 2021

67 pages

Directed by: Tom Hunley, Cheryl Hopson, and Trish Jagers

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This creative thesis is a collection of poetry. Many of the poems are personal in nature, but several deal with important social issues. The style of the poems varies from free verse to formal. Many of the formal pieces are sonnets, but there are other formal arrangements as well, such as “Mammoth Cave,” “Dawn Chorus,” and “A Staircase in Jamacia, Queens.” All of the poems were completed while I was a student here at Western Kentucky University.

## Hillbilly Noir

Walking through the university's basement  
there is no sunlight only students swarming

like eager bats. I jingle my chain of keys  
outside the small office I share with a folklorist.

A journeyman writer approaches and asks  
about hillbilly noir. He wants to know how dark

the genre can get. I tell him a few names,  
authors dead and alive, titles of stories:

*Tough People, Poachers, Trilobites, Dogs of God,  
Winter's Bone, Good Country People,*

books dripping of damp woods, the stench  
of rusted blood and country death,

the soiled kitchens, bedsheets and towels,  
wife-beater t-shirts and trembling hands.

What I should say to the curious boy  
are the names Mary, Helen, Tater and Sam.

Those are a few of my aunts and uncles  
who dug coal, waited tables, and I'm sure

kicked ass, drove shine, robbed a store  
or two. At seventy Aunt Wilma was still

working a factory job in Oak Ridge,  
her DNA stamped with plutonium,

leukemia twisting her veins like licorice.  
None of her dreams ever mattered. Hell

her hopes died many moons ago, like fog  
through the trees. Hillbilly noir, huh? You mean

Cormac McCarthy watching a young couple  
fuck each other as a shotgun sneaks

through the car window. You wanna know  
white trash, the kind Yale MFAs write

jokes about for Saturday Night Live,  
the crooked cock of a thirty-year-old farmhand

quivering with a diamond of cum on the tip  
and one of my aunts at age fifteen

gazing up through the spotted rear window  
of his Cutlass as the moon scraped the black

sky and its stars. My own mother  
may have been one of the millions lost

had her father not dug enough coal, sold  
enough insurance, killed enough Nazis

to get her and her sister and her tired  
young mother, Mildred, out of there.

A Buick crushed Mildred's older brother Tom.  
He was fixing the carburetor with oily fingers.

Noir means dark, people. Dark as a grave,  
dark as the inside of torn panties stretched over

a hidden branch. What do you want from me?  
I should have said to the kid,

the one who wants to write, who wishes  
he was better than he is. Shit

isn't he hillbilly noir? Because he longs to be  
somewhere else, someplace like New York

or Boston, slouched at an oak table  
talking to famous authors with fancy sweaters

and fancy degrees to match, degrees yellow  
as jackals' eyes in a forest,

yellow as the false teeth my skinny grandfather  
Lee Roy gave up on scrubbing, let fall

into the cold creek that morning he hunted  
a good deer to gut and serve



his family who lived and prayed and survived  
in the woods, in the noir.

Part of me likes stories: *Child of God*,  
*Suttree*, *Town Smokes*, *The Killer Inside Me*.

Another part knows fiction can never  
replace truth. None of us can forget

where we come from and what strangers think  
we are. We hear a terrifying voice

tell us we're not wanted, not now, not  
ever. We all come from darkness.

And to the dark we shall return, screaming,  
writing, clawing. Hillbilly noir is about that.

## A Voice

Kill a snake throw its head in the trees  
Momma said  
Snake bite you dead, even it's dead  
That head bite your leg  
Daddy drink whiskey, fuck momma silly  
Sit on the porch, eyes up in the trees  
Me and my kin, we been around  
Appalachia has its ups and its downs  
Daddy slap momma silly  
Drive into town buy more whiskey  
Wrap his step-side truck a tree around  
Don't ask on us  
We bad luck, we all kinds of trouble  
Take a wrong turn  
From the hospital little baby  
You be one of ours  
Wait tables, work on old cars  
We cook whiskey, watch stars shimmy  
Till moon goes down  
And sun comes up

## The History of Generosity

Generosity gifted me a mother  
then she gave me a father  
and some light. Upon giving me  
light she gave my body  
to another person to teach  
and light fell from her  
mouth and her white dress lifted  
above her and more light  
spilled into my hands.  
Her touch was light and  
she twirled me in her arms.  
Along the midnight shore  
we danced in shadows of flames.  
My mother's light held me  
each night and my father heaved  
and became the tide and dreamed  
of us swimming heavenward  
to make more light. My family  
was a horse-drawn carriage of light.  
They were goddesses of light  
like diamonds in the morning.  
Light shook the pantry, light  
rattled the attic and eaves.  
The yard was rustling leaves  
until it wasn't, it was only light.  
Lightning and rain in chaos  
of night, my sister she cried  
then another sister cried. The days  
were a dream and generous  
and I give my light away  
just like this—so fast its fire  
caresses the page—in waves.

Somewhere in Vanderbilt Hospital

My father's ghost strolls the ICU  
His brown ass sags from a gown made of flowers

Nurses in blue scrubs feel him pass I remember  
The last night I stayed with him red and yellow wires  
Uncoiled from his wrists like AV cables  
Knotted behind the TV

I clawed the leather recliner  
That creaked like a broken knee

I shifted from hip to hip the odor of piss and turpentine

Every hour the nurse came in and we tried to wake him  
She rubbed his sternum with her knuckles  
I pressed his hairy chest  
Slick as a fish

His head was wrapped in bloody cloth  
His arms propped on firm pillows to encourage  
Circulation

Machines beeped and buzzed  
His warm flesh under my palm the young nurse and I  
Sang *Wake up Harold! Harold wake up!*

I hid my tears the nurse secreted her ambivalence

I rode an elevator to the family room the dark  
Filled with cots but the sobbing strangers were too much  
I settled for a coke

A view of the October campus  
Lights on at the football stadium from the night before  
Like sentries

I watched an intern slide Dad's head through the mouth of a gruesome machine  
A butcher's mechanical saw  
A resident in wireframes and green scrubs pointed at the monitor  
Shook his head no

I wandered brown halls  
Onto the patio of a deserted cafe  
Chicory coffee roasting  
And beyond

To the autumn campus where students  
Moved through dismal  
Sunday morning light to their dorms

I walked among them  
The breeze sharpened by the whisper  
Of hackberry trees and a fountain  
With trunkless mayan heads spitting water

There was a stillness  
Like times I walked away from Dad  
Brick path hard under my Asics

Southern magnolias losing their white petals

I didn't even recognize the sky

In a Laundromat with Golden Chairs

“The law of dreams is, keep moving.”

—Peter Behrens

I’m tending a rose garden.  
I dig like a man who loves

to dig with his hands. A horseman  
gallops up, says to keep moving.

I kneel in a graveyard  
with panting trees.

Fog wanders the markers  
like the cold breath of the past.

My father’s ghost rises, breathes  
in my ear and flies away.

The desert moon turns blue.  
I hike through rattling sand.

At a wind-blasted intersection,  
hieroglyphs I try to read.

My father’s ghost rises,  
kisses my hand, flies away.

I’m in a cathedral. I paint  
its crystal ceiling a wash

of bleach detergent and shine  
my machine’s soapy mirror

among the racket of coins, an ocean  
and some clouds. A father’s son rises.

## Wiping Elvis's Ass

Whenever a great man dies an average one comes along  
& wipes the great one's ass.  
Front to back, back to front. Gentle as angel's wing.

Usually a rookie paramedic.  
*Wipe his ass*, the veteran says.  
It's better this way,  
Won't smear our new stretcher.

On that morning at Graceland  
On the checkerboard tile a young man kneeled in sunlight  
That flowed through the bathroom window & he took a deep breath  
& another & shook his head

A wad of toilet paper cupped in his palm perfectly white  
As the lace belt of cocaine draped on the mirror  
By Elvis's whiskered sink.

We won't go into the scent or the substance. Lord knows  
We owe the great man that much. Nor will we discuss the tears  
In the maid's eyes when she arrived with a gleaming breakfast platter  
& found that The King had died.

Why has it taken so long for someone to write this poem?  
Is it because the ass-wipe was illiterate  
Or because greatness demands  
More grandiose gestures?

We should hold a benefit concert  
Not for Elvis but for that young paramedic,  
Cody or Sam or Whatshisface, the one  
Who reached out & sent Elvis's last lyrical movement

Down a commode to the afterlife—the uncertain  
Kid who lifted one dimpled cheek & reached in & wiped  
& wiped again & again like a son digging at a father's grave

Clawing & weeping yet begging for closure  
Until tears dried from the boy's face & for once  
The crowd outside could turn & blow out their candles  
With kind faith that all those gold records would continue to spin.

## Alpine Tundra

A marker said prepare to enter alpine  
Tundra. The summer sky was my blue helmet  
As I advanced up Longs Peak's rocky spine.  
A vultures' flock flew overhead—I met  
A crooked wooden sign that warned of thunder-  
Storms. I saw no troubled clouds or lightning  
And hikers gazed up at the cliffs in wonder.  
No ropes were tied, no ledges looked frightening  
Enough to keep us from the top—Chasm Lake's  
Ice water cooled and stung my swollen lips  
And tongue. I turned and folks were taking breaks  
On rocks. A woman breathed and rubbed her hips  
In sunlight. Students walked up sipping flasks  
And none were bearing guns or wearing masks.



Zedrka

A crash, three kids, their father, no survivors.  
My little pal's last name began with z  
And he was Catholic. I knew that we  
Weren't. We passed a line of cars, no drivers.  
We walked in and my father shook the hand  
Of quiet men whose faces looked so grave.  
They wore black suits and smelled of aftershave.  
The family burned alive—the priest said stand  
And pray. The rolling of the caskets lit  
By candles caused a ringing in my ears.  
Most people cried; a few tried to hide it.  
His mother's veil was tilted forward. Tears  
Touched my lips like fingertips. I bit  
Down hard and kept on biting all these years.

Forty-One

Now it's not so hard  
To spend daylight napping  
Instead of sharpening the hours  
With workman's tools—hacksaw  
Chisel, crowbar, hex key  
Give me a melody  
To massage back and shoulder  
Electric gospel blues  
Verses that shower  
Sunbeams through clouds  
Lazy walk by river trees  
Dance down Main Street shouting  
Dreams that can't come true  
Dizzying names  
That I've been called  
Bright child, bashful  
Pedlar, counselor  
Beggar in stolen sheets  
Light pierces the heart  
Fires hip and knee  
I march through rotted leaves  
Toward street sign ahead  
A green arrow pointed west  
Painted Forty-Two

Westerns

*for Lee R. Sweat*

No bullshit, when I was a kid I loved westerns, films out of fashion today, ranchers riding horses into towns named after places and ideologies that never truly existed. Westerns are bronze stars on the treasure maps of Hollywood. Characters were as brave as their stories required, no more, no less. I recognized bad guys when they barged through the swinging doors of a saloon that buzzed like a wood shop, where townsfolk were getting liquored up before lunch, and a kid played banjo in the corner. A bad guy would spit black soup on the dusty floor, callout the biggest guy in the room and the bartender. Villains wore black hats and heroes wore gray. Bad guys had black eyes, too, and black guns. None of them had wives, maybe a harlot who stole their wallet and their heart when they were nineteen so they started hijacking horses and ambushing wagon trains near boulders made of cattle bones and sand. My grandfather introduced me to the genre when I was seven. Movies eased his memories of paratrooping during World War II and the horror of shooting a man in the stomach then marching on frostbitten feet, rain blurring his vision as a tornado touched down behind him. Later he recalled the awful night he jumped into Normandy, boys murdered by anti-aircraft guns and howling propellers with their voices crying *Lee! Lee!* in the paralyzing dark. Fifty years later his hands shook so badly all he wanted was to smoke marlboros and turn the leaves of paperback thrillers, a lampshade's halo circling his armchair like a lasso.

## In My Mother's Yard

The dead leaves are held together by sticks  
Some kid's spit and bubble gum

A hickory's four broken arms  
Cry to me about crooked years

Decades of rain and light spent inside  
Doing laundry my mother feels so much

Pain she puts her hands on her burning hips  
Like a four-star general ordering

Lunch in a busy McDonald's  
Or a blonde teacher in front of a class

A little cinnamon on toast in the kitchen  
A little cinnamon on her wrinkled hands

The heavy basket of laundry  
Ruffled like a child's hair is her enemy

The memory of her dead husband  
Buried by the interstate is her enemy

But not her wedding dress nailed to the wall  
In a gilt frame in that yellow photograph

Outside the blue leaves are bound together  
By sprinklers and the wind's tongue

The leaves freckle in warm grass  
They shuffle and flip like kids dancing

In a high-school gym  
The leaves smell of pine

Baby doll arms potpourri  
My mother's breath and sunlight

If I had an army I would order it to help her  
Do the laundry and massage her pink toes

Get a serving dish down from a tall shelf  
Move the fridge around lift and tilt it

To the right like a painting of Jesus or  
Of sailboats lined up for a regatta

Tilt the house so lamps and couches slide  
Into place like on a cruise

I would wrap my arm around my mother's waist  
To better see her in the dark

Living room so I could escort her  
Down the spiral staircase of my mind

The neighborhood I grew up in had quiet houses  
And houses that knew how to sing

In her bedroom the curly carpet  
Is a type of grass, white grass!

On my mother's lawn live the seasons  
In my mother's breast lives the time

A history of heart disease  
A mouse out of breath

She carries the laundry into its cramped room  
Ouch my toe!

In my mother's house there's a loveseat a couch  
Grown kids and her dead parents

There's an orange cat with diabetes and some needles  
There's a mom with pre-diabetes and wheat toast

There's a door I stumbled out of years ago  
And never heard it screech or felt it close

## Ballad of the Trial Lawyer

In the murky woods I veered  
off the ruined mud path.  
I saw a bear rubbing a tree  
but then I realized  
it was a wolf  
or dog caught  
in a snare but as I stepped  
closer  
my feet crunching  
leaves and sticks  
I found a man dying of cancer.  
Right there  
in the grass, roots and rocks  
coughing blood  
mucus and expletives.  
Bloody veins traced  
his pale scalp.  
His instinct was to hide  
his naked illness  
like a hive of bees or his wife's Polaroids.  
He asked why I became a personal  
injury  
lawyer instead of an oncologist.  
I told him I could never study the thing  
killing him,  
I am far  
too imaginative,  
self absorbed.  
He nodded and before I knew it  
the day was bright again  
even under the dripping  
green canopy  
of trees and our single star.  
I was back on the trail  
hustling  
walking away  
in a cloud of sweat and crown  
of mosquitos.  
I smiled  
and I swear to God I even whistled.

## How Could This Happen?

You're driving your car then boom  
you remember that lady's face.  
It seizes you like a bouncer  
escorting you down the aisle of the prom  
you ditched to play spin the bottle  
by yourself. Remember that night  
the waitress with the great coke,  
bad complexion and fire-red Mustang  
said she'd love you with her eyes  
then dropped you off instead.  
Remember all those times  
you wished like Satan you were the one  
in the vulgar flick whose call  
everyone awaited in tearful rage.  
For once you would throw your anger,  
spread it out like a red carpet outside  
the Academy Awards or wherever.  
Then you would feel a release  
like the first time you came  
home and found nothing there  
except your failures and a fifth  
of disgust with the label half peeled.  
Stop what you're doing and picture that woman  
or man (you choose the royalty  
you deserve). Look over at them,  
those tan legs and red flip flops.  
Don't you dare lie to me, their voice  
says and you say, I would never lie to you,  
Superego. I sold my innocence days ago.  
It drove off like a taco truck into Alabama  
stars. Is it late, honey? Yes, it's getting late.  
Are you lonely? Flip that quarter  
and guess whether you'll get another chance  
with beauty happenstance enough to leave  
you for a bean burrito. Let's recreate  
this story in perpetuity. Your mother loved you  
because you were her; you were also part  
of the Universe and that's why you pray  
God exists and you're right to think that, silly.  
Take a left at the next light and flag down  
that cop with your middle finger.  
His red and blue lights will answer.  
You can explain the beer on your breath,  
the untucked safety belt, and that patriotic song

whistling away on the radio you forgot to poke.  
Life is a poisoned box of chocolates  
served in the colorful Aurora,  
Colorado showing of Batman.  
Purple smoke bombs ignite.  
The first shotgun blast is heard.  
Some poor bastard beat you to oblivion.



## Passing Savage

On the bad side of town felons are sweeping up  
the graveyard, giving the tombstones haircuts.

A few stray clouds slide through the gray sky  
like a crew of stoners ditching sixth period.

The teens lie down on the fifty yard line, passing savage  
blunts. Empty metal bleachers watch them like police.

See this deck of tarot cards? It forecasts doom.  
I cancel my subscription to the happy suburban life.

*Carry me down*, I sing to the river of bruised knees  
where on a crumbling bank the grasses bow.

Charon poles the ferry up and my bare feet touch the shore.  
Cottonmouths scatter in the grass. In the woods a party rages.

Fire spills from a stage and no one stops the flames  
from climbing trees. A fireman calls the band

The Black Roses. Stage collapses. Drums and guitars dissolve  
in steam. Crowd grooves to the beat, tears off their jeans.

A Cessna buzzes overhead, burning like a cigarette.  
Behind us sailboats float along in joyful smoke.

A catlike lady in stockings prowls the bodies with a hat.  
*Dollar for the band?* she asks. *Dollar for the band,*

I say and stick it in, watch her dance into the crowd  
with the swagger of a person finding her place in a world

not for you, not for me, a land where even the loudest roses  
curl up like a biker's fists, blow away like ash.

## You Can't Put a Ring On

A coke rock, and even if  
you could the rock would  
shatter. You can't tell a beer  
you love it without its label  
starting to peel. The cigarette  
behind dancer's ear is dipped  
in PCP and LSD. Toke it soft  
and hallucinate AA meetings  
filled with angels vanishing.  
After my father died I tried  
pretty much everything, yet  
the only things that worked  
also tried to kill me. Shame.  
Some folks call it addiction.  
I call it love. There's no diff  
since both provide us bitter  
light in the dark, ice water  
over burned lips. Rosebud  
that blossoms in my chest  
trickles from my nose and  
my last nerve is shorn and  
I am possessed by the dead  
-ly thoughts that plague and I  
will wander for the rest of my life.

Ties

Each day my father woke burning  
with routine. He'd move

through our house, oatmeal dripping  
down his chin, dawn splashing

the hardwood,  
mustache curled over his lip.

He'd sit in his chair  
and listen to birdsong and garbage trucks

then wrap the tie around  
his throat—a polyester bouquet,

lace spilling  
from his hands

as he twisted the knot  
in the bathroom mirror.

Snug in my bed  
I dreamed

I was a football star.  
He said to take the field

I better practice. He told me  
I could have any future.

Now it's my turn to step  
before the mirror, tie the knots

that grip the neck,  
blue and gray and crimson ribbons

from the dead  
principal's wardrobe, relics

that hang in my closet's corner  
like pious faces.

## The Crooked Tree

That's me, a place folks take a knee  
Retrieve an errant frisbee throw  
And pause within my frigid shadow  
For four short breaths, the crooked tree  
I stand alone, a maniac  
Who creaks at dusk as if he's haunted  
Leaves tumble from my limbs unwanted  
Like Granny's rusted Pontiac  
My trunk sinks in the weeds and nettles  
As deer run by this disc golf course  
That withers like a rose's petals  
Plucked from their stem without remorse  
Beneath me nature's precious metals  
Provide my only intercourse

## Katmai Salmon Run

Today I watched the live video feed of a grizzly,  
in Katmai National Park, Alaska, ripping the face  
off a salmon with its teeth and devouring the fish.  
What I thought was this: what excellent technology  
and how delicious the fish must taste.  
Probably a bit salty and damp, like popcorn  
with butter splashed on it left to cool in its bucket.  
So many fish jumped at the base of this small  
waterfall that it looked like rain or worse  
like a hail storm and I wished I were there  
ducked to my neck in the river with those ferocious  
bears, only our heads showing, our ears alert.  
Now, if I had interfered with their suppers  
they would have mauled me to death.  
It would have been my spine on the sandy shore,  
my countenance dislocated from the bone hinge  
of its jaw. My pink belly and heart throbbing at the sky.  
And for a minute there at my desk I was  
okay with that notion. And the grizzlies were, too.  
I know that because they looked at me  
through the camera's revolving, mechanical lens  
and everything was exceptional with the world.  
They killed fish with their teeth and I drank coffee.  
But those bears' heads hunting up from the water,  
my God, those were thrilling as I'm sure  
the camera's lens, its cyclic eye, wasn't to the bears.  
And that was the odd encounter I had this morning  
as my computer's eye watched over me, with wonder.

## The Protector of Knowledge

A tired old man is mopping up this room.  
He watches students learn from fall to spring.  
Daydreams enthrall him like old songs and soon  
Progress will crush him with its mighty wing.  
At night the janitor sweeps up with his broom.  
Sometimes he spots a pencil or a ring  
That someone dropped, broken and forgotten.  
Tonight he cracks an absent pupil's desk  
And finds an apple core that is rotten.  
The children leave the room in such a mess  
That scraps of paper blow around like cotton.  
Nights like this make the janitor feel distress  
To know that once machines can sweep the floor  
The school he loves won't need him anymore.

## So What You Want?

You want your words to be an armored car  
but you let strangers tell you how to drive.  
Censorship smells like urinal cakes in spring,  
tastes like someone else's Sunday cooking.  
Its tofu stings like hornets on the tongue.  
George Washington ran an Auschwitz for slaves  
while speaking the best language in the land  
from the snowy white cliffs of Mount Vernon.  
Thomas Jefferson founded this country.  
You can pray for it in the bastard's garden  
above the racial tomb of Charlottesville.  
Shout out to your boy Ulysses S. Grant.  
Drunk killer ran shit in his day, like Snoop  
and Dre and Donald Trump at the shake joint.  
Dr. Dre's belt-fed album *The Chronic*  
got Bush elected to the highest position  
on the charts. Bill Clinton inhaled that herb  
on the campaign trail from New York to Seattle.  
How you say *fuck you* in the PC Bible?  
How about *how may I help you* in Detroit?  
Kids called me Muff because I ate pussy.  
At least the little monsters said I did.  
I'll drive back to that graveyard someday soon,  
bumping metal and going down on fiction.  
Heavenly high school I'll never see you again.  
Didn't you like being caged up with friends?  
Hell yes you did, don't lie, don't tell the truth.  
Free Speech flowed in this here US of A  
till some wiseass teacher took it away.  
Namaste, 90s, never to ride again,  
never to feel the rattle from box speakers  
pound you like Ice T on *Law and Order*,  
shouting *fuck the consequences, son,*  
*speaking your mind, cousin, light your tongue, be free.*  
People are preaching bullshit in the street.

## Blindness

I wander through the chambers of a sanitarium  
or an emergency room; most likely it is  
a military processing station or a hospital  
for burn victims of the eye. No telling how many  
patients, maybe a thousand. I stumble along

screaming, push open doors made of lead  
until someone captures my arm and takes it with them  
to an area where they shove me onto a cement floor.  
The others step over me and say to remain calm.  
I anguish there, shouting, *I can't see!*

No one answers, though my voice grows louder.  
On the cold floor I strain to open my eyes.  
The others come and go like translucent fish.  
Underexposed negatives flicker like wings  
of fly or bat. I catch flashes of brilliance

leaking through the lens like dirty water filtered  
with iodine. The pain is inescapable and hard.  
I worry I might choke on my tears. To see  
I press a fingernail against my eye's bruised iris  
and squeeze the lid open with awful pressure.

There are workers whose job is to keep me still  
and quiet, whose pleasure it is to train me  
not to speak and to behave, the way a light can be turned  
off by throwing a switch so that a woman can silence  
her crying child and fuck her husband in the warm dark.

I understand I am bothering them, and this makes me  
most afraid. I stagger into a room that feels like a sauna  
where shark-like men and women bathe in their sensual sight.  
Lukewarm water splashes on my feet. I continue to strain  
to see these creatures and perhaps a way out.

Then I find one. I escape into an amphitheater, I think,  
where an old woman and an old man say, *My God,*  
*this one says he can't see.* I strain so damn hard  
I can almost make out their faces, but my burning  
eyes snap shut like the talons of a crow.



A few men approach. For a moment I see they are fit and strong, blonde and nasty, Brownshirts, soldiers with biceps much heavier than mine. They smile at me and guide me where they want. Finally I understand why someone might prefer their company.

## On this Morning of the Apocalypse

Everyone in this busy Kentucky coffee shop  
is screaming. Their voices sound like cicadas  
chirping in the rafters, the insects fluttering  
like miniature, decorative candles.  
In Alaska, whose Brooks Range I flew over  
in a rattling can, the air gets so cold  
settlers no longer pan for gold. Here coffee  
tastes like salty Fairbanks snow, pushed  
off the wagon road, but I don't mind anymore.  
When I sip a foamy cloud it fizzes like you  
on this gray October morning, gray  
because you have nowhere to go, other  
than into the cold that holds no answers.  
Thanksgiving Thursday is based on a scam.  
Ditto for Christmas with all its blue, green  
and red incandescents strung up by wires.  
The whole Gregorian calendar's one big setup,  
like the last lemon on the frozen lot, the jovial  
sales person smiling and waving as you drive off.  
They walk away with your money and one hell  
of a story to tell their friends at the fascist pub.  
Snow causes depression so I drink lattes inside  
which is why I want to study meteorology  
and why kids worship violent video games  
as if by winning the simulated battle they might  
survive the real-life shooting. The barista begs me,  
*Speak up, please, please raise your voice!*  
And I shout back, in a non-threatening tone,  
*Brad Murff doesn't have all the answers.*  
*And that is why we find ourselves in this crisis.*  
In the future Brad Murff will be seen as a giant  
snowman blazing like a marshmallow on the lawn  
as censors form a circle and nod their heads.  
Immolation is possible and I love those odds,  
don't you? The dead tree sheds no leaves  
on the hardwood, at least none we can see,  
and the turkey sprawled out like a bomb victim  
on the table, he doesn't have the answers either.

## The Simulation Lottery

Some friends of mine in California believe Jerry Garcia  
is a simulation, ditto Elvis Presley and Steve Jobs.  
The Disney exec wanted in but he got blackballed  
because he was a goofy weirdo from Orange County.

Garcia and Elvis I understand—watch those YouTube vids  
of them dancing and strumming guitar, those men sparkle  
the way Steve Jobs wishes he could, and he does wish  
from whatever apple-shaped island he lives on now.

You see, the future is for serious people only,  
those who have every pony they can ask for, plus enhanced  
genitals, self-driving cars, dope habits, ceramic relationships.

They sit around investing in cold fusion or crackerjacks,  
opium or Russian hotel chains and gaze out their micro-dosed windows.  
What a lovely late winter day, they think to themselves, unseasonably  
warm, might as well live forever.

Never mind the existential philosophers of the 50s, Sartre and those other  
donkeys who blew each other bong hits and discovered heaven  
would become hell in a jackrabbit's heartbeat

once we realize it will continue in perpetuity, even the sublime  
must end, like holding your father's freckled hand one last time  
in the hospital or eating too much Papa John's.

It's winter in Kentucky and rain keeps coming, an ugly cloud  
chasing me around, cold drool spills from its jagged teeth.  
Go ahead, it says, beg for that sunshine.

Let's invest the rest of our murky days in futures,  
whatever the hell those are, and they are hell, the devil lives on Wall Street,  
a land one part cartoon kingdom, one part police state, two parts war zone.

Perhaps I'll win the simulation lottery, be visited  
by agents in dark suits and darker shades, who take my pulse  
with them to store on some server, a virtual Beverly Hills poolside  
where celebrities greet us with frightening stares.

## Our Latest Oppressive Toy

How convenient to live in the twenty-first century  
where no one needs a watch and so what?  
Folks say because I have a smartphone I should text  
some bot to show me how to socially construct  
my own utopia and strawberry ice cream.

Luckily for us humans the sky fell down  
on our silly heads at the angry rally  
last Tuesday and the latest oppressive toy,  
a smartwatch that burns a blackhole  
into your pineal gland, is being debuted tomorrow.

Ours is a time of safety and depression,  
sunny days of people crawling across Amazon's  
webpage shouting for help from automatons  
of coming generations. Life in this century  
is like existing inside a game show,

choosing to pass, to wait for next week's show,  
forfeiting your spin to prove how decent you are.  
Most of us hide our tears under trendy hats  
as we lie choking from fear of being outed  
for our meagerness and uncertainty.

The fat we hide in our jeans jiggles with kindness.  
It's kindness and love squashed up down there  
and we should let it out, even if it's unpopular  
and has a few varicose veins and a wart or two.  
Who cares if we are great again or ever were.

If you are lonely or afraid or someone's ugly stepchild  
truth is better medicine than gardening a barren botanical  
as most people do now, gazing up at a cloudy sky,  
saying: *Thank you Internet for blue sky*. I don't want  
to betray my motive, but I would like to destroy that tablet

the drowsy timekeeper uses to write the official record  
during these mournful days of techno jargon, political  
dramedy and plagiarized, Chinatown ripoff viewpoints,  
shout at the newborn child of tomorrow and say: *Stop!*  
*We fucked up: don't buy this radioactive trash we are selling!*

Ultimately, I'll tell friends to leave me alone, then quest  
around like a crazed donkey confused on the Oregon Trail,  
walk into a bar, ask for bourbon. When the guy serves me gin  
I'll notice the shiny blackhole zapper on his wrist, take out  
my trusty golden phone, and order one on the spot.

## Fallout Language

The Big Bang was a type of war & we are the fallout.  
God hurled dust into the black sky  
& called us constellations.

My first dog was a retriever named Goldie until he flew away  
& drooled on some other kid's Nikes  
or maybe he died.

He came back as a bullet-silver dachshund named Dockie.  
I do not come from a spangled bloodline nor a sharp  
bloodline & neither did my dog.

He got run over by a gold Buick that sputtered like a crippled  
cartoon. With his dying breath Dockie said the Big Bang was a  
war  
& we are the fallout that started a brainstorm  
over Palo Alto.

Why sell glitter when you can trade for a spacecraft?  
When I think of Dockie: intellectual disassembly. When I  
kneel  
& pet him he buzzes like computer parts

raining from star trees & whippoorwills. Pyramids  
are only triangles. A choir of lab coats  
has the hiccups.

Thought clouds worry the congregation. Touch the clouds,  
they go pop. Basically gaslight & some astronomers.

When Susskind taught string theory my favorite coffee mug  
shattered & reassembled from fragments.  
High-level language got deployed.

## Dream Aubade

As dawn glances over the hills I wish I could drag last night's dream with me like a wounded old blanket to work. Show it to folks yawning by the water fountain like a chorus of nightingales. Say, Look, my mind is a stinging beach with seventy foot waves or a blue mountain in the Himalayas. If only I could summit the beast without rolling over on my stiff penis, there would be hope in the world's dark theater for us all. In my dream last night I drove a Ferrari and the Ferrari was white. I swam in the Ferrari like a pool. I sipped wine from it like a cup. Maybe Bill from accounting will mention Pam Anderson gliding down the spiral staircase of his narcoleptic masterpiece. We were together for hours and my wife never knew the difference, he might brag. Perhaps a dream is like vitamin c in a glass of orange juice, it gives us an excuse to sugar ourselves and water the skull roses, drowse away the early morning so that when the sun rises we are poised to watch it barge into the bedroom like a parent ready to wake our asses and make us eat the damn bacon and eggs the day demands. An alarm goes off and you rise. The curtains can't stop this from happening. The bus will have its conversation with the stop sign with or without you and your pajamas. When the bus's mouth opens and kids climb on or a few poor souls jump off there is no use running away. Go ahead, bow into your book. Don't stare but the hot sun is arcing over you like the St. Louis Arch shrouded in fog. I once read a wild story about a park ranger who every night parachuted from the apex until one evening a woman saw him do this and they fell in love.

In America our dreams have always traveled west with the sun only to drown in the salty pacific waves where poets and guitarists go to dive in and die. The ocean in San Diego is cold as Alaska in summer, but don't quote me on that. In my dream last night there was a blonde woman in a flowing red dress and she whispered into my ear the word *poetry*, which meant the world to me at the time though now I can feel it slipping away, like an iceberg collapsing into the sea which is the dream that will kill us all, or so the scientists say. Can one believe in America but not in America's tired ghost? To dream is to behave badly. To dream is to drink from the river of your own desire. I haven't had a real dream since I was nineteen, which was the last time I mourned being alone, which was the last season I dared climb the mountain of yes and yes and yes. Where are you going from here? you ask.



Dawn Chorus

If men are just machines  
Why do I have such vivid dreams?

Perhaps my dozing mind's a screen  
Where all my crazy visions shine

To form the most fantastic wheeling sky  
That shows our world to stars that died.

Or maybe those celestial deaths were mine  
And massive stars are falling in my mind.

We all are fracturing, splintering time,  
A concerto composed by the divine,

Which doesn't explain these noisy birds  
Outside my bedroom window chirping.

I'm glad they found a sparkling home  
In my oak tree, while I rest here alone,

So that my mind becomes a singing tree  
Beside a railroad track in Tennessee.

## Mammoth Cave

Here's to you, great cavern!  
Shadow within the earth,  
Dark and murky heaven  
Where thoughts are given birth  
Like little bats that clap and screech with skyless mirth.

Deeper and darker still  
From prying minds you hide;  
Down muddy halls that thrill  
Spelunkers descend inside  
And exiled ghosts and spirits sing with saddest pride.

Sodden chasm and cliffs  
Tempt the mind and eye  
To decipher hieroglyphs  
Of flightless birds that cry  
From walls with narrow streams that freeze and petrify.

I hike above you now  
As I have done for years;  
Like widower at plow  
I move along in tears  
With my legs working like a pair of rusty sheers.

When people say I'm mad  
Teach me your restraint;  
Why should I not be glad  
And smile without complaint  
When these fall woods look splashed with red and yellow paint?

I walk through trees and wind  
As passive shadows merge  
With leafless elms that bend  
Till rage begins to surge  
Into my mind like some frail witch's creaking dirge.

Your chasm's massive spell  
Shakes the limbs and grass  
And thoughts that hurt like hell  
From nightshade seem to pass  
Through nature's leafy church for sunlight's autumn mass.

Awesome trees and sky  
And hills and wind's commotion  
Make me feel so high  
With wonder and devotion  
It seems as though I'm drifting on a rugged ocean.

I wander from the trail  
And sit down in the dirt  
And leaves that feel so frail;  
I think of folks I've hurt  
And friends I've lost and blot my eyes with my t-shirt.

I could rest here for hours  
Leaning against this tree  
And smell the wildflowers  
Then see a buzzing bee  
And know why Shelley sang of mutability.

I picture you, dark hollow,  
So solemn and serene;  
How do you bury sorrow?  
You are the shade between  
The poet's grave and mountains man has never seen.

You are a kindred soul,  
Father of this land;  
I notice one sinkhole  
Spread open like a hand  
And native spirits rise and in the woods they stand.

They amble through the brush  
And I can almost hear  
Their voices say to hush;  
Eternity draws near  
And like them I will have the grace to persevere.

These weeds are coarse as hair  
Of phantoms I have fled;  
Was it the chilly air  
Or prayers a cave's mouth said  
That steered my steps away from my own living dread?

## Gallathea and Phillida

Their aging fathers forced them to pretend  
That they were men to dodge a sacrifice  
But what they found their dads did not intend.  
The love they had some might have called a vice.  
Tradition said they both must find a man;  
A lady may not be a woman's lover.  
But love makes bonfires of what old men plan.  
True bliss will compass lovers' heads and hover  
Until they burn their clothes and blush and kiss  
Without regard for Neptune's grotesque monster.  
Young Cupid's arrows hardly ever miss.  
Love leads to truth and grace and holy wonder.  
The wooded path it follows is well worn  
And when you reach the end you are reborn.

More Lines for the Duchess!

How many of you think it's super weird  
And furthermore a grave and dumb injustice  
To have so few lines read by Malfi's Duchess?  
Her heartfelt words should be the ones revered.  
The Cardinal was such a greedy fool;  
Her other brother turned into a wolf.  
So make your presence known like Beowulf,  
Shout at the stage and show them ladies rule.  
Then jeer them once again tomorrow night.  
Until the play has more lines for the best  
Of thespians, don't be afraid to fight.  
Till she takes center stage we must not rest.  
Our time is now; the spotlight's burning bright.  
This woman's plight deserves to be redressed!

## The Tamer Tamed

This isn't why I chose to be your wife.  
Misogyny has gotten to your head.  
To sleep with you is worse than being dead.  
I'd rather gamble on some afterlife  
Than put up with brutality and strife.  
I'll make a bonfire of our wedding bed  
And laugh at all the vows the preacher said  
Then stab myself with dad's dull pocket knife.

Don't go; I'll act right, be a better man.  
I won't starve you or bop you on the ear.  
From this point forth I'll do all that I can  
To bring you joy; I'll always hold you near.  
I'll wait on you and be your biggest fan.  
Our love will be immortal as Shakespeare.

## The Changeling

—after Middleton's Jacobean Tragedy

Our Beatrice was dead before the closet  
Door shut behind her and that creep DeFlores.  
Her soul had left her like the ships of Cortés.  
Love isn't like a check we can deposit  
In some bank slot and take out as we choose.  
By keeping her from marrying her love  
Her dad made her heart once a hatchling dove  
Crack like a shell she wasn't scared to lose.  
Yet till the end she saw her love as wonder.  
She even thought she might have loved the one—  
Though this was surely her most tragic blunder—  
Who stalked her till the wanton deed was done  
And her last scream was like a crash of thunder  
When clouds sweep in to mask a virgin sun.

## The Roaring Girl

—Middleton and Decker, 1607-1610

Moll was a handsome girl who loved to roar.  
No one mistook her for a passive saint  
Cause she would strike when someone called her whore  
And when rich women saw her they would faint.  
This girl she liked to stand on stage and rant.  
Some may have thought her hot tirades explicit  
When she would stomp like prissy ladies can't  
And stand on street corners and solicit.  
Yet most men dreamt of taking off her shirt;  
The feral bosom must have been a sight.  
She proved the average man a dull pervert.  
Her breasts they bounded forth with gentle might.  
Her life contained beauty without finesse  
And could not be leashed up behind a dress.



Tis Pity She's a Whore: The Friar's Prologue

Have you good people felt such strong desire  
You thought it was too pitiful to tell?

You even feared that you would burn in hell  
So that desire became your secret fire

Till flames dripped from your hands and licked the ground  
And blazed and razed and scorched the chapel floor?

They blocked your feet from running out the door.  
Incest is such a putrid sin. The sound

It makes thrusts deep; its virus will infringe.  
Young girls should never sleep with older brothers.

When folks speak of such awfulness I cringe.  
And yet the play that brings us here, dear mothers,

Stings like a healing shot from a syringe,  
And you must watch and share its truth with others.

Mary

Her naked stomach on the motel bed, she struggles to light the pipe. It jerks from left to right. She tries so hard—a mirror, a Bible, a razor, a bag of chips, a picture of Jesus. The man hammers her harder from behind. Her body tightens and shakes. She flicks the purple, gas-station light.

The pebble falls from the tip. It skitters on the floor like a brown recluse. *Get off!* she shouts. She pushes him away, finds the rock in the diamond-patterned red carpet among the cum stains and yellow sweat. She places it on the tip.

In the flickering bathroom, she holds a wad of toilet paper to her butt. She wishes she could stop the blood. She hears the door open and shut. *Oh no!* she cries. She runs out and is so relieved that on the nightstand—he left her a crumb.

Black Friday

In the front yard leaves fall like hatchets  
from hickory trees

The evening sky  
is getting sick

And on the porch  
a man's shadow is creeping

His wife slumps over  
white patio sofa

busted lip and black hair  
in his teeth

A slash of light  
curls from his fingers

He picked out the knife  
in a crowded department store

He had the kid sharpen it had him  
box it in a red velvet case with her name

stitched on top  
When he got home he cracked

the blade open  
and trimmed his nails with it

Squad cars turn into the driveway  
Blue lights slice across the dark lawn

Hatchet leaves fall from hickory trees

Descending

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”  
—Martin Luther King Jr.

After climbing up there’s still descending,  
Stepping over rocks and passing nervous  
Hikers headed the other way, pretending  
To understand what waits for them, a service  
In which the best are ordained social saints  
Whose hearts tremble while others wield the knife  
And when the preacher shuts his eyes and faints  
They pause and say the prayers that give us life  
Before we slice the leavened bread and hold  
The hands of souls centurions would shoot  
Or keep as servants shackled in the cold.  
For those unfortunates who have to loot  
To stay alive, each day’s a prison riot.  
Put down your silver fork rich man and try it.

S&M

Every day I put on a creepy mask  
that numbs my mind and dims  
the morning light so much  
I want to crawl back to bed

and curl up like a scythe  
a migrant worker let fall  
in a blood-scented field  
and forget whips and chains.

Night brings tears  
dry as a skull's teeth  
then I call my mother  
and her voice shakes.

To lie happy and still  
I need to be unconscious  
yet I have student loans  
and a slumlord to deal with.

Do you want to come over  
dressed in leather and spikes  
and strangle me in my sheets  
till all is forgiven? I'll even beg.

A Staircase in Jamaica, Queens

When they had scaled the mountain to the stars,

Eve saw the urban serpent and intoned:

“It’s bituminous as a rhino’s horn.

There is an entryway in that red cloud.

With spinning cups above the divers’ town

And midnight loaming up from salty sea,

I don’t have time to listen to your jive,

So slide the sword from leafy, denim sheaf

And slay the serpent with your tiny blade.

In other words, Adam, unlock the door!”

## Coronavirus in the Rain

*Negative Capability, I mean being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*

—Keats

I heard a man coughing at my door  
but it was the rain starting up, damn rain  
always doing this, spitting illness at my step,  
making me gloomy and self absorbed.  
Stay inside, Brad, no concerts today, no picnics,  
no swingers swapping tongues in speedos and bikinis.  
You can't even get drunk at Chili's.  
No two-for-ones for you, no fajitas, no great ass  
in black work pants. Rain approacheth  
like a stealth fighter then maketh itself known  
with bombs of shiver and chill. Rain has a fever  
though its thermometer plunges, leaves me  
covered in blankets, angry protestors  
coughing medical advice, banging my door.  
Dr Fauci's sermons rattle and thrash  
with hurricane force. Keats called that talent  
negative capability. Right now Keats would feel  
*vaporish*, would *adonize* himself. I could be dying  
and kind of know it. Pretty much want to think  
about other stuff: rain, the romantics, sisters who hate  
their brother, brother in laws come to kick my ass,  
piss on my grave, torch my poems. Bring it on, I say,  
my voice the exact tenor of evening rain.

## The Poet's House

Outside my window stands an old white house,  
two stories high, shotgun style, black roof and shutters,  
perfect symmetry. Lit from within,  
looks like a block of clay.  
Spiderwebs hang like curtains.  
Shadows kneel and flit.  
A poet lives there. His children leap  
beneath yellow trees. The trees and flowers exhale pollen.  
Fence posts lean. The poet's son  
chases the daughter across the lawn.  
Tire swing quivers on its chain.  
One night a calf was roasted in the side yard.  
Bells clanged. Sky turned red.  
I started work on a novel.  
Pilgrims marching through gravel and nails.  
Saturday morning the poet and his wife  
passed me in Hank's Hardware.  
They were disguised as magicians.  
They bent tools with their minds:  
hammers, axes, saws,  
bolts, tacks and planks so that townies thought they were angels.  
That night I walked by the house, language  
devouring my mind like a Rottweiler and the front door  
screached. The poet and his family  
ran out and cried *Poet! Poet!*  
I shouted *Devils! Devils!*  
They stepped aside. I walked in—  
antique furniture, silver carpet. A chandelier  
lit the room. My novel  
bound on a table. The text  
a crooked font, broken into lines.  
I hid it under my shirt.  
The poet smiled at me  
and I hobbled out the door, a hermit fleeing a plague.



Breton Reads Dean Young to Desnos

Dean Young with poet's eyelids of armor  
With lashes that speak of savannas with eyes  
Magnetized in prisons that are forests.  
Dean Young with lips born of tired water  
Cold like a river with current of tooth!  
Lightning bolts tango on this summer night.  
I call sadness tornadoes and hurricanes.  
I talk volcanoes. Smoke of cigarettes.  
After hours of voodoo drumming creatures  
Are outcast messengers from drunken faces.  
They ask me for a flame and disappear.  
Trembling they say my name. Disappear.  
In Sappho there appears no perfect rhyme  
That does not reek of shit, piss, the sublime.

## Crime and Punishment for Kindergartners

If your evil teacher won't let you have anymore Kool-Aid  
hide behind the fish tank while the other kids are at recess  
and when she is alone picking up the class's mess,  
counting the weeks until Christmas break  
jump out, strike her multiple times with a sharp ax  
and when her sister who gets paid to wipe noses  
barges in like a mop tumbling from a closet  
ax her too so it looks as if the class's best artists  
Nikolai & Mitka have gotten into a brawl  
and knocked over gallons of red paint on the linoleum  
so that the office has to summon a janitor  
and make his peasant ass clean that shit up.  
Child, you will be amazed at your propensity  
for sadness and the blood on your blue velcro shoes.  
You will feel weaker than when you got lost in the mall,  
feel so bad you play hooky from school. You will  
know the cold chill of a St. Petersburg winter  
though you have no earthly idea where that is.  
Your mom will be like get out of bed, get dressed!  
and you will be like no, I have a fever, my tummy hurts!  
Of course your pal Dmitri Prokofych Razumikhin will worry  
about your wellbeing. He will visit your treehouse  
every day and you will shoo him away like a pound puppy  
and when you lie to the principal about your whereabouts  
at the time of the crime, that you were swinging  
from monkey bars or skipping rope he will know  
you are lying like a little thief and your inability  
to live with your cowardly conscience will trigger you  
to confess to the authorities what they are asking for  
which is everything you know. They will sentence  
you to military school and you will anguish there  
for thirteen years drawing pictures of inmates and razor-wire  
sunsets and eating hotdogs until you reach age eighteen  
and the paranoid government sets you free to join  
the hardworking masses who wish they had the courage  
to do something brutal, human, essential and true  
as a rebel like you did at such a young age.

Park Avenue is an Ashtray

Broadway is a junky's wrist.  
The coke your favorite rockstar snorts is snow.  
The president is an orange ocean.  
Workers gather on the shore. The republic is  
for bankers, horse traders (thieves),  
toilets, starving farmers. A dust devil  
circles a rest stop on the high plains.  
There blows your golden ticket  
to the national circus. Shooting galleries  
are the latest trend. With sharp chains  
the Rockies are still drivable.  
All these bugs committing suicide.  
Has anyone seen thunder?  
Wonderland's for bandits.  
The rabbit must be elected  
on the courthouse steps in the blizzard.  
Fetch a bowl of burning matches.  
No more truth telling. You are only  
allowed one last confession.  
Bless this table, this house,  
this strap on, this ray gun.  
Fall to your calloused knees, collapse  
into the mirror, watch your face shatter,  
I mean shimmer. Your imagination  
will rescue you, the rabbit says,  
& drive you on the tractor to the doctor  
so they can drag the demons from your mouth  
so they can brush the ashes from your chin.

The Shaman Says

So strange  
walking around  
dazzled by storm

clouds.  
There is  
a presence

in the hills.  
Careful  
parents

watch your step  
don't wake  
the trees!

Someone's child  
left a tricycle  
by the canal.

Little boy lost  
his black dog  
in the fog.

## Moccasin

So many critters stompen through the south  
There's plenty spots to grab a bite to eat.  
This morn I snatched a bunny by the mouth,  
Spread my jaw wide and swallared up his feet.  
I dive! Dodge getten run down by a boat.  
Love hangen out under these shady trees,  
I lift my chin to watch the sky and float  
Along the bank, do what I damn well please.  
Now watch me stretch my body, feel the earth  
Unroll beneath me as I flick my tongue.  
I droop and slide as I have done since birth  
And there she is. We curl and twist like young  
Mocs in the brush. Her rugged scales I roam.  
Hate us or not this lake's our goddamn home.

The Good Sock

I'm gonna fuckin' die  
You don't stop steppin' on me!

Grateful Dead

The wicked witch whispers  
Hey can I drive your car

Shaman steals the shrooms  
Pisses white girls off

Oz's great  
Especially these monkeys

Hey can I drive your car  
Pisses white girls off

Shaman steals the shrooms  
Oz's great

Especially these monkeys  
The wicked witch whispers

## Hollywood Legends Are Never Obsolete

Now I am crackling like Johnny Depp's lighter  
when he and Del Toro fired up that last joint  
on the flamingo-colored set of Fear and Loathing  
in Las Vegas. I remember the time I learned  
precisely how it feels to throw a bullseye.  
My sense of touch was the bull and my vision  
was of my ancestors hunting for bison,  
finding a trailer park in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.  
Dig this: the orange Lamborghini's flesh ignites  
as you peel out back-roading and feed the roaring  
bonfire of a drunken midnight Mulholland Drive  
car-crash explosion. If I could take it all back,  
I would appropriate every decision I made,  
pack them in a hash pipe and start puffing away.  
Here is a confession to which you might relate:  
I went and got drunk as my grandfather lay dying  
and I did it again two years later when his wife  
kicked the magic bucket. Check that. I would not  
take that back. Instead I would move to Hollywood  
at a young age and do whatever the hell I needed  
to feel accepted. Brad Pitt twirled a fucking chicken  
sign on La Brea Boulevard, where crack cocaine was  
decimating a community of people who didn't have shit  
to begin with. Perhaps I would have been strung out  
and alone like a male stripper knocking on a hotel door,  
taking a deep breath, trying to squeeze my sphincter shut  
as some rich guy's ex tried to shove her ring finger deep.  
Perhaps that's what life's all about. Box of Chocolates?  
No, Forrest, life's a dozen assorted acts of vengeance  
and every asshole has their favorite flavor. You too  
must meditate on your reflection in the saltwater pool  
at Compton's Victoria Park or in your own hot tub.  
Reflect on the paltry fact that you are so deluded  
you might as well be a hot-air balloon filled with meth-  
-ane gas. And what's your name anyway? Oswald?  
People are going to die because of your fuckups.  
The used Bibles of eternity are far from free  
and that's okay. Hunter Thompson growled  
*faster, faster* to Johnny and Benicio from Colorado  
via a phone cable that snaked between Aspen  
and Cali like a junky's vein. And that's no shit.  
That's good shit and good advice, too. I'm talking  
downtown Saturday night Sunset Boulevard Viper  
Room sidewalk Depp and Flea kneeling over River.



Double barrel those lines and eat the shotgun blast  
to eternity! One of these days you'll regret choices  
you are making but until that Malibu wildfire sparks  
there's nothing left to do but sing.

Podcast

It's 1969  
and soldiers call  
you a door  
gunner, M-60,  
nineteen and mean.

When they haul boys  
onto the chopper  
the tropical field  
ripples in hellish heat,  
gunshots rattle and clack  
and your body trembles.

The machine gun's kick pounds  
your chest and brass casings fly  
like coins thrown in the air.

Your buddy Bobby the medic  
clamps a thrashing forearm,  
blood dripping down and down  
like redman or copenhagen  
dip spit and it too trembles  
and sways as you lift off,  
your hair blowing like grass.

And you are safe then, speaking  
familiar tongues, beautiful words  
that just might last forever  
and you smile, glance over  
your shoulder and the man  
with a headset flying the helicopter  
is Joe Rogan.

## Baby Poem

The best thing about a baby is blood  
The womb is strawberry ice cream  
When a person spans a baby it can scream  
Or go silent

In court I defended a man whose eyes were crescent moons  
His mother shook him when he was a child  
He told me she was quiet her hollow stare  
He couldn't forget

The best thing about a baby is blood  
That passes down desire & lust  
That junkie's mother  
Was skim milk

The worst thing about a baby is snowdrops of spit  
On its kissed cheek & afterbirth leaking  
From doctor's fists have you ever  
Feared a baby?

When I think of a baby I dream of the west coast  
Of parents & sex followed by  
Brutal tenderness we feed on  
Like cans of peaches

A child in the passenger seat waves fast food napkins  
A child in the cradle is warm to touch  
Its mother has the face of an angel the best  
Thing about a baby is love

## Poem with a Fortune Cookie in It

Your parents try to protect you, but  
nothing can stop you from leaving  
the farm, smoking in the choir loft  
and jumping off waterfalls. All you get  
for your bravery is the graffitied  
token of a broken leg. Kids sign  
your cast while your mother cries  
over how close you came to a coffin.  
You might as well snap open that fortune  
cookie left on the table by the quiet waiter  
while you slurp lo mein on your parents' dime.  
Don't off yourself before you get started,  
your mother prays. Daddy begs, Please don't die  
before you pay me back for those happy meals  
I spilled dollars on so you can paint  
rainbows across the sky, drunkenly  
unroll Thanksgiving Day parades  
from your sleeve and draw pictographs  
with your bad karaoke. Bright are those  
hospital lights and bright the lights  
of the big city at night. What's the tallest darn city  
you ever saw? In this country most people say  
New York unless they've been to Burning Man,  
tasted mushroom tea and flown away  
with a surgeon on his freaked-out motorbike,  
the quack with killer weed who experiments  
with kinky sex, meth and plastic surgery.  
Imagine that guy wearing a clown suit,  
selling apples with razor blades tucked in them  
like fortune cookies. Ouch, sting, blood,  
elephant dung. This is what I'm saying:  
throughout life you are going to die.  
You are breaking through clouds  
to where nothing exists except a village  
of angry pilgrims just like the hay field  
where you were born, that purple-brown  
blemish of a town. A sixteen year old girl  
is Rambo. A fifteen year old donkey boy  
is the bull the man wants to become.  
Everything is backwards, like a pair of jeans  
you struggle out of before leaping  
off the balcony of your best friend's  
girlfriend's couch. Parents grow orchids  
and the best child is the orchid that longest lives.

That's what nature tells us, according to Darwin,  
and nature is progress. Darwin is a black star  
stuck in your eye. Imagine Earth as an eyeball.  
Imagine Jupiter's Great Red Spot.  
Isn't that a better eyeball? And Saturn,  
pow! Saturn is your left eyeball.  
Van Gogh knows this. Van Gogh lives  
in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.  
This is Saturn, this is your eyeball, this is  
your fortune. Go head and crack that cookie.  
*Try Another Fortune* waits inside.

Dream House

Rather than gated community  
or condo looking down  
on other mortals

I'll take the average  
aircraft hangar.  
Locals will say:  
*He must have jets in there  
must take them out at night.*

But inside  
just a couch, bookcases  
my old recliner

scrappy pool table  
dart board  
stereo—no tv  
a bar I'll purchase  
from Sears.

I'll invite folks.  
They'll show up in flocks  
to see my F-16  
or corporate G5. They'll beg  
for a lift on my chopper.

The looks on their faces  
hair blown back, eyes  
wide at the sight—

a big open space—me  
right in the middle  
laughing.

## Seventeenth Century Picnic Spliced with Contemporary Disaster Flick

An eagle watches a pastoral picnic  
from a mountaintop,  
her gray beard fluttering  
when she sees a sackcloth dress  
& white bonnet set a swaddled  
infant on a bower. The eagle  
swoops down & snatches  
the child & glides into a cave  
near the summit where she provides  
nourishment by scraping  
her talons on the walls;  
her claws leave marks that drip rivers  
of milk. The baby cries a song  
so mellifluous a mountaineer  
in a red jacket stumbles  
into the cavern. He gawks  
at the baby & sees dollar signs.  
He learned mountaineering the hard way,  
on a film set, late nineties;  
he was one of the souls who perished  
in the disaster flick where the kid  
who stole the lead in *Scent of a Woman*  
rescued his fictional sister but not  
the mountaineer, who since then  
has starred in prizewinning adult films  
& for Cirque Du Soleil, lying on his back  
& spitting flames. Tonight he takes off  
his gloves, straddles a rock, hits a bowl  
of Afghan Kush, sips Jack Daniel's  
from his flask. Storm clouds roll,  
black & velvet, moving swift  
with the goddamn wind.  
He snaps a selfie with the tike  
then stuffs her in his knapsack. The dark  
cliff is fierce & foreboding. He hitches  
his rope to a ledge as hailstones  
skitter on the rocks below. He repels  
off boulder after boulder, wind in his hair,  
rope in his hands, hailstones fat as golf balls  
pelting his jacket. He is high as fuck  
& in the moment he grips the crackling rope,  
looks up & sees the eagle plummeting  
straight for his head. Wings fan out & veil  
his bearded face. The eagle plucks

his left eyeball with one talon  
& the baby from the knapsack  
with the other, carries them to the peak  
of the bald & troubled mountain. She leaves  
the baby reclining above the precipice  
on a patch of grass between two tulips  
that are dancing like little girls  
in the hellish breeze. Beside the child  
the eye gazes over valley and hills. Lightning  
strikes & then comes thunder. Angry villagers  
glare up at the rock wall with their torches  
gleaming. They rage at the man falling  
toward them in his red jacket, a blazing  
premonition from a relentless & punishing sky.



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