

Let's Waltz the Rumba

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ABSTRACT

A collection of poems primarily in free verse that deals with loss, love, nostalgia, memory, nature (both human and wild), and the self. The title is a Fats Waller quote I found as the epigraph in one of my favorite books, *The World Doesn't End* by Charles Simic. While it is literally impossible to waltz the rumba, since they are two different dances and types of music, I like the idea it provokes for me: it says to me, "let's do this our own way" or the old cliché phrase "let's walk to the beat of a different drummer." This quote embodies the spirit in which these poems were written.

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-Table of Contents-

Empty Bucket, Full-----	1
Diluvian Dismemberment-----	2
Why Not to Inscribing Books on the Backside of the Front Cover-----	3
Mercy on the Cliffs of Santa Cruz: The Moon Is Behind a Sail of Clouds-----	5
Yorkshire Cul-de-Sac to Sacramento via I-80 West-----	6
If the Wind Told Me a Secret It Would Tell Me, "Never Trust Flowers"-----	7
Balance-----	9
On the Job-site with Graystone Foundations, Inc-----	10
The Day I Turned the Smallest Amount of Light into Refracted Prisms and Discovered What it Means to be Ripe-----	11
Walking into a Conversation about Bears (In the Context of Big Hairy Gay Men), Alex from West Texas Joins In, Launching into a Monologue on Bear Skinning-----	12
Sesos Burrito: Alex from West Texas Explains Why He Will Go Mad-----	13
Dirty, White Cowboy Boots-----	14
Each Way I Turn-----	15
Rats as a Metaphor for Loneliness-----	16
Lying in Wait-----	18
Behind Looking Up-----	19
Mercy-----	20
Americanized Haiku-----	21
How My Third-eye Opened-----	22

The Peacock-----	23
My Lover Is on the Prowl-----	24
My Lions of Creation: Taming the Roar-----	25
Green Girl in the Riptide: How I May Have Become a Vampire-----	26
To the Last Napoleonic Soldier.-----	28
The Dead Cicada on My Windowsill: I Keep Chasing Ghosts Through Time-----	29
How to Eat Fresh-baked Cookies-----	36
Tiny Accidents-----	37
A Color Theory of Desire: Pink on Grayscale-----	38
Fatal Nostalgia: Trying to Define the Indefinable-----	39
Tomorrow, Lithium-----	40
Assessing My Life and What I Forget to Forget While Walking Through a Real-life Alfred Hitchcock Horror Film Set -----	41
She Listens to What the Wind Says-----	42
Taming the Wind-----	43
Possibility-----	44
Wish List: A Cable TV Guide-----	45
In the Grove of Fair Oaks Park: A Sacramento Valley Autumn Hymn-----	46
Moths Always Fly Towards Light-----	47
Upon Learning I Can Buy the Scent of Fireflies Online-----	49
Works Cited-----	50

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Empty Bucket, Full

The bucket is blue
on a gray Tokyo sidewalk.
There is a glyph of the sun
impressed in the cement beside
the bucket. A young girl, perhaps
five-years-old, walks hand-in-hand
with a hunched old woman
as she points at me
and the bucket speaking
indecipherably in Japanese.
It is humid—as if the pacific
vaporized—the moisture compressed
between Tokyo and the overcast sky.
But this bucket is sky blue,
sky blue and still water.
A slight push of wind
moves a pink plum blossom petal
in circles on the surface
of the water without leaving
a ripple. One of Tokyo's giant crows
swoop and perch atop a lamppost
in the faint reflection on the water surface.
I take light into my camera to freeze the frame
of this moment—a picture of the playful contrast
between the pink in the petal and the blue plastic
of the bucket; the balancing act of the gray
in the cement; the black in the beak
of the crow; the yellow in the possibility
that the streetlamp may paint light
into the scene at any moment. A picture
of time repeating seventeen
syllables of haiku endlessly:

*empty bucket, full
of clear water, a lone plum
petal and perched crow.*

Sometimes I am the bucket,
often I am the water, rarely
I am the flower petal,
and always the crow
is watching.

Diluvian Dismemberment and the Subsequent Search for Missing Pieces

I am downstairs.

My hands are ghost—

breath, smoke.

The gray carpet is zigzagged, but the zags arc electric, the zigs melt
to rivulets.

I pace to the black glass door that leads outside—

My reflection is dark and fleeting, so I go upstairs to look at myself with a mirror
in goodlight.

When I get to the stairs, the carpet turns to riverwater, falling
down.

I climb.

The water floods faster.

My foot slips.

I spill.

Water rushes over, straightjackets me.

I stay downstairs, to dredge the floodland for clues.

Why Not to Inscribing Books On the Backside of the Front Cover

I came to this decision after reading the inscription
a past lover wrote to me in *This Clumsy Living*.
The irony of the title had not hit me yet
as I settled into my recliner, ready to relax,
but there it was, the birthday inscription
in blue marker, “Happy Birthday, Bear...”
(Yes, that was my pet name,
I can’t help it, I am not a slight-built
person, and perhaps a bit deceptively
gentle-tempered—my claws can scratch
letters in flesh though. How do you think I
am writing this, with a pen or word processor?
It’s all claws and blood.)
“...Oh bear, I love you,” reads the end
of her inscription about combined
laughter and words building things,
which I presumed at the time were not lies.

I tried to remember if I had carved
our initials in any park benches or trees
with a pocketknife. I thought of squeezing
her hand while my tattoo was inked
into the flesh my arm. Her hand
was supposed help me ignore the pain,
which felt like dragging a nail across
an early-summer sunburn.

Once, I bought a used book for her.
It was inscribed by a stranger who then gave
it to his lover. It seemed romantic to me
at the time so I left the inscription,
which was on a blank page. I inscribed
the backside of the front cover—I said
something about the previous owner
and how she must have moved overseas
with the man who gave the book to her
and how she had to ditch all her possessions
and I was fortunate enough to find
one of her lost treasures so I could give
it to my lover. I don’t believe a word
of what I wrote in that book any more.

If she has picked that book up to read
it since then, I wonder if she noticed
that the inscription on the loose page

is more permanent than my
note to her because she, too, would
like to rip it out and read on.
I wonder if she, too, noticed the beauty
of a blank page.

Mercy on the Cliffs of Santa Cruz: The Moon Is Behind a Sail of Clouds

above West Cliff Drive,
I couldn't see her eyes.

eastbound waves pound
into caverns
which may have once been hollow
but now are full of thunder
and crumbling rocks
that fall deep beneath our feet
as we exhale
whiskey on the wind.

what I believe, about the touch of her fingers
wrapped around mine, hangs on danger
like this small sea cliff where we sit
shouting sins at each swelling wave—
the black water crushing those rocks below.

the ground rumbles furious
when the sleeper waves hit
and catch the rocks off guard.

she pulls close, still scared
of being swept away.
the wind rises. her hair tosses
in my eyes. she's right there
in front of me and I can't see her face.

the cliffs release pebbles into the sea.
the sea kelp churns below the surface.
I pull from a handle of bourbon, fill my lungs
with sea air, turn, and leave what I can
behind to thrive.

Yorkshire Cul-de-Sac to Sacramento via I-80 West

on I-80 west,
semi-trucks bring
brown snow chunks
down from the Sierra.
Which jump me back
to Michigan's winter
Icebergs

sludge
built up at
intersections and on freeways
by mid-afternoon
when school let out, the sun
was high and I
gathered cold sludge in
wheel-wells and slop flaps
of my Oldsmobile en route
to the bong-shack to hang with
unmotivated friends who,
like me, enjoyed laughing
at what we laughed-at
and who are still
stuck driving doughnuts
in parking lots—tires roaring on
slickness.

by night, slush freezes into
sludge-bergs, molds of wheel-wells,
behind tires, splattered on mud
flaps.
Michigan's ice,

falls off

when kicked by snow boots in
my driveway where it sat
on tire-packed snow
next to Dad's green Dakota
on Yorkshire drive; or
when it's warmed by
relocation: in the
garage, or down the mountain
to Sacramento.

If the Wind Told Me a Secret It Would Tell Me, Never Trust Flowers

Look at the cherry trees—
they bloom
for a moment. I rush out
to see them, but the wind—
the sad wind. Petals flying in maelstroms,
branches steadily stripped bare,
their sweet scent lingers on:
intense presence
of the essence of spring sex,
ripe and rotten.
But the cherry blossoms are gone,
pink flakes in the grass
pretending to be beautiful flowers.

I listen to the wind as it rips
flower from limb. I listen
to the branches creak
speaking secrets. I pick up
handfuls of the petals
and try to reassemble the blossoms—
all I end up with each time is a fragile ring,
empty in the center.
So if you ask me why it is hard for me to trust
I will point to the moon
who disappears monthly during the new phase,
leaving the night
black as the cave in my eye,
or I will point to the starlight
that flickers in and out of sight
unsure if it's dead or alive as it waves
past Earth in a vacuum.

*

The leaves change every fall,
shimmied-off like an evening gown in haste.

I will swim out into a Great Lake,
Erie or Superior,
swim chasing the sly flagellum of moon's reflection
until the other shore
arrives and the moon is still out of reach,
where there is nothing left but abstraction.
This is the beach

where love is abandoned and embraced.
This is where taste becomes taste
and touch becomes lust.
Trust is my eyes tracing
the ripples of the water, drifting off
farther and farther. Waiting for a reason. Waiting for a change.
Waiting for someone, something to remain.

Balance

Two Zen monks—bareheads white shirts black pants barefeet—
stand in a wooden fat-canoe. Each one holds a long bamboo pole with
three prongs. They push the poles into the pond bottom in unison to move
the boat and manicure the myriad of lotuses. The plants spread like oil-on-water
and cover the pond—then the waterfowl cannot scratch the surface, tree silhouettes
cannot reflect.

Two monks thrust poles into silt and muck—then twisttwist to rip
stems from roots and pull lily pads—noodled on prongs—
into the boat bed. For nine hours they dredge
lily pads until they restore the balance
of negative and positive space—
white lotuses sit on green
pillows, blooming
buddhas on
still water.

On the Job-site with Graystone Foundations, Inc.

for one summer
I laid red fine
chalk-lines across
gray slabs of concrete
like a Lloyd Wright
master stain
without translucence.

a dusted string
reeled in
and out of the
chalk box, stretched
tight and laid precise
according to plans
so the framers,
electricians,
know where
they are.

the tight snap
of the string from
point *a* to *b*
over and over again forms
fine chalk-line diamonds
to mingle with
cemented anchor bolts
and asterisks
demarking fireplaces, showers,
and nooks—

2x4
2x6
4x4

windows, blocks
or simple
doors.

The Day I Turned the Smallest Amount of Light into Refracted Prisms and Discovered What it Means to be Ripe

On the thirteenth day without
sun, I wore 3-D glasses
with the shades drawn tight—I needed

change. I cooked pumpkin soup
on the stove, the steam thick
with cloves and cardamom.

Outside, all the apples were falling
from the tree one by one—some fall
and rot, others are eaten by birds

or squirrels. The aroma is like sex—
sweetbread, cinnamon,
and sweat, but it is still un-mistakenly

crushed apples. The soup
bubbled and splattered like lava
from below, burning

my arm and hand. I walked outside
to pick an apple off the tree
and decided to eat one that had fallen

instead—it was delicious—soft
and ripe with a bite taken
before I found it.

Walking into a Conversation about Bears (In the Context of Big Hairy Gay Men), Alex from West Texas Joins In, Launching into a Monologue on Bear-Skinning

When you skin a bear... have you ever skinned a bear? Well, by the time you're done peeling back that hide... ok, look, first you string 'em up from rafters with their arms stretched over their head until the ligaments in the elbows loosen and the arms are completely straight then you start pulling at those arms pulling and peeling the hide, filleting along the flesh with a real sharp knife, a knife so sharp it can peel the printed letters off a newspaper and leave the paper in tact—and you pull and pull peeling skin from muscle like peeling open a stubborn fucking banana, you have to pull hard, real hard, eventually you're not even pulling with your strength you're just hanging your full body weight to pull the skin off those sticky, fat layers and by the time you've peeled that hide to the bear's hind legs, the bear's so stretched out it looks just like a fucking person who has been tortured by some medieval stretching torture machine, so stretched out it loses the bear shape almost entirely except for the long alien-like snout, but you gotta remember the skin keeps a bear's shape, once it's lost its skin, it's nothing but a red meat mammal... I don't care for bear meat though, a bit gamy to me, now gimme some venison any day—deer never look like people.

Sesos Tacos: Alex from West Texas Explains Why He Will Go Mad

The great thing about beef brains is they absorb any flavor like a real thirsty sponge—throw those on a corn tortilla and pretend it's eggs, because if you expect meat or something the consistency's off, it's softer than oysters you see so you kinda gotta get your head ready to eat some beef brains—I think it's best to expect eggs, but you won't be disappointed on taste.

Don't eat beef brains any more though, not now that the mad cow is in Texas. The scary thing is I ate beef brain tacos the whole year before they identified the first damn case in West Texas and that shit can take years to show—so if I'm sitting around when I'm thirty with a hole in my brain y'all know where it came from and don't say I didn't warn you.

Dirty White Cowboy Boots

A woman in a green sweater with long red hair and white cowboy boots looks at me as the conductor calls *Charlottesville, next stop!* There is a moment of pause when the ocean in my legs and torso wants to surge forward—there is a moment where I imagine what her hair looks like in sunlight by a river and if she wears those boots everywhere, no matter how dirty they may get on the way, or if she rides horses. There is a moment of pause when I question the ability of my mouth to move; I even question my ability to hold her hand, as clammy as my hands were. There is a moment when I am uncertain whether or not her green sweater is by J. Crew and, if it is, did she get it at a thrift store—who wore it before her? Maybe it's a Christmas gift from her grandmother when she was fourteen—at the time she probably hated it, but now it seems to cling in all the right places. maybe she wears it because she longs for a life of complimentary colors to make everything more dynamic, full of friction.

The train stops. I am still in my seat and never even said *Hello*. She leaves the train with a toss of hair over her shoulder for one more backward glance that I almost missed while writing this. The hiss and steam of air brakes as the train pulls away from the station mimics the sigh I sigh into the fogged window. I am leaving with more questions than I arrived with and lost even more answers in that exhale.

Each Way I Turn

kingsnake

who grew a limb:

snail with

salt-sweat glands:

oyster

who sealed its

shell with misguided
calcite:

nicotine:

in a room lined

with
mirrors,
sitting here

on the edge

of my waterbed
wondering
why
it's frozen—

holding black socks in my
left hand
unbundled—

not sure if I just
took them off or have yet to
yank them on.

hands to eyes I lay back

to try and forget
the raisined
snail
and forget

the flopping kingsnake
and Nicorette, but

this mirror-room offers no escape—

knows only reflection
each way I turn I
face myself—the only way left:
turn in.

Rats as a Metaphor for Loneliness

I scooped dead rats
out of the cistern—they
were reduced to feathers of flesh
floating in the gray water.

I needed twenty gallons of bleach
to sanitized the reservoir—
it isn't potable, but showers
and dishwashing are safe.

I am the live-in house sitter,
rent-free up on Mount Madonna,
above Pajaro Valley, where there are
no sewers or city plumbing—the granite

is too thick. There are
owls, lizards, crows, bamboo
and yucca and a view
over strawberry fields,

as the migrant workers
bruise their hands with dirt
and make the soil
bleed fruit.

I stay here, in this big empty house.
The toilets have overhead
reservoirs with pull-chains
for the flush. The floors are made

of fat wooden planks which
have not been finished. The
refrigerator stinks like rotten
potatoes, but works.

Every time I shower
there is a lizard curled-up
in the corner because the tub
is too slippery for it to climb out.

This happens every morning.
In the bedroom, I have an
old typewriter on
a glass desk over-looking

the valley through a huge
picture window. I don't think
of the rats too often, only when
I get drinking water from the fridge

where I smell the stink of rotting fruit, or flesh,
or when I take a shower, or wash the dishes.
The only way to remove the rats is to sanitize
the cistern. The only way to fill this big house

is to look out the window
over the Pajaro—and when it's dark,
I sit outside and listen to the screech owls
hunting the rats. When the moon is full,

I can even see them swoop
from the telephone wire,
a silhouette that plunges with talons empty
and rises with talons full.

Lying in Wait

In memory of Grandpa Louie

Where is it that the twilight
twists our hearts?

Is there some hand offering
you a green poppy (not yet
white—unripe) through
dusk-dust?

Will you accept it? (push-button drip.)

Will you use the petals for paper
and pen remedies from the otherside
with the ink of your heart's scare?

See how the night rub rubs against day,
and friction warms cold green poppies falling
into your hair and chest?

(We waited for drops of morphine
to ease your slip-out-of-body
and for our pain to leave with you.)

How many of our tears did you feel fall through
your roll-down eyelids before
your heart was flooded and rushed out
like a vanishing river in loose sand?

Behind Looking Up *for Grandma Rose*

Darkly dressed people
diffused across the church
lobby. Most faces familiar, long-gone
relatives (some faint. quivering.) all pilgrimaged to Madison
like rivulets to a river.
In the center of the room, a circle
of Kaja cousins standing in neckties with hands
pocketed or folded, searching for the right
thing to do in
idle time.

Thirty-minutes passed and I
did not look at the casket o p e n sitting
not five feet from our conversation.

You demanded attention
but my eyes fumbled around the room, resting
quickly on familiars, then a glance to the door
then away.

Our conversation resorted
to reminiscing about
Grandpa's Pool (aka the 'ool, "notice how
there is no 'P' in it," he'd say);
and the green-felt pool table
with a broken coin slot ("Don't scratch
the felt!" he'd say). I smiled and finally looked
at the darkbox. A frigid hum began
working inward up my fingers and toes until
I came close enough to look inside;
fleshtone with a hint of coldgray, rosary wrapped
and gripped on chest, a fine charcoal suit
and that sly-Louie-grin off to the left side,
frozen in place.

Where's your round-flannelplaid-belly? Where's your
copper crystal brandyglass and the rocks? Your rosy
plush cheeks? Where're your broken
golf clubs that never hit the ball straight?
Where's your pipe smoke?
The knocking of your pipe in the big
cork ashtray? Where's your lithe tongue? Your
sharp-eye, searching
for a wise crack to slip through?

Mercy

La Merced rumbles down from
hanging valleys and rivulets
splashes through Yosemite
a melted magnifying glass
searching the cobblestone riverbed
for a place to seep.

Americanized Haiku

For Bob

a rusty washtub of oil-
screened riverwater—

an orchard of apples, so
rich and ripe, rotten—

a laughing locust sitting
on a lotus flower—

a ketchup-smothered hotdog
and swill-spitting baseball players—

lost: eaglet eating blueberries
in a red tree—

How My Third-eye Opened

a woodpecker
was pecking my forehead at 3 am.

I went to the mirror and found a deep-welled
bloody dot on my third-eye.

now, I am sitting on edge of my bed
staring the motherfucker down—
he has a smug look and a swept-back mohawk.
he's cleaning his feathers and cackling.

I try chasing him out, but he just dodges and I'm
afraid to go back to sleep.
afraid he'll finish what he's started
afraid he'll breach my skull to get at the worm beneath.

so I devise a cunning plan to avoid being lobotomized by him:
I carve a life-size replica of myself from that oak tree
in the front yard using nothing but a handsaw, pliers, and paper Mache
then, I lay wooden-me in bed, hide myself in the closet, and wait,
and wait,
and wait,
thinking of wooden statues of Siddhartha and if I will have to sit in the closet
for seven years before the woodpecker takes the bait.
Maybe I'll just wait 'til 7am, I decide, as I dab the blood from my forehead.

The Peacock

As I stepped out onto the tenement steps
a peacock swooped my shoulder nearly
knocking me over.

There were peacocks in the streets,
plumes spread wide fanning hundreds
of iridescent feather-eyes.

Around each corner
in every tree, along sidewalks—peacocks
by the thousands.

The ones hanging in trees were ominous—
looked dark, like shadows of bridal veils strewn
among the barren branches.

Every few minutes a wave of cock-calls
swept through the streets like a line of squawking
dominoes passing along the word.

I ducked into the corner café, ordered,
and sat in the front window.

A peacock followed me—he stood next to me
in a chair with his plume folded
into a tail that draped off the seat
onto the glossy red floor

like a paintbrush that had been steeped
in all the colors on the palette at once then boldly
stroked along the fender of a cherry corvette.

We sat eye to eye.
I sipped masala tea.

I looked at the peacock beside me closely—his electric
blue head, neck, breast, and sweeping tail in morning sun.

I passed him my tea.
He bowed, clicked his beak,
and gulped.

My Lover Is on the Prowl

Night, a silk cloak: black
by nature, paper-thin by
design—wind reveals

its darkness and life. The moon
is fully dilated;
the sky cloudy, yet bright.

Silky frost of light
cast down on a black puma's back—
fire flashes in her eye

as she slinks out of her lair
in the heat of search.

A coat falls over
the night, a thick fog—it's then
she croons and hunts

and hunts for the cure

for the heat.

There is no fire nearby,
but one flares in her eyes.

When her eyes glow,
she prowls
for a small kill,
for a little death.

My Lions of Creation: Taming the Roar

staggering through sleep towards
faint roars
a cougar smiles my way;
whiskers brush by the windows
of my eye—morning-bruised glass
and dawn filters blue like burning
 showers of thought blossoms
 falling on the page like rain.

as each word drips the roars
 grow louder;
each line sheds freshlight on the lion's
 tracks until I find their
 pride
and stumble dead-center to

drop;

their roars rumble my skull
 then fade in waves.
I plug my ears—but
 my belly begins to purr,
the roar enters my throat,
whiskers brush my whiskers,
soft teeth scrape
 my neck—arousing a slight
 tremble and chicken-skin-tingles.

the cats circle facing me, transfixed, mouths open.
 (one approaches)
I let out my own roar—straight from my gut until
 black-vision sets in—

a lick
like a blanket tongues
my cold nose.
now it is quiet.

Green Girl in the Riptide: How I May Have Become a Vampire

A tall, beautiful woman with blue eyes
and black hair entered the Riptide Bar.
Her skin was green, especially her hands
with darker ripples of green
in the creases of her knuckles.
I thought *maybe she's a painter*
taking a quick break
for a few drinks
before going back to her masterpiece
which maybe has trees
or algae or a neon green sun?

After flipping me off from across
the horseshoe bar
we talked about the fat sun
that rolls into the Pacific
when there is no fog
and the life of words that turn
into animals that bite
if you don't listen
which was her way of saying
she liked poetry I think.

She told me her name—it rhymes
with *ampere* or *cashmere*
but was neither of those things—
I don't remember
and it doesn't matter now,
but I do remember when she said,
I went to a Gwar concert
earlier and I sardined my way up to the front
and was sprayed with fake blood.
I didn't care that blood isn't usually green,
even when it's fake.
A girl who likes Gwar, I thought
as I watched her lips
mouth the words:
Come to the bathroom with me,
and she took my hand to say
I had no choice.
I tried not to look while she peed
but couldn't help it.
She didn't mind, I was her doorman.
I can't zip up my jeans, will you do it? I tried

to head out the door presuming nothing
about her invitation.

Can I bite you? she asked,
which is a question I have never been asked
and couldn't help thinking
about vampires. *Sure*, I said.
She started with my neck,
and I felt my flesh crushed
like a mealy apple by thorns—
she moved to my cheek, shoulder,
bicep, forearm, biting and kissing
all the way down.

I kissed her lips. I tasted licorice
and iron on her tongue.
I thought of red French wine,
warm baths, and oozing red poppies,
while she gently bit my lips.
She asked me to come to breakfast
at the Red Victorian where she waits
tables. I wasn't sure how to take
the invite, until she left minutes later.

Later that night, sitting on the beach
around a fire singing *Dead Flowers*
over the strums of guitars, I watched
the riptide in the moonlight.
It swept sideways. I imagined
how the moon would inflate
and turn green as it set
into the sea.

To the Last Napoleonic Soldier

for Charles Simic

I have walked along a red road
lined with old birch trees and new foliage.

I have seen the gypsy caravan of ants
thieving young from one another on their way

to the anthill. I can't tell you how
long those hundred-year afternoons

have troubled me—just yesterday, four feet of snow
climbed up the trunks of those birch trees

and the leaves are still green.
It isn't so much that I feel my body slowly

turning to smoke—like your mother, the braid
of black smoke—but I can't stop feeling

that time will end at some point, whether
the world does or not.

On your way back from Moscow,
after Napoleon fell, you walked

naked and hungry past the one-eyed
woman selling chickens—you didn't

even steal one from her, hungry as you were.
As if wandering for decades, that one afternoon

your hair grew to your ankles
and all you could do to keep from tripping

over it all, was cut it with your saber.
Now I walk back along that lane of birches, plodding

through the deep snow, searching for stars to replace
those deaf ears in the night sky, searching for someone

who will listen to the sound of fire burning down
homes and hovels, someone who can play the songs

of sparrows and tropical birds on the lyre—
someone who can say this, someone who can transform.

The Dead Cicada on My Windowsill: I Keep Chasing Ghosts Through Time

1.

fallen cicada,
not the usual split-back molt-shell
cicada found on June (bug) nights, but a
full-weight dead-body cicada
in August.

I lifted you from your last green leaf,
set you on the windowsill
and waited—

2.

Autumn winds
grow strong—

tiny shriveled eyes
like white raisins.

color, lightening to spring green.

legs, crumpled inward, fetal.

thorax, plump and sectioned.

wings, immaculate.

3.

hot days shorten.

sun falls across the sill
differently these days.

shade comes to your ledge
most of the time:

time shrunk your

eyes, sunken-in like miniscule spoons.

legs, relaxed and slumped.

thorax appears as if in mid exhale:

the sections sucked-in, rigid, and straining—like the joints
of a turning train on a sharp curve.

wings, still translucent, green-web veins
drying out, wrinkling.

4.

many long weeks you set
upon that sill
ever still

burial planned, body aging,

those decaying leaves—

as the colors turned in branches

something burned the air—

your remains, traceless

windowsill, stark blank, and restless.

5.

I see the silhouette of your
body: just glimpses—nothing certain/ nothing
focused/ always fleeting/ hocus
pocus/ wind wind wind/

on the sill now
nothing sits still.

6.

leaves take turns landing,
briefly resting on your sill
before they wave away in twirls

but not the green leaves like those you fell
on in August, some yellow
poplar, orange maple—mostly brown oak.

frost rests like silt in the morning.

the katydids, crickets, and cicadas have abandoned
their trees and the nights—though their thrum
is still ringing in my ears.

7.

it's your ghost the echoes of memory constantly migrating
south along the jetstream then swept East in Caribbean tradewinds
to Barbados

and it is there I will be chasing the ghost a long way
from here I will find you the window will be left open no one will be around
iced rum on the table its sweat dripping thick water rings on a glass
table and it is there I will let you go just as I found you resting
full-bodied on a green leaf beneath the windowsill.

How to Eat Fresh-baked Cookies

Shadows shimmered on the walls
in her apartment. Over two-dozen

candle flames wiggled and shook
to the poly-rhythms of an unheard

Cuban rumba. I helped her clean
the ever-cluttered dining table

in preparation for mushrooms,
salmon, and instant mashed potatoes

while she cooked. The wine practically
poured itself into our glasses

and down our throats as the evening
began to heat and sway. By the time

we started to eat, I was ready for desert.
We sucked on fingers

between bites. After dinner
we baked cookies. The sweet

dough complimented her vanilla
vapors that swirled through my stomach,

ears and nose. We mashed
the chocolate-chips

into the dough. The oven was
preheated. The cookie sheet,

greased. We set the timer and waited.
The chips melted into the dough as she

became my arms and mouth, dripping
hot-baked chocolate down my cheek

and chest. We braided our bodies. The candles
continued to shimmy, the sky rolled into morning.

Tiny Accidents

you veered toward
a yellow and black striped bridge-sign;
concrete curb stopped you roadside, just short of the gully
(flattened tire, bent rim).

waiting,
you say you are
so cold
(shivering in a solo huddle).

“here is your jacket.”

A Color Theory of Desire: Pink on Grayscale

A shadow orchard of obsidian crabapples
All in shades of gray, leaves twitching

on writhing branches—all
except the pink flamingoes waltzing

the rumba in and out of the drapery
of old mulberry trees surrounding

the orchard. The two flamingoes
pirouette, weaving

like figure skaters
as they push branches

aside in stride with knobby
knees, while plucking white unripe

mulberries (which they crave for the tart
burst and to quench some insatiable thirst).

After circling the shadow orchard
of obsidian crabapples several times,

having plucked every mulberry tree
clean of white berries, the flamingoes

march wing-to-wing to the tallest tree,
climb to the top and twist their long

rubbernecks into one braided spire
piercing the swirl of the starry night sky.

Fatal Nostalgia: Trying to Define the Indefinable

"I wish I was in New York or dead!" exclaimed Mrs. Nora Legro... Forty-eight hours later she was dead... she was suffering from nostalgia, the technical name for homesickness."

from "Fatal Nostalgia" *New York Times*, August 7th, 1899

When I smell pumpkin spice candles
I think of apple cider, thanksgiving, and my father
raking leaves into a ginormous pile
for my sister and I to leap in.
When I hear Pearl Jam sing *Alive*
I remember chasing death like a dragon
as a teenager in rural Michigan
where there was nothing to do
except find creative ways to try to kill ourselves
with cheap beer, baseball bats, a *Delta 88*, and herby curbies,
though our intentions were never to die.

Every time I eat a crepe suzette
I think of a lost woman's abalone eyes
and how I found her once, then lost her in my sleep
after growing giant memories
around crepes, butter, sugar, and a bit of lemon.
Every time I see a lake I want to dive into the summer of '89.
And every time I walk into an old '70s-era bowling alley
the orange Formica and brown dinge remind me
of growing up in Richland
and how much less there was to forget then.

When I think of home
I get lost on the way
because the way home has changed.
The first few trips to find it are like wandering
through dense forest with binoculars on.
This seems appropriate—bumbling through
an unknown forest looking for the answer to a question
I don't even know how to ask—
something like: *why does my heart feel like it's being
sucked into the cold air of fall?* or
why is my beating bill so high?
But these aren't the questions I don't know
how to ask. The right questions are on my tongue
like beads of liquid mercury.

Tomorrow, Lithium

birch trees
in four feet
of snow
during this
blizzard.

tomorrow will
be the same.

green leaves
still cling to
their branches.

Assessing My Life and What I Forget to Forget While Walking Through a Real-life Alfred Hitchcock Horror Film Set

I have been awake since yesterday.
It is now 5 am at the Lynchburg Amtrak station
(the closest one within 2 hrs of my home)
and the fog hanging between the bare lindens is tugging
at the corners of my life. *This cannot
be my life*, I think aloud as I cross
a cobbled street to a building that looks
condemned, but is labeled Kemper Station.
It is not my life because I am in the middle
of Virginia, it is raining, and two years ago I couldn't even
point to Lynchburg, VA on a map; it is one and a half hours
from the Appalachian hills I live in
and still in the middle of nowhere I used to know.
It is not my life because I don't remember how I got here.
It is not my life because this old town is so quiet
my ears are lonely. But soft taps from the rubber soles
of my shoes remind me I may not be dreaming any more.

The train leaves in an hour for New York. I was warned
of the expense of food and drink so my suitcase
is a quarter full of fine scotch, tequila, caffeinated vodka,
and protein bars. I am thinking of this
as I strain to lift my suitcase
onto the scale at check in. I am thinking of the weight.

Smoking, waiting outside for the train to come, my breath
becomes the fog—my breath is hanging in the trees. *This cannot be
my life*. Red bricks under my feet rumble. The train is coming
out of the mist.

She Listens to What the Wind Says

Geese are having a loud cocktail party on an island in Lake Hartwell.

The cloth screen on the porch whispers incantations in the Carolina wind.

We stew our bare bodies in a Jacuzzi, and the bubbles stir and rise to the water's surface, making it churn in the pale blue of moonlight.

She leans over the edge of the tub, towards the lake, to look into the shadows for the black panther said to be loose in the woods nearby. She looks like a crouched cat, ready to spring, slender back arched, skin taut, eyes glowing green, legs slightly parted and bent at the knees, senses alert and conversing with wind.

As she leans out into the darkness, light traces her body, sugar-glazed, but just on the edges, a silvery silhouette as if I finger-painted her myself.

What do you see? I ask.

I see trees. What do you see? she replies and all I can look at are her legs rising out of the water just where her ass meets her thighs and the light around her body—

Everything, I reply and I move next to her to look for the panther.

You know, if we do see the panther, it may only be the green of its eyes and the white of its teeth just before it pounces through this screen, she says.

At least we would be part of one last hunt, I say.

At least we'd know there are ghosts, she says.

Taming the Wind

I set out to find the start of wind
in the midst of a bout with the blues
whose rhythm keeps the swing
in my step and the moon
in my eyes.
it doesn't matter what key

I sing in, or what key
opens the gate to let loose the wind—
all that matters is the eye
of the storm, the blue
of the sky above it and the moon's
nightly swing

across the heavens. The gate swings
open, but the key
is lost under close watch of the moon.
I began to chase the wind
to try and shake loose these blues
and rekindle the fire in my eyes

because these eyes
have been dim too long. I pass a child on a swing
reaching for the sky's blue,
hoping to unlock its mercy without a key
and a strong push of tailwind.
A daytime moon

is peeking through, like the moon
sometimes does—opening its eye
out of turn. But the wind
is loose and my arms are in full swing
as I try to dance free. Determination is key
when trying to shake loose these blues.

Sometimes it's best to sing low-down blues
away in a duet with the moon
in some agreed-upon minor key:
I just close my eyes
let my hips start to swing
and sing so loud it brings the wind.

Possibility

If I were a ghost
all I would need
is a b i g, thin cotton shirt
on a blind-woman's
clothesline and some
wind to fill
my sleeves.

Wish List: A Cable TV Guide

Tarantula hairs gave itching powder its itch
in the first gag shops. Tarantula hairs seem a small matter,
but I don't want tarantula hairs dumped down my shirt,
funny as it may seem, I also don't want
sleep to be deprived of blanket-robbery, or cigarettes to go
without nicotine and coffee.

I don't want to send Falwell money no matter how fast
he says I'm going to fall into hell and I don't think
CNN should care so much about the death
of Anna Nicole Smith. I don't want to know about
the new disease newly identified to sell the new drug
for those who suffer from recently recognized symptoms.

I don't want to eat natural foods or escape the cancerous dangers
of monosodium glutamate. I want deep-fried hotdogs
and beer-cheese soup with buttered Wonder bread,
apple pie, and ice cream on the side. I want spring trees
to campaign for a new religion involving sunlight,
carbon dioxide, fruit, wind, and sex.

I want to let wild animals loose in my bedroom.
I want the colossal squid to reveal itself and finally confirm
the existence of the Kraken—enough blurred underwater
pictures without perspective, tentacles found in sperm whale bellies,
or mid-sized near-giants near the Ogasawara Islands.
I want the real beasts to surface at last.

I'll grab the tail end of wind until I understand the distance between now
and the next galaxy, or until I feel an urge to raise a pug
or labrador near a lake in Georgia. I want near-death laughter, I want
someone to laugh with who knows what she wants, I want croaks from bullfrogs
on a hot summer night in Michigan, mosquito repellent,
world peace, a cure for insomnia, a time machine, a robot butler,

a hover-board, solar-powered hovercrafts, healthy bacon cheeseburgers,
and more TV programs about the uses and dangers
of tarantula hairs so I have something to watch at 3 a.m. while I avoid
retreating to a cold bed by falling asleep on the couch
with a blue blanket wrapped around my legs
and my cat curled beside me.

In the Grove of Fair Oaks Park: A Sacramento Valley Autumn Hymn

Crispy trees and
red berries
pulsing all around

goose-bump wind
grey
grey
grey skies for many days

bushes full of berries

trees barely foliated

harvest

rain

harvest

moon

crispy trees and
red berries
red berries

pulsing all around

olives falling on opened ground

in the grove the elder olive and oak branches are creaking of spring
and I am listening,

dancing on fallen olives among their shaky-wind moon-shadows.

Moths Always Fly Toward Light

The wine helped. We found
our way through discovery
of our selves while the moths
flew into the bedroom through the open
patio door. The light was on,
a lunar phenomenon on this full-moon night
drew them away from the real moon
into the room. The smoke rode in, too.
Here's me, trying to cut-back on smoking
and she's having her first few smokes since moving
from the Pacific sunset—almost everything was floating
back west to the coast.

The moths, the open door,
the lights on in the room,
the books piled on the floor in colorful
random stacks that bring order to chaos through association
and the marriage of book covers and words—
Bukowski mounting Ashbery
while watching his convex mirror,
Zapruder avoiding *Death of a Naturalist*
by a few inches of white carpet only to barely escape
with his new pajamas in-tact, Neruda searching
for answers to his *Book of Questions* in
A Coney Island of the Mind.

Later, when it was time to go, I helped her catch
the twenty-some moths in the bedroom
as they fluttered toward diffused light
and landed on walls, well, I caught them
and sent them toward the moon, she
killed them softly so as not to smash
and mess the walls and carpet—their wings
left glitter-dust on my shirtsleeve.

When I went home that night—
somehow, sometime between the hours 11pm and 3am
a package was delivered to my door,
a vinyl record, original cut
of John Lee Hooker *I'm In The Mood*—I flipped
that record for hours—and as John Lee sang
I left my heart in San Francisco I found, not love,
but trust in that same change that can often
lead to love but really I just mean
it was ok to feel again, to believe,

at least suspend disbelief in the idea
that when a heart breaks it doesn't break
beyond repair. As the LP came to a finish,
the needle bump-ksh bump-ksh bumped
beckoning me to get up
and flip to side *A* all over again.

Upon Learning I Can Buy the Scent of Fireflies Online

I never thought
to smell it, when
I was a kid, after smearing
chartreuse guts of their
glowing butts
between forefinger
and thumb.
I held the power
to glow
in my own two hands
and never wanted to know
what light smelled like—
I could have even tasted it,
or held it to my ear
to hear light being born.

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