I Woke Up a Ghost

Samuel Olson Woodworth

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Robert G. Hicok
Thomas Gardner
Jeffrey A. Mann

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ABSTRACT

*I Woke Up a Ghost* is a collection of poems interacting and reacting to the death of a mother in the speaker’s childhood. Through examining various relationships and states of mind, the speaker seeks new ways to imaginatively interpret and emotionally deal with loss and begin healing.
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Morning scene

It starts with a BANG!
& the starling murmuration of memory’s small relics—
a salt-shaker, buttons, socks, a swatch of river, his brother’s
hands, a stray-haired knee, a bridge, etc. etc.—
stipple in the air
turning from nova to nebula
from cape to tilted top-hat to planet to assemble the sundries
of Sam Woodworth, bed-headed in the kitchen.
Down the hallway, his bedroom door
slams. Goodbye, starlings.
And though he lives alone,
he believes a murmur behind the door,
and says in his head, “You are there.”
Believes you closed the door
and are teasing behind, pressing your hands
to hold his hyper-heart in the pause-
moment before TA-DA! It’s me! or a bombardment
of blue balloons. All of this on the actor’s face.
No words. Sam pushes the door and it hesitates
not for your hands, but for the tight jamb.
It Boy-yong-yongs open. Not you exactly, but
the wind’s spine articulating
itself against the curtain, somersaulting from the window,
and shattering cool air across the floor.
SEPTEMBER, the subtitle reads.
Realizing he is alone, and no one can witness
the behavior, Sam Woodworth spends the rest
of the morning hovering from room to room.
New Pants Day

I’m taking a walk to celebrate my New Pants Day
since my old pants got a blown-out crotch,
not from wickedly powerful boners,
though that’s the story I’ll tell,
but from my thighs rubbing a saddle
while biking up and down the town all winter
maybe to the office, maybe for just because,
and with each step I’m noticing
a spider-webbing sensation
behind my knee and notice
it’s probably so with each new pair of pants
I’ve ever worn and then I’m always forgetting it
or getting used to it. Once,
when I got my college diploma in the mail
I thought I should call my mom to share
my proud news and I’d walked into the other room
and picked up my phone before I remembered
she was 13 years dead.
My apartment filled with two feet of water
and the rest of the day I waded through
my re-remembering until I forgot again.
It was spooky how it all felt new and old at the same time.
It’s spooky how many mindless loops I’ve walked around
this field today and only realize it
when I pass the plastic bag and caution
my way near the barbed wire it’s snagged to.
Ol’ Goodbird the Obscure

My friend, even as his hair goes wolf-gray,
has still got the shoulders and 6’2” frame
of his star high school quarterback years,

but now he plays with words,
and he’s played my last name
into Goodbird.

He shouts that when he sees me—
Ol’ Goodbird! and jabs me with a finger.

Some days I don’t mind
the nickname or the touch,
and other days,
it’s a kind of pollution.

The truth is,
I kind of like being tickled,
every once and a while,
like once a month,
but preferably by someone I find sexy,
the same way I like being interrupted
by a loud voice
every so often,
preferably by someone I find sexy,
and whatever that prod brings
—either discussion or wildness—
is a little escape and I’m glad to leave
myself behind for a while.

*

Every June through my open window
distant train sounds divide me
from sleep. Those nights my urge is to dog
along after that train and hoist myself
into a boxcar. I’d leave an impression
in my sheets shaped like the number 1
and the myth of myself dwindling
with my few friends to nothing.
I’d go wherever that train goes.

I’d buckshot apart
like I was the son of a gun
and a dandelion,
all across America
until I dissolved completely.

But my arms are loose and weak.
My wrists are dainty.
I know my attempt to grab
a train would pluck my arm off,
would surely flip me under steel wheels
and scatter me like a scarecrow
in a field where a farmer forgot him
and let the tractor till his flannel
and straw into the soil he'd half-heartedly guarded.

* 

I remember being a scarecrow for a season.

My neighbors left me to mind their strawberry patch
while they vacationed away.

_When the berries get ripe_, they said, _eat ‘em._
_Make sure the crows don’t or else_
_they’ll get used to eating in our yard._

I watched the berries swell with June,
and since I neverminded the crows,
and never had the heart to scare them off,
I watched the crows swell with berries.

The fruit was almost gone
when I lay in the mud
eye-level with the vines
and invited the murder
to pluck my failure,
and if they wanted,
to pull my flannel and straw
to tiny bits and carry me off
in any and every direction.
Daylight strobed to midnight and back again
under their wings as the crows ignored me
for other rotten fruit.

Evening came.
The lawn bloated with dew
and the air with a wounded, earthy smell.

I stood up, bewildered, still
with life, still
with this ongoingness
and hungry for dinner.

I was thinking about that the other day,
my scarecrow season, that lapse in lucidity
when a finger poked my ribs
and my friend boomed, *Hey what’s the news?*
and I said, *Strawberry murder,*
and he said, *You’re so fucking scattered,*
and I said, *Fuck,*
*I wish.*
Some brother poem about shit that sounds like blah blah blah & sobs

I picked my brother’s shit up today.
By shit, I mean the clothes and trinkets
he left at his old apartment.
I helped his girlfriend move too
which is another shitty thing he left behind
when he relapsed, and stole her money,
and left for Barclay Street in Baltimore
where I hear his body is turning
the color of wet newspaper rolled around tobacco.
He pawned so much, but still,
down the highway I go
with carloads of shit.
The girlfriend’s mother calls me an angel for helping.
If helping people move makes you an angel,
angels often subsist on pizza & beer
in mostly empty apartments
leaning against boxes neatly labeled kitchen and books
where people talk about worry and anger
and starting over and how to give up on others
without feeling too bad in the morning.
Have you ever tried to give up on someone?
Have you ever tried throwing your hands in the air
in the theater of feigned finality
and hoped,
miraculously,
the stray bullet meant for them
struck your palm
with the safe snap of a catcher’s mitt?
Did you look at the bullet,
so shiny and neutered in your fingers,
you inadvertent hero?
Me neither.
There’s blood everywhere.
Maybe I could make a tin can telephone through the continuum

It’s a little bit like Heaven—Space-time—
the Past is still happening simultaneously
to the Now
which happens simultaneously
to the Future
which means nothing is lost;
everything is always here.
A scientist on TV says so—
that’s how the math works.
Sure.
Okay.
Maybe.
is how I respond to preachers on Heaven
& scientists on Space-time
because they both sound so lovely
and take a faith I don’t often feel.
But that’s why I called you tonight,
after years & thousands of miles—
not to apologize for reading your letters
(about your broken-down car,
your shitty poo-poo janitor job,
how you saw a kid’s mitten stiff in the snow
and realized it was your cat, etc.)
and never writing back—
but to try to convince you,
I was once a good friend,
and by the rules of Space-time,
it means somewhere,
somehow,
theoretically,
I am still the good friend
carrying you home from the bar
singing “Remix to Ignition”
to cheer you up.
You don’t answer the call.
I assume somewhere in Space-time
you realize not answering my late-night calls
can save you a lot of trouble and ruined sleep.
I drop the phone and walk outside
where the trees are still dizzy-headed drunk,
dropping rain on lower leaves.
It sounds like a parade
of everyone I’ve ever known.
It was smaller than that

She invited me out
of the bedroom—
I’d slept from Tuesday
and woke on Monday
without an appetite—
told me to take
a shower and put myself
together so I did.
In the kitchen,
she sat me down and
cropped my hair.
Where did my strength go?
She said I was made of magic
when we met—
I must’ve been
so impressive to get her.
The ceiling light made me
a dim shadow on the floor
where my clippings
stuck to her socks
and we found hairs
around the apartment
for months, like stray pine
needles. By December,
we split. I walked by
the old place once
and saw her smoking, alone,
but not alone, with her dog,
that nervous machine,
stretching the leash and flinching
as if everything were scary,
and she can’t let on to the dog,
but everything is scary.
I lost a season and
I can’t remember why.
I can touch its shape
but I can’t go back.
My shadow under
that dim light,
still and waiting.
This is a sculpture of my first day

There’s a fleck of a myth I think I know from overhearing something as a kid,

that a coroner or someone figured out by the cylinder of ash from a burnt away cigarette about what time that morning she lit up

and about what time she hit the kitchen floor.

I slept in the room above.

How long did the smoke rise in small threads from its glass tray and curl upwards into tangles of soft knuckles at the ceiling before it went out?

How long did it knock at my floor before I woke and found her?

It can’t be true, that someone rewound the burnt tobacco to her last puff. Impossible. One memory must have dissolved and polluted another and pollinated my hope that time could invert and be re-sculpted.

I made a sculpture.

Below my floorboards, a loose, thin cloud of straw-wrappers gathers at the ceiling.

They weave an erratic cloud and follow to the floor in a kind of funnel-shape,
a tornado,
to a single origin point—
a mason jar:
my origin point.
Before I found her there,
I was barely me.

If I rewind my sculpture more,
the mason jar goes backwards
and spells no sam,
recalling a time there was no me,
a time before recalls.
No, Sam
I can tell myself,

No, Sam, still in your bed,
stay asleep, a little longer.
Let these last minutes
before you become
be still.
Be no Sam. Longer.

Okay. It’s 8:33am.

Now time begins.

Now, you are.
Meanwhile in Space-time

a knock

my brother’s kids
at my door

orphaned & gray

their chins & ears
their crooked grin

so much like his

& months later
my nephew rough-houses
into the familiar

we laugh till
it hurts

we punch shoulders
we rug-burn

it’s fun
till it’s not

he pinches my nose
punches & pulls
till blood

pulls more

as if he could break the feature I share with his father and raise the ghost out of me

some nights
in the mirror
I repeat his name
& try the same thing
Party time! Excellent! Woo Woo!

My friend is in the kitchen
punching himself in the face,
telling me
not to take his visiting sister
out on the town. I'd teased him
about it, so he's punching
himself. His sister hears
from a room away how
he's worried she'll fuck
a random guy and he'll
hear about it. Please go,
he cries, and leave her
here. She gets to hear
him punching himself
from the next room.
These two rooms are
connected by a door
and streamers
of breath that smell like
a basement flooded
with whiskey. I'll hear
if she fucks some guy,
he says. His sister pulls
a blanket over her head
when I put my hand
to her shoulder
asking are you okay?
Her doesn't move
doesn't work. Small shakes
under there. Against the wall,
my friend's new lover,
jabbering about work,
how her work place is,
frantically chattering as if continuous
talking will ease everything.
Like we'll all stop and agree,
work sucks. She talks
through my hand signals
for her to stop him
from punching himself.
Nothing helps so I do the same
thing I always do to help—
I get the fuck out of there.
What happens in the house now?
The sister gets to hear
a couple of sorries from him,
gets to hear the girlfriend
soothe his worry a room
away, gets to hear,
for a while, sloppy
drunk sex. She gets to sleep.
And I walk to Main Street.
Laughing all the way.
My friend is a talented
fucker. He's got a trick
to get exactly what he wants.
Let's go for a walk so I can say goodbye to you

Is it late spring or early autumn?
You're not sure
if the leaves are limp
from the weariness of rebirth
or whether they are expiring
with summer. The day's warmth
evaporated and is pocked
with a rusty smell—either tilled soil
or harvest.

This neighborhood is familiar to you,
the salt-lick and sugar cube houses.
You'd never want to live in a haunted house,
but couldn't stand to live in a house so new
it couldn't have ghosts.

On the street, your shadow looks waterlogged.
Not your shadow, my shadow. I am the you,
talking myself through you.
I'm sorry, I'm ditching you
because I want to open my shadow
like a waterlogged hatch.
Now it's just me.

I open it and there's the bottom of a lake.
The lake in the city. Upwards,
two silhouettes swimming. Summer.
Night. I know this night. Years ago.
With Clare. I am here now
like I wasn't there then.
Where was I? I was there,
but I couldn't touch it,
the moment,
I couldn't feel it.
I'd like to will myself
into the water touching her everywhere,
holding us afloat,
holding the night,
but all I can do now
is build the water with words.
So the water is hands.  
The hands are holding the globes of light. They try to assemble the skyline underwater. Each of their movements bringing light closer to the swimmers—to me and her—so we seem suspended in the inverted sky. I can almost touch the liquid sparks but our strokes scatter the flickers. It happens over and over—the city starts to form, and we slap the lights away and float in darkness.

I need you again, to take the story back, away from me.

You missed it. You are here, walking around, watching your shadow, dumb, in a different town, half a country away, 5 years too late to the party.

The asphalt is still warm from the late spring or early autumn sun. Steam’s rising and surrounding your feet like the hem of a phantom’s robe. There you go.
When the suicide prevention hotline operator mentions sex as being a good reason not to kill yourself

Maybe in heaven,
you think,
there’s an angel
whose job is
to show you
all the semen
you ever sprayed
in your life.
And as you both stare
at the dunking booth
full of fluid he says gently
in a reassuring whisper,
so much life—
so much pleasure
and you’ll be in awe
and you’ll want to live all over again
and you’ll want to high-five the angel
but he probably won’t
want to touch your hand.
Dear Joe,
I think I'm possessed by a ghost.
It doesn't hurt.
I might break the first house rule.
The second house rule was gone long ago—
I never bought slippers and I let my toes hang out.
But the first rule—what, with the mess—
I'll try to make it outside.
Ghost is the wrong word.
I have a hive of hands inside me.
Some are familiar. Some are strange.
I don't think I have a heart; it was replaced
by two hands clasped together
not like prayer, but the way a pair
of hands can squirt water
between their thumbs in a pool.
They pump my blood these days.
Bloody hands. Something else. Not a prayer.
My stomach is a fist, a retired punch.
I've got no appetite.
If I get cut open, hands will fall out.
A river of hands. See them?
Someone I loved told me she could remember
the hands of everyone she loved. I do too.
Some of them. No, I lost them. I don't know
these hands but they feel familiar. I'm ashamed
of my own hands. Small, crooked, nails bitten.
Slow down,
the handful of heart says. Slow down.
It's not that I want this distance; but I crave a union.
If a door appears as an outline in the air, I don't doubt
I’d take it and go into that colorless and quiet room.
A voice.
The lip of ice around a skim of pond.
There goes another duster.
Sunday Umbrella Villanelle

a simple
sunday
it’s not

a big deal
but you left
a simple

umbrella here
on saturday
it’s not

fair of me
to call your umbrella
“a simple

thing” really
because
it’s not

like I could
accurately replicate
a simple

machine of such interconnected
angles and arms
it’s not

a talent of mine
because if it was
a simple

thing you’d
still be here today
it’s not

like I couldn’t
carry your umbrella to you
a simple

man would
but it’s still raining and
it’s not
going to let up
a weatherman says
a simple
solution would be
to carry two umbrellas because
it’s not
like I don’t have two
good arms for
a simple
“one-for-you and one-for-me”
trade off
it’s not
easy for me
to talk about anything
simply.
it’s not.
Suddenly a deer, suddenly a telephone

I bike home
from the bar tonight
in Virginia
with no lights
down the farmed backroads
in the middle
a gray fog
knits itself
a few feet ahead into
*a deer!*
I shout
as it freaks & flees
and my chest
goes crazy
with my imagined
body impaled
by antlers and hooves
and yes Erik
I’m drunk
like we used to drink
and bike along the bridges
in Minneapolis
and the Mississippi
was flowing like wow
carrying all
the lights of
street lamps away
and me too
I went away
but you live there still
I’ve been meaning to call
and say, *I’m sorry*
your dad died
*so suddenly*
but I’ve meant to call
for a few years to say
*Hey I miss you*
and I mean miss
in a totally different
way from how I missed
colliding with a deer tonight
but how I hope the miss
implores the deer
to share his hyped
heart till calm
with the quiet
in a field parted
like my hair
you and the deer
both on my mind
and cell phones
won’t do for my call
to you Erik but old
corded phones might
because I would ask
you to wrap
it around your neck
and I would too
and we’d see if
the 1,000 miles
of wire would carry
my vein’s wild hum
to yours, to make
my love more tangible
because there is
nothing I can say
to lift you
but I could try
giving you my weight
in silence and sighs
and listen to you
I’d listen to you
and I’d try more.
Dear Brother I

I put the belt between my teeth and had this vision that the veins in my arms were the veins in yours, so I climbed out of the bathtub. This was a false alarm. And now I'm at the mirror and I admit I don't like what I see because there's far too little of you and much too much of me. There's my body. Taller. Lankier. It pines and needles. It was the mistake of a magician's sleeve that I replaced a dead brother—that infant dead brother, his name was Ben, remember how we seemed to know that story even before we were born?—when I should have been born a tree. And then I could have been there and you could have climbed on me and if you fell down you could have reached for my limbs and when the humid wind, at night swam across the rooftops, I could have been the slough at your window.
Connecticut Play

I was in a play she wrote premiering in Connecticut that won an award and there was a character based on me, she told me over the phone, I should come see it performed. Though I remained seated, my living room was suddenly obscured by the painted backdrop of an Amtrak's rows of seats, and an extra sat next to me, a grandmother snoring about her Jack Russells, projections of winter in Jersey, then New York whirred by on the walls until we blurred into Connecticut and the grandma exited as the backdrop divided revealing me, still seated, amidst a theater's velvet chairs. I waited for showtime, waited to see a character not unlike me waltz out, on stage, under the lights: not me but an actress, so much like her, went about her life, her affair with her boss, a father appearing as a missed phone call, a book she's writing called thirteen ways of looking at a bastard—she stole my title!—all the while a TV in the background
played footage of the
Iraq War, the world
spilling in. And I waited
for my character boldly
to enter. But I don’t show up.
She was pregnant—
that’s right—and aborts—
I should’ve been there—
and she and the sister
ate cupcakes afterwards,
quietly in the kitchen,
and people are crying,
and now I'm crying,
and the father never shows
but I’m relieved the sister is there
and the main character
says to her sister something like,
"I stole that title—thirteen
ways of looking at a bastard—
from a guy I knew"
and describes the night
we walked through grass
thick enough with dew
we could swim through it.
A little bit more and the play ends.
That's it. Nothing else.
I appeared on stage as visible
as a few words whispered,
with the mass of a frayed recollection.
The crowd is leaving
and I'm thinking of islands...
I think if I were
set adrift in an ocean,
I'd think the islands
swam past me and that I
remained perfectly fixed
in space. There are way
more than 13 ways
of looking at a bastard.
I stand up and have weird
pangs in my legs and back,
my body is returning from being
off somewhere else.
I search around a bit
and I find her, Clare,
orbited by the cast and crew
in the greenroom. I give her
the flowers I thought could
lead to sex, congratulate her,
really, that was amazing,
thank you for inviting me,
and leave. Outside,
behind the gray curtain of clouds,
the stars do their backstage work
shaving snow down like soap flakes,
making the couples on the avenue
go ooooh as they carefully
walk the fresh and slick sidewalks.
A street lamp flicks on
above me and I feel
like a leading lady and ready
to deliver a monologue concerning—
but it flicks off again and
I'm no longer much of anything.
I think of the play. And Clare
and her pain and try to picture
Clare again, but I can't see her—
just the actress who played her.
Who was she anyway?
Thanks for the oranges

My eyelids are tied
with 99 lead balloons.
The light radio lights.
The road humming along.
My many years solely
commuting by bicycle
means, when I’m riding in cars,
like a kid,
I fall asleep;
my folded childhood
rises like warm bread;
then my chin tries
kneading my chest;
right now
I’m abandoning you
to face this highway
alone
but that means
I trust you enough
to doze
while you drive
but then again
I trust strangers
wholeheartedly
when I catch their vague
kind-caring look
tossed willy-nilly
across streets & restaurants
seemingly meant for me.
I trust you wanted
my company so
I’m sorry I’m marching
the boundary between
wake and sleep
like a soldier
at the border
of two warring nations
but now I am running
and hiding from battle
in a cool blue attic
and through thickets
of dusty beams
a candle
in the corner
& as I hold it
I grow golden
& too giant for the room
so out the window
I hover above
the town
its hills & valleys
wrecked & worn
from a flood retreating
centuries ago
I wrap myself
against the fall
in clouds
losing my sight
but not the feeling
of being wrung out
and shaken
I’ve become cotton
a bed-sheet
in my mom’s hands
a parachute tamed
to a clothesline
I haven’t forgotten
her hands
here I am again
in the wind
lifting me from line
carrying me to sea
atop waves
soaking through
and so thirsty
from the salt.
I am grateful
for you and that
you brought oranges
for the drive
and I say that
I say Thanks
for bringing oranges.
Filtering through the threadbare
quilt I hung at the window
to keep the day away,
the watery gray light
fell softly upon
the 666 tattooed on her ass.

Whew. Thank you. I needed to tell someone,
even though it’s not my secret to share,
just one I acquired through a kind of bodily osmosis that goes:
all clothes aside,
here’s what I got.

Friendships, relationships, courtships
are my favorite kinds of ships
even if they can’t float
or fit into bottles.

Once when I whispered into a bottle,
the hair growing around
& outlining my nipples
makes them look like two pink jellyfish
dangling from my chest,
the bottle remained empty
except for hot air & embarrassment.

But the other night,
when I hesitated my shirt off,
& she finally saw my aquatic chest & accepted Yes,
I felt my secret mutation momentarily forgiven.

And as her cottons & silks became jetsam on the floor,
she blushed some line about youth & tattoos & stupidity
I didn’t understand
so I remained an empty vessel
until I saw her satanic ass,
& filled with blood & a secret I feel the need to share,
not to brag about sexy-times
or to comment on the strange things we shy about our skin,
just to say:
I kissed her ink & we laughed.
She kissed my chest & we laughed.
Hail Satan.
Pretty quiet, Quiet pretty

It wasn’t the garden of Eden
I walked through
a golf course tonight.

I wanted to find peace
and have a word or five
with god who keeps
in all of our conversations
pretty quiet.
Quiet pretty, gentle pretty:

the sprinklers

made a beaded door
of synchronized jewels
ahead of me.

I ran to find the room
behind it
was more night, lawn,

and agnostic trees cupping August
and moving with the liquid
shape wind mimics.

I heard some voices
far-off and gave it no mind
until I realized I’d given no mind

for a while
in their direction
were the lights of an ATV.

Security guards, I guessed
looking for me, or trespassers.
Well,

I ran down a line of trees
and hid in a shadow
one made as a spotlight
swept back and forth.
I leaned
toward the light to give up

and aw shucks
you found me
but I pulled back.

When the light
turned away, I sprinted
toward taller, untamed

grass. I was in awe
of my leaping strides.
I still got it, I thought,

Like a cat.
I have my 9 lives still,
after all these years.

I never get found;
not during hide and seek,
not in a game of capture the flag,

not sneaking out my bedroom
window as my stepmom wept over
conspiracies of her demise

she’d overheard
by whispering them to herself,
breaking glasses,

I ran into nights so sensitive
and tactile I could feel the moon
like popcorn ash from fireworks

falling on my face.
Still with my 9 lives, I never
get found.

I hit some neighborhood street
and slinked around until a familiar name led to a road back
to my apartment where I caught my breath and held myself like a missionary holds a starving kid on tv.
Dear brother II

Keep up with me.
I’m keeping time.
I expect you’ll play the trombone
when you join the parade of the dead.
You did as a kid—
the trombone.
I played the snare drum.
I kept time.
I keep living for the dead.
Do you remember our mom?
You were so young.
Keep up with me.
I remember her.
I have a great memory.
Have you forgotten?
You must be so close to her.
I don’t think I can save you.
I have friends who say they want to die.
They don’t do as good a job as you.
Keep up with me.
You’ve been missing for a week.
Are you closer?
If you are,
play the trombone in the parade.
I’m keeping time.
I’m terrified of forgetting.
I remember her tucking her hair in a hat
to play backyard baseball
with the neighborhood kids and us.
Do you remember?
I could tell you sometime.
You could play the trombone.
Are you playing ball somewhere?
You were the star pitcher.
You’d strike out the side.
9 or 10 pitches and they were done.
I kept time.
Christmas morning last year.
You went to the bathroom
and unwrapped a gift to yourself.
Aluminum foil, a straw, and a lighter.

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You got through the morning okay.
I knew.
I never told anyone.
It was the best that I could do.
I don’t think I can save you.
If you’re dead,
can I have that cape?
Do you remember?
The one with the bull on it?
You’d wear that and a colander as a cap
when we performed music together.
Do you want me to keep that?
I wore a lavender dress.
I was the bandleader.
I’d count down and we’d play our song.
People liked to hear us play.
Are you closer?
You can always look the same.
Did you whisper in her mouth?
I did once.
Shadows walked the house.
What did you say?
I’d like to know so it can remain.
Do you remember?
She talked to marigolds and tomatoes.
Do you hear it?
It’s okay.
I’m tapping to keep you all in line.
Kitty Hawk, NC

It wasn't even a month after I'd found her on the floor, and found the objects she'd touched or given us newly alive, like the way I once saw an ordinary painting with a copse of trees create the world—it's not that I'd never seen trees before, or even that the painting was especially sublime—it's that, before I saw them painted, trees didn't seem to exist.

Her vase, records, jewelry, clothes suddenly existed and I couldn't break the feeling I witnessed a waiting surrounding them—for her hand to return with water, her hum along, her neck & wrist to hold, for her shape to form them.

I never noticed the kite she'd hung on my bedroom wall waiting for wind.

I took its yellow tugboat, its stitched seagulls drifting near a smoke stack, & I lifted it to waves of wind above Kitty Hawk, and let it go.

The blue diamond. The wooden spool. Rising away from the sand dune.

The month was July. The age was 11. I let that fucker fly the 500 feet it could. The ocean. Hang-gliders. Para-sailors. Everyone trying to eat their weight in wind, sky.
By some trick of sunlight,  
the sky appeared white, closed off,  
stretched with fabric  
and the kite became a small tear,  
to me, grounded, worried  
it'd pluck away too.  
I wound it back,  
half-blind with sun-squinted eyes.  
I was so thirsty.  
I ran down the dune, jumping,  
holding the kite above my head  
and felt for a moment  
the kite held me up,  
and just perceptibly,  
I hovered.
Love in the time of melancholera

I did things— séances & dances
of quiet staring—I thought might make you
materialize from the spaces
between today's rain.

Nothing worked in the way nothing
and everything work together

like the universe and all its everything
expanding until it's all
cold dust getting colder
and farther and farther
and feeling a lot like nothing.

On this planet, a friend tells me,
and I’m telling you,
the deserts are expanding.

Now I worry about the day
the grand desert envelops the world.

Even saying desert makes me
want to French-kiss a monsoon.

I tried telling you about my fear
of deserts, why I'd never been
to Arizona, while we swam
in Lake Calhoun. Instead,
I kissed you and never got
the fear out, you tasting
enough like rain for me.

The same friend tells me,
as a way of solace,
that—as well as deserts—
forests are increasing too,

but I worry in the wrong direction,
growing upward rather
than outward so someday,
from the moon,
Earth will look like a mummified grapefruit with a cocktail umbrella pushed into it. That's the last slim oasis and where I'd like to be if I live through the age of the great sands making nothing of words and oceans and cities and bowls of fruit.

I can wait for you under that tree in case you should compose through the cylinder of rain falling from a cloud as small as a shower-head. I'll have an umbrella to share but if you've walked that long through the big everything of nothing, you probably won't want one. I'll throw it away. And if the storm ever stops, I'll shake the branches to make it rain over and over again.
Escape

I climbed out to escape the fire
    happening nightly in the house—
my dad's wife crying out
    at nothing, kicking and
throwing through the 18-inch flood

of newspapers, broken answering
    machines, doll debris, stabbed trash
bags spilling clothes and documents,
    a week’s worth of half-empty
water glasses with dust,

and other bric-a-brac & knick knacks
    she curated across her bedroom floor.
I could hear her son of a bitch
    my brothers and that mother-fucker me through the night.

Eventually, she believed the voices
    keeping her awake
came singularly from my brother.
    She medicined him into a coma
of ambien and codeine.

It split him in two. One, a stone dis-
    solving into electric fuzz, he said,
the other rising out of him, levitating,
    failing all night to ascend
through the ceiling. And I'd split too,

out my bedroom window,
    I couldn't carry him, I never tried,
walked to a cornfield a mile away,
    bisected by a tractor's path. A ways
away, the orange drone of Baltimore

softened and washed the contours the moon
made on clouds. And in summer,
the fireflies flashed and pointed
    like a vacancy sign I'd like to follow
from the soil, steps above
the stalks to treetops, beyond
where I could dissolve
as pollen windblown
from branches,
of that place and away.
The Truck Driver

From the cabin of a pick-up a hawk was eyeing me.
That meant her boyfriend was over,
the guy who hunted with hawks
and drove a tractor-trailer for a living.
When a memory drops
a circus tent over me, I call it time-traveling.
Today I time traveled. A tractor-trailer kept pace
with me as I biked down University Avenue
and it felt like I was being protected
from the honks and fingers of other drivers.
I thought of her boyfriend. He gave me
a corduroy hat that said ABF for Arkansas-
Best Freight. I wore it till the bill flipped
off. He was good to her, I think, maybe.
Maybe not. They broke-up. I was a kid.
He'd bundle me up in the back of his truck,
after lighting fireworks with his son into the night
—sparks thrown in the grass; humidity sweating us clean—
I was a constellation made by pinpricks
of sunburn pulling taut across my back and nose.
He drove me home nursing a Budweiser between
his knees. I sang songs to myself. In the days
after she died, I made sure
someone called and let him know. I think it happened.
Someone said they did. The rig turned away. I biked through traffic
just fine. I think of him,
the ex-boyfriend, walking in a patchwork
of briar and grass watching a hawk
carve the night, trailing the golden beer
of evening across the horizon,
his boots soaked with winter
dew as he heads home, warm.
7 out of 10 Americans kick it, slowly, in a hospital

Remember that.
I stood on a garage roof in Baltimore
and raised my arms and conducted the traffic to go
gently and where a collision would happen
I pointed so marshmallows filled the inches between
bumpers to soften the crash and so the pissed drivers
were some grahams and chocolate away from s'mores
and laughs over a fire.
I tickled my fingers above the harbor and the oil slipped
on its city light jewelry.
I moved the chess piece buildings around
just because.
And I—What an idiot magician.
I was nothing.
The city went on as normal. The statue
at the intersection was a heroin guy
in a stupor cars wheezed past and a million pigeons
freaked out at the barely controlled chaos.
My Aunt Leslie was crying
as a building away her mom yelled
"Help!" when people touched her swollen feet
and asked Uncle Bob why birds were pecking
around her whirring life machines.
She lived off ginger ale and those machines that last week,
then climbed out
beyond our sight the way pollution’s twilight
stretches its red gauzes thin and thinner
and we're all surprised it could ever stop
and then it's night.
Plants, Earth & Kingdom of the Air

I failed so long waiting for the kingdom of air and light to take me in,
I didn't feel myself sinking into the soil.

Someday, when it swallows me,
I'll learn the language of a landscape;
I'll be the million-year tide
a mountain is when it's becoming,

always trying to meet twilight halfway,
just at the next horizon.

No, the next one.

Listen, the trees must walk and talk
in very small bouts
vertically toward the sky,
but I don't hear it.
The black pond shatters upwards—

a few dozen sparrows
at our approach.
She goes wow. I notice
my feet feel heavier.
This morning she slid

out of bed totally naked
except for the dress, thinner
than a wash of watercolor,
she's always wearing

in her skull. I touch the echoes of its hem only by whatever she says. Or any interpretation of her yesterday's long look away. Or when I asked her how she's doing and she said, *Figuratively? Blueberry.*
Touching her echoes
makes me simultaneously

happy and sad and something else
entirely. It makes me an astronaut
who never went to space
bow to my knees to sip the moon

out of a puddle. And under
the puddle my lips
kiss the earth with failure,

wonder, and awe.
An attic in the ground

Just outside of town
beyond the highway construction's fences
and concrete tubes and slabs
the cranes will move soon,

and after the empty cow pastures,
to the pure roughage of a winter
corn field, a hill rises to forest
like a slow breath.

I found a door out there
in the ground. It had rusted
hinges and a handle
I didn't try to open. I was suspicious

the door would lead to an ocean
and the ocean would be laced
with the contents of an attic
and the attic would be my mom's.

I like hands. They can make so many
shapes while remaining hands.
The odds and ends of my mom's attic
expand and warp with mythology

while remaining so ordinary I would
out-quiet the snow to return time to them.
Return to the binoculars the chopped-away
landscape between her eyes and the perceived

to find whatever needed to be closer.
Or return to the old coffee table
the cigarettes before they rolled away
and burnt it, return to it the weather systems

of conversations converging above
the wooden plane that dissolved.
I imagine most people carry pain
at their sides like an IV drip

of poison set so it never floods the body
and flows just enough so the bag
never bursts. I thought for a long time
people shared secrets by whispering them

into another's open mouth. I leaned
mine to hers once and shared a secret—
and I can't remember it—except
how her mouth caught my voice and kept it.
Seeming seams

Sometimes I skip
a memory across
the surface of the moment,
and it goes
crooked, a little off,
and I wait for it to transfigure
like,
I got home near 9pm, plastered
with mud. She threw a toaster
and threatened to send me
to live with my dad & his wife
a state away.
Nothing.
Or her teasing me
about the neighborhood girl I liked
and I laughed so hard I popped
a shit in my pants.
Not quite.
Or maybe how,
while she sunbathed and smoked and
backgammoned with a friend,
yes,
I hid in the branching center
of a tree. How even with evening
slipping into our house,
the smell of sun floated above
her skin like an after-image.
She is an after-image now,
a space the sun bends around,
holding the shape of,
a small seam in the air leading to an
other place, like if I could touch it,
and pull it open a little,
she'd be there, and all the gone
everythings, returned.
And they'd say Where have you been
we've been waiting for you
and I'd say Where have you been
I’ve been looking for you.
The sky inside-out
for a skip moment tonight.
It's just me, talking to nothing
except a cottonwood seed
seeming to dangle from nowhere
and dancing to the invisible
wind.
Carnival of the Air

In a few months my mom's death will be old enough to smoke so we'll smoke together and have a coffee for old time's sake. That's a joke, you see, she lit her morning smoke, brewed her morning cup, and fell to the floor, dead, before she could enjoy either. Since I'm 29 and her death will be 18, we can have that smoke & a coffee. Her death is old enough to be craving a good buzz, to start looking for a fake ID. We could go get hammered and dance together and people would be surprised and say, You're a surprisingly good dancer and I'd say, We've been practicing for 18 years and they'd say We? and I'd woozy-hit my forehead remembering no one else sees that I am shaking and spiraling around the door and hallway of her vanishment like watching the torn air a hummingbird left behind. It's fine. I'm fine. I keep on dancing through it, all these 18 years and onward, dancing along the hallway expanding in the night sky, dancing through this old carnival I can't see around me but I know I am in by looking upwards, by the way the lightbulbs blink, and people’s yells and cheers, and the grass and candy smells round and reflect off the low clouds above, bouncing the carnival to me, muffled, quiet,
an echo off the up-there summer storm
that doesn't break, just pulses,
and when I sing upwards to the sky,
and I'm still enough, for time,
opening enough, to vanish, and forgive—
still enough for time to open to gone and forgive time,
the sky sings back,
a little heat lightning rumbles
out there, a ways north, I think,
above a town I don't know the name of.