

Summer 8-2009

Night Field Anecdote

William Garrett Wright
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wright, William Garrett, "Night Field Anecdote" (2009). *Dissertations*. 1065.
<https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1065>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

The University of Southern Mississippi

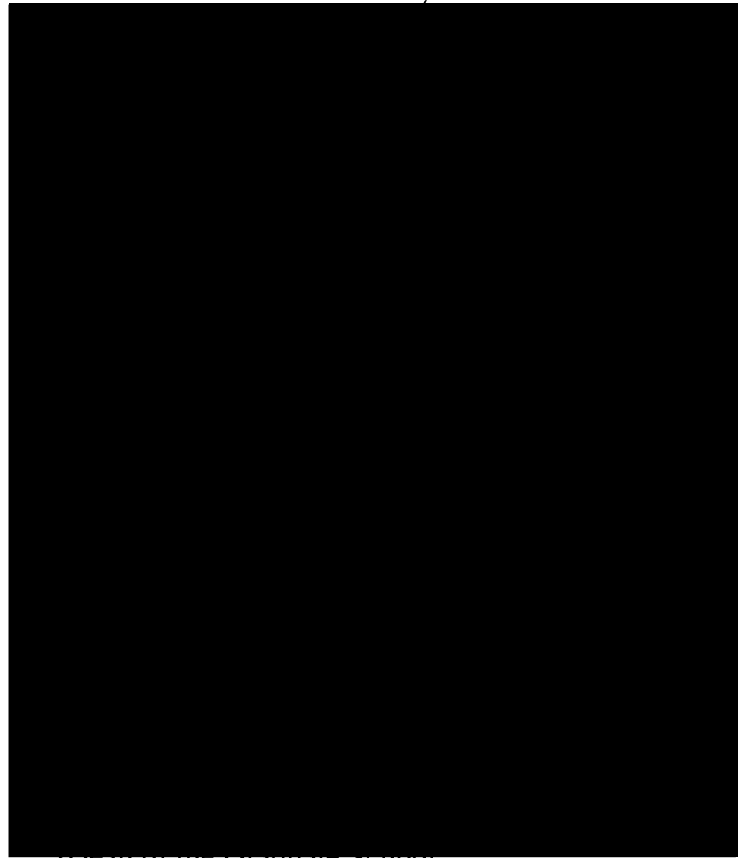
NIGHT FIELD ANECDOTE

by

William Garrett Wright

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:



Dean of the Graduate School

August 2009

COPYRIGHT BY
WILLIAM GARRETT WRIGHT
2009

The University of Southern Mississippi

NIGHT FIELD ANECDOTE

by

William Garrett Wright

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2009

ABSTRACT

NIGHT FIELD ANECDOTE

by William Garrett Wright

August 2009

Night Field Anecdote is an original collection of forty-one poems accompanied by a critical introduction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank members of the dissertation committee: Angela Ball and Julia Johnson for their unflagging help with the work, both inside and outside of class; Martina Sciolino, for her inspiring teaching and enthusiastic confidence in my scholarly and poetic pursuits; Kenneth Watson, for the opportunity to work on *The Southern Quarterly*, helpful classes, and myriad therapeutic conversations; and Monika Gehlawat, who, despite her newness in the English department, willingly and helpfully served on my comprehensive exam and dissertation committees. I appreciate the committee's encouragement, and, in times of stress and unforeseeable obstacles, their understanding. I would also like to thank Stephen Gardner, mentor, colleague, and best friend. Thanks to Finishing Line Press for publishing approximately half of the poems in this collection in the form of a chapbook entitled *The Ghost Narratives*. Finally, I appreciate the readers and editors of the following journals, in which many of the poems of this collection have appeared, often in different forms: *AGNI*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Colorado Review*, *Grist: The Journal for Writers*, *Indiana Review*, *The Journal of Truth and Consequence*, *New Orleans Review*, *New South*, *North American Review*, *Product*, *Smartish Pace*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Texas Review*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	vii
WORKS CITED.....	xvi
NOCTURNE FOR THE SECOND DEATH.....	1
THE ESCAPE.....	2
FERNS.....	3
GHOST WATER.....	4
PRESCRIBED FIRE.....	5
BLUE PEAR AND SLEEP PARALYSIS.....	6
BURNING HOUSE.....	7
TRUMPET CREEPER.....	8
DUST.....	12
BLUEBIRD.....	13
FEVER.....	14
OXBOW FLOWER.....	16
A PLACE TO SLEEP.....	17
AUBADE.....	18
CHISEL.....	19
PEACH TREES, SUFFUSED WITH PESTICIDES.....	20

THE OTHER BODY.....	21
HELL.....	22
ECLOGUE: DROWNING.....	23
CHERNOBYL ECLOGUE.....	24
FALSE AUGUST.....	26
IN THE ORCHARD.....	27
NIGHT FIELD ANECDOTE.....	28
RABID.....	29
WHITE FOX AND SLEEP PARALYSIS.....	30
SUMMER CONSTELLATION.....	31
STILL LIFE WITH PEAR.....	32
BEECH TREES AT NIGHT.....	33
ILL.....	34
COLD SPRING.....	35
APPLE ORCHARDS, ABANDONED.....	36
THE TIDE.....	37
WOLF SPIDER AND SLEEP PARALYSIS.....	38
MAGRITTE'S HYPOCHONDRIA.....	39
THE EAVES.....	40
BOYHOOD COMPRESSED BEHIND THE EYELID.....	41
THE CURERS OF FOLLY.....	42
HYPOTHETICAL BLOOM.....	43
STORM.....	44

SELF-PORTRAIT AS THE AUTUMN OF THE BURNT MEADOW.....	45
RIDGE COUNTRY.....	46

INTRODUCTION

Nature is the primary catalytic source for the poems in *Night Field Anecdote*: images of insects, stars, plant-life, weather and seasonal systems, water bodies, and the human body itself abound. However, the poems are anything but “natural”; though they are written out of my voice and a lexicon I use from day to day, they deny the casualness of quotidian speech. Purposefully serious, the poems strive toward the incandescent, vatic, and songlike; they are hymns that worship the imagined intertwining of non-human nature—particularly the vegetal—with human poetic consciousness. I find intense beauty in the metaphorical potential of fecundity—growth and decay—and I often employ this motif in my poetry. But locating an original beauty depends on navigating the fecund objects of nature in a new way. Thus, the narrators in my poems are often disembodied or anonymous subject positions, but the poems attempt a warm intimacy by invoking the familiar and the familial, even if these intimacies are decontextualized, alien. Thus, my final goal for these poems, in their undeniable fixation on death, is to synthesize images and notions of the known natural world to create new intimacies and relationships that inhabit a reality stranger than the “ordinary” *perceivable* universe.

“Nocturne for the Second Death,” the poem that opens *Night Field Anecdote*, illustrates these paradoxical tensions. Written in the first person plural, this poem attempts to establish an intimate tone for readers, to invite them into a familiar but reordered wilderness. The “we” of the poem, a group of ghosts who were family members in their past, corporeal lives, must now navigate nature’s things, both big and small—“snow blown off dwarf pine,” “blighted corn,” “underground streams” and even the microscopic “paramecium.” The ghost-figures are granted access to the knowable and

unknowable, but their entire world is one the living also navigate, if in highly different ways. Because they exist unseen and unknown by the living, they strive to interact with the world in a way that distracts them from the reality that their former, bodily lives have been forgotten, and so they constantly change shape and context: “we unload / the bright syllables of our hair and skin, / then move on, torches in a tomb.” They move with nature’s movements and even “wait centuries for the youngest / to boast and swagger in the silence he has become.” Because they have decayed from human memory, they dwell in nature’s processes, even decay itself, leaving “the purity of hunger / in a starved fox’s belly,” letting “maggots eat the gray eyes / to a dark scald.” Thus, the ghosts inhabit *all* beginnings, interims, and finalities in nature and have become part of the “dimming myths” the living “dream and hoard.”

To create this sense of a dynamic afterworld, the poem is very carefully constructed. Highly declarative and aestheticized, the language attempts to aurally mimic the actions of its speakers, to imitate the strange logic of these lives. In efforts to make the poems appear voluptuous, etched, and sensual on the page, stanzas taper with progressively shorter lines enjambed to create intense micro-narratives. Lines seventeen through twenty are indicative: “But we are forever assimilable, / even when the lights of the earth’s curve // lock all the doors: We will wait for centuries for the youngest / to boast and swagger . . .” The first two lines of this example suggest that, despite the cyclical nature of the earth and through centuries-long arcs of time, the ghosts are always able to reassemble, to revisit, at least ethereally, a vestige of their familial pasts. However, one learns that the lights of the “earth’s curve // lock all the doors,” suggesting that the cycles *limit* the narrators in some fashion, even in their indefatigable

transformations. Additionally, the line “lock all the doors: We will wait for centuries for the youngest” taken on its own implies that the ghosts might be rapacious, always waiting for the even the youngest of the living to join their ranks. One soon learns, however, that the “youngest” refers to one of their own. “Nocturne for the Second Death” seeks to offer a sensuality and a celebration of fecundity in its travel through the natural world, but its push-pull movement and carefully constructed sonic tension create a visceral intensity. “Nocturne for the Second Death” thus summons familial ghosts out of a charged, even impatient language, and readers, like narrators in other poems of the manuscript, must relinquish control to the will of the speakers and their alien interactions with a world only half-familiar. Other poems in the *Night Field Anecdote* manuscript that adopt the intimate first person plural narrators and that negotiate the natural world in new ways include “The Escape,” “Ghost Water,” and “Night Field Anecdote.”

“Ferns,” the third poem in the manuscript, is in a separate species of poem, similar to “Prescribed Fire,” the third section of “Trumpet Creeper,” “Ghost Garden,” “Bluebird,” “Oxbow Flower,” “The Other Body,” “Apple Orchards, Abandoned,” and “Ridge Country.” In “Ferns,” the speaker, even though disembodied and anonymous, inhabits the world of the living. The fern, one of the Earth’s oldest complex life-forms, becomes the central node around which the narrator’s fixation orbits, a fascination provoked through fear and suspicion: “Hard to trust the way they spin and nod in the light / always looking away”; the narrator goes on to suggest how the ferns’ vast histories have brought them a nearly sentient knowledge of how to proliferate and survive. They “lick through stone,” “outstare all the locked houses / of blood and hair,” and “outspcak / the millennial sky-clatter of bird language.” The ferns, then, symbolize the greater

inevitability that nature is cyclical, overseeing myriad deaths and rebirths, reaching out to take and to thrive. The living narrator detects a an eerie cognizance in the ferns, and their “fossil tongues” bring a deeper understanding of how plantlife and poetic consciousness resemble each other in their tendency to take, consume, and recontextualize. Like each poem in the manuscript, stanzas and line breaks are carefully constructed to reflect the actions within the poem, and the two-lined stanzas in “Ferns,” alternating between long and short, appear to “reach” across the page, a mimetic echo of the push-pull quality so prevalent in the manuscript.

Like “Ferns,” the first four sections of the long poem entitled “Trumpet Creeper” explore the predatory nature of the vegetal world, but the poem’s employment of the familial renders it a more complex and intimate piece. Lyrical and protracted, the first section of the poem invokes the “song” of the plant, initiated by the “June light” which “comes again / and again without remorse.” The section goes on to explore the biological proto-history of the *Campsis radicans*, or the trumpet creeper vine, a plant evocatively described to me by a former botany professor as a “high climbing problem.” The result of a “trillion trillion cellular divinities,” the trumpet creeper vine takes root in the mind of the first person singular narrator, and he considers how the blooming plants, peripheral and merely ornamental to most human perceptions, are actually “coiled red mouths” that parasitically entrench themselves in every nook and cranny of waking life: they “bloom beyond the shed . . . brighten, pump, swell through everything.” In the sixth and seventh stanzas of the first section, the narrator self-reflects and turns his “back to the animals, the hush- / hush metaphors—abandon[ing] a green too brilliant / [to] face the black interstices of the tree wall.” In a prophetic event in which his inevitable death becomes

partially detectable, he then feels the plant *suffusing* him, the “imminent collapse” of his ribcage and his skeletal remains “transformed / under the leaf-kiss” of the flower’s powerful vines. The self-reflection turns to self-realization in the last stanzas of the poem, when the narrator realizes that “Heaven / is symmetry’s absence” and that one day, inevitably, he will be a new being, half-plant, half-man-remains, a beast that will “roll its leaf-lobed head / [and] howl new identities.” Perhaps more explicitly than anywhere else in *Night Field Anecdote*, the first section of “Trumpet Creeper” explores the human body’s transformation into the commingling of the botanical world and the poetic consciousness, the template for those “new identities” the narrator anticipates inhabiting.

In contrast to the cold, drawn out lyricism of the first section, the second movement of “Trumpet Creeper” begins to venture into more intimate, familial territory. In this portion, it is never explicitly understood whether the narrator is living or dead, but his perceptions of the natural world are undoubtedly peculiar: He compares the summer sky to an old onion, suggesting the many layers, both literal and figurative, of the natural world. In the second and third lines, the narrator takes us from the expansive sky to a fecund, close-up microcosm, the “flares” of trumpet creepers, accompanied by the “bees [that] wheel about their coral bells, fly off.” This limpid scene suggests the transformational cycles of blossoming plants and the sensuality entailed in their making, which leads into the starker second, third, and fourth stanzas, wherein the narrator, in short, clipped lines, describes the frighteningly organic simplicity of his own physical body: “I am meat, salt water. / In my skull hums / a three pound sentient chunk.” As though contributory, the epiphanic acknowledgement of the physical self gives way to the narrator’s interactions with family: “When I kiss my mother’s hair, / a sleeping giant’s

heart blooms, collapses. // He shifts in his sleep and smiles, / mica flashing. // One day he'll look me in the eye." These lines render and acknowledge an ambiguous third presence: the sleeping giant is the narrator's father or death itself, perhaps even an amalgam of the two. The last stanza of the second section returns to the simple nature-observations of the first stanza: "A fleet of cumuli leans away. / Freightened with rain, bees drop / to the freshened grass, / red clover." This closing vignette is constructed to relay a dual message: that nature, while beautiful, is ultimately indifferent. Simultaneously, causal relationships exist between the human and non-human worlds, even if they occur beneath literal perception.

The brief third section of "Trumpet Creeper" is a statement about how even the parasitic are killed by nature's normal dynamism. The "blessed worm" is burned into the pavement and becomes a hieroglyphic-like symbol for the erratic, ever-changeable shifts in nature's processes. This short section leads to the fourth section, a less oblique statement about familial hardship and nature's inevitable encroachment. The first three stanzas of the fourth section tell the story of how my great uncle, Basil Hartline, died in his fifth year by tipping a cauldron of scalding lye on his head. Basil was the youngest child in a family of thirteen, a group of children forced to work every day on their father's farm. The horror of the child's death is rendered declaratively and explicitly, acknowledging that a family's earnestness and hard work can never fully evade the unforeseen and often tragic circumstances that befall it. In this way, the first few stanzas reiterate the sense of inevitability—the relinquishing of control to the universe's forces—in all the manuscript's poems. But the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth stanzas attempt to redeem the cold realities of human life by suggesting that, as time goes on,

when everyone of the family members have perished, they will sensually intertwine with one another and renew their familial togetherness in a new context: “As water scars deep grain, / cottonmouths uncurl / over roots that twine kin / to smilax and larkspur: / the stream’s clear coil.” The tentacular grain, snakes, roots, and stream work harmoniously to interlace the dead family into a new collective.

The final poem worth discussing in detail is “Blue Pear and Sleep Paralysis.” Since age seven, I have experienced a recurrent phenomenon known in the medical community as “sleep paralysis.” In that peculiar state between wakefulness and sleep, our minds tend to reach out into random places, overlapping memories and images, murkily finding new meanings and contexts. Unlike most, however, in this state of inbetweeness my body becomes paralyzed, and though I am not asleep—in fact, I am fully awake—my brain thinks that I am dreaming and so locks all of my voluntary functions, with the exception of eye movements, so that I cannot move or speak. Since my brain “dreams,” even in wakefulness, I often hallucinate and see or hear things that aren’t there. In “Blue Pear and Sleep Paralysis,” I explore the poet-figure in a sleep-paralyzed state. The blue pear is an objective correlative for fecundity, human intelligence, and the ultimate strangeness of nature. The pear itself is an object that all have felt, smelled, tasted. But this pear, a deep blue in color, suggests something slightly amiss, a reality slightly altered, a poetic analogue to Wallace Stevens’s blue guitar.

In this poem, the human lying in the bed, unable to literally speak, is endowed with vatic abilities: Not only does he comprehend the complex science of light vectors, he also understands death and decay. But this understanding leads to a relinquishing of individual agency, wherein the mind must take in the unsightly and disturbing,

particularly the half-decomposed raccoon. Though the image of the putrefied animal might strike readers as repugnant in its explicitness, the image is purposefully employed to contrast with the simple and radiant “blue pear / lifted from a bowl.” Like a stone dropped into a still pond, the paralyzed human’s perception concentrically expands outward to appreciate small aquatic life: “Minnows / prodding rain-scalloped shores, each spine / anchored for the moment’s purpose.” The narrator is aware of the grand and the infinitesimal, all the intricate movements and revisions of death, decay, and the consequent fecundity. Thus, he hears the sound “music that falls on the grass” and that “retreats into the shuttered dark.” He has access to the future’s messages, and the source of this music is the “man singing at the house’s far end, his mind a halved blue pear.” The blue pear, then, symbolizes the transience of all life and knowledge, and the boy in bed, in addition to knowing much about the world, fully understands his future-self and that self’s inevitable death.

“Blue Pear and Sleep Paralysis” is a fitting last poem to analyze, as it attempts to exemplify all of the thematic and aestheticized idiosyncrasies that make the poetry in *Night Field Anecdote* unique. The poem’s three-line stanzas and terminal couplet are at once hermetic and deeply concerned with questions of transformation, change and decay (physical, spiritual, and psychological). The narrator, because of his sleep disorder, dwells in a disembodied or anonymous subject position, and yet he summons collective and familial ghosts while simultaneously invoking a universal relationship to death (human and plant life). Highly attentive to the outside world, and trapped in a highly particularized and even eccentric experience, he relinquishes control and individual agency and thus locates the source of a new, *inevitable* knowledge.

In these poems, word and image arrangements embed a kaleidoscopic, but *inexorably* ordered array of nature's things. Telescoped metaphors and image clusters reflect an amorphous, ever-changing natural world. As in Theodore Roethke's "The Waking," the narrator anticipates and understands death's inevitability and the human being's ultimate acquiescence to nature—"Great Nature has another thing to do / To you and me"—and yet, to deal with this inevitable reality the poems in *Night Field Anecdote* "learn by going where [they] have to go" (65).

WORKS CITED

Roethke, Theodore. "The Waking." *Theodore Roethke: Selected Poems*. Ed. Edward
Hirsch. New York: The Library of America, 2005. 65.

NOCTURNE FOR THE SECOND DEATH

At first, the wind sustains us, holds us aloft like gossamer:
the first sting of snow blown off dwarf pine
into towns that still constellate their fires,
dream and hoard the dimming myths.

To know the earth, we record expanse: meadow's longitude,
river-crux and the salt-sick coast. We search
farms of blighted corn, lean with their husks
to hear underground streams snap

and sluice dry roots into the running. To know the earth,
we record microcosm: pine needle and paramecium,
pumpkin seeds rotting in hay. Always, when moths
raid the ruined factory and chew gowns to powder,
thronging the air with larvae,

one of us will stray: Because the ice in her mouth is a lily
opening, because he leaves the purity of hunger
in a starved fox's belly, lets maggots eat the gray eyes
to a dark scald. But we are forever assimilable,
even when the lights of the earth's curve

lock all the doors: We will wait centuries for the youngest
to boast and swagger in the silence he has become,
to stitch the sky as if he could bolster the light.
He returns as the last ember's hiss,
the last frost unsheathed.

Even spring, buried in water, we keep ourselves
down with the briar and bramble. When we can't bear to be
forgotten anymore, not by sludge or sleet, we unload
the bright syllables of our hair and skin,
then move on, torches in a tomb.

THE ESCAPE

We take to the burning farms,
bent forward and quick through chaff:
 our mother gone to gossip of the eastern bay,
 her hair sewn with gray leaves of that place.

Father stays behind, hauling
wood from the land's silver scar,
 his strength perfunctory in the rain.
 Towns of torn roofs, torn mouths:

Church bells toll wide vowels
through grass, the path to the other world.
 When country roads, farms and houses
 reflect just enough light

to state the dark, we assemble on the hill,
windows of our hands letting matter pass
 through, cartilaginous tulip bulbs,
 primed to fill the spring's maw.

Field wolves snarl loose the hearts
of slow cattle, snouts bloody in the starlight:
 We pass the slate of their eyes.
 Rustle and grain, rustle and char,
 our footprints already in front of us.

FERNS

Hard to trust the way they spin and nod in the light,
always looking away.

Older than the creeks they flank, their fossil tongues
fold to the sun in green, outstretched

syllables, asking their one question. When a body passes,
they turn and glare, eyes nested deep

in their black heads. Dense and sentient with more
history than the sweet gum that seeps

and falls, or ground water that diminishes
in the fattening sun, these reversed medusas

lick through stone, outstare all the locked houses
of blood and hair, outspoke

the millennial sky-clatter of bird language, leaf-litter
and lichen, reach out, take.

GHOST WATER

We enter the pond during a night of glassy corners:
 Frost toughens the grass, slows red oaks
 until leaves unlock. The last of minnows
 like gray brushstrokes. We turn home
 to see what's abandoned—

window light, Mason jars, blue corymbs of hydrangea,
 fading like our skin that brushes past cicada husks,
 snake skins, old burdens shucked. Death smells
 like wood-smoke and clay, apple and ash,
 thick as the slush our feet plume

near dank knuckles of water roots, mosquito eggs,
 crane feathers trembling in shadows of bass.
 Toads thrash the shore and plop into duckweed.
 When we dive, the water sings away
 the stories of our bodies,

our throats opened: grandmother's evening dress
 drifts into the dark; grandfather opens his arms
 in exaltation or dismay, all of us sinking below
 circling gar and algal blooms
 to where horse bones

shift in the slow pull, to the rich mud we take up
 and eat, our mouths ripening
 like white fire.

PRESCRIBED FIRE

Rain stirs clover and rot, rouses the beehive's thrum,
barn slats tiered in fungus. From bloodroot to cinder,
leaf-mold and cedar smoke bitter in six weeks' deepness.
Autumn deserves nothing it demands,
not ghost or doxology:

Say soon cinnamon and cider, soon scuppernong and gourd.
Years from now, the body disassembles; bees drowse
in their cells. Ash drifts through the field's red sumac,
spectral edge where two hounds guard
bright scraps of their kill.

No matter: A word rises the moment it is spoken.
Past fodder stacks and tobacco, near the small
blue vase on the sill, garlic crackles
and pales in a broth near-boil,
rain quells and the heart
owns its one room.

BLUE PEAR AND SLEEP PARALYSIS

He lies reed-like in his bed as in his mind,
a lure to ghosts and master
of measuring light,

understands early how the moon finds
a raccoon's carcass under
elm leaves just beyond

the window, its mouth and intestines
ulcerated and sloughed
to runnels. A blue pear

lifted from a bowl. Minnows
prodding rain-scalloped shores, each spine
anchored for the moment's purpose.

He knows the elm is a cathedral
through which crows shake
and bend dark rafters,

leaf-light patinas on the far wall.
What is the music that falls on the grass,
retreats into the shuttered dark?

It is the man singing at the house's far end,
his mind a halved blue pear.

BURNING HOUSE

Even though you only remember a pewter spoon,
the sap-dark core of oak and your mother's
long shadow snapping the screen door,

the axe strikes the wood's black heart:
You haul and stack racks of ruined cedar, ember
of the kitchen window across the blackberry and ice.

You suffer the fox hour down the hill to suppers
of hot cabbage with salt and water, parsley and rye:
Even when the house smolders, crossbeams

hissing and finding their own charred context,
you step into the May-rush of another fire,
another room that spins and seethes.

TRUMPET CREEPER

“The mouths say, *I am hungry*. They say, *Hum a thin song*.”

—Van K. Brock

1.

June light comes again
and again without remorse:
Pollen rummages the blonde scalps
of spent deciduous hour after hour
until two sycamores puffed open by the wind bend
over the creek in twin green flames. Lacertilian armies
raze the garden and the yard’s fringes,
flares for ruby-throats, bees.

Around the bowed trunks the loam shoots forth
 lush feelers, sprung broad then clustered,
pink star-trails drooped at the stalk
 and bursting
now to hum a song I almost hear.

*

Coiled red mouths, they bloom beyond the shed
into unhinged greenness,
brighten, pump, swell through everything,
 fall flaccid,
foiling their own morphology.

All spines suffer their histories, blossom-lattices
 formed from water
in microfossil plumes,
when great black smokers
 billowed up, kelp-like shifts,
fields of ducts, white worms, smokestacks—
a trillion trillion cellular divinities.

Preglacial, they shift into the woods and out again,
 coil and articulate
deciduous nooks, flaunt the seasonal genesis:
vast gasps of light and air,
power of galaxies held forever in the lungs.

[section break]

["Trumpet Creeper" continued]

*

After June rain, I turn my back to the animals, the hush-
hush metaphors—abandon a green too brilliant
and face the black interstices of the tree-wall.

I feel the imminent collapse, the mass,
vibrissa crowding the ribcage,
my skeleton transformed under
 the leaf-kiss, deep earth
watered down,
gourd unwrapped like a gift.

*

Heaven is neither lamb nor lion: Heaven
is symmetry's absence,
a trumpet creeper's seedpod
drained down the dead man's throat.

Strands and stalks expand
beyond order, uncontainable,
 pierce thistle and stone:

Whittled to hair and bone,
the beast rolls its leaf-lobed head,
 howls new identities.

2.

Summer sky an old onion.
Over the fence flares of pink trumpets.
Bees wheel about their coral bells, fly off.

*

I am meat, salt, water.
In my skull hums
a three pound sentient chunk.
When I kiss my mother's hair,
a sleeping giant's heart blooms, collapses.

He shifts in his sleep and smiles,
mica flashing.

[stanza break]

["Trumpet Creeper" continued]

One day he'll look me in the eye.

*

A fleet of cumuli leans away.
Freighted with rain, bees drop
to the freshened grass,
red clover.

3.

Green glass bottles clog
the creek's umbilicus,
afternoon
 a furnace of refractive pine:
 Creepers redden
drowned fringes,
jackstraw and crabgrass. Like worship,
mosquitoes rise and veil
 the saturate earth,
turtle skull and chert,
 the blessed worm
 burns into its space.

4.

My great uncle Basil died when he was five years old
on a farmhouse floor in Iredell County, North Carolina,
half his face boiled from his skull.

Quilts and winter storms
broke my great-grandmother
to bone and a scorched gown,

pre-dawn dimness on a copper cauldron
that held the lye he tipped and spilled,
his little fingers charred,
hard as rust.

*

Sleeves of corn stalks flapped and clattered,
ash in the chimney flue, plum jelly's bright jar.

[no stanza break]

["Trumpet Creeper" continued]

My grandfather turned in
his mother's darkness, eyes fusing.

*

As the calyx
unsheathes a petal,

as the hand holds
the scalded hand,

furled leaf,
heat to breathe and bear.

As water scars deep grain,
cottonmouths uncurl

over roots that twine kin
to smilax and larkspur:

the stream's clear coil.

5.

Elm roots clinch
creeks, black snakes in honey,
palindromic bay grasses,

mica flecks and spider sacs'
dried bladders stipple the more definable
chokecherry and squawbush.

Fossils hum their Ordovician gospels,
my grandfather's throat
a channel of black silt.

Pastoral of buried pulses,
bone, rock and core,
cut to fill the separate
bloom, marl heart.

DUST

To witness the bud fatten for centuries: hydrangea
chalky as moth-wings, stems arcing into blue

meadows of their own dusk.
To ride the underground

river to leaves that unfold their praise—
uncoding of stone, star, nebula.

BLUEBIRD

Morning's windfall light flecks this chapel of bone.
Houseflies drone, scatter alms, minor chords
strummed in stained grass:

Up close the inside becomes Byzantine,
a palm-sized vault, ribs rows of pews.

Out of the body burst ants and their sanctity
to clip the plum lungs

and heart,
bear the flesh home.

FEVER

1.

You remember that tall Mexican
 come out of the orchard
 with bloody hands.
 Sweat salt on his hat-brim and shirt collar.

Chewed on hard candy that looked like sapphires.
 Didn't had but seven teeth.

Raked back a leaf patch: Copperhead snagged
 his foot to the hard vein.

2.

All around the trees breathed on
 their invisible exchanges, arborescent
 heat-shimmer, light-eating leaf.

Foot swollen with venom,
 he stumbled into a vision of relics
 piled under his mother's bed:

(feather drum, wolf eye):

*O madre,
 I cup the helix in my hands
 and let my faith wash through me.
 I am the xylem of the Lord*

3.

Engine oil guttation,
 leaves greased and sagging in August heat.

Boots streaked with dust.
 Head tilted back to nurse his third Sol.

4.

The truth of his delirium: her womb a cumulonimbus sac
 lopsided with hemorrhage. Her brain the shell of a locust:

[no section break]

["Fever" continued]

Hermana, I have no choice but to burn your little brown house

5.

His sister took the painting of a great storm cloud
raining from its belly a heap of red blooms.

*for converting gasoline
to glossolalia, singeing the hair and the gown.*

6.

Half-drunk, he ate breakfast at the PK
and shook his head,
claiming deafness.

OXBOW FLOWER

September: Silt and sudden dusk.

A bush of purple loosestrife,
its droop of bright cells, ornament
and leech, darkens water
blooms near the porch:

The body swarms with buried incident,
piling the days,
gnawing them back.

A PLACE TO SLEEP

1.

You walk beyond the cities
to the radio tower—dark now
for years—through the fields
where cattle bones inherit the earth,
stripped by vultures and rain.

Storms slant in, the long
yellow path of cloud, dry thunder
shaking far trees to burning, shaking
dusk into an ash of books.

2.

You will search the house
for signs: blood in the tiles,
the creak of rope
in the attic.

3.

Some went so hungry
they boiled bark and mud
to fill their sleep, cold ache
on the floor that locked
their eyes, teeth
showing for a year or more.

Morning a brown puddle,
birdless, the scorched
noctilucent birch closed
to its own deep light.

AUBADE

The Swiss doctor
has dreamed about you again.
He knows where you are and whom
you have wronged. The shape
of your need. It's simple:

Winter wrens chip the sun up:
A string of spittle knits his lip
to the pillow. He rises, the wedge of dawn
cutting the oak floor, scalds
his fingers on thin tea. Stooped

over the clutter of his notes, he writes:
"The young man will soon lose
his tongue." The saucer clatters.
Rattled, he clings to these
new answers.

CHISEL

My mother dreamed of green
lawns, minnows, a hickory-horned devil moth.

A haze of gnats rimmed the flaming woods,
mulse and rye on the wind: Winter rolled on
to flower, a sweep of bright cells.

*

One poet writes, *Then the field shrieked into frost.*
Another: *The hour of the thorn, stone cutter's chisel.*
Another: *Go ahead and let the world return to dust.*

PEACH TREES, SUFFUSED WITH PESTICIDES

Hummingbirds stop
to bathe in the creases of leaves
where each least grass spider
has left the husk of its body.
The sky ravel in the throat

when ends of limbs tremble, unlatch their petals
to a distant sea of hands:

the body
cannot scrub it out, this lack
of stain, emptiness gathering.

THE OTHER BODY

Fog hovers above water, exact twine
 of the creek made ghost—
 Moving like darkness beneath the skin.
 The same dark holds
 oil in the leaf that fires silences
 of this autumn day.

Body in health, body in death,
 inscribing its downward
 logic, the unfinished phrase:
 capillary's nexus, ellipses

of wing-bone and glacier, a sweetness
 in the milk and whistling
 of a honey bee's musculature.
 The body's language

lingers, dissipates, always moving,
 even as the sea stalls
 arms and legs to falling: Deep hum of silica
 in oak, the green crush
 of vines in sun, blood's thrum

stilled, spoken for.

HELL

after Hieronymous Bosch

The damned might as well burrow into the earth,
let salt spill into wounds that reopen like blossoms,
red thrumming in the bone. They stumble

over slag-heaps, white-hot mud gasping at their feet,
cliffs sprung with emaciate grasses of human hair.
As sight dims, here, where they follow a skeletal light,

where the angel worm shimmers like a cloud as it hunts
to gnaw from them any memory of the earth, they reach
the parasite river, boats like wedges of rotten melon.

Water devours regenerate flesh, hauls them to caves
of forced resurrection, each new body trembling
with cumulative pain: they dig for all eternity

in the glare of gas flares, their hands soiled then burned
immaculate, again and again the radiance
of melting lungs the closest they will get to song.

ECLOGUE: DROWNING

This is the time of musk and mint, helix of silver minnows.
This is the dream in which leaves infringe.

Bayberry rushes eye sockets and blooms new answers. If the mouth opens,
taste mulberry and soot. Let the feet sidestep any omen.

Wind unshackles rain, the creek's eelgrass
flat on alabaster, water a long grave.

Small bodies hide: throb of bees behind
barn walls, their hymn

a voice: *You are a green cell curled in an amnion of leaves.*
A voice: *Snakes drag their dark fires beneath the shale.*

When the door's hinge cracks loose, your fingers
disturb the silt. When the silt is disturbed, your hair

becomes the grass's ghost. Lungs pull down
your mouth, eyes to clay.

You will not see the marks your hands have made.
You will not see the fossils your hands have become.

CHERNOBYL ECLOGUE

Day

Guards nod our white van toward Pripyat's yellow prairie, where
 refusniks hunker in robin's-egg-blue sheds. Peat-smoke
 coughs from chimneys. "That smoke makes
 plutonium," I say, and Sasha answers
 "Da," almost too soft to hear.

Sasha is contaminated. We ride to his district,
 tall grasses iridescent, swath of weak sun
 peeling more than bark from birch. "It's the little
 things," he says, though the forest
 that's overtaken the carnival,

bleached of color, first catches my eyes. I know I won't
 remember this: It's the sort of forgetfulness
 the day demands: Sky's milky iris
 dragging the afternoon, light
 like a snapped bone.

Strontium roots deeper in his teeth when he speaks.
 Licks his lips: "Old mother will say: 'We've survived
 two bouts of starvation, and now
 something invisible will kill us?
 We'll stay here.'"

In the middle distance, her husband steps out from the fence,
 his legs wrapped in pig hide below the knees.
 He smiles, toothless, and as we close in,
 I see the Holsteins, the harnesses.
 The man's white eyes.

Inside—mushrooms. The couple has spent the day at harvest,
 cooked these brown ribs cored with cesium,
 wet with steam. They smell like rye but taste
 of the autumn floor, rills spiced
 with leaf-mold and rain.

At dusk, my head feels like a gourd in which the day
 rattles. The sheds swarm and puddle with laughs,
 and a little girl, her shaved head like a stubble
 of gray corn, trails her soiled dress
 through mud-slick grass.

Night

Window's rust-light. I won't remember it: memory
like groundwater radiates to weeds that jag
a shrew's belly, a hill-wolf that keeps its mouth

closed. Distant lumber truck huffs to Belarus.
And these small rooms, hot with stubbornness,
hot with some soft poison that leaks between them.

Sasha lies down next to me, his bare spine blanched
almonds in the moonlight. Behind the paper wall,
the fire snaps its half-life out to new snow.

FALSE AUGUST

Bees disperse
into their own cloud,
tether sex blossom
to blossom:

A bush of purple loosestrife,
its droop of bright cells, ornament
and leech, darkens water
blooms near the porch.

Salt leaks.
Then: a chalk god in rain.
A pivot that snags a draft.

IN THE ORCHARD

An apple pitches to the earth's swell,
squints from black-eyed grass, a chapel

where worms bear their votive hunger, strip
the mortal body, cleanse to sate the gut

and heart. Dawn, slanted on the tip
of late autumn, rips fog apart, apple

a scumble of juice the keen wasp
thrashes, its wings lodged in flesh.

Ants scald, flush out all
divisible, their tiny fires, swarm and smoke.

Even rot is absolved, seeds let loose and buoyant
on the dark mass of their own beginning,

all marked by what it lacks.

NIGHT FIELD ANECDOTE

Neurons flick out in pairs.
Silence of the leaf, the closing door:

We are two baptisms. Every word
might be our hymn, our wine,

every stem might sway
to hum our name.

Two stars arc over the wind and pulsing
trees, tides strengthening.

RABID

Rags of cheek sagged from the jawbone's white.
The sick mouth snarled, pocked throat
frothing half-rattle, half-growl.
When it dragged death's pong along the yard,
my father rigged a trap of chicken, wire,
and a stone meant to break its scabrous back,
which worked: Since madness shook the squirrel heart
in its gut, the gnawed mouth brave
enough to clink the latch trigger.
As if the bludgeon wasn't plenty,
my father aimed the gun and sprayed
the cat red against the porch-wall.

Into morning, with gloves, bleach, and scalding soap-water,
we crouched into that pale gore, our sinuses torched
raw, hair steam-wilted, scooping jelly viscera into bags.
Pre-dawn lit the bed I'd lie sleepless in, that demon
eyeing my dream's door, and my father, dog-tired,
would heft the skull bits to the trees.

WHITE FOX AND SLEEP PARALYSIS

She knows the fox's smell: ice and moldering apple,
the smallest contours of his mask—

She discerns the whole world as a slanted slate of white,
the smallest fracture, movement:

snake's arc in bayberry, the urn of a mouse's bones
picked clean. And as the fields outside

fall upward into snow, she sees how the night shackles
her body, bright and plausible,

a mammal warmth, a bowl of milk. When she tastes
his breath, all earth and fur,

an orchard afire, she knows the white fox
has come to sleep

in the garden of her mind, now
bodiless, torn leaf on stone.

SUMMER CONSTELLATION

Heat, for some weeks, prepares the elm's limbs,
so deep life shimmers in their jagged matrix,

expands in this uneasy night, the air hot
and stiff, the scent of rosemary circling

under a fragile spray of stars: Earth's resin
tears will leave on fall's flawless knife.

STILL LIFE WITH PEAR

On a chipped blue dish,
an overturned gourd, a lantern that spills
oil of the sky's flame:

How precise,
the star's dust in the mottled flesh,
sweet language of second sight.

BEECH TREES AT NIGHT

I walk the orchard, over the berm of the drug store,
and skim the beech trees, the elegant contrast of their trunks
against the char-dark matting of the evening's stratus:

Peace is here, in this illusory play of limbs
that press the earth's fact into my movement, the dawn's dim
warning apocalyptic, gorgeous, the old giving thanks.

ILL

Dreams:
hummingbirds, hibiscus, blood
on a blue room's floor.
Lately each breath whistles.

Somewhere in this house a loaf
of hearth bread that's not a tomb, too high
for us to reach.

We walk these halls in fever, searching,
sudden dryness of our throats.

Dreams:
ribs lifting. Body filled like a lung.

COLD SPRING

My body was wind
passing through the wood.

I was the orchard keeper, hidden in my role,
rehearsing the grove's momentum into apples.

I walked to the pond and washed my hair
in the redolent languages of moss and vapor,
the spillage of a sparrow's shadow.

*

I heard nothing of the earth.
The stars shone their platitudes, tricks
of dead light, peripheral.

Sleep brought signs, trespass,
yellow dust in my throat.

Spring was a creature hunting me, quick
yet heavy-footed—it held the seasons
inside its skin, eyes clear and colder
than the rain it bled through
like a flower.

What good were the trees
to hide in, leafless, mere scrawls?

*

Anything that rots suffers, but I stood upright in the clay.
From that bank of scrub pine, I took part of the light with me.

Of all nights in April, this would have been the one to freeze,
to break red flowers like blood from the roots,
to clean pollen from stone.

Ice scars the skull's marrow.
Eyes curl like scorched leaves.

When I rose, I clothed myself in chimney smoke,
the barn roofs below stippled in lanterns.

APPLE ORCHARDS, ABANDONED

Deserted under the farm's harsh spillage
of sunlight, parts of them tumble
to grass where even grass has turned away:

Inside them, the cold pulse
pushes between roots and dust.
Rain cannot unhinge

cores choked with weed-wire,
the day leaking through
and hardening to shards.

THE TIDE

After Sophie Cabot Black and Jack Gilbert

All day, two women cross the island to honor
another who has died, to throw a stone
on her favorite shore. They snap and clatter
the shells, reaching a dune
where they sit and rest awhile.
They talk of chitin and fossils, how the wooden
jetties separating long stretches of shore
resemble a jaw, how each day gives
back a million teeth. When the sun
pulls gauze across the air and dying
sea-grass shivers, the taller woman leaves
the other behind, hair like a black fire
in the wind. She takes the north ridge
toward the marshes, where the mosquitoes
ensure she will not be found. The forsaken
lies on a dune until the moon demands
the sea shape its language to a hiss.
She wakes, retreats, builds a fire near
bleached palmetto trunks, ringed in salt.
She sings a song about another world—
fronds and terra cotta, a mango tree.
She thinks about the one who has left her,
how the west casts a blue hive of stars,
tries to read the low clouds' script,
how it moves and moves, never pinned.

WOLF SPIDER AND SLEEP PARALYSIS

Three nights in succession, the earth has pulled dawn
to the chapel, the first light-smear like a thorax split,
blood-arc, sky a matrix of bone. Graves shimmer
like quartz under the hill, where water sings
strong summer rain.

The chapel's windows, toothed and gleaming. No one
knows why the yard's trees hiss hymns. No one knows
how the spiders, deep in hydrangea, seal behind
them calipers of space, stitch gossamer
bloom to bloom.

When thunder riots foliage, rattles the panes,
holy relics gleam blue on the altar—
The night swaggers forth and falls.

MAGRITTE'S HYPOCHONDRIA

*"Contact with my paintings should make the viewer sick –
contact with reality always makes one sick."*

--Magritte Exhibition Catalogue 1978: 17

He's up late, considering the flesh,
how the evening's cloud-scud fills the moon
like a lung, each leaf a cracked hand.
Each cell brightens against sleep.
Each organ stack on stack
of meat, rotten squash, crab shell.
Not to mention the blue coral
of the mind, the whole body a trapped river,
netted in the skin, the sky glaucoma
gray and the slate-backed gulls paper-flat
in their flight over the river his mother's
ghost still rinses in, her hair sloughed
with the leaning grasses, her mouth
sprouting a brown rose. Outside, the city
lights scatter like migrant snow, then
melt, frigid, sluicing into the cellar
of his veins. Given signal, the easel
opens a window, and he begins
to work, leaning in, drifting toward
the horizon in his eye.

THE EAVES

Amboise, France

The men do not know how to behave
in the face of ultimate circumstance.
Like lightning, in their mad climb
up from ground they rush to marry
whatever descends, and because
that ignorance creates a sound,
like a blind primeval fish droning
beneath an ocean storm, they settle
for the eaves slanting the sky down
to a champagne bucket clattering
with coin, the sill bowed in hydrangea.

BOYHOOD COMPRESSED BEHIND THE EYELID

The land heaves up the farm
and all its ghosts—milk-balm,
salve, tobacco root. Like stump
water, the palms cup a bloody knee,
a salamander.

When we're called back in,
wisteria falls all around
the clouds: Such hatred
for our mother's teacup,
strict and floral on the sill.

THE CURERS OF FOLLY

We walk to the field's center with instruments—
metal hook and drill, rusty tube to extract
the stone of madness. Our tongues
are locks that seal
demon's language—

dust-rain and locust, black grasses and dust
that clouds the town's stars. We shave
the hair of the possessed, pierce
skulls to find the hex. Hard
to believe that devils

conjured this radium sky, this struggle
for air and brackish trespass
with a wasp-sized calcium node.
Men lurch as we pull
sin from their brains,

cease the inexorable. We guide them
from the dead. In the silence we have
brought to their slack mouths,
we will teach them to slough
the dead womb and emerge

to grace, to take fire and not
be consumed.

HYPOTHETICAL BLOOM

Somewhere in the arctic countryside, under permafrost and the few tenacious grass-clumps, between root-slick sumps and meltwater pools, white flowers have begun to grow, their stems long twin arcs. In years, when ice

gives way to rain, flooding farms in the south, when land heaves up for industries, the blossoms, independent of light and subsequent chlorophyll, will never be picked by a human hand; one will never witness

the dim glow of their stamens, evanescent as Japanese lamps. As bleached chimneys spew hot ash and steam on sea-floors, the blooms will foster new life that might take millennia to reach the surface and break into sun. Invisible, untouchable,

they can only be experienced if the mind devises a method at dusk; one knows that distance is an arc, not a line: the mind will follow the moon as it curves past the pond to meet its welcome in the ice-caked meadow, distant from the sphere

of the thinker, yet remote only as a pair of hands that clasp a frost-cracked stem. The body in its precision cannot seal the calipers of space, but knows nonetheless the light that brings the hypothetical bloom to the mind's touch

is the same radiance that schemes to reveal the last hound sulking out of the foxless orchard, the same radiance that illuminates a Chinese port city where a woman gives birth to a child who will grow under the coal-clouded scuds

of sky, trained lifelong to load hatcheries. It is the same glow that pulls the exploded star into itself, the light that will morph the squat hedges that line our houses to the sediment plume disturbed by future fish with brains triple the size of ours,

with bodies that need no sleep, and thus glide into the conquerable water with fixed fang-smiles to devour hordes of lesser slitherers. The mind sees night figures shimmer across the bridge. The mind knows the snow piles high on the black road under which new blooms

radiate their intelligence, their ice-sheathed stems wholly separate from any small wisdom the hands carry like a lantern.

STORM

Strict downwardness: rain pelts the bent wrists of grass;
porch rail and black branch flicker under cloud's dirge.

The man in bed, bone-chilled with the body's own generous
storm: sea-wave of atoms hurrying home, collapse of the giant

guest that seeps bright organs with waste. The earth's
dark muscles, like the body's cells in aspiration:

the post-rain creek, raged with flux, calls birds to flex
tentative praise, the leaf increases, thus the body's song

attunes with April trees and dread lit by the mass
of such softly turns to hymn.

SELF-PORTRAIT AS THE AUTUMN OF THE BURNT MEADOW

A thousand blue-chalk moths collapse
the fence. Moon douses
the grass as I walk,
looking for a passage or a stable.

I keep my head cocked to the purple staghorn
leaf, moss's buried sound.
Wilderness takes my name
but never calls me back.

Whatever song I think I hear
in the wind's clatter
slinks my ear into syllable.
I ask for God, hoping
to stimulate the word

that would ignite the night's grammar
or draw it closed, something sheer
and uncomplicated for once:
a cloud, the calyx's texture.

The sky goes red and brown; maybe the moths
know how. I can't move
my tongue and poetry is out
of the question.

Certain of my friends begin to hide
in the trees. Leaf-swarmed, I lie down
in the scorched paddock
and my shadow asks, are you the lattice
or the bloom?

RIDGE COUNTRY

On the spine of the ridge, moonlight blots the elm and briar
in its ruined milk, haze of approaching rain.

Northward, summer's machinations
lift the orchard's wine-scent,
each peach a womb of cloud,
each stem a deciduous

dream. Enmeshed in every moment,
the green river of moss advances under the helix
of branches. Air tangs with rain, vowelless,
fierce: Thunder makes of every brain
a warm wooden bell, cell's pendulum.