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THE OVERVIEW EFFECT

by

Todd Osborne

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT
THE OVERVIEW EFFECT

by Todd Osborne

May 2019

The following poems were completed by the author between September 2015 and February 2019.

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INTRODUCTION

All poetry emerges from a sense of history. It is impossible for any poet to disconnect their writing from the context in which they are writing, even if they intend to do so. Poetry is always speaking to the past, whether consciously referring back to its own poetic history through the use of form or through allusions to other poets. My poetry tries to make history something less academic and more visceral, more personal. I am trying to write my way into history, and I use poems to do so because poetry is not beholden to history as it actually happened. My own personal history involves television shows and family stories. At the same time, I am interested in interrogating the American idea of what “history,” especially American history, is: I want to take American conceptions of history and shift them, to help readers see the narratives that are ignored by textbooks and teachers, and to see that history is not a story that has already been told. Rather, it is a story that America still tells itself every day. Or, as Louise Gluck writes, in *Proofs and Theories*, “All art is historical: in both its confrontations and its evasions, it speaks of its period. The dream of art is not to assert what is already known but to illuminate what has been hidden” (7). In my poetry I want to do exactly that. In writing about history both personal and national, I intend to add my own experiences to the larger pattern of tales being told and bring forward stories that have been obscured for too long.

I interrogate history through my use of form. In my poems, form often serves as a way to order a world that feels chaotic. In this collection, I juxtapose history with form to show the disordered nature of history, whether personal or national. This can be seen in a pair of poems, both titled “A History of Gardening,” which are central to what I want to do in this collection: discuss family, art-making, and the way that stories are told. In these

poems I tried to create a new form based upon the sonnet, one of the oldest received forms in poetry. Sonnets work by setting up a premise, complicating it, and then resolving it, usually in the last couplet or sestet. In both of these poems I wanted to take that idea and push it further, creating a *sonneto e mezzo* or “sonnet-and-a-half” which would enable me to take the ideas of a traditional sonnet and expand upon them. The poem that appears later in the manuscript was the first that I wrote, but when I wrote the other one, originally titled “A History of Spring,” I saw a way to interconnect them more closely. In an original draft of these poems, they appeared as one, a double *sonneto e mezzo*, titled “On Gardening”:

Both of my grandfathers have gardens
—roses, zucchini, okra, beauty
and utility. I would like a garden to call
out to once a week, after dark,
how are you? If the flowers crook
their stems, if the bushes stop
rustling, I will take that as answer.
Keep watch over them as a trellis.

I will take my time, bend into
their ears, whisper sweet somethings,
tuck them in, pat their beds with water
from a metal can. Even after death,
my grandfathers’ work continues.
The gardens return what they have received.

Some people can do a lot with a small
plot, but I am useless even in an expanse.
The ground is patient, it will do what it can,
but first: action is required. Rain may fall,
may wash the ground or flood us all away.
I could wither, could decide not to stay.
My grandfathers have gardens; I have what remains.

* * *

My grandfathers have gardens; I have what remains

—another winter in an uncold place, my parents
waiting the other side of a phone, an empty table
in an empty room. I say make what you will
of imagery. Somewhere else, a hawk pierces
the corona of the sun. A car bisects perfectly
a suburban driveway. There are hands, hand-offs,
and hand-me-downs. They all work singlehandedly.

I can tell you a story about gardens, a history
of peering over a grandfather's shoulder; I can
make you believe I know what I am saying.
When my sweat falls to the earth, it is rejected
out-of-hand, and I don't mind. I straighten my back,
crack my neck, and go inside for the day.

When I write this down, I mean to say something small
and adjacent to the truth. The way a watering can
is meant to service a patch of land, not an expanse.
Summer means to warm and stop, not pass into fall
and winter. We want our garden friends to settle down, stay
awhile, pick our yard for their home. When they move away
we let them. Find new friends in their seedy remains.

In this version, the last stanzas of each poem, the stanzas that were added to make them something more than a sonnet, are also linked in their almost strict repetition of the same words with only “stay” and “away” changing places with each other. In revision, I cut down on some of the wordiness and odd word choices for the second half, which resulted in the repetition falling away as these poems were separated into two distinct “A History of Gardening” poems. Here is the revised final stanza of “A History of Gardening” which appears later in the collection:

Some people can do a lot with a small
plot, but I am useless even in an expanse.
The ground is patient, it will do what it can,
but first: action is required. Rain may fall,
may wash the ground or flood us all away.
I could wither, could decide not to stay.
My grandfathers have gardens; I will have what remains.

Here is the revised final stanza for the earlier “A History of Gardening”:

When I write this down, I mean to say something small
and adjacent to the truth. The way a watering can
is meant to service a patch of land, not an expanse.
Summer means to warm and stop, not pass into fall
and winter. We want our garden friends to settle down,
pick our yard for their home. When they move away
we let them. Make do with their new-green remains.

While the direct repetition is gone, the idea of it is still plainly visible, creating another connection between these poems. Originally, I conceived of the *sonnetto e mezzo* as possessing a complex rhyme scheme to go with its added stanza, but as I revised these poems, I began to understand more fully what Robert Hass means when he writes, “The form of a poem exists in the relation between its music and its seeing; form is not the number or kind of restrictions, conscious or unconscious, many or few, with which a piece of writing begins” (65). By letting go of the restrictions that I felt were necessary, I could more clearly help the poem bridge the gap between “its music and its seeing.” In doing so I was able to craft two poems that tell the story of the rest of the collection: poems concerned with the way that we tell stories and what they mean for us as we do so.

I create a sense of order through my use of received form because so many of my poems are about the uncertainty of life. There is an ambiguity that can also manifest as a kind of grasping towards something—faith, goodness, concrete answers—without ever quite reaching it. In my poem “A History of Housecleaning,” the speaker is concerned with the things that we leave behind to help us remember, but the poem is also interested in what can and cannot be true. The main image of the poem is of a coconut carved to look like an ape’s head. In using that as the central image, I am able to talk about things that are simultaneously two things—both a coconut and an ape’s head. Just as the speaker

is old enough to help his grandmother and to understand the importance of this moment, he still feels too young to truly take part in it. Near the end I write,

my grandmother says there's no way
my uncle bought the coconut. My mother
nods, *He would have been*
too young, as I feel, even still,
even bending over to sweep
dirt into a pan.

The speaker's uncle is certain he bought the ape head, while the speaker's grandmother is certain that is an impossibility. All of it adds up to convince the speaker of the basic uncertainty of life. In response, all he can do is continue to focus on the work in front of him. By using a standard stanza of seven lines in this poem, there is both an off-putting quality—as seven lines is an uneven number and thus unconventional number of lines for a stanza—and a calming one, as the regularity of the stanza length imposes an order that the poem resists in its meditation on the ambiguities of life. While I am still following Rilke's advice to “write about what everyday life offers you” (15), I am also embedding my own interest in ambiguity and searching into the poem, creating a poem elevates the everyday, the way that good art does.

In “A History of Housecleaning,” I am interested in a story from my personal history, and in the ways that my history has shaped who I am. In my prose poem “A History of Genealogies,” I am interested not only in my personal, familial history but also in how that history interacts with the larger national history, especially around issues of race. It is important that my poetry concern itself with issues bigger than my own personal concerns. As a white Southerner, issues regarding race are especially important to me and to who I am as a writer, because challenging racism and highlighting the way

that “good” white people have often been complicit in it is vital. This is something I try to achieve through “A History of Genealogies,” a poem that is particularly concerned with how progress is viewed in America. The speaker’s great-grandfather is named after a president only remembered today for ending Reconstruction—a time when equality between white and black Americans was actively being worked toward. As I thought on that, the rest of this poem emerged, and I found myself once again considering the way that certainty so often seems at odds with how the world works. At the end of the poem, the young speaker agrees with his father, but the present-day speaker chimes in to say, “there are stories, pieces of luck and faith strung together until you can’t tell the difference.” The speaker is not trying to negate the father’s beliefs or his experiences, but he is pointing out the way things can be viewed when looked at with a more skeptical lens. Natasha Trethewey writes, “I see how the past holds us captive, / its beautiful ruin etched in the mind’s eye,” and this poem also wrestles with the problems of the past. If this speaker comes from a line of people who would rather hold onto a South where white people rule through fear and intimidation, then what must the speaker do? The poet does not have an answer, but is not content to accept passivity.

When thinking about how to interrogate race in these poems, I tried to be frank and straightforward throughout. Jake Adam York, whose poetry I discovered and read while writing many of these poems, helped shape my views on writing about race as a white person. His frank discussion of lynchings and other historical representations of white supremacy have been instructive to me. His poems served as guides for my own poetry and helped shape my view of the larger project of this collection. Early on, many of the poems in the manuscript were persona poems from the point of view of a character

named Forrest Johnson, who has been named after Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Civil War general and founder of the Ku Klux Klan. In writing from this point of view, I hoped to write as frankly as York does about race. All of these Forrest poems culminate in “Ode to Your Monuments, Your State Park, and Me,” a poem written to Nathan Bedford Forrest in which Forrest Johnson tries to wrestle with the legacy and burden that Nathan Bedford Forrest has left him. As I continued to revise the collection, I realized that many of the weakest poems in the collection were Forrest poems and, rather than hold on to weaker material for the sake of one poem, I jettisoned them from the collection, leaving “Ode” as the last remaining Forrest poem. During these changes, the content of “Ode” did not change much, only the way that I thought about it. Rather than having to serve as a capstone for all of the Forrest poems that came before it, it could stand on its own as a poem written to a specific subject by a specific person. In doing so, I could still talk about Nathan Bedford Forrest and the way that a person’s family history shapes them without feeling the need for too much context. Forrest Johnson could stand in for any white Southerner who feels alienated from their family’s past: “Here: names and words still mean / more than we think. Prayers from above fall on / our silence the way rain collects in open palms.” The poem once again bridges the gap between personal and national history. In writing a poem about these issues, I engage not only the historical problems of racism and their effects on the country, but also connect those problems to current events, such as a day of remembrance for Nathan Bedford Forrest (referred to by the governor as “a worthy observance”). In using poetry to critique and analyze, I can seamlessly move from the past to the present, holding both within the same poem.

While many of the poems in this manuscript focus on the personal history of their speakers, the collection is also concerned with the larger national history and what can be learned from it. For example, I can use a poem like “Robert Todd Lincoln Was Present At The First Three Presidential Assassinations” to talk about the weird ironies that history sometimes displays, commenting directly upon its story-ness by pointing out the coincidences that led to Robert Todd Lincoln being at or near three presidential assassinations. From this larger rumination on Lincoln, I move into a smaller, more personal observation:

...A man thinks
of an old friend, and then the friend appears, stepping outside
the bank across the street. There are polite *hellos*, and the expected
marveling at the way the world works sometimes.

Even when my poetry is about a national question, I am still concerned with personal reactions. The poem ends on the image of Lincoln sidestepping notoriety, opting instead, presumably, for a quieter life. And although the poem leading up to that moment has been full of violence—“like the many unwashed hands of doctors / into James Garfield’s abdomen”—it calms as it reaches the end. Lines become more regular until the very end, when the echo of violence returns in the form of “a gunman’s zealous aim.” Even as Lincoln tries to escape his past, it is still waiting for him.

Similarly, the poem “Six Degrees of John Tyler” discusses the way that a person’s past cannot be forgotten. Using the conceit of the game Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, this poem, comprised of seven prose paragraphs (most as short as a sentence), forges a connection between the speaker and the former president. While the speaker is not as implicated in systemic racism as Tyler, I still wanted to show the pernicious ability of

complacency to make someone feel justified in their actions, even when they are unintentionally aiding the very thing they seem to be against. As the speaker of this poem writes: “John Tyler’s grandson is still alive in the same place where 150 years ago his grandfather owned up to 90 slaves in a Virginia that Tyler hoped would one day be slave-free more through luck or happenstance than any act on his part.” My goal with this poem is to show that events often thought of as history are not as far-removed from the present day as people like to think. In writing this poem, my hope was that the fragmentary nature of the “Six Degrees” game would lead to a similar fragmented quality in the poem, represented by the short sentences that are present throughout. Kimiko Hahn writes, “It is lovely when a fragment can be a whole, not just suggest entirety” (50), and in “Six Degrees of John Tyler” I wanted the fragments to suggest something about the way that the speaker feels. While confronting this fragmented nature, however, in the final word of the poem—“Enough”—the speaker is able to find wholeness. By refusing to ignore the past or to let it define him, he is able to strike forward into new territory.

“Firefall” uses repetition to challenge history, invoking it and asking it to answer for itself. “History says—and History is always saying something,” I write, part statement of fact and part condemnation. Throughout this poem, the repetition of “History says” creates a sense that while History is constantly talking, it is not always capturing things as they are or should be. The poem’s final image is one of absence: “When the last fire fell, it was snowy, and no one was there as witness. No one to tell the fire what to do, no lenses to capture, even momentarily, the weight of what can be, still falling.” This act of recording on the poet’s part is one that History itself is incapable of. No one witnessed the last firefall, and so no one can write about it historically; however, the poet is still

capable of showing it to an audience. In a time when so much of history is being written and re-written daily, when the norms that governed our news coverage and our leaders are falling away, it is even more important that poetry do the work of capturing this historical moment, whether through poems that detail the specific injustices of a given day, or poems that talk about historical events in a revised light and with revised understanding. I agree with Keorapetse Kgositsile when he writes that “any worship of literary craftsmanship divorced from the realities of the time a writer lives in is a perversion” (14). I try to keep a focus on the particular realities of the world in my own poems, especially when I am writing about history. In writing about the past, I try to shed light on our present and reveal something about the way that American society has viewed itself.

“Firefall” performs a kind of ekphrasis, trying to describe a visual phenomenon using language. This emphasis on the visual and the ekphrastic is also apparent in my two pecha kucha, especially “Promised Art,” based on the works of the British artist Damien Hirst. Ekphrasis is usually thought of as a work of art responding to another work of art in some way. An ekphrastic poem may represent an art work; it may imagine the life of the people, creatures, or objects within a work of art; or it may use the work as a jumping-off point for the poet’s own meditations on similar or dissimilar themes. For “Promised Art,” I mostly follow this third mode, though the poem, at times, references the works in question, as in the stanza [THE PHYSICAL IMPOSSIBILITY OF DEATH IN THE MIND OF SOMEONE LIVING]:

God told Moses what to do, and he did it. Walking across
dry seabank, the wonders of it, we have recreated in our
everyday aquariums, our wild galleries. A parade of fish

arrayed before the children's eyes. So close they can see
their own arms reflected in the shark's dark pupils.

Hirst's work of the same name is perhaps his most famous: it consists of a tiger shark (that Hirst claims to have fished out of the Thames) placed inside a large tank full of formaldehyde, giving it the appearance of an aquarium-dweller caught mid-swim. This image stuck with me since I first saw it many years ago, and I knew that I wanted to write a poem about it. After I learned about the pecha kucha, a poetic form pioneered by the poet Terrance Hayes in his book *Lighthouse*, I decided that Hirst's works would be the perfect inspiration for my venture.

One of the defining characteristics of the pecha kucha is its ability to talk about many subjects at once. Traditionally comprised of 20 stanzas of about 4-5 lines each, the pecha kucha can cover a lot of ground. Terrance Hayes's "Arbor for Butch," which riffs on the works of the sculptor Martin Puryear, accomplishes this in several ways, but the most obvious way is by repeating the phrase "In the far south" in several stanzas throughout the poem, like in [THICKET]:

In the far south where history shades everything,
there are people who fear trees. I once heard an old man say
I may be black as a crow but I'm white inside.
Nowhere else does the sky do what the sky does there
where the graves are filled with dirt the color of fire.

The pecha kucha, as established by Hayes, is a form that embeds absence. "Arbor for Butch" demonstrates the absence of the speaker's father, but there are other absences as well, like the fact that, when reading "Arbor for Butch" aloud, Hayes does not read the titles of the works before each stanza, creating a new kind of absence that is not immediately apparent but which still affects the way that a reader experiences the poem.

This notion of absence is one that I wanted to explore in “Promised Art,” and I knew that using the works of Damien Hirst could help me.

Hirst’s works often center on physical bodies being shown in odd ways, either suspended in formaldehyde or split into parts, revealing the inner workings of a cow’s brain or a sheep’s leg. While looking at these images, I immediately thought of the Biblical story of God promising Abraham that he would be faithful.

[DEATH EXPLAINED]

Genesis says that God cut a calf and sheep and dove in two and walked between them. *If I don’t keep my word, may this be done to me.* And what could Abraham say to that? When he awoke the next day, he felt the same, but knew that he was different. The desert landscape beckoned.

With this stanza near the beginning, I knew that I wanted one of my repeating ideas throughout the poem to be one of Biblical stories where promises are made or broken in some way. Charles Wright once said, speaking of his poetic voice, “It’s some kind of speech on the outside of the stained-glass window looking in” (26). Wright’s poetry, in its evocation of both place and spirituality, has been a major influence on my work, and I would tweak his own statement to say that my poetry is often a kind of speech inside the stained-glass window looking out, yearning to see through the ideas that it has been given to something beyond. My interest in writing about and using Biblical stories is one example of this, but I am not merely interested in subverting Biblical tales. Rather, I want to interrogate them and see if they hold up to the scrutiny—and if they do not, to forge better stories for people of faith and those who do not hold to any faith.

In writing “Promised Art,” I also realized early on that Hirst’s art, with its focus on the body and how it appears when split open, fit well with the larger theme of Alzheimer’s that I explore in the poem through stanzas about my grandfather, my

grate against even an unpracticed ear
who can tell what one string out of tune
with another can mean like two bugs

This section, speaking of tones that hurt the ear and seem to grate against the norm, is offset by the lines, which suddenly appear in unison—except the word “off,” which I wanted to highlight here as a way to show the speaker’s mindset. In a poem that is so often moving counter to expectations, this is a moment where it slows down and allows tension to derive not from movement, but from stillness. The poem is interested in the ways that the world confounds us, and so the poem confounds as well, as seen in this section where the speaker talks about lovebugs:

secondly that they exist in this very moment, when I am trying
at peace and have no desire to swat anything,
not the bugs hovering over our skin,
or this water unmoved in its containment,
or the words we keep batting at each other,
perhaps thinking they can connect,

The poem creates a new kind of order, not from regular margins or line placement or even stanza length, but rather from the seeming disorder that it utilizes to keep the reader as uncomfortable as the poet, as if the reader is also trying to swat at something but is unable to do so. Human connection, for this speaker, seems as impossible as the existence of lovebugs, and yet here they are in front of him, making themselves known. This combination of skepticism and renewed hope is one that I aim for in all of my poems. Often my speaker seeks a connection with other people, even if only imagined.

In my poem “Re:”, this connection comes in an unexpected way: an email sent to the wrong person. Taking the form of a sonnet, the poem presents its story in one stanza,

and charts the speaker's reaction to receiving this email that was not intended for him. At the volta, the speaker writes:

I don't want to tell them I'm not their friend,
just an impostor with a new Comcast account.
For all the emails or text messages unreplied,
the conversations left unstated, this is my penance:
find me sitting in bleachers 2000 miles from my home,
sweating in bright blue, praying that this is enough.

This final image—the speaker, cheering along with a team that he has no affiliation with—is both an imagined one and also not. In the story of this poem it becomes real momentarily, it constructs a new history for the speaker; one in which he is always faithful to those who put their faith in him. It is a kind of hope that even this speaker who does not respond to these emails can one day atone for all of the ways he feels he has failed those around him, a hope similar to the speaker of Mark Jarman's "Ground Swell," in which the speaker still feels like he must write about "the summer that I turned sixteen," but he keeps returning to that subject over and over again because "that's my ground swell. I must start / Where things began to happen and I knew it" (14). For Jarman's speaker, this is an intense period of growing up and realizing what the world is really like. For my speaker, the emails are a new reality that continually remind him of his failures, of the ways that he has not grown up yet, and how much he longs for the kind of connection that they imply. These two speakers are not alike in many ways, but they share a concern with the world and a desire to write about it in a way that can reconcile pain with the possibility of joy. Both speakers are also interested in their own personal histories, in the way that their past continues to shape their present. For my speaker, each day is a new chance to rewrite who he has been.

In writing about history, I want to show the possibility for poetry to talk about these topics openly and explicitly—to change the way that history has been conceived of so as to better tell the story of America, and the larger story of humanity. In utilizing both a personal history and a national history as jumping off points, I have aimed to tell stories that are specific yet relatable and that help challenge people’s own ideas. My poetry is an appeal—to our better angels, to hope, and even sometimes to the loneliness that comes along with being human. My poems are not a finger pointed accusingly at the past, but rather a hand outstretched, inviting the reader to join with me in interrogating who we have been and contemplating who we can become.

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FIREFALL

History says that a man stood at the bottom of a cascade and, as a signal, intoned: Let the fire fall. As if this could be done by mere hands; exposure to the elements teaches even the noblest skeptic that fire burns through everything given enough time. Anything can become historical; all it must do is stop. History says—and History is always saying something—an entrepreneur built a hotel on top of a mountain that History, decades later, would call a park. There were bonfires, and when those died down, the tradition of boys kicking flames over a cliff became a sensation that people would pay to experience. History says the park caught up with the spectacle, disallowed it, called it a fraud, unnatural. The rangers must not have seen it with their eyes, must have heard rather than known the splendor of it. When the last fire fell, it was snowy, and no one was there as witness. No one to tell the fire what to do, no lenses to capture, even momentarily, the weight of what can be, still falling.

ODE TO MARK ROTHKO

[NUMBER 14]

Some colors require no name. When I look
in another's eyes, what use is *hazel*, *turquoise*,
or even *starburst* to describe them? When two
faces meet, they are still separate hues.

[NO. 61 (RUST AND BLUE)]

Achilles, too, was a kind of painter. He worked
in lead and saltwater, he coated battlefields
as if a canvas. His death as tragic as a morning
sink, a kitchen filling with carmine.

[NO. 9 (DARK OVER LIGHT EARTH)]

Took a train to the Louvre, spent all day surveying
its insides, careful never to touch or use flash or stare
too long. There must be time for everyone to stand
in front of each work; the brochure assures me there is not.

[NO. 61 BROWN BLUE BROWN ON BLUE]

Three types of fog fight over the cityscape, chasing
you, the artist, out of home and into streets already
blanketed by their heft. They sky themselves before
you reach the studio, their memory dissolving into air.

[UNTITLED, 1953]

In the periphery, color; tunnel vision, color.
Every side of every frame, color and color,
purple and black and orange, or red and blue,
a kaleidoscope fished out of its eyeglass
and spreading each canvas, enveloping the room.

DON'T DREAM
after Mark Doty

After Crowded House disbanded,
said farewell, the bassist's bleached
hair fell out all summer, perfect
for a day at the beach, a burnt forehead.

I don't know any of this—the stress
they must have felt, each verse
and chorus still remembered but now
useless, an architecture with no one

living inside it, an empty motel.
In my imagination, they avoided horizons
for ten years, their lawns greening
unavoidably and somewhere there

was an audience like a pillar of salt
waiting to be disturbed back to
humanity, to watch them perform again,
guitars not chugging but gliding

through the depths of “Don't Dream
It's Over.” The singer's voice curving
over the notes, a causeway of tones
placed in the correct order to elicit

boulders of applause racing downhill.
They returned after the new century,
of course, piled their name on top of the other
comeback acts, one more log for the woodpile.

And it turned out fine, I'm sure: the arc
of their career seems impossible,
like most things in life, never simple,
never simply an up or a down, a shield

against life's arrows. An erasable past
was never in the cards. A stone stuck
in their shoes until, cash-fluid, and needing,
perhaps, a hard look in the mirror,

I encountered their hit song, a radiance
in the middle of *Glee*'s smudged later
years. I'm not un-proud, exactly, of what
I've been, only sad that all I know of them

is Cory Monteith singing in fake snow, casual,
unaware of the few years he has remaining,
the vanishing he will become, the pall
he will cast across the gardens of what seemed,

once, like Fox's savior, but became a rough
beast lumbering past its prime, its strengths arrayed
before it but seemingly unseen, tidewrack
left untouched by the writers' room, evidence

that good was possible once, either because
Ryan Murphy could concentrate before
American Horror Story's rise, so steep
and then so quickly gone I hardly knew

what was happening. One end begets
another beginning, doesn't it? Where
is Chord Overstreet now? Between
Chris Colfer and Amber Riley, what explosions

of talent. And yet, the shivering
New Directions singing like no one
is watching stays with me. It achieves a stasis
so pure that maybe they are still resting

on the set of the high school's outdoor
cafeteria, a solid idea that doesn't jibe
with the Ohio setting, a landscape unfamiliar
to me but not my friend Jon, whose heavy

beard scared me freshman year, his certainties
about the world, his years spent carefully
in the real Lima meant much to me,
and at the same time so strangely little.

What have I reduced this world to? A reference
to a band so abstracted to me that their
Wikipedia page is revelatory? How
fragile my hold is, how there's always

something glorious to turn my attention
toward, undisturbed like the snow
that fell last week, pure and melted
into nothing now—a sheer thrill

to see this once-imagined thing,
but then a drag to be stuck inside
for more than an hour, to be flung
back against the silken sky and made

to exist indoors. Reader, know
that I have tried to wrestle knowledge
from my lack. I haven't gotten far.
In this way, I am a familiar story

like the books I have read and tried
to re-write in my own hand, a path
to nowhere in particular, just another lane
to trod or leave barren as travelers

often do. I have come to tell myself,
I will tell all myself, mysteriously,
we cannot perfect a smile. The world
we'll inherit may not be fine. It will be ours.

LOVEBUG

An easy way to start this poem would be to say
I don't know a thing about love
-bugs (the break after "love," but before "-bugs" is
crucial
to establishing the tone of the poem
which is both serious and unserious contemporaneously;
also, I should try not to use words like contemporaneously,
especially in such close concert that their tones,
practically the same but slightly off
grate against even an unpracticed ear
who can tell what one string out of tune
with another can mean like two bugs
actually joined in an act of love, not the metaphor
or turn-of-phrase I took it for all my life
until, oversunning, you point
out a lovebug, and I am surprised, mostly,
that they exist—a thing I should not confess—but
secondly that they exist in this very moment, when I am trying
at peace and have no desire to swat anything,
not the bugs hovering over our skin,
or this water unmoved in its containment,
or the words we keep batting at each other,
perhaps thinking they can connect,
I should add something here about impossibilities),
and ease is all I know.

A CHANCE EXISTS FOR BOTH OF YOU

Already, you are turning to see what happens
when the hangman's rope is cut: the miller
caught with his neighbor's wife and horse,

the tailor accused of treason; the silly cobbler
everyone knew to be mad; and lastly, face
unsmocked, a girl you knew once, smiling.

SATURDAY

On the morning my sister survives
a hurricane, I sleep so late the day
is over before I've woken up. The blinds

low in my bedroom mean it could be anytime
at all. The new bedsheets don't fit
the pillowtop, but I make do, consider

buying new sheets but don't—I'm however old
and still trying to figure out how to be a person.
I know my sister is okay because she doesn't

call, my mom doesn't text me frantically.
I am as alone as a person can be these days,
a goose who thinks they're flying by themselves

then looks around and sees a perfectly arrayed V.
Maybe we are always trailing the people we love
in our wake. Or following theirs. The meteorologists

stay quiet about Mississippi, but I know: heat,
humidity, a chance of rain every day. I walk
around the room, make coffee, say the only prayers

I can say these days: *thank you* and *thank you*
to whatever lives inside empty places,
thank you to whatever I cannot name

that keeps sending their presence outward,
the point the geese follow because they know
it's where they're headed next.

A HISTORY OF FAITH

You say I'm a *functioning atheist*, and it is difficult to disagree, much as I want to (blame upbringing or outmoded ideas about "the self"), and you claim

some separation from what you are, what I see you to be. A man asks for help and I look away, you look him in the eyes, walk to a nearby pharmacy, buy him

Mountain Dew and crackers, give him directions to a shelter he doesn't take. I am smiling the whole time and still unsure of myself. Somehow,

two things can be true at the same time. Paradox is the foundation of belief, I think, and so is believing. It is not unlike bringing along a jacket

in case it rains: good if you have it, and there even if you don't need it—a comfort either way, one that you are still wearing, and I am slipping out of,

despite what we might say.

A HISTORY OF DECKS

Deck is gone Mom texts to me and Michelle,
and shortly after a photo of the ground outside
the back door, empty of anything but a few
wooden posts, time passing. It is strange
to remember the last time this happened,
maybe 20 years ago, maybe 15, either way
enough to make the new deck warranted,
enough to make me nostalgic. My mother
cleaning out my old bedroom, and Michelle's
too, and a step-ladder leading up to the back door,
and nothing more. If one wanted, a step into
sky; if one wanted, anything at all.

PROMISED ART

*after Damien Hirst
for my grandmothers and my mother, too*

[TEMPLE]

My sister swims with stingrays, while I wade through waves,
waiting to see what will happen. My grandfather,
with his transition lenses and hair white as an X-ray, lets them
kiss his back, their mouths suctioning his skin.

[DEATH EXPLAINED]

Genesis says that God cut a calf and sheep and dove in two
and walked between them. *If I don't keep my word, may this be
done to me.* And what could Abraham say to that?
When he awoke the next day, he felt the same, but knew
that he was different. The desert landscape beckoned.

[A THOUSAND YEARS]

When my grandfather spoke to me, I laughed, all nerves
and teenage circumspection. I could not imagine his life,
or see it as in a movie: the marriage, the kids, the years spent
at the same job. I kept adding them up and losing the number.

[IN AND OUT OF LOVE]

Alzheimer's is unretrievable once spoken. It hovers
in the air between you and the speaker. Flutters
in your ear canal: a fly nattering at your eardrum,
a bat smashing itself into a closed window.

[THE KINGDOM OF THE FATHER]

Winter cold outside the screen door, and my mother and grandmother
waiting. A clock on the wall the only thing that changes. No snow
to dampen the doorways, just the wind and the night air calling,
a phone no one wants to answer, that keeps ringing.

[HYMN]

The heart, the lungs, the intestines all intact: the eyes that see,
the pumping guts. Only the brain truly exposed to the elements—
shown to be as fragile as it looks, sulci and gyri willing
to stretch into nothingness given the right leisure.
A taffy-pulling machine would be more forgiving.

[THE TRANQUILITY OF SOLITUDE (FOR GEORGE DYER)]

When learning to swim, it is important to exhale.
At all times practice the in, the out. Tell yourself
you are in control, even in the ocean. If you stay
calm, you can backstroke through breakers, breathing.

[THE PHYSICAL IMPOSSIBILITY OF DEATH
IN THE MIND OF SOMEONE LIVING]

God told Moses what to do, and he did it. Walking across
dry seabank, the wonders of it, we have recreated in our
everyday aquariums, our wild galleries. A parade of fish
arrayed before the children's eyes. So close they can see
their own arms reflected in the shark's dark pupils.

[THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS]

The pain was not that he was gone, but that he had been dead
for years, and we were left to carry his body like a casket
with no grave to be lowered into. It is enough to know our shoulders
sighed when he went. Our backs gave up their stupor. We fell to
knees grown weak from overuse, the bending and the raising up.

[MOTHER AND CHILD (DIVIDED)]

I felt cut off from the loss my mother owned the way I possess
arms, legs, the etcetera of body. I kept siphoning emotions
into my face, the twist of a frown, the mechanics of waterworks,
the slow realization that someday I will know what she knows.

[SAINT SEBASTIAN, EXQUISITE PAIN]

When I hear *pool*, I remember a stranger's backyard, learning and failing to learn the perfect butterfly kick, the trick of when to come up for air and when to keep going. Not my grandfather, bearded, already losing himself in the sun beside blue waters.

[VERITY]

Samuel's mother prayed silently for years until he was born. Saul scoffed, and then his Jonathan was lost. Solomon the Wise nearly cut a child in two. And above them I hear David bleating, pleading, his son caught like a ram in a thicket, his shadow dancing among the leaves and branches. *Absalom! O my Absalom!*

[SOME COMFORT GAINED FROM THE ACCEPTANCE
OF THE INHERENT LIES IN EVERYTHING]

I thought grief would split me and move on, but nothing moved in to the place where my grandfather had resided. When I think of him, I see a picture that my mother took: he's in a suit, holding his wife, and I can hardly tell he doesn't know where he is.

[THE TRUE ARTIST HELPS THE WORLD
BY REVEALING MYSTIC TRUTHS]

My grandmother picked up her Bible, found something in the words that reminded her, perhaps, of a day when she saw a stranger across a room and crossed it, or waited for him to cross. When they touched they were encased in glass, preserved for generations.

[TWO SIMILAR SWIMMING FORMS
IN ENDLESS MOTION (BROKEN)]

The mind goes back to the last moment when the eyes were his, before the circle of his mind became a curved line, before the trap door in his head opened, plunged him into another room with no windows or doors, a word problem with no good answers.

[FOR THE LOVE OF GOD]

I placed a rose on my grandfather's casket before the caretaker began his work. The country cemetery—a green yard with equidistant stones lodged into the earth—billowed out to the road and the church. In the car's rear-view mirror, they looked like teeth in a skull.

[BECAUSE I CAN'T HAVE YOU I WANT YOU]

Jesus said, *Cast your nets* and they were cast. He said, *Other side* and they were recast. And there were fish. When Peter looked up to thank Jesus, He was already ashore, cooking breakfast. So much to do, so Peter got to work. When he looked up again, Jesus was gone, the brazier still smoking. A note written in sand half-washed away.

[UP, UP AND AWAY]

I heard a story about my grandfather: he was in a battlefield laden with landmines, he mis-stepped and shrapnel found purchase in his back. Doctors were too frightened to remove it, so it became part of him. Later, my mother said this story was wrong: it was a child's go-kart accident. Or it was neither of these truths.

[THE PURSUIT OF OBLIVION]

Driving back: blur of roadside trees, houses and businesses, subdivisions and then we are home. Like a pet bird, we squawk when the cage is covered, throwing the world into darkness. Other side of the cloth, everything is there, but we can't imagine—the same furniture in the living room. All our books still painted with dust.

[THE KISS OF DEATH]

This is what I write about: my mother; a bull's heart cleaved by sterling silver; the feeling the heart senses when it is not split, but left hovering in the chest as a lacuna. My mother stares at me, and we both look like we're smiling.

ON CAPITOLS, LOCAL AND NATIONAL

An unspoken rule of city planners is that all citizens must have direct line-of-sight with the Capitol building wherever they are. I can stand outside a food-pantry-turned-hot-yoga-studio and across the Cumberland see the state capitol building where a monument on the hill to Nathan Hale declares *I regret that I only have one life to give to my country*. Regrets I understand, and patriotism, to an extent, the idea that your sacrifice will save others' lives is necessary when staring down a hangman. In a room bespoke with dust in the furthest basement, grids are waiting, charted and mapped away, the symmetry a mask for the things we have chosen to forget.

I can turn the corner from the stairs where my sister's roommate was shot in a drive-by because he was on the phone or because he was in Anacostia or because, and I can see the United States Capitol building and all of this can be true and all of this can be terrible and what else to do. I want to say something here about inadequacy: my own and this country's. I want something else to do with my time than thinking about the problems inherent in Capitols. I want to stop finding *I want* in every scrap I write.

People plan cities because they have to. There is flight and there is flying over and seeing the perfect squares that mark a block. If my hometown is different than I remember, is my memory or rapid growth to blame? Alzheimer's runs my family down, and Nashville is It City, for now.

A HISTORY OF GARDENING

My grandfathers have gardens; I have what remains
—another winter in an uncold place, my parents
waiting the other side of a phone, an empty table
in an empty room. I say make what you will
of imagery. Somewhere else, a hawk pierces
the corona of the sun. A car bisects perfectly
a suburban driveway. There are hands, hand-offs,
and hand-me-downs. They all work singlehandedly.

I can tell you a story about gardens, a history
of peering over a grandfather's shoulder; I can
make you believe I know what I am saying.
But when my sweat falls to the earth, it is rejected
out-of-hand, and I don't mind. I straighten my back,
crack my neck, and go inside for the day.

When I write this down, I mean to say something small
and adjacent to the truth. The way a watering can
is meant to service a patch of land, not an expanse.
Summer means to warm and stop, not pass into fall
and winter. We want our garden friends to settle down,
pick our yard for their home. When they move away
we let them. Make do with their new-green remains.

ODE TO MARK ROTHKO

[WHITE CENTER]

For a moment, before Achilles sees the runner
come into camp, Patroclus is everything:
champion of Troy, victorious, Hector bound
and waiting for him to enter the scene.
For a moment, Achilles is still alive.

[BLACK IN DEEP RED]

Never took to fingerpainting: the feel,
some undead thing drying on my hands
left me cold, covered in a toxicity
unnamed, the expectant paper unmade.

[NO 4]

In Oklahoma City, in the Museum of Art, glass cast
into shapes nearly made me weep. A woman's robe.
A seascape in orange and red and every blue.
Sometimes, all brightness in a dark room. Sometimes,
the only prism a dull sheen for light to see through.

[UNTITLED, 1968]

Chiaroscuro can be amended. This need for something
that looks real to stare us in the eye can be forgotten.
Replace *en plein air* with warehouses, artists' lofts,
a lone painter in an emptying room, apertures
between cubicles of color letting in a little light.

[GREEN AND MAROON]

Maybe Patroclus didn't ask. Stole out one morning
with his best friend's armor and no plans. Maybe
it wasn't until he heard of this death that Achilles knew
he had already lost, his eyes sea-green and red.

SNOW

Murder someone in Sevastopol in December
and by March there will be a present left

for someone else to find. I read this in a novel;
it is a striking image, like a lit match too close

to your face and moving nearer. I want to pinch
the flicker out, leave a slight contrail of smoke

like a corpse flowering in Spring. Even this image
is familiar. Who doesn't want to be found like this?

Face still red and, at first, one could believe
your blood still pumps within, not without.

Saint John wrote verses about moments like that:
the tearing away of old thoughts, the way light

finds itself breaking in to hidden places: city streets,
subways, skulls. When given enough time, anything

will become familiar. Thousands of people walk past
a snowbank every day, for now, and do not think

they are walking past a grave. When the snow is gone,
so are the secrets of winter, the layers we bundle

ourselves into. We strip down to t-shirts and bloody teeth.
We curl our biceps around a stranger's neck and leave

what's left at the bottom of a lake. It's summer's problem
to resolve or forget. The new tradition: trawling becomes

the national pastime. I walk a street salted more
out of hope than need. I whistle. It is a sweet sound,

I think. Like wind is an instrument. Like I can be
unmade by the things I make. Undone by what I do.

CHARLES WRIGHT AT THE ROTHKO CHAPEL: A FABLE
Houston, TX

When telling a story, begin at the crucial moment:
the poet, entering the primary setting—no need
to show how the mind can move,
the buying of airplane tickets,
the early morning drive to the airport,
maybe, or a couple days' drive. It is the 70s, after all,
maybe the 80s, already in Virginia.

No matter. The point is something simple: this: he enters
the chapel and does not leave for at least an hour or two.
He contemplates each pane,
seated in the quaint rows, maybe
by himself or with a colleague of his,
someone else to appreciate what's going on,
to write down what happens: (here's the story:) he cries.

It's overwhelming. Or even moreso: *It is sublime,*
a word so unnatural it could mean anything, yet
he thinks it must mean this:
these black-on-black-on-black portraits
of whatever the viewer needs to see.
Perhaps, for him, a poem, reorienting
his thought processes, constellation of new moons.

CAMP TALES

First year at summer camp, I jumped
into Garner Creek without looking down.
It's still the bravest thing I've ever done.

The hard part was climbing back up,
convincing my bunkmates the water was
warm while my whole body shivered,

hair limp and full of creek germs. We shared
ghost tales around bunkrooms, laughed
at last year—the way we terrorized

the girls in camp, the night we spent
snapping towels until someone brought
blood to the surface of Nick's skin,

until our bunk guide told us to quiet
ourselves for the night. In the dark,
our stories didn't stop. They wrestled

with each other until one was proclaimed victor.
At this, we discovered anything
was possible. We sneaked out

of our bunks and ran to the creek.
Spent the night jumping into its waters,
waiting for something
like a story to begin.

A HISTORY OF MINI CORN DOGS

Their bellies are blackened
when I pull them out of the oven,
crispy golden-brown shells
that I shove down my gullet
by the fistful. *Dinner's ready*,
I say, mostly to the still air
of the house. I am probably
16 in this scene, both parents
at work while I perfect
the perfect beach body,
corn dog-stuffed tummy
stretched out under fluorescents,
ready for summer to end.

WATCHING DON KNOTTS

In memory, you are a fish, Don Knotts,
and I am the kind of kid who watches
television eye-to-grainy-eye, feet resting
either side of the entertainment cabinet
as you distract a U-boat and win
WWII. I get dizzy as you wish yourself human
again, all my blood collecting behind pupils
burned out and hungry for more commercials.
I build a blanket fort with strong walls, clear sight-lines.

In memory, you are a ghost
-hunter, or just unlucky, trapped inside a mansion
haunted by a player organ, and a lonely
descendant. A house at the edge of town filled
with people the townsfolk have forgotten.
You don't want this life. In the morning,
you are sure there are no ghosts. But I saw the bloody
keys move themselves, know spirits inhabit that place
like I exist in this room. They stick around past the credits
and snuggle into my dreams. I envelop my head in quilt
and sheet; I sweat until I fall asleep.

I never watched *Andy Griffith*; learned
the melody but not how to whistle. I caught the gist
of it. The sheriff seemed nice enough, but he couldn't
command my Technicolor vision. The TV called
to be watched, so I flipped past you: your deputy's costume,
your face slack-jawed and incredulous and—probably—supportive.
I avoided small towns, wishing stars, and obvious hauntings.
Remembered old movies and dramatic irony; how small a thing
it is to know who I am; how difficult; how even
fish get the blues, need glasses, wouldn't wish their life on anyone,
not even you, Don Knotts.

RUNNING WITH THE BULL

The convicted murderer is comatose,
but that's last season, backstory,

Previously On—there is family
to consider, his and mine, what it says

about me that I spend hours inside
his world, how these windows

his sister is waiting behind look
like the prison bars he knew for years;

the dream sequences feel like my dreams
or memories I had removed years ago:

it all comes back to some screen
and the ways I can live inside it;

after 45 minutes the convicted murderer
wakes, batting his eyelashes like

a French skunk or a mouse in a polka-dot
dress, a rabbit, a desperate man. I think

like this too much: metaphors no one
understands are gibberish, when

the credits roll I stay seated because
personhood is enticing but trees have

the right idea: face me toward
a window, let me practice losing

my leaves every autumn. Let me
never grow anew each spring

the green I believe must recur.

A HISTORY OF ALCATRAZ

Because I was never much of a swimmer—
learned too late, me and Brian the only
kids with double-digit birthdays in the pool—
I know I would never last at Alcatraz.

I don't like to think of this often—how
fragile my peace is, how little control
is mine. You visited San Francisco,
rode the trolleys, made a campfire

on the beach, got me a postcard I keep
on my desk. In this way, you are here
within reach, the only distance
whether or not my phone has a signal,

whether or not you will answer
when I dial your number, still memorized
from middle school, along with
the alphabet song, “Twinkle, Twinkle,”

me singing *when the bough breaks*
over the cradle we both slept in, now
waiting in your old room for someone
new, and I like to think this tattered

piece of paper with a now-defunct prison
on it makes us close, like siblings should be.

HOME STATE

There's an actual-size replica of the Parthenon in Tennessee,
where I can imagine the gods have gone in Tennessee.

Wherever you grow up is canon. Can't be unwritten
or stripped from your bones. Not even in Tennessee.

Floods and twisters. The land rolls like a young mind
wondering what's beneath the Cumberland in Tennessee.

Blood in battlefields and lunch counters and streets.
The ghosts don't leave anything undone in Tennessee.

Someone curses Memphis, says Knoxville is full of hicks.
Three stars on a flag because three cities can't coexist in Tennessee.

Last to leave the Union, first to rejoin. The kind of
honor one will take when they're young in Tennessee.

Why not say Nashville if that's what you mean?
You want to be something, to *mean*, in Tennessee.

Call me whatever you like. If I write long enough
I'll leave no memory unspoken in Tennessee.

CONNEMARA, 1964

Carl Sandburg was retired, basking on a narrow-shouldered farm, far from Chicago. Let's
say it was a Sunday, more
for symbolism than any attempt at fidelity. What happened feels apocryphal—a scene
from a movie no one
would watch—Sandburg sits at home waiting to become history, when Bob Dylan walks
up to his door
holding a record, wanting to see this man who meant so much to him, stays for a few
minutes, talks, lets

his shoulders slump forward, gives him the record, drives away. You can believe
whatever you want about
what happened next: Sandburg, bemused and heavy-bearded, put the record on, listened
to it with quiet
appreciation or shook his head and slid the record back into its sleeve. Or possibly,
Sandburg never fit
needle to groove, instead let it become a fixture of dust that you can see, even today, if
you visit. Pet the goat

on your way out. Wave at Dylan's form, decades later still receding. See the poet-
biographer-statesman
standing on his porch, ill-at-ease with the conversation they'd shared, already sensing the
forgotten days
ahead of him, the years spent in isolation, the subtle ways he would be remembered—a
car in the distance.

LAUNDRY DAY

Another day with no rain, and we are
arguing again. You say I don't
know how to fold. And you're not
wrong. *Like a body at an altar*
you say, but I never liked them,
the public nature of the thing.
You talk about the communion
of saints while I fish coins
out of my pocket. The dryer's no good,
so I pull wet clothes and you wring
them into an empty trash can. We hang
shirts around our bedroom like the cloths
some people affix to trees
in prayer. Bending into a machine
can be a catechism. I am standing
amid a ruin of everything
I own. I'm asking for redemption
the only way I know.

A HISTORY OF PIANO SHOWROOMS

One day a piano appeared in our den,
not like the grands in the showroom
where my sister Michelle took lessons,

practiced her scales with each hand,
building strength in her fingers; Mom

sat in the soundproof room with her while
I wandered the floor, using one finger to pick
my way up and down the keys, or sliding my hand

across like how I imagined real piano-players did
for emphasis, or to end a rousing piece.

Michelle played “Fur Elise,” learned
“Somewhere Out There” from *An American
Tale*, gave up after a few years.

She had her books and “Chopsticks,”
she’d be fine. Now, when everyone’s back

home, I find myself at that same piano,
plinking out a carol or a new pop song
for us to sing along to. The showroom isn’t there

anymore, but a guy on PBS can teach you
to play piano, for only five payments of \$19.99.

Watch Youtube videos. Look up how
to play an F chord. Put your thumb
on the first note, then count to three

on the white keys, then five. Or maybe
the showroom is still there, waiting.

ODE TO MARK ROTHKO

[OCHRE AND RED ON RED]

Sun rises over another planet, the corona of one
becoming the earth of another. I learn distances
through physicality: the space between them
and the time it would take to negotiate. I know
they cannot speak; they look like they are touching.

[UNTITLED (TITULURIK GABEA)]

When you stand still, for long enough, your body
becomes a sculpture, only the arm swathing
the canvas, a pendulum, a drinking bird
dipping down for a little more white, a little red.

[FOUR DARKS IN RED]

All of this should amount to a kindness,
a promise spoken between you and me: I will
remember your paintings, if you will remember,
in your painterly way, the worlds at your back.

[UNTITLED, 1951-1955]

The triptych so often depicts the religious
that we have forgotten it can be anything:
three slats hanging a window, three mice
lording an attic, the three-finger salute
of a Boy Scout. Yellow on yellow on —.

[WHITE CLOUD OVER PURPLE]

Achilles died with an arrow emerging from his foot,
his body imperfect in its own way. This is how
we remember him: not the things he did, but the things
he never could. The hole between his ankle and the earth.

A HISTORY OF GENEALOGIES

My father's grandfather was born Rutherford B. Hayes Osborne, after a president that most don't recall in any way. First president to win despite losing the popular election, showing the American story of democracy to be just that. He ended Reconstruction, too, and I suppose it is the latter that makes him a proper name for a child born in the South at the beginning of the 20th century. But my great-grandfather thought his birth certificate read Bea Hazel his entire life because some nurse mistook him for a baby girl, misread or misheard what the doctor said. So he went by B.H. his whole life. Maybe he blushed when asked what the letters stood for. Maybe like Truman's S, he said they stood for nothing. Still, it is almost magical in its story-ness, first told to me years ago by my father while I sat on the big freezer, legs dangling, his face stuck in a PC's guts, as he pulled out arteries and re-attached organs, rebooted the heart with a few clicks. *What are the chances of that? What luck!* My father stared me down, and simply said, *There's no such thing as luck, only faith.* And I agreed with him then. But I would say now, I would have my younger self say—there are stories, pieces of luck and faith strung together until you can't tell the difference.

ROBERT TODD LINCOLN WAS PRESENT AT THE FIRST THREE
PRESIDENTIAL ASSASSINATIONS

Let that sink in

like the many unwashed hands of doctors
into James Garfield's abdomen, searching

for a bullet that Alexander Graham Bell
could not find with a rudimentary metal detector.

Don't forget Roosevelt's forerunner, William
McKinley, killed for anarchy's sake, who told the crowds

to spare his assassin's life. And Robert was always
spared.

Thirty-six years between his father and the Exposition,

and what could he say for himself? What stories
did he have that didn't touch death

in some way?

Robert, the only member of his family to survive
the 19th century, kept living,
declined invitations

to events for future presidents, knew something about
the way that tragedies collect on top of each other

until they force a calendar off its nail. A man thinks
of an old friend, and then the friend appears, stepping outside

the bank across the street. There are polite *hellos*, and the expected
marveling at the way the world works sometimes.

An event repeated once is a fluke, twice is a miracle, even
when it is a tragedy: watching someone board a train

can symbolize for most a beginning, or for a few, what must be seen
as ending. Robert never saw himself as a leader, chose the background

of paintings, the footnotes of texts, somewhere he could
sidestep his father's shadow,

a gunman's zealous aim.

MOONGLOW

15%

September 16, 2017

The moon: pale-white and patient like
my father, on the deck each night, stealing
a photo of the moon. It must be a rite
for him, like prayer or brushing teeth
nightly. I look at his reproduction of a moon
I never saw, and a gravity pulls me along.

2%

September 21, 2017

Your smile is lopsided now, changing places
from one side to the other. I can say
with certainty that you have moved
because science tells me so, because
I understand something about trajectory,
but for those who saw you before
astronomy took root, what must it have meant
to see you so diminished, a glint
the only proof they had of you. Your picture
the evidence that my father exists.

13%

September 23, 2017

My father doesn't believe in unlucky numbers,
insists on taking your photo each night, your light
streaking towards the deck, you an orange rind
hiding in the bottom of a knapsack waiting to be thrown
out. Waiting, always, for what else can happen:
reflection of the sun. Maybe nothing
is waiting on your other side, maybe we have
thought too much of you, maybe you hide only
what we devise—your personhood still debated,
your body's composition in question.

20%

September 24, 2017

You look like the Dreamworks logo. You look like the classic vision of a crescent moon. You look like a glazed croissant. You look like a child's version of imperfection, or an adult's version of perfection. You look, I'd like to say, beautiful, but I can't form the words. You look lonely, too, of course you do; you look at me and have, I'm sure, these same thoughts, too.

28%

September 25, 2017

Your defects are more visible to the naked eye now. I see your face pockmarked like my own and feel a kinship to you, like we are not bodies hovering in different spaces. We may as well be sitting next to each other on a sofa, commenting on how long our hair has gotten, complimenting your new glasses, while you speak well of my record collection. We can see each other, and that means something here. This relationship is more than one-way. You see my father, and I see you.

65%

September 29, 2017

You look round, expectant, like you are waiting for yourself to be born. Your colors are clear adjectives. I want to hold what I know of you in my hand and let it go, to fall into darkness like you are falling away from it, let my body reconcile itself to nothingness, let the earth and its gravity do what they can.

95%

October 3, 2017

You look complete—nearly. Funny,
when we think of you, you are either
entirely made or so thin as to be non-existent,
or else a hole in the sky we see transparently.

99%

October 4, 2017

My eyes are insufficient to the task of seeing
you as you really are: beautiful, wholly
separate from the darkness that surrounds and
threatens to envelop you, a beacon
for half the world. The other half sees you
as a ghost in the morning sky, a wailing
woman rounding her way home. If I could
touch you, I know, my hand would pass right through.

100%

October 5, 2017

Is this what I have been waiting for? Expectation
and release. A shadow still hangs on your rightmost
edge, teasing me into disbelief that this is who you
are. And yet, there is a holiness to your visage:
you do not smile at me and I do not smile at you,
but we are both known, somehow. Both of us
see one another. I imagine that many look up to you
and believe that someone they love is performing
the same act. It provides comfort. It orders a world
that seems so irrational, like the numbers on a clock
or calendar. Counting up and then returning to 1.

A HISTORY OF TREES

My mother told me, once,
that she'd read Kilmer's "Trees"
in school. Now, I think
maybe she recognized

in this Joyce something
she hated about herself
(besides that name):
his insistence that trees

could be miracles,
that their ability to stay
in one place for so long
without changing was something
to be admired, not

to be cast off, like
yellowing leaves or
snow-dead branches,
the detritus of years

waiting by the street
to be finally thrown away.

A HISTORY OF HOUSECLEANING

Sweeping my grandmother's house
for the last time, probably, I ask her
about the ape-head that has hung
in her living room forever. In 1972,
my grandfather bought it in Florida.
It's a coconut! my grandmother says
as I untangle the coathanger that connects

it to the ceiling, an emblem
I will take with me. My mother dusts
while I vacuum, mowing through carpet.
Later, my uncle says he bought
the coconut-head, but
he does not want it now, over
40 years later. We are having dinner,

almost an entire family. After,
my grandmother says there's no way
my uncle bought the coconut. My mother
nods, *He would have been
too young*, as I feel, even still,
even bending over to sweep
dirt into a pan.

LOOKING OUT ON BEAVER LAKE THE MORNING AFTER MIKE AND
CAITLIN'S WEDDING
Eureka Springs, Arkansas

I'm already figuring out a way to make this
moment poetic. The landscape
wants my eyes and hands alert; I want them to
create peacefully in this
woody place: re-construct the mountain lake,
the trees, the feeling of wind
against my barren face, all of this incoherence means
another life—and yet I am
writing myself into it, inscribing my name on every
root and trunk, a stump full
of initials pointing in each direction, signals
to anyone passing only
that someone, once, was here and wanted to be known.

DRONE

I drove all day the day
before, arrived in time for
the rehearsal dinner,

 early in fact, early
enough to stop
 at a coffeeshop

that even a decade before
would not have existed—
revitalization at its finest

 —and then to the farmland
where, of course, Graham was
 to be married; it made sense,

then and now, for him to be married
at a farm, and as I waded
through something

 that, if it wasn't actually
a cornfield, certainly feels
 like one in hindsight,

the photographer pulled a drone
along with him and then let it
fly up and up, even let

 Graham handle it a little, and
if I did not, exactly, think
 of Syria, or bombs, or whether or

not Hillary's foreign policies
would be harmful
to the Middle East, those thoughts

 were not distant
from my mind, as a friend still
 called me once a month

to tell me how great
Bernie was, even after
I told him primary

voting had already happened
in Tennessee, even after I
told him I would have

picked Hillary if I'd been
in town because
she seemed more practical,

had more of a chance
to win, and what I wanted
to say to Graham

after seven hours of driving
from a place where love felt far away
was perhaps love celebrated

in a field, under a tree, can last,
but maybe it shouldn't
in a world where drones can

photograph someone in one place and
photograph someone in another place and
the contexts can be

utterly opposite, and one makes
children smile and clap
their hands and the other makes

children afraid of a cloudless day,
a day like when Graham made
a vow, I witnessed it and

thought things would get better.

A HISTORY OF POULTRY

My father is a boy, is not yet
my father when he visits
a relative's farm for the day
to see, more than likely,
the chickens run the yard
and maybe play with the cows,
the goats, the expected farmtime
routine that is sewn
into our collective unconscious
as if on a pillow in grandmother's
house; but there's a hitch
in this idyllic day: someone
forgot to tell (or assumed
there would be no reason
to mention) how chickens behave
when decapitated, how
running in play and running
in death throes look the same
from behind a fence or even
inside, the red still stuck
in one's vision even years
later, leading to no chicken
restaurants for your family,
and no closing your eyes
when it only brings the memory
running back at full speed.

A HISTORY OF GENEALOGIES

Solomon Osborne loved his step-father,
last name Wood, like a father and so,

when he had a son, named him Wood Osborne,
after this man who he made his blood,

when Nature couldn't. All this is said to me,
breathlessly, by my father, who loved

his own step-dad with his entire throat,
and wanted to share this quirk in our lineage

with me. And I can imagine my father
recognizing in Solomon something

he might have wished onto me. Another son,
named Roy, perhaps, or my own name

changed, a symbol to say something and mean it.
For once, perfect communication.

All the lights in a house left on to let a wayward son know
he can always come home.

AFTER SUNLIGHT
After Charles Wright

everything feels like Mercy,
the grackles hopping like nuns upon

a broken path,
 their eyes pinned on us
as we kneel into the ground we

love, fold our hands and wonder who

will save this land next. What have
we taught each other, what learned?

The sky runs forward, to
find itself broken like the broken path, to preach
at those of us

 with listening ears, but
not listening hearts. There is not

a reason within us, nothing to
say, no action left but to pray.

A HISTORY OF FITNESS

My father prepares for his first
track meet with a Dr. Pepper,
and I think of how thick colas

stick to stomachs, ingratiate
themselves into our blood.

The gun,
imagined or not, goes off, and

my father runs. My grandmother
and great-grandmother in the stands,
maybe. Or no one watches him

take a step and see himself in
flight. He looks over his shoulder
and beholds enemies arrayed

behind, and then the twinge of gut,
the muscles pull and bend. He falls.
Or maybe he never exits

his starting gait. He flexes once,
goes down. Grandmother rushes toward
him. The coach rushes toward him, too.

An ambulance arrives. He sits
on the bench, an ice pack and orange
in each hand. Or maybe nothing

happened. I am making most of
this up. His version of the tale
is quicker: *I collapsed. I drink*

water. For over forty years
he has been pure in this way I
reject almost daily, unless

my body tells me it would like
some more water, a little tea,
anything but more coffee and

soda, more pizza and grilled cheese.
I remember this story more

grandly than he told it; I am

compelled to tell it in a way
that makes him heroic. My dad
made a choice and kept making it.

Child of the fifties, child with no
father to speak of until his
teens, child of near-unwavering

faith, who are you asking me to
be with your question of a life?

ODE TO MARK ROTHKO

[ORANGE AND YELLOW]

Spent an hour in a Durham art gallery, watching
a film, an entire landscape stripped to pink. The grass,
the sky, the rivers all one. In a pitchblack room,
the same color reverberating every corner.

[ORANGE, RED, YELLOW]

Can't stop myself from writing about what I am doing:
writing, thinking about what color the sky will be
when it ends, watching television in my pajamas. I look
at your shadow, Mark, and I do not see anything.

[BLUE, GREEN, AND BROWN]

Blue: for the color blue, its inherent blueness:
The Blue Boy, The Blue Period, all of the blues
that you wore in your life. Green: for the wild
earth. Brown: the stain left on kitchen marble.

[YELLOW BLUE ORANGE]

Achilles did not recognize it at first: the body
brought back was not the body that had left
that morning, laughing. His helmet daubed
with other men's blood. The limbs at right angles,
the spear still standing in the ribcage.

[MAGENTA, BLACK, GREEN ON ORANGE]

You could have used any color—all color—to describe
the world. You could have found yourself anywhere
at all to describe. I could have described you in any way
I wanted, a circle, a rectangle, a square filling with every color
I can recall, a single image suspended on a blank-faced wall.

“SOMETHING HAPPENS TO YOU OUT THERE”

--Edgar Mitchell, Apollo 14 astronaut

Something happens to you down here, too. Something happens down there: Death Valley, the Marianas Trench, something happens in every hillock and low area if you pay attention. Something happening is not the surprise; it's the change of perspective, not the changing climes that are to blame, a kaleidoscope at the wrong end is a blindfold, a change in opinion at the wrong time is an apple fallen from a tree, waiting to be picked up, and thrown out. *Something* happens to be the watchword, when I say *something* you say *no thanks*, when I say *happens* you say *get on it with it*. Start it all over. Count the not-white, not-males who have felt something happen without needing to fly to the moon. Look: something is always happening.

STORYTELLING

When I start these stories, they do not stop,
they keep rolling out of my mouth

like a river, maybe? Or something less
expected. If I say
Like that boulder from the Indiana Jones

movie,
you know what I mean, right?
You know that I mean to speak a better

story than that?
All I have, at this point,
are bad stories, but I keep telling them:
the broken ankle, the dead fingernail;

my body can become a story
if required,
but I'd prefer my story a body, the words

a life of their own, Pinocchio to my Geppetto,
obviously. Obviously, I don't know
anything about stories. I can keep talking

but who is listening, really?
Who can know
I say too much, but I mean it, too.

GHOST STORIES

I visited the Hermitage in fourth grade, heard stories
about possible ghosts, but they made no impression on me,

unlike the time in San Diego I visited an old mansion
and was told ghosts wander the backyard

we were currently wandering through. My aunt
who loves ghosts played along, moved

the high grass, pointed, laughed when I jumped
out of my skin, temporarily left my body,

towards sky, returning older, and not particularly wiser.
Another kid afraid of what life after death means: an eternity

with the same neuroses that haunted me in life, still
trying to please everyone, if only they could see me.

ON GAMEBOYS

we compared notes on
which Pokémon were best

we grew up know someone
long enough and pain becomes

integral as joy each goodbye
bracing against whatever—

train with no whistle
screen fading to white

MORNING RITUALS

Based on a Line by Jessica Guzman

The Clay Aikens feared dying first, the thirst
that lack of spotlight yields. He started as a single
Clay Aiken, the one we all knew with the smiling face
and aw-shucks demeanor, but each day he woke
after coming in second on *AI*, a new Clay Aiken appeared
beside the last one until he had to rent an entire block
of apartments for all the Clay Aikens he was. He sent one
Clay Aiken to Broadway, one to *Dancing with the Stars*, another
ran for Congress, unsuccessfully. The Clay Aikens became a father,
grew their hair out, lived their life in peace. All this wanting
became a bore. The Clay Aikens settled down, let their dog out
each morning, smiled when Raleigh fetched the paper.
The Clay Aikens never see their face under headlines,
and this excites them. Somewhere, Ruben Studdard is alone,
crying. This, too, excites them. The neighbors
barely recognize them as The Clay Aikens anymore,
That's just Clay, they say, and it's true. The Clay Aikens
go to yoga at 6:15 every morning, punctual as Ryan Seacrest,
though perhaps not as well-groomed these days. In their lululemons,
the Clay Aikens appear average, their classmates point and say,
Clay Aikens, they're just like us behind their hands
and into their cellphones. The Clay Aikens go home,
search "Clay Aiken" on Twitter, check their Google Alerts.
The number of tweets about Clay Aiken is less than
the number of Clay Aikens, and Google is tired
of keeping up with the Clay Aikens. The first
Clay Aiken pulls out an old Philips VCR, watches the dust
dance as he blows on the small of its back and plugs
it into his flatscreen. From behind a portrait of himself,
he pulls a tape labeled "LORD OF RINGS RETURN OF KING"
and pushes it into the VCR's mouth. The VCR gulps.
Clay hits the triangle, watches himself
sing Billy Joel, Elton John, The Beatles, Simon
and Garfunkel. In the stale air of his apartment,
Clay Aiken feels alive for a moment. The other Clay Aikens
fall silent. No pleas, no songs. When the tape regurgitates,
Clay forcefeeds the VCR again. He wakes
the next morning, still by himself, makes coffee for one,
and a muffin. Kisses his child on one of the soft spaces
where, someday soon, bones will grow. "Not yet," he says.
"Not today." At the door, the mailman hands Clay
Aiken an envelope that reads *I blame you. xoxo R.S.*
Next morning, there is a Clay Aiken in bed

with Clay Aiken and nothing to watch on TV.

THE STATE BIRD

Some scientist, or natural anthropologist, must have thought that to echo another's sound always means you are making fun and not that you, too, are searching for yourself, even when you do not know who or what you are. Especially then. Before Harper Lee, mockingbirds still meant something. State bird of Tennessee, Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, Texas. A gray-feathered thing that flies. Look, I don't know what I can tell you that you can't know somehow. Where are you that a mockingbird can't, also, be? Close this window and open a new one, type *mockingbird* in the blank row where, often, you type *what is wrong with me*. See what appears. Try to find what doesn't. Hiding between what is said, the white spaces that are never written upon. The gaps between letters on a page.

A mockingbird wings
over them. Like winter will
never return, it soars.

SIX DEGREES OF JOHN TYLER

Todd means fox.

* * *

I watched Disney's *Robin Hood* as a child, imagined myself wandering Sherwood Forest, whistling.

* * *

Sherwood Forest is the name John Tyler gave to the plantation he bought after he left the White House, a plantation formerly owned by William Henry Harrison, whose job Tyler also assumed.

* * *

John Tyler's grandson is still alive in the same place where 150 years ago his grandfather owned up to 90 slaves in a Virginia that Tyler hoped would one day be slave-free more through luck or happenstance than any act on his part.

* * *

I have lived in states that wished, once, they were not part of any Union, and still wish.

* * *

Likely, the lack of sanitation in the White House killed Harrison, not the lack of a coat in a storm, but we love our stories in America. Like to laugh at how foolish people were. John Tyler called himself an outlaw while enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act.

* * *

The sun beating down was an annoyance. He put a hand over his eyes and gazed on what he'd accomplished. It seemed so much, to him. Enough.

A HISTORY OF TREES

In elementary school, I had to conduct
a Leaf Project. I visited Grandma,

who helped me identify the leaves
in her yard. She told me about them

and also about what happened in those
trees at night: men gathered and burnt

God, wore white masks. *They're bad men.*
This was Tennessee in the 90s.

She wasn't specific. It is easy to believe
the history books are already written,

that they all end in 1968, with tragedy that is
also, somehow, victorious. I can't make

that story make sense. I can't square the Nashville
of my childhood with the one that has TV shows

named after it. In no way do I consider
anything resolved. The Confederate flags

in my high school parking lot I did not confront
are a scourge. I can't tell you anything about

leaves or trees or why anyone decides
what to do. Sometimes I still pray. But mostly

I hope that when I stoop to pick up a leaf, I will stand
to find the forest
gone.

ODE TO YOUR MONUMENTS, YOUR STATE PARK, AND ME

I can picture my great-great-great grandfather
marching in your company. He christened
his son after you, and so on, and here I am:

a skeptic of the efficacy of names
after so many years. What have we
learned? I don't want to be known as anything

anymore. They moved one of your statues.
Not the one by the highway—technically Private
Property. (The local government almost

passed legislation to cover that one in leaves. But your eyes
still see every car that passes.) Your hands cover
more of this state than Polk or Jackson. What have we

done? I cannot wish myself free of this town anymore
than you could. I heard that you repented
your robes and your anger, hot and stark

against a starless sky. I understand the impulse.
I, too, have claimed regret for the choices I stumbled through. Still,
I recant you and my fathers

who wore your name without complaint. I keep
washing my clothes, but they always return
a dazzling white, the spoilt flesh hiding underneath,

starched but rotting. Last July, the governor called
your day “a worthy observance.” Some cultures allow children
to name themselves, spend years without anything

to call them but “Child.” This is not one of those
places. Here: names and words still mean
more than we think. Prayers from above fall on

our silence the way rain collects in open palms.

A HISTORY OF GARDENING

Both of my grandfathers have gardens
—roses, zucchini, okra, beauty
and utility. I would like a garden to call
out to once a week, after dark,
how are you? If the flowers crook
their stems, if the bushes stop
rustling, I will take that as answer.
Keep watch over them as a trellis.

I will take my time, bend into
their ears, whisper sweet somethings,
tuck them in, pat their beds with water
from a metal can. Even after death,
my grandfathers' work continues.
The gardens return what they have received.

Some people can do a lot with a small
plot, but I am useless even in an expanse.
The ground is patient, it will do what it can,
but first: action is required. Rain may fall,
may wash the ground or flood us all away.
I could wither, could decide not to stay.
My grandfathers have gardens; I will have what remains.

RE:

Sometimes I believe in something like karma,
or not that, exactly, but the idea that if bad
occurs to me, I probably deserve it, like the skinned
knee I received after a jog—in my apartment
complex, looking at my phone, I missed a step
I'd walked down a hundred times. Or, the emails
from a group of Boise soccer parents who want
me to show up at every game—*It's very important.*
I don't want to tell them I'm not their friend,
just an impostor with a new Comcast account.
For all the emails or text messages unreplied,
the conversations left unstarted, this is my penance:
find me sitting in bleachers 2000 miles from my home,
sweating in bright blue, praying that this is enough.