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ZONA

by

Zachary Williams

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

This dissertation is a collection of poems written between 2011 and 2019. *Zona* the title of the book, meditates on themes of precarity, loss, imagination, and transformation. Drawing from both the Surrealist and Deep Image traditions, the book comments on life and aesthetic experience under late-stage capitalism.

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DEDICATION

Zona is dedicated to Maisy Ellinger as well as the memories of Renate Williams, Moises Santiago, and Mary, Calvin, and Ronald Rishel.

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INTRODUCTION

Though I do not consider myself a writer of openly political poetry or fiction, my theoretical concerns nonetheless populate much of my artistic output. As a Marxist in both my scholarship and political leanings, I often have difficulty squaring the tensions between frivolity and necessity at the center of creative practice. In many ways, *Zona* is a book that seeks to reconcile those tensions. The collection draws its title from the Zone, a strange, quasi-mystical space in Andrei Tarkovsky's film, *Stalker* (1979). Cordoned off by the oppressive state at the center of the film's world, the lush, verdant space that constitutes the Zone is presented in marked contrast to the otherwise sepia-toned locations presented elsewhere in the film. A bunker lies at the center of the Zone, and in that bunker a room that will reveal one's greatest unconscious desire and grant it if the traveler possesses the fortitude to navigate the ever-shifting landscape that surrounds it. *Zona* references and attempts to enact this space, one where maintaining imagination is a kind of discipline, where separations and contradictions can be reconciled, reconstructed, and transcended. The book's thematic through line may best be described as the speakers' attempts to maintain imagination in a world that continues to foreclose its possibility. It is a work concerned with closing the gap between a rational world that exists and a marvelous world that can be creatively constructed.

James Wright, in a review of Pablo Neruda's *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, remarked, "I want poetry to make me happy, but the poetry I want should deal with the hell of our lives or else it leaves me cold" (191). What I find interesting in this statement is the notion is the central tension between joy and "the hell of our lives." In fact, I would argue that the tension proves utterly necessary in the construction of a successful poem.

The title poem of the collection serves as a kind of mission statement in this regard, illustrating agonistic reality, the possibility of agency, and the chance of transcendence:

Is it enough to vanish
 into the greenery,
 breadcrumb trail fading as soon as it's cast?

Like you were never meant to find your way
 back into the place that comes to kill you
 when your eyes open?

One must scorch their Americana—
 neons, cookie jars, checkered flags—
 and laugh. Don't say anyone's gone to Hell.
 The place doesn't exist. I can prove it.

The poem—and the book as a whole—gestures toward the possibility of finding something constructive in the mess, that imagination is one key to doing just that.

At the center of my notion of imagination is the image. In fact, most of my poems begin from an isolated image, one that, like the Deep Image poets assert, arises from a space in the mind, usually informed by a dream. Perhaps this stems from my love for cinema, especially the films of David Lynch, Luis Buñuel, and Tarkovsky, whose works often resemble dreams in their willingness to eschew rationality. Buñuel's penchant for social criticism, as illustrated by films like *The Phantom of Liberty* and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, treads the line between madcap comedy and moral depravity. Lynch, perhaps my biggest filmic influence, renders the most quintessentially American spaces—Hollywood, the small mountain town of Twin Peaks, the North Carolina suburbs—as sites of crisis, fragmentation, hallucination, and transformation. All engage in disruptions and critique of received ideas regarding the nature of their respective mediums and cultural norms. Though I would never qualitatively place my own work

alongside these figures, my political and creative concerns run adjacent to them. As such, I situate my aesthetic within the Surrealist tradition.

If the original surrealist project sought to shock complacent society out of a tacit acceptance of industrialization, scientific management, and consumer culture, the American version adopts a more chameleonic approach. I tend to err on this side of the Atlantic with regards to influences. The Deep Image poets used images as a vehicle to transcend the regimented forms then in vogue, to distill the operations of the unconscious mind and the images they produced in order to transmit emotion to readers. Like European surrealists, they wished to mitigate the doldrums of modern life. Robert Kelly, who with Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Wakoski laid the foundations for the Deep Image aesthetic, believed that “the present and necessary function of poetry is the transformation of the perceived world...We are given: 1 world to transform, 1 language to transform it with” (9). Rather than employing automatic writing and other chance operations, however, the Deep Image poets practiced the “rational manipulation of irrational materials” (Haskell qtd. in Bushell). Instead of eschewing connection and meaning-making, the desired effect is to allow readers to make connections, to reach beyond their own purview into something more universal.

Robert Bly, a poet who, along with Wright, was part of the later incarnation of the Deep Image movement, illustrates this relationship in “What the Image Can Do”:

...the difference between a literature that includes the image, and a literature that excludes the image (such as the newspaper or scientific Newtonian essay) is that the first helps us to bridge the gap between ourselves and nature...a human being can reach out with his right hand to the natural world, and with his left hand to the

world of human intelligence, and touch both at the same moment...What is the power that enables us to do that reaching? Barfield says it is imagination...unable to accept the severe categorizations of outer and inner, divine and human, intelligence and matter, that Aristotle and later Descartes acquiesced in. (48)

The primacy of image in poetry serves multiple functions, the first being the transmission of meaning. Emotions, likewise, are played upon by image; in fact, images are often what make emotional investment in a poem possible. They allow the kind of reaching that Bly describes and that I seek in the construction of my own poems. Reaching, to me, is a fundamental aspect of all aesthetic experience, and sensory engagement is ultimately what drives much of the work I do as a poet.

Kaja Silverman, whose book, *World Spectators*, serves as the inspiration for three poems in *Zona*, positions “looking” as a kind of reaching, a means through which to develop reverence for the world and, thus, ethical sensibilities. She starts by critiquing Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” and its implications for how we experience reality. According to the allegory, what is considered “Good” exists beyond what is merely represented on the cave wall. The viewer must turn from these representations, which are mere shadows and deceptions, toward the world of Forms (ideas), where viewers may “come face to face with the self-present, the self-same, that which forever Is” (2). This demands a movement from the phenomenological to the ideological, resulting in “the undoing of appearance,” an enterprise which Silverman ultimately contends is not good, but rather evil (2, 17). Such an act results in a type of blindness, which holds existential ramifications:

Being is precisely what the world loses when it is eclipsed in this way. Darkness precipitates the loss of Being because it is only insofar as creatures and things appear that they can Be. Finally, it is we alone who determine whether the world will appear, and so Be, or languish in the darkness of non-Being. We bring things into light by looking, in the strongest and most important sense of that word. We conceal them when we fail to look in this way: when we neglect to exercise the visual agency with which our subjectivity entrusts us. (7)

Silverman makes the case that we must, instead, turn to the world, to accept the phenomenological as the good, to see and be seen. Though she speaks specifically about specular experience, one could just as easily situate all sensory experience within the context of her argument. When applied to poetry, the “look” becomes “the image,” those sensory engagements that make a poem possible if one wishes to move beyond abstraction and ideology. Silverman’s similarities to Bly are striking in this regard. She, like Bly, rejects the separations entailed by capitulating to the purely objective and purely rational thought. Each seeks a return, Bly to passion, Silverman to desire.

The three “World Spectators” poems that appear throughout the book present both the need to cultivate this kind of vision and the difficulties therein. The first sets up the conflict that spurs the action of the other two, the speaker rendered passive by both lack of self-possession and loss:

We drip
 into foreground

 like a river or rain cloud.
 Hanging around too long

made me mere feature.

Lost my tongue,
two-of-three dimensions.

An empty outline shares the bed.

The other two “World Spectators” poems turn from this passivity in that they provide strategies for addressing the stasis at the center of the first. If the book has a backbone, one which synthesizes its metaphysical, aesthetic, and ethical concerns, Silverman’s work and the poems it inspired provide it. For this reason, the book’s final section, “Spooky Action,” takes a quote from Silverman as an epigraph: “...the world is not in competition with our dreams. On the contrary, it intends toward the newness and braveness which they alone provide” (143). She appears, like the surrealists, to appeal to the need for the marvelous, the necessity of imaginative apprehension of the world to bring it to its full potential. I would argue that such a tendency is ultimately a Romantic one.

Contemporary surrealist poet Garrett Caples makes such a case. In his essay, “Surrealism Is a Romantic Critique of the Avant-Garde from Within,” Caples critiques both Language Poetry and Conceptual Poetry as being too academic and too attention-starved, respectively. For him, each has disappeared into a status-quo of a kind, into places where poetry does not exist. What he claims as permanently revolutionary—surrealism—is an antidote:

...surrealism identifies so much of itself with poetry. This is perhaps no shock, given that its elaboration begins at the hands of a group of poets. As it is an attempt to integrate the real with the dream, so too is surrealism an attempt to infuse reality with poetry, by attending to those phenomena deemed irrational, like chance, coincidence, love. (Caples)

It should be clear now why I have placed so much emphasis on imagination and sensory experience at the expense of regimentation; I wish to create a world worthy of being seen, one different from the one we are invited—and often forced—to accept. Part of that is being inviting, and the kind of surrealism I prefer is a one that retains a sense of romance rather than mere shock and awe. As such, the use of anomalous images throughout *Zona* attempts to defamiliarize the otherwise quotidian, the otherwise tragic.

Joy and humor prove key in this regard, and one of the ways in which I diverge from the Deep Image aesthetic as it is commonly perceived, even within their own cohort. Though there is a deep sense of joy in much of Bly and Wrights work, especially in their depictions of awe in the presence of nature, there is little in the way of lightness. Wright, discussing his relationship to surrealism, remarked that “The key feature of surrealism is that its funny,” implying that his own work, and much of the Deep Image aesthetic, did not aspire to this criteria (Wright). While I agree with his assertion, I also believe that surrealism can be both serious and lighthearted; in fact, such work is at its most successful, at least in poetry, when navigating the perceived gulf between the two.

In this regard, I align myself with writers like Caples and Heather Christle with regards to a Romantic conception of surrealism and the latter’s critique of Bly, specifically. Christle, writing about Bly’s foundational essay, “The Wrong Turning in American Poetry.” Christle’s criticism, aside from the essay’s blatantly misogynistic treatment of Marianne Moore, lies in his denigration of lightness in tone. Bly writes, “Often in recent United States poetry the poet adopts a genial, joshing tone, indicating that what he is saying doesn’t seem to be of any importance, even to him” (qtd. in Christle). Bly’s critique is characteristically prescriptive and limiting, and one that

Christle rightfully bristles at: “It seems to me there is immense danger in the belief that one possesses the ability to distinguish “real poetry” from whatever else one has decided to deplore. It makes one look a self-righteous fool...I’m still pro-duende. I’m just also not anti-light” (“In Which I Find Myself in Disagreement with Robert Bly”). Christle is correct in her consternation over Bly’s dismissive and prescriptive position, and his cantankerousness is perhaps why Bly’s own work sometimes struggles to tap into that passion he chases. Passion manifests in myriad guises; to say that humor or lightness is not one of those manifestations seems inherently wrongheaded and limiting. It also engages in the fallacy that one needs to be unfailingly serious if one is to have any political valence. Perhaps this is true for Bly’s own practice, yet I find that play, especially in the hyper-regimented culture in which we now live, proves as revolutionary, if not more so, than mere scolding.

Perhaps this is why, despite my love for much of Bly and other Deep Image poetry, I gravitate toward poets like James Tate, whose entire career seems concerned with bridging these competing tendencies. In an interview conducted by Charles Simic, another of my key influences, Tate remarked that “I love my funny poems, but I’d rather break your heart. And if I can do both in the same poem, that’s the best” (Tate).

Elaborating further, he also casts this balancing act as a kind of moral imperative:

Simultaneously, we all know that we’re enshrouded in tragedy, lies, and all kinds of evil...beyond what we can contemplate, and yet life is wonderful for those of us who haven’t been directly affected. So we walk around balancing the two all the time. I, for one, am not giving in. I am not going to walk around in tears all day

long. I still want to have a good day if I can...In my poems, I try—God knows, probably unsuccessfully—to bring that home. (Tate)

I would argue that Tate, perhaps my primary poetic influence, is generally successful in this regard. Hopelessness and cynicism, while no doubt understandable and necessary in many ways, provide no means of mobility.

As such, I attempt to play into these conflicting impulses as much as possible, partially for amusement but also out of an investment in providing my poem's with a tension that gives them necessary heat. Throughout *Zona*, loss is almost always subverted by something on the periphery that maintains the appearance of a dream or miracle. For example, "I Place My Hands," inspired by my first experience of euthanizing a dog, aspires to this kind of balancing act. As the poem moves toward its final stanzas, "suffering establishes its own polarity," disallowing any meaning making or commiseration with others beyond the speaker and its companion. Yet the poem makes a final turn, the grief entailed by the event transacted into strange visions and disorientation of commonplace objects. The final line suggests as much: "Back home, the cat does dog things." The closing image is patently silly, yet gestures toward a reconstruction, if not a reincarnation, of the creature whose life has just ended. The poem attempts to answer Tate's imperative in his poem, "South End": "The challenge is always to find the ultimate in the ordinary horseshit" (Tate).

This, to me, constitutes poetry; a means of reaching up from the rubble and touching the ungraspable, of retaining sense when the world goes askew, of enacting a kind of Spooky Action from a Distance. The reach is utterly necessary, the "look" its best means of conveyance. It provides opportunities for revision and construction. If I have

accounted for the aesthetic and thematic concerns at the center of *Zona* in too sprawling a fashion, it is because I am just now beginning to apprehend what it is I am after as an artist. I ultimately conceive of my project as transacting surrealism into a kind of wish fulfillment, one that might serve as a palliative to the categorically unromantic times in which we find ourselves. *Zona*, then, is ultimately a call to continue looking, to continue moving, to find a means of orienting oneself in a treacherous, ever-shifting space.

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Zona

I used to be darker, then I got lighter, then I got dark again.
-Bill Callahan

Thinking abstractly about color hasn't done me any real good.
-Frank Stella

House Sitting: A Study

Contemporary house sitting is an art.
Keen processes required to account
for parallel universes. Wired for omnipresence,

I must occupy each room
at once in altered costume,
illustrating my sympathetic imagination.
I become homunculus
home, another house within

the larger structure. I choose
cautious gestures, fashion
miniature models of each
room's ideal self.

For the less vain, simple forts
of blankets thrown over sofas suffice.
The house will, for a moment, feel total.

For my aid, it teaches me to exist in tableaux,
interpret tensions between floorboards,
to read the discrete symbologies of floor plans,
their secret histories. Did you know
houses lured tenants to their doors with dogs
and songs? They took centuries to tame.

Discipline

I found that I could not choose a subject, throw it out of focus, and then have a good picture. I had to learn to see No-Focus from the beginning.

-Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Homeschool

I'll bide my time
in the backyard,
dripping with camouflage.
Prance in mama's boots
or papa's pumps,
steep daffodil tea,
tie string around wasps
and walk them. Or better yet:
build a tree house to fall from.

Sentimental Journey

Lagniappe was on
mouths everywhere, but
the doctor took one look at me,
said that credit would
make renters of us all.
My score follows as I crawl
home, the strings swell
when I throw a chair
through the ice cream shop
window. Glass is gone, already.
Streetlights swoon, kneel, withdraw.
When I arrive, mother says
I'm growing, glacially so.

Waiting on the Results

How long? Enough to draw Pinocchio
noses on every portrait in the magazines.

Beard finally filled in.
Three ladies' hair turned white;
they were ground-bound by sunset.

Contractors tore the building down around us,
replaced it with a Radio Shack,
tore that down and built a nail salon.
Mani-pedis on the reg. Purple
lacquered my toes, save the red big ones.

Fell asleep from fumes, woke to big fat breakfast.
A woman I'd locked eyes with inquired,
"What will you do if the prognosis is good?"

"I hadn't thought of that. Perhaps
wait it out under a chair here, like a dog,
so no one sees." She was next, in and out
like a gas pump. I'd like to say I was gone,

but I'm still here. I've forgotten my name,
so I'll take yours.

My Doppelgänger and Me

My doppel dresses at dawn,
nun's habit and knee-highs.
I don my Uncle kit, pre-gripped,
creek-bound, covered in pictures
and pelts. Can't leave the house
without tamping down my tusks.
We take turns menacing each other
in the parking garage, hidden

under respective cars. He was a fish
monger in a previous life we shared,
one where I plotted revenge against
a sea that pilfered my first mate.
We clashed where water met the sand.
Sometimes the sun swallowed shadow,
what animated us inside. Now as then,
his life is unlike mine in every way.

Rumschpringe

Two boys died on this thing,
years ago, and I shout that

to you over the groan of metal
joints, the Foreigner. Then that stiff,

white bucket flies off; you flung it.
Neons streak across the wild lashing

of your Anabaptist hair, curl me
in it. You are sixteen. You are

leaving. Coach said so in detention
while I wrote your name two-hundred times,

inhaled you as chalk dust.
He looked up and laughed, said

I wasn't cut out for the work,
that these hands couldn't raise

a house. The splinters would grow
to be too much. My girth

would stretch the doorways.
He, for once, is right, I think.

But I could steer horses, pump
a well if I tried. Or build

a birdhouse, shrink myself
to live inside, hang outside

your window and sing to you.
God, I could travel, too.

My First Expedition

On a plane and I've almost managed
not talking to the man sitting next to me.
Just as I put my book on moth husbandry
down, he says, "Good?" "Yeah, I think
it's going places." He hums a thing
that sounds like, "I get it." Then nothing.
When we de-board he trades
his jeans and polo for a beekeeper's
uniform. "Airport business," he says.
The captai plants a kiss on his cheek.
Terminal-side, everyone stands behind
glass and claps. I bow and wave, accept
my bouquet of lilies, my wreath of hornets' nests.

Walking Through a Poorly-Planned Botanical Garden in Winter

Perennials, no one thought
to plant. The place appears
to have always been here

as consequence. The flowerless
topiaries resemble cliff faces,
lattice work choked by dead vines.

An odd bee pierces the illusion
of gray sky, which opens like a tire
that won't stop sobbing.

Philosophers in the Airport Bar

1. In Which Mill and Nietzsche Go to Happy Hour

It's precisely as you'd imagine.

Mill clutches

a small stuffed giraffe.

Nietzsche holds

a white kashmir sweater. They discuss,

at length, the sweater.

They discuss

at length, a world in which

a giraffe is also somehow a rhinoceros.

JSM—surprise!—is first to cry,

a flock of sparrows, to be precise;

a flock of sparrows actually

exited our man's eyes.

2. In Which Hildegard Von Bingen and Sister Corita Kent Go to Happy Hour

Corita: Do you need an Ibuprofen?

Hildegard: No; I'm cresting.

3. In Which Leibniz and Hume Go to Happy Hour

It does not go as expected, as neither is happy.

Hume is in his element, but takes no joy in Leibniz's

discovery: the Monadology imploding

before his eyes in bursts of blue crystal.

For his part, Gottfried makes the best of it,

his differential and integral calculus

on the tip of every drunk prof tongue.

What certainty, Hume thinks.

And here, fallen, grown corpulent,

just like me. Despite their ages not exactly

adding up, the Utilitarian crying sparrows

at the bar's corner table, actual-

Spinoza slicing lemons and pouring

genever, he is not certain where

he is, only that it may yet be

the best of all possible worlds.

Oracular Trash!

Behold! my nude
in cracked bird bath.
Saint Sebastian reenactment
with lawn darts. I'm growing
from my shoes. Once made
witch board with actual witch.
Sludge cloning in the driveway.
This house is cobbled from
a haunted erector set, most bits
disappeared into mattress realms,
long gone to sidewalk.

Discipline I

Everything adopts religious
overtones. Item: cup holder/holy
grail. Water was never
wet, never was wetter. At the start
there was a body huddled for warmth.
I am tricking myself into another
body, shiny, barely corporeal
body. I wish for an ancient
body, my future soft geometry,
to fall inside and be overwhelmed.
By which I mean, I am learning to
take leave of my insignificant arrangement.

In the Parking Lot of Forking Whatever

As someone who joined the cult of Eat Shit and Die
in the middle aughts, I get it: you here/now—like
a paper cup marooned in a car park,
straddling the white line while your insides
condense, card stock ready to bottom out
and spill what's left onto the tar.

During the right rush hour, the scene resembles
a memorial garden commemorating thirsts
most busted. We all aspire to accidental beauty.
But if you keep waiting, all you'll find is ska's
final frontier, a menagerie of import cigarette butts.

Really, we could go on forever talking at Euro
babes in broken Deutsch; you and I both
know that Europe won't be around forever.

There are two exits, as entrances mark means of escape,
even in this junked real estate. Myriad possible futures.
You could grow eight arms, berate line cooks
while balancing plates. Perhaps some Paris fantasy
of hash and moped femmes, a boy with ASMR you can sift
through bags of rice with.

Or, you say “fuck that.” You leave the surface.
Upon exiting hyperspace, you may find yourself
accessory again, the organelle on some alien rock
lad's paisley-print bandana. Yet from this vantage,
you discover new species. Cue narration: *Note
the smallish mandibles. At the center of their plumes,
a mouth. It rubs its eyes.*

*They are always waving independently of each other,
never seizing anything.* And you there/now—
gathering mass.

The Body and Its Facts

When looking at any significant work of art, remember that a more significant one probably has had to be sacrificed.

-Paul Klee

Meeting the Furnace

Why do you rumble,
blush beneath the door?

*To keep you warm. What will
you give in return?*

What will you take?

*Burnt offering of your skin.
Leave it on my shoulder
once daily. I'll read your future.*

You've already taken
the elbows. What do they say?

*They say stop;
stop running. They say, child,
look me in the eye when you speak.*

Are You Gonna Walk a Mile?

or will you stand bolt-upright
at the thing in front of you,
unfolding itself like a lion, or
otherwise vomiting grasshoppers?

A voice asked me this in a dream
as I sat astride an opulent pillow
that told me awful things.

The sun was like a clock. The ocean:
a cask of ill wine. Everyone had
spider eyes. And a Cadillac spine.

I wake up so full of eyes,
I can't close a single one.

World Spectators 1
After Kaja Silverman

We drip
into foreground

like a river or rain cloud.
Hanging around too long

made me mere feature.
Lost my tongue,
two-of-three dimensions.

An empty outline shares the bed.

Painting for Beginners: A Study

It's amazing how things collect
so much dust the paint lies under
as afterthought. Best to lie down.

Best to focus on the window pane
that houses hundreds of dead flies
trapped between glass, wood, glass.

I have broken the first rule. I haven't shown.
I haven't shown a thing. For example, sound
of your shoe striking the hood. You cleaved

wet air. How could that be seen,
except as a line in space, tracing the arc of travel
from twenty-three to null?.

What can be known beyond the red light,
your slight frame, stillness under sheath of rain
whose motion is likewise static?

My First Friends and Where They Went

When you vanished, another occupied
the space. Almost eerie, the same
though larger, the space and what took it.

How could it not be? When once no words
got said, you sang to me in psychic blooms,
but not for long. Less time to lose the paw,
less time for everything, it turned out.

I blinked and you'd sunken into where
the mouth was, teeth transmuted into blight grown,
another half-life lambent in nauseous hospitals,
extinguished by lack of air. I'm ashamed to say

I cannot think of you at all, save the moments
my own teeth turn against me, or when
my waxen skin strikes light like yours.

Fugue View Master®

Like waiting for last year's
calendar to reach relevance.

Again.

Or calculating the youngest
you remember your mother:
twenty-five. The year of

the accident.

I no longer think of things
not being underfoot.
The evidence is

in the grass.

Flower
after Brooke Ellsworth

stop calling it a super moon
or a figurative chain mail
making a perimeter about a person
it wasn't yet D-Day

I felt an approximate ultraviolet
noise filling a leaky lifeboat
was daughter to the natural bridge

it was vicious boredom
that things died so you can too
strange there never being china
in the air packed with invectives

I'm leaving a blood moon
without kneeless

Elegy: The Body and Its Facts

I can say, for instance,

the woman I am learning to love is beautiful
only after I leave her in the car

to spare her der Körper my grandmother
barely occupies, strapped to a bed in a room
where the rot of departing is etched in linoleum.

Renate, von Deutschland, Einhundertfünfundsiebzig Zentimeter,
Einundvierzig Kilogramm, translucent,

on the verge of cracking in two, gut filled with tar,
hair, half-formed teeth. She seethes through spaces

where her mouth used to be. The unwashedness clings
to the crowded air. In this room
that is ein Körper unto itself,
die Fakten only apparent in recollection. Take, for example,

her Körper, former Bolshevik,
the vessel that carried her first
child across our eastern sea.

She failed to see it all coming: black eyes,
anger that marred her daughters, tiny cuts on her hands
she felt when she drank away the crushed Körper

of her murdered brother—emptied in a Frankfurt
flat—the growing gulf between her and other
Frauen who took to Amerikanisch like Hund to
whistle,

sordid politic of losing or not losing
a house, and, finally, the clusters growing
in her lungs and stomach and cortex.

Enter: mein Körper before her,
in the act of transformation
in response to her Transmogrifizierung,
eyes sunken from two-and-a-half sleepless years.

Fever and tremors make mir ihr Bruder,
my age his at time of slaughter,

when his neck split and he drained
for days. She names me Dieter
again and again,
and who can say she is wrong,
that this Körper belongs to me,
is not occupied by sein Geist,

that der Geist of sein Schlächter
won't someday chip my skull away and bore inside?

The television strobos behind,
irradiating our pressure points and small folds,

the places we are most likely found
falling into: mouths, knees, the creases
where our eyelids meet, our throats and bellies.

After her Körper is burnt,
all die Personen are drawn back to the stage.

Cue "Will the Circle be Unbroken."
Her urn is doves and peach, and no one can pronounce her name.

Beifall. Vorhang. We don't bow so much as bend.

Discipline 2

From this day forward,
find the occult
at the bottom of snapped rat
traps and empty Tide bottles. Plant
lily bulbs under every discarded house
slipper. Lift weights with others;
no noise, no eye contact. Pray
at the altar of newsprint. Wrap in Tyvek
to check the mail. Cook alone and depress
appliances. Eat at least one thing while it is alive.

You Can Turn into Just About Anything

I should know. I was born
a can of paint. Now I tell

strangers about my son
who's not real. I tell them

he attends university in Halifax,
Old Paint horses walk right up

and eat off his hands. This is how
you guarantee Christmas, or a gulf

between you and a future. Typically,
I turn slack, watch five Orcas

kill a baby Gray, eat the jaw and tongue,
only to waste the rest. I drain the Earl Grey,

lap the honey from the bottom, curl
pearls around my fingers like hair.

I Was a Teenage Quadruped

When we met they'd cut seams
out your jeans, sewed them
into skirts with the lance

of Longinus. "Not our thing, but it'll make her
more biblical," they said. I was hiding
in the Kingdom Hall's air conditioning duct. No one was

smiling, especially the women. They'd spent
all day building a moat around the place
while elders watched, sipping Tab.

Next Chinese New Year, we reclined
on a rock in the middle of a river; no ants bit us.
You stood before the largest stone I've ever seen.
Dazzled. A Golden Retriever hopped right to the top,

and the thought of you small made me
so angry I transformed into a goat,
followed you knock-kneed to the bank.

You tried feeding: a pear, grapefruit
rinds, five nickel-sized stones.
I took only to a bottle filled with Tab.

When the antlers came, you used them
as candelabras, always finding ways
to make me dazzle.

But I grew heavy, obstructed entry
to restaurants and truck stop
commodes, got us kicked out everywhere.

You read in the *Yee Naldooshi Almanac*
about a shamaness who could make me
boyish again. Loaded into your back seat,
we made it halfway through Wyoming

before finding my own kind queued
outside a rest stop refuge, their rectangle eyes
glowing under street lamps. I butted the wind-
shield until it shattered, arched through,

munitions factory smoke the middle distance.

I woke making toast,
but used too-small bread.
It sank to the bottom, burned
on only one side. Not thinking

I jammed a fork in to claw it out,
got zapped, so good and zapped
my mind went white.

Through the spots in my eyes I spied
the postman through the window,
crowned by tree limbs.

Your letter open on the table, the date
attesting to four years in wilderness,

and that goes for both of us. Both
moving toward a time and place
where all versions of ourselves collapse
into something workable:

restoration of my tongue, opposable
thumbs. Return of your eyes, arms,
your stolen wonder.

I'm so glad you're thriving,
finding the faces in your faux-wood
walls less frightening.

It's the definition of good to know
the asteroid landed just adjacent to your house.

Work/

Not Work

“You won’t have to die if you can play!”
They showed him a peculiar instrument.
-Tomas Tranströmer

Hollywood

I have the same dream
same video store
nightly the tapes talk
about their feelings

I feed their spindles Spree
and M&Ms which is a sex

act for them I tell them my life
has always been a movie
and my problems sound petty
compared to theirs better
Heaven but like also Hell

Things I've Done to Improve

Sold my unsavory friends out to The House
Un-American Activities Committee.
Took the truck nuts off.
Replaced my teeth with that candy you like.

Even tore that old fence down,
the one around the theme park,
and now you can ride the roller coasters
not yet underwater. Lost a thumb,
but I wasn't using it. Still, sharks
everywhere, and they hurt.

Tell me, my dear: when I can crawl back,
hatch my eggs in your heating blanket,
sup the last bit of broth from your mug?

I'm sick of wandering these brass-rung streets,
with their sink holes and insincere alarms.
Would much prefer a warm washer-dryer combo
to curl in, perfumed by your fabric softener.

Venus, huff that hot air and guide me home
to that terrestrial towel rack so I may hang,
watch my beloved bathe, interject to remark
the swarm gathered out the window.
Damn, this luck of ours.

Scenes from a Work Week

M.
I turn left
and half the crowd's
in period costume.

T.
Met a woman
in front of the painting
she walked out of.

W.
Serious paper hats.

Th.
Over lunch, we lament
our own absence.

F.
In my margin,
a sparrow explodes

Work/Not Work
after Whitson Ramsey and Holly Boone

you can train your eyes

yet leisure must somehow remain larger

of

because

there's pleasure in b-flat

though I show stillness

minutes despite appearance

though I show stillness

and everything in motion

to find a consensus of angles

at the edge

nothing mastered is a game

presence when colors curve into their inverse

I remain animate

come to weigh a ton

I remain animate

draws a line

World Spectators 2
After Kaja Silverman

Now and then I find myself
a temporal distortion.

You'll know if you're in one.
Space in your peripheral
vision becomes stretched
and everyone talks two
octaves too high.
Sometimes I roll over
the image of myself.
The only thing to do is practice
slow-mo movement, concentrate
your blur in a straight line
as the speed takes you
to the curtain call, the color bars.

Pacific Daylight

1.

There was always smoke
and a smaller sun floating
below the large one. Stars
sang lurid songs all night,
which made sleep pretty

2.

much impossible. On the roof
I looked at the line light traced.
Out toward the empty hills
a giant cactus flowers into view.
When we crested the mesa,

3.

below was all a pit of dirt. We
planted orange trees, coral reefs.
We sleep for days at a time now
that the constellations have a curfew.
No loud music. No music at all.

As If
after William Bronk

You say to ask you
whenever I can
what it's like to see
into the future you came from.

I'm incredulous. Still, I assume
I might try in my bullheaded way
to focus on the image we exit.

Things grow here. Lilies stretch out
in a world that used to not be there.

It disappeared and refused to return.
no matter what. We didn't have to try
all that hard to coax it back to bed.

There's no telling what happens
until after love lunges upon us or
scuttles away. I know it seems
like it doesn't have to, as if
it never had to, not to us.

It's difficult to explain, to color it in.
All I can say is I'm cautious but glad.
After all, it's lovely to pretend

I could be rational
if I put myself out
into the background a while.

Discipline 3

The kingdom did not pop;

The Jiffy Pop did not burn;

The Jiffy Lube serviced 71 automobiles;

The automobiles did not mutiny;

The Automated Teller Machine told me a version of the truth;

The truth is forthcoming, with a thousand free hours;

The thousand free hours will go by like that...

Coda

I don't know how many
years are left, years are right.
They dip their beaks into water
glasses, harbor a grudge
scratched in bronze. Tranquility is
a creature's sneak, tonguing the roof of
its mouth, breath a discordant cloud,
notes staccato. If a spell could be cast,
it would get details wrong on purpose.
I forego the nicety that is the capital-W,
supplicate to the clock arms'
sharpest points. Between midnight
and now, there are haircuts, parlor tricks,
plates of meat and three. I keep walking.
I pray the shoes sing at me.

Zona

Is it enough to vanish
 into the greenery,
 breadcrumb trail fading as soon as it's cast?

Like you were never meant to find your way
 back into the place that comes to kill you
 when your eyes open?

 One must scorch their Americana—
 neons, cookie jars, checkered flags—
 and laugh. Don't say anyone's gone to Hell.
 The place doesn't exist. I can prove it.

Spooky Action

...the world is not in competition with our dreams. On the contrary, it intends toward the newness and braveness which they alone provide.

-Kaja Silverman

Received Form

housed hobby
horse metaphysical
fuckwit of the twenty-first century
my teeth canvas
tongue triptych
purple on account of
the radio
the radio
the radio is sounding
into distance
invisible klaxons
honeycomb made
hieroglyphic hexagon hothouse
total image
of trust soil history of birth
bulging with eucalyptus
before I was born they gave me a name
but I'm sorry you asked about essence

In the Twenty-Third Century

Wendy Carlos's National Anthem
heralds each meal. No evening
to unwrap; our suns only sometimes set.

We'll elect a wisdom tooth oracle
and wind our watches, talk at and into
a tough crowd, one that autopilots,

never misses. An opportunity
presents itself, bows like a butler,
flashes fangs. It is either your life or its.

The Lurch of Cosmic Thrust

Pluto's in Scorpio. Mars retrogrades out its ass. Two lunar events, some planetary alignment nonsense, and coincidences have ceased. Honest to goodness, Andy Griffith stepped out my television screen, very patient with the guests. A bit lecherous. If you listen close enough to the five-second silences bookending the lurch of cosmic thrust, you can almost hear a big voice, one that backs away from saying the thing it came to.

The Atheist Years

I'm not one to be found
topping a temple. Still, don't wish
to watch polemic dress down
a truck stop chapel.

We all get burned into event

horizons; no one's done anything
to deserve that. It's not about not

caring, I promise, it's a matter
of comfort. Because everything is fine

so long as you entropy.
You entropy so long
as no one watches.

Spooky Action from a Distance

The scene can no longer undress
itself. Rooms grow, first hot then cold,
back and forth, until the walls distend
and everyone finds themselves,
outdoors, rising up and up, until
the ceiling announces its arrival. No birds
anywhere, no buzz of bee nor blowfly.
You hear, instead, gasses condensing
around you, the currents that trace and arc
the ground. Just because
I take whatever form I want
does not mean someday one won't be
imposed. Just because a coinage exists
doesn't make it worth its weight
in silver. Things terminate,
regardless of how they seem to maintain
velocity, even in dispersal. Raw-throated,
I'll ululate until you come home, or
find a door to tap upon, you waiting,
immaterial, on the other side.

Coven

I have come into an arcana
while making lemonade
for my school-aged daughters.

Fast-forward to prom
and they have jinx too.

Me and my daughters cross the country
to locate our skinwalker cousins,
stop once in a while to hex a gas station.

My granddaughters and I take turns carving the face.

I twist above my own corpse like a gasp
or smoke ring risen from a circle of salt.

My daughters and their daughters
disperse, conjure husbands and wives.

Their daughters and sons call
from sleep, obey only us.

In My Arms, Many Flowers
after Daniel Schmidt

Perhaps got held too much
or, rather, turned purple.
There's something in the way
disappointment, set like a bear trap,
forces us to feel our sinews.
I have adopted untenable positions.

Only allow tears to the violins or
looming illness. I take teeth
dreams for granted, always turn right
at stop lights. Someone called me
strident, but in an adorable way—
the way they said it, not the affliction
of seeing the world as theoretical-flat.

Maybe one day I'll set upon a valley
carved into the clay, my arms full
of flowers, my hundred children
mobbing me as I approach the porch.
The Earth will crack like an egg,

and we'll discover we can breathe
in space, which isn't as cold
as it lets on. A first impression
proves important, but the seventy
some odd impressions after that
more so. Who has time to think
in numbers that middling, madly

large when put to the ax? Lusting
after the golden ratio, Math tripped
into God's house, first suffered the long walk
down the driveway before being brought
under heel. Progress, they say. Still,
we observe elegance in strange, brutal places.

World Spectators 3
After Kaja Silverman

Our change into
dust has always been this way,
why waking feels like how lovers telescope,
appear to approach
yet recede into background, no matter
our angle of vision. Still,
to say, "I swear I have an eye" is a promise
you will someday break. No blame,
but the world will shrink, taking all
down to a needle of light that passes through
your cataracts. Hoard color while you can.
There is no new lens, only hue's absence,
the weight of grass.
After all that effort.

I Place My Hands

on his chest, feel the life
diffuse in the fur. We have
never done mercy like this.

There are no puzzles, really,
just troubles to accept. When
we leave, the waiting room
approaches cinema; everyone
moves slightly to the right, as if
suffering establishes its own polarity.

Had we come out the door
on the other side...

Glass goes soft when broken.
We can still fill a sink, watch
the water tip over the countertop,
find some way to walk across.
Back home, the cat does dog things.

Allegory: A Study
for Maisy

Our tendency toward putting out
fires forecloses our making anything
from the dark. A monolith extends,
a landmark or sometimes a body,
as in mausoleum, moss-covered,
which serves to mark what passes
between visitations. Elsewhere, we find
the beloved corporeal, standing
starboard of a morning slept through
after a night that won't be reasoned with.
Maybe some rain, always a little
too much. An hour compressed
so reflection proves possible.
The events themselves are addendum,
history maintained like a white wall
awaiting projection. I find you there,
more than mere silhouette, every time.
And this is how I know.