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Counterfeiters

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COUNTERFEITERS

by

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This thesis is an examination of region. More specifically, it is about the physical and psychological landscapes these characters find themselves having to exist in. This book examines the liminality of the local; this is very much about thresholds. Rather than examining what exists beyond the threshold, this book considers the forces that drive us to one. This is a book about regional stasis and how, in some instances, stasis can transform itself into suppression. The enclosed environment of community can create this suppression, this contractive or almost gravitational hold the place has on the people who inhabit it. This is a suppression of forced routine and monotony and having to accept things for what they are. This is a suppression that views creativity as dangerous, this is a suppression that locates and identifies creativity with the intent to eradicate it. Ultimately, this examination of region creates a paradox of creativity; through its intended suppression it forces people to get more creative in order to find means of escape. I think this book traces the road of one kind of creativity, here its about the creation of chaos, an entropic environment intended to counterbalance the stasis felt by so many of the community members.
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Chapter 1

Counterfeiters

After the Automobile Rendered the Body Useless

Tonight we’re going to party
    like it’s nineteen-fifty two
we’ll sit in the backseat and neck
    until your nose bleeds.
Roll through a toll booth, pull off
    at a gas station and let
the car guzzle down its gallons.
    Head in for a soda and a tin
of tobacco. It’s impossible to act
    stuck up in the midst of a stick up.
Hold it, don’t do anything
    drastic. I’m going to put
my hands down slowly, since we are
    almost, all of us, now leaving.
Dad always said the way you back
    your self back out into the night
says a lot about your character.
    Your character: that thing
we thought we found but are still finding.
    Let’s get serious for a moment
and airbrush our initials on each other.
    Come to find out, there’s not
an endless back stash of soap
    opera love affairs and I’m pissed
to go on living in a world knowing so.
    If we keep pressing we’re going
to find out why its so hard to exist here
    and now and then.
You blow breath between your fists
    beside the Lutheran fields
that drag on and on and on and over
    and stop abruptly beside a tree line
or Boomer’s Bar & Grill.
    The wool on the collar
of my jean jacket still feels old fashioned.
    Dad keeps saying my whole history
is just me trying to remember you the right way.
    He tends to hit it right on the nose.
Which, in the rearview, you are still nursing
    with your napkin. You eulogized
the jar of cottonwood seeds you caught
    sometime before I met you
and poured them softly from a cliff.
    Everyone defines ash differently.
You put your cigarette out in the tray
    beneath the dashboard.
Kill the switch. Cut the lights.
    I keep telling myself
I’ve been in the trunk of your car
    for so long I’m like luggage.
**Portrait of the Body with Bear Trap**

Let us start with the relatively unknown mythology of horse eyes. It is said each palm reads field, reads high wire.

Picture us dragging. Two-track under the power lines.

Deer split and draining in the back of barns.

Just let me, for a moment, think of you

all highway-blind and bone scattered across the blacktop.

Nostalgia: your body naked in an ice-bath.

Forget folklore. Forget psychic. She works now as lead phlebotomist at the county pharmacy. Pinprick makes me butterfly, makes me bleed out among the rushes.

It’s funny, they say, the way we keep our horses from the house. All winter we left the sparrow to bathe bloodless in the birdbath. You, in the back acres sorting weeds to press between pages of your field guide.

Let’s recall that winter we spent diving. Where we cut a hole in the ice. Rumor had it, underneath there existed a body in a rusted out Chevette. Even now, I hear you telling that story. The fish swimming in and out of sockets. Speaking of electricity: we lost it.

Searchlight over the field rows. Silent silo. Old husk of husker, rain rusted and mute. Ghost murmur and wind-shift among the haystacks. Afternoon is a small animal unscathed, confused of the bear trap gone off over head who slips out and into a hole in the frozen ground. Here you come empty handed in your camouflage over the field. The horses never lift their heads. Your breath an insipid cloud suggesting no one can tell you or tell you apart.
Equine Elegy

Figure it’s November, twenty two miles outside Indiana

and the heat cuts out. There is a sign to be cautious

of the crosswinds. The highway forces travelers to pass

policeman probing a car in a ravine. Supermarket,

Dairy Queen, cemetery—bury your horses. At a service

station, the young boy with the family in the station wagon

grows frustrated with these forced close quarters and with

a sharpie writes “sex” across the stall in the men’s room.

Strip mall, cinema, cemetery—bury your horses. For the next hour

all he can think about is the things he could do
to the condom he bought like a gumball in the bathroom.

Cornfield, pasture, pasture, schoolhouse, pasture
cemetery—bury your horses. On the other side of Indiana,

figure it’s the driveway. Take a headcount of the herd
and like all things picking up steam wish them well as they gallop west

surely to end up at the bottom of the coastal cliffs of America.

Michigan isn’t Necessarily a Joke but I’ll Keep Telling it Like it is

If a group of hunters walk into a bar and start talking about the wolf that got away the young man pouring their drinks is going to listen. If the wolf, bullet bitten, crawls into its den and devours its mate and itself in the same act we will all just write it off as the sort of mess a cub crawls into. When he walked in to find that his dad killed his mom and then himself, my friend washed off the walls before he called anyone. The police arrived as he was emptying the pail of water into a snow bank. My uncle deposits more cans than paychecks and attempts to yell louder than the echoes from the rifle range. That sure is a lot of fur in the barbwire. A cat in a field with an arrow through it. My youngest cousin always falls from the high wire when she’s playing circus. Asks why there is never a thunderstorm in the snow globe. Manufactures a makeshift dungeon in her dollhouse. Only looks up when she’s pushed the thumbtack a little too deep into a callous. Those
cubs, probably on the side of the highway with their ribs exposed and I cross the road wondering, obsessively, if I’ve left enough lint for a flame in the dryer—if home will still be there when I get there.

**Where were you while the rest of us were getting older**

From here to less lonely is a long shot.

Dad raises dogs in duos and whistles them in from the field.

I want so badly to tell you they don’t come back. I want to tell you the cement now smells like autumn the kind of concrete you can sink your teeth in. Both of us know I gave up being cute a long time ago.

Still, I want to show up on your steps knit-hatted and Novocained so you could pinch the numb from my cheeks. Poke fun at my ears, the cold contemplation of our next move.

Farm stands are popping up all over Michigan, like you’d remember how you loved to shuck through the road stand’s supply of cut corn. The attendant forcibly suggested we put down the sugar beet— the birds made like his voice and rose. We hook and laddered that wannabe Hitchcock hail-mary-monkey-in-the-middled him
left the beets in the box and biked home.
I want to tell you this
small town’s the same now that you left it.
The arms at the crossing still stop the cars
as the train bleats through.
If there was a railroad track
you wanted to be tied to
it was this one. But no damsel.
No distress. And always, just like that, the train
has already made its turn
up past the Wild Horse Tavern.
The bass in the community pond go belly up, it’s the best
thing to happen to this town
since that whole Blue Collar Comedy Tour and a bus trip to the casino.
I want you to tell me all about it.
Neighborhood love stories always end
in a cul de sac at dusk. We try to forget we were born
in a place where nothing startles the bird dogs.
A place where every slot machine
reflects not you but every character
you created in the play house. A place
where I want you to come back
the same seems selfish.
Wouldn’t you know, I thought I saw you
with your legs through the window
of a Pontiac parked close and looking out
over the gravel pit. This is just to say
I’m a stones throw away
from feeling better. It feels a lot like you left me
alone in a movie theater but had the decency
to feed the meter I’d been parked at.
If you don’t mind I’d like to be the shoulder
on the side of the highway I imagine
you walk on with your thumb up.
I was in your woods one winter
blowing breath in my hands
beside the tree line. I watched you
from a far way off pulling your sled up the hill.
I waited far too long for you
to come back down.

Equine Elegy
Because the bales must be unloaded individually by hand
he workers understand the need for assembling
an assembly line. Before there were factories there were
factories. The horse on the dark side of the stable
stays there. A young man and a young woman stand
at the edge of a field and watch her mother aim
a rifle at her father. Both of their glares dare the other
to move first. Unfortunately, nothing comes
of it. The young man and young woman remain
on the outskirts of the field. If he said
it’s getting dark he meant he loved her. If she agreed
to shoot the pistol in the pasture, even better.
It’s been such a long time since anyone has brought
a lawnmower into the meadow.

Poem Voted Most Likely to Take its Clothes Off in Public
Not because it’s about to save someone
from drowning. Not for any apparent reason
other than it’s fed up with mowing
the grass and no one saying thank you.
The VFW hall honors a volunteer
every month and this poem has never been
it. This poem is pissed. The fishermen
get used to this poem. It wakes up
every morning and bums a cigarette
from the crew down by the docks.
This poem disagrees with the courts
decision to make it pay back
all of its parking tickets.
Despite all of its shortcomings
you have to admire this poem.
By shortcomings I mean manners.
I mean this poem laughed in the face
of the parents of the kid who grew
facial hair at fourteen that everyone
said was going to be a major league pitcher.
This poem has no problem
letting you know your mother is sexier
than you are, sweetheart. This poem watches
a biker in spandex pass a biker in gym shorts
and suddenly feels bad about itself.
This poem works so much with the water.
This poem’s work phone rings.
This poem knows you are the stupid
son of a bitch who got too close to the edge
and “slipped” in. It’s like you’ve gone
missing, in the water for days
this poem is the poor bastard commissioned
to fish you out. This poem doesn’t care
about you, your bruised and bloated body.
This poem has trouble paying the bills.
Then again, maybe this poem would slip
down to its skivvies, swim around
and reach for your hair rising up
like an oil spill. Nah, this poem isn’t
into the business of saving lives.
The difference between you and this poem
is that this poem is not afraid to admit
if you found it unconscious in the water
it would rather you not try to push
the lake from its lungs.

This Whole River is Just a Grave I Like to Wash My Feet In
I finally give up the idea of digging down to you.
Cold water, two teens don’t see us see them
fucking in it. Forget it, lets start with something
less romantic—watch the anchor away, down
and tight
  rope the tree to the bow.

It is always almost something close to summer
or like the end of it when rain begins
to drum inside the empty belly of a dumpster.
Strike a mailbox with an aluminum bat and hear
your wrists ring
  loneliness: a dog dips its head
to sneeze on the river. Over there, a trailer
backs in to the shallow. *Hold it tight, now.*
Give a boy a lasso and he will create a horse
or hang himself or both
    fairly close to one another
a cooler and a bag of chips on the boat bottom—
arrestological lunch break: feeding fishing line
through your teeth.
In the froth and twigs the water spiders mimic rain.
After the river, the smell of river and a city
acts like it’s the first time they find a body
barbed with fish hooks.
At this hour, a gas station is certainly not open
for soft drinks.
A blue bowl full of worms and newspaper.
Just a lot of broken glass by a boat dock.

**Equine Elegy**

A young man puts on the knee-high boots of a young woman’s
    father to help her water and hay the horses.
Dead of winter. The barn, its three pull-string bulbs,
    their naked bodies find cadence in the hum
of the powerlines and evening. It will still be an hour
    before her parents are home.
A young woman sitting on the fence tells a young man
    if they play their cards right they might have
a full house. Both of them are now unintentionally
    uncomfortable. She only meant a hand to bet on.
When the young man and young woman feel old
    enough to have regrets, they do. They push their car
off a cliff and swim as far off the coast as they can.

In hindsight, the hind legs were the most important part of the story nobody at the barn party would get behind.

**Instructions for Stepping Out of Line at a Theme Park**

For whatever reason, all the Ferris wheels stop spinning. It’s the last day of school and our bicycles and the Pistons find a way back to the finals. I sit on a curb in the cul de sac listening to you cuss your mother about how we’ve spent so many summers serving as garage sale attendants. Anyway, the carnival is in town and the power goes out and the sky goes all siren. We turn to watch the wind, cyclonic over the overpass where, last spring, the new highway meant movie theaters, meant an economy. When the highway collapses it means more to two people who live at its opposite ends. See the bridge we’re rebuilding? Underneath: paddleboats paddling about.

You walked into the river, then I did. Your long dress rising up like an oil spill. We used to watch cars pulling out of the rent-by-the-hour cabins. It’s like small town fever always hangs someone’s jizzed underpants from the flagpole.

You said we could have been hawks, talon tied and twisting in the air. Then we laughed and traded pictures of our privates. Like the railway tracks we can’t see the end of, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Like I was saying, everyone began to congregate by the exit. Seek ditch seek low ground, seek nope not in front of a window. Aftermath: neighbors in the street with their candles lit. Out of all the mammals we’re the only ones who bury our children in leaf piles.
Here, let me brush you off. You use your teeth to bite through the buttons. You: breathing hard at the edge of the forest at dusk. Wind riling the pine fringe, the horse manes. Leaving a trail because you like to imagine someday you might need to find your way back. And my last hope is: you haven’t yet.

Animalignancy

Well, here we are again
in a it is exactly what it sounds like situation.

A woman pressing her hands
to a frosted front window
as the pipes freeze.

She did not mention the local E&G
when vasoconstriction
took the cat’s life.

Sped through her own heart:
she did not mention
that the humming in the bird cage
was without it. Do not confuse this
for an incomplete taxonomy
of plausible phobias, though, it is exactly what this has come to be.

In all of their books,
the glaciologists concur
we should catch the next plane
to an ice cap while we still can.

Once there, it begins its lesson on buoyancy.

A weight shift. Someone reaches forward
to prepare the boat hook.
Body in the cranberry bog.
The woman from the front window
is blue and bloated. This has been
an awful thaw. A soft rain falls
as a structure more or less
instinctual: something other
than the incessant impulse
to wipe your eyes. A man whistling.
A hound backing out
of a culvert. Diabolically drear
is the dog kennel, those bones
in the corner of his eyes
have been gnawed over
a period of time relatively consistent
with metastasis. Before we knew ourselves
we knew our personalities
were nautical: not deep or distant
but the color of the décor
in a fast-food fish restaurant.
Dump the guts at the end of the dock
and rinse your hands.
Frame everything in the woodwork
as spontaneous plague: suddenly the grass
becomes a swarm of horseflies.
Nobody questions how to hunker down
in the season of slap your shins.
They hug the guardrails along the road
over the lake. Cyclists
flipbook by us on the downhill.
A last page with only wind
    in its whiteness. A person, a far off speck
raises their hands and waves emphatically.
    Something beats its wings
    and rises out of the field between us.
Nothing worth conveying would carry that far.
    An elbow on a fencepost. The dog licking the grass
    where I’d spit just moments before.

Equine Elegy
There is no headcount. There is no herd. There is no young
    woman or young man haunting any hay barn
in any state from here to the coastal cliffs. There has been
    a lawnmower idling for weeks on the edge
of a meadow. There is a can of spray paint at the bottom
    of a ladderless water tower. There is a ladder
leaning on the supermarket’s awning. Only wind hangs
    from its rungs. Elementary swings sigh.
The tires of the car under the tarp rot dry. The horse is in the barn.
    If she actually had eyes in the back of her head
she would have been able to see everything creeping up
    behind her. The horse in the barn is bones.
It is again what it was then. No one, now, left to worry
    whether to bridle or to bury.

Autobiography with Grass (and Swimming Trunks) Around my Ankles
I never intended to begin with exposure, but
    here we are with whatever’s left
of the lake and out of gas
so we pull the paddles.
    Another long day on the water
& your skin’s burnt.
The way we circle the summer, it’s like
you hit the throttle and I stood up
on the skis both bareassed
& bashful before the tourists at the dairy bar.
The dam hasn’t drowned us out
but we haven’t stopped hoping.
Look, I mean the children can’t find enough sense
to stop stomping on each other in the shallows.
Hold me under. Turn me blue.
The two of us were bred in to this boredom
so you dare me to waterboard you
with your favorite beverage. Dare me
to put a bag over your head and time the escape.
Go ahead, admit it. It’s what you’re after:
out of here. It happens to all of us after this.
In my mind you will always walk out
to mine the Michigan night. But before you do
you’ll strap a headlamp on a mannequin
so you have something to look back at.
Looking back is, well, what it is. I’ve been modeling
getting older for so long it’s actually happening.
The hill I grew up on has rolled over, meaning Dad
hitches something to the back of the tractor and pulls.
Grass goes down easy if you press it.
If I try hard enough I can see you waving
part way down. These hills are not unlike the hills
I lost my lungs over. I logged so many miles.
Cramped so many times at the county line.
Thought seriously about not going back.

The exhausting thing about trails is that you keep running until you come
to the end of them. Just how grass gets its name
from the Old English

all I know about it

is that the football program coughed up
some dough for the new kind.

Who cares what they are laying we are laying
sod somewhere else and if we lay long enough
it’ll hide us.

We had a friend who kept his Adderall in a chew can.

It disintegrated. We watched him eat the tobacco
as we prodded the fire pit. He’s the same
one who penned the bomb threat to get out
of a math test and instead made us all sit still
in the high school grandstands

while the bomb dogs sniffed our lockers & truck cabs.

I can only imagine the sweat our parents wiped away
knowing where we were headed.

Call it ghost genes, call us phantoms

whatever you call us you’ll be forced
to nod our knack for disappearing.

I once got a BB in my bare ass but not because

I was getting careless, I had asked you to
remember me like this forever

but you couldn’t unless I was bruised and welted

and I respected that since I had just gotten over
two black eyes from that confrontation

at the swim hole where we swam all summer.
They kept telling us a somersault
from a rope swing has no sound
except if the spine snaps in the shallow.
That must have been years before we stole
the conference in the last two races
of the season & they hung our portrait
in the cafeteria & to this day
I still haven’t been back to see it.
It’s funny how quick you can go
to not giving a shit. Let’s go back to middle school
and the first pair of breasts I saw in real life
but not because I couldn’t forget them
but because it was behind a barn, and dark
& I feel like I’m still trying to make them out
in the night. Everything is quick
and from what they keep saying
you’ll spend the rest of your life chasing
it down. That’s not true. We broke a leg.
We knocked wood. We blew that popsicle stand.
One time I came back to visit
& found a picture of the first girl I loved
in the top drawer of my dresser and it made me
think back to when she gave birth
to her first child and how I had wondered,
sincerely, if she would tell it about me.
I think I probably hate all the versions of myself
that still hang around in the minds of other people.
The two of us turned the topsoil in her yard
to plant tomatoes that would only last one season.
I cut grass before classes but
    my first job after high school was as a chauffeur
    but the only thing I chauffeured was vials of blood
between hospitals and I still can’t convince myself
    to get tested because if it came back negative
    I would have to find something new to worry about.
I had a few beers in a bar with my manager
    after the union refused to fight against our outsource
    & I was still a few years underage
but in those places people had gotten over feeling bad
    for each other and just kept their heads turned
    which made life more interesting
for the drive home but luckily I didn’t
    hit anybody or anything. I was working there
    when I saw my first dead body.
When I say dead I mean blue, bloated, and unattended to
    on the grass outside a warehouse. I say this because
    I want to draw lines between the dead and the dolls
we are mostly accustomed to seeing in caskets.
    Mostly, those who raise up the dead
    in conversation come across annoyingly
but again I want to say each family has a stint
    with suicide and mostly the experience is the same:
    someone doesn’t come back
from the woods. Finally, flashlights stretching
    and dimming in the tall trees. Coping
    is just ignoring the thread that tethers
us to the past. For instance, out the window
    of a four door truck there is a huddle
of livestock. Snow drifts.

One cow has sixteen Q-tips in its belly

which is evidence enough that it isn’t just the pasture

leaning over for a better listen.

Take the two-tracks. The deer draining

on their hooks. It all leads to the same place:

a tired woman building a replica subway

station in her basement. The kind of mind it takes
to shovel off all this cold. Forget shotguns

think about the two of us on our bikes
down at the dock to watch the trucks

attach to trailers the trailers lose their loads

into the water. Boats circle in the shallows.

Oil and exhaust on the river. Pedaling fast we probably follow

the dripping wheel wells and veer off

as they near the main road.

That must be us on our backs in the water.

Loving the stones and stumps beneath us.

Bubbles billowing from our nostrils.

If I could hold my breath long enough

to give you one less thing to worry about

I would have, believe me

when I say the stillness in the forest at night

is the smell of an ancient man gone mad.

The sound my thumbs make

under a pillow: two twigs snapping.

The pines always whistle

for what seems like hours.

But let’s stay away from that for now
because I want to bring in the girl I was dating
while I worked at the hospital
& how she raced horses and loved to hike
her skirt up in the hay barn & also, once
on the roof of her parents house
which was a surprise even for someone
who was at an age of hard
surprises & we would sit there with a good view
of the sunset & the turbines & nothing
not even the Christmas tree, could be as artificial
as it was back then.
I spent all winter sweeping
out a warehouse without heat
in a Carhartt & in between the snowflakes
& broken glass I found time for a cigarette
& watched buildings burn along the river
because that’s what happened
in Flint during the holidays or everyday
& I thought seriously about quitting school
& doing this for a living but obviously
this was before the outsource
& let me say one more time
I loved the warehouse
& could not resist busting fluorescent light bulbs
in the parking lot since no one was there to supervise
& besides a little broken glass does nothing to a city.
That guy who ate his Adderall beside our campfire
also left a little vodka and vomit in the burn barrel
& years later would spend some time in the hospital
for running his car into a parked plow truck
   in an attempt to, well, you know. It’s like this
   sometimes I suppose when we’re forced to come
to terms with all the shit we missed out on.
   I know I didn’t miss the arsonist
   light the neighbors barn on fire
one spring when we were nearly set up
   to take the fall because, like I said, we lived nearby
   the burn pile and fire pit & when we saw the smoke
rise over the rooftops we ran toward their house
   & woke them all and tried to pull the fifth wheel
   from the flames but it was already too late
so we just stood by and listened
   to the aerosol sizzle in the rafters
   & held our breath when the cans finally blew
the barn roof open
   and the firefighters, with hoses in their hands
     looked as helpless as we did.
   It’s such a shame that when the shit hits the fan
all we can do is try to contain it.
   I ended up hanging around
with a pair of brothers
   whose dad found out his cancer
   was already to the point of prescribing
the go-on-home-and-enjoy-it regimen.
   No one brought it up. When they buried him
   I was far from the funeral but unintentionally.
They bred cattle and sold them in quarters
   at the county fair. I remember being quite young
and losing my personalized compass
in their cornfield. Thirteen years later
they were excited to tell me they found it
while turning the dirt for the following
season but when they handed it over
it was not mine & what made things so eerie
is that I wasn’t the first
person to stand peering out over their pasture
trying to gather my own sense of direction.
The good thing about dead dried grass
is that it burns quickly when it’s baled. So the search
parties, if their searching, won’t look long.
I’ve wished so many times
I could have told you about the horses
outside the abandoned house
we made into a hangout.
They were always spooked in their places
& from what I could tell from the highway
they kept pace with the traffic.
The best breath clouds always emerged
as nostril clutter. Ectoplasm. Crafted prism.
Whatever the light was
was something I first encountered in a wood line.
Something standing at the edge of it
breathing hard at the border at dusk.
There is so much air caught up in a thing
so bringing the hammer down
on the rabbit who was crawling in circles
dragging its back half by the culvert was the only way
to let it let it all out. The one thing I hate
    more than road kill is its in-between.
I was one of those kids who got bored
    easily & one summer I knew
    I could make a dollar if I sold
a mere fraction of the freezer burnt meat.
    That same summer an old man bought me
    a bike just because
    I dug him a hole in the backyard for his dog
    who’d been lying there a while in the ditch.
    That’s when I decided to hate cars
which was impossible since my Dad came home
    everyday from General Motors like his Dad did
    and his Dad before him
& once when my uncle who married into the family
    pulled up to a cookout in a KIA he got shit
    for hours and after he left
I think the family talked seriously about betrayal.
    Lineage is forged on an assembly line
    and my Dad gets pissed when I tell him it’s dying.
Despite that, I will say a favorite moment
    of mine is him pulling into the driveway
    and me going out to meet him
to find a small beagle in his lap
    and when I asked whose
    is that he responded yours
and I cried and wanted to hold it.
    Physically speaking, my form never filled out
    which I use as an excuse for not feeling well.
Sometimes I associate dizziness with roller rink eyes

& arcade prizes or let’s just say the sixth grade

when I held hands and skated
circles with a girl while Usher told me I had it, I had it bad.

My mom would take me there sometimes

in the summer when it was raining

and she could tell I was getting antsy

at home & once when a small scale tornado tore through

the area the skating rink went black

and everybody screamed & we drove home

through the aftermath just my mom and I

& our Slurpees.

I remember a lot of tornado warnings

especially the siren that went off while I was in the lake

with the one woman I loved the most

(who would later die of an aneurysm)

who whispered *nothing lasts forever* in my ear

poking fun at the sperm

that surfaced slowly between us.

She wanted things and wanted them quickly

& was known for intelligence

& pulling her panties to the side

but despite the root word of my last name

I was never in a hurry for anything.

After years of frustration over the family

not knowing its history except it started

with Milo and Jennie

I was disappointed to find out

our last name meant essentially
the place where grass grows.

I wasn’t the only one because Audrey Hepburn’s birth name is a variation of our surname but she chose Hepburn over Ruston because no one gives a damn about small shires in England where the grass we got our name for was manufactured for torches.

It might seem medieval but to break in a hunting dog the best thing was to keep it in a cage by the pole barn away from any contact so the dog can learn when it is un-caged nothing exists outside of its jurisdiction.

Or so said the old manual on my Dad’s desk which he didn’t abide by but the dogs were always outdoor dogs & I remember at a young age when the dog whimpered like that in the darkness it was easy to picture the possibilities of the thing that must have stood close by clutching hard to the edge of the kennel.

My dad used to dare me to swim as far out in the lake as I could & we would wear ourselves out & struggle the whole way back & once over a holiday beside the ocean we swam out past the continental shelf
& the lifeguard in a tizzy whistled us in
saying we were lucky
the riptides hadn’t been stronger
& who were we to not know
the one thing about a body of water
is that it is notorious for swallowing
bodies. Sometimes in that boredom
so many of us were bred in
we have no other choices but to create
confusing situations for everybody else
& mostly in Winter
when everything closed up
we would wait by the highway
& choose a car come up off the exit
& follow it as far as it would go
& sometimes when we were lucky
the driver would panic
and do something drastic
like burn rubber or call for help
or the brave would confront us
at a stop sign and threaten to hurt us
which was exactly what we deserved.
It’s no lie I hung out with some bad influences
& I still feel a little bit guilty
about accepting the money
my friend handed over
after he went into the store for a Pepsi
& called it my half of the stick up.
This is the sort of thing you can try to avoid
associating with for the rest of your life.

If you’re lucky you won’t get caught doing it.

You’ll go home someday and listen
to the listless rap of long toss in the parking lot
of two of your ex-teammates

trying to impress the town.
After the pissing contest peters out

you might acknowledge

that even the numbers on the back of our jerseys
have grown cracked and wrinkled.

I laid down with you once in a hotel

& we talked about the ceiling tiles

& said nothing of the future. I ran ten miles a day

for a few years of my life

& on the way to meets I’d stare

out the bus window listening to Bob Seger

before I knew that song

was even about cross country.

I told myself a lot of things

but most especially that it would hurt

like hell to hear it when I was older

and I was right: it does. I’ve never trusted

anyone who talks about their running

but let me explain.

The hills look different now

that I can see

the end of them.

That dog my Dad brought home
got congenital heart failure
    in his later years
and I did my best to keep him
    less active. Sometimes it’s instinct.
    Sometimes it’s how we’re trained.
Sometimes there is too much temptation
    in a rabbit and the pace of things
    just passes us. When the dog ran
right out of his body I rested a while
    with him there in the long grass
    before the burden of carrying him
from the woods & digging a hole
    in the backyard by myself.
    I’m never too full to eat
my own words. Let me say up front
    I’ve been pretty damn stupid
to not realize how many times I’ve loved
the places where grass grows.
    How it would grow everywhere
    if we’d let it.
This ain’t nothing you’ve never heard.
The stories of small towns
    are almost homogenous.
When I left the north, not having a winter
    made me susceptible to want, regret
    whatever you call that thing
that makes me sweat in the night.
The last day at the hospital
    when they asked for our keys & our badges
I was driving away and thought I saw that Adderall addict

   sitting on the docks packing a pack of cigarettes

   between his hands.

It wasn’t him so it must have been someone

   from the cafeteria or the stockroom

   on break & at the stoplight I watched him

strike a match through his leg hair

   & the steps he sat on were all smoke.

   Sometimes the ominous figure in the rearview

is worth leaving there. I’ve long lost track

   of the days you’ve been gone

   but if you ever come back this way again

drop me a line before you do

   & I’ll bulldoze the houses down

   the street so the city will look just the way you like it.

When I came back from shopping

   a grocery sack in my hands

   I found you writing a note for me

on the front steps and I learned a little bit about hesitancy

   about the here-after. It’s still light out and we’ve nothing to do.

   Stay a few more minutes.

We’ve condensed years into hours

   and found out all that ever mattered

   was minutia, miscellanea, and how the people loved

most get left out. I should admit

   I only ever paid attention

   to us out of gas on the water when that wall

of weather blew in from the north
we lost our shit and snapped
    the paddles. You tossed tin cans
in the air and if I wouldn’t have known any better
    I could’ve sworn you lit up
    with the lightning.
How quickly we metastasized into that mass
    of sense everything we knew
    was never making.
It’s been such a long time
    since I showed my bare ass to everybody
    on the beaches
& how you laughed and laughed
    slipping us out of our suits
    & off the side of the boat.
By the time we finally come
    across something good enough to give
    we are long past giving it to each other.
We are all of us most likely guilty
    of more than we let on. All of my biggest regrets
    are of the things I didn’t get caught doing.
So run me out. Run me over.
    Run me til my lungs burst
    red beneath my t-shirt.
Hold it. Right there. The end
    of a meadow. Where all the deer go
    to lie down.
No beach chairs. No beach.
    Just grass from here clear up
    to the water’s edge.
The one thing that’s still

growing between us

is this lake.

They keep telling me

if I have the right kind of speed

I won’t even need skis.

They keep telling me if I run fast enough

I won’t feel a thing

as I cross from one side to the other.

I keep telling myself at the end of everything

is a grass stain or a splash.

How there is absolutely nothing
to grab on to if you are just a body

somewhere between a rope swing

and the water.

**Epistolary Elegy**

Dear Holy Father of Hayfields,

Being, especially, with the way it was in the beginning, is as close to not being as one could be.

Please, permit me the personality to reminisce. The human brain is highly legitimate, just ask it.

The dog claw in the bear trap suggests, sometimes, things just come apart. Beginning, especially, with the way it came into being. Suffering has always been sufficient at obtaining information.

Don’t ask me to tell you more than what I know. When the media cried the death of the letter, we forgave it. Preservation is really our last hope for expansion. The height of goal posts, alone, ices the kicker. Listen, I understand you’re under a lot of pressure. It’s time to face it, as suggested, trajectory is a force that stretches out to encompass the eventual. According to apocalyptic theory
all accommodations will be located on the coasts. Meaning: even at the end of the world nothing changes.

**Any Resemblance to You, Yes You, is Completely Coincidental**

Give up on the whole

   this landfill is romantic

I’m sick of hearing it

   you got a lot of nerve

to drag me out past dusk

   just to show me your parts

in the backseat of a Buick

   where things can get a little foggy

like check out these hand marks

   we’ve left for the future archaeologist

whose arthritis flares up

   and prevents everything

from being closely examined

   forensic statistics suggest

99 percent of burglaries

   are committed by the bully

your neighbors are raising

   in their basement

they’ve got small dogs

   they’ve swept up off the street

so obviously it’s an interesting concept

   the community now has

to deal with adolescent aggression

   I put the dart gun in the dog’s mouth

just to watch it piss across the playground
where you broke your arm
in the mulch beneath the swings
  it’s been bulldozed to make room
for a reservoir commissioned
  by the contractor for the Wal-Mart
built for stimulating this city
  is all about feelings
and I’m fed up with having them
  it’s just a bad idea we need
to come up with something else
  say remember you carving
our curfew into the front door
  I remember you a lot like that
for instance the way you placed
  roach motels next to the pond
because they too must have preferred
  a room with a view
yes you you who makes house
  buying decisions based on the bath
tub you’d look best bleeding out in
  I think sometimes it’s easy to forget
how peaceful it can be
  locked in our attic apartment
letting the dishes clog up the drain
  downstairs I’ve got this funny feeling
the broken glass on the tile beneath
  the window is just a quicker way to explain that
by this point in the story
  the house has already mistaken the intruder
for one of its own

**Portrait of the Community as a Building, Imploding**

After dynamite brings the abandoned building to its knees

one might try to trace the wiring

back to the bike-pump-modeled detonator in an attempt to lift

prints. What I mean is sometimes burglars report

their own robberies for reward. It’s hard work, the heaviness

they feel in their hands, as it is for

the mailman who, while at the party, speaks toward this sad decline

of letters and reminisces of a time when there were people

who took the care to articulate their message. Which was

fear or I’m afraid.

The fear felt over contaminated finger foods.

The fear felt like names we’d give to fish or lakes

where all the dissatisfied lovers throw their diamonds downstream.

What I mean is that nobody at the party dresses up

like this daily, which now makes sense, considering

nobody could name the plant they had pinned to their lapels.

Our mailman arrives home to find someone dismembered

his door chain, stained his loveseat, drank his liqueur.

Made off with his favorite vase and a carton of milk. He says

his story is not unlike all the manuals on animals

that suggest we can exercise entropy responsibly. His desire

is his disorder. Even in a pinch the mailman delivers.

The billboards read thou shall not be the bearer of bad news.

Thou shall not not shoot the messenger. It’s all a joke, really.

Knocks coming at you in twos and nobody left in the rubble

to ask who’s there. Save for the stray cinder blocks, harvested

and used primarily for anchoring the overly ambitious.
Epistolary Elegy

Dear Holy Father of Hayfields,

Believe me, when I’m bored to death, I stand on the edge of the bridge where all the dissatisfied lovers throw their diamonds down river. This is the type of thing that, even if recovered, should not be resuscitated. I’m talking about love. Like many things, our fatal flaw is persistence. For example, the calf with the contusion continues to charge the fence post until it convulses in the pasture. There was never any warning against shaking things up. In the public garden, a woman suggests, to her toddler with a tantrum, that he consider cooling it. It’s safe to assume we’re all looking for a deep freeze. The extended history of human longing begins with the desire to be legitimate at the molecular level. For no other reason than to maintain a projected image of herself, the movie star takes the centenarian to see the ocean for the first and last time. Over one hundred years the old woman had been served the under hand. It’s not unusual to consider how easily the waves, overlapping, formed a rhythm she could beat her chest to.

Self Portrait of a Stilt Maker

Top shelf service is best left for the bar, hell, I’ll raise

you one better: I’m all bummed out on the crack corner
with all the other folks with vitamin b deficiencies, waiting
for Walgreens
to slide open this morning.

When I met you I told you I was a bartender,
a stilt maker, anything other than I hang ladders
at the hardware store. If it isn’t too much to ask
I’d like to stand here until I feel like myself again.

Tall, dizzy, and like myself again. You insist
on the importance of invasive procedure. Home burglary.

We cut keys in the back of your father’s barn
where you taught me to weld
together my broken bike frame.
I didn’t need a seamstress. But, the way you acted
toward my untied loose ends
made me self conscious. We learned how to keep clean
houses. But as far as actresses go you were not a good actress.

Please, don’t take your clothes off
the clothesline. The Sunday dress you left on my dashboard
must be in a second hand store by now, I’m sure of it.
When I used to wake up next to you
on an air mattress, the birthmark
on your left butt cheek

looked like Ohio.
You became so obsessed with sleep.

When I caught you looking out across the county line
with a canteen of chloroform, I knew our days were numbered.
Listen, remember when you told me if you kept your mouth shut
long enough in this town
it would find ways of making you talk?
Well, there’s someone coming down the sidewalk
and maybe once, for old times sake, I’ll put a bag over their head
and you’ll do the creepiest thing you can conjure up
in your mind.
They’ll reach for the bag first and then the sky

like maybe there’s a key on a hook in the air above them
a lock somewhere blocking the way out.
The tall tales this whole town grew up believing.

Even to consider it is a stretch.

I Sing the Body Allergic
I’ve got a dryer tied to my trailer hitch
and you screaming only thirty two more
miles to Des Moines. We’ve driven all night
to get there, and when we get there, I want you
to tell us, without hesitation, to leave there.
It’ll be like discharge or that night I shared
a hospital room with the old man who consumed
too much carpet cleaner. Despite that, I want you
to shoo us away from your doorstep. I want you
to call me clingy. Like humidity or hay fever.
I’ll reel in what’s left of the dryer and put the rest
of the rust in a burn barrel. This used to be
such a classy diner, I’ll think to myself, as you hurl
a cocktail from your side of the car. Flames
contort the dust and the darkness behind us.
You were all rearview remorse for miles.
You haven’t looked me in the eye in ages.
The last time I had a good grip on your collar
bones was standing behind you in the river
fish swimming between your legs like goalposts
while we agreed the last score left to settle
was why we got into arson in the first place.
We had all sorts of reactions. I welled up.
I wiped tears from my eyes as you dusted
the dashboard with your dirty feet. It made me
consider a shower, the rain, how everything
happening is slow. Methodic. What made us
fire starters also made us fugitives. Apparently
we are listed as wanted in all states
we aren’t currently driving through.
When I say allergic I mean trailed, I mean no way
will I sneeze my way out of this one. I consider
the semi, the rotational pull of its tires—the way
I wipe sweat from my brow as it keeps pace
beside us. Like how in the hospital, when we lost all
electricity, it took such a long time for both
the hives on my skin and my roommate to pass.

**Epistolary Elegy**

Dear Holy Father of Hayfields,

The newborn screams in his sleep and there’s nothing I can do about it but suffocation. Our
options are not as endless as we would like to believe. There is only wind in the fields and the
bales are still burning. Nobody considers neurology, not even when their arms go numb.
Apparently it’s colder than it’s been all century. If you play dead for an extended period of time,
they’ll start calling you cadaver. This is the part of the story where we give up envisioning future
developments. How hard it is to accept. How hard it is to accept there is no animal sipping at the
perimeter of a puddle with an unknown depth. No plumber to plunge his utensils through our
piping. I don’t mean to insinuate the only place we’re all connected is in the sewer. Had you been
there, on the railings of an abandoned cruise ship, during a sunset reminiscent of all other sunsets,
you’d have seen an image to which we’ve grown accustomed—something spewing into the sea.
I’d like to think, if ever you can unthaw thought, of someone who left her lakefront property to
the limnologist she fell in love with in a prior life. The finality of everything is that we legitimize
our love affairs by leaving.

**Consider the Daylight, Our Diminished Rates of Accuracy**

the thing pursued fleeing over the landscape.
a hound with its snout stuck in a culvert.
the way it barks if it happens to bark
sounds like distance, sounds like get me out
of here. consider us when we come to the edge
of the forest. consider the way we walk into the suburb
the mail blowing down the street to where it ends
up in a leaf pile. rain on the end of the rifle.
consider tracking anything through a place
known for its traffic. perceptible presence: a light
on a timer by the window clicks on.
so much more than time and its short duration
makes the house dark. somebody’s fooling no one.
consider the next house. someone asleep early
on the couch in a rainstorm and the floor underneath
their cigarette is all ash. voyeurism: hand marks
on the window the morning after. consider getting out
of there. consider the broken compass, how direction
is now determined by the flip of a coin. Consider the sign
on the fencepost as far as it goes we are never
permitted to return to a meadow. Consider
the daylight now diminished, the trail ending
on a high ridge that seemed like the spot
for a clear shot, the crosshairs a crucifix for nothing
no target just a man picking up his mail in the dark.
Consider the tin cans tied to the rear of a vehicle
slow clapping past on the highway below like a sound
of whatever I was after getting farther away.

**Diadromy**

Just last spring a bull shark was spotted in Lake Superior
causing, as you might assume, a slight hysteria and hesitancy
for anyone considering to enter the water without an ax
the rule has always been, especially when ice fishing
to have a tool sharp enough to break the ice, but this town is not
the kind of place one seeks out to engage in conversation
and for good reason, for example: last night a woman walked out
through tree fringe carrying a cow’s placenta in a paper sack.
Before that, it had been a while since her last hallucination.
She spent all autumn carving a canoe out of an old oak husk.
When asked what was inside it, she said her mind, and waved
toward the river as the canoe floated away, empty.
I remember that winter by the way the fish acted
like there were schools of smaller fish swimming in their brains.
When, under the pressure of a blizzard, the pine boughs break
their silence by erasing the path taken to the lake.
When, under the lake ice, her body fashioned
my hands in a motion resembling the steam
swipe of a mirror, I took the gloves off to clear the snow
away quicker and by the time I realized my reflection
was her looking back at me, I almost became that part of the path
a dead body redirects.
Snow blows across an open field and haunts the ribcage
of a downed steer. There is little meat left in the ice chest.
It has all been handed over to the sailors expressing a need for bait.
You should hear how they reeled in the shark and split it open
right there on the boat deck. How they found a compass in its stomach.
How its body suddenly looked like a needle pointing north.
All that evolutionary cross breeding going down at the estuary.
There is very little left for the rest of us. Snow is an endless sort
of structure. It falls on the water. Fish surface, they offer at the flakes.

Epistolary Elegy
Dear Holy Father of Hayfields,

It’s no use to be concerned with a height only achievable by airlines. You should know scientists have finally solved the algorithm for salutation. Their computations are not available to the general public, which means it does not involve you. According to evidence supported by recent tests on animals, performance can only be safely permitted inside fences. I hate to be a bearer of bad news. When we are older and our eyes have sunken in and the envelopes sent between the two of us have yellowed with age and must, I like to think we’ll think about the smoke, those trains on the move mid-century. This will be before the finest things of us are framed, before we picture ourselves as Polaroids or fast fading strips of film. I don’t mean to downplay our dormancy. All of our conditions are credible. Besides, there is no one left to authorize the production of an asymptomatic alternative. The cells in the cylinder grow colder. The human brain is best at being by itself. This is how to stand equipped at the end of an electrical age. A box of memorabilia belonging to a being before you. A list of suggestions for things you should have said in a scenario with a sunset. It’s a shame, this animal apparatus does more to us than decades.

Everything is contingent on the calculations of the caretaker. To hell with whoever it was that first thought up an ending to begin with.

**Portrait of the Body in a Bed Sheet with Eyeholes**

It’s that time of year again in America

when I must apologize for my attic.

The insulation left in the yard. The two boys

masquerading around the cul de sac

with pitchforks. The figurative skeleton

in my closet shares your marrow

and its got me thinking about how we hid

in the hay barn. How when I met your dad

you had bailing wire in your hair
and told him we’d been playing
scarecrow. The only thing he’d ever bought
was my inconsistent stammering.
It’s that time of year again in America
when we start to feel romantic.
A stowaway forgets his bedroll on the horses
back as he makes his transfer
to a boxcar. An assembly line foreman sits
at the state line with a body in his truck bed
thinking: there’s still a lot of desert left
until morning. This is that crossing
where trains pick up weight.
I haven’t seen a penny pressed like that
in ages. Everyone is riding under the influence
of elm trees and their droppings.
It’s that time of year again in America
where we rake up what we can.
It’s that time of year again when everything
is haunt and gimmick. The sun going down
over a subdivision. Two kids outside
of a station wagon with their pants
around their ankles doing that funny sort of friction.
My love, it’s like we’ve worked so long
in a Laundromat. All tumble and dry heat.
My love, we’ve hitched our hopes
to an MTA bus notorious for its breakdowns.
My love, you’re on your way
up the stairs to tell me you found tickets
to the next town over. You’d like to say
something standing there in the doorway.

    Hold your thought, the framing of it.

It’s that time of year again

    when everyone sees right through me.

Documenting the Distance of Our Last Hail Mary

Forget the aggravation

    of the aggregate small town.

The fathers and their fathers
lining the trophy case.
I couldn’t begin without mentioning
how little faith this place puts into turbines.
Forget I brought up the environment.

    Just forget
we leave our trash in a pile with our pants.
Outside the house we grew up inside of
a smell of boxed-up-belongings
in the back of a box truck.
This is how we exit

    the old life
is like the dog dies, then dad
    disassembles
the dog house and moves on.
We could bury so many bones in the yard.
I’d trade you skeletons

    if I hadn’t already
hacked mine apart.
You know that shiver. It’s like the leaves
    prophesizing rain.
It’s not only the emptiness. The hardest part
is handing over the hammock
that back and forth
     of pulling away from the property
as if, for once, we were finally better
than the places that became us.
You will not die of asphyxiation
     by choking on your own foot
despite what the fortune teller told you
in the alleyway
     I confessed all this left a bad taste
in my bottom lip. I spit
     my own blood over the brickwork
you, having punched me there, for good reason.
Forget the aggravation
     of the aggregate small town.
Things that never mattered. All the evidence
I’ve had to sink in the river.
Memory is a foul tip into somebody’s temple.
It’s like the warning siren chasing the geese
low over the tree line.
It’s like rain starting in the leaves
     and my shirt’s off.
It’s like I just convinced you
     in the backyard
to go long