

2016

Orange Juice Elegies

Jared Coffin
University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Coffin, J.(2016). *Orange Juice Elegies*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3907>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

ORANGE JUICE ELEGIES

by

Jared Coffin

Bachelor of Arts
Southern Connecticut State University, 2012

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2015

Accepted by:

Fred Dings, Director of Thesis

Samuel Amadon, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

© Copyright by Jared Coffin, 2015
All Rights Reserved.

ABSTRACT

This is a creative thesis presented as a collection of poems written by Jared Coffin. This is the complete thesis submitted, defended, and approved as part of Jared's completion of the requirements for earning the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| ABSTRACT | iii |
| The new language | 1 |
| Hollandia | 2 |
| Upon the applause | 4 |
| Unsponsored | 5 |
| and | 6 |
| Erratum for an old mechanic | 7 |
| Twenty years before the clownish makeup, childhood theories | 9 |
| How one time I ended up sleeping in my car in a snowstorm after being called evil | 10 |
| In a pink chair at the yellow man’s wake, thinking about friendship and dipping my hands into my suit pockets | 11 |
| The art of historical anecdotes | 13 |
| My father’s chest | 14 |
| Instructions to a boy who thinks he loves a girl | 16 |
| Case study II | 18 |
| The art of description | 19 |
| Before assaulting a librarian: lines to the sister who should be disappearing into a woman | 20 |
| Instructions before reading this poem | 21 |
| Gods | 22 |

| | |
|---|----|
| One and three women | 24 |
| Meditation on the causal consequences of short sleeves | 26 |
| My hands haven't found how to misinterpret Lisa's t-shirt covered breasts | 27 |
| In the matter of developing jealousy of weather, a case of water-flattened hair and jealousy of rain | 28 |
| Notes after unpeeling the bandage | 30 |
| Case study I | 32 |
| 600 dollar painting | 33 |
| Study in the potential for facial hair to create bathetic grocery store encounters | 34 |
| Thinks I'd like to tell my poet-friends | 35 |
| Besides the psych ward, house arrest is a good place to kiss a meth addict with pistachio eyes and a left arm highwayed by scars | 36 |
| In advance of the bruised vein | 37 |
| Theory of the antagonist | 38 |
| Incorrect anecdote | 40 |
| Breakfast elegies | 41 |
| Wrong story | 43 |
| A list of nothing, excluding trees | 44 |
| Snapshot of so & so leaving the country in which some things are omitted | 46 |
| The art of verbal irony | 48 |
| A list of everything, not including trees | 49 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| On finding Helen Keller's reading glasses (dreams about the yellow man's resurrection)..... | 51 |
| Absence is a lively anecdote | 53 |
| A day racing tinfoil boats or my sorrow upon discovering my non-omnipresence..... | 54 |

The new language

I knew a boy who wanted a new language.

His friends all wanted new bikes or new videogames to wander through the way some wander uncharted pine forests. At worst, they were whimsical and prayed for the gift of flight or to be born as birds, if that were the only possibility. One of these boys splintered his shin jumping from a tree. I remember it sprouting from his leg, offering its white filaments to the air as if it were revealing ancient secrets.

Later, that boy found himself strapped into a suit that strangled his legs, belted into a great seat, sealed into the pod of a cockpit, rushing through filmy clouds, peering at a bubble-headed man tilting a tiny stick. The boy knew he had done this many times before, but he was tired of strapping things on as a way to say he had touched the untouchable parts of the world when they were still, in fact, untouched. That boy realized he needed a new language.

The language could not be like any normal language, though.

He would not say *tree* and mean it as a symbol of the thing he had jumped from. He did not want to spend hours pressing lettered squares in front of a screen bright as rain; he did not want to dig ditches draped in the sun only to set up signposts pointing to a tree; he did not want to fold himself over cardboard and markers, building posters asking people to imagine tall wooden stalks with branches that sometimes dangle little green hands and, sometimes, do not.

In the new language, none of this would suffice.

In the new language, the tree would be the signpost and the word would be the tree. Reading each word would be like sitting in a boat as immense creatures drift beneath. Reading the world *tree* you would risk finding yourself in a tree – reading *jump*, you might find yourself dropping from a tree, your leg opened like a husk, displaying its hidden beam to the world.

Hollandia

for example, having your dog tags
rot off and afterwards, for example, hooking
them like minnows over the metal ring
you pried from a gas mask abandoned
on the bomb fin packing cases that compose
the seats of the outdoor theater where,
for example, the same movie is playing
a third time, but you are the first
customer of the aid station you helped
build, having, for example, gone
snow blind staring at coral since the CO
marked your letter home, the one asking
for your clip-on sunglasses, and sealed
with a chapped kiss, *divulging military secrets*,
and now, for example, you have memorized
the script to your imagination and fear, more
than anything – than needing, every guard
shift, to blink yourself into the correct
awakeness, than the red moon of the cigarette
butt stuck to your buddy's only face, than the mosquitos
so bad you hide inside a raincoat never worn
for rain – that the movie will ruin itself

like it might ruin a book, but by that
time, for example, it might not matter
since your rain-heavy buddies have soaked
three skirts in melted yellow Atabrine pills,
bleaching them into improvised Hawaiian skirts, except
an officer, for example, steals them, and sends you
to search for metal to patch fighter wings with and meanwhile
your clip only carries three rounds and the jungle is so dark
its darkness has eaten your buddy and eaten
his cigarette, and so, for example, you are blind
again, jungle blind, and the Japs use children
and women as shields, and children grow
on cords that look like gas mask hoses, for example
the one you pulled a metal ring from to hold
your dog tags together in your damp pocket
where your sunglasses should be, not your dog tags, except,

this is war, and you do not worry during
war, you hoard ammo and threaten to shoot
your buddy if he won't snuff his cigarette out, is he
suicidal?, and seventy-three years later, for example,
having gone blind, remembering all this
and wishing you had cut your son's umbilical

Upon the applause

Other bodies were disappeared
in the drink. There was even a flat
board. The man who concocted a story about two
towers disappearing into gray parachutes
of smoke disappearing into gray
hills of rubble and rubble-bound bodies was
wrapped in a white sheet wrapped in a weighted plastic
bag, was slid into the drink. The flat board guided
the body off the ship into the drink. One man read
English, another man spoke Arabic. Everyone understood
the drink was dark, everyone understood the man
was being slipped into an understood darkness.

Not long ago men weren't dead
when they hit the drink, eyes peering out
like unintended wounds. Army pilots hated
hitting the drink because they couldn't
drink it all. They dove out of big wings uncoiling big
smoke, got set down by parachutes that became messy
Lilly pads on the waves. The day our CO said
Over the side! a Jap had knocked
into our ship with only a parachute
of flames assigning heat to all
our faces, lifting up the CO's hair. The Jap was
yellow, we were nearly yellow from taking
atabrine. The Jap's hands mapped his face behind the jumping
flames that were his disappearing chute. One
man spoke English. *Over the side!* he said. We hugged
big hoses, let out big water, pushed
the Jap over the side before our gestures
could miscarry in our limbs.

Un-sponsored

In Fiji puddles archive the rain,
return small and shifting
versions of our faces, terrified
brown bowls, grown traceless

as old men's toes. Here,
ferns correct the sun, teach us
our skin is murky like jungle
umbra, murky like the sergeant's

calls fizzing into anagrams
over the mud-wet radio. Only
the river is honest, carrying
our sweat and Vernon's

glinting dog tags along
its monologue of tree roots
and smooth boulders. My smile
worsens when we find them

caught on a branch sending light
signals to tantalize the fish,
embellish the scales
we never see until they color

a villager's quick hand
and our words rattle
like spoons caught in the disposal
no one has imagined yet.

and

very suddenly there is another
bike between his legs, his hands
have already resumed their fists
around the bars, his body
pedaling weakly wing-torn bird,
though somewhere life is
hoisting its flag in the blood behind
his misdirected eyes, the nurse glaring
at his heart rate, asking him to *pedal
harder, remember the days?* and very
suddenly he does remember
the days riding darkly through
the suburbs after the bright war

Erratum for an old mechanic

It isn't hard.

The story about the dumb guard scrubbing his face
with cigarette light only means he wants spaghetti.

Don't worry how hot.

When he is born bleary white and cold
as boiled ham, the midwife stashes him
in the oven to keep him warm, coax
his blood around its tiny circuit.

This means he wants it hot hot. If he asks
about engines, don't mention Allison.

You've got it right when the plate steams
like a factory in Hartford where he grew up and
where he played with a boy after watching the
same tight-haired woman talk in the same
room and listening to the radiator

crack. Outside the grass is slicked back and oozing
mud and the stick is darkly glossy when it slips too
much and replaces his right eye. Tomorrow it is
a bright raspberry. Later it is the cereal I eat out of orange
plastic bowls in my parents' kitchen. As a kid

I watch him in his big green chair diving
his hands around my face describing bullets.

A car goes by and his eye is flat
against the light's quick tilt.

When I think of coral, I think of the dumb guard, the bone-
white runway, the pile of shredded rubber soles
sitting at the edge of the outpost collecting
mosquitos. Rifle shots are the night snapping.

By now, I think my parents' kitchen is empty. I think

it smells like old water and sunlight. Watch his hand
eke out the spaghetti, idle the spaghetti at his mouth.

It quivers.

The ice cream truck trolls imaginary neighborhoods.

One time, his brother dies drinking battery acid
the broke milkman thought would grow the food
across his family's plates. And he only burbs and looks
at his brother on the floor, hands balled up and skittering.

The spaghetti wets his face.

His whole body is becoming beautiful. It is
festooned with purple clots. His shadow
pauses in mechanical stupefaction. In the cellar,
there might be a few stale cigars, but he is busy
trying to hear the inside of his ears and eat
his unwinding spaghetti. In two days

he would have been a dim god. In two days,
there's a fly batting against the screen door. It is
raining. It is going to rain – and I am shrugging off heat.

Twenty years before the clownish makeup, childhood theories

When you're old, they don't keep you alive. They turn you into a big meat-sack holder for a little story box resting between your shoulders.

The meat-sack holder sits in a chair and watches TV – it reclines on a pea-soup footrest, it eats, it complains about eating. It sleeps erratically and instantly – walks around haltingly, but it is not alive, not in the way a child calls things alive.

Eventually the meat-sack holder does what some people call dying: it gives up always pulsing with liquid, gives it up, shuts down, gives up always pulsing and jerking and spouting off stories from its little story box.

The doctors opened up my grandfather's meat-sack holder six times, each time it was trying to give up, to shut down. They never touched his story box. For now, my grandfather is still pulsing and jerking. Stories are still shooting out of his story box.

**How one time I ended up sleeping in
my car in a snowstorm after being called evil**

I don't show up to Christmas colored with a bluebird
tattoo and a cast like a hard, blue fish slipped mouth-gaping
over my left arm. There is no girl dabbing her lake-black curls

on my chest, no mud-veined man using up all the light. Or if
you can see it, there is. Before the story ends, the man turns
yellow as the men he tried to kill. Then the storm, snow

slow as feathers. The girl with black curls is ash
in my stomach until we are both standing in refrigerator light
and I notice her black eyebrows and tell her about her

beauty. When I say refrigerator light, I don't mean it
the way you think. I mean it ends perfectly. I mean we
hook our bodies like fingers hook into a wound and it is slick,

illiterate distress, us shining our loneliness
into each other like flashlights, forgetting our hands are
hands. But never mind. Can you see him on the table, the yellow

man with his lips letting in the light, his teeth all gray
pebbles? And the men in tears, sending their voices
into the room, trying to fill it up and suddenly everyone's

hands are untrained, are cantankerous and rubbing the yellow
man's arm whose lips only get wider, whose eyelids
collapse into big toenails. Everyone looks at him

like he's the back of a photograph – everyone says
he needs clownish makeup and a somber party full of people
apologizing. And I laugh, but I am evil.

**In a pink chair at the yellow man's wake, thinking
about friendship and dipping my hands into my suit pockets**

I.

The book on the table is about New Guinea
& the man next to the table with the round
belly keeps emptying his breath & wiping
his forehead telling the story of the mechanic
who went AWOL & risked confinement & lost
pay & most of all risked shrapnel strangely hot inside
his body just to see his friend, another mechanic
ragging at aluminum cans, hands filled up with tools,
waiting for a bomber to make brown clouds.

II.

In Connecticut, the forest happens quickly &
under snow-cruled oak branches it is easy
to kiss a moon-faced girl out of hate
for the bearded boy who smokes & throws lamps
past the girl's soft hair which is wet on your cheeks
& springs back when she turns away & stares
woozy & big-eyed through her damp glasses.

III.

Seventy-three years earlier & there's a green-
painted bomber sitting on its tires in a costume
of jungle heat & a man goes AWOL & sneaks
on when the sun is still coiled in cockpit's
bug-stained glass & when the sky-fed
crew finds him shivering, hands postponed
by cold, & knows he has sneaked on & has gone
AWOL, they yell against the engines'
whinge & lean against the breeze leaking
past the side turrets & when the sky is the wrong
size they pat him on the back & cock
their heads while they piss in condoms & throw

them past the turrets, pointing at the flak
blinking awake over the repeating ocean.

IV.

Some nights I wake up when the room is still closed
by dark & think I'm in a flak cloud until, throwing
a condom off the bed, I realize I'm only
in a bedroom lifting my shadow up & trying
to swallow my tongue like impossible meat & tomorrow
a moon-faced girl will be in bed miles from here
turned different colors by her television.

The art of historical anecdotes

torpedoing Noah's Ark,
the sea is hot and brilliant
after the orbbed torpedo
busts the ark ajar.

My Father's Chest

carries two scars long pink mounds
like someone pressed
all their bubblegum
beneath his left breast

On the beach I discover myself thinking
a small fish has attached itself to my father
who parades the shoreline chest thrown back
stiffer than a car's hood

This is Attention:

arms merging with his sides
face unflinching as a reptile

The memory pursues him even here the gull's yowl melding
with the gook's
tinny battle shriek
flushed from the mouth appearing before my father
a photo thrust too close to his face bobbing and looming
and grimacing that squint-eyed grimace
from his muddy
Kewpie doll face
my father lock-jawed and staring through
the grimace like a fog
rifles grown indistinguishable knocking
bayonets jiving to unseal flesh somewhere here the rug burn of steel

blood's hot
rush and forty years
 later the pink mounds and forty years later me
 this poem
 you ¹

¹ Except my father never went to Vietnam:

There was no hot-breath scuffle beside the Mangrove's gray ribs
There was no Kewpie-faced gook drained and lying in the mud
his eyes lacquered like a deer's

The scars were an accident on my grandmother's farm
two boys jousting with silver shears in the barn's warm dark

[Or there was no farm – only the fresh plastic smell of a license
and later two cars smashed and smoking in an intersection

(Or there was no accident and not even any scars
Only this poem, you, me – that irretrievable war)]

Instructions to a boy who thinks he loves a girl

It's easy to fall in love with a girl's addictions
and think you have fallen in love with the girl.

Say you meet a girl who puts things behind her ears.

She has a cigarette's soft finger couched there, above
her huge black glasses. The cigarette keeps falling
out and her glasses keep slipping down her nose.

You also have black glasses. They are not huge.

On the way to her car, she tells you, post pinky
swear (*don't think different of me*), she did
heroin for two weeks. At this point, do not
love her. You will want to tell her
about your scars. Do not.

It's too early.

Wait until she punches her apartment window open,
strips the papers off her floor-bound mattress,
and touches your knee. She will do this
on her mattress while asking you about God.

Do it now.

Too late.

She's curious about demons. She will be the only one
who thinks your exorcism story is something to be proud of.

If you still can't tell her about your scars,
tell her that story. But do not think
you love her.

Next week, pay attention to her
hiking. You will forget how
you learned she smokes pot. Don't worry
about this. Don't let your mind jump

and roil when you think it was by the river,
playing ticktacktoe, but can't be sure.

It was probably by the river.

You are worrying and she is skating
on a pile of roots. If you're not careful,
she'll grab your shoulder
and you'll think you love her.

During lunch, be ready when she lifts
up her shirt. You have finally told her
about cutting and she is going to show you
her own scars. They purple her ribs like worms.

You want to touch them, but don't. She will
touch yours. Do not be surprised by this (she is
reaching) and do not think you love her.

Especially do not think you love her
when she tells you about her abortion
six minutes from now.

Not when she promises to quit
smoking (*I've been doing it
since I was twelve*) and doesn't.

Not when she goes off
Prozac and on Red Bull.

Not when you realize both
your minds are charioted
by depression

and this is why you are poets
and are sad.

She is not sad. You do not love her.

Remind yourself that it's easy to fall
in love with a girl's addictions and think
you have fallen in love with the girl.

Case study II

Some people stop wanting it before
they read it. Some people want their story to be better

or worse. Robyn was cast as the dark-haired girl
for a year. Having the same abortion for a year,
smoking the same cigarette, swatting the same smoke
out her window as I tell her my exorcism story
again and again. And every time she's just as impressed

and we're both just as sad. Before he turned yellow,
the yellow man is the color of old oatmeal. Everyone
at the table is looking at me, arranging their hands
like large consonants on the table. I read him

his poem before he dies and he doesn't tell me
it's wrong – the guard more or less dumb, the coral more
or less irritable, the film settling in his ears through the aid
station walls more or less exciting,
the snow blindness more or less blinding.

At the funeral a woman says he bragged
about his poem and I'm distracted by the story
my uncle tells: a man snuck on a bomber
to visit my grandfather. I hope he doesn't
tire of going blind and dying and snuffing
out his buddy's cigarette, but if he does,
there's always the bomber to write about.

I have a theory that the poem puts on a moment
and wears it like a bright jacket. Another theory
that my characters are secretly happy to be
my characters, to be carried around in a bright jacket
that's never hung behind a door.

Every few months I set my head
to the ground and listen for bison.

The art of description

we would watch it draped there like a too-small coat we might
describe like skin draped over the bones of an old woman until
we realize it is skin in which case we would describe it as a coat

**Before assaulting a librarian: lines
to the sister who should be disappearing
into a woman**

I imagine unpacking our mother's stomach
in the gradual silence of the hospital room,
fumbling my hands in your hot soup, slipping
over the throbbing tube, plunging for the pink

fist of your body. A nurse watches the scene
fleck behind my eyes and is content to leave
it there. She is lost to the nostalgia I have
conjured here, typing iris-black letters

that coalesce like breath hardening a cold car
window. She is surrounded by hospital
walls punched with too many doors, canopied
by florescent bulbs a child will compare to lasers

nineteen years before I splinter my cubicle
into fat needles, and outside a too-young librarian's mouth
is throwing off words, that configured stirrup drawing out
syllables gone to mush against the glass door, and soon

there is the shifting color of a cop's skin, there is the quick
leap into the future, yelling your name, all you
ever were, that name, into the long moment of the cop
car, and somewhere there is the nurse I never met,

and somewhere the child not lost to the dictionary,
not confined by my metaphors, by how long
I have, by how many thick-aired hours I have
been staring, I have been staring longingly at my fist.

Instructions before reading this poem

You cannot pick up this poem / say hello, answer it like a phone / This poem is not a phone It will not tell / you if someone has stolen your car, watch you / yell into the rumble It will not / comfort you afterwards, offering a dress-strapped shoulder / to lie on Don't expect it to take you / to dinner, order in French, and whisper / in your ear

This poem is not even a novel / It has no moral, no plot to trace out, there is no reason / to plumb each word as if you are looking / for your car If you find a car in this poem, do not / attempt to drive The car will not start, it will not shuttle / you around this poem, there will be no tour guide to point and pour out syllables / in an accent thick as sap

In this poem, each line breaks / off when you least expect it, leaving your eyes to drop without some tidy marshal / to flag your descent Whatever you do, please do not ask / your teacher to explain this poem Though her face is welded / together with wrinkles She is not the marshal / or the tour guide She has no key to the rust-freckled car / If you read this poem, do not look / at the words which are only a list / of black triggers

Gods

Shut the fuck up she yells because she can't
sleep because her roommate is blowing
a guy, noisily, on the couch, because she can't

sleep sponged by noise, because the noise is her
roommate blowing a guy on the couch, the noise
of the guy, the noise of her roommate, the gush,

the pop and gurgle, because she waited
three hours on her back listening
to sirens failing into the city because she wanted

to be polite, not scream dirty *shut the fuck
up* words, because she believes it's important to be
loose friends with roommates even if they blow

guys every date too soon and have bad collarbone
tattoos over their collarbones and because she is
new, anime and poetry and black twisty-tied trash

bags of clothes growing everywhere, because she just
got kicked out of her parents' school bus-shaped, school
bus-colored basement at a damp 11pm because

she mistakenly told her parents, mom
and stepdad, that she would visit her
boyfriend, beard and gauged ears, on Christmas

because his parents are also assholes but they are mostly
disappeared because his mom is thinned by
chemo because his dad is lost to a California

villa because the now-hospital woman, years
ago, cheated so said the private investigator, the letters,
the ring, the taxes, because no one needs to get caught

hard or wet or both to be counted
a cheater because disappearing counts
as revenge like screaming *I think*

I might be a dyke to your mom counts
as bonding because even half of this was enough
to spend Christmas because she believes that spending

time with someone is worthwhile
because swapping body heat is comforting because
she is a biological creature because she is

flesh and nerves because nerves need comfort
because chemicals count as emotions even if the word
is too mythic because words count as meaning

and meaning, when mouthed in small apartments
under fake-but-still-shedding pine trees
without ornaments, somehow, very trickily, counts

as commitment which she believes is important
because her parents were never committed except her
real dad because he threatened to kill, with possibly

a fertilizer-crusting shovel, possibly some
fists, left, right / left right left, her
stepdad because he threatened to hit her, lady

or no, because she mistakenly said she would
spend Christmas with her boyfriend
which is why she is telling me this

because she believes I am her
friend because she believes friends, romantic
or not, should be committed because she believes

I believe she is my friend because she believes
I believe that she believes I believe we are friends
because belief is all we have to go on

because we are not gods

except our words
which count as meaning which counts
as commitment which is why,

which is one reason why, I will never
tell her I love her.

One and three women

A moon-faced girl is not a turntable in the way
a turntable is not a singing single-armed cave,
but is a machine. In thirteen hours, it is Connecticut

and I am afraid to find my beamish self outside
my parents' window, delirious and shut-eyed
in the dark. She has written some lines about Plath

and forgets to show him. Her face
is the mnemonic for my confusion. Outside his
mother's blue van, she wears rain, wears cold, lips

the color of un-red candy – doesn't wear a heart
tattoo on her left arm like the dark-haired girl he lies
next to, dictating words to delete in the old house

in the old city that is not a collection of oak tree
forts and cardboard boxes, is only a maze and cardboard
wet on the street. Mother's phone call's reminding

the girl that desire is blood in the veins, is a strange
ventriloquism that gets blown out into moments that eat
desire – like I write this about the moon-faced girl

and my beamish self, how we carry accidental sadness
in our forearms and my thoughts are a dank arcade. In New Haven
or Hartford, a girl disappears into her age and doesn't say

she loves me and now the train's long yawp skipping
in the heat over the brown legs of palmetto trees is her
round face in New York looking and saying it is accidentally

sad. And I don't care I listen to drums on the radio and worry
my beamish self is a quiet animal waiting to smile whose car shunts
and drifts down streets with the sun's aftermath for where she fights

the boy folded on the Advil-colored couch, picking cat hair off
his thighs and my beamish self is on her cement steps watching fog
pixelate door numbers. And I am mostly next to a palmetto tree

and Connecticut is thirteen hours I can't cross where the moon-faced girl is
on the lamp-dabbed street, is staring at her duct-taped car and doesn't
see me kiss the kid-armed girl who is mostly a turntable.

Meditation on the causal consequences of short sleeves

One time, I punch a girl. It is
imaginary. I am not sorry. Her hips

are inculcated on my eyelids, sleeved
red jeans mottled with black

specks. Like dust or TV static over
mashed raspberries. Like the

gravel I pretend kick in her
pretend wound. The one

fraying the heart tattoo on
her forearm and mimicked, dimly

glossy, in the drug store window
where I catch myself daydreaming.

I catch myself mimicked
dimly over a girl's sleeved

forearm on the black TV
one time. I pretend

it is not imaginary like where her static
hips are on my sorry eyelids. I

pretend the mottled red
jeans in the one glossy drug store

window wound kick or punch her
her heart tattoo, like dust-mashed

raspberries, with fraying gravel specks.
I am inculcated in daydreaming.

**my hands haven't found
how to misinterpret Lisa's t-shirt
covered breasts**

Only after Carol sees a heifer's dung dry among other brown cows (clipped daises gambol over the grass tops at the schoolhouse). Only after a quick wing lifts an engine lung chewing jungle air (Vernon's dodging the barefoot lizards who chase the big-eyed moths). Only after a boy ruined by hair wears a sunburn into his father's car repair shop (the picture of the heifer is by the blue grease). Only after a long-boned woman comes home with a tongue muscle that's taught itself Japanese (Don is still ruined by hair in the church room that's putting on darkness and people). Only after an Italian rodeo man gives words into a girl's turtle-shell belly (John will disappear into a skinny catalogue of skinny threats in two years). Only after this fandango of occasions is newspaper-color photographs and green brambles in the woods liting up a girl's bumpy, stone-pale leg.

**In the matter of developing jealousy of weather, a case
of water-flattened hair and jealousy of rain**

Stepping away from the castle Lisa's hair
is a misspelled word. The rain has come
early and pulls down her
curls the way I can't.

The gray leg of the ground turning under us, holding seams
filling with liquid. Seams searching out
seams. The lake, appearing around
the pines, making unmemorable gestures.

Morning and the oak tree filtering her apartment, the sand
and cigarette butts I imagine around its roots
how this is city happy
makes me happy.

Because the light isn't
thick and Lisa's wearing her life on her
skin, the tough pink thing of it
the question of it fading black below her

nape I pretend to circle, easily, like the neck
of a beer John didn't give her. I say

the feather washed into my sheets a little. I say your smile
let's me know your body grows around
your mouth, a hung-up coat.

The feather hung above the seams
means I'm inconsolable, means my hair is slime

for three years. I'd like to tell you anything. Did you know
cupping sunlight isn't hot? Cupping sunlight isn't hot. Fog
wanders my windshield and I am not angry at the fast color
called time,

the lines about Plath I never read, the pebble-toothed man you left
me to. Only the rain, your hands stammering over
my back and the tarot cards

striping your thoughts with Palmetto trees. I can tell you now that you won't believe them this time.

Notes after unpeeling the bandage

Do not worry about the feathers. Later,
they reappear, lithe as ever
beneath your skin. Of course
you will not remember if, before,
fingering them under the pine
boughs at the zoo, shadow-jacketed and
coltish, you held them to your arms, tentative
with lightness, smoothing their barbules

between your momentary fingers. The Velcro
shoes that turned the dirt-floor basement on
and off with each step are long rotted and soon
enough you will forget the bison, too, your love
for the bison, how you broke from sleep, and raked
by your love for the bison, turned to mother
and the bright box ready to stiffen the air
with color at her touch. Worse,
you will forget the lurid packages
of your dreams, the bison muting
the plane with his hoof-boom, the faceless
horsemen glossy and letting off
arrows, crosshatching the circus
of blue before the numb cliff drop, the chaos
you painted on paperboard for art
class, adorned with tulip-orange
beads, smooth
and calm to the touch. I am only here

to say everything
subsists. The bison, the crosshatch. Even
the beautiful wounds called lilacs will
repeat in an eventual neighborhood, after
the feathers return to your arms, suffused by the dark
darting drill carrying its noise and its
ink to your skin which has only been revised
over and over as self
deciphers self – the boyhood blankness,
the freckles occurring and punctuating and punctuating
and punctuating until the crosshatch of scars

sprouts dark as lupine when you realize you have
forgotten the feathers and the zoo magic
with feathers where you ran, mangled
your body over the jungle gym, contorting to match
the quick monkeys in the cage beyond the soft
hill and you have forgotten them worse
than the time you forgot the bison,
your love for the bison, despite the two
brown heaps dropping their feet in the field down
the road, ineradicable as the feathers inking your arm.

Case study I

For instance, a girl called Jules grows up
on a yacht with her father and a white cat
slipping across the deck. The ocean lasts
for eight years. She's on the water
until she's on the land, learning to walk

and see colors. After class, the professor
apologizes. We walk out together. She shows me
a skinny alley in New Haven and now we're friends
and now she tells me the yacht story. I keep it

but never write it. I'm a pilot. The afternoon
has turned into an airplane and wind. Jules is next
to me in the airplane, which has orange stripes,
which is buffeting in the wind. I compare the airplane
to a dingy. Jules says she knows. We look
at the gauges and we don't take off. Looking
at the engine, her skirt yawns. She is all
Marilyn Monroe and I am watching it all

from my face. There are other stories with airplanes
I've never told. The one where I burrow through
a rainstorm and land with lightning off
my wings. I get home and squeeze the rainstorm out
of my clothes and then it's in the drain

and maybe I drank it this morning. Or the one
with the black lake and Alison squeezing
my leg as we dive towards the silent canoers. Or better,
Lisa lying in the sand, tasting the Connecticut
River with milky toes. The airplane watches
and coos from the grass, reminding me about Jules

and the yacht and the cat. My cat has never
been on a yacht and I don't think she minds. I don't
think she knows what a yacht is or how to want it.
Jules has never been in a poem. But she knows
what a poem is. And she knows how to want it.

600 dollar painting

At the art show
a man
with improbable
clothing
prattles
under the jazz
 piped in
from everywhere
about buying
his
 600 dollar painting

it is full
of expensive
oils piled
and dried
 hard like
 old food

and I have
 just
 stolen
all a woman's
 poems for 20 dollars

**Study in the potential for facial hair
to create bathetic grocery store encounters**

I tell the salt-haired woman about my loneliness.
We pan outspoken isles for something to drop
fifteen years, brown rice maybe, figs, green
tea – maybe. All this under the assorted hum

of refrigerators, cool white light printed over everything –
the whole fish whose murky eye investigates the thumbprint
on his glass hood. All this in the short, repeating distances
through disappearing food, its smooth bags, its noisy cases.

The stock boy with the singular face hovers the fact
of his mouth above a grimy microphone and my hand
grasps a solitary tower of aqua shaving gel. My companion
wanders like a delirious child, lost in the store's quick instances,

her smile expiring, gestures expiring – the woman who five
miles ago, was at home, half-an-hour ago, at home, was hugging
detergent, the gaudy circus aisle clicking over her mind, the cautionary,
jungle colors claiming erasure, broadcasting unspecified erasure.

Things I'd like to tell my poet-friends

Next year I end up not having died.

The poetry reading is dark and squadrons
of mosquitos skirr invisibly, landing
and biting as the bearded poet unhinges his slow
words slowly. I ignore my friend (he's calling
another to pick him up), feed my hands to faucet water
three hours later, wonder whether the breeze actuates
the dark-haired girl's hair as she leaves
the elementary school where children I've never met are
continued by children I've met never. I won't tell
my friend or the oblivious dark-haired girl.
The lightning bugs floating in the garden
delete patches of the night

and I hate their beauty. Today,
if this means anything, the rain is white –
it walls the house before it clears. For a while,
I hold the tan font of my hands
to its needles. At the poetry reading, a slab
of sunlight probes our faces from between
unreachable branches. She is a new friend. I smile
factually at the back of her head until she turns. There
are no squadrons, no slow words
slowly. I've found a hawk feather and she
says it might be a sign (it's been
thirteen years). I only picture the drive home
as the poet reads a poem about his
fast-dead son, how he lives
in proxy. At home, we walk atop streets dull
with emptiness. I imagine her
breasts might look like aluminum
spoons in the moon's glow. I
don't tell her. Tomorrow

I write this wearing a pilot's headset
as a proxy for silence. It's next year
and I end up not being dead.

**Besides the psych ward, house arrest is a good place
to kiss a meth addict with pistachio eyes and a left
arm highwayed by scars**

even now the wind hates us, grabbing
my voice over the warm pond so that I am
just a mud-haired boy stepping along
dim asphalt and she waits to see the bluebirds
blue around my bicep. Twenty-nine days

ago her mouth's full of anger and her anger snags
on the wind. The wind washes over her
mother's ears and the blue-suited man, whose suit's
a too-dark blue, takes the girl whose mouth's full
of anger to a bulb-lit box where everyone is embalmed
in time for having the misfortune of wind

and sorry ears. This is too much
for us. Bones navigate our bodies. Sunlight hits my arm
and I worry about scrubbing it off. Her grandfather stirs
the wind with his cigarette. The wind makes body shapes
against our bodies. Her grandfather preaches

about mermaids. The wind chimes giggle
in the wind. There are people who have never
said anything. People who glance at their wet machinery
and, terrified by its wetness, call it dry. *Remember*

*the kid-armed one, I say, the one who hid
her poem from her lover?* It is only right
that mutes are everywhere, lucid as grass.
The circumstance of our voices has already vanished
us from box to box. The white puma roams. The day

disassembles outside the meth addict's
window and she pulls me inside
her. She is wet. The white puma is grey. The kid
-armed girl speaks of ice cream flavors
at her sister-in-law's wedding. This has nothing
to do with wind or with boxes, I think.

In advance of the bruised vein

There is so little violence left to do. Trees chew
tunnels in the air, and the breeze ducks under

indifferently. Days collect in the hallway,
the way the fish-tailed beavers build their dam

every night despite my shouting. I can't hear
the sunrise, flowers deploying the slow trap

of red petals – time has no hunger
over a rug. I remember fog breathed

large on the damp grass as I set ambers along
orange water because a redhead unpacked her catastrophe

into my hours, which is merely a note with a hat
over it – the trauma of words said behind music. Soon

twelve men catch me in the intelligence of river
water, capsize the dark with cool yellow beams

and the yelps of terrified dogs or Pentecostal
women. They catch the small Cherokee girl

too, with her car rolled and throwing smoke and her hair
tufts of blond grass tethered to a seat blossoming

foam until a man severs it like the grass peering into her
grandfather's mosquito-filled tires. We'll dig them out

later, whisper lust into our spit, leave shallow dirt rings
in the yard. We know the fiction of blood. We are all notes

under hats. Only water is perplexed at my hands, I tell
a nurse, even criminals can yell over their arched stretches of wire.

Theory of the antagonist

Lou's sun-pale field is a misnomer for oak forest. The stone wall falls over itself like an old woman's layered skin and no one,

I wonder, has climbed the trees since they were sliced down. You can hear them like gunfire if you're lucky. The clap

as the saw dismantles a tree and turns it to a field, a low scoop of light, a soft cheek of unclothed ground. A couple

water-slick nights from here, there is a photo of the bantam girl levitating, even though we know how

the moon works. Sometimes I cast her up in sentences, the way geysers can freeze reaching up

because they are not allowed to speak. When we traded words, her stories were always shy as wounded dogs

and her face was the way a cow walks away from a fence. Despite our pinked enumerations, her legs

quiet over my lap in the bar with a painting of Venus or her thumbs reading my arms bending under the ceiling

fan, the cucumbers nodding secrets to the ground, our anger has grown essential as genitals. Bantam girl – there are so many things

I cannot tell you. The undark hallway you sent me to, the flashlight bleaching open a spoke across

each room. The window that was a redundant clip of sky and strangers entering cars to leave it. The nine

hours that window shades were for pretending. How sometimes, for two or three minutes when I am lonely,

I believe in god. Or the day a horse jumped a drooping wire beyond the oaks and red-berried thorn bushes to wave

the cake-yellow translator of its long body in my yard,
his hooves testing the cold mud, his nostrils shooting periscopes of air.

Incorrect anecdote

and never tells you what belief is anyway. Whether you can squeeze your eyelids shut, unpeel them and, wham-bam thank you ma'am, believe, whether belief is like thinking the sun will wheel back to its place, even though it could, someday, go dark and impotent, whether it's like knowing my girlfriend isn't a cheat, despite the unwrapped, never-worn lingerie I dug from her old mothballed t-shirt drawer, hung on my thumb like the dead blue jay our cat unmoulted onto the concrete porch except maybe it was another cat or maybe it was the neighbor boy who found road kill and wanted to scare us and maybe I believe it's our cat but maybe, possibly decades later, I doubt our cat was really strong enough or fast enough on the furry candy bars of her hind legs and then what if I die? What if identity is just a story? We're all just skinsuits of story? What if I die thinking, for a second, that our cat was a swinging-bellied slob and not some swift, tiny-fanged bird killer?

Breakfast elegies

At this point in the story I have already noticed
that my orange juice is still an orange and I've contemplated
my misinterpretation of television –
how sound waves only touch you softly.

Look at these things: the orange shining on
the table, the television box
exhaling its gentle noises. There's a river nearby
that carries the bouquet

of a dead crow and his feathers comb the gelid water. I believe
in this. In the crow and his combing,
even though he cannot see

the orange. At another point my fingers are falling
through Alison's hair. Yes, I've given her a name
even though I might have called her *orange*. Alison
sounds more like the river
combed by the drifting crow.

If you are curious, she is leaning against
my bed while the brown walls paraphrase the wind.

I cannot tell whether she is naked under her clothes.

The subaqueous longing has gone
to some nostalgic girl who keeps glass dolls
posed in her closet's quiet warmth.

Alison's eyes are less difficult:
cow-sorry and drowned. They are something like oranges,
but I call them eyes
because *eyes* is the word for eyes.

Now I want to catch her by her elbows
which means the time she lies supine under her dream
catchers to tell me about making stick soup
by the pine trees, which is to say her father loved the occasion of her
round and freckled face.

Instead I tell her *purple* (I mean bruise).

I mean: the world is alive in pieces. Look! There is a boy
with shoeless happiness bowing under the tall grass. He has oranges
in his pockets even though there are no elbows in my palms.

Wrong story

The day the kid-armed girl begins waking up
alone, the forest hides things. Thin
flames twitch under dank leaves, vanishing
smoke arms test the piney air. It is only

patting my face by the orange
window, that I remember a man
must start all this, must go about
with some cool instrument, squeezing
his fire onto pine straw and soft-fingered
pines and now the forest is a many-
studded moonscape – nothing that is
easy to imagine.

A list of nothing, excluding trees

The last time I smelled the forest was on a cassette tape.

Let me say it: Alison has come back:
her mouth is long, she carries longing in her mouth.

I've never understood words,
like when she tells me she's not a cow or
not walking away from a fence.

In other words:
her mouth is not short or she doesn't
carry apathy in her mouth.

A year later, the forest is a litany
of trees whose syntax is the syntax of bark.

I understand now: she is a deer walking toward a fence.

The oaks are obsessed with me,
collecting shadows around my body,
which has only been departing me for my whole life.

Sometimes I like it better as branches cracking
and water gulping turtles laid on hidden ribbon.

I pour it back into the snap and plunk like old blood,
a language of childhood hair rehearsing water.

Now there's an elegy above her
breakfast table, which tells me I've already forgotten the pile
of blond tufts that name the departure of a deer into a dog's bark.

I'm not sure if the elegy is not a tree or not a cassette tape –

by the washer machine, her hair is indecipherable. If she catches me
by the elbows, the sun's credulity is the woman knocking on my door.

Already she's enthralled them in her palms
like the oranges I am trying to reassemble
out of all this orange juice in the rug.

**Snapshot of so & so leaving
the country in which some things are omitted**

Take the ubiquity of lips –

 Lisa's lips dark as worms in the clock-lit kitchen
 Robyn's lips releasing a goodbye that tangles in the wind chimes.

Take Lexi's lips

 splintered by a scar
 I haven't noticed.

On her bed my body depicts itself

 on her bed. She looks at me while I read
Ginsberg as if she wants to memorize the emergency

 of kissing. Her mouth is a purse I haven't finished
searching and the minutes are leaving.

Behind the old barn, my hands try on the dirt. I think

 the bones my limbs hide are the same

in every possible self. This time, the river is muted by ice.

 I'm on the mossy rock
 when I see a deer with antlers

snarled as branches. Rain becomes rice on the pond.

 Lavender clam shells flap on the shore.

She told me she's baffled by the trance we worship as consciousness –

 except words are a new superstition here,
 except my arm carries a tall pain

 that won't fall out.

In the city I'm not sure which beam she's dressed with graffiti.

 It's not enough that the towers devise themselves in rain
and I find a dead boy's shoes snagged

 on unwet tracks. My sight is cleaned

by a train's beams. I'm reading an anthology of ellipses
and I can't find my place. An ellipsis of hair, an ellipsis of grass,
an ellipsis of hogs growling in the tan reeds.

There are no people in the city.
So & so's feet are confused at the ground. Vanishing
behind a shop door, even my doppelganger is sorry.

The art of verbal irony

I am happy I cannot shed this city like frayed shoes slide it
behind the door I'm happy we can't watch it there heavy with gray rain
I'm happy we cannot pass it by laugh at its torn tongue
its unthreading laces its eye-wide eyelets

A list of everything, not including trees

After the rainman puddles, I bury the water in the backyard.

Lexi is watching from the porch and tasting rain droplets off the blue wood. If the rain was river water, she is happy. My eyes want to debunk her

face, but there is no word I know that makes a girl vanish. Most uncoil into soft animals with harsh colors, so I have been dog earring all the trees

before they turn to books. Because we are taller than each other, the way she jumps as the snake dives overhead, over hair with a sole red streak, into the pool

with rust pants caught on rust rocks overlaid by water that turns white with speed, the way men's hair turns white with time. I am tired of tuning the wire of grief,

of my arms the temperature of arms, my legs the temperature of legs. In the cicada trill of morning, I worry I can't tell if I'm my doppelganger. When I saw him

at an intersection, child-handed and ink-haired, my tongue trembled at my deformity. Which is to say, I love her, and love hasn't been invented yet,

it's not even a tree, only the timid flag of my tongue in the air. Here's the idea that words are only sounds we've tethered to things and there are so many untethered

sounds. For instance, I give sentences to many rivers and I put rivers in many sentences, which is a silly poet thinking Lexi is happy. The river is a metaphor or a name

on the air or here's a river and its calm stones and water that shivers in whites, a gurgle and laughter and the static of all the televisions

your father befriended. I've yet to translate
the static, but it goes on being said. Oh noisemaker!
Noisemaker river, noisemaker tree, noisemaker mouth –

noisemaker legs, noisemaker train, noisemaker jungle –
 noisemaker rug, noisemaker dust, noisemaker spaghetti –
 noisemaker lizard, noisemaker feathers, noisemaker refrigerator –
 noisemaker gray puma.

You are the words for every unworded thing, for every rainman
buried in the dirt, for every Lexi yet to be debunked.

**On finding Helen Keller's reading glasses
(dreams about the yellow man's resurrection)**

I would have liked to watch you die, to dive
inside the coarse and lucent olive wave, your body
a costume of quivers. Sometimes, I leave

my hands in the cannibalism of dirt, hoping
they will root or disappear, the way your fingers
rooted in my arm and vanished into dirt. Lately,

the year is a secret I have already forgotten. Lately,
I embrace the birch's lack of imagination, its whites
hyphenated into a code of silver gibberish,

the way your legs turned to phrases I failed
to decipher. Come rummage the lugubrious rugs
behind the blue door. There are cobwebs dark as Lexi's

hair – there's maple-colored oil stains and toy guns
tufted like long dry reeds. The dark is fat
and restless. The dark is changing my arms to fish

scales while the garden grows into soil suspicious
of water. In each dream, you are trying to show me your heart
is not a piece of kiwi or a group of homunculus ballerinas

and I believe you. I go back to your room
where the television sits, a doll muted by plastic
and the sorrow of chalk broken on summer

asphalt. My hands diagnose a wall, the way a virgin
touches everything to know that it's real. In your chair,
I bask in monumental shade, I see you embarrassed

by a stranger's hunger, your eyes dull as milk,
your blood remembering its cruel language.
A man is selling bayonets and green

uniforms that are actually gray uniforms
at night. Squeeze my hand like a limp bird. Everyone
knows that color is only an idea we have about light.

Absence is a lively anecdote

We'll find loneliness later. For now the ground grows cowed with snow. The yellow man practices his rotting. The patient darkness learns dog quiet behind the cellar door. All decade the glum rug has been rehearsing our feet and turning the color of apricots. For some reason I am sitting in his seat and I am not afraid. Don holds a rusted pot of blond spaghetti above the table. Lips pucker around hot peppers large as bulbs.

Uncle Steve remembers everything except the nighttime coral cigarettes, the mosquitos mocked by rubber raincoats, the dog tags drifting through jungle brush. Now a corrugated clap and the floor is a kite whose string we've lost to the wind. Boards scowl under the rug. This is the part in the movie where the table empties like a crime scene and I grab handfuls of blue stairs when a beam tumbles in the basement. I am the dumb action hero. The room is a paused lung. Our breath is cold smoke going red in the fire engine's strobe. No one is unscathed, and it is good.

**A day racing tinfoil boats or my sorrow
upon discovering my non-omnipresence**

Already I've forgotten to hide. I'm embarrassed
when the river is gullible
and believes my body's form.

Lexi lingers on the rock, delineated as a lizard. Her limbs jitter
under sunlight before she eliminates each leg

in the murky spool. We are slow elephants,
watching the yellow paws fall
and drift along the long water.

Blue pines idle in the mud. I know they are jealous
when Lexi unpeels a mottled leaf
and sticks it to her noiseless forearm.

The crow-black water billows around
round and algae slick boulders and I am surprised

our bodies haven't opened to join it to their own. Maybe
we're not wrong enough to be forgiven

yet. Maybe I've neglected to cross my skin
across your skin. I'm too busy pressing a foil canoe
into the water and thumbing my melancholia:

the notion that the river's not the oak forest
and the oak forest is not the river.

Lexi erases a rock beneath her dripping limbs.

The drops stain dark freckles in the dirt. Did you see it: every moment
the erasure of every possible moment?

Even at lunch we have no oranges unless we have
oranges. Let's hope it's not too late to be

hungry. The best we can do, love, is sink
into hair and into flesh.