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dead eye open.

by

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Bachelor of Arts
Bennington College, 2010

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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DEDICATION

For my mother

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ABSTRACT

This collection chronicles the youth and adulthood of a speaker, and how those experiences shaped considerations of masculinity, intimacy, and sexuality.

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En suma, no poseo para expresar mi vida, sino mi muerte.
-César Vallejo

La Juerga

Before we leave the house, my mother and I pray to
a shrine of saints and loved ones.

My mother's father, handsome

and murdered when I was one,
stands a framed limbless gentleman, combed for
posterity. Slave mother

and conqueror father in his prayers,
Martín de Porres poses among his criaturas.
Rosa de Lima wears her harvest in her hair.

Before our prayer has ended—an errant flash,
from behind a portrait of La Mami, the elder
from whom dead and distant children werekept

secrets for so long. Mistake.
This is a garden party in heaven and
all are gathering for a reshoot

of the moment. A crooked-haloed Gabriel
raises a glass to wobbling amens
and says *On the count of three*

say APOCALYPSE say we're DRUNK
say we take our clothes OFF! It's messy,
but this is prayer. This is the asking

by simply standing before,
and the wistful answering. *Say*
you believe in DEATH

and she will come to you on a wild horse!
they say. *Say you come sent by your MOTHER*
and no one will know you do not BELONG!

Before her eyes are opened, my feet are wet in
the liquor-soaked grass, the side of my face
is brushed with the end of one of Rosa's petals.

Prayer: a question form of survival.

Answer: a choir of dead smiles, returning
to their final resting raucous faces.

I

My Mother's First Job in New York City, USA

My mother's friend got her a one week job at the bank, and in those seven days, she turned it into a month, then a year, then finally, via temp fence, a permanent post.

Safe boxes were opened, her key allowing all other keys to work. Her key was not her key, but theirs. The story had to be that she was handler of the key, who was keeper.

She was careful to be trusted, crossing into their vaulted mote, new nativism where she had no treasure to trade for place.

She was careful to speak English, even with the ladies in the office pen, lest the brown suit and mustache threatened them with curation, said:

“And that would be the story of you.”

Call it difficult, plying between their safely stacked world and the open-floor pen she'd spent seven days learning to keep,

—but call it, too, Creation Theory.

Call a god a god, and if you were me, God, My nomadic God building the time to build a house,

turning a seven day job into
permanent post.

Every morning, she turned the lights on, and
saw that it, finally, could be,
one day, all good. The journey into what

her life in the states could be,
into the paradise
where money grows.

My Father Naked

“Kings do not touch doors.”

Black leg hair wet.
Still in tub. Curtain
pulled wide. *Come in*
he'd said. This was not display.

A common—not intimate—thing,
that I be there at that moment, that,
to him, I was a familiar creature in
the house.

He thought himself
provider—beaten clean,
like a dog, of knowing
what to provide.

His truck routes
coursed the city,
couriered bats and gear
to Yankee Stadium.

His shoulders swelled
every summer. Rotator
cuffs splintering like wood,
but never the hours.

His hours were robust,
dark skies at each end.
His hands showed this,
even stood doused and naked.

His nights showed this.
Ashen hands graced with dew
from beer bottles opened
still in uniform.

His dinners were heated,
after we had eaten.
He preferred this.
He preferred this offering.

His earnings always flew
to Colombia, to a litter
of brothers and sisters, seventeen
born of the same mother.

His mother called me *descarado*
on her visits to America,
the land from where her son
sends so much gold.

His mother called me *descarado*
to whip a man out of a boy,
said *descarado* with venom,
to make my father hear.

She did not know
I giggled behind her.
She did not know I followed
mirroring her waddle.

His mother called me *descarado*
to my father late into a night.
She did not know
I was still awake.

His father spent years
doing little but dying.
Wore wool sweaters
in dead summer.

Cloud white hair thinning.
Daylight a burden. Eroding in
a woven beige womb.
This was his father.

The man who used to beat him
like a dog, as my mother
would always find need
to remind me.

He, too, remembered this
about his father, though he
never wanted
to remind me.

His body carried a scar
where I have a birthmark,
and an anchor tattoo
where my bones still showed.

He had what I thought
was a child's penis.
Not so different from mine.
Part of us was the same.

It, I knew, was small,
before I knew what that
could possibly mean
to a man.

He asked if I knew
what I was looking for.
I said yes, and he said
so grab it.

I pretended to reach for something,
tenderly gripped the air, and went,
shut the door behind me,
pondered the nothing held

dearly in my hands.

Mother Before God

She mourns nomadically.
Mamá has always been a
transient seed. Abuelita

has remained unburied a decade,
boxed in ashen state, ghost toggled
through a foreign country.

Home is where
the heart is, but the soul
is so much deeper. Fortune cookie wisdom

is how the drunk pagan prays
for mother's forgiveness—
for making a sundry of an elder—

for her own grandisima culpa—her
saddleback packed with the freedom to
wander with both dead and living.

Abuelita rests in her own shadows,
and in the shadow of the urn, and I pray
for my mother's deliverance—my mother,

who changed nations years before
I was born, and did not alight easily.
In our language, child is given *to the light*, instead

of birth. The doctors said very little, but cut it dry that
there was choice to be made that
one bright morning: me or my mother.

Her choice: light for both of us.
That Jesus only died for the men! an aunt says,
We still suffer like his mother. And I imagine

my grandmother then,
nursing my mother still drunk
from giving, and replying

Not even God has domain over his mother.

A Faithful

Faith has kept me, sneaking me in
through the back door for years.

Finger on her lips like daddy's home,
smile that's so much louder

with my eyes open. She is Jesus,
taking me home, and tapping the bloodstone,

vaulting over me, saying and saying
this is how.

What would my mother think?
—If she knew we lied Saturday sinners,
dreaded the morning star,

and lived that good life, on
two hours sleep, lamenting
“It's been *ages*

since the devil's been in town.”

Jesus Dream No. 1: Yeshua, My King of The Bronx

Moist with one drop of thy blood, my dry soul

-John Donne

¡Amor de rey!

-Latin King Nation

Slaughtering lamb,

consecrated bloodstone,

participle strewn

and vaulted over me,

a body and blood willing to throw down,

your face stenciled by hope onto dandelion rags,

what can be holier than you being mine in your second coming?

Yeshua! I call out your original name

the way you showed me at Pearly Gates Park on St. Peter's Ave

where the streetlights juddered

a pure glow. Tell me again, how you waited to live

the miracle of your birth,

how Herod counted the days of you

to know how young the children must be to die. Tell me of life, before this one

hangs on lumber and grows intimate

with the coming summer rain.

Wash not my feet but all of it,

this body that rises like fingers of benediction
that trace my clavicle frontier, upon which
you wrote the slopes
 of Calvary,
 in the image of a spider-glassed past. Yeshua,
I can hear them out this window, the boys in yellow, calling for you now,
begging for it,
a king's love.

Chicken Tongue

My brother and I secretly try
touching
tongues to see

who's braver.

We're buckled backseat
to visit with father
the butcher and market.

We know meat

and the sound
of how it's made, though
we know so little

about raw texture.

Squirrel

I flicker awake just as the streetlight
flickered us asleep. A housefly opens
my ear to the day whispers something

about the light in my eye through curtains
of a window where the streetlight is off, switched
out of misery after bearing a heavy glow
trying to live out the night. This dawn I see

as the first one awake is low but slowly swelling.
The honey vapor buzz continues, the whole house
sleeps in my ear, a light that comes with sounds
of all the nearly-absent, I know Hector is next

to wake, this, the hour he and I share all summer,
on the other side of what starts
as a desperate judder, so tired who knows
if what falls asleep to the nightly streetlight coda

would ever wake. Each morning, tatters

of black foil sky turned inside,

out. Each morning we sit, afraid

our family will take forever to wake, we never know

one night we'll try to fall asleep

after the last voltaic hums of a bulb going out,

and to the final chitter of a squirrel's mouth charred by

the high electric wire, and the slender body

that will hang there for months.

Welcome Home, MotherSoldier

50 feet down from the trees' peaks and seated at the border of an empty fountain,
my grandmother gives me a bag of Wonder Bread

for my hand to grind from the inside, serve morsels of wheat flesh
to parents of squabs moving in a matrix of hunger.

I have seen the pigeon navigate the world built around it, the
corners and branches webbed with boobytrap plastics,

bags that read Thank You and Have a Nice Day. And as a boy, I could imagine
a bird's gratitude, for mother soldier's return on hollow bone, nest teetering in the wind.

I too am a son, and these are days a mother soldier works long hours.
These are days where feeding gets the best of me. These are nights

I am too young for gratitude, and cannot stay awake, to greet and say goodnight to
my weeping, weary mother.

Como los Unicornios

While stowing our jackets and backpacks in lockers I softly hummed the trumpet overture of *Déjà Vu (Uptown Baby)*, sampled from Jerry Rivera's *Amores como el nuestro*. For those unfamiliar with the musical theme: imagine an eager angel announcing the arrival of one who has seen love and is come to sing praise and knowledge. Catalina heard this, and before setting in for another day in 8th grade, asked if I too listened to "that music."

I explained the sample. I know now language can cannibalize—and that feels wrong, but *right* when the juices find their way out of our closed chewing mouths.

I remember the way her curious eyes bloomed out and how she folded away again at my response,— how, for a moment, she thought I was on the brink of blooming out to meet her, of smuggling myself out of the Catholic school uniform and invisible to the classroom and into the air between us where it was said nothing can flourish. What she was expecting was a unicorn—but, like the song says, that kind of love is disappearing. Disappearing. A thing that never existed is disappearing. For her, I was that beautiful impossibility, and at the very least, free to do something,

like disappear.

T-2

Terminator: Affirmative.

Young John Connor: No no no no no no no,
you gotta listen to the way people talk. You don't say, "Ah-
ffirmative" or some shit like that. You say,
"No problemo." And if someone comes up to you with an attitude, you say,
"Eat me." And if you wanna shine them on it's,
'Hasta la vista, baby.'

Terminator: Hasta la vista, baby.

-Terminator 2: Judgment Day, 1991

Humanity is the American underdog in this movie,
quipped through a mechanical shell
in strings of words flimsy as they are
performative. *Vuelvo*

was my grandfather's promise
to my grandmother, the same year a
futuristic immigrant grew

in American hearts for the same utterance.
My mother says disappearance
is difficult to tell—a story about having
no story. It took her years to have a word,

and a way of saying "Disappeared," to warn
of the nothingness in a tale of kidnapping
and in "his heart gave out, God willing."

Truth is, she spent years hoping her father was taken,
hoping his heart caved. In the early days,
she often heard the phrase, "And that'll be the story of you"
while fighting to keep her first job in New York City.

There are things you learn in a new country, she says, that
make you pretend some things never were.
And here, miracles were debuting seven years later,

a holy return to the canon, a sequel in which
this immigrant machine comes to undo
a death. And how she desired a journey through time, and
land. If she had been home, in Lima,

what would his promise have brought?
What would she have said? Or what
was she still learning to say?

She wonders if she never left, but then,
she worries that she'd never learn,
but then it learns to shine them on
and speaks it for her in her tongue,

“Hasta la vista, baby.” Goodbye.

Going to the Movies Feels Like the End of the World

To the universe we shall return. It's a matter
of how—do we hold hands
and hum until the drumdrums shimmy us
to freedom? Or maybe I'll surge into the stars alone,
you alone, and snap back like a rubber band
raining like death onto villages. The million

dollar movie in front of me has one of those actors
with a big head and noteworthy chin—they're all like that
these days, like we're collecting perfect models
in case they need to don the cape of Superman, all of them.
With this many Supermen dying by our side, what could we possibly
have to fear? Falling into the past? Not a chance. Not

in this lifetime. I bet the best view will be in the middle
of the pack. My head won't be so cocked back
while I look at the great silver screen in the sky. There will be
footage grainy and triumphant, odes to tyrants, a chrysalis
thundering open, recorded and rippled through
memories not unaware we are watching,
just indifferent.

Roll credits. And that's the story
of us. Names and duties scrolling, a collective life ending,
looking on nostalgically, reading then with interest
at what was never noticed, and to our lefts and rights
we'll ask *Is that what we really did?* In Parkchester, there used to be

an American Theater—haunted without question,
staircases roped off in worsted velvet, balconies high in dark corners,
off limits due to safety. I used to think it was there
and dusty to pull a soft thing over time's eye. I used to know
it wouldn't end along with the world. I'd return there
to catch it, the apocalyptic premier, the event of an age, if it hadn't
closed its doors for good last year.

II

In the Garden

*“It’s like a jungle
sometimes it makes me wonder
how I keep from going under how
I keep from going under”*
-Grandmaster Flash, THE BRONX, 1984

We are flowers
crushingly treed in,
fenced in, and from within,

from the ground where soil springs stem we
look up,
seedlings peering into

a sky, from where
light comes and gashes
our herded overgrowth

through serrated leaves
often hidden in the teeth of
vibrant predators,

where colors come alive
to fight, to fuck,
to mother dandelion boys,

to father fountains
of morning dew’s sustenance
that we swill into the night

What hand from on high

with an empirical plan for bodies for a
modern wilderness wilding

in its own fester came to us
large, green
and bedeviled

What hoer brought the butcher's tools,
to plot the bedding

Ransack. Overthrow. Caravan and leave.

Seedlings will be seedlings and walk the
grid like oak

our promise is always, flower to flower
to push our soft faces into the fence

to color the cars from everywhere draping
a reflection,
a soft and far possibility

and we grow roots into that fence
and how we now become part of
that which frames

what passes us by leaving us
the beauty of what grows madly in the underneath, a
panoply of wither, leaving
us
still wanting
to be beautiful

Account of the Birds as the City is Built Around Them

The makers have landed, the birds are already here,
their journey says, "Build a cage" and so they build the cage
from within. They must be kept, these pigeons,
and be called *pigeon*. The art on their bodies, the miscoloration of
iridescence tarred to their backs, called *pigeon*. They build trains in
diagrams of irrigation, loose the local

mongrels to paint forest walls on rivers, catch them
and confiscate their colors. They, too, are to be called
pigeon, and loosed again as part of taming generations
of geraniums, for these birds—they'll descend into color,
the bleaker the sky, and as in a garden, only live ground-

up. To keep them grounded, they train their wings to descend.

Drift Down the Bruckner, Sept. 11th

From the highway, The Bronx's wilderness quality
legible: the low sagging canopy roofs,
the occasional visible alley garden
overgrowing, at the feet of a silver road

running miles up the wake of two towers,
built side by side to resemble the boulevards
to get there, and only there, built
to promise that by wanting down this road

one has already left behind this borough,
traded in the jungle for an empire. But we
are stopped on the shoulder, drifting
at the sight of black smoke bellowing,

at the desperate shape it takes
of its absent twigs, the promise
unwilling to die. Here,
years of jungle fires cold on the curb,

reprised on a bright distant morning,
at the center of the apple's ivory
flesh. From this highway, the roofs
of The Bronx are with us,

no tower so tall it burns for years.

Ground-Up/Tree-Down

A tree has never promised anything
to my wake. Tree, whose name I wish I knew
the name of, fabric from a careening
impulse, won't you cling to the rising force in
this wind, I say, No, you cannot sway
to your leaves' desires. Do you not reach up
like I do, or is my reach for the sun
misguided? Is asking a misguidance?

A bird flew to where shade could no longer
reach, above the trellis of the brick's peak,
stood on a branch over the tenements,
twiddled the glare, and sang from way on high,
glory to the limits of our city,
chirping downward into every window.

Under the Elevated Train

In a fatigued influence, your hub rocked towards me
and away and I, nowhere near tired, stood
under the tracks seeing your face stippled with light
from behind the chain link and the rendezvous
of three back Brooklyn streets reflecting their dark
scales to glissade onto this main avenue, this river
soaked in rain, an organic and flawed
ordained inception. In some sense, how difficult
it was to stand there and not kiss you. Reflections
on the granite rippled in the wind like orange
dogwood flowers like the mural and the lighting
of the café we were leaving. A half-blooded
intermission gave me enough pause to fear
the train approaching breathing like a war
just above us. It was loud and wet
when I started to say goodbye and so another
intermission. The train sounds reminded me
of the ghostly structure down the street, a marriage
of beams in a mineral romance out of place
and once meant to house or hold something or
to keep something else out. What is it
about structure that breeds the need for purpose
and a cultivation that lurks?
In a pulse of strength to my hand I had
my mouth cupped, I had the industry
of this landscape on my tongue and I spoke small
because it was dark on this corner near a fence
and we took useless cover against
wind and rain,
the mouth of a body. Of water.
My waist in the arm of autumn holding me. Up. Before
I tired. Of the city-planned barrier. For love.

A final stop is somewhere down these tracks.

So
the noise. Here is just one place. Where
what it all could be—
Where what it may sometimes
seem— Where the weatherly pulps of a city's hearts

in a train racket—
How it sounds

What it would at the end
To love in the most difficult.

In Transit

The M103 hums to a halt and breathes open
for the passengers, —
to arrive here,

or have a step up and go southbound, —
there are smiles
and tired faces.

And that quiet freedom
flies like dandelion dust
down the street of a city,

in through our black-barred window, —
or tries to—meets
a mass of silent stillness at the frame

and has no space to enter.
And it isn't that we
will not speak or know we shouldn't;

it isn't that we scream,—
or curse quietly either,
or that we stopped loving,

or started to hate. What do you make
of wanting to wake
in the past? What do you make

of that wanting? *We don't*
sleep that way. You say. *We shut*
our eyes knowing

*to what they will open. But what
of those mornings I say.
What could you make of that making?*

I advise you don't ask questions
for the sake
of salvation; that no man wants

to be saved—need,
brushed aside. This is something
I do not say.

You watch me collect
quiet anger
for this political world

and you ask if I have any other faculties—
anything besides thinking
I am *only a victim*.

Forgive me, I am only
a made thing,
I confess.

Just months ago
you lied, question-wide
on the winter morning bed,

and I was a bade thing,
and we were grateful
that such good love can be made

in the gray the starlings awaken;
I said your body moves
how the snow falls,

and you wondered if I'd evaporate
you—do something
to take away your body

and crystallize you for myself.
This is something I know
only now.

Inside, I am anti-
pastoral—swallowed
in industry, fevered

by commerce. By the gun,
there is your grandmother's bible
opened to a page

you say I may not turn, — and so
I never read it.
I tell you to read Shakespeare instead.

(I'd do anything for those
wars)

“Yet Edmund was beloved”
I read to you over and again
to prove that even

the most violent bastard
is in search of something,
that maybe even I can be—

(I stop before another
confession)

Just beneath us is the train system—old
but vast, and willing
to take anyone anywhere;

closer to us is the restaurant at street level,
whose young patrons drink
Halley's Comets each night;

closer still is the family a flight up
rolling and glazing churros to sell
to pay for a daughter's arrival;

and closer still, is the bed,
on which you dreamed last night
of killing a wolf with a sunflower stalk—

and on the desert floor
formed a rapid red river
to take you out of town.

American Flag

In The James Hotel we had a view of the American flag
and without it, would we have been better lovers? There were bulbs
blazing, a balefire, some stories down in a photo shoot
of a pretty thing maybe, who'd arrived clean-clean and done up right
because her skin is soft and chamomile. Without them, would I have said

anything else? That boyfriend of yours and that girlfriend of yours—
talking about them started to lead somewhere, so I asked carefully
if you enjoyed fucking in plain view of our nation's symbol. If you only
thought we were there to pledge allegiance. They knew we'd be animals,
you said, and got better bulbs for catching shadows. You laughed

and we kissed, clothes on. The bulbs flashed
and flashed again: artful distractions, perfect particles of light. We wanted
what we wanted, and so pretended to want to love. And that is what
took us just far enough, with the last scenes just blurry enough
that we could call it nothing more than a flash of a particle of light.

Elegy Written During Hurricane Sandy

A blue rag holds despite a tempest of moisture,
its fibers offer a collective body to the water,
unfurl over the muted crackle of ephemeral knees—this,
the sound of breath when water is in the lungs.

Strange weather inks through open windows,
pressure ascends, our bodies at rest and not
hiding from the wind that is all over us,
and yet we live a day in this life.

Not three months left on your prognosis
and with the flood coursing down your street
from the hurricane are mosquitoes,
blown in and bloodthirsty.

What have they come to divine, these swamp angels?
You've named each of them Sandy,
after this storm that's put a city on its back,
bled at once its lights and commerce.

To name them is to survive, count their bodies as
one to keep the body at bay,
use the blood you have left
for the ragged ends that matter.

You clean for a while the counter
in the kitchen, coughing, in this apartment
left to estranged children, about my age,
you say as you go on eroding

the grease this kitchen collects, coughing,
the dust on the shrinkshelf
of library books, passing a rag,
coughing, the way you did over a dead lover's back,

who asked that you fold back
the towel's rough hem,
and use instead loose ends, threads
undone and undoing.

You clean for a while, so that I won't,
and so that I could, after
you'd gone to sleep, clean you
with a rag first made of cotton,

and then also of you,
rubbing the sweat you
have left
into everything.

Cleaning Out Your Bedroom

it takes an audacity to see in this almost-dark

I became husband to the dawnlight
learned to grow in this rising
root of crooked ecstasy :

ekstasis : I'm beside myself,

standing with the loss of you—

and a body may begin here, in a potential space

were it not for the oily creak of a hutch:
a history sung to the tambour desk
that waits with patient noises of its own,

were it not for the old-house groans
of emptiness pleading to fill other rooms

how busy this room already is with absence

can you be reconfigured in the furniture?
if I try to catalogue:

a table lamp sat before the mirror
can be the liar's light required

to assemble a shadow in your image

a team photo and a map
can be musculature and compass

an empty pitcher
can be thirst and desire

I'm working on the warmth of blood

to rearrange this room
is to reflect that no one fills it,
to ensure

that you,
you and your absence
fill it

The Transverberation of Loss

ekstasis:

I am beside myself
meaning I am

you, by my side.
Could you be

as (dis)embodied
as we are?

Jesus Dream No. 54: *Vaya Con Diós*

*Ay, que los tres clavos de la cruz Vayan delante
de mí*

-Hector Lavoe, *Aguanile*, New York City 1972

Thirst

begot a dark bar and a dark bar
begot a dance and a dance begot
a Beautiful Savior's

bursting out of the go-go
cage to seduce a history
splayed on the dancefloor.

Un baile

He asked. I touched
my mouth to say I didn't know
the steps, the old paths
laid by Maria La Coquetona,

whose dark hair came down
over Her shoulders, over the cups
of Her evening gown
hiding what's hiding what She

dares us to want. I've only
just met her and She teaches me
to want to be wanted. *You think too much
of dancing—think of wanting*

to dance She says on this night, *y vaya,*
vaya con tu diós. I danced slow
holding him tight
and came in close to mask my feet's misloving.

At the moment of Creation, the Creator
divided: light and dark, heaven and earth.
And on this night, we undid his father's book.
And had the Creator been watching, he would have seen:

a jawline glint came and went, and He
did not shame me for wanting to be kissed.

I I I

English as a First Language

Tell me why narrative is
difficult to divulge. Is it
last-gasp impulse to
grasp a frantic end? Is it
nostalgic bloom to root
in a beginning?
Tell me why my story is
yours and in the light of
telling, mongrel
as a spoken thing. What language
has brought
us here? What flimsy self
is it I've built, that I
only learn to tell by
telling?

The Car Named Grieve

We were told stories. Like, *The Incas were giants*. Like, *Before they came for our soft metals and grains, at sunrise a golden frizz garlanded the coastal mountain roots, and at sunset, amethyst clouds in suspension over fields of choclo. We've since become small, less able to fly colors*. My siblings and I were American kids, peloteando with first & second cousins in Lima, kicking a ball in decay, against the solid iron gate, clanging out a rusted howl up and down the streets of the district. On Christmas night, we hid behind a truck, lit the fatal wick of a rata blanca, and prayed, our heads between our hands, the hail of windshields did not cut us. For we bled, the uncles would know. And if they knew, they'd tell us: *How dare you come to hurt the cars here. An old man named Old Metal built Peru's first car. This was after the war. His true name was Grieve. And so was his car's.*

Matamos Poetas a Domicilio, Lima, Peru

There was the coffee vapor rising into his nose
he said he breathed like a ritual
before his first cup each day for forty years.
Age has made it difficult, he says,
to make it to the local cafe. Friends, poets,
long gone, gathered there, called out *las mesitas, las mesitas!*
and shifted tabletops into herded masses.
Says it's good to see a young friend's face
even though it's only passing through,
says the government took his herd
over time and memories took their seats.
So now he drinks coffee without the absences
he says would take time for me to understand.
He says there was a time people made signs
that read *We Kill Poets in their Homes*,
followed by a phone number, and a reassurance
the service was open to all
24/7. Sicario culture, he says, even in the clouds of
artistry. I made the error of telling him once

about my cousins, gunned down in a bar
in Medellín, scenic victims of local commerce.
And what could you do, he asks, if *this* city
wanted me dead, with you here, now?
What if you learned to breathe the same dead air as me?
He showed me a photo of the sign,
said, this number could have been called
by anyone. For anyone. Well, not *anyone*, I joked.
You're right he said, *everyone*.

Jesus Dream No. 77: In front of the bodega on Zerega Avenue

there's a stain from when Ray was stabbed in the side by
Jasmine with his broken bottle

and it stretches
from where they fought in front

of their son to where he fell
and bled out. You brought me here

ages after I'd lived here. It was morning,
the one after you said *your love has its limits*.

You wanted me to or needed me to,
but either way, we dallied into the fire

of Ray's orchid bruise on the pavement,
all toils and trills of tempered grief,

a thrill too deep to be joy. And it was here,
where I watched Omar fall off his darling

motorcycle and sparkle like creation
down the street, and today

I'm still afraid to take both my hands off
bike handles to ride headlong into the break

between man and angel. Omar, too, died on this street,
walked an angel's walk between upright

and puddle. I drank Mystic here,
with raspberry and boysenberry, and I

pocketed grape Bazookas at ten years old
because even Nestor and them from the bodega

had stolen things, like dogs from yards,
and car radios whose frenzied wires

peaked out of cardboard boxes, behind the counter
just screaming *This was never mine.*

I've meant to come back to the block for
years, remembering all the while

where these men died and how, through the rain,
floral crosses, candles and rosary circles

showed how mourning sets in and then
again long after. And this is where

you moved in me like roots through a body,
going to where the dead always come back from

and I stood with you, refusing
to believe I could someday stop loving.

Fireworks

The headlights bead across that deep green mountain,
all along its anatomy. Down there, in the valley between

us and it, teens are building rockets in the dusk. It's winter,
that ashen punctuation snuffing out bloom, nothing

expected to grow. A New Year. In town earlier,
we shopped for cigarettes, walked among the holiday

relics, festive sweets in children's torrents,
chipped ceramic angel faces. Heaven closes early,

turns out its lights, you said, for troglodytes
going around maiming angels. We needed to sit,

treat the early-20s hangover with a smoke and cold air,
and now we find ourselves here. Something

in our lives doesn't add up and it's taken us
to this place, sloping but somehow still

a brink, poised in dormant anticipation, our muscles
fevering for burst, and we discover

as children we were the same—followed the lights of our elders,
pulling in the ends of our sweaters stolen

from some mother or uncle or cousin. Could we know
in this moment, that we've always belonged

to someone else? Could we know what becomes of us
is alive and well in the days we know we'll want to go back to?

The young ones are ready, propped to fire—and look,—
their rocket's hit the power lines,

our eyes go bright for the moment
the lights go out all over town.

Una Madre's Advice on Marriage During a Destructive Age

Love economically.
Demand and supply : need
less to breed want.

We are here to love who we can. Even
if they're white; even if by the sheer erosion of numbers,
your color will disappear.

A Morning Under My Skin

The trees' shadows on our naked bodies rubbed each other joyously. Your alabaster finger ran over the locust leaf scar on my inner thigh. You said my skin

was strong, said its color got so deep in the sun.

I thought this was a good joke, so good I couldn't laugh. You asked

if I knew this about my own skin. Something in me did not. What do I know

and love about my own skin? Is it that you loved it? Because strong

would not be my word, my color,

not the way my brown skin goes grey in desolate winters, nor this depth you've observed that brines and

bruises purple in the summers.

It has done most things out of weakness. Desperate hoarding of warmth: weakness. A field

of chickadee yearns gasping for touch: weakness. Touch: weakness.

I did not mean weakness. I meant wind or chill. Shivers do me no good. I meant to say fewer words on skin.

This *was* a good joke. That the scar is strong. There, the skin has healed to hold itself together

while the rest of it bumped, like an uncontrollable quiver.

Fear of Small Things

I fear one day I'll waken stricken
with trypophobia, a fear of the
honeycomb,

where in a macroscopic droplet of amber,
the curve of our planet is accentuated
and a mouth like mine would blight.

March 29, 1986 was the day between Good Friday
and Easter Sunday, a single day of no god on Earth,
and on that day I was born. Black Saturday

is a solemn day, where we have quiet meals
and Our Lady of Solitude ushers us
through rosary beads, because evil runs free

with no god, and in just a day,
can create like God did, but never rest,
a difficult brush to grow in. And I think that's

Catholic guilt—some shadow I admit to donning
but can barely articulate its body,
a paralysis dream of elders standing over me

alluding the anxious eye.
There's never a lack of trying
to articulate meaning. To articulate fears

is a power of human quality. As if
words were a small thing. As if
to put our fears into a word, we make them small

orbs of mouth salt and water,
just small and hard enough to perch on the lip,
and spit out.

In South Carolina, Thinking About Northern Winters

It's supposed to be winter. In this region,
it will certainly come, soon go away,

soon return before my anxious body settles.
The more places I live the more seasons

have their disappointments. As a boy,
I wandered Parkchester, cat-faced

in the wind, busied from the chill
with a bag of bread, between

Bravo and Strawberry's, cherry-picking
the birds to feed along the way.

To me, their pigeon minds were beautiful,
when a crumb of white bread

would land on white snow, and three
would converge, vying perfectly

through the city's clamored grid.
How much it looked like flying,

this well-practiced day through winters
just like it. How easily it seemed

abuelita had adapted to the unrelenting,
north Atlantic cold of this country,

enough to learn to walk the winters
with her grandson, who'd act up with nothing to do

in the snow. It was she that gave me
the bread, fresh from baker's oven.

It was she that gave me bagged wonder to
share with citizens of winter.

What would a young boy be
if a migrated elder could not resist

the tepid ghost of a motherland?
When the traveler knows they've arrived,

they, too, know how to dress for weather,
how to wear the cold, and bask.

Here, I'm given winters
with butterfly lives, three days

and I'm heaved back—I try to reset, try
to learn how to look through a city

of fickle seasons, with no time to drop
to the temperature of the birds

and wade in the freeze,
no time to alight one's body

on a warmth deeply desired.

Vigilance

Look,—

the pigeons, even after my absence,
remain

lined along the awning, hidden in bare trees:

COO-ROO from the old cocks to call upon mates,

my father's hissed whistle from squabs' beaks—

a desperate beacon for warm worms or wrappers

discarded with the memory of flavor. They are

fragile mounds of malnutrition; the fat

like a sop of wet rags hangs heavy on hollow bones

and the weight of their stasis consumes me.

Shit, the fact that I'm hundreds of miles from the nearest pigeon
with a Bronx accent and lambasted wings—

nowhere near the nearest pigeon that sits over the bodega with his winged pals
crying *DIABLO, PERO QUE FRIO* —

consumes me. The nearest memory of a pigeon I have

is the nearest pigeon I've ever seen—only inches

from my face.

Angel was a trickster. Made pigeons fly and fall at will.
Stomped the ground near them, and watched them leap

in a wing-beat. The eye must be a boy's most obvious

weakness.

Why make me watch? Not Angel, but the pigeon, that leapt towards my face,
and would have made its way into my mouth,

down my throat and somewhere dark, its eyes locked and told me so,

but eye level is fist level, and Angel
had a fury up his sleeve and punched the pigeon perfectly.

I remember its battering against the sidewalk
made him laugh rabidly. And he stopped when it stopped,

when it's body came to a rest, and faced us.
An eye closed he said.

I never thought of birds blinking, or if their eyes ever closed,
if they had become omni-vigilant
in the city bred to kill them, if they, from hundreds of miles away,
would continue to look back at me with a dead eye open.