

Heart-Shaped Fly Swatter

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A Thesis
in
The English
of
Department

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Arts (English) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2014

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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Master of Arts (English)

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Abstract

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Heart-Shaped Fly Swatter is a failed attempt at writing in the style of so-called New York School Poetry, but a successful attempt, I think, at writing towards writing in that style. It's a failed attempt because most of these poems are planted too firmly in the ground (the page), unable to leap off into the air. Take, for example, the difference between "Heart-Shaped Fly Swatter" and "Fly-Shaped Heart Swatter": one is easily imagined before us, as satisfying as a well-timed swat killing the bug, while the other can't be pinned down exactly, more out of reach, momentary, and indistinct—which is more akin, I think, to the playfulness and "going on your nerve" New-York-School sensibility. I hope my poetry moves towards and eventually *in* this direction in the future, happily embracing uncertainties and a slippery range of meaning.

If they don't leap *off* the page, perhaps these poems leap inside and around themselves. As I understand how I wrote them, they use repetition in one way or another to hold themselves together. "Cheerless and Ready for Love," goes on a rampage of repeated diction to restrain its wild imagery; "In Preparation for the Long Awaited I Forget What" and "Infinite Digestion" are more interested in syntactical and rhythmic unity; and "Small Town" and "The Procedure" employ a narrative and/or a central theme or idea. Most of the poems in this collection fall into one of these general categories. The exception is "Noon," an erasure, which might explain why it's more loose and abstract. I'm excited by the first two lines: "I ran out the back of my closet. / Two people elevated the space for me." What is holding these together? The speaker appears in both lines and the "back of my closet" becomes "the space" — but why or how two people are elevating it is the mystery, as well as the different

implications of the phrases “back of my closet” and “the space,” a movement from the specific to the general, which fosters a kind of control and release in the poem, an almost unheard click in the lock that will (hopefully) eventually open for a Houdini-like escape. I think “Noon” comes closest in this collection to almost successfully resisting a kind of intelligence in which repetition isn’t the deciding factor that holds two lines together, but a mystery of difference, estrangement, and unpredictability. The rest of these poems are struggling towards that mystery. I imagine them like beginning swimmers holding on to the side of the pool: they’re kicking hard, but afraid, not fully trusting that something will hold them up if they let go.

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A Beautiful Nun from the Spanish Netherlands

No nun is more beautiful than the nun from the Spanish Netherlands.

Show me a nun who is more beautiful. Show me.

A stone, unmoved by anything, is moved by the nun's beauty.

Stones, they are moved—Many stones, all are moved
and moving now, the beauty of this movement like the nun,
their faces together joined by others, more stones rolling
in the mountains of the Spanish Netherlands, and the nun
watches on. Once, I was there. Her beauty moved me there.

“Die!” I said. (It was her beauty. Her beauty moved me to say it.)

“If I must,” she replied. “But first, meet me beyond the mountains.”

Before I could say anything more, the stones and her beauty
moved her, up and across the mountains, over lilies in the peaks.

A Different Weather

after Lyn Hejinian

The snow had already melted from our socks. More and more delicate as they go up. The pink and light blue coming apart in the sky. What it means to pick one up and hold it to the light. We went up north to look at the trees. The new calming word. Still, I remembered it like a dream, hours and hours trying to make a choice between two identical things, and deciding even one was too many. Owing in part, at least, to the orange stones we threw onto the frozen lake. I knew what it would be like and tried to put myself in the way of changing it. The answer like a voiceless fog, nobody knows the question. A soft blending of what becomes progressively translucent. Don't go anywhere before I'm not sure it's working. There was plenty of paper but not enough pencils, so we watched explosions on TV. Above or below or near or far. The sense of belonging nowhere but also needing nowhere. The stones looking orange in this light. The joke that you barely had time to be one person, crossing your leg over mine, nodding my head, chewing with my mouth open, etc. It stopped snowing, the trees all covered with sun, which did us both good, but privately. Ever since watching the movie, the occasional wish I could stomp my foot twice on the ground and a trap door would open. Legs plucked from their standing. The ice giving off a faint blue light. The tooth held under running water. Reluctance. Too far from me to ever see yourself standing next to me, and not needing space for us to grow. The inside scooped out. Split into three equal parts. As if the cords had snapped when I tugged at them, moving out from under me. Something catches in your hair, and you hope the verb is "untangle" but it's "yank". Every comfort belonging to a different weather. Applause as the room darkens—so why not the day?

A Nightmare on Pigs, Poker, and Hearts

A litter of gambling pigs. I join their
poker game. Five-card draw. Show
your cards. I lose. I lose to a pair of
sixes. Hearts. The winning pig grins,
shows its teeth. I pounce. I gut the pig,
watch it smoke. A dark colour is my
heart. A dark colour is my heart. She
presses her hands over my ears and nods.

Another Theory of Hope

Teddy bear snatched from behind flames,
the rafters collapsing. Is hope a risk we take
at the risk of losing something greater?
Just look at where the sunset ends. Look at its
fiery one-of-a-kind waddle across the surface
of the lake. Why am I always outside myself?
asks the sun from its reflection on the lake.
Nothing replies in the darkening sky.
Someone paddles ashore and collapses.
Is life the exercise regimen of death? I hop not.
Standing on the footstool, I reach
a higher position, a cookie jar, a shelf
of erotica at the children's library. Provoked
more by imagination than pain, the idea
that if you advance towards the sunset
at the same speed as the setting sun,
everything comes to a standstill, or seems to.
The sun, like electricity, has spread itself so far out
it's forgotten its point of origin,
but maybe you become a new reference point
and adopt a permanent glow,
theories of hope growing around you.
A child colouring-in all the white space
is filled with a sense of emptiness and longing,

and that's one theory of hope.
Another involves a leapfrogging gesture
among random particles, the semi-fluid transition
between dreaming states. The crumbling statue
in the park, its armful of blue irises
is not a theory but behaves like one, while fingernails
recently clipped and strangely tender
or wearing sandals in the rain
are observations towards a new theory.
In the past year, hundreds have been debunked,
but thousands are in the works, each
like an unknown hero escaping on horseback,
a hopeful speck on the new horizon
of a landscape that is always there.

Avant-Garde Monster Movie

A tentacle snatches a bicycle and hurls it
at a bur commuting by mutant kangaroo.
You really relate to the bur, its mission
not unlike our own, hitchhiking with the hope
of finding new roots, starting over again.
Harder to sympathize with the tentacles
attached to whoknowswhat, a shapeless mass
undulating over the dark sea floor, although
the director's cut includes a flashback
to its troubled childhood, a deleted flogging scene.
Not much to say about the kangaroo.
Typical experiment-gone-wrong stuff,
a secret laboratory somewhere in Australia,
alarms blaring, searchlights sweeping
the compound when the power goes out,
a security guard says Who's there?
followed by smothering noises and you're
supposed to believe the kangaroo did it
with a genetically-modified marsupial pouch.
Who comes up with this stuff?
I can't remember how it all comes together
or falls apart, a test tube emptied
into the burbling ravine, cocoons
disguised as artillery shells, the violin theme

recurring twice as fast as the kangaroo
hops up the Eiffel Tower, the bur
fending off a sticky-note. Sure they've teamed-up
but it's not enough when the tentacle
snatches a bicycle and hurls it at them.
The credits roll and the camera zooms out
from the bloody spokes to the rest of Paris
overtaken by tentacles, to the nation,
a dark-green spaghetti-like confusion,
to the planet, which, in a final twist,
is a bur clinging to a tentacle
extending from Planet Kangaroo
in the Galaxy "Bur".

Cheerless and Ready for Love

I had come to the moat, the silent ducks.
I had dreamed of women wearing dirndls.
I have halts and starts, sobs and silences.
I have misrepresented myself.
I like horsey-backs and water balloons.
I like a curtain covering the shower stall.
I like bugs clinging to my socks.
I like the dog guiding me, carrying a lantern
on a stick in its mouth.
I met Sieghilde on rollerblades
in the cool wide corridor of a monastery,
in a lonely time among hatching silkworms,
in the garden of von Utzschneider's factory,
in the fiery trajectories of cannonballs,
in May amid the airborne beetles,
in the ricochet, the criss-cross,
in spite of the receding cliff-face,
in thick shadows filling the aisles between shelves,
in getting right the hell out of there
in a kind of delight, the inflatable sundials
in the checkout line, the wet clouds outside, the
inflexible hamstring of memory, in her thumb
a sliver, in my mouth a clue, in my stomach
the answer, her indifference—Sieghilde doesn't care.

I hate her collections of opera programmes,
ceramic ducks, and circumcision knives.
She hates manoeuvring around
my revolving rack of books. I have tried
to meet her halfway. She has tried
to meet me halfway. I have chopped
the onion. She has left me a note.
Meet me in the garden of the textile factory.
Meet me under the radiant moon.
Meet Yo-yo, this dog, who will guide you there,
and when you are there, meet me
in a sidelong glance,
in words that dodge the burning lips
as we watch the wolves walk on their hind legs
and the pigs squeal as they flee across the Schlossplatz.

Excerpt from the Memoirs of Alfred Perseus Jr.

I sliced through the squirming mass of shoulder-length snakes and dodged the arterial spray or absorbed it with an oven mitt (whichever was easier given my position in relation to the post-mortem spasms of the snakes) and as Medusa choked and spluttered beneath the red waterfalls about her face, I delivered the death-blow I had practised so diligently, often nude, in my full-length bedroom mirror, giddy with revenge, thinking of my father whose fingers she had jammed, he'd said, into the spouts of hellish faucets that sucked until each was reduced to a long stem of bone, save for a few flaps of skin clinging like red petals. "Now I will never play Bach's Cello Suites," he'd said, not that he could play the cello, but there's something terrible about a dream ending before it has the chance to never come true. "Medusa," I said, "fuck you and the snakes my father mistook for faucets in his pain-induced delirium!" She lay there, struck dead by the death-blow, which was expected, I suppose, but seeing it meant something else. I remembered that old saying, "the mouse found dead in the mousetrap is not trapped in death." Did it finally make sense to me? But I was too exhausted to think. To get to Medusa I'd had to administer eye-drops during an orgy, tap-dance across rubber monkey bars, secretly contaminate the sponge-baths

of small insects, and other things forgotten due to a head-injury sustained during the dunking of my head into a cauldron of cool chicken broth. I began crying. I cried, and the snakes, as if competing for the greater sadness, crackled, burning-up from their follicles and exuding a different perfume with each pop, like a bubble-wrap of diverse blossoms. Of a sudden, they struck me as prisoners, attached to Medusa through no fault of their own, as any child feels attached to its mother. Now I cried harder, for what I had done. The snakes, like long slender buds of love, spat out their tongues and peeled back into shards.

Fully Awake

The fat-cheeked night rolls the stars
in its mouth, occasionally spitting one out.
The cupboard opens then shuts
with a new can of soup inside.
I stand on the roof and look at someone
standing on another looking at me.
A lemon rolls off its branch and into the street.
Tomorrow the dark-eyed Romanian hairdresser
is waiting for my hair, and the railroad tracks
for a train that takes my new haircut to Ottawa.
I'm off by myself again, wandering by
some thoughts I haven't had in a while,
the not-too-distant overgrown field
where a dog plunks down on crossed paws
in front of a china plate with a tennis ball on it.
A wind blows from left to right, carrying
little bits of me and the earth. I see
a Fritos bag leap around an alley, a door
slam shut. I hear the wind like two voices
from the same mouth. The kinds of details
that exhaust me throw themselves open
like an umbrella, keeping out the details I love:
a ladybird perched inside your earring's hoop,
a cloud not taking on any shape, just a cloud,

and the thought that I can get somewhere
not knowing where to go. I lie in bed
fully awake. Outside the river is wide-open.
I want to swim and swim and swim and swim.

Heart-Shaped Fly Swatter

The earth sucks the sun's golden thumb
but I guess we've got to grow up sometime,
leave the abounding pillows of this guest-room
for something less comfortable
like a spider trapped at the top of a salt-shaker,
six legs poking through, the other two flailing in desperation.
Only so much patience before nerves mutiny,
orange flame bits bumbling under the skin.
Only so many fears before the heart sops them up
and becomes like a street covered with slush.
I look at your shadow, the flapping sleeves
of your oversized jacket, the scarf kicking out behind.
I look at the hand waving goodbye
as each shadow flings away, replaced by another
cast by the next streetlight.

I Remember Middle School

I remember learning how to wink, and wanting to try it out on girls. I did, but I don't remember who at or what happened next.

I remember the teacher asking which would be better for your teeth: sucking on a gumball or swallowing it right away. I raised my hand and said swallowing it right away. I was right.

I remember singing in the school choir and being the only boy. I loved it.

I remember somebody came into class to talk about sex. She gave everyone a card, and we stuck it on our foreheads without looking at it. Each card had a body part written on it, and we had to guess which one by asking the person next to us some questions. Everyone was worried about having Penis or Vagina.

I remember looking around the classroom and somehow everyone became the body part named on their forehead. It made a strange kind of sense. Alike, the popular girl, became an eyelash, and Jordan, the thin hairy kid, a vagina.

I remember when break was over, the teacher on duty would blow her whistle twice. The first time, everyone had to freeze in place. The second time, we had to line up before going inside.

I remember taking the freezing thing very seriously. I remember freezing mid-step. I remember freezing just before taking a bite out of my sandwich. I remember freezing mid-sentence, and the other kid rolled his eyes at me.

I remember Anthony planned a fight between me and Vaz, a kid who really didn't like me. I don't know why he didn't like me. I thought he was okay because we shared the same birthday. Anyway, during the fight, he kept trying to kick me and I kept moving backwards, away from him, until the whistle blew, when I froze. The bottom of his shoes grazed my arms. I remember thinking that's not what shoes are made for.

I remember Anthony telling me there was a rumour going around that I was gay. I didn't know what that meant, but I didn't like rumours, so I asked him what I could do about it. He said leave it to me and told Stephanie, a girl I hated, that I got a boner whenever I saw her. She ran off giggling, so I asked Anthony what a boner was. He wouldn't tell me, but the rumour went away, so I figured he'd done the right thing.

I remember Predator with Arnold Schwarzenegger, the first R-rated movie I saw. There was a lot of blood. A man's head gets blown off and the body falls on its knees in the jungle.

I remember Zaid pretending to masturbate at the back of math class by groaning and banging his fist repeatedly on the metal compartment under the desk.

I remember always feeling sick before gym class.

I remember being the only one who couldn't do a somersault in gym class, and practising at home on a mattress. I was terrified my neck would snap and my family would find me in a ball, upside-down, and dead.

I remember thinking how romantic it would be telling somebody you loved them right before summer break, and then spending all that time apart, and then meeting each other again after so long, and then—what?

I remember mum packed a bag of Lay's Potato Chips with my lunch, as a treat, every Friday.

I remember there being five different flavours of Lay's Potato Chips: Salted, BBQ, Salt and Vinegar, Sour Cream and Onion, and Prawn Cocktail, my favourite. I didn't understand what Prawn Cocktail was. The chips didn't taste like prawns or cocktails, but I hadn't eaten that many prawns or drank that many cocktails, so what did I know? It was all very mysterious and I was too ashamed to ask anyone to clear things up.

I remember Friday being the day you could invite a friend over, or go to a friend's house, and looking forward to it all week.

I remember Oleg, a Serbian boy who had an especially large head. He couldn't speak English but I hung out with him anyway. His mum must've thought we were friends, so I was invited over. We bought Donald Duck comics and played a videogame about trolls. I remember being so bored and thinking it was the biggest waste of a Friday afternoon ever.

I remember at friends' houses not wanting to go pee unless there was a lock on the bathroom door. When there wasn't, I must have gone about seven hours without peeing. When my mum came to pick me up, I felt—for lack of a better word—relieved.

I remember in hot, humid weather, getting a squidgy feeling like you'd just shit your pants, but you hadn't.

I remember The Friendship Tree, an idea some teachers had to get kids with no friends to have friends. What they hoped would happen was somebody with no friends would sit under the tree and meet somebody else with no friends, and then the two of them would become friends.

I remember you'd tell someone "Go sit under The Friendship Tree" if you didn't want them around.

I remember not liking the crusts on sandwiches, but not not liking them enough to make a fuss.

I remember tuna sandwiches, and smelling like tuna.

I remember egg sandwiches, and smelling like egg.

I remember having my tonsils out. The anaesthetic made me dream of black-and-white geometric shapes, mostly triangles, flashing against static. I remember wanting to wake up, and unlike any normal dream, I couldn't.

I remember fantasies about my parents dying, and everyone feeling sorry for me, and girls falling in love with me, but I'd be too depressed for love.

I remember Nefeli, and rumours that she liked me.

I remember Nefeli's long blond hair leaping up her back and about her face.

I remember encountering Nefeli once in the playground. We stood staring each other, about 10-feet apart, not saying anything. Suddenly she picked up a rock and threw it at me. It hurt a lot, and a teacher told her off. I don't remember crying, or even caring too much. I was just confused and still am.

I remember the strings regularly broke on my tennis racket and my coach always told me I should be proud because I was hitting the ball so hard. I had to pay him each time for new strings.

I remember taking tennis lessons with Seren, a dark-eyed Turkish girl, and sometimes we'd mess around and pick up olive pits and whack them at each other with our rackets. I never hit her, but she often hit me.

I remember how sexy Seren looked with wet hair, but I can't think of a reason why her hair would have been wet.

I remember looking forward to Valentine's Day because of Seren. She'd asked me what I wanted and I'd said, "Just a photograph of you." The photograph was disappointing. I didn't like her haircut in it, and it was the size of my thumb. Maybe she'd wanted me to wear it inside a locket.

I remember praying to God that one day I would marry Seren, but then telling God I didn't mean it because I was worried it would come true, and as much as I thought I loved her, maybe I didn't, or I'd change my mind someday.

I remember complaining to my mum about how hard it was getting good grades all the time because the other kids teased me. I don't remember being teased.

I remember George, who always wanted to beat me on a math quiz, but never did. Once he got 98%, but I got 100%. I think he cried.

I remember Ms. Stavrinakis, who had red frizzy hair. I liked her a lot. She made the class keep a diary on the cycles of the moon. I don't remember writing my diary, just how much she liked it in the end.

I remember Ms. Stavrinakis warning everyone about the dangers of pornography, how addictive it can be.

I remember trick-or-treating for the first time with all the American kids whose parents worked at the embassy. We didn't walk from door to door, the parents drove.

I remember counting backwards from ten, again and again after school, waiting for my mum to arrive through the school's green gates in her green Toyota. I didn't let myself believe it was really her until I could read the license plate number.

I remember a small frog-like woman with a croaky voice who always waited with me and held an umbrella. It rained sometimes and I stood under it with her.

I remember countless arguments I'd have with my sister in the drive on the way to school. Mostly they were about what we'd listen to. I argued for a pre-recorded tape, and she argued for the radio. Usually she won.

I remember proposing a compromise to her: on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays we'd listen to the radio, and on Tuesdays and Fridays we'd listen to the tape. She said, "No." That's when I started to use the word "stubborn" to describe her whenever she came up in conversation.

I remember collecting marbles and filling bowls and ice-cube and popsicle trays with them.

I remember reading a book on how to find rare marbles. It said garage sales were ideal places to find ultra-rare marbles. I thought, what did selling garages have to do with marbles?

I remember pork chops and ketchup, or fish fingers and ketchup, or broccoli and ketchup, or pasta and ketchup for dinner.

I remember dad telling me he ate pasta and ketchup all through university.

I remember dad telling me he ate bread with sugar when he was my age.

I remember listening to Verdi's Requiem and looking out over an empty soccer field. It was in preparation for my grandpa's death, which I knew would come eventually, and it did.

I remember dreams about exams coming up and not having studied, and studying hard in the dream, only to find out last minute that you had to know about the French Revolution, and I didn't.

I remember dreams about driving a car and the dreams always ending with me losing control and crashing.

I remember trying to get the balance between milk and cereal just right, so that when you finished your cereal, all the milk was gone too.

I remember someone kicking a soccer ball away from everyone else, and me having to run after it.

I remember coughing and my back suddenly being very itchy, and then the trouble of scratching your back.

I remember wondering if I shouldn't live a little more before writing out my I Remembers.

Improvised Death Scene

for Hannah

The twin brothers are killing each other
having just discovered they are twin brothers
and might have lived like the other
in better circumstances.

You, meanwhile, are the mother,
wearing heels and singing your heart out
so we can see it
between one brother's knife and the next.

We sit on the edge of our assigned seats,
eyes lodged in tears
until the curtain's brought down
like your hand, reaching out
and emptying us, our hearts
tearing out of their pockets.

In Preparation for the Long-Awaited I Forget What

Laminate nothing. Floss with film reels.
Spank my membrane. Smirk through a burka.
I have curtsied and pulled the chain, wiped
my nose across the rain. I have pruned
the iffy boughs, festooned a 12-inch unibrow.
Is that ice slipping down the mannequin's leg?
Out the back door, my favourite bog.
I float and sing like a singing log.
External bliss followed by internal horror.
A teabag, a technical glitch, lizards
in the soap dispenser. My membrane vibrates,
converts the signals into blue pom-poms
where my fists used to be, a field of lint
where my feet used to be, a damp cushion
where the memory of my pet octopus watching me leave
tentacles pressed against the tank
used to be. Now the broken towel bar.
Now I dribble at sea. Brain a bowl of cereal
among the nudging seahorses of depression.
Sometimes a thought is thrown back
before it has a chance to explain itself
like a flat stone the size of your palm
you don't even try to skip, just toss
like any other stone. Kerplunk.

No chain of ripples, no flippin' flight.
Nothing like a pigeon, the momentum
throbbing in its neck. Nothing like
the sparrow refusing to bend its knees
but somehow hopping. Flames ruffle
the sky's dark feathers, a mannequin's dream
shuddering then collapsing. Maybe everything's
coin-operated. Deposit enough,
the big drum lights up.

Infinite Digestion

How come when I bang empty the piggybank
there's broken pretzels? Why's my pocket
full of mud? There's a mountain in the distance
pulls down its avalanches. There's a battery
makes a thing go. I regret the sticky patches
where I pulled the stickers off. Can you believe
these puppets up inside each other's interiors?
Don't think for one fucking instant
I don't like tartar sauce. Why are the subtitles
always wrong for the potbellied horseman?
Imagine the chickens stole their eggs back
and the snow plowed us off the street
and sponges squeezed all our brain-water out!
We'd be dead for sure. Will I die smelling?
I mean smiling? I guess I won't know.
There's a tired fly on the windowsill.
There's lime carpeting makes me feel at home.
There's the moon a bit more to the left than usual
or is it my eyeballs a bit more to the right?
Every toy leers down from the shelf,
all their batteries dead, my neighbour
pissing through the fence onto my lawn.
Cosmic dust clogs up the atmosphere
and the wind slams blossoms to the ground.

Let's fill the piggybank with bacon bits.

Let's dance in ever-tighter circles. When I throw
this javelin at the neighbor's blow-up pool,
maybe the water rushes out and my roses grow.

Maybe I hold one up to the moon, the night's nostril,
my feet lifting off as the world takes a whiff.

It's That Time Again

It's that time again when Gary switches on the bedside lamp and next to him are four hoof-shaped bed-dents. Are dreams the result of real life turned inside out? he wonders. Or are they more like improperly labelled shipping crates? Either way, it's the closest we get to living inside ourselves as somebody else. Michael switches on the bedside lamp, lets out a sigh of relief. No longer is he a Japanese fisherman who must load the van with sixty jars of fig paste and calibrate the flapping anemometers or else the diaper floating on the lake and half-eaten sandwich on the log switch places resulting in his entrapment by industrial-sized saran wrap. Such are the deranged calculations and results of a dream's arithmetic. It's the closest we get to an extreme sport with zero risk of death. Imagine rappelling down the sidewalk. Meanwhile, "Vanilla façade dangling sun-fried ovaries," says Christine in her sleep. "Zesty scalpels nibble fast-forward phlegm." Her brain is like a maraschino cherry

garnishing the world of consciousness.

“Intratubular flap itch itch itch aspartame,”

she continues while Nick transcribes

at his desk. He will sleep after the sixteenth

chapter seems more or less complete.

Mission Briefing

How long since you swirled among the shifting sands?
Sure you were busy hauling so many unwieldy thoughts
like tractors from a loch, but now they're more like jeeps
from the sea. Now you must alternate between phases
of self-mockery and martyrdom, a careful misspelling and an inkblot.
It may take years of exhuming the bodies of dictators,
stabbing them repeatedly in the heart with a party hat
before you walk less as a person and more as an action, an event,
stomping through sandcastles among honking dune buggies
while the night hugs the great ardency of your spirit
like a black push-up bra. It all depends on the state of your nerves,
the number of napkins in the glove compartment, whether the jeep
drives away or rusts and is buried in the shifting sands.
Probably what will happen is you give up out of a sense of not knowing
what you're doing and why, but that doesn't stop the tide
playing fetch with the shore, or the bay shimmering
as if it were the only bay, the ocean's only neckline.
Even a wave rises then bends toward the earth, like toilet paper
unrolling to its cardboard tube—but you'll find more under the sink.
If captured by chain-smoking insurgents and fed nothing but pickles,
do not forget the civilized world, its tablecloths and paperweights.
Do not become like a broken kite or an over-tightened screw.
Remember your upcoming retirement, the sandcastles wave-erased overnight,
the leg room in the assigned seat of your non-retractable, untelevised life.

Noon

I ran out the back of my closet.

Two people elevated the space for me.

Babysitters in the grade above were small and brazen.

Jo was regarded with suspicion.

As my dreams lost most of their zoologists,

puberty hit. The clearly grown two adults

were writers. "Want hat?" they would say. "Want hat?"

Of course we wanted hat. My club was planning to be one.

The adults had a son, Miami. We were palms

sweating at the possibility of it all.

Could we be singing at his son for \$200 a month?

That still wakes me up at night...

40 years from this we would be skiing, underwear

exhausted by the 80s. It internalized

an entire achievement in Happiness.

Perhaps we uncovered the crop of it, or maybe

I don't know.

Some of us never featured in this issue.

The best writers emerged on the other side,

shockingly timid. Fred, Sharon, Victor

and George helped the back in my closet,

knocking down clothes, making space.

A Mexican was there, writing.

Ode

O froth of spawning carp!
O flowers running your colours in place!
O mountain peaks like nipples—O clouds
like toothless mouths of babies bearing down upon them!
O astronomical sense of things—O cometary intrusion of things!
O self-dramatizing plans of the universe—A shoulder planned for an arm,
a hand for a wrist and—O! All of this for a stroke of paint!
A slashing hunk of purple in the sky!
And there, above, a moon—O moon!
And there, beneath, a kitchen counter bathed in moonlight!
And there, a leaky faucet—O that I might hear it!
And there, a bendy straw—O that I might slurp through it!
And there, silhouettes of little girls in midair!
O pigtails flying! O arms and legs flung out!
O people! Some young, some old, some younger, some older...
Ye who walketh impatiently up the slow-moving escalator...
Ye who slippeth into a shirt of threadbare elbows and frayed cuffs...
Ye who waiteth for the unrivèd cheque of \$50 from Sandwich Serum Quarterly...
Ye who taketh no more than one step before ye changeth direction...
Ye who shaketh thy brain into glorious open-air confusion...
O all of ye bustling in the streets banging into each other
like the umpires of a thousand tournaments involving kites!
O busy bodies! O tournaments! O TV!
O dubbed actor—O your silence behind subtitles!

O warrior adorned in feathers—O blushing maiden!
O scribbled declaration of love!
I come as a wind that billows up and swoops over the field!
I come reciting lines, weeping decorative tears!
I come like a propped ladder amid flames! O burn!
O ambulances wailing in the great tradition of emergencies!
O fish-monsters fucking at the bottom of Lake Baikal!
Ever the insuperable barrier of self-love,
Ever the needles of the pine grow,
Ever the orchestras in their seasons play,
Ever the sprinklers across the lawns,
Ever the spray to be circled around,
Ever our legs and shoulders, knees and toes,
Ever life like a shirt darkening with sweat until black,
Ever a glass raised to the fading moon,
the wine tilting this way and that
like a wobbling bat!

Periscope

A rubber ball
falls from the sky
and bounces back up.

Only a few people
see it and never
again. The ball
captures nostalgia,
the media, and
one night when
everyone's eyes
squeeze out
like tiny balloons.

Plugged Up

My nose plugged up
at the exact moment
lightning struck
the TV antenna
zapping the channel
to a dark-eyed woman
in a bathing suit
overtaken by
a fiery boredom
and diving off
the zooming speedboat
quickly followed by
an equally dark-eyed man
while everyone else
just lay there
sunbathing
watching me
on their TV.

Small Town

The locals eating beef cheeks, the tourists
zip-lining through fog. When it storms,
each tree like a thirty-legged upside-down
ballerina. Always the question of how
to better repair the world-famous fifty-foot
snow globe, whether Matt's Laundromat
is haunted or else how do you explain
the lint screens popping out at once, lint
flung into this tumescing burrito-shaped lump
floating right before Ms. Meaford's eyes?
Every Wednesday on the hiking trail
a shirtless biker gang picking raspberries.
Every Friday, seagulls from across the bay
strew watermelon rinds over the streets.
It's bad luck to spit down the barrel
of a replica King-George-II cannon
but it's good luck to laugh at your own jokes
or run through a cluster of midges at dawn
or get hit by a watermelon rind. It used to be
social status was determined alphabetically,
Abdul Assad the first mayor, his foot-rest
William Yorkshire. It used to be half-price
on beef cheeks every Sunday at The Dam Pub.
Eight jackhammers broke in the process

of unsealing the snow globe's gasket
so a fire hose could slip in and spurt thirty
gallons of glycerin. "Nineteen lint screens,"
mumbles Ms. Meaford as she watches
dandelions shake in the breeze. There's
a communal clothesline, a pair of mildewed
castanets hanging in the centre. There's
a blind girl who balances a pink bowl
of potato chips on her head, except when
the seagulls are out. There's no reason for you
not to come here, but nobody minds if you
don't. You buy a refrigerator magnet, visit
the snow-globe, try the new zip-line route.
Next to your motel is an all-night cattle auction.
You fall asleep to the sound of rain
and livestock jargon as the storm approaches
over the bay.

Sonnet to a Chambermaid at the Paraíso Intemporal

You're gone again, into the elevator
and sinking towards a different future,
one without me. I imagine the sea.
The doors open into a coral reef
and you live amid colourful fish and softly
swaying tentacles like you've always dreamed.
I barely know you and I can't swim
so we don't see each other. At night
I read or look out over the balcony
at the moon. It is like my heart, a shell
that houses the silence of a great wayward crab,
one day to be washed out
among stellar billows of soft foam
into a sea of eternal laundry.

Sonnet to a Dreamed Hand

I stand at the edge of a diving board.
Below, the pool boils. Steam rises
in thick, unwavering lines.
I reach out and they are like fingers.
One curls around my thumb,
another presses into my palm. I think
I am holding a hand — I think
this is what it's like to hold a hand.
I remember pulling someone to safety, squeezing
and the hand slipping through.
I remember a patch of wet cement.
When you lie down on it,
you think your head is a pillow
and the ground is a head.

The Afterlife

Is there small-talk in the afterlife?
Polite laughter? Nodding at appropriate times?
Or is it a room you enter and everyone's asleep?
Maybe there's a tour when you first get there
only you're overwhelmed by all the facts
and forget everything except that you're somewhere famous.
One angel serves nutcakes while another
sings hymns accompanied by lyre,
and everyone cares about everyone else,
a deeply attentive care
like the kind that goes into plucking eyebrows.
Or it's a sham. The afterlife is a sham.
The nutcakes are smuggled from Morocco,
the angel is lip-syncing, the love useless.
As you get older, the afterlife feels more and more
like a high-school party where anyone who matters is invited
except you, for some odd reason.
Whatever.
Really what I think is nothing happens
and you aren't even aware nothing is happening.
It's difficult to imagine, but don't bother.
The closest you'll come to what it's like
is by not imagining anything —
and how boring is that?
Can you imagine anything more boring than that?

The Candy Interrogation

Did it have a wrapper? Did you unwrap the wrapper? How did your fingers accomplish the task of unwrapping? Was it a slow process, your fingers working with great precision and care, or did they trip over themselves in anticipation? What colour was the candy? What did the colour remind you of? An emotion? Which one? Did the emotion give your candy a personality? If your candy had been an individual, what qualities would it have possessed? Would it have been sensitive, outgoing, reckless? What did your candy smell like? Did the smell remind you of another time or place? What was the candy's flavour? Did the flavour remind you of another time or place? What was the candy's texture as it moved inside your mouth? What did it sound like when the candy came into contact with your teeth? The roof of your mouth? Did the candy dance in your mouth? Was it independent and free, like a break-dancer, or were you in complete control, your tongue directing its every move in a strict, well-choreographed tango? Was it pleasant and enticing? Strong and overwhelming? Did it get stronger? Did you resist the temptation? Did you know what was going to happen? Were you afraid? Were you anxious to bring the tango to an end? Did you press your lips together, darkening your mouth? Did you feel your teeth begin to clench? Did you feel it shatter into thousands of tiny pieces? Did you feel the last sliver slip down your throat? As it became a memory, lost in a forgotten corridor of passion, did you feel regret? If I offered you another, would you say yes?

The Clarity of the Simple Present

Coffee keeps me awake. Riddles keep me awake. Shame and sex keep me awake. Hunger, or that empty feeling like hunger keeps me awake. Indigestion keeps me awake. A toothache keeps me awake, the black vertical line of it. The ringing of total silence keeps me awake. Small noises keep me awake, dramatise my paranoia: the thought of a shadow under the door, the doorknob turning etc. ending with me dead. Me dead keeps me awake. Rothko keeps me awake. My eyes keep me awake—I close them. My eyelids keep me awake—I look beyond them into questions seductively posed at the vanguard of human consciousness, like What is human consciousness? An awareness of self? A road to the self? A bridge to the self? Something said by Descartes? Something said by my father? Something said by a rabbit? A dying rabbit? There is a rabbit that keeps me awake. It appeared in a poem. The rabbit leaps and a bullet enters its brain. There is a bullet that keeps me awake. It appeared in a dream. The bullet leaps across a yawn between your lips, black on maroon. There is a jolt of electricity. A heart beats. The rabbit leaps. My body is released into the delta of night and the cold keeps me awake. The plunge, that falling in falling asleep keeps me awake, the soundless jerk of muscle.

The Experiment

It's nonreflective glass. The power drill is cordless.

The bulldog has undergone a vocal cordectomy.

All the zippers have been replaced with metal flaps,
which is better. The tubes are just in case.

We don't like to use the word 'secure,' but it is.

If you start yawning uncontrollably, hold your nose.

If you forget when to exhale, listen deeply.

Don't move your eyes. They'll ruin it.

Here are the terms and conditions. Choose any three.

Here is Ben. He lived a preening and predatory youth
but now he is old and a master of the terza rima.

You will hear his voice guiding you throughout.

Keep your hands up. Move your head to the side.

If you feel a small pinch, it's not working. Restart.

The Miracle

Everyone finds candles during the power outage,
dreams taste really good, and infinite elbow room.
Was it better than the last miracle? Kissing
the cyclops through waves of musical confetti?
My all-time favourite was that thing flapping
in the microwave like a cartoon tongue mid-scream.
We never found out what it really was, miracles
never good at explaining themselves. Here in the city,
a boy wakes up in a cardboard box, air-holes
overhead, but in the country, udders overhead,
and rumours about chainsaws overhead,
lopping off the udders. Damn extremist miracles.
What does a miracle see when it looks back
at what it's done? Does it want a miracle for itself
to relive the glory of its own miracle
like a washed-up rock star? A dream is bound
by wings to its sleep, but a miracle spins
like wing-nuts of release, discharge from the ether,
a psychotic pink scribble. Miracles are greedy —
don't we have our own miracles to live?
A miracle makes you smile but your smile is not
part of the miracle. It's part of you the same way
lightning reveals one edge of a celestial jigsaw piece
and who knows how many pieces altogether
or what the bigger picture is.

The Poodles

Some insects learned how to make holes
in the trees by spinning on their heads
and the trees turned blue at night
with the moon shining through them.
The poodles barked in every direction.
Friends of the poodles barked back,
and in the distance, friends of friends.

The Procedure

This gadget operates like a toy truck loaded with chickpeas dumping them into your dreams. Did you ever see a bird shake its beak into song? Not unlike the gizmo at your lips shaped like the screw of a parking structure. A cloud edges-out a snowflake and doesn't feel a thing, but after the procedure you may experience painful bowel movements. Imagine a potato shoved into the corner of a sack by the other potatoes and the sack kicked real hard in that corner. That foot-shaped tool with the serrated prongs also dismantles visual data into identical spurts of light. Are you familiar with the old adage "Don't direct your heart through a pitted olive"? It's recommended you shave everything down to your knees, but it's required you wear socks of a particular hue that studies have shown benefit the growth of chickpeas. Did you prefer the slideshow of scraped feet, cereal boxes, and aroused pastry-chefs, or busted refrigerators, finger food, and torn pants? We're testing for "Perched Heart Chirrup," which interfere with our distal approximations. Imagine a bed-sheet over a rosebush: besides the occasional thorn poking through you can't see the rosebush. Don't forget, the accuracy of this information depends on your Tuesday-night yoga attendance rate and how closely the recording of you snoring, slowed-down and amplified, resembles radio emissions from Saturn's ring system. Otherwise we can do this orally, tympanically, rectally, you name it. Our main priority is always

the heart, its resilient puffiness to cope with the anaesthetic or it becomes attenuated, feels like a pretzel over a waterfall or the hole in a free-falling donut. Eat all you want before the procedure, but don't dress yourself or read aloud or come into close proximity with lemon-scented urinal cakes. The last thing we want is hair loss and repositioned erogenous zones. It's best if you misunderstand our intentions, like a tornado reconstructing a home, even helping out with the interior design. Does this dark cherry rug match the bedding? When you're not flung skyward, musculature like so many strained elastic bands, we find out.

The Sandwich

Plastic bags, pointy sticks, a running shoe
with red lightning bolts down the sides
that kicks and kicks and kicks. Raffle tickets
left in the hat after the draw, a bagel
trapped in the revolving door. Under the tree,
a dead squirrel, limbs positioned
as if smelling its armpit. My knees felt like
on the back of my legs. The sun
kept going from left to right. Colours
gushed out over the sky. I sat at the bar,
ordered another side of fries.
On the radio, the same saxophone solo
in every pop song. I rubbed my eyes
and lost another eyelash—oh eyelash in the dustpan.
Something can be itself for a long time,
then it can't. The toothpick's pulled out
and the sandwich falls apart.

The Seine

Maybe under the snow, that isn't a racehorse
But a cardboard sign with holes
For your arms, if you have five arms. But winter is clumsy,
Tugging too hard in the rapidly thinning air
Like a young prince who has come from a far-off country
To rescue Rapunzel, her hair braided to give him footholds
When it begins snowing, he slipping like a comb
Until the season changes and, settling down again,
Rapunzel laughing on the Mirabeau Bridge
Hair in the wind like the Seine flowing below,
Winter seems merely helpful, having finally washed her hair
Or else sad, the necessity of betraying her clumsy old stepmother
Who might have fallen due to a powerful convolution of braid and legs
But finally it is over, like an empty street before the parade,
The coffin lowered, black veils against the snow,
And under the veils are faces, and under the snow
Seems only what was ever always there.

There is a Gravestone like a Duck

So maybe it floats in a pond

or quacks occasionally

or is shaped like a duck.

Maybe children throw crackers at it

and run away crying

as it waddles after them,

or maybe it just leaves them be

and does other things

or nothing.

It probably does nothing

though I can't be sure.

A dead thing is funny that way.

This Window

This window looks onto a courtyard, a bag of peanuts.
This window is fastened with a seatbelt. This window
pulls away from the wall like a puddle from the curb
towards a drain. This window lets you reach through
and flick pigeons like switches in a cockpit. The view
steadily recedes from this window and there's a sound
like shaking a broken gizmo. Two of these windows
drool. Clouds pass through a canyon in the reflection
of an opposite window. A pulse across the windowsill
enhances the horizon. My French sounds great from
this window. This window wheezes like a broken accordion.
You can blow bubbles into this window through a straw
but don't go near that window. Weirdo window.
Disco window. This window squints through its grime,
its fuck-ups and regrets. The onlooking windows
argue over a better simile for a shattered window:
as a collage peeled apart or a noisy squadron of pointings?
All at once, pigeons fly up over the courtyard. I flick them
all at once. A pigeon smacks my window. Another falls
to the courtyard then smacks my window. I stick my head
out the window and see David McFadden, a tiny
electrical storm brewing in the air above his brain.
He throws a word at a window and it bounces off. Stuart Ross
raises his arms in triumph. Sometimes a window

is so clear and consumes your field of vision
it's almost not there, but if you look out the same window
every day, you might stall for a moment, feeling sad.
Why are you so sad? Maybe you never could fix that window.
Maybe you've made plans to move. Once you threw
a paper aeroplane out your second-floor window
and it flew over the courtyard below, over the bag
of peanuts, over a yellow balloon someone had let go.

Waking Up

The right wall is bricks.

The left wall is cement
painted as bricks. The
right window is jammed
shut. The left window
is open, full of voices.

On the floor, beside my
bed, a left slipper. My
left foot slips in. It's
morning, the right time
for breakfast, so I open
the drawer of cutlery
to my right. There is only
one spoon left, my least
favourite spoon, and
my right hand is the
spoon's least favourite too.

When I reach into my
bowl of cereal, the spoon
veers to the left, scooping
at the air, spilling milk
and sending the bowl
to the floor where it smashes
over my slipper-less right foot.

The pain goes right, left,
mostly up, but everywhere
so I close my eyes. When
I close my eyes, everything
moves in my favourite
direction, which is no direction.

The pain moves there too,
but slowly, slowly,
as I settle into direction
again, eyes opening,
open.

Without Snacks in a Childhood Fraught with Scenic Routes

A large smelly radish in the telephone booth.
Toast smeared with butter then thrown onto the highway.
Juice boxes for everyone. Would it rain?
The eenie-meenie-miney-moe of the season.
A red park bench and shoes caked in mud.
The slugs plucked from the windshield,
the cool kids in the backmost seat of the bus.
I couldn't see anything, my hat
pulled down too low, the mountains behind us
sinking with a hollow rumbling noise.
Is this got something to do with that stuff I ate?
We gave each other the eyeballeroo.
I held my nose in the telephone booth,
buttered the toast then watched it get smeared
over the highway, crumbs for miles and miles
and miles. How does it happen so slow?
All the squirms in the jello of life's daily
immensities, the foil chocolate-bar wrappers
rolled into balls. We kicked the dead goldfish
onto an electric fence. For the last time
it flipped and wiggled and kicked and flopped.
I blink and there's twice the sparks.

Wrench, Monkey-Like

1

An insect bites another insect.
The results are negligible.
I bury my face in the mud
and emerge with clear skin
as in a commercial. Meanwhile,
in a commercial, a goldfish jumps out.
It twists and flares for an instant
in the air—then explodes! Every
room with a TV in the country
is covered in orange muck.
The commercial is a huge success.
Four years later, you are born.
Thirty years after that, on a hot
sunny day, you tilt a glass,
hoping some sky will pour in—
and it does! a powdery royal blue
which you mix with cold water,
stir with a finger, and slurp
through a straw. But one
who dares to slurp the cosmos
must face grave consequences.
You begin to feel woozy. Then,

an unpleasant sensation, your body
like a broken zipper shuddering
from navel to nose, when a blinding
blue light consumes you, warping
you back through time.
You find yourself without snacks
in a childhood fraught with scenic routes.

2

You hurry through the debris
of childhood memories. You're
sort of like Orpheus in the
underworld. Slow sentimental
things creep over you, but you
brush them off and keep on
hurrying. Sticky-fingered flames
leap from beautiful embarrassments,
your first kiss, but you hurry
through it and chip your front tooth.
All you ever do is hurry. You
hurry through life as if the whole
thing were a woollen sweater
pulled up and over your head.
Listen: it might startle the skin
at your chin and arouse an itch,

but you must defy bodily expectations.

You must give your knee

a good scratch.

Notes

“A Nightmare on Pigs, Poker, and Hearts,” “Periscope,” and “There is a Gravestone like a Duck” appeared in the chapbook *Teeth, Untucked* (Proper Tales Press)

“The Experiment” appeared in *Cadences: A Journal of Literature and the Arts in Cyprus*

“Improvised Death Scene” and “The Clarity of the Simple Present” appeared in *This Magazine*

“Noon” is an erasure of Shannon Tien’s introduction to Matrix Magazine’s Freedom 55 Issue

“Sonnet to a Chambermaid at the Paraiso Intemporal” appeared on the blog *The Week Shall Inherit the Verse*

“Sonnet to a Dreamed Hand” appeared in *In/Words 11.1*

“The Candy Interrogation” is after a writing prompt by Paul Sonsteby