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A collection of poems written during two years of study in the MFA writing program at UNC Greensboro. Poems concern mechanisms, vanishings, and appearances.

THE IMPRACTICAL MAN

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Returned

Come back saying old words like foreign ones,
stone-heavy and full of smoke, and you could be
right: it's your season of manumission,
personal autumn when all to do is
undo hometown education. But if
your drifts of crisp forgetting were leaves,
no child would play there. They're crushed already,
for bagging. While you were gone picking up
new gestures, birds came for once to your yard.
Now they circle, who recognize your eyes.
You've come back with a swagger step, and no friend
can tell it from bravado or a welcome limp.
They noticed you left when you returned.
They want to slap the new glasses out of your dismissive hand.

Splendid Idea I Had Once, When I Felt Spring

The human-powered flight machine spans
his house—airfoil sketches all across
the floor, aspect ratio
calculations written on walls,
propeller plans hanging full scale
beside the bed. He's learned to draft
to place curves exact. He's
training his legs to find what horsepower
he contains, what pedaled thrust
he can make, how much lift,
how much weight he can hold.

The human-powered flight machine has no name,
not *The Mary Anne* anymore, not since she left
saying, I can't live with an airplane,
and he said, Not
an airplane, but a human-powered flight machine,
and how the door slammed behind her.
Noonlight, Solstice, Wheel Within Wheel,
no name pleased him but
Splendid Idea I Had Once, When I Felt Spring
Come Down To Me On A Hillside, the one
too long for him to remember whole.

The human-powered flight machine has no body.
His friends stopped asking

when he would build it, so often
was his answer Soon, Soon.
From the hillside at noon he tosses balsa miniatures
of new designs in the wind. The way
they curve above the trees,
how they disappear
into the sun, it is not what it should be.
No matter how high they rise,
it is never right.

Grandfather engine

After he died I broke into his workshop.
It was a grayed shack, windows slatted shut,
stacked with used-up work shirts and kids' toys.
Beside the tool box and the wrenches gone to rust,
in a crescent crack of sunlight through the roof,
sat the engine, palmprints in dried grease,
planned restoration put off for good.
I could smell his illness in the air,
a dementia from before I was born.
Each hanging light bulb chain snapped when I pulled.
I could not budge the engine toward the door.
In the slight light, I tried to loosen bolts and
pry off manifolds, but the tools slipped, stripped
the metal. I would carry it out piece by piece
if I could. In daylight I would study
each bearing, shaft and bore until I learned
the logic, the assembly, the control of it.

Transverse orientation

Studying the moth mired headfirst in wax
that liquefies beneath the singeing limbs,
the child thinks it had wanted
the heat of the flame, its flickering.

Before the moth's wings caught
in the candle, its body was only motion.
Curved flight flapping spiral in
was the face the child saw.

At night it navigated by lunar light
too dim for sight but bright enough for knowing up.
The moth flew faceless until it found the candle
in the open window, the child watching the glow.

To the girl in California

In shade at the rim of the park,
with his textbooks and notebooks
and his glasses so dirty I don't know
how he studied, your friend
mentioned you and stayed with you, how after finals
he will invite you to surf, though he knows

you have waves enough out west and
would not hold *no* against you. He knows
if you visit him it would be for the coast,
but he said if you come he will say what he has not
through years of emails and phone talks
like ship-to-shore signals, brief

but bright. It is possible to take the mud
of a belief and sculpt it into a work
beyond description. He did not proclaim to me
your beauty, great as innumerable suns,
did not praise your laugh, lilting
as the first of spring, whatever that might mean,

but neither did he say your name.
Girl in California whom he will not call California Girl,
when he asks, answer soft but clear.

“No Limit Soldiers”

First time I heard the phrase,
it was still the nineties—the name
of a rap group that didn’t last.

Now, the nickname of a reserve regiment
printed on the jackets of two women
headed home after training. Three in the morning,

they chatted and photographed themselves
in fatigues. Everyone else in the bus station slept.
But for the jackets with those words

curving around a skull,
I might have thought they wandered in
from some costume party. I wanted

to believe they were old
as they sounded in their thick boots
that stomped no matter how light they walked—

or younger, like the friends
joined to my first memories of the phrase.
Just not in between. I could not

imagine the name in them,
their bodies full of bullets but still fighting.

Children's letters to the President at an estate sale

Wide and wrinkled
like wrecked cars,
the papers, gray and
grid-ridged, were fibrous,

cotton, homemade—
maybe a teacher's project
kept career-long,
or an obscure collection stored

with albums of two-faced dimes.
All of them, full of birds,
clouds, raying light, blended
together except one: a girl

in thick red crayon,
arms flexed, feet firm
on land she labeled *Texas*.
Behind her, a crosshatch

of chain-link fence
across the whole page,
and *Remove illegals now*
in thin, precise letters.

Library genealogy room

Off the unlit hallway where children learn
not to explore after trying all doors
and finding them locked, in the first room,
on flaking stacks of graveyard maps
and college yearbooks from thirty years back,

on index cards bound in blocks by dried out
rubber bands, lie the dead of my county
from first death to now, thin in data
and all out of order. It was my job
one summer to set them straight, names,

birthdays and death days recorded
in minute mortician script. On some cards,
notes on cause: *hole, fishing accident,*
shot by son. On others, no names, only
If. of Sullivan, If. of Cox,

or just *If.*, shorthand for a delivery scene:
two parents, a quiet body, and
remission of the planned name, the unsortable
decision this would not be remembered,
this is not what names are for.

Father truck

He ditched it in the lake
then the lake dried up.
Twenty feet gone

in a burnt year. I climbed down
into the lakebed's cupped palms.
Sunk up to the floorboard

in cracked clay, the browned body
reflected no sunlight and smelled
in the heat like ferrous sweat.

When grandfather passed it down
to him, the engine stalled too often
to be trusted. He tried to fix it

until he thought every part suspicious
but perfect. Grandfather went
to hospital for good, and he drove it

all the way into the water.
He kicked to the surface and watched
the unsolved form darken.

I broke a window with a rock
and climbed into the cabin,
swollen too brittle for doors

to open. I forced my key
into the orange-ringed slot
and tried the ignition, and the engine,

fused with itself down
to the chambers, the engine
that did not stall when he came

to drown the truck for inevitable flaws,
that engine was still turning
with immobile inertia.

Afternoon in the park

My sister did not notice when
the ribbon loosened from her wrist
and the balloon left.

We watched it rise,
the ribbon shining, sometimes
in the right light, wavering

as if evaporating, and she asked
Can you still see it
once, and again, before she looked away,

and though I could see it, I looked away,
and we left, both of us tired from looking
all day for a place to hold her wedding.

Lunch break strike

April 2006, Atlanta

Carpenters are walking at the Biltmore again—
in gloves, in tool belts, they're there for lunch hour
then gone. I had my camera
when I first saw them two weeks ago. I didn't
take pictures. They walked like cardboard cut-outs might,
rigid left, right, and they held their signs up, Fair Pay
For Overtime Work, to say what they were not chanting.

A man in sunglasses and hard hat watching
from the line's end smiled at me and extended his arm,
an invitation to photograph the men
as if he were leading the strike instead of allowing it.
Someone snapped shots from a balcony
as if a few pictures of Mexican carpenters walking in flat circles
could launch a newspaper career.

The news is full of protests, but I could not take pictures of it.
Not of the foreman behind sunglasses,
glancing from them to his watch
with ten minutes to one, to the needed work again.
Not of you saying over dinner
that they have it easy these days, that in a year
we will have forgotten anything happened.

Terrestrial dusk, and the man who stands

Terrestrial dusk, and the man who stands
against the wall is the one who reads
old newspapers on a hill,
the one early night birds set their courses by.
When he wore blue canvas, it was said
denim would suit him better. Dressed now
all in denim, it is said he is not the sort
to go about all clad in denim.
There is no work in him, they say.

Flat noontime, and the man who stands
against the wall is the one who paces wide
in rain, composing cadences for wind
running through dried grass. When he whistles
he seems to chance dry through the storm
like a leaf beneath a leaf. Even when
he pauses silent in the open
rain misses him, they say,
jogging through puddles at lunch hour.

Morning stretches out, and the man
who stands against the wall is the one
who stands against the wall,
watching the day gather from the white
and blue side of the burnt-up corner store.
When he smokes, his gloved fingers

do not move. When he does not smoke, his gloved hands hang
hollow at his sides. It is said he does not remove
them, even when, hands in pockets, he has removed them.

Transfiguration containing no ash

Let us begin again where we left off, I
before the congregation crossed with ashes,
counting them recognizing one by one

my clean-foreheaded doubt, and you,
more abstract than math, than one
divided by zero, were absent from us all.

I would rather you, corporeal, had looked me
in the eye and turned away three hundred times
than watched them release their trust, serial.

I didn't want you to tear off your tetragrammaton,
your *is* and your *is not*, but to reveal each and all
of our faces. I wasn't asking you to take back

your winnow logic that restrains compassion,
the gift knife that keeps you and I apart. Just
follow me this once, and we'll show everyone

is everyone else. Come with me and we'll
go down, father, way, way down.

Diarist

Around him, an arc of typewriters. Spares.
Details of dinner, a light bulb replaced,
A trip to the john, he records it all,
Records his recording. Reading of a man
Who typed from *one* to *one million*
In words, sixteen years,
Paper stacked six feet,
He wonders how high his own ledgers measure.
They fill a room no one enters,
Pages pasted with pressed leafs, bills, letters
Addressed to Occupant.
He would tape down pictures
If he still traveled, notes to self
If he didn't transcribe them first.
Each week he calls everyone he knows,
Types down what they're doing.

The naming of Blood Mountain

The gas station man tells stories
Of an Indian battle at Slaughter Gap.
It happened right there, he says, pointing
To a dip in the ridge the florist insists is called Neels.
She claims the name is from rhododendrons.
The junk man on his bench next door
Grumbles, It's a joke from a comic book,
And fumbles through a comic book,
Half-ripped. In the junk store,
The newest man in town picks through items
And says nothing.

*

On the trail. Treetops
Close enough to reach for
But too far to touch.

The slope is all fallen limbs,
Pine needles, sounds
Of hidden living things.

Someone might have lived there once,
Probably someone has walked there,
But not today, not me.

*

If I could find the water
I hear purling down the mountain
And watch it flow for weeks,
I would not see it deepen
Its rut in the rock. At my scale,
The mountain stings
Like a hand cut by a rope too thin
And quick to catch, and water
Is someone fallen from a fair ride,
Hitting every strut. How long
To imagine this not human.

*

Smoke rises from a fold
In the forested foothills. Stumps
Burning out of a new field.

Someone is watching those fires
Waiting to rest. When
That farmhand douses the flames,

The mountain will be there for him to say,
I ache like the mountain, and add
To its years of names his own.

*

At the top sit the junk man and
The newest man, friendless for months.
The recluse says to the outcast, Trust me,
You don't need people to live out here.

If I say to the mountain, I know
The history of your name, it would
Answer like the outcast,
No, Not nearly.

Uncertainty on a bridge across the sound

Miniature in coastal wind and morning light,
my friend in the lawn chair held aloft by balloons
glides west. She began her mission days ago,
cutting the last rope after she gave me
her rifle and instructions for how to start
the landing. Rising silently, she kept
speaking to me as if I were still beside her.
Altitude has made her the smallest visible thing.
She has not called out for me to shoot
through any balloons. No longer does she look
for me to check that I have followed her.

Of the river and the river town

He knew nothing from before the river.
Slow wheeling and flat, he did not think *river*
in the carry of the water. There were no ideas
until the sun behind a cloud, how a tree shifts
in its blotted shadow, the capture of light.

Rain came and he drank. Fruit fell and he ate.
He discerned the lengths of days and years and lost
count as they slid away, believing nothing
ever stopped, only faded in and out of stars.

When he saw two men on a dock
did not see himself in them, their movements
more like a shrike banking than the worm it spots
in the grass. When they drew him in with nets
he tried to fight. When they brought him naked

before the town he would have thrown down
the gray work clothes they gave and fled, but first
they took him to a hill to see the end of the river,
how it emptied into a sea, its current dragging

into the open water a string of people
who floated on their backs like fallen leaves
until they folded into waves. One man
said to the other, Now he knows he owes us.

The end of winter

One man running down the street
on the last cold night of the season,
leather jacket and rotary legs
converging into one form
in the distance as his footfalls fade,
no one in sight ahead or behind
even if he was looking.

Son machine

I walked along a dirt road.
The sun was low enough to make
long shadows, but made none.
Beside the road, a lake with no
reflections. Stepping down to it,
I saw beneath the surface a vast machine.
Gears and chains and shafts between turbines.
Strips of focused light from ripples stroked
the mechanism, inert. It spread wide as the lake.
Rust ridged up from every surface and dissolved
into tree trunks and grass out of the lake bottom,
gone iron. I imagined myself at the bottom,
in the nest of the engine, looking up
through the membrane of water
at the streaky world, waiting
to enter it, my body.

Late hours

Jabbed from my night cynicism
by coffee and coffee and not enough water,
I began to hope the world was only people,
down to the crispness of air in water, people
more like peculiar relatives
than white-eyed figures of myths,
people to love as if it were a word that can be said
to anyone so like oneself, to anyone at all,
people, because my body was filling from the lungs out,
discretely, until I believed I could breathe all things,
or say to a stranger, Goodnight,
and guarantee to him the night, people
until I heard a motorcycle rip into
high idle then stall, a man in a backyard shouting
What are you doing? Go away,
metal crunching to the ground and a woman
gasping a name, then the man yelling
See what you've done and riding away
in a cloud. I saw her sitting
where he had pushed her down.
She did not watch him go, did not
gather the hair from her face.

The sound the universe hears

as the wax and ash bead
of itself reworks itself
is not like the whistling of thin
quickness heard whirling around
mountains or the convex and hard
lots of backroads gas stations,
nor like any sort of silence,
oil barrel hollow or still
as before and after sudden
country death, stargazing
man struck by meteor,
nor astronomical,
the hiss of glistening suncores
becoming diamond, but more
like this man I watch by window,
walking home from work near midnight
to do more work, laundry work,
dinner work, 'Tonight maybe
I will make the car work'—
not the beat of his steps, his breath,
but the passage of cars
down the highway, an ebbing
I hear because of the long-note song
he does not sing,
the music his tiredness contains.

The second daughter

Ellen, our family has no children or parents,
just us, floating like fog. When you tell the story
of mother's last day, you do not say enough. Go back
to our first years, to the army town and the army
families shuffling through like records in a beat up jukebox—

the houses of neighbors known through windows
collapsed together as you remade the neighborhood
in your mind, pasting down layered maps of names
until everyone you could know became
like ink, paper, atlas: replaceable.

I cannot remember enough of the house we had,
not more than colors and sometimes her face in rooms.
Do not revise what you keep. It is ours. When you tell
the story of your car breaking, you dwell too much on the wait
for a tow. The tale is in how you used to watch rain swell

the river. It's in how mother taught you
to play bridge and you played no one, how you
observed from the widow next door
the art of nostalgia, fixing rooms
for a time that never came.

Don't don't don't complain, frayed-wire sister,
about your job fixing copy at the paper
and your bled-out correction pens. You've coasted,

a water droplet on a leaf, and paused too little
in all the wrong spots. No one knows which

goodbyes need saying, but the future does not stop shrinking.
When you tell the story of her last day I don't want
to hear you ranting roadside at the car. Tell me you listened
for her breath to come mixed with wind. Tell me
you saw the day age, the sun sliding irrevocable.

The first daughter

In morning, chimneys breathing smoke don't stop
to sigh *Dissolve, dissolve*, the chant of night.

Because it is early, it seems even
the clouds will go somewhere today. At work
these days grammar is tough to fix, refix,
so many ways for words to fall correct.

At least it keeps me reading news, I said
once, but not anymore. At night I walk
the railroad tracks, and the wind says to me,
Soon you will be more near to End than Start.

I say, I know, You always tell me that.

In leaves blown across the ground, the wind
says, *And it will be this simple.* Believe me,
it isn't that I do not hear them speak.

I started long ago a game of chess:

myself at sunup playing white against
myself with black, moving at night.

To give the evening self a chance, I try
to lose the moves that come in sleep,
and do, but still I can't forget

enough dreams: in doorknobs, reflected clocks;
and riverside, you calling for me
to come down from my burning oak.

I only meant to pass the time—now
just the kings remain, circling.

Night drive ending near a stable

I tell myself I came to see its shadow drape across the field,
its leaning walls and rafters overcome with vines.

In light from passing cars my shadow stretches and recedes.
I tell myself I came here. I say, You are not disappearing.

The philosophy professor turns into air

for Martin Robinson

Prolate and featureless against the sky,
the body sliding from the jet's tail
reminded me of a staged bombing
I saw once at an airshow,
the stream of falling dummy shells.

I could not understand why
he wanted it this way, burial at air,
thrown from the back of a Fokker 28,
but his will was exact: *no box,*
no bag, just clothes. Come see.

I do not know how he expected us to watch.
Few did: daughter, son, sister, I. His wife
was not with us in the early morning,
tracing the arc of that gray
top-heavy thing. She waited

in the radio room with grandchildren.
The radio man stood watching outside the door.
He had not been invited, but approached
when we unloaded the hearse on the tarmac.
He agreed not to report us if we let him see.

It fell for a long time. As I marvelled
that the shirt remained on the body,

wind ripped it off. It whipped away
in pieces while the arms remained in place.
It was not free,

the body. Something inside bound it
to itself, would not allow arms to ratchet
or let legs flail. The body would not do
what I think he would have tried,
would not force the arms out

into the sun and air, the brightening
clouds that made his body
filament. I did not watch him
and think, He was my teacher—
I recalled his favorite lesson,

the theory of Anaximenes
that all things are made of air.
My memories of him began to leave
as I felt in my chest the start
of a long and slow rigidity,

until nothing of him remained but the lesson,
my failure to imagine him finally striking ground,
the pure tomb of his will.

Mister Six poems

Mister Six to the Impractical Man

Listen fellow, we're all young and jobless
and full of debt once, believing our days
will billow in us like wind in clouds
and carry us along a long while.

But that's kid life, that is to neglect
your number. Don't let it go fellow,
don't let the letters gather with you
like dust sickness left unhealed for years.

Keep away the letter writers,
men of figures who said on their papers,

It is not for you to be debtful here—

Go down from this place.

On a morning outside light they will
arrive with trucks and crates and arms,
quick as the end of a nested dream.

Fight them and every one in your number
of friends will deny you. Fight your debt,
and your fingernails will split
cracks from the quick will track up your fingers,
each bone will break and bond and bust again, and though
you will rest your body down and rise as if you hadn't,
though you will become difference, friend,
you must pay for what you take
until you have nothing to pay for anymore.

Day at the beach

Brought to the sea when I was small, I was
taught how to sit in the shallows of the tide
and bear against the salt and foam of the waves,
tide's impersonal shoves to shore. All
noon we played with the sea's refusal of us,
no one speaking of refusal in the waves, the way
the water makes wind and sand from air and rock,
those things it cannot expel from itself. It does
not want, so does not want to be alone, but
everything given to the sea returns to shore.
Stones become shells, boats become boards, we
become bones. Nothing can remain beside it,
so evenly does it own and owe nothing.
When it tried to knock us back to shore,
it did not wish it, no one said it, but it serves
the ones it keeps, the ones that stay.

Enumeration at the end of day

It does not happen that you forget,
that the days cover what you do
like earth that swallows houses fallen down.
Forgetting goes
until there is no memory
that does not return to you like an exile
who has learned disguises
but comes with only weapons—

At night, piano notes from the highest window of a friend
with whom you do not speak, and your footsteps
steady on. The slow sense
of all friends become this, while at the door,
at hours, knocking and knocking
and the shouting of your last name.
On a bicycle in a thorough winter,
the dry whine of chain and gear
all the way down the road you did not think would end.

They will not end, your memories
of the unholy smear of your one voice in that stillness—
let them last.

Quarry

My plan was a wish singing itself prayerful.
At night I said it, Come time, I will find what is mine.
And to the sand I said it, Come earth, and every soil
will be full of my riches. To gulls flapping out to sea, I said it
as best I could, Come wings, and I will depart in every direction.
At the edge of waves, shore going out under me, I said it
as it cannot be done, Come each arm and leg,
each body I have, and I will do all things
to all things. With my skin come unlayered at the ridges
and the bandage about my head come undone and I flaring
with all kinds of sight, everyone forgotten as I walk,
each name I have lost, my quarry, narrow and becoming,
through each medium, I will find you.

Of the ocean near the ocean

At a midnight station stop you say to some stranger, I'm headed to the beach.
He says, I'm unfixable sick, my family quit me quick, Can you pay
my ride away? You hand him some dough, you keep your face plain.
He slumps on his bench like a rot stump getting full of dirt.
Stay long enough, his head will cave in. This is what happens.

To the boy across the bus, runaway son of a reverend resigned in sin,
you say, I'm headed to the sea because I've never gone alone.
See that broken line down the middle of the road, he asks. That's alone.
He'll watch those stripes pass through headlights all night,
he'll be forgetting himself for good. And to the man who calls himself

the unluckiest man, whose parents demanded rent at fifteen,
whose quick marriage broke under insanity of wife, her eyes
flicking like a cut artery, you say to him as the sun is rising
on the last mile, I'm headed to the winter sea—
And he'll say, That locust lust ain't just in your head, Get away from me.

When you arrive at the ocean to begin your days of mutter prayers
that will open a pocket in time for you and no one will hear it zip shut,
when you wander out in search of a wisdom seat to sit in
like quitting work is earning back your time,
you'll stay in one of two ways. Get to know the metal man

who went deaf under his headset but still carries his wand
up and down his stripe of coast. Get to know the woman
standing at the tip of the waves, nest of papers to her chest,
phone in hand. Meet her quick. The water will roll to her socked toes,
and she will look at you like she does not know what to do.

Regards

No place I looked could bear my looking.
They fled me like loose leaves in a hilltop wind.
The delta went to mud and water and weeds,
and all the curious shadows in the field unwound
from the dried grasses, if I approached. Pebbles
glittering in a low stream became only light,
and that light became an angle and a thirst.

I made once to sleep in a punched-in-the-face shed
that leaned across a flat plate of land that resisted me.
There were shacks like that all along the road,
tumbled all like love letters from a moving car,
and no interior for me. I bedded down
in some deep meadow and when I woke
a man sat against a tree across from me,

doing and undoing his fingers and quiet, watching.
He spoke nothing the time I took to leave,
and followed me out with eyes. Nothing
was open, nothing given to be known. The men
on the store porch kept every place from me
when they refused to give directions,
except for a price. The woman at the pasture gate

was every woman at every pasture gate, a shadow
watching me pass. At night I sang and nothing came.
The man sitting in his car in the gas pump parking lot
heard it, his ears turning his head, but the rest of him
turned back. The officer camping out a two-lane
intersection heard it, and made sure in his rearview mirror
that I passed on. The motion lights on house fronts

did not hear it, but lit as I walked by, rattling
the last coins in my pocket. Fields became towns
until the town was the one I knew. Under orange lights
a car drove past, backed up and drove past again. No
words. Anyone might have been back of the dark window.
Come day, I recognized everyone I saw. No one knew me.
They asked my name. What it was I did for a living.