

DELGADO, SHAWN MICHAEL, M.F.A. Do Not Try This at Home (2012)
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The poems of this collection are written in a style intended to mirror natural speech, as to feel conversational. Usually rooted in narrative, the experiences and observations of the speakers serve as launching pads for the lyric, allowing thoughtful, yet playful, exploration of human relationships, history, and landscape. Questioning and observation take precedence over certainty or knowledge. Humor is employed to balance and complicate more serious emotion. The poems vary widely in setting and theme, often multiple in a single poem, to keep the poems and overall manuscript agile. Major structural elements exist primarily to serve as pacing cues.

DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME

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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I.

Before the Bang

In the Beginning, our bodies were so whole
we were holy—unformed energy in a ball smaller than any sun,
yet all the suns were there with every son of the reptiles
and all the dancing daughters of water and light.
Small enough to be emptiness, our center held each worm and root.
Every quasar. Every skyscraper. Every rock.
All pets, past and present, rested by the lost keys,
even the ones still not lost. All was potential
as the universe churned in its womb.
The Angelfish were years from being
Angelfish, and metal elements hadn't been invented,
needing to sort-out their arrangements. My hands had to live
countless lives in darkness—in caves and fields, in castles and cities
—wringing their atoms for eons as they waited to become hands.
For my lifetime, they're borrowed tools. I inherit and lose flecks
of each fingertip when I stroke a piano's note, greet a stranger,
sip from a mug. I shuffle and deal myself to unknowns
that might include ten thousand stones,
but I wonder about that first sacrifice when the everything gave itself up
to make us. If that's not evidence of God, it still proves
to me that each man is grander than a singularity,
and the world exists by a magic so large
that even as an accident I would call it divine, still some kind of love.

Put the Needle to the Record

Each noise rides a wave in, sends a quiver to the sapphire
that grinds the imprint of each sound, cuts a furrow
in fallow vinyl. Be careful, any extra whisper or misstep
in a scale can be replayed, and there's little time for apologies

that half-change nothing. It's in the ledger
of a record, buried in a corkscrew of grooves.
The recorder bobs to each instrument, makes final drafts
of moments, so when needle contacts wax

that tip becomes a gatekeeper with no favored tones:
Grandmasters can't cut to the front of the line, leave feedback
at the back of the track. Such a simple principle, though I can't grasp
how the wiggle on a stylus can free every note at once, unpack

the layered waves. It's an acoustic truth, and I'll never be
able to dismiss this honesty like digital's foreign tongue
of ones and zeroes. It's a physical fact with no spin but its own orbit.
All these ditches look the same, so the Isley Brothers

could be Beethoven until a needle settles its nose into the spiral
exposing the notes' tones. It doesn't need eyes:
this sharp observer is a perfect ear. The platter turns. The sounds bloom.
The round ripples fill the squarest rooms.

Of Sweat and Distance

When I can feel the heat's weight, I stay sweating as if this
will prove I work, if not on an assembly line cutting steel
or pushing a cart of hot dogs down the sidewalk
or a broom through an empty elementary school,

then at least at being alive. My first choice for cool
is the breeze, not the AC, and if a trek's ahead
(up to forty furlongs) I choose my own engine,
cooled by beads of brine on my skin and the wind

singing in my face while I pedal through traffic.
I've not been pickled by saline crystals
that barely glint in noontime light.
When I encounter acquaintances buying groceries

or a cup of coffee, I avoid the handshake,
apologize through and for my dripping, say "Hey"
and answer questions. I lean toward the polite,
though as a body might, I'd prefer to wrap someone

in the wave of my embrace, submerge an ally in the sea-spray
that fights to be free from my internal ocean. I need
to believe that breed of people exists, even if a bit rough,
and when I meet one, I might see my life as a series of tides, receding

now, but rising in the future that will become past.
My moisture will leave a patch of dark wetness, the kind
that allows fallow ground to grow fecund and full
without a mind for *tainted* or *grime*, so lush you can't see the filth.

And Sometimes, as You Stand at the Microphone, an Ambulance Passes

and the howl scares the grackles from their lamppost perches. It tramples the crowd's murmur as the siren moans *Urgent!* again and again through the cool September air, louder than any rescue you've ever known. You lock your speech below your voice-box as if to shield it from lemon-sized hail. The people sitting at wrought-iron tables turn their backs to you to better hear the pitch climb during the approach, then dive the instant the truck streaks past. Its automobile breeze slaps their hats to the floor and shakes all you've said from their anxious brains. What should you do when their attention staggers back to the stage and silence returns? What to do, as their minds resettle like a snow globe tossed into a snow bank?

Begin at the beginning. Louder.

Poem as a Gateway Drug

I remember my days using back in high school,
avoiding eye contact as I rushed upstairs
with a chapbook stowed inside my coat.
My bedroom door locked, I'd tear into the package,
gobbling pages so fast my vision would blur
when the work unhinged a valve in my head.
An electric tremble would hit my hands and feet,
push my arms and legs into a stretch.

I smashed my first car into another's bumper
at a red light while inhaling lines of verse.
I stashed the book under a seat as I talked
to the cops. I tip-toe around my habit
when meeting new folks. I find that I get
a crush-faced *no thanks* from most when I offer
up a greatest hit. It's my secret: how much I pay
for these tiny bags of books.

The high school teachers talked about poetry
like it was sex-ed, enveloped in mystery and danger.
Instead of diseased penises projected
on a pull-down screen, we were taught tales of heartbreak,
obscurity, never of the pleasure that could be released.
They squeamishly offered the wrong techniques, squeezed
the poem so hard it would turn blue and wilt,
cut from its supply of blood.

When a guy standing in a concert-side lot
opens his hand to reveal a couple confetti squares
tucked in tinfoil, I'm ready to experiment.
I've rolled whole tomes across my tongue, so what
could these wordless scraps do? *Go ahead*, I tell him,
drop some into my mouth, slide one into my ear.

Dandelions

It's a blessing that some things are designed
for destruction. Early May, a warm day
already ending,

I kick the soft globes,
scatter the airy feathers to assuage
an unnamed grumbling, a kind of hunger
needing uncommon sustenance.
The finest foods steaming on porcelain plates
wouldn't soothe my roiling guts.

These blossoms were unwanted, the ragged
leaves sharp and ugly most months,
and I'm only making more, an easy chore, as some
seeds will waft into the garden's soil, take root.

None of this matters in the moment.
These white tufts goad me to violence—each
flaunts such a transient beauty! I explode a whole field
with the ease of a child plucking
the wings off a beetle, radiant and metallic in the sun.

Led by my body, I strike toward a season
of prosperity, nursing my own ill weather.
A satisfying *thwock* accompanies each kick
as my boot connects with the seed heads, freeing
thousands of parachutes barely visible in the breeze.

In a year, there will be a larger crop, and if alert,
I might salvage the tenderness of the young leaves
beside the burgeoning sprouts. I might wait
for blossoms to emerge, so that I can fill
myself with a feast of wild greenery, store
the rest in the dark beneath my house
where it will turn to crisp wine.

Afterglow

My lungs shutter, grasping at the air
while I sit to recover from a slim victory
in a tennis match with a man who hasn't played

in years. He will beat my ass
with any practice, but instead of worrying,
I think of how easy it is to not be fourteen

when I wanted to be great
like Sampras, who spoke like a lug,
but became an elk on the court: power and casual quickness

paired with a caveman face. I bought his racket, the heaviest
and smallest. It was so useless, Wilson discontinued it
while he was #1. I wonder how I could've swung it then

and think out loud to my friend, *The game's a lot
more fun now that I'm not weak
for the first time in my life—I know*

not to try to cop to strong, and years before
I realize I've had more time alive than most men
in history, I'll admit a quiet descent from my peak: not weak.

Don't take this as lament. I have trouble
seeing the trouble. I've seen radiance in aged faces
and found fewer fistfights with age. My tongue

can greet the air like brass knuckles or a handful of lavender.
I've learned some back roads to bypass traffic, and I think
happiness existed before I could walk or stand.

I'm curious how long it'll take before I'm eight again.
I understand it'll occur in some parallel universe
where I'm about as strong, but maybe as fast

as my six-year-old self. And I won't heal
like clay in rain, but my shell will be buckskin
instead of velvet, and I'll be able to read the wind

and the sunset and the night sky for signs,
and perhaps be less inclined to curl into a furry ball

before falling asleep. That late in the game,

I bet I'll stoop, but will try to stretch, something simple,
a habit we hardheaded only learn
after bruises and tightness, straining our stunning, frail bodies.

Discontent in the Garden of the Gods

Cliffs don't wander, certainly never fly,
but I struggle as I try to restrain the descriptor
soaring from landing. In my mind,
the orange that echoes off the hoodoos' steepness
seems alive, better fit with a fox or pumpkin
than columns of stone. Still, enraptured,
I stew as hordes emerge from vans and tromp
through the brush, climb boulders on all fours, their feet knocking
chunks of red rock downhill. I can't help wanting
to lecture them on geology,
three-hundred million years of gorgeous erosion.
(Imagine how this place once halted an expedition
so the leader could bestow such an audacious name!)

In the distance a few are hooked into harnesses,
climbing like awkward insects.
I wince at the ease with which
soles revise terrain, but why do I
care to impose my brand of reverence
sheltered in silence, crush their glee
beneath the burden of my own awe?
I'd call them tourists, but I'm not a native.
This landmark isn't in my custody—it's nonsense
to coddle rocks...still, the changes made with each cliff chipped
rattle me. It's subtle destruction. How much
should the traffic claim? Where does phenomenon end
and intrusion begin? I'm unsure of my eyes
in this place: one more landscape unknowable.

Start to Finish

Monday: the scientist wakes up a chemistry problem of excited ions. He works toward equilibrium: the lowest energy state. His body is comprised of more than a hundred thousand reactants, so he can't know the names of all these equations, but he does propose that when you combine a body, music, and the ground (optional) with energy, dance is the product. He can seal energy in a letter before he lifts the flag on the mailbox. When he takes it to work, he leaves with a check and the bellies of his pets hang lower, heavier. Some days he finds he must reach into an embrace to ground some charge climbing his spine.

Friday: the scientist wants to stop moving without anyone asking where he's not headed. He drives to the end of an alley that dies into hundreds of paused head- and tail-lights piloted by people with grimaced faces trying to go to different homes from different jobs at the same time. He parks at the stop sign. The stereo settles on top of the world like fresh snow. He flicks on the hazard lights, and they heave in tandem, almost keeping time. No cars pull behind—no horns berate his fatigue. The cars outside his steel terrarium scrape lines forward like pigs marching up a ramp, then through a hallway where every door is numbered and lettered.

In the book a man reads to his nephew

on page six the toothbrush in the bathroom tells
the goldfish in the bedroom across the hall, *There is no reason
to excite yourself.* The goldfish,
water-colored copper and silver,
continues to swim pinned to its reflection
the way its owners (twins) do
skating together across a frozen pond, surrounded
by classmates, their coats dusted with snow
in their own stories elsewhere. The goldfish rubs and nudges
its bowl which looks like an inverted astronaut
helmet to the nephew, and maybe
also to the children hidden in the breath
of the surrounding world. The toothbrush buzzes
and the fish, not an enchanted or gifted goldfish
by any measure, listens and rises in its orbits
around the eight or nine, finger-thin reeds
anchored in the center of the pebble floor.
It flits toward the reflection of itself,
and the reading man glances off the surface
of considering whether the double is a part
of the fishy self or apart from the goldfish flesh.
The ideas, though opposed, seem fair and likely
and simultaneously true. He feels if he chases one,
he must lose the other, so instead, he directs his attention
to page nine, where the goldfish, once fed,
*it races through the water from flake to flake
like a hungry pinball. . . .*

The uncle who is reading
works as an appliance repairman who has fixed only
three pinball machines in fifteen years and remembers
returning each cleaned and rewired machine
to an arcade where a small crowd would form
waiting to see the game made new again. He rests on
one memory in particular—though his voice is back
with his nephew in the fish's house—remembers lingering
a few minutes after the handoff and the manager's
signature to finish the paperwork. He paused
to watch a near-empty room from a distance
where a boy stood on a crate to play
badly, slap at the buttons in tandem,
almost a random act and usually too soon or late.
The man watched this boy drop coin after coin down

the slot, and each time the boy's face relit at sparking the lights
and sirens which cheered the reunion of toy and master,
and the bumpers that twitched to show their tense readiness,
and the paddles that thrashed once before Ball One to give
an example of their talents. The end of the game,
as with the beginning, always came the same way: a carnival
quickly winding down to silence, drained
of its jocular flash and song, a decrescendo
only hinting at the excitement and its loss,
much the same as the face of the man's nephew.
He has fallen asleep now. His eyes flutter beneath their lids,
almost as if swimming, while the man gently shuts the book.

II.

Resolutions

Tonight's my final fling with fast food:
thirteen mini-burgers nested in a pile of fries
between two apple pies. There's one night of sleep
between me and the new me, you'll see,
as the supersize gets dropped from my diet.
I'll raise papayas and peppermint house-side,
six bushes of sage. Tonight, I allow
cheap beer and celeb TV. Tomorrow, I'll start to run
three hours each day. I'll learn Latin,
Swahili, enroll in an online course
in Australian. I'll take up parasailing, teach myself
the harp. The spider webs can stay one more day,
since soon I'll cast a spell to banish them and dirt
from my doorstep. Then I think I'll bronze the bathtub.
Around the day-calendar's corner each letter
will get three notarized replies, I'll read
four books daily, memorize the star signs
and movie-star résumés so I can win games of Trivial
Pursuit. In a few hours tomorrow comes to flip
my switch. No longer will I have to walk, scared of a spill
at full-sprint. Tomorrow my plastic wrapper comes off,
and my wings will unfold to grasp the power
of the sun, which will somehow shed warmer light.

Forgetting

Before the blackout at closing-time,
before overwrought emotions
arrive with their friend: the internal,
insistent voice with nothing
to say, just something to prove,
before the memory warps
like pig iron in Time's foundry,
it's a warming of the blood at the brackish
threshold where clarity meets nostalgia.
You can't remember the volume
of any yelling or the minor
asymmetries of his haircut, her face.
You wish you'd stopped for more pictures.
The edges have been softened,
and the only light on the dance floor
is red. Say goodbye to scars, blemishes,
most of the freckles. Goodbye stray hairs.
Hello dead-end desire.

To the Kid Wearing a Che Guevara Belt Buckle at JFK Airport

I get it: the damn thing drives the hips
of the hip chicks wild back at high school.
With its slick-steel finish and macho beard
lined in chrome, your crotch appears daring,
wearing the jungle fighter as its pubic crown.
What you don't notice is when *Guerrillo Heroico*
holds up your pants, you're somebody

special as you unite a nation shredded
by its Revolution. Exiles burn like acetylene torches
when you advertise the man who selected their kin for death,
lined them up on the wall, and smoked a cigar as he watched them shot.
Back in Havana, the natives wait for your suburbs
to crumble in the aftermath of capitalism.
I should stop, step away righteous and glibly correct,

but who the hell am I?—barely half
the half-Cuban I claim as my heritage when I fill out forms
for the government or give an abridged lineage
to someone who catches my skin's slight tint.
Even my Spanish is in shambles, a weak tongue
parched, a muscle atrophied. I'd like to say
I lose twenty words a week, but that would imply I remember

a lot of names for things. In truth, I blanked
on the word for "check" last week in a Mexican restaurant.
I would never have tried it, too scared of drowning
in a conversation I couldn't control
and too ashamed to face native-speakers
who would patronize my attempt for a few extra bucks.
Am I that single-serving conquistador?

My grandparents died before I could meet them,
so the only Cuban I know is Dad who was born
"Armando Enrique" and grew up "Mandy."
These days, everyone calls him "Henry."
At five, he was one of the "Operation Peter Pan" kids
who left with one suitcase, and now he doesn't talk
about his homeland (maybe a quip about the pastoral)

unless it's to drool venom onto the names
of the people who stayed to pillage his birthright:

a family store and acres of cane.
Sometimes he tells the story of how Fidel's cronies visit
schoolkids and tell them to pray to God for ice cream.
It doesn't work. Then they're told to pray to Fidel.
Two scoops for everyone, at least this time.

When I was that age, I prayed no classmates
would call me a greasy Cuban, insisting
my surname was Spanish. Years later,
I realized I'd been right, since every Indian
was purged by European diseases or murdered, and I can't
claim I'm an African descendant of slaves: the only other option.
I'm European after all, same as my mother's "white" side of my family.

Spanish is just another way to be white,
sort of how ads have rebranded pork,
favorite flesh of my ancestors. In Cuba,
the explorers marched behind an infantry of snouts
that chewed rainforests to the roots. Oh, and Ernesto
Guevara wasn't Cuban either. He was another wealthy, white-faced
descendant of the Old World who decided what was best

for the little guy—first on that island, then, off to Africa
and the rest of his abridged world tour.
Kid, I know my real problem now. Seeing
that smug statement of El Che's face buckled
inches above your little soldier, I catch myself reflected
all too clearly and my insides tie themselves into a hangman's knot
that wrings the patience from my body.

In the Drug Store 1-Hour Photo

The gears designed to drag the negatives
through chemicals slipped out of the film's notches
and nibbled the strip until it crinkled into a wad.
When Carol Johnson returns for her film,
but gets this news, she chews us out. The metal reprobate is dead.
Dave, the repairman on call, has made sure to hide from her
shouting: he has a hangover and needs a cigarette.
Kevin, our manager, offers a blank reel of film
with free processing: all he's allowed to give.

I try not to watch Kevin or the woman as he intercepts
her anger, and I hope for other people to come buy candy
or cotton balls, drain cleaner or a newspaper
to provide a distraction. They don't,
so I retreat into any memory and find a childhood pet:
my black rabbit choked by the red ribbon
I tied to his cage, made breathless by his slow swallowing.
I found him cold, deflated on the bed of hay.
The tip of the nylon string peeked from his mouth.
The rest coiled, a clog in his throat.

Groucho Marx Joke

Have you heard the one where Groucho says, *I don't care to belong to any club that will have me as a member?*

I think of it some nights, when I'm unwelcome even in my own bed.
I tell myself, *not tonight, go sleep on the couch*

where I lie in the dark, watch TV next to a half-drunk beer
while 2AM recycles the 10PM movie into the dead air.

My favorite number is one hundred. When paired with a %,
it becomes tangible infinity, great mountains in the distance

on a flat road, but a small tank of gas. I can see it,
can touch it with my eyes, but there's no way I'll make it there

to the place of easy sleep, where *try your hardest*
doesn't have to mean exhausted-death like the first marathon.

This morning, I asked a sidewalk stranger for the time. He frowned as he lost
a few steps to deliver an answer. *Just give him what he wants*

so he'll shut up. I roll in my sleep, bump the remote
and hear a voice: infomercial lullaby, tell me again about \$99.95

in five-easy-payments. My debt can't be capped at a single sum;
it's a wound, the gap between *could have* and *did*

V-ing wider with time. I want exhaustion: to sleep spent, penniless
and limp. This sleep only feels broke, gets shorter each night.

A high school freshman joins band,

not to scream through his trumpet 'til he's Dizzy, or because his heart beats with the cadence of Sousa, but for summer camp: a chance to infiltrate the elders, find allies before classes start. He'll need pals for protection. He's saddled with glasses and a crooked haircut that's prone to cowlicks. He's claustrophobic and any rumors of geeks stuffed into lockers never say the size of the locker's insides. As a bonus, he's heard that the lip-buzzing builds muscles for kissing, and there will be parties with the color guard. Once away from home, he proves he can play from memory, and he shares balm with aching band mates. At attention, he's rigid as an icicle, sweat melting off his skin. Seniors buy him sodas. They twist his last name into a clever epithet. He parrots their slurs about his back-up Sibley, a snob who honks cracked notes and can't march in step. *He has a dog snout. In that striped shirt, he looks like the Prince of Candy Land.* During one lunch, two upperclassmen race to the tableside. *Someone put Icy-Hot on the toilets. It made Sibley cry! Ya know who did it?* The boy attacks the opportunity with a smart-bomb lie: *I did it.* He laughs, 'til their mouths drop the smiles, reform to tell him *It wasn't Sibley* he had admitted to fooling. *It was us.*

In Church, I Am Still a Child

The hands of my watch
click around their pivot,
and the slope of my back
flattens, my view drooping
below the pew's edge.
It falls on my polished shoes.
Treadless, they glide
across the crew-cut carpet—
forward and back, forward and back.

When the Eucharist comes, I pass.
I have not earned the right,
and I don't have cash
or check for the silver plate.
During hymns, I can't account
for how everyone learned to read
music so well, while I mumble
silence in time with their notes,
hope no one notices.

Then I check our progress
in the program and look
back down at my watch.
The sermon washes over me.
I hope that through the routine
of attendance and reverence, one day
I will want to be here.
There has to be someone
who can tell the difference.

My cat licks plastic grocery bags

that once carried bread or books or bottles of juice.
One of her favorite things to do, so I tried too, got down

on all fours and made quick tongue-strokes
up the side of the thin sheet. Still, I didn't purr her way.

My back stayed unarched, and I have no tail to stretch.
I tried the same on the spout beside the house that rolls the rainwater

to the ground. It's one of her favorite games:
to steal the dew from evaporation. After an hour's effort,

I gave up with a parched throat and a jaw sore from holding open.
The day I put my tongue to a neighbor's screen door

like I'd seen, I got dropped with a codger-thrown boot.
I make a bad cat, but I want to wear her habits.

She's heard me read Keats, sat at my feet through more
of my broken poems than any person should,

but her death will be small. I'll give her away when I leave town,
convince myself she was only the stray my old roommate

adopted and left behind. I'll never visit her grave, not even know
the hole, but it's strange to think of her as gone.

I have been told more than twice that even reading at a housecat
appears more sane than talking to yourself.

Do Not Try This at Home

Piledrivers, moonsaults, the Indian death lock, flying clotheslines, inverted atomic drops, and the shooting star press. The cobra clutch, figure-four leglock, powerbomb. Irish whips, monkey flips, snapmares, stunners. Neckbreakers. Sound nasty? They are. Impossible? For us, but

cross the ocean to Tokyo or take a train to Mexico, in Moscow and Manhattan the millions
(*and millions*) ache, waiting for a decision: pinfall or submission or a screw-job played right. Show us a codebreaker, a lion tamer, a backstabber, the mandible claw, a human suplex machine, and a pumphandle slam. Get the tables and chairshots, the wristlocks and chest chops,

but only if you *know* you're Stone Cold or an Apex Predator. You'd better be a Cerebral Assassin, or the Ultimate Opportunist, The People's Champion, or The American Dream, 'cause it takes a Dragon to stagger to standing after a DDT, and repay it with a slam. If you aren't *the best there is, the best there was, and the best there ever will be*, take off your mask

and tights, and go home. I wouldn't even think about it: that floating moment above your foe—sandwiched between canvas and spotlight—you are not of them. And not because your biceps are not twenty-two inch pythons. Not because you have never been called The Personification of Domination.

You are simply not tough enough. Take one back drop to find out. Now think thirty. I learned last winter, dropped a high elbow to the gut of my cousin after he slipped in the ice outside a bar. For weeks my mistake mocked each movement.

In the ring, even the victor suffers, and to be Great, you'd better sell every bump. Every spot. Prove tonight's rival can test your limits. How much desire would you need to flip fifteen feet off a ladder onto a flimsy table? How do you feel about thumb tacks? about blading your forehead to let the juice flow into a crimson mask? How 'bout sandpaper?

What would you say into a microphone to make it a pipe bomb? If you broke your back in a non-title match, would you try to return? Would the rules matter then or would you be ready to cheat to win, live for the fireworks and the fans? Too many have died in pursuit—their goal so much bigger than a distracted ref. It matters

more than an illegal hold
or a handful of tights or a manager's hand slithered below the ropes. Underhanded? Yes,
but upfront.

You've been warned. And I know why crowds chant "Foley is God," because I bow
down to the Hardcore Legend
who earned every chance. For years, he jerked the curtain and saw ceiling in bingo halls
and high schools,
did the J-O-B in front of turnouts so small they make bomb scares look busy, and he went
to the hospital
the way some people hit the bar after work, except he didn't get a cold beer.
He got stitches, over three hundred if we're counting, and we are, because he was not
unbreakable,

except his will. His ear ripped off, second degree burns in a C-4 match, his four front
teeth knocked out, six broken ribs, a torn ACL, a torn abdominal, a broken jaw, two
broken noses, a dislocated shoulder, a separated shoulder,
a fractured shoulder, a broken wrist, bone chips in his elbow, eight (documented)
concussions, and thousands of thumb tacks driven into his skin
couldn't make him quit before becoming Cactus Jack, Dude Love, and Mankind. And the
World Heavyweight Champion. *Bang Bang!*
Call that "fake." I dare you. I want to be called Phenom or Showstopper. Call me The
Heartbreak Kid,

Mr. Perfect, The Nature Boy. I want a ticket to take my act from Manchester to Panama.
I want to hear the crowd pop when I rip off my shirt. *Wooooo!*
would already be in the dictionary if they knew how many *O*s it took.
I wanna be *styin' and profilin'* 'til the day I die,
wanna be a Rated-R Superstar, show y'all what R-A-S-S-L-I-N is all about.

I want to be a *kiss-stealing, wheeling, dealing, limousine-riding, jet-flying son-of-a-gun*
on the road three hundred days each year.
I want to be a Road Warrior. I want to hoist the gold, because *to be the man, you've got*
to beat
the man. I want to be *the best in the world at what I do*.
Give me a signature move, a finisher to make my problems *Go To Sleep*,
so I can pin the world down for a One—Two—Three.

III.

Stalin, 1937

—*A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.*

Even in translation, his grammar is cruel, uses
a semi-colon to deny tragedy a full breath, but to him,
this is polite. A tragedy would be his own
death, in the papers, tearful riots at the memorial, but Joe
doesn't want to make this about himself;
it's not about his end. The subject is you.
You wrote the play, handled the pamphlet,
drew the cartoon... doesn't really matter who
snitched. The investigation is over. There will be no parade
for you, though gathered with your comrade
criminals, there would more than enough marchers.
Watch his good hand, free from trembling
as he pulls it from his coat to give you
his version of a spanking. Freed, the hand expands
into a granite cliff, and though you know
it's still growing, the distance to the top
starts to look the same—fifty feet,
fifty meters, fifty miles, just goddamned far.
Joe wants you to know you're a speck among dirt
so start thinking small. Think leaf of an oak
felled in summer. Think krill filtered through the mouth
of a whale. Think grain of salt dissolving
in the first-course soup of the King's feast.

The Nature of Pluto

I don't want to speak with the folks
who make facts, the men who nail
this universe down. I need my own
theories now that this rock has been
unlabeled "planet." Growing up,
I always suspected
it was something other, taking turns
with Neptune as the edge
of the Sun's kingdom, and now
if I wanted, I could smirk at being right
all along, but this affirmed feeling
just brings more uncertainty
that yanks me off our world. When a name
was given, the giver had the dead in mind.
There's a sister named Eris, discord, but what else
could we have wanted from it? Ice and rock
are stable, more than the raging, ranging
storms of Jupiter, cyclones and anti-
cyclones swirling at the surface
of that hazy, chemical sphere.
Was it a size issue? Does this hurtling rock
have a different purpose?
Perhaps Pluto's a cruise ship where tourists
snap pictures from the perimeter
of our solar system, maybe an outpost
(the remotest) is there with a telescope,
possibly an arctic frontier. Maybe a workshop
for a galactic toymaker, a hideout
deep underground, or jewel-rich caves.
It could be there's the threat of nothing,
empty inside and out. No being to ever touch it,
no reason to look any closer
or say another word. Pluto,
I'm trying to ignore the likelihood
that you can't confirm any belief,
that you're a cold anarchy, a kin of death.

Dear Bruno,

Leaving work I saw a note
tucked beneath the brake cables of a bicycle
chained outside the building.
I immediately wanted, then needed
to read it, remembering the dozen-or-so
notes and ballpoint drawings
ranging from friends to dolphins
that I would find after class
taped to the handlebars
of my own bike.

I fiddled with my phone
looking busy
until the traffic light changed
and nobody on foot was around
to chastise my theft.
I planned to replace it, unharmed.

Instead, I folded the page three times
as it had been before.
Then I ripped it up
and stuffed the shreds
deep in my back pocket.
The scribble said this:
*Thanks for almost
hitting me with your
bike asshole. Be a
little more careful*

She Told Me She Would Cry for No Reason

as if she thought each tear was an immigrant with no homeland, no cause.
Instead, I want her to blame her phone—voiceless for two weeks,
maybe tell me about an eyeless statue, its face rain-erased,
or teach me that in every flash flood the blind worms drown first.
She could say it's rush-hour clamor riding the walls or midnight silence,
let me know about teen shoplifters leaving with candy-stuffed pockets
or with hands cuffed. Do traffic lights splash red accusations
into her bedroom? I'd listen if her oldest cat died—now
the other twelve won't eat. Say the bacon has green fringe
and the milk has soured. She could share a dream where she was a dog
abandoned in the woods, show me the shipped gift the mail returned,
or share how the park of her first kiss is now a gas station.
Let me see her flood-warped cello—untunable forever.
I'd accept words describing the sun as a Crete-sized island, all grass
as gray, a depiction of tomorrow as an empty vase on a fence.

Prepare for Impact

Trapped in a stuttering
caravan headed toward
the gearing-up lane of
the highway, we drivers
lift our right feet slightly
from the brake pedals, just
to drift inches. Some cars
peel away from the calm,
take the outlets into
the city I'm trying
to leave for the weekend.

In the blue, morning light
before the sun's edge crowns
the horizon, I spot an overpass
before the juncture of lanes. Trapped between
concrete barriers, I speed up. Two men amble atop
the overpass ahead. Watching their outlines, I can tell
one carries a bag of oranges, the other has a watermelon
hanging beneath one arm. I'm getting closer now, and I see the fat bag
flip over the lead man's shoulder, slapping the melon-man on the cheek. Melon-man
responds
with a kick to his partner's pants. They stop, set their fruit on the narrow wall, begin to
point
and argue. It's the perfect, awful space of time before we align—my car, the overpass,
and the men—
when the melon, green sun on my horizon, rolls off the thin ledge, its swollen ripeness
unavoidable.

Smoke Summer

The smoke isn't rising discreetly
behind houses. It has wafted across counties
from the forests where fires have fed
for months like packs of wild pigs.

The aroma is wrong for summer,
not tangy cut grass, chlorine in wet hair,
or one of the pastel odors from the creams
and oils to ward off bugs or the sun.

All summer, train station monitors
report the weather as *smoky*. In cars, I battle
urges to look under the hood when I can't trace
the acrid steam scattering the headlights.

News anchors warn to stay indoors and show
aerial pictures of our gray city, the smoldering forest
knotted like a close-up of a weathered, wire
brush matted with brown and black hair.

My friend from Montana, here to help
fight the burn, describes the remnants
as *naked* then tells me the blaze will soon
swallow a cache of old tires.

With his overtime and hazard pay,
he'll ski all winter, repaid for months in a tent.
His favorite part of each day in the black fog
is arriving back at camp and lighting his first cigarette.

Concealed Carry Poem

I.

As a kid, all that mattered was
Concentrate, take your time and squeeze
to make cans jump and grunt for an instant.
My father's hands overlapped mine to brace the recoil,
and we wore earplugs and glasses to insulate us.

Today it's *Shoot first, we'll deal with the consequences.*
My back is a warm holster for the first secret I don't want
to expose, and Dad and his advice are miles from my side.
I wonder how loud an unmuffled blast sounds.

When I walk into work to pick up the food I drive
to the gaps of Atlanta night, proper posture keeps my shirt
hanging, hiding the 9mm outline. The less
people know, the easier I think this will be.

2AM Thursday, I dial the number on the receipt
as I approach an apartment. A canopy of trees suspends
the lamplight, so I just stop somewhere, guess at the address.
No answer. The wrong number must be a mistake.

I walk a few buildings uphill and *Knock.*
No one. *Knock.* Nobody. *Knock.* Nothing.
My mind grumbles about my missed tip and wasted trip,
as I walk back, fiddle with my phone to cancel the order.

Two teens loiter near my ride, but so what?
As I approach, I hear *Back up!* and one swings a tree limb.
It slaps away my raised forearm, snags my face. The phone clatters
across the pavement, bursting on the blacktop as I slip out two shots
that splash through the cola-colored night.

The talker drops, struggles to a hunch, and limps into the darkness.
I howl tough talk into the dark, my gun jammed open
after I limp-wristed the second shot. Who knows
where the other guy ran? He never said a word.

II.

Back at the Buddha I can call the police. The clerk cancels
the last of our orders. We lock up. In my head,
the adrenaline ebbs and I touch my knit cap,
feel a wet spot bleeding into the gray wool.

A half-dozen officers arrive lighthearted, radios blazing
with updates. They snicker when the branch gets bagged for evidence.
Someone's partner relays news of an arrest in a hospital.
A tall blue-suit tells me I should have aimed higher,
right for the heart as if I didn't know where center-of-mass sits.

They pull the pistol from my glove box, take it
in case this case includes death. I say I'm fine,
get home by 4, and fall asleep thinking
of tomorrow. The silent guy is somewhere.
My piece is locked-up at West City Hall.

The next night at work, the owner pulls me aside,
tells me to give them the money next time, not to fight,
but they never asked me for anything.
Untranslated heat rises from the chatter of the chefs,
their words spin like their knives.

A Malaysian man points at my fedora,
chops out a nickname: *James Bond*. Another
hands me a plate of braised duck and a fork. A third,
the oldest, wrestles enough English to tell the story
of an armed man my age stuffing him into a freezer.

III.

When I leave beneath the neon *Open* with bags
of Lo Mein and dumplings, I hear a customer
ask, *Is that him?* I think *Shit*, and question my job security—
this is not good publicity for the restaurant.

The story becomes an ice-breaker for strangers
in on the true rumor, neighbors whose eyes flicker in frames-per-second
as they snort and chuckle, shake me down for details.
Some confess vigilante fantasies with an *awe shucks*
grin and downcast eyes that won't meet mine.

Unknown numbers light my new phone's face.
I try to dust a name out of a voice, then tell them

I dropped their address with my old phone. I know
how this will go. *What happened?*

Well...

My story's an overripe fruit coveted until tasted.
My head's a crystal ball that broadcasts one rerun,
until, like everything else, it becomes just something
that happened. Friends who shoot make sure to ask

Are you packing?—a half-joke, because I know they are,
and they're proud I was. Most days, I'm not.
Still, as to not forget, I've never bought replacement rounds.
Instead of ten shots, I load eight in the magazine,
then cycle one into the chamber.

Home Invasion

I ignored the rustling for weeks,
forged a silent truce
between myself and the wildlife
in this urban environment, until (just once)
at 4AM, I woke to a wail that shook
the air ducts, as if a squealing
something had been set ablaze,
revealing the truth:

something was scraping out streets
for a city in my ceiling,
and it was time to end that industry.

In the daylight I met my culprit,
a raccoon awake far past its dawn bedtime.
He sprawled-out, sluggish, fat
on the peanut butter bait and bits of plastic
bowl shredded and left amidst
the detritus of dirt, leaves and straw.
His gray, filmy eyes revealed
age, his dim vision.
He barely shifted, except for his hands
darting, grasping, through the bars.

When he first grabbed my pant leg,
straining to reach with his five-fingered paw,
I thought he wanted to fight.
Grabbed again, I saw a placid stare
and thought he wanted to be friends.
The third time, I knew he wanted
to know what I was, his
whisker-tipped fingers providing sight.

I took my captive to a stream at the edge
of a golf course. There, he leapt
off the embankment, spread his legs
to stretch his skin into a sail, then glided
before crashing to the shallow creek
and paddling across. Freed,
he mounted a tree and turned to face
my side of the riverbank
as if trying to look back.

The Kiss

Broken free from friends walking
home from a show, we never planned
to be alone, but as I lay on the sidewalk,
eyes shut drunk, babbling
to her or the stars, she leaned in
and kissed me. I rolled aside
with no apology, no excuse.

So now, the natural questions:
Was she ugly? Not at all.
Was there another girl? No,
and this wouldn't even be a story
if our sexes were reversed,
if I was a girl caught off guard, she a boy
too forward and casually rebuked.

Truth was, without a plan,
even for my next meal, I feared
any surprise bigger than a smile
might de-rail me. But from what? Had I
thought a prophet might arrive
with a map of a distant land,
a sword and shield to fill my hands?

We never discussed that rebuff,
and I pretended it never happened
during the months we came together,
and long kisses erupted behind
apartment doors or at parties
where we knew no one but each other.

I'm sure she remembered the first,
and while never saying so,
it must have made leaving
(despite my tattered protests) easier.
Once upon a time, she was the one
who hadn't complained, and I was the one
who, wordless, said *No* first.

We Drive into the Fire

—After Rodney Jones

We rush through red-sand valleys, our eyes fixed
on the horizon, and crowds of mountains merge
in the distance behind us. Kim and Jeff swap shifts at the wheel
of the truck, sending us into the forest the way we left.

Still three hours out, we see smoke, but *It can't
be the same fire as before*, according to Jeff, *too far*;
those would be 200-foot flames, he argues
as Kim notes the direction is uncanny.

I'm no expert, so I stay silent in the backseat
and amble backwards through last-week's memory—watch
the fire retreat to one side of the tree-lined highway as the roadblocks
get dragged and re-stacked on the trucks of the extra firemen

who uproot their tents from our campground, un-unpack
as their numbers shrink to the local three dozen in charge
of the first thousand acres aflame where the blaze licks its lips
full of split branches, picks its teeth on decades of deadfall.

The action continues to rewind, and the wind collapses the burn
onto a single stand of aspen, then disappears as the white limbs
reform top-down, flames descending the trunk
like tired climbers as my radio announces the first

fire warning, too distant to be dangerous. And the sky sucks
its stalks of lightning back into the thunderheads which retreat
toward California. Then, interrupting my odyssey
toward the unborn, Kim spots our destination in the distance.

The plateau glows, reflecting the inferno. It's bigger
than Jeff's conjecture. We turn onto the last dirt road home
and begin our ascent toward the fiery clouds to see what remains,
if our fire-chaser friends have kept the flames off the camp.

IV.

Your Name Here

On the southbound train I scan for names
and spot one red word—*PERVE*—on a gray embankment.

Its edges bulge, voluptuous and bold, holding the scribbled fill
like orange intestines. Up ahead I see a bridge,

prime spot to tag, but instead two white blotches
smother unreadable lines. The broad strokes of this cold buff

tell me it's a vigilante with a paint roller, a pissed-off amateur
trying to bandage the city. For him, it's more about erasing

than cleaning—hide graffiti with a bigger paint spot,
almost the base coat—but to my eye it looks like a tattoo

removed with a hot iron, as if he's trading-in a message
for a larger scar. He thinks his disdain is righteous,

and his battle colors are ash, charcoal, and slate.
He can try to amend what his shadow-hugging doubles

embrace, but he'll never be free from *KNIFE* and *VOMET*
on girders above the overpass, *ARSN* and *RIOT*

in-and-on empty buildings. In Cabbagetown and Bankhead,
residents yield to the spray, understand a finished piece

can be beautiful and always looks better than a throw-up
done in a lamplight rush. The painters have picked the landscape

as their anthology, The New and Rejected Works
of non-profit vandals. They dream of being All-City,

making the autograph art, anonymous celebrity. The opposition
idolizes emptiness. These bombers will climb under trains

if it keeps the work alive in a gallery making a tour through a city
near you. *AUZIE* keeps a stainer-pen in his pocket for the road signs,

the bathroom stalls. I look up and watch *ENZO*
advertise on a blank billboard, and who is hurt? With one word

in their minds, rebels climb to the concrete heavens to whisper a landmark
beyond the censor's reach in a war that won't be won on the ground.

The Lone Earthquake Speaks

I'm flattered you think I'm plural—
 assume my work is too big for one—
 but after millennia I want credit
for humbling
 cities and towns the same, for how I gift
 islands back to the ocean bottom.
It's my fault, really. I've poked
 only my fingertips through the fissures
of this planet's crusty walls, barely
swatting, thinking you don't eat much.
 This game is finished. Tomorrow
 I'll show my head, blow
 all your homes down with a whistle.

A Puddle of a Garden

A man had read many books with “Secret” in the title.
One of the books promised many answers,
gave him his mantra: *Whatever I give attention will grow.*
Now he keeps the soil fat by tipping his green pail
in the mornings and when he returns from work.
He makes it rain because water *is* life—evolutionary hometown
for the species, his pool before birth, 70% of his body.
It’s a solvent to dilute and erase his muddy mistakes.
He splashes the leaves, often as snack between meals,
delights in the sight of green droplets and how the topsoil
heaves and sinks like breathing when the ground sucks
the water down. He never lets the ground crack
near his plants—he is god of monsoons,
but not the god of rot. When the stalks drop,
he wonders how something he loved
so much couldn’t put up with a little extra wetness.
What were the death cries? How could *he*
see through to the roots? One of the bestsellers
cited Buddha and Emerson, Einstein and Edison.
It said he could be like them if he knew
what he wanted, saw it come to him, so vivid
forecasts of fat flowers and jungle-sized fruit
should have been enough. He’s not sure how gurus move
history. He wants shrubs to learn to breathe
better underwater.

Mythical Themes Revisited

We poets agree
the movie industry's gone soft
after we watch a trailer for The Birds
Vs. Alien Vs. Predator. They're ruining
the Classics with remakes and sequels.

*No original work anymore.
Where are the writers?*

We should read poems instead.
Just today, I read a new one about Orpheus.
The author added a clever bit
from the horse's point-of-view—something
the myth-makers missed.

Chemistry

I dislike Cold.
I'll never be Cool.
My best self must be Hot.

How can I achieve this state?

I will use the ideal gas laws.
I should explain my thoughts at this point
—Far past death, men exist like a vapor.

I am a container of uniform size.
To observe a positive change in temperature,
The simple solution is to increase the pressure.

As long as the container holds together, I'll be Great.

Pay for the Placebo

He only watches old shows,
re-runs from when hosts
gave warnings before
any impending ads.

*We'll be right back
after a brief word
from our sponsors.*

The programs are grayscale.
The commercials are louder
and Technicolor. The hawked
products' promise of a swelling sense
of confidence and a cash-back guarantee
takes the spotlight from the side-effects.

*Side-effects can include fatigue,
headache, insomnia, dizziness, acne,
etcetera ad nauseum...*

He has been feeling listless,
distracted. He knows about that 2:30
feeling. His testosterone
has been dropping with age,
but that can all be fixed
since he has no plans
for athletic competition.

*Clinical studies show
a sixty-five percent success rate
compared to forty percent
with a placebo.*

He dials the number. Is the cure
in his head or in the drug?
Either way the odds are high
and the downside seems low.
If he fools himself to wellness,
does it matter? A false positive
is still a positive result.

Upon Hearing Rumors of Elvis's Racism

1

Dish soap
on the handle
of your blue Graceland mug
gave me an excuse for breaking
the King.

2

Found out
those rumors were
untrue. Guess I owe you
two tickets to Graceland, Darlin'.
Let's go.

Elegy That Should've Been an Ode

I'm sorry I showed up late.
The traffic in my heart fused
into gridlock, not quite an attack—
more like some neurotoxin
of nervousness strapping my muscles
onto the stretcher of my bones.
Not that it mattered. I should've
shaken myself loose, dragged
myself to her door.

Should've spoken while she
was alive to hear it, but halfway there,
I noticed I'd forgotten my tongue
at my desk, turned back.
When I arrived, the house was vacant,
so I tried reciting to the rats and roaches.
No good. I deflate my words,
pack them away like a Thanksgiving's Day
Parade balloon in December.

How can my thoughts matter now
that she'll never be in the audience?
I'm a jobless actor breaking
into the theater to sit
center stage in the dark.

Lighthouse Portrait

The sea grasps the sides of the tower, splattered
fingers stroking each joint, the swollen doorframe.
Blind wind slaps surf into the gaps, wanting entry,
wanting anyone inside to feel squalls pushing
through the stairwell. Water is a confused accomplice.
As the house splits, drafts fill the slits
and each day the furnace needs more wood.

An old man with a recent limp arrives
to tend the beacon. He spackles walls slowly
in the constant rain, feeds the heat
of the furnace with a rusty shovel: a race
against weather's breaking. He adjusts
to his hobble, climbs a long ladder to lock
each window shut with caulk.
His home's heat steadies. He finds
a green and orange bird he keeps
uncaged. It follows him and sings.

Box Wrapped in a Map

It arrives in the mail with highways snaked
red and blue across the thick paper folds,
addressed to me, but from an unrecognized source.
I pry the edges with a dull knife,
toss away scraps of Philadelphia, Savannah,
Charleston, and Quebec, rip the mountains apart.
Deeper I find Phoenix, Pike's Peak.
My fingers brush symbols of bustle
as I tear the streets and city grids away,
struggle with the tough, striated tape.
Layer after layer yields, and some serum wakes
my blood as I near the cardboard heart.
I forget old news about deathtraps
in packages or poisons lining envelopes. I don't know
where I'm headed, but it looks like a ticket.
I'm ready. Take me away.

Hasta Siempre

English and I are best pals.
He often completes my sentences
before I know what I think,
but hearing this Spanish phrase sail
through the cacophony of sidewalk
vendors on a summer afternoon makes me feel more
Cuban, shakes a drowsy lineage inside
me buried under a blanket of hamburgers
and twenty-four-hour cable that sometimes runs
out of programs but never out of things to sell.

Hasta siempre: until always, reads as a better
expression of forever. Forever feels distant
the way space stretches endless
and sparse with stars that dwarf my rambling
experience with their combustion of basic elements.
Stars remind me that this planet's tethered
to a ball of burning gas not too hot or cold,
not too close or far—the galactic devouring of luck
at Earth's inception. For the stars, forever
lasts until a time beyond us, but not
eternally as they burn out and implode.

Hasta siempre is my desire, prayer
condensed to two words. The phrase opens with the *Ahs*
of epiphany, tells me *sí*, yes, to begin the next word,
and whole, it says: Please make this moment
linger, not until some gassy giant blows
its engine. Instead, infuse this feeling in the world—
oil soaked into the dark fabric of the universe
leaving a supernova-hued stain. I offer it up,
a summons: *Hasta Siempre, Amen.*