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ROUGH RECKONING

by

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Committee Chair

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To the geeks

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by TIMOTHY LUKE HUFFMAN 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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GESTALT

What fits inside
the fits under the dead
sheets Time's tiny thousand

mouths tickle drawing blood
until they don't In between
the sensuous discomfort difficult

to discern the scene is ambiguous
The sheets the curtains the relative frame

From one angle
a man lies with laughter
shaking

From another
pinned to the wall
in epileptic spasm

You must choose
the fateful view
the eye's consequence

where to stop how far
is too far what does dominance
look like posturally who is above You

know what I mean

the shaking dog the migrant
on the road the woman in your bed
the face behind your balled hand
your face your smoking face
apologizing like a play

Take the house
here as example

DAISY IN THE DELL

Darling shameful

What's to say Six drinks in on a Monday night
Echo echo You still won't go

I try to rough you up but I don't have the heart
and you mistake it for love and I do too

Look there now
you on my desk you in my closet

The game the game
you all about in-a-pro-pri-ate-ly *about*

I want to sleep I want to open
the cupboard and not find you

there there there
There's no prize left in me

Of course I love you your memory
would not tend to your tension

buzzing in the library or your exacting
laughter begging for play but

you've got to call off the circus of me
shrieking down the street

losing it at the bank Messy memory
don't be so bad Just wait one minute

This week every day some embarrassment
Last week a tricky quiet near hope

There's no fooling
you padding at the door
you cat come to lick the bowl

RESIDUE

The clearest figure remains
the backseat ride to the airport
windows down blowing in
5AM cobalt blue

Then the approaching light
of the city humming with its buried
polyphonic wail robotic too close

In the long orange tunnel
too homogenous to keep the eye
from hazing over arise
the repressed shapes

motion of thighs caught
pressed into the carpet

ceramic shards
collected on the table

the black rectangle
of our door shrinking

YOURS THEN DEATH'S

When the shock like cubed ice

slides over each bump of bone

down the spine's ladder and the floor

in a hurry upon you all heavy

and the uniformed man rampages on

WUR PAH kakaka GaLEE

just say *Yes*

officer I understand what

you are saying and let

the terrible light spill in

DOMESTIC

For Mr. Death reclining
the cast and crew
lit in electric blue
put on their slow show

on the scene of where
gravity pulled you
lickety split apart
and I last week

beneath the couch
found a photo of you
covered in dust and
something tacky

SOLIDARITY

Vacant flailing near dawn waving away
the venom in the air in the wires I'm afraid
of everyone and I'm sorry I want

to snap the sorrow over my knee
reduce it to kindling for the stove forge
orange jewels from it to hold in my throat

and lose in incremental payments
for the transactions of day *Here have a little
of me I can afford it* All the light a waiting game

but the gentle membrane of night says
*It's okay you can cry now you can do it you can
make your hysterical motions in the dark I'll cover you*

HOLD

that line in your body
what the doctor said about
the simple persistent fact
of loneliness so long now

it must be part of you no I
mean you it is you replicating
yourself your codebook
making you over and over

with you all morning sponging
the dishes with comical care
as the porcelain chips to bits
as the scalding torrent aerates

down and right on past
On my desk is a pile of matches
by a candle now just a thin glaze
of red on blackened glass

The tin butt of wick rattles
despondent in the bottom of the jar
where it just won't light Look I
try again again again

but the whither of light stutters out
with me standing in the black house
with the pulverized phosphorus and my face
threaded over with smoke

TO STAY EARNEST

The universe gestures irrationally
sometimes convincingly with caricatures
who inhabit collapse

anxiety righteous failure
additional absurd themes
For example the Conquering Mime

despite his hateful play at least implies
a certain fidelity with his quest
My soul do not aspire

There is but one truly
serious philosophical problem
the distress of nudity Reply

is humiliation but my God
there is still a progress to be made

TEMPER

I hoped to receive your contact like gifts
little parcels of meaning passed between us

with each meeting not just parochial love
lashed out in dead rings

You said
Labor omnia vincit
I do this because I love you

Slowly I am learning
The fire softens the hammer
shapes the anvil supports

There is a vision of me
I have not yet become

In your tongs I lie
in wait to be regular

I study the rhythmic sound
of my production out of ore

BELLS WHICH WILL NOT RING

I might have learned to hear in any stray rotting log
what rot has reached the very root of us

this infinity forced down the gullet
this string of bees that once turned

honey into sun do not answer
One by one they open in my head

There is I know a science
of separation an infinite inch between

that sweetness and your hand
and then again all of space

crushed suddenly to one dark tick
In night's disheveled elegies

stifled laments A trapped wasp
crazes in your brain that it may lie

rough and real against your collarbone
Soft atrocity sweet fright

Even the chandelier shakes
I watch my telephone with a watched eye

like a bee completed dying hiveless
You with square windows holding

onto some airless annihilating height
Eat your god child and love it Redeem

the clockwork oxen jaws the tense
anticipation eating money by the old river

for the country that comes when
I close my eyes The world wears

its nerves in screams of children
playing at wars playing

your sad your same your only air
and the splendid official all otherness

and air sighs like a vent in the earth
and breaks like a black wave above my bed

LOST AND FOUND

Rising from a sewer grate
your prayer like vapor
among the thunder

Then muddy-pawed head
swiveling just as a satellite dish
seeks signal the family dog

caught the disturbance
in the ether an electrical
ping or error and froze

there over the grate
seized in an odd shape
conspicuously still

empty-eyed all body
soundless screaming
a beacon above you

FITS IN REFRAIN

That old time religion
feels sure in the hand
in the broiling breathy room
accumulating its due of

silence and shouting
smiling and shrieking
in roughly even measure
sweetness meeting

the terrifying light
the neighbor's hands
upon you warning
any alien sadness

taken up inside
you so vulnerable
you a residence
held up by hands

Thy rod and Thy staff
thrust like electric prod
into the dark buckling
your knees raising the house

of you lovingly from that
pine-knotted floor saying
Didn't you feel it son
the Lord's hand

in this house in your house

ANNA LEE DIFFUSE

She stayed alone at Usher's Well
and stirred into her tea
the children's willow faces late
a memory now only a cloud

of cream that swirls among the dark
At once all three were lost
by fire's curled smoke which snaked
around their gentle throats

as fields away in ecstasy
she missed their cries between
the braying of the ox and the
the baying man beneath

GYPSY MOTH

The ear clay fresh and cool
pressed into my fingers darling you

In the meadow your pallor
your algor rigor *Yes* I speak

delicate spoonwood flower words
Hallelujah Your breast refreshed

gives way Your ugly in the kitchen light
is over beyond sight as you are

again beautiful and hush
One night I heard you whisper

that old song into the hog
Oh I wish I were a single girl again

Then I knew I'd have to lay
you under the towering pine

comely as Jerusalem
sweet as a honeycomb

PAINTED ROCKS

An even shake of corn over
the tracks what slipped from
cracks lures winter-hungry deer
and in the night the train

lays them down makes
a procession of offerings
then only tufts of hair
wafting in the current

Half a mile from home
this fetid altar
among the wood
grown over old Terminus

wreathed in warm December fog
stern-browed with its grim black pines

COIL ENDS

Like a refrain curled against
wet March air and a fallen red oak
the copperhead and I exchange
appraisals and crude gestures

slow wobbling pink fork
thin dirty finger extended
in general return
Fuck you *Fuck off* *Hello* *Hello*

The dead pillar splits us but
we are tied by a common tongue
meeting pharynx drawn
upward to truce among these scenes

of violent eating these oily black wads
scattered over the snow's remains

TOURBILLON

March's veil of vapor
billows loosely over

Earth as it opens itself
risking cold for sunlight

What is spring
but a softening

Or more simply accumulation
For instance this breeze

grows soft and heavy
tousling so many maples and scratching

through last year's accumulation
teams of sparrows

remorselessly rummage Earth's
carefully-laid sentiments

BOUNTY

In August I pray for February's belligerent hand

*Knock away the late equatorial crown Grip
the sky with frozen fingers of Heaven Let reign
Winter's soft silvered light*

I take my joy in mean wet night cheer

the Sun's seasonal death its weakening
a bath of victory scream *Down*
you bull you bloody rage you fatherly gore

SPRING SPAWN

When the alewives spun their mass
to a rushing sloshing funnel

folded flecks of dusk light
in the dim green river

from the dock's edge I looked down
into the cyclone of flesh as it jostled

In that centrifuge whirling
with centripetal communion I saw

desperate weird love
pathetic frail unstoppable

UNISON

We imagine one mouth and one ear floating on opposite ends
of outer space and the mouth shouting through an open window between worlds
The scientists are puzzled Relations bend limits make light dizzy with spooky
speed but distance has no bearing has no word in entanglement's tongue
The error is how we perceive two where there is only one Not a feeling or a motion
sent one to the other no one sound caught in both ears But even this leaves
two ears joined by a wire of nerve and neuron running ear to ear It's difficult
but listen sometimes it is in fact the same one moving in both places Across
so much space I imagine this hand on this face and you and I split the feeling

LINE BROKEN

Did the wind once pass us
an intimate joke when we pressed
ears to the stone still strained

varnished with sweat asymmetrical
one eye shut mouth agape as
the face's throng of slight muscles

palpitated skin a-flutter seized
in the electric search for pattern
a sequence a rhythm coded

among the undulating
melodies whistling
Was it always between us

this grinding disfluency
of failed starts sputtered
umm uhhh eehhh ahh

or in other words
an Other's garble a knot
tied too loosely to hold

an awkward exchange
between foreigners cocked
heads blank bewildered smiles

hands shoved into pockets
shoulders rising tectonically
to the ears like mountains

LJUBLJANA

In September steam hunched and silent
we ate plain horse sandwiches

In a year I will wrap your expressions
in the crazed orange street light and believe

there was chewing gum on both ends
of the bench remember it was

a German dragon crossing a Slavic
bridge *No* you said A German river

through a Slovene town *No* A Lutheran
marsh of a fecund people *No* you explained

*To the west and the south is a sea
which makes love to the whole world*

I am that sea but the world is not you

INTRAMURAL

The platted ceiling washed with light droops
toward me in what I interpret
as intimate gesture Meanwhile

the clock there on the mantle walnut and steel
proceeds un-methodically as I running
too fast then slow The key I stuff into its face

each morning or afternoon or evening
makes a sound that turns my stomach but
Care takes guts I say with each small revolution

By the window the fern lounges as a jaguar
might in the trees serene but sinister
motionless but an implied tension

anticipation's quiver electrifies the pose -
The society inside the human mind
abuzz industrious arranging exchanges

I find quite enough
Walking the peopled literal streets
is both dull and terrifying

I prefer to pile spent matches on
the little table beside me for company
and name them each by each

SPIGGATE STUCK

I wake you asking *Who is open who
can share how does one stay open*

I want to see emotions as little
charms in your hands a glass record
these feelings as objects wonder

What would mine look like what color
would they be with what texture would they rub
against the skin how could they fit in one pocket

Once it was simple one feeling at a time Now
I don't know Should I throw oil on one
of these movements I'd just like to know where

to put this black potion lake what shelf
by which books Where can I pay respect sing
out a hole with a big enough need I carry it

around on a precious silver tray sloshing
up and down the stairs the living room
the den slip some into the tub but the drain

won't swallow Crawling the carpet spot
to spot dabbing the mess still more spills
till the black waves break over the window

over my bed At night its black sounds
rise with cicada trill frog song
loon crooning on

blister of infernal harmony

YIELD

The wall of bitter sound
stuns me I can't hear
over the din

can't comprehend
the numerical tongue of
Economy swallowing

can't refrain
from the transfer of
the whip's snap down the line

The table spread over
with the *Times* I can manage
only a despairing echolalia

I know I don't need to read you
examples everyone feels
the approaching valley stagnant

breath in the cinder
block bones wonders
what will come for us

ST. JOHN'S POND

Stumbling out of night into me
a racoon wracking clutched
its throat its paw foaming over

the sound it made
at the marsh's edge
wet bellow rasp

flunking as it pushed
against or through
what wall awaits

OBLIVION RAG

We cockroaches survive
among apocalypse just fine

we wash ourselves clean
in fallout's sublime holy light

there is no world
we cannot make ours

this organism Earth will not shake
us till we play it out

the end of the world
will make perfect pink hues

oranges and blues
a dazzling backdrop

for the final routine
our tiny feet will tap out

a tune to guide you
and anyone left

to the other room

QUAVER OR CLEFT

As a gazelle reads

the homogenous flitting what's that

yellow grasses

I cannot see time

The way it moves

confuses my eye

sometimes

a slippery

surprise upon you but

sometimes the gait goes freakishly
fixed hypnotic robotic brassed
beating cadence so straight this un-
-natural creature or is it location

Behold regulating heart

sometimes it is the lion

sometimes the land

everyone else feels

a shape I suppose a contour

in the dark able to anticipate

where the banister and run

their hand along

to the door I cannot find

even locked in

time's voracious eye

the impossible house

loses me

TRANSLATE CONTACT

I wonder how to explain to my computer in words
it could understand touch

in three dimensions how the hand

meets the face not a connection like a wire no
a delightful resistance I say *Look your dance*

*is too economical Where's your counter
point counter-beat You've got to build
anticipation Syncopation
is erotic The rhythmic pocket*

*is an exciting place to groove Sure
you've got speed but the operation
you're running's stiff*

I say *Hey did you hear me
Can you decipher
these tones of mine*

COURSE

Elegy to John Easton, Sr.

Johnny Appleseed perhaps we ought
to have called you with your nine wives
up and down the East scattering

those women like dice and your daughter
my mother sometimes casts a funny
stare saying *My how you look*

just like him like you my
blue-eyed grinch thin-mouthed mould
thick-jointed fine-haired eating

with a particular possessive hunch
blood-memory of lack unshakable
apparently from our gestures and I

too crutch on charm to glide
over the rot showing through
our shirts our hair wild with running

late and drunker than we'd hoped
Yes I know the exact thirst
after the paper so much in the world

hardly enough to wash it down
I know I know I know John
but you're a father were one

I will be soon and different and will
not drown in the hospital like you
in bodily waste wrapped up

in beryl gray gown
bloating out when the works
liver kidneys pancreas collapsed

Last year I found another
of your sons who told
of one of your lost daughters

states away finding him mistaking
him for you so what will you believe
of me my son my father

rumbling in the black yonder

OUT OF ORDER

I should have been born a lizard
That body I could embody with gusto
Lovely how it accepts escape

leaves skins in leaf litter sheds limbs
still wriggling in any goshawk's mouth
and the smug expression shared between

the two confused claims to the irony
of death and gotcha and doesn't matter
I wonder whether all predations can't be such gags

rainbow handkerchiefs spilling
from knife wounds clean white rabbits
leaping from the beheaded the false head

only a hat tumbling and the man safe inside
surprised at the joke's telling unsure
if he's the teller the told or the joke itself

My point isn't a sharp one It slips
back into itself retracts with pressure but
isn't it nice to imagine the knife not committing

ODE TO THE LAWN

Our fetish is to line you
up to cut you down to pour
acid on your color

rip quirks out at the root
Once you tried to end
but we wouldn't let you we

pumped you full till
you grew agreeable Now
in mid-Spring the robins

with terrible gusto pull strands
of muscle from you and
the neighbors cheer

I can't imagine how you rise
and rise and rise without thought
with hope indestructible

FANCY

To the shimmering jangle of Lexus on townhome
in the deli aisle she turns
the hummus around checking for sodium
for non-organic peppers for earth
sweating bronchioles of brush
tickled with gnats when they bumble

low through the damp sagging green and
mosquitoes gracefully
alighting on their red clay
dime-drop pools to
make love and move on
I rubber-gloved standing behind

the sample counter I
Yes ma'am the mango lemonade is gluten free
Yes the Londoner Cheddar is very unique
4.99/lb. I dead-skunk greasy in a leaf-litter grave
wafting through the pricker vine
poplar tulip stuck to my exposed gut The land

says *Take care* says *Come home*
says *Hush* says *Did you find everything on your list*
says *Have a great afternoon*
says *Careful in that parking lot now*
says *Yes I checked the spring geese for cracks*
says *Twelve wet honks elegant south*

ADDRESS

Thin dead fingers of silver maple clutch
the remaining bone that is *fibula* that is
to say *Procyon lotor* to say you
to say *Namassingakent* say *Fairfax County*

No one here knows the names
that came before the words
for the place that lit up with an expression
of recognition I remember

back home back before
in Cocke County Tennessee
in an oak and ham smelling shop
a shrunken old local

cross-legged chain-smoking
unfiltered Camels gestured to the *baculum*
piercing his hat as he said *That there's*
a coon dick Good for all kinda

things You know old people used to use
them to pick their teeth
all the time Don't see them
around here much now

+

To know a place as real is to merge with
it as a body This machine cannot no matter
it will die all the same as its units
strain apart groan a part

in this Act's end and in time
all this wound will clot
coagulate as the center
holds onto itself a mass growing

against the bonds of *it*
Cancer like all life flourishes
inversely to its container The rules
work both ways and one

day quietly with the loblollies swishing
in the wind a survivor will again bristle
brains onto stretched flesh singing

WHISPER GALLERY

There is in the brain a boundary
We say Somewhere marking
a place where the order of arrival
equals the order of presentation
We want to believe

in a central but material Theater
where it all comes
together

But recent
experiments call
into question the idea that brain
states could directly translate into
the contents of consciousness
There is no stream

of consciousness because
there is no central
Headquarters no Theatre

where it all comes
together
The eye is not a camera
and does not see in frames
per second In other words

vision is not as simple as light
registering on a medium

GRIDLOCK

Moon after moon
ash after ash What remains
to be said what has not long

clattered about the public record
Mystery like some poor father
is exhausted and wears

a pitiful toupée
that makes one want to say
bracingly *It was a good effort*

Everything embarrassing
predictable and all this slush
of instantly expired cool drones

IDENTICAL SHAPES

How the ants unconscious triumph
over everything Loosely animated
dust more process than creature
mesh of Will or rules scattered over
the dirt eating and bearing away
the world piece by piece

How among them bureaucracy appears
a common language intuitive gestural
from their deepest gut feeling the impulse
to pulse in ordered waves through the earth
forming or unforming Yes my mammal brain

must wonder if beneath among
the subterranean order citizens
rushing over and around one
falls still struck

with fright-death
fatherly feelings or
some ant version of malaise

at the sight and sound of *it*
machination always *reduction*

while above awash

in cold blue a sparrow scans

for morsels among them

ON TENTERHOOKS

A hand axe is enough to chip
maples to a point thin enough
to push over enough to build

in wattle and daub In fistfuls
we excavate the creek's mud flanks
pile the sticky remains pummel

in a temper of ash and crumbled leaves
for strength Fingers of clay coiled
evenly make good pots particularly

if when dry a thick slick shell
or oil-smooth bone is rubbed over
concentrically to burnish before

baking In early morning's sun
the pit of pots gleam like teeth
till the burly lip of hardwood

covers the lot The mottled vessels
emerge as the fire burns itself away
and in evening's cool if it was right

a firm thwack from index and thumb
will ring it like a bell If not
a thin dry bleat then a sigh

then a clatter This investigation
this need is it the child shaking
the box or the elderly

in us double-checking the day's
expense for worth for viable fruits
not ash in the mouth asking

how will it be different

STEADY

Now a loose knot Leaning in
feels like everywhere or at least many
at once Yet this pressure
is assuring not the usual sense

of constriction or collapse I know
the distance between submission
and submission is the hair's width
between running out of air

and gifting tongues to each other
in the dark The silhouette of bent knees
is hard to decipher whether welding
or yielding if love or death above

But here our steps are stretching
long and easy over the ground
Look I'm running now
and I'm not going to stop