

PARODY, CLIFFORD, M.F.A. *Our Sad Ecstatic Mouths*. (2015)
Directed by Professor Stuart Dischell. 49 pp.

Loss is a tricky thing, but grief can be even trickier. The same can be said for finding love, whether it be familial, fraternal, or romantic, and keeping it. The poems that make up this thesis, *Our Sad Ecstatic Mouths*, deal primarily with these ever present topics: loss and the grief that arises in the aftermath, and love and how to maintain it. Principally autobiographical, much of the work revolves around my own interpersonal relationships and the death of my brother, Gordon Parody, as well as others I have loved and lost and the impact these losses have had on my life since.

Denise Levertov wrote, "Grief is a hole you walk around in the daytime and at night you fall into it," and I believe the same can be said for love. These poems are my attempt at actualizing, through poetic translation, this walking, this falling, and the choices (both good and bad) one makes when struggling to find footing in the process of being alive, the process of loving and losing. While sadness, sex and drug abuse find their place in much of this work, I believe that, overall, the ecstatic nature of a life being lived, shared, and reflected upon shines through. At the heart of every poem in this collection you will find love – a passionate fervor for the world that oftentimes, when allowed to roam un-reigned, borders on frenzy, but always, somehow, finds its way back home in the end.

OUR SAD ECSTATIC MOUTHS

by

Clifford Parody

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2015

Approved by

Committee Chair

© 2015 Clifford Parody

APPROVAL PAGE

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

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

April 7, 2015
Date of Acceptance by Committee

February 20, 2015
Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Elicit.....	1
Since You Left	2
Elegy for my father who is still alive	3
They build canoes in the basement.....	4
The Blizzard of '96.....	6
Summer in Annapolis, 1972.....	7
Four months after you gave me the goose down coat	8
Portrait	9
In a minute I will leave	11
In the end there is nothing.	12
Sometimes I see you/in the palms of my hands	13
Bad Habits Hide in Nice Neighborhoods	14
Home is Where Your Losses Are	15
We had lived 18 years invincible	16
Gainesville, Florida.....	17
Our Shoes, Our Socks, A Proclamation	18
Portrait of a Waitress at a Strip Club in Miami.....	19
I think we are about to see some things	20
Argument.....	21
We try to keep.....	22
The Prophet	23
A Love Poem	24
The night (in the hotel room).....	26
Knowledge.....	27
Heat Lightning.....	28
When we deal.....	29
Days later you were dead.....	30
Your voice didn't sound like your hair.....	31
Linoleum.....	32
Anthem for a 17-Year-Old Late Nineties Suicide.....	33
In The Jewish Section of Oak Hill Burial Park, December 2011	34
Thrust.....	35
As soon as we stop.....	36
And out of which flowed:	37
and if I die before you	38
Because I did not know what to do.....	39
*	46
Suburbia: A Litany.....	47

Elicit

I am the stretch of easement
beneath a stretcher beneath
your broken body, your weight,
and I hate that the last hand you felt
was gloved in blue latex, attached
to a man who detached himself
from the boy who lay bleeding
before him. I am the minivan
and the pilot, frame and feet,
I am the kids in the backseat,
how I scream, how I scream,
how my body tenses, my
tires screech, we meet. I am
the green light so quick
to turn yellow, I am the aluminum,
the seat, I am the pedals
beneath your feet, how we
creak turning tires that took you
and took you, I am the backpack
you threw on the floor as you walked
through the door, I am the door
and the floor, I am the school bus
that carried you home, I am the school,
I am the bell that carried you from room to room,
I am the bedroom you woke in, the bed
where you slept, I am a flash card
on the side of the road, weeks later,
stumbled upon, staggering stoned:
to draw forth – to bring out from the source–
I am picking it up, I am thinking,
and the only word I can think of is theft.

Since You Left

Is it strange that I stand before the mirror
and carefully tuck your toenail clippings
into my tear ducts? Is it strange
that it doesn't hurt? I want you to know
I am living off butter spread on the backs
of black and white photographs, frames
of family at the dinner table, our mouths
again full of song. I want you to know
they taste like sleep. I want you to know
I keep your teeth in amber on top of my tool chest,
that I once had a scab shaped like your right eye, and
before you left I took ten strands of your hair
fourteen of mine, strung them up
between the branches of a low hanging pine,
hoping one day someone would—
something else I didn't have the chance tell you —
for months I left a kink in the blinds of your bedroom
so I could sit in the driveway and pretend
you were ten, spying on me again.
I turned your voice into a box
of bent spoons and rolled up dollar bills, brother;
I searched for you in crook of my elbow,
the itch on the backs of my hands, in my hands,
and when they x-rayed my wrist
I swear I saw you in the off-grey mist.
You were stunning. How many hands
does it take to make a bird, brother? How many
blades of grass to make a boulder? And why
did they never bring your clothes back?

Elegy for my father who is still alive

And one day, Dad,
you too will duck down the alleyway,
bare feet licking puddles pooled along the bricks,
a broken leg, a pocket full of silver dollars, it's not winter,
it's you and me and I will watch the dirty trail
of your gown, no, you're naked, yes, you are back in your prime,
hair longer like mine, a curl-cropped face, curls caressing
the nape of your neck as you walk amid dumpsters,
as you walk knowing what
you're doing not knowing where
you're going not knowing what you do
and to who. I will always watch you; I will
let the sun spring off steel, sear my unshielded eyes,
I will not blink, I will breathe you in while I can, I will whisper
"Oh breath of God breathe on me" even though I don't believe. It's warm
and I will watch you; water dripping off the power lines,
water dripping down your muscled back, don't turn
around, don't turn, there will be no music only
ceaseless traffic, a series of magic tricks,
a series of tubes removed, I'm watching please
don't turn I would collapse. It is your turn to collapse,
it is okay if you collapse, even red woods collapse, and I'll
be patient, I will watch you; your calloused hand gripping a Marlboro,
you will turn around and I won't fall. You will be young, your face not
the face under the head we shaved, your body not the body
that made those noises when it climbed the stairs, legs
powerful unbound by walkers and wheelchairs,
your shoulders broad, my shoulders,
my feet forward licking puddles pooled
along the bricks. I will wrap you in a sheet—
if you must go, let me carry you.

They build canoes in the basement

I.

The smell of cedar, sounds
of Bob Marley and shuffling
saw dust under bare feet, pink
cotton candy flinching along walls,
fan oscillating in the corner—

he stops and thinks,

a deep breath right hand to chest
hand clutching silver can to breast
one eye closed as he steps left
lowers himself to the symmetry, it's perfect,
dry hand caressing the curves.

II.

On the other side there is carpet,
a rug, and on top of that two
small chairs big enough for two
small brothers big enough for the faint
sounds of Bob Marley drawn out
by 8-bits of baritone.

Held breath small hands between knees
clutching controllers shoulders slumped
eyes wide keeping pace with the pixels, they're perfect,
stationary hands sweat, tubes tickle nerves.

III.

Above potpourri and pasta, linoleum floors
underfoot, Grandma asleep in the other room.
Solitude, sit, stand, it's boiling, downstairs
the boys are bonding, Bob Marley
barely audible through the floorboards, bored.

Mouth pursed to the steam that rises, hands
rocking back and forth, two quick stomps
on the linoleum, the scratch of a needle,

six feet light and heavy on the stairs.

The Blizzard of '96

The same year the blizzard came, our evergreen
browned curbside and the scent of plastic filled
the living room as my father balanced on the side
of the couch, placing an ancient Jewish star
on the newly-planted poly-vinyl Christmas tree
as my brother watched through heavy breathing.

My mother had noticed the heavy breathing
the day before, my brother's face turning green
as he gasped for air. "Asthma," – from the tree,"
she told my father. He forced it through the window, filled
garbage bags with the scattered needles, set the star
on the manger, and told me to come outside.

Big steps as the snow fell up to my thighs outside,
my father with a cigarette to chapped lips, both of us breathing
smoke under falling strings of lights and stars.
"Grab that end," he said, and together we carried the evergreen
through the yard. With every step our boots filled
with snow. We reached the mailbox. Dropped the tree.

The next morning the store was filled with trees,
trees much bigger than me, too big to be inside.
My father held my hand, dodging people as they filled
shopping carts with toys, dolls, "This one is breathing,"
a woman said, "And when you feed it, it poops green!"
We turned a corner to a whole row of trees, lights, stars,

a whole shelf and none of them looked like our star.
I meant to ask why but we moved on to the trees—
white trees, red trees, blue trees, silver trees, green—
my father stopped, clung a box to his side and sighed,
"This will keep your brother breathing."
I woke up on my Christmas morning my lungs filled

with breakfast, my brother's lungs filled
with the mist of an inhaler. We sat under the star
and I watched him breathing,
imagined his chest full of trees,
a forest slowly growing inside,
the red and pink now browning green.

Summer in Annapolis, 1972

There's a copy of Grandmother's gazpacho recipe
between pages 66 and 67 of *Paradise Lost*.
It's been there since the summer of 1972.

That August, in the kitchen of her Annapolis apartment,
she sliced open the middle phalanx of her Apollo finger,
while my Grandfather sat cross-legged across town
in front of a Ham Radio –
“Are you troubled by static? When will you call again?”

They evacuated the school that day.
As helicopters circled above,
a gas station went up in flames.

Four months after you gave me the goose down coat.

For Dad

When I pulled the pieces of pine needles
from the pockets of your coat, I pictured
you pre-birth (my birth), bundled up in
Appalachia beside a small fire built for one,
two curls falling from beneath Grandpa's wool hat,
a cigarette in one hand and a hatchet in the other.

Gently guiding the needles along the terrain of my hand
I think about that hazy photograph: you standing,
straddling the peak of Backbone Mountain,
shirtless with your shorts around your ankles,
hairy bare ass and varsity thigh tan lines
splitting the horizon in half.

I reach deeper, my index finger dredging
the inseam of your down coat, remembering
watching you glide the bench plane along strips of cedar,
sipping beer out of silver cans, quickly dropping flies
into that mason jar we kept the Black Widow in
(the one we hid from Mom), cutting the heads off
the copperheads in the sandbox, taking out your own stitches,
building decks, building forts, building playgrounds, building, building.

I'm standing outside on a Friday night
pushing these pine needles around my palm
through sweat from thought and glass, the smell of a cigarette ending.

Do you remember that time in Austin when it was ninety-
eight degrees after nightfall? The rooftop bar on sixth street?
When we staggered through the streets "on business?"
Do you remember the way the sidewalk enveloped the trees?

You tripped on a root and apologized. I was 22
and wanted to hold your hand.

Portrait

Her voice flung against the ceiling
curling under the feet of cockroaches
crawling around in the attic bouncing
back down into the unfinished basement and the arrowheads
buried below, her voice in the cabinets and drawers
the glisten of spoons and knives, she closed her eyes
and cut off the tip
of her pinky finger,
watched it fall
on the cotton crammed
into the small box below,
the water run pink, the bandage run red,
the comics section carefully folded, taped,
a bow on top, a card
two by three off-white embossed,
the lipstick, the laughter,

the smoke filled bathroom,
scratch-off's in the stalls,
she could herself with knives,
razorblades, metal, her metabolic mind:
nights when nearness to death equates a closeness to the floor,
sheets put down protect the oriental carpets, bodies pressed together, pelagic,
she knows she isn't raising the roof, no, she is doing everything in her power
to keep it from falling down around her,

but she forgets, she blows balloons,
writes letters to the inmates,
the jail cells filled with women who have women hidden
in their ribcages, bare arms like thighs, counting their bones:
she told them of cold nights wishing for wood, for cardboard, a flame,
a well-dressed boy doing magic tricks;
she told them of being bored with the memoirs of God,
how she screams not because she is frightened,
how she screams to frighten the ghosts,

remembering the words of her mother,
love through a megaphone in her mind:
"we are the way we face our death, sweetheart,
and the difference between
a homecoming and a journey

is nothing more than a magnet.

In a minute I will leave

While your body grows cold I lay in bed
straddled by a girl with long dark hair, large
freckle on one cheek pirouetting with the pulls
of her sad and ecstatic mouth. I lay alongside
your bedroom in my old bedroom, now guestroom,
muted tans and this near-virgin looking down on me,
mother's Mary on the wall, dried fronds
tucked behind the cedar frame,
mattress on a cedar frame,
you remain in cedar frame,
my fingers digging deep into cedar flesh of hips,
cedar flesh of breath it comes
heavy leaning forward
heavier long hair falling forward
one hand gripping flesh pulling
her breasts to my chest
her ear to my mouth
a knock on the door:
I whisper your name.

In the end there is nothing.

No, in the end there is everything
you leave behind and your voice
echoing through the air conditioner,
your skin cells resting on books
and bookshelves, along the tops of photos framed,
on the drawings and the drafting table, your skin
on our hands, our tongues, in our lungs,
propelled by footsteps and fan blades;
and then there are the boxes and the bags,
donations and an attic full of “we can’t just
throw it out,” the bedrooms becoming guest rooms,
the chairs tucked under desks as though never
upturned in the first stage of the “process.”
The process. It’s all a process. It’s keeping the door shut
but peeking; it’s two refrigerators
full of kind words and casseroles;
it’s teaching us how to know gravity,
how to remain thirsty while drowning,
how to ignore the sky
when he calls to say we’re falling,
it’s that uncle’s shattered elbow mended crooked,
prescribed a briefcase full of rocks,
a piss stain on the carpet of a house without a dog,
the Blizzard Blue Crayola in the 72 crayon box,
a syrup flood while sleeping,
the ants it leaves behind.

*Sometimes I see you
in the palms of my hands*

I see you lowered again
but this time from a hole
in the soil of sky,
bare branches like roots
bending, clearing a path
for you, descending
on slow string, weight
counter-balanced
by the rental we moved into
years after you left, weight
ripping the roof
from the rebar, weight
splitting the foundation
in half, walls collapse
and I shield my eyes
as the sun seeps off
your glistened skin,
I sit at the table
in the open air,
watch your naked body,
orbited by earth and rocks,
blades of grass,
slivers of wood, watch
you slowly fall, watch
you wave, watch
you land in your old chair,
brush the hair
from your face
as Mom bounds in across
the cracking hardwood
floors, arms full with
the good china,
you raise your head
and ask "Is there anything
I can do to help?"

Bad Habits Hide in Nice Neighborhoods

Bad habits hide in nice neighborhoods
like a little kid kiss – hard and
handless, tongueless and loveless -
grasping for the weight of something
aside from the way the world looks
through the gossamer fabric of Grandmother's
favorite ankle-length evening dress;
the shuffling of feet, the slightly muffled laughter,
the somewhat sepia tone cast upon the world,
and the hand on the head.

Bad habits hide in nice neighborhoods
like reaching inside a pack of cigarettes
only to die in the same place back-issues
of People magazine with the address
square torn out go to retire,
all because you stared into the sun,
finding nothing but dots on the horizon
floor and your stick and poke Uncle with
a wet Budweiser tallboy.

Bad habits hide in nice neighborhoods
so keep your windows closed and
your dog closer, watching for small
changes in barometric pressure,
and struggling to remember whether
hot air rises or falls – either way,
you can't air out a basement, so just
brush the teeth of your reflection,
give a homeless woman a TV dinner
or a gym sock full of nickels,
and don't forget to rinse
your feet off before you leave.

Home Is Where Your Losses Are

A bedroom window, the look on your face
when I caught you and your friend
watching me get head.
You're dead, and he's in rehab.
Both of you must have looked up to me
in one way or another.

Cleanse, flush, lemonjuice and Sur-Q-Lax,
trophies on the alcove, plastic people
posing dipped in shitty gold paint
so kids can look back fifteen years later and remember.

Old Polaroids. Pieces of people I don't remember and
places I can't forget:
Bloody duct taped fingers,
A three legged table inside a twelve foot teepee,
Jane Austen "You Are Beautiful" tattooed on top
of a red head's tits.

At six years old I wandered off.
Down the street a boy with the same last name as my Grandmother
told me there was a dead bird behind
his shed. His boxer shorts were multicolored.
There was no bird.

We had lived 18 years invincible

for Jeff Klapatch

A liter of vodka alone can kill a man
but you insisted on making it easier:
a liter of vodka, no shoes, no shirt,
400 horsepower between two wheels,
between your legs, as you cut through
the suburbs, trying to light a cigarette.

You were four blocks from my house
in the yard of a red-doored home,
lights and yellow tape surrounding
the two sheets that surrounded you,
black and blue pieces scattered on
the sidewalk, the grass, the porch.

All that metal so far from machine.

Later, a red-headed police officer told
us how your body flung from the bike
horizontally,
a tree splitting you open at the waist.

Gainesville, Florida

The refrigerator door swings closed and I am nineteen again,
opening a beer, cigarette ash hanging long,
surrounded by fat tipped Sharpie scrawls on pale green cabinets and off-white walls
I move from room to room, let the rooms wash over me.

Shower with no curtain, under bulb bare bathroom in a house with no stove—
her legs are longer than mine, black makeup streaming off her eyes
water droplets pounding the puddle forming on the tile floor.

Head full of cat hair, a mattress on the floor, a room full of dream catchers,
and tiny holes burned in the belly of my shirt, a flash—
her back, how it arched in the grass, how the white Christmas lights framed
her face, dirty blonde pubic hair, it glistened.

Speed of drink and dancing and when they take the fake IDs away
we will dance our way out of poorly patched jeans, dance until missing shoes,
dance on tile floors with Tiger milk and renaissance and looks shot
across the room, the sound of licking lips, of ligaments stretching between bones.

Shadow of lips left on cigarette tips. It feels weird with other people in the room;
more hands and more open mouths, breath like water faucets, OxyContin and cocaine,
a constellation of hickeys, Kawasakis and my heart beat beating, beating.

Bamboo on the bonfire, so tall it licked the stars, pulled out of the veins in the fold of my
arm and for a second it was death. When she fell from the roof
I put a Band-Aid on her elbow. She took off her shirt and said “You sleep in too late.”

But there is no sleep. There are ceilings giving way to cracks giving way to palms trees and
palmfuls of hair and the sudden realization that you are not where you thought.
The feel of knife through tendon, the answer that came four years later on a street corner,
four years later sitting on a toilet with a soft knock on the door, the buckling of knees.

Our Shoes, Our Socks, A Proclamation

The scent of blood was on the street
in front of the meat market that day as you fell
into the rodeo-themed bar next door
where the women danced with their
bruised shins and scraped knees at eye level
feeling empowered.

The pornography stapled to the bathroom wall
and that girl named after a rock
or a gemstone or
some kind of precious metal or
sedimentary form
who fell asleep and
was never seen again.

The oven has been prepared and it's time
to throw in our shoes, our socks –

A proclamation.

The scents are sewn into our skin, the
faces become the medallions in our minds,
and the sounds we hold in our ears
like the sea itself is held in shells.

Portrait of a Waitress at a Strip Club in Miami

It was the strangest thing I'd seen in an alcove in at least a decade, but even stranger was the fact that the establishment served black beans and rice and that woman with the ears told me that on June 5th, 1944, her grandfather's Ouija board had predicted the Normandy Invasion, so I laughed and shrugged my shoulders which made her put the tray down because her hands were shaking at this point while she explained how that same Ouija board, 55 years later, on August 5th, 1999, with her sisters hands inches from her own, spelled out "Bruce Willis really is dead," and the next day they saw M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* and as she tells me this I can see the goosebumps on her arms and thighs and I don't shrug my shoulders and I don't laugh, and we look at each other, and I think about how Mom used to tell us that Ouija boards were evil, and I question myself for thinking about Mom in this establishment, and I wonder if Freud would say I'm a pervert as I return my attention to the alcove, and ask her nicely for more black beans and rice.

I think we are about to see some things

In deep sleep you can't feel me,
but I can feel you: standing

at your feet, your smile an open
window just out of reach, jumping
arms outstretched a knife in teeth,
double edged, your body opens

a door to a room where those
you barely know fight
their way to the forefront, while
faces of mothers and fathers get lost

in the crowd. Outside, everything
grows in the wrong direction, even
the azaleas are angry and there are
ways I can take you so strange:

here, my left hand is the rarest bird;
it is the bulb loose in the lamp;
it is the footstep that flickers;
it is broke, something broke.

There is water everywhere
and we are covered in dirt.

We are dream state driving,
Connecticutting the dots down I-95,
the Beatles never broke up,
and no one ever dies— Reach Up!

Can you feel the rocks up above?
Take a right at the funeral home,
hang a left when you pass the graveyard.
He'll be waiting on the shoulder

with rosemary and parsley
along the makeshift graves,
a beer in one hand,
sixteen nails in the other.

Argument

Under the tea-lit, eight-point
deer chandelier, there you stood
with the rodeo statue held
high above your misted head, long since
cross the border of madness with an un-
searched trunk, packed years before
full of — no,
back to the task at hand, or the minutes before
the task at hand became a task: Look,
You never clean up after yourself:
your shadow always lingering on the kitchen floor,
everything unsaid piled up on the coffee table
with laundry and loose change and coffee cups,
bathroom cabinets opened overnight, laptop left
lingering on WebMD diseases and glimpses of
your image in the images on the walls, on the walls,
in the mirror, floating underneath potted plants and
that damn deer chandelier please put it down,
that's good, sit, breathe.

“Will you follow me to the scrap yard?
Copper prices are up. We could trade our blood
for gas money.”

*Only if we cover our tracks, only if
we wear our cow shoes.*

(With sharpened arrowhead ice cubes
we carved the names of cities into the tops of each other's feet,
thrust wet hands wrist deep into to the wood burning stove.)

That was Monday.

On Tuesday we slept.

We try to keep

All those secrets we hide
in the creases behind our
knees, buried between shoulder blades,
stitched to our napes, crammed deep
into the shallow dimples carved
into lower backs and cheeks.
Ciphers etched into the enamel
of our wisdom teeth, removed.
Hours spent sitting on the
bench in front of the auto-
matic door at Goodwill,
opening and closing my eyes,
looking for love at first sight.
Hours spent in quieter places,
breathing deeply – focusing –
trying to separate the souls,
distinguish between the bits of skin
suspended within – a connection.

My father told me to treat
women like gold, so I spent
years melting them down, trying
to form them into something
that would fit my wrists like
Houdini's handcuffs, knowing
escape was inevitable. "For
now," she said, "can we just look
forward to looking back on all this
laughing?" In a past life we broke
the same bones. In a past life only
one of us was able to mend. The
house we shared became the
basement in the house of night.
We lay in bed like lightning bolts.
We lie in bed like lockjaw.
The poem begins with the first
three letters of the alphabet, a
brown bag full of malted courage,
a fire too close to the house.

The Prophet

It wasn't so phenomenal, at first, her ascent,
the tree half dead, some limbs broken,
some not, she focused, she stopped,

let her hair down, down to her brown bottomed feet,
slipped a white dress overhead, bare skin bristling as
the wind picked up.

She walked along a limb leaves falling
feet in front of feet eyes closed arms out
they bent (the limb

the arms) and swayed (the limb,
the arms, the hips of her body
heavy with the change of seasons)

and below the necks of men craned with held breath
savored before swallowing, silent, fixated on feet
heel toe heel toe.

Bending but not breaking her
return to earth like Birches she stood in the uncut grass
and the men circled up silent

eyes oversized waiting for stories of a new God,
God caged in ribs, pouring from pores, pressed
into pocketed pills,

God electricity in the dust, re-author of twilight,
exploding with flowers and the seeds of flowers,
like stardust over the valley.

A Love Poem

I wish I could have held your mother's hand
on the day you were born and told her
everything would be okay.
I wasn't there
and neither was she.
three years later you're running around shirtless
in a Bartow backyard
lathering yourself with all nature has to offer,
like some sort of aboriginal
Disney princess in training.
Your grandfather sang you love songs
that were not about your grandmother,
but about a mule named Rhody
that took the kids back
and forth from school.
Now Rhody holds a place on your arm.
When you were five they told you,
"Your mother – she is the green in your eyes,"
and for hours you stood underneath
three bulbs, in front of the bathroom mirror,
searching for her face in your own.
Sitting in the cart at K-Mart
Your father pushes gently peering
through the housewares as
you gaze upward in admiration,
feet dangling.
You say you have your mother's eyebrows.
At six years old you took a puff
of your uncle's cigar
and cried, knowing for certain
you were dying of cancer.
As puberty set in, your father sat
dictionaries in your lap on birthday's
knowing that you'd thank him later.
Seventeen came and went
with burns and broken bones,
waking up with your head under the dashboard
thinking you had killed a man,
but he was just there to help.
In high school you were the apple
of the golden-mouthed basketball star's eye.
You maced nine girls in the face,

and sold drugs on roller skates.
You got so high you had baby hands,
and envisioned the covers of childhood storybooks,
but couldn't remember the names.
Now, at twenty-three, you lay in bed
with your dog and contemplate
the plausibility of true love and obsession.
You have your doubts, but so does everyone.
It's not the dark that scares you,
but the unknown that's attached.

That night (in the hotel room)

Through your cage I slid my finger.

Not too far.

Just as the proximal interphalangeal joint slid between the bars within

the blue light sang.

The blue light that takes notes on your inner thigh: lists, dates, times,
a cursive scrawling of your name with mine.

The blue light that burned your eyes in backwoods backyards, burned your eyes in wood-
paneled living rooms, burned your eyes in department store fitting rooms, burned your eyes,
burned your eyes, burned your eyes.

The blue light that suns the small scar on your cheek.

The blue light that brings a new disease every week.

The blue light that primally rectifies rising tides, burns along on flatland drives,
rides sidesaddle landslides, shines.

The blue light the blue light the blue light the blue light –

That night (in the hotel room) there was a moment.

Feet dangling, belly down, propped on elbows, fully clothed,
there was a moment.

Blue light incandescent casting iridescent shadows through fly away hairs
there was a moment.

Amidst tiny soaps, five stories up in Orlando, Florida
there was a moment.

We taped our faces together mouth to mouth.

The blue light leaked out of my left ear, trickled down my neck, around my shoulder, along
my arm, finally dripping off the distal phalanges of my outstretched palm, facedown hiding
the healing initials carved into it, burning tiny holes into the tiny carpet.

Knowledge

The pasta pot full of ice
and your slowly naked body.

The jeans that fit the floor
better than they fit your hips.

The door left unlocked,
unknowingly, and the noise.

The semi-darkness,
the television in the other room.

The night you became the hands
on my clock, twelve minutes to
twenty-six, twelve minutes.

A birthday, a piece of cake,
the morning that you left.

The fingers that crept inside,
a fragment of fragile thought.

Words whispered underwater
that never sounded so clear.

Keep staring and remember that
time a hundred years ago,
when our souls cracked open
unbeknownst.

Layers concealed—
uncovered, revealed, possessed—
amalgamated in small boxes
underneath a living room table,

Where I return to re-learn the difference
between turning right
and turning.

Heat Lightning

And we tried our best to keep the blood
in our bodies as veins spread silently
through the sky, mosquitoes swarmed
our thighs, with hands on mouths and breath
and breathing, the faint sounds of shoveled earth
in the distance. The city unfurled itself
for us, scaffolding and smokestacks
across the lake, swans and suburbs
and the feel of evolution like turning
a doorknob or opening a refrigerator. The feel
of your breath on my neck, on my chest. The
veins. This cul-de-sac is empty, filled
with the shadow of water tower,
barren of cars, barren of foundations,
but still your feet are grounded,
your toes buried in the pavement,
mine still scratching the surface.
The breeze, a smell like rain
on a construction site, your breath
on my ribcage, in my ribcage, heavy,
your hands, my belt, the blood
doing everything it can to remain
in our bodies, our bodies, the ridges
of your elbow, a novel in verse, in braille,
it says, "Now let this move you forward – euphoric."

When we deal

On the day your grandfather shot himself,
you took four and a half shots
of Irish whiskey and passed out
money for the smallest of favors. To you,
this seemed the thing to do,
and before the tears arrived
there was nothing else in the world but
two scraped knees,
the Zip Locked “Do Not Resuscitate” forms in the freezer,
and that last trip up the coast,
when the two of you stood on
the shoreline, shielding your eyes, watching the woman
parasail past, bikini clad, screaming nothing in particular,
while your cousin filled your Granddaddy’s cup
with sand dumped from his own.
In the hotel before the funeral you lay
and listen to the displacement of air – disquiet –
like the day you realized spoons don’t really sound like airplanes.
No one could have known.
If you work on a suicide note long enough, it becomes an elegy.
You kept it.
Tucked it deep down the inside pocket of
the soot colored pea coat in the back of your closet.
The pea coat that was handed down during the Depression.
That he wore the night he met your grandmother.
That he wore the night your mother was born.
That he wore the first time he held you.
That you pulled from the donation bag while your relatives were in town.
Meanwhile, in the Middle East,
crowds are gathering to remember their dead,
and as the young men casually walk the streets,
showing off their blood-splattered clothes
as testimony to their fidelity,
back here kids line the pews in chapel,
lock their knees during the sermon,
and one by one they fall.

Days later you were dead

For Scott Santa

You collapsed
in the grass
in diabetic shock
and someone yelled
orange juice
so I ran.

It was fall and the leaves
were falling, the trees were
brandishing bare arms,
but they were not dying
and I ran.

I thought about your past lives,
the time you spent
enthroned behind snare and hi-hat,
as a drug sniffing dog,
engulfed by bushes,
a blanket behind a wall at a church.

“A lot of times things seem like fate,” you told me once,
“but they aren’t.”

I put a dollar in the machine and I ran.

When you came to,
you laughed and I didn’t.

Later in my car you told me
take a left, told me take a right.

We stopped
alongside a house
with no lights on,
a for sale sign in the yard,
weeds to your knees,
price reduced.

You went in through the back door.

You didn’t have a key.

Your voice didn't sound like your hair.

For Mark

You came in and out of the room
without a word until
you came into the room broken,
limping, spilling yourself onto the candles
and the coffee-stained tile floor.

Shoulders slumped, hands clasped,
light flickered off your toes, purple,
poking out of the sharpie scrawled
plaster that said "I Love
You" and "Get Well Soon."
There may have been hearts.

You closed your eyes behind your hair,
looked up at the ceiling, told us your name,
about waking up with your forehead resting
on the bathroom mirror, upright, the water running,
the bar of soap soggy and half the size.

You told us about how you collapsed
in the closet, woke up throbbing hours later,
tucked in behind a curtain, metal in your leg.

You may have said,
"I woke up limping to the next life."

You may have said
"I woke up wanting more."

Linoleum

In first grade my best friend told the photographer
“I want to be a tiger.”

I think he meant it.

In middle school we watched porn
in his parent’s basement,
breasts bouncing (buffering) bouncing (buffering) with boners
bent back beneath belts.

At sixteen we smoked honey blunts behind grocery stores.
On Sundays we picked locks in trailer parks,
rearranged the furniture,
took nothing but spoons and
the blank pages in backs of Bibles.

In college we got lost in our own house.
We donated plasma and got drunk on three beers.
We got arrested shoplifting BB Guns and Polaroid film.

Everything is worth trying twice.

At twenty-three my best friend lay blue
on a linoleum floor.
I pried open his pockets
before picking up the phone.

Anthem for a 17-Year-Old Late Nineties Suicide

The ambulance. The spilled shampoo. The collapse—
your disappearing theme.

Someone at the wake said, “He looks just like the sun,” pointing
at a photograph of you standing on the Pacific shoreline,
your face splitting the coast in half
two years before it split open on the pavement,
the boys you once played capture the flag with
yelling words like handjob and fag.

Two years before “meet me in the basement.”
Two years before “meet me at the hotel.”
Two years before the lover’s spit, the sentimental x’s,
the guilt.

No one heard you when you talked of feel good lost,
the smiling darkness, the romance of the grave.

No one answered when you asked if there was water in hell.

The letter began: “To all my dear friends.”
Continued: “Take care, look up.”
Ended: “It’s all gonna break.”

In The Jewish Section of Oak Hill Burial Park, December 2011
For Willy

Just days before you died I gripped the armrest of your Lincoln
as you changed lanes without reason,
tossing gravel as we drove past the headstones, stopped.

I handed you the small broom.
Watched as you slowly swept the leaves from the marble,
twisting and turning the head to remove bits of dirt and cut grass
from the ravines of names.

Earlier, together, we harvested five rocks from the patio.

“Too big,” you said, as I held one up.
“Too ugly,” you said to another.

We washed them in your kitchen sink.
Scrubbed them until they were white.

I poured the rocks from my hands into yours.
Held my hand to your back.
You lowered yourself, carefully placed the rocks above the names,
kissed the palm of your hand after each had found a home,
pressed your tribute into the carvings.

Canyons held in your hands.

Thrust

Night mimics Winter as it falls silently.
I am asleep and cannot hear it.
In a dream: "Can we survive in the non-smoking section?"
I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.
"Can we survive?"

All that mountain forming within you.

Please forgive me as I am in mid-collapse
no I don't want any breakfast.
I am seeing the faces of those I haven't met
in the faces of those I have known.

All that mountain forming within you.

In the morning while you pull
clumps of hair from your head I sneak about the bedroom,
breathing into your pockets, kissing the insides of
your hats, licking your lipstick so you can carry my
genetic makeup through your day.

All that mountain forming within you.

And in those small spaces that form,
the seemingly empty cavities constructed between us,
that is where our world now resides.
I want to wash your hair means more than allegiance recited.

All that mountain forming within you.

Dropping day-old flowers clipped from neighbors gardens
into mason jars quarter-full of water salvaged from birdbaths
you whisper things like, "We'd love a lot more if we knew
when we were going to die."

Night mimics Winter as it falls silently
and sometimes the body mimics the Spring.

All that mountain forming within you.

As soon as we stop

That night we stretched our bodies into a canvas
where we sketched our former selves:
the unevenness of the lines, the divides,
shades of black pulled back and the lack of light that remained—

Together, we stood back and studied them:
analyzed the topography, the contours, the dips and pits, the peaks and dives,
the places unbound by our own shaky lines. We ran our hands along scenery and scene:
my body, wading in a pool of January; your feet and the architecture of arch, waist wrapped
in measuring tapes. We began to color them in,

gently, at first,
we kept to our own, unaware of the ways
each other's images changed,
the way the colors blended,
how hands intertwined...

and then there were voices, letters, decisions, and coffee, so much coffee. There were things
put into boxes and taken out of boxes, there were walls filled with art and the world
became so noisy, the lights were always on, and there was broken glass and bare feet on bare
floors but still our hands kept moving:

crayons became colored pencils became charcoal became pen became permanent marker,
a faint red line became two faint red lines became two bold red lines became a plus sign
became
the sound of paper pressed between a table and a hospital gown, a table and a strange
feeling,
and table and a heartbeat,

kicking,

and no, I wasn't there to see you catch the feral cat under a bucket in your grandparents
backyard,
but I can see your hands masking your mouth, the index and middle fingers slowly parting,
the quiver of your lips revealed eyes wide before the canvas on the wall as you whisper

keep me here,

keep me.

And out of which flowed:

1. Lather in your hair in the water,
in the steel tub sunshine seeping
off the sides surrounded by sand
and sand spurs on a patch of cement,
grandmother's hand on your head
tilted back close your eyes;
your mind with the fingers
of a teenage piano prodigy, spread.
2. The way you open under the weight
of my palm, voice like live wires
sliced and sparkling.
3. Pacing street corners in the rain,
in the living room, your shoes on the floor,
a part of things – like tables, like chairs –
you are laughing and that's good,
because it means you aren't suffocating
under a pale blue pillow,
under your own pale hands.
4. You think of eyes opening.
5. An unfinished basement,
brick and mortar building, filling
the gap, hands attached to arms, attached
to torso, attached to torso, attached.
From this angle I can see
the brackish corners of your eyes
as your tilt back, trying to reverse
the currents of the canals.
6. You wake up throwing darkness,
swallowing light, fans and humidifiers
displacing dust mites and dry air.
7. I say, "You are not the arms
of your mother."
8. Tiny breathing in a tiny room,
you are looking down, I am
standing in the doorway.

and if I die before you

I will drag my finger
along the forearm of an angel
taste her sweat
on the tip of my tongue
and I will think this is not heaven—

I will float down
from the glorious bloom,
float down while you are sleeping,
feel your muscles flatten beneath me,
feel your fingers flex firm, I will take
your breath in my hands and tear it
into tiny pieces.

I will scatter. I will sit. I will wait,

and when you feel alone, I will scrape
a serrated knife harder
against the china in the cabinet,
I will chew louder, I will tap my foot
into the tempo of your teeth,
turn on the heat,
drape my leather jacket
on a dining room chair,
rearrange the silverware,
big forks with little forks,
I will cotton. I will lay as your sheet,
and together we will burrow
into box springs,
open eyes toward the sky,
and the water spots
left on the ceiling.

Because I did not know what to do

I stood stagnant,
squared off 10x10
with chalk on the blacktop

inside my mind
and with brick
I built a tiny home there:

No photos along hallways
long no hallways
at all. No bathroom,

no need. Just one room,
one door, one window and
inside, you, brother,

laid on a Lay-Z-Boy,
reclined, tethered there
since the day you died.

In the mornings
I came carrying
cans of Crisco.

Carefully I covered
your scars, opened
the blinds so
they could shine in the sunlight.

While you lay I look
out the window: it's hot. Heat
rises off the blacktop and beyond
that, in the field, the grass
is dying but the lemon tree
is thriving while above clouds
are dividing like people
who know: it's time to go.

If I open
the window will you
float away, tether snapping
sharp and slicing a straight

line across my face?

If I open
the window at night,
will I reach out
and pull another you
back from the silence?

Heat rises off your body.
I slide a stool across the asphalt.

*

Your limbs:
the tourniquet
I used to tie
my days and nights
together.
Your eyes:
the covered candles
that kept me warm.

There were no instructions.

*

Your toe fell off today
so I stuck it full of toothpicks
set it over a glass of water. Later,
I wrapped your toe in tinfoil taped
it to the top right corner of the window tied
a length of copper twine to the tip ran
it into the canal of your left ear opened
your mouth and danced. Later,
I hung a picture of your old bedroom
on the wall of your new room.
You didn't respond but I could tell
you had been missing home.
If the biggest part of any story
are the rooms and the things inside them,
this will be easy for anyone to understand.

*

You are dead but living in the house I built on the blacktop.

You are dead so I covered the floor in black plastic sheeting,
covered the sheeting in sphagnum and soil, planted perennials:
blanket flowers and switchgrass, pincushion and black-eyed susans.
I planted food, brother, so I would never have to leave your side:
cattail and chicory, pennycress and sheep sorrel— they grew—
Buds blooming flowers like bright mouths biting tongues.

Then the people came with bodies
buzzing like easement electrical boxes,
mouths moths fluttering about you,
firefly eyes slow wet and flashing—
eyes that said I love you
meant I want to fix you
meant I am here
to pretend, meant project
all of yourself onto me,
meant no no that is too much;

Stillness:

“Open,” they said,

and the soft skin
of your finger’s tips
peeled and cracked,
revealed a push of petals,

“Open,”

each finger a new species, a blossom unseen,
hands hardened arms hardened and greened
thorns formed fell

“Open,”

roots shot from your shoulder blades, body
blue black broke down rooted bloomed,
you filled the room,

“Open,” they said.

*

Through the window I look through the window
carved in our father’s chest where you sit

at the drafting table pen in hand
working on copy drawings of anime and William Blake.
It's been seven years since you died
but in here you're still fourteen and warm,
lit constantly by the glow of a computer screen
or the bedside lamp, book spread in your lap.
Outside in the hallway, mother's hand on the door
hears the pages turning, the clattering of keys,
closes her eyes and sees all the things
her boy will become.

*

White on the top and red on the bottom
or
red on the top and white on the bottom

brother I turn you and turn you

pour ice and salt beneath your body

beneath your feet, place blankets above
and below you

stand you up in the corner

lean your arms out against the wall

Is this what it is always like?

Even in death I cannot stop the flow of blood
Even in death it hurts to drain it

*

Your body and the bloat of it,
the blowflies and the bees of it,
the bruising and the blooms of it—

Sometimes I wish that we had burned you.

Oh to mix your ashes with water,
a paste thick enough to paint
your face onto the faces of others.

*

There was a time (what time?)
a simpler time (how do you mean?)
simpler because we knew no loss (loss?)
and nothing about the act of losing (so how did you act?)
when it was simpler to act normal (but was is normal?)

The flowers grew unruly and it became hard to see.

*

The rest of the family came today, brother.
Your body was cold and the room was cold
and the four of us sat there
while you slept and slept and slept.
We touched shoulders and lower backs,
buried heads in our hands and the hands of each other.
We were silent and loud and there was a piano playing
somewhere or somewhere in our heads.
Did you hear the piano?

*

It's autumn again. The flowers have died back,
and you still lay back, dead. With cool weather
the smell is bearable so I pull up the stool alongside
you, tell you how it feels to toe the line between death
and life even though I know you
understand and I never noticed
how beautiful the beds of your fingernails,
how same the size of our nostrils, earlobes, how
the space between our knuckles matches up
despite our age difference, and how now, in death,
we share the same color eyelids.

*

If the clouds would uncover,
if the temperature would rise,
but the clouds do nothing then
they thicken and burst until
the blacktop gives way
to sheets of black ice and
brother, do you hear that scraping?

What is the sound of fast approaching?
What is the sound of blade
slicing through ice?
It is the sound of my pencil
pressed to another page full of you.

*

Through a crack in the blinds,
I see a crack in the blinds and light
across the field running alongside our
blacktop. It flickers and I realize that it's
flickering in Morse Code:
"I know that the walls are getting
thicker. I know
you still feel a tangible pulse. I know
you will always feel it. Remember:
your life is a painting in a dark museum
and sometimes you examine it
closely."

*

The roof caved in and the hard rain came and the brick walls were built so thick
and the 10x10 room filled with 28,317 liters of water and you alone inside.
I scaled the side wall. Dove. Found you afloat foot tethered to the Lay-Z-Boy with
your dead eyes open holding my eyes, your dead eyes saying "Look,
look how long I can hold my breath!"

*

Gordon me leave the roof
unfixed so I can get some air.
Let me pry your eyes to the clouded
sky, the glaucous sun revealing
itself before fading away again. Let me
leave the door open when the rains
come, make our little room a shed
for storm. I will strip you once again
of your collared shirt and its tuck,
and with rainwater caught in a sponge
I will wash your dying flesh away.

*

You'll be happy to know I brought wheels from a couch on the side of the road with me today. Here, sit in this corner while I screw them onto your Lay-Z-Boy. Boy, you have gotten much lighter, brother, it's almost as if you are wasting away. I'm sorry the drill is so loud, honestly this is only the sixth or seventh time I have ever used one, and never for a thing like this.

There, all set. Okay, so here is the plan. I was thinking, and by all means tell me if you don't like the idea; I was thinking that maybe we should cut your arms off – hear me out, hear me out – we should cut your arms off and rig them up somehow in front of you so then, while I push you around the blacktop (we can do that now that you have a set of wheels) you can remember what it's like to reach for something. And when you get bored of that, I can turn your arms around and put things in your hands: travel guides from all around the world, family photos, pens and pencils, blades of grass, bags of sand, anything you want.

*

Under the cabinet, in the sink of our tiny house, I have kept hidden
behind the wooden box
tied to the pipes with twine

a small bag with a small piece of every person I have ever know inside
skin cells harvested from soccer fields
a bit of chocolate the fell from a Snickers bar
clipped fingernail of an old flame
pilfered pocket lent and tiny pieces of photographs

I am going to leave it here with you, brother, leave it to keep with you
it is hot again and I need to go
I am sorry but I need to go
I has been too long and I need to go

for safe keeping, because I do not know what to do with it anymore
because it doesn't hurt like it used too
and I don't need it like I used too
but I want to make sure it all stays in one place

and you have plenty of room here in your house on the blacktop.

*

Suburbia: A Litany

We reach
for ourselves and find one another
breathless, arms outstretched, coming together
we disintegrate, we are tense, straining, sweat seeping
through forehead pores not yet dripping
along the creek bed, breasts pressed to a screen door
eyes closed and this SUV is uncomfortable,
as is the one that follows, and the Chrysler in between,
the trucks that will come later,
the tiny Mercedes and the sweatpants stumbling
blindly into bedrooms and the bathrooms,
apartments, trailers, houses, jeans ripped
on tall fences and codes forgotten,
horizontal mirrors and too many people,
(there is never enough music, there is never enough people)
rooftops of houses and schools, a twelve foot teepee
on fire, the studio with no heat, we speak
like starvation, the beautiful drugs are gone,
skin warm fingering the holes in a pair of leggings, running
back home to drop-top Beatles and parking lot tears,
glass shattered kicked under tables
with blues and American beer, backrubs and blows jobs,
those who help but are not needed, pillows on the bonfire,
community service, panties stolen from Macy's,
child proof seals, a rolled up bill alongside a crystal container
of potpourri on the back of a toilet
in the bathroom of a Joann Fabrics, digging
deeper into packs and pockets, pawn shop patronage,
pocket knives and cans, nicotine stained ceilings,
running and waiting, the half and the whole
and two or three more, tired eyes like cigarettes burning
through thighs and his skin
is not supposed to be blue
someone slap him—
tightening belts, tightening teeth,
the hardwood floor is cold.
We reach.