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This thesis strives to present and explore an assortment of themes from the perspectives of individuals, cultures, and communities, while using a variety of poetic techniques. The motivation of the thesis is the establishment of a community, including its idiosyncrasies and paradigms, and the exploration of how the characters within deal with uncertain futures, unsteady circumstances, and unrelenting pasts. In creating this world and these characters, it has become abundantly clear that the places in which we develop often inform and define the places we create.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

by

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Approved by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
WHY .....	1
Field Recordings (Ethnographic Notes) .....	2
WHERE .....	3
Brown Corduroy .....	4
Granny Lockie's .....	5
Seven Hours of Freedom .....	6
Participating Cleaner World Locations .....	7
Archilochos Fragment 28 (As it Applies to Childhood Accidents) .....	8
Standing Water .....	9
Middle School .....	10
Transitional Economy .....	11
Face Paint .....	12
An Exercise in Mental Topography .....	13
WHAT .....	14
Electric Sign From 6 Feet Above .....	15
Debra's (Still Life) .....	16
Limping Across a Stage .....	17
The Sunday When I Realized I Wasn't There to Shop .....	18

The Battle of Silo Hill .....	19
An Orphaned Song .....	20
You and Me at Jackie’s Mom’s .....	21
Picture .....	22
Photo Album .....	23
The Sophomore Curse .....	24
The Week I Kept a Dream Journal .....	25
Outside .....	26
And Suddenly You Are My Trinity .....	27
Road Poem .....	28
Stolen .....	29
Recurring .....	30
Ballad of a Clean Apartment .....	31
How it Applies to Us .....	32
Stayed with the House .....	33
 AFTER .....	 34
Letter: Awkward Interaction with Former Classmate .....	35
Dear Nathan, .....	36
Relapse .....	37
Turned Over (Colors Fade and They Grow Brittle) .....	38
On the Cookie Aisle .....	39
What Dogs Think About When They Think About <i>Wuv</i> .....	40

My Psychic Bound with The Great American Scream Machine .....	41
Weekend Work .....	42
Old Friend, New Pen Pal .....	44
Crooked Stamp .....	45
To the Point .....	46
One for Brick Apartments .....	47

Why

## Field Recordings (Ethnographic Notes)

Back when Nathan lived on Blue Bird,  
and there was that gang of kids  
who roamed the trailer park,  
I would sit on the cinder block  
steps and watch them as they huffed  
gas, always looking for a ride  
to the store.

Once I brought tapes for the boom-  
box to record their conversations;  
preserve them for the ages,  
like a white trash Alan Lomax,  
collecting the songs of a people,  
who were always looking for a ride  
to the store.

Ethnomusicologist, Lomax's title:  
I looked it up once, but it doesn't say  
if you're suppose to judge, somewhere deep  
inside where no one can know,  
just that it's a science, nothing  
about notes on smells or landlords,  
nothing about the times Nathan stared  
at that girl's chest in the car  
on our way to the store.

Where

## Brown Corduroy

At a quarter 'til 1, I'm not supposed to be leaving;  
I don't have a doctor's appointment today,  
but we're at the hospital by 2.  
In the parking lot, I see your 76, extended cab,  
big white pickup, and I want to play with the CB,  
while riding down the mountain on a cool Monday morning,  
and listening to your bluegrass tapes.  
I never really understood what they were saying.  
I could never quite understand what you were talking about,  
but I listened, because you made me laugh.

They said you were in the well house working on the February pipes.  
There was nothing they could do for you at Northern,  
so they brought you to Galax.  
I want to be sitting with you on those stumps  
in the front yard, next to the circle drive,  
watching you whittle with your pocketknife.  
That skin of yours like a baseball mitt,  
your hair slicked back with pomade,  
without a doubt the toughest looking man I ever knew.

Tough enough to call your own ambulance,  
met them at the door with your coat on.  
You were chewing gum  
'cause they told you to quit smoking.  
They said there was nothing  
they could do.  
I had said I loved you before,  
But at three, I touched your feet,  
and they were cold, and I pulled  
the covers over them.  
I wouldn't say, "Goodbye," if you were asleep  
and could not hear me.

Granny Lockie's

Marlboro reds,  
Texas Pete on eggs,  
Haystack Road,  
and a dust cloud  
hiding a one-lane bridge.

A whittled pine limb,  
Christmas name drawing,  
snuff runnin' down  
the side of a Dixie cup.

Mindin' and behavin',  
old time foot washin',  
Lowgap low class,  
running corn liquor  
down Thunder Road.

The wood-stove room,  
and years written  
on canned beans  
telling us good from bad.

## Seven Hours of Freedom

Those drops of rain became the shards of ice  
that stung my face as I walked down the road,  
towards the house, from where the bus left me.

Those afternoons, that die so fast, gray  
becoming black by six, frost beginning to stick  
to bits of gravel on our private drive,  
are set off by a song that begins to play  
on the radio.

The dogs meet me half way, and I see  
their barks, but hear a Ricky Nelson tune  
about a lonesome town where people go  
to cry their days away, to buy a dream or two.

And when we reach the porch, I turn  
the Walkman off and pull the headphones  
down around my neck. I am at the steps  
when the door opens, and it all rushes back.

## Participating Cleaner World Locations

The Salvation Army gave Jason a coat.  
His mom and dad took him to pick it up.  
Somebody's mother got tired of seeing  
that old acid-washed black denim jacket  
take up space in her son's closet.  
She dropped it off when she picked up her dress,  
the navy one she wore to funerals.

Jason hated that jacket because it was not  
an oversized Charlotte Hornets Starter,  
like the ones the other kids wore on the first  
day back from Christmas break.  
He hated the name Jimmy Gwyn written  
with a felt maker on the inside label.  
He hated the tag and the jacket,  
because another mother had bought it  
and claimed it first for her child.

Archilochos Fragment 28 (As it Applies to Childhood Accidents)

Dripping blood from a gash  
just below the knee, I sit quietly  
when I realize there is no one to help  
us boys, thrown from our bikes, in the late  
afternoon, before mom gets home from work.

## Standing Water

We are tearing down the old sun deck,  
first the railing, then the frame.  
My father uses a crow bar. To some effect,  
I'm using my boots to do the same.

First the rails, and then the frame,  
He rips each nail from its board.  
I am using my boots to do the same  
in this land of Chevys and Fords.

Ripping the nails from the boards,  
tearing down this water-treated memory.  
In this land of Chevys and Fords,  
replacing the splintered with a new symmetry,

tearing down this water treated memory  
as if it were a Thompson's sealed family tree;  
replacing the familiar with better symmetry.  
With force I set the rusty nail free

from deep within our Thompson's sealed tree.  
My father uses a crow bar for the same effect,  
with force he sets the rusty nails free,  
and I am helping him tear down my sun deck.

## Middle School

You spoke to me, for the first  
time, on my super birthday  
(I turned 13 on the 13<sup>th</sup>).  
We were at Mitchell's,  
blasting "Black Dog"  
on his parent's CD system.

In that big house  
with the sunroom where  
they kept the tree, already brown,  
two weeks before Christmas,  
you wore your hair back.

When Mitchell showed us the train  
tracks where he flattened  
spoons and the bridge, next  
to C.F. Jones, where the homeless  
Mexican slept,  
your nails were painted red.

On the way back to the house,  
Andy and his friends tried to run  
us over with that Geo Storm, so  
we threw our milkshakes on his hood.  
I stared into your clear lip gloss,  
as we hid in the woods, and I saw the future:

you would marry right out of college,  
move to Juarez and teach English.  
Mitchell would run a successful  
porn site, develop a coke habit,  
divorce at an early age.  
I would sell Flood Insurance,  
drive an S-10, collect shot glasses  
from all the towns I'd visit.

We would barely speak after that day.

## Transitional Economy

A Gomer Pyle of Hillbilly clichés  
nestled in a quant ham biscuit hamlet.  
The mills are gone, but the Bubbas stay;  
work retail and get their Associates.

Punkish, pointy haired, children  
walk the streets looking for escape,  
but skateboards and Meth can't hide those necks.  
No Deliverance, banjos, or rapes.

Just whistlin' Dixie, with a mouth full of dip,  
taking in stride what we deserve.  
Here comes a bus tour, bumpkin it up.  
Live in a pigeonhole or join and serve;  
Podunk scapegoats for a nation's history,  
who were once grateful slaves of menial industry.

## Face Paint

As I prepare for the middle class masquerade ball,  
I coach myself through the finer points of middle  
class conversation:

It is perfectly acceptable to discuss the private  
tennis lessons you received as a boy. However,  
at no time should you discuss hunting or fishing.

It is perfectly normal to discuss other wedding receptions,  
but don't mention Kathy's recent divorce, or the fact  
that James hit her, or how you and your cousin  
went to their house and almost killed him; domestic  
violence does not make for pleasant conversation.

Your parent's ranch style house is something worth  
talking about, but your brother's trailer, the hole  
in its hallway, and the fact you can see through  
to the underpinning is something you should keep to yourself.

The time you drank too much wine after college graduation  
is somewhat acceptable, but do not discuss, those nights  
you spent stoned in Melissa's driveway.

Never forget who you are and never allow others to know.

## An Exercise in Mental Topography

From here I can see  
the things Griffith missed:  
a place where the portable CD players  
are connected to tape decks,  
a trailer, next to a dealer,  
with stolen pills in mint tins,  
a church I grew up in,  
but would never attend,  
the black letters  
on the bottle of 151,  
a yellow box filled  
with cheap powdered cheese,  
the vegetarian who  
made me chicken,  
her book-bag  
covered with safety pins,  
the nights we spent stoned  
in driveways,  
all the words wrapped in cellophane,  
all the snapshots affixed to magnetic tape,  
and an iguana lost in your mom's fourth divorce;  
things I will one day put into syndication.

What

## Electric Sign From 6 Feet Above

The Holiness always left  
a door unlocked,  
but never the same one,  
so the problem was finding it  
before anyone spotted us.

Once inside, we threw down  
our bags, drank and ate whatever  
we had lifted from the gas station,  
turned on a few lights  
in the rooms without windows,  
searched for the switch plate labeled Sign.

On a Sunday night, after evening  
services, the marquee had been changed.  
What have you done for HIM lately?  
had been replaced by Jesus is the answer.

We sat by the window waiting  
for headlights to come over the hill.  
Timing it just right, the sign would light  
up a few feet in front of the driver  
and go dim in their rearview.

If we caught their eye,  
and that moment had changed  
things, we would forever  
own someone's faith.

Debra's (Still Life)

I watch the Goth queen in her knee-highs down Red Stripes  
as an out-of-work programmer kneads her inner thigh.

A woman with hair-metal bangs sells X from an Aspirin bottle;  
her twelve year-old does his Social Studies homework.

Lavardo, from Kingston, and Billy, from Lowgap, sing  
"One Love," as if auditioning for a Benetton ad.

In a corner, the best plumber in Cana plays "The Rose"  
in Drop D.

I sit Indian style watching a Halloween special.

Allison cries over her stretch marks.

## Limping Across a Stage

Screen doors dissolved by buckshot  
fall like children who know they'll be caught  
by fathers who prepare for their landings.

Billy Burcham does not feel the pellets  
embed in his spinal column. Nor  
does he feel his legs as they crumble  
like boot-cut towers. But, he cushions  
his baby's fall; in spite of physics,  
she lands on his chest.

The mother tends to her daughter.  
The ex-husband sits in the living room  
floor, gun in lap; he rocks like a buoy.

Billy, the father, lies restless on the porch.  
As moths flutter into the light,  
he is waiting for what happens next.

## The Sunday When I Realized I Wasn't There to Shop

Back when we liked flea markets,  
and would drive hours for out-of-print videos,  
there was a Sunday trip to Yadkinville  
for some old horror film called Incubus,

and if any place would have a copy, it would be 421  
where Movie Guy knew us by our flea market names,  
and knew what to hold, what to push, what his film school  
son might recommend: a Singapore bootleg  
of Song of the South and Yojimbo (a good way  
to get in to Kurosawa). Three for \$20,  
and our purpose met, we roamed around the market  
in search of characters and kitsch.

Bookman was always a favorite, with his tables  
covered by books about Mustangs (the car and the horse),  
biographies of Robert E. Lee, Gresham paperbacks,  
and a collection of Lee Krasner's better work.

The other vendors, for whom we had made monikers,  
offered something for our bi-weekly paychecks:  
a lime green Sinatra fedora, a mechanic's coat  
with a Pablo name patch, some old game cartridges,  
novelty biker tees, and homemade rubber band guns.

With gas and a few burgers from Hardees, we smiled  
despite the fact that we faced another week of bumming  
smokes in the courtyard.

## The Battle of Silo Hill

We walk for a half hour towards  
the farm house, through abandoned  
tobacco fields, trying to follow  
Eric's muted bongos as they pierce  
the pine tree line, battling the roar  
of stock cars, just over the hill  
on the dirt track.

When we found the breakers  
and lit up the shack, we drank  
Bud Ice on the crumbling porch  
and killed moths with our free hands.

The smell of mold stinging our noses,  
forcing us to squint into the darkness,  
we played guitar until the wound Ds  
cut valleys into the dead skin  
of our fingertips. And after midnight,  
as the stadium lights began to fade  
and last lap was run, we played louder  
finally hearing the noise we had been making.

## An Orphaned Song

The string broke, and his hand stopped strumming,  
but his body moved with the absent sounds.  
As the room grew quiet, except for his singing,  
we stayed calm as our heads began to pound.  
Like throbbing lights tucked behind the blue hills,  
lost to time and men with better vision,  
his notes were ghosts that died inside mills,  
like each word and its collision  
of tongue and teeth, that clicking of his mouth,  
and we knew this was not a solo song.  
His eyes were closed, but ran north to south,  
battling the lids; it would not be long  
before he knew that we were no longer with him,  
before he knew this world was dim.

You and Me at Jackie's Mom's

The kind you don't see these days,  
durable to a fault,  
that sofa was too tough:

a floral pattern,  
rooted in 70's green,  
with strong wooden arms,  
and enduring matte finish;  
our first time couch,  
rigid, uncomfortable,  
awkward and narrow,  
a persistent bench.  
inhospitable  
and adverse to rest,  
a functional time capsule,  
perfect for us,

because it was up  
and out by 4:00,  
when your friend Jackie's  
mom went to work.

Jackie would wake her boyfriend,  
he would wake me, and I always left you  
half awake with no blanket,  
to dream of days when we could sleep  
the whole night through.

## Picture

I asked you for a photo,  
to keep in my wallet  
like some soldier-boy  
in Saigon. Instead, you gave  
me a Polaroid of people  
I didn't know.

In the photo you gave  
me, there is an old couple  
sitting at a two-top table.  
One, the woman, is definitely  
a librarian. The other, her  
husband, is probably the best  
transmission man in town.  
They are in the Pilot Mountain  
Hardees sharing a senior drink  
and an apple turnover, which probably  
sat under the heat lamps all afternoon.  
They could not look any happier.

And from their smiles, I think  
they understand why you  
are taking their picture.  
But you must understand

I'll never work on transmissions,  
and you'll never master  
the Dewey Decimal System.

## Photo Album

I.

I am standing in the Toys R' Us lot  
watching you with that flock of geese,  
your hands full of M&Ms;  
people are beginning to stare,  
and my stomach is turning.

II.

We are at the light in front of the Reeves Center,  
two strands of your hair in delicate braids,  
I snap a photo before light changes,  
while you fain embarrassment.

III.

Every bit of snow has been pushed into one  
corner of the Goodwill parking lot.  
You are standing atop the pile  
arms raised in victory.

IV.

We are at your mom's trailer,  
I hide my eyes behind a Kanga hat,  
your head is buried in my chest,  
neither of us are listening to your father.

V.

You are picking daisies in the rain  
at Veteran's park. Water got inside  
the lens and forever distorted this memory.  
In my mind you will always be blurry.

## The Sophomore Curse

I was at the Holly Springs Exxon,  
in the Saturn, writing about you,  
and when I thought I was finished,  
I turned the radio back up to drive  
but the shadows of single engine  
Ceasnas, flying low overhead, nearly  
caused me to wreck as I tried to watch  
them through my windows.

On the radio, our song begins to play,  
a Weezer single from a commercial flop,  
critically panned, sophomore album.  
Pinkerton, the one that sent Rivers to Harvard,  
to grow a beard and try to forget. The one  
people now call their best and ahead of its time;  
I hope you can see where I'm going,  
and how it applies to us.

## The Week I Kept a Dream Journal

We are sitting in the Subaru, so this is before the Great Trade-In of 2000. I've had 6 No Doze and 1 blue Valium; I'm feeling kinda normal. We are both smoking, in the days when I smoked slower and inhaled less. Some song from Antichrist Superstar is playing, and we are enthralled by a Marilyn Manson metaphor for coming down.

In the Latter Day lot, we are basking in what we think is irony. You are wearing your one and only skirt, so that means it's a Sunday afternoon.

I can see all of the details, but I'm grasping for the symbolism, searching every inch of the car's interior for the meaning, or at the least, something that assures me of the difference between a memory and a dream.

## Outside

She pushes the front yard in her gray sports bra;  
a neighbors calls to see if we want to hire someone.

I'm try to start the weed eater, but I've forgotten  
to prime it.

She wears pants in the middle of June,  
because she hates her ankles.  
I wear my shirt,  
because I hate my love handles.

We finish around 4:30, and she showers first.  
When we're ready, we head towards town  
in the 89 Lincoln.

At the "Italian" place downtown,  
she orders the vegetarian pocket; I get the chicken tenders.  
The waitress doesn't care much for facial piercing:  
how does she eat with that thing?

After dinner, we wander around next door  
looking for some books on tape to send  
her father; he's driving cross-country next month.

Eventually, we get home and fall asleep  
watching something about monkeys on Animal Planet.

Around 3, I wake up, check her pulse (like always),  
kiss her forehead and turn the TV off.

And Suddenly You Are My Trinity

Three-for-one  
discount love-life  
her curls  
her scars  
her mercy

With your amalgamated voice  
you ask me  
if there is a difference  
between light blue and dark blue  
if it's all the same sky

I give it some thought  
enough that we coast down  
from 100 to 60  
and I ask your permission  
to be vague  
and you say

No  
that's the problem  
to begin with  
the sky's too vague

## Road Poem

The backseat an overturned dumpster,  
the radio too low to hear,  
you are sleeping, and I hate to watch you sleep.

I consider swerving to hit that bump  
in the road; I would have someone to talk  
to, which doesn't make me a bad  
person; it makes me tired, bitter, and weak.

All my life I have searched for this sun-  
drenched highway, the one that started  
the cliché, and now that I have found it,  
I'll be damned if I'm gonna drive it alone.

## Stolen

Daniel's septum is all but gone,  
and the weight he put on,  
that's gone too.

Sabrina had the kid; it's ok,  
but they were scared  
they'd messed it up.

She's back at Wendy's,  
and Daniel stays at home  
with the baby.

His mom tried to get him on  
at the grocery store, but  
he failed the piss test.

The two of them come to the store  
and shoplift, because they know  
I won't say a word.

## Recurring

I'm wearing  
a suit  
in a parking lot  
someone has died

You're smoking  
a joint  
in the front yard  
something is missing

We are lying  
in bed watching  
an artsy movie  
someone in the other room

You are packing  
gifts into  
a storage unit  
someone is smiling

I am parked on  
an overpass  
with my lights off  
someone's real home

You are sleeping  
in the backseat  
someone from Barstow

I kiss you in the yard  
We give up in a parking lot  
something is buried

## Ballad of a Clean Apartment

Our eyes are filled with paint, but red  
is all we see; this day  
will rip, like clocks on walls of thread  
or knives through pounds of clay,

our world in two on its way down.  
And when it sets on us,  
and we must watch as our light drowns,  
the night will make us less

than one but more than we can carry.  
And in unison we'll say,  
Should we take another look,  
or just turn in the keys?

How it Applies to Us

Restless hinge, within we go,  
the whole way down we feign.  
Heist my love's worried arms,  
and I in my head again.

after "Western Wind"

## Stayed with the House

When the door closes, the wind bites,  
struggling to spring us from our nest.  
And as you step down into the night,

the moon is muted, the dogs are quiet,  
all our things are laid to rest;  
the door closes, and only the wind bites.

While the neighbors sleep, as if out of spite,  
you have decided to leave our mess.  
And as you step down into the night,

the car's interior, your only light,  
on a new road, inherited in jest,  
remember: doors close, and wind often bites.

And though I want to stop you, to put up a fight,  
the steps creak No, and I trust that they know best,  
because as you step further into the night's

deep bruised sky, onto its ground of blight,  
the house knows what I can only guess:  
when doors close, and wind bites,  
you must to step down into the night.

After

Letter: Awkward Interaction with Former Classmate

Remember Tracy from Honors English?  
Short, ... elfish, the bigot,  
dated that guy from Virginia.

I saw her at the gas station last night.  
It's kinda strange talking to your first  
girlfriend through bullet proof glass.

She remembered this time I kissed her,  
when we were ten. I said, "How things change,"  
and she asked if I was still with "What's her name?"  
I said "No," but, to be honest, I wasn't sure,  
so I switched the subject by looking for change.

I was short a dime, and she helped me out,  
but by the time I slid my money under the glass,  
I was thinking of something else and forgot  
to say Thank You.

Dear Nathan,

Everyone is getting married  
or on an Army bus bound for basic,  
but I'm still reading "The Things They Carried,"  
and saving money for my eye surgery.

My parents are still picking up the tab,  
but things could be worse: I could be Neal Speas;  
the dumb fucker that went AWOL from Fort Bragg  
that they're looking for him around here, who

is hiding in Texas with that girl we can't stand.  
What is her name? Anyway, she's pregnant,  
and when the baby is born, Neil will get caught.

And every other day that recruiter calls;  
they got Neal, John, Mark, Tony, Chris,  
and they won't give up on getting me.

## Relapse

In these smoke filled clothes,  
I smell my 13 year-old hiding place:  
the woods were I pined for teenage riots  
and wrote stories set in Seattle.

In my ten yellowing nails,  
I see crescent scars  
burned into window seals  
and tattered Tom Petty tablature  
from the May issue of Guitar World.

In these hacking coughs,  
I taste Canadian soda from All-American  
truck stops and love stories turned to ash.

Turned Over (Colors Fade and They Grow Brittle)

Your hemline hiked by child within,  
I stare at the bags beneath your eyes.  
As words escape your crooked teeth,  
I swallow them like tacks.

Your face is softer, grown round  
and full, but your lips are cracked  
like the hard Ks from the first trimester.

And before I sleep, I hang bouquets:  
one for you and one for it.  
Like frail reminders of the fall,  
off-color roses and rigid breath,  
they hang together bound and nailed,  
blood rushing to their heads.

## On the Cookie Aisle

I saw Jackie at Food Lion,  
her complexion has changed;  
no longer olive, she's  
gray and covered  
with scars, from bumps  
I don't remember her having.

We talk about welfare  
and Section-8,  
how she can't afford  
to get a job. How she's hoping  
they'll get back together,  
if he stops dealin'.

I try talking about their baby,  
but that leads to a story  
about the Health Department  
and meth freaks wandering  
through halls, nurses stumbling  
over children, inoculations,  
condom jars, and something  
about a bilingual sign.

Then it's my turn,  
what I've been doing:  
college, mountains, girlfriends,  
a lot of good days, petty gripes,  
and words that mean nothing  
to her.

What Dogs Think About When They Think About Wuv

psychotic apes that shave

corrugate the bed sheets

place mints between the ridges

we are leaving this hotel

primates with pensions

crease the slacks

they must be pleated

if I am ever to complete

my apocalyptic novel

chimps with debit cards

starch the collars

write the lipstick wrongs

we are moving to Sandusky

## My Psychic Bound with The Great American Scream Machine

When I was a kid, we grew corn in one row of the garden,  
as part of a plan the farmer drew-up on a clipboard.  
And for a while we had fresh greens to be canned and kept,  
but the peace we had forged, my family and I, with that red  
soil was broken on the day I lost my pinky. When the Earth  
decided what it wanted, it sang to me, in its familiar falsetto,  
Give me your body, and let the plow help.

That gash went to the bone, sand filled the cut,  
and I passed out from pain, but I dreamed. I dreamed  
of the devil limping though a dance under moonlight.  
And somewhere, feeling these words as they escape my mind,  
Henry Rollins is laughing.

Half naked, bare foot, watching some Bangkok sex show  
with a Scottish bootlegger named Grant Robson,  
Henry's chest waves like a Black Flag in a blue sky,  
and he lays it all out, "That's who we are;"  
slapping the bar, "who we are!"  
Henry Rollins is laughing at my lost pinky finger.

And I wonder if his knowing makes it true,  
takes our connection to the next level,  
or by writing this have I spoiled our bond;

Is knowing the undoing  
or can it survive a game  
of Scrabble, a face to face,  
the perfect breakfast  
after a night of drinking,  
the little bits of bacon strewn  
about the Persian rug ?

## Weekend Work

To burn trash in the morning:  
drag garbage and brush to a ditch,  
ignite, top off with lighter  
fluid every few minutes,  
and make sure it keeps  
burning. Let the wind tell

you where to stand. If it tells  
you it's too breezy this morning,  
spray everything down, or it will keep  
going until it escapes the ditch.  
Keep water on it for a few minutes,  
wait until the wind is a little lighter,

and try again. Use matches, not a lighter,  
because you can never tell  
what fire will do; it takes just a minute  
for the flames to ruin your morning.  
Stay as far back from the ditch  
as possible, but close enough to keep

a constant eye on the fire. Always keep  
an eye out for embers that could light  
the grassy area surrounding the ditch.  
Stay close enough that you can tell  
where the fire begins and ends. Mornings  
are good for burning, because of those minutes

where it is both dark and light; the minutes  
when sun and moon keep  
each other company and share the morning,  
when it is like the night, but a little lighter,  
and you can see the flames and tell  
where the grass begins and the ditch

ends. You must keep a fire in a ditch,  
if you want to see it burn. The minute  
you turn your back, there is no telling  
what might happen. If the flames keep  
growing and the wind doesn't get lighter,  
you could have a miserable morning.

Still, there are those morning, standing over a ditch,  
light coming up from the ground, when minutes  
seem to keep and fire has a story to tell.

Old Friend, New Pen Pal

Our mothers stroll  
down grocery aisles  
( is it “Holiday”  
or “Hollandaise?”)  
forgetting their eggs.

My father  
(in the conference room)  
tries to remember  
the projected growth  
for the Triad.

Your dad (kneeling  
on the OSB)  
struggles  
to get his nails  
under the chalk line.

I crawl (parallel  
to the chair molding)  
down the hall  
towards the shoe box  
(full of clippings  
from French  
magazines).

You walk in circles  
(from the kitchen  
to the bath)  
failing to notice  
a week’s worth  
of mail  
and the letters  
I’ve sent you.

## Crooked Stamp

There is always room in the bureau  
for another religious tract or half-hearted  
apology,

for a Christmas card -- months earlier  
or years late. And when the address  
changes, I assume the worst,

but I always know what you  
have to say:

“I saw this.  
I thought of you.”

## To the Point

I can barely tell the difference  
between what was once my voice  
and what no longer belongs to me.

In an upstairs bedroom with unsteady  
floors, we'll bloody our fingers  
before we stop to look for picks.

Words bounce off the snare  
giving my drawl a rattle that fits,  
a labored sound that is deserved.

Behind me is a woman, and in her arms  
is a baby, whose eyes I can feel. And Matt  
says she cackles with every high note I hit.

## One for Brick Apartments

Usually late in the afternoon,  
before the sun had a chance to go down,  
you would call the house and let me know  
who was coming, what they would bring,  
where the night might lead us -  
to a case or to a bottle, from a pipe or some papers-,  
whether to bring movies or a guitar.

In those days when you were working  
and had money for a Friday night and a life  
full of friends, we would cram into the living  
room to tell stories and sing songs.

This was before the hairline fractures  
in your back, before Sarah's brother moved in,  
before the new apartment and the higher rent,  
long before the baby and the new yellow house.

This was a time when you weren't so angry  
and barely cursed the day, when you laughed  
at jokes on television and loved to write riffs  
in the tiny wood paneled rooms.

But now when you call, I can't hear voices  
in the background, no well wishers  
drunk in the living room; I can barely hear you  
over the rumble of responsibility.