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This thesis is a collection of poems exploring the relationship between love and loss. It is composed in three sections that mimic the two quotations used in its epigraph (one passage from *The Odyssey* and one passage from *The Heart Sutra*). Each section investigates the relationship between the human desire to love and the inevitable complications that accompany it.

The perilous and transitory nature of human relationships (to friends, to lovers, and to nature itself) is found to be paradoxical, and the poems as a whole are interested in ways of maintaining these relationships beyond the logic of conventional thought.

THE LOST FRIEND

by

Josh Exoo

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Approved by

Jennifer Grotz
Committee Chair

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For Tony Matott, who will never read these words.

APPROVAL PAGE

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

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Epigraph.....	1
Introduction Involving the Lotus Sutra.....	2
I.	3
On a North Train.....	4
Leviathan.....	6
This Woman.....	7
Kill the Poor.....	8
To No Eve.....	9
The Snow Outside the Hospital Window.....	10
The Newfoundland Runs on the Island.....	11
Pathetic Fallacy.....	12
Laced.....	13
Photograph Framed by a Strange Recollection.....	14
Aeolian Lung.....	15
A Light Wind in Winter.....	17
After Buffalo.....	18
Tony's Dead.....	19
Dream with Its Tomb Made of Leaves.....	20
II.	21
The Lost Friend.....	22
Lines for Christa Brown.....	23
The Eulogist.....	24
Heart Failure as Reported by the Paper.....	25
Tender Given at the River.....	26
Fragile Guy.....	27
Love.....	28
Power Plant.....	29
The Ragman Leans on His Wife.....	31
Hide and Seek.....	33
Dream with an Animal Lurking in Its Shadow.....	34
The White Car.....	36

Hemophiliac.....	39
Aubade.....	40
Titanic.....	41
The Kingdom of One.....	42
Hyenas at the Party.....	43
Hungry Ghost.....	44
The Work of Forgetting.....	45
III.	46
Queen of Hell.....	47
Frankenstein.....	48
Page of Wands.....	49
Song for John Clare.....	50
He Puts the Revolver to His Chest.....	51
Terrible.....	52
Suffering.....	53
Dream with a Joker Pulled from Its Ear.....	54
Rain Runs the Gutter Down.....	55
To Spring.....	56
Springtime Joint.....	57
Kind of Blue.....	58

“Three times I started toward her, and my heart was urgent to hold her,
And three times she fluttered out of my hands like a shadow or a dream
And the sorrow sharpened at the heart within me.”

-The Odyssey

“Form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form;
Emptiness does not differ from form;
Form does not differ from emptiness.”

- The Heart Sutra

Introduction Involving the Lotus Sutra

I read once in the Lotus Sutra,
That life is like a house on fire.

That makes sense.

When I was younger, running
Frightened in a dark and frozen field,
I was on *fire*.

When I fucked her,
Red and swollen flesh inside of flesh,
I was *burning*.

When my loves
Were turning away, or simply
Dead, with their dulled faces,
Cold and quiet in the coffins,
Everywhere a *blaze* took shape.

Fear, desire, losses, shame,
Our house is made of flames
And yet, in the Lotus Sutra,
The Buddha lies: "Outside the house,
There's a toy for you." So the child
Runs from the burning house, unscathed.

I used to see myself as the child,
Or when I aided a friend in need,
I played the sage.

Consider then:
The hapless boy, oblivious,
And the lying sage, afraid.

I can flatter myself with different names,
But the flames are most like me.
And I've learned to love the flames.

I.

On a North Train

Clacks on the track sound down the line.
The clear day shines on the dun deer
Who runs by this spear of a train.
And in the late fall, in the air, under glare,
North rises slow from the ground,
That old cape of snow on its back,
As the train tracks suture through
The mountain curve and the valley low,
And in the click-clack of rail bones
The Hudson and the trees run, home comes:
That cold sun.

All the snow and that sharp, sharp wind,
Girls I loved in the second grade,
All the suicides I've known, the crows
That shadow this old dying town.
November tied around me like a chain
Makes me remember every old friend
Who ended up in prison, all the blonde
Desire that I wore like shackles, humiliation
Red in my cheek, I let it come down
Like the snow upon the wooded sprawl.
The Albany tickets seated around me,
Will never know how far North
You can go:

The frozen hayless fields that stretched for miles,
Kids scampering in front of black tractor wheels.
The kids fighting, the kids crying, and always,
Like the rolling shade of black tractor wheels,
Those kids that had died. And fathers, all those fathers
That scowled in their beards and spoke in stifled
Mumbles. How one day they just took their rifles
Into their work rooms and closed the door, for good.
In the woods the fallen leaves dissolved.
The town was always involved with winter.
Even in summer, stray kids drowned in the river.
And that hushed school chatter after a death,
The breath and words like a light snow.

And, God, those blizzard drugs that swept the town
In blurs of rids, smack, weed at 10 a gram,
Everything was being sold, or just let go.
No one could hold onto anything, so
There were junk shops with dented kids' bikes,
Everyone drove through the slush in their rusted
Trucks by the busted houses in Law Lane,
The low rent squats off West Main.
Some families moved in unseen, others
Moved out, some got smothered
In a blaze of kerosene when their space
Heater tipped. It was all made equal
In that coldest, hardest place.

And the blood, O God, it was everywhere!
I loved calluses from shoveling snow
Splitting open in smears of red on the wood,
Kids in cars, spinning off the icy road
Or smashing a buck on a country curve.
Blood on the metal, on the snow, on the animal,
O, and the old woman who died in the ice storm,
Slipping and splitting her skull, the red running
Onto her cheap nylon coat and that smooth moat of ice.
Ice and powder-snow and blood, O, Adhesiveness!
O Ice, gorgeous on the fur of dead cats,
Reflected in the high-school-blonde's blue eyes,
In my cold-spiked vein, all the same,
When you slipped, it all sort of wept,
It was there to hold you, hard:
The marrow of home.

Leviathan

“He maketh a path to shine after him; one would think the deep to be hoary.”

-The Book of Job

Every Wednesday night, snowy, solitary,
In my little bed, unheard, I heard the train
That tore through town. Deep and long
The whistle came to resonate, through windows
In my child-brain. It echoed in my sleep,
In dreams, in waking things, the echo came.
My little town, a broken, northern place,
And yet, He swam among our snows,
Rumbled, coiled, raked the frozen soil
With his gigantic tail, all tail, He snaked
Across the lawns, the park, the sidewalks,
Through the trails in the woods, the dark
Recesses of the back-road ponds, the fields
Of ice that spanned the fruitless miles,
They struggled, undulant with him,
The rims of terraced vistas caked in rime.

I found Him everywhere among our tribe.
The man slugged a jug of anti-freeze, it slithered
Down his throat. The child's bones were
Breaking, his marrow had been venomed
By disease. The woman driving Route 11
Was met head on by a weaving car, the blood
Slid serpentine in rivulets across the ice.
What was it that swallowed them?
Was it God or the Leviathan? Was that His voice,
That boomed through 3 a.m. on Wednesday
Like a choir, as hollow and as powerful,
Human and inhuman, blasting through the night
And meaning what? What to me then?
A boy, bound to a bed, gazing out a window
Filled with dark, while through my heart
Blood coiled like a snake.

This Woman

This woman's name is _ _ _ _ _.
Her father erased himself with a rifle.
This woman walked a dirt road, alone,
For a whole year, waiting. As a girl
She heard her step dad brush his teeth,
Nightly, before he cracked the door,
Put his hands on her as she sunk
Into the mattress. She's always sinking.
When this woman tries to speak a swallow
Breaks from the eave of the roof and flies South.
This woman downs Southern Comfort
For four hours in the bar before
She blacks out, passes into night.
Her men friends lay her on a table
And take turns fucking her limp form.
Her darkness swallows everything,
And everyone in town knows what
She's done. No one knows this woman.
Her brothers are dead, her fathers are dead,
She drops her pill bottle and all of it
Spills. Each green tablet becomes
A fragment of glass, glittering and broken
On the floor. She crawls on her knees,
This woman, in her dress, ready
To eat each piece.

Kill the Poor

On the first of the month we send them their checks.
See them wait by the boxes, pace by the boxes,
Hungry for ground chuck, and cheap smokes, and rent due.
It's always the same, the great plague of lacking:
My house burnt, I'm pregnant, they stole this,
My car's broke, I'm laid off, my heat's dead.
The welfare and the WIC milk, unemployment,
Single residency occupancy. But we'll pay it
Won't we? Above all other virtues we hold charity.
We'll pay for all the handcuffs and cop cars,
For all the mace in their eyes and the clubs on their skulls,
We'll pay for the cells and their cinder block walls.
And still we have more mercy to dispense. Dollar
After dollar we'll keep giving till it starts to hurt.
Then one of us, the bravest one, will stand and ask
Couldn't we just get this over with? And shouldn't we?
We herd the poor, the starving, the huddled mass
Into the waiting room, click the TV on, pick the first
Poor kid to walk into the courtroom. He shuffles in
Wearing secondhand clothes. We put the gun
To his head, click back the hammer, and he turns
His face away. In unison, we say "God bless you."
As we pull the same trigger, every goddamned day.

To No Eve

To no Adam do we owe our burden.
We built the vivisection lab,
Its squealing cages and syringes,
Its incinerator full of dead rats and rabbits,
Shipping cheap shampoo to discount stores.
We construct the interstate, its asphalt,
Its twisted wrecks, its dead-stopped
Traffic and the dark exhaust.
In the superstore just off the highway,
The woman wanders the grocery aisle
Under the yellow lights and crackled muzak.
She chooses the apple, red and perfect,
A whole bag of waxy, chemical apples
Is thrown into the cart, each one
Shellacked, cancered, dyed.
To no Eve can we relay the blame.
Not this dusk now lain before us
Like a victim, nightly taken in our greed.
It's all ours, this guilt that throbs
Like dead stars above the concrete field.
Even while we rest it breathes,
Expands its chest, tar-black, acrid,
Reeking of gasoline.

The Snow Outside the Hospital Window -for my Father

This is the year that Dad finally dies, we thought
Driving Route 11 to the Potsdam ICU, ditches
Piled high with snow beside us.

We had found the dead fifths all over the house.
In his office. In his car. Cold eight months a year.
He's hibernating, we thought. We let him disappear.

Until he ripped his windpipe throwing up,
Blood everywhere. The hospital rose
Like a monolith from a field of endless snow.

It was white as memory, and where it melted the earth
Poked out in patches. The bag of blood they'd sucked
From his stomach hung over his bed, his face

Pallid, whiskers poking out in patches, lips cracked,
Eyes distant, glassy on a zephyr of morphine.
We were eighteen, waiting for our father's body to fail.

FRAGILE: DO NOT CRUSH, read the box of syringes
Across the room. It seemed so probable to us,
That he would die as soon as we grew up.

Merciless at six years old, we'd shoved him down
The pile of snow they plowed from the municipal lot
And stood triumphant at the top, Kings of the Mountain.

He'd shout up at us like a cartoon villain "I'll get you guys!"
My brother and I sat together in the Hospital,
Hung over, drinking little cups of water,

While they pumped five of pints of blood in him.
He woke up dizzy, afraid that he'd missed Christmas.
It was January, but he was still alive.

Outside, the snow kept falling flake by frail flake.
He had wanted it, to die. It almost made me
Sad that he'd survived. I loved him that much.

The Newfoundland Runs on the Island

Here is the woman and her giant black dog,
As they walk to the island in a fog of snow.

Here is the bridge, and the river beneath:
The blue of ice, and the dark of stream.

Here is the island, at the end of the bridge
With its birches, so still, under snow.

So she is here. She slips a plastic bag
Over her head and waits for lagging breath.

So she must think of the white weight of life,
How hard and blue it all seems, and how cold.

So she must think of the dark flow of death,
And the movement of water under the bridge.

The dog doesn't think the river suspicious
Or auspicious, a place of mercy or darkness.

The dog bounds around the island alone.
From tree to tree, on great black feet he goes.

The dog doesn't think much of life and death,
His breath moves in, his breath moves out.

Pathetic Fallacy

When the cat gets hit by a car, the guy
Buries it in the backyard garden,
Waits till dark, takes a tablet or two
From his stash, downs a bourbon,
And folds his fingers in his lap. His stomach
Smolders while he thinks it over. What if,
Just tonight, he walked outside to where
He buried the cat, and used his tingling fingers
To break the Autumn earth and dig him up?
The guy keeps sipping on his tumbler,
Thinks about it, gives it up. Waits.
Thinks a second time, *No*. he says
To no one. The third time he decides
It'd be okay. One last embrace, to hold him
Once more face to little face, see the cat's
Teeth, each one smaller than a grain of rice,
The white fur still the same, the white fur
That always smelled like rain. To watch
While cold works its illusion, and heat
Steams out through each exhale; see the cat
Breathe in his burning breath.

Laced

This man will lace his morning juice with rum,
The smell of it burns in his nose while he gulps.
The blood-nosed boy will blow his gram of coke,
The drip inside his throat is hot with salt.
This woman's throat will puff a cigarette,
Till lungs turn black and black begins to grow.
The black-mood girl will plan her own sweet
Death: a belt, a kitchen knife, a fist of pills.
And slumped into the kitchen chair I feel
The thread that binds the fabric of despair.
I slip the needle in my arm and hear
The echo of forgiveness in the air.

Photograph Framed by a Strange Recollection

In the picture, Tony slants his head and stares
Outside the frame. I'd like to say he's looking
At the future, but it's just a photograph, a plastic
Way to see the past: our brothers, our fathers.
Tony only saw his Dad in pictures. He'd died
In an accident before T was even born. The colors
Bled everywhere, red throughout the room
That first night T and I got high. I watched my skin
Fall right off the bone. I saw everything farther.
He looked like he was about to cry, he looked
Me right in the eye and said "You are my father."

Aeolian Lung

The night before the SAT exam
We chewed 5 hits of LSD and ran
Across the field and through the woods and felt
Vibrations from the great machine of earth,
Its axis grinding round in metal growls,
I felt the dolor hum, spit little sparks,
Innumerable numbers hung in air,
While deaths lined up in hallways, sat in desks,
And metal doors slammed shut in ceaseless waves.
So Tony grabbed the phone and made some calls
To his dead father, then some guy we knew
Who owned a car. "We need a ride from here,
Right now!" He shouted to the dial tone.
We'd caught that kind of fire of the mind
That nothing could put out. We slammed the last
Two cups of rum, took long-lit resin hits,
Ran fingers through the lighter flame, we could
Not stop the manic gears of that pure fear.
We fled the house, like exiles on the lawn,
We begged the spirits, cursed the shit we'd bought,
Just please, stop buzzing so damn loud, that god-
Damned strychnine curse had burned our bones. We ran
Behind the barn and eyed a pile of junk
Then dove headfirst and crawled like mendicants
Into its bowels and Tony's eyes were wide
And black and all ablaze with rage and grief.
He snarled for breath in his own yard, his mind
In flames of illness, age and death, he sobbed.
I thrashed across old boards punched through with nails
But when he saw me sprawled across the wreck,
He took a breath, his eyes turned blue, his face
Made suddenly soft by random Autumn breeze:
"Christ, Josh," he said, "Be careful, breathe. Okay?"
The wind was up and stirring all the leaves,
And what could stop its breath? Not all
The concrete walls on earth, not life or death
Or even SATs. And like two waves,
Two leaves, two clouds we floated on the dark
And rode its gentle musings through the air.
The bats flapped crazed across the sky then dropped

And scattered out like hope, while we breathed deep.

A Light Wind in Winter

The telephone-pole lights hummed blue
In shrill spots on the frozen dust.
In winter on a Wednesday, young
And damaged, grasping for fun
Drinking frigid vodka and punch
On a school night mixed
In plastic cups, with videogames,
Whispers, music, strained and blue,
The purple glow of strings of lights
Hung about the busted room.
My brother and I at Tony's house
Splayed out on the half-wrecked couch
Slapped pills and joked and drank too fast,
Smoked the shake and seeds we had.

It always ended when we broke
Into lull of night through the window
We'd prop open. There's a kind of wind
That keeps things in the soft flings
Of its secret breath. It billowed
Lightly through the frame and
Carried us as phantoms then
Down through the glacial slope of dark,
Outside, to the woods behind the house,
That darkened copse beyond the pane
The rushing sleep and reeling brain.

Lying down there, that last young breath,
My friends half-dead in an icy lounge,
That phantom-tingle of the limbs,
The air letting go of everything,
Stars burning up in violet streams,
The glittering ice that choked the creek,
The shadowy trees that grew through the black.
It seemed confounding then, but now,
So sweet:
I could never
Remember
The end of the night.

After Buffalo

It did not matter what happened after the cracked blacktop
And the barbed wire fences loomed from the snow's soft wool.
All through high school, hungry, gripping our money,
All eleven miles to the dealer's place, ready to shoot
Another weekend full of white. Driving home with the score
We'd always slow to the shoulder of the old county road.
Always the same icy pasture where the bison crunched
On the snow and stared with tiny eyes into our brights.
It did not matter they were pent up with electric fencing,
That their great legs, and strange humps were to be smoked,
Shrunk and shrink-wrapped into jerky for the interstate's
Insatiable trucks. It did not matter they were docile,
Horns sheared and balls ripped off. We still stopped
Just to watch them, the great beasts of our lives.
An hour later back at T's, starting to hit the high
I'd think of you, old Buffalo, the both of us on the nod,
Our breaths descending toward great sighs, a part of me
Would rise to your animal dream. We dreamt you
Were a mountain, with blue birds and black squirrels
Crawling all across your flesh. You'd take a breath
And feel your molten heart grow larger, churning under
Your massive shoulder, your million granite horns.
I hope you thought of the dream when the slaughterhouse
Saw blade sliced you through to the bone. O Buffalo,
The both of us, a terrible grace once burned in our breast.
It does not matter what happened after.

Tony's Dead

The mountain bows and bears the curse of night.
The trees are born upon the hearse of night.

The coffins of the world are shaped from wood.
The trees give up their leaves, dispersed in night.

In this dim forest of grass, I work to breathe,
My heart is dark and depthless, nursed of night.

His mother weeps alone inside her house,
And wooden rafters leak the first of night.

The book of wind and fall now spreads its leaves,
So J must read the rhyme and verse of night.

Dream with Its Tomb Made of Leaves

His whole house is empty.
I'm trying to find him.
Out the back door
And into the flames
Of maples trembling
In the wind. Red and orange
Everywhere. It's warm
For Autumn. The fallen
Leaves are stacked two stories
High. And there he is,
Standing beside it
Hands in his pockets.
The worst part is
I know it's a tomb.
I don't want to ask,
But the wind is up and
Already stealing leaves
From the top. "Hey T,
Whose..." and he
Looks down and sighs.
Smiles sadly, says
"It's mine."

II.

The Lost Friend

Who cares now how you downed that vodka
In seventh grade then sobbed like a baby
About your Dad being dead, and what's it matter,
Us sitting stoned inside the backyard bamboo patch
On a couch we'd thrown off the roof, the leaves
Fanning out across the dark, or suddenly it was sunny
And we backstroked that summer in the chemical-blue pool
You found that drowned mouse, cradled him in your palm,
Then gently tossed him into the lawn's tall grass.

Years passed, across the world in a hostel, middle-of-nowhere
New Zealand where you and Christa Brown split so you slit your wrist
With a Swiss Army knife, wrote me drugged-out from the hospital
Then never mentioned it again, took the Amtrak
From California to New York, high on peyote and bad coke
The great West outside the window, dying with you like an Indian,
You begged the business man sitting next to you for help,
Well he just stood up, disgusted

Well I loved you just the same, your face drained by travel
And having your heart cracked in two, like that Christmas you
Divided your last dilaudid, gave half to me and never asked a dime,
We slapped them back and hit the drift of music, long midnight
On your stereo blinking blue, that old song with its low organ swing,
I can't ever remember the name. It's like these memories
Strung together without sense, it's all confused, like I'm still
With you in the winter-dark, dope washing over us in waves,
The Northern Lights, or someone burning in the crematorium,
Skin blackened, eyes crinkling up like paper, and me
Clutching my sheet of paper in a church while I
Deliver your eulogy, my voice strained and sore.
They think I'm the lost friend; they think I am the ghost.
No one knows you anymore.

Lines for Christa Brown

"I am, yet what I am, none cares or knows."

-John Clare from Northampton Asylum

And yet I know you yet, my oldest friend.
My you, sweet you, who speaks and breathes
Yet you who're gone. Now liminal,
You crawl the hallways, white and long,
These hospitals outstretched and strange,
The range of you outreaches you.

You've reached the Center: vast, alone,
You tread the lonely rooms confused,
Juggling too many jagged sounds.
Helicopter noise, impossibly small hands,
Convinced your sister's dead, you're lost
And yet, to me, you look the same.

I know your brown hair in the yellow light
Just like when the sun shown on you then.
Yet now, the doctors act in these strange plays.
Shadows speak, or stare.
It's hard to say what's best. Best not
Speak to human beings. The ghosts

That come are cost enough for you. And in
The time between you shuffle through their lines.
Each day, the medication is again refused.
The little pills passed out in cups
That mute the world into a game:
Which one's dead? Who's dying?

Christa Brown, I know you know:
Running summer nights through emptied streets,
Or playing hide and seek behind your house.
Or now, how light retreats, how things begin
To blur. What part of you hides now, what part
Hid back then? You distant, sickest heart;
Yet you, my oldest friend.

The Eulogist

They stared us down stern-faced
In detention until the Friday bell rang
 And we dove right out the door, pill-tilted,
 Clutching cans of Beast, a plastic bong,
 Plunging through the uncut lawn, the old barn,
 Laid out sideways on the lateral sweep
 Of wood floor, him gasping "I didn't think
 It would be this good." We'd hit bottom,
 One of us would drag the other to the bathroom,
 Vomit in the bowl and the reek of cheap soap,
 Running the rusty faucet while our lungs rose,
 The descent was always followed by the breath,
 Synchronized divers, we fell together for years,
Till that October when I disappeared, no one there
 To throw him in the shower, no miraculous
 Water to wake him. I reappeared too late,
 Funeral bound, and choked with thirst,
 I found myself dark-suited, strange,
 A eulogist chained by necktie to a pulpit.
 The congregation, acquainted, awkward,
 Gawked up at me, old social studies teachers,
 Alcoholic uncles, petty criminals we knew.
 I was just nineteen, strung out and underslept,
 Fresh from dreams of him, my alias, my twin.
 I had helped them carry in the coffin, my head
Next to his, pumped full of chemicals, caked
 With mortuary make-up. I didn't give a fuck
 What anybody thought. I was half-gone
 With grief when they called me up to speak
 Ridiculous and skinny in my too-large suit,
 Lone voice in front of our whole town:
 "Love is vast, larger than death."
 He's probably high, that's what they thought.
 They were always wrong.
 They thought he was gone, but I
 Could feel him everywhere. The air
 Was him. I was him, in the middle
Of my eulogy, dust cascading upward
Through the light, I took a breath
And everything was rising.

Heart Failure as Reported by the Paper

No one says it was on purpose.
But I know
How many white pills it takes,
How many white pills
It takes to take you
All the way
To sleep.

Tender Given at the River

In the old days, tender fled from our hands.
Thirty five dollars bought a wax paper slip.
We'd divvy it up, savor the fall, gold grains
Coating the heart's thin walls. I suppose
This is the flipside of the coin: older,
More sober, locked here in the prison
Of the body, tired and tender. I squirm
The sheets, stare at the dark rise of ceiling,
Fear the air. Sweaty, electric with muscle ticks,
Alone in my hurt, my heart, heavy as nickel.
I'm still doing better than you, years dead,
Your blank ashes in a nameless vase.
Now 4 A.M., I bury myself in a bed.
And in the blank and heatless air,
And in the heavy blankets, underneath,
I see a path, and like the dead, a shade
Of me can walk down through the floor,
Until I arrive at the river, until you're
Like you were: young face, blue eyes
Surveying the gray horizon as you stand
On the bank's pale clay. The dense mist
Writhes on the water, and the lone ferry
Inches closer. Take my hand, this last
Time. In my palm, there's still a coin,
It's yours. I want you to have it.
Place it under your tongue, tender
Between us, still ours under grief's patina,
Green and corroded and dear.

Fragile Guy

Leaves and stars are tiled like mosaic

Over Tony's skull.

I pick it up, dust it off, wear it like a hat. This happens every fall

When I pore over his notebooks, letters tiling into patterns, old, archaic.

I feel dumb, donning my ivory bonnet, but how else do we love what's gone?

The dark

Grows like a gourd. Its soft tissue surrounds the slim arch

Of bone that was his brow. I pretend he's reading, and I get to read along.

I'm being sentimental. My grief is like a minnow,

Mouth aflutter, darting pointlessly around the pond.

The temperature drops as Autumn descends. Frost ministers without a sound.

The granite sand sticks like stone in the shallow.

Each year I die this way. Water slows to a stop. Fragments aggregate across the sky

And let me know it's time. I'm a fragile guy. Watch: a hat drops and I start to cry.

Love –for Sarah Rose

The flock of swans descended on the quay.
At the pub, a dozen glasses clinked in the smoke.
Green waves rolled in the bay.
Everything moved when she talked.

Cold stars sparked silver in the vault of black.
Dead cans bobbed helpless in the brine.
The smell of salt. Her white cheek.
Her sadness was more beautiful than mine.

The streetlights glittered green on the sea,
Dim flickers in the pitch.
I walked home dizzy with loneliness while the tidal splay
Washed over the stones. My shoulder still burned from her touch.

No one was out that night. The street was completely clear.
What had she done? The moon hung blue for years.

Power Plant –for Sarah Rose

We walk slow
Down the rows of hedges and houses.
Rose and I
Took some pills and went out to explore
This little world
Of springtime Suburbia we can't afford.
Through the dark
The KV lines are stretched on their towers
The power
Burns the streetlights all yellow, the ghost lit
Television sets
That flicker blue from in the brick built homes.
We follow
The crawl of wires over concrete, reach
The Power Plant,
Where all those domestic electric springs start,
And my heart
Is on fire at the locked gate of the chain-link fence.
There's a sign
That says in huge letters of red: DANGER!
The block man
Below, is electric, back-arched, blank-faced
Caught dying
Forever, while the lightning surrounds him
And I am him,
The man who can't stand it, the metal all humming,
This place where
It happens, where the power is sold in bursts
Of blue sparks.
You can feel it, the Power Plant, searing the dark,
It kills us,
These places and people all burning in grids
Hid behind fences
And brick walls, locked in ridiculous houses.
But *we're* together,
Dosed and scattered, wandering wires
In our frailty.
Put your hand in mine, my Rose,
My compass,
My windward star above the vast

Electric-sea.

The Ragman Leans On His Wife—for Sarah Rose

I wake at 5:00 to the dim wars of things.
The arc of the chair, the dresser's height,
The white-hot burst of the bathroom light,
And the wet of the frigid tap on my cheek.

I sway half-dead in the threshold.
My wife, asleep, a curve of blue peace:
The white cheek, her hair, how it seems dark
And light, cascading in waves. Such silk.

My frayed uniform splayed on the floor,
Gets slipped on and I tromp to the car.
Then a slide alone through the solemn street,
Past strangers' houses silent with sleep.

Pull up, punch the clock, rub eyes, work.
I mop the disinfectant slop on the tile,
The bleach and the chemical-lemon-scent,
Harsh incense of this hallwayed place.

Nice cars roll into the lot with the sun.
Sets of nice clothes span the sparkling floor.
The office awakes with the clack of keystrokes
Hum of dial tones, voices droning into phones,

Trickle of rags in my hand, soaked and wrung,
In gray chemical showers, and lights shining gray,
I scrub the hours away, until the Boss appears:
“We need to talk about some issues, Josh.”

Of course, it has to do with dust and money,
His disappointment hovers like a vulture over both.
On his desk there is a picture of a boat he owns.
He has me wipe the glass clean every day.

Alone in the empty hall, I hold my mop. The hot
Water drips in the slop and bleeds steam.
I lean and dream of the silkiest thing:
The slime bucket shimmers with darkest grace,

Reflects her mind, her face, this plastic spine
That holds me up. I stare into the grit, the scum,
The threads of the mop, dark and light, in waves.
I work to save; but what I love, I have.

Hide and Seek

I hold the two year old who isn't mine.
Curled in my lap, she watches old cartoons.
See babysitting's work that I don't mind,
To hold a little life and feel it breathe.
My Rose and I are watching her today.
She's tired from playing too much hide and seek.

I like the little arc of play and rest. Her chest
Is such a miracle. That sound, slow breath,
Amidst the blams and scrambling of cartoons.
Many wails will pierce the veil of morning.
Some are playful, some are painful. It's strange,
Cartoons and kids display a lot of range.

We lost a little thing like her one year,
Before it really was a thing like her.
We lost a hope, and Rose, a little blood.
Today, we're simply playing hide and seek.
I close my eyes and count to ten then peek
To see her turn the corner, coy-eyed daughter.

I make like I can't find her hiding place
And shout "Where's Kimberly?" She might get so
Wound up in it, that she'll forget the game,
And nervously mistaking this for loss,
She might cry out my name, a child's voice,
That echoes from the other room: "Hey Josh!"

Dream with an Animal Lurking in Its Shadow

I awoke in a dark sea of ferns, all around

Loomed a maw of pine. Through the gloom
I watched the black shape pacing
Back and forth. I stood, squinting,

Shirtless and freezing, and brushed
The frost from my eyes. Numb-fingered,
Wrists aching, I was bewildered, but

I walked to him, the dark coyote, skinny,
And as tall as me. When I stepped
Within a man's length he stopped pacing.

He had one crimson eye, and one gray-blue.
My hand was not my own, and darted out
To cup his sable ear. Coyote spoke:

Love is always leaving.

His voice smoldered like a cinder in my ear.
My right hand rose, fingers sharp as teeth.
Coyote simply stared as I ripped through

My breastplate, felt the snap, crisp as an apple.
I tore each artery like a rubbery worm,
Then pulled it whole from its ivory silo.

The copper-scent burned the windless air,
The vaulted sky above, the woods below.
I tied a ventricle around my wrist

Like a little rubber band. I let it dangle,
A lightless lantern swung into the dark.
Coyote tracked behind me like a shadow.

I held my red heart, riven in my hand,
Spilling blood with every step along the trail.
I felt my chest get heavy, my limbs begin to pull.

I felt love buzzing like a fly around my skull.

The White Car

October rolled over the night factory pipes
Two blocks away, over the white car parked
Outside in the trash-covered foundry yard
And everything was crisp, everything exact
Except for my life, and my wife who was
Beautiful, and tired, and sick of my love
And who, five years before wore a white dress
In a red church on a warm afternoon. But now
It's night, the joint's burned down, the wine
Is gone and there's an old song we both loved
So shouldn't we take a walk to the tracks
And stand on the rusted overpass, light
A cigarette, read the graffiti that shouts
NO KING GEORGE! But what's he to do
With all this? With bombs over Baghdad
While mad King George, with his wife
Sophia Charlotte, had fifteen fine children
And us with none, though you promised
That we'd have a girl named Sophia, but
We have only the wisdom of nothing, wisdom
That makes us stand on the train track stoned
While King George walks in the foundry yard
Adorned with white velvet and a crooked crown
Sifting through trash while his white brain burns,
And as I study the turns of the chain link fence
And think of your legs folded on the white sheets
The night we got married, and the light
Burning through the cheap hotel window
While we made love and conceived fifteen
Phantom children, though we only had one,
And did not manage that and tonight they line up
On the soot-covered tracks, with their dark hair,
Their shadows stretched under the factory lights
And the hum of the lathes, the voice of machines,
The cast off metal littering the yard,
And this is love isn't it? I know what you're
Thinking: *He's just fucking crazy.* Maybe I am
I've been caught in the haze of a love
Eight years long and the pub on the sea prom
Where I waded into Galway Bay, and shouted

To you on the shore, and you just watched
And wouldn't step in, and what was it
I was saying? NO KING GEORGE or
I LOVE YOU SOPHIA CHARLOTTE
And tonight this sea of factory debris
Is our hearts, we're surrounded by broken
Glass bottles and trash and King George
Who would just scream and thrash at the end,
Blind and deaf, stuck in a straight jacket
In his ornate palace with the factory noise
Just burning his brain, the insane
Kind of power these machines must require
Juiced all night under the fogged out sky,
Each socket, each cog, each gear grinding
And the last time we made love, I just stopped
When you came, I got this terrible feeling
You were already gone, I was already alone
So what good to come here, to this desolate
Factory with its rust piles and saw dust
And metal and concrete? Then I see it
Parked in the dark behind the foundry fence.
The white car cast in gloom with this blue glow
Burning inside. *I will touch that white car.*
I just say it out loud, without thinking
Though I know what you're thinking
He's just fucking crazy. Well okay, I am,
But it's too late, I'm already climbing
The overpass asphalt down to the street,
I kick a foothold into the fence and climb up
Till suddenly I'm standing on top of it
Ten feet in the air. And the stars where were they
All this time? Blocked out city wide
From the third shift factories burning their fuel.
So I hang and drop down to the foundry yard
And I walk past the scrapped palettes
Stepping on rust bolts and cold dirt
While I imagine the hands, all the hands,
The thirty white hands of the children
And the calloused hands of the workers
Grinding out steel, and my hand in your hand,
And the hands of machines forging engines,
Fiery hands making glass, and black rubber

And steel. Millions of hands working tired
Under hidden stars, these same million hands
That have made the white car. They burn
While they work for this thing. I'm so close now
That I see a man who's sleeping inside
And the screen flashing out some children's
Cartoon all blue on his cheeks, surprisingly smooth
And long hair someone's folded in braids
And this peaceful look and his dark Latin skin,
He's not a night worker who's taking a nap,
He's the son that we lost. His name is King George.
I can feel it as my fingers almost meet the car's steel,
So I say it: *King George*. And he opens his eyes
And this slow surprise washes over his face
His cheeks like a child just waking,
Like some confounded king who rises
From madness just before he dies, and my God
It's been years, it been years I've been waiting,
Just to touch this white car that's his cradle,
His throne, his royal steed, and it's all
Fucking crazy, it's really just crazy to try
To hold love in your heart like a white horse
Pent in a stall made of muscle and vein,
It just thrashes around, blind and mad,
As it kicks at the walls with its iron-shod hooves
And it just wants to bolt, to just go,
And go far, but it can't even break the dim
Distance between us, you up on the tracks,
And our son, King George, locked behind glass
And me trespassing here in this foundry yard.
I know you'll say none of this did any good,
That I just took this whole thing too far
And all of my million hands have been burnt,
So I let go of my life, and I touch the white car.

Hemophiliac

The woman no longer loves her husband.
He knows this. Her love always flows away.
He listens to her hollow
Voicemail echo through the plastic:
“If you need to cry I hope
You let yourself.”
In a way, there is sweetness there.
In a way,
Once he starts bleeding he will not stop.

Aubade

The cops are coming, red and blue
With sirens blaring so we run through
Emptied patios and alleys, jumping over
Wrought iron railings. What cover
Can we find now? I hold her hand and
Sprint full tilt. I will not leave her behind.
How fast we can run together! How far
We can jump into the air! Her hair
Is longer, dream hair, and we could run forever
In this night. When I wake in the severed
Light I find my world again. The facts
Dawn slowly on me. I must go back
To this tired skeleton that I cannot outrun.
And Sarah will not be there. Sarah's gone.

Titanic

“I drink to the wreck of our life together.”

-Anna Akhmatova

The women and children (we hold no children)
Leisurely layer their formal wear and board
The life boats. I let them. I must go down,
I must bequeath this body to the deep.
Let the thousand dollar chandeliers
List their crystals on the ice now.
I shall drink it, my darling this
Water that tastes like your
Blood. Half-frozen, heavy
With salt, so unlike the air,
So unlike a warm breath
Passing across my neck
At night. Who would
Have thought we let
The hull sink all the
Way to the seafloor?
Sand and cold, fish
So oblivious they
Couldn't care less.

The Kingdom of One

I am the King of this tomb. I could
Lie in this bed all day if I want to,
 Eyes closed, with my hands at my sides. I hear the fleeting noise:
 Each heavy step of the upstairs neighbors,
 A far away leaf blower's drone,
 The birds, all day, each chirp.

The King can make his coffee, cry with his face in his hands
Whenever he wants to. He can don loneliness like a crown.
 In His robe He is majestic watching light leak through the blinds:
 Slatted on the newly purchased chair,
 Spoked upon the tea-stained carpet.
 Illuminating all remaining dust.

The King cannot afford the luxury of sleep,
And any repast just makes his ulcer worse.
 I wake alone each morning to a dream where I am still myself.
 But no, the King does not exist. To be a monarch
 Requires another heart. What am I but some dull
 Decree dissolving in a white-walled room?

So why must I insist on this charade?
I am not the King, am not myself, am not a thing at all.
 Why cling to a tattered title with no subject but itself?
 Still the same background sounds to hear each afternoon,
 Still the same sun arcing crisply through the sky,
 Still together in separation, this wreckage so pristine.

Hyenas at the Party

The hyenas awaken ready to scavenge
Everything I have. Poised on the border of rain
They tail me all the way to the party.

I round the corner and feel them watching.
Outside on the porch the streetlight turns
Each wet leaf into another hyena's eye.

Inside everyone's propelled by PBR and 80s pop,
Out here, the hyenas circle the house in silence.
Composed of water and leaves, I watch them

Flash past the windows, hear their manic
Laughter; they are laughing while they eat.
Am I the only witness to their feasting?

How come no one sees them stalking up the hall
Into the bathroom, no one sees them bristle
Up their hackles and shake their filthy ears?

There's a hyena on the table ripping sinews
From the white cat I used to own. Hyenas
Are cackling on the crowded dance floor,

Invisible underneath the partiers' feet.
One crunches on my best friend's arm. Another
In the empty coatroom, chews my ex-wife's leg.

I sip Campari, study his maw, begin to see
I am floating in an ocean of hyenas.
Camouflaged as streetlights, bitters, and tree leaves,

I float past them on the starless boulevard.
Their green eyes stare me down the whole way home.
They won't stop gnawing. It's their bone now.

Hungry Ghost

I can cook the rice. I won't
Eat it. My ulcer smolders
While it steams. On the mirror
There's still a strand of her black hair.
When I dress, I open the drawer where
Her fingers used to sort her silks.
When she left, she gave me her ghost.
The ghost is my wife. I cook
For the ghost, shave and dress
For the ghost. I give thanks for it.
I consider it a kindness.
But I am a liar.

The Buddhists believe if you
Desired too much and you lied,
You became a hungry ghost
Forced to wait at the gates
Of an Indian city you could never
Enter. And so you stood there in the dust,
Clutching your swollen belly
With skeletal hands. And some souls
Could see you, so your ghost heart
Leaps as each foreign caravan
Drives its oxcarts to market.
Which one will know you?

The beautiful Chinese girl stops,
Walks to you calmly with a pot
Of white rice. Go on. Take it.
Place a grain onto your tongue.
Feel it burst into flame, a bitter
Cinder. The girl is so beautiful.
The way her black hair falls
Over her silk-covered shoulder.
But she knows what you are and still
She fills your beggar's bowl, and still
You will tell her she is kind;
All the liars do.

The Work of Forgetting

Alright, let's begin
With the needle. No ink needed.
We're taking out the blood.
Reverse tattoo. The ring
Finger first. Split the skin
And watch a single drop
Well up on the tip

That once traced her white breast in a rain soaked city.

Now finish the rest of the finger,
Then your tongue, and your wrists,
The inside of the cheeks,
Between the toes, the eyelids,
Each thin blue vein, everything
Connected to this idiot heart
That just won't stop.

III.

Queen of Hell- for Aubrey, before we met

When my wife moved out she tacked
A Chinese tapestry to my wall.
Over the phone I asked her
If she knew who it depicted.
“No.” she said “I just thought
You’d like it.” The crimson visage
With its flaming crown belongs to Yama;
He is the King of Hell. I can’t recall
If he has a wife, but I will myself
Imagine her: her elaborate white hair
And ebony skin, long sharp nails,
Slim, with elegant eyes and skeletal cheeks.
And she would be in love with him.
She would trace her delicate finger
Across the desert of his chest.
She would embrace him, hold on
While the ceaseless screaming echoed
From the kingdom’s twisted spires.
They would lie together on a bed
Carved from bone, covered in sheets
Sewn from the skin of sinners.
She would think of all the suffering,
Of Hell’s myriad levels, how their
Dominion stretches all the way to earth.
In the temples of endless torment
Under the underworld’s red sky,
I will still believe it possible,
That he could have a wife, that she
Would love him in great pain.

Frankenstein

What I'm making's complicated, intricately
Stitched between cuts and pills, shots and booze.
Cheating death is easy. People do it every day.
But I get dizzy, watching the tiny red and blue squares
Patter softly off the walls. My work begins
Every evening when I retreat to the secret basement.
The woman upstairs cannot hear me, or
Does not need me anymore. Still, I must pursue
Supernatural grace, I will tattoo it on each muscle.
The dead are so supple, we can make them into
Anything at all. There will be a new man,
Stronger, faster, and better equipped than I am.
If this sounds foolish, just take a look: the skin
Is almost ready, tethered to the frame it shimmers
In the lamplight, glistens just like life. But the
Beaker won't stop leaking acid and I cannot
Hear a thing under here, it's all red and blue noise.
When can I complete the ritual, with my mad hair
Floating in the static while the basement crickets
Flicker into light? When will I rise three feet
Into the air and shout to no one *It's Alive*

Page of Wands

“A young man stands in the act of proclamation. He is unknown but faithful, and his tidings are strange.”

-Rider Tarot Deck

The heat at midnight burns the summer air.
My wife has left so what's to do but read
Out on the porch with a thick *Romantic Verse*,
The ice inside my scotch now melts and drifts
In tendrils pent inside the glass. My hand
Now leaps the rim to flip a yellowed leaf.
From lake to lake, and verse to verse I roam,
My mind, a skylark flitting through the dark.
The cruxes of their pens in letters laid
Across a page as vast as a ravine,
Paint scenes both beautiful and strange,
And at the arcane bottom, there's the heart:
A bark upon the ocean's darkling hush,
A ghost that roams the gloom around the lake.
I hold a line from each and hear it breathe,
Still, this smoldering energy: death's face,
An ancient king, a Goddess with no name,
The lovers and their doom, the violet moon.
Shelley got a letter once from Keats,
That urged him toward control, and yet,
John confessed he'd been an untamed pen
“Whose mind was like a pack of scattered cards.”
The years have scattered, still, this page of words.

Song for John Clare

It's the sound of it all that wounds you so, John,
It's the sound of the wood and the thrush and the sky,
It's the cricket in the thick of it, the rocks in the grass,
How they echo and twitter and talk to you John,
And the rushing, the rushing, the wind and the rain,
Hear the river, the slivers of minnows are sighing,
And it's louder, it's louder and it's not calming down,
So you're thrown in the clink, in a Northampton cell
But you hear it, John, you've always listened so well,
O the well John, the underground water, and the roots
In the cellar and the dirt, it's all screaming, for you John,
For all your dear daughters and the wife and the friends
That saw you off, and the cages, the branches, the hounds
Are all barking, and the bark is now braying, and the leaves
John, the leaves how they whistle like a knife through the air,
And the stars John, walk out John, to the stars now,
Feel the night John, in your hair and in your ear,
It's the stars that are ringing, how they ring, God they ring,
And the dark, the dark is the bright of the soul John, it sings.

He Puts the Revolver to His Chest

“Through me you are directly involved in the creation of paintings that will appear calm even in the catastrophe.”

-Vincent Van Gogh,
from a letter to Theo, never sent

Still, the crows heave up from the dim-gold wheat in their black spatter,
Scattered in the navy sky, they hang on the wall while we watch them.
There are other paintings: a dozen portraits of his postman, sunflowers, ears
Of wheat. But this one's best, with its murder of crows. I feel them surge
Inside my chest, think of his heart exploding in that field, the great birds breaking out.
How strange that his painting can contain them, just cotton-canvas and antique-oil,
Held together with scrim and horse-bone glue. We agree that this is beauty:
This clumsy flapping through the dark.

Terrible-for Brigitte

After my divorce I fell in love with a sparrow.
It was winter so she sang with light sorrow.
I could do no right with women, why
Not love something whose heart beats 500
Times a minute, something with wings
That lived far away in a North Country oak.
I could find her at a halfway house for the poor.
I could find her flitting around the liquor store.
And I was terrible to her, took pills and
Nodded off while she flew all night
Down the coast just to light on my finger
Then I would fall into her just like she was
A woman, I never thought of a sparrow,
The strained heart, the marrowless bones,
The stone-cold wind on its breast. I'd like to say
I was patient and kind, and could wait
For a long time, the whole life of a sparrow,
Until she turned into a woman. But I can't
Write that kind of poem. Instead the sunset
Is blue all through the snowstorm and
The sparrow is never seen again. My poem
Always ends this way, with the dying light,
With a man being terrible.

Suffering- for Linda Gregg

Where the beach meets the ocean
There's a door. Carved from marble,
It is yours to open. So you must.
Set your foot into the water. Wade farther,
Feel the cold rise up your calves.
The ache in your ankles is the beginning.
This salt brine floats everything, everyone.
The lover leaves the house for the last time
In such calm. The dog laid on the side
Of the road is attended only by flies.
The child sprayed with shrapnel, now
So quiet. Everywhere the starving
Hold their stomachs and try not
To move. The bombs have leveled
The whole city to rubble. This water
Is not drinkable. The door has closed.
This ocean is what we have. Watch
The white sun recede on the horizon.
In twenty five years you will be dead.
Over the phone a thousand miles away
You insist there is still joy. Within
My skull I hear a voice. And why,
Why do I believe you?

Dream with a Joker Pulled from Its Ear- for Stuart Dischell

There you are, you waltzing fool,
In a shark skin jacket at the battle
Of the Somme. This evening your bride
Is played by a beautiful dead Frenchman
Missing an arm. You spin him with your
Customary grace, dip his broken body,
Then trace your ashen finger, tenderly,
Across the face of all dead beauty
Leaving only a pencil-thin mustache above
The lips. All this just a lead in to the kiss
That you lean for, but will not bestow.
Instead, you pull a single playing card
From behind his ear, twirl it through
The mustard gas air, and for the finale
Lay corpse and card into the foxhole's
Cradle, its still warm blood-wet mud.
Goosestepping through the whizzing bullets
You blow a kiss to that stray dog
Picking his dinner from a cadaver's cheek.
When the faulty mortar shell suddenly
Explodes with all its silken smoke,
I can still make out your Cheshire grin.
How like you, to break every heart
In the scene, then make your sweet escape
On a 19th century bicycle, carrying only
The Mona Lisa stolen from the Louvre,
And a sheaf of poems written in the shapes
Of antique cars. Your night is not yet over,
Mon ami. I will watch you cycle all
The way to Paris just to keep your tryst
With the beautiful deaf prostitute, who
Is now preparing your glass of Ricard,
Sorely needed and much deserved.

Rain Runs the Gutter Down

The graveyard's headstones
Are flat in the ground so no one
Has to mow around them.
When rain splits the summer air
The dead feel close as friends.
All of us are here,
Smoke-clouded in a ring
Around the porch rail,
Sipping warm beer,
Just watching the storm.
There's a rusted tin fence
That runs a length of field,
In the drizzle all lit gray,
Liminal. I love the way
This rain that hosts all evenly
Falls now in waves of wetness
On the churches, on the trailers,
Cows and crows, the old roads
Where the clouds roll out,
Such easygoing ghosts.

To Spring- for Allison

In my dim apartment slow dancing this new woman
In her bloneness with her lips next to my neck and as we
Sway she says so softly: *You smell good*. So I ask *Why?*
I mean, I smell like cigarettes and bourbon. And she
Says with sudden gravity, she says it, *No. You smell like spring*.
What does she mean? Why say a thing like that to me?
To Spring, the constant stranger, sleep's great destroyer,
Season of musk and desperate sex, thawer of animal carcass,
Uncoverer of the winter bone, usher of broken branches,
Windy dervish in the middle of the meadow's verdant carpet,
Spring the swarm, the gnat, the ant, the worm,
His trees have leaved their dead and swell to bud,
All their blossoms open up like wounds upon his hands,
Spring sways now in his haunted music, the rain bird
Chatter beats the rhythm as it rises crawling, creeping
From the backs of last year's dead. The song stops.
We're done dancing. I would like a kiss, just one,
To help bring back the Spring. What do I mean?
Spring will come regardless. It comes, but not for us.

Springtime Joint

The red breasted
Robin in the yard
Changes every
Day a little more.
Bird eyes, once brown,
Are now a milky gray. Feathers
Are fraying into threads of dirt.
Legs shrivel into twigs. Years ago,
Kid-crowded in the park we held
A funeral. A dead bird someone
Found. I laughed and Christa Brown
Got mad. "Be serious!" she said. I suppose
I'm serious as I walk to work past the robin,
His beak peeling back its little husk. At night
I roll a skinny j, seal it with a lick. I sit here
On the porch steps, smoke. Death behaves this way, moves
His hands, breathes the same as us. Under the shroud of stars:
My robin, cold, constant, red-breasted like a feathered heart.
Smoke reels skyward, slims its tendrils into night. I stub my ember
On the rail, and then descend the stairs onto the darkened lawn grass,
Lean down, touch his crinkled ankle, chuckle, like I've known him all my life.

And make love to me until

We'll feel like we can die.

Dissolve there under the summer sheets, soften to
The blackness of the earth, the smell of fresh-cut grass,
The sound of Miles's trumpet bleeding out a window
Two floors up.

I know, my gurnied girl, you can't
Believe me now, so I'll tell you this is all just a poem,
That a stranger, years later, dreamt up this whole scene:
The jazz, your dress, the cool sheets that cover
Your scarred

Heart, which is somehow still so green.