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[No Titles in Utopia]

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[NO TITLES IN UTOPIA]

A Thesis

by

ESTEBAN J. RODRIGUEZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2013

Major Subject: Creative Writing

[NO TITLES IN UTOPIA]

A Thesis
by
ESTEBAN J. RODRIGUEZ

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May 2013

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ABSTRACT

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The intended purpose of this thesis is to compose a collection of poetry consisting of four sections with each section containing between four to ten poems. The poems themselves will range between one to three pages and will be divided according to their particular subject matter, such as, but not limited, to childhood reflection, father-son relationships, the estrangement from suburbia and modernized America, and ekphrasis-inspired pieces that weave both art and narrative elements together. My main goal with this collection is to write poems in a clear straightforward manner without obscuring language, and constructing persona narratives that invite the reader to view a particular theme or subject from a different perspective.

DEDICATION

I would like to thank Dr. Steven Schneider and Emmy Perez who have mentored me for the past few years, and their patience as I gradually grew as a writer. I would also like to thank Dr. Cole for her keen ears, and the feedback she provided me with the music and rhythm of these prose poems. Finally, I would like to thank my mother and stepfather for their loving support in whatever I chose to pursue, and a special thanks to Kaitlin Martin, Daniel Mendoza, and Charles McGregor, who read and reread many of these poems in order to get them to their present form. I am in debt to your motivation and gratitude.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful for the patience and guidance with everyone involved in helping me get this thesis together; their input and advice have helped me tremendously throughout the past few months. I am also appreciative of the editors and journals where some of these poems first appeared or are forthcoming.

basalt: 'Christmas' and 'Toothless.'

Ghost Town: 'Telenovela' and 'Toolbox.'

Huizache: 'Fence' and 'Fowl.'

Sleipnir: 'Equilibrium', 'Diplomacy', and 'Zapper.'

Thin Air: 'Goldfish.'

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I began writing poetry somewhat seriously when I was 21, primarily as a way to break the monotony I was experiencing in my life at the time. As an unemployed recent college grad, I needed something more concrete, not in the financial sense but in the sense that I could have something that was always there, that I could always turn to, regardless if there were changes to my life or not. Initially, writing poetry was nothing but a cathartic release, a way to express frustration in a different manner or a manner in which I could speak beautifully about something or someone I had a strong relationship with, like my parents, friends, even girlfriend. The extent of my audience was limited to a small group of coffee shop colleagues, and I was satisfied with sharing and writing with them in mind, knowing full well this was just a minor hobby I had with many others at the time. Those of us who play basketball know very well we won't all make it to the NBA but we keep playing day after day knowing that it's the sport that really matters, the feeling that no matter how the score turns out, you're in the thick of something that's important to you.

American poet A.E. Stallings said in an interview with the MacArthur Foundation that poets are only happy when they are in the middle of composing a poem. I think this emotional description rings true not only with poets but writers and artists in general. It's the art of writing that captivates those who want to become writers, and the reason they want to perfect their craft

further. Perhaps I'm being a bit too naïve here and not all of us feel this way, but as I became more serious about my craft and the poetics I was subscribing to, a poetics that was still evolving as I evolve as a person, I too shared Stallings' sentiment, and started searching for poetry that would elicit the same emotional response I wanted to write.

At the start of 2011, I began reading a few collections by American poet James Tate, particularly *Worshipful Company of Fletchers* and *Return to the City of White Donkeys*, which I was attracted to because of the fluid and accessible, although highly poetic language of his poems. Tate also combines a large amount of surrealism (especially in the latter collection) that brings his readers into a completely different world, and allows them to experience something different they perhaps might not experience with another poet's work. A great example of Tate's masterful simplicity is seen with the first poem in *Worshipful Company of Fletchers*, titled 'Go, Youth' (pg. 8). Although I have never tried to emulate the strangeness or haunting surrealism Tate is known for, I love the way he can use simple, cliché phrases such as 'missed the boat' and 'middle of the road' and twist them enough to suggest something more below the surface, a loneliness everyone can relate to. Tate doesn't try to say what doesn't need to be said, and instead focuses on colloquial use of language and exploring it in different ways, whether it's turning phrases or using them in a fresh context. It is the exact same language I've been trying to manipulate ever since, something inviting and highly original that other poets haven't fully explored yet.

At the time this seemed easier than I had envisioned, given my still narrow view of poetry, and as I began exploring different American poetic movements, New York School, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Confessionalist, etc., I realized I liked a variety of poetic styles and that ultimately I should try to carve my own voice given the eclectic tastes I was slowly starting to

develop. Even now, I'm always willing to explore the contemporary poetic landscape with an open mind, with the idea that different poetic styles can still have a direct or indirect influence on me as a writer.

An American poet I explored less than a year later was Tony Hoagland. I became fascinated, again, with the simplicity and humor in his language, the dramatic monologues, and the way he could take a subject such as relationships, sex, masculinity, consumerism, American guilty pleasures, and make them not only fresh but relevant to today's society. Perhaps what I loved, and still love, and keep coming back to, is the fact that Hoagland's poetry extends beyond that of academic circles, and it isn't bogged down by language that obscures the meaning of what a poem is trying to convey. Particular poems that have influenced me are "The Change", "Dialectical Materialism", "Safeway", "Mistaken Identity", "Visitation", and "America", which are all persona narratives that relate the speaker's personal alienation from subjects such as race, consumerism, disease, and male-female relationships. For example, in the poem "America," Hoagland narrates a scene where the speaker (presumably a teacher) is reflecting on one of their student's response about what America means to them:

America

Then one of the students with blue hair and a tongue stud
Says that America is for him a maximum-security prison

Whose walls are made of RadioShacks and Burger Kings, and MTV episodes
Where you can't tell the show from the commercials,

And as I consider how to express how full of shit I think he is,
He says that even when he's driving to the mall in his Isuzu

Trooper with a gang of his friends, letting rap music pour over them
Like a boiling Jacuzzi full of ballpeen hammers, even then he feels

Buried alive, captured and suffocated in the folds
Of the thick satin quilt of America

And I wonder if this is a legitimate category of pain,
or whether he is just spin doctoring a better grade... (*What Narcissism..* pp. 7)

What I deeply admire about this kind of poetic aesthetic is the fact that Hoagland can capture the speaker's reflection about American culture through the use of clear, colloquial language that doesn't try to intentionally obscure the meaning from the reader, but seeks to convey it on a much deeper level precisely because it isn't contrived to feel like a regular poem, in the sense that it's adorning it with complex syntax or word choices.

I feel that sometimes, some contemporary poets veil the true enjoyment of a poem through often dense, ambiguous, and incomprehensible styles, such as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school and those that have been greatly influenced by them, but even though I enjoy reading poetry that has a hint of mystery and extreme linguistic complexity, I prefer to write poems in a slightly opposite manner. I'm constantly seeking to create an easy yet poetic way for readers to view a particular theme or subject, which in my poetry at its current stage, focuses on childhood reflections, alienation, and dissatisfaction with contemporary living and relationships.

This was an endeavor I had taken on long before I began thinking about a thesis, and I once I started working on the outline for what I would include in this collection, I found it easier to handle the organization of themes and voices. For this thesis, I decided to make three sections titled *Broken Mementos*, *Dear Father*, and *Life Among the All-Too-Common*. The first two

sections would consist of a younger voice reflecting on childhood memories with relation to their family, culture, and the ever changing world. The second section would particularly focus on father/son relationships, which as discussed below, have been of personal interest to me for quite some time now. For the poems in these first two sections, I make use of entirely fictional personas, although a few of them are inspired by actual experiences such as those in “Fence,” “Flea Market,” and “Rated R.” Regardless of the persona, I still immersed myself in every poem, and wrote them as if the experience was my own, hoping to capture a wholly real situation that could perhaps have happened to someone else. One of the ways to accomplish this was to use the prose poem format to create a lyrical intensity on the page, and give the voice a little more liberty, while still narrating as story to the reader. Not all of the poems in these first two sections are prose poems, but I felt that the ones I did write in that style helped me experiment with lyric and narrative, and loosened my writing from strict lines breaks and stanzas. This perhaps is a strange creative way to go about constructing a poem, but whenever I begin writing one, I know whether or not I want it to be a prose poem or not, and I feel this resulted in an array of personas in my poems because it allowed me to focus strictly on the content, and not worry about the secondary features such as an emphasis on line breaks and enjambment. Still, I employed the latter techniques to create other personas that focused more on narrative while the prose poems focused more on lyric and musicality, switching back and forth between the two to create the first and second sections of this collection.

For the third section, *Life Among the All-Too-Common*, I decided to depart from the younger voice in the previous two and focus on a more mature speaker that is nevertheless still estranged from the greater world around them, and becomes a witness to situations they cannot fully explain, such as poverty, familial interaction and responsibility, love, and discontentment

with American fads and culture. Not all of the poems are persona poems, and I took the liberty in this section to write from the third person perspective, (“Oeuvre”, “Diplomacy”) still taking in account the subject matter I was working with, making sure the narrator stays close to the main character in the poem so their sentiment toward a certain situation could be conveyed clearly and fully. Although the maturity and reflective nature of the voice does depart quite a bit from that of the first two sections (which stay close to a childhood understanding of their world), I wanted to show a certain movement throughout the collection in the terms of the personas I created, which in this section are more aware of the world, although no less estranged from it. It was important that my own poetic voiced stayed the same, but that the personas (the speaker of a particular poem) matured so I could show the range of styles I was working with throughout its creation.

While writing these three sections, I also started focusing on ekphrastic poetry and began writing about certain pieces of art from my favorite painters, including Francis Bacon, Henri Matisse, Willem de Kooning, and Marcel Duchamp, all of which, in their own right, have had a great influence on my poetry. However, I did not want ekphrasis poetry that was solely a description of a piece of art, but an active engagement with it, weaving in a narrative that tied the painting to the larger story that was occurring. Ultimately, I wanted the poems to stand alone and take a unique approach to ekphrasis that also relates to the previous three sections of this collection. This section is titled *[Untitled]*.

The four poems in the *Epilogue*, *Intermission*, *Prologue*, and *Encore* are poems about poetry or about writing poetry, which are inspired mainly through my desire to look at the art of poetry as objectively as I can and write about it in a poetic manner. Originally, the idea was to write a complete section with poems on poetry, but I decided to organize the collection in this manner because I feel it flowed better and gave the reader a pause from between themes, while

also providing a snippet into the creative process I undertook and as I understand it. In looking at the entire collection, there is a noticeable growth in these personas' voices and content matter. I feel this reflects my own growth as a writer working with the same themes of reflection, estrangement, and narrative. Regardless if the poem is a prose poem, a narrative poem, or even something in strict form such as a ghazal or pantoum, I wanted to work in a variety of mediums to explore my own range as a writer and focus on the certain themes I hope I can continue expanding for years to come.

In many ways, having the outline of the manuscript laid out helped me write many of these poems because I went into each fully aware of the themes and techniques I was going to use to compose them. For the first two sections, I wondered how I could take childhood memories and strained father/son relationships, and write about them in a slightly different way from the contemporary standard. I particularly thought about what ways I could make the language fresh and how I could weave in a musicality to a piece that I also wanted to have a strong narrative to. The excerpt from the poem below, titled "Telenovela," illustrates how I approached the first section titled *Broken Mementos*, which deals with reflections from an imagined speaker's childhood:

Telenovela

I was born to a line of housewives obsessed with living more dramatically, devoted mothers immersed in Mexican telenovelas, hour-long afternoon marathons with the same basic plot: handsome Latin Boy falls for pretty Latin Girl, jealous ex-lovers scheme to

break their love apart; conniving aunts, pregnant brides, shady rich step-fathers hogging camera time; farmhands always shirtless, chiseled chests magnets to shiny sweat, to my mother's concentrated eyes aroused by thoughts of haystack sex.

As stated above, I used the prose poem format because I felt it would offer a way to introduce both lyric and narrative through this speaker's voice. The boy in this poem is reflecting on his mother's constrained role as a housewife, and the way she vicariously lives through her telenovelas in order to escape the limits placed upon her in this household dynamic. At first I was a bit reluctant about including my Hispanic heritage in this collection, even though it's something I've written in essays or had in conversations, but I felt it was necessary to include because it is not something I can neglect, or want to, and really wanted to explore how I could mix my heritage with the idea of 'broken' memories. My reluctance does not stem from any notion that I think of Chicano/Latino poetry (or poetry with strong ethnic ties) as inferior and therefore chose to separate myself from poetry that defines itself as such (considering that I actively read and encourage people to read more of it), but in my life I've had a hard time defining myself in a particular racial category, and it's something that I've been trying to navigate through my writing. I'm not so much trying to deny any part of my ethnic history as much as I'm acknowledging that it exists, and that I exist in it, exploring it through some of these poems that take on the issue of identity, and what it means to be a person given the cultural surroundings one is a part of. To me, poetry has to take some fictional liberties in order to achieve what the intended goal of a particular poem might be. I therefore sought a hybrid voice that would quilt a variety of personal past experiences with invented experiences into what would become the first and second sections of this collection.

The speaker in “Telenovela” is an invented persona, but in other poems, the speaker and situation are based on actual experiences I’ve had. The poem “Fence” for example narrates an event I once experienced crossing the Mexican/U.S. border in Progreso, TX. Here is an excerpt:

Fence

We weren’t exactly tourists anymore,
amateurs at crossing over, tossing change and lint
inside their half-cut empty jugs of milk, nodding
as they blessed us from behind the fence; their scabby fingers
anchored to the plastic’s jagged edge, heavy with the weight
of someone else’s pity, stares. We weren’t exactly shocked
by all the begging at the border, the seated group of women
sprawled outside the bridge, sleeping children cradled in serapes,
strapped like hammocks just below their mother’s breasts;
hordes of kamikaze flies diving at their eyelids, legs and bellies
dragged across their cheeks. As sad as the scene was supposed to be,
I’d still have fun feeding quarters down the slot, swinging past
the metal arms, the rattle from the turnstile louder
than pennies dancing inside a can. We’d matured from trivialities,
group photos at the flagpole, at the emblem of an eagle with a snake
perched above a cactus, copper cruelly chipping off,
a metaphor for the landscape of this country.

Despite the fact that this poem is based on actual experience, I added some fictional elements in order to add to the linguistic and physical tension the mother and son share with the women at the bridge, illustrating how certain linguistic attributes allow the little boy and mother

to relate to them, while still being considerably different from them at the same time. The speaker therefore becomes a witness to a world and culture he doesn't quite understand yet (in much the same way I am navigating this through my poetry), and reflect on the event to gain some insight on how they have been shaped as a person.

Because the poems throughout the first two sections of the thesis were persona poems, I also took the liberty in switching genders from male to female in order to add another dimension that perhaps I wouldn't have attained with solely a male speaker; this can be seen in poems such as "Clothesline" and "Equilibrium." I know there are some confessional schools of thought that would take issue with the fact that I'm willing to write from a female perspective, since the experience is not mine, but I felt it was necessary to not limit myself to one voice that perhaps wouldn't fit with what I was trying to achieve.

For the second section, *Dear Father*, I focused on father/son relationships, which is a theme common in contemporary poetry and I found in poems like Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" or Bob Hicok's "O my pa-pa." I became very interested in the father/son theme partly because I grew up without a father, not that I personally hold any deep-seated anger toward him, since I never knew him, but also because I was trying to explore different 'voices' that could potentially capture the nature of what I imagined a father/son relationship to be. The excerpt of the poem below, titled "Dear Father," shows the estrangement from a father figure through the speaker's emotional and physical interaction they've had with him:

Dear Father,

I have known you like the sidewalk beneath an underpass
knows the warm feeling of homeless piss and pigeon shit,

like the bot fly knows the scent of excrement
gushing from the hairy anus of an elephant.

I have seen you kill the pink elephant in the room,
when the bruises on my mother's cheeks

were screaming behind a thick layer of rouge,
rouge not thick enough to erase the history of heavy palms,

to keep your heavy palms from writing that same-old story in the air,
from the jackhammer swipes that spoke riddles across my face,

from a face that vomited tears on a Batman pillowcase,
where nightmares were safely tucked like cash inside a wallet.

The reflection here obviously isn't flattering, and it isn't meant to be; the speaker is remembering the ways in which he/she 'know' their father, highlighting specific details that have shaped their understanding of their relationship. In other poems, however, I played with subtlety, and really tried to humanize the father more while still leaving a bit of ambiguity for the reader to decide how to feel. In the excerpt below from "Fowl," I imagined how the son would witness his father killing a pet chicken infected with louse, and how the father is pushed past the point of his dilemma because he knows he has to even though this might devastate the speaker.

Fowl

No killing cone for this one,
no quick and numb routine
hoisting its body upside down,
claws clawing at the air,
wings tunneled inside the flashing,
a feather-full of impulse, struggle,

and my father's knife sawing off its neck,
bleeding like chickens bleed
when it's time to bleed out.
No, this one's mine -my Elena-
this one he picks up,
cradles in his arms,

in the sweaty sleeves still fresh
with after-scents of hay, manure.
I couldn't hear what she heard
standing where I was, the humid afternoon
spread across our backyard,
his prickly jaw leaning over,

kissing the wet ruffle I kissed
before he came out, before the screen door
slammed shut and my mother's shouts
echoed to a stop.

I worried that perhaps this second section would be bogged down with one father poem after the next and that it would be quickly exhausted by not only me, but the reader as well. However, I believe I added a substantial amount of variety and subjects throughout the poems to keep the section balanced and not always so melodramatic. As Tony Hoagland said in his essay ‘Obsession: Are You Still Writing About Your Father?’:

A real diehard, indestructible, irresolvable obsession in a poet is nothing less than a blessing. The poet with an obsession never has to search for subject matter. It is always right there, welling up like an Artesian spring on a piece of property with bad drainage. It is a pressing subject that subjectively expresses; it will infiltrate the innocent description of a cloud and inveigle its way into the memory of a distant city (Real Sofistikashun 81).

Of course Hoagland knows that obsessions can turn into clichés, and even clichés can be further exhausted, but a good poet will cultivate their obsession into something greater:

Still, those without a primary force to drive and aid them, like a spirit guide, or a revenant, have reason to look with envy upon the blessed. Passion is the greatest gift a poet can have, and nobody is mildly obsessed. Violence of feeling can compensate for many other weaknesses in writer (82).

When writing about this particular obsession, I always pushed myself further in exploring the interactions between a father and a son, hoping I could in some way capture at least part of the sentiments of such a relationship, describing what I perceived as the various mentalities of a young boy or girl, with their father.

The third section, titled *Life Among the All-Too-Common*, comprises the oldest poems in this collection that I began writing in the summer of 2012. I had a vague idea of how I wanted them in my thesis at the time and when I looked back at them, I realized there was particular type of voice with these poems that I could make into something a bit more light-hearted and humorous, but also very serious. I feel that a lot of contemporary poetry is too confessional at times and seeks to make the speaker of the poem a victim instead of an observer. This section departs from the previous two in regard to voice, which matures here as one that is much older and more aware of the world, although no less estranged from it. The subject matter also differs and doesn't exclusively focus on family and identity issues, but larger cultural ones such as poverty in "Saving Face" and "Refuge," New Age American fads in "One," and marriage and sexual relationships in "Oeuvre" and "Love pantoum (failed)." Here is an excerpt from the poem "Saving Face," in which the speaker is standing behind a female patron on the grocery store, witnessing her food stamp card being declined:

To my left, the registers chimed with the quick clamor of cash and credit cards,
conveyor belts thrusting America into lava-colored scanners:

cases of boxed wine from California, light beer shipped from Milwaukee,
strawberries picked, packed and plastic-wrapped,
as if to erase the hands that touched them first.

It was a melting pot of Pilgrim's chicken
sprawled with Fruity Pebbles and hidden Trojans,
upright like a line of inmates awaiting execution.

I wanted to show how the speaker is a stranger to the environment they find themselves in, and illustrate the ways they choose to navigate these scenes by still maintaining some distance from the situation at hand. The same goes for the rest of the poems in this section, which were again, inspired by Hoagland's persona poems in collections such as *Donkey Gospel*, *What Narcissism Means To Me*, and *Unincorporated Persons of the Late-Honda Dynasty*.

What concerned me with this third section was the fact that some readers might consider the poems too light, and without sufficient poetic content to fully explain the subject matter. While I was aware of this issue, I felt that these particular poems still held true to the approach I intended to accomplish with this thesis collection (as stated above), and that poetry can take a clear and narrative approach to discovering something new and wholly human, in much the same manner as Hoagland does in his poetry.

For the last section, titled [*Untitled*], I departed somewhat from the subject matter family and societal interaction to one that included art as well. These ekphrasis-inspired poems came about after exploring the genre in a poetry workshop in the spring of 2012. I've had a fascination with art since high school, and considered double-majoring in Studio Art and Art History when I first arrived at the University of Texas at Austin, where I completed my undergraduate studies. Ultimately, I didn't pursue such a degree, but kept up with contemporary art since, and when I discovered there was a poetic form specifically dedicated to works of art, I dove into the subject more, and started writing a series of ekphrasis pieces for a potential collection on their own.

Again, the issue of separation and estrangement continue with the first poem in this section, "Figures with Meat", where I used the painting *Figure with Meat*, 1954 by Irish-born British artist Francis Bacon. I focused on the issue of meat and isolation to describe the speaker's interaction with Bacon's painting, which is housed in the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as

those with his brother and the fetish the aunt has for dead animals. Below is an excerpt from section V:

V.

Every now and then,
she'd drag them in
like portraits of Jesus
squatting low with the cross;
their bodies heavy
with webs of maggots,
trash, a trail of raccoon mush
brushed across the back porch and yard.
I knew there was a story
behind every wavy stroke,
the bread crumbs, makeshift booby traps,
bellies bloated for a few warm days.
But I only saw the appendix
of their deaths, how my aunt
flung them flat on the picnic table,
how me and Robbie tiptoed
at the kitchen window;
their stomachs cut
with her hammer's crooked claw.

I wanted the pieces not to be strictly about the painting, though in each I reference particulars about them, but to also have narrative elements that make the poem stand alone, with perhaps only a footnote explaining the title of the painting. The same went for "Odalisque with

Arms Raised” (taken from Henri Matisse’s *Odalisque with Arms Raised*, 1923), “Non finito” (which references Willem de Kooning’s *Woman* series), and “Variation on Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant Donnés*” from Duchamp’s *Étant Donnés*. I like to think these are poems that juxtapose high art with persona narratives in order to tell a story, subsequently revealing not only my love of art, but diving into the themes that I’ve worked with throughout my time as a graduate student, and which I will continue working with after I graduate.

I don’t necessarily look at this thesis as a strict book-length collection, but representative sections of my best work during my time in graduate school, which I plan to separate into different manuscripts at a future point in time. Nevertheless, I think there are overall unifying themes of childhood reflection, alienation, family relationships, and dissatisfaction with modern living weaved into persona narratives that hold this collection together, and illustrate the range of persona voices and poetic styles I was working with. In many ways they reflect my growth through the MFA program. The four sections, illuminate a speaker that is a witness to a world he/she is trying hard to understand, much in the same way I have been trying to understand my surroundings and my role as a writer.

CHAPTER II

[NO TITLES IN UTOPIA]

PROLOGUE

Dear Reader,

this page is my birthday suit,
this metaphor, this ink:

spices that season unripe thoughts

as they marinate like meat

into solid words,
as I surrender to obsession,

slip on my final draft &

serve you

shish kabobs of line breaks & stanzas;
every enjambment, every

sentence breathing right

through your hungry eyes, even tongue & teeth

when occasion occasions

this alliteration

to be shared like gossip with someone else,
when the moment between you

& them, between you

& this poem, becomes as intimate

as politics or sex, &

you cannot divorce your

thoughts from the buffet of interpretation

spread like spider webs inside

your head. Dear reader,

for you I lie naked on a silver

plate, let you dissect my
body with a scal-
pel of questions, my brain with a chainsaw
of criticism, for you
this poem is a bo-
dy bag stuffed with a spoonful of similes,
a casket of overwrought
adjectives nailed to
the base of their nouns. I have wrung
my syntax
as tight as hairs on a wet mop,
squeezed every simile onto
the womb of this page, because
reader, once you have read this
I will become a casualty
of endings, as numb as the
white space that pours from
one line to the next. My heart, your gift
spit out like cyanide
before
our final punctuation is born.

I. BROKEN MEMENTOS

Telenovela

I was born to a line of housewives obsessed with living more dramatically, devoted mothers immersed in Mexican telenovelas, hour-long afternoon marathons with the same basic plot: handsome Latin Boy falls for pretty Latin Girl, jealous ex-lovers scheme to break their love apart; conniving aunts, pregnant brides, shady rich step-fathers hogging camera time; farmhands always shirtless, chiseled chests magnets to shiny sweat, to my mother's concentrated eyes aroused by thoughts of haystack sex. To sit and watch her sit and watch another episode was an episode in and of itself, the rising action of her pudgy body rising to adjust the foil-wrapped antenna, smack the hiccup static out the box, baby-daddy drama left hanging with her heart, quickly sweeping between commercial breaks, sudden orchestra, clichéd surprise: *¡Julio, tu eres el papá!* Mother yelling to lift my shoes up off the couch, mimicking the mothers who controlled the show, women she imagined herself to be. I imagined her inner-monologue saying she wanted out, courage to break the spell cooking rice and beans, tortilla flipping rhythm on the stove, dinner for a husband who reeked of wet cement, firm machismo he'd bring home. I could see her taking mental notes on how to fake a death, on the latest ways to use mascara, comb her frizzy hair, hold back the waterworks when Boy was losing Girl, when her novelas were about to end. And she'd turn to me as if I were the boy cast solely for his smile, to provide cute comic relief, comments so innocently profound they'd linger beyond the screen, beyond the kitchen table where she'd help me master English with her broken English, reading story after story like reading lines off a script, rehearsing scenes where the mother sighs, hugs her son, accepts a role she knows she has to play.

Christmas

I used to imagine crumbs of snow quilted over rows of *colonia* rooftops, a blanket of white disguising poverty, no patchy asphalt shingles scrunched or shriveled like the moldy skin of dead tomato. I used to imagine my house wasn't part of those poorly constructed houses, stitched together with Home Depot wood, slabs of grey brick stacked and restacked to form another wall, a future bedroom for my baby sister, family afternoons spent working in the heat, watching my father curse in Spanish, ¡*Putá madre!*, his words soaked in sweat no matter what the season. He was always building something with his hands, the same car engine, a crooked driveway we knew he'd never finish, yearly promises for a better home, new neighbors, flower patterned wallpaper, central air so we wouldn't keep the stove top on when the weather got cold, those unfair winds seeping through towels nailed like crosses around our windows. Winters never dropped below 50 in the Valley, yet there we were: Father, Mother, Son hiding from the temperature beneath layers of sheets and pillows, flea market coats and sweaters, restless limbs pressed and bound to each other's warmth, hostage to a dirty concrete floor. And I used to imagine waking up on Christmas morning, seeing the Rockefeller tree standing in the center of our living room, neon lights softly strung, the scent of suburbia and pine needles perfuming my nostrils, eyes spellbound by the spinning ornaments flickering glittery gold like a disco ball, and below: a hoard of store-wrapped gifts placed around a shoebox filled with snow, my tiny hands digging for a childhood I'd want to remember, an infrastructure for memories that would never melt.

Toothless

After lunch, I'd sit and stare as Grandpa pulled them from his mouth, spellbound by the splash, the way they sunk the only way dentures ever sink: steady, slow, soaked in a glass half-filled with water, a squad of small bubbles burping, rising, reaching the wavy horizon before the saliva wobbled to the bottom. It was almost as if the plastic resin still held his breath, a sigh, a curse, another crude and muffled comment about Grandma's cooking, how the soggy saltless rice stayed stuck to his roof like glue, his tongue too old and thick to dig between every crevice. I was only ten then, new to my second set, incisors sprouting through gums like a crooked white-picket fence, silver crowns crowned around my molars, too stubborn to uproot completely. Everything I ate tasted like metal or chicken, my amateur palate couldn't tell the difference, but still I'd slouch with Grandpa on the sofa, pretend to share his disapproval, pretend my buds were victims to a healthy diet. Mother told me when he was younger tobacco chewed on his enamel, carved a chain of canyons, dyed his pearly whites the color of corroded pipes, and yet naïve and neglectful of my own brushing habits, I envied his mouth: no more suction tubes or drills, plaque and tartar removed at will, the ease to abandon language, throw speech in a glass and let it lounge on the table. I wanted his slack-jaw drool, the nap through afternoon news, the groan and gruff when he'd wake up, squeeze his cheeks to lock his teeth back in place. And when his cravings ached, when Grandma's anti-sugar crusade held no weight, he'd take me out to town, lift my tiny body above the counter: the parade of flavors smiling below the frosty window, our pale lips dying to be bathed in sweetness.

Boys

Because he stands on the mound, four-eyed and focused, hinged and poised like a pitcher in the 9th, he hurls the red rubber ball straight toward my feet. Because I am ten and swift, and anticipate the curve like a better athlete would, like a younger brother does, the ball flies back, digs and ricochets off his face, glass and wire-frame sprinkled like confetti in the air. He is impulsively pubescent, unconditioned to self-control and I am laying beneath him, helpless, hijacked by his helicopter swings: fist face fist face fist, brooks of blood sprouting from my lips, fused and clumped like cake batter on the ground. Because his friends huddled around, ooed and ahed every time my skin chipped off, head flung back, I replay the scene decades later from their point-of-view, realize why the beating went on, their cheering never stopped. “Boys will be boys,” Pa would simply say, but Ma wouldn’t walk away, she’d pat the puffy shiner, the busted chin and cheeks, the dry blood sprawled like Pollack’s brush across my white-T. Even I questioned how we could hate each other for weeks, perfect our pint-size pride, then return to that parched field and play kickball till our sweat ran dry, till we resurrected a semblance of brotherly bond. But tit-for-tat we’d grow up swapping love for spite, spite for shoves, middle-finger salutes for five minute fights, language for that inherent, silent understanding that we only had each other, that one day there’d be no more scuffles, no shit-talking spats or slights, no hot afternoons touting meaningless talent; he wouldn’t clench his palms with retribution, but a telephone instead, a rare, late-night call to ask if I’m alright, my confused hello reassuring him I was.

Flea Market

Even now I taste the scent of wet cilantro, grilled onions and cut *bistek* perfuming the air against clouds of heavy exhaust, the pot-hole riddled parking lot jammed with rows of sunburned cars like flies vying for position on a fresh corpse. As claustrophobia settles, my stomach nauseated with the back and forth motion of crooked parking, I hear *banda* tunes blaring through plastic speakers, treble downing out bass, every song sung with schizophrenic trumpets, clarinets, Spanish *gritos* my English-only ears can't decipher. Grandma and Grandpa Cruz and I play hooky from church on Sunday mornings, unafraid if God and Father Santiago take attendance, if Mom discovers our true pilgrimage across town, an hour spent driving in their oil-thirsty, wobbly white Pontiac Grand Am, tinted windows rolled halfway down because their A/C's still not fixed, still saving up for Freon they can't fit into their budget. Even then I couldn't fit my skin into that culture: the light-complected, freckled boy strolling hand-in-hand between his mud-brown grandparents, navigating the labyrinth of \$2 sock bundles, tables showcasing cases of tomatoes, strawberries, knock-off DVDs not yet released, mountains of used car parts ripe with rust and unreliability, where Grandpa stops, scans the prices before moving us along. Everywhere we turn face after face fling in our direction, those long stares of curiosity, as if Grandma and Grandpa had kidnapped me from the suburbs, were parading their prize to make the vendors jealous, make them reconsider assimilation. Or as if I had kidnapped them, dragging their old bodies around the beloved *pulga* they'd never see again, a life they'd remember only by the stringy sacks of garlic they bought, piled like snakes in the backseat where I'd lay my head to rest, silently leading these immigrants to a new home.

Clothesline

There we were, Sunday afternoons hanging from the clothesline, two wooden pins hoisting Pa from his beltless waist, scabs of cracked cement patched around his knees and thighs, faded denim dripping water like a leaky faucet. For hours that pair of Levi's dried beside his wrinkled work shirts: brown, button-downs he wore to building sites every day, drenched in waves of heat and dirt, a résumé of sweaty stains not even soap could wash away. To and fro, his disembodied arms swayed between the droopy lines, caught inside Ma's white and chubby blouses, each unbuttoned, quiet, tangled as the tipsy wind forced him closer. I would jump and swing on the stout T-shaped pole as Ma tugged the wires down, put us up one by one, three lives strung like broken Christmas lights, the Texas sun tanning padded bras, soggy socks, a bed sheet blotched with my impulsive piss, beige brittle fabric I'd drape my body with, play dead, pretend to mute their arguments beneath my pillowcase. It was always the same-old budget, bills they couldn't pay, the way the first snuck up with water, electric, late payments for a used Pinto that wouldn't start most mornings. And in between the shouts and threats, slammed doors and counters, I'd hum the names of all the Barbie dolls I'd never get, think about the dresses nestled in other girls' closets, the shoes, the smiles, the shiny dryers in Sears catalogs Ma collected. But come Sunday, as I'd mimic our flapping clothes, as Ma set down the basket, let routine unfold, I no longer cared about my Goodwill shirts, the itchy underwear, the same school uniforms from the year before, memories that clung to our polyester bodies like pollen. It didn't matter if our backyard was larger than our trailer, if the grass beneath my naked feet resembled dead lettuce, or that when Ma would grab me from the pole, hold me in her arms, I could smell the beaten bar of soap on her puckered palms, a past she tried to scrub off till her fingers bled, till she made herself believe this was the week we'd start fresh.

Scabs

The face staring at the face in the bathroom mirror is my younger face constellated with scabs and scrapes, an after-sting of crusted blood streaked across my temple, another playground brawl I lightly touch, tilt my head and turn it left, study the abrasions where pavement mapped its scars through eyebrow, skin; a geography of reflex my nails, still stained with clumps of dirt, pick and pry and peel and pinch, satisfying deeper layers of itch, like a Matryoshka doll of flesh laminated over thicker flesh. My face leaning closer in, stomach pinned against the sink as the scratching becomes impulsive, compulsively convinced my mother's ointment acts too slow; fingers pulling down the tiny tarp-like tar, unveiling further questions about Bobby's fists, the way they flung a pendulum of punches on the court, how fast I plunged across the free-throw line head-first; my week-old scabs unstitched, ego puddled warmly into Kool-Aid red, dripping as I'd push and lift, run home to cotton balls and alcohol dabbed along the porous wounds. And as much as I'd resist those burning baptisms, kick and bang the kitchen table, squirm inside my mother's grip, I couldn't wait to tear the tissue off again, scrape it hard like windshield ice, squeeze the pus and watch it pour along my purpled cheek; its little hairs unplucked, pores widened just enough to breathe beneath the light's fluorescent gaze, my face inflamed and flushed, knowing once the vessels got a taste of air, they'd never stop repairing.

Goldfish

The stench got stronger, but I got used to wiping the shit from my mother's ass every morning, from watching her body bend like a shriveled sunflower in the heat of July, deflated, defenseless, her face digging every ounce of embarrassment into my chest, spine stretched to acrobatic proportions, vertebra popping like fresh bubble wrap against my hands. Even my fingers became acquainted with the wrinkles on her back, with the jaundiced skin as rough as crumpled cellophane, tiny rivers of veins flowing along her lumbar, murky green like the shrapnel of shit glued to the rim of the seat. I got used to lifting her up from the ribs like a child, feeling the apple juice piss running down the inner sides of her legs, a steady stream streaming along the seams of my faded blue jeans, down to my socks, down to my heels, down to her fuzzy slippers parting the warm puddle almost biblically. And it was just as hard becoming familiar with the sticky sweat on last night's underwear, with the thin white fabric hanging loosely around her waist, the amount of weight she lost since diagnosis, the amount of memory stranded inside her head, paranoia convincing her the scrambled eggs I cooked were poisoned, because I wasn't her son anymore but a man who resembled her son, a man who would wipe the shit from her ass like her son would wipe the shit from her ass if only her son were still alive. And all those years I got used to being dead, to hiding the frames around the house, persuading myself that the face of my younger self would only confuse her more, lead to waterworks on the toilet that morning. Every morning her arms were wrapped around my neck while the cotton paper was wrapped around my hand, my fingers reaching through the crevice of her cheeks, knowing this gesture would be forgotten by noon, her mind like the mind of a store-bought goldfish, a goldfish just waiting to be flushed.

Fence

We weren't exactly tourists anymore,
amateurs at crossing over, tossing change and lint
inside their half-cut empty jugs of milk, nodding
as they blessed us from behind the fence; their scabby fingers
anchored to the plastic's jagged edge, heavy with the weight
of someone else's pity, stares. We weren't exactly shocked
by all the begging at the border, the seated group of women
sprawled outside the bridge, sleeping children cradled in serapes,
strapped like hammocks just below their mother's breasts;
hordes of kamikaze flies diving at their eyelids, legs and bellies
dragged across their cheeks. As sad as the scene was supposed to be,
I'd still have fun feeding quarters down the slot, swinging past
the metal arms, the rattle from the turnstile louder
than pennies dancing inside a can. We'd matured from trivialities,
group photos at the flagpole, at the emblem of an eagle with a snake
perched above a cactus, copper cruelly chipping off,
a metaphor for the landscape of this country. At ten,

I had no metaphors for barefooted boys selling Chiclets
like insurance, running after every passerby, one by one
tugging down their sleeves, nagging how their gum was cheaper
than the other guys. But *diez centavos* was far too desperate
to translate to my mother's ears, who spoke their tongue
but used the English silence to mute their pleas, the shouts
for discount pharmaceuticals, healing herbs and Freon,
strings of garlic and street-side taco stands drenched in spices
I had never tasted. I could tell she thought our skin
was safer even if it looked the same, our faces like their faces
like the muddy bed of thirsty rivers, corroded pipes
hidden beneath the sink. We were them without the burden
of being them, shared last names with them, an economic convenience
living so close to them. But when my mother tugged me closer to her waist,
clenched the collar of my white and sweaty shirt, I could hear
the tension in her grip saying I was not, would never be like one of them,

would play the role of ‘in-between’ instead, the cousin from *el otro lado*,
the boy straddled on the peak of two geographies, hybrid definitions;

walking over with his middle-aged single-mother,
not knowing her title ‘Secretary’ was stripped of dental;
no immunity for plaque or cavities, the black
canyon in her second molar, where she’d thrust and dig
with toothpicks, nails, scoop out the half-chewed gunk of food,
repeat the rhythm after dinner. And there came a point
when all she’d scrape was nerve and gum, raspberry red
aggravated by discomfort, by the dentist speaking Spanish
too clinical to understand; drilling, talking, drilling, pausing,
yanking out the reason why we’d make our trips, those weekend
afternoons crossing back high on anesthesia and lobby candy,
the line of women staring through the heavy mesh, still begging,
jealous of our sloppy smiles.

Rated R

Not even our fathers bathed their jaws
with so much Aqua Velva, Brute or Stetson Black,
quarter bottles quilted from our cheek to neck.
Not even acne aggravated by the musky scent
convinced us not to cover all our bases, make up
for lack of charm and real cologne. Another Friday,
boys night out sharply dressed for Midtown Movies 10,
Chuck Taylors looking almost new, khakis over-starched
and pressed by mothers who'd insist on looking cute,
who nearly burned our multicolored plaids, untucked
and wrinkled once they dropped us off, once I leaned
against the wall with Cole and Blake; scrawny sleeves
rolled quickly to the top, as if we were old or cool enough
to tuck in packs of Camels like our fathers did, our buzz cuts
so unlike theirs, combed and hard with clumps of gel,
rows of poster lights bouncing off the grease,
flashing like arcade machines we used to play.

But we put those games away, begin the sport
of watching girls, breasts and skirts zigzagging out of view.
We stood and stared like we knew what pick-up lines to use,
what suave and nonchalant body language to convey,
ways to keep the butterflies from clogging up our throats.
And when we did sum up a lump of courage, timid winks
and whistles shot down by dirty looks, we had no way of knowing
love, or something like its twin, lied beyond a sea
of high school flings, beyond the college parties
where binging segued into one-night stands,
where another mid-life marriage flat-lines into failure,
and something once archaic, a night out at the movies,
defibrillates attraction from its sleep. Like Trish McDonald
and Lucy Campbell, fashionistas who controlled our scene,
Stallone looked down behind us brave and unimpressed,
watching as we'd play the roles we knew we had to fit,
even if we'd improvise our scripts, risk it all by sneaking in.

II. DEAR FATHER

Dear Father,

I have known you like the sidewalk beneath an underpass
knows the warm feeling of homeless piss and pigeon shit,

like the bot fly knows the scent of excrement
gushing from the hairy anus of an elephant.

I have seen you kill the pink elephant in the room,
when the bruises on my mother's cheeks

were screaming behind a thick layer of rouge,
rouge not thick enough to erase the history of heavy palms,

to keep your heavy palms from writing that same-old story in the air,
from the jackhammer swipes that spoke riddles across my face,

from a face that vomited tears on a Batman pillowcase,
where nightmares were safely tucked like cash inside a wallet.

I have known you like the poet knows every poem
dressed with piss-drunk fathers, every waltz, every kiss,

every father-son baseball game, every doorway embrace
that gave birth to a mouthful of doorway goodbyes,

our waterworks replayed inside my head
like the 'like's' in metaphors echo inside this page.

Dear father, I have known you like flavorless gum knows the bottom of a desk,
like a desk knows the cute and crooked heart etched on its wooden arm,

like the love not etched on the veins of your own blood and flesh,
a childhood of scars chiseled into memories,

each as meaningful as penis graffiti
tattooed on a filthy bathroom stall.

Toolbox

Everyone has their Zen, my father's is a philosophy of *Popular Mechanics*, How-To projects, sheets of quickly drawn blueprints, plywood, wrenches, screwdrivers and claw hammers piled next to an afternoon of sawdust and sweat. It's hobby blurring the borders on sanity, obsession, hours spent remodeling a home that isn't broken: mahogany countertops around the kitchen, another front door with reinforced deadbolts, a backyard deck he keeps extending, as if what he already built wasn't large enough for Ma and me, wasn't what his own father would have expected. When Grandpa died, he quit talking about the slums of Mexico City, a childhood raised on low wages and landfills, sheets of corrugated metal he'd collect after school, use to patch the naked corners of their roof, to relieve the absence of heat, electricity, the reality of sewage water, late-night gun shots, dumpster bodies, palms that reeked of all the recycled garbage he ever touched. He's amnesic to his past because *mojado* still means wetback in Midwest suburbia, because his skin is still tanned with a language he can't erase, a last name with r's too stubborn to roll off my tongue, half an identity I barely speak. *You're hands weren't made for this kind of work, son*, so when I hear the jigsaw sing from the garage, I bring him a glass of water instead, watch him shape and reshape the legs of our dining room table, the arms of chairs we never sit on. His middle-aged body bent and stiff, grinding away memories like the cartilage in his fingers, sanding every jagged edge till he's forced to retire for the night, abandon his toolbox, workbench, come inside and play family man again; unwinding his limbs between mine and Ma's on the couch, nodding off on moments that can't be cut or measured.

K-Park

Between the rows of anorexic oak trees always stuck in fall,
and the always under-construction highway too porous for traffic,

lies the twin fields of Kennedy Park, ironic remnants that remind us
progress was not a recipe our parents savored,

that that field would always be their side, this field ours.

It's unkempt terrain clumped with daily sweat
and dirt pretending to be dry grass;

scattered palm-sized islands of red rubber track
dividing our version of football
from the one they played like hot potato with their feet.

I remember my father, as loving as he was obsessively prophetic,
warning Casey, Bobby Joe and me
that new infestations were no different than old,

that brown was just as bad as black, and like cockroaches
squatting an abandoned building, they'd eat the crumbs
of what meatpacking jobs our kind had left.

So when he died, still clinging to his fear
like the smoky cells clung inside his lungs,

I kept his tradition of keeping my distance alive,
maturing a more personal level of play
without knowing why,

as if every touchdown, every tackle were protesting their presence,
their kicks and goals softly speaking for it.

And when their cheap, black and white ball
would wander into our field,
flanking our momentum,

we'd stop and stare at them like they were livestock
navigating a holding pin;
their brown and sticky bodies
 inching closer to our side,

our nervous steps
 unsure if we should bridge our world with theirs.

Theory on the Origin of Step-Fathers

I thought he was a prototype, Version 1.0
Mother got to test before the real thing arrived.
Next door Bobby lived with the real thing his whole life,

Down the Street Mary had hers broken when she was three,
sent to sit behind bars, wait for the state to fix him up.
Mine went driving a busy Houston street one night,

never came home, but Mother, chin and cheeks
still dented, scratched, explained his joints were rusted
with too much booze anyhow, heart programmed with a bad temper

and a set of fists too quick to override. For months,
I thought the makeshift model sleeping in her room
was a consolation prize, a temp named Pete

waiting to expire, but when the man
in Mother's secret photo albums never arrived,
and the doorbell merely rang with pairs of Mormons

preaching they had found our souls, we scrambled
to claim our presence around the house.
Score one for proto-Pete on the BBQ pit,

two for the garage and tools my father never used.
Add one for me on the middle dining room table seat,
another for cartoons on the living room floor.

And tit for tat, as we marked possessions like a silent auction,
tug-of-warred our time for any time with Mother,
the ambassador between two worlds too stubborn

to understand each other, we raised our flags,
slowly bridged the space we knew we had to share,
well aware my father wasn't coming back,

dumped in the Junkyard of Defective Dads;
his memory used like scrap metal for more efficient units,
real-time data on the assembly line, convincing me,

that when I came home from college that first summer,
versed in self-taught Buddhism and laced, homemade brownies,
proto-Pete had shed the proto from his skin,

became a father reincarnate, an elephant
I no longer had to ignore.

Equilibrium

Pretty soon it felt like I was always on my father's boat,
convinced there was no difference between land and sea,
just rumors spread by maps
and outdated globes.

That everything, regardless of its roots,
was caught in a blinding current, swaying back and forth,
bobbing up and down,

performing almost every verb and adjective
that best describes the aching feeling of flux.

That sense of unevenness sprung from the Galveston Coast,
from a string of summer days spent catching wind
when I was twelve,

clutching a rod too big to cast, bait too wet to hold,
afraid, that like Medusa I'd gaze over,
see him cased in stone,

interrupt the instant he was reeling in
some time for himself.

'Daddy's little girl' for a tom-girl
was responsibility I didn't want,

an assumption I'd grow to claim my title,
learn to cross my legs sitting in a skirt,
erase the urge to spread them wide.

But when we'd come home,
the smell of fish on my father's fingers,
my feet couldn't find a horizontal surface;
my patella, calves and hips,

doubting gravity's promise to remain heavy,

to anchor my body so it wasn't stranded
like a storm-beaten buoy,
far from that elusive tide of equilibrium.

I thought perhaps the moon rebelled
against its own compulsive orbit,
or the drunken earth fell off its axis,

but no girl I knew succumbed to the same shaky side-effects,
no Ruth or Sally Jane had memorized
the imprecise rhythm of waves,

the steady rocking from side to side,
foreground shifting focus like a broken camera,

a feeling captured sitting in a boat with my father,
dropping naked hooks into speechless waters,
waiting for a sense of balance
to come along and bite.

Weight

Watching my father dig his teeth
into that greasy double-meat cheeseburger,

half the processed gunk stuffed inside his mouth,
half still hostage to a thin white wrapper,

I wanted to tell him straight to his face
how truly disgusting he was,

how his large oblong head and double-decker chin
resembled a deformed potato found
in the corner of the supermarket,

how embarrassed I felt walking with him
when his pot belly,

pregnant with unused calories
and lack of a decent diet,

hung like a tumor off the rim of his belt buckle;
his stretch marks gasping for a morsel of air,

peekabooing beneath the border of his XL tee.
Even worse were the lumps of juicy fat

drooping from his shoulder blades,
creating the illusion of two bodacious tits
on his hairy back,

each emancipated from the shackles
of proper bra support.

And when he walked, the layers of soft dough
wrapped loosely around his thighs

jiggled like Jello-O right down to his ankles,
where his plump feet nestled against their will

inside diabetic shoes a size too small.

I hated the way he shamelessly chomped down

on anything half-cooked and unhealthy,

how our outings once a month

consisted of a horror film at the movies,

a trip to the golden arches after,

where, during our chit-chat about school,

he ate and ate away

as if his life or our relationship depended on it.

Like the childhood smell of my mother's home cooked spaghetti,

I still remember the afternoon he left for good,

the anorexic suitcases in hand,

car keys jingling like a busy cash register,

his lanky body running out the door

without the excess weight of guilt.

Fowl

No killing cone for this one,
no quick and numb routine
hoisting its body upside down,
claws clawing at the air,
wings tunneled inside the flashing,
a feather-full of impulse, struggle,

and my father's knife sawing off its neck,
bleeding like chickens bleed
when it's time to bleed out.
No, this one's mine -my Elena-
this one he picks up,
cradles in his arms,

in the sweaty sleeves still fresh
with after-scents of hay, manure.
I couldn't hear what she heard
standing where I was, the humid afternoon
spread across our backyard,
his prickly jaw leaning over,

kissing the wet ruffle I kissed
before he came out, before the screen door
slammed shut and my mother's shouts
echoed to a stop. But there was nothing he could say
I couldn't already see in his hands:

louse feeding on her belly,
pores unplucked, Kool-Aid colored scars
quilted with scabs as rough as tar;
her pecks so sharp and accidental.
Perhaps it was accident that brought us
both together, that brought my father

past the point of feeling sorry for his dilemma,
twisting Elena's neck as if he were twisting mine,

slow, severely delicate; looking away
as he squeezed and snapped, waited
for her clucks to grow limp.

The sun caught on the wavy horizon,

trembling like a spasm.

Kite

It stayed in my grip only when the wind held still,
a few frozen seconds foregrounded against milky,
chain-linked clouds, plastic-bag tail caught in mid-flutter,
gauze-like wings angelic, soft, sprawled by a cruciform
of crooked sticks. Pa thought things were just better
hand-made, *More reliable that way*, so he chopped
one of Ma's old bed sheets up, glued the straightest branches
he could find, dared to call this a kite, dared to predict
our afternoon as fun. We were country boys with no use for parks,
no inherent sense to dress in short-sleeves or shorts,
strap our feet in sandals, let them tan in the sun. No,
we sweated like one sweats through plaids
and boots and faded blues, spurts of speech drenched
in city heat, our cornfield bodies breaking
through flight paths of footballs, Frisbees, short stares
shot in our direction. But standing there, thirty-some miles from home,
I knew Pa wanted me to feel like I was somewhere important
even if it meant doing something not so, so
I hunched over with him, pretended I wasn't tense
as the poor thing trembled on the ground
like a head-sawed chicken believing in flight;
Pa jumping, throwing it up, those unforgivable gusts
tugging it higher, fishing string yanking on my grip
as if really the kite had caught me, reeling in its prize,
Pa yelling, *Fasta boy, fasta!*, knowing I couldn't keep up.
And in between the sharp swirls and spins, dips
more unpredictable than Blue Angels,
there was a glimpse of pause, tangled silence;
the cotton warm and crumpled, like a napkin held
by the wind's fingertips, ready to unfold.

Smoke & Clowns

Of course they were lingering like flies, smoking
behind the tent, a semi-circle of a half-dozen clowns
chit-chatting and spitting bits of their red painted lips
on the mud-thick ground. Of course I'd be traumatized days later

by the hijacked image of crazed chuckles, defiled teeth,
poison-squirt flowers and rusted mini-tricycles squeaking
through the neighborhood, killing little boys who 'touched' themselves
before sleep; at least according to my brother who sold me

on their second lives, colorful demons feeding off our sins.
But of course I was only ten and susceptible to role models,
snuck off between acts to follow them off stage, hoping I'd discover
some secret 'cave', where I imagined they kept on juggling,

jump-, smack- and piggybacking, or sledgehammering each other
on the head; cartoon stars sprinkled in the air, balloon animals
splayed across their chests. But I saw them slip out the tent instead,
yank off their wigs and 'shoot the shit' as Mom would say

about Dad and his boys on Sunday afternoons, lounging
on the porch with tobacco, booze, and strings of drool
hanging off their chins, the residue of liquid speech spewed inside
their old spittoons. And like my father and my father's friends,

these weren't the backyard Birthday clowns hired for magic tricks,
the famed harlequins of European descent, some Buster Keaton
or Charlie Chaplin, but the American South, hobo, tramp, and bum,
migratory entertainers now taking a break. I could have been inside

suspended by the net-less tightrope-walkers, enamored by the scent
of elephant manure, the salty butter of soggy popcorn, the fuel
from the fire-breathing sword-swallowers, and the glittery ringmaster
shouting like a street-side prophet that we should all be prepared;

his pronunciation so death-defying our ears would tremble. But

I wanted the show behind the show, the nitty-grits of a travelling act,
some strange belief that our lives were art enough, that non-performance
was performance I could see and trust, not meandering clown feet

caked in butts, sludging back inside for a second act,
a new thrill watching them taunt the focused tiger-tamers,
a feeling that when they stopped and bowed, I was the only one
not applauding like a shill.

Razor

A cloud of Barbasol oozes onto my father's hands,
and he lathers half a makeshift mask around his face;
lips scabbed and tightly tucked, gripped
by the yellow bricks he still calls teeth,
gums melted by twenty years of cigarettes
he never cared to quit. Even at the bathroom sink,
a pack of Camels hibernate inside his back pocket,
and a younger, shirtless me, stands anchored to his waist,
wielding a plastic razor just like his, tilting up my head
when his turns left; our nostrils flaring, chests ballooned
as we take a deeper breath. I loved the way
he'd place the razor on his neck, suspicious, steady,
intimidated by his own reflection, as if the blades,
so unforgivably thin, would somehow sever
flesh and speech, de vein the jugular
throbbing faster than a flooded river. But
as rhythm angled sharper landings,
he'd cleanly plow the foam patched around
his jaw and cheek, that rocky fluff
I thought was heaven when I believed heaven
was a father teaching his son to shave, easing up
his strokes so he could mimic them like prayer,
create his own technique someday; knowing
all the nicks and burns, dotted blood and ingrown hairs,
were merely practice so the Aqua Velva wouldn't sting,
so he could stare back at the mirror,
remember a father pretending to be a father.

INTERMISSION

Laundry List

There's a laundry list of poems I want to write, stacks of proto-stanzas soaking Broca's Area with syntax so ripe, diction so sweet, these raw ideas form a language my eyes begin to eat, a pretty language shining like a disco ball inside my head.

There are memories of my mother's dementia stranded inside my head, my tongue too timid to confess that even on good days

I prayed she would die, wanted her body buried because her mind already was, because her thoughts were flopping inside her brain

like a goldfish flopping on the ground for air; my younger self so desperate to keep our lives afloat. In another poem,

a different state of mind, I'm descending the escalator of an empty airport lobby, a witness to a rare Texas night,

light snow caressing the windows like my mother caressing the curls of my long college hair, her voice sweetly demanding

I trim my new habit. But the habit only grew longer, softer, aged with indifference until she couldn't remember how I aged at all,

couldn't recall the features on her only son's face, the same loss of memory my father suffered all his life.

In that poem, I picture him sitting at a table when I call, fingers fingering the ice cubes inside his glass of 3PM whiskey.

For spite, I imagine karma's caught up to its host, a catheter growing warm on the side of his thigh, a dying man still ignorant

to the sound of apologies. On the other side of the country, I'm still a boy inside the body of a scholar studying the history of estrangement.

I say hello, the stranger says hello, and our hellos echo the hum of a dead dial tone that fades a few seconds later.

I want to write a handful of poems about all the dead dial tones I've suffered, an entire collection describing how the call began,

the familiar 'Not you but me' chiseled into an ex-lover's speech, because no matter how perfect you think you've captured the moment,

no matter what lens you use to filter bullshit, there's always a wall crying with a crooked frame, a door leading back to the darkroom,

a blank page, a poem you rewrite because the girl you love wasn't the girl who hung up but the one who moved away,

the green four-eyed poet whose tiny teeth are dressed in mercury, ribs and pelvis hanging through her skin;

a health that ebbs and flows like white foam erasing footprints on a beach. Even while she stands

in front of her mirror,
wearing nothing but a faded green tee and the memories of that faded green tee when you wore it
around her, the afterimage of your voice
persuades her to write another letter. But you're 1500 miles away drowning in 1500 synonyms
for *loss*,
not one which this poem is ready to pronounce, so you write another 1500 lines about the 1500
strands of hair tangled on her head,
about the crockpot chicken soup she cooks and cooks and eats all day, about the way *Celtic* salt
smells when it's burned 15 feet away.
But one cannot chain their words in loss forever, cannot edit what's not already written on the
page, and as quickly as the late-night shots
of tequila and Nyquil demand a ransom from my brain, my list of subjects slowly grows longer,
drunken somber, explorations
into the love-hate relationships I have with everything, the countless empty cups of coffee I
never recycle, the way so much depends
upon the convenience of Styrofoam, the reliability of plastic, cable TV I never have time to see,
but you see there's a sense of security
knowing it's there, the safety net that an escape exists, that the blue sunset of nightly news will
tan my eyes with another war,
another quick report, happy commercial breaks followed by perfidious politicians who think
too much with the wrong head,
who regret their actions because they regret getting caught with their actions; hand in the cookie
jar, hand on the crotch, my hands
searching for the lost remote, channel after channel flashing more of the same, more of the
same, more of the same,
until there comes a point when all this life can guarantee is more of the same; another chapter to
add to our sad sad story,
another thing to scratch from our long long list.

III. LIFE AMONG THE ALL-TOO-COMMON

Zapper

And when the Ambien peters out,
and I'm left to entertain delirium
like one entertains a mother-in-law
overextending her stay,

let my eyes bathe in the blue sunset
shining from the screen,
let the barrage of blinking infomercials
flood every scene, as bearded men explain

why I need their kitchen knives, Foreman grills,
their sweater/blankets trademarked with names
too ingenious to forget. Let me memorize
the 1-800 numbers flashing like a fit,

the exact size and color now slipping
from my head, as I thumb my remote
with a Channel Per Minute Average of 96.
Channel Surfing League, it's the kind of thing

only insomniacs invent, the perfect sport
for an undrafted middle-aged male,
whose greatest talent lies in keeping seats warm;
gluteals shaped like slabs of brick,

hardened by a broken office chair,
by the memory of every high school team's
second string bench. When numbness
soothes the tendons in my hand,

and the couch sinks me deeper in its grave,
let me sit through marathons of cancelled sitcoms
till the rise of the early morning news,
let me strive for the Channel Surfing Hall of Fame,

so my heart enjoys those lonely weekend nights

when the bags below my eyes melt further down my face,
when I surf through thousands of cable channels
that don't even work, somehow hoping

the distance between me and my TV,
amounts to a life as meaningful
as the black and white static
laughing madly on screen.

Spike

It's like the end of preseason drills turn their practice into more than practice,
more than eight year-olds dressed like pros in oversized pads and helmets;

the veteran coach yelling *Kill! Kill! Kill!* to his little troopers lined across the field,
as one-by-one they shuffle through his circuit, growl and lunge at dummies
with logos of next week's opponent.

From the unmarked sidelines, where I watch my boy listen to instructions,
I hear the reluctant mumble of parents repeating the coach's motto,

unsure if it's okay to wish death
on objects representing children's bodies,

or if they should curb the urge to applaud every tackle,
every snap and helmet crack whipping back their tiny heads.

There's nothing like violence sanctioned at the start of autumn,
nothing like being spectators to controlled conflicts.

So like middle-aged parents still evolving from Neanderthal habits,
the fathers grunt a louder *Kill!* and the mothers, sitting in their lawn chairs

fresh with Gatorade and gossip,
quickly follow with a *Knock 'em dead!*

Even as their huddles split into crooked line formations,
I can't help but envy their inexperience,

the nerves my son feels when he catches his first pass,
then runs to the opposite end zone

unaware there's a geography to football fields,
a humiliation to losing,

to spiking the ball, looking over only to see your father clapping,
the lonely cheer from the crowd

as you moonwalk past the goalpost,
break into that robot dance he taught you over the summer.

Saving Face

My presence seemed almost fatalistic
the moment her food stamp card declined for the second time,

her two boys, dirty blonde and shoeless, playing airplane
around her shopping cart, where the bag boy

placed a 12-pack of canned generic Cola,
two loafs of deli-baked bread, and a handful of frozen pizza boxes,

perhaps that night's home-cooked dinner
for the last and longest day of the month.

To my left, the registers chimed with the quick clamor of cash and credit cards,
conveyor belts thrusting America into lava-colored scanners:

cases of boxed wine from California, light beer shipped from Milwaukee,
strawberries picked, packed and plastic-wrapped,
as if to erase the hands that touched them first.

It was a melting pot of Pilgrim's chicken
sprawled with Fruity Pebbles and hidden Trojans,
upright like a line of inmates awaiting execution.

You go in for one thing, come out with more lives than you can handle,
more discount prices stacked across the aisles,

like the pack of Huggies and ibuprofen I shot into the Express lane with,
watching the young woman swipe her card to a taunting ring;

her eyebrows thinned to the point of whiskers, turquoise tank-top
flaunting a faded tattoo on her left shoulder,
the name Jim or Joe inscribed in Old English font.

Even as she curled her toes over her pink flip-flops,
expecting a different outcome, *Declined* rang again.

And I could feel the echo of uneasiness

as the teenage cashier explained their machines were working fine,

and her frustration cramming her card back inside her purse,
gripping the cart, as if her and her two boys
were about to make a mad-dash for the parking lot.

I wondered who would play hero, spread their arms and block them at the exit.
If I, drugged with my impatience, would rush to snag her bags,
return them safely to the counter.

And just as I was picturing my face on the 5 o' clock news,
hand gestures reenacting the events,

she shoved her cart aside and snatched her two boys up
like an eagle snatches food,

flying through the automatic doors,
never once looking back.

Diplomacy

The sand in the pixilated hourglass is quickly falling.

Dinner in ten! yells his mother from the kitchen,

where she labors over cold Tupperware containers,
prepares to nuke spaghetti from the night before.

But from the shelter of his dark, messy room,
from the headset drowning out his presence at the table,

he is nowhere near the state of starving,
nowhere near concerned with the politics of lukewarm noodles,

the indigestion after soggy meatballs form a coup inside his colon,
trading playing time for time spent sitting on a toilet.

No, tonight diplomacy has failed his online planet once again,
and sanctioned by the powers of suburban boredom and a plastic joystick,

he commissions himself to save his country by invading others,
by tapping the X Y Z buttons like Morse code,

machine-gun fire sprayed across a busy plaza;
his squad bent low, fast and focused, sniping out jihadists

lined like pigeons on alley rooftops.

Every boy his age knows the consequences of a stiff thumb,

the wrong clicks that thrust his soldier's body up, expose his head
above a bullet-beaten wall, that *Pop-pop-pop!* before his skull bleeds out.

But in this world, where drones hunt heavens above Helmand province,
striking empty mosques and highways sparse with cars,

tribal fields where boys once played soccer
with the same adrenaline he plays his game,

life is lived with the comfort of long pauses, the relief
that M1 tanks, IEDs, WMDs, and KIAs

are all acronyms as meaningful as simulated experience,
as suspenseful as the last kill before he gets killed,

before he laughs, shakes it off and starts again.

Oeuvre

For years, Mrs. Klein has eaten the ashes of her marriage like bread crumbs,
starved herself of herself to give herself to Zumba, PTA meetings,

two boys (aged six and eight) whose curiosity with color is a fever she can't erase;
Crayola melted in the backseat nooks of Lexus leather,

Sharpie river-systems mapped on her bedroom wall, and yet,
despite her weekends nauseated with the scent of bleach,

she wants her boys to liven the paint-by-number canvas of her skin.

Add:

1. A dab of pink to her droopy cheeks.
2. Mascara engineered to soak up tears.
3. Maraschino cherry red penciled on her jagged lips,
dry with the after-taste of Mr. Klein's kiss.

Night after night, she studies his body's shifting geography,
the way the couch and calories have staged a coup around his waist,

the way his penis now dangles like a damaged power line,
the side-effects of middle-age so unforgiving. And she's glad,

if glad is the word for exhausted relief, that they've given her uterus a break,
an unpaid vacation to Menopause, a reason to let intimacy expire on their sheets.

She tames insomnia with a stash of Ambien, tucks herself tightly in
like a body bag, numb and ready to zombie about the kitchen in just a few hours,

pour affection into bowls of Lucky Charms; her two boys laughing,
catapulting soggy marshmallows, fingering the green milk

into abstract masterpieces across the table. And as she watches
her business-suited husband bolt out the door, bagel and responsibility in hand,

she snaps, if only for a moment, from the sugar-coated hypnosis of motherhood,
aware she's shading her self-portrait with strokes of obligation,

routine blotted through her sagging breasts, thinning hair,
captured in the rearview mirror every morning, wondering

if somewhere there's a woman smiling in her driveway,
living the century's greatest heist.

Love pantoum (failed)

My love is like an Excel spreadsheet,
nauseated with too many rows and columns of relationships I fuck up.
It's hard to measure the future of my heart in the footnote of a one night stand,
even God and my therapist can't tell if my life is worthless or not.

There's always another row or column of pretty men who want to fuck,
men who love their mothers like they love their shiny credit cards and cock.
Only Freud could have told you if that last line was humorous or not,
but all you can do is laugh when your body's being gnawed by vultures in the dark.

There are mothers who spite their sons because their sons never loved them quite enough,
who dream their sons are throwing lilacs on their burning caskets every nine months,
who laugh when bouquets of fresh roses arrive on their birthday every year,
and cry when they realize not even baby photos hold their innocence for long.

I often dream I'm throwing unanswered questions on my father's burning body bag,
unzipping the scars he chiseled around my thighs when I was young.
I cry when I realized his hands stole a childhood I never felt.
I wear pantsuits to work because skirts mourn his memory too much.

It's hard zipping up the past when the past bleeds through your sheets every night,
when the weight of my heart is measured on the length of another blow job,
when not even brand-name clothing can hide my memories from view,
and my love is deleted again and again like an Excel spreadsheet.

One

I'm beginning to question the flexibility of male anatomy,
the degree to which my rigid limbs can bend,

how long I must touch my sweaty feet
to feel the spiritual enlightenment
I pay \$50 a month to reach.

What's the limit on club memberships,
yoga mats, blocks and pants that ensure my ass,
sagged with cellulite and middle-age,
enjoys the numbness from asana every week?

Whenever I attempt to balance my arms in perfect Crane,
watching my petite instructor balance hers with ease,

I doubt whether physical transcendence
is worth every throbbing stretch,
every bend and twist squeezing the love handles
hanging off my hips.

I wonder if reading more New Age self-help books
will minimize my flatulence,
let me catch a breath in Downward Facing Dog,

or if resigning myself to the back of the classroom,
humming deeper Om's than the iPod stereo,

will still give me that self-confidence to claim
that I,
practitioner of ancient eastern philosophy,
am one with everything and everything is one with me.

Perhaps my mind and body are too diluted
with the pleasures of a Western lifestyle,
too dependent on fast-food and cable TV,

or perhaps I don't meditate and pray enough to those Hindu gods,
whose Latinized Sanskrit names now escape me,

like embarrassment escapes my pores
as I hold another unpronounceable position,

lunging, sun saluting, hoping the row of women to my right
don't gaze over,
 see my body shaking.

In Texas

Early morning forecast: no chance of rain to baptize the heat in Texas.
Another day of cloudless skies, news we bear for 52 weeks in Texas.

Drought usurping the green off grass, front yards cooked to the color of dirt.
Every hose, every sprinkler, every tear from God's eyes forced to admit defeat in Texas.

Not even the labyrinths of hell can be so hot, not even the sun so vengeful.
Our bodies conditioned to the fever of this land, a fever not even the devil can cheat in Texas.

Despite the furnace our ancestor's labeled weather, our burning hunger
lights a fire, our backyard pits perfume the air with the scent of meat in Texas.

Coolers stocked with mounds of beer, garage TVs echoing chants of football pride.
Crowded tables, bowls of beans and dip, BBQs without ribs are incomplete in Texas.

Every Sunday pastors pace their altars, pray those absent souls will someday reach the light.
Given the number of churches per capita, being a nonbeliever is no small feat in Texas.

Still, not every rumor preached up north is true, not every Texan owns a gun, a pickup truck.
But count your horses, regardless of the times, cowboy boots are never obsolete in Texas.

In what other country are roadsides painted with bluebonnets and cattle?
Where else does black gold bleed as green as when the ground secretes in Texas?

Let those fancy seasons keep the Union wet and cold, let this faithful heat be my death.
For all I care this world can go to hell, my sweaty heart will keep my feet in Texas.

Refuge

He staggered in
desperate and poor as usual that morning,

the unstrapped Velcro from his diabetic shoes
scraping the ceramic tile near the counter,

where the young barista said *Hi* like she was paid to mean it,
paid for the perkiness of latte torture,

the soft screams of low-fat milk
steamed into quick frothiness,
espresso drained like diarrhea
into Venti Styrofoam cups,

as the sloppy sips sipped the sweetness
and the chit-chat drowned the Muzak
raining from the speakers.

But it wasn't the sound of rushed coffee I wanted to hear,
or the chime of credit cards
singing their own Christmas tune,

but the seemingly sympathetic *Sorrys*
telling the homeless man they didn't carry cash
in their purses, wallets;

guiltless shoulder shrugs shooing him away
for someone else to handle.

I watched him loiter the parking lot
like a stray dog searching for scraps,

pacing back and forth
as if he were weighing survival
with consideration,

knowing the *No Soliciting* sign was just a sign after all,
a suggested reason not to flank the tables,
disrupt our mood, attention,

make everyone reconsider
their favorite social refuge.

And after brushing aside his mumbled requests
with the stench of ripe urine
clinging to his sweatpants,

the liquid gold
he could still claim as his,

he hooked around the bar and wobbled toward me
like I hoped he would,

like he does every morning,
staring at the change and dollar bills
I leave on my table,

unsure if my answer
would be the same as always.

Morning News

I'm taking a vow of political celibacy this morning,
sipping my cup of Folgers half-naked on the couch.

It's late October, the leaves have hibernated,
the trees are in desperate need of antidepressants,
and the campaign has hit its final stretch.

As I study my reflection blurred on a 36" flat-panel screen,
I surrender the urge to thumb my remote's power button,

switch between 24-hour news cycles,
pundits who complain the other candidate
forgot to quote the Constitution in his speech,
forgot to be the spokesperson for peace.

It's 7:15, I have ten minutes to squeeze into a suit
and weave through morning traffic;
run numbers in a cubicle
at a company with decent dental.

The problem with middle-aged life is that there's too much time
to fill the other 16 hours in the day,

too many Chinese restaurants to order take-out from,
too many channels on cable TV;

another commercial showing how my driveway would look
with the latest Lexus, how happiness feels
with power steering, satellite radio and black leather seats,

lights from the downtown nightlife zooming
like a Pollock painting around me,
the pretty woman blushing with sex in the passenger seat.

But I like to think I'm more of a cynic than I appear to be,
that I'm aware of the nonsense

lullabying my insomnia to sleep,

the celebrity news that isn't news
but makes the headline news
because that's the chaos we like to see.

Afghanistan has lost its magic touch,
Iraq has lingered like the last guest at a house party
who just won't leave.

Death has bored us all to death,
yet I still can't relate to death
with so many numbers flashing on screen.

I need something more concrete,
a dead soldier on my living room floor,
an IED wired around my double bolted door.

I need a semi-sentient politician
who doesn't make golf on TV look like porn,
public debates at maternity wards
so abortion is settled once and for all.

I need to keep persuading myself
that the other guy has it in for me deep,
that his policies will wrap my family
in Commie-made chains,

a sarcophagus of promises
to put my political promiscuity to an end.

It's all very close to home,
very American news worthy.

IV. [UNTITLED]

Figures with Meat

I.

I imagine Bacon imagined a butcher seated on a throne,
feasting with the spoiled scent of flesh, authority.
His speech decomposed into processed sacraments
he feeds his hungry flock. Every April he hangs a carcass
from his altar, marinates the spine in atonement, and listens
as their filed teeth gnaw through leftover prayers buried
beneath meat and bone. This butcher sees how they savor greed
with every bite, how these bitter limbs taste like sacrifice
to shriveled tongues, how the blood dripping from their lips
forms a fetus on their plate, a starved lamb they nurse into obesity
as they sharpen their knives with ritual, belief. He wraps
the animal's hide in thorns, they nail their white cloth to the table.
Tonight it's raw beef and sin for dinner, a slice of crucifixion
for dessert.

II.

At my aunt's table again, and she eyes my posture, hands,
the fork my fingers grip as I fork the mound of meatloaf,
lukewarm from the belly of her microwave,
the Tupperware where it sat buried
for three cold days.

The silver teeth break the crust,
and I stare back, cautious of the way she holds her knife
upright like a gavel.

There is no way to undo the way
she slammed her fist three days before,
threats of sawing off my tongue
if I chewed like a goddamn rat again.

But again, even in memory, I'm tempted by spite,
by the need to expose my gums,
spit chit-chat and ketchup
on the plastic tablecloth.

Each syllable nibbled louder inside my head
so I could imagine just how she'd sever speech;
the slow carving of my cheeks, jaws unhinged
and her fingernails scraping the vocabulary
off tongue and lips,

until all that's left
is the residue of a language I once spoke;
a silence sewed-up,
resurrected even now.

III.

Then I read the caption,
and recalled how my brother could hear their squeals
far from the kill floor,
how their pain echoed off the holding pins,
and how the stunning sometimes failed,
bolt shot too high on their dirt-pink skulls.

Then came the body flop, the spasm, pause;
their bruised and shit-caked legs shaking
as they'd chain and hoist them upside down,
dangled like piñatas on the trolley line, knife
ready to devein their jugular.

He told me once over dinner, how this one,
still scabbed with feces, fear,
regurgitated blood from its open neck,

sprouting fountain-like on his goggles, cheeks,

until gravity found greed, and it fell
flopping like a fish fresh out of water,

quick to die again.

He calls sometimes
panting with the nightmare
that followed him from work,
how he's always standing naked on his bed,
ripe with the stench of pig intestines,
with urine oozing beneath his feet;

that warm puddle reflecting his face
melting inside a scalding tank.

IV.

“Permeated by tormented visions of humanity...” and yet, I study the slack-jawed face flanked with “two sides of beef”, reminiscent of Rembrandt, Soutine, Velasquez’s Pope Innocent X. I’m allowed to interpret an alternative figure, a “depraved butcher”, a “victim” seated on a self-mutilated throne. But I see myself instead, the black and purple pulsations of a dying body; shoulders hunched, legs crossed, displayed as isolation inside a glass box. Even as I lean closer in, adjust to a thicker point of view, I feel my lips and jaw sag further down my neck, as if I’m about to squeal, caw, ask like a passing guide why the artist chose to paint his subject this way.

V.

Every now and then,
she’d drag them in
like portraits of Jesus
squatting low with the cross;
their bodies heavy
with webs of maggots,
trash, a trail of raccoon mush
brushed across the back porch and yard.

I knew there was a story
behind every wavy stroke,
the bread crumbs, makeshift booby traps,
bellies bloated for a few warm days.
But I only saw the appendix
of their deaths, how my aunt
flung them flat on the picnic table,
how me and Robbie tiptoed
at the kitchen window;
their stomachs cut
with her hammer's crooked claw.
Even if she'd wash up before lunch,
and we all held hands,
praying for the un-repentent
sinning of this world,
we couldn't describe what we felt
seeing their ribs and sternum
cracked apart, or when we touched
her hands bathed in the after-scent of guts;
fingers fresh from their familiar fetish,
amens we could never repeat
in front of Ma.

VI.

He nailed his oeuvre to his heart,

but what was left after his death,

but his bones and his teeth?

VII.

Chicago. December. And from the window
I see a squirrel nestled in my front yard, bloated, black,

calm in its advanced decay. If this were summer,
the ants and botflies would have had their feast by now,
purged the meat from its stomach, head; drained
the cartilage from its tiny paws. Perhaps I would have shred
the rag-like remains mowing the lawn, not given the bump
a second thought. But here, winters are unforgiving,
and I'm left watching what's left of this squirrel slowly open up;
insides shriveled like a rotting plum. My dog wants out,
he can smell what isn't alive peeking through the snow.
I've witnessed this lump of flesh and hair before,
and because I know this rite, I want to drape it
in white linen, douse lighter fluid like holy water,
and let it burn till I can taste the ashes of another animal
passing from my life; the sentimental fire rising, smoke
but a brief signature in the sky.

Titled taken from Francis Bacon's *Figure with Meat*, 1954. Oil on canvas.

Odalisque with Arms Raised

Like a drowsy landscape sinking beneath the horizon,
she surrenders her limbs to private reverie;
posture now prisoner to the chair's green-gold frame.

The rose-pink centers of her nipples swell
with the candlelight drowning the room in stillness.

Her arms curl back like thick origami folds bent into shape,
while the semicolons of hair below
unite our eyes with breasts,

with the lumps of flesh anchored to her hips,
as we wait for the genesis of movement,
for her diaphanous stare to sway into consciousness,

like Eve's awareness
after her first sweet bite.

~~~~~

But that also could've been my mother painted in that scene,  
mid-life belly fat exposed beneath the wet folds of an old white-tee,  
thighs sinking further through the couch,

as her body slips into a different state,  
far from the noise of faucet water hitting plastic plates,  
from her own voice yelling that I help find the TV guide,  
remote.

No, she substitutes her rerun of *Golden Girls*  
with a pause instead, a stare, that moment between reality  
and the loss of knowing you've lost a hold of reality,

where she imagines herself (if only for curiosity) in passive pose;  
arms yawning behind her thinning hair, her naked back  
as she flings her shirt and bra,



lets the fluorescent light touch her nipples, breasts,  
calm the way my father never could,  
soft the way my after-school hugs  
were contrived to feel.

But she's past understanding the complexities of her skin,  
the way it wrinkles with divorce and age, sags  
around her torso like a washed-up jellyfish.

And I'm past understanding why years later,  
I picture her only this way,

peeking from the hall as drowsiness  
sheds herself from herself,

and she hardens to a still-life  
in the memory of this written frame.

~~~~~

There are moments when my wife slithers into bed
and opens the jellyfish folds between her legs,

reposed again, positioned again like Matisse's odalisques;
arms soft and raised, waiting for the moment
when I anchor my lips to her torso, waist;

our bodies stretched to a consciousness
our marriage rarely claims. But
there's a scene before this horizontal frame,

where I'm standing naked at the edge of our bed,
studying the stretch marks shaded on her skin,

the way her stomach sags like melted cellophane,
the way time drains color from her thighs and hips.

And yet, even as she sinks further through the mattress, sheets,

even if I know she won't shed this weight,
she offers a reality true with age,

the perfect imperfect state as I lie on top
and let these thoughts thaw to a feeling
only my body can taste.

~~~~~

The same subject, slightly altered,  
and she waits like all the rest,

perfectly poised, imperfectly posed,

hired to endure hours of his thin stares,  
thick strokes.

She's sprawled across the armchair, arms coiled  
in a state of vulnerability,

flimsy blouse barely hiding  
the conflagration between her legs,

as he outlines a darker shade  
around her pale pale skin.

She tries to be his *coup de foudre* again,  
but knows she can't,

even if her body language willed it,  
even if he finished by painting her dead.

~~~~~

And so, as the moment goes,
my mother moves again,

alive, awake,

covers her flesh clean from its naked slate.

I crawl back to bed
without words to say

how there's so many ways
the body can't escape.

Title taken from Henri Matisse's *Odalisque with Arms Raised*, 1923. Oil on canvas.

Non finito

“Flesh was the reason oil paint was invented”, but mediums are subjective, and since stick-figures are the visual limits produced by my fingers, I apply language to your skin instead, spread adjectives like suntan lotion: *chalky, sensitive, scabrous* still with my ballpoint pen. I’ve formed the idea of your body in my head, a rough draft outlining the details in your legs: long and firm, soft in theory, yet dense when wedged between the crevice of my lap; feet tucked and naked beneath my crotch, hair yawning against my hands. I remember sliding my breath across your thighs one evening, heavily methodic, but still colloquial as I reached the borders of your waist, migrated my nationless lips to their newest state. We pluralized the laws that governed us as individual, eradicated old habits like polio, but even through proximity, comfort never factored circumstance into play, and now I’m left carving your hips with words like *supple, opalescent*, layering the memory of your torso like de Kooning’s *Woman*; jumbled nouns and verbs scaffolded into a second-draft beneath your breasts, which for a moment, I consider describing symbolically as apples, biblically tempting in curvature. But this is not the metaphorical texture I once felt, not the subtle qualm echoed through your ribs, nor the waterworks puddled into salty saucers on your clavicles; neck sticky with secreted questions never asked. I’ve abandoned this image for revisions composed of ambiguous statements, scribbled phrases I could stitch into a falling action, ending, a sense that when I read what I’ve written about your face tomorrow, how I used *obsidian*, not *green* to sketch your eyes, I won’t stop at the punctuation and feel this means I’ve finished.

Quote by Willem de Kooning.

Variation on Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*

An almost-lifetime passes, and I'm left paraphrasing your birthday suit
on memory's tableau; flesh ripe with a pale incandescence singed to your limbs,
body as thin as broken eggshells nestled on our bed. I find you here every morning,
still half-asleep, sheets spread across your torso like the birth of a funeral pyre.
You reach for the lighter before you reach for me, lips scabbed with Marlboro habits,
and the smoke, as miasmatic as it is dramatic, fogs the borders of this scene.
You wake slowly like you were dead in a dream, like the bottom of your skull
was hinged with a wooden door, and one of Freud's conniving repressions
purposely opened it, rearranged the timeline of your fears into puzzle pieces.
You say that even when it's closed I'm still peeking through the crevice,
Duchampian in demeanor, and quietly enamored by the malformation between your legs;
your thighs spread-eagled as you lay victim-like on a feral lawn.
But not even you can tell if you're alive or not, if the autumn-tinged lighting
can be deciphered, perhaps inexplicable in theory, yet lucid when I lay next to you at night,
and proximity revives the need to prescribe everything a meaning.
I'm sorting the details like I do the Ambien, Lunesta, counting sheep
to sink me back to your body's echo, your sudden silence stammering down the hallway,
as I form your name in my mouth, don't pronounce it; the glow from your cigarette
burning a tunnel through the darkness.

EPILOGUE

Fin

The greatest thing about a poem
is it always ends, always collapses
under the weight of its own design,
even epics drown in drowsiness
when the rambling narrative lingers on,
when again the hero questions morality
like a child questions the tenderness
of leftover meatloaf, an uncertain future
growing cold on his plate. But a mind
must be made, an action taken, haikus
know this all too well which is why
they say so little if they say anything at all,
another mountain crying in snow,
a petal sanctioned into sadness by tiny raindrops,
sometimes you're a few words in
when someone jumps onstage and steals the mike,
improvises a new elegy for your death.
Sometimes this affair with language
is better left on mute, resigned to footnotes,
abandoned like the novel draft about a hurtful
ex-lover, the final chapter composed entirely of ellipses
because written confessions could go on forever,
regrets alone can take 1000 pages.
No matter how much prose you feed
your starving body, no matter how much syntax
settles deep inside your stomach,
the heart will always crave another poem,
carve a few cathartic stanzas seeking closure,
a line describing the sunset
when the casket of goodbyes is lowered,
sad violins ebbing in and out like waves,
our punctured lifeboat sinking
until there's nothing left.

ENCORE

Dénouement

It was like watching a human time capsule
sit onstage that evening, his white buttoned tee
and faded blue slacks slouched on a chair
soft enough to cradle the skeleton of his body.
Beneath the hall's fluorescent light, he spoke
into the mike with a delicate demeanor only known to poets,
reflecting on the evolution of his work, trying
to reconquer a past he thought was his to remember.
I remember his spongy hands reaching inside his leather satchel,
his first collection of poems pulled from the pocket,
his eyes staring at the cover as if he had never seen his work
in flesh before, never felt the words he caged so alive
between his fingers. And when his fingers started shaking,
as if panic and Parkinson's had hijacked his nerves,
and the student helper rushed over to calm his turbulence,
I remember thinking this reading would be his last,
a self-eulogy for his future death. I wish I could have laughed
with the crowd when he delivered the punch lines from his poems,
when his surreal humor and lovely tragedies
crackled through his voice, gave new meaning
to lines I had read so many times before. A part of me
sat awed that at 73 he hadn't lost a beat to his step,
hadn't self-pitied himself into retirement. But a part of me,
a poet part of me, wished my attention wasn't colonized
by the fact that he was dying, by the revelation
that even the most lofty and well-crafted language
can't save us, that the man sitting in the spotlight
spent his entire life trying to capture the world with words,
when perhaps what best describes the world
are moments when the audience says nothing at all,
but applauds as we close our books
and quietly exit the stage.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Esteban J. Rodriguez earned his BA in Latin American Studies and Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin in 2010. He moved back to the Rio Grande Valley that same year to pursue an MFA in creative writing at the University of Texas Pan-American, with a concentration in poetry. Currently, he works as an elementary reading and writing tutor at Donna Independent School District, where he mentors economically disadvantaged students in order to promote English and Spanish literacy in the community. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Huizache*, *Thin Air*, *basalt*, *Ghost Town*, and *Sleipnir*. He lives in Weslaco, Texas and is working on his first poetry collection.

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