IF I WERE ON FIRE

By

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ABSTRACT

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A collection of seventy-two original poems by Michael J. Argumedo as a thesis for the Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Kansas University, subsequently published under the pseudonym Mickey Cesar by Spartan Press (Kansas City, 2011).
fireplaces

Spires stab low-slung clouds
with grey silhouette, as church bells
settle into sidewalks, down fences,
and echo under porches;
dogs snort and root through dumpsters
on the south side of elementary schools,
padding bloody paws through
beer-bottled snowdrifts.

Embers of yesterday's sports page
catch their tails sometimes,
and as the hymns of halftime
shudder storm windows all along the street,
fireplaces cough coarsely,
evergreens pop,
and a mouse explains his death in a ventilation duct.
Mister Black does not want
to become a walking caricature
in anyone's animation.

He shifts himself every morning,
hoping to blend into his surroundings,
no two days ever the same.

On sunny afternoons, seated
on an iron bench outside the Greyhound Station,
he must sometimes wave away the suspicion
that every landscape has been painted,
that even waking makes him
the product of someone else's creation.
Brushes follow his every footstep,
and he hates them:
every angry young mother,
every sleepy security guard
seems to have slowed,
drawn progressively poorly.

At the bench, with folded hands in his lap,
Mister Black plans his escape:
soon enough, soon enough, by God,
he will paint with grenades.
So the streets are cold and wet; 
the hours leave time to think 
of shrunken heads, to contemplate 
uniformed English girls 
with sallow cheeks 
and long legs.

The sunlight slants low through 
chimneys and rooftops 
on unemployed afternoons, 
and as you regret 
the last American cigarette 
you brought 
in a suitcase 
the bus up the block 
unloads schoolgirls in blue, 
one two, 
one two.

You realize for the third time 
you didn't bring 
enough warm clothes for the winter 
while you wait at the cafe 
for that one friend, 
that other foreigner 
who kisses your rumpled face 
in the morning.

In theory you both speak the same language, 
something beyond the odd talk of coins in pockets 
but these songs are merely early flights 
soliloquies of cigarette butts 
coffee-spoons 
and the rumbling uptown bus.
aurora borealis

Between alarms, she stirs, sighs, and tells you she's been having those dreams.

Her breath on your chest is a blast furnace.

For nine minutes you feel the weight of her on your neck until the alarm sounds again.

Bedroom to coffeemaker is a short cold voyage you feel in your heels but some mornings – ones like these – the transit feels like twenty-three years.

In the darkness beyond the basket, the filter, and the five spoonfuls of awful Robusta you brew like an insane penance, you remember all the things she doesn't: sharp words with a waiter. A broken cellphone. Cheshire smiles all around, a wet kiss for a stranger on an elevator. And as your coffee burbles and sighs into its carafe, rippling in the weak light of a snowy five a.m., you set your coffee cup aside; it is one of a set, but solitary still, and quiet.
the promises of girls

On waking,
he finds the house whistles.
It might be the pipes, but
it seems wiser to wait,
as his breath is short,
and the bath may hold
questions he cannot answer with any certainty.

The window muddies everything,
but daylight is arrived,
newly foaled,
unsteady on its feet.

Somewhere an alarm clock lurks,
threatening the morning
like the scent of a stranger's breath
or unkept promises.
Fingers make their first reports,
and his spine complains in multiple voices,
and as small traffic noises filter in past the door,
he reminds himself of the old lesson:
there is no such thing
as an easy escape.
cooking for nicole

By hour, by minute
the contents of kitchen cabinets,
imperfectly packed, brown. When the sun
streaks through grease-stained glass
the tiles beneath your feet engage
reflections on
consumption, and it is with a certain weariness
that you make something
out of what remains:
bits lying about appliances,
canned beans, old cabbage,
the last wedge of cheese,
eggs. It is an inevitable ritual
you undertake, a genetically
coded labor.

You slice onions on the counter
and in the dying light of evening,
fry them.
You've made no mistake.

You're quite right,
for it is clearly tattooed on your forehead
in blue ink.

Over the years, you've concluded that
mirrors lie;
and similarly, photographs
are only slightly more honest than that,
but so much these days seems blurry
and obscure
you have trouble trusting
or believing circumstantial evidence.

It is obvious when you walk downtown.
Your latest lover sees it when you sleep.
Your mother always knew it was there
but said nothing.

You've tried to erase it with clenched fists,
but oftentimes it is
the most striking thing about you,
the thing
which people remember forever.

Elsewhere, the latest murder remains unsolved.
Someone sees Jesus in a bakery window.
An old man dies in his bedclothes.
Two lovers have tired of each other on the train to Trieste,
but here, for that mark on your forehead,
you cannot sleep.
mere accidents

It is just coincidence, Aunt Edna, mere coincidence.
The last harvest brought mice.
The owl followed.
Jason was transferred to Pittsburgh by men working from spreadsheets.
The light outside dims because the sun sets every evening.
I felt it too, but the spring rains made our foundation sink just a bit;
the door swings open, the latch needs oiling. I’ve said
the appropriate phrases, Aunt Edna.
I set an extra plate in the kitchen, but no one came. Thick steam of beef and onions still lingers in the cupboard.
I can’t explain, but have faith: it all makes perfect sense.
expiration dates

Oak leaves crisp
under winter's last layer
of ice. Weak branches lay in early graves;
slush gathers thick at
intersections, the curbs
on the shaded side of the street,
and by late afternoon come
the noiseless tracks of unpolished boots.
The evening brings taxicabs,
pizza deliveries, poor radio reception,
and another freeze.
The windows have not been cracked since last spring,
the last time
she was here to touch them.

A draft remains.

Expiration dates are not enough:
some things should show themselves
the curb: toasters, teapots, second-hand furniture.
The furnace seems a bit weaker this year.

A young girl touched your hand once,
strangely reassuring, but you awoke,
your room still dark save the streetlights outside,
the green glow of your VCR,
the fingers on your clock.
other children

At noon, the sun falls short of the porch.
Tobacco drifts over pages, and from over your shoulder
skips the sound of sketching, erasers.
A writer at rest worries his nails, considers
how this century keeps them clipped close,
how children speak in whispers.

Check your pockets now, my friend:
a fetish from some decades past may be brushing
uncomfortably against your leg.

There is soft footfall in gravel
at this spot where the sidewalk ends;
there are remnants of flesh on the tip
of the morning’s first cigarette,
and somewhere, young mothers bet
the sunlight will tilt closer down the concrete
in another hour, that it might
touch their feet.
Pray for them: place that coin beneath your tongue,
keep that talisman close at hand,
for you are young and Egyptians should never touch your eyes;
we should spend our lives at
exclusively American tables
where utensils are so easily buried,
and the walls are awash with scents and flesh.
Let us never tire of it, and should
the service slow somehow, we could
drown in older spirits,
rub our sweat into the woodwork
and comment on framed portraits
of other people’s children:
they exist in glyphs and ciphers,
crooked lineages you and I
will bend to our own design.

sparrows

It rains all morning.
Sparrows chirp at afternoon traffic
from the eaves and gutters of eighth street.
The asphalt shimmers with oil.
Sidewalks surrender the cigarette butts of winter.

Next week it is April.
Tied beneath the awning of a coffee-shop
a dog pines unhappily alone,
unable to share his stories:
a beating,
a bone.
Crabgrass forces its way
through a crack in the concrete.

Your letter arrived last week,
postmark smudged by wet spring fingers.
elegy for jennifer gardner

There were broken beer bottles
at the bottom of the basement steps
when you, hunting for Easter eggs,
found them with your foot.

You were tender as a girl,
curling into the corners of
birthdays and funerals,
limping toward the musty covers
of unheated guest rooms.

By the time you disabused yourself
of collecting Queen Anne’s Lace, by
the time you finally knew that
every hand turns fist all too soon,
that little hitch in your step had
traveled up your back and twisted
your every movement
by the slightest fraction.

Could you have ever loved
the hands that held you down?

You somehow welcomed
the blunt instrument,
the blade,
much as you took that last step
on Easter Sunday:
not looking.

On faith.
flood plains

She finds fragments of back-yard Necropolis:
hollow bits of dim past cenotaph
to string into his necklace.

The music of ambiguously blue Saturdays drifts in,
a slow harmonic sweep of brittle fingers
circling buffalo grass and dandelion,
a cold incantation.

On the other side of the world
the sun rages on sand,
islands sway in thick breezes,
laden with fleshy things. These
pulse through meridians of the earth,
following descending veins
into the hoarfrost
where whispers carry leagues.

She knows a shiver is also a prayer,
and certain mornings
his talisman speaks to her blood,
to the tendons connecting
her hand to her wrist,
to her bones.
hemispheres

In Kansas, wind gusts fire
supersonic ladybugs, soft shell
projectiles. In Lancaster, it rains,
the sun forever hidden in hills
and I am bereft – you
returned my underwear
unwashed in a plastic grocery sack:
cruel that it smells like you. Here,
the grasses lean north in the wind.
In England, cobblestones never freeze
though each drop is arctic.
It rains, and everywhere
there is drunkenness, silences
punctuated with anger, and the
subsonic susurration of emotionally
remote rivers, steam-heat radiators,
the BBC; it runs through my guts,
sends clutching hands into my pockets,
and I alone remain uncertain
which side of the world
you left me.
the pathology of cutting

He had
an interest in injuries, the image
of heroin, developing the vocabulary of insects.
Imagine paper. Imagine
her skin, her silk. Imagine the taste
of baby powder and turpentine, the scent
of God’s industry, riveting pages, punches, stamps.
Imagine sheets, her skin. Imagine
Nicole at the foot of the machine,
pressing manifestoes. She slices card stock,
videotape, pastes
a million companions into her books.
Edit, cut, shoes and hair undone. She knows
displaced words lose their semiotic value
through repetition, her silk, her skin,
her hand still
tending the machine. The pathology
of saws and razors results
in a thousand soft cuts. She reads
reports of injuries, imagines, edits,
leaves the library,
wants to the art museum, her skin
exposed to April
all goosebumped,
and she knows
there is a utility in not knowing
the powder, the paint thinner,
the dialect of insects,
the rain.
states of grace

Should I deconstruct my succubus,
this shape to whom all my
ill-gotten incenses drift and curl, or instead
examine my own hands,
thin and trembling with alcoholic ache,
the one unclean, the other
twice broken on phantoms?

Her every angle begs fresh clay,
ankle-deep in unwanted attributes
chipped, chiseled, sawdusted,
hands and feet redone beyond all recognition.

This work seemed so simple once.

To begin again, I would need to examine
those Platonic preconceptions, be rid of them,
and instead sculpt using only exceptions,
exclusions, incongruities and contradictions,
ignore the shape waiting within that stone,
make bone soup from all that fell to the floor
stroke by stroke.

She will be moods, states of grace, and elegies,
a gruel brought to boil on an electric plate.
natalie 9:12

Darling, this charge, it is an overtone, a shiver, the scent of you sweeping in doorways spilling inexpensive vintages, cellphones and underthings. I have spent a century drowning and offer you nights entombed in cat hair, cigarette butts, and traffic tickets underfoot; I shall force your knuckles together and anesthetize your ankles.

You are all lips and anxiety, I should stroke you into stillness, part your hair with my tongue, buy groceries, change the litterbox.

When you dominate my closets, when you abscond with automatic weapons you have made it: you have flown naked and shaking over awestruck shepherds.

You are every definition of the sacred and profane I can taste in jalapeño and rum on Sundays.
hurricane season

The April snows have evaporated from the tips of your nipples.

I have seen you burning, burning like rain over English cities when you rage, but you and I are glacier today, in conflict with pebbles.

I bring you flowers wrapped in edible plastic.

You bring me hurricane.
coruscations

The night the moon spread cold sugar
on the pool house, we could not breathe
for the rarefied sweetness of flesh
we consumed. The hours of sunlight
had long escaped: the coffee spoons,
the teas and towels, lapsed
into limp and tepid dissipation.
The shower’s wet tiles, mosaic, became
our manic chapel, you and I
its imperfect acolytes, our evening vespers
wholly given over to sangria.

When we
fall out of language, you and I are
drunk, iced, sore, and broken. Our teeth
touch, our bodies reflect darkshine
saccharined, our bones haphazardly laid
in unadorned ossuaries, placed farther
from each other than the sun ever was
from us.
strands

The former Soviet Union
covered eleven – count them, eleven –
time zones. Consider
all those far-flung hours: you
disrobed in Greenwich Mean,
Eastern Standard,
left discarded underwear
in Central Daylight.

Months and years do not weigh so much on your hips
as these hours,
when the sweat which pools on your stomach
creates a small lake, an Aral Sea,
an eddy of decisions and revisions which
an hour can reverse when damp sheets dry.

You have carried your native skirts
into a hundred exiles,
hung lovely in a dozen closets,
then left here, in Kansas,
a single strand.
an ordinary noise and seventeen things

High John the Warrior Root.
Essential oils of
balsam and vinegar.
Love Lucky Lode-Stone
and black cats' bones;
a blue-eyed woman
burning her father's last letter,
slick paperbacks
and untested theories.
Dorothy, Scarecrow on the wall.
Toto's shrunken head in the basement,
steeped with gin in a Mason jar.
Wax and scented sheets.
Ordinary noises leak in
from the laundromat next door,
drift through locks of hair
culled from the men's room floor,
and fingernails
in a box
locked away from the moon.
sacrilege

You arrived on a sidewalk
disappointingly dressed.
The sense of loss
which followed my first notice
comes not so much
from the weakened cotton
which clings to your hips
and breasts, but
the fact
that you are dressed
at all.

Had Paul
ever seen you naked, ever
watched you skip into the kitchen
clutching a couch cushion
– for the sake of some modesty
between me and your dog,
ever dueling for touch and taste –
seen you scampering
for a green tea following
insistent summer sex,
he would never have written
the Corinthians.

Know instead
it is sin itself that you own clothes,
and the world’s loss
when you wear them.
locus point

Between poets and psychologists
in the chigger-ridden grasses of rented back yards
there lie

One: vodka, cigarettes, barking dogs and the dialectics of
futon and floor, underthings
clustered around ankles. Two:
ill-rehearsed lines, character studies
common disorders.
Three: words by
shower curtains,
don’t flush, I’m almost done.

Between organic greens and teas,
waxes, half-moons and unfortunate infections,
vowels and vacuums
lie subjects, declarations,
old growths, a conditioned
call and response, recurrences,
bruises and blood,
scratches, tar pits,
pendulums and symphonies,
clinics, diagnoses,
disease.
**physics in welding**

We have spent a century in garages,
our words echoing tinny within corrugated steel,
only to fall flat into cat litter,
flat into oil stains,
flat onto concrete.

We sat on driveways
trimmed hedges
spread fertilizer and
hoped for the best,
waiting for some realtor to return
and tell us
we’ve done well.

Forever, we said.

Fools.

It seemed such a simple alchemy,
this joining of base metals
through the careful application
of electrical current;
a few joules, a few billion
negative particles
create
a flawless seam.
capricorns session one

Doctor, I am just so many different things these days, I am a series of slammed doors, I am continually guessed at, and the most beautiful things, soft and fragrant, conjure me confusedly.

I am sick of being at their mercy, doctor: I swear, if I were on fire, no one would bother to piss on me to put me out.

Each day I awake naked, but as soon as I move I am smothered by unfamiliar names. Songbirds mock me continually, but if I had any talent for music I would undoubtedly compose snapping sinew and broken bones; this woman proposed I soak myself in jimson-weed water, wash my eyes with salt and clay from the banks of the Wakarusa River, avoid Capricorns and American cigarettes, but she kissed me with garlic and monosyllables but then I ached even worse than before, doctor, and every time she tries to help I hear another slamming door and I think the problem might be I just can't stop thinking even when her needles go in and I try on those words of hers but I still hear those small snapings with every goddamn step I take, and everywhere I go people butcher my name.
the lesson

He writhes and kicks, 
screaming, trembling, 
the skin at his narrow wrists 
burning sunshine and cinnamon oil, 
gripped and dragged 
along a gravel path.

His father knows 
he has lived 
far too long 
insulated by doors and screens, 
mother soothing every wound, 
shirts well-pressed and creased.

The edge of the wood 
just past the fence looms 
before endless insects.

His shaking legs know 
how the gravel path 
grinds out and perishes 
in the throats of sparrows; 
beyond his mother's call 
the lake 
where things sting and crawl 
stirs, its bitter water 
alive with antagonistic eyes, 
cutting wings.
the strain

Brother, born with teeth so sharp
they cut his tongue:
didn't talk much.

Sister, with twelve toes and stormy eyes
kept a steady hand on the butcher's knife.

They kicked around a half-dead basketball
to roll in the construction dust
between them,
feeling the strain on mosquito-marked ankles,
showering gravel for the bats to catch.

You can see them sometimes
among fireflies,
the crescent moonrise,
the flickering streetlights.
sarah says

Sarah recalls all the fractured voices which skipped off sheet-metal doors and grates throughout the clinic, manic energized by bands of sunlight: rigid mosaic barriers and borders wax disinfected byzantine in green and white.

Sarah knows voice and shadow slice silence and light, the sting of a dozen ragged cuts; in other rooms, howlings muffle in cinderblock.
meditations on watching your enemy eat

By poorly-placed tent stakes,
beetles cling to your skin;
hollow knots of kerosene
drift near your heels,
but the match yields
little satisfaction.

You are the freak
disenchanted with the ringmaster,
the dull-bladed saboteur lately enlisted
for the dog and pony show:
the one who hates music.

There is a strong-box beneath the passenger seat,
bare wires below the dashboard,
and you unwisely depend on harlequins for justice when
the barker carries a bullwhip,
the magician's wife, a knife.

Everything disintegrates at a touch:
the last slice poised on a counter top,
greasy wrappers sprawled beside
ungrounded power cords and bits of cheese,
while a hundred yards away
laughter trims the last fat from the breastbone,
and the dishes wait to be washed.
sunday at the strip mall

Mister Black gets paid
to mop blood,
to scrub brains,
to sanitize the instruments
of imperfect surgeries.

This work makes for long days,
but it is a sunny trip
to the dumpster, almost pleasant
if the kids from the burrito place
aren’t back there smoking.

At sunset, he uses blue stuff on the glass out front
before locking up and
crossing the street to wait for the bus
where women in cars,
anxious at stop lights, never see him:
they are
almost beautiful at times.
Today, the sad girl on the southbound six-fifteen
is missing. Tomorrow he gets paid.
late models

Summer has you sitting in broken glass again
on a short break from the bakery,
back on the loading dock where diesel engines rumble,
when suddenly girls flock on the street
just out of reach;
fifteen and newly sexy, some half-dozen,
tiny tops stretched over breasts
that God surely didn't intend
and as your eyes slide down
taut tummies to untouched waistlines
you think, blood rising to your cheeks,
such things should be locked up:
the school system isn't doing its job.

But it's summer and somehow seven miles south
of nowhere you live between parking lots,
apartments, and bars, and you vaguely sense that
a marginal credit rating and a decent car
are all that qualify you for the human race these days,
but for now your cigarette burns your fingertips
and you're confused when one of those
newly-minted models in the distance smiles your way
and break time evaporates,
leaving you sitting in bottle caps
and broken glass.
phalanges, fittings, and forgotten geography lessons

These are the implacable ghosts of hardware stores:
stacks of calendars, army commendations,
cardboard boxes, old cologne,
leather belts and plain soap;
they occasionally coalesce in corners,
or follow you through aisles.

When leather-soled shoes crisp on unwaxed tiles
and catch you breathless,
indecisive between shelves of ten-penny nails
and a cornucopia of gaskets,
think of nothing:
that voice is unfamiliar, you must insist,
and the smell of sawdust in the garage
a phantom
a thousand years distant.

There is nothing esoteric under florescent fixtures,
no curses stenciled in flat black or olive drab
hidden under racks and shelves
of plumber's fittings, caulk guns, and hinges,
just these echoes of AM stations
and a muffled cough
which might or might not
call you by name.
alison, indelicate

She looks great
in bra and panties,
on those
rare occasions when
she thinks you're still sleeping.

She is wonderfully indelicate,
the way her calves flex
when she reaches into high cabinets.

She pours water into the coffeemaker
furtively, whispering an odd injunction
for it to remain quiet while brewing;
you peer over blankets
distraught that the cat
might give you away with a yawn.

The blank moments between
the first percolation and pour
are perfection:
she languishes a cigarette,
elbows up, thighs slightly parted,
at the table in the kitchen
while you drowse in blue thoughts
from the bedroom.
dissipation

The scent of flesh, baths, and morning sex
filters into summer afternoons:
soft sandalwood and vanilla touches
remind you that you are still alive despite
these short-breathed mornings of
vodka-ached shoulders and strained necks.

That moment of thirst and darkness
is slow to dissipate;
the morning is a stiff assembly of pieces, colors,
a reconstruction of limbs, and afterimages
of teenaged girls and freckled shoulders,
greetings, but they belong to a less criminal domain.

The sun still blazes unexpectedly
low in the sky when you inventory
those last bits of your remaining breath,
when you still feel
something
sitting on a park bench,
even if it is only ache;
remain still long enough,
and someone will inevitably
paint your portrait, do a character sketch
in shades of black and grey,
detailing every crack and crease
in your hands and face, and place you firmly
on a curbside pedestal,
spackled, categorized, cauterized into a dim corner
of the larger universe, formatted, spattered and
unmoved by the scents of sex and flesh
which edge into summer afternoons.
the american cafe

Timetables and trains are
for other countries and complex days
of sentiment and good-humored recollection,
but they have no place in the
American scheme of things,
where no breeze blows
and all that touches your cheek
are noises and impatience:
even indoors, in sterile spaces,
flies find your flesh.

You have spent thirty years waiting on girls,
a dozen looking up from wrought-iron tables
which tip and talk at your every motion,
your rusty gestures, and it seems your chin
is near erased from the touch of your hand;
appointments are for other folks,
and you've long since convinced yourself
that freedom is an option,
but this heroism isn't evident
to your skinny-legged companions
sitting quietly in the corner of this cafe
with no waitresses, taxis, or ashtrays,
just wallpaper that no one chose
and a strange humming from the farthest room.
caroline

An eight-hundred dollar skirt
looks twice as rich
on a fifteen-year-old
Brazilian girl.

While Summer has
depth-fried California,
and the permanent tourists
beachside have finally realized
that their faults caught up with them years ago,
old men consider their viewing habits
through dark glasses
rimmed with lime.

Twice as rich in kiwi
and coconut oil,
rich in chocolate and daiquiri,
these Neapolitan delectables and delicates
steam September coastlines far more often
than recurring ocean currents,
and on rented porticoes
overlooking paving stones and drying grasses
in the shortening shadows of Santa Lucia,
old tomcats sun themselves
smoking.

Caroline has left for the parking-lot.

This evening, whiskers twitch in the wind,
and every piece of the puzzle
dim behind the window-screen
has long since
been fitted perfectly.
letter # 2,939

It is so damn hot today, and every unhappy woman walking downtown in sunglasses and uncomfortable shoes looks like you, and I wonder if you might have gotten married in Las Vegas again, lost another baby or gone back to Indiana, but then what little I've achieved since would seem such a weak greeting were we to trip over each other's feet and exchange spiked pleasantries: we might mention a few new lovers found and lost, comment on the same old cigarette jones which has seriously begun to kick my ass, and, of course, my crippled poems.

Every year our imaginary daughter gets taller, and I hope she never meets a boy like me when the pavement blisters on days like these, when the cats sweat under porches and birds bake in the trees.
fermentation

The last gnat makes its way into the corner of an eye. Straw stirs into the lower layers of air where wasps wait. Through the trees the tones of a manic calliope linger.

Sunset flinches through the spokes of wheels, tent stakes splinter in hard earth. Broken grasses weep from the tracks of trailers and the hooves of angry horses.

Celebrate raised voices, denim, a sea of belt-buckles and crotches, crying babies. Mosquitoes sing elegies from the darkened amphitheaters of encroaching ditches. The witch waits. All eyes revert to a certain height, bellies and knees.

The bonfire begins soon.

The clowns will come, fueled by fermented children: they tease, shriek, and beckon.
spearmint tea, tracks and trestles

The sun settles
on the far side of the river,
under cover of beechwood, oak, and elm;
in the shadow of grain silos,
the Union Pacific trestle
offers no sure footing:
we either follow, or fall.

I might remain idle
here on the east side of the levee
but for your blinking in the wind,
and the shortness of breath
I heard on your waking;
I could hardly condemn you
to another night
on these sheets.

Our feet form a strange forest
for bullfrogs, chiggers, fireflies
and copperheads, our hands
a trembling bower, mosquito cover;
we have nothing, we are blind,
our breath barely mixed with the
exhalation of cicadas, our spirits
so far removed from any ancient altar,
our tongues so torn from each other
that we form monosyllables,
yet hear nothing at all.

God answers back from the pulse in your neck;
the river refuses to bend.
nearing midnight

Unsettled dogs scavenge late in back yards, scenting the alley. Fences lean for the dark earth with the same urgency that makes us sink in our chairs by candlelight, heavy with July atmospherics. Our words flicker past the patio’s edge, gently insinuate themselves into the grass.

We have stayed untouched for many months, our bodies sore from repeated beatings; when the night breeze bends branches over us we must cede our daylight designs to the wind as the dogs erupt, throaty and violent at the ends of their chains.
the day we made sangria

In July, the heavy scent of California wine
mixed with laundry detergent and rust
to bathe the spare tire,
the jumper cables.

We had rented an evening,
a patio, borrowed
a punch bowl, stole
tumblers, wrote jokes
on index cards
for the event. The kitchen groaned
under miniature mountains of sugar
surrounded by
grapefruit skins
melon slices
cantaloupe
lemon
and orange wedges,
all ready for
a small bacchanal,
but that night, when we turned into the drive
our contents shifted, shattered
in a brilliant crash of inexpensive vintage,
leaving six gallons of California 1991
to seep into the hatchback,
the wheel well all summer pungent
under glistening bits of broken glass.
barbed wire and irrigation hours

When we unwound ourselves, 
we became more swollen than before. 

We took these lessons into the cornfields 
just beyond the pavement’s edge 
where asphalt runs into 
gravel runs into 
dust runs into 
still rows reaching for the sun, 
tall before harvest, 
endless. 

Still stinging from the serrated leaves 
which attacked our ankles, 
we continued with whips, convinced 
that salvation lay in bare flesh. Our visions 
would dance all afternoon, 
wavering in the earthworm’s breath; 
we would cut and slash, in sheer desperation 
but blinking, discover 
nothing had changed: 
we had not learned a thing. 
Sweat ran into the cracks of our skin, 
our salt into small poisonous streams. 

Beaten, we each 
defied the splint, 
shunned the tourniquet, begrudgingly 
admired our marks; 
we might wait for the apocalypse, 
pray the sun might bleach our bones 
but must first negotiate 
the ants and centipedes, 
legion 
hungry 
and patient.
electrical storms and wheatshocks

A cat blackens the barn door.  
The soldiers are still friendly;  
they haven't seen you smile.

Beneath the ash and cedars,  
thin dogs pant and glance sideways.  
A storm brews to the east,  
a lake of rippleless lightning,  
a camera malfunctioning.

From the fencepost, the evening's  
last hawk leans into the breeze,  
exultant in the surety that  
small prey runs riot in the field.

In the distance, the soldiers stand,  
shouldering their weapons.  The road  
narrows, and you notice  
the dogs have disappeared  
without a word.
afternoon showers

*It is now ascertained beyond a doubt, by actual experiment on an extensive scale, that a dead soldier is a most valuable article of commerce.*
~ London Observer, November 18th, 1822

The cicada chorus began its nightly rendition of the *Messiah* when the bone-grinders of Yorkshire ran pulverizing almost continuously the harvest of Leipzig.

It is said that we never leave our dead, but they blossom again among the corn and wheat.
“That's music,” the Sergeant says as fifties open up in the morning, drumming a strange slow percussion of interwoven lines, small thunder.

Cease-fire and silence and sparrows return while cordite wisps disperse in the breeze.

This is the incense.

These are the morning prayers of infantry.

Between vespers armored acolytes arrive bearing Pharaoh's necklace, one-hundred rounds of sun-kissed brass.

Sergeant-Major smiles: the unbelievers run when they hear this song which opens again in quick cadence.
finished porches

Morning declines
down walls now silent
with the rustle of lifted skirts,
and alive with the scent of laundry detergent:
two spiders converse quietly in the corner
where frayed elastic recalls spasms
of a more brutal, drying time.

Something by the baseboards
has been there two summers or more.

Take heart, my friend, give in to merriment,
we are still at war.

We will exchange wounds and drinks
beneath the marquee of a clothing store.

You offer fresh thumbprints to the window;
I'll take your questions
and photographs as well.

We will swear to each other
by darker gates at nightfall.

The sun hangs hatefully
when the coffee is gone.

You came to collect bullets.
The spiders went home.
burning in a’sayliyah

Shadows stand straight in the sand; an idiot breeze has caught hold of phantoms, and bolts strike back when steel is surprised by the call of the muezzin.

And where does the wheat-colored girl fit in, when sparrows wilt in the heat?

She is tending an oven in an open kitchen on the other side of the world.

Here, steel and sand reach astonishing temperatures, and soldiers simmer in a slow-broiling sun.
the charge

You know nothing of being alone, she said, flashing storm, then sun.
He has an unshakable faith that no sin exists which nights of nakedness cannot erase.
From the kitchen, a faucet drips, and restaurant sounds drift through the hall.

Again, she says, you've never calculated the kinetic energy of a threat or the potential charge in falling apart.

An unpainted door slams back on its hinge in the wind, a sand-blown complaint on a prairie, where he stands all too aware that there are no mountains to be moved, and there is no sea to be seen, no river to drown in.

He's been reading poems to Kelli by lamplight, drawing in the margins of cheap hotel Bibles and supermarket scriptures; she's been deconstructing blenders, lamenting the inflexibility of small instruments of torture and the utility of improvised explosive devices for days, yet said nothing.

Nothing at all, she says, you know nothing of being alone. Outside, church bells ring in the distance. Near nightfall, the neighbor starts his lawnmower as always, keeping a crooked eye on the crocus.
the psalms of wasps

I offer you nothing
save this poverty,
this idleness,
this listless pressing into sticky sheets,
these faint thrusts made
to drive away
the frustrating hours
of broken things
and antique happinesses.

Come shed your skin,
leave your humid darkness on the door frame;
we will watch wasps walk south on
chipped-paint windowsills
on breezeless, unemployed August Mondays,
our pulsing necks still strained,
our thirsts unchanged.
the good earth, demobilized

This is a strange place for a lighthouse, Stuart – with the endless leagues of hay, the wheat shocks standing unsteady in the fields. We had mistakenly booked passage on a dreadnaught, and served stoking coals, but that was long ago, Stuart; the burns on my palms have healed, and this century finds me uncertain between tack house and tractor.

The sky goes on forever here, a blue subsumed by its underlying blanket of insect drift; the irrigation machines are amazing mile-long monstrosities which straddle the soil like somnolent gods. When we were twice removed, prostrate before the furnace, you told me stories of Idaho, stories of children, told me to grab onto my faith and save it for the upcoming harvest.

I did, Stuart, I did but this is a strange place for lighthouses and fallow dreams; I just wish you could see them.

I do.
tonight’s fiancé

Sure, I'll marry you.
You know where I live.
I'll leave a key under the doormat
and you can come in.
Take everything I have:
this bag of bones,
some broken toys.

Wander through these halls you've never seen,
warm these sheets you've never stained.
Take everything.
Even streetlights through the blinds
make evenings achy and sleepless.

Forget my name.
capricorns session four

She's alone in the dark, doctor,
trying to reach a consensus with the bullet;
once the tip of the full moon's
light touches the smoke alarm
in her kitchen
   and by here I mean
   the one without batteries
she starts,

starts building her F-bomb
from the fleshy parts
of every boy she’s ever known. Man,
plants are poisonous. All of them.
And then she

   I've seen her,
   I used to live next door
she does this Satanic thing
that comes from California;
I saw the package, and I swear
she's losing her hair
from mixing that monstrosity
and although she's usually alone,
I've seen, doctor, I've seen
she's pregnant again
with small murders
and even bleach doesn't clean
her dishes like it used to
and I really want to help her, doctor,
I really, really do.
terminal velocity

Unlock the car door again,
sigh in the still embrace of shredded upholstery,
sure in the knowledge that no one
will come to save you.

This engine has seen you through
many legs of your evolution, from A to B
to M and back again, ferried a thousand faces
for you, all your own.

An abutment sounds tempting tonight,
but as your hand grips the wheel
you're well aware that recently
you've developed an aversion for the necessary speed
for reasons you can't even explain
while idling.

It is the same thing:
the dashboard, the radio,
the cracked windshield, everything
is the same as it has ever been,
even the highway, the tumbleweed,
the cattle on the hillside lowing.
the myth of failing blood

After days of impossible weight,
you have begun to doubt
that gravity exists.

When night falls, and sparrows seek shelter, you discover
your every move has been scripted
by a bastard; your dialogues fall
flat. Streetlights click red to green
and back, barely pausing
when your heels catch manhole covers.

Your uncle once recited
the myth of failing blood
to your captive cousins,
and as you fail to recall his
vein-streaked face properly
missing
the dry skin and gin blossoms
which kissed you with talcum powder
and test patterns

a chill creeps
up from the concrete and settles in your socks;
your belly hurts again, and your spine
has lost all strength.

The things you taste on
Saturday afternoons, the usual,
have become bland despite the constant
turnover of waitresses, the frayed aprons
in the back corner. The last strands of crabgrass
have grown roots in the sidewalk outside.
Emily has moved to Manhattan,
and you are paralyzed
beneath the marquee of a shuttered theater.
aisles, hours and shelves

The half-light beyond bare blinds
glowers on Westinghouse surfaces, slow-cooking
cotton lint, damp soap, drying dollar bills
and a wet wasp’s wings.

In back yard poplars, sparrows speak Greek
in animated chorus.

This is the city of unwanted trinkets,
the island of ill-fitting doors in sinking frames,
oversized ashtrays edging windowsills.

Sarah found cigarettes at the grocer’s,
plain packages, cellophane and impatient stares,
filled the pregnant hours of scuffed wax and sobbing
with blackberry brandy;
in the coughing fog of dandelion season
she here considers undiscovered corners,
batteries, pens and other instruments
of unnoticed afternoons,
quiet and precise,
immutable,
thin.
passing an island

She shimmers in and out
with every touch of the tongue.
Tonight she is just
taste and scent, born and burst forth
like a saltwater spring.

We each have our own oceans, tides,
our own vast tracts of sea and sky,
moments of unspeakable sadness,
slow drowning. She breathes
in humid mist.

Sailors have long known
it is not the sudden storm which breaks over the prow
that sinks them, but more often
the unchecked stress on the hull,
the swampish intake of water into the sea-chest
which makes the cargo shift: she has long known
this immersion, learned
to drift. She no longer prays,
but tonight, in the Tropic of Capricorn, she gasps,
seized by sudden hope
until the current curls past
and is gone.
self-reduction

“You live inside of your head,” she told him:
he just wondered
where else he might live.

Each little corner chipped
is not reduction
when self-inflicted, he says,
no:
he calls it love.

He'd pour himself
into a drink
for whichever woman
might show a certain fondness for it,
a craving, or simply dubious taste.

Jostling with ice-cubes,
settling, and
slightly decarbonating each day,
he smiles and tells himself
tonight he's getting drunk.
less a stew than anything

There is a colander, companion to the steam cooker we find ourselves in. It felt cold on our skin, but now hangs on the wall above us.

We miss it, and instead simmer side by side in here. It is said that you can’t throw a frog into boiling water; he’s too quick, and would jump out, but if you warm the water slowly, he too late knows he is cooked. We went south for a winter and stayed. We hungered for flesh. We aged, and soon enough will be reduced to grease and bone, less a meal, less a stew than a back-yard gardener’s fertilizer.
weight

Holding your tongue
with my fingertips and
studying the soft down on the nape of your neck
I am
so much less than I could say in one breath.

You have somehow switched off
your identity, filled your throat and cheeks
with me. You quit trembling
some time ago, and we lay pressed into sheets,
hoping somehow to eat ourselves
into a graver weight.
exhalations

Soaked into cushions,  
we lay beneath clocks,  
engaging final moments.

When your thighs and mine  
smutch together, and our toes  
usher in dénouement,  
I am still stirred.

Desire is criminal. That I would  
want to possess your every breath when  
we are locked together is  
an offense.  
I have only  
two hands  
one mouth  
one cock;  
not enough  
to keep you from dressing eventually.  
Our bodies grow heavier each hour,  
stitch bits of skin into a single shroud.

Let your blouse rest on the carpet  
a moment more: it is nothing  
without your breasts to fill it.

We need convincing, talk ourselves  
into and out of each other  
when our bodies want silence,  
the carpet, the floor.
fruits of our labor

We dreamed, you and I
of the arrival of
outrageous phone bills,
the King’s man at the door,
the sheriff demanding.
The cupboard is bare.
All we do is fuck,
yet the miller, the cobbler, the tailor,
and now the King’s man
all want coins.

Even the witch wants a touch of copper
to tell us that we’re screwed.
auguries

We have cigarettes
lined up like a belt of small-caliber ammunition.

The signs have been there from the beginning:
bottle caps beneath the sofa,
scribbled notes on the coffee table
mean we were never meant
to mean anything;
the sun set some time ago, we have
re-dressed in soiled clothes.

We have often wondered
at our respective weaknesses, our propensities
toward violence, prophesied
our carelessness. We curl into each other’s curves
on third-hand furniture, two tongues
alive with trembling;
we consider different tastes,
and suffer a strange hunger
in an unused kitchen
where we sit sometimes, smoking,
stacking matches into
small pyramids.
Some quality of non-descript silhouettes always recalls your face.

It is difficult to acknowledge just how pedestrian we were, but the unique just seems evermore common with the telling: the hurried romance, unspoken expectations, small infidelities droll and unremarkable in the end.

Our script called for high drama, but the final product was vulgar, an eight-millimeter short that no one would pay to see.
thanksgiving day, 2007

A quiet day, cooking turkey
for the cat.
No dates,
no calls,
no notes
from lost loves.

And I stretch, my bones
a year older from the last such
slope into winter.

Snow dusted yesterday,
only leaves remain.

Today, there is no use
in shaving, showering,
even changing clothes.
The cat will not notice.
He will say nothing of
the latest failed romance,
or the lack of catnip
from the girl's soft hands;
instead, he occupies
the coldly sunny square of tile
in front of the oven,
dreaming turkey.
Butter.
Thyme.
Marjoram.
mister black’s unfinished business

Sarah says
she has seen him
by moonlight, in a cloud of dark dust,
with hammer and nails
working to fix
a house which burned down
years ago.
capricorns session twenty-seven

Doctor, I think your words form mists. They dance with breath, swirl into shapes then fade. They are your color, doctor, your shade and language. Any motion, any penetration, no matter how slight, can disturb them, send those curves and singularities rippling through the topsoil to rest in sterile beds. It would seem an innocent waltz, doctor, how your words, those flirtatious vapors insinuate themselves into our skins, but I see clearly, sometimes clearly, doctor, how much deceived you are by the dialectic of you there and me here. You seem to think that thinking about feeling is the same thing, but it isn’t, God damn it, it isn’t: excuse me, it is thinking, your talking is scent not scalpel, nor jagged edge, broken bones, bruises, talismans, essential oils, fluids, plasma or awful spasms it is an unfathomable distance your language your glaciers your considered opinion and I think, God damn it, doctor, you’ve forced me again think my language my body my scars are so much saner than yours.
fugue

Strange now to think of you gone now with your B-team panties and vitamin drink while I walk past Watson library sick and wheeze panting from two packs a day longer than you’ve lived now three packs you’re no longer there here clear Summer crisped into Fall now fucking Winter hateful sunny pavement cold under my coat and I have been broken on my dogma smoking talking telling all you me we were a dissonance I could not resolve per se on Mondays my company my poems my cock you want but it was not named and yet fit a definition I am no longer your definition I have slipped outside the dictionary west-facing windows Stauffer-Flint Hall lit up you came on Sundays to get fucked but thought thought is itself Northern Phenomenon, hellish cold you want cake your panties in a ball beneath my futon god damn want but not me you think think when your breath is gone your body no love god damn it is the same thing I say but there were so many Sundays months of them and desolate Mondays always I should have insisted this insisted this is what it is not just for me but for you too but I could not resolve and snow now I spend nights coffee no whiskey tonight four in the morning your taste still on my tongue interstate drive to Kansas City fight kiss overpass abutment goddamn guardrail

you are walking your dog in snowfall with your panties on and I am painting from memory your body my God.
wires and winds

Toe to toe, our legs shake,
and our hands have forgotten their business.

We have made a smooth transition
to raised voices,
and it is visible in the way our hips twist,
bone and belly mirror dancing,
breath caught
in raw and sobbing threats.

Your eyes find a new wrinkle in my neck,
an old scar, or maybe something missed by the razor,
and I just this moment notice
your hair is uneven, strands multiply irrationally,
and your lips quiver.

We have wandered long enough, it seems.

My chest is thinner now, my hands
cramped with thoughtless labor;
your arms have weakened from carrying me,
and your back is all unhappiness, inflexible.

Our legs shiver with the wind,
and we are naked, our bellies warmed
by proximity, our ears
burning, chapped, and swollen.
eighth-street basements

We come to this colander
to be sieved through
dark-carved walls, pint glasses
and barley malt,
with lit cigarettes to
loiter with waitresses,
make note of old angles,
new carvings and
recent curvatures.

We are subject to
unimaginable pressures,
where the weight of the sea
has long since slowed the sun's rays
to a trickle.

If we are lucky,
Tonya will dance for us,
leaning on the jukebox,
hers audience.
cars and complexes

Mister Black has had enough.  
He has packed away all the photographs  
of the ones he ever loved,  
having tired of all his  
eschatological bullshit.

God is a quiet, unremarkable light.

In the shadows of candles,  
he records  
his name  
again and again  
to replay, somnolent.  
His carpet  
holds fragments, shed skin;  
his window,  
cars and complexes,  
half-baked identities, broken bottles,  
jake brakes and downshifting semis.
escabeche

Preheat your apartment to three hundred sixty degrees.

Use smelts, fresh anchovies, sardines or whittings, plunge them into hot cooking oil for five to ten seconds, until they scream or you forget the girl for a moment.

Remove them, drain, arrange, and place in an earthenware dish. Recall again the old lesson that, intentions be damned, taste depends on what you actually create; sauté two tablespoons finely minced carrot, one onion, four cloves garlic. Consider calling. Forget it. Add salt. Vinegar. Simmer.
flattening

Should I cover my walls
with collaged nothings,
rough glue and obituaries,
desolate notes to Russian girls?

Picasso had
a Siamese cat, apples, and mandolins,
but I have nothing save
vague sensations, photographs
to fit in my hand.

I should paint over windows,
remove ventilation ducts and stuff them
with women’s clothing.

Your sweater is there, my dear.

And your rival’s scarf.

A weakness runs through my arms,
flattening my hands and feet.
talk about the weather

Stuck on the salutation, I can only stutter
Greetings...? or the explosion
of every inappropriate suggestion
that ever formed in my guts?

Perhaps we should speak of the weather?

It is colder tonight.
This week.
This month I miss
so much I shiver
and I wish,
as only a child might, I wish
for summer cigarettes,
smoke wisping from your mouth
to mine. You complained
of the lush, chigger-and-cicada-soaked
Kansas nights while I
catastrophized Minneapolis
on my fingertips,
Yet I would keep my tongue,
your darknesses, secret, savor for days
your taste, as if, by believing,
I might give birth from
my bony hips, as if
my faith would become
an unending summer solstice but
I am too tropical, humid,
an intemperate mist when
your winters seem endless.

On November sidewalks our toes meet again
bound by socks and boots,
uneven bricks between them,
and I stumble over
the simplest beginning.
closing

And so
it comes to a close,
with some sadness, then;
everything thins out
and perishes
in a second.

Every possible future
has been pre-packaged;
this sad century
has barely opened
to muffled explosions,
but insists,
persists,
already an unwanted memory.

These years
are unreturnable gifts
shrink-wrapped and dusting
on a shelf in God's closet,
their receipts long lost
among the ribbons and bows,
wrapped candies,
and brightly-painted grenades.