

A Brief Introduction to the Small Beast of Hearts

poems

by

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ABSTRACT

A Brief Introduction to the Small Beast of Hearts starts from the basic assumption that the apocalypse is ongoing. From there it explores grief, loss, and the dangers of human ambition. At the same time, it seeks to provide and investigate comfort—in the notion that our beautiful endangered world and all the life on it are very little pieces of a little multi-planetary vehicle diving through space; that time is a construct and, just as likely as not, we've been through all this before; that birds might whisper songs from sleep and may flash and fly above our houses, even after death; that civilizations in the depths of outer space have ineffective politicians and are subject to the exigencies of decay too!; that there are mysteries, mysteries, mysteries, including, but not limited to, friendship; and that, of course, should all else fail, we can always rely on the corporeal, though largely unknown, imaginary friend of our entire world, the small beast of hearts.

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A Remainder of Breath

*So we've woken to find that there is still sky.
The four round lights don't point a direction home,
but bells sound. Somewhere there are still skaters,
and the air persists, hungry and open,
inside the rooms and when we step outside.*

Starlight has just begun to obscure us.

*The map doesn't read for us any longer,
but drop the mile marker in place.
Draw it on the map
as dusklight feathers off our weight on the planet.*

The houses glow like they're lit from the outside.

I.

Something About the Present

A pair of wolves circles a point on the ground
a few feet inside an unknown clearing
in a wooded area in the north of Wisconsin.
It isn't blood, not something wounded.
It's a burned spot, an energy-tattoo
stamped into the face of the ground.
But what is there to say about it?
The wolves circle because they're hungry.

They've learned a certain burning smell means food.
But there is nothing to say. The mark
of a small explosion and a circling
pair of wolves is attractive as an image.
Meanwhile, not so far away,
a city has gone up, the ground tattooed and built on,
reshaped completely, and (what the hell?) here we are!

Somewhere at least, there are wolves circling,
lame birds for them to eat when times are bad,
maybe something for the birds to eat most of the time.
Or that's how we'd like to imagine it...

Dusk Edge

A flash of yellow shadows upward
from the lawn beyond the cement block
patio. It was probably the bird's spirit
leaving its body, I remember in the red pall
of a late winter rain storm, now washed
in blue and streetlights. The trees pull into shadow.
The street silvers. A neighbor's cat steps into the rain.
Crossing the street, it isn't hit by the car.
Light has blown through and disappeared.
Cars pass. Airplanes pass.
The sky turns woolen above us. Bird spirits
whisper down the street above the apartments,
opal light, night bird, and no song.

Risking a Satellite Island of Loss

A voice, a mountain, unspeaks everything—
a textile unraveled and turned to the wind.

The station's left empty. The station,
itself, has left. Left behind the trains,
the whole hope and handle of forward motion...

But I'm still here, dressed and steady,
completely unaware as I watch
a grammar drape itself over a country.

The field is sweet clover and covers the graves.

The markings of a Higher Order
had all the makings of a startling happiness
ready to brim over. This is a question
of human endeavor.

*The system has been cleared perfectly,
to the point of origination.*

This is really the best we can do.

The turn, and a country unwraps itself
from a pastoral veil.
None of it is left anymore.

Advancing on the Great City None Remember, Yet All Long For

Let's live another day with no sense that doesn't falter, but without fail
will fall backward into the march of springtime. We can hardly tell
which turn to tail—earth and shovel to fill the bucket, but no one asked
how much money he had. I am the force driving the merry-go-round.
I am the horse—and everything alive—winning by a nose.
The money did nothing, declared, “Lately something—
there is something to worry about.” I am the force driving into the wall,
but I am not the consequence. Ignore it. Over there, ignore it.
That's the thing we march toward. I am not the consequence.
Anger won't do it, but frustration is the only thing, and to move forward is to destroy.
To destroy may mean History, to move forward is everything, and everything is progress.
To say things we can, which we say that others can't—is progress.
I am the horse that was just a seat. I am bent metal, ruined metal
made of horse—nothing so impressionable and colorless as neon.

Funeral Mythology 1

We sing a shaking
we know better
than to love.

Hunger, tired mourning
of one day
and each day after.
Smaller lamentations
fill our heads,
shape the wordsong we know.

It's the graves
we're ignoring.

Regret Economies

Cash counts the cows
to the grind beevy dead.
Pour me the sour.
Leave the gamble back
on the table there.
Count the cinders *off*.
Souls hanging on the transom?
The keys are with the note
that's coming.
Collapse our humble bar
back into its parts.

Return us to life, oh, cows,
that we may be softer,
that we may make smaller
ourselves than before.

From the World-Womb of Our Impending Doom

What do we hope for, horse? What do we hope for
at this point? There is nowhere to run.
Know that the world doesn't simply stop,
wherever we run. *The blood won't —
the body passing through its own fires,*
the landscape we know, the hard escape of it all.
We find an unmaking. And over the climate?
We cower. The mountains are violent. *The pit
teems with horses, dug beneath the snow. Horses,
steam from the noses, the hard mouths,
gashes in shoulders, tears at the neck.
Steam from the pit, from the snow...*
Whose geography...? What world did we ask for?
There's nowhere for what we've made to go.
We'll poison the ground. We'll poison the air...
Take this great hole in my chest, where we'll fit what we can.
We'll poison the air and the air will die.
Not to leave us behind as all our sweet pets have left us behind,
as our mothers and fathers have left us behind. Nowhere, horse.
There's nowhere we'll lie.

Wolves Grovel at the Gate of an Abandoned Fourteenth Century Hermitage

Miles away, a man dreams in perfect silence
that he starves to death in a forest
in a world he doesn't recognize.

The gate remains closed against him.

The wolves smell mice
living inside the walls.

He watches the world fall on its side,
the shapes fade into each other.
And that's the end. The man wakes up,
composes himself, returns to his home
in the twenty-first century.

The dwindling wolves beg at the gate,
trembling on the precipice of a country

in an insignificant night sky
with an asteroid's arc,

the debris field, the flying darts...

Current Century Eclogue Boogaloo

Stitch me into the ragged shouts of memory,
perimeter marking *coast, coast*,
a place we know dropping off into sinking or sailing, gliding
across swelling middles of the soon-floodwaters. Shout
foretelling onto building-skins. See me standing on a crowded street,
yelling *Stop it. Just stop it.* to nobody while nobody watches,
still all of us knowing the difference between news reports, morning,
late night, pop radio, personal updates, or status, news-sharing, story sharing,
craving to be liked, craving, craving like someone to follow,
follow me, still all of us knowing the difference between telling, hearing,
listening, reading, seeing, between news reports, between
you & me, still-standing walls & doorways, whole buildings,
goods, shelter, sustenance, the flashing numbers, regret economies,
news reports, number counting, each our satellite island, casting & caught in a radio net,
all of us knowing from loss, reporting, differences of fact,
from event, from projection, and, yes, annihilation. The coat against winter,
of memory, the storm that our speech is slowly becoming,
an imprint of here, of the time now —

shout my aching lungs from me. The muscles in my arms sleep now,
sleep now. My legs, my back, wish not to carry me forward.
The boy in the street, shouting. The people at home,
shouting, shouting. The untold numbers
of we-don't-know-what-we've-done-we're-very-sorry-we'll-never-do-it-again,
shouting to nobody, the nobody we are, more countless
uncounted, the world, end we wait for, the steam, we will
call it upon me. Call me to stand, to answer.
Begin me to roil, the boiling waters at *coast*, at *coast*.
The vapor parts to unveil growing masses,
armed to the night, into night...

Call me to stand into night under blankets of static
in radio light. Stitch me into the fabric, into memory,
circuit in storage, in system, into system, into system.
Shout me to simulation, simultaneous conflagration, one & another
next great war, forest fires, or coal burning,
nuclear electric calls the kettle calls the pot.
And here in the fog of the shore, a whisper to ash,
ash, the falling snow knocks at the door. Mother answers,
and the family melts. I whisper to ash, scatter out from the shore. Shout
the silence that dances, descends on the wood, the city, mountain,
the silence not paved over, shouting. All of us knowing the difference

between dressed & steady, an unwinding continent,
its hungry wolves disintegrating on sight, our forward, forward, forward,
great coating, great blanket of ocean, and yes, and yes,
all of us knowing the difference between,
between, and annihilation, the child shouting
to stop the merry-go-round.

II.

Late June

Cradled in the trumpet of midday,
two boys walk through a side door, into the kitchen.
A cat in an open window turns to look
then turns away.

On the other side of the house, in a small sitting room,
the TV is barely audible. The curtains are closed—
blue flashes over the reddish dark.

Eating cheese and mustard sandwiches,
the boys sit across from the television.
Actors whisper their shouts from the speakers.
An electrical hum rises. The screen becomes
a colossal blue, an ocean, the room's shag carpeting.

Too bored to move, the sandwiches eaten,
the boys, unknowing, fall through the television.
The heat of daytime returns to dusk.

Still now, behind the neighborhoods,
the boys ride slow bulls through shallow grass,
in the bell of a horn, which holds the world.

Train Whistle

A flock of molting birds
rises from scrub brush,
a spray over dry river.

A skeletal tree receives birds.
Struts of red sunlight
cross from horizon past the river.

A tree, the birds,
point into the sky,
risen

from scrub brush.

Not the Elegy

Tell me, P., tell me
how I go on.
The starlings have gathered up
and fogged away forever
into the night sky.
The mountains have crowed,
I truly believe, for the last time.

That's just about all the asking
I can ever imagine to me.
And yet, no grammar
can turn me back,
hours I could only live once
and, no, never again.

Whatever racket hummed,
piling painfully inside my hearts
doesn't remember at all
the story we could live,

but how do I go on? Now that you don't?
And how do you? Now that you don't?

Feather out the musical notation.
Maybe, P., there's nothing you can say.
The night sky has coughed
itself away from me. All the lakes
of childhood have simply
flipped the switches *off*.

The blots of paint, swatches
of fabric quilted all together
just filed *away* . . .
So, please, tell me the story
just one more time.
Then I can go on.
Then, sure, you'll go. I can. You will.

Between the Speaking Jaws of Probability

The secret of a universe folds into a bone.
It reveals shapes I recognize, angles tracing an instruction
beneath the skin of a lover. *A ray of light will split
to crash against itself on a screen*, chaotic tension humming
within bodies. It's not about this,
but about the current itself. Muscle pulls the curve of bone into life,
a matter not of sound, but before sound.

At its smallest level, we can never know it.
To arise and return to nothing, truth is declared on a hinge—
a pattern struck from nowhere whose movements
breathe stiller air into arcs.

A Brief Introduction to the Small Beast of Hearts

Beneath the surface of the ocean,
he lives in an air bubble that wanders about.
Every sound in the universe inhabits him,
fills, stacks relentless within him.

Quiet and alone, he is *full* of, he is made from hearts,
which swell to burst and make the bubble glow.

He calls our answers beneath the waves.
We wash clean the daylight
and return to our beds.
Softly we fall there, coiled whispers
unwinding gentle throats,
voiceless isles...

Our radio blanket of light gently touches him,
electrical signals along the path that he travels.

And the small beast of hearts
skitters on, on, not home,
sings us silence, sings his breath
on, not homeward, and on.
His call sings to us, the echo filling
his hearts. Our secret answers sing
over our sleeping faces.

Farewell Speech to Friends Gone East and West, Some Time Since They've Left

If I could climb high enough to see,
with binoculars, down to the harbor,
would I remember the story?
Would the story allow me to crawl our way back?

It's been so long since the wolves
discerned our whispers from pine needles
hollowing spaces in the air. It's as if,
when the springtime began to point downward,
a deafness poured through the wood,
dusted like picture frame glass, with snow,
with the long-falling, long-falling,
long-falling snow.

I didn't know, I couldn't know,
it would be over as soon as it was.
And what would I have done?
In the fantasy, I spent the whole day crying.
Really, I wouldn't have the energy.

Even in a years-long snowfall, a lightning strike
may be attended by forest fires.
But I don't remember the story
or even if all the creatures from the forest
really did leave the land.
That's what I was told growing up.
Why did lightning ever enter into it?
Because we see God in nature, so nature is cruel.

Like the way there are days
where my eyes, open all day long,
expose me to thousands
of millions of pinpricks of light,
golden needles entering the muscles
of my arms and back, radiating from there.

And in the story there was a song. A dead wolf lay oddly
beside the path. *The birds crawl in.*
The birds crawl out, they later sang
almost truthfully about the wolf carcass.
In the long-falling, long-falling,
long-falling snow, they sang, *The birds*
crawl in. The birds crawl out...

Funeral Mythology 2

*Fine forgetting,
sweet the graves.
Handle us downward,
baby, all alive.
Swing the round mess.
Swing our earth doors open,
baby. You'll be waiting
with us, too.*

(The world is rolling
off a cliff.
Forget the photographs,
the emergency flares.
The world is rolling
off a cliff,
where they'll catch
and keep it in a box.)

Elegiac Hat, the Sky

for P.

While it lasts, the air surrounding us blinks
beautifully into every direction,
whispers into our limbs, and, yes, carries us
through how much more *today*
until we let go of the threads tethering us to balloons
we've carried, forgotten, for years?

We count forward as we've counted the rising streetlamps
each summer day into summer evening.

There's no answer, no.

But the waters you remember from nowhere
still run through the land over smoothing, quiet rocks,
waters still cool, warmer than the air.
Lie back. They will still hold you,
cradled into a whisper of light,

sighing *yesterday, yesterday, yesterday,*
sighing *now, sighing now.*

Calm the trapdoor down to teeth of other waters,
holy made, opened stars on the pond's surface.
Down to the slow corners of the morning snow,

count us backward to where you begin.
Sit up, stand back up again, again...

Songs Heard in a Dove's Sleep Whispers

1.

We pour our crying down
between the pavement cracks
to feed the sorry,
the innocent, moths
their lovely flight to a setting sun,
a fade into distinction.

Over the fire, watch as we become
the falling sunlight
where the sea melts to silvery pools.

We pour our crying down
to flower the sun, fold into wings
wilting to ash.

2.

What a thing to be a dove
flying over a shimmer of orange,
pixels of fire on a charcoaly ocean,

no return to the first light we saw.

3.

Loser, lover, come home to me.
That's not even what I'm asking. Just
resolve yourself back into my eyes,
Little Electricity. Mutter at me.

Make the load looser around my neck.
Loser, lover, mutter me back.
Make it all better.
Soothe the desert wrapped around me.

Desert me back into land. Cover me in a blanket
in the bottom of the boat *To-Go-Away*.

4.

Sing me sweet mythologies, Little Electricity.
Pull me under gauzy ribbons of air. Keep forgetful
of words. Whisper to my neck.

The story feels itself fading.
At the skittering edge of the streetlights,
the teeming surface of between-things,

we pour our crying—
forget it.

I've jumped from the isles, sung a gray-red
Electrical center ringing-round
the sleepy child

in a lonely hunger of sound,
dissolving backward into light.

Don't cry, winter cello. Don't cry.

III.

Accretion Disk

The ladder of your spine leans into dusk.
Deer cross a belt of asphalt.
The moon hangs amid the heights of endless pine.

A series of cuts in the windowsill
marks time as I imagine it
passing from wall to wall in the dark.

We count versions of ourselves by repetitions
we share—leaving and returning to bed,
a group of yellow birds searching out their trail...

Somewhere, the birds return to the earth.
What repeats becomes confused.
The middle of a story gets marked out.

On a back door of a long forgotten apartment building,
a red and white sign warns against entering.
In the distance, a net of radio towers

gestures to the night sky, where epochs
of flotsam still burn toward us
from the edge of a throat torn open in space.

The Small Beast of Hearts in Crisis

An airplane drones by overhead, shakes the water.
The sky gasps a heavy gold and red
at sunset. The small beast of hearts watches.

He wishes he could do more,
but it isn't his place.

However deep the oceans that he delves,
however far his orbit extends,
he sings—
his job just to send a shimmer
through us.

*. . . carnivore chaos & desperate betrayals,
nuclear intrigue, power succession,
men in the streets seizing men by the wrists,
the poorly ventilated fire
causing the family to die in their sleep,
the cat in the street stung in the eye by a wasp,
losing the eye to infection . . .*

*There will always be fires and hunger,
always be fear of hunger,
always the tired insistence of decay.*

He sings and sings, and still all of this...

He makes a slow half circle toward shore,
turns, wanders back below the water. He sings
his song beneath the sparkling water.
Eyes closed, barely even to himself,
the small beast of hearts sighs,
then falls into a sleepwalk.

The Small Beast of Hearts Sleeps

He drifts from his sleepwalk into rest.
The sway of algae-bloom
coos all about his bubble,
and, mercifully, he doesn't hear,
floats amid the constant tremor
of an earth in motion.

The night sky, now cleared of clouds,
rolls open to sprinkle its small light
on the ocean's surface.

The starlight intersects
with a crossing of radio beams
while, in a fit of dream, the small beast of hearts
rolls over in his sleep,
catching a shred of transmission
as he sinks into the safety of an undersea canyon.

He comes to rest on a rock ledge
under the gaze of a curious shrimp
whose antennae twitch
but pick up no dream signal
from him.

The Astronaut and His Horse

somewhere, an astronaut and his horse
ride off the surface
of a blue and cratered moon.

open space closes around them,
nearly how the ocean receives a pelican.

they turn to climb from known existence.

*(the next being
to come across this moon
will find it reduced almost completely
to an ungenerous remainder
of dust ...)*

the astronaut has left behind
a note meant for a son who had been lost
off the coast of the earth years before.

the horse keeps them moving
long into what would be the night.

Ideas on Constructing a Model of the Universe

I. Draw a ring around a red line. Allow it to sit for one half-minute. Cover with a single sheet of low-weight paper. Use a Magic Marker to cover this sheet in dots ranging in diameter from the width of a pinprick to the width of the head of a pin. One dot may be as big, certainly not bigger, than one dime's-width across. Though this should be the absolute exception.

Remove the top sheet, place beneath the drawing of the ring around a red line. Connect those dots which have bled through the top sheet in the following pattern, using graphite or charcoal as strikes your fancy: left-right, left-right, vertical, right-left, left-right, circular, horizontal, top-bottom, bottom-top, top-bottom, top-bottom-bottom-bottom, reverse, crisscross, reverse-reverse. Repeat this pattern until all dots have been connected or until an appropriate portion of the figure has been filled.

Fold the sheets of paper into an isosceles and an equilateral triangle, respectively. Fold the triangles in half over one another. Place onto a plate of any size or a stone tablet measuring no larger than 15 x 15 x 15 x 25 cm and incinerate, observing closely the reduction to ash.

Repeat this process continually for the rest of your days, feeling glad in your heart to be this much closer to the Creator.

II. Imagine a tattoo on your arm. Put it there. Carefully, being sure to imagine nothing that you will regret.

Imagine that this tattoo speaks to you in a voice very similar to your own as heard from underwater accompanied by your mother's, quiet but distorted. What does this tattoo say? Perhaps, "I just don't know what to make of this weather!" or:

I've never known a world
Quite as lovely as this
No, never such a world have I known

Having never known a heaven
Quite so lovely as this
I'm very glad to call this world *home*

Or maybe it says something else entirely.

(If it presents you with an equation, write it down and consider bringing it to the local authorities, as they may know the most responsible course of action to pursue. Otherwise, eat it in the earnest but unlikely hope that in this way you will gain an understanding of the profound knowledge held therein.)

Continue imagining to listen to the tattoo for as long as you like. It is a very pleasant way to pass an entire Sunday afternoon or just a few minutes in the middle of a busy day, on your lunch break, say.

After you've finished, draw the tattoo on a small piece of paper. Carry it around in your pocket for at least the rest of the day.

III. Reach underneath your sofa, or any other major piece of furniture in the room, as long as you cannot see what you're reaching for. Pull out the first item you feel that rivals the size of your palm. Consider this object—say, a tennis ball—as you might consider a vase of flowers on a kitchen table, caught in the sunlight streaming through a floor-to-ceiling window.

What is it like fifty meters below where you stand right now? Imagine the tennis ball, with all that dust from beneath the sofa, in that place. Imagine yourself in that place, but *not* with too much personal detail.

Imagine you are fifty meters inside the earth with the tennis ball you pulled from underneath the sofa, and the rock below you becomes invisible, and you can see down into the core of the earth. Think of what you'll find if you look close enough inside a tennis ball, inside the rising belly of a sleeping human being.

IV. Take a nap and dream about fish skin, a grain of sugar dissolving on your tongue, pinecones and the possible futures of trees, the shape of your skull, and the colossal hum generated when you place these things in apposition to each other in your mind under these particular circumstances.

Then wake up. Sign and date on the dotted line below your sternum. Try to forget all this for a while.

V. To distract yourself, if you haven't done so already, borrow the accordion from your neighbor across the alley. When you get home, turn off your phones; disable your internet connection.

Set the accordion on the coffee table. Its pleats are nothing like your hands, but say out loud, They're not so different, really. Repeat until this feels true. When it does, take the accordion into your arms and cradle it to the kitchen. Put the kettle on. Turn on the rest of the burners. Set the accordion on the empty burners and wait until it catches fire, making sure never to tell your neighbor. As you watch the accordion transform into vapor, remember that you, too, must pull and push air to make your sounds.

When the kettle whistles, put out the fire with the boiling water. Place the wet, burnt accordion in your bathtub. Study one of its remaining pleats. Imagine putting a similar fold in the wall to your right. Then step into that fold, disappearing from known existence for a while. When you return, find that both the accordion and your kitchen cabinets (which have been badly burned) are quite fine. Allow yourself to feel appropriately relieved.

Bring the instrument back across the alley to your neighbor and ask her for a song. When the accordion starts singing too, sing along:

Hold me closer blindly
Love me till I'm old
Pet me on my bad knee
Don't let my heart grow cold

I fell beneath a moonbeam
I've rolled around in muck
I've stitched in time my torn seam
But it won't bring me luck

Let's be swallowed by a laketop
On the calmest night
We'll fold into a star crop
And things might be all right

Hold me closer blindly,

and so on.

Continue longer than your schedule allows.

Write out the verses you never got to. Sing them the next time you mean to apologize.

VI. Remember, you must breathe every breath you breathe. Mark it on your calendar, if you feel you're the sort of person who'd be likely to forget.

Before you breathe to sleep each night, pull the blankets up over your head. Sit up, hold your knees to your chest, and close your eyes. Imagine counting the number of times you've slept, the number of times you've woken up. Recall a time you drew intersecting circles in orange crayon on a sheet of newsprint.

When this becomes unsettling, throw off the blankets and climb from bed. Get yourself a glass of water. Drink the water slowly and have another glass. By this time it is very late, and you are very tired. Sit down on the couch and turn on the TV without thinking about it.

As your head nods and the stars overhead blink out one by one, don't notice. When you wake up in the morning, shower and get yourself to work as usual. Call your mother from your desk, just to say hello.

Go on working. Smile when you're surprised to find a crayon in your desk drawer.

VII. Write the following as an inscription in a book close at hand:

When you look up to find the night sky perfectly black, when birdsong fills the air with strips of silver, when you feel the world dance about your eyes—go home, go home, go home.

You've dropped the fishhook through the surface of the water. You've seen the clouds striped with red. You've tasted the air, breathing over and over. Now get yourself quiet to bed.

And later, go do something fun.

Take a photograph of the page. Place the only copy in a brown wooden box. Make up for the faulty latch by sealing with packing tape. Get rid of the book as soon as you can. (Consider donating it.)

Never open the box. Specify in your will that the box never be opened. Forget you've done this, and go on living normally, feeling certain in your heart that you'll live for the rest of your days.

The Horse and His Astronaut

in the flash of dropping through the radiation wall
edging our universe, the astronaut's head
falls to his shoulder. the horse's legs splay out,
make a pinwheel against the vast blank unrolling.

a light like a silver dagger
stretches from nowhere into a long pin
and dives into the horse's heart,
fills the heart with a courage
for the horse to right its limbs
and rumble on.

a rush of silence trumpets around them.
it swells through the electrical safety
of their brains,
pours into the salt comfort of their slowing blood.

beyond the stars, bundled out of the night,
memory of a mountained past
melts into the sea
in a centuries-long churn and boil.
soft images of the world of life on earth
spill from the travelers' heads,
constellation systems falling
through drifts of undersea forest.

*at the true time of birth,
a moment turns to vanishing
from nothing
(the nested rolling
of globe
and the globe that holds it)
to nothing.*

*

a flare like a golden hive
in the astronaut's rippling eyes
lifts and tears at the edges
into a helix of ribbon
over the reddening pall
of the astronaut's face,

wet as he buries himself
in the horse's mane.

a heaving network
of hexagons hums with bees
wringing fat hands over perfect cuts
of glowing stone.

the horse turns from the field of this vision,
catches the astronaut the first time he falls.

the bees now holding their wings,
retreat into cells
of a blanketed silence.
in the radial fields
of antenna glow,
finally, the astronaut
lets go of the strong neck
he's held for so long
to let himself fall.

he drops away for a time.
the horse climbs on
in an eons-long arc
back toward astronaut,
arcing from horse.

*in an hour glowed open,
the bounding beast through field and forest
will break into crashing waves,
burst to fill the pleated valleys
tumbling to a flattened sea.
great horse crossing out of light.*

IV.

Dirge-Speech at Sunset

We have this map, heavy pink clouds
rolling over it, a world of places
for light to stick to.

This winter means not to let us through
to the farther hilltop. The sure pull of years
bows at the mouth of the cavern
we mean to leave behind.
Turning in the wind, we gather ourselves,
pull blankets over our shoulders
and go on.

Does our breathing correct the flight path?
Do we learn to locate ourselves
on the net spread above us?

It won't happen.
Flickering oil shines the clouds.
A thunder of railroads
collapses into the broken human voice.
We are only our feet upon the ground.

The hunger and winter will vanish.
The songs will fade to whispers
and die. All breath will shimmer out.
The sun at the edge of the sky,
not quite reaching to where we stand,
won't remember.

The stretch of ground we'll cross will sigh,
subside into a world of places letting go.

Stars somewhere still chirp
across great blank waves
we'll never know or need.
But we'll carry ourselves forward,
let the oceans roll through the sky
to bring us with, to scatter our bodies.

We'll keep to the trees, keep listing eastward
through waking and morning

till the shadows open beneath us,
till sleep climbs the eaves of all the old houses.

In the quiet moment,
moonlight hushes thoughts of the door,
and our voices breathe us back
across all the years we'll ever know,
a puddle disturbed by wind, mound of dirt,
starlight breaking on the surface of our map,
and still forward.

Coursing, Several Histories

There are no hopefuls left to ford the river.

Like a caravan of moths,
the way they all turn to dust.

The water splits the earth like a coral-colored rosette.

No one ever goes down so easily as just falling off a balcony.

And the water is cloudy, a layering of sediment unhinged.

Patio furniture, an ashtray, spills out across the continent,
which can only exist when told askance.

*

And in the tourniquet of collective memory,
the ragged breath stretches to fit the right pitch.

It's a question for an apparition, not a giant.
A question for the contortionist who will climb
into his suitcase to be carried home, safe and warm.

A patchwork of currency forms a cradle
to bundle the rest of us homeward.

To go back now will never take us back.
The best we can do is claim to be sorry.

Only the Imaginary Harp-Song Remembers

Beneath the surface of cold clay,
a small singing harp has its arms wrapped
around a detective's badge
from the mid-twentieth century.
The harp is singing about a mystery
no one knows or thinks about any longer.

The badge doesn't hear it. It's only a badge.
The detective, long dead,
trembles in his grave from the wave of memory
held inside the badge, which the harp's song
has released in its flash of quiet music.

The harp is unaware of the meaning of its song,
of the shivering detective nearby.
The dead detective doesn't remember. He is dead
now like the girl whose case he couldn't solve,
which was finally closed with a permanence
similar to that of the coffin lid
inches above his well preserved face.

The harp still sings a small song of mourning,
almost for the catalogued, then abandoned,
memory of a girl who, no, never had a chance at justice.

Weeknight Shudder in a Cloud of Unknowing

The breathing next door reminds
me to breathe.
A propeller chill rinses my spine,
and the thick air greases me up all over again.
The hair grows from my head,
licks its way down my entire body—
I swear, I'm wrapped in hair.
The refrigerator hum frightens me.
An endless airplane makes its approach
overhead. I can't hear anything at all.

The air thickens into locust fields,
elbowing my jaw, shoulder blades,
rubbing against my eyes.
A soily knife grip holds me in iron.

Locust fields and the thick air swarm me away.
It's no use. These thousands of arms
are just like my own, reaching and grasping,
reaching hungry mouths toward morning
and a sun I know may never come.

Still, we can't roll forward the years
just by wanting. We can't roll backward
the years, but

it's been so long since I've seen what?
The face I recognize. Someone I know
strolling along a street we know,
carrying a loaf of bread,
a vacuum package of ground coffee.
And he's whistling!
Rolling through the air,
foot after the other pushing back the ground,
armful of something to eat, in light,
sunlight, strolling past where I watch,
and whistling! So long, so long,
it's been too long. It just takes so long to say it.

Little Lamentation

A memory as long as this, at some point,
can only double back on itself.
This sometimes means an undoing.
Continuation becomes erasure
eating itself, and, dear,
we are inevitability in feeding.
In laughter, in calligraphy
reading backward and forward,
a world inscribes itself onto our skins.
We embrace, lean apart. The ink expands
into an ocean where even shape can't be read.

Marriage Notation

If you could catch me before I made it
down the block, if the wilting iris
floated to us suspended in summer air,
if the boats would enter the harbor
and take us away, where would our answer be?
The sheaf of wheat we carried these years,
what has come of it?

The singing meant for you and no one,
where does it ring to now?
The moth-shine on the moon of the house
cows the garden where it sleeps.
Steal me toward sunlight again, like we used to.
These boating hands still tarnish outward.
A greening light slides the tender halls.

If the hammer never struck the note,
the camera never landed on us,
our voices could call.
The air would empty into a swell of silence
circling our spines.

One day, from opening prairie,
we will crawl upward to the night.

The Debris Field

Like a dance of several lovers, blinded, unable to touch,
the planets and sunlight of our childhood
plunge around an empty spot. This is certain.
The final swan will fall, and slow days pass,
peeling the paths we've walked from the earth.
Even the earth will be pulled from its sky.

Stop all songs a moment. Stop all crying.
Call for stars to breathe us back to our smaller selves—
drifts of dust, not dancing, hung in space.

The night, nested in its own belly, sighs,
blinks a fissure of starlight dropping like an opened vein of ore
into a cut plain of hill. It cowers.
We cower back,

dust and rock thick against falling current
till flying darts burn above us on our cold precipice,
hungry ourselves among hungry creatures
burrowing into the night, fading from their own bones
into the heap of rubble, ashen in starlight, collapsed
into deafened wood, to pool again in pockets of sky-shore.

For now, we sing the only thing left to ask—
a heavy light we will explode from into endless night
gathering into its belly, eaten,
sighing to blink out.

Bedtime Travelogue: The World of Nightmare Avenue

1.

I coil heavy ropes of water on the deck of a shrinking ship.
We know, if water under oil, then fire over water.
Then fire, night-dark sky humming in radio choirs.

But not today. No catastrophe today.
Mountain won't unwind into *sea*.
If we're lucky, soft gold might pour from our eyes
before we return home.

But now we drift with the voiceless isles.

We drift onward, and off, and not home.
When our ship vanishes, we're delivered
to the center of the closest island,
the sudden world of Nightmare Avenue.

The world we know recedes awhile.

Circles bend themselves into corners, but always complete themselves.
We lie stranded on our backs at their centers for hours.
On the concrete surface—no friendly beast to hear or call,
no silence of song.

2.

Comfort here is endless. Afternoons, a rain
falls on the streets, fills our heads.
We cry through the night to wake refreshed.

The people here, this herd, float through the workdays
as if in their beds. We exchange glances with no smiles,
but often the thought of laughter.

No one measures the time. Still,
we age. Like rolling through a life of sleep,
we don't notice, do nothing, breathe shallow, and wait.

The stars don't reach down to tickle us,
but they watch as we live under them.

3.

Just as we're sure we'll stay wrapped in blankets the rest of our lives,
flashing lights wail to life. The herd breaks awake

and falls into the streets. Sirens push bodies together.
Then fire. No ocean. The World of Nightmare Avenue doesn't dissolve.

We don't recall our trip in. We'll have no memory of rescue—
a small beast descending, cooing to say, "We're safe now, Snowflake.
Time to float home again."

4.

We walk back to daylight, back to speaking and home.
Our hands still feel feathers in the afternoon rain,
but we don't quite know it.

Again, we wake just like waking,
and the story nearly remains, swinging.

V.

Ablution

In my reflection I see a face
like God crossing, by air, an ocean
that has not, until now, existed.
It's on a map in a cartographer's closet—
blank space that wasn't there yesterday.
A sheaf of papers unrolls. The earth opens.

God tells me, Don't cross the water,
Don't return to yourself, Never turn
the lights off. The face of God lowers itself
to the faucet, shines with a handful of water.
The face of God calls to me in the past.
In the bathroom mirror, I see two trains

moving in opposite directions, the heat
as they pass each other. In the glow of an engine
there is blindness and there is movement.
The earth rolls over a plot of grass,

and the final swan glides along the rim
of a glass. Under its tongue is a slip of paper
marked *Row* on one side and on the other, *Again*.
Only the swan can show us what this means.

From the arms of an infant, from darkening waters,
from nowhere near the edge, we have been taken
and swallowed whole.

A Theology of Intervening Years

I have a friend who once
attempted suicide by electrocution.
Some years earlier, on a beach
in Colombia with her father not noticing,
she nearly drowned.

“There on the beach, I was calm.
I rose toward a light. Really. And I wasn’t afraid.
But a nearby swimmer pulled me back
on shore. CPR and everything. I lived.
But at the bathroom socket,
that was on purpose.”

She said things went black;
that would have been *it*—
no light, no *next place*...

(It’s been years now since she shared this.
I saw her recently without expecting to;
she’s been living in Germany.
Of course we didn’t mention this conversation.)

We no longer speak. It occurs to me
that one of us could die without the other ever knowing...

At the moment, I like to think
her experience indicates that god or death
may mean to have an edge of kindness—
an end when it’s asked for,
something like a continuation otherwise.

The Ballet, Explained

A child walks her pet box down the driveway, across the street (and a strip of gravel) to the park. The box takes no notice. The child asks the box, “When will the buffalo be returning? How long before I can never go home?”

It starts to rain. The box remembers a summer in Washington and doesn’t understand why. It doesn’t tell the child this. The child, fluttering in the mud beneath a sycamore tree sings, “If I have to go someday, at least it’ll be something like this...”

She chirps and whirs, flips in circles. A descending hand offers a sickle of heather and glides on, dissolving into dusklight. The child wriggles and furs. The box scuttles northward and toward the coast.

The Hand, Offering

This morning, I watched the dog die on a cold table,
watched the attempt to get back out the exam room door
that lasted until the drugs hit. It could not be different.

A taste arcing electricity over the framework
of muscle and blood—everything animal will live
as long as it can. This is not desperation,

not struggle, but the honest spasm of a failed heart.
The clench and release, beyond will,
is finally no different than feeding.

The hand offering food holds out to us a shock,
the remainder of a day—animates the framework,
pauses grief, then starts forward.

The Small Beast of Hearts on the Moon

Singing a short song, he can't see us
down on earth. But he closes his eyes
in the cool glow of the sun and enjoys
the slow orbital swing.

The small beast of hearts rests for us,
waits for us.

In the air bubble from his undersea home,
he roams the craters, cooing over
what we've named—
these empty seas.

He brightens with the fine dust
below his feet. His hearts burst
as he watches clouds swirl above us,
through all those miles of no air.

His little light, his little song, escape
around the moon, into the surrounding
maps of night.

He means to let us feel the moon's fall
through nothing, the earth's.
In the rushing quiet,
he sets up shop for a time.

Transmission, History among Stellar Tombs

1.

An impossible herd has gathered
on the field above the tomb.
They are alone in a world with no welcome.

The tomb and the field unmoor
from one another. The field
rises from the planet, expands, and forms,
under its own weight, into a sphere.
Water bursting from scrub grass
at the equator forms an ocean,
swirling with the new globe
rolling through the night sky. The herd
runs with the ghosts of the hungry dead.

2.

Carnivores and Cancers hum in impossible councils
over who to find and hold accountable
for the stolen hours.

The ghosts of the living
mix with the ghosts of the dead.

While somewhere in space,
nowhere-always-with-us,
a filament flickers and dies,

so the whole thing begins over again.
A room is plunged into darkness.

3.

*Among blinking lights
at the center of the field,*

*among chirping crickets
far above blank machines,*

*among a murmur that rises
and drowns cricket-singing,*

*the starlight drowns in flares of vapor,
after a flash
thrown from the ground.*

4.

A caravan of furnaces collapses
into the street. Hills full of iron tumble
over the countryside. In a landscape of slag,
no one speaks a single word for weeks.
The birds and lizards who avoided the slide,
then avoided the feet of the herd, will remember...

The ocean rolls forward, climbs,
ignored by all the instruments,

which are all pointed backward, anyway.

No one will forget the exhaustion
of the foundry furnace, the orange pressure.
The mold remembers, form remembers,
carries messages through the days
and the days.

The impossible councils can't get a thing done.

They ignore the furnace, the parade's collapse,
decide against the pumping drum, condemn time
for their own movement through it.

5.

(As mountains unravel and woods change for oceans,
as ice rides its way home to air,
still, radio signal hums through the night,
sky choirs churning, singing off to nowhere.
The Carnivores, the Cancers—claim sorry, claim sorry,
only manage, ‘We tell you, well now, goodnight.’
Then a silk and wool quiet. The choirs remember,
ripple out like ash to hum their songs back,
blinking out of the sky to join in nowhere.)

6.

The globe rolls through the night,
with a pivot to plummet toward,
its point of light. The tomb stands empty
to the whispers of the world where it once stood.
The impossible hungry run forever
the field, the new-grown wood.
But there's no one to count them,
no world where they strengthen.

No filament, flicker. No statement on darkness.
The globe returns to its becoming,
a history collapsed into a single moment.
The ground buckles.

7.

*At the center of the matter,
where the round world sleeps,
where the carcass of famine
composes back to nothing,*

*beats the pump of a drum
that lets the ghost herd run,
run down to a corner...*

*Oh, baby, that runs
down to the corner*

*when there's no farther parading.
Let them return us
to industrial rattle.*

*The stars are the foundries.
What idols forged there?*

*Oh, baby, what idols
forged in a star?*