

New Pastoral

Poems

by

Nathan Slinker

A Practicum Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Approved March 2014 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Norman Dubie Jr, Chair
Terry Hummer
Sara Ball

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2014

ABSTRACT

New Pastoral journeys through the altered states of the American West. Readers witness dream-fields at harvest time, watch humans become agro-industrial test subjects, and overhear an exchange of letters set in an alternate (?), [more] dystopian present. Fractured, fragmented, leaping, and stitched, the poems use disjuncture, within and/or between poems, to see with clarity and complexity a landscape that is increasingly all ecotone. In addition to environmental violence, this work explores disclosure and secrecy, intimacy and estrangement, voyeurism, political policing, and, inevitably, the mysteries of making art. Pastoral landscapes have often been compared to patchwork. Now, heavy with guilt, we walk a wounded quilt, searching, with little hope, for bandages.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This practicum would not have been completed without the generosity, patience, and kindness of my committee members, Norman Dubie, T.R. Hummer, and Sally Ball. Thank you. I wish to acknowledge the other poetry faculty at Arizona State University for their support and guidance, especially Jeannine Savard, Alberto Rios, Cynthia Hogue, and Beckian Goldberg. Many of these poems were also drafted, revised, or re-imagined with insight from Ed Skoog, Holly Hughes, and Carolyn Forché. I want to thank Fishtrap for a 2013 Summer Fellowship and the Virginia G. Piper Center for an International Fellowship in 2012 which allowed me to spend a week in Greece, where much work on this collection took place. Thanks to the Aleida Rodriguez Memorial Award, the generosity of which allowed me a little more freedom to write poems. To my classmates in the M.F.A. program at A.S.U.: your criticism has been immeasurably helpful. And to my partner, Ashley Humphrey, to whom many of these poems are secretly dedicated and to whom this collection owes a debt that cannot be repaid: thank you for everything.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION	Page
I.	1
The Adirondacks	2
Mercy	3
The Skagit Valley Tulip Festival	4
Springtime on the Family Farm	5
Nautilus	6
Mercy	7
Four Seasons in Wallowa County	8
Walking through the Pasture	9
Lesson	10
Mercy	11
Anaphylaxis	12
Young Lovers	13
Plans for a Watercolor with One Living and One Dead Sister	14
A Personal History of Giving Up	15
Childs Perfection, A Mosaic	16
Summertime	17
Mercy	18
II.	19
Letter	20

	Page
Letter with Geese.....	21
Autumn on the Family Farm.....	22
Letter with Dilapidation and Rifle.....	24
Letter with Dogs.....	25
John the Baptist Holds His Own Head on a Platter.....	26
Letter with Two Visions.....	27
Winter on the Family Farm.....	28
Letter in Shades of a Desert.....	29
Sand Dunes, Northern Nevada.....	30
Letter with Rain.....	31
Letter Without.....	32
III.	33
The Dogs of Mongolia.....	34
Two Figures in the Ruins of a Church.....	36
The Lamb.....	37
End of November.....	38
An Early Film in Which Four of the Same Man Get Married.....	39
Another Lyric Failing to Describe the Guilt and Despair in My Heart.....	41
The Lost Actor.....	42
Right Panel of a Triptych.....	44
Roadside Crosses, Northern Nevada.....	45
In the Play, We Are Blossoms that Close Each Night.....	46

	Page
Behind My Mother's House Near Enterprise, Oregon.....	47
Erasure Before Spring	48
The Lucky City.....	50
Failed Sonnet	52
IV.....	53
At the Hiway 40 Motel.....	54
The Duck Press.....	56
At the Field Museum in Chicago.....	58
Girl in a Country Scene.....	59
New Pastoral.....	60
A Description of Town.....	62

I.

The Adirondacks

Asleep with arms crossed in the neighbor's green
canoe, gladiolus blossoms falling through lake fog
in the slow rain. Or naked at the dock's edge,
skin against the lichen on the boards, the gray sky
breaking apart in the wake of a thrush. No,
that is not how people leave one another. Not in a gentle
drift through the veil. Not in the graceful arc of a dive—
though, it was kind of like that, your body becoming the knife,
then disappearing.

Mercy

One young man holds a scalp of sea until what terns
had torn over becomes a landlocked swath of timothy
and, his hands traced in salt, he lets
the sky fold around him the way
one folds the tarp after long sleep.

A different young man is executed against a wall.
He folds like a love note passed beneath the table
from my sister to me in which she's circled the time and place
in blue ink, and an eye, drawn over the circled words,
blinks. I am hot as a muzzle—I am going out

to look at the grieving young men
leaving the Clover Leaf Hall as the funeral ends.
I'm coming to understand, in their bowed heads,
how fragile the skull, how fragile the searing bullet,
and what a small and fleeting thing the ocean must be
against love's trembling violins.

The Skagit Valley Tulip Festival

We wandered into the rows,
wrapped ourselves in the pale red wash
of watermelon snow turning deeper
the further in we went.

Underfoot, soil hums with feedback.
A woman mixing powdered fertilizer
into the irrigation holds up her arms
to stop us. One hand vibrant, indigo—
a pair of flower shears show off their jaws
where her other hand should be. We are becoming

more tulip now—red amplified across skin,
dark stamens in our petal-shade of genitalia.

The woman returns to water.
In an adjacent field, hundreds of boys
rise from mothers' arms, canaries taking wing.

Springtime on the Family Farm

The mother cuts holes in the boy
and sticks photographs
of dead actresses
inside him, saying,
Remember what beauty is.
The boy's father takes sheep shears
to the mother: rids her of wrinkles,
trims down thighs,
nicks her labia—*sorry*.

Her skin falls like snow
on the tongue of the boy,
lying now on a mound
in a dewstruck field.

Rising, the boy chops
holes in the sky with a hatchet,
careful to avoid the sun.
He plants cuttings of his family,
presses handfuls of cloud
around each slenderness—waits
for their faces to fall on his.

The next morning,
a neighbor girl comes over
and they go together
to the chicken coop
where a greasy towel
covers something on a table.
The boy slides the towel away,
showing off his family.
This one is my mother, he says,
pointing at one jar of air.
This one is my father.

Nautilus

In a tiny wooden canoe, peyote buttons
float...

*You recite your parents' obituaries
to your brother until you both forget
who the dead people are.*

A metal hot tub sat behind our house,
and when we were little
my brother and I would see who could stay
in hotter water and for how long. Once,
I held him there; I don't know why.

I had to rub aloe on him for months,
and after that, our mother said
he could have the French horn for good.

Your grief will begin when you remember.

Hours had passed since you turned to crow
in the middle of our living room
and flew out the skylight. I wanted you
to come back, fly back and be
a woman with hands
to gesture while you spoke,
to touch the bell of my body,
my wings, these strict, glossy feathers.

In the evenings, while he healed, we'd watch
the movie *Dead Man* as a family,
and when they push William Blake across the water
my brother would pause the TV
so we could all bless the departure.

Why not drift away through the mist
in narrow boats at the same time?
Someone could rope the bows together
with lengths of pain,

while in the final chamber, old fishermen
shake a late frost from their fingers.

Mercy

The woman sits to watch a forest grow
until she's a girl on a patio leafing out,
her sandy skin burnt by a snow late
in the night. Her husband stands in the middle
of winter without beginning on edge and pours
pitchers of cool water from the top of a cliff
down onto his sex, like a young leather flower
caught in a simple snare on a game trail.

It's September and back in Eastern Oregon
a cold-front has dropped the highs into the 40's.
In his woodshop, my father planes a strip of elm
for a new door, while my mother and the dog
move from room to room in the small house
where the wood stove warms everything, even
a summer that dies again and again without us.

Four Seasons in Wallowa County

Hungry, we feed on gaunt wings
our ancestors cut from shoulders and left.
The girl comes to me drunk—feathers
falling like curses from her mouth.

I twist half her words into a necklace.
She fletches arrows with the rest
to shoot into the stomach of sky

that will not even twitch
until we turn...

She follows dusk's blood-track
through fallow land, through deep drifted snow
and into a damp springtime on the outskirts
of a small town where I'm waiting,
passed out in a cart.

A dead man leans on a fencepost,
watches the girl unclasp her necklace,
give back everything. In a field of wings
behind the man, a blue collapse.

The girl pulls a knife from her mouth,
walks into the field and begins to clean the sky—
I lie still, staring up from the cart

until I can imagine
whatever it is I see.

Walking through the Pasture

for Ashley

When you called I was at the kitchen window
thinking, *dusk: obsidian chips in a steel bucket.*
I held the telephone just so
as from the earpiece fell thousands of poppy blossoms.
I lay down and forgot nothing.

Since winter's end we had been walking through the pasture
and then we came to a fence. Strips of animal hide
clung to the barbed wire. Looking at the sky, I said,
Ribbons of oil on the floor of your father's garage.
You said, *We will always follow in the wake of mysterious beasts.*
We turned to see where we had been. Images—
our whole history—pooled in footprints.

We could have stayed there—
but turned back to the fence. A red-winged blackbird
cuts the wire with his wings; his red rags flit away
through the alfalfa. I hear a faint lowing
somewhere ahead, and we continue to walk—
the ever changing constellations of poppies
lighting this timeless field with bloom.

Lesson

Before my mother and father, who both knew
our lives are drought and bruised fruit,
pulled off their dirty leather gloves
and came in from the open-air coffin,

they paused beneath the apple blossoms,
ubiquitous as saliva, and turned to one another
in a rural silence that seemed to say,
*it is everything we wanted and it doesn't matter
that it won't last, that the trees will grow
back into the ground searching for us,*
and then, pulling an old branch
from the grass between the trees where I
watched clouds pass like the speech of animals,

my father said to me, "You think heaven
waits for you there like some undiscovered continent,
but this," he shook the dead, gray stick,
"this is your heaven," and he tossed
the stick at me—a small metal pin
through a hawk moth in the glass case.

Mercy

We gather in the parking lot to look at the dead woman,
tiny pieces of gravel still stuck to the bottoms of her bare feet
but a lot of her turned loose, getting lost inside her.

The sky starts to open like a scene from a movie where you know
someone's committed suicide in the shower, but still you must wait for
the slow, slow hand of the camera to draw back the curtain.

So it's morning again. Good. I'm offering my thermos coffee
to the other ambulance chasers when the dead woman opens her eyes
and asks why the world suddenly reminds her of the apricot

she thumbed open in her kitchen the morning before—
the apricot that had no stone
but was, instead, full of thick, fragrant blood.

So it's morning again. Good. I'm offering a ride
to two scared kids who showed up on bicycles, and the woman
says she feels okay, but still the EMTs ready her
for the trip to the hospital and we're told we never saw her.

Anaphylaxis

It seems my father knew how to coax
flame from the body's tunnel
well before the little pill detonated.
Now he empties dishes of milk
at midnight, while we rub the silver
meticulously with rags torn from his shoulders.

My sisters sang themselves chemical.
I pinch my forearm, make a skin tent.
It was out of love, but still, I grabbed
mother's hand. The glove came off.
Nothing underneath but our family
history—some scalded ruin, the dole.

Next time, if you want, I'll tell the story.
You can be one of the lost hunters
pushed into a rope of constellation—

but the day I came to know my father,
he knelt to the drain
in a boarding house shower stall,
and, as if pulling water from the well,
withdrew from his mouth
a double dahlia.

Young Lovers

Innocent enough to burn all our shirts—
what was left for us but to swim

out toward the hint of fishnet
snagged on horizon, past
the dark rose urchins below.

Wearing only the moon's cry,
we climbed onto a rock, abandoned
and laughing, this world not lost for once.

In the morning, I woke to the fire
still smoldering, beer bottles,
dregs of the wild Greek liquor
balanced on a green rowboat, and I saw

all in an instant through the smoke
a red deer being born, growing old:

I needed you there,
because only you could have shown me
where they went—
all those spots seditious on a dancing fawn.

Plans for a Watercolor with One Living and One Dead Sister

A red-breasted finch in the nothingness, tulips
bursting from glass hands.

Sunlight pauses on skin,
on all they know of sisterly sorrow
cut into rows of sore cabbage in the kitchen
garden squared by the window.

Small creases on the living sister's face.
At her feet, a wooden chest
full of starling wings and marbles.

On the wall behind the dead sister, a tapestry of her only
in-color dream: draped over a blue roan, a bull elk
drips red thread from the neck.
White terriers prance around the horse,
little sunsets on their muzzles, while the rider, his face
turned away, points a gloved hand into woods.

The art inside this art creates two perspectives,
says, "Step in, viewer, inhabit this cabin, empathize."
And yet, the tapestry's presence reminds us
that all is imagined, the viewer again exiled.

A Personal History of Giving Up

Tall weeds on the family graves. We never visited,
so their blossoms opened—each one an abandoned wasp's nest
in the hand of a grandfather, himself mostly windsong.

The cottonwood was too big, but I chopped until my hatchet
slipped in like a key—opened the tree's heart
and I climbed through into the field
where men hoe naked galaxies into dead furrows.

At the dinner table, no one moved
when my father lifted the sheet metal from the farmhouse roof.
An early snow folds us into lilac clusters.

In the photograph that has become my life
I am not yet ten years old. I skate on a frozen pond
above the bodies of hundreds of frogs, iced in hibernation.
I have decided to skate until everything turns again into water.

Child's Perfection, a Mosaic

The girl bathes in her
backyard, and, as if from deep inside her,
small purple flowers surface on her skin,
pattern her body as she hardens
into porcelain. The boy grows up wrong—
wooden wristed
with arms that end in hammers;
he pushes open the screen door.

Rain fills the afternoon,
fills the tub with water and lust
and the girl rises like a swan—
no, more like a long doll holding
a house full of calla lilies.

These days, we are always the boy,
wading through tall grasses
in the damp yard, his own body
open and so briefly forgotten.

An embrace, we say. Just an embrace...

So later, as the moon
falls through the broken roof
of the garage, we try
to fit these pieces together—
now an hour becomes a vise
or a bit of string cut to length.
Here's a perfect curve of jaw
glistening in relief
against our leaden hands,
so finely weighted for this purpose.

Summertime

I sugar and feed. I poppy bleed.

Father laying one hand
in the irrigation pond
studies me with the other.

Mostly, they pulled sweet things
from my body: someone snaps
a pea, the strawberries swell.
And truly, parts of me
longed for their mouths.
Now

sing to me, thunderboy,
hit me hard with light.

*Ripen up, baby doll, get ripe
in the rain.*

Summer rain, summer rain
make me wet again.

I conceived each rhythmic sun
in my skin, and each night
I grew:

hung lupine spikes in my chest,
slipped fingers into damp
red earth.

I lay down where they said to,
and when beauty hurt me
I hurt it in return, growing into roots
for my own autumn teeth.

Mercy

Before the earth freezes, we sow
radio static in the cropland, patch jackets
filled with plastic. On flat stones,
we grind fire to flame and then to ash.
We drive cars to a low belly of land, turn our animals'
insides loose, say, *Eat well* and *Thank you*.

We threw white sheets over the mountains
as if they were furniture
in a big room we had to leave.
The river, like language with tongue at once,
flowed and flew into our mouths. We drank
slowly, with our whole bodies, and spoke of desire
with the metaphors we knew: spawning, gravity
pulling geese from pools of data in the sky.

To re-enter the world like a dog
released from its drowning sack
by an invisible knife—this is, perhaps,
all we can hope for.

II.

Letter

I really am sorry about the clocks, but in the lake north of town
the algae blooms are nebulas of blood and semen—I've never seen
anything so beautiful. Standing on the bank, I thought
what if it froze solid this time of year and a person could step out
over the ice—everything in a dead shimmer below, the green moon above.

Have they found the radio tower yet? I hope your broadcasts reach that far...
Here, the airwaves fill with flood warnings and reports of executions
of fake revolutionaries—for the sake of morale. I found a cheap Casio keyboard
on the street, and a little more of what you taught me comes back each day.

You told me once that there was another world right beside this one,
we just had to step through, fall into it. You were right.

Letter with Geese

Well, today the mayor decided we would systematically poison the geese despoiling the riverside park. The agency says their bodies will be my job for a week during the beautification, so tomorrow I'll buy gloves, and a better mask. The night they brought your relocation slip, one of the bastards winked and gave me a phone number. Tonight, I fear the river will rise up into the shape of a broken woman and have her revenge.

You mentioned rioters imprisoned in a makeshift pen on the playground there—are they all right? Do your neighbors still raise rabbits to feed refugees? I have this image of hutches four stories high, stretched in dark rows across a whole city block, but I know it's nothing like that. This geese thing is meant to comfort us, as though all is normal, while the air thickens with pink oil and dead concertos hang like laundry over our streets.

The agency just called. They don't know how long the poison will need, or the reaction of the geese; it's possible many will take flight or get to the water, then die. You'd love the way they apologize for things like this. Christ. I think I'll buy the gloves anyway... I know you'll forgive me if I have to call her. I want more than anything to stick my whole head out the window and breathe.

Autumn on the Family Farm

Mother like the blind collie, like a clove of garlic.
At least under the ground, though, dressed and together.
Not like Jim—stripped down to his lightning
in the deer-hang shed.

Father reads from the Almanac:
Remember the last season, but dwell not upon it.

In the pantry, I wrap barbwire and burlap
around my feet. Jar upon jar of preserves.

Father cleans Jim's bones with a toothbrush.
Girl, it's the little things that matter. I drop them
into an old seed sack, spend the next week
grinding them into a smaller gray
to spread through the south garden.

Harvest moon: I watch while father digs a hole
near the barn, buries six gold bars, saying,
Bad luck following the poor.

In my room,
I put a quarter inside each of my dolls,
stitch their heads back on, hoping for the best.

All the hired hands are sick of harvesting,
sick of the earth eating their throats like dogs.
One day, the swather teeth get three fingers
from Jim's brother—his thick river in the wheat chaff
reminds me of mother, her gems and chains.
Another hand throws his voice into the thresher.

I run to gather the song pulp coming out—

braid it into my lips, onto a ready tongue.
I pin ribbons through my small brown nipples.
Drops of blood like ladybugs.

Jim's brother is always hungry, always thirsting.
I take a tomato big as a softball out to him:

Father says you must eat this for strength.

He puts his bandaged hand to his mouth as I cut
into the fruit's flesh. We all know what's inside.

We bind my ribs in husk and bailing twine,
pull dark clouds over my skin-locked tides—
my body is the prairie, knotted with red rain.

Letter with Dilapidation and Rifle

Let's hope some staggering light falls into the understory of this. The radio says one of the mayor's rifles was stolen, says dig crews have unearthed an entire building on the outskirts. They're planning a grand project—surely some museum of failure. No pity here for our lost ways. Last week, I walked to the old farm. The woodshop,

where I learned how smooth our bodies could become, has finally completely collapsed, and a swath of something like cotton chokes the creek bed. Pine dust, that thick resin scent—how long since we were both there, breaking ourselves into choirs we'd never hear? I clung to falling fences all afternoon, looking... Then just walked.

Do you still wake up at wrong hours with Bach in your head? Sometimes I think the skin stringing me to the past trembles too much like the violin. Someone's been using a chair from the hospital to electrocute geese and sheep on the government office's steps in some kind of protest that has everyone, me too, bewildered.

I hope that rifle gets put to use soon—the thief must mean well.

Letter with Dogs

From outside the frame, someone throws a javelin and the boy
you had just found...well, as I carry him through the vacant
sawmill to a rainy tent, he slowly curls into a rabbit—
arthritic, shivering—I try to staunch the wound
but lately my dreams have been spilling across my hands,
and I know, I know it's the last thing you want to hear.

Really, it's not so much the violence as the obscure plots
that drip from these tedious days, spread through my sleep.
They've dammed the river where it bends past the meat shop
and flooded the park—no explanation. After a day of dismantling,
they haul the public organ away on flatbeds.

You might think me crazy, but last week, when the dogs
came scavenging, I pulled the fur rug from the floor and went wild
in the street. I haven't been out since—my howls surely
turning some official blue in the screen light on the other side.
Well, what have we ever been except rebels too small for an army?

John the Baptist Holds His Own Head on a Platter

In Constantinople, a paintbrush deepened the Jordan River
while in the eastern Sierras, Paiute Indians gathered pine nuts
from the daughters of trees my father is planting.

Throw a handful of pine nuts into the night sky
above the Black Rock Desert. They will stick
and become stars and in ten generations a few will fall
back into your cupped hand as you walk through
the headlights beating against earth and get back into the car
where some drunk friend asks you why it took so long—

and surely I'll die at the exact moment my father
meets my mother and just as he tamps down the soil
around a tiny, bare-root pine tree out by the ditch.

It is just how it was: John's camel hair shirt sopping
with blood from the coyote bite my father suffered
when he thought the mangy body dead and tried
to lift it into his arms to carry to the cold burn pile.

Letter with Two Visions

Something strange has been happening. Each morning—a blue glow striking boarded windows—an envelope slides under my door then disappears when I reach for it. If I open the door (a mistake I made twice) clouds of dark yellow finches blow into the living room. Looking through the peep-hole, I have repeatedly seen that colonel from the Spanish Civil War you were so obsessed with back in the city.

I awoke today thinking of the night we seared fire balloons across the long valley our fathers worked so hard to both hold and forget, and maybe this too—another in a series of messages from the past—is as full of heat as the emptiness my hands keep finding. Some of the finches are red throated,

some have already turned to glass. I'm learning sign language from a girl who says she can see music. She's only got one hand so I guess I'll never talk to anyone else this way. When she arrives each afternoon, I lay out pastels, tape blank paper to the dinner table. She draws pictures of birdsong—a vivid clamor in the quiet house.

I've come to partake, a little, in her terrible gift. Sometimes her own long scream loops through her like an old film. I know you'll understand this—I mean, Christ dear, those men in Madrid—they knew every way to use a saw.

Winter on the Family Farm

The father calls them all to the table, shows
the smallest child again how to shuffle,
how to deal for rummy. From their places,
they glance in turn at the gray pastures, each
wishing for the one thing to come and lie down.

Holding cards of snow, holding hands
of snow in their hands. In turn, they deal
cold cards. In turn deal themselves, piece by
piece, until they are no more there but each
in each other's place at the fallow table.

Letter in Shades of a Desert

You would like this place. Daily life oscillates between ceremony and work—one man runs tests on the light, his son maps our bodies.

Everything is sand and dust—I dream often of a drowned forest—and yet, it's better than the city, the first city, after they took you.

The lamplighters' white veils reach past their knees. They wear sand-colored boots and seem to float through the dusk like human fog.

I have befriended a few others, but even they fear to care what happened, are content with clean groundwater and the massive silence wrapped

like an amber cloak around this outpost. I don't blame them. I'm mostly envious—still, I continue to excavate my floor, looking...

In the afternoons, when most of the others are asleep, I gather boards from the trash heaps to lie across the pits—

I live like a spider above the past. Yesterday, I found in a metal box a beeswax candle in the shape of an old man's head,

and suspended within the wax, like the peculiar shrapnel of thought, petals from some purple flower.

But so what? Do you still sneak into that widow's house to play her piano while she's sedated? What would you play if she woke and found you?

Or if I did? I'm sorry for writing that.
Please write if the haze clears and they allow passage out.

Here, the sun sets its dead belly on the western hill. The lamplighters will be coming. I stayed up all day to watch their twilit song.

Sand Dunes, Northern Nevada

Why am I doing here,
serving vodka and water
to the only woman
at the Sundown Bar?

She's riding frantic bones,
hard drink just a distraction.
Half the bar's cleaning supplies
in this week's high.
We go in the back room.
Her lips, bruised glass.

I steal twenty dollars off her breath
and a bottle for later,
limp out the loading door.
A dumb glow below eastern hills—
one hawk, hunting.

2.

Seven dunes surround our shivering town—
aberrations against the miles
of sagebrush tripping over themselves.
The desert is easy to traverse
when the drug is right.

Her name is gray, almost real.
We hike a tall dune,
sinking with each step
as if into old skin.
I am doll with shaking body.
She is blown to shadow by sun.

A wild horse gallops violet,
an oppression of hoof and mane
in the early light. And something
in the air around it, a rider
of sorts, dwarfed by numb,
too distant to see—
eyes held on by strings.

Letter with Rain

All the city girls sleep on old mattresses in the hollow trunks of sequoias,
and their dreams rattle my rain-dashed windows. Yes, I'm still translating

the rain. The girls have built fantastic contraptions throughout the forest
to catch, divert, and siphon its endless fall. Looking outside, I pretend
I'm a passenger on a small boat drifting through a jungle—so fecund

even my mouth grows moss. Hard, here, to imagine how thirsty I was
in the huge, orange silence of that desert where I chased after lissome mirages
in dark eyeliner, bruised with halos. Now I choke on clouds, and the girls
from the trees leave locks of damp hair on my doorstep. What can I say?—

some days the forest still sings. You asked why I do this work,
and this is all I know: maybe if I turn enough rain into words,
I'll turn part of me, maybe the best part, into rain.

How else will I get out? This time, I truly felt I was writing a letter,
but now, looking down at my hand as I finish, it's clear it's water.

Letter Without

Reading your letters, I almost believed
that you and I dug more pieces of human
from our frail selves than the rest—
then fled, leaving paper shovels in cinders
behind us. I don't know how to tell you

that I am dry rain, that I was joking
about the rabbits but not the refugees
hanging themselves with ropes made from
strips of empty burlap food bags
which one can unknot and piece together
to form phrases like “my arms r yams r u” or
“marry us”—which the kids sometimes do.

I still remember our first broadcast, back
in the city where people sang in blood,
and it was gorgeous. We sang too much.
I played the piano until the keys opened
our door and they dragged me here like
one of those dead geese you're so fond of.

You must know that you're already forgiven.
You should know that it was the letters
you never sent that burned my hands,
that the dumb girl is my daughter from the photo
I showed you the morning we met and you
promised you could stop the visions at will.

From my window, I can see a great pillar
but not what it holds up—not that I need to:
it's a statue of a gun in the shape of a man.

III.

The Dogs of Mongolia

Dog pawing the awnings of restaurants in Ulaanbaatar where the State Department store hawks dog dreams to businessmen who cast shadows like pit mines deep enough for dog bodies to fall asleep inside. Oh, dog roped to the old Soviet pillar, roped to an oil drum full of vodka. Dog roped to a car husk, head stuck through the radiator & staring at the dead metal flywheel, millwheel. Dog snared by flight, mired in fetal freedom on a staircase to the first world, feral & chained by fur to the cracked ribcage of hunger. Three dogs in a garbage pile near the temple shed. Dog tongue licking the sacred horse skull, licking the wounded shaman's hand, the land. Dog head stuck inside a mayonnaise jar beneath the deep bellow of Asian sky, stuck to a body beneath a season of ice, stuck to a cup of goat milk souring on midwinter's fatal white cloth.

2.

God, you are an old trick in reverse; pick a horse-head fiddle backward until scales shed like fur. Run until your hooves turn to pads and the plateaus of your teeth peak into canines; run until you run the hills into camel backs and your four legs blacken, bloody as the first newborn colt of Spring.

On the broken fire escape, dog. In a pile of dogs on the burnt black factory floor, dog. Dead in a winter field, frozenblooded, dog. Blown into myth, howling into the ice wind from the edge of legend to be born again from the foggy womb of the *hoodoo*, dog.

3.

However the sky falls, we were there, and we were not dogs. On horseback in the wide-mouthed valley, the immensity above us, like some lost faith, threatening rain, we passed dog after dog guarding the *hashas* and flocks. They chewed

sheep into shin bones, chewed the sinew cords from the *ger* poles, the legs from wrestling statues—they coughed up prophecy, swallowed the long winter where gods walk on knees, kept falling asleep in the wild windswept scruff of steppe. Or

that part can't be true—those dogs never slept. I still see them, in full sprint across the blue *khadag* of the sky, their matted fur turning slowly to snow.

Two Figures in the Ruins of a Church

I know how I got here: stepped over sandbags or
corpses or maybe the centuries
just wore me wrong—a mauled
shoe, a torn legging—sleet eroding holy from stone walls.

But you, your incantation has
wandered into the wilderness
and scavenged a few carpenters
who cart trees across the narthex,
saw everything apart—hammer pews together.

Wood dust settles on soft strawberries, on the loaf
of sourdough you parted like a proselyte's chest
in the tin lunchbox on the pulpit's table.

We're learning to not ask questions of time,

of reconstruction songs dropping a sun so low in the far wall's pastoral
that I can barely see the flock shedding colors among aspens which look
freshly painted—and yes, there's the painter now, dragging his spirit
through a side door.

Let's leave him his tiny rotunda, his mouth
wisped with cherubim. Let's let them glue
little gems on the saint box, dog-ear pages in a book.

Unlace my body: the things inside want
to meet you.

Set me on that crate of candles
maybe. Don't tell anyone about any of this.

The service is about to start,
and surely faithful weathers
carouse closer... *Quiet your future wings,*
is what the peacock-feathered lady said when we entered.
Kneel when they kneel, bow when they bow.

Loose the cicadas from your pocket
when the dead man walks by. And please,
before his ghost is also sequined in rain,
show me where you hid the blueprints to all this hallowed blood.

The Lamb

Greece, Early 21st Century

When he arrives from the fire
we gather to take
pictures with cell phones—
intrigued by his curled shape,
size of a three-year-old child
but skin shrunken, burnished, legs
folded inward to fit his metal
pan, chin touching breastbone.

We begin by tearing him apart,
passing to those at the table's far end
bones strung with dark meat.

I eat the delicate inside
of cheek, scraping at his softness
with a spoon—
two small bites, as of rich yogurt.

By the end,
just one thing left:

go home, animal,
to the pit or the dogs—
harden, become marble
that we might again carve
your body into another.

In my pixilated photograph,
two hands
hold long knives, and you can see
the left side of the lamb's head—
his dark, empty eye socket
like that part of heaven
the full moon fills.

End of November

after Pam Steele

The deer carcass in the shed
hangs for a tender week,
and now, at dusk on Thanksgiving,
I check the meat—the hide as
silver as my wife's hands after gutting
a bucket of Dollys. Or moonlight
on the dry grass in that poem

where a woman eats the deer's heart
right in the field
as she's cleaning it: frost on her lips
and on mine. My wife calls me in.

On Friday, same as every year,
we put the garden to bed—why?
She carries a sack of mulch
across the lawn—
half her body hidden.

The husk in the shed—its splayed chest—
swallows the day's last light.
Leftovers tonight, and tomorrow
I will dress the deer to pieces:
loin, rounds, flank,

shanks, chuck—all into butcher paper
and plastic bags and a freezer
that sits empty until this.

Washing up, I will think again
of the woman in that poem—so often
I imagined pulling it free, holding it
in two hands like she does,
lifting it to my cold mouth.

An Early Film in which Four of the Same Man Get Married

We already know all the possibilities of sorrow—
have seen the beautiful women thrown into the backseats
of black Hudsons. That, Hudson, my mother's maiden name:
two syllable genealogy of insanity and the desire
to feel, precisely, skin hitting water after an afternoon
of tender falling through thick bay air.

So one of me climbs into each curbside taxicab.
“Take me to that god damn church on twenty-first,”
I say to one cabbie. “When the spire peeks into view,
keep driving,” I tell another. All the talk
of selflessness in the new poetics, and here I am,
pulling a small gray pistol from my coat pocket
and holding it to the third driver's head, “Lose them
or I'll blow birdsong morning heartbreak radio splatter
melody that ever played in this icebox sedan.”

Her skin like a moon falling gentle and soundless
into the sea of static on the radio in the fourth taxi,
where we have conspired to hide an aspiring painter
in the trunk in his black jeans with his smallest
paintbrush and a tube of cerulean blue in his left
front pocket—these things never fail.

So I guess we should all know, *this* cabbie
is fucking gorgeous, I mean, it's the middle
of Nebraska, and I'm sharing the backseat
with blackbirds, wishing I had that gun now
so I could back slowly away with all the treasured
feathers tucked safely into my baseball cap.

Here's six dollars and fifty cents, and some for you,
and some for you, too. Some for every cab driver
I ever dreamt of while sleepwalking through fields
of dead corn, the unharvested cobs tied to the stalks
with thin strips of winter sky. Good luck.

As we cut the cake, I stare at her slender wrist:
I have no idea what to do with such symmetry.
The pews in the church are all right. I have no

complaints. You look wonderful. Let's get this over with, get in that restored Hudson, drive to San Francisco and see what happens.

Another Lyric Failing to Describe the Guilt and Despair in My Heart

You're a has-been, the sad mother says to a petroglyph of the sun.
One wonders if it was heresy when that ancient hand fixed a god to a rock.

In central Arizona, someone tipped Mazatzal Peak on its side,
and now a ladder leads through the saguaros, then juniper,
and when you reach the top you're only half way up...

There is always a man there to ruin things. There is only sometimes
a second to right them. I have been the first man most of my life.

The ponderosas choir. We drown in spilt light. At the edge of town
a neon sign flashes *Live Nud / Full Bar / Colle Girls*.

We hasten ourselves into stone: an etching that could be a translation
of the blood slipping from your body into mine. Who knew the ruins
of our cities would gleam so kind? That we'd be so warm?

The sad mother flicks a cigarette out the window, igniting the rain.
We sat in lawn chairs on your penthouse patio with deep red beers
and chatted about baseball, the clouds burning in reverie.

The Lost Actor

Standing knee-deep
in a marsh, I fish.
I wait for fish
to mistake my legs
for branches. I eat
a lot of mice, too.
Sometimes I choke
on a fish or a mouse.
My beak is a hammer
in the cloud casket.

Like I said, I was once
a great bird. I flew
into empty Nevada,
doused the storefronts
with gasoline, built
the effigy of Jeremy
sprouting silver feathers
like ash. Like artemisia,
the desert held me
kindly, like a free
smoke when you're
about to cut the reins
on some asshole's
stagecoach.

To be fair, I never saw
a crane in Nevada,
though the mustangs,
some empty night,
must have spread
seared wings and
above the burning
storefronts flown.

The banker's assistant
careens off the road—
dies on a fencepost.
I'm sitting at the bar
with my tackle-box,
tying flies to set
in dirty windowsills,

while outside
they convert the gallows
into student housing.

Right Panel of a Triptych

for Arian

I was learning to pull rain back out of arroyos in Nogales when I received the white bird you sent. You said the sky is a high-wire and the clouds have no balance. Well, even snow forgets me here. The night you pulled your youth from a glass of whiskey at the Gold 'N Silver, I fell into a mineshaft veined with smoked neon on the outskirts of Reno. I keep thinking of that woman outside *Harrah's* who said, "The backrooms of casinos are no place to be born," and that knowing look she gave you. I give you this: even odds—it's better than you've ever had. The only thing you told me about your father was the type of car he drove out of your life. There are no pool halls here. The streets are made of loose skin. I have never given you enough of myself. I know. God damn, Arian, the low desert is hard for me... but I've told you that before. Even in the poker chips and piss and whorehouses I found certain ways to love. I hear you're leaving Nevada for Virginia. I want to say, keep standing in your own blood or come stand in mine, but the saguaros wear their halos again, and between us, I can't even tell the difference between an offering and theft.

Behind My Mother's House Near Enterprise, Oregon

the dirt road ends at a wide pond where he
kneels, drinks starry frog water
until there is no more pond—
just a man, full of the mysterious body

which in its absence leaves
a large depression of black mud,
a broken raft, and a duck carcass
draped with scum, angular as a satellite
leaking from its skin

transmissions that he must also drink, expanding
with pond and data until his bloated belly gives—
so out flow the thousand silver things,
the encrypted placentas, the muck.

Well, I don't know what I expected.
I was swimming and now here I am,

muddied on the bank. Reeds and the hair
of this deflated man blow around me
like trombones—he is a dead planet,

hunched in the pollywog bubbles,
murmuring coordinates to
minnows in the black.

Tired, I begin to shake. I shake
my story into cattails, onto the feet
of the man, who says he feels thirsty again.

Wait, let me tell you about the perfect distances
I swam to find you; the shy constellations
of tongue that spoke to me;
those galaxies' beautiful blue lungs—listen
to the solar wind rustling me
back, back into that dark space.

But the man just says he feels thirsty
and bends his mouth to water.

Erasure Before Spring

Winter crawled from the beds of dirty pickups.
You slept on autumn straw, woke wearing
a tiara of snow.

On a wooden post, the blackbird
ate frost until its remiges went white—taking wing,
fading into weather.

First, it's the idea of snow
erasing all forecasts, street names. Watching
black and white movies, I'd say *She wears a cardigan of ice!*
or *That colonnade never melts...*

You painted the walls
a color called "A Good Excuse to Stay In."

Soon, patches of ice rose on skin like bruises,
and when we quit asking questions, you shuttered
our quiet violence in photos that made me shake.

Snow erases mountains. Snow encroaches. You tried
to write a Romance, but each draft found the good
protagonist or her love-to-be

dying alone
in the unheated loft in Longville, Minnesota.

At night, your feet in my hands felt cold as kopecks
clinking in the filthy pocket of some peasant from Tolstoy.
Each day, I walked to work through freezing fog, but kept
arriving in our kitchen,

the road a hardwood hall.
Our neighbor hacked at night with a sickle moon.
We took him bread with jam, gossip, whiskey. Snow

erases the distance between one town and another—
inserts it between us. Snow erases every path but back.

You drank coffee thick and black and all day
to protest the white weather

folded across the building frames
our bodies were becoming. One morning the sky felt
like a vacant shopping mall poised on a mass grave,
but then you said something like *Today the sky*
bleeds with remission.

I was sick.

Your thoughts took flight like flushed ducks, and I,
at my worst, spoke a pidgin of shotgun and smoke.

You threw our phone into the drifts by the fence.
We forgot how to undress each other. When I looked at you
I saw a field of doves through which I could not run.

Upstairs, a water pipe broke. We dined in a frozen marsh.
Icicles grew from the cattails

hanging from my mouth.

And I remember the search—the binoculars and dogs,
my skinny ghost hidden in dead weeds at the table.

Snow erases nearby houses. Erases town and country.
Outside was nothingness and inside a deafening

I don't know.

You reached for me and found the cold rib of a chair.

The Lucky City

We ran across rooftops
till our feet became rain.

We clouded skylights, throwing
each day's first shadow.

We tied butcher window images
of pigs' heads to our
skinny necks—we wallowed
and in our wallowing
glistened.

We feared nothing.
Our feet were heavy.
We cut them off.

*

Moments of beauty from my life:

Conor alone, spotlighted in a Reno theater playing "Lua"
and not a fucking whisper during the silences;

making love in the old apartment and "Lay
Lady Lay" by chance coming on the stereo;

a short horse's full gallop through the Mongolian steppe;

Sigur Rós at the concert hall downtown
and the curtain's fall at "Ný Batterí's" crescendo...

How to explain? Why?

*

We scraped matches against horizon.
Carried dead buildings
home on our shoulders. Broke

windows to build a sky
that would reflect us. We wrapped
the neighbors' screams

around our necks like scarves.

We loved endlessly. We caught every fire.
We drowned and drowned ourselves.

*

More moments of beauty:

a hundred and thirty-five miles per hour in my
father's hot rod on a strip of highway known for cops;

smoking a joint alone in GA and Isaac Brock's distant stare
while singing "Cowboy Dan," my eyes
almost closed; Crater Lake;

freezing under two sweaters in our Oregon apartment,
reading "Antony and Cleopatra" at the red Formica table;

finding you.

*

We filled our mouths with light torn
from streetlamps. Choked on lumens.

We sang until our voices hid. Brought tears home
in savaged eyes.

We never got enough
of other men's sadness. Never tried death.

We ran we ran we ran we ran. We ran
like clangs of bells all through each other's skin.

Failed Sonnet

Through a house with no door, wind runs a dead tongue.
It's a new moon, a broken streetlamp. In my dream,
the same chase scene. Same crash. Blood, hair, tinsel.

When I try to explain, I cough small bottles of bourbon
onto the officer's shoe. When I was younger,
a child really, we got high in the mustard fields then drove
gas station to gas station, stealing booze in our varsity jackets.
We laughed ourselves out-of-body, but I never drank

the blood we lost becoming brothers, never had to
watch samples of that scene dropped into baggies, vials.
Now I turn to blown glass in the early morning,
and when the sun rises, it will not raise a world yellow.

The crops are gone. I am sorry for everything.

IV.

At the Hiway 40 Motel

East 4th Street, Reno, Nevada – July 4, 1985

Morning never again appeared to us so naked
as when we watched her (a few doors over)
continue to knock, sigh, knock, say

fucking men, and
finally (the door opening) enter.

So we don't have to pay for *that*
the same way—so what. By-the-hour
bed sheets dry on a line
of saliva strung between my mouth

and the purple horizon. Whatever dirty comment I made
as you put quarters into a machine for a drink,

the sun shone on us like an attaché of cash.

Surely her time is worth as much love as we found
in that abandoned Manitoba fishing village
where I pulled you under the ice. Sure it's impossible, but

Springsteen came on the radio and I thought about her
(a few doors over) thinking about him, thinking *tramps like us*.
I thought *tramps like us*. I thought I would never
stop crying because you were trying to sink
through the bed like your spilt Coke.

Quickly, our room became labia, nipple, nape,
ankle, cock, lip—and I said love is a gold bar

buried in a backyard sodden from sprinklers
left on all night in that painting of suburbia
where I first fell into color, forgot about flesh.

But really, love is a string strung across an alley
where we can hang everything once hid: bloody jean shorts,

cheap bible with cum staining odd verses
a fortuneteller would one day tell you
to memorize in order to reach that dead
part of your heart.

Well, I sat in a chair outside room 17, by the pool,
and watched the parade, while you,
secret as a letter slipped to a skirt of fire,
crept across the thoroughbred's coppered haunch
into the brushed and contoured forest.

The Duck Press

Winter of rolling Dakotas—raspberry compote
covering the snow covering the street. The clouds

depress me like antiquarians, fish
chromed on the tarpaulin. I found your hair

strewn through mountain passes, growing west.
The general force of migration

like an order handed down
from the years I walked with fingers out,
just touching you—

today I'm small enough to sup from your platelets,
fill the armoire with decadent juice.

Anxiety helped you move
out of the plains' open palm,

away from rushed traffic, the perfume counter...
but then there was the matter of the pills

and your sister always asleep in the kitchen
smelling like a Bourbon monarch

with all the trimmings. I longed to be
a wooden, handcrafted chair. I slept on cotton
in the bay's broken cannon bone.

Bless me, dead centuries: sew my garments
with tendons spooled from the limbs
of scavenging nurses. This *is* about love.

I remember the first time I saw the ocean. I was
also from the interior, though we didn't know it then.

Or each other. The cranes built shopping malls
all across your shoulder blades and even down

your ribs, like waves far from shore, seen from the cliff.
I was a glass door opening and closing
in one of those buildings. I was right there

in the breathing salt, the sea grasses,
waving hello and crying
as you walked back from the war alone.

At the Field Museum in Chicago, an Electronic Counter Counts the Number of Species Going Extinct in Real Time in This, The Sixth Mass Extinction

And at the bottom of my teacup, dregs
resembling the fated green ruins of cardamom
legendary during my stint as a dead British patriot.

This skiff of tealeaf here—a bayonet.
And this bent figure—a woman
about to rise from a bed of leaflets
and avenge her countless losses
only to find that the dogs have gnawed
her feet off at the ankles. My fortune was to tell

and when I told the history of cacao—food of the gods—
my lover woke up with a Spanish pistol in one hand
and a little spot of wet gold on the pillow by her lips.

O, heaven grass! In the swimming pool,
eight dead cats. In the jungle, quiet ashes.

I watched her brush her teeth, flecks of earth's skin
stuck between them. She flossed twice, the floss
making her fingertips red and dented. See how small

the skin is, and how small we are. How
small is beautiful. A semi-truck hauls
replacement planets packed in Biopeanuts
past our Montana farmhouse.

My dear inherited guilt:
will I ever act against you?—

sound of laughter coming from my tiny laughing Buddha made of wood—

will I just look out the window and cry?

Girl in a Country Scene

In the iron trough—lone remnant of the sheep
that once grazed here—a thin sheet of ice

covers molasses, and a girl, because no one
has told her of a better use for hands, breaks it.

In the next gasp of light, as some sweet nostalgia
dissolves on her tongue, she finds herself

walking where long afternoons of barbed wire
dream of letting the herd loose, and a gang of lazy clouds

hangs around the corner store of mountains,
feeling at empty blue pockets.

In a few hours or years, her mother will call her
to help set the table, help father with tomato cages,

help father with the rolling over, fetch the priest
a cup of coffee, empty the family jar of tears.

But now, she lets the scattered sunlight
remove her shoes, barely trembles as she sews

seconds into breached flesh: making the moment
live in her. Now, frost only sweetens broken wheat;

wind blows through her skin as if through a damp sheet.
And this must be the bright winter of her childhood,

a long time will pass before cold feels so good again.

New Pastoral

1. When Asked What the Hole was For, the Child Said It was a Grave

To be in this body with a rucksack and wet flesh
on a wounded planet's back. Solutions: the one-bullet gun,
the riding whip, or the lost gauze. I chose not the first

and saw some world:

Orchard trees sewn into hospital gowns grasp at dusk,
at each others' appaloosa leaves. And each dusk the same—
the botched sun, the moon nuzzling our flea-bitten galaxy.
Down all the rows, bees build mausoleums under gurneys.

Gods of the abandoned silo, blackbirds dance and caw
through a broke tractor. The mule rebuilds himself
from a farmstead's rusty machinery—heads out for another go
at the golden hills, the earth moist with dead medicines.

2.

On the radio in a white city I built from planet-skin, the pretty voice describes workers
who have dug their last ditch and used it. Flocks of birds pretend to be water, filling the culverts
an old man crawls through—feather streams cut him into spirit, the bright seaming of sound.

3. In Deference to the Creation, All the Medics Have Laid Down Their Harps

This is the laboratory of dust.
Men invent cemeteries
where they bury knots of DNA
inside the skulls of buried women
who unravel the helices with teeth
as small as the white mountains
where we fashion needles from bones
that the earth spits up. Sit up straight—
this is the tailor's forgotten shop.

Animal hides hang on blue wires torn from sky.
Hide, animal. Hang on. The sky just tears at its blue,
a wire in the hideous body on which the animals hang.

This is the land of plenty
of florescent lights and not much else.
Our new veterinarian carves
the cow's heart out, then cuts off
her hooves and strings two together as if in prayer—
puts that bundle in the breast. Rest. And fluids.

4. The Ambulance Lights Looked Like Fireworks on Television

Outside the circus tent, two chimpanzees arm wrestle
to the growls and squawks of the other animals. One arm
snaps like—if you want to hear it—a rice cake.
I collect my money from the bookie, then open the flap.

The magician wraps her in an American flag
and then cuts her in half with a lumberjack's saw—
it's not hard to imagine the cloven stomach,
blood spraying like sawdust into the audience.

If you remember that none of this is real
it makes it easier.

In the workshop, we made chairs from what good pieces
of the past we could find. We made a fire with the rest.
What was it like to live while the world was dying?

I want to hold your hand, walk with you
into the blue, wind-lipped waves and past
the grove of sunk trees to a village
at the bottom of the reservoir. We could dance
in the old church—two lovers sharing the last breath,
moving in perfect unison beneath a dark weight.

5.

And then I was carried home, if you could call it that. I found the avenues the same, but
unsigned. In the foothills where I was born, pines had encroached into many fields that were
once plowed. Walking there was like walking into a night that I, in my innocence, had contrived,
and when I looked I saw no man or building clear to the distant horizon. A thin layer of pollen
covered everything, and I felt as though something too big to name had finally folded.

A Description of Town

Water promises us nothing. Moss blanches in our wells.
Strong men wake up to die in old silver mines, to die
on saloon carpets in buckets of smoke and teeth.
The sun rises over our town like a fist of coin.

The streets talk dirty and look up girls' skirts.
Children grow into fistfights with their bones,
and the painted horse in the barber shop is abandoned.
A streetlamp turns into a house fire, and then turns back.

Most of us return each night to where we found it.
The workers' wives work at a cannery of flames
packing sparks into tins for a dead god's cellar.
Above every storefront an empty room tries to sleep.

Sparrows roam the town edge, pecking late light
then spitting stars into dark. A bell sounds at seven
but the strong men do not come in for supper. A roan
whipped on for three days without feed folds like origami.

One day the sun rose and turned out to be a child
wishing for three more wishes. Those second story rooms
wait for miners' ghosts and certain deities tired of sky.
The most coveted job in town is designing the new moon.

One worker lost all his skin—sloughed off like a joke
about three people no one had ever met. The skin
became a kite and a child is flying it all the way
to something called an ocean, far away and calm.