

Atom City

by

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## ABSTRACT

A collection of poems that explore what it means to be from the Atomic City-- a city built atop cleared-out rural communities in East Tennessee during World War II, and with the sole and secretive purpose of enriching uranium for the atomic bomb. The poems look back to the more isolated Appalachian culture of previous generations, discovering the identity rifts caused by such massive and rushed development. In trying to understand the poet's own cultural inheritance of both nuclear weaponry and an Appalachian hardness, the poems begin to meditate on inhabitation. They ask what it means to live in a country, a local community, a body. The poems travel far beyond the Atomic City's limits, incorporating characters that live, in some sense, at the edge of a community. As he crosses the Atlantic, the Spanish poet Jiménez wonders if either sound or vision are more trustworthy tools for perception; an aging grandmother in Tennessee realizes that she still "drives" her younger body in her dreams; an American woman becomes aroused after touring the killing fields in Cambodia; and the prophet of Oak Ridge, who supposedly predicted the Manhattan Project, considers how his baby daughter has become a thing after death. The various voices show the poet grappling with her own guilt over Hiroshima, and ultimately attempt to understand the limits of both grief and love, how one inherits a tragedy.

## DEDICATION

For Rita Imogene Sams, Sept 24, 1920 – June 3, 2012.

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## IMOGENE

### I. FOURTEEN

There's a cold pail by my feet when lightning  
sails from roof to cow; a charge touches

my finger, makes me buzz the way licking  
hail does. It's the way I hurt, then, that keeps

me quiet, my face as still as the barn.  
When the barn shakes with storm—its final

show a whooping-cough, akin to engine  
failure, I think of a dance I know. How my limbs tremble

as they loosen, letting small bundles of intimates  
go who knows where. Cows don't

like this. A cow likes routine. So I make biscuits,  
though what milk I have is old or scorched.

When my sister goes, too young to know it, the same  
tremor finds me. My body hums *body*. I won't complain.



SONG FOR A HOMETOWN PROPHET, SOME YEARS AFTER MOVING AWAY  
*John Hendrix of Oak Ridge Valley, East Tennessee, 1865-1915*

And what John saw— after he laid his face  
to the ground, as he'd been asked  
by the voice that had come to him—

what he saw was invasive,  
like the charred smell rising through B.'s home  
in the Phoenix predawn blue:

Seeing how the war would come  
must have intruded on John's senses,  
as smoke against the usual desert clear

now intrudes on mine, has triggered me  
awake this morning. What John saw as he slept  
must have triggered him: I can see

how, after his forty days of dreaming,  
he must have stood abruptly,  
dripping with the Appalachian dirt.

What was coursing through John when he woke  
was as real as the color of his daughter's skin,  
blue when diphtheria killed her.

And that he could see the coming factory,  
where they would do the work to make  
the earth shake—that he could see was as natural

as smelling a brushfire. Burnt oleander  
is natural oleander, after all, though it smells  
weirdly sweet, turned neon as it entered my dream;

this flare is my periphery, now, as I lie awake.  
It's made all reds go pink: beside our bed,  
a plastic glass now loud with color;

the Navajo blanket as if pulsing at my feet—  
and threaded in it, clear as the purpose  
that built the city where I was born,

the thought of B.'s sister, how her eyes  
were bright from crying as she spoke  
of the mines on the Navajo Nation,

about some five-hundred  
contaminated structures there;  
how their mother played as a child in that dust:

how, against such glare, the black outlines  
of our selves glow harder—  
how what was coursing through John

when he woke must have felt  
like an even hotter  
burning on his tongue.

Each day of forty, a neon cluster of  
uranium burst from the buds,  
as if he'd licked the same Arizona dust:

For as John slept—I see it— it was a rebound  
of the element, feeding back and shimmying up  
through the Tennessee ridge,

coursing through the place where  
they'd bring what was mined.  
That's what touched his lips.

And on his eyelids, shut against the ground,



## APPALACHIA IN WINTER

She decided to work at the Museum  
of Appalachia after having lived her life  
and come down the mountain.  
She seems to make do, cooks the same  
beans and cornbread she served  
in her Oneida chuckwagon,  
commandeers a kitchen's family  
that almost checks the silence of her own,

serves spit-roasted something or other  
that makes the museum founder cry.  
*This place is all cause've a spice-grinder*  
he says in the book she shows me  
when I visit over Christmas,  
the whole collection inspired by his granny pressing  
the essence of nutmeg from its seed.  
I can see wanting to preserve that:

what we've inherited here is something sadder  
than the hardinesses that bore it—  
it's too shallow, you can strike  
straight through to the bottom.  
I can see him still wanting to hold the thing  
as he puts his palm in Mary's,  
    a family friend who has me call her *Mamaw*,  
as he tells her the food was done just right.

Glassy-eyed when she talks, now,  
she says mostly *Oh yea-uh, oh yea-uh*,  
and if you ask,  
*I like workin' at that place real nice.*  
Straight to the bottom and back up  
will make a man want to know  
the use of things;  
to learn what sun can do in winter

if you let it reach your bones;  
to feel an older contact

as you touch the metal of a kitchen collectible,  
outline the grace of processes.

\*

I've only been to the museum as a child  
and want to remember it  
but wait until I'm gone  
and find the website.  
*Visit the Museum of Appalachia in winter!* it says,  
but it's hard to market nostalgia incarnate:  
*Outdoor vegetable gardens lie fallow;  
sheep and pig huddle in log shelters...*

We're in luck, though, we east Tennessee students,  
fiddle connoisseurs, whoever,  
because *like early Appalachian pioneers*

*who mended their own socks, repaired tools at the fireside!,  
Museum visitors find much to do—and still remain warm!*

Is it warmth that built this place to help us conceive of cold  
without having to feel it?—  
warmth that sent the founder sifting through auction haul,  
deaths and knock-kneed barns  
for a utensil or a loom,  
some ornament of isolation,  
a ricocheted joy to display here,  
for us,

in our own more boring isolations,  
for the occasional tourist?

IMOGENE

II. NINETY-ONE

Nor, for that matter, am I glad. Thankful,  
yes. I can wake and fix me something to eat.

Springs especially are like this—small but measurable  
necessaries rise up from the apples beached

on the lawn: what I mean is, the grass pokes  
like chin hairs through them. After so long a lay

(one wouldn't have tasted them) any such globes  
would go soft—like a fleshy sea beneath the toupee

of spring. My body's bigger than the one I still chauffeur  
in dreams. At Christmastime, dressed and perfumed

in department store goods, I watch a Kroger  
ham with my greens devoured. So groomed

am I as the kids open presents, and so dutifully  
do they line up to hug the thing of me.

## AT HOME

### I.

Reading on the toilet,  
I'm happy for the kind of isolation  
a bathroom allows;  
an isolation that spreads  
a rare and exaggerated barrier  
between myself and the rest—

the sounds so entirely my own in here  
that the aloneness  
forces its way between  
even myself and me;  
when I touch the dip above my lip—  
                                  though I know it's the bit  
                                  that I kiss with—  
I can't feel me as I normally would,  
grow heavy in the skin's strangeness.

Once, when I was six or so, I spent the evening  
in my father's office,  
which was deep with books of law  
and artifacts of grown-up business  
that seemed more exciting than they are,  
more intimidating;  
when he took his crossword  
to the bathroom  
at end of the building's darkest hall  
and was gone  
for what seemed an hour,  
I assumed him dead  
                                  and phoned the police.

In the stillness of my own bathroom,  
                                  the world outside like muted nerves,  
a book review open on my thighs in a swirl of words—  
I remember my panic exactly,  
as if I'd conjured it, and I'm jolted back  
into my younger body:

see the outside air shellac a Shoney's windows,  
am chorded with the vibrancy of Dad's  
embarrassed and beautiful guffaw.  
Only such a surging emotion can allow  
us back into ourselves like this,  
and the trip has made me feel hollowed out.

II.

After a long while, I realize I've been re-reading  
a line on my naked lap, *There is no transcending*  
*the otherness of matter.*

I read it again,  
this line that says  
*my body* will always be a lonesome thing.  
I think of my stepbrother,  
five-years dead.  
When he was six, I remember,  
he sported a scraggly blonde rat-tail,  
refused to cut it off,  
and so had it taken from him  
in his sleep.

I imagine his night barber,  
and no, there is no  
transcending the otherness of matter:  
the slopped-off tail peaking  
over the waste-bin is the same  
as the stump at the nape of Scottie's neck—  
both something other than him,  
as remote from him as the brain that bumps  
with his dream flight—

for even his brain is a long way away from him there,  
in the dream, where he is zooming upward,  
leaving some struggle behind,  
his tiny cape of blonde hairs still waving.

Nothing can unite the body  
as it squirms in Batman pajamas  
with the boy that sees  
out of those glacier blue eyes,  
nothing but death, maybe—and it's possible, I realize now,  
that Scottie knows this, at six—  
that he feels this jarring distance  
as he wakes,  
wants to leave it behind.

## HOME SALON

Margaret enjoys the springing action of the curl,  
the little bundle of her mother's being—  
how it coils around itself as if the present were absurd,  
reaches back toward an earlier time when

these roles were reversed. It's not that she becomes  
or is becoming her mother but that another line is blurred,  
the one that says everything is immediately true or has passed,  
that Margaret is either or; a line for practical purposes.

This is why when her mother dies she *tsks* the mortician,  
the prim contours he shapes with her hair, how he obscures  
the energy they'd contained in the windings they'd made  
of each other for half a century; why her scalp

is still pricked and pricked by the other's fingers  
spidering through her; why Margaret takes the plastic cylinders  
from her pocketbook and grips their sea-foam-colored curves.  
This won't do, she is saying, this won't do.

## SMALL TALK IN SAN REMO

*Yes.* My brother's a riot, like lamps  
left on all night—think last night,  
of the Ligurian, its chuck of salt  
at us;  
think of the window that,  
as if to refresh,  
let in a lukewarm sheen. *Yes,*  
like a marine biologist,  
he takes a sample of a species  
as a pet for himself  
and, believe me,  
like an older brother on a too-hot afternoon  
does he explode it, let  
the brackish water out.  
Then he laughs  
like two whales, if the sound whales make  
might be laughter, and he draws  
a repeating block of cells—  
as if to display insides  
that could explain insides, and him  
so raw from that burning  
through the night.

We're eating breakfast at our campsite  
on the sea when a colleague lets  
peach jam drip down her jaw, asks  
my step-sister—How about you?  
Do you have any other siblings in America?,  
and she has to say: *Yes,*  
but he's dead.  
Other things came to mind,  
she tells me later, lies again.

## COLD LIGHT

I've seen my mother do  
what Caravaggio learned  
as he directed the shine from  
his bedroom skylight: project  
a photo of me in ballet garb  
on our kitchen's white wall,  
move pink pigment over the lines  
and arcs my body made, bent  
in the way I'd been taught to mean grace.

When they took our house  
my mother stopped painting.  
We set up somewhere new,  
*Briarcliff*, which made more sound  
than sense: a land's sharp edge  
or the way the shape of a prickler falls.  
We hang on to each other, wanting  
to know how to live in bodies and rooms  
with the sense of always expanding space.

She offered up the queen oak bed  
as if it were my right to luxury  
and I took it. The husks of summer  
peeled back in a haze of chlorine  
and the glow of fireflies I'd jar and freeze  
for ten cents apiece,  
never knowing for who or what use.  
One of her passing boyfriends  
had given me a train that smoked,  
smelled of eggs and rot.  
Nights I inched toward sleep  
in ivy-stamped cotton sheets,

hearing her awake somewhere;  
*downstairs*, she reminds me,  
*on the love seat. I did, I grew to love that couch.*  
The soft-shelled bodies hardened

in the kitchen, dimmed  
next to corn kernels and pizza bites.  
One of those mornings, late,  
we mix a pouch of mayonnaise with tuna, stir,

and I put the piled-up cracker in my mouth;  
hold it there until the texture dissolves.

I am thinking of our old house's  
new family, how they must prepare meals  
beside my postured hands  
and sloping back—  
a ghost of me:  
what exists after just having felt  
the itch under tight slippers  
or fish mash on the tongue.

MONTREAT, NORTH CAROLINA

We're dreaming—  
it's good that we're dreaming,  
otherwise the snow would have us,  
take interest in the low sound  
of our feet on the way up;  
that's how this mountain works.

I can flush full-faced; you can, too.

If we really were where we are,  
the ground would try to make  
us cold with quiet, so you'd  
go up the other side,

or I would, finding where  
the sun breaks through.

If we were here,  
we'd have to look at here  
from across the way  
and want it. It's good.

## CLEANING HOUSE

*Each second, the earth is struck hard  
by four and a half pounds of sunlight,*

which means the weight of five pocketbooks,  
immaculately kept, the small comb  
in a side zip-pocket, too;

or else it means the pouring down on us  
of a hair-dryer in its '92 Con-Air box—  
the hair-dryer, two pounds,

alongside a porcelain Jesus  
that glows red when you spin  
its wheel-click switch.

It means each second on us  
the weight of these items left  
in the corner of the back room

of my grandmother's house.  
In the living room, the blinds  
shut and the radio on,

my cousin apologizes for being sad,  
the way southern women usually do.

## HOW JOHN HENDRIX OF EAST TENNESSEE PREDICTED THE ATOM BOMB IN 1915

God, the earth of her shaking as the noise sounds out: We're prone to exaggerate. But you'll be imagining our love, now, which is good. It's what people forget. She'd left me, and I missed being touched—the whole of why I walked barefoot through the woods. Bare feet give one the sense of being intimate: The dirt tickled me and made a chill; a speck of oak lodged between my toes. Then I saw two streams run in opposite directions, though they lay beside each other. This struck me, called to me like my long-gone wife. *Listen here*, the creek said; *listen better*. You can call it God if you like. I lay down because I missed her, and desire is a kind of god, we all know that. Then the ground kept at its whispering, so I leaned an ear down. Of course I'd called it god—men around these parts will do that: hear a woman's breath from deep within and say it's *godlike*. Which is the point—*listen better*. I listened so long I got hungry, like on those Sundays we would lie all day in bed. It was in that state I dreamed, listening, listening. I could hear what was brewing here, as if the beginning of an internal disease. The sound was like my own belly, how it would rumble as we fought; and in the rumbling I heard, yes, the pounding down of railroad ties, and then the rushed-up factories for the bomb. I think I had the word for it. But also—and there was nothing I could do, I heard how they'd enlist all this I said for backing in their quarrels. I knew they'd say I'd seen the atom split, that it must have been God's awesome plan. But I was trying to say *I hear you*. I was trying to say *Come back home, now*. *Things just aren't right*.

II.

## QUARREL

1.  
Three nights in a row, now—  
not the same dream,  
dreams with different pleasures  
and as unlike as sisters,  
but always  
the same four knocks  
on a door  
and a hollow sound  
as I wake.

2.

I can always remember  
in the morning how,  
waking during gray hours,  
a door closing out light  
looks like an origin;  
how the door presses, plank-like,  
against a glow you've known  
since childhood,  
makes a sound you recognize,  
a Saab's tire glee-waying  
over Kingsport's hills.

3.

Origin: Four days ago,  
Friday at half-past one,  
actual knocking.

The police ask me my address,  
which I find funny,  
*we're here now*, I think,  
but I realize as I hug  
myself into my robe  
that the number's missing,  
and from the house beside mine,  
which they'd been looking for,  
the peppery shit-smell  
of a love fight is seeping out,  
directs them  
away from me.

4.

Is it self-preservation  
or a penchant for loving  
that makes me think of  
these near strangers  
each time I fall down  
the night's dark spine?—  
What my dreams  
keep coming to—  
foreign landscapes,  
somebody else's brawl.

5.

When the cops left  
I returned to bed and the book  
I'd dozed away from,  
full tilt awake, then,  
embarrassed that their flashlights  
skipped to find the nightgown  
my mother gave me,  
the one with a factory print  
like a cake's iced curlicues, flattened.

6.

Each time I wake  
I gawk at the rim of my door  
closed against the porch light,  
scared but soothed  
by the other lives that blaze the perimeter  
of my watching,  
a chlorine haze, that good burn  
that makes you see you're seeing  
as you slip out of the pool.  
I rub at my eye with a drowsed paw—  
wanting to touch it,  
pressure it away.  
Each time I've quaked  
at the dream-knocks,  
excited that they might have been real,  
insisting otherwise,  
going back to sleep.

7.

It's about being asked  
to leave bed to answer  
for sins I haven't had,  
about those consequences,  
this question: does the dreamer  
remember me at the door  
or do I remember  
opening her, it,  
the air hanging with the lemon rot  
our two lots share?

8.

It's not that I haven't them,  
just not these I wake with—  
though as I sleep,  
I must dress the girl from *125*  
with an old face of mine,  
dress her lover also—  
it's a comfort, somehow,  
to have to fight  
from letting  
all their troubles inside.

III.

THE MARRIAGE VOYAGE OF JUAN RAMÓN JIMÉNEZ  
*1916*

He doesn't know whether to trust sound or vision;  
reaching for Zenobia across the Atlantic, whether to lend  
credence to the sea's bellyaching or the shadow riven  
from the down-slope of a wave. Something distends

inside him, something inorganic balloons the way  
worlds morph in size when we close our eyes.  
There's the reality of the steamship, there's the bouquet  
of neural transmitters tied with enigmatic pains—

they co-exist, but they don't overtop one another.  
Stepping onto New York only aggravates the rift;  
though he's greeted by a fiancé, he'll depend on her  
to traverse the space between tongues in stretches of transit.

Years later he'll come back to this during exile from  
war-torn Spain— the way kissing on the dock  
taught him how to slide back and forth between the worlds;  
the sight of her and the noise of their lips' suction

like the narrative and the vatic; the clarity  
of a white-washed Moguer home against the Andalus sky,  
the resonant wood of its door—recall, above the rest,  
the continuous demands of the furnace.

## PEDRO SALINAS & THE GREATEST SPANISH LOVE POEM

I don't know that I get what he means when he says  
*what steeper joy than living in pronouns*. At first  
everything is dizzy, light; but soon I'm submerged  
in his *you*, the one his *I* gets to speak and quiz:  
if I am *I*, he says, then who are *you*?  
*You* must respond to questions like this  
with nothing but his words; why look for islands,  
I guess, when *I* can have *you* sing them, spew  
volcanic lava *I* himself can cool and glaze?  
*To live I don't want palaces, towers*: here's logic—  
to live from the inside out: Why become a goshawk  
diving, when he can write him up a buoyant prey?  
Why let history buckle me—my name, people, place—  
when his poem might draw tight around my waist.

## AN AVERAGE SET OF BREASTS

weighs almost five pounds.  
Picture Churriana, a suburb of Granada

where I'm teaching for a year:  
the welcoming fountain

offers a pair of large stone breasts  
wetted by mountain water

as a monument to the mothers  
of the town. As my bus loops

the round-a-bout, I slouch my back,  
feel the weight of the sun

on my chest. Inside the town's  
only open café, cigarette smoke

curls around the sunlight, which always  
feels heavy in the south of Spain.

An old man slurps orange pulp  
and tries to sell lottery tickets to the mother

of a girl I tutor—Remedio, a *gitana*,  
who spends most of her lessons coloring

because her teachers think it useless  
to teach her. The plastic tables of the café

are chained to the ground,  
their seats advertising cheap beer.

Remedio will pass them with her mother  
on her way home,

where she'll eat *chuches* for dinner,  
her landscape drawing still burning

in her mind—a red earth,  
a deep burrow into sky.

DOÑA JUANA LA LOCA, QUEEN OF CASTILE

Though Juana examines the black box  
rather as a scholar—  
breathes steady as she peels  
back the casket's sheet, traces  
the auric seal she knows well, knows  
to mean Ferdinand, Isabel,  
and, if not ardor, allegiance—

such poise only helps her courtier recognize  
that no one knows a mind,  
just the show it makes,  
that he should catch the moment when  
grief shakes the cooling ground  
and closes her experiment away.

If, for example, he sees that fear can reach her—  
how her stare maybe widens  
for the slip of a verse,  
*Lacrimosa, the day of tears and mourning, pardon him—*  
he's got evidence to call her mad.

The holy smoke would have obscured  
what he later claims to have seen—  
her shaving off of reality,  
palming its dead skin in layers, clumps—  
but he's able to use the plume as prop,  
says that, *even as she breathed it in,*  
*she took so long to cry,*  
*as if she thought the box itself*  
*part of the king's body,*  
*as if she thought him still alive; and her touch so full of lust*  
*she couldn't stand above it,*  
*but opened the lid*  
*and fell down at the corpse's feet.*

Though only the strange intactness of toenail  
might have drawn her down  
after that dark thing opened—

the past being nothing she longed to kiss—,  
her bowing shadow nonetheless a reminder  
that she'd loved, if only for a day too long,  
when she was not loved in return:  
it's enough, in the end, to convict her.

## GRANADA ARCHITECTURE

I slept through the robbery.  
Alfonso, who was visiting,  
invited a man home at five a.m.,  
Alfonso, whose face is always  
shut with want. Alfonso, who,  
when he'd lived with us,  
used to lock himself in his room  
with an entire season of *Lost*; who,  
to some degree, I always thought,  
liked the *resaca* as much as  
he liked the high.  
Go get some ice, Alfonso,  
the man had insisted.

I walked the Alhambra path a hundred times  
the year I lived in Granada,  
but I never saw inside.  
At worst,  
the way I love  
is like this:  
Alfonso, coked out,  
wandering the cobblestone streets  
for a *24 Horas*, a bag of ice;  
the way I'd circle and circle the  
foothills of that palace,  
you'd think I was looking for a way up,  
a way in. Always sure from the gardens,  
which were lavish enough,  
that standing in the sundried walls  
somehow unlatched  
a hold inside of me.

## AT THE GUARDIA CIVIL

I'm here with Lubna, who'd found the man alone in our *salón*,  
pocketing our loose change, an iPod; Lubna, who loves

Beyoncé and watching make-up tutorials on YouTube,  
wants the Berber symbol for *woman* tattooed

on her arm; Lubna shaking in her pink-felt robe,  
her feet cold from the tile, cursing in Arabic

at the robber in his dialect, so he will understand  
her anger, knowing he is not used

to hearing it like this in this city. The policía scrolls through  
photo after photo of faces, and though there's

the occasional flicker of a brighter color moving by,  
they're mostly Moroccan faces, *éste?*, he asks,

again and again, *éste?*, and when he leaves to file paperwork,  
Lubna tells me the story of the girl who'd been mugged

here a year ago, the "M" branded on her forehead,  
as if to say, *yeah, so what, then?*;

Lubna crinkles her nose when she  
speaks about it. When the policeman returns

there's the look in his eye that lets us know  
he wants to help us out, but he's impatient,

gives me the sense I get while walking through  
*La Plaza Trinidad*, a route we take everyday, here,

somewhat in awe, being new as we are to this place—  
*La Plaza Trinidad*, where squawks, raw and viral sounding,

are either honest birdsong or broadcast from speakers  
*la junta* has hidden up there, for the effect.

VAMOS A LA PLAYA, A MI ME GUSTA BAILA'

I hear the jingle first in a grocery store  
and then in a café with pink plastic seats  
that smell of espresso and asparagus—

I'm vacationing from my art class in Madrid,  
if one can be said to vacation  
from their art class in Madrid,

where once, in an attempt to  
envelope myself in the aura of the city,  
I smoked an old man's pipe,

puked on the metro.  
*Keep your head down,*  
a girl with one long dread lock told me

as she helped me off and up  
and home in a cab,  
*you don't want them to think*

*you're a fuck-up or a foreigner.*  
In my nauseous Spanish,  
all I could muster was *angel, angel,*

a slur of soft g's, a quick gesture toward her face.  
But here, in this Andalusian port town,  
the word they have for *redneck* thumps

with the bass-beat of discotecas  
and it's Carnival, so we're going  
to the beach, going to dance.

I remember her—Miriam, it must have been—  
while I'm dressed like an Indian,

(the kind that fights with Cowboys),  
while a man in a doll frock pees on the tide.

Next time, I think, taking in the Atlantic  
while a girl (*eeeh! perfecto!*) pigtails my hair  
and the guy I've been sort-of seeing  
karate chops the air,

next time I'll drink the sherry of Jerez,  
really get it bad for someone.

## MISSING

An arrival as insistent as a bridge  
that wants to bring two banks together,  
to report how the ten-day search  
for a girl has been scaled down, a focus  
on places of known visitation—  
insistent, this new press of you against me.  
How egret feathers push out finer and whiter  
down the breast and the back. How I want  
that girl to be found, for her story  
to be more livable  
than one imagines here, alone near  
where she disappeared.

And even though her loss  
must mean little to me if you were to turn  
to those who lost her,  
it swells inside me, grows so fast  
that I think of her with  
each glow moving in peripheral sky,  
these planes gliding toward me tonight  
like carolers who'd have me open up  
and swallow their fistfuls of light—  
tonight, the first night I've been sure  
I could miss you, so soon  
it bowls me over, so soon  
the grief I've thieved becomes  
confusing; my protectant.

NOCTURNE IN DOWNTOWN PHOENIX

*Just your hot heart  
and nothing else*

Federico García Lorca

Here, in the kind of field  
that belongs to a desert city—  
a busted asphalt lot  
of plywood drift and bottle glints  
between a warehouse and motel,  
fifty odd yards from the bar;  
where a project has been forgotten,  
has maybe gone over budget,  
and there's no movement but  
the quiet shake of glass  
as we pass over it; no Emmylou pouring out  
from an apartment above us,  
    though it's her album  
I imagine we would hear if  
there were a more hive-like life here;

where the interstate is far enough away  
that it continues in a modest hum—  
and without the wind that sometimes pitches  
    in these empty spaces, dusts up  
    the gravel as it goes;  
in the chill I forget February brings, even here,  
during these few weeks of winter  
    that don't try as hard to push through to spring:  
When the Ocotillo is happy not to be a spray of suns,  
you kiss me. Tomorrow morning—  
the rope let go and the land no longer pulling—  
an air balloon ascends thirty miles out,  
rises over the suburbs.

NATIONAL HIGHWAY 6  
*Cambodia*

I hadn't seen it—  
I felt it, though; a jolt and crunch  
and a quick lift under my ass.  
It was sort of inevitable, you tell me,  
the dog spinning last minute  
as our driver passed a truck  
on the other side of the road.

When we stop at a dust-thrown market,  
the English traveler who'd been talking  
of jurisdiction and child birth says  
There's loads of blood and guts out here,  
just smeared all over, ridiculous,  
and I think about the bone  
in the killing fields;  
how the earth, during rain,  
shifts and spits them up.

None of this should find me;  
none of it's mine. Not the pup  
and certainly not the genocide.  
In a month or so the water will come  
and memorial employees  
will comb the mounding field  
for teeth, split shin.

I could work as they do,  
palm the distance between the ground  
and these jettisoned silted things,  
the display box  
meant to receive them—  
not as talismans and to no safety,  
but here, at least, and seen.

## ART HISTORY AT THE PRADO

At first I thought  
Pradilla y Ortiz had painted the surrender  
before the graveside, the taking of Granada a priority  
over the derangement of a queen:  
And it's easy to see Juana's grief expand  
on top of the battleground,  
to imagine the painter pulling  
a blanket dull over  
the bluer sky of victory—  
to assume that the posture of war remains relevant  
for a funeral scene.

But it's the other way around;  
Francisco learned how to paint the *Rendición*  
as he stepped inside the mind  
of that idiot woman  
from fifteenth century Castille.  
He must have poked around  
in her chamber on his own  
in pre-fascist Madrid,  
looked for lady toys and scrawlings,  
objects that, along the lines of Goya's dwarfs,  
might convince us  
of her madness.  
Instead, her interior remove  
so sober, his *Juana* studies are  
all gray land and mist.

In the end he left her still, and calm,  
like the thin flames inching toward the west  
and the church on the hill, as dry as the Alhambra;  
he painted her among the nobles, slouching their hips,  
but as the others, piling up toward the horizon,  
knowing more of what it means to lose.

*Juana* helped him understand  
all hurt takes place, finally,  
in the privacy of the mind.  
Later, when the king commissioned the conquest,

he knew to return to the road  
down the middle of her grieving,  
how to decorate the barbaric distance  
between the treaty and the coffin-side,  
what a pillar of smoke blots out.

## PRISON TOUR

*Phnom Penh, Cambodia*

Afterwards, a girl dressed in orange  
and with the spunk you'd expect  
from such a color  
gestures toward the man below her,  
tells us *He is Bou Meng, a real survivor,*  
and he will sign some books for you.

He must spend every day here  
where he'd been tortured, saved  
only by his experience painting movie sets,  
a captor's desire to see his face  
put to canvas. As Bou pulls out a photo  
of his wife, who did die here,  
I imagine him at work, drawing the lean figure of a woman  
as two men drop a scorpion inside her.

My lover holds it together,  
pays for the book and looks at the man  
with his characteristic kindness, a clean  
kindness— how I knew, falling for him,  
he wouldn't treat in pretense—  
but I walk away from them,  
a globe of shame in my hands,  
its hot metal burning  
with the names I've swapped in my mind,  
*Bou for Bojan*, the quick slip of consciousness  
that makes me feel a telson sting.

When we get back to our hotel,  
we shed our clothes, shower,  
loft liquor on our tongues and kiss  
like we hadn't in weeks. I want nothing more than to  
slide my lover's cock into my mouth,  
to be filled, this way, with the living.

I'm scared by the impulse—  
see a girl's eyes widen  
at a mess she's made with her own selfishness—,  
even as I slide my nipples down his torso.  
It's a simple enough desire:  
after our day, I should be desperate

to make something good.

But if I'm honest, I know that's not why  
I limber here, rolling him over  
and over with my tongue, a whiskey fog  
hot on his crotch—neither is it  
as if to close myself away from  
the horrors we toured,  
to shut my mouth against the dust  
we'd already swallowed spoonfuls of.

I have no biological idea of balance—  
don't believe in a beauty for a ruin,  
that kind of thing.  
I kiss and kiss him  
because when he comes,  
there's no symbol in it,  
just him pulsing  
and the taste.

AT THE LONDON PREMIÈRE

I.

“Many channels weave secret paths through my quartet”

An invasive thing to say, really;  
the notes in their microtonal ascent  
now antennae riddling around  
in my inlands, pressing aloud  
what their feelers find.  
It’s not pleasant to hear  
those backcountry things,  
not beautiful.

*I let the competing musical worlds have at it,*  
he goes on, and the bows—  
jumping in degrees smaller than  
what one hears between sharp and natural—  
keep sounding at me on my way to East London  
where I’m staying in a room,  
its door in a block called Warley House.

A speckled canvas hangs over the bed,  
an aimless slosh of pigments,  
and not until 3:00 a.m. do I discern the ghost  
of feet that must have danced in paint  
before pressing down into the white.

The sun hits the room early,  
a horning orange.  
Next week that florist’s I passed  
will have burned—  
a shoulder-shaped break where  
the cardboard-cut roses hung,  
alerting me of cheap hydrangeas, peonies.

II.

“ just rob everything”

*Dusapin*, wrote Halbreich, *satisfies anger by affirming it*, anger, something my father’s friend reminds me is useless. “But I’m angry,” she says, “my dead brother bilked me for eighty thou, okay. And the bastard’s service was held in a bar so of course I didn’t—more’n a little money, ok.” The world she colors with speech descends like a discus. “Mass as big as a...can’t chisel that out of a man,” her Midwest accent catches on ‘man’ and wobbles into ‘mad,’ mad her men would never see a goddamned doctor, mad she can’t believe in any kind of balm. “And these riots,” she says as she picks up the world again, “Whatever, I’m sorry, but this ‘outlier’ crap—these guys just banked on someone else getting screwed. I mean, *flowers?*”

III.

“The Quartet is punctuated by three exhaustion attempts”

As if merely exhausting the players would work—  
could reel back the support orchestra or  
at least let them be lost.

I think of Dusapin’s richly fabled backlands  
as I go to the next and then the next  
photo logging London’s trembling:  
From the *Guardian*,  
a floor fan suspended  
after release and before  
its arc toward the police,  
the hurler’s mouth sealed with silk  
and the cord’s plug hovering  
where another rioter’s ear must be;

police who, like the background orchestra,  
can’t distance themselves properly  
from the anger in the looting,  
from the man they killed last week—  
his death an ignition but his dying  
accidental, small.

The six Polaroid’s in *Harper’s*—  
feet, gas, hoods, masks,  
a smashed car, a boarded Aldi—  
like vintage stamps.

An eighty-nine-year-old  
who searches a frame  
for what’s left of his barber shop,  
ready, in front of the mirror,  
to scoop with his hands  
if he finds a relic,  
a comb spilt in blue.

When I think about it,  
the performance wasn’t as surprising  
as it first seemed to be;  
for forty minutes the quartet

tussled with the larger ensemble,  
as in a long attempt to be rid of an itch.  
None of the initiate material  
supposed to snag  
but to buzz what's familiar long enough  
    to take away  
        the music's shape.  
But being without shape  
didn't mean it couldn't lurch  
these three turrets, monuments  
in constant search  
of mainland.

IV.

Because a “hapax legomena” is always alone

During intermission

I order the most expensive wine.  
An Albariño from Galicia,  
it reminds me of two friends  
who, some years ago,  
as we drove from Santiago to Tanes,  
tethered to the idea of  
my body moving through foreign land—  
an abstraction, like *piano*,  
but helpful, now,  
as I keep moving, spasmodic,  
paw the idea of travel  
as connection;

helps me, because somewhere under Brooklyn,  
I hope, Elena hears me  
as she reads but doesn't read  
the hollow gestures of subway ads,  
hears what I said when I called,  
so that I'm not only here,  
alone in Royal Albert Hall,  
but also in those sounds,  
which could be changing, just now,  
and, even if distorted,  
will be fuller for having been held.

## NOTES

“Imogene” is in memory of my grandmother, who was born and raised in rural Appalachia.

“At Home” responds to a book review by Jonathan D, “Speed of Light in a Vacuum,” from *Harper’s*.

“Cleaning House” gets its physics and first two lines from a Charles Wright poem, “In Praise of Thomas Hardy.”

“Pedro Salinas and the Greatest Spanish Love Poem” was written in response the book-length poem by Salinas, *La voz a ti debida (My Voice Because of You)*.

“Doña Juana La Loca” is after the painting by Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz.

“Art History at the Prado” is after *La Rendición de Granada* (1882) and *Doña Juana la Loca* (1877), both paintings by Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz.

“At the London Première” was written in response to Dusapin’s “Quartet No. 6, Hinterlands: Hapax for String Quartet and Orchestra,” which was performed on July 27, 2011, shortly before the summer riots.