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## Millions of names for empty space

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MILLIONS OF NAMES FOR EMPTY SPACE

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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By

Andrew Koch

Spring 2016

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### MASTER'S THESIS

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I.

## To Pass Through the Eye

When chlorine gas was released on the Western front in 1915  
 it simply drifted, soft and blind, like a fog.  
 I imagine a breeze  
 like the breeze that went playing down the street  
 just now, bumping up against the door,  
 and what little band of gusts  
 must have picked up the chlorine a hundred years ago  
 as though by accident  
 and carried it across the map  
 where it filled men's lungs and eyes by the thousands,  
 sent them quietly choking in the mud,  
 drowning in the open.

In the Sargent painting, some of the men go stumbling  
 through the bodies, blindfolded, hands on each other's shoulders.  
 'Gassed,' the painting says, though it looks more like  
 it was what they'd seen that had poisoned them.

Even as a child the church told me  
 I could destroy myself, that all those decisions  
 I felt bristling like static electricity  
 on the back of my neck, decisions  
 to eat sweets, to kiss, to strike with my hands,  
 that was called free will  
 and it meant I was born wrong.

I believed the chemicals  
 in the city pool would blind me  
 if I opened my eyes underwater.  
 Holding my breath, I felt  
 its volume against my eyelids.  
 I imagined depths  
 I refused to see – 4, 5, 12 feet –  
 and how many of my bodies  
 it would take to fill that much space.  
 I pictured myself lying at the bottom,  
 sunlight quivering over me, my mouth  
 and eyes open, having finally looked upon  
 the clean and forbidden deep end.

Chlorine attacks metal.  
 This is what is said next to its picture  
 in a book; a photo of a clear capsule  
 filled with a million little metal-eaters  
 I can't see. *Attack*,  
 that is, to have intention.

A million little wills.

In the summers, the little girl  
who lived across the street  
would invite only me to come swim with her in her pool,  
and we'd drop chlorine tablets in, played like they were divers  
exploring the unknown deep.  
She'd stand just out of sight to change into dry clothes,  
and for a while I didn't think about it  
until one day I did and turned my head to pretend  
to notice the dandelions and the sleeping cats  
and the breeze that had just begun to twirl the pinwheels on the lawn,  
and I knew it meant the death of me.



## Year of the Cedar

Mom dismembered trees  
in pieces she hid  
in closets, underneath sinks.  
I suspected  
it somehow held  
the house  
together.

Every shard  
required its own kind  
of geometry. Like Mayans  
measured time with stone,  
her cedar marked the dimensions  
of her embrace. I found  
cedar in lunchboxes,  
shoe boxes, toy boxes.

The half-risen sun  
would find her  
in the room  
we only ever entered  
to vacuum.  
A book of prayer,  
a ruby-brown wood  
pressed to her lips,  
there would be another piece  
slipped somewhere  
in the guts of the piano.

At night I slept  
to cedar branches  
shuffling in the yard,  
a red smell  
of slivers  
in my pillow.

## The Tennessee Sea

everywhere is a bored tragedy  
of trucks and extension cord  
    scabbed in Queen Anne's lace,  
    tobacco dirt and unending semaphore of traffic light-  
    a slow yawn five counties deep

little old ladies' horoscopes say  
    Geminis let their eyes  
        roll way back like waves,  
their blue pupils backflip inside skulls,  
                                    crash across backbone ridges

the always-drifting thins the ribs like late autumn shadows

sometimes there are bears-  
lost and noiseless  
    they shiver, fish  
crawdads along the bottom  
    where light punches through

### Septet for Knoxville

The night, kissed with blinking jet-light,  
rolls its glass eye, burbles riddles  
the daylight can only half-answer.

The river goes mumbling its gray-green sermon,  
diligent and bleary, speaking  
to a world it can't find

while transformers all through the city  
hum their magnetic Om.  
On the hill back of my middle school,  
I sit alone

waiting for everything to happen  
as June spreads its weather  
over me like cave-damp.

Killdeer everywhere  
announce their pyrrhic victories  
to the crabgrass. The skyline  
twinkling in the distance  
advertises itself to no one.

Against the suburbs  
the tucked woods  
are depthless shadow.

In this landscape  
they do not move.  
I remember  
walking through them the day  
I discovered the little family cemetery,  
a hundred years old, the headstones  
all sunken and lying in the mud,  
and the one  
with my birthday on it,  
pitted in the marble.

## Cape Cod Evening

*after Edward Hopper*

When I was a boy  
in my parents' cookie-cutter quarter-acre  
I could crown princes  
and rob banks,  
but it got crowded back there,  
all that stale daydreaming,  
the dandelions running out  
of things to say.

So I returned to the world  
of what happens,  
its numbered ages inked  
in encyclopedias where I first found  
Hopper's middle-aged pair,  
heavy with what's unsaid  
in the sunset.

I wanted to go to them,  
their forgotten back road  
in their forgotten county,  
the dusk frothing  
on the edge of a cold front,  
the light surging right up  
to the kitchen curtains

but no further,  
not back into the dizzy windbreak,  
the shuddering elms beyond.

I imagined their golden grass  
rolling out of sight  
down to an unseen coast,  
their collie distracted for a moment  
by something backlit,  
dark and emergent,  
just before the day takes it  
and plummets  
toward an even farther horizon.

There was a gulf  
between my picket fence, my wobbling  
swing-set and their quiet grandeur.  
All the old family homes slink off  
into the woods, weather-beaten  
and senile, muttering their raspy pidgin  
of milk doors and wood furnaces.

Oh dark-eyed lingerers  
of New England,  
I could have given you  
new meanings for flowers.  
I could have been your bright-faced child,  
your remarkable boy.

## To See Foxes

James was a better boy  
than I was. Four years older,  
most of him

was already the jagged, crystal  
edges of a teenager. He carried knives,

carved swords out of home  
improvement store steel.

In the cellar below his house  
I watched the sparks fly  
into his heavy, masked face,

the body of a man  
with the head of something else,  
like one of those Egyptian gods  
he had shown me.

Even his back porch was taller,  
more robust than mine,  
perched high off the second floor  
like the prow of a ship.

He would stand on the railing  
in his bare feet  
and call his body

to attention,  
chin thrust out,  
arms raised high  
like a statue  
in rapture,

before hurling himself off,  
limbs retracted as he spun,  
a whirling dervish in a t-shirt  
crashing through the afternoon,

until, at the last moment  
he would uncoil,  
his feet untucked,  
and sink into the embrace  
of his trampoline.

In summer my skin  
became a reticulation of welts,

licks from the bodark stick  
James had cut and shaved.  
In the woods beyond  
our cul-de-sac we gathered

hickory and sugar maple weapons  
and performed for each other,  
what he called dueling,

until I was bruised and sore,  
teaching me to be  
a body, sensational,  
what he called a villain.

Standing on his porch,  
he pointed to my house,  
the street I lived on, and told me

he used to see foxes  
all the time right there,  
going up and down that hill  
like they knew a road was coming.  
But I took them away.

And because  
I was a boy with no strength  
who had never seen foxes  
I was glad

to claim, at least, this,  
small and haunted,  
that I could be  
the absence of foxes.

**Chorus of Nettles**

You young men  
you guns and shovels  
digging your perfect country  
in the loam

see us and know  
you have forgotten  
what it is to cluster

to feel all the many  
pieces of yourself  
being born at once  
to let your body tell  
the story of your body.

That parade of millimeters  
you feel passing through  
your bones is just a season  
an inside-outedness.

All this new marginalia  
you will grow in it too  
some day.

Even a blossom is an exploded limb  
a digit torn more delicate.

Here is what we mean

all the things you need  
are passing between us

through the ground.  
Crawl

like everything else  
like your fathers

moldering in a hive  
pooling in a rock

sharp  
and horned with acid  
in the weeds.



### Foxfire Arithmetic

Tuckaleechee mapmakers use fractions  
     like sextants—  
 the ratio of barbecue vinegar  
 to backwater currents—  
     a watershed engine  
     for seven half-counties of corn  
     and cole slaw

October is  
     a chilled brown powder,  
 mixed with one part well-water  
     spooned to crippled cats and infants

Grandmothers' finger-bones  
     curl on four quick knuckles—  
     resonant at fever pitch  
 a low whistle  
 when drawn through ponytail hair

Naturalists explore half  
     the depths of limestone caverns,  
     slick with acid water,  
     sharp as peppermint  
     or possum teeth.

The mapmaker's phrase,  
 "dead horse topographies"—  
     antique beasts with bodies of nails and glue,  
     jawbone's cudgel  
     and shoulder blade's bellows pumping  
     a hundred thousand breaths.  
 Their funerals are quiet—  
     their graves as big  
     as hills.

## Calliope Yells

*"I am the gutter-dream,  
I am the golden dream,  
Singing science, singing steam.  
I will blow the proud folk down..."*  
-Vachel Lindsay, "The Kallyope Yell"

My first map of America  
was catalogued water.

On the top deck  
of a paddlewheel boat  
nosing its way up Mississippi,  
puddled in Louisiana,  
I was only eleven

when the captain  
gave me a calliopist's license,

my small name cornered  
against a litany of waterways  
awarded by providence—  
*Susquehanna, Chippewa,  
Atchafalaya, Niobrara—*

their names like a thousand riddled  
languages, measured and emptied into ocean.

The pipes,  
part cathedral, part circus,  
clustered and overgrown,  
were ripped from choral lofts,  
the captain told me,

a ridiculous *kyrie eleison*  
intoning in each toot.

Steam was too loud for worship,  
too crass, a tremble too violent  
in its golden hull, an eruption  
too much in the body,  
too metal-timbred and bloated.

So it was couched  
in the crown of riverboats,

between singed stacks,  
to herald the Christian, the entrepreneur,  
slipping further and further inland.

As we passed shirtless drunks  
on the docks at Natchez

casting cat food to fish,  
the captain urged me to ease

my fingers into the keys,  
the paint cracked and flaking,  
and, for a moment, nothing  
but a sound  
like swallowed wind.

Then, overhead,  
the pipes burst forth.

Boil spat from brass  
lids. Mist scalded  
my face. I shouted,  
but not as loud  
as the captain laughing.

I hadn't expected the music  
would be so hot.

**Ecclesiastes**

The smell of honeysuckle splits  
in two. In the same moment  
it is both the perfume of the small dead  
drawn like a deep breath  
across fields and ditches,  
and it is what I once believed  
the world smelt like  
before I knew there was air  
that was not sweet.

My brother  
in his rubber gloves  
bends toward the grass  
and scoops a broken nestling  
off the ground.  
He walks,  
almost too far to see,  
out to the tree-line  
and hurls the bird into the woods.

My cousin, nearly seven, says  
most of the lightning we see  
never makes it to us  
beneath the trees,  
but she knows exactly  
how it would move  
through your house,  
through your body,  
if it did.

She has read that  
all death is hidden  
in the garden  
and the sky.

### **Knoxville as a Film with the Sound out of Sync**

Brick and river city, you were always the sound I heard  
too late, fireworks in the fall appearing suddenly  
over the river, the rumble and yip of football  
in the streets, the delayed boom  
of the whole town

crawling across my porch.

In those days no one knew where I was.

I made little movies, black and white, about a man made  
of newspaper who bled chocolate syrup. I felt only  
the rheumatic inhale of the city, a hurricane  
asleep and snoring. Like the railroad beam proclaiming  
its iron "I" wherever it runs, I looked for myself  
in everything, tried to film the trains, the wrecking  
sound their bodies made as they came to rest. But my edit was wrong,  
my paper man crashing like freight metal, bleeding real blood.

II.

**Revenant**

On the second Sunday after Easter,  
mixed with hymnbooks and Bibles,  
spring blossoms sprout  
in pew-backs like little secrets,  
their heads bowed,  
a symmetry of parishioners  
leaning forward with their eyes shut,  
their backs outlining  
the invisible architecture of prayer.

We launch our slow parade  
down the aisle  
to flower a cross,  
planting stalks of daffodil  
and lily in a crucifix.

A boy and a girl,  
too small for their polyester robes,  
receive the stems, draw them through,  
and tie together another cross  
on the other side  
made of slick, green tendrils,  
knotted with roots' fine hair.

The doxology chants  
for broken ground and resurrection,  
but what returns to the cathedral  
is a pagan ghost of sunshine and daisies,  
the language of daylight  
our bodies half-remember to speak,  
the thin music our blood makes  
pumping through our heads.

## Vexillology

Blood in the wind,  
the spangled banner buckles—

the one constellation  
of shredded stars

and stripes that goes on  
fluttering in each sky

like an aria  
with its vowels ripped out.

Its profane little roar  
could take a lesson

from my grandmother's  
homespun quilts,

rough and warm,  
each a ragged opera

for an old highway,  
a jigsaw flag

flown in bedrooms  
and barns.

Grandmother's fingers  
and thumbs, the sovereign seals

of the republic of her house,  
long gone now,

still curl short slumbers  
around me, the dark pockets

of air she stitched together  
to hem me in. The frayed edges

sing a broken refrain  
that all songs, at last,

grow hollow. The curse  
of the body is an old fabric.

Moths eat your sins.  
Sparrows eat the moths.



## Year of the Flood

A funeral  
like a search party—  
grandmother's gone,

but her cousins  
still expect her to splinter  
from the pine boards

at the church-hall,  
a tobacco queen  
who gave hugs like they were Shakespeare.

They clutch the last green tomatoes  
from her garden, but all that's left of her  
are her own proverbs on our lips.

The last dream I remember  
was a nightmare  
of the river

rising up  
through the floorboards  
of the house,

spilling out  
and drowning everyone  
down the mountains.

*The South is an extinct ocean,*  
grandmother once told me,  
*a bestiary of the dead.*

For all the sunshine,  
nights pour  
into every empty crack

like water swelling inside a host.  
Some nights there's only  
a low-flung moon,

chandeliers,

smoke detectors,  
and shutters

that knock  
in the windows  
like bones.

### Lessons of Broken Trees

In my endeavor to describe them  
I learned that the word 'arborescent'  
refers less to trees  
and more to the shapes  
we give facts,  
those mercenaries  
of empiricism,  
how we take our histories  
and give them branches,  
our brains rooted and stemmed.  
As a boy I would look up  
at the trees of Tennessee  
and could see how much  
of their bodies were their backs,  
could tell how much they carried,  
how much time was in their bones  
like growing pains, how, like me,  
they could grow up and up  
but could not go back.  
Much later I thought  
of the Cherokee marker tree,  
the bent one we imagined  
had been crooked by ancient hands,  
a deformity that meant water  
and venison and well-worn paths,  
and how, even then,  
it was teaching me  
lessons I didn't know I'd need;  
how there can be no return  
to the unwounded,  
how what's broken  
holds and grows with us.  
When I was young  
I wanted my broken bones,  
wanted the slow-moving mouth  
of my new body,  
my own small apocalypse.  
I needed to know  
that bodies replace  
other bodies;  
that, elsewhere, memory holds  
only a wax museum of us,  
that all the gone infrastructure  
overwhelms the structure we see.  
What makes a galaxy is less  
the specks of starlight  
and more the darkness  
we measure in centuries

spinning in all its black direction.  
The woods are not leaves  
as much as they are skeletons,  
the breathless constancy  
of a million engines  
we stand on wherever we go.  
The dead take up space  
in all their secret ways.  
In the halls and rooms  
of her house, the particles  
of my grandmother's dying  
hang like dark lake water.  
Years gone and still my body recognizes  
all the exploded points of her.  
I breathe them in,  
each one pointing me forward,  
saying, "I was in you then.  
I am in you now."  
I take instruction from all the space  
where she is not.  
In the gaps between the trees,  
there stands a forest.

## Orchard

Vultures fill the trees  
 at the edge of town where the road  
 is no longer Main Street  
 and not yet lonesome  
 Carolina highway. They've blossomed  
 overnight in the December freeze like  
 some kind of hell fruit. Warmed  
 by the acid in their guts, perched stock-  
 still, they stretch out their wings  
 like the official seal of death's  
 confederated territories, like dozens  
 of black **M**s, every letter of their evil alphabet  
 the same,  
 dull hum.

My grandfather tells me this town used to be  
 the capital; of what, he can't remember.  
 The Colonial Inn where he  
 stayed with my grandmother  
 in 1950 before they had kids  
 is condemned, stickered in pink warnings.  
 Somewhere around here is a place that doesn't exist  
 where he bought ice cream cones  
 for her. We spend a full  
 Sunday morning driving through  
 cruel Eno River fog, but all  
 it gives up are new  
 churches and stores, the wrong ghosts,  
 fluorescent, smooth, and always open.

When the Roman noble Pier Francesco Orsini  
 came home from war  
 to the death of his wife, he sent sculptors  
 into the rocky grottos on his estate to carve  
 out what he seemed to know would be there, tear  
 those hills into stone men and stone beasts,  
 a conservatory of their torn  
 stone flesh, the rippling faces of monsters  
 emerging like prolapsed agony  
 from the landscape. Largest of all was the open mouth  
 of the lord of the dead, teeth  
 cracking through soil, maybe crying out  
 his own name – Orcus, almost  
 orchard, almost an orchestra.

The day I first loved whatever grows  
 was a Saturday in August the summer

my grandmother died when my grandfather drove  
us into the country and we meandered  
the peach trees of Alamance County,  
the fruit almost mammalian  
that year, blonde and furry,  
as though it had absorbed more than sunshine.  
In the afternoon a little towhead  
boy whose iridescent buzz cut caught the light  
like a scruffy icon tore down the dirt road  
on his bike and trailed us, silent,  
weaving to and fro like an albatross following  
ships at sea. Though his mother had forbade him,

he bit into the ruby-skinned flesh of a peach  
and sweet gold dripped from his baby teeth.

## Firefly Hills

If you're there after dark  
when bonfires get lit  
and the hootenanny whoops up  
through the treetops  
like Pentecost flame—

if you're there in June  
under bruise-blue night,  
warm beer's gloss  
and chainsaw's dusty spray  
in your windpipe,

then you'll understand that, here,  
the land seeps into you,  
the whole sky  
in your stomach,  
a swallowing sprawled in the air,

your body the harness for all this  
shimmering, green and black,  
the dog-stink of the living,  
rotten land. Like the rippling  
age-rings of cracked oak stumps,

all that is past is digested,  
time's appetite a glut of seasons,  
the lolling hillside's  
fat teapot slopes, rain-drunk  
and wet with weeds,

algae's drool at the mouth  
of rocky grottos,  
and the strutting chanticleer  
proclaiming the sun  
up one side of the day

and down the other,  
commanding you drink  
it in. Look, and find  
that this land's fresh lust  
is your own,

your blood and piss  
for mud and smoke  
the exchange this seduction  
calls for. To come into this place  
is to die to it,

little by little,  
the fiddlehead's coiled sleeves  
unfurling, the kudzu veil  
on the hills. Let it fill  
your guts, stick in your teeth,

the briar of its tangled maw  
twist in your hair, a communion  
like fireflies in the meadow,  
their bodies burning away  
in unison, suspended.



## The Most Holy of All Humans

*after Steinbeck*

Furloughed and drunk he came,  
over rain-soaked sidewalks  
and into my weekend,  
whiskey-slick syllables  
stuffed with apologies,  
my shoulders gathered up

in his hands, he whispered  
hot deserts of memory  
to me, his name and rank,  
Private First-Class Stanich,  
the English surname that,  
rearranged by his friends,

spelled the nickname he'd borne  
for two tours of duty:  
Shit-can. Like the plastic  
portable one he'd seen  
collapsing through the earth,  
crater left in the sand.

*Best thing I saw*, he said.  
*What was your name again?*  
*Matthew? Marcus? David?*  
He said he knew dead men,  
said he couldn't recall  
his children's birthdays or

his anniversary.  
Not anymore. Not once  
your wife misremembers  
your face, or you begin  
to sleep with the TV  
on. He considered war

and poetry, supposed  
there must be some of both  
in everyone. He said  
tomorrow they'd drop him  
from a plane, and he hoped  
the damp ground would make room

for him too.

### **The God of Things As They Ought to Be**

Thus reads the inscription at the shrine for the god of Americana, the dictator of joy, the billiken-lord with his fat, teardrop belly, and his stubby, tufted head. Expatriate now in Osaka, he is far from the Kansas he was born in, where, during years of fame, children held him in their hands, committed mischief in his name. In the atrium of a Japanese shopping mall, customers drop coins at his feet, customers unafraid to name each of their deities, to make a prayer even for demons, even for American ones who sell your bad luck back to you, who tell the stories of a century when America dressed itself in blue ribbons and rodeos, braced its baby fat with river barges, when the last cowboys of 1961 were Marilyn Monroe and Monty Clift, gunning down horses from their bi-planes, sprinkling stardust over their brains and their battle scars. When the fortune was neither good nor bad and the boomtowns were gaudy and flat, there was still the billiken, smirking on, one eye closed, posed in the great gesture of commerce: the wink. When half-blind well-wishes became currency, when war economies needed nightmares and other novelties, he was the patron saint of department stores and bastards and other unintended consequences: a god for forgetting, a god for the taste of beds at dawn, a god for buffaloes sucked out of their skins.

## Terragram

The summer I drive my sister  
back home, shoulders sloping  
toward womanhood  
across three days of America,  
there are few words between us.  
Not because we're angry  
but because words never  
seem to hold up against  
endless stretches of highway,  
absorbing in one great soup  
the sage, the antelope,  
the dusty, liquid horizon,  
all the map has to offer.

When we do speak  
I ask her if there's a phrase for this,  
the way the road smears  
everything after a while,  
like a cross-section three-hundred miles thick,  
an acre three-thousand leagues deep.  
We invent a few new words.

The west we pass through  
is somehow smaller  
than the arches and bends  
and badlands we slept in  
as children. The new history here  
is first the pioneer,  
then the railroad,  
and then my sister,  
ten-years old, scooping  
lake-bed into a bottle  
and labeling it 'Utah.'  
Another one she held  
in the air for ten minutes  
on a foggy beach,  
'California,' she said,  
invisible to everyone but her.

After three quiet days  
my sister hears me betray her  
into a phone:  
*Do you think I'm having fun out here?*  
and she cries across the Texas Panhandle,  
something seismic spilling out,  
breaking down  
like a freight train made of bird-bone.  
Far off, oil derricks draw black,

unseen, from the land.

In this moment I remember  
the Delta Queen, our family  
cruising out of New Orleans  
on that big paddlewheel boat,  
and how, after everyone was asleep,  
she and I broke curfew,  
snuck out to the bench swing  
at the very prow of the boat.  
We said nothing. The dock lights  
of little ports twinkled past  
like tiny galaxies, and we swung  
our legs in tandem  
over the obsidian Mississippi.

### Cross Section of a Petrified Forest

Off the highway  
the palace the billboards promised  
is chipping to pieces  
and scattering across the scrub.  
If you wait long enough  
the differences between  
a gas station and a museum  
become semantic.

Buy a postcard from somewhere  
no one will ever go,  
all the worlds  
buried in the sand,  
landscapes where younger suns  
shine through stands of cypress,  
pterosaurs peppering the stratosphere,  
sawtooth beaks agape,  
making sounds we can only guess at.  
Perhaps some residue  
of their cries is trapped  
down there with centuries  
of all the other cries  
of a million other beasts,  
folded into the strata  
of the invisible earth.  
Little baskets of rocks  
bear handwritten notes  
saying, 'Ginkgo - \$10,'  
or 'Redwood - \$10,'  
though there isn't a bit of tree for sale.  
'Un-tree,' the signs mean to say,  
'un-forest' and 'un-bones,'  
but someone polished their decay.

In the parking lot  
the plaster velociraptor  
bares his teeth toward  
the hot, empty sky.  
When the next world comes  
I wonder if he'll still be here  
to purchase my absence.

## Pink Apocrypha

In the morning  
there are a thousand  
new editions of the Gospel

of Houston  
crackling across  
the piled-up precincts,

written in the pink letters  
of the Michoacan bakeries.  
They spell words

that mean: *a type of fire*  
*or earth you can buy*  
*for three dollars.*

In the farmer's market  
a pink plastic Jesus's  
only job is to watch

over sacks of spice  
(this one for avarice,  
that one for ovaries)

and small bottles of holy water,  
wands still attached  
to blow bubbles.

Sidewalks stitch together  
post oaks and coin laundries  
in the uptown districts

where rhinestone cowboys pass through,  
taking the crosstown home  
from the honky-tonks.

Lights dash  
beneath their eyelids,  
a pink Braille

to read the streets'  
run-on sentences.  
Their heels tingle

from a Morse code  
they tapped out  
to steel guitars,

an instrument that can speak  
American: both forward  
and backward at once.

On vacant store-front windows,  
and the back corners of taco trucks,  
kids scrape out dust graffiti,

cursive friezes carved  
fingertips deep,  
the architecture of erasure

often washed out by sundown.  
The alphabet of Texas  
is a single,

endless word  
broken into pieces, hidden  
in the stories that will

be told one day  
to explain  
why all of this was holy.

Children will be  
the first to know  
that there are ghosts for everything,

millions of them created every minute.  
A *quinceanera* dress is a pink ghost  
that lives on mannequins.

Sometimes they pray back to their teen girls,  
*We can give you everything,*  
*but it may not be enough.*

### III.



**Idolater**

*"Every one of us is, even from his mother's womb, a master craftsman of idols."* – John Calvin

all of the several billion gods  
are sleeping  
and in their vast impregnable slumber  
have turned into carrots  
and stalactites  
cockroaches and the blue shivering of the atmosphere  
into soup cans and broken down old trucks left out in fields  
into buttons and velvet antler and red dye number forty  
they've turned into molasses and metal detectors  
and ancient rusted jewelry sequestered beneath your feet  
and the gods have turned into the sandhill cranes I didn't see at first  
when I stood alone on the prairie last spring  
the soft whistle of grass one moment  
the sky covered in their ungovernable honk the next  
the wide gray sheet of their feathered bodies set loose in the wind  
and the gods have turned into the blue milk bottle  
that holds my grandmother's ashes  
the bottle she hooked on a branch  
to keep the spirits that came out of the woods  
from entering her house  
and yet elsewhere  
the gods that were massive underground gypsum deposits  
are manufactured into drywall and toothpaste

now asleep in our ceilings

and the cracks between our teeth

and I have spent skin-covered days trying to wake them

### Dust Devil, Columbia Basin

All spring,  
as we received news  
that our childhood  
friends and pets were dying,  
my wife crossed  
and uncrossed the landscape  
with me.

Smearing the map  
with our routes  
we covered territory like slow, unbiblical  
flood waters.

The name of the land  
changed as we went -  
*Pot-hole, In-land, Scab-land* -  
as though it were something we were  
falling into,  
as though it were a skin  
we would need to cover us  
and cover us  
until we didn't.

I thought, 'Whose hills  
of small destruction  
are these? Whose god  
is all this dust?'

And then you rose,  
tall as the wind,  
twisting knots between dirt  
and sky, a tangle of what is  
and is not.  
We name you devil,  
though only you  
can suture heaven  
to the tilled  
and furrowed field.  
Only you and the hawk  
know ascension  
is both grace  
and violence.

I wondered  
whose god you were.  
Were you ours?

### In the New Year

That first sleepy day,  
several alphabets of geese  
clang like circus bells  
down their invisible canals  
in fluid 'V's' and 'L's',  
and we'll awake to discover,  
no matter what the TV says,  
this is a January  
no one knows anything about.

Outside the snow piles  
deeper and deeper,  
and some part of everything  
will stay buried  
down there beneath it.

We'll set out after some icy Ararat,  
a map of the highest ground we know,  
the country around us  
tilting outward in houses  
of bedrock, the land  
shedding itself.

We'll envy the river  
flowing slow and steely  
between the soft, blue coordinates  
of its beginning and end.

We'll envy the cranes drifting down  
to their ancestral way stations,  
the winter punctuated  
by their cries  
of, 'There, there, there.'

If only there were  
some animal compass,  
some perfect shape we could make  
with just our bodies,  
a silence that is only ours  
to fill.

But at night  
we'll go home again  
to re-enter the little scenes  
of our life, the glow  
of our holiday lights,  
and wait for the new year  
to give us a sign.

## Equivalence

In the scabland marsh  
 April is almost finished  
 dragging its belly,  
 blue and yellow,

through the grass  
 and I try to parse  
 out its path. The desert parsley  
 blinks its long lashes, sleeves

of spruce lift their many arms  
 like sorcerers. My face charms  
 a cold pillow of the air,  
 dewy and green, while pines everywhere spar

with the earth, their lover,  
 dashed bodies of their naked seeds littered  
 among the lichen and fallen limbs.  
 In the reeds blackbirds bend

and bark and I think  
 of my sister, her tricks  
 of algebra, the numbers she measures  
 days with, the assurance

of symmetry. When I say  
 there is a language she can't see  
 hidden in the language she can,  
 a calculus that was broken

and scattered in us at birth,  
 she gives me formulas, Latin math,  
 writes to me of equivalence  
 relations, a transference

symbolized by a squiggle,  
 like something wriggling  
 its belly through the grass.  
 Now, rain falls and hisses

the pond while I stand  
 beneath mist-darkened  
 trees, trying to figure out  
 how I will interpret

the waking dream of poetry.  
 Trumpeter swans, ignoring me,  
 drift across the water

like saints, like soft fire,

and, when it is required,  
they make the sound  
which their heads  
and lungs have always made,

a call that lifts and quivers,  
equivalent to nothing, through the air.

### Somnambulist's Hymn

Last night,  
during some moonlit hour  
of our bedroom stillness,  
I heard a startled flutter  
in your voice  
wing out,

a glossolalia, hard and coiling,  
dart through the pale dark  
and nestle down again  
somewhere near the foot of the bed.

One feathery ordinance  
of half-words  
chased after another,  
your spells conjured once  
out of silence  
and then never again—  
forgotten curses  
for all waking empires.

I fell asleep wondering  
at your drowsy little renaissance,  
thinking of Luther,  
what oaths he never intended to swear  
in the grip of lightning,  
mud-deep in Teutonic night,  
before he made God speak German  
for the first time.

In the morning  
you author  
tiny miracles.  
The small perfection  
of a cherry tomato  
we bought from the grocery store,  
you tell me, is your beating heart.

### Form a Line

The captain of the plane, hidden like Oz  
 in the flight deck, tells us not to,  
 and a big-eyed man standing alone  
 at the forward lavatory, himself  
 the line, turns around,  
 silly look of epiphany on his face,  
 and I wonder if his revelation  
 is the same one I'm having –  
 that our bodies are not  
 fixed points, but wherever they stand  
 the most recent outposts  
 in the long, thin border we build  
 wherever we go, the trail of space  
 we leave touched in our wake.

We're arcing over Colorado,  
 but on the flight tracker  
 our bright, blue path is still  
 attached to the coast we left.  
 Outside, space is overrun.  
 The mile, the valley, the upturned bowl  
 of the sky – out there are millions  
 of names for empty space.  
 On the ground I know  
 each brown acre must seem silent  
 and lonely, but at cruising altitude  
 they surge together, a single,  
 roaring choir regaling nothing  
 less than galaxies.

You sleep above all of it,  
 your mouth open, each gentle breath  
 taking in the farm roads below  
 as they pass through your lips and disappear  
 into you, and this reminds me  
 of the warrior Michelangelo drew  
 against a half-erased sketch of a cathedral,  
 a man with crested helmet  
 going into battle, oblivious to the line  
 as thin as a hummingbird's tongue  
 that floats inches from his mouth.  
 The church obscured into his skeleton,  
 his body's architecture begins  
 somewhere outside of him,  
 a sluice that takes everything  
 and plunges into the throat.



## Giant

There's a murmur in the aquarium  
around the octopus tank,  
and every few seconds or so,  
when someone else spots it,  
there's a gasp that's not unlike  
the gasps one hears in a church  
when a bride, someone one knows,  
appears at the back of the aisle,  
suddenly too strange and lovely  
to look away from.

A sign labels it "giant" & "120 lbs,"  
the same weight I was at fifteen  
when I was afraid my body  
had outgrown me.  
People gawk at the octopus,  
and I suspect they know their own bodies  
are this full of color and slime.

Ninety percent of an octopus  
is devoted to taste, each arm  
a cluster of tongues.  
Today it gathers itself like a bouquet  
of muted trombone bells, all pressing  
against the glass, a thousand open mouths  
saying nothing, tasting none  
of the ocean's bitter fat,  
the abyssal jelly of the deep blind sea.

On the wall a picture of its anatomy  
opens on a solar system inside its great head –  
little planets of venom and ink  
and three hearts in orbit  
around a mouth.  
I wonder if the universe in there,  
like the one out here  
measured by telescopes and satellites,  
is expanding, quietly groping  
into the farthest possible corners.

Their lifespan: three to five years.  
Already in my lifetime  
generations of them have sunk  
like slippery gray snowfall into the black  
where there are no continents,  
their carcasses smudged

into the planet's newest blood.

There are weddings every weekend  
in the hundred-year-old house  
across the street from me.  
Through my window I've watched them  
run out the doors –  
young couples, one after the other,  
brides, their long, white strands  
of tulle drifting up into the air  
and down onto the ground around them.  
Over and over it plays out –  
The moment just after the liturgy  
says the two have become one,  
become something else entirely,  
become larger than just themselves  
and gone out into the world to fill it.

And I think of my own wedding  
and the moment she and I ran from the party,  
showered by guests with crushed lavender,  
so that for days we tasted lavender everywhere,  
pulled it from our hair, our clothes, our pillows.  
For days it was on our tongues.  
For days everything we touched had a taste.

**Redd**

Salmon mothers in their rivers  
thrash against the bottom  
until their name means  
a certain shade of flesh,  
means you have to carve  
your family out of earth.  
To the ground  
the body is just a boat,  
always coming and going.

When I said we should be something  
I meant our own color,  
some point on the spectrum of light  
only we can shatter.  
I meant something some call  
a miracle, so small  
we occupy all its space.  
I meant a nest, a muscle, an animal.

Not everything is a map of itself  
though we expect the body to be  
and sometimes it is.  
Follow my arm  
to my fingers,  
my fingers to the endless  
parade of everything we hold,  
all the red futures of us  
churning on and on.

## Vermillion

In the morning I find the islands  
 you left on the kitchen counter,  
 a grainy archipelago of coffee stains,  
 the coastline still new and crumbling.  
 The sun rises on both worlds at once  
 and from up here, tiny miles above the formica,  
 your islands look like those maps of Pangaea,  
 the continents lumped and restless,

and I wonder  
 if your islands are peopled yet  
 and whether they pray to the sun  
 as it bathes their small topography,  
 or whether, as I do, they write you hosannas.  
*Hail, mountain-maker! Hail, sea-shaker!*  
*Your mighty hand has made our home!*  
 You always said you could never  
 write such poetry, though you have  
 also said teeth often look like capsules  
 of milk, elephant tusks and cobra fangs,  
 as though these things belie  
 the body's need to nurture,  
 and you've said that love sometimes feels  
 like something that can only be registered over great distances,  
 like light moving  
 through deep space,  
 the way those astronomers must feel  
 when they look into a hole  
 barely the width of their irises  
 and see other planets  
 that have atmospheres like ours,  
 look and look  
 into infinity until they see  
 something they recognize.

The first love note you gave me  
 was a strip of cardstock  
 smeared with a single swipe  
 of red paint under which you'd written:

*You're one in a billion  
 just like vermillion.*

Years later, alone in the deep woods  
 of the Cascades, I recognized this color  
 in the splintered flesh  
 of a newly-fallen cedar, spires of torn muscle  
 twisting from the trunk where it had cracked,  
 the red so bold in its breaking  
 I cannot imagine those gray mountains now

without it, as though,  
once the tree had split open,  
nothing could stop its red  
from flowing by the eyeful  
until it filled up the valley.  
And I saw the tree's life  
had been recorded foot after foot  
in a wobbly scrawl  
where wood beetles had gnawed  
a language of eating, the history of what  
they could not live without.

## Bathymetry

When she tells an internet quiz  
 how we linger in winter  
 under drooping street lights  
 and belt our breath-fog back and forth  
 into endless trails,  
 the body engine ending  
 out the spout of the throat,  
 a soft evanescent  
 inversion of entrails,

or that when we're all alone  
 we're prone to lie on the floor  
 until the antennae in our spines  
 are tuned to the vertebrae's subtle,  
 electric ticking, the dull  
 broadcasts our bones make,

the quiz tells us  
 we are not what we seem to be –  
 that this woman is the water  
 and I, the wind.

And it is nice  
 to think of ourselves this way:  
 two spirits, bloodless.

The summer we were on  
 blue-green Lake Pend Oreille,  
 wind frayed the surface for miles  
 in every direction, filled its form  
 with ripples, waved the way  
 I imagine sonar  
 rides the sun-marbled  
 black of deep water  
 to its inverted heights,  
 a thousand feet down  
 to make a map  
 of mountains we don't see  
 stretching beneath us.

The guidebook says the lake  
 curls into dragons and question marks,  
 the forest breaking  
 along all its edges,  
 but when she swam in,  
 it took her shape.  
 When she broke the water,  
 she filled it.

### **An Address of Texas**

You are dying a million times  
slower than the rest of us,  
but you are still dying  
as we are dying,  
and you live  
as we are living,  
the smallest parts of you  
eating darkness beneath the earth,  
brewing all  
the irrepressible color of the future.

So when I settle in you awhile  
and ask you to be still,  
maybe you will  
because you will understand  
the smallest part of me  
pushes the world out in front of her  
and we dare not breathe  
as she passes.

Whatever portion  
of your abundant sunshine  
you have accorded me  
let it pass  
to this one, tender animal  
that grew in red darkness.  
Of the warmth  
she will know  
her mother's will be the first,  
but yours might be the second.

I need the broad trenches of your body  
in the littlest, lightest colors,  
in maps and rhyme,  
in delicate glass.

All of my thoughts on living  
float uneasily on the surface  
of all my thoughts on dying.

If I asked you your name,  
would you know where to start,  
how far back to go?  
How much Texas  
has already been carried off  
on the wind  
or broken quietly apart  
and reformed

with the patience of stars  
in the hidden chambers  
of the world?

I know all the names of Earth  
slough off like snakeskin,  
but my mouth is full of them,  
these alphabets  
tilting behind my teeth.

How do you name a god,  
a planet dancing its tonnage  
into your orbit?

Of all the great sufferings of Scripture,  
Adam and the naming  
of the endless beasts  
must be the greatest  
and most beautiful.

Listen – we share the same star-song  
of erosion, little supernovas  
fizzling in our gut,  
the same transmission  
of blood-code,  
wide as centuries.

I will ask you to be still.  
I will hold dust in my hands  
and tell it to be good.



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