Crash Home into Water

poems

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This work is dedicated

——

To my wife,
the only audience I have in mind,
whose value is far above rubies,
whose lamp does not go out at night.
You surpass them all.

Proverbs 31:10

——

To my son,
that in decades to come
he might return back to what he,
in so many instances inspired,
and know something more
of himself and of his father.

Psalms 22:4

——

To Jesus,
who plucked me
from the breaking edge and
freely gave me the gifts of life,
love, family, forgiveness, and,
now, the long sought desire
of my heart.

John 10:29

——
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Preface

Author’s Note: Dear Reader, before you begin this Preface, I would implore you to first read the poetry contained in this manuscript. While this may seem counterintuitive to the idea of a Preface, there are certain details about the author and his life that are discussed herein which may alter your perceptions of the work. I wish to avoid preconceptions to the greatest degree possible, because I firmly believe that not only should poetry (and all art truly) stand or fall upon its own merits, but that no work should be judged by the identity of its author and rather the author (as an author) should be judged by the work he has produced.

In the beginning of this process, in thinking about how and what to bring into existence, my inclination was towards a devotional body of work. In my writing I am often torn between the sifted, much-thumbed goods of the past—the ones that have been handed down generation after generation—and the contemporary landscape of art and culture that speaks from people who are living and breathing to others doing likewise. Both are meaningful. One tends conveys a greater degree of wisdom than the other; but how easy is it to become trapped in the study of great minds from the past, and lose touch with the world that is occurring and changing all around us? How easy also, to become caught up in the instantaneousness of the now to the exclusion of what has come before.

That tension of time, especially as it relates to memories and family, plays a prominent role in the poetry of this manuscript, as do nature, light, water, death, protection, and the effects we have on one another. Most of the voice presented here is that of myself, as I am. At times there are other voices—personae—that are still somehow mine, but transported into another place, another life, or reality. Some of my poetry has form, much does not. Some has internal rhyme, some end rhyme, some near rhyme, some relies on consonance. For me, poetic form is dictated by the poem and what it is capable of doing well, first. You can see this dictation, for example in “Devotee”—the rhyme scheme is consistent, but the meter is broken in the second
line so that the six lines are 8-5-8-7-8-7. I allowed the poem to form like this rather than forcing it to be otherwise (though I admit I tried repeatedly).

I see poetry as a means of exploration, communication, and, primarily, creating what is beautiful. Poetry is the most condensed form of literary transmission. It is life-concentrate; it leads more by feel than by exactitude; it is the anti-gravity skin. T.S. Eliot said that poetry communicates before it is understood. It is also, or at least ought to be, pleasurable. Even when discussing the harshest aspects of life. Poetry that ceases to be beautiful and enticing to the mind ceases to fulfill the first purpose.

A Bit of Me

Since middle school (at least) I have been writing poetry. Nearly everything I have written has been in the air of the contemplative and philosophical, questioning motives, asking general “Why?” questions, or trying to tease out the lessons I felt were present in all the small moments of life. This early writing was influenced by authors and poets like Kahlil Gibran, Robert Fulghum, Shel Silverstein, Richard Adams, and Richard Bach. Those formative writers have never left the bookshelf of my mind—I think elements of their writing come through, even in what I have set forth in this manuscript. It is an often dreamy, slightly surreal, but still earthbound look at life. A prime example of this can be found in “Perhaps, We Are Gnats,” which draws a line between ourselves and those minuscule insects, and asks the reader to question the exactitude and certainty of our intentions and plans in getting us to where we desire to go, as well as acknowledging that struggle of being driven to press forward that comes along with being human.
One of the next most formative influences in my writing entered my life when I came to a faith in Jesus in my late twenties, and I enfolded the Bible into the repertoire of literature I was reading. But unlike so many other works, I read Scripture persistently. I was entranced by the beauty of David’s psalms, confounded by Solomon’s wisdom, enamored with the story of Genesis and Exodus, and, most of all, captivated by the life and words of Christ. Jesus had a manner of speaking and communicating deep and abiding truths to the people he taught that was, at the same time, simple in language and extraordinarily deep in meaning—access is easy, understanding requires effort. I bring this up because it is essentially the same thing I try to accomplish with what I write. In nearly every instance, anyone can read and understand the story arc or concept that is being laid out in my poems. What takes time and effort, I hope, is teasing out the questions that the work asks. At times I feel I succeed in this endeavor, at others I think that I come up short. An example of the former would be “The World Between My Fingers When They Almost Touch,” and an example of the latter would likely be “Science.” The story of “Science” is one that I could not find a way to tell in a less nebulous, perhaps even enigmatic, way.

As mentioned earlier, I make it a point to avoid forcing the work to conform to my predetermined desires—a lesson learned after innumerable attempts resulted in a worse end. I engage in poetry more like I engage in surfing—as a dance where I lead but do not force; where the best, most enjoyable, most beautiful outcome will result from careful attention to how your “partner” (be it a wave or the idea) is moving and then drawing a line to complement it.

In the ensuing years, I read contemporary poets like Billy Collins, Kay Ryan, Charles Simic, John Updike, and others, and found myself compelled by their craft and voice. Simultaneously, I was drawn to the power and skill of authors like Sidney and Spencer, the distilled communication of Bashō, the lyrical qualities of T.S. Eliot, and the playful exactitude of
e.e. cummings. My true desire originally was to draw threads from all these voices and weave them together with the forms and themes present in the early New England Christian poets like Cotton Mather, Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and several others. I wanted a blending of old with new, of my passion for poetry and a love for Jesus. But that blending was not the result I achieved. Try as I might, I could not force a communication between the groups, and realistically, I would not want to compel the intersection: what audience wants to expend their leisure time in the midst of poetic voices battling for supremacy on the page? Rather, it occurred to me that in writing about life, family, work, death, and children, and doing it in the voice that I have been given, I was writing devotionally. Though I discuss God directly very little in the manuscript, nearly everything in it is like planets and other celestial objects in orbit around the bright center that is His person. He is the gravity that fashions the orbit of their travels. And so, in that regard, I see the work as ultimately fulfilling the heart of my original desire.

Recent Influences

Around the time that this collection came to take shape, my wife gave birth to our son. Nothing prepares you for the change and challenge that accompanies the birth of a child. In some ways this birthing of new life was mirroring the simultaneous process of forming and developing my thesis, in preparation for bringing it into the world to be seen and experienced by others. Many of the poems that are in my thesis either feature or have as a part of their inspiration my son. He is, after my wife, the most prominent person in the entire collection (not counting myself).
In part, with my poetry I try to present my family to the world, yet in a way that does not compromise our privacy too greatly. At the same time, I try to capture them and some piece of myself and my thinking, so that in time to come we can return to what was set down and remember something of who we all were, and what was going on, and how much it all meant to me at the time. These moments are indeed fleeting. In fact, one of the major themes throughout the manuscript is that of flashing, glinting, fading, disappearing moments and memories, and the attempt to capture them and put them somewhere so that we (most specifically and most especially my wife and I) can reminisce. Because, in the end, life on this earth is a series of moments that will cease at some singularity in the future (a singularity is a scientific term that identifies the instant where a sudden and rapid change of form occurs, such as a bubble popping). In that regard, it is important to be living within the moment that is happening. But if we never take the time to look forward, to talk about our future together, and where we are going, and where we want to be, and what we want to see, then we are likely to find ourselves someplace, two decades hence, that we do not care for much and will be forced to employ the tools of contentment. If we never look back to remember the good times and consider the bad, if we never reminisce with the one(s) we have spent our lives with, then what is the point of having lived those moments? We survive the hard times, the lean times, the times when we were strained and stressed so that we can look back upon them and learn and remember and rejoice that they have passed and that we made it through together, that we have reached the other side of the valley and the shadow has gone from over us.

I want my son to be able to pick up this manuscript when he is grown and know that he was born to parents who love him and to know where he was and what kind of life he had as an infant. This manuscript is a kind of memorial, a thing out of the ordinary from the daily existence that signals. One of the poems in this collection, titled “Monuments,” mentions this same idea of
“cairns,/heaped along the roads,/to testify when our children pass”—a metaphor for the spikes in life where events occur, and the objects that are raised to commemorate and remind (or cause inquisition in) those who were and were not present at the time.

Loci

My manuscript, though set in a variety of locations both real and imagined, is mainly sourced in three “real world” locations—O’ahu, Hawai’i; Seoul, South Korea; and Killeen, Texas. O’ahu is where I have spent a plurality of my life, and where my son was born. Seoul is where my wife and I were married. It is also where we lived a two-year adventure, traveling around the massive city and throughout the country, making friends, eating strange foods, and laying the foundation of our life together. Killeen is where we had our wedding, where my wife’s immediate family resides, and one of the most “retreat”-like locations I have in my life. All of these places, as well as the movements between them, background the poems. In addition, my family and I moved around a great deal in my youth. Travel has contributed to a sense of being unmoored, unbound to any one particular spot. The organization of the manuscript attempts to reflect this same sense of floating by being organized more along the lines of underlying themes rather than setting, form, or even when the poems were written.

Another significant influencing factor upon my poetry is certainly my day job. I have a Bachelor of Science in Zoology and have spent about ten of the last fourteen years working in or running a laboratory, which specializes in benthic ecology and polychaete phylogeny. The science background, in general, influences my work by lending a proclivity towards scientific
language and themes. Still, the linguistically useful aspects of my job have always been accompanied by a degree of struggle. While my desire is to write, it competes with my need to care for my family and pay bills. Certainly, the tension comes through.

Poetic Influences

I’ll begin with the strongest—Billy Collins. Though some have called Collins’s work derivative and overrated, I would argue that he is doing something much of poetry fails to accomplish—he gets people to read it, a lot of people. This is no small feat. Does this mean that he has attained the stratospheric heights of poetic ability? I think it does not. However, I believe he is owed a measure of credit. After all, how many people have ever read or heard Collins’ “Litany” (the one about being the bread and the wine) as compared with reading Pound’s “Cantos” in their entirety? After the 9/11 attacks, would anyone have called Stanley Kunitz to write and read a poem to Congress in memorial of the lives lost? Collins fills a niche that other poets do not, and it draws an audience. He speaks, for the most part, in a simple language about simple moments in life, but simultaneously covers the ground of allusion to cultural iconography and employs the historically effective method of shifting perspective on everyday life. It would require a well-versed individual to catch and understand every Collins reference to works of art, music, locations, and events. In a similar vein, I work in my poetry to write what people will be able to read and grasp. I have always been taught that unless I can engage the reader, unless I provide them a work which they will read, I can never challenge notions or encourage them to dig a little deeper into what I say. In other words, I could be the most deep and brilliant poet to walk the face of the planet, but if no one can understand what I have written, I am just a noisy
gong. My writing would then serve myself and no one else (or a limited audience at best). I would like to think that a certain amount of the contemporary, even populist, style of Collins’s work has rubbed off on my writing—I think “Quantum” and “Outrunner” are good reflections of that influence. However, the primary aspect of his work that I have always found to be lacking is his endings—I never felt he was particularly strong in wrapping things up, but rather that he would be happier to go on indefinitely, talking about the look of the light falling on a bowl of pears in the kitchen, the cobblestone backstreets of Paris he rambled through last week, and the way the ice is clinking in his short glass of scotch. I needed to turn to another of the Poet Laureates in the pursuit of endings.

Kay Ryan stands, in several regards on the opposite end of Collins when discussing form. Collins has a long-lined, rambling, free form that nearly always lacks rhyme of any kind. Ryan, on the other hand, has a tight, heavily enjambed, and internally rhyming form that nearly always includes a twist. What is so remarkable about that twist is that it requires an author to pay extremely close attention to the manner in which he wraps up his work. The last line not only needs to have the punch, but must actually play off of the entirety of the preceding lines to produce the effect desired. My work, though not intended to create the same effect as Ryan’s—that sharp snap she produces—does tend to play back against the entirety of what has come before. What Ryan and Collins share, in many instances, is an accessibility to their work that I wanted to cultivate in my own. Perhaps the poem of mine that most closely resembles one of Ryan’s for rhyming would be “In Season,” and for closure, I think “Breakfast Invasion” has one of the more interesting final lines.

The last, and likely the least powerful, of my influences that I would like to mention here is Charles Simic. His work has a strongly observational quality, which I find occurs often in my own work, as well as a high variability in format (line length, stanza size). The attempt to match
the form and construction of the poem to the poem, rather than beginning with the intention of compartmentalizing the words into a predetermined rhyme scheme and syllable count, appears to be one of the hallmarks in Simic’s poems. In similar fashion, I have tried to always work with the poems I write, to feel out their cadence, their rhythm, to make them balanced in their appearance on the page and the information conveyed by the use of line break placement and the sound of an out-loud reading. In order to achieve this goal I read my own poems aloud, record them, and listen to them while reading the text. In doing so, words and phrases are often revealed as unintentionally clumsy, breaks are shown as misplaced, phrases that make sense in my mind but not on the page are uncovered.

The Em Dash

Em-dashes populate my work, both in this manuscript and in nearly everything else I write. There is a very simple elegance in the thin line that connects ideas together. But it is not just the visual appeal of the em dash that leads me to use it so regularly. When one looks at drawings and representations of molecules and compounds drawn out by chemists, the bonds are represented, most often, by a thin line of connection. Likewise, in the phylogenetic trees employed by biologists and zoologist, organisms are connected to their parent grouping through lines, and those parent groupings to their parents through lines. Family trees are a series of branching and converging lines. So then, the dash serves to hold two words, ideas, or images in the balance for a moment in the reading, like a bond.

The em-dash is also a place to consider for a moment what has come before—a kind of space where there is something (rather than nothing), a space that is occupied, but not by any
definitive ideas. Often my em-dashes end a line, serving as a precipitous edge (one prime example is the line from “All Who Let Go” that ends with the only em dash of the piece—there is nothing but empty white space below it).

Additionally, because the dash is so thin, no matter what letter has come before it, the dash narrows to a point from that vertical height of text, as though simultaneously narrowing down in thought and compressing before expanding once more. Though it might be considered as making allusion to Emily Dickinson’s work (who made prolific use of dashes in her hand written poems) this is not actually the case. I intend no such allusion, and I am not sure that Dickinson used her dashes to the same effect that I use mine, but I have not studied her work closely enough to make that determination with certainty.

**Conclusion**

I hope that this brief discussion will enlighten the reader somewhat upon the scope and hope of my activities in this manuscript. I also hope that my injunction was heeded and this is the last thing that is read by the audience unless they turn back to read my poems once more in light of the new information (or in spite of it). That would be the greatest compliment of all.
1

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Hope Raft

——
Petrified

If the air solidifies around us one day,
the impossibility of breathing again
will give a lonely moment to consider

the sudden crushing mass on our shoulders,
a jagged bolt of lightning frozen in amber,
and our preservation for a locked eternity.

If the atmosphere becomes blue glass
and time to react, like a star’s wink, slips by,

I hope I’m holding your hand already.
In Season

Six stripped
yellow honey
mangos—

free to eat
from off
the tree.

Lick your lips,
your fingertips

li hing mui
the rest of it,

and save
a slice for me.
Night stifles the motion of a burnished sea.  
    All day I’ve longed for poured-out dark—  
cool salve for all that burns in the light.

My skin encounters anti-gravity issues.  
    All the world becomes hues of blue and cream.  
I am a speck in God’s water glass.

Uncatchable fish pool like hammered silver dollars  
    in a vortex beneath my bark, leaching  
from my unavailable shadow. It’s no wonder

I can’t get anywhere; they’re spinning my boat.  
    Between glorious sunrises I lose my bearings.  
At gracious sunsets my swirling wealth melts.

To call this a life raft is too much. I think  
    it should be a hope raft. Because if all my  
remaining life runs out, I’d rather not sink.
Because she has nothing to do
and I have too much,
because she’s bored and I’m busy and
the rain came home.

It’s my game, of course.
I explain the rules; she agrees
with a silent nod.

Now she sits in the corner
wearing her serious face,
figuring it out. She loves
puzzles and games and
hates to lose.

Satisfied, I leave her to it,
return to work. In five minutes,
a tapping on my shoulder.

She holds a sheet of half-folded paper,
stares into my eyes, and
then bursts into wild ecstatic gyrations
turning in circles
with flapping arms and goofy faces.

I laugh loudly, freely, needfully,
until she hands me

the note. I unfold it, to read
in her small letters,
“i win.”
Craterlakes at the Equator
Gathering Animaculae

Amazing how, in a shallow dish,  
the sum total of all small life  
makes an opulent showing.

We are poor sweating craftsmen  
aching over our glazed finery—  
paled beside these  
calcareous filigree animaculae.

Far from our glistening eyes,  
the resplendent beauty  
in a cup of ocean and a spoonful of sand  
eddies about under our feet,  
in tidal pools and salty perfume.
A world remains between my fingers when they almost touch, no matter how close they get.
A few germs, some spores, a dust speck or two—
they float along.

Around each grain of sand on the beach
is a flagellate microcosm.
This space is no different,
except I control the size.

Mass murder happens
each time I snap my fingers.
At every breath these lungs
are a slaughterhouse
for oral bacterium.
My step is doom.

I cannot move or live
without killing
something.

So now what?

How small
matters?

Do
I
?
Careful while breathing
under the sweeping sea,

four laden men count,
scoop up the bottom,
and, still counting,
they ascend below
tiny glass umbrellas.

Aboard the rolling stern
empty tanks clang together
like crumpled wind chimes.

In this corner of space
there is no sleeping.

The men will swim again
in the dense atmosphere.

Every contained thing suffers
the same fate of fixation,
having drunk the poison.

These ecosystem cores
are now ours.

Indoors, under deafening lights
we impose an order on the world
so simple we can understand it.

Set on high, brushed-steel shelves,
tiny animal cadavers swim
in high proof limpid ethanol,
under white cotton plugs,
behind curved, capped, glass vials—

eternally poised, climate-controlled,
they breathlessly await the brain's attentions.
Quantum

Theoretically, I might be the moon,
just a little, right now.

A few of my electrons swim around
in craterlakes at the equator

or maybe skirt the dark side
at one of the poles.

It is even possible, though highly unlikely,
that a particular electron

has taken the same slingshot orbit
of the failed Apollo moonlanders

when they raced against their aggregating
exhalations and unstoppable bleeding

of vital energy into the cold, unquenchable
vacuum around them.

That same electron might be hurtling back
this moment at nearly the speed of light

to crash home into water, like Odyssey,
and make me whole once more.
Tinctorial

A finger in methyl-green
spots turquoise on the dorsum,
bands turquoise on the ventrum.

Drops of rose bengal
pink the skin unsheathed of proteins.

Saffron yellows collagen,
gram violets on staphylococcus,
and iodine makes brown
your carbohydrates.

Stains stain the epidermis,
reveal patterned secrets,
and delight the multicolored soul.
Brocaded Fishes

Flaxen and black,
or cream and orange,
brown, red, olive,
lively with splotches,
spots, and checkered scales.

These languorously waving
ornamental carp
attempt to eat
the top off the water,

air above the water,
all the blue in the sky,
and the fucoid clouds.

After the sun sleeps,
brassy armored koi—
fins snipping the surface—
try to swallow stars.

But when the ripples pass
in the moonless night,
each needlepoint reappears
like an anchored rainbow speck.
Sparkler’s Cartwheel
Breakfast Invasion

A tiny alien landed on my bagel.
I left it on the counter, intending to eat it,
the bagel not the alien,
with butter or some cream cheese.

On closer inspection, I realize several aliens landed on the bagel,
which I can no longer rightly claim as mine
due to some fundamental natural property rights
dealing with periodic non-usage and ownership.
I suppose what I claim, ought to be in use more frequently.

With the irrevocable loss of breakfast
it behooves me to recover something in the exchange.
My camera, where is my camera?

Just wait until they see this one.
Imagine the big bold line of copy in the paper–

**Man Nabs Picture of Alien on Bagel**

Macro function, on.
The tiny alien remains motionless while I zoom in.
Filamentous arms reach out in every direction,
slowly feasting on the bagel formerly known as mine.

I wonder briefly if the tiny alien plans to blast me
with some ultra-destructo laser beam at the last second–Click!
Click!

Click.
Maybe it did.
Perhaps I am changed.
The tiny aliens’ technology—
far superior to our own—struck me
with a force so powerful and completely
incomprehensible that the fundamental shift
in the person that I am is actually imperceptible
to me and everyone around me because it is designed
to occur slowly, minutely, celestially in its progress until
I have become the person mentally and thereby in action that
the tiny aliens who landed on my bagel planned to make me from the first…

I reach for a knife.
My heaped-up copper past disappears
in dwindling neuronal corners—

a fading watery luster.

Across a weathered, reflective countryside
verdigris plaques creep moss-like.

Some bell-shaped planters,
black-sooted chimney caps,
and ancient castle doorknockers
are my earthy-metal yesteryears.

Those green growing fingers
coat a teakettle that once whistled
like a child in discovery.

Over here, these carafes on hooks,
hanging lanterns, and elbow-deep pots
gather obscuring dust tangles
and they glint, on occasion, under sunshine
falling through murky window panes.

Memories, like fish, snare the light,
and decline in the green sea.
I wake today to another cold rain
falling on my old bicycle—
unridden so long it suffers.

The summer, somehow this year, fell
in that dark place between bills and plans.

So I sit down to watch and, despite
the water streaming down the frame,
dirt still clings to the stationary gears
and tire treads that can’t forget miles.

Pushing the chair back to stand, I think
I hear branches outside rubbing in the wind.
The world’s done up in pencil sketch.

Warm-washed mug in hand, I pour black heat
into the shadow of my stomach muscle.

My blood drinks the caffeine and steeped out compounds.

The goats, berries, and scripture-studying monks are lost
to history, but the brew lives on in my liver.

My brain swims in this smoky sea,
tries to regulate skin temperature.

Thermometer says, *It’s cold.*

My eyes say, *It’s wet.* My stomach muscle says,
*We’re fine. It’s just a little empty in here.*
At the edge of the visual plane, clouds and sky gather—layer on layer of melted mallow and indigo ice cream—impossibly suspended.

I work in a seven-storied tower; where the air-conditioning always breaks. Four alphabetical courts surround me. The main door placard letters stand in relief—TOWER.

It rains streaky drops. I walk from TOWER to car through this low, long neighborhood of money, where the bright round avocado quietly fall from trees to rot on wet, smooth asphalt.

The rain and I drive. My wipers click-clack, clocking time in something near seconds—a metronome to the politics on talk-radio. To get home in Honolulu rain-traffic means urban bushwhacking.

Remember to swing by the hardware store, my brain says softly. The grooved tires ahead split and suck rain off the black glazed road
and fling it against the fender in a sparkler’s cartwheel.

6
Parking after work on this purple evening requires minimum dexterity and less search. I grab necessaries from the stripe-like aisles arrayed in visually-violent red and waspy, danger yellow.

7
Someone I do not know stands by my car—a swollen-bodied woman with plump plastic bags dangling like glossy fruit from her arms; and hair a grungy mat; I deduce she’s homeless, with my logic.

8
And she asks, with a well-suppressed British accent, for change. For the bus, she says, and I tell her I have no change, only plastic, and then, guilty, I recall in the car some hidden money.

9
The bus costs $2.50. I give her $2.50, I know fare is $2.50. She says it is maybe $3.00. No, it’s $2.50, I say. Here is $2.50. Oh, thank you, she says in either practiced or distracted sincerity. Have a nice day, I say. She walks jingling.

10
Three metal coughs start the car. I pull to the street. A storm is coming and I want to be home now. The homeless woman crosses the street towards 7-11.
A bus stop is not over there. I drive into the adjacent restaurant.

11
She asks several others for money, for the bus. Though not trained to read lips, I’ve been alive long enough to know the words money and bus when I see them spoken clearly. I watch her ask again.

12
I want to drive away—it’s pouring—but the woman walks to a black sedan in front of me waiting to leave; asks money, bus; and also to the car next to me. She turns. I see her eyes.

13
Reverse-parking in the dark between neighbor’s cars, I only want to see my wife and son, kiss both in different ways, eat something, shower, change clothes, drink cold water from a glass, and sleep. I am convicted.

14
Trust is a building—constructed slowly in hope. In a moment, it’s gone. The whole edifice collapses like a giant, dusty map. $2.50 and some hope for good; but I stand in dust and ash, and look for new towers to rise.
Our Square-Knotted Souls
Supplying Later

Hands out, she stretches the skin wrapping her fingers—webbing between each, mildly reminiscent of parachutes. Leftovers, she says, from living as a flying squirrel.

My hands also have relics of squirreldom—
eight white suspension bridges
hang digit to digit.

We meet here, to drink coffee and eat expensive snacks,
where North and Main intersect like tree branches.
In clean, darkly-upholstered arm chairs we chatter
about our small lives though, secretly, we think the opposite.

When we part, she tries playing Frogger across Main street,
laughing because only three cars pass by,
then scampers to her car through the labyrinthian parking lot.

Door open, she waves and hollers something unintelligible.
I’m quick to wave back and make the ‘Call me’ sign—
shaka twisted up to the temple.

Near the apartment, I glimpse my hand again
and the four white bridges hung there.
Memories like today I bring home and write down,
storing them like food, to keep me through the winter.
Baklava

My mother moves before dawn
surrounded by aromas.

Amber honey drizzles on Filo parchment.
The wood-handled brush tip dips in
dawn’s light melting over the stove.

Earthly tones of walnuts, brown and ground,
the warm cider-spice of cinnamon powder
with glinting grains of glorious sugar

all tossed and mixed up
in a big bowl, an ambrosia yet to be.
The oven is warm and baklava baking.

The scent spreads like ivy down the hall,
up the stairs, and out the windows
until the whole house feels the curling vine
and blithely follows tendrils to the kitchen.

In baker’s hues crispy flaking skin
steams in the sun. Slices run in lattice lines.

This ageless delight of Turkish sultans,
praised fancy of Roman royalty—
one day my mother will teach my wife
and one day she will bake the baklava.

Four full trays for our wedding, all gone;
every puffed triangle a dulcet wish for us—
for our love and for our goodness
and for our joy.
One Marriage, with Everything

We eat love
apples on our pizza,
and drink dripping cold
beer in the summer.

A heat wave cuts free
through our cotton
t-shirts, and sweat

wicks from our skins,
slides between fiber,
twists, to shake and

take molecular flight,
mingle and tango,
a moment

one hot, supreme night.
Waʻahila

You pull your green
ruffled blanket over
to hide your back,
your living hips, and
your heart,

but such contours cut
by rain and worming roots
will never conceal
beneath frayed threads
of foliage.

I see you.

And when you burn it all down,

I see you

more.
Wife of the Quieted Tempest

On the way to the corner,
falling rain pats her red umbrella—
congratulating it for a job well done.

Her smile is the river flood
receding from an ivory necklace
left to glisten on the banks.

The shimmering pavement admires
her slender beauty as she walks,
and paints her with water and light
in a wavy Monet.

She waits at the crosswalk in tall boots,
rubber soles touching inverted rippling soles.

She looks down, down into her own
brown eyes, her own black curls,
mirrored curls that reach back up,

and her two red umbrellas curve together,
sealing out the double stormy skies.

She waits in a world where, all around,
rain quietly rises to greet itself.
Moon Bridge

Razorbak clouds
crawl to the ocean
with the last juice
of a celestial guava
fading off their bristles.

When the final pink is gray
she turns to me slow
full of a given light—
like the moon swelling—
and her lips part.
Misty words fall
with the coolness
steep elevation produces—
the unseen passage
over shadowed rocks.

Before, we were a distance
like other distances.
But our gap is bridged
and we pull tectonically,
one into the other.

The last span is covered by
a tiny moon bridge—
and soon that too
will be the memorial
of our long gone divide.
Her fresh boysenberry nail gloss
slides below my thumbprint

and we talk in bed, married-style,
in the stuttering city night.

The day was longer for the distance
our square-knotted souls were pulled apart.

Orange seeping light outlines her
and in her ear I whisper an ancient joke.

She seems to ponder the calico shadows
that stretch at a grumbling car’s passage

and then humor peels her lips slowly,
from those ever-guarded pearls.
On a Date

In the day planner
of my existence,
	n this is a copper-colored
meeting sticker,

	a cloud sketch in the margin;
it's a two-line rhyme.

In the starry universe
and the history of all life
it's not much,

	only a flicker
across the expanse,

but to me
this is jubilee—

the refined company
of my forever wife,

slow conversation,
and the simplicity
of aromatic black coffee.
She bursts yellow citrus skyward
with lovely hands, both soft and hard.

Nearby, I breathe in the floating coumarins
and taste the oils on the back of my throat.

Released seeds sink, each in a slippery coat,
bounce ice cube to ice cube to hidden ends.

My floral bright mind drinks it down and, after
lemon water, the fleeting world holds zests of laughter.
Outrunner

You go out running at sunset.

At home, I think about what I think you think about—
the laundry that needs to be folded,
the PTA meeting at our son's middle school
next week Tuesday,

the raisins that must be purchased at the store
for the oatmeal muffins that must be made
to bring to the church meeting that must be attended
this coming Friday night.

I think you think about the children for a mile,
Julia and Marcus, their little faces.

Perhaps the rush of wind,
the colors blurred and fading in the sky,
or the neighbor's award-winning roses
wedge their way in.

Your feet kiss the pavement so lightly you coast.
I know how hard you work on technique.
Then I think, maybe you think of me.
Maybe running, you imagine what I think about
while I sit at home waiting for you.

If so, it seems we constitute
a strange sort of infinity, you and I.
Your mind thinking what I think,
and my mind thinking what you think.
Then I think, maybe I think too much.
Because maybe you don't think about anything out there.

That the outrunning of everything you think about is the reason that you go out running.
The Sunshine Goes Brown
Lunch for One

At the back of the church, behind a wall,
near the restroom and a steel trashcan,
I feed my infant son milk.

Eulogies from the front of the chapel echo in the rafters,
a bad poem is read, but the subject has recently departed
and the author speaks with halting voice.

The children are both grown and distraught,
their eyes broken.

When the bottle is empty, my son needs to burp.
No one begrudges him this social faux pas.
We stand on a high bridge
overlooking dark green waters

with multitudes left and right
disappearing into fog.

Some hang
from girders or wires,
some stand on the rounded edge
of railings looking down.

Every few seconds one or two let go
and plummet toward the deep.

Everyone falls differently—
in poses of
terror: screaming;
joy: laughing;
piety: praying;
love: embracing;

but all let go,
and all who let go
fall,

and all who fall
strike

the deep, dark
green water.
Lemons, Lemons, Lemons

Once I said we liked lemons
word spread
and now every year
at this time
the lemons appear.

Some at work and some at church,
brown paper bags on the stoop.
I can’t refuse them.

They’re always accompanied
by the same epigram:

I heard you like lemons.

Who, I wonder, grows all these sour fruit,
and then hands them off?

Were the trees planted
with the intent
to never eat them?

We use all we can:
lemonade, lemon shaker pie,
lemon meringue, lemon-crusted salmon,
but there are still too many
dimpled yellow spheres.

They populate the counter,
sneak behind the milk and eggs,
or roll under the stove.
Our whole house smells of lemons, but eventually the sunshine goes brown.

The lemons turn
to dark stones,

robbed of all sweetness
and terribly acidic.
Mulberry

A split stone rolling downhill,
I seek purchase in the earth

along the river—a fissure or
crack where I might lodge.

A solar system inside, I am
unfolding and folding.

Next, I am two solar systems—
a seed sprouting, needing soil.

But the riverbank is granite;
the soil slate without rift.

And though now I am
sixteen bound solar systems,

folding synchronously,

I am still discharged, unseen,
at the river’s deadly delta.
Rule

Kings too long athrone
Lust for immortality,
Carve themselves in stone,
Gift it their virility—

Now are fallen bone
Wrapped in stark banality—

And lifeless, lie alone.
Just predictability.
Falloutside

The breeze has left us.
A colossal canopy
drops frail leaves, floating ash.
Radiating out, hands clasped,
we dance in burning light
at sunset.
This morning,
hailstones bolted from the sky.

Brute, cold, club hammers
punched craters in the soft
earth of your garden, some-
how missing
all our vegetables.

When my beloved sun
finally stepped through the clouds,
it melted the stern ice-chips.

Cold slipped away
leaving lonely water
in whiskey-brown puddles.

I remember our trip to the Grand Canyon.
How odd and arbitrary size is. To an ant,
the Canyon would not exist;
it’s too large to comprehend.

But these newborn puddles would be immense,
maybe worth naming.

Reflection Lake?
The Tranquil Sea?

Then they disappear

and a mist descends
when I think how brief things are—
like flowers in the desert.
But outside, your Alabaster Pegasus,
worn and chipped by rain and hail,
still stands,

wings outstretched,

head raised,

defying

Time.
Spare Plumage
Friday afternoon I’m supposed to be working, but instead we trek downtown to a prosthodontist.

Latest x-rays show your second bicuspid crumpled inside an old crown.

...

Three years ago a dark-eyed sadist cemented on that failed ceramic jacket, after a root-canal without anesthesia.

I remember him and his sanitary office; how he hurt you and with what joy I’d punch his teeth out and then forgive him; God help me.

...

From a corner seat, I scrutinize today’s operation, prepared to pounce at the first sign of pain.

You recline in the pleather blue dentist’s chair and, as if kindling or coals were lit in your throat, smoke rises from the drill—

I crouch, but no flame erupts, no pearlescent tears run to hide in your perfect hair.

Decay melts beneath the whir and grind.
I see it siphoned off into
dark and distant oblivion,

while in the chair, without flinching,
you rub your bare feet together

and laugh with all your glimmering teeth
from the peak of a snowy mountain.
At Beginning’s End

Until sleep, I held you—
raven hair and slimmed-down;

eyes, water-washed and untied;
last of the breathed world

absorbed or disposed—
that once-life, void.

New things, my son, are come.
Old things have passed away.

So, steel your flesh and drink
with the stomach of your lungs.

Fill up on this sweetest sweet;
you will neither sick nor slow.

To any corner you go, if there
the sun shines, the blood dines.

For dessert—a creamy blue treat
to please your eyes upon.

Chalice your growing hands,
be slaked, be satiated, be salved.

Drink your planet, drink yourself,
drink your mother and father.

Drink down the deepest sea serpents
and the highest cirrus ice crystals.
Drink down the truth and having once drunk, you will never thirst.

Having breathed and received the breath, you will exhale light.

And having once slept, you will rise held by new arms; eyes open forever.
Pacific Plover

Stubby straw-beaked dollop
on spindle-legs;
calmly you go way-finding.

Where is your nest
little plover bird?

When hiding out at night,
head tucked solemnly
beneath a cutback wing for comfort,

or in trying to keep your chicks warm
under such spare plumage
as the wind blows in autunnally

and your straw-beak
has gathered too few calories,

do you ever long to be a gull
or a god-like hawk well fed?

Or do you count it worth the trade
to parade your golden coat instead?
Guardian

In a dream where I hold the sun
in the hard hollow of my hand,

I also swallow swallowing black holes
and deflect icy asteroids
out of fear to see that burning light
extinguished
by some careless inattention.

With my galactic palm-span
I sweep off threatening nebulae
and close-creeping novas.

I hold that bright sun
in the hard hollow of my hand,

parrying Death,

let it slowly warm the cold universe
of a dark and angry heart.
Loom

You raise a tiny amniotic hand
and, in roving blindly for a face, grip
a cochineal thread dangling at my chest,
then fold it, unbreakably, in the loom
where it is woven with your breath
by the shuttle of your pulse.

Turn over, my child, in these blanket arms
fixed to my frame. In the new air shutter
your coalescing golden eyes and sleep.
Folding Baby

Before you, are a large square of clean white muslin printed all over with green beans in pods

or with bears holding honeypots, eternally dripping one golden drop,

or with smiling monkeys and yellow split bananas, and beside the cloth, your baby—comfort and one needful of comforting.

Many things are folded—chairs and tables, dough and eggs, flowers in the night. You will fold your baby up in a substitute for holding.

A square of paper, now a frog, a horse, a white crane suspended in the tree.

The boy cannot sleep with freed arms, his loose legs will kick and stomach lurch

but should the palms be pinioned and the elbows nestled in the soft spot below the ribs and above the hips, should the meat of his two-month-old shoulders feel the pressure of a firm wrapping hold; the legs will lower, the stomach will settle and the chin, eyelids, and breathing will droop.

But turning a single square of muslin into a second skin of comfort is an awkward activity,
and more so for a mind paying out the reserves of stored sleep
to the creditors of wet and dirty diapers,
to the anguish of gas filled intestines,
to the frustrating newborn life’s too hots, too colds,
too hungries, too fulls, too tireds, too sleepies,
too brights, too darks, too alones, too much toucheds,
too louds, too quiets, too stimulated, too unstimulated,
two hours, two days, two weeks, now two months old.

And then one morning, when the light
just crests the background mountains
you wake from a hot, interrupted sleep,
gummy-eyed and weaving slightly around corners,
carrying your baby to change away the wetness.

You place him on a flat, soft surface—
the carpet, rug, or perhaps the living room sofa,
in the angle of the couch so he cannot roll off—
and you lay out the white square of muslin,
this one with green beans in pods,
orient it like a diamond; one eye on the baby.
You fold down the top corner and place him gently on it.

Right arm down, muslin over, half-twist around the back to hold,
excess leg fabric up and over left shoulder.
Left arm down, fabric over, half-twist,
avoiding cinching the tiny fingers,
around the back like a belt
to the front again, and tuck.

You elevate the child and cradle him. The sun has come up also.
Look out the back window and see glassy luminous drops
falling arhythmically from the eaves
like a personalized Perseid meteor shower—
a souvenir to remind you of the broken storm
that has just crawled across the Pacific
and swallowed your whole state in its purple jaws.

You hardly remember folding the baby up now, but he drowses
in your arms, so you slip back towards your bed and join him.
Floating Scents and Night Echoes
Devotee

Tiny wings you beat with fury,
bud to bud—how wise.

Busy bee what is your hurry?
Pollen dusty, nectared thighs.

Teach me, bee—all work, no worry;
humble stinger, vigil eyes.
Boxcars Dance

Clank, clatter, rattle and roll
streaming down the tracks.

Side-to-side, they dance
a thrummed-out rhythm.

Sunset rust adorns;
like sashes, gathers, hems;
their mottled metal dress.

Born to dip and bend,
tightly they hold hands,
fighting not to break
the dancing of the line.

All the while chuggalling
low sardonic laughs.

Happy with their haecceity.
Happy not to see the way.
Happy just to dance.
These are all the clothes we own.

That is my son’s balloon;
I think it looks tired and old.

Once young and firm Mylar, now
it creeps along hungry and wrinkled;

a crinkly head that bobs
through the slow moving air.

Periodically it kisses the ground,
but will not lay down to sleep.

All the slippery helium has sidled out
through microscopic pores and seams.

Earth is like my son’s balloon.
Helium constantly escapes the atmosphere;
bleeding out.

We cannot use hydrogen—
the Hindenburg gas—in its stead.

Soon, ours will be a world without balloons,
without floats in the grand parade,
without celebrities speaking
in squeaky chipmunk voices
on late-night television for laughs.

Someday what was sealed away,
but leaks from my son’s dying balloon,
will be worth its weight in gold.

But by then, it too will all be gone.

So for now, as the matter stands, yes, these are all the clothes we have.
Monuments

Lust in the heart shows
not in the glanced at
red soles clicking by,

but the stare that follows.

Not the flash of thought gone
like minnows in the water,

but the turbid fantasy—snagged
and wriggling on the hook.

In the chest, a hot ember blows;
a stone around the neck grows;

pyrite grave markers stand in rows.

Lust leaves cairns,
heaped along the roads,
to testify when our children pass
and ask, What do they mean?

Tell them. Those

mark where I was weak;
mark where I failed;

mark where I broke thorns
from off the red, red rose.
The Rich, Green Snowfall

When the first twenty-dollar bill skittered past my feet
I chased hungrily, running it down like prey—
bare feet hot on the sunburned sidewalk—
until the one that brushed my cheek
was followed by two more
that whispered in my ears,
and I looked up to see

huge, identical green snowflakes descending.

People danced out into the streets
screaming happy.
Money piled up about the feet
of ash and maple like Christmas skirts.

Trash bags filled by the fistful
were packed into garages and cars.
Homes were scoured for more empty space
until swollen and bursting,

and the steamrolled serpents snaked esses
through the atmosphere, blotting out the sun.

Two feet became three
and four turned to six,
until we weren’t just wading but swimming,
not just swimming but drowning;

the world thick and dim like fog.

One face, one number
one beast, one color.
Muffled screams echoed everywhere
by other muffled screams.
Every gaping maw crammed full
with fabric gold bars,
and still money fell.

The last thing I saw was more money—
falling like green painted snow.
The last thing I heard was a rasping
like leaves on dry and ancient skin.
The One Who Came

Blood on the hay—
He came. Trembling,

they knew He would—
denied the shame put

on them. The musky, float-
ing scents and night echoes of

unseen livestock rustling
near, but uncomfort-

ably, with fear and instinct.
People live nearby—certain-

ly, they must have heard.
One cannot birth—

not even the savior of the
earth—without pain and blood.
Perhaps, We Are Gnats

In light decanted through our window
gnats zig and zag and then zug.
    Always here, yet forward moving,
    I can’t figure where they’re going
and I wonder if they even know.

Without directions, they whir and flit in the sky;
    at times shoved about in turbulence.
    What a crazy jumbled up existence—
to know to keep on, to feel that tug,
but never know where to or why.
The Light Blue Sea Forever
Indicative Mood

At the local Safeway, it’s nearly 3:45 am.
The Meow Mix cat stares at me, unblinking,
and I can’t remember why I’m here again.

In the aisles of my brain, sleep is unstocked.
Certainly, I haven’t come for cat food—
as we are catless. I look down. It’s 4:00.

I know why I am here will get figured out
if, in this electric air-conditioned glory,
for an hour or more I just wander about.

But my poorly supplied shelves, it so occurs,
are also running low on that starch of life: time.
Oh, yes. Now I remember. We need more diapers.

In the checkout line I find a mixed brood.
Youth and the living-like-it in search,
after a Friday night’s party, of drunk food.

And also parents, picking up some expense
to care for their baby and a sleepless spouse
still at home. Oddly enough, their purpose difference

you can’t tell at first glance—both drag feet,
are disheveled, sooty-eyed, and ready to get home.
But some carry Gatorade, fried dark meat,

and corn chips; while others lug wipes,
formula powder, and jumbo pack Huggies—
the ones with yellow indicator stripes.
Faithful

In Kaʻaʻawa, rains run down and the mountain
lifts a cloud into lush valley arms like a lover.

Naupaka reaches through this cracked,
slatted wood lānai and shines a wetted green
specked by white berry tears.

Salt tanged air entices the planks away
from rust flaked nails and sunken concrete pilings
to go swim in the light blue sea forever.

Naupaka pleads from this grey slatted prison
to seek out her lover with the torn half-flower.

We stand and sit on the destructuring platform
with bare sandy feet, eating grilled burgers and chicken,
drinking apple iced tea and lilikoʻi passion fruit cans.

Someone recounts our kayak voyage to Mokolii island.
I stare at another cloud running into the arms of a mountain.
You look out over the softly lapping waves.

And we all ignore the tempted deck that supports us
and stays.
I do not miss being cold.

I do not miss the sweat smell of certain soups wafting out into the streets.
I do not miss the taste of swine cartilage or of a frozen tuna’s vitreous humor in soju.

I do not miss people bumping me,
people touching me, people touching
my wife, people shoving me to get on the last subway car of the night while drunk.

I do not miss being cold.

I do not miss the glistening expectorant on the sidewalk.
I do not miss the speeding mopeds on the sidewalk.
I do not miss the passed out in their own vomit shoeless in the winter drunks on the sidewalk.
I do not miss the expats in Itaewon spending all their money and time getting smashed in Itaewon with other expats and complaining about Koreans.

I do not miss being cold.

I do not miss how every rabbit we bought in the subways near our home died in less than a year.
I do not miss the bus drivers’ insane maneuvering that always got you wherever you were going on schedule.
I do not miss the “good for health,” inexpensive, fast food—chamchi kimbap, haemul pajeon, and kimchi chigae—that warm-filled our bellies after work so frequently.
I do not miss the business and hard work rush everywhere.

I do not miss being cold.

I do not miss going to the theme park before work.
I do not miss the children I taught.
I do not miss the animal heads, swords, and
  butterfly wings my wife made out of cardboard,
  in the late night, to be props
  for the students’ silly videos.

I do not miss being cold.

I do not miss flying a kite, very high,
  in the middle of the city, from the roof
  of our apartment building, in a nothing breeze.
I do not miss travelling all night on a bus
  just for a glimpse of the blue sea
  off the Busan or Sokcho shores
  before catching the bus home again for work.
I do not miss the little *sam gyup sal* restaurant
  where we wrote on the walls in English.
I do not miss the Korean woman who gave us
  free *kimchi* because we couldn’t find a supermarket anywhere.
I do not miss the supermarkets, we eventually found
  hidden in the basements of buildings, everywhere.
I do not miss the large, fresh, cheap, delicious,
  fruit.

I do not miss being cold.

I do not miss the search for the familiar.
I do not miss the discovery of the new.
I do not miss the sandwich shop lady who gave us
  coffee mugs for Christmas and put sliced strawberries
between the bread and meat and the egg and cheese.
I do not miss Kwan Ho and Hyun Jung.
I do not miss missing the birth of their baby.
I do not miss being warm in their home in winter.

I do not miss being cold.

And I do not miss, on our days off,
  waking to look out our window, seeing the dingy
city below turned white and sparkling, and then crawling
back under the thick blankets where you were warm,
still asleep, and then hiding together from the chill air.

I most certainly
  do not miss being cold.