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The Blind Arcade

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE BLIND ARCADE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

David Svenson

2011

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by David Svenson, and entitled *The Blind Arcade*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Denise Duhamel

Richard P. Sugg

Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 7, 2011

The thesis of David Svenson is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Dean Kevin O'Shea
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2011

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE BLIND ARCADE

by

David Svenson

Florida International University, 2011

Miami, Florida

Professor Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

THE BLIND ARCADE is a collection of poems chronicling several of the pressing conditions of contemporary American life: poverty and class, sex, violence, hunger, longing and mourning, and the inverse of the latter, requited love and emotional ecstasy. The poems are set in crowded markets, on trains and in apartment bedrooms, city squares and campus quads, dentist chairs, bridges, riverbanks, and kitchens. This contemporary and familiar backdrop dictates the form of most of these poems to be free verse, although terza rima, ekphrastic, haiku, and prose forms are also utilized. The book presents its poems in three sections. As if a series of decorative arches in a blind arcade, they are not broken down into themes. Rather, they are each utilized and are ordered around the weight of their individual topics to demonstrate the capriciousness of life.

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I.

TO MY NEIGHBOR

I fear, one night, the bed will crash
through the ceiling on top of me.
I fear I will be sleeping when she receives
that acme of thrusts,
that under the precipitating dust and splinters
preceding their fall, I won't hear
what it's come to: that pleasing labor
of exhausted sheets and water cups
knocked off her Ikea nightstand, blossoming
cracks along the drywall, a lip-bit yawp
emanating through the jalousie windows,
the open slats, a head bumping
the rough hand crank, the peg-leg
bed frame etching their names into the wood floor
like a yearbook of the night.

As the springs approach my chest,
what look will be on their faces?
Who will be the first to ask, "Are you okay?"

After the haze and down settles,
after he fumbles for the trashcan,
after their pillows nudge closer

and she wraps herself in sheets
and he hangs a foot over the mattress edge,
who will stumble into my moonlit kitchen
for a glass of water?
Who will raise the blinds and remember
that light in the hallway? What will I do,
alone, crushed under the weight
of all that love?

I'M JEALOUS OF THE POSTMAN

I'm jealous of the postman
tucked into his nightly chore of sleep
on a cold New England night.

I look out to my backyard
where innocuous leaves
make black pools under the trees,
under an orange night city sky.

The shed is decrepit.
The bleeding heart has shriveled to the soil.

Whose house tonight will I visit?
Who will look for me beneath the crisp halo of a lamppost?
Whose name will I thumb at the buzzer?
Who will peer from a lifted corner of window lace?

I will seek through the streets
a window alight, someone else looking out
onto the strange silhouette of an empty tree,
a whirlpool of raked shadows and a worn shack of lost tools.

And in the bitter morning I will see you walk down Ledge Hill

fingering mail slots to fill each with their own.

The young bachelorette will look from her morning cup

onto you for a letter, a name, a face.

And I will sit on my stoop to greet you

and put forth my cold hand for any reply.

ODE TO MY PROSTATE

O Protector, Guardian, One

Who Stands Before me:

your Greek meanings say it all.

You are strong, you are vigilant.

My pants reek of your testosterone.

I find you mildly cute, your walnut shape

a caricature of the Egyptian god Bes,

dispeller of evil. And from your shell

you secrete an alkaline harbinger,

a shade of X or Y.

I have come

to know you well.

You volunteer your squeeze

of smooth muscle. My lover regards

you highly. We coo together in the darkness.

I attribute this to you,

lovingly, bequeathed like a silent sonata

from your romantic stroma.

But, oh, Prostate, what wickedness you have done.

I have felt your pulse in the most public

and private of places, sonic vibrations
unseen as you continued to grow
your diction of drips. You uttered
your innocence in early years
until you gravely learned to count.
If only PSA was a public service announcement.

You are a metastasis in the roots.

A gobstopper lodged
in a thirsty throat.

The forgotten nut of a squirrel.

Winter has not treated you well.

I think of those you have taken
with the lymphatic curse.

Every day I remember my father,
his brother, their father, his father.

Every year you are on trial.

Prostate, this is an exam,
stick 'em up!

SONG

In the beginning light of dawn I follow the flow of sheets
across the crest of your collar to that middle dip, cup or lock,
like an eye follows the lines of merging traffic lanes.

I study the collar's etymology and spend all afternoon
at work in a happy whisper, "clavicula, clavicula."

It slips from my tongue as does your last name:

it defines where you're from, traceable to a small house
on a French riverbank, a thin footpath to a narrow door,
as I stand before you in the evening

and trace inward from your shoulders
across the gentle wave of your clavicles
toward that tiny gap in the middle
where I rest my hand and translate from the Latin: "little key."

PRAYER FOR THE DEAD

The cacophonous birds and leaves
gathering around the open door.
Spinning ice in tumblers,
three picture frames and a box
of baby teeth packed in yesterday's newspaper.

We are tired of clichés.
The moon hangs like a stalactite.
The broad drop of night
brings low every starry burst
and black cup of sky. She's been dead
for a good part of the day.
We sleep before we select
her casket. I think
of the gold handrails
and the jet finish.
When she is buried,
we carry over handfuls of dirt.
The rain sparkles
little constellations
in the black soil
shining on its way down.

MATT

Matt I have given you rent, and now I have nothing.

Matt three-hundred fifty dollars, December first 2006.

I don't agree with the price.

I haven't been full since Thanksgiving.

Fuck your white collar.

Matt when will you eat leftovers?

Matt when will you grow out your beard?

When will you see to the blood?

When will you fool the paper Cyclops and return to the womb?

After all Odysseus had his struggles.

Matt your dog is barking.

The double door garage is empty.

The guest room is dusty.

The myrtles are thinning.

Matt when will you replace checks with words for Grandma?

I'm tired of your showboating.

When can I live off a tired back's wage, eat bread and apple, and have your respect?

Matt after all we were raised by one mother.

Your expectations are too much for me.

You made me want to be a bum.

There must be a common ground.

Brother Mike is in California; he won't be back.

I've tried to understand what you want from me.

I refuse to alter my ambitions.

Matt stop questioning I don't know what I'm doing.

I've listened to the BBC for years; every month a regime topples and a politician is ousted.

I was a skateboarder as a kid, now a bellied poet.

I get high and eat ice cream, leaving the spoon in the sink.

I'm not sorry.

I sit in my room for hours with photos of Rodin's bronze.

Every time I go to Sarasota I get drunk and go home alone.

My destiny is in trouble.

Our sister thinks my wage is fine.

Neither of us want me to wake and curse business shoes.

Matt I'll never work with a tie under fluorescents.

I'm prone to migraines and have ADD anyway.

Matt I still haven't told you what Grandma thinks of you after I told her my rent.

Matt I'm finally talking to you.

Are you listening?

Are you going to live your life by business journals and video games?

I love video games.

I play them every time the lights are out.

I play them alone in bed.

I play when I turn off my phone.

I play when my faculties no longer exist.

I read the journals over cereal at noon.

They always talk about goals.

Athletes have goals. Salesmen have goals. Graduates are goal oriented.

My underwear have been worn to transparency.

I realize we don't agree.

I live alone in your house.

The cat sleeps at my feet by night, the dog by day.

We're all so tired.

The clock is ticking against me.

Matt I don't know a thing about my IRA and your mortgage payments are insane to me.

I'd better inventory my worth.

One pencil sharpener, an empty medicine bottle, scratched glasses, three topless muffins,
four balding tires.

I have thin volumes of photos I look at only when high and my stash is low.

Matt you don't really want to work all these days.

Matt it's for your truck with the pristine bed, even bird shit won't stick, white leather
cleaned and cleaned to a blemish.

Now you need worker to repair that leather.

Pay some blue collar, hire the redneck, save the worker, create the corn bread.

Matt hire me.

Matt when I was thirteen I'd pack a cigarette with weed and sit on the viney shore of a

stone creek en route to school

The mornings were cold, I'd throw rocks, make dams, the matches were free and the trail

soft and untrodden.

Headlines read one out of eight on these roads are millionaires and the house costs are

dropping.

Matt you're using my generic detergent.

You have popsicle sticks around the house.

Buster hasn't had new litter for weeks.

The front door squeaks.

Matt are we becoming poor?

Matt this is the impression I get from walking around the house.

Is this true?

I don't want to turn leaves of pages in a homogenous suit.

This is serious.

Matt I'd better stop and sleep.

I have work at nine.

MY FATHER'S HAIR

His hair was said to have the curls of springs.
His hair, I hear, was once a thing to see,
like well-endowed tails of meteors.
Beautiful, sad: James Dean's arm in a sling;
Odysseus and waves of Brylcreem, big rings
to swoop over the eyes—Chaplinesque—to please
the girls to dance, the boys to sit on their seats
and kick the dust from under Harleys spinning.
But Death is no just barber; He takes from the top,
He lops the locks with candid fervor,
He wraps our necks with ties of scratchy plastic.
My father, balding, shameless, tried and fought
the rusty blade of cancer, sweating, fevered,
but was hung in the woods like Absalom.

THE WALKING MAN

You stand erect, astride, as if lacking a head

didn't mean anything.

You hold the middle of the gallery like a general

charging with his troops, expecting the concession,

or maybe just waiting for a horse.

Your rippled bronze legs are magnificent, callous from fighting

and three days foxhole hunkering. You seem perched

looking over the blood-caked brim for victory,

or maybe you're dismembered and looking for peace.

Your torso bears muscle and scars, the tissue

fused with sweat and blood from attack, from triumph

and is present, forward, reaching—if only you had arms.

But now the museum is closing,

and you look more like the man outside,

across Harvard Yard, at 7-11 with a cardboard placard.

Faceless. Handless.

And it's beginning to snow.

WATCHING YOU DIE

Two oranges grow a foot apart
the older below the young
its rind growing thick and pastel
creamy like a waning sun.

The younger basks
in the exposed canopy, gathering
as much from above through the waves
of leaves as the older continues
to hang lower and lower
until the weight exceeds
the umbilical branch.

It falls to the rotting ground
away from the young
of the same seed.

There's a strangeness in this being
picked by an invisible hand
dropped among the cracked and dirty
with a shot of zest shooting up on impact.

That, too, falls back to the earth.

FRANCISCAN GARDEN

I walk to the iron-side sandbox
and light a memorial candle for my mother,
who was burned then buried in Saint Francis Garden,
milk for the tulips, outside her mass,
my head bowed with tears and the wither of a September flower,
who was drained, stuffed, eyes plucked and fitted
doll-like mannequin, haunt of my later dreams, laid in a casket
somber, ashen, not my mother, just another empty window,
who rode for miles to morgue with no pulse,
rigor mortis, lips of water, lungs flooded, the asphyxiation of her years,
who fell alone hanging a plant, hit her head, and ebbed
into the pool wearing a Christmas nightgown, a gift from some past December,
who gave me a hug and kiss, strange endurance two days prior
on a Sarasota concourse with my fear of flying,
“You don’t have to go,” she said, open eyed, and held me.

PICTURES

Looking at BBC's Pictures of the Day—

January 26, 2009: A Kaiapo tribesman in feathers and ink

A Parisian model in dove hat back turned but with eyes

A Singapore lunar eclipse, not seen here, but captured there with a camera

A sculptured polar bear on ice floating on the Thames past Parliament and Big Ben's
time on a sunny winter noon

Burning money in a Pakistan bank, protests, leaders, shouting

Parading ferries, ducks and tugs past Sydney Opera House, making wake

Hundreds of Hindus bathing in the Ganges offering prayers to the Sun god on a foggy
day, splashing, shouting, dipping, falling, rising, carrying-on on each others'
backs, carrying-on in the jubilation

Obama's a nice change, and the inauguration was nice, and so was the music,
and those girls will make nice women, and everything is nice, nice to see
so many people gathered, especially in the not-so-nice weather. So great to see
such an occasion—isn't it nice? I'm glad it was all caught on camera

Emperor penguins are losing, down 95% by 2100 and the Antarctic is melting seen from
that big eye SPOT, a sort of camera

And on the main page the second set of American octuplets scream in the Los Angeles
night, slapped and snipped but imageless, hidden from a camera

And scientists say, "Cut those calories; Gain memory!"—

Have I forgotten?

Do the Hindus remember?

Do the octuplets exist to you?

If I diet

will I remember your face? Clicking past these photos I realize I haven't a single picture
of you

MOSCOW

They sort through the rubble
to find the broken pieces:
a hand, a foot, a dusty femur.
The ambulances leave in silence.
The reporters talk very quietly.
They have long lists on their notepads.
Across the street another train rolls by
with windows full of eyes.
Beneath the tracks the dancers
are ordered back into the studio,
the feet of their leotards covered with ash.

With the bomb wrapped around her waist,
how carefully she must have walked
onto that train. Did she ask for space,
say *excuse me*?

Did she raise her arms over her head,
her hair reaching down her back,
her shoulders tight against her neck?

What ceiling or system map or advertisement
or lovers' names did her fingers caress?
Who was touched by that plumage of fire

unfolding around her beating heart?

SONNET AFTER FRANK O'HARA

Complacency is the artifact of my age gutters are gathering
the first petals of the season isn't everyone collecting an object I am
considering nothing any longer I was told to something like a barrage
is occurring every day is a skirmish between North and South just
because one's right and what's the other reason I am punching the keys
with the ribbon tossed to hammer out the last of the ink the a is disappearing
this c has carried its last of answers b still hangs onto a hint of impression

I am thinking of you are you undressing forget it let's run outside
the trees bend under the street lamps the garage sale signs are piling up the poles in

Sweden

a lot of strange things are happening Malmö is bursting the sun is glowing or is it
shimmering

I've considered Seattle is that far enough I think of the shifting plates it must
begin with an outpouring Vladikavkaz is rebuilding how heavy their tomatoes grow
their carts are toppling everyone hides from Volgas the last trains are leaving

Madrid

what are the artists in Seoul thinking are their minds made up I have every day

ON CROWDED TRAINS IN CITIES

On crowded trains in cities,
the hungry wrapped in blankets in corners,
the handsome tall in their suits,
the beautiful with their gloved hands on rails,
the cake decorator, he knowing when to get off,
the appraiser reading the system map,
the lawyer with his handkerchief over his mouth,
the web designer looking at his hands,
the laborer looking at his hands,
the teacher talking to a student,
the student popping her gum,
the transit cop eyeing those boarding,
the mother with her daughter,
the father with his friend,
the grandmother with her shopping cart
 thinking of the grandfather,
the musician's hands in his pockets,
the waiter at the door,
the boy leaning into the glass, staring into fog,
under San Francisco Bay, over the Charles,
under the East River, waiting to come up
for that breath of air.

II.

BRIDGES

Anderson Memorial Bridge, Charles River—Boston, Massachusetts

How many times have I crossed this bridge?

All this brick beneath me,

what was it meant to keep up?

My father is dying in Alabama.

The bricks are falling out.

His blood festers with cancer.

The roadway is cracked from winter.

His skin is as thin as the cheapest paper.

The patina plague edged with snow.

His eyes follow the image of something

invisible. At 3 a.m. no one drives

over this bridge. From Alabama, the news

comes slow. Some cars are garaged.

He labors under phlegm in breathing tubes.

The narrow arches meet

with the clap of the lapping river.

The nurses bathe him daily.

They measure his low pressure.

He hasn't pissed for days.

What committee organized this bridge?

Who wanted to cross from Cambridge to Allston?

What did we do before we crossed?

The streetlamps fade,

two halogen marauders

in aluminum tourniquets.

George Washington Bridge, Hudson River—Manhattan, NY, to Fort Lee, NJ

What shall I call you, bridge?

I think of all the young men crossing

beneath your steel towers, biting nails,

driving to what destination they have in their pocket—

how many times has the Hudson been gazed

at outside of their windows?

I am driving to death.

Not my own. What carries in the river below
slips along the shores past the Little Red Lighthouse.

Each wave unfolds over the flotsam,
the flotsam rolls over itself.

Pieces begin to come apart.

The light that no longer shines.

The Lighthouse, cradled
under your suspended length,
is like the mottled lungs whimpering in Alabama.

Walt Whitman Bridge, Delaware River—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Your hair was once the hair of kings.

The wave would tie up traffic
with a lean on a corner, cigarette
stuck to your bottom lip.

With a curl you could pull up the sun at three a.m.

But what brings you down
drops all the Odyssean bravado,
splashes water in the James Dean wink

and leaves you wrapped in sheets
not in New York or barbaric Greece,
but in Alabama—not out eyeing heels
or wrapping garlands across sun-tanned breasts
or chasing down crooks or out making money—
with an untied gown and wreathes of IVs
draped across your cratered chest
with yellow bags on one side of you
and red bags on the other,
and a nurse suctions the spit from your throat
and a doctor removes the cuff
and a machine paints your heart green
and jagged like a crown of thorns
and the clock is moved to above your bed
and the night team comes to read your chart
and check the beeps and sweep
the silver strands landing around your bedside.

In a pile, it looks like a mound of quarters,
the silver heads shining
under the evening lights.

Crossing the Appomattox River—Petersburg, Virginia

At the river's turn
the floating docks sit on top
of the iced water

Yellow morning sky,
I receive fewer phone calls
the closer I get

Branches on the shore
frozen in the ice—the leaves
tumbling down stream

Because the falls stop
us going any further,
here is the city

Slow between the hills,
the river is a cold snake
rolling over rocks

Snow in the mountains,
sleet over the interstate—
no more calls tonight

Seneca River—South Carolina, I-85

I imagine it lasting all night,
kicking legs into the air,
knocking over the picture,
pushing the clock to the nightstand's edge,
her chin reaching toward the ceiling,
her toes driven toward the floor,
moaning out the open windows,
the neighbors turning in their beds
bemoaning our moans or maybe
reveling and them too finding each other
under the sheets, the whole corner
of the apartment building thrusting and bumping
in unison like a great clock or turbine or mortar
crushing our beds into a mound of dust.

right after I left for the night,
after I told you the time and date
as if you understood—like time
was carried in those tubes
running through your body—
like everything still mattered,
your body still ticking,
your fingers still counting,
your mind still thinking.

You are the body
covered in kudzu, fallen,
floating down river,
and the leaves box themselves
around you and the current melts
the ice with its friction
and the moon continues its shine
even as these streetlamps
begin their fade.

I see you pass
beneath me, under this bridge
named for another.

I see you, father,

floating to bridges farther down river
with names I'll some day know.

III.

IN THE COURSE OF THE LAST THREE HOURS

He turned his eyes in their waxy rheum

looking left and right as far as we had gathered—so far
too far—so as to see us all—I was finally larger than him
then—his tracheotomy the least of my surprises.

Under his sheets we imagined the undiscovered—purple blemishes
shining like coins.

And when he was dead

we pulled the entire sheet over him like closing a medal in its case.

One of us called a friend.

One of us called the nurse.

One of us tried to cover his exposed wrist.

One of us tried to get the time by looking above the bed
but found only an empty space where we expected a clock.

HAIKU

Bluebird in morning,
snapping the tiny branches
of a lone sapling.

If one more train passes
tonight, I'm throwing the window
out of my head.

If everyone worked
like the mailman,
we'd have more rain.

Ripe avocados
fall into the pool at night.
Five years since your death.

this is the third leaf
to fall against my shoulder
at your treeless plot!

POEM ON A JUMPER AND WITNESS

I am beginning to fear this fall. Just like last week, when I was alone, when you were out of town, again I was dreaming, I could have beaten the rain drops but I knew it wasn't real, I would never falling out of a building dressed like that—who jumps in pajamas? This is so much nicer, together, I'm wearing that dress that you love so much to peel off me. It's like a date. It's like we're skipping work together for a secret breakfast where we'll meet and pretend it's serendipity, our chance of falling together in a dream, maybe we'll float, that'd be nice, past all these windows we look out of every day: there goes the copy room where you first kissed me, you shouldn't have at work, we really shouldn't have, but I fell for you—this dream must be a metaphor—you're squeezing my hand so tightly. Maybe you're squeezing me in our bed, the touch manifesting in this dream. Maybe when I wake you'll be there, maybe we'll go out for breakfast, right after we hit, as I hit the alarm.

it was like a blue, uh, like a real royal blue coat and it, she just came down, um, kinda straight, head first, with, uh, another guy holding her hand, and that's the one that that I can remember, she, uh/hm, yea, they looked really, when they did come down, though, I don't know I just watched them, I couldn't take, just watched them come down, and they would, uh, the speed at which they came down was so fast, I've never seen anything drop that fast it was like, you know, terminal—whatever you call it—but it was like everything else flow/fly a lot slower than the bodies coming down they were dropping and you could tell when they came down but at that point I'd never, you know, you just figure,

from where I was standing there's a façade and they were dropping behind the façade, um, and, uh, you know they looked, they looked like they were at peace they didn't look like, um, they weren't flailing they weren't yelling, they weren't screaming, they were, uh, they were just floating, but fast.

THEY ARE CUTTING DOWN THE RUBBER TREE

Grown close as a kiss along the wall
And upward to the second floor kitchen window
The rubber tree has limbered waxy leaves
Holding the wind and bending the branches to gesticulate
Like a pawing goodbye at the jalousie windows.
They are cutting down the rubber tree.

First the top branch falls, a swoosh of leaves
Like the sound of a breaking and receding wave.
The brief stump oozes in the afternoon sun
And the tiniest of ants, still scurrying along the bark,
Become affixed in the mess, gathering along the edges
Like a slowly shimmering crown.

Under the new light, the second branch comes down
And lies over the first with its natural bend
Like an arm over the mourning.
They are cutting down the rubber tree.

Then they cut that high stump
And repeat the endowment of a moving crown.
The witnesses below make haste to gather the fallen limbs.

From the scaffold drops another branch
Until the stump reaches the bottom
And the crown glimmers just above the roots

As if rested on the seat of a throne.

A line of sap trickles down the buttressing roots,
Gathers the sawdust and comes to a catatonic stop.
They are cutting down the rubber tree.

I AM THE HAIR OF MY FATHER

Glossy sable arches scattered farther than I can bother,
my sheets look like a closet full of someone's winter coats.

I am the hair of my father.

Under the harp of my ribs lay these notes
with their familiar beat.

I remember you singing at midnight on the bow of your boat.

I leave my building and walk for hours in the lonely streets
where telephones ring from a hundred open windows.

November foliage gathers like black shadows at my feet

as they did in your last photo taken in Longmeadow,

limp and leaning under the spiny leaves of a hemlock.

Could we have known this to be our life's foreshadow?

As the sun goes down winter rain descends my block,

a western wind bends limbs and rocks empty porch chairs.

At my stoop lies a trampled flower stalk.

I return to these sheets without a care,

to my degenerative skin

and my thinning, thinning, fading hair

POEM ON CHARCOAL

She doesn't move
because I haven't asked her to.
Instead, I capture
the shadows of her breasts.
I follow the ligaments
to the ends of her arms.
Her shoulders are tiny fins.
Her collarbones meet in the middle
like little keys into a lock.
I press my thumb into the dust
of charcoal fallen beneath the easel
and add shade like the shade
under her hair. Under my fingers
I create the light on her body,
I create the darkness behind
the cups of her elbows
and the dig of her hips
into the sofa. The cross
of her thighs is a deep streak
of a sooty line. Her tuft
of pubic hair curls under my hand.

Rain begins to drip
through the open window,
that channel of light.
Her dusty body glistens
on the page, in the droplets
falling down the paper
gathering like a mound of Venus.

AND CRIES THE LION

At four a.m., the wind and trees are alone but for the stars,
and I look inside this poem and others to find you,
Father, while listening to Bach or Mahler or Handel
and compare the violin to a blackbird on a wire.

—Strange, new consciousness—

I have your last letter, yellowed, five months now,
next to a frame with your picture, my smile your smile, the visage
like an epitaph on a nightstand where I rise every morning
and choke on dry winter air, window open,
your box closed.

With the new light, I walk the burgundy bricks of Florida,
cough at corners, am curiously fatigued looking at windows,
buy a paper, read the comics—of Linus losing his blanket—
and envision what it must be like, now well into spring, to see flowers
grow over your Alabama grave.

I envision your life before the stifle of dirt, before the needle prick
and chemo drip, the self-rising chair and metal tongue, loss
of nails, tiresome anemia, and your eyes looking back to write
letters of grief for age, yet joy for a new covenant with your sons and daughter
scribbled from a chair and sent to mail by weary cane.

And I recount the days to the grave, count backward your PSA
under Sunday's clear same blue sky.

What happened to the Rodin stature of your early 20s, 30s,
or even five years ago at Mother's funeral, when we dusted the garden
with her ashes with the likeness of the hand of God—omnipotent!
But then you succumbed to thin skin, bleeding knuckles, the windward seat of age.
And I, still dreaming in the incandescence of engines, smiles,
and reflective stop signs, now late in morning, remember seeing you last
July after I had traveled north and south from the sour summer swamps of Florida,

past Seneca River's banks, tornado Jersey Turn-Pike, to the dark solitude of a Cambridge
bar listening to rain—I brought you all this, all the stories of my summer wanderings
alone through Walden woods or heavy metropolis streets,
or sitting in a Boston concert hall with Mozart,
dreaming of a gondola on a creased river—to your chair,

until it was your hospital bed. There, there was something stoic
in your stiffly catatonic arms, taking needles with calm, no movement.
No fret over cancer creep to lungs, poisoned blood, or fairy nurses
and sponge baths. I listened to the wheezy ventilator. Your breaths
ebbed on the shores of Lethe; my stories got shorter.

For a week I heard the doctors' news: preparation for the grave.

I'm sure you listened too, in the way of a mute—strange,
perhaps you blinked, for a week.

Florida sweats today. I've walked all the oldest streets
and read the history placards on corners. The sun
is setting. The bay's water graduates from green to black.
I walk home, sit at my desk, and wait for another sun.

CROWN

As the dentist preps my molar for the crown, he notes my ground-down incisors and canines. He runs his latex finger over their plateau. He pushes down on each like planting a seed. He asks how long it has been. When I answer, mouth agape, lips dragged by the dry edges of his gloves, he stops casting, puts his hands on his thighs. Sitting above the exam light, he looks like an effigy of darkness. You're awfully young to lose your parents.

In school, the crown draws attention: a gold tooth on the high school senior. People like to remark on its sparkle. People like to see me smile. Now everyone thinks I am the king, a hidden jewel among the spit and breath. But it hurts to drink. It cuts my tongue. It bleeds over floss. It clinks in my sleep.

BROKEN FACE

My father's watch stopped at 8:04.

The nurse turned to each of us

to mark the date, our tired ticking heads,

her pale gown spinning around our bezel.

In death, my father's face, pallid and stern,

crunches his numbered crowns.

At night I see his face break through crystal.

THE VIEWING

In the photos she's looking away
as if history, a girl pulling tulips,
an exhibit in the museum of our lives
under the plaster arches
of the blind arcades.

My mother was an organ donor
and of all things to take, they took her eyes.
We are told to look for something, a sphere
of marble or metal, something precious.

SUNDAY ON THE ESPLANADE

Love

I take my hat
from the wind.

The wreaths separate
on the water.

Sunday the sun's gone down.

Cambridge, Boston,
old rusty Longfellow,
carry me home to a dog
to the quiet wood floors.

I give up!

I don't want to be the old
grey-hair leaving Harvard Sq
with a bag and frown
onboard the Red to home.

The wind!

Even the wind through the tunnel,
how magnificent!

To be a sheet of paper

a wisp of hair

brake dust motes

MIT swaddled

money emptied from wastebaskets

in the wind!

WHEN I HEAR GOD-TALK ON THE RADIO

The voice is Ecclesiastes.

It speaks to me in my underwear.

The yellow digits simmer in the darkness
on a dusty nightstand, corners of drywall flake
to reveal the sky through cypress panels.

The voice scatters pennies onto the floor

from rusty coffee cans
when passing static scratches into my ears
or the unholy sales pitch of durable squeegees
screeches unloving across the puckered speaker.

The voice curls the wire antenna like a serpentine sword

to receive that which it thinks best,
cutting among sirens and a crying
child in the apartment above.

The voice competes for my cuddle.

It rides my turned back. It pinches like a hernia.

It condemns my woman; the voice has never been laid!

The voice is a sheet on summer nights,
a wet broom, wind chiming again and again,
the sharpener in a jar of shavings,
every pencil is pointless!

The voice blasts under my sheets
paternal incantations of PM preaching
and in the sober mornings I wear white
dress shirts and dark coal pants; the body is a vehicle,

the voice would rather not change the oil.

I pick up my books like weary flesh,
shave off this beard, gather the hairs
and blow them into the silver tassels
of my browning shades.

The voice blows the blinds open,
sends drafts across the desk,
across the splintering floor,
under the crack of a door.

The voice knocks over cups,
the corkboard falls from the wall,

the lamp shade tatters,
my eye glasses slide across the nightstand
and stop in front of my mother's picture, the one

The voice keeps up all night, kicking
in my dreams.

ODE TO THE CAR HORN

Big fist nighttime bully
running through the streets with an angry fist
touting your blare under apartment windows
waking the baby, opening a geriatric eye
under the auspice of urgency, attention, or was it a cry for help

Horn, how I loathed you
Was it too much to seek silence on this sandy coast from dusk to dawn
kicking sand like a turtle to cover my eggy ears,
did I ask too much, did I step into your world?

Horn, I am beginning to question, like death, whose world this is
Down in Florida you leave men sweating and cursing
under the forsaken heat, and your call shocks the coconuts from their boughs
and I grind my teeth through lines at the grocery store, “All in one? Meat wrapped? No
bag for the lemons? And what about this?” They’ve lost their hearing aids, their
fingers daubed with Vaseline

I grind my knuckles across the gates at the zoos—they’re full of alligators and bugs
How many doorknobs I’ve replaced and lug nuts to the salty air

Horn—then it was June, I saw you on a trip in Boston
There, after crossing the Commons, I found my hidden verdure

I wandered through your cattle call of angelic bells,
the sounds of movement, the uncanny consciousness of face and fist
so long subdued on the retired sunset coast from which I bore this inert desire

Was it Ford's wish to soak the streets with sound from corners, blocks and alleys
the same sound I hear now at Park to Kendall to Central to Harvard to Porter?
The love of man's motion runs deep into Cambridge

Ah, horn, horn that I once felt sorry for and not for your ability to, say, inspire,
I saw your dedication to keep a street a street, a fist a fist, and my heart
from growing stagnant and unchanged, although now my own works
only half the time

WEDDING UNDER MT. WASHINGTON

The peak sleeps behind a flurry.

Bride and groom

see each other, the crowd disappears.

The cog grinds its teeth up the track.

The burning

fuel starving for air,

nightmarish pillows of smoke—

All morning the

morning sky has been darkening,

a centerpiece after the last dance.

My suit holds my waiting, their first

kiss sews my buttons.

I am burning

for a place at the peak,

over the cog wheel, a starry ascent.

BOMB IN VLADIKAVKAZ

The smoke furls below the clouds.
The pigeons return
to their market rookery.
Autumn's leaves tumble
across a tattered scarf.
The leafy head
cabbage rolls
across the littered ground past feet
of men shuffling through bits of metal.
They pick up the pieces
they sift with their feet.
One finds the metal shell
cracked and dotted
with craters,
the white burn and blast
of tiny shrapnel.
One pulls a grisly bar
from the school wall,
caked in a dust over pulpy juice
as it swung through the open market,
slicing through the various fruits,
finding the limb of another,

cutting through that, cutting through that
marrow and stopping in the heart-
red brick.

Ball bearings roll out
of car doors lifted from the ground
by men in yellow, rolling toward the dip
in the middle of the market where the bomb
is collecting, those horrible pieces.

The authorities are reconstructing the bomb.
They need to find the horrible pieces.

The small mound is gathering, it is growing
into its own modern monster, it is building
its own face. They see the bolted eyes,
rods of teeth, brains of bearings spilling
from the metal skull. They pull the wires
from a heap of concrete, the frayed red and yellow
ends, toss it onto the pile and the burnt hair
of the bomb hangs over its sooty eyes.

They point at it and yell,

“bomb!” They call it

by name, “Bomb!”

They heave the cracked chassis,
they heap the broken bench seat

on top and around
they place the dotted doors
without windows, without
the hand cranks, the rusted
and fragmented floor,
the ruptured roof,
the warped wheels
and strips of rubber.
They point and yell,
“car bomb!”
They call it by name,
“Car Bomb!”
They throw a fingerless hand
through the window,
bits of jaw, a shattered rib,
the shoe, the femur,
the heart
until everything is whole,
until everything is back
to the way it was,
he’s back in the rented Volga,
he shifts from park
to drive, he steers

around the vegetable carts,

he turns up the radio,

he unblocks the sun,

he breathes in the words,

“Holy, Holy, Holy,”

he lets the switch go.

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