

Perpetual Motion Machines: Poems

A Creative Thesis

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of Millersville University of Pennsylvania

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of Master of Arts in English

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Perpetual Motion Machines: Poems

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### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

In a variety of poetic forms and styles, this creative thesis aims to explore the problem that humans have in being mortal (finite), while also having the awareness and cognitive capacities to contemplate the infinite (or eternal) both spiritually/mystically and rationally/mathematically. What is it like to be finite while being able to fathom the infinite? Why do some things last while other things do not? How is this central and universal to the human experience? What does the irresolvable tension between the concepts of the finite and infinite (which can take an endless variety of forms) tell us about modern/scientific/secular or traditional/spiritual/mystical ways of constructing meaning? Are these modes of meaning making compatible or at odds?

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

This project will take the form of a poetry manuscript written in three parts. The first section, titled “All These Ghosts,” explores the ways in which humans are “haunted” by both the infinite and the otherworldly, even in a contemporary secular context. The second section, titled “Love and the Void,” explores the deep joys of human connection, even in the shadow of sorrow found in recognizing the limitations of the experience of living. The third section is titled “In

Search of Perpetual Motion.” The poems in this final section will explore variations of the “endless” metaphor of perpetual motion machines. Throughout the last 1000 years, inventors, academics, and engineers have attempted to create a machine that runs forever on its own power, even generating power in certain cases. In essence, the search for perpetual motion is the alchemy of physics. According to the modern understanding of the Laws of Thermodynamics this type of machine is impossible. However, this hasn’t stopped many thinkers from attempting the impossible task. This metaphor is a means of trying to capture the folly and dignity of humanity: that we can, and often tragically try, to do (or believe) impossible things. Additionally, this final section will involve a number of historical, scientific, and philosophical sources that will be used directly or indirectly as source materials.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### **i. Influences: “Becoming” a Poet**

As a beginning poet during my undergraduate studies, I was drawn to the images of William Carlos Williams and the heady modernist work of T.S. Eliot. But, at a library book sale one semester, I found a slim volume of Wallace Stevens’ selected poems, which I read and carried around with me for at least a few months, mesmerized by his detached, abstract imagination and philosophical flare. Around this same time I began reading Billy Collins’ selected works, as well as the early love poems of Pablo Neruda. Collins’ conversational, unpretentious style, as well as Neruda’s rich sensuality and musicality were productive counterbalances to the high-toned seriousness of Stevens and Eliot. Furthermore, in the summer before my senior year, I came across an essay from the Winter 1998 issue of the *Georgia Review* titled “In Praise of Folly” by Charles Simic. In the essay, Simic writes about the poet’s role in society throughout history so imaginatively (and brazenly) that he very much influenced my understanding about the logical illogic of the poetic imagination. The essay’s central argument is that poetry serves to “make a mockery of everything sacred” through a process of inquiry by “which fundamental epistemological, metaphysical, and aesthetic questions can be raised and answered....[and] through which ideas are tested, dramatized, made both a personal and a cosmic issue.” After reading the essay, I got my hands on a copy of Simic’s collection, *Walking the Black Cat* (1996), which was (I think) the first contemporary collection I ever read cover to cover. It was fascinating, surreal, and left a deep impression. Later, after graduating, I took an internship at the Lancaster Literary Guild where my assignment was to research and curate an exhibit on Robert Frost’s life and work. While I don’t consider Frost’s work to be a major influence on my own, many of Frost’s aphorisms about what poetry is and how language works

have stayed with me. (For instance, “All language is a feat of association.” Or, “Poetry is a way of remembering what it would impoverish us to forget.”)

I’ve never written more prolifically than in the first few years of seeing myself as “a poet.” From 2010-2013 I wrote several poems each week and rarely revised. I would occasionally workshop poems with friends, but for the most part, I was writing on my own—short, uneven, obscure poems styled after Stevens, Collins, or Neruda. Even though almost none of the poems from this time are salvageable, in hindsight, I’m grateful that I was able to write so much, and in the writing of so many “bad” poems, I began acquiring the necessary self-awareness to continue improving.

In a way, I was saved from being another terrible, solitary writer simply by going to poetry readings in Lancaster and neighboring cities. When you have the opportunity to hear pretty good poets read their work regularly, and can also read your work to them, in public, it forces you to work hard to write better poems. I have been especially fortunate to be encouraged (by local poets who’ve been writing for decades) to read more, revise more, listen more, and be patient with the process of composing. This local cadre of poets has provided me not only a positive influence on my work and my process, but also an important sense of camaraderie. A few members of this group that I consider treasured mentors are the former Lancaster County Poet Laureates Daina Savage and Barbara Strasko, publisher Le Hinton, as well as Jeff Rath and Marci Nelligan. In particular, Marci’s recent book *The Ghost Manada* (2016) was a crucial influence on the way I think about composing poetry filtered through a controlling concept, while also employing intense, dramatic formal experimentation that deepens the treatment of the subject. Furthermore, I was able to provide comments and feedback on early drafts of Jeff’s collection, *The Old Utopia Hotel* (2016), as he was revising individual poems, cutting poems that

didn't quite fit, and adding new poems where necessary. Though I was (hopefully) providing useful critical feedback and encouragement to get the book into its final form, this experience was invaluable to me as a practical apprenticeship in learning the messy process of putting together a whole collection.

There were two major, formative graduate school experiences that have impacted my creative work and are worth discussing here. The first of those was taking Contemporary American Poetry and Poetics with Judy Halden-Sullivan. I learned far too much from this class to describe in detail here, but the overall impact of the class was to “catch me up” on the last 50 years of poetry, while also providing me greater critical insights into formal “schools,” or the varieties of “poetics” at play in the writing world of today. Contemporary poets have diverse and idiosyncratic methods of composing, all of which can be seen to be in dialogue with many different aspects of American culture, as well as with other approaches to writing poetry. I had read a few of the major poets we studied, like Allen Ginsberg and Frank O’Hara, as well as some Amiri Baraka and John Ashbery. But, I was also exposed to so many other vital and interesting poets: Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Kenneth Koch, Jack Spicer, Gary Snyder, Lyn Hejinian, Ann Lauterbach, Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, Anne Waldman, and Charles Bernstein, among others. The second formative graduate school experience that greatly influenced this project was taking an independent study with Kim McCollum-Clark investigating evolutionary and neurocognitive approaches to literature and literacy. I cannot emphasize enough how crucial this experience was in my development as a scholar, teacher, and writer. The readings from this class—particularly *On the Origins of Stories* (2009) by Brian Boyd, *The Storytelling Animal* (2013) by Jonathan Gottschall, and *The Literary Mind* (1996) by Mark Turner—unlocked completely new intellectual territory for me to explore, introducing me to the ways in which the

arts and sciences might intertwine, even across disparate interdisciplinary lines. Evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, and paleo-anthropological perspectives undergird my poetic efforts within this project, lurking beneath the surface of the poems. Beyond these evolutionary-focused readings, I've since branched out into the territory of physics, chaos theory, and mathematics, all of which contribute to the intentional and deliberate expanding of the field of reference within my poetic work. This makes it possible (and necessary) to reference the recently discovered Laniakea supercluster (in the poem of the same name), while also making subtle reference to the second law of thermodynamics in "Maxwell's Demon," as well as a famous mathematical logic problem known as an infinity paradox within "The Dartboard Paradox." It seems to me that the language used to describe and explain scientific phenomena—whether at a large, cosmic level, or a small, human level—is incredibly poetic (with its own unique poetic logic). So, I tried to adopt and co-opt this language as much as I could in order to find new ways of addressing familiar, universal subjects.

## ii. Concept: Perpetual Motion Machines as a Controlling Metaphor

Over the past decade, I've found myself in the process of allowing my given, childhood worldview (conservative, rural, Christian) to fall away, as I've come to realize just how inadequate it was in helping me live richly and meaningfully. This sometimes painful, sometimes liberating process has roughly coincided with my development as a poet. Even though I'm fairly far along on my journey of reconstructing a new, workable framework for being in the world, there remains in me (and perhaps all of us) a small kernel of desire for something transcendent, eternal, infinite. This "subject"—of feeling fully convinced of the beauty of finite human experience, while simultaneously feeling a deep sense of wonder at the magnetic pull of eternal—has made its way into much of my work as a writer, either consciously or subconsciously.

For a long time, I considered this "subject" too grandiose, too passé, or too irrelevant to the cynical, postmodern (posthuman?) literary context. I would often ask myself: Does the world really need any more sad, existential art about the loss of faith, or the so-called "death of God"? But as I improved as a poet, finding more subtle, indirect, nuanced ways of approaching complex themes, I also began to encounter the work of other writers who tackled grand, spiritual subjects in fresh and interesting ways—far removed from the angst of Walker Percy or Miguel de Unamuno. Poets *were* still doing vital work in exploring these themes, expanding our poetic reference and focus from domestic imagery to the vastness and mystery all around us. I found this especially true in the following book length collections, each of which have taught me a great deal: Christian Wiman's *Every Riven Thing* (2011), Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars* (2011), Jack Gilbert's *Refusing Heaven* (2005), Terrance Hayes' *Lighthouse* (2012), Carrie Fountain's *Instant Winner* (2014), and Ada Limón's *Bright Dead Things* (2015). But, even if I discovered

some tacit permission to explore the “subject” that seemed to be holding my attention, I had yet to find the means (both formally and metaphorically speaking) of accessing and exploring that subject.

I first came across the notion of perpetual motion machines sometime early in 2016, though I don’t remember exactly where or when. I keep several notebooks for note taking and drafting early versions of creative work, and so I was able to record my thoughts and keep coming back to the concept every few weeks whenever the idea crossed my mind. In my initial historical research, I was immediately struck by the absurdity of the search for perpetual motion. To think that anyone could build a machine that might run forever and produce more power than it consumes is so obviously impossible to the contemporary mind. As I researched further, I realized there was a complex and interesting history surrounding various attempts at achieving perpetual motion. In fact, hundreds of mathematicians, engineers, hack inventors, and fraud showmen have devised methods of creating (and, in some cases, monetizing) such a machine. Yet, none of them have ever been successful.

Over two and a half years of working on poems that deal with perpetual motion as a controlling concept, I’ve come to refer to it (both jokingly and earnestly) as an “unending metaphor.” There are simply endless ways of attempting to explore the infinite, as it literally encompasses everything. Working with such a large idea in mind (rather than on disparate, one-off poems) became energizing, liberating, and grounding for my writing process. I was able to rework many poems from before I conceived of this project into much improved final versions, while also using the historical, scientific, and philosophical research about perpetual motion (or eternity/infinity generally) to inform the composition process. Because of this, the final selection of poems in this thesis serve as somewhat of a dialogic artifact, or a focal point of intersecting

conversations about the thematic and metaphorical “subject.” (Note: I’ve been referring to the “subject” of this thesis in quotation marks because it feels reductive and strange to say so bluntly: *This is what these poems are about.* They are, of course. But the complex, multivalent, and irrational logic of the poems will refute such easy labelling. At least, that is my hope.)

Ultimately, I’ve come to understand perpetual motion as an unending metaphor for the ways humans (as finite beings) lose ourselves, and find ourselves, again and again, in the pursuit of the infinite. At its simplest, a perpetual motion machine is a thing which defies natural laws. A thing we want to be true, even though we know it cannot be. This gets at the heart of human paradox: of being a mortal while seeking (or at least being able to conceive of) the eternal, the infinite. A perpetual motion machine is an absurd and foolish thing. Yet it is also somehow essential. So many intelligent, creative people have yearned for it, in spite of knowing the pursuit is futile. We as humans are somehow cursed and blessed with a willingness and enthusiasm for attempting impossible things. The search for perpetual motion is the ultimate sisyphian task, demonstrating the hubris, ambition, and exceptionalism that has both frustrated and nourished us throughout human history. But, the metaphor also invites the realization of a larger, more tragic truth: that *nothing* lasts. Especially our attempts to “manufacture” eternity. Every attempt fails. And, if we are willing to expand our thinking far enough, to zoom out and increase our scope of reference, we can see that human existence itself will come to an end. This could be someday soon, for any number of reasons, and there may be nothing we can do about it. It is my intention to insist that this realization can be seen as both deeply tragic *and* sublimely beautiful.

### **iii. Craft and Process, Form and Arc**

The poetic techniques and approaches utilized in this project are somewhat various, and have evolved organically over the past two years of working on these poems. But there are some overarching elements that can be observed within the manuscript that developed and became clearer as I revised the poems and arranged them into the full manuscript.

First, I attempted to limit the use of the lyrical first-person perspective, except in cases where it couldn't be avoided. This allows for a larger, more expansive consciousness to be embodied within the poems. Second, as I revised the manuscript, I realized the most effective and impactful poems developed a kind of momentum and urgency, and I began shaping other poems in the collection to reflect that urgency and sense of movement. The poems achieve this momentum or urgency in a few ways, including the use of the progressive tense, frequent use of the imperative, shorter line lengths, and irregular enjambment. This is something I may have subconsciously picked up from Charles Olson's essay on his notion of "projective verse" whereby he urges poets to "get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can citizen." But, of course, I've taken his ideas and made them my own, bending them to the purposes the poems demanded. Another element I tried to employ somewhat regularly is the use of the backslash character (/) between words, which I use as a means of deliberately creating a sense of simultaneity that might express the multivalent nature of the large, complex themes explored in some of the poems.

Beyond these characteristics and choices, I made use of several recently developed contemporary forms, which helped me deal with some of the more difficult conceptual and emotional territory. "Sweet Dreams," for example, is a Bop. This form was developed by Afaa

Michael Weaver, with three stanzas (sestet, octave, sestet) of any line length, and a refrain after each stanza. Additionally, the first stanza must introduce a problem, the second must develop the problem, and the third stanza must achieve some sort of resolution of the problem. The poem “Gun to Skull” makes use of another poetic form called the Golden Shovel, which was created by Terrance Hayes in honor of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “We Real Cool.” A Golden Shovel is a free verse poem in which the last word of each line is actually a word taken from the lines of a Gwendolyn Brooks poem. A few other forms I employed are the Gigan (“Our Images of Things”) created by Ruth Ellen Kocher, the Demi-sonnet (“Laniakea”) created by Erin Kelly, and a modernized form of the Ghazal (“Ghazal for a Sacred Dwelling”), a medieval Persian form used by the Sufi poet Rumi, among others. I am indebted to Le Hinton for introducing me to these forms in a recent poetry workshop organized by The Triangle.

A final element that was important to the process of crafting these poems deals with the use of sourced linguistic material from historical writings about the subject of perpetual motion. In two such poems in the third section of the manuscript—“A Flaw in the Design (*Why*)” and “A Flaw in the Design (*Inventor*)”—I experimented with an erasure technique. Erasure is a kind of sculptural way of cutting away the parts of a source text that aren’t needed, allowing a poem to emerge from what remains. These types of poems have a way of creating power through the act of negation, which makes the old source freshly illuminating. The source texts used in these poems are a magazine and newspaper article, respectively, each covering a failed attempt to create a perpetual motion machine. This is a series that can be expanded in the future, as I come across further relevant source texts. (As a note: I first learned of the erasure method from a friend, poet Erin Dorney, who has a book of erasure poems, titled *I Am Not Famous Anymore*,

forthcoming from Mason Jar Press this summer. All the poems in the collection are sourced from interviews with the actor Shia LaBeouf).

Another way I've used a historical source text in my composition process occurs in the long poem "A Terse History of *Perpetuum Mobile*," which is also in the third section of the manuscript. This poem is an collage/assemblage constructed from language found in the table of contents to Henry Dircks' book *Perpetuum Mobile; or Search For Self-Motive Power*, published in London in 1861. As soon as I came across Dircks' work, the language of the table of contents struck me as fascinating, and after rearranged the language on the page (and adding some additional language where necessary), the intended effect is a bizarre, uncanny account of a larger dialogue between numerous inventors, mathematicians, engineers, academic institutions, and government agencies who are all trying to figure out, once and for all, whether perpetual motion *is* or *is not* possible. The sheer volume of names within this poem indicates the kind of overwhelming interest in the subject (at least in Europe during the Enlightenment), while also providing exactly what the title promises: a terse historical overview of the search for the impossible, perpetual motion machine. This particular poem's conception and composition was influenced by Robin Coste Lewis' National Book Award-winning collection *The Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2016). Coste-Lewis spoke at Franklin & Marshall College in the fall of 2016, and hearing about her composition process was illuminating for me. The collection is anchored by a long, titular poem built out of the sourced language of museum archive descriptions of Black female bodies throughout history. This idea of constructing poems entirely from sources, with some minor sculpting (but without any other dramatic alterations) stuck with me and was on my mind while I was working with Dircks' source text.

Overall, the intended formal arc of the collection is a movement from more traditional, free-verse poems at the beginning of the manuscript, toward greater experimentation and fragmentation. This arc emerged in order to convey the weight of the broad, complex, abstract, scientific subject matter as it begins to demand more latitude from the poems, pushing and expanding them beyond the formal limitations of what standard free-verse is capable of expressing and exploring.

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## **Perpetual Motion Machines**

Poems

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

—Ecclesiastes 3:11

“Oh ye seekers after perpetual motion, how many vain chimeras have you pursued? Go and take your place with the alchemists.”

— Leonardo da Vinci, 1494

“In so far as the mind sees things in their eternal aspect, it participates in eternity.”

— Baruch Spinoza

**I.**

**All These Ghosts**

## Thoughts of Judas

This is a man born to be chased  
into a tree by demons, born  
to be hanged by the neck—  
a sacrifice to betray the sacrifice.  
In caves, in the soil, in robes: whispers.  
Who the hell can see forever?

Roads not navigable by way of  
the future. Sandstorms at sunrise.  
Eating salted fish and day old bread  
in a dark upper room, the wine  
embittered by wineskins left too long  
in the storehouses. The devastating  
premonition of unquenched thirst.

Hold the hand, the very flesh of God.  
The weariness of travel in his eyes,  
the scent of unwashed days  
on his clothes. Veins full of blood  
trace forearms where sinuous hairs  
catch and keep the road's fine dust.

Perhaps it first started as an prompting glance,  
a small jealousy, a tenderness left unexpressed.  
Then prayers became only words, ceremonies.  
(The antecedent of magic is what is.)

And at the sun's setting each day  
Judas worries about complicity  
to falseness, succumbs to frustration  
over brevity, having mistaken eternity  
for a promise inside the growing restlessness  
to know what cannot be known.

## Traceries

“By fixes only (not even any more by shamans)  
can the traceries  
be bought out  
[...] men, are now their own wood  
and thus their own hell and paradise  
that they are, in hell or happiness, merely  
something to be wrought, to be shaped, to be carved, for use, for  
others”

—Charles Olson, “In Cold Hell, in Thicket”

Yet another mass grave  
found somewhere.  
Which dictator? Which  
war? Which desert? How  
fresh? The tour guide  
doesn't know or won't say,  
but he stops long enough  
to snap a few photos.

Tell me it is possible to hear  
what the desert wind whispers  
about dust becoming dust—  
*Master the art of concealing surprise.*  
*Everything is possible here on earth.*

In the future, when these deserts  
are beneath oceans, take my bones  
and reassemble them into positions  
of repose. Curate from shards  
and scraps, a new set of strictures.  
Throw away my lower jaw, my tibia  
and clavicles. Design a worthy carnival  
creature, a winsome intermezzo  
of evolutionary pressure, whose  
mutated limbs wobble, at most,  
a few hundred generations before  
a fitter brother strikes them down.

Or, upcycle me. Turn my ribs  
into a bird cage. Use my

cranium as a cereal bowl.  
Turn my forearm into a flute  
by hollowing the  
marrow cavities with obsidian.  
Now play it. Play the flute.  
Discover again the universal pentatonic  
resonance, that soundscape someday  
where bones are still wet, where  
stars shine in bare sockets.  
Let rise my femur in your hand.  
Let fall my femur on a drum head  
stretched from the skin off my back.

Then I'll be able to speak again.  
But (like all fossils) I'll be  
a slow, slow talker. Even  
in the afterlife, the only way  
we can find to bear witness is  
through the body's animate  
jabber—the bone-clack echoes  
of a femur's hammer-strike  
possessed of another's will.

## **Kind of Blue**

*For Le Hinton*

Even if there's nothing,  
I want to see behind that curtain.  
To feel the lucid fabric, woven  
entrails from a disemboweled god—  
that would be enough.  
The upright bass steps like footfalls,  
drums stuttering to an unassuming coherence.  
I remind myself to remind myself  
that joy and sorrow well from the same spring.  
There is a god—a mutilated, howling  
emptiness and his grin.  
He kisses me beer-breathed, lipless  
jawbones smearing blood  
on smooth cheeks. Does god exist?  
isn't even the right question.  
Instead ask, Can I manage not knowing?  
Is it the hickory under which no grass grows?  
Will this troubled horn carry me home?

## The Exceptionalists

If my ancestors  
hadn't fallen for the promises  
of the new world,  
in just a few generations,  
I wouldn't have existed.  
In this scenario, my grandfather  
(surely some Bavarian yokel  
milkfarmer) would have no doubt  
perished trying to surrender  
to the Russians  
as they marched west into  
a decimated Berlin.

He could have been wondering  
in those last moments,  
what it is about us that we must  
witness such destruction  
to appreciate the reprieve of rationality,  
the hardwon logic of order  
that shelters us from the multitude of  
petty grievances and unaccounted for anger  
that accumulates throughout a life?

But this scenario never happened.  
My grandfather's grandfather's father  
came here yearning for  
self-possession (as if it existed)  
and found a vast continent  
untamed (which was the point)  
and now we have  
the sedated, sleeping giant  
called America.

The whole time visiting Berlin  
I couldn't shake the feeling  
of being somehow lighter, as if  
each moment followed the grooves  
of the previous, as if

the most inconsequential  
events were born out,  
bristling with sheer intentionality.

I cannot read German, and yet,  
I could navigate the metro with ease.  
I knew when to cross streets, and  
never had anxiety about ordering dinner.  
Others seemed to feel the same.  
No one was running down the streets  
to catch the bus, or haggling  
over the price of market vegetables,  
or otherwise flippantly leaving things  
to chance. All this nothing forged  
from nothing more than a tacit agreement  
that had something to do with  
working within limitations.

Now, here, eating breakfast at  
the Turkish cafe on Friedrich-Wilhelm-Platz  
for a third and final time, I notice  
in the sure, easy way the workmen  
drink their coffee in coveralls  
what a few days in this immaculate  
city have to offer me, before returning:  
that America (the shining place  
in the mind where there's no such thing  
as an equal and opposite reaction,  
where there is an exception to every rule)  
had not yet destroyed itself enough,  
had not yet suffered enough,  
to suppress its unquenchable  
lust for chaos.

## **Heliocentric**

Over the blue hills  
the orange-gold sun rises,  
squinting through  
the crudely trimmed Hemlocks.  
(All the bottles in the liquor cabinet  
are empty. Why do we keep them?)

In a few minutes  
the swirling neon peach of the sky  
will finish, and the sun,  
in yet another revolution,  
will seem to make its way  
around this world.

They say the universe is so large  
that from anywhere within  
it would seem as though  
you are in the middle of things.  
Everything set up to imply  
*we* are the center that must hold.

## **The Invisible Kingdom**

“There is another world, but it is contained within this one.”

—William Butler Yeats

Across the water  
there were cities in  
the clouds  
on two billowing  
cliffs, great fortifications  
that were the armature  
of civilization on its  
highest ledges.  
(If this is not the city of god  
there is no such place.  
If this is not where reality rests  
within the illusion, there is  
no such thing.)  
To the west, the neon  
disc of the sun  
sinks beneath a narrow  
roofledge  
of lavender sky,  
where the cycles of the universe  
place at our feet  
this darkening evening.

## Gypsy Hill Road

I'd swear I saw God on Gypsy Hill Road  
after crossing the one lane bridge  
and turning left.

He was bathing in the muddy creek,  
expressionless and soapy,  
water only up to His knees.

Blinking, looking hard (to get  
a glimpse of wonder), I caught  
His gaze as my car began to drift  
over the double yellow lines.  
He shouted to me in a whisper:  
*The whole universe is a question,  
continuity a gesture. Even I can't seem  
to find a way inside this impossible forever.*  
I nodded in blind agreement, ignoring  
the horn of the oncoming car. There's  
something profoundly convincing  
in the speech of a deity. And then—  
*swerve*—as if by some surreal instinct.

*That was close,* God yelled,  
cupping His hands around His mouth,  
elbows cocked, framing a lush length of beard.  
In a quarter mile the road forked,  
bending under a hillside, but I continued  
to watch Him bathing in the side-view,  
eyes darting road-mirror, road-mirror, road-mirror.  
His lips puckered, whistling some holy tune.  
Then I turned onto the road that bent under  
the hill, entered the rock-walled tunnel  
and God disappeared.

## **Idolatry**

Three AM and the road is still.  
Signs are all lit up,  
grotesquely shining temples  
of the times:

Grinning gas stations, strings  
of tired department stores,  
hello-may-I-take-your-order  
fast food joints, the scrubby neon  
L A U N D R O M A T.

Devils sit atop each sign, malicious  
omnivores sporting tuxedos with long coats,  
distinguished by their dead eyes/red faces.  
Fearful, intending to deceive,  
they have no choice but to haunt us.

But do not fear.  
These are not our idols.  
Ours is the 24-Hour-Diner  
with its scabby aluminum exterior,  
putrid bathrooms, red vinyl bar stools,  
and the miraculous, plate-sized pancakes.

## **Hallucination at Breakfast**

All the nymphs of wisdom appeared to me,  
their odd, hangdog faces like  
ducks asses in a proverbial row,  
convincing me only of contingency.

I am transfixed by these shrill creatures—  
the golden cherubic locks, delicate roundness  
of anatomy. They remove porcelain masks  
exposing the rotten musculature of their faces.  
Nerves and arteries twitch under observation.

They smile, satisfied at my horror.  
Blood seeps from within their grinning  
splintered teeth, dripping down onto the Persian rug  
my parents bought on their honeymoon  
when I was yet unborn and cloistered  
so tenderly  
in the folds of pre-existence.

## **Fear of Supermarkets**

Glacial trucks sweep us  
into obscure corners  
of crumbling roadways  
sounding, from a distance,  
like an atomic blast  
rushing outward  
in swaths of manic, senseless energy  
toward our hideous innocence.  
Outside the grocery, a lawn mower  
is chopping every verdant blade  
to the shoulders  
with dull and rusting,  
spinning, singing blades.

From aisle nine,  
amid cans of sodium-rich vegetables  
stacked in illogical patterns,  
the machine's hum becomes  
an extraterrestrial spacecraft  
hovering above the parking lot,  
aiming lasers at the woman in wedge heels  
shouting at a sales associate  
halfway down aisle seven—  
“Excuse me! Is an artichoke a vegetable?  
What is an artichoke?”

Every moment of sonic paranoia  
turns out (not) to be the end coming for us.  
Still, I imagine rushing outside  
to make one final attempt at waving my hands  
at the blinding dot of the sun  
just before I am vaporized, or decapitated,  
or torn apart by an oncoming tractor trailer.

## **The Mind as a Series of Still Lives Painted in Haste**

A man dozes in a shirt and tie  
half cocked back in the driver's seat  
of an old Volvo wagon.  
The window is cracked,  
his mouth delicately open,  
chest rising, falling just enough  
for me to know he is alive.  
We all pass not noticing—  
orbiting and dreaming, cautiously  
soulless, gently spilling our guts  
onto the pavement—stuffing  
our ears with a loud/silent longing.  
I look up. He is gone. I feel nothing.

Time—this ramshackle rattletrap,  
this derelict mountain slide,  
this majestic counter aptitude—  
painting us blue until  
we are rigid with sorrow,  
free to observe the rise and fall  
of the sun, and the slackening  
of the moon at daybreak.

I noticed her tattoo—a red kite  
tangled in a leafless tree—and  
wanted to tell her it was beautiful.

## The Dog Days

They are summer's incentive  
to roll over and face autumn—  
a moody endpoint disturbing this  
season of hot, dreamless sleep.

Sprinklers are set to lawns and  
fields of crops against the dryness.  
Pool populations grow at an  
unsustainable rate and electricity bills  
spike for round-the-clock AC.

Behind the strip mall, the one with the  
bargain outlet, is a covered bridge  
where we'll swim,  
just beyond the *No trespassing* signs  
and the low-hanging willow tails  
in surprisingly deep pools.  
Floating weightless,  
we will savor inconsequence,  
measure our animacy  
one heaving chestfall at a time.

Every year the dog days  
force us to remember the end—  
that sooner or later  
the sun will set fire to heaven and  
they (whoever they are) will stop  
selling single cigarettes at corner stores.

## **Gun to Skull**

*Golden Shovel, after Terrance Hayes' homage to Gwendolyn Brooks*

Underneath the heat of my  
first neuroses (my last  
antagonism of doubt), defense  
-less in the day/night: there is  
never any space for the  
wisdom(less) present  
to enter, each tense  
moment following it  
-self into the little  
nightfall of untold hurts.  
You simply won't find me  
anywhere, dis-established now  
in the void that travels to  
-ward some hot summer, know  
-ing just where to vomit. I  
laugh, undisturbed. Shall  
we undergo voluntary paralysis, (not)  
for no reason? Or should we go  
on, continue our cathedral-hunting  
where herds of sainted-ghouls in  
-habit cobbled Spain,  
neither languishing nor  
vivifying, nor cherrying  
through the woods in  
Hemingway's Michigan  
(in secret parody, of course), or  
sorrowing childhood's rocky coast in Maine?

## **The Coldest Winter Day**

Go ahead. Talk yourself into  
the tightest of corners.  
Get inside, off these streets  
where winter's whispering  
softness  
persists in our elegant bodies,  
cheerful hymns  
driving us to madness.  
Do it. Trade in your language  
for a sense of belonging  
and a winter coat  
made of 27% recycled materials  
and 27% animal skins.  
(The tag doesn't say what  
the other 46% is.)  
There you go again,  
hoping for intangibles—  
a fiber of meaning, a thread  
of love, or perhaps (god-willing)  
a well-woven, sidelong glance  
at beauty. Just be sure  
to remember, when it all  
comes down to the final tally:  
you'll take anything  
to wrap around  
your mammalian body.

## **Maxwell's Demon**

They said there was a being  
lurking inside the mechanics  
of disorder. That chaotic  
forces fed an equilibrium (coaxed  
by the invisible hand of some  
terrible djinn) while the unreal mind  
reimagines a new theory of heat  
out of slow and fast particles  
competing for homogeneity,  
the comfort of sameness.  
How clever they were  
to conjure a demon  
to manufacture a truth  
they could not torture  
out of the spare facts.

## **The Silent Argument**

There is blood  
in the bloom.  
Every moment  
is a destiny,  
unraveling.

Wind-like curls  
from the clouds  
confuse  
obligation  
with love that lasts.

Walking on  
into the trees'  
stillness,  
unseen visions  
approach  
as would  
a son  
the father  
he has never  
really known.

## **The Dartboard Paradox**

Mine  
is the dart thrower's  
grief:

missing the mark  
aiming in anguish  
forgetting I've

blinded myself  
to improve the sight  
of things unseen.

## **Notch Trail**

*Badlands National Park*

The hard-packed, white earth  
flakes as chalk bones  
beneath our feet. I fantasize  
about dying of thirst.

*Watch For Rattlesnake* signs posted  
every few hundred yards  
warn us of nature's promises,  
mysterious destinies it deals out  
in venomous strikes. (Yet another  
fossil-display of mortality.)

But for now, observe the lower prairie  
from the upper. Survey smears of sagebrush  
and geomorphic limestone cliffs,  
unfathomably wrought, as if  
according to a madman's hallucinatory will.  
All this filtered through nothing:  
endless plains, wavering with grasses.

Here at the end of the trail  
we can either turn back, tracing  
the way we came, or jump off  
this cliff and land out there among  
the beauty. I need you  
to tell me what we should do.

Cars plodding in the distance like beetles.  
Roads, ribbons of tape shielding stripes of earth  
from the prairie sun. I fantasize again,  
and this time I'm hanging off the rockface,  
spending all my remaining energy  
in stealing glances over my shoulder  
out toward the horizon, where clouds  
leave hectares-wide shadows  
miles beyond what can clearly be seen.

## **Other Worlds**

All night long, we drank sweet tea  
on the porch and talked like  
nothing in the world hurts.  
Then my uncle gets a call from the neighbor  
about some UFO's in the sky above  
the back alley.

So we go traipsing up the yard,  
cousin, cousin, uncle, neighbor,  
to lean on the truck  
(which counters the dizziness)  
and tilt our heads upward.  
The things are probably just aircraft  
or Chinese lanterns or satellites.

Still, four grown men, we stare  
unashamed of our hopes that  
one of the floating red spots will  
slant or zag across the tree line.  
We say things like—*It dropped  
too fast to be the lengthening horizon*  
and *It can't be normal to flash  
different colors like that*  
and *If they promise to bring me back,  
I'd go in a heartbeat—*  
in between lighting cigarettes.

As the lights fade and our  
hopes shrink into the knowledge  
of the rules that govern  
the space-time continuum,  
one of us says: *With all that up there,  
there has got to be other worlds.*  
And I could feel us all nod.

## **Pay Attention**

If I could show you the needles I would.  
The branch (it was the trunk really)  
coming out of the cold ground  
and hooking over the sidewalk  
so we might notice the pine cones  
couched in clusters of green toothpicks  
weighted, slightly  
by the flakes that land and accumulate—  
as if the moment had been well rehearsed,  
as if it is always happening in some other universe  
somewhere. I cross the street.

## **II.**

### **Love and the Void**

## Inheriting

I.

Stones arrange themselves  
in caricatures  
on the cement slab  
streaked with breaking.

Through remnants of shattered glass  
a pile of chairs  
hasn't moved since  
before you were born.

The stairs rise into the darkness  
disappearing among  
rough-hewn beams.  
The whole barn a tinderbox.

Each door in is locked  
with untarnished metal,  
though the doors themselves rot.

Outside, two little signs  
stapled to shingles of ash:  
*No Trespassing, Private Property.*

II.

The first thing I photographed  
were three shoddy stairs  
rising out of the grass  
leading to the closed in porch,  
where we sat last night.

You wept softly, despite yourself,  
telling me, *I'm sad. I'm sad.*  
*You're just really drunk*, I said.

This morning I woke  
and photographed everything  
I could find that exhibited decay—

The rusting hinges, the chipping paint,  
the splintered pieces of furniture,  
the sagging roof, the trackless  
train car infested with vegetation.

I failed to realize your intoxication,  
the kind that comes from finally embracing  
the brevity that living  
allows us to observe.

Forgive me. Forgive me.  
We were drunk, and my left hand  
was preoccupied with peeling the paint  
from the tread of the highest stair.

## High School Chemistry

We are a pair of fragile cisterns  
that the invisible hands of being lift,  
pouring the liquid of ourselves  
back and forth,  
our molecules mingling irrevocably.  
Perhaps this feeling is from far beyond us.  
I can't say that I would be surprised.  
But I wish they would have told me  
in high school chemistry  
that this (mostly) has to do with the electric charges  
shifting positively, negatively,  
around the core of each one of our atoms.  
That our souls rise out of  
the complex system of neurons  
relaying the data they were made to express.  
Then, just maybe, we wouldn't have any reason  
for such haunting, fleeting despair.  
We could be what we are,  
and nothing more.

## **Witness for Lost Prayers**

This tree will outlive us all. But the tree,  
like love, has no hand in the matter.  
It only makes itself available to us,  
feeding our slanted desire for an object to hold—  
branches to examine, roots  
to excavate with delicate instruments  
toward some source in the materiality of soil—  
a transfiguration of matter through nourishment.

The tree calls to us in the green heat  
of summer, and as a frigid skeleton in winter,  
always reminding us how to trace  
the threadlines of our fingertips  
over the convolutions of the bark's surface,  
quietly waiting to restore what was lost.

I can recall none of the mercies I've prayed for,  
and your words are farther from me than  
reified emptiness. Yet I watch you soundlessly  
murmur offerings for us, your lips shaping  
each sound without hesitation. I travel with  
the words I cannot hear to elsewhere,  
where all prayers originate in the same spring,  
and, for a moment, I understand how they work—  
they shape the spirit without notice, they make  
dust dance in human figures, they extend  
roots deep into the clay, the water, though  
it all happens in a language no one knows.

## The Rescue

Tracking the shoreline  
in this dirty secondhand vessel,  
cords of muscle and sinew  
pulling you along the surface  
of the gently wind-rippled water,  
you dip the paddle left-right, left-right.  
You're traveling all the way  
to the far westward point  
where the little copse of pines  
frames the sunsets of your recent memory,  
observed each night from  
an aluminum-framed lawnchair  
perched on the edge of the seawall.

You're here to clear your mind.  
But, of course, you're also here  
to survey the damage, witness  
how the scarred coastline is beginning  
to form another uneasy treaty between  
force and inertia, between the rising  
glacierwater  
and stratum of clay, rock, loam.

Finally nearing the point, you encounter  
the worst of the destruction—  
decks splintered, entire hillsides  
swallowed under waves, slabs of concrete  
resting ruinous in the shallows like  
cheap, postmodern parodies of Bimini Road.  
Some of the pines' roots have given way  
laying the sparse timbers headlong  
in the murk. Good soldiers laid to waste  
with unnerving repose. What, after all,  
can be done about the rising of the water?  
On the way back you hug the coastline  
taking in all the spare facts—  
each undone rockwall, swamped-out  
boathouse, and freshly submerged jetty

its own tiny, private cataclysm.

Halfway home and pulling along again,  
an orange speckle bobs in the water. You pass,  
slow down, wheel around for a better look—  
a monarch exerting its final gasps.  
Without pause you scoop the creature  
from the water, placing it so tenderly  
on the bow of the kayak to watch  
it slip and flutter, find its footing next to  
the cupholder draped in sun-withered  
cobwebs. It preens silently, wings  
far too wet to take flight.

No longer alone and pulling again  
toward home, thirsty for shade and  
the unrocking steadfastness of land,  
you dip the paddle faster now, shoulders  
smarting and sore, the monarch's  
wings wimpling softly in the breeze.  
Only a hundred yards from the dock  
the monarch begins to shimmer, stammering  
and high-stepping like a braying horse,  
antennae roving like military satellites.  
And, for a moment, the coloring of its wings  
becomes the latchkey and signal of salvation.  
You hold your breath, feel your heart's chambers  
clamor, as the monarch takes flight.

At peace, you watch as it weaves and wobbles  
toward shore, rising higher into the clear sky  
until it disappears among the trees  
lining Norway Road, moving toward  
other places, other mysteries.  
Before paddling in to the crumbling beach,  
you quietly confess to finally understanding  
that any act of kindness in this fraught spasm  
of a universe is nothing if not a miracle.

## Love, Or Something Like It

“Oh, how horrible that we actually dream ahead to the death of those we love!”

—Milan Kundera

My legs wrapped inside your thigh,  
perhaps, in fear of separation,  
I dream of answering a phone call—  
a sadistic voice telling me  
to come and identify you at the morgue.  
I was relieved to find myself weeping,  
grateful that while we lived in unison  
I was able to muster anything close to a love  
greater than moment to moment attraction  
or a selfishness that loves only to be loved in return.  
I was still holding the phone to my ear,  
sitting in silence with the voice,  
and it said, *Love undeniably scars the heart.*  
*Each kiss is a scalpel's pass across a ventricle,*  
*every sudden collapse of lovemaking, a slash*  
*on the wall of a heaving chamber, every*  
*sign of affection some bloodying quiver.*  
Love, or something like it, is this brutal  
and tender lightness, this cauterizing  
precision of scraping and healing,  
blistering, soothing, clawing, regeneration.

## **Rooftops in Arles**

We came expecting to be haunted  
by Vincent's ghost, to see him smoking  
cigarettes in a café under obtuse  
ribbons of night sky, or to be eating paint  
in that old bedroom, his head  
bandaged with white linen cloth.  
Instead, we found a welcoming labyrinth,  
streets ever narrowing and opening up into  
wheels and spokes of stone beneath us.

Everywhere plaster facades unchanged by time.  
Each threshold a portal to some fantasyland.  
Escaping the heat, we duck under an awning  
and drink golden, unpronounceable beers.  
Here we are in the precise middle of the city.  
I know it, but I have no way of proving it.

Later, we walk the second level of the Roman  
amphitheater, imagining bloodsports,  
seeing crowds cheer as the sand floor  
is blemished with redblack.  
The arches of cragged stone,  
curve copacetic, toward an  
untouchable vanishing point.

A young mother—whose son I photographed  
playing an oboe on his front steps  
earlier that morning—  
told us when the empire fell, residents gradually  
quarried the rock to build their homes.  
This whole place is a testament  
to the brutality of man's will, either that  
or the craftsman's endless labor.  
I don't know which.

Completing the circle, we climb the crumbling stairs

to the highest point and look over the city.  
Gulls glide above the delta. Streaks of  
ancient light move in and out of sparse clouds.  
The rooftops of overlapping terra-cotta stretch  
in all directions like geometric dunes.  
And beyond, past the outer fortifications,  
the Rhone's final stretch to the sea  
appears without movement.

## **Ghazal for A Sacred Dwelling**

Perhaps if we try, we can see *this* place as a tabernacle.  
With gumption, might make of our world a tabernacle.

Investigate the underbelly of each moment long enough  
to dislodge a shard of redemption, the riprap of tabernacle.

Step away from this undoing, this chaos, long enough  
to come up for air. Discover lungs heaving, each a tabernacle.

Agonize over the trash in the street, the poor in their sackcloth.  
But do not deny them a place within this whole, this tabernacle.

Abolish what you think is everlasting, at least enough to gather  
what is not left after. Build there your rude and naked tabernacle.

Again, we find ourselves longing to forge some edifice that remains,  
a dwelling of elemental heft and camber—an unrelenting tabernacle.

## **Our Images of Things**

*Gigan, after Ruth Ellen Kocher*

A train ride through the south of France isn't  
what you'd expect. Taking the night route

from Barcelona to Avignon, we watch the sky bruise  
into an elegant gloaming. All along, the tracks are laid  
on the surface of the water, running through marshes where

ancient French oaks grow gnarled on tiny islands, escaping  
their fate of becoming wine barrels, bent into irons,

mellowing Burgundy or Bordeaux for thirsting strangers.  
For every field of lavender, clusters of industrial block buildings

appear covered in graffiti, surrounded by barbed wire.  
A train ride through the south of France is

ancient oaks growing gnarled on the tiniest of islands.  
Even in this place, nothing stays. Roots rot in the water.  
Our images of things are too imperfect to bear: too soft,

too much shaped by our feeble senses, whittled down by utility.  
The bleary conductor wakes us at the station: *Nous sommes ici.*

## **The Country of Last Things**

*For Joan Copeland*

The long lived die before  
their deaths. Bones and skin  
scattered fragments of other times  
wriggling/dancing like satyrs  
in a garbage frond.

From one moment to the next  
entire lifetimes are lost and won  
in the tattered mind.  
We call this shroud wisdom,  
willing it to goodness.  
(Do we ever hear a sound  
or just its echo?)

Let us sabotage time, you and me.  
Let's go on yearning  
for honeysuckle whispers,  
perform surprise when you enter  
this country of last things.  
Tell us again the story  
of your mother, how she was  
entirely another person to you  
than what Arthur  
might have ever guessed.

## Northside Tavern

Mudcat's slack mouth lops off  
another lyric, his hands spasm elegantly  
on the frets, his little finger  
slides and strokes the strings  
in motions matching the sound  
easing out of the speakers,  
bouncing off the back wall  
to wash over us again.

I buy another round in between songs.  
The five bottle necks stretch skin  
between the fingers of my two hands.  
The harmonica player takes off his sunglasses  
revealing bloodshot whites. So that's why  
his mic is turned low.

Mudcat introduces the next song  
(another about a lover gone away)  
and he reminds us through a cockeyed smile  
to go home and make love.  
The suits love it. They howl at the holy bluesman  
for suggesting we make love to forget we're alive.

This one is up-tempo and a couple  
migrates into the brief space on the barfloor  
before the stage. They swing and clutch each other  
as if they're the only people in the room.

I'm here with old friends, but I feel alone,  
alone as I've ever been. In the dim, smoky light  
I observe holes in the plaster walls  
covered up with painted over duct tape come loose.

I want every single note from the guitar to coalesce into  
a single thing. But they each ride time in a different direction,  
scattering to other realities that sustain themselves  
independent of my noticing.

This wire frame man with his wisp of a mustache,  
hat cocked back on his head, plays music  
for a dark room full of smiling strangers  
on a stage that runs against the cinderblock wall  
of other bluesmen, hung framed forever,  
each of their faces screwed up, completely lost  
in making successions of separate sounds.

## **Oblivion is a Synonym for Nirvana**

The unwound case clock  
doesn't keep time.  
When it chimes 4, the hands are set to 11.  
When it chimes 9, the hands are set to 4.  
We meant to puzzle it out  
(these patterns), but instead,  
we all joined hands and made  
an altar of the liquor cabinet.  
Holy is the scotch, gin, and curaçao!

Later, or after, or never,  
we witness the blood moon  
emaciate the sky, meteors weaving  
into the fabric of night  
while you read to us all your favorite poems.

We listen to the words  
with eyes closed, relishing  
your voice, mixed up  
in the consciousness of another.  
But, they only take us so far,  
these cosmic rocks.  
They burn up, disappear  
upon atmospheric entry.  
Turns out, there's more than enough  
friction to go around.

We fall into roofslumber, wake  
hours later to mist rolling in.  
No more moonthicket.  
No more ribald stars.  
No more raucous comets  
to keep us staring upward.

Missing that bright sprain of bloody  
moonlight, missing the tender viscosity  
of mother's milk, missing something  
you can't really even name—you resign yourself  
to the fact that another Yuengling will have to do.

## Sweet Dreams

*Bop, after Afaa Michael Weaver*

My father, dancing with the vacuum cord trailing across  
the dining room rug. He's belting Madonna, head thrown back  
while I pass my dust rag beneath hand-crocheted doilies  
and cut crystal dishes on the antique sideboard. I'm seven, tapping  
my foot to the synth-pop beat. When the song ends, my father notices  
me watching, flares up: I like her art, but I do *not* approve of her lifestyle.

Sweet dreams are made of this. Who am I to disagree?

My father, looking cool in cut-off jeans and a paint-flecked tee shirt,  
rushing me off to my afternoon ballgame, pissed we're running late.  
I am wearing ripped jeans, purple and gold jersey, secondhand  
Umbro soccer cleats. Hat, glove, and water bottle in my lap, I am small  
in the soft plush seats of his 1986 Buick Regal, midnight blue, fake wood  
accents all over the dash. Stopping at an intersection, my dad empties  
one Labatt Blue and cracks another, drums on the steering wheel, sings along  
with the radio: I smell sex and candy here. Who's that lounging in my chair?

Sweet dreams are made of this. Who am I to disagree?

My father, shaking with disgust, eyes bulging under heavy rage.  
Shorts and socks and boxers lie rumpled in a grim constellation  
on the floor of my room—I had put away my clothes too sloppily.  
Later, after bedtime, he lingers again in the doorway, waiting for me  
to stir and acknowledge him. I keep my eyes closed, breathing carefully,  
so that when he says *I love you* I would not be obligated to respond.

Sweet dreams are made of this. Who am I to disagree?

## **It Is Only You**

I am not the fire you seek.  
Rather, I am the deadening earth,  
erasing the spark, salvaging  
the blueblack darkness.

Yet when you are near, I blaze  
like true youth, insatiable and bright.  
Even the sun cannot compare. Even the stones  
arrange themselves in the geologic constellations  
of our love, even the gnarled trees insinuate  
our longevity. Time becomes a pair  
of amulets worn around our necks.

Perhaps, in some other sphere,  
if the mind's dichotomies are mere vapor,  
I will be your birth, our morning sun,  
and  
the deadening earth—  
forgetting the abstract beauty  
that invents a still more abstract end.

Where is my light-source?  
Where is my well-spring?  
It is only you, my love.  
It is only you.

## **Polaroid**

This would be a great moment for one.  
Our casually candid pose, the jogger  
who pushed down the button,  
the shutter-flash. Adding to the  
historical record, gradually, chemically  
chiseling the moment into stone  
framed already by a thin white margin.

In a scrapbook later, you might scribe a little caption:  
*At the moment of ecstasy, tears, dancing,  
we were hidden in a stand of pines.*

## **Aubade for Oblivion**

If there is a nuclear war, you say,  
let it be now, while we're here in bed.  
Our atoms will fuse together  
forming new kinds of chemicals,  
the building blocks of another universe  
on the other side of this vast folly.

Stunned to stillness, immobilized  
by your words, I want to unleash  
the Promethean horde of my  
gratitude for this love: the sloping  
comfort of your warm body, the  
tangle of limbs, our mutual desire  
for obliteration via nuclear fission.

I haven't cried in years. Yet, you smear  
away tears, hold me close, as we try and fail  
again to find a way that our bodies might  
occupy the same small pocket of spacetime  
while my heart riots in the streets  
in the kingdom of heaven  
for the precise, pulsing beauty,  
this razor's edge, this fickle boundary  
between love and the void.

### **III.**

#### **In Search of Perpetual Motion**

## **The Impossible Task**

*Skinny, after Truth Thomas*

We manufacture eternity, as if  
forever  
were  
mere  
inclination,  
forever  
spawning  
mechanical  
energy,  
forever.  
As if *we* manufacture eternity.

## **Portrait of Bhaskara as a Boy**

Before his father taught him  
the family trade (mathematics),

before he began to unravel  
the mysteries of differential calculus

(centuries prior to Newton or Leibniz),  
before he took up his post

at the astronomical observatory  
in Ujjain beside the Kshipra River;

before he wrote the lithe verses  
of his masterwork (containing proofs

of quadratic equations, the first  
coherent use of the decimal system

we still use today, and calculations  
demonstrating the precise positions

of planets), before he loved his  
wife, before he was called Teacher,

before inviting his own son, Loksamudra,  
into the clear-eyed vision of the world

mathematics offers to those who accept  
its constructions, and before placing a tea cup

in a pail to save his daughter from a tragedy  
he predicted by charting her life's course

in the movements of the stars—  
Bhaskara was a boy like any boy.

He ran with his friends along the river,

laughed at the seriousness of his father,

found comfort in the fragrant arms  
of his mother, and teased his sisters at dinner.

Yet, in the night, he faced the infinite  
blueblack of the sky inside him. Stars

shining down in mock acknowledgement,  
causing him to take stock of limitations.

Not yet ten, and at the beginning  
of the only mind he'll ever know,

Bhaskara wakes screaming, night  
after night, at imagining the horror

of the edges of the universe, feeling  
trapped inside its endless exploding

and collapsing. He wept for a revelator,  
a ruler over all time and all space, a god

to ease the pain of insignificance. His mother,  
always rushed to comfort him, whispering:

*Hush, child. We all are a small part of God.*  
But the boy could hear in his mother's voice

she had never once doubted the transcendence of souls,  
and that his thoughts were entirely foreign to her.

After tears and anguish, the boy Bhaskara's  
eyelids flutter and fall in the warm comfort

of his mother's embrace, and he dreams brilliant  
dreams of fashioning a device that spins on and on:

some precisely turning gyre to quench  
his desire for whatever's beyond the stars.

## A Terse History of Perpetuum Mobile

“The history of Perpetual Motion is a history of the fool-hardiness of either half-learned, or totally ignorant persons.”

— Henry Dircks

I.

Early history, the Sixteenth

Seventeenth

Eighteenth

Nineteenth century characterized

“Perpetual Motion” defined

Found to be a fascinating pursuit

Kind of machine sought

Is a paradox (mathematicians divided in opinion)

The inventive faculty

Undiscovered—constant failures

Folly of secrecy

At best but a toy

Influence to the study

Obsession

Modern instances and correspondence

Abortive efforts, no decision

General laws not without exceptions

Mathematics opposed to perpetual motion

Ordinary arguments against it

Incessant failure

Erroneous contrasts

Its inutility often asserted

Loss of fortune assumed

Understanding assailed

Opposition should be fairly direct

The pursuit likened to a lock without a key

Stimulus to continue

Belief and disbelief

Fanaticism, dogged

Error in the application

Not of the sciences of mechanics or mathematics

Marquis of Worcester

Councillor Orffyreus

Invention of the first

Invention of the second  
In every light paradoxical  
Supposed discoveries kept secret  
Scientific disbelief  
Projectors should analyze their schemes  
Discovery unpromising and unlikely  
All known laws refute  
Apparatus shows the difficulty  
Conclusion (inconclusive)

## II.

Early opinions respecting the possibility of, and projects for obtaining  
Bishop Wilkins  
Scarce works (obsession)  
Seeming facility and real difficulty of several contrivances  
Attempts by magnetism  
Attempts by wheel and solid/fluid weights  
Power analyzed  
Archimedean screw  
Taisnieres on Continual Motion  
Wheel and magnet combined  
Leupold on Perpetual Motion  
On Councillor Orffyreus' wheel  
On a mill and syphon (and a pump)  
"Manual Arts" 1661  
Turrianus' mill  
Fludd's works, 1618—and two inventions  
Bettino's works, 1645

## III.

Experiments and proposed inventions  
Marquis de Worcester's "Century of Inventions"  
Partington's note on the same  
Orffyreus, his character, his celebrated wheel  
Gravesande's letter to Sir Isaac Newton  
Desaguliers against  
Notice of Orffyreus and Dr. Kenrick  
Dr. Hutton and Orffyreus against  
Kenrick lecture in favor, and his own invention

IV.

Patents in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries  
And contemporary scientific notices on the general subject

Ramseye, 1630

Barton, 1635

Wayne, 1662

Müller, 1779

Haywood, 1790

Mead, 1794

Varley, 1797

And remarks on the same

Schwiers' patent

Thiville, 1801, with remarks

V.

Early papers from Philosophical Transactions

Sir Robert Boyle

Notices and communication to the Paris Academy of Sciences, 1837

Dr. Papin on a French invention, with further remarks

A final answer

Rev. J.T. Desaguliers, LL.D. offers a proposition on balance

A mechanical paradox

Sir R. Boyle on self-moving liquor

M. de la Hire's celebrated demonstration of impossibility

Communications with the Paris Academy of Sciences

M. Parent's demonstration of impossibility

VI.

Remarks on Perpetual Motion from treatises on Natural Philosophy

By Martin

Maclaurin, 1748

Rutherford, 1748

Hooper, 1783

Emerson, 1794

Nicholson, 1800

Young, 1807

Gregory, 1815

Millington, 1823

Partington, 1828

Dr. Arnott, 1828

Monucla's "Histoire de Mathématiques"

Cox's clock

## VII.

Papers from early scientific and other journals

From the "Gentlemen's Magazine"

Discovery of longitude

Raising water

Solski's machine

A self-moving wheel

Magnetic motion, and alleged discovery by Hicken

Archimedean water-raising machine

Asman's alleged discovery

By Galvanic agency

Ancient attempts

Kenrick and Müller apply for patents

A magnetic scheme

Spence's magnetic motion

Magnetic wheel

Cox's time-piece

Dodemant's alleged discovery

Poppe on the subject of perpetual motion

Gill's exposure of an imposter

Dr. Young's illustrative model

Gravesande on the subject

Resolution of the Academy of Sciences against memoirs regarding perpetual motion

## VIII.

Definitions and descriptions

Article from Rees' Cyclopaedia

Encyclopædia Britannica

Chambers' Cyclopædia

Stone's Mathematical Dictionary

Fisher's Dictionary of Mathematical Sciences

Francis' Dictionary of Arts

Ogilvie's Imperial Dictionary

Brande and Cauvin's Dictionary of Science

Encyclopedia Americana

Diderot and D'Alembert's French Encyclopædia

Encyclopédie Méthodique

Zedler's German Universal Lexicon  
Allegemeine Encyclopädie, M. H. E. von Meier  
Dr. Binder's Conversations Lexicon  
Hofmann's Lexicon, 1698

IX.

Early and other popular journals  
The Percy Anecdotes  
Absurdity of perpetual motion demonstrated  
The perpetual motion hunter  
Dr. T. P. Jones (America) on the futility of attempting perpetual motion  
Stukeley's anecdote  
Pendulum motion  
Alleged discovery, to claimants  
A deception exposed, and another

X.

Popular scientific journals  
Possibility of perpetual motion asserted by Pasley  
To promote discovery  
A query  
Construct twenty models  
Arguments for and against by Twiss  
Pearson's views  
Its possibility denied by Mackintosh  
Advice for  
Objections to a pump  
No perpetual motion  
Editor's advice  
A lecturer's observations  
Scripture texts  
Remarks againsts, editor's note  
To perpetual motionists  
"Penny Magazine" article  
Notes from Mudie's Mathematics  
W. R. Groves' lecture  
General T. P. Thompson's lecture  
Plans  
A pump  
Hydro-pneumatic apparatus

Le Duc's column  
A pump  
By magnetism  
Several schemes  
Spence's perpetual motion  
A clock  
A hydro-pneumatic plan  
Band with corks  
Propelling vessels  
A pump  
A clock  
Ancient attempt, a pump  
Orchard's engine  
Wheel and magnets  
Water-blowing machine  
Hydro-pneumatic machine  
Sir W. Congreve's schemes  
Pendulum motion  
Wheel and magnets  
Cox's time-piece  
Magnetic pendulum  
Syphon  
New motion  
Railway carriage  
Sims' water elevator  
Worcester's scheme  
Wheels and pumps  
Wheel and weighted levels  
Pump, mill  
Demonstration against water-wheels  
An hydraulic mover  
Paradoxical balance (its fallacy)  
A rising and descending equal weight  
Two "certain" plans  
Wheel, ball, and magnet (an attempt)  
Claimants  
Alleged discovery in Stamford  
Advertisement by Van Dyke  
Franklin, a clock  
Wright

Sellery  
Buckle  
Townsend  
Stringfellow  
Hutt  
Gravesende  
Hendrickson and his sad fate (America)  
Chenhall's clock  
Imposture's in Scotland  
From America  
Adams  
In Finchlane  
Redhoeffler (America)  
Anecdote of Stukely  
Article on impossibility  
On impracticability  
A popular view  
Deuchar on loadstones  
Spence's imposture  
A paradox  
A pump  
Hollow-spoked wheel and weights  
The pursuit censured  
Roio's scheme  
On attempts  
Alleged discovery by Wather; a plan of double wheels (American)  
By Willis and others  
Poppe—plans, imposture, censure

## XI.

Newspapers and miscellaneous sources  
The Athenian Oracle  
Alleged discovery by Bayne  
Spence's invention  
Dalling's scheme  
A wager  
Mannardet's wheel  
Garhar's scheme  
Geyser's imposture  
Irish Advertisement

Alleged discovery in Newcastle  
An imposture  
Presumed discovery by Van Dyke  
Richards' engine  
By Vigneron, Stannard, Hutt  
Probable machine patented by Asaert, of Lille  
Pasley's views  
Eaton's syphon  
Legge's power  
Foster's wheel (America)  
Predeval's patent motive power company

## XII.

Patents of Nineteenth century for improvements in obtaining self-motive power  
Patentees professions  
List of French patents  
American patents  
Namely—Winter  
Copland (three)  
Linton  
Congreve  
Hainsselin  
Predeval  
Stuckey  
W. W. Sleight (four)  
Eaton  
Asaert  
Frèche  
Buchholz  
Greaves  
Faulkner  
Luedeke  
Wood  
Fitt  
Newton  
Glorney  
Bellford  
A. W. Sleight  
Aitkin  
Shaw

Oulton  
Thomas  
Hale  
Malavas  
Huddart (two)  
Benton  
Weber  
Gilardeau  
Jones  
Herault  
Lang  
Dembinski  
Lavender  
Lepinasse  
Barrow  
Lecocq  
Predevaille (four)  
Commandeur  
Fontainemoreau  
Gilmour  
Middleship  
Mennons  
Hill  
Richard  
Black  
Coates  
Pickering  
Wright  
Mercer  
Starbuck  
Roussel  
Rigby  
Smith  
Picciotto  
Prince G. Gennerich  
Redrup  
Edwards  
With remarks on the same  
Conclusion (inconclusive)

XIII.

Scarce works

List of eminent mathematicians, their births and deaths

“Century of Inventions” unnoticed in foreign works

An error in naming

Some patents probably omitted

**Source:** *Perpetuum Mobile; or Search For Self-Motive Power.* Henry Dircks. London: E. & F. N. Spon. 1861.

## A Flaw in the Design (*Why*)

Motion, ever with us,  
in spite of the fallacy underlying  
all such mechanisms.

Causes render inoperative

∞ others.

∞ ingenuity is needed

to make what is perfect  
equally evident.

(We have been favored?)

A sketch  
suggests  
asking

*why.*

The machine:

endless,

∞ empty vessels,

flexible,

sufficiently heavy.

**Source:** "A Perpetual Motion Machine Problem." *Scientific American*. September 17, 1910. Vol. 103, page 561.

## Quandaries of Time

“It is obvious to everybody that the phenomena of the world are evidently irreversible. I mean things happen that do not happen the other way. You drop a cup and it breaks, and you can sit there a long time waiting for the pieces to come together and jump back into your hand.”

—Richard Feynman

Locate the straightjacket of unpredictability.  
Like ordering take out and they say  
*yeah sure, 20 minutes*  
but you're still hungry 45 minutes later  
and completely unable to fathom  
how dolphins, as mammals, once  
were sea creatures who came to land for a while,  
but returned to the swamps,  
becoming proto-wolves with split hooves.  
Then, they pushed further into the sea  
where the fins came  
and the blowhole. It's true  
they do fuck for fun, and kill  
themselves via asphyxiation too.

How hungry, how blind?  
Time slinks through the trees  
in your mind, manufacturing the *now*,  
blending changes in the physical world  
into baby food—stewed okra,  
pear-plum, peas-carrots-ham.

Before the mechanics of clocks,  
time was just cycles.  
Sundials were hip, pragmatic.  
You might get one for the garden.  
And, before cycles,  
time was a seamless garment,  
no way to be divided.  
The garment meant  
everything in the mind  
was magic and nothing, strange—  
as if planned, earned, willed.  
Now, there is only this unending shattering

of the present, every voice repeating every impulse.  
No thoughts, only words. Things we say.  
After all, who can defy the suck  
of gravity? Resist a blackhole?  
Smile at the void between sentences  
with wide open eyes?

Be sure to roll out your words like dough  
and cut them into cookie shapes:  
santa hats, dog bones, hearts,  
hummingbirds, tea pots.

    Eat them.    Eat them and note  
any difference in taste by shape.

They say time is harmless—  
*a condition of constant change*—  
cell death and regeneration,  
oceans becoming deserts,  
    deserts becoming oceans,  
and forests burning down  
each year, where from the char  
little volunteers toil up  
from what was once seen as dead.

Think of the polar bears standing blue  
on rocky shores. Or, swimming,  
    swimming  
the long-sought shoreline  
    nowhere.

In their tired minds the shoreline  
ceases to be and the icebergs shatter  
    like teacups on your mother's hardwood,  
so many shards splintering,  
the absurd consequences of your  
curious little fingers.

## Tallying up the Score

### I. A very brief list of failed perpetual motion devices

democracy  
our  
bodies  
language  
Civilization  
the flesh of  
avocados  
polar ice caps  
fossil  
Fuels  
cheeseburgers  
rock n roll  
the idea  
of eternity  
Ford's  
model T  
God (or gods)  
the biodiversity  
of  
rain forests  
the bottom  
of a hill  
when riding  
a bicycle  
childhood's rapture  
yes, even  
the breeding  
of cockroaches

### II. A complete list of successful perpetual motion devices

the  
war  
against  
war  
the accordion universe's endless  
exploding & collapsing  
the deaths  
of pets  
fear of missing out  
Fear (generally)  
the succulent irresolution of jazz  
the faultiness of memory  
entropy's march toward  
utter equilibrium  
our Hubris  
(Love?)  
one sided conversations  
the neurological  
footprint of  
emotional scars  
petty high school  
sports rivalries  
not  
knowing

## A Flaw in the Design (Inventor)

“Mary, I think I’ll have to give it up. It’s no use, I can’t think it out anymore.”

—Charles Heine, February 6, 1894

Baffled, Despondent,  
Useless Machine.

Devoting all his leisure  
for twenty-five years  
an expert German mechanic  
Fifty-two years old lived with his wife  
on East One Hundred and Forty-fifth Street.

Employed as a machinist in the shops of  
New York Central and Hudson River Railroads—  
(in a fight [a political dispute])  
his arm broken, could not continue.  
He devoted himself  
(more assiduously than ever)  
to his machine.

Came from Germany,  
brought the model with him,  
set it up in his bedroom  
working on it night and day...

*The machine consists of four uprights, seven feet high, supporting a bar of iron crossed at the top by another bar. A complicated system of weights was attached to the crossbars, but no one can now explain or understand the principle on which the machine was to do its work.*

...hopeful of success until  
he gave up. (despair)

His wife did not become alarmed.  
He went to his bedroom (no work for him)  
and hanged himself  
to the model of his unsuccessful machine.  
Discovered by his wife yet alive  
was cut down but died.

**Source:** "Baffled by Perpetual Motion." *New York Times*. February 7, 1894.

## **Laniakea**

*Demi-sonnet, after Erin Kelly*

Know this—we are all tiny particles in the mind of God.  
See the intricate networks of superclusters. See them bending  
toward The Great Attractor as our corresponding synapses  
couple and yoke in a neuro-cosmic web. Contemplate  
each non-boundary where (fathomed from endless dark)  
one immeasurable heaven ends and another begins.  
Our world, our home: a distant outpost, lonely, stark.

## **The Eradication of Categories**

We are mortal/immortal.

We are ancient/new.

We are finite/infinite.

We are order/chaos.

We are lost/found.

We are whole/scattered.

We are fictive/actual.

We are sorrow/joy.

We are boundless/bounded.

We are slender/wasted.

We are gathered/dispersed.

We are blind/sightless.

We are ungendered/unsexed.

We are horror/beauty.

We are waves/particles.

We are navigation/north star.

We are liquid/gas/solid.

We are god/peasants.

We are cosmic signature/neural networks.

We are undone/undoing.

We are love/lovers.

We are mummification/desertification.

We are revolution/tradition.

We are silence/stillness.

We are machine/matter.

We are soil/soul.

We are nothing/something.

We are nothing/everything.

## How to Build Your Very Own Perpetual Motion Device

Locate the box of childhood keepsakes  
sodden on a shelf in the crumbling basement.  
Dump it out on the floor. Find your  
innocence—shaped like a ragdoll rabbit—  
and smash it with a hammer. I mean pulp it.  
Strike a match, and watch the photo of yourself  
as a smiling infant slowly curl and burn.  
Somewhere there is that stone you found  
at a beach outside Bar Harbor, perfectly round.  
Put it in your mouth and swallow it whole,  
the pit in your stomach the point. Sift the  
remaining contents—a hula hoop ribbon  
from 4th grade, spelling bee participation  
certificate from 2nd, a few baseball cards,  
a favorite lego artifact (exquisite, intact)—  
and ratchet them all together with lag bolts and  
longing, duct tape and despair. The resulting  
apparatus should be inexplicably everlasting,  
a sacred mechanism for ticking off  
every world, every star, every black hole  
for the rest of time. The source and sigh of all  
returned to its place within the matrix of  
no beginning/no end. Only the flow  
of totality. And the totality is you.  
And that forever feeling is your animal body's  
laughter after a warm rain.

## The Sea / The Soul

“We make a dwelling in the evening air,  
In which being there together is enough.”

—Wallace Stevens

Most of all, I wanted  
to be wrong. But  
here it is, the sweat  
seething, nausea beading  
on the pouting lip  
of our anxieties.  
Nobody ever told me,  
but you can't see  
the cracks in the walls  
until the house falls down.  
Notice each story we tell  
is built on a foundation  
of future. Notwithstanding  
our delusions of either  
a gladhanded universe,  
or a noxious universe,  
we fucked it up.

I desired so badly  
to be wrong about it,  
I began mentioning our  
not-so-eventual extinction  
in casual conversations, as if  
commenting on the weather—  
Good day for an apocalypse, isn't it?  
None ever surprised. None awake.  
Everybody asleep  
and hedging  
incandescent desires  
into lovely false futures.  
In the laundromat,  
in the bagel shop,  
while the plumber fixes  
my commode, another  
hard-boned mammal is born

with bones that will  
go away, unless  
fossilized, unless lucky.

Some of the old ones  
offer wisdom, telling me:  
Every generation works itself up  
over the end of the world.  
Chalk it up as a fetish of the young.  
Chalk it up to the sensation of  
bones beneath skin.  
Chalk it up to nothingness,  
natural law, late capitalism's zombies.  
But haven't you heard  
the one about the boy who cried wolf?  
I say. Not even children  
convinced by such stories.

I want to be wrong about it all—  
the not-soul black-box  
in the middle of our brain,  
death's meaninglessness,  
the general theory of universal  
impermanence. But, we desire most  
that which is impossible.  
Not the forbidden,  
the unable to be. So,  
compress enduring mysteries  
into tin Chiclet boxes.  
Harvest your own organs.  
Fail to notice the pageantry  
of eternity's end.  
Little, organic, bipedal witnesses—  
robust and tenuous, we are  
the sum of nature's singular pattern.  
Every galaxy sliding serenely toward  
an immaculate asymmetry. The same  
chirality wrapping the quasar,  
so wraps our genes' helix, so the whorl  
of the snail's shell, the vine's

winding creep.

Nevertheless, it is only from  
this vantagepoint  
we'll be able  
to cleave divinity  
from the divine,  
see clearly  
what we'd like to believe—  
that our souls  
are the only kind of  
perpetual motion machines,  
set to spinning by  
some subtle undulation.

For instance, this quiet, constant  
throng of ancient glacierwater  
rolling as the sea would  
toward pebbled shores, where—  
despite the formation of deserts,  
the deaths of mayflies,  
that the geography of coastlines  
are endlessly configured and  
reconfigured—there  
appears the marvel  
of a man-made beach,  
a certain softness in the sands  
perfected by every grain's  
tumbling  
against every other.  
This is the good fortune  
of learning to cherish  
you'll be forgotten  
when you're gone.

## After the Fall

“We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars...everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you’d be surprised how people are always losing hold of it.”

—Stage Manager, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*

Here we are. Hovering over  
the deep. Nursing our malfeasance,  
our hollow-eyed grief, in the  
compounded temporality of  
what is, and was, and is to come.  
Like some slick-haired loner  
smoking cigarettes against  
a bodega, at the intersection  
of two streets that no longer exist.

After the first fall, we kept our bodies,  
were kicked out of the garden  
to roam—sometimes with sorrow,  
sometimes with hunger—but  
much more satisfying than mindless  
bliss. Over time, we learned to grow  
new fruit. Built machines that  
sung symphonies of algorithms.  
Built mazes of cities and roads.  
Worshipped the gods of progress  
and oppression. Grew righteous.  
Made of ourselves rulers of things  
not meant to be lorded over.

We don’t even remember what  
precipitated the second fall.  
Bombs? Pestilence? Supervolcano?  
In any case, it doesn’t seem to matter  
wherever it is we’re looking from.  
We’re at peace, really. Sated now.

And yet, it would be nice to be able

to recall what it was like inside  
a human body, with its sure senses  
and its carnal urges and its intuition  
for what it needs. But each time we try  
to remember, it's like inhabiting  
billions of cardboard cutouts,  
nothing there but the dull sensation  
of crushed paper and glue. Thin  
slices of who we were, who we  
made ourselves to be—alive yet  
dead, awake but asleep, in context  
but also always elsewhere.

If there's one thing to tell ourselves  
(considering what we know now)  
it would be this: love what is eternal  
inside you. Though this kernel is an  
indescribable/indestructible pearl,  
treat it as you would the most  
delicate child. And, above all,  
nurture it in others as if our  
whole enterprise depends on it.  
Because it does.

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