

THE CONTROL GROUP

by

Michael Kern

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

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in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

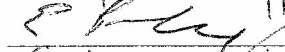

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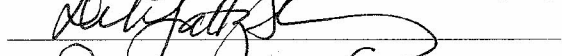
Master of Fine Arts

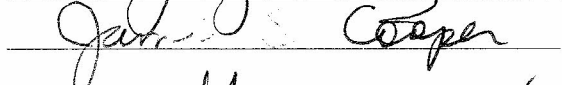
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The Control Group

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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Bachelor of Arts
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ABSTRACT

THE CONTROL GROUP

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George Mason University, 2014

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This collection is an internal and external exploration of perspective. Employing both ekphrastic and personal poems, this collection asks the question: do we look at a piece of artwork the same way we look at a relationship? Recurring themes of the personal poems include hands and fish. As with still-life paintings, everyday objects in these poems are imbued with significance. In contrast, attention within the ekphrastic poems is often placed on insects and light, showing how movement and life can be found on the canvas.

I

Dreams of Ice

Sitting outside a coffee shop on an August day
that would melt most dreams of ice,
I saw a young man working out of the back
of a van across the street, coming in and out
of a storefront renovation at such frequent intervals
it was clear to me he was an apprentice.
At first I pitied him, his work in the heat,
carrying stacks of pipe to rend and groove
into shape, until I realized he was myself
a short eight years ago, a pipe cutter,
nothing more than a vessel for oil to slick
and encase old memories of the shrill
rifling behemoth I used to dope, cut,
and wrench more pipe elbows on with than I knew
I remembered. The sheer thought of the filth
on his hands made me want to throw down my pen
and grab my boots. Where had my industry
been taken? How different in nature
are our beads of sweat, his, forced to the surface
through physical expense, roll down his skin
like water boils, roiling in a constant show
that more is yet to come, while mine,
ineffectual and transitory droplets,
pool in the small hollows that pock the surface
of my skin waiting only until I go back inside.
I often think about a woman, who, when interviewed,
described her dream job as being a welfare
claims assistant, not because the work
interested her, but that it was the only job
she knew of that would afford her the ability
to sit down while working, and I wonder:
does the young man, stopping under the false
shade of the van's roof to wipe his brow,
see anything in me other than the comfortable
shoes I'm wearing, the heavy lean
into my chair, my idle work position
and see it as the ideal, or, does he

turn back to the task at hand, load his arms
with a fresh batch of pipe and disappear
back into the storefront, his silence
saying nothing but *work*.

Still Life With Dead Game

for Willem Van Aelst

Who hung these six
animals leaning on the lip of the table?
One hare, a hen, a rooster,

and three small birds weigh
the scale down, dangle while blood drains
from their mouths, staining

the cerulean and gold velvet
satchel, its sash hanging
the same as the dead.

Only a fly crawls on the rooster
with its cocked head cracked
at the neck. On the hare

I can still see the handprint
that scruffed and bound the body.
I can see its limp and glossy coat

falling over itself like stalks of corn
heavy with weight,
ready for rot.

On Returning to a Hill

A child's
memory true
enough to stick. The white
hill bleached like film over-
exposed.

A gleam,
refracted light,
bounces off snow into
my eyes: the sled skips my body
from snow

to air
to fence. Clean threads
of thought come back to me.
Do I trust where my memories
have been?

Snow-swept
hills, juniper
on the ridge, wet socks in
boots: that's all I remember —
nothing more.

A View of St. Bavo's, Haarlem
for Gerrit Berckheyde

Each arch catches shadows,
the tiled roof a dull laurel
in contrast to the sky.
The clarity of light appears
to push the walls out asking
— what can be held? Light
upon the faces of passersby
seems to blur expression.
Each person then a collection
of multitudes, aggregated
and filtered until only one
remains, the same method
time lapse photography
uses to capture fragments
of light. A picture, nothing more
than the shadow of the past,
the shadow's shadow,
the limited light that pulls
and strings us together.
Where might you hide from
light if not within
the bastion itself?
The glow around the spire,
the lattice work, each
horn and swirl of grace
stands against the utilitarian
build and girth. If this view
is just an echo, then wait for it
to bounce up into the rafters
and stir the pigeon's sleep.
Nothing can be held for long.

Perspective

Closing my eyes, I leaned back
to rest my head on her stomach.

It seemed a good replacement
for talking. We had long ago stopped

caring whether the building across from us
could see into the bedroom, the light on

because we liked how it made
the window a mirror at night.

Self-Portrait

I never really considered
watercolors. They require foresight
and a quick touch when applied,
two things more than the brush
already demands of me.
Charcoal might have worked,
but the inflexibility of color,
layer upon layer of an overbearing
roughness, would have made me
second guess whether the charcoal
or I were made of harder material.
No. Casein was the only choice.
The dull, opaque hues of the milk protein
often bring largeness (one might say
depth) to the canvas. The first
attempts on canvas ended cracked
and crumbling when I applied
too thick a pass in haste.
The stability of the canvas wasn't reliable.
That was when I was still trying
to use it as the primary medium,
before I found that it's true strength
lay in being reworked, over
and again, used to support others,
an underpainting, a background.

An Hour on Kenosha Summit
from Walt Whitman's Journal

the Rocky pencill'd
 Kenosha summit advances
 under the bright sun
 at dawn the entrance of the cañon
all the wonders
 brawling continually the dazzling
 lights on the rocks
stretching north and south
 elephantine.

Control

No teeth fall out of my mouth
to collect in the jar of my hands.
My dead father's face doesn't appear
on the bodies of passersby. How then
can I tell you, your body heaving
and cold, everything is right in the world
when you tell me your dreams are terrible,
when I can tell that half of you
still exists in a world I have never been?
I find the breath of you a heady
reminder that when you are first waking,
your lips separated by fractions,
that I have no more pull
than the dream, but that, for the moment,
as you pull me close, we are awake.

Not the Melancholy of Departure

On Giorgio de Chirico

It is not the bananas
clumped in front.
Neither is it the flags that blow west,
nor the smokestack that doesn't blow at all.

The warped sense of depth perception
would be closer (or farther),
because time moves at a sheer angle:
the past, the foreground; the present, the far.

By the time we register the present
we are in the past – the present just out of arm's reach.
If we tell him, It's not
the present, he'll tell us, It's not the past.

Self-Portrait

It is hard not to notice
the pots and pans
left on the stove

or the freezer door
left open. When I fill
the pot with water

and watch it
it will not boil.

The Gas Station

by Edward Hopper

The difference is light –
the natural settling of shade
upon the road
and the artificial illumination
of the store, lines cast
in degrees of transparency.
The attendant, caught in the middle,
counts the number of cars
that pass. Occasionally
he prays for headlights,
but he mainly passes time
outside waiting for Apollo
to come and turn his *Mobil Gas* lights
into mosquito traps.
The symbol of Pegasus
is backlit and blazing, a steady
beam that is reduced
to nothing more than a glint
in the eye of a passing driver
too focused on earth-bound deer
to worry about the speck of light
that is now getting further
and further in the rearview mirror.

Anglerfish

It was not as easy as flipping on a switch.
Things had to be pondered and, once pondered,
returned to the source, the source of light
in darkness, of unknowing into the known,

of himself. How does a thing become known?
Like seeds, did he have the energy inside himself
to burst a small stalk out of nothing?
Had he seen the light before and buried it

deep, germinating the emitted
light, remitting himself within the light,
the one and only light, the light he created
under the sea of nothing, under the sea

of darkness? Had he not he might still sit
in darkness following the light of another,
a small stalk of light that bobs in the under-
current, too deep to be the change

of water, but of time. He knows
what others do not. That to create change
you must know that change is coming,
is inevitable, is in our bones when we sleep.

He knows that it is better to be the hunter,
to let them see what you want them to see.
He knows that ideas follow patterns,
and one will chase after another.

That ideas, like fish, will swim
towards the light dangling from a stalk,
a stalk it has never seen because it did not know
light, past the translucent eyes, past

the interlocking teeth, past the thought
that knowledge will come to those who believe
light is created out of darkness, towards the light
before it has a chance to swim away.

Three Weeks Later

The moment he realized she didn't love him anymore there was a small tremor across his upper lip. He had tried to convince himself that she wasn't thinking clearly, that her out-of-nowhere abeyance, the result of extreme pragmatism, never circled back round to the truth. For the first time he realized the ache that was present, the steady drip of sweat that fell off his chin.

Where is the difference between knowing someone and being known? He always knew that in the relationship he was the one who put more effort in, always deferring, seeing the endgame, but he often wondered if there was more to sitting across from her, shyly reaching for her hand to touch and calm his skin, and letting the feeling soak into him. He hated himself for thinking that it might not have been the same on the other side of the table, that the hand might have been given out of habit, not need. *Shame*, he thought.

Not the shame you think after reading about a fire in the newspaper, nor is it the shame tinged with the same inflection used to *bless her heart*, but the shame of realizing he was so focused on himself and his love (for what other love could there be?) that the thought hadn't even run through his mind to ask himself the question: What is inside her? He had been sure that his need was to be known, to have her to come back to after work, put down his books, and lean into her as if he couldn't hold himself up on his own. Only now is he able to give a true appraisal of what might have happened

when he was off buying her favorite
type of granola to add to her bowl
of greek yogurt in the morning
after waking up early to surprise
her with breakfast in bed, forced to deal
with the fact that he was doing that for himself,
that she was not there, that the only thing
worth striving towards is the knowing.

Self-Portrait

The trimmer took the beard off
in clumps, threatening to clog the drain
before I reached my hand down

and filled it with wet trimmings,
closer to a wet bird's nest, a basket
of thin branches

that held my youth at bay.
With each stroke I was left
with fewer options.

From the left
I tend to see everything clearly in light
of experience.

From the right
I tend to look off into the distance
wishing it was my left.

The Current Was Weak

I found my sister smashing china in the woods
because the color reminded her of bone.
We took turns throwing rocks at the shards of white
strewn on the creek-bank across from us,
prizing each chip, each crack in the façade.
We hadn't understood what the words meant:
dialysis, foot ulceration, neuropathy.
I only knew what I could hold in my hand —
a broken tea cup with its handle missing,
a nub that reminded me of the amputated foot
you showed me the week before I saw you last,
before I got a grip and skipped this broken
fragment across the creek's surface, watching
each new ring spread before crashing
against the tree roots on the far side.
Before each blow I checked over my shoulder,
scanning the leafless trees for movement.
No one could see us. The current was weak,
carving out a small canyon shoulder deep,
depositing large banks of silt and river rock at each bend.
It felt as if there was no end,
as if each toss called to you across the surface.
The china, glistening white and scattered,
appeared ordered on the far bank.
When the stars looked down that night
they reminded me of what we all are —
fissures of white cast across a cosmic mud.

Persephone's Fall

I remember
the slip, the water-logged
grass that couldn't grab,
the lean, the counter-

lean. I smelled
his breath before
he touched my ankle. My last
image — a gondolier's

pole rippling the water —
steadying my descent,
the gap between light
and dark.

His hands are harsh
but never like my mother's.
Irony: she carried death
when she couldn't see

me, when I dropped
out of sight. I secretly
loved the way
he would crop up out

of nowhere.
Somewhere I lost sense
of the horizontal.
I was the movement

the pendulum makes,
the down stroke,
foregoing the apex
for the arc.

Standing in Front of Number 1

for Jackson Pollock

Stray paint from other work, layers
of light on dark on light, the bottle cap,
the fly, caught, falling in a quick slash to canvas.
Everyone gives you credit for gravity.
I can stand in front of the whole
with nothing else in mind except the small
fly. The streaks of black, white, and green are freckled with skin tones,
my sister's, both wintered and tanned,
the same as when we found a hollow wasp
lying silenced on the front porch, its wings outstretched
as if it might , again, fly
until curiosity took hold of my sister, and, poking the wasp
with the freshly painted nail of her finger,
the wasp adhered.

II

Dreams of a Post-Hole Digger

1.

He checked the rearview mirror
often as he drove down the dirt
road, keeping an eye on the back,
the road pocked with potholes,
not wanting the piles of fence posts
and quickcrete to fall on the auger.
He had been using a post-hole digger
for the first two weeks, had loved
to hold its wooden handles,
loved to hear the thump
in the ground as he raised his hands
over his head and drove the spades
down to remove a handful of topsoil.
More than the sound, he loved
the ache in his hands, the control
to dig a quick eighteen inches
and set the post before moving
on to the next, over and again,
tracing the road up from the river
toward the McAlister's property.

2.

Walking through the forest of oak and elm
of fence posts

of leaves

he'd run his fingers along the trunks counting
each as he passed

show the slow shuffle

trying to hold

each as he passed

his dragging right foot

slightly pushing

in against him

he didn't question his loss of clothes

only the cold

loss of trees

loss of place

and the open

water

that replaced it

3.

There was a rhythm when his hands
touched wood, as if he could crawl
inside the grain and borrow strength.
He felt both hands and wood grew
stronger over years, that callous built
on callous, that if you cut into his hands
you would be able to see his work
like rings in a trunk, counting back
to the days of his father. At night
he would comb hard his hands
for splinters wedged into the top
of callous, closer to the feel of rock
than knuckle, rough formations rising
powerful over the valley of his palm.

5.

As the days wore on each hole
became harder than the last,
topsoil giving way to red clay,
jamming his knuckles, his wrists,
his elbows, his shoulders until
every night he fell into bed
barely able to lift his arms,
their strength chipped away,
as if with every blow into ground
the ground blew back, cracking
the foundation his hands rested on.

6.

The water looked like the river
running through the ranch in winter

large sheets
of rock split by strips
of frozen water,
fissured rocks
that could never be
as strong as they once appeared

his hands
felt like they sat on the bottom
of the river
his callouses

smoothed and sloughed
down
to river rock
years
of formation
eroded away by the steady flow
of hard water
lying on the shore
his hands raised
over his head
his hands

looked like catfish
bloated and pale
bottom feeders

7.

Coming back from the store
with the auger, a metal
rig that did the work of two men
at quarter the effort, he was
hesitant to dig in right away.
As the metal bit into dirt,
then clay, the auger did its job
pulling the hard pack to the surface,
but he found he had to lean
over the engine with his whole
weight, absorbing the full shock
of its vibration in his hands.
The auger would kick and gasp
every three inches, snagging
on chunks of clay, spitting
them out the side of its mouth
like he spit chewing tobacco.
He found at the end of days
his arms no longer ached
the same, but his hands
began to feel the shudder
of the engine, ghost shivers,
unable to uncurl themselves
even when the auger lay
quiet at his feet. Each night,
before he could fall asleep
he would raise his hands
over his head, crimped
with the ache of work,
heavy as bedrock, thinking nothing
could break these pillars of labor,
these dirt encrusted beams
of granite in the form of hands.

8.

Images build

on top of each other

like rings rippling outward,

reverberating

from his bed

as he thrashed under covers

it starts

like oil

moves over water's surfaces

thirsty

his hands

poor excuses for oars

he dives hands first

past the upper layer

lurking into cold depths

of water

where he swims by reflex

his powerful tail's

thrashing

back and forth

his ability to pump blood

through his heart

in search

of wood, the taste of grains

in his teeth, conscious

that his search is futile

that to sit still brings death.

III

The Leaf

My porch looked cold without a sheath
of leaves to keep it warm.
A slight breeze rustled the branch above.

A leaf fell as if it thought
the afterlife waited for it
at the bottom,

slightly cupped and poised to find water, it drifted
carelessly down, tip bent, dog-eared
at the bow, waiting

to be revisited. I put the broom away.
There was no rush
to scatter today's pilings over the railing.

Transformation from Geographer to Astronomer

for Johannes Vermeer

The geographer works tirelessly at his desk
trying to see how one thing relates to another.
At first he stands with compass and cross-staff
close at hand, knowing the distance

from point A to point B is not
as important as how straight the line
appears from a distance.
A man of science will tell you

the things you cannot see
require imagination.
Like a ship against the horizon, his attention
slowly fell out of view

until he found himself basked in light
days later with one thought:
with the globe as my window, I must look
and see what is on the other side.

Reversion

My wife tells me not to
set the table for four

and every time I catch
myself, out of habit, forgetting

I take a walk in the park
down where the river slows.

Two children play tag, running
back and forth across the lawn.

If I squint I can see the outline
of sunlight press against their bodies

and for a moment they are nameless,
stand-ins, my own even.

As the light rests on the pendulum
of left foot, right foot,

I smile for the first time in weeks
and see that Sarah beat John

in a footrace around the oak tree
and back, always back, always

downhill like the river.
She was so proud of herself

as John tried to act like he wasn't
trying. Did he playfully tap

her on the shoulder and begin again?
Did I tousle his hair?

What am I touching, the ghost
shadows, cast by feet

before caskets came to rest
at my feet, came to take them.

In the end, the mother breaks
the children's motion with her palms,

catching one in each arm.
It's time for them to go home.

The river continued to move on.
I wish I could

put my hands in the cold
and feel the cold.

Waiting for Dali to Approve

I remember you
like I remember birds flying
in front of a window,
a filter, some film
of conscience. It makes me want
to take the hands of my clock
and bend them backwards, off-kilter
like a door hangs by one hinge.

This afternoon a young woman collapsed
in the sculpture garden, her body rigid
as a cast iron mould. Her back arched
towards the sky as if possessed
(I want to be taken).

Her fist clenched grass
like mine clenched sandwich paper
as two Smithsonian staff
quickly rushed to her side
and all I could think about was you
telling me about the stain in your van
and how I shouldn't judge you
because of the smell.

How much do I have to tell you
before you will understand?
Before I will do more than just look
at a scene and watch?

On the Relocation of Meridian Hill's Drum Circle

The barefoot man shuffled across the street,
hit his cowbell, and led
the drum circle like the pied piper.

The beat took root in his hips,
his wild spins rife with frustration,
a drum major without a baton.

He was the first of many, a long line
of off-beat rhythms and colors
that trailed down and around the corner of 15th and Euclid.

An old man with dreadlocks to his knees
hit a snare drum slung over his neck with his left hand
while cracking a tambourine against light poles,

stop signs, anything hard enough to thwack
before moving on.
Policemen stood at the corner

of this impromptu marching band,
blue bodies stern and noiseless.
Their eyes followed

a man wielding a large walking bass drum
whose hammering resonated against the brick wall,
a steady thump thump thump

testing the boundaries,
sonar sent out and yet to come back
with a home.

Two women in flowing skirts worked against
the grain, holding hands and laughing, as out of place
in the procession of scowls

as the procession was out of place in the park.
The women danced, weaving in and out
of two dozen members,

giving no indication they understood
the circle was no longer rooted in the community,
giving no indication they cared.

Stop-Gap

At first I didn't realize my bird's eye
view, that hovering,
above the party where
the last of my family gathered.
My son drank
a beer, two crushed cans
beside him on the side table,
laughing and talking to neighbors
as his son played at his feet
petting the dog.
When my son looked at the landing
I saw a look in him I hadn't seen in years:
mouth agape,
nostrils slightly flared,
eyes focusing
in and out like binoculars
trying to find
the range. A look
I hadn't seen since Osborne
clutched his rifle in a ditch
in Nam, when napalm
dropped half a click
too close to Trang Bang,
and we were told
not to shoot,
to let Charlie burn.
A paralyzing, little shit of a look
that said my son
was not ready
for what was about to come next.
Following my son's eyes
I saw the collapsed body,
my body, splayed
on the landing, as if its foot
had missed the last
step and gone limp,
then rigid, with seizure,
pulsing in jolts,
spittle just starting to ooze
out of the corner
of the mouth like a child
who's been napping.

I looked at the body,
unattached, side stepping
to get a better view
of the bearded figure
the shape of angles.
My son ran to the body's side,
shouting for a wooden spoon,
stumbling on the lower
steps before putting a knee
across the body's chest,
leveraging himself
to gain control of the arms
as his wife ran down the steps,
hands covering
her mouth, only finding
control by straightening
out the legs, straddling
knees, squeezing tighter
with each kick and bray.
After the spoon was brought,
I saw my son's hand slip
when trying to force
the body to bite
on the handle, instead letting
the body's teeth seize again
while the flesh
of my son's hand
was still present, finding bone
as strong a stop-gap as wood.
I couldn't see the body
as anything but an animal, wild
with fright, uncontrolled,
trapped behind the bearded
face half dripping
with blood and saliva, mixing
as well as viscous oils.
I expected
to see my father soon,
coming around the corner
of our barn with a shotgun
to put the poor animal
out of its misery, before the body stopped
and went limp again,
more out of exhaustion,

the muscles
overworked, quitting.
My son collapsed in half relief
at the body's side.
Couldn't my son see as I see?
That the body is just a body?
Its eyes, bloodshot and dilated, seemed
to be looking just above
the mantle where the remnants
of the American flag I carried back
from Trang Bang were hanging,
tattered to ribbons
in the lower right corner. The body
made a faint whisper of a sound,
a sound that no one
else could hear, but I, above,
recognized because the body's lips
mouthed "The Pledge of Allegiance"
which took me back
to grammar school where I stood up
in rows behind desks,
hand over heart,
like my son's hand rests
over the body's heart, and I stared
at the red, white and blue,
pledging allegiance to always look
at that flag with a desire
to grow up, to be old enough
to do something, to no longer
look without the relief of action.

The Bird Feeder

The cardinal, shepherd
of his flock,
darts and flutters.
A rustle of feathers, he's off.

Oh, how his wings spread!
Currents of air
change under the red
weight of those wings.

Eat, good sir, fill your
beak. Your hollow bones
wait to be filled with more
than just song.

The man gathering himself
gathers birds. Though they
do not listen, he tells
them which way

to fly with his hands
like a man guiding airplanes.
His final wish to wing and
flit all day,

hanging on the feeder,
spitting seeds with the cardinal
like baseball players
in uniform before the altar.

Laocoön

you and your sons have not left
for Tartarus yet, although I will not judge you
if you wish that day would come.
The folds of the serpent

trap you as they trap me –
at a specific point in time. Every muscle
in your body contorts and strains
against the fear we all have

of the past catching up to us.
Were you punished for doing wrong
or for being right? Even if your spear
had found Greek blood,

would it have changed the course
the serpent took to find you?
Your face, as it clings to life, bemoans our lack
of control and the serpent's teeth in my side.

Ode to a Bicycle

The first time I saw you, bicycle,
you were under the power of another,
legs churning briskly, off to see
what happened when the road bent
out of sight, scattering leaves and humans
alike with the wind at your back,
leaving a trail (you wanted me to follow),
a vortex, an eddy,
a funnel of attention
that dragged me to you
like a sinking ship drags down its captain.
I am your captain. Listen to me.
To your handlebars,
the curved mustachio of metal,
the hand-rest, the reins;
to your saddle, the padded, the seat
of honor wearing holes into my jeans;
to your stem, the neck
you always stretch out for me;
to your pedals, the stirrups,
the boot-straps that gave me
no reason to dig
my spurs into your side;
to your crankshafts, little levers of power;
to your spokes, each one a cornerstone;
to your derailleur, an assembly line
of strokes pushing new
acres before me;
to your tires, the tread,
the friction makers, the only
contact tying you to the ground;
No motor, windshield or radio
could improve upon your thin frame,
you are all brakes and lines, gears and chain.
You are more a part of me than most care to realize,
more than simple transportation,
a pant leg I never realize should be rolled down.
If only legs were so sleek,
so economical, so ready
to roll down a hill without asking
a single question. We could all grow

if we took the time to ride you
around the block, whizzing past
pedestrians, letting the wind tousle our hair,
untying the knots of adulthood.

Cinderella: A Bird's Eye View

Leaning low and hunched to the hearth
you pecked at peas and lentils like we did,
nudging them slightly with fingers stained with ash

before putting them in your mouth.
You sat, one ankle hooked behind the other,
smoldering in the dust of old fires.

The taste of ash left in your mouth
must have left you thirsty for more than just water,
must have stained your tongue gray.

Each brick combed and counted
under the gleam of the hearth, soot stained
black, black with loss, black you could get lost in

and find yourself snapping into focus
how many minutes later? How could we not peck
their eyes like you picked their lentils.

They knew what they were doing, yet didn't know
what had been done. How you sang under your breath
for your father to come into the room. We hoped

when you slept the cinders kept you warm.
When you slept you were no more.
When you slept.

When I Fall

1.

I pedaled the slick road, iced in places, the salt residue crunching under tires. The downhill urged me on. A green light goal waited at the intersection for me to cross straight to the memorial.

Only looking for the glare off a larger body of metal the car must not have seen me because it pulled onto the road from the coffee shop's parking lot about twenty yards in front of me. I sped forward, doing thirty to his ten. I was the greyhound and the car the two-ton rabbit with a grudge, a shoulder the size of a cage trapping me against the side rail.

If I hit my brakes on the ice the pedestrian watching this all unfold would see a fishtail, a flop, a dive, and when she came to help might step on some small rubble, things that caught the reflection of the white winter sun, grinding them against the asphalt, only later realizing they were teeth.

2.

I was going downhill fast, forty-five miles per hour, on a West Virginia road in the country when I started to fishtail. I saw the gravel, the strip of rock tacks, but my eyes were focused on the turn ahead, the sharp veer left, half a switch-back that would have required a full body lean not to fly off into the ravine to the right, no guardrail, a few fallen trees guarding the drop, branches held out like footmen's spears bracing for the cavalry's charge.

The rear wheel wobbling at my back, all I could think about were the other bikers, the young campers I had with me on a ride, what expression will cross their faces if they come rolling down the hill to find me, wiped out and gashed, little specks of gravel lining my open pockets of flesh, or maybe keeled over one of the trunks, bike mangled, breathing hard.

3.

Closing the gap, I brushed along the right flank
of the car. If only he would drive straight, or turn left
everything would be fine. His right-turn blinker
was on when I started yelling, hitting the side of the car
like an EMT patting the side of an ambulance,
giving the go ahead.

I sat next to the passenger car door, riding in the gutter.
The car started to turn, my front wheel
about to wedge into his front right tire hub.
I had to keep moving. To hit the curb meant
broken bones, internal bleeding. I opened up
my left arm like a wing, elbow out, put the side-view
mirror in a headlock, attaching like a parasite saying to myself,
wherever the car turns, I turn;
wherever the car lives, I live.

4.

I could only stay on my bike, quell my back tire's
dancing if I went straight towards the ravine,
but I wanted to live. Standing up on my pedals,
head and shoulders over the handlebars, I leaned
to the right, unclipping my feet, and threw the bike
to my left as I rolled, hitting the pavement
just behind my right shoulder, tumbling like I did as a child
in gym, remembering to keep my chin tucked,
my eyes down and forward.

How better to go out than at full speed?
A blur of movement, limbs streamlined, speed
dictating the point of contact, out of the control of my hands
the second I let go of the handlebars. My feet landed
on the trunk of a fallen tree off road, my butt stopped
on the hot pavement, my body jerked to a stop as if I wore
a seat belt. I sat quiet and looked out over the gully,
past the fallen logs that had whispered my name

and exhaled, drawing in a long breath before I heard
the campers coming around the bend,
before I could stand up,
before the gravel grabbed them.

Nurse Elise Bachman

It started in the driveway. No, it started in the garage. It started a week ago. It started a year ago. It started when she was an orderly, when she embodied the word. It started when she parked her car in parking lot E under the birch tree. It started when she reached across the bed at night and felt the worn outline of a body. It started below her left breast. It started when she sliced banana over cereal counting each slice as if dispensing pills to a patient. It started when she woke up sweating. It started when she woke up and didn't know where she was. It started when her bones began to slow. It started as she sat in the car with the engine running. It started in the garage, not the driveway: the driveway is a place for diagnosis; the driveway is a place you are before you go somewhere else. It started when she gripped the steering wheel. It started when she gripped a patient bucking at the sight of a sedative needle. It started in the same spot under the birch tree. It started when she said hello to Kathy at Oncology. It started when the absence inside her rose to the top and waited like porcelain waits to be dropped.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Kern graduated from Kempsville High School, Virginia Beach, Virginia, in 2006. She received her Bachelor of Arts from James Madison University in 2010 and received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2014.