

TO HEAVEN

by

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DEDICATION

To Teri. Always.

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ABSTRACT

TO HEAVEN

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To Heaven is an exploration of lineage, race, language, identity, America and love. Often lyric, the poems use imaginative language to find new meanings and new ways to think about being variously, historically, and metaphysically situated. This is a manuscript that seeks to ask questions, rather than to answer them. What are the sources of our privilege, our power, our suffering? If we know that it's impossible to completely transcend our links to these sources, how do we live with the desire to move beyond them?

I.

Address

where have all
my enemies gone

the Jews of Lodz and Grodno
asked to stay

put the kettle on
for gentle something in my veins

tangential to gunpoint
bloodier than blood

slipped away too long ago
to say why

am I here where
did they go that god-shat train

full of words strung
crest of boat cant

I can't trade blows with walls
quiet it is

a new 2000
I am in Massachusetts

fifteen shit-faced in the woods
with Hansen and Katz

I grow compressed and morose
we don't know

I have disappeared
into citizenship

and scarlet trail
of letters and land-lines

driven down-
town wink whitely at lifeguards

pass hassled but whole
swim shirt still tucked in

some people are into time

some people are thrown

down open heir dear
there there dear

then then then

Tiptoe

Lord, I speak in prayers,
taut string-can lines
up into air. I thought
I'd got free from those sky
wires, felt my self
diffused amidst molecules
that wander tackless, boil
down to naught but tick-tock
without you. I thought that thread
run through my mother's mothers
got snip-cut by sit-
quiet, how no-thought shut
tight old angst-rush sewn
in my fringe-cloak, my skull-
cap. When I write to no
one particular, my words
want backbone or backboard, want wake-
fulness listening. Perhaps
you are that dreamt world,
those bloomed ears. Perhaps
that makes you real. Perhaps
I left, leapt forth, some son,
some new-shoed quark. Found this
wonder-where, this how-far-down
inside my rib-tight lack.
They ring me sick. They bring no
bottom, no soul, no damp
old mirror bone. Do I
concoct that plucked hum?
Perhaps, Lord, I've come back.

Original Sin

To be oblique or artful
about this: Crossing
the threshold, I
go on believing.

*What does it matter
how my account lies?*

*Why is it not enough
to simply care for others?*

*I am buffeted
by gusts of air.*

I have no time
to waste: black robes
hustled offstage
by white wings.

*I want to know with my tongue.
I want to know exactly*

*the shape of desire
for purity.*

What is difficult:
the citizen cries
in the prison he built
with his own gold.

*I want bricks
made of fact.*

*I want to pave
some longstanding path.*

*I want to mend
what has not yet fallen*

beyond repair.

Up from underneath
the floating castle:
corsair wind
in butterfly-shaped kite.

Genesis

In the beginning,
there was float,
then one, two tied together,
both floating. Then a thread
to a third,

some form of gravity
and falling down a deep hole,
grasping for roots.
You've seen this before?

Of course, breathe.

The voice of something hidden,
hidden in the grass,
and in the veins of the grass,
a hollow in the wood,
a lack sucking.

Flesh falls into flesh.
Sharp stones. Hide warms skin.
The air between this moment and

the stark raving in the desert,
the son on the altar.

My father is a burst of light.

As though it were borrowed
from a library, light
pencil marks cobweb
the book until gray

stacked upon gray, the earth
slowly being exiled
to the air,
conveyer belts.

Vessels for seafaring,
for wishes. The idea
of a wish.

I am electricity.

Tracks

How far down, I'll ask
do I go back?

Past ocean
escape of pale steppe,
soot-edged *shtetls*.
A desert of sacked walls.

I tack always
through new languages,
arrive at scratches
in stone dragged down
from the mountain.

I sound out
without reading
much more than *holy*
and *blessed* and *Hear*
O Israel.
I abstract you.

I pass on exile heaven:
everything is.

I want in
on some people,
some scrolls
that hold on,
but let me let go
of dry-rock-grown hope.

In God's Basement

The bad boys called it, "Donk,"
and played it in the hall
only when they arrived early enough
in the afternoon that Mrs. Werb
would not catch them.

One plowed towards
another who stood sideways
and bent double to roll
the first over his hips
and up
and crashing
to the green-carpeted concrete
or the steel doors
or the off-white cinderblocks
below the bulletin boards'
image of Jacob's Ladder.

All of these boys had sat
in public school all day,
learning to read silently,
to tell time.
The girls that they wanted
to make laugh
paid them no mind.

Two hours more of Hebrew
lessons and Torah tests
after this brief break
to feel the power of their limbs
to make fly,
to be flown.

Windows

That Saturday morning, my parents dropped me off at the back of the temple and went home to finish their coffee and crosswords.

By the time I'd reached the top of the stairs and the soft light bathing the atrium of the temple, it was clear that something wasn't right. Small, thick squares of glass, beveled at the edges, surrounded most of this common space. The glass distorted the plane, creating a less than ideal surface for the skinheads to spray-paint three lumpy, six-foot diameter swastikas facing out to a busy intersection. I was old enough to know precisely what this symbol stood for.

Once, over the summer, when we didn't go to temple, there was more red paint and we'd missed it. But, over the course of years, we couldn't miss the gray-skinned and gaunt prisoners, the cramped boxcars, the net of death and grief they suggested.

Our graying teachers decided that we'd seen enough. They herded us away from the windows to the basement classrooms, the rust and olive carpets peeling up and untwisting at the edges. As we walked down the stairs, I remember fighting a grin. I was scared of what everyone would think, but history was happening to us. I finally understood exactly what I was supposed to feel.

In the Updraft

Milkweed pods and sun-brittled leaves
hover in the updraft.
A vee of Canada geese grieve
low over the black-
limbed trees'
even-spaced sleep.

A marsh bird, brief wonder, flits
between rafts of reeds.
And so will we soon drift up
in hushed bits, spread lean
by thin wind to settle
like shadows on the earth.

The geese, sans ritual, curl up
in an oak's ankles.
Their meat speaks in scents
to the scavenging foxes,
and rain runs their blood
to the mud-sifting fish.

The pods and leaves
carry their own epitaphs
in narrow bones. The wind,
light pressure on the wrist
or heave of wet-thick and light,
cannot help but mean.

As we float and mingle,
we may seem to grow mute,
but our bodies will still whisper
to versions of ourselves.

Book of Numbers

"Life" = "chai" = 18 = יח

six hundred thirteen good deeds six hundred
thirteen ways of sewing a robe of looking at me i
sing a song of sawing a song of walls i wail a song
of parting a song of taping of tapered sawing of
tapering rain a song of falling songs imagine a
table of sawing a tablet of mending fingers
pressed around these nots around these knots of
bowing and tiptoes walk fast then slow hands hold
hands hold tethers and tapers and wailing
partitions foot a version of reality (then fast) circle
walk one hundred eight steps one hundred eight
chimes (then slow) i stand at the door hear sawing
hear song bones not falling but floating over six
times life containing life separated by zero

Silver

I want to start again.
I want to know where to start.

The training that I received
was cryogenic sleep.
There are hundred-year blinks,
thousand-year blinks,

birds of air and fish of sea,
separations of the waters.

I cannot find the bottom.

Land shifts beneath feet,
names slip between the planks.

War.

And after, a river
of black soldiers' sterling diverted,
while my family steeped
in this place of divide.

Whites' red lines,
covenants, and quotas,
quietly laid language.
This green money, even,
only an agreement.

Then the "Colored" signs
came down,
but not without dogs,
hoses, rope,

dreams. (Blink.)

I was born in 1985,
in the desert of early morning dark.

Prisons arose all around
our house. It was difficult
to see color at that hour,

but if we squinted,
the people dragged in
appeared to deserve it.

(--and blink.)

It is 2017.
My eyes adjust.
I test new alchemies of word,
positions of the body.

What seems leaden:
to unbottle us all,
brief, bright strands
discharged from the sky.

My latest night bullet:
I bend like this
antenna. I speak:

If you are
finally over your spite,
please, Lord,
let there, at long last,
be light.

Let it linger.

II.

So Many, So Much

I knew, though I did not want to see
that the seeds of the daisy I am had flown in
on a cold-shouldered wind, a merciless wind.

I did not know my head would spin
so much in trying so much to see
the ways in which I am happy

to ignore the ways in which my white,
my tooth-white petals, grew fat and strong,
drawing, like pearls of milk from the earth,

the bodily elements blown over, swallowed up
and ground into by such waxing wind,
so much sweet flow of gleaming money,

so many harbors, homes, backs, bones,
soaked, heaving in so many ways
beneath my feet, or still entwined

around my stem-thin legs,
still hissing through my bee-kissed head.

Merciless Wind

There is a wind
and it is made of words
and the same alterities
that make up words
and the words are
made of wind
which I wish
was the breath of the world
beyond words
where bluebirds chirp
in meadows green and pink
with hawthorne and eglantine
and skinny birches at the edge
occasionally knock
together in a breeze
a gentle wind
clack clack
if a person could go there
and listen
the sound might alarm them
but even beyond
is a word
so this place this world beyond
words cannot exist
unless we all agree
that it exists
or unless it exists
without our knowledge
and if a person
were listening and alarmed
by the clack of the birches
their alarm would stand
for some memory
of past pain linked
with imagined
future pain
even if that pain
was unlikely
and only relative
to the pleasure
of the meadow
that image of pain
would be in words
or maybe pictures
which are kinds of words
by which I mean these to be

shorthand for how this green
and gray part of the world
got made in many ways
from words typeset
by white people afraid
of what they don't know
and can't control
the wind of words
that blew these people into homes
of other people
over meadows green and pink
and the breeze whipped
it shot
but it cannot now do justice
lick lips and propose
a redress of grievance
it leaps at the thought
it's still leaving
its ghosts in all of our bodies
like knotty plum pits
in our stomachs
thrusting leafy branches
up and out our mouths
our whistles switch
to tuneless rustlings
as though we did not own
our throats as though wind
were not also breath
also words
imagined ordering
on massive and collective scale
of shifting and disingenuous
hurricane its tendrils
whipping its name
ugly and too full
of past oceans and crows
to empty out here
where I have come
for pleasure the birches clack
quite loudly in the minds
of the white people
who fear their own words
may be wind
and not iron made of smoke
and ink and this green
gray world may not be owned
and ordered they hide
their bullets retract

their talons they know
what pain can be
pressed upon those
who do not own
the wind they know
shifts but more
than fear a ripe plum
sweet solace
sucked out of the hand
of this wind of tongues
they will make space
in their mouths I know
firsthand
it tastes good to them

Ad Coelum

Cujus est solum ejus usque ad coelum

The grass, greening, quietly yields
to the dream of dominion,

of refuge and procurement
for one's offspring this distance

from the unwieldy dark others
and the closed-in quarters,

the dreams of the sin-dens,
never the inside seen, the blood-

curdling murder bred or manufactured
by the hot fires, the grease and soot

of competition and nearness,
which my suburban forebears won

by dint of sweat and blood-
relation, a post-genocidal guilt, a white-

bread chosen-ness hidden by history.
They rose up and out on naked and sallow

skinned wings. They forgot the choice
not considered, to stay and work in and with

other city dwellers, struggling and spun.
Fear made them all alive and aware

of death and the fingers or teeth
of the storms of *riotous*, yet *slinking* humanity

against which said forebears dreamed
that they roofed our family, and constructed,

with other families, a nice elm-lined
neighborhood from the looks askance

their own parents had carried
from the old country, nailed to several planks

of market-purchased legalese,
stock often unavailable to the human beings

who might dispute these parchment-skinned peoples'
claims to blankness, to have fairly

earned the salary, and, therefore, the building,
the fence, the soil *ad inferno*, the elms

and the blue sky above them,
which they, further, claim to have plotted, to own.

Shades

Inside I hid
without knowing I hid
behind the fog that condenses

in evening in the windows
of family homes
the always-known that resists

being known
the cloud of crystals my ilk
and I walk around in

lean on the always-between-us
and the sky's lights
or the dark of the gaps

where others stood
in my eyes if I faced the windows
at all their outlines

suspended hazed
in silver gelatin or more
likely standing too far away

to see
or not at an angle
from which the light

could stitch them into
my side of the air

I'm Not There

A poem plays
with the distance
between speaker
and experi-

enced reali-

ty words are not
bullets or rub-

ber bullets or
skin irritants
or eye irrit-

ants or---

* * *

transgression backed
by the state a
backyard freeway
but older lines
drawn inside what
is nominal-

ly me and man-

y others in
love with---

* * *

a poet might use
rhyme or meter
that does not match
the ways in which
we speak natural-

ly or they—

* * *

to a viol-

ent ordering
of space and peo-

ple bluntly black
and brown kept dis-

tant cut short
in thought and lang—

* * *

I watch the vid-

eo and palms

cold granite count-

ertop in Vir-

ginia see
the line of troop-

cops creep streetlight
glint in plastic
masks Kevlar vest
bulk---

* * *

to change the ways
that sentences are
understood they
might paint imag-

es in roman-

ticized ways they
might create pat-

terns of sound that
emphasize a—

* * *

these people with
gun-shaped books and
stolen cigars
and untaxed cig-

arettes and boot-

leg CDs and
permits to car-

ry legally
so long and so
far as--

* * *

distance I teach
tomorrow morn-

ing my students will
not learn urgen-

cy from me or
from another
poem in which
I curl my fin-

gers around my
keyboard swallow
deeply enact
my privilege to
risk only rhet-

orical viol—

* * *

blue sky
it was the gold-

en hour over
the freeway mean

to say *one big*
bad citizen
from a height the
propellers chop-

chop blood drip aer-

ial photog-

raphy down the
window in Tuls—

* * *

poet may fic-

tionalize or
speak as though they
were someone that
they are not they
might not use com-

plete sentences at—

* * *

I fear for you
and the babies
we have not had
time enough love
my brother-in-

law my nephew my
cousins god-damn--

* * *

as maybe but
probably not
on **PCP**
acting erratic-

ally so what

we all pay we
all pay we all

* * *

Charlotte I am
not there the *fuck-*

ing baton never
arrived for the cop
who shot this is
not fun this game
of read 'em and
weep for the state
keeps saying *sur-*

prise but I am
a state and a
half away these
shrieks--

* * *

the words may sug-

gest a version
of reality
that is not sci-

entifical-

ly verifia-

ble they may place—

* * *

or waiting for
one's daughter to
arrive home from
school or shiver-

ing frustration
that a sharp met-

al cone one-three-

hundred-millionth
of which you own
enters your husband's
chest by way of
flesh or so ang-

ry that life can-

not go on stop—

* * *

of metaphor
their diction may
be manipu-

lated and stil-

ted for effect

* * *

stress-sweat through three
layers after
all day her voice
weak *shots fired*
knowing—circled
by police she
thought would pro-

tect her why does
this exist is--

* * *

pay to allow
the living who
we love to be-

come red asphalt
blooms images

that mean---

* * *

it I know you
love Dove ice cream
bars when you call
my phone it calls
you *The Love Dove*
the wings of your
lips sweep open
spaces you dream
grass that sways with
the breath of the
quietly dead

Citizens United

spring comes early
this year on

goes up in pink blazes

robins impatient
frantic I see them shoot up

from the south
the machines allow us

to talk to each other

or only to ourselves
far away

suddenly less abstract

these ears and mouths

15th St in Arlington

two blocks east
of the open-windowed county jail

I hear them chirp
through my kitchen screen

ants dredge our coffee cups

of simple saccharides

and ladybugs from the mountains
dot our sills

in seeking

sweet pink-lipped
flowers

Already

"Still love you like that..." - Ini Kamoze

Already, three college degrees
between my parents, a tiny
yellow house of their own
by the run-down mall in the part
of crack-lit Brockton, Mass. where we
floated bath toys in our own driveway
puddles, huffed dust from piles
of our own decomposing leaves.

I was nine, my chest a tube
in the mirror, little pink
nipples, blue-veined skin.
It had been about a century
since my first people stowed over,
only sixty years since the last.

Already, I wanted to cast
my decoupage-glue self in the bronze
of the Pine Estates boys at school
whose low-slung words sounded so
certain about the rules of touch
football, where the milk carton would get
shoved if someone's mother got dissed,
two fingers out to bullet their points
with rap video rhetoric.

At home, in the bathroom, brushing
my thick, straight hair, licking my hand
to force down my cowlick, I sang
along with the radio,
the original and the morning
DJ's OJ parody back-to-back,
already ignorant
of what my little pink lips
can do if I let them belt,
without reflection,

Excuse me, mister officer,

any old catchy group refrain:

Muuur-de-rah.

Resignation

As the speaker took the podium,
my reverie in the potential of her
approval drew me forwards into

the future. She was black and read
with resigned tone, frustration. I admired
her. And my wife was with me. My black wife.

I, not black, would disclose to the speaker
the truth, and take her smile
and signature as symbols to wear like pins

with the others. Do I not need her blessing?
This go-round on earth. Don't I need all the blessings
I can get? I would explain my wife to her

and confess to the work I still had to do.
People like humility and to converse
in shared language. The speaker would know.

We are of like-mind, since I read her book.
She could not not love me.

My planning over, I snapped back
to the room of stiff-cushioned chairs. I knew
the piece she was reading about a man shot
for asking to use a phone and being black.

Asshole

for my wife

Seven silver-blue cans sparkle and sweat on the plywood beer pong table in the dorm room where my life has changed eight times with the year's chemicals, its Marx, its Nietzsche, its Sartre. Four of us sit around one table corner.

Teri, the prettiest one, who I just met, regales us of Rio, Madrid. We fan with our cards, pile up, point, off-hand toss *Drink* in bureaucratic shorthand. My little laptop speakers hum Iron and Wine, Band of Horses:

people-over music. This noob accounting dude somehow wins three straight hands. The game's local bylaws palace him as the President who can coin a new rule. He asks us what he should choose. We give him standards:

Only left hands. Last thumb drinks. Little man. Wild twos.
Through a two-chugged-beer haze, these seem circumscribed to me. Teri and I share a mind to move. We rail in existential bonhomie:

Asshole Presidents, Dude-Man included, make any damn rules they please. We list stipulations to do with chairs, vodka, headstands, pillow-cases, thrown shoes, running, nudity, graham crackers, garden gnomes. He stammers

at the width, the breadth of his options, tries laughing off the pleats in his khakis. *What rule should I choose?* he keeps asking. *Any rule*, Teri spews, *Any. Fucking. Rule, god.* Dude hesitates, afraid. In that moment,

my thoughts roll, splash, spill into some wordless version of

Maybe I could marry this woman.

The Accounting Department's motley fool goes bat-shit, picks wild twos, keeps winning three straight, asking us what we think he should do 'til we all deplane, elixired, to the roof.

Next day, Teri picks me up from work. She bumps Jay-Z. Kanye and Fifty CDs wink at me from her visor. I think,

Shit. No way

this works.

Arrival

There is place
and there is place

* * *

At first
access to food
and fresh water
was primary

Semi-permeable barriers
against wind and rain
shade against withering sun

* * *

There is welcome
and there is welcome

* * *

Sources of food
to place into bodies
to absorb and replace
what energy is expended
in acquiring the food
that strengthens
or softens the bodies

* * *

Desire shapes
the dream of time

* * *

Slowly and together
faculties for emotion
and identity
co-arose
in the neural networks
housed in the skulls
of these aroused bodies

our original abstraction

* * *

Perpetually collapsing vacuum
experienced as series
of discrete events

* * *

Small cold rock
from the heavens
blazing up
in the friction
of piercing
the concentric spheres
of gas that swaddle
the water-logged earth
orange tongue trailing
behind it

hissing
before the boom

* * *

The inhabitants wonder:

Who? and For whom?

* * *

On a winter afternoon
highway sighs cut through
the temperature
regulators'
overlaid drones

These ways to breathe

* * *

There is earth
and it can be parceled
if we so desire
one place
to be many places

* * *

Titter floats in
from the hall
beneath footsteps
and my ongoing
dissatisfaction
with the projections
of light
through my body's negatives
into others' space

These ways to own
to be so delicate

Bildungsroman

I.

when I was
kleines
I

ein
kind
would
imagine

myself

the protagonist

not knowing
that

for a few
shining moments

for a
few
moments

brief

I was

light's

partner

reflection

my skin

who

aluminum

could be
would be

folded
into

all things
all now

desire

form and

signal

flux

whistled
through my
body

listening
constructed

this self
imagined

this other version
no longer

glass tube
wires bare
convolutions

separate
to sight
opaque
but

open to be

dissected

taken in

cannot be
that

I am
I am

that

I

yet

II.

what pained
abstraction

what happened

understatement
of terror

wooden crates

in which
I come to

nailed together
bare
skin and

wonder

what
bars

halting

make our shining

terrible

to each other

impossible
knowledge

considerable
weight

of
bearing

not
light
not

but the mark
of

brilliance
now

of

of
a weisser mann

a person

and qualified
by this

Here

Some will wonder,
What are you doing here?

That will be fair.
To respond with *I*,

with *want* will whistle
with a missing so high

it'll blister the ears'
blood. To say, *to help*

will wind itself
into mouthfuls of earth

and concrete. So, self,
take off your vestments.

Glaze your skin with rain
water. Listen.

III.

(War is Over)

Happy Xmas, Teri

Du Fu received a letter in the year 762 CE. Allies of the Tang had secured the Eastern Capital after years of rebel rule that had separated Du Fu from his family and sent them on journeys north, south, west and, finally, east down the Gold Sands River. The previous seven years had been difficult and lonely for all of them, particularly the two years in which Du Fu had been sequestered, alone, in the besieged Western Capital, the City of Perpetual Peace.

His family had been reunited in exile, however, by the time that the letter arrived. Du Fu marked the occasion with a poem in which his hopes for this moment cause him to soak his robes in tears of joy, and his family to dance in broad daylight. In the poem, drinking wine, Du Fu begins to pack his household for the long trip to his ancestral home, to see his garden and his brothers.

But they did not wake in the darkness to depart the next day. No circumstances would, in the poet's lifetime, clear the circuitous road of boulders.

Towards the end, still living in the southeastern reaches of the empire, far from the capital, Du Fu climbed, alone, the famous Yueyang Tower. His eyes set to the north, his age-deaf ears heard the war carts, the soldiers that he had been writing about for the last quarter of his life, and he soaked his robes again.

* * *

A picture of my wife and I from 2009 still bobs along in the stream of clouds. It was a day of sharpest sparkle, the District, frost-glittering. My in-laws had flown in from Canada, slept curled in blankets on our apartment floor. We woke in darkness, bundled, and joined the masses on special-run busses to the two-mile lawn before the famed white steps, the windowed dome. We waited in the biting cold. We could not see but black-coated, long blocks, unless we turned to the 20 foot close-captioned screens.

When we could now say, "President Obama," we stood amidst the cardboard boxes our fellow citizens had slept in on the grass, the detritus of so many thousands gathered, and we kissed. We

held each other, cried and kissed hope in
each others' lips, the crisp, dry air.

And snap! We are crying forever in the
obscure digitalia of a college newspaper
photo.

* * *

The Tang allies that claimed to liberate the Eastern Capital, in fact, killed thousands,
raped, looted treasure, destroyed. Residents wore nothing but paper garments for months.
Through how many generations did that violence echo? Has it yet faded?

Asking for a friend.

Allusions to Certain Streets

Two old cities
on the open sea:
The chisel of departure,
the autumn gap.

The plains: Instructions
from the time of war
for a joyous period
of mourning.

Now and then, he sits in the garden
with the sound of grace:
the years measured
in empty casks.

The ancestor's schemes
for the present moment:
sparrows that shatter
the stomach's peace.

On Lineage

new arms-length
epithets fill and dull
sharp crests
and troughs

some lines chosen
and some chosen for

others bred into
what can we know

water flowing underground

then sudden breach
or claim of a breach
or dream and desire
for a breach like a sneeze

into particularity
bell-song of nightingale
trickles through
thick trees
la-da la-dee

To Sing Songs of Joy in Babel

I was born in August, song-warm,
steeped in Babylon's customs—
head coverings worn only for sport;
meat slaughtered by automaton,
disembodied from stock and fowl;
the Sabbath shifted
our senses outside-in this now
and here, full full full;
programmed rivers of want and romance
of objects passing in the current.
Language grays out the literal
leaving only metaphors of exile.

Poem in Response to the Present Quality of Light

"I am no longer sure of the words, the clockwork of the world." - George Oppen

The ticking sounds like timpani.
Imagine
the bombs,

stars in the backyards
casting wide nets.

The colors, in their extremes,
require intensity
to let pass.

Eyes heighten
to the heightening
terminology,

the veil
of bloodlust,
ultimate in its corners.

*We hold these truths
to be self-evident:*

We must not blink
in the bright
bearings of teeth.

We must not yield
our hard-earned
love, our reason.

November 2015

Anthem for Sunday Morning

I dedicate this poem to whispering
broken unfinishable

taxonomies of break
dance beat non-specific cause morning dew I am

afraid pinned-down hush now narrative lateral
pass away a city

whispers limned artificial
periodic table of elements of inter-

porcelain tub leak course make rust love limbs broken
eyes *Ameri-* a more *un mer*

poor freedom poor free from
who brave broken chapter of safe key gates

-ca's hobbles promises horses never and outside
wild uninvited *Nah*

void ways of fill press millions
shun of cells we square inch of finger fifty

whispers lifted up look
for us candles rose dawn light rises through you

June 2016

That's No Moon

The foam swords, the foam shields,
the collections of light sabers
beam and flail and thwap.

My old friend Valentin's off to war.

I've had the Empire theme
from Star Wars stuck in my head.
I had this vision where I watched

men fall from a place
as wide as the language of god,
then I paid my taxes.

What is the relationship between things?

It's not fair to say that I'm scared
from way over LARP-assed here,
as the flecks of gravity, of madness,

of friendship, of the Ukraine
that my namesake escaped
scattershot, all everywhere.

Val, do you want reason?
Do you ever ask, "Why am I lost?"
Moods according to soundtrack,

having something to say.
What about, "Huh?"
What about "Triple-bypass-tastic?"

What about having my tears

scheduled to be buried?
I've had this case of quiet.
I am hooded, float through space.

What is it to hold on
to a person? To let go?
I taste dust, machine-gun residue,

some violence to goats in the yard,
some not-know-now, some why:
the body, and the sphere, and the laws.

Val, I want to sneeze tank parts,
to mooch your cheap beer and good Vermont.

but the Deathstar, because racecar,
because management,
because asterisk, because physics,

because night-time black.

I want to tattoo you to America forever,
but absence of grace,
because vacuum for want.

How I Used to Feel About Hip-Hop

Most days in this place where
I sweat hormonally,
and cared too much about
who saw me miss wide
open lay ups, the sun
softened to white blankets
of flaked hair gel, dead skin
cells by the high up windows.

This

Friday evening brought full
corners, wooden bleachers
folded up but for
the bottom row bench,
punch and store-brand cookies,
cheap streamers, the way I thought
I should look when the lights
finally shined on me.

is

Post-track-practice-spruced-up
and mom-dropped-off, I paid
with a five she gave me
to stand on the sideline,
purposely herky-jerking
for my friends who held hands
close to chests, all of us
too afraid to lose face

how

with the shimmer-lipped girls
and the Hilfiger'd boys
rubbing against each other
inside the orb of light
circling the speakers' throb.

we

Stood staring, stiff and hollow,
as though before a den of snakes.
How did their bodies turn
to wire? The way mine did
when I got up on my toes

and ran around the oval
without a thought, but, "Run"—

do

I did not know how to
uncoil my soft self, let go
my wind-up legs for their
"we," to gyrate their "it."
I feared that to pretend
to understand, to join

it.

would rust my mouth, would scald
my lungs with a body-
spray flavored poison.

Diary

the sacred set aside for obligation
obligation set aside for desire
desire set aside for thought
thought set aside for art
art set aside for the sacred
the sacred set aside for desire
desire set aside for art
art set aside for obligation
obligation set aside for thought
thought set aside for the sacred
the sacred set aside for thought
thought set aside for obligation
obligation set aside for art
art set aside for desire
desire set aside for the sacred
the sacred set aside for art
art set aside for thought
thought set aside for desire
desire set aside for obligation
obligation set aside for the sacred
the sacred set aside for sleep

Walls

immediate
mortar

the bricked-
a kind of

in emotion for
government,

of self,
ways us,

blood-drenched
twists
too short

walls spring
everywhere

~~silent~~

resistance /
tunnel /

lines
slathered

across border
thinking doused

you, the
arena

in some
in others

money
manuscript
hand

up
inside

silent

resignation /
abyss /

have yet to
stop falling

Halophile

“Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about.” - Martin Buber

Thick old ideas,

*O, abstractions
that scaffold*

the *Deus* between bodies

*diminished when sweat
slicks bellies
and my little hairs
stick in the skin-salt
of her surface--*

I, too, feel rubbed the wrong way:
the devastation of specificity.

*I, too, accept
all dualisms to be false,
all walls to be sham,
all sound compressed air,
all vision noted light.*

But is intellection enough?

*When she stubs her toe
on the foot of the bed,
the red well fills my chest.*

Is to feel it?

*Together, electric-drawn,
our spinnings
joined in crystal:*

Death will one day be my bride.

*And then this valence will dissolve,
and then this mediation.*

For Granted

My loves I toss inside a sack
I toss over my shoulder.
I turn. It is night.
The wind.
I don't know why, but sound.
I leave the sack
with the tavern-keeper.

I swear, I will come back,
I swear into a mug
of beer there just enough
and, harp, my body,
strum some factory
of welling up inside me,
all at what?

At sound, a maze of wave
that leads to sign, to post,
a below the mountains, cities seen
through haze, approaching,
awe at awe, at—

What absences make the weather?
What compressions, crests
and troughs of air--

I heard a poor child cough.
I thought I had a sack of loves,
of loaves, of hours, of winged life.

At what cairn-marked crossroads
did I leave it?

I turn back.
It is day and gray.
I see my loves' sharp swerves
and black scissors through the air.

The ground melts away from my feet.
I hover, then soar to join them,
punctuating the apparent

void of sheet-cloud sky.

Homo sapiens sapiens

Baby,

if you were a basal ganglia,
and only a basal ganglia,
and not one of those new-fangled
basal ganglia-plus situations,

you might flail at all-limbs-on.
You might throw shoes
and grind your teeth to paste.
You might yip ungainly phrases,

like "basal ganglia."
Just because your ankles
feel like they need new angles,
you might appear to dance

to some rhythm keyed
in chemical spangles.
But you're not just a basal ganglia.
You're so much more than that.

Darling, your salad parts
nicker. Your tuning pegs lick
and tear at each other's throats.
Of course, I'm glossing over

what it feels like to wander,
wake, read the newspaper
alone and drive to work.
Because, right now, it feels like

I'm hovering, like some sort of
basal ganglia is dangling
my inhibition over a bridge
by its chalky wrists.

I was born full of wait,
hang, listen, drum fingers
while you run,
shake, solve, bang:

Meet me and my dreams
of you beneath
the shivering pines

with a skin of that holy.

I'll use these fresh-whittled
bits of brain to become
whatever it takes to loose
your insides to flame.

Photograph of a Traveler

In the picture, we don't see the window.
We see the rising wall, the upward gaze.
We see the stair's abrupt end, the ways
the sun plays the camera's whip-light snap-show.
When he climbs, the white aura will follow
his body, a knowing ghost that calls and stays,
the quiet glow of what drove him to stray
from ground to skies of white cranes and crows.

We need to have seen his eyes to know the doves
they hide, the whisper-worlds sewn by his hands.
What color, what weight, what life did he dream
of finding? Back home in the windows above
his city, the ceiling-splayed light, taut cream
flowers. In the picture, we don't see him land.

NOTES

Address

1. I've borrowed some language from the band Wilco's song, "A Shot in the Arm."
2. The word "lodz" in Polish, also the name of the city, means "boat," an image of which is in the city's coat of arms.

Original Sin

1. From Adrienne Rich's "Sources," (italics are hers): "*From where does your strength come, you Southern Jew? / split at the root, raised in a castle of air?*"

Book of Numbers

1. A Jewish tallit, or prayer shawl, contains there are 613 knots tied to the four corners of the prayer shawl, which remind the wearer of the 613 mitzvot, or good deeds, described in the Torah.
2. In Jewish culture, the Hebrew letters that spell the word "chai" or "live, life" add up to the number 18. There is deep significance for these numbers in the Gematriya.
3. The number 108 has a long history of significance in Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions born in East and South Asia.
4. $6 \times 18 = 108$. Cool, right?

Ad Coelum

1. "*Cujus est solum ejus usque ad coelum et ad inferno*" is a Latin phrase translated roughly as, "Whose is the soil, theirs it is up to the heavens and down to hell." It's a phrase that's been used in British and American law to describe the rights of landowners to both mining rights and airspace.

I'm Not There

1. Remember the names of black and brown people killed by police. Among them are those who are referenced in this poem: Keith Lamont Scott, Terrence Crutcher, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile.

Already

1. The song referenced is "Here Come the Hotstepper," by Ini Kamoze.

Bildungsroman

1. The German *ein kleines kind* means "a little child." *Weisser mann* means "white man."

(War is Over)

1. This poem references, of course, several poems by Du Fu. I found David Young's translation, *Du Fu: A Life in Poetry* to contain particularly beautiful renderings of the 8th century T'ang bard.
2. It also very obviously references John Lennon's song, "Happy Xmas (War is Over)."
3. The poem also makes reference and use of Elizabeth Alexander's poem, "Praise Song for the Day," which she read at Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration.
4. The photograph of my wife and I is actually online if you care to dig for it.

Allusions to Certain Streets

1. This poem started with a butchered translation of Basho.

To Sing Songs of Joy in Babel

1. This poem references Psalm 137.

Poem in Response to the Present Quality of Light

1. The epigraph is from George Oppen's poem, "Leviathan."

How I Used to Feel About Hip-Hop

1. This poem borrows language from "This is How We Do It," by Montell Jordan.

Halophile

1. The epigraph is from Martin Buber's *I and Thou*.

BIOGRAPHY

Benjamin Brezner is a teaching assistant in George Mason University's Creative Writing MFA program, where he received the 2017 Outstanding Graduate Student Award and the 2015 Mary Roberts Rinehart Award for Poetry. He is the Poetry Editor for Stillhouse Press. His poetry has been published in *DistrictLit*, *The Camel Saloon*, and *Eunoia Review*. He lives in Washington, DC with his wife and cats.