Until I Pay My Bill
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Department of English
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Adrian Sobol, MFA Department of English

Until I Pay My Bill

Thesis directed by Professor Noah Eli Gordon

This collection examines a self in crisis. The poems inspect what it means to be a subjectivity in constant opposition to and the product of cultural forces—it is an “I” always set against the relief of another, of a “you.” The work is meant to serve as a dialogue, and its voice enacts its own anxieties through constant searching for an adequate frame, whether that frame is domestic, commercial, or artistic. In the search to overcome a sense of social and cultural dislocation, the speaker must become a lens through which all culture passes. The text treats commerce, film, music, and other literature as material from which a more stable subjectivity is formed.
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Persona Non Grata

“you are stupid and lazy
and will never be great but you do
what you know because what else is there?”

— Frank O’Hara
My friend and I compete to see who can get skinny first, to see whose ribs round off most like New England beaches. I tell him, *I just had a piece of toast to eat today.* He says, *Yeah? I just had a cigarette.* I toss the toast from my house. He thinks about some ipecac at the bottom of a drawer. I tell him *I haven’t eaten for three days.* He says, *I’ve been keeping stones in my mouth.* I say, *I starved the population of a small European city through a series of calculated trade sanctions,* which wins me the contest, but soon I hear the people I love begin to whisper about me, saying I’m terrifically horrible. Still, they continue to be the people I love.
PAX ADRIATICA

I admit nothing when caught alive
& once I even lived

in a lighthouse where
every other weekend (if—you

remember that index of our
arguments I wrote

on my arm—I could convince people
to help with ice or arrive on time)

I held house
shows & house parties

& the most extravagant
shipwrecks you've ever seen
The New Cosmos

When the earth stops its spin
& hurls us from its cities
I could see us together
shoveled through the new cosmos
the new cosmos would look handsome on you
that emptiness would look good on anyone
the way most vacant expressions do
if only Elton John wrote
songs for such occasions
I’d run up the volume
let it curdle yr hearing
& see where that left us
I’m thinking Ottawa but
that’s purely coincidental
we could live out our
last days in a motel room
dress in so many layers
we aren’t able to move
the sun’ll burn out one day
& I don’t want to be cold
it’s been exhausting I mean
expensive I mean I love you but
until someone offers me yr photograph
how will I know the difference
between what I’ve kept
& what I haven’t discarded
At War With the Weather

I’m at war with the weather
those lousy fingers carried across windows

the flooded floors of Iowa & Illinois
kilned by knees & telegenic sinkholes

I’m at war with economics
how it fondles only those in bloom

so what will I churn my money into
when I have too much to give away

if I can’t purchase luxury
I’ll settle for glamour instead

I’m at war with success
& have taken to poetry

to keep myself from ever
facing the prospect

I’m at war with the reckless & sincere
plotlines of television news

I’ve sunk hours into the box
& it returns still with postage due

I’m at war with the panorama
a slow machinery of containment

I’m at war with high definition
its immediate aging of heroes

no one should be seen
in such white angles

I’ve built blockades against it
& sent out field commanders

important spies cascading over
walls that wouldn’t hold

my reserves were captured or gagged
or left passing time singing
Waltzing Matilda to pretend they come from a land with gun control
I hear they made a job of it the show coming to Broadway
though once audiences revolt they’ll wish the war left them

wounded at art galleries & stables & tiresome parties with uncertain guests who found no pleasure in it

I’ve no pleasure in it just body language I can’t master

what’s it telling of if not my necessity to be loudest liar in the room

I’ve been eating the earth from your garden just in case

we want to see what comes growing when you toss me down into the deep end of a pool

I’m at war with the doorbell & offers of free pamphlets given to me by young men in suits whose best intentions involve

literature concerned with the correct aptitude for grief

I’ve taken their quiz I don’t have what it takes

I’m at war with young men in suits & young men without

& young men who compel me into erotics of frustration

I’m at war with young men who watch me crumple open my Accord in a Whole Foods’ parking lot & wave their sarcasm like cocks
I’m at war with highways where lanes
reveal themselves for twenty minutes a day

& of the last four traffic fatalities
I’ve driven by three

I’m at war with conspiracy theorists who say
Adrian Sobol was an inside job

I’m not nearly that sophisticated
I still take my coffee black

I’m at war with *Time* magazine
for telling me how shallow I’m allowed to be

I only look into a mirror when
I know everyone’s going to be pleased

I’m at war with the telephone
its gratitude & congratulations

the gifts & packages neatly bowed
sent from a city I’m not in

I’m at war with the static & solemn
games of backgammon played

by Washingtonians who allow their city
to be drawn in circles

& then believe it
is the only way to suckle a centerpiece

despite a history of urban planning
which insists chewing works too

I’m at war with my trumpeter swan
her inability to stay dry long enough
to solo over my seventh chords
or go out with the saucers

no amount of courtside seats
could make the sky interesting

to a man who can’t understand a bell
or why it’s determined to ring
I’m at war with the subway car
that charges in late & calls

itself express to skip my stop
& the next three

as if I should have listened
made sure to persist

I’m on a train
I’m not here to make decisions

I’m at war with the voice asking me to hold
its hair back during officially registered dry heaves

the memo said we were too old
to get into vomiting again

I’m at war with today’s distinct lack of skywriting
no pilot’s brave enough
to write a missive
& let the atmosphere slur

their work into knots & naughts
we care enough of it to forget

I’m at war with posterity & those who attempt
to claim they’re not in it

for a long chainlink fence around
their personalities

there was no poet but Rimbaud
who could punt his ghost forward

& want nothing to do with knowing
how the rest of us are doing

I never received a thank you card
which is recognition enough

I’m at war with Christmas I’m told
be on the lookout for saints
crossing at crosswalks
Kate was doored that way
took herself into the air
only to discover bruises

Chicago isn’t kind to cyclists
who have remained solid

in the face of easy apparition
as if it’s not a legitimate lifestyle choice

I’m at war with Billy the Kid
by the looks of his grave

& the way rain has persisted
I’m a few years too late

I’m at war with the Pacific
b/c it’s only temporary

like any western front
the generals believe it will give

eventually a singer may telephone
with news of armistice

I’m at war with other forms of boredom
put into the back of a pickup truck

driven across state lines to advertise
on anonymous corners we don’t

ever point to armed with knowledge
we haven’t stood there long enough

to be disappointed yet
I’m at war with disappointment too

why must it render out here
sloppy & wet against our boots

a pair of galoshes make it for the stairs
a cufflink lacquered by the day

some walls have clocks to time them
others make no excuses for the tardy

I’m at war with anyone
who makes claims for their total
& authentic self  
I've made certain I'm built

from whatever leftover  
detritus I can tape over

our fashionably low cut shirts  
that much skin is one way to show

I should be allowed to belong to everybody  
even if I'm little else than surface

& an exterior is a necessity  
more is plenty to want

& I'm at war with it  
absolutely at war with sprawl

just wait  
one day

I'll be heavy  
heavier than Old Testament

heavier than artillery  
heavier than paradox

heavier than Hetfield  
heavier than this

black hole I've stored  
inside me

it's so full of love now  
I wonder what else it's holding
Mike Soo

Since our last bbq
you burned
yr house down again
Poem with Sinus Pain

*After Adrienne Rich*

Sometimes at that bedside table, you recline
accompanying daylight, those sweat-thru sheets,
taciturn exhales reaching like a leaf,
you too ought to play...when just as the youngest play
out an afternoon party, the city peaking
near another’s private rooftop.
You ought to hold your head together
near this plain window, this spook of glass, this conviction,
but a hungry animal sinus lancing
while a clock hand calls in restless,
& a hard-tinned brass bird chirping the hour
on a white wallpapered wall.
Someone was writing you. You wish you spoke as rivers,
rivulets easing through an unknown plain,
speak through currents, also softly turning,
their single desire unbested by the course.
Poem with Fainting Spells

1.
Dictum: one hundred
degree fever
adjusted for an occasional
gravity
coming to
lip split on the bathroom
floor thinking—Why are you
on the bathroom floor?
It must have been
the most comfortable choice.

2.
In what we refer to
as history I’m told
you were crying
neither one of us able
to assume responsibility
for the mouths of other people.
Charles Gabel’s New Skill and Other Updates from your Network

after their last major email about “careerism”
how we should take to mending daylight
back into our wardrobe, I’m ready to pester
the ash around me into something useful
not like a poem, more like a version of me
that’s willing to improve—it’s five after midnight
my mouth worn down in the small print
promise to unsubscribe every further update
from LinkedIn, yes, where the dead go to chatter
& tell us we’ve got to be pliable, goal-oriented
but if I can’t introduce myself online
how will everyone here know I’ve taken to driving
through roundabouts at night with my eyes closed,
lips pressed lightly into the steer, that this is the best I got
My Part-Time Job

In my part-time job being mistaken
for others in my own clothes I’ve learned
there’s no money in it
    little recourse against
promotion
plus a few things about how to behave

none of it involves pressing darkness
where there’s not even
sun to get angry about

    we talk of being better
    as if every trainwreck is not already sincere

I think about exercise
nothing too long or too strenuous

I just want to look
    like evening has come to barrel over me
A Trick I Picked Up at Parties

involves saying *Can I borrow your girlfriend for a minute*
coming back two years later

married, honeymooned, & wrecked with her
gorgeous rope knots & ribbons

I've swallowed to better understand
why some houses wear Christmas lights

not crosses all year long assured the season
of reconciliation will return

tired but bearing gifts
how our speech drips away when

apologies are in order
I Have This Joke I’ve Been Working On

“and God has many other surprises, like
When the man you fear most marries your mother” — John Berryman

about when I was younger
& Catholic & wanted
in light of vestments in
sight of clothwork bones
to be a priest

I don’t mean at all to bother
with why not

the joke it starts—it starts:
—there’s this old saying—you can
take the priest
    out of the boy
    but

I’m sorry    my hair’s fucked
on earth as it is
    in heaven
Dear America

“Have you your pistols? have you your sharp edged axes?”
— Walt Whitman
1. Hold us close, your children. We the children of dismantled saints. We the children of uncommon loyalty. We the children of dread melted down & minted. Our pallor is our centerpiece. Our verbs know only past tense: the least sexual of grammatical imperatives. Encoded in our capillaries is a new form of forgiveness. The kind dispensed in gravel. The kind you find in the run of your stockings. I love the little glance of your thigh. A clue to your remainder. A clue I would tongue for hours.

2. I want to write you a book. I want to have it crash along your sides & bellow. It has to burn you. Light the windows & peek in on us like vagrants. We will do the unspeakable to our perfect bodies, our perfect pitch. We can contort our faces into something beautiful. Do you know what happens to desire when you forget you don’t want to touch me? This won’t be a love letter. Not until we agree love is nothing more than an admission of mechanics.

3. Let’s appropriate desire. You can wear the rubber mask. You can call me Daddy. You can twirl your wilderness into me. I will be your lo-fi histrionics. I’ve grown accustomed to time in a fish bowl, how it sweats itself, beds the faces looking in. You can’t decant a blackhole, its tireless eye, quiet and true. The end of motion is awe. I’m begging for stillness. If only in me, this leathered muscle, may it beat tomorrow, may it hold against the pressure of your untethered room.

4. They mail me out in installments. In six to eight weeks you will have my arms to drape off your belt. You will have my legs, lacquered & beautiful. My lungs breathing in the mailbox. I arrive in discrete packages for your convenience. You can hide me beneath the mattress. Inside the oven. I will wait in the shower, the garage. I’m no less a body than seraphim listening for the night to arrive. For your throat to become a soft, wet keyhole.
5.

If you went deaf, don’t worry. I know a little sign language. I know the phrase *to want*. You keep your palms flat, raised. You reach & pull out your father’s lungs until the floor’s covered in attractive confetti. I know the phrase *I’m your bedlam swan tonight & The washing machine is on sale*. If you were an appliance, I’d keep you plugged in. Maybe run my lips across the socket until it told me to stop.

6.

I want to do the shit on my SHIT TO DO LIST. I want to leave my limbs hungry in your bedroom. I want to read you the fine print on your medication like it’s the last love letter ever written. I want to kick a hole through the skull of my window. You’re an engineless boxfan & I want to set my tongue on you because it’s safe. I want to recognize real things in photographs. I want real things to recognize I’m trying.

7.

The slowest hands I’ve ever known pushed my skin aside & still couldn’t find me. What they pulled from that dredge was a woman, naked & appalled. What they left inside me still hurdles through. I’m mostly human now. Not born again, not yet born for the first time. That’s the thing with weather. How it never arrives, just passes through. How on a night like this, the wind has no amble. If we can go anywhere, can we trust ourselves to find our way back?
The Weather of Abandoned Rooms

“Emptiness kept us afloat.”

— Nathaniel Mackey
on this map it shows you where
you realize
    you’re going to
die & do   take care to

*  

it shows you where
we spend some thirty years of life asleep
& that’s enough
    for expertise

close yr eyes
practice that posture
    of not being
present

    in the world
    in a meaningful way

*  

it shows
this horse I pushed into traffic
is mostly plaster
    & meat now

I keep doing it—putting horses
in a poem the same way
    I’ve never been one

not even on accident

I keep trying but that’s one excuse
used too often to reach you

*
there’s god everywhere	he showed up
on television
so we had to get
    a radio

it remains

*

I remain
    breathing
in the only city
    the others
    have been swallowed by a sea

but then even ours
will be swallowed
    by someone
    we all must be swallowed

by someone someday

    the crest of unseen clouds
exceed the weight of the writing
buried beneath our

    every bridge

*

Rogers Park takes on its own
    its own weight
    a swimmer in a careless sea

when we’re this elegant
we’re not going to die
    I can promise you this

    I can promise us anything

it’s why these words
get written to you
or someone else who finds them

what I find
I will repeat indefinitely
what I repeat will reveal itself
to be mine

*

I love a missive stolen
from inside a stranger’s mailbox

what a culled forest
no sleep left in these woods
no ash to speak with
no scripture too quick or oblique

not enough people at this
party with just me
here here

press-ganged
by some itinerant radio

*

holy jukebox you will

not take my Visa
we’re back to fill you
with dollars

no song rejoins
except ours

it’s master / master where’s

a holy jukebox to refuse
another hour with
anyone
but us
wait there
  isn’t any kind
  of love like—

  patched through
flashlights propped in our hands

in the surf  keep this seed in yr lips

until God forbid a tree
bursts open

  a plaque with yr name
  placed at the root


on this map we carry out
  our distances

  this song goes out  he says
  to those
  who carry distances
  even through a feverish sky


maybe the DJ is right  but only
when I turn him up
curve it at the level
  of the saltbrimmed
dress
  a bit of hemisphere
  let yr hand
guide the eye
  in the fog  in the snow
a pilot must rely on the instruments
hidden in the body
of a machine

he doesn’t pray to

 *

I wonder how long you’ve been pious

 patron saint
   of hands on my legs

 patron saint
   of typing up the skin

you say a little prayer
   with a flicker
   of tongue

   you say you
see virgins

   I saw them too
   but so little of the world
   is total

 *

slough of morning
rest in my papertincture tunnel

my esophageal cask
Edgewater is English for daydrunk
   you patron saint of Lakewood
   you patron saint of the breach

paint me into the dream
   where you have no name

   we could be one infernal machine
if we ever found a fit

   between us & our crescent city
on this map
I would have cut yr hair
& broke into
yr neighbor’s kitchen to leave
it in his oven
if you asked—

I still owe you the favor & the mare
in my throat baring its skylight

across a jaw

north returns & returns
this is a red line train
this is a purple line train

this is how the city moves at a distance
even lighthouses becomes events
then eventualities then forgotten

at an intersection we’ve never seen
the wind pushing us into howls

you can only feel an incline
if you close your eyes & let traffic decide

in the lake near your apartment
they found a body
naked

who looks just
like me you said you said
you had to text me then

to make
certain
I was breathing somewhere in this city
   & I was in Pilsen sinking
      my accolades into driftwood

I didn’t reply for hours
thinking    it might be funny

forgetting
didn’t your brother
drown here     too

   *

no reason enough to not
   go speak

   cardinal directions & vagrants
an extended diagram of phone lines
   & satellites
      electrical wiring

      maybe once: insurgency
that cute & leatherbound
      terrorist notebook

here’s a joke about
      least resistance

it’s easy enough to call you say

   *

called out from that boombox
yr voice is androgynous     violent
   & I like that

I like how it moves me into quiet mimicry

& wakes me in the shallows of yr white linens

today no part of us is private
except that which was born    in the open
on this map is a record
    of every player piano
    in a proper order
    they will giving up
    no longer let us curry favor
    of last regrets

my dove    my sinister hand
what do yr politics hold if not
my hair on Saturday evening?

    you must believe in these
    simple things:

    the wet pulse of embrace
    the buckle of a trainyard

    you must believe in the French kiss

    the tongue is the only muscle
    I would give away freely
    to you or whatever
    ocean comes

welcome to: bones exist in every body
bodies in every pleasant locale

on this map
light fingered through a shoreline
    means something to a mind with too many rooms
    I’ve abandoned
    the poem

    its vectors reject
    every prim exterior

still there remains someone to speak to
why else have we kept
    our radios on & our doors ajar

*

with those mordant braids
give me four acts

    put my name up in lights
    help me skin the baby deer of memory

    pull the refrain from the glue &
    adhere to the pleasant cursive

    of this supine orchestra

I want your lips inked on my city
I want to hear you lick the feet

    of a red light district    girl

lonely coxswain    listen to me eat
    my weight in gold

*

on this map is a city
arrested for us in place
    beside a beach
    masked for wilderness

    yr hands on the wooden floor
    push sand across

into the pillowcase

*
telegram—I’ve felt up two oceans

go stand
by the window
think of grass
or rosemary & kitchens
& summer
the one dry decent
sidewalk
we stumbled over every year

*

how to explain all this savagery
we permit ourselves
with only a pen
a few dollars more?

how to settle into the wet
of your eye & sync our lips?

to sing as one internal
combustion engine goes
so must the rest

*

if you go
saddle up / let’s do it

I’ll make breakfast
I think I’ve gotten good
read: consistent
hold out
yr hand

*

read to me the map of our histories
let me
lap at its bowl
until even the bowl
is gone
my tongue crust with glaze
of the evening’s porcelain
washed out

let me introduce you
to what
to weather like this

*

our safety is entrusted to reside
in the crosses their stoic ruminants
their simmering stoves
the unsexed students buried
in snow what a vision
we make holding this
our animal pelt
divining
a future from sinew & sands
we will lounge here for days
until
even the radio learns
what it means to talk to us
of quiet

*

on this map
our voices travel on
without us
they offer us no choice
"Monday
Me.

Tuesday
Me.

Wednesday
Me.

Thursday
Me."

— Witold Gombrowicz
Self-Portrait (After Buying a Top Chef 5-Piece Knife Set)

Found in last night’s quiet I was excited. I thought I finally heard my inner voice for the first time, or maybe Spicer whispering a poem on horseback from within. It was just my neighbors arguing. Dear neighbors, the wall isn’t thick enough. Should we discuss it over dinner? I like my food thick enough so I feel it crack over the lull behind my eyes. I can’t sit in silence without an encroach of panic or at least irony. I sleep at bare minimum to two sources of white noise. I buy things to put myself at a distance from myself & I like my things in multitudes to smother what’s left of me out of the room. I find I’m talking to myself more as a practice of intimacy than prayer. That’s what music is for. Because it is never an angel it’s a source of comfort, one I can’t find in another person without a piano. I said to Steve Lewis once I’m dead inside & Steve Lewis said to me I’m dead inside & out. At least there’s a room for improvement I can vacate for the weekend. As far cardinal directions go, backsliding’s equally legit. Okay, I’ll be honest. There is no sound in space b/c sound has nothing to pass through. That’s what terrifies me. How it can’t fit a whole planet right here in my mouth.
Self-Portrait (After Buying Ron Padgett's *Collected Poems*)

I could answer the door in a towel, if the towel did not suggest that I have nothing to do. When the postman arrives he wicks away the light from the blinds. I wonder what he thinks of the heft of my routine packages. He rarely announces himself. It’s not a knock if it does not ask me to dress myself. If only I had a robe to wear that would keep me covered. If my hair is not right-angled, not dry, the doorknob will not demand enough to be turned. The public should look at me as if I’m busy, as if I have a reason to split the day open. I only get out of bed b/c I can’t fall back asleep. I only get out of the shower b/c the water has gone cold. I only come to the door, if a knock has come like a thicket, unannounced.
Self-Portrait (After Buying Octopus Nigiri)

In the back, I still keep a binder of photos of every animal I’ve ever eaten. The studies are inconclusive. There’s eel or there’s octopus & which one will put me in a better mood. I can ask a clouded room whether three-dimensional thinking, of which I’m told the octopus is capable, will provide a more satisfying meal. Last night it’s a whim that made the request of me. Much of the earth works this way, even the handsome men in the corner. Even the ashen conduction of memory. To think I dreamt an ex-lover wearing drapes as a dress. & in my inhale: reservations. What does it mean that I retire & avoid eye contact even in the dream? I can only aspire to demand—that classic fetter. I can only aspire to create problems I will myself not to solve.
Self Portrait (After Buying *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*)

I don’t want to be “in a tradition.” I want to be the one that wipes it out. The last stand, the final run on an equation that unbalances the effort. It’s too simple to put ourselves into something. It’s pulling out—that’s the trouble. I had a dream, yes, about you & (this part is true) an anthology of white male poets too revered to be enjoyed anymore except in a joke or a phone call. I titled the book *THE EXPENDABLES* because when I think “The New Realism” I think *First Blood* & the rest you can map yourself—the dream, again: you’re no longer men, but ideas and ideas must be devoured by attrition—really, the only way to make love anymore—when the temple contrives itself to some fabulous ruin we can ignore, let me know I gave the thing a kick, and then it toppled into me these oblations of some ecstatic fortune.
I love to watch children dying, writes Mayakovsky in “A Few Words About Myself.” This gets a laugh. Alone in my living room, I am not an insignificant part of it. Then Louis CK tells his audience, You all just clapped for a dead baby. Listen, I want the force of the joke—it amounts to a glove anyway—but you can’t have dead babies in a poem unless they’re serious dead babies. Unless they’re doing the poet’s work, b/c poets are cruel. Even for CK the dead baby isn’t a punchline. Just the result of a nuisance spread like classic rosy-fingered dawn. Mayakovsky was the least discreet. He knew children don’t count for every audience. (His champion was Stalin.) Classify that loss as comfortable spending. It’s not okay but I mean it literally. Like it is. You & I, we were once pre-language babies who only know a poem as a pleasing sound & nothing like a political gesture. Babies who looked to their mothers, or their fathers, to say How drab, a polemic. I'll got put on my hat.
Self-Portrait (After a Particularly Long Shower)

I lose track of time in enclosed, windowless rooms like bathrooms, airplane bathrooms, large caskets. Which is why here time’s allotted by shower radio. One or two songs per wash. Adjust for controlled & measured consumption of water, though, it’s clear my system has flaws. It varies by length of a guitar solo or an unexpected key change. No, were I to be honest, I’d soon understand the shower radio persists as a trick toward motivation. Another way to contain anxiety. What’s not background anymore? There are more dead than the dead would like us to believe. That very simple principle. It’s all pipes, body or plumbing. While a pipe doesn’t interest me, it does work, it brings in the neighbors closer. Sure, we’re all human (I guess) but more important we share plumbing & an unspoken backdoor apprehension of its eventual breakdown. That’s something no one’s talking about around the mailroom. Even I won’t bring up the bother between us. The botched water heater. Burst drainage. That temporary porta-potty out by the garage containing an unread copy of Holding It In, the collective autobiography written by the people of earth.
Self-Portrait (After Buying a Small Coffee)

Look, if I had the patience to summer here, I would. I’d put a lake next to your cashbox. Press my mouth to what steam remains from our collective song & let it fascinate me with that delicate scald. But it’s winter. Can’t you see the coats I’ve grown in my greenhouse? Can’t you see the semi-gloss of my shoes? You’ve paid & you still insist on pleasantries. Even flirtation at a safe distance. Counter space! You keep us from traditionally cloying beastly luster! I can be garrulous too in my spare time. I practice in a mirror. Put my arms out, exact change right there, waiting for someone—anyone—to arrive.
Self-Portrait (After Buying Groceries)

It’s okay to feel accidental. Anecdotal evidence suggests we barely belong in the lives we make. We may all be better off in Boca! It’s in the checkout magazine’s interest to make you wait & consider options, the difference between content, contentment, & continent—which one, you think, is big enough for you? Sanctity occurs ounce on precious ounce (that sliced ham, sugar) while a city’s constant hum makes up for our lack of assurance. Even in my lesser fantasies, my image hasn’t been printed by *Us Weekly*—tabloids don’t bother to meet me halfway. Hilary Clinton looks wrung. My cashier, tired & wrung. To say nothing of the rest of the crowd. Carts and figures with loose wheels, I feel you. It might be assumed, you know I’ve heard it heard before, by those with spiritual advisors that the tone of our surroundings originates from within. Look at the sheer defeat that must faucet out of me. If this were a play, would a mother turn to her daughter to say in a hushed tongue, a finger sweet with air: *Don’t look!* *This is when Adrian enters with his wallet out & poetry bolstered*—a helm provided by a gym class orchestra, sweating, conducted in the pit? No! Of course not. There’s yr problem, poet: you have the costume down but no horns to play you out.
Film Trailer for Your Going Away Party
Halfway Through *Sixteen Candles*

I realize it’s *Pretty in Pink*  
& halfway through I think  
that dog curled to Molly Ringwald  
is dead & John Hughes is dead  
& Jon Cryer will die though  
not near as spectacularly  
as we plan on going ourselves  
what with the orchestra  
pre-booked & a parade of craftsmen  
suturing together our effigies  
to look happier than we ever were  
but it’s not worth considering  
in this spiraling airplane  
the captain out of breath  
the flight attendant half-conscious near the beverage cart  
someone left the lavatory door unlatched  
so close to closing  
if somebody would just reach out  
when I recline against the sky  
I won’t sing “Try a Little Tenderness”  
I’ll divide my attention  
b/w “These Arms of Mine”  
& some saccharine K-pop number  
I don’t know the words to  
I’ll just mouth something else  
& maybe you will believe me
At the Movies
   for Roger Ebert

If it wasn’t for my outstanding parking
tickets I wouldn’t move

my car already
precariously low on gas

from thirteenth to fourteenth
street where pretty California

boys don’t own shirts or proper glassware

I’m overdressed for 80 degrees in April
but I’m confident it’s working

   the sun hits my heart
   in exquisite angles

on the tail
end of npr reporting
   “he changed

the way we saw movies

no one thought about framing

or editing or directing until
he taught us

   —now we all do it”

I hear his name

for the first time today
let the engine idle on

   forget
the tank’s about to dry
Goldbluming #4

the floor made love to
broken cheek bones

a left  a left hook
the greatest suckerpunch
    in all of christendom

what’s a  a Polish boy to do
but marvel &
dervish out poolside

rattle the clay
knot the iambic

& catalog the isthmus of
yr marbled laugh
McConaughey Haiku

Remember to
breathe & eat alright
alright alright
Poltergeist

I keep my ghosts by the window
now they’re drapes
Poem for Robin Williams

playing the same shitty
Chicago open mic

we wrecked our shoulders
to get small

you held a light in that room searching
for some maelstrom to peak

what’s selfish is not my pace
just mourning endured

    guilt    I’m not done holding
            practice

practice for an aging father, &
grandparents, & friends, practice for those

who’ll watch us one day turn out
like ripples on the skin off

an indelible stone already cast
growing dim distant & nonnegotiable
You're So Cool

in the spine in this snake-skinnd river in the sex
of a ground down jaw in
the lattice of the Argyle
grain in the L car where
two men mistake me for
Christian Slater maybe
the hairline or that blonde
on my arm they take
my picture it's on
the internet "you're so cool"
with smog cleft
to my collar I say
I'm Catholic when I mean
I'm an eye short
of the whole marimba in
my breast I'd
part the sea for a pint
of wet cement to mend
a theater we haven't seen
Badlands & no
one's un-happy I've got pie
on my shirt too I've got
pie
in my gun
to bandage to pressure
a horn into place
along the ear
This Will Not be a Terrence Malick Film While I’m Talking

while you’re talking

while we have teeth from which
songs can be ground into

little beaches
crowned over

cupping the moon
drowsy with silk

you shouldn’t be afraid
of what hides in the
wheat field

watching you
Film Trailer for Your Going Away Party

After Terrence Malick


Let me tell you what we know about you. You taking a turn, one hand on the wheel. Ornate ionic columns wide to a balcony. A woman reaching to your neck from the back seat. A woman stepping slowly into a pool. A man holding a gun at your going away party. See what your friends have done for you? See what you’ve done for them? Jump cut as parataxis.

Confetti applied liberally to your bad haircut. You’ve told yourself you’d roll off the divan onto the rug at least once. Hundreds of attendees barefoot on your back lawn. Sam Cooke’s “Wonderful World.” You, confused, standing among them. You in a strange, crowded elevator, unable to even look at the numbers. A city, embedded, retracting from view. Shaky cam as a new kind of poetics. Standing with a woman, shoulder to shoulder, the two of you facing distinctly different stage lefts. The two of you on the beach on an unsunny day. A field of wheat inaudible. Your shower, running. I can’t remember what bad thing I wanted to be.

Piano, haunting. Slow club lights magenta & blue. A couple arguing. You standing as if you aren’t already there. It was supposed to be just you, you know. Therein lies the premise. Seen through a glass door, more than one of you becomes translucent. Your eyes. Your thumbs & forefingers rubbing. Hints of a narrative juxtaposition. A woman looks up at the most incremental pace. The top of your bareback. What remains of your idea of a tattoo. You kissing, disappearing into her shoulders. I’ve been planning on getting back to me one day. A new form of laughter makes itself ominous. Digital heartrate monitor dance music. Roughened sound of bass strings. Resin placed by thumb against the ear drum. In one of your less talked about hallways, a woman in a black dress removes her blue wig.
A plane deliberately taking off. You shutting the door. You pushing someone against a wall. Let me show you who I know how to be. You know how it can get peculiar, right? A man running down the beach. Orchestral crescendo. A man standing in the surf. A shipwreck over rocks. Some dog diving into a pool after a rope, the light from above like cracked brick. A fire extinguisher in the incapable hands of your once best man. Smoke between the limbs of your going away party. You walking into it. The surf. Fullyclothed, like you were told you were born, sinking into the lake floor. An escalator, shaking. Maybe we can be better. Maybe we have to strive. Couch cushion about to burst with down. Your going away party. A woman throwing her arms forward into fists.
Dear America

“and I come to you
with bark in my throat
and crime on my sleeve”
— Heather Christle
8.
I’m writing you the torchiest of torch songs. I’m Nancy Sinatra in your bed & my every whisper burns a hospital down. I remember when I was 18 I wanted to fuck on the floor & break shit & when I was 25 I wanted to fuck on the floor & break shit & when I was 35 I wanted to fuck on the floor & break shit. Now I barely even have time to get loaded anymore. Show me what I’m missing, why my doctor keeps diagnosing regret. If the moon keeps crashing into us every night, I'll be the ocean all over again. I'll be the body you never imagined drowning in.

9.
Tether back the gloss from your eyes. The lighting’s no good if we wish to sing *Amen. Amen* to the mandible. *Amen* to the language we’ve yet to learn. *Amen* & I may smear myself some place new. Only if I have to. Only if there’s no place to return to that’s not on a map. You risk everything you reach for, so I’ve been making home movies of everyone except my family. I have hours of footage of rooms you’re not even in. The act of recording in reverse. Where what is erased remains in skin. & the difference between salve & salvage is the meat on the bone.

10.
My admission is that I am almost monogamous. My lovers all know me by other names. I will admit I sometimes dream of Lake Baikal & how I will drown there one day. I will admit I was born in the car I lost my virginity in. I’ve been sitting in the driver’s seat for years, turning the ignition, waiting for the whole thing to rust away. We will not see each other for a long time. You said, *Everyone deserves a French exit at a funeral.* I say, *We measure living by the holes we fill.*

11.
No slivers of our avenues left tilting in the flickerbulb. No wrist to measure proximity. No bangle. No bust. Call me *Liar.* I dare you. Call me *Whatlust.* I’ve driven back most memories of you, how your skin would sweat with mine. It’s your salt my tongue inures. My mouth is sore with you. It’s not a vowel, not a sibilant fur. If I slur, I slur for you. My arms, they can’t stutter. My legs, they don’t believe in dialectic systems. My jaw, it belongs in the cocktail. It has use for little else.
12.
This land is no one’s land. This land is your burial ground. This land has no churches anymore, only bedrooms. The light here, it shambles. It’s what every white boy off the lake wants. To have his name marqued across the neck of a stranger. To have his ashes spread into the shape of what killed him. So let me take care of you, let me hold the hem of your plastic nightgloss. I’m speechless, meaning I’ve sewn some moon into you. You can see it here, if you don’t move. If you don’t forget the Midwest. Its bloodless narcolepsy, its softburned girls & birches.

13.
Let’s make the book a graveyard. Let’s put our families in there. Dress them up in their finest. Announce it in the paper. Stream columbines from all the lamplights in every town. It is happening again. It is happening again. What your voice does to me in the morning. What your voice does to me across borders. To drone like that is to handcuff me to a garden. To drone is to bless this singer’s blues. To drone is to ghost your war back into sleep.

14.
The fine wiring around my eyes, the subtle reds you leave behind & the imperial violets. Each drink we drink & are forced to drink drips into ellipsis. Every whisper goes unheard. I’ve long forgotten you were meant to swaddle me. Not since you muzzled a pistol in my stomach the way heroes do in movies. If desire looks like you gunning down bystanders, I’m fresh out. I refuse astonishment. I refuse to be held in place. I will make two points on this graph. You are here far beneath the axis. I will draw a line between us. This is not how love works, but it’s where we have to start.
The Museum of Everyday Life
The Museum of Everyday Life®

What they call “self-indulgence” is actually a lack of explicit framework. A bolster to keep up a tricky economy. A river just wide enough to call its crossing an unexpected vacation. Convincing everyone every city isn’t Fort Lauderdale—that’s the greatest trick the devil ever pulled. In keeping with history, here’s a rabbit, its entrails read by a witch doctor, who turns to you as one harbinger of death to another with breaking news. The position of prime minister will never be yours to resign. Take it, open this package, but only if you enjoy conditional phrases. Inside you’ll find plans for discreet & state-approved factory farming based in the selected works of George Oppen. That Russian Roulette scene you like in *The Deer Hunter* as the #4 reason we can’t forgive *Reindeer Games*. My exhibitionism’s still under contract. Most of what I have to say gets lifted off men’s room walls & discarded pizza boxes. That’s where I got my catchphrase: *Hot & Ready!* Here are the odds against you. Vacancies upon request. Provided herein: a freshly copied call sheet enumerating the requests of Abernathy’s renowned Breakfast Choir™. As delightful oxymorons go, how’s about “best secondary education.” Though you have had a name
for years & are encouraged when strangers use
it in a sentence in yr vicinity it remains
a “working title.” You asked for it
now go live in the evening. Or an evening’s uniform
swatch. On the pillar, a sign in German you can’t
read: Industry Night This Way.
An arrow underneath makes
itself clear. Have you read yr Marx,
yr Neruda? Enough to say proletariat
of petals and bullets without worrying
about how sincere you stand? Instability
makes for a nation of poets. Turning to what?
Turning again to what we don’t understand
to tell us why we’re once more in the
right. Find a road into true realism
through a dream populated by the types
of people who wish they were you.

Vaccines sourced
from a mother cow, lowing in the field.
I’ve been there. Spreading my ass to the sky.
It was my favorite pastime after cycling
became cornered by medicine. They call
off-season training, as if you’re not getting
better when you perform yr job during
scheduled hours. Like September. I, poet, love
to forget passively a day overcome with
gray so slowly you barely notice until it’s
there in front of you, asking for change,
its tail wagging against a tree,
chewing an inexact replica of the leaf you
imagine when I say over the phone
one afternoon to change the subject,

*Think of a leaf.* That one you know
the one, the one you haven’t seen in years,
yes it plays in yr mind as the stand-in for foliage.

*The New York Times®* arrives
in a plain black suit one
could be inclined to call
“unintelligible.” *Perfect,* you think
you see Jesus making
balloon animals on his porch again.
We all need a day job. I met a lot
of nice people through
making knives. Off the record. I’m still unsure of
what makes up indelible ink. Didn’t
think to study it. Didn’t think to ask
when I first mixed up Yelp™ reviews for
things to do in Denver® when you’re dead.
You can look up the answer at any time,
but as is often the case with Google™, you somehow
never do. I find, though, when I ask
my phone, after I’m stricken awake in the middle
of & by some callous unknown,

*What’s that sound?* Google™ provides
less conclusive answers than the man tied up
next door. I could have asked him
to stop kicking. Something has been
listening to me making out
again. Maybe it has horns. Maybe even
a pair of rollerskates. I don’t gamble.
My money wants a
more simple life. The days pile on.
In an early memory. Which Chumbawamba
song? It’s hard to tell
what a dog is thinking when he isn’t
in the room with you. Accept
the invitation. Skip the party.

You decide today you can’t spell
“artisanal” w/o first having to spell
“art is anal.” The same can be said of a word
like “buttonhole,” which has a “butthole”
in clear view. No one fans away their
shame. I’m still trying to crack a great
joke without being at the end of
one. I can go no further. My
expeditions flagged at the summit. No
less than fewer than. Suppose for a
minute I want & ought to be serious.
That that is a notion that can hold.
Leaking, as they say in the Great White
North®—an official province, of course—is all relative.
A boat, dangling in the reeds,
leaks, while the creek makes itself welcome.
*Nature always wins*, says the fence outgrown
by the seesaw. What isn’t in
competition? Before oxygen
only a handful of not-so famous elements.

This was the year
for planes falling out of view from multiple
radar screens. This was the year
the ocean accrued an airline. Naturally. Does an
invading force ever think, *Maybe I’m coming*
on too strong? Go tell payroll. If my letter is in the mail
you should expect it. What wouldn’t you call
un-inevitable? In Nantucket®, a birdcall is tantamount
to an estranged sibling, curbside & drunk, pretending
to want to sleep. In other words, not worth
the rejoinder. There ought to be
a law against it or at the very least
a circumcision. For comparison’s
sake. Four out of five dentists
agree I’m more of an
anteater myself. Whereas outside
some car alarm patrols the blue
oven of dawn.

Needless
excess as its own privacy. You write
that down. You might even own it.
You’re unsure of the current statutes
regarding—what was it again? A man about yr age
promptly thinks of you w/o learning
yr name. At certain angles, yes, you do 
stop looking like yourself & gain 
a kind of “deer in a fulsome prairie” 
gaze. Which isn’t to say beautiful but 
I wouldn’t draw the hangman’s card against 
a sailboat either. You must have played 
that game. It was all we did 
growing up in the Midwest®. We’d pick 
up the phone & count to a hundred 
if we were lucky. If we were 
the phone would echo the 
world back to us. I’ve got 
something for you, it would say. For 
sale: Anticipation™. Are we in 
a snuff film? you ask, fingers through 
my teenage hair. Are we in 

God’s snuff film? Too late 
into four AM to even think 
about what’s sinister. It’s perpetually 
out of view. Squint. I dare you. Edges 
mask what’s coming behind those headlights. You 
can discern the studio audience 
shifting, discomfited, in their chairs. 
O distinct carrier wave of cotton! You’re 
almost home. A woman across the hall laughs. 
Maybe she doesn’t mean it, but we have to hear.
Whatever's Outside Will Have to Place Me

A tendency to trust what’s here. Geography as I come to understand it requires one to believe in the eyes of other people. You sense the way Columbus must have felt, all alone on the ocean, so certain of his mistakes. What did the seagull tell him that he did not already know? When I stand on the edge of a beach, the water always looks like it has come all this way just to greet me.
Bibliography


