Fasciotomies

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Fasciotomies

Gabriel Lee Bass

Thesis submitted to
the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences at
West Virginia University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MFA

English/Creative Writing

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Department of English

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ABSTRACT

Fasciotomies

Gabriel Lee Bass

This collection of poems follows the disjointed and never complete trajectory of personal recovery from trauma and alcoholism. The poems and their arrangement trouble the notion of a person ever being fixed, even as they make progress toward a better version of themselves. The collection illustrates how the past can impose itself on the present, creating dissonance and complicating the speaker’s understanding of time and recovery.
Critical Preface

No manuscript is easy to write and this one is no exception. I wrote a lot of these poems in a period of pandemic imposed isolation that saw me hit the worst period of my drinking and using and the arguably more chaotic stages of early sobriety. The last three years have been a time of artistic and spiritual molting for me, which is to say, not pretty. As unpleasant as the process of hitting rock bottom and taking the first few steps of climbing out have been, these poems couldn’t exist without all of it.

I see the writing of Fasciotomies as part of the work of I’ve been doing for myself to make some kind of peace with what I am and what brings me to the page. The “speaker” of my poems has always been myself, unless otherwise specified. The poems in this book largely deal with me trying to figure out what the next right thing looks like in the shadow of inherited and self-made trauma, regret, and fear. They have a certain post-apocalyptic quality, the more I think about it, a kind of “now what”-ness. My main poetic vehicles for making sense of things are cutting self-reflection in the present and deep examination of the past. I’m not a huge fan of writing as a way to exorcise one’s personal demons, but in some sense, that’s what I’m doing. The title of this manuscript comes from the poem “Fasciotomy”, which is named after a surgical procedure where the fasci, groups of tendons that hold leg muscles together, are removed after becoming so enflamed that they restrict blood flow and cause potentially lethal tissue death. It’s normally done as a last resort before amputation. Fasciotomies are becoming more common in treating victims of opioid overdoses who lay on their legs or other extremities long enough to cause such severe swelling. I wouldn’t recommend Googling what that surgery looks like on a full stomach. The work that these poems do on the page feels similar to that kind of procedure to me. They’re doing away with the rotten bits in order to salvage what’s left. After the surgery, of course, comes the long recovery. What sets these poems apart from some others, though, is that I’m not under the impression that writing them is going to fix me, or anything else for that matter. That happens off the page. This manuscript is not the capital “W” Work. These poems are gifts that I’m fortunate to be present enough to receive. And like the real work, they’re never done.

Besides the idea of working shit out on and off the page, and what that even looks like, the other main obsession of this collection is how imperfect and nonlinear that process can be. In ordering these poems, I wanted to stay away from creating a neat arc from
disaster to recovery. I’ve always been interested in how the past can barge in on the present and throw everything into disarray. For me, this looks a lot like trauma flashbacks and nagging memories of intergenerational grief. There’s nothing quite as funny or disheartening than to feel I have the hang of things only to have some old forgotten terror come back and remind me just how much is left to reckon with. This manuscript represents that scenario, the getting knocked around, put back together, rinse wash repeat. On the bright side, doing the necessary spiritual fasciotomy on a regular basis helps that initial roller coaster ride level out little by little. I wanted to illustrate all these things with the book. Things get better, then worse, etc. and in the end it’s worth it. Doing that with a book necessarily means bucking the whole concept of final resolution. I didn’t want anything about this collection to be neat, which I think was a success. The final poem feels like an ending, which it has to for a manuscript to come off, but I imagine as just another plateau before the next thing happens.

Doing all of this life-work on and off the page, I relied a lot on the work of poets who have done the same thing. I returned often to the poems of Gregory Orr. He’s a good model for to move on from the past without ever getting away from it. Dianne Seuss and Wanda Coleman provided a lot of formal guidance with their innovations on the sonnet and writing class and memory into it. Franz and Charles Wright and Kaveh Akbar were models for what writing about alcoholism and recovery can look like. I referred to Carl Philips a lot when it came time to do some discovering on the page.

As for the real work that made this collection possible, most of it was getting sober in a community of people committed to doing the same thing. Making a daily practice of admitting to my innermost self that I can’t drink with any degree of success while taking a certain set of steps to make sure I don’t try has kept me alive and more or less in one piece for a year and some change after that had ceased to be possible otherwise. Finding community in that way of living has made the difference. It also left me with a lot of time and money on my hands that I’d usually spend in a black out. New hobbies that helped me to stay well enough to write have included a return to music and a slightly less disastrous increased dependence on nicotine. I understand a little of what Mark Twain was talking about when he said smoking pipes and cigars was crucial to his writing process. I wrote most of these poems with a pipe in my teeth and a banjo on my knee. Having the ability to maintain more than one creative pursuit helped me to write what I wanted to when I felt like it without a sense of guilt or feeling trapped, which made everything a little more fun. Doing all of these different things helped me to find more ways to be among people that I wasn’t just trying to rip off, which made a lot of these poems possible in the sense that I was
meaningfully aware of other peoples’ existence for the time when I started writing about those relationships. The poems get written alone, but they don’t happen without other people. I’m very grateful to my many teachers who have helped me figure out how to be and how to write about it. Jenny, Mary Ann, Glenn, and a lot of the folks in the English department provided the most valuable mentorship for how to put all of these things on the page. Thank you for that.
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Caoineadh

My mother gave me poetry
Her rhythm punctuated
By blood and snapdragons, the first
I remember hearing. I inherited
The disease from her too. She passed
The pain down from her mother,
Whose hand reached back farther
Than memory, names. A wound coupled
With its salve, passed from one body
To another, mother to daughter.
What does that make us to each other?
Dog Days

I'm beginning to like the train howl
And the constant hush of traffic I pretend
Is the river. Here with the bed bugs
And the piss stains on the carpet,
The stained-glass window sends its light
Across the state of my apartment
And it all looks magic in that violet.
What I Mean when I Say *Baseball Bat*

What I could see of her face
was the color of the shadow divided
by the light in the hall. Mom's
legs kicked in her sleep. I watched,
my chest throbbing with them. I thought
staying awake would help, at least
I wouldn't wake and find her dead.
Four days. They beat her. Her roots
peered out from her scalp, the color
of her mother's ashes. I couldn't stay
awake. The last I saw of her then
was one blackened foot. I left a part of me
there. All around us the shadows came
gulfing. It was nowhere near the end.
Laying Down at 5AM

A robin starts to sing, on cue.
The window unit drones along
And I feel like a cicada crawling
Out of my skin, dry, so dry.
Now and then an unfamiliar
Cat yowls in the yard. I want
To name it, to forget myself,
So I jump to look. It runs
Off, of course, startled by my noise.
Lumbering thing that I am, I stay
At the window and watch the dew
Freeze on my car. Another robin
Joins the song. It’s a miracle
Alright, now what?
In Praise of Chocolate Gravy

When you give it to your friends, they'll taste
The bitterness and think it some mistake;
As when, aged nine, you took a bite and frowned,
Took another and knew this was a holy thing.
Thick as a voice about to break, it is delight
That spites the barren earth's broken promise.
The butter melts fast like an old name.
Remember that Christmas morning, remember
It is good sometimes, living long enough to forget.
For you, the learning and the knowing how to keep
Improbably thriving are the most important things.
Your friends will ask you why it exists. You won't know
What to tell them of nourishment, who lack hunger.
Petrichor

Sparrows throng the long catalpa, eager
As the suds frothing at the lip of my beer can
Beside the ramen noodles, egg on top.

The fridge hums and I agree, this is good;
I haven't eaten breakfast in a month.

My house is infested with bats, I leave the door open
But they don't take the hint and the rain blows in.
I worry it might soak the rent check on the table.

I'm content to watch the grackles fly
From the yard, worms curling in their beaks. I eat

And break open, undone by the grass, drunk
On rain and curling upward in what I imagine
Is delight. I've spent too long looking inward.

The ones I love are alive, others have been
Less lucky. What right do I have to grieve?

The smell of rain through the open window
Slackens my jaw and deepens the color of
Surprise; green as alive as I've ever seen it.
The Souvenir Gorilla Speaks of Rain

I wish you knew what it's like to be
a bottomless piggy bank. I can't hold
onto anything but the echoes of your knuckles
tapping my coconut head like an unlucky seagull.
Tomorrow: a new apartment, maybe ours.
The storms in Hawaii were my favorite, you know,
palm fronds so full of drama and delight.
So, your oven is falling apart, okay.
What happens when you die? To me, I mean.
Spring for a day, such sun, now the rain.
Another for the God Box

Today, I got up before 3 in the afternoon.
Well, not all accomplishments are happy.
Milosz, tucked in the back of the bookshelf,
knows how easily I can create distance.
So/ much depends on the little /red Honda,
Falling/ apart/ beside the grey trashcans.
Of course-the sassafras, whose spirit knows
no guile, is budding again. It just knows how.
The orange box peeks out from under my bed.
I'm only just learning to be taught.
Lucinda Williams

Even the good parts sound sad
when you say 'em out loud.
I can run wild on nothing now-like a moth
beating itself to death against a lightbulb.
*Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* starts playing
and all I hear is the sound of sandpaper
shining the shit off fresh eggs, rifles
sounding faintly in the Fall.
I've been living on that dirt
mixed with those tears
as long as I can remember.
Your song is somewhere that smells
like rust and ash. I go there
but don't stay. Home is a place
I've never been.
Caught on the Lake Before a Thunderstorm

We drifted among dead trees
Whose roots and trunks decayed
With the bones that thundered
In the clay of the drowned valley.
The toads' hoarse music a warning.
My stepfather glowered behind his cigarette,
Clicking his reel in the silence--
A depth we tried to sound but couldn't.
Our lines held the moon's light, cast
Brittle between the gathering clouds.
Fog wrapped around the staves, thrust
From the bottom, and the islands
Softened, that had once been hills.
For a moment, we were steady-
I reached out for a bony pine and caught
My breath when I heard the thunder.
Lightning crept over the far shore.
My stepfather cursed, his cigarette
Hissed back from the water.
I prayed that he would catch a fish.
Purple

Purple is liminal, hyacinth, a fading bruise:
The livid color of a crushed mollusk;
Cup of wine, the purple of ferment;
Purple of veins, their channeled life;
The consumptive purple of choking;
Somatic purple, the purple of smoke;
Erotic purple, arching over clavicles;
The purple of pigment, blue-red-neither;
The purple of in-between;
Purple of clover, purple of plums;
Purple of swelling barely contained by the skin;
Purple of geodes, broken, open;
Butterfly purple, pluck-preserved wings;
The purple of pokeberries, blood-handed children.

After Charles Wright
Which is... to Keep That Hid

You took me in
Your mouth outside,
As if to say
We were not
Afraid. I...
Didn't hold hands
To walk with you-
As if…
Hm-your glitter
Was really something.
There was more
I feared than... *them.*
You knew that.
You called me
A coward... well
You were right.
I could not
Give you *that.*

*Title from John Donne, "The Undertaking"*
Oh, Happy Day

Dogs howl on the rooftops and cats bask
In violets and furious hyacinth, and what's more,
the orchid on my dresser is no longer a metaphor
for my sobriety. It yellows on its own slow time.
After "To a Dead Drunk" by James Wright

Despite his best efforts, we loved him.
Ekphrasis on my Grandmother's Self-Portrait

She stands alone with her camera
in front of the mirror.
Her face blank except for the tell-tale pinch
of pain at her eyes, the comers of her mouth
cut downward almost imperceptibly.
Every year-more questions
and no one left to answer.
What was it that haunted her look?
Even if everyone was alive
would they tell me what I want to know?
She liked Hawaiian shirts too.
Nana told my mother when she was a girl
how she was afraid to sleep,
because she couldn't see the walls
in her room at night. She felt, she said,
swallowed over and over by the dark.
Recipe for Acceptance

I guess we're feeling *that* today, alright. To me, it's a matter of preference. Tension? Or the break. Swallow a lemon pip, take note of what you dread. The sky tonight is all mussel shell and rust. If I weren't in love, I'd probably be dead.
Waiting for the Miracle

Spring snow dusts the grass here
and there like resentment's bitter aftertaste.
Every day I learn more about my lack
of power, its lethal progression. Paint
surrenders to the wind in brittle white
flakes on my naked neighbor's windowsill.
I tried so hard so long to dissolve, but my atoms
cling stubbornly together. What holds them,
I can't say. It's so quiet I can hear my tea
steeping, a kind of burbling squeal. Fear?
Sure. But a little of that never killed anyone.
Starlings cackle brash in the sassafras
and another lightbulb burns out in the hall.
These are the long days before the epiphany.
The Stitched Monkey Reflects

How much can one person need?
The car repair place isn't going anywhere,
neither is that busted muffler. It's only money,
You know. It wasn't long ago
I was a pair of old socks. The stuffing
And sewing wasn't my creation, actually.
A kind of rebirth, you might say.
I don't miss the old days. Are you sure
You don't?
The path that leads to my door is strewn
With broken eggs, baby blue and alive with flies,
Ants sucking at what the starlings missed.
I hear a darker timbre in the calls of the birds.

On the porch, I smoke and stretch my legs, the end
Bums, color of raw skin, then cools, fades deep
Into itself like my mother, and her mother, and her mother...
I remember them as one slow hollowing out.

My mother's cheeks threaten to hug her remaining teeth
Tight enough to squeeze them out, as I held my grandmother's
Ashes against my chest, as her mother held us.
The grip's violence is not without care.

I held the bag of ash, so light, and the portraits
Tight as thinning memory. I stole our dead to keep them
From our living, the burning, the empty shell, my mother.
I let her believe that she lost everything until she was safe again,
But I never gave everything back.

Safe doesn't describe the sober passing of the years,
 Doesn't perforate the emptiness of the vein.
The future peeks out from amid the iridescent
Churning in the eggs. I don't blame her.

I prepare to hold on for the last time;
I will steal back what I can.
The insects feed brightly on, never finished
While there is something left to grieve.
For my Great Grand Uncle Jack,
Burned in a Plane Crash, Peoria, 1927

Pauline left the light on for you.
Heard of your damn foolishness...
Watertown flyer burned alive.
Fuselage pierced, it burst into flame.

Heard of your damn foolishness...
It burns my hand to write it:
Your fuselage pierced, it burst into flame.
Such color in the boughs, gold, red...

It burns my hand to write it.
You liked Byron enough to steal.
Bright Fall lights the boughs, gold, red.
You snuck that little volume full of women.

You liked Byron enough to steal.
All this time I thought it Sherry's
Sneaky volume full of little women,
His shade, his grief that follows us.

All this time I thought it Sherry's
Inability to undo the combination.
Your shade of grief still follows us,
Whirling in the air, first flight.

Inability to undo the combination:
Trapped by your harness, you burned.
Gay whooping in the air, first flight!
While banking struck a tree.

Trapped by your harness, you burned.
Don't tell me you were drunk, Jack.
While banking, struck a tree.
The light still burns in your window.

Don't tell me you were drunk, Jack.
You're a legend now, a story,
Still burning like the light in your window,
Told hushed around fires, like Icarus.

You're a legend, not a boy, now, a story.
The house these days is a ruin
Asking for fire, like Icarus.
There are no pictures of you left.

The house is someone else's ruin. Pauline left the light on for you. There are no pictures of you left, Watertown flyer, you burned alive.
It Thunders Across the River

The moon on its wobble, like a wedge of orange in a Dutch still-life, tracks along, imperceptibly changed. It's time to get used to the facts of my life. What else? An oyster shell full of ashes, Brunello Flake in a mason jar, invoice for a muffler. Enjoy it while the coastline holds. You never know when you've crossed the invisible line. Living well is hopelessly simple: do a day's work, sleep eight hours. But if I don't make a mess, there's nothing to talk about. Best get to it. The train insists tonight, a trapped animal. Who's driving?
Untitled #1 (Crystal Bridges)

The rain was a hot summer blanket.
I could feel it in my fractured vertebrae,
The taste of pill-chalk, neck brace, footsteps echoing
Among the bright glass flowers that smelled
Like nothing. I didn't know I needed it until
I was close enough to taste but didn't.

*Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.):*
I couldn't have, I needed to save, to keep.
I still haven't told them, I'm not sure I have to.
Walking slowly, as if through muddy water,
Naturally, I nearly collided with *Untitled #7.*
The painting stretched out from can't see to can't see,
Its thousand-and-one little cuts of possibility.
A bitter silence contains all our lives, sustains
Our need to break it, my urgent telling, yes, all of it.
I could have wept before the painting, but I didn't.
One way or another, my country will kill me, and then...
The tittering water nearly flooded the museum.
I memorized the works, the names of their makers, *Agnes,*
*Felix,* everyone. I was the only fag alive in there.
The candy, its eucharistic presence, still rasps at me.
Every year there is a deluge on my birthday.
I Lead with a Contradiction

I am my mother's daughter, like her
I am meticulous about pleasure, a practitioner
of consumption's ragged art. I insist.
I don't know how to go home, ask me why
and I'll lie before I admit I have no clue
how long I spent dissolving like sugar in a cavity.
I can say I was dutiful there.
Belonging has something to do with it,
it's still the hardest thing, but what's closest
to home is the feeling, place being irrelevant.
The evening is the color of a white house under water.
Realizing this is enough to distract me,
which, for now, is enough.
Someone once told me I sound like I have a little coal in my blood. I didn't know what to tell him but yes, embarrassed of my pride in it. I'm cut off from those generations of my flesh that dug their graves in the dust of the longest dead. My father won't even add me on Facebook. What I know of Buffalo Bill Bass I had to find on my own, Dianna could have told me, but she just died of Covid. I scroll for hours through their lives, their faces like a flicker in the mirror. Do they know I exist? My cousin Abel got clean, then married. He's self-conscious about his thinning hair. We're named for the same man, Billy Lee, the miner who jumped out of planes and killed Nazis. Nothing I have of them is mine. Buffalo Bill's church of the brethren still stands, faded but solid, like the silence my father tends. One of us must be dead.
Poem with Half a Line by Diane Seuss

The cheeky rhododendrons hang
their flowers in the walkway, daring me
to ignore their bruise-violet hearts.
What's my damage, anyway, that they
can smack my face and I feel nothing?
These aren't rhetorical questions.
*I felt love all the way then. Never since.*
Never? Maybe it just needs coaxing
like a frightened animal. Sing a little
Sarah McLachlan, make it pitiful, something...
It's just such an awful long time
to go without.
Okay is Another Story

It makes me uncomfortable to be told I am loved, to be comfortable. Braced, as I am, for pain, it hurts. Like a woman who, after wrecking her car nine months pregnant, told me she went into contractions at the wheel for years after. The child was born. The rain today was marvelous. I could hear the tires of the new old car screech like a funeral. My neck used to tell me the weather back before it healed. If I need to, I can leave my body. It's a kind of magic, it takes no practice. Nobody's yet found a cure for the past, only pain. The loss of which is still loss-of sensation, I guess, healing opens a void in the bone that whispers a storm in the spine. It's a lose lose game, or not. In bed tonight, the hot depth returns, I can almost feel the rain, the blood, the taste of glass. Does it not ever go away? No. This I can keep, thank God.
Summer in Millcreek

We listened in the long low school building as a child screamed where they held him down, waiting for a needle-full of Thorazine. We listened down the hall in silence. Then we laughed and some socked each other tender when we left at the appointed time. All we knew of touch was the weight of a fist connecting with walls, trees, faces we couldn't help but reach for. The trees grew out of bounds, poked their laden branches through the gaps in the chain link fence, green stones of Summer daring the bravest to clamber up and pick. The staff couldn't stop us if they wanted to. We grabbed and threw hard, the fruit bruising with us where it left its marks and pulp on our sweating backs. We spoke a language of impacts and aftermaths, burdened with a need that made us hardened and tough as the unripe persimmons that broke like knuckles against our bodies. We ran out of breath, some laid flat, I stood sore in the breeze of the afternoon and watched it carry cottonwood seeds effortlessly through the fence.
In Heaven, Can I Drink Again?

One false move and the day breaks apart, as if I were an ant with a credit card Pressed between my head and abdomen.
Fasciotomy

Mom called to make her confession, which I always grin and bear. If I didn't? We wouldn't speak. Fentanyl overdose, no shit. Connective tissue removed from muscles rotting under their own weight, fileted like a beautiful steak. Another email from the WFTU, *DIGNIFIED LIFE* is our cry this year. Another overdose on High Street. Alive then, Chris was talking to the cops. Of course, I want to dislocate myself from anything I can't fix. What use is this witness? There's no revival in town, only snakes. All I can hope for is to pass on the fury, the bum-cold murder at the back of my throat that rises when I see us die. Bitter, one might say who doesn't know how a 12-hour shift lingers in a body barely running on SNAP and meth. I remind myself, sitting at the red light awash over a sleeping figure in front of the bank, that suffering is the root of our power. My love and rage have always been mingled. They run together in this curse disguised as a poem.
My Cup's A-Running Over

I’m holding on to Chekhov's gun, waiting
for an excuse. Only the best will do-I have a list.
Every day I’m stealing me back from myself.
The morning, what little I see of it, is the best
time to be silent, I do some real good thinking
that way, on the porch, with the sparrows, and the cat-
all of us worked up because the snow shines brightest
when it melts. Cue the sirens from downtown.
I like the rhyme in dappled and Harold, sounds
like a storybook title-but dappled with what?
I'm losing my train of thought, let's start over.
There's no problem I can't make worse if I try.
When I need a little reminder, I remember
what my best friend, a little ambivalent, once told me:
wherever I go, there I am. It always stuck in my mind.
What I Mean when I Say *Shotgun*

Nana sat her daughters down
and told them her plan because
they were bad daughters.
In my imagining, they're at the place
on Grizzly Road, where I first heard
the story. Nana held the gun
and said goodbye and where
to find her body, emptied
by the blast. She walked out
the door to the home I remember,
the sun blazing like an eye
wept out. One daughter
at the door watched her place
the gun in the passenger seat
of the crown vic. The other stayed
back and did not weep, move.
*Good riddance.* Nana drove away
and her favorite daughter followed
in the cloud of dust she left
behind her. In the memory
I've made for them, a glance
saw Nana turn back, my mother
making promises between gasps.
I imagine them hugging in the dirt
I want Nana to cry now,
to say sorry. But I can't make that
picture feel real. I never saw
her shed a tear, can't see
anything but the gun.
Portrait of this Alcoholic Nine Months Sober

Summer's winding down, my back
Is always sore. I've forgotten why
I write, maybe truth. But it's elusive
As God and money. If I did steal
No one would blame me.
My life was never so precious
to me as now. How about that?
It takes loss for me, everything but today,
To remember I fought hard to get
Here. It sounds profound until
I remember I have no clue where I am.

After Kaveh Akbar
Now that I'm Better

These days, I could lay down in a green field and stay.
Nocturne

I run my fingers again, along
the long deep scars buried
in my head of hair and sweat.
The A/C wheezes in the depths
of early August. I felt God most
lain open in the wreck-rolled car,
like he crept into me against the current
of my blood. The lightning, crackle-close
and thick as an oak, nearly had me
on the ground tonight.
Starlings

Figures dark as shadows
Over spilled liquor.
Wings slick with pomade.

Their beaks startle out
From their heads, color
Of a struck match

That keeps the shine
In their darting eyes
That hunt the earth.

They watch me watch
While they jostle for worms
And rattle from somewhere deep.

I admire their stark beauty
And am awed by their hunger.
I see ghosts in them,

Something empty come
Back to be day's deepest
Shadows, reflecting the moon

On their wings at dawn.
They are too common
To be bad omens

Unless they come to tell
Something as simple as how
Many lives were lost in the night.

I think so to see them, crude
As oil and twice as thick.
There are so many.
Sometimes Quickly, Sometimes Slowly

I stop worrying about money.
It's no object when you don't have it.
Gizmo's sprawled in the street again, I
scratch around the ticks
Behind his ears. Nothing really
Sorts itself out. It just ends or doesn't.
My brother has the ashes now, our rite
Of passage looks a lot like theft.
One burden to the next. Autumn's coming.
I felt the first chill. Anticipation and fear.
I find sassafras everywhere now, the leaves
Grown tough. I pull off any vines.
Raspberry sunset in the poor air. It hurts,
I'm alright. All these things are true at once
In Other Words, I'm Making it

I call home when I need a reminder of why I don't call home. Domestic battery and burglary are just a Tuesday in some families. I don't know how to hear it all without carrying its weight. A spider sits in a perfect web just outside my window, right in the center, twirling a moth in its teeth. My brother caught the virus after all. Hoping feels more like obligation than sustenance. The wind blows and the moth trembles like a leaf. I could break so easily but I don't. The 1AM train conductor gingerly taps his horn across the Mon river. One could mistake the wheel-rush for the river. Believe me-if water could hold my grief, it would.
On Silence

It isn't all created
equal, there's before
and there's after the orchestra
tunes up. My trouble? I can't tell
which I've fallen into. Easy
poems don't feel good anymore.
I can't think about the hard ones.
The train sounds the same as always,
My thoughts turn to regret, no news
But the ice on my windshield.
Maybe I'm not listening. Or
There's nothing left to hear,
No clear C chord at the end
Of this deep drift.

After Gregory Orr
Summer's End

The leaves are just starting to turn.

What is there to do but listen to the ice-Cream truck twinkling ragtime, children
Flying down the street like sparrows

In their brightly colored masks?

I spend my days at windows and screens,
Envying the cat padding his soft way
Through the yard as he's always done.

Life is groaning, pressed into a new season.

The morning glories growing in my neighbor's
Gutter are beginning to wither, the sun is not
Enough to keep them going in September.

I take whatever novelty I can get.

Sirens carry from downtown, wailing
Into the tinny music and muffled laughter;
It makes an incongruous symphony.

I train my ear to the extraordinary

Ache of the heaving knot
The scene tangles in my chest.
Surprise has shrunk to a sound. Anything

Out of the ordinary is enough.
At Cooper's Rock

A year later, I still dream about getting drunk, the imagined terror of coming to at the wheel is pretty convincing. The ace of cups still overflows. Everything is opening again, different lines, same hours. I never noticed how much downtown smells like shit until I quit hanging around. The mountains are changing color somewhere under the fog. I kiss my lover in their crevasses, still stumped at where I've found myself. Feels like I'm crawling in through the back door to my life, still on the come-down. Suppose I'm in it now. I didn't think to imagine how this would feel. Chipmunks scatter through the brush. I don't know, but I love this air.
Is Despair a Character Defect?

The ache in my tooth moves slow,
I feel it at the DMV, pushing deeper
Into the exposed bloody pulp.
Everyone here has the same blank fear
On their faces, praying they have
Their papers in order, the money to file them.
I can't let this thing rot any more but
I can't afford to get it yanked either.
They're calling out numbers at the counter,
Maybe mine, but through the masks
And the tinny microphone
I can't make it out.
Warning Signs

Ancient sycamores shed their bark
in the shadow of the hills.
I assign an exercise in purpose.
*If you can’t find one, lie.*
At home, Jesus liberates the dead.
My father doesn't speak.
*Angel Boy, be kind to yourself.*
A girl in Highland believes
God speaks to her.
*What is He waiting for?*
I imagine it will snow tomorrow,
as it did yesterday.
The ground is warmer than the air;
ice sweats under the bridge.
New Year's Eve, Pittsburgh 2021

Last year, sticky floors and the big ball breaking apart like my little brother's skull, bodies sweating at the bar.

Celebratory gunshots mingle with the fireworks. Everything is different now. The city shies away from midnight like a beaten animal.
Fourteen is my Lucky Number

I'm listening to Black Sabbath (with Dio), slamming pizza and room temperature Red Bull, having already finished my Perrier. Lupercalia is in full swing towards the inevitable, I can't blame anyone for being young. Time just gathers like a pile of stones on my recalcitrant chest. It's anything but heavy though, you know the feeling? Everything today is so crunchy, my neck, the snow hugging everything like a fitted sheet, it could be worse. Waking up is new, I still expect the same old blur and still want it to a frightening extent, but today, today is Valentine's day, and my own anniversary. Fuck David Attenborough, we've known for years how doomed we are. The course is set, why ring the bell tonight? I'm as full of dreams as the dog on my shins.
What's In Front of Me Now?

What's a boy got to do
to cease being a boy?
The flowers only look
like tulips on the outside.
Degrees of Separation

Drinking coffee and talking about the famous people you meet in rehab, I repeat to myself: *think think think's not for you.*
The rain can't decide whether or not it wants to fall. Everything smells like gunpowder to me.
It's the season, close to killing time, to prepare the rot we live on, the rhododendrons and the sparrows too. I feel like a Styrofoam cup struggling to become dirt.
Love Poem for my Unrealized Self

Who knows your shape
As a body? Everything is
The same but how you're perceived,
So not the same, not at all.
This is no mere androgyny,
There has never been language
For you. Strangers stammer
Around what to call you,
Who reject reference
Or vice versa. I carry you
In my body, unspeakable,
Unmade. You are me
But I am not you.
I am your mother.
Another Aftermath

It'll always be in me to go somewhere lonesome and die. After all, I'm still a sick dog.
A Little Bit of Madness

Just enough to keep things interesting, well...

Those were different times, different people,
another night in Little Rock would probably kill me.

It's too much fun, breaking bottles on the club floor,
the same my mother danced on. We run in parallel streets.

Nowadays I stare at mirrors for hours waiting for a glimpse
of myself about the eyes. Poems don't do much
for that, but if they did, I doubt I'd want them.

The five-finger ivy on my neighbor's wall begins
its shaggy life again. I like the new leaves, their softness,
color of Spring light. I bet I could be that delicate.