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Where the Night Whistle Comes From

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Where the Night Whistle Comes From

Micah Holmes

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

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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Abstract

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The poems contained in this manuscript explore cycles of grief brought on by the ending of relationships, along with ideas concerning paternal lineage. Classical music and the sonnet form heavily influence the work.
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Preface

In the essay "Halflife" Charles Wright writes, "people go to poetry readings for the same reasons they go to church -- they think they should, and they hope they'll learn something. One writes the poems for the same reasons." Reading this simple statement for the first time I wrote "Good Lord" in the margin. People are often confused to learn that I am studying for an MFA, even more so when I tell them that I am a poet. "What are you going to do with that?" is usually the next question. This question entirely misses the point of poetry, and now having read Wright's words, I am armed with a more appropriate response. If I could leave the matter here, I would. However, the parameters of this preface require me to explain my work. In a short answer, I've been learning to write in order to learn to live, to scrape inch by inch toward enlightenment.

The following poems enact cycles of grief. In the summer before my second year in the MFA program, I began a long and drawn out split with my then-fiancé. Because we had been together for all of our adult lives until that point, it felt to me like a divorce. In writing the poems, I was trying to figure out how to "do" the grieving process. I found myself revolving around a wheel of beginnings and endings. One day you think you're OK and that everything will be just peachy, then later that night you are back on the couch watching “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” and drinking more red wine than is probably healthy. The exact same thing happened in the poems. I’ve tried to organize them in such a way as to let this cycle play out between the poems. The cycles are shorter towards the beginning to emphasize the initial wobbliness in the steps of moving on, then they get longer as the manuscript progresses, because, well,…I got better.
These poems aren't trying to hide or mask anything, whether it be emotions, thoughts or events. The thoughts portrayed are my own and to figure them out was part of the reason to write the poems in the first place. The actual events went through a distilling process before landing in the poems, but their facts were changed as little as possible. I've never been good at making things up. If I wanted to craft new worlds and new people I would write fiction, but dealing with this world and its people is more than enough of a challenge for me. Almost every poem contains an "I," a speaker for whom I take responsibility. In other words, the speaker's persona is as close to my own as I can manage. Due to the nature of the material and the fact that I tend to write a poem of direct address, there is almost always a "you" present as well.

In the essay “The End of a Golden String” William Stafford wrote that, “Literature is not like a relay race with a changing baton passed from person to person, but like something more horizontal and immediate, something that develops amid influences that for the most part are not literary.” This idea is a useful jumping off point for me to discuss what influences me as a writer. There is a strong thread of musical influences in my manuscript, classical music for the most part. Because of this, I can trace what I call the "lineage" of these poems back a few generations, from composer to performer to me to my poem. The pieces of music I am drawn to create in me the types of moods and emotions that I am trying to create in my readers by way of my poems. Many of the poems that carry these lineages are marked as such either by title or epigraph. For example, "Watching Yundi Play the Nocturnes" came about while I was watching a YouTube video of the Chinese pianist Yundi Li performing Chopin's nocturnes. The particular movement that had the most influence on the poem was Op. 9 No. 2, a piece in which I find a sort of confident hope expressed in soft tones. Another piece that has had a lasting influence on the emotional tenor of my work is Brahms' String Sextet No.1 Mov.2. I feel in this piece violent
beauty, a sadness with profound power. I have tried to explain just how music has influenced my work by providing these few examples, but I would wager that the poems themselves do a better job of it.

I tend to go on "kicks" in my writing and in life (day to day living is, in my opinion, the highest form of writing). I've experimented with sonnets, prose poems, and a few different stanza patterns, all of which I'll speak about in a moment. Naming these patterns "kicks" or "experiments" may imply that they are short lived, which isn't really the case. In reality, I'll do one thing for an extended period of time until it finds a permanent shelf in my wheelhouse on which to live, then I start messing around with something else, mixing it with the other tools I've collected, all the while navigating the perilous seas. The "kicks" become skills.

Of the 45 poems in the manuscript, at least 10 are variations on the sonnet. Here I will claim a lineage back to the great Shakespeare, because my first tries at the sonnet followed rather strictly the Shakespearian model, though I did not read his sonnets all that extensively while composing my own. The influence is on the level of form. I find the formal restraints of the Shakespearian sonnet to be instructive. You must stay with an idea and try to fully explore it (for 3 quatrains if you are writing a strict Shakespearian). Then you are asked to view your subject in a different light in the couplet. I found that I had done similar things before even taking up the sonnet. The poem "Unstageable Play" instructs the reader to perform in their mind the actions described in the poem, placing them in the audience of the unstageable play itself. The poem ends with a turn-like flourish: "Gas the audience." Another poem, "Reading Poetry While Eating Mac and Cheese," also acts as a sort of proto-sonnet. It is structured in couplets separated by asterisks, but they all push toward the final line "I fear to reach for what I want." Because I was
prone to discovering meaningful lines by going through a sonnet-like process before I ever learned to write sonnets, I can't say that I am surprised the form has served me so well.

Even more numerous than the sonnet variants are poems written couplets. More often than not, my poems will have at least a few couplets in them even if they are not constructed completely in that stanzaic pattern. I find the couplet to be more stabilizing than other stanza forms. Couplets beg a certain type of discovery where an initial idea or perception asks to be linked quite quickly to the next. If you tend toward an end-stopped line, as I do, the observations can become tightly self-contained, yet (perhaps paradoxically) they project their strength outward into the rest of the poem. The first poem in this manuscript, "Please Let This Be the Last," is as good an example as any to illustrate the effect I'm trying to illuminate here.

It is difficult to know when to stop a preface like this one. It is my hope that the poems contained in this manuscript continue to yield meaning on multiple readings, just as I could think of different ways to shade them in prose. Perhaps, this difficulty in concluding stems from the type of poem I write. I am, for the most part, a lyric, mood-based poet. Some people say that if you write more than one poem in a day, that they are most likely parts of the same poem. I think this is true on a larger scale. Writing lyric poetry is a daily, continuous experience that is only later molded into discrete units. So without further complications, I will bring this unit to a close.
~For the ones who were there. You know who you are~
Please Let This Be the Last

Because I lived through your life,
I may tell it.

These things that are mine were ours:
My pictures of you on the bed.

You were cherry scented wax, and soft cotton dresses,
young for the both of us.
This Morning I Woke to an Explanation of Pulsars

Some stars have such treacherous gravity,
you told me, perched at the foot of my bed,
that all their light gathers into these huge columns.
Slowly you stretched your arms -- palm to palm
as in prayer, then outwardly moving, creating yourself:
head as solar nucleus,
body as constellation.

I think Yeats said something similar of time,
but I was looking out the window.
Little rows of kindergarteners sat in the playground, legs outstretched,
slopping paint on each other's feet with old brushes.
The banner they made with their chasing steps
hung on the cafeteria wall for months.

At some point in my history, a great grandfather
abandoned his little boy. I was told the story at Thanksgiving,
between the green bean casserole and the oyster stuffing.
A sepia tone photo lay on the table:
three brothers in their finest suits,
double breasted and bow-tied
or full windsor knotted,
and four sisters dolled up in such fashions
as would fit a weekend jaunt over to Gatsby's.
These are the last names we know:
Great Grandpa Harold,
Great Uncle Kermit,
Great Aunt Mildreth.
Their parents are lost,
a secret no one talks about.
Someone was not who they said they were.

Your shoulders are still turning,
swinging toward my face like the outer arms of the galaxy,
spanned forward and back like a hunter,
bowstring taut and stalking.
The Place Where I Finally Let Go

I set the coffee alarm and take off my jeans. 
My feet, cold beneath the covers, are too drunk 
to stay within the boundaries of the bed’s middle 
where the three of us lie in parallels.

My greed is in that bed. 
It hides behind the cryptic, those borrowed touches:  
I am a closed throat that speaks only nightshades.

Confession: My fence is low, crossable.

I was too afraid to shower with her, 
so I sent my greed instead.

These bone structures are different.  
Shoulders: broader. 
Hips: less padded. 
I become enamored of the contrast.

My greed fears to be ignored. 
It is naked – I push it at angles. 
It won’t let me sleep 
unless I hold you both 
straight through until morning.
February, 2010

Today was a twelve ounce Red Bull day,
An Ibuprofen set out for you on the night stand kind of day.

I turned your body so I could fit into bed.
I tried to touch without feeling.

When March brings the sun back
I will miss the weight of you,
and the extra blankets above me.
Separation Poem

The air conditioner is leaking again, rhythmically tapping out a little pool onto the windowsill.

I toast a cinnamon waffle and remember the way your body once occupied the cheap sheets on our bed.

This afternoon, the laundry will need doing. When I toss your panties into the washer, I’ll remember the sound, a slow *swish*, they made when I slid them down your thighs. This evening, when you still haven’t come home,

I’ll make oven fried potato wedges the way you taught me, then go back to bed with your pillow lying parallel against my back.
Where the Night Whistle Comes From

Little boys are supposed to love trains. When I was six, my father and I set out plastic tracks in a circuit around the Christmas tree. Tiny evergreens dotted the hillside where the skirt covered the stand.

When I was twelve, my brother’s small, terrible hands threw matchbox cars at my forehead. Unprepared and frightened, I hid behind the sofa, unable to find a bottle to feed him from. Even now I wince when I look at him. Though he is older now than I was then.

You once told me I would make an amazing father, that everyone wants this. I replied: My blood is my blood. I am selfish with it.
**Early Morning Poem**

I spoke a poem to you in my sleep. I remember, it was three lines, stretching from your collar bone to the softest part of your neck, just below the hinge of your jaw. I wanted to regret this moment of tenderness.

*

I always see us in the countryside, somewhere in the Riddermark or the Highlands or the Shire, where I tend the animals and forge little pendants and rings to sell in town, and you cook shepherd’s pie over the hearth where we fuck wrapped in stag skin blankets and furs even though we smell of sour, unwashed bodies and horses. But you’re leaving soon and when Heather McLeod died on the TV screen I lay on the couch in tears, because you and I would have raised strong and beautiful children too.
Watching Yundi Play the Nocturnes
Recorded 200 years after Chopin’s birth

His piano is open to us,
a great shelled beast with pulsing lymph of sound
alone on the surface of all that seems to matter.
I sway in time. I tap the laptop keys.
I pretend that I'm helping, that I could
keep possession of such impossible hands.
But there's a weakness forming; in the candle
burning on the coffee table, a small mouth opens.
The key changes, and C minor fills the branches
that reach spear-like and winter-colored
to scrape against my window. I am reminded to exist.
November Reflection

For J

You moved to Cleveland,
where beer is sold in the cinemas.
I was close enough to touch
the illusion of intimacy;
then, the closing credits.
I am always small town with you.

This is how we are now:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law Student</th>
<th>Poet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vegan Activist</td>
<td>Taken Man</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I knew, when I saw a lone cow
grazing on Interstate 80.

I am in a tree stand:
with grandpa's .30-30, and a pen,
glassing the spruce line,
trying to write you out of me.
Reading Poetry While Eating Mac and Cheese

Ok, they were shells. There's a difference. Somehow, shells are less offensive.

*

I suppose I betray self doubt. I just want strong legs and a ball to run.

*

Would you like to make love on the passing train? She led me to the side of the house.

*

When your face is close to mine I see double. When I look up at the moon, I see double.

*

I'll need to go there before the decade is out. I fear to reach for what I want.
**Elemental Poem**

Come and read the bottom of my meniscus.

Come and open up a precise incision.

Come and put me down in a little notebook in a hospital bed. Come and bear

witness to the last performance of me.

Read it all back. Pronounce each turn in the road we took, and the creek that winds past a housing project, a barn, and healing time.
When I First Started Down the Path

It takes a certain bravery, a giving over
to being squeezed, pressed, and vulnerable.

The hours don't matter on the underground:
An issue of inches, meters, distances between bodies.
I lay on the tracks and chew the ties. It's like love.

You sing Ave Maria in my heart, notes that provide
the appropriate sadesses. Our conversation also,
mechanical comforts; words can't press down on a mattress spring.
Cherry

There’s a pocket watch somewhere in my body.
It belonged to my mother’s father.
I swallowed it last night, but the chain crept up
my esophagus as I slept. The silver hurts my teeth.

I told you we couldn't make love that day,
and I sat on the couch knowing where your hands were
as you laid on the bed. I was saving myself for something new.
It took a trip to the grocery – and back.

The cherry wood roots have grown deep into my shoulder blades.
I am thankful for this; I can taste their sweet sap.
Christmas Day

There were four identical boxes under the tree. Blue and white paper, a wisp of snow over the manger, and that improbable little star, doing its guiding.

Each box contained a Bible, one for each “kid,” though I am the youngest, at twenty four. In all those years I have never owned this book.

It has a leather cover, like the ones you see folded up in the hard grips of the evangelicals on TV.

Yes, I carry these prejudices, but I'll admit to uninformed prayer.

I just like to bow my head to the floor at night and breathe deeply of the musty carpeting.

I have now read the book of Micah. I have no idea what is says.
A Definition

Scientists now claim that the modern mind is overstressed by "micromoments," experiences tailored for consumption between moments of consumption of other moments – the quick fix of media. As a result, the brain never rests; memories coagulate, but never solidify. Psychologists also believe that the language in which one thinks has a quantifiable bearing upon the spontaneity inherent in that individual's personality, the willingness to touch a hand, for example. In touching that hand, the individual will believe that a “decision” has been made, however the physical mechanics will have been set in motion by the firing of neurochemical mechanisms dependent upon an electrochemical gradient created by relative concentrations of sodium and potassium ions.

It follows then that Love is the necessary conflation of chemical and verbal languages.
As Fervently as de Sade

A friend told me, you can be the poet with heart.
I walked away chanting
a ward against the word "broken."

Last week, the handle snapped off my favorite coffee cup.
I got some super glue, read all the warnings,
carefully fused the pieces back together,
and still managed to get glue on three of my fingers.
The label said to see a physician. I worried all night.

Maybe I'm just contrary.
In Christian West Virginia, I'm drawn to Buddhism.
Want burritos for dinner? How 'bout sushi instead?
You told me to sow my wild oats:
I want only you.
Three Occasions

I. Question

I like my reflection in your sunglasses.
A mirror is expected – This is not that line.
Your eyes are brighter than mine, philosophically speaking,
and I catch myself seeing the negatives,
the red without the blue, like old school 3D glasses.
But one of my lenses has popped out;
You're holding it in your teeth, like an answer.

II. Delusion

Yesterday, I pulled my sticky viscera out
through the knothole and onto
the coffee table. You said I couldn't do it.
Now we have to divide me up, with butter knives
with soup spoons, and the ladle we never bought.

Look! I found the piece I was digging for.
It is jagged -- and calm
like the lives we've sewn into each other.

III. Acknowledgment

It's snowing a little today. I'm trying to take comfort
as I walk, in fabric, in hood, in coat, and not –

I want the kind of city a man can get lost in,
streets where I might be lonely, surrounded.

Desire is getting old.
Desire is all a young man has.
I Examine My Instincts Each Evening

Tonight, soft flows of steam rise up
between the splintery planks of my porch floor.
I sit down lotus in the plume,
inhabit the damp fabric softener scent.
My laundry seemed lonely,
so I stopped sorting the colors.
It helped a little, I think.

I want someone to catch me,
to see how spiritual I’m being.
A divorcée maybe,
who peers out her hotel window.
She’ll forget her shoes and run
barefoot across the highway.
I’ve been waiting I’ll say.

K, I know you’ll never hear this.
Our separation was born to me in pronouns,
and it’s an effort to keep it alive.
Do you remember our little minnows?
We just knew their names,
Jake and Esmeralda, we knew they were ours.
She was much less somber than he was,
and lived a few days longer.
I was so glad you slept late that morning.
Late Night Prose Poem

I’m walking through a narrow corridor. It’s mostly quiet, except for the droning of the few fluorescent lights left intact after the multiple strikes our ship took to the hull, just below the starboard aft turrets. Yeah, I’m on a ship, whatever. Most of the crew in this section is dead, and the only reason I’m not is that I’m the narrator of this story. I hum a note in unison with the lights. The combined sonic vibration is comforting in my chest. At the end of the hallway is a door clearly marked: ANGER. Well shit. I just came from the DEPRESSION sector so this seems like a bit of a step backward, but since I decided to throw our engagement pictures in the trash last night, I guess I’ll open it. You know, I’m still carrying the pain from the night you slept with everyone at the party, everyone but me. I’m holding on to it as tightly as I hold on to doubt. I restate this over and over, freshening the memory of you, stripping off that blue dress you looked so beautiful in. Anyway, I open the door to the ANGER sector and it’s all fucked up. The comm panels and instrument arrays are on fire, some of the ceiling has collapsed, baking dishes have fallen down from the galley, and Intel Officer Davis is chunked into about six pieces. Not really sure how that happened, but it’s a damn shame. All I can do is take off my helmet and see if I have any cigarettes left. Then I notice you, standing at the opposite end of the room, all dolled up, holding the stargazer lilies I gave you for your birthday.
There are Renovations to be Done in My Soul-Dwelling

The pantry door fell off its hinges,
the refrigerator’s handle snapped.
(these were different days)

But similarly, I was standing before a closed portal,
holding a broken key.

I’ve been trying to fix myself up lately,
with the needlework of the body.
A dragon-mark here,
a new phoenix there.
Some notion of healing pain.

We had agreed, Leto Mishra Holmes would be the name of our son.

You and I sealed up the entrance to that wing
before we sold the house.
Instructions on How to Avoid Calling Your Former Spouse

Don’t believe in false Springs.
February promises more than she can handle.

Go home and eat.
Dip crackers in anchovy oil;
victory enough.

Leave the scotch in the cabinet.
Grandfather was an alcoholic.
You have that potential.

Let the phone rest beside last night’s glass of stale water.
Remember, you breathe the same air as the birds
flying home from the tropics.
They Say the Body Regenerates Every Seven Years

I

That strength you held in your thighs,
hemline of a red dress,
let me keep it, that smile
from the night on the river.
We tied up at a small dock
and left a trail of ourselves.
Cold wet grass and exposure.

II

There is an art to asking.
Matching cups of tea, the cold,
subjective café table.
We haven’t faced each other
like this in weeks. Our hands don’t
touch. They are weighted under
the burden of their reaching.

III

Dear, you may keep the lilacs.
I don’t know how to use them.
I’ll keep the notes of the chimes,
and the sizzlings of meat
on the grill. Inside the door,
a grease spot on the carpet
where you took off your work shoes.

IV

I’m folding myself up now.
Hear that satisfying crunch,
 joints going in directions
 they shouldn’t. And how I fit
into your old jewelry box.
I’ll sleep for a time; in May
turn me out in fresh soil.
On the Occasion Kempff's Moonlight Sonata

The dead master's eyes far away and weary,

watch nothing threaten me with an easy sleep.

Why is it always like this on the other side of you?

The rain here doesn't create me anymore.

There's no room for a middle scherzo only lavender fabric softener

nag champa burning and the instrument of the world.

I can keep the key changing
How Many Have Come After

If we were to compare notes, mine
would list my favorite phenomena:
cold fronts, dark matter, thylakoids
stacked like poker chips in their grana,
and how a smooth, rhythmic, tandem motion
can disrupt those membranes, and transfer
the power to absorb photons
onto the clothes we wore that night.

If you turn the page here, you can see
impression sketches and woodcuts:
the first astrolabe, the chartable stars,
that machine that makes rough diamonds
for chainsaw blades and glass cutters,
because these forced things are never quite so beautiful.
Cedar

Tonight exists a broken little boy.
A hill – his home. Beneath the dirt there rests
the machinations – Voice - compressed in time,
with luck at dawn he’ll scrounge a pint of air.

His breakfast comes on shingles taken down
by roofing men. Their blood has come to him
from ancient places. “We are lineage,”
they sing, in nine part harmony. I sing

with them, and drag the bow across the strings.
We chop the walls to make a diving board.
We burn the thresh to clear the floor; we breathe
the smoke. And then, the boy: he must create.

This life is thick with symbols, so I will choose to be
a green stone  polished in the stream.
Psychoanalysis

I

Mine is a happy little tree, 
drawn with a squirrel home.

I bask in the glow of autumn leaves, 
my fur sticky with maple sap.

Then, Boy-Self pulls the trigger, 
I become impregnated with BBs

and ride home in his kill-pouch, 
mouth-blood drooling out.

II

In this office, nurses really do wear white. 
She lifts my briefs and gropes.

The doctor bashes through the exam room door, 
shakes my hand. I’ve been bad, but it’s not my fault.

III

I am last year’s fawn. 
Mother has taken to estrus again.

I snout for roots in the frost. 
Spike antlers poking, still fuzzy.

I thought I heard a sapling snap 
across the hollow; Boy-Self sees me fall.

He cuts open my soft white belly 
fills it with snow.
Surrealist Projective Meditation

I am the massager of retinal walls, of eye-backs. I turn sideways, outward and pass under my cheekbone, then out through a wrinkle in the canvass tent.

A brief pause among pine rough to nestle in a fallen cone.

Beyond the dirt-beach, at the lake bottom; catfish churn the silty muck and small-mouth bass hide in little twig and moss tee-pees.

At the fringe of audibility: a crisp rustling. I run back, to rest, at last, in the right angle between your hip and thigh.
Jesus, We Need to Have a Word

Before I was born, my Nana painted you sanding a wooden block, gentle smile on a stubbled face.

Some days, people tell me I look like you; I’ve mostly given up the argument.

I never wanted to know the differential equations that yield the wave functions of dandelions. But I’ve learned where to look.

If I push my hand against this wall, all day every day, for a million years straight, the molecules will eventually align.

I will pass through, fall into the next room, and you had better God Damned well be there to say “That’s the spirit!”
Kindergarten

I was a middle five, April-born, just young enough
to be afraid of all the other kids.
On the very first day, the nurse tested us
for tuberculosis. I screamed
in front of the whole class and all the teachers
well before anyone had done anything.

My father always kept sweets in his lunch bucket.
I stole an orange cupcake, a Skoal can,
and played coal miner in the corner of the living room
behind the big fuzzy reclining chair.
I really just sat there with my stolen sweet. I didn’t understand
the work my father did underground.

In gym class, Mr. Tribbit told us the school was haunted.
Everyone told stories about the ghosts,
how they made the water in the fountains turn to Kool-Aid
and how they crushed kids in the fold up lunch tables.
Billy started to cry, and I begged them to stop.
I’ve never been good at playing along.

That winter the snow came up to the front porch.
Our little bichon, Broadway, walked right off
and sank straight down. I ran yelling through the house.
Dad was on midnight shift, and had to wake up
and dig through snow to find a white dog.
It was the beginning of my fear of death.
What About the Disney Princes?

I'm glad Simba fared better than young Hamlet. No one wants to see a massacre of noble lions or the ending of their monarchy.

I say this as one, that all men need validation, something to fix, or someone to save.

I'm fearful of my empty house. If someone breaks in, what would be the point?
Prayer

It's October. The sky is new.
Like a sheet of vellum, brushed pink,
knifed over with light.

The valley is a coarse grain of colors.
Here on the ridge, I am cold.

I want to bow my head to the east,
breathe in my native soil,
and dig out a place to sleep.

But your skin means so much to me.
Cleaning the Grill

The slats speak a language, a *twung twung*ing, as I scrape them over with a steel-bristle brush. The charred, carbonized, caramelized bits of last night's cookout fall and pepper the bottom of the firebox. The sooty, blackened slop collected in the grease trap smells like childhood, like manhood. I scratch my beard with dirty fingers. Will I be the last of my house?
Myth-making

We had a nickname for your vagina, and my knowledge of it was carnal, like whiskey aged in white oak. It takes this blatantness for me to keep creating you.

Or was it the sassafras oil? Isomerized, in conversation, from the backseat. Ripening corn, a child taking a pumpkin; a Beatles song on the radio I'm not fond of, but I listen.

We're all breathing equinox air again, the cycle turning over. One day one of us will die, and the other will have no knowledge of it.
Unstageable Play

Inspired by Tom Andrews

Enter a straw man, literally, fierce.

He walks about the stage for ten to twelve minutes, but not thirteen, we wouldn't want him to tire his poor legs off.

He pours a cup of tea. All lights converge upon the kettle, which sighs, or melts, according to your discretion. Darkly, he speaks.

STRAWMAN: I am the Earl of Consciousness.

He vomits salt.

Now from the back of the house.

STRAWMAN: Yes, these revels have ended. Yet...

He catches sight of an owl that isn't there. It is brass and we can see it too, for a time.

Gas the audience.
The Slower the Motion, the Greater the Fear

I'm lying under my coffee table
peering up through its distorting glass
still searching for new senses.
I can hear a koto playing,
the taste of its music resembles a memory:

Wind, height, the unknowable tension
that keeps the Ferris wheel carriages aloft.
We held each other and made victory signs for the camera,
tagging the photo "Japanese Tourists."
You can see my right hand gripping the rail,
The Magnum's steel trains roaring behind us, and still rising in me,
is the sick urge to fly.
Oak

On every son are hooks in threes, and cords. Among the birch and oak I learned to look for darting fur and rustling leaves. I learned to listen – antlers cracking trunks – to kill.

Beside our house, a Christian place endures a clumsy grace, a pastor drawing hell in sharpie during sermon. Glowing night enclosed another Sunday spent away.

We could go off the grid. The basement holds enough to feed a fighting force of men. And Dad would lay up on the roof and scope the streets. I feel a need for death in him.

I may not pray to father’s God. But I was made from coal and grime. I breathe, I stand.
Today I Saw a Chipmunk Running in the Rain Gutter

This autumn has been like a snake, shifting its body away in cold dirt.

*When I was a child, I spoke as a child. You could be a mother* by now: It has been long enough. Does a man ever put away childish things?

I still cling to the concept of dreams: shepherd's pie under the broiler,
downtown Dublin sprawling out below us, my son at the window, starry eyed.
**Meaning Is Something Deliberate**

I can create it by arranging the glasses in the cabinet,
The glasses your grandmother gave us.
Your grandmother, who was my kindergarten teacher,
who watched me do the chicken dance in the school play
a paper beak fastened over my nose and mouth.

Some years ago, I stood with your family in the Christmas parade snow,
I wrapped myself around you, chin resting on shoulder,
watching the little arielette girls handspring down the street.
I whispered to you, *Wouldn’t it suck if one of them fell?* then one did.
Stunned, we watched the blood flow from her delicate head.

Before you moved out, you said, *your life is going to explode.*
The crazy person in me wants to smash all this dinnerware you left behind,
but I know they’re just plates and bowls and drinking glasses: utilitarian, meaningless
Painting You a Poem

I'm working with watercolors.  
My childlike hands are large

as a frost giant's. I pick you up  
and return us to the first night we stargazed.

I have no memory of anything real.  
Even the reminders needled in my skin

grow foreign to me. The hours  
become my amateur brushstrokes.
It is from the Union of the Mind and the Ear

That the old gods forged
in eons past
that milky pale blueness given over,
the moonfolk,
the scrape of a drawn blade
dipped
and pulled from the sea, forms
a craved perfection in the minds of a people
and four perfect islands.
Four drops of a god
padding swiftly through an unknown,
a sunrise,
through dewed undergrowth.
He is the “Us,”
the “We” in crested nominative,
the pyretic aspect,
you had it right.
At ease. Lay the body down,
the one you still own,
and the mists will still roil
like a singer whose shoulder
slips from beneath her kimono.
Her skin is the mirror
and you are the bachi that strums the shamisen.
A hart walks onto the stage;
it was always there.
The Firefly Form

This is the firefly form.
This is unaccompanied hope.
This is the boy in the red scarf.

Listen to the cricket in the wall.
The quick grinding of pepper.
The closeness of sundown.

This is the library of the answer “yes.”
This is the Titan Ringlet of Saturn.
This is the first crayfish from the stream.

Listen to the downturn of the sheets.
The swish of saliva in the mouth.
The burrowing of mites in the straw.

Listen, I'll show you the time it takes to count the houses on the ridge.
This will be the engine that idles in the yard.
After “Zanarkand”

Composed for piano by Nobuo Uematsu

Outside my lover's house,
the blossoms are falling.
It is sakura time.
It is spring.
Of course, it is spring.
I walk with Uematsu-san.
He breathes a single breath,
and after, a chord
and notes as clear as peppermint.
It is sakura time.
The blossoms are falling,
outside my lover's house.
Para "Malagueña Salerosa" Interpretada por Chingon

The electro-flamenco charge has me
oscillating, like the calendar-calculating savant
who told me once in a trance
how many days have passed since I've slept.
On the library floor plan, this place is marked "void,"
a pleasant emptiness settled in
between polished marble floors and a need
for honesty as new and foreign as the pedal steel
I hear plucked harp-like when you speak.
At Three A.M.

I was walking along the path
    pacing between my table and stove.
    
You were there again, asking
    if I could be an animal.
    
I would choose the Saluki,
    because I want to run
        in the land of Allah.

I don't keep that faith,
    but five times daily could be a help.

Rhythm, nourishment, a sky disrobed of colors,
    I require these things.