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THE UNTHINKABLE BOTANICAL GARDENS: POEMS

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

TRAVIS OLIVER GREEN SMITH

May 2013

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ABSTRACT

The Unthinkable Botanical Gardens is a book of poems in five sections. The first, third, and fifth sections present a speaker navigating a wondrous and often hostile world. The second and fourth sections are long poems: “Zodiac B,” a sequence inspired by obsolete or forgotten constellations, and “Elbow Island,” which tells the story of the beluga whales exhibited in Barnum’s American Museum.

DEDICATION

For my mother, my father, and Leah.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I.

Table Of Abbreviations

ARF	Artificial Rain Fund
BOP	Ban On Pyramids
BST	Boomerang Surveillance Training
C	Crizzle
C ₂	Cuckooflower
CAAW	Cautious As A Waterbug
DDA	Dictionary Decoding Algorithm
DOCCOTP	Dollop of Cream Cheese On That, Please
EDANSAIMY	Each Day a New Statue Appears In My Yard
EPM	Extremely Painful Memory
FR	Fox's Razor
GWOE	Global War On Eagles
HVT	High Value Tentacle
IP	Ice-Plant
JCRT	Jacobin Calendar Reinstatement Team
KEA	Kudzu Encoding Algorithm
LAG!LAG!	Launch All Ghosts! Launch All Ghosts!
LDF	Langage Des Fleurs
MAD	Mutually Assured Dinner
NVC	National Vortex Commander
OFCT	Observe, Flee, Cower, Tremble
PATLAD	Pity About The Leopards All Dying
QC	Quetzalcoatl Club
RP	Red Pimpernel
SP	Scarlet Pimpernel
SQD	Squellette Qui Danse
TP	Taupe Protocol
UA	Unsupervised Automaton
VIU	Vortex Integration Unit
WWRS	Walt Whitman Resurrection Squad
WWC-RS	Walt Whitman Counter-Resurrection Squad
X	Xebek
YB	Yam Bomb
ZPRTF	Zeno's Paradox Resolution Task Force

Poem Ending with Gogol

Today I'm feeling
like the suit and bandages
an invisible man wears
when he goes out in public.

At the track I keep betting
on the horses
with the most beautiful names—
run, Esperanto Sunday,

run, Thermidorian—
but the king's old camel
keeps strutting to the finish.
Race fixing:

one of his last royal powers.
The storm clouds barge in
like upside-down steamers.
And back at home, someone's stolen

the cardinal directions
from my weathervane.
Just the cockerel remains.
And in my mind I can see

the thief, East and West
rattling in his jacket pocket,
North and South
clutched in his fists,

not caring about the rain
as he turns down
an alleyway, free
as a new century—

Gentlemen, it is a dreary world.

Thicket

Having listened to *This American Life*
and finding I have not lived an American life,
I wander into the thicket looking
for something to eat. The thicket this time of night
is forbidden, so only those in a mind like mine
come here— it's like a singles bar just for melancholics,
moon-people and comics.
In the thicket there are berries I know
and then there are otherberries.
Outside the thicket my name is Travis Smith
but here they call me Aubergine, that is
to say "Eggplant," and I'm fine with that, that is beautiful:
The moon is a vacuum tube
that will zip down on us, soon.

Island of Living Clocks

Short on water and food, we anchored off the next island we saw. Once on land, we were attacked by a race of savage clocks, twelve feet tall, with twelve black eyes arranged in a circle around their bone-white faces. Their arms were sharp and shaped like arrows, with the right arm twice as long as the left. They moved towards us with surprising speed on legs that were more like gears.

We found that, each time a clock landed a blow, you did not bleed but grew older, the severity of the change proportional to the force of the blow. I escaped with only a scratch, a few gray hairs. But some saw their hands grow arthritic, some saw their teeth fall out, and others became rheumatic, deaf, entirely wizened, curled on the ground, too tired to move.

Soon we discovered that the clocks could not easily turn around and face something behind them, so the still-young among us were able to sneak around and shove branches into their gearwork (which was entirely exposed from this vantage), arresting their motion and killing them. So the battle with the clocks ended in slaughter. We took what water and food we could, gathered the most wounded among us, and went back to the ship.

The Compass-Plant

Do you know how compasses are made my uncle said and I said no
 there is a compass-plant that grows in distant gardens he said
it looks like the artichokes you've seen me clean but grey like a magnet
 you cut off the tough pointed leaves and scoop out the bristly hairs
until you have just the tender heart the heart that knows true north
 and you slice it into needles he said and I believed him
I was five bad men want the compass plant he said mariners
 want it for guiding their murderships mortarmen want it
for aiming their mortars so I am leaving he said
 to find the compass-gardens and burn them and I never saw him again

How to alter your face so not so much as your friends shall know you

— *Natural Magic*, Giambattista Della Porta

Among my gifts to you:
the book of Renaissance magic, bound in green.
It seems you weren't delighted

by its instructions for making eels:
mix mud and wood and grass,
let them sit in the rain. You weren't delighted

by the accounts of madmen cured by harps,
or the scraggly, buck-toothed *leontophonon*,
the one creature poisonous to lions.

You skipped the wondrous properties of lodestone.
Instead, you boiled mashed sumac
and walnuts, used that to dye your red hair black.

You smeared your face with a paste
of bee stingers and wasp stingers,
went incognito under welts. Who knew

you'd miss the chapter on causing pleasant dreams,
that you'd skip the cure for melancholy?
Who knew you'd find the chapter on how to disappear?

Eyjafjallajökull

I.

While we were talking about the ash-cloud,
a black ant
made a filigree pattern on the floor.

The rest of the conversation is censored:
little black rectangles
cover our eyes and mouths.

How friendly is the ash-cloud?
Will it reach the market?
Will it coat the strawberries and kale?

Nature has a plan for all of us.
You will succumb to the vapors.
My plan involves gillyvors;

and the ant, if you've watched closely,
has spelled out
HELP ME on the floor.

II.

I've got a personal ash-cloud,
but the whole world is implicated in it.

I whisper part of its name in your ear,
like an anagram of a word that wasn't a word to begin with.

Yet the whole word takes a lifetime to say:
every word I say in my life is part of it.

I tell you how the closed captioning, set to Spanish,
translated a phrase as "un gigante skwolfment": that is the ash-cloud.

I say the word "skulls" in my sleep? That too is the ash-cloud. I call you
at midnight? Ash-cloud. I whistle "Dixie"? Ash-cloud, ash-cloud, ash-cloud!

(That night the weatherman says "pumulous," laughs,
tries to correct himself, can't find the right word, moves on with the forecast.)

III.

Presuming I'm not in the ash-cloud,
presuming my mouth isn't stuffed with ash,
I'm free to walk along the esplanade,

where irrational thought balloons
of cotton candy bob over the vendors' heads
and a busker plays *Lonesome Day Blues*.

I'm sampling all the fortune tellers.
I'm free to wander under the umbrellas,
free to stop at the puppet show, to watch

as the Devil, for once, triumphs over Punch—
presuming I'm not in the ash-cloud.
Presuming I'm not made of ash.

Portrait of a Dandy

The one thing I hate about my birdcage hat:
wild birds keep attacking it,
and in the ruckus the caged birds get free.
You'd think I'd hate the notoriety
but I love the notoriety.
It is not the notoriety of that man
who walks his tapir on a leash,
that ostentatious, silly man.
It is not the notoriety
of the talking brass head at the center of town.
When I tip my hat to you,
I tilt a gilt world on its axis.
When I ask, May I come in?
I speak for many.

Generalissimo

He welcomes me to his war room
his war map's
thumbtacks arranged
in an infinity symbol

They will be defenseless
against this formation he says
and begins to list
his many enemies

Warren Harding he says
defenseless
Galileo defenseless

There is something civil in his madness
like a quiet town
after a witch burning

Let's play a game of poker
to the death he says
and deals me a hand full of jokers

On Azimuth Avenue

I walk past the corner
where the man selling telescopes
yells at the microscope man,
scaring off the customers,

where the blonde-wigged girl
rakes it in with her crate
of plastic Easter eggs
marked MYSTERY, \$2.50;

and I haven't yet gotten used to
living in this city,
in my bungalow
where the mail still comes

for the previous tenant. Roderigo,
I leave your bills unpaid.
I read the letters
from your creditors and lovers.

Why did you leave here?
Why did I come?
The city with the only
black lighthouse in the world,

home to the largest known
sculpture of a tear-drop!
The capital of No
Explanation, the start

and end-point
of our drifting, where the kids
row out most nights
to get drunk on a junk-strewn

island they call Paradise.

II. ZODIAC B

PREFACE

Today, the constellations number 88, fixed in place by a council of astronomers in 1922. Centuries ago, though, the shapes in the sky were constantly being named and renamed. As the telescope made fainter stars visible, the star-mappers of the 17th and 18th centuries set down a glut of new constellations in their illustrated charts. Some saw inventions in the heavens: the electrostatic generator, the hot air balloon, the printing press. Others saw a cat, a reindeer, a seahorse. These oddities never gained popular acceptance. What follows is a zodiac of the obsolete, the disused, those constellations not recognized in the official 88— the zodiac that might have been.

ARGO, the SHIP

The stars that are now called The Keel, The Stern, and The Sails once formed this greater ship. Once, you thought you were one body— but your arm flew out and struck your friend, and your feet walked you, unwilling, to the house where you once lived and were happy. You, Ship-in-the-Sky, are you a life-ship or dream-ship? Speak, oracular prow! But the timbers creak no answer. Fear the Lesser Triangle.

TRIANGULUM MINUS, the LESSER TRIANGLE

You take strength from your smallness. Look at a giant fern closely: see how it's made of smaller ferns, which in turn are made of smaller ferns, and smaller—closer— smaller. The largest river is prefigured in the dripped shower-water on the bathroom floor, the Lesser Triangle knows all others. Nothing to trouble you; you're in the sway of its calm geometry. Rest on the broad back of The Cat.

FELIS, the CAT

You are like a drawing of a cat done from memory by someone who'd seen more rats than cats. Over time, given the warm inertia of home, given the flickering TV set of your mind, your memories can become more of yourself than you. Or have they already? A whiff of manchego sends you into an hours-long reverie: That year you worked at the dairy, and then there was the spur-of-the-moment trip to Spain—but your wanderlust days are over. Here is your grid to lounge in, 3x2. Here the Hot Air Balloon holds no allure.

GLOBUS AEROSTATICUS, the HOT AIR BALLOON

Or, literally translated: “Sphere that stays in the air.” You thrive on the fantastic. You drove all day to see the hot air balloons with your father— just over the ridge, there they were, beings of benevolence and wonder. But they did not stay. Decorated with suns and kings and animals (is that a golden Reindeer near the top?) they rose past the realm of fire, past the sublunary world, into the fixed stars.

RANGIFER, the REINDEER

Notice the rack on the reindeer's head, suggesting priapic abundance. Notice the one black eye, which seems not to see the buzz of stars and symbols like flies at its fur. This is the Zodiac poem about the imperturbability of the need to fuck: You who are governed by Rangifer, you are as blunt as I am, writing this. Rutting puts you in a rut. Look outside the radial lines of want that bisect you like so much insensate meat. The stars of Northern Fly will guide you.

MUSCA BOREALIS, the NORTHERN FLY

Once these three stars were called The Bee. Then the Wasp, then The Northern Fly, then nothing. Your list of problems takes up pages (the first is that you made a list of your problems) but there is one in the pit of you that you cannot name. It makes you thud your head against the window. It makes you leave the lights on at night. If only there were more of you— you could cover the problem entirely, give it shape like a black sail gives black shape to wind. If only there were a Spider to catch you and keep you still.

ARANEA. the SPIDER

When people say that you seem so “stable,” you know what they really mean. They mean “boring.” You wish you could be more spontaneous, but you love your routines. You love cooking your eggs the exact right way; you love your thrice-weekly jogs, your Saturday matinee. What happens when your web of habits gets blown away, Aranea? What happens when all you have left is you? Study the Earthworm well.

LUMBRICUS, the EARTHWORM

Lumbricus and Gemini: the twin on the right regards it with affection, the other seems to look away in disgust. People don't know how to feel about you— you who take so much pleasure in simply being you. You crawl through the world with ease. What would be a mortal wound to others, for you is an opportunity to wriggle into a new self. Be careful not to let this self-reliance turn to self-satisfaction, Lumbricus. You may expose yourself to the Turtle's jaws.

TESTUDO, the TURTLE

The Turtle looks up, but only so much. You notice details others miss: the cracks in the sidewalk, the small but precious coins trampled underfoot. How many of us keep our bellies so close to the ground? How many of us do this much with such horizontality? Your thoroughness will take you far— but there are striped lines beyond which you cannot climb. You risk being overtaken by the Toad.

BUFO, the TOAD

Dear Bufo: We see you here, I think, at your best. In other moments, you could be accused of indecision, squatting, as it were, on the same lily pad for hours or days, belling out your deliberations for all to hear. Should I? Shouldn't I? Should I? But once you've made up your mind, Bufo, your execution is admirable. You leap from one quadrant of the sky to the next, too quick for any cartographer to ink you in. Yet beware the swift-diving Owl.

NOCTUA, the OWL

An owl bathing in a puddle: a watery owl. An owl in the branches lit by the fire: a fiery owl. An owl flying: an owl of air. An owl diving to catch a Toad: an earth owl. You can adapt to most anything, yet you ally yourself with nothing— perching on the tail of a snake one minute, then flapping and coming to light on top of the Sundial. A government of one, you are ungovernable; an anarch supreme, you're tyrant, too. You'll make fast friends with the Seahorse.

HIPPOCAMPUS, the SEAHORSE

So many mistake eccentricity for monstrosity. Chameleon-style, the seahorse's eyes swivel independently. Its monkey tail grips stalks of sea-grass. The male seahorse is the one who gives birth. You do nothing in the conventional way, and for you it comes easy. Those of lesser imagination will hate you for this, Seahorse: here you're pictured horizontal, you who, in nature, swim upright. There are those who would skewer you with striped skewers. Avoid them. Seek out that other oddball, the Electricity Generator.

MACHINA ELECTRICA, the ELECTRICITY GENERATOR

You know that the charge goes into the jar through the brass knobs, the charge which is made from the spinning glass discs, the discs which are spun by the crank, but the crank, who turns that? Who set your brain ecstatic spinning? Whoever it was made you dangerous. Erratic hands, high-voltage heart: All of you happens at once. Yet sometimes, in the next room, you take comfort from the steadiness of the Printing Press: the *chunk chunk* of nothing spoken or thought.

OFFICINA TYPOGRAPHICA, the PRINTING PRESS

The noise from the other room jars you. Procedure is your panacea: You feel an Old Testament thrill in the moment before the paper closes down on the type. Everything is in order: Each block of type held fast in its proper cell. Each letter sticky with ink. You tighten the page on the rows of text, then reveal them, pressed finished and fresh. It is a little like Genesis, a little like death— a complex joy, though you suspect it could be greater if shared. You want to feel another's hand while you press down the print. Perhaps the Pangolin will join you.

MANIS, the PANGOLIN

No wonder you have those scales, Pangolin. Everyone wants a piece of you. Here, you're set upon by Lacerta (Lacerta meaning "Lizard," though this cartographer drew a dog). To many, your flesh is a delicacy. And anyone so armored becomes a prize. "Sting-proof," "serge-clad," "strong-shod" (or so says Moore), you long to leave your coat of mail behind. To stand aloof and bare, like the Sundial.

SOLARIUM, the SUNDIAL

You often think about the day when all the watch batteries are dead, when the cell phone towers stop broadcasting, when the atomic clocks crack. When that day arrives, the shadow of a stick in the ground will still tell the time. You thrive on this pride— the pride of the disused, the pride of the sundial, its gnomon like a middle finger to the wayward world. Your day will come. The forgotten Ship waits for you in the harbor.

III.

There was Mr. Abrams the shoeblack seller

constantly mauled by his dancing bear.

The bear was named Cato and as part of the act

Cato would do a shuffle on the corner

while Mr. Abrams played the hurdy-gurdy and sang

how his blacking was the blackest you could buy, which it was,

and then Cato would wheel around and swipe him with his massive paw

and resume shuffling and when Mr. Abrams woke up

you would buy some shoeblack.

That went on for months.

And one day Cato gave him a really good one in the head

and from then on Mr. Abrams

would lift up his shabby bowler hat to reveal

the silver-dollar-sized hole in his skull

where the brain showed through.

It didn't seem to bother him.

Everyone thought his song was getting better.

House of the Irrelevant President

When I'm having an off day, I like to walk
to that nonagonal house up the hill,

spiky with lightning rods, barricaded by gardens,
to listen again to the tour guide's speech:

how the President designed each room
as the true expression of one of his many ideals,

how the windowless Periscope Wing
represents the value of paranoia,

how the Gallery of Pendulums
honors his belief in vacillation,

though chief among his ideals
was the principle of refraction—

welcome to the Prism Room!
A fusillade of rainbows riddles my eyes.

A General Gloom Pervades This Community

the frogs start up with their *brekekekex*
the planes scrawl their obscene messages in the sky
the clocks ring the hare-brained hour
and this gloom is no hors d'oeuvre gloom this gloom
is a ballpark hotdog this is gloom with coleslaw
and chili and abundant relish
this is a gloom you've to get all over your face

*

my friends it is said that Democritus
sat under an apple tree one afternoon
dissecting animals to find out the source of gloom—
whether in the glands in the throat
or the dark jelly of the brain—
and it was under the shadow of that apple tree my friends
that this community was founded

*

dry hot nights we find the weakest watertower
one with spindly legs a tottering one
we come with ropes and empty jugs
we ring it round we make it groan and creak
and we haul it down
and it spills its gloom
and the frogs start up with their *brekekekex*

Hircocervus

A field of chive and crocus.

A field where anything I say occurs.

In that field, a hircocervus
grazes in the chive and crocus.

Half-goat. Half-stag. I make it occur.

I make the chive. I make the crocus.

I make the wondrous hircocervus.

But this making is a curse,

because all I can think of is the crocus—
the crocus, the chive, and the hircocervus.

I can't make anything else occur.

This is the curse. There is no cure.

Island of the Mirror People

The water began to turn a silvery color, and at length we came in view of a glittering beachhead, as if many mirrors reflecting the sun in our direction were placed on it. Drawing closer, we saw that the mirrors were people.

Once we landed, the mirror people approached us, waving so that that the reflected light flashed in what seemed to be a friendly manner. They had no means to speak, no eyes, or mouths, or features of any kind. The only way to distinguish them was by the objects they held, each unique: a piece of sea glass, a seagull's skull, or a musket-ball, perhaps.

In the course of a few hours, after becoming used to their flashing speech, we understood that no mirror person had an identity separate from his totem object, and if it were destroyed or lost, he would become despondent and harden into something like obsidian. As a result of this you see many darkened forms scattered about the island in various poses of despair.

That night the mirror people fed us handsomely, pouring us cup after cup of quicksilver and serving dishes of silver pears. Held by some vague unease, I sat apart from the group by the fire. There, I noticed that some of the crew found themselves gazing more and more often into the mirror person next to them, enchanted by the reflection of their sunburned faces in the smooth, featureless visages.

It was then that I saw one mirror man set aside his totem object and place his hand on top of the head of the crewman beside him, whereupon his eyes silvered over and his mouth went slack. I saw that we were all in danger: they were as enchanted with us as we were with them, and intended to make us their new totems. Taking a piece of sea wood next to me and lighting it in the fire, I was able to blind the mirrorpeople with smoke long enough to gather the crewmen who hadn't been enslaved. We returned to the ship in darkness, leaving behind the ones with silver in their eyes.

Still Life with Quince and Fly

The painter of great still lifes
now likes to comb donkey's tails
and pluck the dead hairs out with his teeth,
even though he has a perfectly good pair of tweezers.
We can't criticize him for that. Give him
some pity— he is a sad man
who was too good at doing what he loved.
When he painted a fly perched on a quince,
someone ripped through the canvas, trying to swat it.
A starving boy stole his painting
of a lambshank,
so next he painted a rotting lambshank, thinking
no one would steal that,
but public health got called for the stink.
And the portrait of his friend's dead wife,
which he warned him about, saying
I'm not sure you want me to do that—
he shouldn't have done it.
Now he puts a pot of water boiling
and watches it until it's nothing.
Now he paints apple seeds to look exactly like tears,
then plants them.

Un-Words, or Moon-Dust

I like the un-words on the Scrabble rack better than the real words
shall I repeat some of them zaganu teelix nerk and roynsta
shall I continue alzord and badaki they are like dark matter which I
hear so much about in the news every time they have discovered more
of it the un-words outnumber all the real words in all real languages
by a margin impossible to understand when I was seven my
grandmother taught me about the humors which are phlegm blood
yellow bile and black bile I learned how dryness and heat make fire
how heat and moisture make air and when I asked what lightning is
I learned it is wind forced from clouds so fast it catches fire
like orange-pips I shoot by squeezing them with my fingers
and as for earthquakes they are winds trapped under the earth that violently escape
I think about the un-words if they are trapped like wind and what will happen
if they burst loose all at once snordic lusp and grooto and aemeyr
my grandmother was a strange and noble woman
she called me 'gros-tête' which I later learned is broken French for 'big-head'
she kept twelve jars of white ash on the mantelpiece
she called them her 'moon dust' the clock was behind them
and I thought that each jar embodied an hour I thought about stealing one
or breaking one but never did and what the ashes were from
or why she put them there or who took them when she died I still do not know

Tornado Event

The organizers start by making fists, spreading arms wide & spinning like crazy & crashing into the participants, who then have to spin until everyone is spinning.

When everyone stops, the participants get on Twitter & say that they have narrowly escaped a tornado. When people respond to the tweets, or call the participants in a panic, they are invited to the event & must once again start the spinning.

The participants refer to everything in terms of tornados. When someone joins the event, they say, “Looks like another tornado just touched down.” When someone leaves the event, the remaining people say, “Now we have to deal with the aftermath.” If they leave behind their keys or something, everyone says “The tornado strewed debris.” Everyone rates their feelings on the Fujita scale, like “I’m F5 hungry for a hamburger” or “I’m F3 embarrassed about what I said last night when I was drunk.”

Everyone feels dangerous. Everyone feels like they’re connected to the ground & the sky at the same time. Everyone makes train noises.

When the participants get so dizzy from spinning that they can’t stand up any more, they collapse in a pile on the ground. No one makes train noises. They can feel the rise & fall of each other’s breath & the warmth from each other’s limbs. They know that to be human is to be a tornado. The organizers declare the event over. Everyone goes away and feels lonely for a while.

IV. ELBOW ISLAND

Elbow Island

“Human kind cannot bear
very much”— but of what
we may disagree. If, as Barnum says, “in this
wide-awake country there are more persons
humbugged by believing

too little than too much,”
then the birch-bark buckets tacked up
to the trees to catch sap in the “frightfully filthy”
Isle aux Coudres would be enough to hold
our belief, or lack

thereof. Barnum went there, in 1861,
first by train to Quebec, then
ninety miles by the Grand Trunk Railroad to the mouth
of the St. Lawrence, where the Elbow
Islanders, “whose gibberish

was almost as untranslatable
as it was unbearable,”
agreed to catch two live white whales for him, which would be
put in sea-weed-lined and salt-water-filled
boxes and transported

to the dank basement
of his American Museum.

*

I've seen, in a movie,
how the Elbow Islanders
do it. Within sight of the island, the belugas
in their pods send off eruptions of spray—
Pliny, apparently,

never looked at them
very closely: "Whales' mouths are
in their foreheads," he says in the *Natural History*—
and, since they have no dorsal fins, telltale
signatures of sharks,

their turnings in the water
look like the turnings of slick
white wheels, tens of muscle-ridged slick white wheels turning
in the porpoise-gray water. It's not hard
to spot them. The island men

have cut down, stripped and hewn
many birch saplings into
stakes, which they thrust down into the water to make
a "kraal," shaped like a V, with the narrow end
pointed toward the shore.

When the whales swim into
the wide end, which, on Barnum's
trip, takes them days to do, they're wary at first,
clustering always just outside the kraal
until two of them decide

that it's safe, at which point
men in boats close off the wide
end, singing and slapping the water with their
paddles, trapping the whales there until the tide
goes down and beaches them

and all that's left is for
"the slip-noose of stout rope"
over their tails, and for several men to drag them
into the sea-weed-lined boxes, and the men,
in the movie, to slap

the thrashing slick white hide
as if to prove to themselves
that they'd really caught it, saying, "Hey, old man,
you got caught, my friend! What brings you here?"

*

The illustrator who
drew the scene for Barnum's book
Struggles and Triumphs, like Pliny, apparently,
also didn't see them "Catching White Whales,"
because the whales he draws,

though white, have black
dorsal fins, which belugas lack,
and black flippers, and, it seems, gills, and large triangular
eyes, quite different from the true beluga's
puckered pinhole eyes—

and the broad, scowling mouth
and overall pointed-
pumpkinseed shape you would not recognize if you'd seen
white whales in an aquarium, with their
upturned, beaky, slightly

porcine, slightly over-
biting mouths, and their "melons,"
the fatty convexity of the forehead, good
for picking up each other's echoed words,
the almost torpedic

submarine and fusi-
form fluodynamic
economy of their slick white lengths, porpoise-
purposeful— but the aquarium you'd
have seen them in, the kind

with water that doesn't kill,
is not the kind that Barnum brings them to.

*

“After months of unwearied labor, and spending

NEARLY TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS
NEARLY TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS
NEARLY TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS

in capturing and transporting them from that part of the Gulf of St. Lawrence nearest
Labrador, the Manager is enabled to offer his visitors

TWO LIVING WHALES
TWO LIVING WHALES,
TWO LIVING WHALES,
TWO LIVING WHALES,

a male and a female. Everybody has heard of WHALES
IN NURSERY TALES and ‘SAILOR’S YARNS,’
IN NURSERY TALES and ‘SAILOR’S YARNS,’

everybody has read of WHALES in story, song, and history, and everybody

WANTS TO SEE A WHALE,
WANTS TO SEE A WHALE,
WANTS TO SEE A WHALE,
WANTS TO SEE A WHALE.”

*

And it seems that Barnum
got even the name of
the belugas' island wrong, as I see later in the movie
about Isle aux Coudres, when an old man reads
in Old French the account

of Jacques Cartier:
“On the sixth day of the month,
with a fair wind, we made our way upstream
for about fifteen leagues, and landed on an island
off the north shore, about

three leagues long and two leagues
wide. The land is good and fertile,
full of big beautiful hazelnut trees that we found
heavily laden with hazelnuts, and
for that reason, we named it

‘Isle aux Coudres’ ” — which sounded,
to Barnum or one of his men,
like *coude*, “elbow.”

*

Barnum said of his
second pair of whales that “their
sudden and immense popularity was too
much for them”— this, after that first pair died
a few days after arrival,

“but not before thousands
of people had seen them”— after
the original brick and cement tank was replaced
with a tank “of slate and French glass plates,
one inch thick, imported

expressly for the purpose,”
and salt water pumped from
New York bay through a system of iron pipes.

“Thus was my first whaling expedition
a great success, though I

did not know how to feed
or take care of the monsters.”

*

For Barnum, it seems, belief
was as capacious as that tank
that whale after whale died in— “landsman that I
was, I believed that I was quite as competent
as a St. Lawrence fisherman

to superintend white whales”—
but there were some who were
so skeptical of Barnum that they thought
his whales were just porpoises painted white,
and since the whales were scared,

probably, of the gas-lamps
installed to light their tanks,
scared of the hundreds of blurry, huddled
faces that pressed up the glass daily,
tapping it, fogging it,

they rarely performed
like Barnum wanted them to,
always off “in some unlooked-for quarter of the
huge tank,” vexing Barnum with their “persis-
tent stubbornness in not

calmly floating on the surface
for the gratification
of my visitors.” In one case, even, a woman
from Connecticut, “Mrs. H,” sees the whales
and congratulates him

on “ ‘what a number of purposes
the ingenuity of
us Yankees has applied India rubber, ’”
meaning she thinks the whales aren’t even alive,
but steam-powered machines,

and you can see how she thinks that,
never having seen a whale
before, if you’ve seen a picture of rubber tapped
from a rubber tree— and it’s in this story
where it becomes difficult

to separate notions
of the capacity to
appreciate wonder, and the capacity
to understand what is real and what is not—
because surely, as Barnum

suggests, we humbug
ourselves by believing
too little, we trick ourselves by letting in
too little awe. But what if the awe leads
to horror, to the whales,

so-called “sea-monsters,”
dying in the filthy water?

*

And when the fire comes, in 1865,
when the defective furnace
under the office of Barnum's American Museum
sparks and spreads to all five stories,
no one is asking if

the whales are real any more,
because, along with everything
else — the cage of live boa constrictors,
the stuffed dromedaries and kangaroos,
the steam engine made

of glass, wax statues melted
to their wires, the scraps
of cloth from coats of Revolutionary heroes,
the dioramas of the Creation
and the Flood— they burn

with everything else, their tanks
broken to slow the fire.
“The leviathan natives of Labrador”— this
was the fourth pair— “when last seen, were
floundering in mortal

agony, to the inex-
pressible delight of
the unfeeling boys, who demanded a share of
the blubber.” No one is asking now
if they are real. They are there in the street now for everyone to see.

V.

Hangover with Mosaic of a Man Leading a Giraffe

Hard to feel a sense of radical
connectedness to the universe
on day one of the hangover. Hard to feel,
as Carl Sagan said, “made of star-stuff”
when I wake up in my clothes
from the night before. But that’s the trouble,
isn’t it, with being cosmic? The cosmos
includes the Horsehead Nebula
and the Magellanic Clouds
and also box wine and cheap tequila.
It includes the Sloan Great Wall,
a string of galaxies one billion light-years long,
and there’s also me, a blunderbuss
firing in my forehead. I have never felt
so small. I have never felt so anti-Sagan.
And really, which is more cosmic: the Milky Way,
or a guy doing hair-of-the-dog
with warm Coors Lite? The trouble
with being star-stuff, Carl,
is that I’m not really star-stuff.
I’ll gladly leave that to the stars.
I’d much rather be the 5th century mosaic
I once saw in a museum
of a man holding a giraffe by a leash.
I’d rather be its mortar
or its small colored tiles,
the white and red and chocolate-colored tiles,
which, you might like to know,
are called “tesserae.”

Skype Love Poem

You said I should clean the mold out of my shower.
I said But I'm trying to grow a tiny slimy mold homunculus
to be my friend in the shower,
since you are mostly not here
and I don't often get to shower with you—
which, I suppose, was not so much a request for you to clean my shower
as a guarantee that you would.
When you leave again, when you're back to being
a 24-hour drive away again,
you said, why haven't you written a poem about me?
I promised I would, but I've been putting it off.
The problem is, most of the time you are a shifting matrix of pixels
on a 3x3 patch of screen. Most of the time your image freezes
when the datastream gets interrupted
and your voice goes choppy like a robot that's been sprayed with water.
I can mute you. I can put election news right next to your face
and read it and you only notice sometimes.
Do you want to be in my poem? Do you want to be
less real than that?
Do you want starfruit to grow from your pupils
and for me to pluck them?
Do you want to be compared to a mouldiwarp,
which was John Clare's word for "mole"?
Do you want to be imprisoned in a cloud?
That is what would happen
if you were in one of my poems.
I wish I could write a poem that could double you,
put one of you here and one of you there,
a poem that could double me. I wish I could write a charm
to teleport us wherever.
But the best I can do is stand in the shower
trying to remember what your body feels like.

Distracted Translation of Hesiod: *Works and Days*

When the artichoke flowers and the grasshopper chirps,
then the goats are plumpest, the wine is sweetest,
then my friends and I cool our feet in a tarp-lined
truck-bed filled with hosewater, which we call
The Hillbilly Hottub. We gulp beer from an eight-tubed bucket
called the Octo-Bong and sing “Livin’ on a Prayer.”
Sirius hangs overhead and I don’t care.
I tried planting a tree once. It died.
Instead of gardening, I wonder: what if I built a piano
only hummingbirds could hear? What kind of music
would they like? I bet Philip Glass
and free jazz. I bet not Bon Jovi. I bet,
if it ever comes down to just me and the land,
I’ll wish I’d paid more attention to Hesiod:
What was I supposed to plant when the crane first cries?
When did he say to winnow my grain?
Yet even Hesiod loved a party—
I’m pretty sure he’d write about this one.
We’ve sucked the crawfish clean,
we’re singing so badly out of time
it sounds like a round. Someone lets down the tailgate
and the water bursts out and we cheer.

To A Lawn Deer

O my deceiver,
O my turncoat,
less a lawn deer
than a lawn fawn,
deep in my backyard's
scrim and bramble—
it's not an emerald glade,
not even close to
an emerald glade—
but when I first
saw you there,
lawn deer, I really did
have a few awe-filled
hours when I thought
you were a real deer,
just enough of you
obscured by vine
and vetch for you
to trick me,
and I was amazed how
still you could be
for hours on end,
I didn't want
to get too close,
I didn't want to spook you,
until hours turned to
an afternoon,
and forgive me,
lawn deer, I became
suspicious of you,
and I climbed into the bramble
and saw that your eyes
were plastic, your ears
were plastic, your flanks weren't
soft, but plastic,
and I wanted to throw you
on the curb—
so can you explain to me

why I didn't,
my lawn deer,
my legerdemain,
why I left you
deep in the bramble
as if nothing in me had changed?

Island of Doubles

Fatigued, our numbers severely depleted by the battles with the clocks and the mirror people, and again desperate to find food and fresh water, in the morning we anchored off the next island, which seemed to appear just when our hunger and thirst were at their peak. Grateful for the blessing, we nonetheless came ashore with weapons drawn.

Before we had been on land for long, though, we were greeted by a sight more surprising than anything that had come before: out of a copse of trees walked a group of men equal in number to our own, and dressed in exactly the same manner. More than that, they were us. Each of us was greeted by his double, and seemed to look into his own unshaven and salt-chapped face, to shake his own hand and to have conversation with his own voice. Until now, we had been too shocked by the fact of our own survival to discuss the ordeals of the previous days. Finding no one more sympathetic to our laments than our doubles, we talked until the sun was setting, our hunger and thirst forgotten, and fell asleep.

I awoke sometime in the dead of night. Looking around at the sleeping men, I was unable to tell the originals from the doubles, if we were indeed the originals. Looking at my own double, for whom I had felt such brotherhood hours before, filled me with disgust. I woke the quartermaster and his double (or was it the double and the quartermaster?) and put to them the question of their daughter's name. Both answered the same. Both supplied the same memories of her.

I won't tell how long it took to kill both the quartermasters, and then all the other crew, or relate the identical pleas of each man and his double, the stories they shouted to prove that they were the original, that they should be spared. No detail would make me more credible: I am alone on the ship now, and no else is alive to confirm that what I say is true, or if I am I.

The Unthinkable Botanical Gardens

Nature is just one
disaster after another: flowering

quince, then lemon balm, then
purple ruffled basil. Past the bamboo

grove, past the mammoth
sunflowers, I wandered

in a controlled manner.
I didn't want to become

a victim. That's what the giant sign
on the garden gate said: DON'T BECOME

A VICTIM! SOME OF THE VICTIMS
MAY ACTUALLY BE SUSPECTS.

I didn't want to become a suspect.
I didn't want to become a Japanese

apricot or columbine
or camellia or aster— merely

to observe, from the path,
their intoxicating exteriors,

all the trellises bugged.
The reflecting pools monitored.

More signs warned me:
DO NOT PROPAGATE INVASIVES!

HELP US KEEP OUT EXOTIC WEEDS!
and I wanted to help, so I kept on checking

the bottoms of my shoes, kept inspecting my bag
in case seeds of torpedo grass

or chamber bitter had tried
to sneak in with me.

I wanted to help, but then
I felt the terraced ferns loom down,

I felt the blooming myrtles stare,
seeing me for the invasive that I was,

but it was already too late:
the buds and suckers and spores

were thronging me already,
in my blood and my breath,

had thronged me from the start,
and I was naked in the garden,

the unthinkable had happened,
and every stowaway in me was free.

Thank You Anonymous Sponsor

thank you anonymous sponsor
for the alphabet like atoms
for what you mixed in
with the wind today
this higher-proof this aquavit wind

I wouldn't be surprised to see
shavings of light blown off
from magnolia leaves like shingles
to see the e ripped from hello
out of a passerby's mouth

anonymous sponsor
let wind batter me like light
let light shift down
on the book I'm reading
the book about the millennium

thank you anonymous sponsor
for double-sided sight
as in I thought the letters on the side
of the shipping container
spelled UNGLORY

unglorious the grandees unglorious
the simulacra unglorious the state
of perpetual smoke detector unglorious UNIGLORY
I hear a voice saying finish your bowl
of sorrow-os thank you

for marking distinctly the things
I should be afraid of for example
a spider with the shape
of a wheel on its back
or was it an eye

anonymous sponsor it's not
in the gerrymandered-looking
plots of sky the branches make
that I think I might
manage to see you

but thank you for the grocery store's
neon letters newly
gone blank thank you
for the new store P I L Y W I G
you put in place of the old

anonymous sponsor you speak
by subtraction you wear
a beekeeper's suit and veil
you pluck you zigzag and vamoose
your m.o. is my planned obsolescence

anonymous sponsor why
do I sometimes say thanks
when I'm the one who deserves it
thanks I say to the woman
I just opened a door for

last night I dreamed that all
my lost ones everyone I've lost
were alive and well on the moon
on the moon sleeping in craters
on the moon sipping on dew

on the moon slightly
silver and distant on the moon
wearing masks not quite the same
as they were on earth but they were there
so who to thank for that my brain or you

VITA

EDUCATION

B.A. in English, Minor in Creative Writing 2009
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Thesis: "The Ballad of Kid Eclipse" Directed by: Alan Shapiro

TEACHING

University of Mississippi
Instructor: ENGL 302 Introduction to Creative Writing Workshop, Spring 2013
ENGL317 Introductory Poetry Workshop, First Summer Session 2011

Duke University
Teaching Assistant: ENGL 179 The Gospel as Literature, Spring 2010, Professor
Reynolds Price

EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE

Poetry Editor, *Yalobusha Review*, Fall 2011- Present
Assistant Poetry Editor, *Wag's Revue*, Fall 2012-Present
Reader, Bull City Press Chapbook and First Book Contests, 2010, 2013
Publicity Intern, UNC Press, Fall 2009
Editor-in-Chief, *Cellar Door* (UNC-Chapel Hill literary magazine) 2008-2009
Reader, *Carolina Quarterly*, 2008-2010

PUBLICATIONS

Poems in Anthologies

"Minor Ghost Hotel" "Thicket" *Another and Another: An Anthology from the Grind Daily Writing Series*, Bull City Press 2012

Poems in Journals

"Portrait of a Dandy" *Redivider* 10.2
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Interviews

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17
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Reviews

"Flowers of Ennui: Ennui Prophet by Christopher Kennedy" *Carolina Quarterly* 61.3