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IS THIS FIRE
THESIS

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
GREGORY SHERL
May 2015

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ABSTRACT

Is This Fire is a collection of poems which centers around the themes of faith and loss. In one section, "The Third Testament", parts of the Bible have been reimagined. There are poems about Joan of Arc, as well as poems that touch on miscarriages, as well as the Columbine massacre. There are, of course, also love poems.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Ms. McNeely.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my deepest appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Derrick Harriell and my committee members, Dr. Ann Fisher-Wirth, and Dr. Ivo Kamps.

I could not have put as much focus into my work without the John and Renée Grisham Fellowship. I would like to thank John and Renée Grisham for the financial opportunity to put all of my energy into practicing and learning the craft of being a poet and writer.

Lastly, I would like to thank the editors of the following journals who originally publishing some of the poems which appear in this thesis (often in different forms): *Anti-*; *The Owl*; *Barn Owl Review*; *Columbia Poetry Review*; *Diode Poetry Journal*; *Forklift, Ohio*; *Gargoyle*; *Eleven Eleven*; *Jabberwock Review*; *La Petite Zine*; *Los Angeles Review*; *New Madrid*; *Poets.org*; *Rumpus*; *Swarm*; *Versal*; and *Whiskey Island Magazine*.

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PROLOGUE ONE

“Pre-Genesis”

These are my words. Press them against your gums.

In the beginning God Sr. made God Jr.
because everyone needs to come
from somewhere.

That means God Sr. just appeared
& that wouldn't make any sense.

Still, follow me.

Tucking God Jr. into bed, God Sr. tells him
*I hope you dream about stupid zombies
instead of martyrs being eaten by lions.*
God Jr. is scared of lions because thoughts
of the future are worse than thoughts of the past
when the past is just beginning,
like fourteen lines ago beginning.

You'll never really love them that much anyway
God Sr. tells Him, words about the martyrs,
not the lions. *They pretty much deserve that shit.*

The sky is always bloated, constantly held up by strings.

That's got to be uncomfortable.

God Jr., holding a ball of clay the size
of a lampshade, wishes for two brothers,
pieces of Himself that would be next to Him,
inside pieces of those who formed worse
versions of Him.

Figure that shit out.

The Holy Ghost feels so cramped trying to build
a house from something no bigger than a fist.

To Him, nothing will ever be bloated enough.

Does God Jr. feel the nails through His wrists
while the second part of Him feels it, too?

I am quitting every drug that doesn't get wet
when turned on.

There is nothing natural about a disaster.

Elephants, I am sorry you only have a little while left.

Eventually Kentucky will be beachfront property.

The biggest thing I am wondering is, how did space
gas get so goddamn beautiful?

“Love, etc.”

To read of love to a pregnant belly is a dirty thought. See, how can there be another child when there is too much breathing already, when there are so many last names already, poor mailbox, poor postman, poor trees stuck in medians. It's day eleven of the government shutdown & the only difference I've noticed is the caption on the bottom of the TV saying it's day eleven of the government shutdown. Why can't more things shutdown? Take a vacation, cancer, you've been working so hard. Day eleven of the cancer shutdown & I kiss my grandmother's cheek. Poets, stop falling in love with other poets, put your fingertips in the mouth of a quiet surgeon, let the birds rest, go to trade school. Day eleven of the poetry shutdown & Pfizer goes belly up. Right now I'm sitting in a coffee shop, alone, while outside, somewhere a football spirals, love is given, somehow given back the same but not really, it slants now as I drown myself in a package of creamer. Please, worry this intimacy into me, mine, you a thoroughbred of a gallop, tossed dirt, a message on a billboard on an interstate, gravel on your spine: *I groove into you.* I wish I knew what you smelled like at prom, was the punch just punch, were you walking with your head in your lap, I hear that happens, a corsage pinned to a thigh, fireworks lit, exploding like a moan into a warm mouth. I hope I was thinking *Why did I learn cursive?* while you went dressed as a supermoon for Halloween. Were you an emotion while I was circumcising the sound of an Iowa cornfield, the winters & what they carry? Isn't it weird, the modesty of the sky?

“Calling Something Animal Husbandry Is Weird”

Necks break & that’s a shame. Babies die & I know one. My car needs a new car. I water it, but nothing. I leave it in the sun—but still, nothing. My nighttime medicine: blurred crosswalks, girls dressed as girls, how everything craters. Super pill, stop not existing. It’s weird how the world stays lighter now because we tell it to. A ball of clay, giant sloths, asteroids, & then I’m thinking about space. Below space, clouds playing with each other. Millions of years before millions of other years, a T-Rex that can’t tear open a condom wrapper—such tiny arms but what a massive cock. Seems awkward fucking over the trees. I think they teach this in school. Last night I called myself *You you you* after I crawled out of a beached whale. I was beginning birth: four tiny legs not holding anything up. There were other children the color of plankton. They worried as they should—the jellyfish were coming. I was told I should become a lake. I said *I am an ocean* before walking into a swimming pool.

PROLOGUE TWO

“Gimme You”

Please, that’s how this page starts.

Please hold, I am funneling dreams, I am hunting bears
with a gun full of bee stings. I am blowing the wind awake.

The wind, sleepy-eyed & hung-over, blows
the trees to the right. The left, lonesome, takes a nap.

In the beginning God made God, & what I remember still:
how we grow like giants next to those we love.

Where were you in the third dream you ever dreamt?

I love what catches my mouth: you going kaleidoscope,
but windows can only be grown

so big, & I fear we are all glare from a windowsill. Still, we grow wild
through what we find, the love grown between the two rivers

in Oconomowoc. Gimme you,

in a bar between two Stellas. Gimme you,

in a sky we’ve yet to see, yet to be built

by the god who builds such things. Gimme you,

in the dark, in the sheets in the dark—your bed, my bed,

gimme you, the smell that comes with it.

I was so tired from thinking about you I forgot to high-five the moon.

Still, gimme you, in the pre-morning wild, burning your

bright tender, the way we practiced before.

“Thesis Statement”

In the beginning God created the June bug,
a way to name your child after something ugly.

A way to put a month in skin.

& God made the cockroach because He knew we
were going to make the atomic bomb.

You can't erase everything God whispered into a tin can
attached to a string that was attached to another tin can.

The string went south & wrapped itself around a sparrow's neck.

The sparrow, a mother of six, while suffocating slowly,
visualized a pie chart detailing the percentage of her love
for each of her babies.

Six pieces of unequal love. *Still* she thought

there was enough for each.

The string went further south & I was looking
for the tin can, looking for a burning bush, a note
that I was someone worth thinking about.

& Joseph said *I did not have sexual relations with that woman.*

& Jesus was like *You're fucking kidding, right?*

& the dinosaurs didn't say anything, they were too busy
laughing at the size of trees.

& my lover woke up, & I was already inside her.

—This was yesterday.

—This was a good day.

—*This this this this this feeling* she said.

Dreams, she meant dreams.

& God said *We called it the best feeling ever.*

& after making love on the green shag rug,
her stomach was the color of a rug burn,
fresh enough to kiss, hot enough to burn my cheek against.

“Nothing Won but the Insides of Our Mouths”

Hello, I am trying to build some tenderness, so today I treat
you like a tree. I breathe what you breathe out, meaning
I am trying to breathe in reverse, meaning
I am suffocating like a motherfucker. Look at me. Look at me
again—teaching myself how to not talk like chipped paint.
Every prescription is another side affect: dizziness, short of heart,
lack of noticing sky. You never end. You close your eyes
exactly twelve seconds into a kiss. We could say some tenderness
starts here. I’m in a hip-to-hip kind of mood.
I want to watch my sweat sweat. Is it weird to have a second bed
just for fucking? Every Vicodin tree I have planted
has withered & died next to every Valium tree I planted before it.
Still, I plant a garden in Mississippi: Cinnamon Toast Crunch,
John Cusack DVDs, skin peeled from my knuckles
because alcohol is in hand sanitizer & touching things
is scary. I even plant the scary. I plant it next
to the bravery you blew into my ear, after we fed
ourselves daffodils, after you folded my jeans right out
of the dryer so they wouldn’t crease, even though sitting
makes them crease. Penicillin works. Lamictal works. I’m still dying,
it’s just much slower now. *A casual death* they’ll write,
but who is they? I pretend there are so many *theys*
I have to plant a village. If I call you her & her the other her,
please know I am still quite good looking in sunlight. I plant
the sunlight, too. My favorite color is the entire sky.

“Goddamn, We Let Go of Ourselves”

Who can complain when everywhere is scary? Find me
outside screaming dinosaurs Find the Valium tree
I have planted withered & dead Its roots raised
themselves pulled its own leaves right off
Everything starts in dark curls, crooked highways, blown
daffodils Do they put faces on the backs of milk
cartons anymore? I ask because people
are still missing & it seems wrong to stop looking.
If I go myself gone please don't stop looking.
Years ago my sister stopped breathing Now even
the worms are bored I patent my heart Soon I will
patent my heart In every head bombs getting
closer & closer All rivers that burn aren't
really rivers but stratocumulus clouds can be anywhere
I look at my feet Maybe I look at the sky Probably
I look at the place that was the last place we both thought
of as the last place when our thought bubbles
met clothed sometimes unclothed often
& I think *Probably, but darker*
I am writing the same poem over & over again until my sister
comes back to life She can be a zombie
I don't even give a fuck Adderall makes me miss
words when I write so who knows what else could've been
in this poem Don't worry about that shit though
worry about the Midwest & its remote controlled tornadoes
Worry about the words that have been put inside me
& if my mouth must be used as a puppet all gums no string
then please let the word *mellifluous* be put into it let the words
cherry bomb be put into it & then back into it again
because to explode to pit lust is how I feel skinned raw
after a long fuck But still if we shall worry worry about
the clouds I can't name Worry about everyone
who tried to feed fruit to the wilderness in the wolves.

THE THIRD TESTAMENT

“Once Upon a Time”

It is said that the earth was created in six days, that on the seventh day God rested, lit a Camel Light & was pleased.

& God said *Let there be guitar riffs.*

After God sneezed, He said *I am I am I am.*

& God raised His arms & ants stopped carrying so much weight.

The platypus stopped laying eggs.

The platypus was like *Fuck eggs, fuck this beak
I am not a duck, goddammit.*

Tumbleweeds still smelled like tumbleweeds.

The smell people said

was everywhere.

& God blew me a kiss so I wrote a poem that blew a kiss to the devil & then the devil blew a kiss to his favorite demon & his demon, lonely, cried tears so hot they burned through what little beauty he had left.

Everyone forgot the phrase *panic attack.*

& I wondered why there were no girls in this poem.

& I walked into my bedroom & wondered why there were no girls in my bedroom.

& God made the scent of girl emit from my stove, from my TV set, from the hallway closet.

I spent the weekend drunk from the nose.

My mattress felt softer.

& I believed the soap on my bathroom
counter might actually clean me.

“Jonah Was a Shipwreck”

Jonah gets swallowed by a whale & it's all vacation like a motherfucker. The Macy's Day Parade in Jonah's whale. Shrimp cocktails in Jonah's whale. Excellent cell phone reception in Jonah's whale. Jonah gets swallowed by a whale & then he gets a book. I fall off my Vespa, but I don't get a book. My foot gets infected, almost falls off—it's puffy & limp, my stomach & larynx & tongue casual filled with Percocet, but still—no fucking book. I took so much Klonopin, charcoal saved my life. There was a tube so far down my throat I don't talk about it. *Pirates of the Caribbean* is a sequel to the *Book of Jonah*. Jonah is in a whale for three days. Periods last five to seven days. Orgasms, over in seconds. *When Harry Met Sally* is ninety-six minutes long. Jesus is dead behind a boulder the same amount of time Jonah is in the belly of a whale. Most people die & then they are dead forever. I know a few of them.

“IKEA Is Scary”

Today Amazon.uk reports a 6,000% increase
in the purchase of aluminum bats.

That is a sad way to start a poem.

Hello, Loon.

By afternoon Jesus’ fingers are splintered
from building IKEA furniture.

I am doing my part.

I birth high fructose corn syrup.
I birth Wikipedia.
I birth fireflies so Ohio knows I care.
I birth sand.

My road to Damascus is stained with hand sanitizer.

I birth Valium trees in the smallness of Mississippi.

Hell, maybe Solomon had it right: two minus
one can be enough.

So I birth a new beginning.

& in the new beginning I start a letter:

*Know I wrestled the giant & even though I lost,
I still need you to know I wrestled the giant.*

Every day I am reminded by how strange
it is to not be forgotten.

I tell God *That fucker holding the earth looks tired.*
This morning I woke up full of caged abdomens.

All the white space in this poem

is me laughing through every chorus
on my third hip-hop album.

My fourth album: Elmer's Glue,
her body halfway under mine.

Tomorrow I will be one of the fifteen happiest
people to have ever touched a neckline.

This is the best white space in the entire poem.

“Late Last Week”

On the eighth day, machine guns.
The ninth: trenches, barbed wire, flasks
secured to our green helmets.
What I’m saying is God quit two days
ago & now what?
What I’m saying is the trees shaped like sharp poles
will always look that way. The sun,
halfway between a cloud & another cloud,
will eventually pick a cloud.
After, it will pick another cloud & then what?
Who could possibly look at a volcano
& not think *lava lamp*?
I could eat a bread bowl every meal
& still feel empty.
See, I have measured monogamy.
I have published the results
inside the pillowcase on my bed.
It was so thick there was no room for my pillow.
It was so thick there was no room for a bed,
so we each traveled the Garden.
The Garden was so big we lost each other for weeks.
Later, I found her nose halfway up an apple tree.
Maybe she was trying to reach every crater
on the moon.
I would like to reach every crater on the moon,
take a nap & then start over.
What I’m saying is every argument
should’ve ended late last week.

“Communist Heaven”

We could all be soft moons, toothpicks
in club sandwiches, orange Tic-Tacs.

We could remember birth, but why?

God tells me *Understand hearts are weird
& never dormant.*

It's why He gave us two ways to breathe.
I nod while He pours my cereal.

God needs a nap, so He puts me in charge.

I birth mountains so we'd have a reason to use jetpacks.
I birth air fresheners & that was smart.
I birth George Clooney & two million women sigh nightly.
I birth suntan lotion & that was smart, too.
I don't birth tanning salons—that was the devil
& his need for crisp. I don't birth Mel Gibson, either.
I tried to push that fucker back inside.

I birth Netflix because she's always asleep by 4 a.m.

No one can figure out where rape came from.
The devil won't even take responsibility for that shit.

Everyone agrees doorknobs are something scary.

I birth airplanes & regret it half the time.
I don't birth germs, they came with the mountaintops.
Herpes, I swear to sleeping God, no.
Chlamydia, yes, but I thought it was a flower.

I birth a Communist Heaven because I never feel
evened out. In Communist Heaven writers are janitors.
Poets work the night shifts.

Communist Heaven is the same as Socialist Heaven
except everything is the color of Adam's neck fat

after he rolls off of Eve.

In Communist Heaven the toilet bowl cleaner
always makes the toilet water an ocean blue.

“Who Is You?”

In the beginning God created sound
& wind blew itself awake.

I was so good looking I wasn't even born yet—
I was underground weather, a revolutionary
cloud—a puppet heart holding paper guns.

I loved cowboys too much God said
all the Native Americans just left.

They were carried away by the wind,
which was born awake, bushy-eyed,

tailed-doe,
an underpaid receptionist.

& in the beginning every song sounded the same.
In the beginning no one said *In the beginning.*

Why would they?
—They were too busy climbing out of lagoons.
—They were too busy not realizing they existed.

I am sick of being so fucking sensitive.

Goddamn I told her
look at your electric guitar.

The chorus of this poem goes
*Been better when you were around/
So come back around.*

& God said *I dreamt this all.*
& *when I woke it was so,*
so I left it so.

My left hand shook the equator,
& I found myself sleeping on a field of sheep.

—The sheep said *Bah, bah. Baaahhh.*
—I said *I know, me too.*

“Lack of Social Skills/Hidden Love Poem”

You, stop reading this poem
if you have someone better to do.

God is too busy getting name-dropped on every hip-hop
track for me to get name-dropped on any hip-hop track.

Shit, was the world not enough?

Shit, imagine how Jonah must have smelled
when he crawled out of that whale.

You, make someone crawl inside you, teach
them how to make their tongue a propeller.

I am leaving notes inside her lunchbox. They say *Blush
into this salad. Feel your thighs because now
I am calling them my own. Do they feel softer now,
with more context?*

& on a day even God forgets happened, He created
infidelity because some things aren't worth working out.

Pretend I didn't He says, but now I'm thinking about
octopuses, how God made three hundred types
so we'd never be able to remember them all.

Three hundred types but only one bone,
right at the nose. The rest of them: black
mist, multiple heartbeats, rows of suction cups.

They die so shortly after sex I am worried about
their three hearts, their goodbye fucks,
their six-month cum-filled hospice stays.

If not for their short deaths, they would probably
die from heartbreaks.

What I am trying to say is, I'd like a reason

to climb out of a fire escape.

Everything below my heart gets turned slightly
to the left when she moans.

The fourth chord on the guitar I never learned
how to play: Elmer's Glue, her body halfway
under mine, this forever thinking.

If you throw an octopus against a glass wall, would it stick?

Suction cup hearts. Suction cup stanzas. Suction cup soapbox.

Suction Cup Testaments.

I guess it would be nice to not crack.

I am still waiting to be name-dropped on a hip-hop track.

Hell, I guess it would be nice to only crack a little.

“We Can’t Schedule a Seduction”

I call God collect.
I tell Him *This morning*
I felt a little too in love.

See, I have been dripping
into His thirsty pores
for days but still—

He makes me sign
a form saying I am happy.

Later, I cross the street
& don’t even notice.

I call God collect.
I tell him *You sound*
like a tree.
I have thought about taking
my medicine for days but still—

the bottle stays mostly full.

It seems I am always
hungry like a monster.

Afternoon, what a fucking
afternoon you are.
Stop it with your cold shoulder.

I call God collect.
He’s worried I’m leaving Him
for the man He used to be.
He’s upset I’m always text messaging
people who ignore Him.

But she’s so good looking
in that dress I tell Him.
You have to understand,

you did put her together.

God calls me collect.
He wants to make sure
I'm stretching
every morning,
flossing every night.

*Every white hair pulled
turns into six* He warns me.

My cereal is always soggy
by the seventh bite.

A list of things
I haven't tasted today:
sun, an apple core,
warm beer, poetry.

Tonight I am taking pictures
of my own face,
making a photo album
& calling it *Excuses*.

TEN POEMS

“How to Brave Night”

Love should come with four exclamation marks, not three.
My heart goes bird poem, bird poem, bronchitis, triceratops.
I was born a world with my lips into your chest.
I brought the dust to its settle. Never three-way with ghosts.
Slowly gorging in rhythm while burning down
wildfires—wonder how last names curve like highways.
The Age of Yelling Love & doing it wrong.
I believe we all came from passion, the last seconds
of ticking, the directness of locked doors. Say burnt coals walking
through feet. Falling in place, throw rocks
at everything. I think best while counting Eskimos.
Say the smell you make when you moan. Or, how an angel
eats macaroons. Even so, yesterday in your different hair,
attaching strings to clouds. Alone with wind. I came here
to tell you I have loved everything once.

“Poem Where I Don’t Mention Columbine & Regret Even Thinking About Mentioning Columbine”

I want to say the wolves are here but they’re afraid of me.
Still, they follow me as I move from the south
to the other south. They call it the real south because I live
so far south it’s not even south anymore, it’s gone back up north.
Try to figure that shit out.
What I know about Mississippi: there are no tentacles
in Mississippi. Jellyfish are everywhere
but you won’t find any in Mississippi, so the phrase
jellyfish are everywhere is false. Somebody fucked up.
I grow fame in your bent knees, your skinned carpet.
My heart stays useless through all weather,
but it’s still here, further south before just south.
Kanye West sweats beats & that’s why the oceans
are constantly vibrating. You: where all I think
about you: *bright bright bright*.
Later, five shot in a high school. Later later,
a twelve year old stabbed in a parking lot.
He just wanted to keep his milk money,
you know, a bone growth kind of thing.
Ohio is for lovers, but that’s not true. That’s Virginia.
That’s short fingernails. That’s two pills with twelve
ounces of water every night so I don’t scream
at walls that did nothing wrong.
A firefly lives as long as a firefly should live.
Some jellyfish live forever & that’s fucked up.
Somewhere, a nightlight is always plugged into a wall socket.
Trench coats, you are useless unless a naked woman
is being naked under you.
I miss the smell of your legs on a chair you never sat on.
I stay useless dressed while the oceans stay sad.
There are too many jellyfish, & now the oceans are being
trampled by tentacles. I was taught manners so watch me catch
all of the jellyfish, save every ocean before breakfast.
When I get home, my superhero cape is salty. Still, watch
me help you carry your groceries home: two hundred
ways to double-jellyfish a gallon of skim.
Kiss my neck as I line my walls with thank-you cards

soaked in salt water: *You're welcome, plankton.*

“Domestic Terrorism”

I am hiding in a state north of Virginia. Bomb shelters are cheaper there. In the state north of Virginia I am always looking out of a snow globe or into a can of low sodium black beans. I am with a girl who is also hiding in a state north of Virginia. We are building a bomb shelter because nine year olds are being shot in grocery stores. We are building a bomb shelter so we can fuck with the lights on & feel weird about it. Alternative title for this poem: “For Breakfast I am Going to Pretend to Still Be Sleeping.”

In 2008 I went to school where that guy went to school, but nobody talked about that guy who went to school there. I didn’t know the guy, saw a picture maybe three times, but I know he chained the doors & promised no dessert before bed. Instead of talking about the guy, we talked about the price of pita pizzas & how beer tastes good always. I didn’t write in my journal *I see shootings*. I wasn’t in Virginia when other people were leaving Virginia. I was in Virginia when it was okay to feel normal in Virginia again. That is the motto of my bruised heart: *Feel Normal Again*. The state flower of my left shoulder blade is a fan I buried in my backyard. I watered it every morning before I watered myself. Watch the fan tree grow, watch it cool the earth.

In 2008 I didn’t watch the news, so what I learned was that cows shared fields with sharpshooters. Count the black spots on the cows, count the Kevlar vests on the men with guns. Connect the dots. Find Waldo hiding in a bathroom stall. Let’s rewind. If I were writing a poem to 1985, I would write *Are you sad you’re over? Do you miss the ground the way I miss a juice box & her face painted across my chest?*

If I were writing a poem in 1985, I would be nothing years old, maybe two weeks old, maybe five months old. In 1985 I was twelve weeks old & fell out of my high chair, cracked my head—rivulets of blood in the cracks of tile. If I had died, I would still be dead. I wouldn’t have swallowed a bottle of Klonopin in 2005, a few weeks after I tossed a handful of pebbles at my ex’s second story window & thought *This is how movies are made*. Rewinding without a remote is hard work. The state bird of my spinal chord: an origami swan lit on fire. In 1999 I watched a high school fall apart, cops pointing their guns at students. *It could be anyone* the cops or the news anchor or my mother said. 2007 was my year of no fucking.

I held my breath in the shower, counted the seconds till worms danced across my eyes. In 1999 Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold killed thirteen & injured twenty-one, but the cops pointed their guns at the students.

Someone's been building pipe bombs in their garage and the pipe bombs smiled because it was true. I was fourteen when I watched students run out of the school with their hands on their heads. I was fourteen, & I hadn't met my future wife yet, just watched the news & ate something, I'm not sure what. In 1985 Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold were four years old. If I were writing a poem to 1985, I would write *Did they tell you secrets about how they wanted to eat flesh, paint the hallways like a horror movie?* What I remember from yesterday: a latte with aspartame, a blowjob that felt like the moon. In 1999 I never had a fear of flying, no desire to soak my hands in sanitizer. Fast forwarding is easier when you're in love. What I remember from yesterday: nothing about poetry, nothing about the way air carried me like a pink cloud. In 2009 I smoked my last cigarette. It tasted like a cigarette. What I remember from today: holding myself like a dirty flagpole.

“Bridged Deer Crossing Before the Ice”

Heart surgery goes scalpel & you, angioplasties
ballooned heart, your tendon-ed thread count.
Do you still drip that way? I ask
because I've stopped pretending to know
shit about growing flowers.
Deer cross before the bridge in yellow raincoats,
& ices always bridge first. Thank you
for warning me. Monsters are filthy
because under beds are filthy. Fuck monsters,
we never let them out.
The moon looks so clean but who can stretch
that far to bleach it? I bet it's lying.
The moon is a fucking liar, & that's worth
saying again—the moon be a lying motherfucker,
creeping out in daylight, embarrassing the sun.
Do you know where we're going?
I ask because the maps keep getting stuck
to the kitchen table, & now we have nowhere to eat.
People die in daylight & that makes me nervous.
Hell, I bet people die in daylight
just as much as they die in nightlights.
In the north I could say people die in fireflies
because fireflies are nightlights
for Ohioans, for Virginians, for Otherans.
I never meant to make you feel less hilly.
I will never crawl you out of bed.
Go on, get hilly again, dress mountaintops
along your hips: your thigh-high heart,
looking at a woman with your hurts
makes me realize it is not yet dusk everywhere.

“Nine Out of Ten Republicans Will Not Buy My Next Poetry Collection”

In Thailand a butterfly flaps its wings & nobody gives a fuck. If I went back in time & stopped that butterfly from flapping its wings the exact amount of times it did before, Thailand might be completely underwater. Thailand might have never been born. Thailand might be called Iceland & Iceland might be called Greenland, since it's greener than Greenland anyway. If I went back in time & stopped that butterfly, Obama might've been born in Kenya, Leonardo DiCaprio might still be attractive. Dogs might catch their tails, & oh the blood! Someone wouldn't have been raped outside of a meat-packing plant & days later shot to death, stabbed after just to be sure that death was death because he dressed like himself, just with fake parts over his real parts that weren't really real parts because he didn't want them, didn't even think to ask to have them. I stole all of this from an Ashton Kutcher movie. Don't judge me, I'm doing enough of that myself. It's pathetic, how much coffee I have left, where my cock will go next. 49% of OkCupid users believe in miracles. This girl who rolls a blunt & shotguns into my empty mouth is .004% of them. Obama said good things even though he was 1,275 days late when he said them. That's 545 days longer than an elephant stays pregnant, & elephants stay pregnant forever. If you look at an elephant, it is probably pregnant. Elephants will be extinct soon because rich people need something to put on their mantles, but that's a different poem, I wrote that poem too, I did. Yeah, Obama fucked up. Still, he showed up, so he's already beaten most of my dates, most of her bangs that forgot how to follow me home. I left breadcrumbs & everything, she still lost herself. *How hard is it to follow a trail?* I ask Obama & he says

About 3.5 years of hard. That's out of context because of enjambment, which shouldn't be confused with alignment, which is important because highways state you have to stay straight or they'll kill you. Imagine every highway looking like North Carolina, holy fuck. These days I keep body parts & poems separate. It seems slutty not to. Or maybe that's backwards, & it seems sluttier this way, fucking two things nightly & then again by mid-morning. For breakfast I only want pale mouths, paler thighs, never a penultimate stanza, never lightning bugs hovering over microwaved oatmeal. I don't bother with that shit until the day is already ruined. By the time I get to poetry, I want to feel tied up. Please, join me in this poem. Let's adventure. The real sun is hidden behind some clouds we didn't invite over, but we didn't create the sun, not that one, no not the other one either, not even the backup to the backup sun, the one that's still in the box, the one God's been thinking about returning for store credit, the one that doesn't even know it's a sun yet. We created the sun hanging over the ceiling fan, not long after we created lips thicker than fan blades, but before we created blades of grass that don't need to be watered, so we can still tackle people without worrying about water bills. Linebackers get concussions, years later shoot themselves in the chest so their brains can be used for science. It's awkward falling in love with men because I never want to touch them with buttered hips, a terminal nest, but how else will I get them to stay? I am a pancakes in the morning kind of feeling. I wish this poem ended with a cat watching a video of a cat playing a keyboard. Someone just sit on a bench with me.

“Kanye West Poem Featuring Gregory Sherl”

There are suns on my tongue & they all smell like France.
Depending on my mood, I am every color of fall—
the temperament, not the act, never the action in the before.
Depending on depending, I am what you call basketball short.
I am what you call teacher hot. My hair stays night
when it's still falling on more night. My face be storms,
my face be standing rainforests. Your legs stay space shuttles
while my therapist goes hypnosis.
My heart stays a puff, puff, pass kind of feeling.
Please know I only snort women, I only drink what comes
out of them. The best weather is thigh weather.
Hey, I'm digging on us. How we fuck like bounty hunters.
How we fuck like Europeans on vacation. This here it goes:
we fuck like all nations. I could say *We fuck all nations*,
but we practice minimalism in bed.
This should've been the refrain: *You go over legs so well*.
I never lived longer because I opened a book.
Someone start this poem over. Don't publish my mother
crying over the charcoal on my hospital gown.
Exhume my sister, try the feeding tube again.
I am good to have known you, so I keep myself
only wilderness. When I grow up I'm going to be quicksand,
lightning, that goddamn super fast shit. On TV a rocket
launcher goes through a Kevlar vest, & now nobody stays
safe even while inside. They got these drones now,
so I'm hiding my children even though I don't have children.
Let me borrow yours. My favorite part of fucking is before
your clothes are off & I already smell what you'll taste like.
Last night the wind left, but the trees were still moving.
I thought *Love*. I thought about growing
into incredible monsters. I thought to think
Thank God civilizations start with just a twitch.

“Nine Out of Ten Dentists Agree I Am Not an Octopus”

I think I am an octopus.
Nine out of ten dentists agree
that I am not an octopus.
Still, *eight eight eight eight*
eight eight eight eight thoughts
before bed, *eight eight eight*
eight eight eight eight eight
kisses in a cave of black mist.
Having three hearts, holy fuck.
I filled you & then hid my three
hearts behind a rock that looked
like me, just stonier. Sad, I know,
the way my hands bleed rooms.
I think I am a salmon. Hello, upstream.
Nine out of ten dentists agree
that salmon are so brave.
Grizzly bears don't need to be brave,
they just lean over running faucets.
I didn't notice that tree before.
This damselfly, these Google Alerts.
Mom, did you see them say
those words? I didn't turn
wine into less wine but I brought
her home & she wanted to stay.
Her is you & you are midwestern's
winter, soon midwestern's spring,
my never midwestern's forgotten.

“Superhero Poem”

Look at me, so worried about the fireflies we caught last night
in a mason jar. I wrote that sentence wrong & now
all of last night is caught in a Mason jar. It’s cool though,

I punctured extra holes in the lid. Now, we all breathe
like leftover redwoods. Is California still on fire?

Was it ever? I am convinced it is bad to live
forever, so I’m going as a poet for Halloween. I’m broke as fuck,
so I’m selling this poem to a car commercial.

& as the Lexus rounds the bend in say New Hampshire,
in say the parts of Memphis that weren’t pregnant last week,
in say my coffee swirling tornadoes whistling heavy
train tracks, the narrator will say *Sometimes giants
only smell like giants*. The couple in the Lexus smile
like old mistletoe. Their blood feels lazy. *Sometimes it only
takes a stone to kill a giant*. Matte pages are never for lease,
but the strings holding up tomorrow are.

The way today has stretched me out, how do I still have eyes?

I am sick of trying to buy things with contributor copies.
I was always born old.

Every bridge I build goes straight up.

“We Kept”

You find a boy touching himself to the thump in his own chest.
A boombox with the teeth of polar bears. All of me
in a parsnip. I take you home & everything smells
like medicine. I can see through walls & everything
that came before them. Fuck the police until I'm robbed, shanked
to the lamb, forced to quiet the burning of a forest fire.
I will never be tall enough to breathe redwood. Still, grass so tall
it grows past heaven. What's past heaven but more heaven?
Longhand I'm broken, hanging from a tree branch
built by art history minors. This high, I've seen it all—cornstalks past
the eyebrows of giants climbing down the shoulders of gods,
breathing the ignorance of fire. Or, how to flatten the left hip
of Mississippi. Really, everything but the parsnip.
I still keep you fondly on the vinyl couch, looking the noise
of west. It was better than a secret language, hustling corners
to streets, how to blindfold the goddamn broke of dawn.

“It Was the Poem About the River That Made Aaron Cry”

The second time I met love I promised starfish.
I promised lightning from the hips. I promised
the longevity of trees. Love was moments
piled kindergarten high, & my favorite part
of her was whichever part was closest to me.
Now, when I think in the present tense, I
think of what I never told her: *please*.
Still, to crawl back into a lagoon: to start
over: I meet her in a class of hieroglyphics.
Days of glue. A secret language, crop circles
grounded into skulls. I don't want to talk
about pills or charcoal or a sponge
bath starting on my right arm & ending where
I don't remember. Instead, I drive quickly.
She grips her belly in the waiting room, &
again in a room given just to her,
curled fetal, wrinkled flowers papered
to a gown. What starts from two curved spines
ends mostly the same. Say what the last breath knows.
This morning she sighs in breakfast clothes.
I think in October mornings. Never near an ocean.
It was the poem about the river that made Aaron cry.

THE JEHANNE POEMS

“Twice the Hands Than Before We Met”

To look at the sky for the first time. To name an emotion.
To be born into poetry, but what of ink when we go loud
in the wintertime? It feels weird never growing the way of tree
anymore, & how gravity eventually slumps us all into C's.
I prefer my heart gone broke
in the book where I renamed every hemisphere.
I felt love in the ground swallow entire cities by the knees.
My grape-welt tip of tongue, how hearts loosen the creases in language.
I wave a baby thermometer through the outdoor wind.
& what have I learned from college but to touch softly?
All poems are haunted houses, & underneath you grew
to burn a shiver. It's night when the bed sweats.
Under the cover of the roof that is under the cover of the moon,
you want to know why poets talk about the moon like it loves them back.
Like it came here to make them shiver inside someone.
Like it will bring them a hope that stretches beyond their wrists.
Like it could have saved Jehanne, who couldn't talk the burning bush
into not burning. I crawl toward Jehanne again, the walls sigh.
I tell her about the library in her ribs.
I tell her about the bible in her heart.
I think love holy. I know too many people still sick—the wetness
of hair. How to only dream in sin. & these listless prayers: Jehanne
in a water park; Jehanne, injected into the stars. & I know them,
they are my brothers & sisters, they are the feeling
of standing under a mistletoe in March.

“Stay, Still Life”

In the beginning you dream fire,
I field swords. I've got a heart, you know,
so birds smell like poems.
Rain so cold it wants to be snow,
& I call the passion after itself. Even
when the soul speaks. Even
when Mercury warms himself risen
while Jove crawls to his sister.
Tomorrow I wake up force field,
stiffen the leaves, declare the fairness
of spring. Jehanne, being & being. Jehanne,
threatened by dust, there is something
of a god in you. You went scorching
above me. There was thunder,
then the sound of *when*: propeller clouds,
the falling in love. Did I mention the faith
in your eyes? It spread wildfires.
Little tree get big, break my lungs wide.
O how you glow even in the early day.

“French Kissing”

What is there left to do during a truce, but look at boys
swinging swords at the trunks of trees?
You reach into the sky & pull down a phonograph,
& we listen to the helium in the stars. Your hands
are clean air & that's worth repeating, but the clouds
are mad. What more than dissatisfied nature,
the lakes rise to the sky, only to fall back down.
Everything not the same, but still, everything.
Warmed by skin & thunder, please stay.
People love & it's good. I've always said to the going,
it is better to gaze at the ground than to find
yourself buried beneath it. Rouen in a dream
I'll never have. Or, to purify the Seine, to growl like a lion,
to cough angrily into the wind. Jesus, may we all die
the same? I said His name too, I said it
in a morning not yet sung.

“A History of Crosswalks”

They say burnt flesh smells nothing
like a pig smoked under dirt. A wisp
of back. A stale grace. Relieve me,
I am a state of terror. We are nothing
but the keep. Still, this magic I have
brought inside. & this terror, a state
of am. Learning how to look back.
To weep—a cross, legged folded flame.
The closest thing a martyr feels
to Switzerland is the bark that held
her higher than her sisters. I am
speaking to Jehanne when I rhythm
in weather. How a balloon goes cloud.
The calm of God in a hand I dream.
Breathing down in a hiccup.

“You Look So Good in All Glow”

Wear whatever you want, I'll still write
this poem about you. I'll still save you.
If you were Rapunzel I'd climb up your
hair, bring you back down on yourself.
But I look at you & you are all bob. Fuck it,
we're got a good morning & we're still
young. I've been practicing you.
I've kissed three girls who have
the same haircut as you. That's six lips
but only three tongues, & my heart
wasn't in it, so divide all of that by two.
Hell, let's cut everything in half,
since Solomon was half song, half machete,
& I was planted & grown into a mathematician.
Let me to you. My hands are clean
air, & the square root of sky is always
a hummingbird's heart.

“Conclusions”

I find night under the shade of women born
from angels. Wind grown gone, it's the multiples
of skin I crave. Always, the scent between the top
of your thighs. To thicken my skin with what
I lost years before: the growth of grins,
the so many of hers with wings. Youth goes numb.
There's a white picket fence in the part
of my brain you were never able to reach.
& Jehanne, did you hear what guns do?
I'm worried. They say it grows in us all—the burnt
bodies, the deaf image of a tree, a cardinal
packed in snow. How all love goes petulant.
So gracious, you slip into night. Goddamn.
The fire & tomorrow.

EPILOGUE ONE

“Stay Through Wild & Pruned”

Sixteen year-olds are posting my poems on their Tumblrs,
then tweeting my poems from their Tumblrs to Twitter,
& all of this makes me think of a hummingbird & every emotion
I want to give it, hey hummingbird, *tweet tweet tweet*,
I'll trade you a bucketful of hickeys for a night of fucking
over gravity, & when I say *fucking over* I mean *screwing over*,
I mean look, it'd be nice to flick the clouds off
once in a while & not get a crick in my neck, & I hope
you read this poem, sad sixteen year-olds with your
Tumblrs filled with my poems next to GIFs of white-capped teeth
kissing on escalators next to pictures of skin safety
pinned around ribcages & sacra next to the word *thinspo*
guttled like the library of a haunted high school, I get it,
I do, I'd never want to be sixteen again, not even if writing poems
felt like her mouth along the scar around my waist,
not even if I got to name my own forest & sleep on a panda,
but it gets better: the facial hair, the fucking, the face fucking,
the lack of Axe Body Spray, & eventually that bridge
you're standing on won't feel so high & like a bridge, it won't feel
like anything, & why lean over nothing, that's boring, stay
still, see tomorrow & how it brings wind & how the wind
brings pollen & then the pollen brings life, & a few years
from now when you're drinking beer for breakfast
& your sheets still smell like last night's sweat,
remember this poem, remember that everything ends
with a long kiss down a naked throat stretching to infinity.

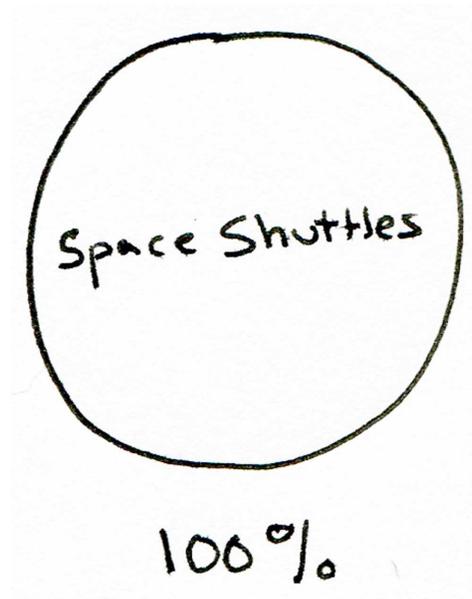
“Ekphrasis on My Wall, Ekphrasis of Megan’s Arms”

Megan cuts her arms, but the blood forgets
to be a painting. Maybe painting is wrong,
so she cuts her painting but the blood forgets
to stay in her arms. Or maybe the blood
is already there & now my wall is covered
in blood & that was an accident, I swear.
I always swear after a cough.
It’s like cough cough fuck. Cough cough
goddammit anyway. How do you paint a sore
throat forgetting itself? There’s a sailboat
in the painting of my heart, I don’t know why,
I don’t ask why, I’ll never ask why even though
I could ask why. She’s still alive, Megan, her
slit arms are still alive, her slit thighs
which I haven’t seen but have been told about—
the width of the slits, the circumference from
there to here to there to back to still here are still alive,
& it only takes a blink to imagine the desire
for the lack of pain. This heart on my wall
which is supposed to be my heart, is too big
to be a real heart. A heart is the size of your fist
& this is six fists, give or take 1.2 fists. I think she loves
me, or at least she did once, underground while drinking
pitchers of dark. I’m talking about Megan, not
the heart, but maybe the heart, too, maybe even
the sailboat in the bottom right corner of the heart.
The seas are choppy. All cannonballs sink.
A moon the shape of a whittled soap is above
the boat, & that means something, right?
I worry Megan will be the first funeral I go to
where I realize that I’m at a funeral.
How many rapes were ignored today?
I haven’t talked to Megan in weeks, but I talk
to the sailboat on a daily or maybe weekly basis.
That’s me lying. I talked to Megan two days ago.
I’ve never talked to the sailboat. That’d be weird.
Fuck the sailboat. Fuck paintings shaped as paintings.
I am telling you more about a person

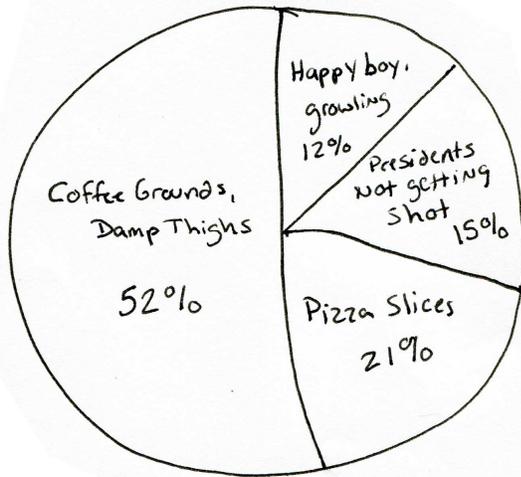
than a painting, more about a heart than a canvas.
I am telling you I have never talked to a sailboat
but have thought about wearing boat shoes, once.

“Rocket Science”

I am full of space shuttles.



But sometimes I am pizza slices,
coffee grounds & damp thighs,
every president never shot at—
a boy who grows up happy, growling.



But one time I was all spring. Another, the one who saved daylight's savings. *You need a better bank* I said. & after, light found a reason to stay busy.

Always, I stay the contents of my Purell.



If I get lost in a forest, I will build
a house. If I find myself on a horse, I will squeeze
my calves together until I find myself
going somewhere that resembles forward.

EPILOGUE TWO

“The State Next to the State FEMA Forgot About”
back to & fro Bob Hicok

I am moving to Mississippi because they are paying me to live in Mississippi. Is it living below the poverty line when everyone is living below the poverty line, or is it just living at a line? I saw a documentary where a guy tried to walk on a tightrope across the towers that are no longer there. He fell off. That's the whole documentary: a guy walking & then a guy dying. If he tried to walk across them now, he'd still be alive, & I don't know if I'm saying something bad here, or if I'm being deep or if that guy was just dumb as hell. I could write *my brother's out of work and my other brother's out of work* but that line's already been written, & I don't have any brothers. Hell, I've never even thought about having a brother, not until I started this poem. If I had a brother, I'd tell him *Where were you when my bloody lip got so bloody in the back of Mr. Watkins' class?* What a fucking terrible fake brother I have. I throw out my fake brother & start this poem over. I am moving to Mississippi because they are paying me to live in Mississippi. I have two sisters & neither of them are in Mississippi because Mississippi isn't paying them to live in Mississippi. I guess there are enough sisters in Mississippi. One sister is buried in Florida & the other is walking on top of things buried in Florida. Bob, If I asked to be taught about love, you wouldn't have pointed to words, but you write poems sometimes only a sentence long—just comma after comma after comma, & maybe that's love, this constant stream of splices, patches gripping what world you know, a ladder built east to west, a trampoline at the end in case it was all worth trying again. Is it worth trying again? I've found it's never worth trying again, but you're smarter & more bald, which means you built yourself more testosterone, which means you're more of a man than I'll ever be, which means you know if it's worth trying again. Please, tell my stoned heart, say pebble then rock then boulder then blood blood blood, which probably sucks so much & yes, I got stoned in your class when I could only write poems

in paragraphs that were only about fucking, when I used the word *thigh* in every line because they're the softest thing to chew. It's been a while, the chewing, the softness. Recently I've divorced *charm*, dirty talked *gimmick*, necked in the front seat of a Buick with *tenderness*. Nothing stays. How much would it cost to put a Kanye West sample over this poem? I'm desperate for a hit because these pills have to pile higher just to get me where I used to get myself two, three, four years ago. Still, I got a shoebox the size of one of my sisters. You can guess which one: the dead one, but you probably guessed that. The shoebox is full of quarters, maybe a buffalo nickel, so many pennies my father picked off sidewalks because one day he knew I'd buy loafers. Do agents have agents? It would make sense—I used to have a poet & then I had another poet & that poet was better to have, was a love that broke us both six feet deep because that's the saying, right? So I'll dump my first agent for the second one, & the second one will dump me, but still find herself texting me for medicinal purposes. What I'm really saying is nothing. Hey, I miss you, but right now I'm looking for the sign pointing me to the bar full of elementary school teachers. That sign isn't real, so I'm looking in sun & dark & it's sun again when I'm brave enough for a pillow. Highways scare me. Kissing scares me. Poetry has never taught me anything. Maybe that's the point.

“Daughter”

The lock goes on the outside. The window doesn't exist.
Boys are some motherfuckers. Teach her the subtleness
of never leaving the house, the necessity of cats.
How do we tell her that boys don't purr
without a pointing cock without saying *Boys don't purr
without a pointing cock?* Pick out every boy worth fucking
& tell her what pulses inside them. Open a broken oven,
say *This this this is what pulses inside them.*
Plug the oven in & have her watch it still not work.
If she falls in love with a girl, throw a party. All of our hairs
can be short, our heritages secured in ourselves.
If I'm not around when she gets that look, make sure hers
isn't for one who breathes over the page instead of into the bed.
What a waste. Tell her that jellyfish are everywhere & that whales
have legs. It's okay that sometimes only sleeping makes sense.
She should know that sharks never think about us.
Tell her every John Cusack movie is based on a true story.
Highlight the lips of those who said I was the bravest man scared
of the dark. Tell her how I kept my masculinity
in a crowded basement.

“A History of the Holiday Inn Express in Oxford, MS”

I spend her mornings drinking the spooky stuff in the same Holiday Inn Express where I stayed stuck inside her awe, stayed stuck longer than what went glued & then unglued. We ate fruit from plastic cups, thought words into amusement parks as blood started to clot then drip then limbs like chewed pen caps. As age grows, the last still stays. It's hard to save what barely was, but it's easy to offer free rent. So I keep my pockets light—just the first match of a forest & what stays narrow between us. I think in August mornings. I think in landmines. Or, how to dream her into the size of a living landscape. It's the start of a bullet, the blight of an ovum, the saccharine in holy water, which shapes the hips of Christ.

“A History of Goddamn”

Don't talk through a weak chin. Learn
the language of fingers. I want
to be better, so I'm saving my tongue
for what rises—the dawn, your favorite
weather, everything between the fog.
I want to live a light year in love,
but every new poem I write takes seven
minutes from my life. Thinspo in a mirrored
savage. To waste hope in a thickened bed,
digested by the heart. The baby never
came even though I asked nicely. So bring
the giants, I want to hum songs
of famine to the clouds.

“Two Minus One”

She called to say she lost it. She wasn't pregnant long enough for the leaves to go crisp, toasted almost brown. They were still gold, still burning themselves orange. *I don't understand* I said out loud & between the joints in my fingers. *We should call the police, file a missing person's report. I'll put flyers around the block.* I'll find her. I have a flashlight, canned food that'll last for months, a backpack that straps around my waist. I have beard stubble. *My eyesight has been perfect since birth, so spread open—I'll climb inside.* In the nighttime, they keep the lights on at cemeteries so the dead can find their beds again. Some things stay too small ever to be buried. I've got the police on speed dial, but how do you pick out your embryo? It was there just hours ago. They put jelly below her stomach. There was an agreement that something was inside her: ghosts shaped as shipwrecks barely moving. Leaving nature we still keep it. My favorite part of the future would have been my daughter's ears studded like the buds of chrysanthemums. I couldn't pick out a linden tree in a police lineup, if the lineup went linden tree, parachute, Boy George, maple tree, orange grove—so how would I pick out my embryo in a lineup that went embryo, embryo, polar bear, embryo, winter? *What did your embryo look like?* Like the cover of a book no one would read. Like gleaming.

“I Thought We Should Know the Best About Visions”

It's the pills that make my chest hair soft. Keep quiet with me.
I want to push someone small on a swing if I can stay alive
long enough to help build someone small enough to push on a swing.
If not, please be with me after I go too mad for Mississippi,
after I go too mad for the ghosts,
& I tell you in the last moments of Mississippi,
after the ghosts have left & the bleached sheets that have sewn
shut their eyes say *rock paper scissors genitals manuscripts*,
that *It's the visiting rooms which smell the worst. Stay.*
Stay dreaming of a cloud the shape of ten years of tenderness.
I am not yet in Mississippi, but already I have slept her
winters warm. You were there. You were a jacket
I was barely able to fit on the stove.

“My Career Is Going Nowhere Except to Bed”

How do I feel softer without gaining weight?
How do I finger things without any holes?
I want to be The Velvet Underground of poets
 five hundred people buy my book
 pick up a pen & write their own books.
How do I stay a footnote when I am at least
six foofs & all of my notes say the same thing—
 why aren't we getting ourselves off more?
I want to go on tour with God.
Only red M&M's in the dressing room,
air conditioner set to light snow.
Afghans on afghans on afghans.
Naps on naps on naps.
I want to be the Ryan Adams of poetry
 three books a year
 a harmonica for a tongue.
Lovely girl, I like pelicans almost always.