

2011

Delinquencies

Bryan Thomas Rice

University of South Florida, brice@usf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Rice, Bryan Thomas, "Delinquencies" (2011). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.
<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3309>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Delinquencies

by

Bryan Rice

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Jay Hopler, Ph.D.
Ira Sukrungruang, M.F.A.
Maura Stanton, M.F.A.

Date of Approval:
April 1, 2011

Keywords: poetics, juvenilia, delinquency, pop culture, failure

Copyright © 2011, Bryan Rice

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the editors of the following journals in which some of these poems first appeared, in slightly different form: *The Common Review* and *The Timber Creek Review*.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
One	
John's Sentence	6
Life Before Man	7
Lines During Peacetime	8
A Variation of Infant Sorrow	9
Slain Adam: Coda	10
Good Morning, Pig-Pen	11
On Slippage for Wordsworth	12
Per Biblical Errata	13
Midwinter Fracture	14
The Old Museum	15
Lines from a Poem Titled "At Lincoln Memorial" Read in Reverse	16
Parenthetical Asides from an Essay About a Eulogy	17
Five Depositions	18
For a Scrapbook	19
Code Amber	20
Appalachian Memoir	21
Two	
Shame	23
To a Juvenile Delinquent	24
Clown	25
Charity	26
Delinquency	27
Soothsayer	28
Song for My Sleepwalking Brethren (1)	29
Song for My Sleepwalking Brethren (2)	30
Mopping Floors at Saint Francis Hospital	31
Discipline	32
And Speaking of Ashtrays	33
Woolf Studies	34
Abner Yokum's Night at the Leather Bar	36
Carnival	37
Hemingway: On Fitzgerald's Untimely Death	38
Manna for Pig-Pen	39
Yesterday Was a Quiet Day	40
Hustler's Pantoum	41
Inferno	42
Physical	43

Three	
Bodies	45
Common Prayer	47
On Waiting for the Great Image	48
Raw Material	49
From the Spanish	50
How	51
Four	
Paradise	53
Sodomy	54
Hell	55
Departure	56
Still Life with Fence and Prairie Wind	57

Abstract

Delinquencies brings together forty-eight poems that reflect some of the aesthetic, philosophical and cultural interests I've attended over the last five years or so—namely, ideas related to failure and abhorrent behavior.

Introduction

My thesis, *Delinquencies*, brings together forty-eight poems that reflect some of the aesthetic, philosophical and cultural interests I've attended over the last five years or so. Since its completion, this wayward child of mine has assumed many titles. Originally, the working title was *Stories About John and Other Poems*, a playful (perhaps *too* playful) gesture towards my interest in genre-bending and, especially, towards my interest in writing poems that combine elements of narrative and lyric. In this way, the title directs the reader's attention to style. Rereading the thesis, however, I concluded that the "John" poems aren't central enough to bear the weight of having the entire manuscript named after them. Moreover, many poems resist the techniques inherent in narrative poetry—transitions, namely—and resist telling a traditional story with a clear beginning, middle and end.

My next choice was *Happy Children*, an ironic allusion to a poem by William Blake called "Cradle Song," part of which serves as my opening epigraph. Ultimately, I scratched this title out of fear that the reader's attention would be drawn too exclusively to the content of the poems: an inclination might develop in him or her to seek out every reference to children—indeed, there are many—and anticipate an arc in the book that moves from childhood to adulthood, innocence to experience (*a la* Blake's early masterpiece). Even reversing this arc—adulthood to childhood—seems stale and predictable, if not altogether gimmicky.

Therefore, since I am more interested in experience and remain skeptical of our shared Wordsworthian conception of innocence, I've decided to call the manuscript

Delinquencies, a title that most fittingly compliments the epigraph and, most importantly, the poems themselves. Obviously, *delinquency* brings to mind *experience*, as well as notions of unlawful behavior, social deviance, punishable tardiness and so on. A handful of the poems included here embody these particular delinquencies: “Stories About John,” “To a Juvenile Delinquent,” “Charity,” “Sodomy” and “Hell” come to mind. Worth bearing in mind, *delinquent* has its roots in the Latin word *deliquentum*, which means “to fail,” “to desire but fall short,” or “to relinquish.” As it happens, failure and relinquishment are additional themes in these poems. (See “On Slippage for Wordsworth,” “From the Spanish,” “On Waiting for the Great Image” and “Paradise”).

I’ve always been interested in the idea of failure (rooted in the French for *fallir*—to miss), especially as it pertains to the failure to recognize truth even in the presence of concrete, contrary evidence. I particularly enjoy crafting poetic utterances in which in which the speakers misinterpret the images they’ve chosen to absorb and render. The epiphanies are misguided; the images don’t add up in the way the speakers believe they do. A reader may notice my occasional use of the qualifier *believe*—a way of implying that these speakers’ epiphanies (unlike those of James Wright and Gary Snyder) are suspect. In my work, these failures and anti-epiphanies provide the necessary space for ambiguity and, perhaps, different kinds of emotional truths: in essence, I want to shift the focus from what the speakers realize to what they don’t realize.

I wanted *Delinquencies* to begin with poems that mirror divided states of consciousness, driven by concrete (yet fragmented) images and unusual syntax. In accordance with this conception, the first section begins with a poem called “John’s Sentence,” which details the moment following a public execution. In spite of these grim

circumstances, the speaker of this poem (John the Baptist) decides to spend his last moments of consciousness observing as much physical beauty as possible. I originally conceived the poem as an exercise in syntax: I wanted to write a poem using only one sentence and I wanted the syntax to push the occasion further into the past. The remaining poems in the first section deal with fragmentation by making use of techniques (white space, lack of punctuation, seemingly-erratic line breaks) found in the works of so-called “Experimental” poets. While some readers may regard these techniques as gimmicky and unnecessary, I feel that they are necessary for they allow the speakers of the poems to broach occasions and weave narratives in ways that traditional modes of thinking don’t allow.

If the poems of the first section mirror a state of consciousness somewhere between sleep and dream, the poems making up the second section are rooted primarily in lucid dream. The poems are less Imagistic, more narrative. Many of these poems owe a large debt to the Eastern European poets Marin Sorescu and Novica Tadic, as well as to Americans May Swenson, Charles Simic and William Matthews—none of whom are typically regarded as “narrative poets.” What I love is how all of these poets engage the world with wonderment; such wonderment, in turn, results in a poetry that radically defamiliarizes the things that constantly surround us. The speakers of my poems make extensive use of allusions (literary and non-literary) to find additional common ground with the reader and to make sense of their experiences in a figurative language that most closely mirrors their thinking patterns and worldviews. I try to use similes and metaphors that these particular speakers (rather than a poet) would use. I enjoy including references

to both high culture and low culture, sometimes in a single poem, to see how these seemingly disparate allusions interact with, and ultimately compliment, each other.

While the poems of the second section engage with the reader through storytelling and occasional humor, the poems of the third and fourth sections are more inwardly meditative and somber. In these sections, the speakers are wide awake; the poems are grounded more firmly in the physical world. A good number of the poems in the third section are about the creativity that happens (or doesn't happen) in a quiet, solitary space. The poems making up the fourth section of the book comprise a five-part narrative about an accidental prodigal son. As much as possible, I wanted to mirror the doleful ruminations of a man driving at night, how one thought leads to another and another. The longer enjambed lines yield a greater chance for introspection, letting one idea or image continue down the page, like water, as in some of Robert Hass's and Philip Levine's meditative poems. As it happens, the final poem in the book was inspired by a graphic design of a man tied to a fence post like a scarecrow and (presumably) left to die. I decided to give the design some context (the Matthew Shepherd murder came to mind) and compose a few lines from the point of view of a man encountering the fence post and being transformed from stranger to mourner. The final image in the poem (and the book) is a metaphorical crowning—an interesting contrast, I think, to the first image of the beheading, meant to suggest eventual triumph, even in death or failure.

One

Sleep sleep happy children.
Blake

JOHN'S SENTENCE

On the morning of my beheading
hours before the French maid
displayed my O
of shock like a hollowed pumpkin
on a silver platter, before
I was picked up & cradled as a child
cradles a basket of dyed eggs & before
a bouquet of roses burst open
between my shoulder blades, before
my bound hand relaxed, before my
bound hands made fists, before a blur
of metal wrenched a long sigh
from that body & before I recognized
the executioner's timbre
and my name—my only name—sung,
I looked into a mirror & thought, Jesus,
so this is how it's going to happen,
this is the destination I stiffly treaded
the earth's skin to reach, this is my idea
of salvation, for an instant, the world
so sharp, so bright—

LIFE BEFORE MAN

In the cavernous basement
of the public library,
the snug stacks close in.

I am like a cricket
in a boy's hand,
small, almost extinct.

(Imagine steering
the ox-drawn plow
while the earliest human light

strips the fur
from your body and your bones lengthen
like stalactite.)

Closing time,
I rub my eyes and return to the cold,
still without firecraft or drive.

LINES DURING PEACETIME

The jagged shadows slip in like oil,
collars tense,
flamencos retreat from the sea,
our view of a manicured lawn's now obstructed
by soldiers, the paper plates
blown away. The wind
wipes sweat from the dogwood,
and we crouch together
on the sidewalk
like orphans boarding a train,
waiting for the cadence and trumpet-grip
to slacken. When our legs surrender,
we're lain in a bed of salt and carted straight to Hell.

A VARIATION OF INFANT SORROW

I pity you as I pity
that fruit fly
in blind pursuit

of vinegar
in a jar.

*

At the foot
of a glass casket,
I, too, am useless,

my hands
eggshell-smooth
and hard and my mouth
dry as mortar.

*

“Do not ask
for what you shall never
receive.”

*

The newborn stirs
in her incubator.

The heating lamp
cannot be lit.

The fog rises and reaches
the eaves.

The river turns to coal.
We whisper through the curtains.
We don't wish but dream.

We limp eastward
in deerskin boots.

SLAIN ADAM: CODA

You sent me to bed.
 Early.
Without supper.

 Without lullaby.
Of light rain.
 Mew and croak.

And grunt.
 And hiss.
Grew faint.

 Without lullaby.
Something was in the water.
 Something sent me under.

Without supper.
 You combed dense papyri.
Early.

 Like the beam of a flashlight.
Without lullaby.
 Gathering evidence.

Seeking the perfect bone.
 You sent me to bed.
Come morning.

 No part of my body.
Lacked function or ache.

GOOD MORNING, PIG-PEN

The moment I woke and realized my nose
had dissolved in the night

I thought, Today is the day I empty that bowl
of papery petals
and grime
in which a spider recently drowned,

clutching itself with all its might as though
—in the world to come, once it
slackens its deathly grip on life—
it, too, might rise
to the surface
and break away from its blossom.

ON SLIPPAGE FOR WORDSWORTH

Drizzle demands a careful stride
 I trod the planks slick and streaked
with grit where other walkers slipped

 and I run my fingers slowly
over miniature lakes whose splintery
 shores recede I'm shocked the banana

spider's web is still intact delicate
 geometric trap nearly invisible *O*
Look! A bobber's caught in a branch

 a bottle's caught in a net of scum
a dragonfly a paperclip heli-

 copter skims the water an egret inquires
—*pee-lull, pee-lull*— they are too quick
 for this gaze to pin them down

the planks' creaks send the snowy
 egret yonder into sunlit steam
rising off the lake I wipe

 my dewy brow resume my easy gait
overstepping my bleary-eyed bounds

PER BIBLICAL ERRATA

Thomas made a megaphone
of his hands: “Yes, yes, yes!”

Mary Magdalene demurred:
“No.”

The Virgin asked: “Can I get to *know*
you first?” [Emphasis mine]

[There is no record
of “Joseph.”]

Shalimar turned cynic; King David
turned to logic.

Lot: “What happened in Gomorrah stays
in Gomorrah.”

Lot’s Wife: “What exactly happened
in Gomorrah?”

Eve never talked
to strangers. [Debatable]

_____ beheld the final version
of his sun

and shrank in horror from the shadow
of his right hand.

THE OLD MUSEUM

Somberly lighted
hazily traversed

open country
of walls and frames,

of shadows
darkening and sharpening

the closer we get
to the edges,

to windows
unreflective and fogless.

*LINES FROM A POEM TITLED "AT LINCOLN MEMORIAL" READ IN
REVERSE*

Wretched human eye
Invisible to this

Through a maze
Threading its way

That swift housefly
How greatly I envy

PARENTHETICAL ASIDES FROM AN ESSAY ABOUT A EULOGY

(as though reading words from a teleprompter)

(deadpan, kind of funny)

(the eulogist's *delivery*, not the eulogy itself)

(or like Peter Jennings on Ritalin)

(his mother yawned, too)

(understandably so)

(G.I. Joes, He-Men, Kool-Aid)

(i.e. spoiled rotten)

(in the neighborhood of a blink)

(from inside the school, too, you could hear
the music
of all that metal)

("unexpectedly" also bringing to mind
his father's decision,
later, to dismantle
the tree house)

(a place better than earth, presumably)

(as if he had a choice in the matter)

(though perhaps he meant, "I cannot *comprehend* how...")

FIVE DEPOSITIONS

1.
Unexpectedly when the earth tilts, the winter coat
comes undone in a slow series
of clicks, a wounded V
widens its jaws.

2.
Rain drubs against the window separating
an amputee
swaddled in gauze
from a sky churning with molten pearl-of-bone.

3.
Last breath.
One gold star for this model
of submission!
And the sun tries to sketch
a map to Atlantis
across that bastard's chest.

4.
“...Then how is it we're still bound
to his bedside
like army nurses?”

5.
We rest our hands
on the berth, we divide
the metal stitches equally.

FOR A SCRAPBOOK

All eyes are on the man
whose charcoaled
knuckles work overtime
to sketch an angel
for the little girl
with a dollar bill
balled in her fist.
She wants flight
and a gray-swipe of sky
and a place to praise
at duskfall. He sketches
a shadow that could belong
to any of us—
a double-blur splayed
wide as the arms
of a woman searching
a crowd for her child.

CODE AMBER

In the time it takes to suck down a single cigarette,
something has happened.

My car roars again.

Billie Holliday's alive again,
breathing despair.

The road lays on its back and plays dead.

The eyes of deer flash.

"Elegy is a form
of compliance."

My headlights stake their claim.

APPALACHIAN MEMOIR

Tunnel of breath.
Cement river.
Pinkish winter clock.

Hammer-of-God
hauling coal
over that steel bridge

Saying, *Don't leave, Stranger,*
Please don't leave,
even after Mother

has unfastened my coat and combed
the dust from my hair.

for Brandon

Two

SHAME

I once made love
to a streetlamp.

Oh, how our nude spines
shimmered with dew!

His hooded
eye-of-Cyclopes
winked orange heat,
casting a code of moths
around us.

What made things hard
was warding off
those moths, who seemed
to want a piece
of our sidewalk romp,

who seemed, like daybreak,
to want to peel back
night's curtain
and catch us in the act.

TO A JUVENILE DELINQUENT

Dennis Mitchell, I've given
your case careful
consideration
and determined
you've got all the potential
of a pinstripe suit
soaked in kerosene.

I've considered each time
you've sucker
punched the head of your class
and I've considered
the shark-fin's ease
with which you've abandoned
etiquette and hygiene.

I've narrowed these
considerations to a bright
and alluring conclusion:
You're a leader in the making,
beyond earthly censure,
you're the desert bush
that burns and burns and burns.

CLOWN

Pediatric Oncology's always
a real drag, except
on certain Saturdays, when Jug
Pinwheel, a clown, comes bearing
his bright and joyless upturned
frown, his Bicycle cards
that vanish and balloons he manipulates
into animals and fruits and other
lifeless things.

One afternoon,
I join him on the loading dock
for a smoke. It is winter but by
some twist of grace
a fistful of tulips spike
savagely through last year's
grave of mulch. *Those
won't survive much longer,*
Jug mutters, his eye weighing
a tulip pink as ground
lamb. *Frost'll get them.*
Is it my place to agree or disagree? *Yes,
frost will probably kill them,*
I say, and our little trees of smoke ascend.

for Dan

CHARITY

Two black suits
made my family an offer
we couldn't refuse.

One suit took out
a clipboard and drew
a line through our last name.

The other suit, whose face looked like
a scratched-off lottery ticket, patted my head
and told me our lives would improve:

"You'll see," he said. I saw milk
and frozen butter.
Thick loaves of bread

shaped like torpedoes
fresh off an assembly line.

DELINQUENCY

You refuse to recognize
foreshadowing
in spilled milk

groping toward the kitchen corner
crouching there
dust bunny with a frantic pulse

The stain on your bib
looks like a lopsided Kentucky
a state whose lonely lengths you'll drive

to lap sweat
off a male hitchhiker
in a public toilet

Years later
your body weeps into knotted
bed sheets—

white satin canvas
on which you leave behind
an emaciated angel

recalling the names
the hard flanks
& the tongues & the lamplit alleys—

all the men
you still believe you knew

SOOTHSAYER

She sold carnations
in front of a delicatessen.

The butcher worried
she was bad for business,
but he had a soft spot
for blind women.

As did I.
I'd leave a buck
in her coffee can.

When I introduced myself,
I offered an alias:
Charlie Chaplin. At which point

she removed
her sunglasses. Her sockets
were black as the pair
of shoes I stared into
morning after morning.

"Snake eyes," I called,
when she cast her die.

To this day, I'm still
waiting for God to force
his tongue into my ear.

I'm waiting
to begin my holy
quest for flesh.

With a little luck,
my trembling legs will be severed
at the knees.

SONG FOR MY SLEEPWALKING BRETHREN (1)

Once I started going to bed in cheap running shoes and hiding
my wallet in the back of my closet,
I felt relaxed enough to appreciate waking to the coos
of pigeons perched on my knees, and got over
what analysts considered an “abnormal” fear
of panhandlers and birdshit and rodent-fleas. Call me
Lady Macbeth. I learned I can clean off birdshit
with a soiled shirtsleeve, and by the fifth night,
I couldn’t feel the buildup of dew-filth on my brow,
or the roach lovingly sifting my hair for breadcrumbs.
There are drawbacks, of course—for example,
I miss out on the curious beauty of my shadow
slipping through the moonlit park, lengthening beyond the stone path,
molesting the shadow cast by this town’s founder, giving him
an extra head and set of arms.

SONG FOR MY SLEEPWALKING BRETHREN (2)

Some early mornings, the night patrolman pokes me
in the stomach with his flashlight and goes *Son,*
do you live around here? and leads me to my apartment
by the elbow and watches me sink to the welcome mat
to grope for my spare key. If I have coffee,
I offer him a cup and apologize for all the trouble. I don't
worry that the key may disappear and every number I dial
is the wrong number, that my elderly neighbor may insist
I am a stranger, I'm the guy who passes out
religious tracts on the corner of Jackson and Belle
or I'm the girl in leopard hose and blunt black pumps
who shudders when children ask if she's impersonating
Tina Turner. No, I'm impersonating a pussy-of-the-gutter
who feeds beyond the nets of streetlamps
and returns home in one piece. Call me Ishmael.

MOPPING FLOORS AT SAINT FRANCIS HOSPITAL

Some nights these wings
are so quiet you don't
have to strain to hear

the necessary hum
of electricity. Even
from inside you'd swear

you picked up the drizzle
that slowly sheens
the visitor lot,

the bodies of moths
that crack upon contact
with bug lights lining

the smoker porch out back.
Some nights when I stop
mopping I'm convinced

I'm like the others, tube-fed
or helplessly wheeled
on a gurney. Some nights

these wings are so quiet
you don't even have to strain
for the hum in your veins.

DISCIPLINE

No matter where I've gone to school, whenever I need to visit the library for some reason or other, I always find a desk close to where the books related to my discipline are kept. I don't know why I want to be close to books related to my discipline: in truth, I find this discipline very dull. Mostly this discipline involves statistics and percentages and colored columns that no longer make sense to me but must make sense to somebody, otherwise books related to this discipline would not be published. I don't know if I've chosen a discipline that suits my personality, as I don't consider myself dull and certainly not disciplined enough to publish books to further the discipline. But since I crave silence and dullness in order to do what I do when I visit the library, the fact that my discipline is dull is agreeable to me. However, when I'm sitting at a desk close to where books related to my discipline are kept, I'm very likely to run into other people who are in some way affiliated with this discipline. These people tend to be very pedantic and, understandably, very dull. To my horror, however, I find that I am very good at maintaining dull conversations about my discipline with these dull people. But in all fairness, I don't know if the people drawn to this discipline are dull or if this discipline makes them dull. It is possible that at one point, before they became interested in this discipline, these dull people were interesting people. It is also possible that the discipline itself was once interesting, that it has been made dull by the dull people who take an interest in it. Regardless, I should feel grateful that whenever I am at the library, books related to my discipline, as well as people affiliated with my discipline, are close by, and books related to other disciplines, and people affiliated with those other disciplines, are far away.

AND SPEAKING OF ASHTRAYS

One cannot deny the conspicuous overcrowding of Ashtrays in airports, in buses, and especially in trains, where Ashtrays are practically crammed into cars. One cannot deny that something must be done. There are rumors of unwed Ashtrays copulating in the back rows of movie theatres. There are rumors of married Ashtrays copulating on asphalt in broad daylight. There are rumors of Ashtrays wanting to convert the masses, but in truth, these are not rumors. Last night, an Ashtray handed me a card emblazoned with a likeness of Saint Clare. Moments later, another Ashtray offered me a Gideon testament small enough to hide in my coat's inner pocket. The two Ashtrays wept and walked away and left a coal-black mark on my forehead. This Ashtray world could be improved. There are mounds that accumulate and stay put and harden, as when a multitude of Ashtrays congregate at a public beach and refuse to leave. There are small wars that ensue, as when the aforementioned unwed Ashtrays intermingle and disperse and intermingle again and disperse again. This Ashtray world is not a perfect world. There are Ashtrays, for example, who visit soup kitchens and stand in line for hours, silent as a tongue wisely bitten, and there are older, heavier Ashtrays abandoned in back alleys and miniature, pulp-pink Ashtrays abandoned in hospital entranceways and, practically everywhere you look, shattered Ashtrays that need to be swept up— and look at that, rotten Ashtrays weighing down those delicate poplar branches. As for Ash, one cannot but regard the heaps of Ash, threatening to billow. These we do not claim.

WOOLF STUDIES

I. Mrs. Woolf's Brilliant Idea

In my long summer skirt, I am a virgin testing
the weight of obscenities on pink stationary.

My pockets are deep, and large enough to fill
with stones.

Instead, my pockets are weighed down with money to burn,
plenty of money to burn.

There are hours upon hours
to kill.

II. Mrs. Woolf Visits the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior

Sunup, a German shepherd barks
and a squirrel scales
steep bark
for a bullet
he mistakes for an acorn.

The German shepherd
leads me to a tree stump
as intricate and illusive
as Braille. (Lord, I shan't misplace

my trifocals again.)
My palms are useless,

and there is no squirrel
clinging to a tree.
There are no trees.

Such are the tricks the mind
plays these days.

III. Mrs. Woolf Window-shops at the Garden of Eden Boutique

How I long to buy a dildo on Piccadilly
and scrawl sharp hearts

along the tender, unresponsive shaft:
V + V + V + V.

If I live long, I'll prosper.

ABNER YOKUM'S NIGHT AT THE LEATHER BAR

In a blacklit corner
his long limbs yawned,
and the ash on his skin
twinkled like asphalt in June.

I put down my cue and leaned
against the wall, blushing.
The little room contained

Jack-tinged panting and dark
relief. My fake I.D.
guarded me like a raven
fat with roadkill.

Closing time, the deposed hustler
raised his watch and
the whole show came to an end.

CARNIVAL

The cartoonist slides a piece of paper your way.
You recognize the eyes
that bulge with wrath on the page.
As for the pronged, pocked tongue
and the teeth like sharks' fins, these bear
no resemblance to your own.

When you request a second sketch,
the cartoonist shrugs, "Sorry, pal, one sketch
per person, rules are rules."

A cone of scarves pokes at the fire
whose embers glow like the mason jar in the window.
She studies leaves in a teacup.
She shakes her head and frowns.

Outside, in freezing rain, the guy on stilts
searches a tree for another locust shell
to put in the mason jar.

HEMINGWAY: ON FITZGERALD'S UNTIMELY DEATH

I've paid my respects,
goddamnit.
I've got the afterglow
to prove it.

MANNA FOR PIG-PEN

*When I wake up, the porch plants
gleam as though poisonous and the watering can's
filled to the brim with the sweat of God.*

Please do not read deeply
into the voice on the tape—
you said “Pig-Pen, associate.” So I am.
I am not a person known to harbor ambition

or greed. That spider at the bottom of the can,
bloated to the size of my thumb's quivering
tip, it is a spider.

YESTERDAY WAS A QUIET DAY

Yesterday, another bomb
went off in Kentucky.

The salt shaker trembled
on your stove and deep
in the hollow of your ear,
a bell tolled. The paperboy

brought wine
to his lips and passed out
in a hammock, humming *For he's
a jolly good fellow.*

That night, I made love
to a blind man and learned my fingertips
are cold as a lead pipe grazing the belly
of an infant, and that even my lips
are cold, my eyelids cold.

He said, "You tremble
like a wet animal." Behind him,
the moonlit clouds
spread their deck of stars.

HUSTLER'S PANTOUM

(Hard Rock Reservation Casino)

This, friends, is where the carpet-rainbow ends and I begin.
Bowie's voice drowns in a drone of sequins:
"This is not America."
I dodge drunkards, the bidding eyes of blackjack dealers.

Bowie's voice has drowned in a drone of sequins.
Cripples on cricket legs: I dodge your canes,
I dodge drunkards, the bidding eyes of blackjack dealers.
(No pennies gleam at the bottom of the courtyard fountain.)

Cripples on cricket legs: I won't forget to dodge your canes.
Free cocktails and coffee float past on black trays.
No pennies gleam at the bottom of the courtyard fountain.
A blonde pleads: "Please...come on!" Springsteen is on fire.

Free cocktails and coffee float past on black trays
But I'm patient as a snare, collared to nothing.
—Please, come on. Springsteen's still on fire.
A handsome bartender keeps busy by cleaning ashtrays,

And I'm patient as a snare, collared to nothing.
Although anything goes: even I could be mistaken for a hustler.
The handsome bartender keeping busy by cleaning ashtrays
Watches red-faced men feed the slot machines.

Here, anything goes. I could be mistaken for a hustler
Because this is not America.
I watch red-faced men feed the slot machines.
This, friends, is where the carpet-rainbow ends and I begin.

INFERNO

Claims have not been verified by the Pope.
Sign has very sharp edges. Avoid touching.
Abandon hope. Garment is not flame resistant.
Use gloves when handling toxic waste.

Sign has very sharp edges. Avoid touching.
Do not drink water at boiling point.
Use gloves when handling toxic waste.
Do not eat glass due to risk of fatal bleeding.

Do not drink water at boiling point.
Moving gate can cause injury or death.
Do not eat glass due to risk of fatal bleeding.
Safety glasses required beyond this point.

Trip hazard. Be vigilant for brimstone.
Moving gate can cause injury or death.
Safety glasses required beyond this point.
Room does not contain an emergency exit.

Trip hazard. Be vigilant for brimstone.
Abandon hope. Garment is not flame resistant.
Room does not contain an emergency exit.
Claims have not been verified by the Pope.

PHYSICAL

The arctic tern, for example, often performing
his bodily functions after high flight.

In broad daylight.
then off and away.

Quick, how quickly

you rinse the tears of rapture
from certain crevices.

Handshakes.
Soft knocks
on the shoulder. First
names suffice.

Excuse him. It must continue:
this long and necessary migration cannot
be thwarted.

The pillow mint dissolves in your mouth—

how the lamp on the nightstand trembled,
how you drove your heels into white percale,

his Southern accent and tagged baggage
a guarantee of a safe

entanglement.

Three

BODIES

During a season
of whales beached
and planks swollen
among the usual
ceremonial debris,
you begin to ask
hard questions
of a shared past.

There's something
about a man
in a shark-skin coat
pinches your eye:
reclining beyond
the dunes like
an out-of-work
Olympian, always
some fool on hand
to give him aspirin.

Naturally, complications
arise when he stands
and you must shuck the suit
from his bones, and he cries
for mercy, because
the salt-choked breeze
has designs of its own.

When we put our glasses
and hats back on,
we noticed dents
in the sand, too large
to be footprints. Even the fog
stood at attention.

We had no choice
but to build a fire
and reconstruct the scene.

Why the wind wrapped
her scarf and disappeared,
to this day I cannot tell.
I presented an offering

of foresight, yet
I kept forgetting
the exact colors of things,
the exact manner
of the fall, so I was useless
to the photographer
who missed her train.
“Buy yourself a coffee
and wait in the parking lot.”

This country is too foreign
for my taste, too austere.
Look at the rope-burns
on my wrists.

I kneel before you and trust
you'll do these field notes justice.

COMMON PRAYER

Suddenly recalling the plight
of the newly blind
we raise our glasses
of red wine and play-act
a toast to a clearer future
and to other matters

We raise our glasses to the tavern's
four dank corners, to the white napkins,
to closing time, to the fogged
windows, to the expanse
of fresh snow that permits
Absolution of the world before—
that is to say, our tracks, our cars
like mounds of sugar
we quarter and lap up
knowing it's salt

ON WAITING FOR THE GREAT IMAGE

Having locked the gate and checked for messages
from acquaintances back in Arkansas

and forked tuna into the cat-bowl
and flipped off the light

on the back porch and lowered
the thermometer and put on long johns

I adjust my desk lamp and face
the empty shelves.

The night will be long
and the shadows steep.

I'll spend hours thinking about lines of Lao Tzu's
regarding the soundless coming of the great image

until the winter sun rises and gives shape to dust and removes
every shadow from every surface.

RAW MATERIAL

There is no further use
for the liquid glass
we blew to the size
of a cathedral
and forced
through the eye of a needle,

or the cockatoo
we shrank to nothing
and set loose
into the open throat
of a canyon.

We must learn
to profit from the loss
of a paper boat
sent skimming toward
expectant hands
on the opposite shore.

FROM THE SPANISH

Stubborn Poem, I want you to cross
your arms and say, "I prefer the company
of koi to men," because
the men I've known rarely
behaved coyly. Will this work?

All right, then try to say, "When I drop pellets
of fish-food into sunlit water
the koi clamor like children
clamoring for a candy bar,"
like the children in Nogales who once
begged me to purchase a stick of gum.
Does that sound better?
Boy, we're so directionless: the sidewalk
that bends through these public gardens urged us
Come this way, toward
the macho fern—No, that way, toward
the banner of silk roses! Cross

out the tree whose twisted trunk
looks "like the spine of a Polio
survivor." Cross out the koi, and the macho
fern. Leave the roses on the threshold,
and swear to God "they bring to mind martyrdom."

HOW

Put the urge on the back burner,
beside the red kettle.

I'm talking of holding your breath
and listening to the stones' whispers.

Later, you can wipe away the leaves
matted against your damp cheek, later.

The whorls of silence
are not digitalized, manufactured

in Japan, not unhesitant
and crisp as the rhombus

of an envelope. The lightest
among them will hum through the wind:

This, my love, is how you break
every bone in your body.

Four

PARADISE

A summer evening, the highway
crawling like a drunk through unfamiliar dark,
windows down, industrial fumes
clogging the vein of a pleasant memory
I failed to invoke. In the distance,
the power plant holds the bruised sky
in place, guards a river stained
at *any* hour by blue and yellow tower-flames.

I wonder why the steel bridge
has been condemned
—the bridge, as a child, I believed led
to Paradise, or, at the very least, farther
up the yawning river, to the great state
of Ohio. Riding home
with my father at night, I'd sometimes
notice the same uniformed man
leaning against the rail,
waiting for the stillest moment
to sprinkle ash and hope onto the muscular back
of the Kanawha, his shoulder blades rising
and marking his stake in the world we shared.

All those years, I learned
nothing about that man,
who might as well be pure vapor, or a photograph
I've gone to great lengths to keep
out of scrapbooks out of shame.
When I reach my old house
and pick along the streets—though I'm an adult—I'm
half-afraid I'll encounter these ghosts
still hunched with yearning and hurt beyond
the tender burn of travelers' headlights,
and half-afraid I won't.

SODOMY

In this country of unions
and wholes, our bed
tends to be the divider.
The act itself
is ultimately fruitless,
yet occasionally includes
fruit. Ours acts
out passion
where the square's the deceiver,
and the slattern restores
order. We are a family
that rarely makes family,
but the truest "family,"
as its roots are concerned:
submission and servitude.
We, too, hurry to the myth
of the straight line,
even as our hearts grow
knottier and knottier.
Our act lacks
nothing, yet comes
to nothing, every time.

HELL

When I last drove home from Ohio,
coasting into the blinding morning
light, I politely tipped my hat
to the husks and to the stiff
workpants left overnight on wires
durable as the laces of military
boots. I didn't think I'd abandoned
myself to strangers' kindnesses in Ohio.
Drawing near the dividing Ohio
River, I pulled off to cleanse myself
of the smell I associated with rapture:
latex and copper. I was twenty-seven.

Dedicated to a boy kidnapped, beaten
to pith with a metal bat, the rest stop
welcomed the fatigued with broken
faucets, cracked mirrors. The bulb
burned low. On the door
of the farthest stall, I read and reread
misspelled admonishments scraped
with a key, or perhaps a pocketknife,
into the paint's thin skin. I was
twenty-seven. It was nothing I hadn't heard
or seen before: the same words painted
on a barn or chalked on walls in the town

where I'm from. I'd traveled this route
many times before—straight-spined, vigilant
for the deer whose naïveté towards death
I couldn't fathom. I always made it home
in one piece and crashed on my couch
till two. That morning I scrubbed dirt
from my skin with pre-moistened
napkins, brushed angry salt from my teeth.
I spat into the drain, oblivious of that rare miracle
of being told in the language of another outsider
what I am and where I'm going.

DEPARTURE

White spark in a black field—
if you were blinking,
if you were scanning
that immense, dark plane for houses,
you missed it,
that white spark,
white as scalding water.

 You were in a plane,
blinking back tears:
when I squeezed your hand,
the rush I felt
was like the slow,
reptilian rush I feel
now that I am
miles away from you,
standing in a black field.

STILL LIFE WITH FENCE AND PRAIRIE WIND

(Laramie)

In which no complete sentence can do its ruined beauty justice,

In which the North Star's a lone headlight roving the night for roadkill,

In which there is too much red, too much of the heart's bitter honey
To store,

In which the wind's tortured howl lusts after a human ear and the fence's
X marks the spot
Where ties bind and, years later, a grown man is driven to his knees

In praise of the tumbleweed crown that's snared there.