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# Ashes from Falling Stars

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Ashes from Falling Stars

by

John A. Nieves

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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# Ashes from Falling Stars

John A. Nieves

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a book length collection of poetry—all original and by the author. The book has three chapters, each with a different mode of expressing the work's overall theme: the remnants of unfulfilled wishes. The first chapter deals with ordinary or mundane manifestations of the theme. The second chapter covers extraordinary, but still feasible, variations on the theme. The final chapter deals with subconscious versions of these unfulfilled wishes. It is far more surreal than the other two chapters and exists in a sort of dream-reality.

The poetry included in this work is all free verse. There are narrative and lyric poems present, along with other experimental modes of poetry. Even though plot threads run through some individual poems, the overall collection shares only thematic unity. The work, as the title implies, seeks to call attention the fragmentation of dead dreams after hope has burned away. In a sense then, this collection could be seen as a post-modern work. The poems are arranged within the chapters to either create groupings around mini-themes, or to create sharp contrast. The order represented in this collection is an attempt to maximize impact.

The cast of characters in this collection of poems is meant to be representative of the characters present in city life. There are drunks and prostitutes, mothers and fathers, lovers and ex-lovers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, schoolchildren, writers, grandparents, lawyers, politicians, photographers, gamblers and even corpses. These characters populate a world where unanswered wishes are as legitimate as minutes and hours as instruments to gauge the passing of lives—a poetic rendering of Earth at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Chapter One:

The Palace of Wandering Artifacts

The Alarm Clock Translated

I am all you have left to believe in.

You *stand* when I'm talking to you!

## Backyard

After the tree fell,  
six hours slid away from you  
like a snake into the brush.

You spent the night telling the stump you were sorry,  
but decapitation was hard to forgive,  
even a loving caress left only splinters.

The next morning sun raped your windows  
and the squirrels pushed up a grate,  
moved into the eaves of your house.

Your children called you “giant killer,”  
avoided your eyes like they were bedtime.  
Even the sawdust flew away.

At dusk, you were still sitting with your back against your victim,  
tying and untying your shoes,  
wiping your sweat with blueprints.

The day had left no new shadow,  
no meal to sate the ravished sky,  
no pool, no picnic table, nothing to stop the night from eating you alive.

## Cooking Onions

She's unconcerned with the dicing.  
That chapter has closed,  
    all tears shed,  
        all fingers soaked and scented.

Now she casts her onions into the pan—  
sizzling and popping in a thin layer of olive oil.  
    The scent fills the room.

Outside a dog chews on a dead lizard,  
    a child falls off a swing set,  
    a letter arrives in a mailbox  
    and a husband rings a doorbell to serve his wife divorce papers.

But in here the spittle of sizzling oil,  
the little burns on her hands,  
the discoloration at the bottom of her wooden spoon  
    keep things calm,  
        keep things safe,  
            keep her from answering the door.

Across Tables

You didn't need someone to tell you  
where to press your tongue against a woman,

or how to write a suicide,

or how birds never die of old age—  
at least not in public.

But this was important—  
for this you needed instruction.

So you enlisted an old man with determined hands  
to teach you how to pour your Sambuca,  
select a leader,  
shoot the liquor,

but wait . . . hold it . . .

swish as long as the leader does,  
now gargle with him,  
then swallow and breathe in through your fingers.

This was your ritual:  
how you'd consecrate your friends—  
negotiate an understanding of camaraderie  
through a backwards whistle,

and make them promise to teach this—  
as you promised your grandfather,  
as I promised you.

Silver

Your hand pressed the glass,  
your palm hiding her palm.  
Your eyes, avoiding hers, find the ashtray  
overflowing onto the counter.

“I love you but I don’t trust you.”

You’re already late for work and  
you have given up the search for the car keys.  
The mini-bottle of Jim Beam in your left hand  
is almost empty.

“I love you but I don’t trust you.”

You both pull your hands away—  
you throw your lipstick,  
it strikes itself, falls into the sink.

You turn off the bathroom light,  
fumble for the door knob,  
eager, urgent,  
knowing that once you reach the hallway,  
  
you will be alone.

## Deliverance

I passed a child in downtown Albuquerque.  
His soil-dark eyes met mine.

He said, "Excuse me, Mister.  
Would you like to see the road to Heaven?"

Intrigued, I nodded.

He led me a few blocks south  
to a dirty street.

"This is my cat, Jenny,  
and this is my dog, Woof,  
and this is my other dog, Puppy,  
and her baby, Chocolate."

While he was speaking,  
he was pointing at stains on the pavement,  
"And this is how they got to Heaven."

## New Moon

In the middle of twelve candles,  
on a mat made of pillow cases,  
you sat, eyes closed,  
face pointed to the stars.  
Your breath was slow and distant  
but your hair danced on your cheek.

You asked me to be silent  
so you could “concentrate on night time”  
while the little wicks flickered near your toes.  
I tried to swallow my breath,  
keep myself from moving,  
but the wind came  
and sang the candles to sleep.

Then in the new darkness  
you dipped your finger into warm wax—  
touched mine,  
let it harden between us.

We gathered up the candles.  
I blushed and bowed my head.  
There was a moment that, with full arms,  
you managed to embrace me.  
Then we slid along the grass to the back door,  
to the hallway, pure blackness.

Once inside,  
you hit the light and turned off the night.

Dawn

Sunrise. Some Sunday. Nevada skyline.  
You watch dust  
pirouette near a rusted stop sign.

You smoke the end of your cigarette  
and a little of the filter—  
trace your initials into the sand,  
encircle them

(You'd spent the night leaving orphan kisses  
on a slide show of faces,  
dripping mascara on ice-white sheets,  
letting steam sing lullabies  
to squeaky box springs)

and the sunlight spills like white wine across your cheeks.

## In the Wake of the Morning

Crying at the bottom of a stairwell,  
a little girl. She stood facing a wall  
maroon and cracked. Her forehead  
pressed against the old paint.

I walked down to her from my apartment:  
“What’s wrong?” “I killed it. I stepped on it.”  
I looked down at the desiccated remains  
of a lizard just a few inches from the bottom step.

“You didn’t kill that lizard.  
It’s all dried out—been dead  
for days.” “No, no.” She kicked  
at the trash on the ground.

“Mister, I stepped on it.”  
“Don’t cry. You didn’t hurt it.”  
“But it was alive before!”  
There was no arguing that.

Without a shred of dignity,  
the dried-out lizard, half-interred  
under gum wrappers and cigarette butts,  
at least had this wake—

the two of us to mourn its passing.  
I patted the girl on the shoulder,  
headed back up the stairs.  
Everything was in order.

## Blackout and Condolences

The candles, sick from their own wax, hang themselves off the end of their sticks. Words break on yellow paper. I try to force out this letter, but no matter how hard I push the waves keep rolling back.

There was something important—the kiss of a moment—that I wanted to send over the sea to warm you in the snow of being alone, but my ink just won't reach.

I want to mail you my fingers to massage your muscles—I know your neck sometimes turns on your head, and those cramps won't let you sleep.

I wish I could get my eyes to your bedroom. They'd wink, smile and empathize. Then the rigors of coping with fresh earth and tombstones would slip away like nightmares when the sun kisses them goodbye.

Your family plot thickens; don't let it unravel you. I long to give you these words to retie. But here, with no power and insufficient postage, the dark is thumbing a ride on my scratches, my pages.

I'll buy a stamp tomorrow,  
then call to apologize.

You Have Reached the Voice Mailbox for . . .

At 8 p.m., I left you a message.

Then a spider parachuted from the ceiling,  
landed on my phone—  
began frantically weaving,  
lacing his paste over the headset—  
anchoring it to the touch tones.

I watched him for an hour.

Then it struck me...

He knew you weren't calling back.

## Linear A

Tonight I'm a freelance photographer  
watching the night unroll like gift wrap  
across a city of skyless stars.

I'm a deserter  
leaving the war of silence to tired grass,  
to sidewalks.

A cannibal eating the intellect of those around me  
singing the old shaman's song:  
*what I ingest becomes my own.*

An amateur linguist—  
keyboard full of frantic digits  
desperately trying to translate their own fingerprints.

## Stalemate

You will keep it tied neatly and tucked in a corner,  
a packed bag never meant to come home,

but I will call to it anyway  
and you will answer for it: “Maybe tomorrow, OK?”  
but tomorrow’s just a suffix—  
impossible to reach because we can’t get past today.

You will leave your passion to the dust  
to rot and rust and reek  
and I will sing  
to try to restart its heart

but eventually a clear ringing note  
will shatter it,  
and then hope  
will be in a dustpan  
then a garbage can  
then a landfill  
but you will still be here—

talking about yesterday.  
It’s just a prefix.  
It will always be today.

New Words for Old Desires

for John K. Samson, folksinger

We both whisper the same innocent obscenities—  
the awkward moment when eyes meet  
after something untouched becomes touched.

We send scars as sympathy cards,  
beating bodies for their own pleasure,  
for their own good.

We find our flat places—  
yours prairie, mine swamp,  
both covered in stones that mark our old mistakes.

With ink and tongues, we raise them,  
fling them at the eyes and ears of bystanders,  
then look graciously, like there should be modest applause,

like our quiet and revealing treacheries should be praised  
like soldiers for “dying well,”  
or convicts for “taking their medicine.”

## Drying a Rose

An empty can. A puddle of beer  
seeping into faded blue carpet.

A spent book of matches perched against  
a leather-bound photo album.

Old sneakers in the toilet.  
Unused condoms tossed into a waste-paper basket.

A cut flower hanging upside-down  
from the mini-blinds

exhaling the moisture of a thousand kisses,  
losing the red of blushed cheeks,

becoming brittle and immortal,  
precious and delicate,

but still dead.

## Still Life with Drowning Man

Not so much standing,  
as falling very slowly—  
you might reach the floor by last call.

You've drooled enough to put out your cigarette,  
but you're still pinching it,  
tapping imaginary ash.

One sandal off,  
your bare toes clench  
at the bar's brass foot rail.

The one still sandaled,  
a pillar in a pile of peanut shells,  
your only safeguard against the ground.

On the bar, you've laid a picture,  
face down, but you still stare—  
your eyes manacled to it.

Your nose dripping,  
the bartender's back turned,  
three shots of scotch on the counter.

London, Zone Three

Sink quietly—  
the sun has forgiven what it can,  
and the smog from the Great Eastern Line  
responds by rising uncontested over Washington Street.

A double-decker bus stops on the corner.  
People bleed out, each in a different capillary,  
surging toward the kebabish, the off-license  
or back to their flats.

The front page of a newspaper wafts in the breeze,  
the headline: “Petrol Strike Impending!”—  
a birthmark on its belly as it migrates toward Ilford.  
The cars of Manor Park line the streets like tombstones,

the emblems of this land of anachronisms.  
Out of habit, they line up with old hitching posts.  
My girlfriend squeezes my arm and squeaks,  
“Can you believe the District Line has a stop under Hadrian’s Wall?”

Two thousand years in a whisper.

## Above the Tree Line

On a mountain too steep for sound,  
we sat, feet dangling off the edge of a lookout rock,  
dawn coming but the wind still asleep,  
and the cold as still as we were.  
Silence.

My hand delicately on yours—  
silence like moonlight on glass.

Then they came like ravenous gnats:  
thoughts.

I realized that our sanctuary was someone else's jumping-off place,  
someone else's prison.  
Then I thought of my own—  
how the time clock sounded like a guillotine  
dropping on a new victim each minute.

How faces of the dead seem stretched and bruised  
and tumbled over and over like the wheels  
of a truck barreling down the highway  
with the force of a thousand angry marching bands.

Ice stared at me from the cliff face.  
It made no comment.

I looked at you, ashamed,  
the newest victim of the only thing  
that can ruin the quiet of a place without  
interrupting the silence:  
thought.

## Mulch Song

I was a tree once—  
tall and dignified  
(well, if not dignified, at least stately),  
meant to be climbed,  
not walked on.

I was a tree once—  
the world's lungs and shelter.  
Now, I am reduced  
to road-side refuse,  
something that gets wedged  
in passing sandals.

I was a tree once—  
a home for bird and bug,  
opossum and squirrel,  
not plastic bags and soda cans.

We were all trees once,  
reaching to the sky  
with clear purpose and determination,  
before we were torn down,  
processed,  
committed to the earth.

We were all trees once,  
before our roots died.

No New Haven

Limping along ivy and brick,  
one more decrepit sunrise over New Haven.  
This time, it looks like it might fold—  
                    quit at twilight,  
sink back to sleep at the first opportunity.

A sick little mist engulfs this bench,  
threads itself between us,  
                    hemming us,  
                    as if two were too much—  
  
                    one of us was extraneous.

                    A shadow slides across your face—  
the clouds are coming.

An owl somewhere in the eaves of the Peabody Museum  
                    beats the silence back at regular intervals.

I squint.  
                    My eyes,  
                    frosting over,  
                    try to focus  
                    as the fog erases you.

## Field Trip: Redding, Connecticut

A pile of dead autumn leaves,  
shifting shades and inclinations,  
    old and cracked:  
the tombstones of Redding Cemetery.

I trudged, single-file with the other children,  
across moist ground,  
carrying a grave rubbing pad, more than half my size,  
and a small stick of charcoal.

The inscriptions on the stones hidden by  
bracken and centuries of wind and rain.

I chose a small gray-white stone splotted with ochre.  
I pressed my pad to its face—  
    it made no comment.

Then I rubbed my charcoal across the page,  
the way my teacher had shown us.  
    Before my eyes the letters appeared  
    as emptiness in a sea of gray smudge:  
a name and dates that I can no longer remember.

But it left this, an impression that still clings to me:  
how death appears suddenly,  
out of nothingness,  
sharing a story composed of words that loom huge in my eyes,  
but are not written in my hand.

Gold, Stone, Wood and Glass

Your hands, moonlight on a rain-rippled pond,  
wrote essays in gold.  
You, always concerned with impact—  
with grace.

A stone set in a memory  
created an heirloom for a stranger's family,

and some child will say: "This is my grandfather's ring,"  
but, this is *my* grandfather's ring.

Your hands, always older than the man,  
cut wood like a peer of the tree that shed it.  
You built a playhouse,  
put a lock on a glass door.  
"For privacy," you said.

You, on the porch, arms folded, smiling.  
We locked the door—  
you waved to us and went inside.

Your hands shuffled dominos on a card table,  
served us plantanos,  
created heirlooms for our family—

out of gold and stone,  
out of wood and glass,  
out of necessity.

## Chapter Two:

### Peeling Tint from Broken Windows

## Red All Over

Newspaper. Local Section. Page Three.  
The police briefs.  
I'd see your name there once in a while.

Arrested for racketeering or assault,  
illegal gambling or petty theft.  
I remember one Thursday; assault was the flavor of the week.

They ran your picture,  
first time I saw your face  
anywhere but my dreams.

You were a scrawny thing with tissue-paper skin  
and a pipe-cleaner neck.  
Not at all what I pictured when I heard Mother tell that story:

How you busted in at two A.M., rum dripping from your chin,  
some whore in her underwear kissing you on the cheek,  
saying, "Who's that Big Ben?"  
Grandma, still young, in the kitchen with shattered eyes  
answering, "His wife, last time I checked!"  
You decorating her cheekbone with a frying pan,  
and taking all the money in the house.  
A little girl, about nine, coming out of her room in pink pajamas,  
struggling to open her eyes, saw Mommy holding her face,  
blood streaming between her fingers.  
Turned to you, "Daddy, Daddy! Call the hospital, Mommy's bleeding!"  
The little girl running up to you with her arms open.  
You shoving her against the wall,  
red from the back of her head running down the paint.  
Her screaming and you walking out, your whore slamming the door.

I thought you'd be seven feet tall,  
made of steel and breathing fire.  
So, I recycled you.  
Five years now, still haven't seen another picture,  
but I keep reading, you keep turning my fingers black,  
and once a year the paperboy drops you in a bag at my doorstep.

## Backstitch

Singing on a lawn chair,  
you fingered your beer to kill the foam.  
Your shoes slumped before you,  
kicked off like vagabonds from a storefront.

Your voice shook out of the air—  
snow from a coat just removed.  
A dog howled next door.  
You tossed bread over the fence.

There, in the almost light of 3 A.M. suburbia,  
you buried an obituary  
rendered unreadable by the sweat of your palm.

Your eyes, threadbare,  
turned to the earth for something whole.  
The grass pierced the ground.

Dejected, you looked to the sky.  
Found only this:  
Sagittarius' lonely arrow—  
the night, perforated.

## Less Than Morning

You are scraping carbon from a baking tin  
by a plate of burned biscuits  
cooked too long, too low.

When you're done you eat the tops and leave the bases,  
just like all the cigarettes you smoke.

Then you slump into a corner,  
like a child crippled by hunger,  
chanting "Old MacDonalD" with your hands over your ears.

I touch your shoulder,  
ask you what you're doing.  
The song changes but you don't stop singing:  
"And on his farm there was a check for every bill,  
and on his farm, a phone that had something to say,  
and on his farm, a door that lead anywhere but here  
and on his farm, legs that could still stand and walk away."

## Windbreaker

You were happier when the wind was still in your eyes,  
before you learned to sacrifice the little things.

You'd sweep us away with an afterthought,  
a short delay,  
an acidic quote you'd ripped from a political rag  
or public radio.

You'd stand—  
one hand on your hip,  
one hand directing traffic for drunken ethereal butterflies,  
igniting us with your moral match—  
your brimstone of daily injustice.  
The smell would linger long after you had gone.

I still hear it in passing:  
someone will hit your angry falsetto—  
crank out a crackling aria of social iniquity.

But not you.  
You are too intent on the scales to see them tipping,  
and the creeping spider of law  
has caught your anger in its dusty web—  
sucked it dry.

Now, when you scream "I object!"  
it is followed by "Your Honor"  
instead of "to this bullshit."

Your wind has broken on statutes and footnotes.  
When we see you,  
we try to stir you into stirring us,  
instead of your coffee  
with your slick black Bic.

## Syncopated

I've catalogued your touches:  
the gentle, the accidental  
and the ones that made your fingers blush.

And the sighs you left on my doorsteps,  
dancing like flags in the wind—  
half-mast and homeless.

The spot where your eyelid meets your face:  
the destination of oblong glances  
and renegade tears.

And how you'd blow kisses at the back of my head,  
save your scorn for my cheeks—  
for my half-smile.

And the dimple in the mattress near the headboard  
that still smells like you,  
even with new sheets,  
even with a new mattress.

## First Day in St. Louis

My friend, a native, says:

“There were times so violent  
the Mississippi ran red with blood.”

I reply:

“What does that say about our own chunk of history?  
Unless I’m hallucinating, the river is brown.”

## National Anthem

You will attempt to sell them the blunt side of the knife—

stutter through the rhetoric of sacrifice,  
stack the children on the altar,  
say a prayer that their blood turns black and burns,  
dump their bodies into pools.

They can only ripple back at you,  
as you smile and wave.

Cliff's Notes on the State of the Union Address

I am.

I own mythology.

I am my own mythology.

Notes: Repeat until they believe me. SCRATCH THAT.  
Repeat until belief is inevitable. NO NO NO, STILL WRONG!  
Repeat until they are saying it for me.

And to the Republic for Which It Stands

Walking through the streets of Tampa  
with an acquaintance of mine,  
we came to a pedestrian traffic signal.  
Both the *walk* and *don't walk* symbols were lit.

I laughed and turned to point it out,  
but my friend had one-upped me.  
Rigid and straight-faced,  
eyes fixed on the malfunctioning light,  
he stood, hand-over-heart,  
saying the Pledge of Allegiance.

He finished and turned to me,  
“First time I meant it since third grade.”

## Fallout Photographer

1

A mitten, half eaten by fire, shining its charcoal smile  
onto the black and cracked husk of a couch,  
and the guilty-looking soot of an overturned ashtray.

2

Photographs.  
His livelihood, his trade.  
Pictures of crime scenes, traffic accidents,  
and the remnants of house fires.

He sighs, “The horror of sudden violence is in its precision—  
it does exactly what is necessary to create the scene.  
Nothing more.”

3

He turns his camera over,  
    reveals a tiny display screen,  
    on it an overturned pick-up truck—  
    unfinished olive green,  
    an arm, dressed to the wrist in plaid,  
    resting at a forty-five degree angle to the concrete.

4

He smirks, “Brutal work?  
    Not really. It’s kind of peaceful.  
    Physical evidence, by nature, is still—  
        is silent.  
    The terror has already done its work,  
    left everything ordered and arranged.  
    I just touch a button.  
And even that is noiseless now ...  
my camera has been silenced by progress,  
    my heart by coincidence.”

## Cul de Sac

She kicks the wall.  
Sweat walks the plank of her forehead,  
abandons ship.  
“You shit! You impossible shit! You ruined my life!”

The room sends her voice back at her  
in a spiteful echo.  
She fixes her eyes on his  
and foams a little in the corners of her mouth.

“You bastard! You took everything from me!”  
He looks back at her like he might cry,  
then he smiles.  
She knocks a book off the nightstand.

“You don’t even care! You ruined me and you don’t even care!”  
The two of them fall silent,  
eyes locked into each others’.  
She begins to shiver and sob.

He giggles.  
Hopelessly,  
like an ancient and long-broken slave,  
She hunches over  
and fastens his diaper.

Well After Sunset

“Do the stars conspire to pin us down like butterflies?”  
—Blake Schwarzenbach

The moon rent the sky,  
leaving a gash of cold light—  
a beacon, a battle axe.

Your eyes shivered.

You put a red marker to your hand,  
scratched an arrow.  
It will never point west.

You averted your eyes—  
as if you could feel the trees staring you down,  
whispering you into submission.

I sipped a beer,  
put my feet up on a mossy rock  
It will never point west.

You were blushing.  
The angry coils of your hair  
fended off another kidnapping attempt by the North Wind.  
It will never point west.

You held your arms out at your side.  
You looked more like you were drowning than flying,  
but the stars weren't moved,  
and the grass rose against you.

## The Last Hieroglyph

**I:** Was it desperate? Did the hammer strike the chisel like the heartbeat of a hummingbird—in the same frenzy children now attack presents under pine trees? Did sweat from the author’s brow seep into the sandstone as forehead hit wall after completing the glyph—a moment of relief, of submission, of realization that the conquerors were coming with fingers like mosquitoes singing for blood? But the word *was*. Had the sculptor chosen the race for audience over the race for existence and won? **II:** Or was it insignificant—a job commissioned and done? The apathy of the next pay day? A finish line with no meaning and a last breath that was less gasp and more sigh of relief? **III:** Or, worst of all, was it a slow deliberate admission of defeat, as meaningless as covering one’s eyes in the path of a lava flow? Did the sculptor see the ships coming, the soldiers marching and carve a lowly goodbye before fleeing the scene? Instead of **I:** chipping the scene—desperate: the hammer, the chisel, the burst heart of a hummingbird mistaken on a dusty floor for a mere pebble.

## Stained Glass Window

Sweet,  
almost sick-sweet air,  
forty-five miles per hour with humidity streaming through my hair.  
A flashing yellow and a “just finished a nine-hour shift” smile.  
The warm amber light of my stereo display screen blinking 11:25.

Black truck screaming through a red light, an unexpected road block,  
ten crumbling yards, no chance of stopping.  
I yank the wheel with a right hand I can no longer feel,

My shiny midnight lemming plunges head first into the sea of offending metal,  
an unimpressive thud ...and smoke ...and deflated airbags.  
The brown fog in the cabin tears at my throat like a rabid wolf ...

Silence.  
Watch is ticking 11:27.  
The car door whimpers a little when I lean it open.  
Hazy-eyed I fish a chunk of glass out of my arm—  
still numb.

Smoke and sirens—  
But I’m too busy smiling,  
Rediscovering the joys of breathing and bleeding,  
staring at a glass-covered road.

It sparkles like an ice sculpture—  
too beautiful to be an accident.

## Scrap Iron for the Scrapbook

Your voice sagged a little,  
like trees supporting a fat man in a hammock.  
Your eyes crystallized,  
and the new angles became too much for your lids to slide over.  
You couldn't blink.  
In rebellion to this new impediment,  
your lower lip quivered,  
your upper lip held its ground,  
like a young girl  
fighting with all her might  
not to have

an accident

There was glass on the road  
staring up innocently,  
like shark teeth on a black sand beach,  
the treasure of some passer-by,  
not the violent remainder  
of the hungry beast.  
Somewhere in the grass beside it  
was a beached whale  
    -periwinkle blue and primer gray-  
turned on its side with its wheels still spinning.  
Hanging lifeless out of one of its shattered eyes:  
a man shape  
limp like a dead eel,  
hard to focus on.  
And all you could spit out of the low tide in your mouth was:

Wide-Eyed Ambassador Zero

You knelt on uncooked rice,  
hands clasped like your lips  
when hammered into a Hail Mary  
prescribed by a man who vends visions,  
whose salvation begins with two vertical lines through the s.

You forgot that you were part of dusk, part of sunrise,  
moonlight on the wet grass, the music of mid-autumn wind,

the regret of a raindrop that, when finally on the ground,  
looks back up at the clouds and is homesick—

the packed earth beneath a tombstone.

If you would rise, you would understand:  
(Wipe the hard grains and blood from your knees.  
Rinse the guilt from your shadow.)  
You can always see further on your feet.

## Obituary of an Aubrey

Cause of death: Typical Coronary Thrombosis

like a typical rock

thrown in a typical pond

causing typical ripples

then sinking

then gone.

A Drink before Bedtime

in memory of Chris Peace

Your body: a hand-grenade  
ripe with the aftertaste of Southern Comfort.

Inside—you've rocked to sleep  
parts that you never should.

Your wife cries in a nearby chair  
tormented by the thought of closets—

and all those hangers  
missing their black clothing.

Elegy for a Man I Never Met

to the late poet, S. Daniel Simko,  
as translated through the soul of Nicholas Samaras

I have seen the story of your name  
cut into rock.

Yet  
you whisper through absent moonlight,  
through pages you filled with silence,

that the real story is not in the chiseled,  
or the chiseling,

but in the homeless stone that used to fill your name.

## Greenbrier Road

Little legs lollygagging in loops,  
pedals scraping the bottom of my feet,

and Katie keeping pace with me,  
laughing, panting and saying: "I'm gonna pass you!"

Thick sweat crawling down the back of your neck,  
matting the hair along the way.

Racing our tails off around blind corners,  
over one-lane bridges and back home . . . almost.

One more sharp curve and a truck and a swerve  
and opening my eyes in a ditch,

your bare handlebar wedged in my hip bone,  
my hand in something soft and wet.

Straining the scene into focus—  
your head dashed on a rock,

my hand in . . .  
enough to keep my mouth shut for a month.

So many stretched faces screaming, crying,  
clinging to the no-longer you,

while that bastard kept driving.  
While that bastard keeps driving.

## Narrative Distance

“I ran over a kitten and a squirrel  
it was chasing yesterday,” she said.

Sucked her bottom lip completely into her mouth,  
focused her gaze on her shoelaces.

She continues, “I’ve never felt so damn guilty.  
I would never kill anything on purpose.”

Tossed her cigarette into a nearby pond,  
took a bite out of a hotdog.

## Two-Car Garage

She caresses the spine of a tattered red notebook  
like a lover's back.  
"Box of Dreams" tattooed on the cover  
in thick black marker.

She flips through the pages,  
each has only a single phrase  
written so carefully  
that they seem embroidered.

*Back pack through Europe, Attend modeling school,  
Join the CIA, Earn a Doctorate in genetics,  
Become a diplomat, Leave my hometown.*

A buzzer sounds, his clothes are dry.  
She clears the notebook off the ironing board.

Frantically, her eyes race toward the clock on the stove.  
She bites her fist.  
The front door bursts open, "Honey, what's for dinner?"

## The Bottom Drawer

Paler than fluorescent light,  
she dips her fingers into old water  
that's developing a skin in a blue vase.  
There is something like an undertow—  
her hand slides in to the wrist  
and for a moment it's invisible.  
Then the vase tips and hits the ground.

---

Sharper than the shattered glass,  
she runs her tongue across an envelope,  
sealing her bills like her fate, like her lips.  
There is something about the sending  
that makes an avalanche out of a quiet slope  
and every time the rumble comes  
she takes a nap in its path.

---

As for hope, she'll keep it in the bottom drawer,  
tucked away like a gun in a nursery,  
a secret pornography of *maybe I could's*.  
She'll write of waterfall kisses  
and wet hair on the faces of lovers and fighters  
and anyone who moves—  
then close the drawer and set her alarm.

Chapter Three:  
In Violent Light

I Saw You Watch Me Cross the Street from Your Living Room

Eighty degrees,

Florida afternoon ...

still ice on the window.

## Low Tide in the Eye of the Storm

He fed the ocean a bottle cap full of rain.  
His handmade map urged his feet to trace  
the seaweed lining the shore.

He closed one eye to feel more  
like the sunset before the colors were torn  
from invisible stars  
and rum-soaked rainbows.

His face lost the war with the sprays of the sea  
and sand, like new teeth,  
eager to bite through  
unprotected cheeks and lips.

He tried to raise his hand to shield his eye,  
but nooses of wind left bruises on his neck  
as he slid along a shore,  
all scream and no song.

## Strength Replied

A progression of three notes  
fingered unevenly,  
inadvertently, the middle note muted.

You have played this song the same way for centuries.  
Tonight, I stopped you—  
denied you.

Made a new song through weakness,  
through hesitation ...  
healed what was never broken.

The air clung to your lips:  
tasteless honey,  
an empty cup of midnight and candlelight.

You reached for words,  
but they scurried away,  
lived new lives in empty hallways and open doors.

I would not grant safe passage.  
Your tongue stumbled and fell—  
leaked the poetry of half-formed thoughts, umbilical.

Under dead stars, I pulled victory  
just out of your reach—  
just far enough that your blood screamed for it.

In that moment, man, child and shadow,  
merged without my assistance,  
and, in weakness, silence told the story that strength never could.

## Absinthe

Static from the TV poured onto the floor.  
Someone sat Indian-style in the corner,  
buzzing like a fly in a jar.

The doorway shrunk, too small for any of us.  
No one was leaving—  
seventy degrees, sweat everywhere.

A girl lit the wrong end of her cigarette,  
a glass broke in the kitchen,  
laughter fell like an acrobat off a high wire.

The toilet flushed.  
You asked who was in the bathroom.  
The toilet flushed again.

The blinds closed, lights off,  
still the moon found us.  
In the background, an alarm clock sang with the crickets.

## One Full Rotation

You fell asleep on the edge of a dime.  
All the timers were set,  
and the clothes were still riding  
spin cycle—a TV left on.

An old book with a furrow left by a burning cigar.

The cat paced silently,  
and the morning crawled passed you.

Its carcass will sing you Happy Birthday.

## Soothsayer

I dreamt of silver rain  
shredding the clothes of a beggar  
surrounded by four large mossy stones.  
His gaze refracted off the mirrored raindrops,  
spilled color across the muddy road.

He whispered a mantra  
that spun in the wind  
echoing off the darkening sky:

*No secret is safe with me.*

It was the mystic honesty,  
the total disregard for the pleasantries of deception  
that woke me—

that told me it was a dream.

## Acquiring Mythology

A red-handled ball-peen hammer  
leans against a faux-wood baseboard  
surrounded by glass shards and ash-grey carpet,

basks in the chatter of mid-afternoon television,  
adjusts to the change in temperature,  
reminisces about its mode of entry,

becomes *the hammer that came through the window*,  
not just *the hammer*—  
graduates from tool to tale.

Leave the Pearl in the Oyster

You ate a plate of fortune cookies,  
left the paper inside.

The wet of would-be kisses  
blurring blue words on white.

A pile of cellophane in your lap,  
wrinkling the evening,  
imitating wind-blown November.

## Train of Oughts

This atmosphere is crippled.  
The smoke can barely crawl away.  
They're climbing shattered bar stools,  
but they won't peak. There's no pinnacle to reach.  
The women are tired of flaunting,  
the men are tired of hitting,  
the clock is tired of ticking  
And the truth is intermittent.

We are lonely and crowded.  
Our solitude is stripping.  
Pulling out its garter,  
but were not tipping, not tonight.  
I look at the guy next to me.  
He's dried up, cracked and frayed.  
I light a match and then he's ashes  
And I can't recall his face.

We're too damn tired for dancing  
and we're too damn cold to smile. We  
lost our innocence on TV screens,  
kept our identities in files, said our  
*I dos* and *don'ts* into microphones  
to worried withered ears, gave up  
our hopes and joys and happiness,  
but kept a tight grip on our fears.  
They landed us all here—

riding the train of oughts.

## Midnight in the Quarter

A bronze statue of a woman sitting  
river side of Decatur

an alley behind an open air coffee shop  
on the edge of a fountain

a bronze statue of a woman, sitting  
it faced us

you asked for a picture of yourself beside it  
on the edge of a fountain

you felt a sense of dread from the statue  
you couldn't move

I took the picture  
you felt a sense of dread

I grabbed your hand, pulled you from the fountain  
an alley behind an open air coffee shop

in the picture, the statue's head was turned toward you  
you felt a sense of dread from the statue

it wasn't looking at you, but through you  
there was no menace in its face, only fear

you felt a sense of dread from the statue  
something was coming, we were leaving, it had nowhere to go.

Guided by Voices

for Robert Pollard

To see through the skin of the eye—  
give birth to yourself in syrupy light,  
leave the child kicking on the changing-room floor.

To arrive at the entrance  
with a canned sense of exit  
and a fifth of something that burns.

It may taste like tomorrow,  
but the tongue will send yesterday.

To ash in the bottle then take a sip,  
bite the lip, lick the blood,  
find the powder in the pain,  
cock the jaw,  
let the teeth become a trigger.

To put the motion onto paper,  
stand up singing,  
sit down on the melody of old phones and busted amplifiers.

To let the broken guitar string articulate an apology  
on a dusty faceplate,  
while the future slides into present tense—  
the king of renegade echoes:  
sound that skins vision alive.

To swallow the freshly peeled mantra  
and sing to newborn dew,  
the skeleton of a cloud that never got to be rain.

## The Coffee Remains Anonymous

In the same breath that he heard you yell “Rummy,”  
you saw the dirty face of victory on a chipped diner table.

The wet straw-wrapper, compacted,  
then expanded by an artificial raindrop,  
looked guilty,  
like it could be blamed for its shape.

The monkey dish  
tipped—  
spilling honey mustard  
like its throat had been slit.

The menu—  
aptly watered—  
rooted to the table.

His hand—  
swooping down on the deck  
then returning to the falconer’s perch.

Your eyelid—  
the story of a blink—  
the one moment of blackness  
in a storm of playing cards.

## The One Leaning Over a Book

Inspired by S. Daniel Simko

It's the way somebody rips a blank page,  
as if it had nothing to say,  
as if lungs  
and hands  
and eyes  
were all that could tell a story.

It's the way the paper rips back,  
pushing its scar  
into the mind of the murderer,  
teaching imperfection by example,  
forcing its story  
through the hole in the whole.

It's the way the message is digested  
and excreted  
and ignored.

It's the way the cover of the notebook  
hides the violence.

## I Watched You from the Doorway

On the brink of something important,  
the lipstick is knocked off the countertop.  
It leaves a long stain on the vanity,  
a short one on the carpet.

Two Years Ago This Morning

You were always feeding me glass apples and speaking in tongues,  
kissing places I didn't have names for,  
running your fingers over me,  
tracing me like a chalk line on the street.

You'd press your silence against me—  
    let your toes brush the bottom of my feet,  
    write poems on my chest with your cheek.  
We'd creep like soft shadows toward dawn.

But when day finally came,  
we were sunflowers in violent light  
chasing different suns.

## Palimpsest

You lay naked in gritty light spilled through an old lampshade.  
On the rich parchment of your skin,  
I watch them rise again—  
the ghosts of letters  
below the lines of the story you've allowed me to see.

Tonight their phantom brown is distinct enough for me to read  
through the wax-seal vermilion of the new you.

They are old letters—  
inch high, each distinct from the next.  
They tell the story of the sky:  
how it made love to the sea,  
and the land was born in the fresh foam.  
And how you believed the stars sang to you  
and the flicker of every flame held the secret of the sun.

But the new letters are superimposed on these ghosts—  
they share their tale as well—  
louder, redder, rounder.  
How you were such an extravagant and expensive writing surface,  
impossible to replace,  
so when the new men came  
and taught you about guilt and confession,  
you could not afford new skin.

So you scraped the old you away,  
and in a new script full of ligatures,  
you rewrote yourself,  
told your friends to call you Caroline—  
your old name had, until now, eluded me.

But here in a thirty-dollar motel room  
a thousand miles from home,  
I see you—all of you.

You pull the covers over your flesh,  
blushing because I'm staring,  
but it's too late—  
the whispers of your histories  
have reached my ears:

you are two texts,  
two stories,  
and they will not be reconciled.

## Meditation in Fragments

A window frame with glass in only one corner.

The last three letters of any alphabet.

The green ghost of a yellow sun that hides behind eyelids.

This is home:

the click of teeth on a pen after an idea has struck like a death adder—  
the moment before the venom's effects slither to the surface.

Smoke Signals to a Poet (a Friend)

Your words come like Florida heat  
across a long flat road.

A trick light plays on itself.

You take biography away from the right-angles of prose,  
fold it over poetry's gentle curving edge.

What is truth but a lack of sharp corners,  
a collection of soft turns that force all eyes inward?

You have become fluent in the whispers of those curves—  
the language of circles.

In the victims of premature burial,  
in the passing of a brother—  
more brother than genes or the fruit of a family tree,

here, you find the same tangible mysteries  
that lined your father's hands.

Here, you leave their story for us to turn to,  
then turn away,

back to the mirrors we so carefully center  
on our own empty walls.

Incidental Music

A Collage of Poetics

1

You must eat the apple of your eye.

2

Somewhere there is a man with no tongue  
singing the only song that will ever break your heart.

3

Shape is the only thing keeping you from being the ocean,  
and the only thing keeping the ocean from being you.

4

Beauty is the translation from one mouth to another—  
disembodied kisses.

5

You must burn yourself alive,  
but not rise again like a phoenix.  
You must let the ashes speak for themselves.

6

Lust after the words of others until your heart  
pumps only ink,  
then create words to reciprocate that pain.

7

Trust is the one thing a poet can never give a pen.

8

Be concerned with the universe of meaning and implication  
in every wry glance,  
in every smile that someone conceives,  
then decides against.

9

Know the three essential lines in every poem (they may overlap):  
the first line,  
the last line  
and the fault line.

10

Mapmakers are your clergy.  
Strive to be ordained.

11

Religion exists in the space between thinking and acting,  
but neither are required.  
Poetry exists in the same space,  
but requires both.

12

Poke your pen into the eye of the page,  
then wonder why it is crying.

13

There is a girl looking back at you from one hundred years away—  
your biographer.  
She will write your life more accurately than you lived it.

14

Gunshot. Bloody hole.  
Everyone will assume “bullet.”  
How do you imply something different?  
This is where the poet’s work lies:  
where muses become demons.

## Twilight Serenade

A car crash with no survivors across the street from an ice cream truck, that's how the day ends. The truck's psychotic music box sings to children, frozen like their treats. The sun hangs itself on a white thread left in the sky by a jet that was racing to meet a deadline.

An empty glass hammered into a counter and a belch like a trumpet reverie, that's how the day ends. A bar door shuts like a heavy eyelid. Sleep becomes something liquid, sometimes finds the floor.

The day ends in front of a time clock. One hand firmly grasps a manila ticket to freedom, the other runs down tomorrow's schedule. The machine bites the card. Car keys emerge from a pocket.

The last dinner dish is dropped into hot water and suds swallow it like a snake swallows a rat. That's how the day ends: when the last chore can wait for tomorrow, when bed is the only pressing matter, when the alarm is already set.

Naked on the floor with your hands over your eyes, that's how the day ends. You shiver, but fear clothes; yearn to see the sunset, but fear the dark; sing "Happy Birthday" to today's box on the calendar. All alone, you shine white like the moon on your black carpet.

The day ends with the back of a shovel patting down the loose soil of a newly filled grave. Trees creak like old floorboards. A motorcycle speeds by on a road too far away to see.

With the weight of the ghosts I gathered, that's how the day ends. Whispers from picture untaken: the way their toes curled, the way their nostrils flared when they cried, how soft their cheeks were on my chest.

In the middle of a blink, that's how the day ends.

## Guided Meditation

On the far side of the woods,  
the darkness is so thick that you can't even hear—  
so thick that you can't remember how to hear.

*I am unnamable,  
yet you have named yourself after me.  
Declare yourself!*

commands the darkness in words without sound  
that carve themselves, pitch black,  
into the inside of your eyelids.

You part your lips and send back sound  
that will never reach your own ears:  
*My name is . . .*

You freeze.  
Nothing comes.

After a long icy silence,  
the dark responds:

*You have done well  
and are welcome here.*

## What Was Left

Night locked you into your bedroom  
with a battered cot, two wicker chairs  
and a pencil-grey card table.

You sat, shifting your weight from one side to the other,  
flipping a coin you retrieved from a well,  
drinking ashes from falling stars.