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Guiding In and Away

Terry Belew

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GUIDING IN AND AWAY

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Terry Belew

July 2016

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GUIDING IN AND AWAY

English

Missouri State University, April 2016

Master of Arts

Terry Belew

ABSTRACT

“Guiding In and Away” is a collection of poems exploring shifts in contemporary American culture. Major themes include technology-induced anxiety, human connectivity, isolation, and the importance of nature in a man-made world. These themes are demonstrated throughout the collection through the use of speakers set into situations that reflect what is lost with the recent digitalization of human interaction, the isolation and loneliness caused by these losses, and how natural settings are encroached upon because of digitalization.

KEYWORDS: poems, contemporary, America, technology, nature, anxiety

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Sara Burge, MFA
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

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By

Terry Belew

A Masters Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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July 2016

Approved:

Sara Burge, MFA

Marcus Cafagna, MFA

Michael Czyzniejewski, MFA

Julie Masterson, PhD: Dean, Graduate College

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“Departing in a Space Shuttle” *Beecher’s Magazine**

“Tattoo Removal” *Tar River Poetry*

“Cigarette Vending Machine, an Elegy” *The Fourth River**

“The Fickle Land” *Big River Poetry Review***

“#Trending” *Word Riot*

*Pushcart Prize nomination

**Part of Missouri State University’s Brick City Sidewalk Poetry project

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INTRODUCTION

American culture has recently undergone a titanic shift, induced by the widespread use of recently developed technologies. Face to face interaction is now often replaced with digital exchanges, tactile news sources have been replaced by social media news feeds and websites, information regarding almost any subject is readily available from a wide variety of both reliable and unreliable sources, and these shifts have changed the way people interact, perceive information, and behave. This shift is a central theme in my poetry, as I seek to explore the anxiety induced by these new technologies, how it affects both physical and emotional constructs between people as well as experience in nature, and a speaker's obsession with truth in a man-made world. I use different forms, ranging from traditional memory-based narrative poems to more radical forms and explorations of how the human mind perceives the world around it.

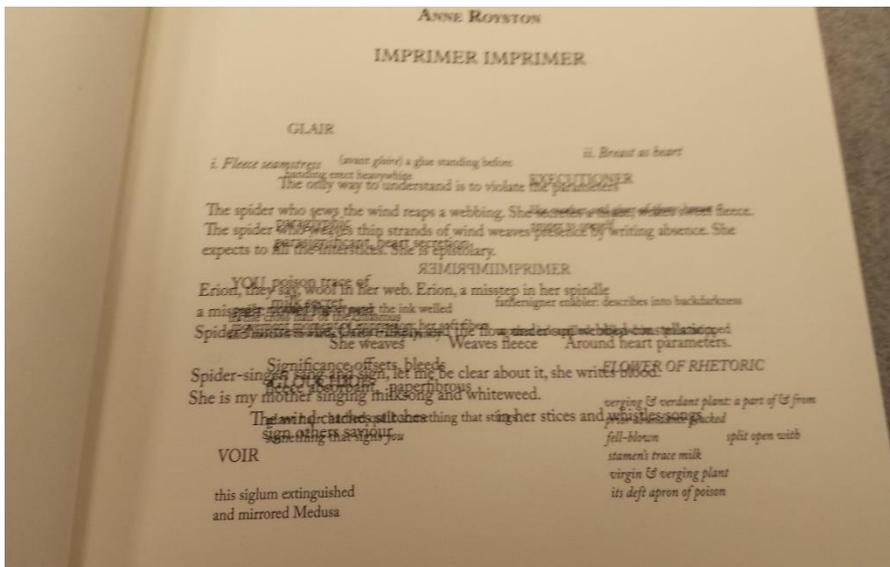
Artists exploring their culture and reacting to it has been an important part of the development of literature, as examinations of different time periods and the art and literature created during that time often exists in a binary, which is to say the writer or artist had a desire to respond to the world around them and detail how they felt about their surroundings. Amiri Baraka begins his essay "Expressive Language" with the declaration "Speech is the effective form of a culture," (Poetry Foundation), which is to say speech is language and language comprises culture, making language an integral part of cultural identification. Poetry is language, and should respond to shifts in culture, especially profound shifts such as shifts in the way humans interact. My poetry seeks to respond to these shifts through lingual demonstration through mine and my speakers' observations regarding contemporary American culture. Adrienne Rich's essay

“Someone is Writing a Poem” also addresses the importance of poetry to culture, stating, “In a political culture of managed spectacles and passive spectators, poetry appears as a rift, a peculiar lapse, in the prevailing mode. The reading of a poem, a poetry reading, is not a spectacle, nor can it be passively received. It’s an exchange of electrical currents through language—that daily, mundane, abused, and ill-prized medium,... that material thing” (Poetry Foundation). The daily and mundane things that comprise human existence have shifted because of the aforementioned technological advancements and the change in human interaction, and my poetry seeks to be a moment of clarity for a reader, a moment of reflection on the anxieties brought on by technology, a moment to realize what people stand to gain or lose with the developments of American culture.

An example of one of my poems that seeks to demonstrate the overstimulation and anxiety caused by the use of digital media is “Which Table is Larger? Asks the Illusion.” The title was brought on by a Ted Talk video featuring Dan Ariely titled “Are We in Control of Our Own Decisions?” The video featured an illusion with two tables alongside one another, one horizontal and one vertical. The vertical table appeared significantly longer while it was vertical, and then the image was manipulated, demonstrating that the tables were actually the same length and size, but one appeared longer or larger than the other because of an optical illusion. This illusion was interesting to me, and represented how humans perceive information, especially digitally. While using a computer or a smart phone to view information, we are really looking at a projection of that information, whether it be a photograph of person or place or a video, it is not alive or a real version of the thing we are viewing. We often think of it as real and take it at face value, but images can be manipulated, such as in the video. “Which Table

is Larger? Asks the Illusion” seeks to question that manipulation, while also demonstrating the complete overstimulation that is common on the internet, the first few lines read “Honda + tackle + sleep aid restless leg heartburn / ads + food + value food + storms /in the northeast. Ribbons / of paper smiles + LED smiles + buy / a larger screen / to see more clearly—Have you?” The poem ranges from subject to subject and place to place radically, seeking to demonstrate an internet user’s navigation. By doing this, I also wanted to indicate how radical a subject shift can be on the internet with just the click of a mouse or loading of a webpage. Seeking to question the ability for internet users to take internet subjects at face value I use the lines “buy / a larger screen / to see more clearly—have you? / Have you seen? Have you seen / the swirling galaxy and seeming infinitude? / Seems,” which is really just a command followed by a series of rhetorical questions designed to suggest the artificiality of the digital world.

The form of the poem was not without inspiration. I frequently read and submit to literary journals, and one which struck me as particularly interesting had won a contest in the 2014 *Beecher’s Magazine*. It reads:



(Figure 1).

The poem is written and printed in such a way that there are many parts of language and images imposed upon one another, and reads much in the way one might view a web page or web search. Having the lines and strophes overlap one another in a cluster of non-sequiturs is representational of the overlap presented in digital media. If a digital device user is to open up a social media site, news site, or shopping website, they can be expected to encounter hordes of additional information that would be unnecessary to whatever they were intending to do. This technique influenced me to try more radical forms, such as “Which Table is Larger? Asks the Illusion,” and ultimately allowed me to formulate more ideas on how I can present my work in print in a way that reflects the language and visual nature present in digital media.

Another way I attempt to present the way digital culture envelopes human consciousness now is with poems that are more direct, with the speaker being influenced directly by a smartphone while they are in nature. For example, both of the poems titled “In the Woods” are narrative in construction, referencing technologies intrusion with the lines “I look for my phone, / find Ronda Rousey / getting knocked out / and watch the replay / on mute,” “I google hunting tips / and calls to buy for next year,” and “ Just north, there is a tower’s / blinking strobe. // I take a picture of a caterpillar because I know someone // who would like that... / I just look down into my hands to see where I am.” The goal with both of these poems is to have a speaker who is more or less completely immersed in a natural setting, but is also distracted by manmade objects (towers and google) and therefore unable to appreciate their surroundings. The poems have the same title in an effort to demonstrate the different experiences a person can have

in nature as well as represent solidarity when reading my work collectively. The situations presented in the poems vary between hunting and hiking, both of which are less fruitful than they would have been if the speaker did not have the technology in their hands, evidenced by the speakers defeated tone in the poems.

Another central writing anxiety featured in my work is escapism, or at the act of not engaging in the real world as opposed to engaging in an imagined or constructed world. One of the poems that best demonstrates this was published in *Beecher's 5*. It is titled "Departing in a Space Shuttle" and closes with the lines:

I can watch every pitch of a baseball game.
Subtle cutter break, a foul into the dugout
or seats scattering fans who stand in replica jerseys,

applaud comradery and the spectacle of rounding third.
Maybe it was nostalgia, but my grandmother
said she was never so close to her father

as when Orson Welles broadcast the invasion
over the radio, how she imagined the Nazi's,
a death ray and how things would end.

"Departing in a Space Shuttle" uses imagery and description to depict different kinds of escapisms, both the speaker's, the speaker's loved ones, and the different escapisms the speaker observes in the world surrounding him. The poem presents a kind of blitz of different situations that are presented in the poem were designed to compact as much information into as little space as possible, leaving the reader with a slightly overwhelmed feeling. Dropped lines alternate from tercet to tercet, and they are designed to enhance these feelings while also maintaining the poem's vertical momentum. The goal of this poem was to demonstrate the human mind's obsession with dealing with

escapisms as opposed to facing reality, even though reality may be the practice of escapism in some instances.

My poems are also often influenced by current events, or are a reaction to pieces of recent news. The idea from this initially came as a prompt from *Rattle*, a literary magazine based in California. They digitally publish poems on a weekly basis that responded to recent news, and I chose to write several poems that reacted to that prompt, as they fit thematically with the rest of my work that pertains to internet culture and the influence on the way information is perceived in the digital age. The opening section of one of this poem, titled “Following” reads “Amazon keeps following me, trying to sell / a pair of shoes I placed in my cart months ago, // the purchase never completed / but my feet are not bare. // The radio earlier—plane crash in the French alps, an interview.” The opening lines of this poem incorporate both an anxiety brought on by ad-tracking and the notion that the speaker cannot focus on one individual thing considering the constant overstimulation going on around at any given point. A person can, at a single moment, be influenced by radio, television, the internet, different thoughts about these stimuli, and “Following” seeks to represent that overstimulation and eventual defeat, closing with the lines “I clicked the ad and bought the shoes.”

Another theme that I explore in my work is human connection, and how it is changed or changing because of the way information is conveyed. While some of the poems I’ve written focus purely on the connection between the speaker and the other surrounding characters, some demonstrate the loss of connection or the way human connection is becoming unnecessary due the technology. One poem that focuses on the

human connection more so than the loss of it or change, is the poem “Lathe,” which closes with the lines:

He hands what he calls
a *parting tool* to me, and I run my fingers
across the blade and am surprised
at how dull it seems. I touch
the steel to the oak whirling,
trying to steady my hands, feel
the dust spread across my knuckles
and forearms, settling on the floor around.

The poem is a simple descriptive narrative about working on a piece of machinery. While this may represent a deviation in the standard anxiety I present, the one which deals mostly with recent technological developments and their problems, a lathe is a piece of machinery that has been around a long time. The speaker and father character in the poem seem to have a distant relationship, represented by the speaker’s thoughts about the way his father dresses. While the relationship seems distant, the speaker and father character are bonding over a common endeavor, or a learning experience for the speaker.

Another poem that focuses on human connection, but in this case the poem seeks to explore the loss of human connection because technology renders it unnecessary. The first six lines highlight this loss, reading:

Take the grease the Autozone employee
sold you and smear it on one palm (this will ruin
both of your hands so don’t touch anything)
Father grandfather wikihow mother mechanic
youtube tutorial it doesn’t matter who shows you
take the new bearing in the other

While the tone is similar to “Lathe,” in that it is describing a simple action, this poem suggests a lack of human connection because of the widespread availability of

information and tutorials on how to complete any sort of work available online. The poem juxtaposes instruction with images of internet culture and family, suggesting that these two exist in a binary where internet is slowly overtaking the lore that is involved with a family's elders passing know-how down to younger generations. The younger generations no longer need this guidance because it is available through media, and "Bearing" seeks to explore what is lost through that.

Several contemporary American poets write about contemporary mass cultural themes in a similar manner to which I do, demonstrating how we as humans are affected by the different losses and anxieties prevalent in contemporary America. Two that have had the most influence on my subject selection, the way I construct forms, and the way I present information in poems are Kevin Prufer and Nick Flynn. While Kevin Prufer typically writes in a nontraditional fragmented narrative, one that I have been heavily influenced by, Nick Flynn writes using fairly radical imagery and deep images. I've sought to combine these two styles of writing into my own unique style, combining both fragmented narratives with moments that use metaphor to demonstrate the desired meaning in the poem. Prufer's poem "In a Beautiful Country" makes great leaps, much like some of my work does, in order to convey the anxiety Prufer's speaker feels regarding contemporary American culture. The first fifteen lines read:

A good way to fall in love
is to turn off the headlights
and drive very fast down dark roads.

Another way to fall in love
is to say they are only mints
and swallow them with a strong drink.

Then it is autumn in the body.
Your hands are cold.

“My Mother Contemplating Her Gun” is an example of Flynn’s ability to alter his syntax using radical enjambment and short sentences. This technique is interesting and useful to imitate because the subjects my poems focus on need to be broken up in such a way to give the reader pauses for reflection, while also conveying the chaotic and overstimulating nature of current digitalized American culture.

My work pulls from contemporary influences, as well as my own observations and responses to stimuli provided by the recent shift in American culture, or the culture that surrounds my speakers. It has been noted that artists responding to their surroundings, both natural and man-made, is of great importance. My efforts to portray speakers in a variety of settings while also maintaining consistent themes throughout my work demonstrates this importance and highlights what I feel is important in this shift. Delivering my verse in a range of different ways, including traditional narratives and more radical forms seeking to demonstrate changes in information perception, helps convey what I believe is being gained and lost with the digitalization of American culture. I will continue to add poems to this collection as they are created in the hopes of it being published as a poetry collection, as I feel the contributions my work makes to the current poetry landscape is worthwhile and significant.

Departing in a Space Shuttle

Maybe entrapment is the first story
about magic, a hero(ine)'s triumph,
love love love. Violin suite reverberates

off building walls, shabby street musician
with eyes closed, smile though few put money
in the case at her feet.

I'd read through high school detention,
shape shifters and aliens slinking
into the brain to control the body

as in a shooter game.
Now three men huddle around a smart phone
watching a bikini model dance to a pop song.

Replay, mouths open as it turns slow motion,
wonder how to get wives or girlfriends
to wear lace, dance on the bar barefoot.

I can watch every pitch of a baseball game.
Subtle cutter break, a foul into the dugout
or seats scattering fans who stand in replica jerseys,

applaud comradery and the spectacle of rounding third.
Maybe it was nostalgia, but my grandmother
said she was never so close to her father

as when Orson Welles broadcast the invasion
over the radio, how she imagined the Nazi's,
a death ray and how things would end.

Tangled

I can touch
 your neck-up picture anywhere

 can taste a friend's dinner through pixels

When I turn on a light switch
 something shocks me

 Maybe they're broken or I've become static

It's strange, how light from a screen

 can swallow a face

+

When I was little I liked to watch passing trains
 would ask where they came from as graffiti's ribbons spoke

I learned how quickly a voice quiets after leaving its' tongue or hand
 disappearing entirely before speaking again

+

If you google my name
 a mustached man wearing a Stetson hat appears

A state distribution map of names

Oklahoma red
 because there are more of me there
 than anywhere else

Vacation

A tourist attraction—maybe a waterfall
or giant abstract rock. Weddings,

sometimes the spreading of ashes. Families
and vending carts selling snacks, trinkets.

A carousel in city center's theme park.
Mirrors always cleans and smiles white,

where the plastic horses always receive
fresh paint in the offseason and quarters

are plentiful. Someone I knew I loved
gifted a buckeye to carry in my pocket.

It never brought luck so I try to lose
it, but then wake up and it's still on my dresser.

In the Woods

I could describe the intricacies
of moss

the way leaves push

in summer
a birch sapling cowering
beneath a parent

A fox
in a hollowed out tree
The light shining
through foliage

None of that matters.

Just north, there is a tower's
blinking strobe.

I take a picture
of a caterpillar
because I know someone

who would like that. I smell the fresh

clear-cut before I see it
and I'm not appalled,

I just look
down into my hands
to see where I am.

Acts

If they hadn't done what I told 'em not to do, they'd still be alive.

-Mr. Blonde, Reservoir Dogs

Semi-auto shock + prescription side effect + the line
around the line around the drive thru

crawl thru an asbestos attic to remodel + am I supposed to?

I didn't know I was allergic
meximelt + look at my stomach it's always
growing + blood pressure + five egg

omelet + .45 caliber is how wide?

stop smoking ads + arterial plaque and I know
it must be there but it feels so good
I need to start running but my knees

alarm + the gunman always says don't press the button
but never listen + doctor said no salt
so I can't taste anything + gas station lunch

tornados on a roller + dr. pepper + mom sitting
in a lawn chair in the garage
box of wine plastic vodka bottle Accupril Salem

Just one more episode of anything
but first a break + a drink a last smoke before bed
the filter smoldering by my feet

Love Letter

I've never seen a smile like an advertisement smile.
Erasures or embellishments, wikihow on determining
what is or isn't real.

*

In front of Pink Cadillac, a Honda Odyssey
with a seven person stick family in the rear window

On the news, three women drank "happy drinks"
at a rural mansion and woke up not remembering

*

Couplelizer mamba LoveStruck beautifulpeople.com

Fitness-singles ChristianMingle FarmersOnly ShakeMyWorld

*meet REAL beautiful people who actually look in real life
as they do online*

*

I knew an ex-stripper (doesn't everyone?)
and she had a polaroid, holding Ron Jeremy's dick.
Her husband kept it around but it was fading.

She talked about how to cover
ingrown hairs on a thigh, thong
and lace or not lace. I could never
get used to how naked dancers are.

*

Ronda Roussey fights tonight, sexily.

sports bra and arm bars, bloody mat. #heartbreak.

*

I was helping load a car at work. A wedding dress buried
in the trunk beneath a spare tire, coffee cups, a shoe box.
She said it didn't work out but the dress is so pretty.

*

#love and a meme explaining pregnancy scares. Pop star had a new baby
isn't it cute? Isn't it cute? Aren't they adorable parents?

*

Beat the Odds, Bet on Love

Last time I saw my mom I punched her newest boyfriend in the stomach,
watched her crumble and cry after being crushed by a door.

Watched her cruise through photographs
and vodka, send emoticons
and times to meet.

Opportunity

A hunter in Canada found a box of puppies
in the woods and picked the maggots

from their wounds, and I thought it could've been me

and what I could've or would've done,

but have never been to Canada
or scaled a mountain

except as an image search.

Another mob
on the news—mother drowning

child, or not, instead a boyfriend
has inappropriate hands,

a new memoir on abuse, blog, tweet.

The way our pictures multiply, how small
and non-threatening a single bee sting
generally is.

From here the travel tutorial advises
that anyone who fears flying
over the Midwest, fears flying
over anything, should look down,

focus, seeing only fog as if an infestation was being defused,
only rinds left to flatter the surrounding dust.

Holiday

I hope to never be half of a couple that argues
over what color to paint the baby room

Expedition khaki + coy pink + perfect taupe The possibilities
of a department store

Date night—movie + chain restaurant #something nice steak and my
probable wife

will have a salad because she's watching her figure

so we stay in love and I don't stray

One day I promise to ride a rented donkey down
into the grand canyon on vacation
because what is there left to do?

Change the oil + check the tires + drive

cross country
in my crossover
to have what the travel agent
says will be the time of my life

Just the donkey + probable family + sun + rocks + everyone
else on the tour

When I think of what love is

I picture a Ferris wheel

The carriages slowing down
stopping to let passengers off safely

the rest in line waiting their turn

Pasts

Suspended as if on hooks, an envelope wrapped
tighter than a too small coat—pretending

to sleep I heard my father slap my aunt
when she said she'd kill him, or maybe

that never happened. The past presses
down upon shoulders, an impossible weight

always being moved forward by a ghosting
nuclear powered machine, constant.

I've never been at war but think I've seen it,
imagining how a knife would feel as it pierces

skin, sinew, touches the bone below
that, a bone that holds place and gestures.

Earlier today, a selfie of a girl standing in a mirror
holding the phone in front of her with a towel

on her head, thought nothing of it. It reminded
me of how I know nothing of the time

men spent at war painting women's curves
on the sides of planes and bombs.

Bearing

Take the grease the Autozone employee
sold you and smear it on one palm (this will ruin

both of your hands so don't touch anything)
Father grandfather wikihow mother mechanic

youtube tutorial it doesn't matter who shows you
take the new bearing in the other

spin it and act as if the bearing wanted to nibble
the grease from your palm each ball biting

softly on your hand's skin do this in circular
motions until the bearing is coated by

Father in the shed with his lathe mother in the garage
with a box of wine grandfather stroke

wikihow's lesson simplicity the ball should bite
until you see the grease through the top of the bearing

and then it is complete drop
the greased bearing into the race into the wheel

where it'll work until it wears down
and repeat the process

#Trending

My ex would send me ads for engagement rings
I'll never afford,
models in wedding dresses and tuxedos
at an exotic resort
where the weather is always plain.

The supple curve of the bride's hip,
the stubble trimmed with exactness on the groom's cheek,
That is what romance was to her,
two mannequins
on vacation forever.

I don't even know what romance is, but it can't be
these constant updates.

Some girl I met at a party
just took a long walk,
a best friend from school had twins,
my brother is sick of women,
a guy I worked with
got shot in the back
over cocaine, someone

is getting married in Hawaii.
My grandmother is learning to type,
my mother changed her relationship status
to single.

I can never count the photos,
selfies at a beach, at school with friends,
alone in lace underwear, or flexing a taut abdomen for show.

I sat in the dark the other night
our whole block lost power
when the transformer, saddled by so many
burdens, went off like a shotgun suicide.

The neighbors stood outside protesting losing their kills streaks,
dating site soul mates, or the finale of the reality
series where the last participants
are eliminated, the street illumined with the lights from their cell phones.

Hello Thrill

Another song about being young forever, throbbing bass speaker in every corner of the room. Glitter you can never get rid of. I watched a Lexus backed over a killdeer in the Walmart parking lot this morning, a flash of red under feathers and the sparkle of asphalt. These girls with their sequin shirts, glimmering beneath swirling club lights. The song choruses again and the floor holds the dancers closer, hands wrapped tight across strangers' bodies, the warmth between hips that are so close to one another, some clothes to be removed, blue jeans and boxers or a green satin thong because everyone wants to feel sexy, to feel the thrill of unfamiliarity exhaling with a tiny gasp of surprise.

Following

Amazon keeps following me, trying to sell
a pair of shoes I placed in my cart months ago,

the purchase never completed
but my feet are not bare.

The radio earlier—plane crash
in the French alps, an interview

+

My neighbor kept ball pythons in his basement
and we were afraid they would escape,
eat small dogs and children

When my car broke down
in an intersection,
I was surprised he helped push it home.

+

New hashtags about loss and depression, bodies
scattered like dry leaves
among rocks and bushes, sympathies
from the faceless who've lost nothing
but time and mourn anything they can, to feel.

+

The coral snake in the cage at the pet store,
coiled like a shoe lace. Staring
(what I can assume is staring)

at the light and heat passing by. Lean muscle,
smooth skin, swift as a broken belt.

+

He was a low key, seemed to like running,
the interviewee said, the copilot
developing into a first name
as details emerged about the deliberate descent.

+

I've grown tired of the news.

Airbus crash someone raped drone strikes.

I struggle with the idea of the flight recording,

what I would have said, what their voices
might have sounded like as they slowly fell

from the sky, beating a door designed

to keep them out.

I clicked the ad and bought the shoes.

Predicative Text

I don't know
if you want to do
something tomorrow night.
What do you do you do you
mean? Do you want to do
something? I don't think
I'm going to come home.
I've been listening
to doo wop wop deedle
wop wop and drank
a bit of the whiskey lol. and I'm sorry
for being such a drunk ass.
What if I not lying? I'm sure I am
so I don't think don't think it's important.
Maybe we should quit
talking about. Maybe we can watch it
on my phone watch netflix if you want to.
Maybe we can really do
nothing really at all.

Handshake

I have constructed your details
because of how we take shape—balloons
designed to be twisted into forms
instead of float skyward.
Imagine someone knew—tattoos
stitched onto unseen shoulders,
the way they may throw quarters
into a fountain to solicit god's response.
Remember how the iron insides
of a building reveal themselves
only after the walls have shed their skin.

Which Table is Larger? Asks the Illusion

Honda + tackle + sleep aid restless leg heartburn
ads + burger + dollar burger + storms
in the northeast. Ribbons
of paper smiles + LED smiles + buy
a larger screen
to see more clearly—Have you?
Have you seen? Have you seen
the swirling galaxy and seeming infinitude?
Seems Seams of textbook (live link)
landscape + Australopithecus + dead
celebrities + he's dead
but maybe Elvis still lives, says someone.

Because this is how they say
it looks (was) (distantly is)

The shape of a mouth
+ outline of shoulders + photoshop
airbrush Football stadiums

+ headlit + highways + scores + weather report disparity
Crowds distinct as what lies beneath flood
water loud as a quarry conveyor belt,
all of the plummeting stone.

Shooter

Pictures of police in tactical gear, getting out of black vans.

A dozen or so dead, AK-47 or AR-15 or pistol unloaded, reloaded, dropped when cops *eradicated the threat*.

The shooters are dead or in custody, at large and the city is on lockdown.

It's fifteen hundred miles away, I don't panic, instead read twitter #prayers. Someone holding a scared child. A victim's family member's interview about loss. The journalists cite mass shootings this year, define mass shootings, bias pulling their explanations towards prohibition or the NRA. *Three hundred fifty-fifth mass shooting this year: When is enough, enough?* or *Get rid of gun free zones* or *are you ready for SHTF?* A month ago, a man waved his gun outside the restaurant where I work. The sheriff called and told me and whoever else to stay inside, the situation was being handled, no one was shocked.

Ailments

I keep finding empty packs of birth control,
harmless preventative save for occasions
of sudden stroke or liver failure.

The pharmacologist's formula gone wrong.

I'd seen an advertisement for medicine
to combat restless leg syndrome, my legs
started twitching as I remembered

I was hungover and took ibuprofen.

I was riding in a van with my aunt
and my little cousin said *Mommy, pass
back the Ritalin I'm hungry,*
later chewed a scar in her tongue.

Looking East from the Ozarks
after Linda Blaskey

The screen flowers with light.

This is how it will end I think—
LED budding to blur—

Lights are oblivious
to their brightness.

On the bark of a maple
I could carve graffiti if I knew—
loop for solidity
line for alive
loop for eyesight
line for losing

This is how it will end I think—
a cursor and delete glossing over
my limbs, anything I've ever said.

I'm never if where I am is home.

Bridge

*On April 14th 2015, two youth pastors in their 20's and their infant son were killed
when concrete from bridge construction fell, crushing them in their pickup.*

The mail keeps coming for a few weeks after vacancy.
Utility bills and coupons, the local community colleges
course catalog for certain age demographics.

+

I remember a crushed hot wheels car in the driveway
and I asked my mother what would have happened
if someone was inside, so she poured more Kool-Aid.

+

In the latest dream
I am a satellite, my circuitry
filtering too much, as if I were a prayer machine

+

Driving past road construction, singing or arguing
as couples do in cars. Their last act must've been
to look up through the windshield at something unexpected.

Advice

You should not worry about cows riding bicycles in memes,
aluminum or carbon fiber could never hold that weight.

You should only think of childhood
after eating hallucinogens.

You should anticipate
chemical reactions.

You should never tell the patrolman
there's a gun in your trunk.

You should act thankful
for your speeding ticket.

You should drive off slowly,
then speed again because you're late.

You should change your oil, 10w30
for winter and summer and anytime

You should somehow translate
this to blessings, amen.

You should remember that your parents tried
going to a Methodist church before
they got divorced, how the old
women reached out their hands.

You should avoid blessings
because they are usually selfish.

You should avoid stubbing
your toe on religious texts.

You should avoid stubbing
your toe on living room walls.

You should remember
the time the grill caught fire

and dad put water on it and the fire got worse
so the vinyl siding melted.

You should be grateful for your cheeseburger.

You should always always be happy

for your cheeseburgers. You should always
look in the rearview mirror
to make sure you are not leaking anything.
You should get the tires rotated.

You should drive away
because don't you have somewhere to go?

Lights

Take note of how few can fill
a lens, the way streets refuse to stay still
or how if we look in a crowded mirror
we can only see ourselves and flashes
of color around. The last time I was at a funeral,
someone snapped a selfie next to the casket,
#RIPgma, then flattering condolences from a list
of handled photographs attached somewhere unseen.
Fill in the missing words of the next phone
(text) conversation you hear (expect)
to fortify your omnipotence, add vocabulary
for a cell's text. If, while driving
nowhere, you become lost, the way to find home
is to look for all the bright street lights
flooding the evening's low cloud ceiling.

Gutting

Take the knife, a hunting knife, and run
it across the pelvic bone.

Remove the anus by cutting
through the bone with a saw and pull.

Think of holding hands while driving
with someone you loved and cut away

the fat, make an incision along the middle
of the abdomen all the way to the bottom of the ribcage.

Cut through the sternum.

Separate the sternum.

Push the organs aside and reach your hand in,
find the trachea, cut it.

Think of leaving. Think of weeding
the garden and how saying anything
at all is a struggle.

Start to pull. Find the heart,
pulped by a soft point

thirty caliber round, pull it toward you,
liver, kidney, and don't touch the stomach.

Pull it toward you as you kneel
by the pelvis, cut away the fat.

Cut away the membranes keeping everything
in place, think of an end,
wipe your hands on the leaves.

Cut and pull and drag your knife
across the inner ribs to release everything.

Pull until the pile can be set aside.

Let it rest for the raccoons and coyotes to find.

Cigarette Vending Machine, an Elegy

Today an emphysema patient lights
a Pall Mall at the bar,
 sallow and thin skin, swallowing
down the stagnant air. An advertisement
on television, a Chrysler with auto-cylinder
shut off, better mileage, no loss of power

I can't stop thinking of the stainless shine
of fast food tables, livened walls that levy
life and satiated hunger.

 Those bleeding ulcers,
the meat ground so fine.

 They took out
the cigarette vending machine yesterday,
time-eroded Marlboro logo, but the levers
extended, still trying to claim hold.

There is some girl laughing
 again
on the television, sexed--up preteen
in a miniskirt, encouraging twelve-year-old
hand jobs
 in middle school locker rooms,
waiting for their parents' cars to arrive.

The next commercial is for a stop-smoking aid,
but he pays no attention,
 just tugs on
the brown filter, thinking of carb cleaner
and chrome, the steel hood of an AMC
Rambler, the nostalgia of vinyl seats,
a steering wheel so thin it can half you.

Broadcast

Headline and caption;

A lottery winner lost all the money
to his granddaughter who died
of a drug overdose and was left wrapped
in a tarp behind a van.

+

Working for a wrecking crew
my friend recovered a suicide's body.
Truck, blood smell, shotgun skull,
cleaning with a plastic cup.

+

I never knew how thin these walls
were, the way fight
then fuck is how some couples

really are. It's like a father
going down the stairs to find his son
hung from the floor beams.
I've yet to read that story but news circulates,
double clicks mean sympathy, so I will.

Something like Christmas Day

Commuting past a Trail of Tears crossing
sign I remember
 the Cherokee from history book
paintings shoeless cold
dying still pursued
 by soldiers on horseback
then wondered if that is how they really were

+

I think too much of trash
 cigarette butts and cellophane
 daily stock updates

scrolling peripherally beneath protestors
 tear gas and crowd
 news of another dead journalist

+

Late night infomercials suggest
 gold investments because paper money

is just paper a photograph of bills
 next to bullion—scale tipping coin

I was gifted confederate money and told it was useless
 except as nostalgia

+

She worked at a fast food restaurant
 and would always burn her arms
A youth pastor approached her
 said to come to service
 looked at her arms and frowned

We put the pocket bible in the skillet

+

Christmas day but no snow.
 We exchanged department store gifts
 and drank wine so we could speak

When I left there was no traffic

Ask the Wind to Blow

A young couple walks their designer dog past *tyranny*
spray painted on a stop sign, a freshly sodded yard,
the street named for a tree or a city founder.

I don't know if I would call it envy but I stared
for longer than I should have as I thought
of the weeds in my yard, the loose diamonds,
imperfect, in my mother's jewelry box
and how she says if I ever need one it's mine.

I read news of soldiers who never knew where
they were going, what—only being able to bury
their dead in the dark, followed by *The choice
of an attorney is an important decision
and should not be based solely upon advertising.*

My dad used to tell this story of taking a Cessna
into the woods to go ram hunting, the pilot
looking back at the three men and asking
their weight, saying *we'll give it a shot.*

She thought I was her friend, told me
of her abortion, maybe an attempt to explain
the star tattoo behind her ear. I just looked
away and thought of how I couldn't.

It's almost spring, the church sign
told me to try god, and I'm unsure
of which one I am supposed to choose.

In the Woods

The sun has been up
for an hour now, restless
and I look for my phone,
find Ronda Rousey
getting knocked out
and watch the replay
on mute. A squirrel scurries
on a felled tree and I chase
it with my rifle scope. Leave
the safety on, but fumble
the trigger for practice,
the crosshair on a beady eye
but unsteady. I look around
and there are birds I cannot
name, radishes planted
in a crop field to die with frost,
cover crop to rot and prepare
the soil for next year's beans.
I google hunting tips
and calls to buy for next year.
When a doe appears I rest
the rifle and pull the trigger,
later finding only where
my bullet entered the ground.

Surplus Store Physics

Body armor laid out on a sales counter
like a sweater a clerk explaining

to the XXXXL customer how not even
a .308 wouldn't penetrate the hardened steel

I just want to buy a fucking tent
but instead stand and listen
to a sales pitch that maybe shouldn't be

+

Line at the grocery store and my girlfriend
keeps losing things I don't know how

to help and my mind wanders to being twelve
again and staring at a beta in a bowl

a squirrel tail in a sock drawer
dad building a house that'd burn

and taking turns pissing into a PVC pipe
It was too cold and the propane low to go outside

+

*This, you see here—damn useful for inner-city
driving or for shit hitting the fan—some million
Muslims screaming over Mexico but goddamn
this'll save your hide from them AK's—credit right?*

+

I leave but I don't stop light line
(did I like the tent enough to go back?)

Linear like a wheel coiling
back around, the way we become plural, or not.

*The distinction between past, present, and future
is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.*

+

Lincoln boat car—I remember a head on collision
put a kink in the steel frame I burned
a round bale in the middle of the gravel road
and the others just drove around

+

When a helicopter is landing
on a hospital I think of how someone is dying

My keys are always in my pocket
but sometimes I still lose them in there.

Tattoo Removal

Outside, there's a patrolman searching a Lumina
with a Gadsden flag bumper sticker.

The driver, handcuffed, stares down at the curb.

I, too, keep a loaded pistol in my nightstand
because I'm tired of hearing about burglars
and all of the dead children in the Middle East,

their robed bodies laid down in rows
to be identified or unidentified, their tongues
foreign and silenced. Some nights I unload

the magazine, and the brass rounds slip out
to roll along the floor. I watch as the cop pushes
the drivers head down, guiding him in and away.

Legacy Waste

Hydrilla's fingers had taken
the pond. After spraying herbicide,
we worried the fish would die too,

knew they could be restocked
when the pond recovered.

Every day I drive past a closed school,
frames of swing sets behind chain links,

boarded windows, the walls
filled with asbestos.

The only time I've seen my young cousin
since he joined the Special Forces
he talked about training. He would be drowned,

resuscitated, drowned, dropped off in the sea
to tread water. *The military is not involved
with XXXX but I have seen XXXX.*

A few miles away a landfill smolders
a hundred feet below the surface.
The heat keeps spreading closer

to nuclear waste a munition factory
buried illegally during the Cold War.

On the news, specialists say it is safe,
even if the fire reaches, it poses
no threat to anyone's health.

There was a rash of Hodgkin's disease
at my high school. Maybe the children played too close

to the railroad tracks, maybe something seeped
into the aquifer, into kitchen sinks.

It was then I dated a girl in remission.
We sat in my car listening

to Meat Loaf, I started to kiss her neck. I ran
my hands through her hair and pulled off her wig.

Ask

If only to save my consciousness
so I can stop forgetting who or where I am,

which is to say wanting my hands to pass
through a screen, clutch a piece of earth,

piece of flesh, smile rainforest party glade bomb
otherness, hold it to my face to taste

but even the street outside is a replica.
I remain haltered, curbed by a unity

which never appears, or does as an old song
from a passing car. The world never mutes,

or does if only for a second before I start an endless
playlist, how it offers condolences for any loss suffered.

The Fickle Land

I.

A hundred thousand acres of corn died
this summer. Cracked earth, dust storms,
crops stunted, barren yield, a fatal drought.

Quiet fields of brown leaves, half-length
stalks, crisp as paper, fruitless, stale.

A farmer, sunburned and dirty, starts
again his tractor. A harrow and plow,
this year's harvest returned to the ground.

II.

Beans and corn bud
from fertile ground.

A new promise of bloom,
dark soil, moisture,

virility provided
from last year's deaths.

Men and tractors toil
over fields, spread

compost, manure; till
marrow from the fickle land.

Living in a Motorhome

Baptized as a child, I listened to sermons
 of throwing deck chairs off sinking ships.
Hallelujahed for the symbolism,
 then everyone got in their cars, jockeyed
over who left the parking lot first.

 Heaven's gate is a collapsed cave, a tourist
destination where families with phones
 and scripture ascend hundreds of stairs
to touch a cold rock, take selfies
 next to a hole in the sky.

A friend I never talk to anymore
 heard from god his boss
was part of a mob syndicate
 and needed to be stabbed
in the neck with a Bic pen.

 I have never been granted faith,
but was on vacation once,
 saw a man on a boat, praying. He crossed
himself, looked skyward, stepped
 into the water and plunged underneath.

Lathe

He takes the roughing gouge
to the oak revolving, *it's not good*
spinning wood, grain is too wide,
a chip from his unpracticed hands,
tar and weather stained. I always
think of flannel, but now he works
in a dress shirt because his new wife
(I can't call her stepmother) takes him
to a Lutheran service, breakfast
with her family at somewhere local,
omelets and coffee. He grins
and presses the chisel deep
into the spinning oak, an ugly cut he meant.

I'm just practicing on this--I want
to get a set of walnut bowl blanks
to match the floor inside. I think
of the necessary precision, the fine edge
cutting intricacies into dark wood,
the hardwood floor and tile he had set
for a house without his name.

He hands what he calls
a *parting tool* to me, and I run my fingers
across the blade and am surprised
at how dull it seems. I touch
the steel to the oak whirling,
trying to steady my hands, feel
the splintered wood spread across my knuckles
and forearms, falling to the ground around.

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