



**Missouri State**  
UNIVERSITY

**BearWorks**  
Institutional Repository

---

MSU Graduate Theses

---

Spring 2016

# Apocrypha

Robert Taylor Supplee

As with any intellectual project, the content and views expressed in this thesis may be considered objectionable by some readers. However, this student-scholar's work has been judged to have academic value by the student's thesis committee members trained in the discipline. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

---

Follow this and additional works at: <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Supplee, Robert Taylor, "Apocrypha" (2016). *MSU Graduate Theses*. 2362.  
<https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/2362>

This article or document was made available through BearWorks, the institutional repository of Missouri State University. The work contained in it may be protected by copyright and require permission of the copyright holder for reuse or redistribution. For more information, please contact [BearWorks@library.missouristate.edu](mailto: BearWorks@library.missouristate.edu).

# **APOCRYPHA**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Robert Taylor Supplee

May 2016

Copyright 2016 by Robert Taylor Supplee

# **APOCRYPHA**

English

Missouri State University, May 2016

Master of Arts

Robert Taylor Supplee

## **ABSTRACT**

APOCRYPHA is a poetry portfolio which explores the relationship between knowledge and pain through the examination of Platonic epistemologies, Christian theologies, and Neoplatonic poetry. These poems are inspired by a crisis of faith which necessitated the telling of this story. Pain is then extrapolated into a state of suffering as delineated by theorist Eric Cassell, which then affects the intactness of the authentic self. Official Christian ideology and Christian folk knowledge compete within the foregrounds of knowledge for control over the authentic self of the individual whose pain necessitates the telling of stories, specifically health narratives as described by theorist Arthur Frank. The portfolio itself seeks to tell a complete story through the use of intertextuality of Frank's chaos narrative and quest narrative. Poetry then becomes the means by which these stories are told.

**KEYWORDS:** poetry, knowledge, pain, suffering, doubt, Plato, Neoplatonism, Catholicism

This abstract is approved as to form and content

---

Shannon Wooden, PhD  
Missouri State University

**APOCRYPHA**

By

Robert Taylor Supplee

A Masters Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
Of Missouri State University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts, English

May, 2016

Approved:

---

Shannon Wooden, PhD

---

Kenneth Gillam, PhD

---

Margaret Weaver, PhD

---

Julie Masterson, PhD: Dean, Graduate College

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Ken Gillam and Dr. Margaret Weaver for going above and beyond the call of duty and assisting me with the construction of this graduate thesis. Their volunteered time is greatly appreciated, and no thanks I can offer would be enough.

I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Shannon Wooden for her continued support of my studies and my poetry for the past four years, and being for me a paragon of teaching, empathy, and all-around badass-itude.

I dedicate this thesis to Dr. Jane Hoogestraat  
to whom I owe my confidence as a poet.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Plato and Neoplatonism .....	8
Christianity and Elite Knowledge: Genesis .....	17
Christianity and Folk Knowledge: The Flagellates .....	21
The Poet .....	30
Works Cited.....	32
Wreckage .....	33
Vespers.....	33
Basilisk.....	37
Chimera.....	38
Necrophage.....	39
Nightmare .....	40
Gorgon .....	40
Entry in the Book of Nightmares .....	41
Specter.....	48
Harvest .....	49
Azrael.....	49
Harbinger .....	50
The Simonist .....	51
Sirius.....	52
Necromancer.....	53
Scarecrow.....	54
Apocrypha.....	55
Apocrypha.....	55
Necromonger.....	59
Salamander.....	60
Litany.....	61

## INTRODUCTION

On the forgotten eighth day, man  
learned that blood  
could be struck from the body, could paint  
the face of a lamb who senses  
the knife of a nation and cries abba, abba.

The title poem for this thesis, “Apocrypha,” begins in the forbidden space beyond scripture, the first day after Christian creation in which the reader does not expect to find God. Man, human kind, the lot of us, learn in the nakedness of our sin that pain can mark the lamb with the death of God incarnate on earth. This forbidden space, this incredible implication gives spine to the body of poetry accompanying this critical introduction. Working from this trajectory, I use poetry to examine the relationship between knowledge and pain, and how the two have operated symbiotically since our earliest epistemologies, specifically Plato’s Allegory of the Cave and Theory of Forms. I also seek to trace this poetic tradition of Neoplatonic questioning from the Romantic poets, William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Percy Shelley, to the contemporary Deep Image poet, Galway Kinnell.

For the speaker of these poems, pain is derived from the collision of many forms of knowledge around the individuals who then experience a breakdown of what they know in a way that Eric Cassell gestures to as suffering. “Most generally, suffering can be defined as the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of a person” (15). A person, Cassell categorizes, has personality, character, a past, cultural background, and—most importantly to this thesis—a transcendent dimension, (17-20). The culmination of these aspects enable the person to build a knowledge identity, the means by which the self organizes what he or she knows and then allows for the



interpretation of external knowledge through that basis of knowing. Suffering then acts as an attack on the intactness and authenticity of the assembled personhood in a way that objectively-correlates the suffering self to Apocryphal writing.

Apocrypha can be defined as texts of dubious authenticity. Religiously, apocrypha describes scriptures not included in the Septuagint or Vulgate, or later in the New Testament. The Latin word “apocryphus” means secret. The Greek word “apokryphos” means obscure, “apokryptein” to hide away. The language which surrounds this term suggests a predominately clandestine nature in the uses of apocryphal texts by those institutions which seek to control what the people who subscribe to the institution’s way of knowing know. The accompanying portfolio seeks to utilize poetry as a means of exploring that space of secret knowledge, access of which ultimately results in pain.

Sitting in this abandoned house  
passing alms

from palm to palm I wonder  
if it is for me  
to decide the hour of Jehoshaphat,

that hour coming ‘round  
from the shadow between  
two pages of history, its scoliosis

that could or could  
not explain  
how this clockwork orange

proves anything  
of a watchmaker or transdimensional Higgs Boson  
standing kneeling opening turning  
within me  
within us?

like a sperm  
that might as well be a god.  
The valley doesn’t even darken

from his casual disregard.

As the poem “Apocrypha” continues, the speaker of the poem finds himself in a church building where he does not experience the presence of God. He begins to question his placement here, if scheduling the final judgment of all mankind in the valley of Jehoshaphat is within his power, the predestined time described in the Bible, and the speaker’s perception of this metaphorical book’s twisted spine by whatever powers that seeks to utilize it. He does not know what this book of history can explain, and this accommodation of discourse allows for the painful intrusion of Apocrypha. The book could or could not explain the ontological conceit of the watchmaker—how the watch is evident of a watchmaker—or the scientific theory of the Higgs field, and how this one particle substantiates our material existence.

This allowance for different ways of knowing gives rise to another critical examination of this thesis: the examination of elite knowledge and folk knowledge. Within his introductory book, *The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life*, George Schoemaker defines elite knowledge (official ideology) with the example, “Catholics have an official ideology that is contained in an official document called the Credo. Official Catholic ideology might be characterized in the following manner: belief in the trinity...belief in the absolute infallibility and authority of the Pope as the mouthpiece of God, an adherence to the seven sacraments of the church, a belief in the Bible as the word of God, certain symbols that have special meaning to Catholics, and so forth” (Schoemaker 59). Much of the imagery of these poems has been inspired by Catholic stories and imagery, considering my upbringing in the religion. The essential distinction between elite knowledge and folk knowledge is the adherence to a doctrinal text. Without

that textual support, Schoemaker defines folk knowledge (unofficial ideology) as, “based on the unofficial beliefs and practices of the people, usually performed in face-to-face interaction, and which makes up what is called the folklore of religion” (Schoemaker 59). As seen in the second section of “Apocrypha,” the speaker allows for the possibility of many different ways of knowing and pits them against each other in an attempt to rebel against the authoritative control over knowledge. In this instance, competing elite knowledges of Catholicism, ontology, and particle physics all combat to answer the speaker’s questions. The poem then turns towards suffering when the genuflections of ritual are abandoned for competing ways of knowing as the speaker muses on God’s absence. The speaker sits in an abandoned church, going through the motions of alms-giving. Participation in the intended service is lost to contemplation of possibilities. This competition further gestures to Cassell’s notion of the nature of suffering.

Once the person’s authenticity has been attacked, the knowledge identity has been broken down. That identity must then be rebuilt in order to preserve the authenticity of that personhood by mechanisms that, “suggest that the parts of the person are structured in a new manner, allowing expression in different dimensions” (Cassell 21). This process of reconstruction can be identified within Arthur Frank’s theory of health narratives, specifically the restitution narrative and quest narratives.

Working within the field of narrative medicine as well as Cassell, Frank defines the restitution narrative as the story which tells, “Yesterday I was healthy, today I’m sick, but tomorrow I’ll be healthy again” (77). This constant deconstruction and reconstruction is the means by which humans learn anything to begin with, though typically labeled as the process of accommodation and assimilation. As a person acquires more knowledge,

the more susceptible he or she is to the pain that knowledge can cause. The further a person is removed from a state of normalcy, or ignorance, the less likely that person is to return to that painless state, which illustrates the limitation of the restitution narrative. “Restitution attempt to outdistance mortality by rendering illness transitory...Restitution stories are about the triumph of medicine” (Frank 115). A more substantial utilization of health narrative is that of Frank’s quest narrative. “Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it. Illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person’s belief that something is to be gained through the experience” (115). Substituting physical illness for suffering as the apocryphal attack to the authentic self, the quest allows for the reclamation of that self through the exploration of new personal dimensions of opposing knowledges.

Within the context of religion, the greatest utilization of the quest narrative is through the application of ritual and prayer. The primarily linguistic structures that map practitioners’ interactions with their religion ultimately seek to recognize the pain of humankind’s fallen state and seek to rectify that pain with overtures to God. Though the pain that necessitates prayer is utilized as a means of spiritual quest—either as small as a bedtime prayer, or a ritual such as Reconciliation—the pain can often not be entirely expressed. As Frank delineates the chaos narrative, the illness, “traces the edges of a wound that can only be told around. Words suggest its rawness, but that wound is so much of the body, its insults, agonies, and losses, that words necessarily fail” (98). The speakers of the poem “Apocrypha” resides within that acute space of imminent pain.

The lights have gone  
down now, vigil

for the sacrament. Everybody  
black ashen  
pillars of salt. Not a breath, no

rush of wings sacred.

Catacombs. Necropolis. Tombs  
in the heart. Everyone  
diseased  
in the unreal city.

Lay shrouds upon our heads  
and we may seem asleep, safe

for the one who quakes  
in witness  
of his own sacrifice.

How alone it is in here.

In the midst of this ritual, the speaker observes the emptiness of the gesture. The other bodies with him in the church bear no witness; or rather, they bear witness to the immediacies of their sins. They feel divine presence. The church is compared to burial places, then drawn inward to the poetic seat of emotion. The one who quakes with witness is the speaker himself as he anticipates the continual emptiness he faces, He is alone. The inability to articulate himself becomes indicative of the chaotic narrative Frank describes; however, the speaker is aware enough of the chaos to quake in anticipation of pain, suggesting a retrospective approach, for which Frank says, “For a person to gain such a reflective grasp of her own life, distance is a prerequisite. In telling the events of one’s life, events are mediated by the telling. But in the lived chaos there is no mediation, only immediacy” (98).

The story becomes inaccessible in the same way as the ritual in which the speaker participates. Pain cannot be utilized the same way as Plato's character of man utilizes it in the Allegory of the Cave.

## PLATO AND NEOPLATONISM

Plato offers two distinct epistemologies that demonstrate how man experiences knowledge and the subsequent pain that dismantles his personhood which prompts suffering. This first theory is the Allegory of the Cave, in which Plato—giving words to Socrates—exclaims,

See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable...to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets (Bloom 193).

Speaking on the nature of education, Plato describes this elaborate scene depicting the metaphorical states of ignorance and enlightenment for humans. They are enslaved by their ignorance, chained to the ground, forced to endure the wicked shadow-puppet show of images they cannot understand because the original object passing over the light becomes obscure (194). They have been, “compelled to keep their heads motionless all throughout life” (193), unable to about-face and witness the implied truth for themselves. “Now consider,” Plato asks, “what their release and healing from bonds and folly would be like if something of this sort were by nature to happen to them” (194). We can consider their physical pain after being enchained since childhood. We can consider their mental pain after discovering the farce of the reality-bending puppet show. Deserving the foremost attention, however, is that of the human identity at the center of this experience.

As the human acquires freedom, the human also acquires identity and a personhood that becomes vulnerable to the pain that his newly gained knowledge can render chaotic. As man leaves the ignorance of the cave and emerges in the light of knowledge, he transcends to a place of enlightenment. “Transcendence is probably the most powerful way in which one is restored to wholeness after an injury to personhood. When experienced, transcendence locates the person in a far larger landscape. The sufferer is not isolated by pain but is brought closer to a transpersonal source of meaning and to the human community that shares those meanings” (Cassell 21). For Plato, transcendence comes from the enlightenment of the sun once humans leave the cave. This journey out of the cave signifies a coming out of chaos for the human, and the fulfillment of a quest narrative, at the end of which, the damage done to the human is remedied. For Cassell, transcendence happens when, “the sufferer is no isolated by pain but is brought closer to a transpersonal source of meaning and to the human community that shares those meanings” (21).

However, Plato’s human character does not maintain enlightenment for long. “And if...someone dragged him away from there by force along the rough, steep, upward way and didn’t let him go before he had dragged him out into the light of the sun...wouldn’t he have his eyes full of its beam and be unable to see even one of the things now said to be true?” (Bloom 194). As the human attains enlightenment, he becomes blinded by the brilliance of the metaphorical sun. Again, physical pain is inflicted, which takes many nights, as Plato describes, to overcome. When he recovers and begins to understand the truths he sees, he then needs to share them with those still in the cave, complimenting Cassell’s notion of the transpersonal.



“All behavior is or will be involved with others, even if only in memory or reverie. Take away others, remove sight or hearing, and the person is diminished. Everyone dreads becoming blind or deaf, but these are only the most obvious injuries to human interaction” (Cassell 18). This gesture towards the transpersonal suggests why man would need to return to the cave to retrieve those still enslaved. Man’s need to overcome suffering is a need to participate in the empathy of the community. However, Plato does not reward Cassell’s transcendental recovery from suffering. As the now-enlightened human returns to the cave, the darkness blinds him again, and when others then see how infected and diseased he has become, they rather remain in the darkness of the cave, their ignorance, and if they should get their hands on the enlightened man, they would try to kill him, (Bloom 196). The enlightened man cannot hope to share his narrative in a way that allows for empathic witness by those still enslaved to the puppet-handlers. This story must die with him in the height of that pain. What matters here is how intricately knowledge and pain consistently exchange with each other, one causing the other, causing the other, and so on. Plato describes how transcendence is ultimately an individual experience; however, for Cassell, transcendence is accessed through the transpersonal which necessitates the presence of the community.

The second theory of knowledge Plato posits is the Theory of Forms. In this instance, Plato describes an ideal state in which the forms of all things exist. Humans derive our constructs from the concept of these forms, such as, the form of a chair, the form of table, and the four forms that govern virtue. All constructs derived from these forms act as shadows in this world, the shadow of the form of a chair. Plato also describes how humans, before we are born, are from this ideal state of the forms,

possessing all enlightened knowledge of all forms, until we are born. Through his conversations in the voice of Socrates in his work *Phaedo*, Plato asks after two possibilities: do humans acquire knowledge at the moment of birth and on, or do humans possess all knowledge before birth, and that living and experiencing is a series of remembering this knowledge that birth removed? “And if it is true that we acquired our knowledge before our birth, and lost it at the moment of birth, but afterward, by the exercise of our senses upon sensible objects, recover the knowledge which we had once before, I suppose that what we call learning will be the recovery of our own knowledge” (Plato 11).

William Wordsworth, the progenitor of Romanticism, poeticizes these philosophies in his poem “Ode: Intimation of Immortality,” in which:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home (Lynch 338).

The description of Plato's forms couldn't be clearer in these verses. As well as complimenting Plato's notions, Wordsworth also emphasizes the transitory language that distances humans from the ideal state of forms, thus reinforcing our fallen state as humans. The Soul which came from elsewhere has come from afar. For Wordsworth, our capacity as children represents the closest to the divine we can come in this lifetime. The moment of birth is when the Soul comes trailing clouds of glory in our infant state. Percy

Shelley uses the child image as analogous to poetry within his Romantic manifesto “A Defense of Poetry.”

A child at play by itself will express its delight by its voice and motions; and every inflexion of tone and every gesture will bear exact relation to a corresponding antitype in the pleasurable impressions which awakened it; it will be the reflected image of that impression; and as the lyre trembles and sounds after the wind has died away, so the child seeks by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect, to prolong also a consciousness of the cause. In relation to the objects which delight a child, these expressions are, what poetry is to higher objects (Lynch 857).

Superficially, Shelley uses the image of a child at play to demonstrate the work of melody and harmony as a base of comparison for the work of poetry; however, this passage buries many Neoplatonic sympathies. The allegorical child represents the extent of the forms into the material world, how they excite his reason and imagination in such a way that allows for poetic access to the immaterial realm of the forms, a gesture that Shelley all but deliberates with the final line of the passage. Poetry is the vehicle by which man can access the ethereal world, for Shelley, the divine.

All things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient. ‘The mind is its own place, and of itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.’ But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being (Lynch 866).

As Shelley describes poetry's ability to alter perceptions of the ordinary or the familiar, the language also suggests the similar purposes of Apocrypha in its ability to change what is known. To Shelley, poetry can act as a metaphorical curtain that can both reveal and obscure the scene of things which then reflect a microcosmic constitution within the individual. As poetry alters the perception of an ordinary object within the percipient, that percipient's knowledge of that object must necessarily change in a way that could be damaging to that self's authenticity. Though the connotations of purging away that which does not allow the individual to wonder in his own being are essentially positive, they are also intrinsically violent in a way that threatens the individual with as much suffering as it does liberation. The final section of "Apocrypha" describes can be used to exemplify this manner of perceptual alteration, if not manipulation.

Pandemonium in the streets.  
By candle light,  
the brazen shadows of Christ  
—crucified to the sacristy—  
break.

It must be too much blood  
in the wine,  
our need to ingest too much of anything.  
I think he is coming  
down  
    into the sepulchre where all around  
rage those who  
                    scream to come in,  
                    moan to be let out.

*This necronomicon be damned,  
this Messiah.*

All we have left  
are the words of a ghost, all of us  
murmuring some return, swarm  
  
of voices, and that face won't stop looming

attenuated, still bleeding, waiting  
in the horror

of a choice that has been  
made and unmade  
for centuries.

The Miltonian throne of Hell has broken through into our world. The stillness of the speaker's isolation of the previous section breaks into motion with the shadows of Christ. He cannot explain what has happened as he perceives a coming of Christ into the midst of those unable to define their own liminal positions in the cosmos from which the sepulchre is supposed to provide sanctuary, yet where no one finds peace. They rage to come into the church. They want desperately to leave. The Bible has become a book of the dead in the spoken word from an unknown source, presumably one who moans to be let out of the church. The scene is at once hallucinogenic and performative in which the suggestive "too much blood in the wine" has begun to alter how this scene actually plays out. The ritual has become extravagant to the point of theatre which diminishes its own purpose, and all Man are left with is the narrative of a two-thousand-year old ghost, revenant of a bygone age who waits, staring at the speaker to answer the question of his faith. What is he going to believe? A decision must be made. "This horror," Franks says, "is a mystery that can only be faced, never solved."

The significant distinction between the Allegory of the Cave and the Theory of Forms is the presence of the body. With the Allegory, the body experiences the symptoms of pain in a way that is physical. The sun blinds the man. Knowledge inflicts pain, but the human's suffering is perpetuated. With the Theory of Forms, the person is born in a perpetual state of suffering as existing in a body, the shadow of a form. If

experience becomes a process of remembering all knowledge before the violent trauma of birth, then the self must be continually built and rebuilt which does not allow for an end to suffering which post-modern poet Galway Kinnell seeks to explore. His poem “Under the Maud Moon” best exemplifies this Neoplatonic tradition of birth as suffering.

5

Her head  
enters the headhold  
which starts sucking her forth: being itself  
closes down all over her, gives her  
into the shuddering  
grip of departure, the slow,  
agonized clenches making  
the last molds of her life in the dark.

6

The black eye  
opens, the pupil  
droozed with black hairs  
stops, the chakra  
on top of the brain throbs a long moment in world light,  
  
and she skids out on her face into light,  
this peck  
of stunned flesh  
clotted with celestial cheesiness, glowing  
with the astral violet  
of the underlife. And as they cut

her tie to the darkness  
she dies  
a moment, turns blue as a coal,  
the limbs shaking  
as the memories rush out of them. When

they hang her up  
by the feet, she sucks  
air, screams

her first song—and turns rose,  
the slow,  
beating, featherless arms  
already clutching at the emptiness (Kinnell, 6-7).

As a Deep Image poet, Kinnell's poetry attempts to bridge the physical and spiritual realms through the use of poetic language in such a way that appears to be a direct inheritance of the Romantic sublime, in so much that beauty moves beyond mere pleasure and attempts to access a higher state of beauty by inspiring fear for one's survival. Parts five and six from the seven-part poem depict the birth of Kinnell's daughter Maud. The reader can experience the true violence of this birth. But the uncanny ability of this poet is to show us the person at the center of this experience in a similar way to how that health narratives are told to reclaim the story of those who surrender to medicine (Frank 64). We see the celestial elsewhere Maud comes from, the ideal state, and we know or can fore-imagine the suffering she will endure. This aspect is what gives spine to Kinnell's collection *The Book of Nightmares*, from where this poem comes. Nightmare becomes the central metaphor for Kinnell's expression of suffering, and it is not only sublime, but heartbreaking.

## CHRISTIANITY AND ELITE KNOWLEDGE: GENESIS

“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked” (Genesis 3: 6-7). This quote from the Christian Bible represents elite knowledge as doctrinal and textual support for a commonly accepted belief that Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s law. The Biblical characters have the ignorance of bliss removed after they eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the acquisition of which would make them godlike.

They realize their nakedness in the Garden and hide themselves in shame before God, who, learning they have disobeyed his orders to eat of the fruit, says,

To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing, with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.’ To Adam he said, ‘Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, You must not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return... The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and life forever’... So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken, (Genesis 3: 16-24).

This passage marks the fundamental knowledge for the Christian faith which explains our fallen nature as humans, the fallibility which necessitates the covenant with Jesus Christ to be absolved of our sins and re-attain Paradise. However, this passage clearly states that those who acquire knowledge shall be cursed with pain. Beside the



element of temptation that the serpent of the Garden represents, the intertwined rhetoric of knowledge and pain is undeniable, regardless of how Adam and Eve gained the knowledge. This passage also denotes a measure of control over what Adam and Eve know to begin with. God forbade the humans to eat of the tree of knowledge, though the Bible does not textually support a reason. This control over what humans know suggests that there is accessible knowledge which humans are forbidden to access, which reinforces the significance of apocryphal texts. God's command parallels the Catholic church's authoritative process of assembling the first anthology of Biblical texts that would further support their authority over the common people while denouncing excluded texts as heresies. This doubt over what one knows, what one can know, and what one shouldn't know can be seen even within Genesis once Adam and Eve's knowledge identities had been challenged by the tree's knowledge of good and evil.

Their doubt then deconstructs what can be understood as a very limited body of knowing, and their reconstructed knowledge reveals their nakedness and precludes pain. The Apocrypha occurs in two instances: the first, in the concept of God withholding knowledge from his creation; the second, the moment Adam and Eve gain that knowledge and have their own previous knowing removed.

Adam and Eve, now burdened with the punishments handed down by God for disobeying his law, endure the greatest of human suffering, simply by being the first to experience it. The knowledge of good and evil destroyed any sense of pre-lapsarian personhood, the pre-fall identity which either character possessed. However, by using Cassell's basic building blocks of personhood, such as: history, role, personality, culture, actions, etc., Adam and Eve's suffering actually filled them with a greater capacity for personhood.

They acquire a better sense of character; they now have past experiences to draw upon; they are ascribed roles by God, such as husband and wife; they must perform labors and acts to survive; they now occupy their bodies more fully through birth pain and toil over the earth; they can now seek to achieve a transcendence from their suffering; and more critically to the evolution of the Christian way of knowing, they must facilitate the beginning of a human culture by having a family. The nature of the first family must change again the nature of Adam and Eve's suffering thus giving into history the modern human.

Having lost entirely who they were, Adam and Eve perpetuate a state of suffering while outside Paradise. That purity of the Garden cannot be retained, thus their suffering continues. However, Cain and Abel, their children, do not endure the same suffering being post-lapsarian creatures. Neither son experienced the pure state of Paradise. They only knew the fallen state into which they were born. Their status as people was not challenged by any dramatic episode as the betrayal of the Garden. Their bases of identity remain intact, at least for a few chapters of scripture.

The original sin of fratricide reintroduces suffering to Cain. He murders his brother, and is twice cursed by God, marked for his sin, and exiled, again, causing a similar trajectory perpetrated against Adam and Eve.

Contrary to contemporary conceptions of grace—the means by which man is forgiven for his sins—the modern fallen man must instead endure the suffering of grace. If the nature of the fallen man is that of sin, having no pre-existing condition of pre-lapsarian purity, then grace's process of removing sin from man ultimately destroys the personhood he has built upon that fallen nature. Within this context, grace becomes

violently redemptive, much in the same way that surgery serves as the butchery that allows a body to heal itself. To live in grace is to live in constant challenge as a fallen, modern person, and may even go so far as to rob the person of his or her necessary story considering the story that must be told would be a fallen story which grace would not allow as it removes that fallen nature.

Simultaneously, these characters are not offered the restitution that Frank's narrative construct would afford. Man cannot return to the normalcy of the pure, pre-lapsarian state; instead, they embark on the ultimate quest of redemption. They must accept that they will never recover from this pain because it has become an essence of personhood. Pain must instead be utilized for a larger boon at the end of their mortal tribulation. Other stories in different times tell tales of these characters in an attempt to round them out, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Lord Byron's *Cain*, yet nothing exists in the elite knowledge of the Christian way of knowing that allows for any recovery for the people at the core of this suffering.

## **CHRISTIANITY AND FOLK KNOWLEDGE: THE FLAGELLATES**

Now that the human animal has come out of the Garden with knowledge and greater character and the accompanying pain, and following the subsequent histories outlined in the biblical Old Testament, the introduction of Jesus Christ becomes catalytic for the knowledge breakdown for the Jewish people.

There are many famous parables in which Jesus can be seen preaching, and every story, though inspiring to the Christians reading them, represent a violence against what the Jewish audiences already knew of God, sin, ritual, and any other aspects of Jewish life. Rather than inflicting bodily harm, this pain resides in the psyche and spirit as a challenge to that authentic self constructed around the Jewish way of knowing. Taking a passage from Luke, Jesus himself confirms that violence.

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against daughter (Luke 12: 49-53).

It is with this motivation of disruption in mind that the reader can then anticipate the pain that this breakdown will cause. First, in order to follow Christ, the Jewish people must abandon what they already have accepted to be true faith through various stages of doubt. What they already know becomes challenged by the new way of knowing that forces them to either reinforce what they already know or to abandon it in favor of the new way of knowing. This doubt then positions the individual experiencing a new

knowledge in the in-between space of Apocrypha, not situated in a specific space of knowing.

It is also within this preliminary state of doubt that early Christian beliefs, before they were even written or sanctified, can be described as folk knowledge, and even apocryphal knowledge. As Schoemaker describes, the early Christian faith was practiced face-to-face and was not structured around any official destinies that could classify the practice as an official ideology. Christianity was treated as a blasphemous cult and continually prosecuted by the Roman Empire. The fear for one's life as a Christian and the substantiation of one's belief would cause a revolving state of both physical pain and the pain of doubt. It would take hundreds of years before the faith became indoctrinated to the point of elite knowledge, legitimized by the Edict of Milan in 313 by Emperor Constantine. The First Council of Nicaea, held in 325, determined which texts would canonize the newly consecrated faith. The texts not chosen—such as the gospels of Peter, Thomas, Phillip, and Mary—for this anthology would come to be known as apocryphal texts. The Nicene Creed was also written, an official prayer by which believers of the faith can orally affirm their beliefs, thus establishing, for Schoemaker, the official ideology,

Even after the legitimization of the Christian faith, now known as the Roman Catholic Church, pain maintained a constant presence within the faith. Moving forward in time to the medieval ages, a time of cultural, artistic, and spiritual draught, along with the presence of mortal hardships and the Black Plague, pain took on a predominant role of worship in the unofficial Christian practice called flagellation, the practice of inflicting bodily pain to strengthen and reaffirm a believer's faith, to keep in continual mind the

suffering Christ endured through crucifixion. Considering the lack of doctrinal support for the practice of flagellation, perpetrated predominately by poor and rural people from small congregations, the act itself remains in the dominion of unofficial ideology, or folk knowledge. No edict came from the church hierarchy that would adopt flagellation into elite knowledge, and so it remains a considerably uncommon practical phenomenon. Johanne Sloan explains this gesture towards deliberate pain as an ironic virtue in her article, "Spectacles of Virtuous Pain." "Earlier ideals of religious serenity were superseded by a reconceptualization of Christian faith as an inner fever or a physical affliction, destabilizing the individual's attachment to the phenomenological world. Images of torture and martyrdom became normative signifiers of this exemplary passion" (Sloan 118). The practice, itself, however, becomes its own form of folk knowledge within the Christian culture. Sloan describes how the clerical elite acted as intermediaries between the lay people and the divinity, giving access only as they deemed necessary. She quotes St. Ignatius of Loyola's "Spiritual Exercises," saying, "The spiritual faculties had to be exercised; the individual was encouraged to experience faith as a perpetual struggle against sin, and this was accomplished by imaginatively repulsing assaults to the corporeal body" (Sloan 120).

This notion that faith, access to the divine support structure of the Christian religion, could only be fully experienced through the infliction of deliberate pain weds pain and knowledge non-intrinsically. The flagellate folk culture essentially reverses the traffic way of knowledge/pain relation. The way to come into a fuller understanding of faith, for the flagellates, is to access knowledge through pain, rather than the two working as symptoms of each other, as Sloan suggests, "With the almost synthetic stimuli provided

by these practices, every manifestation of physical discomfort or pain is welcomed, as an opportunity to test the limits of the quotidian sensory world against the immutable reality of divine right” (Sloan 120).

Sloan then devotes much attention to artistic representations of this pain of faith, “Counter-Reformation art’s saintly heroines provided an alternate performance for doubtful spectators, in their ability to transcend the worldly pain inflicted by their oppressors, achieving states of extraterrestrial bliss...In the simulacral realm of religious art, the plasticity of the human body knows no bounds” (124). Sloan examines the feminine subject matter within represented artwork because women’s pain supposedly represented a greater capacity of faith, defending their beauty and virtue. She then introduces the figure of St. Teresa of Avila, the significance of which, for this study, is the use of her story.

She died at the end of the sixteenth century, when the Counter-Reformation was in full operation, so it is possible to trace the rapid transformation of her life story into official discursive territory, and into a privileged position in the visual arts. She was not martyred, and yet the ecology of pain instituted by the Catholic regime necessitated an arduous struggle toward full Christian subjecthood, and so as proof of her fidelity she induced her own access to an emancipatory realm of pain (Sloan, 124).

Religious authority sanctioned pain in an attempt to establish a true Christian identity. Pain became necessary in order to fully purge sin so that grace could be engaged. However, the Catholic regime does not mean to include the entirety of the church in the context of flagellation, but rather suggests that those clerical offices which sanctioned flagellation operated much like a regime which the mischaracterizes the entity as a whole.

The next section of “Apocrypha” concerns the Evangelical practice of “prosperity gospel,” in which, members of the congregation offer money to the church as metaphorical seeds that would grow into the answers they seek to their prayers—typically as a financial return on the investment—depending on how large of a monetary investment they are willing to make. While this practice does not inflict deliberate pain as that of flagellation, the pain is no less evident to the people who fall victim to this contemporary ecology.

*God wants you to be rich!*

Didn't you know?

exclaims the preacher  
among his tenement choir, even  
their voices plagued. The poor

sew his suits  
from their children's skin  
sacrificed for a mouthful of dust Jesus  
blessed in Jerusalem.

*Prosperity!*

the ungood news.

He crosses his heart  
from the television screen advertising

to the holy consumer here, far  
from a world twice removed  
from itself worshipping

a plastic calf that rubbles  
the bricks of that same city into the same ruin.  
Your seed won't sow

a new Eden, the credit Gospel  
swiped again and again butchers  
another  
thieving hand



because the children  
hunger.

They threaten to turn the page, choking,  
*Thy kingdom come.*

The poor sacrifice their children to a rich man worlds away from their plight, and yet, they believe the preacher's ability to fix their problems. The economics of this practice haven't been seen to this scale since the Catholic church sold indulgences for guaranteed passage to Heaven. This practice, in turn, divorces the afflicted from the necessary story of their prayers in a way that Frank would call unethical.

"Becoming seriously ill is a call for stories" (53) Frank says in his book *The Wounded Storyteller*. Frank discusses many approaches to how a person reacts to illness, specifically in distinct narrative patterns, primarily the restitution narrative and the chaos narrative.

These stories are told in conditions of fatigue, uncertainty, sometimes pain, and always fear that turn the ill person into what Ronald Dworkin describes as a 'narrative wreck'... The way out of the narrative wreckage is telling stories, specifically those stories that Shafer calls 'self-stories.' The self-story is not told for the sake of description, though description may be its ostensible content. The self is being *formed* in what is told (Frank 54-55).

In the instance of St. Teresa, her story has been hijacked by the ecology of pain instituted by the Catholic regime in its propagandistic use to demonstrate the effectiveness of self-inflicted pain. St. Teresa's pain becomes an attempt to reassert power over the crisis of her faith because that is what her faith required of her, regardless of how the use of pain perpetrated her narrative wreckage.

St Teresa's story was not treated as a self-story by the Catholic church. The only reassertion St. Teresa would have over her narrative would be through Frank's notion of testimony. "Illness stories are told by bodies that are themselves the living testimony; the proof of this testimony is that the witnesses *are* what they testify. Others can *have* the story as content...But only the ill person herself can *be* the story, and that being—the excess of any content—is the plenitude of testimony and its demand" (Frank 141). Those who witness the artistic depictions of St. Teresa's pain initially witness a body in pain. It takes the rhetorical lens of the Catholic ecology of pain to then equate pain to spiritual fulfillment. If the rest of the St. Teresa's work hadn't been disregarded, more of the narrative could be accessed. But with only the art depicting her ecstasy in pain, St. Teresa is robbed of her self-story which Frank is concerned with as a moral act and how one cares for the person telling that story as the moral action required (157). "The *ethics* in narrative ethics is best suggested by Barry Hoffmaster: 'The crucial test of a story might be the sort of person it shapes'" (Frank 157). In a sense, the reclamation of St. Teresa's narrative was in the participation of deliberate pain, causing further wreckage. "Teresa's 'divine sickness' announces the health of the Christian regime" (Sloan 125), a health of which seems purposefully destructive.

The purpose of the health narrative is to inspire ethical and empathetic listening. Frank classifies this gesture to illness as postmodern. "The *postmodern* experience of illness begins when ill people recognize that more is involved with their experiences than the medical story can tell" and that, "Postmodern times are when the capacity for telling one's own story is reclaimed" (Frank 6-7). Since St. Teresa did not live in postmodern times, nor did the early apocryphal Christians, their stories were not afforded the ethical

attention that the individual deserves. This perspective of the postmodern patient allows for a de-medicalization movement of the individual who has surrendered to medicine, a way of knowing the illness that differs from the individual's experience. The same rhetorical structure of medicine can be used in the instance of religion, considering the individual narrative trajectories follow similar patterns. The use of this postmodern storytelling intends to begin the telling of the wrecked narrative.

This also follows a similar pattern of folk/elite knowledge conflicts. A person becoming ill begins to build a quasi-folk knowledge around himself by telling others around him of his condition, seeking answers to questions from other people or other sources of information. When the ill person decides to see a doctor, the visit begins with the telling of that ill person's story, living conditions, work, home life, symptoms, etc. the person then must surrender what he or she knows of his own condition to the medical knowledge of the doctor. This process is called medicalization.

Illness calls for stories, and in the context of faith, the basic stories told are prayers. The Nicæan Creed was the first story of faith spoken aloud among Christians in an attempt to reconstruct their faith. If doubt is the means by which pain deconstructs knowledge, then prayer would be the means of building it. People turn to conversations with divinity in times of turmoil, in times of doubt, when they need help. This remedy could take any form, and yet, its natural state is that of language; and, by its allegorical nature, prayer can be rendered down to the same space as poetry.

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is as once the center and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the

fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of things; it is as the odour and the colour of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and the splendour of the unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption. What were Virtue, Love, Patriotism, Friendship etc.—what were the scenery of this beautiful Universe which we inhabit—what were our consolations of this side of the grave—and what were our aspirations beyond it—if Poetry did not ascent to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar? (Shelley 865).

Often, unstructured prayer, such as meal prayers, prayers before bed, general discourses, represent the most basic need to tell stories in an attempt to seek comfort for ourselves, to navigate the everyday wreckage of our narratives. Building these prayer and ritualistic structures gestures to the last of Frank's three narrative arcs, the quest narrative.

“Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it. Illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience” (Frank 115). This notion of quest, the utilization of pain rather than succumbing to it resonates with Cassell's amelioration of suffering.

“Persons are able to enlarge themselves in response to damage, so that instead of being reduced they may indeed grow. This response to suffering has encouraged the belief that suffering is good for people. To some degree and in some persons, this may be so” (Cassell 20).

## THE POET

I've avoided this section of this thesis for three drafts now, staring down the inevitable exposition necessary to introduce the poetry that evidences a poet. The reason I avoid speaking about myself as a writer, I think, is because it provokes a confrontation between an immovable object and an unstoppable force. I must confront myself, my stubbornness and ambition, my short-sights and forethoughts, my core and orbit. Writing even that makes me feel pedantic in a way that suggests I am only an imposter here, that one day, somewhere, someone will figure me out. Or no one will. Either way, here I am, in this eleventh hour, trying to explain why I've chosen to pursue a Master of Arts in Creative Writing poetry. It is this doubt of my authentic self from where I draw much of the influence for the accompanying poems which are how I exercise my pain.

Thematically, most of these poems come from my dissatisfaction with my Catholic upbringing. As I've grown older, I've begun to starve on only one way of attempting to understand the world in which I live. But with that need to learn about and experience other ways of knowing comes an overwhelming sense of abandonment from that assurance of the one faith I had known. It is no longer enough, and yet its beliefs—specifically those against heretics—still hold such a sway over how I think, which causes doubt and therefore pain. It frightens me to think that if I'm not Christian, I'm going to hell, an unspoken belief ever present throughout my twelve years of Catholic education. That fear then turns to anger more often than not. How do I satisfy this starving curiosity with only one wafer of eucharist a week? It's impossible. So poetry.

Poetry has become for me the prayer and ritual by which I experience anything divine. Much in the way of the flagellate culture, writing poetry comes from the

purposeful utilization of pain in order to access that place of language that, for Shelley, can alter perception. So many of the images of these poems are disconnected and war against each other because that perception is in constant flux. I want the reader to endure a violent reading experience, so I utilize drop line breaks and break at grammatical points that exacerbate the inherent anxiety of the line break. I want to challenge that continuity of the consciousness the reader attempts to build throughout the poem by dragging their eye down the breaks. Much of the imagery is influenced by Christian iconography, classical mythology, and other poetic influences, such as Galway Kinnell. In Kinnell, I found my Virgil to guide me through this process of poetry writing. He serves as that bridge from mere grapholect into the metaphorical and spiritual place behind the symbolic representation of language, thus my Dantean tribute to him. I seek to move through these poems as a pilgrim, utilizing the intertextuality of chaos and quest, to hopefully arrive at some kind of answer.

## WORKS CITED

Bloom, Allan. *The Republic of Plato*. Ed. 2: Basic Books, 1968. 193-196. Print.

Cassell, Eric. "The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine." *The Social Medicine Reader*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1997. 13-22. Print.

Frank, Arthur. *The Wounded Storyteller*. Ed. 2. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print

*Holy Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005. Print.

Kinnell, Galway. *The Book of Nightmares*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971. 6-7. Print.

Lynch, Diedre Shauna. Jack Stillinger. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. 9. Vol. D. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 968. Print.

Plato. *Phaedo* in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Classics, 1954.

Schoemaker, George. *The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life*. Bloomington, Indiana: Trickster Press, 1990. Print.

Sloan, Johanne. "Spectacles of Virtuous Pain." *When Pain Strikes*. Vol. 14. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota, 1999. 118-125. Print.

## WRECKAGE

### Vespers

#### I.

I face a great precipice, the immeasurable  
moment between every second of choice. Though unseen,  
I know that valley crawls on into curvature

and back again towards some possible place with many moons,  
and the nova hammer crashes down, stigmata  
run dry. A dream. If I reach into that darkness,

I fear what could take my hand, that I want to go.  
We can dance down this ledge into the waters of oblivion, and I am  
less than alone. The greatest lie we tell ourselves is the future.

I step away, and I don't. I step onto the faithless air  
deeper than the Galilee where Peter should have turned to stone,  
darker than any whale's belly, and after

a thousand years, I won't ever wade out to meet him  
waiting on the verge of this great stillness to break.

#### II.

Waiting on the verge of this stillness to break,  
the children have come of age again for first communion.  
Circus of the sacristory, wolves in fleece, and a few of us are

missing before processing, chained in gold, into camera fire,  
mother's fiendish eye. Stained glass light wavers in the rain  
as if I could hold that light to my mouth. I witness

the body lift out of the priest's open palm—his own skin—  
once for each of us, corpse cast into the chalice, purple  
smoke. I have to piss. I have to itch. I have to know

how much Christ is in this man before: he's only bones;  
I'm only a child; this altar bears Isaac's heart;  
and my father shames into scaled crimson

as I rise up, mouth unhinged to scream, and the church



stares silent as another silver coin is placed on another tongue.

### III.

If only I could see where each of us is branded.  
Sickle iron on the cheek, cock forever erect, entrails  
dripping wax. Bull ring through the nose, dragging

lead-dipped feet, gold teeth, neighbor's wedding ring. Would we  
then walk into the streets shoveling glass into our shoes,  
ciliced in barbed wire, penitent, holding hands? Tell me,

whose breath licks my spine in the confessional, ghostly  
masturbating as I crush thorns beneath my own nails. Drown me,  
mother fucker, maybe in holy oil, maybe in hell fire, maybe

I'll sit here a while in the sanctuary. Look for the men  
with charred feet, bodies buried to the waist, legs flailing  
in the air and branded, simonists of the salvation industry. The pews

have been hacked to stakes and kindling. It's a witch hunt in here,  
and if you find me in the wreckage, I'll be rocking on a Judas cradle.

### IV.

This is all I have when the moon falls  
broken into the rain, the grey city river at dusk,  
this cigarette, the filled lungs of tongues and smoke.

When the angel of the tenements disguised  
in curling calligraphy comes, a silken noose and prayer tangled  
in my hands, I'll send him back in pieces, holding his own head,

the Dantean falsifier he knows he is. Eighty-eight pairs of wings  
galeing into silence toll midnight through the city mantles,  
sheep's blood blessing death into that black and in-between believing:

the way towards the otherworldly house illuminates, the road home  
bends into the invisible shadow on the wall, and I am left in this breathless  
3 AM. Place your finger dipped into water on my tongue,

shapeshifter of the scattered clay. Gabriel, would I even know the trembling  
of forgotten rapture? The crucifix above my bed sways as if escaped.

V.

The crucifix above the bed swaying, babies  
will soon roar out of uteral light, the season of flesh sealing  
nearly over, the blood hounds slaked. What's the loss of a name

when given another with another meaning? This isn't her emptiness  
but mine, deep in the side, the broken curve of the necronomical Gospel's spine  
falling open to another useless spell when I'm drunk

at another reception. She's always beautiful because  
it's true. She was no one before today. Today  
she can't be anything I recognize, only whisky, only the sea, only

a name I'll never forget. I was asked if I'd ever write my own vows,  
but instead, I'll take for my bride the western wind, black-veiled and cold  
turning into our consummate grave. I take her disease. I take the name

*disciple of nightmares* and pilgrim from this side of the valley of not knowing  
to the other where I'll take the hand of a dying man, press it into my rib hollow.

VI.

I have not taken into my hand the hand of a dying man,  
turning it over to lay an eddy of oil on his wrist  
for as many slugs I couldn't feel of a pulse. Elastic eyelids open

themselves curiously. I have seen the smog phial of tar lung,  
my grandfather's, his last words inaudible. The last time I'll see  
him smells of catheter, acrid, the poison ivy burns on my skin

bloom into my blood, wormwood anointing every blemish every  
fly bite. No Theresa in sight. Calcutta can burn, this hospital. If I plant  
my milk teeth, I won't find another skull growing among the lilacs

my mother tends, wreaths with anise a holly stake screwtaped  
into a cross, lances the green boils from my eyes. When I lay my head  
down in fever, I'll find Jesus hiding underneath my pillow, finger to his lips,

hushing. The white horse stamples through all the fields,  
summits the one pestilent hill, then dies.

VII.

Monks hold flames on their tongues against the night  
blossoming through the basilica's rose window, unfurl  
the velvet petals of Mary's blood for that one immaculate pearl.

So weep the bells of Conception Abby.  
*Lord, grant us restful sleep* heavenly  
and haunted in their resonance with the grey stones of Nimrod,

their towers and broken, holy walls. What secrets lie  
in the depths of a novice's hood? No dancing  
in the woods, naked, no

conjure in his bladed mouth that has rasped against  
the cacophony of centuries. *Lord, grant us a peaceful death*  
so that the soul might escape through the ribcage.

O Death, won't you come down into this house of bones  
and brush their throats with your one black feather?

## Basilisk

Ophiuchus upsets the western sky, and dogs nip at amateur  
astrologers thumbing through daily horoscopes  
for quick answers

to no work, repossession, the plague.

The paper wilts at the edges  
tracing slug trails of heat

through poisoned crops and the chicken coop ransacked,  
the methadone daybreaking  
on the farmer's wife strangled

by her own rosary, a stranger.

We shed clothes, shed  
skins if to read carvings  
on our bones, toss them for luck at a lottery of bread,  
a knuckle  
for a few bars of music,  
the liver

for a drink of anything, saying,

*I should have bet my tongue*, eyes—already taken  
by taxes and gadflies— uplifted  
to medicinal Serpentarius clutched in the Dog's putrid glow.

Its jaws  
butcher the last augury of chicken feathers and toss the meat  
into drowned gutters. And when

a toad creeps

into the broken coop, sits upon the last dead egg,

the serpent that hatches in the shadow of Sirius rising,

the town whose scales tighten

in sweat, the vinegar-stained air,

will devour its mother whole

and rear

a crowned head

that no heel can crush.

## Chimera

Was it only last night I dreamed  
the iconoclasm of mirrors, bone white  
knuckles blossoming into shape, a post-  
meridian vanishing  
laughter. I can't  
remember what I told you only a few moments ago,  
gasping in the bog  
of a fever dream, sweating. You are my terrific nightmare.

By corpse-light I will alchemize this  
kaleidoscopic jabberwocking back  
into the menagerie of shadow  
shattered between epileptic folds of the brain that mushroom  
out of my forehead,  
unfurling a mane of sunlight. If only  
the luminescent blood on the moon could  
make this memory any less opiate, the one

in which I have broken your spine with the rain,  
I have chanted the zodiac of your name,  
I have lived a life of your violet irises  
spliced onto my own. When I look  
into the river's black surface, the empty  
space beside me, I remember  
that yours isn't  
the first face I've made.

## Necrophage

The vulture buries its cursed black skull  
into a tenderized pedestrian, hit and run  
presumed criminal of fire.

Even grown men  
are laid fetal into their coffins, sewn into animal skin,  
and preserved in the Peruvian Amazon where

there exists a parasitic fungus colonized  
into Camponotini ants. The able-bodied  
process the afflicted from the hill

once pathogenesis  
has so lovingly rooted itself into the brain.  
What is this eating  
alive, necrophagous pre-dawn  
so thin  
it could  
evaporate into vacuum?

Surviving mothers paint magpie on vaulted tombs,  
titanic mountainsides. The spirit, bird-like, condor and humming.

The Nazca point to a star array of wondering. One mother  
leaves her hands  
stained, the germinated ant clings  
to the dark underleaf,  
to the edges of that hole in its head where

one pollenating limb spindles out, almost a finger spark,  
the gangrenous hiss of birth.

If some western wind should catch this spawn,  
the others would soon die.

And the tamarin who scours the charnel grounds for husks  
will be taken up.

And the harpy eagle who hooks those monkey vertebrae into charms  
will carry them across the ocean where  
an Aghori will string those bones  
into his hair. He will lift cut flesh  
drug in from the Ganges from the fire with his mouth.

His cursed black lips, purified, to preserve that fluttering spirit,  
come up from the liver of the condemned man

whose story rusted out of its chains centuries ago.

## NIGHTMARE

### Gorgon

Here, above  
the clouds unriddling themselves,  
I'm flying

home from New York that could be  
anywhere  
    in this abysmal blue,  
this bronze temple.

A shape—maybe  
a patched shroud of history  
or a serpentine blossoming of rivers  
or an owl's cursed panorama—

kaleidoscopes in  
the imagination of landscape  
below turned to stone

    the blue that could be  
the waterless ocean  
of a stolen constellation staring down  
with a gaze of aegis

*against what?*

    we cannot know, we  
who crossed over  
the new Styx into the ether world  
of possibility without  
even heels to dip in.

**Entry in the Book of Nightmares**  
*for Galway Kinnell*

I.

There, the hazed sphere of campfire  
in the dark comes into warmth

as whatever path  
I once followed bends away from the river,  
its fog woven into gypsy hair, ghosts. Prophecy  
plucked

from a deathwatch beetle in the hands  
of the ruined oak tree reaching  
into black water, bear tracks  
in the silt. What violence plays out

from the amphitheater of this river's beginning?

I have not known pilgrimage, so I take into my lamp  
this burning husk, a broken seal. O Magnanimous,

would you sing beside me in cursed sleep  
at this fire, the voice that comes back when I  
am orphaned, drink not of the river, that well

of salvation? Tell me, when I peer in, when  
I let slip the light, tell me, what will I see?

II.

I saw nothing but  
Sirius and the maud moon spilling her light

through your witchdoctor's bone, the runed ram's horn  
curving into the golden ration. The Virgin  
dips in her vase. There,

the hen has gone again to the block, landscape  
of her skulls and gray eggs.  
Has this spealbone, on which the auroras have lain  
the alphabet of the cosmos



shown you

the first blade of sin pierce  
his brother's burning sacrifice of love

the brand of commerce struck three times  
against every sheep skull mulching  
mulching mulching

the horn which brought down  
Jericho, only to raise up a mechanical Babylon?

She has dropped dead, a pebble  
on the mountain. She has opened herself  
so that I might dip my finger into

her eggs, the icy pulp of what will be.  
I hang the bone above  
the ransacked chicken coup  
where, inside,  
the serpent has been devouring  
its own tail for centuries.

III.

The skies have darkened in siege, another  
war, somewhere, when

I live under the sign  
of the scorpion and eagle and phoenix  
sewn together  
                  only after I crawl  
through this valley where Eurus, the unnamed  
in his gray cloak, bids me look up into

the elder words of my birth spelling out  
everything  
I will have ever done, Stranger  
with one eye, and I can't wake up. I can't  
keep the darkness from unstitching my spine. I don't  
remember where any of this actually is.

The city shall fall, and when the valley  
floods with judgement with blood, when

I have set this book down, I return

again and again to where  
the Crone waves her iron lantern  
from east to west, a withered hen flower  
in her hair,

and I let the water rush over me.

IV.

Dear Galway,

I know now that I have never lived, that your letters never come. How could they? I have slept the eons of void light inescapable. Tonight, I'll be laid on the same altar, the ouroboros painted onto my skin, my heart ripped out beating to thunderous applause again, a thousand amputated hands—green rot taken by the red rider—dropped into a grave. I've tossed the dead bird into the air, thinking, *if I were really here*, and I wasn't a shriveled husk reaching for the medicine cabinet, a shadow stroking the dead light from my hair lovingly, I would walk the finest edge of atmosphere, drawn to your terrible lure of vacuum. Won't you take the other fork of this wishbone already vanishing into darkness?

V.

I remember the womb, its galaxies where  
light arcs through spider webs,  
an open wound on the finger blessing

the heart, the absolute  
spell of binding.

Each body hangs crucified in the ether, unborn  
as the last

meteor rust breaks into bones  
Lucia kisses crystal tears into eyes  
clouds feather into muscle.

Over the amniotic mountain comes  
the Oliphant call of duty to this violent forgetting.

Come now  
into this immediacy, you  
lost light in the darkness, the place  
where we stay as if we have anywhere else to go,  
this body.

As the surgeon suspends the child,  
smacks the blood red, do you then  
let go the junction of shoulder blade where  
some day soon, I will ask you why  
there are no wings reserved  
into this body which you have carried

and I shall soon carry  
for some eighty years?

VI.

They've been hunting you for fifty years,  
Captain, Burnsie, revenant  
of any war that ever was or

is or

will

burn in the light of a dying sun, one rising  
tongue of smoke going out,  
almost a prayer  
in the desert where  
I walk your copper footsteps  
in the sand poured  
from cracked bells of hourglass.  
Toll silence, and we  
all turn east for the hope of dawn.

They've been hunting you  
for more than a hundred light years from where  
you died, the wolf's bone frozen  
in blubber. I see you there  
at work over  
some otherfire,  
my lamp to your face apparently  
asleep, vexed to nightmare, if not

for that one line, that spell

scratched onto my arm:

*The dead shall rise incorruptible.*

## VII.

This room, the one  
in which

the cradle has vaporized back into ashes and  
the kite with the cut string lands in the iris of moonlight and  
the skeleton has rusted into a nebulous ambigram and  
the handprints of bear have fallen stuffed into dust and  
the quiet hum of bear song lingers in cobwebs and  
the field of black stones has cursed thoughts of rain into her fontanel and  
the sheep's head let go its sheep's blood into the alphabet of vanishing

is one that I will not  
trespass into where

you must still be healing  
your broken selves around each other.

## VIII.

Again, the valley sunders into the horizon,  
and it has come to the second birth. If she

were the moon, then he who came through  
his own passage  
into his own flesh rags,  
would be the tide of the river from where  
you heard footsteps after  
making love, naked, unashamed.

If I were to insinuate you  
into the spine,  
would I

need again another half of completion  
awaiting me on the other side of that rupture  
into the last morpheme of not knowing?

I have come now to that darkness.  
When I call,  
not even an echo.

IX.

The final descent, the path among the stones  
that you now lead. I close my eyes, rather

my eyes have  
been put out, and your hand  
                  the spealbone  
                  the Crone's milk eye  
                  Captain's blood hound  
hold to my ear one shell taken  
from the river, how the waves glide into breath.

You place into these sockets agate  
and jade, seal them in with  
the baked clay of what could be

your blood, and when I see again  
in the unreal starlight of another world,  
another spray of arterial light,

I'll know the way to where it all goes out.

X.

It is this path  
of mossen azurite that by the domelight on the horizon  
I walk,  
brush away the weeping hair of cypress and willow,  
lay restless roots back into  
their marsh beds. Somewhere

the bog witch creaks her song and fades  
around the last low bough before the doors

of necropolis. In its werelit windows, innumerable,  
black and deeper than any alchemic measurement carved

into the book of the dead  
into the backs of teeth  
into the hen's final egg

for flesh and spirit and death,  
the pilgrim sets down his nightmared fire.

And if, by chance,  
the Aquarian has drawn the bow of dawn,  
and the gates of Saturn's house have been thrown down,  
and the phoenix has taken its quasar flight into oracle,

then I will turn east  
to find upon one slumbering crest above  
the silver shore of that crowning light

nodding from side to side,  
the bear humming  
his bear song.

## Specter

Summer, the air swimmable, sweating  
towards downtown towers, I recognize  
no one in the man hole

haze putrefied, faces  
fogged on, gunshot mirage. In the bars,  
the women haven't spoken in centuries,

moments, men stepping high-hats from lay  
to possible lay sizzle pussy  
cat calling,

their gestures moved unseen as if  
on strings. Outside, beyond the turin shrouded sky, ignites  
the burned star of whatever end coming, maybe

an air liner, a harbinger, or nothing. Summer,  
the slow rot and the city sinks another year  
deeper into my shoes, drunk

when *Aka Manah & The Marionettes* take  
the stage. Estell, Lün, Roxxy, the trumpeter  
black suited, ram skulled plays

the piston valves  
of the spine, and violets open in the blood, the rush  
of poison that makes me want it more than medicine,

the music. It's the limelit hour,  
and the horn is a voice of jackals. O daeva,  
your outstretched hand

bound in strings, I have  
come here for something  
Dionysian perhaps, something promising. Outside, can't you see

that shadow on the clouds above, some ghost I should  
recognize? How he stands halogenic. How he raises  
his hand, how mine goes with it.

Aren't we all lovely  
shadow puppets? How many times have we awoken into

these grave beds? Another gunshot, and there that star is again.

## HARVEST

### Azrael

He brings the blade low,  
hands worn into the sickle's bone

the cold edge  
that cuts,  
                    cuts blood-rusted fields.

A petrified tree stands  
alone and reaches like a hand  
that offers  
                    nothing. Its broken fingers  
cup the pregnant hills  
through contorted distance  
and time.

                    Iron bites  
into the bark, and he sighs  
wiping his thin scalp.

Sinews strain,  
                    release  
when his bones creak  
barely dust, black smoke  
as he shoulders  
the faintly breathing wheat.

He rises, and cleaves  
to the harvest  
                    to his blade  
that whispers  
through every umbilical stalk.



## Harbinger

Bruised skin collapses  
and flies burst  
                    from the dog carcass  
laid open on the side of the desert road.  
Wings shimmer like heat  
and sugar-grit  
                    circling the hole  
of a hammer strike  
or bullet in the back of Abel's skull,  
  
fanged—buried beneath eons of carbon  
and the belief that one day  
                                    the wicked  
would be punished, a man who turns coins  
in his hands full of empty sacrament,  
the serpent vertebra tangled  
in its jaw.

Buzzards drive their heads  
into gullets of sand  
and come up clutching  
a knuckle joint,  
cursed into a smog of feathers  
and Cain howls in jackal throats,

in the ashes of Gomorra  
in the shadow of a pale star  
and flies  
one by ten by hundreds  
swarm from the point where  
his brother's  
                    bone plates fuse,  
the empty sockets,  
his voice of a plague.

## The Simonist

Beneath a red sky, the preacher processes along the trail of light  
and dust in the wake of a comet  
    blazing towards the village  
deep in the nearing valley scar Jehoshaphat. He had come  
from a saved land out of the east, bearing the finger bone of St. James,  
he slouches into this steep country. All the birds scatter  
    into smoke from naked trees,  
the preacher's face sabled beneath the wide brim of his hat,  
eyes thin slashes of white. He holds his reliquary before him,  
cheeks sinking in its feint green light,  
    and he prods off wild hounds,  
their muzzles dripping bile from the man torn open on the road.  
Gears grind in their throats  
    at the passion of Christ upon the preacher's staff,  
at the deep bible beneath his arm like a piece of night  
    cut away from the comet's tail  
that leads this man to lambs,  
to wash these woods in blood so that God may know  
that they have been chosen  
    by his coming  
every deliberate step closer to this broken Jericho,  
every step in the brazen call of a trumpet.

## **Sirius**

There would be no rain, no wind out of the east, and the skeletal oak doesn't twitch when I break off branches and light them on the bleached sun burning low against black clouds. I set my pack in the hollow trunk that a fox clawed out then died, unstring a rabbit and cook the meat on a flat rock seasoned with greave dirt. Sweat pearls in the dust at my feet as I gather crows' feathers and lace them into my hair, dance to the spitting grease and iron breathing through withered wheat. Down the hill, a dark figure reaps the dead crops. I call to him, blood-rust in my throat, and offer him a shank. He slows and points a crooked finger towards the Dog Star. Its cold light pierces those veiling clouds like shadows, and the blade keeps falling. The meat rots like blood in milk, and I bury the offal in the fox's skull, gather my pack and string a tooth to my wrist as a charm to learn how to scavenge along the road in the shadows of this howling omen. Thunder rattles like carved bones being cast.



## Scarecrow

You awake on the crags of a steep hill and stumble drunk off the cross, come down from that place of the skull into a field of brittle crops grating together like so many locusts gnawing at your brain picked by indignant desert birds. You fall a few times, sick with a kerosene fever and the mirage of sitting at the bar where Jesus found you playing with a match. Jesus, his hair out on all sides, sleepless eyes, red and dry like straw, grabs you by the shoulders and gasps, takes you onto his back and bears you to that grey Golgotha. Jesus in his torn robes, bare-chested, thrusts you onto that beam and ties off your limbs. He smears more dirt onto his face not an inch from yours, whispering, *You haven't seen me. If anyone asks, I'm in my tomb. No wait*—and stammers off wildly into the mountain's shadow. Crows perch on your crown when they hear you sigh and started working on the knots again.

## APOCRYPHA

### Apocrypha

I.

On the forgotten eighth day, man  
learned that blood  
could be struck from the body, could paint  
the face of a lamb who senses  
the knife of a nation and cries abba, abba.

II.

Sitting in this abandoned house  
passing alms

from palm to palm I wonder  
if it is for me  
to decide the hour of Jehoshaphat,

that hour coming 'round  
from the shadow between  
two pages of history, its scoliosis

that could or could  
not explain  
how this clockwork orange

proves anything  
of a watchmaker or transdimensional Higgs boson  
standing kneeling opening turning  
within me  
within us?

like a sperm  
that might as well be a god.  
The valley doesn't even darken  
from his casual disregard.

III.

There is a skeleton key  
finger bone of a saint  
it is said  
tied around the father's neck that might  
unlock  
the pearling bone-gates of the ribcage.

Is Peter there, holding  
one scale of this terrible leviathan?  
Moloch! the scribe who knows

the hour to turn that finger-key of scripture  
spoken through wax. The word  
delivers perfect meat,  
anointing even the dust of skulls.

*The dead shall rise incorruptible.* Heaven  
bound in the body,

so convinced of appendages  
and unimagined absence.

Give us this day,  
our beloved miasma.  
*Amen*

IV.

*God wants you to be rich!*

Didn't you know?

exclaims the preacher  
among his tenement choir, even  
their voices plagued. The poor

sew his suits  
from their children's skin  
sacrificed for a mouthful of dust Jesus  
blessed in Jerusalem.

*Prosperity!*

the ungood news.

He crosses his heart  
from the television screen advertising

to the holy consumer here, far  
from a world twice removed  
from itself worshipping

a plastic calf that rubbles  
the bricks of that same city into the same ruin.  
Your seed won't sow

a new Eden, the credit Gospel  
swiped again and again butchers  
another  
    thieving hand  
because the children  
hunger.

They threaten to turn the page, choking,  
*Thy kingdom come.*

V.  
The lights have gone  
down now, vigil

for the sacrament. Everybody  
black ashen  
pillars of salt. Not a breath, no  
rush of wings sacred.

Catacombs. Necropolis. Tombs  
in the heart. Everyone  
diseased  
in the unreal city.

Lay shrouds upon our heads  
and we may seem asleep, safe

for the one who quakes  
in witness  
of his own sacrifice.



Can you hear it,  
how alone it is in here?

VI.  
Pandemonium in the streets.  
By candle light,  
the brazen shadows of Christ  
—crucified to the sacristy—  
break.

It must be too much blood  
in the wine  
our need to ingest too much of anything.  
I think he is coming  
down  
    into the sepulchre where all around  
rage those who  
        scream to come in,  
        moan to be let out.

*This necronomicon be damned,  
this Messiah.*

All we have left  
are the words of a ghost, all of us  
murmuring some return, swarm

of voices, and that face won't stop looming  
attenuated, still bleeding, waiting  
in the horror

of a choice that has been  
made and unmade  
for centuries.

## Necromonger

I have been obsessed with  
                  death  
saintly  
in devotion to the absolute.

How I pray to  
                  the body atrophied,  
                  nothing less  
                                  than  
apostolic. Hear the words  
breathe  
                  through birds' wings  
                                  entropy,  
how dying is  
a great flying out, feathers  
from the mouth.

Pale rider. Falconer. Weaver  
gone beyond

this nether-passage of the loom, this burial  
of the blessed  
undead  
so much like a womb

like a chalice filling with light,

answer me, make me  
real           to myself  
with your black spindle stitching

a place for me beneath  
your cloak.

## **Salamander**

Here, beyond  
the river spilling out of  
the world  
into every hellmouth  
breathing nebulous steam, I never

expected stars to hum crystalline  
silence. I never expected

to make a hell of heaven,  
how fire burns hollow  
and clothes silk  
                                around the shoulders  
comes a light in the darkness

eclipsed, a sun at the edge of  
  everything  
dying bloody. There,  
an answer

                                cradled in pain.  
Oracle of the furthest atmosphere  
                                of the gray bodies out here drifting  
                                of the newt's milky eye

wave your lantern going out. Show us.

Point that light to the hearth  
from where you once leapt out  
from where it all goes out.

## **Litany**

Stitch this string  
of curses  
    into my hair  
    O corpse-to-be  
string a feather  
for every name spoken  
in this mockery  
in this theater.

Lucia of the blind  
and brilliant eye.  
Thomas  
without stigmata.  
Job, whose house crumbled  
into blood-stained sand.

### *Pray*

How could I forget  
the sinners every morning  
on the way

to school, to service,  
the hellmouth  
wide, milk tooth hunger

always below our feet  
behind our ears, a whisper  
in the mirror?

### *Pray*

Bring now the athame  
of soul-sealing  
    blade of black light  
    against the ram's throat, its smoke  
and sulfur. Crack  
that spell of summoning into  
my ribs my  
skull, ampitheatre of the crooked  
masks and cast, spell

the nameless child  
Solomon split in two  
the nameless innkeeper  
of Bethlehem  
the nameless crucified  
to the left and right.

*Pray*

How could I not steal  
a taste of eucharist before  
the sacrament was offered

when I was sick and so alone  
I could echo forever inside  
where Jesus wanted to live

at the inmost I can no longer  
bear to face, to feel all  
the emptiness, holy of holies?

*Pray*

all you saints  
all you doctors  
all you drowned innocents  
    in baptism  
all you lepers  
all you prophets  
all you martyrs

all you prostitutes  
all you debtors  
all you golden masters  
    the unseen "they"  
all you soldiers  
all you slaves  
all you possessed

all you in the crowd roaring to the torn out  
heart and beating before you blood

*Pray*

My father tells me to try, it couldn't  
hurt. The Lord helps those who help  
themselves helpless to themselves

