

BLACK RIVER

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## ABSTRACT

### BLACK RIVER

by Brian McKenna

*Black River* is a collection of free verse, prose poems, and dramatic monologues which form a larger meditation about the value of time spent observing nature and art. The poems explore the tensions encountered when we try to strike a balance between a life of observation and one of participation. To this end, the collection utilizes nature poetry, ekphrasis, and occasional poems to expand the temporal scope of the collection beyond the personal. The poems in *Black River* examine the individual's struggle to remain conscious of their transience in relation to perennial and cultural conceptions of time. The collection also deals with the distortions of personality caused by the passage of time. Tracing the path of personal obsessions back to their roots is an issue at the core of the collection. The narrators and characters in the poems of *Black River* try again and again to turn their consumption of the products of culture and their observation of nature toward some meaningful end, never quite certain whether they have succeeded.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I first started writing the poems included in this collection and began referring to the project as *Black River*, I had plans for the collection to be rooted in my experience of nature. However, as the project evolved, it became clear that *Black River* was not going to be the straightforward collection of nature poetry I had imagined at the outset. Instead, the *Black River* of the title came to represent a palimpsest of cumulative experience that grows ever more illegible and difficult to navigate emotionally. The *Black River* is a force that has carved deep into the lives of the speakers and characters in this collection. Rather than drawing upon a title poem as the centerpiece from which the collection draws its meaning as I had originally intended, the collection now relies more heavily on a variety of poetic modes and themes in an attempt to invite the reader to pull meaning from its depths.

While nature poetry remains a key component of the collection, a marked increase in the number of ekphrastic poems and the imprint of popular culture grew more prominent as I began compiling the poems. The nature poems that remain are used in conjunction with a number of occasional poems to create a seasonal arc within the collection that begins and ends with the New Year. The occasional poems dealing with holidays and other seasonal activities help augment this structure while simultaneously drawing attention away from strict focus on the natural world. In the end, the seasonal structure simply proved to be the most logical way to incorporate the nature and occasional poems.

Including ekphrastic poems in the collection allowed me to complicate this chronological structure. While the observation and experience of art runs parallel to life's seasonal events and occasions, the content of the art observed does not have to conform to seasonal or occasional themes. My hope is that this loose, seasonal arrangement is subtle enough that it gives the

collection a logical order without seducing the reader into drawing thematic connections between the growth and rebirth of nature and the growth of the narrators and characters in the poems. The seasonal arrangement is intended to reflect a chronological fact rather than to support any grand statement about the progress of the individual. This is also why I did not divide *Black River* into sections. I wanted the structure to reflect my interest in relentless accumulation of experience. I want the reader to make sense of the experience.

The shift away from a strict focus on the natural world and toward a balance that more closely resembles the balance of activities in everyday life occurred because one of the main concerns of my poetry is the pressure that the passage of time places on an individual's choices. Also, it becomes extremely difficult to avoid being redundant when discussing the passage of time solely within the confines of the natural world. Since time usually enters into most nature poems through discussions about the relationship between the ephemeral observer and eternal nature, I felt that a singular focus on that dynamic would have produced a predictable, one-note collection. The ekphrastic poems helped alleviate such concerns about redundancy by expanding the ways in which the subjects of transience, individual choice, and emotional response could be addressed. Including ekphrastic poems in the collection not only gave me the opportunity to discuss my own personal history in connection with works of art, it also allowed me to address present and past cultural moments, reflect on the critical and public reception of those works of art, and discuss the subject matter or event being depicted. Examining ever shifting notions of the qualities that give value to a work of art is a productive way to expose the proclivities of past and contemporary cultures, as well as establish the speaker's relation to those cultures.

The ekphrastic poem "Thomas Eakins: The Gross Clinic" illustrates the complex relationships between the personal and the cultural, and the present and the past, that I attempt to

delineate in the poems. Using Eakins' painting as a springboard, the poem explores the effects that artistic and scientific progress have on the individual in society. In the painting, Eakins depicts what was then, at the time he was painting, a cutting edge and slightly gruesome medical procedure taking place in a dark operating theatre filled with observers. As counterpoint to Dr. Gross' resolute and scholarly detachment, Eakins shows what appears to be the mother of the patient recoiling at the horror of what she sees. The painting contrasts the operation's use as an educational experience for a group of students with the personal, emotional reaction of the recoiling woman who cannot feign scientific detachment. This painting is particularly rich territory for an ekphrastic because these questions about human emotion and scientific detachment have never gone away. Additionally, the graphic nature of the scene depicted in Eakins' tour-de-force caused his painting to be censored and hotly debated upon its arrival, and obviously issues of censorship have never disappeared either.

While the narrators and characters that inhabit *Black River* explore the issue of transience, as a poet, I am more concerned with the distortions and deformities of one's personality that can be caused by an aversion to acknowledging the subject. During the composition of *Black River* I returned again and again to an eloquent essay by one of America's preeminent chroniclers of personality distortion, Tennessee Williams. The insightful comments William's offers in his 1951 essay "The Timeless World of the Play" about the human capacity to placate one's self in a variety of dubious ways may help elucidate the tensions I am trying to explore in my poems. In the essay, Williams wrote, "Time rushes toward us with its hospital tray of infinitely varied narcotics, even while it is preparing us for its inevitably fatal operation" (Williams 650). While Williams, given his predilections, may have intended the aforementioned narcotics to be interpreted less figuratively than I have done, I do believe he chose to use this

surgical metaphor to emphasize just how comprehensively and completely human beings are made captive to the absurd and uncontrollable pressures of time. Whether fear of such captivity manifests itself in an individual's laughter, tears, avoidance, or acceptance, I am interested in that reaction.

The narrators and characters who inhabit *Black River* share in the constant awareness of the captive patient. The group of obsessives that populate these poems often interact with the world around them in a manner that betrays certain desires, hopes, and fears which have become unclear to them because of the insular world they have carved out for themselves. Whether it is the narrator of the poem "Psycho" sitting in the dark, ruminating on the pleasures of consumption, or Wile E. Coyote examining his own obsessions and disappointments in the persona poem "*Overconfidentii Vulgaris* Thinks About History," there is a definite undercurrent of avoidance and repression which these speakers project onto the objects of their singular focus.

While it is true that a poem like "Psycho" obviously has a voyeuristic quality, issues of power which are usually involved in discussions of voyeurism are not my intended focus. Instead, I intend the poems to show how observation can be an absolutely insidious and beguiling substitute for action, whether that observation occurs out in nature, at the art museum, or in the movie theatre. The possibility that experiences initially stemming from a genuine desire to lead a fuller life can become a habit-forming behavior valued only for its ability to distract us from the less balanced parts of our lives is a subject of great interest to me. When we revisit artworks out of a sense of nostalgia, or immerse ourselves in nature solely for purposes of escapism or isolation, even these powerful and revelatory forces can seem static and uninspiring.

Themes of isolation and habitual behavior as a reaction to loss of time or relationships find powerful expression in the Chinese and Japanese poetic traditions which greatly influenced

this collection. The influence of Chinese and Japanese poetry can be seen in obvious and not so obvious ways throughout. The spare, declarative style of poems like “The River Otter” and “So Red,” owe a debt to my infatuation with Kenneth Rexroth’s books of translation *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* and *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*. However, there are other poems in *Black River* indebted to these traditions which may not be immediately apparent. “One of the Billions” is a poem about the ravages of age on the physical being, a theme that is central to many of the greatest Chinese poems. However, the poem takes place in the modern setting of a fast food restaurant. In the poem, a third party speaker observes a middle-aged man ordering fast food. The man is very plain looking, except in one particular aspect:

All his reckless youth is right there  
in a faded crown of ink.  
Hair he thought would never grow thin  
is in tatters, exposing tattoos  
like litter in a ditch  
after the snow in spring has gone.

The marginalization this man experiences based on the ways that his past actions have literally marked him is very much influenced by my reading of Chinese poetry.

The influence of Japanese tanka and haiku can be seen in the very short seasonal poems that appear throughout the collection. While these poems do not follow the syllabic organization of the Japanese forms, they do aim for the extreme compression of image and emotion that these forms are capable of producing. Great poems in this tradition always strike me with the immediacy of a great work of visual art. Through their brevity, these poems access the ineffable. To be successful, they cannot devolve into platitudes. The connections they suggest between image and emotion must be developed to a stage in which the clarity of image and the complexity of emotion are at their height. My aim is to find and preserve that moment of great

tension in my own work. For an example of the many decisions that go into creating this tension and compression, consider my short poem “Autumn Morning”:

Like a spider  
cold night  
has left its web—  
in the puddle’s frail lattice  
sun is caught.

Simply choosing which articles to use and when to use them in such a short poem is a choice that greatly alters the emotion. For instance, I debated at great length whether to include the word “the” in the last line. Including the article would have made one picture the sun as an embodiment, or sphere, rather than a light spreading evenly across the world. Thus, including the article would have made the sun more like an insect caught in the web of early morning ice. However, such an image does not reflect reality. I feel that poems come closer to conveying the ineffable when I do not try to force nature to conform to my similes. I feel that the ineffable exists precisely in those gaps where words fail to directly align with what is actually observed in nature.

While Chinese and Japanese poetry has exerted its influence on my writing, I am really quite omnivorous in my reading life. However, the seminars and workshops that I have participated in during my graduate school experience at Central have made me a much more purposeful reader. Both inside and outside of class, examining poetry collections with a critical eye fixed on their overall structure has been the primary focus of my graduate studies. Analyzing the collections of contemporary poets rather than focusing strictly on reputed classics proved particularly useful when I got around to putting together this collection. While reading collections by Philip Larkin, Tomas Tranströmer, or Elizabeth Bishop might be inspirational, it seems harder to learn from collections that hit all the right notes. However, examining the work

of contemporary poets who are still trying to figure out the best way to present their talents in book form was an invaluable experience that one would not get from strictly focusing on the work of deceased or late-career poets.

Putting together this collection afforded me with a terrific opportunity to see exactly what types of poems I do not write. From the early stages, it became apparent that my collection would contain an eclectic array of subject matter, but not necessarily a great amount of formal variety. Short-lined, lyrical free verse dominated the majority of the work that I had produced up to that point. My divergence from this default style over the past two years can be primarily attributed to changes in the way I read poetry. When reading poetry, I used to be almost solely concerned with drawing inspiration from the tone of a poem, which proved unproductive, since the tone of a poem is often its most inimitable part, or at least the part from which a poet can learn the least. This is not to say that certain factors that contribute to the tone of a poem are not fit to be isolated and studied. For me, however, studying poems to see how they progress rhetorically and causally has been much more important and productive.

Being blunt about the meaning I want a poem to have from the outset has led to more solid drafts that are not plagued by a desire to keep beautiful images or sounds that fail to contribute to the overall meaning of the poem. Thinking about the poem for a period of time before I begin to write, and not censoring myself so severely when I do begin to write, has helped me write with more clarity and power. In the past, obsessively shifting around the syntax of specific lines frustrated my attempts to finish drafts. Being obsessed with the music of single lines before the rhetoric and main ideas of the poem had been clarified often proved to be an excellent way to squelch my desire to finish a poem. However, close study of collections in the

graduate poetry workshops has instilled in me a drive to utilize the work of other poets in ways I had not previously envisioned.

Two examples of this newfound drive can be found in the poems “The Salmon” and “*Overconfidentii Vulgaris* Thinks About History.” Reading the short-lined, sonically rich poetry of Todd Boss greatly contributed to the structure of “The Salmon.” Focusing on the creative rhymes and enjambments he uses, particularly in his poems with very short lines, helped me generate several poems from favorite images that had been languishing in my notebooks. The central image of “The Salmon” was one that I had been thinking about for awhile, but it was not until I began to condense the language into short lines that the scenario for a poem finally emerged:

The Salmon,  
  
in a deep hole  
of broiler light,  
  
blackens. Buttered,  
peppered, lemoned  
  
to taste, the glowing  
fillet, red-orange as  
  
an exit sign, snaps  
and hisses, ready  
  
to be fished from  
the heat, released  
  
into the black  
river of the senses  
  
to dart off, through  
smoke and wine.

The extremely condensed language of this poem makes even subtle sonic changes very important

to its mood. For instance, the words “heat” and “released” create an assonant moment on which the final section of the poem pivots. During the process of winnowing down the language of this poem, the conjunction “and” was removed from between these two words. While it seems like a minor point, breaking expectations in such subtle ways really enlivened the poem. Close reading of Boss’s *Yellowrocket* within the workshop setting, as well as being forced to write in his style, helped me in ways that my own isolated reading of poets like George Oppen and Robert Creeley never did.

Another unexpected source of inspiration was Meg Kearney’s *Home By Now*, a book to which I had a lukewarm response. However, borrowing from the premise and structure of Meg Kearney’s poem “Dr. Frankenstein Learns the Mother He Never Met is Dead” to write the poem “Overconfidentii Vulgaris Thinks About History” was a breakthrough in my own work. My previous aversions to building off of another poet’s premise stemmed from the fact that I often failed to take the proper amount of time to reflect on the core meaning of that poet’s work. One could easily look at Kearney’s poem and see only the clever investment of a fictional character with details of one’s own personal history. However, upon further consideration, the character chosen to be invested with personal detail needs to be carefully considered in order to choose the perfect vessel for one’s personal obsession. Because Kearney wanted to investigate the difficulty of creating and maintaining normal familial relationships, she chose a narrator whose obsessive drive to create the impossible destroys him. Wanting to investigate the subject of a foolhardy desire to persevere, I chose Wile E. Coyote, a character whose archetypal quality most certainly is foolhardy perseverance. He is the perfect cipher for metaphors about artistic endeavors, such as writing poetry in an apparent vacuum. The product of this exercise turned out to be one of the stronger poems in *Black River*. The fact that “Overconfidentii Vulgaris Thinks About History” is

no less personal because of its second-hand provenance makes me more confident in my ability to look outward and find unexpected ways to convey personal emotion.

Closely scrutinizing the rhetoric, tone, and imagery in other poets' work has made my own poems clearer and more emotionally robust. Such close study has made me acutely aware of how subtleties of image and tone can be deployed to rouse the emotions of the reader. Being able to objectively appraise what an attentive reader of my work could possibly be expected to glean from the actual words on the page is a skill gained from true engagement with these intricacies in the work of others.

Most of all, throughout my graduate school education I have learned that vitality as a poet depends on openness to suggestion. I use the word suggestion rather than experience because I feel that poems spurred by imagination and language can become just as powerful as those based on a desire to express personal experience. I always find that my concerns as a poet and human being end up revealing themselves no matter which direction suggestive phrases or scenarios have propelled my work. Wringing the evocative power out of a particularly interesting turn of phrase offers a way to add variety to my poems by changing the entry point through which my poems emerge. Unrestrained free-writing has never proven to be an extremely effective approach for me. When I encounter a phrase that seems exceptionally striking or pregnant with meaning I use it as a focal point to write around. This combination of freedom and fixity has resulted in poems like "Taped Game" and "Waging," short poems which nicely expand and supplement themes already present in *Black River*.

This process of improvising around a theme or phrase has proven especially useful for enlivening the revision process. This is especially true of poems that recount personal experience. In a paradoxical way, adhering steadfastly to the factuality and chronology of an

experience often keeps a poem from conveying the emotions of the scene. Isolating weak stanzas or images in a poem and then taking the time to think about the stanza or images' rhetorical and emotional appeal in mind has supplanted much of the aimlessness I used to associate with the process of revision. Being productively tenacious and acquiring the set of skills required to continue refining a poem until it is imaginative and emotionally robust is my goal. Even with these skills honed, I know that drafts will always have their own incubation periods, which is precisely why it is so crucial to allow imagination and language their own place next to experience in the pantheon of poetic stimuli.

Many of the poems in *Black River* will benefit from a post-thesis cooling period before they are further revised. However, I have begun submitting some of the poems from the collection for publication, an act that is itself revealing of what I perceive to be the strengths of the collection. "The Salmon," "Overconfidentii Vulgaris Thinks About History," "Psycho," "Inheritance Spring," and "Taped Game," are all poems I have submitted for publication. After a period of further revision, I also plan to submit some of the other ekphrastic poems such as the Raoul Dufy and Thomas Eakins poems to journals which regularly publish ekphrastic poetry.

The small sampling of poems I have submitted for publication display my fixation with the blending of whimsical imagery and existential inquiry. While I definitely think my ability to invent striking metaphors, similes, and images constitutes one of my primary assets as a poet, I often worry that my poems lack emotional warmth because of this whimsicality. The process of revision can yield great similes and metaphors, but I have also found that it can bury the founding emotions of a poem. Longer narrative poems and dramatic monologues can become emotionally shrill if the story and emotion fail to unite. Time constraints placed on the production of poetry are more forgiving to short lyrics than they are to long narratives. However,

the long process of revising poems for inclusion in *Black River* has helped me develop my ability to more accurately gauge the affect a given metaphor, simile, or image is having on the emotional impact of a poem. This increased facility in appraising the unity between a poem's form and content has begun to spill over into the process of composition which has resulted in first drafts much more capable of retaining their emotional integrity throughout the process of revision. As a poet and reader, I am currently drawn to poems of brevity and compression, poems that rely heavily on metaphor, simile, and image rather than narrative for their success. When *Black River* eventually finds its way into book form, I expect that it will contain a greater number of shorter, non-narrative poems that reflect this tendency.

Though I expect this will happen, the process of putting together a collection has shown me that the experience is rewarding precisely because of its unpredictability. *Black River* continues to evolve in ways I could never have envisioned at the outset. Watching the themes of the collection cohere, fracture, and reassemble in different forms has been the great reward for all the effort I have expended. Hopefully, the generations through which these poems have progressed will result in a collection with which readers, too, will want to spend time.

The Salmon,

in a deep hole  
of broiler light,

blackens. Buttered,  
peppered, lemoned

to taste, the glowing  
fillet, red-orange as

an exit sign, snaps  
and hisses, ready

to be fished from  
the heat, released

into the black  
river of the senses

to dart off, through  
smoke and wine.

## Forecast Extended

Gushes of crowd flood the cab of the car this morning: aural spills from the fabric of a wild night lift from the speakers. Crowds from Cairo to Key West count those most famous seconds down and cheer beneath the correspondent's breezy recap of how the world spent its night last night. Eighteen hours ago, Tahrir Square was crowded but unexpectedly peaceful. Eleven hours ago, a sequined drag queen named Sushi was lowered from a high balcony, down through the dark trade winds in a giant stiletto, until its timely red stem clicked down on Duval Street, and 2012 boomed in.

All the world's confetti lies parti-colored and plastered to the streets of the world like the vomit of a clown. Morning's come, and somewhere along the vast continuum of human experience, between revolutionary politics and female impersonation, I'm awake, vaguely hungover, chauffeuring my brain to the convenience store for coffee. For hours, an unseasonably hard winter rain has been thawing the dull meat of Mid-Michigan. Rain sticks and unsticks from the tires of my car. Thick mist issues loudly from the wheelwells. The same neighborhoods shush by like always. In front of each house, mailboxes reach up like bored palm trees from their own pitted little islands of graying snow.

Supposedly, a line of arctic wind is coming down from Canada to glass all this up and drop its coat, but I can't imagine such a change. I can't picture the greasy make-up of all this mud seizing up again—this sopping momentum turning back toward romance. The world looks like a drag queen the morning after. Gone to bed a crisp, camera-ready Sushi, it has woken up a smeared and stubbly Gary Marion. But the crowds of the past persist on the radio. And as I listen to the cheers rise from Duval Street, I wonder what the moment was like when Gary Marion finally decided to keep driving off into the world, far off, until the weather he had in mind matched the weather around him. I imagine a smile breaking sweetly across his face as the first palms absolved him and the car plowed on through the warm sea air.

## Bus Stop

The shadow that he waits on  
hand and foot  
holds him  
in the way of light,  
the one  
who can't be alone  
always leaning  
on the one  
who can't be bright.

When raspingly  
he kicks a stone  
in boredom  
in the morning sun,  
his shadow  
does the silent same  
without the same  
cold reason.  
And all those thoughts  
he thinks his own  
are only his  
until the bus gets there.

This couple then  
will be forced to pull  
money from pocket  
to pay the fare,  
money the shadow  
cannot earn,  
lift, or concern  
itself with,  
though it rides for free  
on every bus  
to everywhere.

Raoul Dufy: L'Avenue du Bois de Boulogne

The gesture of a man and woman  
ends in a broken line  
where no hand  
at the end of him  
reaches for the X of her arms.

Walking down the avenue  
away from the bubbling congregation  
still painting all the party champagne,  
they find themselves  
lost in a broad blue fog—  
again, not speaking.

Lashed to the side of each other  
like a lifeboat and its ship,  
they leave a mark  
in the paint where they touch.  
Atop a surfeit of color, they move.  
A wake of strangers closes behind them  
as they walk on in silence,  
each believing themselves to be  
the bigger boat, the one  
cutting rough water  
for the other to travel through.

Empty chairs look up as they pass.  
Window squares of an apartment building  
look down from green heaven.  
Shadowy limbs of the chestnut tree  
reach further and further  
through the light of early evening,  
pulling more strangers  
onto the street  
like candy from a dish.

The jutting stubs of two  
darkly suited men  
walk off in opposite directions  
after meeting  
in a flood of ochre light.  
Two women stop to listen  
as the last note of the dark violinist's song  
lasts like a lit match, then goes out

under an applause of leaves.

If you can tell at all  
who these confections  
of lines on canvas were  
it's by their clothing.  
Top hats, jackets, parasols.  
You can see they were  
a high society struggling for distinction  
whose fluid outlines became  
just another measure of empty whole notes  
in the long song of the avenue.

But the day that surrounds them  
with all its burgeoning clout  
is unmistakable. It is one of those  
June days, when the fashion of the present  
seems as wise as fashion will ever get,  
and all the contentment of color and air  
makes you fearful of the coming night  
when you will lie down  
and think about the trick  
your heart has done again.

*Overconfidentii Vulgaris* Thinks About History

I went into debt trying to kill him,  
ordering rockets and anvils  
by mail, thinking of  
little else. But years in,  
I found myself still  
planted at the bottom  
of the same yawning canyon,  
waiting for the boulder's shadow  
to widen around me, *yipes*.

Somewhere along the way  
I stopped believing that gravity  
works the same for everyone:  
I started to read instructions,  
stopped painting black tunnels  
on the mountainside, began reflecting  
on a long past of blind curves.  
But my hunger, if limited in focus, remained  
endless in degree. I knew.... I know  
time and faith will deliver  
a smarter bomb to my door.

## January Full Moon

Every step across the field  
was a loud one. Each boot,  
a pestle on the crust of snow,  
sending its rasping gripe  
off toward the windbreak's  
snaking uplift. Each step,  
loudly scattering  
bits of the field's shell.

That night, I'd gone out  
to walk the frozen river  
at the back of the property  
and digest the steady gruel  
of all your gestures  
and become hungry again.

I walked until the cold  
began to reason  
right through my gloves  
and anger, turning me  
finally home.

And when the full moon  
shone down with  
something of your steadiness,  
I didn't compare it  
to a growing fingernail  
waiting to be clipped.  
I understood its cold charm  
was simple boredom largely writ.

In the distance, the neighbor's barn  
hoisted its roof of snow  
high into the night  
like a gleaming page.  
And I read its blankness  
and constancy, with us in mind.

A few hours out in the cold night  
had been enough  
to walk off  
my own uncharming self  
rather than tracking it

all through the house.

I remember stopping under  
the old oak in the middle of the field,  
and watching our house,  
tiny and white, spill warm squares  
of yolk-colored light  
out over the snow.  
Standing, still in my tracks,  
I watched a lone cloud pass  
the bright plate of the moon.

Bell in the Dark

Back and forth  
toward a star.

Calling all night  
at intervals.

Ring and ringing  
its deafening self.

Forging a life  
by the sound.

## Advice for a First-Time Flyer

Take magazines, a good book.  
Wear shoes that slip  
easily on and off.  
Chew gum. Relax.

The view will be better than the movie,  
so get a window seat.

A drink or two  
may help calm nerves,  
but don't have more.

It is impolite to recline in coach  
with anyone but a child behind you.

If you can, try staying  
at least six rows from the bathrooms.

If the person sitting beside you  
is obviously ill or taking  
more than their share of the seat,  
ask early for a separation  
and the flight attendant  
may be able to reseat you.

Since yours is a non-stop flight,  
expect no food.

A drink or two  
may help calm nerves,  
but don't have more.

Fear is very irrational.

It would be nearly impossible  
for the luggage bay  
to open in midflight.

A drink or two  
may help calm nerves,  
but don't have more.

You will be amazed at America:

such a thriving, populated country,  
but from the sky  
clots of community,  
large plots of land  
scrolling by in the night,  
vast dark distances huddled around  
tiny crushes of colored light.

Don't worry  
if you look out  
and the wing  
is bouncing a little.  
They're made to do that.

And remember,  
if the plane is shaking  
in the middle of the flight  
you are just  
colliding with clouds.

You *will* experience turbulence,  
but look around:  
Is everyone still reading, still sleeping?

## Fragment

Rose among the shadblow,  
the grosbeak calls  
across the muddy river,  
below the drip  
of bloodroot time.

## Inheritance Spring

When last plaques of snow  
in shade go away  
and the cool pine  
is undertaken,  
when the budded branch  
strains bluebird  
from blue air  
and coming-soons  
come at last to the bloom marquee—  
desire meets the loosening life.

The mud of the field rubs its eyes,  
the sky blows swift armor,  
and variety  
begins to wander  
out of the earth  
with ample patron saints  
on its bright mind—  
forsythia, foremost,  
puts on a crown of chaos  
as gusts rush through  
its hopeful, yellow bloodline.

## Surroundings

Midday: the ditch is burning  
a black frame  
around the tilled field.

Standing on the gravel roadside,  
gas can at your feet, you watch  
the tawny ribbons catch.

A crow, hopping,  
caws in the ear of a stone.

Out in the wide field,  
a slim wafer of a pool  
roils lamb-white cloud.

An airplane noiselessly halves  
blue March sky with contrail.

Head on hand on rake you stare  
where you know the flame must be.

Somewhere, buried in sunlight,  
its twitch and fizzle goes on  
blacking out its gains.

Midday: the ditch is burning  
under your watch. Still, no wind.

## Where Character Actors Come From

While Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys  
astonished themselves with tame revelations,

I sat Indian-style on the basketball court.  
For weeks, I watched these three leads

re-solve the same mystery every day,  
with all the subtlety of a candlestick

to the skull. Each day, after school,  
I sat in front of the stage in the big kids' gym

with the other burgeoning character actors  
feeling stray grains of sand on the floorboards

with my fingers and wondering why the word *colonel*  
was pronounced *ker-nul* if it had no *r* in it.

I'd auditioned for the play and been given  
a part with exactly one line—no—

one word. And it wasn't even a word,  
it was an action. It was an *harrumph*,

an audible, self-important, throat-clearing  
delivered by a perturbed colonel. Of course I was

simply expected to know what this word in italics  
in our play's script meant. But not unlike the rumor of *sex*

then wandering the fifth grade halls testing random  
locker combinations, I couldn't make sense of it.

Harrumph was just another of the many actions  
no one felt an urgent need to explain to me.

Never once did mein direktor, Mrs. Southworth,  
bother to correct me when, at the appointed time each day,

I walked out from behind the curtains of the dark wings  
onto the scarred wooden stage, folded my arms,

uncertainly said the word *harrumph*, then creaked

back through the bowels of the backstage

and descended the stairs to endure the rest of rehearsal  
with the other bad little Indians encamped on

the painted mascot of a beaver at half court.  
With no ride home, I had no choice but to listen

to Mrs. Southworth lob admonishments at her shy troupe  
like a jock with the big kickball. Calls for them to

speak *LOUDER* or *TOWARD THE AUDIENCE*  
echoed off the backboards of the gym and loudly

spanked its walls. At most, this had the effect of briefly  
shocking her timid targets into projection. For hours,

I sat on my harrumph watching this unfold, pondering  
all the hidden depths my fifth grade teachers had so callously

overlooked at my audition. But no amount  
of revisionist history could save me from those long hours

of rehearsing for a performance that already reeked of  
anticlimax. At a certain point the mysteries just become

so threadbare that even a kid starts to think he  
sees through them. And when it becomes clear that

no one is going to clue you in on the subtleties  
of pronunciation or the meaning of actions

like harrumph or sex, life requires an educated guess.  
I remember exactly nothing from the night of our

first performance, except for what I wore. The only thing  
I'm absolutely sure of, is that I strode out onto the dark stage

in my best friend's grandpa's World War II jacket  
and ejaculated my meaningless word into the drama dark.

And it didn't matter if I didn't know the word I was saying  
wasn't a word, because no one in the audience  
seemed to know either. What mattered was  
the bomber jacket that I wore and the cool

it conferred. What mattered was the fact that bit parts could be made to feel enormous through the use

of functional disguises and elaborate dress. And so, when a few years later the disparity between

the size of a person's role and their actual talent became even more pronounced and real, I realized

those boring rehearsal hours had been teaching me the meaning of the word harrumph from context,

like a Hardy Boy piecing things together slowly, carrying his torch deeper into the cave.

## Trout Stamp

The quartz among riverbed stones  
offers up the fish its rose.

Into water shallow, clear, and cool  
my still foot drags a whirlpool.

Surface spins and fish move on.  
The briars on the bank grow green.

Thomas Eakins: The Gross Clinic

I.

One can get used to anything,  
even a man in a three-piece suit  
holding a scalpel like a piece of chalk  
lecturing about the life in the light beside him.  
Ten years earlier, before this modern art,  
the boy's leg would have had to come off.

In the dark theatre of Eakins' painting,  
it is this proximity to the cutting edge  
that determines the amount  
of light one gets.

This is why the wild wreath  
of the doctor's gray hair  
radiates certainty  
and his forehead flares  
above the stern shadow of his face.

It's why his five assistants  
surround the body  
like a campfire. One etherizing,  
two retracting, all of them  
making sure to stay low  
so the audience can see.

And into the bright narcotic pit  
of the operating theatre  
the audience stares,  
down toward the body  
and the healing wound  
with rapt attention.

The doctor looks away,  
leaning on the hand he's planted  
on the operating table,  
while the other,  
slicked with blood  
firmly holds a scalpel  
in a vault of light.

From the shade of his brow

deliberation crawls out  
like smoke from an original fire.  
As he parses a phrase  
in the procedural silence,  
the stern union between  
his thought and action  
look like righteousness.  
Minutely, unconsciously,  
he tips the blade of the scalpel  
as he thinks, nicking  
a tendon of light.

Like fog above  
a field of melting snow  
the patient waits beside him,  
only the heft  
of an exposed thigh  
anchors his consciousness down.

## II.

Too bloody to be shown  
with the others in the gallery,  
Eakin's painting was rejected  
by the Centennial committee.  
Instead, it was put on display  
in a U.S. Army hospital ward,  
where a civil war  
had just been through  
spilling gallons.

And yet, the alizarin  
on the doctor's hand,  
the cadmium  
of the parted wound,  
and crimson spatter  
on the white cuff  
of one assistant,  
were all a step beyond  
the curtain of decency.

## III.

The mother's wrenched hands tear out  
the eyes of the unsaid.

Her contorted face tips forward.  
The black bonnet she wears  
shrieks into the face of an ape  
and scours the room with a cry of pain  
that no one cares to hear.

## Lake Huron

Alone on  
hot sand  
I listen  
to wind  
and the girl's guitar  
strum the sea  
of dune grass.

Eyes closed,  
I enjoy  
the sun  
pounding  
mandalas  
thin as  
an eyelid.

Psycho

The swamp  
takes the car  
in  
like  
a deep  
breath.

Black  
viscid  
the mud  
runs over  
each  
chrome seam  
each dead  
brake light  
each  
white fin  
  
over  
the white trunk  
with her in it.

Norman  
  
waiting  
  
hypnotized  
  
shining eyes  
riveted on  
the sinking sedan  
  
eats  
another  
piece  
of Kandy Korn.

We all  
eat  
another  
piece.

## Swimming on the Solstice

First sharp star  
like a first  
gray hair  
grows long  
in the beard  
of night above  
the black  
white pines.

Up into our  
seasonal fiction  
a crescent moon  
climbs, adding  
its comma,  
dividing  
warm clauses  
of summertime.

Happily kicking  
in the middle  
of the middle,  
our tradition,  
to stare up  
from the black lake  
to the black of space  
with all its stars,  
treading  
out where feet  
can't touch.

Hokusai: Thunder Shower at the Foot of Mount Fuji

A black cloud barks into existence  
like a stray dog at the heel of the mountain—  
its lightning outruns the chain of sound.  
Everything around but Fuji flinches.

In a dim room of a house miles distant,  
a mother sits, rocking a wailing baby in her arms.  
When thunder rattles, she lays the infant down  
and walks out to a window on their untended farm.

Another flash scintillates pine and cherry,  
then withdraws. Another boom locks its jaws  
around the present's quaking prey,  
seizing wind and rain, biting cone and berry.

As the seconds between flash and thunder grow few  
she prays for the storm to kill him or the sky to clear.  
He'll be drunk, wet, and angry, when he finally appears  
by the far pine—nothing between death and clearing will do.

## Waging

Living on kindling  
is exhausting.  
It's tough to know  
what no logs means  
until you try  
backlogging kindling  
and cannot seem  
to unstick yourself  
from the breaking  
and stoking  
of very thin things.

## Jesus was a Carpenter and He Hated that Shit

She's new for now, hunched over,  
cautiously steering the mop bucket  
around the end of the deli counter  
as the chartreuse juice,  
almost out of momentum,  
finds a few more routes to take  
in the tile grid  
around pickles and glass.

The mother, who couldn't be  
*more sorry*, has already  
taken her crying child  
*out to the car*, leaving this  
teenage girl at the center  
of the dumbest tableau. Fat pickles  
that skidded across the tile floor  
have come to rest in  
one giant Freudian slip.

Jostling its shag in tiny circles,  
she handles the mop hesitantly,  
offended by the very public nature  
of the bottom rung,  
righteous muscle of the underpaid  
yet to form in her arms.

And while she clears spill from the tiles  
like a non-smoker stubbing out  
someone else's cigarette,  
she wonders about fate's rigor,  
and whether it's rigorous enough  
to govern pickle spills  
and those who clean them up.

She wonders if there's a piece  
of glass in the chartreuse juice  
that's meant to cut.  
And this thought slips out  
as a barely audible  
unmistakable *fuck*.

## Outside the St. Mary's Hospital Gift Shop

With the doors closed  
and the sign turned  
low light climbs  
from the cold belly  
of the refrigerator  
where carnations and roses  
go on lasting.

The clutch of Mylar hearts  
tied to the refrigerator's handle  
nod on their leashes  
afloat in consumer twilight,  
perusing a current  
of unstirred air.

Glow stretches out  
on the People magazines  
and lulls in the mints,  
glints in the black plastic eyes  
of a plush bestiary.

At two in the morning  
this is what prayers  
look like. New issues, flowers,  
sweets, little bears and tigers,  
all of them locked behind  
glass walls, waiting  
for future purchase.  
Everything inside for sale.  
Right now, you can't buy a thing.

Egrets

I want them to be the hopeful sign  
that I can't make them be.

Because they fool.

They make me say, *this time*  
every time I ride out  
to see them come in.

*This time, I'll translate an obscurity  
gracefully.*

But for all of my trying,  
I can get  
only so close.

Often, when they arrive at sunset,  
even with eyes fixed and interrogating  
the sky above the tree line  
that backs the swamp,

I still miss them.

I miss them  
as they lean from nowhere  
down through a golden dowse  
of sunlight  
each white one choosing  
when to shatter from the whirl, choosing  
when to tumble, splay,  
join back in, and finally,

when to alight in the dead tree  
out in the middle  
like a whim.

I arrange equivalents for light.  
I render and rough-study:  
each time, end confounded,  
and leave them as they choose  
the last best branch  
and settle in  
for another cool night

under the moon here,  
perched unconscious  
and baffled white.

In a few weeks  
they'll be gone:  
lost in the long transit  
of another year.

And these pages will be  
pacifier and souvenir,  
the revenant of a decision  
not to render anymore,  
ink being too amenable,  
and the page  
being endless.

I've been crumpling  
little bits of paper  
and throwing them out  
as far as I can  
into the dark water  
under the tree  
to train them, to try  
to coax them down  
to instill in them  
a hunger for the page.

I've been scattering pieces  
in the high grass nearer the trail.

I dropped one  
at my feet  
and a lone egret  
awkwardly considered,  
wary steps bringing  
its cursive shadow  
and fixed eye  
close enough for me to see  
he nearly craved  
enough to risk it.

North of Superior

That cheap lens did little justice  
to the shoreline  
west of Katherine's Cove.

And while it's slander  
what the camera's done,  
it is also exceedingly common  
to pore over a halted scene  
to end up wishing  
it would move  
and move closer.

It's common to want things over:  
to make a distant voice  
break upon the shore of our hearing.

Artifact  
poor photograph  
feather of the flown:  
even what the lichen  
shouted brightly through the wind  
is a whisper here.

You can barely see  
its chartreuse  
on the granite face  
fainter still  
its gray concentrics  
on the quartz  
just cracks  
those fissures  
packed firmly  
dark green;

and the gruff scales  
and mint trailings  
are completely gone.

That was a shore of rounds and roams  
of gneiss and granite sprawl  
around two slight bays  
we talked across  
little bays ramped around with stoic rock

for the lake to be loud against  
and the waves  
to wind down upon.

But here no waves run  
to white conclusion.  
The draw, the magnetism  
of one thing following  
after another  
after another  
has ended.

The grasses  
stand transfixed  
around the bayberry:  
a blonde ring biding  
on the palm of the rock  
without wind, without  
the cool scent of balsam  
stacked in the sun.

A shutter in October  
froze ritual and rite:  
seized the moment  
going out:  
stayed the sight  
at the lake's sliding verge  
where the pipit dithered  
and the water crawled  
coldly back to itself  
through gamboling bands of light  
flexing in the bluish shallows  
over basalt, rose, and rhyolite  
those heavy stones that swayed color  
through the water's beveled pane  
slate, pale pink, mint green.

The photograph holds  
the muted colors  
of a bright stone dried:  
and a voice in its wind  
that will not carry.

## So Red

An apple rots  
back into  
orchard soil  
with a laughter  
only bees can hear.

Dracula has Risen from the Grave (Hammer Films, 1968)

Worldly, tall, debonair,  
he dreams of the blood  
that the warm girls wear  
out on their balconies  
in the faux moonlight.

Checking his make-up  
before the scene,  
he meets his bloodshot eyes  
in the mirror again. Notices  
how the laugh lines  
around his fangs,  
have deepened  
in the past few years.  
He blows smoke hard  
at his reflection, ashes  
in the tray, and  
makes his way  
out to the mark.

Even in this, the summer  
after the summer of love,  
he knows the script  
will be the same.  
She will open her  
balcony door to him  
as if by premonition.  
And all the stakes of the past  
won't compel her not  
to do what Draculas  
always make her do.

When he arrives  
on the set and eases  
through the bedroom door,  
she's already there,  
out on the balcony  
leaning on the plastic-iron rail,  
staring into the night  
over tile rooftops  
and painted depths.

Above the tiny hamlet

of her first big break,  
she watches smoke ooze  
from a chimney pipe  
and wonders what things were like  
before things were like movies.

She thinks about how  
good it feels to be  
plucked and placed here.  
To be given a pocketful and  
have all these eyes on you.

For a long time,  
he stands behind her,  
smoking, silently drinking  
the sight of her in,  
his smoke tugging gently  
at fabric of her senses  
until she turns  
and meets his laughing face  
as he crosses the marble floor  
to introduce himself.

## Taped Game

Don't tell me  
how it ends.

Don't tell me  
who wins.

I've stayed away  
from everyone.

What's happened  
hasn't happened

on the diamond  
of my mind.

Pieter Claesz: Little Breakfast

Herring, roll, and beer.  
To view this still life,  
is to sit down to a sober meal  
away from all striving,  
as if, the long-awaited  
event in our life  
has escaped like steam  
from a lobster's cracking.

And from those vibrant  
heaps of De Heem,  
we return to  
the subdued palette  
of the daily, where  
Claesz has bussed  
all color from the table.

The long bright curls  
of lemon rind,  
the grape stems  
and fine silver,  
the peach pits  
and the dregs of wine,  
all trace of  
the night before.

## One of the Billions

All his reckless youth is right there  
in a faded crown of ink.  
Hair he thought would never grow thin  
is in tatters, exposing tattoos  
like litter in a ditch  
after the snow in spring has gone.

Waiting for my cheeseburger and fries  
I watch as the man looks down  
to dig the wallet from his navy blue work pants  
and pay for his meal.  
I watch as the teenage cashier's eyes  
begin to shine with held in laughter.

Autumn Morning

Cold night  
like a spider  
has left its web—  
in the puddle's frail lattice  
sun is caught.

The River Otter,

while murk still clouds  
the shallows where the struggle was,  
cocks his dripping head  
and gorges at the haul-out spot.  
Below the dark broach of his den,  
he gnaws the belly of the carp  
until it blooms, then blooms  
more brightly red.

Ribbons of dry grass  
and willow leaves  
stick to the fish's sides.  
Harvest distance  
dilates the sky.  
The oxbow settles.  
Alone with his fat fish  
the otter hunches.  
The wrinkled sheet  
of the water's reflection  
pulls tight.

## Dark White

The town has changed, that house is gone,  
those stairs I used to climb are air,  
the bed that childhood sat upon,  
its window full of snow and prayer.

In the room where the world first fell into my eyes,  
before its sights grew deep with unsurprise,  
I would stare out toward the downtown night  
through the world's new purchase, falling thin and white.

## Lines Arranged Around the New Year

Mind

to mind.

Brought to mind.

Never brought to mind

and never brought to mind.

Forgot and never brought to mind.

Be forgot and never brought to mind.

Acquaintance, be forgot and never brought to mind.

Old acquaintance, be forgot and never brought to mind.

Should old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind?

Old acquaintance, be forgot and never brought to mind.

Acquaintance, be forgot and never brought to mind.

Be forgot and never brought to mind.

Forgot and never brought to mind

and never brought to mind.

Never brought to mind.

Brought to mind

to mind.

Mind.