

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

I Am Still on My Way

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/19z0h9jx>

Author

Macdonald, Dylan

Publication Date

2020

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

I Am Still on My Way

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in English

by

Dylan Macdonald

Thesis Committee:
Professor Amy Gerstler, Chair
Professor Michael Ryan
Professor Oren Izenberg

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	Page iv
ASTRACTOF THESIS	v
Million Dollar Ideas	1
Small Steps	2
We Stayed at a Best Western in Laval, Quebec for Two Weeks After Holly Died	3
They Don't Want to See Your Eyes	4
Fragments of the First Two Weeks	5
GODISNOWHERE	7
I've Only Seen Gold Once	8
She Can't Stand Much Longer on the <i>City 6</i> Bus	9
Living in the Moment: 5 a.m. on a Tuesday	10
I Am Still on My Way	11
At the Equator of my Continuing	12
Another Argument Over the Naming of Children We Won't Have	13
Faded Yellow Butterflies Fly Above Our Juniper Bush	15
The Birds and The Bees	16
After Her Stroke, My Eighteen-Year-Old Cat Wants Desperately to be Baptized	17
Fear of the Dentist	18
If You Were Me	19
Fear of Flying	20
Planned Obsolescence	21
Cobwebs	22

Quarantine	23
Circles at Infinity	25
Through the Window	26
The Heaven with Basketball	27
Thirteen Mirrors	29
Fox	31
A Dream from an Outsider's Perspective	32
The Origin of a Phrase	33
Instructions on People Watching	34
Alternate Endings	35

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgements to the editors of the following publications, in which several of these poems first appeared, sometimes in earlier versions:

Bitter Oleander: “Faded Yellow Butterflies Fly Above Our Juniper Bush,” “I’ve Only Seen Gold Once”

Columbia Journal Online: “I Am Still on My Way,” “Living in the Moment: 5 a.m. on a Tuesday,” “She Can’t Stand Much Longer on the *City 6* Bus,” “They Don’t Want to See Your Eyes,” “We Stayed at a Best Western in Laval, Quebec for Two Weeks After Holly Died”

Flint Hills Review: “If You Were Me”

Whiskey Island: “Planned Obsolescence”

Firstly, thank you to my parents and my friends for providing me with life and friendship, respectively.

Also thank you to the University of California, Irvine and the wonderful teachers employed there: specifically, Amy Gerstler and Michael Ryan and Oren Izenberg. And thank you to my cohort, for reading my submissions and always providing me with excellent feedback. I am grateful for the TAsip provided to me by the Department of English in the School of Humanities as a form of financial support.

Also, I am grateful to God.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

I Am Still on My Way

By

Dylan Macdonald

Master of Fine Arts in English

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Amy Gerstler, Chair

These poems are invested in measuring, or perhaps simply noticing, the distance between things— person A and person B, the external and internal, life and death, etc.

Million Dollar Ideas

A pill that keeps you hydrated
while you sleep. Seedless avocados.
A do-over machine. Uncle once said
he'd pay a million dollars for his body
to burn only visceral fat. A monthly
infusion that boosts the immune system
and unclogs every artery. A strainer
so fine it sifts salt from seawater.
A restaurant where you can dine with the dead
for the duration of one meal.
Imagine Aunt Jenny sitting, perfect
posture, across from him again,
wearing a crown of freshly cut grass
to cover her new smell. She's not sexy
any more, he thinks, and suddenly feels
silly for all the miles he's run
on the treadmill. That's a million
dollar idea: running in place. Swimming
pools. Hearing aids. Face cream. My barber
says every barber he knows is trying
to invent a cordless hairdryer.
Imagine an ice rink where you're allowed
to wear your sneakers. Broccoli that tastes
like fried chicken. A dating app where you
bring your dogs along. Uncle met Lorna
on the internet, a website for widows
and widowers. They honeymooned
at Lenin's Mausoleum. He looked so *real*,
Lorna says a second time, Imagine if
everybody who ever lived was stuffed.
She scratches at Uncle's forearm with
an acrylic nail. Can you imagine that?

Small Steps

Gripping tightly the mechanical bull's saddle
with their thin thighs, they held on to knowing
they'd get flung into the mat with only enough time
to dust their knees before walking to their hotel—
stars pressing hands of light into the wet cement
of their eyelids, and the foxes beside the sidewalk
taking such small steps as if they understood
the connection between moss and static
electricity. But a taxi always pulls up
beside them and offers a way back for five cents
a second; they don't remember the address,
or have, for that matter, enough change to waste
trying to recall whether they've passed Fourth
and Washington. Or were they proving a point, again:
if everything is spinning like the olive on the
eighth martini, doesn't speeding to work at Alan's
Bowling Alley lose some importance? Or maybe
buffing the shoes has never mattered more?
But pretending that anything is exactly
as important to you as it is to me
is its own type of cruelty. This is what I believe:
those two will always be alive, but the excitement
in their kiss will become harder to find. For instance,
Mrs. Aldrin, in the lobby, tried to paint the ocean
for forty-five years, from her front porch
in Wimberley, Texas, never knowing how quickly
the waves moved in relation to the shore. And they
got here, to the parking lot, just below my window,
alarmingly fast, considering they grew almost
five feet in that first decade, and that between
calculus and piano lessons, they barely found
the time to plant, in a pot on a windowsill,
a yellow flower for anyone passing by to glance.

We Stayed at a Best Western in Laval, Quebec for Two Weeks After Holly Died

We were easily affected by ideas—having to take the bus, for example, kept us from visiting the *Bodies* exhibit, which had a section dedicated to observing the cardiovascular response to heart attacks. Defibrillators were close by so that anyone who pleased could practice shocking the heart back into submission. The heart has only ever responded to brutish force. We could have learned so much at *Musee Armand Frappier*: how blood flows against gravity, or what exactly skin is. What is the sky made of beyond color? Why doesn't cherry ice cream taste exactly like a cherry? A cherry is sensational. Thin red fibers cling to the seeds we spit, gaily, into the yard, hoping that a cherry tree would grow. But the black squirrels eat most of the seeds, and the others, I assume, lack potential. Perhaps our ground lacks fertility.

They Don't Want to See Your Eyes

They'd rather see
the scar
above your knee,
beige
like the bald blackbird's
skin—

or crust
the candy coating
from their medicine
to taste the bitter pill
beneath.

They don't want to see your eyes.

They'd rather hear
your cartilage crack
like the cement
the palm's parched root
has pushed out of place,

or feel
the sun's soft
heat
glisten off the arch
of your wet foot.

Fragments of the First Two Weeks
After Malachi Black

I.
It began: dark red:
the back of an eyelid.

I.
Forced from somewhere
freshly broken,
without a minute
to mourn the loss of warmth,
head first into a light
blue glove.

I.
A peal of bells
and a mobile.

I.
Milk warm as blood,
a little grittier.

I.
My nose and how it's
connected to my throat,
the wiggle in my toes,
the amusement of
those standing over me.

I.
What was that bitter
smell— lemons rotting
on branches outside
my window?

I.
The inequality
of heat in a touch—
having to adjust
to the pain that came
with my mother's hand
patting my back.

I.
The vomiting and

not wanting to be
alive.

I.
The knowing that
something was growing
in my gums.

I.
The knowing that
that there was more
to come.

I.
My first dream and the
weak screams after waking.

I.
I understood death
differently then—
as the smell of lemons
and a memory
of somewhere else.

I.
There was a stuffed bear
wearing a raincoat
and a blue blanket.

I.
Someone put a pillow
under my head.

GODISNOWHERE

It's my 27th Birthday and I'm walking back
from Wal-Mart to the hotel where I've been
living the past fourteen months. No sidewalks.
I bought a bag of groceries and an upright
vacuum to celebrate. To the right,
a field and a small river. To the left,
a car dealership. On the hood of one
Volvo in pink spray-paint, GODISNOWHERE.
Two men with buckets and washcloths try
to scrub it off. This is exactly the dusty
puzzlement I was trying to avoid today.
Yesterday I dropped a bowl of spaghetti
in my shower and felt quite certain the God
of humming lights was disappointed
in me. A body only has a birthday once,
which is spent trying to forget all the time
devoted to comfort in the last life,
only for every leg of the embryo to grow
too large to curl up in sleep. It's summer
again. There's a place for helicopters
to land up ahead. You'd think by the way
everyone was covering their eyes with
their elbows that one was landing now.
A wind thick with dead moths and dandelions.
Then I felt it too, the artichoke in my chest
losing its leaves. A portion of the N
coils inside one man's upper most palm line,
and looking deep into the soapy water
he confesses, I never really kissed
Annie Robinson in the fifth grade.
Sure you did, the other man says,
she was the prettiest girl I ever saw.

I've Only Seen Gold Once

a short man with a metal detector scooped it from
the sand is filling up with small waves white hills blending
into the lighthouse attendant's lunch break
at 2 A.M. the flying fish circle his house
hoping for a breadcrumb their scales glistening like
broken stars above the night are rolling over on their sides
again he is throwing an empty water bottle into
the wrinkled water swells as it sinks as it shatters
the bottle becomes a light bulb stripped of its filament
unable to shine it floats instead toward the ocean's eye socket
whirling in love is the only way to make the day turn
around and throw it again and again I see the yellow
light approaching like a spangled moment before a memory
I won't forget the flying fish also get tired at night

She Can't Stand Much Longer on the *City 6* Bus

I wish she would
unzip her high-heeled shoes, and step
each arched foot
onto the black rubber
floor. The honeysuckle scent
of summer weighs upon her wrist, bending
it backward: the breeze lifts, gently, the growing golden grain— forever
taller than the grass could hope to be. I imagine
she spends her days sweeping
the fallen hair from the floor
of a barbershop; doing her part to keep our part
of the world. The ring, made of thread, on her thumb
stains, red, her thick, young
skin. Her toes
ache; the meat beside her left shin trembles.
I'd like to believe that, during her lunch break,
she swims.

Living in the Moment: 5 a.m. on a Tuesday

There is a sink a bulb a door the checkered floor
faucets I feel heat from some
small somewhere I can't recall the space
between the bottom of the door and the beginning
of the checkered floor water pours from the faucet
to my hand through my hand the sink the sink
the white, yellowing white, sink
where you washed the blush
from your cheek, sung out of key, and tasted
the stale air falling in from the windowsill above.
The shell of a crab, buried under the sand, floated
on the sea's foam. Every frozen raspberry once shook
loose from a slumped bush: red and perennial.

I Am Still on My Way

Doesn't he know it's spring? Thick pollen
in the breeze and a hedgehog in a bush.
I sneeze. The slow-walking man, thirty yards
ahead, keeps looking over his shoulder.
He doesn't know me. He's wearing a winter
coat, has thick yellow hair. The grass
is uncut, and I'm so far from home.
Heat burns the bottoms of his feet,
urging him forward, but he wastes away
his energy looking back at me. I wish
I could pluck the longest strand of grass
from the damp earth and write a green
message on the papier-mâché sky:
I am still on my way. He's almost reached
the corner now. A sunflower field
somewhere wilts as a cloud shadows the sun.
I pass the patch of grass where we lay
submerged, seasons ago. It's night again
and the grass looks soft and dark like
hairs inside your ear. The slow-walking
man wears fear in his face when he turns
to see if I'm still here. If I wanted
to hurt him, I would have by now. Cold
freezes my tongue, and my lungs churn
the lean wind fat. I cough it back into
the air where it sways, white, for a moment,
before falling. I wish he'd offer me his coat.

At the Equator of my Continuing

I.

In sleep, before dream, I visit
the coastline of my childhood—
Ophelia picking bugs from the Vizsla's
fur, father's ghost, still inside father's body,
whispering through his feet about time,
cousin in the river holding his breath.
It is always summer in my memory.
Dune grass and cracked stones. Science tells us
it's peaceful, cousin says, to drown.
Father only offers advice from
his hammock— tomorrow everyone
will look like the lady who left you
yesterday, and doctors are just humans
with reflex hammers. Look how fatherly
he lifts his chin, his fat criss-crossed
in the hammock. His toenails wooden.

II.

I've reached the age where everyone I know
is checking for lumps and investing
in an IRA. Ophelia can't have children.
Some combination of fibroids
and endometriosis. It's raining
at the equator of my continuing,
and there's a brown bag of bananas
with a note in father's handwriting
losing its legibility. When cousin
finally exhaled, each breath bubbled
so round, and taut at the edges, that
I could almost pinch one between
my index finger and my thumb.

III.

In sleep, after dream, the hoofs sound heavy
and the mare is slowing down. She looks out
from her snowcap, over the fragments
of imagined futures. Someone is hanging
bright, fresh laundry. Her cold nose gloves
the smell. The last horse of my mind.
She's grayed around her eyes, and the Vizsla
to her left has, somewhere along the path,
gotten tangled in a loose string of Christmas lights.

Another Argument Over the Naming of Children We Won't Have

Ophelia can't have children,
but still we list the names of dead
family or old actors we'd consider
good middle names. A girl, we think,
would have a round face and long
thin arms like a drawing, and we'd
dress her in a yellow rain coat even
on days without rain. She'd look like
a Gracey, or possibly a Chelsea, after
Ophelia's dead aunt, who also had
some combination of fibroids
and bad luck prevent her from having kids.
Our son would be surprisingly hairy
and his middle name would be Isaac
after the Biblical Isaac. On all this,
we agree. And that he'd be serious
and dress in a small suit and tie.
But I want to name him Hamlet
after my father and after myself
and Ophelia, who has been gently
shooing away a mosquito with her
toothbrush, wants to name him
anything but Hamlet. She gargles
with her whitening mouthwash,
then swallows a pill, without water,
for her endometriosis. It's raining
over Denmark. My shower window
is stained on both sides and the cornfields
look like a painting returning to paint.
I think I see a donkey, muddy and fat
and smiling with perfectly square teeth.
And now I see a dozen donkeys, but
lose the happy one. On the globe
of this argument we are only now
at the equator. My continuing,
like a wind, might push her too far north
or south. Still, I say what I always say:
Sarah was 90 when she had Isaac.
And she says what she always says,
something about free will and
predestination, about Jon Calvin,
about believing in a world
already written, in a name signed
over and over again in a language

that allows us, in a kingdom,
to think so little of anyone but
ourselves. She hasn't flossed yet.
It surprises me every time she
unspools six inches and returns
to her teeth, but by shape of her face
in the fog of the mirror, I suspect
it doesn't surprise her anymore.

Faded Yellow Butterflies Fly Above Our Juniper Bush

Sadie says their wings are woven
from fool's gold; not the type you buy
in a small burlap sack from *Sheriff and Son's Novelty Shop*;
the type you find in a mine, and think,
for a moment, you are rich.

They are every child's
first dream. We, each of us, lay
inside a faded wing.
*Can you imagine waking from
your first dream?* Sadie says.

They are the sand inside
the dried clam's shell—
broken golden
bodies.

The Birds and The Bees
For RJ

It is always best to wait. Unless,
of course, you are accident-prone,
in which case you must hurry.

If, for instance, you have ever cut
deep into a thumb, mistaking
it for a yam, or if the stove

ever filled your home with gas
from night until morning, then
it is best to get to it

as soon as you can. The trick
will be meeting someone, which requires
sweating a little less than you may

be comfortable with. There is often food.
Sometimes, wine. And then there is love,
which, like the wine, will make you sleepy

almost immediately; if it's strong
enough, you'll want to hibernate:
pad the love on all sides with fat

and wait it out. This can take winters.
After your nap it will be time
for sex. Now, you are low

on electrolytes, it smells like warm
cucumbers; now, she's hugging her knees
to her chest, still rotating her hips,

something churning: waves pulling
yellow roses apart, petal
by petal. Now, it is time, again,

to stock up on batteries
for all the alarms hanging
by wires from your ceiling.

After Her Stroke, My Eighteen-Year-Old Cat Wants Desperately to be Baptized

And I don't blame her, but if she's not careful
she'll drown herself dunking her head so fervently
into the water cups I leave lying about.

I've had to pull her head out, like a good priest,
seven times, now. Each time she looks around
like she's made it to heaven—*my bed is here,*

she seems to say, *and my toy mouse!* But somehow
she realizes. Perhaps it's the smell of the garbage
bags collecting on the kitchen counter,

or the arrhythmic beeping of my broken fridge.
This is not heaven, she says with her wet ears,
which is a hell of a thing for my cat to say to me.

Fear of the Dentist

It's Christmas Eve like the melody between the rain
on the windows. Large enough for a deer
balancing soft new muscles on its thin legs
to look through with dumb eyes and wonder
what religion— the pink gloves snapping, my jaw
prematurely stretched to my collar bone— I am taking
part in tonight. And the king, my father,
nearly 500-pounds, is in the waiting room, waiting.
Fifty years ago, his father, another king, told him—
humid under the glass in the court yard, the branches
of the banana tree heavier with each imagining—
that a dentist's waiting room is where one goes when
one is ready to die. To signal to some lower-case god
or upper-case Germ that there is a home for rent beyond
the nose hairs. Somewhere in the ninety-eight-degree liquid
of the mind. Except grandpa didn't call it dying.
He called it giving up the ghost. And he wasn't kneeling
beside my father, but rather hollering up at his feet,
which dangled like dark fruit on a trembled branch.
How many iterations of a body does a person get
in a lifetime? Honestly, I'd be mad— the way an old
man, seeing years of plaque collected behind his bottom teeth,
might be mad at no one in particular— if the dentist's hand
wasn't already in my mouth. And the cavity didn't hurt
until he asked me to open and pushed the drill in.
Now we are as carolers— the drill, the dentist, and I—
to the deer. We are rehearsing for her, and tonight
we'll go door to door in the Denmark of my mind
where people are selling plastic emeralds to one another,
blow drying their only pairs of shoes over bathroom sinks,
surprising their reflections in ornaments, and where nobody,
nobody has a good enough excuse to give up.

If You Were Me

You would
sip your bitters and soda while
you write— dripping your basin
of ink onto the parchment, smudging it hopefully
onto your pointer finger, trying only to draw the lines
above the eyebrow. You would stretch your
hamstrings over the fretboard of the grey guitar
your mother set down years ago, and thumb
a few mismatching notes: tumbleweeds in winter
sing for the cacti; caterpillars are born hot
and will never be angels. You would not eat the ginger root
beside your sliced tuna, but might rub
a strip of it on your wrist, as if it were cologne—
(I've pressed my thumbs into your hips—
the smell of your lips: strawberries popping in a bush on
a 127-degree summer day.) You could not see the edge of things,
if you were me,
the lines between
states, countries, a cresting wave and the surrounding sky: the sun sets
every evening, in the same place and in the same gregarious way.
You can be alone and
you can hum that song you can't quite recall
as the shower does its best to drown your old-man voice.

Fear of Flying

You unfold fifty sheets in each satin eye
to dress the world outside in doll's clothing.
A red house, an empty field, a mountain.
And your optic nerve is lined with the
spongy faith that you've been here before.
Memories of relief, like blood-red houses
with little else around. The air funneling
thinly through the vent rests on your skin
with the limpness of hospital air,
and you nudge your sleeping neighbor's elbow
off the shared armrest. Sometimes you worry
that if given the choice you'd too easily
choose to die. The way one might choose to faint
in a courtroom. Not with desire, but just
to move on to whatever gum-colored
country comes next. The pressure point between
your forefinger and thumb is empty.
Like a field bereft of bugs. Like a green
olive without the pimento. You can
only understand yourself relatively
at this height. The uniforms rolling their
metal boxes of Ginger Ale toward you,
the carpet that tendons this temporary
city together, and the pillbox hats. Even
the mountain seems impossible without them.

Planned Obsolescence

On our last day together, Professor Bradbury stands lecturing for just under three hours about technology, an old red brick in his hand, and you pass me a folded note as if we are teenagers again *We should, if we can, leave. Also, What if the stars burn red and backward into themselves like lit cigarettes?* I cannot follow you. Who would feed my cat? And what would we do about my brand-new coffee maker? Tomorrow or the next day try not to stare for too long at the eighty-five-year-old man on the street corner (who resembles in many ways Professor Bradbury, who resembles in many ways your father, who resembles in many ways you) laughing out loud at the leaves— faded yellow, red, orange, but, still, mostly green— falling like rain around him.

Cobwebs

Martha started walking into cobwebs
on her way to her daughter's funeral.
Everywhere she went she walked into
a cobweb: work, church, bars, family dinners.
Nearly weightless but not weightless,
their effect was clear— Martha stopped
her nightly jogging, then quit her job
at the arboretum, then built a nest
around her chair in the living room:
a circle of sliced turkey, blankets
and brooms, a bathrobe, two flyswatters,
one of which she used as an ashtray.
Still, every day, passing through the doorway
of her bathroom she walked into a cobweb.
These seconds are heavy enough, she thought,
untangling a strand from her eyelashes.
Two days before her ninetieth birthday,
which would also be the day she died,
Martha realized she had given her life
to cobwebs. No part of her ceiling
was visible, and like snow, exoskeletons
drifted down from the silver sky.
This is my life's work, she thought, suddenly
closing the windows, turning off the fans.
These are the sinews of my grief, she thought,
reaching for a spider the shaky way
a dying woman reaches for a nearby hand.

Quarantine

Nobody was with him
on the 40th day of his hallucination—
rather, his meditation: a breath
and what surrounds it, the fluid
in his left ankle's joint capsule stilled,
the vacuumed hum of a bell struck
behind the horizon of an eyelid
greened from staring too long into a lamp.

Nobody was with him
and where was he? Gliding atop a pool
noodle of thought like a yellow
caterpillar in the Adriatic Sea,
had he given up on returning to his
body, worn and teeming with gravity?

*

Body, worn and teeming with gravity,
this is what would happen if separated
from the soul: you'd stiffen around
the knees and neck and blister around
the lips and fingertips and bloat to twice
your size as if you were celebrating
your independence. Look at me,
you'd seem to say. Look what I can do now.

And the soul, in some kaleidoscopic
darkness, would see a figure dressed as a
doctor on a riverbank, wearing an
instrument around his neck to measure
loneliness. To live in this interstitial space:
memories thin as the shadows clouds leave.

*

Memories thin as shadows; the clouds leave
the sky; a wooden gate; a welcome mat;
a backpack filled with chalk drawn maps;
How gently the winds comb the roses here.
Had the soul gone inward or outward
or sideward? And if it were rejoined
by some intervention to the body
what could fairly be expected of it, then?

The lamps in apartment 201 were bright.
The shades were drawn. The kitchenette
was clean. His body— the bottom half
folded over itself, the top half slumped—
was barely more than a fixture screwed
to the floor, but Nobody was with him
and Nobody squatted to lift him up,
by the under arms, propping him against
the sink, where Nobody, quietly,
splashed warm water on his face, unlocked
the front door, and led him out into
the hallway toward the vending machines.

Circles at Infinity

however it happens
to end

bursting from
between the leaves

showering the clay
in her hands

the thirsty earth
flowers like rain

of life I will
remember the end

I will remember
the embryo of life

flowering like rain
thirsty for the earth

in her hands
clay showers

leaves bursting
between green embryos

however it happens

Through the Window

I try to paint someone I've never seen before
pink and wondering if the sink is overflowing
in her kitchen she's peeling the skin from
her foot is arched like a stiletto resting
on the coffee table a half-eaten tomato
drizzled with salt she is too young to fall
asleep sitting up in a chair devoting a part
of each day to distraction the art of getting by
sipping coffee petting the cat after work
she loosened her knotted hair as if
coming home was the whole point of
leaving the tomato on the table she opens
the window, through the window, the clouds
say they love every child equally, but secretly
the first snowflake was their favorite and the last
raindrop caught between the blades of her
brown hair never lived up to expectations.

The Heaven with Basketball

Not the one you are thinking of— with the wings
where everyone is fat with happiness. A jump shot
wouldn't carry much currency there. Not the one
on earth, where everything is made right
or at least reversed, either. Where mother
doesn't need cortisone for the arthritis
in her thumbs, but she never quite regains
the handle she had when she was young.
Where uncle starts drinking carrot juice,
loses twenty-five pounds, but his post-game
suffers. And certainly not the heaven
that is the peace of dying without coming back.

I'm talking about the heaven with basketball,
with sweat and bruised ribs. Where, if
you're shooting well, a defender might put
his foot under yours to sprain your ankle.
With jump-balls and buzzer-beaters and referees.
Where the man in the third row is cheering
for his son, and the man behind him is cheering
too. He came alone. He has never seen the Lakers
play before, and Duncan, off balance, barely
looking at the rim, just hit a go-ahead fadeaway over
Shaq, from the top of the key, with .4 seconds left.

The Spurs double Kobe, who, less than twenty
seconds before Duncan's shot, hit a long two
to give the Lakers the lead, and defend against
the lob to Shaq who is rolling to the rim. Fisher
darts free from the stack, but the shot he makes
couldn't be made in .4 seconds, the man in the fourth
row shouts to his neighbor. When he watches
it later, at home, for the fifteenth time, he admits
to the empty can in his hand that he wanted
the shot to count. He's just finished a twelve-pack
of Budweiser and, knowing he won't sleep,
he walks, a basketball under his arm, out into
the night below the trees. The darkness
in San Antonio is broken only occasionally

by headlights or lightning bugs, and when
he tries to dribble, he loses the ball into the
street to his right or the shrubbery to his left.
It's almost five in the morning by the time

he finds the park, and the moon has turned dim
with dawn. He stands at the ridge of the park
like a man who has confused his own dreams
with the dreams of giants. Spread out in front
of him are eight cement courts, and on each one,
at least three children. All practicing that same shot.

Thirteen Mirrors

I.

the black rubber of the *City 6* bus is
a mirror the way it jostles you
outside of yourself you watch as you stumble
to find a seat on the bus is a quarter full
when he sits next to you in his sun hat
and his high-top sneakers he is taking them
off his feet are pruned and arched
as they tremble out of his socks they reveal
themselves as two more mirrors you can't see
them without seeing yourself see them
they smell of honeysuckle and vinegar summer
pressed into the sweat around his big toe is
a thread string stains the knuckle so red
so thick you can see it pulse the night

II.

so thick you can see it pulse the night
is a mirror a broken femur in fall
a mirror is an elevator in a building with
over thirty floors is snow a mirror
when you are walking under
the moon lowers itself to your
eyeline grief the brightest mirror
the one through which you can only see
yourself and his sun hat is a mirror
when the sun is behind the clouds and you
want to go home before it sets to shelter
yourself from the night that pulses again
a mirror is a medley of shrinking space
around you the bus is full and you are

III.

around you the bus is full and you are
lifted up like a golf ball struck
with a wedge in spring is the *City*
6 bus where this floating began twisting
lightness around your broken edge
was it not the fog of your too-tight goggles
each splash you swallowed was a mirror
blued by the tint of the pool water

where the shadow goes to grow
when you float away your neck cramps
craning to keep you whole below a hand
reaching up above a hand reaching
down like a mirror to your right and
to your left the man in the sun hat stands

IV.

to your left the man in the sun hat stands
up and walks you by your hand to the front of
the bus was never moving and now you
see the trees are dead and the roads are
covered in salt the hand around your hand is
death's is a two-sided mirror splitting
you see only yourself and a foot away
he sees only himself and no one
remembers how it got so crowded inside of
you can barely move any direction but up
above your left shoulder there is a cord
meant to stop the bus everyone's too bright
when you pull it the mirror is gone even
the black rubber of the *City 6* bus is

Fox

—if I should tell you
through the window—

I pulled off the highway to sleep
in this parking lot tonight.

Why are you here?
Your ears like small moons
of dried apricot. If souls copper
at soft edges then you are old
enough to know better.

I don't know how
to come to terms with
what I'm unwilling to name—
something in the throat,
a shallow lung, pennies rising
to the lips. You remind me of him—

not only the wind
spidering through your fur,
or the finite beginnings
inside your wet nose, the shiver,
not only your sleep's intuitive
curl or the small artichoke
shedding leaves inside your chest,
not only that you are here
in this otherwise empty parking lot,
the asphalt twisting the streetlight
and starlight together in its hollow—

A Dream from an Outsider's Perspective

Her pupils dilated, the kitten canters from one end of the one-bed-one-couch hovel to the other. A frog sits quiet outside the front door. Dr. Pivko told me not to sleep with my concussion and you were supposed to keep me awake. (The shadow of the ice-box is so much brighter at night.) The blades of the fan push the air up into itself, into the sunset ceiling. I follow one blade until the others blur. (We all live in the shade of an active volcano, and the most we can hope is that snow will drop in from time to time to remind us how old we are.) Now there's croaking outside. (The flowers in the vase trade places when they don't think we're watching.) (Your eyelids are straitjackets.) (We're young enough to love anyone and still recover: librarians, bus drivers, mail carriers, or only ourselves and the stars to the left of the moon.) The back of your neck smells like sweat. It smells like frogs. And all we've done is all we could have done to keep the night outside: close the blinds, whistle the candleflames, and, with our ears pillowed and eyelids locked, count down from a thousand. Outside our only window, the frogs see a painted home, a green mound, a quarter-lake. (They don't understand that this is the world we've made.)

The Origin of a Phrase

Uncle and I were staying in a dog-friendly
Raddison in Hollywood, for an Elvis
Presley look-alike competition when
someone pulled the fire alarm. Sirens,
flashing lights, being jostled down
the stairwell— all the ingredients
of something I'd remember in a few years,
only to say, I'd nearly forgotten that.
Except, this time, the hotel burned down
as if to prove that a body, no matter how
massive, isn't as strong as a doubling germ.
It was night again when I realized how
similar we all looked, hugging our valuables—
either bundles of unwashed clothes or dog beds—
in confused arms. A woman with a camera
took our photo with the flash on, said we'd
be in tomorrow's paper. It was summer
before I read the article in which
she claimed that for years an unlit fire burned
in the bells, in the whistles of that hotel
where the hound dogs' last secrets were
howled red out the window toward
the priestly moon. Never before, Uncle said,
has there been such dissonance between
an article and a photograph:
the pale Elvises, hair unslicked, reflexively
smiling, behind two chihuahuas
pulling at opposite ends of an old rope.

Instructions on People Watching

You can practice at home—cutting eyeholes
in the newspaper takes time to perfect.

Camille commented often on how oddly
the dog must see the world, but only when
the dog was looking at us (which I considered
a bad omen in regard to Camille).

She was right though, about most things:
the dishes in the sink, for instance,
and how even blind beetles carry the sight gene.

I watched her pack for weeks.

You can practice on furniture—the dog's bed
is small like a toddler. And if
you've ever wanted a teenager,
I'd recommend a fainting couch.

Camille didn't like children,
even in theory. A baby's hair, she said,
I wouldn't enjoy watching it grow.

(It was hard to disagree with that.)

The blue jay enjoys the spectacle
of a public bath, but the hummingbird
at the feeder is all anxiety.

It's important to practice not being noticed:
put a hat on a cantaloupe and crawl
under your desk; arrange the change
on the counter into a smiley face
and avoid eye contact; sit behind a fern
and eavesdrop on your radio (on which you've
also put a hat). When you're old, it's best
to practice on light bulbs. You can look
longingly at a light bulb. You can even
press your thumb on its cheek for a few seconds.

I think I'll buy a chandelier to lie beside
in bed. And each morning when
my getting up again causes her
three hundred prisms to clink together,
I hope it sounds something like applause.

Alternate Endings

I overhear the clouds tonight,
close enough to my head
to remind me that my head
is a napkin wrapped around an ice cube,
and that summer can still melt in the rain.
Have you ever stayed awake until
you were certain you'd discovered
evidence of shadows in the dark?
I watch one faint behind a can
of garbanzo beans, then rise again.
They say, to those of us who listen
to alarms, *there is a cane around your waist
pulling you toward the balcony slowly.*

*

My hands are cold on my stomach.
The cloud in charge of monitoring me
through the eyes splashing against
the windowpane of room 311
must be able to count the magic inside:
a microwave, a mini-fridge, a plate
of old spaghetti twisting for the moisture
of a mouth. These words keep me
alive on Wednesdays so I'll say them again.
Microwave. Mini-fridge. Spaghetti.
And whatever god the laundry machine is
the echo of is waiting for me
down the hall, down the stairs,
out in the parking lot, under the cars.

*

211 doesn't believe in anyone above
his umbrella. He wraps his plastic
coat tight and waddles into the wind,
believing a bus is waiting for him
down the road. 411 steps like he understands
the round fragility of the Tokyo below.
Today is the tenth day I haven't slept
in the last four days and I wish I were,
proportionally, strong as an ant.
312 is playing a violin on the radio.
310 is empty, leaving the ears lopsided.
Leaves, heavied with rain, carpet the balcony.
Tomorrow, I'll microwave a cup of water

to warm my hands and sweep away
the ones caught on the railing.