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MY ASSUMPTION IS THIS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy
Murray State University
Murray, KY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by Alex Blonder
December 2016

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis manuscript is the culmination of hours of revision, frustration, and excitement. I have been influenced by many of my professors during my time at the MFA program, and I can say that without such exposure I would not be presenting the same manuscript today. Additionally, the poets I read over the course of each semester have contributed a great deal to the final draft of this manuscript. Through this manuscript, I hope to capture what is beautiful in the written and spoken word. I strive to encompass the human experience at such an integral level that anyone can pick up one of these poems and feel an inexplicable sensation at their core. Poetry is the way we can speak to the soul rather than the circumstance.

One of the poets who had a profound impact on my writing was Kay Ryan. She captures the beauty of ordinary life in a way that transforms the certainty of reality. Ryan writes about ordinary occurrences with such powerful grace and creative perspective that she inspired me to try to achieve a similar outcome in my writing. In the first section of “Argument,” I employed Ryan’s short-line form, which I have found is an effective literary device which acts to slow the readers’ pace and bring their focus to specific areas of the poem. The final lines are even more fragmented than the other verses in an effort to emphasize the correlation of the beginning and ending of the poem. The short line, additionally, acts to establish the tone of the scene in those lines. The reader’s eyes must carefully navigate the page which, in turn, sets the environment for the reader before they have begun to read the words. When I began to construct this manuscript, I found my drafts contained many similar elements. Despite my desire to explore the possibilities available to my poems, I tended to revert back to writing in a manner I felt more

comfortable with. While I do believe it's crucial for a writer to develop a voice unique to themselves, I also believe the ability to transpose that voice across various forms and themes that contrast with one's preferred mode of writing is of equal importance. During the writing process, I incorporated several exercises to combat poetic stasis. When I found that I began to replicate form, or resort to a writing style that felt safe, I would find another writer's poem and place my words in accordance with their form. The goal of this exercise is to expand the self-imposed boundaries that hinder the possible result of my poems. I was able to see the words I wrote from a different perspective which, many times, would shift in a direction I could not have otherwise anticipated. For example, in the first draft of my poem "Argument," the form I chose is one I write in quite often.

Lines 1-5:

rain taps the bedroom
 window like a boyhood friend
 eager to set off bottle-
 rockets or shoot BBs at squirrels.
 I didn't think much of it. (Blonder 26)

The above form is one I return to with many of my poems and has become a default form subconsciously. In my first draft I used a ten syllable line to give the poem a conversational atmosphere. I realized the syllable count was not working with the subject, and I tried to cut the syllables but discovered the form of the poem remained unchanged despite shifting the syllable count. I knew the poem had to change, and so I applied a form, or a variation of one, I found Kay Ryan wrote several of her poems in. The form spread the poem across the entire page and demanded the reader pay close attention to each line. The line breaks were surprising and the punctuation was unexpected. I used the

form to draw out the end of the poem to create emphasis on the scene towards the end.

The change shifted the entire outcome of the poem. Lines 1-5:

rain taps
 the bedroom
 window like
 a boyhood friend
 eager to set off bottle-. (Blonder 26)

The new form gave me an opportunity to consider options for the poem that had been unavailable because I had unknowingly limited my scope. I chose to use minimal punctuation and capitalization to emphasize the poem in a more thoughtful, ephemeral way. I also chose to slow down the moment toward the end of the poem to create an element of tension before the conclusion.

Another exercise I often employ throughout the revision process is to read poems from some of my favorite writers. I find that if I am able to remove myself from my current frame-of-mind, I am able to loosen the restrictions I have imposed on the poem. When I reread the poems of the writers who have influenced my writing, I am able to more objectively evaluate what it is that their poetry communicates and how they are able to express their points in such an effective manner. Too often, I am unaware of the confines of expectation I inflict on my poems. Many times I sit down to write with a predetermined direction for each poem, and if it starts to veer from its path, I will force it back to where I think it should be going. If I am able to identify this trend during the writing process, then I can overcome this tendency by exploring other possible outcomes for the poem through reading other writers. Reading other poets helps me get out of my own head and move into a place I would otherwise be unable to access. When I read the work of my favorite poets, it reminds me of what my goal as a writer is, and

understanding my goal allows me to gauge my writing in comparison to others. Reading my favorite writers enables me to evaluate my writing under the lens of what I hope to accomplish. For instance, when I read poems by Dave Smith or Donald Justice, I am amazed by the way they interpret the world in such unique expressions and, moreover, how they so effortlessly translate that moment to the page. When I experience these thoughts, I am reminded of what I hope to accomplish with my poems. I want to capture the reader in a replica of my experience. I want to share the vivid detail of an experience through my words with a person I have never met.

The process of creating this manuscript has helped me articulate the elements of poetry which I find so desirable. I am captivated by poetry's inherent involvement with the human condition. I am drawn into poems that capture moments of humanity that are otherwise impossible to understand without being incorporated in the experience. Poems can cause a change in perspective within an individual which, otherwise, would be impossible. Poetry causes us to mourn people we've never lost, long for a childhood vastly different from our own, or see the world as something so different than what we had previously thought. Connie Wanek's poem "Walking Distance" expresses these intimacies for me as if I had written the words myself:

Walking distance used to be much farther,
miles and miles.

Your grandfather, as a young man
with a wife and new baby son,

walked to and from
his job, which was in the next town.

That was Iowa, 1946,
and it was not a hardship

but "an opportunity," which is youth speaking,
and also a particular man

of German descent, walking on good legs
on white gravel roads,

smoking cigarettes which were cheap
though not free as they'd been

during the war. Tobacco
burned toward his fingers, but never

reached them. The fire was small and personal,
almost intimate, glowing bright

when he put the cigarette to his lips
and breathed through it.

So many cigarettes before bombing runs
and none had been his last,

a great surprise. Sometimes he passed
a farmer burning field grass in the spring,

the smoldering line advancing toward the fence.
He had to know what he was doing,

so near the barn. You had to be close
to see the way

blades of dry grass passed the flame along
at a truly individual level,

very close to see how delicious a meal
the field was to the fire

on a damp, calm, almost English morning
ideal for walking. (Wanek 31)

The beauty of poetry is that it is universal in its message and enables us to share an intimate piece of ourselves with people from all over the world.

I also discovered that I had a tendency to restrict myself as a writer in how I used form to enhance my poems. I did not consider how the appearance of a poem impacts the

reading of the poem and how it is received. I began to invest myself in establishing a foundational understanding of white space and how line breaks could be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of a poem. I understand form in the traditional sense but I want to pursue new uses of form in correlation with an expanding subject matter in my poems. Form is one of the first things a reader sees in a poem, and I hope I can work to understand form in a way that would allow me to create poems in which the form was of equal importance and creative design. I think of William Carlos Williams and how he developed the triadic line, a form that implements line breaks and movement to bolster the poem's strength. His use of form was foundational to his poetry, and I want to work toward a similar achievement albeit to a substantially lesser degree. I observed new ways to approach poems I felt had been stuck and new perspectives within the poem itself.

Many of my poems are written to address instances of everyday life and work to transform those moments into something unexpected. I found a major challenge I faced was trying to clearly articulate the shift away from what is expected. I ended many poems too early in an effort to stave off any disconnect between poem and reader. I struggled to understand what I was missing and how I could improve. One of the poets I read that helped me overcome this tendency was Jim Daniels. The authority with which Daniels captures the grit of life is powerful and inspired me to strive for a similar outcome in my writing. I was able to confront my fear of cutting a poem short out of fear of losing control. The question I began to repeat to myself was "what risk does this poem take?" This question has prompted me to challenge each poem I write, to examine my poems with a critical eye and understand the purpose of each word. Asking myself this question allowed me to fully appreciate the concept of writing a great poem using only the words

that were necessary. Jim Daniels' "Anthem" exemplifies the power of risk in poetry. I remember reading the poem for the first time and how unexpectedly powerful the last few lines of the poem were. Daniels' swift turn at the end of the poem worked beautifully, yet he had to take the risk, shifting so dramatically at the poem's conclusion.

I was inspired by his poem to demand more from my own poetry.

"Cumulonimbus" is a poem of mine that seems to be in a state of continual revision. Despite such uncertainty, I believe allowing room for the poem to grow is essential to successful revision. The initial focus of the poem was the language; more specifically, how my choice of words would direct the outcome of the poem. For instance, I wrote:

one, two, three, four as if it were a pulse—
Even now, after so many years, when I fall asleep
I think of blood rocketing through chambers and valves. (Blonder 8)

These lines create a correlation between a thunderstorm and anatomy. I wanted to transform the childish behavior of counting the distance of a storm to a tangible, sensory driven experience such as taking a pulse. Now, there is a relationship between the counting and the soft pulse of blood pumping through human veins. The idea of blood, or the body, becomes integrated into the existence of the thunderstorm; no longer can either storm or self exist separate from the other. The challenge is to create a self-sustaining moment, one in which the reader's own suppositions are integral to the poem's success. Therefore, I employed language with strong connotation which, when implemented properly, fosters relationships between otherwise disparate elements. I continued to rework the first drafts of the poem because I didn't feel it took enough of a risk. I worked to push the poem further from its original design and demand the poem accomplish more. I staggered the lines to visually mimic the erratic direction of lightning and to mirror the

sensation of discomfort within the poem. “How Far” is a poem I doubt I could have written had I not taken time away from my writing to read Daniels. I began writing the poem with my goal being to transform a typical experience into something unexpected. However, after several revisions I didn’t feel the subject was working well with the direction I had envisioned. I halted writing and read a variety of Daniels’ poems because I felt the subject was in his wheelhouse. In his poems, I discovered the voice I needed to reproduce to give my poem the authentic grit it lacked. I realized that the poem would be more successful if it were more grounded in reality. Daniels’ poetry captures the gravity of a lifestyle I have only observed and being able to apply that perspective to my poem resulted in a drastic transformation in both language and outcome. The poem was able to address subject matter without the distraction of lofty language or convoluted metaphors. I felt that such application would detract from the simple power that Daniels’ poems embody so well.

I have also spent a great deal of time working on the titles of the poems in this manuscript. The title is an element of poetry I believe to be paramount to a poem’s success. I have become increasingly interested in the power an effective title holds and have made a renewed effort to create titles that serve to enhance the individual lines in each stanza, not simply introduce the subject matter. Through my experimentation with titles, I have been able to appreciate the titles of other poets I read and have begun to read their poems from a different perspective. I wanted to ensure that my own use of the title proved neither insufficient in the body of the poem nor detracted from poem as a whole. I have used titles in several ways, hoping to gain something unique for each poem through the title.

In “Beware of Dog” I used the title to present the reader with a notion of movement or action. I wanted the title to drive the reader to focus on the internal movement of the poem as opposed to the observable, external movements noted by the speaker throughout the poem. Another way a title can enhance a poem is through its use as an anchor for the reader to define the reality of the poem. Previously, I had not thought to apply a title to serve this purpose. Only after reading several poets who framed their poems through their titles effectively did I start to work to incorporate this technique into my own writing.

Over the semester I began to notice the stylistic choices of other poets, such as form and syntax, which work to shape the poem. I started to experiment with different approaches in my own poems to see how I could challenge myself. For some of my poems I chose to use a ten-syllable line in an effort to give the poem a conversational feel. I found that using a conversational approach acts to incorporate the reader in the poem’s outcome and draws them into the moment on comfortable terms. I implemented various forms to usher the reader through the poem. For example, I used a pseudo-triadic line in “Cumulonimbus” and a short line coupled with a variation in the punctuation in “Argument” to pull the reader from line to line. I found the use of short lines an effective technique as it doesn’t allow the reader to dwell too long on any line to emulate the ephemeral nature of thought.

I experimented with the use of couplets, such as in “Gospel.” I felt this poem was well suited to be written in couplets because it exists in a moment of closeness between the speaker and the person who is the subject of the poem. I believe that the use of couplets in this poem establishes the lens through which I want the reader to understand

the poem; the tone of the poem can be understood before any of the words have been read. The proximity of the lines fosters a sense of intimacy that enhances the poem as effectively as a well-constructed title or strong metaphor. The final lines of the poem are broken down much more than the other stanzas are to emphasize a correlation between the beginning and ending of the poem. The breakdown of the lines is crucial to the establishment of tone and demands the reader linger in the concluding moments of the poem.

I have come to realize through the revision process that I can never consider a poem to be complete. Sure, I am able to be comfortable where a poem is at a specific point in time, but to limit a poem with the label “complete” would only be a mechanism of control. Therefore, I don’t believe that revision of a poem leads to a more “pure” version of itself but rather demonstrates purity through possibility. Each version of a poem is comprehensive and no two revisions dictate the possibility of the other. I believe that with each revision a different life is breathed into the poem and therefore it derives a sense of purity through the fulfillment of possibility. Poetry is fluid and organic at its core and to “complete” a poem is to dilute its purity.

I have seen such unexpected change in my writing as I have progressed through the MFA program. The poems of this manuscript represent hours spent disassembling every inch of verse until I could find something I liked. I found new ways to approach poems I felt had nowhere to go and new perspectives became available within the poem itself. I feel that this manuscript speaks to how far I have come since the first day I stepped into the classroom.

I

Lift

There is a hummingbird
suspended above
the flowerbed in the backyard
like a marionette. I watch
the blur of her wings,
the impossibility of it—

Oh little time keeper,
let me stow away
beneath the pulse
of your wing beat;
teach me how to shed
this wreckage of flesh—

carry me with you
across vast wilderness.
Scatter me over the world as you go,
casting off your invisible strings.

Crossroad

I remember that particular fork in the road
a few miles down from the
Benson's dairy farm,
the pavement splintering, wanting to get away
more than I did. I remember the river
that ran along the road and kept running
until it collided with a dam
or an ocean—I didn't know which.
I could always pull out a map and shadow
my fingertip along the blue vein
of a landscape to an end but
to what end? I would be here still,
bent over an almanac at the kitchen table,
the sink stacked with dishes, the dog
asleep near the refrigerator, knowing
only something less of myself.

On a Bus from D.C.

I didn't know the girl seated across
the aisle, tapping her phone with an index
finger and a smile. I can't tell you how
to make her blush or which half of
the mattress she prefers—

yet, somehow, we might have spent each
cool July evening cradled together
in the belly of a mesh hammock, our hands
overlapping, tracing the constellations.

How will I forget the way she slings
her bags into the seat of her car and eases
out of the bus station parking lot, one wrist draped
over the steering wheel, perfecting her
lips in the rearview mirror content to vanish
into the part of myself I do not yet understand.

Since You Asked

No, I'm not listening
to anything you've said.

I'm thinking about
the blue jay

grasping the bottom
branch of that

Bradford Pear, those
sharp onyx eyes and

of a dream—

Desire

I want to climb through a bedroom window,
step out onto a stem of moonlight, the night air to be deep and dark as water, the breeze
to splash my body, find a small boat at its edge and push off, the world to sink away
beneath me, to dip oars into its black body, to shatter the galaxy. But I have
work in a few hours and
the window is locked.

Before Work

7 a.m. is so much like war.

Knots of fog like gun smoke gather
above a battlefield strewn with
formations and tangled bodies and scarlet.

Men on horseback shout orders, swords drawn in
high arcs, amid shocks of rifle fire
on these still mornings when children rush

to bus stops, their lunch pails swinging,
a loose juicebox rattling
tiny explosions with each step.

Cumulonimbus

the weathered man predicts

on the 5 a.m. news but he

doesn't forecast the stillness—

the way it claws the base of my skull—

between each fracture of lightning.

When I was a child I believed

the planet had been devoured by a giant

in the night or at recess while

we were distracted playing four-square;

I would never join the other children, gathered like ions,

to count the distance of the storm

one, two, three, four as if it were a pulse—

Even now, after so many years, when I fall asleep

I think of blood rocketing through chambers and valves,

and the pound of a colossal heart.

Of Loss

After Nick McRae

When I see a fresh grave torn into the ground,
I think of yard-work. Clawing through flower beds
each Saturday morning of my childhood, careful
not to disturb the sleeping neighborhood.

I think of silent men huddled
at the rear of a funeral procession,
leaning on planted shovels, on-deck, soon
to heave thick clumps of earth onto the slick
coffin lid. Would I enjoy it? Would I feel
the same sense of accomplishment as on
Saturday mornings, sipping cold lemonade
on the front steps?

My assumption is this:
the bouquet in the center
of the kitchen table is a signature
and tucked away in your breast pocket,
folded into a tight square, are the conditions.

Someone once told me that
a goldfish can only remember
something for a few seconds.
Each bubble ghosting across their

bloated lips must be perfect, complete,
packed into the impossible
hermetic globe pinballing to the surface
and fizzing out of memory.

By then they have fallen silent,
focused on the tulip slithering up the mast
of a pirate ship from beneath
a bed of turquoise pebbles.

II

Robbing Chekhov

It is late and he is on business out of town.
His gut doesn't tingle, no sixth sense jolts
him awake in his hotel bedroom so many
miles from me tugging each window,
one after the other, until one snaps open.
I linger in each room filling an old backpack
with whatever seems valuable—a pair of candle sticks,
a manuscript, an ivory-handled revolver hung on the wall.
I empty the chamber, shove the muzzle into my jacket
pocket, and vanish into the dark. When he returns home
to discover all I have taken, his anger will explode
hot and violent as gunfire.

Over Breakfast Someone Says “Grapefruit Is Like Sacrifice”

Take the body up—
under a faucet, scrub
the flesh clean.

Lay its uncertainty to rest
on a smooth surface. Split
the body apart.

Sprinkle salt over its
openness, then carve out the
heart with a spoon.

“This morning, with her, having coffee”—Johnny Cash

This morning, with her, having coffee
two saucers piled neatly on a short table,
crumbs pepper the pair of forks laid at
odds with the each other. Rocking chairs
sway in flurries of sunlight sifted through
the porch screen while her fingers drum
against her coffee mug. In the distance,
an arrowhead of geese cuts across the blue
sky, their dark bodies swimming on forever.

After Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Staircase"

How exhausted you must be
from the endless flight
of stairs and the nakedness,

your body's secret no longer
yours. Head lowered,
your shoulders betray

the unfamiliar gravity
as if you once had wings or
don't know how to suffer.

Each thin step sheds
what divinity is left,
brings you and I that much closer.

Broken Time

a woman's
voice crescendos
through smoke-
thick air, while
another
baritones
drunk
memory,
table-tops
rattle, packed
plates
crash to
time like
piano keys.

“Beware of Dog”

in bold red letters

read a jogger’s sideways glance,

her Patagonia snapping in the cold.

Street signs read: McKinley, 4th, and Main.

Back-alleys branch, black like sick arteries.

Cabbies sipping coffee (always black)

“*motor oil*” they say, and steam drifts from

lips and lids and lifts out of earshot, up, out of gunshot

like exhaust from junkers angled along a cracked curb,

where junkies cradle as many bottles as their arms can carry,

wary, wearing well-worn jackets, fingers fingering cigarette

packs, and pack tobacco. Then morning breaks wide open.

Counting Sheep

I don't blame the boy who cried *wolf*,
wolf, wolf at the top of his lungs anymore
than I fault the sliver of moonlight through
the curtains that kept me awake last night.
On sleepless nights I imagine that boy and
his kingdom of livestock, the hatred
he stockpiled in some dark crook of his heart.

His desperation, suddenly, seems less
sincere, his cries meant for the wolf's
ears. I'm sure his heart beat hard in his throat
when the charcoal paw dipped out from
the shadow of an oak tree into the sunlit
grass as if to test the waters. What bliss
it must have been for him watching
them die one by one by one.

Hubris

was it gravity or disbelief
that cast him from the sky,
a clump of molten wax
and chicken feathers?

The rest, of course, is history.
Yet my thoughts are of Mrs. Icarus in
the distance, shielding her eyes
with a crescent palm, watching the tide,

and how, when she had gone to meet
Daedalus, she didn't ask the specifics,
turning instead to clear the table for dinner.

Déjà Vu

What if you and I
exist as fragments
dependent on the whole.

Today is tomorrow,
yesterday,
in-a-moment,
for another us.

You and I are
shadows on sidewalks
rooted to another body;

each experience
isn't our own deep down
we know it.

III

For What It's Worth

She hunches in a wicker chair
in the corner of a local coffee house,
her yellow sweater a tight cocoon
around her shoulders, knitting a pillowcase.

A pair of plastic needles between her fingers
commands strands of yarn: green for the pastures,
red for the barn and water pump handle—
soon the smell of ground coffee and the shriek

of molten espresso fade and her thoughts move to childhood,
of the stories read to her each night as she drifted to sleep
and how she no longer remembers how they end—

instead, how she'd count the leaves spattered
down blacktop streets like footprints, or the name
she gave each firefly as their bodies lifted into the dark

those night she spent leaning against the porch railing,
the moon fastened overhead to the clear sky
as if it was the face of the nail the world hung from.

Among Things I've Kept Secret

He and my mother
argue in the kitchen,

their voices pouring
over the windowsill

through the sliver
of open glass, clinging

to the grass like spiders
he taught me to hunt

in the summer. Something
shatters in the kitchen and

I should run but I stay
by the window listening.

My mother cries and
he threatens to leave

if she brings it up again and
I realize I want to reach

between their ribs and crack
open their ferocious hearts,

empty their fury into

cupped fingers and gulp it down.

Annabelle

You can imagine my surprise,
seeing your name carved across
the back of one of those deep-sea
fishing boats. You were always uneasy
beside the ocean, ankles deep in the sand,
when waves rushed over our toes. We
laughed at your fear, and still
you nursed us back from the flu with ginger ale
and chicken noodle soup, hummed lullabies
at our bedside on the nights we couldn't sleep,
but you would never, even for us, go out to sea.

Argument

*

rain taps
the bedroom
window like
a boyhood friend
eager to set off bottle-
rockets or shoot
BBs at squirrels.
I didn't think
much of it
then but now
I know what
it's like to
be a target
unaware
of danger
until the
trigger's dry
snap, the
unmistakable thunder.

The story comes to mind—
the last thing said
to a loved one
before a tragic death
isn't loving
and a lifetime
of regret follows—

and I realize
if I were to hang up now
and later discover
you were obliterated
by a train or crushed
under a rockslide
I would still
take my chances.

Orange Caution Cone

Pastiche after William Carlos Williams

how much depends
upon

the orange caution
cone

bright in head-
lights

beside the fallen
rock.

Public Speaking

I was not standing in front of a foreign battalion,
hands haphazardly fastened behind my back,
having my charges spat at me in French.

I was standing at the head of an American classroom,
poised to discuss the rise of the Napoleonic empire.
But in that moment of slippery palms and paroxysmal
illiteracy, I found I'd rather be hundreds of miles away
being offered no opportunity for any last words.

An Alternative Morning

Pastiche after Langston Hughes

I was not sick last night.

I clearly could
comprehend my cognitive
faculties. Not sick
at all last night,
could clearly comprehend
my cognitive faculties.

I drank a Green Warrior smoothie quicker
than usual before bed,
my eyesockets ached.

I hope there are
no long-term
ramifications.

The Girl in the Waiting Room

You are smoke from a stone chimney in winter, hazel eyes in its firelight. You are like the silence in the room, the bowl of fruit in a poem, the ant circling. You are fallen leaves and snow dusting the windowsill. You are not a sip of wine, the whip of a ceiling fan in the dark. You are not goodbye. But certainly you are the silence of this room.

Water Tower

I bet you aren't thinking
of our first kiss

the sky soaked in stars and
wine glass wind chimes—

well I am,
even while you twist
your hair around
your finger in frustration.

Migration

Tangled in whips of white-tipped waves,
the echo of a fog horn splinters like driftwood

against the dark shoreline while wind sweeps off
the water and I think of summer camp as a boy.

The inexplicable pleasure of making
lanyards, layering strips of colorful plastic,

right over left again and again on rainy afternoons
and the decades smell of our cabin. I can almost

hear the rain against the metal roof like static
from the radio I've propped up beneath

a painting of a wooden house
buried deep in snow, a pair of geese

shadowless above its white lawn.

Super Moon

Seeing her that night

reminded

me of a poem left

unfinished

suspended in ink, like

she

After Hearing News

I watch the rain fall
dance across glass
cheeks to an odd, familiar
melody with unrehearsed steps,
then be swept away. I want to
know about the window-
sill, pooling all of that delicate pain,
and somewhere out there
a separate me asks everything
I leave out.

When Somebody Says Your Name For The Last Time

Murder is a passive practice you don't have to practice to practice.

Alzheimer's the kind of suicide that gets all the media buzz.

You don't get it, of course, because you're dead.

The wallpaper in Heaven doesn't add up when the solar system is a bunch of glow-in-the-dark stickers on an apartment ceiling.

Spit out your watercolor lies by the carton, but it won't change, won't stop the dirt from breeding, stop singed skulls from bursting.

We don't even notice.

Gospel

After the Gospel of Mark

I was reading Mark
the moment you took
your last breath.

I try to imagine
the exact verse,
how each letter tasted,

the softness of your
paper-thin fingers,
as if I were sitting

on the edge of your bed,
holding you with each
bitter syllable.

Destination

They shuddered,
bundled in rain jackets,
the bitter wind a god they bent
to worship, the thrumming
engine an ancient hymn.

Ahead, through rain
and speed, the landscape blurs
the way hope can. Soon the
fists of water soften, the boat
slows to hover in the dark,
in emptiness, where there is
weeping and gnashing of teeth.

How Far

A maroon pickup jerks to a stop
beneath a red light.

The driver wears a denim jacket,
pins a cigarette in his jaw,
and smoke twists out the window.

It's 4 a.m. frigid. Overtime for
the mortgage on a single-wide built to fail.
He drums the steering wheel with split fingers
and the radio is optimistic. The light
turns green. Behind him the road
unfolds for miles.

Priorities

Today the dishes need to be scraped
clean, the laundry scooped off the carpet
and the Guinea pig's metal wheel oiled before
the squeal of each rotation drives me crazy.
The water bottle, hanging silent and crooked,
and the bowl of pellets nestled in the shavings
must be refilled. A column of sunlight opens
the living room wall like a doorway and in an
hour or so will be gone.

Works Cited

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