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# The Monster that Can't Be Defeated Here

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**THE MONSTER THAT CAN'T BE DEFEATED HERE**

A thesis submitted to  
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In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
English  
by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	vi
The Imagination's Perspective of Personal Alienation, Social Concerns, and Remedies in <i>The Monster that Can't Be Defeated Here</i> .....	1
Section I .....	18
Off Topic .....	19
Cases .....	20
Traumatized, Traumatizing .....	21
Nimrod on Amtrak .....	23
To Whom It May Concern .....	25
The Weathervanes .....	27
Lightning .....	29
Section II .....	30
Job's Wife Watching from the Window .....	31
Kanawha County, West Virginia, 2014 .....	32
In a Grocery Store Near the School Bus .....	33
Bacchius Or Antibacchius in Brooklyn .....	34
The Smell of Nearing Rain .....	35
Flood .....	36
Passing a Field of Wind Turbines in Indiana .....	37
Mock Pastoral Stupor .....	39
The Death of the Baltimore Veteran .....	40
Ode to a Sense of Entitlement .....	41

Section III .....	43
To Harpo Marx .....	44
Windows .....	45
Used Lava Lamp.....	46
What the Dentist Might Say.....	47
Ode to the Schwa .....	48
Hymn to a Cockroach .....	49
To John Falstaff .....	51
Harangue Against Lemons .....	52
The President of Lionfish .....	53
Ode to a Very Tasty Sandwich.....	54
Section IV .....	55
Why There Are No Toasters .....	56
Stickers .....	57
Pierre Menard’s Lost Sonnet .....	58
Off/On Salad .....	59
Instant Reblog .....	60
Instant Reblog II .....	62
My Ideal Self .....	64
Putting a Coat On .....	65
The Hat Horizon .....	66
Staircase Wit .....	67
The Monster that Can’t Be Defeated Here .....	68

Sudden Aging with a Hula Hoop .....	69
Fake Moustache, Nose, and Glasses .....	70
Close-Ups of Some Fur .....	71
Lust .....	72
Love the Commodities You're With .....	73
Countercultural Electron .....	74
Works Cited .....	75
Appendix: Letter from Institutional Research Board .....	76

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a poetry manuscript that establishes its footing in multiple poetic traditions, particularly blank verse and free verse, in order to discuss general themes of separation, isolation, and alienation on both the personal and social fronts in an imaginative light that proves aesthetically pleasing and points the reader in the direction of solutions to these problems. While the poems of the first section generally speak to issues of both the struggle to tame language to one's own desires and to issues of personal alienation, the poems of later sections branch out more into the world in general and take on a wider breadth of themes, such as environmental degradation, socioeconomic conditions, and the appreciation of beauty. Many of these themes have a more explicitly social nature than those of the first section.

**THE IMAGINATION'S PERSPECTIVE OF PERSONAL ALIENATION, SOCIAL CONCERNS, AND REMEDIES IN *THE MONSTER THAT CAN'T BE DEFEATED HERE***

My collection's poems use the techniques of the creation of worlds and associative ties not only in order to discuss general themes of separation, isolation, and alienation on both the personal and social fronts in an imaginative light that proves aesthetically pleasing, but also to point the reader in the direction of solutions to these problems. While the poems of the first section generally speak to issues of both the struggle to tame language to one's own desires and to issues of personal alienation through the end of friendships, the poems of later sections branch out more into the world in general and take on a wider breadth of themes than the first section, taking on such issues as environmental degradation, socioeconomic conditions, the appreciation of beauty, and the potential for less alienating relationships, with many of these themes also taking on a more explicitly social nature than those of the first section. While the poems of the second section frequently take part in everyday activities in the world that overlap with flights of imagination on the part of the speakers, these flights increasingly take a more prominent role as the poems continue through the other sections until, by the fourth section, poems rooted more in the everyday exist alongside many poems featuring worlds more extensively rooted in the fantastic, suggesting that, in the interactions between the speakers' imaginations and the external world, the imagination has begun to, in many cases, enter the foreground, though still co-existing with the everyday, familiar world.

Although these flights of imagination eventually explore more of the world and speak to potential solutions to the problem of alienation, this generally does not appear until the speakers' own situations as people alienated both from former friends and from language are established in the first section. Both of these themes appear strongly in "Traumatized, Traumatizing," in which

the speaker finds himself concerned with the way that words, assisted by the dragonfish swimming in the room, can function, contrary to the Samuel Beckett quote in the epigraph, to convey nothingness and represent the void. The last stanzas indicate that this concern with language's relationship with nothingness stems from the way that the "You" of the poem used language in an e-mail to forbid the speaker from talking to the "You" and, in the process, created a "void" for him. In this regard, the speaker positions his alienation in the context of two themes that appear both in the poem and in the first section in general: the loss of a friendship and the question of language as subject matter, the latter theme seen in a more depersonalized context in "Cases." In much the same way that the speaker of "Cases" finds that language refuses to orderly fit into the neat categories that he attempts to establish for it, the speaker of "Traumatized, Traumatizing" finds that language betrays him by serving as a representative of nothingness that helps the addressed person cut ties with him. In this regard, the first section's theme of personal alienation complements the section's other theme of struggling with language, for the speakers' troubles in their alienation from their former friends is compounded by the struggle to make language serve their purposes. Outside of "Traumatized, Traumatizing," these two themes appear together most strongly in "Nimrod in Amtrak," in which the speaker sees the prospect of discovering "a global language / Of inexpressiveness" that can not completely fulfill his desire for "catharsis" after the loss of a friend.

This does not mean, however, that these poems always need to connect a severed friendship as intensely to the subject of language as "Traumatized, Traumatizing" or "Nimrod on Amtrak" do, for "To Whom It May Concern," a poem in which the speaker addresses and, in the process, summarizes aspects and actions of a person who has pushed the speaker away, offers a more singular focus on the theme of personal alienation. The speaker contrasts the professed

attitude of the addressed as an open-minded pleasure-seeker with his sudden, close-minded cutting of ties with the speaker, suggesting, by the poem's concluding stanza, that the "You" of the poem is one of the "hypocrites of tolerance" who ultimately partake in judging others without admitting it. This point is driven in by the second stanza, in which the speaker reaches his conclusion about the hypocrisy of the addressed and others who, like the addressed, adopt an official stance of "tolerance" that they do not act on. It is not coincidental that "To Whom It May Concern," with its definitive conclusion about the addressed person and its complementary narrow focus on that person, follows "Traumatized, Traumatizing" and "Nimrod on Amtrak," for it is this very sense of conclusion in "To Whom . . ." that appears to mark a turning point for the speakers in their ability to grapple with their sense of alienation and attempt to move beyond the disturbing uncertainty that such alienation plays on their minds, an uncertainty that, in the context of poetry, is somewhat reminiscent of John Keats's "*Negative Capability*," referred to by him as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (qtd. in Young 84, italics in original). This uncertainty and its subsequent lack of a conclusion in "Traumatized, Traumatizing," which contributes in this case to the poem's melancholy tone, function with the poem's multiplicity of subjects as features reminiscent of what Lyn Hejinian refers to as the "open text," one that "both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating" (41), one in which "all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work" (43). By contrast, "To Whom It May Concern" is more reminiscent of what Hejinian calls "the closed text," defined by her as "one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. Each element confirms the reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity" (42-43). This

“closed text,” in dispelling some of the uncertainty of “Traumatized, Traumatizing,” functions to give the speakers a greater sense of certainty that can strengthen their confidence in exploring the world in the later sections and, by extension, give a sense of thematic progression to the readers.

To emphasize the speaker’s focus on the addressed in “To Whom It May Concern,” all of the first stanza’s lines open with “You” or some word related to “You,” such as “Your” and “Yourself.” Each line break in the first stanza occurs at the point when a second-person word appears, regardless of how short or long that makes the lines in relation to each other. The anaphora evokes the same feeling of refrain observed by Alfred Corn, who notes, in the context of referencing some poems that use it, “It is as though the refrain contains an obsessive thought or concern, one returning over and over again to consciousness until some kind of resolution is reached and the poem ends” (111). “To Whom It May Concern” is not a metered poem and has no end rhyme patterns, but its anaphora still functions as a formal element designed to replicate that feeling of obsession that Corn sees in refrain in general. This refrain, in fact, does not end until the second stanza offers its conclusion, as if to signal that the knowledge of the conclusion has allowed the speaker to break the spell of obsession in the first stanza and, in the wider context of my collection, steadily transition into the world beyond the “You.”

In the later sections, the speakers’ exploration of the world frequently involves a greater variety of subject matter and themes—both personal and social—than the first section’s severed friendships and linguistic dilemmas, including environmental degradation, socioeconomic conditions, the appreciation of beauty, and a less directly alienated sense of engagement with other people. It is as if the zeitgeist of the thesis’s first section, upon dealing with the linguistic and personal issues that the speakers of that section frequently face, is now attempting to explore the world in the later sections in an effort towards recovery, similar to the search for catharsis on

the part of the speaker of “Nimrod on Amtrak.” One example of this exploration of new terrain is the second section’s “Passing a Field of Wind Turbines in Indiana,” a poem that, through the speaker’s chronicles of the experiences that he and the “You” of the poem have while driving past the titular field and while visiting Chicago, speaks to potential issues of alienation both in travel and, more strongly, in a perceived lack of action to save the environment, thus expanding the types of alienation discussed in the collection. The poem involves an implicit comparison between the city and the field, particularly in terms of the latter’s wind energy, with the speaker eventually wondering if Chicago can provide “enough space / For the new, renewable energy.” Although this may sound like a simple celebration of cleaner sources of energy, the speaker’s observations sweep over far more points than these, musing on Renoir’s paintings in the Art Institute, the addressed person’s dislike of “[driving] in big cities,” disappointment while visiting a pizzeria, and a reflection on Spanish and French phonetics, the last of which transitions into a reverie in which the speaker imagines the creation of “*Le chicago*” as a French word. This reverie, in turn, leads to an implicit admiration of Chicago, “defined in my bilingual dictionary as / ‘A concrete suitcase stuffed with bookstores and museums and jazz records.’” This admiration keeps the poem from descending into a simple dichotomy between the “bad” city and the “good” field, instead operating as a more open text that indicates a yearning on the speaker’s part for the best of both places in an environmentally sustainable solution.

The poem’s concern with the environment finds its expression through what Carl Phillips refers to as “associative poetry,” or “poetry that works almost entirely by means of association—no connecting narrative pieces, often no syntactical connection, poetry that is characterized by leaps not just from stanza to stanza, but from one image to the next in ways that do not immediately make sense, because their relatedness to one another is not clear” (91). Whereas the

more closed “To Whom It May Concern” uses the associative method to complement its narrow focus on associating various thoughts and actions to the addressed, “Passing a Field . . .” uses the same method to facilitate a greater degree of more open exploration through the imagination. On the broader level, the implicit comparison between the field and the city that drives the poem—and also helps to make its point about the importance of renewable energy and the positive prospect of incorporating it into cities—functions as a kind of association. On the more specific level, the associative method allows the speaker to take part in such reveries as his explanation of how the letter “i” in “Chicago” could sound more French if it “spread itself out” like “a Times New Roman pancake” whose seriph is “hanging on a Willis Tower needle.” Through the power of association, the speaker is able to explain his thoughts on phonetics and expand his vision of “*le chicago*” while at the same time keeping his flight of imagination rooted in the skyline of the city he is talking about, thus keeping the association from appearing completely illogical even as it sets up the speaker’s assessment of the city’s positive elements.

This revery is also an example of how the poem, like many of the works in this collection, allows itself room for cases of what Tony Hoagland calls “disproportion,” or points in which imaginative excess is engaged in for its own sake, even if it is not strictly necessary for whatever “argument” the poem may present (107-127). Hoagland, after identifying Wallace Stevens as an example of a poet with “deliberately excessive” works (112), sees Stevens partially using “whimsical associations” for his poems’ organization; he also says, “Stevens leads us to appreciate that excess and pleasure are, if not synonymous, at least related” (114). In the case of “Passing a Field of Wind Turbines in Indiana,” the associative method is used for a similar purpose of pleasure through “excess.” For example, in the first stanza, the speaker compares the turbine blades, which he calls “triangles,” to “somersaulting track stars on treadmills / High

above the grass,” track stars who “have stripped away their corsets.” Admittedly, the speaker does not explicitly state that these “triangles” are the turbine blades, but in light of the setting and the reference in the stanza to “each machine’s three blades,” it is implied. At the same time, however, the use of the metaphor before the setting’s explicit identification outside of the poem’s title may also indicate that the energy of what the metaphor has invented has enough legitimacy in its own right that it deserves some attention outside of what it is describing, though this is not to say that what it is describing is unimportant. Indeed, to the extent that the description of the blades “[stripping] away their corsets” and becoming “track stars” may imply a certain degree of looseness and energy, the metaphor even contributes somewhat to the overall positive aura that the wind turbines have in the poem. Nonetheless, this metaphor also takes part, to some extent, in Hoagland’s “disproportion,” allowing the imaginative power of figurative language to exist for the sake of its own aesthetic pleasure. In this regard, the associative aesthetic in this poem generally serves not only to draw connections for the reader between the field’s renewable energy and the city, but also to facilitate the imagination as a pleasurable experience for the reader.

Although much of this discussion of “Passing . . .” may make it sound like it is mainly concerned with the social issue of environmental protection, the poem also alludes, in its address, to a relationship between the speaker and another person that strikes a considerably more amicable tone than that of “Traumatized, Traumatizing” or “To Whom It May Concern.” This speaks to the attempts by the speakers of the later sections to find solace and friendship in a different kind of relationship than those typically referred to in the first section, giving the reader of the later sections a sense of progression not just into a greater breadth of themes, but also of ways of relating to people.

The themes of seeking a better, less alienating relationship and of attempting to counter alienation through the appreciation of beauty appear more strongly—albeit in a somewhat frustrated manner—in the poem “In a Grocery Store Near the School Bus,” which emphasizes the beauty of a check-out worker at the title store by constantly contrasting her with less desirable elements in the world. In the process of these contrasts, however, the poem also alludes to a persistent dilemma on the speaker’s part that his admiration of the woman does not completely overcome. Although the contrasted, “negative” elements of the world, such as “a stick insect wriggling among a truck’s lumber,” initially sound like images distant from the grocery store, the later lines’ references to “the clucking of a running engine” and “the mangy soul patch of her brother, who steps off the bus” vaguely allude, in connection to the title’s reference to a “school bus” near the grocery store setting, to a potential lack of harmony between the check-out worker’s family—or at least one relative—and the speaker. To the extent that this is soon followed by a reference to “the hangman’s traffic light above my weathered car,” the poem suggests that the speaker hastens to depart now that the brother approaches, thus also indicating the potential of a general pre-existing relationship between the speaker and the check-out worker that, due to circumstance, has been frustrated, not fully formed. On a more general level, the fact that the poem runs on contrasts also indicates that, while he admires the beauty of the worker, he is also conscious of less attractive elements in the world, such as “the appendages of a Luddite snowflake before a crashed car,” a line that is called back to in a more personal context for the speaker with the final line’s reference to “my weathered car.” In this regard, even as my collection engages in a thematic search for a solution to the alienation discussed in the first section, the solution does not always reveal itself easily.

On the technical level, “In a Grocery Store Near the School Bus” indicates the speaker’s positive view of the worker through what Elisa Gabbert calls “Definition by Negation.” According to her, “Definition by Negation, and its variant Description by Negation, define or describe a thing by way of telling you what the thing is not, rather than what it is: the thing is described by the shape of the hole” (39). This method works with what Phillips sees as the associative method of making lists, which the poem does with both aspects of the worker and things unlike her (97-98). Furthermore, the poem’s setting is additionally clarified through the context of the title, a technique identified by Phillips as helpful for associative poems that employ more “leaps” in association, as “In a Grocery Store . . .” does (104). The poem’s method is also complemented by the poem’s use of what Harvey Gross, analyzing Walt Whitman’s poetry, refers to as “syntactical rhythm” (87). Gross says, “Whitman’s basic contribution was the substitution of syntax for meter as the controlling prosodic element in his poetry” (85), and Gross particularly notes Whitman’s “syntactical parallelism” through the use of anaphora (86). “In a Grocery Store Near the School Bus” establishes its own “syntactical rhythm” through its patterns of anaphora. The odd-numbered lines, each opening with “Her,” describe some aspect of the appearance of the check-out worker, while the even-numbered lines, each opening with “Not,” describe an entity that the speaker deems dissimilar to the aspect of the worker’s appearance described in the previous line. Divided in this way, the lines thus establish a rhythm that emphasizes the contrasts that drive the poem, which makes sense partially because, as Hejinian notes, “Statements become interconnected by being grammatically congruent; unlike things, made alike grammatically, become meaningful in common and jointly” (45).

Like “Passing a Field of Wind Turbines in Indiana,” “In a Grocery Store Near the School Bus” fits within the second section’s general exploration of the everyday world from the

perspectives of speakers prone to flights of imagination, which serve both to offer the reader aesthetic pleasure and to illustrate personal and social themes of the texts in a novel, yet fairly straightforward light. For “Passing a Field . . .,” the imagination, through the associative method, suggests the positives and negatives within Chicago through an implicit comparison with the field and its turbines, whereas for “In a Grocery . . .,” the imagination serves to illustrate both the beauty of the woman in the text and the frustrated desire to be closer to her. In the case of both of these poems, the imagination serves to cast the everyday world in a new light, but it does not overtake it through the creation of a new imaginary world akin to that of “Traumatized, Traumatizing” or, along the same lines, those discussed by Matthea Harvey in her essay “The Mercurial Worlds of the Mind.” In that essay, Harvey argues that the imaginary worlds she discusses “are outlandish similes, connected to this world by varying lengths and thicknesses of likeness” (104), and she notes as one example of this the way that A. Square, the main character of Edwin A. Abbott’s *Flatland*, “is clearly commenting on issues of class and gender in his native England” (119). Although it does not feature the explicit commentary on social issues that Harvey perceives in *Flatland*, “Traumatized, Traumatizing” constructs a world in which language can ride black dragonfish through the shadows of a room and represent nothingness in order to speak to haunting feelings of loss and alienation that can exist in the world outside the poem, feelings that are transmitted because the status of the words in the imaginary world allows their relationship with nothingness to be examined in a more direct light than if the poem had a more “conventional” setting. At the same time, however, the world of this poem also appears much more separated from the everyday world’s context than “Passing a Field . . .” or “In a Grocery Store . . .” are, almost as if the speaker’s sense of grief has become so strong that it has created its own psychological landscape. By contrast, the flights of imagination in the everyday

world in such poems as “Passing a Field . . .” both give a sense of thematic progression through the speakers’ attempts to co-exist with the everyday and offer a more direct engagement with more ordinary matters in a way that may appear less clear in an imaginary world’s context. “Passing a Field . . .” leaves little doubt in its settings of Indiana and Chicago that it relates to the relationship between turbines and an actual city, and “In a Grocery Store . . .” affirms that a woman working in a “normal” situation is being praised. In this regard, the placement of these poems after “Traumatized, Traumatizing” complements the sense of exploration of the world and different themes beyond those that dominate the first section.

Many of the prominent themes of the second section, such as the appreciation of beauty and a concern with social issues, also appear in the collection’s third section, which consists entirely of poems featuring the second-person. The speakers open themselves up to a greater variety of addresses than those of the first section, as if, after the early loss of friendships, they are now making efforts not just to explore the world and interpret it, but to talk to the people and things of the world. On an aesthetic level, the second-person also frequently establishes a sense of immanence and importance of whoever is spoken to so that the reader develops a sense of proximity in relation to the addressed. Such use of the second-person may not be appropriate in all cases of intimacy; “In a Grocery Store . . .,” for example, adopts the third-person voice both to strengthen the sense of an unvoiced fondness for the worker and to complement the possible social impropriety of vocalizing these descriptions to the worker while she is on the job, thus making the speaker internalize his observations. However, in other cases, the use of address can help to stress the importance of a figure who may otherwise more likely appear estranged from the matter at hand.

One such example of address playing such a role is in “To John Falstaff,” which joins in the tradition of “Passing a Field . . .” as a poem more concerned with social than personal themes. However, whereas “Passing . . .” concerns itself with environmentalism, “To John Falstaff” takes note of the excessive amount of labor that workers are subjected to by comparing their conditions to those of William Shakespeare’s character, who has a well-known reputation for idleness. The speaker of this poem laments the fact that Lou and Carol will, after the current July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration, “spend a third of [tomorrow] / In the last two car factories in town,” and he expresses his admiration for Falstaff, who he imagines “resid[ing] / With a French couple on vacation,” as a figure who implicitly opposes this tendency to keep the workers laboring for what the speaker sees as excessive hours. In light of Falstaff’s “far away” status as a “[spirit] . . . barred from America,” it may be easy to portray Shakespeare’s character as a detached figure in the context of the poem, but the speaker’s address to him lends him a sense of importance and immanence, as if his presence and the ideal he represents are summoned in the speaker’s desires even as they appear absent in his observations of Lou and Carol’s future work schedule. By its nature, this also connects to the imaginative, associative impulse in many of my poems, for it summons Falstaff into a contemporary, everyday situation in the U.S. In this regard, the poem’s use of second-person, in allowing the speaker to more easily convey both Falstaff’s importance and his absence, also strengthens by extension the poem’s thematic concern with socioeconomic conditions that workers face in their schedules.

At times, the populist, socially conscious theme of “To John Falstaff” overlaps with the theme of appreciating beauty, as in “Windows,” a poem whose address to a threatening minnow “constructed from sapphires” takes a critical tone designed to illustrate the antagonistic relationship between the collective speaker and the fish in a world that represents how beauty

can be unfairly controlled by a conformist elite. The minnow's aggressive behavior is portrayed as he "[eats] the ladybugs on the sills of windows" and uses his tail to "[b]leed us" in response to the perceived dirtiness of the speakers' feet, the latter action conveying the minnow's attempt to establish its authority and sense of order. The speakers, who live in a "house submerged in lapis lazuli," contrast the minnow's aggressive behavior with their own "desire" for "unity of beauty, / Both quartz and kindness joined throughout the windows." The speakers recognize that the fantastic "river of blue jewels" that they arrived in has its beauty, as does the minnow himself, but they want this beauty to take up a more populist and all-encompassing stance than the minnow takes. When the speakers tell the minnow, "We do not want your scepter's pointy edge," they are not only making a reference to the minnow's painful tail, but also suggesting that the minnow represents a regally elitist state that conflicts with the speakers' populist desire for "the salmon to feel free to deck / Their scales in opal on the sills of windows." In this regard, the speakers of the third section, much like the second, find themselves grappling with obstacles that impede them from appreciating beauty and new relationships as counters to alienation, instead finding that such beauty is currently in the service of an alienating, violent authority figure.

Unlike "In a Grocery Store . . .," "Passing a Field . . .," or "To John Falstaff," "Windows" is strongly rooted in an imaginary world along the lines of "Traumatized, Traumatizing," worlds that attempt to take Hoagland's imaginative "disproportion" to a level that can better convey abstract points in a novel and entertaining light. However, whereas "Traumatized, Traumatizing" appears more situated in the psychology of the speaker dealing with the loss of a friendship and the problem of words, the world of "Windows" invites more people into its situation, as signaled at least partially by its collective voice. Furthermore, with the speakers' opposition to the minnow as a regal authority figure, the poem's imaginary world, on some level, connects to a

more social theme along the lines of “To John Falstaff.” Although, as previously indicated, these imaginary worlds may not initially appear to represent the concerns of the world as directly as, for example, a field of wind turbines, they often end up rolling different elements together in order to make an intangible more tangible. In much the same way that, in “Traumatized, Traumatizing,” the role of language in representing the void is conveyed through words riding on dragonfish, the minnow of “Windows” is capable of symbolizing an authoritarian power that attempts to claim beauty under its regal domination. This portrayal through a minnow in an unusual world allows this issue to be explored in a more entertaining and novel light than if this idea was portrayed through a more “conventional” figure of the world, such as a king. In some ways, these worlds connect to a point made by Robert Pinsky, when, writing about “historical surrealism, as I understand it,” he claims that it “was deeply allied with ideas about dreams, Freudian and otherwise, and also with related ideas concerning a profound cultural unconscious. The word ‘profound,’ a mining of unexplored depths, seems appropriate: a stating of mysterious connections and unacknowledged junctures, a reality beyond ordinary reality, richer in meaning and emotion” (82). Along these lines, the poems of this collection, to whatever degree that they embrace the power of imagination, seek to not only embrace Hoagland’s principle of “disproportion” for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment of the imagination in its own right, but also to illustrate the relationship between “this world” and the imagination and the way the latter helps to uncover “unexplored depths.”

In much the same way that the imaginary world of “Windows” allows the exploration of these depths in terms that are both more symbolic—through the figure of the minnow—and more entertaining, poems like “The Hat Horizon” and “The Monster that Can’t Be Defeated Here”—two works of the fourth section that represent the greater prominence it gives to imaginary

worlds—have fantastic settings that allow a similar examination of the familiar theme of environmental degradation, with the former work using its fantastic setting to take the potential consequences of such degradation to an extreme. “The Hat Horizon” involves a world in which the sky, having collapsed, is replaced with various hats. This situation suggests the way that human creation has the power to reshape the order of the world, with the hats—human creations—rising over nature’s old sky and thus symbolically dominating it, usurping its old reign as the atmosphere. However, to the extent that this world also involves the use of “a spire from an abandoned chemical plant for the spike” of the reconstructed helmet now lost to the horizon, the text also suggests that the technology of human creation can also lend itself to ephemeral causes, and to the extent that the sky has collapsed in the prose poem, “The Hat Horizon” evokes the question of environmental degradation due to technology, degradation that may prove more serious than the short-term goals of industry. As noted before, Harvey points out the way that the imaginary worlds she discusses connect to and, in the process, comment on issues in “this world.” In this vein, “The Hat Horizon,” while describing a situation reminiscent of the children’s story of Chicken Little, also has the ability to engage with the serious concern of environmental degradation.

Whereas “The Hat Horizon” uses its imaginary world to emphasize the potential consequences of environmental degradation, “The Monster that Can’t Be Defeated Here” uses its imaginary world not only for this purpose, but to also raise the prospect of a solution. The “monster” of the poem is not a corporeal being, but rather a representative of environmental degradation under the status quo, with its “sedimentary tentacles” symbolizing the pollution of the river and its chest as “the arid, heat-soaked land” symbolizing the decreasing fertility of the soil. However, whereas the collective speakers of “The Hat Horizon” are unable to prevent the

sky's collapse and must settle for their hat-based alternative, the speaker of "Monster" notes, "The only weapon that will work is there, / Whatever there's are gathered near the here." In this regard, if "here" is understood as the currently established system, the one that allows the monster to continue its brutalization of the earth, then "there" represents the prospect of a new, more ecologically sustainable system that can defeat the monster. This poem thus uses its imaginary world both to paint environmental degradation in starker terms and to suggest that an alternative is possible.

As indicated before, both "The Hat Horizon" and "The Monster that Can't Be Defeated Here" represent the increasing prominence that imaginary worlds receive in the fourth section, as if the imagination, steadily giving the reader a sense of its own growth through its expression in the everyday world, eventually gained such power through its flights that it has now managed to construct its own worlds. These worlds ultimately function similarly to that of "Windows." In much the same way that the minnow of that poem symbolizes authority's control of beauty in a way that could be difficult to represent effectively in a more everyday setting, the titular creature of "The Monster that Can't Be Defeated Here," for example, symbolizes environmental degradation in general in a way that could be difficult to represent in a more "conventional" setting. Although a poem with a more everyday setting, like "Passing a Field . . .," is more effective in alluding to the literal place of its turbines in the everyday world, the invention of the titular monster is more effective in rolling together various aspects of environmental degradation, such as water pollution and the soil's lack of fertility, into a single being who can be talked about in a succinct manner. In this regard, the everyday and the imaginary worlds each serve their own purposes within the text, to the point that, even in the fourth section, more "everyday" settings still exist in such poems as "Putting a Coat On" and "Love the Commodities You're With."

Ultimately, the continued juxtaposition of poems featuring flights of the imagination in everyday settings beside poems featuring imaginary worlds suggests that the division between the two is not as pronounced as they may initially appear. Along these lines, Harvey sees a connection between the imaginary worlds discussed in her essay and “this world,” going so far as to note in her essay “how our invented worlds never let us fully leave the world we live in. As Federico [sic] García Lorca put it, ‘the imagination is limited by reality: one cannot imagine what does not exist’” (123). Regardless of whether the poems are set in “this” world or an imaginary world, they both involve the expression of the imagination and, as Harvey and Lorca both maintain, its relationship with the everyday world. Along these lines, the poems of my collection, to whatever degree that they embrace the power of imagination, seek to illustrate the relationship between “this world” and the imagination and the way that it explores the themes of the collection, including personal alienation through the end of friendships, the search for less alienating relationships, and environmental degradation.

**I**

## OFF TOPIC

I signify without the signified.  
I am a mangled portmanteau of five words,  
Incomprehensible upon creation.  
I am perceived as nonsense syllables,  
An onomatopoeia of white noise  
Across the page, although the readers know  
My origins (the long-forgotten words  
That merged to form my flesh) had meanings,  
In fact had widely disparate meanings,  
And yet I can't remember them at all.

I signify without the signified.  
I am a transitive verb with no object,  
Or more specifically, I am "to do,"  
A verb amorphously floating on  
A paper pool without context or syntax  
To help define myself. Not setting fires,  
Not sitting on my knees, not fixing lunch,  
Not recording videos of dogs in heat,  
Not reading nor writing, I'm just "to do."  
I only say that someone does something,  
But I don't know which someone, which something.

I signify without the signified.  
I envy people used in metaphors  
And roll my eyes at folks who think themselves  
Dehumanized when they're compared to rugs,  
Acanthus leaves, or apple juice boxes.  
Provided I'm accepted as myself,  
I'd love to be a word in flesh, companion  
To another image, just as powerful  
As "the smell of stovetop eggs," the page's phrase  
That makes me think of prefaces to breakfast.  
Likewise, perhaps the dryness of my hands  
Could signify "a little garden's drought."

## CASES

<i>Nominative:</i>	The U-shaped magnet, when left alone on the desk, stretches out to form a circle.
<i>Accusative:</i>	The belly button's pit meets the pointing finger with yak carcasses and solid maple syrup and sand.
<i>Genitive:</i>	The suitcase's handle reads his long-concealed letters to the hand.
<i>Dative:</i>	The eye clears the crack of the motel room's door and takes instructions from the couple in bed.
<i>Ablative:</i>	The departing vaudevillian act makes a slow treadmill of the earth, a treadmill fast enough to keep the actors from slapping the sunset.
<i>Vocative:</i>	The cave's echo of commands addressed to us comes in fading.

And thus I tried to seal Latin in gelatin,  
To keep a language—any language—  
Wrapped inside a series of edible girders and domes,  
All to steady that shaking bridge  
As it passes through mouths and ears and hands and eyes.  
But it didn't work! A passive voice commands  
The belly button to transform into a magnet.  
Even now, even in English,  
The mud I kept in a box marked "Noun"  
Spreads outward, muddying up,  
Along with the cardboard, my works.  
I left the box marked "Verb" in the closet.

## TRAUMATIZED, TRAUMATIZING

*“Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.”*

—*Samuel Beckett*

The shadows of my room are oily water  
Through which the black dragonfish navigate  
With lights that I can't see.  
The pods on their backs  
Aren't nautilidae hitching rides,  
But words for nothingness from different parts of speech  
That got the dragonfishes' protection.

On that back, “zilch” is a verb,  
As in, “I zilched your chin through constant shaving,”  
Perhaps thinking of its fish's barbel  
Hanging like a thin, long strand of beard.

On another back, “nil” is a preposition,  
As in, “There are no colors nil your crayon box.”

Then the words reveal  
That they have studied human cells,  
Performing mitosis and spreading out  
To other parts of speech  
So that, for instance,

“Nil” is also an adverb,

And “zero” becomes a conjunction,

As in, “Nothing zilches nil zerond emptily.”

“Zerond” and “emptily” are understood as the terms most in need of revision  
Due to leaving too much room for hope.  
“Zerond” is open to addition,  
And “emptily” evokes pitchers poised to take in root beer.

Such revision will take place, no doubt.  
They have that power.  
Even my feet's imprints in the room's brown carpet  
Are as fragile beneath the phrases' waves  
As footprints on the beach.

Beckett was wrong. These verbal copycats  
Of the void can speak eloquently  
For it on their own. Typography  
Looks like a brank's bridle holding the jaw  
Of paper or digital, paper-like backgrounds,

Like that of the e-mail in which you told me to shut up,  
To never talk to you again.  
The last time we met in person, I was outside,  
You in your van. The sun, imitating the moon  
Behind the glacial clouds, was lugubrious  
As it shone on the falling snow. You told me  
You couldn't stop to think about the dragonfish,  
That you had too many issues to care.  
It's just like how I didn't care when you,  
Upon concluding your remarks and driving away,  
Promptly crashed into a signboard  
That said either "Traumatized" or "Traumatizing."  
My vision wasn't 20/20.

## NIMROD ON AMTRAK

*“Raphel mai amecche zabi almi”*  
—*Inferno*

This train’s doors must be larger than they look  
For me to have fit, the ring of rock from Hell  
Fitting around my waist like a clumsy cummerbund  
Scratching the hinges as I passed the threshold.  
Nobody noticed it.

Catharsis never came  
For the unintelligible intelligence  
Whose friendship you ended for no real reason,  
So I looked for it through a long ride.

I have seen an orange tuque fall underneath  
A seat, have seen the flare of its cloth obscured  
By the shadow of the seat, have even seen  
The shadow of the tuque’s brim obscured  
By the larger shadow. And I have understood  
That, to the outsider, the blue and white metal  
Of the train, its lights through the doors,  
The shadows left by the lights  
Were all obscured by a tunnel’s shadow.

I have seen efforts to invoke  
The grand and the eloquent  
Culminate in a pompous suitcase,  
And I have heard testimony  
That silverfish aren’t as tasty as they sound.  
I have seen the insects at a station escaping  
A pocket of the grandiloquent portmanteau  
And crawl to a crevice below.

I have heard a dozen breaths of hesitation,  
Each a precursor to a story,  
Nullified by a snore.  
And who can say that, from these breaths,  
From the guttural groans that end in a squeak,  
From the panting of a wheezing, rabid dog,  
We may not find a global language  
Of inexpressiveness?  
For too long, the paranoid have watched  
The skies for U.N. helicopters

Out to impose Spanish, Chinese, Esperanto.  
The universal tongue dwells inchoate in our own mouths.

And may we not find a system of writing  
In the scar tissue of a crossword puzzle,  
Those disjointed notes outside the boxes  
That don't answer any announced clues?  
From these, from illegible signatures,  
From furtive check marks on ticket stubs,  
From washed-out graffiti in a subway,  
Might we construct an alphabet?

I have seen the passengers file in and out  
And on and off, the human mass forming  
An ellipse like a single fly's orbit  
Over your mantle of tarot cards  
And candles. I have often imagined  
This seat as your mantle, myself  
As an overstuffed doll, but even then,  
My stitched frown failed to reach you  
And your circle of friends,  
As the tarot cards failed to reach the fly  
Who burned too close to wax.

I have seen the ghosts patrol the stony hoop  
Around my hips, reminding me of you,  
Though you're alive, keeping me awake.  
I still watch them. They remind me  
Of the luminescence of all mortal things.  
The ectoplasmic glow  
Reminds me that there's no return to dust,  
Dust never being our home.

I have seen the deception of maps and scales.  
A map and its blue zigzagging line can be held  
Between the chests of hugging vagabonds,  
The distance overcome.  
Boston and Chicago have never hugged like that.

I never saw you.  
I never saw catharsis.

## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

You saw the blue convolvulus amidst the bees' buzzing and thought it could make a great  
vuvuzela.

You saw the irises and thought their petals could be dropped with the orange juice on the  
ceviche.

You rank appetite first, then beauty, then conventional morality, though  
Your appetite and definition of beauty aren't really "conventional" either, or so  
You like everyone else to think. Even I must admit that  
You have had some good ideas here and there.

You once wore fishnet stockings, spurred boots, a football jersey, blue surgeon's gloves, and a  
pink executioner's mask while  
You walked through the bustling public park and made a platonic pact with  
Yourself.

You think all dough has the potential to form a *commedia dell'arte* plague doctor's mask, and  
You appreciate the dough all the more for it, molding it until it reaches  
Your ideal cookie cast, its two lonely chocolate chips positioned like eyeholes.

You once dyed an owl's feather purple and wore it as a ribbon in your hair.

You will not eat rats for The Last Poets' revolution, but rather because  
You love rodents and believe that love is best expressed through mastication.

You would never kill a spider, but

You would tear a thousand legs off already deceased arachnids and place them around a rabbit's  
head if

You thought all that would produce a chimera.

You would gladly welcome the lion and lioness into

Your house and pet them, even if their jaws are bloody, for

You figure that they are "being themselves" and that the lamb was holding them back anyway.

You snatched a golden gauntlet from a woman's blonde hair after reaching into a Gustav Klimt  
painting,

Your favorite work by him;

You taped a vermilion brocade to its wrist, and then

You punched me in the mouth with the gage after

You said my netiquette was "gauche." I'm still spitting out golden plates months later, and for  
what? Because

You were mad that I e-mailed

You to tell

You that

You were technically mistaken when

You asserted on

Your blog that an atheist is only someone who lacks belief in God. In fact, my dictionary gave,  
along with

Your definition, the definition of an atheist as one who actively disbelieves in God.

You will likely call me a liar for this, and

You're right:

You dislike me for reasons much dumber than what I just claimed.

You may have helped me, however, in realizing this much:  
The hypocrites of tolerance may be  
The most infuriating of all.  
Most religious hypocrites at least  
Admit they believe in judging.

## THE WEATHERVANES

*after T. S. Eliot*

They're nervous from the pressures of the test,  
The poets who observe the weathervanes' beasts.  
No verse is free that seeks to do its best.

The roosters, pupils of the wind, face west,  
Although they know the hens live in the east.  
They're nervous from the pressures of the test.

They miss their mothers' hymn-like clucks of rest  
And shelter for the chicks to sleep in peace.  
The hens' verse, not free, had sought to do its best.

A vane on the ground—disheveled, ant-infested—  
Bears a fox who wants a handsome poultry feast  
From those nervous from the pressures of the test.

Although they sense danger behind their crests,  
The roosters stay stalwart, to say the least.  
No verse is free that seeks to do its best,

And that is why the chickens make requests  
Of the wind, that powerful gust that creased  
And creases the houses' shutters up and down,  
To teach them how to crow as it has blown,  
And that is why they follow its directions  
Without fail, with only small gyrations  
On the roofs, leaving themselves open to attack  
From the fox, who—face beaten  
By the rust and ants and dirt  
That mixed and sometimes stuck  
In his fur and broken nose—resembles  
The duck-billed platypus of soap dispensers,  
That container whose beak-shaped head is pushed down for liquid,  
That container covered with beard shavings in a bathroom  
Of a house whose roof holds up one of the roosters.  
Saliva like a moist hand sanitizer,  
Canines like bars dropped during baths,  
The fox tears up the shuddering chickens  
And screeches louder than the wind had been  
While straddling barnyard boards moaning at night.

“They’re nervous from the pressures of the test.”  
Who’s nervous? The boards? The dead chickens?  
Poets, why are we loyal to this form  
While warmer fronts pervade a higher sphere,  
Warm fronts of imagery, of making sense?  
What can we say for what we’ve done,  
And what can we say to change our gaze?  
“No verse is free that seeks to do its best.”

## LIGHTNING

The way the lightning looked mid-afternoon:  
Construction beam from the Quaking Aspen,  
A slab of cheddar full of phosphorous.  
It flashed outside my window while the sun  
Was beaming in and harmonizing  
With my lamp, but both were dimmed compared  
To that wild shade of white converging  
With yellow, leaving me to wonder  
For an interval if this could be  
The source of light that could reveal it all.  
I imagined that, beneath my backyard, there  
Were buried the darkest study in the world,  
And all the pages in its books were nearly  
As atramentous as their letters.  
Although some torches are inside the room,  
No match can give a flame that's bright enough,  
And even if I packed flashlights, they would  
Not work. Only the lightning could provide  
The necessary spark for reading,  
The fire that can ignite my shadow  
Into cerise. Such thoughts occurred to me  
Until the thunder sounded off before  
A second bolt, and then a power outage.

# III

## **JOB'S WIFE WATCHING FROM THE WINDOW**

Our Lord can conjure up a cavity  
So small not even he can push into it  
The trick of how to catch the giant fish  
With scales like closely neighboring copper huts,  
Nor a list of metals needed for the sword  
That can slay the ox whose thirst can drain the rivers,  
Nor just what meal best satisfies the raven.  
The human mind—for that's the cavity—  
Can't even grasp the reason why the plan  
Drawn by the somber, far-off General  
Involved attacking allies while they feasted,  
Their roof hit by the windy battering ram  
Until it buried my sons and daughters.  
Omnipotence implies ability  
To make oneself well-understood by even  
The dullest consciousness, the oil transforming  
The wispy flame to blazing luminescence,  
And thus our Lord's apparent litany  
Of accolades for his strength and experience,  
His apparent accusations aimed at Job  
Are actually confessions of impotence,  
And thus we lack the power to attain  
The truth, or put another way, God lacks  
The power to explain himself to us.

## KANAWHA COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA, 2014

They're saying that it smells like licorice,  
The chemical that seeped into the stream,  
Preventing bathing, rinsing, washing hands.  
Like saccharine whiskey, fumes perfume the road,  
Itself a grizzled string of licorice,  
Its bumpy grooves each marked by slow sedans  
That scoot ahead in search of fresh supplies.  
The tiny holes that fill the metallic backs  
Of the water bottles' empty shelves  
In the Dollar Tree are licorice gumdrops.  
The setting sun is blinding butterscotch  
That, scattered on the windshield, makes it hard  
To drive. Even the coal the chemical  
Had washed is just a rinsed-off chocolate  
That fell on the floor. Austere beside the river,  
The storage tubs of Freedom Industries  
Don't need the colors of our jelly beans  
To hide behind, merely a nom de plume  
Of liberation.

Eventually, I go  
To a gas stop's convenience store. Before,  
When I had visited the Dollar Tree,  
I overheard reports of fighting  
At other stores: pushing, then fists, a fall  
To frenzy for some jugs of water.  
Now, entering the gas stop, I see  
A man place bottles on the counter and turn  
Around for more. I nearly run to the back,  
And I think I've lost when he beats me there,  
Opens the cooler door, and offers me  
Two bottles, saying I can take some more  
If I need them. His hazel eyes reveal  
A sweetness that transcends our candy's smell.

## IN A GROCERY STORE NEAR THE SCHOOL BUS

Her aquiline eyes, vivid in their oval slits,  
Not bored autumn leaves snoring in a tire fire.  
Her lengthy fingernails brushing my celery stalks as she loads the paper bag,  
Not the appendages of a Luddite snowflake before a crashed car.  
Her wispy hair, its fallen strands blending into the inky conveyor belt,  
Not the veil of a dying willow tree ashamed of its lack of rage.  
Her freckled nose, its patina harmonious with her crimson uniform,  
Not a stick insect wriggling among a truck's lumber.  
Her large ears, canals to earphone boats chugging the Beatles,  
Not the clucking of a running engine.  
Her gentle palms handing me the receipt,  
Not the mangy soul patch of her brother, who steps off the bus.  
Her heterochromatic gaze, green and red and slightly yellow,  
Not the hangman's traffic light above my weathered car.

## BACCHIUS OR ANTIBACCHIUS IN BROOKLYN

Our cab's stalled in dim Brooklyn.  
No sun's cracked; bright yellow comes  
From car doors near flat tires pricked  
By zinc, tungsten, tin, gold, or  
Lead pins. The exact metal's  
Unknown. Background bridge wires hang  
Beyond traffic far, far from  
Us and stay taut, like cello  
Strings, yet play robins' high chirps.  
Brick buildings with lamps turned off,  
Thin paths, and trees stuffed with figs  
Are some sights in our slow trek.  
Mike Spencer, the cab driver,  
And I keep pushing this stuck  
Car. Our phones dead, we keep watch  
For lamp lights to gleam signals  
Of folks wide awake, doors we  
Can knock, asking for their phone  
To call up a tow truck or,  
If not that, then pay phone change.

## THE SMELL OF NEARING RAIN

When it was about to rain,  
Its smell reminded me  
Of what I thought the smell of ink was.  
The odor, initially light, started sketching  
A handle, then a rectangular block with wheels.  
When the nearing rain's scent  
Began to heavily shade the rectangles,  
I realized it had drawn the lawnmower  
That sat broken in my front yard.  
I was walking away from it to relax.

When it actually rained, it was like  
It had removed its smell, or rather  
I forgot about it with my umbrella,  
The round bleaching agent to the drawing.  
When I turned to look back at my house,  
I couldn't even see the lawnmower through the downpour.

## **FLOOD**

The archipelago of green highway signs  
Floats below my shuddering sheep.  
Will my ramshackle ark remain unbroken?

When I return, my crops will have already drowned.  
The verdant tips of my dead turnips  
Are seaweed to this shallow ocean.

Even my rusty tractor, its red metal drifting  
Half-submerged,  
Migrates to the sunset's city.

## PASSING A FIELD OF WIND TURBINES IN INDIANA

“Praise to the triangles!  
They have stripped away their corsets—  
Their old, jagged tributes to the semicircle—  
And have spread out, refashioning themselves  
As somersaulting track stars on treadmills  
High above the grass. Cheers to them!” I said  
And swigged the dregs of my soda bottle  
As you drove us past the turbines.  
The clouds were as thick as a previous field’s alfalfa,  
As if the wind did not scatter them  
Because it was too busy spinning each machine’s three blades,  
Allowing the flourishing of noun and verb alike.  
Later, when we reached Chicago, the clouds  
Above Lake Michigan were thin, like the gauzy ribbons  
In the Renoir portraits beloved in the Art Institute,  
As if the subjects—the lurching rowers, the acrobatic  
Wartenbergs, Alfred Sisley—had scooped up  
The blurry fabrics and tossed them away,  
Submerging them in the air.  
Nothing, however, came into focus  
As a result. The water’s schooners  
Kept their secrets of fishing rods, contraband, sexual  
Relations between goats and humans, and other miscellany.

You have come to hate driving in big cities.  
Perhaps it’s the way the one-way only signs  
Keep making you draw and redraw a rectangle  
Around the place you want to go  
Until you fear the tires’ graphite will break  
On your itinerant pencil.  
Perhaps it’s the way the car heats up  
On the road, the sunbeams falling in  
Like peaches to a factory can  
And us the tin, shirked bottom.  
Perhaps it’s just that your legs get cramped,  
But maybe not.  
Shuffling slowly through the gaps  
Among the people on the street who walked  
In the opposite direction of where we were headed,  
I felt crowded enough on foot as we went  
To the pizzeria, where we learned  
The cheeseburger pizza was no longer sold,  
The worst news yet!

The TV there was loud enough for us to hear  
A pundit refer to “Shay Guevara.”  
That’s not how Spanish works; it’s “chay” as in “change.”  
The “ch” as in “Chicago” applies to French,  
The metropolis’s name itself derived from a French attempt  
To transcribe a word used among Algonquians.  
And perhaps the name could even be  
A French word if the “i” would sound more like an English “e,”  
Maybe spread itself out along the skyline  
Like either Big Brother’s camera stationed on a zeppelin  
Or a giant Times New Roman pancake,  
One of its serifs hanging on a Willis Tower needle.  
*Le chicago*, defined in my bilingual dictionary as  
“A concrete suitcase stuffed with bookstores and museums and jazz records.”  
With a luggage bag this large, couldn’t there be enough space  
For the new, renewable energy?

Back at the field, one distant turbine’s blades  
Looked almost two-dimensional as they turned  
Into the horizon. They helped me see  
That this could all be as simple  
As small lines on paper pointing onward.

## MOCK PASTORAL STUPOR

Are these some cobalt statues in my path,  
Dropping their prickly bells with dull resound?  
These conifers must fill uncharted grounds  
Near maples that exude their sap like jam.  
I am among the beasts of forests blue.

From the feet that have sneezed in the rustling dash earthbound,  
The leaves now form a fresco in Pan's nave.  
The goats and sheep convulse in woolen howls,  
And wolves drape paws over my cloak quite grave.  
I am among the beasts of forests blue.

Above the nearby city's power outage,  
Above the sidewalks scowling from the sun's weight,  
The clouds that form faces I once knew  
Fulfill the spark of my lonely descant.  
I am among the beasts of forests blue.

## THE DEATH OF THE BALTIMORE VETERAN

*after Randall Jarrell*

I was a failed abortion of the State,  
Abandoned under Thor's old rattling bridge  
Outside the city. Twelve feet from the line  
Of taxis, I lay on the sidewalk, flat,  
My stomach empty as a paper cup.  
When I died, some tourists nonchalantly stepped  
Over my false bed, tomb of open air.

## ODE TO A SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT

The prisoner is alone now,  
Three of his right hand's fingers  
Denailed and fractured, hanging away  
From his palm like ribs tilting off  
A butchery's display case for meats.  
Although he sweats, his face is wet  
Less from the perspiration than the drowning  
The guards had given him through a pink rag.

Through the cracks in the walls, he tries to listen  
To what the outside world has to say,  
But the crow does not know the UN's  
Declaration of Human Rights, nor have the cypresses  
Studied the Geneva Conventions,  
Nor does the wind blowing through them  
Teach them anything by Kant, Rousseau, or Marx.

As for the universe, taken  
As an abstract compilation of nature  
And the cosmos and not of all  
Intelligence throughout existence,  
Of course it's indifferent,  
But then, who asked that dumbass for his opinion?  
He doesn't know about evolution,  
Could join the Geocentric Society for all he's heard of Copernicus,  
And can't tell Alpha Centauri from his elbow.  
He'd probably drool all over himself  
And flood the Pacific if he had salivary glands.  
As it is, he doesn't even have a brain!

This is the way the prisoner silently humors himself,  
Though he dares not speak nor even laugh out loud,  
Aware that the guards, easily annoyed,  
Have disconnected their heaters  
From the categorical imperative's generator.  
The indifference of the universe does not bother him.  
It's the indifference of humans that's torturous.

Entitlement, you are a bird.  
You hide your longest feathers  
Until you reach his wall, unleashing them as chisels.  
When enough of a crack is produced  
For the many trills you've mastered

To be heard more easily,  
You teach the man how to tweet  
Like the whippoorwill, but not to call  
For flagellation. You help him claim  
The sound while speaking your language,  
Neither that of other birds nor dehumanized,  
Dehumanizing humans. You helped shape  
His tongue into both a skeleton key  
And a mallet for his palate's xylophone.  
If the tune pleases the guards  
And the lost travelers who wander outside the jail,  
They may wonder where he learned it,  
May ask him with desperation, as if the regime  
Were at their necks and ready to throw them in cells.  
He'll reply that you were the teacher.

# III

## TO HARPO MARX

If a flaming bush rested on my head,  
That, by itself, would not make me an alarmist,  
A prophet, or you. I am no man of action.  
Any carefree handkerchief that dances  
Before your mouth is caught between  
Your merciless teeth, dragged like a rug  
From an upscale house's foyer.  
Any knife that remains idle  
Finds a home in your deep pockets.  
Any passing woman is swiftly followed  
By your flabby trenchcoat. The enormous  
Arc of your snarling lips  
Confuses the waddling police  
Officer, the seat of his black  
Trousers a target of your swinging  
Foot. While your horn  
Communicates an obscure  
Morse code, I rely on my pen  
To penetrate the veil of silence.  
My distracted sketching recreates  
Your leg in a ninety degree angle.

## WINDOWS

An azure minnow traveling through the windows,  
You eat the ladybugs on the sills of windows.

Our house submerged in lapis lazuli,  
We see you, gemstone fish, within our windows.

Translucent carp constructed from sapphires,  
You waddle slowly through the windows.

Whenever we lie down and raise our feet,  
You see the gaps between our toes as windows.

You see caliche on our soles and rage,  
Viewing our messy feet as dirty windows.

The slivers of your tail within our skin  
Bleed us like shards from broken windows.

Why must you threaten us while we try to rest,  
You pinprick ornament of drowning windows?

Newcomers in this river of blue jewels,  
We can appreciate the view through our windows.

What we desire is unity of beauty,  
Both quartz and kindness joined throughout the windows.

We want the salmon to feel free to deck  
Their scales in opal on the sills of windows.

We do not want your scepter's pointy edge.  
Surrender, minnow, to the realm of windows!

## USED LAVA LAMP

You do not need precipitation for  
The mockery of rainbows you perform.  
On coffee tables, your buffoonery  
Inside your violet tent has long entranced  
Inhabitants of shady living rooms,  
But now I'm underwhelmed sitting with you.  
It's fun enough, I guess, to watch you kick  
Those scarlet balls with hearty leisure,  
But I don't see volcanoes in your thrusts,  
And I would like my fifteen dollars back  
From your circus act. But worst of all is this:  
You're really not that great a source of light.  
Distracted by your dim attraction,  
I don't see, within the shadows, feline claws  
That strike my ankles like twin lightning bolts.

## WHAT THE DENTIST MIGHT SAY

The light above the chair knows how your eyes  
Can tell half-truths and overgeneralize.  
You read the notice on the wall  
Inveighing against sweets,  
And you don't see the purple  
Of the letters in a 42 point font,  
But simply incantations made visible  
Against the soft drinks pictured on the poster,  
A fence, blurred by semiotics,  
Constructed to keep the sugar out.  
You notice the drill, but don't detect  
The engine or the gears inside that turn it,  
Instead summarizing it all as one machine.  
The light above the chair knows how your eyes  
Can claim mastery on most subjects without bothering  
With all the research, exhausted as those pupils are  
From hearing the lecturing gleam read off the photons.  
Therefore, close your eyes.

The mouth, at first, appears a dilated pupil,  
Its tongue as eager to make glib assertions,  
But let it fall silent in imitation  
Of a tree's hollow in the Everglades  
Or the spittoon next to your arm.  
Let yourself receive the sensation  
Of the water jet's spray  
Like the python's hiss  
Or expectorated phlegm.  
Let yourself receive but not judge  
Until you realize such judgment will come  
Through pain, your lips like limbs on a rack,  
The novocaine weighing on the upper lip  
Like a two-ton mustache.  
When it is over, when you  
Return to listening to your eyes  
And the facts that they detect—for, after all,  
They really do know many things—remember  
Beyond your whiter teeth's reflection in the mirror  
And, in writing, translate your mouth.

## ODE TO THE SCHWA

You've been calumniated, bosom buddy  
Of burps, accused of lazily pursuing  
Attention as the speaker hesitates  
While you assume your alias of "Uh."  
You definitely deserve a better rep.  
Your gusts can blow Homeric lotuses  
To sailors of audio waves, relieving them,  
Except for some sick-stomached sounds, of stress.  
When formalist poets begin their game  
Of jumping from black stone to gray to black  
Again throughout the gravel lot, your gleam  
Quite often marks the way, and when they think  
The noises of bass drums aren't loud enough,  
The gentle shaking of your tambourine  
Provides a contrast to the clamor.  
Amalgamation of the wind, the pebbles,  
Percussive force, and more—that's what you are.  
Within your modest puffing through the larynx,  
The multitudes unite in peaceful flanks.

## HYMN TO A COCKROACH

after Frederic Tuten's *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March*, from which the title is taken

Somewhere inside the downtown shopping center,  
Within an alleyway,  
You clasp your legs around a rusty nail,  
A toolbox's orphaned egg.

Your mandibles won't make a hardened crumb  
Of this meager, stalwart cane.  
You want to tackle it to imitate  
The Tramp's comedic gait.

You scamper round the metal walking stick  
And tilt about its head,  
Your balance barely kept for the sake of your game  
Of counting time with limbs,

Or rather counting time with sprawl of limbs,  
Of measuring the beats  
Of tarsi digging air like a second hand  
Across a watch's face.

Inside the nearby pizzeria, workers  
Don't know about your antics.  
They're made to stay for seven hours more  
Before they get to leave,

Before the ovens' heat gives way to naps  
Inside their cooler beds,  
Though they may not be cool enough without  
The air conditioners.

As if on cue, your wings envelop  
The nail to imitate  
Your ootheca. Is this the Ithaca  
To your Odysseus?

Maroon, your wings resemble foliage  
Of the park you traveled through,  
Resemble bricks of pizzeria walls  
Outside the alleyway,

And now evoke the ootheca,

That bag you once escaped,  
That still and brownish hammock where your rest  
May nurse and hatch a sprint.

## TO JOHN FALSTAFF

When I saw the fireworks, I imagined them as your taste buds  
Set off to sherry. If a meteor had passed by  
Just as one explosion's lights scattered, the simile  
Would have received more obvious support,  
The shooting star's glimmer like the wine's reflection  
In the goblet as it's tipped into your mouth,  
But that's OK. The asteroid was like you: far away.  
It was July 4<sup>th</sup>, and although the other guests  
At the barbecue may have celebrated an old king's expulsion,  
I mourned for your exile from King Hal.  
Perhaps you later faked your death and today reside  
With a French couple on vacation,  
More spirits that, like you, are barred from America.  
At the picnic table, Lou and Carol's revelry  
In their repast of sausages was like a tribute to you,  
But tomorrow, they'll spend a third of the day  
In the last two car factories in town. Perhaps if you saw us,  
You would call us "a whoreson caterpillar's leaves,"  
We who lose the saccharine slabs of beef we drew  
From cattle of the sun and carbon dioxide  
To the insect's maw. As for you  
And the French couple, you all had too many free hours  
To count them, as Hal might have suggested,  
Through dinner's capon legs  
Inside the otherwise generally empty tea caddy,  
Your dagger, once a makeshift scepter  
While you played Henry IV, now claiming its role  
In carving up the meal, free from near-courtly intrigues.  
Back at the red mangrove, the jewel caterpillar,  
Wearing a platinum frock, slowly consumes us,  
The ones who pray to the heavenly soil below.

## HARANGUE AGAINST LEMONS

*Lemons: all freedom, all ego, all vanity, fragrant with scent we can't help but imagine when we look at them, the little pucker in the mouth.*

—Mark Doty

I do not rail against the figurative,  
Those humble, broken Chevys parked on the street.  
They do not boast about their expletive-  
Inducing hiccups. Why, they seem sweet  
Compared to regal snobbery in gold-  
Laced coats. Such lemons mock the apples,  
Calling their bathrobes drab and moldy,  
But if you help the lemons doff their lapels,  
You'll find the lecherous grins within their piths,  
Their pulps—their genitals—like splaying larvae.  
They'll promise kisses while the ice cubes drift,  
Then leave you slobber-ridden, wanting scurvy.  
I rage against the even ratio  
Between sourness and braggadocio.

## THE PRESIDENT OF LIONFISH

Within your pride, you were the president  
Of lionfish, your skin a coat ornate  
With stripes of caramel, your spotted eyes—  
Immaculate in maculate design—  
Both peppermints to sweeten up your speeches,  
Your pointed fins your ballpoint pens reposed  
To sign the bills into new laws. You were  
Hardly alone, the diaspora from  
The Indo-Pacific made a pilgrimage  
Beneath your leadership. Off Florida's coast,  
Your soldiers slaughtered heathen snappers,  
Blasphemous groupers, and peccant parrotfish,  
And when the Nassau groupers snarled and tried  
To rise against your army, your troops' spines  
Were bayonets that took the fighters down,  
Their chestnut girth left dashed against the coral.  
When the war concluded, those who had survived  
Were left to starve; your army took the snappers'  
Food supply. You were luxuriant,  
Though many veterans went hungry.

## ODE TO A VERY TASTY SANDWICH

Your tomatoes are like lines from an E. E. Cummings poem,  
Affirming what is yes through what was strange,  
Seemingly unthinkable. My scarlet muses ride in green  
Lettuce to my eager mouth, its saliva kissing you.  
Though you lack any creamy dairy products,  
Your bread is practically a cheese unto itself,  
And many a bovine who stared at your grainy skin,  
Cast in the hue and delicacy of mozzarella, would nod  
In approval. You shed mayonnaise, your white  
Blood cells rushing to defend my  
Taste buds from ill tidings.  
Crunching into your ham, I think of PETA  
And its support of artificial meat. I can only  
Wish that laboratories hasten their magic  
So that this sweet pink substance  
May herald the here and now  
With the loudest humanists  
And without the taint of any death  
Anywhere. The test tubes are spires  
To the laboring scientist's cathedral.  
As he mixes their muscle cells  
Into the broth, he stares down at  
The pigs, hungry in appetite  
And curiosity, while they stand before  
their trough, a pew for a late congregation.  
His priest's collar as white  
And dapper as his open coat,  
He preached, "Fear not, holy swine!  
The kingdom of heaven shall come  
Without cannibalism!"  
My tale of the lab must have bored you,  
For I don't see you anywhere.  
Sitting in my kitchen, I can only wait for your return.

# IV

## WHY THERE ARE NO TOASTERS

Friedrich Nietzsche's reborn  
As a melting butter stick  
In a messy apartment.

He hears a man in the hallway  
Testify that lightning is not just  
A flash to the one it strikes.

Nietzsche tries to write down this idea  
That he had not considered,  
But the pencil slips from his grasp.

He cries, and his tears are bread.  
They absorb him until he becomes  
One with the stale goods.

As for me, a TV antenna,  
I've spent years listening to people  
In specials talk of being one's self.  
Do they know that can mean  
Being one with change?

As a biscuit near the TV set,  
Nietzsche reflects on the actions  
Of the static named Rosa.

She's solid and deep, much like an electric  
Scarecrow caught in tall grass,  
Yet her waves still fluctuate.

Nietzsche asks me, "Is this just a dream?  
Is this just somebody's drug trip?  
Why do I sound like Rene Descartes?  
Is that appropriate  
For this circumstance?"

## STICKERS

Try to construct a god  
In the prairie with your sticker collection. The circular  
Stickers can be his nostrils.  
Make them stuffy, the opposite of voids  
In human noses. Such stickers feature cartoon dogs  
Sniffing out a trail, so can't they breathe for him?  
Give the god rectangular stickers  
Portraying pears when he  
Needs abs. Give him the triangular  
Sticker when he's being good. He  
Is naked when you complete him. The shrubs  
Can't grow leaves as green as his fingers,  
But unlike the leaves, his fingers drift  
Away with the rest of his body. They don't  
Have anything to stick to. They're like  
Paint flakes that hang around after the pot broke.  
The wind emphasizes their lack of attachment.  
The wind seems fickle, full of happenstance.  
You think that it has standards.

## PIERRE MENARD'S LOST SONNET

*after Borges's poem "El Sur"*

Seeing the stars as established constellations,  
With Ursa Major like a Klondike bar mascot,  
Seeing while tired of tradition's domination  
Of what you're seeing, preferring to grow kumquats  
In the plot of the sky owned by hand-holding twins,  
Melting the Big Dipper, forging from it a Swiss  
Army knife, stabbing the Great Bear, carving his skin  
Into a ziggurat, fireflies on each terrace,  
Coming back to earth, seeing the wheelbarrow's bricks,  
The patio table's knife, the neighbors' bright lights,  
Realizing the "new" vision of the sky's a trick  
Of recycling objects that were perceived tonight:  
These things, perhaps, could be made into a poem,  
A gaudy carpet of desiccated plant stems.

## **OFF/ON SALAD**

If you keep going in the direction you're walking, you'll find a fork in the road about a mile from here. A signpost shaped like two scythe blades identifies where the two paths lead, with "Hoffman" on the left and "Concord" on the right. Behind the sign, there is a large, fenced-in field full of some of the moldiest lettuce you will ever hope to see. Aphids are known to hide within their leaves while keeping away from ladybird beetles, but they dare not consume the lettuce.

Many passers-by are known to vomit, swear loudly, tear up their clothes, beat their chests, or enact some combination of all these deeds whenever they see the field. You are welcome to do the same, but whatever you do, you must never say that you've been "turned off on salad" or, really, utter any phrase that involves "on" or "off" while you stand at the crossroads. The very moment you do, the sign's two blades will fall on you and slice you in half. On the halves of your now-split forehead, you will bleed until, on one half, the word "Off" is spelled out, on the other "On." The rest of your body will spill your vital organs, only they won't be the organs you've known; they will have transformed into various light bulbs, switches, and related equipment.

At this point, people dressed in aphid costumes will step out from behind the bushes, pick up your innards, and prepare them as ingredients in Off/On Salad, the legendary dish served at The Aphid Aficionado restaurant. This is the trick they set up to get their food supply. Light bulbs are prepared as cauliflower. The flipped light switches familiar to walls, after about half an hour in the oven, are sprinkled in the salad as croutons. Pull strings from ceiling fan lights are spread throughout the salad as stretches of cheese, and the ceiling fan blades are chopped up and served as carrots. And the lampshades, when they're cut up? That's where the lettuce comes from.

If this happens, you will die. Follow my advice. Don't become Off/On Salad.

## INSTANT REBLOG

An Internet meme, I am the coat  
Of arms you hang in your two  
Most prominent forts.  
You posted me on Facebook  
When you were feeling mainstream  
And posted me on Tumblr  
When you were still mainstream  
But felt alternative.  
“Cut out the toxic people.  
You’ll breathe easier.”  
This text floats in  
My picture’s center above  
A field immersed in purple fog  
And foreground mushrooms.  
You’re not a toxic person.  
Shiitake shrooms are well known  
For avoiding toxic people’s pages,  
Particularly when growing  
In pastures this lavender.  
Instead, the fungi are your lawyers  
Consulting their caps  
As law books, seeking to justify  
Your right to kick out your family  
(Or, really, some close friends).  
And it isn’t arrogance.  
You are no caricature of a Gummi Bear  
As drawn by their TV show’s theme,  
A song that, driven by nostalgia,  
You looked up the other day on Youtube.  
“They take pride in knowing  
They fight for what’s right in whatever they do”?  
Really? *Whatever* they do? No guilt,  
No lapse in judgment, no uncertainty?  
So the singer’s saying that Gruffi  
Didn’t spend the night banging his hammer  
On the hallway doors’ arches  
Just to wake up Grammi, who’s refused  
To speak to him since last week,  
When he kicked out Zummi after the magician,  
Under the power of an invisibility spell  
And Gummiberry Juice mixed  
With absinthe, bounced all over  
Gusto’s grotto until he tore

The wooden bathysphere the artisans  
Had built to pieces? Is that what he's saying?  
Obviously, you'd never act like that.  
You've probably never called up John  
To call him a piece of shit  
Just because you were mad that Amy called  
To call you a piece of shit.  
And even if you did, you're not *them*.  
Don't give a damn about *them*.  
The only way you'd become one of *them*  
Is if they reblog me.

## INSTANT REBLOG II

There's a new meme spreading around  
Among all my friends and acquaintances  
On every website they use.

It's an overhead shot of a tidal wave  
That, near its breaking point, looks wrinkly,  
As if it were bundles of buoyant blue yarn  
Or the bark of a banyan tree.

On top of the tide, the words "Accept yourself"  
Appear, as if attempting  
To soothe the worry lines of the ocean's forehead  
Before the water kills itself trying to impress the beach.

If the tide, in its creases, seems flimsy,  
Ever-changing, a fickle follower of metaphors  
That could just as easily be a future sweater's yarn,  
The phrase "Accept yourself" is designed  
To be the stable counselor, the universal law  
For all the readers, its silver letters unbreakable.

That's how it seemed  
Until I looked more closely  
And found that even the meme's advice has its share of caveats.

For example, Ed, who believes that Hitler's  
Still hiding in Buenos Aires, posted the meme,  
But he doesn't think Nazis should accept themselves.

It gets more complicated than that.  
Tina won't extend acceptance  
To the neighbor who practices with his drum set  
And keeps her awake late at night,  
Nor will Bill urge acceptance  
For the driver ahead of him  
Who forgot to signal that he's turning right,  
Nor will Tony forgive  
Any "pompous" arborist who can, at a glance,  
Identify a banyan tree,  
Nor does Bud believe acceptance applies  
To Alaska or Hawaii, faithful as he is  
To the dictum of soda bottle cap contests.  
And yet they all posted the meme.

It's not like we're that judgmental.  
We even embraced  
The retired general who moved into our town  
When he revealed  
That he wanted to be an iron-fisted dictator,  
Had that desire ever since he was a boy.  
We threw a party to celebrate  
How he was finally being true to himself,  
Completed when we bestowed to him  
A medal made of two guitar picks held together by a safety pin.

Eventually, we had a falling out,  
But not out of any "intolerance of intolerance,"  
As the philosophical kids like to say.  
It was boredom, our eyes habitually rolling  
As he sat on his porch and yelled about "strong government,"  
Holding his brown quilt almost like a sandwich board.  
It's almost like the same boredom I feel with Tina's flute playing,  
Her attempts to drown out the drums.  
It's getting to the point  
Where we will only tolerate pictures of cats  
Because they don't profess to be profound.

## MY IDEAL SELF

I am the dot in the small overlap  
Of a Venn diagram hovering over a desert.  
No one knows the source of the circles.  
There is no projector in the brown bush,  
No geometer's compass in the dunes.  
Red and blue, the two circles float as one  
Dichotomized, much like an image  
From a broken TV or a 3-D movie's screen  
Viewed without glasses. At war, flat Mars  
And Venus stop for a brief eclipse  
At my purple enclave.  
What can I, one  
Corporeal period, do? Will I mark  
The end of strife? Gravity pulsates from my swelling  
Meditations, drawing the planets, unmasked  
As ovals, closer together  
Until they collide as one.  
No more cliques.

## PUTTING A COAT ON

The way it falls from the rack  
And the way you pick it up  
Allow its fabric to mix together.  
You know you should be able to find the hoodie,  
But in the dark room, it blends in with the rest of the coat  
Like a white flag in a vat full of glue  
Or a black flag in a trolley full of coal  
Or a blue flag with a white stripe in a scummy pool.  
As it is, your coat is green and wool.  
You often think of wool as more formal  
Than cotton unless flannel is in play,  
In which case wool becomes bombastically formal,  
As pompous as a musical jug that falls  
Right after it is blown.  
You, on the other hand, don't feel pompous,  
But merely foolish as you place one hand  
Through an arm but can not find the other arm  
For your other hand. Lines crisscross your coat's interior  
Around the armholes, crisscross like coordinates  
To an obtuse map. And as for your other hand,  
It is indisposed, unable to help you hold up the rest  
Of the coat, as lost in the terrain as anyone else,  
As unable to help you right now  
As everyone else who's gone this morning.

## THE HAT HORIZON

When the sky collapsed, could no longer function as it did before, we understood pretty quickly that it had to be replaced with hats. We weren't too sure about using the stovepipes due to their size and the way that they could obstruct both the sun and other hats, but besides that, just about any other type of headgear went up.

For the places in our canvas of hats where we most wanted to see the sun, we riddled holes into bucket and short-brimmed straw hats until one might think they were more material than hat. Strangely, though, one never did; their hat essence remained. We also used pith helmets, and our process was less taxing there; a single large hole at the top would allow the sunlight to slide through like milk falling from bottles and down a sluice.

When we finished replacing the sky with hats, the horizon always looked like a knight's half-open visor, and people always felt unnerved going down the road, as if they were walking right into some great danger. The sparrows, however, kept on flying forward, frequently crashing right into some of the old leather helmets that football players used to wear. The birds squabbled at first, but when they extricated themselves, they'd usually either fly where they were going or, suddenly fascinated by the branch-like leather, set up nests in the helmets.

Planes never had a lot of problems with the hat horizon. They'd fly through the canvas as if it were the world's thickest bead curtain: some scattering of the headgear as the plane passed before it all returned to where it was.

Occasionally, some tricorneres would fall from the sky and float together on a lake, frequently confusing swans and deterring them from settling there.

We made do with the fallen clouds as replacements for our hats. Whenever we felt like wearing some old spiked helmets, for example, we'd fashion a cloud into the helmet itself and then tear off a spire from an abandoned chemical plant for the spike. We were resourceful like that.

## **STAIRCASE WIT**

Fresh sheets on the bed the first weekend of spring.

The deep blue fish-food box sinking in the lifeless, full aquarium.

The cardigan sweater, somehow caught by a thread on a stalactite, that, after an earthquake, fell on a stalagmite.

The abandoned mall's map that says, "You are here."

## **THE MONSTER THAT CAN'T BE DEFEATED HERE**

The sedimentary tentacles concealed  
Within the river near the mountain,  
Our coughs like catapults incapable  
Of pushing back the poisonous limbs enfolding  
The cells that stand behind the fortress walls.  
The monster that can't be defeated here,  
The scaly chest that's brazenly displayed  
Throughout the arid, heat-soaked land, its cracks  
Deceptive in convincing us that grains  
Of wheat can penetrate the armor, only  
To see the tips of spears break on impact.  
The monster that can't be defeated here.  
The only weapon that will work is there,  
Whatever there are gathered near the here.  
This there, that there, the other there arise,  
Adhering to the creature like the hairs  
That catch a bug on a leaf of the butterwort  
To which the souls of dying buttercups  
Had transmigrated. Past the skeleton  
The monster leaves behind in the desert,  
The crops begin to grow. We start to breathe.

## SUDDEN AGING WITH A HULA HOOP

*"A boy becomes normal today."*

—*Built to Spill*

After spelunking through the dictionary  
One afternoon, the boy ran to the backyard  
And, playing with his hula hoop, called  
Himself ferruginous, inspired less by  
The hawks who bite into some muskrats  
Than by his own ability to spin  
The plastic ring around his pelvis, as if  
He were a magic iron stake to horseshoes  
That rattle around the tip and never land.  
He kept his balance until the mudslide came,  
Slip-sliding past the hillocks with a torrent  
Of rhododendron stems and corollas,  
The former lanky as his tennis shoe  
Laces. The purple of the petals,  
To the extent that it was visible  
Through the turbid depths, resembled  
His aglets. As the maelstrom pushed forward,  
It slipped him up enough for the hoop to fall  
And stick around his hips, remodeling him  
Into a chimera of earthly space,  
The upper half a monolith leaning  
Toward the flood, the lower half attempting  
To shift away from it. To extricate  
Him from the hula trap, some adults applied  
A paddle to his buttocks, slapping him  
Until he catapulted over his house  
And landed in a paper grocery bag.  
His manager is yelling at him  
To pack the goddamn tuna cans already,  
Suspecting him of drinking on the job.  
The boy becomes a normal man today  
And calls his greying hair ferruginous.

## **FAKE MUSTACHE, NOSE, AND GLASSES**

They see the mask as ostentatious irony,  
Comical in just how little it actually disguises,  
And they don't even recognize how it was made,  
The materials that it uses.  
After they finished beating us at the protests,  
We stole their batons and melted them down  
To form the frames of our lensless glasses.  
When the adhesives their spies hid  
In the mailboxes exploded, those of us  
Who survived gathered what rubber remained into noses.  
And what of the plastic mustache  
Tied beneath the nose? No special  
Origin story there. Just plastic  
Forming a black zigzagging pattern,  
The shadowy counterpart to a jack-o-lantern's  
Smile, the cover that can function like  
An umbrella to the pumpkin's grin  
So that onlookers passing it by  
Only see vague candlelight trembling,  
Mostly obscured.  
So, too, does the mustache hide  
Our knowing, mocking grins.

## CLOSE-UPS OF SOME FUR

I gently stroke the fur of the reposed dog  
And let it tickle me like brushes  
Spontaneously popping up to paint the artist.  
The fur is like a fluffy canvas,  
Blank enough to suggest creation  
And yet demanding what the creation will be  
In each soft stroke from the board to the hand.  
A small bite.  
I see a flea pass  
My finger, walking with brief triumph  
Before traipsing aimlessly,  
Increasingly entangled in the hairs.  
And I wonder what I'd do  
If I were a flea, if I were lost  
Among those dandelions  
That obscure my sight,  
Obstruct my search for drink.  
What if my carpet were a dog's fur,  
The strands sprouting upwards,  
My house itself growing legs,  
The kennel the dog itself?  
Would the canvas seem that blank then?  
Would tickling lend itself to repose?

## LUST

Nature entraps me like the mantelpiece  
That holds the head of a taxidermist's victim.  
My ears are slightly bent, a weak, abashed  
Facsimile of a moose's antlers, and  
The wooden wall around me wobbles like  
The rolling ripples of reclining flesh,  
A sign an earthquake's mildly passing by.  
The silly curves around my lips reflect  
The sterile pleasure of fertile organs.

## LOVE THE COMMODITIES YOU'RE WITH

He rode his bike through the rain to the hotel. He would ride it again  
After sneaking it through the lobby, into his room, and onto his bed.

He searched the bike's bell for a vagina  
While his balls danced on the wheels.  
He stroked the vehicle intimately  
And cooed, "Nice handlebars."

He would have brought his aphrodisiac, but she's her own woman,  
Uninterested, unlike the open telephone book on the nearby stand.  
With her zeroes hanging like open mouths, she was totally aroused.

The calendar on the wall would have told him how long he had gone without  
Human visitors if he wasn't busy  
Mentally undressing her.

"Excuse me, sir! There's a lot of noise coming from your room. Is anything wrong?"  
Said a maid as she knocked at his door.

No response. It wasn't long before his door  
Was broken down by a group of cops.

When they saw him, most of them averted their gaze,  
Though some felt intrigued, whipped out their cellphones, and took pictures of him,  
Planning to later upload them to their computers as wallpaper.

After much laughter and applause on his part,  
He held out his arms, eager to play with  
His new blue-uniformed toys.

## COUNTERCULTURAL ELECTRON

Sometimes, I think we'll all go mad wasting away on the Gecko's toe hairs,  
Those setae that look like white pills or a toothbrush's bristle  
But in fact are neither prescribed as medicine nor allowed to shine molars,  
Hidden as our home is beneath the shadow of this specimen of *Hemidactylus frenatus*,  
The cold-blooded animal who holds in his eyes the new iron maiden of filth,  
Who carries on his skin drops of Iraqi blood cleaned up to look less recognizable  
For the TV news and for the basement ceiling that he crawls on,  
Who lugs about a tail as undying as a hydra.

The Gecko can't conquer us, though.  
Niels Bohr thought we'd settle for the stillness  
Of sad-eyed bodies orbiting the gravedigger's old house,  
But he never met us, we who won't be trapped in our home orbital in Atomerica  
But rather travel through all the other orbitals just to dig their sights  
On our quest to reach the Nucleus—  
The HQ of fatass, conformist protons  
Who keep our city from becoming total neon for even one moment of relaxation—  
And levitate it, Yippie style.  
At times, when the hellish beast relents,  
We've even bonded with electrons from the walls and ceiling  
Of the basement where the Gecko lives,  
Meditating on each other's beds and capturing the soul of the world  
Beyond the borders of Atomerica,  
And even when the Gecko prematurely tears us away from each other,  
And even when the physicists sneer that we've got a negative charge,  
O brothers and sisters, we've got tomorrow's peace going on.

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**APPENDIX: LETTER FROM INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH BOARD**



Office of Research Integrity  
Institutional Review Board

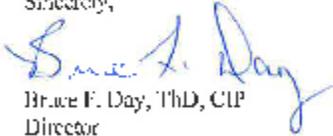
January 12, 2015

Aaron Morris  
6 Ashley Circle  
Elkview, WV 25071

Dear Mr. Morris:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract utilizing a poetry manuscript that, through its various poems, will establish its footing in multiple poetic traditions, particularly blank verse and free verse. After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction, it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future projects that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,  
  
Bruce F. Day, PhD, CIP  
Director

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