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# Hypnotic White Silk Skylights

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# Hypnotic White Silk Skylights

by Anthony Borruso

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of  
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to the Department of English  
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## *Introduction*

*"I'm now making myself as scummy as I can. Why? I want to be a poet, and I'm working at turning myself into a seer. You won't understand any of this, and I'm almost incapable of explaining it to you. The idea is to reach the unknown by the derangement of all the senses. It involves enormous suffering, but one must be strong and be a born poet. It's really not my fault."* — Arthur Rimbaud

*"If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."*

—Emily Dickinson, *Selected Letters*

Dickinson and Rimbaud both come to poetry to feel a euphoric and traumatic disassociation from the body, the poem being a place where time collapses in on itself, where contradictions and paradoxes thrive. How else could such a small piece of writing contain ideas so vast and profound? How else could one leave his body, walk around it, learn to love it anew.

\*

*"In that huge and microscopic career of time, as it were a wild horse racing in an illimitable pampa under the stars, describing immense and microscopic circles with his hoofs on the solid turf, running without a stop for the millionth part of a second until he is aged and worn to a heap of skin, bones and ragged hoofs—"*

—William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*

In this brilliant passage, the reader is moved with incomprehensible speed—then suddenly stopped dead. Time is confronted as both an eternity and a millionth part of a second. It is as if we were to look at the whole earth and zoom in on the leg of an ant. After having brain surgery

this summer, I realized that recovery confuses time in a similar way. Alone in the darkness of my bedroom, I tried to shield myself from overwhelming sights and sounds. Days felt long and short at once. They melted into one another, became vague. Williams' line was certainly in the back of my mind as I began my poem "Anatomy:" "Lightning / strikes the primordial soup and life / rises / out of the ocean / some billion years later / you have a disease / that makes you / earth-crusted, / water logged."

\*

When I was 18 years old I was hospitalized with an anxiety disorder for two weeks in South Beach Psychiatric Ward at Staten Island Hospital. Afterwards, I dropped out of school and ignored my friends—I wouldn't leave the house for fear of having a panic attack in public. In that time I didn't do much beside read, watch movies, and write. I journaled incessantly as if to purge myself of an overflow of feeling. Though what I wrote was often non-sensical and melodramatic, occasionally I'd come upon a line that resounded in a way that made a special kind of sense, a temporary order.

\*

*"Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds."*

— Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West"

\*

When I finished my first poetry class the teacher called me into her office. She looked at me with consternation, her eyelids half-lowered, and said, “I’m sorry to tell you this, but you’re a poet.”

\*

*“A poem is never finished; it is only abandoned.”* — Paul Valery

Sisyphus is a character I’ve always felt great sympathy for. As Camus did, I see him as emblematic of all humans, ceaselessly striving for an apex in the face of certain failure. When his boulder rolls back down he can do nothing but start over, repeat his journey, because all he ever has is his journey. Poetry is a task as Sisyphean as any other. The poem is never perfected but is embarked on by the poet nonetheless. With an unwavering enthusiasm and a curious nature, he must be open to whatever might enter its path. And when the poet inevitably quits the poem, he is met by another white sheet of paper.

\*

*“Faith is a long commute.”* — Laura Kasischke, *Fire and Water*

\*

Trauma and recovery are two things I notice constantly cycling in my life and poetry. I want my poetry to be relentless and resilient. I have ordered my manuscript so that the “T” in my poems recovers from his mental break down only to find out that he has an anatomical abnormality called Chiari Malformation, and that he will need brain surgery. Again, he must recover, again he must hide away for a time in darkness before he can reacquaint himself with light.

\*



*“Be stoic when necessary and write—you have seen a lot, felt deeply, and your problems are universal enough to be made meaningful—WRITE.” — Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath**

\*

*“Much of what is said here,*

*must be said here twice.*

*A reminder that no one*

*takes an immediate interest in the pain of others.” — Billy Collins, “The Blues”*

\*

Humor is important to me. Especially dark humor, as in my poem “At The Reception Desk,” where the persona tells a “very kind receptionist...to go fuck herself.” Such capricious and amusing shifts of tone hope to engage the reader’s curiosity, to inspire in them a kind of voyeuristic intrigue.

\*

I’m interested in things that cycle, things that spin. I want to present the experience of disorientation to the reader: through form, language, and tone. I want to evoke feelings of displacement and chaos. When you feel most overwhelmed by tragedy, I’d like to make you laugh.

\*

I love movies. I love reels of film and the warm, fuzzy noise they make. But also, the idea of acting or playing a role interests me. If I'm sick, must I play the victim? If I'm in the psych ward, does this make me psychotic?

\*

*"Suddenly that's the thing we can control. We'll use language to control this and to actually contain our feeling. That way we don't have to feel. In a certain way, it's a projection of feeling out of us and onto a wall. It's a little movie of feeling. We can watch it, but not actually feel it."* —Nick Flynn, *Divedapper Interview*

\*

*"Memory takes us where we need to go."* — *Waltz With Bashir (2008)*

\*

*Waltz With Bashir* is a movie that explores how trauma relates to memory. In it, the director and main character, Ari Folman, interviews fellow veterans of the 1982 Lebanon War in order to track down memories he has lost or blocked out from his time as an Israeli soldier. The movie depicts the soldiers' memories through a kind of animation that is faithful to their story but conjured up strangely, in brighter lights with wilder colors and surreal touches. I want my poems to function as this does. I want to leave my reader somewhere between a memory and a dream.

\*

*"Tell all the truth but tell it slant — / Success in Circuit lies"*— Emily Dickinson, 1263

\*

*"Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy arises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus, Edipus at the outset obeys fate*

*without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well...." All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is a thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols.... The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing"*—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

In this return is where I believe Sisyphus becomes a poet. He has achieved some distance from his woes. Instead of running away from his struggle, he finds himself re-engaging with it just as the poet does on the page. He continues, in spite and in love, to roll his boulder with a renewed sense of urgency. This is why poetry for me is not an escape from my traumas and anxieties but a way for me to, at least momentarily, understand them and how they have forged my identity. In the theatre of the poem I can transform myself. Surgery can be seen as a metaphor. More than cutting through muscles and sawing through bone, poetry has given me a chance to change myself and to heal. To journey up the mountain with renewed vigor, even while knowing I will be knocked back down.

## Natural Selection

Oh I am this cordless chordate  
two holes

for eating and shitting, frenzied,  
contemplative, picked

last for the football team.  
I watch trees slide

slowly, into the sky—  
Oh I am a man

lucky  
to have a head-

ache. I have evolved.  
Where do I go from here?

1.

## Post-Utero Refrain

Believe you me even the innocent  
appleseed has cyanide. Kittens  
have sharp teeth. Obstacles loom  
as you try to find the bathroom, half-asleep.

Believe you me you walk through life  
thoughtless as a cauliflower.  
You throw yourself headfirst  
into bowling pins.  
Slide and scrape your knee: bone white  
before the blood comes.

You watch days pass like accordion buses  
that never make music.  
You wonder why kids no longer dance  
in fire hydrant geysers.

Believe you me you could crack a tooth  
eating biscotti,  
or spend a whole morning lost  
in the back of a cereal box.

Someone told me once that we are all cadavers,  
or was it flowers  
that have yet to bloom.

## Mrs. America

Every morning: a bowl of oats  
then off to school: the blood oath,  
a pledge I fill my fledgling mouth with.

Shiny red apple displayed  
on your desk like a new Corvette.  
The flag drooped solemnly over

our low and knowledge-less heads.  
O, Mrs America, mother,  
teacher, lover, money grubber,

I pledge allegiance to you  
in black high-heeled boots,  
lustful ruler ready to crack

my knuckles, ready to wear  
them down as a river does  
a disobedient valley.

You know the lay of the land  
and make minnows of us:  
flicking tails, blurring bodies.

Even as you take attendance  
my blood boils to steam,  
I wonder, do you

think of me at recess?  
Do you want me dressed  
in baby blue? My love-sick

imperialist, let's meet up  
for detention, I'll soothe  
the tension in your shoulders.

I'll take your swollen  
feet in my hands, Ma'am.  
I salute your salacious smile.

Keep gnawing, gnawing  
that red pen with crooked teeth.  
My god—those ink-stained hands.

## Dizzy Boy

He lived life like an oven timer:  
the world winding, friends and teachers  
whirling round his desk. Stay still,

he'd whisper, to notebooks, atoms,  
planets, crickets. He reached  
for a cookie and missed. The compass

inside him was broken. Dizzy boy  
had a lizard that wouldn't stop  
chasing its tail. He was twelve and lost

as anyone who's been twelve, wanting  
to slow the blades of this fan, to find  
a switch. Smelling the earth-thick stench

of unstemmed buds, seeing their sticky  
glisten, he decided to roll up a joint.  
This didn't stop the spinning, instead

he felt himself lifting and just as his feet  
left the grass, a door opened up in the sky:  
bees funneled out, honeycombed his insides.



## Unfathomables

A chimney swift        skims with its beak  
then its body this merging of water  
and light, leaves

                  a cloud of soot in the lake.

I ask dad why  
I can't have candy.        Why that boy  
is brown. Why grass shivers in the wind,  
why the wind moves but is bodiless. Dad, dad...

Scatter your rhythms in the bog,  
young mud puppies.        You!  
Go tickle the beard of a jellyfish,  
I don't have time for this—

Water stirs.  
In everyone. In me.  
In everyone in me. What happens  
when the moth's wings throw its breath  
against goldenrod.

Dad has a badge, a big silver badge.  
Heavy in my hand. I'd like to be dad,  
dad and his badge and his gun, his gun,  
his little silver bullets.

Towers collapsing in on themselves.  
                  A little obelisk in a big cemetery.

Capillaries reach  
toward touch.        Limbs  
sift through dreams. Flesh, flesh. This prison

of acanthus flutings. My father  
the tree coaxed me back, loved me  
as his roots        love the dirt. To have  
bread and breath keeps us tethered

to the whipping post.        What are  
these feelings from under my toenails. Why  
does the dog speak with his tail.

For the first time I am disappointed in my father.

He came home  
crying        I didn't know he could cry,  
dad, with his badge and his gun,

wearing a cloud of dust, dust  
of fathers, the fathers that didn't come home.

So much dust even night  
              could not wash him.

## For Solipsism

everything is a metaphor for

how alone you are

enter a room

the size of daylily's mouth

film smooths itself

onto a screen

this is what you see

a hand and behind it

a brilliant silver

cityscape, skyscraper-

syringes filling

clouds with black

leave the room

walk down the street

past the bodega

past the butcher's shop

its hanging meat

walk to the edge

of the circle god drew

around you

never get there

## The Knife

The knife wants to cut into you  
metaphorically—like a lover  
or therapist. It sniffs around  
your wrist and up the white

underside of your arm.  
It knows the petty gripes  
you have with your body,  
the vague marks

you've made upon it.  
The knife looks at you,  
clinically, tensely, gauging  
the color of your remorse,

measuring the dimensions  
of dreams you lug to bed  
each night in a burlap sack.  
You deserve each other.

Look at its body curled  
in your hand, its coy glint.  
You feel dilated in its sliver  
of mirror, you believe

in its power, *a treasure*  
*hides behind night's eye,*  
the knife says,  
*gouge it out.*

## Anxieties

I am scared, that's all you need to know.  
Whether it's the flash-flood that gets me  
or the rebel organ, the inside man plotting  
my demise in the space beneath my ribs,

doesn't matter. The lions will make of me  
a triptych. My head, torso, and legs will each  
arrive at different parties in the same clothes.  
No one will know of my misdeeds, of the guilt

hiding under this scarf. Linden Tree, Basset Hound,  
I could have done better, been more careful.  
Mudflats where has your hair gone? I'm packing  
pistils and stamens, I'm dangerous, ripe with love

and greased like a mud puppy. I'm vulnerable  
and lonely. Venison is too gamey. Does the strangler  
fig know what I did, will he tell my mom and dad  
and brothers. Does he play bridge with grandpa?

## I Want To Be A House

These days my gait is strange,  
my back cracks, my ribs ache.  
This business of being

in a body is so tiresome. I can feel  
the chemicals shifting: failure  
has its own physiology.

Suicide is not an option,  
not with this butter knife,  
but I can hide inside

a ring of caution tape  
four feet thick, and if friends  
try to visit, beat them away

with a stick. Look, my fist  
is missing knuckles, my teeth  
and mind—have gaps.

How did I get here?  
A wilted disgrace, I trace  
back the family tree to see

where this Benedict Arnold  
skeleton came from.  
I wonder sometimes why

I'm so hard on myself, but better  
to hate what you are  
then what you want to be.

I want to be a house  
on a dead-end street  
with a dumb beard of ivy

crawling up my face.  
And on the kitchen counter,  
a jar for leftover change.

## Orange Mazda

paranoid sky   repurposed   the coke can became  
a pipe   and the Mazda   a rocket   as we were high  
high and found there   one spot   of blackness  
in blackness   in blackness   and there the island  
choked blue   the island of me   the island of you  
and through the window   and the wispy words  
just barely we   could see a swing   teetering  
ghost child   a chain of linked steel   and stop-  
watches   and there a casket filled   with ellipses

2.



## At The Reception Desk

after billions of years of natural selection and a few  
 sleepless nights my father drives me to the hospital  
 in a minivan and brings me to a very kind receptionist  
 whom I tell to go fuck herself I am hardly in the mood  
 to be somewhere so sanitary white walls water cooler  
 a television in each corner through the front glass  
 I see parked cars and trees drooling sap I remember  
 me there five-legged and scared scuttling between rows  
 of wood-framed chairs and the room's chiaroscuro

the me who tries to wipe away the shakes the me  
 in the midst of a crisis one moment a waxwing  
 singing to myself the next a moth caught in light  
 I crack into a jackal blaze into Johnny Rotten  
*this hospital is a piss-stain and how dare they* pinned  
 to the lepidopterist's table I pray for a way out  
 no they say I beg I apologize to mom and dad  
 and God *fuck you* I wail amorphous un-specied  
 as a tall man in a white coat with fingers  
 like spiders props open my mouth and fills it with  
 polished rocks ambered insects little pills

## Evaluation

*How do you feel about your diagnosis?*

I could take or leave it.

*Do you sometimes find it difficult to breath?*

Only when clouds stoop to eavesdrop on my conversations.

*Whose lungs are tied to my string?*

There are no lungs, there is no string.

*Breath Balloons?*

Not yet.

*What faith do you consider yourself to be?*

I have no faith in anything but the coyote's howl

*Where is my cloud?*

*Where is the face of the dragon blood tree?*

Soon, soon sings the snake

*Who put this lotus in my chest?*

Yes, yes...

*Is it my breath?*

Yes.

*Is it your breath?*

Don't rob the sky of that kite.

*And what of the moth?*

He flies in the cave of your mouth, blows kisses toward your teeth.

*Is doubt like a branch? Is hope like a sieve?*

Breathe into my flower-chest.

*What flavor is heaven?*

Bring me back to gills.

## Blackjack In The Psych Ward

what are the odds she and I 18  
fast friends having lived lives  
separated by only a few streets

as I shuffle cut the deck deal  
to her in this house of wailing  
stomping swallowing whatever

she tells me about her dad  
his hard hand hanging from  
a phone cord in the coat closet

I tell her about how I inhaled  
visions of a busted sun with blood-  
shot eyes the moon cracking

to plaster bits she turns over  
her card bright red slashed  
across her wrist I never talked

to girls like her at school white skin  
eyes black with shadow never  
read poems or felt a chill at the top

of my spine like a music made  
by ghosts I wish I could give her  
something besides conversation

double down ditch this deck  
what if she pressed her scars  
against my cheek what if

we buried our pasts here together  
under these white walls under this  
discarded pile as some other lucky

patients form a line and wait  
to be dealt a kind of communion

## The Hospital

Apparitions pass through walls, appear  
to me as I lie in my moon-gown,  
the quilted squares of my hospital dress.  
In the cafeteria, I see them,  
swirling angels above the tables,  
hypnotic white silk skylights.  
I tell them I am  
scared my soul is sliding out of my body.  
I am trying  
to hold it, my soul, to press it  
down, farther than even my feet.

Joe, in his gown, wants to know  
my name, a beard bristling  
up his cheeks like creepers on a trellis.  
Milosz with his foggy glass face  
and his meth teeth.  
Mandy with her red wrapped wrists.  
Everything else gray:  
gowns, walls, half-smiles,  
nurses, ping-pong table.  
Gray and muddled, as I  
forget, as I make more space in me.

I wait by the phone. It hasn't rung,  
it won't ring, it only makes calls.  
But I wait to hear  
the voice of God, and he's mad,  
so mad that dahlias crack  
through linoleum, bloom into  
pink mouths of jagged teeth  
and the scent of burnt black resin.

Anatomy

Lightning

strikes the primordial soup and life

rises

out of the ocean,

some billion years later  
you have a disease

that makes you

earth-crusted,  
water logged,

bed-ridden

chewing over a dream.

Mirror the motion—

sick mollusk

grasping at the shore, winter  
gnawing at its shell.

Follow

the lamp faced fish

into the abyss.

Listen

to fiddler crabs singing,

how slippery is this  
mingling

of saliva and soul?

There is no answer

but silence  
in the riverbed.  
As you spit the pits  
of cherries,  
little sanguine seeds,  
up into night's mouth, think  
about your bones,  
how they have nothing  
to do with death.

## Borrowed Bloom

O flower breather, lovely green-thumbed  
Goddess of mud hills, take my body  
And make of it what you will.

Elusive duchess, give me a skull of soil,  
Earthworms, water, light.

Unroll the scroll of my tongue.  
Then be on your way.

It is summer and everything a garden.  
I can be a garden.

Seedlings, sprout from my chest.  
Feet, go green with moss.  
Brook, I will breach your sheen.

No fee to climb trees,  
No fault-lines in the forest.  
Brood, brood, you thirsty roots.

I know this weight, this wait. This pressure  
in my head comes from a great thought.

Lover, dig your spigot into me, twist  
The nozzle, what a wonderful liquid!

My toes roam through loam,  
My clothes are off, I do not blush.

I drink the ink from deep, deep.  
I think so long crickets hush, words weary.

A bud bloomed in the back of my throat.  
Now, nothing but a few crispy leaves.

It is a cold time. My books turn blue.



## The Rogue Patient

I haven't been happy since the hospital. One hall  
and a flock of nurses, their faces, crow's feet  
and white eyes over smokestack scrubs. Sorry  
for them, I'd ask about their days, their kids,  
their weekend plans. I sat by the window with one,  
looking out into the parking lot at stray weeds  
straining through cement, asking if this was  
a form of punishment or of help, she told me,  
*a little bit of both*. At night we would line up for meds,  
I thought about the movies, the rogue patient  
who pretends to swallow, sweeping the mind medicine  
under the tongue. I swallowed though. The brain  
glazed over, the mind muddled grey. As a nurse squinted  
at my open mouth, pity billowed out in clouds.

## Revival

Where are the heads  
quieted on pikes?  
Where is the crooked

steel smirk of the guillotine.  
How coarse this kiss  
of life: lungs inflate,

cheeks flush,  
even the coldest corpse  
throbs with pulse.

Strung up anew,  
in saggy garb,  
he speaks in a foreign tongue:

*Rest is not what rest used to be.*  
He would prefer the earth's belly.  
His hands, gone so long stiff,

writhe upon the page,  
his desk becomes  
a ribcage.

## Against Solipsism

I always wanted to be

alone, a dark dot

on a white page.

Noiseless, sexless, I kept

kisses on the threshold

of my lips. I was a birch branch

teetering in wind.

Then winter came to crust

the streets. Trees slouched.

The sun turned peach.

Slate faced strangers

passed me, smiling, frowning,

wearing whatever expression

I imposed on them.

Like a dusting of snow

swallowed by a blizzard,

that's the taste

of realization: all this white

connects us. Silence

clings to the world:

a boy lying on a field

of dried husks,  
the hound dripping rabbit's blood  
in the spruce's understory,  
one cloud smeared  
on an unspeakable sky.

## Pointilism

Okay Seurat, Seurat of the dots, the spots splotched  
over and over like cells of the body but brighter,  
softer. The Channel of Gravelines—a name too  
bumpy for the subdued scene smoothed out and along  
the harbor.

    This mist of white and blue makes the mind  
gray, reminds me of the hospital where I, the “I” I am now,  
was born and not from the dark skin of my summery mother.  
Where was born in me, a new eye, seeing weighed by too much  
seeing.

**3.**

## Ode To R. Budd Dwyer

To have two mouths, one for singing  
and one for screaming bloody murder—

this is what the poet strives for, to speak  
from the temples. Still, I promise no spectacle,

I will not make of me a puzzle, a humpty-  
dumpty-put-back-the-pieces affair.

So I've spent some months groaning  
in the dark, sinking into an ossuary

couch. So I sit on the stoop staring  
at distressed brick homes. Grant me

these indulgences, this leftover thought  
reheated in the microwave of the mind:

*maybe I will not mend.* Is it melodramatic  
if some days I come home and hang

my skull and skin on the coatrack.  
If some nights I dream up a man's

busted bust seeping lingonberry jam.  
If I have a kind of morbid admiration

for R. Budd, his moxie and his manners,  
how before he blew his brains out—

he stepped back and pleaded, *Please,*  
*please, leave the room if this will...*

*if this will affect you.*

## Atavistic Parable

Is not the infinite made  
of the finite, and the impossible  
of the possible, thus

it seems likely, the slow  
un-hunching of men's backs.  
I'd like to cry a big cry,

but won't risk the headache.  
Feeling too much brings them on.  
It's like that infinite monkey

metaphor, "almost surely"  
I would get a headache,  
just as the monkey

would type Hamlet.  
Move on to the Bible  
and the Odyssey, this poem,

then stare at the sky dazed  
feeling utterly alone  
as I do, sipping my black coffee,

scratching my head like a chimpanzee.



## Chiari Malformation

This affliction—a ticked-off horse that would hoof me in the teeth.

That’s wrong.

Chiari’s not so blunt. Not with a name like that. She lies low, a snake in a field, feeling her way toward my body. She sinks her fangs in my flesh, the venom cold and slow.

The brain is a flower, the skull a too-small pot, so roots spill over its sides.

When a hermit crab gets too big for its shell, it finds a new one.

Or dies.

Imagine fifty-two clowns stuffed in a Fiat.

Chiari Malformation is a neurological condition. The brain, not fitting properly into the skull, is pushed into the foramen magnum (or spinal canal).

*Foramen: a hole or passage, especially in bone.*

*Magnum: a thing of a type which is larger than normal.*

Imagine the thickness of a deck of cards, that’s how far my brain breaches my skull.

Is this why I can’t get “Under Pressure” out of my head?

Sometimes it feels like a balloon inflating inside—pushing into my eyes and ears, pushing down on my neck.

Sometimes it feels as though there’s a boy in there trying to beat his way out.

Sometimes it feels as though I’m the boy, balancing myself as the world spins like a Queen record.

My friend Eric had a full-bred King Charles Cavalier who was chronically ill and would exhibit a strange behavior, “fly biting,” chomping at air as though to catch a cloud in his mouth.

95% of King Charles Cavaliers have Chiari Malformation.

Sometimes I feel like a symptom of my symptoms.

In a dream I was spinning the earth on my finger like a basketball.

I was Sisyphus kicking a boulder the size of my head up a mountain.

At first MRI's are nerve-racking. Your head is fed slowly into a white mouth, then knocking sounds start: a construction site peristalsis turns into a techno rave. The noises penetrate and stop, then start again.

Some people have Chiari but no symptoms. Others barely function.  
I am somewhere in between.

I don't like to feel bad for myself.

I wish my hardships were made from stone and asphalt. Not pebbles clunking around in my head. No one can see my suffering, no one can hear the whispers: something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong..."

In "Going Down Slowly," Howlin' wolf sings: "You know I done enjoyed things that kings and queens will never have. In fact, kings and queens can never get, and they don't even know about."

I am a long, luscious fuse. I am a dog tied to a post out of sight. I am a cartoon maiden roped to train tracks by a mustachioed villain and death is coming.

50% of Chiari surgeries leave the patient symptom free.

It is the summer of my surgery. I am obsessed with puzzles, those 1,000 piece behemoths. I wake up, slink down to the basement where the tiny fragments are spread upon the table like misshapen constellations. I feel less dizzy with something to hone in on. This one is of The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy and Company on the yellow brick road.

In Stand By Me, four boys follow a train track searching for the body of a boy their age. The track is a poignant metaphor pushing them towards something: death? adulthood? a busted skull beside a walnut tree?

River Phoenix died eight years after it was filmed. At the time he was more famous than Leonardo DiCaprio. In the movie, his character, Christopher Chambers, is pegged to become a degenerate like his brother and father before him.

Instead he becomes a lawyer. He dies trying to break up a fight in a fast foot restaurant. Is that his fate following him?

20% of Chiari surgeries leave the patient worse off.

After a while, the MRI noises become amorphous, your consciousness starts to dissolve: you find yourself sitting on a swing by a lake at night. The moon is inside the lake. You think about swimming to it. Then you do.

I'm tired of feeling trapped in my head.

I drink two cups of coffee and I'm reeling. The dog of my mind roves. Cars and stoplights and people blur.

Today is the day they will saw through my skull.

I have an obsession with dead actors.

This is my train track: wooden, rickety, beside it a dead deer splayed. I have been walking and I am walking. It is sunny. Maybe I will go back to bed. Maybe I will walk right off the end of the earth.

## Self-Portrait With An Open Skull

How cold this room, how baby blue  
the sheets as I shiver myself to sleep.  
I want to remember  
what it was like: face-down:  
scalpels, forceps, hands,  
intruding on a dream,  
saws, clamps, breaking in  
to bone, the white theatre.

A hole in me, how cold  
the clamp, how taut the skin.  
Sing, sing bone-saw, open  
the passage my thoughts walk,  
the frosted back-alleys  
of the brain, the seedy  
side-streets with plastic bag  
tumbleweeds, an anesthesia dream.

Godly cinematographer,  
get that dolly shot  
in the subway, show a rat  
trekking a slice of pizza down  
the tracks. This is where  
one goes when the lights go  
out, when sterile gloves tread  
deep in the soul, this is where  
the metronome of the mind is.

Then a waking, soft and slow  
like walking in the corridor  
between two lives. The lights dim.  
A projector flickers and I see how  
the bone saw let the light pour in—  
sawdust, stardust, thought rust.  
I see the surgeon's hands  
and the paper moth  
which he pulls from my skull.

## Origami Moth

White paper caterpillar. Black table.

Hands,  
as if flown from a dream,

shape  
the larval pinwheel,  
the square cocoon.

Sound of a match  
flickering.

Sound of a forest  
burned down—that  
kind of quiet.

An illusion of geometry.

Paper folded over and in  
to itself.

As if flown from a dream:  
silk fingers:  
the moth

becoming  
more a moth,  
thirsty  
for symmetry,

thirsty for light.

## In Praise Of Forms

you wait for the sky  
to exhale purple

and pungent birds you wait  
for the ocean to sweep

its hands full of ambergris  
and piss you wait

to become the patient  
blanketed in welts

and bedpan wetness  
watching through a window

the slow drip of days  
soon you will pry

diamonds from your teeth  
soon you will climb

the rungless  
celestial ladder to

night her gasping hips  
and lunar womb speak

she'll say to the ampersand  
what will it tie you to

light is almost ready  
to spread itself over

the trees and dirt and mossy stones  
the bullfrogs elastic throat

you wait in the theatre  
begging for whispers

praying for forms.

## Sad Little Anthony

look at you, hardly an outline  
in this dark room, this dark time  
of recovery. poor little anthony,

they cut you up good:  
a bit of skull, a slice of spine.  
you've draped beach towels

over the blinds, you sink  
into a black lake. let sleep  
smooth you like a zamboni

over scarred ice. let darkness  
scrub the blood from your head.  
when dad's spoon goes clink,

clink, in a bowl and the whole  
world quivers with clinks, crawl  
into yourself, shivering, skinny,

hungry, here, let's fill you  
with oxtail soup and oxycodone,  
poetry and sympathy. poor

anthony, clench your teeth.  
no one feels so bad for you  
as you, and that makes us sad.

## February

*In my twenty-fifth year*

All I know of the present moment is how it bends  
into the next one, like the jackdaw flapping through

daybreak, like footprints in the snowstorm  
turned toward the shed. I watch the scurrying

of my neighbor's Pomeranian, a black poof-ball  
drifting toward the fence. A husband hurries his son

into the idling SUV. A tetherball hangs limply on  
its post. It feels like I've lived my whole life looking

through this window at how the day's drudge pieces  
into the year's. A shadow like a scythe curves from

the bedroom door. I am between families.. The teapot  
looses an undulating whistle. The lease is up in a month.



## Poetry Class

We'd fill in our circle, fluorescent lights  
buzzing, chatter and clatter breaking  
the room's silence, the windows open  
to twilight. You were there, love, gauze-

filled chipmunk cheeks (your wisdom teeth  
extracted). Then the teacher, her pale face  
and cigarette scented, black leather jacket,  
bustling through the door. I had no idea

what poetry was, but I wanted sunflowers  
and milkweed, and to conjure whatever  
music grapples into being. We started  
with words, our favorite ones: mail-slot,

melancholy, string, ceiling, bronze, poppies.  
*Put those in a poem*, she said, and I did.

4.

## Her Craft

A bud is hatched, a flower wilts.

She tends to what grows inside her—  
seeds, prayers, storms.

If she doubts, she doubts  
that the dead have names still  
lodged in their throats.

It's arithmetic:  $x - x =$   
everything. Even  
as the tropical storm is provoked  
to a hurricane, even as God blinks  
and her brother drops dead—  
everything is always even. This infuriates her.

She swallows some bittersweet words,  
then shuts herself.

She becomes a container  
made of 37 trillion cells  
(just big enough to hold a poem).

## Spinning

Los Angeles, between rolling hilltops  
and the city's halo of light, we stood

at Griffith Observatory, in coats,  
for the wind was whipping darkness

into an overwhelming thought: perhaps  
this spinning will not stop. Love, I felt

the earth's orbit; felt the centrifugal pull  
when we looked at Foucault's Pendulum,

a cannabis kind of confusion. You spoke:  
*fuck, it's beautiful up here*, and I nodded.

There we were, two hopeless losers perched  
at the edge of a bird bath city, scared

and alone, wingless, when I wound an arm  
around you it seemed obvious: the spinning

wouldn't stop, the soul is circular, how else  
to explain the turning of desire into touch.

## Love-Sloshed Cinema

I want you laced in celluloid—  
the script torched, tossed—  
This is not an act. It's love

as we learned it. Technicolor  
big band: burly trombones.  
I want you laced in tempestuous

trumpets, a slicked-back Sinatra  
deepening night's hues.  
This is not an act, it's love;

umbrella-less, rain-drenched,  
Gene Kelly stomping down the wet set,  
I want you. Laced in celluloid,

intoxicated, both of us, ruthlessly  
ransacked, a deep-cut red dress,  
not an act. I want love, Love,

sliding from a string quartet  
as we melt into melodrama and gin.  
I want you laced in celluloid—  
this is not an act it's love.

## Voodoo Lounge

Past bayou bungalows and one way signs,  
 past trees with beards  
 of Spanish moss stuck in the low-down  
 earth, out by the brackish waters  
 of Lake Pontchartrain—  
 beside a boarded up glass factory—  
 In a neon-signed hive I'm hunched  
 at a high top in the low light  
 of a jazz club.

My red-lipped, black silk mistress  
 givin' me lip as I drag on  
 Chesterfields, as a bass line walks in  
 beside some wobbly chords.

From the murk, my man's  
 schizophrenic horn section. Voices  
 like ash trays and match music  
 crackle from the brims  
 of fedoras. I say to her, *this ain't*  
*no Abbot and Costello misunderstanding.*

*I'm in a bad mood,*

*I got bold thoughts and hot palms*  
*pressed in my pockets.*

She sips her highball and sighs.

I got one body and all this desire  
 drumming in my chest.

Is it rabbit season or maggot season?

Let me dupe death another night,  
 give me one more Malagueña.

Sweet cemetery of trombones wailing  
 and broke men bobbing their heads,  
 damning their luck; sweet cemetery  
 of blooming moonflowers, and a rhythm  
 that knocks me senseless, tenseless,  
 where I take my cue  
 from a witch doctor with an alto sax,  
 to let my soul off its leash, to sink  
 a few feet deeper.

## Oh How I long For Sadness, A Sadness Worse

than the willows', worse than what toads know  
in their slate homes. I want to understand  
the wind's thrashing, to become one with it.  
Plastic bags, cracked beer bottles, shredded  
skins of tires, I feel warm just thinking of you  
there, discarded on asphalt, while a pain  
like a bow through a violin hurts me, beautifully.

## Self-Deprecation

You *would* write this poem.  
Your gimmicks  
are a dew-less grass,  
yellow and stale. Onion or no onion  
you would cry in the kitchen,  
loosing doubts on the blender  
and the bendy straws you never use.  
There is a room  
in your house, a guest room,  
whose emptiness  
you celebrate: the made bed,  
the sleek metal lamp,  
a burgundy rug with hidden  
wine stains. You jerk off here  
four times a day.  
It is a safe place, a toehold  
that gnaws at your foot.



## The Pet

An old woman in a house full of ferns has no one to talk to so buys a parrot. She feeds him the only food he will eat, fried meatballs. At the kitchen counter, she shapes the spheres of flesh, whistling, fingers slick with grease. The parrot serenades her in a brisk baritone. “My little Titto Gobbi,” she says to him, his red-feathered chest puffed proudly, “one day we will leave this place, one day I will take you back to the homeland.”

At twilight, the woman ascends a stepping stool and curls her bony feet upon an oversized perch. With knees bent, she chatters to the setting sun. One eye shuts and she dreams of the Amazon, of soaring over opaque green pools. The parrot, snug in her king-sized bed, dreams of walking among the villas of Campania; breathes the robust scent of puttanesca. *Nel cielo manca un angelo*, he asks a black-eyed contessa as she passes.

## Staten Island

Island of buzzcuts, fades, and tape-ups,  
 nail parlors, tanning salons, pizzerias  
 that sell by the slice. Island of callery pears

that bloom and stink of bad sex, Honda Civics,  
 paint-chipped handball courts, Arizona tallboys.  
 Island of roaches and joints, ice cream trucks singing,

slinging oxycodone. Island of stained glass  
 churches, false awakenings: dullards staking  
 claims on a post-life, Jesus at a juice bar,

flaking flaxseed in his smoothie, downing shots  
 of wheatgrass. Hipster island, Guido island,  
 black island, white island, island of my dad's a cop,

it won't happen again, officer. I take two trains  
 and a ferry to work island. Island of suburban bliss,  
 as south as you can get in this city, driver's license

suspended, mother-in-law rear-ended,  
 football captains flunking trade school.  
 Island of callused hands and radioactive parks,

panicked teachers praying for a pay raise,  
 slate-faced junkies, pin-striped suits at yacht clubs  
 clinking drinks with amnesiac immigrants. Glass-lipped

island, blue-ache island, island of don't park  
 in front of my house, peach-glow alcove island,  
 late night bocci ball island, rickety boardwalks

and salty breezes, crushed four lokos.  
 Island of the osprey perched on the highest branch at Gateway beach.  
 Island of nervous break-downs, a city that thinks

its a small town, the forgotten borough,  
 Staten Italy, island of the white-tailed doe  
 and the candelabra-capped buck. Island of I'll never

come back, island of I always come back.  
 Island of second chances. Island of my love,  
 her woeful hips, our lip-locked afterglow.

## Ode To Kalief Browder

What's the point of wanting  
if not to want conflagration,  
want to burn this city down  
to a foot of soot. The want  
man has smoldering in the boiler  
of his loins, woman, in the blue  
fire of her womb. You  
tally each dank day  
in the clank of a run-on  
sentence; tending to the sapphire  
garden that flares in your chest.  
You innocent slice of soul,  
the watering can in your hands,  
your deracinated feet so used  
to roots. They say if you're to lose, lose  
loud, like the moth crisped black  
in the mouth of night's  
one light, too bright, but O, Kalief,  
how you needed to be kissed,  
how you needed to be swallowed.

## Ars Poetica

This poem strolls through  
the blue antiseptic halls  
of the Children's Hospital, rousing

the sick to sew capes to their gowns  
and crown their heads  
with wreaths of rosemary.

This poem is taller than it looks  
on T.V.—I met this poem  
at the Met Gala and mistook it

for an obelisk in a suit, clinking  
flutes of Pérignon with Obama.  
Even in small talk its voice was thick

as a redwood and sensual  
enough to stir the loins  
of a dentist. Still, this poem

thrives in solitude, disappearing  
into the woods for weeks with nothing  
but a flint and a canteen.

This is the origin of its horde  
of images, in which one sees  
the heron hovering before

its beak impales the shell  
of a crab, releasing sweet meat  
and river-sighs. This poem seeks

an opening in the pines to view  
the orange fist of the sun  
spreading its fingers.

This poem expresses itself so  
that the owl swallows his name,  
it coaxes the house-cat back

from the maple. It lands the plane  
safely in a lavender field, then kisses  
each passenger on the navel.

This poem is modest as the sea who kneels  
to the sun, the sea always falling  
back into herself. O poem!

How lowly you make me,  
how brashly you cast your shadow!

## Sky Maintenance

Never trust an orchid.

Never lock eyes with a maple.

If there is snow on the ground, never should you speak  
of spice-plants or ace bandages.

Take things slow,  
allow every day  
to seep into the sky:  
an empty jar filling  
with honeyed light.

Love in every direction at the same time.

Love until the whole world buzzes  
like a grapefruit.

Patient, white, cold.

Listen to the wind moving  
through trillions of invisible strings.

Ice glistens on the highest branches of trees  
beside the highway. The road glimmers.

You glimmer.

Quick, whisper a secret.

Always speak tongue first.

Give praise to the snail's trail,  
how he goes on feeling  
as it goes on following.

## Cubicle

No tie noosed round my throat, no  
attaché case at the end of my arm  
like an anchor. I'm just the boy

my mother measured on the closet door,  
the one who swallowed a handful  
of pomegranate seeds and was made

to stay in this body twelve months  
out of every year. No cubicle assigned  
to me except for this bone-box

my brain came in, ivory confine  
of the mind; if I *must* go to the office—  
give me a mahogany desk and plant

it out by the pines, top it with moss  
and scotch decanter. Let there be  
a mail-boy blooming acne, a secretary

sheathed in primrose. Conferences  
of blackbirds and that great machine  
the sky pumping out its endless blue

until up on a rope comes the moon.  
Sure, this job might be a dead-end,  
but when I clock out I'll exit

through a door in the grass.





