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Lounging among the Ruins

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Trinity College

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TRINITY COLLEGE
Hartford, Connecticut

Thesis

Lounging among the Ruins

submitted by

Daniel Barrett 2013

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in English

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I

To a Friend

Let's hold hands I said,
Reaching out, palm down,
As we started across the park.
Without speaking, she raised
Hers to mine, palm pressing palm,
Mirror images, perfectly aligned,
Until instinct rotated them one click,
Like a clock counting a minute.
Then our fingers spread, curling
In the gaps, hands locked together.
And between our hands,
Some warm, imaginary center,
Like the heart of a rose,
As we strode across the park,
Sharing a unified hope,
Hands clasped as in prayer,
Companions on a short journey
Whose end we both could see.

Sloughed Off

She reaches for Kleenex before I even roll off,
Then she's up, her round white ass hurrying
To the guest bathroom while I head to the master.
Our eyes never met; her gaze, over my shoulder.
I had half-snuck a look back to guess her fixation
But only found her white leg bent at the knee,
White foot bouncing as I pumped. I pressed
My cheek to hers, held her, kissed her.
She pursed her lips, not to kiss me back,
But almost to defend against attack.
Now I hear the toilet flush, faucet running.
I stare into the mirror and try to imagine
Her face through the wall looking back.
Then she's gone, her thigh highs
Coiled on the bathroom floor, flipped
Inside out, a run down each, ready to be discarded,
The sticky elastic inside the lace exposed, loose
And wrinkled, like the spent skin of a garter snake.

Statuesque

I turn to face you, your eyes closed as you sleep,
Bottom lip drooping, cheek squished against the pillow,
And I trace lines with my eyes around your face,
The curl of lashes, dimples where the mouth sags,
Then I color your cheeks pink, purple on your eyelids,
Lips red, and darken shadows cast by the lamp,
Before molding wild auburn waves framing your face.
You are my perfect work of art, asleep.

Title Fight

Stacked on the couch, I have your back,
You on top, asleep, pinning my left arm
To my side, my right looped around your neck.
Craning toward the TV, I struggle
To watch the end of the fight, when you roll,
Digging sharp elbows into my soft body.
You half-mount, crushing my diaphragm,
One leg jackknifed across me, as you lean back,
The other knee scraping my pelvis. I defend jabs,
When suddenly you hold up your hand,
Still asleep, mumbling for me to wait a second
As you purse lips and scrunch eyebrows.
Then you let out three tremendous farts
In quick succession. Your body falls,
Deadweight settling in, mouth slack-jawed,
Completely asleep again, hot breath
Tickling my neck. I can only shake my head
And smile. Fight's over. Nelson knocked out Schaub.

Happy Now

A piece of copper hair left on my pillow,
Your scent contained within a single strand—
I imagine my face buried in auburn tresses,
The happiest I'll ever be, holding you closely.
Let other poets have my sorrow;
They can write beautiful works
In dimly lit rooms alone.

Sour Milk

You spend your whole life chasing
Girls and parties and excitement,
Drinking, fighting, fucking,
Coming up with all these rules
And strategies, moral
And practical, to live by,
Then you hit a certain age,
Before thirty, I'm told,
When you are expected
To forget all this
And adopt love and family
And responsibility.
But it's like drinking
Week old milk.
You drink it unknowingly
And think it's fine
Until somebody points it out.
Then it instantly tastes
Sour in your mouth,
And you can't help
But spit it out.

Out of Love

We stood in front of the clock tower
When suddenly she lashed out,
Raining down those pretty little hands
Attached to pretty little wrists,
Striking my chest and upheld arms,
While I kept saying No; I gotta go.
And she kept saying But wait. Wait.

Mirage

After dinner, I lay down with the windows open
And the lights off. Kara rattles dishes in the sink,
Water rushing from the faucet, then the sudden clench
Of pipes. Outside, women's heels attack pavement.
A door slams, and male voices join them. They chatter.
Someone forgot their keys and heads back inside
While the rest wait under my window lighting cigarettes.
I imagine small clouds of smoke around their mouths
Slowly spreading out and up; four floating, orange dots
Moving head to hip. Kara's watching TV now
And suddenly bursts into laughter. A car starts up,
Drives off—I never heard the doors—and in the silence,
I imagine tiny wisps of gray exhaust trailing
From the tail pipe, visible in the cool, autumn air
Before dissolving into nothingness.

Illusion

Shaving, I snag my upper lip
And taste the iron tang of blood.
Kara's never seen me without a beard,
And even I'd begun to forget my face.
Cutting lines reveals my youth,
Cheeks red with each razor drag,
And I notice blue eyes, bright but sad,
As severed stubble washes down drain.
I finish shaving, then splash cool water
From hands cupped tight, rinsing
Leftover foam from cheeks and chin.
I look in the mirror, a boy again.

Numbers

I sit on the toilet, asshole puckered,
But can't shit. I stand, wash anyway,
Then take a long, cool drink
From cupped hands. I turn off the light
And open the door. I'm in darkness.
Kara's in bed, asleep an hour. It's 12:07,
And I think of all those people dancing
In Times Square and elsewhere,
Drinking, laughing, crying, puking.
And I think of all the people who didn't call,
All the people who'd say they know me,
Or would recognize my name, at least,
From high school, college, work.
I think of where they were when we met,
And all the places they are right now.
It's not jealousy, disappointment, or nostalgia.
I merely appreciate the numbers.

Glass

Will breaks a drinking glass a moment before
I walk in the back door with milk for his cereal.
I'm in a rush he says. There's no need I say.
It's early. Have you had your juice? I ask.
No he says, picking up broken pieces
And placing them in a paper bag.
Have your juice, and cereal, too I say,
Pointing toward the milk. I will clean it up.
But you hate broken glass he says.
I know I say. I think tiny shards
Will get beneath my fingernails,
And when I rub my face, tiny spines
Will puncture my eyes and blind me.
Then let me do it he says. No I say. I want to.
I don't have time to eat or drink now
Anyway he says, kneeling down.
If you have time to pick up glass I say
You have time to pour yourself some juice.
I'm done now he says. Don't bother.
There's the horn. My ride's here.
I'll at least sweep around the table I say
Because I'm sure some flew out there.
Don't bother he says. Go get ready for work.
You don't have your tie on yet.
I will I say. Not like it's a real job, anyway.
But it's work, Dan. Money. I know I say.
Don't look so depressed he says.
That'll all change soon. There's the horn again.
Where are you going so early? It's only 6:15.
Something for seniors only he says.
Oh I say. He takes the brown bag with him
As he leaves, and I hear the crash of glass
As he tosses it in the bin. I put the milk
In the fridge and grab the broom.
I put it back, and lean against the table.
Then I pour myself some juice.

A Modern Drama

Every time I take out trash,
I slide the dumpster door
And expect to find a dead body
Stashed among white bags
Ballooning beyond capacity,
Tied tight with red and yellow bows
To keep our garbage secret.
Maybe just an arm or leg visible,
Jutting straight into the air, waiting
To be found. All the neighbors,
Numb from TV and work, don't look
Where they throw their trash;
It goes where it's supposed to go,
Where it's always gone, no need
To pay attention. But think of the killer—
Stabbing or shooting or strangling,
Then dragging the body to the dumpster
And discarding it among old chicken bones,
Snotty Kleenex, takeaway boxes,
And burnt out light bulbs. I never do find
A body or anything remarkable;
Only a dozen, empty, plastic pints
Of Peppermint Schnapps, resting
On the heap every week. I wonder
What lush they belong to—maybe
Someone I've never seen before, a recluse
Trapped in self-imposed exile, marred
By untold, unimaginable tragedies. Or maybe
Just a fondness for Peppermint Schnapps.
Least the son of a bitch could do is recycle.

Paper Thin

This cigar is smooth as paper;
Wrapper, dry and weak, bland, not sweet,
Like the coarse wrappers rolled from leaves
Grown and dried in the sun that push back
When you lip them and rarely fall apart.
Like ones the man rolls at the tobacconist
Down the street, across from the Methodist church.
Hunched over an old writing desk, stretching
Dark brown rectangles of Connecticut leaf,
He wraps them tightly around the bound filler,
Then packs them in a cedar box. He never
Says anything. They're good and cheap;
All I buy. Today, I come in, and the box is empty.
The guy behind the counter, hair, long and white,
Skin, pale and greasy, who lives upstairs
And eyes me suspiciously, like I can't enjoy
A good cigar, says he went back to Nicaragua.
Papers? I ask. No. Grandmother. Dying he says,
Teeth rotten in the cracks as he drags on a cigarette.
So here I am chewing a cheap, machine-wrapped cigar,
Stale, dried out, and tasteless, threatening to break,
That I had to buy at the liquor store to save money,
Along with two six packs, one of lager, one of ale;
A bottle of red wine, 3.95; and a half pint of Jack.

Sport

A man mows his lawn
Across the way from me,
Smoking a fat cigar.
There's no pain of labor
In his step as he proudly
Pushes his machine
Edge to edge, occasionally
Stopping to kneel
And measure the grass
With a wave of his hand.
Adjusting blade height,
He starts the mower again
In one fluid motion,
Engine snarling to a rumble,
And he's back trotting his plot.
I think of his woman,
A wife way past her prime,
And a time when men care
Only to cut grass in a level patch
And are glad when it grows back.

Search for the Soul

If mind's contained
Within the brain,
Where can the soul be found?
Sometimes, I think it looms
In dark rooms of the liver,
Not wanting to be seen.
Other times, it spews
Crepuscular spleen,
Or gall-green goo,
Like busted caterpillar guts.
Sometimes, I think it's living well,
Tucked securely in muscular chambers
Of the heart, sending out
Palpable waves with each pulse,
Coursing rich and red
Until it comes spilling out,
Skin severed by a sharpened edge.

My Double

I let him in. He moves in smoke,
Cigar locked in his teeth.
He slides toward the window,
Regards my desk, then plunks down
On the couch, feet jutting over
The armrest. I take the chair
By my desk and close my journal
On what I was writing. He exhales.
How terrible none of our vices
Come up in the poem. Only
'The grass long, sparrow cold,
Moon bright, wind still.'
We still out tonight?
I shrug. Neither of us moves
As night drags its slimy belly
Inside, reducing him
To a single, pulsing, orange dot,
Until it too joins the darkness.

Scrutiny

I'm reading when a tiny insect crash lands
Upside down on my open book.
It must have snuck in as I opened the door,
Drawn in by air rushing out, an invitation
To rest and be sheltered from the cold.
Yet, lying so still, I think it died right there.
Touching it with the tip of my pen,
Its body wriggles, wings vibrating
Against the page, unable to roll over.
I think of slamming my book closed
And squashing it black and red
Between the words of O'Hara,
But instead I grasp its tiny legs
And walk to the window.
The fly's tiny wings fight my fingertips,
Then stop, and I wonder if it accepted
Its fate or finally succumbed.
I bring my hand to my face and squint:
Its body tan and gray, wings clear, eyes black.
Lifting the window and screen,
I hold my cupped palm outside,
Cradling the tiny speck, hoping
The cold wind will stir its senses.
My fingers tingle, so I draw back inside
To find it gone. I imagine it flying
Into darkness, searching for a place
To catch its breath. Or rolling over
Asphalt shingles, knocked by wind.
My eyes are unsteady at 3:18, staring down
At dried, damaged hands. I turn over my palms
And do not recognize them as my own.

Encouragement

I could get up and tiptoe to the other room,
Flip through letterman and leno, o'brien too—
But all that will deaden me with pale jokes,
Stale faces, and rehearsed laughter,
Nonsense, repeated over and over,
Only for me to stand again, kill the TV,
Creep back into the bedroom undetected,
And lie there in the dark with my eyes open,
While on my nightstand Bukowski talks death
But was too much of a pussy to do it to himself,
And Eliot sits in silence, berated by his mad wife,
Contemplating moving his rook to E7,
And Frost pretends to be a farmer
But only cultivates the soul,
And Modigliani drinks himself to death
Before Jeanne—and what was left of him—
Flings herself from the third floor;
While Cezanne lives to be a geezer,
And Matisse gets fat and draws with a stick,
And Picasso thinks highly of himself.
Shit, my words must mean *something*
When Nostradamus's predictions
Came from a bowl of water.

Dreaming

My bed is a narrow canoe,
And while I write, I fish,
My pen, my pole,
Until I fall asleep
Supine, staring up
At the smooth expanse
Painted white,
When my vessel runs ashore
And I wake with a jolt,
Alarm clock ringing.

Exposed

I want to fall back asleep while it's still dark.
I want to sleep in darkness, hidden away,
Before the sun peaks its phony smile
Over the windowsill, between the curtains,
Before it wakes the birds, too dumb
To be annoyed, singing the day's arrival.
I lie here trying to sleep, only more aware
Of each new car zipping past,
And Will, downstairs, rattling dishes,
And my father, in the bathtub,
Scratching his hairy belly,
Water sloshing as he shifts his bulk,
And my mother, chattering aloud, stumbling
To the bathroom and pissing in the bowl,
Until my eyes, squeezed shut, snap
Open, and I stare at the world map
I pinned to the wall as a teen,
Dark continents barely visible,
All those jagged land masses pointing down,
All those names and borders hidden in shadow,
All those places I'll never know or see.
I close my eyes and hope pray beg for sleep,
While outside a Carolina wren taunts me
With the same four, loud, sweet notes.

Bukowski says

Wisdom is being in the dark.
But these fancy curtains Kara bought
Don't prevent afternoon light
From snaking its slimy claws inside.
I'll try sleep, though I know
It won't bring wisdom.
Dreams will haunt me,
Attacking with intense color.
It won't bring rest, either,
Since I'll wake, still tired,
Unable to write, unwilling to read,
Counting the hours until nightfall
When it will be cool and dark,
And sleep will come easy.
By morning, when the alarm
Goes off, it's too late to worry.
The sun's already up,
And I can't stop the clock
From cranking its gears
And laughing.

Disenchanted

After you leave for work,
I lift the covers off my head
And watch people
In the condo parking lot
Warming up their cars,
Scraping frost and shivering,
While crows fly overhead
And a blue jay shrieks,
And I think they are all suckers,
That I could never leave my warm bed
And the promise of sleep.
But they have somewhere
To be. When my body
Finally rejects sleep,
Forcing me from bed,
I will have nothing to do,
Except wait for nightfall
When I'm tired again.
We all invite the noose.

Interview

I sat in the waiting room alone
For a marketing job I found on the Net,
When a mouse fell from the ceiling vent,
Landing on my suit sleeve.
It regained its senses as I began to stand,
My brain identifying a little brown blob
With a squirming worm for a tail.
By then, it had fled down my shoulder,
Disappearing between cushions.
I sat again quickly in a chair facing the couch,
Before the secretary looked up: a tiny brown face,
Barely visible, two eyes, ears, trembling,
Nose twitching, with what I assumed was fear
And disbelief. He had nothing to fear from me;
I wasn't going to rat him out. He could hide
Until the office cleared, then escape
When he deemed fit. We stared at each other
Until I was beckoned. I don't remember
What we talked about, or what the interviewer
Even looked like. But I felt a calmness
Fall over me. I think it went well:
They offered me the job.
But I didn't take it.

Trapped

Driving home from Beacon Falls, rock faces
Sprayed with names of people married or in jail,
Or living far from here, are too small to see
Clearly from the highway. A plastic bag clings
To a branch high in a tree, like a giant white leaf,
Waiting for rain or winter's last snow to knock it
To the ground to roll around shredded tires, cans,
Cardboard, and shattered glass along the highway.
Hawks plot from empty trees, eyeing pigeons
Lining the silver arms of streetlights, like blue
And white ornaments. Vultures orbit everywhere.
A dead coyote lies in the breakdown lane
On 691 East toward 91 North to Hartford,
Tan and brown and white, dead but undamaged,
Tongue hanging from its open mouth, touching
The pavement, ready to be shoveled
Into a plastic barrel. Where they blasted
Through the mountainside a century ago,
Water runs down the jagged rock face
And freezes, forming blue and white columns
Of ice slowly overtime, currents frozen
Mid-fall, trapped in perpetual motion.

Nothing

I say, when asked what's wrong,
Though my lips betray the truth
My eyes struggle to assure.
You ask again. Nothing I say.
Not family, not school,
Not my health, not your eyes.
It was the walk we took
In the woods this morning;
The way that natural spring
Ran down the rock face,
Pooling at the base,
Dripping to its own music,
The birds in the trees, unimpressed.

Things to Do

I have to
wash laundry,
throw out trash,
drink more water,
walk the dog,
kiss you good morning,
kiss you good evening,
read the paper,
buy flowers,
fry cutlets,
smoke a cigar,
take a shit,
write a poem,
call my mom,
peel a tangerine,
swallow aspirin,
open a beer,
stub my toe,
hold my breath,
bite my nails,
tear a lampshade,
replace the shower rod,
feed the birds,
itch my arm,
talk to God,
laugh at nothing,
listen to my neighbor sneeze—
I think I'll lie in bed
and grow my beard.

Possibility

Without purpose on the last warm day of autumn,
I consider wandering the old neighborhood,
Cutting through the lumberyard, resting
At the park, watching wind move trees,
Then visiting the tobacconist for a smoke.
Or I could stay inside, look out the window
And draw that lone pine standing along the roadside,
Trunk bent S-shaped, like a dancing woman,
Arms overhead, hips swaying to the wind's music.
Or I could draw nothing in particular,
Just my hand moving in lines and circles,
Some heavy, some jagged and harsh,
Others light and quick, in blue aquarelle pencil
On a large white sheet propped on my easel,
The easel my mother used in college
When she was an artist, before kids.
Or I could go to my parents' house and sit on the patio
And throw the ball with Sadie and watch house sparrows
Puff their feathers on the fence or a nuthatch cling
To a trunk, head downward, waiting for a feeder perch.
And if I wait long enough maybe the red squirrel
Who lives in the abandoned woodpile in my neighbor's yard
Will pop its tiny head between dark blocks of rotting maple
Leaning against the wire fence we share.
Or I could sit at my desk in my old room
And look out the tiny window
Facing the street and imagine the dying maple
That used to blocked my view until men from town
Chopped it down last summer and think how strange to see
The unobstructed façade of the abandoned house across the street
And that giant oak tree, as old as my house, beside it.
I could think about old bottles I placed on the sill
Or giant snail shells I collected on Martha's Vineyard
Or whelk shells I excavated from their hiding spots
Wedged between boulders and sea wall.
Or I could listen to Chopin make the piano sing
Or Frost read his poems, or I could think
About reading or writing or just words.
Or I could sleep until the sun goes down,
Then walk my neighborhood as planned,
Everything transformed, cast in shadow,
Another world completely.

End of Summer

I'm waiting for the sun to show
From behind the clouds to warm me
On this cool day in September.
My old dog followed me out,
Pushing the door open with his snout.
Now he lies down by the porch steps,
Breathing heavily, loose flakes of paint
Stuck to his dark fur. My father
Wants to paint the chipping porch,
But a new coat would ruin it,
Like old ladies slathered in makeup.
I take a breath, glancing down
At my round belly. I wear no shirt.
My skin is pale from lack of sun.
Even with clouds, I squint.
I haven't been outside in days.
My dog doesn't move
From where he collapsed,
Except to scratch his bony chest
Before he settles, and I watch
His chest swell, deflate, and wait
To fill again. Smoke burns
My tongue as I light a cigar. I wince
And brush away a hot ember that falls
On my bare skin. The porch swing
Sways in the wind. A saw buzzes
Somewhere. A bird sings too.
All spring's ants are gone.
Looks like a storm is on its way.
My neighbor comes outside
To take down the flag. I'm worried
My dog hasn't eaten for two days.
He's forgotten food. I would too,
Eating the same food yesterday,
Today, and tomorrow. Rain starts.
My neighbor heads inside. I watch
Each drop sprawl like shrapnel in the street.
The end of summer, another kind of death.

Lesson from Virginia

Even with air so light, it still feels
Hard to breathe, but I think maybe
If I just held my breath long enough,
I could escape regret, stress, obligation.
But I know my body won't let me die:
I'd only pass out, wake up, and begin over.
Maybe I'll walk into the sea
With my pockets full of stones.

Letting Go

I often forget a mollusk makes its shell,
When I find so many tossed along the beach
Stripped clean of their animal insides.
Bent over in the Florida surf, I scoop
Augers and tellins, too small to see
Amongst the shale, caught on the lip
Where waves crash and roll
As sea floor meets beach.
Pinched between finger and thumb,
I rinse sand off a sunrise tellin,
Red and yellow streaks like rays of sun,
And realize I have a complete shell,
Its two halves still suctioned together.
With a little pressure from my nail,
I pry the two ends open, a mollusk
Still inside. Its pointy, fleshy ends
Wriggle, ripped from their hold,
Its black eye or mouth in the center,
Sucking wet and alive, struggling.
I try to squeeze the halves back together,
But they wouldn't seal shut.
Eventually, the thing stops moving.
I scrape it out into the ocean.
How terrible to kill a living thing
To gain a lifeless trophy!
I find two more tellins, one small, one large,
Their halves glued shut, still holding fast,
Amongst my collection when I get home.
I place them in a coffee cup
Not knowing how long they will last.
The next morning, the two halves of
The smaller one are butterflyed open,
Two tiny white lungs. I had hope
For the larger one, with more reserves
To last out of water. But two days pass
Until I return to the beach,
And by then, it too had succumbed,
Thin, white flesh waving in water.
I wonder what the moment was for each,
When they could not hold on any longer.
Did either of them lose hope and loosen the grip
That held their halves together?
Was there a final watery breath,
A final surge of energy before dying?
Or did they just let go?

Progress

The torn skin of a plastic bag
Skewered on the barbwire fence
Flails in the wind while
Three black vultures
In the skeleton-tree stare hungrily
At cows grazing in the pasture,
Hopeful that some lie down
In the heat and close their eyes.

Scavenger

Four crows crowd the road,
Conferring over a mangled squirrel.
They do not fly off or even startle
But turn to face me, eight black eyes
Hidden among black feathers,
Before returning to their find.
Why would they fear me,
Those who eat the dead?

Dead Bird

House sparrows sang first,
Disappearing beneath the eaves
To mend last spring's nest.
I listened for hatchlings,
But a trail of ants marched single file
Along a crack in the cement,
Over the downspout and up
The wooden post into the cavity.
Another line on their way back down
Dodged those heading up,
And I imagined the return party
With mouthfuls of soft, pink flesh.
I followed their convoy to the rotted
Wooden step at the backroom door.
They will eat inside our house.
What did Eliot say about spring?
The sparrows sang too soon
It seemed to me.

Where Birds Go

They must die sometime,
And with so many, I'd think
Their bodies would litter the streets.
But I rarely see a fallen bird.
Maybe they know the time,
Some flying skyward, disappearing
Into light, becoming a ray of sun,
Others plunging into the ocean,
Transforming into a drop of water,
Dissolving in the current.
Or maybe it's not much different
From you or me: in the gap, we die,
Between one second and the next,
While relaxing, eating, sleeping, dreaming.
Except birds need no burial;
The clever little world
Snatches them right back up,
Secure in the fox's mouth
Or the pincers of ants.

Bulldozer

They're knocking that old building down
Now that the owner's given up on renovation.
The pigeons never seemed to mind,
Sneaking in through broken windows
And building nests on top floor rafters.
They'd perch, evenly spaced, on the roof peak,
Sometimes fluttering to the ground to bob
Around before returning. This morning,
Before seven, men with sledgehammers
And pickaxes smoke cigarettes, standing
Behind a bulldozer as it pushes through
The front wall and raises its bucket,
Lifting the second floor, then dropping it,
Bringing most of the third as well.
A few pigeons scramble out
A section of collapsed roof, except one
Who takes an upper window, only making it
A body's length before the roof crashes down,
Burying it in rubble. The bulldozer continues, unaware.

Work

A brown pelican cocks its wings and plummets,
Spearheading green glass, then bobs to the surface
And chucks a fish back into its gullet.

An osprey plunges feet first with a splash, hidden
A moment in the surf, reborn by eager flapping,
A shiny, wriggling fish skewered on its claws.

Men fish along the pier, smoking cigarettes
And coughing, crunching emptied cans of beer,
And what they catch they usually throw back.

Closer to Nature

Crumbling glaze lost its hold,
And a pane of glass fell out.
Now spring wind blows
Through the gap, and I hear
The birds more clearly.

II

For my father

Sons of Erin

Mom calls. Dad's been up since seven,
 Digging out the driveway. He's sixty
 And nearly a hundred pounds overweight
 But would never ask for help—
 Not for a job he can do himself.
 That's the way Meeka did it,
 So that's how he does it too.
 Okay I say. I'll be over in a few.
 The driveway fits six cars comfortably
 But isn't paved. So every fifteen years or so,
 My father must replace the top layer of stone,
 Washed away by rain, some shoveled away
 Each winter, to prevent the driveway
 From becoming a mud pit. But first
 We must dig down a foot to reconfigure
 Sand and dirt, slanting from the house
 Toward the fence, so rain won't pool
 And flood the basement, damaging
 The crumbling brick foundation,
 Carting excess dirt and stone
 To the backyard before replacing
 Large stones with smaller gravel
 That won't jam the snow blower
 Dad finally bought now that his boys
 Moved out. It's a two day, three man job
 That mom says dad wants to complete today,
 Before heavy rain packs it tomorrow.

A six-foot-tall pile of gravel and another of sand
 Block the mouth of the driveway, forcing me
 To park in the front yard. Meeka's tools,
 Heavy iron shovels, rakes, and hoes,
 Uniformly rusted but still sturdy, line the fence.
 My father, already sweating, hoes loose stones
 Into rows, exposing the hard earth below,
 Packed solid by the weight of cars. I begin
 To scrape and chip and pick until it starts
 To give, flat shovels scooping loose matter
 Into a wheelbarrow. Then we jump
 With both feet on spades, taking bites
 Of softer earth eight inches down.
 We section off the driveway into car-sized
 Rectangles, my father hoeing as I shovel,
 Both of us taking turns running

The wheelbarrow to the backyard.
 It's that time of autumn before the winter cold
 When hands dry out, crack and bleed,
 And the slightest wind parches your throat.
 I yell for water, but mom can't hear us.
 So we just keep on, only the sounds of metal
 Scraping rock and our labored breathing.
 My entire body aches with each shovelful,
 But I don't say anything; dad doesn't.
 We will work until the job is finished
 And do it the best it can be done.
 I strain maintaining balance over uneven ground
 As I race each barrowful to the backyard,
 Using momentum to flip the load beside the brick pile.
 And I think of those Irish boys they found outside Philly
 In a mass grave under a hillside. Immigrants forced
 To level mountains and fill valleys sixteen hours a day,
 Moving dirt from here to there, heavy with clay and rocks,
 Fueled by whiskey, sleeping in portable, canvas shacks,
 Drinking and playing cards at night, little money earned
 Not enough to take them anywhere. Only two months
 And they were dead. Cholera and fear from locals
 Finished off the lot. Fifty seven deaths kept secret,
 Bodies buried like trash below the same earth
 They toiled to lay, tortured even in death
 As the weight of carriages pressed their bones.

With the patio light broken, we struggle as evening sets,
 But never break pace, neat rows of loose dirt and stone
 We raked this morning, now fuzzy lines beneath our soles.
 The moon climbs behind us, full and bright,
 Over the abandoned house across the street,
 The yard dark, tree trunks black, light enough
 To make our trip to the pile and back.
 Every barrowful heavier, I tip only one,
 Surprised by moonlight catching a patch of leaves
 On a silver maple tilted the right way.
 So bright over my shoulder, I had to glance back
 But felt two hundred pounds of dirt and stone listing
 To one side I could not save. I collect what was lost,
 Then spit on hands, and gripping wooden handles,
 Push off with legs, neck and back straining,
 Load too heavy to lift with arms alone.
 I think of those Irish boys and all they had to endure.
 We often forget who built the roads
 And laid the tracks for our young country.

But whatever pain I suffer now is only temporary,
No matter how many hours. When we're done today,
I'll take a hot shower, and Kara's cooking shrimp scampi,
And when I wake tomorrow, arms and legs sore,
Body stiff, I will recover the rest of the weekend
Then go back to papers and school come Monday.
So we push on, our fourteenth hour straight,
Toward a hope our men, the sons of Erin, never lived
To see: the peace that follows labor complete.

Decision

I come over early to start on the yard.
I've been living with Kara for four years,
But with most of my things still home,
I feel the need to help my father frequently,
At least until I move out completely.
The back door is locked, and I have no key.
Dad will be up soon, so I wait on the patio.
I'm surprised he's not up now.
Probably still in his bath. Lately,
He's been getting up later and later.
Something moves a branch overhead;
A gray squirrel, tightrope walking
The tiniest branch, leaping as it bends,
Completely airborne, knowing
Its tiny claws will grip grooved bark.
It runs up the trunk of a neighboring tree
And disappears from view, blocked
By branches still full with leaves.
This was the tree my father saved,
A sapling two feet tall, sprouting
Amid a tangled patch of brambles.
Thirty years later, I arch my neck
To see the crown. So wide,
It nearly spans our yard,
So that any squirrel can cross
Without touching the ground.
A leaf drops, sifting down,
Where others line the patio.
What made the tree set free
A still green leaf?
Was it the leaf's decision?
In that moment before it let go,
Did it struggle to keep hold
Or willingly release?
Another falls, so calmly,
It must think it can fly.
It lands with the rest.
I stare up at the tree,
As I wait to hear the familiar clatter
Of my father yanking the stuck door.
I will wait in the tension of the moment
Between anticipation and fruition,
Watching each leaf release its grip,
Drifting slowly toward the ground.

My Father's Maple Tree

Halfway up a ladder leaning against the trunk,
My father trims the less leaved, lower branches
Of the maple tree that stands behind the patio,
The tree we call his because he rescued it
From a mass of brambles threatening
To consume its budding branches
When my parents moved here thirty years ago.
Barely chest high, you could have easily grasped it
By its trunk with one hand. Now the tree towers
Another two stories above the attic, and you strain
To clasp your hands together hugging the trunk.
I watch my father saw the limb
Shaped like an elephant's trunk
That I used to swing from as a boy.
It hurts to see the amputated end,
But my dad says it helps the tree grow taller,
And somehow it's okay since he made the cut.
It's his tree, like the beech tree on the little hill
Next to the driveway in Winsted was my grandfather's,
The only tree on ten acres we weren't allowed to climb.
And we wanted to: thick, sturdy branches,
Evenly spaced, all the way to the crown.
But we never got the chance. We grew up
And stopped climbing, and Meeka and Dete moved out
Of the canary-yellow house on Wallens Hill,
The one my father and four sisters grew up in.
And now Meeka's dead, and Grandma Dete is too.
I've heard the house has changed hands twice since then,
And I wonder if that beech tree's still standing,
Or if the new owners cut it down. Either way,
That tree is somehow still my grandfather's,
Like this maple will always be my father's,
Long after we've moved him out of this house,
And he's gone, and I have children, and a tree I call my own.

Okay

The night after Kara and I breakup,
My dad stops at my closed door.
Goodnight, Dan he says. I'm glad
Mom and I will have someone around
To wipe our chins when we drool.
And maybe other things too he says.
I won't be around that long I say. Besides,
I have faith you and mom'll drop dead
Long before that anyway.
And I have faith you'll make a decision
About your life by then he says.
I'll have to get back to you on that I say.
This is my dad's way of saying he's sorry
And hopes that I'm all right. He has to joke;
He could never say it directly.
And that's okay with me.

Concern

With bone inside and cartilage around it,
There's not much room for veins. Still,
My trigger finger gushed when the handsaw
Raked across it, bubbling thick, red blood.
Washed clean under the faucet,
A slick white thread hung slack.
Just bandage it, my father said.
But one look from my mom,
And it was straight to the hospital.
We all climbed into the car, tools left scattered
Around the yard, ladder stretching toward
The half-severed limb, still holding strong.
With my hand wrapped in blood-soaked towels,
My father's eyes floated into the rearview.
You were rushing, weren't you? he said.
What did I say about taking your time?

Help

I feel like a kid again, as dad pulls in the driveway,
 Then walks out back, a huge maple limb between us,
 Like a mythical bird shot from the sky,
 Dark green wings splayed across the backyard.
 Will and I had decided to chop the entire limb
 Since the ice storm snapped the three main branches
 That fed it, each too high up to reach alone.
 Why didn't you just leave them? my father says.
 Those half-dead branches hanging by a hair
 Of bark aren't *aesthetically* pleasing I say.
 Besides, we had it all figured out.
 Will stood on the woodpile, swinging
 The ax overhead, hacking furiously,
 While I tugged on a rope to guide the fall,
 When, finally, he broke through,
 The limb falling straight down,
 But too heavy to maneuver, crushing
 The fence and knocking over the woodpile
 Dad and I spent three weekends stacking.
 You should have used the ladder he says.
 That's buried in the barn I say.
 When would we have unearthed that?
 He doesn't answer, staring up.
 Look he says. You massacred it.
 I know you can't cut a major limb
 Too close to the trunk or it will rot I say.
 Will did the best he could—
 But we couldn't get a clean cut,
 And it was too high to use the chainsaw.
 Then what's it doing out here? he says.
 I wanted to get the wood cut fast I say.
 And since you haven't used the chainsaw
 We bought for you two Christmases ago,
 I thought it was about time.
 You shouldn't use it without me he says.
 I want to be here to supervise.
 Dad, we're grown men I say. We figured it out.
 You used it? he says. Yes I say.
 It worked fine. Until I broke it.
 He stares at me. It's fine I say.
 I was cutting the downed limb in the middle.
 Halfway through, the pressure
 Pinched the blade between two sections.
 I got nervous and tried revving it

And backing it out, but it jammed
And wouldn't even turn. I stopped
And used the ax to push the pieces apart,
But by then, the chain had loosened,
And I didn't know how to tighten it.
There's a right way to do things he says.
You should always start at the end.
And use a wedge the moment it gets stuck.
Don't rev it, or you'll blow the motor he says.
I know I say. I panicked.
I wanted it free as soon as possible.
You can't be mad at us anyway I say.
We're cleaning *your* yard.
Well then, my father says, admiring
His youngest. Thanks for the help, boys.

Chopping

In the backyard, my father and I split
Maple blocks round as his stomach.
I keep overshooting my mark,
Whacking the neck on the wood.
Not so hard, he says. It's a quarter swing,
Not a half. You want to hit the wood
With the edge flat, not at the tip.
It's about inertia, not sharpness.
The wedge doesn't cut the wood,
Its thickness pushes it apart.
With the maul overhead, he lets the weight
Carry the head down, right hand sliding
The length of the handle until it stops
Against the left, gripping the butt,
Just before the edge meets the wood,
Separating two pieces easily along the grain.
Don't try to swing through the wood, he says,
Because if you miss or the blade slices cleanly,
The momentum will keep the blade coming
Until it hits something that stops it,
Like the ground or your shin.
I'd been scraping dirt off the blade all afternoon.
I take the maul. I set my feet and swing,
Missing the mark, sending a splinter of wood
A foot long and a quarter inch thick
Flying off into the grass. My dad picks it up.
What are you making? Toothpicks?

Strength

We inspect a section from a large maple
Where a dark band in the crotch of the tree
Marked the old bark that had been grown over
As the limb sprouting from the trunk
Grew larger and larger, reinforcing itself.
It's impossible I say, after a series of hacks
Leave three shallow grooves, vaguely visible.
Too strong I say. We'll need the chainsaw.
My father takes the maul, and with three hits,
He's split it down the middle. He smiles at me.
I loosened it up I say, and we laugh.

Practice

I learned to swing a hammer
The way my father learned,
Punching nails into scrap wood
Until it resembled art.
Kneeling over the rotted wood
Of a fallen telephone pole,
He practiced what he thought he knew,
Until a section was barely recognizable,
Covered in metal dots, and each strike
Was reflex, and he'd never have to pull
A bent nail from a cherry dresser.
I swung a hammer easy as a boy,
And after practice, helped my father
Build our tree house when I was only five.
My small hands ached, attempting to grip the handle
As I tapped the head of each nail tentatively,
Before sinking it into the wood.
He swung a heavy-duty roofing hammer,
Burying nails into floor studs with two solid strikes.
He rarely missed—only a few times
Would a nail skip out, bouncing to the ground.

Precision

Like some strange, four-legged animal,
My father balanced on calloused hands and bad knees
With a migraine every Saturday for three weekends,
Placing bricks he got from the crumbling foundation
Of a burned down house near the railroad tracks on North Street.
Like his father, my dad would never pay someone to do something
He could do himself. And these men could do a lot.
But it meant labor and time, and since I was young,
It often meant going alone. But it was the only way.
Sweating in the summer heat, he placed each brick precisely
In the leveled square of sand blocked off for the area of the patio.
My father still has the leftovers, piled in the back of the yard
In case he ever needs to replace a loosened brick. He never has.

Skeleton Key

My father files the shaft
At the end of a skeleton key
Over a pile of newspapers
Spread on the kitchen table,
The front door still locked
After someone lost the key.
My father works with a chisel,
His hands stained dark silver
As he grates iron, wearing it down
With each stroke. Then he walks
Through the sitting room
And tries it, before walking back
To the kitchen to continue.
He grabs another key from a can
Filled with old keys.
Number three skeletons
Have the same shape teeth,
But the shaft's too big for the lock.
He takes a break for dinner.
He still can't make one fit.
That was over a year ago.
He would never change the lock.

Naturalist

I split a section of oak that sat behind the shed all summer,
One swing fracturing the cylinder in two, scattering
Black ants all over the chopping block. I expected panic,
But with autumn dragging on and winter's cold approaching,
They moved in slow motion, deliberately, disappearing
Within an intricate system of tunnels and chambers.
I flattened the hopelessly mangled so they'd stop squirming,
And measured up another swing, bringing the ax overhead,
But stopped as each adult emerged with a U-shaped larva.
Still, no rush; saving the next generation so matter-of-fact.
I stared down at this dead stump, just wood for a fire,
And at these ants, bad ones, my father warned me
Would love to feast on the timbers of our old house,
And still, I felt guilty forcing this family to abandon
What they transformed into a nursery and home.
I dropped my ax and carried the halves to the edge
Of our property and left them in the tall grass.
I'll squish ants when they find their way inside.

Scraping

My parents want to paint the house.
It's been blue my entire life;
Sky blue, like the sky today.
But my parents want a change.
They settled on olive green.
I start scraping peeling paint
Under the front porch eaves,
Perched on Meeka's step ladder
Covered in hardened blotches
From fifty years of paint jobs.
It wobbles beneath me, unsteady
With two legs on the walk,
Two in the garden, leaning over
As I stretch up. But it's easy work
Around the gutter with paint curled
From water splashing through holes
In the rusted downspout.
With each drag of the scraper, chips
Whisper on the plastic drop cloth.
Yellow jackets pace silently around me,
Vibrating shadows catching my eye first.
They are only looking for some place
Warm to die, so I leave them.
With my hood up to fight the cold,
And safety goggles and mask
To protect against paint particles,
My vision is reduced to eyes only,
So I rip off goggles to see more clearly.
The dead maple right behind me
Reaches its leafless, algae-covered
Stubs toward me, while a nuthatch
Picks at loosened bark for insects,
Sounding its mission as it goes.
It flutters to the beech tree beside it,
Still green with leaves, edges
Like saw blades, a tree we transplanted
From Meeka and Dete's when I was young.
I pull on goggles and go back to scraping.
I catch a knuckle on a loose nail
And do not realize it is bleeding
Until I smear blood across white paint.
It is so red, like nothing out here.
I stop when I spot a tiny square paint chip
Hanging from an abandoned spider's thread,

Floating midair. I watch it spin,
As if alive, faster and faster, then slow,
Then speed up with the shifting wind,
Until a strong gust blows it away.
We're changing the color of our house.

Everything for Sale

My father stops in front of the house
With the sailor statue guarding the steps.
I've always wanted to see who lives here
He says. The tag sale is like any other:
Tables with books, old records, glassware;
A refrigerator and mower parked in the lawn.
People scrutinize items like freshly found artifacts,
Picking them up, turning them over, squinting
With archaeological intensity,
Before putting them down. Behind the garage,
A woodshop's open to pick. Tools scattered
On benches, poking out of drawers; unfinished
Fence slats, cut and rounded, lean
Against a box saw, waiting to be sanded.
Framed photos cover the walls: fighter planes
And ships, the corners inside curled and worn.
Some pictures have a note stuck to the glass
With bright blue duct tape: SOLD.
Others are gone, the outline remaining,
The wall's original color preserved below.
A man, my father's age, places SOLD
On an old desk, a newspaper clipping
In front of him: "Japan has Quit."
My father asks if he knows whose shop this is.
It was my father's the man says.
Eric Loos died suddenly of an aneurysm.
He was a Navy vet, and my dad tells the son
He was too. The Americano, 70-74.
Built in shelves lined with books
On woodworking and the war
Span ceiling to floor in the far corner.
My dad flips through a book on carriers.
What a neat guy he whispers to me.
The son says he can have it for a quarter.
My dad gives him a dollar.
Back in the truck, he tells me about Bob Barrett
Winning the Purple Heart fighting the Battle of the Bulge,
And about my Uncle Bobby fighting in the Pacific.
He tells about the Tin Can Sailors,
And about cruisers and destroyers and flat tops.
Loos and his shop reminded him of Meeka,
And I know it hurts him to remember out loud.
He says he teared up seeing all those people
Picking through this guy's stuff, arguing over a quarter.

Everything had a price tag, and what didn't
Could be purchased best offer.
His whole life broken up, pulled apart,
And sold, until only the memory remains,
And memory fades faster than things.
But being remembered is a living man's concern.
No soul, once freed from the body,
Worries about being forgotten.
When someone dies, everything's for sale.

No Matter

As last light fades blue,
I go outside and find
The crescent moon, low
In the southwestern sky,
And two bright stars all fit
In a finger's width. But tonight
I know these are not stars,
But a rare glimpse
Of Venus and Jupiter,
Millions of miles away.
I call my dad and tell him
He better go outside soon
Because it's getting cloudy,
And this won't be visible again
Until 2050. I won't be around
To see it then my father says,
So offhand, it surprises me.
But you'll be watching it
Much closer to the source I say,
Unsure exactly what that means.
It is strange to think in fifty years,
He'll be dead, and I'll be close,
When fifty years feels so great
But is nothing in terms of Time.
And even after everything is gone,
Not just humans, but Earth itself,
The universe will keep expanding,
All those celestial bodies rotating
In that dark pit we call space,
And no thing will give a thought
To me or dad or anyone.
But somehow, maybe, just by thinking
About this moment, recognizing it,
Cherishing it, I will forever lock it
Within the fabric of the universe,
Since no matter, once created,
Is ever destroyed. I hang up
With my dad and watch hundreds
Of geese rise up out of the cornfields,
A blurry mess of wings and honking,
Until they arrange themselves
In troupes of ten or twelve
And fly directly overhead
As dark, heavy clouds enter the scene,

Slowly scraping the horizon,
Threatening to blot the moon
And its temporary companions.
Cars pass in the street.
Two drove by, one flew.

Just a Trim

My father's sick of paying sixteen bucks
For a buzz cut that takes no time at all,
So he asks if I can trim his hair,
Like I do my brothers' and my own.
My father doesn't have much to cut,
And what's left is mostly white,
So I shave it as short as he'll let me.
Holding my father's head in my hands,
I knock a few wisps still clinging to his forehead
And feel scars where the cancer's been cut away.
And I think of the time when I will have to do
Other things for my dad: when he is too old to walk,
And I will push him places; when he is too old to drive,
And I will lift him in and out of the passenger's seat.
And I think of the time when I will have to feed him,
Bathe him, wipe the drool from his mouth,
And maybe even change his pants,
Like he had to change his father's.
And I think how terrible this all sounds,
And how I won't want to do those things,
But will anyway. I finish cutting his hair,
And standing in front of him,
I lean down to admire my work,
And notice he looks younger now,
If only by a couple years.

Change

I unwrap each paper sleeve slowly;
Quarters first, then dimes, nickels,
And finally pennies, dumping them
Onto the moving belt, landing
With a light tap, red numbers
Scrolling higher. I had wrapped
All my change in paper rolls
Because that's the way dad did.
It relaxed him, a simple pleasure,
Sitting at the fold out table,
Half-watching TV. I enjoy it too.
But banks don't take rolls anymore.
The teller just points to the machine:
An automatic monster devouring coins,
Separating and counting
As if by magic, belt whirring,
Metal clattering, finally spitting
A slip of paper when done.
It all feels alien; as if I'm missing
The last step of the process.
Dividing into piles, counting,
And wrapping are when I enjoy
Coins most; their tangibility, realness.
We have always loved coins. As kids,
My father placed a large glass container
That used to hold kerosene and told us boys
That if we filled it, we could go to Disney.
And I wonder if my father knew then
How impossible it was. My father still
Puts his change in that jar and is only
About six or seven inches from the bottom.
Now none of us care much about Disney.
I'm sure that will change when we have kids,
But I only hope my dad saves enough money
To take my mother on a cruise,
Something she's always wanted.
Actually, I hope he doesn't fill the jar;
I want to send them on a trip myself.
I hope I get a job real soon and make money
And can afford any cruise they wanted.
Not like they'd take it, unless, of course,
I was really rich, and I haven't ruled that out yet.
Last night, Mom called, surprised I picked up.
She said I wasn't very talkative;

I told her I was distracted, bored.
She said dad and she miss seeing me
Around the house, just hanging out, talking.
I know. I'll try to visit soon I said and hung up.
Mom and Dad don't want fancy trips,
Just for me to visit and talk. They'll be gone
In the next thirty years, most likely less,
As they enter the last third of their life,
And I will have wished I talked to them more
And visited them more and was a better son,
When all I had to do was drive two miles
Down the street or pick up the phone.
I dump the last sleeve of pennies.
They disappear inside, and the belt
Stops running. Numbers flash: \$52.18.
I think I'll take my parents out to eat.

The Hunt

We always wanted dad
To take us fishing,
But it only happened once.
John and I went;
Will was too young.
We stopped at a donut shop
On the way; I think
It's a dentist's office now.
We headed to a lake in Somers,
Lem's Pond, a manmade lake
Owned by a friend of a friend.
Only one town over,
It felt like a journey.
We got lost, at first,
Confused by square posts
For street signs, the first time
I'd ever seen such a thing.
When we found the place,
We parked in front of Lem's house,
And my dad left a note
Signed as our mutual friend,
And I was shocked
My father lied, appalled
When he said it was okay.
Disappearing into the woods
Across the street,
Tall, dark pines loomed overhead,
Ground sprinkled with copper needles.
Then, suddenly, it opened up,
Looking out over blue water
As far as my eyes could see.
I don't remember baiting,
Casting, or if we caught anything.
I don't remember driving home.
Fishing was fun, I guess,
But since I've never gone since,
I still can't say for sure.

What we did do more often,
Which I grew to love
More than fishing,
Was on a cool night after a rain,
Armed with a flashlight
And empty aluminum can,

We'd hunt for night crawlers.
Ground damp, soft underfoot,
Cushioning our steps,
Concealing our advance,
As we surveyed the earth,
Looking for those brown ropes
Stretched out under our ring of light.
Locating our target,
We'd slowly lean down,
Anticipating their long bodies'
Retraction into their lairs,
Reaching suddenly for the end
Nearest the entrance,
Sometimes missing completely,
Other times, grabbing hold,
Their bodies slippery,
But at the same time,
Somehow, gripping the earth,
Neither of us wanting to let go.
And for a thing
Without muscles or bones,
It held its burrow tightly.
I did not want to rip any in half,
So we'd wait, as I held steady,
Until some gave up; others, I let go.
Any unlucky enough to be caught
Would never find their way to the hook,
But died a worse death
Under the tree house,
Eating the same dirt,
Circling the same plastic tub
Until they dried out
In the summer heat.
A small sacrifice, I guess,
For happy memories
Of looking up from my work,
Hands slimy with worm spit,
And seeing three other halos
Of Barrett men
Engrossed in the hunt.

Survival Tactics

Whenever I walk around outside dad says,
I always think: if I was stranded out here,
Where would I build my shelter for the night?
Today, I saw a close grouping of good pines
With spread out bases, low to the ground,
Where I could lean some branches to protect
From wind and leave a small opening for a fire.
When I can't sleep at night, I lie in bed
With my eyes closed and imagine
I'm out there in the woods, camping
Away from everything. And I picture
A cool night, like tonight, and pretend
A fire's burning down near the opening
To my lean-to, heat from embers warming
Me enough, but I'm still able to feel the cold.
But I don't think I'd actually want to be stuck
Out tonight. It's going to be *freezing*.

Elysium

My father tells me I have to get a job
And save some money so we can buy
A piece of land—my brothers, dad, and me—
Ten or twenty acres of forest
With some water on it, marshy water,
Or a brook, for birds and critters.
And open tracks of woodland
With lots of hardwoods:
Hickory, walnut, beech, and birch—
And we can clear room so they can grow.
And we'll build a little cabin with a woodstove,
Live off the grid, no internet, no TV.

This land is more than my father's Eden,
More than a fallen world he hopes to regain.
I see it as his Elysium, the place
Where soldiers who died honorably
Performing their duty, fighting
For what they believed in,
Can finally rest peacefully.

III

Lounging among the Ruins

To understand poetry, one must look no further than the words themselves. If directions or explication are required, something is inherently wrong. A work of art—whether literature, visual arts, film, music, or theater—should function first without context or clarification and certainly without a guide for understanding. Of course, art operates on multiple levels, but the most basic experience is the receiver's initial, often intuitive, reaction and is a crucial step in the process of understanding. Art should first work with as little noise or distance between the art object and receiver. How well he or she initially responds and then continues on to deeper circles of thought is dependent on the individual, whose level of awareness and proficiency at accessing his or her own repertoire varies greatly person to person. Art engenders a mixture of subconscious and conscious responses from mind, body, and soul, which provide the base structure on which to build contextual frameworks, opening up the next levels of inquiry, whether historical, biographical, cultural, literary, or technical. The refinement of the mind, which includes the ability to self-assess and identify flaws in one's thinking, is most important because the mind lords over all other functions. And since one's mind, body, and soul are an indivisible trinity, the individual can even sharpen his or her subconscious mind indirectly by the purposeful cultivation and training of his or her consciousness, so when the conscious mind is unavailable, subconscious acts can function at a high rate, particularly the absorption of sensory information as well as intuitive responses. My consciousness has dominated my life with its keenness for knowledge and learning as well as its acute self-awareness, a preoccupation with its own functions and ever shifting position to the world around it. With this comes a love and respect for my brain's insights but at the same time a deep epistemological mistrust, a constant questioning of what I can know and how I know it. My goal, therefore, is to better process,

organize, and understand my existence in order to improve it. Art, my poetry in particular, is the manner by which I express my life. Words and writing help to reinforce and develop ideas, sort out that shaky stenographer we call memory, and define and redefine my personality. Thinking and language, experience and memory, each have intricate working relationships that greatly influence my self-perception and worldview, making the declaration of a single victor in the battle between empiricism and rationalism moot. Doubtless, the most important source of evidence toward the crystallization of my personal vision is a combination of the physical and mental, both of which I consider experiences in their own right.

Why and how we see what we see and remember what we remember have always puzzled, frustrated, and amazed me. Often times, we absorb extreme events and recall them vividly, but that is not always a steadfast rule. Our brains are a marvel at taking in, organizing, and ranking sensory perceptions and abstract intuitions, choosing to focus on some while discarding others. They recognize countless experiences subconsciously that never register consciously. For our sanity, the brain prevents us from being aware of most of its processes, including the slow functioning of linear time and metacognitive faculties. This self-limiting mechanism is also beneficial because part of experience is the ability to let things happen and to absorb experience indirectly through one's subconscious. Most brains are turned off to the "trivial" things as well as deeper philosophical and existential concerns about who we are, why we are here, and where are we going. I have spent many years nurturing my conscious mind, over which we have greater control, feeding it knowledge and experience, developing a strong inner voice, which, in turn, sharpened my awareness further. I have absorbed much of my experience, my brain keenly receptive to highs and lows as well as everyday occurrences, receiving, reading, and recording them. The majority of life consists of daily experiences we see

and do automatically, nothing more than background noise, which I believe produce some of the most meaningful experiences. Every day, Nature exists around us whether we notice or not: birds and insects flying overhead; trees and plants on their seasonal cycles; the sun, clouds, and wind. I want to know what and how and why for everything my body senses. And it does not happen outside alone. Brushing my teeth, getting a drink of water from the faucet, taking a shower, or preparing a meal are experiences that hold their own meaning. These little moments, all the stuff in between, which everyone rushes past to the next big thing, is where I live and what I attempt to capture in my poetry.

My constant awareness and acute consciousness have been gifts but have also created a prison. Much of the day, my mind is painfully attuned to my environment and my experience, often aware of each moment and moment within a moment, scripting nearly everything I see and do and think. With the difficulty I have shutting off my brain and silencing its constant commentary, sometimes I wish my brain was more balanced so I could contemplate certain things and then let them go, without dwelling obsessively. Though we cannot choose how our brains function, we can work to train them. I tried for a number of years to turn this inner voice off, to take a break even, which is why I drank so much so young and abused my mind for more than a decade. I thought I wanted to get rid of it, that I could get rid of it; I wanted to escape the pain of being trapped in my mind, by my mind. Much of the anxiety brewing inside, however, was not simply the voice itself, but the strong desire to overcome it, to will it gone.

Unsuccessful, for numerous reasons, I began to loathe myself, seeking destruction of body and mind as an alternate solution for frustration. Poetry was fundamental in helping me regain control over my mind, and over the past few years, I have worked to accept the way my mind works, even if it is turned on most of the time. As I began to let go of the guilt and anger I had

toward myself, I felt better, and with other techniques to quiet my mind, I have finally reached a point where I feel okay with myself.

Art is an experience, and like experience itself, it changes the receiver in some way by working on his or her mind and emotions. Effective art often evokes an emotional response, its merit based on the authenticity of feeling portrayed with other elements working together to convey it. When we encounter emotion through art, sometimes we connect with it, and it moves us deeply; other times, when it appears phony or slathered on, we remain at a distance, finding it alien and remote. Emotion in art is not perfectly transferrable, though at times, the most effective art may feel that way. Though we cannot understand exactly another's experience, sharing experiences through art is not futile because of our ability to approximate another's emotions and then insert our own, which we have gathered from pure experience. The emotional baseline we all share, which art attempts to tap into, is at the heart of empathy. We recognize emotion portrayed in a manner authentic to our personal experience or to what we think of as human experience in general. Portraying emotions, especially sorrow, is difficult, but it is even harder to provide good reason for their expression. It is certainly not a new idea that the intensity of the emotion often matches the situation from which it springs, except, of course, when ironic manipulation suits a desired tone or purpose. But for readers to connect with the emotions, thoughts, or obsessions of another, the writer must also exude credibility. A writer who is in touch with and better understands his or her emotions can better transmit emotion via a work of art, and a reader who is more aware of his or her own emotions is better able to identify and experience the emotion communicated through art.

Therefore, the artist has a duly difficult duty: to make the emotions in art believable and their expressions justified. Not all emotions and the situations from which they arise are easily

justifiable. Certain types of physical pain, especially those involving disease, loss, and death, are serious traumas at the core of human worry. Since we have all felt physical pain to some degree, it may be easier to empathize with the physical pain of strangers, extrapolating our own pain to the degree of the stranger. It is easier to process and accept another's suffering if one has a frame of reference with which to associate it, even if one has never experienced the same situation. This is why we feel for sufferers of a disaster across the globe. Fortunately, my life, so far, has not been marred by any single trauma so great that its mention alone would trigger the empathy and understanding of any listener. Some traumas, like mine, manifest themselves beneath the surface, under the skin, out of sight, and maybe buried in the caverns of the mind, elusive, shape shifting, easily mistakable for something benign. When the trauma is less visible or hidden better, people may have difficulty gauging and understanding its severity in real life and in art. Mental health's increased visibility in the public sphere has engendered more accepting attitudes toward its sufferers in the past decade alone. I still feel the need to justify my mental pain to the reader, and to some extent, myself, though I have finally come to terms with the fact that the pain I feel is real. I do not wish to diminish other kinds of pain, but elevate my own to include it in the conversation, to better define something that is often harder to see (in the most literal sense) than physical ailments.

I began writing poetry as a way to both better define and release the pain caused by my mental struggle. Like most young writers, I started by imitating another. At the start of my collegiate career, I was so deeply entrenched in the voice and style of T.S. Eliot that even when professors strongly recommended I stop writing these embarrassing knockoffs, I still put up a fight. I had stolen (and not in the good way) practically everything from subject matter to phrasing to tone; even exact lines. Nearly nothing was mine, except for a few accidents here or

there. It took going to England my junior year abroad and more importantly, suffering an existential crisis upon return, to finally free me from my dependency. At that time, I literally could not write; mentally, the words would not come, would not form in my mind; and when they suddenly did, I could not put them to paper, my hands unable to physically grip the pen. I certainly could not write like Eliot anymore, who I thought wrote poetry like it was supposed to be. At the same time, I was being torn up inside and out and needed the release of writing. So I just started; I said forget expectation and pressure from me, from professors, the canon, or any other imaginary critics to whom I was attempting to appeal. I said I am just going to write down words, exactly as I think and feel, no matter the outcome. That was in November 2006, and it marked the origin of my voice. I no longer attempted to write “poetry,” to translate my experience into some narrow, predetermined definition of “poetry.” I simply wrote words and employed this particular genre because poetry grants control over the sentence, the line, the word, breaking language down into its fundamental building blocks of letters, punctuation, and space. Such intense focus on each word and its placement, its relationship to everything around it, heightens sensitivity to sound and rhythm, flow and movement; where voice lingers, runs on, or comes to a halt. I have worked to refine my voice, not only how to capture an image but how to suggest something greater, to say something worth saying, something meaningful while also expansive, open for the reader rather than restrictive. I want to reduce imagery down to its simplest, most direct form, while still providing highly suggestive possibilities, connections and associations accessible and plentiful but the meanings left to the reader to explore.

The four primary sources of influence on my poetic voice are Eliot, Baudelaire, Frost, and Bukowski. When I finally distinguished my own voice from Eliot’s, I was able to return to his work and take from it a number of important lessons that shaped my poetic development.

The music of his words and the suggestive richness of his imagery proved that even the most complex poetry can be enjoyed before deeper meaning is attained. He could appeal to the senses in poems like “Preludes” or “Prufrock,” placing me on a specific city street in London, but he could also integrate a complex web of different voices, fragments, and allusions, like in “The Waste Land,” that transported me through time and space. His poetry is so highly suggestive that it was up to me to complete the proposed idea. I learned that the difficulty or complexity should not be in understanding the imagery or the plot of the poem, but how the images and narration relate to each other, both within the poem and what they mean to the reader himself or herself. Poetry should not confuse but clarify; it should be specific in what it says but expansive in what it can mean. The difficulty in his work has been chided as elitist, but I saw it as a challenge for the industrious and academically inclined. The foundation on which to build meaning was there, something I sensed long before I could articulate it. He was not going to spoon feed anything; it was up to the reader to search out the materials and build the meaning. Eliot’s allusions combined with his critical body of work also greatly widened my literary repertoire. He turned me on to the Metaphysical Poets, Imagists, and Symbolists, most importantly, Baudelaire. Eliot and Baudelaire shared a similar world outlook that appealed to me. Though Eliot’s tone was more restrained while Baudelaire’s was marked by outpourings of emotion, both poets’ works were image driven, and I focused my efforts sharpening my ability to clearly define an image, choosing language particular to the intensity of feeling I wished to portray, based on the examples of these two. The dialectical method Baudelaire employed to attempt to understand his world taught me that in the search for truth, no single force out of the many antagonistic forces pulling on me determines the outcome of events, but instead, all forces work simultaneously in their own distinct ways to contribute to my experience of the world.

Therefore, it is up to me to determine how and why these forces work on me and in what distinct ways and to what degree.

Being a naturalist, I look outside for inspiration. My straightforward narrative and lyrical poems with a cynical edge about suburban life are based on the landscape of my hometown with a focus on natural imagery confronted by human intrusion. Frost's observations of rural life and his ability to identify, express, and convey deep meaning from the simplest acts of loading apples or looking at bent birch trees or seeing a crow knock snow from a tree helped me to look deeper at commonplace suburban things. Maple trees, house sparrows, tobacco fields, and road kill figure prominently in my poems because I see them every day, and I am aware of their presence and attempt to capture their endlessly rich meanings. Frost's dialogues sharpened my own narrative voice and his prosody improved my rhythm. He also demonstrated to me how to push the literal aspects of plot and setting into the deeper, metaphorical realms of meaning, but without letting either take precedence, in poems such as "A Tuft of Flowers" or the often misread, "The Road Not Taken." My poems, like many of Frost's, are grounded narratives. I like the reader to be standing somewhere with me. Though I believe certain images possess meaning inherently, I have worked to move beyond imagery alone and am attempting to infuse my own philosophy. I learned these lessons from Frost, Baudelaire, and Eliot well, but it was reading Bukowski that gave me the confidence to write about what I wanted, how I wanted. He taught me to trust my instincts, and that anything I found meaning in, no matter how banal or grotesque, was a possible topic for a poem. Bukowski's voice, like my own, is comprised of a series of contradictions, including overzealous confidence bordering on mania, followed by unparalleled, indescribable self-doubt, guilt, and a carefree (sometimes careless) attitude. But he always desired to tell the truth, or at least his version of it, and without embarrassment, he

presented himself unabridged and unfiltered. I learned to be unafraid to write about things that I had previously considered unimportant or out of bounds or too honest. I write the truth about myself, my life, and the world around me and am honest with what works in a poem, what needs revising, and what needs to be shelved.

I write how I see the world; how I react, both intellectually and emotionally. I have learned to trust my instincts when responding to any particular stimulus. My desire is to create, not simply duplicate the world around me but forge something new, welding all the disparate images, experiences, and thoughts floating inside my brain. Through my words, I wish to define myself as a person, expressing my mind and soul. I work to avoid self-pity, being as fair to my positive affirmations as to my indictments, providing good reason for my observations and opinions. My purpose in writing is to find salvation, to reconcile my regrets with my desires, and better define the struggle of living. Discovery and redemption, the recognition of pain and pain overcome, are the pursuits of any intellectual activity. I hope to make more manageable the absurdity of the world—for me, at least—especially in our modern predicament. Not necessarily to understand it, which I doubt is possible due to the nature of the absurd and the fact that we are trapped by human limitations. Yet, I find catharsis through thought and the written word, by further defining the problem, articulating it more clearly, taking control over it, saying exactly what it is, pushing it into light. I find comfort in the contact of pen to paper alone, my hand's movement across the page, and when looking down at dark scribbles and not reading words but glancing over all this thought, observation and insight, knowing that they are mine, that I possess them. I also recognize my words are part of the literary consciousness, even prior to publication, because writing enters them into the stream of ideas that exists not only on the page but in some ethereal space where the souls of all ideas live, that can't be accessed but is sensed nonetheless.

As a young poet, I told myself that helping others through my work would be a fortunate coincidence but was not a necessary goal. I suspect, however, that this apprehension regarding publication arose from fear of rejection, laziness, and other personal maladies rather than involving some great flaw evident in sharing our creative efforts. The possibility, no matter how remote, that my work may bring solace, companionship, or strength to someone, like the writings of Eliot, Baudelaire, Frost, or Bukowski have done for me, is worth overcoming my fears and doubts. Especially since my work, like children, once released into the public sphere, is on its own, and there is little risk of injury except to my own ego. Still, it hurts to think that most people do not care about poetry and that our culture as a whole does not view poetry as a viable means of expression, communication, or entertainment. For the most part, it now survives in academic circles alone. I realized this years ago when I found the poetry section at Barnes and Noble whittled down to one bookcase. Now other genres and different types of media rule, many of which are not literature and nowhere close to poetry. I should be excited by the challenge, knowing that every artist struggles against his or her own age. More importantly, I know I am okay for once with what I create and am even working toward something that resembles contentment in my life.

The definition and function of art has drastically changed in the past two decades with the proliferation of technology. People still need artists—poets, painters, philosophers, and musicians—who observe the world and create art, to fill the void. When artists share their vision, they illuminate what others miss, comfort those who feel alone, and guide them to the brink of new thought and experience. True artists are visionaries who see what most refuse to or simply cannot see. I attempt to put the reader's eyes behind my eyes in order to trigger one's personal experience by experiencing my poetry. Art flushes the tedious amounts of useless

information flooding the engine of the mind, unclogging the gears for critical thought, sparking the ignition so the brain rumbles to idle. But only the consumer can rev the throttle and provide the fuel of his or her own experience. Art helps people understand their own experience, better helping them to understand themselves and the world they inhabit. Inspiration and intention of the artist influence art's final outcome, but once the work is completed and released into the public sphere, its function and reception rely solely on the consumer's experience. Consumers must judge, order, and assign value to their experiences of art and others' opinions of art, which sometimes occurs consciously when engaging directly with art, and other times, subconsciously, by gathering whatever trickles down from the mainstream or through social interactions. To understand more clearly and intimately one's own life and the world around him or her, it is the job of the consumer, his or her part of the pact, to gain meaning by experiencing and evaluating art. There are no absolute conclusions; one searches, studies, makes assessments, questions, reconsiders. It is a constant forward progress as the individual grows, acquiring new knowledge and experiences, constantly readjusting one's attitudes and beliefs. The consumer does not require any particular prior knowledge to appreciate art, though it is helpful and encouraged when probing its deeper meaning. More importantly, one must be aware of the world and his or her view of it, which includes being open-minded to the different, sometimes conflicting influences, especially through art, and not adopting the views of others' without analysis first, internalizing all available information then deciding on one's own.

As with any technological advance, the model has shifted, drastically altering the role of the consumer at the turn of the 21st century. With the domination of the internet, and the ease and freedom by which to share information and publish personal opinion, the new model reflects the increased influence consumers possess. Though centered around creators still, the actions of

each party now influence the other in a cycle of creation and consumption more directly. Just as art engages the consumer, the consumer exerts influence in return, which dictates and constricts the artist to varying degrees, whether consciously or subconsciously, and the circle of consumption is set in motion. Now when the creator puts his or her work in the public space, it is molded, twisted, turned, interpreted, and misinterpreted by the masses, changing as it goes. The ease and speed with which consumers can access and respond to art has elevated the consumer to share in the role as critic. In the past, the critic, part consumer and creator but not fully either, held the role of interpreting art, boiling it down for the masses to be more easily consumed. Then the public would ingest it as presented. Consumers had less direct influence than critics who were closer to artists through the academic spheres with which artists are associated. Now, however, technology makes art readily accessible to the public through the internet without the bias of passing through the typical spheres of processing and packaging. The critic still informs both creation and consumption but when and how has been modified. He or she must enter the conversation earlier than previous decades to keep up with the immediate dissemination of art by presenting one's interpretation in the same digital space of the consumer, which only requires a certain speed in producing something worthy to say. A critic can also wait for the public to make its claims about a work, and then assess the public's opinion while also asserting his or her own about the work itself. All art is different, and without critics to assist in the differentiation of subtleties, we risk falling back into the lazy interpretation of placing art in predetermined boxes, which does not stretch our minds but leaves them locked in the same dimensions. Yet, even with the help of critics, art, which is there to guide and correct us when we err, is being ignored, relegated to something of little importance, and our society suffers.

In my poetry, I attempt to lay bare the absurdity of the world, both harsh and uncompromising, while stunningly beautiful and amazing, by demonstrating this co-existence everywhere I look and in everything I experience. This unflinching absurdity unsettles me greatly, and I yearn to dissect and analyze, while knowing I will never fully grasp it because it is beyond our human comprehension. But since Nature is where I recognize soul, at least where my soul responds, I believe partial redemption through Nature is the closest we can get. The coexistence is so closely blended together that it becomes one entity in Nature, unable to be separated even by words. Nature and its functions are perfect and unadulterated because they are stripped of human emotions and the biasing effects of human consciousness and perception. However, all my observations of Nature, even in the most remote locations, are not free from human intrusion because I am present, my consciousness, my clarifying voice, intervening, interjecting humanity, world and mind, everywhere I go, which recognizes and applies these labels of beauty and horror. My consciousness and my awareness of itself are the most haunting features of life: the inability to escape, even quiet, the mind, destroying any hope of complete salvation. Through writing, however, I feel as though I am surmounting my struggles; at least, I am not letting them get away with their crimes. Wherever they injure me, I am there to expose them. It is so my soul can remain buoyant, live on, not be crushed under the weight of existence. Poetry is my fight against destruction, until death sets me truly free, returning my soul to its pure state.

People desire escape through frivolity and superfluity; they do not wish to be reminded of life. Remaining ignorant certainly does not fix the problem, and we should be concerned as ignorance spreads at an epidemic rate, and we devolve into a primitive tribe rather than an organized society. Sometimes, I feel like I have to apologize for, or at least soften, the tragic

outlook of my work; not because I feel there is something wrong, but in order to make it more palatable to the reader, fearful they will not see the balance and just lump it in with the cynical, world hating, life hating, downer poetry that I too find irritating for its single note staleness. Of course, my poetry contains these elements but not them alone. Death and sorrow are often conveyed through natural imagery that I also associate with purity and life. An undercurrent of cynicism will reveal the truth that joy and beauty can be as crushing as the horror, the Beauty in Evil, as Baudelaire displayed, just as there is pain in beauty. Frost achieved this as well; some of his most life affirming poems, particularly, "The Road Not Taken," are underpinned with a cynicism and hopelessness that most seem to miss. Eliot's poems about decay and sorrow are beautiful in and of the words themselves. Like lounging among the ruins, the world is beautiful for what it was and what it could be, and sad at what it is, especially if we cannot tell the difference. I think of that painting by Canaletto, where the elite of English society casually stroll around Roman ruins on holiday, dressed in their Sunday best, unable to recognize they were seeing the future of their empire. I have realized an apology or attempt at masking the rawness of anything I write is unnecessary and would be a falsehood. My words are the product of a certain frame of mind at a certain time, and therefore, like any historical document, I must maintain a certain journalistic integrity. The reader is expected to judge my words and determine for him or herself what sounds right and what is too much. This judgment is for the reader alone and should have little direct effect on how or what I write. It would be impossible to write if I tried to please everyone. The truth is I think life should be amazing and grand. I'm just here to remind people it's not.

As America goes the way of ancient Rome, another world superpower exceeding its limits due to greed and lethargy, two seemingly counteractive attributes that trigger decay with

synergistic efficiency, we perch on the brink of nuclear war, the final war, as we consume, consume, consume and produce nothing. Our downfall seems obvious: the household and educational system, government and religion, institutional powerhouses which have dictated and dominated organized society for millennia, have lost credibility and influence at a tremendous rate in the past decade alone. They have not engendered thinkers and believers but instead caused people to lose faith and look upon authority with suspicion and doubt or created narrow-minded extremists with severe intolerance even among sects of similar ideologies. Even those who still hold on simply because they need to follow something and are too lazy or weak to decide for themselves, are led astray as these institutions fail them. In the long run, these could be cultural growing pains we must grit our teeth and withstand. And though culpable in their own right, no indictment of education or parenting, government or religion, can explain away the rise in ignorance in contemporary times, especially when one considers the incredible breadth and ease of access to knowledge available to most. What I refuse to accept, and believe has little redeeming value toward our forward progress, is our newfound reliance and obsession with the social arena, the entertainment and pop culture aspects, ministered by technology, which have suddenly taken over our lives, trumping our drive to fix any other problem areas. Many people do not see a problem with the rise in pop culture. It is an escape, they say. But inherent in the construction of escapism is the eventual and necessary return to one's own life with either a new sense of purpose or new state of mind, relaxed and re-centered, which will better suit the individual to tackle his or her own problems. Yet, when the focus of our lives becomes something that has little to do with our own improvement, we no longer wish to escape the toils of everyday life but want to replace our lives with something else. And with the help of social media, we are actually substituting our lives, not with another person's, but with a fictionalized,

exaggerated version of our own, which is more dangerous since most are too close to recognize the problem. What has occurred as a result of—and because of—this trend is a reprogramming of the mind at its most fundamental level, a psyche skewed and screwed by pop music, reality TV, gossip magazines, smartphone apps, and other forms of isolating, depersonalizing entertainment and technology, which batter us until we know little about each other and even less about ourselves, while parading under the banner of communication, ingenuity, and progress, as society dead-ends, and we carry on apparently unaware, or worse, apathetic. At the same time, the failed reputation of the arts is symptomatic of a larger, more serious issue beyond shifting generational tastes. It is damning evidence of the de-intellectualization of modern society.

So far, I have fought against the traps that I see killing the souls of many: I refuse to buy an iPod, iPad, or Smartphone; I keep my computer exclusively for typing, checking email for school mostly; no Facebook, no Twitter, no Instagram. And it is not simply a self-righteous, masochistic form of torture. I have little interest in what those services can provide; they simply do not suit my needs. I need only paper and pens, to write and draw, and books to read, and the woods behind my house through which to walk. I have avoided and eliminated where I see fit mostly because my mind is so busy dealing with philosophical, metaphysical, and existential problems that adding the concerns of all these other people, whether friends or reality housewives, with their problems, both real and imagined, serious and small, would overload and overwhelm my mind. As is, I'm at capacity. However, in our time, it is inevitable, without moving off the grid, not to come in contact with these things. Some are necessities with attributes that I appreciate and could not live without. Certainly, labeling everything related to technology as "bad" is as ignorant as spending all our free time absorbing as much nonsense as possible. But we are overdoing it, forgetting how we lived before these time-wasters, and I fear

long term repercussions. I have watched my share of reality shows, HBO specials, and sitcoms, some amusing, some hysterical, some with real emotion. Yet, when I partake even a half hour too long, my mind goes numb, after which, I yearn only to create, despising anything that dulls my brain and makes it fuzzy. But by that time, I am too anxious, having been aware of time passing, energy being drained, and I am left feeling empty, having gained nothing, no progress forward. I imagine Hell like this. Of course, it is not technology's fault as much as the mind that uses it. Technology is supposed to supplement our lives, to advance our understanding of ourselves and the world, not to *be* our lives, not to consume every thought and hour, enslaving our will, impeding, rather than improving, our minds. We have convinced ourselves that technology brings us closer together when in reality it has reduced meaningful communication to impersonal shorthand that highlights distance and lack of connectivity, if only we could see it. Technology should help free our time for important things, such as being with our families, pursuing hobbies and interests, creating things, thinking about our lives and how to improve them. Recreation has its place, but we are on the verge of an overdose. My thesis offers an alternative route: detox by being outdoors. I attempt to demonstrate the importance of the solidified bond between my father and me and to highlight the fact that it was gained not through text message, email, or Facebook post but through sharing common interests and common goals.

With similar personalities and ways of thinking, my mother and I have always been close. Aside from the ups and downs expected with growing up, we have maintained open communication and still have long talks on a regular basis. My father and I, however, were not very close until a few years ago when our work in the yard and our shared appreciation of nature helped strengthen our bond. My father never had it easy; successive bad luck with a number of companies meant he had to work even harder just to get by. But he never gave up, something I

admire greatly now. He often left for work before the sun rose and returned after it had set. He was almost never home for dinner. As a boy, I hardly understood. We got everything we needed, though it was rarely what we *wanted*. Not until later did I realize the immense struggle that had taken place just to assure necessities, and the sacrifices and close calls that allowed my parents to keep the harsh reality hidden from us boys. I always knew my father loved me, but I could never understand why he seemed angry all the time. Though it was only yelling, it still made me resent him, especially all his rules. College provided the space and time apart to free me from his jurisdiction. I spoke mostly with my mother but still depended on my father for many practical problems. After graduating, I returned home on an equal footing. And though he attempted to enforce his rules at first, he ended up abandoning this effort after he realized I would no longer submit. Now that I was older, he finally loosened up a bit. I loved my father but was still unsure exactly how to tell him. We said it sometimes, but it felt more like a formality than a deep-rooted connection. Around this time, I began helping him on a regular basis. We had always done yard work, but larger projects such as digging out the driveway, roofing the house, chopping up brush and logs, building a fence, and others brought us together. At first, I wanted to simply help my father, especially after all the support my parents had given me throughout college as well as during my breakdown post-England. As we worked week after week, I became more amazed at everything my father knew how to do. At the same time, I discovered my father's love of nature and his sheer desire to know all its intricacies.

Over the past five years, we've become close. As with my mother, I realized I share many major characteristics that define me as a person with my father. In my thesis, I desired to fix in time this particular period that I cherish so deeply as a stay against the faults of memory by defining the specific experiences my father and I shared, the many things he taught me, whether

how to swing an ax or hammer, and the lessons about hard work, determination, and self-reliance. But I also desired to place this period on the timeline and articulate its relation to the past with poems such as “Sons of Erin” and “My Father’s Maple Tree.” Whatever struggles I have in my life with relationships, growing older, and with my mind and its obsessions and fears, I feel most alive and content when my father and I are chopping, digging, planting, and building, activities that have been performed for centuries, things we love for their physicality as well as their direct involvement with Nature. Physical labor connects us to our lineage, especially when my father teaches me things Meeka taught him and that I will teach my children. But my thesis also shares in the hope that we can be part of something continuous, part of Time, rather than one point in the present and one point in the past. Poems like “No Matter” help fight the fear of mortality. My father and I both believe that Nature is the closest we can find to something eternal while on Earth, which is why we both dislike many aspects of modern technology, especially electronics and things made of plastic, because they feel so temporary and fleeting and make us feel so too, like we’re plastic wrappers ready to be crumbled up and thrown away. That is why my father loves antiques: things made of wood and metal and glass that were built to last and have survived the wear of time. Not because they remind him of a more desirable past, though sometimes that seems preferable, but because they forge a link between him and the past, and in doing so, make him part of the continuous timeline connected to eternity.

Many variables modify human behavior, and certainly technology, or any of its applications, is not responsible alone. With its numerous benefits, some of which I have mentioned obliquely, a crusade to purge technology from society would be unnecessary and potentially detrimental to our wellbeing. Still, in order to avoid pitfalls and make better choices in employing its use, the public should be aware of the negative effects of technology, which

multiply with its rapid, global proliferation. Our inability and failure to self-regulate is evident in the infinite supply of data provided by the masses. Whether directly or indirectly, any internet video, blog, social media page, news program, reality TV show, or movie is testament to the decay of the modern world, reflecting the devolution of society apparent everywhere I look: at school, church, the office, in the grocery store or bank. Yet, nothing has stepped up to abate this trend. What we desperately need is a 21st century Renaissance, a renewal of art and literature and music—of culture—to help pull us out of this nosedive. Unfortunately, before the Renaissance is the Dark Ages; before the rise, the fall; before redemption, error; before resurrection, death. And I fear we have not fallen all the way; worse is ahead. I have never understood those who fear the world will end with some massive calamity that brings sudden death. The truth is the world is not going to end like this. The only proof required would be the fact that quoting Eliot here would *not* be heavy-handed, cliché, or ironic, but simply the sad truth: it is going to be a slow, painful death, unless we instigate a cultural upheaval, a rebirth, which will be equally painful but will promise a positive future. And like the plains of Africa or forests of America, all require fire, burning everything to the ground before encouraging new growth. Our fire is our technology; it has improved our lives when contained and put to use, but left unattended, it has actually sped up our destruction. Maybe this is a painful but necessary step. Yet, I cannot help but think that unlike Nature, we could possibly help guide the flames. But maybe the fire needs to burn out of control, burn indiscriminately, and level the entire plain. And as the pendulum swings out far to one side in our age of anything goes, it will eventually come to rest somewhere closer to middle.