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Because You Are Beautiful and Dead

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BECAUSE YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL AND DEAD

by

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ABSTRACT

The poems in *Because You Are Beautiful and Dead* deal with dysfunctional people, substance abuse, loss, and death and dying. The poems also highlight the struggle of the poet/speaker finding her place in a hideous world, which, paradoxically, she really doesn't want to belong.

The poems are influenced by the playful and sad imagery and subject matter of poet Matthew Dickman. These poems, like Dickman's, are assessable and quirky. Michael Earl Craig and Terrance Hayes are two other influences. Hayes' work is artistic and experimental. Michael Earl Craig's poems have a brilliance that isn't fueled in its complex or radical subject matter, but by the ability to see into the human condition in its most simple form. These poems are interested in language and form.

The speaker in it often wants to tell someone *I am sorry that I have forgotten you. You are still here, inside my poems*. The poems bring people back to life. Sometimes these people are symbolic—not any specific person—but rather a representative of loss. Mostly the speaker wants to highlight the absurd and dysfunctional nature of humankind without any need to offer a remedy. Humans are predictable narcissists, they mess up their children, talk too much, and simply annoy. These poems are not predictable, boring, or always so fundamentally normal.

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For Ralph Nader.

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GONE

Because You are Beautiful and Dead

Because you are beautiful and dead
I will wear your smile:

Once, a construction worker
wrote me a love letter
all in pale-yellow highlighter,
tucked it secretly under the windshield wiper
of my Camaro while I was at work.

Later that night,
after I put to bed
a group of mentally ill,
you helped me decipher
the letter's faded words

like how you've become—
faint and gone now like

a singer inside
his washed-up song
that no one will listen to.

It's as if you died
and just disappeared.

You

I don't know how to find you
or if you want found
or if you're saying, *yes that's me*
in the videos only I'm a different type of gone.
When it's cold outside I say your name
breathe out the smooth fog that is and is not you.
I carry you in my liver, filter you into my fingers
that never get tired only hungrier digging for you.
Someone told me tonight you had chained yourself
to the clouds so I waved to the sky.
I've made a mess of our home.
My heart has run down its battery.
I believe the stars do not lie.
I believe in the sadness of snowflakes dying
in lamplight.

Everything I do is an accident

like lilacs when they hang in a neck of rope
or a map of noise that follows me into streetlights at 4A.M.
near where you lie under bluegrass and stone
or why I never visit but passed by your body lonely
a thousand times
or why my hands are not clean
or why this color grey feels better than I remember
or for \$100 dollars a crack addict will kill anybody for anyone
and while the world grows bombs that sound like a room
or a dream I had last night of you
haven't changed I watch the leaves change
and fall onto your headstone
fixing the color of your house
or why cold air is the engine of my grief
and why I can't lift stones without you
and I know my dogs are better people than most people
and if I drown in this dirt beside you let me remember how I did it.

Town is a Magic Trick

The town looks different now—
the unexercised spilling
out of short-shorts and tank tops
but the people who live here still
own the tight-knit
concept of family.

Rebel flags hang like lost ideas
from most everything.
Sheetz convenience store,
its bright red and yellow kitsch,
is prettier than Bloomingdales.
It's the place my friends
and I pitstopped for junk food
at four am drunkenish
after all the redneck bars
closed in West Virginia.
Dives where all the men looked like
they had such small
paychecks for my taste
I look back at my old friends
who I see as trash now
which I guess made me trash, too.

Last night I watched a real life,
grizzly crime show
where two dogs ripped a woman
to fine red shreds
in her driveway.
Me, my mom, and her boyfriend,
the three of us all snuggled in her in bed
and I know that one day
this will not end well as we all must die.

Once upon a time, I ran far and fast
from here and never looked back.

This town has become a magic trick,
with all its darkness just gone.

You Lived in my Mouth for Many Years

always fixing our house with your grand hands
clocks ticked like you told them to.

The ducks outside are gone I flew
too but not with them. I'm still lost

searching through your bones for some
words we could never find. In the yard

where you lived you said life was soft
and white but you weren't always wrong.

I won't show you my secrets you will
find them in the dark circles under my bed, so

go on now, grab those sounds behind the gunfire
and breathe again as if you aren't already gone.

An Alone Feeling Must Have Followed Her

I don't know you did it.
You were thin like a disease.
She wasn't like you—
She had substance.
An alone feeling
Must have followed her
To make her go home
With you that night.
I don't know what made you so mad
But that tree branch you
Rammed into the back of her neck
Came out of her mouth.

Amey's Blues

I'm stuck in this place again
with people, primarily
bad, naturally, though most
won't remember us but I
remember dying to see
you only you'd appear as
nightmares and we'd drive between
green stony elegance and
vivid killing streets a place
we called home like rocks neither
of us has changed we grew up
stolen and vanished from this
rooftop we hurl tin cans and
bricks at our past.

The Messes We Clean Up

Every day I watch you
watch your father kill your mother.

You've got his scream,
his aim between the eyes.

Grandma can't help you.
Monday morning

you die alone
in an inpatient bath tub.

For a minute you are
an overmedicated three year old

and the water swallows you like
breathe you slick little fucker.

Nurse screams for help
but the loud vacuum has its job to do.

She shakes your naked.
Wakes it from that night that night

that pulls you back and forth
between the hated and the dead.

I Will Wait Until You Are Dead

For Sam

to share this poem with you each August your back becomes more breakable your lungs more
air hungry your heart more enlarged and failing after the cardiologist broke your pacemaker
in the ED leaves you exhausted at every Chicago corner leaves your wife saying stop
complaining! every time you muster up the wind to tell her *I don't feel quite well can you take
me to the ER* still you muster up the wind to walk modern art museums with me and before
long both our hearts are broken an eight minute video on floor one of a starving prey-child
and its vulture in sunbeat Sudan splayed across the silent-black screen you say *I hope that
didn't depress you* no I say *I've been angry a long time* and you laugh until your shoelaces
untie your wife says your heart is too big—now that's a problem.

Next Door to My Brother and His Four Boys' House

A violet park a pea green sky
Local artist dreams a charred family
Into a painting the four swing on a swing set.
Two men slaughter the baby first
Slash its throat like it's a game of craps
Unlucky sister returns from a sleepover
Meets her unlocked door massacre.
The men steal TVs torch the bodies.
A week later the men stab their
Lookout girl, her mom, and step dad. It's a breeze
To see those three bound and gagged.
The men post to dating sites
Inside their cell still look for love
Admit they made mistakes
Mistakes but there are more.
There are dead girls
In parking lots of Philadelphia
Roses are red violets are blue.

Upper West Side

Between window glass and carshine

a plump Korean sings:

moves the room
in song
a bass
perturbs the apartments
below
a child cartwheels
one-armed across your floor

ask me about our father
and all I'll say is this—

he is here
with us

cold
vague and ghostly

(God Forgive Me)

The two men weigh
800 pounds combined and
enormous with rage.
Drones of fuckyouwhitefaggotmotherfuckersillkillyou
explode from their mouths.
At us. Their caregivers.
All the time. I pray (God forgive me) they die.
Just not in the hospital.
Painful deaths. Street deaths.
I don't care aslongasitslonganddramaticdeaths.
(I'm not the only one who prays this).
The deep dog-bite wound on the ankle, I'm sure was provoked.

I daydream of a hot desert landscape.
One with an obese fire.
The two men's blood-soaked swollen feet
drag over saw-tooth rocks
chewing into their skin.
I hear faintly a dog's dying breath.
Then (God forgive me) a cloud-splashed sky and I watch
their thick bodies burn at the base of some cliff.

Ode to Something

I was looking at a Max Beckman at the Met
turned to the window clouds outside hiding
their light sky gray like bone your son looking
like you did 30 years ago he has your same quiet
it took a lot to make you mad for him too and the snow
is falling differently in Central Park planes with all
their people the tiny cities below my favorite
Starbucks has closed and when I text a friend
where in the hell did it go she replies her father
just died and I keep walking down Park I know
if I walk far enough I'll find an answer my shadow
lost in lightlessness I don't know how much more
of Florida's sun I can stand the plane has just landed
with all its people trying to find something.

Cheering for the Away Team

The small crowd wears
red & has the faces
I once wore only
I didn't wear my face
as straight as they do now—
straight & alone like
a JetBlue jet to nowhere and

when the small crowd cheers for Will!
so will I! (whoever Will is!) but
back when
when I wore their faces
it was to take the face off messy—

& now
I want their airline ticket
back to their away-home,
I want their red, red shirts inside mine.
I want to buy them something
from the concession stand.

My face won't fit their faces.
My home is not their home.
My face is stuck and wrong—
a night swamp inside a cathedral of sconces—

but after I pull their faces over mine
I will say a godly little prayer for us all.

For Diane

Route 11 is slim and dark
lit with the lives of
Hackberry trees. We drive
into West Virginia's thick
November cold. Me
at the wheel, you, a new
widow— brave, pale,
haven't laughed since
the morning he died you tell
me it isn't getting any
easier even though everyone
says it will. I won't admit
converting to Anarchy since
leaving you for Florida,
that you will never see him again
except in nightmares.
I will tell you
if you sliced a knife
through your heart
I would understand.
You laugh for the first time
in months like you are falling
from a plane. I say
I'm being serious
you say you know
that is why I am
your best friend.
We careen our gazes
above to the buried planets—
plow through night's
heavy black without headlights.

Here Lies Amey

To my left is a parody
In it and around—

The wind in me has me.

Which house is looking
At my hedges?
There is housing, really,
Trouble always smothers my air.

Most of us escaped the human
Snake-pit yet I always had the feeling
Of almost talking to death.

Before I landed in this coffin,
Mental hospitals
And thunderstorms
Made me happy.

When I Die Don't Bring My Grave Flowers

When I was ten I wanted
To be a forensic pathologist
All those bodies lounging

Around skin burnt in color
Thin at their edges fallen from some
Mayhem or another I thought was cool.

When they bring my body to you
Under brightest of light
Some blunt force sorrow
Will rest in your eyes but

It's the cold of my skin on yours
You will miss the most.

The Man Who Couldn't Stop Walking

Start where
the body burned/
Baton Rouge to Seoul/He
can't take off his sadness/his new
New York

Dirt

Mom's a shopping cart full
of gold
traveling backwards

I push her she laughs
(You want her dead)

Bleach stains like a picture show
on her insides won't fade you've forgotten her

she's forgiven you
she's a bad poem poking out of dirt

Pour me more of what you are not drinking, brother—

Transferring Calls in a Psychiatric Center

It's always the same—
The new psychotic patient looks like you
and the phones won't stop ringing yet

when the local medical examiner calls,
her voice soft like a bruise
and so kind you stop to help her.
She says a man who lives somewhere
but I don't know where
was killed by car this morning
can you help me find where he lives?

You think back to your tired drive—
the black morning, the moon full of itself.
The same time this man is body slammed
by two tons of careless plastic.
The same time you went through
the drive-thru of Starbucks and now

the dead has found himself alone,
naked, and lost probably
and you imagine a cold blue sheet
covering his crushed body like a bird's wing

but the phones keep ringing so
you transfer the kind voice
on the other end of the phone
to the wrong number anyway.

Stripper (Yellow is a Noun)

Yellow leaves and falls
like my body from a stage
into a gone world.

I knew a girl who turned gray.
I ran from her while she died.

I Think of You

when it's cold outside
and my breath exhales ghosts of air
or when I sit on your old blue sofa
that has faded unlike
the grass at your gravesite
which is alive and loved by crickets
and earth worms and

I think of you when the clouds
are a comfortable gray
or when the house is stone quiet
and the light from your bedroom
fans into our living room like
dandelions throwing earth its seeds.

Your voice is still here
in my head and in this house
inside this body but I am the only
one who hears you and

You were a person made of light
and we watched you die
then we practiced the art
of forgetting you
and some of us got really good at it—

so good that there are people I wished
we'd buried that day instead of you.

C&O Canal

I'd forgotten the O was for Ohio
and how your Sycamores stand tall
and silent like a field of tall silence.

I'd forgotten how frail you are
and how your sons have forgotten you
and how our miles along the towpath
have vanished like empires
and their empire-crimes.

I'd forgotten why I've forgotten you
and how pale your legs are.

I've missed you—
Golden ragwort & Philadelphia fleabane
When I return, I'll run with you again.

BROKE

Chandelier

You were as pretty as chandelier and wallpaper
until you dragged me by my hair up twelve stairs
which made me love you more.

Dysfunctional Sonnet

I thought if I were black you would love me.

Sir, You Dropped Your Coat

the young black guy kept calling
out through the crowded subway
to a homeless Caucasian man
who'd dropped his threadbare coat
his shuffle bent and slow he couldn't hear
and kept walking fifty feet below sixteen
degrees of cold so cold it snaps thankfulness
right back into a warm bed no one white
would help them not even me.

Dysfunctional Tanka

After the lilacs
are beaten out of you al-
ways mouth the words I
forgive you to those who
never apologize.

Now and Then: Partying with a Prostitute (Or, You Never Really Recover)

clean sheets for sleep/my
walls I paint clear/I wish I
had taken that child.

Still Life

I'm in this West Virginia trailer
with strangers.
P.J. brings me here.
Don't know his last name
or these people.
Best I don't.
P.J. robs banks. We have fun together
I do know this.
Not a month into this world,
a neonate sleeps
on a counter.
I can hardly see its face
to remember it.
I can tell the guy of the house
is abusive the way he controls
his baby mama crack pipe.
It's weird the way
he says "no more"
stiff, silent-demanding sergeant.
Prize parents.
P.J. has these big, suede Tims on.
Honey colored.
Ones that demolish fully functioning doors.
I seen him do it, too, last Sunday.
His girlfriend's apartment.
I think she stole something from him
the way he was so violent with that door,
didn't care it was broad-autumn daylight,
just shoved that door in
like it was about to stab his face.
Didn't know what to do with myself,
so I waited in the car.
P.J. and I,
an odd couple.
I, the car, he, supplier.
His dad likes me even if I'm white.
That little baby, though,
pretty still life over there
dreaming in smoke, asleep on a dishwasher.

White Girl Haiku

First cocaine/sordid
clichés/pressed to diamonds or
/unbearable happiness

Yellow Cinquain

Silence,
language of stars,
the moon's lost weight again.
It's weird up here: cloudless, dustless
coward.

I Can't Love Your Clam-colored Face

Follow yourself to the Ritz with your Coke One and Pringles lips and bottled water stuck in the high blow-job position we paraphile the ocean gouge it as if it were a Halloween doll pull its insides out its feet dangle in confusion frightened and unnatural I have an unnatural desire to live in Jersey I never believed in the sun if I ever come back as anything Lord let it be a rusty chain link fence so I can shut all of you out.

Junkie

I know it is late
and this blood
on my hands
is not mine
I was hunting
through the mass grave
of my past
and I remembered
these college girls
in their dorm
how they stared
laughed and joked
at my expense
and I'd been tired
and awake
for a week
and the used parts of me
stood there as if I belonged.

White Trash Proletariat

A shmanszy art party of white light,
wood, and wallpaper. We are the proletariat
among mink stole and Botoxed forehead.
(I swear I'm getting injections this year!)

My professor's an excellent conversationalist
to my quiet, and though I identify comfortably
with white trash, living off some of my investments,
she disagrees politely with the title I've attached
to myself—a sticker I peel on and off as I please.
I'm ok with it, really, there's merit in crass just
as Byzantine Jesus told us, who now hangs framed
in front of us, clutching him to her saggy, gold titties.
We stare at the author we've come to hear. He's over
there by the meatballs, head bald as paper. We
wonder how long his head has been this way.

White Deer Run

I don't remember much about you except that you pronounced beatitudes correctly in rehab and you were my only intellectual friend there and I remember how they separated us like lab rats into opposing dorm rooms because we didn't want much to do with our fellow rehabers and the professionals had their theories they thought we were the perfect recipe for relapse wrapped up in our exclusionary staying up late together watching TV we stayed away from the needle sharers the heavily medicated and other liars and we'd discuss mutual dope dealers back home and the therapists didn't know your long shaggy hair with an 80's flair and opiate addiction weren't my thing and they couldn't see how in love you were with a much older crack head back home who still lived with her mom but if you're reading this know you made me laugh when we both had lost everything.

Family Feuding

For Richard

Into low light of the intensive care, past the *you aren't welcome heres*, the son says, *I'm only here to say goodbye* and though, not biologically related, the almost dead, breathing man raised him when his own father left him for liquor, but then the whoosh of two palms slams into the stepson's boney chest shoved by a son(of a bitch)-in-law, then another man's hand grabs his neck from behind, a second John Wayne-ish type, his hand not quite man enough to topple him, but by now the sad, gray-haired stepson has flowered into that monster his wife sees right before he beats her ass (though, she holds her own being heavyweight to his lightweight title) and, skinny as a shoestring, he cocks this John Wayne-ish, levels him like hot wax to that sanitized floor, their wives and girls scream, nurses and security guards are called, (and I think *my family isn't so dysfunctional after all*) while the father eventually takes his last, ventilated breath, and the stepson is unable to tell his father all those things you say to someone who couldn't quite mold you into that perfect person, who you fought more than you loved—all those things anyone says to death like I never told you I

Miss Maryland Turns Informant

She's as pretty as a Ferris wheel
after rain when its lights bleed pink
onto night's macadam.
Her parents named her a type of bird
always knowing she would fly—
only not in this direction.
I ask, feathering my words, so I don't insult her,
"What happened?"
"You know what *happened*, Kitten?" She says.
"*Life. Life happened*, that's what *happened*."
I don't know exactly what this means,
but it makes sense. She wears jail time like a snare
and we sit in her lifeless apartment
giving into to age, her doorman suites,
and modeling days on Park. I'm not afraid of her,
so we place a delivery of cocaine and sing off-key.
Whitney jams inside a small black speaker.
It's not one of those slow songs she's famous for
but it has a rhythm that's electric and rapid— like our heartbeats—
like the thumping of old bodies falling down a stairwell.

You Won't Call me Back

Listen

New Jersey.

The globe is on fire.

All my bloody patients are dead.

Don't know the street rate for an eight ball these days.

Acrid taste of the swallow.

A rankle gangrenes across my nimbostratus sky.

It's a terrible sad we live in.

How can I swallow truth when I'm too busy gnawing on the memory of you
said my sweater was beautiful.

Like a Lonely Sound

The thin
pages of your
life you couldn't reach to
erase inside of them all the
sadness.

Dysfunctional Tanka

After the lilacs
are beaten out of you al-
ways mouth the words I
forgive you to those who
never apologize.

Sometimes I write about yard plants instead

I've always wanted to use the word *bougainvillea*
in a poem but could never find the right fit.

I've always thought my past boyfriends
were wrong and brilliant at the same time
like a diamond on a knuckle of a severed arm.

I've always thought if anyone finds themselves in one of my poems
most likely they will die in it.

Once, Ron Paul and I traveled backwards down a dirt hill
in a lone tilt-a-whirl cart yet we did not flip.

Sometimes I think long and hard about what Lovell said
in the NA meeting—*crack should be called broke because we're all broke.*

Sometimes I feel it snowing in Maryland even
when I am frying in Florida.

Sometimes I write about you.

Sometimes I write about yard plants instead.

I've always thought if I could meet anyone I'd remeet you.

What You Will Need to Do at the End of the World

Count the stars.

Avoid heavy underbrush and mistakes.

Ignore old men rotting in armchairs.

Remember, all your crows will sky downward.

Forget fingertips tapping at the front door.

Pretend your food is dead.

The escapers are presumed among you.

Take Care—

Stay quiet and wait.

Dysfunctional Dada Sonnet in the Shape of Cocaine¹

I

Valentine, your sister is bound, face down

II

Guns to her head. Cruiser lights

III

Break across the room like pistol shine.

IV

Eight hours prone on a hardwood floor—never a good sign.

V

"Just tell us where the dope is, ma'am. Make this easier for all of us."

VI

She once confided, Maybe I should try that, you know, to lose weight, like you...

VII

I never told her crack was a bad idea.

VIII

The family that prays together—

IX

I liked this about your family,

X

Though none of you are on speaking terms these days.

XI

()

XII

With you, I freebased my path to hell.

XIII

You said no rehab could conquer us!

XIV

Valentine, you were doll blonde and dangerous.

¹I take care of myself, now.

Golden Horseshoe Club, Ranson, W.V.

Lap: place for women to sit.

Sit: interview; twin bed; office behind a bar.

Bar: anywhere but here.

Here: chrome; vague light, money

Money: what their names are.

Are: alone.

Alone: rigor; naked body.

Body: alley; torso; trunk.

Trunk: casket of lies.

Lies: the shape of a memory.

Memory: hair; dragged.

Dragged: flight of stairs.

Stairs: look down with a smile.

Smile: more like a scar.

Life at the Bank Teller's Window

Have you ever withdrawn all of your life's savings, all \$1400 of it, asked the teller one sunny afternoon to give it to you only in large bills, then gone on down to the shanty part of town, where ready rock fattens up the Dominican's baggy pockets, the ones who wanted you to sell their hard, week after week in 6 inches of winter-cool makeup and heels with no traction for ice, where the night takes white girls makes them forget they were soft and loved once a long long time ago, then approached a sandwich shop that employed the guy who you loved to hate and wished would drown alone and penniless in the Potomac, then paid your vegetarian submarine with something no smaller than a hundred dollar bill and when the registerman asks if you have anything smaller you look straight at the cook behind the grill, the man you'd slept with night after violent night like a clubbed, baby-harp seal, who left you for the young Ethiopian with a face so thin it looked like a blade, so you kicked in his particle board front door when he was at the movies, clobbered his computer and bleached his wardrobe ,Timberlands, Polos flung them all like buckets of water to a fire, slammed into the front grassy yard, of all places, knowing he's gonna kill you but if he's killing you at least he's not ignoring you and you say, real loud, I'm sorry, sir, it's the smallest change I own, knowing you'd let your ex use you till your last Benjamin, you didn't care only if he'd love you, pay attention to you, even if it's the two of you going to dig your own grave on South Mountain, while you held the shovel when he got tired, only to redeposit the money at the bank first thing in the morning because you know you'll be back the next week?

Barry and Alan

The 84 Chevy
that Barry drove
fifty miles
each Friday
to pick his sister
and I up
from school
was the color
of dried blood;
it belonged
to his black-haired
boyfriend Alan,
who studied medicine
in Baltimore.

I never saw
Alan much,
he was quiet
in a frightened
way, his face pointed
always to words in a book.
Barry told us
his lover's darkness
was Italian,
but Alan's family
was rich as oil,
educated, and knew nothing
of Barry. (Barry's family
lived in the ghetto,
beat each other up
a lot, and hated queers
and foreigners)

Twenty years later,
over a coffee-table
laced with lines
of cocaine, I asked
Barry about his ex.
He said Alan's father
was the doctor
to the Shah of Iran—
that his family

fled to America
to escape execution
during the revolution—
that Ali had to pretend
he was Alan
and not gay.

I Will Survive, *hey, hey!*

My island is warm most of the time & lined with fan palms.
It has four seasons (unlike Florida!) & the chilliest one is my
favorite. Only my mom & brother live on this island with me,
because they're the nightmares I wake to. 1978 disco invades
the radio waves & even the breeze wants to dress in velour & dance.
It's a real hard year, though, for my brother & me, shoveled around
like dirty snow between two islands with parents who hate each other
enough to make their oldest a drug addict.

White Trash Slumber Party

It's three a.m. and I'm jumping rope
in a living room
with my best friend's mother who is drunk.
She is drunk all the time.
(She's a good jumper, though, at three a.m.!)
And there's a baby or two upstairs

crawling inside darkness
in dirty diapers alone
(at three a.m.!)
Their moms are Godknowswherehighordrunk
with guys who don't give a shit
about them. In the kitchen
we party-girls devour
grocery bags of artificial flavors, chips, pop

frozen pizza, and pickles,
and because we are eating so much ungodly garbage
at this hour, we've fallen
into pajama heaven not unlike the heaven
Jerry Fallwell is demanding
from the living room TV. At dawn her
tired siblings arrive home
like lost mail that's been finally rerouted to its correct slot.

Drugged and disoriented, they wonder
why their mom is jumping rope
(at six a.m.!)
No one in the room has slept
and a contagious addiction
has been running through this house
with its head cut off for years
(and now it's mother's turn to jump rope again!)
Her daughter and I laugh and twirl

the two rope ends like we are in a parade
(eventually, the other parents bar parties at this house!)
But then their mother dies a few years later
of a failed pancreas in the ICU
under a light so bleached I couldn't tell if the family

was sober enough to notice when their mother stopped breathing.

The Curtzes

It's always the music,
Supertramp or Frampton
behind my recall
of that summer
green, my wooded
yard that I looked
past to follow
the screams
floating
above your pool.
Your baby
face down
in the water,
your flailing arms
from the car window
trying to grab the tail
of the speeding
ambulance that held
your unbreathing son.
Soon after,
you moved
to a new city,
one without water.

A few years ago
I saw a picture
of your brother—
the good one—
the one who
joined the war
and never used drugs
or fist fought
your lonely mother
at our slumber parties.
He was standing in front
of an American flag,
but he wasn't smiling,
he was being beheaded.

As a child, the six of you
were kings to me—
Your Faberge eggs and shag carpet,
a full bar carport.
My mother called you new money,
but you were always the Kennedys to me
without all that wealth and power.

Poem for a Mean Ex Boyfriend who's an Ex Soldier and Now Good Friend

I took for granted I could live in the world without killing anyone.

My Patient, Queshronda

Quesh isn't holding
her breath
She's dead.
Fifty seconds
is forever between
inhales so shallow
and reserved you'd
think air costs money.
Shook her
Percocet slumber
silly awake—
Then she fired me.
Made her take
a shower said
you get up right now
you were dead!
Called her every
name but her own
so she'd hear
how I hated her.

Fight or Flight

It's fine if you're in the woods
And there's a bear
And your brain tells your kidneys
To tell you to run
And you run and you run and you run

But what if there is no bear
And there are no woods
And there is no life you can escape
Just four walls that look like a parent—
lead paint and gunshot
or some other hell?

Snowy Writes a Play

Character

Snowy: Cauc-
Casion
Juandiced
Crack addict

Setting

Snowy's bedroom half lit by moonstare

Time

Awake 7 days

Snowy knows he's in here somewhere, fiddles inside a dresser drawer, remembers photos from a vacation he could never talk about. Snowy knows this is where his grey feeling comes from. A ghost, bright as childsmile, gusters in demanding answers to which Snowy has no color for.

The Halloweens

Dad pointed me
in the wrong direction
after I abandoned him.
He'd given me a map
Anchored in another language—

I fell into a few
nightmares after that

(Later I'd say *let me fall again!*)

Some years, stars
were the only light.

I biked down mountains
and broke my neck, learned
to swim with bodies
in the deep end.

Late last night I swore
I heard myself out back
digging up that black and white
of a young girl
who wore a beehive hairdo
and the wrong skin.

The Art of Harm

The vacations south
Polaroids hidden you
could never talk about

Heaven

Last night, my blue morning
Took me to a place on a map
A spot on my lung

A machine gun blast
Between silence
And full-blown black

Into fog I grab white—
leaving night
to its wide screen.

Every Castle Has a Torture Place

My skin burned
all evening today.
I walked
a hundred times
and it disappeared,
my skin.
My shoulders
splotched with
moon.
I grabbed dirt,
and yellow light.
I shook my
dirty things
into the dirt.

I Stand Over Their Bodies Like an Axe

Their beds are coffins, and I stand
over their bodies like an axe.
One asks me if I hear a voice in the hallway
say her sister is dead.
I say *no voice, that's just dietary*
bringing dinner. Her roommate has the same
My-Head-Will-Be-Cut-Off-Once-I-Leave-Here Problem also.
They've fed off each other for days.
When one woman hears her baby dying
the other hears hers dying too.

I separate them like limbs
hoping this distance will push their delusions
into the playfulness of a rococo landscape.
I medicate their mouths
or thighs or make up some damn lie
to keep their heads
from thinking they'll be chopped off.
I can't decide who's most sick,
so I just pick one. Move her to the sweet,
old lady's room who's tried
and failed suicide. Their faces light when they see each other.

When I am home on my porch,
I listen to the sounds
of the salt pool filter its electrolytes.
I drink in thick, black coffee
from a ceramic mug that has the smiling heads
of my three nephews
glazed into it. I think about the women
in their rooms and how they believe
they were built to make their babies dead.
The construction site inside them
must be really, really loud and quite messy.

My Best Friend, Jo

It's her butcher knife that kills me
she pulls it out
on everyone
I don't smoke with her
she's my best friend
but she'll stab you
stab you where you need stabbed
your artery blood
spraying grease fire
over some cheap-ass, scuffed-up linoleum
tile or carpet with bugs
and boogies mapped into it
shame she didn't have it on her
the night two demons
sucker-punched-raped her
I'm glad Jo loves me
Hadn't heard from her in ages
thought maybe her moms killed her
or she's sittin in jail on Walmart charges
she loves stealin TV's all by herself
she's brave I tell you
at 4 am
the time you start runnin
out your money
all cracked out and buggin thinkin
bridges you cross
hold big black and white police cars
inside the stonework
I've seen em, too. They're monsters
and fill up the whole bridge
when you look back in your rearview mirror
sometimes the cruisers move
inside the cement which is trippy
I told you she's brave like a lion who's shot but still runnin
to his pride
I'm not sure what Jo's runnin from
Her dad's dead and I'm happy
he doesn't get to see her like this anymore
except now maybe from heaven
where he's smilin
proud to see his daughter

dig her blade into a shoulder or neck
or wherever they probably deserve it
I heard from her yesterday
sent me a card with a pretty pink flower on it
sent it the old fashioned way
phones too dangerous
better send mail
dope slingers aren't big on fixed addresses anyway
says she's had a rough year
that she misses me
I miss her too
Never worry about myself
when I'm with her
No siree
"I'm still alive," Jo says, "I guess that counts for something."

That Head on the Wall May Be Your Own

I walk in early
sunrise to be exact.

Sky-tall hospital
just me.

Silence
I hear air.

I sit
phone an old boyfriend.

An aggressive
past.

My neck
aches.

The waiting room
grows a crowd.

A blood-smeared floor
everyone slips.

Another red stain
high on a wall.

Only this one's distracting
and in the shape of my head.

They Say the Ears are the Last To Go

but I watched a brother visit his sister
every day in the hospital for weeks and weeks
both in their nineties
though they didn't talk much
he'd just sit at her bedside
in this silence that was both
beautiful and blue
and on some days
he'd sit in his quiet
and wait for her for hours and hours
to come back from dialysis
her blood bleached clean
but it was his eyes
they were the size of sunsets
that held every azure of the sky
behind those thick lenses you couldn't miss
if you had had your own coke bottles on
and then I'd wonder if my own brother
would do the same for me
if we were just in our *forties* mind you
and I doubted he would and I'd get down
and even though the brother and sister
never spoke much I knew they knew
they needed and loved each other
and that's why when
he died in a terrible car accident
on his way to visit his sister
I knew it was his vision that caused the accident
and it's those big fish eye blues I still see.

Sister and Brother

We drove
from DC
to Florida
in that
rented Lincoln

Two of us
your hands
at ten and two
to find Pee-wee

An adventure
the length
of a slow breath

We died at
South of the Border

From laughter
That silly gorilla photo
we took together

still hangs
in a locket
around my neck.

Crack House

Maybe it was blue paycheck night? We were dirty. Or the eve Samsung's went missing? We sat on an old 60's sofa, its brown flowers wilted under our ass. Prostitutes ran from room to room, itched their skin, spoke a curious language, one I want to learn. A large white family walks in grinning. They want some, but it's hard to hear over their baby crying. The room grew smaller and turned tourniquet grey when I saw the baby. We smoke; the room drowned us in sheets of rusty rain water. I hear the oily mechanic in the kitchen say, "I only killed *three* people." Others remark three wasn't even that much. The baby was tiny fragile glass. I see a scar form around its ribcage. It slept in our warm smoke. I've always liked the number three.

10k with the Dead in Manhattan

She waves goodbye to the brown-haired girl in a tutu.

Walks downstream on Broadway to 89th. A layover at a green juice bar.

Central Park is empty save a fistful of gray squirrels fat with winter.

Along a white-powdered path she inhales snow air for a year.

Branches bend as imagination against the topaz sky.

But New York isn't a city; it's a map tied to a wind of flies
and there's no train home.

Time, matters only to the living. Air, only when it's cold

Tomorrow, her dead will clear a path and cheer as she plows through the finish line.

Underwear

So I say to the guy
you need to give me
your underwear
you can't wear them to surgery
you have to put this
gown on instead and he says
he ain't wearing this gown
on account he's cold
and it doesn't fit well either
so I ship him off to surgery
anyway with his illegal underwear
on and the surgeon removes bits
of plastic the child-guy swallows
for attention and I force myself to break
at 4 p.m. for a twenty minute
sliver of peace against the battle cries
of call bells but then the OR nurse rings me
in the middle of my sandwich
and tells me to come get his underwear
and I say fine and then forget
for a few hours on account
I'm so busy and can't care anymore
there's no family at the guy's bedside
but then I remember his underwear
when I see dietary wheel
dinner down the hallway
so I say to the charge nurse
send someone to get his underwear
and she says you go
and I say I'm not going on account
I told him to take them off
and then she says she's not going
and now I wonder if we lost his underwear
or if the surgeon simply drilled through them
because I forgot to check when he came
back on account of all the new
bloody tubes sticking out of him.

The Pedophile

He stands in front of me tall
Six foot five aloof and more like a tree

Waits for a paper cupful of tranquilizers
He won't look me in the eye he won't look at me at all
Only the ground that carries him before me.

Yeah
We all know what it was like to be crushed from inside out
We all remember our fathers raping us

We all want him dead

When he leaves here he walks straight to prison
A wrecked kid of four decades
Something so unnatural even the wind won't touch.

Vietnam (or It's Easy You Just Don't Lead Them as Much)

My father tattooed Christmas lights
across his chest to remind himself
of the true meaning of Christmas.
To be like him, I tattooed bullets into my elbow.

In the summer we sat
on plastic fold-up chairs
in the middle of an army green lawn as
the sun carved its signature
into our faces.
He never gave me
a sister, just a garage
full of cardboard statues and knives.

At night we'd sit on Grandma's old brown sofa
and watch Fantasy Island and news.
We swallowed marathons
of bitter coffee at dawn and listened
to sounds of Bluegrass and birds waking
on a porch hidden under
clouds of purple and mud.

Sometimes we'd have arguments
lit-up and loud like festivals,
But mostly we talked with silver breath
about the faded dog tags next to the clock.
How if the winter's angle was just right,
you could almost see the faces of the women and children running.

What Did I Love So Much About Crack?

I chased the same darkness I ran from.

(I didn't love the running.)

I learned to lie in a loneliness so comfortable I made it my home.

(Seventeen years sober, I'm still a visitor in my own body.)

Being in a Room With You Feels Like Being Buried Alive

Your mouth talks

but it looks more like you're gnawing on bone.
Even a trip to the local grocery store with its so-so citizenry

makes me want to swallow Prozac. I see
what parents produce and I want to write
my obituary.

Fighting or not fighting
My dogs got in four this week: broken arms, brain drains, bloodspray,
cloud colored happiness disappears.

Our house a failed state.

Now when I leave
the weight on my chest follows me.

I love that you're so pristinely wrong about everything.
It makes me feel better about my crack addiction.

Every tragedy isn't always about you said the pronoun I five times.

Seven Ideas While Listening to Alice in Chains

Job

The butler to the sun is blind.

Meritocracy

What to do with all the average people?

Broke

The copper doorjamb to your heart latches improperly.

Hypochondriac

Night is the underexposed photo of exorcist shapes.

Aubade

The door shoves you at 0600 into a cold, ceiling-white room of schizoaffective eyes.

Abstract

The eyes of the windowless soul is a concrete image.

Advice

Dad insists I dig until I reach the rocks that are all in the shape of headstones.

Feminist Hurricane

Let's call it what it
is/batters our weekdays like
fists/forget the squall/
the eye/ and why *her*? Something
that cruel is/a himicane.

Apologia for the Skulls

The people filled the town
with poets then shot them.

Planted their skulls

in parks and gave them names
like Lester & Maxine or Tim.

Local jewelers soldered
onyx & topaz to their eye sockets

copper to their teeth.

The garden club cultivated
snapdragons in the bullet holes
& meter readers gave them

warnings just for fun.

But the heads shone like exploding
stars even on drab days, even

when no one missed them
or came looking for them

& this went on for many years

until the heads grew faces
& they bloomed there
like flowers breathing life onto graves.

Thoughts After a Hurricane in a Mental Hospital

They are not the same stars above us.
Mine live in a black rectangle fist of light.
Yours, you haven't seen in ages if ever.
This morning I said thank you to the hurricane
for throwing the sky some stars, put on my
work clothes and drove through the damp dark.
When I arrive to stay alive, I'll pretend I like you.
You'll keep your dead audible and speak
nonsense to them or whoever until I see the shapes
missing in you and I'll know why you believe
Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson brought you here.

It's That Crazy

It's like shooting up heroin by mistake. It's like bringing a butcher's knife to a party and dying to use it. It's every hit old grandma takes from her crack pipe in the dark and she goes berserk. Won't let anyone in the room move. Or speak. At all. Um, um, um, she growls and grunts like she's getting ready to chow down on a big bowl of stew, only she's not happy and definitely not hungry, but livid that we are moving. Can't even scratch an itch. Can't even look out the window after your own hit because you're suspicious the police are sitting outside with warrants for everyone's arrests, so instead everyone has to sit in this big bowl of paranoia waiting for grandma to shut the fuck up. It's like realizing you have a large crack addiction and you don't need a smack problem, too. It's like your best friend Jo with her butcher's knife ducked way down in the backseat as Joy drives the three of you to a dealer's crib both girls calling each other crazy bitches and fist fighting the whole way while you sit there thinking this is all so strangely normal. It's like showing up to your other best friend's house at three a.m. with thirty heavy-ass dollars worth of your mom's quarters in a sandwich baggie thinking Ray Ray's gonna take that shit for dope. It's like your neighbor Jamie who grew up wanting to be a pharmacist but held one up at gunpoint instead then carjacked someone's mother and spent the next eighteen years in Roxbury. It's like not eating, drinking, or showering for seven days and you still have kidney function. It's like not answering the phone for two straight months and your parents think you're dead. It's like you're a freezer, locked and numb and dark and cold and stuck, and nothing not even prayer gets in. It's like Narcotics Anonymous and all of us in it are a joke and it doesn't work. It's like talking about it makes it real and you have to stop.

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