



2016

## Hat and Man

Sean L. Corbin

*University of Kentucky*, seanlcorbin@uky.edu

Digital Object Identifier: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13023/ETD.2016.219>

[Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.](#)

### Recommended Citation

Corbin, Sean L., "Hat and Man" (2016). *Theses and Dissertations--English*. 45.  
[https://uknowledge.uky.edu/english\\_etds/45](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/english_etds/45)

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations--English by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu).

## **STUDENT AGREEMENT:**

I represent that my thesis or dissertation and abstract are my original work. Proper attribution has been given to all outside sources. I understand that I am solely responsible for obtaining any needed copyright permissions. I have obtained needed written permission statement(s) from the owner(s) of each third-party copyrighted matter to be included in my work, allowing electronic distribution (if such use is not permitted by the fair use doctrine) which will be submitted to UKnowledge as Additional File.

I hereby grant to The University of Kentucky and its agents the irrevocable, non-exclusive, and royalty-free license to archive and make accessible my work in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known. I agree that the document mentioned above may be made available immediately for worldwide access unless an embargo applies.

I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of my work. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of my work. I understand that I am free to register the copyright to my work.

## **REVIEW, APPROVAL AND ACCEPTANCE**

The document mentioned above has been reviewed and accepted by the student's advisor, on behalf of the advisory committee, and by the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), on behalf of the program; we verify that this is the final, approved version of the student's thesis including all changes required by the advisory committee. The undersigned agree to abide by the statements above.

Sean L. Corbin, Student

Julia Johnson, Major Professor

Dr. Andrew Doolen, Director of Graduate Studies

HAT AND MAN

---

THESIS

---

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Sean L Corbin

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Julia Johnson, Associate Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2016

© Sean L Corbin 2016

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### HAT AND MAN

Rapid life changes can lead to a certain amount of cognitive confusion if not full dissonance. Events take on new meaning. Images stand for new ideas. Through prose poetry, surrealism, deadpan humor, and word play, this thesis gives the sudden advent of fatherhood, domestication, intellectual exhaustion, and shifts in mental and physical health new shapes.

KEYWORDS: Language Poetry; Prose Poetry; Domestic Poetry; Meta Poetry; Bipolar Disorder

---

Sean L Corbin

---

HAT AND MAN

By

Sean L Corbin

Julia Johnson,

Director

Dr. Andrew Doolen

Director of Graduate Studies

4.6.2016

Date

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

The King of Fists.....	1
Shed.....	3
Hat and Man.....	4
Dear Wife, My Mania.....	5
Gateway.....	6
Circular Ruins.....	7
Assisted Mouth.....	8
Red Ants Underneath.....	9
This is a Poem.....	10
On Painter's Tape.....	11
Company Town.....	12
When the Pills Kick In.....	13
Waiting in a Science Building.....	14
Bubbles.....	15
Healing a Broken Bell.....	16
High Above the Machine of the City.....	17
Local Roasting Shop.....	18
To Cook with Lithium.....	19
My Son's Art Hangs Over My Desk at Work.....	20
Unable to Decide.....	21
Slow Cook, Texas Style.....	22
Q&A.....	23
Sea Salt in a Pot Roast.....	24
Tragic.....	25
Ouroboros.....	26
Custom Blades for Making Staves.....	27
A Breather.....	28
What Could Have Been.....	29
Turning Down a Drink Leaves.....	30
Wu Wei.....	31
Old Fashioned.....	32
Appalachian Tropics.....	33
Arguing with Donald Trump.....	34
The Day Ruined without Even a Chance to Try.....	35
Valley of the Flies.....	36
Tobacco Fraud.....	37
Fade to Blackberry Jam.....	38
Heat in the Winter.....	39
Baby Sounds.....	40
To Kill a Dead Thing.....	42
Touch the Lean.....	43
Family Man Poker Hand.....	44
Fire Triangle.....	45
Lacking in Parachutes.....	46

Administration.....	47
An Unowned House.....	48
Canary.....	49
Perforated Godforsaken.....	50
The Shape of Kentucky.....	51
Goodbye, Polar Bear.....	52
Small Mercies.....	54

## THE KING OF FISTS

The three of us—you, me,  
and the King of Fists—

sit around a crackling fire  
and wait for the chicken to balk.

Jelly beans dangle from the leafless trees.  
One of us whispers, *Fat burns from the inside out.*

You poke the bird in the breast  
with a dusty hammer and hum *O, Fortuna.*

\*

Autumnal breezes, you say, pickle best  
in a felled trunk filled with spices.

I prefer to let them circle  
in the bellies of plastic bags.

Someday, says the King of Fists,  
I'll have all the wind I need.

We feed him small white grubs  
and potatoes from the fire.

He shakes himself at the treetops,  
clinched and tearful.

\*

I am ready for snow. I tell this to a can  
of coconut milk in hushed tones

while you rub the King's shoulders  
and clean your own feet.

If a goose falls from the violet sky, I will fall  
upon it and feather myself with chewed gum.

I will begin the dance of long-necked tomfoolery.

\*

At some point he suggests we lick everything.  
Our tongues burn and splinter. We taste

old squirrel toes and young furniture.  
We taste hot coals and unlit cigarettes.

We taste hula skirts and dog shit, funnel cakes  
and underpants. We taste the Magna Carta.

You and I kiss the King for different reasons.  
He wipes his eyes and nods. We continue.

\*

When the clearing is damp with spittle, we start in  
on the forest, the King's hands on our shoulders,

his fingers sticky from candy. You thank him  
for his knowledge of pressure points.

I curse his hairy knuckles. Together, we crawl  
forward like dead dogs. Together, we pull apart.

## SHED

In the yard I make an eagle's call with my tongue and curse cirrhosis. The shed—its cracked windows, its cinder walls, its withered wooden doors and dirt floor layered with roofing nails—sighs beneath my neighbor's oak. Red and blue paint flakes from the blocks of its leaning walls. I lick the shedding colors, taste apple pies, salute in reverse, hold my own swollen and wasted minerals. A congressional urine, dark and hot, burns from my urethra, across the patched and yellowed grass and down into the bubbling mud. I reach out for the baneberries in the corner of the yard, wrap myself in their blooms, close my eyes, see fireworks.

## HAT AND MAN

There is a hat  
with a man  
trapped beneath it.

The hat is many things  
but never follicles.

The man isn't much  
but always razors.

When the man sweats,  
the hat is filled.

When the hat sweats,  
the man refuses to drink.

What the hat longs for  
is to lift and be lifted.

What the man thirsts for  
is to be ground into dust.

Together,  
they search  
for stones to smooth.

DEAR WIFE, MY MANIA

Fuck your work—I'm all abother. My feet are daffodils with pebble toes, my knee caps fish hooks just below my corkscrew cock and copper balls. My stomach is a six-pack of wide-mouth beer cans. I am nuclear fallout. I am Jesus Christ. If I have blistered carousels for arms and an aluminum tongue, can we still have kids? If we can't talk now then tomorrow at dawn I'm walking down to the pond and strapping an F-14 Tomcat to my ass and flying to the moon. Oh. Well. Friday is free. Can we talk on Friday? And if I make it till then: I'll need your ears: I want to tell you secrets. I'm ready to share secrets. I want to talk now. Why can't we talk? We never talk, always sitting and staring, staring at the walls. I'm ready to speak so let's speak. Can we speak? Can you listen? I'm listening.

## GATEWAY

Diamonds of coal taste as soggy as tobacco stalks. What is patchouli if not a hip replacement for cracked shaved marrow that permeates the untreated floor skin? What is a horse if not the conveyance of grass? We are, at worst, siblings. At best, we make a bridge between worlds. Moonshine is marijuana is Maker's Mark is Marlboros is Blue Mondays is milkshakes is mint juleps is southeast is central is western is the field is the mine is the factory. Come together. Kiss each other's sisters. Be a gateway not a mirror.

## CIRCULAR RUINS

I sit in a cold breeze on a clay bench and read beneath a blooming pear tree and spit smoke into white bells as I turn the pages and wait for my pocket to quiver but it is still like me in a cool breeze on a cracked bench reading beneath an overripe pear tree and belching heat into white green stars as I turn pages and wait for a popular song to echo from my hip but my jeans are silent like me in a warm breeze on a crumbling bench reading beneath a fading pear tree and vomiting tar into withering tan bark as I rip pages and wait for my phone to ring but my cell phone is engulfed in flames like my lungs in a stagnant breeze on the shattered concrete reading beneath a dead pear tree bellowing fire into brittle black bones as I burn pages and wait for a connection but the connection is a pile of ash in a vacuum.

## ASSISTED MOUTH

The lips will hobble their own banana peels, will banjo their baggage handlers, will Persephone their lavish guacamoles. Help them, when the time comes, to keep straight the necklaces that fruit loop, to keep the curry bowls that complicate, to keep talking even if the hellos beg for tangerines. Lead them through this Bed Bath and Beyond of tombstones etched in distant sunshines. Lead them on this broken road of dangling participles.

RED ANTS UNDERNEATH  
After David Lynch

Childhood seemed wet earth,  
black lungs, hung horses

shitting in the gravel,  
iron in the trees,

electric cages and barbs  
on the telephone wires,

dead dogs delivered  
in FedEx packages,

daggered chestnuts  
and stapled sternums.

Beneath the skin,  
red ants crawled.

Looking closer, I find  
that the ants always fed

from a steady stream  
of saccharine teeth.

THIS IS A POEM

that crawls inside  
itself

and finds a small pecan  
stored for winter months

when the winds blow  
the easy shit away

and the words up  
and vanish

like so many red  
match heads struck

in the throes of hot  
meta hyper bolic ink

that burn down all  
the trees except

the pecans – good  
for their slow smoke.

## ON PAINTER'S TAPE

Blue tape, ravage me.  
Cover me with cold sweat.  
Make my mandibles glisten.

Where are the spiders  
when legs are required?

A sterling lamplight.  
A memory of a stomachache  
on a late-night cramped flight.

Travel is necessary,  
no matter the conditions,  
to gather the threads.

There will be a web of lines  
across the dusty canvas.

Trust me, man of the world—  
this blue will turn to phosphorous  
before the acrylics turn hard.

## COMPANY TOWN

Bigger digging trigger mills  
cutting bills into the forest.

Pay the burning bellies with barrels  
of beef dragged through the trees.

Let the squirrels ask:

What's with the bellowing  
chain-link teeth belching

black breaths like sparks  
below the acorn holes?

Let the crying children chant:  
Make the baskets bigger, bigger—

big enough to hold a mother,  
son, and father deer;

big enough to peer into for minutes  
without getting scratched;

big enough to run from, squealing  
buck-toothed skitter sounds;

big enough to fit within it  
a key that opens up a state.

## WHEN THE PILLS KICK IN

The zeal picked in the hills has grown stale. The blood has dried from the kill since Old Dad drank the swill and died. I take my face and pace my mourning from autumn to spring. I will miss my visions, those elliptical squirrels, those whirling jugs, those lightning bugs and frightening stubs from the power grid, those fat-ass burning ecstasies. I fear the rotting valleys of my ever-static grooves, rinsed of sense that makes none, cleansed of life that seems fun, left alone with bleach dry bones that just feel a little stale.

## WAITING IN A SCIENCE BUILDING

Simple sirens sound  
around the southern wing.

Somewhere on this floor,  
a radiation pulses.

I am waiting for a neon Jesus  
to drag me from the rays.

I picture his green beard.  
Now you do too.

Let's listen to this incessant  
*beep beep beep* and wink  
toward our waxen savior.

Let's hold each other's melting thorax  
and bleed from our ribs.

## BUBBLES

Swaddle back and forth the bubbles. Spring them free with gravity so that they may defy and fly up, up, up above the cups of liquid grass and toenails squeezed through cheese cloth. Spit them up higher, higher, higher along the stainless spires of spaghetti strings spinning the spheres with illegal torque that tosses them higher, higher into the heaven of heights. Watch them flutter in the winds. Wish them only just enough harm to ready them for empty space and all its pockets, all its acres.

## HEALING A BROKEN BELL

The salve is smoothed  
across the bronze skin  
of the broken bell.

When the clapper  
quickly strikes the point  
it may stick, given  
its eagerness to echo.

Nothing can wait  
long enough to heal.

The bell will only sound  
in soft and muffled tones  
until the metals take  
each other and bond again.

## HIGH ABOVE THE MACHINE OF THE CITY

The elevation of the feet  
makes the heart brimful.

Here, in the clouds,  
the arteries agitate.

Here, above the biomass,  
sanguine ideas flow in  
and out of perception.

The ants skitter scatter for sugar.

The wolverines shovel the wet  
black earth from one hole to another.

The beetles battle  
for a inch of asphalt.

What if blood rained down  
from the height of this tower?

What if there were finally  
something worth beating?

No time for hypotheticals.

Rotors care nothing  
for a pumping organ  
at dangerous altitudes.

## LOCAL ROASTING SHOP

I cannot find the fucking blonde roast. Blueberry, yes, and caramel salad and reindeer droppings and chicken spit and concentrated caterpillar calculations and peanut butter cup, of course, and Catalina dressing too and macaroon and Dodge City spittoon and a barrel even of copper bathtub shower ring. No blonde roast. Nothing light. Nothing to be sipped and passed and thought of only when the time comes to sip again. Only dark. Only heavy. Only enough density to sink into the lower intestines and die there, burning.

## TO COOK WITH LITHIUM

Mute the marrow sparks.

Lukewarm from the micro  
wave, the white meat is enough.

Sacrifice the flavor  
of undercooked blood  
and just-right flesh.

Suck the bland bones.

## MY SON'S ART HANGS OVER MY DESK AT WORK

The scribbles of green glean in the fluorescent tapioca cubicle while I cut my charcoal cuticles with my incisors and read insights on investigative journalism from germinating adults activating their salivary glands for the gluttonous first time and I find more truth in the hollow figures dancing in crayon curves on the copier paper pinned into the wall before me than in the angry grammar glowing from the dim computer screen that's screaming drunken obscenities at my face in retaliation for its activation to only display dissonant comma splices and the occasional omitted paragraph.

## UNABLE TO DECIDE

A pair of dice is rolled into a flow of golden circulation that is to say a nook of leather-bound weather-ground books glazed with spit but just a little so that the words don't wilt under the wanton wanting a/k/a the covetous craving for accounts of adventures or acrostics at higher altitudes than the roller can requisition with his meager moments and inability to initiate the meeting of foot and floor without external assistance from a librarian liberal with his own time and when the dice delivers a single number and that number is converted into Dewey's code and that code carries to the roller a biography of Kardashians he bitches about his absolute lack of luck and begins to read the rock-bottom unreality.

## SLOW COOK, TEXAS STYLE

A pile of post oak bubbles in the heat.

Where is the tumbleweed?  
Gyrating in the vaseline vapors,  
the slick stick of perspiration.

Where is the bumble tweed?  
Burning his hips on the lips of a whole hog.

Barbecue the new seedlings.

Cattle call the spider limbs inching  
a menu into orbit over clouds.

Where is the wood? Waiting  
on the brisket bulbs

Let's cover our fingers in sauce  
and consume the countryside.

## Q&A

I ask, Who goes there?

Where? In the air,  
divided into a doubled pair  
of interlocked fingers  
and freewheeling hair,  
floating without a care.

I answer, Whoever  
declares an end to gravity,  
ensnares a universal force  
in the midst of their wares  
and finds it wanting.  
Whoever makes  
words float.

## SEA SALT IN A POT ROAST

An overwhelming overgrowth of ornamental lobster tails tallies itself across a low ceiling tiled with lavender petals, petitions the property owner to light a pyre below the light switches, surrenders to the serrated scissors in the woman's gloved appendage. The seawater summons its nymph to seduce the rusting doorknobs, donates her services to the war against wagon trails, tires of her trembling absences at supper time, sobs inside her own waves when finally she weds the jamb. Lactating limousines leak crudely into the branches by the road, brake for deer but never mice or hares or hobbled herrings, horrify the racing river into reaching back behind itself, intervene when bridges buckle underneath the burning pools, park outside their domiciles and peel open the front pages and debate simple humidity.

## TRAGIC

Tragic jails the shipping trails  
until no movement can be seen.

Tragic sails the ocean rails  
until no waves can gather steam.

Tragic tails the busted males  
until no criminals can scream.

Tragic snails the tubing gales  
until no storms can stream.

Tragic wails the warlock spells  
until no magic gleams.

Tragic stales. Tragic frails.  
Tragic fails to be.

## OUROBOROS

This is the beginning of a poem about poems, surely, but also the first sentence of a poem about hating poems about poems, the opening salvo of a declaration of separation from poems about poems. Right here, in the second sentence of the poem-not-about-poems-and-yet, appears the explanation that another poem about poems would simply be a snake deep-throating its tail until it's chewing its own face, a spiral without end, a man with his head directly up his own ass. The third sentence is preserved for a bashful apology for the previous sentence's final image. Once this fourth sentence rolls around, though, I am ready bring the poem-that-tried-to-not-be-about-poems-but-failed to a close with a well-chosen moment of "Oh, well of course," but all that comes to mind is the image of an old lithographic printing press, where each pulled print would have its own subtle and distinct individualities thanks to ink pressures and amounts of water and yet, objectively, be the exact same thing again and again. In this fifth sentence, something is said that compares the rolling press to the curl of the snake and the swirl of the spiral and the curve of the man's spine and a connection, so poetically, is made between bones and beveled rocks. By the time the sixth sentence comes to be, there's no one left to bend except us poets, so we salvo new poems to discuss the lack of attention given to poets writing poems about poems.

## CUSTOM BLADES FOR MAKING STAVES

Designed: a blade that bides its time before  
abiding by the wishes of dismissive  
barrel-bopping bourbon boys and not so  
timidly cutting curves of corrugated timber.

Designed: a jack for Jack and Jim to jam;  
a pick for Pappy to perforate; a cork  
for old crows to claw; a bevel for Bulleits.

Designed: sharp teeth; a sharper tongue.

## A BREATHER

Search out the vinyl threads  
stretched betwixt aluminum.

Discover their glass-scratched  
distinctive scar tissues  
with your calloused finger.

Yearn to drop trou  
and plop down, bare-assed  
and damp with sweat.

Yearn to tell the gasoline  
and the taxicabs and  
the cold dead pillars  
to go to hell.

Yearn to eat a hoagie made  
of sand, wet and otherwise.

Yearn to sting a bee.

Yearn, teeth clenched  
and cutting gums, to take  
just a single evening

to belly crawl to the top  
of this Appalachian peak,

to unfold a chair and sit,

to acknowledge this  
endless ephemeral  
sunlight, to let it  
stick to your thighs  
on the mountaintop.

## WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

Celiac, a foolish case  
of cramping from ciabatta  
eaten at the picnic.

Son, don't chew the chapatti.  
Don't swallow the sourdough.

See the lee act a fool and leak  
all over the leftover wicker  
baskets from the picnic.

Lee, you Swiss rock.  
Lee, you fissured fixture.

Sea, lean back upon yourself.  
Ocean, spit rain upon the  
checkerboard bedsheets.

Precipitation bowel-obstructs  
what could have been  
an absolutely lovely day.

## TURNING DOWN A DRINK LEAVES

Turning down a drink leaves a shame that sours the soiree by shifting the volume knob to the left beneath that late night lunar light meant for dancing lovers and gamblers glancing at unopened boxes of latex gloves and condoms and glue that slaps the tongue to the roof around the non-vulcanized; a knot that rots my guts and spots the constant knot that is my side and snuggles its lump against those scars and sighs *My bad, buddy* but in that sarcastic sounding way that slides from someone's mouth in the shape of a backflipping bird; a burn not unlike the boiling bile that honks its horn after a bargain barrel banana pepper bites through a baby's gums and blares the bebop of abandoned lactations and missing libations and the vibrations of a piss that stinks of milk instead of iron.

WU WEI

Be the cigarette butt on the creek bed.  
Be the mandible on the steak meat.  
Be the gibleet dressing on the fork.  
Be the ink on the peacock quill.  
Be the underpants on the stink.  
Be the silverware in the sink.  
Be the limbs in the gentle autumn breath.  
Be death.  
Be an open door for a vacuum salesman.  
Be an attic full of drafts.  
Be the sun hula hooping the earth.  
Be a man in love with his wife.  
Be a man who spurns his strife.  
Be life.

## OLD FASHIONED

Consider the old days. Muddy the bitters with sugar cubes. Back then, there were no grimaces in the gunfire. Now the whiskey suffices for a smile. What of the slice of citrus leaking fire upon the surface of the earth? It lasts until the burns subside and the rind goes sepia. Hold a sweating glass and watch Europe erupt in shades of brown. History. I expect to be seen in Long Island iced tea neons, drowning in triple sec, my newsreel speckled in lime. Good times.

## APPALACHIAN TROPICS

Pineapple the bedsheets left wet  
overnight on the subzero porch.

Shred the frozen fibers into starlight.

Serrate the starfruit.  
Drip the juices on the pillow cases.

Tie the sheets around your waist  
and wave your hips  
to the melodies of bluegrass.

Say a savage prayer  
for the natives. Bury the rinds.

## ARGUING WITH DONALD TRUMP

Tornadoes are tumbling in the wine cellar tonight. No, I'm special. Talk about me. The fish don't give a flip for fountain sodas. Damn you, I'm all that's worth saying. A lemming named Lemmy could never leave. Now listen here. Fine: the musty way you ripple your rancid tongue in circles around the same rotten moss-lined never-milked areola you were on when hair was easier bought than grown gives my guts a gelatinous feel – a quiver, a shiver, a riptide in a river of dust. Fear the tallow, fire hazard. Stop spreading just to sour. Listen to the horseflies in the midnight mist.

## THE DAY RUINED WITHOUT EVEN A CHANCE TO TRY

Can't even get a fart off. Can't even take a single breath of sulfur-riddled bedroom air before the calendar begins to drip hot black tar from today. Can't even take a piss into my own open sneaker. Can't even sneeze into the crook of my arm and drag the sticky skin across my son's doorway. The dawn brought with it a certain weight to drape across the house's frame. The kitchen is already adrift without a single faucet twist. We stagger forward in a half-raging mist.

## VALLEY OF THE FLIES

There are pits that rot like old oranges left beneath a wet and dripping towel hung from the branch of an autumnal oak tree. Fields that fester and fade, their grasses stinking of burnt lemons and jam cake, their folds of skin worth nothing more than a simple trip. Hills that haunt themselves as the heavy mists hover, gray and ineffectual, over their dead ripples and peaks. Caves that call in molding cries echoing through their throats, that scream about themselves into themselves until the walls crack. This is the valley of the flies. This is what is left for the bright-eyed Daniel Boones, the maple addicts, the fucked ones, the waifs.

## TOBACCO FRAUD

False flag yellow leaves  
flapping in the hot December.

Licorice leather veins puffing  
out from synthetic skin.

This will melt your  
mitochondria  
into malt liquor.

This will burn your lips  
into Vienna sausages.

Truth campaigns swirl the drains.  
Insure the perilous proclamations.

No matter the winds,  
the storms will be weathered  
as the crops wilt and drown.

## FADE TO BLACKBERRY JAM

Spread the black-blue gum across your hairy nipples and flick the sugars. Press the play button with a desiccated chicken bone. Press play until the metal cracks. Dance like an asshole on fire. Lick your sticky fingers and wipe messages to the dog on the glass storm door looking out over the backyard filled with colored sand. Make sure the messages mention how good the meat and jam tastes. Dance until you become embers. Flutter black and blue and grey upon the jellied linoleum. Sleep amongst the particle seeds.

## HEAT IN THE WINTER

Rub the neon sneakers with a wet washcloth. Toothbrush the grooves. Stretch the innards like a chicken's heartache. Tell the duct tape not to dawdle. Pull the meat over the bones. Pick the threads and play a tune. Kiss the plastic on the windows. Sweat the sidewalk. Jump the asphalt ice trays. Run until the house bellows. Run until the trees stop swinging.

## BABY SOUNDS

### *I*

Easy Street just past his feet:

these sneaker-covered toes, these  
meekly swaddled peek-a-boos,

these appeasing drips of mother's  
milk, these cheering finger flickers,

these leaping feats of fatherhood,  
these devoted sibling dances,

these cheesy dog barks, these  
photographs of fleece and glee.

### *II*

Abject horror:

Acrobatic banter belies  
the absence of cradled cuddles.

What manner of minimum snuggles is this?

Where is the maximum?  
Where is the absolute apex  
of tickles and tackles and kisses  
and cackles and altogether  
one-hundred-percent attention?

### *III*

Only for a moment will a swinging sling –  
with its cold aluminum poles, its bold  
Brazilian cloth, its oscillating motor –  
be enough to hold the obstinate body.

There will be kicks thrown.  
There will be fits thrown.  
There will be owls and ponies thrown.

There will be messages known  
to those who dare to take  
a single breath: No dozing is allowable.  
Now brace yourselves for a power pout.

## TO KILL A DEAD THING

A nickel presses into the fabric of a man's pocket and moans. A centipede orgasms in the operation center of his brain. The man touches the outer edge of the northernmost star in the hemisphere and sings his grooves. How many limbs would it take to kill this dead thing in the sky? How many apple trees would weep, their tears breaking the skulls of goats and small children? How much would it be, the price of a celestial snuffing? How many dead presidents would have to grope one another until climax? Go ahead and count, the man thinks. We insects can wait.

## TOUCH THE LEAN

Barns make noble borders for gophers buried in their own belabored excavations. Fill the holes with ink and light a match as if the wet black were gas. Watch it spark, ignite. Listen to the rodents screaming beneath the earth. Touch the lean of the barn and kiss the chapped wood you once raised with your now dead fathers. For a bit more, the charred meat will fester below. For a bit more, the beams will hold the sky at bay.

## FAMILY MAN POKER HAND

Pass me the celery with dairy-free cream dip and the ace of spades and the remote control for the ceiling fan and the eight of hearts and the ash tray for sunflower seeds and the ace of clubs and the printable primary paper for the boy's kindergarten project and the eight of diamonds and oh what the hell the cayenne pepper wings and sriracha and hot coals from the fireplace and let's say the joker just to make it five and wild and don't forget the non-alcohol alcohol and now I can make my bet cause the odds are odd for school tomorrow and the beer cheese is cold just like the radiator and if we're going to shoot the moon we need to see stars before bedtime rolls around and the dog ears start to droop and the cards fall onetwothreefourfive justlikethat onto the scratched felt and we fall onetwothreefour justlikethat onto our mattresses cause work and school comes early baby and our silver Bronco needs to be warmed up and defrosted just the way we like it.

## FIRE TRIANGLE

I spit chewed spaghetti onto the cracked brick of the breezy fireplace. Shadows tell stories on the ceiling. Stories of death and dances. The lampshade is stained with the entrails of stink bugs. Stories of cracked cars and shared consommés. At my feet the dog watches, taking notes for her review – negative, judgmental, scathing. I embrace the season of blatant self-fuckery and light a candle. Stories of broken bones and dripping ink pens. The window leaks and fights the flame. Everything will burn as soon as it starts to rot.

## LACKING IN PARACHUTES

I decide to learn how to fly:

- 1) tie two oak sticks to my back with baling wire;
- 2) glue pigeon feathers across their trembling bark;
- 3) blow on the quills so that the Elmer's may fully grip;
- 4) hold them out with each arm to test my new wingspan;
- 5) push them down then up to get used to the flapping;
- 6) squawk like a crow captivated by its own burial stone

## ADMINISTRATION

I notice there is a typhoon in the laminate;  
there is a dangerous wind in the scuffed wax.

The gales sail my swollen bones  
on past the withered herd

and onto the slick sliding surface  
of a glass-riddled hallway.

There, in the shadows of cabinets,  
floats the fanged butterfly.

Let there be tornadic tap dances, the butterfly  
whispers to him. Let there be a lack of folders.

Let there be free copier toner.  
Let there be a burning of meetings.

Let there be a willow tree  
to eat sack lunches underneath.

Let there be a library of supernovas  
and a cafeteria of chocolate rabbits.

From the darkness, a newspaper swats  
the wings into crumpled memos.

The butterfly grunts to death  
and bleeds an orange ink.

I return to my halogen office.  
I grade the breaths of flightless birds.

## AN UNOWNED HOUSE

An empty wine bottle gathers dust on a stained red shelf. Salts shed from their adjacent pillar. An acrylic hawk watches, sharing observations with framed ancestors. We ring the bell of peppermints, taste their sugar-free sweetness. The name on the deed is the name of parrots, of nightcrawlers, of ancient fires. This is a house of burnt wood, its walls haunted and bitter. The only sugar, we'll provide.

## CANARY

In a cave made of citrus I meet a canary that taps piano wire and clears her throat and chirps. Chirp, she says, forget the bottle and drink yourself because the coke is cracking ribs and all that's left is powder since I've taken all the lemons.

Prepare for thirst, she says, the walls are nearly dry enough for chisels and a steady hand, a hand that never shifts the shaft, and never minds forever if only for the weight and ain't it great to sit upon a stone and wait for falling skies to answer all the questions from a tiny mouth of sparks?

She barks. She speaks in smoke and waits for echoed barks. She looks up into the broken crannies that were once eyes and says, Were there eyes ever perched upon those cages plucking strings for every fissure?

My throat unclenches only when the sour hint of power sinks below the sternum, shocking bits of bone into a uniformed decision. Only with precision will the rinds avoid collapsing in a lapse of judgment equal to a pick-ax and its point.

The point, the canary cries, is that acid always eats the feet when banisters betray. The point, she says, is that digging is a constant burn for light.

## PERFORATED GODFORSAKEN

Bevel this blue baby's lips so that his screams will properly breach the perforated godforsaken patio door and garrote the good times pursued by several farming family members who would rather make racist comments about Reaganomics than confront the different shades of skin in the crib. Tear apart this blue baby's chest. Stitch him back together beige. Pulverize this beige boy's preference for action with praline ice cream and cans of pop and by packing him safely under the kitchen table with bubble wrap around his legs to keep his knees from bending so that only enervation enables him an identity amongst suntanned sinews. Unearth the underlying yellow in this beige boy's blood. Masticate this yellowed man's optimism for normality by padlocking the pilsners and half-stepping around his outstretched hand and libeling his libido until all he wants to do is sit alone on a well-sat couch baling his body in preventative bandages. Tell this yellowed man, *Chin up*.

## THE SHAPE OF KENTUCKY

A key is a thread of cable  
is a footprint is a fold of brass is  
pigment on parchment is solder  
on silver is ink on stone on skin  
on page and pages and pages and pages  
of inks and thumbs and keys beside  
keys beside keys but there is only  
one key and the rest are dummy  
only one true key a skeleton key  
a foundation for a nation key a  
spinal serpentine root of a key  
a key made not of iron or limestone  
or platinum but a key made of flesh  
and blood and bone and bark and brain  
a key made of knuckles and heels a key made  
of irises and lobes a key made of a collective  
palm pressed against the warm glass  
embedded in a door to the outside  
a key made of a border a key made  
of an end to borders a key that  
sparks an engine of quilts.

## GOODBYE, POLAR BEAR

Dance with the baby around the ribcage of your addiction to kindred spirits. Dance with the baby around the empty bottles of parking tickets. Dance with the baby around the shattered femur of basketball bourbons. Dance with the baby around the tin cans of cigarette ashes. Dance with the baby around the chipped toenails of days of digital dermatology. Dance with the baby around your dancing with the baby. Dance with the baby around yourself. Dance with the baby while you dance with the baby around your dancing baby dancing around your baby teething baby dances.

\*\*\*

Goodnight, son.  
Goodbye, daddy.  
Goodnight, chickadee.  
Goodbye, rooster.  
Goodnight, gorilla boy.  
Goodbye, monkey man.  
Goodnight, puppy dog.  
Goodbye, wolf.  
Goodnight, my little cub.  
Goodbye, polar bear.

\*\*\*

Acetate, you activate and burn acidic  
when the bitter tones cry out and spill  
against the living room walls  
and bathroom linoleum and the nearest  
available spouse or family member.

Oh, to be a polymer.  
To bounce and be bounced off of.  
To vibrate and batter and hold your shape.

Neoprene your soul, maker of fabrics.  
Save the kin from the elements of your heart.

\*\*\*

Claiming everything and nothing, you climb into the catacombs of cauterized continuances. Darkened, the demonstrating decadence of dainty defecations canters and caudles and slips into a half-assed activation, a half-astral altitude, a half-achievable artifice. In a distant room the rodents resuscitate the roast beef. There will be a succession. You've left it beside you to bend into your back with his back, to bark obscenities. You've left it down the hall to hallucinate a lack of hydroxycine and hail the leftover shadows. There will be a clamoring

for claims. There will be enough for everyone. There will be none at all. There will be something or nothing and weeping will weaken the possibilities. Boys will be men. Man will be bones. At the time, when your skin implodes in its inferno, anecdotes will turn to ash, dreams will deviate, passages will swell. All will glow like reflections from a frozen flame.

\*\*\*

Oh, to be on solid ice.

To hold a cracked earth together  
with my chapped and bleeding paws  
so that my cubs may wrestle  
pelicans into submission.

To growl at the sun and the moon  
in the same submissive tones.

To take the ocean's salt  
and make it a patch of grass  
like a good bipolar bear,  
a beast that finds balance  
on a sliver of ice.

To catch the fish and let that be enough.

## SMALL MERCIES

That nail left hanging after the excision of the pork chops from the office wall is certainly a danger. If only there were a way to stick the lifeless flank of a dead field mouse into the iron to pull it from the withered plaster. If only there were a way to use a carcass to clean up after another carcass. A gnawed carrot would help the thinking or thank the helping process, whichever it may be. After all, there is no more smoked meat over my head. And that is something.