

Steeple dwarfed by power lines: poems

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2013

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English, Creative Writing

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[The West That Was; poems]

The Universe, As Seen From a Truck Stop Diner Outside Missoula

Start it off with an egg: neat, self-contained, oblong,
then shellless and spreading against imminent sizzle
its edges crackling. That will suffice
to call in the usual crowd:

scrubbed or stubbled, sometimes solo, sometimes accompanied
by low rotations of gait and the shook of blonded hair;
with boots mounting higher than any probable stream;
hats brimming wider than any possible heaven.

At your basic ham and egger, prepared for all this and breakfast too.
The grease trap teems hidden from view, concentric halos
of calcium form around ice melt in a smoked glass, and coffee pours
like dust into a mug where cream makes a second Milky Way.

Then it's the talk that lets the world leaven:
of Anaconda, and the asphalt-gleaming turnoff
that took out the trailer and hopes for the roundup with it;
the slow invasion of Kallispell by Billings people

and their *developers*; when might be the latest time
to ride the Triumph through the pass; and most importantly
the morning's French Toast fouled by last night's onions.
A scatter of light swirls around the room

like a planetarium projector, but is just
a crystal ashtray catching
cigarette and sun. The world seems to run ragged
just as easily as it would run smooth.

Four Attempts at Long Beach, WA

WORLD'S LONGEST BEACH

Beyond the cabin
with its wallpaper
cartography and
sea sayings, the beach
grows further from us,
shore demanding journey
through plains of cordgrass,
sand and seeds dumped out as if
everyone had come here
to empty their shoes.

MARSH'S FREE MUSEUM

The shipwreck started it.
Any force of attraction
wants a place to sit down.
A passenger freight crashes,
Marsh starts a burger stand.
But the eye can fill
many times by one spectacle,
whereas the stomach
keeps wanting. Marsh collects:
Aberdeen skeletons,
shrunken heads, eight-legged
lambs, an alligator
man, born in Florida,
who killed, birthed, and is now
under glass, watching us
watch what's left of him.

*WORLD'S LARGEST SKILLET**

Somewhere in the arms race
of Americana,
we lost to those upstarts
in Kentucky. Records,
once a matter of pride,
were left next to the stove
and burned. In legends,
girls glaze across iron

on skates of butter.

WORLD KITE MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME

Just strings wrapped around hands:

We are no longer bound
by nation or winds.

We fly postage stamps,
ukiyo-e, bombers,

all the animals
of the zodiac. We tried

our own choreography
and exhausted it, now

research how to fashion
box kites into

flying tesseracts.

The Settler's Wife

You midwifed a harbor and the newborn
post office called itself after you:
a baby's burble, a portmanteau

carrying nothing but trainsmoke. Workers
washed up on these new shores sainted
as shipwrecks. And where did your husband

run off to? Like a prophet, he went south ...
he was seeking a printer for his newspaper
in the infant metropolis nobody

had heard of. He wrote a letter
to eleven years thence, addressed
to an imagined griever who sold off

too soon. After the rails were realized
elsewhere, you saw the fearsome mountain
still unexplored, new lots ceded

to stray dogs and sawdust, and men
maundered through timber and ocean
looking for something —

something to do with their hands.

The Logger's Retort

Wood turns to fences, paper to slander,
no business of mine what happens downriver.
Do their trees hold bluffs together? Whose roads
do they drive? I've made mine, cracked as a knuckle.
They sling their mud at my work, who never saw
a widowmaker drop and splinter a man.
You can't count rings in a bone. Blood and sap
run out at different paces. Too many trails
are marked with cairns, a small defiance
of falling. There is no "away from it all."
Write whatever you want, your tracks will stay,
but mine will fall under the leaves. The still
I left behind to rust will be taken
for an oil or milk jug, shot up with holes,
and the deuce and a half I rode through strands
up to this bouldered ledge will show off
ferns for a while, then go under too.

Carbon

Tinder frames catch the blaze, vacated into
smoke in the sky and char on the ground:
A town built for coal gone
over to coals. Cinders settled
on cellars. Then: a live body on the ashes,
fingers splayed dark fuses.
One gives him water, he gives back a cry,
heat's shrill singing in singe.
A curl of smoke at the lips, the bellows
of lungs at work. He'll be cared for
through the sere season.

* *

No words, laid up
month after month. His amber eyes
flick to light and certain passing colors, squint
at shapes but don't burn off their haze.
When the boards creak, he looks for cast sparks.
Fewer people visit. He eats only what he can
press through nearly sealed lips.

* *

The leaves turn in all their glory
to the next day. On the horizon,
more smoke, or maybe a blessing
from the thunderhead closing on the ridge.
He's gone, lit off.

The Concentrator

Were you a stone, it would be another matter. To be found
 with each season would mean some disturbances, in this climate of cliffsides when flush
 would find its own in November frequency, but no mystery among them. Rain
 banks brought in the marginalia, and the river would rouse to reach it, until
 for a winter. Then, the snow-caked paw, along with a thin bridge, to hold sway
 and draw them up to where the sun the peaks, their basin, would clasp the lowlands
 to a foggy crag by a faint, golden cord. spiraled around, a local comet tethered
 where people bring their offerings to you, No mystery within this, but for the town below
 out of the shallow ground. They labor a concentrator. Bring whatever could be gathered
 their hope of blessing, when the snow severs for their blessings, and they labor for
 dusks into a riddle. And there could be the spine of the road, when the way home
 over another, one bond, but while you loom here justification now in holding one claim
 when the last of them straps on his shoes, looks back in repose, there could be a morning
 on what is no longer there, then packs out.

Snowblind

Absent other forms
of negotiating time,
we tried the sidereal
but then the stars came
in drifts.

When one shot off
the engine, I remember
the whole hill went up with it.
The wind made off with the rest.

The winter clearing they tried
to dig filled up
in under an hour. The lay of it
looked like everything does.

Once there was a streak
of them above, so much
noise, but then I think
there used to be more of us.

Some passed the days in song
though the scene was always
the same, ice making shards
on windows, a scatter
of valises, the conductor pacing to
keep warm. There was nothing
we heard after the lines
went down, but I woke
at one point, and I remember the sound
as if there were too many
trains and passengers and cargo
to tell which we were.
But that went by too.

Perhaps epochs blew by.

Significant

Too soon after the snows,
 the rainfall comes and torrents start
 flowing down First Street.
 "The river," I say. "Liquid," you say.

We're after the same things:
 a disaster syllabary, sounds
 to fit to circumstances. The words
 exist for the shard in the field,

a blackened tree five centuries old
 gone up first in lightning
 then careless fire. My ruin comes as
 your folded arms under folded scarves,

hairline scars on your brow, clover
 gathered to ward off cancer,
 and words I'd hope to find or say
 if I just had the means.

"Reunion," I say. "Glide," you say.
 But instead, we will sleep
 on separate shores. In these straits,
 the passage is the debt paid

for survivors to live among others.
 A flood is simple logic, so is a blaze.
 What's telling in either isn't telling
 anyone not there beforehand,

meaning one of us
 might live to hear a response.
 "A respite," I say. "Glottal," you say,
 like I know what it means, but I do.

After Math

Given that heaven and earth produce no equals sign,
solve for a plume
converting minutes to miles, mass into
volume. Estimate rotations of bystanders towards the reports
or the ash cloud coarse with static where soundwaves
deflected asymptotic (a symptom of mountains);
figure for rise over run
overrun, running out
in flows of lahar, radii
demarkating where life was all hindsight,
where logs ran parallel to the ground, where at right angles
they choked where they stood; a plane
of ash diffusing over eleven states,
the matrices of parking lots and cornfields,
interstitials from weaving fingers
finding each other out while on a walk, planes
rerouted in hyperbolae,
hyperbole seeming level-headed in factored losses,
apexes of unemployment, nadir of yield;
the distances closed between earth and moon,
the decibels at which noise begins to ring
out of existence, a trailer
flung through yards and years to rest a wreck
with cameras film-laden, temperatures burning images
from the negatives, your proof.

The Unresolved Investigation of Flight 305

Scene with graven trees: cars like litter roll up black streets to the tarmac, a terminal by the water relinquished to misfortunate suitcases, waiting in shadows for a ticket to mark the departure gate. Just a quarter-full plane on a half-hour trip, with nothing amiss

until a letter slips to the attendant. "Miss, you'd better look at that note." The word "bomb," red and black wires and cylinders, intentions made plain-spoken, easy voice asking for bourbon, water, a seatmate who can read none of the marks of criminality, dissidence, just a case,

of traveler's blues at first, now the case a destination itself. Arrival missed, the cabin is enveloped in remarks, but silence around the pair of shades in back chain-smoking, hand to mouth. Circling the water indefinitely, fingers trace the plain,

"twenty minutes to the air force base," he explains to no audience, a small "just-in-case" consideration, a bourbon and water for a second time, offers of change dismissed. Landing on the strip's edge, the windows black as a move anticipating the marks-

men camped nearby, eyes track a man who embarks across the runway, ransom in tow. The plane unloads its human cargo, bewildered, blank, leaving behind a mind to design a chase south to the border, the spare crew remiss but compliant. Night brings a turn of weather,

the dark hazed with droplets of water when the refueled jet departs, route marked elsewhere, and the tracker lost in mist, another plane to follow this plane fails to see it or the figure encased in never-spent cash, stairs opening wide to black...

Wanted: D.B. Cooper, since Nov. 24 1971, missing, believed to have ejected near the water

of the Washougal Basin, suit, tie, coat, all black, medium height, build, no distinguishing marks, wanted for hijacking a passenger plane and extorting \$200,000 in ransom, open case.

The Field of False Horizons
for the Mima Mounds

Not that they're lying to you, but they are lying
like a game of checkers gone to seed.
For explaining this fraying away

of land at countless knees, the reasons
are mere pretense to the possible: their recline
is decline from once-named causes. Remember

as they do the earth in seizure and you
might bolt up like a blister. Or instead, recollect
the glacier's plod, dragging its feet

cubed of silts and stones. A new skin
of rain buries the mark
made by a wide flight of fire. Someone leaving

someone set to skipping stones, but then the creek dried up,
then everything dried up, and what was left was settled
around what could still stand

to be touched. Forgive us, then,
the flatness of our lives, no more
or less majestic in effusions.

Tiger, Up and Down

Prehistory has treated you well:
laureled with strips of moss hanging about
an alder and tension-wire frame,
then striated with a locomotion
of shadows, too quick for exposure.
Genus and genius dominating landscapes—
prior to our admission to a Holocene
of reedy voices, all feet and nervous hands.

How long to be imagined; how many times
were you seen before you became what we know
as you? How often afield as a form
bent around a vale? Sitting by your shoulder,
seeing half of what you know, we would wish
ourselves into pollen, smoke, or kites.

Homesteading Next to the Moon

Nobody now has grandparents who remember
when the quick days were just a shade of night,

the ground colored with rushes of foxes,
pines gabbing with corvids.

That was what we heard; we knew our arrival

as the exhale of plains, rivers, the moon
as its bulk shadowed the valley.

Our settling for spring gave certain balmy impressions:

prairie-fire painted the slope, beargrass pawed its way
out of the offal of last year's windfall.

Then a chill winter scudded down sleet and sands,

smaller meteorites battered coops and woodsheds,
the window's eye put out
by a severed fragment. The river, surging as it was,

struck us as amenable. Our camp shifted away
from the ice-bloated, turbulent
moon. Fearing we'd done wrong, we rechristened it

after a good man we knew still camped at the base,
though we fumbled in naming
our own colony (nothing lunar, we decided). The thaw came

with both of us, the moon and the town, still holding on.
Its face turns up to the sky:
if you summit it, it will yield everything up to the coast.

Hiking Stuart Island With My Brothers (Summer 2009)

An island formed like a child's footprint
 in a drenched field, where the rain rushed about.
 The motor is off, the dogs are asleep, and none of us
 has reception. Instead, an expanse of hours knocks off
 minutes, and stories of a lighthouse on the northern shore,

well beyond our earlier track of kicked rocks.
 The way there, a mesh of root and stones curved
 around to a salt marsh, where a new track begins.
 Mosses drip from the trees with a splintered swing,
 ignorant of roads as ferns are of sunlight. A hill peaks

with a solar-paneled schoolhouse in noiseless neglect.
 For taking out my camera, Stevie tackles me while Peter looks
 for a phone signal. Past a fork, another rise, "more fucking hills,"
 then lowlands dotted with houses, horses, cars
 preserved by those who can afford the laziness. A plane

nearly clips us at a clearing, an uneven strip restraining it
 from a clot of trees. We strike out in the same direction
 to fields of dwindling deer and crickets. A rusted carapace
 of an old VW is planted at the foot of a dead oak,
 "the island's last drunk driver," a bit of local history

along the walls of slow shale speckled with stones
 shed in a glacier's expiration. The northern cliffs
 crumble away from the forest into ravines and slides.
 Brittle scrub grass shatters at our ankles.
 A solitary madrona staggers out of black sediment near the edge

and walking over to take a peel of bark, the echo of a heavy slap
 rises up from the breakers, "oh look, they're breaching!"
 Pointed fins curl up the water, rile and crash, "God,
 there must be twenty of them." A private showing
 nothing more than happenstance, as a panicked fleet

of suburbanites closes in for their money's worth. A hawk hovers
 above and I find a spread of bones next to me, a resting point
 chosen for water, land, and no men, but Peter reminds me
 "Dad's going to be pissed if we don't get back soon."

It Could Have Been Here

Streets named after men or trees and what it means to either of them. Firewood with the chance of chainsaw art. Murals absent the present tense. Cedar siding unpainted. Awnings from before awnings became unfashionable. The word "tavern" in context. Welcome which is the disavowal of the probability of strangers. The impact of coffee. The heft of burgers. Places to be fed. Places to get feed. The ornament of a hitching post. A steeple dwarfed by power lines. Churchyard denoting cycles. A single letter spelled out in painted stones on a hill. The same letter emblazoned on a readerboard. Alliteration manifested by mascots. Locality laden with apocrypha. Trestle bridges for their own sake. The railway. The unwitting resting place of defaced boxcars. The stump round. The stump round in a gazebo. The stump round diagrammed with all the history of its lifespan. This is the cross section of what was the thickest tree in the area and there will never ever be another.

[Wood Knots; etudes]
Split Pine

pulled apart by what hands

an adolescent wind has

rent half this copse

and now come round

mushrooms in steps ascending

to a light I don't know

does either any good

shadow falls, crow follows
such symmetry, said the sky—

rowed in wings like spokes
rolling in night to crowd the ground—

spoke other things
too, about awe, words

fell for null ears, said the dusk—
words rather for the crow's

account, half-orator, half-
curator, hoarding to crow

purposes, worms, bits of shine
as we have seen, said the stars—

night as round as any night
roped in by a crew of wings

to find a tail now fanned to
a banner, we are flagging