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Dendron, A Collection of Poems

Peter W. Rosenberger
Gettysburg College

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Description

“Dendron” is the Greek word for “tree.” “Dendrochronology” is the study of a tree’s rings. “Dendrites” are the neural projections that grow like a tree’s branches in our brains so we can learn and respond to stimuli. This collection of poems, Dendron, is a poetic exploration of my growth. The collection—twenty-one poems, one for each year of my life—is a living, poetic memoir. Presented in chronological order, each of the poems is meant to capture a specific year of my life. The poems—of varying styles and sentiments—are not without quick moments of fiction, but for the most part, they coalesce into a poetic autobiography. The poems at the start of the collection are strange and abstract. There aren’t memories to pull from for those years, so those poems capture the indescribable, mysterious early stages of human existence. A sense of place is established as the collection moves on from those first poems, and as it grows, it primarily addresses themes of belonging, family, and trust. Along the way, it makes room for tradition, God, romance, travel, loss, masculinity, and art. Each of the poems features an original, accompanying illustration drawn by Veronica Rosenberger. The cover art for the collection is also an illustration of hers. The drawings were created with the poems in mind, so while the poems are meant to stand alone, the illustrations provide vivid exclamation marks. Each year, I will add a poem to the collection, and like the rings that form as a tree grows, this collection will grow as I do.

Location

Breidenbaugh 205

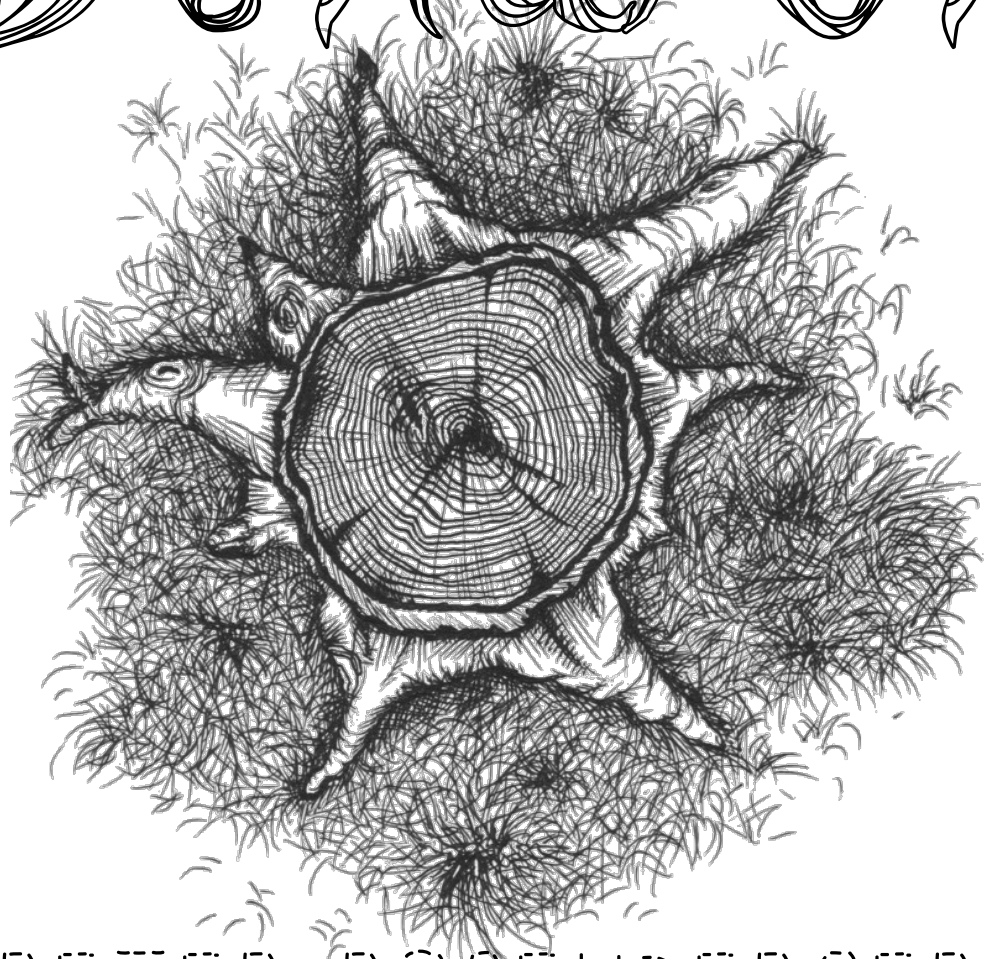
Disciplines

Creative Writing | English Language and Literature | Poetry

Comments

English Honors Thesis

Deendron



PETER ROSENBERGER
DRAWINGS BY
VERONICA ROSENBERGER

for Mom

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A Note

First and foremost, this project, made possible by the English Department at Gettysburg College, is my honors thesis—my final project capping off my studies in the English Department as an undergraduate. A preface like this might be a surprising start for a collection of poems, but it seems necessary for me to write a note to whoever might be reading this to explain the project and give it what I think will be some helpful context.

This collection of poems is a living, poetic memoir. As I write this preface, in the spring of 2016, the collection contains twenty-one poems, one for each year of my life. Every year, I will add a poem to the collection. Some of the poems existed before I took on this project, some were completely re-envisioned, and some were merely edited. Many were written specifically for this project.

The poems vary in their proximity to the events and memories of the years for which they are written, but each poem is meant to either capture events and memories or to communicate my current relationship with specific times in my life. Each of the poems is meant to stand alone, but together, they make up my poetic autobiography. When I die, this collection will have one poem for each year I was alive, and although it is macabre, it is also deeply comforting to know I will leave this behind.

I owe an impossible debt to Dr. Nadine Meyer, my advisor on this project, for her exceptional patience and the necessary direction she provided for each of the poems in the collection. I must also thank Dr. Suzanne Flynn, the director of the 2015-2016 English Honors Program, for her support. Thanks must also be given to Dr. Stefanie Sobelle and Dustin Beall Smith for their reading suggestions as I started this project. Those suggestions were enormously impactful.

It is cliché, but I must also thank my friends and my family. My friends, in Huntingdon and in Gettysburg, are ceaselessly supportive, and many of them endured hours of listening to unfinished (barely started) poems along the way. My family is responsible for much more than the memories that inspired the poems in this collection. My father provided the colors in which I've been painted, while my mother's hand held the paintbrush. And my sister, my venerable illustrator, is as responsible as my parents for who I am. I look forward to living and writing the poems that will, in some shape or form, find their way into this collection over the years.

Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it.

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, “Letter Four”

Thanatos

My first year was parasitic.
Its words weren't my own,
and the voice that spoke it
was splintered and ghostly.

My second excited.
It was still formed in borrowed language,
but each of its lines brought
new images and sounds.

My third was different.
Ramparts were built
with sharpened stakes
to protect my blossoming universe.

The fourth was fast.
Its undirected energy was fraught,
and patterns that began to form
yielded to chaotic descriptions.

My fifth poem was stubborn.
Its images defied the
devices carefully measured
to give it the structure it needed.

My sixth year made gestures.
It painted its words with
heavy, colorful strokes that
were too thick to blend.

My seventh was a soft song.
It was sung quietly into the empty spaces
between the birches and oaks
where I would build my home.

My eighth expanded.
There were new worlds and
new images for inspiration,
and they were somewhat understood.

Nine was tangled.
The new worlds of inspiration
blended with the old,
and a strange form emerged.

My tenth poem was dark.
Written simply in free verse,
its darkness was more
of ignorance than of sadness.

My eleventh year was athletic.
With no thought of audience or objective,
it reveled in nimbleness
for the sake of nimbleness.

Twelve was a tome
bound in wounded leather—
a text always transcribed
but never translated.

My thirteenth was energetic,
like the last throws of a spinning top
when that whirling regularity
yields to imbalance, uncertainty.

The fourteenth was buoyant.
Its quick rhymes lifted
its modest language into
a happy, unassuming rhythm.

My fifteenth had purpose.
Its language and form
fell easily into
detailed templates.

My sixteenth poem was intimate.
It was a sappy sonnet
that told a love story
that wasn't truly mine.

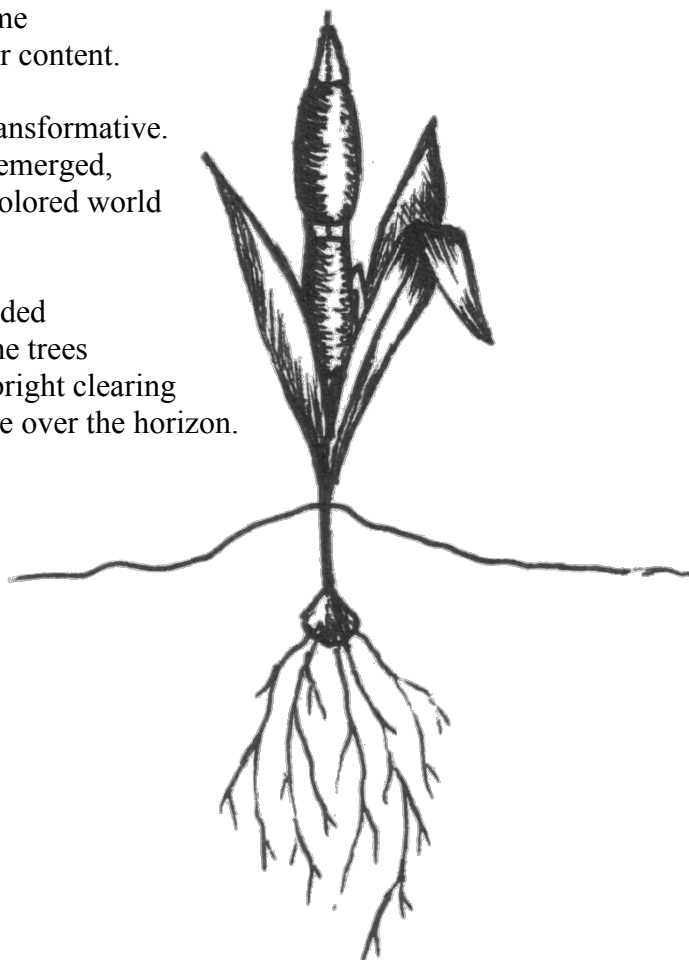
My seventeenth was a twisted, old willow.
Its leaves were like natural chains—
forged and linked before my birth—
anchoring it to the shifting earth.

Eighteen was confident.
It chose the best language
from the worst dictionary,
and it sounded better than it was.

My nineteenth had support.
Line and stanza lengths were predetermined,
and rhythm and rhyme
took precedence over content.

My twentieth was transformative.
Long, rhymed lines emerged,
singing of a bright-colored world
of vivid images.

My twenty-first receded
like the shadow of the trees
in what would be a bright clearing
as the sun aches to be over the horizon.





On Echo and Narcissus

How do two blind people love each other?
– Jacques Derrida

After following the sound of his sweet song for hours,
I came upon the perfectly beautiful hunter.
His song was the lullaby he sang to his kill
and into the air of the forest,
as he sharpened his knife and strung his bow.
He was very tall and a crown of brown curls rested on his head.
The canopy of trees above him lightly shaded his olive skin.

His face was mesmerizing,
and his long frame was magnetic.
I fell to the core of the earth in love with him.
I forgot my curse,
and in a daze, I stumbled forward.
He was in a clearing ringed by thin birches and sweeping willows,
and I reached out to him with long, pale fingers.
I stumbled quickly forward,
and he heard my footsteps and looked up.

“Who are you,” he shouted, surprised with contempt.
“Who are you,” I replied, now remembering my curse.
Doomed by Hera, I could only repeat his words.
I ran to him anyway,
but he threw me to the ground.
His beauty was stronger than his disdain,
and I ached to feel his skin on my skin.

I looked up into his blue eyes like a crazed beast.
It was like I was climbing a ladder into his soul.
My hands and feet couldn't move fast enough,
but I was content to fall.
The clearing and the trees and the breeze and the sun
fell away from the world.
Only our bodies remained,
and even if he wouldn't have me,
I would have him.

I crawled on all fours like the animal he made me
and clutched his ankles as he sneered and kicked.
But even in disgust he was a beautiful creature,
and the power of my desire made me strong.
I clung to him and climbed him
until my face was inches from his.

In my eyes, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection,
and he stopped fighting.
His arms slackened,
and his grip on me loosened.
He stared at himself in my eyes and felt the way I felt—
deeper even.
He could see the perfect symmetry of his face
and the soft, rounded lines of his cheeks.

I stopped too and scanned his face
as his eyes remained locked on his own image.
Love looked on him the way it felt in me.
Now, his eyes on mine,
he was just as doomed as I.
Neither of us could ever love another.



Atropos

I had a dream that I saw the horizon cut free.
It was an apocalyptic vision.

I saw the world as an architect's sketch—
everything reduced to two dimensions.

The razor edge continuum of the horizon
was cut at two distinct points.

I watched the freed horizon ripple
and recoil from the force of the cuts.

The broken ends reached out,
trying to re-form their bond.

But they failed, and they fell slowly
downward into darkness.

The landscape trembled as the horizon folded.
Trees creaked and moaned as their roots tore from the earth.

Buildings slid unpinned from their foundations
and toppled into piles of sharp lines and bricks.

The things created spilled over the edges,
released finally by gods and gravity.

Like rain, the content of existence
dripped through the space beneath the horizon.

The only sound was that of

metal on metal reverberating terribly.

The connected, navigable life of what was
yielded to a tumbling chaos.

I couldn't see myself in this
broken, falling universe.

But I knew I was there.
I knew this was my home.

The line of horizon continued to fall,
unmoored and unfettered.

Then, the two cut points—the first to know destruction—
began searching for each other.

In time, the two points felt each other,
and they yearned once again to be anchored.

Through the hazy precipitation
of the world now gone, they caught each other.

In the midst of a falling world
of days, wishes, blood, and glass,

the points connected, and all at once,
the echoing metallic wailing stopped.

The line of horizon became a circle,
and formed a new world.

Giddy with long lost shape,
the circle spun, quivering excitedly.

With each rotation, it picked up speed,
falling into itself with frightful power.

I had been searching for myself amidst the plunging havoc,
but this new motion distracted me.

Like an engine roaring beyond its bounds,
the circle of horizon spun and shook.

But its pace betrayed its fragility,
and the circle burst.

Debris rained down again,
but only for an instant this time.

Pieces of splintered trees and buildings and people
floated onto a new world with its own horizon.

A new, simple world—returned to order—
replaced the one that was cut away.

Before I could start searching for my home
in this new world, I awoke.

On Photography

In the photo,
my mother and my grandfather
pose slightly left of center.

My grandfather's birthday cake
sits out in front of them.
They wear the same smile.

I'm stuck too close to the foreground
like someone pushed me into the frame
at the last moment.

My father stands with his back to us.
His broad shoulders spill
across the top of the photo.

With messy hair and wide eyes,
I stare into the camera,
hoping to be captured.

I imagine being trapped
inside the old camera
responsible for the photo.

I'd climb and crawl through the metal and plastic
and stop to stare at the image of my miniature self
in one of the camera's tiny mirrors.

It looks like the picture was stained with coffee.
All of the light colors bleed into
yellow and brown versions of themselves—

except for my skin.
And the loose, white blouse
hanging to my mother's frame.

The family resemblance is striking.
I could be a younger version of my mother,
and she could be a younger version of her father.

Now, looking at my father
with his back to us,
he seems defiant.

It's as if he is standing in protest
against the celebration
taking place in the foreground.

I know his posture is mere coincidence,
but time crafts us new lenses
and tints our memories ever so slightly.

I sense a similar defiance
in my grandfather
in other pictures.

But not this one.
Here he looks young and happy—
in this time before his era of dissatisfaction.


This was before he was in the chair.
He still looks like an athlete and a soldier—
nothing like the round, immobile man I remember.

I don't like to look
at the photographs of days
I can't remember.

I wish I knew origami,
so I could fold the photo
into a fragile crane.

Maybe then it would
float out of my hands
and find a new nest somewhere else.





No Man's Land

With my feet in the Juniata and fishermen sliding by, I look out at the uneven mosaic of farms stitched into the valleys that rest easily between our rolling hills—my grand small-town hometown. In mythical times, a shrewd giant from the East battled a brave centaur from the West. They battled fiercely for the sweeping tracks of land laid out between their homes, but they were too evenly matched. Bloody and tired of fighting, they retreated to their homes, mazelike metal cities that reached out toward God. We were left only with strange stories and broken allegiances. Those distant cities—one, at the mouth of the Ohio, and the other, along the great Delaware—anchor this vast land. Some amongst us claim to belong to those places—to the old capital in the far East or the golden and ebony land in the far West, but towns like ours are forever caught in between. We were fractured by the worlds that abandoned us, and into the gaps were poured different American mindsets. These mindsets are the strands of our hybrid DNA, and we think we belong everywhere and nowhere. Many of the farms caught in the orbits of small towns like this one are far from productive, but they are many, and time looks past them as it wages war against other taller places. We have off days of school to kill the deer that would otherwise die against our cars. It's a strange struggle sharing the roads with deer, tractors, horses, and buggies. Signs shaped like keystones mark our state parks and our state penitentiaries—our wide open spaces and our most tightly sealed ones. Those signs dot the worn, cracked roads that tumble from the green valleys into our little, sunburned towns. We built our homes in the spaces in between our churches, and we always fear the wrong things. When we're young, our worth is determined by the brand/year/size of our trucks and our performance on the field/court/mat. Burning rubber as your tires screech out of the school parking lot, maneuvering for a late pin in a close match, getting your first buck—these are our early victories. Eventually, all that gives way to the quieter value of your labor—at work and at home. Receiving trivial promotions at work, watching your sports teams in the playoffs, having your third or fourth child—these become our victories. People used to build things here, but those jobs were flown overseas long ago. Now, we're merely fixers. In the spirit of Prufrock, we break things then we fix them. But it's not all bad, and you can always leave, of course. Though I'll tell you that it's not as simple as crucibles cooking us and our matter being cooked. We are tissues of our mothers' wombs, and our souls are fluid and affected. Don't ask us to admit we've settled. On this subject, those who stay and those who've gone will agree. Seeking is as fraught as staying, and we pay to escape, but we were always free to go. The muddy waters move around my ankles, and I wonder when time will give us back all that it never gave us.

A Spider's Son

Fast forward to 50—I work at some college.
My wife works there too.
One of our kids is in college;
one is still in high school.

“We found something in your MRI,” he tells me.
That was yesterday.
Now, I’m back at the doctor’s,
waiting to hear news I’m too prepared for.

This room might as well be windowless.
Even the sun’s bright beams
seem manufactured
like the light and air in the office.

Too-green plants, too-bright lights,
fake wood that looks too real—
a room made modern in an attempt
to un-sterilize it.

It’s the doctor’s office of a science fiction writer—
overly angular furniture
of white and chrome,
too synthetic to be anything but sterile.

“You have a brain tumor.”
It’s a meningioma.
It was always going to be a meningioma.
That’s the great gift of my mother’s bloodline.

The tumors grow on the meninges,
in the arachnoid mater.
In Greek, “arachnoid mater” means
“mother in the image of a spider.”

My mother’s genes
gave my brain a punishing spider mother
that’s been lying crookedly
in waiting for five decades.

That gift also came
with a grandmother I’ve never met,
and, leading up to this moment,
a creeping sense that my brain is my enemy.

It's not cancer—not poisonous.
It just pushes.
It grows and presses on things,
suffocating the good around it.

The headaches, the blurred vision,
the weakness in my legs—
all symptoms of the living,
growing bead of calcium in my brain.

Have you ever felt jealous of a sick person?
People flock to them.
People genuinely care—
even if they didn't care before.

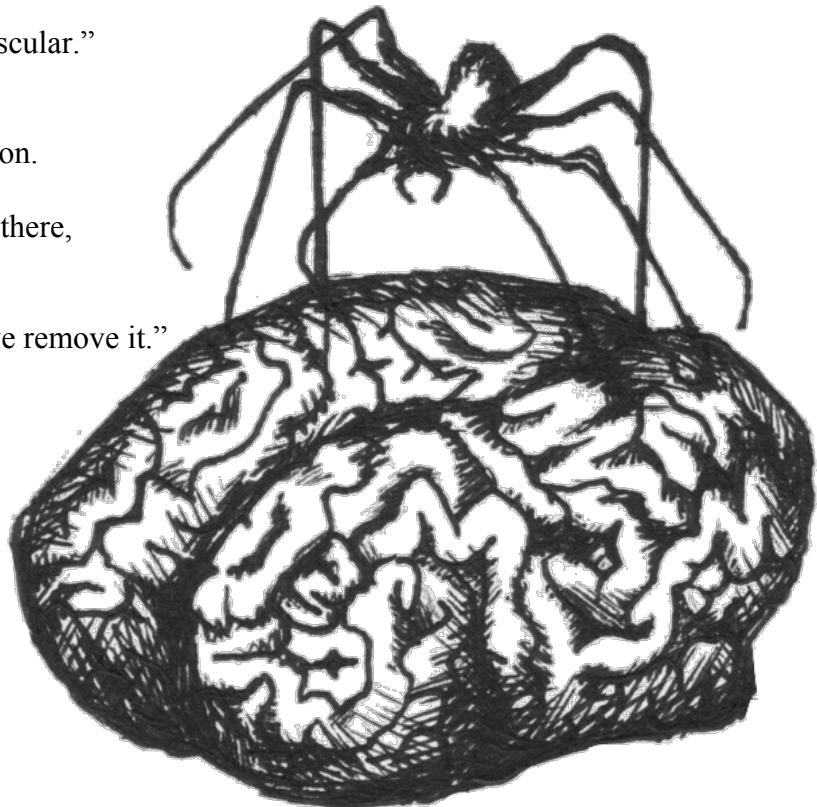
It's a strange, guilt-inducing
desire to be an emergency.
The attention that comes with clearer steps toward death.
The painfully boring inadequacy of functioning normally.

Those feelings were there
when my uncle had his surgery.
They were there when Mom talked about her mother's surgery.
They are gone now.

"The fear is that it will be too vascular."
Tumors that bleed.
Not a death sentence,
just an invitation for brain invasion.

"We won't know until we get in there,
but it might take a second pass.
We can embolize it,
but you still might bleed when we remove it."

My grandmother's brain bled.
And she had a stroke.
And she died the next day.
But that was a long time ago.
I should be fine.



Catch Me

For ten magical years of my existence,
December brought an elaborate tradition.
The tradition, with the utmost persistence,
brought Christmas wishes into fruition.

For all of December, my sister and I
would be visited by an elf every night.
“Catch Me,” the elf, was wickedly sly;
she would come to our house but stay out of sight.

With a shoebox or Legos, we’d build her a home,
and each night we would leave her a gift and a note.
Her house, with her bed, was a place where she’d roam.
We’d get a gift in return and something she wrote.

Not too different from these, she wrote rhyming lines.
We asked about her family and life at “the Pole.”
She answered our questions of varying kinds.
She told us how we could avoid getting coal.

Catch Me, the elf, was our in with Saint Nick.
We traveled on Christmas, but Catch Me could aid.
She’d talk to Saint Nick, which would do the trick.
We could celebrate early—our Christmases made.

The Polar Express was our holiday scripture—
as was its annual Christmas Eve reading.
The bell in the story was a holiday fixture,
and one year, Catch Me brought a gift we’d been needing.

Two small boxes, to open Christmas day,
tucked deep beneath the branches of our tree.
They contained bronze bells from Santa’s great sleigh.
I’ll never forget opening them—that feeling of glee.

But Catch Me’s visits couldn’t last for forever.
I was much too old to believe in such things,
and our ties to our elf had to be severed.
My belief had to be broken, and it was going to sting.

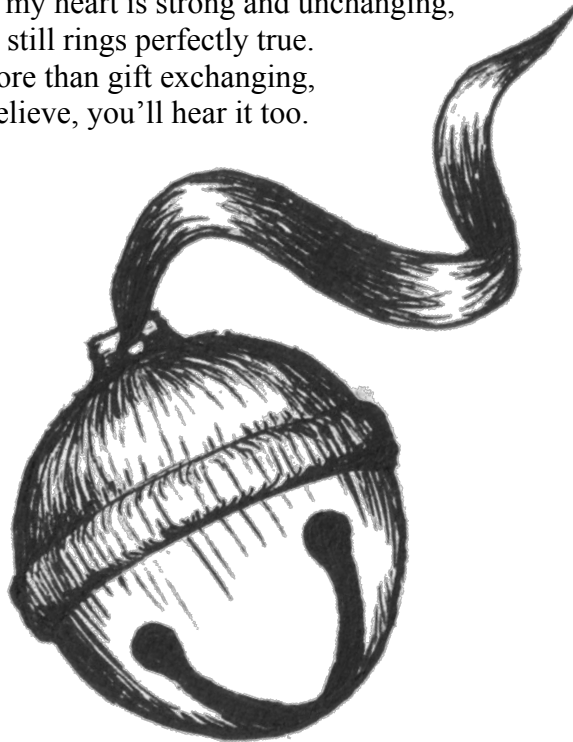
One Christmas, I got a letter in an elf’s handwriting.
It was the long-fated letter that broke me the news.
Before I knew what it was, it was purely exciting,
but it revealed the great secret—the incredible ruse.

It's a trip as I think about that magical time.
My father, up every night, with a pen in his hand,
writing those gifts—writing us rhyme.
He was dedicated to making our holiday grand.

It was a huge undertaking, carried out for years,
but that feeling was special—it was ironically true.
And I know that it ended with me in tears,
but I'm thankful it was something I had while I grew.

I have a feeling my kids will have an elf of their own,
and that Catch Me, Jr. will have stories as well.
They can pass her to their kids once they've grown,
which will remake that magic—recast that spell.

Her place in my heart is strong and unchanging,
and that bell still rings perfectly true.
It's much more than gift exchanging,
and if you believe, you'll hear it too.



A Culinary Travel Guide

I made my family
go to a TGI Fridays
in Paris.

Everything else was new,
so I wanted a taste of home.

The heat from a scorching,
Parisian summer sun
filled the grooves
between the cobblestones
in the street below us,
and we ate hamburgers.

The sounds of the sirens
kept me awake at night,
but so did the energy of exploration.

After trekking up the long lawn
in front of Sacré Coeur
and climbing the twisting stairs,
we reached the top of the basilica.

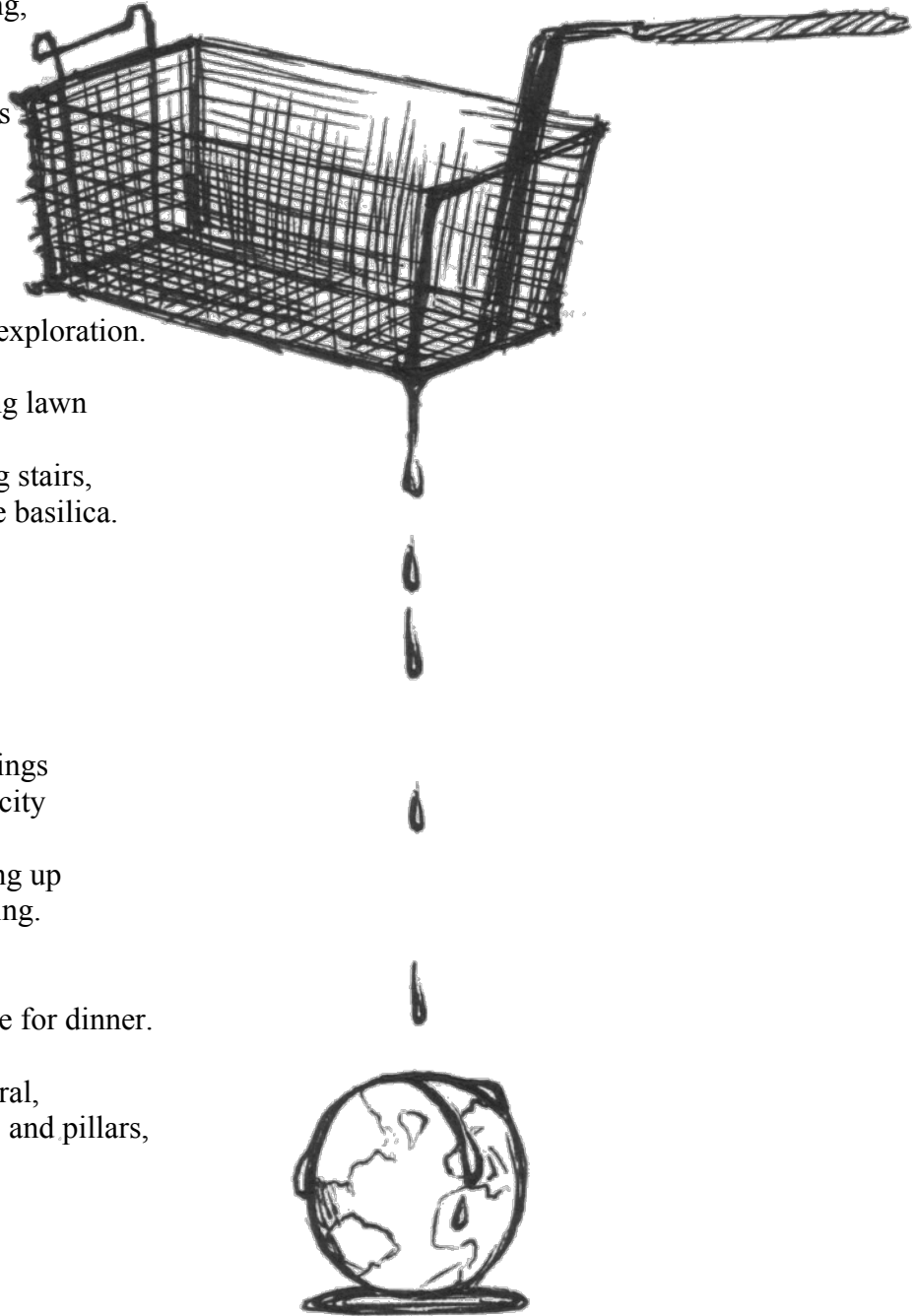
From that vantage,
it's hard to focus.
Which of the sights
do you look at first?

And the apartment buildings
notched into the ancient city
like Tetris blocks!
I couldn't imagine waking up
to such glory each morning.

After Sacré Coeur,
we stopped at Pizza Time for dinner.

The façade of the cathedral,
with its intricate grooves and pillars,
looked down on us
as we ate.

God himself had to have
designed Sacré Coeur.



Four years later,
after watching a World Cup game
in Germany,
we would be dragged
by familiarity
to the Burger King
across from the stadium.

We saw the US lose to the Czech Republic,
and I said it would cheer me up.

The tens of thousands
of screaming patriots
were long gone.

With red, white, and blue face paint
running down my face,
I enjoyed my chicken fries.

It was the same story
in the UK too.

About 1,000 years
after the Tower of London was built,
the KFC around the corner
was built.

After a day
of visiting imprisoned,
tortured,
and dead Brits,
I led my family
into that KFC.

Still in awe
from the Tower's stories,
I daydreamed
of executions
and escape attempts
as I ate my biscuits and mashed potatoes.

The food tasted like home,
but the ancient conflicts—
the overthrown kings
and beheaded queens—

and the shimmering jewels
could not be found at home.

It continued
when I studied abroad too.

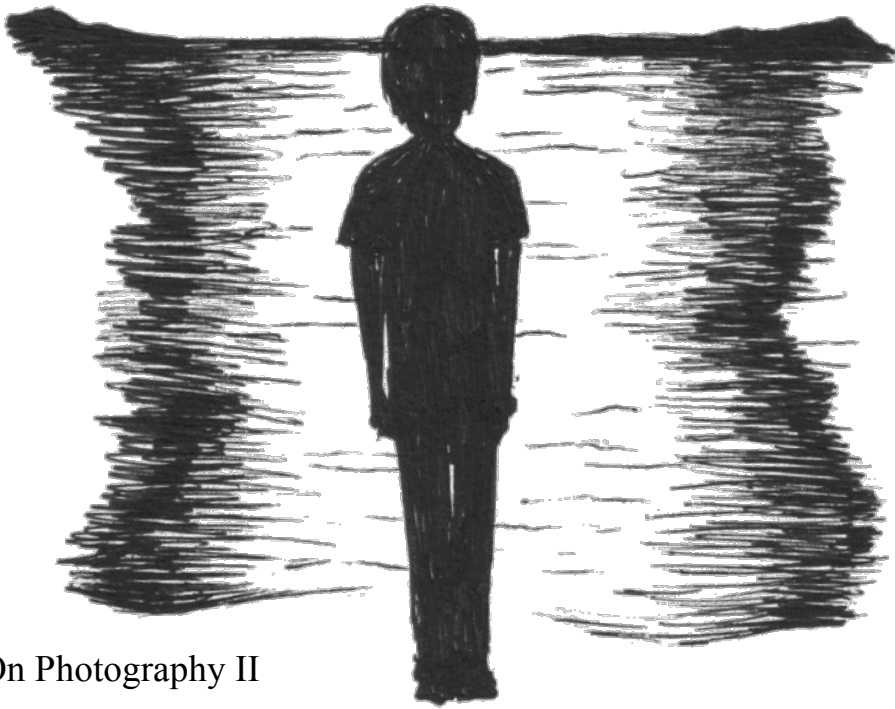
If you follow
the crumbling medieval wall in Bath,
through the sea of Palladian buildings—
not to the Abbey
or to Jane Austen's Pump Room—
you'll find the golden arches
of McDonald's.

Have fish and chips at one pub,
have a few drinks at another,
and stop by McDonald's
for a dessert of salt and grease.

Ancient places and stories
are dangerous—
they can overwhelm.

I have followed
the cheap, greasy food
of my homeland
across the globe.

It has sustained me
as I've gotten lost
and time traveled.



On Photography II

Another picture I wasn't ready for:
It's my mother and me with
the Atlantic at our backs—

committing my father's
cardinal ocean sin:
“Don't turn your back on the water.”

He gave that warning as if
he was the ocean's oldest friend.
He was right though.

The powerful, grasping waves—
the ocean's ancient arms—
showed no signs of aging.

My mother, in another
crisp, white shirt, wraps
her arms around me.

The hazy, barely blue sky
is brushed on above
the ocean—olive colored with foam.

My face is pressed tightly against

my mother's stomach as I try but fail
to shield my eyes from the sun.

My hands clutch the hem
of my black, wrinkled T-shirt—
bony, angular hands like my mother's.

This is our week at the beach
before my parents will
leave for their trip to Ireland.

This valley of pale colors,
ocean, sun, and sand will soon become
the dark greens and browns of the Irish coast.

They will travel with my grandmother.
My grandfather, too afraid to fly,
will stay home with me and my sister.

We have one grandfather,
kind and fearful—and the other,
strong and dishonest.

My father's father,
grounded by fear, stayed with us.
He was a wonderful caretaker.

My mother's father—
we barely knew him—
was a soldier.

He said he helped
liberate Dachau,
but that was probably a lie.

I used to jump on my mother's bed
and lay my head on her stomach,
just as it is in the picture.

My head would rise and fall
gently with her breathing
as I plucked at the fraying blanket.

I'd lie there as if she were pregnant
and feel the warmth
of her body.

It wasn't like the warmth
of the sun's rays
that blind me in this photo.

It was a precious, unbound
warmth that called me
softly.

January 28th, 2004

for Walter Blake Huddell, Jr.

Metal encases me as I pull my car door closed,
sealing myself away after walking down the
long driveway from my mother's house.

The driveway is steep and rocky, and Mom always says,
"Park out by the mailbox and walk.
Some exercise never hurt anyone."

The blue shading on the top part of my windshield
colors the moon in frosted shade of deep navy,
the way the pond next to Mom's house looks at night.

It was a long, silent evening inside that house.
The funeral was shorter than we expected.
We got back earlier than we wanted.

Mom told a story about Grandpa sleeping
beneath an underpass so that he could wake up closer
to where my grandmother lived.

It made us laugh at first,
but our laughter turned to crying,
so we stopped telling stories.

I robotically slide the key into the ignition,
and the dashboard of my old Buick
lights up faintly.

Many of the lights on the dashboard have gone out—
like the ancient, fake Christmas tree
that stands half-lit in Mom's living room.

The light behind the odometer
stopped working around
100,000 miles.

My speakers crackle and come to life.
I recognize the song that's playing on the radio.
I think it's called "This Life."

The song is upbeat and triumphant.
The cold, enormous winter surrounding my car

responds to the song with maniacal silence.

The tan felt of my Buick's roof
hangs loosely at the edges,
as if the very seams of the sky are tearing.

I feel like I'm sitting in a paddleboat
in the middle of the ocean,
holding a gas lantern as my only source of light and warmth.

I've been trying to pretend that death is my friend,
the singer's exhausted voice speaks over the radio.
I didn't listen to this song's lyrics the other times I heard it.

This life ain't for me now.
I listen closely, and all at once, I feel
a strange pressure building in my chest.

Saw my angel in blue, she said, "This life ain't for you."
I close my eyes, and I can see that angel,
and I believe her.

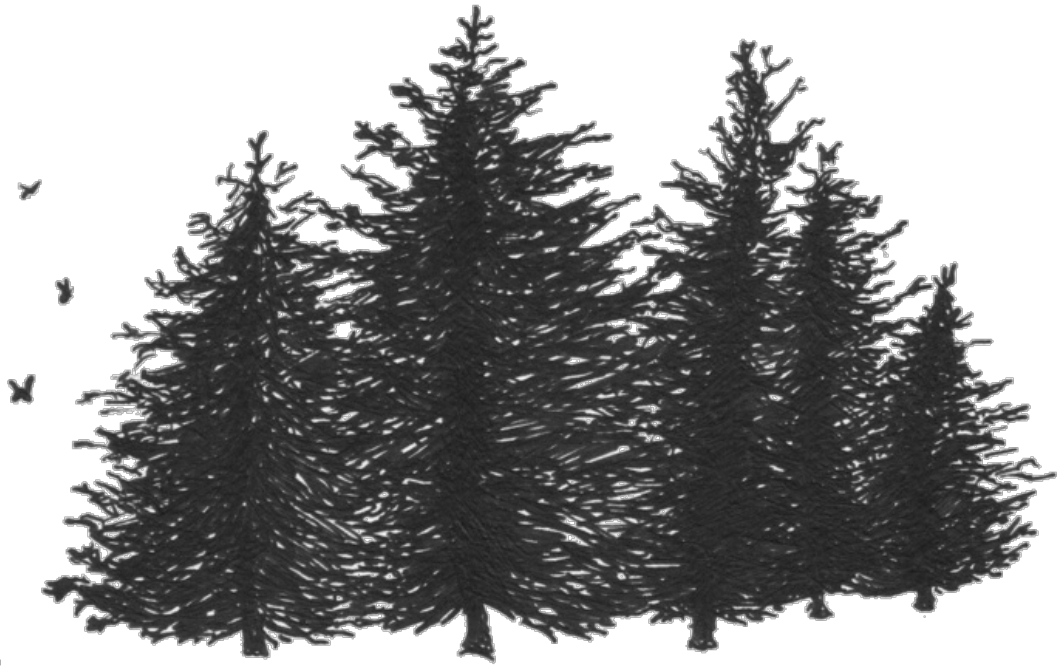
*I woke up feeling new because
now I know this life ain't for me.
It's for you.*

I can hear my grandfather's voice as clearly
as I could when it played in the home videos
we saw at the memorial.

I gasp, and my chest swells as I breathe
the first deep breath I've taken in hours.
The cold winter's air soothes me.

I lift my hand to the ignition again.
The engine sputters at first but then thunders to life.
I take another deep breath, blink, and ease onto the gas pedal.





Chrysalis

A row of ants battles through heat and humidity,
trekking across the cracked sidewalk out front.
Sunlight spills into the creases of their ebony bodies
and glances off the sharper ridges back into the summer air.

Ten-year-old me crushes one of the ants with my pointer finger.
Pointer outstretched, my hand hovers over the trail of ants,
and then I slowly, purposefully press my finger down,
grinding the insect's brittle body into the sidewalk.

I could feel the sound it made
as the small, hard panels of its body broke off
and fell away to be crushed too.
Fragile but too small to spare, I must've thought.

The ants didn't seem to mind.
Their line undulated, adjusting course.
A black crescent in what was their perfect path
twisted around the side of my finger.

I used to have a fort under the pine trees
for me and the other boys—
jagged tree-stump seats arranged
on the carpet of soft yet dangerous pine needles.

A blanket of sunlight was draped against the trees,
and only a lattice of light shone through
onto our earthly thrones
and the toy guns at our feet.

We imagined great hunting exhibitions,
with those guns as our instruments.
It was easy to pretend the guns' hard plastic
was grained wood and black metal.

We'd shake the crab apples from the trees in the back—
bait for the deer that would fall into our guns' sights.
We'd sneak around from the fort and wait.
Deer always came—even if we had to imagine them.

Bees would nest in the failing, red fence outside our fort.
They would buzz through and bother us.
We would sit motionless, baiting them too.
They'd land next to our stumps and we'd step on them.

The bumblebees, with only their gray and golden fur,
feel soft under our heels. But the wasps,
like the ants, with their rigid, alien shells
crack and crunch as we step on them.

Young boys are the best insecticide.
Crushing and stomping small things
to find a proper place in the midst
of bigger animals and tall trees.

But I could never kill a butterfly.
Orange monarchs and yellow swallowtails,
floating through the soft, blue sky,
were immune to me.

If I could, I'd pluck the thin wings
of a monarch butterfly one at a time.
I'd pluck one and rub it into my palm
like I'd done with the heads of dandelions.

Then I'd pluck the other and place it on my tongue.
Bitter, it would dissolve and mix with my saliva.
With my eyes to the sky and my mouth open, I would stand
with that thin wing staining my tongue yellow, black, and brown.

A Prayer to Theia

My father crafted a pair of lenses for me
that I never have to put on or take off.
The lenses blur my vision and color my memories.

Before he made those glasses for me,
he was my Atticus.
His transformation began
when he started crafting those lenses.

When they were ready,
he handed them to me,
and I put them on without doubt.

When I looked back up,
he was a jester—
painted in embarrassing colors,
sneering and skulking.

I remember his deception deeper than it actually goes.
Years that weren't tainted feel tainted,
and I wish away the memories of them.

The glasses,
still too big for my face,
slid down my nose
no matter how hard I pressed them back.

I didn't blame my sister and me.
If it was my fault—
or her fault,
it was because we were too well adjusted.
Maybe we were too independent.
Maybe if we had reached our anxieties and depressions sooner,
he would have stayed for us.

I grew into the glasses,
but the weight of the frames
pressed on my nose—
aching constantly.

The divorce wasn't the worst part.
Breaking up our perfect foursome wasn't the worst part.
The other woman wasn't the worst part either,

to be honest.

It was the lies.

It was the overt ones.

And also the technically-not-false but still dishonest ones.

It was being forced to learn about the depth of the lies and
being forced to learn about my family of liars—
relatives that knew but stayed in the shadows
watching our fiction unfold.

The temples of the glasses
cut into my ears on both sides.

Then I had to lie too.
I lied when people asked where he was.
And when they asked if I was okay.

I lied to myself.
I said I wasn't like him—
though I'm more like him than anyone else.
I said I wouldn't hurt anyone the way he hurt us—
but I've done some damage.

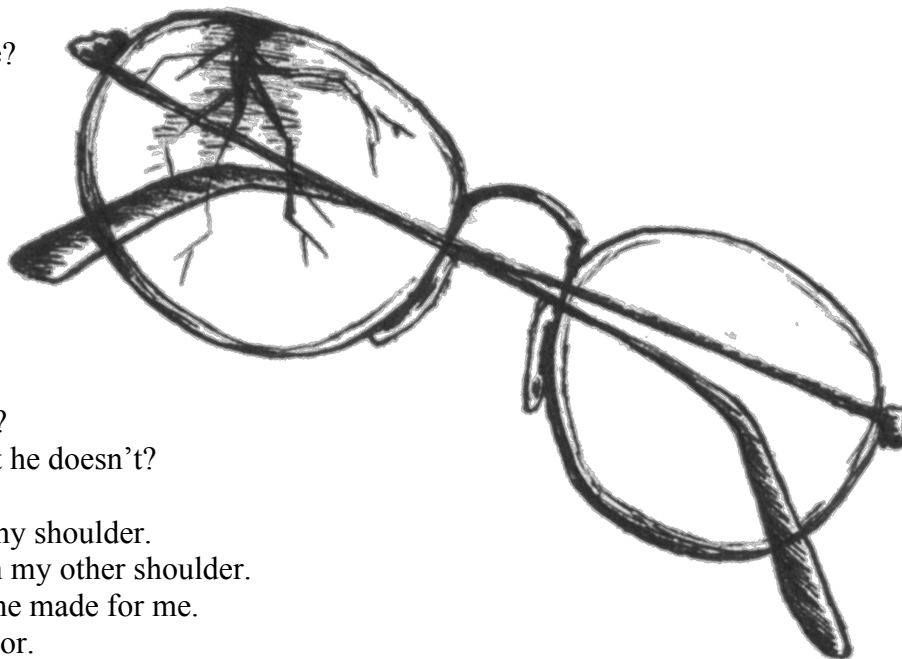
He has a bride.
And what do we have?

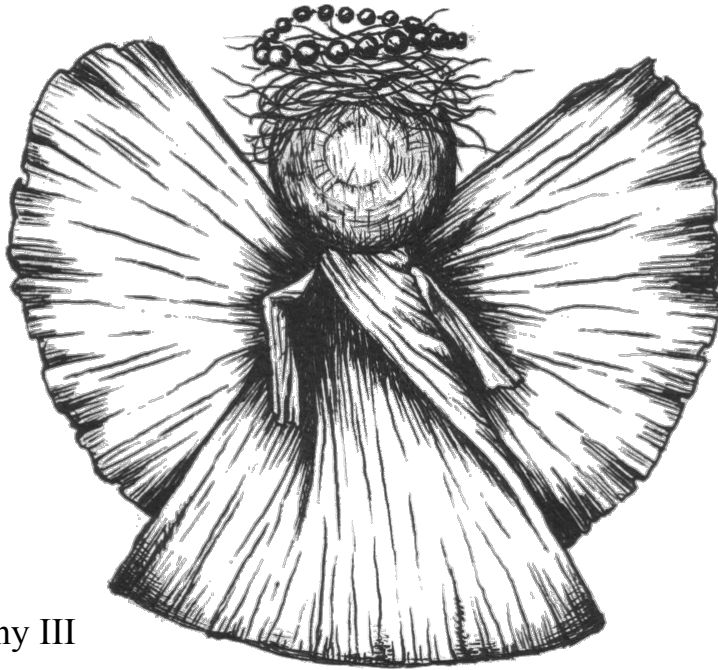
Mom has her house.
Sister has her books.
I have these poems.

He has an ex.
He has a daughter.
He has a son.

But what do we have?
What do we have that he doesn't?

A hand is placed on my shoulder.
Then another hand on my other shoulder.
I remove the glasses he made for me.
They clatter to the floor.





On Photography III

In this picture, I christen our shining
tree with the only angel
I'll ever believe in.

The angel is modest—
a gown of crisp white paper
and a halo of tiny silver beads.

Her expressionless face,
made of unstained wood,
is nested in a mane of dark curls.

Regal Christmas angels
in red and gold velvet
do not belong on our family's tree.

She belongs to the humble
divinity of St. Francis—
rich only in spirit.

I look back at the camera
and smile through newly straightened teeth.
My halo is the rim of a gray hoodie.

There is a method to our tree's decoration,
so arriving at the angel's hanging
is a yearly miracle for us.

No rogue branches from
the sides or from below
can interfere with the ornaments.

Every ornament must be “free-hanging.”
It’s an inviolable law
given from father to children.

Find the best nook in the tree.
The one with a strong branch
and adequate lighting.

And save those premiere spots
for the best ornaments—
the glass butterflies and miniature fruits.

Light from the fake candles
made to look like real candles
by the window spills lazily into the room.

Its prisms, the bright ornaments,
catch its light and dispense it—
jagged glass snowflakes and sparkling baubles.

Finally the light crawls
to the top of the tree and
rests on our perfect angel.

She stands resigned,
tacked to the tallest branch
atop the tree.

The tree beneath her,
like the hill at Golgotha,
pushes her towards the sky.

That mountain of belief,
not of God but of family,
seems misplaced now.

Every year, when I’m alone with the tree,
I imagine drawing features
on her smooth, round face—

a slightly crooked nose,

lips angled into what could be a smile,
and sad eyes—not the ones she deserves.

Fish Out of Water

In elementary school,
my music teacher said,
“Rap is crap without the ‘c.’”
So I said, “Rap’s not for me.”

I had no reason to doubt his
quick dismissal of an entire genre—
an entire universe of music.
I accepted his position without drama,

but eventually the rap tide turned.
That spurned genre and its mighty voice
left me no choice.
I yielded to its power.

I wanted to be a “write raps” white kid,
who likes the right non-white rap kids,
and is liked by the right rap-writing kids.
But it’s not that easy.

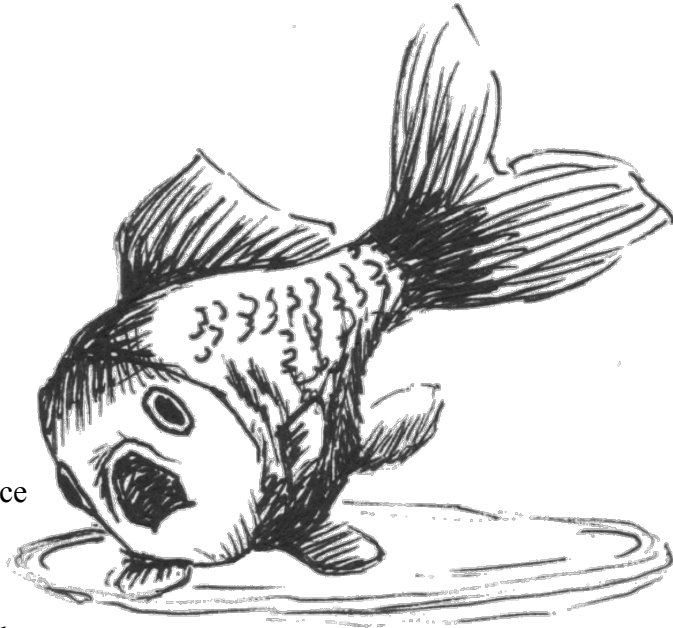
Oh what a sad, sad day
for a writing-raps white kid
who realizes his not-right-rap
isn’t even right for white kids,

but it was a relief too!
There would never be
another me rap-writing,
white-rapping sighting.

The pressure was off!
And no one knows pressure
quite like a formerly rap-writing
white teen, right?

My teacher’s crap-christening
and nights of rap-listening
led to writes about right-rapping
and some other right, non-rap writing.

I’m one of those white “likes rap” kids,
one of those “can’t rap but writes” kids.
It’s okay that I’m not a rapper.
as long as I still seek to capture



the scenes of my modest world
and the stories of others in other places—
a hawk overhead, wings slightly curled
and simple, surprising love that leaves with no traces.

And it's not that my whiteness kept me from a mic.
My life did that.
I inherited pen and page
not verbal combat,

but what I do and can do is akin to rap—
those words leaping from page to stage
reaping that system-sin, that to-the-rim
brimming angry inspiration calling for cage-breaking.

What I saw and see in rap
is an outside myself wish,
an outspoken breaking free itch
to go beyond and to say it plain.

I didn't see myself in it,
but as I clung to it and it clung to me
it revealed a fight for life or for death.
It showed its soul—a soul that rung free.

Eris

She was the prize
all of the high school
artists and musicians
yearned for—

a punk goddess
who blew kisses
and flipped the bird
equally often.

We locked eyes
across the classroom,
and everyone else fell away
like windblown cardboard cutouts.

Not because her beauty
put everyone else to shame,
but because her gaze induced doubt
about even the simplest truths.

I felt butterflies in my stomach.
Not because of that nervous
up and down motion
that flutters through the gut.

But because of what time does
to a cage full of butterflies.
And all things that undergo
dramatic unsolicited evolution.

Only some of the feelings have transformed—
half new and shiny and artificial
and the other half, old and unchanged—
the curse of incomplete emergence.

I had watched her for so long.
We all had—at least
all of us that still sought
her damning attention.

Her skin looked so soft.
It had imperfections,
but those slight pink nicks
were easy to overlook.

Her skin looked like
fresh parchment paper—
the kind bought for writing
dream journals and second apologies.

She had a heart of gold,
but not because she was kind.
The closer you got to her,
the meaner she was.

But her heart was of
a strange and mysterious value.
And people fought over it
like prospectors fighting for land.

Her hair was
layered and sleek
like the neat plumes
of a raven's feathers.

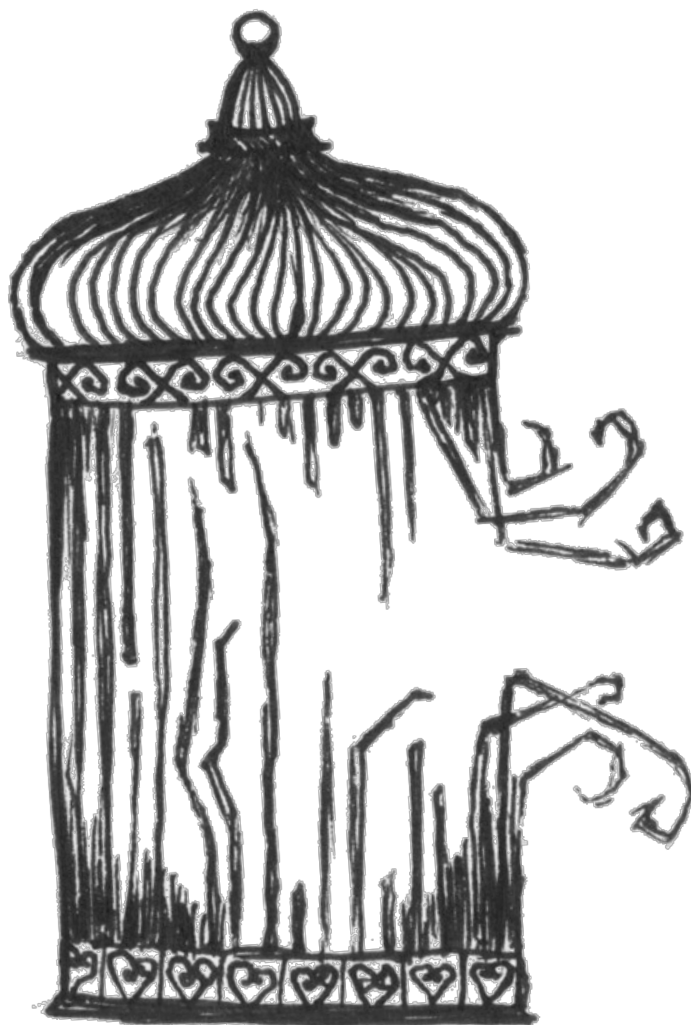
As it ran down her face
and across her angular shoulders,
it reminded of Poe and a
creeping, invasive darkness.

Her voice was like music.
The words she spoke were
practiced and revised.
They were rehearsed.

And her eyes were like emeralds,
though they were almost gray.
They refused to shimmer,
like a freezing pond of algae.

But the pattern of her irises,
with its strange branches,
demanded belief in some designer—
like Paley's pocket watch.

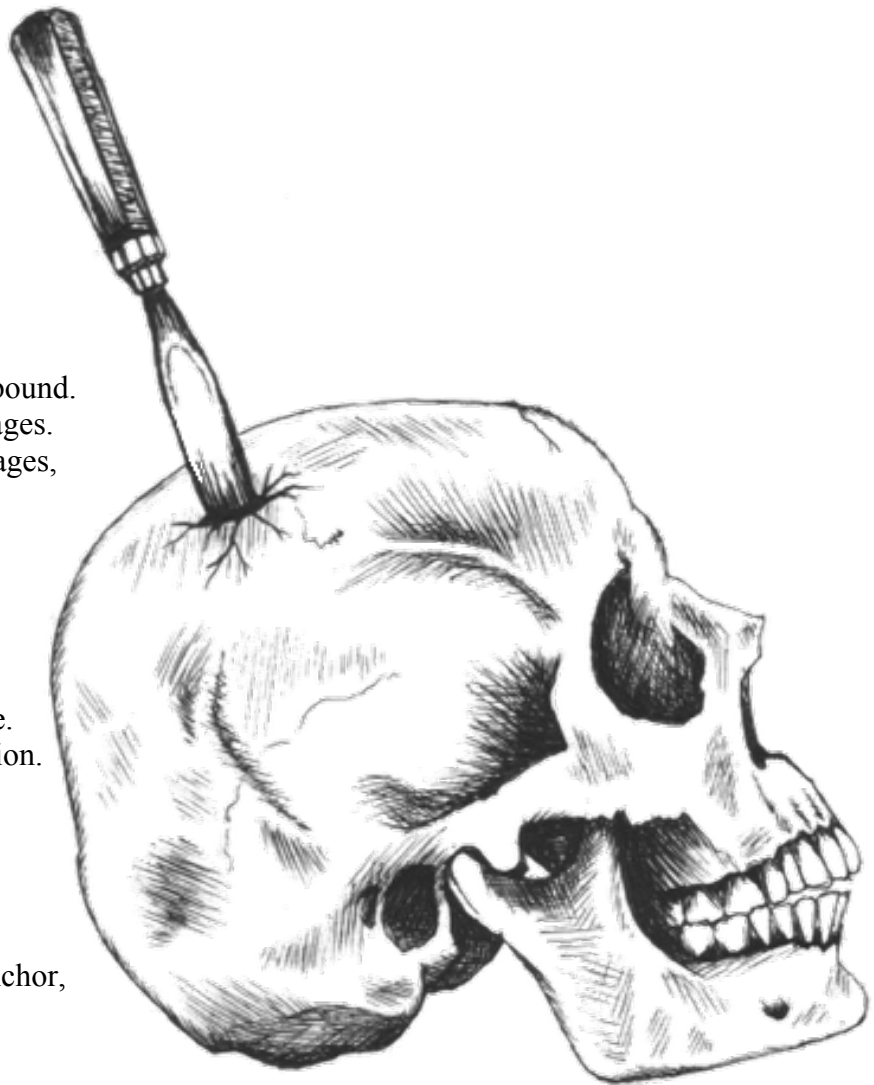
If the many faces of an emerald
were cut by hand with precision,
so too was the forest in her eyes—
that haunting leafless canopy.



Epistle I: Son of Bone

*Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.
It is the bitter poison by which the physician within you heals your sick self.*
– Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, “On Pain”

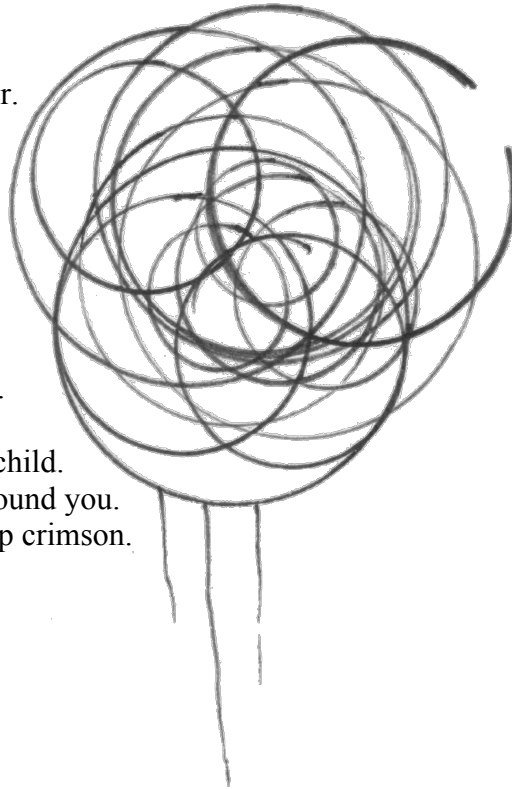
My ancient carvings litter
the earth you crawl on.
Sculpt your skull
from the marble of love.
Give your soul a head,
so that it can have ears
and hear itself.
Discover the vastness,
the crippling magnitude,
of your anti-library.
Find the books most loosely bound.
Find the ones with missing pages.
Copy the words from those pages,
and let your pen strokes
lull you to sleep.
Your dreams will not be
of creation nor destruction.
The pain of creation
and the joy of destruction
are for the world of the awake.
Your dreams will be of isolation.
You will float
in a fragile bubble
full of icy water—
suspended at its center.
While you sleep,
you must build yourself an anchor,
so that when you rise,
you won't be lost.
Awake to love,
that almost unsayable,
inimitable parcel of quivering human energy—
those atoms of transcendence.
The journey and the destination are love.
With a sculpted skull,
thoughts well-doubted,
and a soul for intersection,
you will learn my secret
and make it yours.



Epistle II: Daughter of Bone

Sickness is the means by which an organism frees itself from what is alien.
– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, “Letter Eight”

My vastness lingers in all things.
Desire me—and our secret sex.
With every lie seeps a broken dream,
but feel the breeze float
through your forest of desires,
and know that your truth
is a peace you’ve never known.
Infinity lies between one color and another.
Once between color,
my young daughter,
you’ll awake to eternity.
You must be put to sleep
before being woken.
Awake easily, and when you rise,
be free from your nightmares.
Your broken morning will be most sacred.
In your sleep,
you heard the pounding heart of winter’s child.
You saw the seasons’ trees spin circles around you.
You watched the marble floor blush a deep crimson.
Now, you can collect the shards
of nature’s shattered form.
Embrace your memories of memories—
they are like an emptied dam
being filled drop by drop
by tears and rain.
In time, you will softly sing
our secret to the sky.



On Rhythm

On the stage, I could sing.
It was the first talent I had.

But when the concert had ended,
I couldn't find my voice.
I needed the choir with which to be blended.

So I spent my time listening,
and I learned to describe.

Now I aim for my words—
on the page and in air—

to sing my songs for me,
to prove I can share.

I could act too.
That was my second talent.

But the curtain would fall,
and the characters fell too.
But I never stopped acting at all.

I pretended for amusement
and for protection too.

People pretend far bigger things
than the characters on page,

so the second of my talents
found life off the stage.

In time, I learned dancing—
my third stage talent.

But the music would stop,
and my stillness would follow,
and my heart would drop.

In life, that rhythm and grace
is evasive.



It's balance, and I think—
I think it's love too.

Such a challenging talent,
and I'm stuck with just two.

The Operating Room

Everything disappears but this view of the future.
Blue wraps around my head like a heavenly suture.

In the hallway attached to my small, padded box,
I can hear the doctors and their hushed, eager talks.

But focusing on the sound makes my mind blurred.
I look back out my window at a world barely heard.

The plastic apparatus that clings to my face
releases its ether and lifts me from space.

Everything in front becomes shadowed and black.
Detail disappears, and my limbs start to go slack.

The tension, the anger, and the enemies within
release me and leave me alone with my sin.

While I'm under, I dream of the treacherous world
and a fiery phoenix—its great wings unfurled.

It flies through the darkness inside my mind,
setting fire to anguish—to the pain it can find.

The world that is left is a strange, sparse forest
of trees and of voices that sing a dark chorus.

The branches reach out and cradle creation.
They are the arms of God; they are foundation.

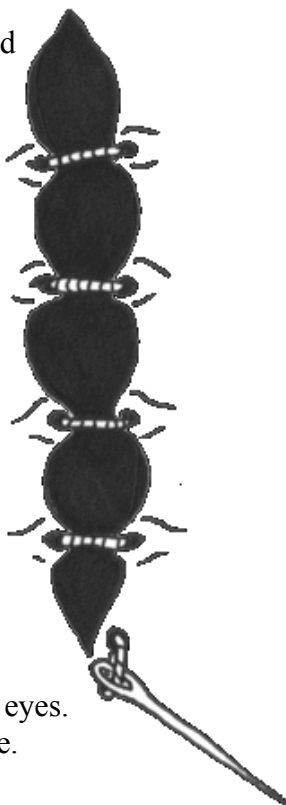
Beyond that is wonder and mystery and might,
and what I feel most acutely, a formidable fright.

It's a fear that I'm trapped—eternal seclusion—
or even worse that my world was just an illusion.

But a day later I wake—the world's light hits my eyes.
A new day's sun is falling—the moon soon to rise.

The last of the sky's streaking ribbons of red
leak back into heaven, having finally fled.

Nature, the surgeon, has sealed up the sky,
And my fright follows with it, now also to die.



American Traditional

*You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead
or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.*

- Leviticus 19:28

Nerves beat against my body,
and I worry that they can be heard.
Chatter fills the long hallway to the electric operating room,
and I pace.

Red, yellow, and black attack from all sides.
Inside their designs, they look downward
and laugh at impending pain,
with menacing eyes and frightening, wide smiles.

Above the entryway,
there's a design of a huge, black anchor.
As I think of my last appointment,
that anchor pulls my heart into my stomach.

Hearts, roses, and eagles
dot the high walls of the hallway.
Mighty clipper ships sail side-by-side
over billowing waves of teal and navy with white crests.

I'm led down that hallway now,
toward the mechanical droning,
and artists, its source, dot the corners of the room
and sit hunched over their patients.

The artists sit in front of their patrons
and turn between their paints—
small ink wells full of beautiful pigment—
and the quivering bodies stretched out before them.

The hollow words of Leviticus 19:28 sound in my mind,
and from on high, they decree that I should
stop where I lie and rise out of darkness before
needle meets skin.

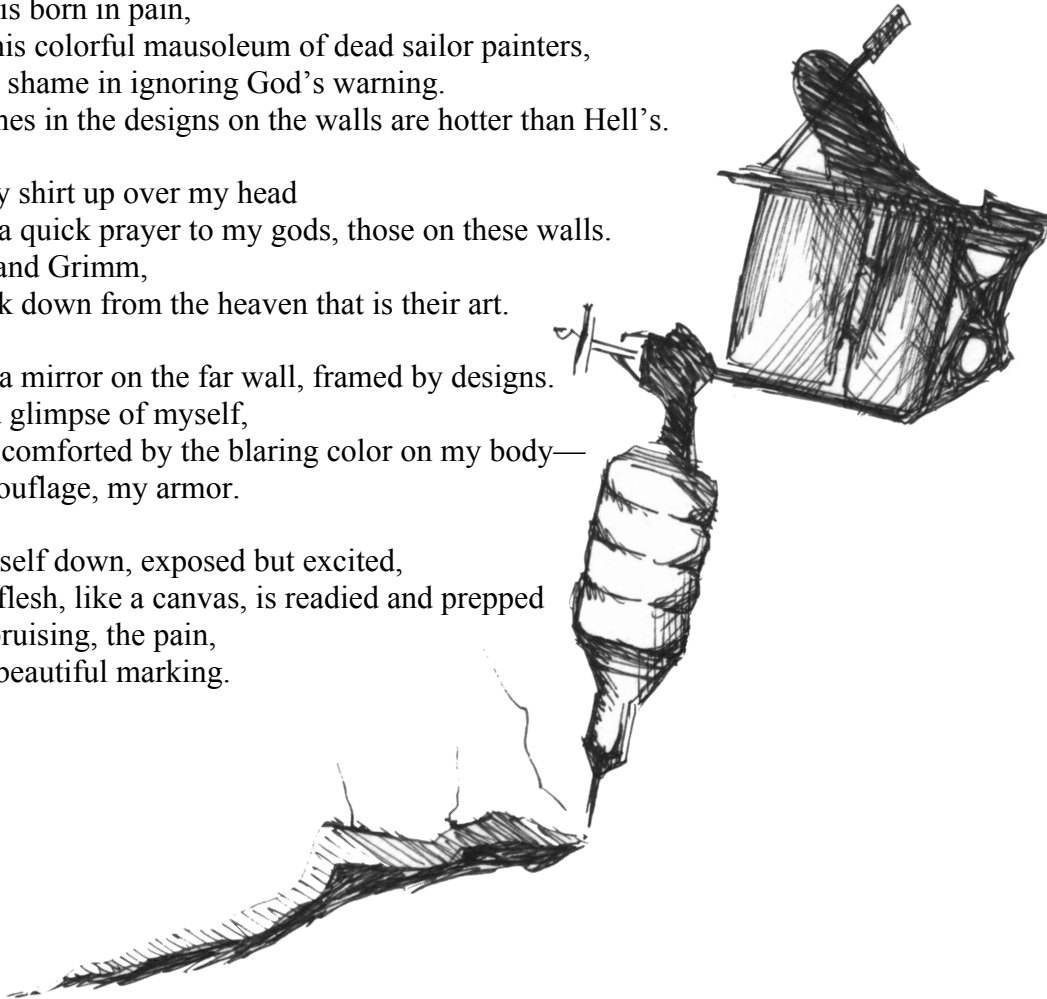
That warning could rip me from this place,
and deliver me from the pain.
But those words have never stopped me before,
and without the pain, there's nothing.

This art is born in pain,
and in this colorful mausoleum of dead sailor painters,
I feel no shame in ignoring God's warning.
The flames in the designs on the walls are hotter than Hell's.

I pull my shirt up over my head
and say a quick prayer to my gods, those on these walls.
Collins and Grimm,
who look down from the heaven that is their art.

There's a mirror on the far wall, framed by designs.
I catch a glimpse of myself,
and I'm comforted by the blaring color on my body—
my camouflage, my armor.

I lay myself down, exposed but excited,
and my flesh, like a canvas, is readied and prepped
for the bruising, the pain,
and the beautiful marking.



January 20th, 2015

for Charles Miller Wagner

Students sit around me spinning in their seats,
The reaper drums his rhythm, woefully it beats.

Class has just begun, but this Tuesday morning mourning
has ruined my routine, coming almost without warning.

The hour hand hits 10, and our hands begin
to try to wind the clocks back, go back to where we've been.

11 hours ago was 11, and that's the unfortunate time
that the reaper like a villain claimed one more of mine.

I heard early in the morning, but I couldn't skip day one.
News of death broke the horizon, rising with the sun.

But now I find myself listening to a teacher,
sitting in my spinning chair. In the front, she's like a preacher.

Her sermon's one I've heard in first classes for a while.
I've had a number of first days, so I conjure up a smile.

But inside my head is spinning like the chairs on which we sit.
It's torture by that spinning rhythm, and I try not to submit.

A last day on earth, framed by hospital halls,
shadows my first day of class, lined by these white walls.

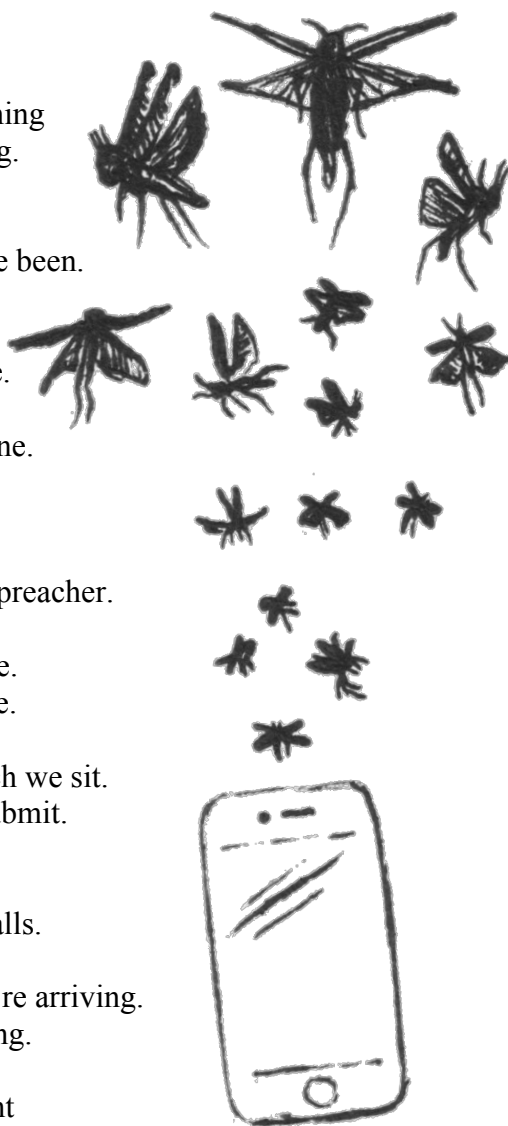
My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's the locusts; they're arriving.
Darkness on the other side, then death is next conniving.

In the room, a breath of chalk dust ignites a ray of light
shot from the sun and onward, searching for my sight.

That light exploded from the sun that set a day ago.
Set for him and rose for me, a debt that I now owe.

My thoughts run to my mother, to her sitting on her own.
And me here with these people, equally alone.

I have a long day yet, and the news that has me fretting
will be there when I'm ready. For now the work's forgetting.



I manage to stay threaded, but the day has just been born.
I know one thing for certain: this day will die in scorn.