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Overlapping Mornings

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OVERLAPPING MORNINGS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Joshua A. Cembellin

May 2011

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

OVERLAPPING MORNINGS

by

Joshua A. Cembellin

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

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May 2011

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ABSTRACT

OVERLAPPING MORNINGS

by Joshua A. Cembellin

This thesis project, *Overlapping Mornings*, is a book-length collection of poetry based upon my family. Throughout the collection I examine the lives of various family members, particularly my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. In exploring the lives of my progenitors through poetry's lens, I strive to discover my own role as a direct member of this male lineage.

Comprised of four parts, the collection generally follows a chronological order that begins with poems about my childhood and ends with poems of the present. Part Two is a prose section that includes important biographical information about my great-grandfather, Edwin Schivo. This section is told through the perspective of my grandmother and derives from the stories she has told me about her father—my great-grandfather—whom I never had the chance to know.

The primary intent of this prose section is to augment the sequence of ghost poems I have written about the ghost of my great-grandfather, Edwin. Edwin committed suicide at the house where I grew up, and I have used this traumatic event as a crucial component within my collection. I use the name "Eds" to refer to my great-grandfather's ghost. These ghost poems often use unconventional syntax as a way to blur the line between the real world that Eds visits and the ghostly world in which he lingers.

In bringing these poems together, I hope to suggest how the events of our past continually shape our present selves.

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This project is dedicated to my parents and my grandparents, to whom I am forever grateful. I also would like to acknowledge my wife for her endless support. These people are the inspiration behind so much of my work, and I would not be where I am today without them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Part One	12
Overlapping Mornings	13
Family Backyard.....	14
Musical Eds.....	16
Fruit Trees in Winter.....	17
Eds in the Mirror	18
On Watching My Father Shave.....	19
First Catch.....	20
Observant Eds	21
Second Story Life	22
First Valentine.....	23
The Old Olive Tree on Forrest Avenue	24
Old Crow before dinner	25
On Watching My Father Sleep	26
Whiffle Ball	27
Cognizant Eds	28
Wet Paint Eds.....	29
Hangnail Eds.....	30
And the Years Rolled Slowly Past.....	31
Part Two.....	32
My Grandmother’s Stories.....	33
Part Three.....	41
Dead Man’s Rock	42
Pruning the Mulberry	43
On Having Fires	44
Eds Sophisticated.....	45
Mother’s Clam Chowder.....	46
Caretaker Eds	47
Feeding the Doves.....	48
Father’s Day Eds.....	49
Chopping Eds.....	50
Corduroy Eds	51
Peach Tree.....	52
Camouflage Eds	53
Waiting.....	54
Broken Glass.....	56
Spinning the Wheel.....	57
Candied Yams Eds	59
Dishwasher Eds.....	60
Part Four.....	61
Dizzy at Lunch	62

Wine Tasting.....	63
Work Night	65
Going to Work	66
The Land of Plenty.....	67
Pale Eds.....	68
Stray Cat.....	69
Eds Searching.....	70
Jalapeño Eds.....	71
Ripe Eds	72
The Skin	73
Her Voice	74
Feeling Good.....	75
New Times Blues.....	76
Spare the Air Eds	77
The Conversation	78
His Old Body	80
Where Eds Reside	81
Knots	82
Climbing	83
Your Hair	84
Works Cited	85

Introduction

Overlapping Mornings is a collection of poetry that focuses on family, specifically *my* family history, relationships, and identity. The collection examines my family lineage, calling attention to the lives of various family members including my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. The intention behind portraying in poetry some aspects of my progenitors' lives is to highlight the relationships I have with them and attempt to discover, through the creative and compositional processes, my own role within the family and specifically as a male heir to the line. The poems include historical aspects of my family and show how these histories are reflected in me. Through the selected portrayal of the lives of some of the males who came before me, I present in the ensuing poems my own journey of self-discovery. The title *Overlapping Mornings* signifies the conflation of time, from one generation to the next, and the interconnectedness I feel with my ancestral heritage.

The collection is divided into four parts, which are loosely structured into chronological order. Part One contains poems about my early childhood. In "First Valentine" I retell the story of my first heartbreak. I use the traditional form of an Italian sonnet because the child speaker in the poem is led to believe that love is structured. The form helps demonstrate how the child speaker envisions love as flowery and romantic, and the actions and events in the poem—buying a teddy bear, scribbling a fluffy poem in a card—allude to what the child has observed and been told about love. In this way, the sonnet form contributes to the ideal love that the child beholds. The volta marks a challenge to this ideal love, however, because the events that occur cause the boy to

reconsider his previous notions. The octave shows me preparing a Valentine's gift for a girl, and the sestet contains the unfortunate unraveling of love that takes place when I discover that this girl has given away my gift to another boy. What the speaker has been told about love and what his experiences show him about love contrast with one another. This poem, then, suggests that the speaker is beginning to craft his own definition of love, even in its earliest stages.

Part Two is a prose narrative that provides crucial autobiographical background information on some of the people in the collection, particularly the character of "Eds," who is the ghost of my great-grandfather, Edwin Schivo. I include this section to explain the history of Edwin, who in 1975 killed himself at the house where I grew up. Edwin and his wife, Josephine, lived there prior to my parents. Growing up, I repeatedly saw Edwin's ghost throughout the house. These childhood experiences were profoundly haunting and influential on me, as I was scared by the unfamiliar figure who would frequently roam the house at night. Afraid to sleep with the door closed, I would see him in the hallway or standing in my doorway. My mother was always a scream away.

After learning about the nature of my great-grandfather's death and reflecting on the events I experienced growing up, I became fascinated by this particular aspect of my family. Why did Edwin's ghost so often appear to me? Was he unable or unwilling to fully leave this world? Was he trying to communicate something to me, warn me of something I could not yet realize? This intrigue compelled me to learn much more about Edwin as a person and the details of his life. I began experimenting with writing poems about my great-grandfather's ghost, starting with subjects derived from vivid memories

and then extending to more imaginative subjects, such as fictitious conversations between Eds and me.

About a year ago, I was rummaging through the basement of the old Victorian house that my grandfather and great-grandfather built on Fourth Street in downtown San José, directly across from the University. With masks and gloves, I worked with my brother and father to haul out and organize everything beneath the house—wood scraps, old roofing material, antique furniture, unused sinks and tubs, and even the disconnected parts of my old bunk bed. While rummaging through these items, I found, hidden between two pieces of plywood, one of my great-grandfather's paintings. It was a beautiful but weathered picture of a potted assortment of pink, white, and purple hydrangea, with one particular flower drooping down in the background. My father let me keep the painting as he marveled at its presence, and now it hangs in my bedroom in a frame that is big enough to see Edwin's signature in the bottom right corner.

My initial childhood fear of Edwin's ghost has transformed into an almost obsessive curiosity, which perhaps derived from the fear that I might somehow be fated to follow in Edwin's footsteps if I were to follow the same family lifestyle. I continue to be haunted by my great-grandfather's death and my numerous experiences of seeing his ghost as a young boy. However, my fear now is more preoccupied with the reality of Edwin's suicide and less with his haunting ghost. In order to more lucidly depict who Edwin was as a person and help readers contextualize the character of his ghost, I felt it necessary to include this prose section. I present this section through the perspective of my grandmother, who is Edwin's daughter. Whereas I use her voice to offer details

about my great-grandfather the person, I use my own voice, in contrast, within my poems to focus on my own experiences and imagination with Edwin's ghost. I attempt to utilize what I've learned about Edwin throughout my life to help shape how I envision the curious existence of Eds.

In Part Three, the speaker is a young adult who sees the family dynamics taking shape. He observes more closely the people around him and reflects more maturely on the changes that come with time. "Mother's Clam Chowder," for instance, provides a snapshot of the aftermath of my dog's death. Structured into three stanzas of broken lines without punctuation, the isolated words and phrases complement the scene's interconnected parts and their emotional implications. The poem begins with a description of the blended ingredients of my mother's homemade clam chowder simmering. This creates a warm and soothing mood, which is further highlighted by a fire beginning to crackle in stanza two. After the scene grows peaceful and comfortable, a sense of nostalgia emerges as the stories from the flaming newspaper "fade beneath the iron." The poem turns at this point and ends with an image of my dog—alone in the corner—"missing his companion" and lamenting the death of my other dog. My mother's soup functions as a way to soothe our family's pains; she's prepared it for this occasion to help us cope with the loss of, in our eyes, a family member.

But the poem ends on a more somber tone, leaving the reader with the final image of my dog in the corner. The broken lines and lack of punctuation throughout the poem create a deliberate sense of ambiguity, which I feel is one of the poem's strengths. The larger thematic ideas within the poem seep out slowly through the narrative details of

each line, allowing the reader to participate in finding meaning in these subtleties. That my dog cannot partake in the comfort of my mother's soup or find solace in our company is disheartening to me. How does one console a dog? It is this complex reaction to emotion that intrigues me in this poem, and I strive to reveal this emotion through this particular scene.

Finally, Part Four of my collection contains poems of today, in which I investigate how my various relationships with relatives and my past experiences have affected who I am now. These poems are about me primarily and rely on the details of the first three parts. As the final section of the collection, Part Four depicts me creating my own path and projects the way that I, the poet and the person, have arrived at the present moment. I experience things similarly to and differently from my family, even though each experience is somehow shaped by those various family members. In "Dizzy at Lunch," the opening poem of this section, I present the reader with a new female character within the collection, a person with whom I am starting a new relationship. The poem shows us in the kitchen together. She is fresh out of the shower and making a sandwich, and Dizzy Gillespie plays in the background. Enveloped by music, energy, and intimacy, the speaker in this poem has evolved into his own person. He becomes a more active participant in the poem in addition to the subsequent events that occur in this section. The final lines of the poem read, "I wrap my arms around her from behind, / and she gently puts the pieces together." Though the pieces literally translate to bread slices, they allude figuratively to the pieces of my life that this woman has helped me discover.

Consequently, these two lines help introduce the rest of Part Four, a section containing poems primarily about me and my new experiences of adulthood.

In my poems, the male figures are vehicles through which I realize a sense of my future self, having expunged the fear of imminent self-destruction. Their lives are windows and mirrors reflecting history. The world in which I have grown up is greatly different from the worlds my relatives have seen. My poems often call attention to the simple values of life. I envision my elders not understanding today's world, and, in a sense, I do not fully understand it either. However, I persist in trying to find meaning. My collection evokes a nostalgic mood, showing how time continuously and relentlessly passes on and how the events of our past continually shape our present selves.

The theme and structure of my collection are primarily influenced by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. Lowell divides *Life Studies* into four parts. The most notable feature I will adopt for my collection is his prose section in Part Two, titled "91 Revere Street," in which Lowell describes his childhood by presenting autobiographical information about his family and ancestors. Similar to how "Lowell insisted on his own version of the family history," my collection is a subjective retelling of my own family history (Ramazani, Ellman, and O'Clair 119). Although a prose section is an unconventional feature of poetry collections today, Lowell's inclusion of "91 Revere Street" is a vital component to his collection, as it contains crucial background information about the figures in his poems. My reason for including a prose section is that the unique history of my great-grandfather is necessary for readers to fully understand the context of my Eds poems. While this would be difficult to achieve in the

style of these individual poems themselves, a prose section allows for useful exposition, making the context of the ghost sequence more clear and credible for the reader.

In *Life Studies*, Lowell explores intensive self-inquiry within his poetry. He wanted to deeply investigate the self, but also believed that his personal experiences could suffice as subjects of poetry. He felt that these experiences needed to be universalized, so that the poem conveys what the poet has learned from these experiences. The learning that takes place, then, should thus be applicable to others. Lowell validated these beliefs in *Life Studies*, in which his poetry is largely personal and confessional. In considering his familial relations, he was preoccupied with the idea of the self, and his self-examination ultimately led to his own self-definition. My collection is similarly told through a confessional voice. According to poet and literary critic Samuel Maio, “Lowell uses the confessional voice in his personal poems as a method of self-exploration” (31). Maio continues to explain that the voice in *Life Studies* is sometimes the central character in the poem, or it is the observer of events described in the poem (31). I chose to write in the confessional voice because I am the speaker in the poems exploring my own life and the people in it. Consequently, the confessional voice is the most appropriate voice for my poems to appeal to the reader. In making my poems personal and sincere, the reader will feel more connected to not only my work, but also the speaker and people within the work.

In using the confessional voice to share autobiographical narratives about his family, Lowell is able to connect to the audience. The narrative details he provides give the reader important information about the context of each poem, the characters within

the poem, the observations Lowell made at the time the events in the poem occurred, and the adult reflection he often makes on those events. For example, in “Grandparents,” Lowell observes his grandparents’ daily routines and draws conclusions about them in their old age. He describes them as “altogether otherworldly now,” a description that creates such a distance between his grandparents’ generation and his own (line 1). Later in the poem, Lowell writes, “Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me! / Tears smut my fingers” (31-32). The confessional child-like voice captures Lowell as a young boy and also shows the reader important details about his strong relationship to his grandfather, which contrasts Lowell’s relationship with his father. Lowell’s adult insights to these memories are significant, as he realizes new meaning in his past relationships. My poems are constructed similarly. Each poem is written in the confessional voice and provides important contextual information, such as details about the setting and characters. Because my collection is structured chronologically, the speaker is one who continues to make new observations throughout the collection. In Part Four, the adult speaker is able to reflect on past experiences in a more critical way because he is older. Readers will believe these reflections because the confessional voice throughout the collection will help them connect with the maturing speaker of the poems. The confessional voice of my poems, as in Lowell’s, is intended to establish credibility for my observations of my family history.

My collection is also influenced by Troy Jollimore’s collection *Tom Thomson in Purgatory*. In this collection, Jollimore uses a character sequence to depict the fictitious character Tom Thomson. I define the character sequence as a collection, or part

of a collection of poetry that explores a particular character or characters through a sequence of snapshots. These snapshots provide essential details for understanding the respective character(s), and can be but are not limited to chronological order. Further, a character sequence traces the growth and development of particular characters using these carefully selected details. Jollimore's character sequence consists solely of a series of persona sonnets revolving around Tom. This ultimately creates a collage of narrative poems which results in a final narrative arc.

Over the course of Jollimore's collection, the reader gets to know Tom based on his everyday experiences. Tom is unfamiliar at first, as evident in the poem "Trout Quintet." Jollimore writes: "*Is Tom Thomson a figure of legend? / Tom Thomson is a living totem pole. / Is Tom Thomson larger than life? / Four men could stand in Tom Thomson's shadow, / smoking cigars and talking about baseball*" (lines 30-34). Readers are initially intrigued by Tom, who almost seems unreal. But in seeing Tom through various lenses, the reader can relate to and engage in his successes and failures. I will incorporate this technique of a narrative collage and character sequence in my collection, especially through my Eds poems. My poems function as various snapshots of some of the members of my family, and these snapshots trace their habits and traits cumulatively. Characters such as my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather share many of the characteristics and emotions of the common reader, thus allowing readers to engage with them more honestly. But more directly, the intrigue that Jollimore creates through his Tom Thomson sequence relates to my Eds sequence. Eds will initially seem strange, and the fact that he is a ghost may not be clear until the poems begin to accumulate. But this

mystery will strike readers, and after learning more about him as the collection goes on, my relationship with Eds in the collection will come across as more personal and comfortable. The seemingly randomness of certain poems prove to hold more value and meaning once the reader understands the overarching context.

Another influence on my collection is Robert Frost. Frost felt that the world was full of pain, anguish, and depression, and he believed we needed relief. He wanted to transport readers to his poems' settings, creating what he called a momentary stay against confusion. This is evident in "After Apple-Picking," in which the speaker reflects on the apple-picking season: "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still, / And there's a barrel that I didn't fill / Beside it, and there may be two or three / Apples I didn't pick upon some bough. / But I am done with apple-picking now" (lines 1-6). Apple-picking is the only time the speaker can free himself from the earth, as he is literally on a ladder off the ground. But now that he has finished for the season, the speaker is reflecting on his work and the significant effect the many seasons have had on his life. Similarly, I see my father and grandfathers looking down the ladder of their lives, observing things unfinished, and realizing the quick, relentless passing of time. Like the speaker in Frost's poem, my father and grandfathers have engaged in the same structured tasks of labor, only to realize that these tasks will continue after they die.

Frost's momentary stay against confusion connects to my Eds sequence as well because Eds lingers between two worlds. Apple-picking is stuck between living and dying, and there is a contrast between heaven and Earth in the poem: the ladder stands on the ground yet also reaches toward heaven. In my poems, Eds is also stuck between life

and death because he is a ghost. For this reason, my Eds poems sometimes include unconventional syntax. Because Eds is a ghost, some of the events that take place in the poems are fictitious. His unique circumstances as a ghost allow me to use biographical information about him from the past and apply it through experimental language, syntax, and style. Because my voice throughout my collection is confessional and sincere, I hope to blend the real and not real so that readers believe in the uncommon events that are described in the ghost sequence. Furthermore, because Eds is stuck in limbo, between death and reality, I imagine Eds as a confused soul whose life ended unexpectedly. For these reasons, the language in my Eds poems often demonstrates the paradox between reality and the metaphysical world, a world perhaps without rules or order. This sequence functions as a momentary stay against confusion for readers, as they are able to temporarily leave the confines of reality to engage with the unique character of Eds.

Part One

“That dusting, in your hair, too,
and covering your pant legs,
was what I, at eleven, wanted.”

—Albert Garcia, “On Making Wood”

Overlapping Mornings

—*for my father*

The fifth hour of a new day,
coffee drips in the dark kitchen,
the paper plops in the drive.

Your bedroom door creaks,
stairs moan, pets stir. The deadbolt clicks,
gives way to cold. There is dew

on the neatly kept lawn.
Flickers of a dying lighter sear tobacco.
You breathe smoke, read headlines,

check the five-day forecast.
You choose a mug to fill with black
coffee in place of breakfast.

Outside—authoritative whispers
hush the dogs, the clanking of knife
against tin of a cat food can.

You sit in a chair lacing your boots.
It is cold and dark, and you are gone
before you think anyone is awake.

Family Backyard

The playhouse that my father built in the backyard
stands next to the thinning berry bush,
which my father says is the last living thing
in the yard since my great-grandfather died in '75.
But I know from pictures that some parts of the old fences
and the bricks around the flowerbed were there before.
And who knows if those are still alive.

This yard hears my father's cries.

I've spent half my life out here.
Like a pyramid of a pact between nature and man,
my father sits in a red, rusty aluminum chair.
Heavy eyes of whiskey fueling.
"My grandpa shot himself out here," he said.
"Grandpa Ed."

In this yard, I watched my brother die by wooden guns
that my father carved by hand.
I held my sister hostage and cooked her Barbies
with dinosaurs over pretend fires.
My mother loved to watch us play.

Was the tapping on the walls some kind of call to me?
Bunk-bedded beneath my brother, I would wake
against the wall alongside the playhouse.
Smoke mist of an old man glaring at me,
standing there, waiting for an appropriate time to fade out.
I'd scream and I'd cry.
Sheets are never thick enough.

Countless nights, my mother's delicate fingers
rubbing my hair until I drifted back to sleep.

Out here, where my mother's potted flowers sit on the iron table now,
the privets still whisper his last breath.

And when I saw Edwin's ghost standing in my doorway—
or at the table, or leaning against the heater in the hallway—
I didn't know him then.

I didn't know the story
about the alcohol, the blood
pressure, the mishandling of medications.
The accident.

I only knew what I saw:
the living room floor one early morning,
visits from his world.
For me, it all became "Eds."

Right here, where the sunlight never quite hits
and the sparrows sing for the birdbath,
his flute music caked onto my hair.

What must have caked onto his hair then when he ended it all?
Lavender hydrangea, mixed hyacinth, vinca minor.
His last thoughts lamenting the depths of woodworks,
the bigness of himself.
The bullet's weight navigating his brain.
His last twisted expression.
That can make a face do strange things.
That can make a mind confused.
That can make me know him.

With the dimness of a light on somewhere,
my father circles the yard from one side to the other—
from where he splits to where he stacks—
and sits down next to the woodpile,
next to the playhouse.
His dehydrated organs waiting like his meticulous stack of wood.
Two cords along the fence next to the berry bush.

The berry bush stands there like the old man watching.
The bottom step of the playhouse is concrete, scarred
with all our finger-drawn names, mine beginning
with a backwards "J."
He looks deeply at the letters.

Musical Eds

Sheetrock muffles flute whistles.
Melodies on Eds' whiskers
like whiskey on his voice.
Can't keep my head
resting near this wall.
His pores play notes
of alcohol.
I'd recognize that
receding hairline anywhere.
Nighttime lullaby
he plays to whisk me
to sleep. I can't.
The black's awake in my eyes.
In my ears,
silent pressured
liquored tunes
juiced from nightmares.
Eds spreads thin
like his blood
laced with lush bourbon,
rich rivers drowning
his flute.

Fruit Trees in Winter

He's on a ladder—
pruning shears in hands
stretched out above him.

A cigarette dangles between
his lips twenty feet up.
This one's apricot, he says.

Dead limbs severed, tarred
spots without growth.
The tree's older than him.

He pictures fruit, not shape.
*You gotta look for the eye—
new growth. Where do you think*

I should cut this one?
He doesn't cut where I say.
I'm still learning.

I see my breath amid barren
branches and think about his hands—
cold for so many years.

Eds in the Mirror

Eds wrap his ashy throat
with scratchy wool scarf, blue
as ocean as blueberry as dead baby as Eds.
Eds can wear cowboy boots
or cinder blocks
on smoky feet for nobody
hear him when he be everywhere
and nowhere simultaneous.
“Take off your mask!” he yells at the mirror,
unzip his face a million times,
always the same size.
The zipper catches every tooth.
He been in the mirror for close to a week
drawing kiwis and sunflowers
with index on steamy glass.
The boy join him,
add a petal to his sunflower—
*You’re missing
one there—*
to which Eds reply:
“The flower is dying.
Why put a petal where God has
chosen to remove one?”
The boy does not answer
and Eds shut the bathroom door.

On Watching My Father Shave

he hammers the razor
 clanks porcelain
single blade Bic rides his face
like shoveling gravel
 on concrete
blood pools in neck crevices
 along his jaw
 near his ears
tightened skin
his face his father's
steamy water falls
 for years
 black stubble rivers
down the drain
stroke by stroke
the cream
 disappears

First Catch

We trudged the rugged path around the lake
enclosed by charcoaled pines from last year's fire.
The noses of our poles were dipped with weights,
and Father's tackle box a rattling choir

against the cold. We trailed him half-asleep
to find the spot that early risers love.
With treble hooks of PowerBait and feet
gripped firmly to the shore, we took the cove

and cast our lines, my brother's passing mine.
Our clicking reels choked with eager hands.
Then Father told us, "Slow, take your time—
be sure to watch the pole until it bends."

I held the trout suspended in the air,
but couldn't snap its neck beneath its stare.

Observant Eds

Eds be watching you.
He see you shaking hands
with unfamiliars, smiling
for camera shots
like teeth are most respectable
and closed mouth
is most not.
Eds like you a lot.
Observant Eds notice how careful
men in suits be serious, looking
over you and check whose hands you shake
and which hands reach out to you.
They care so much, those men.
Poor Eds wonder how
his old life would be
if someone watched so closely
over him.

Second Story Life

A smile loops Mother's face into a knot.
While she and Father pace the grass, her arms
around his neck like picture wires to nails,
they stare upon the ruined house they brought
down and dream of upstairs bedroom windows.

I've never seen them kiss before. Their eyes
are framed like memories. Mother, barefoot,
rubs her hands on Father's chest. She steps up
onto his boots, her footprints lift slowly
off the grass. He drops his chin on her hair.

Father waves goodbye because we have to
leave. The house in shambles, he works at night
and shapes the house for second story life.
I watch him fade away through the rear glass,
waving slowly till we turn the corner.

First Valentine

At ten years old, when I was far too young
for what awaited me, but old enough
to recognize the pulsing of my love,
I walked the aisles of teddy bears that sung
with hearts on chests. I bought *the one* and hung
a card on its arm, filled with poems and fluff.
At school, I took a breath and rolled my cuffs,
then gave Danielle my bear—my nerves unstrung.

I waited after school for Mom to pick
me up, the kids with stacks of valentines.
I saw a friend who held my bear, and asked
him where he got it from—and I was sick
because I knew. Pretending it was fine,
I fought the tears dripping down my mask.

The Old Olive Tree on Forrest Avenue

rooted like a snow globe without snow.
Dad was doing the annual pruning—
shears in hands, cigarette clinging to lips.
The clippers' red handles, like horns, stuck out of his back pocket.
He silhouetted between branches against the morning sun.
Smoke rose, and each snap became distant
like railroad tracks.

My grandpa drove up in his rusted dump truck
and looked at my dad twenty feet in the air.
He took out his cigar stub and said,
*There's only two people in the world
who can prune that tree—
you and your grandfather.*
But my dad's grandfather was dead.

I looked at Dad's knees, the sealed branches,
the inevitable weathering of seasons.
His back abused from rising and falling.
If he had ever, once, in all those years, given in
to his throbbing shins, and hacked the limbs with a chainsaw,
I'd never see that tree the way it's meant to be.

Old Crow before dinner

there is alcohol
 yelling
 a full plate of dinner
sitting on the table
covered with a paper towel
 screaming voices of family
 fists against sheetrock
 scampering paws of pets
 slamming doors
 drunken self talk

there are her
 rolling eyes
 saddened face
expressing lost efforts
of another hot meal
 consoling children
old enough to understand
 embarrassed to look
her in the eye after what he
screamed at her

there are soft sounds
coming from the television
 deadbolt clicks from
the back door
 drunken self talk
 the lighter's grinding
 calls for the cats
 deadbolt clicks from
the back door
 creaking sounds up the stairs

On Watching My Father Sleep

The hall is dark, sliced with bedroom light
from Father's nightstand lamp. His door opened
enough for the cats. Snoring muffles faint whispers
of electricity while a western's
scene changes, forty years later, nighttime.
His knees agonize his sleep. He's naked,
facing the wrong direction in bed,
the cat confused and watching me stare.
His right bicep is underneath his face.
Left arm hangs down the edge of the bed.

I descend the stairs. Outside is pleasant,
the sky a dirty bathtub glimmering
with Epsom salts. I sit in his chair,
ignite one of his Montclair Lights and think
about his dreams.

Cognizant Eds

Eds hold the hammer tight gripped—
swinging hammer
 like the world on a string.
All these places he hammer through
are maps for children.

Places demolished like dirty rags so dirty
they are thrown in the trash.
 Sit in that corner, Eds.
 You sit there and ponder what you done.

Eds don't need discipline or punishment!
Eds be fully cognizant like windmills
 in still heat on stagnant hillsides.

That eerie feeling driving to vacation
with hundreds of windmills not moving.

Eds know exactly what he done, alright.

Wet Paint Eds

Why do I smell of wet paint?

What color?

Purple. Vic was a nice guy
when he wasn't messed up.

A swell brother to your grandfather.

Your father's got a brother.

And you've got a brother.

Pour another.

This bourbon smells like paint.

It smells like bourbon to me.

We are ice cubes
melting into pools, evaporating,
and then...

And then...?

...That is delicious.

And then gone, of course.

Yeah...gone.

Hangnail Eds

*The more I look at my hands
the more I realize something, Eds.
What might that be?
That be that you be a hangnail.
I be a hangnail?
Yes, you be a hangnail. I've thought
about it, and you're a hangnail.
Detached from the life of the flesh,
yet still clinging desperately, painfully.
Ah.*

*Please don't sulk, Eds. I didn't mean to
upset you. It was just a thought.
Yes, but a thought very much realized.*

And the Years Rolled Slowly Past

The silver radio with the large, cold knobs
turned low. Dad kept dialing
the station, sipping icy bourbon
and enjoying the music.
Busy tones kept him listening.

He bottom-lipped wetness
from his black moustache
as I watched him and Mom
dance around the house.

Dad placed the phone in my hands
and said the number to me
over and over until it finally rang.
His request—Bob Seger’s
“Against the Wind,” my small voice
tracing radio waves across the city.

And when the piano got going,
Dad sat down on the sofa’s arm
and stared off into a distant past.
Mom backed into his lap.
They sang, “Till there was nothing
left to burn and nothing left to prove,”
and told me how good it was.

Part Two

“We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.”

—Robert Lowell, “Waking in the Blue”

My Grandmother's Stories

Your great-grandpa Edwin, my father, was born and raised in San Francisco. Born on October 23, 1909, on 19th Avenue, and he was there his whole unmarried life. That's the Sunset District. He married my mother, Josephine, and they lived there when I was born and then until my sister was born in 1941. We had to leave after that because my sister had bronchitis chronically from the fog. From there we moved to Redwood City, and that was during World War II. Your great-grandpa had a knee injury and they wouldn't take him into the war; but they had him working in Handy's Iron Works off the peninsula, someplace. So we lived in Redwood City and my parents renovated a little house. I must have been about four or five. And then from there we moved to a rental that was owned by my aunt in the Santa Cruz Mountains, a little crummy, damp, dark and dank and stinking rental that belonged to my aunt, full of banana slugs and black widows.

Great-Grandpa Edwin was in construction. He was a carpenter and started working full-time once we moved to the mountains. On the side he was building an adobe house in Los Gatos on Blythswood Drive. That was probably 1943 or thereabouts. He and my mother used the soil that was on the property and made their own adobe bricks to construct a two-bedroom, one-bathroom house on a good piece of land. My sister and I went to school in Los Gatos. Eventually we moved to San José where your house is right now. Well, we had a couple moves, in the mountains and everything, stupid moves. He should have hung on to the adobe.

My parents were always just skating along, barely making it because alcohol was such a great expense for them both, which is very sad. But anyway, what was I talking

about? Prior to the move and working as a carpenter, your great-grandpa Ed was in what was the family business when he was a kid; and until he was seventeen years old his father was an owner of the produce company in San Francisco with A.P. Giannini. This was prior to the Bank of America, or Bank of Italy, being founded by Giannini. Then upon *my* great-grandfather's death, when Edwin was seventeen, he had to go to high school, help support the family, and work in the produce company, which meant get up at three o'clock in the morning or so, work all day until school started, and then go to school and fall asleep on the desk.

Your great-grandpa was a very gifted flute player also. That's how he met my mother, actually, who was a jazz fiddle player. They were in an orchestra together. Prior to their getting married, she worked at Broadway. She had a radio program in San Francisco and was a composer. Nuttier than hell. Alcoholic. But very gifted.

He consumed a lot of alcohol, too—this was what I was saying earlier—but it never knocked him on his butt. It's just very divisive, being dependant on alcohol. But that's the culture he was introduced to when he was young—getting up at three in the morning and going to the produce company. It was Scattina Galley I think was the name of it, on the wharf.

But yes, he drank. He drank bourbon. I remember on the weekends we'd go to Dick Leifort's Liquor Store here in downtown Los Gatos and he would buy a box of alcohol and cokes and whatever the hell for the week, pay off the previous bill—he kept a running bill all the time—and then this bottle of whiskey was on the drain board all day long over the weekend. I remember that.

We had a little garden, a Victory garden. That was the thing during the World War. We had a garden, we had rabbits, we had chickens and turkeys, and that's why I won't eat chicken to this day. I remember him slaughtering them and cleaning their feathers in the kitchen sink, and it just reeked. That was in the early '50s when we moved to the adobe.

Backing up into San Francisco, after my parents got married they moved to the beach, I don't remember the street—maybe 42nd Street, unless I'm nuts. But he was a block captain because it was during the war and they had blackouts. That's one of my earliest recollections, going down into this little area where the water heater was in the basement. We had beds down there. He would walk the blocks and alert people if they had lights on, because we were afraid the Japanese were going to come off the coast.

Things were different, very, very different back then. People treated each other differently too. I think they were more respectful of their reputations. And your great-grandfather was truly a gentleman. A real gentleman. It's what you think when you think of Clark Gable. But not learned manners. Just an inborn caring for how other people were. He was very sweet. Never heard him belch in my life, which is odd. Don't think he even picked his nose. A real gentleman. I don't care who it was, he'd always open the door and it wasn't just a big gesture—everything came from his heart. He was very, very sweet and gentle and he loved animals and he was good to people and his family all were very congenial. Very, very nice people. Decent people, all of them. And when you're raised in that, it's not necessarily culture. Well, maybe it was culture also,

because they were first generation Italians, northern Italians. But they were just close family, very religious. Catholic.

My father made furniture and was surprisingly artistic, kind of like your father who was a surprise all of a sudden with the cartooning. When your father was in high school, he did some drawings that I thought were pretty interesting. He got his artistic ability from that side of the family, I think, because Aunt Mel, one of Edwin's sisters, was an opera singer and an artist. She did beautiful paintings. And your father's cartooning and all that shows some ability. I don't have it. Your dad's very clever.

I don't know how wonderful Ed was as a painter, but it showed a special ability I think. A lot of the things he painted on weren't proper, you know, they flaked and all. He made his own frames, did metal work, built a couple hutches. Doesn't your dad have one? Great-Grandpa built that hutch which was left in the house when he died. It must be in your garage somewhere still. He built all kinds of little tables and things. They're not really top-of-the-line. They're more like country furniture. But he made a lot of benches and things like that. He enjoyed woodworking.

He didn't paint early on, though. He was always very busy. It was after he retired that he started taking up painting. He died when he was 65 years old, so it was near the end of his life. We couldn't keep him busy so he had a lot of time on his hands, and for a short period he went back to the produce company, but that was really hard on him. The hours were hard on him. But he was painting then. He didn't do a whole slew of them, and I don't know if my sister has any either, but I remember there were several of them that were flaking off. I don't know if it's the paint or the canvas or what, but it

wasn't proper. He wasn't that aware of doing the proper thing. He just got into what he enjoyed doing.

Where was I going with this? Well when we moved out here from Redwood City, my dad worked for a builder in Chemeketa Park, and then he worked for a drunken Los Gatos builder who used to get really crocked and fall off the roof all the time. And then, probably around the '50s, he was working with your grandpa as a carpenter. They were working in Morgan Hill and San José. I'm pretty sure he was working on the houses on Assunta and Evora and Kobara. I think he built 15 houses or thereabouts in that area with your grandpa, who was the building contractor. Custom houses. Those were sold. So Edwin was building with Grandpa all that time, and they became really close.

Then your grandpa got to the point where he was buying too many rentals and he couldn't do everything, so he sort of shut down the operation and took care of rentals only, like your dad is doing now. That left your great-grandpa wondering what the hell to do. He didn't push himself, he wasn't aggressive. He wasn't the kind that would just pick up his shorts and say, *Okay then I'm gonna this and I'm gonna that, and I can and I can and I can.* He couldn't.

He just got depressed and moped around. But really what did him in was his high blood pressure. He was building apartments off of Union Avenue when it started getting bad. Hundred and ninety blood pressure. So the doctor put him on high blood pressure medication. But, you're supposed to put patients on anti-depressants along with this particular medication, and they didn't. And the pharmacist didn't catch on to it. So that's what caused him very, very great depression. And it was so sad. So sad and so

unexpected. One day he just walked out into the backyard and shot himself. But it's just another medical mix up. Of which there are many.

My relationship with my father was nice. He was sweet, really sweet. Never laid a hand on me, ever. Every night he'd come in while we were in bed and take the pillows and tuck the blankets under each end. A very sweet man. Didn't use vulgar language. Well, *asshole* was a good one! He used that a lot. It's my favorite. He was very decent, very honest, very sensitive, very kind, and how the hell he put up with my mother I don't know.

And he was drop-dead handsome, too, even in his old age. He never lost his hair. It was baby fine, like a little baby duck. Very fine, fine hair. Brunette. And he had dark brown eyes. Like your grandpa, he worked with his hands and he was strong. He was probably about 5'8" and a hundred and eighty pounds or so. Always very healthy. He knew how to eat, and he was a good cook. Really good cook. I remember when I was a kid and we lived at the adobe, he was always cooking. My mother cooked too, and she was good. But he used to enjoy it. And he used to make the most wonderful stew. Oh, my God! With the rosemary and all the herbs and everything. It just smelled so good, it was so delicious and I just loved it. But I quit eating it when I found out it was made from kidneys. Kidney stew.

One of his special treats was veal cutlets with the kidneys in them. I used to get them for him on his birthday. I mean they ate everything back then. They're all from the Depression, you know, so they used everything. I don't know what they did with rectums. They probably made hot dogs. But they used the intestines to make their

sausage, that blood sausage, cook up all the meat and the blood—that's what it was, blood—and onions and garlic and throw it in the intestines. And then that was your blood sausage. They just put it down in the lard and fried it. That's why when your grandpa married me he was full of boils. Had boils all up his leg. They used to take this lard and spread it on French bread and eat it like that instead of butter. Lard. They didn't die from hardening of the arteries. Well, maybe they did.

And I remember all the fruit trees we had growing up. Plums and all kinds. My mother canned. She canned like fury since she had all the free food early on in San Francisco from the produce company. Your great-grandpa Edwin used to bring home crates and crates of asparagus or whatever vegetables weren't selling and getting old. During the Depression things were really, really tight, and after a shift at work he used to come home with all these vegetables and stuff, and that's when he had his dinner. But it was breakfast time. And they had a neighbor that would just sort of hang out because she didn't have enough to eat. So he'd fry steaks and potatoes and vegetables and that was his dinner at six in the morning or whenever he came home. Then with all this food, my mother would put up—I still have a big pressure canner, that might have been hers—she'd put up 500 quarts of vegetables and fruits. And that's how they lived, you know, off their cans. It's an art. It's very creative.

But anyway, my father passed away in 1975, 65 years old. It was the year your dad graduated. I've never seen my father's ghost like you have. I've heard about all the commotion that went on when you kids were little in that house, and I believe it. But I've never seen anything like a ghost, which is odd because I believe in that. I do believe that

that's not the end. I believe in an afterlife, which means that maybe one of you is his soul returning. You don't know. You can't say that's silly because none of us really knows. But if you see certain things in certain grandkids you think, Oh my father's back. You know, and I believe it. This isn't something that people normally want to talk about because they're afraid of getting labeled as cuckoos. But it's nothing I learned. I wasn't raised in a church. And maybe it's really not necessarily a religious concept. It just sort of grows, and you think, Oh this just falls into place. It falls into place. And I don't know if there's anything like heaven and hell, but I think what you do in this lifetime, in the form of being good—that doesn't mean religious or buying your way to heaven, because I don't think that counts, I think you have to really feel it and show it—you do good in this lifetime, and then you're blessed in the next life.

Sometimes people just linger on this side and they have their ties on this side, and they have a hard time going on. I think that circumstances when a person's life ends the way it's not supposed to, or not naturally, then their soul is in between. It doesn't so easily move on. I had a psychic tell me that one time. Right after my dad died, we were just horrified. Horrified. It was very hard on your father. They were very close. And it really took its toll on your grandfather, too, because he and my dad worked with each other a lot. Then right after my father died, your grandpa's own father died. That's why your grandpa stopped working over there on Fourth Street in downtown San José, across from the University. He just said screw it and got depressed. He was quite a mess. They were all real close to each other, your dad and your grandpa and your great-grandpa. I think you would have liked your great-grandpa too.

Part Three

“All about me
were the works of my Grandfather’s hands.”

—Robert Lowell, “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow”

Dead Man's Rock

The little house in Brookings, Oregon,
that my grandfather built
up on the windy hill overlooks
the Pacific and Dead Man's Rock.
From the single-pane window
I can see the man on his back
in a casket of sea salt.
The defined head, long body, and feet—
brown against the blue and white
of crashing water.
I'm not sure I could swim there,
but someone could.

The key wind chime on the porch
jingles and glistens in the sun.
Banana slugs slime their way
down the stony path.
And in the backyard,
I know an apple has dropped.
I know the dew is drying.

Pruning the Mulberry

the aluminum extension ladder clanks
each time my father moves
it's raining lightly

he's the pumping heart inside
the old mulberry's skeleton
the yellow spadix
of a white calla lily

his shears cross tentacle branches snap
whip through damp air
he warns me
I'm already watching
standing
holding wet handles
my own shears
hands numb cutting branches
little pieces fill cans
neat piles in the street

he comes down to rest
his cigarette dies
inside of him under the overhang
he studies the tree
his hands bloodshot eyes
the limbs he envisions budding
he drags his smoke
climbs the ladder in the rain

On Having Fires

With hobbled steps, he hauls five logs and stacks
them on the pile against the weathered gate.
He'll be out there tomorrow with his ax
and wheelbarrow on house-chore Saturday.

There's sawdust sprinkled white throughout his hair,
his sleeves are stained with streaks of sweat and dirt.
His boots drop mud in crosses tracking where
he splits madrone, loads, stacks although he's hurt.

He's got that tree smell—stagnant birch and oak—
and breathes the chainsaw gas. Gnarled hands crack dry
year round, calluses ring circles like old
trees exposing age to the naked eye.

With every log he tosses in the fire,
my mother moves her blanket with desire.

Eds Sophisticated

Eds drain through vent like water
strained from spaghetti.
So warm up there, he claim.
Watching them sleep again.
So foreign now this house be
with second level and new blue-
print, boys' room a closet.
Dark that closet be, don't go down there
lest you care to see him, say he.
That closet door open
where their heads used to be.
Stairs go up to heaven.
Heaven down to hell.
Confused Eds wander.
He ain't here by choice, by gosh.
Think he alive, think he lost.
Wonder why familiar faces dwell
in unfamiliar place, wonder why
mirror don't show his face.
Fire not warm, ice not cold.
Bourbon be wet paint.
Eds in wet paint drown.
Imagine swallow all that paint.
Imagine sifting through vent holes.
You see Eds tonight you
see God. You see Eds tonight
Devil you see smoking.
Leaves fall in summer,
in winter flowers grow.
It matter not since Eds can't paint it.
And if you can't paint it
you can't live it, say Eds.
Eds be sophisticated so.

Mother's Clam Chowder

my mother stirs clam chowder
spooning creamy
 potato chunks
slivered carrots chewy clams
broth steams green onions wilt
celery softens French bread breathes
 on the counter

redwood kindling pops kisses
newspaper flames
 reads burning ink
stories fade beneath the iron
the redwood catches dry apricot
my father split half a year ago

my black lab missing
his companion lies in the dark
with his face in the corner

Caretaker Eds

Lights be off so Eds on and go to television,
watch news confused at night,
catch moth then watch it take flight.
So blinded by dark
it go so far sun burn its wings.
Icarus moth, not only wings do burn—
moth singe and melt to ash when world not look.
But Eds always look. He gather ash,
scatter inside light fixtures.
He out finding shells for snails,
place worms back in flowerbeds.
That be Eds. When Eds is sleep
Eds is wake. When Eds is wake,
Eds take care of moths and snails,
add log to fire when blanket fails.
Eds find love in loveless places.
Eds find death in every faces.
When he tower over your bed
maybe he just check
to see you sleep okay.

Feeding the Doves

My grandfather sits in his basement breaking
breadcrumbs to feed his doves.

A black wool beanie rests on his scraggly gray hair.
He wears a red and black checkered flannel.

His chest is a tree trunk; his limbs are boughs full of water.
Hands like Earth ancient with dark rivers.

Outside, cold, the doves are tired beneath blue tarps.
When he's finished breaking up the bread,

my grandfather canes the rocky path, untwists
wet wires to uncover the cage. Tame doves blink

dreams away, squint at the rising sun
surrounding my grandfather. He steps inside the cage

and sprinkles breadcrumbs like heavy rain.

Father's Day Eds

Telephone voice machine play Eds
on Father's Day, and his daughter wake
confused, somnambulant sweeping steps
down cold hallway tile.
Eds' voice resound the empty kitchen,
dark with drapes and night.
Empty stools still on swivels.
Even clock stop ticking.
She stumble in, confused Eds
see her through telephone line
air tight in wires, sleep beneath buttons.
Her fingers tremble when she flick the light
and scurry to stop her father's voice:
STOP STOP STOP PICK UP HANG UP.
Then it stop for Eds can tell her frightened.
He not want to scare her, only remind her
his love, but he realize he remind her
so much more.

Chopping Eds

Eds remember chopping heads
off chickens slaughter clean
feathers in sink
make baby girl daughter
watch and smell the stink.
That girl never eat chicken again
for every time chicken cook
bake fry boil broil grill simmer
wings breasts thighs eyes necks
faces feet faces eyes
she see heads gone like Eds.

Corduroy Eds

Eds like corduroy brown
fine fitting fit
fit like a glove
palm to gun grip
finger to trigger
smooth like copper
Eds be Lincoln
arrested in copper
lined in corduroy
like Lincoln lined
in fingerprints
what of dimensions?
Eds can mingle with the mangled
but corduroy don't fit anymore.

Peach Tree

The fruitless peach tree spites him
like finger picking
rusty banjo strings.
Black rain is rainbow haunting.
Pink crawls in the wind
tracing sidewalk cracks
ambidextrous,
baby feet hanging
from highchair.
On hot summer days
he lets the hose drip slow
to let the peach tree drink.
Flooded beetles flee
like free legs
searching for cold spots
beneath bed sheets.
Sparrows chant, blue jays
eye the kumquat tree,
watch him pop kumquats
in his mouth.

Camouflage Eds

The upstairs hallway painting's camouflaged—
blue skies, clouds, cherry blossoms, and Eds' face.
It's crooked, this still-life living collage

that breathes. Eds must think this distant lodge
is home. He lurks at night and leaves his trace—
the upstairs hallway painting, camouflaged.

No, Eds never been one to sabotage.
Gentle man...but he feels so out of place
it's crooked, this still-life living collage.

At first the boy mistook him for mirage.
Then, clarity. It makes the young boy race
the upstairs hallway, painting camouflage

truths of stirring house and trying to dodge
the hiding man. Memories won't erase.
It's crooked, this still-life living collage

Eds admires, old saws in the garage,
still hanging there. Cold nights. The new fireplace,
the upstairs hallway painting, camouflaged.
It's crooked, this still-life living collage.

Waiting

He waits by her side at four a.m.,
waits like himself at the lake
with his fishing pole in his cold,
wrinkled old hands, sitting in the boat
rippling water softly in chilly dawn.
If he were there now, at four a.m.
hot coffee thermosed in the boat,
Frank hoarsely chatting away,
scaring away all the fishes, he says.
*Frank, he says, you're scaring away
all the fishes,* and then it's quiet
again, water lapping the boat's body
and morning birds waiting for day to break.

The house is dark, faded green curdles
walls and carpet, even the sofa, even
the high-backed chair in which he sits
by her side. All night long he sat by her
side asking her if she'd like a sip of water
because her mouth looked dry.
And suddenly something is wrong.
The coffee maker *beeps, beeps, beeps, beeps*
because it's turning off, the bold aroma
he's grown to love seeps out beneath the door.

She says, *Dad, Dad*, what she's called him,
her husband, for fifty years instead of *Lew*
or *Dear*. *Dad*, she squeaks. He rises
from the green high-backed chair
to touch her hand and look at her
eyes, wide. He's seen this look before,
out on the lake balancing hot breath
in cold air and a fish net, balancing
his weight with Frank's in the small boat
as he tries to net Frank's rainbow trout;
Frank fighting the line and spinning
the rod, tight with the trout's fight,
taut like his old hands reeling.
A little more, a little more, he says,
and Frank says, *he's a tough one.*

Closer, the moan of line, closer pattering
boots on the boat floor, closer, reaching
out the net, the trout flopping around,
gasping for breath and staring at the men
frightened, flopping in the cold air of dark morning.

Both of them are unsure what to do next.
He calls his daughter to tell her it's time,
and his daughter hurries over a couple miles,
nobody on the road, nothing of the day
except gray and fading street lamps,
green lights letting her go. She tastes
what's in the air getting stronger
as she nears her parents' house.

The lampshade is tilted away from her,
reflecting a subtle bulb of light
off the green wall of the living room.
He says *I love you* and hopes she hears him.
It's quiet under his choked sobs. Then,
she opens her eyes and tells him *I love you*
and trails away looking at him,
his wet face locked in hearing her.

When his daughter arrives she already
knows, she sees him open the screen door
and knows he wouldn't have stood there
otherwise, wouldn't have left her side.
She begins to cry, hugging her father, both
of them knowing this is best for her.
He tells her about the last moment.

He tells everybody about that.

Broken Glass

When the needle grooved Jackson Browne,
Mother dropped the glass she was washing
in the sink and it shattered down the drain.

Father walked in and she cried a little, dropped
her rag and covered her face. He held her
head against his shoulder and kissed her hair.

He poured some whiskey and they sat
against the kitchen cabinets on the floor.
Mother brought her knees close to her chest.

Through the window, moths danced
mazy paths around the cob-webbed porch light.
Jackson Browne's voice was all ice and water,

the moisture from their glasses ringing circles
on the hardwood. She was missing her mother,
and he whispered something gentle into her ear.

Spinning the Wheel

Grandpa sits across from me
in the dark living room.
The hard, green carpet
embraces us.
He's in his high-backed green chair
talking about people
at the hospital.
The antique clock
clicks on the wall.
The heat kicks on; the radio plays soft oldies.
This place is messier since Grandma passed.

Behind him the fireplace is cold.
A small pile of dry wood crackles
softly—chimney wind touching
browning newspaper.
His droopy eyes, framed
with large bifocals, are falling tektites.
From my stiff chair, I see the window's reflection
on his face as I follow his story
from the living room.
We're both full and tired from breakfast.

He says a man named Jean
spent twenty-six hours
in the emergency room
for a blood transfusion.
*By the time they got a room
it looked like his wife needed the transfusion!*

He guides me
through the house, reliving
old photos.
In the backroom, where he sleeps
on a musty twin bed,
he shows me a very old computer.
Grandpa, with trembling hands, asks
me about the wheel on the mouse.

I think about how Grandpa won't sleep

in his own bed anymore;
won't use the fireplace;
I think about him all alone
at four o'clock in the morning,
the dripping coffee,
the humming heater,
the subtle light above the dining room table.
Restless, Grandpa reads about saving
files to a floppy disk
and customizing the toolbar.

Candied Yams Eds

Yams?

Yes, Eds. Yams.

Can you make them candied yams?

Delicate almond flakes,
sweet, melted marshmallow.

Those orange boats.

Float away, orange boats!

You're excited today.

You're not?

They're just yams.

Not just yams.

Loaded boats ready to set sail.

Ready to sink.

Please make them candied yams.

I won't.

May I have one?

And feed a yam to the air?

Eds, they'll think I'm crazy.

*I can't go feeding yams
to misty mouths, plopping
orange boats from hand
to kitchen floor. Splat!*

See?

It reminds me of my spilled paint.

A sunset on wooden floor.

Don't try to eat it, Eds.

You'll merely kiss the floor.

Dishwasher Eds

Yes, love is a strange thing.
You're like a sponge.
You let all the dishes pile up
in that sink heart of yours—overflowed
with grime and unwanted.
You scrub away burnt memories,
clean lip marks on glasses,
and wash what fed your hunger.
But it's downhill from here.
Why will it get worse?
Downhill, not worse.
Downhill is easier.
You ride your bicycle downhill
and don't need to pedal, yes?
People are very confused about that saying.
Yeah. Yeah, you're right.
Up is down, down is up.
Not always, surely.
Only for hills.
My point:
Your sink is now sparkling
white with emptiness.
You are cleansed.
Let your sink fill up
with more dishes, silverware, food scraps.
Take your feet off the pedals,
coast downhill for a while
catching the breeze with your face.
What if coasting isn't fast enough?
I feel like running.
Run, you'll fall on your face.
Coast, you'll see
the next batch of dishes
might not need washing.

Part Four

“Lay down them projects for the crackling stars.
The hourglass sifts itself.”

—Troy Jollimore, “Tom Thomson in Turmoil”

Dizzy at Lunch

She separates soft honey wheat,
spreads peanut butter.
Dizzy Gillespie tells her,
The jam, baby. Don't forget the jam.
Her hair is twisted in a soggy white towel.
Water droplets spoon her neck
as she layers grape trumpet coating,
knife-and-glass music.
I wrap my arms around her from behind,
and she gently puts the pieces together.

Wine Tasting

I.

I'm swirling red wine in a glass like they say,
catching aromas I don't recognize.

I'm just drinking—everyone thinking, tasting:
There are hints of violet and rosemary in this Pinot Noir.

I agree, glass empty, rim stained from mouth thronging.
“Baby, do you love me?” And I nod, kiss her

with lips numbed from purple flavors. I ask for another.
“Are you having a good time?” Yes, I say.

Good wine, refills are free from Clem behind the counter
getting tips from sloppy singles. I thank her for taking me.

II.

“Fields of Gold” is playing and for some reason it's making me
sad. She holds my hand—warm blood from warm wine

warms her chilled fingertips. She likes white. *West wind moves.*
She rubs my back in circles. *Will you stay with me?*

Will you be my love? Her body rises when I kiss her mouth—
I've never been to a wheat field before, but it sounds pretty.

III.

I rub her legs and ponder the length of Syrah.
You can really taste the blackcurrants, everyone agrees.

This one's supposed to have bitterness. I look at her;
she smiles. I tell her, “If you were a wine, I'd buy a bottle.”

My cheeks are red reflections of full glasses,
silly eyes she knows so well. I know her legs, her body,

mouthfeel and palate. She is balanced and assertive—
elegant with full-bodied character, seductive with cutting edge.

For once, I know what I'm looking for.

Work Night

The gutter pings, wind chimes dance
as we whisper windowed night songs.
Work tomorrow.

Hammers.

Ladders.

Don't care.

I'm in your neck like love
is supposed to be,
and you smell so good.

We go to a diner at one in the morning.
You order breakfast, laugh
at the waiter who gives you my burger.
We switch plates and you dunk
your toast in runny yolk.

Love in the night
that the light
can't quite reach.

We leave, blurred under smeared
windshield squeaking in drizzle.
I rub your damp jeans,
and notice you falling asleep.

Going to Work

After closing the aluminum screen door of my apartment, I notice a cat has sprayed my threshold along with my new doormat: *Welcome!*

The red-lipped golden orchids have bloomed, and they remind me of nectarine centers gilded with a film of juice reflecting the sun.

But it's cloudy. Abandoned snail shells, like ghost towns, litter the walkway to my car. Silver tracks lead to the ivy. I follow them with my eyes.

Going to work, my car stuck between accelerating and braking on drying roads, the crowded pavement world leads me downtown in jolts.

I take the Vine Street exit off 280 South. The pillars holding up the on-ramps are marked mysteriously with words (at the moment I can't remember

what they are, except for *earth*, *fire*, and *myth*). The stoplight holds me like the silver breath of the homeless man who stands at this intersection

every single morning talking to himself, throwing two fingers in the air at passing cars, maybe a peace sign, perhaps a two, or possibly a sign

for something I don't even know. I watch him through my peripheral windshield while I turn the knobs of my radio to catch the sports on KNBR.

I adjust my steel thermos that leans in the cup holder, avoiding eye contact when all I want to do is look right at the guy, bearded with caveman teeth,

and give him a peace sign back. But I'm not so sure that's what he means.

The Land of Plenty

Something about driving with the windows down
listening to Tom Petty makes me wish I had long hair.

My Civic scatters the black crows on I-5, summer heat
blows a breath from hell and burns my left forearm

as smoke roots out my nostrils. Brown grass
hugs the roads that stretch from 505 South to 80 West.

I think about wildflowers, miles per hour
on a broken speedometer that winks at me through dust.

I try to find the link between gas and empty water towers.
The pavement's got a grip on me. I'm bound.

Benicia steam at dusk chokes the orange hills.
It can't belong to songs it won't fulfill.

This crowded bridge is about to tumble down.

Pale Eds

And his face is gossamer holding
in all that pain. Diaphanous looker.
He looks foggier than Santa
Cruz mornings eating away
at the ocean breath of salt sand;
or, he looks paler than that shell
he left me on my nightstand
which I held up to my ear
only to hear not the sea
but the grinding of sand grains
falling into my head.
And this is what he said.
I only imagined how the seaweed
leapt across the breeze
and knotted my knees
and he pleaded not to let me
let him do it but I blew it
before I ever had a chance
and he just stood there
in the sand looking at me
with his crooked head
and his oozing holes
and I felt guilty like the souls
of the souls of the souls
of the souls.

Stray Cat

I killed a cat today that wasn't mine.
His gray unraveled coat a lion's mane,
his ghastly walk was like a dying man's
with back side matted covered thick with filth.

I killed a cat today that wasn't mine.
He glared at me with somber children's eyes
and dragged his withered tail along the street,
secreting stench fowl of garbage grime.

I killed a cat today that wasn't mine.
His body, starved, erupted morbid howls
that begged for someone to give him help.
I showed him food and water on the porch.

I killed a cat today that wasn't mine.
To find some warmth he sneaked in the garage;
his sewage smell was far too much to bear.
I sadly urged him back into the cold.

I killed a cat today that wasn't mine.
He stunk of rotten, tattered flesh that bled
on leaves of Raymond Ash attached to chest;
he tracked a trail of puss across my porch.

I killed a cat today that wasn't mine.
I never saw him once before today.
A stranger to this place, he came too late
but moaned surrender trying anyway.

I killed a cat today that wasn't mine.
I cruelly fooled him into metal cage
with fresh canned food delicious all for him.
Behind him dropped the door to lock him in.

I killed a cat today that wasn't mine.
The truck arrived, the man cringed at the sight.
The howling cage was open casket now;
I couldn't stand to look him in the face.

Eds Searching

Last night, at two, Eds lifted
up my house—
the way old roots lift
curbs and fences
when no one's looking—
and carefully searched
the foundation for his spouse
with broken binoculars,
eyes like cannon balls,
a voracious hole for a heart.
He blew the dirt
like dandelions, clouds
of dust with bits of life
so fine he sulked.
I felt my bed
inside his mouth before
he gently set the house back
down to rest.
In warm air whisking
through the window screens,
I heard him crunching leaves
of worried trees.
The neighborhood was quiet.
I could feel him
hurting, looking
for what was not there.

Jalapeño Eds

Eat jalapeño like candy,
Eds does. Inside chifferobes
like cold jargon. He sweat
the heat. Absorbent
like cinema seats. White
pellets. White picket fences
no place for Eds.
Lucifugous Eds.
He cooking up
a Christly feast in that
chifferobe there.
Steaming wood, squeaky
doors, handles too hot
to touch with common hand.
Common man. Sad, strange,
common little man, say Eds.
No knowledge of conduit
cuticles he lose in the
chifferobe cookoff with all
his kind stuffed in there.
Huddled together.
Stagnant air no place
to go. All those buckets
of jalapeños dripping.
Dripping.
It be a riot down there.
Catapult the rest of you
through the crevices, Eds.
See them taking note
of your performance.
All trumpets and cymbals
crashing and harmonica
molding all that air
making music of Eds'
jalapeño breath.

Ripe Eds

Eds is a fruit
a loquat

woolly leather leaves
his pit is thick

blue jays peck
yellow skin peels

high in sugar
like hearts pumping

he be different
appear in autumn

ripe in late winter
many Eds

oval clusters
sedative in quantity

for jays or ghosts
fragrant depth

heady aroma
smelled from distance

The Skin

at the back of her
thighs smack like lips
kissing hot leather
off the chair
in the private room
at the pizza parlor.

She slides off her sandals,
places her bare
feet on the red straps, spinning
the chair,
her hair perfumed
with acoustic mahogany.

Like nectarines, her body
yields under pressure.
She dreams
of the other side
of the window,
where people look in
instead of always
looking out.

Her Voice

This maze of books contains us. Reaching up,
her dark jeans snug on curvy hips, she pulls
Neruda from the shelf and reads his love
songs gently, makes them sound more beautiful.

Her whispers touch my bones. We stand so close
her scent exudes, burnt almond cake skin
and smooth Chanel perfume. This sweet repose
is burning up the shelves we live within.

She says to me how good that was. I know.
I'd buy this book if only so she'd read
it to me every day, her voice this low
and lips so soft they feed this hungry need.

As we walk out without a dime to pay,
outside, our voices rise and fade away.

Feeling Good

The piano quivers
sax percussions.
What would John Coltrane
be saying over all this?
Does it matter?
He isn't talking
but he's got me listening,
moving while I'm sitting
back relaxed—
foot taps &
finger pats.
We got the same initials.
He goes and leaves
and when he leaves
I leave with him—gone.
A good gone,
gone to a restaurant,
order a dressed scramble,
eat alone at the counter.
I don't care.
I don't give a damn.
I'm feeling that good.
The sax rises
like sizzling eggs.
Flip 'em toss 'em mix 'em
John Coltrane—
I want potatoes
and ketchup too.
Piano notes like clematis
wind around
this breakfast—
a blossom.

New Times Blues

I need to fill my empty car with gas.
Three dollars and ninety cents a gallon.
Only card, she says. But I don't have one—
all I have is thirty dollars cash.

Tonight I build a fire in soggy ash.
Don't know why, but I answer the phone
only to hear the scolding tone, the drone
of the neighbor's warning and verbal lash.

Knocks at the door, a cop in the porch light.
I open the door and greet him, though
behind my head the sparking fire's aglow.
Evenin', sir. Got a fire goin' tonight?

He puts out my fire and gives me a fine.
I take out my wallet, hand him my card,
and he asks, *What's that?* then stares at me hard.
My card to pay, I say—again declined.

Spare the Air Eds

Your shivering woke me.

Aren't you the one who loves fires?

Can you build me a fire?

No can do, Eds. Spare the air.

*Can't have fires on spare the air nights,
or we'll get fined.*

That is ridiculous. Now please,

I need my fire.

It's the honest truth, Eds.

I can't give you fire.

Please do not call me Eds.

The wood is stacked along the wall,

left by that useful fireplace—

warms these frozen bones

as best it can, if only it burns.

That's very much Frost, Eds.

Frost comes from my mouth.

I see my breath.

I see you.

Where is the old heater

I stood by long ago?

No more heater. Your daughters are old,

your grandchildren grown,

and you...still cold.

Stand by those vents.

No more heater, no more fires.

I am so cold.

Me too, Eds. Me too.

The Conversation

“Hey how ya doin there?”

John from across the street approaches me.

He’s still taking his walks, I see.

His voice, like it’s gone, a whisper.

No matter how much he struggles it out
it whistles out his throat.

“Warm for October,” I say. And we chat.

John and his wife, Arlene, used to watch me
play whiffle ball in the front yard here.

They’d sit on their swinging bench

holding hands as I pretended

to be Kirt Manwaring and Matt Williams.

John says Arlene’s doing okay.

I tell him that I’m helping out the folks.

“Gotta let the dogs out to pee,” I say.

“I walk em too and help out around the yard when I can.”

“That’s awfully nice,” he says.

This morning, I had already walked the dogs.

I took them to the school down the block,

threw the ball for a while

then looped around the neighborhood

and came back home.

John sees me today because I’m watering
the little strips of grass in the front yard for my dad,
who had arrived home from work
earlier than I expected.

He’s cleaning up for his doctor’s visit.

Getting a CAT scan on his lungs

because they want to check out those spots

they saw when they X-rayed his kidneys last week.

I don’t tell any of this to John.

John tells me he’s real happy to see me.

He leaves and I zone out in the routine

of watering. I’ve had my thumb

over the hose, soaking the grass.

The pressure’s high.

Water is filling the gutter and spraying all over.

I try backing up, holding the hose up higher,
trying to find the right touch.

Through my parents' bedroom window,
I hear Dad in his upstairs bathroom
gagging from the toothbrush.
I can't stop listening to him.
I can't stop thinking.
I can't think of anything.
And I suddenly notice that I've found the sweet spot
on the hose and the water is sprinkling down
like the most natural kind of rain.

His Old Body

think about his insides
organs like sandcastles
 nowhere
 near the water
eroding grain by grain
with every gentle breeze

broad-winged birds
 cloud his eyes
short words of his
body
 kid knees
 he ear art
 live her

drain his history
lungs like ruins
filled with sand

Where Eds Reside

There in the room.
There in the womb
of the Earth
be a hearse in a purse
with Eds in a box.
Eds have a pillow hang
from a willow in box
meadow full of corpses
headless horses gallop
the wind of spirits breath
dangle ghosts weeping
willow branches sulking
sunshine on day of darkness.
History sings
in their faces.

That be Eds.

Eds be last breath trapped
in a box in a hearse
in a purse in the womb
of the Earth in the room.
Strange world it be
where Eds reside,
tucked inside tablecloths
and wallet pockets.

Knots

Sometimes I stand alone in the kitchen
and think the knots in the wooden cabinets
are looking at me. Eyes, stuck in the shine
of sealed pine, and the only thing keeping
them in there is that thin lacquer coating.

The condensation from my glass pools
in the kitchen counter grout. I open
the freezer, take out the ice tray, and twist
it around, crackling like fire. I add
more cubes, listen. If I open the cab-
-inet and a bunch of eyes turn into faces
and bodies, I'd be more surprised than if
my own eyes jumped into the live cabinets.

Climbing

We run from tree to tree to find the one
to keep us from the rain. Her wandering hand's
inside my coat pocket like a button
buried inside a birdhouse. She's sans

nail polish—simply sweated, jeans, and flats.
I point her to a pine that's known my life.
She wonders how it grew, tells me, "Now *that's*
a tree to climb." I feel her ring, my wife

of only seven months, and trace her palm
the way I used to climb that tree. Its limbs
are many, strong and steady, like her long
fingers searching the crevices for lint.

But we won't live to see this tree grow old,
and both our dreams combined can't match its hold.

Your Hair

In the wind, when your hair lost its flower,
I thought for a second about chasing it
down. A dance in the breeze, white petals
slipping deeper into a sun-stickered day.
I caught the scent of your hair lingering
in the air off the stem's edge, and I swear
that the flower grew when it floated.
Did a strand of you trail away with it?
Slowly, in the most natural way, it kept
on tumbling around, inevitably
reaching the ground. When I turned to face you,
I noticed the dazzling whites in your hair.

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