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Catching On Dark In Public

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CATCHING ON DARK IN PUBLIC

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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by

Joshua Robert Long

2018

Dedication

These works are dedicated to my wife, and to the memory of my mother.

CATCHING ON DARK IN PUBLIC

by

JOSHUA ROBERT LONG, B.A., The Ohio State University

THESIS

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Preface

It was in a class called “Antropoesia: The Poet as Ethnographer”, taught by Professor Tim Z. Hernandez, which led to the conception of the poetry that follows. Up until that point, there had been a genuine inconsistency in my writing—a habit of mine that I had been exercising for more than half of my life, and it all changed when I began figuring out what my final project would center around. A couple of years prior to this class, my mother had been diagnosed with late-stage colon cancer out of nowhere. I had an incredibly close relationship with her, and between battling the disease and the disease winning, it left me carrying the most puzzling sense of loss for years.

The culmination of this class was to do a project centered around an event that took place in your life that you could piece back together with photos, writings, news pieces, or anything else that connected to the situation. Many others in the class went in a much lighter direction with their content, but at this point I was still hung up on losing my mom and it was seriously damaging every other aspect of my life. Friends and peers had often suggested trying to “write my way through it”—which seemed like the most troubling of choices for me and how my mind works, but being at a loss for what else to do, and realizing I needed to begin to move past the event, it seemed like the logical choice for the subject matter.

Within the final document, there were long stretches of prose—which isn’t something I usually write, photographs taken by myself and other family, and little poems that I would write while hanging out in the hospital rooms, waiting rooms, and all the other rooms that cancer brings into your life. From that project, a small untitled poem turned into the original poem that led the collection you’re about to read—a poem titled “Happy Holidays”, which was originally written shortly after our family met with the surgeon who attempted to remove a tumor the size

of a softball from my mother's colon.

Up until this point in my writing, I had mostly focused on that cliché level of hedonism that tends to exist—especially in younger male writers. Things tended to center around adventure, parties, sex, drugs, and so forth. In a way, it's an easy way to cop-out of diving into more serious situations, or so I've learned at least. If I tried to write on a more serious issue, I felt insecure. I felt like a fraud with my abilities and knew someone, somewhere would see through it because I'm neurotic. The beauty of this Antropoesia project was that I knew I was delivering an event in a straight-forward and honest way. It felt more like being a journalist covering the death of my mom than a son dealing with losing the only parent who had ever guided me along through life.

By the semester's end, I found myself still feeling very anxiety, lost, and puzzled. I remember still trying to call my mom in certain situations, and felt her absence during holidays and other specific times of the year. But the anxiety and the sensations of being lost felt different by then. There was almost an urgency to the feelings. It made me think back to being 17 or 18 years old—that time when the world is still on fire in your head and you want to go dancing with it. It took me awhile to really grab ahold of it—being in my late 20's had already started to make me jaded to different sides of life.

For the first time in my writing, I was dealing with difficult situations and I was feeling confident in my ability to talk about them. It was a double-edged sword though I suppose, because this exploration of the dark sides of my memories led to voices and scenarios I couldn't get out of my head. Since clichés had done me so well in the past, I figured I would follow another one of them and have a drink or two to take the edge off it all. The saddest part of this newfound drinking habit was everything else that was going on in my life at that time—things

that were very positive. I had recently married my girlfriend of four years, we had saved enough money to buy brand new cars—which was a world I never thought I would know of growing up in the sort of poverty that I did, my best friend had a baby, some other friends were married or on their way there, and so on. Instead of allowing all that goodness to take the dark away from me—I was happily floating down the cliché and drowning myself in whatever liquor was on sale at the neighborhood grocery.

Like everything else, eventually I made my way out of it without any major problems, arrests, or other bits of bad news that usually follow years of drug and alcohol abuse. One thing I've learned over the last several months of no longer drinking is that it never seems to be bad when life is going good—once something goes wrong though, it's an entirely different situation.

The bad started around December 2016. My wife and I had moved from Yellow Springs, Ohio, an area I had spent most of my life in, and relocated to a small town on the south-central coast of Alaska called Seward. She had recently completed a Master's Degree program at Johns Hopkins University and scouted the entire country for curator gigs—naturally landing one four thousand miles from where we were. That initial summer we were here was fantastic. We were living nine hundred feet from the ocean and were surrounded by mountains. The sun never seemed to set until the middle of August. It was dramatically cooler than the summers we were used to in Ohio. It seemed like a wild dream that came out of our collected minds and sprung into reality. But, as the lesson goes, just with any other good in my head, there's a bad, and that started piling up as the daylight began disappearing more and more each day.

Over the next few months as we move away from Alaska, I will never forget just how important the sunshine is. Prior to the seasonal shift, which starts slowly around the middle of August and progresses dramatically faster, essentially “peaking” in December, around Christmas

holidays, there was always a manageable amount of it in the sky. By the end of September though, roughly two minutes of sunlight get pushed back in the morning—making the sunrise later, and then another two minutes get shaved off the sunset clock. By Christmas Day, the sun “rises” between 10:30am and 11:30am, and “sets” around 3:15pm. Where we are in Seward, the sun is basically gone during this time of year by 1:30pm because it’s blocked by several mountains. Maybe it was the Ohio boy in me, or maybe I just love being in the sun more than the average person, but not having much sun for nearly 8 months out of the year destroyed my mental health.

It wasn’t just the loss of the sunshine unfortunately. Just weeks before we moved out here, my god-daughter, Alexis, was diagnosed with leukemia after fainting at her softball game with what her mom and my brother thought was a cold. The initial prognosis looked very optimistic and treatable, so we still departed as planned, but by this time of year things were getting difficult on that end—which is its own type of sadness—being so far away from loved ones during an emergency time. Sometime around November my brother told me his wife was taking Alexis to Boston to do an experimental treatment involving stem cells that was a total longshot and had never been performed on a living person yet.

Just a week or so before hearing back from him, we bought tickets to go back to Ohio for Christmas and Chanukah. What seemed like a literal minute after the purchase, he had phoned me in the most hysterical happiness, informing me that the operation was a total success and that she was “temporarily” in remission. The “temporarily” part could be solved with a bone marrow transplant, which she would have in February. Everything about all of this seemed to lift us up in the best possible ways. For the first time since the passing of our mother, everything seemed like it used to—especially the holidays.

As February came, Alexis went in some time during the first week of the month to begin the procedure. Her younger sister was the one donating the bone marrow, I remember watching all of that unfold from a distance via Facebook. The bone marrow transplant went as smooth as it could have. Taylor, her younger sister, felt so proud knowing she gave the bone marrow to her older sister. After the procedure, Alexis had to go through an extreme round of chemotherapy since the procedure she had in Boston involved stem cells, which only stay active for a short window of time—or something along those lines. She'd done a million rounds of it up to this point, so none of us thought anything about it. A few days later it became all we thought about though, because her body had been so weak from everything it went through that the chemo made her liver and kidneys begin to fail. This is where the dark came back into the picture.

Alaska got my wife and I back into drinking in a professional way. In Seward, between the months of October and May, roughly eighty percent of the town shuts down for the season. The only things left open are the grocery, the pharmacy, the hospital, three restaurants, a library, an aquarium, and the four bars. The nearest city, the well-known city of Anchorage, is over two hours away during clear summer weather. With the snow-covered mountain passes in the winter, that drive turns into a three or four-hour affair that simply isn't worth it. The drinking caused problems between the two of us, and caused problems for each of us individually. It skewed our views, as alcohol does, and led us into absolute chaos.

My brother's wife had told me on the telephone to get down to Ohio as soon as possible because they were not at all sure how long she would still be with us. This brought on the first bout of chaos. My wife had a few different things happening at her job she didn't want to just suddenly call off. Then it developed from her being busy to her being too nervous or anxious to ask her boss for more time off for a family emergency. About a week went by and she finally got

it all sorted out. We booked flights and left a few days after that.

We were back in Ohio for about five days, which is the amount of time that my wife had requested off. As they came to an end, my niece was still alive, and everything was still very uncertain—but we knew that it was coming soon. I asked if she would send an email to her boss asking for more time off, and she was too afraid to do it. We had a big giant argument in the lobby of Nationwide Children’s Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. We left there, arguing about what to do in the car on our way back to my brother’s house. My wife was too scared to make the giant drive from the Anchorage airport back down to Seward alone, so instead of just having me stay, I went back with her. Two days after we got back to Alaska, my niece passed away. She was thirteen years old. It was probably the most tragic situation I will ever know of, and the rift it caused with me having to come back with her instead of being with my brother while it happened still lingers around somewhere in the back of my head.

So another two days after this, I had a friend of ours drive me and her back up to the airport. My wife didn’t have any more paid leave to use at work, and with her being the only one of us with a steady full-time job, we just couldn’t afford to have her missing work—especially with buying all these plane tickets. I went alone. The whole trip was a surreal waking nightmare. It made everything with my mom seem like nothing at all. It made me question everything about my life and the choices involved with it.

After going through every different thing related to the funeral services, I stayed with my brother and his family for about three more days. I offered to stay more since the only real thing I had going on at that time was the winter semester at UTEP, but he said they really needed to just be with each other and that I should get back home to my wife.

From the moment I got to my brother’s house in preparation for the funeral, everything

about my drinking had gotten out of hand. I was drinking as soon as I woke up in the morning, and it was all liquor. He was doing the same thing.

Growing up our mother was always big on making sure we stayed away from alcohol. The reason our dad wasn't a huge part of the equation in our family was because he was a terrifying alcohol and drug addict. His entire family, for the most part, fell into that category too—many of which died very prematurely from health complications that come along with aggressive alcohol or drug use.

One thing I know to be very true as I write this as a thirty-four-year-old is that while it may be debatable about addiction being a “disease”, it is something that is passed on from parent to child. If the child ever activates it, that's an entirely different argument—but it gets passed on.

I carried this accelerated drinking habit back home with me as I got back to Alaska. Over the next several months, my wife let herself cool off about it, but I just kept rolling with it. I wouldn't drink every day, and my life never got controlled by it. I didn't have that kind of relationship with alcohol. Rather, mine fell into the realm of “once I had one I had to have every one of them that ever existed”.

Our relationship continued falling farther and farther by the wayside. We stopped being so interested in what each other were working on, who we were going to hang out with, or anything else really—short of “what do you want to eat for dinner?”. By the middle of the summer, around the Independence Day holiday, I thought we had started mending everything. We were talking and engaging with each other more, we were doing all the things people in healthy relationships seem to do. Friends were flying up to visit us. Everything started to feel exciting again.

Because there was this regained level of personal happiness, I stopped caring so much

about drinking. I had balanced myself out. I was about to begin my third and final year of graduate school at UTEP and I was burning up with so many ideas for what to do with my thesis. But that's when I realized this new strangely-intimate relationship my wife had formed with our friend, a guy who's name I don't even want to write down still. He's the one that drove me up to the airport so my wife didn't have to travel back alone. He was, up until this point in time, someone I considered to be a genuine friend—one of the friends you only get a few of over the course of a lifetime.

By the end of our second August in Alaska, I started feeling completely neglected. When we were out in social settings, it genuinely seemed like my wife was in a relationship with this other guy. I've heard a few times since last summer that other people were confused about that too. Seward being such a small place—everyone notices everything and everyone, especially out at the bars.

Through my own neurotic ambitions, I slowly pieced together how and what they were to each other. Essentially, what's now been told to me in hindsight, is that my wife *wanted* to have an affair with him, but couldn't get passed the guilt of *doing* it—because realistically, she *didn't want to do it*. She circumvented around it by doing things way out of her character—such as wanting to play a naked version of Twister, and more adult-based truth or dare games. Things she expressed zero interest in ever doing, even when we were young in our undergraduate college days. This led me back to the alcohol and the drugs and the general disassociation that I was becoming way too familiar with.

I want to think it felt so different and harsh to me while this was happening because somewhere in my head I knew that marriages and relationships never really bounced back from this sort of thing. I knew it happened and it wasn't a hopeless thing, but I also knew, especially in

the modern world, it wasn't worth the effort for most people involved in them. This put me on a mission to just catch them in this weird world they made for themselves. I was done. It was too much for more to want to deal with.

This stupid approach of mine led to drinking my way through September, doing more crying than I think I've ever done in my life, and, against my own worst sort of fears, learning they really were on the cusp of just having their own relationship. It all came to a head one Friday night towards the end of the month. I couldn't handle seeing them running around together at a music festival we were at, so I went into the beer garden and drank myself to the point of not caring anymore. At some point after that, I went out front of the venue we were at for a cigarette, and noticed, since I happened to park in the front row when we came out, that the two of them were in my car, embraced in some way. Because I was so drunk, I'll never know if they were just hugging each other or if they were making out or whatever else they were doing. I ran over to the car and lost my mind.

I kept trying to get my wife out of the driver's seat so I could leave, but they somehow forced me into the backseat. She was driving him back to his house, and then she was going to take us home. When we pulled into his driveway, we all got out of the car and I started yelling at them again, telling them I know they were doing something because I saw them. It turned into a whole giant tragic mess. The friend and I ended up getting in a giant rumble, resulting in me running to my car to just leave them there. To stop me from driving, the friend punched me directly in the middle of my forehead. The reason he did this, apparently, was to knock me out so I wouldn't try to drive away. Punches don't always work like they do in the movies, and I still got in the car and started driving down the road. Roughly three hundred or so feet from his driveway, I realized that I was not in any condition to be driving a car. The effects of the punch

to the head were working together with my drunken state and it was leaving me in a terrible position. I tried turning the car around in the road, and it was dark, and overshot the road by a small amount and ended up putting the car down into a giant storm drain.

I don't remember how long I had been in the storm drain, but I remember waking back up, to the sound of someone knocking on the window of the car. It was the son of the person who owned the house the storm drain was in front of. He asked me some questions to basically just make sure I was aware of where I was, and then told me I should probably start running because his mom had called the police and they were on their way to the area.

This friend's house was out in the middle of nowhere, which, like most rural places, has no streetlighting. I had only been out there once or twice and genuinely had no idea where I was. It was raining lightly. It was very cold. There was a giant gash on my forehead from where he had hit me. My shoulders were sore from the seatbelt whiplash of the crash. Before I could even begin to realize the general area I was in, an officer from the Alaska State Troopers turned the corner and began driving towards me. I was only a few feet away from my car, which was somehow, minus a little dent on the front bumper, completely alright.

I was so done with my entire life at this point that I didn't have an argument left in my body. I was at such a level of sadness and shock that I couldn't think to cry. There was nothing in me to cry over. It was as if everything within my spirit was leaving me. I was becoming something else. It made sense in numerous ways, and no sense at all no matter how much I examined it.

The trooper drove me back into the city of Seward, and had me booked and formally charged with DUI. The process took close to three hours, which seemed insanely long to me considering that I was the only person in the entire city's custody on that night. I spent a lot of

time joking with the trooper, who was a guy roughly my age, about the uniform they made him wear. I was particularly hung up on the pants. They were this vibrant royal blue and they had a very fat red stripe down the sides of both legs. I've concluded they were only funny to me because of how much they resembled the pants I had to wear in marching band when I was a kid.

My wife picked me up from the police station when they released me around 4:00am. She walked back up and came inside our apartment with me telling me to get some rest and that we would talk about it all when we woke up. I forget what I said, but it was something to do with me sleeping on the couch because she probably didn't want to think about it all anymore. That's when she said she was leaving and going back to stay at our friend's house—the friend who left a giant gash in my forehead. I cried hysterically for about an hour as I attempted to call each of them repeatedly until they both shut their phones off. Here I was at the lowest possible point I could imagine being hysterical. I remember getting up and smoking a cigarette out the kitchen window and then grabbing the entire drawer full of knives and dumping them in the bed with me. At some point the sobbing ran its course and I fell asleep. I woke up to her calling me around 9am saying how she was coming home to change her clothes and was going into work for a little bit.

As I look back on this now, nearly six months later, it makes complete sense the change that occurred within me. It's one of those changes you don't even have to bother explaining to people. Over the last several years, I had taken for granted all the company and all the love that had surrounded me. I had allowed it to become invisible as a bad situation would come to the surface. I would allow it to cover any bit of light with every bit of dark.

I cannot say if I would have reacted to this series of events in the same fashion had we not been in Alaska. If, for instance, we were still in Ohio, where there were familiar sights,

people, and places for me, I don't think it would have impacted me to such a degree, and I may have allowed it to become much worse. I can say with every bit of truth that from the moment she brought me home from jail and told me she was going back to stay at our friend's house, a wave of isolation and loneliness washed over me on a scale of which I hope to never experience again in my life. I remember staring out that kitchen window, crying, trying my best to keep the cigarette out the window since we were not supposed to smoke inside, and I remember thinking about how I had no one here. I barely had anyone anywhere else, but in Alaska it was just me and my wife. I genuinely didn't think she would come back the next day to stay, but she did. And I didn't think the next situation after that would happen and work out, but it did, and here we are still, trying our best to get out of this strange northwestern world we've dragged ourselves into, while also trying to not get caught by the dark again.

Looking back on my life in the therapy I've been taking since last summer, twice a week, I've started unpacking a lot of parts from childhood and beyond that I never took a serious look at. I know I was never serious because the parts I was looking at were the same parts I had been exploring again and again recently. Maybe it takes a few times to get the hang of it all, but I've never been too firmly behind that kind of thing. Serious situations need serious thought. I was a child in a lot of ways, both physically and mentally, and still am to a certain extent. What I've realized from being in my thirties and looking back is that because of the abusive environment I grew up in, I programmed myself to forgive very easily. Along with that programming also came my ability to not see violence and abuse like a normal person. I would see it on a scale almost. I would find things like verbal or mental abuse to not be *real* abuse at all because it didn't physically harm me. The adult in me now sees the harm in all of it. The adult in me sees how my life has basically been a giant dance of trying to move around the dark.

Those environments always provoke the victims going through them to seek escape. For the mentally unhealthy, it leads them to substance and alcohol abuse, in addition to perpetuating the environments themselves in their own lives because of the control it gives them. For mentally healthy people, it leads them to finding hobbies and activities that let them submerge themselves. Time consuming ones are the very best for this. Tasks that take hours or days, or even weeks to complete. My sister was seven years older than me, so I would always kind of look to her, or her twin brother for examples of good things to do or to get into. My brother was more of a sports person, which was the opposite of anything I was curious or interested in, so I spent a lot more time focusing on my sister's hobbies. She was my introduction to the arts. In her teen years she started painting and reading all large variety of literature—both of which are things she stays actively engaged in to this day. At some point, around when I was the age of fifteen, I would start snooping through her bedroom while she was away at college for the day. Everything she was into always seemed to speak directly to me. She got me into all the music I still love to this day, and all the painters and writers as well.

Like any paranoid young person, she noticed someone was going through her things when she wasn't there. At that time, our bedrooms were opposite each other on the second floor of our mom's house. Our mom began losing her mobility because of knee problems and her refusal to get a surgery that would fix them, so, because of this, we didn't really have to hide things in our rooms because she couldn't make it up the stairway. This also meant that it was very apparent who was going through the other person's room, because we were the only three people that lived there at that point. I always just brushed it off when she yelled at me for any of it. I would borrow CDs or giant anthologies of art history, novels, and whatever else caught my attention. At some point there was one book, a collection of poems, that basically ended up

leading me to this point in my life.

The book was *A Coney Island of the Mind* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Even now, after having read the book a thousand and one times, I can't explain *what* drew me to it in the first place, but some small part of me wants to think it was the old car on the back cover. Some part of my teenage rebellion era was more than likely drawn to how it had the title of the book spray-painted down the side of it. It was rebellious in the right way. I remember not even opening it for quite some time. My sister would come steal it back every so often, and yet I would still go back and take it—still never *actually* reading it. In some way, I probably thought just having the book on my desk somehow made me cooler. Who knows.

Eventually, probably a couple of months after finding it, I finally opened it up and started reading it. The only poetry I had known was the stuff I assume they still teach in junior high and high school. The ancient legends or whatever you would like to call them. I enjoyed homework assignments involving it simply because it involved less reading than if we were assigned a chunk of a novel. The work itself never did anything for me, nor did it provoke anything in my mind. The only things I knew about the man who wrote the book was what the book had written on and inside of it. The internet was a very basic tool at that point, and wasn't the massive ocean of information that it is now. I couldn't just run and search something on Wikipedia. In some sense, the mystery of Ferlinghetti and what he was doing appealed to me very much. Even the giant chunks of the book that made no sense to fifteen-year-old-me made sense in some unspoken way. It was my first exposure to someone writing through very surreal and lucid scenes, while also tying them together with real world scenarios that are even still as relevant today as back when he wrote them. As the months went by I found myself continuously reading the book repeatedly, until it got to the point of where my sister told me to just keep it. As the

years went by and she finished college and moved out, I eventually gave it back to her and bought my own simply so she could read it again if she ever wanted to.

There was a point where I simply had gotten sick of continuously reading Ferlinghetti's same book over and over again, so I finally dragged myself down to the library to look up all the other titles he had listed in the Coney Island one. This led to digging deeper and deeper into him as an individual and completely altering my own goals for the future. I wanted to be him, or at least something very similar to him in some fashion. His backstory was exactly the sort of legacy I yearned for in my life at that time, without realizing I was even in yearning. His creation of the City Lights Bookstore, his rebellion against censorship with the works of Allen Ginsberg that he published. Everything he did seemed entirely important. After finding more of his books, and reading books by people in his peer group, I found myself trying to write like him. I got notebooks and would often start or end my days writing little poems about the things going on in my life. For that last stretch of my teenage years I must've filled hundreds of notebooks and journals with some of the worst poetry in human history. By the time I started my initial time as an undergraduate college student at a local community college, I had figured out, to a very small degree, how to write in a decent manner. I didn't know the technical points of it by this point. I was basically approaching my newfound pastime the same way I had approached playing guitars or drums in my late childhood—I was trying to duplicate what I liked.

I knew from high school that I hated the rigidity of poets that followed strict parameters. I didn't enjoy trying to make the lines rhyme because that eliminated thousands of ways I could say something. I also knew I didn't like counting each line's syllables because that, too, made everything feel so forced. This is probably why Ferlinghetti stood out to me so much. He was the first poet I read where the writing seemed wide open and free. When I considered that next to the

things he had done, the things he stood for, and so on, it just had to be the direct I took for myself if this was something I could seriously dedicate time to and want to gain skill with.

When I registered for my winter semester classes the first year I was at that community college, one of them was a poetry writing workshop. I had never taken a poetry class period, and by this point in my life I had been writing poetry for quite a while, but didn't have any real confidence in it because I really didn't know what I was doing. It just felt like I was journaling with random line breaks. I devoted a lot of time into considering what Ferlinghetti was doing in his writing. I began seeking the rhythm, the use of metaphor, how everything sounded and smelled and looked when I would read something of his.

As someone who played the drums in since around age eight, rhythm was always something that jumped out to me. I had never considered it within the context of writing though until I started realizing some of my favorite song lyrics resembled the stylings of Ferlinghetti. I was also fascinated by dissecting the introductory blurb referenced in *A Coney Island of the Mind* just before his poem "I Am Waiting" on page forty-eight, which led to my initial exploration of rhythm in poems, and changed the way I ended up reading so many of his poems:

These seven poems were conceived specifically for jazz accompaniment and as such should be considered as spontaneously spoken "oral messages" rather than as poems written for the printed page. Because of continued experimental reading with jazz, they are still in a state of change. "Autobiography" and "Junkman's Obbligato" are available on the Fantasy LP recording No. 7002, "Poetry Readings in the Cellar," which I made with Kenneth Rexroth and the Cellar Jazz Quintet of San Francisco.

Having played in the junior high and high school jazz bands, I understood one of the core principles of jazz—the spontaneity of it. This led to me having to read some of the poems in this

section of his book several times before finding the right pattern, but eventually it figured itself out. Luckily drums never veer off too much in musical patterns since it typically plays the role of the backbone.

While this frustrating continuous reading of the poems to find the rhythm eventually led to me having a real love-hate relationship with the subject, it did lead to me becoming very intimately aware of the words Ferlinghetti wrote within each of the poems.

Far and away the most important poem to me within *A Coney Island of the Mind*—the poem that to some degree is solely responsible for keeping me interested in the art of writing poetry—a piece titled “Dog”—gave me the blueprint that I used to develop the direction I wanted to move in.

“The dog trots freely in the street / and see reality / and the things he sees / are bigger than himself” Ferlinghetti begins the poem (Ferlinghetti 67). This is a simple observation that anyone could make, the only thing making it a poem perhaps is its shape on the page, or so one could argue. But even just these four simple lines at the beginning of the poem tell so much more than that. As the audience reads, they visual the dog—which is probably different for everyone depending on their dog preferences, but we so easily find ourselves putting on the dog’s perspective. We feel the weight and tension of the leash, we consider the people we would see walking by, the noises, the smells. There’s an every-man or every-day quality in this initial observation of the dog. As the poem goes on though, we see the dog turn out to be more like any one of us. The observations grow wildly beyond a canine seeing numerous things that are larger in size than himself: “He would rather eat a tender cow / than a tough policeman / though either might do / And he goes past the Romeo Ravioli Factory / and past Coit’s Tower / and past Congressman Doyle / He’s afraid of Coit’s Tower / but he’s not afraid of Congressman Doyle /

although what he hears is very discouraging” (Ferlinghetti 67). These ideas, from where I’m sitting right now, are the most important elements in writing poetry. They show the truth of poetry being the existence of life itself—with every element of our days being poetry to someone else observing us—even when those things being observed aren’t human.

The lesson I took away from my closer study of Ferlinghetti’s poetry prior to beginning the first poetry workshop of my life is that for the writing I was doing to be poetry, the core value it needed to have was life. Whether I was writing about myself, or the random fruit on the counter in my kitchen—it would only come to life when I gave it *life*. With the “Dog” poem, we are first only given a dog, but by the time we make our way roughly halfway through the poem as a whole, we no longer see just the dog—we see ourselves within him.

By the time that next semester ended, poetry brought out the same level of passion that music did originally when I was much younger. I didn’t realize it at the time from my own lens of youthful arrogance, but it also kept the light of the world from disappearing, or if nothing else, it kept me from realizing it was dimming.

This past year has taught me the truth in all the old sayings about idle hands and what that leads a person to. Up until my mother got sick and everything else that has happened since then, I never really gave myself the opportunity to stop and look at the life I had lived. There’s nothing wrong with stopping and looking every once and awhile, so long as you remember to move along again. When you’ve stopped moving, everything else stops too. That’s when the dark comes on. I want to think the whole point of the dark is to consume the rhythm. There is probably more that it wants overall, but the rhythm keeps things moving along, even when I don’t understand the pattern or where it’s leading me. That’s the poetry in it. The constant quest of trying to make sense of where you’re going and what is driving you there.

On Hold With The Electric Company

A sky falls behind the gray curtain of living room
predicting a middle income and a better way
to draw itself on paper

Though not the usual sky and yet still presents itself in white
while a telephone operator fades into piano music

In the car behind telephone glass
the windshield vibrates itself into silence
like a conveyor belt of memory evening itself out

The windshield had brought me here
only as a trial ordeal as it watched me walk
out of the door, away from the living room

A glow appearing on the glass where the cold meets the warm

A message of jealousy
as the piano turns back into the voice of an operator
who has no further requests for my excuses

At A Dinner Party

I stop paying attention to what they're saying
while sitting around the oak and glass
knowing each of them intimately
but still hearing the walls talking
about the piano resting its legs in an adjacent room

The person beside me remembering how it played over the voices
but never brings this up
while the one opposite me remembers how she never let me talk
in broken sentences over a major scale

A television playing in the kitchen begins speaking in a man's voice
and I'd never recognize him at a bus stop
but he sounds exactly like me
with the cadence of his voice
comforting me like my grandfather's hand

So many avenues of my life around
these pieces of oak and glass
as I continue the history lesson behind my eyes

Walking A Line

Suzanna was holding a spot
for someone else
before she realized their name
and where they had been before this

While none of the rest of us do, she carries on
just like anyone
eyes darting in and out of the windows
and beyond the doors
a dart board into oncoming traffic
each car an individual bee
working its way back into a hive
reminding each of us
of anywhere better than here

Suzanna never realized their name
and they return to the spot
before she began putting it all together
like the pale-thin-line she walked before here
as her legs buzzed between each movement outside

I thought about the view from a helicopter
and how it would all seem so choreographed
measured out in a series of buzzing sounds
as I noticed the skin on my knuckles
was beginning to match the pale-thin-blue
of my lips

Small cuts covering all of them
from not being able to shut off my tongue

How To Properly Feed A Dragon

Step one is understanding
how the peanut shells rest
in your palm
while you lounge back
thinking of an air mattress
and a stranger's living room

As you shift back
keeping your palm
upwards and steady
your head knocks
into a piano just behind you

A pain reverberating in your skull
to the same tuning as the piano strings

You're letting yourself figure it out
while hearing a clawing sound
from the other room

You're realizing there's a good chance
the paint of the blood-red-walls
will match your hand or your wrist
as he comes back out to take more
than the shells in your palm

Step one is about understanding your dragon

The same patience you've come to know as intimacy
speaks to you while fixing your pillow
against the side of the piano
resting back into it
no longer at peace with the mattress
while your palm beckons back
in the language of fear
that is being spoken from the other room

Diamonds Are Forever

But tape dissolves over time she said

A man and woman leave through the same doorway
moving backwards in the same direction
as a 1pm sunlight eclipses a mountain across the bay

They don't know how to speak to each other
unless through the tongues of strangers
they've wrapped around

He gets confused by this and asks about the weather
reminding her for the fourth time today about the clouds
while saying *I often remember exactly what it feels like to die*

Moments before over lunch
she spoke of her own death
telling him *it happened while I was sleeping next to you*

Later that night she met him under an umbrella
in the alley behind the Post Office
eating Goldfish crackers out of her coat

The two lingered there
moving only after the sight of blue-and-red sirens
reflecting onto the houses and bricks around them

Police found her the next morning
bound in videotape
with her neck slumped too far to the left
as he slept beside her
holding onto her breath
as he went from warm-to-cold
underneath the sheets

The Last Time I Arrived At Ambassador Bridge

The best way to forget your Jewish ancestry
is to have a molar taken from the right side of your mouth

It leaves you like the neighbor boy
that would climb the dirt pile in the backyard with you
playing *construction worker* in the summer months
until you hit him in the eye with a hammer
and his mother chases you down the driveway
only seeing him twenty years later
while you're drinking wine out of your parka pocket

You offer him some while forgetting about a Greyhound bus
you're supposed to board at midnight

He drops you into a taxi and leaves the driver twenty dollars
forgetting his face as the driver pulls away
marveling only at how much his eye recovered from the hammer

Two men in their forties stand outside your bus smoking cigarettes

You offer them the wine and anything else from inside your coat
while they ask if you're going to the Queen City
and you're confused about Cincinnati
knowing that you're going to Toronto
not thinking about them again until your head smashes against
the window of the bus

The yellow warmth of the tunnel darkens someone walking past
into the bathroom

They're just a silhouette like the hammer
as you talk yourself back into the moment
just before the conversation with customs

Waiting In The Checkout Line

A face stared back at me before the register
from inside a bin
that looked exactly like my sister's

An exercise routine
the genuine feelings
of loneliness
four thousand miles from her door

A child came along
wearing a coat
like a strawberry in boots

He smiled at me as I forgot where I was

The conveyor belt moving forward
like the second hand of a watch
circling around and around
into tomorrow

my items moving closer to the checkout boy
as I forgot my sister was ever behind me
or that there was a sister inside of me

The Night Of My Only AA Meeting

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror
asking myself
if I had really just spent an hour
mixing seltzer water with mouthwash
in the backseat of a car I can't drive

I convinced myself with a firm no
as I came to giving handshakes
inside a church on 4th Avenue

As I walked out of the meeting
I noticed different things about the street signs
all the poorly-spelled Russian words
each of which feeling more *lost in translation*
than myself
while a Steller's Jay shuffled off a wire
towards the bird feeder and the peanut shells
in my front yard

Moving To Alaska

If you'll let them
any *one* of your loved ones
will put you in a small five-hundred-square-foot-box
by the Pacific Ocean

They'll pretend to love you more each month
while you're there
watching the mountains drip dry for three months
as the sun stops resting and the rain stops for breath

If you'll let them
any single *one* of them
will swallow everything you feed them
as the spoon turns into a potato that turns into a cabbage

There is always so much to see of an amusement park
even after legs get tired
and the sweat stops pouring itself into the rim of your hat

Mental Health Awareness

A man in blue pants with a red stripe
loads me into the backseat of his car
and drives me to a hospital

I stare at the small corner of his face that shines
in the rearview mirror
on the short drive
asking him all those little questions we ask strangers
to take our minds off things

He asks me *how long were you wandering around in the dark?*
while I sincerely contemplate why
my hands are behind my back
bound together

I lost my glasses before I met him
so for the whole drive he continues on as a threatening blur

There's a wall between us
and I feel it growing thicker
as he turns on the radio

At the hospital he asks me how long I had been inside the Russian girl's car
and I'm confused
because I only remembered the beautiful walk I was on
half-blinded and blurry on the darker edge of Stoney Creek

Escapism

You woke me up
telling me about a small vent
halfway up the stairway
on the landing

You told me about how
a man was inside
wearing a sandwich board sign
that read *MIGHT*

We brought this up once
on accident
in our group therapy session

The doctor told us it was a coping mechanism

Eventually
he told us what coping was

Fleming Street in St. John's

In South Philadelphia
I got reminded of the little blue stoop

Five or six of us
sitting there
poorly-rolled cigarettes
in our hands
or the corners of our mouths

The girl across the street
peaking at us
through her living room curtains

One afternoon
we walked home from watching the World Cup at *The Duke*
and saw her pissing in the alley behind our house

We took ketamine in the kitchen
just after that
and for a second our legs
felt twenty miles long
and it only took twenty minutes
for Mikey to go outside and invite her in

We let her sleep in the bedroom
that we could never get rented
until she woke up screaming
like seagulls in Churchill Square

She calmed herself
and we all took a walk

Each of us climbing a tree in Bannerman
screaming just like she was

Confusion Looped As A Dead End

We were empty and pouring gasoline
all over our luggage and the tank
while a man approached
telling us *y'all just keep driving south until the land turns into the ocean*

And I felt like a road sign to his words
that was interpreted by an elderly couple
who never understood symbols
in a modern social context

The next few hours were spent *feeling each other* out
realizing we had never been so far away from a movie theater or a prison

Read The Instructions

The therapist moves
the part in his hair
he lets both arms fall
over the sides of his chair
after I implied a need for *instructions*
explaining how someone removed mine
from the same drawer they were always in

The entire conversation begins moving
like the part in his hair

It's an inside joke instead of *instructions*
it goes along the lines of
*everybody knew your wife fell out of love
with you and started moving on to someone else*

I had considered this earlier in the day
before meeting him
walking home from a café as the gash in my forehead
started bleeding again
in the shape of a pyramid

He tells me to revisit the ditch
where I met the man in blue pants with the red stripe

We get into his car and drive across town to it

Like Being Buried In A News Cycle

A cubicle of a living room
a woman and man
inside
without clothing
next to each other
atop a Sherpa blanket—a small silent bow of August

As I sit across from them
alone
quietly consumed by a daybed
with a broken set of springs
yelling into the silent void of my conscious
that *I'M MARRIED TO HER*
only for some reason
it stays silent
as they continue through the cycle
of their moment

Happy Holidays

You watch the butcher behind the counter
carry three massive birds around the corner

His arms glisten in the florescent lighting
and you flashback to a surgeon and the previous November

He's standing in a room with blue carpet
talking to your nieces
illustrating with his hands
a tumor the size of a softball

His arms glistening in the florescent lighting

You imagine your girlfriend fucking him on the blue carpet
everything that she stopped doing with you
before you put yourself in the situation
with you and him doing everything you ever dreamed of

Moments after this
you already want to leave
which feels like the queue at the butcher

You remember how you just want to dip
into the janitor's closet with the surgeon
while your mother was dying on the other side of the wall

Textbook Definition

It looks like it's just you and me again, best friend
he says with a hand on her driving thigh

She's seated in a silence
driving as a competitive sport
everything a means of *making good time*

A frustration moving her bottom lip
which he is too familiar with

We're not best friends
we're married

He considers this
sinking slowly into becoming a better passenger

Windshield wipers moving as fast as his pulse
in a rainstorm that is barely touching the road in front of them

House Arrest

A man understands how a dog feels
when it gets to stare into windows
not really seeing anything
but hearing more than what the mind lets on

A tribute ceremony to a dog begins moments later
with a man and woman staring out a window
each drumming their fingers on the window's ledge

The man is listening to a car running outside
the conversation between the engine and its leaking exhaust

He goes back to being arrested on the couch
waiting for the argument outside to stop
as she disappears into a new passenger seat

Hours later she comes back inside
unloading her purse and coat onto the floor
as she dives into the bathroom before he can move

Little Detail

Tracing fingertips
as they are tracing entire bodies
building a roadmap
to forgetting what it feels like
to live on a shifting curve

This is an example of how relationships start

Fingertips as classically-trained
cab drivers
aware of alleys
and understated turns

A period is spent sometime after in bed

There are many beginnings and exits
as the sun glances back in
reminding you to check your voicemail

Someone else comes along
and sparks these same feelings
in your fingertips
as you begin tracing out a new map
to the same curves

These become your new fingertips
as you find yourself alone in the shower
considering different razors
and crying as the water melts over everything else

Alone In A Backyard On Vacation

Arms pictured however you like
interwoven and dancing on a pile of dirt
in a *new* backyard
as the sun becomes blocked
by a house that the neighbor owns
and you grow cold in your thoughts

Meanwhile a boy comes along through the yard
offering to sell you weed
for whatever cash you have on you

So you pay him in bits of change
and some wet five dollar bills
and he wanders off to have conversations with your recycling bin

Glimpses of yourself feel a certain level of change
while other parts stay transfixed on the boy

Your feet begin sinking in the wet dirt and it becomes wet cement
as he starts talking to your wife about museums

A Second Time With Fifty-Two Cars

We're in your mother's house
in the upstairs apartment
smoking cigarettes out the bathroom window
two days before Thanksgiving

A cop driving around outside
while a breeze made the door knock
behind us
reminding me of eight years ago
sharing a cigarette on a picnic table

Little pieces of thought circling around the concept of forgiveness
as each pair of headlights roll down the dark driveway outside
two-by-two-by-two-by-two
while we flush the cigarettes down the toilet

Stopping To Look At Yourself

I wake up to the feeling of the skin on my face
not necessarily touching it myself
realizing it takes a decade of staring at a wall
for it to tell me what it wants from me

Days when I feel the skin, I feel it
sinking down into the mattress
I speak upwards into the heavens
or the ceiling
making sure I haven't died
finding myself speaking as decomposition on a mattress

I pass three mirrors on the walk from the bed
to the living room
each of which involve a conversation
that always feels one-sided

There are better ways to tell if you're dead
I'll say to myself
watching as my pupils shrink and expand
as I make my way back to the pills in the kitchen

Sitting on the bench in the kitchen
listening to the percolation of coffee
I notice the red stripe slowly unstitching itself
from my blue pajamas
and it takes me back to the bed
so that I can relive yesterday somehow
without moving

Witnessing A Presidential Election In Alaska

You consider that time someone said *well this is Future Hell*
while standing outside of the J Dock Seafood shop

It's three days before the *Actual United States*—the connected ones—
elect the opposite of what represents society
and you're sitting on a couch now trying to consider the reality of this

The day comes and goes and the feeling washes over you and your wife
like a tidal wave had come in through the window while sleeping

There is no tsunami warning siren or radio messages
so you accept it on some level
feeling the moisture and the wet wash over your skin
while everything else in your house just feels somber and loud
like the morning after your mom passed away

So much panic cycles through the television and the talk radio
throughout that morning that you genuinely feel like the world
is on fire and nobody else has any water left

It feels difficult to lift your arms to grab a cup
or to pet one of your cats

You catch yourself on fire with thoughts

and then, suddenly, it all stops

The alienated feeling of where you're located comes into your mind

Outside, you sit on the front step and stare off into the distance

An older man fifty feet away tugs on his dog's leash
and it's so quiet that you can feel the tug

The rest of the world feels like the rest of the world
as you wonder what that means for you
and everyone else in the house behind you

Termination Dust

She telephoned to ask that I see her as a city
—a town at least
something small that showed off
the few thousand people she let in

I'd only thought of her as the abandoned orphanage
off Phoenix Drive
her walls an ambient stucco
covered in faded camouflage paint from World War II

Each of her windows were broken
one for each year of her life

She telephoned to ask
that I consider her like the mountains around us
that I was supposed to be able to distinguish her from the siblings

It was important seeing each of them as people
to imagine their clothing being gone over the summers
as they buried themselves into layers
around Thanksgiving

She telephoned to ask
that once the dust settled on her in October
to no longer speak again until July

As more minutes turned into absolute darkness
the sunlight drawn behind a velvet red curtain
I began listening to the man behind it
explain how the concrete underneath me
was to be trusted because it would never rust

This perception of his was like a neighbor
I used to talk to
when I would go outside and lounge underneath
an oak tree
where two squirrel families lived

Shadows

A slightly-closed window
directs a breeze into the living room

You decide that nothing on Earth
is worth the effort of movement

Consider the cold
as it slides around
hitting the roof of your mouth

A forehead covered in sweat
understands the rationale of this conversation

Shadows from the Cottonwood outside
sway and move the light coming from the streetlamp
projecting onto the wall opposite of you
dancing like a field of nerves
making memory move back into an afternoon with the eye doctor

Away from this distraction
you notice you're still scared
just like the eye doctor

Meditation points all of this fear into the same direction
as the wind stops moving
and the nerves begin standing still

Each one a plain dark maze on a fading white wall

Waterfront Park

The tide wasn't low enough
to see the faces of the sand

Each rock feeling each pressure point
in each foot
moving alongside of it

A body can only rest when it feels comfortable
while water moves out and the darkness of the stars
leaves a shimmer across the sand

Each grain of it being an entirely new life
smoothed over by the peace of rest
by an ocean that forgets everything in each movement

I consider the smoothness of my own edges
as the tide begins piling bits of seaweed in the shapes left behind
by my feet

Colorado Was A Real Person

A telephone rang
a short day with a short light
I remember how the room felt
and how a skip rang through its pulse
like jump-ropes scraping against a sidewalk

A set of house keys jiggled
across a coffee table as it murmured
with memories of riding on a bus

Nobody ever phoned except for people wanting money
the endless cycle of debts unshorn

Colorado was on the other end
something she had forgotten plagued her
outside of a bus terminal made of pigeons
leaving her with a fever-state-of-mind

There's a birdcage singing inside my chest is how he explained it
to a doctor
which works on a certain level to make sense inside my head

Nights after this
I would wake up screaming
him and me and the separation of scenario
that was being born between the two of us

He used to sing into my answering machine
when this would happen
leaving three sensations of peace on a thinning piece of tape

Sometimes
I would find myself hanging onto this
for way too long

A prolonged sadness
 hanging
above me
 always taking me back

I dwelled on this
and the silent humming
that lived on the avenues of his voice

His words an embodiment of reactions
spoken in English
while sounding entirely alien

We had spoken to each other like bus-stop strangers for years
and suddenly it was me alone in this feeling
each time the phone would ring with his voice

Falling Out A Window

A thought occurs to me
while speaking to myself in broken sentences
in a garage filled with recycling containers

The windows open on the third floor
I say to myself as gloom dusts over
the florescent tubes lighting a path back to the doorway

All of this *gloom* is real
and lives inside a body that I cannot touch
yet I feel the warm press when it comes up against me
leaning on the trim of the doorway

I go speak in-person
as a person without destination
to a larger group of people back inside the house

They're mostly a dinner party crowd
some raising glasses as I walk past
and others looking off in the direction of the present
as their own way of saying *hello*

Which makes sense to me
as I cushion myself on a bench in the middle room
on a pile of coats that belong to everyone else

I run through the layout of the house
drawing pathways with my fingers in the air
gesturing to nothing—if only to keep people away
until all parties are fascinated by the movements

A man dressed in a similar way to me
with similar glasses
asks if I know where the bathroom is
and I suggest *try going upstairs*

I was partial to this conversation about a partial solution
and follow him for a second before finding the stairs
that he chose not to follow

Each step was a steep childhood memory
sliding on a rug down the thirteen steps
without a mother home to yell about it
and when I found there was a third floor

I felt a silence and a darkness brighter than evening sky

It's hard to be overwhelmed by darkness I whispered
feeding into the somber side of it
and it questions back the actions I've made
for the last three hours

Just ahead
two windows lit by moonlight
smile back at me
smile back to a face they cannot see
and I walk up to them
as strangers in a bar

I touch the first one gently
like it'll break if I touched it any other way
and a tear forms in my eye
rolling down my cheek
while I force it open
staring down into the seventy-five-or-so-feet below
wondering
how
long
it would
take the
cops
to turn
up

Waiting Outside The Toronto Greyhound Station

Standing on a sidewalk
a breeze circulating in the corner
where the glass comes together
litter and leaves and bits of paper
things that just wanted a bus

John came outside
cigarettes in hand
we shared puffs in the brisk

We both came across this empty-pocketed
with a pinch of hope in our hands
crossing the same border again
with nothing different really to add

We talked about the joke we always heard growing up
about Toronto being a *safe* New York City
and only having been there once
was still enough of a laugh
or a cough
to stir us around in the corner
coming together
with the litter and leaves and bits of paper

When I Told My Brother I Stopped Driving

Blurry eyes always lead to trouble he tells me
coughing to himself
a slight roaming in his step
like a buffalo without a mailing address

My brother always felt like this
infinitely walking along
connected to everyone and yet entirely oblivious
everything about him being the exact opposite of his community

You can't say things like that when you're wearing shoes like those he tells me

I surrendered my car to the repo man
no longer obligated to the debt it made me feel

I told him about my newfound passenger seat
the dependence of being a dependent
and he liked the burden of it

Reality In The Kitchenette

I'M TIRED OF BEING PEELED

he screamed as a helpless banana
entirely shutting down on linoleum greens
as a boxed-out cat
walked in a slippery silence
brushing against his own ankles

*A man who has situations in common
with bananas is a rare type of man* he whispers

In his mind
these are the things that keep him
as a child in the eyes of strangers

This truth was felt by the bananas
each one in the bunch holding onto their judgment
as he wrestled with the clog in the sink—a battle that lasted days

His mother was dead thirty miles away and his sink was clogged with brown water

This began a trend that would follow him for years to come

Every clogged pipe being another life that was no longer with his

She Was Showering

Sunlight tapping on
living room window
like rain was doing
the previous afternoon

She

Void of it
vacationing by herself
in the confines of the shower
a joint in her left hand and a Coca-Cola in the other

The cleanest showers to her
were always the ones with her closest allies

Inside Chevron At 4:07 PM

Quiet driving feet
turning into quiet walking feet
and they're not mine because I was walking
but they remember my face
and I don't remember theirs
as I only think about how she said it was *only two lefts and a right to the gas station*

Apocalypse shelving laid bare in front of me
scattered boxes of cereal and potato chips
and more feet that don't make any sense to me

A different rain fell down on each of them
because they were all getting out of cars in the parking lot

Every passing step illuminating a different plan
each with a set of eyes that go nowhere
except the ones waiting on buses

Heroes wear shoes like theirs
but so do villains
and I remember this
as I swipe my credit card
wondering if it will be declined
as I buy more Coors Light
for people I don't want to talk to anymore

You Or Me As A Racecar

For you to believe in me
more than you do
let your hands touch
the steering wheel in my absence
guided by the leather that rests
against each clenched hand

You told me once
there's no such thing as losing
if that's all you ever do

I let it seem like I believed you
knowing that we both shared
the same sense of loss
orphaned in early adulthood
by the blindsides
brought on by steering wheels

Other times I can remember
you pushing me into the backseat
screaming the words
of "Seven Wonders"
into oncoming traffic

Snowed In

Busy rereading the night before
staring out the window
the snowfall becoming distraction
a globe lamp in the corner
spinning into destination
or somewhere else

You notice the mail truck outside
still going about whatever Thursday means
the driver stepping out onto an ice-covered deck

Their feet moving in a different rhythm
than the world around them

Standing On The Shoulders

A bathroom upstairs that never gets used
looks in on an abandoned grocery

The sun falls in line with a woman downstairs
emptying dinner plates into the trash
much the same as the sun fading down

A bathroom upstairs that never gets used
notices this sunset for the first time
as he stands in its doorway
thinking about Jack Bowman
and how he objectified each person
between its walls

It's just as if anyone else
was his own little nightlight
something speaking comfort or concern

The red bits on the walls still unfinished
not matching any other parts
like the man's socks
both of which were exactly how Jack would have wanted

Do You Ever Dream Without Me?

Usually it's a house flaked in red
covered in hills
that are rolling against one another until the barrel
comes to a stop sign
on the corner of 2nd and Jefferson

So many faces back inside
each one laughing in a tidal wave pattern
as I spend the fortieth minute dancing by myself
with faces I recognize that don't have names—again
after speaking to someone else on the phone
three hours earlier
encouraging me to coat orange slices in molly
before eating it

I feel just like you in this situation
only somehow more approachable
since the faces always come back
in the form of a different body
as my mind reconsiders the right type of *opposite mind*

You being the only face I can name
standing in the corner
moving around like an ice carving
of a swan melting
in the smoke of the woodstove
as the thoughts of being too old slither
between our minds
back and forth without words

It's you and it's not you
and it's just like every other time
this has happened
as I stay on fire
in the center of the room
burning more parts of the past
as the present parts go green in the stove

Facing burning into themselves before burning into memory

Epiphanies

Footsteps in the alley atop fresh snow
on a Tuesday afternoon evening sun
already gone

I notice footprints to the left of me that resemble mine

There are only so many resolutions I came come to about myself

Walking back up balcony stairs
my feet heavy with fire escape gravel or mud

The only reason I still smoke is the excuse that it gives me time to think

If I were to disappear
in an instance like this
a pile of wooden beams
would be temporary
until a replacement model showed up

Honesty

It started out as an argument with cutlery
each of us spoons in the wrong slot
meanwhile

I'm explaining how you are incapable
of meaningful emotional attachment

Disease breeding with itself mid-sentence
and I've felt it burning the soles of the feet in my sleep

Each night waking up
tied to a bedpost
watching the flesh bubble and crack
the smell overwhelming the room
which is fixated on the stink of melting hair and flesh

Hearing The Same Four Songs

Part 1:

She threw her jacket into the corner
a pile already going
with a body swimming underneath them
asleep and snoring with the rhythm
of the sofa on the opposite wall

These people were at the Chevron down around the corner
and they were on the patio out back

They stood out and she didn't
because strangers always win an argument of puzzles

It was like we had never even met

Part 2:

My brother called me halfway through the night
and once a few months after we had gotten married
each time telling me the same thing
being married and being at a party are exactly the same thing
—you hear the same four songs over and over again
until someone shuts the stereo off and you go to sleep

Who Are You Singing To When You Listen To “Silver Springs”?

A voice asks me to calm down
it's my own voice and it's standing on the tile of the kitchen
as I sit on the couch wondering who *you* sing to
as you drive home for lunch
while a frozen paneer thaws next to the sink
and voices stir the water on the stovetop

Everything just like the stovetop voice
stirring into a whisper
wondering what that *really means*
focusing on the sweat pooling in my socks
or the cold fever that is sweeping through our studio

We're very different in situations like this
in definitions like this

I spent years looking for why you checked out on me
as I was already gone well beyond your line of sight
wearing slightly nicer jeans and one of forty pairs of shoes
decorated in all the right colors to piss off the matador

Acceptance

A peach tree thaws itself in a snake-like motion
while I'm across the street
standing on an ice cube moonlighting as sidewalk
wondering how many quarters are in the jar
on top of our microwave
while you, a wife, sits down in the bathroom to read
a jarring experience about the poverty of airlines
on the edge of a bathtub too full
for anyone over three feet tall

Having never seen a peach tree before
I gaze forward like a child in the night with a blanket
equal parts curiosity and blindness

I begin to wonder in a snake-like position
each thought falling back upon where they always travel
realizing it's my fault for screaming at the peaches and you

Everything under control that can be controlled
as the peach tree whispers *I'm a finely-detailed piece of scientific equipment*

It had accepted itself
in a way that I could never do

Waiting On The Roof For Macka

Warmness of light intruding into our hips side-by-side on a daybed

No More Ocean For Four Hundred Miles! she yelled

You or I always breezing in through the open window
a pair of flies counting each other as retired on our tax forms

There was comfort as we would rest
at the nearest spot—a kneecap exposed to the July sunshine

I wondered about your name for so many years
alone at a desk
counting the sticks I kept
in the drawer that didn't get stuck

Remembering the rope from the rooftop
and whether our hands were even capable of gripping
as I threw my broken phone down into the alley

The sunshine above us making the afternoon into a brunette daydream
that would always cut our bangs too short
if we asked it too many questions

The amount of space to the ocean made sense I thought
realizing your eyes were beginning to shut
as the lighting on the patio adjusted to our exhaustion

Welcome To My New Life Alone In A Basement Apartment

Alone in a basement covered in thick red fur floors
we argued once
about how you didn't see the direction we were moving

I remember pulling a compass out
and having no idea how to read it

This was on a night that never happened
and every scenario we've lived through ever since

Alone in a basement covered in thick red fur floors
surrounded by vines and plants
each of them with a name
thinking it's something more boring-sounding
being alive like someone named Charles

I wonder ever other hour if you set the precedent
and if Charles can hear these conversations I have with myself
just like the thick red fur floors can

Barking

Opening the front door before dawn
always makes me have a conversation I don't want to have
and it's not that I'm adverse to *conversation*
it's just that I don't find a satisfaction in them
because it's always something no one wants to hear
or a scrambled eggs approach to making the right words

There is a certain way the door hitches closed
that mimes an alarm of sorry
as silent as the point of each of these exchanges

It leaves me startled and staring down at the doormat

Across the hallway lives a Doberman
and he watches me out the window when I'm on the porch

I've never asked him but I always wondered
if I could pay him in treats
just to chew my legs off

Walking On Ice

Age is an epiphany
struggling for balance
as it moves down an iced-over road
just past the Post Office

Each shuffle helping it realize a truth
that never quite sticks to the wall
like the undercooked memories

I see my entire life
while it just sees the chase
as a thunderous force moving
towards the wrong type of light

There is a selfish quality
obvious in both of us
as the darkness cuts
into the corner
of my eyes

Self Portrait In Watercolor

A checkerboard pattern of green and yellow
blending with a brown cabinet as a sunset
meanwhile
a thin tall man stares down into the kitchen sink
his hair a Calico blend of blonde and brown and black
he is crying like the woman opposite of him
as she blends into pastel reds and yellows
speaking in the type of *goodbye* that falls just off the canvas
onto the floor with dust and hairs and scraps of food

In this lighting more is spoken than said
and while they are both speaking directly to a goodbye
the goodbye is different for each of them

His arm raised drifting into a wisp
a breeze you can see
as it dissipates into a nothingness

Her arms crossed fading into her body
a language that feels defeated yet reborn
only an hour prior

They have dealt with this insanity their entire time
and mask it when in the company of churches and wardens of the state

The insanity leaving them through his arm
rocketing onto an adjacent living room rug
a freedom in this action stirring into the leftover colors running

As more eyes look upon them
they're reminded of a calm that distances itself
as if it becomes a vacant Rest Area that was passed five miles ago
vacant to the idea of seeing another one again for another hour

When The Sky Is Falling

Urgency shakes hands with worry
the two realizing they're cousins
and are meeting for the first time
while at the 75th family reunion
crowded into a small community hall
each of them eating different things out of crockpots

Beyond the handshake
the two stay together holding hands
each step down the sidewalk becoming fulfillment
a promise of some followed-through-on-promise

As they make their last left turn towards home
sky begins hitting them on their faces
each drop bigger than the one before
until suddenly a saturated feeling takes them over
their feet moving faster as to avoid it
they feel the previous days cold touch them
while connecting with hands

Leaning Over The Balcony

As a flicked cigarette fell over the edge of a hotel balcony
a Steller's Jay stopped

He shuffled feet together for a moment thinking about the peanuts
comforting him for a moment before
beginning a conversation he had heard about new beginnings

The man on the balcony admired the bird's form
and the two of them switched places

Neither explaining their own difficulties beforehand

Waiting On The Kettle

An obnoxious cold red voice buzzes
dancing with me
through the telephone receiver

Air moving along the tips of my fingers
wiping away dust from the ledge
while a crisp cloud of cream
boils over the cup resting beside the kettle

This was the first realization involving my toes
that didn't feel like entrapment
and it only made me grow more fluid
bubbling like the cloud of cream
dancing around a small stretch of tile
as the whistle finally went off

A New Home Destroys Home

A July midnight standing on the bay
water almost making its way to my seat
while the sky stares looking like 7 PM does anywhere else

A few feet to the left
campfire begins its creep through a living room window
blocks away
where even sober minds find the fog of flooding waters

A July woman is floating in a bathtub taking apart a shaving razor
as campfire rubs against the open bathroom door
mixing a blend that becomes a lavender haze

She's thinking how the melting snow melts her ambitions for summer
and how she just braces herself
as they come back
to take away any sense of this place actually being hers

How The Cables Ran

You're walking across a cable suspended two or three feet
between a pair of Juniper trees and your voice sounds of a dial-tone

You collapse
and below you rests a calm and peaceful sand
as two strangers standing across from you in leather vests
lean against the shaded side of their truck

Standing up covered in a cloud of red dust
you think about the first telephone wires that ran across this chunk of High Desert
wondering about each conversation that has taken place
and which lines told stories about you

The Same Pair Of Pants

Legs see themselves in mirrors just like people do

Each turn examining their expression
turning themselves off in self-loathing
while also seeing the history of their lives
as they settle in and accept what they've become

There was a night a certain pair couldn't stop
thinking about
how they lost a rivet on some turn they made
as the steering wheel of a car smashed into them

Both of which being genuinely unaware of how they had gotten there

During A Blackout

Her eyes had not met mine yet
as we remained side-by-side
inside of an old truck
parked
in a Safeway parking lot
discovering the limits of each other

She was an old friend
her eyes were a thousand flashlights
with no batteries

I would stare at them forever
wondering when the power would come back on
and when we could go back inside

Ears And Not Mouths

A conversation involving questions had begun
while a coffeemaker dripped in the background
with the sun just barely learning what it meant

It was between two people and one of them stopped listening
focusing only on themselves
like a fascination with the sound of percolation

Each brewing only involved so many drips
and this person was practically counting them
waiting on their turn to make it their own

The had been like this for ages
but had never really settled into what they know
to be true
as if everything was just about the percolation

We Never Should've Left Town In The First Place

Where the shadows stopped bleeding over the trees
is all that he told an officer
a man in blue pants with a red stripe
outside of the railroad terminal
in reference to another man
sleeping in a car
that fell off into a storm drain
just off the Seward Highway
on an early Saturday morning

As the officer woke the man up
he asked him for a ride home
before the man in the blue pants with the red stripe
offered to take him somewhere else

Mental Health Awareness, Pt II

Imagine being a little blue dot
on top of a melting blue ball
moving in circles
around a dying fireball
in the middle of a vast black field
that is swallowing itself

Standing In My Sober Shower

Between sad saturated tile fog
and water damage
sinking slowly into the rotting drywall

All of these things were never about me
were they

I just somehow got blamed for them

Work Cited

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Curriculum Vita

Joshua Robert Long was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1984. He received his Bachelor's Degree in English from The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio in March 2012, and his Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing from The University of Texas at El Paso in May 2018. He has authored numerous chapbooks and full-length poetry collections, in addition to operating a DIY-style press with several others known as Sock Rides International. His most recent published collection is *Hello, Hi*. If he's not writing, he is usually walking his cattlemutt, Jolene, adventuring with his wife, Madeline, or doing something else with his two cats, Seymour and Heloise.

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