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SEHNSUCHT

by

Dena ten Pas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Arts in English

Longwood University

Department of English and Modern Languages



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4-23-14

Date

Sehnsucht is German, referring to a longing or yearning, sometimes further qualified as the longing for something unknown or something that will never be possible.

Section 1

Afterglow

A little girl walks a black road
underneath the streetlights' yellow glow.
Above, a shooting star burns across the sky—
a sky dotted with the whites of galaxies.
The star slices through the atmosphere,
leaving planets and solar systems,
it lets gravity take hold.
But to her the star is only beautiful.
She whispers a singsong lyric to it;
whispers about child passions;
wanders further down the street.
Alone, she'll be missed eventually,
yet for now she's wondering.

Floor Plan

A rearrangement in an emptier apartment
over a busy street.

Half-bare bookshelf to the opposite wall.

Kitchen cupboards still full

but she empties them now, tossing

larger pans into pack-away boxes.

TV moved from bedroom to living room,

maybe that was part of the problem.

Couch pushed back to make room for yoga again,

entertainment center listed for sale,

cat hair vacuumed up, dog fed.

She cuts the grocery list in half;

thank you Jesus—

she can buy the expensive coffee again.

Sisters of the Unfamiliar Kind

Three chickadees flapping
awkwardly on a fence post,
we lived different childhoods together—
those two years apart may as well
have been centuries. We kept company
on long car rides, at construction sites,
campgrounds, telling jokes,
arguing about things that used to matter.
There are always those bright windows from
our past, never eternal, yet they seemed infinite.
As I run on, separate in my present,
I can't forget you.
Beginnings are always along for the ride.

Working Home

Building the house, studs up, is easy,
just sinking one thick nail after another into
two-by-fours. Plywood floors and
slightly bruised drywall sit atop
an enormous slab of smooth concrete
poured from a rented truck.
Outside is stained rust-red from the dirt.
Stiff-legged, his girls walk the slim,
two-board bridge from the dirty ground
to the second floor entrance.
Bent nails and plywood slivers threaten,
and there's one huge hole for the stairs.
The house is a work-in-progress with a roof.
He'll want to build his life
the same way. Ground up, piece-by-piece.

Campfire

I heard stories round the fire
(The Lady with the Golden Arm)
before the cousins started talking
of worldly how-tos and things
you know when you're older.
Things I know now like the pain of
we're over and the terror of *not enough*.
I stayed awake late into that night,
watching fat drops of rain roll trails
down pale tent walls, lit by a single streetlight
at the end of the gravel drive. Next morning
we formed circles around iron rings of fire
and watched the endless jumping flame,
wondering what held us so late at fireside
last night. I watched the cousins eat cereal
from styrofoam bowls with plastic spoons
that curled in the flames when they were done.
I wonder if I've ever eaten with the same
look on my face—cold happiness and fear.
I didn't understand what it meant, those faces,
so I let the question go before I could ask.
Those feelings always left with the packing up.
We'd fold up tents and sleeping bags, toss
trash into the fire, cover the coals with dirt.
But I kept by the fire as long as I could.
Some days I think I might still be there.

Road Trip

On the road she spent time
 peeling off layers of dirt;
 the grime of past sin shaken off.
 Yellow-lined asphalt pours out
 into the future. Her life, now a
 two-lane highway, trees blurring
 both sides.

In a black car, rust spots on the wheel wells,
 a cracked mirror splays rifts
 across the fast food billboards—
 her view of the past. She can only
 look forward while the color of pines
 and the smell of french fries
 drowns her present.

Her tired hands are splayed
 in a lazy 10 and 2, Coke hands
 sticky from lunch.
 A greasy paper bag tossed
 in backseat wind currents flies out the window,
 and she squints in the gray before
 her lights come on.

Bed's in the backseat.
 Mornings peel sweaty skin off vinyl,
 finding leftovers in another greasy bag,
 black coffee at a truck stop.
 Moving forward again, worn tires
 kissing gray rock every mile,
 every yellow-lined day.

Counties pass her by: sprawling
 suburban things. She could pull off,
 take a road into a town
 that stands peaceful and stagnant.
 Momentum is a curve and a straightaway
 until it comes back around, a figure 8:
 her infinite perp walk.

Sehnsucht

Yearning for something
she's never known.
It lurks in unused pockets of her mind,
wandering out
when she doesn't need it,
feeding tears she can't understand.
Nostalgia for what she can't be missing:
mountainous seascapes in England, snowbanked German fields,
buildings side-by-side for miles in Berlin.

She wants escape to someplace more:
to be on the passing train
pocketing new money,
drinking tea not burnt coffee,
answering a phone call,
living a life not her own.

But for mere seconds on rainy mornings,
she understands.
If she were someone else, she'd never know it.

Friday Morning

The current moment is an illusion
that breeds passion in the woman at the cafe
with her back turned to the world,
caught in the storm of what she knows,
her hand is poised over a mug of coffee,
steam seeping from the center.
Everything rests in that instant.
It's that she can't see the moment that makes it real,
brings out an unwarranted answer.
She is nothing but creator of her world,
and that world crumbles away tomorrow
so that the curl of her hair, the bite of her cheekbones,
the forest in her eyes will be nothing but unnoticed pockets
of something someone might once have loved.
The waiter's eyes flicker past her thin frame,
silhouetted by the sunset
glinting off a parked car outside.

Herself Inside

Moving in the dark,
she feels her way out
of their room to watch
stars shining like beads
from the dirty window.

She can steal minutes like these
in the dark while his breath is
steady in the next room
like their weekly dates for Italian or Chinese
or takeout and a movie.

So when the stars shine
she peels back the grime
to look out at what she could have,
doesn't truly want,
but likes to envy anyway.

Packing It In

His eyes tear, pull, rip her to shreds.
She sees hurt pulsating
behind dilated pupils, hears him rail
against her. All she's done.
His packed suitcases like gut punches,
sitting by the door to the bedroom,
right next to the chair that he uses
every morning to tie his shoes—
it leaves her black and blue,
gasping and wringing in air.
She'd like to relive the hotel-lobby
moment of first meetings, turn her head
a second later, maybe two.
Just enough to miss him then.
Just enough to erase
those suitcases, the chair,
the smell of chocolate
coming from the Valentine's box
still sitting on her desk half-full.

Ascent

Piles of paper marked *final notice* and *urgent*,
accompanying phone calls that she left ringing
in the den: they drain her,
while three screaming kids
dirty the white walls of a two-bedroom apartment.
It's a steep climb better left to entire parties
decked in gear that could handle the trek, but
she needed to summit alone. No partner,
just the memory of his muscled arms reaching
for Cheerios on a Saturday morning
and echoes of laughter
that she forgot when he left,
hand on a tattered duffle.

Climbing so high
leaves her gasping for air, seeking shelter
on an open rock face, ceaselessly moving, trying
to keep her momentum.
This life is running her. Pushing her
away from anything like
who she used to be:
dirty laundry, microwave dinners,
toys everywhere like boulders.

If She Died

He'd think he knew her.

He'd hold a service and change her favorite song,
give speeches about her work (at the job she cursed),
serve pasta afterwards though she was gluten free,
quote from a politician of the wrong party,
lament the kids she'd never have (that she never wanted).
If she was buried in an unmarked grave,
he'd smile like he knew her, cry like he wanted her.

He'd come along and carve her name spelled wrong.

Section 2

Funhouse

Its name is a misnomer.

One foot in front of the other, I get lost
in illusions and warping mirrors smudged with prints,
like the edges of my vision while wearing glasses
in the cool morning and late night when walls
bend behind the thick glass and blurring
shapes whisper on the periphery.

In here, it's the mist that leaves a bad taste
in my mouth not unlike the burn of Listerine.

An opened door briefly illuminates a scurrying
clown. He shouldn't be there maybe, but I'm not sure,
like the guest in my bed this morning. It's all
lackluster dust and dirt: sloping floors,
moving walls, rusty and squeaking on hinges.

Snowed In

A blue that looks cold
lines the windows, frosted, rough.
She's peeling back the pages—
Of Mice and Men—
uncovering layers of story,
an archaeologist of the black and white
that brings images to her mind
and abandons them to be covered
again with the next.
Alone in thick-wooded walls,
sheltered in blankets and sweaters,
she leaves days untouched while
discovering questionless answers;
things she didn't know could be asked
until the last page rests on the others
and she looks up.

Gray clouds
will offer up more snow and ice
to keep her indoors.
She pauses for coffee before exchanging
the book with another.
Ice begins tapping
against the window panes.

Leaving Home

Today she is cleaning the rugs for the first time since he died. She's in her slippers, red handkerchief over her ears, coughing through dust clouds until the snow starts and her rugs are clean.

Three weeks ago she dropped a cup on the hall rug. She dug out glass slivers from her heel twice before she hauled the rugs out to the back porch, to lay them over the rail, one by one

and beat them clean with the stiff-bristled broom from the pantry. She'd never done it alone before. Now, stiff, stooped, wrinkled, she thinks of him while she lugs each rug out, stumbling twice.

They're cumbersome and rough in her lotioned hands. Before he'd died, his strong, loose-skinned arms carried them with no breaks or falls. Calculated movement, slow, steady, just him. So like *him*.

His arms hadn't dropped one off the rail into the red mud and snow slush by the cellar door. Yet here she is beating away another part of him. Hairs, nail filings, dirt from his barn boots.

Stomped, sloughed, torn off: fuzz from his wool coat she'd shaved off with a dollar-store razor, strings from his ratty jeans, the ones he wore to change the oil in the truck only he could drive.

She watches them go, lets them go, falling and flying in the wind the way she had let his ashes run through her fingers into the pasture behind the barn. The way she'd let the auctioneer take the animals off,

selling one, two, three, fifty. And the way she and her daughter took inventory of the house after that, packing up to go—a thing at a time and then all at once. She'd only hesitate a moment at the front gate for the last time.

Tuesday the 14th

The old woman left out antifreeze
for the rats in the basement and
shut the door to keep the cats out,
ran her finger down the list of names
in her address book, called
the boy who mows the lawn.
It's too tall from Thursday's rain,
can he come a day early?
Returned a missed call—son
in Washington—stamped a bill,
walked it to the mailbox,
prepared tuna for lunch
with a cat wrapped round her feet,
passed commercial-filled hours
until asleep and missing dinner,
woke up in time for *Doctor Who*,
anticipates next week's episode
before back to bed.
Decided not to set the alarm.

The Rebel at the Crossroads

She sees James Dean that morning:
a movie marathon on a throwback station.
He saunters slow, always uneven, and
her skin prickles, the way it did
when she was young and seeing his face
first time.
She'd cried when he died, but she can't recollect
her own dead anymore, they're vacant lots in an urban
ghost town. The grocery list, which children
she hasn't called, the number to her at-home nurse:
everything difficult and vague.

But the feeling of loving him, of watching
the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*, Vietnam
in her subconscious like a shuddering
flag, fierce and fearsome,
these things come back
even now when her present is a near-constant press
of disconnected scenes, seeming rote lines
coming out sticky-sweet from gently-wrinkled lips
that she wants to read as familiar.

She can feel the strength of old images
like cold dirt: lived in, played in.
Watching her mother lean into the record player at night
and tell stories about Robert Johnson,
“a deal with the devil”—an echo
filtered down through the decades;
now she understands, watching James Dean
toss out lines recorded 60 years ago—
it's all crossroad bargains burning
through her blood, it's all demon deals
that keep her living
for the long-dead famous.

Road Work

At the last rest stop,
the semi parked and gassed,
she gets her news from the TV
behind the counter.

She makes her way through
a microwaved burrito and a soda,
saving some for her dog who's waiting out
by the truck. They'll drive these last
300 miles, home for a day, until
back out on the road.

Really, it's all home to her.
It's all backyards, driveways, and front doors.
The apartment in Tulsa isn't the place
she sees when she thinks
home and safe and happy.

Her neighbors are the man with the cigarette
in the semi behind her and the wrinkled lady
in the gas station handing out lotto tickets
and slushees. With a pink-nosed pit bull,
an energy drink, Eminem, and the Rolling Stones
she'll fly past towns, across entire highways.

Clocking In

In patterned scrubs she pushes
a single cart along a daily track,
each patient the same—
lifeless with beating hearts,
 chests that expand in death.
All pale under a glass-paned sun,
anxious for nothing, yet maybe they'd beg
for the stress of her unpaid bills,
to do the same everyday thing,
to walk this track that she curses.
She follows the beaten path through living ghosts,
envious of their ignorant bliss, she checks vitals,
portions out medicine.
Each step a few more cents off
the stack of bills at home.

Waiting for Breakfast

Passing on tea for hard coffee
that goes down rough. Time now
half past when she came in,
and she looks through the menu again.
Something else to do
while she's waiting on him.
She waits for words he won't tell her,
moments together he forsakes for
dates. She's always hewing down
the minutes like trees when it comes to him.
Waiting for his soft voice. They're
conspirators, but only when together—
tossing back drinks with jokes they've kept
to themselves and insults they shoot back
and forth liberally with smiles instead of screams.
The problem—her problem:
she is one of many,
he is her only.
Her expression as he walks in, wide eyes
and wider grin, the same old Picasso,
and he'll never let her see
what he leaves outside the door.

Holidays

Letting them in, poison seeping out of
hellos and polite conversation.

His parents' thin smiles prod questions
that peel back the carefully placed layers,
leave him exposed and raw,
trying not to hurt: a bundle of nerves,
with no skin to stop pain.

A holiday spent
tiptoeing through conversation: not
peaceful, but necessary
to keep guilt from piling up,
from tipping the scales into pure failure.
It might be easier, disappointing them
completely, one great end. But he can't.
So he calls, offers up a bed.
They'll all have a chance
to ignore each other
and listen too much.

Mourning After

I no longer have time to tell my body
to break around your empty frame.
To tear out the ghosts you let loose in my mind
and whisper with you: nothing matters.

More than anything it's you and your self-pity
that don't matter. Time
twists on while you try to push it away
but like blankets the morning after
you can't escape easy.

Still you persist, something
I can't do anymore. I won't let your words
echo
the way they used to.

Sometimes I mourn my lost self-indulgence,
my search for meaning,
but most times I'm mourning
that I won't ever look at a painting the same way,
that poems don't whimper for days in my soul.
This mourning is fleeting. Like yesterday.

I pull open the door to the bank and go inside.

Old Man Under the Bridge

His name is Mr. Seward,
a ghost playing with his lapel
under Fifth Street.

He fixes his bow tie,
steps back from the rain.

Holds a candle
he can't light to keep away
the monsters he can't see
in the dark.

The weeds under the bridge
become bushes, intertwine
with his feet.

In his dreams he sees lights.

Stub of a Life

Brown shoes, brown pants, a green wool coat
worn too thin and anchored at the waist,
newspaper-lined pockets.

There's a blue ticket stub in his empty wallet:
his family picture, taken
out each night, studied, remembered.

The numbers across the top roll through his mind all day;
he finds pieces of it everywhere—
57 in the road number,
32 in his license number,
88 in the date on a nickel plucked from the park.

In the shelter, filtered neon from the bar across
the street turns the ticket purple
like the last night he saw her, bruised face,
candlelight in her eyes. The same night
she handed him her ticket stub,
told him she lost his name, that it just slipped away, ended.

Lost Words

Books in the library,
gray with dust from the streets.
The librarian—his the only footprints
across the floor through the dirt he's long
stopped trying to clean.
Unread volumes litter carts and collapsing shelves,
the building intact despite outside explosions
as though even war had no use for it.

Books so long unread are unthreatening,
like an uninhabited forest; no fear in something
that can't fight back. Black-inked words,
faded with time, the pages might crumble
in harsh light once reopened, thin light filters
through dirt caked on so thick the fluorescents
in the back rooms are useless. Stacks slowly sink
into shambles; outside there is only fighting.

Typewriter—

Rusting, dirty, used once at 50 words per minute;
secretary lacquering nail polish on her lunch hour.
Red drips gathering on the space bar.
She slips ruby-lipped smiles at the attorneys as they pass by.

Then donated—Catholic church down the road.
Keys tapped by a black-layered nun
who finishes charity reports and types sermons
on milk-white paper. She pauses in the bathroom
to apply clear nail polish to the runs in her stockings.
Grim-lipped, she smiles at parishioners' interruptions.

Then boxed—a lonely boarder in the church basement
until passed from garage sale to estate sale
to a neglected shop window.

The Painting

The landlady touches the portrait as she walks past.
Eyes less than blue:
a small boy, folded onto a wooden horse.
Brown shoes skim the ground,
scuffs on the toes,
browning stain on the sweater.
Sometimes his hands were clasped
in his lap. Others, she'd swear they
clung to the horse.
His mischievous expression—
why she'd bid on the painting—
kept the hall full of echoes:
boys of past and future tenants,
and her own son now gone—AIDS.
The painting is visible from her bed, door open.
Sometimes she swears it's empty.

Antiques

Here is where things come to die—
stuffed, mounted, and hung.
Old pillows, decades-old trikes, rusted out
metal baskets probably once nothing but
side-of-the-road trash. It's a type of
time travel like sitting in the backseat of a '69
Impala with holes in the vinyl. It's all of these things
sitting in my windows, pacing my floors
in the hands of future owners, kids
who've never seen anything like 'em before.

Thing is, it's suffocating like tearing out
your lungs, stuffing 'em with sawdust,
and trying to breathe again. Stories left behind,
bottles shared between friends, vending machines
that have long since dispensed their last memory.
Skeleton keys, postcards, bowls maybe someone used
for birthday cake mixing and handing out Halloween candy.
All of it's too much, and together they crush me in
until I'm too sick of everyone else's left-behind,
lost-and-found miscellany to collect any of my own.
I can smile at hipsters and suburban moms for a while,
but my patience wavers with all of these old things.

Requisite Confessional

Soft statue in the entry rubbed smooth;
I might have made it so, letting go
sins from the time before. I'm always
catching up and not. Unaware of time
passing like bees on a raspberry bush
in the backyard last summer.

Angels and saints never miss me,
the one with the guilty mind
and bloody conscience.

It's easier with the wall between us,
and rote words read off a post-it
make things bland again. Smooth.

Always I don't want to be here.
But I come just for the leaving.

Section 3

Carnavalesque Memory

It's a carnival for child-echoes and once-lovers,
those no longer able to come,
yet bound to a single instant:
faded canvas, cracking wood, and distant spells of happiness.
A lost amusement park surrounded by woods—
dense canvas tents festooned with faded reds and yellows
peaking over treetops: evergreens and bushier leaf-ridden trees
that fade to skeletons in the winter like the tents do slowly
with each new hole, revealing bent frames underneath.
Ferris wheel's lit spokes once turned to a high-pitched folk song
with a forgotten name. Bellowing voices called
into the forest, only ghosts from far enough away; nearer,
they were overwhelming cries selling candies, popcorn,
fried foods. It's a piece of brilliance even now
in a valley otherwise the color of trees,
calling to those who used to see it, calling them back:
moths to lanterns, an inescapable bond
now shared only by ghosts.
It's a fading ember that stands empty, waiting.

Scarecrow in the Back Pasture

Untended grass grows wild, dried, and brown.
Occasional cornstalks sprout only to be picked apart
by crows that venture in. Or the stalks rot to black.
He stands at the center of the straggling fields—
sole inhabitant of this patchworked land.
Ragged man's silhouette is center, standing
on its own spindle. He wheels the wild outward,
arms pinned spread-eagle, dangling hands
filled with black-speckled straw: a perfect tinder figure of
stuffed denim and flannel.
He forgot his job when he was left alone,
maybe he's as human as me, forever carrying two tins
clacking together when the wind blows.
His head bows to the tree line.

Mountain Peak

Under a patina of dirt
it juts up at a distance
above the dark green
trees that form
a rough line
across the west.
Privy to grandeur
and a relentless
trampling of visitors:
college undergrads
on the weekends,
retirees staying active
during the week,
and always the
wanderers, seeking something
in the mountaintop view,
only at night
is it left alone.
With a slow growth upward,
it knows of stillness:
simple existence.
Never contemplates,
desires, wonders.
It only thrums up slow.

On the Tracks

With a shovel rhythm, the train drags through town
on rough tracks surrounded by evergreen.
It's parallel to the trails of deer and elk on one side
and the paths of children in back-of-city neighborhoods
on the other. Free ride for some who end up in town
with stories to hypnotize those same kids,
parents unaware that they scamper off so close to the tracks
to see the new man who hops the train when it slows.
He carries a bent cardboard sign, talks
slow and drawling. He keeps them entertained once
when he comes and once again when he leaves.
He finds the rhythm of the train;
digging him deeper, piling his life higher.
It passes without staying, like him.

In a Small Patch of Woods

Between two houses
is an overgrown path
once worn down by children's feet,
trike tracks, the long impatience
of running next door.
Untouched for years,
brush grows up over
a deck of playing cards.
And maybe between
bird calls and cicada sounds
are the last child-voice echoes,
"pick a card, any card"
in wavering bravado
and the last of the
comic book conversations
repeat themselves over,
fuzzing in and out
like a tape played too often.

Tracks

A mouse starves on a sticky trap
watching the cat that slipped in
through the warped double doors.
A cobwebbed tractor, faded nearly pink from
cherry red, stands like a question.
There're no boot prints in the snow outside.
The cat turns to a crow caw, turns back
and adjusts to pounce.
He waits, eyes unblinking.
The mouse still moves; she blinks.
The cat jumps.
Later, he drags the trap with him
through the doors, howling.

Rooted in Perpetuity

Stolen rocks brought out and chinked away into
a forgotten face. He's pulled out of stone for the trees
to watch, or for his stone-plucked eyes to watch
the trees. Branches intertwine until a tangle
of brown/gray/green mesh stops light
spilling downward. This one statue,
a figure lifted out of civilization, stands unnoticed,
guards the trees and animal paths that follow
the bend of the mountain. He wants to keep
still, retain his post, forget about the bounding
creatures that cross his path momentarily;
they beckon like sirens. He's granite and alone.
The fall rains plaster him with leaves of red and gold.

Might've

A ragged messiah in a side-highway field
roughly forgotten by time;
it stands testament to a farmer's dedicated dirt-ready hands,
a demonic angel protecting his land from winged
interlopers that perch on fence posts,
one gaggle of geese or murder of crows.

One hand dangles, a faltering hello
to the diner across the street
where a withering waitress pours coffee for one more seat,
twirling the loose hairs around her crown--old habit
from when she was twenty-four and still had an escape route.
Today she's resignation in a rusty Ford station wagon.
She sees the life-sized rag doll across the road,
starts to wave at the crow perched on its shoulder,
then stops.

A Sacrifice

Some are so forgotten they can only hang in the world like wind chimes, catching light and wind to make themselves known. The gray angel in the cemetery knew of them.

She stood still long enough to know. Long enough for the kudzu to wrap her feet, tendrils reaching her legs. Peepers chirruped, invisible in the dusk. She might have heard them among the unmarked graves, pauper's stones, rotting pine boxes underfoot, some buried shallow, some under squares of sunken dirt, begging to be let up again.

Granite woman out of place, her small wooded corner was once tended when the bodies she guarded were still tethered to the living. When the first weeds encroached, she stood unchanging; then new plots spread across the first hill while the bodies below her shifted to dirt. She kept still until, left alone in the wild cemetery, she let her wings crumble into the remnants of tilted headstones.

Anticipation

A cool wind shakes the trees, surprising
for August. Quick feet, stepping
in time to avoid roots and loose rocks
that threaten turned ankles. A bobbing lake
whispers from between the trees that she sees
but doesn't as she passes. One black Nike
sinks into a pool of dense almost-dry mud.
She wavers, but keeps going. Small water
bugs and dragonflies dapple the trail, displaced
by pounding footsteps. Late summer light
falls easy to the ground while
the shade foretells autumn.
She heads back at the end of the trail.
The breeze hits her face
and for an instant
she regrets the oncoming cold.

November Hunt

Panicked cows in a pasture beyond the tree line
let out low, urgent moans. Crows carry themselves
out into the gray sky, fleeing the sound.
He shifts, situating himself over roots,
waiting for movement, for familiar deer-sounds,
white tail, brown-gray fur—slicked back, coarse.
Years of this and he's still surprised
how they blend in, nearly disappear against
a leaf-coated backdrop. He watches woods darken,
knows his truck will still be empty at day's end,
but he waits. Another thirty minutes, another ten.
Until the gray light leaves. He finds his truck
with a flashlight, turns on the heat, noses toward
home. He's still watching for eyes, flash of white,
their bounding figures crossing the highway in the night.

Section 4

On a Pale Horse

He comes in a white suit
the color of milk and just as dense.
Under the weight of a million eyes,
hands low at his sides, he soaks up
lives around him; they all dissipate
in the space where his shadow should be.
Bluebirds follow him. You'd think
he was brilliance, light,
but it's a chill in the air he breathes out.
He parts
the world as he walks,
and those he deems unnecessary
vanish for good, their last breaths
calling out for the wolves they ran from.

Funeral

In the church Friday

words broken out
slow, hard, stumbled over

pews upholstered in velvet
flush with the backs of her knees

cold air from the vent
sets her arm in numbness

she thinks
not of the speeches
or the box at the front
where she saw her third-grade teacher
without the blackboard and math problems

she thinks of the slumber party she's attending
tonight.

Death of a Man on Fifth Street

It's on a walk home, late night.
Black skin in a black street until
car bumper meets body.
He's caught, dragged.

She's drunk and
going below the speed limit
doesn't help, but it's too slow for
it all to be over. She's got two miles
to home. She's too far gone to notice.

Safe in her garage, she's about to find out:
he's dead.
Black body painted yellow and red
from the same dirt stopping his lungs.

Passing

Slipping in and out
of consciousness

makes for a long end.

Makes for a pattern
of breathing in
the chemical smell.

Alone then surrounded
family
friends
faces

all out of context.

Wrinkled and bald,
she's ending the same place she came.

Window to a sky always blue

TV always lit,
marking the minutes.

She's wishing it's over, hoping
it's not the end.

Just one more thing,
different thing,
before she goes.

It's Always the Finding

Black terrors flash across the mind,
pull her back into autumn and
the dark edges of near-winter.
Crows dot browning grass beside

the cornfield, red and gold leaves slick
themselves over the sidewalk. A remembered vision
let out only in these first drizzled weeks of November.

Vision morphs into memory,
headless body with a long black shotgun running its length:
decoration too late for October, too late to be a joke.
One sockless foot pressed against the trigger, gun pointed
at where the head should be.
She's screaming again.

Letting Off

It's a flat world she's in—
grays, rough sand that
forms peaks not high enough.
She sent herself here, or
would have if she could.
Exiled. Two days after
she got here, she thrust
her hand through the only
mirror she had. She wanted
her face in shards on the ground.
She got only a hundred
miniature faces for the bloody
fist. She pounds thick-paned
windows, leaving red prints;
the glass is too solid to let her
cut herself away.

“Any Last Words?”

At the question, I ask my own:
“Will you feel better when I’m gone?”
When last week’s, last year’s, yesterday’s
newspaper headlines belong
to a green recycling bin marked *paper*,
when the blood I tore from her mingles
with the more important memories you have
and you find yourself recording new ones
over the time you spent watching me
in the court room, when my body is at last
limp in this chair, will my smirk disappear
like light echoes on the backs of your eyelids?
There for a moment then gone.
Truth is, like you, I’m not so sure.
But there are no answers,
only questions. And then I’m nodding
I’m ready. You don’t move.
The two of us tangled up in a scene
I set up and will tear down in one instant more.

Makeshift Medic

Woolen black tourniquet
from an old scarf. This isn't
his job, the medic's been missing
for hours. It's cold, but his scarf,
it's keeping the blood in.
Trying to. He's used
to harsh, angry work
for the pointlessness of it all.
Forty-three weeks in and still
never seen the enemy. Boredom
is a kind of safety he's never
envied more. Here it's all
necessity: food and sleep,
assets. He just wants a
long supper, a warm body
to curl up next to, eight hours
of luxury instead he gets five
and wakes to numb limbs.
Just instincts; all desire is gone
except where it overlaps
the periphery: when he glimpses
it in warm wool scarves hand-knit
now tied in knots.

Crash

His shattered palms hold the smallest world:
a life fading out in twisted wreckage sliced into
an embankment beside Route 29. Small beats,
an infant heart whispering to a stop in his
bloody hands. Windshield in a shattered concave,
blood-slicked limp airbag, roof gone and snowflakes
like tiny feathers peppering his forearms.
Somehow it all seems supernatural, finding himself
here, crouched in the backseat of a warped,
mud-filled SUV, watching that last tiny breath.

Gone Unnoticed

There's a body hanging in the woods out back
fifty feet from the tree line.
It's thick with gasses and heavy with maggots
ten yards uphill from where Becca and June
played last weekend. The rope around its neck
is pink, a purple-handled jumprope wet with dew;
The right eye is wide open.
Maybe it sees the doe and fawn passing
the mating squirrels three trees over.
It might be found later, when the girls
come back to play, or maybe it'll just
spin there until it shakes itself into dust.

Legacy

Gray ash on the grave robber's son
from the remnants of their double-wide.
His hands find what's left from the fire his father set
before leaving the blackened home for good.
The burnt cover of a photo book now full
of corpses like those they misplaced while fighting
the grave robber's paranoia.
It was twelve counts of murder that got him
a trial, murders he told the son wouldn't matter.
Who would condemn a man that kills the enemy?

Father pled for insanity before it was over.

Full moon through leafless trees lets the son
pick his own way down their mountain
to a skeleton bridge that leads him out of town.
He carries on secrets fueled by fear and inherited guilt
that leaves him responsible for killing the demons
his father warned him about.
The grave robber's son doesn't want to keep it going
for his father to hear about. Doesn't want his own
legend to filter through those bars for the man
to relish like nicotine.
But demons don't end.