

BODIES, BODIES, BODIES, BODIES, BODIES

Poems by Gahl Liberzon

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MORE PRAISE FOR
BODIES, BODIES, BODIES, BODIES, BODIES:

In these poems, Gahl Liberzon makes an urgent argument for critical thinking as a crucial element of love. His work is ruthlessly interrogative, not least of itself; but at the core of its frenetic questioning is a desire to know and be known with the kind of deep tenderness and understanding that precludes complacency. “Tender” means loving, yes, but it also means bruised, sore, raw, exposed, and Gahl’s poems are all of these. The dance, literal and linguistic, that his speakers perform is not a showpiece; it’s a survival mechanism, rooted in the need to confront the fundamental vulnerability of living beings and badger, prickle and shove it into the open, where it can no longer blackmail us into silence.

– Fiona Chamness, co-author of *Feral Citizens*

Bodies, Bodies, Bodies, Bodies, Bodies inserts the vowelless beauty of the Hebrew language directly inside the lawlessness of English grammar, rhetoric, and literary tradition. Through his intimacy with both linguistic worlds, Liberzon carries his Israeli legacy into the heart of Detroit, giving the reader a crash-course on what it means to be otherized, proving forgiveness is not only possible but necessary. Scar by scar, Gahl Liberzon peels the etrog of Jewish masculinity and invites us to take a bite.

– Aaron Samuels, featured performer for TV One’s
Verses & Flow and winner of the 2012 Write Bloody
New Author Contest

These poems are a glimpse into a strange, complicated journey of verbal excavation. He moves through questions of voice, race, family, and discovery with the deft ear of a poet of the highest order.

– Nate Marshall, poet and star of the award-winning
documentary *Louder Than a Bomb*

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The poems “North Carolina Interstate, Age 8”, “Growing Up”, “Epithets”, and “The Scars On Your Wrists and Ankles” were all in a manuscript entitled *Because of the Cold* that received the 2008 Hopwood Underclassmen Award for Poetry. The poems “Ode to My Tongue”, “Russian”, “What It’s Like to Be a White Guy with a Black Eye in Detroit (For Those Who Don’t Know)”, “I’ve Been Thinking About My Charges”, “The Co. of Noodles & Co.”, “Talking About It”, “Hell”, “Heaven”, “Death”, “The Time the Trunchbull Slow-Danced With Me”, “Raking”, “I’m Sorry,” and “When You Haven’t Made Love Ever” were all in a manuscript entitled *Come Back* which received the 2011 summer term Hopwood Award for Poetry. The poems “Ode to/Attack of the Sharktopus” and “Keeping My Mouth Shut” won the 2011 Michael R. Gutterman Award and Marjorie Rapaport Prize, respectively. “The American Boy” appeared in *The Museum of Americana*.

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BODIES, BODIES, BODIES, BODIES, BODIES.

Poems by
Gahl Liberzon

For Spencer Kimball, Shmuel Liberzon
Yasha Liberzon, and Maggie Hanks—
what love for those who are gone,
for those who are here.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword

Ode to My Tongue 1

I. MADE FLESH

List of Things My Older Brother Would've Invented If
He Had Been Alive at The Time of The Renaissance 4

Brother Fears 6

Wrong Thoughts On Baby Brotherhood 7

Russian 8

Pleas to My Grandfather's Body to Not Die Entirely
Until After The New Year 11

Made Flesh 13

II. I KEEP MY FEET MOVING

Morning Person 18

North Carolina Interstate, Age 8 22

What It's Like to Be a White Guy with a Black Eye
in Detroit (For Those Who Don't Know) 24

I've Been Thinking About My Charges 28

8-Mile Honey 30

Ghosts 32

My Proudest Moment 33

III. BLUE AND WHITE AND RED

The American Boy 36

The Co. of Noodles & Co. 39

Six Remixes of The New York Times 41

Talking About It 42

Things Dogs Tell Me (If Dogs Were Commercial Radio) 46

Diary of The Flying Man 47

An Invocation for Erotic Justice 49

Ode to/Attack of The Sharktopus 51

IV. שבעה (SHIVÁ)	
What I Know of Dismemberment	56
Redefinitions (Hell, Death, Heaven, Overcome, Solitude)	57
Why It's Easier to Fake Sick Than Happy	59
Growing Up	61
On Depression	63
A Debt of Gratitude	64
The Time The Trunchbull Slow-Danced with Me	66
Raking	69
V. WHEN YOU HAVEN'T MADE LOVE EVER	
I'm Sorry	74
Epithets	77
Stop Bath	79
When You Haven't Made Love Ever	82
Solace	83
Open Letter to Myself at Age 5, Who Thought He Would Grow Up to Be a Lonesome Drifter	85
Superhero	
The Scars on Your Wrists and Ankles	87
Keeping My Mouth Shut	88
VI. THE DEFINITION OF POETRY	
The Definition of Poetry	92
<i>Notes/Glossary of Influences</i>	95

FOREWORD

For Gahl Liberzon, the journey into the body starts with the tongue. The history of the tongue. Its legacy of gifts and curses, spits and sputters. Its willingness to fight. Its fear of conflict.

Then the teeth.

How they can become weapon.

Or impenetrable blockade.

Or so tender, they ache with longing. And lonely.

Gahl's poems, like a tongue, can lather us with warmth, sear us with heat, or pepper and jab at our collective conscience, urging us to pay greater attention to an honesty we might prefer to ignore. At first blush, and in every blush thereafter, we can taste the lushness of Gahl's language and our teeth can clatter in time to his insistent rhythms.

In the end though, Gahl's poems will reside in our bodies. Our many bodies. The ones we wish we could discard. The ones we've yet to meet. The ones we are born and stuck with. This collection is a poetry that challenges our intellect, yet refuses to be satisfied at enticing only our brains. It is a poetry that wants to be physical, to be muscular, to prick our skins.

The body Gahl's poems travel through is uniquely his, but also all of ours. It is a body that dances first thing in the morning and can't stop moving the rest of the day long - both in concert with, and in betrayal of, its tongue. As Gahl says, it dances *like aurora borealis like roomba with a virus*. It dances *like milk into mess/ like rocks into virus, like banana peels on banana peels/ like bugzappers*. It is a body that is marvelously inventive and always searching for a rhythm, a jolt, and an occasional stasis that will make it feel somehow more connected to other bodies, somehow less lonely.

It is a body that is sometimes violent, or yearning to be. It battles against such yearnings and sometimes gives into them. It practices twisting and rolling and snapping. It practices opening its jutting angles to the angles of other bodies. It practices walking away. It practices shutting up. It practices softening, hardening, becoming sticky. Slippery. It practices disappearing. It practices being present. It fails at all these things. It succeeds at all these things. It is full of contradictions and it wants to embrace them, to rid itself of them. To find another who understands them. It is proud of itself. It hates itself. It yells the way it used to yell at its mother. It is an American body and safe from war. It is an American body at war. It is an Israeli body fighting for understanding. It is an Israeli body failing to understand. It is an Israeli body ashamed of its American tongue. It is an American body ashamed of its Israeli fists. It is the body of its father. It is the body of its baby brother. It is uniquely Gahl's body. It is all our bodies.

In his description of the trudge through the sludge of a Michigan winter, Gahl writes, *Often, I feel/like I walk through or am part of/ a gymsock flavored milkshake*. Images like this keep me wanting to journey with Gahl. I know that feeling too. The stale grey stink of it. The thick and heavy. When Gahl calls the world precisely how it is in such fashion, I want to join him in his explorations. I want to dance cheek-to-cheek with the Trunchbull the way he does. I want to take my own broken and make it good. Gahl's poems help me do that. They help me be a little less lonely. They help me battle my own impatience, that feeling of desperation I get when I too am waiting for my next best chance to get straight with all the coulda-beens, to breakdance through Angell Hall.

Jeff Kass

Author of *Knuckleheads*, Independent Publishing's Best Short Fiction Collection of 2011

ODE TO MY TONGUE

It is not something I can take credit for,
this king of vagabonds,
this snake-oil ambassador.
I never underwent formal training,
no years of elocution lessons nor orthocalisthenics.
I got it from my great uncle Lev who inherited it
from his great-uncle-twice-removed Vladek,
the flea-circus ringmaster
who ripped it out of his prized golden parrot
after she took up the voice of his wife
stolen by pogroms one winter before. He put it
in a kiddish cup, filled it with pickle juice, ox blood,
and grape jam, waxed the top over,
and hid it in a trunk in the cellar. After he died
of a black rot of unspecified origins,
Lev found instructions in the will
to bring it to the first seed of the family crossed
over to the next world, and so, in firm respect for the dead,
he wrapped it in printed wax paper
like a salt-water taffy, and said “doctor’s orders” when
I looked twice at the strange foreign candy.

My father had given me a salted plum jawbreaker
from Japan only two weeks before, so
trusting adults was something I did with all my body
but my mouth. All the same, I knew Lev saw me once
a year and yet he knew my name and blood type and how much
wax my ears held down to the cc, but all I could remember of him
was the smell of his stethoscope, and in the logic of family
for whom we have only hand gestures and good intentions
that meant I owed him at least my theatre.
So I took the writhing thing and let it sit in my mouth
and melt onto my real, clumsy, seven year old spit-nub
and smiled wide enough that my mother didn’t have to translate
and found, year by year, as if through blood-quickening,

how naturally the trills reverberated out of my larynx,
how the *khets* and *ejyins* began to march out of my throat
like soldiers on a homecoming parade.
Little did I know what a strange sweater I'd unravel
the loose string of, how many other voices were puppeteered
by it, what freakshow minstrelry lay hidden. Sometimes, even
simple sentences came out bended into origami abstractions of
countries I had and had not seen. Sometimes when
I'd stub my toe on a hard object my mouth would dance
out the histories of whole dead civilizations
before I'd think to yank the leash of my lips shut.

Dentists have doubled the number of suction tubes in my mouth
during check-ups because of "an unusually large
amount of highly volatile saliva." After he took
my wisdom teeth out, one Dr. Stephen Payne took an extended
leave of absence to Kamchatka and never returned. A year later
I stumbled upon a picture of a man with the same powder blue
eyes, rosy cheeks and bald spot, naked and tattooed
head to toe with the opening verses of the Mahabharata.
I haven't stepped foot in a dentist's office since.

I have been training to keep it in check,
disrupting its vociferous hexes
with beat-boxing and record-scratch, trying to confuse its
voodoo logic with nonsense poetry and multilingual riddles,
but the thing is tireless. It runs circles around
school teachers, whip-cracks at the television
if I watch MSNBC for too long. It drools rainbows
that stain my dreams. It is a kicked hornets' nest
and the syrup inside. It is a cactus of diamonds,
all glint and flash and needle. I'm always mystified
by the carnival and afraid of the sting;
it is a venomous and impatient prick.

I.

Made Flesh



LIST OF THINGS MY OLDER BROTHER JON WOULD
HAVE INVENTED IF HE HAD BEEN ALIVE AT THE
TIME OF THE RENAISSANCE

Brass Knuckles.
Pliers.
The Bolt-Action Rifle.
Grits.
The Semi-Colon.
The Coffee Grinder.
Naturalism.
The Steel Guitar.
Tax Breaks for Business Expenses.
The Wire Saw.
Bourbon.
Hip-Waders.
The Hydraulic Pump.
The Scarecrow.
The Domestication of Birds of Prey.
The Stirrup.
The following crayon colors:
Brown-green,
Green-brown,
Salmon,
Burnt Umber,
and Cobalt.
Amnesia.
Penicillin.
The Metaphor "He farts dust."
Beef jerky.
Greco-Roman Wrestling.
Backyard Wrestling.
Movies about dead painters.
Teddy Roosevelt's Soft-Spokenness.
Captain Ahab's White Whale.
Ernest Hemingway's Screwdriver,
or at least the orange juice.
Jacques Cousteau's O-ring.
The Word "balderdash."

The Construction Helmet.
The Magnum Revolver.
The Magnum Condom.
The Pessary.
The Rosary.
The Cat-o'-Nine Tails.
Covering a black eye with a steak.
Duct tape.
The Moment of Silence.

All of the following signs:
Beware Falling Rocks.
Deer Crossing.
Yield.

BROTHER FEARS

I knew my baby brother Yasha had sleep apnea before my father told me. Before the doctors told him. Before the sleep labs and otolaryngologists.

My father told me, his head bowed slightly with worry, *he snores*. The snores did not worry me. It was the quiet. The sudden stop of his breathing. His chest's halting paralysis. Sometimes I would count the seconds between the end of in and the beginning of out. Sometime I wondered if, in the other room, we'd notice

if he choked to death. It was a scary thing, these silences my brother would trip into, one moment stirring, another still, one moment breathing another not. I could see them in his wake too- the body waiting, the brain stuck turning in its cage.

When I entered the house he'd stand stock-still smiling, open mouthed, silent, a deer in headlights, waiting for something, and then I'd say *zdrastvuy* and he'd jerk away, run off to a corner. When he saw strangers for the first time he'd go slack-jawed and non-responsive for a few seconds, unable to process, then burrow his head into my calf or shoulder.

The other day my older brother Jon and my father tried to teach him to share at the ripe old age of two and a half. My dad propped Yasha up on his knee, waited, made sad faces while my brother asked *Papa is sad, will you share with him?*

and Yasha, not understanding, looked at my dad's harlequinned lip-biting, at my brother's beseeching stare, and then looked away, laughed, ate more of the raisins he was supposed to give, not understanding what was wrong, why he was caught in the throe of our silence, just that people were sad, people were hoping, waiting, for it to break.

WRONG THOUGHTS ON BABY-BROTHERHOOD

I could bite off your
hand. After all, you keep stick
-ing it in my mouth.

RUSSIAN

This tongue turns my teeth crooked,
recedes my eyes into my skull,
makes me like the smell of gasoline,
gunpowder,
spilt drink.

Hebrew deepens my voice more confident,
puts hair in my eyebrows.

English makes sharp the cheekbones,
straightens my spine out.

But Russian,
Russian is a sponge bath
with pumice stone for soap;
leaves bodies bruised clean, discolored.

My stepmother is Russian. So is my father.
She's actually from Turkmenistan. He's actually from Ukraine,
each country actually had a native language, had Russian
forced onto them with production quotas, militant chic, censorship.
They took it all in international stride;
Ashkhabad to Moscow, Chernovitz to Haifa,
eventually, both to America.

In Russian, there are three different ways
to say one must do something.
There is no word for fun.

My stepmom said she loved me
after knowing me for less than a year,
because she was my father's wife,
because now we were family. I understood that,
but I didn't understand the love.

I've been learning Russian
for near to a year now, because

my half-brother Yasha was born
and would speak nothing else.
For the most part, his mother too.

When I started, I thought
it was an ugly language.
Now, I think it's probably
the ugliest language.

I hold it in my mouth like a jawbreaker
made of drunken porcupines,
rub the quills wrong with my tongue,
scratch salt into the tastebuds.
I've started to itch.

There's something appealing about
licking the rusty dagger of its syntax,
its blunt, remorseless adjectives.
The word for dangerous hisses
like an agitated tomcat: опасный.
Russian teaches me about love the
way my grandfather's glass eye
doesn't look at me, just resigns itself
to stare in the corner. All in stride.
The word for safe is безопасный: without danger.
There are thousands of these unwords.
Unbeautiful. Undecent. The standard answer
to *how are you* is unbad.
You can write whole sentences, pages about
everything that isn't:
Никто не сделал ничего нигде никогда.
Unwho didn't do unwhat unwhere at unwhen.
This is grammatically correct.

My father frequently breaks into Russian
while talking to my stepmother.
Usually it's to call her stupid. She laughs
the way a crow laughs at its next meal,
reminds him of his second-class Ukrainian

accent, his weight problem.
I don't think they've willingly slept
in separate beds while in the same state
since they started dating. Not even
when she refused to speak to him.
For a week.

In Russian, the male verb for marriage
is *жениться на кого*– to wife yourself
inside or on top of someone. The word that means
I love, люблю, sounds
like a sneeze, or a dry heave.

The other week, while my
father and I are out, Yasha falls
forward trying to walk and
nearly brains himself on the coffee
table. That afternoon, I see the welt and ask
what happened, she apologizes and my father explains
how this happens all the time with infants
while I sing Yasha a song that sounds like
coordinated belching, his forehead looking like
my idea of Moscow. I catch
a horrible case of the flu that day,
mucous filled lungs and nose, throat
swollen against vocal chords,
everything itching.

The next morning my teacher
asks *How's it going?* I tell her
yesterday my unmother watched Yasha
not take his first steps,
my nostrils flaring, cheeks pinching in
with lips towards ears,
eyes half-closed.

Then I sneeze. She says
my accent is near perfect.

PLEAS TO MY GRANDFATHER'S BODY TO NOT DIE
ENTIRELY UNTIL AFTER THE NEW YEAR

1. *From my heart*

I have to put so many of his family in boxes
with no choice in the matter—
one visit a year, conversations clipped
by dementia, politics, the language
which now he's only just learned to wear
and still doesn't know how to live in.
Just 6 more months, just one interview.
One goodbye. He knows not even where
his grandparents entered this world,
his grandmother too far gone to tell him.
His brother doesn't know either.
He can't ask his father about the past.
He hasn't even seen the hospital.
Let him know this little: where they came
and where they left. I have spent two years
trying to proof the seams from the storm
of Spencer's memory— let him dig out
this dike for the coming flood.

2. *From my ancestor Rabbi Yitzkhak Ben-Eliezer*

I was famous for one act and one act alone—
I let the mute boy whistle in my Beit Knesset when
he could not mouth out the words of the holy tongue.
Each prays how he can, I said, and the lord
blessed this judgment by necessity 20 generations
later, the athiest children of my children's children.
It was not for the mute boy alone, my judgment,
but the community. We cannot be a house of congregation
before the infinite righteousness of HaShem if we shun our own
mouth-fouled brethren, no matter how they mar our blessings.
We must give them access to our stories—
our hard won grace.

3. *From Kevin Coval*

Diaspora is a meaningless word for the Jews unless they understand that they are as much the places they were between the first kingdom of Israel and now as they were either. It is the ignorance of the oppressive plight of our ancestors that allows us to oppress, to forget ourselves again and again. This is what capitalism wants. It is the root of all our whitening.

4. *From my father*

I have done everything I could. I have hired a nurse for you and Mama, I've settled your prognosis and your payments with the doctors. I know you are afraid. We all know you are afraid, I did not have to tell your grandchildren—the first thing they learned to read when their words ran out was bodies, yours as well as hers, slump and sick and sad and pissed. You can't leave them this way, one son bedeviled in Haiti and the other hung up on a last phone call uttering *I heard*— into static. I was there, I saw his face falling. I will forget the worthwhile parts of you. It is what every son does; I will remember you an impatient man and try my best to keep my back turned so your disappointed face won't egg me further. I may even succeed. But my children are not so lucky. The question of you will nag them. They will polish you into a tragedy. They will feel your absence more than your life.

MADE FLESH

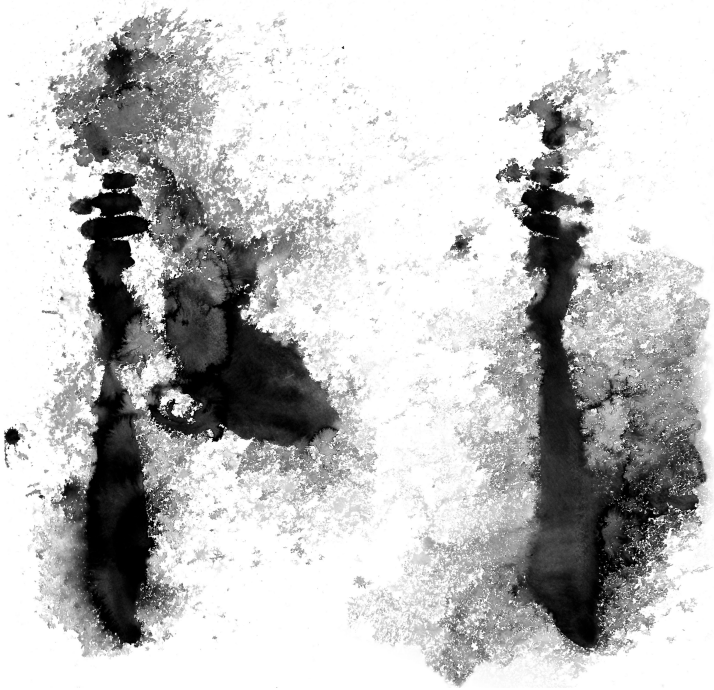
My name is גל it means Wave
the cycle of crest and curl, of leaving and returning,
my name is Liberzon it means Son of the Beloved
Gahl it is Hebrew it is mangled
Liberzon it is English it is mangled Hebrew
which is mangled Russian which
is mangled German royalty
My name means son of royalty
and son of Russian Jew which also means
son of poverty My family history is an abyss
between a Moldovan shtetl and a Camberg coat of arms
My name means son of mystery
My name means lost in translation
My name means substitute
with what sounds right to you
my name is Ghoul, Gail, Sea-Gull
my name is Gumps, it is short, it means
shorty, it means smaller, my name is gully,
galit, wavelet, rivulet, tributary
channel kiss of waters and sand
My secret name is בן-ישראל,
Son of Israel, my father's name
which means Wrestles Angels
which means demands his blessings
which means takes the birthright of
his blind father from the eldest
My grandfather had one
glass eye and one flesh
Neither ever saw his eldest's lover
because of the cancer and before that homophobia
My uncle's name means high priest done wrong
My father's name is the place my uncle
remains and sees and is not seen in
My uncle's name means he who cannot speak to god
means steward to the silence of others My father's name means
wrestles with god demanding his blessings
means methodical orchestration of deaths

My father's name is a litany of wars from Jericho
to Gaza My father named me for beauty
and secretly his anger and secretly his need
My grandfather named his sons to mark destinations
and secretly to revive the dead
Our names are hope My great grandfather
had my father's name until the sickness took him
Another held my uncle's until he was undone
in a trench His father burned to death in the synagogue
where he spoke the word my grandfather brought back,
made flesh, moved to, the land
my father forsook for this country
which my name confounds at every turn
as my father did his own
My name means confusion
Even the Jews ask me if I keep
kosher until they remember I am
Israeli Even the Israelis ask me where
my accent is from My name
is its own country My name means
the death of movement across oceans
driven by the moon My father's name
means land of milk and honey
My mother's name means Morning
Dew My aunt's is Bell Clapper
My grandfathers' names are Bear, God-Listening,
Prophet on the Cusp of Worlds
My grandmothers are Source of Life, keeper of faith,
progenitor of kings and saviors None of these are metaphors
My birth is a transcontinental affair
My brothers' names are Jonathan and Jacob they are cognates
They mean God-Given and Heel-Grabber
They all mean Assimilation all mean lessons unlearned
My father named me for what he left behind
My name implies shores but does not say which
My name implies shores but cannot be borne by them
My god-given brother is sad Israel is not my home
My land-water mother is sad Israel is not my home
My name means transliteration

It is the purview of borders
My father is sad his house is not my home
My home is a litany in constant revision
My name holds a dagesh in the gimel it is a mark
of emphasis It is a dead mark in the gimel
Nobody alive knows how to pronounce it
My birthright is a revival tongue
My name means invention
My home is wherever I crash against endlessly

II.

I Keep My Feet Moving



MORNING PERSON

after Tim Seibles

Down until hoe
break until beat
like a mongoose
I dance

I dance like a robotic squirrel
like piano keys

Finger until snap
roll until tootsie
I dance like
hummingbirds like typewriters
like waterbugs
I dance

sunset til nighttime
nighttime until sexytime
I dance

like dimetradons
like dolphins

I dance like slinkies

like stir fry in the wok
like punchcards in the clock
I dance

tomrrow til yesterday
yesterdaytilnextyear
I dance like

like gorillas like
fruit flies like
Brooklyn
I dance

People say, "Hold on a second"
I dance

People say, "Gahl, we're trying to have a board meeting"
I dance

People say,
"Go whiteboy!"

I dance like bad dreams
like light on ocean waves
I dance

my hands whipping out sharp
as rubber bands off the fingers
of the third graders
I dance

crossover into layup
layup into Nike commercial
hair into Don King's Hair™
I dance
like rollerskates like steam engines like
"it tasted almost entirely but not quite completely unlike tea"
I dance

at the bank
at the combination KFC/PizzaHut
at Kroger's in line for the flu shot
I dance

skin into callous
evol into love
cuckold into cock-a-doodle-doo-

Give me my after dinner mints!
I dance
like lightning

like aurora borealis like a roomba with a virus

I dance like shrimp gumbo
like argyle on socks
I dance like
I dance like

Carlton

gear into gyroscope
pebbletopepper
purplepolkadottedpokémon
I dance

cobra into cake
feet into flight

People say, "How do you do that?"
I dance
People say, "This is a library"
I dance
People say, "Are you
tryna
belike
Michael Jackson?"

I dance like basketball
between legs like hurdy-gurdies
like karahi curry

milk into mess
rocks into gravel
curt to caress

like fireworks
like quail
like parameciums
I dance

I dance like everyone's watching
I dance like the house is on fire
I dance like circular saws
I dance like
I dance like

I dance like banana peels on banana peels
like bugzappers
de-ass those chairs
I dance

like the devil under pale moon light
Call your local exorcist

I dance like a three-legged dog with vertigo
dizzy as Gillespie

like dandelion seeds on a breeze
I dance

You say, "Mind the ceiling"
I dance

You say, "Get him out of the operating room"
I dance

You say "al-HAM-dullelah"

I dance
like a fiery grin
like steel pan
like flies after swatters
like cuttlefish
like a mongoose
I dance like rhinoceri
clunk your horns
I mean clap your hands
I mean eat the snakes alive
and biting.

NORTH CAROLINA INTERSTATE, AGE 8

I was surprised to find the car again Not
that I'd thought they'd leave me, just
that I'd thought there was a gas station maybe

five or ten miles up the road where
we'd meet and yet there they were,
some thousand-odd feet after the yelling

and the yelling and our chests swelling
up like pigeons ruffling their own feathers until
we're too puffed up for the same car, so my father

makes a threat which turns into a promise which turns to
me kicked out of the car while my mother and brother stare
straight ahead without blinking, one horrified, one amazed

and I, still too pissed for dazed, step out of the car and
watch it shrink into the distance then disappear
around the bend and the pavement is smoother than the trail

but much less forgiving but that's okay I'm feeling
much less apologetic today
and the first thought I spring to is that

he's trying to punish me with quarantine,
which just gets me more hot under the collar
and the air is much cooler than on the trail

and the wind is much louder than usual
and usually I'd say I'm sorry but not this time and
the boots groan and creak like an old door

or a strange bird and the white lines are
blurry at their edges, not as black and white
as they first seem, kinda like the second idea

I'll think a week later, that he's quarantined me
to keep me safe or maybe just far from his anger
so I can walk it out, because I do:

my piss and vinegar are diluted by sweat
and my fists open slow like bear traps
and my mind can't help but become

preoccupied with the rhythm
of the pebbles in the asphalt and
the wildflowers spurting in the cracks-

I keep my head down as I walk
because that way when I look back up
the distance will surprise me

like the last thing, which I'll only know
years later, after having forgot
I'd ever been so angry so young, something I'll know

instantly and sure as a dead goldfish
that he quarantined me to protect himself
from my anger, a thought which will surprise me

even more than the sight of the car
when I do finally draw my head up
or the feeling of the anger

which by now is a smooth rock around which
my mind eddies, which keeps me silent
and staring straight ahead without

blinking as I get in the car with my father
and my mother and my brother,
who are all silent too,

and are all staring straight ahead,
and all without blinking,
and all for different reasons.

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A WHITE GUY WITH A BLACK EYE IN DETROIT (FOR THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW)

It's like one white van,
two black males,
three punches to the head
and four squad cars means four witness statements-
get used to the math- it's statistical

It's the scramble up to the van to avoid getting kicked
in the head and stomach it's fear
like a car accident you say
just like that it's the fists
on a collision course with your head it's the palms
patting your pockets it's your skull heavy
locked downcast by the blows it's like a broken ipod
and an obsolete cell phone, car keys, a money clip
with a dollar bill in it, ironic
like the chase after the boys, the backpacks,
the authorities, after the answers
get used to the questions:

How'd you get that? Who was it?
Did they catch them? Were they armed?
Did you fight back? Were you alone?
What'd they take? Did you know
you were a target? Will you keep teaching
there? Will you press charges?
When the school-kids stare at you
is it because part of you is black
or because the rest of you isn't?

Get used to not knowing, excusing,
get used to wondering, to humor,
to the east-siders who joked you'd get beat up
before the fact gone suddenly silent
to the white girls from Ann Arbor
who tell you *don't get mugged* like it was funny
or serious

like you were a target
and not just a struck bullseye
like you could wipe the egg off your face
with the right joke like the egg wasn't
your face itself,

get used to your newfound blackness,
your purple-black and blue-black,
your students complimenting how well
you took the punch like it's something to be
proud of like your supervisor telling you
you're officially a Detroiter like
you've earned something
It's like out of the frying pan
and into the burn ward

get used to the stinging, the swelling,
the ringing in your ears
everything not combat is white
noise get used to children
scared of your face, white people
scared of you on the street
it's like confusing intentions like
the difference between
smile and wince, grin and grimace
get used to bearing teeth-
you never know what's coming

It's like you're not racist
except in Detroit except
in the gas station, on the street
in the school yard except at night
in the afternoon at eleven in the morning
it happened at eleven in the morning
like a car accident it could happen
anytime get used to the fear
when they're bigger, when
you can't see their eyes and arms,
when you're alone, when you're with friends

and you're not home get used
to profiling *Officer, he was 5'10" to*

*6 feet tall young black male
with a blue ecko unlimited hoodie
and camel colored workboots
Officer, he was 5'10" to
6 feet tall young black male
with a blue ecko unlimited hoodie
and camel colored workboots*

Officer get used to the repetition,
5'10" to 6 feet tall
the looping play over and over
the crime scene
get used to the daydreams
a blue ecko unlimited hoodie
the fantasies of grabbing the palms patting
your legs and breaking the fingers
of pulling the arm down and shoving
your elbow up in his nose
the blood spattering over
camel colored workboots
of the same questions looping
Why didn't you call for help
He is 17 years old
Why didn't you hit back
Arrest Warrant for suspect Anthony Moton
Two counts unarmed robbery
Minimum sentence 15 years
Would you rather him
charged as a child or an adult
young black male
Is he a boy or a man
blue ecko unlimited hoodie

Why didn't you hit back
He hit me in the ear and eye
Why didn't you hit back
He told me to give him all my money
Are you a boy or a man
I told him I didn't have any money
Are you a Detroitter or a target
I didn't see his face well
Are you a car accident or a victim
I was dizzy and my head was heavy
I couldn't pull my head up
to look him in the eye
Does it make any difference

IVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT MY CHARGES,

those captains of underground industry.
Years each, millions of dollars in
tax-payer scrilla to cage, feed, and
rectal-stare two teenagers. What
did they get from my robbery?

A cell-phone so old its accessories
have been discontinued, and my
cracked ipod, that wonderful taoist
inscription on the back: *to hold, you must first
open your hand*. I think in one
of my many dreams, one of the boys
(preferably the younger one)
reads the inscription and for a moment

forgets what he is doing and notices
the texture of the sounds of the expressway,
falls out of his mind at the distant bird chirp,
and wants to cry at the emptiness of the wind.
Then of course he is hit by a taxi-cab

or some other dream nonsense,
and I desperately try to explain
to his parole officer that I didn't even know
he was kid-who-mugged-me-#2 even when I
sold him popsicles the day before, Cherry Burst Pop-Ups
(he paid a dollar he'd bummed from his mom),
and he gets younger as the dream goes on so
he's no longer 14 but now 12, now 9,
now 6, his baggy clothes now comical,
not threatening, he's tearing up at the eyes
and I wasn't even driving the cab.

In the waking world today
I imagined meeting the older one
once a week for chess and questions
neither of us could answer. I would move

to take his bishop, he'd knock over his king
or the whole board and I, peeved, would ask
Why'd you do it?
and then he would ask
Why do you keep coming here?
and we'd look at each other and open our mouths
and close them, silently, like fishes
trying to prove they can breathe.

8-MILE HONEY

is leaking down the side of my backpack.
It's 12:34 am, and I am in the bowels
of Newark, more specifically
in the lobby of the Crowne-Sheridan Inn.
I am waiting to try to use my hotel voucher,
which is for the Ramada Inn.

The 8-mile honey was a gift
from my boss when I worked in Detroit.
It's a small jar of real honey
from real bees in a real hive, from 8-mile.
When I got it, I couldn't tell if it was a serious gift
to show me Detroit's burgeoning agriculture movement,
or a gag gift designed to lift my spirits
after the mugging happened. When I got it,
I put it in the water bottle pouch of my backpack
and forgot about it. Now I carry it
everywhere I go.

I got the voucher at the customer service desk
of the Newark airport after they laid-over my connecting flight
to the next day while I was on the plane for the first one.
"I came from Detroit," I told the first representative.
"They messed up my flights."
She told me air traffic control did it.
She told me the airline doesn't pay for hotels.
She told me she couldn't help me.
I asked to speak to someone who could.
"I'm from Detroit," I told the second representative,
in my Detroit voice. "We got a problem."
The airline paid for my hotel.

I picked up my Detroit voice in Detroit.
I call it my Detroit voice because
that's where I picked it up.
It's the same as my voice, except
my tongue stays at the bottom of my mouth. Except

I keep my feet moving. Except
I don't blink. I see things,
and things see me, but I don't blink.
I picked up a lot of things in Detroit.

I picked it up after the mugging, maybe
with the mugging. Strange gift.
When I used it, I felt like secretly
it was a joke, but secretly it wasn't.
It made me feel in control.
It made me feel like
nothing could hurt me again.
Not without paying.

When I give the hotel clerk the voucher,
I notice a sudden stickiness
on my fingers. I see my forearm
is smeared with streaks of something:
maybe oil, maybe dirt, maybe ink.
Between the streaks there it is,
the same glistening stickiness.

He looks at the voucher,
looks at me, looks back.
I look at him, look at the backpack,
see a droplet oozing down the side.
I taste my fingers. I look back at him.
He gives me my room key.
The honey is sweet.

GHOSTS

are the thing I saw and recoiled at when I saw you, Margot.
Fists, I saw. Not yours, but you know. And again
when they honked their horn in the van.
And all the walk back after they picked you up. I saw

my hands and the things I must
always prepare them for
and never let them do.
Practice turning practice into practice.
The box I will put my heart in,
the voice I will use to speak to him.
The words. *You will repeat after me, Nick,*

*or I will call the police. Or I will dislocate
your shoulder. Repeat after me: 'You are not
a narc or a soldier.' Say it. Practice twisting my body slightly
down and in towards him, my shoulder to his head,
rolling the wrist until he yelps. Say 'You are nothing
but another me- to hurt you is to hurt myself.' Practice*

hurting myself. *Say 'I will not harm you
again because you are human and I am
a good person and I respect that.'* How I will
switch from his left to his right side
to be sure, how I will spread his arms
above and behind his head like chicken wings
being snapped off the breast.

My knee to his back or my foot
on his neck. *Or I call the police.
Margot saw how you attacked me just now,
for the second time, right Margot?
Right Margot? Say it.* The push of
his temple into the ground. *Now Margot,
you tell me. Or I dislocate his shoulder. Tell me
what you saw: what he did, and what I did,
and why. And why. And why.*

MY PROUDEST MOMENT

Once there was this drunk kid
outside the old Neutral Zone.
It was a Saturday night, late night. He was
real angry, real drunk, started talking to me
about Israel and Palestine. I told him
who I was, where I was from, and
he started saying things I wouldn't repeat.
I started arguing with him. He got angrier,
raised his voice at me, so I raised it back.
he came up to me, put his head
in my personal space, yelled
"You think you can beat my ass, huh?"

He was so close I couldn't see
both his face and hands
at once. His eyes were unfocused.
His eyebrows were bunched together.
He was staring me down, but he didn't see me.
All of a sudden, it occurred to me
how close anger and sadness are.
I knew that if I wasn't there,
if he was all alone, he'd be
crying, hugging himself.

Even still, I was angry- he'd been an ass,
and I had a right to my opinion
without being threatened.
So I didn't back down. I put
my head right in his hostile face
and I yelled back.

"Do you *want* to fight me?"
It wasn't a challenge. It was
exasperation. I yelled the way
I used to yell at my mom
when she'd talk shit about my dad.
I might as well have been asking

"Do you think this solves anything?"
And he yelled back, just as pissed,
"No." So I yelled "Then don't."
And then I walked away.

It was the rarest thing back then,
to know what you were really fighting.
To win.

III.

Blue and White
and Red



THE AMERICAN BOY

after Jon Sands after Angel Nafis after Terrance Hayes

- The American boy wants to know why they call him *sahib*
The American boy looked it up on Wikipedia but nothing doing
The American boy thinks mirrors are too judgmental
The American boy has taken to calling people *sahib, gai-jin, honky*
The American boy is convinced his use of irony is both subversive
and original
The American boy thinks the hatred of Americans is a peculiar
universal, an undeserved curse Bush Jr. brought on us all
The American boy drowns himself in rum and calls it poetry
and means poetic justice
and doesn't know it
The American boy wants to stop breathing so hard but can't
The American boy takes 25-minute showers
The American boy is in a bind
because he can't watch his free streaming internet porn
after taking a women's studies class
but he also can't allow himself to pay for fair trade
sex positive 3rd wave feminist pornography
because he wouldn't want to be associated
with the type of people he'd have to buy it from
The American boy laughs when his European friends talk about
their hatred of gypsies- it seems like a strange
fairy tale to him

The American boy wears handknit artisanal scarves,
Axe "Dark Temptation" body spray,
sweatshop Pumas
The American boy instantly classifies every one he sees
into clean or unclean; he suspects
everyone who is unclean
to be homeless
and avoids eye contact
The American boy won't give money to the same charity twice,
but he'll tell them as he passes,
"Yo, I gave you like 2 dollars last week,
remember?"

The American boy spends a week's food money
on a beer pong table

The American boy is almost certain he won't make
his father's mistakes-
that is why the American boy is going to have
a family.

The American boy eagerly awaits pot to be legal so he can buy local

The American boy loves Xbox and sitcoms and sleep
with dreams of ample women
who know the food groups for you
and don't care if you exercise

The American boy stopped watching the news after September 11th
because he felt like the TV wouldn't stop asking him
a question he didn't understand

The American boy feels like the Asian GSI's all hate him
because his parents paid his tuition in full and didn't care
if he got an A-, and he still appreciates their studiousness
but wishes they learned English better
before they moved here

The American boy says he loves Detroit when he means
Hamtramck

The American boy just wishes all those people around the world
who fuckin hate America
would just come to his house party
and share a blunt with him
and listen to some Phoenix
and fuckin talk about the universe
and shit, you know?

The American boy has felt nostalgic since he was 16 years old
for when he was 5 years old

The American boy has seen neither his dog nor grandfather die,
but in each case was bought a suit
and made to stand still
as a casket was lowered into the ground
and was then told something about heaven
and goodness

The American boy always likes to talk about heaven, but
in his heart of hearts

he is not sure
how he feels about that
The American boy is only working his job
as a file clerk/counter jockey/drive through order dialer
until he finishes college, when he can work as
a day trader/junior member/CPA
when he's not scuba-diving on the weekends
on small islands where his money goes far
and they call him *sahib*,
though he's not sure
how he feels about that
The American boy's grandparents knew what *real* courage was,
the American boy thinks
with a stirring of admiration
in his breast
The American boy thinks his life is more like reality TV
than a sitcom,
but like not the Jersey Shore kind,
but like also not like the The Weakest Link kind-
he can't seem to find his genre
The American boy is wrought with anxiety
about the future of his football team
The American boy worries he is reaching his peak
when it comes to sleeping with fuckin' superhotties
The American boy, almost every week, looks to his right and left
at the bar at his friends in their grins
and dress shirts and clean sneakers, how sharp
and relaxed and ready they are, and thinks *I'm so glad
we're all in this together*,
smiling into his pint.

THE CO. OF NOODLES & CO.

We all had to know everything,
The grill, the silverbowl,
busing, dishes, garnish,
prep, cashiering, I did it all
except the sauté line.

*You can start with hot oils
when you turn 18,* said the manager
at the time- his name was Jason.

Our staff was 50% illegal.
All of the latter were Mexican,
half were in the same family: Abel, his father,
his son, and his 16-year-old cousin
Alfonso whose forged social security card
said he was 19. *He's a nice kid, but he
needs to stay in the back if he doesn't
speak English* said the manager
at the time- her name was Samantha.

The other half was ex-students.
Preston had a film degree.
Natalie was going to be a lawyer.
Sometimes people would eat
whole meals than protest
the nutritional content. *Who
the fuck complains about the lack
of baby spinach on a 6 dollar meal
we cooked in 4 and half minutes?*
said a manager at the time- His name was Eric.
He had a master's in drum performance.

Everybody quit, transferred, or got fired.
Alfonso got fired for stealing,
then came back the next day.
He tried to redeem \$126 in free food...
I just felt sorry for Abel's dad, said the manager at the time-
his name was Gordy. He was fired for sexual harassment.

I worked there a year and a half.
By the time I left, the only people
I knew there from when I started
were Preston and Abel's dad.
I hear they still work there today,
but I don't see them anymore—
they work in the back.

FIVE REMIXES OF THE NEW YORK TIMES

after Idris Goodwin

Barbara Bush, wife of former president George H.W. Bush and mother of George W Bush, generated criticism after comments on hurricane evacuees and a donation. While visiting a Houston relief center for people displaced by Hurricane Katrina, Bush told the radio program *Marketplace*:

“Almost everyone I’ve talked to says ‘We’re gonna move to Houston.’ What I’m hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas... Everybody is so overwhelmed by the hospitality, and so many of the people in the arenas here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.”

Remix 1:

What I’m hearing is Barbara Bush told the underprivileged that a relief center is hospitality.

Remix 2:

Everybody is working. Barbara Bush generates criticism.

Remix 3:

Texas is working the hospitality of the underprivileged very well for the marketplace.

Remix 4:

People displaced by the marketplace are almost people in Texas. To Barbara Bush, they are a sort of hurricane.

Remix 5:

Barbara Bush is scary privileged. President Bush is scary privileged. A working marketplace generates almost-people. Criticism is displaced in programs and hurricanes- a relief for any Bush visiting.

TALKING ABOUT IT

1.

Hadassah crouches a bit lower.

So this next poem, I've been told, is pretty controversial.

We are in a hotel hallway in Chicago
at the 2009 Brave New Voices National Youth Poetry Slam.

Israel, she begins, is raping Palestine.

I couldn't say I was sure about Israel's gender,

but the last poem I remembered

described it as a woman, so

I imagine a strap-on.

A big one.

2.

At the college nationals in Philadelphia

the team from Brandeis

opts to pantomime

both an Israeli paramedic

and the Gaza weapons smuggler

he is saving from a collapsed tunnel.

The Brandeis team is 100% white

christian american. Not one arab

among them, no ashkenaz or muslim.

Aimeé squeezes my hand tight to stay quiet.

It's the third time today she's done this.

3.

At half past two in the morning, I am

sitting in my uncle's car in Haifa

University's visitor parking lot maintaining

my end of the argument while

he waits for something to happen.

*They cut off the genitals and put them in the mouths of the bodies
after they kill them.*

he says. I want to say
*people have done much worse
to us, but they are still people,*
but I know he's not talking
about what he believes,
but what he's seen,
and the difference,
so I say nothing.

4.
Marwan tells me
in Bahrain
the wickedness of the Jews
is a well known fact.
Marwan tells me
when he first arrived in America
people thought he was homeless
because of how he dressed. Marwan tells me
when he tried to use his own name
as a handle on Xbox live,
the admins canceled his account
claiming that his usage of
a terrorist's name, even if an imaginary one
from the tv series 24,
is offensive to the people
he plays with. I start to tell him
something, but Max Friedman, drunk
says *Where my bagels @, yo?*

5.
Rebecca can't understand why I think
her decision to marry only Jews is racist.

6.
My mother cannot understand why
I do not believe in a Jewish state. She cries
It's the only way to keep us safe.
I try to tell her, the reasons pogroms could happen was
because all the jews lived in shtetls. I try to tell her

when the land is small enough there is no difference
between a wall that keeps out and the wall
that fences in. She cuts me off because she doesn't
understand, I lose my train of thought, she can't remember
the English for the things she wants to say,
and none of this, not even the tears, is new.

7.

My father was a paramedic paratrooper,
my grandfather a naval commando.
Everything they did is off the record.

When I ask my father if he killed anyone, he said
it's impossible to know in the shooting whose bullets hit what.

I want to ask if there was ever a time he saved anyone's life,
but I'm afraid to find out about the time he couldn't.

8.

In Israel, I'm an American Jew.
In America I don't call myself Jewish,
and in America I don't have a choice about being called Jewish
and in America that's supposed to mean something about my heart
but in Israel I'm talking about my mother
and in Israel people don't hang the Israeli flag on the wall
and in America people hang the American flag on their bodies
and Shemaah Yisrael and שמה ישראל are irreconcilable
and America means both and Israel is decidedly neither.

Tell me the accent of my Hebrew is nationless. Tell me
Trader Joe's Assorted Hummus Platter is refreshingly authentic;
tell me *schawarma* is made of chicken, the IDF is evil,
the Fatah controlled Palestine and Hamas controlled Palestine
are one Palestine being raped
Tell me how a country rapes
How a country is more than a land
and its people, how being a soldier is a choice
Tell me the president is good for my country
and bad for my other country

Say blue and white
and red
and white and blue
and white and red
and black and green Tell me what to say
to Hadassah, My mother, Rebecca,
the Brandeis slam team, every uncle, cousin, grandparent
in Israel, my father, his patients, his victims,
the Palestinians, tell me
which truth to what power
which flag to what wall
between my people and my people where
is the middle ground not an ocean?

THINGS DOGS TELL ME
(IF DOGS WERE COMMERCIAL RADIO)

Bow wow wow Bow wow CLEAN YOUR ROOM Bow wow
wow Bow wow GO TO CHURCH Bow wow Bow wow Bow
wow wow Bow wow STOCKS&BONDS Bow wow wow Bow
wow STOCKS&BONDS Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow
wow Bow wow Bow wow wow FLOSS OFTEN Bow wow
Bow wow wow Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow
wow NO CUPS WITHOUT COASTERS Bow wow wow
Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow wow
STOCKS&BONDS Bow wow wow Bow wow DIVERSIFY!
Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow
wow DIVERSIFY! Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow
wow wow Bow wow MOW THE LAWN Bow wow wow Bow
wow Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow Bow wow
wow Bow wow Bow wow wow DIVERSIFY! DIVERSIFY!
Bow wow NO WHITE AFTER LABOR DAY Bow wow wow
Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow Bow wow wow
Bow wow FLOSS ALWAYS Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow
wow wow Bow wow Bow wow wow FIFTEEN PERCENT
Bow wow Bow wow wow CONSUME Bow wow wow Bow
wow Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow wow
CARPETS MATCH THE DRAPES Bow wow wow Bow
wow FLOSS FOREVER Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow
wow Bow wow Bow wow wow DIVERSIFY! OBEY Bow wow
CONSUME OBEY Bow wow wow Bow wow Bow wow wow
Bow wow Bow wow wow CARPETS MATCH THE OBEY
Bow wow wow OBEY Bow wow Bow wow wow Bow wow
Bow wow wow Bow wow OBEY OBEY Bow wow Bow wow
wow OBEY

DIARY OF THE FLYING MAN

Woke up early.
Hit my head on the ceiling again.
Drifted back down, landed on the bed on all fours.
Hangover from the wine and cheese party.
I stepped out of my room.
The second floor smelled of puke.
Someone painted the toilet pinot noir.
My feet floated up to the stairs to the third floor,
my head still swimming behind it.
I couldn't focus right.
Had to grab the rail with my hands
and pull myself towards the bathroom.
My wrists were sore.
The bathroom was clean.
I took a shower,
and almost fell asleep in the bathtub.
Didn't want more of the puke smell,
so I wafted out the third floor window
like a piece of paper;
thought I'd drift down nice and easy
through my bedroom window.
The blinds were down.
My hair got caught in them.

Three hours later, I went to the kitchen
for mashed potatoes.
The first floor smelled like puke too,
but that's were the kitchen was.
The mashed potatoes made me feel
better, but I still had so much gas.
I burped and came three feet off the ground.
I burped again and found myself in the living room.
The couches were soft. I fell asleep in one,
until the ceiling fan woke me up.
The house president says I have to pay for it.
The living room isn't your bedroom, he says.
Everyone wants me to replace the party lights with normal ones.

Nobody has any ibuprofen.
I tried watching Afro Samurai 2 to relax,
but it just bugged me.
All he does is kill people,
including his father, even though
he could've just walked away.
It's so unrealistic.
If I had his super sword skills
I'd use them for something good,
like, you know, open a Benihana's,
or like, make salads for soup kitchens and shit.
I could really make a difference.

AN INVOCATION FOR EROTIC JUSTICE

I saw two movies tonight. One was a horror and the other a tragedy.

A warning for the wise: I am in the process of burning out.
This is not me being melodramatic, just slangy.
I missed several homework assignments and I didn't care.
I suspect I won't care when my grades come back looking
like I'd turned my brain to oatmeal porridge for two to three weeks.
All the same, I'm pretty sure I'll make it through my seven years
of college and have a steady job.

By the end of *American Beauty* it didn't
seem like that was a cure for anything though—
the best I could hope for was a celibate Spacey
smoking pot and listening to high school songs
while his family falls apart and the neighbors
fumble their way towards the derringer. More likely

I'd end up with the Annette Benning nightmare role of the wife,
spending her days in houses she can't make into homes,
bedding a walking self-help slogan with a smile faker than his hair,
clutching the gun like an answer until she gets back
to find a bloodstain too big to put peroxide on, at which point
hug the coats, bury your face in the smell,
and cry yourself into collapse. I've done it before.
No reason it couldn't happen again.

A word for the wicked: I am a Jew, just like Saperstein,
the doctor who delivered Rosemary's baby.
That movie was more sad than scary.
When I found out at the end of the movie
what I already knew, I couldn't give a shit
who the baby's daddy was. Rosemary was raped.
All the smiling old assholes in that room were complicit,
and she just had to sit there and try to ignore them,
and love a child with skin and eyes that are not hers
or her husband's, and rock him back and forth while
strangers hail her rapist over and over. I think Roman

Polanski was trying to make an autobiography and didn't know how to make the terror end.

He did touch one nerve with it though; I'm beginning to fear patriarchy has stained my hands so much I couldn't really love a woman if I wanted to, and I've always wanted to. Like my lips were wasp tails, my fingers just restless bludgeons, every knuckle hardened irrevocably. It's so easy to do wrong and say sorry afterwards. Everyone cheers you on, no matter who or what. Like it's a victory.

Let this be my prayer:
I want to become something that doesn't hurt anyone.
A bookshelf. A basin. A carriage. A cubbyhole.
Something people can choose, use without violence or pain.
Something people fill.

ODE TO/ATTACK OF THE SHARKTOPUS

"Got you, mother."

Nick Flynn, speaking to the S-11 after firing the transmitter dart out of his grenade launcher, shortly before the S-11 squeezes the blood out of his injured leg.

It begins with the cover of the dvd case:

tagline reads– *Half Shark, Half Octopus, All Killer.*

reads– *All Danger.* reads– *Look What Science Has Wrought*

Upon the Scarred and Submissive Earth–

There Are Things in The World God Doesn't Love.

See the picture: the Sharktopus, turgid, purple, blue

outstretched, suction cups luscious, puffed, blushing pouts,
seductive, the head fanged, the gills spiked– neither animal had
spikes– this is consequence, promethean forest fire, tentacles

gripping sensuous as legs, the shark's head
a relentless vagina dentata, gills all vagina dentata,
the Sharktopus, he is, she is, is neither, both, the divine unholy,

überfreudian frankenfish, scourge and symptom, descending
from the pinnacled heights of genetic engineering, descending
upon the hapless blonde besiliconed bikini-clad sun-bather;

she is only trespassing the private beach secretly controlled
by government mad scientists hell-bent on creating
the ultimate weapon, and create bent hell they have: the Octoshark,

what they can't control, classify, taxonomize: the Sharktopussy,
Cocktopus, codenamed the S-11, crowning gem, the past 10
(Starfish-o-War, Mantaeel, Prawnsquid, Corallhorse, Petroleum-

Jellyfish, Magikarp, Krakken, Charlie Sheen, Free Willy 2,
crowdads) were nothing by comparison,
Sharktopus is a superweapon unleashed,

heading south, *demands virgin sacrifices*
reports pirate radio DJ Captain Jack before
the Sharktopus death-shanks him through the back of his throat

with an errant erect tentacle- the Superweapon has many
tentacles, the sunbathing woman on the cover is threatened by
the Superweapon, the Cocktweapon is a threat to the woman,

a threat to her bikini, a threat to her clearly delineated breasts,
her straight blonde hair, her Cancun tan and reaganomics,
her professionally lightened teeth, the Superpusy has

teeth everywhere it shouldn't and they are crusty and crooked
and hard as diamonds, its tentacles want to kabob her
like they did with Captain Jack's mouth,

its toothed vagina head will swallow her whole
like it did the sweat-soaked beachside yoga class
and the beef-caked beach volleyball tourney, will unbirth her

and her bikini and satin beach towel all at once, taking it in
indiscriminately, the joe six-pack cruise ship hullscrubbers
and their Puerto Vallarta bungee-jumping tourist patrons,

both Pez, the smelly horny drunken schooner jockey and
Stacey Everheart, the cleavage brandishing punky yet exploitative
news reporter who commissions/is sexually harassed by him,

both her tattooed and presumably hispanic cameraman Bones
and Santos, the heroically quiet Iraq veteran and second-banana
to gun-toting chest-waxer and cauczoid protagonist Nick Flynn,

and let's not forget: the bronzed and glistening bikini-clad
"pan-ethnic" twenty-something fire-dancing troupe,
the dripping wet bikini-clad twenty-something

jet-ski enthusiasts (their patrons), even the bikini-clad
twenty-something beachcomber sweeping her metal detector
across the beach in languorous groping arcs, moaning

with pleasure as she bends over at the waist for a doubloon, slowly-

THERE IS NOTHING SALACIOUS ABOUT THE SPECIFIC
COLLECTION OF VICTIMS PRESENTED. THE
PRESENTATION IS NOT DESIGNED TO TITILLATE.

The Sharktopus does not discriminate,
the Sharktweapon is a threat to our bikini-clad
twenty-something women everywhere, our sunbathing

yoga-exercising mojito-sipping yacht-owning
pan-ethnic-dance-patronizers everywhere,
the Sharktopus is a threat to the whole private beach,

every private beach, the Sharktopus cares not for boundaries,
for property, for propriety, the Sharktopus will eat/fuck
every other helpless white female English speaker vacationing

south of the border, razorsuckoff the heads of all our brave young
(bronzed) white men and their brain-exploding-transmitter-dart
ejaculating grenade-launchers (our only hope; Sharktopus is

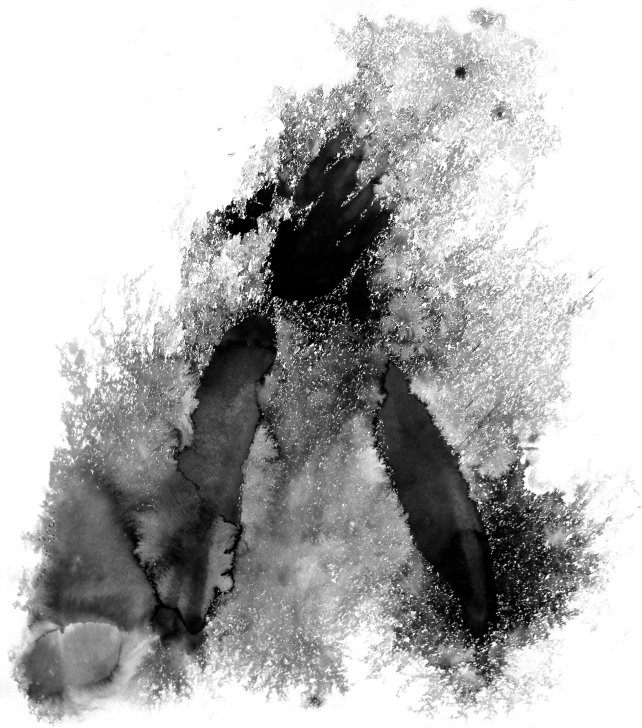
bulletproof), even now creeps menacingly towards
little Jack, a well-kempt (lightly bronzed) white boy, all
our otherwise innocent khaki-shorts-sporting younglings who are

still too little to have yet purchased clearly delineated bikinis or
ejaculating grenade launchers, will mix up all their parts in its belly
into one big mess, one big monster of a mess,

the Sharktopus will not stop, will not be satisfied
until we are all mess, all undifferentiated parts, nothing but
bodies, bodies, bodies, bodies, bodies.

IV

שבעה
(Shivá)



WHAT I KNOW OF DISMEMBERMENT

When the body unravels,
the only thing like a skein spinning
is the sound of the ground rushing to meet you.
*If amputation or the severing of an artery occurs,
the blood will come out in pulsating squirts
in rhythm with the pulse. If a vein is severed, the blood oozes.*
In your head the memory of textbook pictures, documentaries,
facts will blaze a prophecy, an invisible hand that pulls your strings,
frayed as they may be, limp as the limbs may fall.
*A broken bone will appear deformed.
A severed nerve will lead to a lack of feeling
and voluntary muscle control.*
When you pull something apart, the stomach turns,
not at the violence, but at the disconnect
between things that were one.
*After the onset of serious injury, the sympathetic nervous system
will secrete a series of hormones and neurotransmitters
as part of the fight or flight response.*
When you are pulled apart, the stomach does not
turn, but the two sides of the brain crash into each other and flip
like pancakes. The godless air aches inside each ear.
*In response to these the bowels and bladder will clench,
and hunger, fatigue, and for 2-5 minutes,
pain will be suppressed.*
when you are pulled apart, even if you are forced
to continue living, to continue moving forward,
you will not drag your body or flail it.
You will turn what is left of you into a cradle
and you will carry. Above the aching air,
and scrambling scrambling brains,
you must carry.

HELL

Like when you're 8 & at the soccer field & it's an hour after practice ended & all the other kids went home & the coach asks "Is *anyone* coming to pick you up?" & you look up but you don't say anything, except everything forever.

DEATH

Things keep happening. Well, except you.

HEAVEN

Like when it's your birthday & you step into a dark room & flip the light switch & then everybody stands up & yells "Surprise!" except everything forever.

OVERCOME

I'm as broken as anything god made, but my heart, it just keeps on beating.

SOLITUDE

You have to fill up the empty space, or it'll drown you.

WHY IT'S EASIER TO FAKE SICK THAN HAPPY

"He's desperate and sad because his dad is fucking dying."

-Myself, during an English 297 class discussion of Dylan Thomas's poem Rage Against The Dying of The Light, two days after the funeral for Spencer Kimball, a close friend and poet who'd overdosed a month earlier.

"As a matter of respect for other members of the class and for me, I hope you will adjust the register of your contributions to discussion in English 297. I've no doubt that you will have no trouble finding other ways of expressing your ideas."

-Professor [REDACTED], in a private email sent to me later that day.

Missing?

Swine Flu.

Really, late waking

tardy = (depression +/- 3Playstation^2). Easier to stay

Absent

say *HI NI*,

offer words.

really, excuse myself:

Can't explain grief can't

say (*he's unwell*)

Dead.

Not here.

Never could tell

you couldn't (even) respect the

loss.

Sorry,

excuse me.

Still reeling sometimes

anger speaks me untrue (again).

Apologies.

Stuck.
Broken record.
PS₃>my head
this morning cried (myself) awake (again),
caught

stumbling,
awkward steps.
Keeping up attendance?
I mean, what painful
lurching

deserted
hard work.
Needed sleep, even
while awake, with friends, (still)
alone.

Here.
currently present.
keeping up attendance.
(it's nowhere) In my head regardless, (so)
Present.

Cooperating,
acting agreeably.
"Watching my register."
Can't get too riled (while)
complicit.

Silent.
No register.
mind-less the mouth
(its inexplicable). I and he, we're
voiceless.

GROWING UP

Is erosion

Is not writing

Is cleaning the kitchen knife, pushing off the crust of blood and fat
with a wet rag, back and forth,
back and forth

Is repetitive stress injury

Is the stapler being put back in the drawer

Is not looking in the mirror too hard because there's nothing there
because it's just
you

Is the taste of gums and spearmint

Is a half-windsor knot being pulled smaller

Is a close shave because good hygiene is self-respect
because you care enough to shave
slowly

Is a styptic pencil

Is reading efficiently

Is throwing the loaf away because of the mold because if you eat
even a little it will grow
become more

Is the inside of an EXIT sign

Is hugging yourself

Is leaving the TV on when you're alone,
even if you're not in the room, because it fills,
functional

Is white noise

Is the ellipsis at the end of your mood swings

Is the stomach shrinking because you haven't fed it yet
because you don't need to
yet

Is a patina creeping up chrome
Is the eyelid spasm onset when sleep debt exceeds 8 hours
Is reserving judgment because you know once you fall
it's hard not to give in
completely

Is bleach smell
Is getting a good, firm grip, and squeezing
Is knowing what to ignore, because some things, people,
are just meaningless, random,
insane...

ON DEPRESSION

My Body is an EVIL LAIR in an undersea cave!
My Spine drops rows of RAZOR-TOOTHED stalactites,
gooey light reflects off pools of RADIOACTIVE PLASMA
in glaucous waves! GIANT DEEP-SEA CRABS can be
seen building nest-like structures in the shadows of
my Crackedly Ribs! There are fissures deep in the Pancreas,
and sometimes Molten Bile pores up! My Skull is where
the MAD SCIENTIST lives, pulling ball-handled meter-long
levers that go CHINCKA-CHINKA-CHONCK,
and flipping giant threatening LEATHER-METAL switches and
watching the Jacob's Ladder of Neurons in my brain
light up, and laughing *HA-HA ILL SHOW YOU ALL!*
My Arms are where he keeps the TITANIUM DRILLBITS
for his DOOM MACHINES! When I Dance,
the giant crabs swarm in FRENZIED MOBS
and eat some of the LESSER HENCHMAN.
The mad scientist is NOT WELCOME, his lab coat is
STOLEN, He sleeps with an ELECTRIC NAILGUN
under his pillow. He knows this is not his place.
There are VOLCANIC VENTS in my Heels
with RABID GREMLINS, and UNSTABLE NEBULAE
in the SWOLLEN JOINTS of my toes!
There are large empty LIGHTNING RESERVOIRS
in my Stomach, their contents siphoned somewhere Secret.
The mad scientist wants to know where they're hidden,
thinks they are the key to BUILDING Paradise
OR DESTROYING The World. He's NOT SURE
which. He only sees the THUNDER crack between
my Teeth, my Mouth always roaming, a sinkhole
into a GLASS CANYON, the floors of the canyon covered
with broken toys, desperate MEN WITHOUT LEGS,
TRAIN AXLES and whole DISEMBODIED ELEVATORS.
The mad scientist wants to pull the mutilated men out, but there's
nothing he can do: the sandworms will eat him
if he leaves HIS ROOM.

A DEBT OF GRATITUDE

Thank you Nike. No,
not for slave labor. Not for Jordans either,
at least not specifically. Let me put it
simply. Michigan is cold.
Michigan is also grey.

There are stretches of this year,
six months or more, when the sky looks
like an unwashed sop rag used to mop the floor
at St. Mary's food pantry. The snow hasn't been
purely white in decades, and after a day's worth
of icing and cars, the sidewalk is bordered
by mountains of gray sludge. Often, I feel
like I walk through or am part of
a gymsock flavored milkshake
as I stroll through shoveled valleys of wet dryer-
lint and cement. This is where you come in. Your hightops

have rebirthed my mood. When the sky offers no color,
the brick reds dulled by their overexposure, I see you dazzle
as walking orchids two-stepping down State street.
These fuchsia, black, gold trim
Air Force Ones, these MF Doom
dunks with electrified fingers,
even Japan's own co-opted sun rising
over the outside arch of some porch-drinking skateboarder
or crate-hauling backpacker on his way back from Encore.

Even on my own feet, a pair of wingless bumblebees
strapped to the nines in gortex,
tongue fat and flush out fluffy laces.

I bought this pair hating damn near everything
in the world, my PF Flyers dinged and falling apart,
socks wet, stained, and holey, the insides of my ribs
muddied and aching from dissatisfaction.
A therapist who couldn't call back, a roommate who
couldn't grow up, a best friend who'd kill himself

without the decency to call me.
I was all sorts of concrete dull
and bunkered in all that bullshit, when

out of nowhere, these shoes appeared,
these supersonic moon boots
lighting my ass on fire from the bottom
up, hugging my ankles like a tarsal was
the sexiest thing on a man since his own
swagger. I wasn't saying it was instantaneous,
shit- the sun don't rise in under a minute.
I was still a red-eyed lion roaring
at the futility of it all for the next hour,
but slowly, surely, I let go of the sea urchin
hooking into my epiglottis and it loosened up
its barbs and rolled out of me in some offbreath.
And what did I find then? Not simply the weakness
of a bleeding throat and teary eyes,
but my head held newly
higher, ankles supported,
myself standing straighter
rooted in these blazing archstones,
these rocket thrusters, this breakdance
of rubber and soul.

THE TIME THE TRUNCHBULL SLOW-DANCED WITH ME

was the first time
I'd slow danced with anyone
who had a choice in the matter.
I was a 21-year-old at a folk concert
in the tap room DD'ing for my friend
who was chatting up a guy she met.

Thirty minutes before, a guy
sitting next to me at the bar
had called his friend a kike
and I was silent

and it was most everything
I could think about. Misty
Lynn was playing a slow tune
and I was swaying back and forth, wondering
if the fights I'd been in prior to
that day had taken the fight out of me.
Misty looked like she was halfway out of a good dream,
swinging in and out of the lights all shag-
rug-orange and tina-turner-purple. The Trunchbull was

drunk, possibly desperately so, dressed
in the same cobalt trench coat and strop-leather belt,
but her hair was down. It didn't want to be.
Her eyes were sunk in her head. Her mouth hung open a little
as she stared, drooped brows.
Eventually she saw me, stepped the whole
breadth of the place in three strides, put her hand out
like it was a mule and I was a well.
She called out "Magnus"
but it sounded like "Maahghns." I took her hand,

I don't know, because anything sounds like
"Gahl" when the music's loud enough,
and I thought maybe she had a secret for me,

because sometimes strangers,
especially the older ones,
especially the drunker ones,
especially the ones that choose you,
they got good secrets; something that'll
make you stand straight awhile.
She just wanted to dance.

I thought it was gonna be
one of those middle school dances—
hands on the hips, arms round the shoulders,
but she's not from that generation. She hugged me close
behind the back, put my right hand in her other,
sashayed me left and right, cheek to cheek. A real blues dancer.
I had to turn my head sideways so I could breathe
(she kept so tight), but she led damn straight and circumspect
for a drunkard. She started mumbling in my ear
something about all sorts of coulda-beens, about how
you can't pay the bills with feathers and lollipops, about how
she didn't have the time for pot-roast making and airs-putting-on
and we were lurching in these neat curlicues, all one-two-three
one-two-three and Misty was leaning on air, on nothing at all,
and the sloppy drunk guy and his probably Jewish friend were
off somewhere getting all sloppy and Jewish together

and in this cradle
of Trunchbull,
in the rock of this sea
of Trunchbull,
I hear her say something to Magnus
and by accident to me,

how she was just one woman and
goddammit and she was sorry, real sorry
she was always so worked up and what bullshit
that she couldn't be sweet to me, couldn't be a good sister
and dance with me when I was lonely
until I came back as a bottle-spirit.

So I told her it was alright.
I told her my name was Magnus
and I was a bottle spirit come down from on high
and I sure as shit had a bone to pick, but really,
all I ever wanted was a good dance
from my good sister
and now I got one and so
we're square. So she loosened up,

and then she let me go.
And free I was.
Free I was.

RAKING

The rake is the long arthritic arm of nature's law:
the one where everything has to die,
gets swept away.

There are certain people, quiet people, who,
when they are most pleased
by the things you do
will grunt & nod once. The rake
is the grunt. The movement of
their head is the movement of leaves.

the difference between raking
a front lawn & raking a zen garden
is the difference between getting
your thoughts in order & pushing
the unwanted ones aside. Raking
is like doing pushups, except
it's also like doing ballet.

The handle of a good rake is a crown of shaved wood
which can be hung off a wall
using string looped through a hole
one inch under the crest.
My mother always told me
the key to good posture is to
pretend someone is pulling you
up from the crown of your head
with a string.

A good rake's head is made of metal, & its teeth
are slightly warped & gnarly
with rusted brown spots.
My mother's teeth are parts silver,
zinc, nickel & plastic; some are brown
altogether. The rake's teeth are
the fingers my mother runs through my hair.

When I was a boy, my teeth were
twisted & gnarly. When I was a
boy, I couldn't be angry or sad
for more than an hour; everything got
swept away. I wanted to hold on-
to my feelings better; I knew other
people had grudges, but I couldn't.
A rake was a Sunday afternoon
then. A rake was a *fffft*
& back, & *shhhht* & back, until
the sun went behind the fence.

When I was a boy, a rake was a sore
hand & no cartoons, but also a nod
& a grunt & a glass of lemonade.
A rake is hard work.

My fathers belly used to rise &
fall in the evenings when he'd watch
the news. I would put my head
on it, & try & match my breaths
but his were too deep.
A rake tells you your limits. Sometimes
he would watch boxing & I would
put my arm on his belly. I didn't move
my arm, but breath by breath
my elbow would hit Oscar de la Hoya
square in the jaw & then
it would go back, & hit him again, & back,
over & over. Rakes didn't break
back then, they just got grumpier.

Now mom buys new rakes every
two, three years. She rakes by herself,
my dad hires the neighbor's kids.
They all rake alone. Now
my teeth are straight. I don't rake
anymore. I don't want to rake.
A rake pulls up the dead grass.

My dad doesn't watch boxing anymore,
just UFC, checks his e-mail at the same time.
My mom wants to sell the house I grew up in.
She doesn't like living there
by herself. Again:
A rake is hard work. Sweeping

away is hard work.
There's still grunts, & sometimes
our heads follow,
but everyone rakes alone.

However: My mother's fingers.
However: My father's belly.
& *fffft*. & *shhht*. & always.

V.

When You Haven't Made Love

Ever



I'M SORRY,

especially because I definitely will,
but secretly, I have no desire to have coffee with you.
It's nothing personal, except yesterday
my uncle asked me over Skype
what happened with the girls
because neither he nor my grandfather stood a chance
and I had nothing to report
and I went to Holi
and was painted pink and yellow and purple and blue
and I found the prettiest girl in the crowd
and then accidentally threw pigment directly into both of her eyes
so much that she had to go to the bathroom to wash them
out, me too embarrassed
even to ask her name,
I left the crowd smelling of
flowers, of their pigment
and my father called me from Petakh Tikva
and then we spoke on Skype
and my whole face was red

when he asked me about the girls (the pigment, again),
and I said nothing doing and Yasha asked
what was wrong with my face and why wasn't the
killer-whale a shark since teeth
and the dolphin a shark since mama said so
and my dad was explaining things
about fin orientation and his mistake-
n mother but still he cried, he is only 3 years old,
he can't understand phylums and evo-bio,
just that momma said shark and he likes sharks
and he wants sharks, even when momma talks
with papa and gets her story straight-
there was a lot of wanting
for things to be sharks
that clearly weren't you see;
I had to wait for my dad
to ask me about money

before I had any useful answers,

and afterwards I went to dinner at mom's
and she asked *mah im habakhurot?*, meaning
of course, Jewish, but still, female
and somehow supposedly mine, like stock-
market, futures-bonds, investments,
and of course I'm all recessionomics,
but Jon calls us from Port-Au-Prince
all of a sudden, and I feel saved by the bell
until he too asks me about girls, and,
because I do not say the magic words,
Haiti's monsoon season literally starts less than 10 seconds later
and he loses his cell-phone reception (my b)

and 19 hours after you told me
you'd decided to get back together with your boyfriend from
Boston and wouldn't let me leave your house
until I cried, I guess, because you watched
too many rom-coms growing up
and didn't know how to just shut the fuck up
and let people go, and because
until you showed up I spent most of my time
disappointing relatives and writing poems about it
and for a moment, I'll admit, I entertained
the hope that I wouldn't have to,
like a bowl of milk left for a stray cat
you hope hasn't yet died of mange,

yes, 19 hours of transcontinental flight
and 300km of desperately polite and sterile bullet trains later
I found my father, the Where's Waldo World Edition
of neuroscientists, and he showed me my room and bed
and I turned on Facebook
to let my mother know I had landed safely

when that Boston boyfriend of yours messaged me about
how jealous he was of me being in Japan
and sorry about taking you back

and I magnanimously said nothing and unfriended you
because honestly, I wasn't interested in being your friend,
because if you haven't picked up on it yet,
great whites mate by biting each other and humping
and I got people all over the world telling me I am
my bloodline's great white hope irrespective
of my clear lack of gills, my clumsy blubber,
and these teeth which, however big, are still
too soft, too sensitive.

EPITHETS

SLUT

Inside the old Neutral Zone,
Mel takes her tongue out of my mouth
and puts her head down
while the single exposed light bulb
warms color into the graffiti
adorning the lower half of the stair-
case we are crouched next to.
The temperature is perfect,
which is not usual for me
for this sort of thing.

As I thumb the tear off her cheek
she tells me that she's sorry,
that she told her friends
she wouldn't do this tonight
and I tell her it's perfectly natural
if two people liked each other, and
back then I think I'm talking about
kissing but right now I'm not
so sure but back then I hold her
face in my hands and I kiss
her again and we smile and
she sorta snivels, sorta giggles,
and she calls herself that word.

It was the first time I'd heard anyone use
that word.

VIRGIN

Outside the bounds of liability insurance
sometime around midnight,
Mel and I trespass into a Fingerle
Lumber Co. stockyard, taking
refuge from the snow in an open
wood garage while everything gets

painted amber by the streetlight-cum-
mood-light. This is no film noir.
My nose is running and it burns and
this feels more usual for me
for this sort of thing, more natural.
I scooch back spread-legged
on a pile of covered boards,
the kind you'd build barns with,
and Mel steps up and does what's
natural and after some time of us moving
like we're asleep but more urgent she slides
her hands up my thighs and they
are cold through my jeans and
I shiver and she stops
and laughs because she thinks
I've shivered because I'm one of those.
It was because of the cold.

You reading this Mel?
It was because of the cold.

STOP BATH

This is how it happens the first time you ever cry
in front of me:
his name is Zeke, and you're not
sure. It's been a week since you've kissed him
by now
less than a month after your vows
I count in my head as your head
shakes muttering something about
how stupid
and we are taking a leisurely walk to shoot
and shooting the shit, doing this waltz of
a conversation we sometimes do, when you present a problem
you don't particularly want to solve
and I snap off a solution I remember
from a TV sitcom or a Dear Abbey column
and you restate your initial problem
and frown your face against it then press your eye
to the viewfinder, like the answer was there somewhere
and we're now in front of the school,
on the lawn to which only the 2nd floor classroom has a view,
and the head inside my head
is remembering that

Zeke seemed like a nicer guy than the last one
but strangely, all the boys you pick
have a habit of wearing a lot of black
and parachute pants and this one is not in a band
right now, does he play an instrument? and calculating
what's the next blunt thing I will say to you
as if feeding a pigeon a handful of seed
when all of a sudden
you stop and go silent
and instead of this waltz we talk our way through-
complain, explain (as if I know), evade- you are
standing behind me, crying

and for the first time my heart listens in,
and small miracle, without even taking the time to shame me
my heart says in its language, simple and perfect:

She is hurting. Go

to her. it says,

and I have never really seen anyone
crying in front of me like this,
and I have never touched you either (except maybe by accident) but,
small miracle,

I obey. *Go hold her,*
my heart tells me, *and tell her*
it's going to be alright
until the tears stop. and I do. And your body
is much frailer than I'd have thought,
and you shake as you weep, very slightly,
but I can feel it in your back through my palms,
and most surprisingly, you fit.
Angular and sharp as each body is, for every jutting rib and elbow
and the awkward expensive pendulums of our cameras
on each side, we set into each other's arms
like the meshing cogs of a single clockwork.
And it works. You stop crying.
When my heart tells me,
I let you go.
We look at each other and say nothing.

WHEN YOU HAVEN'T MADE LOVE EVER

after Patrick Rosal

Whatever makes you steal a plastic daisy
from the display bouquet- hope, lies, the excessive curve
of shoulders familiar and taunting Whatever rouses
your arthritic toes to their blessed hectic

shuffling Whatever dashing screen hero's
reflective pupils and coquettish quips you mimic
Whatever gravelly chicken scratch your bloodpump prays in
Whatever bed and blood Whatever haphazard

dance leaves you sweating and spent for pretending
without feeling first your body's incandescent burn
before the charge of another Do not rush
from *not* to *never* Stay the slam of that seesaw

Close your fingers slowly, Pray yourself to sleep like
some stubborn stolid rooster bent and cawing for his keep.

SOLACE

When you have broken up with your girlfriend
and in so doing missed the poetry show,

and when you get home
there is nobody

and so you pour out your bourbon
into a tea cup and drink,

watching internet reruns of shows
you've never seen on television

because you don't own a television
and you only watch these shows on your computer

late at night, on your bed, which is
suddenly only ever expecting you again,

and your bourbon, while it serves
to make you drunk awhile, does little

to warm your belly or tease the edges of your eyes
into crow's feet; when you find yourself staring

past the flashing lights of your laptop screen
into the two-lane state highway of your projected future,

on which you are now driving in a car fast in the rain
towards you-know-not-where, and it seems, no matter how bright

the blush of your halogens on the asphalt, nor how keen
the eye and steady the hand holding the wheel

that there is no way by continuing as you have done
to make the seat next to yours any less empty

and so you have grown accustomed to putting your work-
filled backpack there, but even propped up

as such your backpack never talks back
nor strokes the back of your head

nor insinuates love at you with its eyes
for your work has no eyes as of yet

and no more love than you've given it
anyhow; well then maybe, at that point,

the alien hum of the fluorescents in your bathroom
or the spectral shadows projected on your wall

(like the streetlamp's puppets) or the persistent rickety clack
of your old house's heating pipes and the arrhythmic scrape

of zippers inside the basement dryer's spin cycle, maybe these
aren't so eerie and threatening and inhuman anymore, maybe

they no longer symbolize so much abandonment
to you as evidence, proof to the wayward heart

there was something here. Oh
there was something here.

And so then, you see
you can't be all too alone.

Even the ghosts sing
in the same key.

OPEN LETTER TO MYSELF AT AGE 5, WHO THOUGHT
HE WOULD GROW UP TO BE A LONESOME DRIFTER
SUPERHERO

*"I will not write the poems that leave me or my body trapped in a world
whose conditions I did not willingly help shape and under whose laws I
am not intended to survive."*

-Fiona Chamness, *A Statement of Intent*

Kid, that is a velvet meat grinder
to fall into, a good way to let a heart
pestle itself to pulp. I know. I used to get high on
lonely when I lived with my mom 2-3 times a week.
Up until it was time to bike to Angell Hall
for breakdancing, I'd circumambulate the living
room, shuffling a manic step through
a thousand scenarios that would never happen.
Telling this one I loved her. Telling that one don't leave,
failing; I'd look out the window at this big black
helmet sky with these christmas light stars
and realize the whole world was an empty living room,
and it wasn't mine (I was a spartan decorator),
but I was there all the same, waiting for somebody
to come back and smile at my open chest or stay,
circling the rut of my million struts,
and I'd feel these big beautiful cold bolts of fire
trace their fingers softly up my back
and it was something close to the lovemaking I saw
promised in every movie with an ending
like an ice cream cone lying handle over head on a sidewalk,
sad and sorry. I invested in that feeling, put stock
in some bank of despair, rode my bike at midnight to nowhere
and talked at the air like it was giving me the cold shoulder,
and I'll tell you, I couldn't kiss a girl without
fantasizing about crying in her arms
out of relief.

It didn't help. I could not cry,
in the end, because I was not relieved,

because that manic pixie dream girl
shit I was raised being told I wanted
was something so far from love
that in the best of movies the guys
are always definitively denied it,
not because the director is a jerk-off,
but because he hopes for the future.
He wants our stupid hero to learn.

That's where you got it backwards. You think
that the wandering yojimbo cowboy lifestyle is for you
because you don't think you know how to act or feel right
anywhere and it's really the other way around, because
those stories are about people who are lost in their navel
and then suddenly find that the world is full of people
who are not them, who are pretty and ugly and elderly
and infantile and when you really see them, not as things
to swoon over or inside of, but as teachers
who have one lesson, over and over, that
love won't take your broken and make it good,
but that you have to be good enough with your broken
if you want to really love, that broken people don't do it,
and that you only pinball in people's dreams if they're seriously
worried about you, if you learn that, then you'll understand
how in the later comics, Batman doesn't hang up the cape
because he's too old

but because he adopted Robin, and
he wants to help the kid with his homework even come college,
at least, until the Joker kills Robin, and that's the joke of it all,
there is always a gun or nerve gas waiting
behind the flower in some slick-shit's boutonniere,
but that's all the more reason to screw your head on tighter
and learn how to dodge any joker's bullet. After all,
Harley Quinn had a lot more going for her
than anyone in that whole damn universe
ever recognized, and we all know exactly
why they didn't.

THE SCARS ON YOUR WRISTS AND ANKLES

At first, I mulled over them
like a Braille telegram containing
the short list of reasons we don't talk
about commitment.

Later, it was an inspection
to make sure they were as old
and long sealed as they seemed,
or, when I was more scared,
an attempt to rub them out
like some dry-erase mistake.

These days, I run through them like
a rosary. I finger each one slowly,
whisper under my breath.
See how we always heal.
See how we always heal.

KEEPING MY MOUTH SHUT

I suppose, on some level, my brain goes with it.
Quieting down. Did I tell you [REDACTED] called?
She didn't want to talk us, only me. Strange huh?
I ended that conversation

quickly. The other night [REDACTED] tried to kiss me.
It was clearly the sort of thing
she didn't want to do,
the way little kids apologize
after hitting other little kids. Yet
there she found her herself against me
in the elevator, mouth hot and smiling,

silent. Earlier, [REDACTED] took my sweat-
shirt which I thought was an invitation to play,
but it became clear after a short while
that her plate was so full all she could do
was look at it while her stomach ached

in protest. [REDACTED] loves me,
or at least, is supposed to.
Is physically affectionate
when socially appropriate.
Dances when I don't.
the good kind of cousin.

Inside, the scaly-skinned
spike-spined gremlin
(his eyes a dark green)
puts down his big black sumi-e
brush gently, opens his
thermos of instant coffee.
A break from blotting out names.

Did you know they are all really the same woman? he says,
and the Great Finger humors him by assuming

puzzlement, scratching the Great Scalp.
So the gremlin goes *Yeah,*
the ones you can't wrap your mouth around,
and the Finger, now pointing up, stirs the air.
The gremlin shrugs, says
I guess really, it's you that's
the same each time, but by now
the Finger's out for coffee too.

VI

The Definition of Poetry



THE DEFINITION OF POETRY

is neck beards— like the really bad kind where the dude hasn't grown it out enough so it's still just short enough, just curly enough, just bristly enough, that it looks like pubes. And you can't help looking at it, by which I mean staring and thinking: *Scrotum Face*. *Chinstitles*. *Dick Nose*. Except you don't hate him, you don't hate him at all; he's just this dude who you kind-of know, one of those dudes who is relatively earnest and sometimes kind and not-so-aware that you are imagining his neck pubes ingrowing and becoming infected and him having to convince somebody that's it's not neck herpes because neck herpes doesn't even exist and you can see them, yourself, laughing at the dude ruthlessly—except you are filled with ruth, because you don't even know this guy and here you are, imagining him being forced to spit for the dentist or in a Shakespearean play and all the actors around him who are also University students studying pre-law or poli-sci and are only doing the play for the 2 easy-A mini-course credits attached to it or to make their grandparents happy are thinking silently that Mr. Neckbeard's stage-directed spitting is, thanks to his scrot scruff, some sort of ejaculation double entendre, and laughing about it after the play to themselves while they get drunk at one of their apartments and fuck and get an internship at a respectable firm and buy nice houses in the exurbs and shop for cradles at Ikea and have backyard barbecues with old friends and toast to how far they've come and the dude isn't invited. And it has nothing or maybe everything to do with his wearing a black trench coat and a fedora in the summertime, or thinking mutton chops could work without ever using a trimmer because it's more historically authentic, or doing weapons training with Ring of Steel even before the play starts, just for fun, just for exercise, and there you go again, placing the dude in some Shakespearean play with people who can't or won't understand him and you feel it now don't you? The chuckle with an aftertaste like cigarette ash? The secret solidarity you yearn and do not yearn to have with Mr. Trenchcoat, because you know at some point in your day or month or mid-to-late twenties you too will not always be totally on-kilter with respect to your grooming habits or fashion choices or other seemingly inconsequential but

actually very serious decisions you've made regarding how you present yourself, and you remember spending Friday night after Friday night pacing your room, dialing up friends who will not answer and will not call back for a minimum of 2 days because they are busy being the type of people who get called or otherwise have shit-to-do and who you suspect have a secret guidebook telling them how to chill with one another on Friday nights and enjoy themselves and be normal, unlike you, who are busy calling and fretting and burning an elliptical rut into the carpet with your feet and getting lost in thought about the imagined lives of those you do not plan to call on any given Friday night or on any other night for that matter, turning over their relative futures so you do not have to think about the actors in your own social circle or your own growing facial hair, which oh your god, oh your god, you know you can't see.

Notes/Glossary of Influences

I. MADE FLESH

The poem “Made Flesh” draws heavily from Roger Bonair Agard’s poem “Allegory of the Black Man at Work in a Synagogue” (from the book *Gully*) in the use of names and translation for anaphora.

II. I KEEP MY FEET MOVING

The poem “Morning Person” mimics the structure from Tim Seibles “Runaways” (from the book *Buffalo Head Solos*) almost entirely. “North Carolina Interstate” was similarly inspired by and follows the tercet structure of the Patrick Rosál poem “Ashbury Park, 1977” (from the book *Uprock, Headspin, Scramble and Dive*), though in this case the subject matter is a near inversion of the original narrative. “What It’s Like to Be a White Guy with a Black Eye in Detroit (For Those Who Don’t Know)” is after the style of the Lauren Whitehead poem “What It’s Like to Be This Blk Chick (For Those Who Don’t Know)”, itself a fantastic poem modeled after Patricia Smith’s iconic “What It’s Like to be a Black Girl (For Those of You Who Aren’t).”

III. BLUE AND WHITE AND RED

“The American Boy” is modeled after Jon Sands’ poem “White Boy” (from the book *The New Clean*), which is modeled after Angel Nafis’ poem “Black Girl Plays the Dozens with Doctor Seuss,” (from the book *Blackgirl Mansion*) which is in turn modeled after Terrance Hayes’ “The Blue Seuss”— all of these poetic forbears are well worth reading. “The Co. of Noodles & Co.,” while without a specific model, draws generally from the work of Martín Espada in the book *Imagine The Angels of Bread*. “Five Remixes of The New York Times” was written in a workshop centered around found poems using the example of Idris Goodwin’s essay “Ten Remixes of The Phonograph” (from the book *These Are The Breaks*). The poem “Things Dogs Tell Me (If Dogs Were Commercial Radio),” while originally a fake epistle, actually developed as a mixture of the last couplet in Charles Bukowski’s “Blue Moon, Oh Bleweeww Mooooon How I Adore You!” (from the book *Play The Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until The Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit*) and an opening credit

from the Simpsons during the 2000 election cycle in which Bart Simpson writes the words *I Will Not Write Subliminal MessaGOREs* on the chalkboard over and over, though the sunglasses scene from the 1988 John Carpenter film *They Live* is an obvious influence. “Diary of the Flying Man” comes from the Rachel McKibbens blogspot writing exercise #1 (hit the link for January 2009) and the accompanying model poem “Diary of a Fire Breather”; the opening poem “Ode to my Tongue” came from the writing exercise no. 2 and the untitled model poem about her breasts, which was apparently inspired by “Confession Poem” by Louis Jenkins.

IV. שבעה (Shivá)

“What I Know of Dismemberment” is a poetic answer to the question “Tell me what you know about dismemberment,” one of the 12 questions from Bhanu Kapil’s “The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers,”¹ and describes how I at the age of 12, fell off a tight-rope and fractured both the bones in my left forearm, one of which ruptured the skin and popped out from the force of impact. The poem “Growing Up” is in large part inspired by the Martin Scorsése film *Taxi Driver* and the Radiohead song “Fitter, Happier” from their album *Ok Computer*. “Raking” is modeled after the poem “Persimmons” by Li-Young Lee, which is available online for free at the Poetry Foundation website.

V. WHEN YOU HAVEN’T MADE LOVE EVER

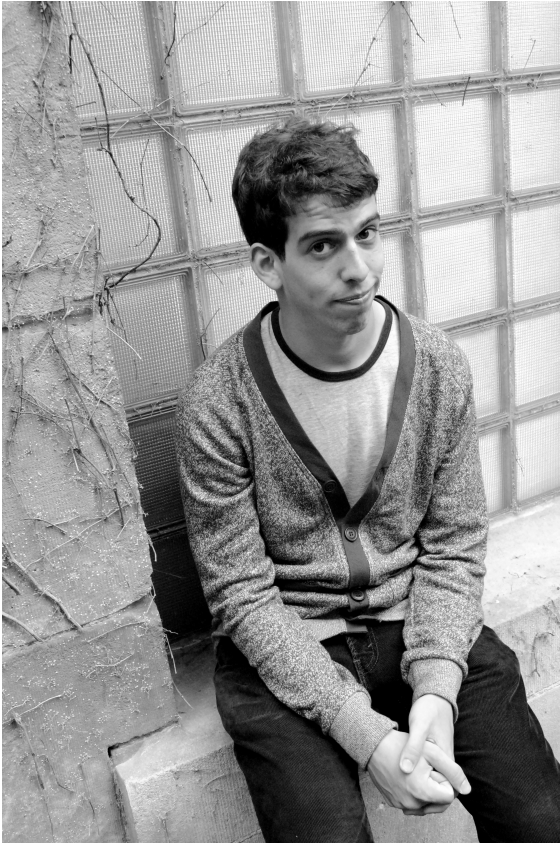
“Stop-Bath” and “Epithets”, along with nine other poems not appearing in this manuscript, are part of a memoir in verse I’m crafting, which itself is modeled after Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*. “When You Haven’t Made Love Ever” is a direct response to Patrick Rosál’s poem “When You Haven’t Made Love in a Long Time,” from the book *My American Kundiman*, though when I wrote the former I did not realize the latter was a sonnet. “Open Letter to Myself at Age 5...” while not explicitly modeled on one work, draws in tone and style from the poetry of

¹ I’ve never actually read this book, but it sounds dope. Anyone wanna buy me a birthday present?

Scott Beal, specifically his later work (if I had to choose one, I'd recommend his most recent chapbook, *Pink Parts*).

VI. THE DEFINITION OF POETRY

The idea of the definition of poetry being “Neckbeards” was offered up by Joe Lipson at a Volume Youth Poetry Project workshop I taught the winter of 2012. The character of Mr. Neckbeard is a composite of three different people I know from the real world, all of whom possess both a beard and social life more exciting than my own.



Gahl Liberzon is a recent graduate of the University of Michigan's Residential College and School of Education, where he studied Creative Writing & Literature and Secondary English Education, respectively. A native of Ann Arbor, Gahl was a two-time member of the University of Michigan Poetry Slam team, a four-time coach for the Ann Arbor Youth Slam team, and a three-time Hopwood award winner. In his spare time, he enjoys singing, beatboxing, filmmaking, dialogue, dance, fighting arts, dance-fighting arts, photography, and impatiently fiddling with his tie. He plans to teach high school English.

