

THE STRAW THAT STIRS THE DRINK

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Against the Grain

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Contents

Song

Jujubes

The Italian Countryside after the War

After Thunder, After Silence

Buy 3 Areas, Get 3 Areas Free

Chicago Food Desert

Native Texan

After Thunder, After Silence

Bad Credit Very Welcome

The Straw That Stirs the Drink

All Night Every Night

After Thunder, After Silence

Breakfast House

Underdog

Contains Water and Wind

After Thunder, After Silence

War Garden

Big Bang Free Fall Holy Data Collection

After Thunder, After Silence

The Show, 1970

Just a Few Stars

Last One Out Of Lee County Burn It to the Ground

After Thunder, After Silence

Out of the Way Places

Café Poem

59 Dollar Limo

After Thunder, After Silence

Found Poem

Two Rooms Sharing a Chimney

Scar

After Thunder, After Silence

Free Coffee with Jesus

Smalltalk

Satanic Data Collection

Iron Will

Acknowledgements

Notes

This thesis is a collection of poems I wrote during my time as an MFA student at the University of Houston (2013-2017) minus the afterword. It contains the best of what I knew how to do poetically at that time: lyrical, narrative, and persona poems. It also tracks my personal experiences as well as the experiences of those outside of myself who I felt inspired by and wanted to include. As a whole, this thesis is a documentation of the world as I saw it during my years as a graduate student living in Houston (my city of origin) in my early thirties. I want to give a sincere thanks to my thesis director Nick Flynn for his encouragement and support as I was writing, revising, and putting this collection together. I want to give deep thanks to j. kastely who supported my work as a poet, was very generous with his time (our in-depth discussions in your office meant a lot to me), and served on my thesis committee. I also want to thank Martha Serpas for her helpful comments while I was under her instruction in the master class. This thesis would not have been possible without them.

The Straw That Stirs the Drink

Song

This is the song of my perpetual unrest—
Growing is easier with a dedicated team,
But I'd rather shred denied bond proposals,
Take a blowtorch to zoning ordinances,
Sabotage tear-downs, terrorize group studies.
This is the song of my contradictory self—
I want to build dream homes, but refuse
Architects, craftsmen, and problem-solvers;
My rapid community development suffers.
Still, you expand your reach, tweak floor plans
At no extra charge. I say, *meet or beat*
The price of my legitimate showrooms.
You offer me quality care instead,
A cost-effective alternative to the emergency room.

Jujubes

A billboard outside Dallas proclaims:
Stop the porn! Be reborn!
Across the highway,
Wispers Cabaret isn't quite
The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas,
the strippers aren't quite
Mötley Crüe's "Girls, Girls, Girls,"
DW's adult store welcomes
all women and couples because
God only knows where the cowboys went,
God only knows who's too high to die,
God only knows about the nuns
dancing in the wilderness moonlight,
rosaries bouncing against their hips
like spiritual pearls, like ripe jujubes,
and how Sister Barbara Ann kissed
the other Sister Barbara Ann
and how hell didn't quite swallow them up
just like it didn't when the Spanish
left the natives to run the missions—
when the coast was clear,
they shut the Bible
and let the altars crumble.

The Italian Countryside after the War

They threw a parade when we came to town,
tossed grapes at us as we rode by in trucks,
leaving sticky juice on our uniforms
that attracted biting flies. Men kissed us
on the cheeks and mouth; women threw flowers,
but still, I kept the bulletproof Bible
taped to my chest, reminded myself that
this is better than sleeping in a cold ditch,
better than digging up mass graves,
better than fighting in bombed-out jungles.
I still remember watching the newsreel
of Nazis holding bunches of green grapes
low to the ground so their dogs could eat them;
one of the dogs looked like my collie, Sue.

After Thunder, After Silence

Urgent Language—

How does one improve upon anarchy?

Where the fuck do all these words go?

Rupture is an important word—

I was made into a woman,

but the deeper I go,

the less I'll be understood,

the threads of my body

split into the first blood of sunrise.

I sit and wait for my name to be called.

Don't stay away so long.

Buy 3 Areas, Get 3 Areas Free

You're thinking of the consultation,
the plastic surgeon with the black marker
and which areas will be free
and what constitutes as an area,
the face as a whole or just the chin,
what can be done about the nose,
just the cheeks, just the neck,
a breast lift or a tummy tuck—
he'll find places you didn't think of.

You walk to the taco stand
across the street from Family Thrift,
the snow cone stand. A guy dances
in a dinosaur costume beckoning
people to buy bubblegum flavored ice.
You go over the possibilities
like candy apples lined up
inside a glass case, the sugar coating
so hard to crack just to get a bite
of fruit. A woman walks by
selling roses in a shopping cart.
You buy one and smell it.
It's not as fragrant as you hoped.

Chicago Food Desert

On paydays she gets off work early,
walks to the food bus.
Old people are always first in line,
but she waits and waits and when she gets on
there are wooden crates instead of seats.
She buys lettuce and tomatoes,
sweet onions, gold potatoes,
lemons and garlic.
Last time they had purple carrots;
her son was fascinated by those.
This time they have yellow squash.
On the way home she walks by 4 liquor stores;
the one across from her apartment
is called Orion Liquor.
In the spring, birds build nests in the O's.
Her son noticed this.
There's a Cubs billboard above the store.
They haven't won a World Series
in over 100 years.
This doesn't matter to her;
she takes her son to White Sox games.
He likes his hot dog with ketchup and chili,
hopes for Adam Dunn to hit a homerun.
They have a new manager, Robin Ventura.
He once picked a fight with Nolan Ryan,
charged the mound without a second thought
only to end up black-eyed and bloodied.
The people on the food bus tell her
how to prepare the squash.
She bakes it so it will get sweet
and maybe her son will like it.
He comes home from school;
he wanted purple carrots again
but they eat the baked squash together
and he decides it's not so bad.
At school the teacher asks the kids:
Bananas are what color?
They all say brown. He says yellow.
The teacher gives him a coupon
as a reward: a free hot dog at the ballpark
to be redeemed between the 17th and 20th
of that month. If he wants chili, it's extra.

Native Texan

Have you found your spirit in the sky,
a white-hot light above the bristled pines,
your Jesus as Willie Nelson,
your Mother Mary as Sissy Spacek?
Have you practiced Feng Shui,
consulted your compass of Black Tortoise,
Vermillion Bird, White Tiger, and Azure Dragon,
visited graves in Bremond, spent pocket change
on a blue plate special in Mexia,
endured a pilgrimage to the mecca
of glittering orange oil refinery lights?
Have you dreamed in prisms
of broken bottles, blown-glass, and clay?
Have you traveled this hot box of humid muck,
confessed innumerable sins
in this cone of tornado silence, flatland silence?
Have you curled back the borders,
examined the seams,
memorized dried-up rivers,
crumbling missions? Have you seen
all the dead men walking the green mile?
You say come and take it,
but the *it* never belonged to you
in the first place.

After Thunder, After Silence

Hell-Raiser—

They named you the Bringer of Curses,
but you came into this world of mountains
already circumvented, beasts already tamed.

What you wanted you didn't ask for.

What you needed you couldn't take.

Maybe by taking all the survival out of surviving
we made something worse,

a kind of pain that doesn't sweat or bleed.

Say things. I'll forget what you say.

Dream a big beautiful dream instead.

Bad Credit Very Welcome

Every place is off-limits except
cow pastures nestled between dealerships,
pawn shops with stacks of used tires out front,
dented cars on copper-lit streets.
No credit needed here—
just the relentless way we move through life,
the way we had to be several versions of ourselves to stay ahead,
fixing the disposal, oven, and drier
with the same cheap parts that broke in the first place.
For once, let's watch the harvest moon,
soft rain spilling over lush treetops.
You're a red-hot desert rose,
a strong horse with a chestnut mane.
Let's follow the uneven sidewalks together,
keep the whole damn night to ourselves.

The Straw That Stirs the Drink

Tonight Reggie will drink at the Banana Boat.
He'll order a few glasses of wine,
eye Billy Martin, Whitey Ford, and Mickey Mantle,
send them a round of drinks, but
they'll refuse. A waiter
returns with a note from Whitey Ford that says,
All I want is your shirt. It's hot blue
With *Superstar!* in silver letters across his chest.
They'll laugh at him, but
he'll take off his shirt
and send it back to them.
Then Whitey
sends over his pink v-neck sweater.
This is 1977. When Reggie hits
it's like a hurricane
ripping through New York City.
Sons of bitches should be buying him drinks.
Tonight he'll walk right into Studio 54 wearing
his 7,000 dollar black fur coat.
Everyone will stop popping
disco biscuits, stop snorting coke;
Reggie's the blackest man they've seen.
In Baltimore, they pelted him with hot dogs.
Now, he'll walk past all the white assholes
kneeling behind the velvet rope.

All Night Every Night

You're hot rain on a hot roof fast
Aware of my awareness be generous,
We could go anywhere belly to belly,
The absolute exploration, all night
On the road, it took years, evolution
Fire flickering off skin going and going,
You're good honey to drizzle slowly,
Split us in half don't destroy myself,
Melt sweet butter, deep golden pools
Of sublime throbbing holding glowing,
Submerge the whole thing at once,
Be ripped apart more, feel rolling burst,
Measure and pour fucking ancient swarm you,
Have me in the strong loneliness of the cliffs.

After Thunder, After Silence

Alpha Wolf—

I think the structure's off.

I mean the tea kettle's steeped in contradiction.

The grass was spring green,

my face wet with that day's failure,

and my delicate center

imprinted like daisy petals pressed in clay.

The same fingers that worked the big needle

drew fresh dirt over the roots.

My true self is under the self I inhabit.

Midnight birdsong for no reason.

Breakfast House

Two black women sit on a bench outside,
the older one with silver hair,
the younger one with braids,
her son in her lap holding a toy truck.
The smell of bacon and fat biscuits
pours out every time the door opens.

An old white woman approaches.
The other two half-smile, straighten up.
The old white woman sits down
and says to the boy,
Aren't you handsome!
Do you have any girlfriends?
He shakes his head.
Girls are yucky, aren't they?
Do you have any dogs?
He nods.
How many?
He holds up three fingers.
Wow! Three dogs!
Are they big or little?
Little, he says.

The hostess calls for the old white woman.
She gets up and says,
What a cute little thing he is.
If y'all don't want him
I'll take him.
She trips a little on her way inside.

Across the highway,
behind the thick mangled brush,
the gun range is active.

The younger woman zips up her son's jacket
as the older one reties his shoe.

Underdog

Tell me all the stories, morning glories
Real excited-like, real creative-like
No crime in reading between the lines
Or living all your life after midnight
Making requests like
Leave me the last hard drink
Leave me the last ticket to paradise
Big ol' jet airliner, carry me oh so far away
Over grace-land, gang-land, government-land
There ain't no parties in the county jail
Ain't no two girls for every boy
At this hour or any hour
You're nobody until somebody kills you
Or you kill 'em all and
Grind their bones to make your bread
Sing as you roll out the dough
Goodnight moon, goodnight and good luck

Contains Water and Wind

Watch me breathe in cold air
from the tiny window,
hot shower water sliding down my back.
Constant motion is completeness,
like wind pushing through pine trees.
The road's minutes away—
travel the thick darkness with me
too early or too late,
past never-ending brush,
wind filtering through our energies.
Inhabit me all those years ago
on the seawall at night,
absorbing tender waves.
Watch with me
as a man throws beer bottles onto a pier
until he can't find any more
and walks away.

After Thunder, After Silence

My Fallen and Risen Christ—
There'll be days
where you'll see your life
in multiplied fragments.
My Christ of knocking over
money-changers' tables
and telling the Pharisees
to go fuck themselves—
The night is not toothless.
If nobody wants you,
I'll take you with me.

War Garden

Country and city soldiers prepare soil
In the backyard of an abandoned English mansion.
They want to grow tomatoes and peppers
In a climate better suited for peas and potatoes—
They crave onions, garlic, woody herbs.
Before and after missions, they dig in the dirt,
Eat carrots raw, pray for cucumber vines to boom.
When their unit moves on, the new unit
Takes up the task. There is always one soldier
Who tries to grow something different:
Watermelon or sweet corn, but the seeds freeze.
This evening, they shred cabbage for a salad.
Each soldier is offered a ripe tomato
From a miraculously grown plant—
They had hoped for fat beefsteaks
But ended up with a smaller, more acidic fruit.
Everyone eats them anyway; they save what's left
For the few who will return tomorrow.

Big Bang Free Fall Holy Data Collection

1.

Bring out purple skies, slathered fat sound buzzing
from stacked speakers. One good song and skinny trees
crack and split, rusted train tracks buckle, thick winds
swirl down over deer as they graze in a dark ditch.
I'm a velvet mountainscape, sunbeam background,
magic flowers pushing the vast whiteness
that sparks against my kitsch-junk brain. I search
every great space for the appropriate tools:
brushes, pencils, and soft threads. I avoid the pack
of silver wolves, but hope they find something
worth saving. Their clean paws scratch the foundation.
They find more space, I find more space, all void
of rolling-winding-singing-floral nature.
Swear to god, I do the best with what I got.

2.

Swear to god, I do the best with what I got.
Dogs trot through empty parking lots in the cold,
pick at loose garbage, nip each other's jagged ears.
Girls clack across the street in party dresses.
They laugh and jingle among dazzle-lit trees.
Power is the polished black Escalade
parked in the street while drug addicts hang out
at the corner store. Management's letter reminds us:
Be aware. Lock doors. Hide personal items.
Two girls shout, *we're princesses!* from a horse carriage.
A windblown woman sits on a bench. I put her
in a swanboat swing with a disheveled man.
They kiss high in the cool, painted sky. At home,
they warmly stir and feed their honey-oat yeast.

3.

I stir and feed my fragrant stewing thoughts.
Sometimes it's a spotty-static-manic mess.
I got hit in the head too many times,
cried too many tears in this sulfur fog.
When my consciousness was about to collapse,
he aimed his biggest gun at the front door.
He was beyond anthems and allegiances.
Why sneak in through the back door when he can
burn the motherfucker down? Would he
make me into a sweet piece of machinery,
rewrite the dense code of my identity?
Why build a regular fence when he can build
an electric fence? I punched the off-switch.
Am I the one with the complex?

4.

Tell me: Am I the one with the complex?
You took me to the bowling alley
to help me remember how an 8 pound ball
could glide smoothly down the lane, how pins
erupt into chaotic musical percussion.
You're an ice hockey rink made smooth
by a Zamboni. You're not violent at all.
At the diner, we order a thick slice of pie.
An old man sits at the corner booth,
turns the record over in his mind,
says, *sorry kid, you got here too damn late.*
Power is the automatic rifle
locked in the safe. One good storm out here
and the poorest neighborhoods flood the quickest.

5.

The poorest neighborhoods fill up the quickest
with flying ants and mosquitoes. At night,
trucks drive by spewing pesticides.

Don't mind the guy taking a piss on the
back fence, don't mind the hookah in the pool.

My dad used to say, *if you don't learn
anything else, you're at least gonna know
how to spell, add, and subtract*. I can
look at stars. I can look at pine trees.

I know basic words. I like basic words.

It's not the best language, but it has a history,
it's a lowbrow history, but it's still a history.

Maybe I surround myself with the wrong books.

I say I'm a desert, but I'm really an ocean.

6.

I say I'm an ocean, but I'm really a prairie.
Black hummingbirds drink from orange flowers,
wet meadow grass flattens, sparkles, whispers,
two small rabbits eat tender blades by the
dirt path, lick their paws, rub their ears, white cows
with brown spots rest under every tree,
my old dog rolls around in wildflowers,
likes dirt and petals and stems in his fur.
I got a tall-crunchy-pile-of-leaves part
of my brain that's always on the other side
of some thought-river, a fat bluebonnet I can't pick.
I turn compost instead—*turn it, turn it*—it gets
blacker, blacker, smells of rich coffee grounds.
Twirling sunflowers shoot up over the fence.

7.

Sunflowers shoot up against my brain-fence
that's also my sturdy, splintered dream-fence
that isn't just mine, or yours. We share it.
Highway lights are rhinestones visible from
a cracked windshield in the black-gold
night sky. Our hearts rise—flaky and full—
into split-at-the-seams marbled pastries.
We get lost again and find our way back.
We trade sweet notes in loose-beat music,
don't chase the ones that float away,
that bubble up to the top of the barrel.
We trust what's left—all thick and cultured,
cold and smooth and creamy—thinly ribboned
with raspberry skies, sonic waves of sound.

After Thunder, After Silence

Neon Dahlia—

I can't shed this skin, this holy rush.

There are no clouds, just buildings here,
white-gold blinking lights, war drum fountains,
resurrected birds everywhere.

The human psyche is not a fucking playground.

Give me silver sonic warheads,
tricky whistles, roaring engines,
a taste of heat, rays of light shining through,
red, white, and boom outside the giant window.
The best things hurt so good.

The Show, 1970

I didn't have to be in San Diego until Friday
so we got fucked-up on screwdrivers, pot, acid.
When I woke up the next day,
I took another drop before I realized
I'd slept a whole day and it was Friday.
I barely made it to the game,
was dizzy on the mound—
the ball felt like a volleyball,
Nixon was the ump.
I saw a path of colors leading to the mitt.
I don't know how many batters I walked.
An amber fuzz swirled around me.
In the dugout I kept my eyes down,
picked at the dirt in my cleats.
I was still going strong after the 6th inning.
Someone whispered, *Hey, Dock,*
don't you know you got a no-no going?
That got me fucking excited.
I embraced the trip, hurled the ball
down that path of fuchsia,
magic blue and gold,
hit the mitt every time
until the catcher jumped up
and ran toward me,
his body a burst of scarlet flames.
I went right to that fire. Later,
I found the scorecard taped to my locker,
Ellis, D written at the top.
Hot yellow sparks flew everywhere.
I took the card and kissed it anyway.

Just a Few Stars

A distant spot on the radar,

The dream we thought was dismantled,
The biggest dream far away—

To be dirty and free,
Running through a field,
Sharp-clear peace,

An abandoned barn covered with ivy,
A handful of blackberries.

What do we say about the night sky
Above the rotting beams?

Dim-rich blue night—
To love, roam, lay down,

This only tastes good right off the vine.

Last One Out Of Lee County Burn It to the Ground

No more laughs at the Leesure Lanes
No more beers and splits
No more *shake shake shake senora*
Crackling from the shitty speakers
You make me lose my mind
With your brown water navy stories
You're getting fat on scotch and milk
And discount weeknight brisket dinners
The cakes inside the bakeshop window are white
The First National Bank is the only bank
Mercy mercy me, I won't giddyup in your 409
Don't you see sugar pie honey bunch
The bad guys know us
They got all the guns
And they won't leave us alone

After Thunder, After Silence

Sunfire Heart—

This plot's a devil's device.

We hear the old ones say, *come on now,*

let's get out the chainsaw.

Recite your memories changelings.

What beasts they'd draw.

We're more alive than the absence of light,

empty retinas encased in constellation.

Sparks fly from our lips and vanish—

All those words, yours and mine

highlighted in red, after all.

Out of the Way Places

I saw a bird today, brown and cream-speckled
waiting on the edge of a giant field.
To get back to who I was means tracing myself back through you.
Show me your out of the way places,
your corners overgrown with tall soft grass.
Watching honeybees float from one clover flower to another,
throwing a basketball against the backboard,
I came close to jumping the fence,
navigating my way through the brush,
might as well have been an ocean,
me on the cool beach with sand in my hair,
you manning a boat without a light.
Invisible energy pulled at your core,
intricate and absolute,
I felt it pulling me too.
I can look back on those memories
and see you there like you always were,
not knowing you were even closer
to burning down that overgrown field
just to get to me,
your voice begging me to stay put.
What if I told you I would've loved you even back then?
A purple flower grows along this chain link fence.
How the fuck do we get out of here?

Café Poem

The pastry chef is a New Jersey Italian;
his display case is filled with cannoli,
little cups of tiramisù, Italian cream cake.
Four old white women drink cappuccinos
at the next table and talk about *House of Cards*.
They are petite, middle-class, and tender-voiced.
A cake designing competition is on TV
and two groups of female pastry chefs remain.
The final challenge is to construct a cake
that resembles a sunken ship. The male judge
hands the winning team a golden whisk:
two black women grip the trophy together.

I look over the butter cookies filled with fig paste,
crowned with dollops of chocolate ganache.
The apple strudel on the bottom shelf
reminds me of lunch with my grandmother.
At the mall, we'd sit at the coffee shop
in the food court as she stirred her cappuccino.
I'd look at her feet in a pair of sandals too small
for her and think, *you're not in a war anymore;*
why don't you wear the right size?
Whenever we went to Astroworld she'd sit
in the Alpine section of the park where the clock
chimed every hour with wooden maidens
ringing bells as they passed by on a track,
watch the carousel with the golden-saddled horses.

There is no fascist school in this village.
The windows aren't blacked-out;
children don't sneak onto the train platform
to feed bread scraps to people in boxcars.

I try a slice of apple pie.
It's not as good as the other sweets:
the apples are sour, the crust too salty.
The old white women wear open-toed sandals
showing off their pink toenails. *I love Kevin Spacey,*
the prettiest one says with a polite giggle.
He's so mean.

59 Dollar Limo

59 bucks gets us a limo for an hour,
an hour gets us the city we never get to see:
crisp black skyscrapers dotted with lights,
the neon blue Ferris wheel,
wide arching live oak branches. Don't say
a few beers, a few games of pool,
and late night tacos are all you need
to have a good time. I've got overtime coming.
I want to take you to the fountain
where that man with the old jogging shoes plays the sax.
His playing sounds just as good as your dad's
before he died of liver failure.
Imagine the open roof, night autumn air
blowing through your hair, smoky, fragrant.
I want to show you the city he never got to see.

After Thunder, After Silence

Rhythm and Blues—

I'm staring beer-tired and unwonderfilled,
admiring your face on the blue, blue wind.

We learned there'll be days of two kinds
and nothing we can do to predict it.

We rode around in the same busted trucks,
ate the same cheap dinners night after night.

I hear your voice break into a new language—

How'd we get our flowers to grow
so damn big and blinding yellow
in such poor soil?

Found Poem

Someone left a shopping cart
beneath the stairs of our apartment complex,
so we got ahold of management,
asked them to move the cart,
but no one came to take it away.
Late Friday night, we pushed it
to the front door of the office,
then went up to bed.
The next morning,
while walking our little brown dog
with a bit of silver on the top of her head,
we saw the manager push the cart
across the parking lot
and leave it behind the dumpster.
We had to cut our walk short
when it started to rain.

Two Rooms Sharing a Chimney

I hope you don't mind, but I made a list
of things I wish we were doing, had done, or will do,
like watching the Ferris wheel over the water at night,
using crayons to color a picture of a winged horse,
or having coffee and donuts at a small dining room table.
I like to think of us as two rooms sharing a chimney.
They're saying we did all sorts of things,
so it's only fair that I should make my own list.
I don't know what they're saying exactly,
but we could sleep or not sleep if we want,
and if we decide not to sleep,
I could tell you about the woman
who almost threw out a watercolor
of blue and yellow birds in autumn branches
until my mother took it home
and put it above her sofa
so those birds wouldn't end up
at the bottom of a trash heap
with no way to fly off the canvas.

Scar

This isn't Keith Moon driving his limo into a hotel pool.
This isn't Freddie Prinze dead from Russian roulette.
This isn't corpses being exhumed from Detroit cemeteries.
This is the grit and elbow-grease of your foremothers.
The nights you stayed up late listening to Bad Religion.
This is Cassius Clay throwing his gold medal in the Ohio River,
Walt Whitman finding a pile of human limbs under a tree.
This is your uncle dying of liver failure.
He slowly gets out of his off-white Cadillac,
walks over to the passenger door,
and opens it for his wife
just like he's done for the last 35 years.
Listen. Stars are dead by the time we see them.
It doesn't mean they shine any less bright.

After Thunder, After Silence

Love Language—

It must be sacrilege to beg like this.

Throw away your dead irises;
press your ear to the earth.

This machine makes bodiless spectators out of us,
but we're still pure and beautiful,
eating plums under thick bodies of clouds.

I crane my neck to peer at the treetops
where birds have been singing,
singing for a while—
invisible and loud and everywhere.

Free Coffee with Jesus

The sign in front of the buffet place says:
Free Coffee with Jesus, Sundays 11 am,
but it's been boarded up for a while.
I see this sign every day so now I'm convinced
I need my free coffee with Jesus.
I imagine walking into a place on the edge of the county
that serves awesome chicken-fried steaks
and Hootie and the Blowfish is still
the most popular band on the jukebox.
I'll walk in and Jesus is at a table alone
eating a chicken-fried steak as big as the plate,
thanking the waitress for the extra cream gravy.
He looks like one of those guys
who never got over the 70s
and is completely content with it.
He's got flecks of gray in his beard,
wears a silver necklace with a turquoise pendant.
He's the mellow Jesus in a town
where men wear special clothes to conceal their guns.
When he sees me, he says, *pull up a chair.*
I sit and the waitress brings me my cup.
And then "Baker Street" comes on.
He puts his fork down and sings,
*another year and then you'd be happy,
just one more year and then you'd be happy,
but you're crying, you're crying now.*
I reach for the sugar,
open a pack, pour it into my coffee.
I peel the lids off of two little cups of cream,
add those; stir it all together ritualistically,
take a sip and say, *I just need to have my coffee,*
because that's all I can say. He smiles and says,
Dear, you can have all the coffee you want.

Smalltalk

Teach me how to change the past
Explain how any piece of machinery works
Explain a memorable football game
Explain Romanticism
I've never seen the ocean
My skin needs the saltwater
Let's have a beer
Let's eat a pile of shrimp
Explain Vietnam
Explain Abstract Expressionism
The shore I see is filled with pebbles in earth tones
Smoothing over ripples of sand
Explain how need turns to hardness
How hardness turns to pure fire
Sit close to me and explain nothing
When it's time to leave I won't want to go

Satanic Data Collection

Let's say how this ground got cracked and uneven.
We sprouted iron wings. Birdlike, we poked sharp holes
in this open space among old cars, dead engines.
We circled our superego, our storm's big eye:
smoke stacks vibrated in the pure white-hot sky;
high gusts shook rooftops, this dirt lot, these wrecked cars.
No one here but us ditch-digging smooth-talkers, one big
fat needle making its wavy mark on the endless scroll.
Let's say we didn't know how our third eye got cancer.
In the end, our composed myth is all that matters.
Truth be told, it's so damn smart: godlike, fireproof;
it lifts us into its heavy metal thunder cyclone.
Let's say we left these cars scorched chaotic; we left
blissful, beneath this, a room on fire.

Iron Will

I've got my superconscious,
I've got my circle of wolves
breathing and sniffing
and scanning the woods,
taking musical steps in full color.
I like the idea of a glowing purple door,
the privilege of getting to disappear,
reappear at will. I sink into the grass
under the dome-shaped blue,
under the tree—warm, but the air's cool—
flowers hang in thick long strands.
A cardinal makes his way up the swinging branch.
I've got this journal, but you can't see
what I write in it except this one thing
about flight: People don't just leave.
They take their dead with them,
they take their history with them,
but the footprints glow.
I leave my dead where they are.
You don't really want to know
what happened to them, do you?
I've got this bonfire
with my circle of wolves,
this primal electric heat.
We curl up for the night.
Don't step on any sticks
out there.

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“The Show, 1970” was inspired by Dock Ellis’s experience of pitching a no-hitter on LSD.

“Satanic Data Collection” is a sonnet written with Nick Flynn.

About the Author

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