

## **The Singer and Her Dirty Pioneers in the Lyrical Village**

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*...but in music  
my desolation is my rejoicing.*  
—Louise Glück

**One**

## Dirty Pioneers, the State of the State, and a Fabulous Woman Who Dances

1.

Looking out in wonder, I imagine, and not unkindly,  
at their doofus fans and devotees, through the giant tinted windows of their megalithic bus,  
the Singer and her Dirty Pioneers  
ramble all over these dirty states, a rolling holy  
boulder down the crazed and crumbling lanes  
of one sad and scary, scared America. Roadies, I'm sure, are always along,  
but in the Pioneers' roadshow also spouses & kids, sisters & mums,  
a funny rock and roll tour  
right out of *Exodus* crossed with Flintstones  
plus Patsy Cline if maybe she had married  
everyone in Pearl Jam.

And so just the right home for a fabulous woman who dances, goes completely  
tornadic, I heard, doing her thing in intimate clubs, sleek civic centers,  
grassy heartland festivals smelling of sunblock and beer, and Venue  
Security, once, even had to restrain her. One time they roped off a place just for her.  
But the band just loves her abandon, I think they love her abandon. They even made a video  
of this proverbial wildcat spinning  
all over a vast darkened floor, completely alone to "Mainstream Kid,"  
lights sparking upward and her hair  
flailing upward and the chief thing seems to be  
that she doesn't give a damn about anything  
you might call external, absolute  
authority.

Still, I'm not completely sure that she's free,  
or only feels herself free, or if feeling free  
actually does make us  
free—am I overthinking this a bit?—  
or if she isn't in fact doing battle, ferocious but hilarious battle  
with something monumentally  
difficult to dance. I mean say. I mean dance.

2.

It slightly sickened and thrilled me today  
to realize the only way to be free  
of death is to die.

And yet there she is, the woman who dances. In flesh.  
At least I think

she's made of flesh.

\*

I saw her at a concert this year, squished into a nutsoid crowd  
that was kind of trying to eat  
the stage. It was New Year's Eve in a country  
lately inhospitable, you might say, a little less than welcoming  
to the globally homeless. And a city well-known for its colorful (you might say)  
criminal history, but also its blues, divine northern blues! a Loop and reverse-  
running river.

Anyway, there in the stir, there in the crush  
of that godawful crowd, I could see our dancing woman leap, I mean wind  
right out of herself, dancing  
with the very air itself. And let me tell you this: that's not even  
possible. Or legal, I don't think. I mean, they outlawed heavenly bliss  
on earth  
a long time ago now. Clear back at the start.

The bastards.

And yet there she is.

..

\*

Meanwhile, the voice that quickens the dancer and all of us,  
the Singer's voice so manifestly  
correct for this human strangeness unending, meaning downright gorgeously replete  
with error—little yelps and skips and hoarse-sounding, even growl-like stuff, even squeaks—  
is not yet illegal like heavenly joy  
on earth. Although maybe it should be.  
We don't allow dead men walking  
to listen to music, correct? Their agitation  
can turn extreme. They won't be restrained.

## Fanatics

1.

I'm talking Row A, dead Center, practically mashed  
into the stage. So you watch the concert looking straight up, or nearly.  
So you're just about surgically aligned  
with the Truth and the Light and the Way. It's kinda sweet, isn't it,  
the nearness? the defeat?

\*

Still you long for a backstage pass, the ultimate pass, a really kickass VIP ticket.  
You don't know about Truth, Light, and whatever—  
but you imagine, at the least, that someone beloved  
will shake your hand, pose for a pic, write down their name in amazing letters.  
You may even do whisky shooters together.  
They'll tell you everything.

\*

Oh, I know; the band in truth is comprised of mere mortals.  
I'm ok about that. I already know  
that. The human celebrity never quite matches  
the luminous dot in your brain  
which is always withdrawing  
and dragging you along. They're just guys  
who scratch bug bites, tie their shoes crooked,  
hiccup like everyone else. That's ok. That's good.  
Perfect alignment only works for the planets,  
and perfection itself, well, is boring.

I'm not even identical to myself.

2.

          s  
          r  
      ergo the holy  
          s          s  
                  r  
                  p  
                  a  
                  r  
                  g

, a stop-  
gap presence

on posters, freshly unrolled like fragile Magna Cartas;  
on a used blue ticket, perhaps, still crisp or splotched with rain;  
on some odd, ill-focused old personal photo

back when the Singer busked in Seattle.

And ergo of course the big question: record or don't record  
the show? LIVE the moment or KEEP  
the moment? Should I try

to live-stream on Facebook for all of us the whole gorgeous wave

of it always too fast, should I leap

on stage if only in my  
mind or my camera's  
eye,  
get as close  
as I can, should I try to inhabit  
all three of them right  
at the moment they make  
the sound  
and more than the sound,

the Song—

can I?

Afterwards, we all do the long and patient, not-so  
patient lingering out by the stage door or bus.  
The show may be over, but we are not over  
the show. Our longing runneth over. We cannot suffer  
enough. We huddle in the cold under a single bulb  
or chat off to the side in small groups. Maybe she'll step out and visit, maybe she won't.  
Maybe she will, and we'll press to the front of the line,  
take her by the hand and look her in the eye—we are not yet completely  
broken, or mute,  
or imaginary...

3.

I suppose what I long  
for are contours

to complicate, colors to thicken,  
detail to be detailed, at last.

I want a song that crunches and pops,  
turns out to be something you can pound with a shoe  
or throw a rock at.



I want to say concrete differences  
so minutely and truly you will finally be able to see  
identical twin bandmates precisely  
apart, the delicate crinkle  
at the top of somebody's ear,  
concise clues like the swoop  
of a jaw.

Problem is, if I start, say, with tattoos,  
I never get much further than *bruisey*  
and the overall flow of forms down their arms.

That is, I don't see each brother's intricate, particular markings  
so much as the winding of ink around and around  
the arm, so I have to turn my head, or turn the picture,  
or turn both my head and the picture  
to see it...

Jack over there looks wounded and hunched over  
whenever he's really and truly rocking a solo. It's like a heart  
attack or falling down into, say,  
some long lonely vortex  
to go deep  
to go loud  
and public with lead guitar.

Mac, meanwhile,  
is wholly unfolded and open, always mugging to the fans, his big grin beaming rock hosannas  
as his fingers elsewhere and unnoticed translate  
the underground throb of the bass.

Did you catch that? The doubled-up muckimucks? The backwards mirror effect? The spinning  
gets fucking numbing, I tell you.  
I can't say the two sides as they need to be said, there's no word for different and same,  
shifting  
proximities intoxicating both,  
opposite equals advancing  
and withdrawing at once...

\*

Let's be clear.  
Aside from the Fender and Gretsch or Martin or Collins, Jack  
plays to the right of the Singer, Mac  
to the left. It's as simple as that.

Wait! I just found on the web: Mac's front teeth overlap just a bit.  
ID solved! Now I've only to figure out, if I spot them some day,  
how I'll ask them to open their mouths  
so I can stare at their teeth.

**The Singer's Wife is Also a Singer**

The Singer says they're both buddies and lovers, I think they share all their clothes,  
and I guess their take on this wide and scrappy, inscrutable world  
is exactly the same. They even dream exactly alike—  
bird homicides, something about a shoe.

Sometimes their daughter comes toddling onstage as well.  
She rides either mother's shoulders like a very large hat  
that laughs.

Honestly, if you can't fall in love with a family like that  
something's fucked in your heart. You're out of whack with the world.  
Or you're so in whack with yourself  
there's absolutely no whack left over for anyone else. You're alone  
and perfectly aligned  
with you.  
How does it feel.

\*

In Buddhism, nothing has inherent existence. If "I" were a solid something,  
with sealed up edges, as it were, I'd basically be inert. There would be no  
flux or birth. I wouldn't in fact exist.

But being empty means  
being open and  
in relation to all the other, incredible, whackjob forms of life, equally empty.  
Having no inherent existence  
means I am in fact here.

Sometimes I understand this shit, and sometimes I don't.

\*

One time they came out and did a killer "Fields of Gold." It was genuinely  
something.

I could tell because  
it obliterated  
us.

Our hearts, I mean.

*when the west wind moves  
feel her body rise*

\*

Because the Singer and the Singer's wife  
are not exactly alike. Don't believe it. They wouldn't sound so beautiful  
together if they were. They wouldn't have that giggling  
Hat.

**Her Famous Green Guitar Picks**

1.

She tosses them out to the crowd like after-dinner mints  
at the end of her most devastating performances. She's a little bit  
funny like that.

One went streaking over my head like a drone  
gone AWOL on Adderall.

She otherwise lines them up on the neck of the mike  
like rounds of ammunition,  
or even the worrisome serpent of old.

A lot of people, by the way, don't believe  
in the mystical hoodoo I'm helpless  
not to ponder. I don't either. It's not a matter of belief.  
It's a matter of frequent  
flyer miles, yeah, and listening, and pining,  
and *like*. Which can apparently go on forever.

*like the worrisome serpent of old*

\*

I imagine a boomer couple just retired, maybe,  
local hipsters geeking out on a scene,  
or more likely some good and kind kid from two states away  
(she came wearing the exact floppy fedora  
her favorite singer wears), amazed now to snag the prize from the air  
and hold it gingerly in the palm of her hand  
like the final word, or a key.

Then remembering she can't remember  
what it's supposed to unlock.

\*

And green. *Green*. I have to keep saying it, I want to hug the damned thing,  
I suppose so I do not forget. I mean *verdigris*, *verdant*,  
*viridescent*. Maybe *punky*? Maybe *park*? Like little pieces of Eden  
we managed to smuggle out.

Like and unlike  
the way people saved bricks and even pieces of bricks,  
even pieces of pieces you get the idea,  
from the Berlin wall.

Maybe *good*?

2.

Sometimes, when they flash like tiny green birds  
above our heavy hominoid brains,

so freely,  
so easily,  
at the end of a show,

we can't even.

Why we long to see her live and on stage  
in Charleston, in October, at the height of a flood.  
In Fort Lauderdale spring, just before hoards  
of college marauders erect the kitschiest  
golden calf ever. And Atlantic City in lights. The lights.  
Just the lights.

Because we crave that feeling of the moment going.  
The heart-twist of not keeping it.  
The heart-sink of no  
such luck.

No story; no grand story, certainly.

Just a skip in a voice  
making sadness absurdly luminous.

3.

She will of course glance down, now and again,  
at a chord she is making or about to make  
on the neck of the guitar, like touching a foot to the earth for balance  
or buoyancy before launching away yet again.

While actual silence itself  
she works like a pro, a very maestro of light, prolonging  
one unexpectedly there, and again further there—  
in "Follow," perhaps, then "Hard Way Home," then "Blood Muscle Skin  
and Bone"—

zeroing in on "The Eye"—

for encore the famous “Hallelujah,” practically blistering with irony...

**Tinder**

The Singer is crying, crying, and no,  
she is not crying while singing, she is just  
singing. You might even hear it as laughing.

Is isn't is,  
which isn't to say that it's not. That's what I think.

And she is not crying. Oh  
my god the pain when she cries. We cannot  
bear to stop listening.

\*

In one scene, in the tour documentary,  
the band makes the driver pull over. They've had it, I guess,  
with the bus. They spill out and over a nearby beach, freezing and windy, cloudy,  
a grand soul- or psyche-beach right out of Bergman  
or something. They are all bundled clear to their necks, they scatter  
in groups, a mother with baby  
splits from the group near the back and  
slows down to be wholly alone. She feels completely alone  
to me. And that's ok. That's good. The way she's drifting  
away into mist, the far edge of the frame, the way she seems to be looking  
in, just in all the time, just lost in herself, as we say, until all  
the way gone.

Funny that I keep on watching.

\*

Meanwhile, the beloved Singer is walking and chatting  
with someone who is walking and filming,  
the wind sort of making her lean  
forward against  
the wind. But she's relaxed. Her voice is relaxed. She knows what it is to be looked at  
a lot and now feels perfectly easy, perfectly present,  
as though no one at all  
is looking.

\*

She talks about bonfires—everyone knows she loves bonfires.  
On a windy beach, she explains, they can really take off. Whereupon,  
she motions to describe what a very large wind  
likes to do to a spark. Whoooooshholyshit!  
She is the Singer.



Fire is.

\*

Her voice cracks, there's a country western tang—  
No not twang; I do mean tang.  
You know, like what the astronauts drank. Bahahahaha!

Like, I mean, she hits  
a sharp note in "Hallelujah" and holds it right there till my god we're all flung  
way clear of the earth  
that we love like we love  
coming back down to the next  
strike of the match.

How to explain  
that something so glorious  
can be tangy? Alright then twangy too. And funny. I think funny  
is bound up in glory, some alchemy inside the Big Bang  
when it banged.

*Damn, that singer's so good, it's funny.*  
Like that.

\*

Is isn't is  
just like it wasn't when it was  
and won't be when it will be.

I only said that to be funny.  
I know it probably isn't.

Derrida talked a lot  
about probability. But he wasn't that Derrida.

\*

Meanwhile, their unplugged national tour  
requires that they more or less sing  
their living guts out, naked voices in a naked theater.  
Requires that they find  
that crazily evasive needle of air, what will hurt  
the most to reach people through.  
And yeah, they found it. They find it again and again.  
The weeping, the needle, the laughter not optional.  
What kills us alive.

**What Does Music Sound Like**

It sounds like music. Of course.

Well, sometimes. Sometimes it sounds  
like something else—horses galloping, or rain, maybe.  
Or some kind of hulking, impending  
disaster, or something big that already happened  
and flopped. WAH-wah.

But the really good music  
sounds like nothing but music. I will never understand  
how people can be vocal  
right in the middle of orgasm.

Me, I'm too busy  
having an orgasm.

The Singer's like the adopted little sister  
of her older bandmates known as the Twins.

One of the Twins  
is married to the Singer's sister,

and the Singer's wife's sister  
is married to the cellist.

Songs are named for the bandmembers' kids, the kids  
are named after grandparents and one or more cherished aunts, cherished towns.

The Twins' beloved mom is friends  
with everyone— even, on Facebook, with the band's berserk fans—

and the Singer's mom was a beautiful, professional  
crooner herself on the country western stage.

And then there's... well. Angelina.  
I'll call her Angelina.

Hysterical  
wee little angel,

the Singer's little daughter. She's two.  
She may or may not be able to sing.

She may  
or may not wish to.

She bursts giggling straight for the open ocean

on the beach at Quintana Roo.

\*

It's funny; I imagine the tired crew, maybe some of the family  
inside the tour bus, outside the theater, after the show,

watching fans by the stage door flock.

They know the fans long to speak with the Singer  
who, earlier that night, from the bright stage itself,  
in the other inside,  
called out the Fabulous Woman Who Dances—someone Angelin  
I think is destined to be.

Or not.

\*

But yes, the Fabulous Woman Who Dances  
was there in the molten crowd like a breach, a distinction  
ongoing but mending itself  
always as the crowd flowed instantly back  
around her, so the dancer's dance  
if you think  
about it, if you follow where I'm looking  
exactly,

is a violence  
and a bliss  
you can't exactly

locate

anywhere. It's everywhere.

**Two**

**Stage Presence**

*Who is @roamingknitter and how'd she get that picture??!! Was she sitting on the edge of the stage?!*

—Facebook fan site

*These Facebook threads are like roots. You never know how far or where they go.*

—Facebook fan site

*They wanted to unplug and I wanted to plug in and we met in that contradiction.*

—Interview

I.

Mind

you she leaned

into it, busked and hustled like hell

even before graduating high school, dropped out to outwit

and outwork the Nothing that haunts all the land (so says her favorite

unending yarn) (which is a very good yarn), or more likely had to stay even

with the inevitable

simply because the inevitable

in her case was a stir, a wow, a wonder. O her voice. You don't want

to send back a package like that. She offered to haul their equipment, maybe nagged

at the Twins such a wiseass young kid, total tomboy, *who is this person*

*what planet is she from*

with a sound that could turn you to goo or at least inside-out.

And the famous Auryn on both upper arms, sort of ouroboros

crossed with mandala, because I hear she really digs the symmetrical.

It looks like eternity

is trying to hug her.

Or maybe the cosmos turning

around to look for

itself,

and keeps on turning...

\*

Eventually the Twins (Seattle metal heads, also bald heads, kind of punk too and really good guys, long-legged and kind, very song writers)

could not resist

her agitated  
mind and generous heart, startling beauty—  
all encased in so slight a shape, one that now and then sways  
and yaws, sways and jimmys, even jogs around the whole stage, even flat-out hops.  
Yeah. Straight up and down. Photos of her everywhere, bashing out a chord,  
both legs sharply bent at the knees, suspended and basically  
levitating  
off the stage.

\*

I wish I could name what anyone's chasing, what anyone's leaping  
to catch. What im- or pro-  
pels The Singer? Sheer naked nerves? Gargantuan ego? Worrisome blood  
sugar? The maddening hum  
of time-to-come, the moment not-yet, a musical note  
that is always and ever just taking shape  
but not yet clear of her lips—deliciousness  
always almost?

Something down among the roots, perhaps. Something @roamingknitter  
might know.

\*

Whatever precisely  
she pursued, whatever precisely  
pursued her,

it all just finally collided, a Big Bang of angst  
from the sound of those early recordings—  
*Fall and Temporary Time, When Angels Touch  
the Ground, certainly Last One to Know—*  
her sparkling oddness and sweetness, way androgynous,  
basically a brilliant queer angel who could actually yodel. Yeah, yodel.  
And write songs in any genre to save your life  
because...because they compel you to feel it. Feel your heart beating feel  
the ungainly radiance, fact

that someone or something created  
us to kill us. You have to admit, that's a little bit  
funny. One could damn-near choke  
on the fucking silliness. Fuck.

II.

And so the Twins now are constant companions



who guide the winding string of her sound, winding it out and out and back again, in and all the way in,

then back out again over and over in the crazy big lights of the stage—

where sometimes she stands, just stands if she wants, circle of still light. But even then I believe she is spinning too fast to see, a glorious mad ballet, pure rock and roll groove—

ah God I love winding circles like Roethke's winding circles— you know, his dancing idealized Woman—or, no, forget that, her moves are more Pollack, all fluid and all over. Or,

no, forget that too. Her dance is her dance is her dance. Can you imagine

that: to be like nothing  
but yourself, aligned but a line  
of movement defined by  
no man, although, like a line,  
and as we know from  
Geometry,

theoretical. An idea made of  
language, in fact—just ask Derri Da Da and Saw Sewer and all of those  
guys, whom I love, by the way—

Hell, even ideas  
fail to synch up  
with themselves

... Meaning, my friends, a dark whisper  
of difference, always, between you and me, you and you,  
me and me, the thing and the idea  
of the thing, some say even thing and thing source of vast  
human heartbreak endless struggle and wailing maybe even  
yodeling

\*

. And always the damned end-point of all  
cogitation's one tiny and writhing  
dot of paradox.

Most utterly utterly utterly utterly  
impossible singularity no brain  
can stay sane  
entertaining.

[break]

Only the Singer, or the Singer's song,  
seems to unwind it

, as she herself is unwound  
by the Twins

into form.

### **III.**

It's troubling. Form isn't form

until it's over.

What I mean is, it can be pretty bad  
for those of us who have traveled  
very great distances and drained our accounts and separated  
ourselves from loved ones  
to be there. The show stops, the encore or encores are demanded and played, and we sit there,  
finally, like stunned  
fucking puppies and stupid as clams  
as the house lights come on, on everyone, on everyone's lone  
countenance BAM.

\*

Meanwhile, her own earliest, kind of primeval "photo-shoot face"  
is so

casual. Retro sneakers and hip-hugger jeans, all Pacific  
Northwest teen or pre-teen even, a mere t-shirt in fact, silkscreened with popular  
green-lovers' redwoods and wolves, one large  
canine face staring dead-straight ahead and  
endangered (not really casual, LOL, whatsoever),

and someone has done up her eyes they are very  
densely and darkly circled.

While in the very early promo of *What Can I Say*, a song about time,  
she sort of bounces a bit up and down  
with an emotion or spirit that is also scrunching her face  
almost comically. I can't tell if she's trying to shake what she's feeling  
like ancient wounds and ancient transgressions out, or is hauling  
it all up from below like  
some fisherman's net,  
brimful of longings to-be.

And all in the presence of thousands, eventually millions of eyes. Because as you, too,  
may have noticed, my friends, she likes or needs to be  
seen. She has to hold  
herself back when  
she's singing on-stage with a guest. She actually mouths the words of *the guest singer's* part  
standing right beside them  
distractingly, she practically nudges them like a jealous kid right off the stage. But it's  
not rude. It's fine. It's ok. Endearing, in fact. I think our poor girl's afraid  
of disappearing

\*

—while at the same moment *wants*

to be fully gone, or at least fully with.

*dying in the light of the room,*

*blind side please*

. Look how she wades into the sold-out mob in Chicago, at Christmas,  
warm in her huge Santa hat.

Look how she smiles when hundreds of viewers join in  
impromptu for *Amazing Grace*, how her face bursts  
on like a sun

#### IV.

. I'm almost inclined to believe she's divinely empowered. Though of course I well know

that it's all just performance, a habit of performing, she's grown accustomed to considering walls. She practices.

As a kid, I guess, she'd wait till family were gone, the house was her own, to entertain volume. She'd really belt it out. She talks about this in interviews. She'd listen to popular singers with the really big voices—Patsy Cline and Roy Orbison, Freddy Mercury, k.d. lang—and study the way to fill space with a sound till it stops or is stopped, rebounds or absorbs, but also has plenty of strength left to break free of the singer

... [I'm always imagining such things. Do I imagine such things? The free part, I mean.]

And I think she practiced how a sentence when sung might stop and start, the zillion deliveries, overtones and undertones, easy or abrupt, prolonged or postponed

moment between sounds

, because the singing voice can do that, can flow and stretch,  
fade, evade and

silkymerge

, CRASH in several thousand ways

, punctuate in infinitely variable, visceral ways. Even bend sounds into circles. Longings too. How I envy

the Singer.

V.

Which brings us to the phenomenal, courageous and outrageous

## PIN DROP TOUR

wherein her voice

and band completely unplug. I mean they completely strip away all gadgets and amps and electrical enhancement and sing directly into raw space, straight into people's ears. Nothing, apparently, in the way

, though of course our bodies and brains and all of our cultural gunk gunk everything up, we are absolutely axiomatically in the way (see page and part and chapter above)

\*

. SO LET US SING  
whatever's IN THE WAY, shall we?

Let us sing BODIES, raw bodies of all the old venues themselves—*these rooms have*

*something to say*

, which is something that she would say

, because she's wonderful like that

—with their crusty plaster ornaments, stately deco radiations. Also the smell, the temp, the depth and height and shape of a place, the mustiness or not, the ghosts or not; grunged-out peeling walls at Chicago's old Thalia; imaginary night sky and “almost disturbing grandeur” of the fabulous Fox in Atlanta; sweetness of Bluestem on the far away Plains...

What's it like to sing, even, according to the stage itself? The elevation above the crowd, and the crowd? The actual human bodies in a vast room all together, their damp sadnesses, crackling moodiness, their craziness whirling and tilting on an axis made of lust, or something kind of like lust, and their joy?

\*

Sometimes something genuinely ugly. People holler from the audience, usually light, usually funny, but I've also heard them scream at the staff, probably minimum wage, who appear at the end to clear the place out. Fans mildly

deranged who seem to think encores heretofore, anymore,  
shall be ever-more

and wait to mob her at the studio door they just want we just want  
to be with her.  
her.

\*

. So I think, now, of the Singer  
with her solitary  
body on any given night. I want to ask about headaches, profound  
weariness. What if you're still feeling rattled, darling Singer,  
by a random weird dream from an afternoon nap? What if you just had a tense  
misunderstanding with the wife not moments before,  
felt her interest suddenly and dramatically  
collapse, or what if you heard  
something new in her voice, a small lie, let us say, or even  
her ability  
to lie

... What's it's like to come suddenly out of the world and onto  
the dais? Does the world kind of stop? Or does it actually  
enlarge, does the stage hold more life, does it feel vast  
as time itself when you sing? Making you free but

inconsequential ?

\*

And what about thorns I mean facts: when the show is scheduled, the show is scheduled.  
People from hundreds, even thousands of miles all around come to see you, we're talking fans  
and roadies and band managers theater managers merch managers all kind of fucking  
managers I mean damn. And PR to be accomplished,  
the venue set up, the bar help hired and on and on. Certain nights,  
at least, you must surely feel that you can't, absolutely can't

not sing.

The moment is nailed into place. You are nailed  
to the moment.

What do the walls say then?

\*

In the documentary, she talks with the Twins about how,

without amps, without flash,  
you can't actually do it  
until you're actually doing it. You absolutely must

negotiate  
each particular

configuration  
of boundaries,

and each moment's boundaries  
are minutely  
and fleetingly distinct.

You'd better hurry. You'd better seize  
this infinitesimal space and this infinitesimal moment

with a word  
you cannot

fake

I know I, for one,  
am inclined  
to avoid  
such words.

God.

I can't even  
look  
in a mirror,  
especially in public.

I deny everything

right to my own face.

How I envy  
the Singer.

**VI.**

In what strange theaters, friends, do you house and perform



and offer up your own endless woes? Are you able to gracefully manage  
the arbitrary harnessed to

the inevitable? Harnessed to  
unending  
change? After all, we all go

to work.  
We all say, *Good day.*

We try to make the lies  
as honest  
as possible

, even while saying the truth  
so shyly, so faithlessly,  
you'd think we were making it up.

# Three

**The Contest**

*I don't want to be part of the war. —BC*

I.

I think of you waving something away,  
or waving *to* it,

just before you died, stoned on some hospice medication or other,  
curled up uncannily scant on the couch.

Or you might have been gesturing, in fact, to *us*  
as we passed through the room, not knowing

how to talk to you now, each of us clenched  
like a fist

in each our distinct  
history,

no one holding your hand.  
(When Mom died, we gathered around her hospital bed;

we all held her hand.  
*My wonderful family*, she whispered to no one,

to everyone.)

You kept pointing to something in the air,

and you kept pointing strangely at your feet.  
You kept pointing to your feet.

You had grouched loudly, just days before, in your delirium,  
probably your last trip on your feet with the walker:

*I have to get to the post  
office. I have put in a change*

*of address.*

Then you were talking to the air with your hand

which no one held as you died.

\*

Late in his life he was pissed about everything,

a goddamned bitter heap  
of pissiness and ego. I don't know what it adds  
up to. I'm holding still in a stillness. Always have.

One day a great performer, Beloved Artist,  
asks the world to write  
a story of forgiveness. Something real and hard as shit.

Damn. For weeks, fans across the globe  
withdraw to their remote and frightening solitudes, trying to forgive the assholes  
in their lives. It's a  
contest. Or a commandment. She doesn't mean it  
that way, but everyone is strangely  
aching for the task.

II.

His workbench in the dark of the greasy, dank garage

everything sort of soaked in oil. The tools all gleamed  
in the gloaming, gorgeously off-limits.

The time he stopped me there in secret  
to say Mom's doctor had diagnosed emphysema.  
She was going to be ok, but she had to quit smoking.  
She would be ok  
if she would just quit smoking  
But she wasn't  
quitting. She hadn't quit.

I didn't know why he was telling me this.  
I was just a kid. What could I do?

I guess he needed to tell  
somebody.

\*

They were both pretty good, actually,  
at hiding things. Hiding *from* things. We hid ourselves, meanwhile,  
crouching at the head of the stairs,  
and I remember him saying, down there in the living  
room, out of view,

*This is my  
house.*

Quietly, with low, almost delighted derision.

III.

I had always heard that, as a young man,

he liked to do sketches. But his art, later in life,  
appears to have been all in trees, shrubs, real Christmas holly  
banked along the back fence, an unfinished stone path  
around the big center oak.

He installed an enormous patio too,  
out back with Ray, a just-married boy who took off his shirt.  
I watched and watched as the big cement mixer  
groaned out its crud, a kind of white  
powder settling over the scene as they labored  
like two sweaty snowmen, two earthly angels,  
Chalk and Cement.

Susan, Kellie: remember the time he hosed down the nests  
that lined the eaves of the house to the north? They were excessive, they were deemed  
excessive,  
mud nests packed in a line up there, giddy new life, little mouth-heads  
poking up all over the place.

I think now how  
could he. God. The mess, the shattered shells,  
life in all of its mute stages of growth,  
and then the tiny riotous mouths.

I remember one miniscule gray thing there on the ground, featherless, a gigantic single eye  
closed over and not looking up  
at me.

A frail thing mangled and worked over  
by the force of the hose, like a child's gagged-on gum.

\*

I honestly don't know  
whether I love or hate  
him.

No wonder  
I can't move.

IV.

He kept clicking his dentures.

He sort of played with his teeth.  
I wanted to claw his face off.

Mothers and daughters were the negative spaces  
that made fathers and brothers real.

It's pretty messed up  
when your primary role  
in a story  
is not to be there.

The way he dragged my mother  
to the beach  
so he could stare at other women.

\*

One morning we came down  
to find him passed out  
in his own vomit.

He was hanging half-off  
the sofa, it felt like  
a painting. A stillness.

It was like the house itself had been drunk  
the whole night before  
while the kids tried to sleep upstairs. My dad's crazy  
holiday work parties.

My mom would come up to check us,  
tuck us freshly in,  
but it was all feverish and strange. Drunk adults squealing,  
banging on my brother's drums down in the den. No one  
was allowed to touch my brother's drums. And someone,  
my dad's secretary, banging on the drums and squealing,  
somebody my mother accused  
him of cheating  
with. *Don't think I don't know.*

*You've always had a bed,* her voice weirdly slow  
and baritone with bitterness,  
*of roses.*

V.

I think I forgave myself, at least, long ago.  
It's my religion that tells me to.  
Forgive everyone, don't be a jackass  
to anyone, and that includes yourself.  
I've more or less got it down. Maybe. Sometimes.

Because I do believe forgiveness is possible.

It just takes, literally, forever.

VI.

One time I saved three dollars in quarters  
and he took me to the TG&Y. I picked out a drum.



It was red, I think, and I can still see it  
up there, on a really high shelf, much higher even than him.

He had to ask somebody for help.

Tom-tom mirage, a daemon companion,  
positively dizzying.

Later we'd backpack together all over the Sierras.  
We'd only ever hike  
to the highest possible altitude, we'd cross ridiculous snow fields,  
massively steep, twelve or thirteen thousand feet,  
places like the Minarets,  
in work boots and sneakers from Sears.  
We didn't know any better. We just kept climbing.

\*

The air above treeline was crisp and tasteless.  
The sky got deeper and deeper blue.

I suppose we wanted to walk right off the planet.

I supposed we were hoping  
for that one, killer view.

Meanwhile, getting back was substantially harder. Maybe because  
we'd been over the same ground before,  
the switchbacks down were always grindingly slow,  
absolutely endless.

VII.

One year he promised  
we could open our usual morning gifts

at four am. It totally irked my mom,  
but he was such a sweetheart  
about it. We crept in, my sisters and I,  
we shook his shoulder gently *Dad you promised.*

Four a.m., it felt like the middle  
of the night, the middle of a century, tearing into our middle-class booty  
like animals in the dark,  
the Tree of course just standing there, aromatic and iconic, in lights.

\*

My mom put on music,  
Ray Charles' Country-Western on vinyl,  
full-blast into the backyard all summer long.

*Your chee-eeeting heart  
will tell on  
you.*

                    Waiting  
for her to finish  
hemming my skirt,  
I couldn't stand to just  
stand there, over and over,  
every little second,  
till she was done,  
cutting and sticking, pinning  
my new clothes into place.

\*

My heart understands, I think.  
Forgiveness is when the mind  
goes around and around  
the problem of wrong  
behavior, and cruelty. It just keeps going

around, but as it spins it all gets smaller and smaller  
until forgiveness is like standing, finally,  
in the heart of a fire.

Where it seems to be very still,  
but isn't.

\*

Father, how dare you base your self-esteem  
on my mother's lack? On my sisters' lack? That's fucked up,

man. I hate  
your guts.

You and your  
Party.

At least we know that 45  
is almost pure monster, not too many  
arguments about that. The guy such a mess, I actually  
almost  
feel sorry for the narcissistic man-baby  
carnival prick.

And yes, I could see kindness in you. And fear. And gentleness. Imagine that.  
You made my friends laugh, you were actually a very funny guy.

And if someone cried  
it completely tore you up.  
You'd even break down and cry with them. You didn't like to see  
anyone hurt. You beat

our new basset puppy out back  
so badly the whole neighborhood  
could hear her screams in the sky.  
I was standing with Lauren out by the gate  
and the cries filled the sky and  
you beat her because she kept pawing  
and digging in your yard. Your landscaped yard. What kind of fucker.

VIII.

A single, dark bird, probably a crow, almost a speck, really,  
in the far distant sky in his painting.

This was after he retired.  
It intrigued the whole family,  
but no one could explain it. Just something  
there, both the focus  
and flaw of the whole composition.

IX.

Christ said that loving God  
is the first new commandment, and loving our neighbor

is the second.

But later on John of the Gospels  
says that God *is* love. So the two commandments  
are kind of mixed up and mixed together.

It doesn't matter how you think  
about it;

you have to love both  
to love either.

\*

No wonder

it's hard  
to move.

X.

I could write my whole childhood, I think, if I tried,  
with lots of hard, physical, sensory

detail.

Random  
violence, this is my  
house.

—said almost lyrically, laughing. That was the worse. A jolt  
went through my mother's  
body, I saw it, when he suddenly erupted, that evening in the kitchen,  
upon arriving home. I wouldn't be surprise  
if the whole neighborhood heard.

I look back now and yes, I can see  
the terrible stresses of the job, extra kids  
in the house, trouble at work.

We had to let him  
*unwind*,  
my mother said.

Which meant  
*do not utter a sound*.

Unlike Superman, Santa,  
and other great chieftains of the sky, guys down on Earth  
have to slow the spinning  
down, slowly, in their own unique ways,  
in silence, alone.

This was something called life on Earth  
for a man.

\*

His last word  
on the sofa, before he died,  
was *Mama*.

XI.

I wish I could talk to him now.  
I think he'd hear my arguments at last. My arguments

are strong, he'd have to. I think I'd maybe even liberate  
World War II and all of that stupid fifties gender shit  
right out of him, along with his vile Oklahoma racism.

*This damn life is so  
counter-  
intuitive, right,  
Dad?*

*Why live  
just to die?*

*Love, Dad,  
is the only  
commandment.*

My mom taught us that families  
take care of each other  
religiously, but she was racist too.  
She knew better. She struggled with it.  
But she was unarguably racist too.

Mother: it's simple. We are all  
Family.

And yes, even his Party, that shithead 45, and Mitchell, and Ryan,  
and Pruitt, and Sessions? Oh God Sessions. I can't find it in myself  
to forgive them, exactly, but I get it. I know  
that serious jerks inhabit the world. I know  
they could be  
me.

They are *in*  
and *of*.

I accept  
that.

Yeah. For real. If I had grown up  
a different way, a different place, with differently  
fucked-up parents,

I could actually be  
Mitch Fucking McConnell. Moscow Mitch. The Turtle.  
That's what they call him on the web  
because it looks like a truck  
drove over his face,

a little.

But it's his power, its absoluteness,  
that pisses me off. These asshats have gerrymandered  
America so that no  
one can get around  
them.

God are they  
Satan? No. No, I don't  
believe in that.

In  
and of.

Meanwhile, those loony, right-wing Dominionist nuts  
think it's a Holy  
War. Two great enemies, a great unarguable chasm, they're gonna get  
this whole damned place blown up.

I should have taken his hand.

We should have taken his hand.

Who else  
is gonna cross over, or try?

Right through the fire.

Why we've entered  
The Contest.

Love is the only  
commandment.

\*

Wouldn't it be astonishing  
if love  
were greater even than God?

*Dear God, do not  
abandon us.*

*Keep the children  
on both sides  
safe.*



*God we forgive  
you.*

# Four

## Resort

People with guitars were singing,  
the sky was turning creamy colors,

an "embryo monsoon" a half hour before  
had drenched everything spectacularly,  
and everything now was breathing deeply in.

Well, I was breathing in. In and out. Of that I'm pretty sure.

My flight had been rescheduled, twice in twenty-four hours,  
because hellacious winter weather on the Northern Plains.  
So I only had a day. Mere hours, in fact.

I wondered how I would decide  
what to do with a day.

John was signed out of the hospital, just days before,  
yet insisted I still pack, weather and madness notwithstanding.  
You'd think the more there is to worry  
about, the easier it would be  
to let it all just go. But no;  
I felt shitty going, I felt shitting staying.  
Then went, notwithstanding.

\*

My roommate, a friend who'd gifted me the trip,  
was funny and and kind. Now and then she'd step outside  
for a minute to herself,  
looking across at the other balconies, other balconies  
looking across at her.

She told me she had spotted  
some amazing native birds  
there on the courtyard in the center, but I never witnessed  
any myself. I'd hoped at least to hear their famous squawks  
and cries around our building, around all the buildings, around the great green selva further  
out.  
But no. There I sat, three thousand miles  
smack in the middle of the Yucatan,  
trying to imagine  
where I was.

\*

Later, from a nearby patio with open bar,  
I had a view, more like a view of a view,  
across the lagoon (maybe natural, maybe not),  
across the distant ocean (weirdly smooth and blank),  
in the general direction of Cuba.

Funny to think how, if I were to find  
myself out there, in my own little boat, the sun full-on, according to pure  
reason, I  
would be but a point  
on a line,  
and thus imaginary.

Like any  
body.

Meanwhile, the staggering  
fact of my travel friend's  
wholly corporeal suffering.

Her back was damaged, see,  
by some infection long ago,  
and now her spine is arrondi, a brutally swooping, frozen question  
mark. Matter  
never not matter.

But who knows. Maybe it's the soul's own highjinks, after all, responsible  
for the dark, ecstatic experiment  
of the body. Or the mind, the punk human mind,  
now and forever stuck in the middle  
of a sharp u-turn: *I was only kidding. Turn around.  
Get me out of here.*

God's creatures  
send up all kinds of cries.

\*

So. Por favor?  
Forgive this tropical breeze of a beginning, friends.  
The story itself is trim  
as a bone, even slight, but language should let us breathe,  
no?

2.

I don't know if it's rude or fantastic or simply truth  
to speak of others' private hardships. When should a person shut up, already?  
How much before they call you asshole or even

post-confessional? Should truths rain down hard  
when in season, or is any single truth, however minor, however fleeting,  
itself all the truth? I mean evidence of Truth? Or already more  
than anyone can stand?

In the end, maybe we just want some beautiful Art, now am I right?  
Beauty seasons and leavens us. Calms us. I keep hearing a lovely villanelle  
in this poem. Does it want to be a villanelle?  
Should I have begun with a villanelle?  
I do, after all, repeat myself a lot. And I always want to get  
somewhere  
as much as I want to just keep going.

Let's review. Truth is iffy if positioned at the start  
because it won't be earned, no one will believe it, and, even if they did,  
we'd have nowhere left to go  
in search of it.

Introducing truth  
in the middle will only smother it.

And the end, well, the end is too much like a nuclear  
burp or the damned Rapture in miniature or something.

What is revelation anyway  
in a time of massive, historical, geopolitical gaslighting?

When you hear or think you hear a truth coming in  
do you guide or let it freely drift  
into place? And if it's false,  
will it go of its own volition (it won't go  
of its own volition) to some great ancient peak  
where all the abominable, failed lines and stanzas  
and overblown endings congregate?  
A club of flubs, monumental drags,  
Christmas trees in summer?

Think by now how many. Parings, Fizzlings.  
Some still maybe jabbering and slobbering with possibilities,  
if not banging their wee little heads against windows  
or mirrors. Are they plotting something?  
Aren't they in fact beautiful because  
their sacrifice, after all, once made a poem or a book or a mere  
morsel of wit  
work?

On the other hand,

what if a poem held close and did its best to use, make space for,  
shrink to fit  
most of its own scraps? Bonus tracks, haha.

I know; one could argue that a poem  
should be clean and spare; stringent for the sake  
of fuller joys. It should compel the reader  
to feel the most, intuit the most, in every sliver, every shard—  
yea, even so the holy  
unshardness containing  
and contained by every  
shard. The chiseled bits say more and yield us more surprise,  
heart, and truth than discursive bloviations ever could. Let excess  
sink. Into body. Into memory.  
Let it enrich the poem that follows  
in ways we cannot guess.

On the other hand, how do you tell the muse-meister, *I love your donation, dude,*  
*but I'm throwing fully half*  
*of it out?* I mean, we have no time to edit  
our lives much less our scribblings, because the world's  
more full of weeping  
than we can possibly save-as,  
auto-check, or delete, because the Earth is moaning  
inside us at a particle  
level because America's a corporate snuff film featuring the planet—  
and children in cages.

Hence, should I leave in or out  
a few excess images and textures, gestures, a seemingly immediate  
pop in pulse? a lounge? a lagoon? Re-  
presented always, of course, but at least presented? This isn't consumer  
extravagance. It's joy. Ok joy  
tinged with panic. Ok panic  
approaching despair  
soaked to its eyeballs in grief. (Is there a word for grieving  
a future  
we've already passed?)

Even. Flowers.

May be  
gone.

Soon.

At.

the rate we're going.

Write "creamy colors" and "monsoon."

Write "fizzlings" and "bloviations."

Imagine a horizontal Tower of Babble, long-crashed, long trash,  
and beautiful. Down to raw material. Soil.

Ah, in a dream of forms, let us now scramble  
pagination. Let us re-say, unsay, or otherwise gerrywander  
every finale...

Like,

what if the end of a book doesn't actually occur  
until the third reading or more,  
and even then in the middle?  
The reader won't get it till they get there.  
They won't get there till they get it.  
At which point they may want  
to blow their brains out. LOL But seriously.  
Couldn't Borges meet up with Einstein  
and imagine a space-time fabric  
of poetry? Something  
to jubilantly and usefully screw  
with our heads once again?

Maybe any arrival is illusory, never there.  
Or forever not there yet.  
Or just keeps moving  
around between drafts, driving you crazy.

Maybe it's a relief to have no ending.  
There's no confusion, then,  
about how to get there honestly.  
No discomfort when it's an ending  
nobody wants.

\*

Maybe any idea, or body, or world  
simply stops.

Because all things stop.

Let what else there is to say  
continue on, somehow.

*After Serious Consideration, I Have Decided*





3.

The shuttle drivers down there will mess with you  
if you're female and alone. Not that I blame them, exactly. Americans  
are ignorant and funny, at best.

One guy drove me into the jungle  
at midnight and pretended he couldn't find the resort.  
He was getting handsy too.  
Stupidly, and incredibly, I couldn't find the address  
for the place in my bag. I didn't even have the number  
of the resort to call the resort, nor anybody there.

God, I thought, is this how (cut up and buried in a jungle)  
and where (I already said a jungle)  
I will die (not breathing, of that I'm pretty sure)?

Also, I tried but couldn't dial  
out of country so that someone  
might snag the address off the desk at home,  
or so that anybody anywhere would know  
my whereabouts.

My students, after all, hadn't heard that I'd be gone.  
No one at work knew that I was headed  
into the steamy lower coils of the heart  
in a time of blizzards. I don't think my local friends even knew.  
I wasn't sure what to tell them on behalf  
of myself  
and someone dearest locked away, unable to speak at all.

Then we were driving up the highway in the wrong direction,  
back towards the airport an hour and or more distant.

Finally, out of nowhere, he swung a gigantic U  
right there on the highway of resorts, kind of grinning, I think, the jerk,  
and got me to the place at last.

There it was, all ugly stone compound from the front,  
lit up in the dark and draped with climbing vines and complete with uniformed guard  
flipping through a list of legal guests.

Strangely, that included me.  
I who have forgotten all

and I do mean all  
of my ninth-grade Spanish

—except, apparently, for *Señor*,  
and *por favor*? Pathetic

tourist. Tragic whisper  
of a cry.

Sure, someone will turn abruptly, by instinct, to say “huh?”—

but then refuse to stop driving  
you nowhere as a joke.

4.

It's getting hot  
here on Earth.  
Somebody think  
of something.

5.

Walk alone on a beach.    *Partial Check*

Feel the cleansing surf around your damaged knees.    *No Check*

Sit quietly among the ruins of Chechen Itze.    *No Check*

Drink some green mojitos, hear a certain marvelous crooner

on a liquid winter night

beneath the alien stars.    *Check*

6.

The show would start in several hours  
in a big outdoor plaza not far I think to the west.  
Older people were hanging out in the lagoon  
on immensely dumb-looking, inflatable animals—which is fine,  
I'm not judging—  
while young people, as early as that morning, I heard,

had already claimed their spaces  
in the pit at the very forward edge of the stage.  
Other young people were ready to hold their places  
if they had to pee or go get something to eat,  
and they piled water bottles and daypacks so no mistaking  
whose two-foot square was whose. I've been there; I was pretty sure  
there'd be actual bloody carnage  
if anyone were to cheat and cut in front  
to see the star performer, a famous advocate of peace.

My own spot would be a chair and a lot further back.  
I have arthritis all over and numerous other failments.  
I couldn't stand up front  
because I feared that, in a crowd so seethingly tight, I would die  
and no one would even know it until the show  
was done and everyone was gone and I fell over.

No, I didn't mind further back;  
or, at least, I was actually ok with it for once,  
with all of it—

pain,

age...

Sunsets down there

seem especially soft and so

incremental. I don't believe in epiphanies  
anymore than I believe  
that driving in circles  
forever is a way to end something.

## **Bonus Tracks**

*ET, A Flower, and a Supreme Being*

each sit around in a bar watching humans  
on TV blow the whole thing up,  
muttering shocked. I'm utterly shocked.

*Form*

Up to  
and including.

*Form*

Exactly delirious  
till liquidly sufficient.

*Form*

Press Go and go. When it's over catch  
your breath.

*Form*

Press Go and go. Wander around. Do not get killed.

*scrap*

Lord, let me stop breathing,  
when I stop breathing,  
without decrepit body or damaged brains.  
I want to be here when I go.

*scrap*

End. Begin!  
Relax. Move!  
Feel. Think!  
Poem. Spend!  
Release. Redact!  
Quit. Prolong!  
Beauty. Minutes!  
Minutes. Feel!

Bouillabaisse. Mayonnaise!  
Naught. Nonce!  
Drought. Now!  
Flood. Now!  
Fire. Now!  
Tree. Breathe.  
End. When.  
Gone. Song.  
Tongue. Stone.

*scrap*

From my small patio table, late in the afternoon, I might have heard  
but couldn't see  
stunningly colored birds all around us.

*scrap*

Endings  
are perhaps the real  
story. They making the weeping real.

*scrap*

Endings  
make the weeping now.

## Five

Here you are *says a voice in the light, the trapped light*. Be happy.  
—Teacher

### **Guest Appearances by Neil Young and The Thing with Feathers**

Bashing out retarded simple chords  
and obsolete, grinning-idiot MELODY

there in his

gigantic furry hippie-boots, he's some iconic, bionic, and ironic  
Canadian Sasquatch  
Punk o'Planet Earth.

Music heart-  
thwacking fully amped-up feedback-  
stinging religion. The Romantic re-emerging

or staying, despite everything,  
a scary century of, well, you-name-it—  
corporation-as-legal-person circa 1893  
to the start of never-ending war circa September, 2001—

not to mention the sensible-logical specu-lattes  
of Derrida et al re: presence construction culture and all the rust—the  
Romantic I guess still viable circa now, albeit stunned,  
lopsided, and leaking  
blood from every  
thought, cough, pore and  
high-pitched whine of  
I-can-hardly-force-

myself-to-say-it but I will,  
I'll say it circa here

and now as  
hard as

I can't to  
the

nth:

h©pE.

## **Empathy for Fat Elvis and Notes Toward the Impeachment of Dread**

1.

Thing is, you absolutely have to conjure  
the dirt-poor kid from Mississippi  
who sucked up gospel, country and blues  
till he bled them, a bruised-eyed boy  
with blistering talent and near-giddy energy,  
and certainly not the sad man  
of bizarrely elongated collars, peanut butter and bacon sandwiches,  
and don't even get me started  
on the cape.

Of course he had no idea he'd usher in  
one of the goofiest eras of human god worship  
ever known to our species. He couldn't see ahead to the look-alikes,  
no inkling he'd be studied  
in university courses  
as a Distantly Emergent  
Posthuman Cultural Artifact.

(In death, of course, he's all proto-metamodern  
Jesus  
coming soon  
to a dying planet near you).

Anyway.

When the King sings the Dixie trilogy, very very late,  
when he's the Elvis no one voted for,  
the Elvis who never made it onto a stamp—

you believe him. That song is way  
too sad as he intermittently and obliquely  
apologizes for his bloated drugginess,  
unseemly giggling when he forgets the lines.  
He is mourning his own  
and everyone's golden beginnings,  
even as he sees his own ignominious  
and nightmarish end  
clearly coming down the pike.

You can hear it in his voice, those final shows.  
He was preparing.

2.

I've heard it said that to live a good life  
you must be ready to die a good death;  
in fact your life should be spent



getting ready to die.

Sounds pretty godawful, yes?  
My own dread shoots through the roof.

But I know that Tibetan adepts, for one, flat-out practice.  
Right down to the instant  
of letting go. They are always letting go. They spend half the day unclasping.  
They are completely aligned in life  
with death, and yet more alive than the rest of us  
because focused and clear and still.

In meditation they feel cool air quickly warm  
in the mouth, all the way down the throat and into the lungs,  
and back out. They observe every thought  
precisely when a thought  
emerges like a slow liquid arrow and crosses through  
and out of the mind, and they do not cling  
to a self. To a story. Certainly not  
to some retrievable, gold-plated past.  
(Please do not cry to go there.  
It is both a sentimental  
and fascist delusion.)

And some adepts die sitting up. Cessation  
is ambiguous; the flesh does not even degrade. Tap  
a monk's corpse and it bursts into—what? Conceptionless  
nonpermanence. Rigpa shunyata dharmadatu, so many damned  
formulations, so many words  
for wordlessness—  
or just the next hungry body.

3.

Elvis's long-heralded return  
in '68, I think, after all of the hideous movies,  
was a moderate shock. I don't know, I guess I thought  
his hair and clothes  
would be mildly hippified, at the least,  
what with the Summer of Love and all that.  
But he dressed like a retro cartoon teddy boy, a fifties rocker  
shellacked in black leather, a superhero whose superhero brothers  
wore tight outfits too but could fly.

Elvis couldn't fly. He had to manage on the ground in secret.

For all of his ironic self-inflation,  
they say he was a humble and kind man, always.  
He would never hurt a soul  
down here.

And he had such a time singing  
his self-spangled comeback. For some of it, the band was seated  
in a casual circle on a very small stage, an intimate live audience,  
and he kept grinning at his bandmates  
like they all knew the world's  
most acutely sweet secret. They all knew the world's most acutely sweet secret,  
and were letting us have it,  
one quarter teaspoon at a time.

Like there wasn't a single note  
he wouldn't die alive for.

4.

2019. People are walking around in near-cryonic  
states of the soul,  
when not boiling over with anger and stress.

It's this other king, a tabloid celebrity ratcheted up  
to hugely puke-worthy, banana-republic con.  
Might as well say it again. *Fascist*.

Donald, if you really want to bully us  
with your ongoing freaky, petty, and vindictive tweets,  
if you want the media scandal of all scandals,  
just remind us in your daily belches  
that we are all going to die. Think of it!  
You can get back at anyone  
who has ever called you a goon or a fool  
or pure moral slime on MSNBC.  
Just tweet out to everyone DEATH  
DEATH DEATH DEATH just whisper it  
in one-hundred and thirty-nine characters  
plus a tiny emoji skull.

But you won't. I know you won't.

BTW, you are too stupid to breathe.

\*

BTW, I'm not intimidated by any of your tweets.  
I'm strong. I can talk about all  
that I don't have in this life  
and I can talk about all  
that I will someday not be. I've been preparing  
for awhile, ok? Even today, right here.

\*

Maybe we should turn the whole ugly thing  
back on you. Maybe we should march in the thousands or millions  
to the White House and erupt  
in one glorious voice *Donald Trump you are going to die!*  
*Someday, Donald Trump, you really are going to die!*  
*Fool yer already dead and don't know it!*  
*Think about it, Cheeto!*

At which point they'll arrest me and put me in Gitmo,  
where they'll torture me till I talk.

I won't know what to say, except *Viva, viva*  
*Las Vegas!* and of course they will kill me.

That's ok. I'm prepared.

\*

Well, I'm preparing. I'm trying.

Friend, if you're there, it would help  
if you could whisper any tender,  
mad truth you hold close to your life.

What I mean is, let's collaborate.  
I'll tell you my nightmares  
If you'll tell me yours.

## **Lyrical Village**

1.

The Lyrical Village

is the famous Sahara Desert, where grains of sand rub together in the wind  
and sing. Did you know that? Sand sings. Planets too.  
Icebergs and whales,  
wolves, a young vocalist raised on country western  
and pop just outside of the City that Rains,  
two guitarists who loved the Beatles and Ramones,  
a quiet cello player whose past is uncelebrated, quiet.

I mean it's his cello that speaks.  
I mean it articulates silence.

You probably don't believe me. I'm just trying to say  
that equal in mystery to any  
thing—grain of sand or planet, beloved Creation, beloved breath  
itself—anything  
we can lose —forever— now—  
is the Lyrical Village.

\*

I think I just articulated  
the opposite  
of what I meant. And yet I also said the opposite of that. All  
of which is the Lyrical  
Village too, "meaning"  
no, I'm knowing knowing now. Plus awe. Oh never

Mind.

2.

The Lyrical Village  
is the Shepherd's Bush Empire in London.  
It's Edmonton's festival out on the Canadian plains,  
Cayamo on the sea, stops in New Orleans, Cozumel, and Harvest Caye.  
Even the Singer's tour bus is the Lyrical Village. The grit on the tour bus wheels.  
The desire to sing and singing per se. The throat of the singer, the tongue, the wind,  
the nothing. The alignments of identical twins  
and the hilarious deflectometrics. Everything Walt Whitman ever said  
is the Lyrical Village. And sex sex sex sex—  
grief,  
the Milky Way in a dream about hammers and looms,  
things that crawl the ocean floor, the forest no more, the ice caps  
gone, never to return, these are the Lyrical Village  
where I must stop now in order to breathe.

\*

The Singer often hums a quick blues  
or gospel riff seconds before starting  
her actual song. It's how she warms up.

Blues and gospel, back in the day,  
were the pure pain and moan  
of people who were voiceless, see?

Without which beauty  
is voiceless.

**Life's a Long, Unspooling Series of Rooms, Very Doomy Rooms,**

you stumble, you race, you clomp through forever and cannot reach.

And always you find yourself missing.

In fact you only know you're alive  
in here because you feel something twist, some kind of torque,  
a spiraling energy in place of an I, and as onely.

This year be a groupie at nearly sixty. A kind of project  
that stumbled upon you and stuck. You call it incandescence.  
You follow the darling artist, schedules taxis and tickets, you get on a plane  
and off a plane and dance with the other sweet angel crazies  
when the artist encourages such, when she cues  
you to rock the place clear to the ground.  
You love to rock the place clear to the ground, an epically  
awesome remodeling, your face fully melty, truly you do, but lately  
long to sit very still and be quiet.

Sit very still and be quiet. The Singer is going away—  
in certain songs, please, if you listen—  
into her emptiness, her solitude.

She may look eternally young,  
but her soul we know is ancient,  
and sad, and sore.

\*

Her tour bus is long and dark, you can't see in.  
Understandable; the more a star is pursued  
the further they must go  
away.

love—  
withdraw

love—  
withdraw

\*

She's doping us up on her voice real good, she's ridiculously good.  
And if we'd only shut up, if we'd only stay put,  
she may actually deliver us there, way down there at the heart  
of the song unsingable  
and we are all of us no one together.

## **Notes & Acknowledgments**

“Dirty Pioneers, The State of the State, and The Fabulous Woman Who Dances”

"a rolling holy/boulder down the crazed and crumbling lanes": adapted from Brandi Carlile's "Things I Regret."

"Fanatics"

"opposite equals advancing": Whitman, *Song of Myself*

"The Singer's Wife is Also a Singer"

This poem appeared in *Isthmus Review*, Spring/Summer 2016.

"How does it feel": Dylan.

"Fields of Gold," the song and italicized lines: Sting

"Stage Presence"

The second-to-last epigram: BBC.com, *Entertainment & Arts*, "Brandi Carlile finds her rock and roll voice": <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-31310552>

The lines "who is this person/what planet is she from": adapted from a statement made by Phil Hanserof on CBC Radio Canada: [www.cbc.ca/player/play/2669832744](http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2669832744)

Auryn and "unending story": Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*

"[T]hese rooms have something to say": Brandi Carlile, *The Pin Drop Documentary*, Chapter 1: <http://www.brandicarlile.com/media-items/2016/6/14/brandi-carlile-pin-drop-tour-documentary-chapter-13>

"[D]ying in the light of the room,/blind side please": Brandi Carlile, "In My Own Eyes."

Part Five

Line attributed to Teacher: Jorie Graham, *Fast*.

"Bonus Tracks"

St. Thomas, Logion 42: *Come into being as you pass away*.

"Life's a Long, Unspooling Series of Rooms, Very Doomy Rooms"

"you only know you're alive/in here because you feel something twist": an adaptation from Brandi Carlile's "Eye of the Needle."