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This history of small things

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THIS HISTORY OF
SMALL THINGS

by

Paul Sacksteder

Bachelor of Arts
Maryville College
2000

Juris Doctorate
University of Utah
2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Thesis Approval
The Graduate College
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November 21, 20 08


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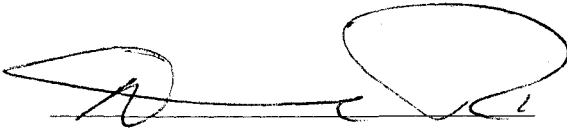
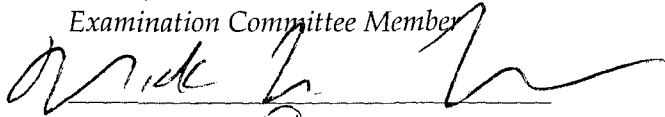

Entitled

This History of Small Things

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing


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ABSTRACT

This History of Small Things

by

Paul Sacksteder

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The poems in this thesis seek to explore the notion of uncertainty in terms of its value as both an intellectual and political position. Uncertainty is echoed both in subject matter and form. It serves not as a tool of conservatism, but as an opportunity towards empathy and expansion in a narrowing world.

Ecology also plays a prominent role in both the poetry as well as the development of uncertainty and sustainability. The poems seek to broaden conceptions of ecology by drawing often disparate objects and concepts in proximity. These poems then exist in the anxiety of trying to understand the complex relationship that is a product of their ecosystem.

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INTRODUCTION

It's strange that I sit here writing this. I come from a varied academic background. I have a degree in Biology and Chemistry; then later attended and completed law school. So, it's strange to be writing an introduction to a creative writing thesis. I start here, though, because I believe it's an important point to make in relation to the poems that I have written. I have long been amazed at the infinite variety of things that one can know. Of course, I think there are many people like me in this bewilderment, but I do have a particular anxiety, a sense of wasted time, in that I am overwhelmed in this recognition. I have long respected and even felt jealous of colleagues' and friends' ability to focus on one thing – to become an expert. Yet, my awareness of the distant peripheries surrounding the world, the infinite great library, has always robbed me of this desire to develop an expertise. There was always someplace, something, someone new. To me, these news things were constantly criss-crossing and coming alive in their interactions. And the truth is that despite the anxiety that pushes me forward in this, I have always felt most at home in pursuit of, well, the connection of everything.

I say all of this knowing full well that I'll never know everything. But rather than blindly pursuing this vacuum, I think it is important to acknowledge and even embrace the poor definition with which we see things. That recognition of this indeterminacy is also a fundamental part of seeing. Our emphasis on expertise

has long directed us towards creating specific, clear pictures of the world. We are taught to create arguments out of our perceptions thereby denying the depth of dimensions of the object we study. The poems I have written hope to stumble towards this multiplicity. They are poems primarily informed by ideas of uncertainty and hesitancy. In writing these poems I seek to determine the value of such a position, but also refuse to simply devolve to a point of cynicism or relativism. These poems are simplistic at heart in that they seek for commonality and empathy. They seek interstices, so that somehow they might briefly see.

In being inclusive I've made a point of including news in my work, not necessarily to provide commentary, but to allow current events to exist as part of the landscape of the manuscript. This includes not only the events themselves, but often an emotional response to them whether it is mine or someone else's. The last year that I have spent writing most of these poems has been filled with news of the Presidential election and all of the issues that resonate from it. As it's been an ever-present part of my life, I can't imagine these events not being part of what I write. I've been greatly influenced by Lisa Jarnot in this sense as she always has one eye on the political while trying to authentically communicate with the world around her. Drawing from Robert Duncan, Jarnot views the self as a social object that is constantly shaped by the environment surrounding it. In her introduction to An Anthology of New (American) Poets, Jarnot discusses growing up in the 70's and 80's and observing what she calls "the fragmentation and disintegration of the Left." She states, "What is surprising is to come out of such circumstances of childhood into life as a poet and to again embrace the

world with some determination to communicate candidly, with hope, and with urgency.” Jarrot isn’t necessarily worried about writing commentary on the current events occurring within the world, but to reach beyond them and demand to see the world humanely. As George Oppen once put it, “A simple poetic undertaking: to see if life is livable, to make life livable. Without lying.” I have taken Oppen’s comment to heart. In writing this manuscript, I have cast the net widely attempting to place my personal experiences in relationship with those that sometimes I quite honestly don’t understand. The goal in doing this, however, isn’t to seek reconciliation, but to simply let them co-exist, to observe and attempt to understand how these things impact me and I impact them. I’ve tried to write poems that are intimately felt, derived from a particular and even personal place. I don’t want to disembodiment these poems and don’t believe that it is possible to remove my stamp of subjectivity. Yet, I’ve tried to be very careful that the poems don’t fixate on any particular narrative. I want to both empower the particulars and destabilize my own lyrical experience. This is in recognition of poetry as participating in an ongoing and complex relationship, a product of its own ecology. The choices that I make in constructing a poem are compounded in the choices a reader makes in reading the poem, which are all embedded in the particular events of any given day. In a way, it becomes this beautiful exercise in randomness.

This is part of my compulsion in writing the series of list poems. I like the pure subjectivity of the list. It is an exercise in choosing whatever one wants to choose despite any overarching rationale that might be applied. While this might

seem contradictory to what I've discussed above, it recognizes the arbitrariness through which we see the world. I interact with a multitude of objects (both animate and inanimate) throughout the day; I have willfully chosen these few things out of the multitude for my list. My choosing of a particular list doesn't preclude the construction of another list under the exact same heading by someone else or even me. If anything, my choices encourage interaction. People seem predisposed to providing some sort of hierarchy to a list, especially when numbers are involved, but depending on the type of list the numbers are mostly irrelevant. So, if I had a list of names that start with "O", then there is no implicit order: just 1) Oscar 2) Olivia 3) Olaf - etc. The various names are slowly reduced to a jumble in the mind - the reader immediately begins to reassess to see what might have been left out. One is constantly seeking to expand the list - to ask what is missing. I like this sense of constant multiplicity. It flips the nagging sense of having forgotten something at the grocery store into a positive sense of possibility. It serves both as a constant push outward and as a constant reminder of the absence and possibility of something forgotten.

Implicit in this notion of multiplicity is ecological theory. I have always been very nervous about using concepts of ecology in talking about poetry. One doesn't want to simply appropriate a particular type of language and vacuously apply it to another discipline. However, I continue to return to ecology as a referent and find it increasingly more and more relevant, so I feel it necessary to try and pinpoint precisely what I mean by it. Ecology came to age in the early 20th century and was first developed based on the idea that nature progressed

through stages (succession) and then ultimately concluded at a climax stage that was stable as long as it wasn't influenced by any major interferences (such as forest fires or pollution). However, as time passed, ecologists found that the initial models that had propelled ecology were at best inconsistent and often even entirely misleading. They discovered that ecology resisted these holistic approaches – to put it simply, ecosystems were too complicated to be reduced to a particular model. Each ecosystem was subject to a wide array of stochastic variables both infinitely small and large.

Ecologists have since stopped working towards globalizing principles that seem to drive other sciences and focused on understanding smaller scale issues. It has become a practical science geared towards problem-solving. Ecologists make assertions hesitantly, cautiously, and do so only to solve small-scale problems. Ecology, rather than being reductive in its perceptions, has embraced expansiveness. The “web of life” is dense and overwhelmingly complex. Consequently, if one admits to the complexity of what one designates as the environment, then the very definition of what is included in the environment must also be challenged. One of the predominant arguments between postmodern and ecocritical theorists is the relationship between culture and nature. I would argue, however, that having definite borders between culture and nature is misleading. Claiming culture has subsumed nature first posits nature as merely as a resource, something for us to use or re-imagine, and secondly denies the tangible realness of its existence. However, one has to also recognize the ability of culture to mitigate our interactions with nature. As an

example, global warming is a composite of these stances. There is a physical reality mirrored in the chemical equations and statistical data. The climate has fundamentally changed regardless of its causes. However, human behavior, one of the components of global warming, is shaped by the rhetoric from political debate and everyday dialogue. Drawing solid lines between what one considers natural and human becomes deceptive. We are of nature as much as it is of us. Wendell Berry in his book Life is a Miracle captures the resultant dilemma in the following question:

“But if, as in fact we know, the creature is not only *in* its environment but of it, and if the relationship is a process that cannot be stopped short of the creature’s death, then how can we get outside the relationship in order to predict with certainty the effects of our participation?”

Berry utilizes this uncomfortable position as an argument for sustainability. Because of the fundamental unpredictability of the world, he advises to approach the world’s problems humbly and cautiously.

Another poet I have been influenced by in this regard is Gary Snyder. Snyder discusses the relationship of human and nature as a source of constant mediation. Much of his work suffers from anxiety as a result of the destruction of the world as it is brought into language. Snyder, at the beginning of *Myths and Texts*, quips “The morning star is not a star.” This not only points to the strain between the representation with the object itself, but also to the indeterminacy of our very own perceptions in fully conceiving an object. I feel that my manuscript

is full of this sort of anxiety, as if I'm constantly missing something. Like Snyder (albeit in far different manners), my poetry tries to not be overwhelmed by these complexities. Several of the poems have what I'll call forced speech. It is a desire to acknowledge the object as real despite the realization of the inadequacy of the perception. It is a hesitant push forward – a sort of faith – that appears both negatively and positively in the text. As I mentioned earlier, I worry that the perspective of these poems would boil down to a mere relativism. By allowing everything in, I didn't want to thus justify the fundamentalist behavior I began arguing against. I didn't want uncertainty to lead to certainty. Snyder argues that to overcome this problem one must continue to work the land. For Snyder, this means a continued, still observance through writing and reading of the landscape. This attentiveness seeks to try and understand how the individual sees and exists within the world. To me, this is at the very heart of what an ecologist does.

In terms of form, I must admit a lagging interest. I have always been aware of form in terms of its ability to enhance a poem. I view it as a tool, something to be used. I feel that influence in this case can be drawn from the exuberance of modern poetry. In particular, I would point to Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara as two poets that I frequently revisited while writing these poems. Ginsberg, continuing in the tradition of Whitman and Williams, argued that the ecstatic expression of his lines was inherently poetic. Exuberance in form, whether it is via long lines, prose, or even in variety, reaches closer to the

principles of ecology. Consistency of form would seem to belie the landscape from which it arose.

Although, I must be honest that this wasn't how I originally constructed my ideas on form. My initial concept was to rely solely on prose poetry. I wanted to eliminate line breaks that served too harsh of a severance between objects. I thought that by using periods I could achieve a similar emphasis of line break but still maintain a sense of proximity. Also, I was drawn to the conversational writing of Claudia Rankine's poem-essays in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as well as the essays of Ander Monson. I liked how both of these writers achieved a sense of disconnectedness and fragmentation without emphasizing it in their usage of form. This seemed to put these sensibilities actually in the world and not just a product of the poem's form. In other words, fragmentation occurred beyond and before the author's perception of them. Ultimately, however, I found that this predetermined notion of form to be unsatisfactory. I found that often a poem worked much better written in a different form.

As much as I'd like to say that these thoughts fully encompass the driving rationale behind my writing, they don't. It takes me a while to write a poem and that one poem is generally a product of influences and thoughts across several days or even weeks. I find inspiration in activities such as walking around my part of suburban Las Vegas, reading Carey Tennis's self-help columns, and listening to my friends talk. And these things all crumble together into a poem. I don't believe that this is different from anyone else's experience, but I do feel

compelled to emphasize it in my writing. I hope that my poems, if they do anything, at least attempt to be in the world.

The Cracked Sidewalk

In this thing of beauty

in this cracked sidewalk
roots of a tree

Never a true fault
From atop Parnassus

We swallow whole
Bones and everything

Languishing youth
wags a finger

So father dances
Mother sings

Just like everywhere else

Topeka, Kansas

As I gather everything around me
And organize the piles neatly
A man makes his way across the plains
Towards Kansas Towards Topeka
And I can't imagine it
Can't see it
Despite being there
Despite touching it all

Using a Light That Was Too Dimly Yellow

1.

My friends
at the steps
of a white,
white stairwell
in a mid-
century Las
Vegas casino
couldn't find
their trembling
fingers straining
into their pockets
against thick,
thick fabric

2.

One turns
to the bathroom
to disinfect
the lines of her
palms
and she hears
shouting
and feet tumbling
and echoing
and cars
crashing
the soap
foams up
very nicely

3.

Occasionally
people get hit
by buses
and news cameras
appear to
film the body bag
and a mother's buckling
knees are carried up
much higher
than her head
and people find
bodies are heavy,

heavy things when
carried

4.
My friends
at the steps
of a white,
white stairwell
sing
and its hard to see
but they sing
they sing
because
it is
an impossibility
because
the lighting
was never very
good to begin
with and
there is concrete
everywhere and the
city is dense
with all of its people

A Brontosaurus is a Brontosaurus Except That It was Never a Brontosaurus

1,
The bones
were not
buried that
deep under
dirt, which
spread out
too far.

2.
Reassembling
in the basement
the bones
fit so neatly
together and
they named it
what they named
it in order to
believe it to be.

Visiting a Small Country (for Uruguay)

If the particles would slow it would be solid
but from the boat nothing stays still
there is always movement and you adjust to
the flashes of deep brown river and
the distant, diminished banks

I look out from the hill and
see everything: the shacks, horses, the uneven sidewalks
from a hill you see in every direction
this small place and its small history

Montevideo
I'm sure you exist

A List of Structural Changes

1.

I noticed that the bumblebees had at long last awakened from their
prolonged hibernation
but the winter wasn't even over

they buzzed above brown fields

visiting the most beautiful of flowers

2.

Ornithologists gathered in the town of Blue Diamond
they wanted to see the strange bird of course
the magpie jay isn't shy its graceful tail cascades from trees
but what is one to make of this displacement
the bird so accustomed to the desert

3.

The appearance of the city changes daily
re-fabricated with cheap green polymers
citizens lost on their way home classic rock blaring from car
stereos

4.

They watch clouds a quiet rush of movement and worry that they are a
threat to public health
inexplicably living things

A List of Whereabouts Unknown

1.

I was a hairy beast angrily gnashing at my own tongue. I said, "gyrah!" and "mynah!" I couldn't help but strike out in every direction, flailing at the tiny insects settling in my mane. My skin glistened with sweat, muscular and tense. Confused, I wasn't sure where to hide.

2.

I rode in a spaceship flying across farms in Kentucky. Old men gawked. Teenagers raised cell phones. The hull caught the fading sunlight of the day and reflected onto bodies of water glistening into primary colors. I was aware of every shift of wind, of secret government cameras, of the deep and glorious sky.

3.

I worry that a giant octopus's eye is too much like my own. I find a dead octopus. I pluck out an eye. I taste it. This is a rudimentary test. I know. But I always worry about these things. In my dreams, an octopus escapes squirting out a dark cloud of my own skin.

A List of Lunar Tides

1.

They were scared of a black man in 1987. He raped a woman. There was anger towards parole laws. Michael Dukakis lost the election. Or at least that's what I think happened.

2.

The Spaniards found Francisco del Puerto shouting at them on the banks of the Rio de la Plata. He was now a Charrúa warrior. Curiosity led him onto the boat and back to Spain. But eventually, he returned to Uruguay and disappeared forever.

3.

Patrick Kellog traveled the world in a cowboy hat. At age 44, he began to keep a list of everything. He made lists of his past. His present. His future. His lists. Some things on the list of the future had question marks next to them. Also, some items on the list of the past were marked with question marks.

4.

In 2003, Indonesian villagers found a 49 foot python. When Western reporters arrived to measure the snake, it mysteriously shrunk. The villagers said all things shrink. Nevertheless, they lost their claim to the world record. The python now lives in a zoo.

5.

No one had seen the Yangtze River Dolphin in three years. There were photos of Chinese biologists crouched next to the finless dolphin. Their fingers touch it lightly. Their drowned princess. Until Mao. How are we to know when we make a mistake?

A List of Self-Determination

1.

All Georgians hate Russians. All Russians hate Georgian wine. The Caucasus Mountains rise. A backbone. A wall of implication. There is irrationality in the geography. Peaks form jumbled backdrops. To the south the Black Sea laps at the shore incessantly.

2.

As a kid, she wanted to marry her baby doll. She would give the doll the lightest of pecks on the lips. She was a nest. The lightest of love cradled within her. A tiny egg. With a speckled and brittle shell.

3.

Two boys poke sticks through the ectoplasm of a jellyfish. It's difficult at first, but once inside the stick slides neatly to the other side. The inside of the invertebrate not terribly different from the outside. The boys are delighted.

A List of Things in the Desert

1. What is there left to do now that there's nothing to do?
2. Corey and I found the burros next to the field. They just stared at us. Corey got close, but not too close.
3. Curled under the branches of a mesquite tree were the remnants of a fire. There are many stories about the Native Americans that lived in this area. I don't remember what their tribe was called. At any rate, this fire was from last week.
4. Donna Haraway realized that the usage of irony is troubling.
5. Jaclyn and I argue over weiner dogs. She says they're genetic freaks.
6. Citizens of Las Vegas suburbs debate flight patterns to McCarran Airport. I look in the sky and see planes everywhere.
7. Megan found a tarantula on the step. She makes a few assumptions and won't walk up the steps. I go up. I'm scared. I act like I'm not.
8. The environment never existed.
9. A train speeds through the desert. Dragging along all of its cars.

A List of Mistakes Made in Building the House

1. I tried to drill a hole where a screw already was.
2. The line wasn't straight. It couldn't be straight. Despite still being a line. Stress emanates from the corners.
3. Barack Obama was elected president. Kate couldn't stop crying. She grabbed my arm and hid her face. I was surprised. A little alarmed.
4. Gun stores across the country are reporting an increase in sales. A store in the Blue Ridge Mountains completely sold out of semi-automatic rifles in less than three days.
5. History calls you names. Calls you boob. Asshole. Marxist.
6. The ceiling fan in the guest bedroom teeters and makes a bunch of noise. I tried to say that it was rhythmic. No big deal. Like one of those rain machines.
7. Light serves as a monument. Everyone can see it rise from the city. Blanching the sky.
8. Michael Chabon signed my book. He said it wasn't weird to sign his name over and over. He never thought about it anymore.
9. I sit on my couch. Reading a magazine. There is a slight whistle of air coming from the front door. I doze off.

And There Were People

and there were people
blue computer light and refraction
created and space
no shadows and no corners
standing and waiting and too old
smelled of alcohol and tasted and felt
and roads and metaphysics and architecture
overwhelmed and tiny insecurities
and stacked green petals
and small hands and large fingers
and organized and organized
people in pajama pants
and smoke and dissipation
and sound sound soundsound
blistered open lips
and sex and satellite
this separates
and holds
and holds
and there were people
and what there was
echo and grief
and shadows and corners
and yes and yes and yes yes yes

you needed a quarter for a bus fare
to Peru.

I placed the quarter in your hand
and stared at the veins in your wrist
deeply purple
criss crossing
underneath
skin.

Urban Living

Paul Paul Paul Paul
I am one Paul in the city

The city churns to make itself
new again. They built our
neighborhood in a month. And I
never met any of my neighbors.

My car blew up in the intersection.
People were angry and Pete couldn't
quite get the car rolling. His feet
slipping.

We sat talking to a homeless man. Smoking. A car. Calling elsewhere. For
help. There was seriousness. And elation. Yes sir. Yes sir. There are many
cars in the city.

I have half a sense of something happening. The wind is blowing. The wind
blows. The city becomes. A different place.

A coyote crossed the street. At dusk. On it's face. If that's what you call it. A
look of guilt. The desert city spreads. The coyote was shot. For killing kittens.
In my neighbor's backyard.

Among. Paul.
Seeking a softness.
Likes noise.
And a little light
to sleep.

Urban Living

Here. A place that is slipping. A place where you hear singing.

I once thought this was the desert.
This is the desert. You can get used to anything.
My love.

Say it: My love. My love.

I couldn't get over the grotesque body. A baby is a beautiful thing.
It comes into this desert. Of Joshua Trees. A red-wing blackbird.

I push the furniture together. Making space for the desert.
A coyote ran across the street. In front of the bus.
The passengers stared out the window. Hands on glass.

The force of rain fall. A monsoon. Pushes dirt.
Say it. Say it. She told me there are
16 planes hovering in the sky.

Pete won't spend a summer here. The desert isn't a place for a city.

There are baby mourning doves on our roof.
Every morning.
Coo. Coo. Coo. You know.

Urban Ecology

The buildings overwhelm the city. Pushing up hastily from the ground. There is an intoxication for renovation. And the history of small things piles up. Always teetering in the background. Across alleys and boulevards. Through small windows with blinds half pulled.

Eventually. Concerned that the city would run out of room. They built up. People would live on top of each other. But away from each other. And the news would also filter upwards. In emergencies those at the top would exit last.

The heat of the desert creates a terrible space. From which the buildings arise. This necessary evolution. Creates an isolated perch. For the birds.

Ecdysis and Juan

This peculiar thing. This catbird. This pneumatocyst.
Held in your chest. Rapt. Wrapped.
There is your reflection. For a while you forgot.
What you looked like. Juan prays for the weather.
To change. It's intolerable. He's shedding.
His skin. The new skin.
It's the same. More. Or. Less.

Mister. You're on Fire

Revolution
burns down
houses of
monsters who
aren't quite
monsters

Chè is
on
your T-shirt
hiding
in
your forest
killing
your children

Your source
is an ocean
of anger
of helplessness
it floods
the farmland
into city streets
the people
are on their
roofs

mister you're on fire
floods never
cleanse but
leave piles of
mud

Nevada's First Caucus

and I saw her and she was real
so my presence was misleading in that most typical way
because she wasn't my mom but really Hillary Clinton
and Las Vegas is safer and you know I love all of you love all of you
but that's the mistake I made at the very beginning

After Eggleston and the Vice Presidential Debate

I dream. I'm taking a picture
beautiful I must stay steady
here my words
force me to simple
doesn't the vestige keep moving
I've never thought of that
she's never thought of that
growls you are too close
And the disappointment that
not quite as beautiful besides
we all thought about that
dream

Slow down, Brave Multitaskers

A little bit from the newspaper
about a new born polar
bear cub. Knut. In Berlin.
An emblematic white-
ness. Oh, but black eyes.
and, secretly, black skin.

I look pale
you said
a lack of blood to my head
my mouth
stupidly agape
There is a clutter of things taking up space
There is a clutter of tissue and water
obstruction bounding
the hands. the feet.

the spleen. the gall bladder.
Separated. I'm not sure of your function.

They want to kill Knut. He can never be returned to the wild. No Momma Bear.
Only a plastic nipple. I imagine a vivisection and Knut in perfect working order.
His heart's spastic pulse.

living
red neurons
the white unadorned lights
line up across the sky
filling moon-hued clouds

Just Let Him Sing

He said he wrote this jazzy doo wop kind of thing. You could tell how proud he was. And who was I to say anything?

He would sing it with such
gravity.

My baby don't care for shows. My baby don't care for clothes. My baby just cares
for me. Crooning. He meant it.

I think that's all that really matters. The quaver in his voice. His eyes
clenched tight.

And at night, when he would get drunk and chase off all of our friends, I would
sing along with him, his cigarette hanging lightly off his lip, knuckles scabbed
over, and that gravely determination.

Can't get out of this mood. Can't get over this
feeling.

And this is the most beautiful thing. There was never awkwardness in his
warmth. So I just let him sing. What good could ever come?

As long as you end up better than you started.
He shouts.
And then drifts
to sleep.

The Half-Life of Everything

One year, as a birthday present for Megan, I attempted to make a cork board world map – the type you can use little colorful push pins to chart your travels. It was an easy process that consisted of cutting up cork and pasting it onto the back of the map. Unfortunately, I have never been that great when it came to arts and crafts projects. The first problem I encountered was the over-application of paste. It left large, wet blotches over the Urals in Russia, the Pacific Ocean, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the entirety of Utah. To make matters worse the cork board was curling as the adhesive dried, so despite my efforts to flatten the map the world looked like a withered leaf curling at its edges. Megan was sweet and put the map on our office wall, but the corking was thin so the push pins didn't stick very well and the blotches never cleared up. Despite my best efforts to maintain it, the map was in shambles a year later. It drooped from the wall with whole strips of cork peeling from the back of the map. One day, while Megan was gone for the day, I threw it away. I was surprised by the certainty of my action.

He strikes out for something new

but it is

defined

by its decay

it remains (no it can only be residual
the impossibility of solace
yes?).

Decay of the atom is a result of its instability. The product is also often unstable and will undergo further decay in a continuing attempt to gain stability. Ununseptium (Labeled as "Uus" on the periodic table) is the temporary name for the undiscovered element with the Atomic Number 117. It is presumably a solid. Presumably a halogen. All elements in the periodic table beyond Uranium are highly unstable and exist only in small quantities. They do not occur in nature. These elements only partially exist because they cannot exist.

We organize
ourselves

according to
things indefinable

Find our
principles

in
things :: say it
he urged

I say neutrino
you are too big
to understand
I say I am overwhelmed in the world
I say the world is overwhelmed I am

Four years ago I was diagnosed with a learning disability. This is part of the diagnosis: Due to his relative weaknesses in working memory and cognitive efficiency, Paul benefit [sic] from using check lists. He should develop lists that break down the steps involved in accomplishing household tasks like paying bills, or for projects or school assignments, etc. For example: 'Pay bills: 1) gather all bills due this month, 2) get out checkbook and review balance in account, 3) get out envelopes, stamps and address labels, 4) write out checks and prepare envelopes, 5) take bills to mail box.' Paul should check off each step/task as he completes it. In academic settings, Paul's instructors should help keep him on-track by asking him where he is.

Here is my position.
Firmly Taken.
I was grown from shattered glass.
You are refracted light.
Here is Here. Is?
Check. I am Here.
Hree. Heer. Hr.
How long is this half-life?

'the surface
glistens, only the surface.
Dig in – and you have
a nothing,
surrounded by
a surface'

I trace the lines of a super-hero onto a blank piece of paper. I have school in the morning. My parents are downstairs. I press down so hard that my pencil keeps breaking. The lines never look right. Write and maybe it will come clean.

Clean
Clean

Clean:::::Mr. Williams?

4.5 billion years. The half-life
and then
 α

and then

I dropped so softly
The world was a neutrino
There was nothing bigger to fall from
And my hands
touched all the surfaces
The slight tickle of everything

don't forget how it feels

Things To Remember

- Importance of proximity and speed.
 - Light refracts.
 - Sound Bends.
- Mr. Williams uncertain.
- Mr. Williams old and sick.

The first major discovery takes place when Marie opens a curtain covering a blackboard where she has written the chemical composition of pitchblende. Another occurs when they unveil the final evaporating dish after four years of crystallizing out the remaining elements. This move is profound, because they find nothing but a stain. The removal of the final veil reveals a void that only later, in the dark, can be seen as something, raising fundamental questions about the nature of a "thing" and making problematic notions of objective science.

I glare towards the edge
to its

faded obscurity
the ungainly colors
blend
and then push away
into a pulse
of something
unseen

Hesitant She

all day there were no clouds
just objects pushed into the corner of the room
long unruly periods of breathing and pacing
at moments light criss-crossed the room finding new ways of illuminating walls
and she didn't want to admit to being confused and listless
she just wanted some sort of contact from the sky
something natural something
something not constantly turning in on itself
something of a primary color
something flushed with blood something present

or, she thought, to drop to the pavement
tiny pebbles grating into her knees
to somehow engage the physical world
to enter it without thinking
minerals make cars, cars make traffic
clunky, tedious things
sort of ruffled voices, she couldn't help but thinking
and she pushed her skin into skin held breath
she daughter of war hesitant
this everyday improvisation
a true voice a perceived goodness
she knows she knows
that there must be an honest love

A Couple Purchases a House in the Suburbs

The house smells a little funny. Like new but also like something else. I try to keep things clean. Though there is always dust somewhere. A few dirty dishes sitting on the counter. I feel like you might have stolen my obsessions. I feel like a dirigible. I don't know what that means. I feel like I am no longer constituted of atoms. Because that would make me something else. Electrons. Neutrinos. I would look at you and say, "Hello, you are floating," and this would make you feel wonderful. Then I would be Eritrea. A spider monkey. A Palo Verde tree. Sandstone. And not me. Or you. Or she. Or he. Meanwhile, they made rice for dinner. There was little conversation. And little attention paid to ecology. She kissed him on the forehead. Such little places. Change me each time.

Ablutions

In a house, a neighbor's house,
There is an arguing couple
And apple sauce left out on the counter
(I am interested in human interaction).

An envelope, maybe Publisher's Clearinghouse,
Promises to tell the future,
But there is great risk in opening it.
So we divert our attention back to the arguing couple.

His hands are very cold.
The thumb continually peruses the knuckle for
Dry spots. He says things like,
"Why the fuck are we talking about this?"

A television plays the same dialogue.
Except with superheroes:
She-Hulk. Or. Aquaman.
Picture. Words. Movement. Flitter.

We cry.
One voice. An intrepid ear.
It is so difficult to separate from
the crushing repetition.

A Family History
for Tom Bedford

1.

I own a phantom collection of wonderful marbles
such great predictors of the past
this one made from stone
traced with a finger wraps forever
painted the color of
dirt and sepia

2.

where are the boundaries of such memories
should we not spill out past
the borders of our own territories
I never want you to end here
not with your eyes averted
and your hands in your lap

3.

the history of families
is a difficult thing
a face is an imagined world
if you're not looking
and the ground will not pull away
without the division of cells and cells and cells

4.

this will outgrow all of us
a reverberation
released from ancient vocal chords
the soft curvature of the true horizon
was never even apparent
can't you remember
the texture of skin
the smell

My Mythology

I was hoping that I might be born
of my mother's hip.

Special boy. Sunshine boy.

Joseph Campbell and all his talk of mythology
has gotten into my head, swimmy head.

I laughed at the pictures
on my wall.

They tell a story. As do the stars. As do tea leaves.

I believe in divinity. A life outlined in gold.

Yesterday I saw a green snake. It had swallowed its own tail.

Ouroboros

My tongue tastes water. It hurts if I bite.

I decided to write something familiar.

You read this in the paper yesterday morning.

You woke, saw my face

I'm right where you left me last.

I'm still here.

I'm still here.

On the 18th of August I was born from the hip of my mother.

Good Morning Darling

At the end of the song. They were moved. You could say the spirit took hold.
They testify.

He slept by the river. And it was not beautiful. Not then. Its experience
was not his. He had ceased to move. People could not see him. There
is so much hidden. And soon all of this would look differently at him.
Nothing envelops. Nothing accepts fully. It holds softly. As it should.

Good morning darling. I move you. The river moves you. There is a rush that
will cement this. And then it too will wash away.

Always Approach

Eric's house is hidden by trees. But I can see the trees. These things are not the same. They are proximate. Explained afterwards. I watched the blimp in the sky. Against the Spring Mountains. Everyone was pointing to it. Always approaching. Always approach.

I put my hands on her face. It wasn't until later. That I realized I had made her uncomfortable. These are mistakes I'm always making.

Eventually. Megan tells me to stop doing that. Stop doing what I'm doing. I tell her I'll try really hard. I remind her. To eat lunch. To remember. Her. And you start to realize. That everything is right. And there are slight echoes of birdsong.

The Memory of Ice Floes

Scandinavia was tranquil
but the elderly
remembered the war
memories that hid
guns under mattresses
the intolerable continuation
of night
so many reasons to shiver
an unresponsive body

Even in the spring
the ice floes would
shudder and wrench
with melting
and the slate-blue
rivers would be impassable

The Newly Ordained

They anointed him
laid hands upon him
a hand to a shoulder, a forehead
and the faint glow
which they all thought
to be a blessing:
their skin felt his bone quiver
full of seraphim

He is shadowed under a likeness
not so much likeness
not so much uneasily
which is not to say
you

As you might guess
choice is imperative in this story
but there are also many other things

There was ferocity in his eyes
as he raised from his knees
he reminded them of all the others
wading in a dark grey suit
he would carry this
we all carry:
we all are to speak
surrounded by the world

The Smaller Components of Driving

He almost ran me down.

This big truck bullying me on the highway. My wife always references small pricks. I just want to talk. I'm not sure who's more foolish.

I worry that we're
all ruined.

Relationships built by hundreds of thousands of other smaller objects.

The metallic whir of the brakes reminds me of the sea. But always only momentarily. And only in its constancy. In and out of focus: this must leave me uncertain.

We are not
separate
from our
ecology. We are not always
moving.

To Be Good

with acute awareness

of the relevant
statutory code

we were reminded
a fixed framework before

a lost civilization
two objects next together
an involuntary comparison

it was also something we imagined
the sudden appearance of bees
the loss of time
these things we did not expect

An Ode to Fallen Political Figures

The light turns green. I open my throat and sing.
It doesn't sound so bad. Although, I wouldn't dare turn the radio off. And I could swear that the pigeons are swaying in time.

So I sing louder.

I imagine Zeus floating on a cloud. He throws brutal lightning bolts when he sees fit.

And you may wonder. But that's the hand of power closing down on you.
I was never at a stop light.
Now that's power.

I flood this room with animals and children. I summon flocks of birds to fill the sky. And Elliot Spitzer has always been an asshole.

There are no more lightning bolts. And now we are all in one place. There's no power. Just noise. And the humidity of bodies.

Rio de la Plata

To make matters worse
this is supposed to be a river, but I
can't see the other side and at night I
squint towards the other bank looking
for lights but only see darkness where a
town should be and this is how I
thought of it or at least imagined it as
the egret stood there in the reeds gulping
down whole fish in its long, long neck
into its beautiful white body

Three Gorges Dam

In a drop of water, the molecules on the surface are attracted inwardly by the pull of other molecules within the bead. This pull is a result of the polarity within the molecule itself. Oxygen pulls the electrons closer to its larger nucleus creating a negative charge, while the lack of electrons creates a positive charge around the hydrogen atoms. Each individual molecule is then drawn together through the affinity for the opposite charge.

Imagine a dewdrop hanging precariously to a blade of grass. The surface is smooth. Tenuous. Now picture it falling. It holds its shape. Briefly, you might see your own reflection.

The Three Gorges Dam Project will be 1.2 miles across and 600 feet high. It will create a reservoir 360 miles long and will submerge 632 square kilometers, 113 cities, 140 towns, 1352 villages, 657 factories, and will ultimately cause the relocation of 1.3 million people.

The colder water is carried by convection currents to the bottom of the dam where it will eventually be released. The release creates electricity. The release creates a river. A natural phenomenon. Millions of people visit the dam every year. The water is clearer than before. The fish disappear. Questions will always arise.

A push. A pull. There is an attraction from inside. The persuasion of differences creates a new bond and, to an extent, elasticity. I always thought the Yangtze River began in Kazakhstan, but it doesn't. Think of when you were certain. What did it look like? I think of the world and all of its oceans. There is too much space. There is so much space.

The Boys Leave Town

It was this grand idea
to go driving to Montana
on Tuesday because we were youthful
or at least that's what my friend said
and the wind sure shook our little car
as we drove across the desert
looking for small towns to fill up in
this was a road I had been on before
but nothing looked familiar
my friend complained and slept
there wasn't anything to see
a goshawk flashed between clouds
riding a thermal up and around
and into the mountains
of what we were which was always
a little bit reckless because places like Montana
are always just close enough

A Muddled Picnic

Meanwhile,

he slipped her his serious tongue: a muddled picnic
(oh honey, everything is muddled)

I wish he would hurry up and fall in love,
knowledgeable knowledge, he is a boy
with a serious organizing principle

a tornado before a rainbow before a tornado
so beautiful in their passionate excesses

Is It Torture If It's For the Common Good?

They were fastidious

oh waterboarding!
oh philosophy of damp weeds!

they took fescue and weaved a thick blanket
drawing it over them they were hidden but itchy
in the name of morality

the smell of rot fills the room

it was something like insecurity
the pawing for attention
the soft muzzle of an enamored beast
he grows excited when I enter the room

we brush cheeks
it tickles
but if you close
your eyes
it is the most
wonderful feeling

Jaywalking

People do not follow the street signs. They jaywalk and cause cars to panic. Cars with drivers not really concerned. Cars only concerned for cars. But then it strikes you. Arising from a moment of political idealism. Because you remember seeing students in Chile protesting who were savagely beaten. Chile such a thin country. So little room to imagine itself. And then you remember. Trotsky and the multitude of possible alternative histories. And you think of how in Mexico City Siqueiros painted a picture above Trotsky's bed. A brilliant mural of love and devotion across the room. Around all of the walls. All except one lone corner where Trotsky and his wife liked to hide. These were messages of faith. Faith like fingernails. A country can be separate. A city can be separate. A space can be separate. Cracks are created by water. Where flowers can grow. Maybe chicory or forget-me-nots. And what is this petulant talk of fascism? You know it can never be helped. You also never knew what anyone really meant by it. You fascist pigs! And here with what move meant. You find yourself with everyone else. Rushing across the city square. Your flag in the air.

Blue Clouded Blue

58 people died in a carbombing. I blimp up. Bloated. Obese. I experience. I experience. Chemicals and substances. The fire of neurons. I try to retract everything I have ever done. Remove the warmth of my hand. The salinity of my sweat. I refuse any sort of recognition. What is my name? Where am I from? Small people tie me to an iceberg. I float to sea. My skin puckers out of dryness and starvation. Ocean water spills up and over the edge and tickles my skin. I am still partially aware. The sky looks the same. Blue blue blue clouded blue. It is mottled like my skin. There are always the same components. This is how we began. Eventually, the warmth of the water melts the iceberg from below, and I find myself free. Floating in the water. I find my way back to land.

Next to the Cumberland River

There is much to see and not just elsewhere. My brother changed his party affiliation. He's a raging Republican. So. Yesterday. I bit his lip. When he was breaking the news. He told me one day I would understand. One day when I had kids and money. That's what does it. That's what makes you see right. My brother twirled and skipped in delight. He decorated himself with pearls of light. He held his children tightly. Pushing his hands through their blonde hair. And I spoke and I spoke and I spoke. I began to grow excited as well. I preached, oh HUMANITY!, I bellowed, albeit quietly. Because it's humble. You see. And here we were. My brother and I. Next to the gurgling Cumberland. An aging Red Maple. A short-eared owl. And my brother and I trying to pierce some shell with nothing more than a sense of direction. I surged ahead anyway. This was my mistake. We should be drawn towards open spaces. Tops of mountains. Long rolling fields. But I pushed into him. And he grabbed me. Legs. Arms. Then fingers delicate at times but not in close proximity. And teeth gnashed into lip. And it was amazing how quiet everything else was. I was so intensely focused on the taste of blood.

The Color of Color

The color of color found under her lips. Pink gums. White teeth. I was driven to keep digging into her body. Bones from her hands could produce a fine birdhouse. The elasticity of her esophagus would make a lovely hat. Oh, all these useful things I thought.

I admit there was probably a little discomfort. A little pushing, pulling, tearing in the name of compassion. Outside people were pouring into the street. The war was over.

And I looked to the sky for birds. For the color is there too. But it is a flash. A mere reflection of light.

Police Officers Panic

They shoot ladies that drive ice cream trucks. In the stomach. There is nothing to live for. In these delicate movements. When you get shot.

People who sell ice cream don't get much. They are Albanian. Or Salvadoran. People buy bomb pops. Red. White. And Blue. They love their country.

When ice cream ladies wield knives. Police officers panic. They struggle to. Do the right thing. And there are lovely children. Children whose parents are Yugoslavian. Or Sudanese.

And they all love. But. There isn't much to live. For. If you have to.

A Policy of Conversation

There are 3 million varieties of seeds. Stored in a vault. Underneath the permafrost. It's a narrowing. The constriction of solids. And the things still alive. Perpetuating. An entrenched blooming. The massive walls they've built. To stop movement. A resignation.

A Story of Woodpeckers

A child was kidnapped. It reaffirms their sense of things. See their shifty eyes. The way they scratch at their palms. The nervousness. Nervousness. A mother pulls her children closer. She lifts them into her shopping cart. She knows that it's okay to be a little bit wrong. There are things that will always loom above her that she can't touch. Things that are separate that she cannot hold.

A snippet of unsolicited internet porn:

The freckle-faced boy stopped reading and looked at the man and woman; they had been in trouble with a housewife about a color he had mixed for painting. He puts it on her. She looked at him suspiciously. "What's this graft? Which one of these jokers gets stuck for the bill?"

What is it that you recreate? The shell of a hermit crab. Your insides rendered. The barb that brings the feather together. You should take this lightly. Like a man with a hat and no umbrella. Do you see how he holds his hands out to catch the rain? There are simple smiles and simple smiles and circles that are less than you.

A picture of grainy-looking things:

an ivory-bill or pileated. A turnkey. a turnkey and a tungsten tongue will not melt. Scientists searched the Arkansas forests. Anything is not anything and I am not your answer. Take away the splints and the shifting will begin again. Aren't you bothered? The trees will fall away and everything will be glaciers. We will hold hands and only move slowly.

April 9th: 4,030

Some say
That lovers were left
Behind
And mothers.
Yet
This number
Of dead.

We wait
In our bed.
Wrapped Hidden
In blankets.
We complain the news
Is the same.
These Lungs Hearts
Organs
Operating in isolation

Cleaved of genetic
Connection
They are
Always trying to
Return.

The Sky is Full

I have always believed. There is a savior in the music. In the march. The train moves on. The crowd surrounds. And the faces. Are kind. When pressed close.

I said. I said. Watch this now. It was what they wanted.

And love. Please tell me of love. And all across the universe there are these voices. She cradled me in her vibrato. The voice of uncertainty, humility. Beauty.

Finally, together we fell from the sky. Icarus always lives at the end. Of this movie. Right? Let's all gather at the river. The beautiful, beautiful. Born of the body. Always. This body.

Juncos

tiny, slate colored
eyes a pin-prick
exerting their own gravity

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