

PREDELLA



ERIC SHANFIELD

PREDELLA
ERIC SHANFIELD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Stories

Story With a Bear	7
Birds	9
There Still Is Hope in the Bottom of the Box	10
Wonderland	12
Armstrong	14
A Fable	16
The Orrery	18
Selvedge	20
Snakes	21
Bats	22
Lives of the Saints	23
Atlantis	25
Earrings	26
Concrete and Ash	27
Chapparal	28
The Little Sister	30
The Quiet Suburban House	31
The Refugee Camp	32
The Octopus	33
The Chimney	34
The Drum Major	35
The Woman Who Floated Down From the Sky	36
The Beginning of the Beginning of the End	37

II. Prose

The Island of Catalina is on Fire	47
The Zookeeper	48
Katrina	49
Barbie	50
Two Pharaohs	51
Mexico	53
Still Awake	54
Instructions for Writing the Same Story It Seems Like Everybody's Writing These Days	56
Fashion Is Not Art	57
On Morality	58
On Forgetting	59
Where the World Trade Center Was	60
The Book of Transience	61

III. Poems

Ash	67
Fire	68
October	69
Saturn	71
Urns	72
Underwater	73
Fingertips	74
Wildlife Preserves	75
The Coelacanth	76
Aphorism	77
Palms	78
Sun, Mouthful	79
Secret Cartographies	80

In the Garden of Eden, Baby	81
Scintillant	82
Upon a Grave	83
Heaven	84
Hearthread	85
Strange Wastelands	91
North Dakota	95
Handseam	96
The Architecture of Arrival	97
The Compass, the Clock	98
Imitation after Du Fu	100
Elegy after Rilke	101
Swim	102
Burn	104
Step	106
Walls	107
Bone	108
Sleep	109

STORIES

We are funny creatures. We don't see the stars as they are, so why do we love them?

They are not small gold objects but endless fire.

Saul Bellow, Henderson the Rain King

STORY WITH A BEAR

Chapter One

The boy came to his father and said,

There's something in my bed.

His father went upstairs and found the boy's bed sheets all crumpled. Inside them was a naked lady.

Who are you? his father said.

I'm his wife, she said. The boy clutched his father's leg.

But I don't want a wife, he said.

Well, his father said, you've got one.

Chapter Two

His father said he should be asleep already and kissed him and turned off the light. The boy tiptoed over to his bed. He could hear her in there, so he ran into the closet and shut the door.

Where have you gone? she said. He could hear her coming closer. What are you doing in there?

She opened the closet door and switched on the buzzing electric bulb. He hid behind the hamper and clutched at his dirty clothes.

Come to bed, she said, and took him by the hand and turned off the light and dragged him there.

He could feel her under the sheets next to him, moving, and lay awake in the moonlight.

Chapter Three

Eventually she fell asleep and her breath was like a clock. What he wanted was to clutch his bear but his bear was gone. Instead there was just his wife.

Where have you gone, Mr. Bear? he whispered.

I'm under the bed, Mr. Bear whispered back. There's someone in the bed, you know.

I know, the boy said. She scares me.

She told me she's your wife, and that you didn't need me anymore. Is that true? Mr. Bear asked. Don't you need me anymore?

I do, he said, I do, more than ever. Please come out.

Mr. Bear slowly emerged from beneath the bed. As the boy wondered how Mr. Bear could have fit under there, the noise awoke his wife.

Her eyes widened as Mr. Bear stood up to his full height in the moonlight, paw outstretched, muzzle frothing. As she was about to scream, Mr. Bear pounced and ate her up.

Thank you, Mr. Bear, said the boy, and curled up beside him and put his arms around him and finally fell asleep.

Chapter Four

He was awakened after a while by strange sounds.

Mr. Bear? he said groggily. He could feel Mr. Bear tossing and turning in the narrow bed and hear him growling.

Go back to sleep, boy, said Mr. Bear. But the boy could see a little of his wife moving in the sheets beneath Mr. Bear.

I thought you ate her up, he said.

I did, Mr. Bear said. You don't have to worry about her anymore, Mr. Bear said.

That's good, the boy replied, and went back to sleep.

Chapter Five

In the morning when his mother came to wake him for school there was no sign of his wife or Mr. Bear.

I wonder where they went? he thought.

On his way to school he passed a lady in a fur coat.

BIRDS

Chapter One

He touched her underneath her thigh where the knee ran open. She twitched a little and rolled over. She was asleep. Her pursed lips in silhouette looked like beaks, black birds with black beaks.

Chapter Two

He would not say her hair was raven-black. Her eyes, though, at night.

Chapter Three

I love you, he said. She was asleep. The curtains nodded and rolled over. In sleep she climbed deeper into sleep. Her dream turned over. Now it was of nests, birds in nests. A mother bird brought baby bird a worm. It wriggled and climbed down her throat. She awoke, choking. What, he said. My throat feels sore, she said. He brought her a lozenge from the medicine cabinet. Her throat put on a winter coat and the seasons changed in her mouth.

Chapter Four

When she died of throat cancer, it was winter. He stood over her grave in the hard ground and shuffled his feet in the ice, shivering. All around the trees crackled and snapped. Over her gravestone circled blackbirds, round and round, and the bright crackling sun did not warm him. At night he slept poorly in his bed of sticks.

THERE STILL IS HOPE IN THE BOTTOM OF THE BOX

Chapter One

Trees rise from concrete into the sky's hand. Where Alice is everything begins to converge and come apart. Into pieces, little fingers and pieces. Beneath the ground are boxes. Boxes and lathes. Strip the land from itself that the dead may be shunted aside. Into the air. That we may no longer step on them as we do without thinking. Alice was very concerned about everything that was past, and would come to be: therefore the dead. Watching each body float through the sky, entwine trees, impale flagpoles, gaze into the abyss, Alice could not help but feel a sense of foreboding, as if each corpse carried a hidden message. They did: YOU WILL DIE, but Alice did not know that, and as long as she knew that she was alive, was alive. On the rooftops, sailors gathered with boat hooks to snare the supplicants for evening mass, but they only floated on, oblivious to the attentions of the church. Ignore the body, they say. It is only flesh. Great columns rise up to an arched sky painted with stars. In the apse, congregants have moved boxes that they may smear themselves with space. Crouched inside, Alice does not think of coffins.

Chapter Two

Beneath the ground are boxes. Honeycomb earth plied with steel. These are the foundations for our morality, that the churches may live upon them and skyscrapers pray to the sky. But they are the kneeling hand. Each building is a prayer that we may rise up. There Alice found the scrabbling insects making paper of the foundations. Where the buildings toppled over into the sea a great roaring and frothing of steel, the waves the color of broken concrete because that's what they were, broken concrete, Alice looked up and there were the bodies from which tourists hung on strings to watch the end of the city. Whereupon she made of her body a balloon, and was taken up.

Chapter Three

She was very disappointed with the religious content of heaven.

Chapter Four

The dreaming head is restless in its cave of sleep. Likewise the dead, who travel without moving, see without seeing. In this way they are like the living. But curtains hang over every distance, blades of sunlight through the blinds slice at the sleeper until he awakens, or is pierced in his dream. Where there are skies, there is hope, or so Alice thought, and from above dropped another dead body down onto the Earth, where it landed without a sound and was sucked into the soil's mouth.

WONDERLAND

Chapter One

It was nighttime. Stepping off the plane onto the tarmac, Alice realized how much she had missed walking across the tarmac to the terminal now that most airports have gates. Inside exploded the air conditioner.

She rode the escalator to the baggage claim. They were both jagged like skyscrapers. A bird flew in circles above, confused by the great glass dome through which could be seen the stars.

Chapter Two

He leaned against the brick wall. His geometric body.

Alice's laugh was like a shell. So was her body.

They crawled around each other. The moon peered through a crevice.

Look, she said, and pointed. Several small white wooden balls rolled along the dark river to where the trees rose and rose up into a dense illuminated forest. Gradually they unraveled into lines of thread.

Chapter Three

Early one morning he called. Let's go to the beach, he said. Alice gathered up her things and drove to the seashore.

She waited by the bungalows, and she waited by the pier.

Eventually she got bored and waded into the shallows where the crabs were. She could see them scurrying in the tide pools. Then a riptide came and bore her out to sea.

Hello, Mr. Whale, she said, but he only nodded sadly and swam away.

She wrapped herself in seaweed and made of coral a throne. I'm not so unhappy here, she thought. The dolphins felt sorry for her and sometimes brought her fish.

One day some time later Alice found a perfect pearl had formed beneath her tongue.

Chapter Four

They had their picnic on a nest of ants.

Great crabs devoured the city in the distance, but the ants didn't notice, and she spilled the marmalade trying to get the lid off.

Chapter Five

Snow blew back and forth past the window like a galaxy. In the morning her window was a frosted white asterism. Alice put her tongue against the pane. It tasted like a slice of wedding cake kept for years in a freezer.

The snow blew all the buildings away, and when the snow was gone a jungle grew up in their place. Instead of cars there were orchids. Instead of churches there were monkeys. Instead of Alice there were still, brackish rivers where murky-eyed dolphins lived.

Chapter Six

Late one night, Alice boarded a subway train filled with homeless people.

We're not homeless, they clarified. We live here in this subway train.

They went over a bridge and into an abandoned rail yard. Weeds grew up between ties and loading docks rotted like gravestones.

Snow fell all night.

The world is melting, she thought.

Chapter Seven

It rained. In the zoo, stripes slid off the zebras and festered in the soot.

Taxis dripped by, and police cars, screaming, muffled.

She padlocked her rusting bicycle under a streetlight's poisonous halo. Water ran from her hands like the end of the world.

ARMSTRONG

Armstrong looked at the moon rocks and saw himself looking back.

All around weighed the great weight of meteorites. He stood another minute before the exhibit, then left the museum where fountains stumbled. Grass poured down too-carefully held slopes. Sky already fading, the color of freeways, the grayness that comes when afternoons last too long.

On the way home he stopped for a drink and called but Alice didn't answer. In the mirror he looked like anyone.

You divorced your first wife, Alice said. It was not a question. One sofa rose up from the carpet to clench her. She clenched back.

Armstrong stood in their living room and mixed a drink. Plate glass, flat roof, swimming pool pierced by a diving board. Astroturf.

Alice's hair drooled down her head. She looked older than before because she was. So was he.

It was quiet. A feeling half in darkness. Armstrong ran his hands up his forehead into the skull rill. He was getting older. These things happen. She was always older than him, but exactly the same amount older. He felt as he grew older she should remain the same, like the stars.

That's Sirius, he said, looking through his telescope, and Cassiopeia.

Was she the one who could tell the future? Alice asked.

I think that was Cassandra, he said. And nobody believed her. I guess it wasn't really the future after all.

I can see the future, she said. It's going to rain. Look.

At that distance it was only an arrogance. Dark against dark, lightning hanging comma from storms' sentences, the air electric like television. He hated going on TV, hair painting itself down against those hideous lights, makeup chalk-caked against his face. It made him feel like a fossil.

An umbrella stood against the door its own gathering space. Armstrong thought it looked: skeletal.

He thought of Titan with its frozen ocean. The red spots on Jupiter are centuries-old hurricanes.

That night they made love, and when he cried out she assumed it must be in pleasure. He passed a stone. She gave birth to rocks.

A FABLE

Chapter One

In the time before animals it was a sound in the trees that made Alice touch the back of her neck in fear. Normally the only thing that could make her touch the back of her neck in fear was the rattling of houses stirring in the nests of wind that occasionally came to speak themselves into calm where she dwelt without her mother. A hole in the ground is not enough for all the stones one keeps. There must be a roof too over the blinding head where the eyes crouch for seeing. She put her stones in a row every morning and sometimes the wind said quiet. In the early days it was not difficult to choose which stones should be placed in sockets and which left to contemplate the ceiling, the earth. Alice touched the back of her neck: the early days were coming to an end. She could feel it. It felt spherical.

Chapter Two

Terrible round things began to grow from the ground. She broke one open, and a yellowish light poured out. Thicker than air, and warmer. Placing her finger inside, felt the tiny beats of a tiny heart. Now going out. Afraid, she would not wear her stones for some days and did not remove her hand from the back of her neck. Finally her teeth cried out for food, and she went looking for sumptuous grapes with which to embolden her tongue, found them missing. Grass went over from its place to push to another place to which it was also connected. Where the animals sheltered. There were three of them. Alice could not tell which one was which although they were different. It is hard to know what to do with what you have never seen before. Clearly there was some unclean difference between them. As they were still tiny, though larger than their dead heart, she scooped them up in her ice water palms and put them into her refrigerator with a stone to keep an eye on them. They pecked out its obsidian sight. A darkness fell inside the refrigerator for which she could not account. Alice touched the back of her neck. She boiled the animals and ate them. They pecked at the sides of the pot; they pecked at her teeth as she chewed. By the time her esophagus was weary of their slide they were as dead as their heart.

Chapter Three

All the apples died. She could not understand it. An ambiguous smile touched the corners of her cheekbones. When a worm crawled out she did not know it was a worm because she had never before seen a worm; and touched the back of her neck over and over as it slid over and over into view. Long enough even to touch both ears and meet in the middle, like her face: that was how long the worm was. And gray. A whole population of worms had sprung up in the apples. All the apples, and all the apples died. Even the green ones, even the red ones, even the immature yellow ones. What was worse was the ground beneath her home crawling with worms. Hastily gathering up her stones in their rows, placed them in the refrigerator where the light bulbed on and on in a hazy background buzz. Next morning when she chose two for her eyes, they froze into her sockets and could not be removed as the tongue from a frozen pole. She tried hot water, pouring it into the sockets but only cooked her brain. Alice fell dead to the ground, having had time to touch her neck as she fell because death is scary.

Chapter Four

Alice grew from the ground in eggs. There were stones everywhere: in the sea, in the cliffs, in the ground, surrounded by earthworms. The eggs tried to hatch, and could not. Grapes, kept cool for days in the refrigerator, devoured her, sightless and round and bulbous. In the times since then, grapes have had pits. Some are green, and some are purple. The color of bruises, and sunset.

THE ORRERY

Chapter One

There is a place beneath the stairs where small animals do not dare to go. A beating of wings, and the ground is threshed with blood. From the house's eye sockets burbles light, bees dribbling around the sleepy flowers. It has a name but dares not speak it. Only rarely one speaks at all, as the ground will claim all things, those that speak, those that do not speak. In the meantime there are skin shades lit with arteries, illuminated manuscripts of the body, wrapped around the light in an evening of shadow. Orgulous swans stretch out upon the grass: these are dead. Look at their necks, the way they bend so sweetly against themselves, propping themselves up on their own death. In the trees cicadas hurl themselves against bark a snapping of coffins. The very ground itself seems to swell with beetles as does the air. Fulminating with wings. Through swarms swim great birds: frigates, the albatross, certain rooks dive bombing with a precise solemn screeching. Memories efface themselves in these dark times, when the moats and armatures are raised above the mouth's drawbridge and the tongue moves out to explore the spreading reddish flesh between the legs. There is a house for all things: and a house for the present which moves backwards, flashing. As the train windows strobe.

Chapter Two

It is not pain but loss that grieves us; it is not mutilation but wholeness that we reach to grasp: flesh hangs loosely in strips. Above buzz the flies, incompetent with waiting, attempting to ambush the nightlight hung flickering in a cage by the fluttering wooden birds strung up on strings.

Chapter Three

The house is a wholeness, a beating of wings. What lives in between, all the sorrowing things. And the beating of hearts in unison. But the little twisty passageways, the obscurantists in the attic, the pinned insects in the conservatory: there is darkness in everything. Shadows lie beneath the house but it is the light that worries most. What is most terrible are the birds flying silently: the fluttering

of moths their endless flight, rapturous raptors darkening the skies, passenger pigeons in their multitudes burning up the sun: how they come down in the thousands, corpses littering the hallways, birds in the attic transformed by the colorful cloth downstairs. All of us are tailors' dummies, stiff in starched collars, lectured to endlessly in an attic filled with the smell of warm varnish, and the superb sense that somewhere, somehow, things are being done that are greater than ourselves.

Chapter Four

Nothing is greater than ourselves, Alice realized, alone among all this. The only things that are done are done by man, and by the animals. We control the earth, though we are made only of it. Build us again out of earth and clay. Remake the world. We cannot make anything greater than ourselves. We have built our house: now we must live in it. In the orrery, round apples are rotting into worms.

SELVEDGE

The darkness lifted and from the shadows emerged a giraffe. Half in darkness, yellowish and darkening brown, rustling.

Alice said, I had a map and it led me here. In the darkness he knelt before her on long stringy legs and bent into the frame. She petted the giraffe, whose eyes were huge and long eyelashes. An uncertain light flickered, fluorescent. Insectile.

That faint illumination describes faint illumination, she said. She took paper from the floor and the paper rustled. She wrote on the paper, faint illumination, and hung it beneath the fluorescent light. She took paper from the floor and the floor rustled, and the paper rustled. She wrote on the paper, giraffe, and hung it around the giraffe's neck. She said, come into the light.

The giraffe was much taller than she was. She looked up and her eyes were huge and her fingers tapped gently against her muslin dress. Her dress was gray and when she moved it rustled like moths. The paper on the floor was moth wings. They rose up and back when the light flickered, only slightly, softly. They were not attached to anything, to moths.

Alice turned to go. I shall not go, she said.

Now the giraffe seemed smaller than before. Alice picked him up. How is it that you fit in the palm of my hand, she said, monkey-puzzled. A system of bonsai trees wreathed them. Green, and sharpening. Alice pricked her hand on one motley bit and fell to sleep. Those thorns are larger than my horns, the giraffe said. Indeed they are, said Alice, awoken from three centuries of sleep.

All of you now are dust, she said, and the giraffe's coat, covered in a rust, slipped from him to reveal skeletons beneath.

SNAKES

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been in his apartment. It had probably been years.

When did you get the snakes? she asked. The room was filled with snakes. Creeping out of cabinets, sunning themselves under light bulbs. None of them were in cages, there weren't any cages. I've always had the snakes, he said, puzzled. Surely you remember my snakes, he said.

No, she said. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been in his apartment.

I think you're him, she said. Aren't you him?

BATS

Watching television one day, you look up and discover that the ceiling of your living room has become the residence of a colony of bats. That would explain the white stuff gathering on the carpet and the rustling when night comes. You had thought it was the wind, but apparently you were mistaken.

Who knows how long they've been here, clutching those little bumps on the acoustic ceiling with their shrunken sickly claws, beating the air into a latex wind, staring at the television with a hundred pairs of epileptic eyes. It isn't everyday a colony of bats arrives in suburbia and settles down. Or maybe it is, for all you know. How often do you look up at other people's ceilings, anyway?

When your girlfriend comes home you take her to the living room. Have a look at this, you say. At what? she replies. The ceiling is empty. You wait all night but the bats don't return until dawn, just after she's left for work.

In fact they never seem to be around when anyone visits. Once the bats failed to show for almost two weeks and you thought yourself finally rid of them. They found their way back eventually, of course.

After a while you decide that if you can't get rid of them you may as well sell their guano, which is apparently worth quite a lot as fertilizer. But when the time comes to collect it the bats have gone, and taken their shit with them.

LIVES OF THE SAINTS

Chapter One

The sea came up to her forehead. That was the tide, her mouth. And in the waves came the broken bits of doll she'd worried over. From the high wisteria window in the crumbling house sounded the waves, reflected back over the strand by a gramophone; now the ocean lay silent as its grave, which was the sky. Every day little bits of people floated upwards, their wet mouths turning up, their moist eyes turning up, and their eyelids broke the skein which was the blanket of air silently slipping over the bodies' bits. Plastic people embalmed in their shells. Sarcophagi of skin. Wavelets approached, meek as hanging bats, their tongues. Now Alice gently put her fingers to her lips. What whistled were the birds in the distance. Rails, grackles, frigates over ships calling back. In the sand were transcribed lines of sticks, the chemical marriage of crabs. Broken boulders moved from here to there, icebergs overhead. Cold clouds crabbed in one corner of the sky, and great gravestones moved monuments, floating, always floating, though tucking the horizon in at sunset. But this was daybreak. Alice lay and strands of seaweed stroked her hair of which they were a part. Through the sun could be seen more sky, the interstellar night, becoming gray as the day went white.

Chapter Two

Harsh with rancor. The Easter-time. All the statues rise from their graves to make obeisance to the dawn. Each bird is a symbol of the Christ Child, each bird bloodies its own breast as the pelican does. From the ceiling of the cathedral hangs a stuffed crocodile. In the dark corners beneath the church wells a spring feeding the city's fountains. This trickling altarpiece is painted wood, upon which roost birds in their multitudes. Jackdaws, and osprey, and toucans and puffins bright with the will of the Lord, or His ignorance. Alice stops by the cathedral to watch the mourners in their tomb. Great gravestones arose in all the cities, and in their black robes they came and saw and went on with their lives until they didn't anymore. The sun turns, and the moon turns, and Alice turns away. Across the street dogs race one another, bite each other's snouts, flecked with blood spume and spray. A sound of hymns spices the air. Galleons pass filled with sailors and their bloated

women fat with smear. Voices inside promise to make fishermen of men, and on the street corners women hitch their pants up a little lower and each Odysseus lashes himself a little tighter into his boxers. Alice walks on until night deigns to appear. By then the buildings starch straight up into one another, and the paths move stiffly into perpendicular intersections. Restaurants everywhere, and blinds. She feels sleek and omnipotent like a whale cruising deep beneath leaking oil rigs, peering curiously toward a blackened shore. In the street Alice meets an enormous bird. It turns to greet her and disappears. On the pavement where it stood is a tiny door. Alice steps through the door and is transformed into an enormous bird.

ATLANTIS

Eight pigeons swarmed at his feet and sucked at sidewalk stones. He felt at his cheeks with his fingers and felt at his brow with his fingers. Slowly his skull was growing out of his face. He could feel it pressing on his eyelids and hardening his jaw against the lights of upper Broadway. Sitting in the little park creased into the street, the bench seemed to tip and slide into traffic. When the light changed he did not. Now that his apartment was bare and only light lived there, some birds snapped shut their beaks and dust eddied about their plate-flat eyes. Once there had been a wife and children but never had they been so far away and closed. And another thing was the indifference of the street that left no trace when he shut his eyes. The mirror turned invisible then. Nothing glared back. He tied his tie tightly and grimaced quite clearly. Sinners paced the sidewalks and shunned the fruit stands. Shabby clothes stuck to sweaty backs and grainy skins bled sugary sap. Armpits smelled like melons. He had left to lose. Now the pigeons circled his grave.

EARRINGS

Chapter One

He lay awake listening to his tinnitus and to the wind. The dog loose in the living room, pouncing on cushions.

What is the wind but the air's idea of the ear? he wondered. And how can it be a ringing bell when it's continuous and solid, a stone dropped in sound?

Outside, the avenue buzzed, peopled with neon. He pulled on his pants and went out in bare feet. There was one shop still open but nobody inside. Heavy carpets hung from the walls. He wrapped himself in a blood-red carpet and fell asleep.

The next day he was carted to a movie premiere and unrolled between hard concrete and movie stars' feet. They poked at him with their high heels, but he did not awaken, and dreamed of being fucked in all his little holes by beautiful women wearing earrings hung with tiny tinkling bells.

Movie stars saw the movie they'd been in: now they were much larger than themselves.

I'm not sure what this is all about, he thought, still half-asleep, but surely there is a reason, and everything in its right place.

Chapter Two

There is no reason. There is no right place.

CONCRETE AND ASH

Winter. Wide black fields cornered crows. Little black voids in the shape of birds. Round body, sharp isosceles beak, all black: they clustered and spoke. Across the fields were the newer homes and the sound of steam, of rising heater-coils turning from whitish-gray to red, furnaces kicking up soot through the air. Crows settled on trees, on cars, on gutters, singing songs of shriek.

An abandoned car: a smashed windshield parted snow. The trees bent and carcass. Ice stalactites and the open mouths of caves. One small crow tasted the air and let out his breath, then staggered over to the remains of a mountain. Mine entrances ringed with ash. Ringed whitish. Steaming shit and spots of gray underfoot. A few lost houses in the fields, empty, unbroken snow heaped here to there. She tramped up to the door, smashing ice, breath heaving, short and hard and cold.

She walked through the doorway and gazed at the sky through no roof. She saw how the fallen roof described a triangular arc like the prow of a great ship buried deep in the West Virginia winter, or perhaps thrust up into it from below.

Erosion had worn away the carpet and the floor, and sunk into the earth beneath her lay the skeleton of an enormous whale, from when all the world was covered with water. And she said, these must be the bones of a fallen angel.

CHAPPARAL

When he arrived in California it was forest fires and the wind. The sky tornado green and the children leaning forty-five degrees into it, their clothes billowing behind like flags. Like kites.

Why do they build on those hills? he asked.

I have no idea.

It's all chaparral, he said, waving his hands indistinctly. Didn't they go to the museum when they were kids?

In a small yellow oval room at the museum fire licked small shoots and grasshoppers crackled. Then the light in the room changed and the hillside became brown. Then the lights came up and small shoots escaped the hard earth. That was the video. Everybody watched the video.

There was an enormous shark too, in a case. You climbed a small stairway and walked its length. At one end was a flabby mouth and tiny dead eyes. At the other end it just kind of faded away. It was the least scary shark imaginable.

If they keep building they will keep burning, he said.

She didn't reply. The clouds were high and moving and the moon too in the daytime.

She took him to a house and he sat in the backyard on a lawn chair, the kind striped with rubber. The pool was too shallow even for her children.

So, she said. What are you doing here?

I have no idea, he said.

You have no idea.

I just bought a ticket and got on the train.

You just bought a ticket and got on the train.

Uh-huh.

She shook her head.

The wind was strong and the gutters rattled. Zeppelins bumped together in the sky and airmen fell out in their goggles. What am I going to do with you, she said, and shook her head.

At night the wind settled and fires burned on the interstate. From the balcony they could see Disneyland. The sound of submachine guns rattled indistinctly in the distance.

I heard New York was flooded, she said.

You heard wrong, he said. They're replacing the Coney Island boardwalk with concrete,

that's about it.

What? she said. I can't believe that.

Well, they're putting wood planks over the concrete.

That's no boardwalk, she said, if you can't make love under it. Or buy drugs. Or sleep in the shade.

Nope, he agreed.

In the morning they drove her daughters to school. I love you, she said. I love you, she said. I love you too, they said, crunching brown paper bags in their fists. Don't trade the desserts, she said.

They'll trade the desserts, she said.

They sat in the car at a red light. Do you have any idea how long you'll be staying? she wanted to know.

All the bookstores are gone, he said.

Pretty much.

So.

So.

He dropped her off at work and took the car into LA. He passed the airport and took the back road past oil wells dipping and revolving like big-headed insects, or sex.

The museum had been entirely encased in a vast glass box. Clever, he thought.

Plastic fish hung from the ceiling on invisible wire. Inside a velvet curtain glittered deep sea phosphorescence. The shark was still there in the hallway, and the partially flattened dinosaur skull.

In the rose garden all the flowers had wilted on their trellises. Cicadas insisted in the air. He couldn't tell if the dissected airplane in the neighboring museum was an exhibit or had crash-landed there.

The parking lot was almost totally empty.

Someone's stolen your car, he informed her by payphone.

That wasn't my car, she said.

He walked to Union Station past tar pits. The fence was down, and woolly mammoths and automobiles and everything else you can think of was being slowly sucked in.

THE LITTLE SISTER

He found her at the end of a street called a movie star. There were stubby little cacti called ocotillos and dry swimming pools in the shape of kidneys.

Hey, he said. Hey, she said. She was smoking a cigarette on the deck. Come on up, she said, gesturing with the cigarette at him or at the deck, either way. He climbed up. This is my boyfriend, she said, and introduced them. He shook her boyfriend's hand and had a cigarette. It was already dark and cold. I didn't realize it would get so cold, he said, it's the desert after all. She laughed. You idiot, she said and laughed, but not in a mean way. Shivering, he clutched the cigarette between his fingers a tiny reddish afterbirth.

They went inside for a while and the three of them sat together on the dingy couch and smoked cigarettes in front of a fire. She rubbed one out onto the arm of the couch a charcoal epithet. Embers in the fireplace chattered to one another. He poked at the logs with a stick, then threw the stick in too.

THE QUIET SUBURBAN HOUSE

They went out on a date and afterward he pressed her for her phone number, but when he called the next day a voice on the other end said, I'm sorry, I think you have the wrong number.

Saul went to the house where he'd picked her up. It was a quiet suburban house in a quiet suburban neighborhood. Someone had drawn the shutters, which were white and chunky like the fingers of a very fat man poised over his dinner plate.

He walked up the steps and rang the doorbell. A rather plain woman answered the door. It wasn't her.

Do you remember me? he asked.

How did you find me? she said.

THE REFUGEE CAMP

Crept across the minefield, what earth was disturbed. Where the tanks went they went too, treading on flat feet, recoiling, round and round. In the shelter of a baobab they stretched their legs.

Are you out of water? She said she was. Are you? He said he was and sucked on her finger. It was dry as a bone.

At night they raided the villages. There weren't any lights except eyes in the darkness. What they shone out of was fear. Sometimes something howled: a monkey, a hyena: something. It set them on edge and their hair too. The villagers saw them coming and hid in their hovels.

He stole a pot of meal and jars of wine and knew what was watching. She said they make that wine by chewing leaves and spitting them into the jar. They drank it anyway and saw visions.

An apple tree. A minefield.

THE OCTOPUS

Saul put an octopus on his head, as was the fashion. He carefully draped its gloopy tentacles to frame his face and adjusted the bulbous crown where it surmounted his forehead.

It's not as purple as it was, he sighed.

In the street everybody had animals on their heads. Sea creatures melted in the heat, and even the mounted mammals—deer antlers, elephant tusks, lions' manes—were matted and drooping. Sweat poured down Saul's face, sweat and octopus goo.

At work he fought terrorists from his desk. They built bombs in rocky caves and Saul pressed a button until they did not.

Your octopus is looking a little toothsome, Alice said. Saul said he knew. Alice wore a squid, its ten tentacles attractively woven into her plaited hair. Ink leaked slowly down the back of her dress as she sat at her desk pinpointing the enemy on terrorist-speckled plateaus. I can see you, she said, quietly singing to herself the silent songs of satellites.

Do you think there are whales wearing human heads in the oceans? Saul said.

What? she said. What are you talking about? Don't be stupid, she said, and pressed a button that killed a terrorist on the other side of the Earth, which is mostly covered with water.

THE CHIMNEY

Saul lived in a brownstone by the museum. It was his first time living alone. His studio apartment was not very big and most of the space was taken up by the fireplace, which stood in the center of the apartment very large and breathing. Sometimes he could see the bricks buckling as it breathed.

It would have been easier to live in an apartment not mostly filled with fireplace. Everything was crammed against the walls, and he had to flatten himself against them just to get to the bathroom, scraping gingerly past the fire-breathing flank of the exceedingly large fireplace. But he liked it because it was by the museum and the rent was unsurprisingly low.

One day he passed his neighbor on the stairs. He liked her green eyes and lovely blonde hair, although the rest of her was not so memorable. He lived on the top floor and she was heading up past him.

Where are you going? he asked.

I'm going to the roof, she said.

He hadn't known they were allowed on the roof. We're not, she said, and pushed the door open. He waited for an alarm to sound but there was no alarm.

The roof was dominated by a gigantic chimney. This probably should not have surprised him but it did. Somehow he had not imagined the fireplace extended out of his apartment. Do all the apartments have fireplaces like mine? he wondered. Of course they do, she said. What did you think?

He put his hand on the chimney. It was warm but unlit. Have you been inside? she asked. Saul looked at her like she was crazy. You've never thought about going in there, she said. Saul continued to look at her like she was crazy. Here, she said, taking his hand.

She held his hand. It was a cool, soft hand. Now put your other hand in the chimney, she said. He put his other hand in the chimney.

They stood there like that for a minute and then she let go of his hand and went downstairs.

When he returned to his apartment it was filled with smoke.

THE DRUM MAJOR

When he was a senior Saul was the drum major of his high school marching band. It was the last game of the season. The marching band played at halftime and shivered in the bleachers. The game did not end until late and everybody was hungry so he marched the band into the street and traffic slowed and fell into line behind them. He marched them to a drive-through window and as each rank passed a man gave them burritos.

They ate as they marched. It was easier for some than others because not all instruments are easy to hold with one hand; some of them are heavy and awkward, as all things are.

Cars honked and crawled behind them on the freeway. Everywhere they went people stopped and watched and sometimes joined them.

The drum major led them up a mountain and down again. They marched past cities and towns, through jungles and lakes and deserts and oceans and into the night.

When dawn rose they were still marching round and round. As searchlights swept the sky clean of stars they raised their instruments and played the sun up in a blaze of brass before following the drum major into the clouds to Glory.

THE WOMAN WHO FLOATED DOWN FROM THE SKY

The woman floated down from the sky with a beatific smile on her face. Floated down right in front of him, arms outstretched. Landing, she reached around and removed the cable from her back. It ascended back into the sky above. He looked up but there was nothing it might have been suspended from.

Hello, she said.

Hello, he replied, a little taken aback.

Do you want to get some coffee? she asked, and he slowly said he would. They sat together in a little cafe.

Where did you come from? he said. She raised her eyebrows as if to say, do you really want to know? and he supposed he did not really want to know.

Twenty years later they sat together in the park reading books. It had been a good twenty years, not without its small shames and arguments, but twenty years is a long time and for the most part it had been a good twenty years. As they sat, a cable descended from the sky, landing in front of them in wide coils.

That's for me, she said, and went to pick it up.

Wait, he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. She looked at him and looked at the cable and looked at him. She did not pick up the cable and it lay there for a while before rising up again into the empty blue sky.

THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Chapter One

They married at a church sinking slowly into the highway. It was white and they picked it because it was white.

The door was a little crooked and so was the minister, but in a nice way. He had a gold tooth and white boots and introduced himself as Father Christmas. Of course, she said: of course.

The altar looked like a living room in some Hugh Hefner miracle. There was a fake rock wall and white shaggy rugs to stand on. We do Jewish weddings here too sometimes, Father Christmas explained, and tapped the Corinthian columns astride them.

Acanthus leafs, she thought.

She said her name was Alice and he said his name was Saul and they did and they were married. He put a plastic vending machine ring on her finger and signed the papers with a flourish.

Well, she said, we're married now. You don't have to impress me anymore, she said.

Chapter Two

The concierge winked and got them the heart-shaped bed. But when they tried to sleep their legs had nowhere to go except around each other, which seemed sweet and entangling at first and then just pins and needles. They tried the other way around, feet where the aorta would have been if they were sleeping on an actual whale-sized heart and not a heart-shaped bed, but that wasn't much better, and in the middle of the night her head came unstuck from his cheek and pulled her down into the sheet-slough. She woke with a start.

Where am I? she wondered, not for the first time. Then, careful not to wake her husband—how weird is that, she thought, *my husband*—she rose, put a slinky thing on, and slipped out the door. Saul slept on in the heart-shaped bed and did not fall off it for a while.

Alice wandered down the Strip. She passed the Luxor and above the Luxor a man was floating at the pyramid's very tip in a beam of light.

In a manmade lake she saw ships sinking over and over again. Air-conditioning blew from every doorway like the breath of arctic giants, rustling the palm trees.

Farther down the Strip there was a roller coaster wound around the top of a building, and Alice found Saul there.

I couldn't sleep, he said.

Me neither, she said.

Stupid bed, they said.

Later they went back to the hotel and she tied him to the bed and left him there after they were done.

When she came back up he was still tied to the bed. You know, those weren't really knots, she said. You could have pulled yourself free anytime, she said. He said he knew that.

He hadn't known that.

Chapter Three

In the morning they met a couple called the Robinsons. Here's to you, Mrs. Robinson, Saul said. Yes, she cried, delighted, although they must have heard that joke a million times. No, no! she squeaked. We were just married. I've been waiting for that joke ever since we got engaged. Congratulations!

You're the ones who just got married, Saul said. We should be congratulating you.

On the joke, I mean, said Mrs. Robinson. Ah, said Saul.

We were just married too, said Saul. Oh my! squealed Mrs. Robinson. How wonderful! Did you have an Elvis?

They had not had an Elvis.

Mrs. Robinson seemed disappointed to hear this. Well, we had an Elvis, Mrs. Robinson said. He even sort of looked like Elvis. The real Elvis. Can you imagine being married by the real Elvis? He could do that, you know, she said. Alice said she didn't think he could. Of course he could, said Mrs. Robinson. He was *The King*.

That's true, Alice said, although she did not say that Kings are often not particularly powerful. Once she had read an article about the King of an African tribe who lived in Queens and drove a cab in Manhattan where the criminal law courts are called *The Tombs* because they look like Egyptian tombs.

They used to burn mummies for firewood, she said.

What? said Mrs. Robinson, a little confused. Alice didn't reply, so she smiled and suggested they go to the pool.

They went to the pool. Alice wore a single-piece that opened in all the right places and almost gave Mrs. Robinson cause to regret the two-piece bikini she had chosen. Hers was not the most striking figure, but it would have to do, or so she had to believe because it was hers, and we always believe in what is ours.

Saul wore swim trunks and a shirt that said *Okkervil River*, which is a band, although it is probably also a river. Mr. Robinson thought it said *Overkill River* and it reminded him of that one time in Vietnam.

They swam listlessly for a while until Alice said, let's go to Egypt. So they took the Robinsons and went to Egypt.

Chapter Four

In Egypt there were pyramids and tombs and sand and the Nile and what they did was go shopping.

In the hovel shops Mr. Robinson asked if he could buy a crocodile mummy.

The shops were collapsible tents and it was Mrs. Robinson's considered opinion that shops should never be portable. Things ought to be where they are and not where they're not, said Mrs. Robinson.

Mr. Robinson squinted in reply. The sere desert light reminded him of the club where he'd met his wife. It was so bright he couldn't see himself blink and it was like blindness. It was so loud he couldn't hear himself walk and it was like floating. The women were dark and soundless in the light and loudness. All he could do was feel them and smell them. They smelled like dead flowers. They moved slowly past him, bumping like tugboats and freighters in a crowded harbor.

There was something about those clubs that made Mr. Robinson feel: nautical.

Once Mr. Robinson saw the corpse of a beached whale. It was an enormous, darkly colored shapeless thing slowly bleaching to a viscid yellow. The whale's mouth hung limply open like a wound, as if those teeth did not belong to the whale but what had bitten into it.

Seagulls were tearing the whale to strips. Grayish shreds littered the beach, blubber raining down from above, the slatternly shapes of seagulls biting and dropping.

Birds don't chew.

Later, flatbed trucks arrived and men with axes and pitchforks struggled to dissect the whale into chunks small enough to cart away.

The whole beach stank.

The club smelled of expensive alcohol and perfume. Mr. Robinson had trouble deciding if it was a desperate smell or a hopeful smell. Surely people would not subject themselves to this without hope. Surely there is hope in any action man undertakes, he thought: when a man washes himself or climbs a ladder or makes a painting or courts a woman, he does so out of hope. He does so that time may supersede itself and actions suggest reactions and the world push forward into tomorrow.

What do they do with washed-up whale carcasses, anyway? he wondered.

Mrs. Robinson laughed. She liked that her husband rarely said anything. Eventually she maybe even loved him. Mrs. Robinson loved people as much as she could make them herself, and his silence allowed her to imagine him completely, so she loved him. The Robinsons would go so far as to say every person is to you whatever you are to them when you're with them. In this way they made a perfect couple, although she exasperated him sometimes.

Chapter Five

They were tired of Egypt and Egypt was tired of them. They had been married just long enough.

Saul and Alice and Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were starting to get short with one another, as happens when people take trips with each other and when they don't, but they weren't entirely tired of each other just yet so they rented some ostriches and saddled them and rode out into the desert.

It doesn't matter which direction, Alice said. The desert doesn't have a direction.

This was proved untrue when at an oasis the ostriches suddenly stuck their heads into the sand in fear. They had unknowingly ridden all the way into Iraq, and insurgents appeared in a rickety flatbed truck and kidnapped the women and shot the men.

Luckily Mr. Robinson had been shot before: I was *in Vietnam*, he reminded Saul, and saved their lives so quickly and so completely that within hours they were able to follow the flatbed's tire tracks to the insurgents' hideout.

The hideout was a small shack surrounded by an endless duneless desert and the ruins of war. There were bombed out bunkers and smashed tanks like the carapaces of giant insects and the blasted skeletons of enormous antennas.

Bombs had emptied the oil wells, and everywhere iridescent oil oceans lay sunken in the sand. From afar it might have been attractive, blue and green and brown and black arranged in neat lines amidst endless beige wastes like the Gap during khaki season, but from close up all the standing pools were slicked with scum and every attendant building long gone to rust and desolation.

The insurgents took the women inside one of the buildings and handcuffed them to a table. The most annoying thing about being kidnapped by Iraqi insurgents is not being able to keep the sand out of your hair and your hair out of your face as a flatbed truck whips you around the desert, thought Mrs. Robinson, and was happier cuffed to the table.

As they prepared to make a ransom video the insurgents tried to make themselves look as scary as possible, but mostly they looked ridiculous. To a man they were short scruffy people, hardly resembling any kind of real terrorist.

Mr. Robinson emerged silently from the sink and snapped their necks.

It was over in seconds. They weren't real insurgents, Mr. Robinson explained. Real insurgents would have taken you to some kind of headquarters. These guys just took you into the desert.

Of course they took us into the desert, Mrs. Robinson said. This is Iraq. Where else would they have taken us?

We should try and find a phone or a computer, something with internet, Mr. Robinson said. I doubt we'll find anything like that here, Saul said, but I'll show you what I did find, he said, and lead them outside to some of a building.

Some of the building had been destroyed when a Tomahawk missile landed on it, but the missile hadn't exploded and remained there, slumped like a beached whale on the crumpled-up ruin.

Smart bomb, Saul said, although it didn't look particularly smart. It was huge and blunt and not very scientific-looking. We could try to use the targeting computer inside, Mr. Robinson said, somewhat dubiously. They gathered round and together lifted him up to where he thought the computer was. As he fussed with some wires the bomb began to hiss.

Uh-oh, Mr. Robinson said.

Suddenly rockets fired and in a plume of sparks and smoke the missile shook loose its concrete cradle and began to rise stertorously into the sky. They tried to pull Mr. Robinson free, but he was caught in the wires and they were all four of them together lifted into the air, dangling behind the Tomahawk like a kite tail, holding on for dear life as they climbed higher and higher into outer space.

Chapter Six

Everything was dark.

I am dead, Alice thought. But she was not dead.

The space station took them in. How did you survive? the bewildered cosmonaut who had rescued them wanted to know. They didn't know. All they could tell him was an impossible story about Iraq and ostriches and unexploded ordnance.

It's impossible, he said.

It is, they agreed. And yet here we are, they said.

I've been through worse, Mr. Robinson said. I was *in Vietnam*.

That must have been rough, the cosmonaut said, but Mr. Robinson disagreed. Not really, he said. I didn't mind *Vietnam*. Iraq though, I don't like Iraq, he said, shaking his head. I don't like the desert. The thing about the desert is it has no morals. The sea, the sea has morals. When you drown you fill with water and become part of the ocean. The forest's roots digest you. The air flings you out of itself so you're killed not by the air but by the ground. But the desert, the desert just dries you out and leaves you there. It leaves: *a husk*.

I don't want to be *a husk*, Mr. Robinson said.

But husks can be nice, Alice said. This space station's a shell, she said, like a husk. Isn't this husk sustaining you, protecting you from the darkness of deep and infinite space?

Mrs. Robinson pointed out that where a husk is a seed once was. By fighting the enemy abroad instead of fighting the enemy at home, you've planted a seed, she said, a seed of peace.

Mrs. Robinson didn't like outer space much more than she had liked Iraq. *Too much of too much*, she thought. Too much sand, too much outer space: too much nothing. And something is

always better than nothing. She liked America's *too much*, even Egypt's *too much*. But kidnapping doesn't count as tourism, she didn't think.

How do we get out of here? Alice wanted to know. I feel as if we have come to the end of something. Saul agreed. As if something that was supposed to happen has not happened, and now it's time to move on.

What a weird honeymoon, he said. There's hardly even been any sex.

Unfortunately the space station was too crowded to attempt zero-gravity sex, so they decided it was time to return home. The cosmonaut loaded them into one of the extra Soviet space capsules he had lying around. It was a cramped Soviet space capsule crammed with all sorts of communist crap including a bona fide Russian cosmonaut, but all in all it was the only way to travel.

We're not going to land in some godforsaken Kazakhstan, are we? Saul said.

I guess we don't have to, the cosmonaut said.

How about somewhere nice? Saul said. We're on our honeymoon, after all.

I hear Mexico is nice this time of year, the cosmonaut said, and pointed out the window at the whole world.

Mexico is nice every time of year, Mrs. Robinson said, except for the Mexicans.

Alice slapped her. She said: *enough*.

Chapter Seven

They landed in the Gulf of Mexico on a passing cruise ship and were taken aboard onto endless parties.

There was food at midnight and noon and every minute in between. There were Lido decks and Sky decks and Mezzanine decks gleaming white in the devastating sun. There were decks with swimming pools carved into them a little piece of elevated ocean and real quaint portholes in every cabin and bars and casinos and a chapel. It was just like Las Vegas, except all of it was sinking.

In the chapel Alice and Saul found Father Christmas. They glanced in and there he was, magnificent and tilted in his gleaming white vestments as if he was wearing the cruise ship itself.

Alice! he cried. Saul! he cried. You remembered us, they said. Of course I remember you! he cried. I remember every couple I marry! What a small world, he said. We know, they said.

Still together after all this time? he asked. But it's only been a few days, Alice said, although that hardly seemed possible.

How time flies! Father Christmas chuckled. How are you? Are you getting along? I heard about some recent unpleasantness? I saw it on the news. I recognized you. I said, that's Saul and Alice. I married them. Hell of a place for a honeymoon, Father Christmas said, Iraq.

Well, it was supposed to be Las Vegas, but we got bored, Alice said.

Of course you did! he cried, of course! Vegas is nothing but hot air and neon. I should know! That's why I took this gig. Can't stand knowing practically every marriage I solemnize will end in drunken despair by the end of the weekend.

Well, we're still together, Alice and Saul said, as if reminding themselves.

Chapter Eight

That night they went out on the deck in the moonlight. The cruise ship had dropped anchor off a fantastic coastline. It didn't really look like Mexico anymore. There where the cliffs met the shore was a headland shaped like a half-buried giant, head in hands, enormous arms sloping to the sea.

Nothing has happened of which we were not a part, Alice said.

Not yet, Saul said. Not yet.

Alice did not reply. It was very awkward between them, like new lovers.

Our marriage is failing, she said.

We must not let it fail, he said.

Later, they died.

PROSE

It is certain because it is impossible.

Tertullian, De Carne Christi

THE ISLAND OF CATALINA IS ON FIRE

The island of Catalina is on fire. Where have all the buffalo gone? Are they stampeding across the bleak beige land through smoke, thick brown coats burning, streaking flames behind like carried candles in the dark?

In Avalon the homes are washed out blues and greens and pinks and overlook the harbor where everybody has gathered for the boats. Homes on hillsides are supported by sticks; it's impossible not to imagine them sliding down into the sea on broken legs. Chimneys wreathed with fire, hillsides haloed in smoke.

On the ferry to Long Beach flying fish sparkle up and land on the deck. Every scale glints in every direction as they flop and it is difficult to tell in what direction they are pointing. The deck is gritty and wide and thrums noisily, a subterranean sound. The sea beneath parts to let the ferry through, dirty and blue and stripped with dolphins and wads of seaweed.

From Long Beach, Catalina appears a low long purple murmur in the distance. Disembarking, the evacuees can see suspended above the island another island floating in the sky, insubstantial and raw, that is the fire's crown. It is not a mirage and it is like creation, light against dark, form emerging from chaos where form and chaos both remain, uneasily rubbing against one another, leaving a margin of emptiness between where some sky shows through, dirty and unnamed.

THE ZOOKEEPER

He went to the zoo. It was Wednesday. He always went to the zoo on Wednesdays. The zoo was free on Wednesdays.

It was early and the sun still stirring. The sky was deep blue and the trees black so that the dawn coming through them looked like stars.

He took the subway. First he took the subway underground. Parks passed over his head and airplanes. Then he took the subway on a bridge that crossed the street forever in the long direction. After a while the subway stopped near the zoo and started again without him.

At the zoo he went to Jungleworld. Inside it was hot and the leaves all sweaty and outside it was still winter. The monorail was closed, the monorail that made him think of the monorail at Disneyland that used to go over the lake with the yellow bumblebee submarines. The submarines were gone. He wasn't sure about the lake.

He watched a zookeeper scratch the tapir's back with a long stick. He watched confused fish discover the blind edge of the water. He watched monkeys grooming one another like old ladies in a nail salon. Beneath him was wood. The boards creaked when he walked and boomed. The animals never seemed to notice him, just like everywhere else in New York.

He watched the panthers sleep. They didn't have much room to move around. Pretty much all they had was a branch. Maybe that was why he always saw them sleeping. He always felt a little sorry for the panthers, and he wasn't one of those people who felt sad at zoos.

The bears were fighting. The lions were up and wandering around and the cubs were fighting. The sign said lions sleep twenty-three hours a day. Because he came so early he saw them that one twenty-fourth hour. Normally they were indeed asleep. He was the first person at the zoo. Actually he'd arrived fifteen minutes before the zoo opened and had to wait. When he went in he saw zookeepers still tiding up in Jungleworld and it was strange to see people in the exhibits.

He asked the zookeeper why he always saw people in that one exhibit. It was because of the birds. So many birds make an almighty mess, the zookeeper said. They had to clean it out every day. That's why there were always people in that one exhibit, and hoses. The zookeeper climbed up the ladder out of the exhibit and rolled up the hose. There wasn't any glass or bars or anything.

But why don't they fly out? he asked.

Where would they go? the zookeeper said.

KATRINA

I drove my boat down the hall in a flood. When the rain was over the roof dripped lower and I tangled the boat in a chandelier.

At the attic I climbed into voices so the rescuers could hear. Then the helicopter fell into a basket and together we flew away over the sawgrass. Below us, houses made bricks in the river like a path to follow.

BARBIE

When he came back from the war his ponytail was still wet with jungle sweat. He wasn't so fat yet, never complacent, fixing and dragging little carts bouncing behind. Everybody dragged things home from Vietnam: war's driftwood, little detritus. There was the footlocker, filled with the bones of Peking Man. The second wife, yellower than the first, eyes black like dried-up leeches. The souvenir sword, he'd taken it from a thatch hut there in the undergrowth before setting everything ablaze. He stood back and watched it burn. Too much lighter fluid on the charcoal, again. Over the backyard wet with grass floated the smell of barbecue and the sounds of children, and then the roar of a jet returning to a military base that wasn't there anymore.

TWO PHAROAHS

MENES

He doesn't know what it is but kills it anyway. This is not his first mistake. Clouds wait for him to finish, hovering. What they bite hardly notices. He strings it up on a pole and mounts it in the earth. The earth swallows and the pole catches in its throat. Choking, the earth spits small seas. From that spring he draws water and waits for what's next. Is this what's next or is it another thing? he wonders. How can we separate what's next from what's next? The King-Lists know, strung up on temple walls. There he saw a fish in an empty cartouche and went to the river for a sign. Birds picked pieces from the backs of hippos. A model boat floated down the river. He thought perhaps the tomb-models were not models but the boats themselves. That people had been much smaller in the old days. He measured himself and drew no conclusions. There on the bank of the river is where he killed it. The river flowed but brackish. This spring cool and clear, drinkable. Cupping his hands to his mouth to drink, he sees his hands beneath the water, as if he had not drawn water from the river but his hands remained immersed in it. Nearby, mountains melt to baldness. What succor the plants have comes from this new spring only, and walk toward it on insincere roots. As if afraid to leave the ground to come and drink. They have grown down out of the dark, burrowing into the land in roots to surround the oasis where palm trees grow. And there were many dragons, but he soothed them, saying it had always been thus, and always shall be, as the eternal King-Lists show. The dragons backed away and palm trees knelt at the water. That was before the weather changed. The sky became hard against him, and because the pole was wooden did not draw away the lightning which struck and smoothed him against the earth. When everything abated he saw he was blind. All the spring turned to steam, and now everything complains of summer. He mats his hair against his head and smoothes his skin until it comes unpeeled. Hanging from himself in strips, he curses against the river, staggering forward clutching the pole. When he trips and falls into the mouth of a hippo the birds do not remove him. Instead the hippo closes its mouth and inserts its tusks into his eye sockets. The hippo is female, but bears him no children, and he drowns after a while under the water.

AKHENATEN

In arid lands is where he puts temples, for you cannot farm a temple. Once he tried an experiment, laying arable soil inside a great system of pillars open to the sky, but the crops turned out sickly and it was a failed experiment. Anyway, if it succeeds it is no experiment but a harbinger. The prodigal. The past never attains the heights of the present, he thought. His predecessors all thought the present never attains the heights of the past, but they were wrong, or so he said. He said that all the temples should be erased and new ones built in another place. From above the sun came down and spoke to him. The sun said sunlight and so he said the sun was sunlight. Without sunlight there are no crops, he said; without crops there are no men, he said; without men there are no temples, he said; without temples there are no gods, he said; without gods there is no sun, he said; therefore the sun: is god. It was unimpeachable logic. He placed a bar of gold in his mouth and spoke a stuttering sunlight. Pressed shining foil into his mouth and with silvered tongue ordered invasions of his own lands. Nevertheless, his generals were not impressed. They said an ibis, or a crocodile. Sometimes they said ladies had lion's heads. It all depended on where they came from. In any case their heads were bulbous now, swelling from intricate flower collars like new bulbs emerging from the ground. And such long fingers! Fingers that strangled ducks, that emerged from the hand like smiles. Every eye, too, seemed to smile. Along the river he built a fantastic city where there was no city to build. In the river they fished stalks, peeling them open and beating them together at right angles, squeezing out the paste to dry in day's oven. Then it became possible to spit words onto them, that they may curl up as the beetles do in the desert, pushing their dung sun toward a desiccated tree. We have worshipped the scarab that buries the sun, he said, but they are the night. He held his head in his hands and the throne legs beneath his actual legs moved less than his actual legs. His neck clutched a system of beads. Such intricate metalwork! Gold like a thousand bees buzzing about his neck. He wishes he possessed their industry. After commanding a thousand statues buried back into a thousand rocks he sat on his throne and wondered himself better than the man who would eventually break what now is his. Who destroys is vilified, yet is he not more powerful than those who came before him to build? Not the bees but the honey we steal from their hives. How we break them open and they sting, but stings heal, and bees die having stung. Do you hear me? he cried out. Are you deafened by my brilliant golden headdress? Does the snake on my chin snatch your words away? We *can* escape history, he said. Then his generals killed him.

MEXICO

Spit sex down the neck of a bottle. Orange beer staggers sunsets over Acapulco. Gunrunners dig holes in the beaches with automatic weapons. Stray dogs pick spent shell casings out of the sand. The worm wriggles out of its drowning pool. Families in hilltop estates set the dogs loose on the gardeners. Back over the border! they shout. Where whales flee the shallow gulf. Mountains crawl into the sea.

I am all abandoned, say the tunnels crammed with a/c. Coyotes swim across their backs. Runoff chokes the Hoover Dam and all Arizona is backwash. Float down the New River to the New World. They offered me chiclets and my great-aunt and great-uncle bought me a wood whale machined in a maquiladora.

All the dolphins in unison. The unanimous sea. Cities buried in the jungle. I meant to say, cities choked by the jungle. Archaeologists armed with radar cough them up. Don't drink the water! Elaborate configurations of flesh arrange themselves around clothing. We just went down for a weekend and ended up fat fifteen years later. Did you get that waxed? Are you talking about my surfboard? Are you talking about my AK? Are you in my line of sight? Can I bring you a canapé?

Enormous wooden crosses on a hillside. Priests serrated by sunlight. After the hot air balloon collapsed, he set about covering the mountainside with paint. If in distress, fly your flag upside down. From our side it looks like a mountain. From theirs, just another hill among hills.

STILL AWAKE

On Central Park West the doors are doctors' offices. Doctors, and dentists. The doors are low because the sidewalks are higher than they used to be. The doors are small and dark like mouths. These are the doors next to the awnings, next to the buildings' entrances with their mirrors and high desks. Doormen clasp their hands together as if trying to prevent their gloves from escaping.

At night the brightness dims suddenly in the street and the park drops away beneath a rugged wall. What are they trying to keep out? What are they trying to keep in? It is farther down and darker than might be expected, but usually there's nothing there. Most of the dark things happen in the buildings where it is light all day and all night long. A man jumped off the Empire State Building the other day. It happens less than you might think. It takes some doing. He took a running start and vaulted over the fences. When a professional daredevil tried to jump off with a parachute police came and pulled him back in. Possibly he was missing the crucial element of surprise, all bulky in black and goggled like a soldier.

Another tall building is the Citibank building. Supposedly the church underneath didn't want to move and sold its air rights to Citibank, so the skyscraper hovers over the church on a huge central pylon ringed with massive square columns. Beneath there is a weak sort of plaza and God and a vast empty space. It's probably not the original church that sold the air rights because it looks just like the Citibank building, angular and white and severe like the men inside suppose Jesus to be. It's a very popular spot for the homeless. Another popular spot is the church by the Museum of Modern Art. They have a whole temporary cardboard city there for a few minutes at a time.

For a long time that weird fortress church on West End also had a homeless population, but then they got kicked off the steps for no particularly useful reason. At night the moon skulks through the bell towers, one cubical but set at an angle, the other vaguely octagonal, but people so rarely look up. It is considered bad New York manners to look up at buildings. Tourists look up at the buildings, therefore New Yorkers do not. But the tourists have it right, for once. Those who don't look up at the buildings aren't really New Yorkers. They just live there. They live in a big city, any big city. New York is up. It is narrow spaces and the triangle between Canal, the triangle between the Manhattan Bridge and the Brooklyn Bridge. It is the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire.

Park Avenue is empty at night. Cruise ship models ignite empty windows. Lever House perfectly balances itself against itself. St. Bartholomew's and the Waldorf erupt from the sidewalk

like the past as the New York Central Building's poster-perfect facade is crushed by the MetLife abortion's fist. On 5th Avenue there is nobody but clothes hung with no one inside them. They don't look forlorn. They don't look like waiting. They don't really look like anything. It is bright like daylight, except the brightness suddenly stops a couple of stories up and then it is dark, and no stars.

Where 5th Avenue runs out Central Park is lit by old-fashioned standing lamps. They stand like men clutching their heads. They clutch their heads as they burn. They can see in the dark. They can see paths, and spreading trees, and the Pond is still.

One night, near midnight, go down to Bethesda Terrace. Light spills through the shadowed arcades with their fantastic terracotta encrustations and hanging Moorish tiles, blue and gold creeping across the bricks and the fountain with its stranded lady. The Lake is still. To the east gleams the white colonnades of the Boathouse, Arch Bridge equally white to the west, but the water is black.

There are lovers under the elms. There are raccoons in the garbage. There are men pissing in the bushes. One year they replaced the intricately interlocking tiles on the Mall with gravel, as it had been in the time of horse carriages. The first rain washed it all away, and now the tenor saxophonist shuffles bare asphalt. Beneath the elms, tree limbs heavy with snow fall and kill passersby.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR WRITING THE STORY IT SEEMS LIKE EVERYBODY'S WRITING THESE DAYS

Something surprising happens. Characters respond to it as they would any slightly surprising thing, when in fact the thing is extremely surprising, or even impossible. These characters may be sympathetic or not; we may not know anything about them; they may not even have names, or be animals, or robots. Ironic deadpan humor occurs. Sometimes the story is aware of itself, its characters ungainly literary appendages; other times it aspires to be a slice of life. Either way, it is told in clear, economical prose, or less often in highly metaphorical, overripe experimental language, depending on who the author studied with at that one university or writers' program. Events that take a long time are telescoped, and events that occur in an instant are magnified. Nevertheless, the story is usually short.

FASHION IS NOT ART

Sculpture is about the description of the human form. Whether we see a dog, an automobile, or simply an abstract shape, sculpture always has as its subject the comparison of its form to the human form. This is because when we look at something, we class it by comparison, whose first model is the self's form, the human body, whereas sculpture is differentiated from other visual art by precedent to the sense of touch.

Touch always has as its object itself, its own form, as opposed to the eyes, which take as their model the forms around them, offering as it does the concretion of edge by (virtual) fingers. Thus, sculpture is a critique of the human form, by means of the consultation of edges.

Fashion, conversely, is the antithesis of sculpture because while sculpture is about likeness to the body, fashion is about difference from the body. Fashion says: I am not the body.

Fashion is always negation, a negative theology, a dialectical force opposing the body confirmed and detained beneath. Because fashion diverges from the human, fashion is not art. It is instead a kind of refusal to see the body as sculpture. Fashion says the nude is not enough.

It is not that the perfect dress is nudity, or that the perfect dress frees the body to be nude underneath. The perfect dress frees itself from the body entirely. Perfect beauty: the body is gone. Disappeared. The perfect dress erases the body.

Nothing underneath. This is why beauty is often mistaken for shallowness, lack of depth. Beauty frees us from meaning. Perfection kills the body.

The difficulties of sex are often mistaken for the difficulties of sin.

ON MORALITY

It is a mistake to confuse morals and power. Morals are the means by which we consider administrations of power. Murder, for instance, is neither a moral act nor an immoral act. It is instead an exercise of power. Even if morality represented real values, since agents of power seek to reproduce its effects, they cannot be differentiated from any real effects deriving from those acts. Seen this way, morals are never absolute. Power is the only absolute, which is to say, death is the only absolute, for power, in human terms, is always the exercise of will toward death. Thus power and morals can be thought of as actualizations of death; morals are simulations of death. No action is willed that does not carry behind it the force of mortality. It is a happy coincidence that only one letter, the T on which Christ was crucified, separates the two concepts. Morals are the conclusions we draw when actions are insufficient.

ON FORGETTING

Any communally experienced event worth remembering passes almost immediately into myth. Where memory is concupiscent, myth is archetypal.

Since it is impossible to say when something truly dies, the world is in effect dying at a continuous rate, neither dead nor alive, in a period of continuous transition, the past a prediction and the future a remembrance of what has been forgotten.

There is something incomplete about writing. Writing is supposedly a form of communication, but this is a misconception. In fact writing is absence. By writing, we absent ourselves from our own thought.

Once you have rejoiced, you have learned what it is to rejoice. Once you have longed, you know what longing is. But you must relearn grief every time you have lost.

The aim of philosophy is its own destruction. If a proposition can be shown to be true, then it no longer needs to be said, because it has become apparent. Thus philosophy is the process of unmaking thought.

Identification is always exclusion.

Art is forgetting. Or, rather, art allows one to forget. Artists create to free themselves from their creation. Artists destroy themselves that they may go on.

WHERE THE WORLD TRADE CENTER WAS

The Winter Garden is that bulbous glass thing behind the World Trade Center Site. From the top of the steps stretches a torqued rectangle of whitish wasteland where ramps mount one another into a low retaining wall. There are holes where excavations were, the search for human remains, most of which are no longer than a finger. They are called potential human remains because it is not at all clear whether they are or whether they are not human remains. They are burnt and stubby and grisly if they are.

Inside the Winter Garden are rows of palm trees that may be fake or may be palm trees. An interesting thing about palm trees is they are actually very difficult to fake. In Southern California, where palm trees line every street and every highway, the cell phone companies have erected fake palm trees to hide their antennas and they may as well have just erected the antennas, so ugly and fake are these supposed palm trees. Reception is good along the streets and highways though, where you are not supposed to use your cell phone while driving.

There are many things not to do when driving and people do them all. Then they crash into palm trees and the palm trees do not burn but the cars sometimes do, and the drivers. It is very hard to set a palm tree on fire. It is easy to set a human on fire; all you need is a wick. Clothing, for instance, or hair. There is a movie in which a palm tree burns continuously for about ten minutes until it is consumed, like a wick, just like a wick. The filmmakers could not possibly have started that fire by crashing a car into the palm tree.

Those palm trees that line the streets and highways are tall and straight and planted in parallel, mostly, like the World Trade Center. In the high desert someone has created a sort of artwork by teasing palm trees into rare and curious shapes, outlining bent toruses and ellipses along the road like living Serra sculptures. Whether the trees were grown and tended and coaxed into taking such strange shapes in the manner of bonsai trees or whether chainsaws were once at work is impossible to tell at ninety miles an hour. The desert shoots by very slowly, changeless and serene and darkening. Dusk arrives so subtly night is a distinction, not a difference.

At night the World Trade Center used to be illuminated, windows in rows and rows of parallel lines. The actual black buildings themselves disappeared and their mottled insides glowed, so that they appeared to hover in midair, delicately suspended in the dark.

THE BOOK OF TRANSIENCE

As all art is a prophecy about how it will be perceived in the future, and all persons our idea of what they will be for us in the future, so too is the idea of body rooted in our apprehension of it in the past, imagining what it will come to, though we cannot conceive of how it will end, for death is not a fact in life, as Wittgenstein knew. Thus we dislocate time in the examination of our bodies. We proceed as if the future were an extension of our past. But the future does not exist.

Memory is a myth. We create thoughts each moment we imagine to be reconstructions of another moment, but are in fact artifacts of the present moment themselves, already passing into a kind of disbelief, into a poetic state of iconography in which objects are simultaneously the idea of an image and themselves the image. Any attempt to conceive of a future demands a recreation of an already imaginary past, and thus makes ruins of objects. It is not that buildings contain within them the ruins they will perhaps become, but that the ruins are the thing itself, and the building a figment of our imagination, already passing into memory.

After all, did not the World Trade Center itself always resemble two great gravestones? Black tombstones of futurity, monumental predictions and precessional commemoration of their own demise. There was always something sinister about those blank dark tablets, even when streaked with light at sunset, less an enormous brooding presence than an absence on the edge of our island. We have ceased to see these buildings as buildings; they are symbols, objects of contemplation. As they always were; only their meaning has changed. They have become ciphers, meaning taking vivid, double shape. In this way we see that the towers are figments of remembrance, the shape memory takes. We see that an object is a circuit, closed by perception.

Every monument is a system of remembrance. If an object is a circuit, the circuit must be closed. Monuments only possess power so long as they possess memory. In other words, memory is the monument. Monuments lose their ability to commemorate as humans lose memory by death and by decay, becoming memorials of monument; eventually monuments are themselves the event rather than memorials of the event itself. The human aspect will inevitably diminish over time until all that's left are forgotten names carved into the side of a sepulcher.

Monuments are always monuments to themselves—monuments to monument. Therefore the only true memorials exist as activated memory, memory made solid by signs. A monument is a hieroglyph, a sign that must be understood prior to reading.

Coming upon a structure with no idea as to its significance, such as the mounds of Britain or the megaliths of the Mediterranean, we can only project onto them what use we might have for such a thing, or, drawing on what knowledge we have of its builders, imagine what use they might have put it to. Even if we recognize a structure as, for instance, the memorial of a great king, because we know nothing of the king, really (even a whole history of his reign is irrelevant now because we were not there), we cannot utilize it as a monument. To call it a memorial is not correct. It may once have been a memorial, but only so long as it lives in human memory. Today it is only the memorial of a memorial.

We make memorials because we need for others to know we remember, and to remind ourselves to remember. When we visit a cemetery or a memorial, the feeling we get is not general. Each gravestone reminds us of a loved one's grave, each monument reminds us of a tragedy too close to escape. This is why when we create monuments, erect gravestones, we are not mourning the lost, but mourning ourselves. We are contemplating the rumor of our own death, for which all other deaths are synecdoche.

And all remembrance stops with death. W. G. Sebald knew this above all. In *Austerlitz* he notes that darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as he thinks how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. It was Sebald's attempt to create such places and objects that possess this very elusive power which commends him to us today, and to the future which was for him a place of the dead, like the past, filled with those with whom we cannot speak, but speak to us, searching for what is not theirs, and not yet ours.

In an essay first published barely a month before his death, Sebald tells of a visit to the artist Jan Peter Tripp in Stuttgart. He remembers that visit as a remarkable occasion, because with the admiration he immediately felt for Tripp's work it occurred to him that he too would like to do something one day besides giving lectures and holding seminars. Sebald fell to examining Tripp's engraving of Daniel Paul Schreber, the mentally disturbed judge who became convinced he was nightly transformed into a woman and subjected to hideous ordeals, and about whom Freud drew some of his more specious conclusions. This engraving, which depicts Schreber with a spider in his skull, leads Sebald to wonder what can be more terrible than the ideas always scurrying around our minds. He tells us that much of what he has written derives from this engraving, not only the will

to create the brilliant works of art by which he will be remembered, but even his method of procedure: in adhering to an exact historical perspective, in patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still life, asking himself what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run.

It can be no coincidence, then, that in this selfsame collection of essays and prose Sebald writes of Bruce Chatwin, in whose novel *Utz* the storytelling I, who remains unnamed like the narrator of Sebald's extended fictions, both the author and not the author, is admitted with some reluctance into the collector's bathroom, where he discovers hanging on the door a silk dressing gown embroidered in the most delicate and fantastic manner. On the way out through the dark bedroom he sees a wig and wonders if Utz, like Chatwin, might not harbor some secret vice which would ultimately lead to his downfall. Indeed, as *Utz* was being written, a dark and then almost unspeakable death was already growing inside its author, a death that might be imagined similar to Tripp's engraving. For things, as Chatwin writes, are tougher than people. Things are the changeless mirror in which we watch ourselves disintegrate.

My grandparents were in Auschwitz. One day when I was young we sat in the backyard of their Denver home and as my parents silently ran the video camera I interviewed them about their experiences. There was a lemon tree, and shade, and cool concrete. The lemons were inedible. I do not remember today what they said, and have not since viewed the video, which may still exist. But although I can never forget the essence of what they told me, being told a thing is not the same as knowing the thing itself. For there is a certain uselessness to remembrance. Memory of the atrocities they witnessed will fade, as they always have, and fresh crimes will be visited on the heads of our children, as they always have. We learn nothing from loss.

W. G. Sebald knew that loss cannot be heard, described, or passed on. His great attempt was to try and hear, describe, and pass on that loss, and when he failed, settled for making a natural history of that destruction, which is the most any of us can hope to do. Writers can show people ruins, but the great tragedy of history is that we must make them for ourselves to understand.

POEMS

Where do we go when we die? he said.
I don't know, the man said. Where are we now?
Cormac McCarthy, Cities of the Plain

ASH

a small wooden box.

sky reliquary.

the long horizon line. littered with gold.

trackless animals. limp across the arroyo.

*

a clotted moon.

cellophane night. meteor crinkled.

*

broken bottles. empty cans. long lands.

where landscapes. breach the skies. or silos.

roadsides. cleave houses. where the porches are. are sprinklers. and summers.

broken bottles. on lawns. shatter sunlight.

*

the planetarium's roof. blew off in the war.

now the zoo. cages strewn with stars.

FIRE

Crumple.

Oranges

seek edges.

OCTOBER

A barbershop
abuts the road.
Buildings low
against the flattened sky.
There is gray
in the shops, and the buildings,
and the concrete.
Cracks snap the sidewalk,
suckling soft shoots and scree.
Everything crunches.
Bare streets alight with stones.
Pebbles chatter, scatter winds.
Brief breezes, really.
In that slight, rapturous cold,
teeth bite each other,
flee the warmer tongue.
Long fingers leave the earth
where the garden is,
to change the brightening air.
Across the purple evening,
some stars sting the vast round sky,
and hang transfixed.
Then, softer than before,
are replaced as the planisphere revolves.
Autumn nights do not lengthen.
There is no winter, or summer.
I am the fading days.
I am the wilting bloom,
the last chrysanthemum.

I am the darkness breath,
faint as all the visible.

SATURN

I am the cedars crushed to silk,
the drapes that cluster and drool like milk,
the rotting mirrors hung with gauze,
the manor where you briefly pause
to describe the garden huddled there,
a labyrinth of sky its weight to bear.

The pillars streaked with ruin and mist.
The luminous temple's stony fist.

URNS

I am the urn. I am the canopic jar. I am the tongue's rough coin.

And vessels lie empty in corners, in soil.

The wells of dirt flow unimpeded underground

UNDERWATER

It's the day after yesterday,

The stars are in their rows.

Icebergs die of cold:

The hand knows. The mouth knows.

FINGERTIPS

Fingertips
chase the hand.

In the steppes,
dreaming particles stir,

and the hand
beneath the fluttering face.

Fingertips
climb the trellises of night.

Wisteria blossoms on the windowsill
remind you that the stars are close,

and contain the resting,
beating heart.

WILDLIFE PRESERVES

Fever dream of seasons I deny you.

Heat from off the trees,
the grass like water.

Still no motion in the sky
where the omnipotent clouds hesitate,
trembling mountaintops

covered in the fever-hair of rainforest
like the explorer's shed body,
abandoned forever to the animals.

Step up, mistress,
I know what you want.
This cloud cover can't arrive soon enough.

THE COELACANTH

The coelacanth is lonely,
its friends are in their graves.
Perhaps this is the reason
it lives upside down in caves.

APHORISM

Our bodies consist of cells, skin, and bone,
But what we think is a mortgage is really a loan.

PALMS

Trees grow from night's ribcage,
unshaping the dark.

Canyons:
petrified echoes.

Highways strung up blinking:
night's slinking backbone.

Electrical skylines
regurgitate the crucified star.

SUN, MOUTHFUL

Sun, mouthful, burns.

Spit rises like grass

From an ashen field.

Fires speak themselves out.

SECRET CARTOGRAPHIES

Enraptured by the deep

psalms and scree.

Wounds open inside arteries.

Bleed and do not notice.

Sharp spires have enhanced the dawn

where towers rise and fall.

Crenellations disturb the perpendicular.

Automata whirl and disappear.

IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN, BABY

Africa, my eye.

No one has been there.

Giraffes a fiction.

Savannas too.

All safaris are inward.

Serengeti scorches my desire,

Sahara mounds my breath;

Adam and Eve have been there,

and Abel, and Cain, and Seth.

How you took her head in your hands.

How you mounted her in her sleep.

SCINTILLANT

In the wintertime
when frost is at its height
mountains bloom
scurry away on the sun.

Satellites
blur the spaces
between stars.

UPON A GRAVE

If we had one minute more
We would not scream and pound the door
But enter of our own decree,
In gentle faith and mimicry
Of what our hands have always sought;
But never knowing when our lot
Shall slit the earthen door a crack,
We turn and fall in on our back.

HEAVEN

Heaven
inoculates itself

against what
is already

HEARTHREAD

Left dark,
and thrown.

The candle-mouth spreads
metal, tinfoil teeth
retract solace.

You cannot care
for you,
you neither in-
to or from
the between-board space.

*

Places bend to will,
branches stand-cling in furnaces,
digging for ash.

Spend me, she says,
element in shadow
where thrust-up embers strike.

Veins stick the arm.
Walks through the urnfield
arterial, venal.

*

Empties puncture the hearththread,
burning itself into beats.

Pulsing, fire climbs the flue
into the fevered, viral sinus.

*

Bed encrusted,
the license-flight wearies.
Her whitish face
lips the swimming pool
emptied of time.

Saturn turns unheard.
Cheap telescopes
red the imperiling stars.
The hole heart empties.

*

Blink, bleed,
what's the difference.
A cylindrical aptitude extends
leaf into chatter.

*

Brimming eye.

Elegance, emergent,
strips the pool.
And a thousand things
rise out of oil,
shimmering.

Overflowing glance.

Rips tide: the arm,
the tabulating elbow.

Skies bend, towers bend, sand clenches and strips.

Leap
led
downward.

Hairs part
and echo.

Reaches and fails, shimmering.

As the eyebrow contains
the dampening
upward-clenching
eye-branch.

*

Spent skyward, the wreath encircles thorns.
Can't tell,
can't speak,
neverending birds.

Spent shrieks
cancel each other out.

*

In the valley strung with electrical wires
reddish balloons blare out round
on spindles for airplanes.

Threading breath, turning suns
a-
way.

Flying too low again, the gall.
Blackbirds scatter over empty freeway.

*

Im-
talent thrown north
the shape of moss
on a roundstone.
Twill and acre respond,
blinding the may-
action.

Pressed between glass,
the never-ware.

*

Threadbare, weak,
darning. The needle
speaks and punctures
the almost-wound,
the temporary heart.

*

Sprinklershards spark the asphalt,
layering mica over mica.
Leapt into armlengths, wavelengths.

Walls planted, sprout arms.
Weeds spy on empty lots.

*

Homes,
unopposed.

Heavy air
rolls up summer,
furnaces jet waver.

*

Fire, rootless, explains.
The hanging eyeball
translucent, red:
corolla.

*

Emperils, empearls.

Diamonds are made in flesh.
World's oyster snaps shut into sand.

*

Sunset is coming.
You do not need to explain the dark.

STRANGE WASTELANDS

Strange wastelands
black with sea creatures
climb out of black ice.

Windmills creep over pack ice,
throttling the falling moon.

An absence claims itself.

*

Justice, in its temerity,
slides down windows
as the glass does.

Thicker at the bottom
like the night.

Stairs climb themselves.

*

Escalators star and draw
nearness out of echo.
A bursting night

Claims fortune is missing.
But fortune is not missing.

She has opened up her hands into him.

*

Emily found fingers in the open palm.
Palm trees burn open.
Alight on a baked desert.

His bald head itches with stubble.
Scraping fingernails bite the face.

Climb up into the ear-horizon.

*

This thumb
blasted and incoherent
presses on a vivid pulse.

Upon the pallid table,
a floral tablecloth.

Ornamental and frayed.

*

Over the rapids

he strings a cobwebbed bridge.

Stuck with black steel thorns.

Incredibly, no one thought to name
the arch.

Stainless steel swarming the sky.

*

Timid, or forewarned.

Tiny insects flee from rain.

Great puddles destroy homes.

Sliding off hills,
the unconcerned weight of earth.

Unconsoled, cars wait in lightless garages.

*

Giddy, she mounts those fingers.

Insides the color of wine

are not wine.

Slick engines muffled by blankets.

Sea creatures emerge from dark holes.

You cannot escape.

NORTH DAKOTA

Fills with dark ice.
It is difficult to see
what the eye covers up.

Wait for it.
Giraffe moon
caught on low telephone wires.

Into the shadows
a silo is tiptoeing.
There are gods in the earth.

Waiting for a sign to reappear.
Hay bales roll on and on
in one direction.

Grilles to the wind,
old Cadillacs
shed paint and grow.

Bulbous fins.
An air
sputters, and stops.

You can never really know
which direction
train tracks go.

HANDSEAM

Backward-wind draws my path, uncertain.

A turn to what we have become

returns,

hollow.

Emptyer even than the string

drawn out between two parting hands.

Moons sing lullabies to loosening planets.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF ARRIVAL

Gardens grow near water towers
green against gray.
Together, and apart.

Near the churches are roads.

*

Long white fences and
long white fences
shuttered against the breeze.

In the grass, long fingers wave
as if they were the wind.

*

Ground,
and trees,
a smoldering fire.

Autumn trails its fingertips down my arm.
I can feel the long bone beneath.

*

Trees flee fire
and the sky full of rain.

Nothing burning. Nothing wet.
At least, not yet.

THE COMPASS, THE CLOCK

Driving home,
I remember the beautiful wooden table.

Heavy rocks
sink into the soil.

Veins
sink into my hand.

Her finger on his lips
slippers the words in a hushed mouth.

The night sky
desert's brilliant colander.

The radiator knocks.
Heat wants to get out.

The sea breaks against islands,
imagines itself climbing mountains.

Summer.
The picnic table crosses its legs.

A system of crabs
speaks against the beach.

There is a certain madness
in the opening of a window.

IMITATION AFTER DU FU

Man red in tooth and claw
batters strange customs.

We live crushed between walls
concrete's etched valleys

wandering sidewalks
picked apart by weeds

scratched at by dogs
laying shit like fruit at their feet.

ELEGY AFTER RILKE

In Africa, men are buried in the desert beneath round clay pots;
how cautious Death must be as it steps among them.
There is power in the body, and immensity.
We press ourselves into the ground like old gods,
like words,
seeds broken up for bread.

If only there were some human place we might remain.
But our hearts exceed us, and our crocodile bodies creep up onto the bank,
gazing with furrowed eyes into the land
where, measured more gently,
the work of human hands finds no greater repose.

SWIM

Deep sound
of desire.

Think how radiant it is,
the storm drain
after a storm.

*

Soundless
and vibrant
the beach
undresses waves.

The encircled ankle
leaks foam:
porous,
whitewashed,
abandoned.

Sand wrestles a crab out of its tracks.

*

There are no homes here,
at the edge.

Under the palm trees
stripped by that lath, air,
bodies start and stop.

What are they making,
those turtles dug into the beach,
laying round white eggs
like suns in the sand?

BURN

Wanton wasteland of stricken pine
needles, deciduous, undecided.

Sticks, spires, a pointing jumble
toward the vast distance of aeroplanes.
Guidelines sway and respire
in towering wind.

Beneath,
mantle's swimming cradle of flame
sings land's lullaby.

*

Cable cars dangle,
roofs shingle. Everything,
even words,
precipitously.

Especially words,
unbuckling themselves flickering from the tongue
where spit is no longer enough
to put them out.

*

Moses in the bushes
couldn't feel himself burning.
All that water, and the vast tongues of hippopotami.

The feverish bush, the sunken rushes, the stone he struck with his own two hands.
A cliff, a sight blows him out.

STEP

Stone builds and unburdens itself,
a great weight lifted from those great shoulders,
dunes.

WALLS

Stand up straight.

Lie down.

Not the wind,

but concrete's compulsion,

the terrible spaces

we walked on air.

BONE

Do they rattle around inside,
the dark?

Is the night so vociferous
it shakes the seas
and dark creatures fall out?

They float there, teeth upward
pointed toward what falls.

*

The bones are smooth
and nerves above them like a knife.
One knife crossing one knife.
There is only one knife.

*

She fit into her bones
like a comfortable suit.
Everything inside her skeleton:
her brain, her heart there already, waiting.
She got a job as a fashion model
and still wasn't thin enough
so she broke herself over a train track
and under a train
and rose up at both ends like a penny
into the shape of a manta ray.

SLEEP

In attics where old chairs molder,
gently ghost-rocked to sleep
by rain's sombrous lullaby,
her arms, fat as stoves, reach.
Her fingers plump smoke.

*

Eyelashes flicker
like fire.

The pupil
a stone
dropped into the eye's pool.
Those ripples are your eyelashes.

And the closing eyelid
sleep's mortar and pestle.

*

The death-word is a thousand syllables
and never ends. The dead speak
but cannot stutter past the first syllable.

Every word is a poem,
and every poem as many poems as contain it.

What translates them is impossible.
What's impossible is all this.