Satisfying the Chemicals

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by
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ezra Dan Feldman was born in Boston, MA, in 1980 and received his A.B. in English from Harvard in 2002. In 2007 he won the Corson-Browning Poetry Prize at Cornell.
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Satisfying the Chemicals

Hail. A flash like God’s broken glass—
you’ve seen storefronts shatter
at a blow.

But white ice rolling’s no toll.
Not all pieces make a whole.
CHOCK THEOLOGY
FIRST ROUND

In the tunnel, muttering, hears them
—clenching their fists and spitting, cutting letters and laws
and lying, and reaching back for authority
to the ancestors’ books. He’s been close to God. He’s not its contender.
He’s mine.

Enter his backers and cornermen,
the pewful of people who’ll cheerily urge him in—
with two, perhaps, who would drag him
before the beis-din. He’s slowspoke
though nobody’s dummy
godselflessly confused as fuck.

Easy experiments madden him, cooked up numbers:
you eat treif hotdogs in retribution
for a Rangers playoff loss, the gloves come off.
But he likes Christmas carols and catalogs,
parents on the other coast; no grandkids
make him guilt. Pro-apostasy, his world’s
a happy clam.

Yes, he’s gotten out of the old chicken coop
with his head on his shoulders.
Says, “I know one ancient language, and I milk it
for all it’s worth” or “I’m no nimbler than a centrist politician, straddling
the American divide
and getting his balls chewed off.”

If you save him, God, what
should he love in you?

There weren’t any chains or weights. What he escaped
you can talk about over coffee:

Heavens! Lend your ears and I will speak, and the Earth
will hear what I say—the words of Ezra ben Rephael:
ELOHIM SPEAKS AN AVALANCHE

Beloved, you do tread daintily; you know the sensitivity of ice and stone in winter, you know the force of all our inanimate affection, snow-pent and pining, awaiting the slightest misstep.

But detect the tickle of our steamy breath and tremble at the live speech from the vent—

beneath your ankle about your calf across your glacial thigh,

thenquiverwriggleshuddershakejitterstutterstumbleinthecloud

Come on—Cry out, lost in your idolatries: for the caresses you drew with your youth to your blackout skin, your blizzard skin, your skin we knew only by touch in the night before we had divided darkness and light.

Shout or whimper and we will rush down to embrace you from our chilly citadel, will settle you beneath our dense cold plague.

Fire the gun, slam the gong, ring the bell, invite us wholly, death-bright, in a shroud to block the sun,—our roar of fear and desire so equally mixed you will hardly believe we are god.
PRINCIPLE

My God: you say
I will not change your direction

if I observe you—
you are

everywhere—
and not your velocity

because already
you have entirely ceased

to move.

My experiments do not confirm
these peculiar claims.
COVENANT OF GRACE

—If you save me, God, what should I love in you?
—With your heart: all; with your spirit: all; with all your wherewithal.

Dig me for overlooking your first flaw, not being me; and your second flaw, insisting to be. Your third flaw was resembling me only in half, and that, too, I pardon. I forgive your temporality, for which inconstancy is a shimmering synonym; and your next shortcoming, corporeality.

Do anything. Speak anything. Your hands and tongue I have utterly blessed, have wound tight, have wounded and unwounded. What harm can come of your tiny incapable hands? I permit you to use them.
COVENANT OF WORKS

— *What harm can come of your tiny incapable hands? I permit you to use them.*

Twice as fierce, my divinity,
if you’d blessed me with claws,
an antagonist ten times as brash.

Soft-handed
   as I am, foot-
short, foolish in your house,
      will you
not wrestle with me?

I never do drag loose the bindings
when we tumble each other—
we settle
   eventually down—
limbs tangled, joints
frozen in.

Why muddy my mouth
   if I tackle your arguments—
you made bees great cultivators, ants scavengers
of dauntless and superhuman strength,
bowerbirds architects
to admire—

if I make
   or hoist
an objectionable flag, why merely
meddle my pen?
      God grace me, God take me
to the mat.
Is my name secret? Have I hid it all
too well? You only need to cry to me
with bare and splintered feet—then I will spare
your captain, helmsman, boatswain, and the yawl.
Each frantic sailor, knee to deck,
bails curse-quick water as lightning scars
the flimsy mast and staggered hull and spars;
each stammers misdirected prayers, tongue thick.
For them, my prophet, will you not pronounce
the syllables that check the ocean’s power?
Acknowledge me, my messenger, just once;
delay your flight and teach me for an hour.
Ah—you slip between my fingers, swim away
amid my loyal thunderbolts, my spray.
Cry, cry, the turning weather.
I sleep before long windows,
    guest of successes, supplicant
to myself. Raindrops freeze
    and melt again on their long
journey down the blurring glass,
    unsteady as my hand.

Tears never garble the words
    I sing along, welcoming angels, but after
we fall silent and my father
    sanctifies the Shabbat,
I miss you, who weren’t born a Jew:
    too foreign to the ritual,
though you matched us taking
    apart the story of our Exodus;
we are welcoming you
    as a stranger.
When you aren’t here
    no one beside me believes
you belong at my side.

Hasn’t my father
    already blessed me, how
can there be so much left to do?
    The thought runs down my spine
with a drop of wine from the lip
    of the designated cup.
The blessing done, I kiss
    each sweetened sip.

Never, I know, will we always
    do this ritual, together in law.
We will live in our own
    sacred togetherness.
    I must grow accustomed.
We must transmit
    the tremors of our adoring to the city walls
until my father’s books
    leap down from their shelves.
DEMETER WITHOUT PERSEPHONE

Whose mating is next to dismay?
With empty hands I have butchered
and razed the plain, with a will
dismantled affection’s nest.

With a mighty sneeze

—a terror of the soul—

in such a breath the universe was born.

    Chase the mother bird:
    murder the rest.
    Shrivell each leaf
    and nude the tree and cast
    no cushiony snow
    on bosomy ground.

Each falling sparrow chick I chucked
away. I battered every frigid, faulted flight.
What touch, what breath of contact, could there be?

    Everything has failed to catch,
    but I’m not unchanged.
    I subject this experiment to weather.

Lo, I am wind departing,
self-wishing away.
SCHEMATIC OF PROCREATION

Lo tov heyot ha’adam l’vado

Who made me
interested in tangles of wires
in tangles
of bodies and their parts

and the physical properties of elements?
Who compounded for me the twists
of industrial cable and the silver
maple’s bark?

I am stopping
the momentum
that leads me home.

Look, a tall dead tree:

if I photograph the gap
where the trunk parts,
I tell myself I am not
excessively lonely.
I am not kin to this split.

To change the topic: my thigh
a bundle of bruised muscle
under construction,
still functional enough
to keep me up.

Jacob, let me loosen your wounded leg,
which a stranger gave to you.
Let me change your name.
Anyway when you are dead
the fibers will spread.

Joseph, I re-dream our brothers,
scattering sheaves.

Na—please—father of my fathers,
set your hand where I am injured.
I swear I will take a companion:
a woman who breathes.
JOIE DE COMBAT

Sent fish,
with your silver skin and glimmer
in the eye,

I pulled
straight for your gapejaw—

begged you
begged you bite

—craving the bruise, craving
the physical mark
for the maladroit

flight—

No mark on the forehead
made you wait.

No possible grip

or grapple appears.
Here’s no limb to lock.

Scourge of me, see, I strike
to the hard cold bone,
knowing no struggle will ensue.

Unwhisper to me what you’ll whisper, undo
what you do.
LECTIO DIFFICILIOR

I am waiting for a difference in the stones
to grow me a worshipful people.
Though this is a part of the lecture, I set down my notes.

This god in the desert of Sinai speaks intelligibly:
My sadness is older than mountains, still
I am waiting for a difference in the stones.

In my testaments time occurs once only:
What follows elaborates the law,
which is the part of the lecture I have set down in notes.

That anyone can imagine milk is a mystery.
Even I feel the coils of the desert tightening
as I wait for a difference in the stones.

The child fathers the man, but the man
kills him minute by hour, breath after breath,
until I reach his part of the lecture and set down my notes.

I leave my threnody descending, put down
slow progress to come to care what pairs can do.
I am waiting for a difference in the stones.
This is your part of the lecture. I set down my notes.
EPITHALAMIUM [I]

Zipporah to Moses

Have your brothers not seen me before? Remember, I was black before you burnt me—thunder-dark, sun-dark, dark-in-the-eye and more brilliant than any godly light. I drew you to the desert well, turned fugitive hero, made you home.

But you take me from the house of my father, priest to a people whose god got them wells. Bandits hound us. Children crawl out of our tents, confound us, unfound.

Will you yet make me the great Jewess, the zealot who guards your stark law? The snake has you half in his hold, started at your head, and gape-jawed engulfed you: neck, shoulder, breast, belly, loin.

As soon as it disgorges you, before it begins again from the toe, tell me—husband, prophet—your God can do good—

No. No!—You’re weakened, do not speak.

Oh, papa! Take me back again, my man’s grown scales.

I draw him near, draw blood, rub blackness from my face. This holiness glows with fear—

O foreign God, you say the fault is in our little worm of a babe; O Moses, lie there useless: The accuser sees me take up the stone, circumcise our perfect son—
he wails so
simple,
so flawed in his folds—

It revives you, son of Amram? Back,
back, my doubleheart; beloved,
you’ll burn me with God.

She’ll dance you on the mount
—in the cleft She delights your senses
with the sleight of Her back—

Her sweet Voice!—
honey-country She holds out—

I don’t dare
reexamine
your taste.

Come to me when I’m cave blind, in a fire,
I desire to transmit your name.
I will still be she, if you will be what
you should be—
I am for my beloved, my beloved for me.

Moses to Zipporah

It was an accident when I flamed your face. You know the smell of that hellbush hasn’t left me, and my mouth tastes of coal. The symptoms spread, burst back from my eyes, migrate down along my red red nerves: Holy, holy, holy, the Lady of Hosts, the Purveyor of Plague, King of the Ill, Master of Famine and Drought; the waters, like the locusts, are under Her sway. Since the day I took off my shoes I’ve been inhabited, had a holy fold in my brain, a painful worm, now even my bony fingers are aflame. When I touch your skin beneath me, it blisters and curls—Zipporah, Zipporah, Zipporah, God swallows me whole.
EPITHALAMIUM [II]

_Zimri ben Salu demands a blessing_

Pronounce it!—Or in the house of the priest  
of the Midianites, do you secretly  
shun the bird-woman, shun  
the children of her thighs?  
Coming home do you greet  
just the father?

   “Good evening, Dad. I hear  
   God left you a message  
   with a roadmap to democracy? Just kidding.  
   But reorganizing the bureaucracy?  
   You sure have that management magic:  
   The Man Upstairs is a fan.  
   How come He’s always so hard  
   for me to get along with?  
   What kind of jealous god  
   gets mad at man-and-wife?”

But pater of the people, don’t stick me  
with your namefulness. We’re as different  
as hail from flake.

_Moses to Zimri_

    Did your father tie you atop a woodpile in a dangerous grove? Did he curse you  
blindly, as only a father knows how? You may hunt his idols in crannies—attics, wall-  
spaces, caves—but the odor of misdeeds clings to your sleek sleek skin. When you turn  
them up, what will you worship? You swarm among the nations like there is no outside  
anymore, but I’ll die a stranger on a porous border, a blocked packet, a protein stranded  
outside the cell. I wouldn’t speak Her name where you could hear.
Cozbi bat Tzur to Zimri

Into the teeth of God you bought me—
into the fist of this plague. It’s not serpents or thirst,
not slavery, not sickness, not one
of the poxes God wrought last week on the Nile
or the fifty from yesterday by the Reedy Sea.
The full tent of meeting forebodes: Forgive
you: I know I am it. What hundred
of your tattered tribe have you gathered here?
They hang on step siblings and second
marriages, black sheep and speckled ones,
a history cobbled together
out of fragmentary scrolls, dry
inveterate leather, unvenerable words.

My swan song is God-speech I know
your kin recognize—when you wrap
yourself in the prayer-strap, you strike out again.
You wed your God, he takes
you up the mountain, he tests you ten times.
Will you kill your son?
Will you slice him in the loin?

Know this kiss
is the last gasp you get if you ask
How do I tell one Midianite
from another? Unchain me from my sisters
and previous lovers, my
mothers from the desert past your camp.
I dream your dream of dying by the spear.
How pure to be punished for loving, for taking
me in. You cook for the angel,
and laugh at him. Good,
call Phinehas up when you’ve got me in the sack.
Hold me from behind, hide my breasts
with my hair; and may the blow
shake the tabernacle walls.
EPITHALAMIUM [III]

Rahab

How perfectly Jericho puns
on your word for thigh. Come
in here—the walls
are ready to receive you.
How suitably my name
sounds wide-open to your visit,
Rahab open like a road, like this city’s
panicked twitch. Now how
does my enemy offer me
my house? In Jericho
echo of moon, the sound
of months-long siege.
Let me tremble before you
strike me. Let me to my knees
to plead me, let me feed
you, a hospitable whore.

Dismay me, flay me—
say to me I’m nothing
but a black mark in the lucky sky
of your white, white thigh—
I foresee
each theft you perform.
I know—a traitor depends on trust,
on double fear, on a louse.

I tie destruction up in scarlet
thread, and hang it from the window.
I won’t keep
your possibilities from you.
CHOCK THEOLOGY

Dear body, dear brute,
of whose chief virtues only gods should speak,
will you bring me close to the scrumple
of the tumbling Greyhound,
gone three times over off the icy road?
You're tossed about, you're shaken
cap to shoes; you have, you hold, you know
your purplest bruise.

Will there be an apocalypse?
Probably never; I have taken a tower down and heard
no sense in the screams; I have thrown
the whole world over save one measly man.
Daily I conjure the torrent,
daily the destructive blow—I hear you yowl,
I don't know half your woe.

Body, baby, will you breathe for me
the sweet dank breath of a cannibal?
Bring it where I'm banished
from your calamities, banished before you were born—
I crave your beat flesh and the splinters of bone
where my hailstones overturned the plain.

I strove to knot myself
into material, to make myself groan
your groan. Too strong, I keep on.

If I forswear disaster, if I promise you not
to intervene—
include me in your wracking grief, your sand-blown ache.
Burden me, burden me I beg—
my insides astir, convulsant, gnaw
nothing at all. Acrid and isolate,
holy, they pucker this tongue.
BUT THINK US ON
PORTRAIT AT C

Hanging on the world
of a distant someone

brief happy vague:

shaped yesterday like the syntax
of a telegram;

today like the digital grammar
of instantaneous text;

next She will whittle down
communication
to punctuation;

an exclamatory pop
modulates Her declaration,

will sizzle every instrument
of detection

and shoot
like a sinuous dragon
to the limits of

Engulfing each
and every lexicon, electric
zing.
LETTER

Thank you for calling
me your sweet pea,
my honey, my pumpkin, my pie—
for making me a legume,
cabbage dear, my broccoli,
my dim sum, my doll.

For there’s nothing not to love
in a dovey name,
my parakeet,
my little chickadee.
It’s an ornament, my daffodil,
my rose petal.
Let me be
your root beer float.
Be my banana split,
my plover, my pup, my love-
bug, honeybee.

Later, my laurel tree, you
can be my shopping list,
my boy to be kissed. I’ll be
your handy man, and you
can be my tomboy, my fuck
toy, my trilobite, my fossil, my friend.

You’re off in the hills
motionless, snowed in.
Love, you are inaccessible
as a serpent: my acrobat,
my gem.
DARK LANDING

My lovely, lay
your saddest sweet
upon my chocolate knee

your berried breath
and kingly hair
and foreign
and desolate lips

your fevered shoulder
and sleep-clenched fist—

    if you snored like a
    Messerschmitt—

I should smash
the furrows and drag
flat the field—

haul you under and unstrafe us,
ox-cut the sky.
INTERJECTION

Your bare shoulder on the bus, becoming the high ground—*Christ.*—it’s the stuff of madness, anyone would agree:

spectacular in cream, how the jacket has drifted and straps slacken: everything seen slopes to breast.

Entrenched,

how glad I am you’ve befriended another traveler.
These many lines may yet hold.
ELEMENTS OF A LOVER

Scattered like tall fireweed
on the roadside and deep
in the wilderness,
coherent in color,
your name like fire
in a language
yesterday didn’t know.

Your mixed aroma: books
and high places,
wildflowers, burnt spruce,
turned pages, and air
fiction has fumed.

Touch a split path reeling
in a strange friend’s forest,
don’t touch time, my tomorrow.
Travel and forget
how you escape.
ENORMITY

1. [BLACK SHOES IN A ROOM]

Imperative to be barefoot
after a stockinged toe to the arm
on the arm of the vastest of chairs.

Shoes shoved under the table,
champagne, cheese.

2. [BLACK SHOES IN A BAG]

How not to be sentimental:
recalibrate, reheat, return to owner, remove
all vestige of sheen—a patent prediction.

Enormity, obeisance overpaid:
So doctor the ledger.
SONG FOR AN ABSTRACT DARLING

Born, as she was, at twenty-one,
Without lineage or language

1.
Murmured without regard to the shape of the ear
or the color of the hair which may
or may not be concealing it,
“Darling” is not a substitute.
I still don’t know your name.

2.
Amorous, amorphous as you are, I would never
let you slip from my grasp
if I could once pin you down.

Let’s wrestle in the galleries of the Louvre
or some smoky Roman alleyway,
where our moves are obscured.

Whatever field you lie in,
you must feel how much the grass
loves the warmth of your hand.

3.
My darling, what if you aren’t
darling at all, but simpering, even
naïve?

Reports reach me from Darjeeling
your footprints have changed,
though the postmark was probably fake.

I believe your dress
hangs elegantly on your exquisite torso.

Darling, your earring
matters more than anything
definite and alive.
4. The idea of an Oreo tastes nothing like a cookie at all. But you, my darling, are delicious.

5. Drlng, thank u 4 nvr 1ce leavng hair in my snk. Do u hv a sister? & is she abstract 2?

6. Are your thoughts as scattered as the fractured beams that your eyes project, and that also hold the roof up?

7. Darlene, baby, I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name.

If at last you appear I will believe in ghosts again.

8. Of the thousand voices that coo to me when my eyes are closed in bed I hope some are yours.

Only with you have I discovered: love is a pang no pasted word can touch.
THE PHILOGYNIST ATTEMPTS A SELF-REBUKE

You with your artless arm
I exempt from my misanthropies.

You with your freckles and a man’s shirt, you
with your elegant—arm.

Too thin! Too thin! I know all the structure
from your taut gray skin—

—can see your tendons
when you flex your fingers
picking up a pen.

Will you? Will you eagerly eke
my advances?

Will you outdo my done—?
I once felt not the slightest twitch
although you beloveded my chin.

Turn, stand, face: the fruit of it
belated us.

—but roll your sleeve up
above your languid limb—
let’s brawn us
till the know-not-what comes in.

Minute upon minute
follows on.
We boombox into amory.
DAYDREAMS OF M AMONG BOOKS

1. Lying in wait for a thought, I want you to come back to say hello. Crave you, I crave.

2. There’s something awkward about my hands in my pockets when sitting down.

3. One folly is eating. Builds one’s appetite. What made me realize just now I’ve forgotten to shave?

4. The answer is anyone so engrossed in her book she couldn’t imagine me taking notice.

5. Talked to you with my hands (no one listened in). Studious now, if I grow weak-kneed later, I’ll let you know.

6. They were glittering eyes that held me. The last word I licked across her belly began a letter to you.

7. I honestly admire her twisted heart necklace; but love your sacred-pink sneaks.
I ask myself again whose dreams I am dreaming.
   They aren’t customary—
so full of regret.

Dream: I awake with a postcard in my hand
from a person who doesn’t exist.

Dream: The overpass runs right through my heart.

Through your new shirt you
are the same you. I expected
to steer you newly under my hands.

   When I grow numb—
   When I go blind—

I don’t know whom I will recognize.

To absolve my footfall dreams, I would fly
down the aisle on crutches
or meet you on two wooden legs.

Clatter after clatter: I’ll miss what I feel.
NOTE TO SELF

Lean into it—not the kiss
—hungry as tulips, a blaze—
or the kiss-hungry self
—I being reckless, playing
a mere-deep game—

but the burn in the furnace—
the crack where inside-fire
—and outside-fire—
speak tongue to tongue
and wash and tilt
a toppling conflagration
—and the pronoun—
caught mid-leap—
halfway across the chasm
of the plural—

dancing—lean into it:
We.
Into the smoke like innocents,
flashing our hazards.
We don’t know scree
or flame
or northern dogs,

we’ve just learned mud,
can’t fish, can’t hardly
get along.

The sun goes in circles, no moon.
We slow to a crawl, to cure
in the burning spruce.
INTO THREE DIMENSIONS

For words I looked
to your anatomy
wanting to name your surfaces
for the colors, the pleasures they wore:
   red succulence;
   yellow shuck;
   brown bristle, thicket, eye.
I took inches of you for acres.

Now I want to learn the names of birds
cubing our long sight-lines, lifting them high.
Such simple ones, robin and starling,
I never knew before:
   red breast;
   yellow beak;
fine branches rerouting the sky.
We’re moving again, the limbs
sign to each other, deaf
as flint but more
articulate. Nor are they
as unfeeling as shale
which will turn under a foot,
grumble among gravel,
will clatter out unmeaning
when it falls.

The limb not only looks livelier,
pinker or browner than amethyst;
it has its counter-systems
to crystallization; it bursts forth vital
against a prod. Touch a limb
and by God it touches you back
electrically; you’ll feel it
moving in itself, ten billion times
faster than a continental shelf.

The earth’s magnetics move brains
as well as stones, they know
not how; but limbs’ loves
draw each other close
portraits, and chart and diagram
internally each moving part.
There’s not a live limb yet
that doesn’t take hurt
to heart, transmit silent sense.
An electron is a lepton
not a leprechaun. What’s it like,
this invisible spin?

A tiny man dancing
in the golden hollow, under
your golden hair, or

the tilt of a room,
under the magnetic haul
of amber liquor,

the lurch of a satellite
at its yearly apogee,
this mothering tug of a sun.

My belly, like the molten core,
heaves after you. How
do you hook so tight,

apply your torque
so smoothly, confuse
my compass, leave nothing

gyroscopic intact?
You turn to do the dishes,
the kitchen wobbles,

the planet’s axis shifts. The traction
draws my knobby
spine askew.

It’s irresistible gravity.
Infinite range. Not the strong force
at all. A motive. A strain.
When I think you I find me
ropy and torn
weary as an angel on a Friday eve
at the last few hours of creation.

Not, love, that I haul you from my imaginings
in your hundreds of forms;
Not: I’ve labored much for an ambitious god;
Not: I’ve polished his works—

I’m cracking like a bullwhip in your sacred hand,
your grip on my ankle-soon-to-snap—

head accelerating I wave and fall, fingers
frayed and racing at the nails
arms in fury arcing to the substrate.

What chaff will you raise and banish
when I crash into stillness
—that you wield me this way?

Will I take the pandemonium to task? Make mayhem
of the Sabbath as it comes?

Hear me—Hear me now!—through barriers of sound.
As I lash the aweless clouds,

I think us on.
FIERY BABY, TOUCH ME AGAIN

1.
Fiery baby, touch me again,
climb on, I’ll lift
us both into the blood.

— for your white-hot forgiveness;

— for the quickbruise
   in the tissue
   that contracts;

— for the contracts
   we compact and contend;

Tenderly, tenderly, write down
our name again—
for the contact of tongue and pen—
the mark on my skin—

2.
We threw off the universe,
we miss it. We can only
burrow so far—

hunt silver nerves and steel;
for so long unmesh their lattices—

before we begin to glint again,

   eye to tooth
   tooth to fire
   fire to eye.
SATISFYING THE CHEMICALS
FOUR O’CLOCK IN THE PARK  
[WITH HEADPHONES]

To my knees before the hop-scotch girls, court  
built of sticks in the park like witches’ bones;  
their guileless ditties and threads.

    Demand of wavering, wave-  
    offering, their screaming  
    belongs in my ear.

But if in a haze the sun made midnight  
silence of the scene? Black eyeburst  
blanking out sound?

    Dark Worship  
    Child Worship  
    Worship of What I Don’t Have

The unaddressable geslings skip  

    over the mark-  
    forbidden square,  
    the twisted limb,

the wizen, the wither, the knot of not-  

    being anything I could  
    plausibly pursue.

    Hello, exclaims  
    the visitor to himself:

I am bending to pick up the stone.
BODY, DEVICE

having transpired having fluids infused having fermented or implemented a thing

saying again not how not luring now lurid allure again again your your

more tide than naming more naming than tide

suppressing after elevating levity quashing levitation nulled

pictures snapped in a dim lit cylinder magnets smoothing surfaces system circulating stain

borrowed compounds compounding new flooded folds organ saturated like a knotted mop

not yet touched touching not yet stabilized contraction: concern
Not only imperfect apples, love—
rotten, rotting so suitably
bruised and brown and warm—

Not only worn out boots, unfruitable longings—how improbably got—
undernourished and unflowing I adore.

Signed, unsigned, a kink-limbed churchyard pine,
I stand before your nakedness:
it judges me unfit or fit.

Slender as matches,
we’re dead dry base to crown,
our fireheads ripe to ignite.

Then come, gray jay, great Obscurer, your faint voice berating the light—

I’m dead-stemmed, my skin in the trash—to seed your impeachable gore—

The clouds mouth, they grunder, they threat above hallowed mounds.

Escape is the awning of ailanthus—
where gather the very young, and the very old, legs locked beneath the weight their wisdoms impose.

It yawns so dark the Prosecutor stalks by day, damp arm across one’s shoulder, his transmissible limp.

SIGNAL, ENTENTE
NIGHT NOISE

_Ithaca, NY_

No screams. No one I know
gets fucked silly tonight
by the boy or girl with the top
crotch, top notch.
The moon is hazy. The cars swish by.
The crickets are MAD!
I am on my way to the bar
to pick up the bugs I left behind
in a small plastic jar.
   O crickets! Men—
I cannot undress you.
When the beer strips
me down, and Buffalo
rolls away beneath my feet
I sing myself silly.
I’m nothing but paint. I rattle
the steel as I cross the bridge,
I hear my breath, you hear
me singing with the crickets.
Bare the energy bravely—
The winter is far.
A PROGRESSION OF SCENTS

Woke up one day as a horse.  
Never suspected it.  
Didn’t know  
how to dream that fear.

It mattered that I missmelled  
horsey—hair, hay, leather,  
the long strands hanging  
stably on the wall: not quite  
my natural spice.

This near my nose  
brings me to another self:  
the very room, the barn  
a cozy bed, each scent  
its proper place,  
 but no vision.

My hand alights a moment  
on the stall door.  
The other side I’m pounding  
with my hoofs,  
such splintering sound.

I hear myself not waking  
from which dream.
The opposite of an escalator is a parachute.

—Escalators possess teeth but do not chew; belts but not buckles // trousers, garments of any kind. A parachute has strings.

—The course of an escalator fixes motion in space. Space unfixes the motion of a parachute.

—A parachute is silent.

parachute: Rabbi says a parachute will not open between the third floor and the first.

-a chute: is like an escalator up or down. An opposite opposes not necessarily.

-chute: A chute is like an escalator.

garments of any kind: are a danger on an escalator. In a parachute some garments are required. The harness of a parachute is not a handrail.

course: An up escalator goes down even if it goes down hiddenly.

- course: The down motion of an up escalator is necessary for nonangelic creatures. Cogs are interchangeable.

opposite: Rabbi says: the opposite of an escalator is a stair. silent: One can never discuss silence convincingly.

parachute: Rabbi says: a parachute is also a category of stair.

course: The down motion of an up escalator is necessary for nonangelic creatures. Cogs are interchangeable.
My God, the tongue slips,
I mean: my father
who is God of my humor

who got me to synagogue or didn’t,
who didn’t teach me to pray.

Aba, I’m addressing you
on the first day of the year.
The ram’s horn
didn’t reach me, but still

I hear you calling the notes
beside the bimah
with your back to me, and your eyes
in the mahzor.

At home, saying Kiddush
you look from face to face; you chant,
the melody subsumes the words

so I do listen— walking
with the long stride you taught me,
singing the nusach in your voice.

Let’s taste sweetly the return,
on the Shabbat before Yom Kippur,
and though I leave soon, leave

me your blessing:
that I find my lines in holiness,

that worship, that prayer.
SELF PORTRAIT WITH MY GRANDFATHER’S VOICE

Shrivellheart, why have you never acknowledged
that I was the father of your family
that I was sick in the very parts
that should have kept me well?
You were not born too late to know me,
you never comforted me. I see my legacy cut off
after a single iteration. I told them
to carry my body away when I had left it,
and not to look at me. I didn’t leave you
a thing you could touch and pretend to,
no headstone, no piece of the house,
not even my wife, who might have been my spine,
whose spine I was, who crumpled her words
out of language, loath syllables
cut loose in waves. Only photographs,
already out of reach as I lay in a hospital bed.

Zeidy, your short beard when you kissed me
and it scratched my face.
Zeidy, your fingers on the piano.
Zeidy, a game of chess. I never knew you were old
even when we misplaced the car at King’s Dominion
and wandered for it in the rain.
I was as lost as you, as afraid.
Zeidy, you are shadowing my sleep.
I am learning to recognize your face.
A good turkey dinner
with stuffing and cranberry sauce
garlic mashed potatoes
and a fine salad will make a new man
or woman of anyone.

Where I come from it’s normal.
My substance is in flux of food,
a nice cup of joe
can pluck the stars from the skies
to open your eyes; hard drink
will tie your innards in exquisite knots,
or love will—if it floods you from its secret
unpluggable spring.

You up here can have only the faintest
idea of magic, our mutability, what stuff
makes us really
kick around.

We aren’t all essence, hardly have
ideas at all—they move so fast from synapse
to simple forgetting.

Life is not like
a glass of tea

with sugar;
        honey, I am what I am.
When I pull my hood up
you make believe
I’m the Unabomber,
but I just watched Faust on film
so to my mind
I’m wrestling devils or playing
hide-and-seek with Mephisto: I see
the yellow sac-spider
set loose on my wall, but I haven’t
checked out yet.

Tomorrow it’ll be some other mask.
I’ll spy in The High Window,
will never be Marlowe, will investigate
the rooms behind the scene.
When Marguerite stops by my office
there’ll be no one in.

The key is creeping home
with my right hand
stiff from holding the umbrella
and too cold to type
my manifesto. I’ve learned
I can repel you
with a careful laugh.

When I withdraw to a cabin—
when I paint my solitude sour
and pose and grimace in the dark TV—
I swear I won’t send you any
letters.
SELF PORTRAIT IN A JEALOUS MOOD

These toes, this little toe, the minimus should be mine, but I am bones and fibers, water, bacteria, blood,
muscle and nerve incoherent as any machine: I scrape myself on the table, I trail myself on the floor, a spit in the sink—skid marks, new fenders, oil change, coolant replacement.

I am not in love with the galaxy, with any star that flung forth any part of me. I wasn’t a party to my making.

Nor am I made so much as cobbled— almost together. In for repair now, bandaged feeding sloughing material I might be.

Half the time I think I’m through a doorway there’s a shoulder left to bang against the jamb.
JAW-ACHE

This thing that will outlast me
though it comes unstuck from my gums
and lets go its dozens of prisoners—
  could it be parabolic?
What resonance is imp-plied,
aped, im-
    possible
  to receive?
[vibration, transmission, broad/cast]
— the lingering motions, eating
hearts from cages, livers from ribs—
radiometry remitting gain to pain.
There I am, almost aloft, back
in the land of idolaters and Jewish kings,
performing the neat trick
of not drowning.

It’s impressive enough to be mistaken for magic.
I’m on stilts, on stones. I’m so
emaciated I float.
It’s an illusion you’ll love
me for: millennia.

Fact: 1959, that’s me memorialized
in a Kansan wife’s little picture
up over the bed.
Fact: up there, on the cross,
that’s me with no illusions,
getting no laughs.
Dear fossil fish, I’m still enamored of flesh, I’ve hardly begun to consider what will happen when its condition declines.

My brothers and I are not collections of brittle twisted spines desert roasted where an ocean once unbrined. I won’t grapple with questions (Is there anything wrong with this?) while chilled air slips in and the mums on my table unhurriedly drink their fill.

We and everyone we know still have several inches to shrink before we come to the brink of not going anywhere anymore.

We don’t even have to think: we use our noses: there’s damp tobacco on our clothes, there’re butts on the stairs. Old pasta sauces cling to the sink.

Can’t I still escape the connection between getting where I want to go and leaving where I am? —if I continue to wriggle up river, I might sneak past the dam—
SELF PORTRAIT AS AN IMPOSTOR

I spy on starlings in the sod patch, built stockily to steal yellow from dandelions, green speckles from grass. Skittish from guilt, they fly when I approach them; when I raise the blinds in my window they vacate the frame.

But I’m no truer a blackbird under my fashionable spring-poached coat—

Come back! Celebrate with me: we’ll go on TV, parade our colorful beaks where no blushing shows—

Our thoughts can’t betray us with pinkness. Our feathers aren’t gray.
TO COVER GROUND

Strip me vein and nerve,
my body’s not too small
for an entire desert trail,
the texture of Utah.

I lie abed, traverse scapes the flesh
of my body has buried—lung slope,
the violence at the liver.

Dry-grind my innards
for pigments, and color
the land.

Dilute me; make me last.
IF

if

these birches, self-similar hairs
spell out the sequence, same
as shafts of punctuating light
in the paperwhite sky:

if

ink, o pen, long-armed
cross the lie of the land:

if

ice covering the ego,
footprint, epitaph, melt:

not I was here;
I am.

fi

the next ax next
to my body,
my worms at their task:

fi

unclaimed maggots
between generations
vibrate indistinguishably:

fi

larvae, livid, anti-
alphabetic,
mirror-writ code:

not I; not any
thing known.
SELF PORTRAIT WITH SUITCASES

Packed and ready to sail:
for Dallas a green bag,
for the empty house
in Richmond, old brown luggage, plastic, hard.
There’s a duffle for the Rockies,
a soft sack for a Greyhound anywhere,
a fancy rolling box for bounding continents
in the air—even a true trunk
for a steamship old fashioned and fair. Baby,
please don’t go.

Imagine the bags piling up
interminably on a quarantined dock.
I will never arrive to claim them,
and this is comforting to the customs
officials, who frankly are relieved
not to go digging for contraband
at the strictest of borders.
They shape the heap
into something they can lounge on
in the quiet hours between deaths.

My hands in my pockets,
I lean against the door.
What’s checked away is obvious
and dispensable. I’ll keep my wits about me,
won’t miss a thing.
OBJECTS IN THE GLASS
CONCEPTIONS

1. Not beauty. The unworking, which does the thread bare. That particular friction.

2. The magical rubbing that happens inside the garment. The wear of which one’s not aware.

3. Power Absolute. Unrelated to everything—her, it, untouchably ardent, or pure. Power not over, but in.

4. Charity with its own volition and inscrutable standard. We do not know need as it knows it: mystic aspect—ever-attended isolation.

5. Its double-gendered ending—a thing we’ve muddied and made good. The pear, the egg-sac, zygotic syzygy—compelling can’t convince.
COSMOLOGY OF A GRAPE

Cold weather aborts it easily. And plucked is it texture or taste? suspended or loose? full or beginning not to be?

The conditions of a raisin continge.

Let’s speak of the end of the universe, an old wine, supernova and skein, vital invitation through the body to vitiate well:

so strong, so small, so lovely, pungent impure.
One could be intrigued by anything, one perfect day.
One may love the voice that lazes over the wires, or stretches with lackadaisical infrequency over radio waves.
   It is not, as one thought once, indolent.
A trillion material bits, and 6.5 thousand million blips on the planet, a maze of twice as many prints just this instant among a galaxy of galaxies— not every dream needs these, although we exhaust scale after scale to breathe deeply of atom and star. To dream God, God must grow, commandments, like orders of magnitude, bursting their shells.
CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES

There is no conciliatory ritual.

Even the bottle’s not new,
there’s no company,
the music is canned, and

it’s no one’s birthday. No one
in particular died today

celebrating the Exodus
or substituting
sorrow for ichor, ichor

for wine. If there is
holiness
what’s the blessing on it?

A blessing that praises the rooster
that tells night from day.
SLENDER EVIDENCE

In the room, in the last resort
where no one asked after Her anymore—
She was slight as an early frost, promised
to linger no longer.

Who, who—in these latter days—
breathing out the old smoke
from the decades of pillars of fire—
who, angling to amble across the room,
in actuality shuffling, indecent approach—
who could manage this slim trim truth
to woo?

She skips like a slip of grand
daughter away,
like a scrawny dollar, gone in the wash.

O clutch—o hug—She,
but barely seen, is no more
a waking dream. Away
with her almost certainties. Let us remain
as unaffected
as frost by rain.
JANUARY STILL NO WINTER

Like waiting for a letter, the waiting
does no good. The thing has got precisely
out of hand.
But scale a pint and from there fall
through funnel, then through wait.

Snow may alarm you like the postman’s
tread on the porch
and make each dizzy sense
believe it has never been satisfied
this way, honed
and limpid,
alert to the least impingement
(to perceive at best:
to have one’s casement cracked)—

but if snow goes
and a new-frocked afternoon
gently knocks,
let it call you
unexpected lover.
Let it in: and let it
bring no gift.
DOG EARS

One more attempt
to punctuate the fiction
that punctuates everything
ever—

invading a corner
where two walls meet
implying

a short-haired girl
in a string
of long-haired girls

brushing themselves out of line

like a broken bone

in the contiguity
of the body

or a tiny whirlwind
tossing leaves in celebration

as though something
happened here.
Unhappy Banana, hanger-upside-down, mouth as sad and fine as anything once green and unripe, meet screaming Strawberry, flinging his seed. Morning after morning, unglamorous hug—How ugly are things in their true appearances? (There is raw straw in the field where the berry grew, which brushed him red and sucked sweetness, then lay down dry. Its texture is the street cleared of gravel by murderous trucks, of coarse hair by a wind both foul and fair.) By the eighth day you’ve eaten out all the sorrow you could find. You hunch—your spine’s bent beautifully over the table, you twitch to be touched—

till a cruddy grudge from one of the taut blue spheres atop the toasted grain in the tub ruptures the bruise on the browning peel, lets loose the mealy mush not much can be done to improve. A sputter in the hand: a clamor in the sink, shattered ceramic. The splattered milkwater dripping out the hour, out the drain through the crack in the pipe to the cabinet floor.

It is wishing everything damp; it is wishing each thing. We have said not only. We have said we promise, and promised; we promise not to. Just water won’t do for the deep bruise. No breakfast will break it away. As soon as we hope we will be satisfied, we’re satisfied, hurried, untrue. But unsatisfied, sad and fine—don’t know what to do.
THE GRAVEN IMAGES

We fray the plunging valve
then wake down from the strain.

Leach spit clamp—
from the last gurgle of a dream
words stand and lapse
like a wracked forest
or the tide done with whipping
at the rock.

KNEEL: *Your granite cock, my marble yen...*
MEDUSA: *Adore!*

Our cold sweats run dry.
  This ghostly banishment.
1.
The establishment that he frequented from sheer sympathy with failure was more of a dusty spoon, in the hold of which he scrawled a few characters in a Slavic tongue.

From behind these, his own half-recognized visage peeked, bent into and over itself in sincerest scrutiny.

‘My, what a lovely thing!’ cried Betty at the sight of it. The promptest compliment I ever saw accompanied the faintest gesture towards the object’s one flaw, a shadow behind the heart.

2.
She’s so young, after all, and so vague. Dear Professor, if it is any comfort, you were never like this. You have been old since you were an infant sucking your wrinkly fingers, older than I can count.

But you bow-bowed to that vaporous bride.

How could she become an object of jealousy when patently she was no object at all? She strove so to dissolve. She faded in another delightful embrace.

He was one she’d adored from afar before drifting into insanity—although the evening reports contraindicated any wind and omitted whether she wafted closer or further from her lover, whether he did anything at all to direct her pitch and yaw.
3.  
The professor finds refuge  
in a pencil sharpener—*that highly satisfying,  
highly philosophical implement.*  
He puts his angel to the test. Will it chew  
her tip-top gala up, or polish  
the dance floor on cue?—  
a Zamboni in the interval,  
among hors d’oeuvres *the colors of shadows.*  
(He never doubted these exist,  
though red and green might have been  
identical twins.)  

4.  
Next stop, *an ageless blond in aqua rayon,*  
a variety of bombshell which  
has been obsolete now for nearly three decades,  
but which certain experts argue  
may appreciate in value, as an antique.  

He calls her *the evil designer—destroyer of minds*—  
but she’s only his personal  
tormenter, with little invested in invading others’  
thoughts. Careful, Sir, she won’t get caught  
in your quagmire; she’s marshalling her forces  
for decisive assault: *What*  
*is your salary, Timofey?*  

Enough to continue alive on, if not to live. O  
*that bashful slynness of hers.* We can only say  
foxes such as she have no business feeling shame,  
or else that slynness  
doesn’t suit such simple chipmunks  
face in paw.  

5.  
*’Ping-pong, Pnin?’*  
Perhaps prematurely.  
Possibly a point per person. Please,  
permit presentation of pointillist paddle, panting  
participant, pugnacious pun. Play on,  
play, play permanently;  
prohibit palaver, persist.
6.
He doffs his hat. He offers withered, 
soundlessly clapping hands, so awfully theatrical—
that’s why she spurned them: flattery
must disguise itself more successfully than that.
The two hands yammered only as much
as one hand would,
though they’d promised more.
‘Would he please telephone for the taxi?’

7.
It was not a walk anyone was looking for, that ramble
through a virgin novel. Not even
the author had mapped it; we bushwhacked it; no authority
stamped our efforts or commanded we cease.

By the back cover we were pageworn, an hundred blades
had cut their ragged way across our fingertips
crisscrossing them in Cuneiform. An hundred
ghosts had hounded us, haunted where no man read.

*He made the Russian ‘relinquishing’ gesture.*
Decent indeed, decidedly diffident:
Give up the thing, but salvage
a dozen dry measures of self.
EPIGRAMS FOR AN EARWIG

The earwig wiggling, a small pig
in the letter pit, a pickled
orange plum.

The ear in the eye
opens up.

The wig for the small hairs
itches the skin.

The big wig contains incarnadine,
it incorporates a corporal.

The confederate earwig rigs juries,
sips on hearsay each Tuesday.

The nosescarf isn’t to the earwig what a stiff
snigger is to the littlest laugh.

An earwig in the jigger, popcorn in the popper,
coal in the hopper one hoped.

A wiser wicker sprig pegged the glib ligature
with an aglet.

The aglet didn’t give a fig
for the earwig.
Impossible to think the same spring
in the woodpecker’s neck and beak,
unwinding, drives the hammer
with such neat regularity against the trunk
of the uncomplaining tree—
as twists beneath my head to bring
my eardeck into range. They seek,
unfinding, what drives the clamor,
despite the tug to the trunk
that carries them off, feet breaking free—
NIGHT WATCH

*as the sentries till morning yearn for morning*

Soon light will spill into the air.

The first trickle at the start of rain reveals a slope’s hidden vein, then overswells the banks become impossible /

imagine:

What could possibly be the source of this birdsong which I have heard for hours?

So indifferent to the breaking day

/ imagine the bird to be blind.
Say the few tall clouds are motionless
as mountains, and sunlight isn’t for you—
neither is true. In the clouds
the water breathes itself through its states
and finds itself finally in its element, and you
are at a loss only in this field of hue,
this parking lot, this long traveling-through.
When you arrive, the sun will beat down
on the desert green and brown.
You will soak it in and store it away.
You will admire the motionless mountains
that keep the clouds at bay.
1. Letting my goofy smile rain
   on all the other strangers.

2. A messy woman in a purple sweater
   brushes off crumbs.

3. These little caps, in army colors, tall
   with tiny brims: I don’t think they’d suit you.

4. Thought: poems come in sketches, too.

5. This woman unwrapping her candy bar,
   opening her mouth, repulses me.

6. For the moment it’s hot on the bus,
   the way it was in bed.

7. Pebbles in the rain: they show
   bright colors to anyone.

8. Recollection: copy editing a poem
   is a pain in the neck.

9. Question: Did you dream anything last night?

10. Quotation: Icicles filled the long window
    with barbaric glass.

11. Joke: A billboard says, RELIABLE.
12. On the 42nd floor my ears at first complained quietly.


14. Binghamton: The entire sky is shifting with the wind.

15. Winter at last: the snow hits on the walk home, on balance, making an assertion.
NUDE MAN ON A HORSEHAIR

He sits with the apples
of the universe, carefully
composed
and silent as the very last accomplishment
of a true charioteer.

Nothing happens, and this, a fact
however it is
begins not to matter at all
as the suns of an orangutan’s eye sleep.

They sleep like sixteen assholes
in the tree of knowledge of evil.

And the hair pricks Him like a nettle,
too expected a prick
to be enticing.
And so—

All the last encouragements go
unheard through the jungle of
—*How can you have a jungle OF?*

The man nude or not.
He, the Man.
He unlyricizes, and then.
He unlyricizes and eats
the missing moments—
what You and I have never
missed at all, only let silently slide.
The man. The nude Man
on the horsehair.
NOTES

**CHOCK THEOLOGY**

“First Cause”—“Heavens! Lend your ears and I will speak, and the Earth will hear what I say” is adapted from *Deuteronomy* 32:1.

“Elohim Speaks an Avalanche”—“Elohim” is a plural name of the Old Testament God and also means “gods” in reference to the pagan gods of the Bible.

“Covenant of Grace”—“With your heart: all…” is adapted from *Deuteronomy* 6:5.

“Letter for a Ship from Tarshish”—See *Jonah* 1:3.

“Schematic of Procreation”—“Lo tov heyot ha’adam l’vado” (it is not good that the man be alone) is from *Genesis* 2:18.

“Lectio Difficilior”—The title refers to the principle of textual criticism, *lectio difficilior potior* (the more difficult reading is the stronger).

“Epithalamium 1”—For the midrash of the snake, see Rashi on *Exodus* 4:24; “Holy, holy, holy, the lord of hosts” is from *Isaiah* 6:3.

“Chock Theology”—“of her chief virtues only gods should speak” is from Theodore Roethke’s “I Knew a Woman.”

**BUT THINK US ON**

“Portrait at C”—C is the speed of light.

“Song for an Abstract Darling”—The epigraph is from Wallace Stevens’s “So & So Reclining on Her Couch.”

**OBJECTS IN THE GLASS**

“Pilfered Scenes [for Pnin]”—Italicized phrases are from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin*.

“Night Watch”—The epigraph is adapted from *Psalms* 130:6.

“Travel Notes for M”—The epigraph is from T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; “Icicles filled the long window with barbaric glass” is from Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

“Nude Man on a Horsehair”—Titled after Matthea Harvey’s “Nude on a Horsehair Sofa by the Sea” in *Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form.*