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Preyer

Mack Rivkin
Illinois Wesleyan University

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PREYER

Mack Rivkin

For Jill, Mike, Colleen, and Shane

CONTENTS

Preface.....	ii
If.....	2
Grand Canyon	3
Words	4
Potato	6
Strife.....	7
Alpha.....	8
Eclipse.....	10
New Genesis	11
New Beatitudes	12
Wild Girl	13
Within.....	18
Calafia	19
The Lady	29
Untitled.....	31
Blooming.....	32
After St. Patrick's Day.....	33
Epiphanies	34
Progress, man's distinctive mark alone	35
Space Kid	36
Bear Soup.....	37
Emergence.....	38
Stellaleila.....	40
Point Lobos	41
Aether.....	42

PREFACE

One of the most difficult obstacles I faced while working on this collection of writings was articulating exactly what this project *is*. It is, on the surface, a Research Honors Project, defined by Illinois Wesleyan University as “an opportunity for qualified seniors to engage in a significant research project under the guidance of a faculty advisor” (“Office of the Provost”). In my preliminary Research Honors proposal, I declared my intention to concoct a capstone project which, through *ecopoetics*, would honor my four years of study in the fields of Environmental Studies and English. I wanted to utilize my skills in creative writing, mainly poetry, to continue exploring complex human-environment relationships and eventually give insight to my readers through vicarious exploration.

In conversation I resorted to a rehearsed explanation, similar to my official proposal, which emphasized an interest in combining my love for the written word with my passion for environmental sustainability. I would try to amaze by again wielding *ecopoetics*, my new favorite word, explaining how the fancy term combined *poiesis*—the making of words—with *ecology*—the study of how organisms interact with their environment. If I detected a pressing interest from the listener, I would delve into my fascination with the specific relationships between humans and the “natural” world, making air-quotes with my hand to segue into the enduring debate over what—if anything—is natural. By this point I was accustomed to seeing blank stares or head nods of feigned interest. A bit frustrated, I would smile and bring my listener back to reality by stating a simple goal: “I just want to make a positive change in the world through my art.” I never let on how intimidated I was by this prospect.

While my explanations held true, I always felt I failed to honestly articulate my deeper visions for the project. The simple explanation lacked substance, felt hollow. Rather than a defined plan with clear goals, a linearity I expressed in conversation, I hoped the project I envisioned would reflect the

wild geography of my mind: riddled with doubts, in flux and awe, eroding preconceived notions, choked by noxious anxiety, bursting with excitement, mutated by invasions of stimuli, and capacious with desire to answer pressing questions.

To write ecopoems, I knew it was necessary to engage with the critical conversation which surrounded the field. I perused many texts¹ in preparation for and while working on this project in order to inform my writing. While immensely helpful in countless ways, these works, predominantly the ones which discussed theory, led me to become consumed by the pressing questions and considerations the texts proposed. Are there any wild places left? What is nature? Is environmental stewardship my responsibility? How effective is environmental policy? Can art change the world? How finite, if at all, are natural resources? How can creative writing be an effective mediator between reader and the natural world? Is simplification and organization a bad thing? Does poetry give nature a “voice”? Are we on the brink of environmental destruction? Is the poet an endangered species, and is this a bad thing? Are humans animals? Can language be a wild system? What are the ultimate implications of technological development? Should quality of human life be humanity's greatest concern? Is there an interdependent quality between humans and nature, as W. S. Merwin writes about (Bryson 102), or is A.R. Ammons correct in that nature is an inhuman, unattainable Other (Gyorgyi 88)? Is it okay to eat animals, experiment on them, have them as pets? Is humanity bad for the rest of the world? *What exactly are we doing here?*

Through the critical study of ecopoetry and related works in conjunction with my liberal arts education—a holistic introduction of the human-environment interactions which shape our world—I fearfully arrived at many more questions than answers. I felt wholly dissatisfied by my first attempts at composing what I considered to be true ecopoetry: writings which strictly commented on

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A full list of consulted texts can be found in the “Works Consulted” section following the Preface.

environmental peril in the context of fading natural beauty. This form of expression, this ecopoetry, could not keep up with my racing mind. As I consumed each critical conversation, each lesson, each paper, each poem, I noticed a strange emerging sophistication in me, a sort of foreign body which seemed to inform at a rate faster than I could express them. Although I had described my project as an eventual collection of ecopoetry which would encourage sustainable behavior, my aspirations for this project kept evolving with my sense of self, expanding as the universe does. My writing began to deviate from the structure I envisioned.

As I considered my life, my actions, and my thoughts in the context of my placement in the universe and through the lens of the structures which I hold on to, the more I came to understand my true lack of control. I found chaos in the places I persisted in, constantly confronted by forces which seemed to shake the ground beneath me. I struggled to make sense of things by utilizing organizational systems, but recent discoveries revealed their limitations and fragility. My studies in environmental sustainability, English literature, political science, and anthropology illuminated a variety of global issues and uncovered the fallibility of authoritative entities from narrators to political institutions. I was challenged to rethink my role in society as a product of privilege. Discovering semiotics cast a shadow over the English language, a tool I had revered as a perfect system to express complex thoughts and emotions. I not only questioned the legitimacy of putting words on a page, but I questioned the validity and appropriateness of me, a relatively ignorant young person, wanting to change behavior through art. I became skeptical of what I held most true and eventually doubted myself immensely. For a short period, I was unable to write.

I entered a period of sobriety in the midst of my comically banal existential crisis: I found myself once again absorbed in the late-night habit of suckling at a heaping spoonful of chunky peanut butter while surfing the Web. Each comforting mouthful would slide down my throat slower than the

last, lingering in some unfamiliar crevice of my body. I often watched videos on YouTube while I ate. One video in particular was emailed to me by the Sierra Student Coalition. I remember gazing blankly as a young girl with a hearing impairment video-chats with a smiling orangutan named Strawberry. They are both fluent in American sign language. Gentle piano riffs frame a pleasant yet benign conversation. The simian is curious about the food she eats. The girl rummages through her cabinet and emerges with a jar of peanut butter. I smiled at the coincidence just as the orangutan's smile faded. "Your food is destroying my home." It was a call to stand against the usage of "Conflict Palm Oil" in popular snack products. The video ended.

I paused for a moment, the spoon hanging dumbly from my mouth. I wondered if the sum of my actions here on Earth, in central Illinois, in my home, results in a presence of overall positivity. I make art, I usually recycle, I'm frugal, I dawdle on the internet, I read, I call my parents at least once every week, I wash my dishes, I study human-environmental interactions. I try to appreciate my privilege. People seem to like me. I try to create more than I destroy, though I know erosion lurks behind the curtain of nearly every routine. I teeter between complacency and culpability, arms flailing to keep from falling to either side.

My saliva pooled around the spoon, drawing the peanut butter into my body. The still image of disappointed Strawberry stared at me from the computer screen. The savory spread that crawled into me was thicker and more persistent than guilt. I attempted to telekinetically pass along an *I'm sorry* as midnight hunger urged me to devour, to consume, to neglect what may be lost. I swallowed the rich mash of peanuts, palm oil, and salt. I swallowed regret. I swallowed the orangutans' home. I swallowed uncertainty. I swallowed the stimuli that fight for my attention from backlit screens. I swallowed before I could taste. I stomachached.

Tired, I turned off my computer, laid down in bed, and attempted to write an ecopoem. "All

living things consume, but is ravaging hunger and resulting guilt is uniquely human? I don't want to be defined by how I have negatively influenced the world; my carbon footprint, the insects I've smashed, the people I've let down. I still want to eat peanut butter!" I stared at the latest entry in my notebook for a long while. I found nothing profound in my lack of understanding and became disheartened.

I came to dream vividly of running naked on all fours through trees. I relinquished control to my twitching muscles and moved like choppy ocean water. I could breathe.

In the waking world, I developed a keen attraction to the poems of Wendell Berry. I became deeply intrigued by Berry's Christian environmental vision and resulting reverence for the natural world, as it challenged my conceptions of Christianity as blind anthropocentrism. I quickly consumed *A Timbered Choir*, a collection of many of his "Sabbath" poems—poetry written outdoors and in solitude—then followed up with some scholarly criticism which surrounded the work. Although Berry believed humans ought to have dominion over the world, a concept which made me uncomfortably comfortable, I admired his commitment to sustainable stewardship through faith. Whereas the foredooming work of some other ecopoets induced anxiety in me, I found peace in the organization Berry's poetry proposed: natural light as God's grace, the source of life, and intellectual illumination; darkness as soil, the potential for creation, and limits of human understanding in the midst of chaos; trees and seeds as the intersections of light and dark, the emblems for all life. His work illustrated a pure understanding of the complex without confining and reducing the natural world to fit in a human palm. Berry instead nestled himself in the world's palm, and sweet, simple poetry trickled steadily from this immersion like sap.

Hungry, I sought out more of Berry's work in other publications, and eventually came across a poem titled "The Peace of Wild Things." In this poem, Berry is confronted by uncertainty and anxiety, and finds freedom in the wild peace of the natural world. He writes, "When despair for the world grows

in me // I come into the peace of wild things / who do not tax their lives with forethought / of grief... // I rest in the grace of the world, and am free” (Berry 79).

The poem had a lasting effect on me. I had spent months immersing myself not in the “grace of the world,” but in the study of ecopoetry, ecocriticism, environmental ethics, and related fields as a means to inform my writing. By displaying how the wild beauty of the natural world could remedy the “despair for the world” I had come to know, I realized I was still ignorant of true wildness. It was almost as if Berry was speaking to me directly. *It's okay to not understand. Celebrate the wild world by entering it.*

I followed Berry's example and ventured outdoors. I temporarily set aside the anxiety-inducing philosophies which made me hyper-aware of the critical state of the Earth. Instead I focused on the feel of the ground beneath me, the chirps of birds at sunrise, the pureness of my breath. I found a way to relax, taking in the world around me without constantly struggling to understand it. I became hungry, craving the presence of warm summer light and nourishing myself with the strange sounds in the dark. I didn't fight anymore. I gave in to the seductive unfamiliar and became electrified.

It wasn't long before I realized wildness is much more than the light, the dark, the trees. Although I still felt a deep affection for Berry's poems, I began to develop an attraction to the wildness in places other than nature preserves and lakesides. I became aware of the chaos within the people of bustling cities and quiet towns, the chaos within the places they inhabited, and the chaos within myself. I developed a keen awareness, and even a thirst for the inexplicable. I craved and feared the challenge of finding my voice in a world I no longer claimed to understand. Most relieving was the realization that I had spent the past four years of my life already taking advantage of many opportunities to immerse myself in the unfamiliar: hiking through the Shawnee national forest, tracking weekly scientific developments on the internet, befriending students from Vietnam, growing organic

vegetables, experimenting with hallucinogens, catching rockfish in Point Loma, building homes for the homeless in Albany, Georgia, sleeping on strangers' couches in Berlin, Paris, and Amsterdam, observing my childhood friend transition from female to male, sitting on a cliff's edge, wandering without a map, exploring the body of a lover, witnessing my aunt face death. The natural beauty of places which were preserved from human development offered moments of clarity and reflection, but I also found awe in people I interacted with and constructed places they inhabited. I questioned my own humanity, and through immersion with the wildness around me, began to see myself as an imperfect, impulsive animal. This is my wildness, my peace, my Arcadia.

Poet Dean Young writes “Go down any road far enough / and you'll come to a slaughterhouse, / but keep going and you'll reach the sea” (“First Course in Turbulence”). Through finding comfort in my personal chaos, my writing continued to change. No longer was I haunted by the big questions, theories, and philosophies which warned of imminent danger. I free-wrote, I recorded my dreams, I lived. The composition process became wild, and the products of these activities were wonderfully chaotic. My new work, finally, appeared to grow out of the studies which had once stifled me. I had reached the sea.

In a *Poetry Magazine* article detailing a lively interaction with the recently deceased poet Hayden Carruth, he is quoted as saying, “Poems are mushrooms cropping up under a leaf, growing on that log. Some are very tasty and some could kill you” (Donohue). I stumbled across this metaphor as I worked on this collection while simultaneously developing a feasibility study for the implementation of a mushroom cultivation program at Illinois Wesleyan University. The poem as mushroom, in my opinion, perfectly captured true nature of *poiesis*. I see my mind as mycelium, the vegetative underground network for fungi. Once in a while, if the conditions are just right, a poem will pop up like a mushroom. The poem may take on an infinite array of characteristics. Some grow easier than others,

and many die before full fruition. Some grow in neat rows or fairy-rings, and others can explode forth in wild disorder. Some take on a familiar form, while others are hard to identify with their strange shapes. Most, when fully grown, are delicious or nice to look at. Many others are dangerous or hallucinogenic.

You are a forager. This preface is your map to help you become mindful of yourself within these surroundings. However, don't give in to your fears; feel free to stray from the path, touch, taste, stay the night.



The project begins with clarity, innocence, and structure. The beginning voices behind “If,” “Grand Canyon,” “Words,” and “Potato” are clear, with a defined stance and only hints of disillusionment. This sense of clarity wavers upon the introduction of nonhuman speakers in “Strife” and “Alpha.” Fear is realized with the introduction of the patriarch in “Eclipse,” and the stability and ethics of human-dominated patriarchal system are further challenged in “New Genesis” and “New Beatitudes.” Chaos is then personified in “Wild Girl,” the first prose piece, and later intimately integrated into works such as “The Lady,” “Blooming,” and “Stellaleila”. Familiarity in the garden poems and lighthearted humor in poems such as “Bear Soup” are interspersed as the chaos develops to make the reader feel secure. This sense of security in the face of danger is justified in “Point Lobos” as the speaker witnesses beauty on the brink of death. The project ends in chaos with “Aether,” a sort of enactment of wilderness which is crucial to the creation of poetry. Through the metaphor of cosmic collisions as poetic creation through destruction, the project is finalized with important considerations about the significance of one's role in an infinite universe.

The writings within this collection can be grouped into three distinct, yet often overlapping, categories: *aphoristic*, *mythic*, and *chaotic*. The project is structured to lead the reader from their

comfortable reality of organizational systems and challenge them to appreciate the chaos and wildness of everyday life. While the entire project is influenced by these groupings, it never succumbs to the rigidity of a triptych structure. Just as the Earth we live on, this project has a dynamic landscape. The hybrid combination of diverse forms, characters, places, structures, styles, and substance which is this project mimics the shifting tectonic plates, magma eruptions, erosion, agriculture, decay, and strip mining occurring at every moment all around the world. This complex dynamism and weaving of forms is best represented in “Calafia,” a hybrid of aphorism, myth, and chaos at the heart of this project.

Many of the works within these pages are *aphoristic*, or straightforward in their expression. This is the first class of writings in the collection: works grounded in reality, familiarity, and safety. The significances of these writings may be explicitly stated, but always leave room for extrapolation through questioning, interpretation, and uncovering of the implicit. While some mythic or chaotic works in this collection have elements of aphorism to orient the reader, the truly aphoristic writings are told with a clear human voice and provide strictly human reflections on the world.

“If” and “Words” are at the forefront of the collection to act as guides into the wilderness. “If” first instructs the reader to disregard the subsequent writings if they can abandoning the safety of the written word and find beauty in the world around them. This not only attributes importance to the inherent value of one's surroundings, but begins to discuss the limitations of the rest of the collection as the reader tunes in a “safe wilderness.” The disclaimer is in final line of the poem, “We'll go as far as our feet will take us,” a reference to prosody and the limitations of experience through the written word. It is my hope, of course, that the reader will choose to enter the wilderness within these pages, which can inspire and prepare them to discover their own wilderness. “Words,” on the other hand, acts as this project's second preface by further delving into the issue of language's limitations. Like the

preface you are reading now, “Words” is a sort of map, a password to unlock the rest of the project. It takes the concept of a limited language eluded to in “If” and explicitly discusses whether the written word can adequately represent certain phenomena. The irony of a poem informing the reader of the futility of poetry unravels the true complications of poetic expression attempting to capture a world that cannot be captured. Organization through language is a powerful way which humans assert their dominance over the nonhuman, and by challenging the strength of such a concept by revealing its instability I aim to inspire a sense of discomfort in the reader and make them question the efficaciousness of the written word.

In order to create a feeling of safety in the reader, the voice of innocence is utilized in the poems “Grand Canyon,” “Potato,” and “Eclipse.” In “Grand Canyon,” the safety is in the child’s protection by the worried mother, a removed engagement with an icon, and revelation hindered by frustrated disbelief. The voice of innocence is slightly more present and developed in the poem “Potato,” however, showcasing the child *projecting* and *enacting*. Projection and enactment are highlighted as crucial methods of synthesizing and expressing oneself in the face of disorder, and this poem begins to reinstate the power of the written word while still recognizing its limitations. The poem “Eclipse” shows the child beginning to discover feelings of insignificance in the shadow of a world that is becoming incomprehensibly large. The poem explores the tension arising from a male child’s perceived inadequacies in a male-dominated world. The father figure in “Eclipse” replaces the mother who is seen in “Grand Canyon” and “Potato,” and the sudden imposition of this character is a metaphor for patriarchal dominance. The father is a symbol of perceived power and control over the nonhuman, and he attempts to bestow that power to the small child. Although the father cares for the child, he feels uncomfortable with his father’s assertions. The poem ends in darkness.

Poet Gary Snyder asks, “if we all live in one ecosystem of diverse cultures, isn’t nature culture

and culture nature?" (Gifford 82). I wanted to explore my own ecosystem by challenging the mythologies of my culture, exploring the mythologies of others, and writing a personal mythology. Through *mythic* works, the second class of writings in this collection, I hope to leave my readers with the desire to rethink their own culture and explore the wide world through the stories of others. I challenge them to dig deep into their own soil and find common roots.

One of the most freeing aspects of embracing the chaos was beginning to recognize my own privilege. I am a white male, I have supportive and forward-thinking family and friends, access to top-notch education, a bed to sleep in, and food when I'm hungry. I feel safe. It took personal interaction with those living with less privilege to realize how truly lucky I am. I also realized that my life, my worldview, was largely a product of my upbringing and limited to a singular perspective. I wanted to hear the stories of different places, different people. I loved to learn about cultures, traditions, religions, and dilemmas which were foreign to me. Eventually I came to understand that these people, who I see as different from me in many ways, are also similar to me in many others. We all are human, we share common ancestors, and have similar questions and desires. Through our interactions we share our lives, our stories, and become closer. We see the wide world in our differences and establish bonds in sameness.

Mythology is the fuel for cultural sustainability; the people shape stories, the stories shape people. But mythology can be important to environmental sustainability as well: these creative histories unite people and tie them to their environment, which influence their relationship to that place. The reverence and fear of the nonhuman world expressed through different mythologies develop those human-environment interactions. The mythic writings in this collection illuminate the power of human storytelling in the context of place.

As I am most familiar with the concepts surrounding my own culture, I begin by breathing new

life into the stories which have shaped me. “New Genesis” and “New Beatitudes” tell of a world—perhaps our world—which has succumbed to the human-dominated patriarchy. These poems frame iconic Biblical passages in a modern context to challenge the validity of these myths in today's world. In “New Genesis,” the seemingly well-intentioned farmer, a creator of sorts, shapes his surroundings to match his desires. His actions are far from innocent, however: he asserts his dominance not only over the land, but over his wife, carving, plunging, draining, naming, and killing in the name of progress. Inspired by W. S. Merwin's “For a Coming Extinction,” “New Beatitudes” brings to light the destructive power humanity has held over the animal kingdom, forcing beautiful creatures into annihilation. This poem further examines dominance over the nonhuman by satirically blessing the animals which humanity has exterminated. By transforming these venerable texts, I attempt to explore the consequences of patriarchal dominance which lies at the core of anthropocentric Abrahamic religions.

My exploration into the mythologies of unfamiliar cultures resulted in the writing of “Wild Girl,” the first prose piece in the collection. Similar to “New Genesis,” “Wild Girl” offers a kind of genesis story, but rooted in an entirely different culture and form. The character Fleur in Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* inspired this piece by providing a starting point to crafting a chaotic and powerful female character of my own. The girl is shrouded in mystery and fear: nameless, with a disputed history, resistant to control. Tales of great power surround her, and the attempts to contain her result in the strangely coincidental deaths of those who attempt to assert domination. The tale of the wild girl is woven between an original spin on the established legend of Montana's Wild Goose Island (Schlosser). The woven structure of the story, which bears a resemblance to the multiperspectivity in Erdrich's *Tracks*, implies the old spirit of the mourning lover has been reincarnated in the wild girl to return power to the natural chaos. Through this tale, I am attempting to use the Native American

storytelling tradition to acknowledge indebtedness to origin and the intrinsic power of place, which many powerful stories can arise from. The ambiguity of the more modern tale in juxtaposition with the myth of Wild Goose Island is intentional, and serves to preserve the magical qualities of the place through story. By directly engaging with the texts of Louise Erdrich and the documented mythology of Wild Goose Island, I am joining the community of storytellers to augment the natural wonder of a place, while still honoring the original mythology ascribed by its inhabitants. “Wild Girl” is a woven text, not only due to its structure, but also due to the engagement with texts from Native American sources.

Ultimately, the process of forging this collection of writings resulted in coming face-to-face with chaos. This confrontation was crucial to my development as an artist and a human being, and taught me the importance of scrutinizing, exploring, and embracing fear. With my *chaotic* works, the third class of writings, I hope to lead the reader to similar discoveries through writings which become wilder at every turn. The journey is gradual, however, with oases of safe reality interspersed within the unfamiliar. The collection ends with finding comfort in the shadows of great fears: death, apocalypse, and ultimate chaos.

“The Lady,” “Untitled,” and “Blooming” further the journey into chaos. “The Lady” is the turning point of the project, as the structural systems apparent at the start are abandoned at the end. The speaker begins “battling the wild ocean’s storm” but finds pleasure in the chaos, remembering “the art / of wild love, / silencing / guiding l / ights cal / culated f / orm vibr / ations vi / olence—“ and reveling in the decomposition of structure. He ultimately succumbs to chaotic nature in seductive female form by “releasing the oar to join her, thunderous and black” to embrace death. The reader experiences first-hand chaos for the first time in the collection in “Untitled.” I tapped into the reckless poetry of Dean Young, who wrote “You start with a darkness to move through / but sometimes the darkness moves

through you” (“Bright Window”). “Untitled” and “Blooming” attempt to bring the reader on a journey through a seemingly meaningless conglomeration of familiar words. The experience itself is in the reading of the poems, and the experience mimics an attempt to make sense of a strange place through logical organization. Through dealing with “an army of forgotten / thinkers” and “Transsexual mescaline dealers,” the poems’ absurdities are meant to be jarring to the reader, yet invite them to succumb to the chaos with the speaker in “The Lady.”

“Point Lobos” is an introduction to the end, where the reader learns that total immersion in nature provides the most satisfying understanding of the inexplicable. Similar to in “The Lady,” the speaker theorizes that Truth can only be achieved in death, and feels most alive when teetering on the cliff’s edge. This leads into the final poem, “Aether.” The speaker here is gazing upon the entire galaxy, perhaps from a spacecraft, and beholds the simplicity of the chaos he observes: the apocalypse. He sees “tiny collisions sink / in” from afar, world-ending asteroid impacts, and finds freedom in the abandonment of trying to measure and understand. He is compelled, like the speaker in “The Lady” and “Aether,” to “drift // in.” These “tiny collisions” act as a metaphor for poetry itself. As a poet, I use language, an arbitrary system of signifiers, to throw my ideas and perceptions into the universe with hope that they will make an impact somewhere, however small. Though I understand my work may simply float in space for an eternity, I believe that the written word has the power to cause a blip on someone’s radar, induce tremors, and end worlds. This is the chaos of poetry.

Though the taxonomy I propose here acts as a helpful orientation, it is important to recognize the shortcomings of such limited systems. Paralleling overlap in taxonomic classification, hybrid writings emerge in the midst of aphorism, myth, and chaos. “Strife” and “Alpha” use aphorism to introduce myth and chaos near the beginning of the collection. The poems bring the reader to a surreal familiarity and blur the line between human and nonhuman in order to draw upon the familiar motif of

man as destroyer and nature as destroyed. Personification is most explicit in “Strife” where the speaker is a desecrated tree who begs the powerful human to end its existence of human-caused misery. Though subtle, personification is apparent in “Alpha” as well; the wolf Thick Gray contemplates, signals, warns, and protects, whereas the human speaker savors his simple cycle of baiting and killing. While equating humanity with destruction is familiar, these two poems transcend the trope by challenging the reader to empathize with the nonhuman through role-reversal.

The poetic taxonomy is further challenged by “Calafia,” the apotheosis of this collection. The long-form poem is the most successful result of hybridizing the categories other writings seem to adhere to. Messy and confessional, “Calafia” details a painful California excursion with my father to visit his dying sister, my dying aunt. Multiple poetic forms and styles are utilized within the singular poem, inviting the reader to engage with a motley California through the eyes of a thirsty observer and the voices of the dying. The father figure seen in “Eclipse” reappears, his imposing power now replaced by glaringly apparent weaknesses in a time and place of struggle. Juxtaposed with the beauty of the natural and unnatural surroundings, death makes a variety of appearances in the “tombstone / garden,” the gull unraveling a bird carcass “like a cat to yarn,” and a small squid which “shivers and pulses like a strained / muscle” before it is penetrated with a fishhook. The changing landscape is often described through aphorism. My own mythology is realized through the uncovering of a sordid family history and interacting with a diverse assemblage of characters in a colorful environment. And through immersing myself in the human and nonhuman communities of California, I come to terms with maturity in the shadow of mortality, the chaotic separation from loved ones in the tempest of life and death.

□ □ □

I hope I can one day have the power to change things. From what I know, I have grown

immensely through the undertaking of this project, and I believe I can leave a lasting impact through observing, capturing, and enacting my experiences through artistic expression. By trying my mushrooms, if you will, I urge you to consider your relationship to the natural world in a different way. This collection aims to spark a reverence for nature, instill awe for humanity's creative and destructive potential, challenge the preconception that humans are innately separate from nature, and ultimately lead others to uncover a sense of comfort in the chaos. While achieving total inner peace in life is an ideal—if not impractical—goal, I hope this collection can inspire a consideration of personal wildness to fearlessly engage an animalistic, active self. In an age when we are bombarded with extrinsic stimuli through technology, it is easy to become passive. Join a protest, go camping, get lost in a lover, travel, live. Nourish yourself with these writings, feel their soil under your toes.

Aren't you hungry?

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IF

If you are reading this
While surrounded by old growth
Streaks of sun and shadows
Look up

If you can feel salty sea-breezes
Dance around your fingertips
Which grip this page
Let go

If you are hidden inside a nest of tall
Prairie grass or curled between
Dunes of silk-white sand
Lie back

If you hear the air is wet
And heavy with chirps and flutters and
Hums and howls
Listen

If you are not in these places
Come walk with me through
These gardens of evolving forms
This safe wilderness within
A world imagined
We'll go as far as these feet will take us

GRAND CANYON

WITNESS THE RAGING COLORADO
SEE PAST THE CLIFF BORDER
FOR ONLY A QUARTER

I squint to find the roaring
waters but can only see
a faint shimmer, a distant
silver thread. My mother presses
a coin into my hand. *Promise
you'll stay away from the edge.*
With a devilish smile I step up
onto the smaller platform, the eyepiece
at the perfect height. I close one eye
and gaze through the other, hoping
to see waves crashing and maybe
an overturned raft. But the snaking white
wave creases are frozen in time, wrinkles
atop magnified blue-gray. *It's a stupid picture!*
The river isn't even moving! I hug the telescope
with both arms and lean back, staring into
the unmagnified sky. My eyes suddenly catch
something way up high, a large bird in flight.
A hawk? It circles above me and then
dives straight down to the river. I push my
face back to the eyepiece excitedly. As if to breathe
life into the scene, a fuzzy flash of brown glides
into the circle frame. Is it...? *Shlink.* Gone.
The round brass cover slides in front of the lens,
blackening out the landscape. I turn to my mother
and hold out my hand once more. She shakes her head.
Out of quarters.

WORDS

The words we bestow upon
the mysteries we cannot know
reduce the most
intricate realities
to a series of emblems,
indicative ink on a page.
What is "Agaricus"
to the fruiting body,
the drifting spore?
What is "apex predator" to the hunger
of the beast, the succumbing prey?

We hear nature speak
to us, hear her song in the
mists of daybreak or under
the cloak of forest's night.
We write lush verse as if
the world was designed
to fit into our palm, as if
we are the audience
of this raw theatre,
projecting voices into
the wind, faces onto trees.

How simple are we,
pretenders and false scholars,
who claim to speak this
non-language, to even confine it
to language at all?
Rotation of fire, larvae
wriggling through corpses, gurgle
of seafoam, converging
land, flash of
abdomens, retreating
claws, bodies
pulsing, churning,
concealing, devouring,
dust kicked up from a jackal's paw.

But it's our own reflection in puddles
which catches our eye
as this unfathomable Earth

turns without consequence.
Enigmas stir and float and feed above comprehension,
outside structure, beyond words.

POTATO

I grew a potato plant as a child.
Pale roots like fingerless arms reached out
To drink from the water they floated in.
Brown spots and what looked like hairs
Became magnified between the small glass
And my wet and wide eyes.
I thought *what a small potato* and wondered
How I would look with a body so small and
Limbs so long and lifeless. I stretched myself
To reach above the sink so I could hold
The potato's dirty head underwater,
Just like the boy next door did to me
At the community pool. The potato didn't thrash
Or scream bubbles like I did. I pushed deeper,
Jamming the oval body hard into the bottom
Of the glass. Ugly arms twisted out of the water,
which became cloudy with brown dust.
It made sense, to scratch off the misshapen
Barnacle sprouts with my fingernail. I knew it was dying.
There were no screams or gasps but I could see tiny bubbles
When its cold body shook in my hand.
I squeezed harder and watched the brown spill out.
By the time I let go, I could barely see the potato
Floating in the murky pool. When she asked, I told
My mother I didn't know what happened. I wasn't lying.

STRIFE

To see what I have seen
would shrivel you
It shriveled me
Now my body is dry and cracked
To hear what I have heard
would break you
It broke me
Now my body is small and splintered
To know what I have known
would end you
It should have ended me
Now my body clings to dust

I witnessed wars
I felt genocides
I learned different cries of pain
I was used to showcase their trophies
I had ropes tied to me
I dangled naked bodies from my arms

I used to pray for an end
to this but there is no end
Now I pray for my end

I begged the axes and flames for release
Only to be answered by more horrors
Half-buried half-alive I am sustained
on tears pressed into the ground seeping
remains of the fallen

I now love the children who snap
my arms to nourish their fantasies
They swing beat and laugh
like their fathers I offer the hungriest child
one more sword with which to play

ALPHA

Four of them linger through
snow-dusted trees, led for the
first time by Thick Gray,
who usually hangs back
until the kill. As always
he moves warily, paws
like a whisper, belly
skimming fresh white.

He stalks the scent of meat
and inviting slaps of bloodied
hands against the wet red hide.
The others raise their heads and follow.
I exhale a gentle two-tone whistle, a
sweet silver gust through the pines.

The pack becomes eager at the familiar
sound, pacing and whimpering
with hunger. Thick Gray lifts a paw as
if to signal a halt. They obey.

We lock eyes, Thick Gray and I, for
the first time in days. I feel his steady
amber gaze struggling to understand.
Everything is still.
Our snouts puff vapor without a twitch.

The younger ones break the
silence with whines and pulse
forward. A deep growl
pacifies them.

I give him a nod and step back. Thick Gray crunches
into snow with heavy paws and approaches the
carcass, never breaking my gaze. I smile and
level my Remington. The other wolves watch
from the edge of the clearing. We all know
what he'll choose. It always goes this way.

The pack scatters at the first shot, disappearing
behind trees before the echoes fade. I weave rope
between tendon and bone and hoist him into
the air. His drippings color the ground.

I wait to meet the new leader. I wait
until hunger comes again.

ECLIPSE

my father tells me: close
one eye and squint
the other, you can cover the whole
sun with your thumb. he promises
it would make me feel
big and strong, but in
his round shadow i
felt small and far away.

NEW GENESIS

like his father he
formed his heaven in
his earth

he glows in
the crisp orange sun once
hindered by dark trees and stares
into the clear horizon knowing
a big sun and a big wood
pile will grow big food big
stomachs big homes

with a hollow smile
he carves the land acres of it
plunges blades into the ground slices
with machines and scrapes
out the innards shapes
clean straight lines of
upturned dirt sprinkles with feces
drains the muddy lake sprays
to kill the hungry creatures

he touches the woman who
bears his name with dusty
hands and presses her
flesh pushes thumbs into her
pelvis forms her forms him in her

and he wipes sweat from his eyes
to see all that he has made
and it was
he thought
better

NEW BEATITUDES

Blessed are the western black rhinoceroses
who once possessed the land wearing skin like armor
yet failed to defend. Their dense
horns shall heal our wounds.

Blessed are the mournful quagga
who once entertained visitors with a strange laugh
yet failed to breed. Their infertile
hides shall make whimsical centerpieces.

Blessed are the cape lions
who once followed hunger and thirst with black lips
yet failed to sustain. Their stuffed
carcasses shall give us a taste of fear.

Blessed are the passenger pigeons
who once carried the spirits of peacemakers
yet failed to placate. Their soft
muscles shall calm the stomachs of children.

Blessed are the great auks
who once laid large eggs and caught fish
yet failed to satiate. Their strange
bones shall be set behind glass.

Blessed are the dusky seaside sparrows
who once were filled with clean life
yet failed to eat. Their bastard
plumes shall be painted in a theme park resort.

Blessed are the merciful monk seals
who once pushed thick bodies through algae
yet failed to fight. Their weak
deference shall be considered our victory.

And though they are blessed, you shall not
think of them more highly than you ought, but
rather remember them with sober judgment,
in accordance with the measure of strength God
has given you. For those who utilize His creatures
best are truly beloved. Be glad and rejoice,
for their bodies, broken for you, are your reward.

WILD GIRL

After Louise Erdrich

She was so young the first time she disappeared into the steep, grassy slopes near Saint Mary Lake. A fisherman saw a flash of white school leggings round a hill past Red Eagle, called across to no response. He tied his boat to a young evergreen and ran up along the lakeside. By the time the police arrived she was naked in a snowbank, stiff, so they lifted her into a blanket until she shivered like a foal, eyes gray and unblinking. The fisherman stayed with her the entire night. He helped her father roll logs into the fireplace when he wasn't watching her sleepless, silent body buried between layers of wool and silk. He disappeared not long after. To this day you can find the evergreen, swallowing the rolling hitch holding the boat to the lake's quivering mirror.

A tiny island lies halfway between the two shores of Saint Mary Lake, like a dislodged tooth in a crooked smile. There was once two separate nations, each living on either side of the lake. They were not enemies, but the chiefs placed a divide between the peoples out of jealousy. One day a handsome copper-skinned warrior from the tribe in the southeast spotted a woman from the other side washing herself on the island. Enchanted by her beauty, he rubbed himself with bison fat and swam to meet her.

The people talked, of course. Some said he raped her, threw himself into the lake out of shame. No wonder she didn't wear dresses like other girls. The folks at Rising Sun insisted she was cursed, said she didn't cry at birth. All were afraid. We gave up looking for the fisherman after the glacier route closed and the cold turned fierce, figured he had either hitchhiked north to Canada or had his remains picked clean by trout.

The two spoke in sweet laughter and hid playfully in the leaves. With every embrace they wrapped into each other like young vines. As the afternoon cooled into evening, they shared their

warmth by the shore. The desire from their hearts melted through their bodies so that there was no need to build a fire, and each lover clung to the dampness of the other until the red sun sank behind Goat Mountain. She sang to him by the water, a tune which he had heard as a child, until the warrior's hard body grew weak in her arms. He implored her to meet him again on the island at sunrise. She accepted, and they swam back to their tribes, each alone under the stars.

The next time she disappeared, we all knew where she had gone. Though she had become a young woman and lived on her own near Willow Creek, she would walk to Browning in the afternoons and whisper fantasies of Wild Goose Island to children until their mothers carried them away. She had gone there to face her dreams. The men refused to fetch her, haunted by the fisherman's fate. Too cold, they said, too cold to follow her two days by foot, through swirling paths carved by mountain ranges. Adam Hayeater, who knew the mountains well, agreed to search for her out of respect for her parents, buried at Nightshoot. A hunter sent him out with a coat of lynx fur. When she returned without Adam, trembling, neck and breasts slathered in mud and frost, we knew he would not return.

The chiefs were in a fury upon their arrival, having witnessed the lovers' interactions. Determined to extinguish their ardor, each stubborn chief declared that swimming out to the island was punishable by death. The woman and the warrior both knelt in the light of the moon and pled to their elders, crying and begging for reconciliation for the sake of love, but the tribes refused to listen. The warrior and the woman waited until everyone was asleep, and quietly glided into the water just before the sun flashed gold upon the hills. Their bodies made long ripples in the still water, and it was not long before warriors from both tribes set out to capture the renegades.

Her light skin caught the attention of men as she passed, barefoot and calm. She whispered stories and spells in her breath, beckoning the brave. Only the firm pines stretched to listen to her strange tales, and so she traveled alone. Some folks, in a burst of fearlessness, called out as she floated through the bending trees, but were quickly silenced by unblinking boulder-gray stares. Girls with tight

braids hid their baskets as if her gaze could penetrate the thick cloth covers. Every now and then someone would arrive home to find that the barley or wrapped shoulder steak they cradled had vanished somewhere along the way. They blamed the wild girl whose eyes followed for a bit too long that day. We should do something about her, people would say. We shouldn't let that girl come around here. But stories of the girl's retractable claws and thirst for blood swirled around in their minds, so no one dared approach her. Fathers gathered at the bar and feigned plans to move their families out to Shelby once the ice thawed and the roads cleared. They reassured their wives, if we go together she can't hurt us.

The angry tribesmen advanced swiftly from both sides in boats wrapped in buffalo hide, so the lovers hid together in the shadowy bushes. They could hear from the approaching war chants that they were to be killed. The young woman frantically gathered clusters of poisonous máóhk berries from a nearby bush, preparing to die peacefully with her companion before anyone would find them. The chants grew louder and faster, signaling the warriors' arrival. Footsteps crackled around the island's perimeter. The lovers held each other and closed their eyes. With trembling hands, they brought the berries to their lips.

Ten years later it happened. A group of boys, out of fear perhaps, decided to follow her tracks from Browning to Willow Creek. It was the warmest January in years, and they were eager to see how she breathed fire into the air to shatter the night's frost. The pellet guns were for protection, of course, in case she conjured roots to pull them into the ground. Schoolyard stories led them to her shack, a slanted abode of lumber and tin. It was once the caretaker's home, before he joined the dead and moss reclaimed the small stones.

The Great Spirit felt the lovers' passion become dark with terror and death, so a spell of transformation was cast to act as a disguise. Their trembling hands calmed as silky feathers blossomed from their skin, arms unfolding into steady wings. Each lover's neck stretched gracefully and wrapped

around the other, their peaceful black eyes closing over sturdy bills. Warmth swelled through their breasts. No longer were they woman and man, but goose and gander, birds that mate for life. The lovers listened for the warriors' approach.

The boys prowled under the windowsills, peeking up through murky glass to watch for movement, cold fingers tight around the rifles' smooth wood. Their creeping shadows faded as the red sun sank behind the plain and gave way to the star-drenched sky. It was then, under the night's magic, that something came over those boys. Terror and desire pulsed through their young hearts. Like elkskin drums in a frenzied dance, it moved them, moved through them. *Bum-bum pa, bum-bum pa.* Strange yells and howls soared above the trees just before the black smoke, an omen in the south.

As the armed men happened upon the lovers' location with bows tightly drawn, two snow-white birds flashed upwards before them like smoke, sending the men stumbling back. One chief's eldest son, angry at the lovers' disappearance, quickly released an arrow into the gander's breast. The stone arrowhead sank deep into his heart and killed him, sending the bird spiraling to the ground. Stricken with grief at the sight of her lover's body, the other goose tumbled down after him. Her misery pierced through the Great Spirit's spell, reversing the transformation. Feathers cascaded from her shivering breast with each squawk and screech, revealing bloodied human flesh which pulsed and bubbled like water. Her bones twisted and snapped to form arms from wings, which grew to muffle pained howls spewing from a crumbled mouth. Horrified, the warriors fled, leaving their weapons behind.

By morning thick slate clouds covered the sky as if the sun forgot to rise. Before noon the horses and cattle were all dead, their suffocated and frozen carcasses dotting the snow. Some stood lifeless in their pens, glassy from the freezing rain. Families were found days later, huddled in their dark homes, children locked to their mothers' cold breast, men with stiff gray skin. Those who remained worked to burn the bodies, as spades couldn't crack the icy soil.

It is said that the woman regained her beauty but was driven mad with grief. She wept for

weeks, refusing to leave her lover's side until the ground swallowed the last of his bones and the wind carried his feathers away. To this day, if the sun is low, she can be seen hunting for her lost mate on that island, Wild Goose Island. Every mother warns her son to never pursue the woman who beckons to him by the shore, for fear he may disappear forever beneath the mountains' shadow.

She walked bare upon the lake, stinging wind rushing through her skin and hair. Trout dangled like ornaments under the thick ice. She searched, smiling, silent, and waited for the return of spring.

WITHIN

In me, the wild
yearning
for places
to see—
In the wild,
places only
yearning
to be.

CALAFIA

America's sandbox
The waterline keeps moving
with an army
of leaning radio towers. The faded reds
protect our land and keep the tombstone
garden from growing. They stick up from
the mowed grass on either side of the
road, like rows of shark's teeth in a hilled mouth.

Chicken n' waffles, fucking glorious
propped-open convertible door
Weaved ficus trunks braided
street urchins, he calls them from his
rental car
calling to a mucous-filled throat
beneath a speckled puffer-fish neck
who gurgles stories of Haight-Ashbury and
asks for a slice.

*

A rusted powder-blue silo, owned by the
Federal Reservation Naval base
overlooks the waters
It is discreetly in flux, the creatures
tucked like prayers in the stone. Children
approach with sticks and probe the folds,
giggling at the peeps and scuttles. It comes
alive before them, a chorus of waving
claws and black pearl eyes beneath silver spiral shells.
A lotta boys died for this country
The red marker balls hang from
wires, sealing the threshold between heaven
and earth.

*

On the sandy Cabrillo cliffs
eyes follow the flock, wingtips
skimming the water in unison
the sharp white featheredge
splitting the tiniest waves into
echoing ripples

DANGER unstable cliff
edges EXTREME DANGER
The long foaming waves move
under the echoes like cats under
a sheet, opposing each other with
no form or direction, only flow of
sand and granite, striations and mosaic
underfoot, a rippling church wall with
crashing water bells sounding twice
per day.

*

Calafia, queen warrior
who once stood tall with taller
hair now sees the world sideways
from her mobility scooter, a heavy
tear in the seat. She struggles
to open her green water
bottle, groans like she did
when Talanque died in a New
York parking lot. Clear tubes peeking
from her pant leg run yellow and sometimes
red. She coaxes her barking
son to jump into her lap so
they can both be quiet.

I don't have much time left
The doctors say I'll die on the table
It's strange facing death
You're never really prepared for it
I don't really know you well
I'm sorry for that
You know how hard it is for me to get around
Or maybe you don't
I just want you to know
I love you with all my heart
I just need you to understand that
You seem like a good boy
Like you've got a good head on your shoulders
I just want to give you this
Before I forget
I know it's not much but I have grandchildren now
I have to take care of them too
I won't be around for too long
I'm sorry it's not more
I'm sorry
Your life will flash by before you know it

Make the most of it
While you're young
Before you end up like me

crustaceans reclaim
 rock and wood we've
 failed to contain the sea

*

The carcass floats in the harbor like a buoy.
It looks fresh, as if it had just been standing
on the rotted dock just a moment before
I arrived then plunged backward into the water
sputtering but too weak to fly.

 As I remember tossing broken Doritos
 to yesterday's hovering birds
 I wonder if I elevated
 their blood pressure

Another gull,
a reanimated version of the first, flaps down
and lands beside the wad of feathers. It bobs
with the body and glances around. Does it
notice the body? The head swivels without
 direction. After a moment
of what appears to be deep thought it plunges
into the corpse's breast, unraveling
like a cat to yarn.

*

JJ takes my ticket and shakes
my hand. Cold today, isn't it?
His friend, sporting a black
"El Borracho" tee, rolls himself
two American Spirits. He lights
one up with a laugh and a white
picket grin. The smoke is almost
invisible in the sun. The ocean
is relaxing, isn't it? Like being
back in the womb. A man in shades
folds his bronze arms and stares.
We'll see the whales moving
south to bear their calves. The warm
water is familiar to them.

 I realize
it's been a long time since I've
 thought about porpoises.

breach, fluke, spout
 like a tornado, exhaling
 CO2, gulping air
 look at that fluke!
 we'll come up behind him
 so we don't spook him
 the boat lurches and dives
 making my father groan
pffssssssssss
 there he is again, up from
 the deep dive!
psssshhhhhhhh
 11 o'clock!
 i think there's two of 'em
 playing tag or running
 from us ohhh that
 boat's getting a little close
 we'll just hang back
pfffssshhhhhhhhhh
 i'll just radio them i don't
 like how close they're getting

*

He's wearing his favorite jacket
 today, denim XXL with Jack
 Skellington on the back. He shines
 proudly in the sun, cackling.
 He only gets compliments
 on his clothes now.

It passes between our Sun
 and a bird's silhouette.
 "Chopper incoming."
 I can't hear over the radio
 static. It pauses in the white
 orb, a speck on the tip
 of my eyelash, contained like
 a bee in a floret array

*

Family History

Cecelia, grandmother.	mastectomy / bad teeth
Samuel, grandfather.	stomach cancer / in and out of hospitals until death at sixty
Calafia, aunt.	insides fried from chemo in the '90s / hernias / colectomy / husband murdered / afraid to go outside / human son won't call / pretends he can hear her through the dog

Kelly, aunt.	in and out of toxic relationships / clinical depression / married and divorced / alienation / name changes / married and divorced / married and divorced / married and divorced / suffocated son with dry cleaning bag / married and divorced / suicide
Larry, father.	nephrosis / in and out of hospitals as a child and teen / bloated from meds / afraid of doctors / xenophobia / can't stop eating / works with criminals with neck tattoos
Susan, cousin.	down's syndrome / doesn't know where mommy went

*

Fishing off Point Loma
 Two Midwest boys stick out among
 The waders and zippered ice boxes
 We need assistance over here, we
 Don't know how to tie our hooks or sinker
 Much less catch a fish.
 The guys are rugged, sport
 sunglasses and thick beards that smell
 of tobacco and rubber.
 They're tattooed and prepared for anything,
 tying strange knots with one hand, beer in
 the other, laughing about some poor sap
 who got pulled in by a marlin in Cabo.
 Favorite rods test the water and monofilament
 lines run between their teeth.
 My father
 leans over the edge, looking at something I
 can't see beneath the water
 as a sharpened
 blade hacks through blocks of frozen
 squid and the man in the floppy sunhat rips
 at his breakfast burrito. Cigs, Swishers, handheld
 vape, couldn't ask for more. Out here fishing
 on a beautiful day like this, away from
 the yuppies of downtown LA. Throw it in
 the tackle box. We approach the bait nets, floating
 pyramids filled with squirming. Earl
 makes the food with crossed arms and waits for
 tips. He wears sunglasses in the galley, squirts
 hot sauce on eggs, wipes his arms with his wife's
 dish towel. I push past a man with red snapper
 eyes as his wormy tongue checks the gums for remnants
 of Fritos and two-dollar coffee. Seven miles out.
 Squid the size of a child's hand dart
 away from predatory fingers, never expecting
 the hook hidden behind my back. I snatch a slower

one with a full grab, aiming its ink
jet away from my eyes. Like rinsing out a milk
carton, the liquid stream turns clear, the body
becoming hollow. It shivers and pulses like a strained
muscle in my fist. Black mucous dribbles out of some invisible
hole, a last resort, as I pierce its forehead and gore the tough
cartilage. The arms tense. My thumb flicks
the switch and the creature is lowered to solid ground. I stare
into the murk and hope it can sense some familiarity before
disappearing into the ocean's briny gut.

*

Three behemoth pelicans, beaks as long
as their bodies, circle the re-purposed fishing
vessel and wait for scraps. They glide beside
the gulls. Every minute or so each bird, one
after the other, touches down to the water to
rest and float, waiting for the fishermen
to scrape off their knives.

The sea lions watch
lazily, an orgy of community pillows smothered
on the dock. A pelican lands on the rusted metal
frame and quickly takes flight again after
a series of incessant yips.

My father is a sea lion too.
He lies on the boat floor in a swimsuit
model's pose, round belly creeping out from
the bottom of his shirt. When I mention the
resemblance, he smiles and mimics their bark.

*

Her colostomy bag exploded this morning
while my father and I were out fishing.
She cries because no one was there to help.

I don't think you understand
how angry I am with you
you come to visit
which I appreciate but
you expect me to adhere to your
schedule? is this a vacation
for you? you don't know how hard
it is or maybe you do
(we're all dying)
the least you could have done was ask
if there was anything you could do

at a time like this
all you had to do was ask

I sit alone on the loveseat and stare at the coffee
table. The emergency squad came twice today,
and Sandy came home early to make
the bed. The wood appears to grow and blur
with their voices. Someone whimpers. I don't
look up to see who made the sound. My foot
finds Jake hiding in his usual spot under the table.
I slip off my shoe and rub his back to let him
know I'm here.

*

All gave some, some gave all.
Cost Mart, the C aging to an L, bars
on the windows and neon liquor
signs. Driving down the Boulevard,
a good time. Good Fellas Smoke
Shop, two women arguing with their
cell phone, kid carrying a soccer
ball on a scooter. Empty KFC.
White hoodie fondles his silver cross
under the pho sign. Charter school chain
link and butcher paper windows. No
humans, he laughs. Yellow cigarette
hat smokes by the bus stop ties down
his flip flops Filipinos live at Taco Shop.
Buddha for you, buddy. 50% off. Stained blue
Econoline van, the baby under a blanket:
ADOPTION. It peeks out like a copper
mountain between palms and broken Christmas
lights. Blessed Sacrament, unity on an
electrical box. Black sweatshirt, long stride, ain't
it too hot for ya? He knocks on the window
with a green eye. Tires rumble on asphalt
cracks, white noise to adult video store
joggers. Press to walk. Wholesale Joe
the Vacuum King we call him, but he's
just a kid in camo, bought out a broken
police equipment shop, sells parts to pay
for those white specs. The only lime tree
in this town is behind the woodplank fence,
by the cornerstone globe and the broken
longboard. Changing contacts in the parking
lot of Little B's, out of the trunk of a car,
public health, say it ain't so, our arms out

the window like we always lived here
eating bacado omelettes with a spiral
orange slice and a hand on our shoulders.
English 7:30, Vietnamese 7 +11, Cambodian
3pm. It's a mosaic of beer kegs and brick,
waving in front of her face like a manilla
envelope, swinging like his keys do
in the ignition,
not coming back, dreamcatcher
on the dashboard, catheter in the armrest,
blasting talk radio and fur coat meditation.

Tucked in a corner off the main drag
it awaits. The primordial ooze.
600 billion year old bones surrounded
by gunk. It carved itself right in the middle
of it all, pissing off the taxpaying business-owners
who don't care to pay seven bucks to park
in prehistoric times. Tomorrow
it'll be a parking lot; already smells like one.

✻

She isn't afraid to sing along, wouldn't live in a college town (they make her feel old), loves Obama, claps for marijuana, has never brought a girl home. Her maroon fauxhawk shows her bravery like a helmet plume, protects herself with alloy bracelets and friends in the industry. In her free time (she's never been busier) she gets drinks and learns Spanish from tapes. O'Keeffe and Dali sit in her apartment across from the purple bathroom, hopes they'll shoot her if she ends up like Calafia. Personal trainer. She's so done with WeHo, would rather stay with friends in San Diego or Albuquerque, can't kick the lifestyle. Early lunch and a run to start the day, lip gloss in the car at night. Proud as a decorated pugio, wise lines embossing her face, she cuts with quick wit and sharp tongue. This is war. She wields herself, for no one can hold her.

*

Nuestro Pueblo
Ribottoli Pennsylvania Seattle Oakland
pique assiette for 34 years
a passionate man left his wife and children
built obelisks of remains only to
leave the towers too leaving the gate
keys to a neglectful neighbor
who never walked under the crafted
arches or touched the found
object imprints framed in volcanic rock
never wished the spires had been finished
or watched as they crumbled like his
spine the tiles slipping from their place
and shattering like a bottle from a tired
grip across the road from crude bungalows
a broken satellite dish scared dogs and toy
parts in the half-watered lawn stripped
knifemarks in bark and pajama pants
on railroad tracks garbage bag in baby
carriage Santana softly playing to
the forgotten mango cart

*

my father pays forty
bucks a night to park
he cries like he did
at the hospital because
he doesn't have the
money nothing ever
changes he says it's
just wake up go to
work make no money
go home read the paper
go to bed always going
with a busted knee
going with his son to
see Calafia and to hear
how it used to be he
hopes he can learn to
say i love you before
he fades away before
his son won't have time
to take care of him or
call on his birthday
he cries like he did on

9/11 and tells his son
who is still learning that
things won't be okay
and ignores the hand
on his shoulder he writes
his feelings too in letters
and puts them in mailboxes
without calling because
he forgot what love feels
like because he wants
to be alone right now
he cries like he cried
when his son left home
still going with vision
blurred he thinks how
he failed and doesn't want
to talk right now
he pays forty dollars
to park so he cries and
parks some more

THE LADY

One day I'm already old
mist-whipped and blind during
the crossing of caves
oars battling the wild ocean's storm

Her lips roll over my ravaged creases
like new water on tidesand
smoothing and firming with each stroke

The body brought tears, charcoal
steam, pleasure learned from
brothers turned messengers of God
redeeming the young and quiet

The Lady, they called her
the nude form behind dewy eyes
whitewashed face by the tributary
singing, singing, sleeping perhaps,
giving directions, forgetting
her way

She teaches the art
of wild love,
silencing
guiding l
ights cal
culated f
orm vibr
ations vi
olence—
then awakening pollen-smellings,
sweet-huntings, night-listenings,
blind-graspings, hunger- fear-
death-longings

An escape, a release from the rigid
opium den which muffles the ticks and
rumbles, imposes gridlines, shows a blurred
world through a half-closed gaze, bending
the Real into tricky knots, losing
oneself to smoke, to flowers

I surrender, accepting stinging
clarity in place of haze
releasing the oar to join her, thunderous and black
to be smoothed like a stone, unknowing and unknown

UNTITLED

Dusty couch.
Seabird circumcision
resting on baby
seal woven into deerskin.
Our formaldehyde
lives fall into flux, a tailspin
of thick wheat, the
gyroscope of sudden derision.
Ward's tomb. A voice
defaced over Sunday's wurst. In
today's news: athletic
conundrums break flasks on her chin.
She sits upon my woes.
The colored throes of yesterday's collision
lie under milky-yellow sky.
I scratch snow upon my head, a changin'
of season. The sun drops
heat like a mile-high elevator within
keepsakes and papers.
In a modern mask, the definition
shortens, a simple
voice in an army of forgotten
thinkers, afraid
to tear hand-sewn cotton
though havoc
is their mission.

BLOOMING

My head reached an old low.
The ticket says Togo
With warnings stamped below:
You're destined to meet the fetish men and January Jim Crow.
They export coffee, copra, kernels, cocoa,
Togo.

She's a fantasy who plays beer pong
Wearing her mother's antler sweater
Each Thursday night. Everything could be better.
She'll challenge you if you let her.
Lead her along. Show her you're strong,
Be strong.

In his ceramic pig pot,
Liquid dreams of dirt-caked hands dance gloriously over sobs;
They hang monkey bones from knobs.
Strange voices stuff his pipe with tufts of fur and heavy throbs
And rub him with a dried chameleon recently caught
For African voodoo markets, guaranteed no rot.

Lost gardeners meet weekly at noon
In the second floor east lounge, sifting fast
Through skulls and stones, eyeing vast
Collections of seashell necklaces and powdered peacock throat.
The dust covers what the naked child wrote
With a charred finger dipped in the thick morning tune.

Poetry precedes Poe.
In "The Spectacles," the trickster is Talbot:
She is the beauty of the day par excellence
He assures from the freshly inked page with the charm of a severed lioness foot
In the gritty palm of a healer. A hummed requiem scatters grey soot
With promise of transcendence.

Transsexual mescaline dealers hold their yearly conference in dusty Togo.
Poe's skeletal hands are caked with old dirt.
The Togolese know slave trade hatched Jim Crow.
I drunkenly fell asleep last night in water, a slumber cold enough for slaughter.
Toad venom droplets soak into pink blotter.
Here's five Francs. This is going to hurt.

AFTER ST. PATRICK'S DAY

Drunken clover-like sprouts stand
As if outside a cold Chicago bar,
Forming a dull green messy line
Only I can be blamed for.
They help each other from falling.
The supple leaf of one supports
Another's sloppy stem. With blurred
Anticipation they linger for one more
Sweet drink, one more gulp with
Their half-formed friends to help them
Persist through another night's frost.
They wait, silently, as I strain to carry
Sloshing barrels up a hill of mud and
Slush. I vowed to quench their thirst.
Their dwarfish stalks straighten as I burst
Through the knobless pine door.

EPIPHANIES

I have not seen weariness
Like a haggard yellow rag
Drooping from the same pocket

I have not seen regret
Like a matted brown and black snout
Slapped from oversized boots

I have not seen pain
Like sturdy arms boasting thorns
Ripped off in an afternoon's time

I have not seen fear
Like writhing piglets
Smelling the hands that castrated them

PROGRESS, MAN'S DISTINCTIVE MARK ALONE

We sit in the garden again
the upside-down buckets
like my father's leaky
waterbed bleeding into the dry
sponge soil our breath
shivering and twisting into
fractals through smiles
and cupped hands
whispering poems in white
puffs or at least
they sound beautiful
floating off
into a thin haze
between the tomato
plants before blossoming
again from our
curled lips

Animals call from the field
jumping and pulling their shivering
bodies like ropes until
they move together howling in pain
a restless initiation in the cold
they catch and hold their brothers
as they fall through air

We talk as though we're better than
those who snarl and fight as we
take shelter and speak calmly and
enjoy what we have grown
yet memories soak into me
of walking blind through straw of firm hands
on shoulders of our rope our chain
of whispered roars of ritual
burial gnawing at my side an empty
house once alive with clashing
flesh on the rocks in the snow
angels shaking me
awake with cold hands free
breakfast averting gazes
marking me twisting
me clearing my breath of fumes

SPACE KID

In another life he was
a photographer for National Geographic.
In another he was an
anthropologist. He harbors a desire
to behold the universe,
to frame, to understand, to
educate, to reach for Truth and bite
down to the core. He
wields kinetic energy and rarely misses.
He's not a leader, but he'll be
helpful if he must. Foremost he is a
navigator, an explorer, unchained
with universal language as his spyglass.
He is in awe of the complexities, yet
regards the human mind as the most
awesome, the electrified mass which dreams
of language and factories and love. He
honors all great thinkers by denouncing
the lot. He eats pepperoni pizza and always
meant to get around to *Walden*.
He thinks he'd like to be alone.

BEAR SOUP

last friday
your old mother
made me the most fabulous
bear soup
she killed her
(the bear I mean)
with a plastic ax
and steaming bear-broth
the claws I believe
were ground up finely
into thursday's pound cake
which could have been better
if wednesday hadn't been gutted
by a heavy bear-paw
the bear (what a drag)
looked so small in that bowl
it's a wonder your mother
found a bowl-sized bear
on such short notice
i congratulated her
(the bear I mean)
by throwing a bear-broth-themed party
at which your old mother
agreed to be the cook
she didn't mind the lack of silverware
after we used her as a goblet
decorated with sequins and plastic ax stickers
so the bear would appreciate our efforts
tuesday never showed (what a drag)
so it was just me and some sequins and a
bear-shaped broth-bowl
speaking of monday please give him a message:
mother knows what you did
in your skull silverware and
which gutted my pound broth
with sunday's bowl-bear plastic
fabulous sights old wonder
bear-paws at saturday's sequins
used her drag showed claws

EMERGENCE

It was sudden, an orange flash in the drizzle, pinned against the gray world. He squeezed both levers in his hands with all of his strength the moment he saw it. The tires squealed and shuddered against the rain-soaked brakes, making the handlebars vibrate in his hands. The bike didn't stop. He kicked his feet outward to catch the ground, sending the right pedal into a twirl. With a quick jerk of his weight the bike tipped and his foot firmly met the wet curb. Finally stopped, he swiveled his head to search for the orange speck, fingers still locked around the rubber handlebar grips.

At first he thought it was a piece of paper, a Post-It note maybe, stuck to the side of the storm sewer grate. It shivered frantically in the wind. He pushed down the kickstand with his heel and swung a leg over the seat. He walked closer. As he crouched down, it became clear that the material wasn't paper, it was a wing. A butterfly wing. His eyes examined the bold black lines over the fluttering orange, like dark veins. Two rows of bright white spots dotted the curved edge of the wing. Raindrops wicked off the surface as soon as they landed. With his thumb and forefinger, he carefully turned the wing over to reveal it was still attached to body of the insect. Tan mud caked the tiny body and glued it to the shining pavement. A thin outline of a second wing appeared under the mud spatter as he squinted and brought his face close to the creature.

A car beeped loudly behind him. He jerked up, startled, and swiveled around. His bike was blocking the car's path. He could see the distorted image of an impatient woman behind the drenched windshield. As he reached out for the handlebar, the wing fell from his fingertips and tumbled slowly through the moving air. He froze, watching it land in the stream of water trickling alongside the curb before rotating calmly in place atop the current. The woman beeped again, twice this time. She inched her car forward, the engine growling. He hoisted the bike's frame onto the sidewalk as the car rolled

past, the woman shooting him a glare.

When he looked back towards the curb, the wing was gone. He followed the path of the curb's stream and saw it emptied out into the storm sewer. His eyes met the smudge of mud which smothered the butterfly's remains. The body was completely invisible at standing height, buried under the ugly splatter against the curb. His eyes lifted up to a sea of moist concrete, neither dark nor light.

Cold rain trickled down his face and dripped from his chin. He shuddered and wiped the bike seat with his forearm. With a flick of his sneaker the kickstand clicked upwards, and he gripped the black rubber handles to hold the bike steady. His heartbeat quickened to sync up with the patter of raindrops on the ground. The road laid empty before him. Stepping onto the pedal, he thrust himself forward with all of his might. He pushed his feet down, one by one, swaying side to side to force all of his weight downwards. The bike gathered speed until the drab world shot past him in streaks. The rain pounded against his body. Bits of light flashed in the corners of his sight, blues, greens, purples. He pedaled faster. Water whipped his eyes until they were forced shut. The blackness opened up to reveal a flood of color against the black of his eyelids. He released the handlebars, slowly lifting his arms out in front of his body. Cool air rushed between his fingertips. He felt weightless, floating in the shifting ethereal light.

STELLALEILA

He told me in a dream, my English
teacher (and porno salesman), before
wrapping his chuckling body in a black
and white Pam Anderson poster, he told me
drive until you see no wild, then keep driving.
Only stop when your car coughs and tires lock,
when you're terrified you'll never see home again.

He pawed through his favorite anthology and
spewed verse which flowed like sap, red-faced
and apologetic, then dropped the tome to grip the
neck of his merry-go-round horse, the rusted blues
chipping and flaking, shaking and drunk with poetry
of abandonment. We locked eyes, both sweating. A box
fan hummed somewhere, dispersing heavy Pine-Sol fumes.

A Vietnamese woman broke the spell, sending us dancing to our feet.

I drove until concrete flooded my eyes, until the rain smelled of plastic.
The trembling of my heart, not the sunken fuel gauge, told me I had arrived.

Stellaleila. It was sprayed onto the mirrored panel above the
doors and carved into every wooden bleacher-seat. My footsteps
should have echoed. I climbed into the smiling pink hippopotamus,
lifting and lowering the curved safety bar onto my lap, the brown hinges
crackling with rust. I eyed the indents and ruts which snaked from the bottom
of each jungle-themed ride like meteor tails, clawmarks on glossy wood panels.

Stellaleila. The name lingered
in my ears like an old waltz.
My hands shook as I gripped
the metal bar, buttered popcorn
spun into the air. *Ta-doo, ta-daa.*
I chuckled, knuckles white as
ice, letting my eyes twitch left
and right, twirling up to a forced
smile, a crazed red-faced smile
and breathing, breathing for the
first time that day or maybe the
first time ever. I sucked in pure
breaths of plaster and rust and
Stellaleila. A lion watches its prey.

POINT LOBOS

The ecologist explains
the world as a delicate
marble to be placed
into the palm
of a hand yet
I prefer to be
nestled in the world's palm
between the mound
of rock and the bed
of dried shrubs above
an ocean cliff I
am nestled in
the edge
because I am
young and filled
with wonder knowing
a mere gust
would introduce me
to all
I cannot know

AETHER

Sometimes I can look
from above
way above
and see the entire galaxy
in motion. There is a
sumptuous structure
to explain this chaos,
equations with bow-ties
smiling from handsome
podiums dangling themselves
like succulent fruits, tangible and
wanting to be picked. But worlds
in space without resistance
from notions of importance
or calculable mass, simply
moving as motion moves
no strings or struggle
just substance
around a core
compelling
warm
easy
never knowing the end
never caring
just moving
letting tiny collisions sink

drift

in

