

UNTIL VALHALLA

By

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UNTIL VALHALLA

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Apocalypse Confidential: Grounding

As You Were: Roll Call

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Abstract: The manuscript is a collection of poems about war, PTSD, intergenerational trauma, the daily experience of grief, self-awareness, and hope, which are broken into three sections. The mood and tone of each section builds and adds to the overall narrative of the manuscript with a feeling of descending, roaming, then ascending. The entire collection is haunted by violence: witnessed, enacted, internalized, and acknowledged. Ultimately, the works lead up to the breaking of toxic cycles and ideas, allowing for the beginning of growth and the hope for continual change. The speaker is the same in many of the poems, but there are multiple persona and place poems. Prose poems start each section and frame them with a feeling that the reader is experiencing everything alongside the speaker. Placing the reader is essential for the emotional movement of the manuscript. Each poem does its own work to locate the reader and then to move them. The angle of the speaker as parent provides and amplifies the anxiety, tension, and hope for resolution woven throughout. Reconciliation is a recurring theme. Like the poems named after the condition, Tinnitus hits unexpectedly hard, seemingly out of nowhere, leaving the reader breathless, feeling alive, incited to reflect on the ways they affect the world around them and those who fill it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. UNDERWORLD.....	1
Note on Survivor’s Guilt.....	1
Why Does the Flag Wave	2
Culpability.....	3
There Won’t be any Veterans	4
From Behind Me	6
Battle Buddy	7
Roll Call	10
Restless-Leg Syndrome	11
Listen Up Kids	12
I stepped on <i>Legos</i> to Prepare for this Poem: A Triptych.....	13
I Keep Putting the Baby-Gate Back up.....	16
Nocturnal Lactose Intolerance	17
II. BATTLEFIELD	19
According to.....	19
Plead for me Thetis	20
Fort Drum, 2008.....	22
Recall	23
Portrait in Apocalypse.....	24
Road Trip	25
An Unexpected Blast	26
Guard Tower	27
Taps.....	29
Racing in the Isle of Man Tourist Trophy	30
III. OLYMPUS	32
In the Army	32
I Cry Every Time I Drive.....	33
Evangelical Choir Director	34
Fully Fenced-in	36
I Know Something	37

Eternally Ephemeral.....	38
I Miney Moed Every Major Decision	39
Buying Gas with Quarters.....	40
Where Milk Costs More Than Gas	41
Good Dad, Bad Mom.....	42
I Know Sisyphus	44
The Molecules in Water Begin Vibrating.....	45
Grounding	46
The Air is Different.....	47

SECTION I

UNDERWORLD

Note on Survivor's Guilt:

Soldiers utter the phrase, "Until Valhalla" when addressing a fellow warrior who fell in battle. It is also uttered among living warriors, reiterating their eternal devotion to one another, implying in some ways that at least one of them will fall on the battlefield or succumb to their battle wounds at some point. It is a reference to Nordic mythology and a place specifically for those slain in combat. The great hall in Asgard provides a place for fallen warriors to drink and dine excessively between war games in preparation for Ragnarök, the final battle, we, humankind, are destined to lose. This inconvenient ending does nothing to dissuade the fervor with which we hold onto the idea of returning to battle with the lost, and some of us ignore the fact that to actually reunite with them, we too must be slain in combat. The disparity lasts generations. This survivor's guilt often results in reenlistments, or at the very least an unquenchable desire to return to the site of war, the chance to fling the frailty of life in the face of the unseen Gods.

Why does the flag wave

in the wind. Demanding my attention.
Reminding me of them. Of when
they didn't show up for
final formation. When everyone paid
their respects, stories were
told. A legend was born.
The green berets dropped
their covers at the foot
of his battlefield cross.
They knew better than us

how to establish fear. Spread it
democratically. There isn't a price
we wouldn't pay! Why did they
pay and I didn't? The flag
rolls like time folds flaps
flutters before me. I drape myself
beneath, breathe the fabric,
inhale, attempting to asphyxiate.
The cloth smothers, but air leaks
through. The esophagus fuses
with the fibers. Now I am flapping,
the stripes inescapable.

Culpability

The color pops on the inside,
coated by draping red petals.
The purple pours forth, protrudes.
Every year the field
is awash in the memory of blood,
blossoming, bursting out—a life
cycled to celebrate, a sacrifice—
overflowing with seeds of the sown.
Wine-dark Sea carried

by generations yet to pass.
More required each successive
year, for the soldiers slain by mines, machines,
others, and the self. Flowers flank
the heartbeat. Pulse. Roots run

shallow, a pool of new sustenance
seasonally. The patch spreads,
pollinates even the least populous
swaths of earth. Weeds which reseed
themselves. The poppy makes a new neighbor.

There Won't be any Veterans

committing suicide if there are
no veterans. Not extermination
of the current. Elimination of
the future. No service. No
obligation. No ultimate sacrifice. No
unpayable debt. Survivor's guilt
gone. Moral wounds
gone. Unscarred. Disbanding
the military could prevent
depression, and think of all
the civilians who won't be
casualties. The condolences
and monuments we won't
have to craft. And,
if there are not veterans,
perhaps also, there will
be only a memory,
a well-rehearsed verse
about ancestors and war.

Tinnitus

Starts with a bubble over
my ear. Like a sound barrier

muffling the outside din,
while within the building

begins. Unleashing, like
it was loaded. Aimed. Directed

directly in. Bludgeoning every
percussive surface between

both drums. The sound
has always tried to escape.

The bubble, the barrier,
is the pain of holding it in.

From Behind Me

The hollow wave of a one-year-old
skull bouncing off fabricated wood.
My socks shuffle across carpet, churning,
charging. *Does he need an injection?*
How long would the ambulance take?
Would they Life Flight him to Tulsa or OKC?

Helicopters travel across Adirondack mountains, simulating
our movement in Afghanistan. The pilot,
reminds us that I-E-Ds don't hit helicopters.

I'm in the room with the echo. *Please be screaming
more from the shock than from the pain.*
His sister hides from blame behind a pile
of stuffed animals. *Don't be a concussion,
don't be unconscious, be conscious,
let it be nothing but an abrasion.*

Blackhawks: composed of vibrations and a spinning sort of pound,
most call it a whirl, but it's more of a slap really.
I can't call the rides silent, static might be more accurate,
not quite right, not quiet for certain.
The landing is a high-pitched dive into a wallop.

I check his whole head twice,
feeling for something to undent.
An elephant apologizes in his sister's voice.
I poach the pachyderm with a rant
about safety, about the imminence of death.

Battle Buddy

I'm not a helicopter parent,
I do contextualize

everything through narration,
I'm not sure I've introduced myself

except through what I imagine
my children would have to say.

I'm no longer sure which thoughts
are internal. My son keeps pulling

The Iliad off the shelf. I've started reading
random passages aloud, to slow

the emptying. I thought myself Achilles,
once, until I discovered his rage. Now I know.

I am no demigod.
Fear felt useful during deployment. Time

was what we had too much of. At home,
I have an abundance of fear, and no time

to organize it. Sleep is when I'm meanest.
The blood wipes out of the fridge, though

the jelly is starting to seem permanent.
I make my son a gluten-free PB&J

every day. He doesn't wake up
screaming any longer. The pandemic feels

a lot like deployment. Invisible enemy,
limited mobility, civilian casualties, racist excuses

for violence. At least in Afghanistan
the oppression is out in the open. I can't yell

around my 11-month-old. Not at
the TV. Not at anyone. Not about

anything. I shouldn't yell. Now
I can't. He always starts crying. Why

didn't I feel bad before?

He runs like I breathe. To breathe

it seems. Jumping kickstarts his joy.
He won't sit still. Won't is perhaps

my perception. My need not his.
His sister wants her pants back. He's still

flapping a leg in each hand. He wants.
I want. I plan.

He disarms me in the moment,
drags me around the field twice.

Tinnitus

A piercing, a funneling
of pressure, a resonate rolling

cone, the building of a wave
not the crashing of a wall.
It's almost a full minute
before I realize the tornado

siren is blaring. The sun is shining
& my ears are not ringing.
Piercing touches on the senses,
the senses ringing neglects.

I don't hear the piercing
as much as I feel it.
It's not a vibration.
I hear warnings, foreshadowing sampled
one note at a time. I saw it
in a picture once, on the wall,
at the VA hospital, image of a jet
breaking the sound-barrier,
a breath-like cone of cloud.
Those clouds I could hear.

Sometimes I escape,
twist my neck
against my shoulder. Strain
the pressure,
coil the piercing,
load it like a spring for later.

I think about the fact that I'll never hear
that exact tone again. The tone
exited existence. I dread
the recoil, spend more time
lamenting the pitch and its leaving.

Roll Call

The surface of the pool ripples—white lines
across chlorine blue. Dust blows
*Afghan dust kicks, plumes, never settles,
eighty worn, rubber boot-heels clap.*

through the air, crystallizes into water.
Newborn in my arms, older sister not visible.
*The dust is inside my uniform more than on it.
Another memorial begins:
Roll call!*

Two-year-old kicks aren't hard enough to crack the surface.
I'm standing on the deck. She is still
underwater. Her eyes bulge for the surface.
*Private Fernandez?
Here, First Sergeant!*

Please! Please. Just one more bubble.
*Specialist Brown?
Here, First Sergeant!*

I fling her from the pool to her mother. I'm still
Sergeant Anderson?
She coughs water onto the deck.

Sergeant Benjamin Anderson?
She folds over her mother. I can't hear their tears

Sergeant Benjamin T. Anderson?
over the tinnitus. I see them heaving,

Taps.
sobbing, breathing, and look down at my son,
who splashes the water and begs to stay in.

Restless Leg Syndrome

The dream is always
The same. Even in different places—
The chase through sludge. Pursuit?
 Why am I running...is that...wait!
The more frequent the steps
The shorter the distance
Between them. The child is out of reach—
The peripheral blur—accelerates

The feeling.
I'm not moving.
The need to move.
The inability to reach

Them. The separation spreads
The silhouette is what I seek,
Landscape's shadow submerging with horizon
Unnatural shapes in squandered light
Sunset starts the race

Heavy legs	syrup fields
So, so	much seeking
Silenced	screaming
Extended	hallways
Loopingcut scenes	
Unseen	lurking
Pursued by	feeling
I can't keep	up
Three strides	from where
They float	like thought

Listen Up Kids,

Step 1: be noiseless

Step 2: run!

Step 3:
(hide)

Step 4: FIGHT

run hide fight

hide fight run

fight run hide

Run to classrooms with barricaded doors.

Flea from an alligator, or crocodile, whichever
the children find more fun.

Straight lines draw the eye of the shooter.

The best way to survive is _____.

When you are present, keep
calm.

Tell everyone else to remain
calm. Exude calmness.

Be alert. You are much
less likely to be shot
if we pull the trigger first. Hope
he entered the other end of school.
Emily covers her mouth. Almost
doesn't start to cry.
The teacher pulls out a basket of pistols—
a few kids faint—
passes them out.
Older students arm younger.

Everyone is a threat.

Someone shouts *The floor is lava,*

all of the children unload
their weapons. Bullets fight off
fear. No need to be afraid
when the gun is unloaded.
Debrief your classes
following an active shooter. Younger children
want a one, maybe two, sentence story. Simply
replace the fourth graders' memories.
Ask the remaining teenagers what they will do
next time it happens.

I stepped on Legos to Prepare for this Poem: A Triptych

Try and remain atop the blocks
For the duration of oration.

I'm trying to teach
My eldest how to control
My anger. Rather, I'm demanding
They figure out how
How I am to regulate
Myself or any other sixteen
Paces. Trace your spaces.
I know what you are.

Like a drill sergeant
Enters my apartment
Wipes finger
Across the residue

Daddy why are
you not
mad at
me you

usually get
 mad at
me when
 my spill
you yell

Keep Putting the Baby-Gate Back up

To bar myself in the kitchen.
Keep the kids in sight.

They keep climbing over
when my back is turned.

They sneak to the trash,
empty the bin. Spread

waste across tiles. Stack
spills for me to clean

in the corner. I return them
to the living room. Secure

the gate, return to cooking.
They bull rush it together

knock it all the way down.
I close the drawers

forget where the silverware is. Turn
the oven off and subsist on cereal.

Nocturnal Lactose Intolerance

Uncle Roger was a United
States Marine. Found out
after he died. Though,
he did always sport
the high-and-tight haircut,
his movies were organized

meticulously, his bed made.
I remember him drinking
milk, just like a friend
who killed himself upon
our return from deployment.

When my grandparents
visited, one night Roger got up
late, for his usual midnight
milk, instead, took his handgun

shot himself at the desk.
The noise woke his wife,
my Mamaw, Papaw. I think

Uncle Roger was already seated,
sipping in Valhalla with my friends.

As the sun sets, I pour milk out.

Tinnitus

An unending
noise. Scraping,
piercing pipes.
Pulling apart
ear drum. Hum.

Lock jaw
for centuries seeking
to unappear for always.

SECTION II

BATTLEFIELD

According to multiple articles in the *Military Times*, Veteran Suicide statistics are confusing. There is the well-known 22-veteran-suicides-a-day statistic, but this is an inflated number, because it includes all active-duty personnel along with veterans.

The actual number is closer to seventeen veteran suicides a day. Accepting this statistic means, there are at least five active duty suicides a day. This nuance is meant to make one or both statistics more digestible, but also attempts to erase, or redirect attention away from, the mental health needs of active servicemembers.

Younger veterans, under 34, are more likely to commit suicide, which is terrifying, because it means that while older veterans make up the majority of the seventeen suicides a day, younger veterans are likely to increase this number as the number of young veterans increases.

Veteran suicide rates have increased steadily since 2006. Not all veteran suicides are related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), some never saw combat, or even deployed. Women Veterans are more than twice as likely to kill themselves as women who never served in the military.

The *Military Times* boasts that two-thirds of veteran suicide deaths in 2017 had no contact with a Veteran Health Administration. They make it very clear that the problem is not with Veteran's Affairs (VA), but with Veterans who don't seek help. Since 2017 between 24 and 30 Veterans have killed themselves on a VA campus.

Plead for me Thetis

I fear my daughter
will inherit the feuds of Achilles.
I beg your guidance,
Pleading Thetis, you stayed your son from battle,
bestowed gifts of Hephaestus, and your favors
with the nod of Zeus. Once,
you saved the blacksmith,
your son you could not.

Shouts hang in her closet.
I've injected anger in her veins—
She'll suffer fits of menis.
Prophecy hasn't scribed her destiny,
she'll scale Ilion walls someday.
My daughter is no demigod,
yet paths to Olympus persist.

Grant her, Nereid,
the same divine armor,
donned by the King of Myrmidons,
though steer her from conflict—
sharply, with words of wisdom and myths
of monsters, immortals, and men—
spare them her ferocity—
she'd drag them in circles—
spare them Priam's grief.
Grant her, Shapeshifter,
the power to reassign the apple,
may she only pass her anger onto her enemies.

Tinnitus

Often an echo,
something
reminiscent.

Scents set

off the sentimental siren.

Affectionately
shielding me, erasing memories,
moments of
nostalgia, recalled within a cyclone.

Alone, spinning
around, while rotating and also
orbiting,
A party of destruction.

Fort Drum, 2008

Riva Ridge is a loop. It surrounds
Korengal Valley Blvd. and is crossed
by Euphrates. The base handbook says
until thirty below we must perform
all physical conditioning outdoors—every degree
below zero better preparation. The Adirondacks
running up to Appalachian,
a stand-in for the Hindu Kush, mountains
more like foothills next to Himalayan giants.

Orders come from the three-foot footprints
in front of me. Abominable upstate tundra
removes everything except resilience. Insulated
uniforms, conceal out-of-regulation
Under Armor, layers built to sustain arctic licks.

The formation keeps falling.
Tracks are filled with snow before they are found.
The only identifiable direction is down.
The Black River is frozen solid.

My mind skates downstream
to Sackett's Harbor Brewing Co.
a pint fills my baclava with froth.

Everything stiffens to endure
the frigid nature of lake-effect snow.

Shivers are a sign of life. Lake
Ontario supplies the blizzard's breath.
Soft powder soaks up echoes, whispers
appear puffs, whisps, whipped

over barrack's rooftops. Shouts
flurry into snow drifts. Flakes
crackle. Frost waves. The sun's rays bound
from crystals on the ground, engulf

the eyes with bright.
Knee-deep strides,
each a minute. Against
the burning cold, accumulating. Snot
creeps into my throat, tasteless.

Recall

I don't wear camouflage anymore,

not because it keeps civilians from seeing me,

but because

they already can't.

I'm imitating their perception,

Or perhaps I'm—

The crazy mumbling veteran.

Drinking liquor from a bag, holding my hand out.

They make bets predicting my suicide.

projecting.

Proselytizing nonsense.

Proffering nothing.

The projectiles still wake me

at night, at least

The soft rumble of a rocket exploding nearby
gently sways me from sleep.

The whistle of its comrade jars me awake

before the air raid sirens scream,

we scurry to the bunker,

the memory of us.

It's not smoke exactly,

rather cooked dirt.

Flash-fried to the perfect temperature.

The sulfur hesitates after someone strikes a match.

I don't wake up in the bunker

And I never sleep

inside it.

Portrait in Apocalypse

Deep-fried by the Texas Sun,
my skin boils more than it burns.
I say howdy and I don't much know
any strangers. From around the corner,
my baritone projects the image
of a much taller man. I wonder,
will they recognize me?
While the cows remain in pen
the grass in the pasture grows.
They isolate themselves until
released. The field they gather in delivers
a sermon, each blade of grass
a preacher, prophesying sustenance.
Scotch burns, swells my belly into a barrel.
My first drink is always after last-call. Before
my barstool spins around the sun
I'll pen the perfect painting.
I prefer to write on parchment
which is being pulled into a paper shredder.
The green blades pass through their
seven stomachs before being decomposed, deconstructed,
combined into a plaster—
the cow dung which calls forth
the descendants of the field.
I always take two scoops of ice cream.
Whatever flavor we have
in the freezer is my favorite.
Fun is the only abstraction
I feel I ever earn. I wonder,
from what pasture does my pint originate?
Instead of brain-freeze
I get chest-chills, when eating spoonfuls
too fast. I always empty the carton.

Road Trip

Instead of speaking to the passenger
I turn the radio up. Riding waves across
the world on repeated notes.

En route to the airport—
another temporary destination—
I drop them off but keep their baggage.

Instead of switching lanes
I impede faster traffic. Watching them wave
as they swerve around to the right

on Route 66—where once upon a time families
travelled for vacation—historical markers,
already cemeteries, flicker in various neon.

Instead of slowing down for the lights
I accelerate away. They follow, multiply,
make me feel wanted, spread like

feeders for the highway. Rattling across
imagined borders, they tail me from state
to state. Fuming I stop.

An Unexpected Blast

I start to feel
unsafe. A roadside
box. SLAP
CRASH Sound
rolls, splashes, surrounds

screams. Then, I hear my voice
cursing the cars around
me. The horns are at
fault. The brake lights
they spite me.
All the other drivers
know which lane
I need. I know
they impede intentionally.

I calculate the cost of new
fenders before realizing
there is no bomb,
only an explosion.

Guard Tower

Assignment: Search Team, Front gate

There is trust here. It
Is broken. We question them

Search them

In their homeland. *on

Sarge says, *Suspect them all. They are waiting
For us to relax. The morning we do is the
morning
They storm. The explosives are what you cannot
See. Searching for them provides security.*

Assignment: Turret Gunner, Humvee outside front gate

Five-second bursts

- Watch Perseid meteor shower through night vision goggles
Green sky streaked, absent
Incoming fire whistles, chirps, flutters,
Galaxies swirl within. Shower the sky

With centuries. Sustain those staring
At the moon. Hypnotized, searching
For the stars comprising Virgo.
Something rising,
Aware of every star, every milky crevice. Eons

Glimmer merely moments. I can't
Remember to glance at the road.
Isn't looking I hope the soldier in the driver's seat
A timer up. I'm glad I set
The barrel to of change the 50-cal.

Assignment: Local National Workers Escort, On Base

Like a hawk, nah, an eagle

- Question any need for the rifle
around my neck. The strap
a worm in my Adam's apple.

Assignment: Watchman, Guard Tower

It stinks here, this country.

- Monitor the burn pit
- Inhale fumes from burning:
rubber, rust, hard drives,

secrets, shit, toxic rot.

- There are rifle mounts on either front corner of the exterior walkway. I'm told it's adorned on all sides with bulletproof glass. Occasionally, I mount my M-4 on the outside. Mostly, I hide from the odor. Afghanistan stinks because of what we bring & burn.

Threats are to be simultaneously shot and reported.

- The main entrance is a gauntlet
 - It shoots straight out from the guard tower
 - The tower is the last line of defense, aside from the hundreds of armed men and women, sleeping and working beyond.
 - There are hills on every side but South. I face North. None of the hills are overwhelming, though all of them conceal.

The shards slap back of neck a moment
after hearing shatter. I hit the floor. Kevlar
beside the radio. Hands at neck, preparing,
plugging wound, pushing blood within. Reaching.
I'm going to report sniper fire.
Clink clank tink clink clank tink.

Just a rock. A Corporal unwilling to ascend
the stairs of my post.

Never abandon your post. Now,
I have a story about skipping lunch,
discovering glass shielding me was plexi.
I guard the gate, unflanked.
I am not assailed, though my body
disagrees. My joints tighten like tendons.
I sit somewhere between
trauma and a prank, pondering
exactly what I am supposed to fear.

Taps

Bugle blasts carry notes, bodies, soldier's gone down below. Boots off. Rifle planted. Tags hung. Battle-

field cross constructed again. Watch Sisyphus pass, rock crushes souls destined to suffer slightly less.

Flat bodies scooped up, carried with care. No soldier left behind, descending between notes. The river

surrounding. Tune pulling them within. Sate death's lust for camaraderie. Return nightly now.

Racing in the Isle of Man Tourist Trophy

For the spectators it is death-defying moments. The sound of swarms of unfathomable size approaches, swells, more ominous. For the riders the moment is an extended metaphor with death. Villages appear as breaths between trees, like fighter pilots, the motorcycle riders sway. Grassy green hills wave as racers speed, split the Glens under tree canopy tunnels, climb the highlands, crest Greeba Castle. Brown, beige, and white buildings, rest beyond stacked stone walls. Returning spectators lean back, riders pass. Zip. Rip. Repeat. Swirl around the island. I've memorized all thirty-seven markers across sixty kilometers, *scream* down Bray Hill, *twist* through the Nook, *squeeze* meters into milliseconds. I always remember astronauts knowing something will go wrong. No need to cover closed eyes. I envision: my death, my record breaking run. The slightest wiggle sends the rider over the handlebars in superman pose—a folk hero origin story started on three-inch screens. Approaching not a tunnel, almost a dot, a bullseye—No, a crosshair on the shifting horizon. The white lines spill. Windy Corner, brandishing death. I've memorized every turn. Everyone speaks of the crashes when you survive, the scars they leave when you don't. Tear off the visor leave bug carcasses behind. I brace for the hairpin, the wheels still spin in slide, even rider-less. If my death goes viral my existence becomes infectious. The faster I go the slower the turns come. The loose gravel produces grainy images, sucks the slick tires off the asphalt My knee scrapes the inside of the road, my body stretches across the bike, pushes the wheels apart, my face jets an inch above the pavement—really, I lean into the road,

assist gravity in grounding
the bike. The last dying
rider didn't die on the next straightaway,
he died just past it. I tumble off the bike,
replace the wheels and roll, arms
snap legs bend into vines,
hums become scrapes,
sparks spray across my visor, a steady stream
means less bounce, less chance of punctured
organs. Helmet smacks,
bones crack. My seventeen
minutes expire. They won't remember
me for dying from the crash,
but from the memorized image of my motionless
body sliding across the road, approaching death.

SECTION III

OLYMPUS

In the army, when soldiers do not listen, people die. Civilians, especially children, do not understand this. When we go to the park, I consider every possible disaster: the wind gusts and the swing twists into a knot and strangles her; the merry-go-round unhinges, rolls wildly, crushes her; the rocking-horse spring loads too far and flings her brother into the horizon; the jungle gym shifts and dismembers her, the slide falls over and beheads him. Not to mention all the passing traffic. I wonder if they saved me, my wife, and my children, or if I have just doomed them, as my fears become projectiles in their lives. With the mood swings, the temper, the residual anger and resentment, the lack of communication, the inability to relate or empathize, my wife must have felt like I drafted her to be a soldier, to retroactively fight my war. I have to stop turning my war into their wounds.

I Cry Every Time I Drive

No screaming children someone
telling turns to unbend silence shakes
over-over anticipates every turn
round roadkill oncoming traffic feels present

one kid faces forward
invisible rear view *I spy something nellow*
flowers, street lines, sunsets
I brake at brightening lights

slow merging sedans elicit explicit
project deformed descriptions on moving van
cut cars off they swing onto shoulder
don't bother don't glance

silence can't survive the entire drive
scream with engine rev not roar
long road trip stretches like legs
on dash asleep every second not spent scrolling

kids fake sleep avoiding rest stops
fast food does the only filling
unanswered questions keep eyes off roads

Evangelical Choir Director

She wasn't strict, she was
a proper Christian mother. Meaning
she did what she was told
as did those she gifted with life.

She professed encompassing
acceptance, bookmarked hymns
about everlasting love, even
choreographed recitals centered
around understanding. At home,

things were to be a certain way.
It does not matter where you
remember putting things
or what you want
to wear. Never tap your knee.
She will let your brothers
hit you when you do. Everyone
will scream at you to stop. Save
yourself the trouble, tap your
foot instead. Lightly. *I remember*

*tapping my foot to a song
I don't know. I'm singing
center stage. The choir director waves
her hand, a wand without
the magic. I hated wearing
button-ups, buttoned
all the way up. But it turns out, buttons
were made with a purpose.
An Adam's apple
should only be visible to Eve.*

She ensures shirts are pressed,
the house is always pristine,
a tidy tithing to the lord. The boys
chip in, *as they should*.
Never a mess
to be seen. *Where
is the mess? I must be
on a witch hunt*. Proper is how
good little boys behave
at the store. No jumping
in racks of dresses,
no screaming back
at the lights. As soon as I went

to college, my questions made me
the family loon. Spoon-fed
liberal agendas, which not only dissect,
but directly attack Christian propaganda.
When I tell her, I don't
want my children to suffer
the same abuse of indoctrination,
she stares at the devil I must be.

Fully Fenced-in

Fluttering
behind that tree.
from another era. Judgement

Reflections

errors carve the scars into me.
Initials encased in hearts. Sticky
notes scatter thoughts, adhere moments of me.

The canopy sways. Light from stars dies in
branches. Spacewalks always occur inside.
Constellation crosswalks,
impeding celestial traffic.
Lunar face leers on, fully
phased. Swirling lines
do double Dutch upon
swimming pool surface.
A leaf jumps right in.

I Know Something

I'm not self-centered but,
I did think Rancid was singing
a song about my hometown,
until I was thirty-three. Turns out
it was about a bomb. One that started
fusing the second I corporealized
an explosion. I escape every four years,

when I move to another suburb,
with another set of reasons
to despise what I'm meant
to become. I frame the world
with the ridges of my expertise,
and nothing an inch outside it.
A wall decoration, oft stacked
in a box. I stare at the mirror
trying to ignore my reflection.

The glass sounds like the wind—
steady, soft breeze—whistling
a wooshy tale. Remembering when
the mountains spoke more than the men
carrying rifles. The radio doesn't click.
There isn't a dial. Only buttons.
The host, named after my past,
plays a song which catches my eye.

Eternally Ephemeral

I use my fourth or fifth copy of the Iliad
to take notes in logistics class,
the second book a study guide.
I know everything. I am aware
 of a fraction of nothing.
The boats were stacked with lineage,
the only battles avoided through
ancestors, invoked before the spear.

I feel like a poetic form
somewhere between villanelle and sestina
 disappeared quite recently,
literally vanished. No trace,
no tangible thought. Just the idea
the structure was there. It was
established, now there is
 only space.

 Not blankness. Unseen, stored
data. Unrouteable. Derouted.
Somehow still plugged in.
I hate listening to song lyrics.
 They speak more
 osmotically to me. I'm
resting, I'm what's the word which
 means enduring/rhymes with funeral?

I Miney Moed Every Major Decision

Déjà vu is not meant for
me. Intertwined reality.
Repeating what has not
happened. Iterations of ideas
so perfect though, they must have
occurred before. This
cannot be the first time.
We must always remain in
the midst. Embracing
either extreme and how their ends weave.

If I had chosen another
toe, perhaps I'd be living
coastally, still soaking, still seeping,
drinking and not yet weeping.

Never made it out onto or into
the ocean. It's not the sharks,
it's the vastness, the endless liminal
swaying, the pitch, the fear of turning
around and suddenly seeing.

Buying Gas with Quarters

I watch as the sun set behind
turns clouds cotton,
taffy—peaching pink.
Passed swaths of green—
uncut, unkempt, peripheral—
fields fluttering orange and brown,
flank the highway, a line

connects horizons. Journey
a nuisance. Who would wish
to linger within limits? Global
Positioning System reads road signs
before I make them out,
reminds me about upcoming direction.

Where I am becomes where I am lost.

No turn lanes, no-passing zones, no flow to traffic.
Headlights tuck

 into my bumper,
 urge the speedometer,
 & the shoulder drops off,
 ravine stretches down
 as far as road does out.

 What escape is there except forward?

 Toll roads are always the preferred route.

Away from the moment,

I cross inviting intersections,
Main Streets, and speed traps.
The right of way yields.
For a moment I question
if I'm driving on the same road
as before. The GPS drowns,
bubbles just below eardrums. Beats

stretch the lines of light
like astigmatism diamonds. I drift,
merge headlights oncoming.

Where Milk Costs More Than Gas

Ding! The low fuel icon
means twenty-seven miles to empty,
we've always made it before,
on fumes more than full tanks.
Twenty-six miles to my apartment.
Usually, I'd take Fairgrounds Rd.
& risk the seven stop signs,
but the kids are with me,
can't / better not risk dying before the lake.
Their mom would never find us on a back road.
No. Better
head up Perkins run out: at a red light,
where kids in cars around us watch *iPads*.
in a crowded department-store parking lot,
where people try to find enough space
in their trunk for just three more bags.
or even next to a pump at *OnCue*.

We have sticky nickels,
but carrying two children inside
to buy fifty cents of fuel is the same
as asking the cashier
if they'll spot me a tank. I'd rather
run dry on country roads, even
ask their mother again for help.
She can be our gas station savior,
we'll play eye-spy-with-my-little-eyes,
until she arrives. The kids' mom,
I never call her ex-wife, lives
just far enough away to rely on.
We'll just keep driving along
the way she knows how to help.

Good Dad, Bad Mom

Buys lots of presents.
Works too much.
Hires a babysitter.
Allows the kids to run.

Outside, at home, in the store.
Not visibly abusing.
They holler in the store,
Encouraging creativity,
misbehaving in public.
Strangers approve aloud,

Doesn't worry.
Parties on the weekend.
Calls a sober driver.
Apologizes for mistakes.

There is no nuance.
Indulgent with self-care.
disappear into the middle.
disrupting clothing racks,
Mirror displaying mirror.
provide a singular reflection.

Tinnitus

Starts with a hand cupped
Slapping the side of your
Head covering your ear
Sending the vibration
Drumming umming umming

I Know Sisyphus

You've got it all wrong
I don't know whether they love
Their stone or rolling it more.
Their stone
Or rolling it more
They love
Whether
I don't
Know you've got it
All wrong
I know the roll of Sisyphus' stone
I know the song it squeezes
From the hillside

The Molecules in Water Begin Vibrating

When I speak, I sound
like I'm seeking appraisal.

When I sigh, I signal
I'm seething. Tea kettle

when I shout. I show you
I'm soothing myself. When

I whisper, *I want you*
I'm staring at stainless steel.

Grounding

There is a pile of avocados. They are not hand grenades. Those watermelons are striped, not wired. The inflatable football field, atop the frozen food isle, is ineffective cover. The grocer stocking the bananas looks as annoyed as I am, there is barely a speck of yellow

in a field of phallic green. The handle for the cart is moist. I hope I've been sweating. My leggings are thin and cool today. They feel like my insides when I'm hugged by someone I didn't know loved me. My hair is tangled on the left. I'm sure I look vain, running both hands through it. The pineapple is heavier than I expected. The frond plucks right out. The automatic doors are not helicopter blades, they only opened

three times. The manager is explaining why the new cashier needs to arrive early not just on time. The lights buzz low, or maybe the fixtures are just higher in here. The prepackaged cookies open with that plastic pop. I'm glad the medical mask

keeps my breath from everyone around me. I finished all the coffee this morning. It's half the reason we are here. The other are those cakes, that warm baked flour, wafting into everyone. Biting my cheek, the metallic tint allows me to begin again.

The Air is Different

Ever since they were
Alive my first-born
Has been soothed by the sky.

Named after the stars,
They scream under roof.

As soon as the screen
Door opens, the
Steam rushes out,
The cool air overflows,

The wonder overwhelms.

No whimper, no wailing,
Slow steady breaths,
Not a single request.

VITA

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