

VETICAL HOLD: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

By

JEFF SIMPSON

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VETTICAL HOLD: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

Thesis Approved:

Lisa Lewis

Thesis Adviser

Ai Ogawa

Edward Walkiewicz

A. Gordon Emslie

Dean of the Graduate College

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VERTICAL HOLD

Early forms of anti-shake technology involved a physical corrector in the shape of an oil-filled bellows-effect prism lens inside the optical block. These artifices have become necessary as camcorders have shrunk in size and weight and been given longer zoom lenses: the human hands that hold them tend to tremble, one of the many physiological factors for which technology has to cater.

—Newnes Television and Video Engineer's Pocket Book

Twentieth-century, go to sleep.

—R.E.M., “Electroite”

Lessons in Childhood Development

If you were breastfed, consider yourself lucky.
You'll have a healthier immune system
and be less likely to develop suicidal tendencies.
But if you started on the bottle, you'll always
be on the bottle, metaphorically speaking,
and life shall be a downhill scooter race
from that point forward. Early physical objects
will play a formative role and continue to hold
immense psychic weight well into adulthood.
Imagine your first bedroom with the clown
wallpaper border. If you favored the hobo clown
with the five o'clock shadow, knapsack tied to a stick,
you'll forever plan exit strategies and possess
a disproportionate love for songs and movies
about the open road. This will be one of the chief
complaints your wife will dredge up years later
during marital counseling. Other possible items include,
but are not limited to: a Hulk Hogan action figure;
homemade slingshot; arrowheads; prosthetic hook;
gold pocket watch circa mid-1800s; autographed
Ken Griffey, Jr. rookie card; illegal bottle rockets
you kept in the closet waiting for the right moment,
which never came; etcetera, etcetera. Parental relations
will be instrumental in your ability to maintain a marriage
into your golden years. The day your father throws
a banana at your mother, you'll realize that even
the most harmless things bruise. The night your mother
chases your father with a butcher knife you'll learn
that everything has a certain order and place—*the flour
jar sits next to the sugar jar next to the coffee canister*.
Picture busted cabinet doors, hinges missing screws,
but everything so clean it's like a museum installment,
like a memory about to break—the saucer and plate.
Physical and psychological trauma are necessary
to prepare yourself for later disappointment,
but there are things to avoid: Don't run across the linoleum
floor with socks on, especially when it shines so bright
you'll swear it's made of glass. Never stage a BB gun
war in your backyard regardless of how much your teacher
discusses the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. Many shall be wounded.
Someone will lose an eye, someone part of a tooth.
In fact, sell your BB guns to Doug. He's naïve
as is his mom who comes home from the tire plant

so tired and frail she'll let him get away with anything.
When you hit puberty and feel like a balloon
in your stomach is about to pop, take your anger
out on something besides the family pet.
If you must, hurt yourself. Thumbtacks work
well, and if you're really having a bad day,
shoot yourself in the hand with a CO₂ powered
BB gun, unless you sold it to Doug, who'll buy
anything—back issues of *Penthouse*,
expired valium. Know that the smell of bacon
and pancakes will always be comforting.
When your wife leaves you in your early 30's
remember to make this meal the next morning.
If it doesn't help, order pigs in a blanket for lunch.
They taste similar, but are more acceptable
for noontime consumption. And if you still feel
like a dumpster that's been set on fire for Halloween,
shoot yourself in the hand with a staple gun or drag
a letter opener across your forehead. Tell coworkers
you're suffering from seasonal stigmata and ask
for the rest of the day off. On your way home,
stop by Doug's place. Show him your wedding band,
the pocket watch, the autographed rookie card.
Ask how he's doing. Ask what he'll take.

B.A. in English

There was so much to learn in those days,
so many things I avoided by hitting the snooze
button and counting backwards from ten.
I remember my first poetry professor,
an ex-chopper pilot who flew two tours in Nam
before landing on the conclusion that for all its Oxford
shirt dullness, academia is safer than landmines
and leaky hydraulics, and how one night over beers
and corndogs he confessed he's still terrified of trees
except for the ones that stand half-dead and lonesome
against the horizon like you'll see driving west
down I-40 toward Amarillo, where there's little more
than clouds and feedlots. This was at a time
when I was really into hair gel and The Pretenders
and generally sabotaging myself, be it sleeping
with my girlfriend's sister or leaving the new gallon
of milk on the counter until things appeared in the jug.
I suppose reading the canon and getting high with Mike
Chandler between classes kept me sane just as the adjunct
professor who complained about her band director husband
and his boring trumpet when she should've been dishing
Huck Finn and the transformative power of rafting,
kept me entertained, even if I wanted to tell her every
Monday, Wednesday, Friday to stick to the fucking text.
Don't like your life? Step in front of a big rig or drown yourself
in a frozen margarita. Hate the instrument you got handed
at the altar? Try your lips on a woodwind or join the choir.
What I remember most about that time is not Chrissie Hynde,
not Huck and Jim counting starts on the Mississippi
or the nights I stumbled around campus alone and drunk
on Maker's Mark, but the semester I worked nights
in the adult GED program at Tomlinson Middle School,
where every evening I was paired with Frank since I was new
and he habitually chewed the bones of his past, the ones
you and I keep buried in the yard, like how he'd come up
close and talk softly about shooting so much heroin
he had to inject it into his cock, the last usable vein
in his body. These details clearly bothered my coworker
Sonja, a Croatian exchange student, who didn't care Frank
was a hardcore biker until he put himself into a coma
after running his Harley into the side of a minivan
or that his brain had smashed against the snow globe of his skull
until families of neurons blew apart and drifted down

to the glittery street below. Now when carefully reads
and pronounces *chilly*, he can't remember it means it's cold
outside or that it's something you eat when the weather turns blue.
Once Sonja had had enough of Frank's anecdotal life and him
to gather his shit and go home, which he confused with *gnome*
and spent the rest of the night thinking we were making fun
of his room at the halfway house because of the hat he wore
to cover his scars. At break I walked to the bench across the street
where Sonja and I met and smoked these thin cigarettes
her mother mailed from back home. I told her any man willing
to share something about his dick besides size or splendor
is legit, as in trustworthy, but that only made me suspect
as a fellow weirdo. Then I had to go back inside and explain
that *spicy* is not a designation of weather but is relative to food,
like *chilly* with an "i"—that it's all relative. You could read
Wordsworth or the back of a Kix cereal box and find beauty
and truth, or not, that we're all guilty of bait and switch
as we say one thing, but mean something else entirely.
And I thought this would comfort Frank, as it did
when I discovered I could burn my girlfriend's toast or sleep
with her sister and the universe would judge me the same.
But he just stared into his workbook with the perforated
pages, then looked at me and said, *The wreck decapitated*
my girlfriend, and I'd said, *I know, Frank, but tomorrow's a new day,*
and the forecast said there's a chance the weather will be nice
and spicy, and if it's not, remember to hit the snooze button
and count backwards from ten, whispering there's no place like gnome.

The Fifth of July

A car down the street backfires, and Max jumps from my lap, spilling Beefeater down my shirt, and for a moment I think about kicking him or tossing my glass and what's left of the ice and gin into his terrier face—those all too human eyes—because I was raised to believe that everything deserves a little pain now and then. He comes back to the sofa, ears folded back, looking culpable as all dogs do when they've disappointed their owners. I say *Good boy* and hope he understands. Good boy for sitting, for shaking, for not barking and letting the neighbors go in peace. These days, I only kick in my sleep when I dream back to the summer I turned eleven—Roman candles and cherry snow cones—the smell of rust and old tires at Manny's junkyard, where me and Tony sifted through mountains of scrap metal for bicycle parts, cutting our hands on broken stoves and water heaters, the doors from a once green Chevelle. The next day after the *oohs* and *awws*, the bombs bursting in air, we rode back to the park to finish our pyrotechnics among the debris of independence—beer cans and fruit rinds, ashes from the bonfire scattered across the grass, the whole scene like an actress thrust into daylight, blemishes and all. We found Spencer and his little sister twirling sparklers by the gazebo, looking proud to play with fire and not get burned. He came over, all pleated shorts and clean shoes, to show off the handcuffs his parents bought him—real handcuffs, a cop's handcuffs—the kind you could use against resisting fathers or delinquent mothers. I remember the metal caught the sun like a prism as he latched and unlatched each side—the beauty of new things in the days when everything we wanted had to be found, assembled, or stolen from a pickup bed. A cool breeze swept through the trees, and I looked at Tony just before he punched Spencer in the eye, clenching his face into a tight ball as he reached across his handlebars. We could've stopped there—should have stopped there—but because we were bored or poor or too young to understand the particulars

of money and class division, we kicked him
to the ground, shackled his arms behind a lamp pole,
and stood there tossing firecrackers in the heat—
the tiny explosions starbursting whelps over his legs,
his screams mixing with the pops and bangs
like an 8-track cassette. We stood there and sweated
fuses like cowboys timing their assault on the unwary
stagecoach with a stick of dynamite—jubilant,
exalted, screaming into the boy's wet face,
You crybaby! You fuckin' mamma's boy!
What do you do when the day tries to burn out
your heart? How do you keep your hands steady
when the world gives you so much to cry about?
Years later, Tony would drive me to a party
in some empty field below a planetarium of stars.
The goal was to shotgun a six-pack and run through
the darkness until you smashed into someone,
your atoms colliding with theirs. Much of me is the same
except I can afford better booze and a little more light.
In the morning, I find the remains of a baby possum
Max has left next to my boots. Such a sweet gesture.
Such a good boy to leave his kill for me—
a gift wrapped in love and malice.

Miami, OK

I can do whatever I want. I'm rich, I'm famous, and I'm bigger than you.
—Don Johnson

My parents' bedroom, 1987, gateway to the land of Technicolor and remote controls, where every Thursday night that electric opening fueled by stereophonic guitars and Afro-Caribbean drums would echo through the house, signaling the beginning of *Miami Vice*—wild flamingos and busty women, sweeping helicopter shots of the great Atlantic surf crashing into South Beach. How could you not love the barely plausible exploits of Crockett & Tubbs as they operated undercover, driving Ferraris and go-fast boats and wooing all those cocoa-butter damsels in distress? How could you not love the slip-on, sockless loafers, white linen pants, Armani jackets, t-shirts in shades of pink, blue, green, and fuchsia, the big-ass Ray-Bans and Floridian sunsets falling behind the buildings of downtown Miami? My mother loved Don Johnson the way girls once loved The Beatles or Elvis, and she often joked she'd leave my father for her Don Juan of the everglades with his rugged good looks, tan skin, and slick hair, leaving me and my younger brother to feel sorry for a Scots-Irish lineman with a cleft chin and a bad temper. The poor bastard wouldn't stand a chance, we thought, should fate intercede, and, late at night, listening to our parents have sex from our twin bunk beds, giggling at the asthmatic breathing and muffled moans that sometimes sounded like pain, I'd picture his ghost-image lingering on the screen, all beard stubble and white teeth, watching them make love in the dark. How could you blame her for the fantasy of a glamorous cop busting drug lords and pimps and saving her from the hopelessness of Oklahoma and Reagan's trickle-down depression, for her resistance to a place whose beauty lies in wheat fields and oil fields and cattle fields and barren fields where nothing but mesquite trees grow, whose beaches surround muddy lakes that'll stain a white bathing suit faster than you can say bleach? And how can you blame me for taking after my mother, that bodily ache for things I can't possess—muscle cars and Super Bowl tickets, Jennifer Beals dancing around my living room in her *Flashdance* leotard? After all, there's an "I" in *family* and another in *vice*, though it rides between two consonants the way I'm sliding between the land of the living and the kingdom of desire. Even now, as I stand in my bedroom clutching

a honeymoon photo of me and my wife on a beach in Cozumel—
two lowercase i's wading in the surf beneath blue skies—
I'm thinking of someone else, a different wife, a better wife
standing on a better beach closer to Miami.

Reunions

This is the night of the living dead, or the morning after,
which I always imagine as a hangover
of restless souls, human and zombie alike, converging
to maim each other in the spirit
of fellowship, but today we've come here for the brisket
and potato salad
and the moonshine, which threatens to melt the two-liter
Mountain Dew bottle into an emerald
puddle while a group of third cousins tune guitars,
fiddles, dobros, an electric bass,
before singing songs about the heartland and their collective
achy breaky hearts.
And so we'll huddle up because we are bound by blood,
or so the story goes. Year after year,
we come here to catch up on the latest weather reports,
obituaries, the pitiful retelling
of Uncle Ed's death, a man who, as far as I can tell, was never
anybody's uncle, tales of triumphant
poker games or the purchasing of a new Lincoln, fables
with plots that remind me
of a pulp novel I once found at a truck stop in Tucumcari:
Trailer Park Trash,
a tale of two people whose "love was as mobile as their home."
Mobile love and mobile people
who once migrated from Mobile, Alabama to the southern
plains of Oklahoma
to work the oil fields and multiply, and now there are kids
running around the room I've never seen,
bodies floating to and fro inside the Seminole Convention
Center next to the Jimmy Austin
Golf Course where men in polo shirts are teeing off
on the eleventh hole,
dreaming of the nineteenth, bourbon and cigars for everyone,
while workers from the Department
of Corrections operate heavy machinery, pluck crab grass
from velvety greens.

What is this fascination with all the little cells of the world—
family reunions, class reunions,
Sting and The Police reuniting for one last performance
of "Roxanne"?
What is this love for folding chairs and vinyl table cloths,
for supreme carrot cake,

for bullet holes and war stories, for rumors of illnesses,
stints in rehab,
for knowing at what age I can expect to develop Parkinson's?
The band revs up.
The music bears us as we bear the music, as we lay witness
to tradition and ceremony
and rituals, the way Cherokee women wear their hair long
until the death of a loved one,
then out come the scissors, the way small town citizenry
fill the stands on homecoming
adorned with war paint and gold bells, the way peaceniks
and students poured into Altamont
in '69 to watch Mick Jagger, all snarl and swagger,
sing "Gimme Shelter"
to a swirling mob of Hells Angels so they could feel like they
belonged to one great human tribe.
And I'll admit I'm partial to concerts and bikers
and leather jackets,
just as I'm partial to all these people who have my mother's
eyes and possess a genealogy
of patchwork quilts, some bearing the name of every first-born
son because we're a family
of male heirs, because we're phallocentric, because the band
plays on as I sit forking my carrot
cake and drinking my coffee before it goes cold, before I start
to forget the names.

If You Ain't Got the Do Re Mi

Someone in the hall yells *Dominoes!*
and just like that I'm shuffling bones
over a card table—the clink-clink sound
like dropping marbles into a wine glass.
Fresh coffee, a slice of pie, and all appears
as worn and smooth as an old Zippo.
We have a radio and a space to eat,
a space to talk, and when you don't
feel like speaking, a space for silence
and an ashtray or a game to pass the time.
I play the double six, sip my coffee
and gaze into the faces of men who never
went to war, never fought for peace and love
or made it to college, but left the schoolyard
in the seventh grade and spent the last hours
of daylight welding horse trailers from the bare
bones of steel beams, oiled and smoothed,
then transformed into cages to haul
thoroughbreds to Shreveport, Santa Fe,
Oklahoma City, where four hooves
and a beating heart are the means
to a capital gain, a ticket for the small
things in life—new linoleum, new washer
and dryer, new teeth, the new smell
of a new car.

If I'm lucky, I'll lead this hand
with a dime or a nickel—anything
for a break, a good start. I take a bite
of pie. I run my thumb across the pips
on the tile as if reading the future in Braille,
picturing casinos off the interstate
shining like Vegas, Mecca of blinking
lights and three dollar steaks, where before
there were only hay barns and unbroken
lengths of sky. I picture sparrows on a fence,
mockingbirds in the trees, farmers
planting subsidized corn in the dark,
knowing it will fail, knowing if the roots
take hold they can fertilize every acre
until it burns and withers back into dust
for the coming spring—anything for a little
disaster relief, a handout in the heartland
because you can forget your stock portfolio,

forget about strapping what's left of your
belongings to a Model T and heading west.
There's no more California, no prospects
of fortune. This state's rush was in '68
when impulsive welders went north to work
the pipeline, sealing gaps with exquisite beads,
pretty as Victorian penmanship.

After all, this is where the wind
comes sweeping down the plains,
where license plates tell us everything is *OK*,
and it is, I suppose, so long as there's honey
in my honey bear and milk in the fridge.
For every grey sky, the kiss of spring.
For every dead field, rodeos in July—
the odor of cotton candy and horseshit,
popcorn and keg beer. We sit in the stands
waiting for a renegade bull or a clown
to get what's been coming for him
his whole life. Strange how much we love
disaster, how I'll watch the Daytona
500, hoping for a collision, praying for a spill,
until it's not so much a race as an assembly
of motorized billboards smashing into one
another at 188 miles per hour—100 more
than the 88 required to get back to the future
and away from clock towers and the pressure
to ensure your own existence.

Someone changes the station and America
sings out on the radio—Crystal Gale followed
by Marty Robins followed by Woody Guthrie
and his tiresome locomotive blues—
song of the dust bowl, song of the banjo,
song of the boxcar and red clay dirt.
I check my watch. I drop a tile and look
for a pattern, though I've got nothing
but a double blank. I think I'm just better
on paper. There's more danger in a Popsicle
stick than my fingertips. The trick is to be
on the go, the way alcoholics' mouths
move even when they're not speaking.
On the muted TV, they're showing images
of the Murrah building—song of the Ryder
truck, song of ammonium nitrate.
The hours pile up like seeds in a grain elevator,
but if you got the money, honey, I got the time.
We start another round, draw another hand,

and I start to wonder about the places
I could've been tonight—song of Astroturf,
song of the reservation, song of the doublewide,
the La-Z-Boy, the microwavable pancake
dinner. The tiles start to resemble a jagged
spine misshapen after years of bad posture.
I try not to overthink the next play.
I tell myself that in the end, every move's
the same, so you might as well take off
your coat and drop another quarter, say another
prayer, score the odds on horses and weather,
the likelihood of an early spring—
song of the cattle prod, the seed catalogue,
the convergence of pressure systems
that'll huff and puff and blow your house in.

Phantom Pains

Morning and a pair of roses leaning against the lip
of a mason jar make me think of imaginary numbers
and the impermanence of organic compounds.
Like all of us, even newborns asleep behind panes
of plexi-glass, the roses were dead the moment
they arrived. Now, staring at them from across the room,
I can see mold has gathered around the stems,
turning the water a shade of green.
And so I tell myself this is how it should be—
a little rust bleeding into the stark, raw whiteness
of the petals, so I can once and for all quit believing
in longevity. In this equation, there is no interval
between possibility and a sure bet.
For my grandfather it was a question of artifacts,
collecting keychains and arrowheads the way children
are drawn to marbles and baseball cards.
I never asked him why, but I suspect it had something
to do with 1963, the year he lost his right hand to an oil
well and bad timing. He said he could still feel his fingers
in the form of a tightly clenched fist. I once watched
him scratch the end of his prosthetic hook while the radio
played songs about western heartache, songs with town
names like Midland and Bakersfield. All of this moves
in flashes like the light coming through the trees
while I sip coffee and read about how to winterize
a hot tub, a two-for-one coupon to the history museum
where they're showcasing a pioneer exhibit
complete with wax figures and the relics of nineteenth-
century life—six shooters and tobacco tins, hip waders,
shovels, pickaxes. In one room, wagon wheels and a set
of laudanum bottles. In the next, display cases
filled with handwritten ledgers kept by store merchants
to track what came in, what went out, like a narrative
of desire and acquisition. In this equation, let X equal
the momentary pleasure of sunlight, let Y equal
the sum of spoiled roses and nerves singing to things
no longer there. And I am grateful to have all my nerves
intact, save a botched wisdom tooth extraction.
But what is gratitude? What is wisdom? Most mornings
I lie in bed watching the grey light filter through Venetian
blinds and try to think of a reason to get up, get dressed
and face the day—coffee and Eggos and a cigarette
to ease my transition from one point to the next.

If I'm lucky, five o'clock will be here soon.
And then joy, and then the shock of joy,
and then nothing but the recollection of a feeling.

Swimming the English Channel

Midway through the fifth lap
and already I'm struggling to keep
my arms in sync, my body streamlined
to reduce drag. I've been coming
to the Y since May, but July's splashing
me in the face, saying it's time
to hang up my Speedos and call it a day.
But I like slipping into the heated pool
to revisit distant bathwaters and pretend
I'm swimming my own version of the English
Channel, just as I like praising the exactness
of models—the methodical calculations
and recalculations—the record keeping.
Besides, who's to say this cloudy tank's
not built to scale? The lifeguard twirls
a whistle around and around her finger,
idly watching the regulars—semi-retirees
twice my age who glide by with such fluidity
as to keep alive the fantasy that I, too,
may one day seem graceful,
that I could make the backstroke look easy
the way Tom Glavine makes a changeup
look effortless, a perfect bluff.
There are daydreams and then there are day-
dreams. Between sets, Dan, the 57-year-old
father of three, tells me swimming led him
to church, which led him back to the pool
like some circuitous baptism
and then invites me to Wednesday service.
I say *No thanks* and swim away in a kind
of half paddle, half breaststroke
because I don't believe things need saving,
but execution. I'm talking about
the leg bone connected to the hip bone.
I'm talking about movement
and endeavors of grand proportions—
grandmas running the Boston Marathon,
eccentrics swimming the Amazon,
mountaineers who climb Everest,
despite frostbite and pulmonary edema,
hypoxia or the threat of losing
your fucking marbles in a land not suited
for the human foot when I can't even stand

chapped lips or the remnants of chlorine
rising out of my skin two days after a swim.
Still I come here, lest I succumb
to drowning, I hit bottom. You see,
I'm talking about heat exchange and objects
in motion remaining in motion.
I'm talking about channeling myself
toward something mystical and unimagined.
Something reckless.

Ode to the Man in Red Sweatpants

When the man in red sweatpants on tonight's episode of *COPS* says that once finished with a batch of kitchen sink meth, he boils the coffee filters to siphon every last molecule, I feel grateful to have my teeth intact, to have sweatpants without any holes in them, a house with houseplants and a decent back porch, for I've been down, but not that down. I've been low, but never too low, though I've known folks who asked directions to the valley of death, have talked to them during visiting hours, wrote letters, sent care packages, and still I'm grateful, as I imagine you are sometimes grateful, that the man in red sweatpants is out there, running around the woods, shirtless and dizzy, trying to make things work or work things out because somebody's gotta take one for the team, someone has to be the goose among the ducks at recess. While I was eating my unpronounceable sandwich from the fancy sandwich place, the man in red sweatpants was burning his fingers. While you were busy blow-drying your hair, the man in red sweatpants was keeping up with demand for those of us hiding our lives in plain sight like CIA operatives or that Boston cream doughnut I didn't want my coworkers to find among the glazed. Stand still and the beast won't see you—or he will—in which case your best defense is to run in circles, shouting and thrashing your arms. Yesterday the news reported that java stands in Seattle have turned to sex to survive in the marketplace. Picture light rain and scantily dressed baristas in black bras and see-through tops blowing kisses, grinding beans, pouring steamed milk from containers that, at certain angles, reflect a distorted canvas of tan skin. Picture the lady in Tulsa who got busted filming love scenes with her lab and blue heeler, my urologist advising me to drink more water, masturbate less. And what about the man in red sweatpants? Everything's going as planned until the deputies escort him to the squad car.

He makes a beeline for the woods—a terrible path
to follow when evading law enforcement—
and gets tackled by Rosco, canine extraordinaire,
as the crowd goes wild. If the monkey doesn't get you,
the dogs will. If someone doesn't shoot you
in the face over car keys, you'll be struck
by lightning or die in a gas explosion. Have no fear.
Thy Fritos and bean dip will comfort thee.
Someone will prepare a table; heads shall be anointed.
These things will follow, will carry you until
every need's compressed, every drop squeezed
out like love, like the last sip of coffee
in the bottom of your cup.

Thyroidectomy

Once the woman is asleep, they tape her eyelids
and remove the top of her gown. Her large breasts
fall to the sides of her ribcage, and I'm a little

embarrassed to look there because I don't even
know her name. Fourteen years old, I'm watching
my surgeon-cousin Jim, who snuck me into the OR

because I want to be the next Doogie Howser,
pull this woman's throat apart like a puzzle
with a zipper. The lights in this place are almost

unbearable, as are the machines buzzing and beeping
and turning gears to maintain pressure and breath.
I ask, *Where's the epiglottis, where's the voice box,*

and then start to worry her stitches won't come out
right. Scars don't become women, my mother used to say,
and things aren't looking good for this patient

whose throat has become a honeycomb of broken
vessels while she lies there like a sheet on a clothesline,
only she's not swaying in some summer breeze,

but falling deeper and deeper into the steel table,
and then I remember my brother once clotheslined
me coming around the north corner of our house,

and I couldn't talk for a week. The surgeons take turns
removing the gland in sections to check for signs of cancer
and calcium deposits, and I can't stop thinking about scalpels

and recovery time, and how if she could sing from right here
on this very table, what would I hear with everything
pulled open like a piano full of mallets and wire and sound.

Stag Night

We're drinking in a bar during the initial hours of a friend's bachelor party. He's drinking some Scandinavian ale because he believes light beer makes him skinny. Sometimes I'll buy a 30-pack of Natural Light just to feel like it's high school again, but tonight we need something stout to meet here and talk and feign interest about our lives. The waitress brings buffalo wings smothered in ranch dressing. Sometimes this is as good as it gets—fried chicken and exaggerated claims from the past. Dave remembers the half-torso our junior high science teacher used to demonstrate the jigsaw arrangement of our organs. She named the half-torso Steve. Dave stole Steve's heart. I took his left kidney. No one knows what happened to his lungs, but I remember she told us a man is the sum of his parts. Didn't someone say *things fall apart*? Didn't three blind men fondle an elephant and say the parts can never form a whole? The bachelor starts to lose his shit and flirts with the waitress who smiles and laughs at his jokes though she looks tired and as bored as those of us still sober enough to recognize pity. At closing time, we drive back to our hotel suite. Bottles are opened, joints passed around. We all laugh when someone buys porn on the TV. We laugh more when we hear someone hired three strippers to come over when they finish their shift at the club. Candy, Genesis, and Starla arrive with impossible names—though I once had a crush on a cheerleader named Candy who everyone said would put out, but didn't—they're greeted with shouts and dollar bills as they spin in and out of laps to Zeppelin, and I think it's been a long time—a *lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely time* since I paid for a dance and felt how desperate each of us could be for something new. One of the girls straddles me, runs my hands through the crevice between her breasts. Her skin is soft the way I imagine lily pads would feel if I were silly enough to wade into the middle of a pond to touch one.

The bachelor stuffs what's left of his money,
including a fifty, into his jeans, shouting
for the girls to *come and get it!*
Of course, he's too drunk to get it up and enjoy
what could be the high point of his life.
Sometimes this is as good as it gets, and nights
like these become the stuff of legend in the retelling
of the moment when the pants came off
and we all stared at something we've been afraid
to see—beer bellies and double chins, the flaccid
future dangling before our eyes. The girls' bouncer
says, *That's enough*. They collect their money
and leave. We go quiet like wildebeests in the presence
of a predator—lesbian nurses on the TV, Nine Inch
Nails on the stereo.

Ode to Love Handles

Pencil *You look like the Michelin Man*
onto a list of things not to say during sex,

as well as the ill-conceived reply that she is,
and always has been, a goddamn bore in the sack.

Understand when she confiscates your DQ Blizzard,
skims your milk, takes away your peanut butter

cookies, she wants you to grab a jog, eyeball
Oprah, comb *Men's Health* so you can solve

all of life's waddle problems. And, no, she won't
count *Playboy* articles as productive reading,

like the one explaining the best way to organize
a mini bar you quoted one night at a party

even though you've never owned a mini bar,
unless you count the kitchen cabinet with the half

bottle of Crown, plastic cups, birthday napkins,
and a blender you've used on two occasions.

You have to stand your ground. You have to say
I will have potatoes mashed in gravy, spare ribs

and apple pie because I got a meat tooth
and a sweet tooth and room for all the sides.

When she pinches your *manos de amor*,
when she slaps your tummy and says you're

an image spit from your father: stretched at the lake
in his blue dolphin trunks—cold beer in one hand,

chicken leg in the other—you have to say
I am the walrus, and I contain fucking multitudes.

Install handlebars if you want utility.
Ditch the spare tire if you want love without judgment.

And don't believe what they say, that women lovingly
hold onto them while you thrash around in the dark.

Know there are only so many ways to get from
point A to point B without extra baggage,

that none of us, no matter how round or monstrous
we become, can ever offer anything to hold.

Letter Sent Via Amniocentesis

Three weeks before your due date,
and I can't stop thinking of all the things
I would revise if I, like you, were just stepping
into this world. For starters, I wouldn't have
given my bus seat to Mickey Allen,
the tallest and meanest boy in fifth grade.
I would have looked him square in the eye
and thrown the meanest left hook since Frazier.
I would've learned to break-dance,
dated cheerleaders, stolen cars for the sheer
thrill of getting caught. You see, I'm talking
now in the conditional tense—I would, I would
not. I would've never learned the intricate dance
of apology and pardon. There are many versions
of your conception: Certain barriers broke,
other barriers did not exist. To this I've nothing
significant to add, but I will tell you that your
father was young, though you will see him age
and crawl home stinking of grease. He was young
and your mother was young and I was young
once, too, and soon you will understand we come
from a line of distant men who did not speak
or whistle while they worked, and one day you
will also spawn some version of yourself and learn
not to recognize its presence. You must learn to live
without curfews and anti-lock brakes because life
can't be predicted, no matter your belief in horoscopes
and crystal balls. Hold fast to the reins because in all
likelihood your parents will name you Lane,
after a deceased bull rider who was gored by the ugliest
longhorn in Texas, which means you're also destined
to die at the hands of something you love—
cradled by that which punctures your heart.
You see, there is so much riding on you—the sins
of your father and your father's brother and a whole
history of grandfathers stacked like corpses atop
your shadow's shadow. I am telling you this not
so much for your benefit, but for the memory
of my past self still sobbing in the corner
of some roller-rink over the death of the mirror
ball and young love. Hear me when I say
this world is as bright as a coal mine, that you
must use your hands or learn to see in the dark.

Color Depicting the Inherent Value of Things

White blooms in the trees
give shape to the dark street below.

Everything we know, a contrast—
the muted female cardinal,

black and white photos, conflicting
blots of color on canvas.

And we are no different,
painting every wall,

every surface down to the kitchen
ceiling. Call it a fresh start,

a new place where the body
can grow, the relationship

between crab and shell.
So many hues, so much confusion

mixed into every gallon,
but if we can believe in the palette

and the wheel, complementary
shades dividing the bedroom,

we can believe in anything.
Because I am terrible with my hands,

entire systems fall away from me—
brush patterns and engine mechanics,

the finer points of operating
a table saw. But she leaves nothing behind—

no separations, no bleed through,
no holes in the fabric of the spell

we're under—*Plum Rose, Island
Green, Desert Sand*. Her hands

are as magnificent as the night
she rolled three joints for me

and my two roommates
when we had nothing but time

and the starless blue horizon—
not sky blue, but the electric

blue flame on a grill.
Everything we know, a contrast,

another division of color—
ivory bones, pink lungs, grey feathers

bleeding into the worn-out red
of old barn doors, thunderheads

swelling behind the last bits
of sun. Buy me a house I can arrange

and mold into something elegant.
Hold me to every square foot,

every habitable corner—red bricks,
white door, nice even coats of paint.

Ode to Suede

I lost my virginity on a suede sofa—*not* the luxurious kind—the sort you buy on impulse at a discount outlet

south of town and upwind from a dog food plant.
This model came fully-loaded with dark stains

and oval-shaped cigarette burns the size of rubies
or the indentions from a hole puncher.

The couch had been stored in my grandparents'
avocado green camper trailer ever since they purchased

a new sectional with spring-loaded footrests,
pull-down armrest, and back cushions so thick

and fluffy they could make even the most portly man
feel at home. I watched Miranda undress down

to her socks. As our bodies moved against the fabric—
awkward at first, like an engine misfiring then starting,

then stopping and starting again—I could smell Old
Spice from the nights my grandfather threw his spittoon

against the kitchen wall after losing three hundred
in a domino game and spent the next three nights

curled like a fetus into the napped upholstery.
Miranda wasn't as sweet as her name, which I loved

because it rhymed with *veranda*—a sound like putting
pearls in my mouth, like brushing my teeth

with caviar at a time when everyone I knew
sat on porches built with cinder blocks and warped

two-by-fours. I didn't know what I felt then was not love,
not tenderness, but a rush of blood making me dizzy

and sick, though watching her—goose bumps on the skin,
nipples erect—I was ready to love anything.

Afraid I'd come too soon, I traced my finger around
the edge of a burn mark, counting the revolutions in my head.

I thought of algebra and the chemical formula for bleach.
I thought about Andy's older brother Tom

showing us how he and his buddies played chicken,
letting a Lucky Strike burn to the filter on their forearms.

When that didn't work, I recited the names of fish I'd
caught—*catfish, bluegill, sandies, striper, drum*—

and got lost in the naming like the day losing its heat.
The fear kept me moving. The suede made it soft.

Letter from a Hypochondriac

Dear Abby,

Every day I wait for a phone call to tell me a biopsy shows an army of malignant cells standing at full attention. Often, *my* attention turns to the pain in my right shoulder, an old football injury I suffered while riding pine freshmen year. Any sensation of light-headedness I may or may not be experiencing encourages me to schedule another CAT scan, an EKG, random blood tests.

The doctors say I'm in perfect health. They say my body clings to life despite myself. But don't laugh. You know you've been there, to the place in your life where every pain, joint creak or unexplained tingling sends dread tumbling to the bottommost compartment of your bowels.

When I thought I was going blind due to migraines I suffered while reading Milton, I consulted WebMD, which was not helpful, then saw my ophlamologist who, after two complete exams, pronounced my eyes to be in working order. He said I had 20/15 vision. He said I could fly fighter jets á la *Top Gun*, all loose speed and sharp turns.

My therapist says most people wait their entire lives for something ugly to arrive in the mail. I'm waiting for throat cancer, hip replacements, some catch-all wasting disease that'll age me like an old book. Sometimes I think I feel my prostate enlarging like a diseased heart. Sometimes I imagine swells of bacteria eating through the halls of my brain until there's nothing left.

And Abby, when I hear the hazy breathing of my father spilling like water over flood gates, it is my breath, and I have to remember my lungs are fine. That I'm not about to drown.

Paris, TX

We move along at a certain velocity, a visible movement
through air as the speedometer vacillates between joy

and excess, hugging the shoulder, heading nowhere.
You might say *escape*, you might say *momentum*.

Just a century ago you and I were riding trains out into the prairie—
drifts of smoke, the hum of locomotive gears, and I wish

for all the salted peanuts of our days we could go back
to telling time by the pocket watch, so I could smile and call

you Susan in the heat of 4:30. But time is now atomic;
a digital counter tracks electrons falling faintly

from a ball of gas, and we are here, half asleep, watching
the sun stretch across the flats of Texas because all we

have is the sweet nothing of the hour—bucket seats
and a radio instead of talk, a map in our hands showing us

the way east until we come to the next road sign—
Paris, 11 miles, so far from the dark Seine and artists

hawking portraits of the city's grand dame and her High
Gothic windows. This Paris, in all its lonestar glory,

boasts an Eiffel Tower topped with a red cowboy hat,
as if to say *We sell crepes during halftime*, as if to say

Our distance is measured in yards. I've been told my lifeline
runs deep like an old river, even though the channel

between my head and heart converges to a single yellow line.
It's the kind of road that gathers crows. This is the sort of town

that thrives on chinstraps and alma maters. What is driving
if not placing one foot in front of the other? What is a road trip

but sex with seatbelts and front crumple zones?
When the road turns to gravel, when the wheels let go,

give me bright lights and a scoreboard running low on time.
Give me a *Dead End*. Give me a *W*, give me an *I*, give me an *N*.

Still Life with Pomegranates

Three pomegranates resting in a porcelain bowl atop a worn oak table.
The light in the window suggests autumn, and you can sense that leaves
have gathered outside the kitchen door, a dead hen hangs from the rafters

waiting to be plucked and boiled for soup. Of course the painter shows
only the necessary details, as he must have worked into the early hours
to guide our eyes toward the simple pleasure of three red spheres

lying in a cracked bowl. He doesn't suggest it was the pomegranate
that tempted Persephone into the underworld, or that certain Roman-era
coins depicted Aphrodite, the goddess of abundance, holding the fruit

in her upturned palm, nor does he allude to Botticelli's infant Jesus
clutching what at first appears to be a human heart torn down the middle.
The painting gives so little, and in return I ask for more—whitewashed

plaster and wood smoke, a pair of muddy boots by the door. I want hunger
spread over the canvas with a pot of steaming soup and a sharpened knife,
the hands of a woman tearing into the fruit to get at what matters inside.

Into Soil

Where the green paint flakes from the hood and doors,
where daybreak illuminates the dirty streets,

where dogs no longer bark but lie quietly in the grass,
is where the mystery ends and something like pain begins,

as the best of my intentions are lifted like fingerprints
from a wine glass, a smug kiss pressed upon the windshield

of a '53 Ford Victoria rusting against the fence line.
And the killdeer building its nest, and the mothers feeding

their young, and the sprinklers watering the lawns.
Can you hear it? Can you hear the static on the TV,

the rattle and hum of gunfire? Are you listening
from where you last left the lilacs blooming

in despair for a shooting star, for that western dream
some say still lingers over the dark, middleclass skies

of Ohio, Indiana, Missouri—Kansas, Oklahoma,
Texas? Nerves singing. Bodies singing as the heart

erodes into soil, as the river rises then departs like steam,
like mist in the woods where moss grows thick among

the detritus and tall pines that rise sixty feet
before branching toward the bright decaying stars.

Hymn

The wrought-iron fence, decorative
metalwork intertwined with white roses,
is alive with the hum of summer bees.

Inside, Quaker pews face one another
like tapestries on opposite ends
of a home, and the hardwood floor,
heavy with the smell of varnish and pine,
shines in the light pouring through gothic
windows. No one speaks.

The idea, I'm told by the friend
who brought me here, is to observe
silence. It is so quiet I can hear
the slow breathing of the woman
sitting next to me, who smells of lavender oil.

An hour into service a middle-aged man
stands up and begins talking
about his dead wife, her seven-year
battle with cancer, how he felt when he flung
her ashes into the Potomac on a gray afternoon
last February. No one replies. A few nod,
but most look out the windows or carefully
unwrap peppermints—there is no sermon.

They say silence gives meaning to sound,
that if you're still long enough the world
becomes apparent, and you can hear
everything—cancer cells and worker bees,
river water and the sound of iron rods
being hammered and welded into something
elegant for the climbing rose to cling to and die.

Upon Reading Elvin Jones has Died of Heart Failure
in Englewood, New Jersey

A week before you died—
while changing the oil in my car—
I listened to *A Love Supreme*
and felt that the way you played
was like the wind rolling
across the plains—
sometimes in a dust storm
of heavy grooves, sometimes
like the soft hush of leaves
on an August afternoon.

Just seven days ago
your voice could be heard;
your pulse was as alive
as the redbuds trading
their magenta for new leaves
the way we trade dusks
for dawns, darkness for light.

And now, after reading you died
motionless in a hospital bed,
hooked to machines and IV tubes
because the chief organ in your
body responsible for rhythm
had given out, or given up,
I think of all the nights
you must have been near death's
horizon with the long solos
you had to hold together under
the haze of hot lights. I think
of the Vanguard and the songs
I won't hear you play,
the procession of women
leaving flowers on your grave.

Poem Beginning in the Front Seat of a Cadillac

Early June and driving down a highway
with no idea where I'm going.

Like a giant, prehistoric bird
I feel the compass in my brain pulling

me across state lines toward some magnetic
destination I've only dreamed about.

My mouth is dry, but I can still taste
the coffee and jelly doughnut

I had for breakfast as I sit watching
a semi-truck burn to the ground

outside Monticello, Utah, a terrible place
with hideous rock formations

the color of antelope skin.
But I'm content to lean back and enjoy

the show. It is like a song, like the thing
I feel when the last of the evening light

seeps from the windows of my quiet house,
on my quiet street, and all that exists

is a stillness begging to be spoken to
or spoken for. I tell myself that all it is

is light leaving a room the way all
things must go, steady as the speed

of a second-hand, a little less of her
in the bedroom, a little less of me

reflected in the bathroom mirror,
where each morning I deconstruct my face

with a razor and try to appear as something
more than a blur. Smoke rises

into the open sky. Far from the road,
two palominos feed on sagebrush.

Elegy for What Can't be Said

This room, this bed of clean sheets, lilies sprigged with cut lavender
on the nightstand, is not an elegy. This song is.

There are days when we walk wires of grief and convince
ourselves to hold on—knuckles white, fingers worn to bone.

And then there are times I have to refrain from kissing you so hard
it would threaten death by drowning. You and I have never

known grace no matter how hard we've tried graceful acts.
You cannot conjure elegance—I learned this slowly—

it is not a summoning act. It is only a prayer, another selfish wish
on a star in winter. The spark we have is contradiction and perseverance

and maybe a little fear. *Fear*, not the kind you find inside a dark,
unfamiliar room but the lump on a woman's breast

that may or may not be benign. Today, while the sun rose
above hay fields heavy with fog,

I watched two rabbits eat the tomato vines you planted
last spring. I thought, *consciousness in action*, but that's too formal.

It's tough juggling between the wanting you and the not wanting you,
tougher still waiting for shutters to be flung open,

playing out days of words and doubt, wondering if the next moment,
the next day or week will open

some tucked-away truth if I can speak loud enough to hear—
Say it, say it, I've said.

Ghost of a Chance

A man and a woman walk shyly
into a little restaurant off the main

road; blues plays in the background.
They take their time ordering

but eventually settle on the smoked trout
and a bottle of chardonnay. She wears

a red dress, one he hasn't seen before,
and he is taken by how good she looks.

When the waitress brings out the food,
it is a long time before he takes

the first bite, because the pink fillet
looks so artful in its yellow pool of butter

and garlic. Halfway through dinner
she lays her fork gently on the edge

of her plate, reaches across the table,
and holds out her hand. He begins

to take her hand in his, slowly scrape
his nails down her slender fingers the way

she likes when they are alone, but stops.
Beyond the flesh and bone of her hand,

he imagines a miniature jazz band suspended
in her palm playing accompaniment

to the weary resignation of Lester Young's
solo in "Ghost of a Chance."

And for a moment he's sitting in the nightclub
of her hand, tapping his foot to the melody,

sipping scotch, and forgetting all about
the woes and pains of this world.

Forgive this man for his ambivalence,
his numerous sins of self-doubt

and uncertainty. Forgive the words
he won't speak on the drive back to her

apartment, the failure and the distance.
But most of all, forgive his blank stare

and glassy eyes when the music starts up,
and all he hears is the sound of his own heart

and the slow beat of an upright bass
pounding inside his head.

October: A Letter

Outside the day is full of tension, a kind of sadness
as autumn begins—nights getting cooler, apple trees swelling

with their last fruit, the smell of ash in the wind that reminds
me of the first girl I fell in love with, and how one day,

after visiting her sick grandmother, the two of us walked
down a dirt road picking sunflowers

until we came to a bridge and fucked there, in the cool shade,
shotgun shells and beer cans around our feet,

the sticky smell of weeds against our skin.
My dear, you are not that girl, though that's how I remember

it sometimes—you, leaning with me against the cold pillar,
your hands digging into the small of my back

while shadows move across a memory that is not needle sharp
and exact but long and broad like the stroke of a brush

whose beauty is matched only by its ability to bleed
moments and desires together, seamlessly,

until I'm not sure if it's dream or memory I'm longing after.
Outside the day is full of tension, a kind of sadness in early October.

Hollow Light

Tonight I walked into the yard,
still dizzy from the wine at dinner,
and stood smiling at the January
moon, incandescent and blue.

In winter, nothing is usable.
Everything is there for the viewing—
even breath has form.
It's the ultimate look-don't-touch
store full of china, and every glass
branch, icy and radiant, stands
still as the moon seeps over the plains
with its relentless hollow light.

So different from the candy pink
mimosa blossoms and the gold
summer wheat, tonight the stars
are fixed high and wide,
and below them fields of winter
grass shine in the bitter air
with the hard glint of crystal.

Song

The musky scent of pear blossoms in the air
reminds me that soon the trees will leaf out,

and the marigolds I planted in the garden
will open sunward, and all will appear to be falling

into place. The dew catches light.
Birds call out to each other from across

the neighborhood. Because I don't know what
it is to be the tree, to feel the pulse of new

leaves as a green fire spreading over my skin,
I will go back inside, pull down the shades,

and try to dream up a new life that isn't so warm
and bright, as if sleeping could transform grief,

as if heat and a single blue ark could weld
the whole disordered world back together.

Faint light in the window, scent of red meat
on a grill. I watch the sun dip like a Ferris wheel

behind a low wall of clouds.

Coming of Age

The first time he went hunting it was late November,
the silhouettes of mesquite trees made visible

by a small sliver of moonlight. His hands and face ached
from the cold. Before he fired into the tan and cream chest

his father whispered to him, *Squeeze the trigger.*
Pull back with the smallest amount of pressure imaginable.

The boy shot. The doe fell. And as he slit her throat,
the blood rushing from her neck gave off steam

before cooling into a thick gel. He was thirteen.
Though it's not what he would have thought then,

the word he thinks of now is *sacrifice*,
the violent handing of one life over to another.

But time changes memory's language.
What he remembers most is not sacrifice

or guilt, but how aroused he felt when he began
skinning her—scent of blood in the air,

the sound of hide ripping like a cotton dress.
The open ribcage, the spleen and heart:

he put his hands inside, and it was warm. It was nice.
No, not nice, but *beautiful*.

Yes, maybe the doe swinging from the pecan tree,
gutted and skinned, was beautiful the way he thought

the mechanic's daughter looked through her bedroom
window—sweet, careless, wild. *Squeeze the trigger.*

He imagines he touches her, and she is warm—a thigh,
a cheekbone, a jaw line. He touches her as if dreaming.

He feels warm then cold, like an engine misfiring
then starting, then stopping and starting again.

Kill Zone Anatomy

Twilight above the hills.
Two deerhounds catch scent

and take off through the trees.
He finds them at the field's edge,

poised against a wall
of plum thickets.

The pig begins to wear down,
bleeding from thigh and ankles.

He unsheathes his knife,
the light is almost gone at this moment,

and throws his weight into the boar's
side just behind the shoulder.

The pig squeals and squeals and
squeals. He stabs only the vital organs

he has learned through time—
the heart, lungs, and spine.

Flash Point

4:30 in the afternoon. The worst time of day by many standards—traffic jams, sunlight glaring through the windshield all sharp and one-sided like a bad argument. The woman ahead of me in line at the hardware store looks frantic as she tries to pay for six garden hoses, fumbling with her billfold and saying something about having to soak everything down.

After months of drought and high winds, wild fires have swept the countryside, with news reports of entire counties burning and farmers being driven to near extinction, and suddenly I feel silly holding a bottle of wood glue and a Dr. Pepper, preparing to mend a couple of broken chair legs, while this lady is worried about heat and embers and driving the fifteen miles out of town to where the latest flares have risen near her home.

Tragedy & Comedy: The two faces hung on the right side of my sister's vanity to remind us that, contrary to the Fig Newton, life is not always fruit and cake, that there's only so much Mr. T and the A-Team can do before the plot wears thin and you're left with the empty feeling that heroism and noble mercenary work are dead. And so as I'm gluing the last chair leg, I say to myself, *Let it all burn down, the whole damn state of affairs*, like the time I burned the woodpile next to my neighbor's shop, and not even the heap of ash or the sheet metal, which buckled under the heat, could satisfy my hunger. I wanted to see the whole mess fall—the shop, the house, every last blade of grass.

Phosphorus

The July heat rises like kettle steam into the open palm
of a treeless field. We moan and grunt as we heave
square bales onto the flat bed of a red Chevy—
me and my brother, who is chewing on a wad of Redman,
the black juice running off his chin, staining
his white t-shirt. The smell of alfalfa is sickening
in the heat. The barn overflows with field mice—
easy prey for the owl who stares with eyes that shine
like obsidian from his perch on the back rafters.
Tonight we'll celebrate the end of a long, hot week,
piling into beat-up cars and dragging Main until we're
we're too shit-faced to see the truck in front of us.
After showers, we're cruising down Broadway in a haze
of tire smoke and aftershave, a case of beer
and enough soft packs of Marlboros to get us through the night.
In the distance the world is silent, but this street is alive
with the pale light of street lamps and roar of stereos
as the air thickens with the smell of summer cooling
and the thought that somewhere, right now, a dog sleeps
under the cool carriage of his master's front porch,
a young couple is parked on the side of a county road,
a murder of stars above them like a black umbrella
in the sky, a late game home run rises into the bright heaven
of halogen lights, and you and I are crammed
into the cab of a red Chevy, windows rolled down,
burning like phosphorous, like celluloid.

Shrapnel

Last week I heard that a guy I used to work
with at a record store was killed somewhere

in the Anbar province (Arabic meaning *ware
house*) when an I.E.D. dismantled his right leg.

The portrait of his face as I remember it haunts me,
and I often wonder if he died instantly or several days

later as his body turned pale and septic, while school
buses back home were busy loading children

from the sidewalks and sprinklers watered the great
lawns of suburbia. Already the morning is humid

and full of bird song, but I don't want to think *song*
or *lullaby*. The absence of sound is a blade that cuts

closer to bone until the world is reduced to its basic
intentions—hunger and parallel lines, death and disease.

A woman I once knew told me she loved the smell
of silage and the patchwork canvas of Holsteins

on her father's farm. She said as a young girl her body
would disappear into the shrill droning of cicadas

at dusk. It was not the sound itself she loved,
but the bitter appetite, the suicidal lust for oblivion

that echoed from pecan trees along the creek.
the call filled the spaces of her body,

and as summer changed into autumn, she swore
she could hear them dying. The airless morning

swells after weeks without rain. It is something,
I think, to be entirely occupied with the living.

Feedback Loop for the Apocalypse

*Pain comes from the darkness
and we call it wisdom. It is pain.*
-Randell Jarrell

The end of the world is scheduled for next week.
I have seen visions of fire in the news—
hurricanes and peak oil, films about dolphin slaughter
and fishies in the ocean disappearing from the scene.

I have seen visions of fire in the news—
bees collapsing, polar bears drowning,
fishies in the ocean disappearing from the scene.
The tarp on my neighbor's grill balloons in the wind.

Bees collapsing. Polar bears drowning.
Turn on the TV there's more bad news.
The tarp on my neighbor's grill balloons in the wind,
making the sound of a sail whomping on the sea.

Turn on the TV, there's *more* bad news.
As I'm watching there's pain in my right testicle
making the sound of a sail whomping on the sea
because I have a cyst or an infection or cancer.

As I'm watching there's pain in my right testicle.
The sonogram looked like a malleated dolphin's skull
because I have a cyst or an infection or cancer
depending on which doctor I see.

The sonogram looked like a malleated dolphin's skull.
I showed my neighbor, Alex, who loves *Flipper* reruns
and asked for his independent diagnosis. He agreed.
On TV, Flipper jumps through a hoop then saves a family.

I showed my neighbor, Alex, who loves *Flipper* reruns.
He doesn't know he'll grow up and train them for our delight,
teaching Flipper to jump through hoops and save lives alike.
He's such a lover, you will discover, when he steals your heart.

He doesn't know he'll grow up and train them for our delight,
then turn activist and free them from the nets of Japanese fishermen.
He's such a lover, you will discover, when he steals your heart.
The child is the father of the dolphin and so must come full circle.

Turn activist and free them from the nets of Japanese fishermen?
Nah. I like eating tuna salad and sushi too much.
The child is the father of the dolphin and so must come full circle?
You can't make a seafood omelet without killing a few Dolphins.

I love eating tuna salad and sushi, maybe a little too much.
I like squeezing lemon over a piece of meat red as a shade of lipstick
and eating dolphin omelets in my quest to be a yuppie.
There's nothing warm Saki and egg-drop soup won't fix.

I like squeezing lemon over a piece of meat red as a shade of lipstick.
The movie shows a harpoon being driven into a dolphin's skull;
I think there's nothing warm Saki and egg-drop soup won't fix.
The networks will broadcast this over and over until you puke.

The movie shows a harpoon being driven into a dolphin's skull—
blood churning in the wine dark sea.
The networks will broadcast this over and over until you puke,
like a Michael Jackson primetime special.

Blood churning in the wine dark sea.
I feel like a clubbed seal pup, skinned and deep-fried,
having watched the Michael Jackson primetime special
three nights in a row.

I feel like a seal pup, clubbed and skinned alive,
worrying about mercury levels and Alex eating his fillet-o-fish
three nights in a row.
I once held a thermometer to a lamp until it exploded.

Worrying about mercury levels and Alex's filet-o-fish,
I caution him not to swirl quicksilver with his fingers,
recount the time I held a thermometer to a lamp until it exploded,
believing I could control anything.

I caution him not to swirl quicksilver with his fingers.
I say our ancestors made flutes from swan bones,
believing they could control anything
(See also: *Moby Dick*.)

I say our ancestors made flutes from swan bones,
lit their homes with ambergris
(See also: *Moby Dick*.)
I say soon we will make mud huts

and light them with bacon grease.
We will witness hurricanes and peak oil—
huddled in mud huts carving dolphins out of chair legs.
The end of the world, dear boy, is scheduled for next week.

Elegy with a Balcony and Opening Credits

Tonight I am small.
I contain solitudes, similitudes of a life
I once raised a glass to while observing a stalk
of summer wheat, but here in the Palace Theatre,
watching the *Die Hard* double feature,
I've got it all—popcorn and diet soda,
coming attractions with vampires and robots
built fast for those with ADD,
and I think if you'd wink at me,
flash a little preview of what's to come,
then maybe later we could bring two sticks together
and catch fire or at least make a spark.
Sometimes we're kindling, sometimes the ash,
but when McClane starts kicking ass
I feel alive and cavalier until he runs across broken glass,
and I reach back to touch the thin spot in my hair,
knowing you feel embarrassed for bald men
the same way I felt embarrassed in the Wal-Mart
men's room for the paraplegic emptying his catheter
into the floor drain—caught like a cricket in a web
in the middle of the room. O the entanglements
we fly into and must escape from by coming to a place
with dirty ceilings and sticky floors, a balcony on the edge
of collapse. And so I'll toast to the season, and to the self,
and to the thunderstorm that churned above the library,
where yesterday I checked out Barry Switzer's autobiography
and found buried between recruiting violations and wishbone
formations, a bookmark illustrated with cartoonish kids
riding mountain bikes toward the sunset, as in *Look, ma,
no hands!*, as in the transformative power of reading.
On the back, someone wrote *Fuck books* in magic marker.
I laughed, then thought about regret and the improbability
of time travel because I'd repeat the second grade
just to write something as mean and direct on the bookmarks
I kept next the glue. Instead of *Be mine* on the Valentines,
I'd chisel a new gospel in capital red letters—*I don't like you.
You're ugly. The Magic Eight Ball says you'll be single
and pregnant by junior year.* O the things we wish to revise—
the ways we wanted to change. I'm disappointed no one
mentions the positive side of Jeff Goldblum's character
mutating into an insect-human hybrid in Cronenberg's
1986 remake of *The Fly*. Sure he develops sores
and must vomit on his food before ingesting it, and yes

he wrecks his relationship with the attractive Geena Davis character, but what people forget is simple conversion—Seth Brundle steps into one telepod and emerges from another, stronger and unique. I had acne in high school. I dated a girl who threw-up her food *after* ingesting it, but we didn't change into the things we wanted to be—the bluebird, dolphin, or tiger. I wanted to be the spider, the fiddleback making you dosey doe with my toxic song. Who needs books when I've got Bruce Willis hissing *Yippie-ki-yay motherfucker!* and tossing bad guys out of thirty-story windows? Who needs imagination when I've got De Niro talking to himself in the mirror, Glenn Close boiling bunnies on the stove? Watch something long enough and you'll learn to love it a little—After surgeons tore apart my shoulder, I spent the next day watching a *Columbo* marathon on a 14-inch screen, and now I've got a soft spot for Peter Falk's glass eye, just as I have to cite John Wayne as an early influence because moms made me watch reruns of *Rio Bravo* on a four-head VCR in lieu of a father. *Ya need to man up, pilgrim!* The second feature rolls, and Bruce is back, all shaved head and designer leather jacket, living free and dying hard as he combats terrorists and hackers in CGI. And when the moment comes for the catchphrase that'll make the implausible disappear, the last word gets drowned out by the sound of something exploding. I weep and throw a handful of Junior Mints at the screen. Sometimes you're the accelerant, sometimes the charred meat at the bottom of the grill. But maybe if I run my hand up your skirt, remembering how your Nazarene father banned you from tank tops and matinées because he knew what can happen in the dark, then maybe we'll be forgiven, and I'll whisper *Are you the gatekeeper?* And you'll say, *Are you the keymaster?* The movie is almost over, and Bruce is out of bullets. Soon houselights and ending credits. Soon the evening will call us home, and we'll be forced to live another day, so let's call in sick and stay for another reel, the way I used to fake fevers just to rewind *The Neverending Story* and learn every minute how The Nothing surrounds us. Let us break-up the seats and make shelter. Let us fall to our knees and worship the projector. May our teeth be pulled to the sweetness of a cavity, Our days be royal and easy, screened in silver, a motion picture, while usher-boys wait to sweep the palace.

VITA

Jeff D. Simpson

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Thesis: VERTICAL HOLD: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

Major Field: English, Creative Writing

Biographical:

Education: B.A., Cameron University, English, 2004. Completed the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 2009.

Experience: Graduate Teaching Assistant, Oklahoma State University, 2005-2009; Editorial Assistant of Cimarron Review, Oklahoma State University, 2005-2009.

Professional Memberships: Academy of American Poets.

Name: Jeff Simpson

Date of Degree: December, 2009

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: VERTICAL HOLD: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

Pages in Study: 56

Candidate for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major Field: Creative Writing

Scope and Method of Study: *Vertical Hold* consists of poems written over a four-year period (2005-2009), which exemplify my prosodic techniques as well as my fixations with post-confessional and postmodern literary movements. Many of the poems were written for graduate poetry workshops conducted by Lisa Lewis and Ai at Oklahoma State University.

Findings and Conclusions: *Vertical Hold*—a reference to the image dial common to analog television sets—is thematically bound together by the running theme of stabilization as the self struggles to stay upright amid the chaos of the contemporary world. This theme is dealt with most directly through an exploration of the individual's relationship to popular culture—specifically, television and film culture. Through a blending of free-verse narrative and lyrical elements, the poems in this collection address subjects as disparate as family, language, violence, alienation, ambivalence, regionalism, addiction, time, the working class, death, hope, love, and loss.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: _____