

BOTTLE FLY:

Poems

A Dissertation

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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MAY 2019

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BOTTLE FLY: Poems

presented by Gregory Allendorf

a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful for help from the following professors: Gabriel Fried, thank you so much for teaching me about publishing, and for introducing me to so much poetry which transformed me, especially the poems of Thomas James and Lucie Brock-Broido. Elisa Glick, thank you for being so patient with me while I stumbled my way into beginning to see the boundless nuance in queer theory and criticism. Scott Cairns, thank you for helping me see my work in a new way. William Kerwin, thank you giving me glimpses into the minds of the Early Moderns and into the life and mind of Ovid. Alik Barnstone, for helping me begin to see and write from my heart and for changing my life for the better.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ii
Abstract	v
Improbable Floridas	1
Tap Me	39
Redbuds	40
Ancient Astronaut	42
Fireside	43
Stun Gun	44
Beset	45
Cat Person	46
Contra-Naturam	47
Reflection	48
I Don't	49
Little Game	50
Locus Amoenus	51
Sweet Peas	52
The Bier	53
Misinformed Postmortem Portrait	54
Pamela, Ventral Aspect	55
Cosplay	56
Imagine	57
Gaffe	58
Parabolic Fantasy	59
Carl's Sweet	60
Parallax	61
Argument in One Piece	62
The Dupe	63
Cry for Help	64
Quantum Tantrum	65
Traklesque	66
Outside the Mortuary	67
Matins	68

Babe	69
Anonymous	70
Should I Try	71
Blight Ordinance	72
As Every Mouse	73
When	74
Traklesque	75
Projection	76
The Wind	77
Marlowe's Lousy	78
Herm	79
Pineal Song	80
I'd Thought	81
The Sleep of Reason	82
Stump Speech	83
The Pigs	84
Viagra	85
Bats	86
Scarab	87
Deluded	88
Etude	89
Venus	90
Flying Fish	91
As a Supplicant	92
Salamander Prayer	93
Imagine	94
Implosive Lullaby	95
Architectural Wonder	96
I Know	97
Sparsely	98
Overalls	99
Chum	100
Having Suffered	101
Self-healing Litany	102
Deadhead	103
Fairy Ring	104
Vespers	105
Works Cited	106
Vita	107

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Gabriel Fried, committee chair

ABSTRACT

The critical introduction: “Improbable Floridas”: Imperialism, Surrealist Tradition, and Gay and Lesbian Identity in Rimbaud’s “Drunken Boat” and Bishop’s “The Riverman” is a close-reading of those two poems through a combined lens of queer theory and post-colonialism and globalism. It is also a meditation on the concepts of identity and identification as they relate to poetry and the selves we find therein. Rimbaud and Bishop are poets who greatly influenced the style and spirit of the poems contained in *Bottle Fly*. The poems in *Bottle Fly* are largely autobiographical and chronicle in various ways the poet’s struggles with addiction, mental illness, love, and death. The poems attempt to explore and express the mind and heart of the poet and flirt with becoming empty armor. They are very interested in approaching and turning away from the questions *what am I?* and *what is this?* They recognize that when we approach the edge of a cliff or an event and see ourselves below, having fallen, nothing has happened yet.

**Improbable Floridas: Imperialism, Surrealist Tradition, and Gay and Lesbian Identity in
Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat" and Bishop's "The Riverman"**

In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said describes imperialism as an "...act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control." He goes on to say that, "for the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination" (225).

Said's relevance to my project in this essay is perhaps paradoxical: Arthur Rimbaud and Elizabeth Bishop were both citizens of empire who contributed to the production of a kind of tropical imaginary. They were neither, then, "natives" nor colonists (a claim to which I will return later). They were each born and partly raised in the colonizing land, Bishop having been shuttled back and forth between the US and Canada before spending 14 years in Brazil, Rimbaud not living for long in France, but striking out for such remote (colonial) outposts as North Africa (where, perhaps very significantly, his absent father was stationed during most of his childhood). I'm most interested, then, in using Said's remark about the recovery of one's native land through the "imagination" to discuss the ways in which Bishop and Rimbaud helped construct the tropical imaginary as intercessory agents, misfits in time and place.

In his “Tropical Island Imaginary,” Stephen Torres writes: “An ‘island imaginary’, an archive of myths, writing, art, and song, has evolved from antiquity through to the present, which powerfully imagines unusual if not extraordinary encounters between self and place” (1). He continues, “...in the twentieth century, islands become the settings against which individuals maintain their socialization and dignity, or fall into primitiveness” (4). I would like to borrow

Torres’s ‘island imaginary,’ and to expand it; instead of focusing on the *island*, I will zoom out (or in?) and discuss “The Riverman” and “The Drunken Boat” as belonging under the in some ways larger heading of the ‘tropical imaginary.’

Said reminds us of the “...pronounced awareness of European and Western culture as imperialism; this reflexive moment [in the latter nineteenth through early twentieth centuries] of consciousness enabled the African, Caribbean, Irish, Latin American, or Asian citizen to assert the end of Europe's cultural claim to guide and/or instruct the non-European or non-mainland individual. Often this was first done, as Thomas Hodgkin has argued, by "prophets and priests," among them poets and visionaries..."primitive rebels" (251). It seems to me that Bishop and Rimbaud could be thought of as identifying primarily with the *colonized* rather than the *colonizer*. So, amidst an already dizzying *mise en abyme* of identifications and reversals, the colonizer becomes the colonized. This, though, isn't really my primary objective here. It seems a facile-enough interpretive move to make, to argue that these two misfit poets identify most strongly with those colonized, especially to argue that they long to don the mantle of the *seer*, the *shaman*, the *native*.

It's more complicated. The two poets—many poets—don't really 'belong' *either* place.

As such, I've chosen two poems about travel and the relationship between self and place: Rimbaud's "The Drunken Boat," and Bishop's "The Riverman." It is my aim in this essay to consider the complex web of identifications, transformations, and renunciations upon which these two poems are predicated. In doing so, I hope not only to enrich, however modestly, the discussion of literary surrealist lineage (the ways in which Bishop's work issues from and bites back against Rimbaud's), but also to contribute to the broader discussion of imperialism's influence on cultural (artistic, literary) production.

In thinking about "identification," I would like to foreground a consideration of gay identity. The issues of anachronism which arise when writing about authors who have since been claimed as gay ancestors are manifold and vexing; in many important ways, too, each case is its own. It's very tempting to generalize and essentialize in an attempt to hold ontological uncertainties at bay. Identity, though, isn't stable: not only is it unstable from inside one's lived experience—it's also unstable from the outside and, even further, *in time and place*. Since identity is constructed from within and without in time and place, that is, it modulates substantially with the passage of time, evolving opinion, and geographical vantage point.

Discussing Bishop and Rimbaud as gay ancestors in the same breath is also impossible in some ways. There *are* many parallels and commonalities between the two poets and their writing, due not least to the fact that Bishop was directly informed and inspired by Rimbaud and the other French Symbolists. But—people saw and see them,

and they saw themselves—so differently across time and place, the dynamic truth of it all becomes too saturated with detail and meaning for writing honestly to capture. This, for me, is immensely frustrating. I'm not by any means suggesting that one cannot obtain a window—or many windows—into and through history by studying the documents preserved there. Obviously such work is important, essential, and fascinating. I *would* however point out that we can never do so objectively—not truly.

What we see is warped by being seen—what we know is changed by being known.

Foucault has obviously made an inestimable contribution to human knowledge; I could never hope to contend with him as a historian or scholar. I do dare, though, to think and feel in my own time and way. My aim here is not to attempt to refute Foucault or those writing with him at all: they're correct in their assertion that people began explicitly to identify around their sexualities in a new way around the turn of the 20th century. I think that much is clear from the historical evidence. There's a point at which, though, our vision is warped by our place in time and culture—and those downstream, so to speak, in time, tend to think themselves the wiser. There's a very tempting fallacy which equates technology and other advancements with sophistication.

I think it will be useful for me to use the work of Terry Castle to linger on the subject of gay identity—and of identity in general (I think there are fundamental, underlying procedures according to which human beings ascertain and reinforce their own identities). I considered suggesting an underlying “mechanics,” but I think that's wrong. I've chosen the word procedures to denote my belief that, in constructing our identities, we're all—and always have been—doing at least *some* of the same things. I can say with some certainty, for instance, that, in constructing our identities, we enact on

some level the etymology of the word “identify” itself: *to make the same as*. That’s the basic move: we see something out there in the world (or see and feel something *in* here, in the world), and we associate it—or even equate it—with *I*. What “I” is isn’t irrelevant, here, but I’ll leave it be for now. It’s obviously at the center of many poets’ life’s work, though—figuring out what *I* is, or at least what it says. Whatever it is, I’m certain that it becomes something else (or tries to) by attaching things to itself. These things can be and are gross and subtle, and sometimes somewhere in between. What happens, though, if we remove those things one by one and try to see what they’re covering up, what they’re attached to?

To those who assert that lesbians didn’t exist before 1900, Terry Castle replies: “None of this seems very persuasive to me—and not only because it relies so heavily on a condescending belief in the intellectual and erotic naivete of women of past epochs” (9). I agree heartily. When I used the word technology earlier—I also meant the technology of naming and identification, carried out by the hands of the mind, so to speak. It seems to me now that sexualities, like all identities, perhaps, evolve and codify and coalesce around our abilities and habits of naming, of making the same as. When Castle asserts that “...where there are words—even comic or taboo or salacious ones—there is identity” (9-10), I think it’s easy to miss the philosophical profundity that is most certainly there. Castle points out many bywords for lesbianism—and so do Foucault, Bray, Boswell and other scholars (though more words, more consistently for “gay”).

There’s the identifying move which one human subjectivity makes towards an object, real or imaginary (say, a self-concept such as lesbian or gay); and then there are the moves which *many* human subjectivities *see* one another making towards those

objects. And *then* there's the potential power in such a move, and, further, whether or not one sees that power. As we all become more conscious of the workings and power structures inherent in the act of identification, our concept of identity changes. Like authors in an Eliotic tradition, too, any such change changes those who've gone before. It's the increased consciousness of available mass-identities, maybe, which makes trying to reflect on historical identities and identifications so vexing for me. I'm looking at from my seat downstream in time (a river is far too simple a metaphor for time and history), and it's all but impossible not to project my current concepts around sex, gender, and sexuality onto the past. One also wants to enlist the assistance of past rebels, whose sophistication was already projecting itself far into the future; focusing on these already anomalous figures, then, as we tend to, creates a warped picture of the past.

Castle tells us that, "Said spoke eloquently of 'the useful notion of worldliness.' Worldliness, according to Said, is the human and expansive faculty of a mind which allows one to see things "in a global setting"—as part and parcel of a larger world of "formal articulations." Worldliness is the very opposite of "separatism"; it has nothing to do with fetishizing one element of experience over another. Rather than haunting "some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world," the truly worldly individual seeks to inhabit "the large, many-windowed house of culture as a whole" (16). Scholars writing about globalization note the importance of the increasing immediacy of communications between people across nations via technological means. Some writers focus on the technology itself as the catalyst and tend to attribute much causal emphasis to it. Others, like Paul Jay, contend "that globalization actually has a long history, that globalization in our own time should be seen as a significant acceleration of forces that have been in play

since at least the sixteenth century and that are not simply western in their origin” (33). I can’t help but align humanity’s growing ability and tendency to identify through, around, and across genders, sexes, and sexualities with this globalization. I agree with Jay, then; but I’d also point out that to choose the 16th century, from a truly global point of view, feels arbitrary to me. The invention of the Gutenberg press was invaluable in the development of Western consciousness; to be sure, a watershed. If the printing press squared the acceleration of consciousness and literacy, the internet has cubed it, perhaps. But the troublesome and unwieldy reality is that there are no isolated events. One clutches at roots here and there—and can even isolate some tubers, to be sure—but there’s nothing that isn’t connected to everything else. The history of globalization, then, is ultimately the history of all humanity, of the globe itself. Perhaps, though, there’s nothing to argue about there.

So, gay and lesbian people have always existed in the sense that human desire has always been capable of anything, so to speak, and people tend to accumulate experience and familiarity with the orientation of their infelt desires. Gayness and lesbianism—in the sense of men and

women who are drawn primarily to love and desire the same sex—have always been. I want to say—and think Castle would agree: those experiences most central and pivotal to one’s humanness are never new. Obviously: sexuality is modulated and attenuated and at some level defined by what we think of as history. But none of it is ever *new*. Castle invokes *common sense*, and I would too: there are only so many sex acts; there are only so many ways to put bodies together, rub them against one another, derive pleasure from congress between and amongst them. The ways may indeed be *many*, but they occur in

the parentheses of the facts of the body. As technically endless as they may be semantically, humans saw them all instantly. It was probably one of the first things we did, culturally. It may have happened in 7 days, centuries, millennia, but—one thing is certain: nobody was *inventing* sexualities in the last few hundred years. What they *were* doing, however, was naming them and watching one another do so; they were also identifying with the ever-permutating names they assigned them.

I think maybe what's happening is that we are waking up to the true depth of the extent to which we construct reality. Castle's invocation of the subject-object relationship at the end of her polemical introduction is telling. People erase one another because they are incapable of admitting how miraculous and out of our control reality and existence are. If we're all walking around mutually altering reality just by *experiencing* it (quantum mechanics can prove that we are, scientifically)—if earth is a cell, or an atom in a cell, in the body of the universe, which is itself enveloped in macro-contexts innumerable: it might help not to get too attached to any particular set of certainties. Obviously, we ignore our smallness and appear larger to ourselves as we bore deeper and deeper into endless subdivisions of knowledge and information. To remember it, though, can take some of the pressure off. We create reality, but never alone.

I mentioned that it's in certain ways impossible to discuss Rimbaud and Bishop as gay ancestors in the same breath because I want to be careful to maintain as best I can a distinction between "lesbian" and "gay" or "queer" to avoid perpetrating the erasure Castle points to in *The Apparitional Lesbian*: "We 'forget' about the lesbian by focusing instead on gay men" (12). Even a cursory appraisal of my experience in American culture

finds this to be true. It's maybe noteworthy, though, how sex between women in popular American culture tends to be rendered more acceptable through misogynist fetishization. Castle continues, analyzing the reactions and questions after a talk she gave: "Even among sophisticated and open-minded listeners, it was extremely difficult, I found, to keep the lesbian focus—so strong the collective reflex to shift back toward the topic of love between men, as if that, paradoxically, were somehow less peculiar or less threatening than love between women" (12). Castle, as I've mentioned, I think quite productively criticizes queer theory: "The term *queer* has lately become popular in activist and progressive academic circles in part, it seems to me, precisely because it makes it easy to enfold female homosexuality back 'into' male homosexuality and disembody the lesbian once again" (12).

In the two years leading up to Rimbaud's composition of "The Drunken Boat," he'd absorbed a great deal of literature (Hugo, Michelet, Quinet), and was about to take a sharp turn inward. The teenage poet had developed a kind of program—a regimen, an almost step-by-step guide to becoming a "seer." In one of his famous "Lettres du voyant" (or "seer letters") to his teachers Paul Demeny and Georges Izambard (dated 15. May 1871), Rimbaud outlines his procedure for attaining this new kind of "sight": "The Poet makes himself into a seer by a long, involved, and logical derangement of all the senses. Every kind of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself; he exhausts every possible poison so that only essence remains. He undergoes unspeakable tortures that require complete faith and superhuman strength, rendering him the ultimate Invalid among men, the master criminal, the first among the damned—and the supreme Savant! For he arrives at the unknown!..He arrives at the unknown, and when, bewildered, he

ends up losing his understanding of his visions, he has, at least, seen them!” (Mason 33, emphasis Rimbaud’s). Rimbaud intended, then, to become nothing less than an oracle.

The young Rimbaud’s wildness seems, on the face of it, very unlike Bishop. Bishop was by most accounts rather shy—or, at least she would appear so when placed next to the madman Rimbaud was about to become. I’d argue, though, that there are myriad similarities, tucked away though they may be, between the two poets’ largely incongruous personalities. Like Rimbaud, who advocated, as we’ve just seen, dependence upon “poison” (drugs: specifically alcohol (Absinthe) and hashish) to make oneself a seer, Bishop was also a drinker—a ‘binge alcoholic.’ In a (27. August 1935) letter to Bishop’s friend, Frani Blough, Rimbaud and alcohol appear in tandem: “It is interesting to discover, in Rimbaud [Bishop was translating him at the time], this: [Bishop includes the French] ‘Here I am on the Brittany beach... The sea air will burn my lungs; the bad atmosphere will hurt me. To swim, to flatten the grass, to go hunting, above all to smoke; to drink drinks as strong as boiling metal’” (One Art 35). Bishop continues, “Not of course to *fumer surtout* [above all to smoke]—with the cigarettes as they are, but the rest is all right, and these strong drinks are wonderful” (One Art 35 *ibid*). While the two poets, in many ways, couldn’t appear more different, there’s a direct connection between them. Sometimes, Rimbaud writes things which smack unmistakably of Bishop, for instance: “People unaccustomed to the sight of mountains quickly learn that a mountain may have peaks but that a peak is not a mountain” (Mason 76).

Both “The Drunken Boat” and “The Riverman” are poems of transformation. This transformation, as I’ve been intimating, is ultimately a means of achieving

revelation—a new kind of sight, an epiphany, transcendence, escape. It is also a reaction to a sense of place-lessness, of emotional and intellectual dislocation. The two poets have made very different choices regarding the point at which this new way of seeing enters into salience. In what follows, I will discuss each poem in turn, focusing closely on the themes and ideas I've outlined up till now.

I

THE DRUNKEN BOAT

In “The Drunken Boat,” the transformation occurs off camera, so to speak. The speaker is the titular boat, who has by some magic awoken to humanoid consciousness: “As I came down the impassible Rivers,/ I felt no more the bargemen’s guiding hands,/ Targets for yelling red-skins they were nailed/ Naked to painted poles” (Varese 93). We begin, then, already enmeshed in commerce, trade, and the trappings and machinations of the colonial power. The boat, though, is instantly divested of these trappings. Not only that, the metaphorical stand-ins for the colonizer, “the guiding hands” of the bargemen (and into ‘guiding’ one might read many ironic connotations—forceful, controlling, etc.) are releasing the craft into the sea and onto its journey. The boat itself is ‘going native,’ casting off the oppressive hands of the merchants, from whom it, in a way, is saved by the “redskins.” The bargemen are violently (terminally) stripped of all indicators of their allegiance to the colonizer.

“What did I care for any crews, / carriers of English cotton or of Flemish grain!/
Bargemen and all that hubbub left behind, / the waters let me go my own free way,”
exclaims the boat. Torres writes, “In the twentieth century islands become the settings
against which individuals maintain their socialization and dignity, or fall into

primitiveness” (4). We’re in the latter 19th century here in the drunken boat (1871). Still, though, I find Torres’s observation useful and apt. Rimbaud is making a typically unexpected and revolutionary move in projecting the “primitive” right back onto the “civilized”: the boat, an *indispensable* vehicle, without which the 19th century imperialism we know would have been altogether impossible, is itself seeking freedom. Even inanimate objects long to break free of the oppressor. As soon as the boat leaves the colonial port, it embarks upon the last and only ‘free’ voyage it will ever know.

“In the furious lashings of the tides, / emptier than children’s minds, I through that winter/ ran! And great peninsulas unmoored / never knew more triumphant uproar than I knew.” Now *we* know that the boat is fleeing through a “winter.” Whether or not the winter is literal (it must be on at least one level), it highlights the movement from north to south, from the cold of Europe into the warmth of almost anywhere else, and especially someplace tropical. It’s at this early point in the poem, too, that we realize the boat is actually sailing deeper and deeper into danger now that its handlers have been removed. Clearly, though, it’s enjoying itself somehow; not only that, it is becoming more and more pure as it leaves the colonial port:

The tempest blessed my wakings on the sea.

Light as a cork I danced upon the waves,
Eternal rollers of the deep sunk dead,

Nor missed at night the lanterns idiot eyes!

Sweeter than sour apples to a child,

Green waters seeped through all my seams,

Washing the stains of vomit and blue wine,

And swept away my anchor and my helm.

“Wakings” is particularly compelling here (in English, at least). There are the waves in the boat’s wake, its “wakings,” then, as well as the series of epiphanies it’s experiencing. Yet more attention is paid here to the boat’s newfound “lightness” and freedom. The boat is “blessed,” baptized anew by the forces of nature, divested of more and more of its colonial baggage. It is ironically “light as a cork” as it takes on water (“water” is always alcohol, too).

There’s a weird ship-in-a-bottle image here taking shape. The boat does not miss the “idiot” lanterns (artifacts of colonial industry are idiotic, betoken counterfeit enlightenment) or lights of “civilization.” Rather, it continues to relish more and more its undressing: sweeter than sour apples (paradoxical marriage of pleasure and pain), the green water of the sea rushes in to cleanse the blue stains left by its former crew. Green and blue are laden with deep symbolism: the green, the new, the growing, is rushing in to cleanse a blue sadness. Blue can mean drunk. Blue can mean lewd. Rimbaud’s drink of choice was absinthe, which is green (the green fairy/ferry?). The second reference to childhood innocence is important, too. The boat is being born(e), in a way, by and over the waves. Its supervision is gone. Its anchor is gone; it is adrift, and its sense of direction (helm) has been swept away. It couldn’t, however, sound more excited to be falling apart. The boat, on one level then, must be Rimbaud himself: the colonial misfit, the artist who identifies most with what he/it sees as primal. The boat becomes more and more human the farther away it gets from people—especially colonial people, oppressive people.

Stillness. “And since then I’ve been bathing in the Poem/ of star-infused and milky Sea,/ devouring the azure greens, where, flotsam pale,/ a brooding corpse at times drifts by,” the boat tells us. The sea itself is now a poem. A Poem, even—POETRY, even: a refuge, a naturally artificial sanctuary—sustenance, milk. Green and blue have fused and, in this new combination, are alimentary, curative. The human body is but flotsam to it now. The sun, though, is setting:

Where, dying suddenly the blue,
rhythms delirious and slow in the blaze
of day, stronger than alcohol, vaster
than your lyres, ferment the bitter reds
of love!

The “reds” (recalling the earlier “redskins,” correlating them with love), after a long, hypotactic series of deferrals, somehow “suddenly” as well, are stronger than alcohol, stronger than poetry as metonymically represented by the “lyres” (even richer in English), and bitter, and *of love*. We’ve removed another layer in reality: blue washes away into green and into blue-green, but it’s all beautifully adulterated by the redness of love. Love is strong, lovely, and terrible enough to ferment alcohol past the point of *being* alcohol. The play of scale here, the metaphorical lyre’s metaphorical “vastness” seems especially surreal to me. It’s as if the boat is pointing back at Rimbaud himself and calling him out as inauthentic: you, tiny human poet with your lyre, you are nothing without love. The boat is now about to embark on a series of descriptions of the land-/seascape—what it has seen, and what it has known.

I know the lightning opened skies, waterspouts,
Eddies and surfs; I know the night,

And dawn arisen like a colony of doves,
And sometimes I have seen what men have thought they saw!

I've seen the low sun, fearful with mystic signs,
Lightning with far flung violet
arms, Like actors in an ancient
tragedy,
The fluted waters shivering far away.

I've dreamed green nights of dazzling snows,
Slow kisses on the eyelids of the sea,
The terrible flow of unforgettable saps,
And singing phosphors waking yellow and blue.

Again, the vacillation between and combination of the tiny and the gargantuan is notable here: the whole of dawn as a **colony** of doves, anthropomorphized lightning, the low sun: actors in an ancient tragedy; the world is a stage. The waters become sculptures—perhaps columns, specifically, a description consistent also with the earlier “eternal rollers.” Stately columns. They shiver, too. The sea has eyelids upon which snow falls. This is all tightly interwoven synesthesia. The landscape is revealing that it too is alive. It is primitive, too—the “low” sun, “fearful” with “mystic signs” sounds like a colonial appraisal of a native. This is appropriate as well because commerce and colonialism seek not only to manipulate, control, and subjugate other people, but perhaps even primarily the land and sea themselves. In these stanzas, you can see Rimbaud’s boat enacting the systematic derangement of its own senses. The colony of doves could be read as an over-

enthusiastic/ignorant/optimistic colonist's folly: the tendency to sentimentalize nature is fiercely overturned here in these lines which roil and resist sense, though all the expected parts required of sense are there. The curious "and sometimes I have seen what men have thought they saw!" reads to me as bitterly ironic, somehow. "Men" are wrong; their "sight" is inaccurate; their "thought" is skewed; and only sometimes and with effort have I, the Drunken Boat, gained even a shred of access to their catastrophic misappraisal of the world in which they and I 'live.'

We're about to cover much temporal ground very quickly:

Months through I've followed the assaulting tides

Like maddened cattle leaping up the
reefs, Nor ever thought the Mary's
luminous feet

Could curb the muzzle of the panting Deep.

I've touched, you know, improbable Floridas

Mingling the eyes of panthers, human-skinned, with
flowers! And rainbows stretched like endless reins To
glaucous flocks beneath the seas.

The boat, now, has perhaps been drifting for months, years. It may not be entirely clear, though, whether the boat speaks only of its travels since gaining its 'freedom.'

Humanity's will to control nature, though, is entirely clear here. The tides are cattle driven mad by captivity, and recall the transformation of Io by Zeus into a heifer. Mary can only denote religion

(Catholicism, which is...has been...historically...pretty destructive). The boat knows, though, or, at least, it had never thought, that the glowing feet of the ascended virgin could tame and control the hulking animal that is the sea. The image rejects the ‘civilizing’ oppression of religion, a major tool with which the colonizer manipulates the native (and the colonist, actually) using fear and shame. “Improbable Floridas” is one of the poem’s star or key phrases, if you ask me. The whole stanza, with its bizarre, grotesque blurring of exotic elements (including people and animals: natives as atavistic savages) is the poem’s homunculus, a miniature which in turn contains the whole. The “improbable Florida” is the crown jewel in the eye of Empire, as the “western” and/or colonial mind dreamed (dreams) up strangely childish and cross-eyed (pun intended, amen) visions of the foreign, the tropical. The “improbable Florida” *is* the Tropical Imaginary. And, actually, Florida was once a Spanish colony. The rein-bows (my pun) image is also symbolically bottomless. It’s a perfect summation of humanity’s ridiculous attempts to control nature, which, as we find (and will no doubt continue to find) today, are always ultimately damned. The boat’s copious catalogue of sights continues:

I’ve seen fermenting marshes like enormous
nets Where in the reeds a whole leviathan
decays!

Crashings of waters in the midst of calms!
Horizons toward far chasms cataracting!

Glaciers and silver suns, fiery skies and pearly seas,
Hideous wrecks at the bottom of brown gulfs
Where giant serpents vermin ridden

Drop with black perfumes from the twisted trees!

Again the boat is met with fermentation. Early, the “bitter reds of love” catalyzed fermentation (love-drunk). The boat has seen a “leviathan” decaying in the russet latticework of the reeds.

This stanza is incredibly rich, even for this poem. Reeds are common in classical mythology. Recall, for example, Syrinx, whom the rapacious god Pan was hunting, sexually. She appealed to the water nymphs for assistance, and they transformed her into reeds, which moaned in the wind of Pan’s breath. Pan pipes. This echoes oddly with the boat’s own transformation. I don’t think it’s a huge stretch to paint a rapacious empire as a rather sinister god or demon. The boat then becomes Syrinx, fleeing the symbolic hands of those bargemen we left so long ago. The Leviathan, though, is the true goldmine. The OED provides the following entries: 1. The name of some aquatic animal (real or imaginary) of enormous size, frequently mentioned in Hebrew poetry. 2. A ship of huge size. 3. A man of vast and formidable power or enormous wealth. 4. The great enemy of God, Satan. 5. Used by Hobbes for: The organism of political society, the commonwealth. 6. Huge, monstrous. It is an eerily perfect word when one reads into the poem the kind of cultural critique I’m attributing to Rimbaud. It’s not my intent to polemicize the poem by suggesting Rimbaud was entirely conscious of the poem as a product of imperial tension (though he probably was). I think it’s safe to say, in any event, that the poem, like much of Rimbaud’s life and work, is clearly rebellious and plainly contra-authority. “Leviathan” is huge etymologically, too, and all of its definitions play well into the reading of the poem as positioning itself *between* the divine

realm and what an average nineteenth century European would likely have seen as two opposite poles of human civilization: the developed or ‘modern,’ and the aboriginal. Rimbaud was clearly not average. He felt, as evidenced by this poem, I think, some kinship and belonging with and in all of these realms—the boat (he), after all, is drawn towards and between them metonymically throughout the poem. This does not mean, however, that these fragmented allegiances added up to a person with a definite sense of place, belonging, or origin.

In the next stanza, the land and seascape themselves are, in a sense, monetized; or, anyway, they’re designated with lavish descriptors suggestive of material wealth: “glaciers and *silver* suns,” “*pearly* seas.” And, as before, there is much disruption in the selection and application of sensory words: synesthesia. And, still appropriately, beneath this veneer of wealth lie poisonous serpents and darkness. This fusion of the natural world and manmade riches is beautifully achieved with the word “dorado”:

I would show children those dorados,
And golden singing fishes in blue seas.
Foam flowers have blest my aimless
wanderings, Ineffable winds have given
me wings.

“Dorado” is legion in terms of its utterly appropriate polysemy: it literally means “gilded.” It is also a South American river fish or dolphin, at that (see “The Riverman”). The word comes straight out of colonialism; think of the myth of El Dorado, the golden city rumored still to be hidden in the South American jungle. The word can also mean “a rich man,” and also refers to the sword-fish constellation. The boat longs to break free of tedious cartography:

Tired of poles and zones, sometimes the martyred sea,
Rolling me gently on her sobbing breast,
Lifted her shadow flowers with yellow cups towards
me And I stayed there like a woman on her knees.

Again mytho-divinity is invoked in “martyred.” The sea has become a kind of mother or lover, or both, and the boat has been explicitly feminized, transformed again to a “woman on her knees,” who is both religious and erotic. The anemones are like golden chalices, breasts, genitals, “shadow flowers.” The boat now becomes the land:

Island, I sailed, and on my gunnels tossed
Quarrels and droppings of the pale-eyed
birds, While floating slowly past my fragile
bands, Backward the drowned went
dreaming by.

It is an island unto itself, but still moving along. The guns of war are blunted and impotent in the squawk and shit of eerily peaceful birds. The dead of war float by, spectral dreams. And now the poem turns toward conclusion:

But I, lost boat in the cove’s trailing tresses,
Tossed by the tempest into birdless space,
Whose water-drunken carcass never would have salvaged
Old monitor or galleon of the Hanseatic league;

Who, ridden by violet mists, streaming and free,
Pierced the sky reddening, like a wall,
Covered with lichens of the sun and azure’s phlegm,

Preserves that all good poets love,

Who, spotted with electric crescents ran,
Mad plank with escort of black hypocamps,
While Augusts with their hammer blows tore down
The sea-blue, spiral-flaming skies;

Who trembling felt Behemoth's rut

And Maelstroms groaning fifty
leagues away, Eternal scudder
through the quiescent blue, I long for
Europe's parapets!

A kind of Stockholm syndrome, then, has led the boat to long for its home in Europe; no longer would it wander. It has conceded, too, that it was never cut out for any of this, in a way. The "Hanseatic League" was a mercantile union, and the drunken boat has sunken into self-pity. It doesn't fit in as a trade vessel. Nor as a pleasure craft. And now, here it is, having sabotaged itself. It's taken a while, though, apparently, as Augusts, plural, have had time to pummel it repeatedly with storms. The OED suggests that "Behemoth" probably referred to the hippopotamus specifically, but it, like Leviathan, is a biblical allusion, here to the book of Job, who, much like the drunken boat, has been subjected to a harsh test of faith. "Maelstrom" is a borrowing from Dutch, and might echo back to the Teutonic Hanseatic league. Most noteworthy, though, is the boat's plea to return to the relative safety of the Empire which spawned it. Oh, to crawl back behind the shield of war! Now, in a typically surreal move of blending realms, Rimbaud turns the boat's eyes heavenward in its abjection, all the while continuing to map the nautical over the sidereal. The boat now longs for death, or for union with the divine:

I've seen sidereal archipelagos! Islands
Whose delirious skies open for
wanderers:

“Is it in such bottomless nights you sleep,
exiled, O countless golden birds, O Force
to come?”

True I have wept too much! Dawns are
heartbreaking; Cruel all moons and bitter the suns.

Drunk with love's acrid torpors,
Oh let my keel burst! Let me go to the sea!

If I desire any European water, it's the black
pond and cold, where toward perfumed
evening

a sad child on his knees
sets sail a boat as frail as
a May butterfly.

I can no longer, bathed in your languors, O waves,
Obliterate the cotton carrier's wake,
Nor cross the pride of pennants and
of flags, Nor swim past prison
hulks' hateful eyes!

It has explicitly identified itself as a wanderer. It's difficult to tell if the exclamatory question of the “Force to come” is spoken by the boat, by the sky, by angels in the sky, or what, or whom. The boat, though, seems to be agreeing with itself or someone else: true! It's throwing a tantrum, really. And the tantrum seems to arise specifically out of frustration with the fact that it cannot remain *here* anymore than it can go *there*. It begs for death and half-renounces Europe, making one last transformation into a paper boat

which, like a chrysalis, emits a butterfly, releases a soul, brings forth a child. The poem then even seems, perhaps, to gesture towards slavery with the “prison hulks” and vessels carrying cotton. These evils are placed on even footing with the trappings and symbols of nationalism, condemned here as prideful.

II

THE RIVERMAN

Elizabeth Bishop’s surrealism takes place directly downstream from Rimbaud’s. This isn’t to suggest, though, that the two are identical, or that Bishop’s work is derivative of Rimbaud’s. Mullen writes, “Although Bishop shares the surrealists’ interest in the unconscious, her methods for incorporating oneiric qualities into her poetry differ fundamentally from their approach. She does not seek to subvert logical control, and she refuses to accept the “split” between the roles of conscious and unconscious forces in our perception of the world. Unlike the surrealists, she does not endow the unconscious with a revolutionary power to remake experience. Instead, within her poems the realm of dreams, like our waking perceptions, remains problematical” (3). I agree and would add that, in this way, I feel Bishop’s application of the

French surrealists’ (chiefly Rimbaud and Baudelaire) techniques is in some ways more complex. It’s subtler, and, for that, maybe even more “surreal,” if surrealism’s power or efficacy comes in part from its ability to render the everyday surprisingly *un-quotidian*.

“The Riverman” is very like “The Drunken Boat” in terms of its narrative. It centers around a figure who undergoes a transformation and is also, I’d argue, an analogue for or representation of the author. And, as such, I should point out that the two have much in common: both were gay, or, since “gay” didn’t really exist, both were

primarily attracted to the same sex (as themselves, not each other). Socio-economically, though, I would place Bishop above Rimbaud; that is, her family was rich, Rimbaud's was not. Both Bishop and Rimbaud, however, grew up without father figures (Bishop without her mother, too). Both were, past a certain point in their lives, constantly traveling. The young Bishop was shipped back and forth between Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. Later in her life she would fall in love with Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares, with whom she lived in Brazil for 14 years. Just like Rimbaud, then, Bishop was a citizen of empire (America) who felt a strong pull towards the exotic, the tropical.

“The Riverman” opens with a rather bizarre epigraph:

A man in a remote Amazonian village decides to become a *sacaca*, a witch doctor who works with water spirits. The river dolphin is believed to have supernatural powers; *Luandinha* is a river spirit associated with the moon; and the *pirarucu* is a fish weighing up to four hundred pounds. These and other details on which this poem is based are from *Amazon Town*, by Charles Wagley.

It's a really strange epigraph in that it flickers in and out of the possible (reality) in much the same way as the poem's events. Bishop sets these items next to one another on an even playing field: a man 'decides' (though the poem clearly depicts his being chosen) to do something which isn't necessarily supernatural—at least not yet; a belief held by the inhabitants of the river and its environs; that *Luandinha* is a river spirit associated with the moon; and, finally, the detail of the *pirarucu* is a cold, hard, but marvelous (and yet super-ordinary) fact about an actual denizen of the real-world river. I think the most telling pair are *Luandinha* and the fish, as they're grammatically paralleled and placed next to one another as if both occurred in nature—or in the supernatural realm, for that

matter. It almost makes the pirarucu a kind of messenger from another world; and, as far as Bishop the traveling New-Englander is concerned, perhaps it may as well be. It's an example of Bishop's 'always-more-successful-surrealism' of the ordinary, or, in this case, the observable.

After the epigraph, the poem opens, much like "The Drunken Boat," with a kind of disturbance, a break in the expected or mundane:

I got up in the night for
the Dolphin spoke to me.
He grunted beneath my
window,

hid by the river mist, but I
glimpsed him—a man like
myself. I threw off my blanket,
sweating; I even tore off my
shirt. I got out of my hammock
and went through the window
naked.

The man (Note that Bishop's speaker is a man, and Rimbaud's, being a boat, takes feminine pronouns) has just arisen from sleep and, all of a sudden, is about to embark—much like "The Drunken Boat"—on some sort of journey. Unlike the Boat, though, Bishop's "man" is, we assume, a native: a very different move in terms of the author's relationship with empire. Bishop projects herself into the human exotic other, Rimbaud into the inanimate, the mercantile. The opening of this poem (and the poem in its entirety) takes on whole new layer of strangeness when one takes the time to track down Wagley's sustained ethnographic study, *Amazon Town*, from which Bishop tells us she has taken the details for the poem. She has taken the details, but, in doing so, she's had a

lot of fun—and psychologically significant fun, at that. I'm not certain to what extent I see "The Riverman" pushing back against Wagley, though, in terms of questioning his endeavors (I question and challenge his endeavors from my seat in 2015; though, like Bishop, I find the information he reports fascinating and weirdly reported). I think Bishop was captivated by the jungle and its people in, probably, a similar manner as Wagley. We see her engage with exotic(ist) ethnography in "In the Waiting Room," too.

The scene we see being played out in the poem's first stanza is a common one in the lore of indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon basin. Compare, though, Wagley's account of the myth (or a piece of it—the Dolphin is a particularly potent and ubiquitous symbol or figure) with the way it's staged in "The Riverman": "It is believed that the male boto [the local name for the river dolphin] may appear in the form of a handsome young man, generally dressed in a white starched suit. He appears unannounced in homes to seduce women, especially virgins. Sometimes he may take on the likeness of a husband and have sexual relations with the wife, who is unaware of the deception" (Wagley 239). So, Bishop has swapped out the wife for the husband, rendering the would-be Sacaca and his otherworldly visitor, essentially, as a same-sex couple. And, whereas Rimbaud's speaker's transformation takes place all-of-a-piece, out of our readerly purview, the speaker in "The Riverman" begins to transform before our eyes.

When last we left the man, he'd just crawled through the window naked (a birth—"The Drunken Boat" ends with a birth image), leaving his wife behind in pursuit of his male marinemammalian suitor. The poem continues:

My wife slept and snored.

Hearing the Dolphin
ahead, I went down to the
river and the moon was
burning bright as the
gasoline-lamp mantle
with the flame turned up
too high, just before it
begins to scorch. I went
down to the river. I heard
the dolphin sigh as he slid
into the water.

The man's wife is in suspension, inert but for her snoring—she's sleeping deeply or contentedly, too. There's a paradox here: she stays behind in the real world, or in the domestic sphere—in the ordinary, in her home— and yet she's asleep, in the realm of dreams—he, who is, or so we're told, wakeful, however, is entering some other world or realm of consciousness. She sleeps to dream, he wakes to dream. It's a deeply imbricated blurring of reality, dream, fantasy, delusion, and/or hallucination, recalling the displacement experienced by the drunken boat, and by Bishop and Rimbaud as people.

Bishop's poetics is often one of a strangeness so calm it tends to go unnoticed. Though I've thus far touted the poem as a kind of wild, Rimbaudian break with reality (and it is that, in a way), I think it's very important to note not only the very different modes of poetic sight happening in the two poets' minds, but also the radically different ways in which these two strange realms and the tales which occur within them are presented. "The Drunken Boat" goes up (and down) in a hail of adjectives and conspicuously obscure diction—Rimbaud was fond of borrowing jargon from across an array of disciplines and specialties, a predilection prefiguring modernism by a stout 40 years. Bishop, by contrast, might in fact have been allergic to adjectives (I kid—but she

was allergic to a great many things); there are almost none in the lines of the poem I've included up until now. Those that are there are often sort of tucked away or buried. As the poem progresses, though, and as its events become more and more surreal and surprising, more and more adjectives begin to appear, though never of a density or conspicuousness quite on par with Rimbaud's. "The Riverman" continues:

I went down to the river.
I heard the dolphin sigh
as he slid into the water.
I stood there listening
till he called from far
outstream. I waded into
the river and suddenly a
door in the water opened
inward, groaning a
little, with water bulging
above the lintel.

"I went down to the river" has become, by this point, an outright repeton. I would argue that it serves a few purposes. It's an organizational device—connective tissue giving the poem shape, both sonically and narratively. It also reflects the incantatory methods by which South

American shamans (and many shamans in many places, for that matter) produce(d) altered states in themselves and their patient/subjects. Wagley informs us that shamans, "in communicating with the spirits they controlled...went into trance states, even cataleptic seizures. These trances were induced by swallowing large quantities of tobacco smoke, and by dancing and singing to the rhythm of a gourd rattle" (226). As the poem progresses, then, it is becoming more and more rhythmic—it would entrance us

just as a sacred rattle might. It's full of rhymes, too—both internal and end, full and slant: river, water, river, door, inward, water—an almost obsessive amount of sonic repetition is rising up in the poem.

There's also a quiet and almost completely displaced desperation welling up in between the lines. Sacacas used alcohol ritualistically, ironically, as another means to “control the spirits.” The contemporary American alcoholic (Bishop) uses alcohol (spirits) to lock the spirit out altogether. The man goes on:

I looked back at my
house, white as a piece
of washing forgotten
on the bank, and I
thought once of my
wife, but I knew what I
was doing.

Clearly, the man's wife isn't really his main concern here. The house itself has transformed into a piece of washing, a kind of grossly understated parody of the domestic. The man is quite used to the general scenery so far, but his mundane world is about to shed its familiar trappings and reveal the path into the mythic or legendary:

They gave me a shell of cachaça
and decorated cigars. The
smoke rose like mist through the
water, and our breaths didn't
make any bubbles. We drank
cachaça and smoked the green
cheroots. The room filled with
gray-green smoke and my head
couldn't have been dizzier.

He's becoming one of the (sacred) guys, is being welcomed into this fantastic world, which lies like another dimension just beneath the visible world with which he is familiar. It's like a reception for his being born into the water. It's also an etiological explanation for the mists which rise from jungle rivers. Enter the enchantress, Luandinha:

Then a tall, beautiful
serpent in elegant white
satin, with her big eyes
green and gold like the
lights on river steamers —
yes, Luandinha, none
other— entered and
greeted me. She
complimented me in a
language I didn't know;

“She complimented me/ in a language I didn't know” is, as they say, classic Bishop. It highlights, however subtly, Bishop's dual awareness as author and speaker, as someone with many identities. Bishop, writing the poem, knows it's a compliment; the speaker of the poem is, essentially, guessing—though, I suppose it's possible to tell when one is being complimented regardless of the language, but it reads to me as a typically deadpan Bishopian joke. Either way, though, it's another moment of 360-degree foreignness or displacement. Bishop was certainly familiar with encountering unfamiliar languages. The man feels so foreign among these surhumans, he momentarily transforms into a dog:

but when she blew
cigar smoke into my
ears and nostrils I

understood, like a dog,
although I can't speak
it yet.

And, much like a dog, being led he-knows-not-where, the man's sense of direction is overturned, and he's led, he thinks, to "Belem/ and back in a minute. "Belem" is Portuguese for Bethlehem, and is the last city before the Amazon. It's also a direct reference to colonialism, especially since it's explicitly Christian in origin:

They showed me room after
room and took me from here
to Belem and back in a
minute.

In fact, I'm not sure where I
went, but miles, under the
river.

It's also noteworthy that the man is traveling *under* the river, a surreal inversion of the way one usually travels rivers. The man continues his story:

Three times now I've been there.

I don't eat fish any more.
There is fine mud on my
scalp and I know from
smelling my comb that the
river smells in my hair. My
hands and feet are cold. I
look yellow, my wife says,
and she brews me stinking
teas I throw out, behind her
back. Every moonlit night
I'm to go back again. I
know some things already,

but it will take years of
study, it is all so difficult.

The domestic sphere has been punctured. The trust between man and wife has been undermined. She is worried about him; he looks ill, jaundiced, as if his liver is failing.

Obviously, that's what happens to alcoholics. It's important that the man is refusing the love and nurturance his wife offers him. The teas she makes him "stink," and are rejected in favor of the newfound excitement he's experiencing during his supernatural nights out, drinking and smoking. The mystical river figures now *expect* the man will attend their gatherings and learn from them. Already, he's far more devoted to this new course of study than he is his family and earthly life. He's having an affair. It isn't, however, your average fling. What the poem does next is important to my reading of the poem as colonial, imperialist. First, he is given gifts of spiritual import, obtained from the natural world:

They gave me a mottled
rattle and a pale green coral
twig and some special
weeds like smoke.

(They're under my canoe.)

He stashes these fetishes beneath his canoe, which, I take it, has been benched, riverside, as it's no longer his preferred method of travel. He's moved into this mystical underworld, which is next conspicuously intruded upon by a 'western' image literally filtered through the waters of the jungle river: the cinema. Bishop has projected herself

into the man. Luandinha is a high society lady in her white satin. She hosts parties in her rich underwater rooms, which “shine like silver.” This recalls the ways in which the drunken boat superimposes material wealth over natural landscapes.

When the moon shines on
the river, oh, faster than you
can think it we travel
upstream and downstream,
we journey from here to
there, under the floating
canoes, right through the
wicker traps, when the moon
shines on the river and
Luandinha gives a party.
Three times now, I’ve
attended. Her rooms shine
like silver with the light
from overhead, a steady
stream of light like at the
cinema.

One of the poem’s strangest moments follows:

I need a virgin mirror no
one’s ever looked at, that’s
never looked back at
anyone,

to flash up the spirits’
eyes and help me
recognize them.

The storekeeper offered me a
box of little mirrors, but each
time I picked one up a
neighbor looked over my
shoulder and then that one was
spoiled— spoiled, that is, for

anything but the girls to look
at their mouths in, to examine
their teeth and smiles.

“Virginity,” here, is extremely fraught. The man has essentially discarded his wife, and wants—not an actual virgin—but a “virgin” surface to help him “recognize” the spirits (or see into himself?). I don’t know exactly what the man means by “flash up the spirits’ eyes.” Perhaps he means something like to throw light on their faces, but I think it’s deliberately, *mimetically* unclear and muddy—*did* he have even the remotest bit of trouble recognizing any of them on sight the first time? What follows, the “spoiling” of mirror after mirror, could be read into pretty deeply in terms of readymade, disposable American culture—that is, it’s clearly absurd, that these mirrors are damaged or made impure by another’s reflection. That might be, though, a little bit anachronistic. It perhaps also critiques “virginity” itself, and the way some cultures treat women who aren’t “virgins” like trash while exalting men for unbridled promiscuity. The “girls” then use these mirrors to inspect themselves for flaws.

We hear Bishop’s voice through the Riverman’s lips:

Why shouldn’t I be
ambitious? I sincerely
desire to be a serious
sacaca like Fortunato
Pombo, or Lucio, or
even the great Joaquim
Sacaca.

A shaman, a Sacaca, after all, isn't too far off from a poet. Actually, in Bishop's American life, a poet is probably the closest thing to a shaman. A poet or a doctor. (But not William Carlos

Williams). A poet. One of my favorite parts of the poem follows:

Look, it stands to reason
that everything we need
can be obtained from the
river. It drains the jungles;
it draws from trees and
plants and rocks from half
around the world, it draws
from the very heart of the
earth the remedy for each
of the diseases— one just
has to know how to find it.

The fourth wall, so to speak, is broken, and the speaker sounds exasperated, as if he's been trying all along to make some kind of rational argument. "Look," rhetorically, is hilarious to me for some reason. The catalogue of the rivers doings and functions that follows is fascinatingly ambivalent. If it were spoken, say, by a European or American business person, it becomes kind of sick and sinister. Its argument could be, that is, purely capitalist, or it could be spiritual, *true*, human. This depends mostly upon what one means by "need." The Riverman himself may be trying rationalize the way he has failed and abandoned his family. He doesn't need his wife's care or love. The river has become his whole world. As if responding to an objection we can't hear, the man continues:

But everything must be
there in that magic mud,
beneath the multitudes of
fish, deadly or innocent,
the giant pirarucus, the
turtles and crocodiles,
tree trunks and sunk
canoes, with the crayfish,
with the worms

with tiny electric
eyes turning on and
off and on. The
river breathes in salt
and breathes it out
again, and all is
sweetness there in
the deep, enchanted
silt.

The river's real life utility is thrown into high relief. Its real life inhabitants, the crayfish and worms, are revealed to be fabulous from the start. They really are endowed with "tiny electric eyes." Traditional magic has been subsumed by the magic of the naked eye, of the fastidious and often unseen observer. And then, in the poem's final about face, a kind of climax or finale. The poem revs up and goes out with a bang, not a whimper:

When the moon burns
white and the river
makes that sound like a
primus pumped up
high— that fast, high
whispering like a
hundred people at
once— I'll be there
below, as the turtle rattle

hisses as the coral gives
the sign, traveling fast as
a wish, with my magic
cloak of fish swerving as
I swerve, following the
veins, the river's long,
long veins, to find the
pure elixirs.

The river is again mechanized—like a primus pumped up high. The river is full of souls, of people's voices, a hundred at once. And the Riverman, by poem's end, has become the man who visited him in the first place; the poem is something of an ouroboros in that regard. The poem ends with the amazing image of the river “suck[ing] the earth like a child,” and the Riverman's promise to hold high the magic mantel of the Sacaca.

When the moon shines and
the river

lies across the
earth and sucks
it like a child,
then I will go to
work to get you
health and
money. The
Dolphin singled
me out;
Luandinha
seconded it.

The glow of the moon is suspended by the incantatory anaphora of “When the moon...”
The second time, though, it plainly “shines” where earlier it had “burnt white” like a chemical fire. The reader has become the novice: the Riverman will go to work to get

you health and money. The poem leaves us with the suggestion or reminder that we all inhabit a world backgrounded by forces we may never see directly, but may intuit between the light of the moon and the sound of the rushing river.

Tap Me

like a sugar maple. Break me in,
an oxblood boot; I want it to spurt.

I want tin buckets massy with serum.
I want you to see how, for me,

every raindrop's a paranoid theorem;
a body bloats in every creek I walk.

There's a train wreck every time (I think)
a bottle fly dies in Ohio. A fractured

family never formally resets.
The maples hang in woolen fog;

booklice till my vellum hide. It hurts
most when the peacock,
now headless,

finally drops like a plain old pin. See how
I carve my name into a zither's

oaken shoulder, lace my fingers
through my father's and dig in.

Redbuds

Long before I learned to spell my name,
there were the freshly opened heads
of the redbuds. There was my mother's
reflection in the picture window, weather
willing. I spent an awfully long time,
for a child, daydreaming of death.

In one dream, the unctuous fabric of death
enfolded a whole dog. Even its name
wouldn't wake it. Its name a second time;
nope—still the velvet of its blue-gray head
in the grass, a newspaper left to the weather.

I awoke and remembered my mother's
saddest turtleneck. Then, yet another
bout with my own shadow—a thought of death
barged from aft to fore like nasty weather.
Sometimes, at night, I think I hear my name,
but am unafraid—won't even turn my head
to find the mouth that uttered it. Sometimes,

it seems as if it's temperate all the time;
it's as if I've never seen my mother's
blood drop like tiny plums from her split head
over rosy toilet water. Or, maybe, with death,
it's not about one's body, but one's name,
its bleak submission to whatever weather,

and forever—no body to keep the weather
out. So death is the name's losing time
with the body, now only a name.
In fifth grade, redbuds in bloom, my mother
still at work, my father found a dead
man across the street in the woods, head

shot open. *This dude blew his head
open; blowflies in his nose.* I remember
the lovely May weather
that day. And there, thinking of death,
looking out the picture window a long time,
I sucked a packet of honey. Then my mother
picked me up from my father's. But to name

the time at which, precisely, my mother's
mind began to run is like renaming death:
hopeless, will never quite wash it away.

Ancient Astronaut

Everybody needs a beloved. Some
look beyond and above. My baby died

in my arms like a Martian, his ribs
imploded into the oven of his chest.

Away he went, *godlovvum*. That was
10,000 years ago. My baby and I posed

nude amidst primitive trees. He pecked
my cheek and it caved. A feathered lizard

leapt into his arms, and it gored him. Today,
I have only his latex spacesuit. Today,

I think god how I loved once his body
as it materialized before me, spoke to me,

kissed me inquisitively. I loved wildly
when last he was here to allow me.

After coming twice, he vanished; have you
seen my ancient astronaut? He was here once;

he was the dunce in the high school play.
He was always watching crotches. From space,

he could see my heartbeat through the nape
of my neck, blow smooth my wavy hair.

I went back to where we met; he wasn't there—
but the pond we strolled around still lay

like a victim under the cypress, goslings dotting
its all-consuming blackness like defenseless stars.

Fireside

In line at Starbucks, I got a call
from my mom: *the fuckin apartment*
is on fire. I remember guilt
and tempered ecstasy flooded my skull's
oil-black riggings. The tulips baked open
that April, buttery smooth to the fingers.

Our cats had tunneled underneath a bed.
After the fire, they were coiled like frozen
shrimp amidst the garbage.

I arrived home after the flames stopped.
The neighbors gawked. Popov vodka
swirled in my mom's eyes like smoke
under pressure. She'd broken again.

They put us up in a scum motel, Fireside
Inn. Then it rained and I took off
with a liter of gin to my friend's.

At the motel,
my mom shifted, a live coal swaddled in old
sheets. The bedbugs rose to siphon
her paper-thin blood through her clothes.

Stun Gun

When he told me I'd been missing
the point, I drank a pint of malt liquor.
I marched back to the store in broad daylight,
bought a 12-pack of cheap beer, and slugged
them one after another. I imagined
a knoll in a beautiful black and white
movie, a mask in some quivering tragedy;
paradise—not my room, my life, my face.

When the sun
went down at last, I found myself
glued to the bathroom window—a party outside
or something. So I put on my coat
and hat. I went downstairs and got stoned
with two women in the dark. I knew neither,
but followed as the line fed into the basement
of the Bluefin Bistro across the street.
It cost ten dollars to get in, but money's not
real, so it was free.

It was packed
with people. This was one of many times
I've seen my features disarticulate
in a mirror-ball's compound eye. The disco-ball
revolved in shadow, my heart in its cavern
of gore. Then the bouncer's nice arms
wrapped around me. My otherworldly
laughter crackled as he pressed me out.

I know I fell
a lot. But when I woke up without
my coat, what looked like two little burns
glittered on my forearm like stained glass.

Beset

by the wet air in the ER,
I watch my mother fall
like a moth to the tile—only lighter,
more bird-boned, more empty, more dome-
headed and flimsy. My mother
whose blood won't obey,
whose vessels unfasten on Christmas
each year. Whose blackened eyes
char the white ceiling, burnt onions.
Whose hemorrhaged, whose wrecked duodenum,
pylorus, jejunum, primroses,
bad omens. Walks into the wall,
falls to the pavement, the carpet.
I love her.
Ripped amygdala humming,
she walks on my arm down the hall.
She nightmare, she genius, she ingrate
cadaver glued to the leather
couch, the ceiling more yellow above her:
nicotinic nimbus, gloriole.
Her inebriate cackling, icteric
smile roped open. All night she screams
in my ear like a violet
buries its nail in the green.

Cat Person

On the back porch, smoking
a cigarette with my brother
on the phone, I saw a cat—really big

and orange under the halogen streetlamp.
I'd moments earlier described my loose
plan in moving forward: write about life

as life, not just the life of the mind.
We joked about the animal poem
in general, wherein the speaker finds,

upon encountering some creature, nocturnal
or not, some new meaning. Even god,
or, even worse, him or herself.

And still the cat approached, its apricot
pelt not quite as glossy as it could be.
Because we were both stoned, to make him laugh,

I beckoned the cat with kissy-faces, stretched
out my hand as if I had something to give it.
The cat seemed to respond. It forged a path

through inky grass and weeds. I asked
my brother, wouldn't it be so weird to end
a poem with a cat that waddles up

to the speaker who discovers, on looking down
at it more closely, that it has the face
of a person? We laughed. Or no face at all,

he suggested. Yeah, like, just fur
and no features, I said. The last line,
we decided, should be,

as it upturned its furry, faceless head.

The orange cat in real life spooked and fled.

Contra Naturam

It occurred to me recently to explore
moth versus butterfly species. I guessed dead-on,
of course (For what is research if not
self-serving?). There are many times more
moth species than butterfly because
it makes sense to spurn diurnal life.

Antemeridian pressures are vicious.

When light
shifts from one's person, something lifts.
The particulate dark is more or less dense,
nor does it matter (a spectrum
is a palliative nostrum). The field is deep,
the points are innumerable. Must

I connect the dots?

Are the moths right?

Their feathered
antennae are as question marks: inept.

I pupate in cigarette smoke. The porch
lamp glows like a surface unit, but is almost
cold to the touch—such alien gas
is its blood.

The rosebush has agglutinated
the trellis's skeleton. Coreopsis
frotteurizes the lattice.

Night grows darker after a broken promise.

Reflection

No sure recognition as I eyed
my face in the platinum flatness of the bathroom
mirror, a parallelogram framed with red
faux bamboo. I lifted my black T
and swiveled my hips once, remembering
the time I'd paid a stripper to talk to me.
I flounced back to the bedroom and tipped out
the rancid foam from my eleventh beer
in just under two hours. I wanted to *dance*.

I blew the candle out too forcefully
and glaucous wax splattered my shirt.
I replaced it with an identical
one (in every way but the joint hole
burnt below the navel). Out I went,
jutting forth from the door like a broken
bone.

At night, my body ends where night begins.
The small town's colored lights poured hard
into my giant pupils, went right through.
Evening's horizon had long since been displaced
by dark so heavy it bent the knees. I shambled on
to the gay bar with long shards of stale
love parting my brain.

The beer was green
amber in the mass-produced glass stein
under the chartreuse track lights. Always a lamb
in my self-pity, always a weakling goat,
I lapped it back as my huge, oblong eyes
went darker, denser. A retarded saint,
I leaned against the bar like fancy bait.

A handsome man let me shove my fist
down his pants on the front steps outside
the bar. He hissed my name in feigned protest.

I blacked in and out in the passenger
seat. I'm sure he squeezed my thigh to test
its tenderness. I'd no idea where
I lived, so he text messaged some friend
of mine.

Home again, under the ceiling fan
in the hardwood paneled kitchenette, we sucked
long plastic glasses of Jack Daniel's. Then he fucked
my sleeping body on the cheap red rug.

I Don't

know how I'll ever love again, what with
the psychic tantrums and Formica smile.

When I feel strange, I want to be alone;
when I'm alone my eyes orbit the room;

excuses tumble from my arms like stale
baguettes.

The baker's arms stay wide
open and nobody fills them. I feel so bad
for myself.

My body unspools into bed
like flypaper.

All I want is strong arms
around me as I confront my inner
thunder.

Heretofore comatose, my sense
of wonder cranes its brittle

dove-neck unexpectedly;
and my heart inside me,

shiny as an anchovy,
begins to throb
like a thawing frog.

Little Game

Just the same, I slept with
an anchor, having doused
the room in a mixture of lavender
oil and water. I don't remember
what I imagined for dinner. I sent
two Bostonian Brahmins
a picture I took of two flies (the blue chrome kind)
having sex on the porch in broad daylight
on a Sunday. They felt threatened. I larded
my heart with the priestly caste's knee-jerk
platitudes, said things
such as, I emit salvation
and I'm not even really embarrassed
about it anymore.
I blushed a season. Tuesday evening,
a brown recluse
made a break from the depthless rectangle
of the walk-in's unlit portal. Undesirable
behavior. I shouldn't
have been able to track it, they're so fast, but after
I'd chased it to the kitchen, flicked on the light—fiat
lux—and scanned the hardwood
floor (its chestnut stain
eerily close to the spider's pulpy sepia), I smeared it
out with my fuzzy black slipper. Oh well,
we'll always have hell,
or we'll come back as venomous spiders.

Locus Amoenus

My bedroom is a bower. I'm a gargoyle. In the parlor,

I amuse bored suitors with my neon head-wound

and neoprene garters.

I draw up my knees, rest my chin on them,

and wince; the whiskers prick my skin like reeds.

I hum

rape me, rape me, rape me. Unhinge

my palm, you'll find a statuette just like me.

Suck its ruthless secret

into your windpipe;

protect me.

Sweet Peas

ensnared the house. Honeysuckle

blotted most of the windows. My mom

 scraped the white and aqua tiles

in the bathroom. Carpet shampoo

in the living room painted me

in hives, portrait pink like buds—my skin

 way too magenta to be my skin,

soft as it was, in its idiot youth. Behind

the house, a pitch of thistle

stretched up to the highway. Distant.

 I shot grackles with my half-brother,

came back with ticks suckling

 at my tender scalp in secret: plump,

firm with tension. In summer, fleas

infested the whole basement. Ankles pocked,

 I crept down to the wild roses, white

 tarts on hooker's green brambles.

 Sometimes my dad

would use an actual scythe to fell the brush.

The Bier

Jägermeister sloshes like crude oil in clear
plastic cups, bending what light braves the bar.

I chew a Klonopin and almost feel
as if I can trust my own body,

if only from afar. Funereal candles tremble
in my sockets (jewelry boxes). I'm a saint engaged
in parallel mortifications.

There is always another petal

to pinch, always an unmolested
passage. My consciousness bulges

the paradisiacal lining of another
dimension's holy order. I keep company with drudges
and terracotta missionaries. The elation
runs from my body as distillate patience.

Another planet has seduced me.

Its gravity breaks my ringlets.

I am a probing maggot in a warrior's

helmet. I lick spiced honey from a god's
armpit. I inhale a whole font
of spiritual soup,

vomit Ramen noodles on a loop.

Misinformed Postmortem Portrait

of John Keats, candle-blackened lamb in his casket:

dentures carved of walrus ivory; bones

like ivory soap; receding gums

like fine bisque to the touch; lungs oblong

urns or ashtrays; cravat a frost blanket.

Abnormal orchids part the gloom his heart

leaks like fog through death's mosquito net.

So it goes,

his avian torso drinks the hyperbolic light.

The cathedral dwarfs his head, its hulking weight

presses perfumed oil from his curls.

Look how the room spins, in death there is reason,

his lips are so full.

So I climb

into the coffin beside him to hold him.

He breaks open and white Christmas lights

slide from the gash in his side. It repeats.

Pamela, Ventral Aspect

All morning over the medical book, Pamela
chased the answer. Behind her eyes,
a palindromic dread pulsed back and forth;
she worried she might suddenly give birth
to an aristocrat, some twisted Austrian angel
with skin as thin and pale as almond milk.

Thus she would scout out a manger.
Redolent with weed, turned out in denim,
she'd swallow green ribbons of cactus,
self-actualize there on the spot.
Pamela shifted her gut, her apartment
eviscerated, all but burnt out.

For every reason, there's a calamity
twice greater waiting just over the wall—
apparition stuck losing her blood in a hospital bed;
Pamela in Bethlehem, Pamela anywhere but under
water,
wasted and praying like hell for a heaven to fall.

Cosplay

All day he wandered
the vivarium in search of a yawning
white tiger. Faded on Xanax
and codeine, his miniscule
calves twitched, swelling the seams
of his stockings; his cloak stank, he came
to a stream (as they all do) and drank
deep and drank powerful loathing
for anything beautiful then. Aspen copses:
numinous, crowded birthday candles. He didn't
know bursting, he didn't know empty, but almost,
and kept to himself. Lyric force
on the body in the gross
trope-scape of the wanderer,
obsessed. He slept on the floor,
drooled on the futon,
crooned to fervid stars,
burnt the nest.

Imagine

a whole beluga whale tattooed with oozy
lilies. It plumps on the beach in your head
as your mind's chiaroscuro
intermittently eats it.
Already, its fluids make a dark
and sticky heptagon
in the ultrafine sand
you've invented. You've conjured
a moon, too, and a black plankton bloom—
and brain coral for miles, methyl blue.
But you lose
faith in your vision. The lifeguard extrudes
his sweet-smelling spores; he explodes
and fleeces the beachhead in gametes. A changeling
shadow unspools from your whale, which still bloats
in aggressive refulgence. The sea oats
snap all of a sudden; the whale's brain
melts. Iridescent flies glow like pyramid
studs on its tongue's sprawl. You've had it. Enough.
No one ever told you that being a whale was this tough.

Gaffe

A Fiji mermaid backlit in a split-end nimbus,

I interrupt an archway's gothic brilliance.

Tanagers draw seed from my cavities. Back east,

larks nudge a nightingale back under

a gasmask, beaks naked. Far below the cirrus,

a dead doe knows its name.

I know lordosis and permissive tourists.

I know the dun conundrum of a flame.

The joker in me cuts my cards to ribbons.

A horse's iron eyes regard my agate

grin and eyes as painterly faux pas.

I asphyxiate; pure shame scalds

my brainstem—a cruel pirouette,

wild will. I guess I'll always be

a haunted fool in my own way—

but I laud the world that taught me

night and day.

Parabolic Fantasy

His goad is good in the deep woods;
there's a hard look about his thick hands.

He squares up to an enormous fungus
jutting from a bent horse
chestnut tree.

He kneels and, silhouette in profile,
blown smooth and huge before the blue
moon, he seems to say forgive me,
we have no prayer.

Any excess sap
pumps into the ends
of the doomed pin oak
leaves, blood unrolling
sleeping sleeves.

Just then, an unstitching
in the gut upends me. I remember
once I rolled down a densely
wooded hill. The pale dust rose
around me. My scrapes glared like irate
pansies.

Reflecting on this scene now, here
with you, reminds me of almost burning.

A flea circus encircles my scalp, anxious
phonemes blowing empty fire.

That is to say *my nerves*
are bad tonight. Unstick the silver slug
in my gummed heart. The sky is turning
green. My hair won't part.

Carl's Sweet

nutsack and steadfast anhedonia,
his insistence his bed point to north.
There was a year he loved lighthouses,
but he began to see them differently
at about a year's distance.
How dense
was Carl? As an all-butter pound cake—
and sweet like a cake—see his sack
swing above you, caress it
like a surgical resident.
Superimposed,
projected onto Carl's
body is a bright chart of its parts.
A world map over that, complete
with sea monsters, washed eerily
over his belly, its wiry hair
silver in the cruel
full-spectrum light. What an eel.
Carl's head
hits the pillow again and again,
day after day, such intrepid consent
is Carl's only gift, his only shield—
elephantine, impossible to wield.

Parallax

after Donne

Difference of sex you'd no more know,
nor me, nor my heart's internment.

Hulk outside the frame: be you man,
be you angiosperm,

my chest is purest stillness, an icebox
in which an angel soon will sleep a space.

I can but mourn for I was born
with a corpse's thumb
between my legs. I'm thusly barred
from my every beloved. Men are horrid
stargazers in mate-making. Watch—a moth hole
in my face, my mouth parches to wool. My eyes
melt back into my skull like hot spoons
into snowpack. The stars look huge
from here. My body grows
the clenched fist of its heart's
flash-frozen rose.

Argument in One Piece

Into what modern river drains our ancient
sadness, he asks us.

My best guess:

Seed birds converge
on the harvest. Schizophrenic finches,
ignition of plumage and thistle.

Arrival

is an empty missile. O but our membranous
body, our brief purchase
on the lot.

Unconvinced

Thomas flayed open—a placard below him reads: *almost*.

The season, though, persists; again the thirsty
braid of our bones, our warm skulls long in bed.

Light slows to a snail's pulse through a rheumy
porthole.

Iridescence

murmurs over the water
moccasin's microcosmic eyes;
it glides and burns and spirals
into the gravity well.

Grave cello's

golden scroll, the iris's soft palate's yellow
is displaced as night weighs in,

unintelligible

mouthful.

The rich swill tea on a corpse's
birthday, and how pretty her service.

The Dupe

The Dupe drank deep, the Bradford Pear looked on,
smiling through its stink. The Dupe drank deeper
and smiled back through pink eyes at his keeper,
and thanked it with a very thoughtful yawn.

Spoilage framed the Dupe's skull as the sun
bestowed on him a nimbus. *Never suffer,*
the Dupe said as the Bradford's foliage scattered;
and, *Death has no trustworthy synonym.*

The wind turned on the Bradford and it fell,
and crushed the Dupe, and crushed him for a year,
and crushed him for a decade. They grew rich

and radiantly dark. One could no longer tell
the two apart. And then another pear
tree twisted from that richness, smiled and stared.

Cry for Help

Regarding my former dolor—
there was a sting in me then I've since
tweezed (I tell myself). But then hot air balloons
dragging over town invoke split lips
passing mucus back and forth, amphibian tongues
flogging bliss to fliespecks. It pains me
still, I think, a little less; then again the leaves
assume their funereal colors and posture. Again wind
tugs at my throat like a lover, just slightly
less disappointing. Strictly speaking,
I recover. But gravity's fingers hover,
force weekdays labeled NUMB
into my gullet.

Quantum Tantrum

I was once a minute thing while I daydreamt
from a third story window in second grade.

The sky never seemed so blue (again).

Years later in a bar, as a drunk woman
in a blue tube-top shifts brusquely on her stool,

I look down at my toes and improvise
provisional obituaries
(mine).

Even if sleeping
isn't what it promised, I love it. Still,
listen delicately enough—you'll likely hear
the dust's magisterial insistence,
smell the sky's all-seeing fear.

Traklesque

An amorous Joseph trots the jagged
path like an exsanguinating stag.

Bluely Mary pursues brown recluses
over the floor of a counterfeit basilica.

A windowpane blooms in the drunkard's
forehead. Acrylic sentences issue
from a well atop the barren Tor.

Moonlit lake. Swelling creeks,
the novice's panting veins. A marooned
invalid leaks piss in the clinical wilderness.

A wire-boned apostle stalks the porch.

The planets of his black eyes weigh too much.

Outside the Mortuary

there were flutes in the surgical steel shrubbery.

Loved one, dead one, sane one, quietly

I acquiesced and kissed his hairy belly,

shuddered with garbled disdain.

Rotten, my heart—

spoiled rotten in enabling dawn.

His chin was always ebon velvet, always

his sockets were transitory

gimlets I looked into.

So close but never touching, each thing

on earth was alone in its shimmering vitriol,

blushing.

Matins

I perceive only an angel's vespine tonguing;
I grow crisp in its molten peel.

Tangier is dead, I hear. Grave words
slither from the jasmine.
The woods
are cold enough this morning
to test my skin.

The simpleton is loose again;
agave nectar (mucilaginous, pellucid

as a diamond) trails like wet spider
silk from his worn-out cock. I drool acid

into the delphinium, over its pulmonary
embonpoint. Tulips' cupped faces
conceal the sun,
organic diaphragms.

Down comes dawn,
rag lowered over an arachnid,
just before just after.

Babe

O, see the sun on the lamb's black wool;
see mortar herniate between pink clouds.

See real children walk in their dozens;
I wilt on the sidewalk, black balloon

hanged over my hand. Impossible
peonies revise their shadows. My horizontal

body drops its jaw and its skull giggles.
I aim the finger at my head: harm no one.

See that the error in the temple
be scrubbed like a bloodstain. Take

my leash. I am only a child, I promise.
I know how to vanish. I'll punish

myself to be honest.
I throw my voice
and watch it. It threatens
to break the feckless
bedroom mirror
but I stop it.

Anonymous

He evaporated
when I told him. But even
as he rose into the ether like spent reason,
my eyes stayed glued to a tuft of violets,
which pulsed like slowing gills
most of that evening.

I was occupied
by a heavy nonentity—ribs hugging
carefully each breath.

&

If into that varied nothing, pawing
like a dog at a man's chest, I could spoon,
would you love me for a mouthful
of what metaphysical aspic I'd garner?

The moths in the hope chest
found a way to amplify their gnawing.

Virgin wool
surrenders
under well-intended stabbings.

&

I drew noble gases
into my tubes, blushed neon, hove my feet
over black sand that wan noon. Pearly mussels
(nacreous hustlers) gaped like willing
mouths by a throwaway lake.
Something had busted;
something escaped.

Should I Try

myself, might I then attain
some universal wisdom, see Meaning
crouching unmentioned, watching
urine dry in Ohioan July?
Wadded underwear are angel wings: typical
figure. Heaven: Too stupid
to get into Hell. But when light hits
dude's crotch just the right
way, it is unholy huge,
big as a saint's foot.
I wonder whose husband's
my blood was. Museum quality
viruses tuck into a microscopic
Amtrak.
Destination: loveless.

Blight Ordinance

You see, I had a love, but it ended.

I found myself standing before a pronounced rectangle,

in it silent grief like we outstretch

to the newly dead.

I wept at the humid

tang of germination. I remembered the house

with the long,

tough linen drapes.

They glowed orange as the sun ended.

In material loneliness, twice craven, a thing

to be hunted,

I strode long

like a panther—complicit, lubricated

in part by ignorance, but absolutely

cropped, in the most worn-out sense.

As Every Mouse

in the house one day goes down for a nap,
I'll join them (obliged) in that sleep.

Thick to close, my quicksilver eyelids; crushed,
my luminous cowlick. The mass of a woe
I've yet to purge anchors a whale
in my head. There, all punishment's bestial,
really, elephantine pain. A brute axman
folds his skin aside, parades his belly's beast
in its neonatal nudity—his inner estate, his good start,
the crowded hallway to the tar pit of his heart.

When

a lightning bolt stoops
from its dark haunt and hawks
materialize in its single heartbeat.

When ferns shield the mouth
of a cold limestone cave in Ohio.

When the crepe paper loiters,
when the straggling black balloon
shades a rat in its eccentric shadow. After
a scarlet newt takes one petite,
panicked breath,
its amphibian rictus clicks shut in silence.

That's when it's too cold to snow
and deer beds blotch the hill
like crop circles.

Then the moon
seems a personal insult.

Then
pure cruelty beats in the trees.

Then candid mouths are branded

VACANCY.

In conclusion: an allegorical
human skull in profile before
Victorian hedges, black gables,
fruit trees; the specular
eyes of a majestic
stag; its broken knees.

Traklesque

Barren meadow. The pupil's an inkwell.
Common fish float there like milquetoast
infants.

The pear grove's besotted
with its own stillness. Into the humus
the sunset pummels our bodies with disfigured
kisses. An unripe satyr
glides through silvering poplars. A white hare
unzips; its lining glints like garnet,
shames the pears.

The moon's rapt grimace
spotlights a doe, gelatinous eyes
electrically dark in the silence
and stillness. All day in the wild
flowers, tall aliens with grasping fingers.
How dare the shadow suffer what it suffers.

The Wind

moans through my head, a prophecy
of unperturbed darkness.

Smiling shepherd,
retract your soft foot and hot nail.

The black walnut's enough. I mistook
love for my blown veins, a braid of nearly gray
mistletoe. An undulant secret
rides your ear's whorls. A laugh track
slithers in and out—the bed is wet.

Alexis, your weak spine's a nexus into which
angels disappear like UFOs. Your velvet roe
runs from my lips like a rumor. You trouble
the shallow shadow of my slumber.

I draw my fingers through your fiberglass
tresses. Should a seasonal wind—
the *Föhn* or the *Mistral*—unseat my heart,
I'll hymn you from my otherworldly perch.

Marlowe's Lousy

pubes sound to their lice like savage thunder.
We think therefore we think. Tombstones

hem the cemetery—granite scansion,
desperate measure, shoulders rubbing

six feet under. Iridescent starlings'
breasts fleck the black metal treetops

like ulcers. Sententia issue from the crushed
lutenist's orbital bone. *Many will die, O,*

many will die. Gape-gobbed gillyflowers
eulogize the bluebells, drape the gallows.

Just then Faustus trips and finds himself
facedown in a dish of curdled cream.

Marlowe leers, adjusts his cockeyed cloche,
and strokes a lion cub with his gloved hand.

Sweet as tobacco, boys wax ribald,
sift the packing peanuts in his skull.

His shadow growls across the sprawling stage
of a coliseum (time's walls have grown thin)

stained in boarsblood, bearsblood, mansblood.
A lurid mask leaves dimples in his skin.

Herm

We begin between the fluted columns
on the backside of a dime. Imagine us
there, listing our infinite riches,
pickling our delicate noses, passing
kidney stones into the evergreen hedges.

Next we emerge from a dime on an island
and shake the silver change out of the sea.

We lisp as lovers ought and promises
bore my ears, now yours—what welcome pain.

The mangroves lurch like overburdened pews.

Now we're born into a church. The priest's latex
cap and linen cassock arc from darkness, doting
lightning, and at length are slurped into a waiting
dime—a static censer rescinding its plume.

Pineal Song

Every thought's a dulled quill,
 an ingrown embarrassment glinting,
stardust Morse from a moat's glass
 surface. I pace a blacked-out turret
 with an ivory goblet of grog.

A choir condenses. A tenor reduces
 to a singularity and, *Shhh*,
I'll lead the way through the fog.
 Yet the solar winds unbutton me
 like psalm.
 I squat lost in primordial noir,
 eyes two opal doorknobs,
 each pupil an empty well.
 My body's forever-wide water:
stillest, stiller, stillest, still.

I'd Thought

vision a river. But then I couldn't

find my way back from the era

of death I'd dwelt in once. *Hélas*,

his linen thoughts and hands.

We'd lived long with no demonstrable license

to do so. A black boat rowed canals in my skull,

the gondolier scalped tickets to my gut,

proscenium festooned with kneecaps

and snapdragons.

You'd think death could reason,

the way he looked that night, how fragile,

his hand propped on the wheel,

sweet smile frozen.

The Sleep of Reason

Season of mist, of ammonia, of Windex—
my pitiful nostrils tickle. The cottage
waits spotless for Keats. In his tight
riding breeches, his hair a comatose
anemone, he shoots over the moor
like a goshawk and kisses my cheek.

There's no reason to sleep; we've so much flesh
to share. We let the owls out of our mouths.
They mingle with the bats we're sure we hear.
Keats is promptly and henceforth a monster,
a lamina of flop-sweat over his sex-
crazed chest, his nipples chipped epiphanies.

I, for one, am haunted by the thorough
saturation of his shadow on the wall
(a million pixels or as many nocturnal
swallows in collusion too deep to undo).
He pounds me all night to the last
oozings.

Gnats the next morning, his laden
head's hole in the pillow. I doubt my face
a split second in the mirror. A hazel shell,
my forehead twitches, sheds its clammy cells.

The Pigs

piss the petals off the mallows in the meadow;

They take the garden as their wallow.

They disappear in the silo's shadow. They glower,

their faces silver platters in the moon's

uneasy amnesty. They shiver

in pleasure as rare earth slicks their trotters.

Their flesh is as readily frozen as water.

They gleam in their argyric fullness

and pose for the picture.

They're made to nose the earth for truffles

to be served to a banker. Their asses

sag like widow's weeds.

Bad omens each, their eyelashes beat fastest

and hearts flutter loudest in foretaste of carnage.

Their shrieks strike cold night air like baby's breath:

sharp, white, brittle, unstoppable flowers.

Viagra

Pink geraniums and robin's egg
capsules. Unimpeachable rapture
sinks like pink-gold earrings in a tarn.

I was never trained, as such, to do such harm,
but find I have a knack for thwarting portraits,
a stiff pink smile squinting my whole mien.

Or else I'll wed an aging duke. On all fours,
still hard as steel submersibles, we'll towel
one another clean, sliced a million times

by blades of sunlight reaching through the blinds.

Distracted sacks of flesh, we'll gape like God's
mouth: steaming, drooling. We'll fondle the lilac

cashmere blanket like a castoff pall,
our scrotums draped like crepe paper
over our hollow balls.

Bats

loop over the back porch.

Lately, my heart's been mulch, a sack lunch,
sirens and rehearsals. The black walnut
rocks in the wind, approximates a drunk's
off-color stillness. I cross my heart and fast
out of reverence. Out of sequence, its wooden
knocking minds its own concentric
 violence.

It is glass. It is plump. It is strident.

 And what do bats know of it, and how?

It is dark on the porch and the street lamps' pulses
synchronize. Overlapping strobes,
 they illuminate the rain from underneath.

I light a cigarette. My heart projects
 diminutive reports.

 Its beats
strike the wet parked cars and ricochet,
 form a tidy pile at my feet.

Scarab

Or eulogy for the lutenist drowned
in October's depilatory swoon.
I lately sleep as if beneath a globe
of dung, quilts fanned like lapis
winglets at either hip.

For heliolaters
fall is a difficult time. Hors d'oeuvres
forecasting decimation include: writing long-
faced psalms and twisting a golden
tress around my index finger. Pensive
unto lassitude, my heart's erroneous,
commensurate with my brain—an aubergine
dirigible, incorrigible stem
to stern. Lord, bless my eyes, both of whom
burn with love and fatherly concern.

Deluded

Unstable denouement and down I go,
a bawling beau, wind-up dentures
chanting, *give me black, give me black*
in untippable buckets. A pocket of dead
mice in the dovecote reeks like lilacs
as it antiques. The walls here are thick.

When I remember you correctly I feel sick.

A sample fantasy:

Our legs entwine on a black divan, like plastic
silverware on an ironwood marimba. A hired lutenist
hums dryly; the neck creaks, rafter
at a hanging. Flesh-eating beetles look on.

The clouds at 3AM elbow one another
like Keystones in a foam
cooler, piss-filled buildings in a flood. Now, slowly,
so I won't notice,
liberate yourself from my sad love.

Venus

Retrograde—these days

when my veins itch
and the altar in my cave (what I call
my heart of late) tips backwards.

Wish

all your life, distended and earnest.

Toss salt over your shoulder.

Kiss the groom,
whose wound twists like a dying promise.
Into his globe I poured my better half;
boys like us are born bound for the past.

As a Supplicant

I'm nothing. Something always gets in the way.

Somehow, I can't stomach the groveling,
the incense, the oblations; the oranges

alone are amply noxious. The toxic sky
obscures my ray unrolling, mists my vector;

I'll give no alms tonight. In tawny fumes,
the sumacs sway like pallbearers. Poplars

snag the clouds like pissy tattoo needles.

A bishop named Bitch mounts a pundit

named Missile. Sinister political cartoons
displace my soul by nods and nudges

in the positively tropical ambient sadness.

Salamander Prayer

One in a series
of salamander paintings—see here
its exquisite mucus, a jeweler's
attention glozed over any suspicion
of glistening. Its skin's grape
skin. Note its toes—charming
as a kitten's. Reel in its curves
the frank sensuality with which the brush
(cue the dirge) must have stalked the canvas.

This is not the work of some aimless
novice in a theoretical bedroom. No, this
is like good evolution: rises, revises
its likeness. This mandala, this
sculpture from the ether. Salamander,
deliver me from hazard. Before you I am
animated deference—how the glassy
paisley of your body weighs my palm.

Imagine

a cottage in a decaying village
in an evenly edenic wood.
Its inhabitants evaporated eons
ago. Vast tracts of spacetime, though,
collapse sometimes. Then the villagers
slurp MREs under a canopy
of camouflage lace. Death's a senate
staffed by immortal polyps. God's cabinet
harbors a boundless field of wheat
tufted with mold like spun sugar.
My head is a burning car, good an answer
as any.

Wherewith such venom
the frogs drone in the trees as the village
grows rigid. Quails freeze under buckled
honeysuckles and starve. Death
is an interview. The human mind is
an interlude. It gleams
like a begonia and wanes
like a scar.

Implosive Lullaby

*

My honor is a difficult operation.

The root of my terror's a ruined
histogram, the orderly procedure
of the body's terminal instant.

In my joy, there persists a particle
of abjection.

*

Light batters the lutes of my eyes.

*

God, primordial hero,
the spasmodic throb
of the sergeant's
jugular vein has replaced you.

From here on out, allot
for every pulse a dead
or dying
star.

I Know

what it's like to feel the world elapse
too neatly around me. Pouting, knees drawn
to my chest, quite apart, I used to haunt the quad and sketch
the boys' nude lips and magazine veins. Stupefied.
A mental fisheye lens clicked shut each day
and cropped the tulips headless. Mealy sky
swung a wan sun from a titanium
gibbet. Crow-flowers
carpeted my skull, acres
of discomfiture.
My thoughts burnt like black crêpe paper,
my dreams were choking hazards. One obsession
centered on the hempen noose, a second
evaporated ere
my eye could catch it.

Sparsely

peopled, my ribcage houses land enough
to keep horses. Right there, by the hedges,

I saw him face the sun and smile.

His heart purred with the hum of heavy
petting. Élan cancelled his black eyes.

Now innocent now

felonious, my heart barks—internal corset

laced up about it to pop it

like a firecracker or a flea.

I barely know the groom. His chariot moves
too quickly for my eye to track it.

He speaks when I want him to see.

Overalls

In one pocket a cigarette pack
lifts the denim bib around it like a table cloth.

Don't worry if you spill wine or pasta
sauce on them. The stain will fade for years

of wear to come, a little trapezoid
of rust or blood, which lifts a little more

each season. Nor should you fear to piss
them on a webcam. They work just as well

for preaching. Enter the minister.

The word led him to the river with a tablet
in either pocket: despair, despair, how steep

the mortuary stairs. How red, at any rate,
my face became when, beneath the hymnal,

I picked open my cuticles. Incense
filled the chapel and my cuts

stung like matches hissing first and last
epiphanies: the mass, the mass, the mass.

Chum

Let the cockcrow's flaying cease.

Let my man mouth-siphon
my tank; imbibe my minnows. Let his bronzing
be an afterthought, mannered figure.
Let be the boneyard. Let be the scissors.

I turn bats inside out in search of silver
to ferry to his altar. At a raw-hemmed hour
there erupts a jarring clatter. Unholy
nuptials melt like fumbled dates
into a hill.

In my heart (naphthalene hatbox) a golden
eagle's folded. Between two fingers
rocks the copper bough
of man's cigar.

In autumn,
when the blood clot's sudden and the stars are too
earnest, many a wedding
descends to keen remonstrance. And that's why
my heart is a comma, and that's why my house
is a gash. Beyond its hillside's an illustrated
seascape. The palms stoop like sad ingrates,
dripping varnish. Hibiscus blossoms, hospital-
honest, twist shut into darkness like difficult
theses.

The sharks circle our hearts
despite our faces.

Having Suffered

the weight of the heifer, the farmer
blew a kiss through a purity ring
to his daughter. The mice said, *the horror*.

That vile rumor. The decorous sunset's
albumin. The hump in the hay
and the attendant fever. Hot rag
 on the forehead.

Red deer, a toppled
fawn, its face alive with ants:
black Swarovski crystals in the misty
embrace of a risky new partner.

The sun makes a dance of its own
departure. A gag reflex
squeezes the moon through matter
of fact blackness, which metes out like sweat
beads the tiny stars. As they spill forth,
the Buddha's bones suffuse the fawn's,
 and earth's every particle burns.

Self-healing Litany

Black light * Noble gases * Animated
martyr * Asshole * Post mortem portraits
*Private pulpit * Meretrix quotient *
Variable whoredom * Shifting morals *
Dropping anchors* * Harshly dark
hollyhocks, bruising under the hail *
Cathedrals: the human being's crystal * The special
residue of geometry incarnate * Purple cabbage,
ornamental * Stainless steel bowl
of squid ink fettuccini on a spot-lit gurney
in a 19th century
painting of cranial surgery * Oxygen
masks on Canada geese * Effigy
of autocrat A * Actual kidney
of autocrat Z * Black condoms and candy
dildos * Exhaust fumes * Black
Lincoln town car in a colossal Plexiglas tank
of heavy water * Roundworms in a row
of art-glass jars * The smell of a man's
neck * A dark arcade of columns *
A general sense of dread * No self-respect *

Deadhead

I must've been fourteen when,
as we drove the wooded road home,
I saw a girl I knew from school. A sophomore,
the kind of girl whose roach-clip
barrettes lit her hair like the green
bottle flies I'd seen in marigolds.
Her name (like, for real) was Rhiannon.
She looked like a medieval French peasant,
hair a wad of bedding, skin like fossil-
rich sediment. Hippies' spawn, she smelled
like pot's ghost and tangled dogs.
She plodded
incredible along the guardrail, yard-long
mane hung down her back like a fresh
kill—until it hit the air
just right and lifted
all-of-a-piece. For a still
instant, I could read her tie-dyed tee—
where red broke into purple into pale
blue, in unassuming cursive: *Fare Thee Well*.

Fairy Ring

Walking through the park to the grocery
store, I saw a ring of thirteen

toadstools on a knoll.

I twisted my fists in my blue-penciled sockets.
A loaf of bread rolled over in my skull.

I wept into a Dixie cup and waved
a quilted napkin at the hearse I imagined.

Forging on, for some secret reason, I thought:

Passions

dry-rot like condoms in my wallet.

Although,

Christianity: two-thousand-plus years
isn't bad for a limp-wristed mystery cult.

I hereby bequeath my sour breath
to Mithra.

Then I thought: we can get sadder
together forever, laid out askew

on the elk-skin throw in the armory,

a pair of particles tickling

a catalpa flower's hirsute throat.

Exotic creatures of habit, we'd retire

into the infinite helmet of space.

Black is my favorite color

because: night,

because space, because dark matters

require it, circle it, bruise it

ever richer—because the bookmark

of ironed silk in his armpit.

Adjectives

pin my pupils and my liver

aches.

The mushrooms bloom awake

to ache again.

Vespers

One night as the moon wore the silver

whisper of a cataract in otherwise

healthy tissue, I tilted my square

jaw and met its glare with my round eyes.

There, in utter hollowness, I watched
the moon not moving. Around my feet,

wild rabbits nibbled at the gravel.

I swiveled my body with one well-timed paddle

to face the blacked out figure of the walnut

tree in its Jurassic ambivalence. Neat pain,
lacewings in infinite blackness, came over

me just as the moon, delusional, slipped into

the walnut's crabbed mass of black prayer
flags. *Pater Noster*, I whispered. Blackberries
wept like ink from my foreskin. Absurd

riddles licked my scalp like opera chills.

An apple

wept (inside my head) a sour

odor, which led me to the innermost
river away from you, now and forever.

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Vita

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