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Neon Allegiance

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Western Michigan University

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NEON ALLEGIANCE

by

Jason Paul Olsen

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
Advisor: William Olsen, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
December 2009

NEON ALLEGIANCE

Jason Paul Olsen, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2009

This collection of thirty-one poems is built around my personal search for place, the idea of “home,” and how it is relationship more than mere geography that defines the places one encounters in a life. In these poems, that idea of “home” ties back to intimate relationships with family and friends, but also with relationships involving culture—both historical and popular—as a whole.

The collection itself is a pastiche of strategies and stylizations, united by a defined and consistent voice. The geographic locations vary—from Las Vegas (where the largest number of poems and energy are focused) to stops in points across the country. In these poems, the West represents the idea that promise and possibility can still exist even amidst a landscape that has been almost drained by those previous on the same quest for promise.

These are poems specifically inspired by a variety of writers, including Frank Bidart (“Thanksgiving”) and Ted Hughes (“A Few Years Ago in the City”), but the willingness to place the writer vulnerable on the page was encouraged through diligent study of Robert Lowell. The search for place begins with an understanding of place and these poems provide insight into the quest for understanding one’s place in the world.

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I dedicate the poem "Thanksgiving" to Michael Johnson and "Retired Postal Worker" to Thomas Johnston.

In the poem "The Sands," the lines "I think I could do it— give up the skinny life, give / into this ecstasy," were provided by Erinn Bentley.

This collection is dedicated to Tina-Marie Olsen and Patricia Johnston.

Jason Paul Olsen

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I.

Neon Allegiance

Nevada apologizes for being an airport unto itself.
Tonapah was swallowed by sand.

Life is not chaos on the concrete.
Her tongue finds the Nevada Palace

and empty forgotten eyes eat the flickering lights.
Crossing against the hand makes everything a dance.
I left Nevada to understand isolation.

My definition of home has resurfaced.
This book controls the heat

and moderation keeps me optimistic.
The silver digital fingers massage my shoulders.
I feel most aware of my oneness when I reach the middle.

I want to restructure friendship.
Nevada can't contain itself within me

and I'm grateful but tired of being content.
It's a long walk if you're alone in central Nevada.
This is high school colliding with the ministry.
I sat around a table of Bibles because of her.
She was a chapter of a life I've stopped living.

Nevada is a sport on which no one gambles.
I needed to join the half-time band

but nobody was willing to share the sound.
I skimmed Nevada when I should have read.
She's waiting for a phone that coughs.
I crawled through the kiss she wouldn't complete.
Get in the car until the road stops slanting.

Keep pushing until you see the lights.
The stars aren't artificial

and everything has been plastic since Nevada began.
Dirt and swimming pool badminton were reassurance.
The reels are spinning to the Zen of Nevada.
I am in the third year of a seven year cycle.

She was the ethical thing to do.
I was handed a prescription written

by an unintelligible hand suggesting to go farther.
There were make-out nights in front of the grade school.
Nevada is where I first understood how to cry.

The downpour flooded everything I knew.
She didn't die that September, but Nevada

changed me, directing me toward a world without her.
Nevada does nothing if it isn't for the good of the nation.
If I couldn't sleep, I would count the rising bighorns.
Considering the current landscape, I can't sleep at all.

The puppy can leap to my shoulders.
Home means Nevada and, as long as

they remain buried in Boulder City, it always will be.
I can't pretend it didn't matter so don't tell me they're not gone.
I would love to read the books I couldn't bring.
I bet mountain bluebirds are walking on the lakes.
When I saw her again, nothing was growing but her.

She was older and I wasn't.
Age doesn't matter as long as you look

like the picture of yourself you would choose to frame.
There is a dream of innocence Nevada will never steal.
She's having the life she wanted and so am I.
Nevada is happy when people keep losing.

The Women of Davenport, Iowa have Run Out of Words Describing Pain

I know this because when I surfaced
from the water, bearing the face
of every brother, husband, son, father—
every man who ever mattered—
the women of Davenport
stood silent until the river washed
the features of my face to nothing.

Overheard—French Couple Discussing an Ice Sculpture

I catch the word *house* but not the context,
whether it's *wouldn't this look good in our house*
or *this reminds me of the coldness of our house*.

The sculpture itself is reaching its final hours,
its shape evolving into the pan beneath it, the mauve carpet.
The ice still holds the shapes of a fawn;

the man points at its head, glassy and alert.
The woman nods—flowers climb the spiral staircase
that divides and defines this hotel lobby

as the sculpture's life support of dying dry ice
sputters a cloud around our feet.
We circle the melting, defenseless fawn.

I knew a friend two years before he told me
he once found a species of butterfly
nearly unknown in the state of Utah and reintroduced it.

This allowed a population surge
that brought the number of that species into the hundreds,
securing years, maybe decades, of survival.

There are these things about ourselves we hold on to,
unable to share, clinging to in even
our most vulnerable moments. We're not supposed

to understand. Maybe it's modesty. Or embarrassment
over the fact that what we love and have accomplished
will overshadow our very capacity to relate to someone else.

Maybe this man, speaking French to a woman I assume
is his wife, is explaining how he once built a house of ice
and watched, over weeks, drip into nothing.

He's talking about the pain
of watching something you love die so slowly
and the woman holds his hand and tells him quietly

that she somehow always knew.
There are butterflies in Utah that aren't supposed to be there;
I watch a dying fawn melt its way home.

Family Tree

I wonder why I've never noticed it—
the marginalia in our mother's Bible.
It stops midway through Leviticus,
Moses wandering somewhere. My brother Doug

and I still live in Ainsworth, Nebraska,
so when we get together every Tuesday,
we pitch horseshoes. It's relaxing,
and the pits at East City Park are regulation

and well-lit. *I ask her how long she's been a waitress,
Doug says, as she lazily unzips her sweatshirt.
She removes an apricot from the fridge—
tosses it twice in air before she bites.*

Doug works at an insect trap company—
he mixes the powder that attracts the insects
before they're killed by somebody else's poison.
The way water is lifted differs in other

*parts of the world, he says. I offer her another piece
of fruit, but she reminds me I have nothing left.
Before she mentions her father,
she apologizes. Doug's a humane man—*

unable to sleep, a preoccupation
with dead insects. Our mother
wrote a question mark next to God's words
to Eve about the pain of childbirth;

the words "sleepwalking" and "night visions"
scribbled near the story of Joseph and Pharaoh.
When Doug dreams, it's row after row
of corpses—an infinite array of dead bugs:

*pardon him as he breathes, she tells me.
It's the quiet quiet breath of a man
who knows no hands can carry the weight
of what he's done. It's summer in South America,*

*but where he is now is simply the place
where he waits as he's told how he's going
to disappoint the world next. Doug releases
a horseshoe with a deft and delicate flip of the wrist:*

*he places his mission, sealed in a business-sized envelope,
in his coat pocket. He walks out of one city
into another. Our mother's bookmarks are still intact,
the funky seventies color schemes*

saying Jesus is still the way. Doug's horseshoe
floats, reaching eight feet, maybe higher—
before it clinks sharply to the stake. *He'll open,*
Doug says she told him, *that envelope, of course,*

tomorrow. But tonight is all about anticipation.
I pat him on the shoulder because I understand.
My work has me driving through Brown County
manually retrieving semen samples from animals

so their DNA can be studied and eventually cloned.
It's hard work, but it's for a greater good.
*The book he was reading has turned itself
to the final chapter. The unread pile of letters—*

*all postmarked Rockford IL—remain on the floor
aggressively unread.* Later I find, much by accident,
some passages in the New Testament
at which I had never bothered to glance,

in which our mother, aided by a ruler,
marked lines forever perfectly straight.
Both Doug and I worry about our parents
and their perceptions of us. *There's an art*

*to doing what he does, the aesthetic of the wrist
as it informs his hand of its strength.*
They're understanding people with shadows
the size of crab apple trees. *He imagines*

*the lives behind him, the ones he's chosen to ignore
and the ones he's ignored by accident.*
I close both our mother's Bible and my eyes.
I reopen the book and stick my finger randomly on the page.

My eyes open: the word I've landed on is *trespass*.
I circle it with my blue pen,
ink bleeding over to the following page.
He knows what he'll know for sure tomorrow.

*When he opens the envelope, he'll find a map
of Baltimore, a photograph of two girls
who entered the world as women
and sixteen words of instruction*

*he can never repeat aloud to even himself.
Our Father invented the ideas of love
and harmony and our mother won
the Nobel Prize for proving the souls*

*of the dead still linger, always providing energy.
Her father, she told me, is only her father by default.
The sun reflects the zigzag of her zipper
but I am not blind. In this process, there is only an implication*

*of marriage. When I think of our parents,
canoeing or sitting in the quiet of their home,
I wonder how much time they spend thinking of us
and how much of that time is spent on regret.*

*This morning, I ate children's cereal in a childless house.
The dog didn't bother me.
I ask her if I can hold her. She tells me it depends
on how long I intend to stay.*

This Garden of Mine

Today, the sky isn't talking
but the neighbors are.
The roses and whatnot
climb and I am envious
of my own dreams,
the tropical, the mundane.
Last night, making love
to a woman who is never
astonished, I realized something
about our relationship.
She once asked me
if I knew anyone famous
and I lied, of course.
When the neighbors turn to me,
when the sky turns to me—
well, well they'll say.
And I'll say *it's all in the seeing.*

Into the Ground for Growth

As the week begins to congeal,
I plant Wednesday morning flowers
on a Tuesday,
taunted by the inches separating me from earth.
I am too young for an inactive life,
but it is my inheritance.
When the young Jehovah's Witness—
wide eyed with secular love—asks me for advice,
I (still not standing)
look toward him and say: *stay away from the women
of my family*. He's quiet. Nothing new.
It's simple—his reaction is sand into mud.
He'll be back in the afternoon,
to see if I want to talk.
I won't be home, but he doesn't need to know that—
afternoon is another visit to another cardiologist,
another set of truths
with which the not-so-distant future will argue.
This isn't so difficult, really,
this pattern of not listening.
I've been told to take all things
slowly. I sit alongside flowers—several different types—
and I neither know nor care
about their names.

Stall

Each kiss was a different
language, an embarrassment of words saying not

I love you
but instead *I could.*

When it came to each other, we did not need to make
because we were already

offended by
hands sliding over the abstraction of fabric.

You were not a child when both of us were individually unshelled to the other
but you, through my impressions of you, made yourself too young

and for that I am sorry, but it was we who made
us and I was both older than you and older than myself.

When it comes to each other, I can say little

until, from you: *Finally, I found*
the way from side

to side.

Gorbachev's Houseboat

As if my touching you were a mistake
and our being here a danger,
you hold my hand like it's unemployed
and you are obligated to help it find work.

I promise, we won't set sail, we're doing nothing
wrong, just walking the outside,
peeking through windows, counting
the obscene number of clocks.

Florida is a patriotic act unto itself,
and unto you and me there is a boat
and it is with this boat we have found
what it means to almost touch the water.

I want to talk about legends,
how the two of us will be perceived tomorrow,
when our post-communist friends
ask us to describe ourselves now versus then.

It's the story of Achilles embracing
the co-op virgin under the flickering yellow "T"
of the neon thrift store. Remember? They kissed;
his nose bled and they continued to kiss

and when he asked her (weight mostly
in her face and eyes) if she knew where he died,
she looked at him with an empty glass of brandy
and drank what breath from his body remained.

What Wasn't the Problem

The room was a translucent bottle of bourbon
and we were in no mood. So we pointed
toward a couple in a booth in the corner,
one wearing Wednesday's paper, the other
pretending to read. The woman with the pies was,
by all accounts, legit. The manner in which she served them—
pie tin in right hand, right hand covered with cloth—
surpassed every expectation.

The questions she asked (*are you going to share a plate?*
for instance) were proper and, impressed by them,
we answered honestly (*no thank you*, we said). The pies were,
admittedly, only adequate, but it was likely through
no fault of hers. Maybe it was the humidity,
we thought (this was Louisville in August, after all),
the way the fabric we were wearing clashed with the café
tablecloth. Maybe it's just the inherent
limitation of rhubarb. No matter, we said,
trying to laugh, but not so much succeeding.
It's funny the things we do
to pretend the heart still beats
even when the physician holds it dead in his hand.

Seashell

She cups her hands over my ear.
In the evening, sound is hypothetical.
In front of my apartment, we sit
on the top step of the burgundy concrete porch
and I wonder how long it will be
before she withdraws her hands.

Look up. Somewhere between glancing
at the moon and staring at it,
there is a moment when the night sky
becomes an orchestra
and the moon plays percussion
with the strings of stars.

So This is What a River Looks Like

Two years ago, we didn't come this far,
stopped somewhere west of water,
humidity stepping in for comfort.

I once sat in a waiting room while my grandmother
underwent surgery and, as I look at you now,
I think of the faces of those who knew not

what those next two hours would mean
to the rest of their lives—calmness
aggressively sought.

What I've imagined: you and I rewriting
you and I. And this time
there is room enough to smile.

Because everything's changed, hasn't it?
My hand inside your hand feels—
floating out of myself, a tributary.

How's this for the past? Jump in.
When we're completely immersed,
find yourself a comfortable place to swim.

Found Dog

As for Julia and I, our first kiss
was in the back of my friend Jacob's van—
we were both living in Post Falls at the time.
I was a junior in high school;

she was seventeen and homeschooled.
We were in Spokane for the weekend,
getting lunch at Zip's.
The broken driver's side door on Jake's van

made the drive-thru too much trouble—
he and his girlfriend at the time
were inside picking up our food.
In addition to being deaf, Julia

was shy. It was clear that, at that moment,
something was happening between us
but I wasn't comfortable making
a first move even at a time when

things were this inevitable.
She looked at me, waiting. I looked
back anxiously. She placed both hands,
fingers together, side-by-side, palms

facing her chest. Her hands quickly opened
and came together over her heart,
one on top of the other.
She was telling me she was afraid.

I smiled. *Don't worry*, I mouthed
without saying the words.
She smiled back— nervous, completely
sincere. I moved toward her face

and kissed her, remembering to close
my eyes only after the kiss had begun.
I would like to say that in that brief, awkward
moment, the world and its fast food

didn't exist, but in truth I was so self-conscious
I couldn't help but think of those things.
I pulled away quickly and looked back at her.
She took a deep fast breath and signed

something I recognized: *Again*.
So I kissed her, longer this time.
I held both her hands, our fingers
interlocked. Her hands and fingers

were still trying to move, still trying
to speak to me, maybe, about that moment
when everything we've been too afraid
to do finally happens and how

we're still stranded inside the space
we waited before we realized
how little time there really is to live.
We heard Jake and the girlfriend

(whose name I've now forgotten)
walking back to the van and Julia and I
pulled mostly away from each other.
Jake tossed a bag of food to us

and started the engine. The radio
started playing as we pulled
out of the lot, Julia's talkative
hand still in mine.

I was born in Spokane in 1974,
a few months before the city hosted
the World Expo that summer.
It's an event that—in my mind

at least—defines, for good or bad,
Spokane itself. A World Expo in a time
when Expos were no longer relevant.
My parents never went, never took me,

but I've created this memory—
the two of them rolling me in my stroller
past the pavilion, the three of us looking
at the exhibits revealing a future

of rivers and lakes, clean and pure.
My father gestures to these demonstrations
of possibilities and says, *someday, someday*,
lifting me hopefully to his chest.

Julia and I found Windmill in the street
outside our apartment when she was pregnant
with Rebecca. He's a bigger dog than one
usually expects to find alone,

but there was nothing in his nature
that intimidated. Julia approached him,
moving slowly and sweetly. He smelled her hand
and took a piece of beef stick from her.

It was a fast friendship. He didn't have any tags
and the few "Found Dog" posters we put up
around the neighborhood were purposefully
uninspired. We had talked about getting a dog

before she became pregnant—
sort of a test run. With Rebecca due in three months,
it was a little late to prove our worth.
But here he was, so we kept him.

Julia took a dictionary off the shelf
and set it on a table, making a motion with her hands
that I should open it. So I did, dead center
of the book. I picked up what she was thinking,

so I put my finger in the middle of the page,
right on the word "neoplasm." I showed her the word
and she shook her head, wrinkled her nose
as she smiled.

So she did it herself—
opening it toward the back, closing her eyes,
jamming her finger on the page. Her finger
wasn't sitting on a word, but a picture.

I looked at the dog and smile. She said
Windmill her voice unable to articulate the word
completely, but it sounded good. We repeated
the word several times until it felt right.

The dog slept in a corner of room
on a blanket Julia's mom had knitted
for no other reason than the fact
that Julia's mom knits a lot of blankets.

The rest of the night, we did what pregnant
couples do—we thought of names—
boy names, girl names—the burden
a name carries, the joy possible when the name

and the named fit perfectly together.

Rebecca, Julia said. *Nice?*

Yeah, I said. She placed her head
on my chest and we slept.

A Few Years Ago in the City

But everything is offered three times.

—Ted Hughes

I forget exactly what you said
about patience, your hands like envelopes
folded inside each other.
That summer you kept correcting me.
Your city was almost bereft of trees.

Once. The parkway curvature
replicating the feel of your skin
against a night
that knows no morning. *Twice.*
The fallacy of myth;
the myth of truth; the truth
of truth. The sun
reflecting off a building facing west—
you said something
once, but then you said it again,
and then a third time. And still
I remember nothing.

Once. You are a perfect replica
of the city you love so much;
its bridges, open spaces. *Twice.*
You stand quiet at a moment
where everything is quiet
and you need not be.

Once. Twice. You whisper
in my ear, but we're too close
for it to sound like anything
but breath.

Hummingbird

In Finland, the aurora borealis
is caused by foxes who brush their backs
against mountains,
tails of flame
painting the night with sparks.
But that's Finland. Where I live,
hummingbirds are made of fire
and there is one hummingbird
who lost his way and, in the desperation
of the moment, about to die of starvation
for the tenth time that day,
found pity from a sky that opened its arms
and said, *I cannot feed you
but I can light your way home.*

Thanksgiving

He never meant to do this to himself
or me or the world—he loved, too much—

he was too much of the moment
and it was the moment that consumed him.

When I was fifteen, he gave thanks
with vodka and amphetamines—

he asked to say grace,

something with which the rest
of the family never bothered—

and he thanked the pilgrims
and Abraham Lincoln, and by God, he thanked

me for putting up with him
and he thanked his mother and my mother, he was losing it now,

and his father and Chrissy, of course,
Chrissy, how could you not

love Chrissy, and his wife, too,
Kathy—always stoic but always with him—

he loved you, Kathy, and all of us—

all of us—

and he left, crying—

I love you,

I love all of you—

up from the table,
out of the room,

I love you—

I became my chair
and my grandfather closed his eyes

and Kathy lifted a fork of mashed potatoes,
slid her mouth across the tines

Conspiracy

"I'm tired of chasing people."
—RFK

1.

The front door opens with its year-round wreath;
I stand on the lawn beside my belongings—

a bookcase, a bag of clubs lacking a putter,
a television that hasn't worked in three years.

The care with which Audrey has relocated my things
is undeniable but the act itself is too unexpected

to praise even its little courtesies.
So I set down the picture I'm holding—

picked from a box marked in black with my name,
the intensity of ink fading with each letter.

It's a framed photo of Real Quiet,
the '98 Kentucky Derby winner. Audrey teases me,

says I'm the only person interested in horse racing
who's not a compulsive gambler or an elderly woman.

The jockey's hand holds the whip forever upright,
forever on the brink of slapping the horse

into the homestretch. Audrey appears long enough
for a few words: From me, *what's this about?*

From her, *the moving truck is on its way.*

In a box is a book about the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy.

It is a mid-day afternoon in early September.
I open the book, sit down on my lawn, and read.

2.

I once twisted my ankle jogging,
rolling it over on a wet patch of grass.

I was alone and it was my fault, mine alone,
but before I fell—

the sound of footsteps,
invisible whispers of my name.

3.

Robert F. Kennedy was not killed by one man.
And, if he was, that one man was not Sirhan Sirhan.

But if it was Sirhan Sirhan, it was because his mind
was manipulated to fulfill the will of another.

I am not crazy. The person who wrote this book is not crazy.
There are sometimes simple and obvious ways of looking at facts.

I have always felt a little sorry for Sirhan Sirhan—
in a world of victims, he is just another victim

but there seems to be more than that even:
a very ordinary man, a life irrevocably altered,

incapable of living as he had done before.
Today, he sits in jail, unable to tell anyone anything,

his mind an egg, sliding across the plane of a pan.
A raspberry donut reminds me

of picking berries with Audrey in central California;
a blue Jeep Cherokee reminds me

of road trips up the coast;
a newspaper wet with rain;

a book about Robert F. Kennedy;
one hand reaching out for another hand;

4.

Audrey once walked with me into a documented
night, streets empty save for the people

I now know must have been watching.
I held her, kissed her, she said she loved me,

I said the same. Around each corner,
a shrouded figure, an unexplained hush—

a woman with a distinctive scarf,
white with a pattern of raspberries.

Audrey led me by the hand into a restaurant,
a flower shop;

a hotel lobby, a hotel room.
Every moment we're together,

she said. *Stop talking*, I said.
We have the rest of our lives to talk.

II.

“Las Vegas is the only town in the world whose skyline is made up neither of buildings, like New York, nor of trees, like Wilbraham, Massachusetts, but signs.”

—Tom Wolfe

The Sands

This is a night without Harpies.
I eat crumbs at the edge of the bed;
no claws rip my sheets,
nothing is terrible.
No boat is beached outside my door.
Living inside my television
is a program about snow.
Those attempting to stop me are elsewhere, sickening all living creatures
elsewhere. The world and all within
waits and my challenges have not yet shown.
Golden Fleece? If I want it.
There's something else. Boar-gored man,
if you're out there,
knock. Go ahead.
I'll answer it. I promise,
blind and blindfolded, swear to tell
the truth and nothing but—
pardon me if I decline to listen.

According to Lieh-tzu: the soul, upon leaving
the form, returns home to its true essence.

If trying to convince her of Vegas' charms,
there are things I will not attempt:
the Panorama Market downtown—
emptying ice cream bars from one freezer to another
in front of a argument
confirming the racial divisions of a too-big-for-itself city.
My hands are cold
and I'm shoveling these confections too quickly,
but I can't stay here so, accordingly, I can't move quickly enough.
The man behind the counter
and the man in front of it
are both yelling. I'm wearing a blue three-button collared shirt
with, on my left breast, a embroidered cartoon rabbit drinking chocolate milk
through a red straw.
I don't belong. The heat
outside envelopes every inch
and will continue without me.

I held her waist, her hands. But of this,
she likely remembers little. This woman—only met her twice.
Still, I'm compelled to Lansing.

There were doves.
Why wouldn't there be doves?
Of course. The salt of my body is the salt
that flavors a Pentecostal fire
over the antependium of night.
Doors, caves, mazes,
knots: how symbolic can one day be?
I think I could do it—give up the skinny life, give
into this ecstasy.
The door is being put back together.
Did I say *ecstasy*? The crickets are distracted
by the Winnemucca moon,
but I am only distracted by the crickets—
big as a fist that does not know
when the plate glass of the front door
is about to give, someday replaced by a piece of oak.

What if Lieh-tzu is right?
Am I of too much concrete if I wonder
what happens next?
What is home if not physical?

The caliche of April
is hard and hot—a barricade to the not-yet-built
swimming pool.
Nothing dramatic about this, no signs—
well-paid men with drills
spending their hours
not avoiding Symplegades
but only drilling.
There is a canary in a cage two houses over
and, for this journey,
I offer it.
It is no dove, but into this caliche
it would search as long as would be necessary
for the one spot,
the soft spot where the ground forgives.

A dove (or, in other accounts, a heron) flew
through the terrifying rocks,
sacrificing a few of her tail feathers
so the ship would not be crushed.
Is it foreign, this concept of heroism?

A new game (messenger) (decibel)
has begun, a new chapter through which
the foundations of wisdom
and hunger will be explored internally.
Everything about this moment
is purple—
my hat, her hair, the sky.
This is a shade not akin to that of pine needles too fresh
to be sharp, right?
Everything gets louder in the dark, squirrels in the garbage,
my stomach.
Her lack of invitation is an insufficient
wagon with three wheels,
a handle broken by someone else's grip.

It's the not needing,
the lack of justification:
if the landscape itself is mundane,
it's because I'm thinking
in non-spatial terms. My hand locked with hers—
the space between.

Vegas is a non-sleeping dragon,
protecting something,
but I'll be damned if I know what.
Lieh-tzu and I are both skeptical
of each other's faith
but neither one of us is willing
to sacrifice a hair from our heads
to benefit empire.
This dragon—it's hard not to be fatalistic—
its towers and Neo-Taoism.
Reconciliation with death is reconciliation
with home. If she's willing,
we can dance beneath downtown's artificial night.

It's in the Black Sea,
adrift ice-floes from the Russian rivers,
almost impossible to pass.
I've been waiting; my Argonauts
are late. Even if they make it, their addictions
will keep killing them—strength
compressed into muscles, nowhere else.

To see my exterior,
look to the outside of this house,
its shrubs and draining pipes.
If they're strong, just say so. Signs should be strong.
The valances inside—
on the bed, the windows—
they explain something else, something about
the body and how it
maintains both bone and skin,
in spite of the fact bone and skin
can never truly understand each other.
It's late—the *Argo* is drifting slowly to shore.

If Nevada were instead shaped
like a circle,
would that compel your interest?
Think about the circle—
Jung's ultimate state of oneness.
Maybe we're not there yet.
Maybe Nevada's not there either.
But there's time, I think, for something to change.

My identification card has most of the info right—
it's just that middle initial, transformed from the *P*
I was born with
into an unearned *O*.
But there's character in that *O*,
an exoticism that carries
the commonplace names before and after it
to something almost like heroism.
Maybe it was a gift from the state, this letter.
Maybe this is a new life
and I ought to keep it.

I read through pages and pages
of oak,
removing my shoes at pertinent moments.
The sun, that cloud; their relationship—is this a sign?
If I asked her not to kill me
or my uncle, would she agree?
And if she did agree,
would her word hold any weight
in the face of prophecy?

Hercules is strong, of course,
but he's no fool—smart enough
to stay by the car while Jason leads the quest
solely for the sake of Jason.
Of that night, Hercules knows everything.
Instead of talking, he takes pity. Guilt and friendship
are interchangeable words. There are trees he knows shouldn't
be growing. Jason is off to save someone else.
Forests are constantly unbuilt—
no one is or will be ever responsible.

Who cried when the Sands was imploded?
Everyone. The dust was contagious, every nose and eye
runny and red. A firework show followed,
celebrating and creating new debris. I was told
this performance was symbolic,
an iconic tower of my city's past
blown up from the inside—maybe that's true,
but it still doesn't mean the Sands needed to stay.
For if there's one thing this city has tried
to teach me, it's the uselessness of history.

I could speak of the woman,
the family friend,
fired from her job at the do-it-yourself warehouse
for, apparently,
stealing a door.
I could have found out more, the details—
but those details, whatever they are,
are burrowing—not into a hole,
but the outline of a hole.

What if I stood here with only one shoe
or I sat next to here with only one shoe.
Would that make sense? Define me?
What about the Argonauts,
their attitude, their hygiene,
do these things have anything
to do with me?
In the same strange way
I spent the night thinking of the way she stood,
the way we both looked
for each other.

At my birth—as he had planned—my father pretended
to weep. He wrapped me in a blanket and hurried
me to the car, explaining to everyone
I was still-born. Everyone, of course,
then wept. He changed my name
and never again saw me
for the good—I'm sure he would explain—
of us both.

It isn't enough to say
this is the building in which I was born
or *this is the taxicab in which my virginity was subdued.*
I've picked up this Bible before—it knows
my fingerprints.
What it doesn't know
is why I've picked it up.
This is the building in which I was born.
There, I've said it again. Does that make it any more visual?
If I were to tell you the color of the hour, the specific day?
The way the nuns, walking from the kitchen, smelled
the afterbirth that remained on their hands?

In Not-Las Vegas, the snow will melt in several minutes
because the rain is hot and tired
and I guess I'm hot and tired, too. The concept
of home is one of self; the concept of heroism
is one *not* of self. Still,
both snow and *not*-snow are equally lovely.
Further, Lieh-tzu would agree.

I had no idea Boulder City existed
in the late afternoon.
Hoover Dam is here if I want it but I don't.
Driving through downtown, the buildings
are mostly igloo-shaped,
advertising canoe rides and sight-seeing tours.
I'm a little lonely,
but that will pass.
I've known people here, but thinking of them
makes me feel old.
I never owned this town,
but I could have
and that makes the looking even worse.

Jason did what he had to do, so say what you want.
Circe and sirens—a man is capable of only so much resistance.
And with heroes, resistance
is liability.
The clatter of dice against a dice cup—Jason pours
himself onto the board, moves accordingly.

I stand up.
In front of the miniblinds,
the pattern creates a sunlight spine on the front of my shirt.
I am red with shadows.
The floors creak with age—I creak with age
only occasionally. This is a house as old as anything
in Las Vegas,
but this is not Las Vegas, so why should I think of it?
The farther east,
the closer I get emotionally to the West. I remove
from my mouth the gum I was chewing,
almost frozen,
my means of securing
a personal adhesion to place.

Her footsteps are tapping
Morse code
in the library hallways.
It never falters, this message—
I can restore youth to even the dead.

Cheese is not a drug and
joy is not a verb
but Glauce the Theban is the most approachable woman I've met since Medea
at the 24-hour Dairy Stop.
I gave her my hand,
my name-tag,
my baggage.
Effective December 1st, I will no longer be an inferior version of my father.
But this is the 2nd of November
and, no thank you, I don't care
and if you're wondering
Joy was my mother's name
and these are things that ought to be learned
because it's important to know your business
as intimately as you know your own name.

There is one piece of physical evidence
of her and I together—our arms
around each other in a photograph
only of faces.

The time to address the chorus has arrived.
Clear the throat (ahem) amplified voice
from the bow of the ship:
*Friends, this not a bad day—it's not a day at all
because you are all merely
extras in someone else's heroic story.
The truth is unfortunate?
Each of you has a pocket
of pomegranate lozenges and enough quarters
for a bus ride home and, of course,
the ride home will have nothing in common with abandonment.
Have any of you ever been famous? Heroes?
Prepare your smiles,
mount your horses—
there is nothing that can take away
this idea.*

Thinking of past glories,
Jason sat in front of the *Argo*
when it fell and he was smashed.

Medea slaughtered Jason's new bride
by poisoning her white robe. He lunged
from an upper-story window to save only himself.
Few other Thebans were as lucky. His choices,
simply, were unfortunate—the east coast elitist,
the plucky black belt, the evangelical sprite,
the beautiful and the blank. Somewhere,
children are being sacrificed.
Somewhere, a woman I once made love to
is giving birth.
Doves flying across the map
are finding new ways to explore longitude. How
is it I became the one expected to explain?
It's simple, really: when reading the prophecy of the oak,
overlook the potential of the pine.
There are always other explanations
to anticipations clearly directed at you.

What he said when he knew it was over
is nothing, really, to speak of.

The rain is hushed;
sprigs of juniper—young and of the essence—cascade the valley.
Songs, spells, incantations:
the unsleeping dragon of Las Vegas stops,
finally, hissing. In the front yard,
the olive tree asks to be trimmed.
My shoes (and I am wearing both)
finish the day stained in purple. I have built *Argo*
with olive pits and branches and it stands
prepared to sail. But me?
I am the opposite of Jason—
the sea can wait for as long as it needs.
I am of the desert and my relationship with ocean
is defined by my questions: *Who is my father?*
How did I come to be conceived?
This might be the opportunity
to explain myself—
defined forever by the things I did not do.

III.

Fire Engine Descending a Staircase

It's simple mathematics—the color of a bicycle the day it matters most,
when I'm ten and can't ride it

until I've looked long enough at the blue
added to the blue of her eyes

when they greedily consume my own eyes,
added to the color of a Montana sky at noon,

alive with open spaces and the right kind of silence,
multiplied by the blue of the internal,

the color of the music you're afraid to hear
when you're walking in the street

because it's too beautiful
and you're not supposed to hear this kind of jazz while you're still alive.

Color was meant, not to be noticed, but explored—
past wild brush and opaque avant-garde

to the center of things—tendrillike lines, dots closely spaced,
optical expressions of white and yellow—

corn husked and exposed, the mirrored reflection
of mature and healthy stalks

revealing an equal number of stalks unhealthy,
unfit—a vegetable jaundice.

This yellow is sick pale and dying. But I'm drawn
to the blue beside it.

And then there's the red, but not all of it, not the sound of red,
the smell, the touch—the hand sliding red against a Fauvist landscape,

the vibrancy justified by the reverberation of red.
The vibrancy of cadence in a clique of color, nude save for that cadence.

Tangibility is less about an object, more about the hand
after the object has been touched and let go.

I walk past the sidewalks and tulips,
toward a multistory building with a locked door underneath a parabolic arch.

This building is the color of a voiceover in a film noir,
the moment when the detective takes a breath, lifts the balls of his feet,
inserts the key, opens the door to his office
and finds the leading lady on the floor, on the brink of bursting into flame.

Gambling on Identity

1. Beth

The Manilow Theater at the Las Vegas Hilton, Thursday, 7:20 pm

The photographer moves from row to row
as the crowd filters in for the Manilow show.
She finds a couple sitting alone—
both in their sixties (though neither would admit it),
and, with a row of empty seats between her and the couple,
she stands in front of them—

your picture, she says, let me take it.

They smile and shake their heads—*no, we're fine—*
and she smiles back (more widely) and nods,
no obligation, she says, they'll be ready outside after the show.
So she holds up the camera. *So, smile real big for me?*
No harm in that, the couple thinks, and the man
puts his tan short-sleeved arm
around his wife and her velvet blouse.

Two smiles and a click,
and *this time*, the photographer says to the woman,
lean your head against his shoulder
like this and she demonstrates with her hands
holding them together as if in prayer
and leaning her cheek with the back of her left hand.
Perfect! the photographer tells her
and clicks again and, for a moment,
closes her eyes and opens them to the same couple,
locked in the smile they've been saving
for special occasions just like this.

The photographer is young, twenty-four, a streak of white
in her shoulder length brown hair.

What was your name? the man asks.

Mandy, the photographer says, *like the song.*
And he says—as they always say, *what a coincidence!*
And Mandy, as she always does, smiles, hands
her card and says, *I guess it's good I'm working here,*
and finds another row, another couple.

2. Eric Deen

The Lounge at Riviera Hotel and Casino, Thursday, 7:30 pm

The fake Neil Diamond has stepped behind the stage
while his band plays the first half of “I’m a Believer.”
Half of the audience is wondering where “Neil” went—
if he’s changing into another shade of sequined shirt,
maybe draping himself in a flag for “Coming to America”—
but the rest are watching Eric Deen, the bass player,
a man too young and too good for this gig—
his long jet-black hair perfectly teased and still
as he plays on and sings back-up,
his operatic voice lifting itself out of the stagnancy
of a mid-week tribute show. None of them—
the band, the audience—should be here,
of course, but the reason Eric Deen shouldn’t be here
transcends the merely pathetic.
There has to be something else,
some other life, that isn’t satisfied by this.

The crowd claps a bit when “Neil” reemerges,
this time in blue. The band shifts into the next song
and the fake Neil Diamond croons
about how much “Love on the Rocks” means to him
before attempting to prove it with vocals.
The spotlight above Eric Deen, bass player,
is broken tonight. In order to be seen,
he has to step into the circle of light
usually reserved for the lead guitarist alone
but, heroically, he plays on—a bass line
of waves crashing for three and a half minutes into rock.

3. Eric Deen

The Stardust Hotel and Casino, Friday, 2:00 pm

An afternoon breakfast buffet with his brother
at the Stardust seemed the right thing,
what with the announcement
that morning of the Stardust's implosion later in the year.
Still tired from three shows the night before,
as he lifts a piece of chicken via spatula to his plate,
Eric asks, *Remember Caroline?*

The photographer? Alex answer back,
balancing an ear of corn on an otherwise vacant corner of plate.

I thought about her last night, Eric tells him,
walking through crowds of the elderly and the gluttonous
to reach their table. *I think I saw her yesterday, before the shows.*

Alex nods. *Where'd you see her?*

It doesn't matter, Eric says. *It only matters
that I've thought of her.*

(This is what they both know:
she was a photographer at the Diamond tribute show
a year and a half earlier,
always wanted to shoot nature photographs for magazines.
Had a three month affair with Eric before she found out
he was married. That affair led both to the eventual
collapse of his marriage and her relapse
into a dependency on antidepressants).

It was never love, Alex tells him. *You've said that.*

Eric chews both a shrimp and an
unchewable fraction of its tail—
It didn't have to be love, Eric says.
It only had to be what it was.

4. Beth

Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, 4:30 pm

A few steps from the site of her first kiss,
years earlier, lagging behind the rest of a hiking group
while she and a guy named Simon
kissed awkwardly in 103 degree heat,
she aims her camera at flora she's photographed dozens of times before,
looking for something new in it.

She doesn't come here often anymore,
but today it seemed necessary,
a step toward finding enough of herself again
to pretend to be someone else.

Something rustles in the brush—
she doesn't need to look, just keeps walking.
She thinks about the Manilow crowd,
how non-existent and unnecessary this place is to them—
how Vegas has to remain a world of illusion and light
in order for it to mean anything at all.

The sun isn't oppressive today,
just sunlight conversing with rock.
She takes her phone out of her pocket
and scrolls the menu—Eric's name is still there.

She walks over rock and dirt
and closes her eyes before pressing the necessary buttons.
Two dozen yellow wildflowers sit in the brush.
This is how alone she is right now.

The phone rings and he answers.
Eric, she says. *It's me*.

Caroline? he asks, less surprised than he should be.

Beth, she says. *My name's Beth.*
And I think it's time we talked.

Museum Field Trip

Kalamazoo, Michigan

My fourth grade class stands/
fidgets/runs/paces
in the exhibit room—
this month: “Photographic
Images of Rock & Roll.”
I love it—Elvis, early Beatles,
late Beatles, Buddy Holly—
with sets of headphones
next to the picture
to sing the stories
the photographs can’t contain.
I’m keeping my teacher’s eye on
Hector, Kenyata, and Bobby,
three boys who never sit still,
never do the right thing
until it’s forced on them.

They look at Buddy Holly—
make fun of his glasses, his hair.
They listen to the music;
Bobby takes off the headphones,
pretends he’s throwing up.
They wander toward Bob Dylan.
I imagine they’ll stop
making fun when they see Dylan—
they’ll look at the photos where
he scorns the press and his fans—
they’ll hear the music
and do what I did when I *got* it—
stare at my uncle’s records,
shake my head, not believing
something this good
has been this close this long.
Those kids, they’ll stop laughing
because they’ll know
what music means.

But none of that happens.
Hector starts singing
some made-up song
he must think mocks Dylan.
I walk over with the intent
to yell at them,
to tell them to sit down,

behave themselves,
as punishment, I'll tell them,
for talking in a museum
but, in reality,
it would all be about badmouthing Dylan.

I miss my chance.
They've moved on and they're quiet.
The three boys are staring
at a photograph that stares
back at them. No headphones,
no music—just this picture that says
sit down and listen kids—
I'm going to teach you how to rock & roll.
Kenyata looks up at me and asks,
with all the gravity of the world
Who is this guy? I tell him
That's Jimi. And that begins
to explain everything they need to know.

Flynn and Blake

Jimmy Blake stood at second, Flynn
at third, as Mighty Casey stepped to bat.
Sure, this is from a poem
about a fiction event—and the hubris
of Casey is legendary—but what about
the resilience of Jimmy Blake,
the courage of Flynn? The game
was nearly over—two outs, down by two—
when Flynn took to the plate and,
with the fans screaming, “You hoodoo!”
singled. And Blake, oh Jimmy Blake,
despised by the fans, called,
of all insults, a “cake,”
doubled, when the Mudville Nine
needed a double most.
But nobody cares about success
when failure is so much more interesting.
What was Flynn thinking when Mighty Casey
let two strikes go by just because
he thought he could? Why should
Blake have even bothered to double
if he would remain despised tomorrow?
God bless you, Jimmy Blake,
for making it to second. And, you,
Flynn, congratulations on making it
almost all the way home.

Reunion

I won't remind you how I died.
18 years ago, you remember.

Since then, I've lived
and grown in another body,

a person you've never met.
This entire life, I've been trying

to get to you, to see how you're doing,
what you've done,

if there's any chance
you and I can at least talk.

Do you know what it's like—
the memories of that coke orgy in Phoenix

creeping up on me when I'm six-years old
and teeter-tottering?

I slid into a sandbox
and thought of the time

I shot your brother
in your mother's living room.

You've aged and sagged
and I'm an 18-year old Asian woman.

Things are different, you say.
You're right.

Take my hand.
Show me pictures of our children.

Uneven Bars

The retired French gymnast—expert
on the uneven
bars—is twenty-seven and enrolled in college,
taking every available
introductory course. She sits on the edge of a fountain in Paris
reading a book
about fountains.

The world's largest, she learns, is in Jordan and, she imagines,
every day, Jordanians looking at that fountain
and she envies them
though she has no idea why.

She watches birds fold and unfold as they look for something she can't understand
and the fountain behind her
is average in every way,
not at all a Bronze medalist, not at all a night in Atlanta in 1996
where every dismount is perfect.

Her hand touches the corner of a page
and her fingers slide
that page into the next as she thinks
about what kind of sky
will be tomorrow forever waiting.

Of Denials and Concrete

I wash my hands in the direction of her photograph,
a generalization of regret.
I couldn't stay— we both knew that. She and I
were both unfit for this world. There are statements
and then there is bereavement,
none of which equal the impact of midnights
and seizures—
her too drunk to stay awake,
me too oblivious to care. I could have used my body
to protect hers
when her own body betrayed her.
But, again, this is simply more of the same.
The things I never told her are covered with red ink—
the outskirts
of her hand.

It's unfortunate, this being alone.
But as I walk home, I see my gardens
from a hundred feet and feel a little comforted.

Imagine there is no waterfall.
Imagine dryness that envelops the skin.

Proclamation

The little girl was bereft,
an assortment of sunrises cleaving
the side of her sideways face.

Look at this, they said,
the twilight, the stream.

Too many people followed.
Too many times
she found forgiveness.

A bug bite:

she spoke French;
her father spit his teeth, effortlessly,
when his gums lost interest.

Her mother was sad almost always,
ugly but not without something
others wanted to
(and did) call charm.

The girl put her finger
to her own lips and smiled.

Just clap, she told the others,
*the show is only now
about to begin.*

How Houdini Died

His heart stopped with the placement
of her hand.

The cough drop
slid down the column of his throat,
a lubricated sun on the first
day of spring.

His father never
read the letter, never
listened to the fabricated rain.

A penknife wound, self-inflicted.

To walk on quicksand,
he said, was to be a magnified Christ.

He buckled over
with the punch, the invisible
bleeding.

A pistol,
poison, the unspeakable
love.

To his followers
he promised nothing. "My life,"
he choked.

He placed the rope
around her neck and pushed,
her momentum the weight
of mountains.

Retired Postal Worker

Hawthorne, California

My work gloves caramelize to my work;
the afternoon is photosynthetic.

The cocker spaniel chases dandelion dust
and doesn't realize she's melting, that it's too hot for her,

for me, for this escape we make daily.
I'm sixty years old. My retired life began seven months ago.

I slice ivy with electric clippers and I will weed whack tomorrow
but now, a lizard is lost in the vertigo of ivy

and I see him too late. Quickly, I pull up
the blade and only miss most of him.

His tail drops in leaves,
lost forever with Whiffle balls and shuttlecocks.

This is something like Los Angeles and it's Fall 1985.
My son is in jail for accepting kickbacks—Laker tickets and frozen turkeys.

The judge asked me, after I agreed to put up my house for Mike's bail,
if I knew the risk and I told him,

Your Honor, he's not going to try anything with me.
Mike is in Lompoc and will be for at least the next year and a half and,

only once a month,
my daughter and I sneaking him in ham steaks and jellybeans,

will I be able to see him.
I turn off the trimmer and listen as the big bands climb out

of the patio-table radio. The stump
in the middle of the yard is simply a stump.

My chainsaw is gone, for now,
loaned to the drop-outs down the street

and they've had it for a couple of days,
but nothing is worth the weight of worry.

They'll bring it back. The mail is late today,
but it's Wednesday and, because I know what it's like,

I'll forgive them.
I imagine the lizard running frantically through

the ivy, turning the corner of the backyard,
toward the bricked garden, and I know,

for the next several years I will come across
that lizard at various stages of tail.

The Seat or Center of Secret Thoughts and Emotions <in his *Heart* he Knew he was Seriously in the Wrong>

There is a woman smelling of avocado
who listens to a man speak
with too much reverence
for Providence, Rhode Island
as his children crayon through
a coloring book of images
inspired by the Book of Mormon.

In a moment, the door will open.
I'll hear my name,
get up, walk past the women forty years older than me—
the ones, I feel guilty for thinking,
who *ought* to be here.
I'll run for an hour on a machine,
the sky—directly into my pulse—
will be both injected and inhaled.
I've been told not to ask questions
and I won't.

But not yet. Since that first episode
three years ago, my heartbeat too fast,
the collapse on the tennis court—
I think of my father, the one memory
I've been given—standing awkwardly
beside him at Baskin Robbins 31 Flavors
as he explains, *it's not you. I just hate your mother.*
I take a deep breath. This physically failed heart
is the only thing he's ever given me.
I hear my name. I get up and walk.

Maybe the Mormons might have it
figured out—
it's easy to keep talking
when everything you say has testimony.

The Failure of Australian Architecture

1923: *The goal*, explained Patrick Callister,
before leaving the podium with a bottle
and no other words

is not merely to line the streets of Sydney with buildings.

Two years later, the thought is almost completed:
buildings, elaborated Callister, *stand for nothing*
except standing still. Ten years after that, he said—

hair disheveled, his moustache
(considering his face) not large enough—
by 1942 we will have towers
that move and sway, conveying
the dynamics of dance.

Just before his death in 1953,
silent beneath a sky
that melted for the faults
of a standing earth, he watched
men and children and women,
merely rivals in his pursuit
to challenge motion.

Atlantis

Of injustice and repentance, the moon no longer needs be bothered.
Celestially, there is no concern for that which traipses ground,
becomes mud, sinks into fossil—buried, lost, recycled into flecks.
Oh, to be young and alive in Atlantis, on the edge of drowning,
alive until the water becomes too much for even the tallest among them
or the strongest swimmers.

To be alive and on the brink in Atlantis.

Can't you see the young romantic, his Atlantellian poetry book in one hand,
dried daisy from his lover in the other, watching his city fall into water
and walking, without tears or regret, away from the stable ground
through the sand, into the mouth of a maw that will inevitably
leave nothing? He even smiles a little—you *must* see this—
as he stops swimming and allows the storm to push him under,
giving up his life freely to the elemental whims, the Gods, the forces neither he
nor anyone else can control.

And he's gone, the rest of his world with him,
painlessly and accepting—eyes willingly closed—his mother, father, sister,
teachers, lovers— they let themselves become poems, verses lost in the wake of a lost
city.

But it's all bullshit, isn't it? Not the part about the moon—it still doesn't care—
but this romanticism is propaganda; levees and bodies break with the force
of rocks and spears thrown down from thrones of cloud.

What were the politics of Atlantis?
Who didn't do what needed to be done?

Oh, to be young and alive in Atlantis, sitting under the moon and watching
the floods of progress
or simply watching the floods.

Tomorrow, you and everything you know will be gone.

But tonight, the air is crisp with an impending storm
and, as you throw stones into the sea, watching them skip
once, twice, again, you can't help but think about a future
you don't yet know is as impossible
as retrieving those stones after they've left your hand.

The Color of Drought

This is a valley painted with drought.
This is what a nourished world lacks.

This suburb (within a suburb) was once consumed by color—
if I ever lie, it will not be about this.

I should be starving:
live without water long enough—you'll see.

I stand barefoot on the cool deck
beside the drained pool and watch albino lizards

crawl up and down stucco, disappearing into the crevices
underneath a bed of plastic flowers.

My mother is afraid of lizards;
I'm not. If there was water,

it would be warm and undrinkable
but there is no water.

Now, the landscape is a dried washcloth—
water, sweat, and dye rung out, dripping onto concrete.

The great untapped West
has been tapped— every evening, underneath a sky too bright

for stars, every day, the sun
takes you by the hand and says *hold on*.