DAWN IN THE EMPTY HOUSE

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The preface to this collection of poems, “Memory and The Myth of Lost Truth,” explores the physical and metaphysical roles memory plays within poetry. It examines the melancholy frequently birthed from a particular kind poetic self-inquiry, or, more specifically, the feelings associated with recognizing the self’s inability to re-inhabit the emotional experience of past events, and how poetry can redeem, via engaging our symbolic intuition, the faultiness of remembered history.

*Dawn in the Empty House* is a collection of poems about the implications of human relationships, self-deception, and memory as a tool for self-discovery.
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PART I

MEMORY AND THE MYTH OF LOST TRUTH
Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

To say I write poetry seems, at times, only partially true. My most personal, striking work frequently seems to arrive from elsewhere, like the whispers of an honest stranger, rather than arising from within. While attempting to reign in this experience and to better claim for myself my own creative work, I’ve come to value a poetry that encourages me to look harder and deeper into myself, that helps me define my every mask and every previously unacknowledged truth so I might expose and confront them. This kind of poetry, like a hammer, is what I keep at ready to split false surfaces so I might see through to the anxious truth. Little wonder, then, that successful poems usually leave me shaken and uncertain as I search out a way to integrate what they have unearthed. Even if I emerge only to restore my defenses, too afraid of what I’ve found, poetry’s capacity for paving inward roads has always worked toward my edification. Whenever I encounter a poetry so raw and so immediate it devastates me, these roads go deep, and I find myself newly exposed to the intricacies of my own thinking heart.

In pursuit of this raw poetics, of putting it to effect in my own work, I’ve found myself drawn most to poems that explore both the practical and metaphysical purposes of memory, particularly as these purposes relate to the recasting of self over time. When reading and making such poems, I am always astounded by the discoveries I make—what truths, like forgotten heirlooms, linger in the attic, waiting only for someone to take
possession. These discoveries have shown me that the poems I want to write and the poems I return to most put the reader’s meaning-seeking, symbolic intuition to task, and they enact the self’s transmutations over time by seeking out what, within the spectrum of memory, is lost in the process. In their best moments, these poems commend the ego for its fluidity, and they understand self as configured within an unfolding, simultaneously personal and universal narrative.

To this end, the writings of Li-Young Lee, Larry Levis, and Rainer Maria Rilke all look to personal, remembered history as a means to re-connect to what Lee, in an interview with Carolyn Alterio, calls “the human residing in the God term.” They use poetry like starlight, navigating through the dim vastness of memory in order to find personal history’s larger context, its configuration within the more universal, divine human narrative. In practice, their work characterizes the self that, across an ever-widening gap, seeks to re-access or re-inhabit the emotional experience of past events.

In technical terms, their poems have impressed me by employing a lyric intensity that evokes a kind of Socratic, internal dialogue that, at least for this reader, charts courses for deep introspection. Such lyric intensity, characterized by a deftness with metaphor, a musicality within the line, and an affinity for the deep image, incites these dialogues within me by appealing to my desire to write similar poems. In my experience, these conversations and journeys within have led to increasing comfort in looking hard at my own writing and in putting honest terms to the inner life of my own poems. As a result, I have identified within my own writing and my own person a previously silent, unacknowledged pursuit—a pursuit of the sense of having lost meaningful access to a prior, intuitively understood version of things. Perhaps obviously to some, truth—my personal version of the world—has
transfigured over time with respect to gained experience. This experience has shown me that
the sense of having lost access to prior modes of being is instead more related to the
constraints of memory than the loss of truth. Remembered experience is always flawed and
inadequate, and it is poetry that can redeem our faulty memory, meaningfully bridge the
gaps, and transfigure it, via engaging our symbolic intuition, into a larger perspective.

Li-Young Lee’s poem “With Ruins” exemplifies this pursuit: more specifically, the
poem explores the melancholy birthed via the self’s inability to re-inhabit the emotional
experience of past events. Moreover, if we read “With Ruins” as informed by the Greco-
Roman mnemonic tradition of the “memory house,” thus viewing the house within the
poem as memory embodied, the “ruins in the soul” to which the ruins of memory
correspond (51-53) become metaphor for the sense of lost truth I am trying to relate.
Ultimately, the poem, by virtue of its rhetoric, suggests that we can make sense of the
“melancholy” (25) that results from the pursuit of the transpersonal by trusting the
subjective connotations we experience in the act of remembrance:1

Choose a quiet
place, a ruins, a house no more
a house,
under whose stone archway I stood
one day to duck the rain.

The roofless floor, vertical
studs, eight wood columns
supporting nothing,
two staircases careening to nowhere, all
make it seem

a sketch, notes to a house, a three-

1 “With Ruins” is reproduced with permission from BOA Editions, Ltd.,
dimensional grid negotiating
absences,
an idea
receding into indefinite rain,

or else that idea
emerging, skeletal
against the hammered sky, a
human thing, scoured seen clean
through from here to an iron heaven.

A place where things
were said and done,
there you can remember
what you need to
remember. Melancholy is useful. Bring yours.

There are no neighbors to wonder
who you are,
what you might be doing
walking there,
stopping now and then

to touch a crumbling brick
or stand in a doorway
framed by the day.
No one has to know you
think of another doorway

that framed the rain or news of war
depending on which way you faced.
You think of sea-roads and earth-roads
you traveled once, and always
in the same direction: away.

You think
of a woman, a favorite
dress, your old father's breasts
the last time you saw him, his breath,
brief, the leaf

you've torn from a vine and which you hold now
to your cheek like a train ticket
or a piece of cloth, a little hand or a blade -
it all depends
on the course of your memory.

It's a place
for those who own no place
to correspond to ruins in the soul.
It's mine.
It's all yours. (55)

The poem tells us that memory’s temporal decay makes the act of remembrance (as it works
associatively and connotatively) an exercise in “negotiating / absences” (12-13). Our
selective, splintered memories are so for a reason—“there you can remember / what you
need to / remember” (23-25)—and we make sense of the “ruins” piecemeal by seeking out
the memories or fragments amidst the holes in our remembered history. Perhaps
unsurprisingly, trying to piece together one’s self via an incomplete retrospection leads to
“melancholy” (25), but in the context I am creating, this melancholy “is useful” because, as
Lee would have us believe, it is symptomatic of the drive to extract the transpersonal from
what Rilke has termed the “tremulous after-ring of memory.”1 The speaker explores the
seemingly random (“it all depends / on the course of your memory”) cascade of associative
memories not only to better understand their nature but to also find a larger context for
prior experience. In the process (as we see at the poem’s closure), he has managed to
conceptualize how these shards of memory can be at once personal and universal: “It’s mine. /
It’s all yours” (55).

Little wonder that the poem’s conclusions, as they explore the possibility for
transcendence, seem to mirror Lee’s claims for poetry. Indeed, understanding the individual
self as a duality—as something simultaneously idiosyncratic and constituent to the
transpersonal self—is crucial to Lee’s poetics. For Lee, poetry is divine—it is the only way
to approach foregrounding one’s context within the transpersonal:

So my sense is writing poetry or making art is yogic in that it links us to our complete
presence. I think for the most part, we’re not completely present. We inhabit
somehow a narrow bandwidth of our personhood. Poetry speaks from a condition
of total personhood. So it’s the fullest speech we can accomplish. Memoir is a way
to work through personal material in order to get to something beyond the personal,
something that is the ground of the personal. ... My own sense is that when I’m
trying to trace some sort of lineage, when I’m trying to account for my own person,
it’s not enough for me to locate my personal origin in a historical path. I have to
somehow discover the absolute origin of reality itself. My personal origin is linked to
the origin of reality. (Interview with Carolyn Alterio)

Noting the transcendentalist overtones, we would expect Lee to agree with Emerson’s
maxim: “[t]he poet stands among partial men for the complete man [….] He reattaches
things to the whole” (Lehrer 7). For both men, poetry is the best method available to redress
our dim, fragmented memories and reacquaint the self with the larger body, the human
condition at large. By surveying the “ruins” of his remembered history and how its
particulars affect him in the present, Lee hopes to find a means re-connect with the
transpersonal self, the “human residing in the God term” (Lee).

Inversely, though poetry may help us to more fully inhabit ourselves, exploring
memory’s temporal dissolution will expose us to what Lee, in “With Ruins,” calls the “ruins
in the soul” (53), those long untenanted palaces of self we wander when seeking, through
memory, a more “total personhood.” Lee seems to suggest that we should somehow take
comfort in our melancholy because it pushes us towards and signals the arrival of a powerful
relationship with truth—a knowledge that yearning for the divine is shared and universal and
that we each experience this yearning in deeply subjective ways (by virtue of our
remembered history, it would seem). In this sense, I agree with Lee without reservation: for
me, poetry, in its best moments, constitutes a means for approaching a personally relevant
transcendence. Poetry redeems my memory’s broken grammar—its sometimes disheartening
fragmentation—and helps me confront melancholy with a new, redemptive faith in the
subjective truths exposed by my personal experiences.

As poetry’s role in my life has grown in clarity, relevant books and words seem to have sought me out and, perhaps unusually, theoretical work has, as of late, proven personally relevant. After much meditation and discussion on the larger resonance of the particular, I am reminded of the New Critics, a group of formalists who have sought a way to “reintroduce religious meaning into literary study” (Rivkin and Ryan 28). Perhaps as an act of rebellion against the Russian Formalists, who employed in their analyses the strictly practical, denotative language of science, the New Critics began to explore literary form by investigating the “nonrational dimension of art” (Rivkin and Ryan 5), which is, in a sense, literature’s “spirituality.” One inevitably notices points of convergence between Lee’s poetics and the motives of New Criticism: by consistently writing with a hymn-like diction and cadence, Lee suggests that denotative, scientific language is worth little in relaying the shrouded, memory-bound truths within his poetry, and no doubt he makes plain his belief that poetry is sacred, like a yogic scripture. Indeed, poetry seems to attain its most profound meanings connotatively, shadowing and suggesting meaning instead of denoting it, and the New Critics have taken due note of this in their analyses. And if connotative or poetic language is concerned with arriving at essences, at seeking the abstract qualities of things we can never capture or reach, then it seems natural that we would seek out poetry when confronted with the ineffable.
Indeed, the “uncapturable” essence of a thing—its connotation—remains an object of continual fascination in New Critical thinking. This preoccupation inevitably leads to questions on the role of poetry in creating larger, more universal resonances for the particular—the connoted objects themselves. The New Critic does not dissect a text merely as a means to understand the function of the literary devices within it but rather, as Rivkin and Ryan put it, elucidate “the way literature [as a whole] embodies or concretely enacts universal truth” (6). Here, Rivkin and Ryan point to New Criticism’s insistence that the concrete details and specific “objects” of a literary work necessarily resonate beyond their temporality—their particularity. The concrete object, for the New Critic, thus stands both for itself and for something much larger and more meaningful. The notion of the “concrete universal,” as Wimsatt termed it, therefore suggests that the particular language of a poem can refer to a large number of individuals while simultaneously keeping a rich store of connoted, peripheral meanings. Paired with the claims for poetry I’ve made thus far, this notion makes clearer how the personal, subjective experiences within our history might gain a resonance greater than the sum of their parts. Like the concrete objects within a poem (think tree, rock, wind, sky, etc.), enactments and instants of past experience are granted, in poetry, a relevance that is simultaneously personal and, again, universal.

Larry Levis’s poetry, like Lee’s, puts the concrete universal to effect via the symbolic, metaphoric re-enactment of past experience. Similar to Lee, and certainly to many artists, Levis infuses his poetry with bits of his own philosophy. More pointedly, in the poem “My Story in a Late Style of Fire,” Levis demonstrates his appreciation for those who confront their naked, “suppressed” self-truths. As an example, Levis characterizes Philip Levine as the sort of person who puts this into practice:
A kind of rare, almost giddy intelligence constantly surfaced in Levine in comments that were so right and so outrageous that they kept us all howling, for he kept brimming over with the kind of insouciant truths most people suppress in themselves, and none of us in the class were spared from those truths about our work, and, by extension, about ourselves. (“On Philip Levine”)

Thematically, while “My Life in a Late Style of Fire” seems to greet memory, like Lee’s poems, as a mostly disjointed, fragmented thing, Levis appears more concerned with exploring the lapsing of self as a function of the lapsing of memory. In a more obvious point of difference, however, Levis’s poetry employs a more discursive lyric than Lee’s solemn, often liturgical one. He writes poems that derive their strength both from the music and the symbolic richness of the line and tempers, to great effect, these abstractions via a conversational, intimate diction.

These contrasting styles are nevertheless underwritten by many of the same tensions—the desire to surmount memory’s fragmentation, for example—and thus provide the opportunity for revealing comparisons. Case in point, Levis’s “My Life in a Late Style of Fire” manifests memory, like Lee’s “With Ruins,” in the form of a house, though in Levis’s poem, we do not revisit our “memory house” merely to observe its “ruins” but instead to view the house, its constituents, and its associated metaphors in the act of fragmentation—of destruction. In practice, Levis conflates the archetypal energy embedded within concepts of “home,” “love,” and “fire” with the intimacy of a personal history, creating, in the process, a meditation on the power of loss to transfigure identity.

Levis situates the poem, similar to most elegies, in the act of remembering: “Whenever I listen to Billie Holiday, I am reminded / That I, too, was once banished from New York City […] I was banished from New York City by a woman (1-6). The speaker
meditates on his history with this “woman”—a previous wife, we find later—and acknowledges that only when threatened by fire will he state, still reluctant, the truth:

Sometimes, after we had stopped laughing, I would look At her & see a cold note of sorrow or puzzlement go Over her face as if someone else were there, behind it, Not laughing at all. We were, I think, “in love.” No, I’m sure. If my house burned down tomorrow morning, & if I & my wife And son stood looking on at the flames, & if, then, Someone stepped out of the crowd of bystanders And said to me: “Didn’t you once know . . .?” No. But if One of the flames, rising up in the scherzo of fire, turned All the windows blank with light, & if that flame could speak, And if it said to me: “You loved her, didn’t you?” I’d answer, Hands in my pockets, “Yes.” And then I’d let fire & misfortune Overwhelm my life. (7-19)

The speaker’s reluctance—his reticence—has threatened to destroy the emotional integrity of the memory of this previous “love.” In viewing the poem as an act of symbolic remembrance, we can assume the speaker’s reflections are in lieu of what he could not conceptualize when these memories were present tense—were being made. Thus, the poem-as-meditation seems, more accurately, like a series of retrospective observations on a truth or answer the speaker has, in the sense Rilke uses the phrase, “live[d] into.” Evocative of Lee’s explorations of the emotions tied to revealing hidden truth, these observations, at least initially, leave the speaker in “Late Style of Fire” with nothing but melancholy.

Reminiscent of my own experiences, the speaker in “Late Style of Fire” fears those truths that leave his fragile essence exposed. Years later, in the contemporary moment of the poem, the speaker is willing to look deeper than before and to, at the least, approach himself on more honest terms. He understands, in a sense, that exposing oneself to these “suppressed” truths and finally looking hard at them lays the groundwork towards “defragmenting” what Lee has called “the ruins in the soul.” Even though confronting his
self-suppressed truths may eventually leave him feeling more “unified”—his multiple selves across history stitched together, if only for a moment—that vulnerability is, nevertheless, no less than terrifying:

Sometimes, remembering those days,
I watch a warm, dry wind bothering a whole line of elms
And maples along a street in this neighborhood until
They’re all moving at once, until I feel just like them,
Trembling & in unison. None of this matters now,
But I never felt alone all that year, & if I had sorrows,
I also had laughter, the affliction of angels & children.
Which can set a whole house on fire if you’d let it. And even then
You might still laugh to see all of your belongings set you free
In one long choiring of flames that sang only to you—
Either because no one else could hear them, or because
No one else wanted to. And, mostly, because they know.
They know such music cannot last, & that it would
Tear them apart if they listened. (19-32)

The speaker’s “trembling” evidences an encounter with something frightening or debilitating or both—in this case, “remembering those days” has disinterred the hard, unrecognized truths embedded within them, leaving the speaker’s self simultaneously shaken and, perhaps unexpectedly, united.

What’s more, to forget what we have named ourselves by—in this sense, our “belongings” (27)—would seem one striking, potential moment for change. More precisely, to lose what we have used to name ourselves—our most prized and personal possessions—would offer, after the initial terror, a freedom to choose new roads. Thus, the speaker’s laughter (27) signals the retreat of a prior self that has been effaced (55) by forgetting, a distance in which, however short-lived, the speaker can build something new. By paying notice, as it happens, to the fire and the destruction of his “belongings” (or, the loss of prior modes of being as a result of forgetting), the speaker finds himself “free[d]” (27) from what
once defined him. By noticing, conceptualizing, and appreciating loss for its transformative power instead of lamenting its occurrence, the act of forgetting appears less destructive and more productive. The flames of forgetting, like the controlled burn of a forest, can be a force for renewal.

Indeed, the means behind this freedom, in the condition of the speaker, are delightfully ironic. The “choiring of flames” (28) directed towards the speaker—or, anyone watching their prior modes of being surrender to the fires of forgetting—resonates with the surrounding population because they, too, have been or are engaged in the same cyclical processes. The processes are essentially human and something we all share in common. More importantly, the observation that “such music cannot last” (31) symbolizes the return to melancholy—that the absolution found in constructing this new and unified identity, while initially sublime, leaves the self lost in the desert of its own freedom. It “cannot last” because the self, now raw and exposed, can scarcely sustain itself too long: it will often restore its defenses, unable to sustain its actualization, and will return to what is easier, more comfortable, and in spite of what was realized.

As if to rationalize this resurrection of defenses—almost like it were an addiction—the speaker returns to the example of Billie Holiday. As catalyst for the poem, her example provides grounding for the speaker and gives him a useful point of comparison:

Billie Holiday, whose life was shorter & more humiliating
Than my own, would have understood all this, if only
Because even in her late addiction & her bloodstream’s
Hallelujahs, she, too, sang often of some affair, or someone
Gone, & therefore permanent. And sometimes she sang for
Nothing, even then, & it isn’t anyone’s business, if she did. (43-48)
Most telling and most relevant to the speaker’s plight is this notion of loss’s permanence—its paradox. While we may lose access to the content of a memory, only to live on within its effectual, emotional shadow, addressing its loss makes the memory’s referent eternal. Paying explicit notice to what we lose, especially by our own hand, creates and leaves behind some perpetual trace, whether in our minds these traces are preserved accurately or obscured by the fear of truthfully admitting to what went wrong. In the case of this poem, the speaker’s wife is “gone,” and her absence renders the memory of her permanent within the speaker’s mind. Thus, the apparent and symbolically rich paradox of loss: despite denoting the absence of something, it has a permanence few things possess.

Accompanying loss, oftentimes, is the impulse to prompt or even provoke it regardless of its implications—the reticent, suppressed self, in moments of profound emotional intensity, rarely considers future regret. Case in point, the speaker in “Late Style of Fire” reveals that within one, brief instant, he wanted, at his core, to stay, but through some imperceptible compulsion, wanted also to flee the intensity of it:

That morning, when she asked me to leave, wearing only
The apricot tinted, fraying chemise, I wanted to stay.
But I also wanted to go, to lose her suddenly, almost
For no reason, & certainly without any explanation. (49-52)

We may see the “inexplicability” of the speaker’s wanting to flee as a result of his failure (or inability) to address the difficult truth: at that precise moment in the past, he did not acknowledge, to the effect he seems to have wanted, his conflicted yet true desires. Now, “fire and misfortune overwhelm[s] [his] life” (19).

If we view, as Lee in “With Ruins” does, that this melancholy is necessary to the project of transcendence (“Melancholy is useful. / Bring yours,” 25), then the poem’s
conclusion evidences an emergence from it. Though we often forget as a defense mechanism, by accosting this forgetting—this fire—we can redeem the significance of what was lost:

I know this isn’t much.
But I wanted to explain this life to you, even if
I had to become, over the years, someone else to do it.
You have to think of me what you think of me.
I had to live my life, even its late, florid style. Before
You judge this, think of her. Then think of fire,
Its laughter, the music of splintering beams & glass,
The flames reaching through the second story of a house
Almost as if to—mistakenly—rescue someone who
Left you years ago. It is so American, fire. So like us.
Its desolation. And its eventual, brief triumph. (58-68)

Like Shiva’s dance, fire, or forgetting, leaves behind richer ashes for the remainder.

Camouflaged by our initial melancholy, the “brief triumph” of memory arrives only when we concede the role of forgetting in creating new versions of self. When a memory fades, the self to which it was tied follows, and so long as we view this lapse of self as opportunity for self-improvement, our fragmented memories may appear more like, say, the ruins of Macchu Picchu than half-burned libraries. Nevertheless, the fact that this triumph is “eventual” but merely “brief” underscores, as we find the speaker has done, the high likelihood of a return to melancholy.

As for myself, before discovering poetry, I returned to a self-induced melancholy more often than I’d like to admit. Poetry, as a primary medium for self-expression, showed me, much like the suggestions of “My Life in a Late Style of Fire,” how important it is to deal with this melancholy and my own frustration with “the myth of lost truth” head-on. Initially, I relished in my discovery of poetry, visiting many delightfully indirect poems over and over for their apparent mirroring of my own self-obscured, nebulous internal states.
Eventually, my literary diet consisted almost entirely of poetry, which was for a time very enjoyable but led to several unexpected outcomes. Without a balance, poetry induced within me a kind of debilitating mental static that I enjoyed because I thought in vanity that it was poetic in itself: it was meaningful but indefinable, and beautiful for what it suggested but did not say. I wrote many fuzzy poems in that state. What I did not anticipate, though, was that by submitting entirely to a world of image, feeling, and connotation, I would be unable to share those feelings in any conversational way. I couldn’t explain outside of my emerging and (still, I think) naïve poetry what was going on in my own head, which left me foundering in silence and, like the speaker in Levis’s poem, all too reticent and distanced from those around me.

Rilke’s words saved poetry for me. At the time, my affection for poetry began to dwindle because I believed it was tied to the static in my head and thus could not turn to it for answers. Beautiful in its own right, Rilke’s prose, even more than his poetry, put language to feelings I previously thought ineffable, acting like a much-needed antidote for this “static.” Most importantly, his letters on memory, self, and love have helped me develop a vocabulary by which I can describe the effect of poetry on me and, by extension, my own confusing internal states.

Rilke would have many things to say about the voices in both Lee’s and Levis’s poems. Like Lee and Levis, Rilke saw poetry as the thing that could trace back through our history—our memories, our forgetting of those memories, and the feelings to which they were tied—to uncover a much deeper, more profound, and transcendent mode of being. In his comments on a section from Rilke’s novel “The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,” John J.L. Mood summarizes Rilke’s views on poetry’s origin to great effect:
For Rilke, or for Malte, the progression is rather from feelings through experiences through memories through forgetting to what can be called, adapting Rilke’s own words, *blood-remembering*. And from this blood-remembering comes poetry, and, for that matter, the wise old age which is like a ripe fruit just ready to fall. (111)

In the tract that follows, Rilke writes that “verses are not [...] simply feelings” but “experiences” (112), and that “for the sake of a single verse, one must see many cities, men and things, [...] know the gesture with which the little flowers open in the morning” (112). Thus, in order to write the kind of poetry Rilke has in mind, we cannot rely simply on our feelings but must turn to and reflect on our experiences instead. Rilke goes on to provide that, though remembering and considering these experiences is necessary, producing “true” poetry requires forgetting those memories temporarily so they might return silently, in unexpected moments, to show us the way:

> And still it is not yet enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the great patience to wait until they come again. For it is not yet the memories themselves. Not till they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them. (*Rilke On Love*, 112-113)

This sort of forgetting will operate much like it always has: either by the simple passage of time or the suppression of self-truth as a defense mechanism. The difference, though, is that Rilke wants to reclaim the notion of forgetting from the realm of the pejorative, and much like the voice in Levis’s poem, Malte (or Rilke) sees forgetting as a necessary component to the making of poetry and thus necessary to the life of the poet, the artist, or any individual who wants to meaningfully represent his or her past experiences.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the “gazer within” will, in the process of honest self-representation, find him or herself in the presence of self-truths that have been long ignored
or subdued. For myself, much like the speaker in Levis’s poem, this process has been fraught
with pain, and this pain has, for me, been vindicated by poetry. Poetry has, in short, shown
me how symbolically representing my own history or my own engagement with
“unanswerable” questions can become a perpetual process of self-discovery. What truths I
uncover via this reading and writing of an honest poetics must be, as Rilke insists,
transferred into the self through an intricate process of remembering and forgetting. To this
end, Rilke, ever the inspired teacher, identifies in the Fourth Duino Elegy with the poet’s
project of introspection, wondering “[w]ho has not sat, afraid, before his heart’s / curtain?”
(19-20). The unspoken tenet here reinforces what all of my experience has shown me: that I
must, despite the terror, acknowledge precisely what I am afraid to. Even more, as all my
inward-looking has shown me, I will continue to read again and again the book of my history
not for any aesthetic aim but to instead find out how my prior modes of truth have
coalesced, like mist, into my present self. In poetry, I pore over my already written chapters
so I might see myself more clearly, stitching together what, at first, seems painfully disparate.
As Rilke suggests, by “loving the questions themselves,”3 I may find myself exposed in the
distant future to those truths that now, because I am still becoming, remain hidden. With all
honesty, I could do no better.

1 See Letter 3 from Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet. “There is nothing that does not seem to
have been understood, grasped, experienced and recognized in the tremulous after-ring of
memory; no experience has been too slight, and the least incident unfolds like a destiny…”
Rilke, Rainer Maria. Letters to a Young Poet. Trans. M.D. Herter Norton. New York: W.W.
2 Borrowing the term from Levis’s essay “Some Notes on the Gazer Within.”
3 Referring to the quote that opens this essay, taken from Letter 4 of Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet.*
Works Cited


---. Interview with Carolyn Alterio. *Site of Big Shoulders*. 27 November 2007


PART II

DAWN IN THE EMPTY HOUSE
Liturgy

Every Sunday, after pushing my dust around the room
I said I loved her, I planted shadows
all over her body, mouth on arm on shoulder
on desire that sifted into a thousand private seconds

that always, after, receded as smoke.
She never knew the letters of that alphabet.
In my life then, I couldn’t care:
I had cursed all honesty
and reverence for eight years until *that day*
when I broke, retreated to hide under my bed

with all my grief-stricken privacies:
photos, cups, old clothes, all of them names
I’d forgotten how to wear. So I made new shields,
those well-wrought mysteries,
and behind my eyes in half-waking dreams
saw fields laden with water. Even more,
an heirloom I’d yet to lose,
or something I wouldn’t believe
unless it touched me, felt a rough shadow,
God trembling there beside me,
as if to show how to fear
and make something of it. That moment

I learned how my mind, a glass flower,
stained and made for staring through,
shone too long in faith of what it imitated.
And after, it wouldn’t be too long
before I misled myself over a cliff
because of some past life
I’d credited with more meaning
than I could ever bear now.
Lumen

Signs were everywhere—
at a school downriver
we sat in two swings,
three others frowning and vacant beside us,
all of them rocking like wordless ships.

Remember—yes, silhouettes
are sometimes enough—

how the penumbra came on slow,
taking the football fields,
the east end of the school
and then us
in our most private hour
in years, enlivened by the shadow
as we begged for something
dangerously important
to happen. We imagined

the eclipse
would peel away the veneer
of the everyday, give us a scene
worth all our frustrations,
    but even better
it began to walk away
like a regretful lover
and I pretended to watch
but watched you watch instead,

the shadows sliding back like plates.
I looked
for what we expected, but we needed
new colors we needed enough
we expected
too much. It was clear:
in the new mid-afternoon morning
something had been corrupted,
the new skin strange and wrong—

and, God, we wore those clothes too long,
twisting all shadows
into omens. Tragedies
wasted. Everything
filled with reasons for staying still.
Parable for My Future Self

Think of June, think of fire,
the warped tongues of heat,
the bruised air,
and this new month, remember,

nothing could be enough,
thirty sorry days
tenanted by vacuum and laughter.
Yes, John, you winnowed days

counting the sloughed drifts of light
floating in your living room,
watching the yellow sun
drape itself onto your arms

like the robes of a grieving priest.
The story wouldn't leave:
that dangerous boredom
a slow blossom of ink

in water, a dark star expanding
into the clear and shameless void.
All this theater
and never any answers

pouring from these aches,
this nebula, this removal,
this voice. The shine
of every discovery

arriving late, the loving mockery of it.
And how strange
when now, years later, you'll recall

every clashing rafter
of light, heavy with the words
you found to paint them, somehow
found the will to float. Remember will

as honesty, fleeting like a room
at dusk, and these muddy books
blooming hollow, your hands burning
the pages before they could finish.
A Way to Breathe Again

Yesterday, when I saw you on the corner
helping the blind man find his cane,
I saw you grin, and I knew, fingering
the change in my pocket, that it was all a fraud.
I could only smile, the stun
setting fire to what it all wanted
to mean, and felt, like some wonder,
he could see again. Only then
could I look past and through
the snowdrift, casting an unaware
prayer to unmoor
myself from old orbits,
my central star weighed down

by every needed yet missing thing. That night,
it all came back to haunt me,
the day’s ghosts taking over
in the seconds before my sleep,
ruling the city inside
where all things became markers
for two ways of existing. When, finally,
my two suns set, I could see again
the blind man looking for his cane,
only this time he found it buried
in a sand dune beneath all the places
you told him it wouldn’t be.
And so I looked

across the canyon of self and other and yearned
for some sweetness, a sign reseen
in the first six seconds of waking
on my walls because, in that first
flush of world, every question
could be, for a moment, conveyed by silence.
Ritual

At night when we are naked
you are always sleeping when I notice you,
your legs warm and bent to the shape of mine,
each of us pooled in ourselves, two stones
cradled by water. Outside, like an omen,

rainclouds graze the roofline.
I remember I left your bicycle in the rain,
and though I cannot see, I know it rusts.
I do not motion for the door, and somehow
you know, and somehow your knees press
harder into mine. So long divided,
our borders fade in the yellow glow of day’s end—
I feel our skin stretch together,
but I cannot feel four legs, only your body loosening,

mine tightening, like the contours of a failing current.
Could I rain something for us? Could I have your body
and keep my own? So I wince, so I shift

and so your thighs follow, bending and bending—
I know in sleep there will be answers,
only to wake into more questions,
hard and rough, all my thoughts
like stones before the river...
Dead Bird

Last March, near my house, a bird was born without eyes. If this somehow concerns you, do not worry: he doesn’t know. He has enough to eat. Stretches his throat for worms like the others,
grows bright red feathers. His mother shows no concern. When the time comes, she nudges open his wings, and, for a moment, he flaps them brilliantly. Confident, he leaves the thistled nest,
not once feeling his own weight. Fortunately, before he knows what is missing, an owl takes him. Birdsong crowds the forest.

If you wonder how I cope: I don’t think about it. Instead I watch the flitter of a thousand other birds. I think: thousands fly and don’t notice. I am thankful for whatever convenience keeps me from considering this bird at all, particularly for its terrible proximity—so close that I must convince myself nothing could possibly shake my trees hard enough to make me fall,
even if controlled by wings long enough only to be eaten—minus the eyes I’d never made use of to begin with.
Song for Tetsuya Fujita
To measure the power of wind

Near a river, it cracks the sternum of a hill—
what pours out is something only the wind can name.
We see its color, though—the air black with cities,
reminded that the earth must sometimes trade acres
with the sky. Here we are made better—

our skeletons airborne, a leaf. The body is zero
at takeoff, infantile, and, death,
our flesh part of the bargain. What we return first is weightless,
like questions—why the eyes go first—then, heavier, answers—
so we can’t see the world caught in heavy drift

around us, ready to break our cages.
At nightfall, the hard clouds pour
our ruins, the material we escaped,
the living caked in our substance—
our bicycles, our chairs.

Those who are lucky
stay in the cloudburst.
There is nothing down
there, terra firma, that prison the wind carried us
to escape from. However pithy

death can make a life, our conversation
remains, scars left for the living—
that series of questions which,
burdened with for so many years,
the weightless no longer have to carry.
Letter for a Modern City

First, old chains.
Then, emptied swimming pools,
water hoses bleeding into an alley.

Though everything is only sleeping,
It must be obvious
I am in an empty seat
reading about absence,

where the afternoon
splinters across chalkboards,
and in the thick yellow light
we cross bridges with our tongues.

Still, when this city dies each day,
I break light bulbs in a parking lot
where echoes mean I have succeeded,

where shadows exist
only to remember the shape of things
and, strangely,
we remain frightened by blindness.

Anyways,
questions are lonely ways
of remembering.
We have forgotten our names.

Dusk takes the room,
and we are always alone at night
when avenues die,
when all we have is flesh

and our continual receding, smoke
from gunpowder, and then
silence, our breathing
an empty warmth
language couldn’t write.
Dying Rooms

I left the hospital searching for a rainstorm.
I walked down corridors,
    wet newspaper limned the curbs,
and seeing I’d missed the rain,

I knew somber would be harder,
blank skin, dry, without words.
By now, the umbrellas had withered.

How a room of flowers
seems to the dead? A late congratulations.
Or — yes — something for the people left:
    oh…the blue irises, when he was young…

Enough. I know your opera:
Birthdays, stairwells, trumpets,
death of your sister,
death of your mother,
and finally, this:

I tell each child you fell asleep; you didn’t care to wake up.
The dead don’t remember—and this makes leaving easier—and
now strangers handle your body. So I look for clouds
to forget your tears.

I try because I cannot find them.
Recalling His Stare

I can only say
it was my fault he didn’t recognize me—
I was thinking only of myself that Saturday,
the day we canoed seven miles
  beneath the waning summer daylight
  & I tried to love the river
but could only think of ways I might lose myself instead—

  now, & I think in days ahead
I will wince enough for myself, & to make his lacking
easier, but as we know, I never find escape
within anyone’s head—my own even— and
Oh, Katherine— his eyes searching mine
for something to call himself
said what awaits me awaits us all
& it was not long before I couldn’t think of anything
but trying to find some lost neighborhood dog,
to give a beggar some new life,
to do whatever I could not.

That evening after eating, a new sky crept across the city
& you and I watched hailstones shear every tree
  in your mother’s backyard,
  & it was natural to call it all a sign
that we too should splinter against
things more earthly than ourselves:

as if it had been scripted, we stood
beside the sliding door
after the storm had left
  & watched your father hover
  only inches above the garden,
his pointless hands pawing the milky stones.
From behind the double glass
we saw how he picked up broken stems
and smiled dumbfounded
at the logic of it all, our own gaze,
if anything, making logic more
  and more God’s
game than our own.
The Sound of Water

I had the idea that the world’s so full of pain
it must sometimes make a kind of singing.
And that the sequence helps, as much as order helps—
First an ego, and then pain, and then the singing.

- Robert Hass

Distance was the beginning.

Our fulcrum was a town buried,
pressed to the earth by snow clouds and mesquite trees.
Two hundred miles of hazy space stretched out
    either side like arms, and here – the torso, nameless.
I was west, thinking about scars—
You were east, across the asphalt body,
held coals to your chest. Your skin hardened
while I held you. Your eyes closed.

North—your father,
where time moves backwards.
We watched as self
moved slowly from his eyes, his hands.
We learned how tissue
forgets—how the mind guts itself,
how faces become nameless.
It was in this strangerhood
I watched pain
manifest like tide, its crest across your face,
its wake through your body—
my fingers never strong enough to breach
the surface tension of your world.
How I wanted, needed to cup grief
in my hands—drink it,
make yours a part of me.
Instead, you spilled over, leaving behind
the water I had yet to weep.

I tried, I came up with this: each of us
huddled on a rainy hill,
the world in water, soaking us to saturation—
and still, the sound of it pushing through rocks
to the river, thunder reflected off high slate walls.

Most of all, and you hear this also—
the sound of wind
through your hair, a soft whistle, almost like reeds.
And as you sleep beneath that deluge,
I can see your father, listening—
even as his body forgets,
he still hears the music.
**A Part**  
*After Levis*

It wasn’t enough  
to come together  
but it could be I said  
if you want it  

and ok, she said,  
though we would  
have to mean it,  
and so it was  
good to be apart again,  

split by the mark  
of what our world  
couldn’t dream  
but wanted to,  
and in this new house  
each quiet we built  
was terrifying  
because it left the door open,  
ever mind that we both,  
in our two privacies,  
saw the same colors:  
a field of trees before some flush  
or flesh  
could cut them all  
and bring them up, again,  
apart but together, scores  
of them new and trembling  
in unison behind a wind that,  
of all things, sought a way  
to breathe something new  
into a thing once thought gone
In An Eastern Window

At the end I built a house
on a hill full of crosses; I planted a frozen
church in each window,
each room more tables than meals in a month.
That winter

I had a thousand last hours,
all of them hammering their conclusions
into the house’s veins hard,
harder than memory knows, though I remember

so importantly

outside, oaks plastered their frames
against the dying ripples of light. . .

In my mind, a candle in an eastern window prays
to its flicker. I know by the light
faces can’t be shunned,
that each shadow means a broken current,
    that houses creak
when their promise is unfulfilled—

and, finally, that we cut the ground to find deeper water,
wearing grooves deep
in the floor by sitting in chairs
    and abandoning them. . .
To the Migrant Rain

It's the last hour of the afternoon
and I'm counting umbrellas
from the roof of the city,
each fleet of black inkblots
a pointillist sea of cover

and retreat. If I let myself wait,
the air furrows into fat bars of steam,
clouds sink into the city’s
pits, and this: the soft flush of fog,
almost audible. But enough of that rouse—

bursts of thunder track northeast
to your house also, trailing braids
of lightening behind them.
   Everywhere,
thunderheads build reasons
for leaving things behind,

including ourselves. Even so,
our past is a house filled
with clouds, and today
is only Tuesday, and I am already wading
through seas of ether, asking

to borrow someone else’s interpretation.
Mostly, I promise untruths, say in one moment
I admire
anyone’s retreat from echoes.

In another I steal your umbrella.
Sleeping

She will wake
in the heated room
looking for substance
in my sunless eyes, meaning
where she knows
there is none, and despite
each failed attempt
to capture me with truth
that, later, I’ll call mere persuasion,
reaches out to touch the commas
of my face, the soft blade
of her finger scouring the years
I’d turned into, of all things, a disguise.
Only I, like a mirror, too soon
give her fear form, tearing
the promise of silence
with the blind reply
of a man who has, instead, lost himself,
hoping in vain to point towards
what kept him silent, the static
in his head some proof of unspeakable love,
like a thunderstorm brooding
in the hard distance.
**Shatter Me Also**

I broke what mattered: it wasn't the purposeful, childlike rendering of revenge for an insult, a cut-up physical comedy, but the failure of reflex, sheathed intently by the simplicity of filling a vase for the dying flower.

It's not to say I haven't felt pain—
but the analogy, draped in the colored shades of a still life, pauses thought and splits me into two halves of heartless nothing. Strewn across the floor, the last effects of a father stolen away, lying there, fractured and purposeless. His daughter can't have him back, or this – the final gift from a mind broken by forgetting, and now I wish selfishly, and utterly, that I might lose myself too, like him.

Days later, glancing towards her, I still see her fingering the pieces, wielding them like daggers, ready to splinter me with what I wouldn't see because I only stayed quiet, because I could only shuffle across the tile staring at my socks, looking, without hope, for a reply to the sadness of others.

Freud – if the mind is like an iceberg, is nothing an accident? In the most bitter psychoanalysis, I am your words of wisdom. My ego approximates, like you say, to the psychotic by some degree, and I become even in my best behavior something like Shiva—only beneath these feet, nothing is reborn.
Mask in a Mirror

In my child’s cosmos,
I stare listless, like Picasso’s The Girl Before A Mirror—
Mom cries, but we hear nothing.
And always that awkward silence—
I think now, like an aging painting,
that whole day is worth more
than most since, those lifetimes
of interlaced hands on legs,
my mind making sense of it
like the cubist: everything split,
all shadows and brave lines, struggling
at every moment to make sense
of what the world wants to mean,
but cannot.
Killing Correspondence

Against the noise of breathing, I hear
your pen bury itself
in hard paper, your palm’s edge walk
over dead trees. From across the house
I hear your letters, inscrutable
as a broken morse—and in my head,
I read the paragraphs, like fuel
for someone else’s months.

As you finish
eyery swollen word, calm
and worried, I hear the low
whisper of air
escaping unnoticed, and I know
your mouth tests
each blue syllable,
a world of errors machined
by your face, your hands. Nevermind
you own enough vowels for seven new languages,

and in mirrored hallways, mired in reflection,
I still can’t find my name. Remember, love,
there is enough astonishment to be satisfied—

we read last night the aorta
of a blue whale is large enough
for a six-year-old to crawl
through. And at night

when all I have is my blood, my
ink, my name, I fill the envelope
of my eyes with whatever warmth
I find inside, with what I can fill
the without we built, like ruins,
together.
Near a Playground

You remind me: roads, playgrounds, meteors, water fountains—
and what reflects the moon?—puddles, hundreds of them.
This side of earth, there is only this wind carving arrows in the water,
pointing to you, pulling me back. And somewhere, a war machine builds walls—
and how ants carry leaves and bodies, single file— and how minutes drip
from these cypresses, metered rain that ages us both.

How resurrection looks: sparks behind the irises,
the body uncurling, a sound almost like choking—backwards,
air rushes in and the catapulted scream
back to the familiar. Now my eyes grow hot and a leaf falls to the moon
beside your face, that reflected promise of somewhere
where everything is written in craters.

In some way, the defense of stone: the sculptor damages marble,
now I am reluctant to admit I may be a better thing because of chisels.
I feel the hammering, my pieces on the floor, waiting for some wind
to carry me to a better purpose: erosion. And you are here, still beyond
these hills, trusting the wind to keep away the sound of gears and clocks.

So you must know how we die: it happens when the sun takes our puddles,
when, after all our efforts, the moon peels back the shoreline to expose only some
incalculable sand, clean and smoothed over, made from bodies,
our wizened shells.
**Last Winter**

I watched a child draw
rings around a shell
in the white sand,

watched how carefully
his fingers tilled
the beach, how the circles

radiated into larger
and larger versions
of themselves until, later,

I left the pier to examine
what I felt to be his poem,
propped up on one hand

so I might use my other
to trace his necessary art
like the priest who,

finally feeling his doctrine,
crosses himself sincerely—

but to digress, which is to say *I am returning*—despite the fact
I hovered my fingers above

the small troughs of sand,
moved them in orbits around
the opalescent shell

and despite each ceremonious
effort I felt at the time
to be necessary and important,

I still found myself drifting
from the center
like a solemn planet,

believing someone wiser
to be watching...
Memoir

My body says goodbye without the mouth, 
only this scar working deep 
through flesh, lungs, through bones 
to where your compass once pointed—
but I’ve lost that magnetism. 
So watch yourself disappear—
that rung you occupied, I’ve set it on fire. 
Nowhere is safe from forgetting, 
and here, where I write 
farewell with sparks 
you burn in all colors, 
a bible in the fire, 
shaking your fists 
and shouting nowhere 
to go, the lonely ghost 
left homeless after an exorcism.
Mary blamed it on herself,
couldn’t pierce the silvery metaphysic
that trailed her—before visiting the grocer,
before the afternoon rain (welcomed
because it interrupted everything), before
the meaningful argument. She knows
she is lost, can’t find the question,
the search too large,
   the doors leaden, all symbols
and causes trying, like lonely children,
to proclaim I am. Anyways,
they are always snuffed instead,
   like tiny brilliant sparks that die
   at the gates. We
can’t blame her,
we are too much, suffering
wrong also. If this
is somber, it
will be. From every
dead end, one rising chorus calls us back:
bury it.
Possum Kingdom, 2007

This year, in the graying light of latter November, I’ve lost my heart in silent turns, my truths grown pale, and, like prophecies, I’ve seen myself awake at the edge when I shouldn’t, shaken from the music of sleep with thoughts too fast to finish.

This month, in all my dreams, a river bleeds from a flesh-colored canvas, and I look back, needing the source, to where mist searches me out, blank and yet to be born,

and from there, I draw purposes: I make bowls from my hands, blue and hardened from life, dipping them in because I need, in Heaven, what I’ve lost. Never can I find enough to drink, drying out though I can feel it near, and so, like the new poor, hoist my hands high, shouting and giving names for every pooling drop so they could mean something bigger than their own empty promise.
Black Windows

One day, dreaming in a hammock, I saw my body sink into a black window. Suddenly it was morning in prehistory, and I saw myself laughing at the entrance of a cave. Someone is next to me trying to measure the entrance with a ruler when a long flag of bats began to rise from the cave’s cold throat:

the dark burns my eyes.
I break every tilted spire by understanding numbers, aware that three hundred feet equals several million years—
and I save this for a friend who must understand magnitude because he knows we must not feign astonishment…

Still when I speak, there are no echoes.
This means on a dark mountain the air is new, and whatever emergent dreams break across the peak blow wordless into the sun.
Two Kinds of Awareness

What happens in the periphery—
we know everything starts shapeless,
and with eyes, borders form without trying.
Creation happens from passing by,

nothing fills with coat racks,
mirrors, mosquitoes, parked cars,
people arguing in the street.
But the unconsidered—

the bullet’s origin,
where startling is born, we find only what
the mind dreams. So

where nothing is at home
we find that spark of art,
and the mind makes lines without eyes
until the far scope of either side

drifts forward, and the stranger
becomes beggar, the dirt on his chin
so close you begin to feel unclean.
Face in the Sand

This time your father is lost
between the couch and the front door,
his brow furrowed, his wrinkles
finally saying no, this is not wisdom

but a kidnapping. Seven p.m. and I am alone
walking him to the dinner table, his stiffened body
forgetting each prior step, each word
lost to the loose fog that haunts his face,

and I am only a stranger to him
for whom each day is always the first.
In another hour, Katherine, you and I swallow
this world by our own choosing:

even the radio, whispering
from the kitchen,
reminds the mourner
that he must sometimes laugh
at what frightens him.
And all the unspoken
has a louder cry: be forgot
a fact today, what it was, again,
to be quiet…

Here was my hymn, my whisper,
and afterwards in a display of knowing
your father laughed, finally, like a man
who’d found his keys after years of searching,

opened the salt shaker, poured
it out in front of all of us,
and on the naked table formed the sign
of his own becoming, working in bas-relief

until we left the table only with what remained:
a few loose grains, five drifts of dead salt.
Nothing

Is only what is gone
or could be elsewhere depending
on your firsthand account of
the time the train left if
it was in the morning I don’t know
where nothing could have gone to
perhaps the vacant store
to buy air or to a wind farm
giant white blades churning the cold
to make electricity
that powers each empty house
in the distant city at dawn,
the exchange, the earth’s crust contracting,
at last, to inhale…
Seeds of Fire

Why not water, filling up the void?
“It must be wings”, pens Socrates—
they make a kind of roaring in the soul,
each wave of feathers eschewing
the dust from sinews, the heart
agitated by a new fire. Water occupies,
wind merely touches, rushes through
to blow something good upon a life—
to beat the chambers of a heart open—

It needs that beating
akin to its own beating,

the white machinery of flight
to inspire and take two ventricles
and turn them to two perfect images
of division and dependence—
one side pouring into the other.
And when those two pistons emerge
from your own skin, you begin to sense
their purpose—that thrust of cinder
upon another body, a breath of another
kind—this calm language
blows through you—it whispers

that what was within you, sleeping,
has blossomed into what you must sow.