LAWS OF INHERITANCE

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This thesis is a collection of poems that meditates on the legacies we inherit and the legacies we leave behind.
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Vows

The way the light hits us, you’d think this is all real instead of playful shadows along the corridors of time’s tall houses. As if we were not destined to become ruins on some field reclaimed by grass or God. To think that any of this was ever ours to claim or craft--it's all pretend.

But, if we must stake claim where the light hits and pretend because our eyes believe then so must we. If logic makes me build the walls before they can slowly ease themselves back into the earth like aching bones into a chair that creaks with them and casts its own lines,

then I will gladly brick myself into you. Leave all the windows blank and facing inward— so that the world can watch our brave turn towards relic.

So that every moment we are pottery and bronze and the dust that covers both. No matter how common we are today—when we are someday unearthed as ruins—

scholars will brush us carefully and worship our bones. We will lie together then, in that certain future, as we do now, covered in the rays that makes us a thing.

And we’ll have imagined stones so heavy that the greatest weight and press of time will move nothing. We’ll continue to reflect one another, even after the light cannot.
Tender

Her legs found my fingers while we slept off the spirit of the evening. I woke first and often—thinking I should raise my hand, help her recover with a blanket.

In last night’s rapture of whiskey, we stopped along a street of strangers, thumbs up. Giggles. Her lips tasted like a ripened fruit, long out of season, against my teeth.

We filled our mouths.
A small measure of prudence—mine—helped us into her living room where she fell asleep.

To see her now, I move the cover above her waist.
My hand from her thigh to her stomach. My lips to her neck

with a single, sober inscription.
Hereditary

1. Cycles
   after Louise Gluck

Memory takes aim at the future
where all our things are gone.
We, me and myself as a child, wait
for the next shaky cycle, with its rusty chain,
to send us falling.

Our world is a busted chassis where we thrust
our fingers toward God. His laughter preordained.
It sounds a lot like a ten-speed slipping its gears:
   “Ticka-ticka-ticka…”

Each time we go back for what’s left,
we push our pedals faster, harder, uphill.

It’s our choice.

Maybe after all that work, we get to turn around,
point ourselves back toward oblivion.
And we’ll lean forward just like this:

coast with our hands in the air
then maybe, for a moment, fly.
2. Nocturne

Sometimes I drag my finger over bricks
to feel the drum beat of my bones,

to rake myself along the sharp edges.
Hiding means everything

when the whole world is a mouth.
This mewling infant his belly is ripe for the talon,

but graced with gentle heartbeats instead.
When the engine powering the body is so small

only the closest lean in to hear its explosion.
3. The New Boy

He stands alone wishing for a tail to tuck,
to outrun the fear of his name called out.
Or not called, to watch him stand beyond
the gate accepting all punishment as afterthought.

He stands against the wall in summer
when boys pick teams. He waits.
Beyond recess, beyond home,
beyond the chain links of children's laughter.

*Red Rover, Red Rover.*

They ignore his deepest wish and call him.
These children, like royalty on the far shore,
hoard their mirth like a treasured
cloak. They make the boy surrender his

so that they might lead their march toward
a pristine twilight. For them, the sun departs
at their pleasure, but for the new boy, it sinks.
Every boy a sunrise, every morning dusk.

Blades of children stretch across the yard.
4. Elegy for the Unborn

I pretend somewhere there’s a scaffold strong enough
to lean on. If you look, you’ll see I’m not brave enough
to test my weight. Sometimes I have no choice. Shoved
by time into the world and left to pray it holds.

Then I remember Brunelleschi’s hubris, that he built a dome
that should collapse, yet somehow endures above the city.

But living is no dome. Just a parlor trick pretending
to be shelter. I will not be the legerdemain that bricks myself
into these walls. Nor will I dance to the steady beats
of dying. This endless carnivale of the dead taps on
my lips, scatters dust. Even as I collapse.
A certainty the world is too monstrous to manage.

Call us gravediggers, and the scars we make a place of rest.
Not damaged, this earth, but begging for our return. Is this the best
we can do: to drink to death? I’m scared. But I toast
the theater, the players. Try to delight in the bricks. The lie

of youth is to think that we are stronger than the earth.
Even now I believe if I can only craft a fountain,

then the drink might forgive each sin. But this cup is hollow.
And the earth’s dome so much dirt. So much unquenchable dirt.


**Insomnia**

I swear it's not black.

Just this gray-from-the-backyard
moonlight leak under my door.

My ceiling crash-lands millimeters
at a time, never fast enough.

Around the room--the world--is how I move.
Still can't swallow this rock.

11:59 p.m. A toast:
To the money I owe
To the girl I lost.
To the life I'm not.

I weave down regret like dull streets. Empty
except for me and my mistakes riding shotgun.
No seatbelt. Fingers on the radio dial.

Dark streets crackle with static.

I stare out a window at my neighbors.
A row of lawns green and cut, kids in church.
Tomorrow a PTA with brownies.

Indoors, I'm hostage to some spin
doctor of desires. But, mostly my ceiling.

The world isn't falling for any of it.
We think it's dark.

But I swear it's not black.

If you let your eyes adjust--you'll know.
It's never really black. Just gray,

these minutes after midnight.
These deep green lawns.
Legacy

1. Dominion

Your only shot that falls, falls silent through the net. Makes a sound like the wind of shuffled cards. You thought time

would slow the world for victories like these. Instead, success is carted off with the injured, mopped up like sweat. Either gawk, or defend.

But know that one shot earns
one more sprint down the court to defend.
I promise you, I will hack your skin until only your tendons

body-up the post. One after another
the shots will clang, or flutter, but they will fly.
Each contest will drain your strength.

Each time a ball finds the net, the weight of its fall will hang from your shoulders. You will thirst.
You may try to drink the will back into your bones.

But if you vanquish nothing, you earn respect from nothing. Still, when I finish you off, you’ll be glad. To stand alone in a gym,

empty eyes scanning the walls for what’s lost.
The lights go out. You hurl the ball where the net might be. It makes no sound.

Not rim, not twine, not ground. Forever now, you listen for that bounce.
2. Ambition

In a fever sleep, I called you by another name, then everyone apologized about the cinders.

A mind pressed against a skull like a little girl's face against the window of a school bus.

No one watched me pour the gasoline. The way it cooked our home bothered my neighbors less than how I sifted the debris without sadness. But, I never liked those buildings much.

I loved their ash. Their futures untethered from the earth. Cast to the wind.

Far. Though I never traveled, my origins scatter beyond knowledge. By never leaving home I take flight. Like a changeling birth, or an arrowhead aflame.

To pierce fuel with fire, then melt a world.
3. Shipwreck

If you sever my hands, 
leave them at my feet, 
so that I can press my wrists into them.

We’re beyond the capsizing peaks 
that overturn this ship. Beyond empty space 
our lungs reject. The breath gives us no choice.

We stand just beyond the reach of fog 
lights and the chaos harbored 
in the shallows of the will.

Empty sails and wind hollow us. 
I wish I could wash your face in the waves. 
(I might still) or crash. My. Fist.

And then, again, crash.
4. Legacy
   -for Amanda

There’s always a path amidst the brambles, even if we mark it in blood.

Of all we have earned, we save the fractures, screams and rustles against the gusts.

We pour into molds. Take and hold the vapors deep into our lungs, like hope.

“This was my way,” said the echo—the map.

And so we follow. To the cradle in which our heroes rest.

“What’s left behind is larger.”

Voices skip between the dead canyon walls, a thousand phantasms across the water.
5. Song

Some will say it's fuel, and it can be.
The way an ant is, the moments before
and after it's magnified. And then it burns.

Or hunger. The way all blood,
a body's river, seeks the delta's
final push, nourishes with flood.

Or how embalming fluid loves
man's final breath; moves into the empty
hollows, dusty creeks, swells them.

Some will say it's formal. A funeral march,
careful words, a rose where man and earth meet
or make an argument. So sorry, so sorry.

Some will pretend it's perfect. A wonder
that stands against time, like the pyramids.
But, they won't mention that up close

pyramids are just piles of dirt. All graves are.
Surrounding them, piles of bone. The ones
who built these tombs to living gods.

Some say they bled out gladly,
ending just right. Their voices, in some language
I'll never learn, haunt the blowing sands,

whisper what a song is--if only I could understand
them. If only the wind would calm. I hear it howling,
in the antechamber of sound I hear crying;

men and women gust against me. Stones they pull
scrape ground like skeletons. Surely they would stop
if not for the whipping. No skin left and still, the whipping.
Statute of Limitations (in Lightyears)

I'm not like you. The way you cut your smile from great slabs of marble. With a madness

I dragged you here, tracked indoors the miles of dirt. Of irreparable shale.

These stones are too precious to chisel your name. Too light to stack against our shallow grave.

But our urn is filthy, emptied of its ash. Does it matter that we ruin the stars?

Their long breathing fires will linger and dim beyond our laughter.

Time punishes time with its chisel.
Caesura

You dangle loosely in my memory,
my lost music, my phantom limb.

Severed, I thought, to save us.
But each night you thrum

my stomach, my throat, my lips.
I think I’ve cried out for you.

That I’ve pounded the ground to wake myself.
But my wife swears I only twitch a little.

Sounds, if I make them, are whimpers.
The gentle movements of my hands surround me.

Some nights I can’t bother to dream.
I shake my legs side-to-side. I moan a little,

force my paralyzed body to move. Whole
notes at first. Half-time to double-time.

Each dream a burden of unfinished lyrics,
the kind that wakes. That sings, “not yet, not yet.”
Matrilineal

1. In Stone

No escaping the invitation to be powerful.

Toss back the covers of a boy—remove his ruffled shield.
Once his mother held a spoon above a lighter
where she roasted the black snow. It melted

until a pool of joy filled a space untouched
by milk, lips, teeth. He watched
the way she tattooed her skin;

the way she cracked apart from hunger.
He tried holding her together with the wire
kids call pretend. But her dripping agony

trickles into paradise. In a nicotine stained photograph
her child she takes for her husband. His half-crooked
smile, his disdain barely masked, his eyes too tired.

This woman on the floor is no toy doll. She’s a stone.
When a boy pulls the needle from her,
there is no make-believe strong enough

to hold it high in triumph.
2. **Orphan**

I hear the buzz through forgotten places
but do not taste honey.

Just the tips of powered feet
across my tongue.

I shuck music from my fingers;
draw the iron in my mouth, spit

the burnt branding on the ground.
When they chopped my head off,

did they find honeycomb?
Or just the fallen queens?
3. Nest

It ended with my mother’s fist, how it smashed the plated window of our motel home.

I was twelve, but still wondered why she hadn’t just opened the door.

And me there, showered with shards, my mother drunk. Angry. My school bus hours away.

Blood fell from the bone, and she lurched into the room where my stepdad slept.

Each drop a breadcrumb for the lost.

She pretended, but the door, already broken, was no door.
4. Shell

If you look out a window as a bird falls
from the trees outside you mustn’t rush.
Your scent—any scent but hers—will agitate
the mother. She will leave the baby to die.
She would anyway but at least it gives us
as good an excuse as any to ignore
the song from the shade of the balsa.
As an adult I have hidden
from the boy my mother abandoned
again, and often, to be with strangers.
Knowing is a yolk. A boy’s trust
is frail and running.
5. Rain

When the window broke, it didn’t sound like the end. Just like so many other destructions.

An iceberg, I guess? With a matter-of-fact groan before it slides off into the ocean.

And in time, it returns as a memory, a river, a pool to seed the earth.
6. Clipped

When birds fall from a nest it’s music from another room.
Sometimes I recognize the song. Even if I hate it,
I sing it. Some words, forgotten,
are a lone voice calling from beneath a tree.

Once, my mother’s blood was so thinned
from Bud and Jack, it didn’t even try to heal her.
I spent hours begging her to visit Emergency for stitches.
No broom could quite sweep the shards,
no window of tape and cardboard protect us.
Once, a young boy watched his mother,
weaker than any woman he’d ever known,
smash the glass of a life and bend the frame around it.

No chance for a boy. He knows. The world could burst
through at any moment and take back what it wants.
Never Avert Your Eyes

-for Michelle

Keeping a friend is like finding out some terrible thing is in remission. Like you've been given,

not a pardon, but a stay.
That our actions are of dire consequence—

both the ones that bury our good hearts, and those that dredge them back up,
clean them off. What we have
is a continuum of opportunities,
each nested next to another, overlaid to the point of imperceptibility.

Brush against one and they all resonate
from a center point in time: forward and back.

Each act would recontextualize the moment before.
This is to build a legacy, how to destroy it.

Little earthquakes crack the pipes. They remind us to fortify our foundations.

This weekend there was a lot of trembling. I wish every paved road was smooth.

A crack runs through the asphalt like a ruined zipper—and some of our world tumbles through the teeth.

But, the dirt paths are unphased. When they crack and fill with dirt, they are still just dirt.

And the journey takes longer—but your companions make the journey easy. I hope.

And when the trembling comes again, you lean against them. And shake.
Apotheosis

1. Viking
   -for Greg Giraldo

I know my way to the water too well. But I’m nervous with you, stranger. My cheek against soil, as if the world spoke beneath it, whispering the known: there’s nothing in the ground.

You point up at my buried arms and ask, “Are you my tree?”

I answer: “You wear my face.”

Your mouth, like all mouths, so often flat and bored. Shock—that was your gift. Wasted. Left, like so many jokes, on a hotel floor. A body burning on a great lake. I pull my hands from the soil, drag out the root and light it. The world you observed was broken, so we forgive you for breaking with it. We strangers as if we have a right.

The pills, they made not towers—but the fall from them. To jolt us into laughter.

The truth is useless, they say. A toy. When I think of you, I see a Polaroid, a body, a silent phone, and somewhere in the corner, a water pistol filled with vodka.
2. On Hunger
    -for Kobe, for Kidd, for Nash

Shapeless and out of time with the broken play
of a fading virtuoso. A guard fails, his post
unmanned, and on the court stands a jester

in his place. No juggle in his mirth, only blanks
fired from fingers and onlookers. Faces slack, lanes
open, your back tightens with the crowd’s fear.

You pray it will hurt too much to rise again. Give back
nearly anything to be carried off the floor a hero
felled, instead of falling.

You shine without purpose. The ball too heavy
for so slight a man to hoist and launch. You thump
it down the hardwood without will, so all dare
to over your buckled lanes, weak legs, tired moves.
A three quarter lob to nowhere. A nothing flail.
You used to be too smart for that. Newly a dunce

you scatter yourself at all points. Each pass an errant
wurm. Success cut its moat around you.
Do champions live so short a life?

Have you overstayed your expectations?
If so, lay down. Rest.
“Plenty for all,” you think.

Fine. Sit. Watch
as ravenous men set the evening table.
3. War at Home

In Minute Maid Park there’s a little train that shadows the left field wall.
Your brother pointed it out on the way to our seats, thrilled
at the carefully recreated relic of American progress.

Did the architects of the million-dollar stadium simulate
the slavery or bloodied dirt with proper authenticity
when they laid the tracks inside the dome’s retractable holds?

I nearly ask (in jest) if you think each railroad tie was hammered with intent
to bring culture to the upper deck populous courtesy of home plate.
There they long ago learned the civilized way to fight over foul balls.

Nothing like the primitive wars in cheap seats
where little boys are forced to scrap with grown men
against the splatter of beer and backwashed bleacher spills.

A ball sinks like a penny into a rushing fountain, churns
in the white-washed current of people soaking
in the American Dream.

_Stay foul, stay foul._
The count stays 0-2 but still we fight
over one more wall-mounted souvenir.
4. Daggers

-for Dirk

Some days I think you’re better at being American than I. Your ambition more expressive: your tongue flashes loose for reckless jump shots, drunken photos. One arm around a nobody

the other waving a tap beer like a herald’s banner. I’ll see it on Instagram later, because the internet makes us such close friends. You’re just one of the guys now. How obvious: you everyman, like me.

If not for your seven-foot frame, we’d be equal. Our only true separation is nothing to do with your ten-thousand hours in the gym, the thousands more spent banging your body

against the will of great men. Crushing them until only your desire remains planted at the stripe you draw in defiance. Neither is it the way you earned that stipe through collision. Recoil. Drive into the ground,

like you don’t even notice—you only watch to see if this time the shot has clogged the iron throat of your opponent—the way you don’t flinch when it bounces off the rim, and harmless to the ground, forcing two.

It’s not that the other team’s fans scream at you to fail before every shot. It’s the way those waterfalls you visit crash against your focus with a whisper and fade, leaving you alone, feet on hardwood. Automatic.

But, also it’s this: Even as the world around you vanishes, you still need to sink those two shots. As if their impact would splash back the last sips of water you’ll ever taste. Maybe it’s enough to be less than you,

to know that we both thirst.
5. Paper

Write this down or trace it in the margins of your voice: "Our heroes are footnotes."

Now wad yourself up like paper. Stay balled in your fists until every lost word, every breath of history is pulled from your lungs. Our stories are constellations of bone.

To speak them, we must boil our dead until their marrow opens.

Legends are like desert water. Impossibly found, then sucked dry. A fever sweat soaks our heads and leaves us cooler. For a while. Soon we will wither from inside.

Harvest the hope that hope will soon metastasize. What was once healthy imagination, the white-out of angels in the blood, is now a plague that spreads across each uninfected page.
**Patrilineal**

1. **Identity**

These were the rags we wrapped around the pipes aging in my father's kitchen. Humble dirt-caked things, they all cracked in the warm water. The pipes, brittle cloth, parchment stained with his voice. They should all be drowned.

His wounds are soaked up. His clothes starched responsibly, then pressed and dressed on his body. It was a sharp, sharp suit.

A nametag raised metal, a beaded chain to prove the pain was really him. He took better care of these clothes than of his fatigue.

We burn them, put them back in a box, alongside old photos in his war chest. Photos of a slender man built, utilized, recycled.

The military broke him down like a spotless carbine. His pieces set upon a bedside table waiting to be reconstructed, discharged. Beside him a travel mirror, an old friend's picture taped in the corner. He once promised to never again shave his bushy mustache. Stop trying to look young. When we found him he was clean shaved and frozen proud. My grandma was unprepared, even though warning shots whistled nightly over voices of friendships in a crowded bar. The tender know to keep tabs. My father chose his own closure. Convinced them to pour out
one more drink. Convinced all of us that he could handle it.  
His weight always greater than his will. So, night followed  
night. He seemed to ask: "Have you ever yearned?  
Then don't cut me off." Imagine his eyes. I see them  
in this shaving mirror, blinking hard--but it's me who's blinking.  
I hope these pipes survive the winter--  

my grandmother is about to bury her oldest child.  
Will he still turn 43 in August?  

How long can I wink at my own expense? How little must I  
expect before I shrink too small to shatter?
2. At Twenty or So  
-after Lynda Hull

Whole nights I knew only years: trailer parks  
and dog shit, newspapers soaked in piss

lined the halls until the plywood rotted through.  
I couldn’t run. My lungs choked with smoke and dander

lost out to my heart’s half-mast whimper:  
I won’t, I won’t.

My father was a ghost—a yolkless body cracked  
around the margins, dripping.

His soul’s long daybreak hunched against the wheel  
of the pickup truck that’s supposed to be mine.

I fold my father into me like a tattered blanket.  
I hold an unheard voice high above the gunshots.
3. Towers Fall

September fifteenth two-thousand one; crashing on my grandpa's couch. There I waited for liver cancer to fell the great tower of my childhood. A people mourned around me, but outside my grief. Distracted by too many other faded voices.

Their sadness feels unfair, and in the way of mine. My empty spaces are smaller yet closer, so seem like a wounded skyline.

His procession flew the flags of younger wars, while he died on beaches of bedsheets in the house that held me.

Twenty-one guns he’d earned muted by our imaginary enemy. An embouchure of barrels sight-reading the music.

Taps played over a loud speaker. The recording popped like ice across a skillet.

Because it cannot rain at funerals I will pretend it did not rain at his. That I was not afraid of his body resting in cover of the gazebo. That I did not stand within the torrent rather than get too close to a pine box.

When I went home, I did not peel the soaked and ruined suit from my body to leave it dripping in my shower. Instead, ten years ago, I kissed my grandfather’s brow, raised up my horn and played the rain’s cadence warped and slow.
4. The Almsgiver's Cup

Not yet the age of enlightenment, 
or maybe we have passed it.

We get by on the changes in our reflections, 
These uncapped wells of oil leaking, floating,

catching fire. Whose fault is that? 
The ache in these fingers,

these pointed accusations. 
Paranoia is the vinegar in the image

of water. True, but no one drinks the image of water. 
Still, reach for the strange the way a beggar asks a coin

from the exceptional. Raise a hammer high, 
prepare to swing until the walls crumble and spill.

Then pause for a moment--just to praise the world.
5. Eulogy

We ferry our urgency to a foreign land.
We have our reasons. Exiles flee their homes.

Death. To avoid it, how many abandon
their patriot’s grip on flags and shame?

If my father, whom I love, clawed out
of the ground and banged against my door,

I would eulogize him with a baseball bat.
He taught me well: that being raised poor

is no excuse for being rude. But being
raised at all is something I did not choose,

to be born into cruel soil.
Must we honor every hanging tree?

Every noose around our necks? My father tied his own,
then sat astride his treason and slapped the flank.
Benediction
-for Bruce

It was never your fault that so much of me rested
on how well you chose to love me. You cannot be
faulted for grace. But, "so sorry," cannot make
us better men. "Thank you," cannot repair me.

How foolish that someone carved me from ice
and then plopped me down in Texas.

A fossil where my heart should be,
it sags to ground in this summer heat.

When the wet of me has evaporated,
that thirty percent remains: a bag of oil

and coal, my unburned fuel, all that can be mined
without apology. None needed when the land
decides to stop being land. Is destroying a thing better
than being forgotten by it? Crumple my thoughts

like kindling. Lay me down like a log.
Not hot enough for cooking. But to start is better

than being driftwood, bloating on a throne of tides.
Better than thinking how tiny any one boy's fire burns

in protest, engulfs his home
and the homes around him in a hearth of cinders.