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Lost

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Lost

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Nathaniel Kostar
B.A. Rutgers University, 2008
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Love and Travel: A Preface

Poetry is the residue of the work I'm doing on myself. –Saul Williams

I.

I read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* when I was nineteen, and decided it was essential for my development as a human being to drive across the United States. For better or worse, books move me.

In the spring of 2005, I mailed my best friend Adam "The Road Trip Manifesto" from Salem, Virginia, a small town tucked into the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains where I spent my freshman year of college. I had left New Jersey to play basketball for Roanoke College, a small, private school with a Division III program where I was confident I would play. But the competition at Roanoke proved better than I had expected. The starting point guard, who was also a freshman, had fifty pounds on me and could dunk the ball with two hands. He became one of my best friends that year, and oddly enough, I never remember being jealous of him, though I had reason to be. He was living the dream that had motivated me throughout my childhood, and I was abandoning it.

"The Road Trip Manifesto" was a 3-page persuasive essay of sorts that outlined the path, means of transportation, and budget necessary for a road trip across the U.S. It argued that there was no better time to see our country, meet our countrymen, and in the process, learn more about ourselves. Basketball had brought me to the mountains of western Virginia, but now the ethos of the Beat Poet took hold. As a young, idealistic, single, twenty-year-old who'd been cooped up in institutions of learning and gymnasiums for the past ten

years, I thirsted for excitement, new ideas, relationships and most of all, adventures. Adam concurred.

We headed west, camping, catching fish, frying beans and eggs on hotplates, swimming in lakes and rivers, chatting across a fire in the night. We stayed in a big barn house in Omaha, Nebraska, hiked in Colorado, gambled in Vegas, spent three days in the Arizona desert with Judy, a friend of my parents who lived in a trailer on a little piece of land where she watered vegetables, plants, and herbs with rain-water she caught in buckets. We saw the Rocky Mountains, the Grand Canyon, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. We dipped our feet in the Pacific Ocean, then headed Southeast to New Orleans, where shirtless kids with cans stuck to their feet tap-danced on Bourbon Street just two weeks before the Storm.

It was during this trip that I first remember experiencing profound moments of bliss when I was overwhelmed by the sense of knowing I was doing the right thing in the right place at the right time. I began to recognize the feeling when it hit—when all the components of the perfect moment blended together to create an hour, a day, a perfect second—and it seduced me. I wrote it all down in notebook. I didn't know it then, but I was becoming a writer.

Afterward, travel became an indispensable part of my life, a cornerstone to my development as a human being, and writer. In the last ten years, I've spent considerable time in Argentina, Costa Rica, Thailand, Korea, Guatemala, Italy, Scotland, France, New Orleans and Mexico—where I currently live with my girlfriend, Maribel.

Here are two truths I arrived at by traveling:

- 1) People and places the world over are more alike than different.

2) No matter where you go, you will be (first and foremost) with yourself. No place (nor person) can rescue you from yourself.

Don't take these truths at face value. Explore them. In my own experience, I have never been to a country without restaurants, shelters, homes, similar modes of transportation (feet, bicycles, cars), and people who have legs, arms, ears, and mouths which they use to eat, fight, laugh, fuck, dance and fall in love. It is through travel I arrived at what I consider to be an important spiritual realization, one expounded in Buddhism, Yoga, strains of Christianity, Islam, and Sufism: and that is, "thou art that." Therefore, to connect fully with another human being I realized I must first connect with myself. This helped quell what at the time felt like an insatiable case of travel-lust. It helped me be more patient, and plant the seeds of a quiet discipline that I think now is arriving. It also helped me work on myself, and become a man that can give and receive love.

It is my hope that some scent and sound of the places I've lived and traveled is present in these poems, as it is certainly present in me. And home— the drum of a basketball on a blacktop on a hot summer night.

II.

The summer after our road trip, I quit basketball and enrolled in English and creative writing classes at Rutgers University, and soon I was reciting poems late into the night over the funky, soulful guitar riffs of Amir Whitaker in our dorm room. The melodies, rhythms and rhyme-heavy verses of hip-hop music had been ingrained in me as a child when the new music leaked into our neighborhood from the Bronx and the surrounding boroughs only forty miles away, and college exposed me to writers such as Allen Ginsberg,

e.e. cummings, Langston Hughes, T.S. Eliot, Saul Williams and Pablo Neruda. Soon I was writing and performing original poems in New York City venues such as the Bowery Poetry Club and the Nuyorican Poets Café. I wrote and performed for about four years before I got tired of the scene, moved to South Korea to teach English, grew unhappy with the work, quit, moved to New Orleans and started rapping with a band.

I mention my experience as a performer because many of the techniques I learned from writing and performing rap and slam poetry are present in these poems. For example, the rhythm in the poem “Dreams” is dictated by rhyme, and the poem is not significantly different than a standard sixteen bar rap verse:

One night while you slept,
I wrote a poem in the bottom
of your back, fingertips to skin
and bone, my crazy lover’s tattoo.

The first draft of this poem read even more like a rap song:

While you slept, I wrote a poem in the bottom of your back.
Fingertips to skin and bone, my crazy lover’s tat.

But because this poem is for the page, it made more sense in the revision process to spell out the word “tattoo,” and in doing so, lose the hard end-rhyme that the abbreviated “tat”

provided. This is a small example of the reconciliation between prosody and clarity, sound and precision, that was essential to completing this manuscript.

The poem “Raspberry” also contains techniques that are prominent in rap. It begins with a quatrain, what is called four bars in rap, where the stress falls at the end of each line. “Raspberry rolled from your lips,/ unfurled from your lips/ bounced from your lips.” But because “Raspberry” isn’t a rap song, my intention was to construct a softer rhythm using repetition (“from your lips”), rather than end-rhymes. And the fourth line, “like the thing itself,” abandons repetition altogether and creates a break, a diminuendo of sorts. If “Raspberry” was a performance piece or rap song this technique might not be as effective or exciting, but as a page poem I believe it makes the poem’s rhythm more interesting and open to interpretation by the reader. I’m indebted to poets such as e.e. cummings, whose work helped me understand how rhythms can be developed in ways that are often subtler than they are in rap, but still surprising and effective. One poem by cummings that I admire for its prosody is “since feeling is first,” a poem that works just as well in the air or accompanied by music as it does on the page. It was my goal when writing this manuscript to achieve this sort of versatility between page and stage. I also intended that the poems’ arrangement would leave space for readers to breathe their own style and voice into them.

III.

In my last creative writing class at the University of New Orleans, a classmate suggested I stop writing love poems. “It’s too hard. They’ve all been written,” she said. The comment made me uncomfortable, but I didn’t know why. I understood her point—everyone writes them and they can be corny, cliché, trite, Hallmark-y—and she was only

trying to help me be a better poet. Yet something about her suggestion offended me. If poetry is the “residue of the work I’m doing on myself,” then how could I not write about love? Love was happening to me; romantic love, familial love, friendships, the love of a game, and even occasional experiences of spiritual love—which I tried to capture in poems such as “Iguazu” and “The Sound of the Storm.” In many ways, love had been my impetus for picking up the pen in the first place. And so, while my classmate’s suggestion made me rethink why I was writing about certain themes, I decided love is too important for poetry to dismiss.

So I begin this book with 12 “love poems” inspired by relationships, the ending of relationships, one-night stands, infatuations, missed chances, loneliness, longing—poems written about a kiss. Great explosions of becoming are possible in a kiss, and the seeds of song often blossom in these moments.

I proceed from there.

IV.

In poetry, I have been able to revisit, shape, reshape, learn, relearn, clarify, mourn, celebrate and paint important moments, thoughts, and ideas with music and meaning. The process has helped me better understand my experiences in life. In this sense, poetry is not just the “residue” of life, but also a filter, a way of making sense out of the Lost.

Now these poems are more finished. But a poem doesn’t end. It is not a static thing. It lives and changes, long as there’s someone with breath and a voice to lend.

I can’t wait to perform these poems. To sing them to you.

Section i:
RASPBERRY

and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom...

— e.e. cummings
“Since feeling is first”

Snowman

When the first flakes begin to fall,
find the nearest star
and gaze into its eye—
I am with you.

When the windowpane freezes over,
and the night is cold and silver,
your bed, warm and lonely,
lips, chapped and thirsty,
and your heart longing—
then follow moonlight's
tiny footprints to hold me as I am.

And if my body is a naked branch,
or empty lot covered in a coat of midnight snow,
or my words are hard like stones
un-skipped that plummet through the dark
to sit in even darker soil,

then kiss me from across the night
as the stars fall over us,
and the world will melt
and drip cool droplets
on our skin,

as if we were the apple
placed inside the snowman's chest;
one sweet fruit, cold together,
playing a heart.

Raspberry

Raspberry rolled from your lips,
unfurled from your lips,
bounced from your lips
 like the thing itself—
red, sweet,
ready to burst with juice,
delicate, soft,
really a gift from God
the way you shaped your lips
when you said *raspberry*
 raspberry

 it sprinted
 down my throat,
vibrated my chest
like drumskins,
 violin strings,
a deep bass note
in my stomach.

You spoke *raspberry* with eyes,
with one breath
one word
jeweled a single line.

Yes, you shattered,
raised, then reinvented
 raspberry.

And in that moment,
I should've tasted *raspberry*
lips, brushed *raspberry*
cheeks with *raspberry*
fingertips. I should have
climbed into your mouth,
swum past the slippery
curves of silence to ascend
the hills of Hidden Tongues,
where rumor has it
many a moonlit
 raspberry is born.

Instead, I looked away,

into the indigo sky,
my face coloring *raspberry*,
betraying me *raspberry*,
where all I saw
bursting from the night
were *raspberry* stars
shooting *raspberry*
 raspberry
in our direction.

Blue Mountain

Kiss my triangle bones
under the sheets,
the forehead of an angel,
whisper secrets
to a butterfly
on a windowsill,
hum lullabies
to lady bugs
asleep on fingertips,
unwrap my heart,

fingers lift a box
fit for a ring,
unpeel a tangerine
in the soft night,
flicker orange
candlelight
through rings
of jasmine smoke,
in our dim-lit room

tonight,
your lips
are blue
mountains,
meadows,
cool-rivers,
clear-skies
and ice-
cream stars.

Green Eyes

Her eyes were green.
I had never seen eyes so green.
To be honest, my experience
with green eyes was limited.
But her green eyes, I would remember.

Anyway, when she pressed up against him
in that tiny wooden bar surrounded
by pine trees, mist, trails disappearing
into night-green tunnels, green grape
clusters growing on green slopes
cut into green mountains that soared
above a blue-green valley, he must
have dived into those green eyes
and learned to swim in green.

If not, he most certainly
drowned.

The Meat Eater

She said,
I'm a vegetarian because the treatment of animals in this country appalls me.
He said,
I'm a meat eater because the taste of animals in this country delights me.
She said,
Do you know how many hormones they pump into chickens so that we fat Americans will be happy?
He said,
No.

The waiter came.

She said,
I'll have the vegetable dumplings and mixed vegetable soup. Thank you.
He said,
Sesame chicken, pork fried rice, and a side of boneless spare ribs. Thank you.
She said,
Do you realize a chicken, pig, and cow were killed so you could have one meal?
He said,
Do you realize a man, woman, and child were killed for your "freedom?"
She said,
No.

They ate in silence until

He said,
With every bite I hear their cries. The chickens are clucking, piggies squealing, cows moooo—
She said,
You're a fucking asshole.

He smiled.
She smiled.
They laughed.

He leaned forward to kiss her.

She said,
Eww! Your breath stinks!
He said,

It's their *souls*.

Dreams

One night while you slept,
I wrote a poem in the bottom
of your back, fingertips to skin
and bone, my crazy lover's tattoo.

Maybe I stirred your dreams, too,
as I wrote dreams into you
to measure their fit.
Isn't that what lovers do?

Did you ever wonder why
my hands moved the way they moved?
I wondered why you had
such inviting grooves...

Nights spent lying
in the grass realigning
stars with my fingertips,
don't touch the night

I wrote my hieroglyphs,
and wondered if you woke,
would you stay feather-silent,
or find me with a kiss?

Or did it matter either way?
For as you slept and I imagined,
slowly crept
the coming of the day.

When I Awoke

I dreamt all day on the train
as vineyards, green upon green,
weaved through cinnamon cliffs,

from Venice back to the castle
on the hill, where sound is soft
as sleeping mountains, and all I do
is think, read, write, and walk alone.

I dreamt of the last time we made love
under the black hands of your neighbor's tree—
and every touch, movement, gasp and sigh
as if we knew it was our last.

Now I walk in pastel mountains,
past grapes I do not taste, strange
streets of turquoise water,
and strangers who lose my phrase,
who don't understand why I sing and dance
when nothing has been said, or played.

Here the map is a maze,
and no path leads back to you.

I dreamt all day on the train
as vineyards, green upon green,
weaved through cinnamon cliffs,

and when I awoke I found you
everywhere, your face soft
in the window, your vines
clutching my hair, bluebirds
nestled in my neck, sunflowers
in my eyes, brown sugar
on my lips, chrysanthemum tea...

Then the last vision broke:
my old Honda zipping down
the Turnpike on a cold November night,
dark as a tunnel, smooth as a train track,
headed home.

No Rest

No rest in sleep
when I dream of you:

his car in your driveway
and the two of you together
behind the glass.

A giant window—
my grandmother's window,
and you're in my neighborhood,
living on *my* street.

I walk past knowing
he's clean cut,
has a great job,
gets paid each week
and takes you for sushi,

not to that half-price spot
we always went for Happy Hour,
but to the one downtown
with the neon sign.

I imagine him:
handsome,
enormous,
goal-driven,
great at saving.

On my return
(it's a dead-end street
so I have to circle back
to make it home),
I pull my hoodie tight
around my face,

and watch your whole family,
one by one, getting out
of a fancy car,
laughing.

Casino, Cuba,
the basketball court at the park—

anywhere but here.

Through the window, I see
your silhouette lean into him
and become one shape.

I look for your eyes,
but you're not looking back.

I look for your eyes,
but you're already gone.

And I'm walking the street
with nothing but a dream
to carry home.

Make Me Gone

I will be the midnight fog.
Shut your eyelids over my face
and I'll walk softly into the dark—

Make me gone.

Make me disappear.
Delete me.
Erase my name.
Wipe it from your lips.
Wash me from your skin.
Purge me from your pores,
clean me out.

Scrape me from your future's fingernails
and like dead leaves dumped behind the brush,
in time, I will become unrecognizable.

Make me gone.

Throw away the photographs.
Bury the fractured amethyst in a cluttered drawer.
The wine's heart has crusted over
at the bottom of each glass.
Rinse. Put them away. Forget.
If that is what you need,
fade me into
black.

I will not scream,
shout, or kick,
as you cast me into fire,
rip me from your stomach
like a fist,
curse, distort, destroy—

Make me gone.

*—But know I knew your hands as you did,
and the valleys in your back far better.
I listened to your pulse, and I—*

Let me navigate my own river, ruins, and return.

Collect the scattered ashes and broken pieces of myself.
Pick me up and put me back together.

Maybe one day I will see you again,
even if only for a—

Make me gone.

One Day When

One day when I stop smoking cigarettes and you stop eating leftovers from the garbage and our cars start every time or drive themselves and maybe a mailbox or drone-drop, even a lawn and lover always there in the morning with coffee and newspaper or to hit the button to make news appear the way a sunrise leaks into the sky or a drop of ink dissolves in water—one day, one day when, one day when we remember the night we got drunk at Molly's by the Market, just us the bartender Pooch with his growling Merry-Christmas voice and your hair twisted into vines and branches skin luminescent and sweat-shined after a long night hauling tourists over the potholed streets of the French Quarter in a pedicab; one day when you smelled salty-sweet as I got close tequila-tongue licked my neck as I threw back *Cuba Libres* and we fell together into Thursday morning then walked our bikes through a creamy pink and orange light pawing at our backs back to the apartment on Esplanade with the high wooden balcony perfect to watch dewdrops blossom on the Neutral Ground; one day when I unlocked the door, you took off your smile pants suddenly, cotton tank-top raspberries and the light slanting in like golden pencils through the large windows curved you like Dalí's woman; one day when I would have slid a canvas under your feet if I had been a magician, or dipped my brush if I was a painter, but I wasn't either one day when I grabbed your waist and pulled you close to kiss.

The Time I Met God

On the eyelashes
 of infinity
I saw her
 sitting and
combing her hair,
 wearing a
blank stare
 with high
cheekbones.

I wanted to speak,
 though
I didn't know in
 what tongue,
so I approached her
 slowly
from a lower stair.

She poured mescal
 on my plate
and told me to eat.

She bit my top lip
 and asked:

What are we going to do?

I didn't know. I'd never
 been to You before
so I suggested
 another question:

What do we want?

Section ii:
On the Eve of Leaving

But you, Sir, had better take wine ere your departure,
For you will have no friends about you
When you come to the gates of Go.

—Rihaku o Omakitsu (Ezra Pound translation)
Epigraph to “Four Poems of Departure.”

Lost

I put yesterday in my back pocket,
knowing he would try to escape.

I put tomorrow in my front pocket,
knowing it was full of holes.

I tried to juggle today,
as if I knew how to juggle.

and then I began to walk.

River

I.

*Hudson, Han, Seine, Mississippi—
river, where are you taking me?*

A deep scar on the neck of night.
A barefoot bubble wisped across the sidewalk
imprisoning a prism of dreams.

You carried your pen into a lucid dream
only to return with “bloodsucking peach.”
You carried your dream into the world
and chewed on shattered glass.

Another blank page
destroyed with ink.
Another blank check cashed for a quarter.
Another passionless kiss
under the sheets of translucent tides—
bodies, caught in the white wings of waves,
afraid of sky!

Each day a crystal pyramid
and a baguette, turnpike
and Italian sub, chamchi
kimbab, kimchi, coconut
curry, Muay Thai, pad thai,
ocean, smoked salmon,
cream cheese, rainstorms, ,
Po’ Boy, streetcar, swamps,
Purple Haze, desert dust,
each day...

board another plane,
another bus...
make your bed in a new home,
again.

Dissolve the pools under your eyelids or surely you will drown.
Trim your future’s fingernails that they don’t scar your skin with bloody expectations.
Douse your past in gas and light a match.

II.

Beads worn silver and green hang from ancient Oaks like lizards' tails.
Sand blown in from Mongolia's desert covers windows in yellow dust.
Lovers' locks, rusted and forgotten, break and fall into the teal,
and the player belts her monologue to no one because no one is the only one listening—

*How many dollars do you weigh?
Euros? Pesos? Won? Bit coins?*

Pigeons congregate in the plaza
pecking at dried orange-peel
cigarette butts scattered
on the spit-stained sidewalk—

*Stock options? Time shares?
Plans for retirement?*

The water is drowning something.
Something is dying and being reborn.
Keep walking, keep floating.
Pack another bag and try again.

Climb the museum steps
while clouds sag overhead like bags of dust,
and take a second look.

Saving?

III.

Alone on the river, silence is floating.
Alone on the river, she is awake.

You have fallen asleep on the edge
of a bottle of beer and dream
her lips.

They speak through rings
of jasmine smoke:

*Come to me.
Come to me.*

You have fallen asleep on the edge

of a bottle of rum and dream
her eyes.

They speak through
museum hallucinations:

*Marble frog. Jade falcon
floating in Dalí's blue.
Papyrus skin, wild-
raspberry. Crystal
tongue, fingers tall
as death.*

IV.

Throw orange away.
Rediscover red.
Everyone in a hurry.
Everyone wanting.
And you want.
You want with lightning-
like passion.
Fury. Madness. Joy.
A tear in the throat,
marble in a straw,
a hen in the belly
of a snake.

It's all drowning in a pool,
so let it drown.

Yesterday opens
the door.

The moment is sly
and slippery.

Tomorrow walks
by in red rainboots, forever.

Stop spilling your coffee
trying to look at her ass.

Pack life in a bag
and give the bag away.

Stir, breathe,
buy the moon a drink.

V.

Blue raindrops gush from the scar on the neck of night.
The barefoot bubble bursts on a blade of grass.

As you recollect, a bottle breaks itself
on the cobblestone street,

*Hudson, Han, Seine, Mississippi—
river, where are you taking me?*

Stranger

A girl with birthmarks
like ink drops on her cheeks,
or stepping stones that lead to eyes
like pools, a deep-set brown,
the sort of shade that seldom roars

but is instead content to listen
or to softly speak in tones
both sad and kind, I think—
her tears would water crops for seasons!
or at least for several weeks,

sells flowers for her mother
to the lovers in the plaza,
and I, too weak, to tell her no,
give her ten pesos and say:

*Mi amor, I have no one here.
Por favor, plant this flower
where it might grow.*

And as I go,
she giggles
and squeaks,

*Señor, tu hablas palabras...
I no speak.*

And I smile
and whisper,

*Si...
I am a stranger to these streets.*

Dark Night in Seoul

We blow smoke out of my window at 3AM and gaze into a checkerboard of darkness and light in the distance. Five faceless high-rises about three hundred meters away.

Upper left hand corner. A woman breaks a dish on the kitchen floor. She's in a rage having realized things won't change. It washes over her with a slug of Soju. Married middle-aged men with kids don't leave their wives for mistresses, unless they're mad or madly in love. And from the dullness of his eye as he casually sips light beer in his worn-out robe, he's neither.

Two floors down from the infidel. An old woman cannot sleep. She tidies her house incessantly, dusts counters, fluffs pillows, rearranges family pictures, vacuums. She imagines her phone ringing so often she can almost hear it. But she forgets she has forgotten the sound of her daughter's voice.

Far left and far right where the lights flicker. Two teenage boys play first person shooter games. They've got fancy headphones with mics attached. Chubby, bowl haircuts, they look like brothers, really. Tomorrow they'll pass each other, groggy-eyed and grumpy, on the way to school, completely unaware that at night when their parents are asleep, they kill each other over and over.

The room with the dim light. Yes, there. A writer stares at a blank screen. He hasn't written a line in six weeks. He cannot stop glancing at the window and imagining flight, the sudden cold rush of air against his face. He never considers how it will feel when he hits the ground.

The room in the middle—directly ahead of us. A man and woman have just made love and gaze out of the window at the soft rain. For a moment, they wonder about the light from the small apartment across the way and what sort of lives its inhabitants lead. One of them longs to know for reasons he does not understand.

A kiss on the collarbone.
Neck. Earlobe. Lips.
Once. Then again.
She hits the light and pulls me into bed.

The Ruin

What broke this wall,
this city cracked and laid to rest?
Rooftops caved-in like flowers placed
soft upon a chest—

gates that once rejoiced and creaked,
now still and silent in their sleep—
buildings, like eggs, shattered in their nest.

What bent this city to its knees,
this citadel, this castle, this stronghold of dignity?
Fate? Grave-gripped?

A hundred generations fade into the mist
because that is how it is?
Fierce walls of blood and blue

reduced to hues of cowardice.
Or simply time?
its constant toll upon what is.

*This gray,
this dead,
is nothing but a thread of yesterday.*

Yet stubborn stones remain,
like bones, unmoved,
but smoothed by time's slow drain,

the ruthlessness of rain exposed,
for water drips, rips
and stains,

and now we see the veins,
the plans, the man's mind
revealed.

*Warriors wrapped and wreathed in gold.
Illuminated halls, dance, strong wine
that flowed into poets' mouths*

*who flashed their tongues like swords—
the stories never told in palaces*

where green gems hemmed to satin dresses,

*crimson lips to collarbones and fingertips,
bracelets slipped to sleep on cotton pillows,
clearly sad like crystal willows,
quiet as a kiss—*

But the feast, of course,
is in the past—what
is revealed today?

I guess some things are cruelly slain,
some remain, but most things
just fade away.

And once they're gone,
should we long?
Does the past ask for this?

Perhaps those who've gone
knew what's what,
but care nothing for what is.

Bus Ride across las Pampas

This land stretches like your back for miles.
At night, it's dotted by your eyes.

—Golden grass, tuft of hair,
copper mountain, collarbone,

I walk my fingers over you like a traveler
who doesn't know how to move on.

In my dreams your eyes are moons
and your cheeks blush the colors of sandstone.

—Clouds spread like hand-whipped butter
across a blue-glass sky.

Your lips, of course, are your lips,
always.

Coliseum Park

I.

You should see the place the Saint was murdered,
on the late night when the birds are chirping,
and jasmine petals hug the ground, like snowflakes
holding yellow secrets in their mouths,

gently kissed on pavement cheeks—eyelashes,
while dewdrops flash on distant leaves
like cameras down on Bourbon Street
or sun-bounced waves beside a beach—

through the dark in spring, tonight, after rain's
come down to soak the city through the ground,
the sky so low and wet it sags like laundry in a cotton bag,
the air a bathroom sponge, and every atom wags its juicy tongue—

an orange night, or black and gold, true story told,
the lanterns hang against the mansions where the blues were sung,
but now is home to new and young who come
and come from all the places that they're from,

and gather here to walk their dogs,
to talk in coffee shops and restaurants and bars,
even a park where children play, beside a road
where people on their way to work pass by in cars.

II.

You should see the place the Saint was murdered,
on the late night when the birds are chirping,
and stay to watch the glow of early morning
when the sky turns pink, blood-red and orange—

oh! how beautiful to see the dawn
on the block that he was on
when the gun was drawn
and he was gone.

But then it hits when I walk past,
the black and gold, the teammates
smiling, the family pictures
hanging on the fence.

Even the air has a certain smell.
Is it new or was it always here?

As I listen to New Orleans like a song,
a siren plays the keys, unseen birds hit notes,
a steamboat moans and distant cars make loops;
a subtle canvas for this evening's slow-drawn harmonies,

and something feels so soft tonight,
and still, and strange,
but stranger still,
still perfect.

On the Eve of Leaving

I.

Will I miss the gray day,
its slow fade into neon night?
The faceless high-rises,
the red-faced “Soju Monsters” stumbling home at six in the evening?
The click of heels, long-legged brunettes strolling past,
their faces deceiving?
Ajummas in pink vests and black-rimmed visors
power-walking a muddied offshoot of the Han,
the stink of the city breathing?

*As Eliot's yellow smoke,
Blown in from the Mongolian desert,
Lies silent on a bed of fallen cherry blossoms.*

Will I miss the smell of sweat, dirt and *Makkoli* on the early evening train?

II.

Spicy pickled red *kimchi*, soft white rice cake, moist green sprouts,
tuna rolled in *kim* and rice, yellow radish sliced thin in a porcelain bowl,
chicken kebab and *bok choy*, coiled fish cakes on a stick soaked in hot spicy broth,
raw fish over rice wrapped in sesame leaf, soy sauce, wasabi, corner-store plum wine.

Accept with two hands.
Only drink when company is drinking.
Bow.

III.

The tanks in front of the restaurant are filled with flounder and silver-finned fish that flicker final under the streetlight; king crab, *nakji*, octopus.

A heavy-eyed man grinds keys in a dusty closet-sized shop with open doors.

An old woman sits on an upturned basket selling oranges that glow in the twilight.

Fried squid at a Doosan baseball game mixes with the smell of fresh-cut grass.

Sad whores watch television behind florescent windows while running their nails over the cherry blossom wallpaper.

Tired red faces rejoice in an orange tent, moist hands grasping beer and Soju shot —
“Geumbae!”—they forget the morning.

IV.

Will I miss my own novelty?
The stares and indecipherable glances?
The strange thrill of being exotic?

Kids on bicycles cut through the gray and shout “*Waygook!*”
as the day fades into evening...

*And Eliot's yellow smoke,
Blown in from the Mongolian desert,
Lies silent on a bed of fallen cherry blossoms.*

V.

Should I toast one last time, or dance
through the slow-death of evening?

Should I meditate on what I've lost
and what I've gained?

Should I apologize to new friends for leaving?
or to the old, for staying so long?

*And Eliot's yellow smoke,
Blown in from the Mongolian desert,
Lies silent on a bed of fallen cherry blossoms.*

Section iii:
The Sound of the Storm

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse...

—T.S. Eliot
“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Iguazu

A waterfall rumbles in my veins,
I am sure of it, a place my blood
turns clear, inhales, then falls
a furious white.

Maybe it begins
where my hand
meets my wrist,
then falls

into my
heart,
hips,
knees.

Surely thunder rolls
through my throat
and lightning dances
on my tongue.

I wish my mind
would stay quiet,
that I might hear
its fall.

Perhaps you feel me too, Iguazu?
the two of us
inside each other
in the storm.

The Sound of the Storm

I am in love with the sound of the storm,
how the rain falls softly as a mother reads
bedtime stories to her child, or erupts in war,
clouds firing crystal bullets at the ground.

I am in love with its sadness,
every raindrop, a tear, and the sky
like the dark flecks in her eyes.

I am in love with the surprise—
gunshot thunder, flash of light—
how once startled, we pause,
reflect, sit together.

And how it begins, suddenly,
like a drunken argument,
until nothing is left dry,
then stops

and a butterfly beats her wings
as if it stopped for her alone
to reclaim the sky.

Feeling is First

We sat back to back,
facing separate tracks.
I listened to him freestyle
or recite poetry to himself.

He was singing Walt Whitman,
or maybe humming some e.e. cummings,
his words were incoherent,
but man, he was saying something!

And “since feeling is first”
I wasn’t hearing,
but feeling his words,
unconcerned about the syntax of things,
I drifted away into feeling...

until my feeling was shattered—

*Hey man, you got a dollar?
I’m four short on a train to
New Brunswick.*

I said, *Yeah. I’ve got you,*
thinking that a man
so well-versed
should have a job, too.

He said,
thank you.

I said,
thank you.

Then I watched as
he slowly withdrew
a brown paper bag,
cocked it back

and sipped a feeling
he might never grasp—
and I cried through a laugh!
How much had his feeling cost?

Four dollars?

How much had his feeling lost?
as I lost my feeling
to the arrival of the train,

perhaps we judged each other then,
but neither of us blamed.
“For life’s not a paragraph,”
and death, I hope, is no brown paper bag.

You're Fired

Sir!

Yes?

Why are you dancing?

Why am I dancing? Well, because it's raining.

Yes, I see it's raining. Should we go inside for a drink?

Certainly not. Can't you see I'm dancing?

Yes. Perfectly well. The whole street sees you. But why?

Why what?

Why are you dancing in the rain?

Well. Because now I'm uninsured!

And?

If I slip, fall, and break my leg, it would cost me thousands!

That would be terrible, sir.

Yes, it would.

So why risk it?

For the risk, John! The risk itself! It's exhilarating!

The Sad Clarinet

One cold night
I opened Rumi
for a poem on loneliness.

In the other room
my father played
his clarinet.

I found a poem
called “granite and wineglass”
and read aloud.

Near the end,
somewhere, it read,
“Don’t keep complaining about loneliness!”

“Screw you, Rumi!”
I shouted, over
the sad clarinet,

and in that moment
my loneliness
vanished.

Smile

This is the beginning.
First, turn off the
television.

Candles.
There must be candles,
and darkness to illuminate
the body of the flame.

Now quiet yourself and listen.
Do not be afraid to fill a glass
with water, wine, tea:
sip and lick
your teeth
and lips.

Sit in the middle of the floor,
somewhere you wouldn't sit
in company.

Arrange the candles before you
and stare until the flames
begin to sway, rock,
hum and dance—
lights and shadows
playing on the veins of your feet,
your toenails like seashells
flickering in sand.

Don't worry
about sitting
in the dark
in the middle
of the floor.

Don't complain
that you're not
flexible enough
to sit a few minutes,
that your ass
is sore, your knees
burn, and your lower
back aches because

you haven't trained
for this.

Don't think about going bald,
your next credit card payment,
whether your best friend will marry
soon, or how easy it would be
if you went to law school
like your uncle told you
when you were a junior
and the future was spread
out on the table
like a feast.

Instead, be still.
Listen to a car pass.
Ponder the flame's dance.
When a raindrop falls,
watch it.

Count the poems your father wrote.
Smell your mother's lasagna.
Feel your brother
moving in your
heart.

And if you must act,
dip a finger in the candle's wax,
absorb its warmth into your blood,
feel it cling to you, then peel it back
like a childhood memory,
and smile.

Vita

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