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The Wrong Sky

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THE WRONG SKY

by

Christopher McAllister Williams

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in English

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ABSTRACT

THE WRONG SKY

by

Christopher McAllister Williams

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018
Under the Supervision of Professor Mauricio Kilwein-Guevara

The poems in the following dissertation are informed by our contemporary notion of systems. The serial trajectories presented here critique and explore bureaucracies, taxonomies, biological constructions and capitalism in the era of ecological imperative. To that end, these poems seek to evoke the serial not just in terms of their own form and content, but also invite the reader to embrace a necessary multi-modality, to view the work as not limited to one platform of expression, but containing numerous ways of meaning-making. The intervention in contemporary letters the poems propose is contained within the realities they offer, simultaneously disrupted by and disrupting to the systems they embody. Ultimately, the work seeks to enact a transmedia détournement and present a world resistant to the controls of inequitable and disenfranchising systems.

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INTRODUCTION

The World Can't Possibly Fail: Systems and Capitalist Realism in *The Wrong Sky*

Our contemporary moment is mediated by systems. Every aspect of modern society is mandated, regulated, and controlled by these interconnected structures. The economic realities of late stage capitalism both directly influence and are influenced by the regulation of healthcare, access to information, and the commodification of every factor of human life. This actuality poses some of the vital quandaries of our time, mainly the questions of who gets to be wealthy, who gets to be healthy, and who is permitted to meaningfully engage with the apparatus of these networks. It is clear that these systems are inescapable and omnipresent, as are the consequences of said systems. This is the predominant concern of the work in this dissertation.

It is difficult to discuss the pervasive aspect of systems without discussing the effect these systems have on the human body. Clearly, the present political climate is inundated with this anxiety, centered primarily on the affordability and consistent availability of biological wellness for all human beings. Capitalism enables this system, like all systems, to be exploited for monetary gain. The self becomes an entity mediated by capital. This circumstance, a byproduct of the ever presence of fiscal inequity, has fostered a culture of artistic resistance, notably, for the situation of this dissertation, in the work of French artist Claude Cahun.

Cahun, a queer artist whose work often incorporates elements of the avant-garde Surrealist movement of the early 20th century, presents material that explores the plurality of the individual, that ruptures the control that systemic binaries place upon the body and the identification of the self. This is particularly apparent in her 1930 quasi-autobiography, *Disavowals*. Loosely organized as a series of prose and poetry fragments, *Disavowals* is notable

both as an interrogation of the Surrealists' notion of dream versus reality but also of the reality of the self/selves. Known primarily for her photographs and visual artwork, Cahun's text offers poetry that is the work of resistance—to hegemonic structures and gender binaries—that exists free from the confines of biological systems. *Disavowals* presents a disjointed and disruptive work that seeks to explore and explode the concept of the self as a single “restrained” entity, espousing a multiplicity of selves that exist without reservation and beyond constraint. It is, as Jennifer Mundy, Head of Collection Research at the Tate, notes in her introduction to Cahun's *Disavowals*, a text “lacking a clear structure” offering an “attack on notions of truth and authenticity, and on the veracity of appearances...it is a collage of fragments that mirror Cahun's parodic view of the self as a rather poorly assembled patchwork of thoughts” (XVII). The work is a parody of the memoir, seemingly confessional, but resistant to all attempts to read it as mere autobiography. It is, like Cahun herself, a performance that pushes against categorization. describing intimate relationships alongside investigations into narcissism and self-love, looking “at what's underneath the crossed-out bits of my soul” (6).

The “crossed-out bits of the soul” here become what's ultimately important for Cahun, and what forms the basis of her explorations. Cahun, unsatisfied with a simplistic understanding of the self, undertakes a consideration of the unpalatable aspects of herself, the “crossed-out bits.” Already, the text finds value in the discarded and the disregarded. The title itself furthers this concern, implying both an interest in the rejected and the unclaimed, as well as the act of negation, of “disavowal,” containing, simultaneously, the interesting translative wordplay with “vowel.”

Something else that lies “underneath the crossed-out bits” of Cahun's soul is a meditation on the simultaneity of life and death, twin “ageless sisters” that are “conjoined” and “cannot

exterminate [one] without destroying [the other]” (13). And yet, Cahun entreats death to “renounce your influence, renounce yourself, O death, base death” (13). The difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of death renouncing itself, of a *self* renouncing (or disavowing) itself is called into question here. Nevertheless, the impulse behind the gesture remains—the desire to destroy, to disassemble, and then remake, to enunciate a new self (or selves) in which “at least I know my face—and maybe that will be enough to please me” (25). The new self, the recognizable self, might provide a new way of looking at the normative world, a world of gender roles and expectation, and perhaps a reconciliation between that world and Cahun’s interior one.

Such an outcome is unlikely for Cahun. Her body, her self is most at home in “Memory? Selected extracts. My soul is fragmented. Between birth and death, good and evil, between the tenses of the verb, my body serves me in transit” (Cahun 173). The selected extracts here can be read as an understanding of the project of *Disavowals* as a whole, extracts from memory, and from diary, distilling fragmented thoughts in the same fashion that the soul is “fragmented.” Cahun’s selves reside between life and death, outside the confines of hegemonic morals and cultural norms, between *be* and *becoming*, and are, ultimately unstable and fleeting, constantly in “transit” and in flux. The instability of these selves, the constant emergence of new selves and new conceptions of selves, free from any system other than the nebulous definition of self, articulates an inward gaze, seeking to reorganize the relationship between the self and art, and put forward an understanding that the self that cannot be reconciled in terms of binary relationships, but rather exists pluralistically and simultaneously. This concern with the language of the self, and the system that seeks to regulate that language, appears throughout contemporary U. S. letters, notably in Lara Glenum’s 2008 poetry collection, *Maximum Gaga*.

Glenum's poetry is poetry of the grotesque, offering flayed and reconstituted bodies, self-flagellation, and scientific language mixed with street slang. Glenum presents a work that pushes the limits of "good taste" in its relationship to the body & its systems. It is reminiscent of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* and Antonin Artaud's "Indian Culture," with its focus on the genitalia as a way of defining and defying gender and identity politics. But *Maximum Gaga* isn't shocking for shocking's sake. Glenum understands that her poetry is designed to provoke the reader out of complacency and into a space of discomfort, for only in this discomfort can the "shock" take on a new role, that of liberating the text, and the reader, from normative values, and the systems that regulate them.

Consisting of a series of poems configured as acts within a play, or series of plays, and creating characters like the Normopath—the "monster" of the book—King Minus, Queen Naked Mole Rat, King Minus' Daughters ("Hysterical machines"), and a chorus identified as Poseidon's Trannie Mermaids, *Maximum Gaga* calls to mind both Greek tragedy and the pataphysics of Alfred Jarry. The only sin in this poetry is the sin of normalcy, of satisfaction and security, of systemic complacency. Glenum, in her short essay "Language is the Site of Our Collective Infection" advises writers to "cling belligerently to your unsightly protuberances and excesses. Take things too far. Shock yourself out of normative language" (281). The entreaty to "take things too far," coupled with the value found in "unsightly" things, positions Glenum's text as an expression of system in which the notion of excess and destruction becomes a way to reconfigure art and life through the infected, pulsating, and pustulating figures in *Maximum Gaga*.

Turning attention to one of a series of poems entitled "Normalcore" presents the clear danger that normalcy presents to Glenum's work. The poem begins "Beware the Normopath's

hobbity gaga / when he performs normacles” (12) positing that, instead of miracles, the Normopath is reducing the landscape to normalcy and standard values, and to a system that seeks to destroy anything “other.” He is to further avoided “when he performs / normacles / on the quivering quail meat / spilling out / of your grotslot” (12). It is here that Glenum’s concern with the body, and the recontextualizing of the body (“quail meat,” “grotslot”) becomes particularly important when juxtaposed to the Normopath’s obsessive normalization of the poem, and of the Grotesque body contained within it. The poem also warns to be wary of the Normopath “kicking honey / into your facegrill / Crustyflaps / will crush your teeth into smiling” (13). The newly organized “facegrill” is destroyed by the Normopath, “crushing teeth” into “smiling,” or physically changing the body, and the poem, back to its normative standards. The implication here is clear—the only true danger present in these poems is the danger of normalcy, of capitulation to a system that perpetuates itself and its restrictions.

In a poem later in the collection, “Interview with The Queen on National TV,” Glenum speaks to the vitality and importance of these reconfigured bodies and their resistance to the normal. She writes, “Q: Is it really necessary to make such abominations? / A: It is absolutely necessary to make such abominations” (101). The necessity here is the necessity of resistance to hegemonic systems, to the threat of normalcy that seeks to restrain and constrain both the articulation of a plurality of selves and of the body that is inherently intertwined with our current moment. The Nurse/Vandal series of poems present in this dissertation is an expression of this necessary abomination. Throughout the poems’ trajectories, the character of Vandal loses parts of his body—his hair, his teeth, his bones—all of which are collected by Nurse, reconfigured into rituals that enact moments of defiance to the apocalyptic scheme controlled by the Elders. When

political power and economic agency are stripped away, subsumed by an uncaring, relentless system, the body becomes the locus of resistance.

The bodily systems present in both Glenum's and Cahun's work, and in the poems of the dissertation, are organized, largely, by the economic system of capitalism. Capitalism, of course, has had several definitions and articulations throughout its various stages, but the most useful for this dissertation is capitalist realism as outlined by Mark Fisher in his 2009 book, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?*. For Fisher, capitalist realism refers not only to the ubiquitousness of capitalism, but also the impossibility of imagining a world free from capitalism. The current status of capitalism is such that it creates its own necessity, a system that mandates its own propagation and demands the subservience of its actors. It is inconceivable to find an aspect of contemporary life free from its influence, for "capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology' in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business" (Fisher 17). The result of this "business ontology" is pervasive, echoed in the resistance to such approaches in the work of Cahun and Glenum. It is worth noting, however, that capitalist realism doesn't work without the involvement of its collaborators. The damage it deals is literally embodied, as Fisher explains, "capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* it would be nothing without our cooperation...Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us" (15). The ever-present system of capitalist realism rearranges our bodies into zombies, draining us of vibrancy to feed its own engines. This brutal economic system casts its shadow over the entirety of the work in this dissertation. It is not simply the physical body that suffers the pain of capitalist realism; it takes its toll on the mental and psychological well-being of its laborers as well.

A participant in any system must confine to its rules. For capitalist realism, these rules are ruthless, remorseless, and, as Fisher points out, “entail subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment” (54). This current mode of production prides itself on “flexibility,” at the expense of its workers. To survive, “you must learn to live in these conditions of total instability” (34). A difficult enough proposition, made more complicated by “the intolerable stresses that these conditions of permanent instability put on family life. The values that family life depends upon—obligation, trustworthiness, commitment—are precisely those which are held to be obsolete in the new capitalism” (33). This is the new system, same as the old system, but without the false promise of stability or agency. We, as collaborator-zombies, are subject to the whims of this callous system, carried not only in the injuries to our physical form, with its inequitable configuration of access to healthcare, but also in our interior mental and emotional lives. Workers in late capitalism, are, in Fisher’s estimation, “like the Old Testament Jews after they left the ‘house of slavery’: liberated from bondage to which they have no desire to return but also abandoned, stranded in the desert, confused about the way forward” (34). This confusion is a direct result of the labor and economic “flexibility” that capitalist realism espouses as a virtue, and has startling consequences on the psyche of the populace, resulting in an environment that contributes to mental and emotional unease. Fisher seeks to explore this condition, stipulating that “if, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, schizophrenia is the condition that marks the outer edges of capitalism, then bipolar disorder is the mental illness proper to the ‘interior’ of capitalism” (35). The “interior” of capitalism, and the mental malaise and ennui it produces, becomes especially important when considering the “Rustbelt” poems of this dissertation.

The “Rustbelt” poems are located, both physically and philosophically, in the situation of the geographic Rust Belt, a place dominated by the circumstances of globalization and post-industrial economies. A cursory glance at the cities located in the Rust Belt reveals the ramifications of late capitalism on the residents of a community that has been informed that the industry that created jobs and stability in that area has now been deemed, through heartless and indifferent capitalism, unnecessary and economically unimportant. This condition, of course, is not unique to the Rust Belt, but finds its counterparts in places around the world. For Fisher, in his native Britain, this takes the form of individuals what United States citizens would recognize as Social Security disability benefits, who wrongly accused of being lazy or shiftless, “are people psychologically damaged as a consequence of the capitalist realist insistence that industries such as mining are no longer economically viable (Fisher 37). The poems of “Rustbelt” interrogate what happens to a place and a people that are awash in the instability of capitalist realism, dealing with the mental and emotional fallout arising out of those circumstances. Clearly, psychological conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety execute their effects because of human brain chemistry in diathesis with the body’s environment, but any conversation about the underlying conditions of these disorders struggles to be heard over the noise of late capitalism. This system has a vested interest in keeping the focus of mental illness on the individual rather than considering this as an institutional concern. It is much easier to blame a person’s brain than focus on the instability that causes these conditions in the first place Any critique or indictment of the larger system’s complicity in these challenges is refused. “Rustbelt” is an effort to resist this dismissal, and explore the reality of these locations.

Fisher's work is also a useful lens through which to view the way in which capitalist realism reasserts its own importance. Part of the insidious nature of this system is its omnipresence. The plasticity and malleability of capitalist realism enables it to rapidly adapt to any challenge offered to its dominance, for "bureaucracy [capitalist realism] has changed its form; and this new, decentralized form has allowed it to proliferate" (Fisher 20). This proliferation allows capitalist realism to proclaim its intractable inevitability not through its actual production, but rather in the *perception* of its economic benefit. Fisher clarifies:

The way value is generated on the stock exchange depends of course less on what a company 'really does' and more on perceptions of, and beliefs about, its (future) performance. In capitalism, that is to say, all that is solid melts into PR, and late capitalism is defined at least as much by this ubiquitous tendency towards PR-production as it is by the imposition of market mechanisms. (44)

The reality of capitalism is, in all intents and purposes, divorced from actual reality, relying, instead on its "PR," the insistence of its own importance. This preoccupation with perceptions finds a home in this dissertation in the poems "I ♥ Bureaucracy" and "Bureaucracy ♥ Me." Both of these serial works utilize an unflinching, sardonic use of bureaucratic language to reinforce the ever-presence of capitalism and its resolute belief in its own supremacy, despite the inequities and disenfranchisement it creates. The poems become PR firms in and of themselves, akin to the "hype men" of hip hop, displaying an unwavering commitment to the cruel and malevolent market forces it champions, and underlining the true problem with capitalist realism in contemporary culture because "there is no progressive tendency towards an 'unsheathing' of capitalism, no gradual unmasking of Capital as it 'really' is: rapacious, indifferent, inhuman" (Fisher 46). Poetry, then, has as responsibility to become a space of resistance to ravenous, the merciless, and the apathetic.

These ideals are emblematic of the work of Chilean poet, artist, and filmmaker Cecilia Vicuña. In her 2016 essay, “Language is Migrant,” published on the “Harriet” blog of the Poetry Foundation, she declares that, not only is language migrant, “Our bodies are migrants, cells and bacteria are migrants too. Even galaxies migrate” (Vicuña). The transnationalism that migration implies becomes important when considering not only Vicuña’s body of work, or of the journey that the Nurse and Vandal characters undertake in this dissertation, but also the transformative effect migration has on language. In this respect, migration itself is an act of resistance to bureaucratic systems that would seek to control movement, to control ideas. For Vicuña, the explanation of the approach of the current political climate toward migration is clear:

My heart says it must be fear, the ocean of lies we live in, subjected to a continuous stream of doublespeak by the powers that exert violence on us, and the media that supports it. Living under dictatorship, the first thing that disappears is the fun and freedom of saying what you really think. Complex public conversation goes extinct. (Vicuña)

The extinction of compelling and vibrant public thought in favor of tautologies is a predominant concern of the “♥” poems in this dissertation, saddled alongside the suburban distrust of language and the power that words carry. Words, of course, are always evolving and changing, shifting definitions and meanings in relation to historical realities. For Vicuña, words, in this current context, are less a space of sanctuary, and more of an enactment of violence. She writes “words are becoming drones, flying robots, as we are “unmanned” in a new sense, becoming less human, desensitized...I am thinking not just of the victims, but also of the perpetrators, the drone operators” (Vicuña). Words, then, are not navigated by individuals, but rather agents of the systems they represent. They are drones, faceless entities, operated by unseen forces, that surveil and destroy. To this end, it becomes critical to examine a mode of resistance to the hegemonic structure of these unyielding systems. Enter the *détournement*.

The détournement has its heart in French cultural critic Guy Debord's 1967 philosophical work *The Society of the Spectacle*, which forms the basis for much of the intervention the poems in this dissertation seek to establish in the contemporary climate. Composed of 221 theses, Debord's work defines and clarifies the concept of the spectacle. The spectacle is a prevailing condition of modernity, fetishizing the commodification of technology over lived experience. Or, as Debord explains "the spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living" (2). The spectacle, then, is detached from the realities of life, an alienating and isolating experience.

More than that, however, as Debord argues, "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (4). It is this relationship that is important. Much like capitalist realism, it is impossible to live outside the confines of the system, of the spectacle. All interaction is informed by this. Debord writes, "the spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production...it is the heart of the unrealism of the real society...the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life" (6). Further, the spectacle subjugates the living "to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them. It is no more than the economy developing for itself" (16). Like the systems that permeate all of contemporary existence, the spectacle is at once everywhere and convinced of its own authority. It is "the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of the social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world" (42). The détournement is the event of pushing back against the hegemony of the spectacle, and, more largely, of capitalist realism. It is the act of resistance in its varied forms.

The détournement can be understood as a derailment, or a disruption to the normative operation of a system. It is a move to assert dominance over capitalist realism, to take back the modes of cultural production, to turn the tools of the oppressor against itself (208). In as much as the spectacle is “ideology par excellence, because it exposes and manifests in its fullness the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, servitude and negation of real life” (215), the détournement is the antithesis of that, prioritizing the “real” over “PR,” the “free” over the overtly commodified. For this dissertation, the détournement exists both in the written form, found in poem series like the Nurse/Vandal trajectory, and the “Rustbelt” poems, and in the digital choose-your-own-adventure game, also entitled *The Wrong Sky*.

This importance of the game, written in the Twine platform, lies partially in its economic irrelevance. It is free, both in terms of financial cost to the player, excepting access to a computer with internet capabilities, and in terms of its relationship to the larger structure of capitalist realism. Thus, there is nothing to “market,” or to commodify. The spectacle, then, has no way for its influence to infect this space. In this way, game creation becomes a way to resist bureaucracies.

Most games, of course, are beholden to the impulses of capitalism, creating as Anna Anthropy writes in her 2012 book, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, “an alienating environment that speaks only to itself” (15). For Anthropy, resistance to this capital-driven market of game creation is vital because games are positioned to explore mechanics and systems, and to make meaningful comments on those systems (20). In order to do this, however, game creation needs to include a plurality of voices and, importantly, to be decentralized, because “to de-monopolize game creation is to de-monopolize access to games” (16). The de-monopolization of creation and access becomes another place of resistance to the spectacle’s specter of commodification. If

everyone has access to the tools of creation, then the system no longer controls what is created, allowing for a multiplicity of games free from the constraints of capitalist production. In this way, Anthropy argues, “the focus of a game could shift from features, the ways in which a game is differentiated from similar games—*thirty hours of play, twelve unique weapons, advanced four-dimensional graphics, acceleration*—to ideas” (19). This shift positions the game as a kind of *détournement*, utilizing the tools of the system against the system, creating a world where resistance to the overarching structures of capitalism is possible.

This resistance becomes especially important when considering the ramifications of what happens when late capitalism collapses, such as in Laura Sims’ 2016 poetry collection, *Staying Alive*. Assembled from various survival manuals, post-apocalyptic narratives, and her own meditations about “the end,” the poems are fraught with the terror and difficulties of survival in the fragmentation of an unforgiving system, displaying a preoccupation with humanity and what future humanity could have in an environment abandoned by the very system that destroyed it. Any version of the apocalypse must include the destruction of the social contract. For Sims, this contract is, like the effects of Fisher’s capitalist realism, literally embodied. She writes, “the social body / is / Gutted, slashed / And gutted” (Sims 14). Gutted, mentioned twice, features prominently here and can be read as figurative disembowelment, a display of the failure of a system to protect its constituent parts, the “guts” it needs to function. With the breakdown of the “social body” comes the breakdown of any semblance of systemic functioning.

Sims’ world is a world that requires careful navigation, buffeted by the dangers of a collapsed system. Being relentless pursued by the fallout of late capitalism produces “wet leather / where men / had stood for a moment, a moment ago” (Sims 17). The zombie-collaborators of Fisher’s capitalist realism become shells of themselves, “wet leather” husks, confined to a

rudderless drifting, akin a ship without any sailors. Fleeing these perils, “a boat with no one on it brought / fugitive humanity” (Sims 15). It is the word “fugitive” that takes on considerable importance here, both in terms of Sims’ humanity and in the characters of Nurse and Vandal in this dissertation. It means, at once, both elusive and criminal, escaping and fleeting. Nurse and Vandal, like the populace of Sims’ landscape, must both continue to evade the remnants of a vindictive system (rendered as Golem in this dissertation) and re-conceptualize what future, if any, is possible for the inhabitants of their world. This work, the suturing of the “social body,” and an imagining of a organizing system other than capitalism becomes especially difficult in the post-apocalypse, because, as Sims points out, “no one would help / the humans left / not even the humans” (20). Compassion and cooperation become impossible when capitulation to capitalist realism makes the very nature of survival a tenuous prospect. It is easy to give into the system. It is what the system expects, presenting meaningless platitudes involving hard work, dedication, and “bootstraps” as a way of placating the people it brutalizes. Capitalist realism positions itself as a beacon of hope, offering a light in the unending darkness that it itself has created. This light, however, blinds the citizenry from viewing any system outside of capitalism.

All is not lost, though, as Vicuña argues, “life regenerates in the dark. Maybe the dark will become the source of light” (Vicuña). This inversion is the transmedia *détournement* this dissertation seeks to offer, privileging neither the text nor the game as the locus of this resistance. The opposition to systems of economic and social inequality finds refuge not in the suburbs of material excess, but in the ruins that capitalism leaves in its wake. Or, as Sims explains, “the city teems. Above / It isn’t heaven: it’s / The ruin / Where / You shine” (28). This location in the “ruins” of economic irrelevancy allows for a vision of a world defiant to the hegemonic structures that would enact control over every facet of its existence. It is the work that is

undertaken in these spaces that becomes the work of refusal, as Sims notes “we drew close to something then / We who don’t live / on this earth” (63). The work of this dissertation seeks to abandon the Earth of late capitalism, of capitalist realism with all its brutal accoutrement, in favor of a new world, imbued with the promise of economic, social and political solvency.

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The Wrong Sky

Rustbelt

This lonely barge, crow
river full of swollen
barrels & blister.

I search
for the rowboat
I know to be mine.

Each sail, unfamiliar.
Heavy. The safest way out
of a channel is to follow

the cairns, but I can't see
the faces in the rock anymore.
I still hear the song.



Harbinger & Star

in which portent is encountered & perverted

Company of bones, split teeth. The bubble of new disease.

Elders file in, make a circle around a consumptive altar, light many candles. This Filth

Temple. They are gathered. This date is etched into their meat with the sharpened

knucklebone of a foundling. I am Hemophiliac Child & I emerge from the ether, wrapped in

goat's hair & a canine necklace. I hold court from the pulpit, clutch a skull, broken & gore-streaked.

The mandible moves in my hands. A low groan echoes.

Each Elder scoops out their eyes in turn, places them in the void where the skull's mouth should be.

The candles burn out. I don't notice the errant star they've called down until it caves

in my head. Elders work quickly stripping the skin from my body, covering it in runes, fresh &

glowing. They push me into a clay jar filled with black liquid. All is dark to me.

The sky oozes new colors.

Hour of Pillage & Thorn
in which Vandal enters the Filth Temple

The low moan of an empty vessel probes his body. There is a perfection to thieving few have mastered. Vandal's fingers know light & pilfer. This place, marble

& obsidian, is rife with it. The dread his hands feel as he lifts an urn set with gems, tucks it in the satchel. He swallows, watches his mouth make tiny clouds

in the cold, slowly recites his mantra. This is how to fight famine. This is how a village gets unburnt. How his people get untorn apart by a warlord's dogs.

Moving deeper, he finds himself in a scriptorium. There is laughter emerging from the death mask of a forgotten king, its diamond eyes. Into the sack & the laughter grows, sputters, stops.

In this moment, Vandal feels all the sharp edges of his life turn inward & cut, at once suspended & lingering. His breath wavers, catches, no longer fogs the chamber. A black

thorn worms in his chest. Reaching for his heart, he hears chanting grow steady & deafening. Blood leaks from his ears. The flash of an Errant Star. & silence. He feels the mask climb up & latch

onto his own face. The howl he makes sounds familiar.

Flight

in which absconsion is a commodity

Child, skin flayed & bottled
something put in a dark sack & buried under stone
slaughter

something kept in a jar
Vandal hands caught in

wouldbe pillager of the Filth Temple
now: witness

wouldbe baron of sewer & catacomb
now: fugitive

he takes to the land
in the ruins

now: bruised in purple light
a set of eyes

now: under a wrong sky
connected to a body

a mouth speaking without moving
written in the cadaver of a young thing

palimpsest & panopticon
a voice

punching through the viscerafog
so he runs

you are quarry so run

Rustbelt

When I sleep, I get
lost, so I tie a lavender
string around my thumb.
It guides me back
to the wretched yard.
There are many statues
here. None of them
have hands or a face.

Rustbelt

The streetlights flicker
& die under snow. The sound

of applause stretches out
from the broken radiator.

Water leaks from its coils,
blurring the faces in the newspaper

who tell me it is a good time
to buy. I started playing chess

by mail a fortnight ago.
My opponent has me

in zugzwang. That means
that any way I move

will hurt.

Song of the Filth Temple
in which the Elders speak in chorus

All histories have an origin. The old growth
spouts up through what will be called
lapidarium. Each stone bears cough & story. Often,
those are the same. Broken columns shape out a heavy air,
the smell inside birth. We make wound
circles in caked dirt. New types of noise for new
odors. Old ones that still fill space & lumber
like undone secrets.

Songs echo, worm deep
through our downturned heads.
A dias forms, each step in somber
glass. In turn, each of us rests upon
the altar & its dagger-point gleam, leave
pieces of our body, make an oath on the abscess.

New systems requires new currency. What
does it cost to make a weeping sky? All this
& more: jars & an earnest desire to do
painful things. Air lettered with atrophy.
Harmful scents. Blade, palm,
& void. A scale somewhere that
measures harm.

Some events can bear no witness.
He is doomed with eyes.

Midnight in the Jar of Weeping
in which Child learns to speak again

The structure of this prison,
forever night & ornate. My skin feels
electric. Through the seeping clay,
I see a fire in a tower. I try to mouth
the words, but that isn't how sound
works here. I summon eyes, close
them, reach out, tell whoever is the light
to listen, to take up that fire, find the map
& the compass & the way. There are many
colors here, but this one is mine.

Rustbelt

I spent all
morning reading about
colony collapse disorder.
My mouth a rictus

of bees.
The broken piano
in the parlor corner
used to play itself.

Nurse

in which our sibyl is revealed

I live between light, in a wrecked tower, filling barrels with froth & color. Beyond me, the meadows are mean with black rainbows. I hear false riddles ring off the cliffside, foretelling of rain & body. Scar & mud.

On the other side of the sea, there will be many peoples. Many bones & agents. & a Golem made of split tongues.

Each morning, I collect the greasewater in little vials. I hide these away under my pillow, feel waves crash through my sleep. Tallow swell. Corkscrew tide.

There are many omens but this one is mine.



Rustbelt

Each roof
in the shadow of the mine

contains a weathervane searching
for the start of wind.

Rustbelt

The ministry of alarm rivets
disease onto its frame.
All our Elders, gathered
in a circle, chanting
to a car on fire.

The flames cough
out over the asphalt.

Rustbelt

Green smoke from the trash
fire. A rooster spreads
its glow, perching on the split

rail fence, divulging nomenclature.
The system of names is revealed:
Farmhouse. Tractor. Rust. Echo.

My grandfather told me that I am
responsible for these terms. When
I am dying, I'll write this dictionary

& leave it in a place where the crows
collect. Some people might call it

a murder.

Night of Estuary & Drift
in which Nurse dreams wilted sacrament

I carve my words on a dead tree, watch the wood vanish the stars out of the water. I am given a kind of anthem, tranced into an empire of cicada & mire. Last night, in dream, a messenger came framed in yellow smoke. In one hand, he held an umbrella made of stone, in the other, the longest portrait of the moon.

He reached out both to me, bade me take this burden. I reached back, then woke when the fire was at its zenith. The swamp hums & I step into the pond, douse my hair in the weeds. I open my eyes underwater, see bleak Vandal on the salt horizon.

Something swims into my ear.

Root

in which Nurse and Hemophiliac Child converse

I know the staircase that leads into the forest, have traced it with my feet & documented each crack in its face. Tonight, I followed your voice here, Child. A dream of vapor & ash. My people believe that each prophet has an echo. I put my ear to the leaves piled over the rocks, sludge & wax. I listen, but am not sure what I should hear.

There are many ways to understand, Nurse. Look at the trees & see my face carved there. I see nothing. Look harder. It is carved inside your face. My fingers move over this oak. I feel a tendril emerge & trickle, move over my ribs, take my entire body & cast it earthward. There are many types of cutting, Nurse. What do you see? I see a man, punctured stars for eyes, bleeding light.

He is lost, wandering through rubble. Why do you show me this? *There are many ways to see, Nurse. What do your bones say? I lost them in a fire years ago. Not those. The other ones.* Find the coast. Find a lighthouse. Find the man & bottle the light from his eyes. Find my bones & bury them deeper. See what grows.

Rustbelt

The Shriners parade in their
hats. A hissing from every
popped balloon. Even
the water has a cellophane
hum. Part of what labor
means is to navigate static.
The tiny cars are burning
in the streets. We, the gathered
sick, applaud until our palms
split open.

Rustbelt

The neighbors find
allure in desperate things.
Milk-faced charm in rubble
& a kiss of mystery in the wanting
dust. But I'm not that kind
of detective. This is not
that kind of story.

Rustbelt

A beehive sinks
in flood waters.

The transformers above
me whine discordant.

I have oily stains on both
my forearms. The radio

statics through. I see my
brother's scar in the waves,

rictus as pavement. I see the water
wave its shredded flag, retreat back

to the factory. Each insect caught
in its current is an idling car.

I see a child's face in pooling
grease. The dead are speaking

with the only mouths they have.



Hour of Vandal & Child
in which fugitivity is a forced embrace

My escape has collapsed
the walls of the tunnel I'm moving

through, so I'm digging through the voice
I have no name for.

It is a shock
when the skies appear. More

shocking still when they stay
overhead. I'm crawling now,

& hoping that the mud
stays wet. You use

your youngest voice to send
all sorts of code through

my blood. That's how to talk
when the earth has too many

ears and too many mouths.
I see the treeline & I hope I

make it, but if I don't,
you use your oldest voice to tell me

my body will be a beacon
& radiate all

through this earth. We'll find
all the secrets we need.

Tower of Bones

in which Nurse erects a panopticon

& my pilgrimage, a chorus of weeds twisting in my skull. The laws of this world tell me that to move I need to see. I lay myself beside the riverbank, watch the dead fish float on the shore. One is jaundiced & swollen.

This one will be the keystone & I will go on my nerve. I speak the words, feel the fish pile up under me, raising me. Within minutes, accomplished, distended. One floats before my eyes.

Hour of Forced Reckoning
in which Child touches the air

Organs & parts burnt out, parts

heaving & sighing like a newborn cloud. *Each foot,*

I hear him say, *forward feels the same, but isn't.*

It is impossible not to notice bleeding, even through

my jar, but Vandal tries, hides his face in his hands, tells

the earth *I did not wish for this.* Vandal sobs, bites his lips until the blood

that comes out is the same shade as the blood on the floor.

I reach out, move the air around his eyes until the dark

fades. Hush, now. We have much to do.

Year of the Wrong Sky
in which our heroes plot their escape

I met him on the edge of this. I reached out my arms, made the gesture of peace. He chewed what still remained of his hands, tore through dirt. I told him to cast his eyes down toward the earth, to listen for the distal bell. Hear the cracks. Hear the falseness in the fattening trough. Not mauve, welt. Not gold, jaundice.

Rinse your hands in this liquid, Vandal. Watch flame cross your broken knuckles. *It is the time of the Coast.* Child's voice spilling through both of us. Anoint yourself with silt. Pull it back through your skin. Saturate.

Your flesh will be a compass that points toward true things. We are in the mountains & must move. He speaks to me for the first time. *It is difficult to tell which stars are falling & which are not.* We'll tell them apart eventually. We don't have a choice.

Rustbelt

My beer bottle contains
a torn red pennant fluttering
from a nurse's neck.
She holds it as she walks
toward the riverbank, rubs
murkwater & gravel all
over her body.

On television, the president
approaches the podium.

The Ghost Sermon

in which not every fire is welcome

Child's voice is color I see
when I sleep. Last night, Nurse put stones

on my eyelids & I saw an endless field. Something moist extinguishing
the light. I could feel it with my hands, & then it went hard, like a rock

still taking shape. I woke numb. I made
noises through my new mouth. I sang the foothills

raw. There is a trembling. I feel eyes
on me, different from Nurse, different

from Child. I feel the dark snake
through my chest & coil. I'm on fire.

I'm burning. The hills are burning too.

Rustbelt

On the darkest night
of this forgotten year,
I found my mother

in the grasses, counting
headlights stuttering
over the highway.

Each of her coughs
caused one to shatter.

Field of Ailments

in which Vandal confronts the dark

The face I once had is in the mud at my feet.

It helps me endure the lightning I found

by my bedroll, lets me listen to what lives on the edge
of this territory—dredgings too faded to identify.

There are worse things than to be haunted, Vandal. I shake off my limbs,
look around for my waterskin. I step outside, find a puddle, fill it with what's there.

The land is darkening again, but I am not afraid. *There are worse things than the dark, Vandal.*
I know. You've shown me this.

Rustbelt

Ink smears on the magistrate's
robes. This is how all earthly
business is manufactured.
I've spent many working
hours thinking about what
it means to stain something,
& how much time we need
to be vestigial. This morning
I clothed myself entirely in red
& laid down under the overpass.

Hour of Answer

in which explanation proves elusive

because of a dead Child & the way light drains when water gets deep
enough because of the speckled blood on the altar because of the mistakes
that get swamped up in sludge because of the fragility of a body & the sound bone
makes when the pressure is great because the sky is deaf & without tongue
because of an errant star because of the way it fell because of new fires in the new
kind of night because of the work that hands can do because of the way brute
illustrations appear black & glistening in skin after life is rinsed out because it is a kind of map
because some know how to read it

Rustbelt

When the pundits use
the word community,
I wonder what they mean:
the smoke vining
up my legs, or the animal
skulls piled at my feet.



I ♥ Bureaucracy

Inside of every little
capitalist is a big capitalist
hugging the best part
of a face. The market wolfs
in its cave, climbs on brutalist
architecture. The way
of the world is a shiny
prospectus. An offering
of initials, righteous
indigestion, a mylar
balloon wrapped
in the stomach, around
the hugging face,
which is smiling & not
smiling. The man behind
the lectern is a curtain.
Various papers, business
papers line the stage,
a table of melted gold.
Orc fights orc until a head is torn
off, another excellent
centerpiece. Every pox
marked & filed. Such joy
to be had in giving in.
Thoughts & prayers
& whatnot. The curtain
blows a kiss, it lands dead
in the center.



My car protects me
from the attacks of enemies,
lets the State wrap me
in a beefy embrace, a
perfume of accounting, an innocent
in a big damn Cadillac. Let me
begin again. I am making love
to my car inside my car. Reagan
is hanging from the rear view. Day glo
velvet stick shift. When facing the tribunal,
I am memory lapse & incomplete recollection.
That's just the way I was raised. How much
is that in the window. How much is the widow.
When I am dead, I will be buried here, in this
bucket seat, my mouth full of earth & its works.
I believe in leather & oil & the market & men
with bowties & lapel pins. We are the industry,
affiliates of the global village clad in Member's Only
jackets made overseas. The eagle has landed,
is eating hamburgers, drinking Cokes.



The television is the most miraculous instrument in this, the best of all possible worlds. Each channel tells me wonderful things, that I am loved & that late onset juvenile diabetes is a killer. I put on a tie. I am a dating show host, a calculated risk, a brand new desire. Behind door number three I am prepping my buzzer. Tonight's death match is sponsored by paisley. By raw meat. By premature senility. Winners will receive complementary vaccinations. Winners will receive true specimens under glass.



I'm a job creator. I make
the mechanism next to the flag
machine. All the skin jumped up. The terror
spikes in the barrel. Every good boy
deserves. I make a note in my notes,
trickle-down my sample-sizes.
The machine hums, licks
out its wonder. I lick
back, compile & reticulate.
Each technology we develop
erodes. Please excuse my dear.
We've died in committee.
The regional cabal let out
the monster in the cellar,
let it meander into the chamber.
We don't torture. We unstrap
failings. This engine won't
run without the dread. We bottle
it up, drink it down. Remember
to get the deposit back.



Let us assemble the bankruptcy
squad & torch all the materials
that disgust us. When frightened,
the smart animal will retreat to any
available hole. The earth reclaims
its own, or so my middle
school principal told me.
I don't know—I wasn't really
listening. I was too busy whistling
in the hallway, spawning varsity-level
endangerments. When the news
anchor says "alma mater," our faceless
chairman always adds "between the sheets,"
& waits for the applause sign to light up.



Collagen & Purge

in which Elders ask many questions

What is the atmosphere we call
our bodies but glass & aspic. We prime
to shatter & meld. We speak memory, whistle
our psalm through a fear pipe. What use
is awe to the eyeless. What use is fever
to the doctor. A symbol only works
if a populace knows what it means. A mystery
only works if desire is uncapped & offered.
What is a wish but a loathsome want, graven
into dead things. What is this light & its cracks,
its phosphorus hum. This lacuna in a catalogue of sounds.
What use lips without a language. We steady our eyes
on the words that hang on walls, weave
through a called-down cloud. Syllables form
on fists & stay there. *Look,*

they say, *look now.*

Rustbelt

Each of my brother's purple
notebooks is blank. He sits
on his arms until they bruise.
Numbness, he tells me, is what
holds the air together. We're assembling
his throne, salvation cinder blocks broken
into thirds. I can hear the electricity arc.
My brother closes his eyes, tells me
lovely things.

Week in the Dreamless Mountains
in which storms are weathered

We are moving through mountains. The litany of slab. Every night, the clouds burst on our bodies. Child tells me *the storm punishes because it is a storm*. Vandal performs his penance, thrashing about in the gale.

He remembers, years ago, forcing down an imperfect pearl he found in a neglected shrine, protecting the prize. Later, he felt it pulpit & seeth in his stomach. Everything he has swallowed comes through his skin, visits him during the night, takes up residence in his flesh & taunts him. Every burned loaf of bread. Every dog left to drown in the flood. Every last limb hacked away. Child tells him *the story of a body is the story of stone*. Vandal shakes his head, turns himself inward toward rock.

The mountains are faceless & mute.

The Contrition Game

in which various fees are levied

We've been wandering to a rough frequency, surrounded by granite & spike. Vandal trudges on the margins, flagellant. Child's voice comes through in crash. *This is blueprint. This is design.* My workings are deep in the waters, far from this place wrenched in earth & stone. I chase them.

As with all things, there is a toll. Vandal pays his share. This skin is for the boatman, to forget he came this way. My own colors, redacted & expunged. The nights are longer now & difficult. The passages narrow, grow darker.

Vandal tears his palms & light pours out, a sickly navigation. The problem with a self-imposed penance is absolution remains uncertain. There is a price. The toll.

Rustbelt

There is a terror
inherent in frequency.

Signals break the sidewalk
like hammers. I gather

a shard & put it in my shirt
pocket. It bends right through

this body. I spent last night
looking at my grandfather's bird.

A rook in the blood & noises
in the moss. A vandal, warning me.

Son, don't run from them
snakes. Son, don't trust nothing but your own

two hands. & my grandfather, reaching
down to find where he left his voice.

Rustbelt

I've walked through the cracks
in the concrete & reached the coast
of language. The flint I've kept
in my pocket is scoured. A bird
circles overhead. I don't know
its name.

A sour tea fortifies my limbs, grants
a quick respite in the dronelands.
Each reed in the marsh where the school
used to be cranes its leaves toward me.

I approach this microphone, tear out
the last bit of my tongue

Day of Oneiromancy

in which the Museum of Sleep is encountered

Light a grip of flesh & call it a candle. The light shows flies on our skin, willing pilgrims. Vandal pulls several out of his beard & sets them on his shoulder. He wants them to speak. We saw the last bird days ago & it pointed us toward this gallery.

Vandal pales, spit his organs on the rock. It mumbles & gives way to an antechamber. The dust fogs our feet as we enter the dark spaces. There is a stone table, a single goblet made of black clay. It is filled with blood.

The flies swarm away from us, drink deep, save the last two drops for us, flick around our eyes until we sip.

We press our heads together, see the cave shift. There is a room. There is a door, leading to hallway after hallway. Before us, two empty chairs.

Palimpsest

in which the Museum of Sleep chants a cipher

There is a hunger here, many mouths
opening & closing at once. Yesterday,

Child guided us to a place deep
within this starving dark, bade us

to pull a floating orb out of its cycle
& see what emerged. A blank book,

an impossible yearn, like a sailor
going home to the waters, under

& fathomless. The pages fill
with a map that redraws itself

over & over.

Let me begin again. The dark
here is stretched, a thin ribbon

across this wound. Child
no longer speaks to me, but

Nurse feels the tug
inside her head. We are here

to find a parchment. She
takes me down corridor

after corridor. Her feet
are shapeless, red

against rock. There is an archway,
a sphere orbits its stone. She reaches

into her robes, her hands
now covered in animal

fat, & secures it.
She puts my hands on the ground,

places the sphere in them, crushes
everything with her heel. I am sent

to sleep. I see a parchment where
my hands should be, a palimpsest.

Temple. Cave. Forest.
Desert. Sea. Coast.

I wake to destroyed
fingers, to Nurse sharpening

her needles, telling me
this next part will hurt.



Rustbelt

The signpost
beside the mountain is still

there, still fading in
rough sunlight. I've never

seen anyone on television
that wasn't me.

Rustbelt

The sound of a gavel
sheathed in dark.

Contempt forecloses
here a landmark.

The judge has issued
eviction notices & cleared

the premises for
the fumigators & their

enormous teeth.

Rustbelt

In this gameshow, my heart
is featured on the terror spikes.

A fashionable wine commences
& is served, bright & fruity.

The host tells the audience that
the new government has decreed

certain melodies verboten. The panelists
are tasked with using drums & airplanes

& traffic cones to tell a story without
lips or the certitude of words.

I shake my head at every contestant,
telling the people watching at home that

I never. I never said that.

Rustbelt

Where there was smoke, there is a new
volcano. It calls the future
by its name, belching a new ash.
The sounds & signals are unintelligible
to the geologists. Ancient people
hired wailing mourners for their
funerals. I know a good bargain
when I see one.

Rustbelt

We hit the foundry
at first light, found
a half-eaten calendar.

which month?

October.

which month?

Uncertain. All
the machines still turned,
so we spent the day making
sundials out of car parts.

which cars?

Old ones.

what makes a car old?

Vengeance & steam.

We took our work
to the fields.

what did they say?

Uncertain. We saw only clouds.

Rustbelt

The daughter next
door swallowed a rock,
big as her father's tumor.
The mayor of television
called it an amethyst,
told her mother she is truly
blessed. The pipes in the house
burst slowly, lost in the magic
hour. The daughter bottled
what came out, sold it
to people playing
along at home.

Rustbelt

Each member
of the congregation has
a jeweled cone fastened
around the neck. A slow,
methodical crash plays
over the video screen.

The pastor skins
his homily. The cones
respond. Another word for
assassination is sanction.

Rustbelt

I fill up a pale
green flask with barn
water, set it where
the house lived.

The leaves bury
it overnight. Now
it is worth more.

The return on investment
whitens my teeth
to a celestial luster.



Year of the Compass
in which skin is a residence

Me with my needles in the coals. They burn green. Child told me that's how I'd know. I tell Vandal to prepare. He is mute. He is vessel. There are waves in my ears as I scrub what is dead from his back, cleanse it with ashes left overnight in my tinderbox. He is prone, helpless. The light from the needles casts a retching ocean over his skin.

& so, I begin. My fingers move, dumb & automatic. I'm listening to Child crash in & feel the parchment's map cut it geographies on my closed eyelids. It burns, something I can't unsee, like all the lifeless things this year. The map I'm making charts its legend. Skin is not the right word now. He is haunted. He is detached.

I know I am done when I smell the parchment he holds in his hands smoke & coil. Vandal remains still. He is riddled. He is fever. He moves his lips, makes sound. I am not addressed. Maybe the shadows, maybe the spinning compass burnt between his shoulders. Maybe the split sky.

Leaving the Museum of Sleep
in which the Lost Coast charts its territory

Spiders crawl through the holes of a skeleton deep
in these rooms & Nurse collects

them in a red hide pouch. I hold the remnants
of my hands close to my chest. When I cough, the new map

on my back bleeds bright. Nurse is gathering tokens, hewing
a course in secret & drone. Each time sleep catches us,

fitful & drenched in dream, the Museum opens
its doors. The newest exhibit: lips stitched in

a dripping flask, its liquid chasing away the rats
swarming through. A puddle forms, its reflection

a small sextant, a glowering wood,
a light slivering the Coast. A drowned ship finding

its way to shore. We wake suddenly. Both
the empty chairs are on fire. All the rats

are blinking at once.

Hour of Inventory

in which our heroes take stock

Take out what is not
needed, flask of midnight,

dram of green. My older
life's toolkit. Keep

the crowbar. Smash
the lantern that no longer

shares its light. My map
leads to a village that is

not there anymore & maybe
never was. Nurse sets all

her food on a rock to soak.
She removes her scarves, oils,

tinctures, the last bit of moss
saved from the only growing

thing. We take out everything
we had before. We keep

what we've gathered since.

Rustbelt

The house down
the street held
its secrets until
it did not.

When the fire died,
the investigators found
a cedar armoire
completely unburnt.

Inside, a jar of skin,
& a child's voice, singing.

The Current & the Meat
in which there is water

& now we move through flood. A sextant & a church in scourge. In the dying days, Vandal enters where his body used to be, feels the spaces.

Let me begin again.

I am haunting these waters. I am the current, thick as meat, threading our boots forward. His body is bait, is hook. We move toward scourge & the Church of Nerve & something small, something metal. Child. The boiling sound. Forward, forward.

I see Vandal leave a breadcrumb trail of himself in the choke. This is an expectation. He leaves another piece, turns his face toward mine.

Rustbelt

Silence made camp in the state
whose name is best forgotten.

A pyre of smashed cars twist
a remedy of oil, spill its grandeur

over the earth. It stained
the ground, left the myth

of closure, left a rent
banner. A wrecked mirror.

Bezoar

in which the inflexible is swallowed

When the sky went wrong, the dam blew open, flooded every animal in the valley. Waters fed down into the dirt, made a cauldron. We walked through the loam, notched the nights on Vandal's kneecaps to keep a count. The remaining puddles that refuse to recede boiled still. I made a tea out of the carcasses scattered on the path, placed a bone from the Museum in its leavings & let it sit for days.

It formed a hard thing, a shape like an ill-made star. I coated its surface with steam, placed it in Vandal's mouth, bade him swallow. He rested fitfully, tearing his hair. Noises haunt the wood outside our fire. I seal our ears with mud. In this way, we hear every insect & its industry.

They whisper to me, tell me that this is the hour where all magic breaks. I sew the flaps of our little tent shut, watch the voices rend at the fabric, pull smoke over both of us.

Day of Adversary

in which the limits of language are discovered

I unleash my hair, throw salt in my eyes, see which direction the water leaks out of me. It falls straight down, burns a window through the packed dirt. I see a creature of decay & maggot & move. It saw the last fire we lit days ago, it felt its heat. The wrong sky burns through a cloud & I feel every hole in this cloak whisper new words to me. I can't speak them but I know what they say.

I take the shawl off my shoulders, unfurl it over the hole, cover it quickly. As I do this, the creature looks right up at me, eyes of burnt out coal. It rips off an arm, plants it in the ground like a signpost, moves toward the forest we call refuge. Something starts growing out of the hole I've made. I have no word for this.

Rustbelt

There's a stillness
in the quarry & grandfather's
ashes in a broken pine box.

Weather keeps itself in a burnt
out van, each passenger thrown
deep in the pit, warbling

false names to the registrar.
When roll is called, only void
& rock respond. The rest

are marked absent.

Rustbelt

We form a line
through the gray,
are distributed a number
& a deed to blight.

When I was young, I thought
there were dragons in every
shadow. Now I just breathe
& they appear. Their eyes
always the same color.

My eyes are always
the same color.

Rustbelt

I slipped on a city
& now my ribs are a broken
hourglass, shale & flagstone
telling fortunes.

In my grandfather's house,
there were many clocks.
When I breath in, I can feel

something chiming within. I don't
know what time tells me. In each

face, I see a golem, thundering,
reaching for its eyes.

Rustbelt

Watch me chalk
a shadow, close
all my doors. He follows
me to the remnant yard,
sits on my shoulder
as I tear fabric away
from the wound. The hands
on the clock click forward,
then back, then forward again.

Rustbelt

The man on the bench
has his name scored
on his bare chest. I know
it is his because he told me

it was. He has been sleeping
for many years, but is still
tired. Always tired. I see
insects in his beard.

They are sleeping too.

Day of the Starving Mind
in which one thing is many

An endless smell, root
down in the quarry, stone
& forge & titan.

Spiders. Sleepless.
I am made. I
am fused.

Boneless & hungry.
Hungry & unrelenting.
I have not one name.

I have them all.



Bureaucracy ♥ Me

& I have the sign to prove it.
This morning, the best
morning, is hungry
& confident. The grass
in the courtyard, the
ecstasy of the confessional.
Each tiny congestion &
congressional interlude
in every toll of the bell.
It is easy to drink poison
when it is someone else's
body. At home, we meet
with family, break every
part of bread. We glutton
& promise. Each house is bricked
over with it. A thin sheet
of indulgence. Candy
floss & barricade.
The new year comes
& with it, the new proclamation.
Same as the old. & this is the power
& the glory. Each of us is ready
for inspection. The youth come
& giggle. We giggle too, then stop.
Then laugh.



Interrogation tactic: ask the man
what he means when he says
hope is a commodity. Ask the map
what it means when it says there are monsters
here. We're in the business of business. The dumpster
fire is the first thing on the nightly forecast. Each of
us delights in the green screen, making our bones
vanish for the audience. There is terror
& then there is terror. Ask the briefcase
what it means to be an attache. Ask the bowler
hat about legal standing & the interruption
to prime time living. We are leading our best
lives. The very, very best.



I see the flags raised over the all-nite
diner & salute each piece of breakfast
meat on my plate. Each delicate juice,
each full glass of milk at the end
of the world. Across the street,
secrets. A gone voice in the playground.
We can't hear what we can't see. I eat
my tautology, spit up condensed
butter. The appropriations committee
approves my tattoo design, a tiny
dolphin on fire. I spent the best
parts of my life in bars, forgetting
to eat. No time like lost time. A small
child on the swingset falls & snaps
his collarbone. Work hard, play
hard. I'm not worried about
the flames. I've got a family
pack of frankfurters & a bedazzled
biohazard suit. The anthem plays
over the diner's jukebox & I stand,
feel the bacon in my stomach & know
I'm ready for this glorious day.



The novelty coffee mug declares winter
the last refuge of the undesirable. The rest
is unmentioned. Real cream, swallowed
directly & in earnest. What use is sincerity
in the dronelands. The announcement over
the loudspeakers makes every useful
animal utter its catchphrase. We all
have catchphrases, government issued.
Where there's smoke. A bird in
hand. A penny saved. You get
what you pay.



Let me begin again—we are not
lost. We are in the throes of the indestructible,
dollar signs on our bootheels. The evening's
gala is not canceled. The caviar will be served
along with the handgun. Please use both. Responsibly,
the cadavers will be nestled away awaiting experimentation.
The night's bondage ceremony will continue unabated,
promising to be both wholesome & enchanting. Any pamphlet
issued will be confiscated. We appreciate your patience as we
model. Pardon our distrust. Silence is our most precious commodity.



Day of the Golem

in which the Elders make use of their hands

How fine it is to make a thing. A body
assassin in the gloam. We filter this bronze, suffocating grief.
& black flowers bloom on its shoulders. We forge
a thorny mass. Our new disease, bits of teeth &
lever. Gangrene & limb. A dismal harmony.

How fine it is, the ordering of parts—bite marks in ash.
We use awl & vine. We use flame, a small gurgled combustion.
How does a thing become born relentless? First it is a thought, then
an assemblage. & finally a myth making itself true.

There are many orbs blistering in our creation. Each are unblinking.

Salt

in which hunger takes shape

A wrong kind of breath & the naming of each
remaining appendage in turn. I woke

here, my eyes leaking a strange kind of fluid, black
& not black. When I run my bloodied fingers

over the log I slept on, I can feel my atrocities
bundle together & grin. There are holes

in this vision. The world is now
derelict, fungal, ravenous.

There is a need for hospice & salt, a need
for each new star to announce its name in language.

I make my legs work, find a path through tree,
see ancient things newly felled. The sky reaches out,

spirit-blind & rancid. I must not
reach back.

Second Wish, Second Witness
in which the Nurse recalculates

I read a feral declaration cut in skin, burnt out & scored again. The errant star tattooed the sky & I watched it streak through the holes in my tower, felt Child fall & Vandal's hands come up red. Second wish, second witness.

I can calculate the peculiar mathematics of this moment, throw my bones & feel questions scream back into my teeth. There is sweat & sweetness, murder on the tongue.

There are a hundred words for antagonist. I know them all.

Day of Forest & Fog

in which sentiment & violence are the same

We are in the Scourge Forest. We are looking
for something small & metal. Nurse

instructs me I'll know it when I see it, but
I've seen many things. When I breath, my compass

spins & spits, churns directions. I can feel
it move me toward a stand of diseased oaks,

dark-hewn & desolate. We rest here & I know
what fog does to organs in this world. The bones

in Nurse's tinderbox tell us Golem
will be here soon. We stay hidden, tell

each other secrets. Last year, before my
home was burned, I planted incense

in the little plot next to my house,
watched the blooms

in the soil. That place is dead now.
Nurse tells me nostalgia

is a fool's game, but I can't help
but lick this festering,

see what new tastes
it brings. I taste something

small, something metal.
I lift my tongue & Nurse

takes out what has been made.
It is a sextant the size of a mouse's skull.

She puts it in her tinderbox, hears
the secrets it tells her, then looks at

me. I see the fog in her eyes.

Rustbelt

Before she was sick,
my mother sang
the cave song. I know
each chord & try, now, to play it
for her on the banjo
her father left to me.
But it is not a banjo.
It is a shotgun. The melody
comes out wrong.

Rustbelt

Sometimes I dream
of forest economies.
The axehandle nurse, gore
wound around her fists.

She hunts for stumps
& the ghost slime
that has become sentient.
Some of them have eyes

& a tiny proboscis. I omit
these details when I file
my report.

Hour of the Cockroach
in which the Church of Nerve is encountered

We have arrived. We've followed the
blood compass, consulted the map,

heard Child urging us on & robbing us of sleep.
This Church of Nerve. There are many altars,

but this one is ours. Nurse removes
the sextant from her tinderbox, puts

it back under my tongue. I spit to see
what reflections are cast. In the pulpit,

there is a hive of cockroaches. They scuttle
toward me, stream up my face & into the hollow

where my mouth should be. The sextant
turns over & over in their legs. I cough

out a constellation. A faint
route is drawn in the spaces between

stars, each one lingering & then dying in turn.
Nurse bites the space between her thumb

& forefinger, dips her other hand in the pooling
blood. I take my shirt off & she traces each

path as they flicker on the wall. The cockroaches
move from me her paths, dying there. I swallow

all the air I can until I lose myself, remote
& unsteady. When I wake, I feel a swimming light.

I feel salt & sand & something new
on my back. I feel a lost thing. I feel voice calling

a place home.

The Coronation

in which the Nurse is crowned with dread

The heath set in darkness, his blood compass spins. I feel the wet roots under my feet make motions. It has been days since the Museum of Sleep & the well-lit moment of things. In the forest, we saw nine maidens, each clutching their chest, each offering a capsule. I took one in my hand, placed it next to my heart, felt it beat in time with the dripping of the sky.

I dreamt last night. He dreamt, too. We were eating a child's corpse, kissed each other with mouths full of flies. I was declared the Queen of Murk by an unseen electorate. The ivory scepter that suddenly appeared in my hands crumbled to dust. Out of each rock stormed a tiny Golem. Each voice proclaimed this the Church of Nerve & severed the Golem's spines in unison. Each chord played a different hymn. It was only then we noticed the rug, made of stars shifting their orbit so rapidly that our robes started to catch & burn.

When we woke, we each remembered. Each day, my hair feels less like fiber, more like wire. We are three fingers deep in the map. This night, I expect a brigade of Golems to seek us out. Our last torch is wet. I will place it near my heart, say the nine words I've swallowed & stored away.

The capsule tells me it will snow & I will leave many tracks.

Rustbelt

Another word for factory
is plant. I visit, huff
dank cellar & a league
of smeared ash.

This infernal measurement
shapes the cinder blocks.
I find a brass
pocket watch in the ruin,

wind it all night, my fingers whispering
something dark & something true.

Golem

in which the Adversary awaits input

Vinegar. Earth. End
this. Decay & command.
Break ribs. Operate. Yellow,

red, new divine. Cutting.
Anchor. Wet heat & chains
dug in sky. Command me.

Tell every part every
story. Worms. Cavity.
Run this marsh. Tremble

the waters, move each
wave. See with no
eyes. What is hunger.

Command me. Follow
the towers. What is salt.
What is ear. Close

distance. This is plan.
This is written. This is the world
awakened. What is sleep.

What is spray. Reach the fugitive.
Cut down what is needed.
Command me. Right

direction, right mind.
What is cardinal. Whispers
all at once. Point me

toward new north. Feel
my feet move.

Kindling

in which a body casts off its dead

The season that was draws its last
clear breath. Through the cobbles, a trash

flower grows, breeds a plague fruit. Child
tells me it is right to be cold. I cough purple.

We've taken to keeping the sextant pointed
at the bones Nurse has clustered

in the tinderbox. The Scourge Forest has taken
its price. I fall while swamping

through mud, killing our torch.
I reach into my pack for

the last match but Nurse shakes
her filmy hair, tells me to put

my scabs away. We must move
in the darkness, she tells me, that

much is evident. I hack up a tooth,
dead in the middle. She picks it up,

puts it in the tinderbox with the others.

Rustbelt

In the movies, torture
has a single swinging
bulb. Here, in the ruins,
my uncle mumbles
German & chains
cigarettes. We go outside
& under his car. The oil
leaks on our faces.
Snow tries to wash it off.

Rustbelt

In my father's workshop
spit mixes sawdust.
There is ancient
advertising on each

wall, proclaiming
cigarettes & kerosene.
On the anvil, discarded
matches make themselves

a coterie. A race car
rests, destroyed. I sit
inside, pretend
to steer.

Night of Named Colors

in which the Nurse offers confessional

This will kill him. He must know that by now. There is nothing to solve this, no balm or salve or saving gesture. I've ruined his body, made him swallow what he cannot & burned the bits of him that fell off during our progress. This has been set in motion & I am guilty.

I used to live in a tower. My parapets. My glass. I could see the rain's next moves, could see the lonely mountain reach out when the snows came. I could hear each color tell me its name & I listened so hard that my ears told me their names, too.

Now, I am here & I know I must make this way right & true & scatter Vandal across this landscape. Last night, I let him light a fire. It took hours to get the wood dry. I watched his broken hands tremble as he worked the flint, watched his chest struggle to rise as he slept in the warmth.

Tonight, there will be no fire. At least not one of our making.

Night of Murk & Tree

in which Vandal's mouth bleeds daylight

Stillness & weave. We waver in this wood, smell a black scent. My mouth ruins
the perfection of darkness, bleeds the trees clean open. What comes through is a famine

that keeps a body awake but a mind asleep. Nurse says we shouldn't linger, but the air here engulfs
my throat with tallow & beetle. I can feel it crawling up.

Daylight & we're gone. But a sort of darkness can't be escaped.

A trail. Nurse told me *your demons are all your own* but what about the one making ground,

sleepless & full of moth? I cut myself today gathering stones for her but nothing came
out. My skin hangs open & empty. If I close my eyes, take a deep breath, I can smell

the start of the sea. It is melting.

Sextant

in which the deathless sea is made manifest

The map on my back led us
to this desert, told me, in palimpsest

& palindrome, to summon the sea.
It is here that pledges are offered

to passing wraiths, oaths uttered to midnight
sailors trawling the waters for treasures: a torn

kite, a glass bauble stuck in a crevice. We leak
in this rickety vessel. We set up our seance below

decks, draw out the equation with a staff
salvaged from the mast. Nurse commits

herself to the circle, her breath, an elixir, melts
the frost coating her feet, & then there is water.

The Lost Coast

in which many fathoms are crossed

We skim the Deathless Sea. Our skiff of feral glass blotting out what is underneath, pith & breath & something coming. In the middle of our boat, I built a nest. Vandal ferments in its crater, tied to the mast.

Last night, a lock appeared on his cheek, inked in salted animal. I spend the day running my hands through the water until I feel the key needling my fingers. The blood compass calls down clouds & I unlock a new landscape.

Trees swell along a coastline, painting drenched wood, a pictogram depicting what happens when the world is flayed & jarred. I try to call out to them, foam up an unfamiliar word in the glass at my feet. Our boat leaves us, deposits us at the base of carved stairs leading up to the cliffs. & the Lost Coast.

The waves we make are our own.



Rustbelt

Each anthill claims
its own army, strikes
itself from the record.

what record?

The record of holes.
Wise generals know
the significance of shoes
& water & kerosene.
Each violence creates
its own weather.

*No, that is fire. It is fire
that does that.*

Rustbelt

The truck drives
through the barricade.
A uniformed man

raises his hands,
puts parchment
over the engine

block. New tariffs
appear on the scroll.
I can't see anything

else. The buttons on
his epaulet glare.

Rustbelt

What was once
a riddle is now an avenue.
Dirty ice sealed inside.
Alarms cry & then
fall silent. It is hard
to tell what kind
of fortune hives within.
I remember singing
improbable psalms
on the porch swing with
an old woman. I remember
her voice better than mine.
Each song, she said, writes
you a little letter. Some are marked
to whom it may concern.

Day of Nurse & Vandal
in which the Lost Coasts hosts several visitors

The size between the monster
behind us & the monument

in front of us is a wish we whisper.
Cloud & contagion drink out

our veins. A sudden rainstorm
floods the welts left by ache

& strangle. Golem chases
us reluctantly, ramrods his boots

through the moss. We wait for the night
to bayonet itself over the landscape,

feel our anthem forming low in our throat.
The Lost Coast perfects our vices, shows the shoreline,

shows the rocks bullied by our feet. We show
ourselves the bit of lightning we've secreted

in her tinderbox. I grab a handful of mud, smear
our eyes shut. She find the brambles, stitch

vines through our lips. Our backwater
warbles up, breaks the lantern,

breaks the waves. Golem stops, climbs
a cliffside, torchlight & tremble, lays down

his sack of rue. He builds a pyre of organ
& fluid & fire. It burns all night.

Panopticon

in which structures are inhabited

A fissure opens in his chest, writ in thunder. It beckons me to climb inside.

Rustbelt

The herb self-heal, cut
with fat, makes a balm.
Most people consider it

a weed. This garden grew
up when the mill died &
now fables abound. Tonight,

I am deep in the animal
battery, breathing the punctuated
air. I reach out my hands, grab

a fist of green. Twin serpents
undulate up my arms, coil
around my throat.

Their words are now my words.

Hour of Many Fires
in which everything rises

I've always been here, this red
cavern, this space stitched together
like a quilt. Blood suns
from Nurse's limbs, & Golem
finds a way inside, joining. Sightless.
Nurse chants, pulls each bramble
from her lips & offers them to her Adversary
as a meal. When Golem eats, we all
eat. Muteness & ocean. Everything rising,
rising. Up & up.

The New Constellations
in which our heroes...

There are shapes here.

Two figures,
intertwined, a shared
sound, a compass
spinning a sextant
toward the start
of the bluest sea.

A mass of light
learning to blink.

There is an echo.

There is a sky, clear & endless & bright.

Prelude

in which...

What, friends, is a world?

A sheaf of tremble in the bone
dust. A theory
of stars, burst through. The shadow wish.

What, friends, is a body?

Tendrils & fire. A conviction
& a sentence
anchored to the ash
of a bricked-over door.

What, friends, is a monument?

Lavender drying
on the line. The scent, filling,
growing.

& what, friends, is a world?

Something spoken, soft & true,
to a child, to the air, to every heart.
A promise.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Christopher McAllister Williams

EDUCATION:

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI
Ph.D. in English (Creative Writing)
Defense Date: April 23, 2018

Columbia College Chicago, Chicago, IL.
MFA in Poetry
May 2010

Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI
B.A. in English (Creative Writing Concentration)
August 2008

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE:

Poetry Editor: *cream city review* (Fall 2013-Spring 2016)
Development Coordinator: *cream city review* (Fall 2012-Fall 2013)
Editor, *Columbia Poetry Review* (Fall 2008-Spring 2010)
Editor-in-Chief, *Central Review* (Fall 2005-Spring 2006)
Assistant Editor, *Central Review* (Fall 2004)

SERVICE:

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Writing Program Administration, (Fall 2015-Fall 2016)
Assistant Coordinator for Mentoring, College Writing and Research (Fall 2015-Fall 2016)
Mentor, College Writing and Research Online (Spring 2015)
Member, UWM Reader Committee (Spring 2015)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Assistant
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
August 2012-Present
Courses Taught
Introduction to Creative Writing (ENG 233)
Introduction to College Writing (also Online) (ENG 101)
College Writing and Research (also Online) (ENG 102)

Adjunct Instructor
Columbia College Chicago
January 2010-May 2012

Courses Taught:

Writing and Rhetoric I (ENG 52-1151)
Writing and Rhetoric 2 (ENG 52-1152)

PUBLICATIONS (as C. McAllister Williams):

Chapbooks

Neon Augury

Fact-Simile Editions (2011).

Winner of the 2010 Equinox Chapbook Contest

WILLIAM SHATNER

alice blue books (2010).

Poetry

Print:

Gulf Coast 29.2: "Turnbuckle" 2017

Bayou Magazine 65: "Winedark" 2016

Copper Nickel 23, "A Visit to the Tragedy Factory" 2016

POETRY MACHINE 11: "The Year of Cadaver," "The Year of Froth," 2015

Dread Train: "Brute Riddle," "Face Engine," 2015

Sonora Review 64: "Game Theory," 2014

Columbia Poetry Review 24: "In This Situation," "Landscape with Alchemist," "Universal Design," 2011

Central Review: "In the Punch Out of Life, You are Soda Popinski," 2008; "Philip Glass Writes Middle School Love Letter," "4th & Newberry," "Edward Hopper's House," 2005

New Orleans Review: "Flesh," 2010

Bird Dog: "Mr. Scunch Visits Disaster," "Mr. Scunch is Released from the Pittsburgh Bridge Co.," 2008

Pindelyboz: "Sonnet," "Weathervane," 2007

Online:

Still 21: "It's August and Feels Like It," 2016

flr_pln issue d: "Quartermaster," 2016

Ostrich Review: "Cartography," 2016

Lime Hawk 7: "Advent," 2015

ILK 12: "Sulfur," "Flinch Century," 2014

Pinnwheel 2: "You Need to Set Your Motherfucker to Receive," "Dump," "Alter and Gristle," 2013

Night Train 8.2: selections from "SCORE," 2008

My Name is Mud: "Mr. Scunch & His Cheap Parlor Tricks," "Defeated, Tennessee," 2008

GlitterPony 3: "Radio Free Moon," "Radio Free Berlin," "Elegy for the Arrival of Frank Stallone,"

2007

The New Yorker: “Letter to Auguries, Dated October 9th, 1983,” “Dream with Horses and the Rat Pack,” “Idiot Creek, Oregon,” 2007

alice blue review 5: “1978,” “Cousin, This is Enigma,” “It is Raining in Enigma,” “A Car Dealership in Enigma,” “Night Falls in Enigma,” 2007

Thieves Jargon 127: “A Girl Told Me She Went to Texas,” “Landscape with Steve Albini,” “[my monkey-heart & I dance],” 2006

elimaë: “That is Not a Horse,” 2006

FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS, AND AWARDS:

Chancellor's Graduate Student Fellowship (2012-2013)

Winner of Equinox Chapbook Contest (2010)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS:

Computers and Writing, May 24-27, 2018

“Unspooling Twine: Practical Game Design as Writing and Research Pedagogy”

Radical Writes, April 14-16, 2016

“Chance: A Pedagogical Approach”

SELECTED READINGS:

United We Read Reading Series

Milwaukee, WI, November 2015

Midwest Friendlies Reading Series

Milwaukee, WI, March 2015

Eat Local, Read Local Reading Series

Milwaukee, WI, April 2013

United We Read Reading Series

Milwaukee, WI, October 2012

AWP Offsite Event with Alice Blue Books, Bloof, Coconut

Chicago, IL, March 2012

Fact-Simile Editions Equinox Chapbook Release

Philadelphia, PA, July 2011

The Dollhouse Reading Series

Chicago, IL, March 2011