WAVING FROM A HELICOPTER THAT NEVER LEAVES THE GROUND

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WAVING FROM A HELICOPTER THAT NEVER LEAVES THE GROUND

A Project

by

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Department of English
Abstract

of

WAVING FROM A HELICOPTER THAT NEVER LEAVES THE GROUND

by

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This collection of poems is a kind of expedition through memory through the relationships we form with words and between words; a kind of exploration via illusion. A documentary film shot from a helicopter that never leaves the ground. [...] And so each venture Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate With shabby equipment always deteriorating [...] And what there is to conquer By strength and submission, has already been discovered Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope To emulate—but there is no competition—There is only the fight to recover what has been lost And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss./For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. — T.S. Eliot

Prof. Joshua McKinney

Committee Chair

5-6-09

Date
DEDICATION

To my parents – Rick and Kathy, and all of my family and friends
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See the Child

The child read
from the Book of Smoke.
words formed a futureland of
becoming and unbecoming, a
trailhead marked: choice

and there, a soft blue chair
upon which he sat –
the hazy distance aglow at all times –

nothing stayed the same.

Now, the child of books watches
for signs of fire. Saves flint
and brimstone shards
in his pockets, throws
stones in still water –
ideas travel in widening circles –

a voice in the water: ask not.
a voice in the water: choose.

Clouds and vapor conceal
these coordinates, peaks
and valleys in a
waveform spectrograph,
one-sided boundaries pushed
to loss.

Now, amongst lines of imprecision, remember
the solidity of margins, the words not
bleeding to the edges unless
made to.

In the Book of Smoke there is telling
and retelling. A voice says: drink.
Drink from your body,
like a lizard in the desert.
Shoplifting

- after Donald Revell

I once skipped Sunday School –
climbed to the roof
where I was invisible,
or beyond
God’s peripheral vision.

Untrue at the time, the story
went better that way.

After words, I gave up
and hiked
to the woods.
I thought to myself, be grateful,
and ruined the mood.

What I had lasted until it made sense
to stop,
though in my nakedness
I was often lost.

As I walked home I worried
what I had stolen
like prayer beads.
Picture Box

Dogwood blossoms spread white on red dirt, cold cars leave carports. Hoses raveled, lawns watered. An old woman bent for the newspaper, pale housecoat, pale arms. Gravel chimes on chassis, morning smell blown thick through the window.
   Finger tracks in dust
   show the tracery of small
   hands – waving goodbye.

Past the A&P, chocolate milk. Train on the siding (4 a.m. arrival), left under the tracks. Childhood’s yellow house, school across the way. The track clay dark with water.
   Plywood gone silver,
   under the pecans and oaks
   white chickens cackle.

   A warm, spotted egg
   suspended over sidewalk
   bird that might yet be.
Genealogy

Unravel this knot, this center that cannot hold, absent from the beginning.

In the woods they have hung up their dirty laundry. Their ghosts blow in the wind. Georgia, we miss you.

Scots-Irish penitents at the ends of your ropes.

The magician climbs a line anchored to air.

That silken cord waits to part the veil between a child and his knowledge of knots.

The houses here are cut in half — long, narrow, windowless affairs. Where time touches down briefly and then escapes through the culvert next to the tracks.

Between the trees hang family clotheslines, half hitches linking nothing to nothing.
Conversion

You listen for the call on the buried phone of unborn southern dreams,
watch the sky for the crossing. A calliope of fire so bright we are deaf to it.

Then smell the churned ozone,
the good earth lidded by the mournful and their reconstituted hope.

You step over a rotten log in Georgia and find new signs in the patterns on
a box turtle’s shell. You remember that you walked through poison ivy to get here. You have the chiggers to show for it.

You grow up playing with the antlers and skullcap of a mule deer
your father killed. You almost forget there is only one kind of death.

But for now you hold that piece of skull against your own, you charge around.

You shake your antlers in the air.
Evening Chores

- after Al Purdy

I have had a beer and am going to write a poem.

I have swept the bathroom floor, and thought about the setting sun.

About her lips, what they mean when kissed and slightly parted.

I have thought about half-closed eyes.

I have thought, the sun is going down, or coming up, and should it matter?

I have thought, other bathroom floors have been swept, mine is but one more.

I thought the beer was very cold and good.
Estrangement

We lived like we were on a vacation
we could hardly wait to forget.
It was cold at night and the trains
were loud and empty
bottles lay everywhere
every morning. In the kitchen
our bodies were charged, our polarity
repulsive. We passed in the hall,
clouds so full of rain no rain could fall.
We followed a map that erased itself
as we traveled farther, the roads back
faded to white, the horizon
was shrouded in white,
beyond the margins.
The Road Itself a Souvenir

When the moon is bright we drive with the headlights off. 
The illusion of depth altered, the eye 
sees what it wants to. The oaks are ghosts 
of trees. The endless bending of starlight 
into recognizable shapes governs their haunting. 
The road growls under the tires. 

Six hundred miles of stale air leaves us drained and tired. 
The best part of road trips is getting off 
of them. The exit signs are haunting 
until we choose not to ignore them. I 
wonder if the stars envision themselves as starlight, 
or are they only ghosts 

of stars gone cold? Dead a billion years, now our ghosts 
to navigate by. Despite one bad tire 
we go on eating time by starlight. 
The road itself a souvenir paid off 
in counted miles, a constant ticking across the eye. 
Their passing is haunting. 

Their steady folding and unfolding is haunting. 
The destination is a laughing ghost 
who stood waving as we left. Our eyes 
on the clover leaf, the weakening tires 
give out. We hitch a hundred miles. We try to stay off 
course and hide from starlight. 

The homeless men say our map is wrong, that starlight 
by day makes the night birds dark and haunting. 
Unsure of what that means, we go off 
to think alone. The printed lines are ghosts 
of landscapes. Down this road a little farther, tired 
(map burnt into eyes 

that blink and stare into a smeared horizon) I 
notice the end standing in a starlit 
rest stop. Behind me, relentless tires 
chew up the listless highway, hauntingly 
regular, the concrete breathing. The nomadic ghosts 
leaving where we left off.
In the curvature of the eyes the endless road is haunted by dusty starlight. We hear ghosts in the shush of tires. We turn the headlights off.
The Changeling

The weight of this decision
rides her like a spirit rides
a medium in a movie.

Leaving will be that séance.

A table will shake, a hand
will scrawl and scrawl in circles
on a sheet of butcher paper,
the candles will go out to
screams and moans. In the dark we
will breathe heavily and barely

touch. Later we will listen to
the tapes – a child’s voice there
in the background. Played at slow
speeds they are oracles:

This is not the end of the world,
This is not the end of the world,
This is not the end of the world.
[The four lane highway]

The four lane highway
begins with a compression, a packed
van, a station wagon six years full.

She moves. He is pleased his
bicycle fits and can come along.

Just before they go, the dog
eats shit in the neighbor’s yard

and a lie becomes a bridge, no
distance spanned truly crossed over.
The End of the Four Lane Highway

Fifth floor balcony with
view of the shipyards.
Thin shadows put needles
in their arms, toes. It rains,
sun out. In the mist split
light, binners take the
recyclables, ride shopping
carts down the alleys. It
feels good to go fast in
narrow spaces.

Signs and signals taken
for protection, semaphore
along the highway spells
out a chronicle of losing
and finding, we unpack.
Haiku on a Plane

From my window seat
the moon hides underwater,
slips under the earth.
In Addition

A woodcut print labeled *El Corazon*  
affixed to the refrigerator

next to rejection letters. Magnets are the only thing  
we have faith in.

Produce checked for bruises. We frown  
knowingly and label it a hindrance  
in darker hues,  

faces hide disappointment.
Indian Summer

As I waited in the gutter
at the edge of the road (because
there are no sidewalks here)
a redtail hawk cried out twice and leapt
from the fence post and into the blue.

I remember a nap on
a sunny day in October.
I had just moved from
further north and the extended summer
weather made me drowsy. A nap
was the only thing for it, but the young
hawks in their nest on the hill behind
the house were making the saddest
sound in the world.
Campfires

Cutting kindling with a dull hatchet as an exercise in splitting, meaning you tell me to be careful and I try but nearly take off my thumb anyway. I could get up to find the whetstone but this constant thumping is easier. Bang the blade against the pine until it splits, then sit back, feed it in slowly, until it’s time for more.
This Dream

Surprised again
that I’m here
with time to think
not again, not this dream
again. The same small
whispers. The directionless
talk, the moment when you
undress over and over
and dissolve to white. Arms and
breasts always the last thing I see.
My hands are pinned
at my sides, palms up.
I almost reach out, almost
hook your hair behind an ear,
then I remember
in this dream we
never touch, we
never speak.
Fragment

The sky's gradient climbs from the horizon and there is talk of how to forget, to shed years like snakeskin. The scaffold of memory held in an oak's black sketch of branches, or measured in old photos and empty bottles, in days that scroll away in twelve point type and skitter as husks in the breeze at dusk.

On the back patio Grandpa speaks in circles, ninety-six year lines around his eyes, lines upon lines. The best way to forget a woman, he says, is to forget her. And come back to God; maybe we all come back that way. In the air between us the past bulges, light plays on long roads and paths, lines on maps of maps behind his eyes. The sun oranges the trees, goes down.
Apple Trees

At the orchard's edge
day is porous.

The creek still
fenced off.
When the fallen
branches are burned I

remember the frantic ants
that boiled out of the smoldering
logs and dripped into
the flames. How we watched.
How we stood

very still.
He Remembers

Montpelier, a home
split-logged and unplastered.
Remembers when it
burned flames crawled
from the kitchen stove
so patiently
he and his brothers
sisters and father
had time to save
mother's things.
He remembers this.

(He cannot remember if
he has eaten today or
what day it is.)
But he remembers
the narrow box
canyon, the road
into Logan that was one-
wagon wide.
His father made them walk
because sometimes a
wagon went over the side.
It happened that way.
He remembers his father stopped
for someone (uphill
wagons were given
the right-of-way) remembers
his father had to back-up,
remembers the absurdity
of horses and wagon
in reverse,
it was a sight,
and the drop there,
one hundred fifty
two hundred feet
to the river.

(He cannot remember
which grandson is which.)
But he remembers
his brother’s car
his first ride
in a car, first
car his family
had ever seen
or touched.
Remembers –
(you can hear
this in his voice)
the way the car
compressed
distance and time.
Remembers the first
time his father
drove, how he didn’t know
about brakes and shouted
Whoa Whoa Whoa
and cursed the car
in Dutch
(which is really
his way of saying
Schweizerdeutsch
which is really
Swiss German).
Remembers how his father
never drove a car again.
The Border

On the way to the ocean
we forgot the war.
The trees slipped by,
the road felt long, but
not too long. We enjoyed
the sense of leaving
something behind.
Even my books felt
too ambitious.
We passed the farm
where I hoped to see
familiar horses, but
my memory misplaced them
in another white-fenced
field next to a different pond.
What we really wanted
was a drink, but the room was
cool and small and lying
on the bed was a surrender
or a treaty with age.
We went down the cliffs
to the river’s mouth, where
the water went in two directions
at once, sloughing land into
each other. The beach was too
hot for bare skin, the water
too cold for words.
[And you were glorious, but the day was worn]

And you were glorious, but the day was worn
like glass, worn to opacity
edges fettled to smoothness

(a woman’s belly between the ribs and navel).

The day’s navel full of sand, wind,
grit. We turned and
laughed, turned and took photographs.
   In the end
we went back to the hotel,
watched us cover ourselves
in various fabrics that would dissolve
as light dissolved. As the sound wore on
to stillness

(which we had but coveted all the same).

Before I knew enough to stop I looked
just long enough to know
that what we thought we had found
hovered above us. Hovered
above and shook as cool air came
in through the open door.

We lay in the damp. Nothing flew in the air save
motes and light and we read aloud and ponderously.
   Pines scribbled towards dawn and we couldn’t stand the thought –

(then nothing flew but owls and phosphor, in the spaces between, nothing
but the sound of blood in our ears).

On the cliff above the sea we drank whiskey, within the night it was hard
to stay warm, hard to –

(I stood in the whale’s ribs and listened to the gulls and seals bark and cough. In the
boneframe I laughed as the day wore on to noon between the slat and joint surround, the
bone gray, frayed, like fencewood and you looked in at me and laughed and when you
looked in at me there was a certainty that passed. It passed and we were not the pilgrims
we thought we had become)
Screenplay

When you turned twenty I taught you to say zwanzig.
On the way to school we name trees – oak, yew,
passed time in montage – until you x’d
the line I’d left blank, grabbed your bag, said wiedersehen
and climbed on a bus.

In the next act, I drive the VW
across a continent, chain-smoking, utterly
inconsolable. 5,000 frames later, I find trouble
in a bar. Watch me crumble like a sparrow
diving for moths. Watch me drown in revisions,
dissolve into landscape, call for quiet
on the set. I’m haunted by the previous
act. In Prague you’re suddenly Odette
in Swan Lake. In Vienna I know
that they’re going to kill us Monday.
Doesn’t matter, because the lighting
is all wrong.

What they keep
in the script is life in jumbled
parody. In the end we rely on illusion
and wave from a helicopter
that never leaves the ground.
The story is never about what’s found,
only about the exhausted
hero standing in the deluge,
in front of a café window crying
a name, fists balled, alone.
Scene in Progress

In an antique tent a Yankee colonel hands a dispatch to Walt Whitman.

A dying general speaks a word that is a name and a flower.

The camera, on its narrow track rolls slowly away.

Horses and leather in motion. Wind shaking the tent.

The screenwriter says the tent is a shroud the past shows through in silhouette. Then

the boom mike droops into the frame.
[To elude]

To elude
think of illusion
or perhaps, and also, elision,
or that which is hidden
in plain speech –

Think of imaginary conversations
with the unborn children of the unborn,
silent as orphaned grapes on a vine
under someone’s arbor. Think of a green blade –
of a knife or grass.
Simultaneity

– after Hiroshima Mon Amour

A poem leaps backwards up a cross-cut redwood –
time is a ring – and there is a woman in a white dress
in front of that ring.

This virtual green. And she falls, has fallen, is always
falling. Now

I don’t want to alarm you, but how did we get
up in this bell tower in the first place?

~

At that instant she read his face with her hands he read her face with his and there was no
doubt that their past was a language transformed. A new syntax. An underwater tea room
with an automatic jukebox. Her plane leaves tomorrow. The curves of the earth fall away
in two directions at once.
Refraction

In some books there are bodies
of water so clear that below the surface
corpses seem real.

(Every word a toy boat - each sentence
a swamped canoe)

Soon, wind kicks up chop on the dark
lake. Bends the trees into parentheses.
    Every
    thing
    under
    water.
Function

You tell yourself, *the windows are there to keep the day out.* Time-lapse clouds unravel in tinted glass. We crowd the walls to keep the center of the room clear.

You tell yourself, *a bird's skull is half air.* One last thump against the reflection of solid sky, you never really see it happen. You see it sidelong, one feather spiraling down.
The Unappreciated Luxury of Birds

How the government of Heaven
Rests this morning in a crow's mouth
- Donald Revell

The paired cackles, the warming sun, the unappreciated luxury of birds. Crow, gull, hawk, starling, more that I do not know the names of. Brown nests appear in trees still chattering in their winter bareness. Pt. Atkinson bald eagles wheel on updrafts. The efficient lighthouse scatters depiction across the undulated rock, words lost in the small, winding grooves — the old questions have nothing to do with this split granite, it plays the long game while language goes out with the tide.

The small door at the base of the lighthouse is open and I see a boy throw a stick into the waves, a dog leaps and sends a column of ducks into orderly retreat around the point.
What If

The unexpected rustle of wings overhead,

or a dictionary thrown from a second-story window.

And what if the pages were blank?

What if definitions were replaced

with impressions –

the dogwood in the front yard
bloomed reference,
typography,
and papyrus.
Where It Has Gone

If poetry is gone out to pasture
then we must reckon in the furrows.

Our own dirt we scatter,
animals between
the furrows.

In the loaming, we stir,
unreconciled
to this, or to that.
Means of Conveyance

Winter A monkish engine hides behind this cowl.
Sluggish when cold, self-deprecating when
low on fuel, complacent on hills. Not quite honest despite
bruised fenders and a wheedling serpentine belt that is rarely seen.

Summer Parking lots melt back into constituents.
Sleeping electric doors fail to open, motion sensors
wink absentmindedly and streets with names like Primrose stink
in the heat. What is, is not when roads and soles begin to fuse.

Spring Leaving the highway, the province of off-ramp and pit
stop, young men ejaculate manifestos. Their waking
and dreaming fused in the invisible patterns left by hands
held out the car window, splitting the slipstream.

Fall A car becomes the sum of its occupants, disgorging
pilgrims at the crossroads. In the slow veins
of leaves, a code. Under the hood, the means of
conveyance. Windows roll down, scenery comes in.
Running the Dogs

Loping across green grass towards the river.
Brown legs gallop wide trails and sound a four beat measure of ground covered.
A chevron of mallards bursts fearful into flight.
Baptism

The font earthen and full
of uprooted trees.
A creeping redemption
covered the land and cattle
fled to higher ground
and many more could not be saved.
Roads disappeared from beneath
our tires and no birds returned
with beaks full of promise.
A tractor became trapped and
men were lowered from helicopters
to help, momentarily birds themselves.
Family photos rafted on curled,
brown tongues. A sonorous
bedlam, whole houses lifted up
and drifted away, twelve-year-
old girls hidden inside. Furniture
bumped against walls, upstairs
bedrooms offered a swaying asylum.
And when the clouds finally scattered,
when pressures low and high
went their separate ways,
a girl and her house crossed
the horizon. She was
already gone when the house
settled and sagged, collapsed,
without saying a word.
The Skirmish

We gave them what they wanted, like a casino buffet like self-serve prophesy packaged nicely in parentheses.

In the desert we feel free to sift through the cradle’s midden for our brass.

We visit the coast and ignore the concertina wire.

In the spring time land mines sprout small plastic flags.

We look outward at the horizon, not realizing that we are the horizon.

Angry men with disposable income watch from their caves in the desert, they create new forms of death in the desert and send them to us via text message.

Cell phones grow on trees. In the seconds it took to pluck that fruit our ring tones changed a thousand times.
O Moment

O Decade
the day you fell – the crepe
paper cars, the demolition
of all things.
Nothing borrowed
returned.
The lines we stood in,
stand-ins, checked
and x’d – O Nano –

left too long
in the sun we
turn circles seen
through
bombsights –

we picklebarrel
our belongings
and leave them all
in refrigerated storage –
O Eon – O Fortnight –
O 21st Century.
Citizen Disney

The evil eye of the camera’s iris
opens –

Kane drops his snow globe.
This time it doesn’t break.

This is 2004 – they’re not
made of glass anymore.

Rosebud is not inside.

Disney staged a keepsake coup –
the little Bavarian village all burned
up by hordes of wide-eyed
plastic militants.

Shake in desperation –
the acrylic snow swirls and conceals
and settles, but the tableau is fixed –
the boy and his sled lost –

The anthropomorphic mice fire their guns
into the gelatinous air.
Interlude

The insomniac's
pre-dawn reckoning
ends and begins in
a dream of bees in swarm
across the ceiling.
Wing beats counted
backwards into stillness,
into cold, black
sleep, the sound
of it still audible, the
bee's buzz in the bottle.
Synesthesia

When the smell
of soap reminds you
of something
that never happened,

when a navel orange
on the countertop
is a memento
of someone who
never was,

think of a metaphor
for the one you love,
and make water
as complicated
as possible.
Unlikely Garden

That is an apple tree
grown from seed.
A core tossed out a
passing car’s window,
falls in the steep rip-rap
along the highway’s edge.
What thin roots it grew
to hold and live and hang
dusty red ornaments
from reaching branches
over the precarious slant.
Disillusionment of Half Past Nine

The houses are haunted
by the blue pulse of TV screens.
None are seen,
not briefly at the windows,
or out of doors,
or on a walk with the dog.
None remember how strange
it is to see by any light
but the white beads of stars.
People are not going
to watch the full moon
lengthen their shadows.
Only, here and there, an old
woman, an old man, broken
shopping carts abandoned,
look up to point, reach
out on clear nights,
for the Great Bear.
Geology Lesson

Garden of rock and garter snake,
glacial valley gutted
by decades of decomposition
and draining watershed.

Nothing outlasts Nevada;
the rock naked after
the Sierra’s sequoias burn
and the cedars splinter.

Ambitious trails abandoned; arid
alpine sun harshly illuminates
a minute hiker stumbling home.
The long shadows lengthen

along the ungraded trail and
backward looks bear witness:
this nowhere will remain
no one’s.
What This Is Not

A false prophet from the county fair
(crystal gazer with an old black hat)
walks
in the denuded suburbs.

The calendar moves
in two directions at once
a summer of no barbecues
spent in a sudden flare.

You’re starved to death
on a feast of *alone*
of learning to be

fragments and figments of
language
like Japanese, each
syllable a photo –
each one a kiss in a
photo booth
at the same
county fair
as before.
How It Works

There is a system in place for when the magnolias begin
to bloom. The seeds that fall through April form wary fists that open into
bone-white dinner plates.
The mechanics of that opening –
initiation ignition passed down
lines of command comprised of G C A T ...

... but really, after the drama,
after the bloom and wilt ...
the trees are beautiful if
you stop and don’t think.
Patrick Lane

The day starts
in your crescent
of light and shade
made by the
bamboo stalks
you and your wife
planted.
You remember.

You remember bottle
after bottle
placed with care,
because you never
knew where the
whine of the saw,
the random fists,
the full moon,
would find you.
I try to hang my poem on your door
with inventive nails, but textbook tacks
are all I can find.

I want to make this poem leap around
and run screaming up and down the street
like it is on fire, or if not on fire, then at least chased
by its figment.

This poem was told that it was raised in the mountains,
wholesome and corn fed. I take it out
each day for some air. And all it has to say
is, the absurd birds herd turd.

I tell it to knock off that nonsense
the neighbors are staring.

I tell it, be a love poem. Read some sonnets, please.
Stop pestering the cat. I tell it about the day
it stood in the mountains, naked and unashamed.
I am lying to it in the nicest way possible.
One day, when it grows up, it will thank me.
Country & Western

Long lost, the beauty queen comes home broken, her mascara mask haunted billboards for years. She was misprized young, crooked smile for all to see. Alone in back lot tents, then a ten minute ride to Memphis. Bakelite clocks blur in travel trailer bedrooms, a slow trial by apathy. Guitars prattled, high and thin, and her taxi missed the last turn again.

Framed photos show a young fiddle player turned groom, tall on the courthouse steps with her. A mobile home in Flagstaff with whisper hollow walls recalls his whiskey fights, her sleepless nights, stale beer in the hall. Her record turns in the dark – shush, shush, shush. The album’s last page enough for us.
Encryption

This ship to shore doesn’t work anymore,  
the dots and dashes down the line all stop  
and hang in absurd air outside your door.  
Sleeping away (the anchor fouls the prop)  
we cannot hear the black chatter of code  
against the porthole. Run aground again  
in beachside bars, a repeat episode  
of salty guilt in gutters in the rain.

    I tap and tap this rusted, brittle mess-  
    age, hoping in the dark that land and sky  
collide, and dream of worlds wherein a less  
audible buzz on the wire seems to cry:  
the sea swallows the sand – the push and pull  
of waves – the dispatch is lost in the lull.
Note to Self

The day you think you've found the lightstrewn path,  
the channeled arcade, you become lost in the shade. 
Some ideas fizzle across the brain, and with 
desperate gymnasts crashing our boring parade, 
they tumble, skitter-skatter, and then thrash 
like dancers in a terrible ballet. 
Distractions circle. Sharks in a bloody swath 
across the cerebellum's sea; a raid 
on the rugose orb. A new pyrolatry. 
One thousand years in the womb a distant plea, 
or bargain with time we read out line by line. 
The light burns for an instant, a thin spine 
of fire to follow past the previous maps. 
The vocabulary unfolds, the ideas unwrap.