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# Songs of Expansion

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Songs of Expansion

By

Blake Earl Ray

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**Songs of Expansion**  
by  
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## Songs of Expansion

### Introduction and Meta-Analysis

For my capstone project, I chose to compose a collection of poetry. I have titled my collection *Songs of Expansion*, a name that I took from one of the poems included. In addition to calling attention to one of the stronger works in the collection, this title serves the purpose of highlighting many of the themes that are present throughout the collection as well as my development as an author over the last several years. Music is a strong theme in the language and metaphors that I use in my work, and many of the poems are songs in a postmodern sense, in that they are not rhymed or formal but turn on repetition of theme. Expansion is also a theme in my work—in the sense of urban decay and progress. In addition, my poems have expanded in theme, length, and subject matter over my time as a writer, and continue to do so.

This collection contains many poems that I have written in workshops as both a graduate student and an undergraduate at Kennesaw State University. In many ways, this collection is a culmination of those classes as well as the classes in literature and philosophy that I took at the University

of Georgia during my first four years in college. I have revised the themes and execution of these poems, but at their core, they show a timeline of my development and my journey as a writer.

From a young age, I have been fascinated by the written word, as I'm sure most writers would say. I learned to read early, and have since then been an avid reader. As a child, I read whatever I could get my hands on. I loved nonfiction, science fiction, and horror. I was a huge fan of H.G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, and Jules Verne. I tried to read everything that they had written and spent long hours immersed in the worlds that they created. I learned to love language and words. I would have to say that I owe my vocabulary to those early years sitting on the porch with some 19<sup>th</sup> century science fiction novel and a dictionary to look up the obscure or archaic words. Those books also probably have a lot to do with my poor understanding of science.

When I was a little older, about eleven or twelve, I found a new author to read obsessively: Edgar Allen Poe. I was absolutely enthralled with the way he used the English language. He was able to evoke emotions and create moods in ways that I had never seen before. One thing that I took away from Poe, which I hold dear, is the fact that well-chosen words and careful phrasing are indispensable to a work of literature. I remember sitting down with the complete works of Poe and reading it, basically cover to cover. This was really the first place where I experienced poetry. I was blown away by



the fact that, with just a few stanzas, an author could really affect me as a reader. I learned a lot from reading Poe's poems that I try to pull into my own writing. I admire the way that the sounds of words and the rhythm of lines work together in his poetry and try to keep that in mind as I write my own poems.

During high school and my later adolescence was the time when I first experimented with my own writing. Most of it was terrible. I was not much of a fiction writer. Often I would lose interest halfway through my stories, which were elaborately ridiculous and poorly executed. My poetry was as bad or worse. It was self-indulgent and maudlin, full of archaic vocabulary and obscure references. I was saved from this sort of writing by my discovery of punk rock and postmodern literature. By the time I was about sixteen or seventeen, I began writing song lyrics. My experiences as a musician and my love of music are probably the two biggest influences I have as a writer. I always try to bring a feeling of melody and rhythm into my poetry.

For most of my undergraduate career, I wrote song lyrics almost exclusively. I still loved poetry, though; in fact, the punk band I played in for five years was named The Subalterns after the Thomas Hardy poem. I only wrote poetry occasionally, and when I did, it was for my own enjoyment and not really anything that I would show to anyone. During this time, I kept busy by playing music and occasionally making it to class at UGA. After four years and three majors, I decided a change of scenery might help me to

actually finish college, so I left Athens and moved to Kennesaw to finish an undergraduate degree in English. It was at Kennesaw State that I first took a poetry workshop class. Through that class, I began to take myself seriously as a writer. I learned what kind of poetry I wanted to write and what my ethos as a poet is.

One of the first things that I wanted my poetry to do was, like Poe's work, to convey a mood. I like to use phrasing and words which are all connotatively linked. For example, in my poem, "Then the bottom falls out," I used the color grey and muted sounds in the first stanzas, and these become the two motifs of the poem. In all the stanzas following the first one, the colors are sparse or grey and the sounds are distant or ambient. This is my attempt at establishing the mood of the poem, making the imagery match the emotional subtext of the subject matter. One of my favorite poets, one who has inspired a lot of my work, is Thomas Hardy. In his poem, "The Darkling Thrush," he establishes a scene in the first stanza that provides a thematic ground for the rest of the piece. Hardy writes

I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky

Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted night  
Had sought their household fires (32).

This establishment of ground with language and imagery is something that I have tried to incorporate into my own poetry. My poem “Late September in Atlanta—A Dirge,” uses this same technique to establish the context in which I wish the rest of the piece to be viewed. My first sentence, stretched over three stanzas, is

This is the season of the wake—  
when tall buildings hide in clouds  
and rain falls in silver needles  
  
against glass and concrete and brick,  
as the long cold nights from up north  
slowly creep down I-85  
  
past Raleigh and Greensboro and  
Charlotte and Greenville to finally  
settle in just south of 10<sup>th</sup> Street.

This is the ground that I establish for the reader to judge the rest of the poem. This strategy of setting the scene with connotation carried by the words has been especially effective for my more narrative works and has helped me to establish a style that I find effective in many, if not all, cases.

I also wanted to make sure that my poetry was modern. I believe that poetry should be, at its core, a living art form that develops and grows. By a “living art” I mean that I abhor the use of archaic language and syntax in poetry, which makes the poem inaccessible to the reader. If the poem doesn’t draw me in and immerse me in the world of the poem, then I feel like I am at odds with the poet philosophically. I do not often see archaic language in the works of contemporary poets, but I have seen it in many of the pieces from classmates and contributors to the literary magazine for which I help to select poetry. I do not want to say that I do not like forms or poetic tradition. I have used forms in the past as a way in which to set my subject matter, especially a very contemporary subject, at odds with a tradition of poetry—for example, a sonnet about punk rock or a villanelle about urban sprawl. I want to explore what can be said in poetry without retreading ground that has already been covered. I think that this can be said of all good poets. For my work, modernity often comes from responding directly to other living contemporary poets. One of my poems responds directly to Galway Kinnell’s “After Making Love We Hear Footsteps.” My poem is an inversion of the themes of domesticity in that poem. I titled it “After Breaking and Entering

We Hear Footsteps,” and it tells a short narrative about the eminent dissolution of a relationship. The poem began as I was perusing a book of contemporary American poets. The name of Kennell’s piece stood out to me, and, after reading it, I was impressed with his ability to paint a scene. Having never been in the place of the narrator, I wondered what the poem would look like from a different point of view—namely that of my own late adolescence. My poem then became a version of his poem through the inverse point of view. In order to provide ground for this inversion of theme, I used Kennell’s lines “...but let there be that heavy breathing/ or a stifled come-cry anywhere in the house/ and he will wrench himself awake...” (300) as the epigraph to my poem, being careful to cut it so that the “he” was unspecific leaving the reader as unsure as the narrator in my poem as to the identity of the one behind the footsteps. I believe that one way in which to highlight my themes of decay and existential dread is to place my poem or my narrator in a context arguing against another poem or poetic persona. In the case of my poem, “Songs of Expansion,” I wanted to write about the philosophical ramifications of the American push westward, and in order to lend my poem more urgency, I decided to question Walt Whitman who is both a poet and a symbolic figure in American culture. This tendency to add urgency through conflict is a product of my background in modernist and postmodernist literature of course, but it can also be traced to my identification with counter-culture ideals and aesthetics.

Most of my formal literary background started with an undergraduate English degree. I spent the first four years at the University of Georgia and focused primarily modernism, an interest that I carried with me to Kennesaw State. I was especially interested southern literature and the shift from modernism into postmodernism. Many of the themes in modernism and postmodernism form the central concerns of my poems. Many postmodernist works are concerned with addressing the artist and the artifice of poetry or literature. My poem, "Notes on visiting my hometown," deals with this idea directly. The poem is as follows,

When everyone I know has died,  
left, or given up on me,  
I will be more honest.  
I will be able to, unafraid, smear  
concrete-white pages with words  
as sharp and sweet and shocking  
as the smell of gasoline or the taste of bourbon.  
I will lay my life out like a cadaver  
inviting the eyes and hands  
that I have hidden myself from.

The theme of exposure verses anonymity is, to me, a version of the way that modernist literature seems to concern itself with alienation. The ironic turn is that, in making the statement that he does not want to expose himself, the speaker is already exposing himself. Originally, the poem was much longer, but it did not have the restraint and impact that a shorter piece has. Through workshop, revision and the advice of my capstone committee, I was able to boil the piece down to a much shorter length that improves the piece as a whole. Bukowski has a poem entitled "As The Poems Go," that I believe also addresses the thematic concerns of my piece, albeit from a much more experienced place. Bukowski's poem is

as the poems go into the thousands you  
realize that you've created very  
little.

it comes down to the rain, the sunlight,  
the traffic, the nights and the days of the  
years, the faces.

leaving this will be easier than living  
it, typing one more line now as  
a man plays a piano through the radio,  
the best writers have said very  
little

and the worst,  
far too much (1).

Bukowski is a poet I have only recently been reading, but I find that his work is interesting in theme and execution, and it has allowed me to explore more of my earlier work with a renewed interest.

Bukowski is one of the poets that my work has been compared to most. I share a lot of subject matter with him. Many of my earlier works in graduate workshops have been concerned with or make reference to alcohol, sex, and urban life. Up to a point these things were interesting to me as subject matter for poetry. I would say that my addressing of these subjects is an attempt to address alienation, a common theme in modernist and postmodernist literature. The narrative voice is alone and disenfranchised in a world that seems to be divorced of meaning. My poem, “In Spite of the Storm,” deals with these themes in a different way, depicting the subject as a recluse with an unspecified mental disease. The use of the villanelle form is a way of providing a structure that helps to emphasize the subject’s obsessive-compulsive tendencies. That poem also incorporates a common motif in much of my poetry—music.

I have been a musician all of my life and I feel like playing and listening to music has taught me a lot of things that I strive to include in my verse. One of the things that I have always found interesting is the



relationship between jazz music and poetry. Since the invention of jazz, poets have been including its rhythms and meter into their work, a practice that has not gone entirely out of style, and yet it is far more rare to see poets doing the same thing with rock and roll. One of my aesthetic interests is combining poetry and rock and roll. I spent most of my adolescence and undergraduate years listening to punk rock and playing guitar in punk bands, and the confrontational nature of punk music and culture has defiantly made its way into my poetry. There is something interesting, in an ironic postmodern way, about hearing Sid Vicious sing Frank Sinatra's "My Way" or listening to The Meatmen play "We Hate This Riff" in which they repeat said riff, originally from a Nirvana song, over and over again. My incorporation of Whitman's phrasing in my poem "Songs of Expansion" is akin to this ironic repetition, the high literary version of the tongue-in-cheek cover song.

I should probably discuss, at this point, my narrative aesthetic, which one my classmates once called "The Blake Style." One of the things that I keep coming back to in my poetry is the idea of incorporation of different types of literature and art into poetry. For example, I, being a musician, try to incorporate the themes and rhythms of rock music into my poetry, which is a major part of what becomes "The Blake Style." A good illustration of my incorporation of thematic elements taken from sub-culture music into my poetry is the use of cigarettes in my poems as a recurring symbol of idleness

and often the beginning of a digressive meditation, and this use of the image is something that can be seen in a lot of rock songs such as in The Stooges' song, "Little Doll," where Iggy Pop sings "Little doll I can't forget/smoking on a cigarette," to present the image of a bored teenaged girl. In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner writes "When new forms arise, as they do from time to time, they rise out of one of two processes, genre-crossing or the elevation of popular culture," (19). Although he is speaking about fiction, I take this statement as a useful place to begin aesthetically. The close of my poem, "A Jump-Blues Elegy," is a place where I have done this genre crossing, incorporating rhythms that are more rock and roll oriented rather than poetically inspired "no, in that moment he's all/ molten arpeggios and glissando, / a pioneer soul of rock and roll/ with a jazz pedigree inside a 2/4 beat." This is the epitome of my use of the popular to inspire the poetic, something that I feel is important to keeping poetry fresh.

My poetry has developed greatly over the course of my time in the MAPW program. I have begun to move in a direction toward combining many different interests and influences into a style and voice that is unique to me as a poet. My collection documents this style and is the end product of my development as a writer through reading and writing in the MAPW program.

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## Centralia, PA

1

The fire could have been burning for years  
before anyone noticed the gas leaching  
up into the homes of the miners and  
their families, because anthracite burns  
longer and hotter than regular coal.  
The fire may have started one night  
in May when embers thrown off by a fire  
in one of the abandoned pit mines caught  
a vein of coal that ran down under the  
quiet streets (most of the mines had closed years  
before taking with them jobs and people).  
Maybe, as the methane bubbled up through  
the dirt for the first time, the people still  
in town caught a whiff of coal smoke mixing  
with the sick-sweet smell of burning garbage.

2

They thought the fire was out.  
The night it caught  
they dowsed it with water  
and they thought the fire was out.

3

The gears that drive the world  
get older and more choked with rust  
every year. As they slip and catch,  
it's easy for a person, or a whole town, to be  
forgotten—for the memory of a place  
to drift away like ashes flicked into the breeze  
by a smoker's nervous fingers, and there  
isn't anyone to notice or care that anything has  
been lost. The only witnesses are  
the distant stars that hang meaninglessly  
in the night sky, dead before  
their light haunts the empty  
forgotten places that lay below.

4

The mines are alive  
with pagan fire.  
Deliberately it  
moves toward the graveyard  
boiling ground water—  
filling the mines with  
steam and poison gas.

5

When the government came to install the  
monitors that detect the gas,  
they said everyone would be  
safe. That was twenty years  
before the ground crumbled away  
under the feet of a twelve year old boy  
and nearly dropped him into the fire.

6

A woman sits quietly  
on a worn floral couch  
in a room with faded wallpaper  
and listens to a canary sing.

The windows are open,  
despite the cold autumn wind,  
and the steady electric eye  
of a carbon gas monitor

gazes unblinkingly past her  
from the far wall. Her children  
are asleep and she wonders  
if they can hear the canary's song

cutting into their dreams.  
They know that if he stops  
the air is bad and they must leave  
the house. She has told them

over and over what to do,  
but still she worries. The night air  
cuts through her thoughts as—  
for one tense moment—the bird pauses

and then begins its song again.

7

They dug a trench  
just past the cemetery  
to pour slurry on the fire.  
If they had worked faster,  
and worked through the  
holiday, it might have worked.

8

It was Valentines Day when Todd fell.

Smoke was rising from his grandmother's lawn in slow lazy tendrils that were perfectly suited to encourage the natural curiosity that exists in all boys of that age.

Todd was just twelve years old when he fell. The rock beneath his grandmother's lawn had been burned away by the slowly spreading fire that lived in the mines, which twisted and turned like big snake holes under the streets and houses in town.

Todd grabbed a thick tree root as he fell. His cousin saw him fall from inside and was able to pull Todd back from what would have been his cremation if he had fallen just a few more feet.

9

The government bought out the few people who still had homes or businesses in town. That was their answer to the signs hanging in windows and posted on cars that read "Save Our Town" in red, hand-painted letters. They put a detour on the highway so that cars could make it around the sections of Route 61 where the asphalt had buckled and erupted from the pressure of all the steam from boiling groundwater. They put up a sign on the edge of the brown field—where the carbon monoxide coming up from the mines have killed everything—with a warning about unstable ground. Most of the buildings in town have succumbed to government bulldozers. The few that survived stand rotting along empty streets.

## **An Existentialist on Zen**

When I woke up this morning  
I was a little less enlightened  
than I had been the day before,  
and the winter wind had slipped  
quietly through the window  
and spread out across the carpet.  
I listened as the two clocks,  
facing each other across the room,  
ticked just barely out of sync—  
sounding the way I imagine  
a prosthetic heart must sound.

I spent all day drinking  
lukewarm coffee out in the  
cool, florescent light of  
an early winter sun, which hid  
behind a thin skirt of cloud  
like an embarrassed child, and I  
read a second-hand book  
about pop-philosophy  
(the hero's journey, the fire thief)  
until I could hear the owl crying  
in the derelict house next to mine.

Today, all the colors were a little  
paler than they had been the day before  
drained by the clouds and the fatigue  
that always seems to come as  
we near the last sprint towards  
the New Year. All around me people  
moved with frustrated purpose, surging  
away from the center of town  
in the thin-aired morning to return  
in the brittle dusk with a slow  
mechanical rhythm.  
The buildings that line the  
expressway watched them, as stoic  
as the statue of Ozymandias,  
but without one word of inscription  
to clarify the point of it all.

## After Breaking and Entering We Hear Footsteps

*...but let there be that heavy breathing  
or a stifled come-cry anywhere in the house  
and he will wrench himself awake...*

—Galway Kinnell  
"After Making Love We Hear Footsteps"

I still remember the night we heard those  
footsteps in the hallway. It must have been  
in late October (back then it was always October.)  
It was the same night I used my knife to pry open  
the window of an empty duplex,  
the blade peeling off long curling slivers  
of the pale paint that stuck the glass in place.

That duplex was profoundly empty,  
and the air was stale and cloying,  
heavy with the smell of paint and carpet glue.  
We teased each other—drunk on the church-like  
stillness of that place, and played children’s games,  
chanting in front of the bathroom mirror—  
*Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary...*  
but she couldn’t say the last one  
and I made fun of her, even though I  
hadn’t said it either. Later that night,  
with the sweet taste of vodka still on our  
breaths, we fell into each other.  
When we had finished, we lay naked and sullen,  
both of us dead-drunk, breathing the silence.

I’ve always had nightmares and if she  
hadn’t looked over at me when I heard  
those heavy, dragging footsteps stop outside  
the door, I would have thought that I’d  
dreamed it, but the look on her face said that  
she’d heard it too, so I took her back to  
my place and laid salt-lines across the door.  
In the morning our careless feet ground salt  
into my thin, cigarette-burned carpet,  
as we went back to living daylight lives.



## Samhain

In early afternoon, I cook the food  
that my grandfather taught me to cook  
washing it down with black coffee,  
the way I learned to in his kitchen,  
and then I walk to the cemetery—  
the smell of cumin clinging to my clothes  
and the sting of Serrano peppers  
lingering on my lips and tongue.  
For my mother's ancestors  
this night was called Samhain—  
the end of the light half of the year,  
the beginning of the dark half of the year.  
This was the night of cleansing fires,  
burning high in the center of town  
under a sky full of pagan constellations,  
and, as I walk the last few blocks,  
I can almost smell the ghost of smoke  
in the air, stirring some desperate,  
feral restlessness buried deep in my mind  
under generations of domestication.

On the gate there is a fading sign  
to warn visitors that the ground is uneven,  
so I place my steps carefully between  
the sinking graves, wandering to the back  
along a barely worn path that snakes  
between statues and family plots  
with fences displaced by live oak roots.  
There is a grave in here somewhere,  
the marker worn into a tiny tooth  
sticking up through the carpet of leaves:  
a little girl's (b. 1848, d. 1851).  
Her parents, they say, still visit her—  
two shimmering figures in mourning clothes,  
their hunched shoulders nearly transparent,  
their faces obscured with veils and shadows.  
They make their way from gate to grave  
to kneel and then lay something down,  
although no one seems to agree on what.

I waited for hours, listening to the leaves  
as they scuttled across the uneven ground  
and meditating on the thinning of the veils.  
When I saw nothing, I was ashamed for believing  
in a children's story, for believing in grief so powerful  
it holds the dead here in this place.

## November 1<sup>st</sup>

When the sun dipped below the tree line  
I left the dead to mourn their own and made  
my way back to the small apartment I rented.  
From the porches Jack-O-Lanterns leered  
with shrunken faces, dull and slouching,  
smelling of rot and full of melted wax.  
In the trees cellophane ghosts crinkled and swayed,  
given unnatural life by the late autumn wind.  
Alone in my apartment I watched the movies  
that scared me as a child, all rubber masks  
and corn syrup splatter, and I washed them  
down with cheap beer and expectation,  
waiting for the morning to come  
and bring with it the winter cold  
and the mute brutality of another year.

## Notes on visiting my hometown

When everyone I know has died,  
left, or given up on me,  
I will be more honest.  
I will be able to, unafraid, smear  
concrete-white pages with words  
as sharp and sweet and shocking  
as the smell of gasoline or the taste of bourbon.  
I will lay my life out like a cadaver  
inviting the eyes and hands  
that I have hidden myself from.

## Five Minutes until Midnight

Driving into Atlanta at dusk  
I watch the blush of a sunset  
reflect off the glass front  
of a tall building, brilliant  
and blinding as the blast  
that burned shadows  
into the walls at Hiroshima,  
and I can't help but be reminded  
of Dr. Oppenheimer's hubris—  
made manifest in a pile of  
steel and glass. What manner  
of man or god was he?  
A physicist moved  
by landscape and poetry  
who steadied himself in  
the New Mexico heat and whispered  
*It worked* when he saw the  
radiance of a thousand suns  
burst like a god in the desert,  
while across the sea  
Romantic bones trembled  
in Transcendentalist graves.

Near my house someone has  
stenciled Oppenheimer's portrait  
on one of the pylons holding up  
the overpass. I wonder if  
it would move the poet  
to ode the same way a cow  
scratched into a crumbling  
Greek chamber pot  
did 190 years before, and  
what the poet would say  
if he could see the night skies  
devoid of stars, or the shadows  
of buildings cutting  
trenches into the landscape.  
When I get home The Clock  
is set to 5 minutes until midnight,  
it has been for the last 2 years.

## Normaltown

Sitting on the stairs of my friend's apartment  
I waited, watching the townies walk by  
dressed in their bohemian daydreams.  
I was young, and my friend had become  
a father just a few days before.

The wind slithered through the grass  
and in the distance you could hear  
the Georgia-sound of locusts droning  
like power lines somewhere in the kudzu  
along the railroad tracks.  
It was in the spring, before June  
settled in like a fever, pulling the water  
out of your blood and covering the city  
with a thin layer of summer grit and sweat.

When I was younger I kept my hair  
short and didn't wear a mustache  
and out in Normaltown that meant  
I didn't belong, so people watched me  
close as I sat on the stairs and smoked.

Inside the apartment my friend washed  
the smell of kitchen work out of his hair,  
the sound of water running through old pipes  
just audible in the warm afternoon.  
When he was finished he came down and  
sat next to me and told me about  
the birth of his daughter. He held a piece  
of cloth cut from the hem of the cotton dress  
her mother had worn while they hitchhiked.  
She had sewn it into a rabbit so their daughter  
could remember her birth parents.

Somewhere down the street music was  
playing through an open window. When I  
asked my friend what he was going to do,  
he shrugged and leaned back to watch planes  
stretching contrails across the sky like scars.

## **On a slow night**

She slides across the stage,  
skin glowing under the  
orange-gelled spotlights like  
a harvest moon. Her eyes  
are bored and distant, but  
her body is all sin  
and slither hips swinging  
to the rolling rock rhythms,  
the bass and the backbeat.  
Under her make-up  
is the practiced smile of  
a professional as cool  
and detached as an undertaker's  
handshake or a murderer's conversion.  
The walls are covered in mirrors  
and her face stares back at her  
from a hundred places.

This place is damn near empty  
and under the music it's quiet;  
there are never many people  
to dance for on a Tuesday night.  
Her feet fall carefully  
in scuffed acrylic heels the  
color of frozen smoke  
as she slinks through space  
orbiting a polished  
metal axis, with the awkward-grace  
of a formally trained dancer  
a couple years out of practice.  
If she can catch an eye  
she'll play the damsel  
and let someone with a hero fetish  
spend his money on drinks  
and her timely rescue,  
but nobody is watching.

## A Jump-Blues Elegy

(For Jimmy “Little Red” Blount)

I’ve never been to Las Vegas,  
but in my mind I can see it,  
glittering in the sun  
like a piece of sea glass  
surrounded by desert  
and 1000 miles  
of shimmering Nevada highway—  
the place where  
Uncle Jimmy should have died.

Only Las Vegas didn’t know  
that name, the one his  
brother’s children’s children  
called him at reunions during  
humid Georgia summers  
after he had decided to quit  
the bands and move back  
to where he’d been born,  
and Las Vegas never bothered  
to tell those thrice removed  
children that “Little Red”  
had finally laid down his  
horn for the last time.

The night he died, Las Vegas  
sat glowing on the horizon  
waiting for Little Red to  
leave Georgia and come home,  
play “Body and Soul” again—  
not as an old man,  
but as the pompadour sporting  
kid pouring heat through  
a brass slide, the one that still lives  
between the scratches  
and grooves of old Louis Prima records.

I can see him there, playing  
the strip, with his tired eyes  
on fire again blazing like neon  
through a curtain of smoke,  
taking the solo at the coda  
and jumping the rhythm as the drummer  
laughs and tries to keep up.

He's not the man I saw  
staring up from the newsprint  
of the obituary clipped out of  
the *Las Vegas Review Journal*,  
not the man I saw at Christmas  
and Thanksgiving at my grandfather's  
every other year when I was a kid,  
and he's not the South Georgia  
white-boy in two-tone shoes  
that he was at his first rehearsal—  
no, in that moment he's all  
molten arpeggios and glissando,  
a pioneer soul of rock and roll  
with a jazz pedigree inside a 2/4 beat.



## Late September in Atlanta—A Dirge

This is the season of the wake—  
when tall buildings hide in clouds  
and rain falls in silver needles

against glass and concrete and brick,  
as the long cold nights from up north  
slowly creep down I-85

past Raleigh and Greensboro and  
Charlotte and Greenville to finally  
settle in just south of 10<sup>th</sup> Street.

The South has a long memory,  
and this city has burned before—  
in the wind, the smell of burnt leaves

follows phantom embers down  
sidewalks populated only  
by the wasp-drone of traffic and

the skinny, street-mean grey cats that  
slink through fences and lurk under  
porches with shining almond eyes.

On these nights in late September  
even the transplants and tourists  
feel a little melancholy

when they hear trains passing through  
with their steel wheels banging the ties  
in steady, staccato eighth notes

that call to mind marching feet and  
a city burning—smoke rising  
into the sky like incense fumes.

**On days like this—**

the city seems to lay in wait,  
with the anticipation of a virgin,

with a rhythm like ragged breaths,  
with sidewalks that crack in the heat

like the skin of some beached leviathan  
dragged out of the trench. The feeling

seeps up through the soles of your canvas  
shoes in stuttering bursts until it grabs

hold of your lungs and takes your mind  
reeling back into itself to remember

the way color and shape struck you as  
a child. On days like this—the clouds press

close to the ground and the air refuses to move,  
and the sound of the highway reminds you

of the tide coming in, and always there is  
a rhythm to it that lays just beyond your

conscious mind, and you can almost feel  
the ghosts of feral things brush past you,

things that lived here long before generation  
after generation of grown children played at

gentrification and nostalgia. On days like this—  
they don't sell booze in God's sun-cursed heartland

so you will have to deal with yourself  
for a few more hours, and wait for the cloud

shrouded sun to give-up, for the new-Sabbath to end.  
On days like this—the cheap red wine would taste

like vinegar anyway, and stain your lips, and spill  
down the stem of the glass to ruin your jeans,

and Mama says you have a problem, and you want  
to tell her that you do, that its all too much, but

you could never bring yourself to call her “mama”

anyway, not out loud, not even as a child. The beat  
is relentless, pounding polyrhythms in your ears that  
you can't quite hear, so you wander down to the  
coffee shop and play at smoking and posing and reading  
until the silent crescendo takes you to the bridge and you  
walk home to stand in front of a mirror and stare  
into pale Russian eyes that, in another time and place,  
could have read music written for the Czar, but you've  
never learned to play a damn thing, and you are so far  
from home and everything you ought to know  
that you sink into the living concrete.

## Songs of Expansion

*Come, my tan-faced children,  
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready;  
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp edged axes? Pioneers! O Pioneers!*  
—Walt Whitman,  
“O Pioneers”

### I.

They crossed a rolling black ocean,  
clinging to the decks and a belief  
in the God of Dante and Chaucer,  
to reach a thin shore not much different  
than the one they had left. The stars  
and the moon were the same, but  
brighter and closer, hanging above  
forest that had never been bought  
or sold but earned. They pressed  
west into the trees where feral things  
lived, dragging with them  
the elect and providence and destiny.

### II.

And the land worked on them,  
burning their pale skin and darkening  
their green eyes until they were  
people of leather and gunpowder.  
When they folded their callused hands  
to pray, the gaps in the walls let in  
the cold and dust and devils that  
had waited in the wind for interlopers.  
When they knelt in supplication the  
hard wooden floors bowed and  
threatened to drop them like spiders  
into the maw of eternity, and yet  
they still pressed on—entitled.

### III.

They were the resolute children  
who died and were replaced, ever  
moving and slowly changing, as slow  
as mountains wearing down to  
dull hills or water carving caves.  
As slow as trees growing and  
dying or the tide carving cliffs.  
They moved to the cadence and  
meter of liturgy driven on by a destiny  
that leached out with every drop of sweat.

IV.

When they reached the shore  
they stood on the high cliffs, those  
tan-faced sinewy children, with  
their broad backs to a land  
that had never known them,  
would never forgive them,  
and they looked into the rolling  
black sea, not much different  
than the one they had left, while  
behind them the frowning, urging,  
ghostly millions pressed close  
to nudge them into the cold Pacific.  
Their God waited, silent, and they  
turned to face themselves  
absurd and empty—pioneers.

## The Reading

The dry sound of the cards flipping  
fills a quiet room  
like the rustle of leaves  
scraping down the sidewalks  
of quiet suburbs.  
Under her hands  
the tarot reveal themselves  
card by card, like tattoos  
hidden discreetly on tender skin.  
Her slender fingers, moving quickly,  
reveal a Fate I can't believe in  
any more than Science  
or Art for its own sake.  
She is showing me my future,  
laying it before me in neat rows  
that she believes in  
with a faith I will never know.

**In 2012** □

I will be twenty-seven □  
(the same age Robert Johnson  
was when he died  
howling like a hell hound  
in a Mississippi motel room)  
and the Mayan calendar will end. □  
I tell myself it means nothing, □  
and yet □  
in dreams □  
I hear the stirring □  
of forgotten things □  
somewhere in the dark gulfs □  
yawning between stars. □ □

## **In Spite of the Storm**

The perfect lives on the T.V. are taunting him,  
so he turns off the set to listen to the rain.  
Robert Johnson keeps singing in spite of the storm.

There is something to be said for being safe and warm  
while outside the fall's naked trees shiver in pain.  
The perfect lives on the T.V. are taunting him.

He picks his guitar and hums an old Baptist hymn  
(something about the old songs keeps him feeling sane.)  
Robert Johnson keeps singing in spite of the storm.

He runs his hand down the cross tattooed on his arm  
and watches the night through a greasy windowpane.  
The perfect lives on the T.V. are taunting him.

The prescriptions don't help with the feeling of doom  
that echoes through his life like the sound of a train.  
Robert Johnson keeps singing in spite of the storm.

He hides from himself in a house he can't call home.  
Afraid it will all fall apart...afraid he might sin...  
The perfect lives on the T.V. are taunting him.  
Robert Johnson keeps singing in spite of the storm.



## W. B. Yeats Is Dead

If we're being honest  
there probably never was  
a center to begin with.  
The problem is his words  
hang hazily around our minds,  
smoldering sweet and thick  
like the ghost of a dying fire,  
making it harder for us  
to draw a clean breath.  
The postcard images  
of places we will never see  
and the saccharine sweet taste  
of top-forty love songs  
infect our thoughts  
and usurp our dreams.  
We waste our lives vicariously  
on gridded streets lined with stores  
full of shit we don't want.  
The blank, staring eyes  
of the corpse-like news anchors  
let us know that we  
were always already the subject,  
and, seeing ourselves reflected  
upside-down and mirrored in  
the eponymous *I* or rain-slicked asphalt,  
we fall apart...as all things must.

## **I Think It's Real**

I remember the blue duct tape  
that held together the dash  
of my mother's Ford Escort.  
My eyes followed the lines of tape up  
to the windshield (spider-webbed  
with cracks but never dirty)  
and eventually to the suburban scenes  
that rolled past the passenger side window.

The leaves (all brown and frail with autumn)  
would shiver in the slightest breeze  
hanging tenaciously in the trees  
despite the lateness of the season  
and the quick approach of Halloween.

The Jack-o-Lanterns  
squatting on the doorsteps,  
looked sad and hollow in the morning light.  
All the cellophane ghosts  
and Styrofoam tombstones  
that adorned my neighbors' yards  
had lost the eerie life  
that they held at dusk.

I pointed at it.  
I had plenty of time at the red light.  
I told my mother it wasn't pretend.  
*I think it's real...I think it's real...*

Swaying gently in the October wind,  
the neighbor's son had hanged himself.

## By Any Other Name

"A rose by any other name..." she starts,  
but leaves it unfinished—  
perhaps catching some look in my eyes  
or just feeling my posture shift.

She moves lazily through conversation  
sliding slowly to another cliché,  
but I stay behind, watching  
smoke rise off my cigarette,  
marking the way the fading sunlight  
(cut into thin bands by the cheap blinds)  
plays across her stomach as she talks,  
and thinking *No, it wouldn't smell as sweet*  
because the names matter—they always have.  
Nothing exists outside  
of the word—words like friend or lover  
asshole, bitch, mine, yours,  
and a thousand other evocations  
she used to call me—to call us—  
into existence.

In the beginning there was the word,  
and we are all cut from it.  
I turn to her, interrupting a conversation  
that I had lost track of long before,  
and in between the unspoken hitches in breathing  
and the names we have for each other  
we give blood sacrifice.  
I say the hex to myself:

I don't need you after all  
I don't need you after  
I don't need you  
I don't need  
I don't  
I

As we finish I watch  
her pale ribcage rising and falling  
and begin to wonder  
if lust, or hate, or obsession  
by any other name  
would still smell as sweet,  
or still feel like love.

## Tarot

You...you were always the Three of Swords.  
And I was the Hanged Man—  
sometimes reversed.

We've been through  
the Minor Arcana five times before  
and we should know  
the deck well enough by now.

The slick cards sliding through  
our hands like sand or rain,  
are as familiar as the taste of your skin

or my hand in the small of your back  
in the middle of a crowded bar  
where electric blue smoke  
curls around us. I whisper

filth in your ear, slam  
shots of Jäger, and sneak my hand  
up your thigh under the table.

You have smoked my cigarettes  
and I have tasted your flesh  
sweet with sweat and rye.  
But now I lie alone

a city apart from you, with the smell  
of your perfume prowling the floor of my room  
and crouching hidden in the corners.

## Last Call

When the veil shreds,  
I will stand on my roof  
and spit blood into the wind,  
as the angel descends  
on buzzard's wings  
that beat the clouds  
into black and green bruises  
that bulge down from above—  
pregnant with thunder.  
I will wait for them to come for me,  
the faceless, nameless troops  
in black boots that shine  
like polished onyx in the sun,  
and I will drink victory gin  
and laugh as they try to find a  
piece of ink-less skin  
to tattoo with their mark.  
I will swagger through deserted  
streets, stepping over  
debris and discarded dreams,  
singing Baptist hymns  
as loud as my smoker's  
lungs will let me.  
I will grind cigarette ash  
into the fine white carpets  
of fine white people as they  
search clumsily through ornate  
parlor Bibles with crisp pages,  
unmarked by needless study.  
And when the leviathan finally rises  
thrashing from the boiling sea  
to blind the pyramid's eye,  
I will watch it all on a 13-inch screen  
which hangs in the corner above the bar  
and buy the last round  
for the rest of the cheering patrons  
who, like me, knew  
last call would come eventually.

## Ode to a Box

There is a box in the back of my closet,  
    which I have dragged from apartment to apartment.  
There is a pipe in the box, cheap and choked with ash,  
    that I smoked pretentiously the semester I studied philosophy.  
There is a well-worn copy of a college newspaper,  
    that reviewed the band I started just out of high school.  
There is a note from a girl with cropped blond hair,  
    that I loved intensely from across the room.  
There are three notebooks, the spines flattened and covers ripped,  
    full of poetry that makes me burn with their confessional shame.  
There are jewel cases from the CDs I've collected since middle school,  
    which have given me direction when nothing else did.  
There are papers from high school, marked-up with cramped red ink,  
    brutalized by the first teacher who took me seriously.  
There is every chance I will take it with me,  
    when my lease expires again.

## **Note to a protagonist I have yet to write**

There will be a moment in which it will  
all burn away like the paper on those  
hand rolled cigarettes I used to smoke,  
and you will have to face the raw ember  
without all the pretensions you have  
used as walls to hide behind for so long.

There will be a girl (there's always a girl)  
waiting for you on page 112,  
blank as verse, to give you your sin again.  
You will wander through the scenes of my childhood,  
living them as if they were your very own.

You will be those things I wish I could be:  
brave, empathetic, strong. And yet, when you  
look in the mirror you will see the faults  
that I see staring back every morning.

You will drink too much, and lay awake nights  
afraid the world is about to end.  
You will be dog-eared, marked-up, and revised.  
By the time all this is done, I may be  
the only one who can recognize you...

For all this I am already sorry.

### **All of the dive bars are gone**

Walking alongside the old railroad tracks  
(ties bleached the color of blond coffee  
by fifty summers of relentless August sun)  
I feel the rhythm of this town in my veins again.  
It's a feeling that I haven't had since I left.  
It mingles with the summer smell of vegetation  
and the ambient sounds  
of wasps buzzing in the distance.  
And yet, at the edge of it all, I can feel  
October closing in.  
I went to a bar I used to frequent  
where the drinks were cheap and strong  
and the bartender was surly,  
but as I wound my way down into  
the charnel darkness that used to  
hold a dive worthy of our youthful delusions  
of rebellion and danger,  
I was greeted by the soft glow of tea lights  
lining the new bar that had replaced the  
pitted wood we had drank at years before.  
I wanted to feel cheated by time,  
to feel my teenaged three-chord angst  
running up my spine, to feel outrage and loss.  
But I didn't.  
Instead, as I turned to leave,  
I felt immeasurably young—  
surrounded by buildings, and trees, and ideas  
that would be there long after I was just a shade.



## Then The Bottom Falls Out

This morning the sunrise was muted  
by graphite colored clouds  
smeared heavily from the horizon  
past the distant skyline.

The rain subdues us.  
It makes talk quieter,  
and walk quicker.  
The sound of passing cars  
catches your ear  
as water cascades off of tire treads.

Sulking under a ledge  
smokers watch as raindrops  
drive themselves into the pavement  
with ambiguous purpose.  
The sound of someone laughing  
drifts from inside  
but is quickly carried off by the wind  
and lost just a few feet away.

Then the bottom falls out.

The rain pours down in thick curtains  
and we switch from coffee to liquor  
huddled together in the living room  
of a cheap apartment with stained carpets  
(which we won't share much longer).  
We watch colorless old movies and let the room fill  
with lazy tendrils of cigarette smoke  
without a look or a word exchanged.

## Pastoral

In the parking lot of the convenience store,  
a loose stone  
rolls away from my boot  
across the asphalt,  
shattering the brittle peace  
of a Sunday afternoon.  
Dead leaves and cigarette butts  
dance in whirling eddies  
stirred up by an apathetic  
breeze, that brings with it the  
smell of wood smoke  
and a veiled threat of  
the approaching winter cold.

Small towns have always made me nervous.  
I am aware of myself and my voice comes slowly,  
and without grace. I feel like a spectator at a funeral  
or like a priest with no faith taking confession.

Inside the store, a woman  
sits behind a finger-smudged  
shield of thick plastic watching  
my interloping face  
with voyeuristic fascination.  
She sells me  
cigarettes and a coffee  
without speaking,  
and I am sure  
I felt her stare following me,  
shadowing me  
to my car,  
onto the highway,  
out of town,  
and all the way to the county line.

### **A coyote in praise of humanity**

He pads silently down the sidewalk,  
asphalt filing his nails at the tip.  
In this forest of immense monoliths,  
all glass and steel and light,  
he sees no stars.

On the wind he hears men,  
smells their warm blood and soft flesh.  
They have driven away the wolves and bears  
and brought with them easy meals,  
made fat and dumb with  
table scraps and fire's warmth.

His ancestors roamed here  
long ago, when there were trees and stars,  
when food was scarce and prey was wary.  
Now, there is carrion along the roads  
and food easily picked from every corner,  
and his kind is grateful.

All they had to do is trade the sun for the moon.

## Hangover

It's going to be a cold winter.  
The anthills are piled high,  
and there is a hint of January  
in the wind that pulls at me, and  
reminds me of big empty houses  
and the taste of five-dollar wine.  
The cold makes the air  
seem tense and expectant, and I  
remember the way, two winters  
ago, the street light filtering through  
frozen branches sent daggers of  
amber raining down on the concrete  
like broken glass. Last night,  
I dreamed that I was lying on the shore  
of an ancient sea, with a  
black haired girl I've yet to meet,  
separated from the life I have known  
by centuries and light-years.  
But when I woke up this morning  
I had a hangover, and the wind  
was winding itself tightly  
around my little house.