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## Endings

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

ENDINGS

By

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## ABSTRACT

The poems in this thesis manuscript deal specifically and theoretically with the concept of finality, and echo influences as varied as Robert Haas, Harvey Shapiro, and Paul Auster. The poems investigate the many forms, structures, subjects, and styles of contemporary poetry, orienting themselves around four primary types of endings: relational, familial, personal, and external.

Section I explores physical death as a primary focus until gradually shifting into examining the last, final moments of a relationship. The final two poems in this section deal with relationships with the end inherent in the very beginning: relationships with nowhere to go but down, given the obvious, flawed nature of the speaker.

Section II continues this theme in a decidedly different stylistic approach: all the poems in this section are in sonnet form. This section examines endings located in one, singular moment, and also deals with the writer's reflection, years later, of certain moments of ending. This section asserts that endings occur at any time, both in moments we fail to grasp and in moments obvious to us.

Section III examines endings in specific, physical locations, such as tree branches that lie dead on the ground, the unfortunate product of an ice storm; phantom limb syndrome; and "the flick of flint on a dead fire" ("Reunion"). The section also examines endings that occur, or might occur, within specific geographic places and spaces,, whether it be in Florida, Iraq, or Haiti. The final poem in the section, "I Remember," is five simple lines, each denoting an ending to the title, and each indicative of a different type of emotional end.

Section IV addresses address endings of a familial nature, examining the disconnect between the speaker's practical experience in the world and his mother's religious conception of the world, and then spring-boarding into poems that examine the death of the speaker's father. The last poem, "Reflections on Turning Thirty," is a summation to the manuscript, asserting in the closing lines, "Love is the brick / breaking windows / of the heart."

In order to best examine endings in their various forms, the writer incorporates a variety of styles and techniques. Many poems are written in couplet form; still others, as in Section II, are composed in sonnet form. Most of the poems are at least fourteen lines long, though some run much shorter – "I Remember" (five lines) – and others much longer – "The World as Word and Meaning" (forty-eight lines). All poems are written in free verse, however, and the writer was cognizant of free verse techniques at work: consonance and assonance, line enjambment, and internal rhyme schemes.

# *ENDINGS*



*I*

## MY DEAD FATHER REFLECTS

The day you buried me  
worms plied their trade  
as if nothing had happened.

It grew dark; your face told no story.  
A tight circle of black crows  
flew just under the tree line,

then dropped like darts to earth.  
The field was cold and hard;  
their feet left no trace around my grave.

You remained alone, wondering if,  
at my last breath, I looked to the window  
and saw early-evening stars

or a clear, slate-grey sky.  
When you found my body  
your hands fumbled at my shoulders,

lifted my head to your lap  
to blow breath back through my lungs.  
To delay what we knew was soon to come.

## VISITING THE DEAD SEA

Only the dead cast their lines,  
flicking the air with knotted tongues,  
licking and spitting as if tasting  
in every atom an empty grave.

There, like a riddle, the smell of fire  
malignant and lapping, the scent of silence  
claustrophobic, words an echo of sparrows'  
wings pounding their own tin drum,

each beat more deafening than the last.  
Blood dammed behind my ears,  
fingers wet: I cannot loose myself  
to set them free, these hands

that touched your face and knew it  
for a stone statue.  
The hands that memorized your mouth  
while you watched me burn.

## MEMORIAM

She trips through placards and protestors  
congealed thicker than blood, into my car,

fingers grazing my arm.  
I feel the shake beneath her kiss.

Absentia worms through the dash,  
rests heavy on my neck like the sweat

on her collarbone.  
That night I sprawl;

watch television on the far wall,  
shadows dancing in buyers' remorse,

Belushi miming the way to behave.  
Watch patterns of china, hers and mine,

mixed and matched: a way of life.  
She takes one for the team?

I take two shots until sleep descends  
like the dead. I wake to my heart

beating a rhythm I can't control.  
Touch my chest, feel decay seething

through ventricles, choking alveoli.  
This is my body, broken, like yours.

## IN THESE, OUR LAST MOMENTS

An inch apart on the subway, we knock no knees,  
graze no knuckles. No shake of motion,  
limb against limb. These moments a microcosm:  
the marriage of not touching like two sides of a wedding bed,

both the cold fingertips of departure.  
If she examined my face, brief smile on her lips,  
brown eyes betraying one palm clutching a gold band,  
I'd turn my mouth north, remind myself to breathe.

We hurtle forward. I lean against the wall,  
crave no daylight but a circle of stops and starts,  
stations of artificial sun. I cannot will this train to stop.  
When we disembark, climb stairs

to street-level rain, it is with this knowledge:  
soon, we will be two bodies fucking one last time  
in a brownstone, our bed barely covered,  
waking before dawn to hurry alone into the day.

## SPEEDING

On I-10, Jayne asks if I made out with “that whore”  
on the dance floor, the night I was late

getting home to kiss her asleep, to rub her brow  
while she watched Matlock into the small hours.

I dodge, unanswer, remember the other one  
riding my thigh, giggling as I cupped her ass,

“I’ve never been with a Republican before.”  
Hands looped into my belt, leading me

around the corner, past the drunk retching blood  
in the gutter, to the alley where I drive her

back against the brick wall, hike her skirt up  
above her waist as she jerks my zipper down

hard. The smell of trash suffocating.  
We speed on, the drive more pronounced.

Jayne stares out the passenger window, says,  
“I don’t care, I just want to know.” I shiver,

turn the AC off, crack my window to the humidity.  
Recall the alley, and a wooden porch still damp

from September rain. Another girl, whose dog  
stuck his nose in my ass, scaring me out.

The girl who wrinkled her nose as I came  
across the butterfly tattoo on her abdomen.

Or another one I left at five in the morning,  
still drunk: is she still waiting for a kiss goodbye?

I put my hand on her leg. “You’re being ridiculous,”  
I say. “I love you.” Jayne takes my hand to her lips,

checks the dash. “You’re speeding. Slow down.”  
And I think of two nights before, fucking her

from behind in front of the full-length mirror,  
her eyes on mine, begging me to tear her to pieces.

## WHAT WE HEAR IN SILENCE

This,  
the sound of breaking.  
Of entering you, becoming you,  
leaving no trace of me.  
Of dancing on silk  
and green cotton dresses.  
Of pillows and lashes,  
heavy with burden.

This,  
the sound of standing.  
Of falling, over and again,  
where I cannot (and never) hear.  
Of you wearing only me,  
hiding, never satisfied.  
Of labeling, pulling tape away,  
creating new names.

This,  
the sound of bones snapped  
and scattered, a wind licking  
the corners of an empty room.

*MARRANOS*

Like a Jew  
kneading a rosary

*We have eaten bees  
with honey  
until our tongues swelled  
and we choked*

a son  
gone native

*on the rush  
of blood and sugar*

or me when I spoke  
one thing to you  
    (like love)  
and meant another

*Let this salve  
in our wounds  
be poison;  
let this nectar  
never fail to sour*

When cut  
I bleed  
heretic



## WATCHING

It's not difficult to watch you at night.  
My television sits next to the window,  
  
a window directly across from yours.  
Accidentally, but on purpose, my eyes drift  
  
to watching you at dinner, on the treadmill,  
hurling books at the men you entertain  
  
from time to time: never me  
I shudder to think at the names tossed  
  
across the room: Dickens, Dostoyevsky,  
perhaps the poetry of Dylan Thomas.  
  
But at 6:30 in morning, watching you eat  
a cup of yogurt, I see it's only Dan Brown  
  
and his hide-and-seek thrills.  
I mine this for voyeur gold,  
  
create an illusion: your every movement,  
your quick dabs of lipstick in the morning,  
  
the bottles of red wine consumed at night,  
alone and in need, stumbling to the couch  
  
and working the remote control -  
Jay Leno, Larry King, then Springer -  
  
before settling on *The Last of the Mohicans*.  
"I will find you," Daniel Day-Lewis says  
  
to Madeline Stowe. You bury your head  
in your hands, ignore the spilled wine  
  
staining your carpet. I notice. I care.  
And I queue up my DVD to that scene,  
  
memorize actions, actors and passions.  
My vague reflection in the window.  
  
I don't watch for patterns of jealousy or rage,  
or for the braided goatee of your last boyfriend

creeping through the back door at 3 am.  
The moments that intrigue me most?

How you haphazardly butter bread before work  
frittering from kitchen to bedroom.

How you search under sofa and chair  
for an elusive shoe found in the bathroom.

How you walk out, shoe in hand, face creased  
with the smile of a conquering hero.

## BECAUSE I'M IN LOVE WITH LUPE, I EAT EVERY DAY AT LA FIESTA

The same thing: Super Burrito with mole sauce.  
It's tasty, but sometimes I dream of the *Verde* enchiladas,  
house specialty of the restaurant down the street.  
Truth be told, I'd like a hamburger every once in a while.  
Better yet, a fish sandwich fresh from the gulf,  
slathered in tartar sauce and topped with lettuce,  
tomato and banana peppers. I'm tired of chicken  
or beef wrapped in a tortilla, topped with cheese sauce.  
The salsa was hotter when I first came here.  
Maybe they changed the pepper combination,  
but one Corona now and I forget I've eaten.  
I miss those days, when I salivated in gustatory excess.  
I want to revel in a medium-rare steak,  
gargle the bacon grease of a crispy BLT.  
Go comatose eating General Tsing's Combo #4.  
I remember planting my ass at Pepper & Hops  
every breakfast so the lovely Jillian could take my order.  
The meals I ordered then: salmon omelets with chives  
country-fried steak doused in home-style gravy.

Those were the days. I'd wander home, undo my pants,  
pass out in pleasure on the couch, dreaming  
of the weight I'd accumulated that morning.  
Then, boredom; and I fell for a new breakfast spot  
across town. Glossy and modern, dangerous  
in its high-minded sophistication.  
Espresso machines that puffed and steamed  
on command, whipping gourmet flavors into a frenzy.  
For weeks on end, I begged refills from Annie  
and her perky breasts and bobbed hair,  
until one morning she never showed,  
leaving me heartbroken and alone, free  
to admire the next bird that caught my eye.  
Ah, but here's Lupe, smile on her face, ass packed  
into standard-issue black pants, gleaming black hair  
back in a pony-tail. Pouring another glass of water  
she asks, in perfect broken English, *Your meal?*  
*Is good?* I want to pull her hair, fuck her like a dog  
while she spits my name, over and over, eyes wild.  
*It's fine*, I reply, *but I'd like the salsa hotter.*

*II*

## KILLING TIME

I touched and broke you,  
watched you fall to the dirt,

become dust.  
Welcome to the earth,

a city of glass and moon-lit façade,  
where trees raise hands to God

and every apple is ripe  
with original sin.

Above, clouds so low  
my fingers comb their milky coils,

the sweat of your throat heavy  
on my hands. Your breath

turns blue. When I release,  
I peel the sky like an onion.

## ORDINARY LOVE

I once loved a stripper with a tattoo  
of a fire-breathing dragon  
tucked tight in the small of her back.  
Green, bloodshot eyes,  
scales glistening with sex,  
my eyes followed hers  
through every velvet booth she performed.

\*

I copied her biology notes.  
If I skipped class we hooked up later,  
discussed entropy and relationships.  
Studied how lips move  
in ways too vulgar to be called sin.  
The more we called it love  
the more we fell apart.

## ON LEAVING

Do not know you, as if to say  
never met or never seen before,

a city never seized.  
Hair the black of crows

draped between your breasts:  
the color of prisms,

reflective and framed by sky  
and waves lifting, repeating.

Inconceivable, the colors  
contained on a crow's wing:

the human eye perceives sin,  
the absence of possibility.

Instead, my face turned to God,  
I wonder if this is a beginning.

## REMEMBERING MY FATHER'S FUNERAL

Along the avenue of your limbs,  
limp and maddened,  
lie crippled prosits;

an enmity of prayers  
placed beside your bed,  
waylaid on the path to heaven.

At your sepulcher, a ridging of voices  
carved, clearly, like bell  
or the whisper of hidden corners.

The arm, the leg,  
the pressed flesh. The wire of stones  
smoothed sharp against the wind.

Each heart a fragment.  
Each beat the violence of God.



## IF I SHOULD EXPLODE

the scattering remains will seek the earth  
like summer pollen lusting for gravity's pull.

Pay close attention: once gathered,  
do not store my ashes on a basement shelf

in a Mason jar, invisible to the naked eye.  
I am afraid of the depths my senses,

even in death, cannot penetrate.  
Instead look to the heavens, for it is there

I'll seek shelter in the stars, far from God.  
If you would be my friend, take my dust

to the highest bluff and release me to the wind.  
I long to leave this body, this shell chaining me

to the ground, this scar in the mirror,  
a picture of permanent imperfection.

## DRY COUNTRY

An ill-forsaken womb,  
her breasts with no milk.

We danced with spirits,  
baited the ground to moisten,

begged for conception.  
Yearned for a field

of dark and fallow dirt,  
for pregnancy awaiting a surgeon;

but rain abstained,  
Her womb still barren,

our tongues turned heavy  
in our mouths, the dust

of unspoken words.  
Our bodies swearing to try again.

## NOOSED

*My dead sister dreams away her life*  
- Harvey Shapiro, "Sister"

And I with a brother I never knew,  
whose face my mother sees even now,  
him passing from between her legs,  
still and blue, neck noosed.  
She struggles with the memory  
of a surgeon's mask, sterile light.  
My father weeping in another room.

How long we hold what has never been,  
dark specks in our vision  
that vanish as time turns full upon them.  
A memory locked in her heart  
to which she cannot cling:  
his tiny feet kicking the air in protest,  
refusing to return quietly.

## LIKE SAND

We were young,  
seventeen,  
formed from  
toxins blown fine.

Lungs coarse,  
mouths sour pipes  
hollowed  
with promises

lost when voiced,  
we melted  
in tablet moons  
and drifted on visions

thieving sleep  
like rocks over water.

## SELF-PORTRAIT

*after William Bronk*

The storm downwind,  
keen centered,  
gravity in tow.

No more half-emptys,  
the ayes, yes,  
the exclamation.

The third, voweled wings,  
sustained middle,  
universal axis.

Eyes closed, world livid,  
light monochromed,  
disposable.

I am.

I am.

## BEGIN AGAIN

As if memory was enough  
to stitch us back together,  
we remember and begin again

to build a city - *better left for dead* -  
with the stones of thought and deed.  
The echo of construction

crushing hearts - a burden  
basking in the glow of better things  
unsaid, unwritten, undone.

We skip forward, slowly, pebbles  
casting tremors on the ocean's calm,  
only to sink as we look back,

seeing not how far we have come  
but how far we have yet to go.

## ENDINGS

Last night, I divorced  
my thought from feeling.

Stroked your thigh  
and punctured your heart.

I warmed you with despair,  
a blanket holding no heat.

These vows of affection,  
shared at an altar

witnessed by the world,  
are tokens. Vows: retracting

silence for future reference:  
Break them.

Spring doors and windows wide;  
let flies and blood pool.

*III*



## THE GRAVITY OF BRANCHES

dipped to earth, an obsequy of shoulders  
freshly-hewn. Stripped from the trunk -

bare flesh of white wood  
fresh on a red brick path.

The fear of shallow, wooden graves  
heavy with water; my image, frozen,

in the mirror. I watch arms  
once raised now broken -

petty fissures deep beneath the skin  
grown large - torn from the whole,

strewn on the ground. Defeated.  
May my fall come quick and sudden.

## GEORGE DEDLOW CONSIDERS HIS FATE

*I had begun to suffer the most acute pain in my left hand...  
and so perfect was the idea which was thus kept up of the  
real presence of these missing parts that I found it hard  
at times to believe them absent.*

*- S. Weir Mitchell, "The Case of George Dedlow"*

An altar. A man with no hands  
touching the altar as if hinging his life

this way or that, a door.  
With no hands or wrists, the sacrament

of tongues forked and knotted,  
like fingers you cannot forgive.

Spirits dwelling in a church with no God,  
who speaks so that to hear Him

is to feel what is not there, a limb  
lost or discarded. Ill-remembered.

I clasp my eyes in prayer:  
what is worship but the torque of nerves,

frayed and dead, the senses  
lying with honest intent?

## REUNION

A bone marked by laughter  
and found wanting. A grave

with sealed lips dashing desire  
to gray ash along the hearth.

Rust learning its name  
by the reflection in a lover's eye.

Mere months between then and now,  
a gulf too wide to travel together.

Or so your letters said,  
if I had read between the lines.

Like the flick of flint on a dead fire –  
the knowledge I have not been missed.

## CINCHING THE BIBLE BELT

*for Tallahassee*

This town is tinder  
and could do with a church  
burning or two

many shepherds and sheep  
enough for cataracts  
in their restless eyes

have broken more backs  
than there are vertebrae  
to count, abacus-like

finding no stones but souls  
thrown far and drowned,  
ripples dead before touching shore.

## ELECTION DAY

I am whole-bodied and married  
to walking under ladders

to the bad sign, the bloated blood moon.  
To suburbia howling with hackles raised.

To horseshoes hung up, down,  
sideways: whichever works.

To the shortened, broken wishbone,  
the light on a hill, forgotten.

I am wed to the black cat  
in the driveway hissing at Satan,

barring entrance to a full house  
flicking lighters in the dark.

Belief in a ballad, a symbol,  
rendered whole and useful.

A God crowned not in our own image  
but in what we need: conjured perfection.

THE WAILING WALL (1967)

Made for kneeling, praying;  
for memories thrust in cracks

and in the dust before dust.  
Before man crucified Son

and carried crosses down streets  
cobble with guilt and empire,

*ne plus ultra* dead  
or drunk on empathy.

Sprung from apologies,  
dead seas of revisionism:

a land without people  
for a people without land.

Lies told from father to son,  
mother to camera.

Build fences from wire.  
Barb bridges with guns.

## FROM HALABJA TO AL-FAW

Those days our souls were found wanting.  
Violence the infatuation of murder,

death a geography of clan and tribe.  
No answer to the unasked question:

why did we watch them die?  
Gas was cheap to put in tanks

and mouths became another story.  
Exhausted bodies fumed black trails

like balanced checks and bottom lines:  
what is the economy of a death toll?

We calculated innocence and blame  
with the same tokens paid for gold

burning black and hot in the ground.  
We waited and history crept:

mouthless, toothless, gumming works -  
best-laid plans oblivious to the rise

of fascism by gun barrel. Inevitable  
but surprising. We help man

by killing man. In nature:  
no freedom but by hammer and fist.

## IN RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY

Television every day, for the past week –images of the destruction in Haiti. An earthquake, high on the Richter scale. Thousands living without food and water. We reacted quickly, conscious of our own experiences: 9/11 and Katrina. Americans are quick students of sorrow, especially when learned hands-on. Within hours of the disaster, relief funds had been set up, 800-numbers established, celebrity telethons promised. We reacted first with horror, then with solidarity. Inside, though, the niggling guilt: for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, our shores barely knew destruction. Wars raged, oceans away, in Europe, Asia, Africa. Bombs blew like clockwork: in parked cars at a Starbucks in Britain, or strapped to the chest of a young woman and detonated in a Tel Aviv market. Recent nights, plagued by insomnia, I turn on the computer, scroll through pictures of rubble, of streets caved in, seemingly imploded to bits, people climbing over each other – over dead and dying bodies – in a rush to escape. In the morning I flip the channel. An evangelist speaks on the Beatitudes. How Christ blessed the meek, asserting that theirs was the kingdom of God. Heaven, as too many philosophers and religions have contended, can be made here on earth, but who would wish such a reward upon those wretches now, dying in the Caribbean? Where is their reward for suffering? Exhausted, I debate making a charitable donation, something to help ease their burden. But I'm saving for a cruise, and my Saturn is due for an oil change. I get cold feet. Before work, I stop for an iced latte. Something to pick me up, get me through. Every little bit helps.



## I REMEMBER

Chancres sewn on the lips you kiss.

Tattooed tongues from which you drank.

Lovers fading like ink on skin.

Your scraps, strewn across the floor.

Darning you whole last night.

*IV*

## THOUGHTS ON POETRY

“Fuck no, I don’t read that shit,”  
he yells from twenty feet away.  
I’d offered to read a sonnet to them  
while they played cornhole in the yard.  
Apparently, poetry and cornhole don’t mix,  
and he just won’t stop the rigmarole.  
“Dude, are you fucking gay?” I ask myself,  
When did orientation become conflated  
with words that may or may not rhyme?

Maybe it’s that poetry’s not easy -  
maybe that’s my attraction. Of course,  
explaining this to him would be pointless:  
the only reading he does is when Hustler  
arrives in the mail, picture captions  
with mean descriptions: “Veronica does *this*  
to Michelle, with *that*, *here*, and *there*,”  
and who am I to argue with such exposition?  
Poetry’s got nothing on tits.

If it’s my masculinity in question, so be it:  
I dig a pink collared shirt like the next guy.  
But it’s a big leap from “gay” to fag”:  
the word slaps you in the mouth, angry and short.  
I don’t know from where his hostility stems,  
but maybe he’s just scared: of words,  
of sublimity, of meaning lurking just deep enough  
to keep him from jumping in the water.

I, too, am scared: of the mainstream,  
of being swallowed by fad, of time cards  
and punch sheets, day after awful day,  
one drudgery after another until the annual trip  
to the in-laws’ lake cottage. At dinner,  
we’ll talk of nothing substantial, like religion  
or politics, but of football and silverware -  
the latest hurricane brewing in the Gulf.

## APPEASEMENT

*In the name of Satan, we'll achieve our goals.  
- Paradise Lost, "In Nomine Satanis"*

I can't decide if this line is a joke  
or a true profession of faith,  
given the proclivity of metal bands  
for fucking with the religious mainstream.

I've no desire to fall victim to a prank;  
if they're not serious and I torch their albums  
I'll feel like a fool. I'd hate to burn money  
but Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell would argue

I'll burn with them if I listen to their music.  
So would my mother, who once offered  
to buy my Dimmu Borgir albums back from me  
if it would keep me out of hell.

"Make sure you pray before each purchase."  
I'm sure she's right, but I'm not willing  
to sacrifice my appearance and self-respect  
by quizzing God in the middle of Best Buy.

I once worked in a record store  
and had a bald, bearded man twice my size  
ask if we stocked any Danzig albums.  
He went wild over our three selections,

then asked if I listened to the music  
of the Misfits' former front man.  
I didn't dig that Satanic stuff, I said.  
He sneered, "Don't limit yourself, man."

How did I get to this point, ten years later,  
buying music blessing the infernal name  
of you-know-who? I blame Marilyn Manson  
for steering me down the primrose path

of mollification, like Neville Chamberlain  
dealing with Hitler in the 1930's:  
Oh, just a little piece of Europe won't hurt.  
It's only our soul at stake.

## MOTHER

What I don't see, she tells me over the phone,  
900 miles away, where she counts rosary beads for me,

fingering each Hail Mary, full of grace, careful  
to avoid the drop and shatter of salvation upon the floor.

How she offers prayers for me, sits for hours alone  
on a wooden pew, murmuring phrases for my father,

dead these years, and me, whose spirit has wandered astray.  
I picture her mouthing silent incantations to God,

firm in the belief that His ears hear the desires of her heart.  
She exhorts me to believe in the unseen.

"The Lord cares for His own," she says. I don't doubt her.  
My bank account says no one cares, least of all Him,

and when I fall asleep it's to images of a block-letter word -  
DEBT - crashing from the sky, crushing my skull.

I collapse on the ground, bleed out, soak the dirt  
around me. Watch it seep through the earth

become consumed in a fiery core of molten flame.  
I wake in a pool of my own sweat and drool.

On nights like these, I've tried to confess my troubles,  
clear my soul. But my spoken sins echo off bare walls,

and nothing changes, no matter how hard I pray.  
If God exists, he doesn't care. But I can't tell her this:

she begins each conversation with a greeting of peace,  
as if I was a stranger leading an unknown life.

Her sincerity gnaws at me when I least expect it:  
like a rat in the attic you swear you've killed, it returns,

hungry, scratching at unseen edges. The more I pray,  
the more He ignores me and speaks to her. Alone,

I perch on the edge of my bed, warmed and embraced  
by only a Law & Order SVU marathon on television.

Outside in the darkness, I hear my cat mewling.  
“Let me in,” she says. “I’ve been out too long.”

I move to the door and let her inside. My mother is silent  
on the phone, but I swear I hear her smoothing prayers

between thumb and forefinger. She knows I can’t believe –  
and that I can’t change. But in the rhythms of her speech

she begs God to open the door, one last time,  
to me, a sinner with no cadence of my own.

## THE WORLD AS WORD AND MEANING

No older than seven, I remember my father's voice  
on the telephone as he called from work late mornings,

asking if my mother had returned home,  
hearing me tell him no, not yet. "It's okay," he'd say.

"It's all right." Sometimes my parents would awaken  
my sister and I at nights, screaming in the dining room,

my mother backed against the wall, my father's fists  
beating dents into the wallpaper near her head.

Thinking myself a hero like those in the Westerns  
I'd watched, I'd grab my Red Ryder BB gun,

and slide out into the hallway, a full room away,  
yelling at him to leave her alone. She'd flee to her room,

lock the door, and cry through the night.  
I'd fall asleep to that rhythm, not cadenced like rain

but hesitant, stuttering, how your heartbeat fades  
in and out sometimes - non-ordered. No constancy.

In the morning she would emerge, still crying,  
toting a battered suitcase, and leave, saying nothing.

We'd stand, awkwardly, in the kitchen,  
waiting for my father to say something.

On those days he'd return home for lunch,  
make us cheese sandwiches and *Campbell's* tomato

soup, and use milk, the way my mother did.  
He'd stay for an hour, check his silver Timex

every so often, as if he had somewhere else to be.  
That night, we'd wait for my mother to return,

but she didn't, or wouldn't. Instead, she'd wait  
for the second morning, arrive a few hours later,

after my father had left. She wouldn't hug us then,  
would instead retreat to her room, emerging, clear-eyed,

moments later. One afternoon, while my sister napped  
and I read in my room, she collapsed in the kitchen,

rousing herself only to a sitting position,  
hands clutched against her knees, sobbing,

beating her head against the side of the refrigerator.  
I found her there when I left my room for a snack,

and sat down, put my arms around her,  
answered the questions she asked of me. "It's all right,"

I said, remembering my father's phrase.  
In college, I'd watch *Easy Rider*,

remember Captain America's fireside guilt: "We blew it."  
In those words the weight of my mother's failed marriage.

Years later, I'd stand at the top of the stairs  
watching shadow reflections of my mother

beating my sister, until bloody, with a sorority paddle.  
How I did nothing but retreat to my room,

pull the covers over my head,  
speak to myself in words only I could understand.



## IN THE BLOOD

My father killed himself with a .45  
a few years back. When drinking,  
I pull a .22 from the dresser.  
Size matters. This one bounces

off leather jackets; this one is used  
for target practice. In certain cities  
this size comes with an Italian  
to pull the trigger, back-of-the-head

talk medicine. But I'm Polish -  
before I squeeze the trigger I look  
down the barrel. From this distance  
the hole could be anything.

When it mushrooms on exit I taste  
syrup, brown and sticky, draining.  
In the end, free will: gauge up  
or down. Enough to draw blood.

## WHEN MY FATHER DIED

His body shook under the pale green sheet,  
mouth open like a fish, eyelids fluttering

and so pale I thought I could see the veins  
in them, tracking the flow of blood

from heart to brain, back again.  
My mother's command fresh in my ears -

"Daddy, if you can hear me, blink your eyes" -  
as I stood in their bedroom, holding her place

until she returned from the kitchen,  
face pale, ambulance on the way.

Not knowing what else to do,  
I returned to my room, closed the door,

disappeared under the covers with a book.  
When I woke, visions of Narnia in my head,

I thought for a brief moment  
I'd dreamed the night's events.

Sounds I thought real - my mother crying,  
paramedics whispering in hushed tones,

my sister in the hall asking What's wrong?  
in a voice heavy with sleep -

were only figments of an unconscious mind.  
But then I crawled in his bed, curled my body

around the pillow on which I'd seen his head  
the night before, lolling from side to side.

Smelled him in the sheets, a mix of sweat  
and Brut cologne, remembered his eyes

fixed open to the ceiling, ignoring my pleas.  
How my eyes fixed on his, wondering

what he saw that closed him off from me  
begging him to blink and return.

## ON THE PASSING OF YOUR FATHER

*in memory of Robert Van Ausdall*

Perhaps your life, at thirty and beyond,  
would be better having never known

the cool lips of death on a parent's cheek,  
or on the mouth of one you called friend.

Of a lover's sweat tracing your body  
a final goodbye, knowing absence

makes the heart grow weaker,  
and then beat no more.

You are the shell of a butterfly,  
a mirror smudged with the fingerprints

of its last viewer. Each night you caress  
your reflection, kiss your cheek goodnight,

feel your arms embrace your body in sleep.  
You dream of the here and now,

a wake from which you cannot escape  
no matter your command to the corpse:

*arise, sleeper, and walk  
unencumbered, whole once more.*

## REFLECTIONS ON TURNING THIRTY

I have seen wind  
whipping for pleasure  
a bird or bee, no order;  
in a single gust, shattered.

*This, the greater good:  
when singing, imagine a nail  
with no teeth,  
or the ground with no feet  
to pound upon it.*

I have heard water  
weep your name  
like the slow cant of sheep,  
a cadence of days dissolved.

*This, the earth pictured  
with no room for digging  
holes to part beyond:  
the way of the homeward,  
the turn of the bound.*

I have felt winter  
whisper a silent greeting,  
a heavy chill like the sun  
might never rise again.

*This, the bared teeth of beauty:  
when dawn's deadened light  
shows sleep an early grave,  
and shadows pause on blades  
cracked and frozen.*

Love is the brick  
breaking windows  
of the heart.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

NICK YOUNG WAS BORN IN COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO, AND GREW UP IN FORT WAYNE, INDIANA. HE ACHIEVED A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN HISTORY FROM XAVIER UNIVERSITY (OH) AND A MASTER'S DEGREE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND RHETORIC & COMPOSITION FROM INDIANA UNIVERSITY – FORT WAYNE. HE CURRENTLY RESIDES IN TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA.