THE AFTERMATH *of* HEAVY METAL

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IT MOVES IN TWO DIRECTIONS

Someone was flying kites again on the hill
Their description could have been dumbfounded
Driving in the dark, trying to look
all the roadkill in the eye

MIDDLETOWN, KY

Light moved the way
you would expect it to.
Dogs chased after beer cans,
deer committed suicide
on the sides of pickup trucks.

In the yellow light of a dirt-brown bar
a girl unstitched her gums in the corner,
another made the sign of the cross.

Two animals clamored in their apartment
and a question was asked about love.

The girl was bleeding unbelievably
She held out a hand of birdseed and said

Come here. Let me show you
all of the awful things
I can do with my mouth.

ILLINOIS STATE FAIR, 1993

We weren't taking any chances this year
on the aging sheep or the cancerous pigs.

The best farriers were summoned from distant counties.
You could see them in the shade of the barn,
polishing their fine pritchels on leather rags

Off in the hollow, the Tilt-a-Whirl received fresh grease
and the crowds shuffled at a funeral pace
between the Dippin' Dots and the Fudge Hut.

At the clogging competition, I halved my ham sandwich
and slid it to Bill, whose underneck jiggled as the girls
stomped and twirled in their denim dresses.

All day we had wandered from stall to stall
looking for our wicker basket or our almanac,
our linen tablecloth, our prize heifer.

We didn't know whether it was dew or sweat
condensed on the forehead of Ms. Illinois Beef Queen,—
but we kept watching her under the hay window light.

We wanted to believe that there was a reason for her,
that maybe she could save our cows from the flood.

SLOW DANCING WITH THOMAS KANE

& it is hard to remember if there was a string quartet,
or a woman with long satin gloves
caressing a trellis lined with ivy;

or if maybe she was the one
holding a water bottle, its cinched
plastic straw lapped into the maestro's mouth.

An arc of pistachio shells trailed us
into an exterior fashioned by the finest moonlight.
The sawhorses were sleeping off in the distance.

& it must have been their trembling chests
in that awkward posture of love
that was misting our view from the balcony.

Oh Thomas Kane, I made you a poem
that will never be done. Your hands were always
full of birdsong, how could I hold them?

PARLOUR TRICKS WITH ED STECK

I waved my arm to signal *ta-da*, but no smoke and no song were revealed. A hand reached out in place of the absurd, the slit in the green velvet curtain. The way the color red made its exit, or is simply invisible now. The winter made of whiskey, this cabin full of limbs. Put all these antiques on eBay, somebody get us out of here.

A CUSTOM TIN-CAN TELEPHONE

Come, let's watch the lies,
Lose sleep over discrepancies In the X-Files.

Touch my finger as I tempt the tightrope,
Tip-to-tip
Remind me, whose country are we in?
On whose side does fire mean light?

& Ellington's ghost
whimpering through our bath towels,
Hip-to-hip and you can't remember how to spin a lady out,

Cover her with the horizon of your body, then
It doesn't matter, we're sunk in
Safe & sound
& Soon
Two white piles of names in our hands
A lamp that burns until they re-open Afghanistan

Until our toes are blue pearls No longer made
Of the things we've attempted to forget

Summer and the rivers belong to us

Pray it's still raining tomorrow
That means we stopped time

That means breakfast on the porch

OLEANA, OH

Drinking again on the balcony,
somewhere a body of water, always
a reservoir in the corner of a thought.

I'm telling the story, remember:
ten bicycles chained around your legs,
the old Crown Victoria in the driveway

You held a cigarette in each hand,
twirled them between your fingers like
Miss Cumberland County would twirl her batons.

See: I think of you,
even if only as a harbor or
a man on a split-rail fence;

and perhaps I think of us as two sneakers
tied around a telephone wire
outside a hamburger shack in July.

The crows were coming from everywhere.
We were learning something about
geography

THINGS TO SEND YOU

A brown craft box marked THUNDER, and a small
cut-glass jar full of snow. A cloud
from the smokestacks down in Panther Hollow.
If you thought of me as this city, I could
make sense to you. Dodging potholes.
The burn on your hands from the ropeswing
under the Clemente bridge. It becomes a language,
how the trees undress themselves, & we
pick apart what's underneath. The sky
that will never make up its mind. All those crows
on the branches at night, waiting for us
to get carried away

APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

There was a man who wanted me,
or wanted my fingers, or loved,
or said he loved.
that feeling of his face peeling off

We both had Axl's haircut,
wore t-shirts whose collars
we ripped off with our teeth

We went to hell, got fucked,
lived in his parents' basement,
drank too much Colt 45 & puked
on each other
& I'd beat him
in the parking lot of the Sizzler
& he'd hit me with his satchel
of gold Sacajawea coins &
still we'd end up in the back seat
our blood and tongues
all over each other

It was the summer of '03· fathers
on the Jersey Turnpike belched wildly
in their SUV's, Chinese teens
tried to kiss through the gauze
of their surgical masks; it was too late
to be pulling that kind of shit.

HOLIDAY

Darkness, I still don't know what you are,
other than the car that carried me here
and the backwoods of November,
this tiny little cabin where I wake
to the shotguns and Neo-Nazi pickups
buried into this earth. Down the hill
the groundskeeper cooks me breakfast
while my lover sleeps in her Amish quilt.

And I should mention I started drinking again
so that I may better look her in the face
It turned out that we were both secrets,
but now my hands smell like vomit
when she least expects them to,
and I can't get the feeling right, dressing her
in someone else's lace gloves,
someone else's navy coat.

I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

I loved that man. Which is all
there is to say. I know we're not
supposed to talk about it.

I guess I am asking forgiveness,
to swear his name into the horizon;
to let him become every father

Gone & inescapable & eternal:
Sarah's, lit like a bird from his motorcycle,
or Oscar's, whose last moments in this world

& first impressions of the next
are trapped on a film somewhere, collecting
the impenetrable layer of dust

The way my father's camelhair blazer
waits in the neglected closet
and sometimes I think to put it on

To make a little resurrection, a cheap
magic trick, but I know it won't do much good.
Grief is still funny, the way

You can't get the timing right.
Wait in bed until the evening, and then
the coffee's weak, the eggs are burnt,

The train was early, the sun's too slow.
Waking and walking and running shoeless
in the dawn of the first snow.

Now I've come to the waters
at the end of America, this formaldehyde town
stopped in time. I had to have a word

With you, Ocean, because I know
it's been rough between us. Leave him
out of it. You have already caused

Enough ghosts to make me a liar. & now
look at me, in the bathtub of an old love,
learning how to breathe underwater.

CONSIDERING THE GHOST

Rolled over, asked where you goin' so slow. There were eggs bathing in the mysterious hum of the refrigerator. There was a rifle with bullets made of sand. I unlatched it from over the bricked-in fireplace; I held it to your face. When you didn't react, I realized there was no one there.

THE CALM BEFORE THE HORSE

When the airplane made it over the Atlantic,
I thought that I was safe. I refurled my eyebrows,
unpinned my wig. No one asked questions

at customs. I fashioned a new dress
from the bright blue towels in the tobacconist's
wash closet. The hotel was a weekly for gypsies

and cab drivers, all of us there learning
how to disappear. For weeks I wandered the stacks
of faded Czech octavos, looking

for any signs of a leak. So when
a man touched my elbow and spoke
with hard consonants, I held my thumb

to my lips and signed the cross. I didn't expect
him to withdraw a folded photograph from his pocket
and confront me with a picture of us

dated five months in the future. How could
I resist? Outside, the fog
turned to humidity, turned to rain.

At night, he sunk into me like a stone,
in the mornings he was gone before I rose
I kept checking the bookstores

and the libraries, sifted through endless
boxes of samizdat, but the more I looked
and the longer I lived with the future man,

the less I could remember what I was looking for
Suddenly, news came from the West
that the last cowboy had died.

The man sitting next to me at the bar kept
flipping his rat tail and hitting me on the shoulder.
The fly attached to my evening bourbon

was looking at me the wrong way.
That night, lightning cracked
against the window, and from sleep

a short cry pushed through my throat,
shook my shoulders. When I laid
back down, the future man was awake,

watching me The next morning
he seemed to be pleading for something, but
what could I say? In the street

I heard horse hooves on the
cobblestone. The future man was digging
in the drawer of his nightstand

It had been five months. He pulled
a leather case out from under a sock. As long
as he has that camera, I will not be safe.

SOVIET DUST

At first I thrilled, returning to find
their white ashes curled up on the windowsill,
or laid out on the floor like an old
battle plan. I swept them into mason jars,
sketched all of the ways their foreheads
could have furled, their lips creased
I kept them like pets on the floor
by the kitchen stove, others lined up
behind the economical couch.

But soon I couldn't come home
without finding one strewn across the TV
or doubled over the bathtub like a drunk.
They didn't approve of the men I brought
to meet them. As we tried to couple
in the warm summer rains, they wouldn't
leave us alone, all night asking us
to remember their names.

ASBURY PARK RODEO

Some bull from the rodeo just jumped into the ocean,
& all the men are on the pier hootin and hollerin at the damn thing.

I said what the hell you expect makin
a goddamn boardwalk rodeo

But they weren't payin none attention.

And Jacky's over there, red-faced with his lip in a knot.
I seen him down there chasin it all day long
bitin on the damn thing's ear
pink blood all runnin out his mouth

Heys Jacky I said
you think that big whale out there
gonna put yer friend in his belly?

But he wouldn't pay me none attention neither.
I rolled a barrel right past him, he just kept chewin
his toothpick and fingerin
that pistol he got in his pocket.

SEASONAL

These old white ladies with white-white perms were sitting behind tables loaded with cross-stitch and tchotchkes like we were at the Big Church Flea Market on a dewy morning in May except indoors and dark and a lot of my family was there and so was my first love but he was still mad at me so we walked five feet apart as my mother drifted between tables and shuffled the dinner rolls in her purse

Well there was a hidden rowboat to Secret Treasure Island that my ex-love slipped away on and even though I knew he wasn't coming back the whole family waited speechless in the parking lot as the park closed and the sun set and the gates locked and as my sister waited slumped up against the wheel of the 'ole wagon I kept arching my back trying to make out the smoke that could have been off in the distance

ALL THAT I WANTED

At the usual temperature of the earth, there are approximately permanent things.
-Bertrand Russell

Still, it was summer
and there was language dripping everywhere

I caught flies in my hands,
swatted them against my neck.

I pinned them to faraway places,
watched the Japanese cinema;

rain impaling the charred skeletons
of humans, or temples, or huts.

Even as the water grew silent,
language was floating over the gardens;

old women were hanging their sheets on the line
with clothespins when they started to wail.

Language was forming over their mouths
and eyes, all things shining before them.

And so what I stayed up all night
worried about the freshly sprouted skin

of magnolias on the tree out front,
and no one doing a thing to stop it.

So what I dreamed my voice
could swallow the wind

and I sang against it, my eyes shut
and my tongue sunk into my chest

I did nothing. The women
went blind. Their houses continued howling

There were so many things
I could have said.

THE AFTERMATH OF HEAVY METAL

How could I have not thought it strategic
that you whispered your somethings
into my deaf ear?

Of course the charming dog did not belong
to me I could never be responsible
for such a thing

Singing again of the same old sadnesses,
here comes the parade of handkerchiefs.

God bless you, God bless you, God bless you

No such thing as a luxury Chinese restaurant.
The bathroom smells like shit in the exquisite hotel.

White women look the same under five hundred
gallons of rain.

Clown mascara.

Every time I go to sleep, there is
a promise of death.

Legendary sympathy, rotten peach

MYTHOLOGY I

I understand the season of leaving:
the words of hurried lovers swept
under couches; the way language
passes from mouth to mouth
but never means the same thing.

Today I woke in a country I'd never heard of,
and my forearms were covered in sand.
I didn't bother to reach for you,
who had already floated off like a whistle

We live the same day like ghosts
covering each other in red clay.

So the bathtub begins to rebel
So we both develop stutters.

MYTHOLOGY II

& then there is breakfast with the ghosts,
whispering underneath the begonia that arcs
across a teakwood table, sunlight imported
from California
                the kind of weather that suggests
today could be good for anything, or maybe
just wasted on a long afternoon nap.

We re-enact old home movies and think
about the things we almost did to make money,
the things we thought would save us.

When it rains, we take the phonograph outside
and groove underneath the thick muggy blankets
of Bessie and Nina, and it don't mean a thing.

The phone never rings, but neither does it wait.
Your children are grown and your wife long
forgotten in that blue-green summer haze.

Waking up with the sound of the train on her pillow,
mistaking the whistle for your body
mistaking the whistle for your name

MYTHOLOGY III

Whose fire? My shivering on the rocks,
your occasional children. The locals
won't let us camp in their backyards,
and I can't blame them.

We laughed so hard we left this world.

So we build the mythology where we run
around the country, drinking beer
in discount motel pools.

We're in love with each other's leaving.
We're sorry we brought each other along.

I keep waiting to wake with you whirring
like a ceiling fan above me. I keep
straining my eyes to see what you are.

MYTHOLOGY IV

Now the pool is full of Budweiser
and rocks. So does your body whittle
or does your body float?

This morning I woke with your whistling
in my chest. I tried to dig you out
with my fingernails, but below
the arc of my ribcage there was
no one to find.

& I understand the stutter of sadness
& the famous silence which lives
in my throat. Nobody taught me
the right way to disappear.

Here we go, back into
each other again

CLASSIC RUINS

After enough time, there is only the kind of silence
that draws the horizon out of awe

So here I am again on that perfect Virginia hill
picking the dandruff out of the clouds

& I'm filled with all this breath
I cannot wrangle into voice

The day vanishes over the ebb of the hill
carrying off the parts of myself I no longer require

IN ROLLED THE FOG

It was a trick we had learned to do with a little rope and sometimes a mirror. In times of distress, we used the garden hose and the puddle of oil left under the Buick. The other kids would be riding their banana seats when suddenly something changed. They wanted to go home and didn't know why. The streets emptied, and that was the magic. *Ha ha, sky,* I said. *Don't you tell me how to live my life.*

READING THE LITTLE PRINCE TO MY FATHER

There is a tiny jackhammer playing in the pale
of my father's throat. It tries to explain the enormous weight

his dwindling body has become, how no crane
nor strongman could lift him back

into the world of the living. In the half-light now,
the pale green stone that fits

between his palm and mine begins to cool
like a river rock in the evening. We built fires once

so we could see the spirits that drifted
off the lake where he scoured end to end

for belief in something beyond all this: beyond the hollow
of his cheek that I try to kiss when he says

but I don't want to leave, and there is no arguing
either way. Someone is making

casserole, someone is swearing with all their breath,
the prayer of the word *irreparable*, and later,

inconsolable. & there is the term *necessary*,
which he was, & something about tenderness

or forgiveness, but no, they don't
go hand in hand. There is the clacking

of brass handles when I close the dresser drawer,
the keys collapsing on the foyer table, the shuffle

of his shoes. There is the trail of coffee
that followed him out the door, that we thought

could lead him back home. A '62 Triumph
in a garage we can't find, an office

made of cigarette smoke and broken
fax machines. A secret storage space

where we find the rocking chair and the box
of photographs, and the possible life

AFFINITY FOR DROWNING

I have tried to be clear
about my intentions toward the moon

& I want to believe that this world
is full of darker things than these bad ideas

Lord, I am no song in the morning star
nor the slope of the sky broken off into evening.

I am the wind swept into the last hour,
this river run in two.

SO IT GOES

Waiting at the Amtrak station, some kind
of futuristic auto racing plays on the overhead TV.
The cars are boxy and spit fire from their rears; the drivers
deploy parachutes as they fly out of their vehicles,

which probably crash,
but I never see it
I want
to go back home, watch Young Guns
on the console TV. I want you
to talk to me like I'm dangerous, tell me
you're not coming back,
make me
chase you through cities of thorn brush,
spread my blood across the map.

I've boarded the train, which is luxurious
and empty. The windows are curtained in Plantation Blue
& the seats are far apart like private islands

It's November and I am nobody's
daughter anymore.
Look at this river, like the skin
of an animal nobody remembers,
the shipwrecked houses, the gang of seagulls.

Pittsburgh was so beautiful this morning, mostly
because a place never looks so good as when
you leave it
& now I'm shuffling through Pennsylvania,
eating fake raspberries & looking in
from the outskirts of each town.

Don't you see?
We're not coming back from this.

In a small backyard patch, little flags wave
over a checkered tablecloth full of crinkle-cut chips
and deviled eggs
& as the train hustles &
carries me onward, a gaggle of children pours
through the screen door wearing birthday hats

& I think how I could have been any one of them;

especially the peach-faced blonde telling
his father, I'm a cowboy, see my boots?

I don't think anybody chose us before our becoming,
but now here we are.
There goes a graveyard of minivans,
there goes my last fruit snack. There's more birds,
just sitting on the water like that. & a boat with nobody on it,
& a white house.
I am coming home, and nobody
will be there to find me.

KNOW NO MONSOON

Now that we've arrived at midnight,
the trailer is filled with a bright, warm light.

All the nurses are done up in their party dresses,
so happy to see us, though I couldn't tell you

the name of a single one. They turn their backs
from the table of sponge cake, and gesture

for a dance that will never end. We've finally made it
to this little island, and I want you to know

how nice it's been to walk with you this evening.
I must excuse myself now, and step outside

where there are paper lanterns and the sound
of waves, strange contraptions of wood and rope

embellishing the shoreline. It's time we both
go home. You are so tired, but the nurses

will keep you dancing. Soon you will forget you brought
your body here, and then you will go on and leave it.