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When We Found Us

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When We Found Us

Chip Ratcliff

“And this too shall pass”

“Sometimes the god speaks through you, just not in a language you can understand”

“True things don’t need to be said”

“When in doubt, just say true things”

“I love you”

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Introduction: On Understanding

The hardest part about writing about myself is deciding whether or not to resist the urge to make myself into a character. I am a character of course, I play many roles, but the problem with addressing this in the course of a single critical introduction, as it is with any singular work, is the fact that I have to painfully staple down to the page the role I think I am or the one I want to be, or even the one I think I'm not, but that I think you would all be interested in reading about. And as anyone who understands the process of writing a character knows all too well, the problem with this process is that you are not in full control of the character you create. The character you create, regardless of how you present them, still reveals something about the creator as much as it does the creation. If God, Himself, made all the multitudes of mankind in his own image, merely to reveal something to Himself about Himself, I wouldn't blame him.

Hell, I get it. I would understand.

For the purposes of this essay I am going to write as myself. Whether it is who I am or who I want to be, or who I think you'd want me to be, is up to you. And when the essay is concluded, you can attempt to see how much of me there really is in here. Whether I have made myself into the character I want to be or whether in the attempt, I have instead revealed the person I am underneath. Perhaps I will even leave you with less of me than you started with. No matter what you or I do, you're going to be dealing with an unreliable narrator. Keep this in mind.

This essay is going to be longer than most, if not all, of my included works. In my work, I value brevity, the punch and pain that comes in picking and then inflicting every word carefully and honestly and making each one work harder so that the effect is clear,

concise and brutal.¹ I value crafting a small and intricate thing so well that it looms larger in the minds of the people who read it, than it seems to stand on the page. I like my poems and short fiction to be knives. The kind of thing you can put on display for their workmanship, but that hold an edge fine enough to shave with and if properly maintained can last a lifetime of everyday use.

Bear with me, dear reader, because I am unsure if I can keep this essay aloft without filler. We may even have to get philosophical before this is over.²

Just as, I prefer not to write about myself; I prefer, even less so, to write about my work. If you want to talk about my work; *Ask me*. I can talk forever. Otherwise, I prefer cold reads. I prefer my work to speak for itself. I also prefer my work to be read aloud. More opportunities for me to talk, some might say, but also to enjoy the soundplay, to feel the punch of the performance. I don't understand writers, of poetry or fiction, who are able to read their own work in a quiet monotone. It is not a matter of being a good reader. If you can honestly write something and not bring those same emotions to a reading of it, then what are you doing?

Furthermore, I can say I don't have many hard influences from either my background or other works. This sounds petty, even childish. I am not arguing, by any stretch, that I am an island, or that my work is created independent of circumstance or time, but what I will argue is that I am not trying to recreate or follow any particular style, nor am I going to say that any particular aspect of my life or up-bringing truly informs my work more than any other. Honestly, if any part of my upbringing has made

¹ Which if you have ever met me, is the complete opposite of how I deal with conversation, but you know what they say, "talk is cheap."

² God forbid.

me what I am more than anything else it is the fact that my parents supported me, pushed me to succeed, but never really pushed me in any specific direction. I was expected and often enjoyed going to church³. I didn't ever know how my parents voted growing up. Politics was not a discussion they or I really cared to have. More often than not, I was allowed to develop myself in the ways I chose, and because I had their support and their expectations and my own expectations, I more often than not enjoyed good success. In school, the only thing I ever really focused on besides writing or other creative work outside of my actual studies was wrestling and though to my great shame, I never placed at the State tournament, I held the school record for "most wins in a four-year career" at 147 wins⁴ for about two years.

The only remotely concrete influence I would argue suffuses my work are myths and epics, particularly Greek and Scandinavian mythological material. As I express in both, *Yggdrasil* and *Finger Bones*, I love to see myth re-purposed, often in more modern contexts, and re-examined. Human nature is the one thing I will argue has never changed, and won't ever change. The people who lived since the dawn of time have held many different beliefs and cultures, but at their heart, as expressed through the archetypes present among all cultures, the core of what it is to be human has never shifted a single iota.

Besides this vague idea of human nature and myth, my influences are a rough amalgam of everything I have experienced and are brought to the page by whatever I feel the urge to say or create. I tend to try to work so heavily in archetype that the ideas

³ I grew up Roman Catholic, in an old Klan town where a staggering number of people still believe that Catholic isn't "really Christian."

⁴ For reference, 100 wins in a high school career is like scoring 1000 points in a 4-year basketball career, or graduating college with Honors. Read here as: "Difficult, but expected of you if you're good at it."

which enter into my work are often boiled down to their essence in the process. A list of my “influences” in this regard would span the rest of this essay as a list of names and titles. I pull from Tolkien, myth, folklore, Neil Gaiman, dark fantasy videogame series like *Dragon Age*, *Elder Scrolls*, *Dark Souls* and the *Witcher*. And all of these, normally, because they themselves pull from the mythic/folkloric source materials I already use in interesting ways, while keeping the kind of gritty realism of both world and emotion that makes the fantasy really come to life.

Every poem I have ever read forms a monstrous mess of things I like and dislike about form and content and soundplay and meaning and putting names to any of it will only really confuse the issue. I can say, for certain one, of the first poems that dragged me into poetry was Randall Jarrell’s *The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner*. So at the very least, one might argue, the wombo-combo of brevity and brutality begins early.

Nereid started as my musings about a Tumblr post which posited a race of mermaids whose hierarchy was dictated by depth-tolerance. *Brush Pile* and many other of the poems and flash fiction pieces involving the Midwest were created by mixing in the kind of magic-realism, archetypes, and “sharpness” I like to see across many forms of media with my own memories, most of which are embellished. My knowledge of the rural, poor Midwest seems, even to me, as someone who lived in and around it, merely observational, the forces that one associates with it, agriculture, addiction, despair and so forth, are forces I observe as having influences around me, but not exactly on me. My home-life was good, we had enough money to get by okay, we had a close-knit family for the most part, and I am endlessly lucky in that regard. I don’t write about these things insincerely, I have seen each and every one, firsthand, but I cannot honestly argue for my

expertise in any of them, nor can I claim them as either an influence or a guide. I write about them because I experience them and because through writing about them, other people might understand. This idea of achieving understanding, I would argue is chiefest among every human need, and above all other aspects of the ever-unchanging human nature.

Writing is about understanding. Language, itself, is about understanding.

As part of the requirements for my BFA at Bowling Green State University I had to take a Linguistics course.⁵ Viewing languages in a more technical light. “This is how we make the sounds that make the words that we arrange through grammar and syntax and context and Grice and his maxims to information, to make ‘meaning.’”

An accent, I learned, is where the two sound or grammar profiles of the languages don’t meet up. A French accent tends to drop end consonants, and often makes the “th” at the beginning of words sound like a z. This is because the lack of the beginning “th” sound and many end consonants are features of French that aren’t features of English.

One of the most useful things I pulled from the class was the idea of Pragmatics in language. How language is used to achieve results. One of the key principles of this is that when language is exchanged between two interlocutors, only information that is assumed by one side or the other to be “new information” is exchanged.

In short: No one talks about things that they assume everyone knows. If I thought you already knew all this, all of these facts about language, in the same way you knew, almost implicitly, that the sun came up this morning, or that gravity was still a force that

⁵ Which, if you know linguistics as a study, is strange because the class itself is all nuts and bolts. A sculpture student doesn’t necessarily need to take a geology course to do their art. Useful though it might be later, after some thought.

existed and functioned, I wouldn't be talking about it. It would be totally pointless. True things, meaning here things that everyone believes are true, don't need to be said. Hence, why I am writing this essay, and why I keep attempting to express myself as a writer through both this particular endeavor and my other works.

Writing is about understanding. Language, itself, is about understanding, and as a result of how these two things work in tandem, understanding is only created through new information; new experiences. If I believed that you understood everything I am writing implicitly as you understand that you, yourself, are the thing thinking your thoughts then the point is moot. There is no story; no poem: There is no understanding.

At the same time I was taking my linguistics course I decided to double down and take a Philosophy of Language as one of the 4000-level courses for my minor. The course which essentially takes all that technical crap from linguistics and says "Ok, but why does any of that even work? It doesn't really work like that, but here we are anyway, using this imperfect system to try to make 'meaning,' so how do we tell a story to make this crap make sense? How are we to understand this?"

And now we're back at the beginning again with understanding. With the creation of meaning.

Meaning is a slippery thing. From an existentialist standpoint, nothing inherently "means" anything. It's all just "stuff" that exists and whether or not anyone can make it meaningful depends on your view about how meaning "works." For my purposes, I'll argue things can be made meaningful by one's experience of them.⁶ Something can't be

⁶ Rather than an existentially nihilistic point of view which says you can't.

meaningful until you know it exists and have some experience, positive, negative or otherwise, with it.

This is why I hate,⁷ the type of person who tries to make it seem as though fact that “The universe is so very big and we are so very small and therefore our tiny, tiny existence on our tiny, tiny, planet doesn’t mean much of anything in the ‘grand scheme of things.’”

Bullshit.

I used to know this kid, he went to my high school, and everyday he’d make these tiny little origami swans and he’d just leave them. Just leave them everywhere.

Eventually the janitor started to complain about the swans so the kid started to hide them in strange places. Under plants, behind posters, between the markers on the whiteboards, inside other kids’ books. Then the teachers got fed up with finding swans in everything and so they started trying to stop him from making them. So, he started teaching other kids to make the swans and to carry out his “good work.” Then this news got out and there were more swans than ever. Swans in absolutely everything. One kid’s locker got stuffed full and it was a damn blizzard where every snowflake was another tiny origami swan, and at this point the kid, now known as “The Swan Boss” is brought into the office— they skipped the detention bit and straight-up suspended him.

What makes this story meaningful to our discussion, is that I made it all up. None of this was real. It never happened, but for the few seconds you were busy imagining it, it was more real and meaningful than any number of “real” things that inhabit both this speck in space-time we call Earth and certainly more than 99.99% of the “real” objects

⁷ Yes, “hate.” None of this “strongly dislike” crap.

which exist beyond us, our understanding or our experience in the vast and yet, somehow, still mostly empty cosmos.

We are not meaningless in the face of the cosmos' vastness, the vast cosmos is meaningless in the face of our inability to experience it.

As a writer, I have the ability to build my own cosmos, to bring the forgotten facts of human existence to new light and life and to create new meaning from them in a universe that is mostly meaningless and empty. Language is the tool I use to achieve this. With language I can achieve, I can make myself more and more the character I want to be, rather than the one I was the day before or the one other people perceive me as, or want to perceive me as. I do this, like writing this essay, because I have to. I need to. I need to create. I need to be understood. And for the sake of your understanding⁸: I don't mean "need" like eating where people have easy access to a ton of options and can choose to eat shit or nothing anyway because one or the other makes them feel good about themselves.

I mean "need" like blood and oxygen, where the alternative to not getting exactly what is "needed" *where* it is needed in a timely fashion is being dead. Full stop. I often have made the joke that if I had learned to draw instead of write, I would never write. I'd just pull the images directly from my brain and paint them onto a canvas or page with no hassle.

Turns out; I lied. I wouldn't trade the beautifully simple complexity of language for the ability to paint like [insert the best painter you can think of here.] I never stop creating through language. Never. I talk. Constantly. Ask anyone.⁹ I come up with scads

⁸ Which for the purposes of our time here, is the most important thing.

⁹ Even me!

of one-liners, re-write movie quotes, design characters to say them, try to make a story around these people I brought to life. I give them lives, and jobs and dreams, then I torture their loved ones and burn down their homes so I can get my damn point across. I try to make them— the strange, the magical, the impossible, the simply made-up— more real than any thousand galaxies twisting through the void of infinite space.

Through language we are given access to an, albeit imperfect, system which can achieve things: ideas, emotion, images, understandings that no other form of media is capable of achieving.

I write poetry because I love the way a few words and the right sounds and right images and the right cocktail of emotions can drop you from barstool to bar floor like sucking a half-bottle of Jameson's through a silly straw, but minus the sudden mouthful of saliva and the lurch in your stomach. (Unless that ugly lurch was part of the point.)

I write prose because there is a story, a world, characters, and magic that needs to be seen, that needs to be experienced and understood. The same way human beings do. I want to make stories that are like living things, struggling to be understood, and experienced; to truly exist.

In conclusion, I'm not really sure if what I'm doing here is working. This is where language breaks down. At the end of the day, it is still an imperfect system. It does not transfer meaning or understanding perfectly, and I think that's part of why writing is so rewarding. In the end, the goal is understanding, but good writing has many ways to be understood. The goal is to create meaning in someone's life, to make it something they can take with them, but what they take is ultimately up to them. Pretending there is a single "right answer" or "correct understanding" with writing is just as destructive as

pretending it doesn't matter because it's made up, or because it's "so small" compared to the size of infinity, which I will fully argue isn't a concept anyone actually understands. I hope the character I try to be on paper and the one I think I am are slowly merging into a man I am happy to see in the mirror and on the pages I cover with words that only make sense because we all assume we know what they mean and those meanings are more real than anything. They have to be. Not just for our sake, but theirs.

And anyway, here's my BFA thesis:

Nereid

She awoke from half-sleep, and left the tangled purse of kelp behind, picking up her spear as she went. It was a thing of whale bone and salvaged metal, the metallic gleam, the starkness of it, out of place within the knotted kelp. She glided through the water, wraith-like, long fins, like a lionfish, trailing behind her as she went; the coral sunset slowly submitting to the endless indigo of the water.

She gathered her flock from another tangle, dozens of arm-length squid. She motioned them upward and inward, toward the feeding grounds, urging them toward the reef, which teemed with fish and crustaceans for her hungry brood. She urged them in a language of graceful motions and bioluminescent patterns played out along her arms and fins to hunt and to feed. She watched them as they darted among the rocks and coral-encrusted crevices keeping her eyes focused, watching closely for predators. Barracuda, eels, sharks and feral squid all posed their own threats to both her and her charges.

Soon she was joined by other shepherds. Each claimed a different section of the twilight reef, and each signed to the others across the distances in the same language of motion and light. The care-worn routines of “Hello”, “How’s the flock?”, “How’s the life-mate?”, “Good hunting, tonight?” Their keen eyes picked up the subtle cues across the darkness and the distances. The younger ones exchanged names with their elders, learned what sections of the reefs were claimed and what to look out for. She greeted her new neighbors warmly, learning their names and signing her own, a series of luminescent motions that described the way sunlight shimmered and twisted as it passed into the water. “Glint.”

She returned her attention to her flock in time to see a massive eel catch one of her squid by two of its tentacles and attempt to withdraw, dragging the flailing squid into

its lair. She moved quickly, catching the creature before it could retreat into its crevice and impaling it just below the jaw, severing its spine in one neat thrust. Red blood hazed the water around the wound as the squid retracted its damaged tentacles before joining the gathering flock to feed on the eel's lifeless body. Glint watched the frenzy with disinterest as the squid swarmed, each wrapping their ten arms around the eel's twitching and contorting bulk, shredding its flesh with their horny beaks. She disliked killing, and the residual writhing of the eel's body made her uneasy, blood must be repaid in blood. They were her charges, and needed all the food they could get to nourish their bodies and minds. It was the latter that made them so much like her and her kind. Other creatures were not trainable as the squid were. These young ones would continue to feed and grow under the care of her people. That was the nature of their partnership. The shepherds guide the young squid; training them, and when they grew larger they would serve the hunters. The adult squid would swarm and subdue larger prey until the hunters arrived, flashing with their own primitive bioluminescence to signal the kill. The eldest and strongest of these were chosen to be sent into the abyss. There they would be in direct service of the Lady and they would grow to immense sizes, serving as both guardians and enforcers.

Glint had only ever seen a true giant once before. A massive shark had attacked one of the stragglers and as it rounded on him to strike again, before even she or her companions could drive it off, the monster erupted from the depths like a great black spearhead. The shark was immediately seized by one of the thick black arms and serrated suckers of one of the Lady's own guardians and dragged into the blackness of the deep abyss, a mist of blood trailing it as it went. She had even heard stories from the

hunters of the Lady's cherished favorites being capable of bringing down whales with minimal assistance, wrapping their many black arms around the beast and using their purely muscular forms to overpower and subdue the struggling creature until it drowned.

Glint shuddered, glad that she would never experience first-hand the carnage her curious charges could inflict in their elder forms. The final hours of her watch passed quickly and the same red sunlight that had heralded the night returned to bring forth a new day. She called her flock, signaling to them with gestures of living light. Each of her wards responded warmly to her call in their own, more basic, signs. She gathered up her well-fed flock and led them, many playfully clinging to her trailing fins, back to their woven tangle of kelp, closing the entrance to prevent them from straying.

She entered her own kelp purse, allowing herself to slip into a restful half-sleep, suspended motionless within the water. She awoke from her respite a few hours later to the sound of singing. She heard it rising up from below, a haunting song of low, long notes, rising and falling. The Lady was singing to her children. She looked out from her tangle just in time to see the first of them rising up from the trench toward the reef. Luminous red orbs which floated dreamily along the current. Each one contained an unborn child of the Lady; one of her people. Each one waited to be collected and tended as they were shaped by the sea. She darted out, joining the shepherds and artisans as they gathered the precious spheres to be taken to specially woven kelp tangles. Below them, farther out toward the open water she could see the black kite-like bodies of the hunters and salvagers as they gathered their own shares of eggs to be molded by the pressure, temperature and twilight to become like them. Less elegant, streamlined and fierce, the trailing lionfish fins and colorful scales of the reef-dwelling shepherds replaced by the

manta-like wing-fins, stark black backs and pale underbellies of the hunter caste. Farther below them on the lips of the trench Glint imagined she could almost see the dark forms and pale lights of the noble caste drawing what few eggs they could back down into the trench, condemning them to them to bodies as alien and terrifying as their own. Forever confining them to the cold, crushing depths, and placing them in direct service of the Lady, herself.

Glint had never seen the Lady. None of her caste, nor even the hunter caste, could withstand the terrible pressure of the dark abyss. The squid, whose boneless forms could survive the descent, served as their only line of communication, relaying messages and allowing the Lady of the Abyss to enforce her occasional edicts through her monstrous black guardians. She had only ever heard rumors of the terrible appearance the noble caste, passed along to the weavers and spear-makers by tribute bearers, exceptionally deep-diving hunters and salvagers whose task it was to ensure that a constant supply of meat, kelp, weapons, and trinkets were delivered to the edge of the abyss. Black, elongated bodies and limbs, chased with pale lights. Huge, bloated eyes and mouths full of long teeth. These were the rumors which formed the only image she had of the noble caste. She could only imagine what kind of horror the Lady must be. It was hard enough believing that she and the hunters were of the same kind.

Glint deposited her own clutch of eggs and returned to watch as the last of the precious red orbs were gathered up. Small disputes broke out between the hunters and the reef-dwellers. Agitated signs flashed back and forth between the participants, each laying claim to the few remaining eggs.

“We need more weavers and makers.”

“Where will you get your materials and food if we don’t have more hunters?”

“What good are hunters with no one to make spears?”

The usual arguments. A few of the more arrogant hunters even attempted to pull caste. As if it mattered. Glint avoided the squabbling that came with each spawning. Caste politics, if they could even be called that, were never her affair. There would be more eggs next cycle and if times were hard for the hunters, allowances would be made. The last few cycles had been fair and by her reckoning the quarrels would settle themselves within hours. She headed back toward the edge of the reef. Picking her way down along the cliff face, she descended to the massive crevice in the rock where the hunters kept their tangles. The water felt thicker below the reef, and the weight around her ribs and gills began to feel oppressive. Even in the early afternoon, it was twilight here. Working her way down around the crevasse’s edge, Glint caught sight of her perched on spur of stone beside where her tangle was tethered. She was using a crude found-metal blade to split open crabs from the day’s catch. Glint signed out to her through the heavy gulf of dusk between them; a sign which described the way a predator strikes. The way a hunter should move. “Fury.” Fury caught her sign and excitedly returned Glint’s name in kind, her pale arms working their way quickly through the delicate signs. Glint swam up the outcrop, playfully snatching one of the crab halves from the knotted seaweed and fishnet purse at Fury’s side.

“Mine.” She signed gracefully. “Thank you.”

Fury mimed a half-hearted snatch at the pilfered crab.

“You are welcome to have it.” She signed back, returning to her work.

Glint signed while Fury worked. It had been days since she had taken the time to descend from the reef and Glint wasted no time trying to catch Fury up on the gossip and events on the reef, and less time eagerly cracking open the crab's legs with her sharp teeth. Fury worked in comfortable silence, breaking only, rarely, to sign the non-vocal equivalent of an acknowledging grunt. By the time Glint had worked her way up to the story of the eel it was beginning toward evening again.

A large shadow passed slowly overhead. Curious, Glint looked up through the water, catching sight of the dark shape above them. Pulling Fury from her work, they ascended together, Fury reluctantly being drawn along, closer and closer to the surface. Glint knew the water here was too light and insubstantial for Fury's liking.

"Too bright." she had once told her, "The color of the water is wrong."

Together they broke the surface alongside it.

Glint had never seen anything quite like floating hulk before her. It was long and vast and it moved without a definite tail or water jets, yet it didn't seem to be merely floating either. Massive billowing white fins hung oddly from multiple, massive spires. Long strands seemed to connect every point along the topside. They kept pace with it for a while, slipping beneath it to observe the underside before resurfacing on the opposite side. Just below the pointed front of the structure, was a creature carved from the same material as the rest of the massive thing. It was graceful, soft and slender. Its body appeared to be rising from the waves, its limbs outstretched toward the sky. Beside it were shapes emblazoned in gold: NEREID.

They submerged. Glint gestured to it, then signed her confusion. Fury signed back, gesturing first to the thing then making a sign which to Glint had no meaning, but apparently was used described the floating hulks among the hunters.

“On long forays we might see them pass, other times we scavenge from their bones on the seafloor,” she signed. “Metal comes from within them.”

They surfaced again. As they watched it pass they heard noise from atop the floating structure. Creatures like the carving but rougher and thicker, looked down at them as they passed making noises both loud and soft, and throwing their scaleless, tan limbs in wild, meaningless, and lightless gestures. The vessel passed them as they watched; fascinated by the creatures it carried. It swung in a wide arc and began to return toward the reef. They dived again, hoping to easily avoid the oncoming thing.

Glint and Fury watched from below as the massive metal hook descended and smashed down among the tethered tangles, bringing the floating structure to a slow halt. The reef-dwellers’ signs were bright and furious and within minutes the hunters seethed as well. It had struck the purse of eggs the artisans had collected. Red embryonic jelly spilled from damaged eggs hazing the water with amniotic viscera. The eldest among them recognized immediately the threat posed by the great shape, and sent a squid messenger down into the abyss.

Glint and Fury surfaced, signing the same anger at the creatures. Fury began signing more and more furiously. She struck out at the things belly with her blade. The creature’s noises were quieter now; they were watching them intently. Some rubbed at their eyes or gestured at the two of them. Many of them were clutching at trinkets around

their necks. Others covered their mouths or made soft noises to the creatures nearest to them.

Glint watched them for what felt like a long time, her anger slowly giving ground to her own curiosity. What were these things? Why were they here? Did they not understand what they had done? Could they not interpret the signs? In an instant, gazing out at their strange faces, it was obvious to her that they could not. Whatever they were, they were far removed from the life she lived and, in that instant, she almost pitied them.

What must life confined aboard that floating thing be like? Trapped out of the water, forced to be reliant on the sky. Living their lives at the mercy of the waves and the wind. One great storm would destroy their floating home. She wished she could understand them. She wished she could make them understand her. Understand what they'd done, intentionally or not, to her people, and the more she watched them the less she believed their actions were intentional. From below, Fury, undaunted in her rage quickly caught sight of a vast, dark shape, rising rapidly from the abyss. She tugged at one of one of Glint's fins drawing her attention to the disturbance below, and Glint knew what was going to happen. She looked back at the strange creatures aboard their wandering home and signed a simple goodbye, before following Fury down, toward the reef. Glint looked back to see the great black arms coil themselves around the floating hulk's belly, dragging it away from the reef and out into the open water.

She watch as the monstrous creature tightened its stranglehold, crushing the vessel's belly and letting the sea envelop it, spilling the entire tribe of strange and piteous creatures into the unforgiving water. Fury had broken off from her to join the other hunters. As the Lady's guardian descended back into the abyss, the black shapes of the

hunters swarmed around the wreck as it sank, the water clouding with red as they worked their vengeance. Furious, coordinated signs marked the locations of drowning survivors, as well as valuable metal and other goods. The artisans would soon have a surfeit of new materials. Blood repaid in blood.

Glint watched from a distance, her eyes unfocused staring through the scene rather than attempting to direct her vision at the horror before her. She struggled to make sense of what was unfolding; the floating thing, the creatures it carried, all of it.

Their savage work now completed, the hunters began returning toward the drop-off. The bloody miasma surrounding the debris of the wreck would begin to attract sharks and the hunters could not afford injuries especially with the amount of salvaging to be done. There was a fresh skeleton to pick clean, after all. Fury caught sight of Glint again as she returned toward the reef. She signed tiredly, asking if Glint had seen the retribution the hunters had wrought on their enemy. Glint signed back.

“No.”

Brush Pile

Tangled limbs,
brought together by August storms and chainsaw circumstance,
weave walls against the world outside.
It is a habit formed in childhood,
making fortresses from fading green.
Leaves shriveled by summer sun—
make shade until they are fireworks.
Until the work is done.
Until night falls.
Until we remember our fallen timber battlements
Not by sight,
but only fondly.
Until the fire leaps up to remind us
That “this too shall pass”
That the walls we build are made of fuel.
That memories are made from things that burn.

Ruri

Ruri climbed down the long and knotted rope into the Well Where Death Dwelt. On the rope, at the point where one could still see colors in the dark, if only faintly, there was a red knot which marked the place where Ruri should cut the rope if she wished to visit Death. Ruri cut the rope just above the knot, and fell, down through the darkness. It seemed like a very long time to fall, longer than a fall should be, she thought, but no sooner had she thought it, she had arrived at the doorstep of Death's house at the bottom of the well.

It seemed to her, was a very strange door, made of tarnished, green bronze and set into the floor like the covering to a pit. It was carved with many strange beasts which Ruri did not recognize and figures of gods or men that Ruri did not recognize and it bore no handle or knob with which to open it. Fear, hovered over Ruri, and though she could not see it in the darkness above her head, Ruri could feel her there, crawling down the well shaft after her like a great spider. She knocked upon the strange door and it opened beneath her, but she did not fall again. For no sooner had she passed through the great bronze door, she was able to step onto the floor, with the great bronze door closing at her back, now in its proper place on the wall behind her.

“As a door should be,” she thought.

Taking a moment to right herself, Ruri looked about the interior of Death's house. It was a small, and dark place. Noise pervaded the place in strange echos, most of which came from an old rabbit-eared television set which was hazily playing the classic movies channel. Its dull silver-blue light played a kind of tug-of-war against the orange hue of a single glowing torch on the wall, which cast many flickering shadows. Every other piece

of furniture was carved from the surrounding cavestone, in an exact replica of every elderly person's home. Right down to the candy dish, full of dull unappetizing pebbles.

Death dozed quietly in a chair by the wall, facing the television set. Hunger crouched beneath the table glaring out with a simple animal stare. Sickness shared its bed with Grief and both lay quietly coughing and sobbing in a corner bed that was no more than a stone slab. War sat beside Death's armchair, and as it caught sight of Ruri, it cried out in a thousand men's voices, through a great maw with too many teeth,

“I am the scourge of small nations and the pastime of large ones! I am blood and metal! I am horses and men and fire! I am the Red God! Send unto me a thousand men from each of the seven nations and I shall declare for myself, a new nation of seven thousand corpses!”

Death, bolted up at the sudden noise and wheeling angrily from his seat, chased War with a broom, swept him beneath the slab where Sickness and Grief lay intertwined before returning to his armchair. Then, being seated once more, he spoke.

“Why have you come to my house?” Death asked.

“O Death, I wish but to ask you a single question, if you would be so kind as to answer.” Ruri said, polite as she was, but in the presence of Death, himself, she trembled, as she spoke.

“Not many are so brave as to journey here, and hold court with me.” Death said, reaching out to switch the television off. “It is difficult not to wonder what sort of question would bring a girl, unaided and alone to my house at the bottom of the well. Ask it.” Death said, “And should it be within my knowledge, I will answer it, in exchange for the most valuable thing you carry with you.”

Ruri asked her question, holding out her lighter, which he accepted, knowing, that a fire to cook by and a light to see by to a traveler through the wilderness is Life itself. And when he had answered her question as best he could, he gave her his own torch, which never went out and never burned the hand which held it and Ruri passed through Death's house at the bottom of the well, satisfied and unafraid. In this way, she continued on.

Yggdrasil

All realities;
merely branches,
spanning out between eagle-crown and serpent-root.
The world is an ash tree.

And on some branch
a man-god gives this tree a name as he swings;
one-eyed and neck-broken from twisted hemp.

Fire-sparks from below in Muspell
reach up to join their brother-stars,
and they fade into the air.

Soot-speck corpses cling to mist-sweat skin and steel
where a spear dedicated in sacrifice to the man it is killing
between Odin's rib-bones with every breath of wind.

Here, the nine-day pain-madness of this new gallows
teaches letters. Runes and spells got by suffering.
An eye,
once traded for wisdom,
is a price the newly-wizened god calls "small"
and so seeks further anguish.

Bleak ritual-suicide.

And on the ninth day
whether by arrangement of some true friend
or the weakness of hemp
or ash branch
the man is left to fall down through the world-void.

And in that moment,
before the great scream new knowledge brings
when the weakened noose-knot permits a single breath to pass between his lips,
a whisper coils out like smoke:
"Now, I understand."

Finger Bones

The myth
that the hand— Like a dead branch,
can simply be snapped off and that
with a god's bravery bolstering him,
Tyr did not regret.

That he did not wake—screaming,
From dreams of worse things—
Wolf-things.

In nightmares,
The hot breath condenses
dripping between his fingers.
The tongue under his palm is a living thing.
The silken fetter fastens, a slow, silent second before
the crunch
he feels in his stomach—
the smell—
the cloying copper-smell—
it does not belong on the outside—
coats his tongue and the back of throat.

The sword he reaches for, in half-wakened panic,
did not strike a scarred stump, that like a man—
a war-god, he does not fear
little silken ribbons like sharp teeth.
That he does not listen in the dark of his own room,
for the wolf-things which must be outside.
That he did not sift,
with his left-over hand
through wolf shit,
looking for finger bones.

Clay

I wake up in the dark.
Force myself from our bed.
Force my bones into my skin
and my skin into who I will be today.
It is an ugly, unchanging shape.

I work.
I attend class.
Sleep away my gray afternoons
to the sound of Blues;
songs about rivers and trains and mud
and sinners like us.
I go back to class.
I come home when it is dark again
while she is washing off the day.

While I cook dinner or play games with myself,
she sits in the center of our third-floor shoebox
and makes lifeless things live—
again and for the first time.
In her hands, she makes a skull from clay
and gives it a name.

For a moment, it wakes to prophesy
something Solomon wore like a ring,
something my mother said.

And before it comes to pass
in a moment's passing into a moment's end
I let her silent spell take hold of me,
soften like gray riverbed clay,
and let her make me whole again.

Dishes

I have been studying the difference
between boredom and depression
to better explain myself to the dishes in the sink.

They pile up as I cook,
daily, attempting to do something
constructive with my time.

Until all the good pans, are caked with
dry, off-colored efforts to ignore
the heap of slowly growing questions

about why I look for smiles
at the bottom of online recipes
instead of at the bottom of a clean sink.

“This is unsustainable,” I say,
looking at the teetering pile.
“I really should do something about that,” I say,
returning to the eggs I that am frying
sunny-side-up in a sauce pot.

A Billboard in the Rural Midwest

It is an advertisement for collecting scrap.
The faded blue image of a soda can is central.
“Cut the scrap”
or some similar “clever” thing
it says.
Also faded.

It stands along some stretch of highway
where the trees have to be cut back on one side
and there is a cornfield on the other.
The billboard is on the trees’ side.
The ends of the brush branches are thrash-broken.
Twisted off and shattered into ugly lines.

Next to the recycling symbol in the lower corner,
there is a bird’s attempt at a nest.
Cluttered and brash; the twigs woven
into the rusted metal of one of the lights
It seems abandoned.
The previous owner evicted by
the turning of the world.

Maybe it is easier for them to go than stay. Maybe
birds love nothing that they can’t take with them.
So little ruins lie where they lay.

On the other side is a smiling couple.
One seated, smiling as though struggling to smile,
and an advertisement for Narcan.

Small Prayer

I see the cat on the roadside;
a wretched wreck of twisted limbs
black, edging black
broken flat
and yellow
where tire treads have twisted off the skin.

I see the town where I grew up, left open
to the sky, huddled on the highway.
The spaces between the buildings are hungry.
In my parents' yard,
ash tree stumps are exposed like roadkill racoon vertebrae.
The space between the porch and the road is too open,
too close.

The sky has grown too wide
while I have been away.
The way that anything scraping
between the ribs of something
is "too wide."

I have held funerals for unlucky pets
Placing limestone gravestones over bodies I could carry
even in childhood.
I have watched a town
like something the road has killed
settle into an animal-grave.

Our only mistake
was not understanding,
soon enough
that this too shall pass.
And though I am not sure
which of us I am sorry for,
and though I am long out of practice,
I say a small prayer for the both of us.

Yearly Ritual

The girl watched as her father shifted the frost-glazed, wooden sawhorses from behind the chicken coop, setting them out far enough to draw the wire clothesline taut between them and weighing down their legs with old cinderblocks. In her arms, she held a cloth-covered basket.

The girl watched her father take his knife and cut holes in some of the old feed sacks they had saved up during the year, and lay them in a neat pile over the line. Then she set her basket aside as they both began the task of collecting up the chickens from their nightly perches, and fitting them into their new sack dresses, pulling their heads through the holes and swaddling them within the shrouds of woven white plastic. She and her father made sure to keep their wings bound tight, and tied off each bag around each bird's feet with baling twine. Every chicken they finished dressing, they hung upside-down on the line between the saw horses. They reminded the girl of torn pillows, their exposed down ruffling in the late autumn-morning breeze. The girl stood facing her father's back as he finished tying off the ninth and final bird on the line. In thirteen years, she had never taken part in this aspect of the ritual, and her innocence hung in the air like the mist of her breath.

Her father began by cutting the first throat. He bent down, taking the first bird in the line by its exposed neck and bringing it forward. The cut was a quiet noise, mostly the sound of his Carhart rubbing on itself, followed by red dripping. The blood hitting the pale gray crust of the gravel was louder than the blood pounding in her ears. It felt like someone had put a live-wire on the back of her neck. Each bird's eyes flickered with fear, their blood steaming in slight wisps, their beaks working with breathlessness, as though

they were trying to swallow some truth. With each chicken in the line, the electric shock of watching her father make the short, quick cuts dulled and her face grew hot. Her father was silent.

When gravity and the slowing, final heartbeats had done their part, they took down their victims. Her father rolled the scarred and stained ash stump, their makeshift chopping block, over to the line. He finished taking the heads off with a hatchet. He'd spent all morning setting the edge, polishing and sharpening the blade. His hands still smelled like gun-oil, and the pungent artificial smell of it mixed itself into the metallic scent of sharpened steel and blood.

It was quick work. The girl made sure the basket was ready for the next part.

Her father handed her each head tenderly. She cupped them in her hands, cradling each lifeless thing in her soft fingers, and placed each one into the straw-lined basket. She had made sure to pick the cleanest, golden straw, and to tuck the coins, little holocausts, her grandmother had made by flattening them on the railroad track, down into the bottom.

She remembered when helping to make the coins was her only job. She and her grandmother would cross town to the tracks and park the car, listening quietly around the radio for the horn to sound from far away before getting out to place their chosen coins onto the tracks. Grandmother had always preferred using gold dollars for this, insisting that the more you give back the more you get back. This, she had said, was how their family lived. Every year there were nine such coins, nine gold dollars, one for each bird; Utterly destroyed. Each coin made worthless by the steel-on-steel of the passing train. A perfect sacrifice.

The girl fluffed the straw up around each head, between each transfer, keeping loose chaff out of half-closed eyes and blood-stained beaks. After the last head was nestled comfortably in the basket, her father nodded.

With her unstained hands, she set the cloth her grandmother had made over it. For a few timeless seconds, she lost herself in the pattern of the cloth. She tried to focus on a single aspect of color or design, but her eyes could not seem to draw out anything from the cloth as a single entity. The colors; the design all were woven too tightly, too close to be pulled out as solitary things. As she looked on, it became close to her, like breath feels against skin and it was not until her father placed his hand on her shoulder, that she returned.

Her father caught her eyes in his, suddenly so like her grandmother's pattern, and quickly brought a finger to his lips, as if now might be the worst and only time she might break the silence.

When she heard the soft peeps, fresh and new coming from under grandmother's cloth, she reached out her eager hand toward the cloth, and her father returned his practiced hand to her shoulder. They waited together, for what seemed longer than the throat-cutting and time she had spent wandering within the pattern of her grandmother's cloth combined, until the cloth began to move. Her father's grip on her shoulder tightened, signaling that this was the crucial moment. This was part even he was unprepared for, and for a moment she was frightened by his nervousness.

The peeping grew louder and soon others joined it, and her father relaxed his grip. His attention turned toward the bodies, piled beside the ash stump, still in need of

plucking and gutting. The girl reach out and removed the cloth, the heads now gone for the season. She left her father to his work, and carried the basket of chicks into the coop.

Found

Jack made himself a bowl of oatmeal in the backroom kitchen, and then opened the door to the converted front room with his off-hand. He set the bowl down on the worn countertop next to the cashbox and looked around at the shelves and display tables the old shop. They were mostly empty except for a few things here and there; a child's retainer, heavily used, a set of car keys with a dingy plastic Hello Kitty head hanging from them, Ms. Matherson's again, a socket wrench, with attached three-quarter-inch socket, a pair of worn, brown dress shoes, and next to them, sprawled in the sunlight pooling on the shelf, a massive, fat tabby cat with no collar, who had been part of the shop's collection since Wednesday. These things, among an assortment of other odds and ends, made up Jack's weekly haul. It had been a slow week, but it was Sunday now and nearly time to open the shop.

Jack sat at the counter for a few minutes, eating his oatmeal. He allowed himself to be badgered by the cat he had been calling "Fatty Dingdong" since Thursday morning and when he had finished his breakfast, he got up, flipped the sign on the door to "OPEN" and unlocked the door. Ms. Matherson was already standing outside. She pushed her way past Jack, breathing out her "Good Morning" like a huff as she went straight for her keys. She plucked him off the shelf making a five-dollar donation to the cashbox as she turned and left without a "thank you" or a smile. This was normal.

The rest of the patrons trickled in over the next two hours, each scanning for what it was they had lost, making a bee-line for the shelf it was on, tipping Jack whatever miniscule amount they could justify at the cashbox and leaving. Jack recognized a few of them, in a town like this one, he thought, you're sure to get repeat customers. Fatty

Dingdong whose name was, apparently, Mr. Scrumppkins, according to the little girl who claimed him, was the last lot to be claimed that day.

With the shelves empty again, and the people gone, Jack locked the door again, turning the “OPEN” sign back to “SEE YOU NEXT SUNDAY.” He counted out the week’s total, about sixty dollars in ones and fives and a twenty from the girl who owned Fatty. He spent the rest of his day reading on a sofa in the living room of the shop’s backroom apartment, the radio droned the oldies in the kitchen.

He’d considered buying a TV for the place, but in his head, week after week, he only ever thought of being the shop’s caretaker as temporary, and if the thought did nothing else for him, it kept him well read. If he wanted news, he had the radio.

Today, his afternoon was a mix of “To Kill a Mocking Bird” and something that sounded like jazz from the other room. Jack was pretty sure most of the people in the town thought of him like Boo Radley though he didn’t care too much for the idea himself. He provided a service, running the shop. He was happy. By the end of the day, the retainer had returned to one of the spots on the shelves. *Everything lost in this town turns up here at some point.* He wondered if it was the kid or the parents who were the ones looking for it and where it was before it settled here, “found” for another week. *Can’t really be lost if no one is looking for it.*

That night Jack dreamed he was walking into the pawnshop from the outside. He stepped through the front door which no longer held shelves and display tables. In the kitchen, the radio was playing something loud enough that Jack could hear it, but he couldn’t make sense of it. It felt like the oldies. The smell of food, something other than oatmeal, bacon or maybe sausage links, was mixing itself with the music. It was

intoxicating. The woman who stood before the stove, seemed to conduct the scene with her very presence, and she was beautiful. Jack left himself in the doorway as the man he was in the dream wrapped his arms around the woman at the stove and kissed her neck. It was a tender moment that Jack wasn't part of, and could not stop being a part of.

That morning, Jack woke up, empty and tired. He spent what felt like hours trying to fall back asleep. Trying to recapture the dream he had woken from. When he had given up, he went downstairs in the dark to fix his oatmeal. In the kitchen, he found a woman already seated. The woman from his dream. She watched Jack from the table.

“I was too big to fit on a shelf.” she said.

Jack made oatmeal for breakfast. As he brought it to the table, he stood beside her a moment. As he set the bowl down, he fought the urge to kiss her neck. He smelled the scent of his dream on her. The radio was silent and he could still hear that unintelligible music, the music of want. Its notes filtered like dust motes through the air around her. His free hand moved trance-like toward her shoulder and she shrank back from him. Her eyes uncertain. Cold and timid in this familiar-unfamiliar place.

They ate and did not speak. When she had finished eating, she left without a “thank you,” or “goodbye.” She walked out the door, closing it behind her, and aside from her unwashed bowl in the sink, it was as if she had never been.

That day, Fatty Dingdong turned up as roadkill on a display table. Jack put the what was left of him in a garbage bag in the empty freezer. Next Sunday he would dig them out and place them on a shelf and answer the questions of a little girl who had lost a friend. Jack wondered, around this eventuality, if the woman would ever turn back up.

Jack laid down on the couch with the radio buzzing dejectedly in the background of his copy of Moby Dick. He didn't think so.

An inventory of things I have found or stolen

1

Dimes.
Offered up by my grandfather's ghost.
Only dimes.
Kept in an old ink bottle.
By the time I repackaged them,
as my mother's early Christmas gift,
I had fourteen-dollars-worth of happy circumstance,
that I still felt the need to pay back.

2

Assorted rocks.
Crystals of various sizes, some of which may just be glass
I'm not sure.
Stones of various colors and origins.
A flint knife and a few broken stone arrowheads,
plucked from childhood Ohio creekbeds
Granite from the Black Hills.
Obsidian from Yellowstone.
A miniature geode from the edge of the Grand Canyon
indistinguishable from a half-sucked petrified orange Mento.
I checked,
so no one can call me a liar.
It's a geode.

3

Assorted animal bits and bones.
Raccoon, possum, skunk,
Things the road has killed, and washed up
crushed on the riverbank of my old yard,
along with some old horse teeth
kept in a Box turtle's shell.
Crayfish claws cleaned
by ants and sunlight,
muddled among seashells
in a freshwater clam.
Whole raccoon skulls,
pierced by my brother's pellet rifle.
A dirt-stained deer jaw
broken off at one end.
Crow feathers and a tuft of buffalo wool.
It's a collection I have put a lot of work into.

4

A giant puffball mushroom.
I grabbed it out of someone's yard
while running past for cross-country practice
I folded my shirt into a sling
carried it the last three miles of the run
like Sacagawea's baby, and
victoriously compared it to the size of
one of my friends' heads on the hood of my car.
Next day, I took it into the science teachers.
That afternoon they launched it out of a trebuchet
and I missed it.
Despite my previous efforts,
I think that was supposed to be my penance.

5

A dollar offered as a tip
I was not supposed to take.
The customer spoke little English
and I think it was meant as a "thank you"
for the short few minutes we spent
puzzling out her breakfast order together.
I'm pretty sure that'll be why they fire me.
I understand the need to pay back.
I honor the gifts I am given.

6

Money that isn't dimes.
I have told myself the same lie
that everyone tells everyone.
Even themselves.
"I am different. I can put this to better use."

7

The last piece of any dessert I have ever eaten
See #6

8

Other people's time.
that I can never pay back
See #6.

9

My own time.
that I can never get back
See #6

10

Death.
Found along the highway,
black and twisted up like an old trashbag
like the trashbag I put her in to bury
her, with her broken cat's grimace.
I did not keep her away from the road.
Death is not grandparents who sleep in strange churches.
Death is an ugly thing that happens,
when everyone is just trying to get somewhere,
and I'm waiting for mine to catch me,
fix me in its headlights,
if it's not me, it'll be the ones I care about,
it'll be better if it's me, first
I was always the one asleep in church, anyway.
My inattention, comes with a price tag.

11

Love.
I have stolen a perfect girl's perfect heart.
At least, I think I have.
I'm not really sure
what love is meant to feel like.
I'm not sure anyone knows what love is
supposed to feel like
but I would die, kill or be killed
if I could only keep feeling
like this with her, even if her heart is more found than stolen,
I don't understand why people make found-love seem easy
I don't know how to not-love her any more than
I know how to be an adult without her,
because when we found us I was a child,
and she was a child and we grew older
with each other as our teachers.
And anyway she got my virginity
so I guess we'll call it even.

The longer I live, the more it feels like
I am stealing.
I cannot wait to find things.
I cannot live my life waiting.