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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

FROM BETHLEHEM
A Collection of Poetry

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ABSTRACT

These poems investigate the inner life of a city and a community. Through poems that range from personal revelations to documentary snapshots, the collection explores the experience of growing up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: a post-industrial city whose shuttered steel mill was converted into a casino in 2009. The poems contain a multiplicity of voices, and borrow language from interviews with steelworkers, community members, historical documents and the lyric voice of the poet. Using the city as their framework, the poems explore labor, illness, family, memory and the tension between attachment to place and the desire for escape. The collection links sick cities to sick bodies, and offers the possibility of hope.

Although the problem of lost industry has been well-trod by other contemporary writers, this collection seeks to do something different: to resist the extremes of wistful nostalgia or flat acceptance, and instead illuminate the city's situation through curiosity about the past and loving concern for the future. The poems don't seek to fix or judge, but instead strive to accomplish the real task of poetry: to see and make clear.

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Unholy battered old thing you were, my sunflower O my soul, I loved you then!

Allen Ginsberg, "Sunflower Sutra"

The story behind this collection begins like a bad joke:

A poet walks into a bar.

That poet is me, and the bar in question isn't just any bar. In the spring of 2011, I finally turned twenty-one, and when I visited home, my family wanted to celebrate.

Home for me is Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Bethlehem had recently undergone a massive change: the site of the city's defunct steel mill had been converted into the Sands Bethlehem Casino. The company vowed to preserve the integrity of the historic site, and the result was a uniquely American lovechild of industry and entertainment; the new casino sported an industrial "molten iron" theme, and the blast furnaces were illuminated by a neon light show on a nightly basis. Celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse signed on to open a new slew of bars and restaurants inside the casino, and my parents determined that this would be the site of my birthday celebration.

I curled my hair and slipped into a pair of heels, and despite my usual preference for beer, I sprung for the fruity martini. Sitting around a table with my parents, my brother and his wife, I smiled and posed for photos with drink in hand. The restaurant was elegant and the bar was sleek, but nothing could mask the jingling of the slot machines just beyond the glass partition between Emeril's Chop House and the casino floor. It occurred to me that my city had changed: It had changed since I had moved away to college, and it had already changed by the time I was born in 1990.

All around me were bizarre references to Bethlehem's past: The lighting fixtures above the table games were meant to look like giant, glowing ingots and the walls were crosshatched by exposed steel beams. I realized that I knew so little about this place that had already shifted into some other state of being. This version of Bethlehem – the casino version – felt like the miniature version of Paris in Disney World: the stunted Eiffel Tower and quaint facades of cheese and perfumes shops masking offices and storage rooms. Of course, this idea wasn't so original. Jean Baudrillard saw Disney World as "a simulacrum to the second power," and his assessment of Disney seems to ring just as true for Bethlehem's casino:

It is not only interested in erasing the real by turning it into a three-dimensional virtual image with no depth, but it also seeks to erase time by synchronizing all the periods, all the cultures, in a single traveling motion, by juxtaposing them in a single scenario. Thus, it marks the beginning of real, punctual and unidimensional time, which is also without depth. No present, no past, no future, but an immediate synchronism of all the places and all the periods in a single atemporal virtuality.

The Sands took an entire bygone industrial era and crafted it into a unified aesthetic of neon and slot machines, an imitation almost entirely severed from the original. I knew I could never enter the mill as it had been mid-century, but I felt curious. That curiosity eventually influenced my poetry.

After that birthday night at the casino, I began to research Bethlehem's history. I knew the basics: that Bethlehem Steel had once been the second-largest steel manufacturer in the country, that the plant closed just before I started kindergarten in

1995. I knew that both of my grandfathers had worked for the Steel, one in the plant and one in the offices at Martin Tower. My father had worked in the mill as a teenager, and up until 2000, my uncle had been a vice president. I even knew that my grandmother Libra, whose parents had emigrated from Italy, grew up working at her parent's bar, which stood across from the plant's gates on Anthracite Road. I never knew her, and had grown up knowing little about her, only that the sepia photo of a beautiful woman with dark hair and dark eyes that is propped beside my piano depicts her. We look nothing alike.

In my research, I saw Bethlehem through two lenses: through historical analysis and through individual voices. I sifted through interviews with steelworkers from the Steelworkers Archives in Bethlehem and Lehigh University's "Beyond Steel" collection, and I owe particular thanks to Joseph Illick's book, *At Liberty: The Story of a Community and a Generation*, which provided me with insight into my grandparents' generation.

This combination of factual evidence and personal voices emerged through my documentary poems, such as "Souvenir of Bethlehem", "Preservation" and "They Were Never Long". I experimented with persona poems in "Charlotte Cole, Memories of 1952" and "One Former Executive Remembers". In a space where the voices of these individuals could have been lost, poetry attempted to fill the gap.

A biography of steel magnate and all-around colorful character Charles Schwab prompted me to write "Riverside at Midnight" and "Upon Ripping His Notes to Shreds, Charles Schwab Speaks." Schwab's unflagging optimism about America and its treasure trove of potential (an optimism that proved tragic, since he died alone and in debt) struck me. Was the Bethlehem of today one that Schwab might have envisioned? On one hand,

the industry that fueled his ambitions had died, but Schwab was shrewd, inventive and reveled in excess. Despite his vision of himself as a *noblesse oblige*, Schwab notoriously opposed organized labor, and unions didn't form at Bethlehem Steel until two years *after* his death in 1939. If Schwab were alive today, he probably would've been the first to approve the plans for Bethlehem's casino. Even I didn't know what to make of the casino – I found it aesthetically depressing, almost funny in a way that would make Kurt Vonnegut say “So it goes,” and yet what would happen to the city without it? I had driven through other post-industrial towns in Pennsylvania, places that were crumbling in plain sight. What did I want for my home?

Throughout my writing process and my investigation of the city's history, I experienced a nostalgic strain of belatedness. In “The Western Canon”, Harold Bloom writes, “Great writing is always a rewriting or revisionism and is founded on a reading that clears space for the self, or that so works as to reopen old works to our fresh sufferings.” If the current situation in Bethlehem, the problem of the casino, was the stimulus for my “fresh suffering,” then how could I handle my impulse to romanticize the past, the years when the Steel provided jobs and security for thousands of people?

During a visit to the Steelworkers Archive in Bethlehem -- located, ironically, in the upper floors of the casino -- an incredibly kind man named Dana began to cry when I asked him what it was like growing up during the Steel's prosperous years in the 1950s. “If you would've told me then,” he said, “that in forty years there'd be no more Bethlehem Steel, I would've laughed. I never would've believed you.” I was moved by his sincerity, and I admit I was bewitched by the photo albums he and the other members of the South Bethlehem Historical Society showed me.

The photos depicted what many people call “simpler times,” images of backyard family picnics, the black ore-loading bridge ever-present in the background. Yet despite the allure of the past, I knew I couldn’t romanticize it without raising some questions.

The interviews I read in Joseph Illick’s *At Liberty: The Story of a Community and a Generation* revealed the more unsavory parts of peoples’ lives: marital infidelity, lack of social mobility for women, racial tensions and people struggling with faith and spirituality, even in communities where religion bonded people socially. During my visits home to Bethlehem and even during subsequent visits to the casino, I also considered the futility of condemning contemporary culture. Don’t I own an iPhone and a Macbook? Don’t I buy soy lattes when I know I could make a perfectly good cup of coffee at home? I admit I do what I can; I buy many of my clothes second-hand, and I’m no stranger to the farmer’s market, but I’ll be the first to admit that I’m no ascetic. I wanted my poems to reflect this push and pull of pop culture in my own life, to show my fascination with glamour, glitz, and what’s behind the curtain.

The poems in this collection emerged in part from the works I’ve been reading over the past three years. When I was a college sophomore enrolled in a poetry writing class for the first time, I thought poetry meant Whitman and Poe, and I knew so little about contemporary poetry and the work it can do in the world. In that intro-level class with Robin Becker, I read Sharon Olds’ *The Dead and the Living* and I realized that poetry can investigate two different worlds: the geography of the interior self, those memories and thoughts that shape us, and the terrain of the world around us, the communities and events that intersect our lives. Olds’ poems straddle those two worlds in a way that sparked my interest. Poems like “The Guild,” which deal with her

relationship with her father and his alcoholism, exist in the collection alongside more political, outwardly-focused poems like “Photograph of the Girl.” Those poems exist in different spheres, yet both feel intimate and intense, focused on the body and imbued with strong and sometimes disturbing imagery.

This first encounter with contemporary poetry set off a chain reaction, and my interests arched from today’s poets back to the Modernists. Yet, I was continually drawn to poetry that dealt with memory, the body, family, work and labor. Under the guidance of Julia Kasdorf, I read Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, Philip Levine’s *What Work Is* and Michael McGriff’s first book *Dismantling the Hills*, and I began to write my own poems about family and work. An early poem, “The Secret Life of Richard L. Campbell” explores my father’s relationship with the objects that define his life: the tools used for building houses. As I began to write about family, I recognized we had been formed by forces outside our home, and that the city we lived in had forged a part of who we are.

My exploration of 20th century American poetry also included an investigation into form and prosody. In the same way that an apprentice must learn to master a craft, I needed to acquire a formal poetic education. Before I could break the rules, I needed to learn and even love them. I read foundational texts about craft like James Longenbach’s *The Art of the Poetic Line*, Ellen Bryant Voigt’s *The Art of Syntax*, Mark Doty’s *The Art of Description*, Timothy Steele’s *All the Fun’s in How You Say a Thing* and the essay collection *An Exaltation of Forms*. I experimented in writing in forms: the villanelle, sestina and ghazal. One villanelle, “The Dragon Speaks”, made its way into the collection, but the others served as exercises. Although much of my collection is written

in free verse, the poems were composed with a trained ear and an attention to the “ghosts” of iambic feet.

One of my most exciting breakthroughs came when I read Richard Hugo’s largely forgotten book *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. Hugo’s epistolary form was one I’d never encountered in a contemporary incarnation before, and I loved the way the seemingly random and colorful events of middle-class American life could juxtapose in ways that were sad, nostalgic and sometimes funny. I decided to try my own hand at letter-writing in poetry, and some of the newer poems in the collection, like “The Art of Fermentation,” “Dear 3rd Street’s Chicken & Ribs” and “Letter to the Girls” emerged out of this experiment. The epistolary poem expresses what the collection was really all about -- a letter to the city itself.

For inspiration, I also looked to the impassioned labor poetry of the Great Depression, particularly the anonymous Depression-era poet Poll’s poem “you work tomorrow” and Tillie Lerner Olsen’s “I Want You Women Up North to Know.” Olsen’s poem reveals the hardships of women working in garment factories, and she questions the role of the poet whose business is finding beauty. She mockingly writes, “White rain stitching the night, the bourgeois poet would say.” As a writer, I became increasingly aware (and admittedly self-conscious about) my role as a “bourgeois poet”. I struggled with how to write from my position of relative privilege, and tried to address those concerns in my poem “Three Acts”.

Ultimately, I want to offer an alternate vision of Bethlehem, so that the city now captured by the casino can be viewed through a different lens, one that is unapologetic about the images it draws into focus. I also hope that these poems offer more than just a

vision of a place. The city is my site, but these poems also explore human relationships.

In the same way that Mark Doty's *Atlantis* conflates images of the natural world with stories of love and the ephemerality of the body, I hope that my poems will tie the city to my family, friends and my community. Beneath the story of the town is my story as well: the aftermath of my brother's illness and my position as someone aching to leave, but irrevocably tied to places and people.

Because these poems link a self to a community, and because I believe that poetry can act as a driving force in people's lives, I want people to read these poems. I realize that they may not be the sort of tribute that Bethlehem natives might want for their city, but I wrote them anyway. I wrote to hold the town, myself and my family up in all our complexity, to show the colors and shifting shapes of our ever-rotating Rubik's cube.

The casino offers one vision of this place, and I will offer another. On New Year's Day in 1930, Charles Schwab told his audience, "I want to glory and rejoice in the opportunity to expand." The days of expansion, as Schwab knew them, are over, but I hope I can offer an alternative: the idea that poetry can deepen emotional intelligence, can help us comprehend the past and navigate the strange pathways of our contemporary world.

State College, Pennsylvania
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A man is fed not that he may be fed, but that he may work.

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"

In 1903, the charismatic Charles Schwab became president of the Bethlehem Shipbuilding and Steel Company. By the 1950s, Bethlehem Steel had risen to become the second largest steel producer in the nation. In 1995, the main plant on the South Side of Bethlehem ceased operations. In 2009, the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem opened on the site of the former mill.

I.

Trains

Nights, I woke to the ghost-howl
of freight trains. I had seen the tracks,
how they snaked parallel to Lehigh Street
and Main Street Depot, how they cut
beneath the iron Fritch sign, curved
beneath bridges stitching West Side
to South Side and vanished
into the underbrush beyond
abandoned Union Station.

Other kids told me: If you follow the tracks any further,
there's an insane asylum. There's Allentown. That's all.

My mother said:
People don't ride those trains anymore.
What about the conductor, I wondered.
People don't ride those trains.
They carry cargo. Supplies.

I never saw fire escape the blast furnaces.
Only the trains sounded their temporary cry,
left Bethlehem at night.

Souvenir of Bethlehem

“These roads will take you into your own country.”

--Muriel Rukeyser

I

Here, a river. The Lehigh River
cuts along black stacks,
and the river moves swift, carries
what it knows, what it has seen,
out of Bethlehem.

This river sorted lives,
divided the city's libraries.
*Foremen lived on the North Side,
laborers on the South Side,
My mother taught me:
Your library is down here.
This is where you go.*

II

This is where I go. I look but never met
Libra Porazzi, born 1919 beneath the haze-grey
exhalation of steelworks, coke ovens, born
beneath South Mountain, here in the Heights.

Row homes and steeples, low-slung telephone wires,
ice rink and elementary school once wove a patchwork
beneath the mountain. Goats and chickens
wandered in backyards. Not anymore.

In photos, she poses in gold jewelry, beautiful
as Sophia Loren. More beautiful, because I am hers.
Grandmother. This is my Grandmother Love Song.
Her parents emigrated from Benevento, owned Leo's

on Anthracite Road. Men weary from graveyard
shifts rushed the bar at dawn.

III

*When I lived in the Heights, that was the League of Nations,
We had Mexicans, we had coloreds, we had the Italians and Hungarians and the Slovaks*

*and Russians and all that. It was mixed, a real good community at that time.
I never felt, as a Hungarian, that I was separate from the others.*

On top of the mountain:
Lehigh University, engineers,
Saucon Valley Country Club,
golf course, tennis court, Angus beef.
On the links in 1939, chairman Eugene Grace
learned of the outbreak of World War II from his caddy.
Gentlemen, we are going to make a lot of money.

IV

Libra: Lily-white and young,
she crossed the Lehigh to marry
a foreman, changed
her name to Lily. She wore
the ivory gown. She lived.
A success, her parents said.

(I bleach my hair and chop it short.
When the roots grow in dark,
I dig my hands in my hair and face
my reflection. I almost become her.)

V

Libra: gone before the recession,
before the record losses
(\$1.5 billion in 1982),
before the company razed the Heights
to build the Basic Oxygen Furnace.

She can't see this place,
but I can. Dreaming almost,
I drive on newly paved roads, past
the ore-loading bridge, its glittering red sign:
SANDS CASINO
Industrially themed.

*I could cry when I go through the Heights.
Everything's gone. It makes me sick.
We never locked our doors.*

The Secret Life of Richard Campbell

My father measures his life
by the weight of his labor --
slate shingles, porcelain sinks,
wrenches, black granite flecked
with constellations of quartz,
plywood, work boots, a backhoe
groaning in piles of rubble,
and a house built for his son,
with no expectation of payment.

My father remembers his dreams
as a tide, receding by the pull
of the moon: visions of fighter jets,
steel mills, mechanics wielding
wrenches at the Indy 500, jungles
of Vietnam, cattle ranchers,
and men smoking Cuban cigars,
men without the weight of sons,
the endless repair of houses.

The Mayflower Luncheonette, 2006

The Angelucci sisters arrive as always,
long hair loose like twin rivers of silver,

and at the mint-pink counter, Toni sways
to the pan-fried warble of Cat Country 96.

Two veterans slouch in trucker hats
and the bookie jokes with a city cop.

In the corner, a professor translates
ink-black whorls of Ancient Greek.

Irene unspools potato peels, slices the white
into paper-thin moons, and at the grill,

John nurses his spatula like a love.
“That grill has fifty years of delicious in it,”

my brother, home from college, tells me.
“Someday, I’m gonna buy it and put it in my house.”

We sit in a booth in a tide of everything familiar,
a block from Saints Simon & Jude, our father’s

law office wedged in a jumble of townhouses
and the Rose Garden, all paper mache pink,

where we snapped his prom pictures, once.
Four months from now, a doctor will dredge

a tumor *the size of a baseball!* from his body,
and I will not return to church.

Things Unseen

I. *Dirt, 1940s*

Albert Czap, a foreman, grew up on the Heights
between Anthracite and Diamond

bedroom looking out on the main gates,
the view a passion play in which

ordinary people go to work
in a belly of flame

and there is no Jesus
just the whole span of someone's life

shuffling from mill to Mass to bar
to unfamiliar bedrooms.

Dirt mottled the windshields.
Traffic squealed in the streets.

"I looked out my window and saw the stacks,
that open hearth number two.

If there was dust on my mother's sheets, I knew
it was going to be a good Christmas."

Coke oven ammonia spoke:
the substance of things hoped for,

the evidence of things unseen.

II. *Glamour, 1950s*

Linda Czap grew up behind the counter
of Ten West, the city's couture dress shop,

trailing her mother with spools of radiant thread,

(Her mother told her:

“You're not rich like you think you are.

This is the other side of life.”)

fitting the wives of executives, undressing

them, their white shoulders, refilling
their tumblers of Cognac.

III. *Imagination, 1940s*

Nights, South Mountain turns black,
city of my imagination more alive than me.

I see my grandmother locked
in the back room of her parent's bar,

draped in her bridal veil before a mirror.
Days, she goes to business school.

Soon, she'll be a bride.
"I would like to see a green meadow,"

Albert, the foreman, said,
"rolling down to the Lehigh River,

like in an artist's painting.
Before the Steel came."

Heat

My grandfather worked in Machine Shop No. 2. beneath the heaven-high
scaffolding roof, a cathedral kinetic with dust, sunlight, fire.
Hot beams hung from chains. Giant gears scratched their teeth. A quiet man,
the furnaces spoke for him, exhaled the ash-black
proof of his labor.

Retired, he walked the West Side for hours. His dog got worn out. He carried him
down Market and Prospect, past executives' English Tudors and Victorians,
Grace's estate on Spring (turned nursing home in '63), beyond aluminum-sided avenues,
half-a-doubles and popsicle corner stores, the chain link fenced park on 4th
and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier overlooking 378, past Orr's on Main,
Hotel Bethlehem's wide-eyed palladium windows, and Nisky Hill, where Grace's
grave faces the stacks along the shore.

Me, I want to know. I never saw furnace flames cut the sky apart. I never met
my grandfather, but he must have paused on the crest of Lehigh, the steep clear
air where families gather to watch fireworks in summer, where you can see the blast
furnaces rise along the river. He must have seen smoke, heard the grinding, knew
that men still worked where he had worked in the years before he died, before the plant
turned ghost town in '95. He walked to feel heat.
A body finds work, any way it can.

"Riverside" at Midnight, New York City, 1922.

"[The estate] may strike the average observer as a burdensome possession, oppressive to maintain, and likely to be embarrassing to heirs, but if Mr. Schwab can stand it, we can."

--Harper's Weekly

In bed, his wife sinks into dreams, rheumatic legs
swollen under silk sheets. Pearls shine on her bedside,
and she will not leave the house except for a drive
behind tinted windows, wrapped in a fur stole.

No child will ever dive into the underground
swimming pool glowing aquamarine,
walk the cool wine cellar alongside his father,
breathe the celestial gymnasium, or run barefoot

past seventy-five vacant rooms,
the elevators silently mining the center of the house.
Deep in her body, an ovary releases
its last opalescent egg.

The Sunday arias still ring faintly in the walls,
the performance captured in a radio broadcast.
Now, the retired soprano sits before her vanity, unpins
her curls, dark as damp earth, loosens the gilt bodice,

wipes powder from her cheek, as she once did at the Met,
in Covent Garden, Dresden and St. Petersburg.
Now, one door opens.
The organist clutches his key, slips into the Chapel,

behind its Flemish tapestries and stained glass
heaven-swirls, upturned eyes of Saint Cecilia.
He will compose at the Aeolian for hours,
though he barely strikes the keys.

In this dark, he mostly wants to imagine music,
dream the deafening chords, the endless
hymn of golden pipes.

*Upon Ripping His Notes to Shreds, Charles Schwab Speaks
(from a speech given on New Year's Day, 1930)*

I want to speak to you
from the heart, to tell you
my own personal thoughts.

I want to glory and rejoice
in the opportunity
to expand,

to hear men talk
about America's situation today.
What do you want me to do?

Carnegie wrote:
It will be a great mistake
for the community

to shoot the millionaires,
for they are the bees
that make the most honey.

I disagreed with his ideas
on how to best distribute the wealth.
I spent mine!

Rejoice and expand!
Compared to what this country will be,
we haven't even reached the foothills.

O, glory and rejoice
as though we had reached
the summit.

I hear men talk in despair.
What do you want me to do?
Cause a panic?

One Former Executive Remembers

[Bethlehem Steel Headquarters, 701 E. 3rd St., 1945-1973]

O, The Steel spared no expense.
We had elevator girls, pretty girls

just late teens or early twenties
in hats and heels. Real traffic-stoppers.

A model came in from New York
to teach them how to walk and sit

properly. It was a prestige job.
The girls made over \$100 a week,

which was good money in those days,
a nice job for a girl, so long as she wore

the right size, no larger than Marilyn Monroe,
or of course until her belly popped.

Bethlehem at that time had a reputation
that its hallways were lined with gold,

and when you got a job at headquarters,
they handed you a pick to mine it.

Nothing was brought in from the outside.
We employed a chef, sous-chef, a baker

who made rolls and cinnamon buns
and a woman who baked the pies.

The black Angus beef was raised
on the grounds at Saucon Valley.

That was our club. The foremen of course
joined the Steel Club in Hellertown.

O, The Steel spared no expense.
I remember the chairman's party.

Inside they had gypsies dancing around
the table playing music, and outside

they had detectives who made sure
nobody walked out with any gold.

Charlotte Cole, Memories of 1952

My father, he was *education, education*,
read so much he had (in his head) the same
as a college degree when he died.
My mother is still South Side, loves
the superstitions and traditions, never
thought I belonged in that world,
taking honors classes with North Side kids.
He always said, "If she can handle it,
let her go."

Lloyd and I cruised top down
from polka dances on the Heights
to silk dress soirees at Yale Weekend,
from Russian Orthodox marriages steeped
in accordions to Lehigh University
cocktail parties and Sunday brunch
on sunlit Saucon Valley patios.

I didn't go to college --
I wasn't spending four years
some place I couldn't even become
an airline stewardess!

Everybody thought
I was pregnant when I got married.
I really surprised them --
It took us five years to have our first baby.

They were never long,

the nights of roller rinks and whites skates
laced against nylon calves, teenagers
swirling currents against the hardwood
as the smoky radio played and soda bottles clinked

like cruets. First date. They met in this
kaleidoscopic dark, where the space between
two palms about to touch unspooled, a breath
of possibility before long marriage, before

fire wreathed the crane control box
and the company phoned his wife, said
not to drive to the hospital alone.

Whatever is not burned, whatever
resists the easy taking, remains:
A pair of leather shoes and his belt,
a meridian traced around the body.

Preservation

INCIDENT, 1984

In the roof of the transformer house, water inked
 a blue-black stain, grew heavy and seeped
 into the tank of a 6,900-volt circuit breaker.
 Seven men volunteered to repair the machine,
 wearing only thick cotton,
 working with bare hands.

PHOTO, 1999

In the abandoned powerhouse, time card racks read:

___ DAYS without a disabling injury
 ___ DAYS without a near disabling injury

EXPLANATION, 1990

After the flash fire, after one death,
 faces burnt and a tattoo melted
 off one man's arm, a foreman said,
 "You can get hit by a loaded crane,
 hit by a locomotive, hit
 by flying pieces of metal."

PHOTO, 1999

Printed on a Whitworth steam hydraulic press,
Safety Involves Teamwork
 erodes, paint chips scattered among plywood,
 a bladeless fan before a window.

INCIDENT, 1984

Who could bear this heat, this fire swirling
 against the ceiling, lashing their machinery?
 They smothered the flames with their hands.

PHOTO, 2000

Somebody's lost dog wandered
 the machine shops for hours, waited
 for this bright morning, stands now
 like a dark spot on the sun,

transfigured in coke dust.

EXPLANATION, 1990

“To tell you the truth,
some men will do anything not to lose a job.”

Sitting in McDonald's, My Father Recounts the Life of his Communist Uncle

My Uncle Mikey went to Lehigh for engineering. It was there he got mixed up with the communists, the socialist club, whatever you want to call it. It was the 40s. He was a college kid, easily swept up in things, you know how that is, but come graduation no one would hire him. My dad, everyone, worked for the Steel. Mikey was blacklisted, basically. He lived at home with his mother, my Italian grandmother who never spoke a word to me I remember, just smiled. She took care of him. He never worked, really.

Nowadays of course that would be a big deal, and he was always a little screwy, not to mention a lazy S.O.B., but that's how it was then. When his mother died, he needed a woman to take care of him. So, somebody in Mikey's family, a cousin maybe, sent to Italy for The Nun. She was somebody's aunt or sister. I don't know. She was old, wore all black, your classic Italian nun. Didn't say a word! But she and Mikey, you know, they got along. They understood each other. She cooked gnocchi for him, made a good sauce. Did his laundry, ironed his shirts. Old lady, never said a word. I don't think she spoke much English. And Mikey, he was diabetic, but the doctors never diagnosed it.

They amputated his leg when he was a pretty young guy. That was a real shame. He and the Nun lived down on Market actually, in that house with the little turret. Of course, somebody else lives there now. A young couple. The Nun haunts the attic. You can hear her up there, banging against the blinds, kicking boxes around. She never left, I guess.

The Art of Restoration

Wheeled beneath the black '64 Mustang,
he tinkers in the lullaby half-light
of caged bulbs strung in the garage, tilted
in summer-sway. The radio hums low,
and the night? Damp June. Gasoline-sweet.
Legs swung over the porch ledge, I watch.
I don't have to leave where I sit
to see the smallest glint of a wrench
or cans of spray paint (British Racing Green,
Grabber Orange) bronzed with rust.
Every summer he takes apart this car
his father left him, and builds it back again,
the restoration always incomplete.

Lineman of the Year

[after James Wright]

“Anybody who goes to school
should get tied up in sports --
It’s about the greatest thing you can do.”

He manages the school bus repair shop,
sits beside an X-marked calendar

and a framed portrait of Kennedy.
Outside his window, South Mountain

simmers to orange and refuses
to tell a single secret.

But he can see the stadium,
can hear the gold-streaked peal

of trombones, pom-pom swish
and sneakered stomp, wrist-flicked

click of batons caught mid-twirl.
The clatter of helmets reminds him:

In the stadium, he could scream
and the world answered.

III.

Letter to My Brother

Dear Chip: *Big Fish* came on TV today.
Ten years ago, you called it your favorite,
cried during the final scene when the son
carries his father into the lake, the father who wasted
his whole life spouting stories no one could believe,
and you said *It was me in his arms*.
Let me remind you what you told me then:
how you, a teenage mystic in sandals and jeans,
drove alone into the woods that darkened
our neighborhood's edge, parked beyond power
lines dividing measured lawns from South Mountain.
I was a kid. I called that place *The End of the World*,
but you leaned against your Mustang
and watched the pines transform, turned
to burning, blinding white.
You said I could have visions too,
but I only have memory, so I will remind you
of the port, the metallic ring implanted
just below your clavicle before treatment,
as if your doctor knew to split
you open meant you could bleed light.
I spent my days shopping, feeling
in every summer dress the scrubbed cotton
of hospital gowns, the latex hands
that punctured your spinal cord
again and again, searching for the divine.
Now, we spend our lives bound
to the smallest spaces: my desk and chair,
your easel beside the window, where you watch
the neighbors smoking on the rooftop.
Call me when you find the time,
because a letter can burn,
but spoken words disperse
in air, a mystery
I can understand.

First Love

Today, my father's law partner moves out,
retired after thirty years of practice.

I watch John button his trench coat
and don the olive fedora one last time.

He has mistaken me for my mother,
but I have traced the atlas of his face

in daydreams since age ten.
After school, I walked to the office,

paced the hallways, studied the slat of light
beneath his door, sealed on the second floor

where I'd listen for his sounds -- the muted
rhythms of his coffeemaker, sharp pinches

of a typewriter, shuffling of documents,
fingers slipped into the knot

of his loosening pink tie.
On days he left early, I examined

his office in secret, my fingertips
grazing the small artifacts of his life.

What did I know of desire?
Only the spines of leather books,

the fountain pen that would become
my instrument of creation.

What Wrists Say

If you want to measure your body,
clasp your wrist. If thumb
meets pinky, it means your frame
is naturally slender. Small-boned.

Call this my first success, the ability
to weave unnoticed through large crowds
and stand a head shorter than every man
I meet, so I can be sure I stand a chance
at attracting him with my smallness.

Even I gaze fascinated at my wrists
too thin for bracelets. I paste wet
tea leaves to their white undersides
and say I can divine meaning
from the pulse of blue veins.
When a lover pins them
against a wall, I will myself
to push back, and when I reach
for the door, my shadow stretches
to twice my size.

Where do I get it? I'm shorter
than my mother by half an inch.
Look at the circumference
of her thighs, the slender fingers
that push away a slice of cake.

Narrow-hipped, she bore me
too soon, and I was light.
I was so small, I weighed
only three pounds.

The doctor called it *a miracle!*
and we repeat his words his promise
of abundance shaped from hunger.

Call this the first lie of my life:
*One hundred years ago, neither of you
would have lived!*

The Epiphany

I know I am supposed to love the rabbit in the grass.
 It's true, the moon does resemble quicksilver
 or dew dropped on the tips of his fur
 and the quick jaw, the only visible movement,
 could stir forever, the way persistence
 grinds invisibly beneath all living things.
 Yesterday, the fog shocked me as I opened
 my front door before sunrise, but by lunch
 I had forgotten about it.

Yet I know I will say it again & again,
 that the cluster of bikes chained
 outside the library wrenches me in two,
 the way they glitter as if to resist
 being left there, and heave up their spokes
 in solidarity, the whole jumble of them.

Or maybe their glint pierces me
 differently. Every shining

metal thing reminds me of the port
 in my brother's chest and the Sheraton
 five blocks from Penn Hospital
 where my father slept in one queen
 bed and my mother and I slept
 in the other, comforted by the motion

of sitcom reruns. Call me
 a pro at deception, able to divine meaning
 from the patterns in hotel curtains.
 Even as a teenager, I understood
 I could pretend to sleep, so no one knew

I was really wishing for a boyfriend
 instead of praying my brother would live.

In Liberty High School

Let there be stilettos and strollers,
rhinestone denim and baby daddies,
crew-cut cassanovas and gum-smacking,
sass-talking pom-pom vixens.
O Pale gamers! with virtual fantasies
of almond-eyed anime warriors,
may there be androgynous coke-snorting painters,
ballerinas with bowls in their backpacks,
the closeted varsity homerun hitter,
suffering freshman girls' crushes.
And let the pinpricks of gossip bleed
from Fountain Hill to Hanover,
from greasy blissed-out booths at Sal's Pizza
to backyard decks on Rainbow Drive.
May there be shy honor roll girls, first time drunk
and fingered in dark basements,
and everyone knows dates at Carmike Cinema
can't end until she gives head.
There will be abortions, McMansion bacchanals,
roving hands of football captains,
and Catholic girls in micro-minis
redeemed as born-again virgins.

Sleeping with the Mayor Is Easy

Look at his wife.
She's pretty, sure, with her blonde bob
and big white teeth, but every day
she's hungry and tired, wearing the same old
fleece and sneakers, smelling like baby spit
and crumbled Ritz crackers wedged in car seats.
I'm the woman he needs, a figure
half-swirled in cigarette smoke:
hair bleached cocaine white, lips streaked
hot vermillion, gold bangles snaking my arms.
I'm a T-Rex in thigh highs and a 38D.
I know what the PTA moms call me:
The bimbo. But I had my only son
at eighteen, and when he passes the bar,
he'll be the divorce lawyer kicking
their stuck-up asses in court.
You see this? I've got an 80K job
in Harrisburg now, and soon he'll leave his wife.
I know the moms in the township,
downing Chardonnay, trapped in a still life
of Yankee Candles and Longaberger baskets.
They really want to know my secret.
In the sealed cupboard of their fantasies,
they think they know exactly how a politician
fucks, and they love to believe
that I'm his sorry slave, taking orders
to bend over or call him *Daddy*.
I'll tell you the truth.
In a barely lit, sparse Ramada suite,
where the windows face the highway exit
and the loud stripe of cars below cast
figures of light into the room,
I stand at the foot of the bed
in the spectacular cat-suit of my bare body.
He waits, transfixed on the mattress,
as a boy waits for the first act of the circus,
and his cock rises like a marionette,
folding from its wooden sleep.
You can almost see the strings connected,
the glittering golden threads spooling
outward like a spell from my ten nails,
the red, unbreakable acrylic.

Letter to Hannah from Far Away

Dear Hannah: They finally figured out how to catalog loneliness. We have been waiting years for this, you and I: freshman who penciled manifestos onto scrap paper stashed in our graphing calculators, swapped Kerouac paperbacks with exclamation points sketched in the margins and suffered twin crushes on our history teacher, the one with soft hips and a single strand of hair.

When the band director touched you in his office, we called it *playing Lolita* and I left notes under my English teacher's door.

No one asked me to prom that year.

We agreed we made a good match -- the subtext being *we're both smart and won't manipulate each other*.

When your first boyfriend spent the night, you told me you never knew anything could feel like that, and I said I learned alone.

What I mean when I talk about loneliness is I found a website where you can listen to thirty-second clips of all the forgotten things I think you should hear, things like:
Very distant subway pull up to distant station.

Voice wash with echo. Kids. Quiet.

After I drove my brother to Penn Hospital for neutropenic fever, you called me to say you and the boyfriend had showered together in secret, and I said *That's great* and Chip waved from his white bed:

Tell Hannah she's my girl!

The funny thing about these sound clips is they don't always sound how you think they will. I searched for recordings of steel mills, thinking I could understand hell or bravery if I heard them, but what I really heard was the crush of waves, the cry of a gull and a rip-saw of silver sparks, razoring the ocean into the sharpest diamonds.

*Three Acts***The Chop House, Sands Casino**

A girl I knew from high school re-fills my glass
again & again. The waiter calls me *sweetheart*.

There's no place like the most expensive
restaurant in the valley, located

inside the new casino: *such a good solution*
to build on the site of the steel mill.

We have adorned ourselves for this:
father buttoned in a bespoke suit

mother's hands folded on the linen
to the yellow music of jewelry.

I wear the loudest colors: regency purple,
my electric hair, which suits my features best,

aunt & grandmother waving their forks
Looks good. I like you better as a blonde.

We talk about the news. We laugh about Sal,
pizza shop owner nabbed in a prostitution ring,

though he wasn't running it, only
looking *for a massage*.

Even an ambulance pulls up outside
the window, backlights our table

in red. Cue my father: *Guess they*
need to haul out some old drunk.

Sal's Brick Oven Pizza

Sal won't come kiss us on the cheek tonight, but he sends free dessert to our table
anyway. His giant body is slumped in the corner booth and for some reason he's wearing
a cardboard crown from Burger King and not talking to anybody. He and his wife Anna
do not look at each other. She inches her butt into the booth and tells us enough to make
us uncomfortable. *I love my daughters more than anything in the world.* The oldest,

Nina, circles her eyes with blackest black liner. *Joanna, she still sleeps in the bed with me.* Joanna is fourteen with eyes shaped like her father's: downward-facing crescents. Sad moons.

Wyandotte Road

My mother and I drive to the mall, follow
the steep road out of the valley.

5 o'clock winter sun drenches
the row-homes in white wine

so they appear to me
(the bourgeois poet would say)
suddenly Mediterranean.

She says "if the city
would just tear those down"

The Dragon Speaks

[Each week, 30,000 Chinese board discount buses that take them from Chinatown to casinos outside the city. At the Sands Casino in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, lucky colors adorn the card tables.]

Tonight, call me your lucky dragon,
painted red and gold above the rows of slots.
I'm your one-roll bet. Go ahead, imagine!

That's me: patron of card sharks, flashing
sirens, smoky jingling of late-night jackpots.
Tonight, call me your lucky dragon.

I'd never judge by pocketbook or fashion.
Armani, faded track suits, polka dots:
I'm your one-roll bet. Go ahead, imagine!

Buy chips, earn comps, whatever your passion.
I run a carpet joint – few tricks, some plots.
Tonight, call me your lucky dragon.

I'll restore this town! (*Excuse my bragging*)
The Steel closed in '95, so play some baccarat.
I'm your one-roll bet. Go ahead, imagine!

Come on, snake eyes, let's get dramatic.
Gamble your history, wager your thoughts.
Tonight, call me your lucky dragon.
I'm your one-roll bet. Go ahead, imagine!

Dear 3rd Street's Chicken & Ribs,

Don't expect this letter to be about you.
After all, you burned down last year,
and my hairdresser claimed your owner
almost admitted to striking the match.
With the new casino only blocks away,
jammed with restaurants that replicate
the globe (Italy. Ireland. China. Fifties-Style
Fries & Shakes), you didn't stand a chance.
I'm happy you died before you realized
you'd never make a good tourist attraction,
but you might like to hear that some people
still miss your flare for the American.

Neighbors complain about the old Chinese people,
the ones who slurp soup *with animal parts in it*
in the food court, and did you know
these people wander the South Side, sleep
on benches in Parham Park and rearrange
the porch furniture of strangers for no reason?
They say most of them don't even gamble,
ride the bus from Chinatown in New York and sell
meal coupons and gambling vouchers
to get a little retirement money so they don't starve,
and when they've made their sales they cross
the bridges like shipwrecked ghosts, waiting
for the bus to take them home.

But you might wonder how your owners are doing.
They still live in the old mansion on the West Side,
the only house with overgrown hedges and splintered
windowsills, and they still hang your stained glass
pig-in-a-cowboy-hat portrait in an upstairs window.
Did you know that when you were still in business,
they'd throw big parties in the summer, great loud
parties with paper lanterns floating on the verandah
and adults away from the kids for just one night,
smoking tall clouds of cigarette
smoke and finally cured
of this town?

Letter to the Girls

I remember sleepovers, how you slipped
into trances in finished basements

with dimmed lights and locked
liquor cabinets, how you counted

back from thirty, pressed fingertips
to temples and painted visions.

The first question you ask is simply
Where are you? and then:

Tell me what it's like. Sleeper girls
outstretched on the carpet, you lie

at the center of a ring of bare
legs criss-crossed in cotton shorts.

You live for the summer.
Yes. Say you don't remember it:

The room you dream glows aquamarine
and a man all in black follows you until

you discover a window
and jump out of it

light as a feather.

How could I tell you I drove
at night for hours to forget

your swimming pools and pale
and beautiful boyfriends?

I'd slice my car clear into the horizon
if it meant finding a destination.

Hasn't she been there forever,
the statue of the Lenape girl tacked

to somebody's patio on the perimeter
of the city, arm extended always

stiff as a board over Bethlehem's
bowl of lights. She's flying almost,

back arched and eyes shut, bird
or woman beside a steep street

that can take me out of here.

The Art of Fermentation

Forget ballet, German philosophy, and gypsy music --
Emily's new obsession is home fermentation.

We're driving to Easton to pick up kefir grains
from two farmers parked behind a fireworks store,
but we've got an hour to kill, so we spend our last
day together wandering Easton: part-punk,
part-fifties time capsule, city of barbers and penny
candy shops, home to our high school dreaming.
Our parents never wanted us to go (too much crime
and they didn't want us driving on 22), so we cut
class to get shaggy haircuts at a rockabilly
salon and slipped into second-hand heels
for a chocolate soiree at the Grand Eastonian,
ate truffles until we felt sick and slumped
laughing on marble steps away from adults
who took this sort of thing seriously.

It's Sunday. She looks into the window
of the State Theatre, says how sad it is
that somebody put a vending machine
in the same room as those old chandeliers
and it's almost too cinematic, that the salon
we loved got turned into a knock-off purse store
and there's a flyer for the yearly soiree;

The ticket has gone up \$20.

She will fly back to Germany in one week,
and this time she has no return ticket.

I know that, like me, she'll binge but refuse
to vomit, and in Berlin she said she used to cut
but called the act *too teenage and angsty*.

Four years ago she wrote me a letter
that said *you're being guarded, and I would
like to treat you as I treat my male friends*
and I filed it in a folder and didn't write back.

I imagine her at seventeen, long hair
crimped and let loose after a night
coiled in a plait, wearing a cotton blouse
she sewed herself on the machine
I gave her, the two of us lying in the secret
hammock we found strung up in the balcony
above the Liberty High auditorium.

Today, I do the talking for once
as we creak through the aisles
of Quadrant Books, and I see the blooms

of a rash spreading over her hands
and the sharp angles of her face.
The doctors think it's lupus, and back in the car
she tells me matter-of-fact that if you have one
autoimmune disease, you'll probably get another.
I see us bundled up outside 30th Street Station
the week before, her confessing that her boyfriend
never took off her shirt. Sex was always painful.
Now her body revolts from inside,
and I'm nauseous thinking about the velvet
tenderness of sick organs and swollen joints,
the months of steroids, the lifetime of watchfulness.
On the highway, she suddenly glows when I ask
about the kefir grains bundled in a plastic bag.
Fermentation is the world's oldest form
of food preservation, and the absence of oxygen
allows lactic acid to overcome bacteria
that could harm the body. Starter cultures
can live forever -- All they need is food.
Leave a bowl of raw milk out overnight
and it will begin to ferment all by itself.
I say, *Do you like this fermentation thing
because it's a metaphor?*
She laughs and says, *Jackie,
what are you talking about?*

Bethlehem's Grandeur, 2012

Visitors from flooded New Jersey circle
the gas stations, search for fuel and food
and *Which way to the casino?*

After the storm, sing your disaster song,
my city, let electricians croon
from telephone poles, and may downed

wires swing before the broken-
bulb marquee of the Boyd Theatre
with the grace of a trapeze artist.

May row-homes dazzled
with wreaths and door-mats sing
Welcome! and *Beware of Dog.*

Invite the world, O intersections
sashed with yellow caution tape,
and let neon-vested men conduct

the music of sedans skating
down Main, doors speckled
with the bronze confetti

of October leaves.
The new cafes flicker into joy
as bars sweep the velvet

of cigar smoke and neon
onto the pavement.
I head for the interstate.

You know I have to go,
but ring your bells of leaving,
and let the ore bridge hang

over the river like the arm
of an opera singer, vamping
the valley with its love song.

NOTES

“Souvenir of Bethlehem,” “Charlotte Cole, Memories of 1952” and “Lineman of the Year” borrow language from interviews found in Joseph Illick’s *At Liberty: The Story of a Community and a Generation : The Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, High School Class of 1952*.

“Things Unseen” quotes interviews recorded and owned by the Bethlehem Steelworkers Archives.

“Riverside at Midnight, New York City, 1922” was informed by an article featured in a 2007 issue of *American Organist Magazine* entitled “Pipe Organs of the Rich and Famous: Charles Schwab’s ‘Riverside’ and His Aeolian Organ”.

“Upon Ripping His Notes to Shreds, Charles Schwab Speaks” borrows language from speeches by Charles Schwab, as found in the biography *Steel Titan* by Robert Hessen. Schwab was, in fact, known for ripping his notes for dramatic effect before giving speeches.

“One Former Executive Remembers” borrows language from the Morning Call’s *Forging America: The Story of Bethlehem Steel*. The detail about the gypsies is true.

“They Were Never Long” refers to one of sixteen fatal plant disasters during the 1980s at Bethlehem Steel. A more thorough investigation can be found in the 1990 Morning Call article, “Steel Deaths Raise Questions on Safety – Bethlehem Steel in the 80s.”

“Preservation” refers to the above incidents detailed in the Morning Call, as well as the black and white photography of Andrew Garn.

The final section of “Three Acts” quotes the Depression-era Tillie Lerner Olsen poem “I Want You Women Up North to Know,” an account of women working in garment factories.

The epigraph to “The Dragon Speaks” quotes the 2011 NBC article “Crash Highlights Chinese-American Gambling Market.”

“Dear 3rd Street’s Chicken & Ribs” is informed by the 2012 Morning Call article “Bethlehem businesses fed up with Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem loiterers.”

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