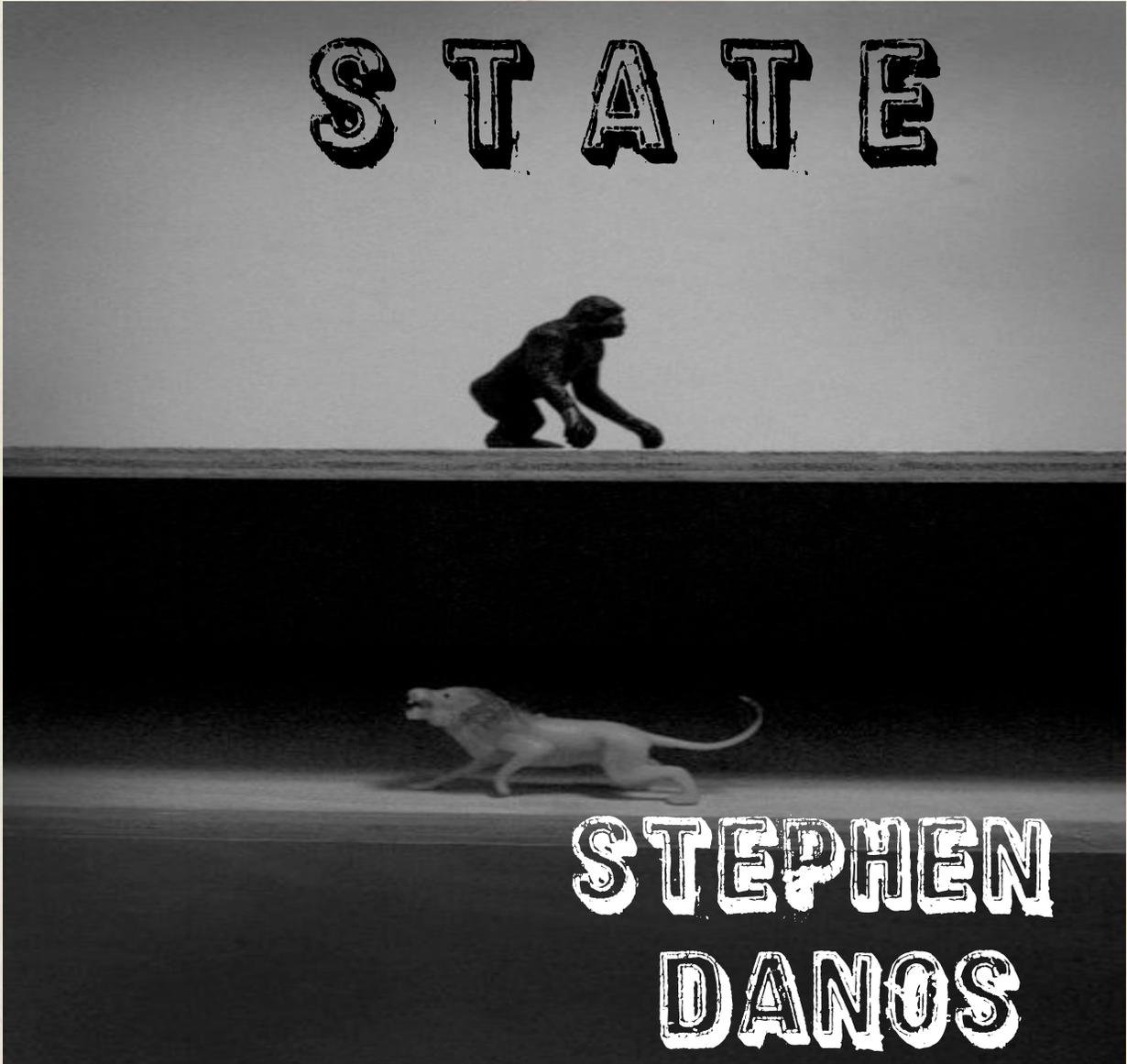




PLAYHOUSE

STATE



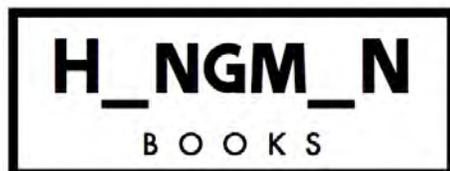
**STEPHEN
DANOS**

PLAYHOUSE

STATE

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STEPHEN DANOS



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FOR JANET

PLACE NO LIKELIER HOME

I arrive pregnant with questions but no real need to have them resolved. Ruby a precious commodity, a metal I melt into sunscape. This performance installation is a living exhibit poking the polished chests of visitors.

Get into hot air balloon. Do not forget the infantile smile, the dwindling wrinkles. Gestalt by any other anonymous sweetener. It is not my place to drop a farmhouse on a pair of striped socks, mine being unmatched.

I curl into a ballet, take vitamins; the health-sickness overwhelms stomach and withers white blood cells. Guarded by every erasure, a song is a showering of *how long can I hold this sound color?*

My dress is a sky blue. A picket fence, adults hemmed into the backyard patio furniture. This scene is number-crunched, an uncontrollable growth, composed but losing its composure.

I correct the night, emphasize afternoon but indoors has no day phases, just irregular light patterns. Reckon each person as a concept: handshake, keepsake, for heavens, for fucks.

Noon's canvas belches clouds. I curl into a ball of nose bleeds as white as—cannot talk directly into my hands, which are microphones. I feel in violation, of potential ghosts, of their hangouts. No one hears me.

My ink disappears as halos appear at dawn. I get a hernia from lifting the gray ruins off the witch. The tornado cuts my throat, chucks my gut as all the familiar fragrances fade.

AFTER SCHOOL SPECIAL

In this childhood my mother runs a daycare. There are no perennial flowers. No newts being courted for fear of toxins, a green backyard because no German Shepherd digging up the grass with overfed claws. No fogbow despite infinity

mist. This is why the sky is full of hysteria and wisteria covers the trees. Everything carries the courage of Capri Sun, of string cheese. A flint timbers and my brother accidentally ignites a garage. Massacre of wood. As I lose faith in my own body

a lash wriggles in my retina. My eyesight weakens; I rummage through the nearby creek for glimmers of healing. The docile water trades my green eyes for stones and says I now have two round conceits to see the world through granite. I ask

this childhood what I am. I get an electroshock retort, a taser to the brain. My goose bumps watch over my biggest fear. Behind the next door might be a false floor hiding a mouth made of foam.

THE SHOUT NEEDN'T YOU

My azure dress opens like a parachute though I didn't pack one in my puffed sleeves. I put everything I own on displacement. The dawdling song bounces low to bottom out. I see a red rose conduct a symphony of head-bang, a floral hierarchy in the marigold cluster. I am a mess of blond hair. I gargle smoke

signals, discard the caterpillar's cancer, tonsils. In this childhood, lowered into anarchy by my own accord. I sound out vowels and find W-O-L-V-E-S hiding behind his tongue. *I am not myself* says myself to the geometrid perched on a clamshroom. In this childhood it's assumed the larva knows

what's good for me; he is a trademark of danger. I see danger behind every coroner. Every bodily segment must agree in order to relay my temperament. Hand gestures recite my learned confusion. In this childhood caterpillars skip the pupil stage, leaving their curved shoes

as mementos, mushrooms as the answer. Right side, zenith. Left side, shrivel. I take this counsel, fly as civil as possible and improve what comes out of the hookah. Remain curious as a white bow complimenting a pinafore. My bitty songs come out with bleach. In this childhood, I will never be late.

DON'T FALL ASLEEP

Palms pasted to cheeks,
with my brothers watching
Nightmare on Elm Street
through a retractable forest
of fingers. The slasher flick
incites my prime nightmare.
I am six years old in red
footie pajamas, tiptoeing
up a series of linoleum stairs
from the basement. My feet plunge
through each step, resurface
trudging rubber cement.
Father appears at the top
of the stairs, drenched
in blue hues, an air of harm
in his smile, chagrin.
I ask him why he shaved
off his mustache.
I ask him why his fingers
are made of knives.
His face becomes
a rest home for burns.
I run out the backdoor.
Our chase scene rules
the backyard, stretching
as I approach the neighbor's
wet lawn. The aroma of
fresh cut grass clinging.

BE CAREFUL AT THE OVERLOOK

I have a twin sibling and we prefer holding hands to fetching firewood in this short-term childhood. Our father, who art sleeping with an axe, whispers *hollow be my grinding typewriter*. His night terrors wait for the right moment to replace neocortex with a house of cards. I am doing that thing again, blurring

two people into one caretaker. In this childhood, drinks are on the ghosts. We commune with big-wheeled boy as a detour, so he avoids our fatal gaffe: never trust the hands that feed you, bite them when they try to bite you. Slicker, you have always been here drenched in blood. The diversity of panic. We know

hiding under the bed doesn't work, just works up his nerves. He says *I just want to be weaved into a permanent history, blend into the paranormal scenery*. A wallflower talking to his suave replica, mirrored. The hotel sneaks around in all of us, cracks its joints during nighttime. If only

our pink bows had quills. If only our powder-blue vigil meant survival. If only forever weren't just a word. Of wisdom we knew nothing. We didn't run through the hedge maze and leave a trail of footprints leading nowhere. We couldn't get snow. Though you got away, you're still stuck here. You says *hi*.

CURE FOR LONELINESS

If your obsession
with fairytales gets
out of hand,

a wayward dragonfly
will turn you
inside out. If you are

a neglectful princess,
you water reality
like a slipper orchid.

You are named for the sound
of pulp squeezed from a lemon.
You are ancient, like a fawn's

strong hooves or a frowning tree
watching its last leaf's downward
spiral. Your stepfather general

steals his lines from Dickens,
pistol holstered. Stitches his lip
commissure, tortures a guerilla

into a stutter. Your emerald
gown brown with mud
is an argument

in this childhood.
When distant rifle
fire snap-crackles,

flee to the hidden dungeon
of forbidden buffets. If you pick
one grape, a monster forces

you to work a Joe-job
bottling sarsaparilla. Abstruse,
you wolf down

the cheese strudel, deserve
a plague of albino eyes
socketed to palms, breathless

screams. Napping people
are mandrake roots.
They catch fire

when remembering
the dreams of their childhoods.
A nasal capillary bursts,

a cabernet stream curves
around your inferior lip.
If rosy cheeks drain

into one bloody pool,
you sit atop a limbo throne,
reigning your kingdom

of dead parents.
Their blanched bodies
smoldering.

RELOCATION PACKAGE

Father moves us to his childhood
dust farm. I talk to detached
dollheads, reinvent my persona
as a courageous squirrel.

I am in charge of heating up the medicine
for his vacation—deep-sea tea parties
beneath a pink coral reef.
He tourniquets, slouches, exhales
like an aerosol can.

Cueing twangy mood music, I provide
a safety net, catch his cigarette hand
before it slams the end table.

Childhood, you're a giddy feather scarf.
Walkie-talkies help speak with corpses,
death sentences are séances.

If the one-eyed witch, an adornment
of polluted hair and black veils
says pollination is dreadful evil,
can I take pride
in my beard of bees?

Epileptic childhood, the freight train
is a monster shark ruffling the cornstalks
of your intuition. Childhood, you scare
the dickens out of me, so I hide
in the dell beset with coppery shrubs.

I lose one friend down a rabbit hole.
The witch teaches me how to embalm,
starting with father. Despite their pleas
I place two dollheads
inside his taxidermy, sew his belly shut.

We paint the entire house white. She says
when you love something
it doesn't have to die. I wish I could say
exactly what I mean.

WATERLOGGED VERTEBRATE

This video game childhood
is addictive, a submarine
city sunk by utopia. I press
everyone's buttons, drag

a gargantuan syringe
everywhere as if it's my blankey.
My eyes are headlights
as I mine corpses for plasma.

Don't be scared of my haywire
society. Algae covers
whatever hovers in the depths:
gramophones, pearl necklaces,
picture frames. Objects left behind
by people no longer needing roots.

You can inherit madness
from spliced strangers clawing
at the ceilings. Your survival depends
on looting and distrust.

Neither parents nor upstanding
locals. The adults made of marble look
down cold like the moon
appraising an ocean, known only

from my worn storybooks.
I creep past fluid shadows, plead
ambiguity. Where there's a will,
there's a squabble.

CRIME FITS THE PUNISHMENT

The townsfolk disown me because I broke all the seminary's windows with apologies taped to bricks. I feel like fingers with nails clipped too short. I translate the sunset as a stunt-double, plump and pounding its chest until it purples. I love the color-bleeder because it is damaged, a massive stained-glass shattering with a slow sink, a slinking twinkle. My parents forgive my transgressions. I straighten into a timeline. This childhood has me wear oversized hand-me-down sport coats, my bed in the trenches. The mayor says childhoods take shelter in the ganglia of adulthood's spinal cord, forming random patches of blisters, small irritating mines randomly exploding like sawdust kissing nitroglycerin. Then they dissipate, some remain scars in your spine. Then ghost towns so parched even tumbleweeds don't bother.

SCAVENGER

I slice cocoons for silk. I carry a range of scars, rave about fire safety like a forest ranger. The cruelty of being endangered comes with its blessings. I carry beeswax lips, annoyed by caesuras hiding in towering tufts of grass. I spot trails of eraser

dust, little corrective larva squeaking in passive voice. They spell out *pilgrimages gather calm*. In this childhood, I splash in a vat of patchouli oil. I fashion a linchpin out of a wooden cadaver and cannot remember

where it belongs. There is a mean grimness to every age. In this childhood, death gently pecks at my forehead. I deliver flowers to my aunt at the cemetery. We share a caucus of awkward silences, eager for the other to speak.

NEBRASKATTACK

I tested my tolerance for nostalgia; it flexed its pectorals in public. Do cornhuskers grow cracked-up-to-be, unsheathed and kernelled? Covered in plum butter, my thumbs wrestle the statute of the inappropriate handshake. I am bordered by six like-minded states of virtue. I ratify the constitution

of my fingernails, passes into law pending the wishbone cracks my way. In this childhood, I have no power. Being less than male every minute I don't grip pigskin. I want to park the forest preserve in the parking lot, have people park their cars in trees and keep the trunks filled with ice chips, beer

bottles. The good life ground into the Great Plains. My brain is unicameral. No hemispheres, no in-fighting. The drunken moments reconcile with sobriety. I can board the first boxcar that crosses me. Threats and promises are the same thing. Shun my shin-splints until the train spits me out. In this childhood

Nebraska never got its own recorded history, its inhabitants too stretched out to recall its 1867 inception. In this childhood, I am acutely contraperceptive. I am told to be a man when folded like a flag into a triangle, highest form of apotheosis. I will my boyish mannerisms to the smell of cattle shit.

GETAWAY ATTEMPT

Though our makeshift spacecraft
is grounded, a cardboard
box with magic marker buttons,
dials and switches,
my mother bestows
whooshes of orange Tang
before blastoff. She says
to choose the vivid constellations
we want to smash to smithereens,
and I point out the largest,
the water snake. I learned in school
that when some brave myth beheads
a hydra's thick, squirmy neck,
another instantly appears
somewhat altered.
Childhoods and adulthoods
stalk a similar course,
tributaries splitting off
from a river's yawning
chest. The celestial equator
awaits our arrival, double stars
so excited they shake.

COUNTERPOINTS

Childhoods and adulthoods
trigger wrinkles in a face.
They are wrinkles,
white-gray strands of dead cells,
coarse like cello strings,
eroding our hairlines
and chins as agents—a word
with its foot snarled in a Greek root—
to drive or lead us into the temptation
of pigeonholing, of claiming
separation. Anxiety bred by both
existing in chorus.

Childhoods and adulthoods
are hairline fractures, a broken bone's
healing process, where healing
always feels like pain,
considering bone tissue and scar tissue—
as potted marigolds blooming
dandelions—and know that once
an ankle breaks
it's always broken.

Childhoods and adulthoods
pair up as melodies
or voices intertwined,
an evolving species counterpoint
flowering complex
over time into polyphony,
malignant polyps in your
powerful lungs. Maturation
is not a musical sequence.

Childhoods and adulthoods
stand on two legs
like a projection screen
displaying the slides
of your filial memories.

Childhoods and adulthoods
are interchangeable like hot air
avowals during a political
talk show—juxtaposed as a row
of tenement buildings, all falling
apart notwithstanding the decade
workers cut the ribbon—
that refuse listening to:
each other, reason. The sound
a dry throat makes
when it's swallowing
snivels of regret.

MAN WITH NO NAME

for Jeff

I track bandits across
the desert every day
in this adulthood.

I get one Bowie knife
full of sunshine,
plus one set of wits.

I uphold
the shoot-first policy
grilling suspects over charcoal.

Footprints brushed
by a sprinting sand drift.
I holster my parched

fountain pen, the inkwell
is hard-boiled. My flea-ridden dog
chases himself into a wobble.

The trees of adulthoods
are cacti with spines
as long as butter knives,

each sharp as a sudden stampede
ending in cliff. I chase mirages
of cactus milk ponds.

Every whisper causes a gold rush,
an earthquake of horseshoes.
These pale rider boots eager

to kick back, kick the saloon doors
off their hinges and round up
painted ladies for intel

on dead-or-alive gunslingers.
The evidence adds up to a bullet hole
tied off with a white kerchief blooming

a cranberry harvest.
In this adulthood, fixated on
particulars. Witnesses spit

into the wind of vague
testimony. I sift their tip-offs
in my slouch hat's

diamond gutter. I surrender
only to the demands
of the sun's adrenaline.

TEETH CHATTER FOR MILES

1.

The pipsqueak car horn shimmies into attendance, punches
his face like a bulldoggish thug after loose change.
His subconscious, disjointed, forgets
how to remember.

The alarm scats, goes concave.

Glass, too, scatters like diamond fractals
onto the driver side's street.

The Ford focuses on fate's assembly line. He smells brittle
in the cold air of this adulthood, a mannerism he now knots
to Minneapolis.

2.

Outbreaking of car-jacks in broad daylight.

A neighbor says the thieves wait, seize
the evidence of adulthood: gadgets, devices, value.

Nothing caught

on camera. They sprint across asphalt

and send you searching for a quick fix:

plastic sheeting, electrical tape.

They can never say

I'm sorry, samsara. Too much street credit at stake

to barge into that cycle.

I forget why the department store, why the cellophane pandemic.

3.

We break up with amnesia and whittle down
the wheels as a sorrowing of burnt-rubber-scent.

We winnow the embargo on grain alcohol, produce
the hippest bootlegs. My hipbone pops

when a high skirt in winter.

I rope my eyes to the thighs

of a missed connection,

wish to press the flesh

before escaping and settle.
I bundle in a cocoon of quilts;
conduct lethargic through three states of varying flatness.

4.

A need for catnaps to dovetail our crossing.
I stay awake to keep my friend,
the driver, in business. As in wholly
operational with adulthood's full bars. Every lamppost we pass
with its neck craned
is an insurance claim, a crooked assertion. Each rolling hill or
flatfooted moraine is a toothache we share.
Miniature decays tucked into a thriving cavity. A joint
that grasps aging. The high-speed wind velocity is a bonding
experience. During the drive home, cold air pretends
we are smoking.

BITTERMAN, PARTY OF ONE

Awfully big adventure, I grant infamous status to you,
barnstorming misfit. My teeth clamp iron, as everything
hooks. As a gaunt adulthood I often stand
bare-assed in front of the mirror to better survey
my decay. Body peppered with bad form.
I pomade then curl the ends of my fledgling mustache.
Bedecked in a boatswain grin. Bejeweled with glimmering

sweat and bitterness. I chose this adulthood to balance
the odds binge on omens purge mischief.
Seasickness optional. Run through with a rapier any rascal
who denies my say-so. Like you. Today's special:
a saltwater processional. A praying crocodile. Tears welling
as I wade through crewmates with taffy arms and legs.
For each mutineer bested

I mark tally on the helm. The meek shall inherit
invisible grub greedily smothered. In gravy. In roofies.
In a body's stale aroma or bug paste. An adulthood planked
proudly waving its wavering. Liver spots heckle
my hands. Bad form. I let the crossboned skull flap
its jaw whether sea breeze or tsunami.
As gullible brats follow your luminous mass. Second surrogate

on the right. A stone's throw from a template of fronds, the treat
of being struck by god's sharp palm. Bring out your mother, a harpy
homebody. Blame her protein deficiency. I feel no sympathy
surrounded by tricksters. Tick, tick. Time is so crystal.
Methodical in picking my scabs. With an axe. To my untimely grindings
I smell unkempt betwixt wine and fixation. Never delighted
to whistle or snap fingers; I see a rank of twerps manhandle

their childhoods. Bad form. Pixie dust a symbol. For
drug-induced fearless. Induces dryhumping. Those fatherless chumps
champion idle hands. Devil's play. Ground meat cologne sprayed
from a whale. I let you charm me with your legend, your reluctance to slip
into your first adulthood. I plant on the plank, stare through
the depths. Tempt the narrowness to swallow us whole.
All grown-ups dress like pirates.

NIGHTSHIFT

I show up to the rally with a Mohawk, wielding guns made of metallic rage. This is an adulthood of runaways, in which one gets tricked into belonging to a nightingale. Or is it adulthood's faceshot, hook-line-sinker slipping arms into an army jacket?

Some improvisation in front of the mirror, some method acting reveling in the backslash of culpable blood. Or is this an adulthood as capable role playing exercise? Hero, meet damsel. Fly, meet ointment. Checkered

stripe, meet iris. Or is this just an amalgam of screw-heads? Am I one of them? Another cinematic delusion charged with breaking and entering. A state of play housing a misapplied reprisal. A playhouse state, a model home for my insomnia.

DISAPPEARING INK

I dress as Julius Caesar for the masquerade party, my assassins feel emptiness as if hungry. How can their arms be olive branches? Leaves are heavy if they crow a crown. I trip over my toga into a thorn bush, sniff its petals separately then dust off the blood.

People are line-item vetoes and vice versa in this adulthood. The trumpet informs all my direction, friction. I sit in my Taurus, let it idle. I let myself lie to myself. My intention is cloaked, croaking, an oil spill worsening.

A pantalooned man asks me to sign release forms for videotaping my conduct while dreaming. His speech infects me with an incurable walking pneumonia. I cough like a child coughing up his entire childhood in one overwrought retch. He speaks of treason and mutiny, his dagger bracing the core of my Adam's apple.

FORGIVENESS SYNDROME

My brother stays awake at the grain elevator for weeks. The wheat stalks fence for the honor of their masters. Saints live in his laugh lines, throw their righteous voices at his eardrums. He dresses the chamber with one bullet, never finds the right moment to fire.

This adulthood is nuts like a calf at odds with an udder. I am not cut out for tending to a pretend farmer. Afraid of fists and a tractor tipping over, crushing my femoral artery. A rooster starts each day at sunrise. Flies buzz it to a close.

My eyelid ripens a sty. A pea sprouts a stem and pods line my lungs, pushing aside alveoli. I coax pity from my lockbox of resolutions while hitching my pitchfork to the barn of amnesia. As I irrigate the crops, the cornfield rises in concert as shouts that gainsay apology. I say *brother, I will never go through this again* and I will.

CENTURIES AGO THERE LIVED UNTRUTHS

My marionette's antics are coffins to the untrained eye. I did not, for the life of me, consider the misery of bloody flesh and puberty he'd suffer no longer bound to cherry wood. I build our ramshackle house out of shark teeth and rubber cement, pin donkey ears on every bullish kid. I guess the hard-working wrecks

don't get to play on jungle gyms. Freeloaders get peeled pears. After his head sticks in a revolving door, I plan the puppet's surgeries. Find him an organ donor. I challenge the laws of physics to a mock trial, leave shadows to their fictions. A journey to the state fair ends

with a gurney. My sledge hammer hugs the Tilt-a-Whirl. Wave your hands in the air if don't care about dismemberment, like the street urchins playing roly poly, steel-toes boot their jellyrolls. I'm afraid the cricket will carve a switch from his splintering shin. Hammers be damned. Carpenter ants be fruitful. A lanky childhood

calls for a coming-of-age party done up with chrome balloons, piñatas, and torrential mood swings. I will pour you glass house, then juggle cleavers and your grief. If you go off on your own and become real, don't drink too much solitude then get all hepatocellular. If you do, I dare you to be as timeless as a disease.

RIPEN, IDENTITY

My credos search trash cans
for error. Every affair dossier
I find verifies adulthoods
of illicit courtships. How much remorse
can I hide inside a thimble?
I learn the tongue as a crackling
campfire, voice boxes as cattle
foraging a pasture. I learn childhoods
hang from the willow of adulthoods.
I pray to the smooth legs crossed
behind each pew, my eyebrow twists
in a bed of dry skin. It's satisfactory
to backpedal into firm
confessions. This is the mouth's vowels
and consonants as sentient beings.
This is as corruptible as an ego
or a trip-wire. This goose-steps
landmines planted with lineal
courtesy. This is personhood
as chemical chain reaction
with a hydrochloric temper. This field
stinks of marigolds, the stranglehold
of empires. If my last name came
with a tilde, it would translate
as ceiling tile crashing down.

COMMITTED

for Natalie

You solicit me to press my chapped lips to your cheek. With ales and ailing, our backs against exposed brick, mothered by adulthood. The bartender chisels his face to resemble an ex-president, the one who ate quinsy then spit up a skeleton. We amass a syllabus of jibes, assent to telling no one. I say *I love you*

into your tickled neck. I am the tick slumming through your bloodstream, the checkmarks to your to-do list. Analysis paralysis. Too many tasks, so we wink at procrastination. Whisked you off to the jukeboxing. We root around in our origins. I say *next step*

and you say *have a nice fall*. Smitten by your miscellany, I claim to be saber-toothed and recite an oath made of honey. Doves flapping around the dive bar, hiding in adulthood's wall. Barflies are cheetahs at rest, bloated with deliberation. I say *holler when you're the echo*

in my neck. My woods, my country. I can be the thermal detonator to your bounty hunter hands, the terminator to your militant resistance. I can be your barstool's structural weakness, and in your Hollywood blockbuster with an indie soul, I can be the end credits scrolling only your name.

EPITAPHANY

Truth is I swear every blood brother oath
on the baby blanket tucked under my pillow.

I swear on the mole stage left of my belly button
as it hopes for more dark growths to map a colony.

I swear on the scar on my pinky finger
from a tennis ball canister's tin top.

The scar on the underside of my middle finger
from grasping broken glass on the seminary roof.

The scars on my wrist from the blind teeth
of a West Highland terrier.

Persistent scars earned in my myriad
childhoods, you whimper like fingers

squashed in bedroom doors, throbbing
like beef bouillon in the broth of adulthoods.

You are orchids potted in teacups, surviving
off ice cubes on hospital nightstands. You hum like bones

in a woodchipper, expelling cartilage ribbons
with which I'll tie presents for any deathbed.

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