

Carry On  
(Elegies)

# Carry On (Elegies)

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Some poems in this collection appeared in some wonderful journals, sometimes in different versions:

“In Ithaca Once” —*Arsenic Lobster*

“Pre-War” & “The Center for Personal Growth is Next Door to Cremation Services” —*InDigest*

“Descriptor” — *Prick of the Spindle*

“Off Hours” —*Similar Peaks*

“Packing Heat”—Thrush Poetry Journal

“Migrations and Monuments” has an epigraph from a full work that can be found here:

<http://www.ngs.noaa.gov/INFO/fourcorners.shtml>

Additionally, thank you to those who have read these poems under various circumstances, especially Christine Bryant Cohen and Nate Pritts.

in Memory of DJ Robinson

## The Roads Will Be Closed

If everyone keeps their brights on,  
there: a beauty's stretched out  
that we might just have to leave be.

A kid plays air drums  
in first period algebra  
with unsharpened pencils.  
There is no incident  
to report down to the office.  
He harms nothing.  
His lunch is in a sack  
in his bag, with or without  
a note from his mother.

I was schooled, too,  
and my parents,  
their sisters and brothers,  
looking at the bomb shelter signs  
beside the basement doors.  
All of our eyes opened  
in anticipation of the blast,  
a pause,  
the hot sweep, and aftermath.

## Packing Heat

Lockheed rings, that vehicle inspector job  
I'm looking good for. Human  
resources has a bank of vital questions.

As a show of sturdy thew, I'm out of the bed.  
Which caliber rounds could find their way  
into a pocket's cough drop wrappers, crumpled  
receipts, and coin? What's discovered contraband?

I'm comfortable with rotating shifts,  
have no arrests, and can submit  
to random testings, must wrestle down  
a genuine objection to wearing a gun.

These answers are what they need, along  
with my motivation: what do I want  
from a company to give all I've got,  
to draw when necessary in the clutch?

Shelter. Compassion. Semi-weekly  
visits to a market for produce. Our fill.  
I haven't worked in almost an entire  
year, and can bear a uniform's weight.

I claim I am the man for this level  
of clearance, wear no shoes on the porch,  
hang up and stand through hours, unarmed.

## What Cuts Through the Woods

Those orange signs show up on trees  
and only make things worse.

Neighboring ranch hands and land  
tenders, raw from a city council dispute,

dump a pack of wild turkeys  
at the foot of my aunt's quarter mile

driveway. They bobble and charge  
the abandoned railroad bed. She says

dogs and deer will take them down  
through the next two or three nights.

And smoke on the wind comes  
from a neighbor's place, is a local wood  
holding oxygen in pockets that pop low.  
We all drink from the same well.

## The Droplight is a Sun

Long before you'll awaken to sip the nightstand  
water, the engine practically removes itself  
from gooied mounts, the proper lubricatives applied,  
dabs of excess wiped into those worn jeans,  
hung on garage hooks so they'll never be cleaned.

Remain tucked in behind the latched doors,  
under the down and multiple threads.  
Just as you'll allow it, someone will  
certainly take care of maintaining you.

A deep rest repairs your body for daily wear,  
so does the wall of every socket  
press on the six sides of each bolt  
that holds your vehicle together,  
lock-washed tight by the hands of men  
who live in the hours where we do not.

## Hibernators

“He felt quite proud of himself. He had been  
thoroughly practical.”

—Hemingway

It's another story of collapse:  
just look to a flock of pigeons  
in an acute dive toward  
under the bench for bread,  
sure as the path  
is worn through woods  
going thataway.

The ceiling is missing  
a couple of tiles. We wait  
for daylight to dig  
through the universe above  
the basement.  
Patient, spread out  
to the tune of deep  
ignition in the belly  
of a gas burner in the corner  
with grasshoppers who've never  
been outside the concrete,  
sheet rock, and beams.

Call them frog bugs,  
creeping, harmless.  
They live here, too.

## Migrations and Monuments

“Regardless of the technical nuances, we can confidently say that, considering the relatively primitive surveying technology of the day, the remote and difficult prevailing field conditions, and uncertainty in the survey's beginning coordinates for Ship Rock, Chandler Robbins' survey was a resounding success...Finally, we cannot overemphasize the fact that the aforementioned technical geodetic details are absolutely moot when considering any question of the correctness or validity...the location of the physical monument is the ultimate authority in delineating a boundary.”

— William Stone,  
Where Exactly is Four Corners,  
5/15/2009

Expecting mothers living near  
a particle accelerator  
have to tell the engineers  
of the main facility.  
Whatever happens beyond  
that, far as we know, is mystery.

In accordance with the lease,  
permission is mandatory to drill  
and wedge a peep hole in our front door.

Your rucksack is washed. It hangs  
in the shower—the small pocket  
full of hotel shampoos

have leaked their goo.  
They drown under the spigot,  
spumed to excess, and all

the where-have-you-beens  
are rinsed and drained.

If you are able to gather  
enough of the skin  
that cushions your spine,  
you can make holes  
large enough for rings  
to become suspended  
from the ceiling,  
provided studs  
are up there  
and strong.

## Kinda Like it's the Sabbath

When I rise anytime after six,  
it's in panic. Entire moments  
spun frantic, lost in the blazing sense  
that I'm running late and will be behind  
for the rest of my life, letting you down.

A clutch slave cylinder in my pocket, busted,  
leaks viscous fluid in a hoodie's pouch.  
There'll be no driving today, kinda like  
it's the Sabbath. Twisted tears of newspaper  
plug the holes and soak. I can walk  
the weight of this bleeding part.

A woman, mom—not mine, but someone's,  
maybe yours—walks a giant white Labrador  
nosing at my lazy grip. I learn he's twelve  
years old, just had a five pound tumor removed  
from his shaved side, is acting spanking new:  
a rubber ball hatched from a plastic egg,  
tossed on the kitchen tile.

## Devastation

The man on the door has lost two friends  
in these last seven days. Suicide.

One: a girl tattooed, thorned roses,  
with thin vines, spreading the pitch  
of just one breast.

We've tried to explain: just because  
there's a break in the road-side iron rails  
doesn't mean a route's been cut to follow.

My dentist climbs the side of the chair  
for the pull, fissures a deep line. In my jaw  
under the gum, through bone,  
I feel your weather an hour before  
the squall hammers on your nest.

I hear thunder, and it breaks  
my heart to kill, even the lights.

## Great Aunt, Winter, & Sun

for Marilyn Adler

Each of us lifts a full shovel  
and sends the earth down,  
stabbing the tool  
deep in a mound. The rite  
is that we're to bury  
our own dead and hear  
the hollow low thud on the box  
at the bottom. Mostly echo.  
She was a small woman,  
frail woven, sharp-angled.  
Everyone drops their scoop—  
cousin Frank forgets, is too moved,  
must eliminate the void  
until a sweat brings him back.  
Still, the *we* never really fill  
the hole. There are men  
paid just for that, who pull  
levers on a machine,  
doze with louder cries  
and bigger teeth  
than any blood can harbor.

## Strangers, Autumn, & Gray

for Ithaca's dead

A whole other mass, back in their ground,  
slowly pushes, worms the pipes,  
and gravels our foundations.

I ride a bus that weaves gradually up  
the side of the hill, and hold back  
somersaulting down in return home  
through the bone yard. I'd surely blunt  
on each of the stones, a flailing avalanche  
on deep chiseled markers toward the top,  
and come a cropper way down,  
the monuments abraded,  
generations' worth of runoff,  
drizzle, and pour.

## Pre-War

Bicycles stacked in this basement add  
up to either eighty dollars in scrap  
or a monkey bar obstacle course  
to the damn water main, frozen again.

We thrash down lumber steps  
for lessons on how to sweep, monkish  
below clouds, shingle, gutter weaving  
maple saplings, porous stone,  
locust-shells-in-waiting dirt.

There is life within single panes, sitting up  
in the front room colored like carnage in a barn.

And we *did* have some peace and lucky breaks,  
in seeping wind through window seals  
that kept our tiny world mostly dry.  
Noise carries through dusted space  
with simple grace of a plane holding on,  
then letting go of Fat Man and Little Boy.

The Center for Personal Growth is Next Door to  
Cremation Services

Tim brings his wife  
to the courtyard  
in a stainless steel egg,  
reckoning she  
could use the air.

I've got one—  
a dash of friend  
in a small vase,  
and Murphy's got one too,  
sets out a bronze cube  
bearing a sunken cross.  
He stores it away  
near canned greens  
in a desk fan box.  
His old partner.  
A business associate.  
An old dog. A doc.

We're of a people  
who keep absence  
near. Handy  
as duct tape.  
The ground  
is for a different kind,  
with fierce ideas  
on remaining whole.

## Carry On

Can ashes be brought onboard,  
or must we check them  
with the larger cargo?  
Could I set this miniature vessel  
on the same surface where food  
is served in the light's brilliant fade and lull?

Through the window is a canyon  
he could have loved,  
all that absence of rooves,  
where one razors loose a dozen leashes  
lashed around a self's own wrists.  
There's a basset hound at each end  
tugging away, or mauling the ground.  
We are never alone in any event.  
My brother who slipped

inks deep under young dermal layers,  
sat in prisons nearby borders.  
We were cornered by the window in a diner booth  
out on the island, and became older men  
sailing in a sedan with a pony in the back seat.  
We're exiles of an old country's long gone century.

We're plowing through this life  
in our longings so mighty, a bird swoops  
up ahead and is creamed by the bumper.

## Descriptor

for Xavier Robinson

These are fingers that cannot  
feel ink on the book's page,  
pressed, but they run the hills  
and sloped lines in other skins.

Blood lifts these lines. A geyser-  
like pressure presses hard  
then calms under a fleshed ceiling:  
swell from the whole night's rest.  
So many visions are sewn in  
to trundling beating beauty.

Your father's was not the art  
of tragedy that comes from, say,  
the fired gun. Nor were their scars  
from glowing wire hangers.

These shapes were tucked under,  
into us, with a machine. It made  
compassionate ligatures from small pokes,  
more curious sensations  
than burning kinds of pain. Each one

a young child, exploding to share,  
pulling at your cuff. Come here.  
Come and take a look. Lookie  
what I made. You've got to see this.

## Our Advances are Not Unique

A sugar maple's arms built a chest  
around our telephone wires, and roots  
tore up a few slabs we shared in the walk.

We razed all the trees to chips over  
that one winter, but left what they created—  
a timber holding on to important calls  
up there, where two birds, at least, dwell.

We stood below their home and rubbed  
oils made from our palms on the toes  
of our high-laced leather boots.

Poured fresh, a concrete path  
between the street gutter, garden and yard,  
the living pass under where others live.

## Us This Day

Canners beat  
the garbage trucks  
to our curb.

Deer have nibbled  
the neighbor peach tree,  
while a man  
keeps his vows  
to never wear white  
shoes again.  
He wanders out  
for a loaf of bread  
he'll slice as he pleases.

This world won't flinch  
at the groggy,  
their stretching from dreams  
and gatherings.

And a girl: she sees it all  
and hears,  
in every car tire's turn,  
the name of a saint.

She recalls, from a collective  
memory of ether,  
great fastings commonly  
mistaken as a sacrifice of sanity.

It is committed devotion,  
a full majestic dish.  
Our hunger is buried  
in a shadeless field  
where we muster,  
just about daily,  
spread on our backs.

## Artisans

Waves distilled in a foam  
applied to our wounds.

A machine we shall never think  
of as a gun, intent  
to ornament up these bodies  
we carry some simple life  
around in.

A new badge covers  
over decades of sun  
weathering and raunch.

Elsewhere, a woman  
in dyed hair  
wears baby brass knuckles  
around her neck.  
The stencils she's cut:  
some are snipped in sheets  
of tin or aluminum.  
Others are sliced from  
pizza box lids  
so they'll be killed  
after only a few sprays,  
soaked and withered  
under creation's gentle coat.

## No Way To Live

This one show had everyone drunk  
with hidden remorse on flashy scenes.  
In another episode, everyone's  
accused of murder, or else they're  
getting killed, or beside a pool  
cooking in the sun without waking.

This is reporting. A young man's throat  
closed in the hospital's lobby. The nurse  
said he was blue before his knees  
came to rest on the tile. After, the ashes  
arrived, sealed in a small jar and  
just like that  
there's too much stuff in my place  
to consider moving. Facts.

Once upon a time, a salad plate  
slid in front of me, and I'd talk  
down to the cherry tomatoes,  
taunt to them, like small people  
at the prongs of the fork.

I hope they've forgiven me.  
They've become a part of me,  
a beast, teeth grinding down  
on themselves, especially in nights  
with drink, when nobody else  
needs to get further hunted.

## Pingueculum or Pterygium

Whatever.

They can fold a flap  
on my eye's face  
and hit it  
with a laser.

It's safe.  
They do it  
all the time  
to everyone.

Unless you're  
some kind  
of kung fu  
fighter, it'll  
hold.

## Containable Noise

I've awoken in spinning cars  
interested in specifically where  
we were, but obligated to scream  
at stretched ragtop skin rooves.

Only sometimes do those sounds  
make sense. If these are my last  
words, they're finally released.

## Dryer

A bartender decides  
a dollar no longer equals  
4 quarters, gives 3 for the felt.

He's out of touch  
with his craft.  
Pours and pulls  
But can't finesse  
that soda gun  
to only drizzle  
the raw syrup.

The laundry mat  
is 24 hours.  
The night shift  
is covered  
by a machine gun turret.  
Drop extra coin  
for the 20 more  
minutes those shirts  
always need.

Pinch the jeans  
in the rolled up  
back window,  
and floor it home  
to give them air.

## Golden Hill

Don't pay any attention  
to how many bumpers  
have kissed you.

The market's T is red neon  
like it's trying to grow  
into a mission's cross head.

Behind all those furious  
sunned succulents  
a retired ginger woman  
fires up a wet saw  
and slices at subway tile.

There are a few nights  
the rain will never stop  
pulling warmth through  
all the walls.

I have to run to the store.  
I have to pull the scarf tight.

Every beet I cut  
looks like a heart  
on fire in a Mexican  
art piece.

Oh, Adam

If you were a real man  
you'd cut your own hair  
with a sharpened stick.

Out there is a flower dealer  
watching a woodpecker  
with priorities in order.

You've been constant  
with grace and time.  
Upkept and polished  
to gaze upon day after year.

## In Ithaca Once

I left her, barely alive  
up in the rental, studying  
our physics above the garage.  
A BMW sidecar was flipped over  
next to that loyal desk I stole  
from a university department.

That landlord had his tea, found  
a notebook in a top drawer,  
called collect, mailed it  
beyond confine: California.

All of those tight rope bridges  
daring city planning officials  
pulled across the gorges  
had nothing to do with it.  
We just froze like smelt.

And then, that one pizza place  
with free delivery through midnight  
locked up, the three ovens  
all vanished in morning.

## Returning

If I were to jump this fence, shoes leading a slide down a canyon's shoulder, those trees at the bottom would catch me, scrape me raw, and I'd deserve it.

I've wasted the last three years, ignoring useful parts of the carrots. Drawing shades in midday. How long do facts about video games take to erase from the human brain? Bees escape plants without flowers, right?

Vegetable stems become soil, if I can see through clouds built from fruit flies. Over a course of, say, seven thousand years, a stone can complete a simper.

An incredibly mysterious current event: a garage door is wide open, waiting for anything.