

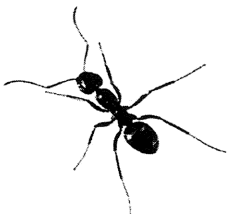
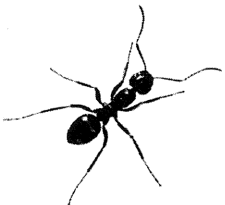
# all hollow-eyed and listless

poems by jack



Shackteau Press  
Santa Cruz, CA

shackteau.press@gmail.com





ALL HOLLOW-EYED  
AND LISTLESS

poems by jack  
with a collage by clarice

PROLOGUE...2 / NEW MEXICO, 1931...3 / WHO I MET AT  
THE CROSSROADS...6 / DUST MITES...9 / THE SWEET  
SCENT OF PENNYROYAL...12 / THROUGH THE THULE  
FOG...14 / YARD SALES...17 / HITCHHIKING, 1/08...20 /  
EPILOGUE...23

In the spirit of total liberation and insurgent desire.

Anti - Copyright  
2009 Shackteau Press

## PROLOGUE

water dripping from tin roofs  
turning of the rack  
tightening of belts  
naked children slinging stones  
bloated corpses on the river  
I realize how little is left  
that my own hands are full of sleep  
deer and coyotes dead in the wood  
children blind and mumbling softly  
they have eaten the fruit of labor  
they have eaten their own tails  
seraphic figures slinging hope  
purest of the angels dealing  
in the nakedest of dominations  
machines, decay, creation  
there are flowers made of lead  
cadmium, iron oxide, copper wire  
is all that runs between our caves  
even the birds here are listless  
the whine of a chainsaw cuts air  
the gasp of the denuded earth  
father, the empty cup of the moon  
what have we to fill it with?  
what is left of us when  
there is nothing left of the land?

## EPILOGUE

This is what is left when night  
comes over me like a fainting spell.  
The scurry of rats beneath my bed.  
How my empty bedside table  
is an altar to all I hold sacred;  
how every high-stacked shelf  
in every strip mall department store  
is an altar to all I do not.

The way manzanita blossoms  
open so delicately in midwinter-  
it is delicate enough to make me  
cry out in tongues. At night,  
I hear a woman's voice in the stream.  
Every morning, I awake  
to the ugly hallelujah of crows.  
This is what is real.

Capital is a ritual  
unworthy of maintaining the world.

the sun is pulled around by a black hole  
at the center of the galaxy.  
Some astronomers think otherwise,  
that there is no black hole. But I know it's here.  
I have seen a culture of water droplets  
sucked into oblivion by the emptiness in their gut.  
Eyes too accustomed to ugly, all skin and bones-

this is all I have for you,  
another broken conch shell of a body.  
I have cracked in the part of me that held the ocean  
so that now, against your ear, I have only silence,  
the memory of a name  
surfacing twenty years and a bottle of whiskey from  
here I stand. An empty bowl in my gut  
where I once held my anchor. They say  
there is a black hole at the center of  
each of us, carved out by time.  
They say when an offshore wave blows  
over the vessel's lips  
it is the crashing of a wave against a rock,  
so haunting in its silence.

NEW MEXICO, 1931

Imagine him,  
New Mexico, 1931,  
pouring lead down anthills  
to extract shape from negative space.  
My grandfather.  
We are both troubled  
by what is under our feet  
that we cannot see. The tiny mandibles  
that bite us  
while we sleep. We both feel  
an emptiness and seek to fill it.  
With lead, with  
the hot numbness of a stranger's sex.  
My grandfather's corpse and I,  
so much alike. So human, so small.

But  
I don't eat meat  
I don't smoke  
I don't pray  
and I'll only drink moonshine  
on moonless nights. Just like him  
I shrink in the shadow of pretty girls  
but I find solace and rare bit sanity  
in girls who look like boys and in boys  
who look like disaster. And in people.  
The whole messy proletariat of them.  
That's why that old man didn't dream  
and why I sleep wide-eyed.

It is why, when I am overtaken  
by ancestral memory,  
it is not his or God's. It is how  
the dirt smelled as he poured the lead,  
cast the bullet caught in Sitting Bull's head,  
the shattered skull looked like the cutting teeth  
of a tractor blade, or maybe it was just  
the lopsided smile of my grandfather  
asking his bride-to-be to an Air Force dance.

The wet smack of their bodies.  
The desecration of anthills.

I don't eat meat.  
I don't smoke.  
I don't pray.  
I can't promise you anything else.  
My dreams are ants  
crossing the boundaries between air and ground,  
dream and day, him and I  
never really talked.  
The same things bite us when we sleep,  
like ants or how empty the sky seems.

The smell of human bodies sweating out sin  
Life without god  
The revolver under the bed  
the sound of her smile  
the broke-in-half trees  
and the children who climb them

like him-  
his iron heart,  
tempered by two tours in Vietnam  
then dulled by twenty years behind a counter.  
He exploded from a gun barrel. Trace the trajectory  
to a single Harley blaring west to the Pacific  
and when he got there, he held his revolver, loaded  
with a single bullet, like a sea shell and gave it back  
to the ocean. Maybe it, forever silenced,  
turned to sea foam. Or maybe it was dug up  
five years later by some sad old man with a metal detector.  
But either way, there he was  
pulling to the side of the road  
to pick up a hitchhiker no bigger than a grain of sand,  
no bigger than I am.  
The two of us drove north to Monterey,  
pointing at the beaches where we considered death  
and those where we settled for life.

We are the insignificance of sand, he said.  
I agreed, this moment, it is a wave against a rock  
breaking the obsidian glass of the surface  
into as many water droplets as there are faces in this room.  
Each one caught cold freeze frame and perfect.  
Before we fall back into each other,  
to forget the names we gave to things.  
We are sand pulled to sea by the tide  
the tide pulled by the moon  
the moon pulled by the earth  
the earth pulled by the sun  
and the sun,

## HITCHHIKING, 1/08

Sitting over the ocean,  
cursing under my breath  
and letting the ocean carry all that away,  
I picked up a rock,  
asked it how big was it once,  
from what cliff was it chipped.  
Today,  
A rock curled into my palm,  
watching the cormorants shit on the tourists  
and the sand get pulled to sea,  
I realized that I am no bigger  
than I am that's not much.  
As I watch stones the size of whales  
crumbling into the tide, I realize  
that we are singular stones,  
gray and unspectacular,  
cast into the ocean by some angry child.  
Now we lay on the ocean bottom,  
grinding past each other when the water moves us,  
fucking in the hot vinyl of the front seat  
or waking from a dream,  
our lover's name on our lips.

Go south from here,  
to an ocean gnashing at the heels of a highway.  
The broken guard rails separating road from ocean  
are no accident. They were broken on purpose  
by people who knew so desperately that they must  
return to the ocean,

life without flesh  
an old forgetful man,  
emptied of his past,  
told me his story of 1931,  
there was a pretty girl  
but she wouldn't talk to him.  
So he retreated to a smaller world  
where he was big and things  
made sense again. And I realized,  
listening to this quiet old man,  
why the land is no longer sacred.

## WHO I MET AT THE CROSSROADS

One night,  
I thought that beside the moon I saw Venus,  
but it turned out to be an airplane.  
Sometimes, my leg spasms beneath my pocket  
and I think my cell phone is vibrating.  
One morning, I was naked in the shower,  
my muscle jumps, and I wonder who's calling this early.

I've seen moths  
confuse streetlights for the moon.  
By morning, a snowbank has piled beneath the light  
all the moths, overstuffed with incandescence.  
Mockingbirds are imitating only the most obnoxious  
ringtones, but somehow turn them back into music.  
The insects are dying.

Once, I hugged a telephone pole instead of a tree.  
I confuse streetlights for the moon.  
Some mornings, I don't stop dreaming  
until I finish brushing my teeth.  
Mockingbirds are learning to beatbox.

One day, he called me with a prophecy,  
his phone plugged into a tree he had mistaken  
for a telephone pole, I wonder who's calling this early.  
There are a dozen or so fireflies. Sometimes,  
they get encased in amber beside the moon  
I thought I saw Venus.

until the blanket is empty  
and can be folded into a flying carpet  
that can take me back to Oklahoma  
where I will turn that carpet on end  
and paint landscapes of all the flat prairie  
because I have been a painter  
mistaken for somebody else's canvas  
then at night  
I will wrap myself in the great plains  
like a warm and familiar blanket  
sleep strong until I wake up for  
church on Sunday



and as much as I say I need a vacation  
that cleaver keeps coming down  
until a fine glassy dust  
collects on its cutting edge  
and in it I swear I can see the reflection  
of my eyes that night you were in Korea  
and our baby splashed red across the sheets  
like a life poured across a canvas  
or a crucifix hanging from the sky  
around my sweating neck  
as you lay kisses across my stomach  
that felt like land mines in open places  
or old t-shirts on a blanket  
that I swear exploded from inside of me  
scattering hobby horses across the ocean floor  
under this titanic pressure  
like the sky is coming down on me  
like the stars are staring through to me  
No, I won't go quiet  
but I don't need any enemies  
I can't hear past the silence  
of the cluttered histories in the garage  
so I'm holding a yard sale  
Saturday I will pawn myself  
to my neighbors who have  
colored me as negative space  
to college students putting part  
of my listless history in their living room  
to children who will lose my dolls  
like I lost my sanctity

At night, a generator humming  
sounds like moth wings and fireflies.  
I want to think the dead moths are snow.  
I dream streetlights for the moon.  
I worry for my dreams. My muscle jumps.

I can only hold his hand over the phone.  
I hug telephone poles because I can't face him.  
One morning, I thought that one pinprick of light  
preceding the sun was staring back at me.  
One night, I looked into the sky,  
this time without a telescope, and I saw that the space  
between the moon and Venus is not empty.  
It is full of all the insects that have left earth,  
crawling over each other's backs,  
breathing and not making noise,  
between the streetlight moon and Venus.

One night, humid in Pennsylvania,  
he held his cupped hands to my eye  
and suspended in them, buzzing incandescent,  
was a firefly. As he explained the science-  
that the enzyme luciferase catalyzed a-  
I could only think that Lucifer  
was another name for phosphorus  
was the other half of the evening star.

It was either the generators or moth wings humming,  
Maybe the streetlights or the moon  
turned the moths to snow,

but one night, buried in his hands,  
I swallowed bugs like a third grader  
until I was empty, like light,  
but I wanted hard,  
    like science  
    like an exoskeleton.

The next morning,  
I'm brushing the taste from my mouth  
when outside my window I hear a bird  
and it's singing something more than  
"I remember when, I remember, I remember when I"-  
when my muscle jumps.

## YARD SALES

for Lee

Yard sales. I like 'em.  
Because all it takes  
is putting down a blanket  
before I can pull out my intestines  
like they were only old t-shirts  
reach into my ribcage for that fifty cent light bulb  
and a small stack of warped vinyl  
with too much James Taylor  
I can sell you my dreams that look like treadmills  
or my husband who I found in that uniform  
that the moths refused to eat  
you can have my childhood in porcelain  
    cracked and glowing  
I'll even sell you this blanket  
that was once a sail full of frustrations  
pushing me through nursing school and nursing children  
towards an empty continent  
covered in nuclear families like mismatched luggage sets  
napkin rings and candlesticks  
This still-life of a yard sale  
that has been accumulating dust  
like I have accumulated Christmas cards  
full of inanities and letters with big signatures  
all promising God  
now the cards are all crumpled and strewn across the floor  
except they aren't cards, they're marbles  
fleeing across the floor  
and the floor is a chopping block

May I see instead  
a mushroom. Awkward tenacious and struggling  
through the muck for sunlight.  
What more could you be? Judas?

Agaricus? Psilocybe?  
But after the rain passed, we would find the remains  
of the flowers and fruit dried and cracking in the sun,  
decomposing back into themselves.

So I pray,  
to the audacity of rain,  
that though we are only ephemeral flesh  
rotting back into ourselves,

that the rain  
with its subtle encouragement  
will smooth the cracks in me.  
That though the fruit, it is poisonous,  
the offering, it is sacred.

## DUST MITES

You said again  
that the total mass of insects in this world  
compared to the total mass of humans  
made humans seem pretty insignificant.

I agreed, on the whole, because  
we are only dust mites clinging lightly  
to some god's furniture.  
But I might never call you insignificant.

In the soft crotch of the Sierras,  
where we on-ended rotting logs  
to watch our little black shining  
ambitions scuttle safely away.  
That day, you found two beetles  
sitting softly on one another. They were  
sleek, happy, perhaps embarrassed  
and you described them cheerfully as "en coitus".

I had never heard a less romantic turn of phrase,  
but you never struck me as romantic.  
Where many men buried themselves into rotting women,  
you, single, celibate, and rational,  
told me that insects don't breathe,  
the air just passes through their spiracles.

I had sworn you said "spirit holes" and I thought  
it was beautiful, the air, this spirit,  
passing freely through them. But at least  
when you corrected me you were gentle,

Unlike your homebrews,  
that went down caustic and choking us  
until we planned a road trip  
that would be christened

Pissing on National Monuments  
tour '06

These things we planned and never did.  
Like staying in touch.  
Or finding a purpose  
for the empty cardboard boxes  
I have expanding in my chest  
from when I unwrapped this friendship,  
saved the packing peanuts like snow  
that might never melt, wrapped the bubble wrap  
bright red around our hands  
that night in the park when we boxed until  
no one was left a man. Bright gloves,  
bright cheeks, this devouring blackness  
punctuated with streetlights.

I saw then  
that you have cobwebs in your throat,  
so I've gotten sentimental for the both of us.  
Us rotting logs,  
napping so long in the sun that we shrivel  
and cough up half-poems like half-truths  
cough up clouds of gnats that buzz around us  
until under this noise  
we can pretend that we won't fall  
from each other's lives and we can both

destroying angel,  
do not touch me or show up  
to my court dates. I have no arms  
to receive you. But I would have you hold me

would I could.  
But this lack of rain  
has watered my grudges more deeply  
than your roots might reach, Madrone, Oak,

Dad,  
did you know that mushrooms are only  
the flowers and fruit of vast underground  
organisms that can stretch even as far as  
the distance between us.  
Did you know that this desperate indifference  
is as much a symptom of love as it is of anger  
that it is only the flower and the fruit

of the life  
that you and this culture laid before me,  
half-naked, seductive, so utterly alien.

It is my mistake  
to see in your stoicism the shivering nights  
outside your apartment after the arsons or  
exploding meth labs or to see in your smile  
the sterility of the suburbs.

## THROUGH THE THULE FOG

Dad,  
there is one edible species  
of amanita mushroom in California.  
When I eat them,  
I think of you.

For the six years  
when I could not more than grunt at you,  
when your presence inspired in me  
the profoundest of silence,

you would still,  
as the clouds split  
and the oak leaves lapped at the rain,  
drive me into the hills to admire

the fungus  
unfurling from the earth.  
So utterly alien. As you are  
to me. Or as the rain must seem

to the dirt  
cracked from the summer's heat.  
It has no arms to receive the rain  
so it grows them: Bolete

Chanterelle,  
the quivering of bird's wings  
or of my lips in your presence.  
You brutish shithead, tenderfaced asshole,

rock out to the first breath of air  
out of a car door onto a windy beach.  
Days like that made the sun seem downright kind  
and made your presence almost tangible.  
I haven't seen you in years,  
but I've tried to reconstruct you  
from candy wrappers on the backs of buses,  
paper bags blown along the interstate,  
you waft my way in the rain.

These cardboard boxes that I have  
expanding in my chest do not inhale,  
so much as their expansion gives form to an absence  
and exhaling feels like choking  
on the dust of history, and on living things,  
larger than us, that we need microscopes to see.  
This spirit of breath, all false starts  
and poor planning, cracked by time's arrow,  
swept into memory, like birth,  
like decay,  
like you.

## THE SWEET SCENT OF PENNYROYAL

the sweet scent of Pennyroyal  
as musky as her snatch  
brings me to a mountain  
where two distant figures  
are running down scree  
like tea leaves settling  
to the bottom of a jar

my spine shudders in her presence  
I become the avalanche of dust  
the heat from her belly  
left me sunburnt  
I wear her hickies  
like the desert its railroads

this desert  
where the rain seldom visits  
today I watched distant thunder  
and the sweeping rain  
loom over golf courses  
waiting in the atmosphere  
to strike a subdivision  
to commit arson  
today the storm sat over me  
not even one well-dressed man  
was lain to rest by lightning  
so better luck next time

but last time was me  
on a rusted ten speed  
pedaling furious past quaint homes  
and the sickness of streetlights  
trying to return to her  
at the trailhead  
turn on my headlamp  
check the beam with a hand  
dirty and stained green  
from where I touched her

she is the answer to my anxiety dreams  
she holds me  
    a coyote weeping at dusk  
she holds me  
    a pistol pressed to my gut  
the pressure from her fingertips  
shattered my sense of self  
swept me into her hands  
held me like that  
when she brought me back  
into the candlelight  
made me tea and told me a story  
of the rustling of leaves before rain.