

all hollow-eyed
and listless
poems by jack



ALL HOLLOW-EYED AND LISTLESS

poems by jack
with a collage by clarice

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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?

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

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.

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 phosphoros
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.

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

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.

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,

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.

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.

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

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

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

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,

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,

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.

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.

In the spirit of total liberation and insurgent desire.

