





**And their memory's like a train,  
you can see it getting smaller as it pulls away<sup>1</sup>**



*For the birds  
and their guts all full of plastic.*



I was at Disney World,  
In Epcot,  
Nine years old.  
I clutched my disposable Kodak,<sup>2</sup>  
Wound up and ready to snap  
Like alligator<sup>3</sup> jaws around the unsuspecting wrist  
Of a glittering parade puppet,<sup>4</sup>  
Offering its skeletal melodrama  
To my wide young eyes  
And narrow plastic lens.  
I also took a photo of a duck.<sup>5</sup>

I wonder if my mother<sup>6</sup> realized  
That her memory wasn't great,  
And that I shared the trait  
And the tendency to forget.  
She gave me the gift more than once,  
First, an inherited temporal lobe,  
Then a black plastic box  
With 30 frames for recollection.  
I received the latter on several trips,

Times she thought I'd like to have evidence of,  
Someday when the soft copy rots  
And I forget if it was a duck or a pigeon.<sup>7</sup>

If it were as simple  
As being able to choose  
The memories I keep  
And the memories I lose,<sup>8</sup>  
Would my mind look like the drawer  
In my bedside table?<sup>9</sup>  
Would I hold on to useless things  
For fear of one day needing them?  
Or what if, in a fit of rage  
Or something more sad,  
I threw out a photo I could have used  
To add just the right color  
To a cluttered collage?<sup>10</sup>  
A touch of clarity,  
A dust of film grain,<sup>11</sup>  
Some white noise to quiet down  
A dissonant composition.



A cheap-bulb flash doesn't cut through much,  
So make sure you're close when you take the shot.<sup>12</sup>  
And the things you missed  
That stay black in the print  
Were memories you could have chosen  
If you stood a little closer.

Like, remember when that rainbow cloud  
Took turns exploding in all our faces  
And fell like festive rubble  
In our mouths and on the ground?  
All that cereal will get dissolved in the rain  
Or carried off by ants,  
So I refuse to brush the gunk out of my molars  
For the sake of the preservation of our lives,  
Diverging now like so many Fruity Pebbles  
Tossed into the air like confetti.<sup>13</sup>

It wasn't as funny when I shot off a party popper  
In a small tent in a Boston backyard.<sup>14</sup>  
The sleeping bags smelled like gunpowder.

Weeks later, another firecracker  
Would detonate at Reilly's head on a beach,<sup>15</sup>  
Closer than expected,  
And louder.

I've shot a lot of friends in the face  
With the bang of a camera's flash,  
Promising that "it will all be worth it  
When I get these prints  
And we look back and laugh."

Would we do the same things  
If we couldn't freeze the spirit  
And bottle it up to sip some later tomorrow?  
How much of this magic  
Is a crack-up for posterity?  
Am I making maps of the past,  
Where X doesn't mark the spot anymore  
But you can imagine  
The treasure we held,  
And how it slipped

And will always slip  
Like sand between our quivering fingers?  
When I seek the shore,<sup>16</sup>  
The gleam of teeth<sup>17</sup>  
Cuts through the sea smoke  
Like a lighthouse.

But how do you move in a world of fog?  
Slowly, for sure,  
And not at all surely.  
When the cloud surrounds  
And your sonar<sup>18</sup> drowns  
The second it leaves your lips,  
You're fumbling ever forward,  
Frankenstein's monster<sup>19</sup> with your arms out  
And your resting speed at a quiet confused panic.<sup>20</sup>  
What choice do I have but to cling to a brush  
And sling pigments on textile?  
The thrill of a vignette now ossified  
And the autonomy of the studio,  
The best medicine for a wretch like me.<sup>21</sup>

I'll take the careful steps when my eyes fail,  
I'll guess at ledges and handrails and roots.  
There's a way out to be found  
Or at least a way to say,  
When the haze all lifts,  
"I have made something.  
I have not wasted my life."<sup>22</sup>

But isn't a lifetime like an ocean  
In the way it seems endless  
While you're drifting in the middle?

Once, I was a sea bird,  
Feathers heavy with brine,  
Flying through a squall  
Toward a shore I couldn't see  
Or even imagine.<sup>23</sup>  
Steady diet of garbage,  
Steadily dying.

Six bottle caps from my favorite root beer,  
Bent into cheap metal gemstones,  
Perfect for carving SLAYER into the table<sup>24</sup>  
Or into your forearm.<sup>25</sup>  
One black lighter,  
Champion of the sandalwood incense,  
Concealer of cat piss<sup>26</sup>  
And roommate's garbage pile.  
Two yellow shopping bags for the transport  
Of a post-coital junk food haul.  
One toothbrush lying in a medicine cabinet  
Next to a razor and some tweezers.  
Dozens of candy wrappers  
From dishes in dozens of cubicles  
(Two white fillings  
In two white molars).  
One dead bulb from a strand of lights  
Spelling out "HELL"<sup>27</sup> in cursive  
On my bedroom wall.

When I found my gray body  
Flightless in the gray sand,  
I opened my stomach like a time capsule,  
Spilled it onto the beach,  
And harvested the undigested plastic for catalog.<sup>28</sup>

My father<sup>29</sup> likes to document  
Gas consumption on road trips.  
Cost per gallon,  
Miles per gallon,  
Compiled into a data sheet,  
Comprehensive and precise.<sup>30</sup>  
He doesn't have a document  
For my laughing fits,  
Induced by my brother,  
Or the songs on the radio  
That finally convinced my mom  
To change the station,<sup>31</sup>  
Or drawings I'd attempt from the back seat,

Lines shaky from the cracked highway.  
He doesn't have a file  
Of columns stacked with  
The eyes of two young sons,  
Widened by untried horizons,  
But he doesn't need one.  
I can see those numbers roll through  
His warm face when I ask him,  
“Remember that time we drove<sup>32</sup>  
Down to South Carolina?”

I think about the places I've been.  
I think about the rooms I've seen only once.  
The sickly green couch of a friend's friend,  
Watching unfamiliar television.  
A warm musty shack in the woods,  
Walls lined with maps  
I'd never come to understand.  
Dim bedroom cigarette miasma  
And a kid I didn't know  
Shoving me to the ground.

The detail that keeps me from thinking  
That they may have all been dreams  
Is the very real way  
Dust filled the sunbeams  
Like a spectral buttress<sup>33</sup>  
Supporting the walls  
Of my memory.

There's a river of light<sup>34</sup>  
Beneath the crust  
Of this black earth<sup>35</sup>  
That runs ceaselessly  
Without source or terminus,  
And my mind is a well  
With a lead bucket,  
Laborious to lift,  
Polluting of its contents.

Even with the clearest eyes,<sup>36</sup>  
And drawing (on a good day)  
From the purest muse,



How can justice be done  
To a world so complex  
Through this many filters  
Of mind and muscle?<sup>37</sup>

In imminent lieu of perfection  
I'll settle for self-satisfaction.<sup>38</sup>

There's always the getting stuck to worry about.<sup>39</sup>  
You can't see into the levee  
From the bottom of the hill,  
And by the time you climb up<sup>40</sup>  
It might be gone all gone,  
No milk,  
No cereal.<sup>41</sup>  
Just a sea<sup>42</sup> of dry dead fish,  
Bleached white rib cages,  
Like the ouroboros<sup>43</sup> finally choked on its tail,  
Died writhing in a pile of itself  
At the bottom of a dusty crater.  
And who wants that?

Stay put in your plot at the bottom.  
Don't waste your time  
Wondering how wet the reservoir,  
And get to doing your rain dance.  
Either it works,  
Or you sweat a small brook  
Good enough for a fish or two.<sup>44</sup>

And sometimes I am a fish.  
Moving forward forward forward,  
Expressionless and steadfast,  
When really I feel wide-eyed like a fawn  
Stuck with an arrow,  
Longing to drink from the stream  
Rather than struggle against its current.

The water is as blue black as wet asphalt,<sup>45</sup> and colder,  
But on my tongue it's clear and smooth  
Like the mouth of a coke bottle.  
I imagine glass lips  
Slipping soda pop sweetly into my teeth.

I imagine the current rushing down my throat.  
I imagine drowning.  
A quiet panic blooms  
In the back of my chest  
As I prepare for a hidden hand  
Gripping my ankle  
Whipping me along a rocky bed  
Too quick to make a grab at survival.  
As my ears and nose took on water,  
I'd mourn the sound of piss on dry leaves<sup>46</sup>  
And the smell of rain in a hot parking lot.<sup>47</sup>  
I'm glad to know that drowning scares me.  
I'm glad to know my lungs still yearn for air  
Even if some days they labor to inflate.  
When my life force is a salmon with a broken tail  
Trying to swim upstream  
For reasons somehow felt but not at all known,<sup>48</sup>  
I'm glad to know I still crave a cold cola  
In summer  
In the water  
Blue black as wet asphalt.<sup>49</sup>

It all melts away if you breathe deep enough.

Suddenly you're home.

My comfort is a jagged green horizon.

Nestle me between the verdant remains

Of massive primeval dragons,

Granite skeletons and pine needle scales.

But when I was in Nebraska,

The sky was just so big,

You know?

With all the open space

of a cloudless Great Plains day,<sup>50</sup>

I began to understand the need

To fill the Clear Blue Void with something.

A corn farmer might be awful lonely

Without a god to chat with

On his tractor.

The difference between a field of flowers

And a painting of a field of flowers<sup>51</sup>

Is that one is a place to clear your head,

And the other is a field of flowers.

When it comes right down to it though,  
I'd trade days of daisies in radiant meadows  
For the rows of ivory headstones  
And the soft red burial plot of a grin  
(Rest in peace silence,  
Rest in peace hunger,  
Rest in peace lonely).  
Our teeth were glaciers grinding together,  
Gentle pulverization of Creation and all that,  
And there was skin that smelled like film grain,<sup>52</sup>  
Disposable photos of small gray oceans.  
I'll remember this when the brush is in hand,  
And the canvas will remember what I can't.<sup>53</sup>  
That's how you get a spot on the wall.

It won't always be enough,  
So beware your greedy hands,  
Tired prongs grasping at salad days<sup>54</sup>  
Like the last iron roots of a loose tooth.  
Your bones won't stay this dense forever.  
Your mind won't stay this sharp,

Your dick won't stay this hard,  
And you will continue to lose the war  
You wage against your nose hair.

Tattoo yourself with nihilistic mantra,  
Grow your hair until it's long enough to swallow,  
Take a piss somewhere that isn't a bathroom.  
Someday you'll have potpourri preferences  
And didactic talk radio  
And bistro reservations  
And does that sound so bad?  
Bound to comfort and set in a groove,  
Needle in a record  
You've been writing for decades.

Wielding your youth like a knife  
Won't be enough to scare off  
The aging of your parents.

It's always time for a change.  
I'll begin by boiling the needle.

I prefer thinner ones, made for a sewing machine.

I stole mine from Michael's.<sup>55</sup>

Clean and dry, it's fixed to a pencil with thread,

Wrapped around and around

Like a spider's meal.

This bulb of cotton will hold the ink

(Also stolen from Michael's).<sup>56</sup>

I'll write the letters out across my knuckles:

“DON'T CARE”<sup>57</sup>

It'll be death from a thousand tiny stabs,

Tracing the words on my fingers,

Poked again and again

Like a swarm of angry yellow jackets.<sup>58</sup>

The death of a future in political office,

The death of my father's respect,

The death of a handshake free of a second glance.<sup>59</sup>

I refuse to be buried

With bare knuckles crossed over my chest.

And since you can't get tattooed on chemo,

I need to be ready in case I get that gut punch,  
The one my mother took like a Valkyrie,  
A citadel despite the holes in her bones.

When my tree trunk torso cracks and crashes into the dirt,  
And the earth claims my husk,  
Breaks my lumber down into the stuff that stars<sup>60</sup> burn on,  
Food for the worms that are food for the birds  
That are food for the people that are food for the worms,  
Let those eight crooked letters be tasted  
All the way up the chain,  
From body to body to body,  
The chalky echo of my vestige coating tongues.  
When I give my eternal silent treatment,  
I want a bitter legacy<sup>61</sup> born from loam  
Stuck in the teeth of everyone  
Who cared too much  
And cherished too little.





