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## The End of Want

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The End of Want

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Anthony Blake  
Centre College  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2013

May 2018  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

The poems of *The End of Want* are attuned to the absurdities of modern existence. They take as their jumping-off points the various offbeat occasions that punctuate our lives: over-researched time spent in art museums, Kevin James sitcoms, half-finished cathedrals, and suburban communal living. They catalog the emptiness of what we say to each other and the increasingly disconnected ways we say it. All the while, with dry humor and heart, they search out, and try to hold onto, moments of transcendence amongst corporate language and new definitions of masculinity, and humanity, and holiness.

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*Set It Down*

*after the climbing pine* comes down  
and crows pick at a kit in the rose bushes

*after the garage generator* exhales  
a final sweep of storm air

*after wildebeest* at a salt lick

*after bacteria* thickening a wound

*after holy water* for a baptism  
at the font's blue-tiled entrance

*after the pod of pelicans* circling burnt trash

*after our mothers* sewing six coins  
to our infant chests

All of a sudden                      after all *that*  
we're to set it down  
shove off at the water  
on a white ship

## *Outdoor Shower*

A fivesome of writers rented a house together to cut down on their collective poverty. It was just off the main strip of the college town they adjucted in but somehow out of the sightline of any neighbors. Deer laid down in the ticky yard. It was all so almost idyllic, the backyard, its nearly-flowing trees, the otherworldly privacy. It really killed them how it was like that. Almost idyllic, but there were slanted floors and there was only the one bathroom for the five of them. One of them, a poet, dug a trench, filled it with gravel. This was the kind of thing he would do. He planted four wooden posts, wrapped them with corrugated steel, hooked a goodwill faucet up to the hose. The shower worked, giving them for some time lukewarm pleasure looking out at the woods. Mourning doves gathered back there, and there were the deer, at night a few stars, once what the couple making love swore was a meteor shower. Eventually though, citing ordinances, a representative of the town demanded the structure be taken down. The poet hadn't thought about graywater leaking into the soil, and he was sorry for it. What wouldn't burn he put for free on craigslist. It was picked up by a dentist who scrapped metal on the side, who said he did it to "keep to his roots." The writers all got this in some existential way. It gave him something to do on the weekends with his son, who wasn't all that into the local sports team but liked to scrap, liked more specifically his hair in the wind while riding around in the back of the dentist's red pickup truck.

### *There Are Too Many Baroque Christs*

Through the Kunsthistorisches, and on a warpath to the Vermeer, I was clobbered by a wall of them. “After a while it all seems the same,” Longboat999 says on TripAdvisor. In this one Christ is slumped to the right, shoulder dislodged, and one eye is bruised and rolled back. He looks like Sylvester Stallone between rounds. Caravaggio’s Jesus is taking a nap while two guards beat him with bamboo sticks. There’s thirty of these. Long matted hair. In each of them, he carries the weight of it all in his neck.

Jesus was there in the vaulted room. He asked me for a euro, took it to the low-rated museum café and changed it into a soda. I followed him at a distance, out to the rose gardens. Those gaunt hands tracking blood that German tourists tread through.

I never actually saw the painting where the artist pulls the curtain back, shows you how it’s all done. I left Jesus at the Easter markets where someone tried to sell me an egg and spoiled the whole thing.



*The One with the Glacier*

every night roommate  
told the same story  
cabbage field turnip farmer  
blazing mosquitos standing  
water roiling the turned soil  
every night he changed  
the ending glacial floe  
over the stubbed plains  
tear drop amethyst  
widow's walk 'til the night  
he got it so blisteringly  
right steam shot  
from his larynx nostrils  
with fingers I came up  
behind him vapor pooling  
the obsidian counter  
I wedged an oven mitt  
locked his gullet another  
word he couldn't say

*Wyoming, U.S.A.*

and we're playing  
that game where we drink  
every time the channel two radar  
pings by a major highway

the guy next to me  
frames water towers  
for a living, fumbles under  
his armpit toward a welding scar  
that feels like a bruised pear

outside the rain is smoking out  
the litigated wildlife it's cold  
a handful of spruce huddles  
just past the ranch lights,  
leering over

our shadows bear us up  
the top branches  
and I'm afraid again,  
the asylum they make of voices

don't mistake me, I've killed  
a rabbit with a lawn mower

but I've seen this guy buy one  
from a pet store  
and eat its heart out

*But what is it / you want?*  
Beyond money, the promise  
of someone to roll  
his quartz skull back  
into this named world,  
*is that it?*

still we're drinking straight  
from a jug of sweet red  
and his teeth are rabid  
we probably look like a couple  
of

*An Oral History*

for Ernesto Gittli (1933-2009)

Pocket-sized Uruguayan  
Einstein, Montevideoano  
small-city maestro,  
buried, near inaudibly,  
behind timpani  
in the background  
of my one orchestral record.

Forgive me, I never told you,  
while you walked the hallway  
to the water fountain, past  
my little sister maiming  
a three-quarter violin,  
I would push the hand  
of your clock forward  
just a touch  
to make the half-hour  
go a little faster.

## *The Briefcase*

Because the poet was someone who felt tremendous anxiety leaving a shop without a purchase, someone who feared eyes trained on his person, after a lengthy visit to the town's newest thrift emporium he became the owner of one cheap, fake-leather briefcase. It set him back \$4.50, a price which had been sharpied directly on the thing. The poet had dug it out from amongst a stack of holiday DVDs & a den of viperous scarves. That the briefcase looked like a prop for a low-budget action flick (e.g. where one Matt Damon type is presented with a load of fake money for services rendered) was one problem. Another was that neither the clerk nor the smiling manager knew the combination to the lock. If you shook the briefcase, gently, you could nearly recognize something by the weight & circumference. It must have contained an object the poet had held before. This was agreed upon by the smiling manager, the clerk, and the poet, as well as a couple of other shoppers, the poet's mechanic, and any and all other passerby the poet encountered in the days that followed. The poet imagined the end of want, the dimensions of which he had known once before, overlooking a grave in Ravenna. Once and only once, the briefcase expelled a brown liquid, like whiskey or unsweet tea or dip spit, down the hall to the poet's office.

After other means were tested and a crowbar was of no avail, he willed the briefcase to a friend who thought, open or not, just carrying the thing around might boost his credibility in the workplace. The friend didn't look like a serious man, in part because he wasn't. Years after accepting the briefcase, he was asked to speak at a small conference in Oklahoma. He wore Sampson-length hair and a Hawaiian shirt. The audience hoped to hear the methods behind his meteoric rise in the world of finance; instead he read, to glorious applause, from a slip of badly-stained paper, a short statement on tarantulas and the earth's receding moon.

*The Purina Dog Show Announcer*

says the hound's face *glows like a god's*,  
says it casually & off-hand, as if we already know  
the physiognomy of desire.

The last time a god appeared to me,  
he was drenched in rainwater. I kept him waiting  
on the porch with his clutch of daffodils.  
I nearly drowned in the deformation of light.

## *Bachelorette Villain*

One was not certain if he was a good one being a bad one or a bad one playing a good one and then later a bad one, when in the end he had the appearance of a bad one but could be argued by many to have been the greatest bad one, which made people say that in the end he was actually better than a good one. A good one is good but there are always many good ones and only a few bad ones. The greatest good one would come out in the end but not until much later than the greatest bad one, leaving the greatest bad one in some people's mind for a moment the greatest of them all. For a moment, he being either a good one being a bad or a good one playing a bad or a good looking bad one, would be the greatest.

A moment is all that he needs being the greatest, the bad one, because part of his badness is in that he will soon be dead. The bad one would die for a bad one, leaving behind the good viewers who, it could be said, loved to hate the bad one. They loved him in no different way than they love the greatest and good ones and more than they love the ones who were not great or good. This comes as comfort to the bad one, at least for the time leading up to his death.

Of the ones who were neither great nor good, there were some who were odd. The bad one, and the great and good ones, were glad they weren't odd and glad the viewers didn't love the odd ones in the same way they loved the greatest bad, the great, and the good. After his death, it's hard to tell if it came as comfort to the bad one that he wasn't an odd one or that he was loved by the viewers in the same way as the great and good ones, but it is said by many that we know he was comforted by this before his death. His death which was a part, although not all, of his badness.

*Coming Home*

the stag is turning  
gray in the backyard,  
broken-legged & so  
implausibly alive  
we couldn't believe it  
when he offered up again,  
months after his injury,  
a sight of himself  
in the concrete skeleton  
of neighbor's  
unfinished house

like projector light  
diffusing frailly  
over too-dark  
patches of oak,  
our memories  
can't cast enough  
of our faces  
to make us entirely  
visible to each other

## *The Product*

He couldn't be sure how good the thing was, but he was sure that everyone had one. He had one. Near-universal possession of an object might be evidence of utility, imply some correlation there, but he didn't think always. He would be able to describe the product to someone who had never seen it before, but it was unlikely, he thought, that he would ever run into such a person, as ubiquitous as it had become. He imagined for a moment what that would be like. He'd be a kind of sage or mystic to them, shrouded in shin-high mist bounding off a lake. These people would sit up on their haunches, presumably grimy from work underground, at least work outside the scrutiny of billboards and lighted signs, with their hands leaning into the heat off the fire. A fire would be entirely necessary for this level of ponderance. They would reflect somberly on the product and what it implies about their own existence. Likely they would weep the sweet tears of someone entering into a new reconciliation with a higher power. The terms and conditions have changed. They'd ask *does it really have \_\_\_? Are you sure it \_\_\_\_?* And the ruddiness of the fire would suffocate them there on the spot. Or else, if the product's goodness is a product of our collective imagination, stretching imperially away like a red tail over the horizon, they might die laughing at us.



*Morning Briefing*

you were promised    a garden that keeps itself  
a velvet cloak        pleasant lies at regular intervals

a city to let you go    a warbler to purr  
back the porch where your first lover  
tongued you too hard over a green soda

a land mine you can plant anywhere

free coffee for the last year of your life

your own muddled cells  
glancing off a model's arched back

a root beer so pure, so rich and creamy,  
you'll swear it's made in heaven

every man a king or    every man a moth  
glowering in the busted neon of a tattoo parlor

every man a moth-king    with free tattoos

we're flexible

I know you expected *more*    look I did too,  
but with money like it is

the limit is one, one  
selection stamped and slipped  
into the shocks of wheat

wait for a whiff of cinnamon on the breeze  
wait for fire in the rock  
when the only dream you have  
is your mother among the persimmons

and I'll find you there

*The author of the Voynich manuscript*

spoke a rare Babylonian dialect used in a small part of Asia. The author of the Voynich manuscript was an autistic monk, who followed a strange mathematical algorithm in his head. The author spoke Nahuatl, a language spoken primarily by Aztecs and named for the fruit of the prickly pear. The author tucked his children into bed by candle light, and every night the moon seemed to him more slender through the opaque glass. The author was Roger Bacon. The author's letterforms curved like someone who had seen things, the tired ascenders reaching only so high. His colors must have come from China. The author had the handwriting of a man who subsisted on barley. The author wrote from left to right, and his children's beds were like this, one after the other. On a dolly, you could have panned a camera past them, one by one, as the author of the Voynich manuscript kissed them asleep and pulled their down blankets. Only then the author must have retired to a small closet, the smell of burning wax wafting through, to draw bathing women and astrological charts until he passed out on the makeshift drafting table.

*White Pages*

for Alex Chick

I tried to find my friend again  
after his passing. I paid my dollar  
& the service mailed in  
a single lined index card.

*Your stranger is in a city with 0 inhabitants.  
The city you are looking for is occupied  
by 12579358 m<sup>2</sup> of water.*

*It Didn't Scare Me*

Open: close-up of a desk.  
I got to a problem I couldn't navigate.  
She left a dark mark there  
we never could get out of the wood.

I got to a problem. I couldn't navigate—  
I couldn't trust my own nose.  
We never could get out of the wood.  
I followed her with the beam of my flashlight.

I couldn't trust my own nose.  
I said yes even though I didn't like scotch.  
I followed her. With the beam, my flashlight  
cut through thick glass. It didn't scare me.

I said yes even though I didn't like scotch.  
She left a dark mark there  
cut through thick glass. It didn't scare me,  
open, close, up on the desk.

*Hostel Wien*

if everyone is      throwing up      she asks me  
the gurgle      of a washing machine  
and two teenagers      groping at keys  
                         in the hallway      I can't get rid  
of me  
                         she seems to feel  
little  
alone      says, "for herself"      she is travelling  
                         that  
                         stiff      self      with      muted eyes  
wide open  
                         her robe      without  
knowing it      her  
                         stainless      figure in  
                         the ill light

*esprit de l'escalier*

between our voices,  
a host  
of sparrows

scorches  
the slow air

one lodges like shrapnel  
at the foot  
of my chest, grows  
a nest there  
out of our words

the woman tells a story  
about rotten figs  
that she meant  
to symbolize choosing

the sparrow takes it  
too literally

figs fall  
from my ticking guts  
on the hour

I've come here by rushlight  
to give them to you

*Not Much*

Last night I told a woman what she wanted to hear.

This isn't the first time I've been caught  
between the light through blinds and small hands.

In grade school they filled a church with me on Wednesdays.  
I'd kneel stiff between two girls in pleated skirts.

Sometimes there was stinging incense, often  
just our young sighs muddling up the air.

Last night I offered this woman healing as if it were mine,  
as if I hadn't fevered and passed out  
every time I begged for it in those pews.

This is all I'm qualified to say—  
Grief doesn't take much, not much,  
not always so much.

And while I don't,  
all the while, behind a chain link  
an unloved dog becomes wild again.

*Dear Reader,*

I was engaged to a jazz singer who collected typewriters, at one point. I asked her, and she said she had them to *energize the room*.

In college, professors fawned their pens over her essay pages in tweedy nostalgia. In tweedy nostalgia that didn't always seem quite appropriate.

The typewriters lived in a shed built for this purpose. For this purpose, although its final purpose remained unknown.

In Missouri, I drive past the vacuum cleaner museum and the precious moments chapel. That's when I thought of her. I thought of her older than I'll know, cutting her white hair over the kitchen sink.

Over the kitchen sink, and the doorbell rings in a parade of thin young men & women. Men & women, well-dressed with wrists you could get your hands around. Anxious, all of them, to get their hands over the keys of a sheeny typewriter.

The jazz singer hands to the visitors, typewriters one by one, until there's only a Royal left. I imagine her grandfather's Royal the lone typewriter, in a bit of chalky light, energizing the shed after the harvest.



*Stage Hands*

Not a scar of bedroom left—  
bureau with the hidden cash,  
patchwork quilt, from the lovers' tussling  
smashed lamp  
vaselined off the polished hardwood.

For a moment only the audience's  
unbodied hands in the dark.

Offstage, the actors hum Wagner,  
warbling like a basket of crickets  
you'd take to a picnic date  
over a lush hill.

When he trips, pretend not to hear  
the old man in orthopedics.

A retired bank teller, he's unseasonably  
new to this. His feet squawk like a sweat mopper  
toppled by a sudden breakaway.

Cross-legged when the lights come up &  
holding back a bloody nose, immobile  
as the protagonist, suddenly in a brothel,  
gets on with it,  
pours himself a fake drink.

### *The Poet Defends His Drunkenness*

A large group of prodigious musicians, the trumpeter of particular but slight renown, played, as they had since their inception, the King's Head Ballroom, a concert hall that had been regionally famous a generation ago but was now in disrepair. It resembled a mead hall with ambitions of class. The previous owner, a man with a penchant for gambling, had rented a corner section out to a butcher when times were lean, and the smell had made a house in the now-illegal old-growth beams.

On a particular Wednesday, at the band's standing appointment, a desperately drunk man wandered onto the stage, grabbed the Shure SM58, and began singing blurred, but noticeably Satanic, homespun lyrics on top of the ensemble. It was like a komodo had been loosed from the local zoo. The audience knew they ought to be terrified but they weren't. Not at all. They hadn't been trained, in movies or on tv, how to feel about this, one way or another.

The band kept playing, improvising nothing for the situation. The man's voice was a garbage disposal. Under other circumstances you'd feel sorry for him, but here, in the stage light on top of the tuneful instrumentation, it all made him into a kind of bedraggled angel. Someone in the audience tapped the man on his black oxfords, gently, to see if he was real. He was.

It went on for months. Which is not to say that the original drunk angel, lissome suit and hands around the mic like a dead pianist's, was ever seen again. He wasn't. Not after he loped offstage and out into a meaningful fog. But still every time the band played the Ballroom, which was now almost every night, a person, with demonstrated corporeal form, would burst onto the stage, inebriated to sudden, near-total incapacity.

The initial shock the first audience felt was replaced by new suspenses. No one knew who among them would be afflicted next. You'd think the janitor a likely angel and a sorority girl you hadn't noticed would somersault up the stage steps, arms like an inflatable car salesman's. It seemed pattern-less, and, almost impossibly by the end, no one ever guessed it exactly right. It was like there was a force in the room more powerful than mathematics, hell-bent on maintaining the element of surprise.

In these early days, the band was careful not to make any changes to the set or to their starched attire. Those with trim beards refused to cut them and they seasoned into salt-and-pepper scrublands.

Everyone came to have their favorite angels. One crowd-pleaser was a young man, the kind would have gone far in this world, had he not been in his life's last act. He smiled radiantly, and that's all people remembered.

Another man, bleached hair under fitted hat, called himself Juiceboy. He sang a duet with himself, alternating between normal and a troubling falsetto.

An eccentric with a sunflower tattoo brought an accordion with her, an unwelcome innovation, and ascended after a week. When she got on the stage, though, she didn't have the motor skills to play or even properly hold the thing. It let out a few rabbit-type gasps.

Then, on the six-month anniversary of the first angel, when people finally quit suspecting him, the janitor, who had been sipping all night from a Windex container of blue vodka he kept in his custodial cart, was called up during a bit of Dvořák. He sang of his homeland, a nation apparently dissolved off the map. Its chief export had been a variety of purple potato. He sang in a low growl, longer than usual, about growing them with this mother, until even the pianist choked up.

It didn't stop a diverse and voluminous body of people from packing night after night into the King's Head Ballroom, but it did become a problem legally that after their stage ascensions, none of the vocalists were ever seen again. There was a filing cabinet of unclosed credit cards in the manager's office, and investigators began to quit looking the other way.

So there was that. And there was that the ballroom was getting out of hand without a proper janitor. The humidity of the recurring, inexplicable fog was warping the floors.

The show kept on through this, though. It did until the trumpeter ascended, not into the fog like the others, but to more lucrative engagements with late night programs his agent leveraged from the fame. The musicians, rudderless, had their wives cut their hair over their kitchen sinks. They started playing new, atonal works.

Between these and other factors, at the final show, nobody sang at all. The musicians got through the set without a soul in the audience.

*Welcome*

There's another world  
but it's in this one,

another world  
with its split lip draining  
through the night.

The wind flecks  
gray rain and I'm there,  
jaundiced again.

I take a photo of a stone angel,  
a joint in her mouth.  
Another spruce pierces  
the wire fence.

Is there such a thing  
as forgetting?  
On the warm cemetery bench,  
the sputter of algae  
across the pond.

*Gnome Cemetery*

Your old parent  
is one exploring  
the blunt eyes  
of a garden gnome.

Each fall they grow  
in the backyard  
of the house  
that you grew up in.

They hold the things  
that they died with,  
a hatchet  
under the oak tree

or the corner  
one carrying  
a tied rope.  
They don't remember  
dying this way,  
which is relief  
to no one.  
As the sun loafs

behind the cover  
of tall cattails,  
gnome shadows  
push into the house.

*It's like they mean  
to kill us*  
she likes to joke  
behind the windows.

One is still  
so far away  
that you need  
binoculars

to see more than  
the flickered glow  
of its lantern  
past the pond.

## *The Cathedral*

The poet, having visited a cathedral hallucinated from the mathematics of snail shells, sought out a project grand enough that someone else would feel obliged to complete it after his death. His poems weren't it, those little earthworms that came up bloated after a heavy rain, and he knew it. Even in the case of the Great Poet, her fragments were exhumed from a heavy roll-top desk and presented to the world *as-is*.

These machinations were made in error. Although few recognized it, the architect's greatest accomplishment wasn't the gothic structure only now becoming sound of its own mind.

Instead was his dining room chairs, graceful sovereigns whose backs melted at the preposterous angles of stick bugs. Of wood, but nimble enough they might lift away.

No one told the poet this. No one told him that maybe he was better suited toward the completion of someone else's image. So he would go on, never finding a trace of his life camouflaged amongst the buildings that punctuated his days.



*Investigating the safe, left open so I could grab my passport*

*Know, I was on earth Count Ugolino.* In hell he's gnawing the skull of an archbishop as he says this. Up to his chest in the whoop of ice, cracking and reforming around them. A sick orange light, like a tanning bulb in a lousy motel, separates them from the thousand others. He wipes his hair out of his face to say *if not now, why use your tears?* The dead to the not yet. Then again fastens like a mastiff at the bone.

Jump to the Carpeaux of the Count and his sons in the Met, next to the food court. A grimace, grotesque fingers, but the rest is cursive. The oldest son looks up dolefully, wraps his arms around like an o. You don't have to pick up your hand to trace the tissue between them. With a couple loops, it slinks down to the youngest, legs spread to half-zs. On them all, each muscle absurdly resists atrophy.

None of this in the safe, but a yellow slip of lined paper in my mother's handwriting. Textbook, that extra movement, between rising and falling, where the r slices across. The capital Q, a boy scout's delicate knot. On the floor in the closet by old loafers. My sister used to listen in on phone calls through a hole in the drywall. *Dear Children, If you are reading.*

*New Animals*

our grandmother  
statuesque on the front porch  
Easter morning and we'd wiggle  
the loose skin on her arms like  
we were trying to coax  
a new animal out of the shell

*Here We Are*

I hollow my lungs into a canoe  
and take tourists down the river  
of everything I can remember.

We stroke past the busted neon  
of a price chopper lot

to the Vermont backyard  
where I saw my brother last,  
covered with blue hoarfrost.

The extra I've hired to play him  
is named Danny too but  
his eyes aren't right, are hollow  
like an upturned spruce  
instead of hollow like  
they ought to be, floating  
moth-like at a mazy sun.

Here, as in all  
incorporations of the past,

if you hold something on its side  
it disappears behind a paste  
of drying asphalt.

*An Oral History*

for Megan (1986-2011)

As a kid you convinced me  
every curse word rhymed with MOUSE.

PLAYHOUSE: I lay in the pink insulation  
while you were going septic. In the dirt  
you and I had spaded an inch down,  
exhuming chips of Corelle dinner plate  
you called Indian artifacts.

LOUSE: With kitchen gloves, you remove  
the blood-thieving pearl.

GROUSE: Their mating call  
like your therapy machine, like pulling  
a mower over a welcome mat.

*Bottle of Jägermeister*

Finally looking closely enough at the blunt object to recognize the emblem of St. Eustace, the poet was reminded of a video. A stag wanders up, inspects the altar of a Québécois cathedral in a city that holds the saint's name.

The bottle reminded him of that especially, but also of his college friends who had synced up phone alarms to pull back rounds of the syrupy garbage. Until he busted his phone in grad school, the alarm, named 'shotz,' still went off at 10:30 pm every Saturday. When they drank, they'd watch a television show about people living in a trailer park. One of them was getting married soon. When he'd called the poet to be a groomsman, he prefaced it with "I know I haven't kept in very good touch . . .," that clause having as much or more impact on the poet than the invitation that followed.

In the clip, around the deer, ornate pillars of marble, such as one would expect. The pews were dark wood carved with lusty cherubs. It was funny to the poet, someone who in most respects valued the unexpected qualities of things, that this understood beauty retained a *spiritual glow*. But if he was being honest, it did.

It did until he found, sometime after the wedding, that the deer's name was Chambord. Instead of a divine break-in, he had been viewing a behind-the-scenes clip for an artist's installation at the church. Somewhere in his mind's lowest reaches, a thought formed that made him forget entirely that he had ever been young.

*Weather Permitting*

I'll rig one up for you  
with teeth  
unlike the smile I give my photographer  
that's really just creased lips,  
chapped architecture  
under the fill lights

draped over your chair,  
a London fog

my one lame tooth  
hooks the others

over your shoulder,  
a jolt of hair

my mouth is a lumber pile,  
a stand of pine  
eroded at the root

*The Petite Narcissism*

of my speaking without any tragedy,  
except the common entropy

which furnishes itself as well  
a yard of old chokeberries or

class hamsters wedged overnight  
between cage-door tines.

The school janitor still  
tugging the unbreathing creatures

from the newspaper & nesting pads  
before the children arrive.

The wheeze of his once-nicer, newer  
vehicle giving out, finally, at the gas pump.

*Kevin Can Wait*

Although none  
mention it,  
every artist  
working today  
shares this hour  
in history  
with another  
Kevin James  
sitcom.

In this episode,  
he drinks  
he eats  
pork rinds  
mutely, like even  
his character knows  
he shouldn't  
still belong  
in a world  
shot through  
by crows.



*An Oral History*

for Maureen

Outside her house  
chiseled pillars  
with names of parishioners  
likely departed now,  
pieces chipped and splayed  
out in the shrubbed yard.

I'm lifting marble slabs  
into my uncle's discontinued Saturn.  
It doesn't want the weight.

I can't name her illness,  
but I know I could brand her  
with a finger.

The cyclist she's  
is cheering for  
with a friar's stillness,  
I already know he crashes,  
pulls out of the race.

I want to spare her  
the wall contact, racing glasses  
flying off as he strikes  
a fan's wristwatch,  
his shattered clavicle on the asphalt.

I want to save her  
any knowledge I can  
because that seems  
the only mercy.

*An Offering*

I keep some loose change in the attic

when the gravity shifts        I hear it scrape past

chifferobe    sounds of wood on    metal

old newspapers        sounds of paper on    metal

the pipes        sounds of metal on    metal

this sound is the worst

there is nothing more bone-flinching        than things that close

in on themselves        things that crash against opposites are

more tolerable.

And you

when I heard you crash        sounds of flesh on    flesh

on flesh        there was no stillness        no nativity

only bereavement in falsetto

*To Say We're Made of Stars*

is to imagine ourselves the grand finale  
of cosmic history, single burst of rainwater  
recollected in desert palm.

When my father dies, we're divvying up  
his ashes into three coffee tins,  
quitting them wherever we'd like.

Pray with me a tree grows there,  
private & holy as a turtledove.

Pray with me, for that tree, the only prayer left.

*Let my atoms be altered into anything,  
Lord of light, particle & wave,  
except fast food cups with the reborn faces of clowns.*

*Right There*

Maybe there wasn't too little but too much of him, says poet's friend, that art—  
lobbed ear, cannibalizing stomach—comes from lack.

The peculiar gauze of stillness wrapped over an exposed muscle.  
Pearls of tapioca extracted from a cassava root, loaded into suspension of bubble tea.

The world doesn't want a full artist, not in the way that it pines for whole folk  
shimmying in its crawl spaces, floating up the pegs of its utility poles.

*My pipes are still leaking, but at least the water is back on.*  
How many Van Gogh paintings came after he made his body less?

The poet nearly lost his arm tripping over a picket fence. The surgeon told him after  
*I was touching all of your nerves. They were just right there.*

*Grab a Coors*

After lethal injections and bull gorings were found too inhumane,  
we let them choose how they wanted to die, the loony bin humans.

Plastic surgery had an uptick the year death went on strike.  
Supplies were low, the elderly panicked. We had a glut of goose skin humans.

The black hole was later proven to be scientists' wishful thinking.  
The apocalypse was another creation which was, like sin, human.

If you replace your organs one by one with lavish metal clocks,  
tell me from your ticking guts, when do you become a has-been human?

After enough lobbying to congress, history was re-written by the dairy industry.  
Despite the TV reports, there never really was a West Berlin, human.

Eventually the sun will be replaced by seven glowing satellites.  
Each continent gets one. The only vote left is what hue, man.

And Anthony, there on the sad height of a former Sear's Tower—  
step down, grab a Coors, and cheer up. You know we all begin human.