



WHILE
THIS
HUMAN
ENGINE
WAITS

Jason Dean Arnold

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for Anna

“The real truth, to begin with, remains invisible beneath the surface. The colors that captivate us are not lighting, but light.” – Paul Klee, *The Diaries of Paul Klee 1898-1918* (1968)

“This is why I write: to unfold the electrical mat of my nervous system.” – Bhanu Kapil, *Ban En Banlieue* (2015)

“Shifting how we think about language and how we use it necessarily alters how we know what we know.” -bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994)

(occupation)

There is a lizard behind

The windshield of the car

Next to mine

Sitting on the dashboard

Watching the car's interior

He doesn't look happy

The same as anyone else

Plastic or otherwise

In my passenger seat lies

A bag of reeds that held

The promise of sound once

But now rest like small, cut corpses

This car has 160,000 miles

Worn into it, & maybe

It will go 50,000 more

Either way, it's stopped now

Parked at the top of a garage

& it might not move for a while

Because I have no place

That I want to be more than
In hiding
Just until everything slides
Into a static calm state
Where even the lizard next door
Feels like he doesn't have to
Stand guard over the car
& the coffee I've just consumed
Leaves me sleepy
& everyone says good morning
& actually means it
I will probably be waiting a while
There is no money on me
& I have nothing to buy
No one to see in urgency
I just have time
Same as the lizard
Behind the windshield
Who doesn't even know
I am sitting right here

A rigorous feeling for what is hardly there at all

This morning, the office is teeming

With flies, floating

From the rat corpse

Bloating under the sink.

Naming them all seems optional

But unnecessary now

That we have started

To swat them from the air,

And I keep thinking of recording

A small stuffed mouse radio similar

To one you had as a child,

A gift from your father.

When unzipped, it's belly holds

No stations but a volume knob

With which to hear static louder,

Punctuated by a random voice

Or piece of music, an opening

Into somewhere else,
The times I sat listening
To an old clock radio and dreaming
Of being brave, doing something brilliant
For others one day.

I leave you each morning, driving
Through early light, past it,
Past our first kiss, past the hotel
Where we lifted one another out
Of our mutual music-filled emptinesses,
Past your family and mine.

Maybe, I drive into the past.

Why does static always remind us
Of the past
And possibility
Of future sounds not yet made?

Clarity is only associated

With the present,

And this morning my present is very clear:

I'm leading a team of people.

Whatever we were hired to do

We aren't doing that now.

Now, we are all watching for flies.

We're all killing flies,

Smacking them against windows

Despite the sun outside.

~~Why I Stopped Looking~~

When the living rooms on our block are lit in television
lightning, they come back.

They crawl up from below the foundation,
through the floor &
into our conversations.

They come back this way.

They always do.

All of them come back

Covered in soil & dead skin,
their eyes open but unlooking,
left dark in the center.

Can you recall whether I held you down on the bed
or if your hands were tied?

Either way, you looked beautiful.

At sunset yesterday,

12 vultures sat waiting on our neighbor's lawn

as I drove past.

I stopped to watch their patience,

but they said something in slow motion,

hissing dits & dahs:

- ..- .-. / .- .- --- ..- .- ..

I wanted to understand their message.

I want to understand everything.

I never understand anything.

I never understand.

I always drive on.

Rate of Change

(After Ian Johnston's Installation, *Fish Tales*)

Filling the cavernous museum foyer,
a large, pale cocoon
turns slightly in suspension.

Within their elevated womb, shopping carts struggle
for space to share their emptiness,
twisted silhouettes against white flesh.

My adolescent nephew, Julian, wants to watch the creature breathe,
a long inhale that gradually increases its size
& holds his attention captive.

He stands silent & apart, changing
with an undefined restlessness, accompanied
by the sound of speeding rail wheels & sloshing water.

In this moment, Julian is again four years old, fascinated
with Thomas the Tank Engine
& hitting the strings of a small guitar.

His eyes move from the massive body to me.

I know he is no longer four.

I know how much time has elapsed.

I know he is accelerating now

& wondering why his uncle is moving so much slower
than light.

Wetlands

(for Anna)

We are mostly made of water
when we're born, but some
is lost as we mature, leaving
children to recognize the sea
as love.

Alone, sitting in the living room of our home,
I swear that I can hear the springs
bubble from an opening in the earth
over a mile away
while Governor's Creek
ribbons around a thick system of roots,
sliding over the surface of rocks
in silence
broken only by the winding
creatures below.

There are forgotten acts
of liquid breathing & weightlessness
inside of me.

The brilliant green canopy wants me.

The springs want me.

They whisper to me,
plead to me,
to come inside & relearn
all that I lost when leaving the womb.

Life exists in your wetlands,
and I recognize your sea
as my own.

You are made of water,
& I desire to drink from you.

Sleepwalking

Abstracted in the shadows of our home,
glaciers wait for me.

The icemaker convulses in the dark
as images evaporate & I rise,
thirsty & full of sea smoke.

A coming electrical short circuit is the echo
of my nervous system.

Rain breaks your bedroom voice
into Morse code.

I remember nothing, &
my hands fail
to hold anything.

Broken Consort

What you see is the worn carpet of the animal's flesh hardened with dried blood
a rust colored trail along the pavement that suggests the violence of the event
the insects and buzzards burying themselves inside
the lifeless flesh are frightened away with each passing vehicle.

What you hear is the growing urgency of flies attempting to land & lay eggs
the wind's lips whispering in your ears
tires rubbing quickly over asphalt

& maybe the sound of your own breath lighter

lighter growing

Your memories rush from their hidden folds & bottleneck

leaving

nearly

nothing

You are left with sense (es) ory-bound images & broken language

nothing to mold into meaningful lines

just images (deceit)

an abandoned bird's nest resting in a wreath

(affixed to the front door)

half-handshake from a man who never made eye contact

for more than a moment

the recurring lightness of breath felt mostly at

night

What you hear is the impermanence of talent in

an ethereal boys' choir

impossibly sewn into the sinews of muscle deteriorating in a motion sickness that

stays long after your motor has stopped,

you are nothing,

&

nothing is

Elegy

This poem is dreaming you,
images & sounds half-recalled, driving home.

The blue sky blushes orange
beyond the tree line, everything creamsicle memory.

Sunlight melts around your fingers
as southern soil & military formation.

Out of Spanish moss, vibrates
a small, white cross the size of a child's open palm.

Above traffic, it dances
a ghost in plain sight.

Along this asphalt scar, our dead recite stories
of stolen light refracted in red wine
that will travel as ruby earrings, hidden.

You meant to tell me what will be carried back
to the sky, untranslated.

Canonical Root 1 (R_c^2)

Miles Davis no longer sounds like a ghost

Whispered speech, like

hushed breathing

Miles Davis no longer sounds like a ghost

Notes muted, hovering over me

A boxer's step softly shuffling

Miles Davis no longer sounds like a ghost

No

No

Miles Davis is a ghost

Miles Davis is a ghost

Miles Davis is a ghost

& I just want to fall asleep

To give experience in precise observations & measurements

Levitating over our bed,
my lips & fingertips
measure time's progress &
the slow ebb of accuracy
found in sensory experience.

Years evaporate like hummingbirds.

Eyes become unreliable
instruments, still ringing
broken chords in failing song.

Pinhole cameras collide
at night,
disoriented by stars.

Touch collects a tapestry
of data from the topography
of your hairline,
half-hidden
under golden waves.

Our memories are catalogued
in nerve endings
as we struggle to hold
what can never be seen.

i (...)

Beyond words,

birds are burning,

& I'm walking with nothing but a snaking horn,

Singing photographs from stars

into whisperwalls

Into

the camera of time's tiny bones

partially buried backwards through the sound or rhythms

Missing from your music.

When those birds

can't sing

above their own flames,

Attempt to veil softly, reflecting any feather artifacts
closer to mine.

When we are blind:

Keep the birds clean,

& even angels won't understand

your eyelids.

h (...)

The stampede of lost lambs tore into the painting,

lost limbs coloring the sky in Artaudian ecstasy

Filthy with desire,

& fucking loud

So much stampede sky

drizzling into every sky we drink now.

The fallen chain link fence.

Bodies.

A field,

strewn across,

or sewn through

the field -

Under no stars

A hymnal-less hymnal.

A flip book of photographs:

discrete, at least;

images,

at least;

nine hours in the making,

at least.

To establish a factual basis for understanding the mechanics of the environment

The hollowed, whitewashed brick walls
of the structure stands a few feet from the highway,
the facade stained with faded graffiti.

The steeple, a crumbling exoskeletal arm,
reaches skyward yet bears no cross.

There is a comfort in this decay.

There is a comfort in this.

There is a comfort.

There is a comfort in the vein-like branches
of trees that grow through soil & floor,
to fill this interior void.

There is a comfort in recognizing nothing
for what it is
but for what it could be.

f (...)

Beneath dark water,

violent history holds

our breath,

our memories

until the island recognizes us again

Your skyline curtain signals

winter will be long

For home

a blind love searches

Ambiguity in the literature is predicated on issues related to the measurement of time

A small 8-track recording device floats away,
somewhere in space & sends signals back home.

The unknown is documented as dream language,
celestial secrets,
from the open mouth of empty.

A weightless time machine carries the universe
as cocoon, ethereal & black. Stars break sound
away from widows of lightning.

Loneliness exists despite our longing.

Silence does not exist, & forever
feels somewhere between false &
what water holds.

e (...)

Southern cottonmouth secrets undermine action

as angels circle out of reach.

Burn desire to edible ash.

Vultures dine.

We're enemies of everything.

Reading ruins language.

Our prayers bury flour.

Feathers thin our atmosphere.

Wings confuse congregations.

Still, we must listen.

Kid Ory plays echoed seventy-eights & needled graves

too deep to consider heartbreak.

Time ends, swallowing its tail.

We require less majestic legions.

Wasps recycle.

Lichen exists to counterweight hymns.

We reproduce out of fear of being alone.

d (...)

You left last summer,
forgetting to leave on your onion skin

Sunlight soaks stained-glass,
as transparent you

Disappeared behind the dinner table,
leaving music loud enough
to keep her awake until morning

Night Pilot

Sound sets ground humming—
worms writhe from my brother & sisters
onto bleached white surfaces,
laughing clouds of ash, rising
powder of anti-gravity.

Everything afraid throbs tirelessly
against windows unseen.
Washing uncertainty suffers me &
pastels pour from torn sky.

Across stringed lights ants march
to resemble the form nights take,
always beginning as blood
orange Turner sunsets black.

Vertigo yells us inside, high again &
future mountains made to steal air
burn shallow breathing fire &
planes crash endlessly as prayer.

c (...)

On the page, language left
In time will fade

To hold light, salted paint
Moves the grain over canvas

Redacted text buries beneath
Rich, white surfacing
My pallet knife cuts through bone hue

Scraping waves of white
Devour lead and ink, devour memory
And magnify simultaneously

Monument to empty lot
A reflection of only, casting shadows
Through fleshy topography

Vast and consuming
Still nothing
Still nothing

Several correlations appeared in the data

The flock of birds above me moves like iron filings controlled by an unseen magnet behind all of that blue. For the first time, I have no need to know why they are moving so fast or where they are going. My air is heavy with rain. I walk home out of instinct, hoping to beat the weather but knowing I won't.

b (...)

Late afternoon sunlight & shadow

dance silently across our wall

to entertain Eleanor.

Her seventeen months smile

chasing their own silhouette.

This diversion won't last long.

Outside of this room

a thick green swell of swamp pulses

with cicada song & humidity

& every living thing is saturated in sky.

The calculations thus far made have been
the closest approximations possible from the
data known, yet there is a chance that the
final result may be inaccurate

Yes, I was the one who lit the match,
a small light on the surface of your skin
to guide my eyes to the nest where
your heart rhythmically beats without purpose
& waits for his shift to end.

I think I am close. Just focus
on your routine, & let's make this easy.
The routine is meant to be easy.
The truth is that you need & want easy.

Imagination's siren is always routine,
& it guides every thought & instinctual itch
that will ever tempt you.

So, pay close attention to these words

(I have to confess, my grasp of the language is not strong):

Follow the light

as it traces that reverberating comet tail

on the backs of your eyelids

& s l o w l y disassembles into random marks

like stars or pinhole cameras

manufactured for compound eyes.

Beautiful trails, whirling dervishes

You are feeling very tired.

There is no reason to get lost

in the way the sun aches to swath those tall pines

in highlighter yellow & cartoon green.

You are very tired.

There is no reason to desire

to wrap your torso in the leafy flesh of strange trees.

Do you smell gasoline?

You should know that I am setting

your heart on fire & next is your tongue

& maybe those trees, if time allows.

You're so tired.

Most of all, know that this will only hurt for a second.

Then, you can relax forever.

a (...)

A charred earth snaps awake
with each step backwards
against smoldering underbrush.

Look through these temporary angels.
Forget your given name.

From the sky,
cut paper petals return
as ash grey butterflies.

Descending figures,
briefly visible, vanish
without warning.

To a home silhouetted by fire
follow torn lines
through blackened trees.

Breathe

as evening breathes.

Open albums,

dreaming leaves-

only fragments remain.

We belong to a lifetime

of letting go.

(...)

Into the ground
you disappeared,
leaving only images
of your fragile frame.

Over three decades
You remain painted, unaware.

Your skin drinks
transparent words & little else
by the lake.

In my hands, I try
to hold no weight
& your warm breath
a hymn of unfamiliar language climbs
out of reach.

There was never very much of you,

only the sound

of moving water.

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Jason Dean Arnold has a doctorate in education and serves as the director of e-learning, technology and creative services for the University of Florida College of Education. In this role, he leads the development of courses, digital content, and software applications that creatively enhance teaching and learning online. His artistic output is usually actualized as poetry, visual art, and music. He lives in Florida with his wife and daughters.

Examples of his work and influences can be found online at temporarytranslation.com