

Steady, World

poems by N. M. Courtright

STEADY, WORLD

THESIS

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by

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STEADY, WORLD

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SAFEST AMONG GHOSTS

The Intimacy of the Crocodile

When I say we walk to the store to buy the things we need
this is a metaphor
for that first morning glance

when eyelids separate and in floods
what survived another improbable night. When I say

the undrinkable oceans are there for a reason
I mean that is why I beg
for a safe passage into the haunted cellars of my childhood.

When I say the crocodile is the most natural mother this means
be very still, and rest your head on my shoulder.

Anonymous Survivor

September is quiet, and he fights it all the way to the drain.
He stares into it, watching
the dirty water stare into it and then go down.
This is one of the dreams he dreams when he's awake.

Behind his evening shadow he feels insignificant,
and doesn't want to discuss his little role
in tragedy. He plays the future well,
but avoids the skyline, terrified of the thought

he might take advantage of it. If he watches too long,
he could be quite prepared to discover
all things to be like heaven.
He isn't sure what that is, though, whether it's white

or whether he'll find the passing ships of his past loves,
the evenings he moves through
with his long shadow and wandering thoughts.
Far away, the soft green memory

of the studio and the city as it used to be, like it too
was made only to be studied,
and that the art of it was not for art's sake.
To him, even the notion of heaven seems very far away.

The Movement of Beauty

In a building with thin walls, white walls, nothing is
Rotten or joyless. In there is your careful body.

It is a body beginning at its center and moving outward.
It does this until it fills a place its own size.

Under your head is a chest. Inside the chest
Are gold coins and letters from the war.

Perhaps this chest is made of more than bone and flesh.
Only some of this is true. For a moment, you are narrow

As a chute of steam. Like steam, you disappear.
It is all you know to do. You are pieces put together

To make pieces. It is natural then that you would be
Under a blue sky. See it want to watch you. The blue,

Blue sky. It finds you beautiful in a way it cannot describe.
It tries using simple and unaffectionate language:

Graceful, supple, innocent, strange.
This does not impress you, a smooth, gentle body,

Steamlike and permissive. The sky struggles.
Still, you are blessed, by and by.

Centuries

With the proper amount
of wind, a rose could
go through
the heart; right through.

Put water on her skin, see it
run off as if in fear.
And then
watch the opiate shoreline.

Down go the houses, she.
Aegean drowsiness,
the time
goes about its lasting thing

like the unbending trees.
Her mouth is eager
and full,
her unseen tongue, red, strong.

She'll have to say something.
About loud wind
and care,
about thorns, about the ground.

Visit

Star too large you called it but for why

it was the brightest you wondered for what

reason are the others overdone it must
be perhaps the others are too young

•

and not ready and like us when **we**

were lovers and comment on human parts

fitting together like metal
in a factory but that was just hood talk

•

as it remained warm beneath bodies

and the cold night Ohio which held our

pieces kept like pictures fire-lost
which **again we would not see for so long**

In Your Sleep You Said Careful

Possibly a hullabaloo, or even the desperate echoings
of rigamarole. Could be
you thought the subconscious was a mess, that five
hundred pages couldn't say
a minute. Could be too much going on, so much even
that the scope
of human thought is too complicated to make real.

Careful, you said clearly. Maybe you were still
making choices.

Maybe you were saying, there are infinite decisions
in every millisecond, like to blink or to
not blink or to not blink or blink.

Careful, you imagine the feet of the dead. Who or
what was tossed.

Could be you, chuckling from the bottom of the abyss.

Could be you
wanted to say, Careful,
these are angry muscles.

Poem for Two Little Girls

This isn't a world for unabashed expectation.
It isn't a world where walking extra quickly down the street
curls the night around the trees
any faster than it would have otherwise.

If you'd walked as slowly as possible, just maybe though
the sun would have seemed
to hold itself gently above the water tower
for a spare moment. And it is at this moment of suspension

when the sun is least concerned
with its own imminent downfall, that workers
break the water tower into pieces two hundred feet up,
and the crashing down of old metal onto the ungiving ground

allows echoes their furthest reach. The sound of voices
bounces off the houses in much the same way.
Like the sun and the sound, metal as it falls
seems to hang a second in perfect stillness, avoiding gravity.

Two babies, little girls, came late. They were both told
they should expect little, so they could be happy
with whatever happened to come their way. Later,
someone surely will say about something serious

that these things take time. And lots of things take time,
but it is also true that the faster you run,
the fewer bits of rain make their hit, so it's best
that you run. Hear me, you run.

Where the Blue-Jay Calls

Listen: the hum of streetlamps above grayness,
where the blue-jay lights upon earth

and not my shoulder,
 where you lie your head.

It's been long since you lent me a glance
through the café window,

where your old friend spoke truths
he himself did not want to hear.

Today, a cut of December sun through the clouds
cools no judgment,

 and the coldness of love
shifts with the energy of its making—

this is where the blue-jay calls, and evening comes,
 its head bowed.

Ukraine Love Song

Open mouths opening over flatland earth, why can't I stop
watching what the eyes want?
—The tireless shape of a leg rising up
as if born of the ground, as if reaching
for the ungiving trees:

the trees' woebegone desire
trembles and the sky trembles back. Romance

is rarely a question of who
has said too much, or who has said too little,
or whose regrets are sealed in an unbreakable jar.
It is a question of east or west,

where we can be scandalous, either together or by ourselves.

Ode to the Draped Aphrodite

What are you doing, sexy thing in sheets, blue-skinned

Woman king, cloud-like, like clouds clasping
Nooks of mountains, valley-swallowing and curled like arms

Across the chest. I'm going in, please lock and de-light

Upon your return, allow the night to whittle its sharp edges
Down along the grass-tops. I'll pretend you rooftop dance

While my eyes are open and looking, but miss the scene.

These are the movements of beauty, the on and on.
And what could anyone say, but be kind and fold yourself

Into this like a man cannot? You lie still, on the quilt.

HOMECOMING AFTER TEN YEARS

α. Homecoming After Ten Years

Evening: the glass is just half, the history
is just half,
the grass is green only in patches

and the hills stand up hunched
like people waiting in line—

behind one cloud, a mountaintop
like a tooth—

and a man arrives home
after so many years.

Beyond the mountaintop

the crossing light of the evening
cuts the air

and he can see his leaving
in the cups his hands form
above the brow.
He answers no questions but his own

and if he wanted
he could be anyone.

3. Aubade (Deception)

The person behind the character

remembers shoulderblades
like wings

through the arrow-sharp
alarm of dawn,

and this is what she asks:

do you love, do you love?

Fog, fog—

the low cloud

he rolls in

is whiter than milk
and heavy.

He carries it
between buildings, down

cobblestone streets,
and in his arms.

γ. A Tyrian Harmony

**“As the sun in his chest kept on,
Lebanon.”**

He stares at things large from afar
until they no longer seem touchable,
until they seem like a screen dropped from a sky
too close to feel.

“Only we touch, and we touch, and touch.”

You there, crossing the bridge,
what miracle do you see in the blade?

Land of sand, land of death,
land of so many, so many—

the illusion of moving when there is no moving,
a memory for the first time

holding still. And the sun in his chest keeps on,
like a volcano.

δ. The Warning

When he searches
for the maps, when he cannot find his way,
air shuffles around his dark body,
apologizing.

Before him,
a shadow crosses the street
so quick and tall, his shadow pouring steel
into the black sea as searchlights
cut the night.
There, he listens:

as the sun grows large in the sky,
as the weather wraps this world like a gift.

— Tomorrow, the day
he runs from, the open doors
he runs from,
the white silence made most desperate
as his red throat closes up—

take a deep breath. Something is coming.

e. Twelve Bridges To & From

Keep still the answer to my question,

I say,
your lightning veins sharp
as tongues, like
the sharp sight of a lighthouse.

In the very far off

*

suspension bridges could be

trustworthy like soot
suffered within the chimney but still

it's bold to believe that
the heaviness

of man's rocks and wires could support
even my small being

above those dashing waters.

*

Feed me, amazing heights, though
the tongue is cracked. Feed me

above the evaporation
and condensation
happening at all times.

Right now. Right then

*

entering like a gentle planet
into its first adolescent orbit, its captive
universal irons—this distant

love brews within it

a starvation. I would make it mine
all over this, my body and the bridge's
shivering universe.

*

The waters below
could be soft at the close, soft

as the nape of a child's neck.
A far fall, as from
a cloud,
calls them hard.

**Hard like the ungiving ground,
hard like the bridge itself.**

*

When I took my deepest breath
it pushed about the lesser

organs and pushed
about the mood
of the day's sun and night.

Too, the bridge's stocky legs there
I could not
bring within my arms, so big were they.

But that deepest breath filled me
like a terrible sword.

*

Oxygen then, safe
and steady, will never be
less loved.
It's high up there.

The bridge buckles lightly
in the wind, but regathers.

Truly, that was its chance
to crash unashamed.

*

Almost from somewhere

I can taste the goldenrod on the air,
 taste the all-about of the sky,
 taste the blood beneath the skin,
 So high-up I've been.

*

From the middle I see the cobwebbing
 of its cable, its gunmetal confidence.
 If I were a braver man

I'd imagine myself as the bridge:
 responsible, certain, so willing
 to weigh my chances
 against the greatest weights.

Then, I would have the arms
 it takes
 to span earths.

To make two places one.

*

At the edge of the earth a prophet
 whispered to me, Dwell
 on the wandering flying
 away face, face of the greatest
 connections, face of electric night.

And so it's so

*

this bridge has a habit of reliability
 and a lone enemy:
 the shaking of any possible day.
 When that happens, I'll hazard a guess:

to heaven, sideways is the way

*

it could be, maybe. It could be time
for proverbial night. When it's dark
it's just so dark, **Stand here**

and stand here, near
the unseen edges. Face
the greatest connector,

steel and concrete and all
it means. Face this black night

with its black eyes, face it
like you absolutely trust its electricity.

But, I whisper, how?

ζ. The Explorer's Faith

An island rises behind the fog

and the quietest of things
 sits up,

trumpeting the oncoming something—

 all this has sprung
only from his eyes,

and then, from what's been learned—

 that so many are one, so many
every minute
agreeing to be born—

the new earth, this rock
 after so many months

bursting forth from the sea,

the steady world hurtling and almost—
almost—

η. Seeing

When the word **ocean**
 leaves his vocabulary, when the taste
lemon is mere memory,

he fears crumbling again.

Like so many
now is turning him in.

/

And he rushes to drink

and he rushes to find

where water's rush
 is greater than his own.

That place is everywhere,
 coming like hellcats upon the earth.

/

Your skin touches nothing but itself.

In this dream
 he hears his own dangerous voice:

you, hold
the ether

like two fearless diamonds.

/

The light before there was heat,
 the heat before there was sight—

he could keep it together

but only when skies
 grab fertile ground

wrenching it from the earth.

/

Strangest in the darknesses
where shape is most misplaced,

a body.

He watches

the rolling water accomplish itself,
how it touches nothing but **all of this**.

/

Forgiveness, curl of the inner ear,
seashell mercy, winter of the nautilus—

Mercy. Mercy.

The sky approaches, coming down
until he can feel it on his brow.

Sometimes he can see too much.

0. The Passing of Time

Beneath that bridge he could not share
the pouring, the light
talk of the missed, once glimpsed, sleepless, sorry—

he felt smaller yet
than a child. Swallows lilt and jostle
the air around him—

he has not come here
because he is the one who is to come here.
Last year is again further away—

bones narrow, the spine narrows,
the boy lays his hands across his lap.
He has waited so long to see again these fields—

then even them, into coal, into oil,
into diamonds, glass-cutting diamonds, then alive
into skin, again into skin and then earth again—

then above, and around, they are all that is left.
And he is but a body and its shifting,
its shaking reach into the volcano.

i. Aubade (Exodus)

Bring to the hills

the silent open hand,
the tree whose bark has grown unfit,

and the darkest greeting of daylight—

his leaking heart
takes so, so long to beat.

In the dream
she is sleeping still

and fearsome, a wingless angel
inside a music box—

her lips
are cold, her face

is like a waterfall...

The sex of the night
is removed by morning,

by the heating of the windows
and catcalls of alarm—

I loved you still, as I left,
as I crossed the bridge.

x. After We Die

The shortness of the sun's shadow,

the barren forests marching
to the coarse, faceless, thrashing

death-beat of the water—

understanding our passing as our passing
understands the clapping

of the leaves
against the sky and

the words on the door,

when they say DO NOT ENTER

he does not,
until one day he does and he'll say forgive me
for not being there when needed

and she'll say we have two souls each
and neither wants to leave.

She'll say, and he'll listen.

And there began history.

WHERE THE WORKERS LIVED

Prelude

How can we build anymore beyond the brown fields of Belarus,
the dangerous smoldering to-do all the boys eyed
and brought into their own hands,
and which carried cities and land into the sun,
and, lady of progress,
how drawn in is the icy dress your shoulders hold so delicately?

I can build for the love of this
and the wind shaping trees' leaves into dirt-colored papers
curled to wait for our feet.
These days are for decisions.

So we put each one slowly together to watch it
unday itself into night, where the careful scissoring of hours
is warmer than every air,
and people raise their faces to the light.

Pripyat, The Ukraine

I.

(Where he remained, he was made) most safe

amongst burdens unburdened, the quantum shuffling
of time and

April of '86
is today, when absent breaths

mouth world-weight
too much to last,

and these airs (We are not needed for this to go on,
What we learn to hate
we will learn)

are like the moon in a dream,
the unwrapping of spring-wrapped forest,
and the shaking hands
shaking birds from their branches above.

When misery places

its feet into the water,
and the antagonist stirs
unseen, he cannot soundly
speak, he cannot utter

the names of our dead.

If the house is empty,
the other world won't be.

—On this baked earth

what we have become
will be what we are not.

Grab the twisted grasses in your twisted hands, boy,
 grab the terror and pull it
 from the land. Move it slowly—
there is no small talk here, nothing small at all.

This is no less than loss.

Atmosphere does not touch him terribly—he
is accustomed to its feel. But the garland

twenty years wraps around his neck
is palpable. It feels like 10,000 papercuts.

And the suggestion of silver shaking
off its brightness, the dullard dulling shine

and gold which does not de-gold in its dish,
are the words which knock

endlessly the left-open doors: his admonition,
the get out get out you must, the name for this

everyone will know—CHERNOBYL.

The warning, and then, the abandoned carnival,

its overturned bumper cars uncrashing
and a yellow bicycle left to rust on the railing,

the state-run shoestore looted, the warning
which could not have come in time—**let's see**

**just how much unseen something
a town can take.**

II.

Dedicated to reactor number four and what happened there

Utterance. Panic. Morning:

audition

wrong-gone—NO. This is

not a drill, this is not.

A drill. Hear: sirens:

when the wind-

wrecked bitter waters wrack,

when the craterous thud mingles
stew as yet unborn...this is

not a drill, this is

the puddles rumpling and

after the last moment without
worry and of course

at first

the sight

was amazing. Of course.

When the explosion—thought it was
only an explosion—not so
big—just a SHAKING
of windows—DISHES in the cabinet—
water in the kettle boiling—tea
almost ready—we could go on—
thinking nothing had happened—it
would be easy—kids in the street say
boom—mimicking
BOOM—for what they don't know
can't hurt them?

(in the quiet)

He has learned: this stone was once
that stone,
this stone is love and time, that stone is a stone

and my callow ambitions. Do not say

what is wrong and what is right. Time
will tell, and it will

whisper one maddening language.
These maxims are to live by, do

not say to him. Do not say **day is a monster.**

Are you lost?
Yes I am.

Are you found?
Yes, I am.

•

Crazy to think you wouldn't have a better room
than this, a finer place to rest your head.

Danger upswing ground-
swell effacing the turning

of the year, and the bulging cipher
eye of the nucleus...

Crazy to think this room wouldn't be better.

•

Are you lost?
I am.

Are you found?
I am.

Trees like wires, the children like wires and miserable.

When everyone left, they did it quick, hands in their pockets,
hands holding bags and bags, pushing carts of things and things,
carryable possessions, maybe they took the bus out of town, felt it
pick up speed, the buildings moving together in the passing, leaving

for the last time what was known, leaving houses and schools
and stores and parks and roads and ground and ground and ground

that looked no different than ever before, leaving
for the last time what was home.

The cargo of day's startling
wagon, filled up up, wagon wheels

marking cross-stitch ways
like stitchmarks of a once-loved's face,

haul up. —It is only after that
that the shadow's eyeless blackness

comforts. Too bad,
these lessons have not yet been born

of the wolfcall romping

through the second floor,
of the turtle whose back is broken.

When snow falls it is beautiful.

When snow falls.

Boxes of bones too warped to rattle.

Who was hidden,
Who wouldn't leave,

Who wouldn't stay to fight
These ghosts with fists upraised?

Who would pack the family bags,
Who would stare in doubt,

Who would say they didn't need
To see to believe?

Beyond the borders of this town
is a giver to and a taker from. Ends,

births, middle-grounds, they came
to the dead zone's edge
to start fires. What they did not burn
burnt later on its arrival elsewhere.

**All they mailed was burnt on arrival.
All their names were burnt.**

Those who remain are new
ghosts by the tower, by the wheel,
by the perfect shape sculpted by rain,
and the smell of fresh ground
after earth is sunk under with water—
forever can be given, but not taken.

Tell me now, city wind, how long will this take,
To give away, give away?

Tell me now, city wind, how long will this take,
To take back, take back?

Come away now. The start is to arrive
at any moment,

its long arms stretching
the horizon's length, as would a red belt.

Time, like a dress, suffers alterations and is new.
Voices, like a dress, snap at the thighs, and protect

the shyness of one's roots. They know
darkness like a bow.

The clocks read 1:23; the stalks have dried.
On thin fingers, nature counts its assets—

Come away,
your disappearance is in the cards. Allow it.

III.

Dedicated to tragedy and to the return of nature, or its never leaving

The mountains borrow much
of your amber lamplight, sun—the way

back is difficult to see. In your fiery pocket
white Venus misses something

but is too proud to admit it. Wake up, you,
you know crashing planets

are unexpected blue feathers sinking into grass,
the furious rumpling

of hot and hot. Out here you can be touched.
Rest your head on my shoulder.

Slowly...

Constellations of bones' clean shadows
Advancing into men

Who reach unwieldy arms across concrete
:
Gun-gray land like many
Whose bones refuse to stack up

Into a remembrance called stellarly
:
Ancient meandering of figures
Idling from stone's side to stone's side

The talk has yet to stop

Silver emptiness or locks of silver hair
Staying well past

Wisdom's well-lain hatchmark
:
The pounding of history's ultimatum
Into the face of sightless night

When Acceptance arrives at your door
:
The moth-addled shade drawn
For the stop-gapped walking of years

The talk has yet to stop

On the television, in the papers—say
it would be hundreds
of years. **Hundreds.**

Fold swans from air, young fingers.
Stay close, hold still the scraps with ambition or glue.

There is no other art. **Everything is other art.**

•

At first it looked amazing.
Of course it did.

But do not say
Pripyat is a ghostland.

•

Growing up is not indifferent to learning, to calculation,
To the stealing-away of bread from market to kitchen,
the pulling apart of the whole.

Childhood wanted perfect swans, but had never seen a swan.

Years roil through the breezeway and the buildings,
Their harsh corners and rock-like ache.
Time, time, time, is having its way.

Who is not better than men? Don't laugh
For the lost, but see the blooming of the unexpected,
The barn swallows' steady flight above the abandoned—

Animals have returned and made like home; this

is a game played
when no one looks. Shivering,
do this to nostalgia

prepped for photographers, the passing-throughs
with government permission. Sweetest though

is bitter-root, is florid waterfowl's wing-scatter

and water moving only with desire...

Listen: a dirty joke in a foreign language,
the synopsis of a single life,
the vast ambition of the underfed, of the all-lost.

The hereafter discussed:
When the last man approaches the earth's edge,
studying its lilt and bite,
only for a signal does he wait.

**to the abandoned city of Pripyat,
where the workers lived.**

When their hands are on fire
and the wanting of belongings dares to subside,

when the taste of the weather is a long-awaited rain,

the city will be there.

•

Dangerous coat of skin,

skin-dappled earth-face, the peeling away
of the onion
one naked layer at a time, all this together

is family.
And what hits the ground is music

•

to the touch down
of bareness on sullenness,
the dry endless sex of mountains and unceasing sky,

what should be done
but a giving away of what has been made?

•

To give away: to allow
the house
its empty future, laying to lie the black and whites
someone would have wanted—

Soon, we can build and build, beyond the fields,
 beyond the once-smoldering to-do
and the icy dress of the shoulders of progress.
The wind shapes trees' leaves, and these days
 are for putting together
the careful scissoring of hours, of months, of—.

Today is the newest of all days.

Coda

Forgive me if what I have said is already
less right than when I said it, like

the here or there moon
correcting its shape month after month
in the brutal blind above—

it feels the Ferris wheel's never turning,
the shivering of untouched
seats in the stiff-stale breeze

and the mangled creeping of its shadow
faltering through deadpan dusk—

forgive me if the nudeness
of the pines is jarring,
its comment on **once was** or **before before**,

when wolves did not walk
daylit through the danger zone—
Number 4, this is your glory. It is all

I will give you. Please, stay
warm within your patchwork sarcophagus.

STEADY, WORLD

The Garden

Expect little of me—the nodding heads of flowers
pay little mind to people. True, the life in this little garden
is not the responsibility of men.
Even the groundhog takes care of his own.

I'm not sure if I'm as far away as I'll ever be
in this neverending business of true love, but that's okay.
Every one of us is under water, even the sky
as it stretches its bluest arms.

Beneath today, the darkest secret
of the night will hold us, and so will the length of rope
that is every relentless year.
Like a hero in captivity, I can try

to find my way beyond the walls, to find answers
to the questions I cannot answer, while knowing
that really, all I can do is wait.
To this, there is only a certain, dolorous music.

When the garden takes hold, twisting itself
into growth, the budding tomato
has nothing but sun and water in its thoughts.
Expect little of me—my concerns are very much the same.

Everyday Crash

It is a no-think day like an even dozen horseflies
stuck to the glass but who put them there?

Lower eyes, keep them

on the street to see how here and there little bushels
of grass all in row spring but don't look up

because a flag is waving like a rectangular tree
for the love of the strange spinning earth again—

such a thing maybe would stop if it could
but then what? —You can't say much about this

nor the flies with their sugary wings. But past
those black legs, that body like a terrible costume,

your eyes would see if they could

those thin wings surely beautiful
as any everyday crash of things against things.

Neighborhood in Andalucía

Death composes himself
In the alleyway, checking the buttons of his shirt, the knot
Of his tie. He hums softly. The brittle sunlight
Eases behind a boy's guitar.

The sunlight isn't afraid of its drop, and could murder
Three dogs at once
If it wanted, their hollers vaporized. Death in the alleyway
Does not consider what happens after himself.

Beneath the mad hair of olive trees
A pack of feral cats
Tears the body of a badger into its least elegant pieces.
Beyond their song, the large mouths of red flowers

Draw in the last vestiges
Of daylight, swallowing as quickly as possible,
Not wanting a drop to escape. In a different kind of world
You could say they were in a rush.

But what we want is freshwater
Slipping down the mountainside, and a leaf
To stand up once it learns the ground, to climb back up
The tree, to settle on the branch of its birth.

Where I am, the valley is only the missing
Of a mountain between mountains. Let me stay
In its divot, where I can hear your beating heart. Tell me,
Death, that my questions will be answered.

The Modern Age

Something must have happened to make men into men and hawks
Into lights upon the tops of pines. Something must have bade reward
For human forms to rocket down the freeway, or for the angel-face

Of a fish on the ship-deck—the collecting of stuff has begun
And already some have gathered more than others. Years
Break off into little pieces, and damsels shout from their towers

Words which won't be heard, to wait behind while earth grows.
Something big must have happened to make what is beneath burst
Into colorless daylight, like firm clay roundest shapes roil into new

Roundest shapes. But none of our eyes have seen the twisted masts
Of sunken ships billowing in the shifting salt, where it's simple to say
This is the best it's ever been, yes, this is the best it's ever been.

Dresden

The stone is blackened and chosen by birds.

The library is empty, the grass is grass

And the marble fountains allow

Water to water—in the photo, below

The sharp points of churches and the sharp points

Of men of stone of God, obstructing

The image—the top of your turned head.

Just your shock of hair.

The Smallest Room

for Natascha Kampusch

Sometimes at night you fear you will turn
As untoachable as the sky. Watching a moth

In your loose fist, you try to witness it, to see
Its giant eyes as the great mouth

Of winter, its small mouth like a mineshaft.
Outside, wind wraps its chilled sash

Like a shiny claw about the city's legs, the tree
Stump cradling its denial—you listen

For a creek endlessly whispering its one word.
That word you never hear is **everything**.

For you, for eight years, the walls
Of the smallest room pinch in at their angles.

There is no little window with yellow curtains.
You have called this **a place to despair**.

Visit (Reprise)

When breath folds into the glass
and curls like legs

under the body **you shook**

•

yourself still
beneath the nerves of so long
as if under water

you feel yourself the doll
of the night and you are such

but **no** you say **we are the past**

•

who wants to reflect
the gunmetal of the moon

and the parts
of the brain which remember

but only parts

•

when breath folds into the glass
and curls like legs

and you on the bed and

what is gone and what is not gone

Preparing for the Fire

Even the smallest bits, invisible to the eye, belong
To us and we to them. Rain is the same.

Leaving this place is hope for a red morning.
A moth pounds the window, in love with human light.

I walk through the front door, and you say
One day you will wake to find yourself finished.

I walk through the front door. Look at the time,
You say. Look at the time.

Your bags and my thousand flaming trees are full.
Hills fall over each other, rumpling their outfits.

In the ghosts between clothes and skin, so much.
Outside, our cold forest warms itself with itself.

Rhododendron

Nameless, alive, she leans into her own shadow
even as it shames the tallest trees, and at night

she hides her face inside itself and waits: dry-petaled before a rain, her body burns away.

She can hear the black echo of her love, packing
its bags with her fallow whisper: this land has lost

all but its own space. So alone in the thicket:
the thoughts of smoke, an open floor still orange...

Yes, the forest has been devoured by the flame.
Yes, this quiet is not the usual quiet.

And yes, she waits, and knows the ghostly moon above
is still the same moon, and that, with gentle fingers,

birth will take root in the rain to come. But, alas:
to the flower's heart, this is a beating beyond.

Condolences

The falling of the jaw from the skull, bone-white as it must be,
The eyes of the skull unsurprisingly ashamed, hollow.

•

In a dream you come to me. We are inside a church. I can hear
The organ's pleas, its pipes urging me on, its pipes not letting go.

•

I see us. We become condensation on the pipe; world, world.
—Earth will do so much and so little with your bones.

•

Don't be so hard on yourself; for the first time the river overflows.
By any other name water is only wet, and you are only gone.

The City

Touch faces like the blind touch faces.
Say to everyone **you're very beautiful**

because you know no better.
Forget mothers won't admit

everyone considers the end from time to time.
Don't wonder **what it would feel like.**

And don't worry:
at too-soon passing, most people fail.

So look up, lilac,
before your neck is broken by expectation—

skyscraper faces mirror automobiles
as they float by,

their steel swimming like barracudas
just below the water's surface.

Do you see how their scales shimmer,
how their teeth are bared?

The Ant and the Artist

Far from the artist's home, anthills tumble
under the weight of dwelling, each small body
like a piston. They run in every direction,
and only he cares if they know where they're going.

See? The night—look how far it goes.
He cannot deny the landscape as it carves itself
from the sky, like a sculptor
forming something merely for interpretation.

In the middle of the greatest city, no one
has ever heard his name, but billions are strangers
to their own hearts. That's when the sky
clenches its fists, and the umbrellas open. But now,

he is only an artist, with all the time in the world.
A huge explosion later and no one
looks anyone else in the eye. Months pile up
their ultimatums, while like ants

the cold forges the man and his city. Now is when
he strikes out on his own
to become the only man in the world.
Now is when he is the one thing left shining.

The Clock

Through the trees, see the sobriety in the hides of animals.
Their opinion is never dishonest.
These are unsteady lines in the sides of a story, the creases
Where one woman's tale folds differently than another's.

It is in the trees that men's leaves wither, and thus,
Become closer to their new purpose.
The palm of the hand is one of these leaves—look at it
And notice how fairly its rivers fade into nothing,
How effortlessly they fade into the skin of smaller rivers.

Is it possible that when we dreamt we dreamt we were
Animals, so we could be free from shame,
And could stand on the hillside naked and in love?
Like a coyote, if only we could laugh at the sheets of earth,
The hidden face that is earth, the greatest cemetery.

Lives are the story of time's endless and beginningless joy.
Outside the opinions of trees,
The gold sun allows its own insight to shine, and last
For so long. It is the clock by which our truth tells time.

The Sky

Meteor shower seen from the city, unseen, where
 they fall they are too
 small to touch, and too bright. Little flags

of wind bloat their indescribable opinions. One
 would think the speeding

earth through heaven
 brought them upon us, but no, we are

a snow globe, and inside the glass, that
 which hugs us is the water, and our lives: the snow.

•

Belly and mouth like fires
 snuff out the coiling leaves of an overhead birch—

two billion tons of land or too-small palms
 of sky, we have no help
 righting the rock on which we stand.

•

There are nights, stone-fisted nights: a place
 inside the body, far within the bone, far within
 the marrow is a place

after the horizon, beyond its lasting evenness.
 For the love of life which will not end, there is

no elegy. As the good wind grows
 and grows, the body rises

and as it rises the mountains rise and as they rise
 the rivers rise and as they rise,
 the meteoroids become meteorites.

Left then in the galaxy is nothing
 but what beats—not the heart but the **heart**.

Elegy for the Builder's Wife

Slow build, houses where thousands live,
skeletons of houses without roofs, without walls,

houses like strange bones rising along red paths
we've always walked but will not walk again—

these are like sheets that will never feel the skin,
the white silences made most desperate

amongst so many indistinct voices,
when her red throat gently closes up.

In her hands the geraniums shake like railroads,
the plaster skin of walls becomes unattached

and a great wave draws back, making naked
the unknown earth beneath the sea, only

to close it off again. We are the builders
trembling under a bridge, pouring the gray rock

as her death calls through the din,
and he remembers nothing but what he whims.

Admittance / Mantra

Much of what I've known is now unknown: Ancient Rome,
Had it survived, would not be called Ancient Rome.
Still, the Tyrrhenian claps its stale hand against the shore.

The cathedral is full of ghosts. All of them are just as pleased
As they'd like to be. Probably, I'll die too late, or too soon,
To ever be the kind of ghost I'll strive an eternity to be.

I won't worry about starting over, because in this life
Starting over is sealed in every second—from the statues,
The doves do not plan for silence this morning.

A million whispered prayers have slipped the cracks.
Quiet, tired, lost in crossed wires or bad patches.
All is okay: what is done with time is not done.

The sun is closer to the earth than it's ever been.
Daytime has driven everyone mad, and dusk is a quilt:
This is how I apologize for everything I've ever wanted.

I'm in a black New Roman night. I taste it as much as I can.
Breath that's blown down buildings does not move.
And to think, for a moment I thought I would never die

VITA

Nicholas Marvin Courtright was born on September 10, 1981, in Akron, Ohio, original home of the American rubber industry. He grew up in suburban Stow, and graduated from Stow-Munroe Falls High School in 2000; four years later, in the beautiful Appalachia of Athens, he received a degree in Written Expression from Ohio University. During this time, he worked for four different gas stations and two fast food restaurants, as a caregiver to Alzheimer's sufferers, as an office boy for a Marketing and Communications firm, as an insurance contractor for a General Motors subsidiary, as a Little League umpire, and as an Assistant Speech Coach for Highland High School. Later, he dabbled in mortgage refinancing and unemployment.

Son of the endlessly supportive Harry and Cindy Courtright, he is the oldest of six children: Josh (the thinker), Evan (the comedian), Daniel (the actor), Zachary (the athlete), and Marina (the terror). Their individual and combined influence cannot be underestimated.

His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in **Astropoetica**, **Caketrain**, **Court Green**, **Cranky**, **Denver Quarterly**, **Diagram**, **Dirt Press**, **Eclipse**, **The Florida Review**, **Flyway**, **Full Moon**, **Ghoti**, **The Iowa Review**, **Lilies & Cannonballs**, **The Literary Review**, **New Orleans Review**, **Ninth Letter**, **Pebble Lake Review**, **Phoebe**, **The Portland Review**, **Salamander**, **Scrivener's Pen**, **Siren**, **The American Drivel Review**, and **Zone 3**.

Nicholas currently lives in Austin, Texas, but surely will soon be off somewhere else.
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This thesis was typed by Nicholas Marvin Courtright.