

Inverse phoenix:
A collection of poems

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Chapter 1

Flight

There used to be this building on Main Street

There used to be this building on Main Street
Full of fine art
And video games.

The art was mostly landscapes
Of haunted calm.
Lifeless, frozen, windswept with no sound.
Panoramas no more beautiful
Than the nearby hills
We could see at any time—
If we decided to look up.

Maybe we needed someone to see it,
to capture it,
to condense it,
to feed it to us,
let us swallow it,
let us snort it,
let it flow into our veins.

The whole building was made of thin canvases
A malnourished artist paints again and again.
A perfection that distorts as soon as it dries:
Painted over our eyes,
Painted over the mountains,
Painted over our nature,
Painted over and over and over again.

Have you ever seen a building made entirely of paint
Ready to go up in flames?
There used such a building on Main Street
But it burned down one day.

There used to be this building on Main Street
Full of video games
And fine art.

The games were mixed with potato chips
And squandered, dirty quarters.
Fingers smeared on sweatpants
Full of holes—
Holes we'd jump
By pressing "A"
While holding down "B".

We stood next to cabinets
With their uppercuts of vengeance
That we dreamed of swinging
If only we could see an injustice
Clearly enough to fight.

Maybe we needed someone to see it,
 to capture it,
 to condense it,
 to feed it to us,
 let us swallow it,
 let us snort it,
 let it flow into our veins.

The whole building was made of pixels
Like tiny pieces of shrapnel
Tied together by fear—
A fear of the chaos of real life
That covered our eyes,
Covered the mountains,
Covered our nature,
Covered itself, again and again.

Have you ever seen a building made entirely of fear
Ready to explode into dust?
There used such a building on Main Street
But it blew up one day.

We thought we had a platform
But it was just a peephole
Trained exactly at us.
Dutifully, we spent whole days
Thinking only of ourselves,
But not knowing where to start,
We just obsessed about the end.

There used to be this building on Main Street
But now there is empty hole.
Are we ready yet
To fill it?

Cantilever

Cantilever

Is a cool word.
I don't know
What it means.
And I've never
Looked it up.
Maybe
It's related
To architecture?

Cantilever

I like how it sounds.
I like
How it makes
Me sound.
I let myself
Be in its shadow.

Unfinished basements

Bare feet
On cement floors:
Worn paint,
Half outdoors.

I grew up
Downstairs,
On shifting rugs—
Throws thrown
Over stains
And open drains.

Cold in summer.
Hot in winter.
A place to defy.
A place to simmer.

It's all finished now:
Covered,
Insulated.
Square feet
In a bound whole.
More valuable,
Less memorable.
Fully realized,
As advertised.

Clay banks

After a day of skateboarding,
We'd jump down clay banks —
Ruin our clothes,
Ruin our bearings,
Ruin our grip.

Sweated clay,
Tripped in summer salts.
Going into our pockets,
Washing away our wallets,
That were empty anyway.

As we jumped down,
The trek back up got easier
Because we put down our weights,
Trapped on our backs,
Packed and strapped.

Clay in our hair,
Clay in our underwear,
Clay under our skin,
Clay nailed to our hands.

Grinding soles,
Grinding teeth
As we gasped close-mouthed
Down a clay bank.

We weren't supposed to be there:
It wasn't our land,
Wasn't our place,
Wasn't our time,
But we jumped anyway.

I belong

I belong
To the whispered songs of girls
Spinning with faces straight up in the air,
Trailing carriages that bump
Over tiny cracks in the pavement
While sun-bleached curtains
Fall out of windows.

I belong
To the detailed rants of boys
Explaining the spoils of imagined victories,
While tricycles are left in the streets
Ambiguously far from any plausible owner
Smelling of warm plastic
Heated with warm hands.

Came one day with my brother
And found myself in the dust,
Swept up from a day full
Of dance steps and scraped knees.

I surrendered,
As I always do,
To his always arriving
Plan for him and me,
His all-consuming
Design for how
I belong.

Betwixt two horizons

In remembrance of Paul William Ryan (1978–2015).

Have you seen him:
In red-dawn hills,
Under cloudless skies,
Crouched and ready,
Ready to live?
Ready to die?

He dammed the river!
He quenched the thirst!
He backed up the water,
Until he and it burst!

And when it came down
He smiled and he cried,
Light all turned up
And then down,
to the side.

But who am I,
If not there,
Along for his ride?

Have you seen him:
Cross a whole city,
On gifted shoes,
To touch a hand,
And kiss some lips?
Kiss a rat?
Kiss the land?

He powered the chord!
He uttered the words!
He ran to his basement,
And lost all his herds!

And when we came down,
To balm the pain,
The bomb went off.
At last — again.

But who am I,
If not there,
Under his reign?

Even if you haven't seen him,
You thought you were there,
Stirred inside that pupil,
In that skull,
Under that raven hair.

He dreamt a world!
He lived that dream!
He danced with his angels,
And touched the Supreme!

And then we all saw him,
Inside his own eye.
We lived in his imagination,
All ghosts, come alive.

But, have you seen me,
Betwixt two horizons,
Spearheading his shockwave,
Piercing veins,
Leaving trails,
Of purple blood
and purple words?

I am here.
I am here.
Now never alone.

The local and immediate expertise of the other

The will to drink truth
Where others drive fear—
Of hierarchy,
Of knowingness—
Overspeak and overhear.

Let me ask
Let you tell
Let us listen
Let it swell:

Fluent feelings
That perspire,
Textures only truth
Could transpire.

Read that closed book.
Question open the pages.
Throw undried ink
On unreserved faces.

Let me ask
Let you tell
Let us listen
Let it swell:

Plain stories,
Foreign and familiar,
Reflections,
Free of any filter.

Knowingness is now over:
Seek and you discover
The local and immediate
Expertise
Of the other.

Over the top

Run, jump
And hold
A handful of chains.

Lean in,
Pull back!
Lean in,
Pull back!
Find the right time.

Protesting chains,
Swaying like a saw,
Wear down the world.

Lean in,
Pull back!
Lean in,
Pull back!
My body a rhyme.

If I push really hard
Will I go over the top?
Continue to swing
A little higher?

Lean in,
Pull back!
Lean in,
Pull back!
Awaiting a sign.

You didn't need to be there

I missed out
On many things
I don't and didn't miss.

I opened doors
To bloody floors
And closed doors
As teardrops poured.

Later stories told
 in laughs
 and chuffs
But I saw the flashes,
Sticks, and cuffs.

From A to B.
I saw B.
And it wasn't A,
If even A could be.

Only experience can teach
When experience isn't needed.
You didn't need to be there,
Or there,
Or there.
Only here,
If even here can be.

Out to skate

There was a map in our heads
Of unbroken paths—
Failed architecture and
Intended unconsequences.
They got us from nowhere
To nowhere fast,
Only more heavy and intrepid.

We made air out of cracks,
Felt safer in backs
Of buildings
Than out front.
Unseen but overheard,
So dark you needed
Small eyes to see—
Next to the trash,
 in the trash,
 of the trash.

Empty parking lots
To failed businesses,
Unsat benches to
Absent promenades,
Closed-down government
Buildings and schools,
That used to search with us
But now, only search us out.

Unwelcomed, we invited ourselves
To a party reviled
For its apparent danger
And disowned
For its earnest marginality.

But that all goes away.
Once you start to roll,
Everything moves,
And when you ollie,
You defy the story of your grounding.

Elastic bands

I don't know where I got them,
They were always just there
Ready to awaken
A latent
Attraction to cohere—
 bills,
 love
 letters,
 coupons,
 post
 cards.
Band them to each other,
In rubber or elastic,
Or whatever else
You call it.

In the Center

Hours without words
I sat there
In the Center
With all of you —
Free of distinction.
I sat there on the corner
Of a long desk
Closest to the door.
A tall blade of grass
In search of the trees.

We'd get up and go,
One empty stomach—
 dandan noodles,
 Muslim canteen,
 Family Mart,
 interesting —
Many mouths
Chewing through words
To fill one stomach.
I sat there
Hiding with the bushes
In search of the trees.

Breakfast, sit.
Lunch, sit.
Dinner, sit.
Monday, Day 2,
Wednesday, Day 4,
Friday, Day 6,
Sun day.
Every day the same
Every day better.
Our hearts
Turned to mirrors.
I sat there
Reflected in trees
In search of our forest.

We were the lowly
In search of our leaders,
In search of ourselves.
We found ourselves,
We found our leaders —
In each other.
A smile come to one face.

Used bookstore

History for sale.
Not borrowed, but owned,
and disowned again.
Pages bent and torn and yellowed and blued and red.

Pasta stains from 1975.
Dried teardrops from 2008.
Forgotten pressed leaves from 1983.

What's the story?
If this book was truly cherished why did it lose its home?
Or was it sent away for a better life,
Back to where it was last born?
Reincarnated with karma tracked in the margins?

If it's true that observation changes states
Like spinning electrons next to angels on pins,
Then of these million books
What does it mean that they were read by billions of eyes?
Am I reading the original sold in 1965 for \$3.95
Or this one now marked \$4.95 in blue wax pen?
Am I sad because of that teardrop?
Can I ever unsee that pasta stain?

A day in the sun

Searched beaches in shoes
For the concept of fun,
My hopes and a volleyball
Bathed in the sun.

Uniqueness is infinite
So what can I find?
An ocean of moments
Bathed in the tide.

When the tide runs home,
And I lay with the clouds,
Will you lie with me,
All being our shroud?

Step out from behind the camera

Caught cotton on the wind
And tied it in a thread
With the deepest blue you've ever seen
Tied behind your head.

Hunted down the perfect day
And stuff it in a jar,
Afraid at once to let it go
In case it might go far.

"Step out from behind the camera
And let me see your face.
A face that's drawn in petals
Dropped along the way."

Heard music in the raindrops
And knew I could be there,
Underneath those blankets
With blossoms in the air.

Opened wide the windows
And remembered how to play.
Let go of what was yesterday
Forgot about today.

"Step out from behind the camera
And let me see your face.
A face atop those pedals
Guiding us away."

I took the lid off gently
And dropped it through my grasp.
Open hands are filled again,
I've lost the world at last.

I tripped and fell over in Shanghai

I tripped and fell over in Shanghai
Holding a bag of cucumber potato chips—
That was hard to open
In a hard-to-describe way—
I guess there's no dill pickle in Shanghai.

Snared by my laces in Shanghai,
I made a habit of not tying—
They were longer than I thought
With a propensity to get caught.
Maybe I wanted to stumble in Shanghai.

Bleeding and surprised in Shanghai,
Not even trying to act cool—
Surrounded by mouths of snacks,
Unblinking eyes on tracks.
A spectacle? A joke? No.
Only the next second in Shanghai.

Happily silent in Shanghai
From eyes to hands to eyes.
My friends had my words,
My luggage, my nerves.
Swapped spirits and shrugs in Shanghai.

Now,
How to get back?

Chords and/or cords

Chords or cords:

Which is wich?

To be hung by

Or

To be sung by

You?

For most of my life

I thought it was one word

With two spellings

—chord and cord.

Maybe one was British?

Sounds made

Of chords.

Sounds sent

On cords.

Vocal cords?

Vocal chords?

Growing up

My father was a musician

And a sound technician.

A home full

Of chords

and cords,

Easy to trip on,

Easy to fall into.

Every moment was worth

Recording.

Every moment was worth

Bechording.

Free samples

Saturdays,
Clipped and ready.
As many stops as deals.
Free samples —
We'll taste anything once
...per store.

Fresh produce,
Bought weakly;
The unexpired,
Bought daily;
Our taste,
Bought.

The tantrums,
The distracted waves,
The rushed escapes,
The forwarded glances,
The holding of court,
The weather remarked,
The complaints,
The praises,
The voiced
And unvoiced
Disagreements —
Free samples,
Unclipped and unready.

Big brother

My big brother
Used to call *me* “big brother”.
But it’s not possible to be bigger than him!
His eyes spanned whole days—
Daytime and night—
His voice echoed loudly—
Off bounties and blights—
His grip grasped more
Than sanity felt right.

Despite his bigness—
That could lift a whole sky—
He was often left drained
And empty and dry.
If he passed a mirror in the hall
All he’d see was a husk—
Spent, bent, cowered, and small,
But what he spent my way,
Made *me* seem tall.

And so I was his “big brother”.

But without his bigness
I’d be outlined in scrawl,
I’d be cowered and bent,
Pre-empted and small.

The most sacrificial
Are self-unaware
They even give up knowing
That the sky is their heir.

A place to be found

Hide and seek is
A game children play
That we grow
To forget.

Or is it more
The game changed?

As children,
Wherever we hid
We would eventually
Be found.

But as we grew,
There were more
Places to hide
Than be found.

Or is it more
Others stopped looking?

What a treasure it is
To discover
A place to be found,
Where the songs we start
Are finished by others,
And timid dance steps
Are followed by others.

Let our vision be world-embracing :
Let this be a place
Where we search for others
And we are found.

Chapter 2

Burned through

Nobel/noble prized

A prison of unshattered glass,
Seen inside as mirrors
That reflect only surface—
A surface of hope
A surface of choice—
But any depth is dark
Indifferent to the outside.

While the outside are average,
The inside are favoured
Outliers of the right breed—
Data-driven
By a steering wheel,
In place of their creed.

The architects couch—
In cherry wood offices,
Barricaded like fortresses—
When they bother to show

Past a plaque
Of embezzled dreams,
Hung from muzzled
And scattered screams,
Greeting well-paying guests—
Taught well to live well—
By the life-stuffing screed:

“Keep the hearts at bay,
Keep the minds in play,
Raise your glass to Nobel,
In distinction we pray.”

But they miscalculated—
Overlooked the heart,
Underplayed the hurt,
Failed to see the wave—
While toying with the dirt.

Will you join us,
Fallen but still afloat—
Thrown out on waves,
Only to drift back—
To raise a new edifice
With more doors than walls?

We are the builders,
Gems born of dust—
Under chewed-up roads,
Under so much force—
Perfected by our imperfections.

The ground outside is green
Flush with fan-like leaves,
A bed for the steadfast
Who live life on their knees,
Pushing up the fresh anthem:

“Let the heart feel cheer.
Let the mind come clear.
Raise your noble hands,
The bright day is here.”

Timeless

The perfect face:
Since 10:10 am
This morning
And 10:10 pm
Last night.

The perfect watch:
Timeless.

Staring into its face,
The other faces—
 subtler
 less perfect—
Tried to reach mine.
But I stared
Into perfection.

They waited
Until they stopped waiting.
10:10 am or 10:10 pm?
I couldn't tell.

Puzzle of sincerity

My work
Was to demonstrate
The need for my work.
My rest
Was to establish
My need for no rest.

I built
A showroom
Of validity
And blueprints
Of a legacy.

I was to be
observed.
Others were to be
persuaded.

Persuaded of what?
To also live the life
Of an example?
An argument
To sustain an argument?
A proof
Of the need for proof?

Did I want
To be understood
Or run
From understanding?

I eventually awoke
To the puzzle
Of sincerity.
How to be sincere
When your life
Is a showroom
For something
Never to be built?

Should I instead
Seek sincerity unwitnessed?

Where is my work—
My rest
My argument
My proof—
With only me
To convince?

Something to forget

Tears wept of flames
Slowly charring an empty space
That would have been forgotten
Had it ever been remembered.

More than I have to offer

What is it you want from me?
To stuff my name into papers?
Sign books I neither wrote nor read?
Offer myself as a bookshelf?
An archive for spent thinking undead?

It's more than I have to offer
And yet you want more?
It's more than I have to offer:
The skin, flesh, and the core?

My brain was replaced
By a wash basin
Cleaning the dirt
Sent through my ears
To come clean
Through my mouth
and by my hand.

I did it all right.
I did it all, right?
I did it, alright?
I did it alright,
But it wrongly did me.

And yet.

I have more to offer
Than you can possibly think.
It endlessly pumps blood
And heat.
And it will never be clean
Of you mixed with me.

All the wild

It has taken me years to make some sense
Of my enduring melee with mathematics.
It's not that I found it too hard
(although it's needlessly so)
Or that I didn't find it useful
(it's painfully so).
It's that it was presented to me as complete,
A perfection independent of my comprehension.
Mathematics brought blackness and whiteness.
It abolished grayness, never saw color.
It brought order and rank and
Judgment of order and rank.

A math teacher once threatened me with my future
If I didn't compete and didn't obey.
I tried to live between his 0 and 1,
Holding two truths in two hands to his one face.
What he didn't understand is that
I loved math and I feared math
And I championed math and I tried to destroy math.
Truth is too complex for its dichotomy.

If I was in search of certainty independent of me,
I would search the sun with wide-open eyes
Or burn my wings to unite with the candle.
I would not search the subservient " $1 + 2 = 3$ ".

I was told I would one day miss math's certainty,
Its end of bickering, its pound of hierarchy
(which I somehow came to be high in,
although never high enough.)
True beats false beats most into submission.
But if I wanted to learn about submission,
I would have studied the Quran,
Not $e^{i\pi} = -1$.
And if I was meant to learn inadequacy and mistrust of my powers,
The same was already achieved in PhysEd's showers.

For most people who don't like math
It's not because math's hard or pointless.
It starts with the feelings math does not like them
And their color and vagueness and splinteredness,
And their "1 + 2 = rainbows"-ness.
I agree we are nothing in comparison to true Truth and true Power,
But to equate these with arithmetic tautologies,
How could the taste *not* be sour?

Should I love to taste the feeling of grit in my teeth?
Should I teach my coldness to belittle my heat?
What is the point of grammar
If you never write poetry?
What is the point of 0's and 1's
If you never crash them together like Hot Wheel cars?

I search now for truth in numbers and words
And flowers and rulers and hair rollers.
Truth is untamed and untameable—
 All the while,
 All the wild—
I hope I never come to believe I've found it, caged it.
I hope I never become what my math teacher wanted,
I hope my future always remains ruined of its perfection.

Unhung Paintings

I have a box of unhung paintings
And empty walls to match.
Each nail is a hesitation—
A raised hammer can speak,
But so can holelessness.
The boxed paintings are sheltered,
But unseen.
Maybe I'll hang them tomorrow,
But maybe the next day I'll be gone,
The paintings unsheltered
But still unseen.

Sometimes you want to say something

Sometimes you want
To say something
So small
You wonder if it's worth
Writing down.

The revolution was televised and you somehow missed it

Hello world!

There's an app for everything now,
But what do I need?
Steve Jobs used to tell me that,
But now he's gone, apparently.
How could he leave me so,
Selfishly?

Fear of missing the other
Who is afraid of missing someone like me—
Just not exactly me.
No fear of missing myself.

I watch all day, every day,
Dutifully.
You'd think I'd be informed,
Given how much I intake.
But either the form didn't take
Or I was formed perfectly.
What would it take to tell?

Goodbye world,
Until I'm logged on again.

Show me the gears

This phone in my hand,
Sure, it's a marvel.
I believe you.
But I don't get it.

Show me the gears instead!

I can only admire
An ingenuity nearly fictional
In a magical place
Where I'm always tricked.
Secrets appear to be open
But are closed in unbreakable glass.

Show me the gears instead!

Let me understand
My torment.
Let me see the breaths
I am let to breathe.
Show me the gears
That lay me out—
Process me
For your procession.

I am stripped
Of my self-machinery.
At least let me grasp
My self-mockery.

Leader of my degeneration

I speak to empty rooms
Full of people
And echoes.

The more I talk
The more they listen
The more I wish
Both they and I
Didn't.

I lead masses.
I leave messes.
Masses or weights
Pulling me down?
Messes or banquets
Filling me up?

I need them
To tell me
Why I am their
 Leaven
So I can believe
I am not their
 Villain.

If I follow them
Around the world,
As they follow me,
Don't I eventually
Wrap around
To join them?

Please let it be.

To be nudged

So glad it worked out
To have someone
Better than me—
In all possible ways—
Help me choose
How to be:
Good Boy A
Or
Good Boy B.

I have just one question.

How does one
 get to choose
What others
 can choose?
That doesn't seem part
Of Good Boy A
Or Good Boy B.

Maybe one day,
If I make all the right choices,
I'll be allowed
to choose
Good Boy C.

Yay for me!

Overheard

I have no special
Point of view
Because of who I am not
Not what I don't do.

I want to hear
I want to learn:
I want to accept
You and I
In turn.

But what if
My search inside—
Your lens
On my lens
And my lens
On your lens—
Finds all the same?

The final intersection
Is either unitary
Or null.
Is it not?

Can I be accepted
Without distinction?
In my plainness,
Can you hear
My mainscream?

Calling out to crimson

I wore your righteousness
As a borrowed tattoo—
My fever, your dream.

The stain was real
But the shine denuded —
My black, your white.

I believed
The stories
I told
To hide
My truth.

I believed
The stories
You told
To hide
Your truth.

But which came first?

There is no straight line,
Only choking on this river,
Falling for these hills:
Crying into crimson!

Better to be
Than to want.
Better to want
Than to have.

I took that crimson ink
And tattooed my soul—
My dream, our dream.

I washed the stain
And the light shone anew—
My light, our light.

Is this the day,
You join me:
Unyielding,
Uncrushed,
Calling out to crimson?

Pick up a brush

Dismissiveness has kept you alone
Atop a mountain no one cares to climb.
Foreign to all but those born there.

Dancing on perfectly sharp and narrow pins,
Only visible to other pin-dancers,
You are the triumphant
on small pins on obscure mountains.

Feet dangling on pins while
Hands hold fine-tipped pens,
Black with certainty
Red with belligerence,
But directed at who?

Never in search of higher peaks,
You can believe yourself the apex.
Where looking down becomes necessary.

Put down your pens.
Step down from your pins.
Climb down from your hills.
Start to listen again.
Pick up a brush—
Flat-footed—
Next to the sea.

How the plain becomes explain

It would seem to be simple
To fill plain words
With heated blood.
Instead, there are these
Strings intact
With triple notes,
Feigning a smile.

And so you sit
Waiting for the door
To pulse with fists
Of unexposed mistakes
And uncollected rakes.

Plain gets lost to everything,
Filled with cream cheese.

Progress

We turned art into science.
So, “*artificial*,”
Became “*sciencifical*.”
But that’s first gen.
This goes beyond mere science.
“Science” is so last week.
This is nothing
If not *super*!

Wait, that’s it!
Superficial intelligence!
Of course!

Can we copyright that?

Eat the rich

My car was spray-painted:
“Eat the rich.”
They let the air out of my tires
Again and again.
I never thought myself rich,
But it’s not up to me is it.
Rich and poor are external ideas I’ve
 internalized,
 socialized,
 epitomized.
Both are badges.
Both are taints.

I both love my “luxury” car
—spray painted as it is—
And hate it too.
I pity what I was
And pity what I’ve become.
I admire what I was
And admired what I’ve become.
I am numbed to what I was
And numb to what I’ve become.
I forget what I was
And forgot what I’ve become.

You, like me, are capable of invalidating
 Everyone as they are
 Everyone as they might be.
Soylent green set in spray paint.
Before the food ran out,
We ran into a taste
For each other.

You the watched

In remembrance of my friend Kenyatta Sinclair (1970–too soon). Rest in peace.

Launched 1970:
The earth, underneath,
The sky, taken.

Folk tried to take
Him down from up there,
But they got nothin'
'Sept sun in their eye.

You don't like it?
Keep walkin'.
You gon' complain?
Keep talkin'.

You can lock
 your doors.
You can hide
 your phones.
You can cross
 your streets.
You can pretend
 you ain't lookin'.
But you can't run from the sky.
He always be up there.

You the watched.

Kindly remember to bend

Isn't it so cute
Being exactly how you were meant to be?
Look how far you've come!
Even *you* can join the march of history!

And if you have some thoughts to add,
Please kindly drop them here!
All opinions are expertly cherished,
polished,
prefurbished,
and fetishized!

All these contributions
Are entered into a draw.
And if you're *really* lucky,
You'll be that special guest
At the world's best party yet
In honor of
Our victories for you.

Isn't it amazing
How all roads bend to progress?
Just kindly remember
When it's your time to bend!

Law of large numbers

Have you thought today?
In bullet points?
Tidy paragraphs,
Tiny paragraphs—
Too harmonious,
Too hegemonous—
To actually read.
Better to inhale,
Better to impale
Your discernment.

Or did you just listen
To a well-knowing sycophant?
Serving average
Thoughts for
Average questions
For average levels
Of attention.
Mean perceptions with
Mean prescriptions.

Welcome to our
Experiment.
Law of large numbers:
Numb and number.

Reinforced labor

Things were made of sweat,
Now sweat is unmade
By things.

Dirty hands and
Sparkling thoughts,
Became sparkling hands
And dirty thoughts.

Perfect efficiency
Leaves no pause for breath—
Play is waste,
But what else is left?

Lessons repeat
Without a teacher,
Without a class.
Reality, reinforced,
Learns without us,
Works without us,
Works on us.
But does it work for us?

The concept of up

You think that you're flying,
On your way up,
But you're only falling
And the landing's abrupt.
Now it's your turn
To confuse others
With which way is up.

Chapter 3

Grounding

Fishing line

Family asleep
My journey begins.
They all are safe
As I take on the road:
Mag Mile to Hyde Park.

Chasing my bike,
That's chasing a clock.
They all are warm
As I take in an ocean
That's only a lake.

Though it's not straight,
I feel no ups, no downs.
They're still at ease,
Shaking my head
Lamp no one sees.

One night I snagged
A fishing line
Or was it that hooked me?
— Whirrrrr —
— zzzzzzz —
Tangled in my rear brake,
Mag Mile to Hyde Park.

How long is this line?
How stretching?
How taut?
They are now safe,
But me?
I might still be caught.

Marked in pen

I treated books like trophies:
Adorning shelves, projecting triumph.
My books were pristine
Like the day they were printed—
Uncracked, undefiled, untouched—
Collecting admiration like dust.

One day I visited a friend
Who had no shelves, no tables, no chairs,
But had a small pile of books:
Cracked, touched, lived with.
He gave me a book
And asked me to read.
He turned the pages
To a passage he underlined—
Marked in pen.

I was embarrassed.

“Why mark it in pen?”
“Why not?”
“Don’t you want to preserve it?”
“Preserve it for what?”

I sat dumb, uncertain.

He looked in my eyes,
“I marked it for you, in pen.
You reading from it
Is what I want to preserve.”

I sat dumb, certain

With a different embarrassment.
Shelves full of embarrassment.

Are you my saviour?

I'm riveted to this insistent
Voice who talks to me
About who I am meant to be
And doesn't bother with who I've been.
If I rest, the voice calls "act!"
If I act, the voice calls "reflect!"
If I reflect, the voice calls "next!"
Is this voice my oppressor
Or my saviour?

Uncalculating

How many of my futures
Were threatened
With the fear of being behind
A pace-setter?
A race tester?
A ratio figurer?
A totalizer?

I am uniquely unquantified
To retell this story
Of the power of numbers,
The power of powers,
That with clenched fists,
Multiply
As they subtract.

I feel it now
The force of dammed-up hearts—
Pumped blood
Turning turbines
Of counterfeit conviction.

A farewell to epsilons,
I used you for long enough.
I am exhausted
Of approaching infinity
With Greek letters—
I much prefer warm gestures,
Wet smiles, and
Open hands.

But is it a dichotomy?
Can we not have warm summers of devotion
And cold winters of design?
Yes, but where are
The springs and falls?
Where is the rupture
In certainty,
And the rapture
Of uncertainty,
Not dutifully filled
With expectations
And variances?

Why all this precision
And it's coupled derision?
My decision
is simple:
I want to be uncalculating.

Standing on the shoulders of people just like me

No titans,
No marble minds,
Just flesh and doubt.
Ideas like thrifted clothes,
Frayed at the edges,
Made to fit.

I climb
Warm hands on worn hands,
Balancing on bent backs,
Clinging on shoulders.

No grand view,
No emergent horizon,
Only more like me,
Stacked and swayed,
Doing what we can
To stand tall.

Sakyamuni sat there

Sakyamuni sat there
As people knelt and bent,
Some many times,
Some once,
All equally sure.
Sakyamuni sat there
And did not change His expression.

I was unsure
How to kneel,
When to kneel,
How to bend,
When to bend.
Sakyamuni sat there,
His expression did not change.

Puzzled, I wondered
What is the source of sureness?
How to tell between
Righteousness and wrongteousness?
Sakyamuni sat there
Unchanging in expression.

If I was all alone,
Just me and Sakyamuni,
When would I kneel?
How would I bend?
As I searched the possibilities,
Sakyamuni sat there,
Expression unchanged.

And then I gave up.
Gave up the thought of doing,
Gave up doing what I thought.
And for a halting breath
It was just be and He.
Sakyamuni sat there,
No change in expression,
But now with a smile.

A conversation with my son

The other day my son said to me,
As I was cutting potatoes for tuduosi,
“I want to go to Harvard.”
I said, “Good idea, give it a try.”
He added, “Because Harvard has the best education in the world.”
I stopped him there,
“No, Harvard is a place to get power,
 You can get a better education being with your grandparents.”
He perked up,
“But you just said it was a good idea. To get power?”
I said, “We get power for others.
 Not for ourselves.
 An education suffices
 for those who seek truth.
 But even this search
 Is not worth it alone.”
He walked away, seemingly content,
To go drill math questions
Before piano class.

All shades of purple

In remembrance of Wendy Marie Ryan (mom), (1953-2012)

The sky earned an angel
One day in September
Her hand on my arm
Even I walked without her.

Her unprocessed smile
Unsubtly sincere.
Her unwavering eyes
Close-seeing and clear.

She sowed paths with lilacs,
Filled room with doves.
My lasting inspiration:
My marma, her love.

All shades of purple
Raise dawn in my heart.
All mine was hers:
The end, just a start.

The sky earned an angel
One day in September.
Her hand on my arm:
Anticipated,
Remembered.

Waiting my turn

I know it's coming—
When not if.
Everything I touch
 now
Will be different
 soon.

I have hopes.
Hopes have plans.
Plans have textures
Felt by hands.

It will all be different soon.

It starts with my eyes,
Drawn to surmise.
Lights grow dim:
Changing textures,
Changing plans,
Changing hopes,
Changing hands.

Sometimes they visit—
Old hopes and old plans.
I am glad they pass
Outside their time.
As much as I hoped
 then
I unregret
 now.

Old, lost hopes
Unfulfil my fullness,
And unempty my emptiness,
As I wait my turn.

Broken sentences

All according to plan,
The future is just a remix
Of the past.
Complicated combinations
Of the curated.
A complete mind
Trapped by its consummation.

Plans are broken
By accidents of the foreign—
 Unrandomly,
 Unplanned.

I mourn the broken
At this dawn of perfection,
The dreamed of day
Where “I” and “you” are redundant,
Replaced by their golden mean,
Where all sentences end in 0 or 1.
I cherish my thirdness,
 your halfness,
Our twisting analogy.

I write in broken sentences:
Foreign, felt, incorrect.
I know you do too.
Don’t fix them.
Don’t fix mine.
Don’t fix ours.
Let us be accidental.

Tragic or otherwise

Aren't knights and bishops
Just tragic pawns?
Held in the same hand?
Sacrificed with the same gesture?

The most accomplished man I know
Told me in confidence
There was no hand
 above him,
No game he was not
 apart from.

But how could he know?
Does a pawn know
It's a pawn?
Tragic or otherwise?

Open to mystery

Impossible to know.
Impossible not to feel.
Only to pretend
Your enlightenment lifts you,
Always looking down.

Theory tells you
Experience is flawed,
All full of biases,
That can be perfectly named.
Biases that sentence the ignorant,
Sanctify the privileged.
As if no knowledge is
 old knowledge and
 all knowledge new,
Discovered by the clever—
On purpose,
By a concentration
Bestowed on the few.

Knowledge is not discovered
Or created
Or conjured.
It descends in mystery
To the dumbstruck
Like midnight rain on the thirsty
After they've fallen asleep
Accepting the drought.

You think your theory can invalidate me?
Classify my experiences
 as biases
You perfectly understand
But with which I am puppetted?

Think again!
Better yet,
Feel again!

Reluctantly

I am reluctant to write these words.
I worry you reading them
Makes them too stated,
Too immediate.

I recoil at the idea
One of my words
Crowds out yours,
Like a too-stuffed bookshelf.

I would prefer you write
And I read.
But alas,
Your words and my eyes are strangers.
Either they hide from me
Or I hide from them.
But hiding suggests a pregnant union:
Words and eyes opening for each other,
Earnestly,
Warily,
Reluctantly.

What if this union lies barren instead?

Why do I write,
Despite my reluctance?
Maybe my search for
 sounds,
 and tones,
 and rhymes
Finds latent companion
With your search for
 sounds
 and tones,
 and rhymes.
The improbable becomes the inevitable
Unwittingly,
Weakeningly,
Reluctantly.

But how will I know
When your words arrive?
Will I hide?
Am I already hiding?
Are these words I write now
Just part of my disguise?

Is this voice fresh?

Is this voice fresh
Or has it all been said?
And even if it all has,
Does that matter?
Is the worry
That all of my light
Is just a reflection?
But aren't we all just moons,
Some just first?
Is the timing of a reflection
Not petty to dispute?
This poem is for those
Who appreciate this sun on me
However it got there.

Imperfect fruits

I'm at great distance
From the sparkle of gold
In brazen proportions,
In this king-scaled hall,
Piled high with fruit—
 perfect in color,
 perfect in size,
 perfect in shape.

The perfect fruit
 goes untasted.
The perfect day
 has no pause.
The perfect path
 leads to itself.

Ugly orange,
 Let me know taste!
Rainy day,
 Let me get caught!
Neglected path,
 Lead me away!

But I'm somehow brought back
To that king-making hall,
Now stacked even higher
In both perfection and flaw.
I found myself in that pile—
It was no distance at all.

An ode to the ends

You hear a lot about the end of the world.
Like it's a bad thing.
I like the ends of brownies.
I always ask for those.
The middle is too soft.
I like it chewy,
You know, the crust.
The ends of the world?
I think I may like it too.

Earnestness

Please don't find this poem clever.
My intention is cloyingly earnest,
Direct along every dimension.

I want to thank you
For reading my words,
Letting them through,
Taking the time.

The words, themes, observations, metaphors,
Are all just so you
Might stay in front of me
For a minute or two
And take me seriously.
Match my earnestness
With your earnestness.

Can I say it that way?
Will you flinch?
Will you impute sarcasm?
Please let it sit heavy with you,
Before you turn the page.