

# *A Place to Burn*

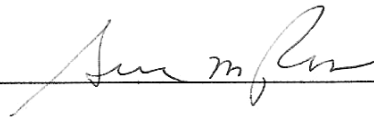
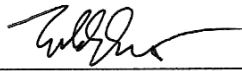
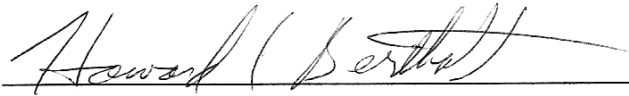
*Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
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*Approved by:*



*Honors Committee Chair*



*Honors Committee*

*A Place to Burn*

*– poems –*

*Garrett Williams*

*for my parents,  
Michael & Rosanne Williams*

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I

*“Blues is easy to play, but hard to feel.”*  
*~ Jimi Hendrix*

## Blues Talks

Blues says she's the sweetest thing I ever saw,  
*smokehouse woman with a heart like the river.*

Blues says you got to let that boy boogie-woogie,  
*loose love to the streets, turn the child free.*

Blues says awww girl I like it like that,  
*red hair bright eyes under the sycamores.*

Blues says I've been workin, workin night and day,  
*bring you flowers, pearls, dirty shoes and sky.*

Blues says she's not coming back,  
*killing floor night watch phone call moon.*

Blues says I'm down, down on my hands and knees.  
*wait for a savior or a sunrise.*

Blues says you may be high, you may be low,  
*but when the good Lord calls, child, you gotta move.*

## Vega Blues

Twenty years of black night and us, huddled  
around fire and a 12-string Martin. Carolina  
in the wind, knobby birch logs beneath our torn  
jeans. My friend played like Skip James, coaxing,  
calling. He played the way a baker crafts bread,  
slowly working in new elements, letting the dough  
thicken and rise and become something rich.  
I looked up. Remnants of fire were still in my  
eyes, phosphorescent scars against the heavy  
cobalt sky. Slowly, pure light faded to inky velour,  
until four stars bloomed between the cool oaks.

We'd found that instrument years before – among  
the few luminaries left untouched by New York's  
light and smog. From our wrought-iron fire  
escape we'd listen to the city's steel-edged  
symphony: sirens and street performers, Rosa's  
static radio three balconies down. Some nights  
we'd sit up until six or seven, me jotting half-  
formed lyrics in a scuffed moleskin notebook,  
Laura leaning against the cold brick, knees  
pulled up to her chest, silent, sinking  
into a borough's worth of stories and prayers.



Years later, they barely seemed the same stars that held court over our tired rooms and poorly-conceived plans. But after the blues, after the heavens became quiet and still as a backwater bayou, I watched Vega make its tiny waterwheel rotation against the oak leaves, a turn no bigger than the spinning label of an LP. Laura whispered *Are you still awake?*, found my hand in the weeds and twigs, didn't ask what I was thinking about.

Son House, Himself

This is not the Son House of the morning,  
the sharp, genial, well-dressed preacher,  
lighthouse of the dawn and a good word.

This is not the Son House of the night,  
bourbon-sated back-alley troubadour,  
guilt-struck desperate ruby brothel prince.

This is Son House himself, alone in  
a breezy June afternoon, playing, for once,  
not for believers or pimps or girls or God.

This is Son House outside, reassembled  
under a poplar tree, perhaps, or beside a tool  
shed, fingerpicking softly, humming nonsense

syllables on the one and three. He shuts his  
eyes, sinks into the Mississippi drone, feels earth  
beneath his slacks, wind in his fingers, thanks

the day for grasshoppers and corn whiskey,  
for the sun's daily struggle with the hills: whole,  
then split, then made whole again, somewhere.

I Want You to Clap Your Hands

and I'll try to tell you

about the wooden drum,

the windy, knifing flute,

the midnight shout and thump.

Years of backbreaking prayers,

this sound that echoes through churches,

clutches at old love, slips through years,

wanders, like summer twilight searches

for these blue notes your blood

desired: this wild planetary sound,

born of heaven and river mud.

Now all the words you never found

sing in soil, in the ancient drum,

pure, earthy as brown-red plums.

Variations on “Child Ballad Number 95”

“The Prickilie Bush,” “Hangman  
Hangman” – the tune’s been called  
dozens of titles, sung in small towns  
from Finland to Jamaica. Francis Child  
discovers a mournful Scottish song-story  
version in 1877, catalogues it as “The Maid Freed  
From the Gallows” (*Ballad #95*), a freedom  
song, a twilight plea to the hangman:

Ailsie’s got muddy red hair and a story –  
tangled alibis from men she calls  
friends, a calico dress and her child  
lost in the stony streets of a cold town.  
Her lover will ride from Campbeltown,  
loosen her ropes with silver, set her free  
from the yew tree she climbed as a child.

1939. Leadbelly’s facing the hangman  
again: two years for what the judge calls  
aggravated assault. Days of courtroom stories,  
Leadbelly’s left with his guitar and Ailsie’s story.  
Scratchy recordings cut in uptown  
Manhattan preserve his strained calls:  
*Save me from the gallis pole, brother, free  
me from the gallis pole, yea-ah.* Hangman  
blues, his voice shakes like a weeping child.

Jimmy's found a banjo and childlike  
enthusiasm for Leadbelly's desperate story,  
Robert nails the verse: *Hangman, hangman,*  
*wait a little while!* 1970, near the Welsh town  
of Bron-Yr-Aur, Led Zeppelin are free  
to supercharge the tune – ominous bass, call-  
and-response dialogue. They'll call  
it "Gallows Pole," stodgy critics label them childish  
imitators of Crosby, Stills, & Nash. But no freedom  
awaits their captive, only a cynical story  
of a helpless man in a lawless town.

Different trees, crimes, but always the hangman.  
Frayed rope, calls for mercy. Endless stories  
of "Child Ballad Number 95," the hill outside town,  
one chance at freedom, the motionless hangman.

## Drainpipe Boogie

Swirl down the gutter and sing, sweet  
rainwater, moan blue riff rivers snaking  
through black mud, whisper about pure things

lying at the bottom of northern lakes:  
mossy stones and anchors and lost sunglasses  
reflecting filtered rays like shiny sidewalks

under streetlights where black shoes  
patter across puddles, past city blocks  
dark and distant as Delta anthems

carried south on Savannah Short Line  
boxcars, holy songs, cold notes  
ringing like water through drainpipes.

## Performance

When we're tight it's kaleidoscope circuitry:  
delicate electric synapses fusing impulses  
into liquid confederacy, the way nations

jostle and nudge against each other within  
snug continents. Tonight we're playing  
borders, ill-defined regions where cultures

collide and overlap in merged accents  
and bilingual street signs, blended recipes  
and families. I'm listening for the new places

that form when tones mingle in smoky  
air: shallow aqua salt marshes, cobblestone  
staircases spiraling like thumbprints, California

ravines flush with late spring. Cinematic key  
change, solo break burnished and fractured  
as the Tiffany lamp above the bar. Low-cut

blues, we'll sing the sound of billiard  
chalk and scotch glasses, play a carmine  
skirt clinging to the night's curves.

Memphis Heat

*Memphis Slim Plays with Canned Heat, Autumn 1970*

To him, they're some tight California kids.  
To them, he's a god and a half, a chilled-out  
sage of lost river cities, mystic cat of jet-black  
jackknife boogie. He arrives on time in a tired  
suit, the edges of his shoulders long worn out  
by windmill arms, always reaching, stretching  
for a higher octave, a higher point to tumble  
from. He plays fierce, then falls away hard –  
now with the beat, now against – pitching  
dirty pennies into a lake. His fingers slam  
keys then dance a barrelhouse percussive  
assault: bullfight piano. On "Five Long Years"  
he suggests Henry sing. *I just want to be free,*  
Slim says. *Free to really do my thing.*



Villaiku: Photographs from October

Cold morning, pale fire  
on the ridge, bands  
of scarlet gilded grey sky.

Wet hair in wind. You were shy:  
bus stop Diana  
under elms' pale dawn fire.

The string pulled higher,  
tugged your blurry hand,  
red ribbons tingeing grey sky.

Cinnamon flames flashed brighter  
than my Canon;  
you glowed by bonfire.

Your father was a liar.  
Promises, plans,  
red jet trails striping sky.

The last one still stops my eye:

You tapped at his grand  
piano, hands afire  
in streams of scarlet sky.

## Invention

Today I am making things:  
a second stanza, a small notch  
in my microphone stand  
so the XLR cable will fit properly,  
new excuses for when I know  
you've caught me with nothing  
to say,

tangible things, since so many leave  
quickly: paid Visa bills, outdated  
promo posters, even lyrics, rhymes,  
recorded and sent to unfamiliar  
places – Valencia, California;  
Leicester, England; somewhere  
in Iowa.

Mostly things linger, gather  
in drawers, on garage shelves. Two  
unused birdhouses, badly written  
love notes, schematics of space  
stations I sketched as a child,  
when the cosmos were close  
and tactile,

simple stellar clockwork. Now  
I need an invention to remain relevant  
and silver: the fabulous chorus  
I haven't found yet, words for  
the arching sky, the sound of you  
and me, listening for new things  
every day.

## Cloudy Blues

First a faint smudge,  
then, barely, a pale smear of exhaust,

all that remains of Ellie's 7:25  
departure from the local tarmac –

a path past the gibbous moon:  
God and all points westward.

I rub my eyes, search again  
to find where the trail begins and the sky

ends, but I can't – just like I can  
never tell whether the background

noises in Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene"  
are static pops, or handclaps echoing

across the hall in Louisiana's Angola  
State Prison. He must've sang his tired

voice dry for the stranger's microphone,  
flat-picking a borrowed twelve-string,

as the inmates across the hall mocked  
his desperate howl for pardon.

I – IV – V

Ragged years pass in three chords, notes  
almost define life's circular mechanism.  
They're the sound of barrooms

and basements, every glorious crusade  
and piss-poor plan. First, the struggle,  
our everyday fight. Weary feet, dishpan

hands, a voice on the line that won't  
connect. Seasons crumble, I'm still  
here – walls too thin, head too full.

Blue spruce wind eases through  
the window above my mattress, wakes  
new sparks in my hands. Upward leaps –

reaching skyward from sidewalks  
on my way downtown, watching  
the horizon tilt just enough

to alter the streets and my name.  
Mornings with a new lover. Joyful  
protest, constant belief in tomorrow.

Blazing pinnacle, quick as light  
caught in burnished golden stripes,  
a tattered pennant hoisted above

a broken war field. Cymbal crash:  
climax. Catharsis, apex,  
Vesuvius liberating lava and years

of silence. Flashes of acid sun  
sing the city's glass skyscrapers,  
true as a flush in spades.

Resolve, re-entry. Inevitable  
tumble back to cracked pavement  
daydreams. Ten dollars in my pocket,

pigeons roosting in the pipes outside  
my apartment, and somewhere, I hope,  
a tired pianist plays the sound of

the cool glaze of the hour after January  
sunsets, the moon etched low in an icy  
sky, the soft voice: *hey mate, last call.*

## II

*“Jazz is the big brother of the blues.”*  
*~ B.B. King*

## Jazz Talks

Jazz says move your feet, clap your hands,

*catch swing and laugh in every fingersnap.*

Jazz says feel hot notes, play sweet rag,

*just like jelly roll and the night immaculate.*

Jazz says never play a thing the same way twice.

*moments: light switch dice roll whiskey shot.*

Jazz says hey hey man listen, listen here,

*turn old changes to new oceans.*

Jazz says Southern trees bear a strange fruit,

*rend the dawn, burn the city, rise up.*

Jazz says come on up man, sit in, blow a bit,

*make new colors, paint new faces.*

Jazz says I'll play it first and tell you what it is later,

*live now breath now feel now bleed now.*

## Monk by Moonlight

Late August love music: black swells  
curl against hard, flat sand, break  
across the breeze and empty night.  
Above town, Hercules surrenders  
to streetlights; in the east, Pegasus splashes  
from the Atlantic as faint Aquarius rises

from horizon blur. The tide's rising  
too, alive with ripples, fierce swells  
tinged with glints of moon. Waves splash  
around the abandoned lifeguard tower, break  
below my khaki shorts. I surrender  
to the warm wind, the motion of night.

Through headphones, another night:  
a steel neon city, smoke and noise rising  
to meet low stars. A tenor plays surrender  
in B flat, bitter, libertine swells  
that echo through the brick alley, break  
against a fire escape like palettes splashed

with paint. Inside her flat, bad calligraphy splashes  
across a legal pad. She's felt too many nights  
like this, felt her words slip, her voice break  
on the phone, felt the distance rise  
up, push against her desperate levees, swell  
until she can only whisper *I surrender* . . .



Monk's piano calls me back: "I Surrender,  
Dear," those cool, downward ivory splashes  
from tinny headphones harmonizing swells  
and distant boardwalk fireworks. Nights  
like these, when all music connects, rises  
and flows over sand dunes, when drum breaks

join distant barges, rumbling breakers  
like Oscar Pettiford's rolling bass, I surrender  
to the moment and wade in, whitecaps rising,  
while behind me on the shore a child splashes  
briny water on marooned jellyfish, ignited  
in bioluminescent blue. The piano swells,

a half-moon breaks past clouds, cymbals splash  
and shimmer. I surrender, dear, tonight –  
the stars rise, the sea dances, the music swells.

Ray Charles Playing “A Bit Of Soul” on Afternoon Radio

We bought chocolate and kumquats,  
    stood outside the store, inhaling  
        the smell of rising French loaves

across the parking lot, rich  
    in the late hours. Five of us,  
        in shorts and brown sunglasses,

framed by blossoming trees, cream  
    flowers against sky. On the road home:  
        painted wooden signs, gleam

from a cherry red bicycle, smooth  
    molded leather of my tan sandals.  
        At a stoplight, I watched a starling

swoop into a still churchyard  
    fountain, splash tiny triangle wings  
        while my tongue tested the tension

of the tart rind between my teeth,  
    resisting temptation until the car  
        jolted and my jaw clenched.

I sank hard into the fleshy core,  
while piano cascades slipped  
and tumbled like wayward seeds

and juice trickled down my throat,  
as copper light fell across me,  
sweet acid stinging my mouth.

## Birth

Now I will breathe the joy that lives in art.  
I'll sing the swinging tambourine jingle,  
the hard snap of ice water, the single  
night when your smoky lover tasted tart  
as September apples. Bless the ancient  
cathedrals with new paint, torch each pretense,  
and I'll craft lines through rising incense.  
This will be language to explain the scent  
of grass on spring air, the celestial  
hum of night, the starry syncopation  
of Motown dance steps. This is our motion:  
the kick and tumble of color we feel.  
Blast poetry of death. I am not dead.  
I'll use my throat for things lively and red.

Past Brilliance

*Harlem, 1945*

Three songs in, Jim knew Parker  
was off. *Misguided bullets*, Jim said  
years later, *scattered inside the smoke*

*and signal flares of Minton's*. Savage,  
feral riffs, momentary as neon flashes:

beer signs reflected in rum & Coke  
spilled across the bar. Discipline  
gone, swaying off-mic, Parker dripped

blues and gravity, blind to his  
bandmates in the maroon night.

Jim was twenty, visiting the city  
on bellhop tips and a five from his  
aunt. Later, no sleep: coarse hotel sheets,

his mind adrift on lost music, a ship  
guided south by unfamiliar constellations.

Caught in dawn's half-rose ache  
he remembered Parker's second chorus  
on "A Night in Tunisia," the cute barmaid,

the vagrant on 116<sup>th</sup>, behind the florist,  
warming his hands above a pile of burning lilies.

Steel Drum

*Grotto Bay, 1991*

If I concentrate, I can remember  
tree frogs singing green evening,  
the thick-leaved palms in amber  
light, trunks curved inward, lining

the broad walk in measured intervals.  
I don't recall where the empty lane  
led, only the light, the drowsy smell  
of hibiscus, intoxicating and foreign.

Yellow island mornings. One curving walk  
led past the massive aloe plant, the wrinkled  
woman in blue. I'd mouth hello, proud to talk  
with strangers like my parents did.

I was five then. I learned draw poker  
with strange new coins, ate powdered  
sugar on Belgian waffles, stayed up to hear  
the steel-drum band echoing through

shady palms, lush calypso rhythms vivid  
and new as the turquoise shallows where I spent  
hours with a small girl, trying to catch shiny  
fish using soggy bread and a purple bucket.

## Playing with Kings

### *Indiana High School's "Jazz Artist In Residence" Program*

#### I. Jon Faddis, 2002

He saunters in, a storybook genie – bigger than all of us, bigger than life, already grinning. Late night bop lion, he swings his words in grooves we aren't hip to yet. We are scared – even

aging Dizzy admitted defeat to this giant's chops. But he is warm, graceful, funny: when our director mentions we have two brothers in the band, Faddis glances over our

sea of pale faces and cracks, *I don't see no brothers in this band!* He works us for a hour on a single note, desperate to convey the exact length of an accented eighth – just long enough

to feel the kick – then declares the remaining 128 bars solid. He takes us to the local diner, even buys Jenny a banana cream pie to take her worrying mind off a bad break-up.

## II. Slide Hampton, 2003

To begin, he is not dead. (After a few inquiries, one agent says he's awfully sorry but Hampton died a few years ago.) This amuses Slide, standing in our cramped office, though not

much else seems to. At seventy he is business, offering occasional advice through a voice like smoke and scratched copper, sea-green with age and worn from years of calling out tunes. During a break,

I ask him to sign my copy of *World of Trombones*. He complies, then turns back to the tired, flat piano, gently fingering seventh chords, stringing out florid notes like laundry hung haphazardly on a June

clothesline, starched shirts and delicate sun dresses waving in damp, light-speckled morning air. He seems happiest here, and I thank God that he's still exploring.



### III. Chris Vadala, 2004

He has none of the regal, imperial quality  
of the other two; he carries himself with the mild,  
reasonable bearing of a cobbler or a skilled  
waiter. Professional: clockwork precision

in assembling his saxophones, his cool glance  
up and down a new chart like a general  
surveying a map, certain of preordained victory.  
Small in stature and presence, he waits for the solo

break like a boy on a diving board. When  
it comes, he explodes. Swells and waves,  
he plays the fury of the sea, a bright, complex  
sound that leaps like a breaching narwhal over

our rumbling foundation, trails of reverb  
cascading through grey mist before the plunge.  
He plays possessed, eyes wide, manic.  
Afterwards, he'll shake hands, pose for photos.

## Hip

I'd sing you swing in six-eight,  
clap every glow in a row of fox-fur  
scarlet trees, torches through morning  
frost. I'd play eighths on this rake  
'til my fingers ached, weave cinnamon  
leaves in threes, burn black nights  
into pale notes. I'd hum the golden slush  
of pumpkin and scattered seeds splashed  
along my sidewalk like late October stars,

the way your world dissipated, sown  
across two towns and three hospitals,  
when the car swerved into your  
lane, crushed your hip, dragged you  
down Daughtery Drive, all the way here:  
thin sheets, ammonia, white steel,  
syringes, where I wish I could play  
you the nutmeg breeze, the acorns,  
the smell of burning leaves.

## Sixth Anniversary

What a place – linen tablecloths  
flawless, every waiter in shiny black  
shoes. Say your lines: *We ought  
to get out more often. Julia will be fine  
with the sitter, won't she?* I'll chuckle  
and nod, pretend not to notice

your pomegranate stew has stained your  
mouth darker than the blood-red  
marbles at the bottom of this glass  
vase. Bay windows offer harsh headlights,  
but you're right, the striped wallpaper  
really does pick up the little white crosses

on the navy carpet. And this pianist,  
she plays well – each note plinking  
with the precision of a pocketwatch. Thank  
God the pauses are filled with the soft  
clack of cups and saucers, patter  
from those shiny black shoes.

But dangling above our heads  
like some benevolent sword  
of Damocles, the gold chandelier  
throws specks of electric light  
thin as the music onto the silver water  
pitcher, fogged with condensation,

its glints reminding me of the August  
night we travelled forty miles out  
of town to see the Perseids  
in a clear sky. You wore my blue  
sweatshirt, clutched my arm, and said we  
should drive across this whole gorgeous country.

Across the room, three old women sit at  
a table for four. In the half-light, cutouts  
in the empty chair's mottled teak appear  
as two crouching vultures, necks curved  
and hunched. I straighten, suddenly aware  
of the patterns at our backs.

## Tide Charts

I was emperor of the ocean,  
for an hour and a half.

All the tourists had left the beach.  
and I waded into the sea.

The sun was low by then,  
clouds dulled the horizon.

The world faded together:  
shore, water, sky, even me,

all one tone of blue-grey,  
like the colors that seep out

when I rinse paintbrushes  
in a cracked ceramic mug,

or when you blew clarinet  
to that Art Pepper record

for hours and days, until  
I lost which notes were yours

or when I write songs and mix  
and match bits of melody

like a vagabond's patchwork  
coat, flecked with red flannel.

Acceptance:

*Regina Spektor Plays "Somedays" at Washington D.C.'s  
9:30 Club*

She screams, whispers, coos, calls,  
but now, behind her red piano, she sings plain:

*Some days aren't yours at all,*  
her voice rising on *aren't*, filling the hall.

God, she's right. I'm drained –  
every scream and whisper recalls  
Jean on the phone, her father's scrawled  
note, words full of hard rain.

*Some days aren't yours at all,*  
*they come and go* – Regina's voice falls –  
*as if they're someone else's days.*

His day, dragged in a dusty sedan. I'll call  
Jean after the show, talk baseball  
to keep her breathing, explain  
that sometimes it's not your day, it's all  
you can do to take the hit, crawl  
home, try so hard to lose your pains  
in blue screams and shaking piano.  
Some days aren't yours, at all.

New Days:

*Making Resolutions While Listening to the Impulse! Deluxe  
Edition of A Love Supreme, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006*

They're not really resolutions. I hate the term, instantly suggestive of unwelcome change – something I *should* do, rather than something I *want* to do, a dull crusade long forgotten by Valentine's Day. So each year, a day or two before the calendar flips, I find my notebook, recreate the past year in cast-off phrases and a crude system of up and down arrows. Invariably at the end I jot a few remarks – *not* resolutions, just suggestions. Of course the old standards are here, like rarely-seen uncles at Thanksgiving: eat better, exercise, write more. But this year something tugs at my hair, cuffs me upside the chin, something in Coltrane's acid-sweet chameleon tone, like teeth in an orange or a girl in the dark. Coltrane – I feel like I should call him John, naked as he is in front of the piano – barely sounds like he's playing jazz. He's playing art, no, *pushing* art, leading art over black rivers like a cosmic Orpheus, past map edges, into fog and Indian towns shrouded in Louisiana mist. I want to build bridges like his tenor, to strike into the west with a horse and a telescope. I scrawl across the page *1. art 2. everything else.*

Revolution Poem

*for Henry Miller*

An axe would work,  
something with heft, or a rusted  
trumpet, or a cracked, twisted palette  
knife. Bring me a sloppy paintbrush, stained  
bristles splayed like bloody limbs. I need a tool  
of violence, an instrument for bright orange change.  
There's napalm in this radio  
but distortion's not enough. Charlie  
Parker once said there's no boundary line  
to art, and I'll prove him right. Tonight I crash  
my cement truck through cocktail parties, to hear  
melody in every shattered saucer and socialite scream,  
and see the slugs pale  
as their favorite soup tureen  
crumbles. I'll smear oil pastels until  
cinder block walls explode with pigment. I've come  
for your mauve beveled woodwork and the glass etching of  
eight generations of clean, sweet Americans and I'm going to set fire  
to everything square.  
Damn your canned prayers, I'll  
find my salvation in blood-spattered steel  
guitar strings. Let's face this pale end fully alive  
for once, howling like madmen, because I choose death  
over dinner conversation, and even if the cold blade falls hard



my neck will gush colors  
you've never seen. So when the cries  
wake you tonight, look north past the armory  
wall, and if the sky is red know that I've ravaged  
every viola in the Philharmonic and my voice is lost  
from roaring at the status quo, raging for something true.

### III

*“There are a lot of ways you can treat the blues,  
but it will still be the blues.”*

*~ Count Basie*

## Rock & Roll Talks

Rock & roll says do what you like,

*fly silver wind scream hymns and blossom.*

Rock & roll says there's a better place somewhere,

*roads west: California days and fireworks nights.*

Rock & roll says we can make some kind of difference,

*smile on your brother join hands raise voices.*

Rock & roll it's alright, listen, it's alright,

*don't worry too much we're all here now.*

Rock & roll says give me one more chance,

*one more chord one more drink one more city.*

Rock & roll says stand up, don't be afraid,

*no more rules, no more mistakes.*

Rock & roll says we could be heroes, just for one day,

*believe in the night, the dawn, an open hand.*

Trip to the Record Store

*Friday Afternoon, First Day of Autumn*

Off the curb, brown shoe striking  
cold street with the snare  
shot that opens “Like a Rolling  
Stone,” the crack Springsteen  
said was like kicking open  
the door to your mind. Wind spills  
my ink black jacket behind  
me and now I’m in motion, sweeping  
over sidewalks like brush  
on canvas. Every stride in step  
with the rhythm in my headphones,  
the change of the crosswalk sign,  
the passing flash of headlights. I’m  
your adolescent heroes: Connery  
as Bond, Achilles in his bloody chariot,  
the one and only Billy Shears. I’m  
Athos, Porthos *and* Aramis.  
I am everyone who’s reached  
his peak and knows it. Napoleon  
on his white horse, Ali stinging Sonny  
Liston in ‘64, Thompson on assignment  
and mescaline. I’m every child  
discovering the sea, every president  
on the red phone. I’m churches

on wedding days, small American  
towns on the Fourth of July. I'm  
every single nation at their height:  
Portugal at sea, Germany at war,  
Britain at tea and crumpets. Hell, I'm  
the whole world during the  
I.G.Y. and I swear to Christ  
I'm motherfucking unstoppable.

Along The Road

*Jackson Browne, 1977*

Lafayette, Louisiana. Hilton Towers.  
Three weeks into the tour. On a balcony  
over the parking lot, Jackson fingerpicks  
dusk melodies. She hasn't called. Hours  
fade, and he plays blues, soft and lonely.  
Night swirls. He wakes at half past six  
to coughing exhaust, dew and dirty bricks.



Holiday Inn, Regency Street,  
Edwardsville, Illinois. After the show,  
Jackson won't fall into liquor and idle chat  
for a little while. He's still on his feet,  
manic in the small bar's neon glow.  
"That 'Shaky Town' coda? Ra-tat! tata-tat!"  
No one is listening. "We *nailed* that!"



Desert Rose Motel, outside Tucson,  
Interstate Seventeen. She's tan  
and willowy, haute couture cool.  
But in the hours before dawn,  
Jackson sits up and can't understand  
how her dreaming face seems so cruel,  
his perfect lover, his perfect fool.

Los Angeles, Continental Hyatt Hotel.  
Fifth floor. The Riot House is afire  
with willing flesh and champagne.  
Alone, naked, bruised, Jackson crawls  
through soaked sheets to his tiny mirror,  
chokes on the last of his cocaine,  
collapses in scattered grains.



Cross Keys Inn, Columbia, Maryland,  
room 301 (top of the stairs, turn right).  
The band's at the bar, but Jackson  
croons into a lone mic on the nightstand  
and Lindley's fiddle hums purple night.  
"You forget about the losses" – *violin*  
*vibrato* – "you exaggerate the wins."

Smolder

*Independence Day, 1971*

Night drags slow and hard,  
steams like coffee, acid black  
as new needle-etched vinyl.  
Speakers preach soul through July heat  
to halter top Jenny chaos-waltzing  
down South Vine Street in red  
haze. Mick's strings clam and stick  
with sweat but he struggles  
through soaked maple to sound  
a voice in swampy air. Back  
porch crew aahs and claps for  
yellow fireworks scratching sky  
leaving baked plumes of ash  
while Mick smokes over the changes  
of Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young live  
New York City '69. Scorch and burn  
says the gold dust man, tells Jenny  
this city's blazed like the whole of Viet Nam  
so she might as well shoot anything  
she can. Wild-eyed boys' choir yelps  
cheap revolt cause the suits are drained  
and drunk and nobody cares if children  
play with lighters tonight. The city flops  
on a stained mattress and sweats  
through tangled prison sheets



by an open window, curtains ripped  
down to coax any shred of cooked  
alleyway breeze. Half past three  
black fire still whispers and drips  
down our necks so we run  
through choked night to the river, plunge  
like runaway convicts and emerge  
in jungle air, anti-war t-shirts clinging  
to our heaving chests. Through mist  
orange lights flicker too near  
to be memories and Mick prays  
that Jenny's waltzing somewhere,  
but mercury's rising still.

Solo

Brown leaves, my red sweater, and *Dylan*  
*Live at Budokan, '75*, left in my girl's  
car from before her surgery. Two weeks  
of dead mornings, fog in my eyes,  
I'd turn her keys, cue up track ten,  
"Forever Young," and listen to my hero  
and his minstrels play his little prayer.  
My mind wandered through the verses –  
I imagined why the other drivers  
were up so early, tried to invent their stories –  
but just as I'd reach the last intersection  
the solo began, a run of throaty saxophone notes  
sad and pure as September dawns, reaching  
a throbbing F, strong enough to carry  
me through the parking lot, up the elevator,  
still hanging as she clutched my hand,  
as the nurse drew three more vials of blood.

Poem for Sweet Janie Miller

On Highway Sixteen East, poplars speckle  
amber hills like casualties. Jack's fingers betray  
restlessness, drum a hollow beat on black briefcase  
leather. Through frost on the Greyhound window, he scans  
the landscape for primary colors. The driver drags  
the broadcast down through junk and coughing  
static, but halfway between Wyoming's Favorite  
Beats and Modern Country Ninety-Two, Jack's  
ears catch the shiny guitar plink of "Sweet  
Jane" by the Velvet Underground. The notes  
shimmer like young love, flirting with fuzz, almost  
out of reach, like memories of Janie Miller's  
yellow hair whirling out the window of her '68  
Corvette. Another turn of the dial and the music's  
gone, Lou Reed's yearning vocals fading  
like the sepia photograph of Jack's mother, nestled  
in his pocket. She's bright in dancing shoes, so distant  
from the perfumed body he prayed over just yesterday.  
Static sounds in Jack's tired ears like the sea,  
or the drone of Janie's engine, driving into dusk.

I'm Slowly Turning Into You

*The White Stripes, 2007*

Coal and bone and blood.

Steam engine blues, iron music  
churning like Detroit smokestacks.

Jack's an Aztec prince parading

before the sun god, Airline guitar  
ripping the haze of pot and spotlights.

Meg plays the armies of Europe

marching to war, imploding sky-  
scrapers, broken arms and silence:

those seismic gaps between

rifle volleys. Prophets of the church  
of flesh and dirt, they synchronize

explosions like a squadron

of bombers, like a murder  
of crows erupting from a swamp

cypress against crushed velour

night, Mars ascendant, retrograde  
above granite November horizons.

## Captions

Saturday night: live Springsteen on the stereo, college basketball muted on TV. Cut to commercial – above fabulous rotating bacon the closed-captioning reads *MCDONALD'S NEW BREAKFAST BURRITO*, then shows the generic “music” symbol: a curving white eighth note, a child’s cartoon of notation. I’m wondering what song is actually playing, thinking about the way labels always fall short of what we mean them to illuminate, how white and black pixels could never describe Clarence’s brawling saxophone, the cosmic architecture of Danny Federici’s rolling organ fills. What caption works for this carousel of good beer and one-off nicknames? I can’t neatly sum up Kristin singing the “Rosalita” bridge, Greg’s ridiculous grin when I ask *What album’s up next?* I don’t want a designation for this perpetual state of quarter to three: Adam karate-kicking magnetic darts into the fridge, Cole yelling *Play something jumpy!* Sarah and Patrick slow-dancing beneath old Christmas lights framing the Grateful Dead poster. We’re strangely beyond language, exploding between the woven Celtic tapestry, the curling sandalwood incense.

Solve et Coagula

*Alchemist's Creed*

Malachite glow, soft hum, transmutation.

Roger Bacon and Nicolas Flamel searched  
for quicksilver soul purification,  
a philosopher's stone. We're separating  
four minutes of recorded floor tom  
into ninety-six disparate drumbeats,  
each neatly cleaved from the mic's  
background noise, each crystalline, discrete  
as the hundreds of violet knobs dotting  
his mixing console, an emerald tablet  
for the twenty-first century. Haydon,  
the engineer, tinkers, twists, blends  
rounded turquoise wave forms reflected  
in his glasses. Endless pursuit for panacea  
from Ludwig drum skins, white maple  
sticks. Sanctuary and speakers, new  
tones elemental and brilliant as blue  
jays, bright against backlit pines. Slowly  
he'll synthesize sounds – steel chords  
fluid as hotplate mercury, acid flash  
cymbals, magnetic zodiac bass –  
eight months of struggle, false-starts  
and breakthroughs brought together:  
jays roosting as night falls, nesting.

## Laying Tracks

Behind my house, scotch pines  
soar, prickly blue spruces sprawl wild  
on the edge of the lawn. Tangled vines,  
rain-carved trenches, purple berries. As a child,  
these gorse-filled woods taught me design:

cardinals and tawny rabbits,  
and fantastic elephant-ear plants  
pieced together in grand jigsaw spirit.  
Crawling through gullies in muddy pants,  
I'd savor tart onion grass, my spit

green as finch feathers. Years later,  
I'd find those patterns – in blankets  
and wrinkled bedsheets draped over  
cinder block walls, in my rosewood frets,  
while I waited to record a backing guitar

riff. Through headphones: the same twisting  
connections, the convergence of rhythm.  
Swirling solos mimicked starlings,  
incessant eighth-note snare drum  
clicks recalled crickets' staccato singing.

## My Father's Records

He digs every sweet swung beat. Saxophones,  
tambourines, soul singers. Mellow citrine  
horns, cinnamon notes, rich purple tones.  
The Temptations. Southside Johnny. Al Green.  
When I was old enough to understand  
he'd call me downstairs on Saturday nights, coax  
new wonder from Sony speakers, spin bands  
I'd never heard. We'd read liner notes, joke  
about album art, revel in the sighs,  
fuzz, and static pop of well-worn vinyl.  
He taught me to lose myself that way: eyes  
closed, head nodding, a faint, easy smile,  
wandering through amethyst harmonies  
swelling up like sun-warmed August seas.



## My Mother's Garden

Born to nurture, she finishes potting  
two begonias, brushes dirt from her gloves,  
surveys terra-cotta temples glowing  
like lanterns across the veranda. Love  
in yellow petals, spilled Miracle-Gro  
across warm cedar planks, unfolds  
lazy amber afternoon through pines, flows  
soft, like a hose misting new marigolds.  
She drifts in iced tea and backyard strumming –  
my guitar singing as earth blooms sublime  
around her, sweet heliotrope humming  
pure color, ringing like copper windchimes.  
Later, in blue dusk and lamplight, I'll feel  
roots – posies, dahlias, my own, growing still.

Assorted Love Songs

*Eric Clapton, 1970*

He's been up since Thursday, writing with Duane,  
rummaging his frets for notes he can't reach  
or find. Beer and bent playing cards, cocaine  
spilled across the console, fourteen songs – each  
a prayer to her honeysuckle bangs, the tight  
violet skirt, the way her lips curve to form rose-kissed  
rings of pot smoke. *Pattie*. His best mate's wife –  
alone in London while George finds Krishna  
and other women. Bleary, strung-out, he  
barely keeps his cool on the phone, invites  
her down to listen to his newest plea.  
Afterwards she'll question the title.  
*Leyla ile Majnun – the madman of Layla*,  
he says. *Persian tale of forbidden love*.

Christmas at the *Café Wha?*

*for Kristin*

I ask Megan, the waitress, how late the kitchen's open and she laughs. We're staying, packed in with strangers, faint condensation smudges of drinks long gone dotting greasy tables like smoke rings rising in early winter evenings. No one's more than fifteen feet from the stage – a platform the size of a bathroom, somehow big enough for eight cats and a drum kit. The leader – me in fifteen years, I think, all sweat and vibe and electricity – can't stop talking about Santa Claus. *I hope you've all been good this year!* he sings, before leading the band headlong into a rolling, soulful Creedence cover. Megan brings us more beer and nachos – they call them “wha-chos” here – and I toast my girl, marvel at the wild European dancers, the guitar drawn in violent neon on the back wall, the lunatic up front trying blindly to conduct the band. Tonight we're brothers and sisters, knocking elbows, half-drunk, caught up in a rambling, sloppy, fantastic third set. Peace on earth, goodwill to all men.

Regent's Park

*London, 2006*

I.

The sun had already paled when I first  
met the park. I wandered left, purple light  
falling over arching branches, bursting  
white blossoms. Ahead, hedges obscured sight,  
but I heard quiet rain, whispers and sighs.  
Around the corner: the Triton fountain.  
Lanky poplars flanked the pool, mocking my  
old Zeppelin shirt, foolish in royal fens.  
Triton and two Nereids, a sea-foam throne,  
bronze and tarnished in their chaotic bath,  
solitary and cold. I was alone  
too, trying to befriend the sky, the paths,  
and the sleepy brown ducks with mottled wings –  
American child in the land of kings.

II.

She was four, probably, in loose shoestrings  
and a red checked jumper that bounced as she  
ran down the brick walk. Scattering ducklings  
and businessmen, a perfect Botticelli  
hellion, she laughed like bells, a pigtailed blur,  
and I stopped. How could I chronicle this  
moment, even remember these wonders  
without resorting to Eden clichés?

The park was strange, dreamlike, even during  
the noon rush: families and lunch breaks. Two geese  
stood at the lake's edge, feet barely submerged,  
gazed across ripples, easy summer peace.

I smiled, thought about my father and I  
watching Atlantic waves every July.

III.

My friends were asleep but June night was grand  
in jewel tones. I grabbed my headphones, my  
copy of *Springsteen & the E. Street Band*  
*London '75*. Through the park to High  
Marylebone, then south nine blocks, past lamp shops,  
through the Arab district, to Oxford Street.  
Blue neon tinged a busker's trumpet bop,  
cool sidewalks hummed rhythm. Alone with three  
thousand other people, I listened to Bruce  
tell the crowd *this is my first time, I've*  
*never been here before* as I waltzed through  
midnight carnival, kebab stands, street jive.  
I was still breathless when I reached the park  
again, so fierce and brambly, wild and dark.

IV.

I had a sunset room over the park.

Reid Hall, 225: a small square room

with two shelves, butter-yellow walls, and plaid  
green curtains. At seven, the sky would bloom.

I'd be writing home, or checking box scores,

when pure tangerine light would play across

my typing fingertips. From my third-floor

perch I'd look past the lake's rippling rose

water, to glowing Marylebone manors

where skyline ignited: violet cloud fire

calling me West, past the mosque's moon tower,

the cool copper blue of the bandstand spire.

One photo shows the gold streaks, the church dome,

but not how horizon tilted towards home.

V.

I was late but he was feeding robins,  
trying to explain the delicate hand,  
the fluttering whistle, the gentle grin,  
to a small skittish boy with hair like sand  
who didn't care to know, whose mother led  
him away so politely as I edged  
closer to the old man. I just wanted  
to say *that's really splendid*, but he said  
*they love cheese crumbs*, told me about little  
bags of corn and hand-cut almonds and sprouts  
but I was late, I said *sorry* until,  
heartbroken, I backed away, he called out  
that he knew a good church group and boys' club  
on Baker Street, not far from the Globe pub.



VI.

Always the left walk, Queen Mary's west edge,  
where the sound of the rushing spray met me  
under blossoms, within boxy hedges.

The last time, silence. Without cascades, the sea  
god looked small, lording over a calm pool.

I felt small too, in the still evening haze  
that settled on statues, on the rose wheel,  
where I'd heard an old woman muse, two days  
ago, *it's a shame that photographs can't  
capture the smell*. I sat with a lone wren  
on a bench that read *FOR EMILY BRANT,  
WHO LOVED THIS PARK*. As the light waned, I ran  
to the garden's peak, the hilltop terrace,  
savored the sky, the ducks in golden grass.

A Place to Burn

*Bob Dylan in London, May 1966*

Striped pants, black sunglasses, cool wind  
in his curls, flitting like some harlequin bird  
down sidestreet London cobblestones –  
he's motion and restless electricity.  
This afternoon his tongue isn't burning,  
he's prancing, and sprinkling words like rain.

We loved his sound, ever since "A Hard Rain's  
A-Gonna Fall" and "Blowin' in the Wind,"  
but this is new energy, quicksilver symphony burn.  
White and black storefront signs – ANIMALS & BIRDS  
BOUGHT –OR– SOLD, *CIGARETTES & TOBACCO* – catch his electric  
eye. WE WILL COLLECT CLIP BATH & RETURN YOUR DOG. Stoned

or not, he's riffing immaculate across alley stones,  
past black taxis slick from cold morning rain.  
His sparkplug voice ignites, loose electricity  
crackling in damp spring wind:  
*I'm looking for somebody to bathe my bird,  
sell my dog, buy my animal, and burn*

*my cigarettes. I'm looking for a place to burn  
my bird, clip my dog, sell my cigarettes and stone  
my animal. I am looking for a place to bird  
my buy, collect my clip and sell me to the cigarette!* Raindrop  
patter and laughter. He's twisting, winding  
himself like a jack-in-the-box, motley and electric,

just like later that night, when his electric guitar clangs “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues” and burns the critics’ soft ears. Now he’s blowing fire and wind through a Hohner Marine Band harp in C, stone faced and singing: *When you’re lost in the raaaaaiiin–* Brown tangles glow in stage light and he hovers, birdlike,

behind the round microphone. Three rows back, a blonde bird smiles, then shrieks *TRAITOR* through the electric wash. Levon thumps the drums and Richard’s keys rain inverted chords and suddenly everything is burning and he wheels and spins against the stony faces in the crowd, their empty *Judas* wind –

*PLAY FUCKING LOUD!* he screams like a blackbird burning, as electricity flares into “Like a Rolling Stone,” and the night is all rain and fire and wind.