



*bastard  
faith*

*john sweet poems  
2017 chapbook  
scarsnoitvniqnd  
publications*

Thanks to the editors of the following magazines,  
where some of these poems previously appeared:

63 Channels (*“the theoretician”*)

Bad Acid Laboratories (*“On approaching the  
wall of death”*)

Burning Word (*“an answer”*)

Identity Theory (*“holy poem, after the death of god”; “the  
blood factory, revisited”*)

Strange Horizons (*“the poet avoiding confessions”*)

Ygdrasil (*“gut-punch sweetheart blues”; “hang-  
man”; “the forest’s edge and what we found  
there”*)

# *the number, diminished*

and right here, right now, you are  
losing all of these moments  
of your life

think about jackie o, her lap  
filled with blood,  
sunlight everywhere

think about the women you've  
loved and the ones who have  
loved you, and then look for  
points of intersection

listen to the sounds the house makes  
after you've turned off all the lights

let the ghosts  
offer you sugar and milk

watch it spill from  
their cupped hands

you will spend your entire life being  
stained by the filth of strangers

# *cupid, deconstructed*

and even here, from a continent away,  
i can tell that you're the sun,  
and what the fuck good does it do me?

anger is not a gift, of course,  
and pain is not a blessing

memories are untrustworthy at best

they will only slow you down when  
the time comes to make your escape

# *the hours, pressing down*

she says it's okay  
but then starts to bleed

says there are prayers  
that will stop it

and she says she knows a man

just has to get home  
before her boyfriend

just needs some money

says nothing  
but gets dressed and leaves  
in the first blueblack  
light of morning

disappears  
for fifteen years



# *...and the heart a broken bell*

says she's tired of being dead and  
what the hell am i supposed to do?

can't have power without money

can't have god without the devil

late august sunlight after  
four days of rain and i kiss her  
feet when she asks

i kiss her breasts

lick the tears from her cheeks and  
wait for the moment to pass and  
what we are is finished  
but not quite yet

what the space between us sounds  
like is an unspoken apology

no one wants to talk about the  
future when it never amounts to  
anything more than children  
sleeping in a house on fire

# *the weight of ambition*

and if i give you all my  
happy songs, and if christ spends his  
free time praying for our deaths

if we learn to ignore the politicians

to defy the laws that are created  
only to let all power stay in the hands  
of those who already hold it, and  
if we fuck like priests and whores

like dogs

nothing but the blood of hope  
smeared across the walls in  
this house we call home



# *holy poem, after the death of god*

snow all afternoon but  
nothing is made beautiful

no one is considered holy

at some point  
the last city is built  
and then there is only slow decay

sons are shot and  
daughters raped and all of  
the missing are given names

and some of them come home  
while others are martyred  
and there is always the threat of  
another religion

of the crippled  
leading the blind and  
of a war that everyone can  
believe in

a way to kill only the  
truly deserving

how much of your life are  
you willing to waste  
making these decisions?



# *gut-punch sweetheart blues*

they fucked up out on the highway  
too many dead and then the  
witnesses had to be killed too the  
cover stories amended all flags re-sewn  
in brighter shades of hatred and glory  
but we ate like kings for a month

we spread the lie  
that the war had been won

built our palaces that much  
closer to the sun

## *A sound*

Doesn't really taste like fear,  
I guess, but more like regret.  
More like anger, hands shaking,  
mouth filled with blood, thick  
with it, angry words pouring  
out dark red onto the flesh of  
someone's sister, and nothing  
here is sacred. Nothing here is  
mine. Every act becomes an  
act of theft.



## *the poet avoiding confessions*

awake and mostly blind  
at two in the morning  
in a house where  
nothing fits quite right

cold

ashamed of my  
twenty-two years spent  
feeding a pointless addiction  
but unable to quit

unwilling maybe or  
maybe afraid

nothing is ever gained  
by putting  
the truth on paper

# icebound

nothing left but to  
break the baby's hands

october and then  
november

blind paths to christ and back roads  
littered with corpses and  
then this man i know who divorces  
one waitress to marry another

who ends up in  
a two-room apartment  
addicted to self-pity

has three children who no  
longer speak to him and the  
barrel of a gun in his mouth and  
we all hold our breaths  
waiting for a happy ending

we all laugh at the prophets  
with their tongues cut out

how could they have  
not seen this coming?

## *the theoretician*

hand in the lion's mouth and  
mouth filled with broken glass

this is no way to live but  
your options have begun to run out

the fire has  
consumed everything it could

picture a long empty hall  
leading to a small empty room

doesn't need to be anywhere  
you've ever been

picture sunlight

close your eyes

in this nation of thieves &  
cowards you're no one special

in this nation of great failure  
you could be anyone at all



# hangman

you inside the sacred circle and  
yr lover outside the door with  
a bullet in his head

no small amount of magic

a mirror facing its darker twin and  
then an infinite number of walls  
inside the prison of your mind

a dream of your father and  
of his father before him

an unbroken line of suicides

all those sad grey songs of  
infinite joy that  
no one ever sings anymore

## *an answer*

life wasted crawling towards water beneath the  
sky blue sky and these  
last days of winter and this taste of dirty frost

this 10 below zero this neverending wind and all of  
the furniture from  
the burned house spread out on the lawn

jesus in his unmarked grave  
dreaming lightning bolts

understands the kingdom of god is a  
fairy tale for suckers and fools

knows in his endlessly dying heart that a man who  
wants for nothing is a man who can never be trusted

## *imagined grace*

weeds and garbage and barbed-wire fences,  
nothing to keep in but poison,  
no one to keep out but the dead and the dying  
and so why do you stay?

where else would you go?

listen

piles of books gathering dust  
in a curtained room

pale winter sunlight on the cemetery

follow the road that cuts behind it and  
sink up to your knees in the muck at the river's edge

consider all of the bitterness  
your father left you

try to remember the last words  
you ever said to him

pretend that they meant something  
more than they actually did

# *diogenes*

and nothing and  
nothing and then ten  
below zero at five thirty in the morning

no FOR or AGAINST  
no TOWARDS or AWAY

am just trying to remember how to  
breathe and how to be

am through believing in gods

in heroes

am moving from room to room  
with absolute clarity and i  
need a gun or a window or the  
doorway to a different kingdom

need to be a fist

a believer in those happy  
days of open wounds

a priest waiting to  
fuck or be fucked

i would give you hope if i could  
just for the pleasure of  
taking it away again

*poem for someone who  
will never read it*

16 or 17 in the late autumn  
fields out past yr mother's house and  
not quite lost and not quite  
gone when you told me you wanted  
to be my fallen nun

not quite breathing when i said i'd  
fuck you like a bloodthirsty priest

and birdsong yes and the  
taste of yr sweat and so we gave up  
our names

made promises just to get drunk on the  
power that came w/ breaking them  
and i don't remember you ever being more  
beautiful than you were in that  
moment you came

don't remember ever being that  
close to the sun again

## *bulletin*

Warm rain at the end of winter,  
and all of the garbage left behind  
when the snow is washed away

These upstate towns that are only  
six houses long, maybe a bar, maybe  
a church, and the hills screaming  
down on either side

Always shadow  
or approaching shadow.

Always the news of war  
arriving in the usual way.

You open the front door on  
a grey and bitter Sunday  
morning, and there it is.

*unidentified girl  
found in a cooler*

dead for fourteen years now and she  
still can't find her parents and  
she still has no name

has no face

no clothes and  
what we're all guilty of here  
                                  isn't clear but  
                                  someone needs to hang

someone needs to explain to me  
the mind of god

so many of you assholes  
have spent so much of your lives  
trying to force his need down my throat

# *one for the drowning man*

carpet on fire and the  
curtains catching and how many  
years until none of your anger matters?

no sound in the valley of ash

no air to breathe

tell my father i *will always believe in*  
*your death before i believe in*  
*mine* and he laughs

i am older than cobain here  
and i am catching up with pollock

i am asked my opinions on the  
riots out west, and i have none

mass murder is  
mass murder

the judges have all been hung

no one here is ever truly sorry  
for anyone else's pain





# *On approaching the wall of death*

Assume the  
conqueror's stance.  
Smile,  
but with a  
weapon in each hand.  
Wait for the signal,  
but don't assume that you'll  
recognize it when it  
finally arrives.  
Never believe that fear  
will help you,  
or courage, or prayer.  
Consider the fact that  
these might be  
all you actually have.

# like hawks

and dogs in frozen fields  
beneath february sunlight

dogs on fire in churches  
built from the bones  
of the poor

laughter

yours  
mine  
doesn't really matter

any sound in a vacuum,  
you know?

any drug to help numb the pain

can't spend your whole life  
crawling naked across  
dirty concrete floors  
but i know you'll try

i know you'll tell me  
i don't understand

it's the same conversation  
we've been having since  
the first time i swore  
i loved you

## *poem*

diane, always dreaming about the  
rings of saturn, about warm beaches and  
good wine, but not here,  
not now

this is the wrong side  
of the continent

this is where the streets all  
end in cemeteries,  
where every town is blanketed with  
soft, dirty layers of ash and rust

early spring sunlight on cracked and  
collapsing parking lights, on  
poisoned soil, and we wait to see what grows

teenaged girls, maybe, all of them dying  
of cancer or of diseases still  
waiting to be named

flowers,  
despite everything

## NOV 17

grey rain on the  
village of severed hands

victim found face down in a  
ditch in the last light of all-saints day and  
your father further up north or  
maybe way out west

sends postcards of  
sunlight and marigolds

sends rumors of his own  
unexpected death but  
when you call  
your mother never answers the phone

the war drags on long after  
the last village has been  
burned to the ground

the days are never as hopeless as  
you remember them but  
we're still a long way from home

# *the blood factory, revisited*

or maybe  
the failure is mine  
diane

maybe the words  
are only words and  
exist without blame and  
maybe none of the battered wives  
give a shit about poetry

this needs to be  
considered



## *imagined landscape no. 1*

and there is nothing you  
can love in this world that  
you can't be taught to hate and  
there is nothing so beautiful  
that it can't be made ugly

there are obvious reasons  
why we fear losing  
everything we think we have

this last part is what i  
remember you telling me  
just before you left



*the holy angel of blasphemy,  
upon arrival*

not a poem but a  
painting

a certain day

sunlight, but  
frost in the shadows  
between houses

a man with a gun or a  
child left  
to drown in the bathtub

soft music on the radio

and was this the year you  
filmed your best friend  
raping some drunken, passed-out  
teenage girl, or doesn't that  
help narrow it down?

was it the year of the last  
unjust war or was it  
maybe the start of the next one?

all of this pain &  
laughter becomes a blur  
and it's not a painting but a  
photograph i keep in  
a forgotten desk drawer  
dead white tree rising up from  
its own reflection in  
the center of a flooded field

blue sky

endless grace

the last of the snow on the  
far sides of the hills and  
the obvious knowledge that  
*here* was never worth as  
much as *there*

the thirty years i spend  
waiting for you to reappear

the first flowers of spring  
filigreed with crystals of ice

and powerlines at some point  
strung between dull grey  
poles, but no buildings

no signs of human machinery

the hum in my head that  
passes for truth  
when i close my eyes

and  
less with each new shooting  
          each new genocide  
          because listen

there can be no wealth in this  
world without cities full of  
children starving in abject poverty  
to make it real

there can be no  
heaven without hell

and, really, it's not a  
photograph i keep but a memory  
and it's not a poem but the  
words to a song you used  
to sing to me

i keep them both close to my  
heart long after i've  
forgotten the joy they  
used to bring

# *the forest's edge and what we found there*

your job is to map the  
city of masks, but where to begin?

snow covers everything  
and the stench of corpses

a war?

always and everywhere  
yes  
but this feels different

a plague maybe  
or a loss of hope

the age of internet porn and  
no way to escape it

a victim is a victim  
no matter how many lies you tell  
and the only way to be a  
politician is to be a whore

the only way to fuck the  
weak and the starving is to do it  
until they bleed and then  
do it again

why do you keep  
begging for the truth if it's  
never what you want to hear?



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