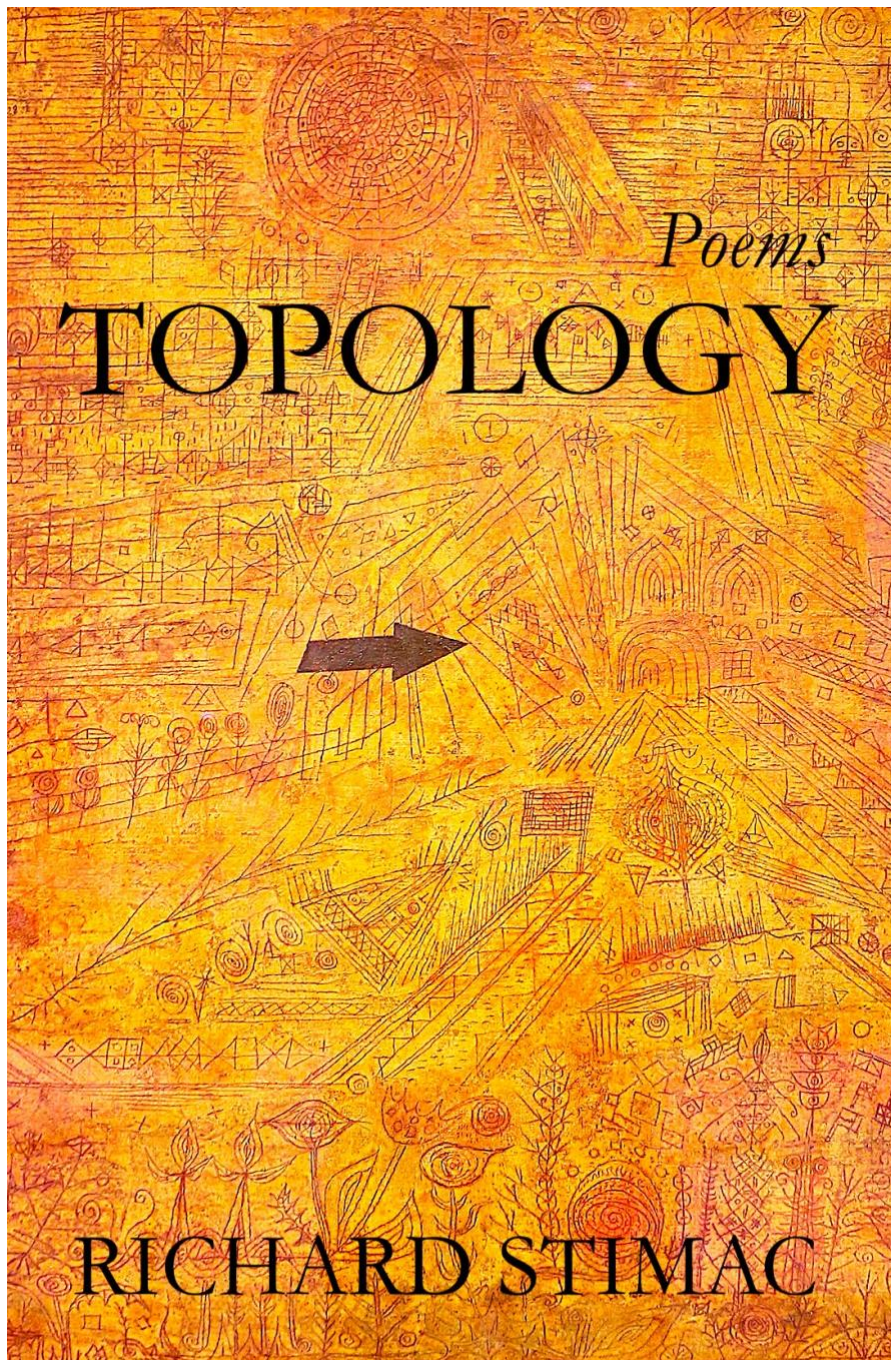

THE O:JA&L 2024 CHAPBOOK SERIES
A Writer's Portfolio



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A Writer's Portfolio

TOPOLOGY
Poems

RICHARD STIMAC

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WILD VIOLETS

We find them between the ties of hushed rails,
or cracked school yard blacktops,
even between control joints of sidewalks
that bank an abandoned city street,
the discarded things of human hand,
the undesired, uprooted, burnt
by controlled flame, or shorn
against summer dust.

Midwest yards harbor them,
delicate, beautiful,
as if heaven, filled with stars,
scattered across zoysia,
a cloudless sky in negative,
the grass, endless space,
the blooms, darkened stars,
and we, angels in our glory.

Their persistence is what frightens me,
cultivated, urbane, refined,
righting words in straight furrows
as if orderliness, being in itself,
gives rise against nature's ordered chaos,
takes root in the measured gardens,
earth turned under plow,
each spring planting given to its fall.

Yet, I love them so much.
Those things we name weeds,
in their uncommon plainness,
unplanned, unintended,
comfort me in deep-rooted knowing
that after the plotting, and platting,
the unconceived, the un-engendered,
will cover our feral desire.

ALLUVIA

We are river dust,
undulating silt of sand, clay,
broken pieces of quartz.
Floods birth us. When the river
sloughs its lining and deposits
its burden across the American Bottom,
the river, potent mother, carries us
to term, saves us from cross-bedded
deltas, then dissolving salty seas.

CONFLUENCE

Honeysuckle and bittersweet
dominate the iced trail
to the confluence. The mud froze
into jagged scutes, as if dormant
Leviathans hibernated beneath
the footpath. In spring thaw, gaping jaws
of miry earth will swallow whole
tread, lace, and sock of wanderers
unwary nothing solid is trustworthy.

The state piled a cairn at the conflux.
A brass plaque reminisces
about Lewis and Clark. Unnamed:
mound builders, underground railroads,
massacres, bridges and barges,
floods, all the give and take of the river,
too facile, too predictable a metaphor.
Next to the pile of rocks are benches.
On the opposite bank, a concrete tower
grants a heaven-eye view of the currents,
one brown-gray, the other orange-yellow.
They wait to merge for miles,
like lovers, afraid to touch.

Last time I walked that trail
along the strand, the river retreated,
not from me, too insignificant,
but from itself. The drought sunk
to record lows. The sky withheld
scarce rain for a year. Groynes of granite
stretched across dry sand.
Both should be submerged.
The land is transgressing
into a river that has lost its fight.
Not even the Corps can save it.

I stood on a sandbar,
as if I were Moses, and Yahweh,
in all His Heavenly Host,
parted the waters between Illinois
and Missouri so His enslaved children,
carrying what they possessed,
and the weight of history,
could flee from bondage.
God left His work unfinished.

And here, of these events,
I write my own scripture,
the black letters and white negative
spaces flow side by side, each denoting
the other. Civilization and barbarism
record reflected images, form one channel
with its swept sediment and eternal crawl
to the sea.

So what to make of this
river, shrunken from its power, its majesty,
its commerce, frontier, and mystery?
No one can walk from shore to shore.
The river still divides, as each word divides
the named and the unknown. I turn
away. The sun is set. Its refraction hangs
just above the crown of trees. Mistaken,
I seem to look unblinded into the sun.
Rangers will swing the metal gates closed
Soon. I retreat in my car down a paved country
road, to the Interstate, past the airport,
to home, where metaphors are abstract
and history confines itself to books.

DESIRE

You'd think something like a river is a fixed thing.
Maps, no matter how old, keep rivers in the same place.
Names change. Boundaries move, or dissolve.
Arrows mark migrations and invasions.
The river, given erosions and sediment, stays the course.

Like children, or cats, fixity is what adults desire.
All things change, with time. This is a truism.
But some things change so slowly, so easily unnoted,
we assume them permanent and build our imagination around them.
To think things can be otherwise is to be a god.

That was the first sin, in the Land Between the Rivers.
The Serpent implanted an image in Eve: "What if?"
Eden could be different than it was. Paradise lost with options.
Wisdom is knowing all that is need not be all there can be.
After the Fall, we could no longer accept we simply are. Like the river,

that once enclosed Paradise, and now slowly dies in its way
to the delta, we turn against ourselves. We are not enough.
Or so I feel. Like the river never rests in its mindless meander,
through my works, my days, wants and grasps, kisses, goodbyes,
I long to be a fixed thing, without movement, without will and thirst,

to be a standing body of water, a lake, a pond, a flippant backyard pool.
But that's not true. It's the sea I fear, the end of course, when all the sediment
collected over a continent dissolves into salt water. There the river ends.
The maps lose their contour. Far at sea, we lose our landmarks.
Lost, we drift, and lift our heads to the stars, secure in their heavens.

EVERGREEN

The snow fell three days before Christmas.
By that morning, rock salt pocks
and foundry soot scabs
marred what had been a beautiful
shroud or a swaddle. Depending on
the time of day, the reflection
from the snow blinded any
person dumb enough to stare too long.
That was the myth.

Inside, our parents commented on the snow,
as if it were an overseas war, unfortunate,
but insignificant. The roads were cleared.
And the sun slowly melted the fringes.
The only threat was nighttime freezing
that left a thin sheen of ice
over sidewalks and driveways.
Within a week, the snow would be gone.

This was a lean Christmas.
Even the painted plaster
Wise Men and shepherds
seemed gaunt, underfed,
overworked. Their unions
lost the strike last fall
and granted concessions
to all of management's demands,
our dad joked.

The previous year, we bought
a fake White Spruce, the best
to hang hand-made ornaments.
We left the lights on all night.

I was old enough to know
Santa didn't exist. My brother,

eight years younger, waited,
and waited, for me to open
the present. That was all there was.
one present, for both of us.

Our dad drug his legs
from the back porch
where he smoked.
Our mom sat beneath a crucifix
with a rosary draped over the arms.
Is this all, my brother said.
Our father held a frozen smile.
Our mother covered her mouth.
I became ashamed.

Of what, I can't say.
It's the non-saying
that's the real sin.
If God ordered Adam
to grant names, then we
sin in our non-naming,
non-naming a disease, a law,
a policy, an order of things
that dictates life. Names are given.
We named ourselves "sinners,"
usurping God as the Prime Cause
of all the suffering of the world.

The TV was turned down.
An advertisement for toy guns
followed one for a working oven,
that preceded by an invocation to visit
Saint Nick at the new mall.
Silent TV people laughed, as if they knew
the secret, had been inside the mall
Holy of Holies and saw not only
the ark gone, but God as well,
like the Wizard of Oz.

My brother unwrapped his gift.
I sat beside him. We made the best
of what we had. Later that day,

we would drive to one set
of grandparents, eat, talk, play,
nap, then drive to the other.
That's how it was, then,
That one year.

FIELD WORK

I slave under the summer sun.
My skin grows dark.
Like the fading of my own shadow,
black in my self-image, I root
deep into the top soil, full of crops
I judiciously garden: ebony blue of eggplant;
green of collard and turnip; uncircumcised
shafts of okra; chthonic white flesh of the yam.

I take refuge in this abstract survey
of the earth. A form of real estate I own.
Land is not chattel that can steal
away in the night. What is mine is mine.
The law confirms in me as much.
I have my peace. What more
is there for any of us?

That is how I seed the world.
There is no truth above the law.
Yet, I suspect there are bodies buried
in these raised beds, tombs
of board and nail and joint.
If I dig, I fear to find ossified history.
I am pale like bones.
My sin is indifference.

Beyond my garden wall, injustice
spreads its rhizomes, pushes bitter
roots downward, noxious stems to the skies.
I cannot keep this construct at bay;
a part must be of the whole. As I weed,
my mind wanders, through the gate,
down the path, up the street, to what
this country life, this heart of the heart
of the country, might have been,
given different sowing.

But that is the garden of mine own
imagination: each, separate, equal,
has an owned plot of land.
Ownership is freedom.
We know we must believe so.
This is a harvest worthy of tender.
I test the fullness of this yield's fruit,
select the good from the bad.
In the fall, my darkness fades.
I will sleep through the snow,
hidden from the fading winter sun.

FLOWER BED

My mother bound her flower bed
 with fasces and ligaments
of wooden beams held in place by iron spikes.
 Her garden was her holy space.
Lilies hung their heavy heads.
 Marigolds, to dissuade rabbits
from trespass, congregated, in mass,
 held on high, in contemplation.

One spring, her father, my grandfather,
 cut all the flowers down.
The stalks, too limp, the blooms,
 Not ample enough, he said.
The garden was in need of trim.
 I learned to hate them, both,
he for his cruelty, she for loving
 Him so much. She cried.

Hate never stays dormant.
 On her own death bed,
this woman—what do I have
 to do with her?—saw visions of her father,
open at her feet. He prayed,
 “Forgive me of my sins,”
as if she were his Savior.
 She could not save him,

but saved herself. When she died,
 I was away. Her mother
sat beside her, with the priest, I
 imagine, not present. My father,
too, my brother, her sisters and brothers,
 all the family, but me. The pain
sleeps deep in the dark soil of my soul.
 I have sat fallow too long.

GARDENING

My father kept a garden,
 As best he could. He worked
through the summer. The sweat
 of his brow burnt his eyes
and chapped his lips to cracking.
 But still he labored.
As much blessed as cursed,
 he forced the earth to render

what it would withhold. He took
 me with him, to the raised beds
of hand-turned clay earth.
 I was no helpmate.
Unspeaking, he held open his hand
 and I, by instinct,
placed whatever tool he desired
 in that upturned, calloused palm.

He kept for himself the why
 of his garden, the drive
to worry through hail, watch leaves
 wilt in unseasonal heat,
toss half-eaten fruit squirrels
 abandoned, as if to say,
even in a matrix of furrows,
 nature has its way with us.

As I grew older, and he grew old,
 I wondered who this man was.
For all the springs, summers, falls
 we bent side by side
in that garden, we spoke a handful
 of words, too few to scatter
in hope some grain of love would sprout.
 That was not our harvest.

What do I reap from these lines of words?

My father spoke through silence.

My memory of him is his seed.

I resow, year after year,

each time I recollect the past,

what he gave to me, his son.

Forgiveness demands its yield

passed down through ages.

GEOMETRY

We are the earth, platted and plotted, and allocated.
And the sea, the relentless, unconscious sea,
as we know, from department statistics and bureau reports,
these dark, wide, silent waves encroach and reclaim the land, reclaim us,
until all we thought solid, soaked with our sweat, buried with our dead,
our blood percolated to chthonic aquifers,
all that dissolves, and, behind it, allots
forests of grey trees and abandoned homes
hung on stilts, as if we could flee from the future.
We know this will happen.
This we cannot prevent.
In some ways, it should be solace,
that from the dust of the earth,
the silt of the river, we have come,
to the lightless bed of the sea, we will return.

HIGHLAND

No longer a young man,
I go east from the Gateway Arch,
that monstrous portal to the West,
a monument to destruction and glory,
empire and enslavement, to all the good

and bad my country offers. To me,
the prairie has a sacredness,
the unadorned vistas of the sky
remind me of gods: Zeus,
Azman, even Yahweh, on high.

I've come to visit my father,
in a nursing home, in Highland,
with its shuttered church
organ company, microbrewery
on the square, coffee shops, and more.

Highland, where my earthly father
has come to slowly die, dissolve,
like morning mist. Each time I visit,
less and less of him is there,
in Highland, Illinois.

I wonder at him, that he even lived.
I know his haunts: the alleys
behind the mill; the linoleum halls
of a now-demolished grade school;
a photo of him, shirtless, in Vietnam.

And now this. His teeth fall out.
He wants me to sue the home.
He tells me the same war stories.
I smile. He's not happy, but
content, which may be the same.

We don't hug goodbye. Haven't
in decades ever touched. He turns up
the TV with reruns of *Bonanza*.
I watch Highland fade in my mirrors.
I want to cry, to feel the loss.
Rain begins. Heaven cries for me.

JEFFERSON BARRACKS

A national cemetery rests
on bluffs above the river.
Once the largest base in the nation,
now a country park, guard depot,
and hospital. A wrought-iron
gate opens to soft curving roads.

I always thought, when driving
through, the cross-hatched rows
of bone-white marble markers
as Hydra's teeth, hand sown
like seed spilt upon the ground
to raise a grand army of the dead.

My mother is buried there.
She will not rise, not like that,
in the least. I don't visit often,
as much as a mourning son should.
We don't miss the ones we love,
but suffer with enduring memory.

I've only been twice, in seventeen years,
once with my dad, her husband; once,
alone. He fell to his knees and sobbed.
I watched. The second time, just me,
in place of words, I threaded tears
like profane crystal rosary beads

cast for the Queen of Heaven.
A doe and two fawn lazily graze
among the stones, walking metaphors.
My God, I miss her, my mother.
She was never happy, never fully
happy. I think, at times, short-lived:

the birth of a son; her marriage;
on her deathbed, when her father,

in a vision, asked forgiveness
for the hate he bestowed on her.
Now she is dead. As we all will be.
I don't know what to make of it,

all this life, this pain, these tears,
love, loss, laughter, the heaviness
that comes with bone and skin and flesh.
May she have peace, there, among the military
dead, as if peace were a thing. I don't
live in a world of metaphors. I leave
the dead to their own eternal fate.

LIBERTY TREE

This time, the river
retreated from its boundaries,
the cobblestone wharf,
the earthen levees.
What was once silty bed
now sun-dried bar,
beaches on either side
of the channel, as if
the river mimicked
its great rival, the sea.

Driftwood, bed frames,
barrels, a multitude of plastics,
littered the sand with tokens
of the past, as if God played
tricks by placing fossils
to dupe the unbelievers
who trust not in history
and its implacable change.

Up the concrete steps from the cobblestones,
The Arch strides wide across the earth
in search of the impious and scornful.
It looks no further than where it stands.
Like a castrated scrotum, the dome
of the Old Courthouse hangs inverse
between the sheet-metal legs.

One block away, a white mob
(white as rage, white as sin)
tied Francis McIntosh to a tree.
They piled up fire wood
and watched him burn
for twenty minutes,
a reverse Pentecost,
or charcoal Holocaust,
if you like. For years,

black people pilgrimaged
to knife off slivers,
as if it were the One True Cross.

MONARCHS

On clear summer days,
when a wind carried the foundry soot east.
I imagined a Sunday-afternoon TV scenario:
cowboys signaled for help against the Indians,
who sent their own pleas heavenward
with meandering smoke signals.
I'd stand on the broken garden wall and looked
to the west. Across the river, the sun
reflected off the spread legs of The Arch,
the monument to a time when St. Louis
offered itself to all new comers
swelling the American Empire.

In the far corner of the garden,
behind our tract house along the tracks,
the wall stood where my dad built it.
My mom planted a painted statue of Mary, Queen of Heaven,
in a grotto of crushed cinder blocks and Ready Mix.
Milkweed grew in abundance along the brick and stone.
Some summers, the thorn-like leaves
draped over Mary's veil.
Turgid pods hung in place of her plaster breasts.

Thick in the middle with uncircumcised tips,
the milkweed pods fit snugly in my palm.
With not much of a squeeze,
no pressure at all, really,
they burst. Silk-like white filaments with seeds
flagellated the air, then spilt upon the earth.
A milky sap ran down my fingers.

Once, my mother caught me molesting the mildewed.
"The monarchs," she said as she wiped the sap from my fingers,
"They lay their eggs here."
"Your father loves the monarchs. So do I."
She smiled. The next day,
I marched to desolate all the milkweed,

and knock Mary off her pedestal.

With one backhand, she fell headlong
into a pile of stems and broken pods
I had torn from the rock wall.
It was late evening, the sun half set.
A soft grey glow descended on the garden,
like a spirit come to rest itself.
The kitchen light went on.
My mother worked at the counter,
the frame of the window like a halo.
I watched her. Then my father
stood behind her and held her and kissed
her neck. I looked at the waste
I had laid and began to cry.

That was decades ago.
The mills shuttered.
The rails rusted.
The skies cleared.
The house sold.
My parents died.
The milkweed is gone, almost.
Almost, too, the monarchs.

I haven't been back to town,
let alone the garden, I think,
since the last funeral.
The family living in the house
now tore down the garden wall
and installed an above-ground pool.

I feed on memories of a time
when there was milkweed and monarchs,
and my father kissed my mother, and me,
alone in my guilt, in the garden.
The future is the regret of a present yet to be.

NAMES

When I push a sprout into the earth,
or mound soil atop a handful of seed,
I memorize the plot I've laid out,
though I know, in the end, I'll forget.

So, in the shed, I notate each square,
the what, the when, the where, the how,
as if I were inscribing a creation myth
for some future fool to read and cherish.

That was my first mistake. I draw blank
on the meaning of my own words,
and interpret, as if it were arcane,
my own writing. So much for scripture.

With black marker and paper cards,
I staked the things in the garden.
A graveyard of popsicle sticks
defined the furrow and mounds.

The first rain washed my handiwork away.
That was my second mistake, to believe
writing prevented oblivion. In any form,
words become visions we see but cannot touch.

I gave up my ghost, and the garden grew
how it willed, contrary and nonconforming.
Orange squash bloomed. Tomato vines climbed.
Carrots stems frizzed. Onions stalks waved

like congregants beset by the Spirit.
I knew what I'd sown only when I reaped.
Consequences reveal the cause.
Endings explicate beginnings.

I put those ideas to rest.
The squirrels left tomatoes half-eaten.

The pinky-sized carrots went to seed.
I stuffed the squash blooms with cream cheese.
and already plot next spring plantings.

PLASTIC FRUIT

A Pyrex bowl shaped like fig leaves held plastic fruit in the middle of my Grandma's linoleum kitchen table. The bowl was emerald, open heavenward, like upturned palms, to catch the rain, or grace, both as good as the other. The resin fruit glistened year-round: peaches, grapes, apples, even one banana. Next to the fruit, on a white ceramic plate with a hand-painted icon of Mary of Czechowicz, crescent-shaped poppyseed cookies hardened. Made at Christmas, by summer, no time soaking in tea softened them. I'd often bite one and nearly crack a tooth. Swinging on a far wall, a Kit-Cat Klock warily eyed the sleeping tiger cookie jar and beehive bread box. Potted plants framed the kitchen sink window. A clay dog slept on the sill, while a gold-plated Jesus hung on a marble cross. An aura of browned palm fronds framed the head. The kitchen was a garden, walled off from a less innocent world.

The back window of the kitchen opened to the clotheslines, the garden, the garage, the alley, and, hovering over the housetops, the smokestacks of the mill, like thin fingers reaching towards God. My grandma's thick fingers reached for a cruet of cream for her coffee. With a simple smile, she rocked back and forth and mumbled her prayers as her hands worried the worn wooden beads. She couldn't read or write.

When not playing in the cinder alley, I'd stay at her side, a glass of milk set before me. So small, I cupped the glass with both hands, like a chalice, and brought the lip to my mouth. She'd smile and push the paten of cookies towards me. "Eat. I'll be gone this time next year." She said that each summer. She put her body and soul

into the food she made. Besides her family,
her cooking was her pride as a woman.

One day, so hot, she had turned the air to freezing,
I watched the lace kitchen window curtains
flutter like the wings of angels above the floor grate.
Were they there to prophesy or witness?
Or simple observe, and stand, and wait?
My grandma wore a housecoat and sweater,
against my t-shirt and shorts. I shivered, then sneezed.
Droplets of blood bloomed in the milk,
splattered like sacrificial offerings
across the crescent cookies,
sprinkled tiny star-like pearls
laced around the Black Madonna and her Son.
The fruit lay untouched.

My grandma pinched my nose with her dish towel.
She forced my head against the back of the chair,
then replaced my hand with hers.
My blood marbled the linoleum table.
On the cold basement concrete, she stripped
me then soaked my clothes in cold water.
I sat under a throw and watched soaps
until my mom arrived from her second job.
By then, I was dressed, no mark of blood
upon me. Neither of us told.

I'd forgotten all this, or, not forgotten,
but misplaced in the attic of memory.
A stall at a Christmas bazaar
sold fresh poppyseed roles. As a sample
melted in my mouth, memory washed
over me, as if my past, all my losses,
held fast in the mold of some inanimate thing,
until I recognized it. Or was it the thing
that recognized me. Either is true.
My grandma did die, not the next year,
but at some time. I imagine myself her,
my grandma, if I'd be anyone. Her soul
speaks both in and through me, an illiterate
old woman buried in a man's body:

Love is not patient or kind, but failure,
and failure, and failure, like a death,
then resurrection, recurring eternal.
Love is loving when you know love
will fail. To believe otherwise is a sin.

RHIZOMES

The more I dig, the more I find.

 The ground that I live upon is full
of junk: coins, wires, screws, a key,
 shards of glass, a swatch of cloth,
a jaundice scrap of cardboard
 with smudged handwriting.
With each step, I press upon
 buried histories, forgotten lives.

But that's not why I dig
 hard Missouri clay
that masquerades as my lawn.
 I probe for rootstalks,
confused stems that do not stretch
 downward, to water, or upward,
to the sun, but side to side,
 each in search of the other.

Maybe that's been my misstep,
 seeing movement only
up, to the heavens, to the light,
 or down, to darkness,
and chambers and passageways.
 I never learned to look,
like the cross, left or right,
 but stay blind to others

beside me. Tribulations and trials
 shared, if never spoken,
weave networks between us.
 No one can find them all,
I conclude, as I rip a cord of root
 from one node to another.
Unearthing connections is endless.
 I leave that work for another day.

RIVER BLOSSOMS

The river blooms into the Gulf.
We see satellite images of bloody petals
push their way open, like a carnation
hanging limp in the ocean-blue sky.
With all the silt of cracked quartz
and all the factory-made fertilizer,
this flower will engulf this marginal sea.

The lower river is the stem,
the Missouri, the Ohio, rhizomes
that thrust their way into the heart
of the country. Once a salty expanse
covered the land. We know where
it receded: the rivers are its remains.

It is we who have sown this seed,
turned the earth over, against itself,
until this flower of evil buds.
The waste, the blood, the infection
drains into the watershed, like gangrene,
and courses through the waterways.

In the sunless deep, with bleary eyes,
the Leviathan smells the blood
and shakes sand from its snout.
From millennia of sleep, awake,
it follows the scent. This transgressing
sea encroaches on the desolate land.

Listen to the slow purr of the surf
as it slowly devours the coast.
It will come, this beast, and grind
with its teeth the alluvial lands.
That flower will never fruit,
but in time it will go to seed.

SALVAGE

Captain Eades walked the murky river bottom
in a pitched whiskey barrel weighted with lead.

A thin rubber tube brought air from above.
Hand over hand, he groped his way

through the mud until his fingers hooked
a balustrade, or fetter links, or jagged edges

of a boiler's burst copper plates.
He'd clasp a chain and haul the chattel up.

Returned to the sun, he laid like a corpse.
on the deck of the boat. His body ached. He labored

for breath. He grew sleepy. And still he searched
for wrecks. When a boy, his family landed

on the cobblestone wharf. The ship caught fire.
Everything they owned sank. Within years,

his father escaped upriver. The family lived
in poverty. By thirty, Eades made a fortune.

He waged war against the river all his life.
I, too, dived the wrecks, hidden in darkness.

When I was a boy, we lived on a raft
of American dreams and union paychecks.

We powered our delusions with cords of bones.
Sweat and tears released from the gas pipe.

We felt our gears slips. The current proved
too strong. The river, like all sleeping gods, devours

it young. When we sank, my father lost
his health, then his ambition. My mother's

body dissolved on laundromat floors
and doctor's waiting rooms. My brother,

too young to know, feared why
gifts were so few. I threw my goods

overboard and swam for the feral bank.
We stood wet and cold and penniless

along the landing. My father fell to bed.
My mother, to work, My brother, to his machines.

And I, to words, my salvage, the ruined hulk
hidden below the waves. I've dived deep.

Lightless, I groped water-logged photo albums,
cribs crusted in sludge, tract homes smeared

with the soot from mills, cars driven to rust,
unused food stamps, bonuses, like deferred happiness,

and bodies, like ghosts, but not, of what
might have been, deluged dreams.

I let them recede. No underwriter desired
to pay me specie to haul this junk to light.

Some things are best left unclaimed, sunken
in the sands of time. Let some future

treasure hunter test his worth against the current.
I turn my back on wealth. I am poor in things.

“SEA IS THE LAND’S EDGE”

Here, in the Midwest, we are far
from the plaintive song of the sea,
so we think. Though what is the river
but the remnants of a shallow sea?
The poet tells us the river
cuts a deep valley through the soul.
Imagine that, the river, a brawny god
who swings an axe of chiseled flint
and cleaves a chasm down the breast
from headwater to the delta between our legs
where all things empty into unfathomed tides.

Those are romantic and comforting thoughts,
like a rhythmic nursery rhyme a mother sings
her frightened child, or the solace of a priest,
conflicted between compassion and creed,
as he strokes the hand of a man
dying, but unrepentant. What does one do?

I, for certain, do not know.
Very seldom, often drunk, or high, or both,
I let my imagined self float on the current,
a desire to be free from desire.
The deep, knowing waters take me
where they want me to go.
In my imagination, so I am.

But in the real, the river is filthy
with industrial waste and fertilizer
and the undecayed discards that ground
the street, the house, the frame,
all the structure of what makes life
life, as we live it. And so, too, this to the sea.

Which leaves us, where?
We are eternal and bound,
we are the earth, and the map

imposed upon it. The river
is always silent, but if you listen,
as I do, you can hear the whisper
of waves as they wear down the shore.

SLAG

Across Illinois, unnatural ridges
rose against the prairie. We called them slag,
though tail or gob is a more exact word,
if exactness is what's wanted. I'd say vomit
from the gaping mouths of the now-closed mines.
I was born near these mounds, in a small town
with an empty Main Street and soon suppression
of the local parish. The bishop removed
the defrocked priest. The school closed. Boys flung rocks
through the stained-glass windows. Faded small plastic
American flags picketed the lawn.
The post office shut down a year ago.
My parents and me drove to that small town,
where my grandparents farmed and where the rest
of my mom's family lived or worked, each holiday.
From the backseat, I'd strain my neck to see
a sky that took up two-thirds of the frame
of the back window and a low horizon
spun past like a zoetrope gone haywire.
It was my repetitive Dutch landscape.
But then there they were, like wrecked monuments
of a brutal collapsed civilization.
Beyond fir, beech, elm, spruce, and pine windbreaks,
built along the small creeks slowly gone dry,
the peak of a violet mountain of ash
appeared first, then the slopes marbled with black
veins, as if the dried dross were precious stone.
And I wondered how such peaks came
to be. Maybe I was a seer, or just
a boy with too taught an imagination.
I thought, what if a demon snatched a handful
of Ozark foothills and spilled highland seed
upon this glaciated ground? Up sprung these mounds
like shattered teeth of a beheaded hydra?
This land was once beneath a wide salt sea,
so scattered scutes, from a leviathan's
back, severed by a demigod hero?

When the waters receded, maybe giants
went to and fro in the earth, and walked up
and down in it, and lived under the sun,
free, til God formed humans from spit and clay?
This vein of thought, this child's tale, scripture, myth,
proofed in the fire of my mind as the purest.
I thought, these giants burrowed in sod dens
and slept. The clank of shovel and pick-axe
awoke them. Minecart after minecart hauled
their cracked bodies to the sun, long forgotten,
as all loved things are when the lover sleeps.
Those slag heaps were cairns to broken titans.
Imagine breaker boys down in the mines,
hammers too heavy for their childish hands,
as they ruptured petrified coal from waste
that then their fathers, uncles, brothers tipped
beside the fields of corn and wheat. It lay
corpse-like, as if fit for a visitation
of the bereaved who wept and prayed their rosary.
When these mourners looked in the dead pupils,
did they see small reflections of themselves?
Probably not. The company logo,
more likely, and the rusted gallows frame
with its lamenting whine of thick steel coils
that lowered grim crews to their livelihood,
or their death. I most like to think the mounds
as martyred beati, incorruptible,
odour of sanctity risen from creeks
sheened with oil of the saints. But I knew nothing
of mines, mills, layoffs, closures. I never
saw these mounds as loss. Such a mass as these
mold history, solidified, and seep
into the sanctified font of groundwater.
Parents baptized infants in this toxic suspension.
Bikini'd girls and skinny boys swam in the park pool.
Grandparents irrigated their backyard gardens.
The food they ate, the water they drank, was the past,
transubstantiated, wholly human,
wholly earth, a link across the chasm
that now separates the two, forever,
world without end. But I can't lament this.
I'm a prophet at a loss. That is fact.

When night gathers its shades, barn owls awaken
in the framehouse of an abandoned mine.
Outside sounds from the arising night echo
against the sheet-metal walls. One owl blinks,
lazily, as it turns its head backwards,
a metaphor for a retrospect wisdom.
We only know how our day has finished
after we have lived, never as we live.
Alit atop a lamp across the street
from the library, the owl's feathers glimmered
as if gilt in gold. The sun finally set,
the owl shivered, then flew into the dark.

TENDER

Beneath the plains, history lies in abandoned coal mines
that undergird the farm fields and small towns and interstates.
At times, the mines collapse. Homes, stores, roads
fall into the unlit sinkholes. The state has no remedy.

My grandparents lived over the mines. On our way to visit,
we passed the mounds of slag, Midwest ziggurats to human hubris.
I'd fall asleep and my soul wandered into those mines,
holes where my grandfather, my great-grandfather, ancestors

once sweated for their daily bread. I imagined my hands brushing
along the chiseled walls, my fingertips reading the raised surface
for judgments or admonitions. Soot filled my lungs.
Stale air thickened my breath. Sweat burnt my eyes.

I saw their ghosts, the men who blasted and hammered
and hewn these lamp-lit corridors, whose pharaohs would never
be buried here with gold gods and bejeweled crowns.
The miners, with dead silence, passed me, too tired to raise

their eyes, even nod, or smile for a common breaker boy.
Some would be buried in nearby plots. Others fled for distant graves.
I longed for the sun, and my parents. As the coal tenders
once followed the tracks, I worked my way out of the mines.

The sun had set. I was alone, in the backseat. My dad,
indifferent, kept eyes to the road. My mom turned back,
smiled, and told me I had been sleeping. A cloudless night
pushed down on us. Within an hour, we returned home.

TOPOLOGY

The staff laid my father out. His hair uncut, his chin unshaven,
his hands folded across the knoll of his stomach.
The hogbacks of his arms and legs stretched like headlands
into the white foam of the cascading sheets.

I had made this Christmas Day visitation alone.
A World War II documentary on the Ardennes mimed
across the TV screen. The History Channel was muted
Commercials for lawyers interrupted the predetermined war.

Across the hall, a man wept, "Jesus, Mary, and Josphe, save me."
The smell of urine and infection and hobbled death rose like incense
through the sanitized halls. Fluorescent lights glimmered off the floor.
A woman in a wheelchair cradled a swaddled plastic baby.

He was a living *transi*, my father, there, before me,
theophany of soul, *memento praeterita*. I needed prodding
to the past. Death is always future. And the future
lies beyond memory. I had no need to remember death

is always future, so death is never present. I know this,
as I mark my father's body, each part a distinct span of life:
his white hair, the wispy smoke from chimney's at the foundry
where he shoveled wet black sand; the stubble on his beard,

hoarfrost overlading branches of the parish park;
his chest, a sinkhole, the karst of his heart, collapsed;
his arm angled like Vietnam, where he abandoned part of his soul;
train track scars running along his stomach, the soft down

like the overgrowth of abandoned rails.
His body contained the multitude of his story.
I, too, am history. When I touch myself, deeply,
let my fingers sink into the silt that is my flesh.

That dust is my life, as well as the river, the sea, all
of time. I am the past, future, was, is now, shall ever be,

forever, word without end. The body is climax of time.
He woke, as if called from the grave. "I'm tired,"

he said. I smiled. He slept. On the TV, snow fell
across the backs of paratroopers. The man across the hall
hummed a burdened drone. The woman with the baby
smiled like an icon of Mary with the infant Jesus,

a *Theotokos* of withered flesh. I drove home
beneath a conscious-clear sky. The Interstate emptied
this Christmas Day. A freight train paralleled
the pavement. Construction on the bridge halted traffic.
With the drought, the river sunk to new lows.
By the time I parked, night had come.

TRANSGRESSIONS

At one time, the sea cleaved this continent in two,
From Gulf to Artic. The already ancient Appalachians
and the adolescent Rockies embraced this marine transgression
as if the mountains were a mother's arms, the shallow salty water, her
newborn.

Slowly, today, the sea reclaims delta and floodplains.
Chaos, if chaos exists, returns to the platted land.
Maps must be redrawn. Values recalculated.
Entropy is perspective, not fact

Can the edge of land and water ever be measured?
The now between past and present?
The sea reminds us, we never know exactly where we are,
where we begin, where we end. Nothing is liminal,
if the limits are always in play.
Disorder is a new order, unwanted and inevitable.

This is how I see the body:
we have no borders; we know no restraints.
Certainty is a self-portrait, a fixed moment, a chart
we reference when we forget who and where we are.
Even our skin erodes like coast lines slough
into the eternal break of waves.
Yet we fear the dissolution of the self.

The sea will rise. We know that.
We will die. We will be forgotten.
But like river silt, or inundated coasts,
parts of us continue. Someone may point
to map, history book, family album, and say,
here he is, submerged now. Or,
there she once lived, before the flood. Or,
a great structure built by human hands once stood
where now the tidal force teases,
where mudflats bloom and wilt twice a day.

I should have solace, this knowing, I am a forever thing.
But the soft surf, rhythmic, gentle, like the heartbeat
of a mother, does not comfort me. I long to stand, alone,
on the shore, look to the sea, ponder the infinite,
shrouded in a rainproof windbreaker.
The sea reflects the sky. The sky reflects the land.
They both reflect upon me.

If my body never decays, and I am stasis,
I will mourn those I love. None will mourn me.
A desire for eternity betrays me.
Tired, or hungry, or simply bored,
I will turn my back on the sea's empty horizon,
return to the land, to what I imagine is trustworthy.
After such days, I sleep well.

UNDERSTORIES

My country is the confluence of Mississippi and Missouri,
the river country of once submerged granite cliffs
to bottomland of black soil and understory of rot.

The river creates this land. Sediment abrades bedrock.
Floods shroud lowlands with silt.
The river is both creation and creator.

We even count time with the Big Water:
“One Mississippi. Two Mississippi.”
As if our words create yearly change.

Springs from subterranean seas birth new rivers.
Stones, cloven like the skull of a god,
give rise to springing headwaters.

That is why we worship them, with their innate wisdom.
In our abysmal fear of oblivion, we know
rivers submit as oblates to the holy sea.

The two great rivers flow side by side for miles
beyond the confluence. The rust-brown,
the jaundice-yellow, meld to putrid-green.

They are like lovers, determined to follow separate paths,
but drawn by laws of nature to touch, tentatively,
avoid coupling, then, lose identity in inevitable union.

Sex and death flow side by side, too. In our imagination,
we keep them separate, as if we were engineers
of the soul able to raise levees, construct dams

that limit the terrible destruction of bed and grave
immersed beneath us. We do not so much
drown as we sink, like sand, to the bottom.

In the last legs of the journey, we rest in the delta,
the open mouth of the river, as it spews
its discharge, a continent worn down by friction,

into the salty, seemingly infinite expanse of the sea.
For us, anything greater than a river is infinite.
We all come from a country of rivers.

WATERFALLS

We heard but never saw
the rush of the woodland stream
over an outcrop of limestone.
The stream marked the boundary
between our land above the bluffs
and the swatch for the state highway
the county maintained. Below,
farms covered the bottom.
Beyond that was the river.

Heavy weekend rains flooded the road.
We couldn't drive to Sunday mass
so we walked the sodden woods.
The tree trunks rose as columns
supporting the vaulted ceilings of branches.
Nature acted as our Holy Ghost.

Most of the year, the stream was a trickle.
The water table had fallen that low.
In the summer, sections sunk into mud,
more a swamp than a moving body
of water. But today, the skies
still dark, half gray, the first
of the sun faded, a real stream
flowed below our home.

If you remember, you said
we should find the pool
that formed after storms.
It was summer, and warm,
and we could soak our feet
in the cool water and watch
tiny fish nibble at our toes.

It was already hot and I wavered,
but you wend uphill without me.
I watched you until I knew
you would not turn back.

We could go together,
or alone, in different ways.

On our way to that very spot,
you heard it first, or I did,
that low rumble, almost a hum,
of the waterfall, an echo, of a whisper,
as if some silvan god,
or nymph, tried to advise us to,
maybe to warn us not, go deeper.

Still, we went, deeper, into the trees.
You'd think the waterfall easy
to find: just follow the stream up
the incline. But the more we climbed,
the more distinct, yet distant,
the sound became. By now, the sun
hung straight over the woods.
We waded through air more like water,
as if we were sea bottom explorers
searching for merchant wrecks
or lost ancient cities.

You paused and wiped the sweat
from your brow. I sat on a rotting log.
Together, we looked upward, to the sun
reaching through the leaves.
Dappled shadows danced across the ground.
Without a word, you turned back.
At the gravel drive
that led to the house, I said,
"Too bad we never saw the waterfall."
"We know what waterfalls are,"
you said. "We tried," I added.
"Satisfaction is in the trying."
You hmped as you opened
the kitchen door. "I prefer
fantasy to struggle." The words
trickled off your tongue, as if
gravity forced them out.
You began to unlace
your mud-entombed boots.

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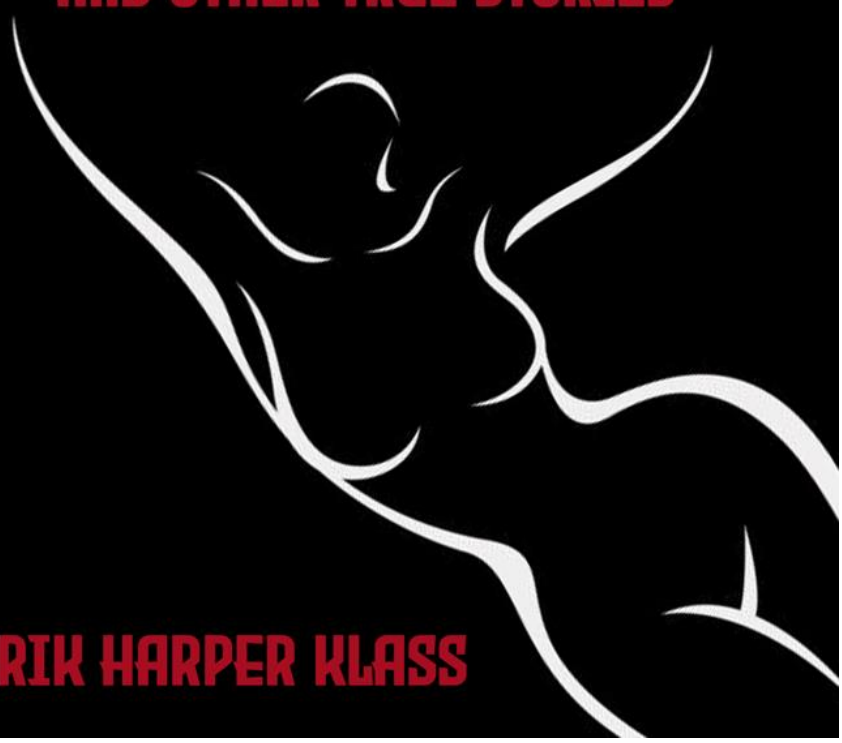
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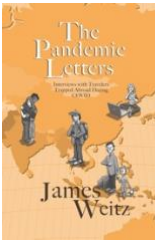


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