AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jon Boisvert for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 24, 2009.

Title: Visible Man

Abstract approved:

Karen Holmberg

This collection of poems discusses the human body, the desires to have control over that body, and the memories contained within. In some poems, the body is overt; in others, the probing spills from man into the animal world, and even poems that depict landscape often do so in bodily terms: the creek as a friend, the shorn field as an infant, notion of the American frontier set into the eyes of a single train-hopper. And, although there are many bodies in these poems, it is the figures of father and son that have the strongest presence.
Visible Man

by
Jon Boisvert

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Jon Boisvert Author
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Visible Man
Desert

Two boys on mescaline
leave their trailer to walk
the cracked red hills
of Arizona.

They find a pair of scorpions
dancing, clipping one
another with their claws,
immune
to each other’s venom.
Crouching in the long
crucifix of a saguaro
shadow, they watch

until one set of claws goes limp.
And God is in the desert too,
watching himself in
Michael,

whose last name
really was Schmeikel,
and Ian, whose last name
was Cain.
Ice

Every year, some schoolmate’s drunken, coked-up father slips through the sheet. His family’s income, his promises to improve, everything about him disappears, flushed down the cold blue of the lake. It isn’t luck, or the Fates. Or a hungry earth cracking open. They get drunk, drive a truck onto a lake, slide around and cheer, spinning in circles; then the ice breaks, and the truck sinks. And after the last air is squeezed from their lungs, the water calms, and nature goes to repairing the hole. Meanwhile, before the man is found, his kids eat breakfast and get on the bus. And every year, after the truck and man are hauled up from the bottom, all children adopt the mourning attitude that belongs to his boys or girls while the adults share memories of their hero, lost to some unforgiving sea, noting how his age stands out among the Obituaries column, the classified ad for his air compressor: BelAire, eighty gallon, single phase, like new.
Telemachus

I went to the garage one day, took a bucket
and a pair of tan leather work gloves,
the grimy fingers almost black.
I put them on and carried the bucket
to the willow tree in the corner of the yard.
Dead from long-ago strikes of lightning,
the tree was soft, with a single sad limb
reaching into the power lines.
I began searching for them,
tiny grey water moccasins I knew
were born here every summer.
The stiff, oil-soaked fingers of the gloves
tore off sheets of musty bark and broke
into the tree’s pulpy belly with ease.
They dug into and pawed the fleshy sawdust
out at my command.
When I got to the half-dozen newborn snakes,
I scooped them out, set them in the bucket.
Their eyes were bulbous and foggy,
their necks unbelievably thin.
As they ran into each other, blind
and scared at the bottom of my bucket,
I watched, entranced by the venom sacs
I understood to be somewhere
back in their heads like tonsils
or the wisdom teeth I’d one day have.
When something told me I was satisfied,
I walked across the road, put the bucket down
and tipped it over. The moccasins poured
like streams of grey water into the tall grass.
I returned to the garage to put things
back the way I’d found them, and saw
the vice at the end of the work bench.
The cold, steel mouth was still open.
I took the gloves off and rubbed its teeth,
still not knowing where he was.
Escapology

Although I did not go out every year,
there was one ritual I was always expected
to perform on Halloween: to stop next door
and visit Ms. Flitcroft. In dark late-afternoon
I walk up the cold cobblestone path
to her cottage and knock on the door.
It opens slowly, reveals an old woman
bent to a child’s height.
She instructs me to take from her candy dish,
holds it out with an arm like a dead branch.
The bars and wheels of ribbon candy are so slouched
from heat and age they’ve become a single piece
under a fine dust growing denser every year.
She tells me to have a seat on the yellow
chaise lounge. I do, and an ancient beagle,
bent like her, appears from under it,
sits over my shoes. I remember the rumor
that she had its vocal chords cut out.
I pat the dog’s back, feeling its skin and vertebrae,
expecting to have my hand coated with
a dust like that on the candy. Ms. Flitcroft
gets to her rocking chair, nestled close
to the yellow couch in the crowded room,
and begins the first story.
Her brother, when they were young, caught a crow
with a homemade trap. They kept it as a pet.
She points to a heavy wood chest
with quilts piled atop it. This is where
the crow’s cage was kept.
For a moment she is silent, staring at the chest;
hers still-extended arm with its moss-like spots
comes down. Her face goes bewildered as the crow
flies from her memory.
Now the second story begins.
Her father was born here too, in this cottage.
When he was young he shared the back room
with an immigrant boy, a runaway.
Handsome, Hungarian, the boy confessed
to changing his name twice already.
From Weisz he was Weiss, and now Houdini.
Clearly proud, she gets up and lurches
through the doorway to the rear of the cottage, returns with a yellowed circus flyer. The curly-haired Hungarian is leaning forward, heavy cuffs and chain on his wrists. Behind them his body is beautiful, classically shaped, with a hard, geometric abdomen and calves big as a man's fists. The intensity of his body clashes with his charming face, calmed by the confidence that he will escape this binding, that he can escape anything like abra-cadabra, I'm gone!
Creek

1990

I am allowed to walk alone
only as far as the creek.
So I make it my friend,
my second home.
Curly eggshells on the bank
tell me snapping turtles are born.
I probe water with
the longest sticks I can,
nervously.

1992

I see brains,
a tiny spray of blood
on the driverside window
of a red car parked along the water.
I walk home, tell no one.

1994

Following the creek into the woods,
I find an ounce of weed taped
to a tree. I bring it to school
to show some older boys.
I want to give it away
but no one wants it—
it's too much to be
walking around with.
They are scared,
which makes me scared.

2004

I find bones, a dog skeleton
half in the water
wrapped in a plastic tarp,
four legs bound
with baling twine.
There is still some fur, a tail.
The rest is clean, large bone
and fat, happy maggots.
Fields

If you shave a doll's head,
the pattern left behind
looks like
cut corn fields in winter.
And after a while,
it's all you see—
acres and acres of shaved
plastic baby head
expanded, pounded flat,
populated
with mice making holes,
murders of crows
gleaning blood like lice.
The frozen puddles' glass eyes
look back at you,
mutter a word
like "mother."
Delavan, Wisconsin

Barnum and Bailey made our town famous, *Circus Capital of the World*. In the Old Square a bronze giraffe reached out toward the belly of the water tower, sniffing it for leaves.

Our Hall of Fame for clowns had walls lined with amber photographs of men with wide smiles painted over their faces. A tiny hat perched on one’s head like a bird.

But when the *Circus* title was transferred to Milwaukee, the Hall was emptied. Lion’s head fountains lost their paint and faded into yawning ghosts.

Railroad cars, once wildly colored, claiming to hold famous acrobats, exotic panthers, also paled. One has been resurrected as a dank tavern adorned with a neon *Hamms* bear.

The caravans left with Houdini, who had run away from home, south to Delavan to find his share of the circus-fame. They took him to New York where he stayed.

They also left behind a great monster. One winter, an elephant too sick to travel further was drug onto the lake and left for a Spring thaw, where this happens:

The ice around it cracks and opens, the ice-burnt giant floats slowly toward the muddy bottom, and the bluegill gawk at God descending upon them.

Rays of sunlight burst through the hole and sharpen the body’s expanding shape: the wide ears unfold like wings, and the long, thawing trunk curves out peacefully, like a benediction.
Numerology

I was in third grade; we were read *The Whipping Boy*, one chapter a day.
Your apartment number was two-thirteen, fifty miles north of my hometown.
I was eight, my father forty-one, when I first heard your name. My father
was building a 'thirty-four Ford coupe, and had cut its chassis for a larger engine.
You ate the biceps and brains, had two freezers full of wrapped flesh.
I was building a scale-model replica, setting a tiny three-fifty-one block
into my own frame, keeping pace with my father as best I could.
When they raided your home, they found three severed heads, three torsos in acid.
My father had, by then, bought a fiberglass body and lowered its top three inches.
I admired his ideas, but he never let me watch when he performed a major change.
How the chassis widened, how the body lowered—these were mysteries I could not mimic.

We were read *The Whipping Boy*, one chapter a day, all the way to the end.
Fifteen murder charges stuck; they became fifteen life sentences.
The youngest boy you killed was fourteen—six years older than me.
Three years later I was eleven; my father’s coupe was finished and sold,
replaced by an *El Camino* from the mid-seventies. My model coupe remained
on a shelf with other miniatures of my father’s works. That year—
the year the coupe was dragged off on a trailer—you were murdered with a pipe in prison,
nine-hundred and fifty-four years left to serve.
Guilt

I didn't beg; I, sharp-minded ten-year-old used tact. I did it casually, dropping a plumb line into my father's subconscious to slide the details that I was capable, responsible enough to take that horned lizard home from the pet store. When I'd filled that hole in him, he said "we'd better not let it get lonely" and, pairing things up the way he thought parents ought to be, he bought me two. They ate crickets, splayed themselves on the warm sand of their cage, shot blood from pockets near their eyes leaving wet polka-dots on the glass. In the summer, I took them out to the anthills where they poised over the holes, tails wagging in anticipation. I said goodnight when turning their lamp from yellowy day to red night. Then the holes behind their eyes grew infected. I went back to the pet store, alone, and asked what was wrong. They gave me a bottle and directions. I applied the liquid to the eyes with a cotton swab several times a day as I was shown, and a few days later, they died. The bottle was liquid bandage. They'd died blind because of me, me who couldn't see when I'd been given wrong directions, me who couldn't even read the label of what I'd been given or understand what I was doing blinding those eyes over and over.
Luke

Naturally incompatible.
We were ten at first.
Every time one sped off on his bicycle,
the other stood throwing stones.
We put a cigarette to our young boy mouths
and wrote our one name in its smoke,
smearing our discord together
and coughing it into the sky.
Yes, we were that huge then.
As soon as were close enough to share
a bedroom, we could no longer talk.
It finally went how we always knew
it would. Luke moved away,
to Chicago.

As real men we met only once,
by accident, a party in winter,
a cold serendipity.
Seeing the same years in each others’ eyes
across a brown card table littered
with empty cans, we laughed again,
like the lines weren’t going down
like fiberglass, and Luke left my life
the way I’d like to leave it, too:
completely.
Unexplainably forgiven.
Concussion

Running for a ball at age nine, I hit my head against a swingset leg, and my unconscious body slid into woodchips. Other children tried to wake me and I blamed them for the hazy vision and pain. A recess attendant took me to a nurse who sent me home, never quite saying why. She may have called it an accident, a lump, a bump, or even boys will be boys. But never a Concussion, Traumatic Brain Injury. I imagined a fight took place in which I was the hero, an underdog against great playground evils. I was loved even more for my losses. Ten years later I met a man so much like me, I fell in love because of it. And as I watched him stumble home at night with heroism built up in his mind, I saw the dizziness, the pride in his swollen lip or bleeding ear, the details of his victory forming like a bruise.
Desert (2)

Two boys at Tenuda's Italian Market
stare the cold hanging pigheads
in the eyes.

At the natural history museum
they pass wax early man, heading for
a pair of Mammoth skeletons
discovered near Lake Michigan's
modern shore: the two largest intact
specimens ever found.

One is wired together, standing prominent,
each tusk larger than a man.
Giant, lifted fishhooks.

The other is in stones, mahogany skull
on the floor, vague, legs piled
like a broken toy.

Later, the boys will go to the shore,
poke at icy garbage hidden
under rocks like shellfish.

The fog will look like an ocean.
Snow will fall into the water,
and on them, and on.
Mirror

I've seen you naked
at the mirror.

While I was opening
snapping turtle eggs
you were racking
Coke machines with bats.

While your mother
was a nurse
mine made latex gloves
in a factory.

When you smoke
I breathe.

I've seen you throw pool balls
down crowded streets,
spiderweb windshields,
laugh like a hero.

The problem with mirrors
is you break them.

Your hand meets its double
on the cool glass,
fractures it,
wipes the pieces to the floor.
Dream

I know people who believe
we dream in black and white.
Grayscale love affairs,
Hollywood flashbacks,
falls from white bridges
into black water.
Here is one instance:

I dream of paper.
A sticky ball of pulp
forms deep in my throat.
It rises into my mouth.
As I spit it out, it dries
in little rounded sheets,
puffs of fluttering scraps,
white blossoms flying
off a cherry tree.
You collect the petals
from the ground,
make a notebook,
begin to draw.

You show me the notebook,
your charcoal drawings
all dead figure sketches—
skeleton men walking
skeleton dogs,
little skeleton children
holding ice cream cones.
That world was beautiful,
your Bone City.

You said I was your father once.
You were drunk, like my father,
and you wanted to kiss me.
I don’t remember when or where,
only that I was your father,
and that your father was gone.

“If I ever see him again,
I’ll kill him.” I’ve said it, too.
I am not a cherry tree, and
you are not this X-ray Artist,
but one of black and white
words more alive than dreams.

I am smoking your cigarettes,
it says in your journal.
I am smoking them
by the hundreds.
Blonde

Michael was all white,
long white hands,
white hair. Michael
didn’t play in the snowdrifts
at recess; the boys hurled
snowballs laced with gravel
if he did. Michael went
to speech therapy instead,
hallway tiles clicking under
the beautiful shoes he wore.
Pretending he was rich,
Michael spent his afternoons
alone in the backs of
imaginary limousines
where he couldn’t hear us
calling him “faggot,” “queer.”
Not even knowing what men
and women really are,
we were certain somehow
that boys should not want to be
models or carry mirrors.

In high school Michael was expelled early
for the ritual dagger discovered
in his locker. It was intended for
casting a spell of love over Pete Jones,
who we eyed for signs of Michael’s magic.

After his expulsion Michael would be
in the old yellow farmhouse where I lived.
He would smoke brittle weed from soda cans
and crippled little joints, stumble up the
basement stairs holding his waterbra breasts,
  twirling the long slivers of his blonde hair,
  imagining names for a new life:
  Nadia, Nikoletta, or Michele.

Everyone heard the story:
There was a party at the farmhouse.
Upstairs, blacked out on coke and Xanax
Michael was raped.

A woman named Siobhan
rolled enormous over his dazed cock,
stuck it in her mouth, unwilling to notice
his indifferent ribcage

undulating with shallow breath,
his long white torso, his long arms
splayed across cotton sheets, not resisting,
almost careless, never coming.
Slow Dance

Haley Hayes was beautiful the first time we met, kicking the back door of Our Redeemer Lutheran open, wearing fishnet stockings and twenty-eight hole lace-up boots, cigarette swinging like a horsewhip, yelling how fucking stupid detention was, how she can’t wait for eighth grade when she will be allowed to public school. Freshman year, we were neighbors; I used to hold her bag at the bus stop when she had to puke liquor before school. It was raining once; walking home she took me into slow dance on Carlson and Third in the middle of the street and sang lightly. The rain took down my liberty-spiked hair and poured it over her shoulders. I asked when we could stop. “You’re going to be a very lonely person if you don’t learn how to slow dance in the rain” she said. A car honked at us in its way.
In November she turned twenty five, and she was still beautiful, with a red silk scarf tied in a big bow hiding the scrapes around her throat the drunken homemade noose had made when she taught him how to dance in the garage of her childhood home. Over the coffin, a twelve by eighteen-inch picture of her taken that Halloween in a white wig and dress looking so much like Marilyn Monroe, smiling.
Nullo

"The role of the artist is a selector of materials and techniques."—Marcel DuChamp

finger

Carbon, charcoal, oil paintstick,  
how many were there?  
How many five-fingered hands had you drawn  
before you decided  
to off one,  
the pencil abandoned  
for a mail-order scalpel,  
bone shears,  
a stolen syringe of lidocaine?  
Or were you more impulsive the first time—  
a few shots of ouzo and the tiny explosion  
of a kitchen knife  
wedging through the joint?  
How did it look,  
all alone?  
How long did your thoughts continue  
telling it to move?

hand

Did you flinch  
when the blade came down?  
Did it look like a star  
had landed in blood?  
Did you wish?

"exploratory surgery"

You’re opening up now, in your way.  
After examining layers  
in so many “Visible Man” books
it must have been hard not to believe
it could be as easy.
Integumentary,
muscular, skeletal.
Knives turn like pages, don’t they?

**genitals**

When you took them off, did you consider
those poor girls exiled to boy bodies,
the comfort they’d feel in a smooth,
sutured spot like yours?
Did you think of Adam and his leaf
in your gauze?
Did you discover something like shame?
Did you still have two legs
for blood to run down?

**penultimate stanza**

When Death runs across a shorn field
with you slung over his arm,
he will take pause to ponder
if he’s dropped something
from his parcel. He will search
until a rosy dawn
lifts into the sky like a sheet.

**understanding**

This is silly, isn’t it? These aren’t
the questions we ask art:
why is this bit of clay sitting here,
why is another there?
Why did you wire-cut into them?
Why do you still?
This is silly, isn’t it?
Suspension

She had four fishhooks put into her back; they were thick, their barbs filed off. She was lifted. Afterward, the hooks were removed and cleaned. She soldered two together in the shape of a heart, wore it on a string around her neck. But the heart never beat, and the holes in her back, though gory crescent moons at first, didn’t scar. I pushed softly on them with a damp cloth when she came home, but I hadn’t watched her hang. Maybe I didn’t like the man in charge, didn’t want to see him push into her. Maybe it was the blood, but I doubt it. I thought she was going away somehow, flying off on shiny wings and not coming back. But here she is now, flightless, and when she takes the necklace off she leaves it on the bathroom shelf, and I look at the heart’s own scarred spots where the barbs were taken. Against the porcelain sink, the metal heart makes a tinny, ringing sound like the chirp of a little bird.
Corset

He will go first. Breathing deep, he will watch ten needles push through ten marked spots: five in a row down his left forearm, five more down the right.

He will watch metal rings open like mouths, go into the holes made by the needles and close, perfect circles half-buried in him. She'll go next, five shiny half-moons down one arm, then the other.

They will stand back to back and lacy black ribbon will be woven around his top left ring, over to and through her top right, all the way down until they are bound tight from wrist to elbow by the crossing ribbons, corsets linking them into beauty.

Then, the man who's done all this, the man they've asked to bind them in this way, will stand back to behold the new creature. “Okay,” he will say to them after a long silence, “now pull.”

Their skin will stretch into small mountain ranges, lace ribbon bridging the peaks, slow lines of blood drying like lava. The image will make them both think of tectonic plates, of the earth growing larger. They will live like this only moments, lift arms, take a few crablike steps, feel new and still growing.
When the man undoes the ribbon,
plies out the rings like teeth,
wipes clean the ladders of blood,
the couple will feel the air
between them on their skin
like water, like an ocean
pushing shores apart.
America

Framed inside three rabid stars, 
the letters of his Discon tag spin 
fat loops of black ink 
on every trashcan and streetlamp 
in Madison. 
It marks parking garages and bus stops 
from Mifflin street to Blair. 
This city is his; 
it is time to move on.

In the blacksmoke trainride west, 
he carries an army surplus parachute bag 
packed with tobacco and tools. 
Other trainhoppers teach him 
how to sew his clothes with floss and twine. 
They squeeze his right arm tight 
as he hits his vein with meth 
cooked in a beer can.

The pros remark 
the names of places going by 
like remembering old friends: 
Minnesota, South Dakota Badlands.

Alone after the others jump off, 
he watches the oilrig arms of east Wyoming 
rise and fall, powered by ghosts. 
He tattoos his hands with old needles, 
scribbles Discon several times inside the car.

When he gets off near the Oregon coast 
he imagines Earth’s blue curvature 
marked with a single boat, 
the mast and sail erecting 
dark lines into the sky.

On a beach, he sits on a driftwood log 
near an old firepit. 
He rolls a cigarette, reads to himself 
the names dug into sand.
Identical Twins at the Bus Stop

Holly sometimes wears tattered beige pantyhose over tattered black pantyhose; it looks bleary, a sinewy leg-mirage, a woman dissolving from the waist down, shedding a serpentine skin, a monster with green eyes and pale, cloudy lips. She sometimes wears a shiny black corset over a tight men’s white dress shirt. Her thick bust fills with smoke, collapses. The action reveals a birthmark on one side of her chest, which must have a twin on Jill.

Jill smokes long cigarettes as well, waves them expertly, her mouth steaming smoke and warm breath as she quietly sings from memory a song to which Holly always sways her head. They stand together in the cold; for a moment it is as one girl standing with her own ghost. Then, as a puff of breath escapes the mouth of each, they stand alive again as an uncanny two. They get on, and for the first time, one speaks to me.

She sits backwards in her bus seat, says she likes my lip rings and asks where I got them done. *I did it myself with syringe needles* I want to say but can’t, caged in instant stone. The next week I have a plan—an excuse for the awkward silence, then, smoothly, I will say *I did them myself with hypodermic needles*.

At their bus stop, they are smoking or breathing. I watch for the usual transmutations before they get on—illusion, ghost, twins—but something has changed. One sways typically. The other is still, bald, a mannequin stood up next to the woman it was modeled after or two displays of a single tree: once in summer bloom, once after fall has taken its body of leaves.

The bald one sits next to me, rubs her shaved forearms like a mantis. “They’re all prickly” she says to no one, looking forward. Eventually
she turns to me. “Do you want to feel my arm?”
Her eyes are dark, wet stones without eyebrows.
“I pierced my lip with syringe needles” I sputter, 
not even knowing if she was the one who asked, 
who stunned me to an embarrassing stupor.
“That’s nice” she says. “I shaved my whole body. 
Do you want to feel my arm?”
Painting Brody Dalle

First the hair,
black and spiny,
a hellish bramble.

Then yellow eyes,
filaments humming
near explosion.

Bloodpacks bitten
spread red,
dirty the teeth,

dirty a chin smooth
as origami:
a false anti-beauty.

Stomach thin
as a riding crop
held by a fist of ribs.

On white
switchblade arms
black tattoos shine

like oil smeared
across beaches, black
Gibson SG slung

low, nonchalantly
grazing her hips,
the grey skirt.

Her lips bloodied,
contentious, coquettish:
paint this—paint

this cantankerous
face and this hissing
chrome microphone—
paint something that sings
"are you rea-day to be
liber-ay-ay-ted?"
Iggy Pop

Three-headed dogs kick at
   empty water bowls;
around them, something electric plugs in.

They cock their ears like dogs
   hearing thunder, the
premonition of “Fun House,” “Raw Power.”

His face framed in a glass
   shard riding his chest
like a flag, his hair greased down to the tips,

Iggy feeds them blood,
   “Penetration,” and
peanut butter for the roofs of their mouths.

A snare drum pops, ripples
   Lake Michigan’s skin
of fish skeletons and shitty exhaust.

In low guitar barre chords,
   the lake moans, his dogs
howl back at it, and he rides and he rides.
Woman

A woman throws a chicken thigh to the seagulls on the shore. As more gulls appear, she becomes the eye of a violent whirlpool. She throws another.

The birds land like a dying storm, and the sky clears. They settle in groups around the larger pieces, pull strips of tan muscle from the bones.

She seems to like this hedonism, the nearly romantic act of a sinewy flesh both fought over and shared between two beaks.

When the bones are picked bare, the pairs break up. They begin to run at one another, wings out, beaks wide to show their tongues, hungry for more bird meat.

When they rise, they rise out from the woman a paperwhite maelstrom, tearing the sky as before. This she watches too, looking up as she is left behind.
Poor

You are feral in ways:
the thermostat at fifty-eight,
you live exclusively
in the warm spot, the attic,
no longer shaving
or putting trash in bags.

Peering through the oculus
rimmed with ice, you run
your thumb along the smooth
handle of your knife,
press down on the latch,
watch the blade fold out.

You roll a cigarette with one hand,
break weed stems into a muslin bag,
steep it in a glass jar of steaming water,
add sugar and vodka,
take a warm drink.

“Fuck this,” you say. Being poor
isn’t like being born, you think.
It isn’t an event.
Being poor is a landscape.
It’s the closest planet to the sun,
and it doesn’t rotate.

You sit crosslegged on the carpet,
shut your knife.
You snub the cigarette out,
reach for the ashtray on the floor,
then reconsider, holding the butt up,
a specimen.

You look past the dead cigarette
where a diamond-shaped mirror
long fallen to the floor
leaning against the wall
is reflecting your face
in the ceiling and smoke.
Texas

"Do me a favor when you get there—burn my house down. Burn it down, and I'll give you a thousand dollars."

I think about brilliant orange hallways, televisions boiled, a whole house, my sister's house rising into the sky black, a plume of great distance.

I think of how to do it, how to be circumstantial, accident prone—how to be innocent.

I think of watching from across the street as Rob Hoffman put his heels into Ryan Cutts' gut for a few crumpled dollars, the Mexican boys who put me down like that for my dollars that same year.

If she and I had grown up together, if there weren't so many years between us, we might have known who was joking and who was truly capable.

Maybe she wants insurance money, or to forget bad years. Maybe she wants to know something that burned.
The rain began this morning.
Mounds of snow shrunk away and
sprouts of purple flowers peppered lawns.
The water felt good and sang.

I found a kitten on the sidewalk, lying
the way they do in slow-moving squares
of sun on rugs in big homes, looking up
with a few teeth poking out.

It was black, and so slicked with rain
it could have been soapstone,
a polished Egyptian knick-knack,
a child’s forgotten souvenir.

Water slid from leaves and hit
its face and ribs, and it did not flinch.
I put my fingers to it,
then laid my palm on its belly.

It was not cold, and bore no marks
of how it had died so young,
out in the open. I wanted to see
how the eyes would rot.

The clouds were dark, and marbled the fields
like the shadows of hands over flies
ready to come down, and everyone
was still asleep.

I wondered what the day would be like,
the winter. I wanted to know
how I would die,
and if I would be as shining.
Odysseus

I always figured his death
would be quick, brought over wires
from whatever faraway kingdom;

I predicted little investment in it.
It would be a tiny service, which
no one would blame me for missing,

and where everyone was already used
to the thought of never seeing him again.
I would not have been a bad son.

That was what I wanted. Yet there I was,
again watching the tubes fill and empty
with fluid, the balloon of his chest deflating,

rising to the metered bursts of the ventilator
interspersed with the radar blips of a heartbeat,
the preservation of his life in concert.

The induced coma, which was staving off
delirium tremens—a term I hadn’t heard
outside of Mark Twain—diminished

enough once a day that one eye would open,
move around the room, leak a tear
of morphine solution, and close again.

The many blinking, breathing apparatus
in the dark room made it seem as if we had both
been swallowed by something massive.

After I had left the hospital, I stopped at a bar
full of strange, mangled people who held glasses
with hairy claws and drank through bloody fangs.

A sniper, camouflaged, hid in a corner booth,
the lasersight of his rifle landing like a fly
on the already boiled and bleeding faces.
Was this the sniper my father saw?  
Were these the monsters that had been 
trailing him? Was this his eye in my head?

Or was I sedated, lost in this mash of 
mutilation and war, and he, my son, 
standing over me watching my eye open?

A blue-skinned man had called to me there; 
he’d ordered shots from a bartender 
with folded white wings, an angel.

We picked up the shots to cheers—
I too scared to say no—and we drank 
as if we were having a good time.

I smiled at him as if Halloween was exactly 
what I wanted, that I, like everyone, 
loved masquerading as something else.
The Statue

One day, after the restoration, the steeple of Saint Andrew's is struck by lightning, the top half snapping, landing on the church roof with a crash of sparks. A man, drunk in an old railroad car turned into a tavern, will call 911 and say only "church's on fire."

But Saint Andrew's will never go away.
The hills it claims will be rough with graves as long as people die.

The lake below those hills would dry long before Andrew himself would ever leave this place.
And if it did go dry, he would see the elephant bones long as the arms of his own cross, and he would mourn.

And children, poking through dusty back rooms, will continue to ease the maroon storage door open and gasp at the massive brown feet of a wooden man, bigger than grown men, bigger than Andrew, a body lain horizontally in the dark room, one nailed hand forever reaching to the sky, daring them to touch him.